Saving Sita:

The *Ramayana* and Gender Narratives in

Postcolonial Hindu Nationalism

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Statement of Originality:

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role that the Hindu epic the *Ramayana* plays in shaping the relationship between conservative Hindu Indian nationalism and gender in post-colonial India. It demonstrates how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has manipulated understandings of the *Ramayana* to best serve its political aims since 1980, and to further an inherently sexist and discriminatory agenda.

Chapter One outlines the role of exclusionary narrative in constructing national identity along conservative and fundamentalist lines. Drawing from this, it goes on to present and expand upon the key research questions explored in this thesis. Chapter Two examines the various relevant fields of literature which are involved in this discussion. Chapter Three outlines the key methodological fields from which this thesis draws as an intersectional study. Chapter Four analyses Valmiki's *Ramayana* in considering its depiction of gender constructs, and touches upon the significance of the 1987 *Ramayan* television serial by Ramanand Sagar. Chapter Five explores the role of gender in the Indian Independence movement and the development of Hindu nationalism. It then examines postcolonial secularism and nationalism, and women's rights till the BJP's founding in 1980.

Chapter Six focuses on India, the rise of the BJP, and the shape of women's issues over the past forty years. Chapter Seven focuses upon three separate endeavours to approach the *Ramayana* from unconventional perspectives, one of which is my experience writing and directing the 2014 production *Fire to Earth* with the UNSW Indian Society. Chapter Eight outlines the BJP's attempts to moderate in recent years, summarises the current state of women's affairs, and concludes by highlighting some of the lacunae that still need to be addressed in this field.

This thesis situates itself at the intersection of Ramayana studies, Indian women's studies, and postcolonial Indian politics. It takes a multifaceted methodological approach to answering its principal questions, incorporating narrative studies, politics, gender studies, and literature studies. I acknowledge the numerous perspectives in these fields and synthesise their various contributions to illustrate the deep-rooted connections between Hindu nationalism, gender exclusion and oppression, and the *Ramayana*.

Contents

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There are several lessons I have learned over the course of the creation of this thesis. That horse riding can be a dangerous endeavour, that more inspiration may be found in French pubs at 4pm on Sunday or in Gloria Jeans at 7am than one might think. And, most importantly, that I can never underestimate the importance of others in turning solitary and frustrating work into a shared experience of learning and discovery.

First and foremost, I must thank Dr. Christopher Hartney, my brilliant and bizarre supervisor. Once again you have guided me through the angst and confusion of turning half-formed ideas into real words. Your faith in me is astounding but I am forever grateful for your support, dedication, and friendship.

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Finally: I must acknowledge the ancient Sage Valmiki for penning the *Ramayana*. Yours is a long and complicated text, with which I have a long and complicated relationship., Nevertheless, I will not deny that:

…As long as the sun and the moon reign in the sky

The story of Rama will continue to reign on Earth.

1. Introduction

Everyone was endowed with auspicious marks

Everyone was devoted to righteousness

And so, for ten thousand years, Rama ruled his kingdom.

(The *Ramayana*, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 116:90.)[1]

1.1.   Intolerance in Nation Building and Narrative Interpretation: Gender, the *Ramayana*, and the Exclusionary

Narrative is a fundamental part of communal unification and togetherness.[2] Whether lived or imagined, these origin stories form the basis for developing notions of group identity. Narrative based nationalism is a common phenomenon, where nations rely on a semi-historical 'origin story' to serve as the foundation for their pride and sense of identity. In a similar fashion, mythic religious narratives can, even in modern and apparently secular nations, have deep political ramifications. Literature Studies scholar Lisa Zunshine refers to "…the thorny issue of the "truth" of literary narrative and the distinction between "history" and "fiction.""[3] In the blurring of history and myth, foundational narratives captivate the imagination, while also rooting themselves within personal and national understandings of history and shared origin.

Understanding these narratives offers valuable insight not only into the specific region in which they are told, but also the formation and nature of the political, social, and religious dimensions of that place's inhabitants. However, nation-building narratives often espouse

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[1] Vālmīki, Robert P. Goldman, and Sheldon Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 494.

[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991); Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).

[3] Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, 5.

rigid parameters and roles for society that can easily be used to justify conservative rhetoric and dogma, including the discriminatory exclusion of minorities who do not fit the established image of the state. Hannah Arendt refers to the notion of the 'stateless' condition, where minorities are isolated from political power and marginalised in society.[4] In this manner, such narratives can serve as a powerful vehicle for fundamentalist and radical political/social groups, particularly those who are presenting a model of religious nationalism as an alternative to secularism.[5]

This thesis explores the role of narrative in constructing national identity through the process of exclusion, through by examining the relationship between the Hindu religious text the *Ramayana* and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in postcolonial India. In doing so, I will examine the process by which the *Ramayana* has become a major narrative of the religiously intolerant Hindu nationalism movement, and its impact on normative Hindu gender paradigms as well as the gendered politics of the BJP. This thesis aims to examine the following questions: how has the Ramayana been used to serve a conservative political agenda since 1985 in India? To what extent has the *Ramayana* shaped the relationship between conservative Hindu nationalism as represented by the BJP, and gender politics and structures in the post-colonial period? In doing so, it will demonstrate the manner in which the BJP has used the *Ramayana* to further a fundamentalist agenda which is inherently sexist and discriminatory, based on a patriarchal and male-driven social ideal.

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Florida: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 290.
[5] Brian Hole, "A Many-Cornered Thing: The Role of Heritage in Indian Nation-Building," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 197.

1.2.   Background

The *Ramayana* is one of the two key narratives intertwined with Indian nationalism (the other is the *Mahabharata*.) The *Ramayana*, literally the 'Story of Rama', is attributed to the semi-mythic sage Valmiki. Due to its sheer length, it encompasses a whole range of interlinked narratives; the key story, however, focuses on Prince Rama of Ayodhya and his wife, Princess Sita of Mithila. Rama is portrayed as a strong and noble warrior, while Sita is traditionally revered as the ideal daughter and wife due to her loyalty, obedience, and grace.[6] Key themes of the poem emphasise an expected social order, kingly *dharma* (loosely, "duty"), physical and moral purity, and ethical combat and military warfare. Female characters do play a significant role in the Ramayana – indeed, the primary complication of the narrative revolves around the abduction of Rama's wife, Sita. However, female characters in the text are placed by and large in passive roles, where obedience, grace and humility are considered vital traits for the 'ideal' woman. This is made more complicated by the fact that a number of these female personalities are, like Rama, popularly considered to be avatars of Hindu deities.[7] Therefore, these traits are linked to the notion of the 'divine' feminine; further cementing them as a mould that Hindu women should aspire to fill.[8] This is despite the fact that Rama, interpreted by the BJP as the embodiment of violent masculinity and ideal manhood, is actually more complex and measured than they choose to acknowledge. Similarly, they have heavily edited their depictions of Sita and other women from the

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[6] Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 2.

[7] Luis Gonzalez-Reimann, "The Divinity of Rama in the 'Ramayana' of Valmiki," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2006): 203; Sukumari Bhattacharji, "A Revaluation of Valmiki's 'Rama,'" *Social Scientist* 30, no. 1/2 (2002): 32.

[8] Hess, "Rejecting Sita," 2.

Ramayana, to suit a streamlined narrative that aligns with their hard-line traditionalist agenda.[9]

The *Ramayana* has been a significant source of artistic and cultural inspiration across the centuries. Diverse regional manifestations and interpretations of the text exist, many of which have overtaken the canonical text in prominence among less erudite Indians. The work and its characters also feature heavily in many classical Indian music and dance forms, such as Bharatanatiyam and Kathak.[10] In addition, the *Ramayana* has a strong presence in Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, and has been incorporated into the cultures of other countries in South and South-East Asia. Its strongest association, however, remains with Hinduism, and alongside the epic poem *Mahabharata* and the philosophical *Upanishads* and Vedas, makes up the core normative canon of Indian Hinduism.[11]

The widespread and far-reaching significance of the *Ramayana*'s narrative and characters means that it influences not only cultural and artistic spheres, but also socio-political constructs, agendas, and rhetoric. Therefore, it has played a significant political role in India shaping notions of Indian identity (alongside the *Mahabharata*).[12] Narratives and characters from both are used by politicians in speeches to emphasise political or moral points.[13] This was a commonly used tactic of principal figures in the lead-up to and aftermath of Indian independence in 1947, including but not limited to Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who were both anxious to emphasise that the envisaged

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[9] Ved Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple: The Rise of Fundamentalism," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 2 (1993): 16.

[10] Monica Dalidowicz and Michael Jackson, "Being 'Sita': Physical Affects in the North Indian Dance of Kathak," in *Phenomenology in Anthropology*, A Sense of Perspective (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015), 90.

[11] Axel Michaels, "India's Spirituality, the Plurality of Hinduism and Religious Tolerance," *India International Centre Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2014): 148.

[12] Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World," *New German Critique*, no. 100 (2007): 198.

[13] Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit, and V. Krishnappa, *India's Grand Strategy: History, Theory, Cases* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 204.

postcolonial state would be the product of what Nehru called "the unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India".[14] His speeches and popular discourse used these texts to frame an ideal of tolerance and culturally diverse secularism. The conservative right wing of Indian politics, however, has also used the *Ramayana* in their rhetoric, to promote an alternative to secularism: a male-driven patriarchal militant society based in the maintenance of "traditional" Hinduism where men occupy leadership in both the domestic and public spheres, while women are constrained to caregiving and motherhood.[15]

Decades after independence, the Ramayana's popularity has only expanded, in part due to the release of the television series *Ramayan*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, which aired from 25 January 1987 to August 1989.[16] This series, broadcast on national television, saw record viewership across the country.[17] It also reintroduced, even more than the narrative, the character of Rama, whose representation in the series was capitalised upon by the BJP. They proposed that Rama was a divine representation of the masculine spirit of India, and looked to him as a role model in their efforts to construe themselves as protectors of Indian identity against the threat of Western and Islamic influence. This deliberately ignores the fact Islam has been present on the Indian subcontinent since the eighth century, and politically and culturally powerful since the first Muslim empire in North India was established in the thirteenth century.[18] Rama has come to represent the 'masculine ideal' of India, and to serve as a role model for Hindu nationalists as protectors of Indian identity against the unspoken

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[14] Ainslee T. Embree, "Nehru's Understanding of the Social Function of Religion," *India International Centre Quarterly* 20, no. 1/2 (1993): 168.

[15] Himani Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male: Cultural Nationalism and the Emergence of the Ethnic Citizen in Contemporary India," *Ethnicities* 6, no. 3 (2006): 373.

[16] Shanti Kumar, *Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 2.

[17] Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 30.

[18] Stephan Schlensog, "Hinduism and Politics: On the Role of Religious Antagonisms in Indian History and Politics," *Die Friedens-Warte* 82, no. 2/3 (2007): 161.

threat of Western and Islamic influence, as well as against the perceived weakness of Indian secularism.[19]

In 1992 the Babri Masjid, a long-standing Mughal mosque in Ayodhya, Rama's mythic birthplace, was destroyed as the culmination of a campaign by the BJP and other extremist Hindu organisations.[20] Subsequent rioting across India resulted in more than 2000 deaths.[21] This swift and violent reaction was also a result of the popular belief that a temple to Rama had previously existed on the site, and had been destroyed during the Mughal Empire to make way for a mosque.[22] The destruction of the mosque was paraded as a manifestation of and a triumph for militant Hinduism as espoused by the BJP, and a representation of Rama's virile powers. [23] The act also represented a clear stance against the quasi-feminine weakness of secularisation which had allowed another religious place to continue to stand on Hindu land. [24] Ten years later, these themes once again manifested themselves violently in the northern Indian state of Gujarat. Gujarat has been under BJP control since the 1990s; and unsurprisingly displays potent and troubling examples of the repercussions of the inherent violence in conservative masculine militancy. Riots in the state broke out in 2002 after the deaths of fifty-eight Hindus in a train fire. The train, which was returning from Ayodhya (Rama's birthplace) might have caught alight for any number of reasons. However, Hindu fundamentalists placed the blame squarely on Muslim shoulders which led to widespread rioting and destruction, displacing thousands and causing the deaths

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[19] Rekha Datta, "Hindu Nationalism or Pragmatic Party Politics? A Study of India's Hindu Party," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 12, no. 4 (1999): 574.

[20] Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple," 16.

[21] Sanjay Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation: The Case of Hindu Nationalism in India, 1996-2004," *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 3 (2006): 317.

[22] Carole M. Cusack, "The Gods on Television: Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan, Politics and . Popular Piety in Late Twentieth-Century India," by Alex Norman and Cusack (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 279.

[23] Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple," 17.

[24] Nikita Sud, "Cracks in the Facade: The Gujarat BJP and Elections 2009," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 28 (2009): 15.

of as many as two thousand civilians.[25] As well as demonstrating Arendt's argument that the establishment of a nation-state along a strict ideal of the nation involves the alienation and marginalisation of minorities, these incidents demonstrate the continuing use of collective memory by the BJP to promote an aggressive, masculine model for Hindu India.[26]

The emphasis on the restoration of a traditionalist male-driven society as the prime tool for the advancement of India also sidelines and diminishes the potential offered by the feminine or female half of the population, as well as ignoring the utility of non-violent 'feminine' methods of governing and nation-building.[27] The thesis will explore the dichotomy of the deification and subjugation of femininity and women in the *Ramayana*, and the way these themes have shaped conservative discourse regarding gender in modern India. This thesis therefore contends that the post-colonial narrative of India as intrinsically Hindu has been reinforced by an emphasis on the *Ramayana* as representative of a shared past, and on a narrow reading which shunts women into the domestic sphere and silences dissenting voices. Thus, the text is used to maintain a sense of monopolitical national unity which is inherently patriarchal and exclusionary.[28]

1.3.   Academic significance

This thesis explores the narrative ecology of "nationalist", "fundamentalist" "right wing" and overtly "masculine" India, at the expense of the notion of the feminine, and the multiplicity of narratives differing from Valmiki's original *Ramayana*.[29] Here I seek to

[25] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 318.

[26] Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2009), 35; Hole, "A Many-Cornered Thing," 208.

[27] Praful Bidwai, "Confronting the Reality of Hindutva Terrorism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 47 (2008): 10.

[28] Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male," 363.

[29] Velcheru Narayana Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), 232.

demonstrate how the BJP uses the *Ramayana* to underscore and justify its particular brand of religious nationalism, and the kind of masculine/anti-feminine gender politics that it supports through a particular reading of this text. While the link between the *Ramayana*, concepts of Hinduism, and the BJP has been explored in the academy, there appears to be a deficiency in examining the extremely potent role of the *Ramayana* in shaping Indian conceptions of gender.

In 2014, while working with the Indian Society at the University of New South Wales on a theatrical production of the *Ramayana* intended to address issues of gender inequality and problematic elements of Valmiki's narrative, I encountered opposition from some members of the organisation. The production, entitled *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita*, was my second attempt at staging a play critical of Rama's actions and patriarchal social structures; a first attempt, with a conservative Hindu organisation, had failed dismally. By applying a theoretical exploration of the use of the *Ramayana* to reinforce conservative philosophies based on the exclusion and diminishment of the feminine to the process of staging *Fire to Earth*, this thesis will demonstrate the impact of this relationship on a microcosmic level in the Indian diaspora.

The BJP has an undeniable and troubling focus on legitimising Hindu nationalist views and using a normative concept of 'Hinduism' as a homogenising force.[30] This, therefore, is intrinsically bound up in their conceptions of gender and the political choices they make. One of the reasons for this is the oppression and silencing of female voices, particularly through the imposition on women of restrictive and unrealistic models of ideal behaviour.[31] By framing the ideal of womanhood as ultimately passive and submissive,

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[30] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 319.

[31] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–314.

attempts by women to break this mould and speak out are sabotaged.[32] The perpetuation of this oppressive gender binary in the postcolonial era, despite significant legal advances, is powered at least in part by the influence of narrow readings of the *Ramayana* and its promotion as a depiction of ideal Indian society by Hindu nationalists.[33] It is vital, therefore, to have a concrete understanding of the limitations and reach of the influence of this text in order to develop effective methods of counteracting its negative social consequences.

Finally, this thesis explores the unique lived experience of attempting to combat issues of gender in religious narrative, particularly in the ex-patriate community. Through examining my own efforts in creating and staging a production aimed at challenging assumptions regarding gender roles in the *Ramayana*, this thesis will provide a combined experiential and analytical understanding of the personal and small-scale impact of the relationship between gender and the *Ramayana* in a conservative Hindu Indian context, set against the backdrop of these paradigms and their impact on gendered structures in modern India under a BJP government.

1.4.   Key Terms and abbreviations

India

This thesis refers to three periods of 'Indian history' and geography: Classical India, British/pre-Independence/colonial India, and modern/postcolonial India. Classical India refers to the period within which the Ramayana was written, ranging from approximately 1000 BCE to 500 CE. British India refers officially to the period between 1857 and 1947, but unofficially may be viewed as beginning in the latter half of the sixteenth century, as the

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[32] Spivak.

[33] Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

decline of the Mughal Empire led to the growing political and economic influence of the East India Trade Company.[34] This region also included the areas now known as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma. Modern/postcolonial India, officially known as the Republic of India, came into being on 15 August 1947, on the same date as the Dominion of Pakistan was formed. As of July 2017, the United States Central Intelligence Service has estimated the country's population to be approximately 1.3 billion people.[35]

Normative Hinduism ('Hinduism')

I use this phrase to refer to several diverse practices, rituals, and beliefs in the subcontinent which are loosely grouped into a definitive religious tradition in mainstream Western understandings of religion in India.[36] The concept of Hinduism as a cohesive belief system is relatively new, and is rooted in colonialism, though the word was first used in the nineteenth century by the Indian social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy.[37] The term was popularised in the West by British scholars, and in India by cultural figures to maintain a sense of unified tradition in the face of colonial influence.[38] The term also aims to establish a notion of community and communion across India, as per Benedict Anderson's notion of the "imagined community" – where 'Hindus' are linked by an often false notion of shared

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[34] Acyuta Yājñika and Suchitra Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005), 61.

[35] Central Intelligence Service, "The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency," January 17, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html.

[36] Brian K. Pennington, "Constructing Colonial Dharma: A Chronicle of Emergent Hinduism, 1830-1831," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69, no. 3 (2001): 579.

[37] Nayanjot Lahiri and Elisabeth A. Bacus, "Exploring the Archaeology of Hinduism," *World Archaeology* 36, no. 3 (2004): 313.

[38] Brian A. Hatcher, "Bourgeois Vedānta: The Colonial Roots of Middle-Class Hinduism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 2 (2007): 299.

belief.[39] This notion of Hinduism is based around a selection of core texts, mostly in Sanskrit.[40]

The principal narrative texts which form part of this canon are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and are supplemented by the *Puranas*, which contain secondary mythology and divine narrative pertaining to cosmology and the genealogy of the gods. Philosophical texts are broken into two groups: *Shruti* (authorless and rigid); and *Smriti* (texts attributed to an author, frequently revised, and generally more open-ended).[41] The most well-known and revered of the *Shruti* are the *Upanishads*. The *Smriti* are considered by orthodox Hinduism to be secondary to the *Shruti* as they are attributed (and therefore definitively mortal creations) and may be rewritten. This hierarchy of texts is the basis for *Hindutva*; a particular ideology which may be traced to the period of Hindu cultural revival in the nineteenth century.[42]

Another important element of Hinduism is the concept of *dharma*, which is woven into the body of canonical texts – both *Shruti* and *Smriti* texts – as well as into the *Hindutva* movement. There is no direct English translation for the term, but a succinct description of the term is best articulated by P.V. Kane, who says that it encompasses "…the privileges, duties and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of the Aryan community, as a member of one of the castes, as a person in a particular stage of life".[43] *Hindutva* expands this term to loosely describe the notion of individual and social duty according to ethical and moral guidelines.

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[39] Tim Phillips, "Imagined Communities and Self-Identity: An Exploratory Quantitative Analysis," *Sociology* 36, no. 3 (2002): 600.

[40] Thomas R. Trautmann and Carla M. Sinopoli, "In the Beginning Was the Word: Excavating the Relations between History and Archaeology in South Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45, no. 4 (2002): 497.

[41] Leela Prasad, "Conversational Narrative and the Moral Self: Stories of Negotiated Properties from South India," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 1 (2004): 156.

[42] Yogendra K. Malik and V. B. Singh, *Hindu Nationalists in India: The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1995), 1995.

[43] Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism: Second Edition* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 50.

Hindutva

Hindutva is a term of British origin emerging from the late colonial period (its first usage was in the late nineteenth century and popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his 1928 book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*[44] The term refers to the ideology of Hindu nationalism and "…is based on a combination of received tradition and active refashioning of this tradition…stressing the inimical traits of Hindu religious myth and imagery while completely ignoring…other religious streams like Buddhism, Islam and Christianity in the Indian tradition".[45]

Varna (Caste) system

The concept of the *Varna* system has its origins in ancient India, and refers to the four social classes and roles that are outlined in the Vedas. While officially abolished, this hierarchy continues to permeate and affect Indian Hindu society. The caste system has been long-considered to be hereditary (a notion which is not mentioned in the Vedas) and is linked strongly to the concept of reincarnation (*samsara*), where good deeds and adherence to the duty (*dharma*) of one's *varna* results in rebirth into a higher caste.[46]

The *Brahmin* caste was the highest in this hierarchy, and formed the religious and scholarly sector of society. While belonging to the *Brahmin* caste has never signified increased wealth, *Brahmins* are generally well-educated with high literacy rates, and dominated politics in the first half of the twentieth century. The second caste, the *Kshatriyas*, were traditionally warriors and nobility. Many protagonists in Hindu religious narratives come from this caste (including Rama and Sita). *Vaishyas*, the third caste, were assigned

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[44] Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindutva," in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 108.

[45] Sumanta Banerjee, "'Hindutva': Ideology and Social Psychology," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 3 (1991): 97.

[46] Nandini Chavan and Qutub Jehan Kidwai, *Personal Law Reforms and Gender Empowerment: A Debate on Uniform Civil Code* (Delhi: Hope India Publications, 2006), 51.

agricultural roles in Hindu religious texts but came to occupy middle class positions as landowners and merchants. The lowest rank of the *Varna* system was that of the *Shudras*, who were generally assigned labour and service roles.[47]

Another significant group is the *Dalit* 'caste' (though there is no mention of this category in Vedic texts). The term, meaning 'oppressed' in Sanskrit, is a self-chosen name by the population of the subcontinent who were excluded from the *Varna* system. The legal term for this group, as recognised in the Indian Constitution, is "scheduled castes and scheduled tribes", and refers to historically disadvantaged groups.[48] Dalit women in particular have faced significant levels of exclusion and disadvantage, as they are situated at the intersection of religious, class, and gender discrimination.

Sangh Parivar

The umbrella term Sangh Parivar refers to the various Hindu nationalist organisations in India. These organisations operate in a variety of fields, including those of politics, education, communication, economics, and religion. While Sangh Parivar groups draw their members from various political and economic backgrounds, they all share the core values espoused by *Hindutva*.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)

Known as the National Volunteer Corps in India, the RSS is a right-wing volunteer organisation with paramilitary and Hindu nationalist leanings, formed in 1925.[49] The RSS is the largest and most powerful organisation under the umbrella of the Sangh Parivar.[50]

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[47] Geetanjali Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

[48] Though this is the technical Sankrit term for the Dalit caste (literally translating to "not-varna") the chosen term used by scheduled castes is *Dalit*, particularly by social and political activists.

[49] Pralaya Kanungo, "Myth of the Monolith: The RSS Wrestles to Discipline Its Political Progeny," *Social Scientist* 34, no. 11/12 (2006): 51.

Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)

The VHP is a non-political pan-Hindu organisation founded in 1964 for religious purposes, by leading RSS figures and Swami Chinmayananda, a Hindu spiritual teacher who formed the worldwide non-profit Chinmaya Mission.[51] The organisation's objective is "…to organise- consolidate the Hindu society and to serve – protect the Hindu Dharma."[52]

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

The BJP is the most powerful and widespread political organisation of the Sangh Parivar. The party was founded in 1980, though its origins lie in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), which was formed in 1951.[53] The party was considered a fringe party till 1991, when it managed to defeat the Congress Party (INC) in the Gujarat state elections. As of early 2017, the party has been led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the former BJP chief minister of the state of Gujarat.

Indian National Congress (INC or Congress party)

The Indian National Congress is a political party in India, founded in 1885. The organisation was the leading figure in the Indian Independence movement, and was the party of both Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, and India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The INC's President is currently Rahul Gandhi, the grandson of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

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[50] Sutapa Lahiry, "Jana Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party: A Comparative Assessment of Their Philosophy and Strategy and Their Proximity with the Other Members of the Sangh Parivar," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 4 (2005): 833.

[51] Manjari Katju, "The Early Vishva Hindu Parishad: 1964 to 1983," *Social Scientist* 26, no. 5/6 (1998): 35.

[52] Vishva Hindu Parishad, "Swagatam | Vishva Hindu Parishad | Official Website," 2010, http://vhp.org/, http://vhp.org/swagatam/.

[53] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 51.

1.5. Text edition

The *Ramayana* has a rich and complex written history, further confused by its inherent structure as an orally transmitted narrative. Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered to be the original version of this narrative. There are however other, more popular versions of the story, such as the *Ramcharitmanas*; the Hindi-language[54] epic poem by 16th century poet Goswami Tulsidas which made the *Ramayana* available and accessible to the wider population in North India, who would have not necessarily have been competent in Sanskrit. The Tamil version by Kamban from the twelfth century aided in the popularity of the text in South India. However, it is the Valmiki *Ramayana* that remains the most detailed extant version of the story. It is from this version that others appear to be reworkings, adaptations, or rewritings to suit different languages.[55] Therefore, this thesis quotes primarily from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, particularly in light of the BJP's veneration of its author (in 2016, the party celebrated the sage's purported birth anniversary and hailed him as the creator of the *Ramayana*).[56] Where possible, references to the text use Robert Goldman's *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of India* series (1985-2009).[57]

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[54] More accurately, the *Ramcharitmanas* is in Awadhi, a dialect of Hindi spoken in the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh.

[55] Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, "'Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?' Locating a Sexualised, Feminist, and Queer Dharma in the Ramayana," *Diacritics* 39, no. 1 (2009): 75; Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: The Video," *TDR (1988-)* 34, no. 2 (1990): 130.

[56] Press Trust of India, "BJP Celebrates Valmiki Jayanti, Says Dalits a Priority for Govt," Tribune India, October 15, 2016, http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/bjp-celebrates-valmiki-jayanti-says-dalits-a-priority-for-govt/309970.html.

[57] Vālmīki, Robert P. Goldman, and Sheldon Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Bālakāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985); Vālmīki, Sheldon I. Pollock, and Robert P. Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986); Vālmīki, Sheldon I. Pollock, and Robert P. Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Araṇyakāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991); Vālmīki et al., *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Vālmīki, Robert P. Goldman, and Sheldon Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Sundarakāṇḍa* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa*.

1.6.   Structure

Following this introduction, the next chapter of this thesis details the separate fields of literature which are involved in this discussion. This covers the following: the *Ramayana* and literary and cultural interpretations; the role of narrative in the establishment of national identity after Indian independence; women in India; and the BJP and fundamentalism in Indian politics. This chapter also indicates gaps in the current literature exploring the intersection of these areas. The third chapter provides a methodological overview. It outlines the particular theoretical approaches used in this thesis regarding the relationship between narrative and nation building, nationalism, secularism in India, literary interpretation, and gender. Finally, it will indicate how my thesis shall attempt to fill existing gaps in knowledge and link disparate areas of research.

The fourth chapter provides a brief outline of the history and narrative of the *Ramayana*, before undertaking an analysis of the way gender is portrayed both in representations of and relations between men and women, but also of the way in which gendered language and rhetoric filters into the text's understanding of power and politics. This chapter also touches on the broader cultural significance of the *Ramayana*, and explores how these elements are depicted in the 1985 television serial of the same name.

The fifth chapter of the thesis explores the role of gender in the Indian Independence movement. It will examine the way in which Hindu narratives were used through the twentieth centuries and how the *Ramayana* became both a tool and a crutch for the establishment of a postcolonial unified state. Finally, the chapter highlights the place and representation of women in Indian politics and society in relation to general trends in the political landscape of the nation and its relation to religion, leading up to the rise of the BJP in the latter half of the 1980s. The sixth chapter focuses on India and the BJP over the past thirty years, since the release of the *Ramayana* television serial in 1985 and the resurgence in

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mainstream popularity of its narrative and character of Rama against the backdrop of the events in Ayodhya and Gujarat. Following from this, this chapter examines the current participation of women in the BJP and the party's current discourse regarding gender roles and structures in India.

In light of this, the seventh chapter explores current efforts in India to combat and redress the impact of traditional patriarchal structures as supported and perpetuated by the *Ramayana*. It first outlines the current state of two key social issues – sexual violence against women, and arranged marriage – and the way they are being addressed and framed in modern Indian political and social discourse. The chapter then highlights some efforts over history to problematise and rectify the chauvinistic injustices and silencing of women in the *Ramayana*. From this, it concentrates on three examples of works which have questioned the Hindu nationalist understanding of the *Ramayana*, and outlines the challenges of traditionalism and conservatism they received which mirror the way women are framed by the BJP in Indian society. These works are: the film *Sita Sings the Blues* (Nina Paley, 2008); the essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (A.K. Ramanujan, 1987); and the play *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita* (Suvarna Variyar, 2014).

The final chapter and conclusion of this thesis outlines the efforts and attempts made by the BJP to change and moderate in the 21st century, particularly with their move into popular mainstream politics. It highlights the most successful and long-lasting methods of redressing gender imbalances in India, as well as the employment of non-*Ramayana* narratives and gender paradigms which are used to combat its assumptions. Ultimately, it emphasises the importance of a wider recognition of the intrinsic link between the *Ramayana* and gender in forming a narrative upon which the BJP has built an exclusionary approach to post-colonial Indian nationalism.

2. Literature Review

A man who always fulfilled his vows

he taught them the whole of this great poem, The Ramayan

which is the tale of Sita and the slaying of Paulastya…

(*The Ramayana*, Bālakāṇḍa, 4:6-7.)[58]

2.1. Introduction and gaps in existing literature

The literature surrounding separate aspects of this thesis is plentiful, insofar as it slots into separate academic disciplines, such as Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, Politics and International Relations, and Religious Studies. However, literature in these fields *directly* focussed upon the *Ramayana* and its social influences is much scarcer. Work on India and women tends to focus on either economics or politics. Work on the *Ramayana* is centred around translation, mythological analysis, or literary critique. Literature focussed on the Independence movement in India and postcolonial politics concentrates on the friction between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League.

In the past two decades, the BJP has garnered academic interest as its social and political power in India has steadily increased (culminating in the 2014 election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister).[59] Reflecting a growing academic consensus, Arvind Rajagopal posits that "…the alliance between economic liberalization and Hindu nationalism was opportunistic and unstable, but…developed a considerable force and momentum."[60] However, work looking at the intersection of gender, right wing Hinduism, and the *Ramayana* is quite limited and still restricted to these separate academic fields. Even though

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[58] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 132.

[59] In 1998 the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition led by the BJP, formed a government. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee from the BJP served as Prime Minister till the NDA's defeat in the 2004 general elections. The 2014 election was the first won by the BJP as a single party.

[60] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 34.

Hindi is the second-most common first language in the world,[61] it is also hard to find venues to study it on a tertiary level in Australia.[62] This is problematic, considering the size of India's population and its economic and political influence. But more problematically, this results in the potential to overlook the importance of these elements to political and economic relations with India. Implicated in this is the failure of Western perspectives and literature to employ a comparative approach to regional differences and perspectives – or even to recognise their existence and the vital role that such an analysis must play in understanding the nuances of cultural heterogeneity within the country. [63]

This thesis will not address these concerns in detail, but it is important to acknowledge their existence, particularly when addressing a pan-national narrative such as the *Ramayana*. It is also important to acknowledge that the socio-political landscape of India differs from that of Western societies in ways that are not necessarily examined sufficiently. Nevertheless, there are numerous academic works which offer important contributions and insight to an examination of the BJP and its relationship with the *Ramayana* as a tool for propagating a normative notion of Hinduism, in tandem with the continued oppression of women.

2.2.   Narrative, language, and national-building

The role of narrative in nation-building is a key component in examining the relationship between the *Ramayana* and modern Indian national identity, and the way in which this identity is inextricably bound with an element of the religious. In Western philosophy, the concept of religious nationalism was first explored by French Enlightenment

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[61] Rick Noack, "A Look at World Languages," Washington Post, accessed September 6, 2016, http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/world-languages/.

[62] I note that the USA, UK, and Germany have in recent years developed excellent Hindi programs.

[63] Ashutosh Kumar, "Rethinking State Politics in India: Regions within Regions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 19 (2009): 17.

philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau discussed the idea in his tract *Du Contrat Social*, where he uses the term to refer to the religious dimensions of the political state.[64] Of course, Rousseau refers specifically to the formation of national identity in countries where it has developed gradually, as much in response to the natural coalescence of towns and cities through alliance and marriage, as via a product of warfare.[65] This Western model of the development of nationalism, which was based on organic growth, did not translate over to colonised states and postcolonial nations. Subrat K. Nanda refers to Africa, Asia, and Latin America as multi-national countries comparable to that of India, where Western frameworks of statehood are imposed over regions with distinct cultural communities, and where nationalism evolved in reaction to colonial oppression rather than as a gradual expansion of communal identity.[66] Sudipta Kaviraj states that as the British expanded their political influence over the subcontinent from their initial incursion through the East India Company, a replica of the European state model was forced on the population.[67] The lack of a centralized authority till the British Empire took over meant, however, that the introduction of a cohesive state structure and democracy was expedited rather than evolving over a long time.[68]

Despite fundamental differences between the cultural landscape within which Western and Indian secularism formed, most scholars agree that the post-colonial state was still heavily shaped by British influences on notions of national identity and legal frameworks.[69] This combined with the colonial struggle for independence to create a particular kind of nationalism rooted in the promotion of a broad-based and wider-

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64 Gail Gehrig, "The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1981): 52.

65 T. K. Oommen, "Religious Nationalism and Democratic Polity: The Indian Case," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1994): 456.

66 Subrat K. Nanda, "Cultural Nationalism in a Multi-National Context: The Case of India," *Sociological Bulletin* 55, no. 1 (2006): 25.

67 Sudipta Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," *Daedalus* 129, no. 1 (2000): 142.

68 Atul Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? Rise and Decline of Self-Determination Movements in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 326.

69 Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," 152.

encompassing sense of Indian identity.[70] A key factor in Western nationalism and national identity was the existence of a shared history or origin story around which a greater community could form. The prominent theorist in the field of narrative and community building, Benedict Anderson, refers to nationalism as a paradox where modern nation-states find their identity in an "immemorial past".[71]

This however further complicated the process of forging a viable single state. T.K. Oommen readily acknowledges the significant problem of establishing a unified nation when there had been no occasion for a sense of shared culture and experience to develop within the territory; language, culture and religion had been the basis upon which individual Western nations had come into being. The presence of multiple languages in the subcontinent has therefore always been a significant obstacle in establishing a unified community in India.[72] This is further complicated by the fact that those languages are not even necessarily in the same language group, making multilingualism quite difficult. Hindi and other North Indian languages are Indo-European languages, but in South India, Dravidian languages (notably Telegu, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam) dominate.[73] This is an area that has been broached by Indian scholars, particularly in relation to Tamil and Tamil cultural nationalism, which is focused on a struggle against the forced hegemony of India as a single nation with one national language, and gave rise to 'Dravidianism'.[74]

In regard to language, Oommen states that the plurilingual and multinational state could operate so long as a link language exists, as without one there would be a limited

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[70] B. C. Upreti, "Nationalism in South Asia: Trends and Interpretations," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 3 (2006): 535–44; Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India."

[71] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11.

[72] Papia Sengupta and T. Ravi Kumar, "Linguistic Diversity and Disparate Regional Growth," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 33 (2008): 8.

[73] Burjor Avari, *India: The Ancient Past: A History of the Indian Sub-Continent from C. 7000 BC to AD 1200* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

[74] N. Ram, "Dravidian Movement in Its Pre-Independence Phases," *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 7/8 (1979): 381.

ability to conduct business and establish political structures across regional boundaries. This role is currently filled by English and Hindi, which are designated as official languages for the purposes of national Parliament or communications between national and state governments.[75] A. Aneesh opines that this was a successful endeavour, and that "India, lacking a pre-existing common national language, was able to actively produce one, modern Hindi, from the amorphous linguistic landscape."[76] However, Oommen refers to the Radhakrishnan Commission on University Education from 1950, which acknowledged that:

> Hindi does not enjoy in India such natural ascendancy over provincial languages as to incline the inhabitants to accept a secondary position for their own language. Hindi is the language of the minority, although large minority. Unfortunately, it does not possess any advantages, literary or historical, over other modern languages. [77]

Such a diversity of language means that the narrative ecology of India is vastly more complex, particularly when considering that oral traditions continue to make up a considerable part of that ecology in a country where, as of the 2011 census, the literacy rate nation-wide was only 66.07%.[78] This means that even within one language, varied dialects according to social class or region are liable to develop. Velcheru Narayana Rao describes the key Sanskrit narratives as existing in a context of broad and varied cultural systems, which differ greatly depending on the level at which they are operating and their target audiences (agricultural, pastoral, mercantile, noble, or academic).[79]

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[75] Government of India (1949). *The Constitution of India* art 120.

[76] A. Aneesh, "Bloody Language: Clashes and Constructions of Linguistic Nationalism in India," *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 1 (2010): 89.

[77] T. Oommen, "Language and Nation: For a Cultural Renewal of India," in *Nation, Civil Society and Social Movements: Essays in Political Sociology* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2004), 88.

[78] Government of India, "Census of India Website : Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India," 2011, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion_PCA.html.

[79] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 232.

Unfortunately, the Independence movement in its traditional vision, as one based on a national identity with a shared Hindu past, has complicated this process. The act of Partition in 1947 meant that India was established as, if not a Hindu state, then at least a non-Muslim state in opposition to the Islamic state of Pakistan.[80] Aneesh highlights the role of language in this through the separation of Hindi and Urdu, but the oral distinctions between the two languages are minor (they may be considered mutually intelligible) and Urdu is still recognised as an official language in the Indian Constitution.[81] In following this, therefore, Sudipta Kaviraj attributes the primary basis of group identity in Indian society to religion, despite the existence of multiple religions and diverse manifestations of what the British labelled as Hinduism.[82] Further, he posits that the need for the development of what she terms a "public spirit" was recognised by independence leaders, particularly if they wished to be an independent competitive force in the modern world.[83]

2.3.   The construction of Hinduism in India

The BJP relies heavily on framing Hinduism as fundamentally bound up in the geography, culture, and history of India. The definition and parameters of what actually constitutes 'Hinduism', however, is itself the focus of a significant body of work. As stated above, Hinduism became one of the main unifying forces in India. Nevertheless, creating a clear image of 'Hinduism' was – and continues to be – quite difficult. Many in the academic field are of the consensus that the parameters of Hinduism are fluid, and that those which do

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[80] Alan Marriott, "Nationalism and Nationality in India and Pakistan," *Geography* 85, no. 2 (2000): 174.

[81] Aijaz Ahmad, "Frontier Gandhi: Reflections on Muslim Nationalism in India," *Social Scientist* 33, no. 1/2 (2005): 23.

[82] Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," 144.

[83] Kaviraj, 149.

exist may have been deliberately constructed.[84] In his *Introduction to Hinduism*, Gavin Flood

writes that Hinduism is simultaneously polytheistic, with a vast pantheon of gods, and

centred on a single transcendent God which the numerous deities are manifestations or

aspects thereof.[85] The hierarchy of deities, moreover, is difficult to establish in light of a lack

of unified scripture across social classes and language cultures, as well as the existence of a

myriad of religious narratives and the tendency for regional cultures to prioritise or worship

particular gods who might barely be recognised in other parts of the country. [86] Geoffrey

Oddie points out that the "…Indian religion does not fit easily with what became the

dominant model among Protestant missionary commentators…where Indian religion is

represented as being a brahman-constructed system…" and goes on to argue that the

documented experiences and understandings of British missionaries failed to account for vast

elements of religious practices and beliefs in the subcontinent during the nineteenth century.[87]

This is not to say that there were not some common elements or belief or symbolism

across the subcontinent. Nayanjot Lahiri, when talking about establishing an 'archaeology of

Hinduism', holds that by the early-mid first millennium CE, Brahmanical texts and

frameworks (particularly the *Varna* system) were visible across regions of India.[88] He also

draws attention to emblematic objects and the remains of shrines and temples containing

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[84] Pennington, "Constructing Colonial Dharma," 579; Hatcher, "Bourgeois Vedānta," 299; Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" *Numen* 46, no. 2 (1999): 148; Rupal Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 63; Jyotirmaya Sharma, "Writing Vivekananda," *India International Centre Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2013): 42; Robert Eric Frykenberg, "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 524.

[85] Gavin D. Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

[86] Harsh Verma, "Leadership and Dharma: The Indian Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata and Their Significance for Leadership Today," in *Fictional Leaders*, by Jonathon Gosling and Peter Villiers (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 183.

[87] Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 62.

[88] Lahiri and Bacus, "Exploring the Archaeology of Hinduism," 315.

icons still used in modern Hindu practice, spread through South and Southeast Asia.[89] In light of this, he contests the notion that Hinduism as a cohesive religion was entirely a colonial invention, but in doing so, acknowledges that these common elements would have manifested themselves very differently across time and geography.[90]

This was further consolidated when Hindu intellectuals were drawn into religious and doctrinal comparisons with Christian missionaries. This resulted in a necessary restructuring, at least on a superficial level, of Hinduism, particularly in regards to the caste system and practices which Hindu reformers found incompatible with their evolving model.[91] A common follow-up to this among some academics, such as Julius Lipner, is that in modernising to respond to British constructs, Hinduism as it stands today is purely 'invented'.[92]

The prominent academic Klaus Klostermaier similarly acknowledges that a precise definition of Hinduism is impossible to determine.[93] He argues that despite this impossibility, the term has had, and may continue to have, useful applications particularly in reference to Vedic elements (including the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*).[94] In addition, Klostermaier points to the difficulty of defining Hinduism as a key reason that the term *Hindutva* developed – where *Hindutva* was framed as an inclusive term encompassing the wide variety

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[89] Lahiri and Bacus, 317.

[90] Lahiri and Bacus, 322; David N. Lorenzen, "Who Invented Hinduism?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 4 (1999): 631.

[91] Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," 146.

[92] Julius J. Lipner, "The Rise of 'Hinduism'; Or, How to Invent a World Religion with Only Moderate Success," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 1 (2006): 91–104.

[93] Karel Werner, review of *Review of Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India*, by Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1 (1986): 132.

[94] Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 31.

of different 'Hinduisms' which would "…allow Hindus to transcend sectarian boundaries within India and at the same time distinguish them from the followers of other traditions".[95]

Ultimately, no academic would make the claim that India could be accurately identified generally as a Hindu state.[96] Oommen refers to India as a multinational state on a linguistic, cultural, and religious front. He points out that "…India is the second largest Muslim country in the world; 80 per cent of the world's Zoroastrians live in India; and the population of Indian Christians and Sikhs exceeds the total population of many nation-states in the world…"[97] K.N. Panikkar similarly points to the diverse religions and cultural traditions which contributed to the historical development of Indian culture, "…which is vibrant and alive because of its continuous rejuvenation through the interaction of different cultural streams".[98] These varied strands of influence, however, were exactly what Hindu nationalists would seek to sublimate.

2.4.   Hindu nationalism

Hindu nationalism is one of the key focuses of this thesis, particularly since it rose to mainstream prominence in India during the 1980s through evoking the *Ramayana* and its popular appeal. Despite the lack of a concrete definition or parameters for Hinduism, the general consensus that its construction has played a major role in shaping notions of nationalism – particularly in reaction to the imperial presence of Christianity (and,

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[95] Klostermaier, 32.

[96] Datta, "Hindu Nationalism or Pregmatic Party Politics?," 574; George G. Thomas, "Solving India's Diversity Dilemma: Culture, Constitution, & Nehru," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2005): 22; Amartya Sen, "The Threats to Secular India," *Social Scientist* 21, no. 3/4 (1993): 6, https://doi.org/10.2307/3517628; Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India Since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14; Thomas Pantham, "Indian Secularism and Its Critics: Some Reflections," *The Review of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 539.

[97] Oommen, "Language and Nation," 86.

[98] K.N. Panikkar, "Nationalism and Its Detractors," *Social Scientist* 44, no. 9/10 (2016): 9.

particularly since Partition, the presence of Islam.)[99] Though India's Constitution was

developed along secular lines, Michael Hanne remarks that the intersection of British

colonisation and internal sectarian divisions was a major cause for the development of

'master narratives' in Indian nation building, and that in a Hindu-majority state, it served as

an easy tool for unification.[100] The topic of Hindu nationalism received a significant spike in

academic interest after the rapid rise of the BJP through the 1980s, and especially after the

destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992.[101] Beyond closer examinations of these

contemporary issues (which will be outlined later in this chapter), attention was also drawn to

the historical conditions which precipitated the growth of Hindu nationalism particularly in

the Indian independence movement.

Underlying both of these areas of study, however, lay numerous attempts to unpack

the political and social theory that frame Hindu nationalism, in consideration of the

differences between Western societies and Indian society. Hindu nationalism is characterised

as fundamentalist, due to its exclusionary and militant elements; however, it is also

characterised as radical. Sankaran Krishna refers to the idea of "secular nationalism" when

talking about Indian secularism (which will be expanded upon later in this chapter).[102] While

this term is debatable, it is useful from a purely semantic point of view in representing the

institution against which Hindu nationalism was and is opposed.

The emphasis that Hindu nationalists have long placed on finding a foundational

narrative for India based in Hinduism means that Western academics and theorists on the

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[99] In saying this, it is important to acknowledge the long-standing presence of Christianity and Islam in the subcontinent. Christians have had established villages and regions since the 3rd century, and Muslims have inhabited the area even prior to the Mughal invasion – as early as the 10th century.

[100] Michael Hanne, William D. Crano, and Jeffery Scott Mio, *Warring with Words: Narrative and Metaphor in Politics* (New York: Psychology Press, 2014), 211.

[101] Amrita Basu, "Reflections on Community Conflicts and the State in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (1997): 391.

[102] Sankaran Krishna, "Methodical Worlds: Partition, Secularism, and Communalism in India," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 2 (2002): 200.

subject of community building through narratives are often called upon by writers on *Hindutva* and Hindu nationalism. In referring to Anderson's 'imagined community', Sankaran Krishna highlights the existence of Pakistan as a primary reason that the exclusionary model of Hindu nationalists is able to function; Muslims, according to this model, have their own state and therefore can never be fully party to the shared narrative of Indian society.[103]

Brian Hole postulates that a key aim of Hindu nationalism and supporters of *Hindutva* has been to "…create a large body of work that emphasizes the continuity of Hindu culture in India from the earliest times, and denigrates the contribution of other cultures…" in order to realign mainstream understandings of Indian history.[104] The *Ramayana*, alongside the *Mahabharata* and the Vedas, having been established through the colonial construction of Hinduism, were therefore readily available to serve as this body of work.[105] The *Ramayana* in particular has been an important tool in establishing and reinforcing this communal narrative, as its limited array of principal characters, comparatively straightforward storyline, framing of Classical India as a 'golden age', and clear delineation of ideal morals and social behaviour make for a well-rounded guiding narrative.[106] The use of texts like the *Ramayana* is part of a larger goal of establishing that the Indian 'nation' has a continuous lineage which may be traced back to the time of the *Ramayana* and the Vedas.[107]

A key area of disagreement is whether Hindu nationalism and Indian nationalism are equivalent. John Zavos presents two models of Hindu nationalism; one where it is formed from the combination of Indian nationalism and communalism, and one where it operates as a

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[103] Krishna, 197.

[104] Hole, "A Many-Cornered Thing," 211.

[105] The *Mahabharata* – particularly the *Bhagavad Gita* – is also evoked with some frequency. However, the text is vastly more complex in storyline, character, and theme. The text's emphasis on problematising even the saintliest of figures means that excessive use of the text has been carefully avoided by Hindu nationalists.

[106] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 80.

[107] Panikkar, "Nationalism and Its Detractors," 11.

wholly separate entity.[108] This operates in opposition to secular Indian nationalism. A.M. Rajasekhariah suggests that Indian nationalism – the kind espoused by Gandhi and Nehru – is more all-encompassing, aims to be compatible with secularism, and takes care to emphasise respect for the plurality of religions and cultures in India.[109] Hindu nationalism, meanwhile, privileges a narrative where India is the homeland of Hinduism, and where Hindus are the 'original' inhabitants of the subcontinent while Muslims and Christians are the product of outside invasion (or at best, incursion).

The general consensus is that ideally, Indian nationalism would not have been able to fuel Hindu nationalism, based as it should have been on (imposed) secular principles.[110] The desire of political figures in the years surrounding Indian independence and Partition to establish a secular state was fundamentally undercut by the necessity for establishing a clear master narrative, which allowed for the continued use of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as nation-binding myths. Amalendu Misra, alongside others, therefore points out that despite constitutional secularism, India continues to be "…in the throes of religious nationalism".[111] Sudipta Kaviraj remarks that, while Hinduism (and Islam) largely maintained their population in India, the former was undoubtedly reshaped both by imposed colonial ideologies and the need to bring 'archaic' practices in line with the ethics of an ideally secular state.[112] This was

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[108] John Zavos, "Searching for Hindu Nationalism in Modern Indian History: Analysis of Some Early Ideological Developments," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 32 (1999): 2269.

[109] A.M. Rajasekhariah, "Jawaharlal Nehru's Contribution to Secularism in India - An Estimate," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (1987): 218.

[110] Basu, "Reflections on Community Conflicts and the State in India"; Omar Khalidi, "Hinduising India: Secularism in Practice," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1545–62; Mukul Kesavan, "India's Embattled Secularism," *The Wilson Quarterly (1976-)* 27, no. 1 (2003): 61–67.

[111] Amalendu Misra, "Hindu Nationalism and Muslim Minority Rights in India," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 7, no. 1 (2000): 2; Basu, "Reflections on Community Conflicts and the State in India"; Zavos, "Searching for Hindu Nationalism in Modern Indian History"; Upreti, "Nationalism in South Asia"; Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation."

[112] Kaviraj, "Modernity and Politics in India," 146.

an apparent compromise which created space for the rise of the Hindu nationalist model

rooted in the principles espoused by *Hindutva*.[113]

2.5.   Indian secularism

To understand the rise of Hindu nationalism, it is vital to consider the place and shape

of secularism in the postcolonial Indian state. As with nationalism, secularism has been

widely acknowledged as a newly imposed structure on postcolonial nations, and in India has

only been present since the Indian Constitution was adopted in 1950.[114] This transference of

principles and political theory, Jakob de Roover points out, is not necessarily effective where

these political constructs are based in historical, cultural, and metaphysical conceptions (as

they tend to be).[115] He therefore emphasises the importance of examining secularism in India

in light of its foreign origins, and is considered to need its own analytical framework. For

instance, Ashis Nandy suggests that a 'hierarchy of secularism' is a better approach to

examining Indian secularism.[116] His framework is based on the notion that Western

secularism is strictly defined as the confinement of religion to the private sphere, while non-

Western secularism revolves around "equal respect for religions", and does not necessarily

involve a distinct separation of religion and state.[117] Nandy argues that this means that while

India's secularism is modelled on that of the Western world, it is fundamentally rooted in

religion. Indeed, the word "secularism" was not used in the Preamble of the Indian

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[113] Kumar, *Gandhi Meets Primetime*.

[114] Javeed Alam, "Ethically Speaking, What Should Be the Meaning of Separation for Secularism in India," *Social Scientist* 35, no. 3/4 (2007): 4.

[115] Jakob De Roover, Sarah Claerhout, and S. N. Balagangadhara, "Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of Secularism in India," *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (2011): 572.

[116] Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," *Alternatives* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 177–94.

[117] Nandy, 180.

Constitution until a 1976 amendment).[118] The urban educated elites who formed the INC and spearheaded the independence movement were forced to balance the democratic British legal and political framework left to them with the religious undertones upon which significant elements of the Indian Independence movement rested.[119]

De Roover describes the current focus of the Indian secularism debate as "...diagnosing the crisis that secularism is undergoing because of the rise of Hindu nationalism." This debate is centred on a) whether secularism has been at all successful in the postcolonial nation and b) the extent to which it is a feasible long-term model for India. A number of academics argue that despite the flaws in Indian secularism in practice, it has operated for the most part successfully.[120] . The majority of the field of research in the area, therefore, appears to be split three ways. The first applies the Western model of secularism, albeit in a more abstract form, to the topic at hand. The second – as popularised by Ashis Nandy – completely rejects secularism as a functioning construct in Indian society, especially as it may be considered a colonial imposition.[121] The third (criticised above) questions whether secularism is necessary, basing this scepticism on the confusing and paradoxical notion that Hinduism is inherently secular and universally-encompassing (so long as other religious groups are willing to accept this).[122]

It is undoubtable that Indian society continues to be pluralistic. Sanjay Ruparella stresses that the postcolonial Indian state, despite Partition's undeniable separation of inhabitants of British India on the basis of religion, has successfully managed to develop a

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[118] Pantham, "Indian Secularism and Its Critics," 525.

[119] Maya Tudor, "Explaining Democracy's Origins: Lessons from South Asia," *Comparative Politics* 45, no. 3 (2013): 256.

[120] Khalidi, "Hinduising India," 1546.

[121] Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance."

[122] Ashutosh Varshney, "Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety," *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (1993): 232.

secularist model which recognises and protects the country's multiple cultural identities.[123]
Amalendu Misra further points out that despite the formation of Pakistan as a Muslim state in 1947, the considerable presence of Muslims as a minority meant that constitutional safeguards were considered particularly important by the founding fathers of postcolonial India.[124]

However, there are also numerous academics who disagree with this. Omar Khalidi, on for instance, argues that far from being a secular state, India essentially practices assimilation, particularly through the conflation of 'Hindu' and 'Indian', resulting in the erasure of, in particular, Muslims and Christians.[125] Priam Singh extends this to the Indian Constitution itself, claiming that while the text does not contain explicitly Hindu elements, some of the language used – such as the word 'Bharat', which is presented as synonymous with 'India' is drawn from Hindu literature – was deliberately chosen to appeal to religious communities.[126] Peter Morey expresses agreement with this idea that the Congress party were more focused on absorbing religious communities than demanding uniform secularism, and cites historian Mukul Kesavan in contending that secular politics was only adopted by the Indian elite in order to facilitate this absorption.[127]

Another issue that emerges on the academic front is the perception, particularly among Indian academics, that unlike historically Christian states, a separation between religion and state is not needed in India as Hinduism is "…pluralistic and flexible and can therefore be a better source of toleration…"[128] Mani Shankar Aiyar, among others, is a fervent proponent of this notion, going so far as to say that India's spiritual history proves

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[123] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation."
[124] Misra, "Hindu Nationalism and Muslim Minority Rights in India," 3.
[125] Khalidi, "Hinduising India," 1546.
[126] Pritam Singh, "Hindu Bias in India's 'Secular' Constitution: Probing Flaws in the Instruments of Governance," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 6 (2005): 911.
[127] Peter Morey and Alex Tickell, *Alternative Indias: Writing, Nation and Communalism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), xvi.
[128] Alam, "Ethically Speaking, What Should Be the Meaning of Separation for Secularism in India," 4.

that to be truly religious, one must be secular.[129] Sanghamitra Padhy suggests that the perception of Hinduism as inherently inclusive was the very reason that the term secularism was not written into the Constitution until 1976, as it was not considered necessary.[130] Padhy goes on to criticise this view as inconsistent with minority interests, stating that "…the problem with such notions is that they seek to create uniformity based on oneness rather than allowing a space for diversity."[131]

In all, the nature of India's secularism is a contentious issue in both the academic sphere and the nation's political structures. The ambiguity of secularism and the secular nationalist narrative is part of the reason why Hindu nationalists have been able to establish their own national narrative through the use of Hindu religious texts like the *Ramayana*.

2.6. The *Ramayana*

The *Ramayana* is the core of this thesis, and its narrative has been significant to the construction of Indian nationality, the reinforcement and perpetuation of existing gender paradigms, and the consolidation of Hindu nationalism. Unfortunately, literature specifically focused on the *Ramayana* is limited, and contradictions and controversies emerge from its very composition date. In her work *The Hindus*, Wendy Doniger dates the story of Rama to anywhere from 200BCE-200CE; however, this range refers specifically to the composition of the Valmiki *Ramayana*.[132] There are a number of notable interpretations of the text, which

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[129] Mani Shankar Aiyar, "Secularism, Atheism, Agnosticism," *India International Centre Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2008): 124; Naidu Ashok, "Secularism Re-Examined," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 68, no. 3 (2007): 609.

[130] Sanghamitra Padhy, "Secularism and Justice: A Review of Indian Supreme Court Judgments," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 46/47 (2004): 5027–32.

[131] Padhy, 5028.

[132] Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212.

are often more popular than the much longer and complex 'original' of Valmiki.[133] The multiplicity of narratives complicates the ability to fully encompass the nuances of the text from a literary perspective, while its background in the oral form means contextualising the text within a purely historical framework is also quite difficult. A cultural approach to the study of the *Ramayana* is perhaps the most straightforward, but once again the obscurity of its origins and its diverse manifestations means that there is no easy way to offer a concise overview of the text as a cultural product.[134]

Textual analysis on the *Ramayana*, particularly in English, is difficult to find in significant quantities. Rajagopal insists that the text has gained an extraordinary amount of power over the centuries, claiming that in light of the myriad of regional interpretations and forms the narrative has taken, "…to know the *Ramayana* is to know India, it is said."[135] The academic publications available, however, are not particularly rich in detail or scope (Rajagopal himself only provides a brief critique of the lack of concentration paid to the text as a potent entity, rather than undertaking his own analysis), in spite of the fact that their authors are mostly in agreement that "…the story of Rama…became the major and most widely accessible repository of religious and social ideas for mass audiences in eastern India."[136] Of the few in-depth academic works focussed on the *Ramayana*, some approach it from a comparative angle, particularly to the *Mahabharata*, while others focus strictly on literary techniques and thematic elements within the text (with little, if any, reference to its impact on or reflection upon Indian society, whether past or present).

Another key difficulty with the study of the *Ramayana* is that, while Valmiki's text does exist in written form, oral tradition features significantly in the dissemination of Indian

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[133] Mandakranta Bose, *The Ramayana Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[134] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 86.
[135] Rajagopal, 87.
[136] Bose, *The Ramayana Revisited*, 10.

narrative.[137] Velcheru Narayana Rao posits that in the oral retelling of stories and themes from well-known stories such as the *Ramayana* over centuries, characters cease to be bound to the confines of their authors' ideas and intentions, and become "…as familiar as your next-door neighbours".[138] This complicates efforts to definitively offer interpretations of the narrative without referring to a particular edition or variant, particularly as oral traditions are constantly evolving and are difficult to trace without written records. A.K. Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" is a rare and significant example of academic study aimed to delve into the complexities of the *Ramayana* tradition; Ramanujan highlights examples of major different "tellings" of the *Ramayana* across language and geography, while avoiding narrowing focus on any one particular version at the expense of a holistic view.[139]

Another relevant area of *Ramayana* study focuses on the *Ramayana* as a text intended not merely to provide a mythic history, but also to offer models for social structure and action. On a different note, Swarna Rajagopalan considers the role played by the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as instructional manuals for strategy and politics in consideration of the fact that both texts would have been written for and targeted at Brahmins and Kshatriyas.[140] While she makes the dubious claim that these texts are equally as relevant in the modern world "…although prevailing moral standards are arguably lower in today's world…" Rajagopalan's focus is specifically on the way the texts reflect Indian political ideas (and military) ideas.[141] On a similar line, Harsh Verma's "Leadership and Dharma: The Indian Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and Their Significance for Leadership Today" provides

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[137] Dinesh Sakalani, "Questioning the Questioning of Ramayanas," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 85 (2004): 54.

[138] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 235.

[139] A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, by Paula Richman (California: University of California Press, 1991), 22–49.

[140] Bajpai, Basit, and Krishnappa, *India's Grand Strategy*.

[141] Bajpai, Basit, and Krishnappa, 33.

an interesting approach to the text in regards to its potential influence on modern politics and political leadership.[142] Verma's analysis focuses on key leadership practices and hierarchies driven by understandings of *dharma* which are depicted in the text: hereditary leadership; leadership by tradition; and *dharma* as moral guidance. While Verma does not apply these models to real-world examples of leadership models, his interpretation illustrates the approach towards the text used by political leaders of both secularism and *Hindutva* in India.[143]

In light of Verma, a more recent focus of academic attention is the relationship between Sagar's 1980s televised serial, *Ramayan*, and its role in enhancing and amplifying the Hindu nationalist movement during the early rise of the BJP. A popular school of thought was that the release of the *Ramayan* contributed to planting the seeds of Hindu nationalism in the wider Indian population.[144] While this is disputable considering that the swell of support for the BJP began in the early-mid 1980s, it is undoubtable that the *Ramayana* significantly boosted the speed with which the BJP and other Hindu nationalist groups gained political and social power.[145] Shanti Kumar highlights this as indicative of the significant role played by electronic capitalism in shaping the parameters of national identity and community. In a country where barriers of language, culture, and vastly differing state governments have been a major obstacle in establishing a cohesive sense of national identity, the emergence of transnational television and media in the 1980s has had the ability to transcend boundaries.[146] Kumar's work also highlights the role of Doodarshan, the state-run television channel introduced in 1959 which aired Sagar's *Ramayan* as part of what she argues was a larger

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[142] Verma, "Leadership and Dharma."
[143] Verma, 201.
[144] Sevanti Ninan, "The Public Address System," *India International Centre Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2006): 245.
[145] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*.
[146] Kumar, *Gandhi Meets Primetime*, 2.

nationalist agenda.[147] Kumar emphasises the fact that Doodarshan was key to establishing

hegemonic representations of nationalism and national identity, and also served as a vehicle

to combat the influences of foreign television and commercial cinema; as a government

enterprise the station was able to carefully tailor their content to reinforce these messages,

even in content not based in religion.[148] Badri Narayan considers the role of Sagar's *Ramayan*

in the Dalit 'caste', and the BJP's exploitation of the fact that some Dalit communities claim

a lineage going back to Valmiki. In doing so, Narayan suggests that the popularity of the

television serial allowed the BJP to more efficiently draw on the classical *Ramayana*

tradition.[149]

Purnima Mankekar offers an insightful exploration of the intersection of female

identity in India as intrinsically bound in with the nationalist movement and cultivated by the

television boom in the 1970s and 1980s. Mankekar's work employs autobiographical,

ethnographic, gender, and political analysis, with a focus on the presence and voices of

women in relation to Hindu nationalism. In doing so, Mankekar examines key themes of the

Ramayan, their reflection on traditional gender assumptions in India, and the influence this

depiction has had on the self-perception of Indian Womanhood through an ethnographic

model.[150]

2.7. Gender in India

While the *Ramayana* is the core of the thesis, its main focus is on gender in India, and

how the history and lives of women in India have been constrained by the text as a

representation of modern Hinduism. The role of gender is a significant theme in the

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[147] Kumar, 2.
[148] Kumar, 36.
[149] Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*.
[150] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*.

Ramayana, and this is noted by a number of writers on the topic; particularly by female Indian writers after the establishment of the Indian Association of Women's Studies in 1982 and a consequent swell in the output of Women's Studies in India.[151] Gendered narrative and sub-narrative is rife in the *Ramayana* – something which is, according to Sutherland Goldman, essential to the structural integrity of the actual verse (*kanda*.)[152]

Velcheru Narayana Rao points out that the binary gender construct which emerged through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and cast men as protectors while tying women to passive roles, was a narrative form that reflected the cultural ideologies of some, but by no means all, Indian communities.[153] In a similar light, Usha Zacharias reinterprets Anderson's 'imagined community' to frame women as "…a metaphor for the erasure of her citizenship, even as her sexuality forms the narrative hinge for…the imagined community."[154] This is exemplified by the term 'subaltern', a Marxist term developed by the Italian Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci in the early 1900s.[155] The subaltern has become a paradigm used in particular South Asian scholars in postcolonial studies to explore the roles of the socially marginalised in colonial and postcolonial India, and the Subaltern Studies Collective developed by the historian Ranajit Guha has played a significant role in the study of postcolonial South Asia.[156] Gayatri Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" applies this paradigm to women and the fact that while women do have voices in postcolonial India, these voices are limited and shaped by prevailing expectations. Thus, the space that they occupy in

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[151] Mallarika Sinha Roy, "Disciplining Gender and Gendering Discipline: Women's Studies in Contemporary India," in *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 160.

[152] Bose, *The Ramayana Revisited*, 10.

[153] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 233.

[154] Usha Zacharias, "Trial by Fire: Gender, Power, and Citizenship in Narratives of the Nation," *Social Text* 19, no. 4 (2001): 29.

[155] Marcus E. Green, "Rethinking the Subaltern and the Question of Censorship in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks," *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 4 (2011): 387.

[156] Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., "South Asian Studies: Futures Past," in *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India*, Cultures of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 287.

discourse is to a certain extent predetermined and renders anything outside of their allocated dialogue unheard.[157]

Another significant focus of study is women's rights and quality of life in postcolonial India, and the way that prevailing traditional and patriarchal views (particularly those espoused by Hindu nationalists and framed by the *Ramayana*) continue to shape the experiences of women.[158] Many academics agree that, particularly in the decades immediately following independence, women's rights stalled or even regressed.[159] Part of this is because female independence and sexuality in India is commonly seen as the result of Western influence – and therefore, un-Indian, as opposed to an adherence to 'traditional' values of binary gender roles.[160] Moreover, the continued influence of traditional understandings of gender mean that women are seen as less valuable to potential parents. This has manifested itself in the key areas of female foeticide and infanticide, the continuation of chauvinistic practices such as dowry, denial of education to women, and barriers to women who either wish to enter politics, or who wish to take on more 'serious' political roles.[161] A number of academics highlight the Hindu Code Bill (adopted by the Indian government between 1955 and 1956) as a telling example of key women's issues in the postcolonial period, and the prevailing attitudes at the time which diminished the potential

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[157] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

[158] Kamala Visweswaran et al., "The Hindutva View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2009): 101–12; Indira Mahendravada, "Public Policy: From Welfare to Empowerment of Women in India," in *Capability-Promoting Policies*, 1st ed., Enhancing Individual and Social Development (Bristol: Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2018), 63–84; Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman, "Communalising Gender/Engendering Community: Women, Legal Discourse and Saffron Agenda," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 17 (1993): 35–44; Mangala Subramaniam, "The Indian Women's Movement," *Contemporary Sociology* 33, no. 6 (2004): 635–39; Vicky Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism: The Travails of the Women's Reservation Bill," *Comparative Politics* 39, no. 1 (2006): 63–82.

[159] Mytheli Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India: Researching the Past, Reflecting on the Present," in *Making Womens Histories: Beyond National Perspectives* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 164.

[160] Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India*, 3.

[161] Nandini Deo, *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The Role of Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 10.

effectiveness of the Bill. Chitra Sinha outlines the discourse around motherhood which occurred in parliamentary debates about the Bill, exploring the areas of child guardianship and custody, divorce, and adoption before and after the Bill's enactment.[162] These debates, according to Sinha, demonstrate that the Bill was certainly representative of the gradual emergence of women as liberated individuals; but that there nevertheless remained a number of significant barriers to female emancipation from the private sphere.[163]

There has been a growing focus on the increasing deficit in female children as a result of female foeticide and infanticide.[164] This has been widely acknowledged as a significant result of the intersection between class, socio-cultural tradition, and religion; all of which contribute to a setting where female children are, in essence, not valued; particularly for those of lower castes and socio-economic status. Tulsi Patel links this, as well as the continued practice of dowry, to girls often being pulled out of school after primary or junior high school in order to care for male siblings or aid their mothers.[165] This establishes an internalised understanding of school education, beyond basic literacy, as subordinate to learning to be good housewives. A lack of education therefore obviously minimises already reduced employment chances. Mukesh Eswaran also raises an interesting potential link between the male concern regarding paternity of their children and the need to ensure social restrictions on the mobility of women; greater work opportunities may well represent a threat to women

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[162] Chitra Sinha, "Images of Motherhood: The Hindu Code Bill Discourse," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 43 (2007): 49–57.

[163] Sinha, 56.

[164] Tulsi Patel, *Sex-Selective Abortion in India: Gender, Society and New Reproductive Technologies* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2007), 21; Jay Winter and Michael Teitelbaum, eds., "Population and Politics in India," in *The Global Spread of Fertility Decline: Population, Fear, and Uncertainty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 139–68; Siuli Sarkar, *Gender Disparity in India: Unheard Whimpers* (New Delhi: PHI Learning Pvt. Ltd., 2016).

[165] Patel, *Sex-Selective Abortion in India*, 34.

who work outside their homes, meaning that "…nonparticipation in market work has become a signal of greater responsibility."[166]

Women might attempt to enter the workforce at a later age when they have fulfilled familial responsibilities; however, this minimises their potential for career advancement when they are forced to compete with men.[167] Indira Mahendravada points out that there has certainly been a rise in gender parity in education; but that the unequal structures that have been the focus of study since Independence continue to persist.[168] This also extends to female representation in government; where, while local politics and councils have experienced a significant rise in female participation, state and national legislatures remain bereft of a significant female proportion.[169] This is a fact which has been acknowledged by Indian academics since the 1990s.[170] It continues to be a major issue, where even a proposal for women in parliament (supported by both Congress and the BJP) does not stop women from being marginalised from the actual decision-making processes within their own political organisations.[171] Similarly, Zoya Hasan draws attention to the fact that the Hindu right has, for example, successfully mobilised its female base, this "…was not progressive or emancipatory politics", instead using women as a tool for achieving the Hindu nationalist goals of the Sangh Parivar.[172] Sudha Pai points out that a major part of this is the imbalance in education and independent finances; while women have succeeded in Indian politics since

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[166] Visweswaran et al., "The Hindutva View of History," 312.

[167] Manuka Khanna, "Political Participation of Women in India," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 70, no. 1 (2009): 57.

[168] Mahendravada, "Public Policy," 64.

[169] Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo, *The Impact of Gender Quotas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 208.

[170] Himani Bannerji, "Patriarchy in the Era of Neoliberalism: The Case of India," *Social Scientist* 44, no. 3/4 (2016): 3–27; Rajeev Dhavan, "Reservations for Women: The Way Forward," *National Law School of India Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1–45; Madhu Kishwar, "Women and Politics: Beyond Quotas," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 43 (1996): 2867–74.

[171] Khanna, "Political Participation of Women in India," 57.

[172] Zoya Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 6 (2010): 952.

independence, much of this has come down to the role of political dynasties in allowing entry and efficient function within the democratic system.[173]

A number of academic and feminist writers have pointed out the role of education (or lack of education) available to Indian women. Nandini Manjrekar points out that this had been a troublingly peripheral concern for the women's movement in the post-colonial period.[174] She acknowledges that, particularly since the 1980s, the women's studies movement has begun to contribute in larger numbers to drawing attention to the importance of women's education as a tool for promoting equality. This has also been acknowledged (including by Manjrekar) as partially due to the fault of the Indian education system itself, where sexist values and structures have dominated throughout the 20th and 21st century.

Narendra Nath Kalia, in a similar vein, highlights the gendering of characters in lessons. Men play dominant roles in textbooks, and women are often characterised as passive and domestically-oriented.[175] This is further cemented by the mandatory study of mytho-religious texts such as the *Ramayana* from a young age.[176] There is also research related to the intersection between class and gender oppression; where class-specific gender roles are yet another imposition placed upon a population already burdened by gender discrimination.[177] Traude Pillai-Vetschera, for instance, stresses that the intersection of class

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[173] Sudha Pail, "From Dynasty to Legitimacy: Women Leaders in Indian Politics," *India International Centre Quarterly* 39, no. 3/4 (2012): 111.

[174] Nandini Manjrekar, "Contemporary Challenges to Women's Education: Towards an Elusive Goal?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 43 (2003): 4577–82.

[175] Narendra Nath Kalia, "Women and Sexism: Language of Indian School Textbooks," *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no. 18 (1986): 794.

[176] This is not a trend limited to India. In Australia, for instance, organisations such as Chinmaya Mission run classes for children as young as four or five, which in a similar vein to Christian Sunday School, emphasise the teaching of the *Ramayana* and other famous Hindu narratives.

[177] Ratna Ghosh, "Human Rights and Sexism in Indian Education," *India International Centre Quarterly* 13, no. 3/4 (1986): 58; Deo, *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India*, 11.

and gender is particularly damaging to, Dalit women as an oppressed group within an already oppressed minority.[178]

Unfortunately, while the majority of the above-referenced researchers indicate a link between gender representation and roles in mythology and religion, few make any specific references, either to particular plot/character moments, or to key themes. Many also reference a common Indian narrative of Vedic history, where women were said to have held considerable freedom and power;[179] despite the lack of evidence for this, particularly when considering the *Ramayana* and other mythic texts composed during that period.[180] Mallarika Sinha Roy also points out that in the aftermath of the first Indian national conference on Women's Studies in 1981 that:

> …a critical engagement with feminist theories and politics…which almost inevitably would have produced multiple positions regarding political practice, was considered best avoided because women's groups and organisations feared that a recognition of differences within their ranks 'would allow anti-feminists to declare that they knew women were incapable of working together'.[181]

Another key problem with academia relating to women in education and employment, which is not the fault of academics, is the difficulty of access to current and accurate data. As of 2018, census data from 2011 has still not been formally tabulated or summarised by the Indian Census Board, and raw figures are available only in the form of unformatted Excel

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178 S. M. Micheal, *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2007), 235–59.
179 Ghosh, "Human Rights and Sexism in Indian Education," 59.
180 Ghosh, 63.
181 Roy, "Disciplining Gender and Gendering Discipline," 160.

tables.[182] The most contemporary summary of census results on the website is from the 2001 census. The accuracy of this data is also difficult to ascertain; aside from the immense population, a large percentage of Indian citizens live in rural areas, have no permanent address, are illiterate, and/or have no formal identification.[183] Michelle Hackett notes that, as with other developing nations, another significant problem is that accurate and up-to-date crime statistics (particularly those relating to violence against women) are difficult to obtain, complicating efforts to produce data-driven examinations of issues such as domestic violence on a national scale.[184]

2.8.   Hindu nationalism, the BJP and the *Ramayana* from the 1980s

The emergence of Hindu nationalism and the theoretical framework for examining it is a key theme in this thesis, as outlined above. In terms of historical focus, the period from the 1980s to the present day is the most illustrative and relevant area of study when exploring the use of the *Ramayana* and its perpetuation of gender frameworks in constructing a Hindu nationalist narrative.

The wave of support for Hindu nationalism and the rise of the BJP in the 1980s was, according to Amrita Basu, unexpected and considered by most academics and observers to be a temporary phenomenon.[185] When it was obvious that this was not the case, however, two key causes were identified. Basu links this rise in the popularity of far-right wing groups to the growing view among the lower and middle class of the INC as spineless, inefficient, and

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[182] Government of India, "Census of India Website : Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India."

[183] Ashish Bose, "Accuracy of the 2001 Census: Highlights of Post-Enumeration Survey," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 22 (2008): 15.

[184] Michelle T. Hackett, "Domestic Violence against Women: Statistical Analysis of Crimes across India," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42, no. 2 (2011): 267.

[185] Amrita Basu, "Caste and Class: The Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India," *Harvard International Review* 18, no. 3 (1996): 28–79.

unnecessarily bureaucratic.[186] B.C Upreti agrees, arguing that the failure of the INC to

establish a non-religious narrative for the postcolonial Indian state undermined the liberal

secular nationalism upon which these core institutions are based. This therefore left both the

INC and the core value of India as a non-religious, secular nation, more vulnerable to

challenges from ethno-regional movements and fundamentalism based upon notions of

Hinduness as the core of Indian identity.[187] Similarly, Himani Bannerji points to the fact that

the liberal and secular Indian state which the INC represented "...held an ambiguity at

heart."[188] In contrast, the general consensus is that the BJP has rarely denied its association

with Hinduism; in 1989, the then BJP president L. K. Advani told the BBC that "it would not

be wrong to call the BJP a Hindu party".[189]

Another reason that is occasionally cited as a catalyst for the rise of conservatism and

cultural/religious national identity is the rapid rate at which India is becoming globalised –

and also, the discord this results in a largely cash-based economy and a nation still largely

inhabiting rural areas. The resulting need for some sense of national cohesion and identity

has, according to Rupal Oza, resulted in fortifying gender and sexual identities, and stricter

and more homogenous views of India's cultural and religious narratives – also involving the

prioritisation of certain narratives such as the *Ramayana*.[190] This is an argument which has

been increasingly made since the serialisation of the Valmiki *Ramayana* by Sagar in the

1980s.[191] Arvind Rajagopal, in *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the*

Reshaping of the Public in India, explores the close relationship between televised media and

the rise of Hindu nationalism in the late 1900s. In discussing the release of Sagar's *Ramayan*

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[186] Basu, 30.
[187] Upreti, "Nationalism in South Asia," 542.
[188] Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male," 376.
[189] Abdul Gafoor Abdul Majeed Noorani, *The RSS and the BJP: A Division of Labour* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2000), 101.
[190] Oza, *The Making of Neoliberal India*, 2.
[191] Cusack, "The Gods on Television," 279.

and its politicisation, Rajagopal contends that the series, whose release coincided with a swell in the Ram Janmabhumi movement aimed at demolishing the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, was capitalised upon by the BJP to expand the popularity of the party and the movement.[192]

In a similar vein, Purnima Mankekar describes the role of state-run television, where Sagar's *Ramayan* aired, as a significant part of the rapid developments in cultural shifts during the 1980s, particularly those linked to Hindu nationalism.[193] Beyond television, particularly moving into the twenty-first century, Achin Vainak indicates that rapid developments in information and communications technology has facilitated in the knock-on effects of protests and ideologies; something which has played a significant part in the ability for the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organisations to mobilise and galvanise its base.[194]

Part of the consolidation of these kinds of narratives has been, as with gender, the manipulation of education. In early 2004, Nandini Sundar pointed to the fact that RSS schools (managed by the organisation Vidya Bharati) frame Christianity as a key instrument of colonialism, and Islam as representative of the invasion and establishment of the Mughal Empire.[195] This then easily leads to claims in the textbooks brought out by Vidya Bharati that equate 'holy land' with 'motherland' and argue that Christianity and Islam have their own. According to the RSS, therefore, only Hindus can be truly loyal Indian citizens as it is the birthplace and holy land of Hinduism.[196]

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[192] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 30.

[193] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 165.

[194] Achin Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," in *Transforming Classes: Socialist Register 2015* (London: Merlin Press, 2014), 71.

[195] Nandini Sundar, "Teaching to Hate: RSS' Pedagogical Programme," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 16 (2004): 1610.

[196] Sundar, 1611.

2.9. Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, there is certainly a significant amount of literature focused upon the subcontinent; however, these fields operate for the most part independently. The space where the study of religion, gender, and politics in India intersect remains relatively sparsely covered, particularly regarding the relationship between specific religious texts and the politics of exclusion in establishing the postcolonial Indian state.

This chapter outlined some of the key issues relating to this thesis, and the current field of research surrounding them. The first of these was the role of narrative in nation-building, and the complications that arise when attempting to establish one unifying narrative in a multilingual, multicultural state. The second surrounded the place and shape of Hinduism in the subcontinent, and its effect on the development of Hindu nationalism and secularism. Here, it was established that secularism in India is difficult to define, with most models failing to capture the complexities of a Western mode of political theory forced upon a non-Western region. The *Ramayana*, as the third area of research, has been acknowledged widely to be significant to the cultural, historical, and political makeup of the subcontinent; however, there is limited work which demonstrates these links in a cohesive way, while simultaneously recognising the amorphous nature of this narrative tradition.[197]

The field of gender studies theory, while large, was found to be largely applicable to Western cultures and narrative. The virgin/whore complex (which will be explored in the next chapter), for instance, while rich with potential application to literature studies and gender studies in India, has been rarely utilised (with the notable exception of Vijaisri's work).[198] The study of the subaltern broke this mould; while it is a theory applicable to all minorities and oppressed groups rather than specifically focused on gender, Spivak and other

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[197] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 235.
[198] Priyadarshini Vijaisri, *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial South India* (New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, 2004).

South Asian writers have successfully taken it from its original Italian Marxist context and situated it in the postcolonial Indian state. In gender studies through the lenses of anthropology, politics, history, and cultural studies, there exists a significant body of work. However, a common weakness was in expanding cursory mentions of the importance of culture and religion into cohesive intersectional examinations.

This is made particularly difficult by the fact that the majority of the academics dominating the field of subcontinental studies come from a Western, white academic background (including Flood and Klostermaier). Part of this seems to stem from the notion of the insider/outsider approach to academia, and the propensity for Western academics to look down upon or dismiss work coming from non-Western scholars; in 2015, Wendy Doniger told an Indian newspaper that:

> Certainly as someone raised outside, I was struck by aspects of that tradition that an insider would have noticed or, perhaps, appreciated in the way that I did. By not belonging to any particular Indian community, I was free to learn as much as I could…[199]

Doniger's statement skims over the fact that, following this logic, all Western academia pertaining to the West should be regarded in the same light. Moreover, she does not acknowledge the fact that her process of learning is filtered through Western concepts and ideas, which "…need to be adjusted to the specific character of the Indian social, political and economic contexts".[200] Mangala Subramaniam similarly criticises Western academics for overlooking or marginalising Indian literature on women's studies and women's activism,

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[199] Srivathsan Nadadhur, "Wendy Doniger's Rise after the Ban," *The Hindu*, October 30, 2015, sec. Metroplus, http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/wendy-donigers-rise-after-the-ban/article7823121.ece.

[200] Susanne Kranz, *Between Rhetoric and Activism* (Münster: LIT Verlag Münster, 2015), 282.

attributing this to a subconsciously imperialist tendency to regard Indian women as victims, not agents of change.[201]

However, this is not necessarily a shared view among Western academics. Gavin Flood, for instance, has called for increased tolerance and acceptance of insider standpoints and analysis.[202] With this in mind, this thesis addresses the gaps in the analytical literature by drawing upon what is available to make connections between these disparate areas of research, in order to highlight the unique place of the *Ramayana* as a powerful literary, mythological and cultural force. In doing so, it demonstrates how the embeddedness of the *Ramayana* in Indian culture and history has been exploited as a tool for Hindu nationalist goals.

Considering the literature outlined above, the next chapter highlights the specific academic and methodological approaches that this thesis employs to provide a foundation that is convenient for examining the intersecting forces of religious narrative and national identity, secularism and nationalism, discourse and literature analysis, and gender.

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[201] Subramaniam, "The Indian Women's Movement," 638.

[202] Nancy K. Levene and Gavin Flood, "Response to Gavin Flood, ' Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religion,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (2006): 59.

3. Methodological approach

The ksatriyas accepted the brahmans as their superiors

and the vaiśyas were subservient to the ksatriyas.

The sudras, devoted to their proper duty

served the other three classes.

(*The Ramayana*, Bālakāṇḍa, 5:17.)[203]

3.1.   Summary of relevant methodological areas

The previous chapter outlined the areas of relevant literature to this thesis. This chapter will describe a similarly diverse methodological approach. The varied subject matter of this thesis means that there are four key methodological lenses being applied to address different aspects of its argument. The first focuses on the approach to reading narrative and narrative ecology as a basis for the construction of community and nation. The second provides a standing definition for the shape and limits of Indian secularism, as distinct from the normative use of the word when talking about Western society. It also situates Indian secularism within the context of Hindu nationalism, and establishes the parameters of both in opposition to one another. The third outlines the method of analysis and interpretation of the *Ramayana* that this thesis employs, in consideration of the tensions between oral and written textual traditions. The fourth lens is two-fold and focuses on gender theory; firstly, in relation to literary interpretation, and secondly regarding historical and cultural analysis.

3.2.   Narrative and community-building

This thesis demonstrates that narrative is fundamental to the construction of national identity. In the case of many nation-states and communities, this is based in ways of

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[203] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 137.

recording history and historical narratives. The methodological approach I am employing

highlights narratives like the Ramayana as structures that make collective meaning, in this

case for the Indian nation.[204] These mythic narratives have the power to support prevailing

hierarchies and threaten the birth of new models of what India could become. Mythic

narratives have particular force because they are tied in with the divine, sometimes

contributing to very rigid, seemingly unquestionable, power structures that gain a life of their

own beyond the narrative.

The key features of effective narratives for creating communities are the selective use

of past events, key characters, and an overarching structure linking events and characters

together in a temporally linear way. In doing so, narratives become filters for reality and in

turn create their own realities, which evolve into a collective, or community, memory.[205] This

means that facts themselves become subordinate to the narrative constructions. In this way,

narrative becomes a backbone for the development of religion and state as unifying and

communal forces.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of*

Nationalism makes a vital point in linking this kind of community narrative to nationalism.

Anderson posits that the construction of an imagined community in large-scale society is

necessary because "…the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of

their communion."[206] Thus, regional differences and deep-rooted issues of social inequality

and class exploitation are put aside in favour of a common understanding of identity.

Applying Anderson's model of the 'imagined community' to India and nation-building, is not

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[204] Ranjan Ghosh, ed., "Reality of Representation, Reality behind Representation: History and Memory," in *A Lover's Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading*, 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 30.

[205] Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*, 36.

[206] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

a simple matter, as Western constructs are rooted in contextual history and therefore do not necessarily mesh with Indian identity. Stephan Schlensog posits that understanding India and its political tensions requires an understanding of Hinduism.[207] Shortly after, he states that "…Hinduism has no founder to whom it traces its institution as a religion and as a culture with a religious message; it knows no binding dogmas and recognizes no binding teaching office."[208] This presents a clear problem: Independence leaders relied upon the rhetoric of Hinduism as an all-encompassing religious tradition rooted in India, but accepting of other faiths. However, the lack of a defined canon of authoritative texts means that there is no singular pillar of belief to support these claims as part of one cohesive Hindu narrative. There was, therefore, a lack of a strong centre point for establishing a unifying story of India around which a community could be imagined.

Anderson points to the "old-fashioned novel" as a key device for imagining a nation, where millions of people may be connected by print and story, so that individuals "…can even be described as passing each other on the street, without ever becoming acquainted, and still be connected."[209] While the *Ramayana* as a tradition is widespread and varied, the Valmiki *Ramayana* is a rich written text in its own right. Therefore, it became a useful tool for establishing an imagined community, even though the majority of Indians in the early 1900s were illiterate and would likely have interacted with Valmiki's *Ramayana* through truncated oral, dance, or musical interpretations. The mythic origins of Valmiki himself, however – he writes himself into the narrative, claiming that he narrated it to Rama's sons after Sita is abandoned by Rama in his care – mean that the Valmiki *Ramayana* is reinforced as a grand narrative not only by the existence of the text, but also by the very existence of its author.

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[207] Schlensog, "Hinduism and Politics," 159.
[208] Schlensog, 160.
[209] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

The strength of the traditionalist Hindu narrative, espoused and encouraged by the BJP, means it can easily step into the power vacuum left by the ambiguity of postcolonial secular India. The BJP have thus been able to rely on elements of this traditionalist narrative to maintain popular support and in the same breath attack political opponents. Part of this involves reframing the standard approach to secularism, which is built largely upon western patterns of the development of secular society and ideology. In considering Anderson's work, this thesis focuses on the BJP's construction of a narrative based on the *Ramayana* as an oral text, which is validated by the Valmiki *Ramayana's* place in the Hindu scriptural canon. The 'authenticity' of this text is further underscored by the fact that it is written in Sanskrit, which is associated with the Hindu philosophical and scriptural canon, and with purely ritual and literary practice.[210]

Anderson uses the term 'narrative' to refer to several different classes of narrative, such as the public, the institutional, and the mythic/religious. The *Ramayana* most closely fits the mould of the mythic narrative, defined by Steven Walker as institutional narratives mostly found in religious contexts. These myths almost always incorporate some element of the supernatural, and are powerful vehicles for embodied meaning. Additionally, they evoke strong emotion through character and story, which is cemented through repetition, thereby engaging the audience in discourse to which they might not otherwise be exposed.[211] Charlotte Linde employs the term 'tacit knowledge', which refers to knowledge which is non-quantifiable, particularly to those who hold it.[212] According to Linde:

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[210] Gita Dharampal-Frick and Sudha Sitharaman, "Caste," in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 38; Sirpa Tenhunen and Minna Säävälä, eds., "Caste and Kinship: The Keys of Interaction," in *An Introduction to Changing India: Culture, Politics and Development* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 34; Adi Hastings, "Licked by the Mother Tongue: Imagining Everyday Sanskrit at Home and in the World," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2008): 25.

[211] Leon Burnett, Sanja Bahun, and Roderick Main, *Myth, Literature and the Unconscious* (London: Karnac Books, 2013), 3.

[212] Charlotte Linde, "Narrative and Social Tacit Knowledge," *Journal of Knowledge Management* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 161.

Stories provide a bridge between the tacit and the explicit, allowing tacit social knowledge to be demonstrated and learned, without the need to propositionalize ethics, specify in detail appropriate behaviour, or demonstrate why particular heroes of the past are relevant today. The reason for this is that stories do not only recount past events. They also convey the speaker's moral attitude towards these events: the protagonist of the story acted well, acted badly, is to be praised or blamed, can be taken as a model for the hearer's own behaviour.[213]

In the context of nation-building and the imagined community, mythic narratives provide a model of moral behaviour through the positive portrayal or deification of certain characters. Positive and negative behaviour is cemented through compelling storylines, thus internalising ethics and social structures, and characters may become archetypes for the 'ideal' mother, son, ruler, or community member. Linde states that these narratives are reinforced by events (festivals or holy days), places (ritual sites or temples), and artefacts (religious objects, iconography in the form of art or jewellery, or personal shrines).[214] The *Ramayana* is deeply embedded in classical Indian music and dance traditions, there are numerous temples and shrines to the gods it depicts, and festivals such as Navaratri celebrate Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana.[215] These features all mean that the *Ramayana* is a powerful mythic narrative and vehicle for the conveyance of tacit social knowledge.

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[213] Linde, 165.

[214] Linde, 169.

[215] Christopher John Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 108.

3.3.   Framing Indian secularism in opposition to Hindu nationalism

Western secularism is most often referred to by the pithy "separation of church and state", meaning that religion and state must be confined to their own spheres.[216] The postcolonial Indian method of nation-building atop a secular foundation attempted to draw upon this principle when constructing the boundaries of a postcolonial government. This involved transferring a system operating in nation-states that had developed over centuries in the particular socio-political milieu of Western Europe to the subcontinent, which had no such background. European state identities and governments, on the other hand, had gradually accumulated legitimacy among populations in Europe and could thus stand against religious authority, which was not the case in India.[217] Lokmanya Tilak, an early leader of the Indian Independence movement, was a strong critic of the notion of forcing Western forms of secular nationalism upon India, as he believed that social change in India had to be based upon 'Indian' civilisation's intrinsic socio-religious beliefs and a healthy respect for past traditions.[218]

In his book *The Legacy of the Lokmanya*, he claims that there are three major philosophies of nation and society: the western liberal; the Marxist; and the Indian.[219] As previously stated, through the Independence movement Hinduism was frequently represented as a binding force that transcended religious boundaries. The idea that Hinduism is a way of life, more than it is a religion, was a key aspect of community building often used even by liberal secularists like Nehru and Gandhi. The long presence of religious diversity in the subcontinent, moreover, has meant that the relationship between state and religion has had to

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[216] Khalidi, "Hinduising India," 1545.

[217] Zaheer Baber, "Religious Nationalism, Violence and the Hindutva Movement in India," *Dialectical Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 62.

[218] N. R. Inamdar, *Political Thought and Leadership of Lokmanya Tilak* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1983), 75.

[219] Inamdar, 71.

be one of tolerance and acceptance, rather than rejection of religious principles in legal and bureaucratic structures.[220] This thesis therefore uses the term 'secular' to refer to the groups of political systems in India which are intended to support and advocate for equal representation and respect for the diversity of religious traditions.

Ashis Nandy's 'hierarchy of secularism', mentioned in the previous chapter, offers a multilayered approach to viewing different Indian secular models.[221] Nandy lays out four different layers of secularism, particularly in the subcontinent in the postcolonial period. At the top of the hierarchy are, ostensibly, political actors who are not publicly or privately religious believers; Jawaharlal Nehru serves a perfect example of this – indeed, he was occasionally critical of Hinduism and stipulated in his will that he did not want any form of religious funeral.[222] Second in this hierarchy are those who are believers in private, but not in public – such as Indira Gandhi. The third rung covers people who are believers in public but not in private. Finally, in Nandy's scaffold, lie those who are religious in both private and public domains – most notably, Gandhi.[223] Nandy argues that Gandhi's religious tolerance, while manifesting on a legislative level in a similar manner to secularism, was rooted in religious values, and therefore that the Indian construct of secularism is at least partially founded on and based upon acceptance of religious diversity, rather than a separation of religion and state.[224] Simultaneously, however, Gandhian and Nehruvian secularism as an imposed construct relies on members of religious communities diluting their faith, leaving the potential for religious groups to exploit feelings of resentment. John Zavos suggests a separation of Hindu nationalism and Indian nationalism; the former being an ideology based on religious and ethnic communalism, while the latter is the universalism of Gandhi and

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[220] Pantham, "Indian Secularism and Its Critics," 526.

[221] Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," 181.

[222] Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 43.

[223] Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," 183.

[224] Nandy, 186.

Nehru (albeit rooted in the idea that Hinduism as a religion is all-encompassing).[225] This, in fact, serves as a secondary mythic narrative in Indian independence; that Hinduism is able to transcend itself to consider the beliefs of other religions valid paths to enlightenment, and is thus implicitly superior to other religions which are restricted to one narrative.[226]

Applauding Hinduism as a rallying point for all Indians provides many opportunities for Hindu religious groups, particularly those of a more conservative bent. In reframing *secularism* as an imposed Western ideology promoting tolerance of diverse faiths at the expense of the supposed Hindu foundation of India, radical Hindu nationalism has been able to develop in its own right despite the continued presence of religious influence in Indian secularism. The BJP has claimed that both the term and the construct of secularism in India has been used to "…denigrate the Hindu categories and symbols of the majority community and justify the pampering of the minority communities."[227] "According to Nandy, the ideology of Hindu nationalist revivalism or fundamentalism borrows from the models of Semitic religions and of the modern Western nation-state, and is therefore "another form of Westernisation"."[228] Nandy's model of Indian nationalism as conceptualised by Gandhi and Nehru was the basis of the Indian National Congress (INC)'s vision for national identity. Based on unity of Indians regardless of caste, religion, or creed under a sense of national identity, 'Indian secularism' therefore stands as an inclusive model in opposition to the *Hindutva* focus on Hinduism as the fundamental core of India's history, culture, and future. The self-inflicted weakness of the INC model of secularism has given *Hindutva* supporters the chance to make their own space in the crafting of postcolonial Indian identity, based on the exclusion of those opposed to a strict interpretation of Indian identity and history as

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[225] Zavos, "Searching for Hindu Nationalism in Modern Indian History," 2272.
[226] Aiyar, "Secularism, Atheism, Agnosticism," 124; Padhy, "Secularism and Justice," 5028.
[227] Pantham, "Indian Secularism and Its Critics," 528.
[228] Pantham, 530.

inextricably wound up with Hinduism.[229] This thesis focuses on this process of exclusion as used by Hindu nationalists and Hindu nationalist organisations such as the BJP, in order to establish political mechanisms in the Indian nation-state which ensure that minorities and the disempowered are forced to either abide by a strict vision of 'the nation', or otherwise to be invalidated and subjugated.

3.4.   Reading the *Ramayana*

There are two main approaches to reading the *Ramayana*. The first approach, is that Valmiki's *Ramayana*, is the original and authoritative narrative, with later tellings being interpretations and adaptations rather than authoritative in their own right.[230] Sheldon Pollock, for instance, claims that Valmiki's poem is the core text at the heart of the *Ramayana* tradition, and that other tellings are "…always retellings of a text everyone knows."[231] The second approach is to grant at least some weight to versions of the *Ramayana* in other religions, languages, and geographic regions; and to refer to the collective of presentations of the story of Rama as the 'Ramayana tradition'.[232] This is a model which is less binary and elitist, and takes into account the fact that while the modern understanding of the *Ramayana* is that it was written by Valmiki, the reason that it is embedded in Indian history and culture is due to the variety of *Ramayanas* – particularly in oral, music, and dance form – which spread across the subcontinent.[233]

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[229] Hole, "A Many-Cornered Thing," 197.

[230] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 86; Press Trust of India, "BJP Celebrates Valmiki Jayanti, Says Dalits a Priority for Govt."

[231] Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 263.

[232] Paula Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (California: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

[233] Richman, 5.

Both models acknowledge Valmiki's work as the origin of the *Ramayana* tradition, however, the first elevates it while sidelining the significance of others.[234] The second focuses on the idea of the '*Ramayana* tradition' – a term encapsulating all of the varied and diverse tellings and interpretations of the *Ramayana*, including elements that may have been excluded from or only briefly mentioned in Valmiki's version. This also refers to the performative and oral traditions which would have preceded Valmiki's text (indeed, in the poem's opening, Valmiki is gifted the narrative in oral form by a wandering sage and poet for the gods.) Acknowledging the deeply embedded role of oral narrative in Indian culture is extremely important, especially considering that Sanskrit, as a scholarly and liturgical language, has been and continues to be a largely inaccessible medium particularly for a population governed by a Constitution that recognises twenty-two official languages.[235] In 1945, only two years before independence, less than a tenth of India's population of three hundred million were literate.[236] This further emphasises that while the Valmiki *Ramayana*'s central written narrative was relatable enough for Nehru and Gandhi's rhetoric to resonate with the general populace, the true reason for its success as a tool of national identity creation has been its rich oral narrative ecology.[237]

While acknowledging this vast tradition, this thesis deliberately employs the BJP's interpretive approach to the *Ramayana* – as a concrete narrative canonised by Valmiki, albeit with some cultural variations. As a text for the political and academic elite, it has served to shape not only cultural narratives and the arts, but also the socio-political fabric of the region. This thesis analyses two key aspects of Valmiki's *Ramayana* considering the above. The first is on the use of character to create an archetype of the ideal woman as inherently passive and

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[234] Richman, 4.

[235] Government of India, *Constitution of India 1950* Articles 344(1), 351.

[236] Tudor, "Explaining Democracy's Origins," 2013, 265.

[237] Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation."

defined only in relation to the men around them. The second examines the wider idealised representation of classical Indian society in the text and its gendered nature.[238]

Therefore, the analytical lens that I am applying to the *Ramayana* is shaped by and centred on the way in which *dharma* and gender rhetoric combine to create an overarching theme and mould within which women are shunted into passive roles, and the masculine is deemed more 'useful' to greater society. Through focusing on the framing of character – in particular Rama and Sita – I will aim to draw greater conclusions about the social structures and gender assumptions made in the text.

3.5. Gender

This thesis employs two distinct forms of gender analysis methodology. The first follows on from the above intended approach to the *Ramayana*, and employs the goddess (virgin)/whore dichotomy. This theme, which is a common feature of gender analysis, refers to the almost impossible demands of perfection that woman in many religious and historical texts are forced to face, and the disgrace they experience should they fall short of this standard. This is intertwined with the second approach to gender that this thesis employs; the othering of women, where women are defined by their passivity and silence. This is best exemplified by the notion of the subaltern as outlined in the literature review of the last chapter, and framed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[239]

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[238] Zacharias, "Trial by Fire," 29.
[239] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

This virgin/whore dichotomy is a Western feminist concept originating in the theories and work of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century psychologist Sigmund Freud.[240] It describes a construct which emerges in several narrative traditions in varied forms and under different names; each of which describes the polarisation of women between two rigid models. According to the virgin/whore dichotomy, 'good' women are those who either do not express themselves as sexual beings, or who only do so within the bounds of marriage. Women who do not reach this ideal, meanwhile, are immediately classified as 'whores'.[241] Wendy Doniger points to the theme of the mother as an "ancient and persistent Hindu mythology", who is characterised as virtuous and wholly devoted to sons.[242] While a mother is not chaste in a sexual sense, her unwavering loyalty to her husband and sons places her in the category of the positive and virtuous female archetype. The other key character in this archetype is the chaste virgin. Like the mother figure, the girl is obedient to the men in her life. Contrasted against this, Doniger continues, is the female villain; often a demon in Sanskrit texts, who attempts to use her sexuality to manipulate men and undermine pure women. This dichotomy associates positive womanhood strongly and irrevocably with the non-sexual, and in some cases, elevates this to goddesshood. Any deviation from the 'good woman' mould irrevocably categorises women as a "bad mother/whore".[243]

Priyadarshini Vijaisri, a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi applies this construct specifically to Indian feminism and feminist movements. While Vijaisri is specifically concerned with the alienation of outcaste (Dalit) women in opposition to caste women, the same construct is transferable to the relationship between the ideal of the

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[240] Browyn Kara Conrad, "Neo-Institutionalism, Social Movements, and the Cultural Reproduction of a Mentalité: Promise Keepers Reconstruct the Madonna/Whore Complex," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (2006): 11.

[241] Jonathan Gottschall et al., "Can Literary Study Be Scientific?: Results of an Empirical Search for the Virgin/Whore Dichotomy," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 7, no. 2 (2006): 2.

[242] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "The Mythological in Disguise: An Analysis of Karz," *India International Centre Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1981): 25.

[243] O'Flaherty, 27.

female deity or the virtuous woman in Hindu texts, and Hindu women in India. The adaptation of Vijaisri's construct serves as a bridge between the 'Madonna/whore' complex as applicable to Indian culture, and the model of the subaltern. The 'subaltern', which as stated in the previous chapter was drawn from the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, has become popular in South Asian Studies. The term "…was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history", where the 'subaltern' is the subjugated or subordinate group.[244] Subaltern studies therefore aims to focus on the experiences and actions of subaltern groups, from the perspective of the subaltern rather than that of the oppressor. In reference to gender, this model is best expounded upon by Gayatri Spivak, a prominent Indian literary and gender theorist.

In the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak examines the role of women particularly in colonial Indian society as silent actors. She argues that there is a key distinction between the terms 'speak' and 'talk'. Women may physically talk and be vocally expressive but, but according they cannot be *heard* as active social voices with independent agency. Additionally, women's history and female narratives are viewed from external, dominant perspectives as objects of examination rather than individual beings. Furthermore, whether women were living under colonial rule or participating in anticolonial insurgencies, the same gender constructs applied to keep males in the dominant position. Spivak goes on to state that "…the protection of woman…becomes a signifier for the establishment of a *good* society…"[245] In both situations, women are judged by their ability to act according to a script which furthers the aims of men.

By applying this lens to the *Ramayana* and to women in colonial and postcolonial India, it is evident that women have been primarily represented as actors in predetermined

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[244] Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1477.

[245] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 289.

roles, with limited autonomous action and thought available to them. Moreover, attempting to subvert or break this imposed archetype leads to negative consequences for those individuals, as acting out against the dominant discourse is a violation not against specific persons, but rather against the social fabric. This thesis considers Spivak's theory of the subaltern and its distinction between the Indian woman's ability to talk versus their ability to speak, in relation to the female voice in Indian history, culture, and politics, and the role of Hinduism as defined by *Hindutva* in shaping the limits of how women are heard in modern India.

3.6. Conclusion

By combining these related frameworks and understandings, this thesis's analysis builds on the methodological framework of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' and Charlotte Linde's 'tacit knowledge' in the role of narrative as a unifying force. These terms operate as a joined lens to examine how the *Ramayana* has been used in establishing a foundational narrative for Hindu nationalists. The reading of the text and text analysis is focused on the Valmiki *Ramayana* as the basis for the modern popular understanding of Hinduism and the extremely popular television serial, while acknowledging that there is also a rich and vast *Ramayana* culture.

The model of secularism that this thesis refers to is distinct to that of Western secularism, and the extent to which the Indian state and legislature may be called secular is debatable.[246] According to the nation's Constitution it is a secular state. Legally members of all religions are considered equal citizens in the eyes of the government, and this is what Hindu nationalists seek to question.. Considering the framework provided by Ashis Nandy,

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[246] Baber, "Religious Nationalism, Violence and the Hindutva Movement in India"; Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance."

'secularism' is the most appropriate term for the system of government and society proposed by Independence activists and currently in place in modern India.

The next chapter applies the literary interpretive methodological approach outlined above to the *Ramayana*, to extract readings in light of the virgin/whore literary paradigm against the backdrop of Spivak's construction of women as part of the subaltern. It also considers the 1987 television serial *Ramayan* (Ramanand Sagar) as a tool for reviving the imagined community of consumers of the *Ramayana* in all its forms, as well as for adding to the swell in traditionalist Hindu nationalism through the 1980s.

4. A background and analysis of the *Ramayana* tradition

His shoulders are broad and his arms are massive.

His neck is like a conch shell and his face is beautiful.

His collarbone is set deep in muscle

his eyes pleasantly reddish.

Everyone has heard of Rama, my lady.

(*The Ramayana*, Sundarakāṇḍa, 33:15.)[247]

4.1. Introduction

The *Ramayana* (literally *Story of Rama*) is a key religious narrative in Hinduism that has become a recent site of political and cultural contention. It a text that is difficult to date precisely, due to its origins out of a long oral tradition.[248] Its influence is nevertheless demonstrably significant, both in and of itself and in the way in which it has shaped other texts and social narratives. The text's significance is not limited to India; it has a profound cultural influence in Nepal, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and in the Hindu Indonesian region of Bali. Despite this widespread presence, the *Ramayana* has nevertheless come to play a vital role in the forging of national identity in the postcolonial Indian nation. This chapter examines key themes of politics, patriarchy, and the archetypes of ideal manhood and womanhood that are represented in the text. It highlights the strong presence of the virgin/whore dichotomy in the text, and the way in which these are used to silence women or shunt them into passive roles. Finally, this chapter explores the release and reception of the 1987 television serial *Ramayan* by Ramanand Sagar, its impact on and relation to women, and its context in the rise of Hindu nationalist politics.

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[247] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 202.
[248] Sakalani, "Questioning the Questioning of Ramayanas," 52.

As earlier stated, The *Ramayana is* one of two significant mythological epics that are considered particularly important in 'normative Hinduism'; the other is the *Mahabharata*, a substantially longer text that includes the well-known *Bhagavad Gita*.[249] The Sanskrit-language poem was composed by Valmiki, a semi-mythic Hindu sage and poet who attributes authorship to himself and writes himself into the text.[250] Dating the work is difficult but it is situated between approximately 500 BCE and 100 BCE , though narrative elements linking Rama directly to the god Vishnu are more likely to have been added during the second century BCE, and the character of Rama most likely precedes the *Ramayana* in regional oral myth and narrative.[251] According to Romesh Chunder Dutt, a notable nineteenth century translator of the Ramayana, the text we have today is the product of centuries of revision and refinement, though the main narrative was probably conceived by a single author.[252] The *Ramayana* comprises of 24000 verses, 500 chapters (*sargas*) and seven books (*kandas*). It is approximately 480 000 words, making it about four times the length of the *Iliad* and one of the longest ancient world classics. Popular reinterpretations in other Indian languages include the Hindi *Ramcharitmanas* (Goswami Tulsidas, sixteenth century), the Tamil *Kambaramayanam* (Kamban, twelfth century).

Just as there are many manifestations and variants of Hinduism, there have been numerous different oral and written versions of the *Ramayana*. Valmiki's *Ramayana* is widely considered to be the original – and therefore most authoritative – version of the narrative.[253] Despite the myriad of different versions of the *Ramayana* that are quite popular, the BJP refer almost always to the *Valmiki* text as the 'most authoritative' version, thereby

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[249] Sakalani, 51.

[250] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985.

[251] Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Mythologies and Philosophies of Salvation in the Theistic Traditions of India* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1984), 78.

[252] Shanti S. Tangri, "Intellectuals and Society in Nineteenth-Century India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 4 (1961): 380.

[253] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 3.

highlighting it as a central 'canon' tradition on which to base its own ideological reading.[254] While the text is situated in the specific historical and cultural period of classical India, is also framed as a partly instructional work, and as a guideline for correct – *dharmic* – conduct regardless of time period or location. Alongside the *Mahabharata* the *Ramayana* effectively forms part of India's historical inheritance and cultural DNA.[255] Additionally, the work is respected and venerated for the wide range of themes it explores, particularly pertaining to gender and gender relations/roles in classical Indian culture, and its society and characters are frequently touted as a model for an 'ideal' Indian society. While the *Ramayana* demonstrates very little evidence of historical accuracy or historicity, it is read by a number of Hindus (and portrayed as such) as being representative of historical fact rather than mythological.[256] A significant reason for this is the use of the text by Hindu nationalists in establishing a shared national origin myth, where the *Ramayana*'s events are represented as part of India's history and heritage.

4.2.   The *Ramayana*: History and narrative

While the *Ramayana* is situated within the text as being from an era long passed, the geography and society it represents is similar to that of the context of its conception. The subcontinent between 500BCE and 100BCE (the probable timeframe within which the text evolved) was characterised by a number of dynasties and empires occupying various regions in nation-states and independent kingdoms. The social structure was largely caste-based, though the system was likely not quite so distinct or rigidly enforced as it would come to be in later centuries. This was the culmination of the Vedic period (1500BCE-500BCE

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[254] Neil Doshi, *Revolution at the Crossroads: Street Theater and the Politics of Radical Democracy in India and in Algeria* (ProQuest, 2009), 22–23.

[255] Bajpai, Basit, and Krishnappa, *India's Grand Strategy*, 31.

[256] Hanne, Crano, and Mio, *Warring with Words*, 222.

approximately), during which the liturgical Vedas were composed and the principles of the caste system were implemented. The key kingdoms mentioned in the text are known historical, geographical, and cultural regions. The kingdom of Kosala and its capital Ayodhya, of which the titular character Rama is prince, was situated in what is modern Uttar Pradesh in central northern India.[257] Mithila, where Rama's wife Sita is from, is believed to be a geographical region in the north-eastern state Bihar.

The *Ramayana* is simultaneously simple and difficult to summarise. In its most reduced form, it is a narrative based around the archetypal hero (Rama) who faces hardship with equanimity until he is faced with the abduction of his feminine counterpart and wife (Sita). After a lengthy struggle, he defeats the evil king who took her (Ravana) and they return home. However – as with many other works of epic literature, the core narrative is not necessarily the most important part. Indeed, the framing language and secondary narratives play as significant – if not more significant – role in shaping the reader's understanding of the greater context and situating of the primary story.

The following is a brief summary of the *Ramayana*, provided to facilitate an easier understanding of the central text and proceeding analysis:

Book	Summary
I. *Bālakāṇḍa*	The ascetic Valmiki asks the famous sage Narada (a figure who also appears in the *Mahabharata* and other myths) if there has ever been a truly virtuous man. Narada tells Valmiki about Rama, the prince and King of Ayodhya.

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[257] "Ayodhya: The Redefining of India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 38 (2010): 7.

	Inspired, Valmiki writes the *Ramayana* and teaches it to his disciples and Rama's twin sons, Lava and Kusha (though their parentage isn't revealed till the last book.) The full story begins here, where Rama is described as the incarnation of the god Vishnu, who is responding to the complaints from other deities about the *rakshasa* (demon) King Ravana. He is born to Kaushalya, the first wife of Dasharatha, king of Ayodhya. The book goes on to describe Rama and his youngest brother Lakshmana's upbringing, Rama's heroic slayings of powerful demons, and his wedding to Princess Sita of Mithila.
II. Ayodhyākāṇḍa	Twelve years after Rama and Sita's marriage, King Dasharatha decides to hand kingship over to Rama. However, the night before the coronation, Dasharatha's second wife Kaikeyi is goaded by her maidservant into calling upon two boons that her husband had granted her years ago after she saved his life. She demands that Dasharatha give the throne to her son, Bharata, and that he exile Rama to the wilderness for fourteen years to ensure a peaceful transition. Heartbroken but duty-bound, Dasharatha agrees. Rama accepts with equanimity, despite the anger and sorrow of those around him. His loyal brother Lakshmana demands to go with Rama, as does Sita. When the three leave, Dasharatha dies of grief. Bharata, who was away during this episode, returns to discover his mother's doings. He follows Rama to bring him back to Ayodhya, but Rama is determined to fulfil his father's vow. Bharata returns to rule as Rama's regent.

III. Araṇyakāṇḍa	Thirteen years pass with relative peace as Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita travel the forests. Rama and Lakshmana defeat many demons and further develop their reputations as fearless warriors, while living off the land. In the last year of exile, Rama is approached by Surpanakha, the sister of King Ravana of Lanka. Smitten by Rama, she attempts to seduce first him then Lakshmana, till Rama spurns her. Angered, she attempts to kill Sita but is stopped and mutilated by Lakshmana. When news of this reaches Ravana, he determines to capture Sita in revenge by sending a demon in the shape of a golden deer to entrance her, and to draw Rama and Lakshmana away. By taking the form of an elderly beggar, Ravana coaxes Sita out of the protection spell Lakshmana cast around their cottage, and abducts her. Entranced by her beauty, he demands she marry him, but she refuses. Rama and Lakshmana discover Sita's abduction and immediately set out to rescue her.
IV. Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa	Rama and Lakshmana meet Sugriva, the former king of the monkey kingdom Kiṣkindhā and current exile. Rama helps the monkey Sugriva to regain his throne from his elder brother Vali, in an arguable breach of his strict moral and ethical code (Rama shoots Vali in the back, thus not only interceding in a personal battle but also contravening principles of correct conduct). After restoring King Sugriva to the throne, Rama is promised aid and the monkey King Sugriva sends out search parties. The southern search party, which

	includes Rama's greatest devotee, the monkey god Hanuman, discovers that Sita was taken to Lanka.
V. *Sundarakāṇḍa*	After Hanuman discovers his divine heritage, he leaps across the ocean to the island of Lanka. He finds Sita, who is losing faith in Rama rescuing her, and gives her Rama's signet ring as a sign of his authenticity and Rama's fidelity. She thanks him but refuses to return with him, saying that she will wait till Rama comes to avenge her abduction. Hanuman is captured but tells Ravana to release Sita, then escapes while setting fire to Ravana's citadel before returning to Kiṣkindhā.
VI. *Yuddhakāṇḍa*	Rama, Lakshmana, and their allies move to attack Lanka. After a lengthy battle, during which Lakshmana is almost killed, Rama kills Ravana and installs Ravana's brother on the throne. Sita is joyful at being reunited with Rama, but he refuses to take her back on the grounds that, after having lived with another man for over a year, her virtue might be compromised. Devastated, Sita walks into a sacrificial fire but is unharmed and led out of the fire by the god of Fire, Agni, who attests to her purity. Rama reveals that he knew that she was innocent but had to prove it to the public. Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita return to Ayodhya triumphantly.
VII. *Uttarakāṇḍa*[258]	Rama and Sita have ruled peacefully for some time, when Sita

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[258] The Uttarakāṇḍa is thought by most academics to be a later addition to the *Ramayana*, particularly when considering the final line of the previous book. However, it features in many popular retellings of the narrative and is generally accepted as canonical among Hindus.

	falls pregnant. However, their joy is undermined when Rama begins to hear rumours that his citizens are beginning to think him cuckolded by Sita. Determined to save his reputation as King, Rama orders Lakshmana to leave Sita in the forest. The devastated Queen is found by the sage Valmiki and taken into his care. Sita gives birth to twins, who grow up to be his disciples. He teaches them the story of Rama (thus completing the return to the time of the first book.) Rama discovers that Sita and his children are living in the forest and attempts to bring her back. After suggesting that she endure one more ordeal by fire, Sita rejects him and calls upon her mother (Earth) to receive her. The earth opens and swallows Sita, leaving Rama devastated and alone.

4.3. Power, Politics, and Patriarchy

According to Paula Richman, a standard reading of the *Ramayana* offers the following three themes: elevation of the notion of the king; Rama's personality and conduct as an example for people; and a utopian ideal of the perfect society as depicted by the end of the story.[259] Each of these centres around the construction and maintenance of a particular political and social systems, which allows for the existence of a state which is itself represented as gendered. In approaching the text through the lens of gender analysis, three key points emerge: that the language of the *Ramayana* is inherently gendered; even in representations of non-living entities and concepts such as that of the kingdom; that this language allows for the imposition of patriarchal gender norms, where men are framed as the

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[259] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 6.

key agents of development and action; and finally, that the inevitable consequence of this is the silencing and/or pacification of women.[260]

While the narrative of the *Ramayana* has developed into a popular myth, it is important to recognise that Valmiki's is a text directed very much at the elite and the ruling class.[261] There are almost no working-class characters in the text, an important thing to consider in terms of its impact and interpretations particularly in light of the way in which female representation in the text reflects on its impact in society.[262] Moreover, leading into the approaches of individual characters to gender, it is interesting to note the language Valmiki uses when talking about the role of the king in the state. The vast majority of the language used to frame nations casts the state in the role of the feminine, in need of guardianship and management by the masculine strength and male-dominated hierarchy, particularly within the elite Kshatriya and Brahmin castes; Valmiki describes the city of Ayodhya in the aftermath of King Dasharatha's death as being "…like a woman bereft of her husband." (II.60.61)[263] The concept of *dharma* strongly frames this on both fronts; individuals are bound by the restrictions and expectations of their caste and gender.[264] This blend of caste and gender is reflected in the constant rhetoric regarding the role of the king – both in the abstract, and in reference to Rama's father Dasharatha, Ravana of Lanka, and Rama himself. The king is framed as "…the guardian of the four classes of society. He is the guardian of his own conduct and of righteousness. " (V:33:11)[265] Therefore, masculine domination encompasses not only the political but also social, cultural, and moral spheres.

[260] Sanskrit is a grammatically gendered language (masculine, feminine, and neuter), however this thesis will not touch upon that element in gender analysis.

[261] Prabha Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss: Ideology of Motherhood in Television Serials," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 42/43 (1990): 105.

[262] Bajpai, Basit, and Krishnappa, *India's Grand Strategy*, 35.

[263] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 213.

[264] Prasad, "Conversational Narrative and the Moral Self," 158.

[265] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 201.

Women, meanwhile, are relegated to motherly roles, even in the social abstract; "...like a woman bereft of her husband, the city of Ayodhya with its great king was cast into gloom*."* (II:60:16)[266] Where male social roles differ greatly depending on caste, marriage and motherhood transcend social barriers to be the ultimate aim and responsibility for women. In referring to a woman's *dharma* as being to "…show her husband and earnestly strive to please and benefit him…" Valmiki even claims that this is a heavenly edict, declaring that they were "…revealed in the *Veda* and handed down in the world…" (II:21:20)[267] This view, incidentally, was mirrored to some extent in the 1990s by KR Malkani, the then-Vice President of the BJP.[268]

One prevalent element of the *Ramayana* is the relationship between men and women, and the social constructs underpinning this dynamic. This is particularly evident when considering the way in which men and male beauty are central to the *Ramayana* – and no more so than on Rama. Descriptions of his appearance are frequent, and mostly focus on his size and musculature.

> Rama was…renowned throughout the world for his manliness as well. His arms were long, his strength immense, and he carried himself like a bull elephant in rut. (II.3.11.)[269]
>
> He is wise and grounded in proper conduct. Eloquent and majestic, he annihilates his enemies. (I:1:9)[270]

[266] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 213.

[267] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, 130.

[268] Amrita Basu, "The Gendered Imagery and Women's Leadership of Hindu Nationalism," *Reproductive Health Matters* 4, no. 8 (1996): 71.

[269] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 85.

[270] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 121.

His shoulders are broad and his arms are massive. His neck is like a conch

shell and his face is beautiful. His collarbone is set deep in muscle

his eyes pleasantly reddish. (V:33:15.)[271]

All of these descriptors are focussed on typically 'positive' masculine traits; physical

strength, virility, excellence in battle, and righteous leadership. The comparison to a "bull

elephant in rut" ties his reproductive capabilities not only to his sex but to his physical and

mental strength.[272] This link between the physical and mental is reflected in descriptions of

other righteous male characters (Dasharatha is described as a "glorious bull" (II.59.14) but

also a righteous and powerful king.)[273] Rama is also endowed with what may be considered

softer and more feminine traits, such as obedience, forgiveness, and reconciliation; he often

serves as a calming and moderating force particularly to his brother Lakshmana.[274] Physical

descriptions which focus on his aesthetics and are framed in a less typically 'male' way are

also common: "Rama was handsome…he was shapely and slim of waist…his hair was jet

black." (III:16.8-10)[275] However, these traits of Rama's are generally overshadowed or

represented only as a sidenote.[276]

Moreover, in keeping with the notion of men as protectors of society, the health and

virtue of its rulers and men in general are centred as deeply intertwined with the welfare of

the state. Ironically, this is fairly fragile – as is evident in the fact that part of Rama's

reasoning for regaining Sita is the dependence of his honour (and therefore that of Ayodhya)

on protecting his wife and his virtue. In being held by Ravana by more than a year, therefore,

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[271] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 202.

[272] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 55.

[273] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, 212.

[274] T. G. Vaidyanathan, "Authority and Identity in India," *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (1989): 147.

[275] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1991, 123.

[276] Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple," 16.

Rama's honour is predicated on Sita's extreme act of attempted self-immolation. This means, moreover, that till she undertakes this act he treats her coldly and cruelly in front of his army and the citizens of Lanka. Her feelings and love for him are irrelevant in the face of his achievement of winning her back and rectifying the insult that Ravana (and by extension, she) inflicted upon him.[277]

In considering the extreme actions Sita is forced to resort to in order to compensate for her perceived mistake – coveting the deer – it is interesting and striking to note the way in which male characters are 'punished' for their own errors. Rama, for instance, wrongly accuses Sita of infidelity – not only at the end of his war against Ravana, but again while she is pregnant. In justifying his actions as essential in order to protect his and her honour, he is able to not only obfuscate responsibility but frame himself as having taken the noble and *dharmic* path, through asserting his patriarchal power over her.[278]

Indeed, the victimisation of women, while a repeated occurrence in the narrative, is addressed only superficially by the story's characters. Ravana inflicts significant emotional pain on Sita by kidnapping and keeping her isolated in captivity to coerce her into marrying him. However, that is not the action that he is most reproached for by the narrator and his advisors. Before Rama attacks Lanka, Ravana's brother Vibhishana attempts to persuade the king to return Sita with the following advice: "There are three faults that lead one to ruin: theft of another's property, raping another man's wife, and excessive distrust of one's friends.*"(*VI:74:20)[279] The emphasis here is not on the wrongness of rape; rather, in keeping with the other two faults that Vibhishana lists, it is on the damage this inflicts on the man. The woman in this situation – Sita, who is counted as both wife and property in the perception of Valmiki's male characters – is stripped of autonomy, and the suffering inflicted

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[277] Hess, "Rejecting Sita," 5.

[278] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 6.

[279] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 370.

upon her sidelined in favour of how it affects Rama. The decentring of women in their own lives and issues is a common theme throughout the *Ramayana*, and one which will reappear in following chapters.

4.4. Talking women and speaking men: silencing the active female voice

In contrast to the above depictions of Rama, female characters are very rarely described by name; rather, most often, by descriptors. This is reflective, of the general framing of women in the *Ramayana*; as passive objects, whose emotions are inconsequential unless they have a direct effect either on the male narrative or on male characters. While there are some female characters who have some agency in their narrative, it is most often minimised unless it has a direct effect on the story's men.

Both of these elements are seen most clearly in Sita, as the main female character in the *Ramayana*, and in many ways the core plot device of the over-arching narrative. Sita is, in and of herself, a fairly robust and fleshed-out character, who is (or should be) prestigious in her own right. The adopted daughter of the King of Mithila, Sita was found in a plough furrow – symbolising her position as the daughter of the Earth – meaning that she is introduced as not only an earthly princess, but also a deity (or at least the incarnation of a deity.) Though Sita is a primary character, she is almost always framed passively, with any active, assertive, or aggressive behaviour is nearly always represented in a negative light.[280] A key example of this is when she lashes out at Lakshmana after hearing Rama call for help while in the forest; Lakshmana responds by saying "…I dare not answer, Maithili, for you are a deity in my eyes. And yet inappropriate words from a woman come as nothing new…"

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[280] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 96.

(III:43:178).[281] Despite his apparent devotion to and respect for Sita, in the space of one sentence Lakshmana turns on her for breaking the soft-spoken and subservient ideal she is supposed to embody.

The message of Sita's submissiveness to the men around her is constant throughout Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The a number of occasions where Sita's name is not even used, instead being replaced with the titles 'wife' or 'daughter'; she is a role, rather than an individual. For example, Valmiki describes the abduction of Sita as: "Then, having slain the vulture Jatayu, he carried off Rama's wife." (I.1.36)[282] In using this phrasing, Rama is framed as the wronged party, while Sita is framed as a stolen possession of his.[283] Just as she is defined by her relationship to Rama or her father, Sita's worth is placed constantly in her virtue and in her devotion and obedience to Rama. Indeed, even the key display of her more-than-human nature, when she walks through fire and emerges unharmed, is explained both before and during the event as the product of her fidelity:

> Because of her asceticism, her truthfulness, and her complete devotion to
> her husband alone, she might burn fire, but fire could never burn her.
> (V:53:23)[284]

Moreover, this act and its implications of divinity are not enough to save her from the scrutiny of the public or to 'redeem' her for having been abducted and potentially compromising her honour.

Much of the representation of women in the text is framed in this manner. Positively viewed female characters are indicated by their passivity, and 'evil' women are framed

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[281] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1991, 178.

[282] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 123.

[283] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, 124; Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, 251; Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 173; Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1991, 111; Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 158.

[284] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 260.

through their initiative, assertiveness, and aggression. The representation of women in the *Ramayana* is lacking, not necessarily in the number of female characters, but in their significance to either minor or major narratives, as well as in their descriptions. Even in the case of women who have a noticeable presence in the text, their contributions are largely passive, and this passivity is encouraged by the men around them as well as by the women they interact with. In this manner, notions of female identity and social roles are reinforced, further cementing within the text's social structure the role of women as obedient mothers and wives, defined before marriage by their purity, and by virtue and fidelity after marriage. This message continues to resonate in the minds of modern Indian women; Sita is intended to reflect the *dharma* of all women, regardless of class or caste.[285] Even more than this – even in the face of maltreatment by spouses, the text repeatedly adjures female characters who desire to remain virtuous to "…hold her husband, whether he is virtuous or not, to be a deity incarnate." (II:56:5)[286] Moreover, the relationship between husband and wife is repeatedly portrayed as more distinct than that of a subordinate and their superior. Indeed, the text is adamant that "…A husband is a woman's deity…" (II:32:27)[287] Valmiki never suggests that in turn, a husband should strive to fulfil his duties to his wife; rather, that he should abide by the *dharma* of his caste. Where men are represented as individuals with personal and social *dharma*, the *Ramayana* clearly indicates that women may well be interchangeable, so long as they worship and serve the men in their lives.

In the *Ramayana*, women are clearly framed in relation to two key categories. The first is the 'virgin' – a virtuous, obedient woman who fulfils her social obligations of fidelity, demureness, and gentleness, to the extent that she may be endowed with goddess-like powers.

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[285] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 75.

[286] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 202.

[287] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, 156.

The second placed in opposition to the ideal woman, is the notion of the 'whore' – a category into which is placed any woman who fails to meet the standards of the virgin ideal.

Each of these primary female characters therefore attach or are encouraged to attach their sense of self-worth – and even the very notion of their existence – to their husbands and sons and their fidelity to the male figures in their lives. This is a message that is repeated and consolidated throughout the text. The following are examples of this discourse; indeed, the reader is told that "…a woman whose husband has left her cannot go on living". (II:26:5)[288] Ultimately, female fidelity is the core of her identity; while male fidelity is almost irrelevant, as women are directed to worship their husbands regardless of their virtue. Where Valmiki's virtuous women are virtually interchangeable, his male characters have unique identities, and are as such judged on those.[289] Rama, when he believes Lakshmana is dead, bemoans the fact that "…Were I to search the world, I could find another woman like Sita, but never a brother, a companion, or a warrior to equal Lakshmana". (VI:39:6)[290] Indeed, this is reinforced by Sita, who refers specifically to the Vedas when extolling the righteousness of a woman who shows obedience and "…earnestly strive[s] to please and benefit [her husband]…" (II:21:21.)[291]

This also means that any blame that could possibly be ascribed to male characters is often instead deflected onto women. Legitimate concerns and disagreements with Rama which are held by female characters (particularly Kaikeyi, Sita, and Surpanakha) are indicative not of his own flaws but of theirs. This is an implication which is extended to the notion that these women are therefore responsible not only for *their* misfortunes but also for

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[288] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, 138.

[289] Doniger, *The Hindus*, 227.

[290] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 223.

[291] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 130.

his.[292] Consequently, this means that female characters almost always have their misfortunes blamed upon a perceived lack of virtuosity. Repeatedly, the message is that "…it is not houses…or such royal treatment as this that shields a woman; it is her virtuous conduct alon*e*." (VI:102:26)[293] The clear implication here is that all misfortune and mistreatment Sita faces at the hands of Rama and Ravana must be the result of her transgressing the boundaries of the 'virgin', rather than the wrongdoing of the men.

Beyond the framing of women embedded in the language Valmiki uses, is the way in which characters themselves represent and refer to women. The message of female submission and obedience is strongly echoed in the way in which male characters speak to their female counterparts. Rama, after the long battle to reclaim Sita, tells her the following before a shocked audience: "Since, however, your virtue is in doubt, your presence has become as profoundly disagreeable to me as is a bright lamp to a man afflicted with a disease of the eye…" (VI:103:17)[294]

This involves male characters drawing upon the prevalent gender paradigms of classical India, and both verbally and physically enforcing them in their interactions with women. As previously mentioned, a key part of this is the assumption that women are to be subservient to men, regardless of the quality of the man. Valmiki informs us that a woman should hold her husband in the highest esteem regardless of the quality of his character. Moreover, no matter the quality of the woman in question, she "…will come to a bad end if she does not respect her husband's wishes" (II:21:20).[295] Consequently, male characters are able to disregard and abuse their wives, and then to blame those women for the harm they suffer. It is telling that Rama is kind and compassionate to almost every other character, even

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[292] Doniger, *The Hindus*, 223.

[293] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 453.

[294] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, 455.

[295] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 130.

forgiving Kaikeyi after she orders that he be banished to the forest. Sita, on the other hand, faces public humiliation for being abducted. The assumption portrayed by Valmiki that women should tolerate negative behaviour from their husbands due to marital duty is still reflected in Indian law, where (as of a Supreme Court judgement in late 2017) marital rape is still not considered a crime.[296]

A natural progression from this is that when female characters disobey or contradict men, they may instantly be treated as having broken the 'virgin' mould, regardless of who is at fault. One key example of this is an exchange between Ravana and Sita. Initially, Ravana addresses Sita with respect and reverence in the expectation that she will marry him, despite having forcefully abducted her. When she tells him that she is already married and devoted to Rama, his language to become insulting and demeaning:

> ...I shall be a lover to win your praise, and never, my beauty, will do anything
>
> to displease you...you think you are so smart, but what a fool you really are.
>
> (III:47:12-13)[297]

A similar contradiction comes from Lakshmana – who is, otherwise, completely devoted to Sita – when she orders him to seek out Rama in the forest after they hear a cry for help: "I dare not answer Maithili, for you are a deity in my eyes. And yet inappropriate words from a woman come as nothing new" (III:43:26).[298] As with other characters, Sita faces the troubling and inescapable pattern of treatment by men; the slightest flaw undermines her virtue, where it might enrich a male character.

It is not only male characters that echo the assumptions of the narrative's general language and depictions of women. Indeed, female characters play a significant – even equal

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[296] Sarkar, *Gender Disparity in India: Unheard Whimpers*, 283.

[297] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1991, 188.

[298] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, 178.

– role in perpetuating and enforcing the archetypes and oppressive structures on their fellow women. This internalised misogyny is an issue that appears not only in the *Ramayana* and its readings, but also throughout conservative Hindu female understandings of gender (both explicitly in the words of female conservative politicians, and implicitly in the support that conservative parties like the BJP receive from women).[299] Sita blames herself for her suffering when Hanuman arrives to rescue her; claiming that "…it is as a consequence of my evil destiny and my own misdeeds in the past that I have suffered all of this…" (VI:101:31)[300] This is reflective of a recurring undercurrent to the *Ramayana* – that of women blaming the actions of themselves and other women for events that are objectively far from their control. The women of Lanka blame Ravana's sister Surpanakha for the war between Ravana and Lanka and the ultimate destruction of the city – ignoring that Ravana was responsible for the capture of Sita, and failed to return her against the advice of his advisors and family. [301]

Even Sita, who has criticised Lakshmana and Rama in the past, is not immune from this: "I hope you are satisfied now, Kaikeyi! The delight of our family has been slain. You malicious creature! You have destroyed our family" (VI:23:4)[302] Sita's denouncement of Kaikeyi (Rama's stepmother) towards the end of the battle when Ravana kills an illusory Rama, is particularly indicative of the way in which Valmiki's women are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to spare male characters the blame for their own actions.

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[299] Basu, "The Gendered Imagery and Women's Leadership of Hindu Nationalism."

[300] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India. Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 450.

[301] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, 394.

[302] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, 177.

4.5.   Bringing Sita and Rama to Television

As previously mentioned, one of the most significant modern cultural impacts of the *Ramayana* was Sagar's serialisation of the text in the late 1980s, which technically consists of two series. The first finishes at the end of the Yuddhakāṇḍa, when Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya to be crowned. Its sequel *Uttar Ramayan* covers the seventh and final book, Uttarakāṇḍa, where Sita is exiled from Ayodhya and gives birth to Rama's and her sons Luva and Kusha.[303] While it was commissioned by an Indian National Congress (INC) government, it contributed significantly to the surge in popularity of Hindu nationalist narratives, particular that of the BJP, which situated the contents of the *Ramayan* within an imagined glorious past, as depicted by Valmiki's original text. Its immense influence also served to reinforce and idealise traditional gender roles and identities, particularly among women at home.[304] The serial also preceded and arguably precipitated the events of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, as will be explored in later chapters.

The *Ramayan* was one of a number of televised serials and films released in the 1980s on the state-run station Doodarshan that were themed around nationalist, religious narratives.[305] One of the reasons for the emphasis on serialising this particular genre of narrative was that there had long been a background in India's history of film of religious narratives – tinged by an emphasis on state-building being successfully transferred to screen.[306] Against this backdrop, it was easy for a series about a narrative that was already well-known and revered to be successful. However, Sagar's *Ramayan*'s popularity and influence far exceeded the level that

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[303] Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss," 104.

[304] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 75.

[305] Uma Chakravarti, "Saffroning the Past: Of Myths, Histories and Right-Wing Agendas," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 5 (1998): 227.

[306] Lutgendorf, "Ramayan," 129; Priya Joshi, ed., "Bollywood's India," in *Bollywood's India*, A Public Fantasy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

the term 'success' might imply, and reflected far more than the appeal of the television serial

itself. Mukti Lakhi Mangharam claims that:

> …Its [the *Ramayana's*] appeal became especially evident between 1987 and
>
> 1989 when, at 9:30 a.m., the Indian nation would come to a standstill as
>
> people everywhere gathered to watch Ramanand Sagar's state-sponsored
>
> television serial…regarding the viewing as an act of worship.[307]

The timing of its release also coincided perfectly with the consumerist boom among

the middle class through the 1970s and 1980s, meaning that a significant sector of the

population now had the opportunity to engage with the series where merely a decade ago that

would not have been an option.[308] The combination of these two factors meant that despite a

general critical consensus that the serial was a flawed melodrama, by the last episode, the

Ramayan was the most popular program ever televised in India.[309] The veneration received

by the serial was not necessarily unprecedented or unexpected, either. According to Philip

Lutgendorf, when the 1917 film *Lanka Dahan* (*The Burning of Lanka*) was released,

audiences prostrated themselves whenever Rama appeared on the screen.[310]

Importantly, this success privileged the notion that the single strand of cultural history

that the *Ramayana* represented was the "authentic" cultural heritage of the nation; and its

values attributed specifically and solely to Hinduism and Hindu Indians.[311] This also served

to homogenise understandings and interpretations of the *Ramayana* across Indian households,

despite a long-standing history of regional diversity in retellings and key narrative points of

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[307] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 75.

[308] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 9.

[309] Lutgendorf, "Ramayan," 128.

[310] Lutgendorf, 129.

[311] Chakravarti, "Saffroning the Past," 225.

the story.[312] In doing so, it blurred the lines between high and popular culture, validating the Hindu nationalist sentiments of the middle class while preying upon the growing fear that modernity was stripping away traditional culture.[313] The series amplified the construction during the Independence movement and the early postcolonial period of a national identity fundamentally based upon Hindu mythology and a shared cultural history of an ideal past. This narrative was implied to be a potential solution to the problem of social and political divisions in contemporary Indian life and guard against the threat of Western cultural influence. [314]

It is also important to note the impact of the cultural narrative on women, who for the first time were able to consume *en masse* the Valmiki *Ramayana* despite continued significant divides in education and literacy levels and opportunities. This impact was so profound that Deepika Chikhalia, the actress playing Sita, was elected to the federal parliament in 1991 as a BJP candidate in the constituency of Vadodara; a direct, tangible marker of the political capital the BJP were able to gain from the *Ramayan*.[315]

The *Ramayan*, alongside other programs by Doodarshan, played a key role in providing representations of not simply womanhood, but *Indian* womanhood, where domestic and wider social inequality could be swept aside or dismissed in favour of a desire to conform to the ideal female place in the 'imagined community' of modern (Hindu) India.[316]

In light of the above, it is clear that the television serial owed its popularity to not only the long history of Valmiki's original text, but also to its contemporary context. That context, which I discuss in the next chapter, signified that rather than simply acting as a retelling of a

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[312] Kumar, *Gandhi Meets Primetime*, 2.

[313] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 167.

[314] Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart, and Bruce Horsfield, *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 109.

[315] Cusack, "The Gods on Television," 292.

[316] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 10.

popular text, albeit one with outdated gender values and norms, the televised *Ramayana* had rather more sinister and problematic implications and consequences.[317]

4.6. Conclusion

Valmiki calls the *Ramayana* the 'Story of Sita'; however, this lip service is not followed through in his rendition. In the first book, Valmiki introduces the *Ramayana* in the following manner:

> I: 4:6-7. "A man who always fulfilled his vows, he taught them the whole of this great poem, the Ramayana, which is the tale of Sita and the slaying of Paulastya." (I:4:6-7)[318]

This turns out to be the only mention of Sita in 27 verses as Valmiki teaches the Ramayana to Kusa and Lava – Rama and Sita's sons. This is reflective of the entire text's approach to women. Great women, according to Valmiki, are passive actors; Sita has "surpassed even the most outstanding woman…" (V:4:22) for being fully devoted to Rama.[319] On the other hand when Kaikeyi actively fights for her son Bharata's rights, she is scorned and discarded by him; he goes so far as to say that "…I would kill this woman myself, this evil, wicket Kaikeyi..." (II:72:21).[320]

In contrast, men are encouraged again and again to take action. This is reflected, particularly, in the Indian Independence movement, which drew from many of the ideals and themes of the *Ramayana*. Savarkar, a prominent and militant pro-independence activist, glorified the notion of warriorhood and disdains *ahimsa* (non-violence) as impossibly

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[317] Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss," 42.

[318] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 132.

[319] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 124.

[320] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 237.

naïve.[321] As I will explore in my next chapter, the *Ramayana* and its characters, as outlined in this chapter, provided a framework and unifying force for the disparate groups fighting to end the British occupation. This influence, moreover, was to extend beyond independence, into the twentieth and twenty first century, and to play a significant role in shaping the social and political landscape of the emerging nation.

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[321] Hanne, Crano, and Mio, *Warring with Words*, 222.

5. Independence, Nationalism, and Women in the 20th century

Because of her asceticism, her truthfulness

and her complete devotion to her husband alone,

she might burn fire, but fire could never burn her.

(*The Ramayana*, Sundarakāṇḍa, 53:23.)[322]

5.1. Summary of argument

The push for independence in the subcontinent and the growth of notions of 'nation' and 'national unity' is generally dated from the nineteenth century, but has its origins at the same time as the move by the British to gain economic, cultural, and political dominance over the region. While the nineteenth-century is not vital to understanding the role of the *Ramayana* in the development of Hindu nationalism, it does indicate the manner in which Hinduism and ideas of nationhood became strongly intertwined. Moreover, it is vital to consider the roots of a sense of national consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly among Indian intellectuals who were aware of the European Enlightenment, and minor and major incidences of democratic revolution on the continent.[323] This chapter briefly outlines the progression towards independence, before exploring the postcolonial social and political context and discourse which laid the groundwork for the rise of the BJP and the prominence placed on the *Ramayana*. This chapter will also note the role of women in the Independence movement, and the obstacles faced in the move towards gender equality particularly as a result of gender paradigms established and reinforced by conservative Hinduism.

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[322] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 260.

[323] S. N. Sen, *History of the Freedom Movement in India (1857-1947)* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1997), 13.

5.2.   Twentieth century pre-Independence

The early twentieth century saw the flourishing of the Indian Independence movement from its origins in the late nineteenth century British-educated Indian middle class, and the development of a more cohesive sense of national self and group identity. Previous to the arrival of and colonisation by the British, as earlier summarised, 'India' did not truly exist as a joint identity; rather as a disparate group of kingdom-states, with barely existent political connection or social unity. This was due to the multitude of differing religions, languages, and civilisations married to the colonial policy of leaving local potentates and maharajas in situ.[324] Both contemporaries of the early twentieth century and modern scholars agree, however, that colonialism was a key cause of pan-national communication and the development of an 'Indian' identity.[325]

The primary independence movement and its strength was driven by and based upon three key elements: the revival and assertion of classical arts and language; the centring of certain political and religious ideals as rallying points; and alliances between vastly different political movements and religious groupings.[326]

The notion of the revival and reassertion of older arts, language, and culture – Hindu revivalism – played a vital role in this. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), regarded as the Father of the Indian Renaissance, revived Vedantic philosophy and as an early English translator of Vedic scripts, used promoted a model of reformed and monolithic Hinduism with canonical texts, in response to the model of Christianity being preached by missionaries.[327] This model was asserted and supported by leaders across the spectrum of the

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[324] R. A. Hume, "The Indian National Congress," *The Journal of Race Development* 1, no. 3 (1911): 367.

[325] Hume, 368.

[326] Maya Tudor, "Explaining Democracy's Origins: Lessons from South Asia," *Comparative Politics* 45, no. 3 (2013): 256.

[327] Schlensog, "Hinduism and Politics," 164.

independence.[328] Gandhi in particular framed the struggle against the British as a struggle against the evil of modernity, and the godliness of the ancient, evoking in particular the concept of 'Ramrajya' (a society founded on and guided by the principles of Rama as outlined in the *Ramayana*). [329] This was opposed by Nehru, who focussed on the promotion of 'Indian tradition', an apparently unifying tradition of Indian men and women across linguistic and cultural boundaries.[330] That said, even Nehru was willing to use Hindu-centric rhetoric to solidify a model of the imagined community of India, referring to Hinduism as "all things to all men".[331]

In 1885, the Indian National Congress (INC) was launched by a group of Western-educated intellectuals, most of whom are Hindu.[332] Beginning on a moderate platform willing to use polite petitioning, resistance and apathy from the British government resulted in the organisation's evolution into a powerful national movement fuelled by anticolonial sentiment and the desire for an independent state. By the start of the twentieth century, the INC had evolved into a nation-wide organisation, operating on a broadly democratic structure of election-like selections of representatives from provincial committees to join the National-level committee.[333] The organisation was dominated by Hindus, and in particular, by highly educated men of the Brahmin caste (a tiny percentage of the Indian population.)[334] but was touted as a relatively secular, religiously tolerant group.[335]

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[328] Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male," 376.

[329] Hanne, Crano, and Mio, *Warring with Words*, 215.

[330] Brigitte Schulze, "The Cinematic 'Discovery of India': Mehboob's Re-Invention of the Nation in Mother India," *Social Scientist* 30, no. 9/10 (2002): 74.

[331] Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 7.

[332] W. Travis Hanes, "On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis," *Journal of World History* 4, no. 1 (1993): 72.

[333] Mark Bevir, "Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 7, no. 1/3 (2003): 99.

[334] Tudor, "Explaining Democracy's Origins," 2013, 256.

[335] Hume, "The Indian National Congress," 369.

To achieve this end, a unifying ideological point was necessary – both for political activists and key players, and for their followers. They did this by reimagining the notion of the 'Vedantic past', supported by the revival of Sanskrit, and the literary, religious, and philosophical texts written in that language.[336] As previously stated, a vital part of appropriating Hinduism for this movement was encouraged by prominent Hindu leaders such as Swami Vivekananda, who founded the powerful Ramakrishna Mission, as a universal tradition transcending sectarian boundaries.[337] While in 1916, the INC formed a temporary alliance with the Muslim League via the Lucknow Pact, Hinduism was firmly centred as a core rallying point for pro-independence groups, and the narrative of India as a fundamentally Hindu homeland continued to feature heavily and gained widespread support for the movement.[338]

Despite the common understanding that the Indian Independence movement was rooted in non-violent protest and pacifism, the truth is that violence and militancy played a significant role in the development of the movement. In this, right-wing nationalists featured heavily. This reflected a strong recurring element in the Hindu epics focussed around nobles and warriors: that the characters least deserving respect were "…the one who loses his male quality of heroic leadership and submits to the power of a woman".[339] Independence leaders were therefore implied to be unmanly and unworthy of leadership if they did not reflect qualities of militant strength, mirroring the male heroes of Hindu religious narrative**.** Conversely, the most valued women in this social narrative were those who mirrored the virtues modelled in traditional texts such as the *Ramayana*; supportive of their husbands'

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[336] Hanne, Crano, and Mio, *Warring with Words*, 212.
[337] Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 47.
[338] Hanes, "On the Origins of the Indian National Congress," 76; Sibnarayan Ray, "India: After Independence," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 1 (1967): 130.
[339] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 318.

interests and ideologies, while remaining tied to the domestic sphere and adhering to a construct of fragile feminine purity in need of protection.[340]

5.3.   Gender and identity in the independence movement

In the historical narrative of Indian independence, the key players whose names are recognised were all men – particularly Brahmin, English-speaking, and educated men. The treatment of women was heavily utilised by both the British and Indian independence activists to advance their cause. Traditional practices such as *sati*, dowry, and child marriage were derided by colonialists as barbaric while Indian nationalists claimed that liberal feminism was merely another forced colonial construct. Gayatri Spivak refers to this rhetoric as "white men saving brown women from brown men"; while many of the changes made by the British regarding the treatment of women were positive, a significant motivating factor for the colonialists was to support the notion of imperialism as a "civilising mission".[341] Despite this, women were not at all passive players in the struggle for independence, and an active women's movement developed in India through the early twentieth century.

An ongoing narrative from the beginnings of British colonialism is that the British aimed to 'liberate' colonised women from apparently barbaric cultural and gendered practice (even though women did not achieve universal suffrage in the UK until 1928). Through colonialism, Indians were berated for their treatment of women and. This resulted in the imposition by the British – and supported by British women – of a middle class construction of English domesticity, which sought to confine women to the domestic sphere, reinforced by the resurgence of notions of an ancient Indian tradition of gender binary – supported,

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[340] Suruchi Thapar, "Women as Activists; Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement," *Feminist Review*, no. 44 (1993): 82.

[341] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 163.

apparently, by the framing of women in classical texts like the *Ramayana*.[342] Combatting the idea that Hinduism was oppressive to women came to form part of the Indian nationalist movement, particularly when combatting the British narrative. The view was constantly maintained by nationalists that Indian women in fact had greater rights and liberation during precolonial India, dating back as far as an Indian 'golden age' in the BCE period (during which the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are considered to have been written.)[343] Partha Chaterjee contends that to a certain extent, the assertion of authority over the domestic sphere and the role of women was the real beginning of Indian nationalism. By clearly demarcating the domestic as innately Indian, under attack from the colonial attempts to regulate tradition, women came to stand as representatives of a pan-Indian identity.[344]

The framing of women as passive representations of the traditional nation meant that women largely excluded from the majority of the independence movement' activities. When the female voice and consciousness was highlighted, it was mainly during male-driven nationalist discourse where women were represented as passive symbols and signifiers of the concept of "Mother India". [345] This is a practice that bears similarities to the discourse of other nationalist movements.[346] Maitrayee Chaudhuri emphasises Benedict Anderson's statement that "the nation is home and home is mother" in arguing that conceptualising the nation as feminine strongly reaffirms the fundamentally domestic and maternal role of women.[347]

Negatively framing womanhood as weak was not reserved specifically to this kind of debate. For instance, Gandhi referred disparagingly to the British Parliament as "a sterile

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[342] Maitrayee Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," *Sociological Bulletin* 48, no. 1/2 (1999): 113–33.

[343] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 163.

[344] Sreenivas, 169.

[345] Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India," *Imago Mundi* 53 (2001): 101.

[346] Margaret Jolly, "Motherlands? Some Notes on Women and Nationalism in India and Africa," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 3 (May 1, 1994): 42.

[347] Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," 116.

woman and a prostitute" in criticising its inefficiency, and a political structure which allowed outside influences to sway ministerial allegiances and legal policy.[348] A newspaper in 1910 decried the apparent weakness the Indian community, asking "who prevents us from infusing into the masses the spirit of manliness, self-reliance and self-respect?"[349] The clear implication was that the men of India needed to embrace their masculinity and defend women (and by extension 'Mother India' from Western influences and British imperialism.

Despite this, women were an important part of the Independence movement – both when they were allowed to participate, and when they carved spaces for themselves. Women's rights groups developed in regional areas, and were also advocated by particularly influential individuals – such as Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati,[350] one of only ten female delegates to participate in the session of Congress in 1889.[351] With the stressed importance of national unity against the British, the all-India women's movement began to take shape in the 1920s and 1930s, comprised of largely middle-class activists.[352] Liberal Indian feminists aimed to fashion a new form of womanhood in preparation for incipient Independence. This envisaged model was intended to move beyond the nationalist construct of 'Mother India', where women were passive symbols of traditions, culture and history which needed to be protected from the incursion of Western modernity.[353]

The All India Women's Conference (AIWC) was the umbrella organisation agitating for these social reforms, particularly in the arena of education. In doing so they came up

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[348] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 90.

[349] Carey A. Watt, "Education for National Efficiency: Constructive Nationalism in North India, 1909-1916," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (1997): 347.

[350] This may partially have been because she was a Christian and therefore not so bound by expectations of Hindu women.

[351] Shahida Lateef, "Whither the Indian Women's Movement?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 12, no. 47 (1977): 1949.

[352] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 163.

[353] Mrinalini Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India," *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 626.

against a problem which would reoccur in the postcolonial period; that discussing education entailed discussion of specific social problems such as dowry, child marriage, and widow remarriage.[354] This led to the emergence of a key difficulty with engaging independence leaders in the fight for gender equality and women's issues. Male activists feared that succumbing to what was considered a form of imperial paternalism (even though it was in the form of women's rights) would alienate conservative religious groups and traditionalists.[355] Bills such as the *Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856)* and the *Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act 1937* were passed under British rule, and were thus seen as colonial impositions and the oppression of traditional Hinduism.

Closer to independence, nationalist support for legislative reform began to grow as women's organisations reframed moves towards gender equality as a validation of India's readiness to become one of the world's modern nations.[356] The subcommittee 'Women's Role in Planned Economy' was established in 1938 by the INC's National Planning Committee, with an ambitious plan focusing on enabling women to participate in production, trade, and business on a large scale without being impeded by domestic duties.[357]

Despite increased recognition of the women's movement, the worry that 'female emancipation' would counteract the narrative of Indian traditionalist and national culture continued to affect the ability for women's issues to attract widespread support on a national level.[358] The continued fear of Western liberal feminism undermining 'Indian' narratives, particularly through questioning traditional texts and practices, thus meant that the move into the postcolonial period was fraught with difficulties and obstacles for women.

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[354] Subramaniam, "The Indian Women's Movement," 635.
[355] Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India," 629.
[356] Sinha, 632; Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 163.
[357] Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," 119.
[358] Sarbani Guha Ghosal, "Major Trends of Feminism in India," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 4 (2005): 798.

5.4.   Forging a Secular Nation

Undoubtedly, the most significant consequence of Independence was the partition of British India in 1947 into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. Intended to separate the population into its Muslim and Hindu majority areas, the division of territory was arbitrary and hurried – an act that would have long-term consequences.[359] The ensuing months, as the decision spread through the news media, government pamphlets, and by word of mouth, saw mass displacement (as citizens attempted to move into their 'allocated territory'), the division of families, mass violence, and loss of life estimated to have been at least several hundred thousand, and possibly as much as two million.[360] The act also set in motion significant territorial aggression and instability between the two states, which has permeated all aspects of culture and politics. Most significantly, however, was the fundamental role of religion in bringing about the existence of two separate states. While India is a nominally non-religious, democratic state, Pakistan adopted the official name "Islamic Republic of Pakistan" and did not officially adopt a Constitution until 1956.[361] In 1971, the long-running Bengali nationalist movement in the area of East Pakistan resulted in what is considered by many scholars agree was a genocide of East Pakistani Bengalis.[362] The and resultant attempted ethnic cleansing by West Pakistan resulted in the Bangladesh Independence War, and the establishment of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in late 1971.[363]

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[359] Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

[360] Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, *The Partition of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

[361] Tudor, "Explaining Democracy's Origins," 2013, 269.

[362] Donald Beachler, "The Politics of Genocide Scholarship: The Case of Bangladesh," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 5 (December 1, 2007): 467.

[363] Rounaq Jahan, "Bangladesh in 1972: Nation Building in a New State," *Asian Survey* 13, no. 2 (1973): 200, https://doi.org/10.2307/2642736.

It is important to acknowledge the presence of Pakistan and the way in which it may have shaped the role of Hinduism as an underpinning force and binding concept in the new, postcolonial state of India. Prior to the Partition of British India in 1947, the continent was split into smaller regional nation states. Therefore, overlapping cultures, linguistic traditions, and populations required a barrier of some kind to delineate separation. Initially. the Muslim League had been framing Muslims as a minority within India whose rights needed protection, but who should remain part of the Indian nation after independence was achieved. This platform was altered when Muslim nationalist Mohammed Ali Jinnah took leadership of the League, however, who argued that India was in fact comprised of two nations; one Hindu, and one Muslim.[364] Pakistan was therefore carved out with the specific purpose of being for Muslims in the subcontinent; an ironic fact considering that there are almost as many Muslims in India as there are in Pakistan.[365] As of the 2011 Indian census, there were approximately 172 million Muslims in the nation.[366]

In contrast to Pakistan's Islamic constitution, the postcolonial federal Indian state adopted many of the tenets of the English Constitution and its common law system, using it as a base for the development of their own (in the process unfortunately adopting several quite archaic regulations and practices that are still being dissolved/dismantled.) Throughout the development of post-Indian politics, the landscape was largely dominated by the Congress Party, founded by Nehru and Gandhi – meaning that their core identity is based on the principles of those two men. Though Nehru was non-religious, Gandhi was openly Hindu. Nevertheless, the party's main philosophies and policies were based on a strong commitment to principles of pluralistic secularism. This, however, was an approach complicated by a

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[364] Raju G.C. Thomas, "Competing Nationalisms: Secessionist Movements and the State," *Harvard International Review* 18, no. 3 (1996): 12.

[365] Bajpai, Basit, and Krishnappa, *India's Grand Strategy*, 208.

[366] Government of India, "Census of India Website : Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India."

number of factors. Firstly, the concept of state values not rooted in a religious worldview was extremely new in the subcontinent. Further, Hinduism was wound up inextricably in the fabric of society – particularly in accounting for the caste system. Nehru and other Congress leaders "…believed that caste inequality would wither away as socialism was progressively established in India."[367]

The determination to form a secular state, however, was undercut almost immediately in the postcolonial period by the introduction of the Hindu Code Bill, which began development in the years immediately preceding Independence and passed in the 1950s. While the Bill is popularly referred to in the singular (as is the case in this thesis), it is actually made of five separate Acts: the *Hindu Marriage Act 1955*,[368] the *Hindu Succession Act 1956*, and the *Hindu Maintenance Act 1956*, the *Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956*.[369] B.R. Ambedkhar, the Minister of Law and Justice during Nehru's prime ministership, believed that the Hindu Code Bill was as necessary as the Constitution, seeing it as the starting point for Hindu reform on both religious and social grounds.[370] Regardless of Ambedkhar's intentions, the Hindu Code Bill undermined the new Indian state and the INC on a fundamental level. Section 2 of the *Hindu Marriage Act 1955*, for instance, states that:

1. This Act applies -
    a. to any person who is a Hindu by religion in any of its forms or developments, including a Virashaiva, a Lingayat or a follower of the Brahmo, Prarthana or Arya Samaj;
    b. to any person who is a Buddhist, Jain or Sikh by religion; and
    c. to any other person domiciled in the territories to which this Act extends who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion, unless it is proved that any such person would not have been

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[367] Jeffrey Witsoe, "Territorial Democracy: Caste, Dominance and Electoral Practice in Postcolonial India," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 32, no. 1 (2009): 70.

[368] Unless specified, all Acts and Bills are produced by the Republic of India.

[369] Sinha, "Images of Motherhood," 53.

[370] Wandana Sonalkar, "An Agenda for Gender Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 1/2 (1999): 24.

> governed by the Hindu law or by any custom or usage as part of that law in respect of any of the matters dealt with herein if this Act had not been passed.[371]

Despite founding the nation on a Constitution and rhetoric that was intended to be completely secular in consideration of the religious plurality of its citizens, the government had directly legislated in regard to religious and traditional customs. Moreover, the legislation grouped Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs in with Hindus, likely due to the fact that these religions also originated in the subcontinent. The decision to apply the Act to members of these religions which excluding others – particularly Muslims and Christians – entrenched the perceived ethnic lines that had already plagued pre-independence Indian politics.[372]

5.5.   The Hindutva movement and the origins of the BJP

The Hindu right, as noted above, traces its roots to the Independence movement, basing their methods on and drawing inspiration from the grassroots organisations that featured in the early fascism of Italy and Germany.[373] The group of organisations following *Hindutva* ideology, the Sangh Parivar, grew rapidly in the postcolonial period. Over fifty major organisations now exist, occupying significant space in social, political, religious, educational, and scientific arenas.[374] This thesis refers mostly to the BJP, as the political organisation in the Sangh Parivar, however, it is vital to understand that these groups are closely interlinked, and that while organisations may claim to have no political affiliations, there is a long history of collaboration between them. There are also several cases of senior

[371] Parliament of India, *Hindu Marriage Act 1955* s2.
[372] Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male," 376.
[373] Martha Nussbaum, *The Clash Within* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.
[374] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 78.

members moving with ease between the leadership of groups.[375] A common trait of Sangh Parivar organisations is the use of particular words and catchphrases. One of these is obviously *Hindutva*; however, this often goes together with the phrase 'cultural nationalism', which the BJP manifesto for the 1996 election stated is "the concept of one nation, one people, one culture…which alone can preserve the unity and integrity of our nation".[376]

The most prolific and controversial of these is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which Nandini Deo describes as the "patriarch" of the Sangh Parivar.[377] The RSS is a social organisation founded in 1925 which focusses on the creation and maintenance of youth groups promoting physical culture, athleticism, and masculinity. Critics of the RSS have observed that it has been modelled not particularly dissimilarly on the youth programs run by pre-war fascist Italy and Germany.[378] It has traditionally contained elements blatantly associated with a particularly Hindu interpretation of Indian history and culture – to the exclusion of other religious influences, particularly those of Islam.[379]

Echoes of the European fascist organisations which inspired the RSS are quite also visible in the history and development of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the religious wing of the Sangh Parivar, which was formed on the birthday of the deity Krishna, on 29 August 1964.[380] The VHP has long claimed that it has no political affiliations or links with the RSS. However one of the RSS's founders, Shivram Shankar Apte, became the general

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[375] Lahiry, "Jana Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party: A Comparative Assessment of Their Philosophy and Strategy and Their Proximity with the Other Members of the Sangh Parivar," 833.

[376] Noorani, *The RSS and the BJP*, 101.

[377] Deo, *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India*, 7.

[378] P. T. van der Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity: The Vishva Hindu Parishad," in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 655.

[379] Kameshwar Choudhary, "BJP's Changing View of Hindu-Muslim Relations," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 33 (1991): 1901; Sumanta Banerjee, "Can the Left Confront the BJP?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 37 (2004): 4126.

[380] Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," 61.

secretary of the VHP, and the VHP and RSS have been implicated numerous times in collaboration on right-wing and Hindu nationalist projects.[381]

The main feat of the VHP in contributing to the cause of the Sangh Parivar was that it brought a number of Hindu religious leaders and factions – most notably the Vaishnavas (worshippers of the god Vishnu, and by extension his avatars who include Rama and Krishna), and the Shaivas (who worship the god Shiva.)[382] While the organisation by no means actively pushed the RSS ideology of turning Hindus into a concrete socio-political community, it provided an avenue for those who shared sentiments along the lines of social conservatism and a desire to see a return to Hindu principles due to dissatisfaction with Nehru's and the INC's secular socialism.[383] In doing this, the term 'Hindu' was intended by the VHP to be used (ostensibly) to refer to anyone identifying with the 'core values' (ethical and spiritual) that had apparently evolved in India – while simultaneously alienating and sidelining other religious groups, in particular Muslims and Christians.[384] Thus, the VHP was instrumental to the creation of the term "modern Hinduism" as one used to define a Hindu entity/unity rather than a scripturally-based religion.[385]

The VHP and RSS based their dislike of Islam and Christianity on their foreignness. Their approach to other South Asian faiths (Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism), meanwhile, employed the argument that Hinduism was an all-encompassing faith which accepted the practices and beliefs of other religions as valid paths to enlightenment. By using this line of thinking, the Sangh Parivar were attempting to absorb other South Asian faiths into an apparently overarching notion of the Hindu civilisation – something that is presented to both

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[381] Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity," 653.
[382] Veer, 654.
[383] Katju, "The Early Vishva Hindu Parishad," 36.
[384] Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity," 656; Katju, "The Early Vishva Hindu Parishad," 36.
[385] Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity," 666.

Hindus and outsiders as a practice of tolerance, rather than one of erasure.[386] As was outlined above, the assimilation of those religions into Hinduism was also reflected in INC legislation, which contradicted the fact that Indian law was, according to the Constitution, supposed to be secular.[387]

The exclusion of Muslims and Christians from the Hindu Code Bill therefore gave *Hindutva* supporters another major talking point for anti-Muslim rhetoric, and further undermined secular ideology in the decades immediately following independence. Moreover, the ongoing conflict and friction between India and Pakistan – which boiled over in 1965 under the reign of Indira Gandhi – left Hindus dissatisfied and resentful at the Muslim minority, who became scapegoats for problems in India and fed into the *Hindutva* agenda.[388] As earlier stated, this decline led to catastrophic results in 1967, and left a political vacuum that allowed the ideological *Hindutva* movement to garner political traction.[389]

Growing discontent with the INC led to its defeat in the 1977 elections after the 1975 state of emergency ended. The new government was made of an amalgam of political parties. One of these was the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), a party founded in 1951 as the political arm of the RSS, and which aimed to protect what it conceived as the "Hindu cultural identity" of India, particularly against Islam and Muslim groups.[390] After this coalition fell apart due to internal division and voter disenchantment, the BJP was formed. On occasion, the BJP has distanced itself from the RSS and *Hindutva* ideology; however, this distance has never been meaningfully maintained.[391] Abdul Noorani claims that the BJP is "haplessly dependent on the RSS"; whether or not this is precisely the case, the next chapter will

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[386] Veer, 658.
[387] Singh, "Hindu Bias in India's 'Secular' Constitution," 910.
[388] Bannerji, "Making India Hindu and Male," 377.
[389] Kumar, "Rethinking State Politics in India," 15.
[390] Lahiry, "Jana Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party: A Comparative Assessment of Their Philosophy and Strategy and Their Proximity with the Other Members of the Sangh Parivar," 833.
[391] Sud, "Cracks in the Facade," 15.

demonstrate that the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar have a co-dependency based in a determination to implement *Hindutva* ideology and enforce a traditionalist and exclusionary brand of Hindu cultural unity at the expense of oppressed groups.

5.6.   Women in post-independence Indian politics and legislation

In the period from the birth of the unified Indian women's rights movement in the 1920s to the Hindu Code Bills in the 1950s, the struggle for equality and gains in human rights was fought primarily by women themselves (through credit has often gone to the men who eventually passed the legislation.)[392] In many ways it was the manner in which women participated in the Independence movement, and the manner in which this participation was framed by male leaders of the push for Independence, that led to the diminishment (or at the least, stagnation) of female rights and participation in politics in the post-colonial period.[393] Ironically, Usha Chandran blames this partially on the Gandhian legacy, where women were typecast as self-sacrificial and expected to be eager to forgo power or benefit on their part for an abstract notion of the common good.[394] Another burden women faced in the postcolonial era was that, despite legal advances and the hard work of the Indian feminist movement, they were still considered to be "cultural emblems of the nation".[395] This was also reflected in the media landscape in the post-Independence period, which focussed on the establishment and veneration of myths around 'Indianness' – something which was epitomised in the 1957 film *Mother India*.[396] This carries on from the leitmotif during the independence movement of

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[392] Lateef, "Whither the Indian Women's Movement?," 1948.
[393] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 164.
[394] Usha Chandran, "A Woman's World," *India International Centre Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4 (2009): 289.
[395] Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," 118.
[396] Schulze, "The Cinematic 'Discovery of India,'" 72.

Bharat-Mata, where India was framed as sacred and pure, a feminine figure to be protected from the violation of Western colonialism and imperial influence.[397]

The immediate post-independence era was characterised by the need to devise a sturdy Constitution.[398] Part of this Constitution did involve a fulfilment of the promise to women's rights activists of legal gender equality. The Indian Constitution as adopted in 1949 prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.[399] Article 16 of the same text prohibits discrimination on the same grounds in regards to employment or appointment to office,[400] and Article 39 stipulates that the State will direct policy towards guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, regardless of gender.[401]

The establishment of this Constitution, therefore, gave women official legal rights. However, issues relating to marriage, guardianship, and inheritance traditions remained significant enough to warrant the implementation of the Hindu Code Bill. These laws were aimed to reform archaic and patriarchal practices "…in relation to marriage and divorce (1955), adoption and maintenance (1956), minority and guardianship (1956) and succession and inheritance (1956), among others…"[402] This undermined the political equality that women had fought for through the early part of the twentieth century – yet the undeniable official legal equality granted by the Constitution resulted in increased difficulties in approaching what was a complex sociocultural and economic issue.

These laws were not as protective as they seemed to be. The *Hindu Marriage Act 1955*, for instance, set minimum ages of marriage at eighteen for girls, and twenty-one for boys. This reflected the belief that female sexuality developed earlier, and thus needed to be

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[397] Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 43.

[398] A.B. Mathur, "State Politics in India: The Shape of Things to Come," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (1987): 644.

[399] *Constitution of India 1949* Art 14(1).

[400] *Constitution of India 1949* Art 16(2).

[401] *Constitution of India 1949* Art 39(b).

[402] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 942.

restrained by marriage from an earlier date. The *Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956*, despite modifying aspects of the earlier Act, maintained that the father would remain the natural guardian of their children, save in cases of neglect or child abuse.[403] More significantly, these laws were not applicable to non-Hindus, due to the INC's fear that this might impinge upon the rights of minorities. In doing so this contributed not only to continued inequality for non-Muslim women, but also carried a very particular implication: that the Indian government could legislate for Hindus as citizens of India, but defined non-Hindus as "other", or as outside the jurisdiction and definition of a "true" Indian citizen. Moreover, as previously mentioned the fading of agitational and nationalist-fuelled politics and activism meant that the remainder of pre-Independence feminist goals were left unfulfilled, and though female leaders attempted to push for further reform, apathy and increased resistance – particularly with the rise of Hindu conservatism – a number of legal changes were left unimplemented.[404]

Legislation aside, whether the theoretical aims of the Hindu Code Bill would manifest in consistent action, was an entirely different question. Former INC president Madan Mohan Malaviya, during preliminary parliamentary debates over the Bills, stated that "…In the brahman society, the woman has been given the highest place. There is nothing higher than the mother."[405] Malaviya's statement echoed the traditional understanding of gender roles within a patriarchal society that had, intentionally or not, become wound into the narratives around which the postcolonial nation had formed itself. Within this structure, the women's movement had been heard to the extent that they managed to influence some legislative reform. However, in the greater scheme of the new nation, their words rang hollow. They had talked, but in speaking they had not been *heard*.

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[403] Sinha, "Images of Motherhood," 53.
[404] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 164.
[405] Sinha, "Images of Motherhood," 49.

5.7. Women in the 'secular' Hindu state

5.7.1. Archaic practices

Two traditions which are often pointed to as examples of sexist and patriarchal practices are those of *sati* and dowry. Both were practices condemned by Hindu reformists; Gandhi vocally opposed them when he returned from Africa to become active in the Indian Independence movement.[406] However, legislation and elite rhetoric had little impact on deeply ingrained cultural traditions.

The practice of *sati* derives its name from that of the goddess Sati, who burned herself to death out of shame after her father humiliated her husband, the god Shiva. The practice was banned by the British under the *Bengal Sati Regulation 1829*.[407] However, when the British banned the practice it was seen as an attack on the freedom of Indian women to martyr themselves, despite the practice never being universal or common.[408] Gayatri Spivak highlights a key element implicit in this historical ritualistic demand for female self-immolation; in appealing to a widow's *dharma* of devotion, surviving family members would be able to rid themselves of her, as remarriage was either not allowed or highly stigmatised.[409] This was further emphasised, Spivak says, by the belief that if a widow did not burn herself on her husband's pyre, she would not be able to escape from a female body in her next reincarnation; a theory that is inherently sexist.[410]

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[406] Lyn Norvell, "Gandhi and the Indian Women's Movement," *The British Library Journal* 23, no. 1 (1997): 12.

[407] William Cavendish Bentinck, "Sati Regulation XVII," Pub. L. No. XVII, Bengal Code (1829).

[408] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 120.

[409] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 291.

[410] Spivak, 293.

While it is no longer a common practice, it still occurred in the postcolonial period. The highly publicised case of Roop Kanwar's death via *sati* in 1987 resulted in the subsequent enactment of the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act in 1987.[411] Kanwar's death was variously seen as an admirable act of religious conviction, a violation of gender and human rights through the vehicle of fundamentalist religion, a murder committed under the masquerade of ritual suicide and/or an unfortunate incident that was nevertheless Kanwar's right as a free and devout Hindu woman. [412] These murders, which are often passed off as ritual suicides, are either ignored or diminished by the police and/or district administration, are prosecuted poorly, and faced with hostile/indifferent courts, due mostly to the patriarchal structures and notions of cultural tradition which portray these women as martyrs/saints rather than victims of a system designed to remove female autonomy with the death of their husband.[413]

In the mid-1970s, the Progressive Organisation of Women in Hyderabad began the first of a wave of protests against dowry burning; a practice also known as bride burning, where wives are killed or burned in 'kitchen accidents' due to inadequate dowry.[414] Dowry-giving had been another tradition derided by the British as savage.[415] However, postcolonial Indian legislation, while legally stringent, was rarely implemented or to its full effect. The *Dowry Prohibition Act 1961* had stated that "giving and taking dowry is an offence."[416] However, as pointed out by protesters, the legislation was rarely enforced and easy to circumvent such as through the giving of gifts rather than money. In response to continued social pressure, the Act was amended twice in 1984 and 1986 to widen the scope of the

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[411] Dipankar Das, "A Tale of Two Incidents," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 24 (2005): 2372.
[412] Kapur and Cossman, "Communalising Gender/Engendering Community," 35.
[413] Das, "A Tale of Two Incidents," 2372.
[414] Radha Kumar, "Contemporary Indian Feminism," *Feminist Review*, no. 33 (1989): 22.
[415] "Women and Gender in a Changing India," in *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 3.
[416] Mahendravada, "Public Policy," 68.

definition of 'dowry' and to be made more stringent.[417] Nevertheless, the practice is still quite common, particularly in lower-class and rural areas where women are considered less valuable due to the view that they are less capable of work beyond the domestic realm, unable to operate independently, and are thus financial burdens to their families.

5.7.2. Marriage and inheritance

Valmiki tells us that, under the utopic reign of Rama, "…Nowhere in his realm do men experience the death of a son. Women are never widowed and remain faithful to their husbands…" (I:1:72). [418] This, as I have highlighted previously, is a suitable summation of the role of women in colonial and postcolonial 'Hindu' India. Marriage in India has featured the giving away of women as property for the purposes of social alliance and the biological union of families through offspring. Even beyond the patriarchal and oppressive dimensions of this process which frames women as items (and not even valuable items, as indicated by the practice of dowry), marriage is not based on the ideal of motherhood. Instead, it is specifically and primarily centred on motherhood of *sons*.[419] The clear message therefore that all other interests and responsibilities should come secondary to this duty. This consequently means that a woman being self-supported and supporting her husband is antithetical to traditional understandings of a 'good' Hindu woman – a view that is also expressed by Sita in the *Ramayana*.[420] Valmiki's earlier declaration moreover, contains an important second stipulation of faithfulness and loyalty. This was considered from two angles in the *Ramayana*. The first was that women who are chaste are so goddess-like that they may be

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[417] Kanchan Mathur, "Body as Space, Body as Site: Bodily Integrity and Women's Empowerment in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 17 (2008): 56.

[418] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 126.

[419] Jolly, "Motherlands?," 44.

[420] Chavan and Kidwai, *Personal Law Reforms and Gender Empowerment*, 59.

endowed with divine powers. The second was that loyalty and fidelity to husbands should be the ultimate aim of women, regardless of the conduct of those husbands.

Marriage, with its links to notions of purity and virtue, has been viewed as a cornerstone of 'true' Hindu cultural and religious life – meaning that, as stated earlier, the argument that offering equal economic rights in terms of agricultural property rights and inheritance law was often based or augmented by the role of women as current or future wives.[421] Indeed, during the writing of the Bill, several delegates called for specific laws barring female heirs from inheriting either the main family house or agricultural property.[422] The key reason for this is that women have been regarded as a family's property – either the family they are born into or the one they marry into. The latter is the primary justification for the dismissal of the Women's Sub-Committee's proposed protections of female inheritance in the late 1940s as the Hindu Code Bills were solidified; male Hindu conservatives (and even many liberals) were anxious to protect the patrilineal lineage of property inheritance from passing into the hands of a woman's husband.[423]

Another element to take into consideration is that marriage in Hinduism is traditionally considered to be the union of two families, rather than two individuals (hence the continued prevalence of arranged marriage and dowry).[424] In doing this, a woman surrenders her autonomy to her husband. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama tells his mother that "…So long as she lives, a woman's one deity and master is her husband..." (II:21:17)[425] This reflects the view from classical India that adultery – as a primary deviation from the scaffold of marriage – was a major crime (though only if it was the woman straying outside the

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[421] Eleanor Newbigin, *The Hindu Family and the Emergence of Modern India: Law, Citizenship and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 210.

[422] Newbigin, 215.

[423] Newbigin, 211.

[424] Indira Sharma et al., "Hinduism, Marriage and Mental Illness," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 55, no. Suppl 2 (January 2013): 243.

[425] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 129.

marriage).[426] Under Brahmanical law, indeed, the only valid reason for separation was adultery on the part of the wife, as her primary role and *dharma* was to produce and care for the sons of her husband. Male infidelity, on the other hand, did not compromise any levels of caste *dharma* or social function; and as the devotion and obedience of married women was required to be unconditional, consideration of a wife's feelings was not necessary.[427]

The framing of women as primarily wives and mothers was remarked upon and heavily criticised by the British colonial government.[428] In 1891, a survey of Calcutta found that there were at least 10 000 girls under the age of four who were already widowed.[429] This was despite the fact that the *Age of Consent Act 1860* had set the age of consent at ten, and the *Age of Consent Act 1891* raised this to twelve.[430] In 1928, an official commission reported that approximately 42% of Indian girls were married by the age of fifteen; a statistic that was rooted in the notion of ritualistic purity.[431] While this number did reduce by the time of independence, this reduction was by no means as significant as advances in women's legal rights might have suggested. The issue of child marriage is also one which, while apparently legislated against in the 19th century, continued to occur on a regular basis.[432] The continued presence of child marriage and widowhood paints a telling picture. A child bride is more likely to be chaste, and a widow (no matter her age) is rendered worthless as the assumption is that her virtue is irrevocably compromised. Just as Sita's chastity was questioned not only by Rama's citizens but by Rama himself, female autonomy comes second to assumptions of

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[426] Chavan and Kidwai, *Personal Law Reforms and Gender Empowerment*, 34.

[427] Chavan and Kidwai, 80.

[428] Sinha, "Images of Motherhood," 51.

[429] Norvell, "Gandhi and the Indian Women's Movement," 13.

[430] Flavia Agnes, *Family Law: Volume 1: Family Laws and Constitutional Claims* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[431] Sinha, "Refashioning Mother India," 629.

[432] Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," 120.

the men around her. A woman's honour and worth, therefore, is implied to be solely located in outside perceptions of her sexuality and chastity.[433]

5.7.3. The value of a woman

All of the above paint a telling picture of the considered value of women, as we move through the postcolonial period. When Sita is convinced that Rama has abandoned her, she contemplates suicide.[434] Her thought is reflective of the love value that is often placed on women who are unable to be useful to the men around them – not only by men, but also by women. The debates during the creation of the Hindu Code Bills focused strongly around the notion that the role of the mother should be celebrated as the highest achievement a woman can attain.[435] Margaret Jolly observes that "maternity is, at least in Bengal and northern India, a cause for celebration only if it results in sons."[436]

There is little doubt that this contributes to the significant skew in child birth-rates. Despite the scientific statistical probability that slightly more foetuses are female than male, in 2001 there were just 933 female live births to 1000 male live births; down from 972/1000 in 1901.[437] This may also have contributed to the decline in the representation of women in the labour force in the immediate postcolonial period – from 34.44% in 1911 to 17.35% in 1971.[438] Other factors than the skewed birthrate had contributed to this. The likelihood was that boys are likely to be fed more, and in poverty-stricken areas it was often girls who are forced to go without food if needed; therefore, as they moved into adulthood they were more

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[433] Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss," 107.
[434] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 189.
[435] Sinha, "Images of Motherhood," 49.
[436] Jolly, "Motherlands?," 46.
[437] Dhavan, "Reservations for Women," 9.
[438] Lateef, "Whither the Indian Women's Movement?," 1950.

likely to be susceptible to disease and malnutrition.[439] Additionally, families did not offer the same level or quality of education to daughters that they did to sons, due to the perception that their predetermined roles as housewives rendered education beyond a basic level a waste of money and time.[440] When combined with dowry as well as acute pressure to marry and give birth to sons as quickly as possible, these conditions perpetuated the same gross gender inequalities that had existed before independence. Despite the promises of independence leaders and the efforts of early Indian feminists, the roles of women were still undeniably shaped by the expectations of ideal womanhood reflected in the *Ramayana*.

5.8.   Conclusion

It is important to consider the history of the BJP and the cultural milieu within which it is situated. The impact of the party's presence in India became genuinely significant towards the end of the twentieth century, culminating in 1992 with a moment that would both encapsulate and define the nature and goals of the BJP in India, moving into the 21st century. Part of this was made clear in the relations between the BJP and Muslims, which has continued to be a problematic and oppressive paradigm in the twenty-first century. As I have indicated, this conservative trend is reflected in the shape of women's rights in India. Maitrayee Chaudhuri posits that the post-Independence Indian state frames women in three ways: as passive recipients and occasional active agents of economic and social development, as citizens (albeit at least initially as second-class citizens), and as cultural and religious emblems.[441]

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[439] Sarkar, *Gender Disparity in India: Unheard Whimpers*, 214.
[440] Sumnima Udas, "Challenges of Being a Woman in India," CNN, January 1, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/12/world/asia/india-women-challenge/index.html.
[441] Chaudhuri, "Gender in the Making of the Indian Nation-State," 131.

Incidentally, it is also interesting to note that the implicit inequality of the Hindu Code Bill and social understandings of a woman's legal place, particularly in regards to inheritance, is by no means supported by classical Hindu legal texts. The *Dharmaśāstras*, a series of treatises on *dharma* that form part of the *Smriti* (secondary corpus of Hindu texts) make no distinction between the inheritance of an estate on the basis of gender.[442] Nevertheless, the Hindu Code Bill serves as a testament not only to the severe deficiencies in legal rights for women until they were passed, but also the socialised assumptions which framed the legislation that was passed.

The 1974 *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* concluded that a significant proportion of Indian women had not benefited at all from the rights that were promised them both in the Constitution and in the spirit of Independence.[443] The understanding of the female role in Indian society, while well-suited to the Independence movement, quickly became inadequate, particularly when used to fuel right-wing gendered rhetoric. A significant reason for this was the continued objectification of femininity for the purposes of nationalism.[444]

The women's movement was therefore forced to reinvent itself, particularly to combat the very real issues of violence and social oppression that were discussed earlier. Moreover, most of the focus tended to be on specific issues – especially dowry, female infanticide, and marriage – meaning that efforts to combat gender inequality on a larger scale were limited.[445] In 1987, the prominent women's studies scholars Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj attributed the stunted spread of feminism to the fact that "…women have been looked upon either as victims of social practices or targets for development as in the post-

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[442] Chavan and Kidwai, *Personal Law Reforms and Gender Empowerment*, 70.
[443] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 164.
[444] Ghosal, "Major Trends of Feminism in India," 797.
[445] Pail, "From Dynasty to Legitimacy," 112; Gangoli, *Indian Feminisms*, 6.

independence period, but never as participants in development..”[446] Thus the struggle against the widespread effects of the patriarchal and exclusionary narratives upon which modern India is based have continued to shape the situations of Indian women in the 21st century. According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, 8 618 women died in relation to dowry disputes in 2011.[447]

The next chapter explores two key elements of the BJP's exclusionary aims and policy as it rose to prominence in the 1980s. The first is that of the mobilisation of Hindu nationalists as a violently masculine force in the model of a carefully perceived understanding of Rama, to quash the rights of minorities and oppress non-Hindu interests and social elements. The second shows how this approach to masculinity has been reflected in the continued social and legal oppression and silencing of women. It outlines some of the legislative and social advances that have been made since the 1980s, and acknowledges that there has been some level of success in this war for women's rights.[448] However, the chapter also highlights the fact that the move towards equality has been slow and plagued not only by issues of society and culture, but also of opposition by political forces.

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[446] Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishna Raj, *Women and Society in India* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987), 6.

[447] Priya R. Banerjee, "Dowry in 21st-Century India: The Sociocultural Face of Exploitation - Priya R. Banerjee, 2014," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 15, no. 1 (2014): 34.

[448] Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India," 164.

6. Four Decades of the BJP: the *Ramayana*, Violence, Nationalism and Gender since 1980

Lovely lady, Rama is the guardian of the four classes of society.

He is the guardian of his own conduct and of righteousness.

(*The Ramayana*, Sundarakāṇḍa, 33:11.)[449]

6.1. Introduction

India's Independence movement was driven by the unifying rhetoric of equality regardless of caste, creed, religion, and gender, with a basis in secular tolerance. However, as the previous chapter has shown, this promise of national unity was curtailed in the following decades. Part of this, as I have indicated, is due to the inability of the INC to manifest promises of economic and social reform and progress. Growing distrust of the Congress Party began to develop in the 1960s, highlighted by the general elections in 1967 where the INC faced unprecedented defeats at the state level.[450] Problems were worsened rather than ameliorated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency in 1975, which revoked individual rights such as the right to trial, and suspended elections until 1977.[451] Perhaps most indicative of this violation of democratic principles which the INC had touted since independence, was the implementation of borderline-dictatorial programs, such as a forced sterilisation programme near Delhi organised by Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi.[452] Meanwhile, the gridlock of bureaucracy and political inaction resulted in frustration in the

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[449] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1996, 201.
[450] Mathur, "State Politics in India," 645.
[451] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 47.
[452] Patna Bihar, "Wasting Time: India's Democratic Challenge," *The Economist*, May 11, 2013, https://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21577373-india-will-soon-have-fifth-worlds-working-age-population-it-urgently-needs-provide.

lower classes and castes with the middle class and the INC, which was further fuelled by unfulfilled social and economic reforms.[453]

In this landscape of corruption, abuse of power, and the denial of basic freedoms and rights, "liberal democracy" as espoused by Congress appeared a farce – and, indeed, a mask for widespread oppression. This impression was only furthered by economic troubles, rising food prices, and a decline in the rise of employment rates through the 1970s and 1980s.[454] Certainly, this was (and continues to be) the rhetoric used by the BJP during its rapid rise to widespread power. The renowned journalist and political analyst Praful Bidwai, in writing on their exponential success, referred to the BJP in 2005 as an "animal…that mutates from a Right-wing pressure-group on the margins with just two Lok Sabha [Parliament] seats in 1984, to a major contender for power at the national level within a decade and which overtakes the Congress by 1996 and forms a government at the Centre two years later…"[455] While Bidwai was writing in 2005, this description of the BJP is prescient, particularly after Narendra Modi's victory in the 2014 Indian general election (the party won 282, that is 51.9%, of all seats).

Rhetoric, of course, cannot be enough to propel a political party from a place in the radical minority into mainstream politics. So, what precipitated this growth, aside from the decline of the INC and the consequent power vacuum left behind? Certainly, until the early 1980s it was a commonly held belief that the BJP would eventually have to moderate its views and political aims if it wished to become a mainstream party.[456] This chapter demonstrates how, in fact, fact that the complete opposite occurred. Rather than de-radicalising, the BJP capitalised strongly on the tensions that plagued postcolonial India as

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[453] Basu, "Caste and Class," 30.

[454] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 40.

[455] Praful Bidwai, "Understanding a Political Chameleon," *India International Centre Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2005): 131.

[456] Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," 61.

the new nation sought out a way to apply a colonial secular nationalist model across a cultural and linguistic area with an identity largely defined by an opposition to those same colonial forces. Consequently, the BJP was able to push a Hindu nationalist agenda in line with the *Hindutva* doctrine with little opposition from the vague secularism of the INC – which was itself still shaped by the elements of Hindu unity that had been a key part of their rhetoric during the Independence movement. To pacify moderates and non-Hindus, the BJP drew upon the ostensibly accepting principle of *Hindutva* which stated that Indians were free to follow any religion (but only so long as they maintained a perceived notion of Hindu values).[457] In 1991, for instance, the then-president of the BJP, Murli Monhar Joshi, stated that "…it is the basic culture of this country. I say that all Indian Muslims are Mohammadiya Hindus; all Indian Christians are Christi Hindus. They are Hindus who have accepted Christianity and Islam as their religion".[458]

Despite these superficial concessions to tolerance and pluralism, the BJP have both explicitly and implicitly continued to advocate for a return to a 'purer' past where, according to *Hindutva* ideology, India was entirely Hindu and its culture undiluted by secularism.[459] Simultaneously, they presented a way to move forward from what they presented as the corrupt state of modern India under the INC.[460] As outlined in the previous chapter, the BJP's desire for the application of traditional Hinduism in Indian society and law has been evident in their rhetoric and action since independence.[461] Moreover, even with the move into the mainstream, the BJP has continued to heavily draw upon Hindu mythology and culture in its rhetoric – in particular, its deployment of the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* has played a large role in shaping, framing, and popularising the rhetoric that the BJP uses to justify and

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[457] Bidwai, "Confronting the Reality of Hindutva Terrorism," 12.
[458] Noorani, *The RSS and the BJP*, 114.
[459] Derek Gregory and Allan Pred, *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007), 167.
[460] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 33.
[461] Sud, "Cracks in the Facade," 15.

promote its ideologies and policies. Indeed, the role of the *Ramayana* and associated mythologies has had quantifiable social effects in India, particularly since 1985. This chapter will explore the scope of this role over the last three decades in aiding the rise of the BJP, despite initial beliefs that its violation of principles of secularism would render its influence short-lived.[462] and the growing persecution of minorities – in particular Muslims – as a method of both consolidating *Hindutva* ideologies across the nation and perpetuating chauvinistic and oppressive practices and politics.

While at first glance, the persecution and marginalisation of Muslims seems unrelated to the issues faced by women in relation to the party and its ideologies, this persecution is a key factor in establishing a militaristic, paternalistic structure of Hindu Indian (ideally BJP) leadership. By rejecting the "effeminate" in Indian society which had been imposed by the "masculine" Islamic conquerors of the mid-second millennium, the political presence of women has been simultaneously marginalised.[463] When added to the politicisation of Islamic female bodies and identity – such as the key Hindu nationalist narrative that higher fertility rates among Muslims will result in a Muslim majority and 'takeover' (a narrative espoused by members of the BJP)[464] – and the importance of considering these forms of marginalisation when examining the relationship between women and the BJP in modern India becomes apparent.

The relationship between women and the BJP has remained fractious since 1985, particularly as the rise in its nationalist conservatism and notions of traditionalism clashed with the economic rise of women, their representation in the workforce, and efforts to combat specific issues of gender-based oppression that I elaborated upon in the previous chapter. Moreover, equally troubling is the way in which the BJP has weaponised the *Ramayana* to

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[462] Basu, "Caste and Class," 28.
[463] Bidwai, "Confronting the Reality of Hindutva Terrorism," 11.
[464] Winter and Teitelbaum, "Population and Politics in India," 143.

not only support their views, but to cajole women into perpetuating their own oppression.

After examining the cultural shifts around the rise of the BJP post-1985 and the increased

militancy of *Hindutva* as a male-driven social ideology, this chapter will explore the

relationship between the BJP and women in political discourse and voting, and the effect of

such a relationship in the twenty-first century as women play a greater role in the Indian

workplace and economy.

6.2.   Political and Cultural expansion of the BJP since 1985

6.2.1. Shift in polls and voting patterns

The support base of the BJP is situated in Hindi-speaking regions of North India.[465]

There are three key reasons for this. Firstly, Hindi is far more widespread in North India than

in the South, where strong notions of linguistic independence still linger. The presence of a

shared language in the north therefore aids significantly in the dissemination of information

and propaganda, as well as easing the process of navigating regional cultural differences.[466]

Secondly, several languages in the south are from the Dravidian language group rather than

the Indo-Aryan, meaning that learning Hindi is comparatively more difficult – and less

meaningful or useful for South Indians – whereas North Indian languages, being

linguistically more similar (and related to Sanskrit), have allowed for the spread of Hindi as a

commonly used language. Thirdly, resentment over the choice of Hindi as the official

language of legalese also means that many South Indians are averse to the idea of learning or

speaking Hindi.

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[465] Oliver Heath, "Anatomy of BJP's Rise to Power: Social, Regional and Political Expansion in 1990s," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 34/35 (1999): 2511.
[466] Sengupta and Kumar, "Linguistic Diversity and Disparate Regional Growth," 9.

Since 1985, however, the increase in popularity of the BJP in the north has spread into southern India. This is due in part to the increased use of comparative methods and approaches to electoral politics and the influence of regional cultures across the country, which allowed political parties a greater understanding of methods of framing policies and propaganda to greater success. [467] In 2009, the BJP managed to gain the highest number of seats in the state election of the southern state of Karnataka.[468] The state, which includes the major cities of Bangalore and Mysore, did not offer the BJP enough seats for a clear majority (it won 110 of 224 seats), but the vote. However, this represented a clear shift away from the popularity of the INC, which won 80 seats. While this by no means equals the widespread influence of the party in North India, it is indicative of the fact that the BJP's nationalist ideological appeal has begun to overshadow regional linguistic and cultural differences.[469]

6.2.2. Cultural shifts

As stated earlier, the BJP's rise in influence concurred with the decline in the Congress party's national popularity. With the swell of Hindu nationalism through the 1980s, supported and stimulated by the repopularisation of religious narratives – notably the *Ramayana* – this rise in power became more rapid. Before 1980, and moving through that decade with its official inception into mainstream politics, the BJP actively sought to differentiate itself from its predecessor the BJS, and its overt Hindutva and anti-Muslim politics. The party's manifesto during the 1984 Lok Sabha election extolled the importance of

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[467] Kumar, "Rethinking State Politics in India," 17.

[468] Muzaffar Assadi, "Karnataka Assembly Election: BJP's Victory and Trend Towards Three Party System," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 70, no. 1 (2009): 261.

[469] Sandeep Shastri, Veena Devi, and B S Padmavathi, "Karnataka: A Default Win for the BJP," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 115.

unity in diversity. [470] Yet, even this movement was rooted in the idea of India as an

inherently Hindu country:

> Alongside, in the 1980s, the BJP launched the Ram Mandir movement…the
>
> BJP propagated the concept of Ramrajya, an idyllic time when the upper and
>
> lower castes will supposedly live together in harmony. Rama and the
>
> Ramayana were projected as symbols of unity between the Dalits and the
>
> upper castes; the Dalits were told how Ram was associated with deprived
>
> people and how the Ramayana was centred around them…These were actually
>
> the so-called deprived communities of today, who had succeeded in searching
>
> out and rescuing the soul of India. [471]

By centring Indian identity on Hinduism, the notion of the 'other' became firmly

Muslim; a tactic to create a binding element for Hindus that unified rather than divided them

into *Savarna* and *Avarna* ('with caste' and 'without caste' respectively.) This also provided

security of identity for *Savarnas* as the caste system began to slowly lose its potency, and as

the perceived threat of non-Hindus (particularly Muslims) became more pressing and

powerful than the threat of the dissolution of their caste identities. [472] Despite the BJP's 1984

manifesto and its emphasis on tolerance and diversity, a series of Hindu-Muslim riots and

efforts to propagate Hindutva ideologies were the principal reasons for the BJP's consequent

success in the 1991 general election. [473] This demonstrates the troubling extent of tokenism in

the party's rhetoric – exemplified in their support for a Uniform Civil Code, allowing for the

government to pass common reforms regarding marriage and other religious practices, where

previously Hindus and Muslims were allowed self-governance (hence the Hindu Code Bill.)

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[470] Choudhary, "BJP's Changing View of Hindu-Muslim Relations," 1901.

[471] Sudha Pai, *Political Process in Uttar Pradesh: Identity, Economic Reforms, and Governance* (New Delhi: Pearson Education India, 2007), 141.

[472] Yājñika and Sheth, *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat*, 260.

[473] Yājñika and Sheth, 264.

Support for these measures also alienated Muslims by portraying their practices as inherently chauvinistic and sexist compared to the apparently accepting and progressive approach to women and marriage taken by Hindus.[474] The BJP's support for a Uniform Civil Code was designed to signal to the voting public that Hindus accepted secular law, and that the INC was subject to the whims of religious fundamentalists.

Despite active efforts by the BJP to moderate their tone, therefore, the rise of the BJP was fuelled largely by a growing backlash against the perceived threat of social deterioration via the 'weak-minded' INC and external influences of Westernisation and Islam. A growing interest in the reclamation of 'traditional' Hindu sites, such as that of Ayodhya, became more widespread with the release of Sagar's *Ramayan*. The serial, as a product of state-run television, was sponsored by a INC-led government, most likely with the aim of mobilising the Hindu vote for themselves. Indeed, the actor playing Rama, Arun Govil, campaigned as his character on behalf of the INC.[475] Nevertheless, both the broadcasting of the serial and the politicisation of it violated a key Nehruvian principle upon which the INC was founded – that government institutions should remain secular. The *Ramayan*, released as the BJP gained in popularity, offered that party a much more potent opportunity to harness and (importantly) encourage Hindu nationalism in a way that the INC, with its secular roots, could not.[476] The power and influence of the serial was particularly illustrated when Deepika Chikhalia, the actress playing Sita, became a Member of Parliament after campaigning as a BJP candidate in the 1991 national elections.[477]

The production allowed the BJP to cite the Valmiki text as an appeal to the text's traditional roots and cultural elements while drawing implicitly upon the references and

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[474] Chavan and Kidwai, *Personal Law Reforms and Gender Empowerment*, 16.
[475] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 85.
[476] Rajagopal, 73.
[477] Chetan Bhatt, *Liberation and Purity: Race, New Religious Movements and the Ethics of Postmodernity* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1997), 254.

knowledge instilled in the population by the television serial.[478] The Valmiki text by itself offered a certain sense of communalism, and served as a link to the notion of the "antiquity of the Indian identity, civilisation, and nationalism..."[479] However, in providing this singular narrative *en masse* to hundreds of millions of Indians, that mythic connection was reinforced and brought into a contemporary context, thereby solidifying and maintaining the 'imagined community' of Hindu India.

Additionally, there are other, more sinister undertones to the resurgence in the *Ramayana*'s popularity, than a general swell of nationalist sentiments. Accompanying this rapidly expanding sense of Hindu communalism was a backdrop of masculine militancy as depicted in the *Ramayana* and the *Ramayan*, particularly via the promotion of the Kshatriya warrior model.[480] These were highlighted in two key incidents, which I have previously mentioned: the first of which was the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992; and, a decade later, the Gujarat riots in 2002.[481] Both incidents were rooted in the exploitation of distrust and discrimination against Muslims, rather than women; however, both contained a strong and troubling strain of violence against, and scapegoating of, in particular, Muslim women. Each of these events is examined below, considering the role of gender and the *Ramayana* in BJP actions and reactions.

6.3. The 'Ayodhya Incident': The Destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992

The Babri Masjid (*Mosque of Babur*) was located in Ayodhya, India, and was one of the largest mosques in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The mosque was built in 1528CE, on the

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[478] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 9.
[479] Dwijendra Narayan Jha, "General President's Address: Looking for a Hindu Identity," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66 (2005): 2.
[480] Morey and Tickell, *Alternative Indias*, xxii.
[481] Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss," 103.

orders of the Mughal emperor Babur.[482] A common understanding among citizens was that the mosque's construction involved the destruction of a temple of Rama on the same site, and in the decades leading up to 1992 there had been a dedicated and growing movement among *Hindutva* supporters calling for the destruction of the mosque, or at least the allocation of part of the site to Hindu worshippers for constructing a Hindu shrine to Rama.[483] This narrative was widespread and presented as objective fact by Sangh Parivar groups; for example, a cultural knowledge exam taken by students at all RSS schools includes the following section:

> Q: Which Mughal invader destroyed the Ram temple in 1582?
>
> A Babur
>
> Q: From 1582 till 1992, how many Rambhakts [Rama worshippers] sacrificed their lives to liberate the temple?
>
> A: 350, 000.[484]

There is in fact no tangible evidence supporting the pre-existence of a temple at the Ayodhya site, and whether any potential demolition was related to the consequent construction of the Babri Masjid.[485] Even if this were true, the notion that 350 000 Hindu lives were lost in attempts to 'liberate' the area is somewhat ridiculous. Nevertheless, this popular myth contributed particularly to the rise of populist Hindu nationalism and to the construction of a historical narrative where the Mughal Empire represented an egregious attack by Muslims on the traditional Hindu homeland.[486] This narrative also ignores claims

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[482] S. P. Udayakumar, "Historicizing Myth and Mythologizing History: The 'Ram Temple' Drama," *Social Scientist* 25, no. 7/8 (1997): 11, https://doi.org/10.2307/3517601.

[483] Sushil Srivastava, "The Abuse of History: A Study of the White Papers on Ayodhya," *Social Scientist* 22, no. 5/6 (1994): 39.

[484] Sundar, "Teaching to Hate," 1609.

[485] Bidwai, "Understanding a Political Chameleon," 133.

[486] Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, "The Bodies of Nations: A Comparative Study of Religious Violence in Jerusalem and Ayodhya," *History of Religions* 38, no. 2 (1998): 102.

by Jains and Buddhists that the mosque was built over religious constructions of their respective faiths. In any case, this led to a Muslim-exclusionist narrative.

Anti-Muslim resentment specifically related to the Babri Masjid had been slowly building even from pre-Independence; a Hindu-Muslim riot in 1934 resulted in some damage to the mosque. Throughout the post-Independence period, Hindu organisations and Hindu nationalists attempted to enact claims on the grounds as a rightful place of Hindu worship. This was exemplified in 1984 by a campaign by the VHP to allow Hindu access to the Babri Masjid, as well as other buildings that had apparently been built over Hindu shrines and temples. In 1986, Hindus were given access to the site and the mosque, and the area began to operate in some ways as a Hindu temple. Sangh Parivar groups and *Hindutva* proponents were not the only ones to use the disputed territory as a political tool. The INC chose to unlock the site, to launch their 1991 electoral campaign from a town near Ayodhya, and allowed the laying of foundation stones for a future temple to Rama near the Babri Masjid.[487]

This culminated in on 16 December 1992, when BJP, VHP and RSS representatives offered prayers at the site. Following this, a large number of young male volunteers from these militant Hindu organisations attacked the mosque. The Babri Masjid, a 464-year-old structure, was destroyed in five hours, the volunteers managing to construct a makeshift temple to Rama in its place by the time government forces eventually took control of the site.[488]

The riots that ensued in the immediate aftermath of the incident and which continued through January 1993 resulted in the mass deaths, most of whom were Muslims. [489] While exact death tolls were different to ascertain at the time, particularly as violence broke out in

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[487] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 944.

[488] Manju Parikh, "The Debacle at Ayodhya: Why Militant Hinduism Met with a Weak Response," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 7 (1993): 673.

[489] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 317; "17 Years since 6 December 1992," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 48 (2009): 5.

other parts of the country, at least 1000 people died and estimates were as high as 3000.[490]

Government action was belated – somewhat due to the fact that it had relied on assurances from the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh, a BJP party member.[491] Singh instead ensured that government troops did not arrive at the site till after the demolition before resigning from his position as Chief Minister.[492] While Prime Minister Narasimha Rao eventually acted decisively by banning the RSS, the VHP, and Bajarang Dal (the militant youth wing of the VHP), this was largely ineffective and criticised as dictatorial.[493]

The Liberhan Commission was established after the event to investigate the demolition. After a delay of 17 years, in 2009 the report confirmed that senior figures of the BJP, RSS, and VHP were at least partially responsible for the demolition. This correlated with accusations from Muslim groups that the attack had been pre-planned and involved state government collusion.[494] The event in Ayodhya served nevertheless as both publicity and propaganda for the BJP.[495] Despite the consequent archaeological findings that there had been no standing temple at the time of the construction of the Babri Masjid, and the implication of BJP members in the event, this myth continues to serve as fuel for the conservative narrative of Muslims as invaders and destroyers of classical India.

The temple-mosque issue in Ayodhya indicates the way in which the political agenda of the BJP was revealed to be explicitly bound up in the principles and ideologies of the VJP and RSS, in a process that almost wiped out the Muslim population in Bhagalpur.[496] Later findings aside, the episode indicated a rapidly growing trend towards citizens identifying themselves predominantly as Hindus rather than as Indians, with the eventual hope of

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[490] Parikh, "The Debacle at Ayodhya," 675; Friedland and Hecht, "The Bodies of Nations," 103.
[491] Parikh, "The Debacle at Ayodhya," 673.
[492] Parikh, 674.
[493] Parikh, "The Debacle at Ayodhya."
[494] V Krishna Ananth, "Liberhan Commission: A Critical Analysis," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45, no. 4 (2010): 12.
[495] Doshi, *Revolution at the Crossroads*, 22.
[496] Veer, "Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity," 663.

merging the two.[497] Due to this, the Ayodhya dispute continued to offer the BJP political and social support, allowing them to ride the wave of Rama-based popularity that brought them to prominence in Uttar Pradesh.[498] While this influence waned somewhat over the following decade, it was dramatically reinvigorated with the 2002 Gujarat incident.

6.4. Godhra, Gujarat 2002

On 27 February 2002, a fire broke out in a train carriage stopped at Godhra station in the state of Gujarat, after Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya reportedly harassed Muslim shop owners on the station platform. The fire, apparently a deliberate act of revenge by the Muslims, resulted in fifty-eight passengers burning to death.[499] Though police initially argued that the fire had been the result of a conspiracy formed by a group of 15 to 20 people, senior police officials later characterised the attack as a spontaneous reaction to the events on the station platform.[500] Moreover, the allegation that the fire was started by the Muslims involved was later cast heavily into doubt by forensic examinations.[501] As with the incident of the Babri Masjid, however, these facts were completely overshadowed by the interpretation of these deaths as a direct strike by Muslims (fuelled by the rumours of a Pakistani conspiracy) on devout Hindus and, by extension, Hinduism. Before any considered responses or detailed information could be provided, vocal anti-Muslim sentiment on the part of both the police and government officials resulted in reprisal attacks on Muslims which

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[497] Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple," 2001.

[498] Amaresh Misra, "Uttar Pradesh: Motion without Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 18 (1992): 933.

[499] Howard Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 349.

[500] Spodek, 351.

[501] Nussbaum, *The Clash Within*, 2.

spread throughout the state – resulting in almost 2000 deaths and almost 150 000 left homeless.[502]

Unlike the destruction of the Babri Masjid, however, the Gujarat riots did not result in repercussions for Sangh Parivar organisations or their leadership. Narendra Modi, who at the time was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, claimed the events of Godhra were a Pakistan-supported conspiracy and deliberate attack. According to some accounts, he also told his administrative officials to allow the riots to continue in the name of justice, and to remain inactive during communal violence.[503]

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (a relatively 'moderate' representative of the BJP party) later supported Modi's claim of conspiracy, blaming the violence against Muslims on the initial train burning, and excusing the subsequent hate crimes as an understandable, if condemnable, response.[504] He went on to claim that "…Wherever there are Muslims, they do not want to live in peace with others. Instead of living peacefully, they want to propagate their religion by creating terror in the minds of others."[505] The timing of the attacks, less than six months after the September 11 attacks in the USA, further seemed to justify Vajpayee's harmful rhetoric.

The then-Gujarat State Minister for Home Gordhan Zadaphia (who had been a senior VHP member for fifteen years before joining the BJP) stated that *"…We will teach a lesson to those who have done this…No one will be spared and we will make sure that the forces*

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[502] Christophe Jaffrelot, "Gujarat 2002: What Justice for the Victims? The Supreme Court, the SIT, the Police and the State Judiciary," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 8 (2012): 77.

[503] Himadeep Muppidi, *Politics in Emotion: The Song of Telangana* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 40.

[504] Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory," 350.

[505] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 318.

behind this act will never dare to repeat it.'"[506] Some VHP members even boasted that they

were supported in their endeavours by the police, being given cartridges and weapons.[507]

Beyond the use of masculine militant language to justify and fuel these attacks, gender was

also exploited in other ways by the Hindu right. Two major newspapers in Gujarat, *Gujarat*

Samachar and *Sandesh*, published false and inflammatory accounts of attacks on (Hindu)

women.[508] In doing so, Muslims were presented as not only raping Indian women, but also of

violating sacred Mother India herself. In this way, subsequent violence enacted by Hindu

men against Muslims was framed and justified by the traditional role of men as protectors of

their women, and men as soldiers of the state. The reverse was the case; women in Muslim

communities particularly suffered targeted and vicious victimisation. In recorded interviews,

one of the leaders of the Bajrang Dal (the youth wing of the BJP) boasted that "…we didn't

spare a single Muslim shop…there was this pregnant woman, I slit her open…"[509] Bilkis

Bano, a pregnant Muslim woman, was gang-raped by a mob of *Hindutva* supporters during

the same riots. The use of sexual violence was not reserved to the Gujarat riots; Himani

Bannnerji links the events of 2002 to the growing use of gang rape in anti-Muslim attacks,

where rape morphed "…into public, collective, spectacular acts."[510] By using sexual violence

against women, militant *Hindutva* supporters enacted the ideology that masculine violence

was an appropriate and even noble response to the perceived threat of Islam towards Hindu –

and by extension, Indian – values and culture.

The BJP had always been popular in Gujarat; however, in the aftermath of the

Ayodhya dispute, their appeal escalated dramatically. The "laboratory of Hindutva" has since

been a phrase used – primarily by BJP opponents – to describe Gujarat in the aftermath of

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[506] Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory," 352.
[507] Jaffrelot, "Gujarat 2002," 78.
[508] Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory," 354.
[509] Jaffrelot, "Gujarat 2002," 78.
[510] Bannerji, "Patriarchy in the Era of Neoliberalism," 4.

this event.[511] Certainly, the violent and exclusionary rhetoric and actions of the BJP and its associated organisations only served to increase their popularity in the state in the 2003 elections. The party won 126 of 181 seats in the state assembly – with its largest vote shares coming from the areas that experienced the most violence against Muslims.[512] Despite a general understanding that Modi's administration was complicit in the riots, he remained popular. Indeed, when he was unable to obtain a USA visa in 2005 due to his complicity in the Gujarat riots, he was likened to Rama and the USA to Rama's father, King Dasharatha. The implication was that the USA had been deceived into denying Modi – a noble warrior who had fended off the invasive forces of Islam – a visa by the duplicitous Indian national government.[513] With this support base, Modi continued to serve as the state's Chief Minister till his assumption of the Prime Ministership in 2014 (making him the longest-serving chief minister of a state).[514]

In both disputes, the BJP exploited a narrative which was introduced through British colonialism of a false history of constant enmity between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, to consolidate an exclusionary agenda based around recasting Indian identity as fundamentally Hindu. This was further augmented by the use of gendered rhetoric, which framed Hindu women and 'feminine' India as in need of protection from the inherently invasive forces of Islam.[515]

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[511] Mahashweta Jani, "Gujarat: BJP Scrapes Through," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 133.
[512] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 318.
[513] Wendy Doniger and Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 333.
[514] Neera Chandhoke, "Modi's Gujarat and Its Little Illusions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 49 (2012): 11.
[515] Schlensog, "Hinduism and Politics," 162.

6.5. Women and men in the BJP – propaganda, policy, and social discourse

The changing cultural dynamic in the 1980s and the growing popularity of the BJP meant that, despite its promotion of discriminatory and bigoted ideologies, the party began to take support and votes from the INC and secular centrists.[516] A key impediment to attracting further support, however, was that it was difficult for the BJP to extricate or distance itself from the patriarchal and gendered rhetoric used by its associated organisations. The party benefited from the fact that female participation in the electoral process was quite limited; nevertheless, women still represented a significant voting minority. For this reason, the BJP had been careful to emphasise an interest in women's issues and demonstrate a desire to improve the state of women's affairs. The extent to which these are sincere efforts is questionable, particularly when underlying motivations are examined and when language surrounding other aspects of policy is examined.[517] Their actual positions on women and women's issues (dowry, *sati*, female infanticide, rape) are dubious.[518] This has been reflected in aspects of social discourse by party members; perhaps most tellingly epitomised by the BJP official website's "Women's Empowerment" page, which states as its central message that "When you empower women, you empower a family."[519]

Despite these issues, the party has demonstrated increasing popularity with women, despite a patriarchal and conservative agenda.[520] This has made it even more difficult to address those issues of employment equality and equality in marriage. A key example of this is the party's approach to the Universal Civil Code (UCC). The UCC has been a key agenda

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[516] Mehta, "The Mosque and the Temple," 20.

[517] Anne Marie Goetz, *Governing Women: Women's Political Effectiveness in Contexts of Democratization and Governance Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 104.

[518] Goetz, 104.

[519] Bharatiya Janata Party, "Women Empowerment," Bharatiya Janata Party, 2014, http://www.bjp.org/vote-for-india/women-empowerment.

[520] Bidwai, "Understanding a Political Chameleon," 132.

item for the BJP, particularly since its election in 2014. Part IV of the Indian Constitution, "Directive Principles of State Policy", specifies that a UCC should be implemented in keeping with the citizen's right to equality and freedom.[521] This is in response to the Hindu Code Bill, which was constitutionally allowed because Articles 25 to 30 of the Constitution states that religious communities have the right to self-govern in regard to "personal laws"; marriage, inheritance, and guardianship rights. As outlined in the last chapter, therefore, the Hindu Code Bill introduced 'reforms' to Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain communities; however, these reforms were still discriminatory against women.

Lobbying for the UCC by the Hindu right was initially based on the notion of "national integrity". However, as the women's movement became more prominent in the 1970s and 1980s, the BJP started to frame the issue as a women's rights issue. The party claims that the UCC is necessary to free Muslim women from apparently oppressive customs, perpetuating the notion that Hindu Indians already have equal rights. As Nivedita Menon points out, however, implementing a UCC would merely mean the further homogenisation of communities under laws that "were assumed to be "Hindu" norms, but what were, in fact, North Indian, upper-caste practices…in the process destroying existing and often more liberal customary provisions."[522]

This establishment of the idea that Hindu law is non-discriminatory and even empowering to women is a deliberately cultivated fallacy which has allowed the BJP to distract attention from their own gendered and patriarchal rhetoric, perpetuate bigotry towards Muslims, and promote *Hindutva* as a far more tolerant and accepting ideology than it is in reality.[523] The push for such a Code comes in line with an attempt to achieve a complete

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[521] Nivedita Menon, "A Uniform Civil Code in India: The State of the Debate in 2014," *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 480–81.
[522] Menon, 482.
[523] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 949.

ban on cow slaughter, as well as to introduce more aspects of "Hindu pride" into the school curriculum, based on a portrayal of the past that is by no means historically accurate.[524]

The BJP has long claimed to support women's representation in parliament and the practice of reserving a third of seats for women; this was the subject of enthusiastic support in 1996 and the proposed Women's Reservation Bill, Constitution (81st Amendment Bill).[525] The Bill was intended to build upon the 1994 Constitutional Amendment Bill (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) which reserved 33% of seats on local councils being reserved for women.[526] The Women's Reservation Bill proposed that 33% of constituencies, chosen on a rotating basis, would be obliged to run only women candidates. However, there were numerous criticisms of this: including that it would encourage parties to run women candidates only in those allocated areas, thereby pitting women against women; and that this could quite possibly curtain career advancement for women due to the rotation of these constituencies.[527]

The proposal was withdrawn by the end of the same year.[528] The next government, led by the BJP, introduced the 84th Amendment Bill in 1998, which also fell through. This occurred two more times, in 2000 and 2003.[529] The BJP were of course not the only party to develop cold feet; however, this clearly indicated that BJP declarations of their commitment to the empowerment of women in work and politics was a tool that was not intended to be actualised. As with a great number of the issues explored in this chapter, the INC were by no means innocent in the failure of the implementation of reservation of seats for women. The

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[524] Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," 64.
[525] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 63.
[526] Mahendravada, "Public Policy," 73.
[527] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 65.
[528] Dhavan, "Reservations for Women," 3.
[529] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 63.

INC generally nominates more women candidates, and most female members of parliament belong to that party as well.[530]

The cases of the UCC and female representation in parliament are not outliers in their reflection of the BJP's patriarchal, Hindu-centric mindset . Using seemingly progressive policy to undermine minorities with a disregard for the women they claim to represent is an agenda that comes through much more clearly in their discourse.

In the speech given by Modi in 2015 mentioned earlier in this chapter, he used the example of the character Jatayu as evidence of the Ramayana's apparent message of respect for women, and the need to protect a woman's honour with "fearlessness".[531] While intended as an expression of support for women, this statement and interpretation undermined the notion of female autonomy. In the example offered by Modi, Sita becomes a stolen possession in danger of destruction (at least, of her virtue) by her thief, Ravana. This centres a woman's honour as the most important aspect of her being, eradicating any notion of individuality surrounding an archaic notion of purity. On 8 February 2018, the Prime Minister responded to female INC MP Renuka Chowdhury's laughter at one of his statements with the following words: "I request you not to say anything to Renuka ji. After the Ramayan serial, we got the privilege of hearing this kind of laughter only today".[532] The statement was widely read as a derogatory reference to the character Surpanakha and her demonic, coarse laughter. The ease with which Modi made this statement, as well as the mainstream understanding of its significance, indicates both the cultural influence and prolific spread of the *Ramayana*, and the treatment which female politicians (and women in general) receive if

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[530] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 948.

[531] "PM's Address at the First International Ramayana Mela," www.narendramodi.in, accessed October 30, 2016, http://www.narendramodi.in/pms-address-at-the-first-international-ramayana-mela-7289.

[532] Financial Express India, "How Narendra Modi's Ramayana Jibe on Renuka Chowdhury Triggered Mahabharat in Rajya Sabha," *The Financial Express*, February 8, 2018, http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/how-narendra-modis-ramayana-jibe-on-renuka-chowdhury-triggered-mahabharat-in-rajya-sabha/1057566/.

their behaviour transgresses the normative feminine. This is reflected by the fact that, despite the apparent commitment to gender quotas in politics that the BJP had demonstrated, in 2004 (a year after the fourth failure of the Women's Reservation Bill) women made up only 8.24% (30/364) of the BJP's candidates.[533] Only 9% of BJP candidates were women in the 2014 election, compared with 12% of Congress candidates.[534] The party itself has been relatively unpopular among women compared to its support among men, as women tend to favour the INC and left parties.[535]

During the early rise of the BJP – particularly the early 1990s – the party nevertheless gained significant support from middle-class and upper-class women, who were far more engaged with the *Hindutva* cause than they were with women's issues, as they were mostly not drawn from women's organisations or movements.[536] Certainly, the BJP vote among women has traditionally come from upper class, more privileged women who are more concerned with issues of national identity, as opposed to the more marginalised (including Muslim women) who tend to vote in larger numbers for the INC.[537] Women were, for instance, actively involved in the movement for the destruction of the Babri Masjid.[538] They have also been actively involved in grassroots campaigns, and there have long been female subgroups of Sangh Parivar organisations.[539] In engaging women in these organisations – particularly in militant groups such as the Rashstra Sevika Samiti (the female wing of the RSS), traditional gendered roles for women, particularly motherhood, have been positioned

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[533] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 74.

[534] Sumita Mukherjee, "How Will Women in India Fare under a Modi BJP Government?," The Conversation, accessed August 21, 2016, http://theconversation.com/how-will-women-in-india-fare-under-a-modi-bjp-government-26839.

[535] Rajeshwari Deshpande, "How Did Women Vote in Lok Sabha Elections 2009?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 84.

[536] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 947.

[537] Rajeshwari Deshpande, "How Gendered Was Women's Participation in Election 2004?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 51 (2004): 5434; Heath, "Anatomy of BJP's Rise to Power," 2511.

[538] Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*, 4.

[539] Mankekar, 4.

"…as a site for female agency…"[540] While framed as a means of female empowerment, this form of recruitment and activism has served as a subversive continuation of oppressive constructs, as will be expanded upon later in this chapter. It also reflects the fact that in large part, the ideologies of Hindu nationalism and the Hindu right in general relied on being able to define exactly who and what the ideal Indian woman should be.[541] Meera Sehgal highlights a key reason for the success of the Samiti; that its organisers are celibate single women, whose authority is rooted in their desexualisation. This reinforces the idea that female sexuality must be contained either within normative heterosexual and patriarchal structures, or else eschewed entirely.[542] Uma Bharati (Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, 2003-2004) is a particularly prominent example of the way in which women in positions of power in the Hindu right come to reinforce exclusionary norms; Bharati was present at the demolition of the Babri Masjid and was indicted by the Liberhan Commission for inciting a mob. While acknowledging her moral culpability and the political benefits the BJP received in the wake of the destruction, Bharati has insisted that she does not regret her participation in the movement.[543]

One clear indicator of the BJP's association between masculinity, Hinduism and the Indian identity is indicated in their response to the appointment of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi as head of the INC in 1998 after. Sonia Gandhi, who was the wife of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (assassinated in 1991) and the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi, faced considerable

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[540] Kalyani Devaki Menon, *Everyday Nationalism: Women of the Hindu Right in India* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 27.

[541] U Vindhya, "Women as Emblems of Culture and Nation: Conceptions of the Hindu Right and the Democratic Women's Movement," in *Urban Women in Contemporary India: A Reader*, ed. Rehana Ghadially (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2007), 64.

[542] Meera Sehgal, "Mothering the Nation: Maternalist Frames in the Hindu Nationalist Movement," in *Women of the Right: Comparisons and Interplay Across Borders*, ed. Kathleen M. Blee and Sandra McGee Deutsch (Penn State Press, 2012), 196.

[543] "I Take Moral Responsibility: Uma Bharti," *The Hindu*, November 24, 2009, sec. National, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/I-take-moral-responsibility-Uma-Bharti/article16893962.ece.

criticism from the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar. In 2002, four years after Gandhi took over as president of the INC, the president of the BJP's youth wing stated that "…it is really tragic that the party which ruled for more than 50 years has chosen its leader who has foreign origins".[544] K.A. Sudharshan, a senior member of the RSS theorised that "certain foreign powers, who did not want India to emerge as a strong nation" had been the reason for Sonia Gandhi's entry into politics.[545] Despite her foreign origins, Gandhi has been a popular and respected political figure by the majority of Indians; until 2009 polls indicated that Sonia Gandhi was preferred as prime minister over Modi.[546]

It is hard to gauge the extent to which Gandhi's gender has played a role in the hostility directed her way by the BJP. The emphasis on the fact that she is Italian-born is strongly indicative of the importance that the Hindu right wing places on ethnicity and ethnic nationalism. As per Indian and Italian citizenship law, she renounced her Italian citizenship upon gaining Indian citizenship in 1983.[547] Moreover, the BJP strongly criticised the role of family and internal political ties in establishing Gandhi as the INC's president; however, as Gunhild Hoogensen points out, "…men have used such connections for years and no one has complained or made an issue with this."[548]

Despite the BJP's public support for the advancement of women, particularly in politics, it has become increasingly obvious that there is no particular drive or incentive for this to be carried through into implemented policy or meaningful reform. While female representatives of the BJP do hold office, their allocated roles are often the kind that are considered 'feminine' or 'soft' (as such). Moreover, women holding political positions with

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[544] Radhika Ramaseshan, "BJP Sees Gujarat Ammo in Sonia Origins," The Telegraph, August 29, 2002, https://www.telegraphindia.com/1020830/asp/nation/story_1151052.asp.
[545] Pi Ci Kaṇēcaṉ, *Sura's Sonia Gandhi: The Unfolding Scenario* (Chennai: Sura Books, 2002), 138.
[546] Jani, "Gujarat," 135.
[547] Pail, "From Dynasty to Legitimacy," 113.
[548] Gunhild Hoogensen and Bruce Olav Solheim, *Women in Power: World Leaders Since 1960* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 131.

the BJP have perpetuated elements of the gender paradigm in publicly supporting the party's rhetoric around the importance of motherhood to female identity. Mridula Sinha, the national president of BJP Mahila Morcha (the BJP women's organisation) stated that "…for Indian women, liberation means liberation from atrocities. It doesn't mean that women should be relieved of their duties as wives and women".[549]

Ultimately, there is one key difficulty with gauging the amount of support the BJP actually holds among women. There has certainly been a rise in women's involvement in elections since the 1990s.[550] Unsurprisingly, however, there is no way to clearly discern whether women make their voting choices autonomously or whether their husbands, as heads of the household, make those decisions for them. According to Sanjay Kumar, fieldwork indicates that uneducated women are more likely to cede to their husbands' political opinions, particularly in regard to affairs outside the domestic realm; a perpetuation of the confinement of female action and autonomy to the household.[551] The problem stems from the intersection of class and gender here and reflects Gayatri Spivak's argument that "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow".[552]

6.6. Education, employment, and social life in BJP India

As has been made clear in the previous chapter's exploration of marriage and the education of women in India, the social discourse relating to women in the post-Independence period has led to the development of generations of women who, while being legally allowed to work and entitled to the same wages as men, did not have the social or

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[549] Basu, "The Gendered Imagery and Women's Leadership of Hindu Nationalism," 71.
[550] Deshpande, "How Gendered Was Women's Participation in Election 2004?," 5431.
[551] Sanjay Kumar and Praveen Rai, *Measuring Voting Behaviour in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2013), 106.
[552] Asha Nadkarni, ed., "Severed Limbs, Severed Legacies: Indira Gandhi's Emergency and the Problem of Subalternity," in *Eugenic Feminism: Reproductive Nationalism in the United States and India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 177.

cultural resources to do so. Women who are socialised not to air their opinions and needs, particularly in front of men, lacked confidence in their abilities and initially found it difficult to take charge in social or work situations.[553] In these circumstances, legal equality has not led to equality in education, employment, and social life; hampered as they are by prevailing assumptions of gender roles. The continued prevalence and reverence of texts such as the *Ramayana*, and their continued use in political discourse does not help this situation.

The control and shaping of education in India has been a key tool used by *Hindutva* organisations affiliated with and often funded by the BJP and ancillary groups to instil an understanding of India as an inherently Hindu nation, and a traditional patriarchal social model as the only way to ensure a peaceful and pure society. As the previous chapter highlighted, the education of women – or the lack thereof – has historically played an important role in reinforcing and perpetuating gender structures. Without formal education, it is extremely difficult for women to surmount the barriers of gender and class. In 1986 (thanks largely to the advocacy of women's studies scholars), the National Policy on Education (NPE) placed significant stress on education as a powerful interventionist tool in socially and economically empowering women.[554]

This was made particularly apparent in the 1991 census, where the nation-wide literacy rate was 52.11%; but with men at 63.86%, and women at 39.42%, a disparity of 24.44% that was truly alarming.[555] In the 1991-2 school year, the number of boys in secondary school was double that of girls.[556] The literacy rate for women, even at the start of the 21st century, did not reach 50%.[557] As of the 2011 census, the nation-wide literacy rate

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[553] Micheal, *Dalits in Modern India*, 253.

[554] Manjrekar, "Contemporary Challenges to Women's Education," 4577.

[555] Suran Agrawal, S. P. Agrawal, and J. C. Aggarwal, *Second Historical Survey of Women's Education in India, 1988-1994: Present Status, Perspective Plan, Statistical Indicators with a Global View* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1996), 81.

[556] Agrawal, Agrawal, and Aggarwal, 83.

[557] Nussbaum, *The Clash Within*, 3.

had risen to 63.07%, - men to 69.76% - and women to 55.97%.[558] The majority of educated

girls, particularly at the secondary school level, belong to the upper castes. The rise in literacy

has contributed to an increase in gender parity in schools.[559] Beyond the initial problem of

access to schooling, a key issue is the quality and content of the education provided. The

expense of education outside of the government education system – which is fraught with

teacher incompetence and underfunding – means that a number of those schools are provided

by organisations associated with the Sangh Parivar, and may be the only option even for non-

Hindu students.[560]

The *Ramayana* is taught in most schools, and its infusion in regional, state, and

national culture means that despite the low rate of education and literacy, most children and

adults have a strong awareness of the epic.[561]This is even more the case in Sangh Parivar-

associated schools. In September 2017, *Huffington Post India* journalist Betwa Sharma

reported on the routines of Muslim children in RSS schools, run by the non-profit

organisation Vidya Bharati. The report quoted Vidya Bharati's national secretary Shiv Kumar

as saying:

> The entire history of this country depends on Hindus, so everyone must learn
>
> about it. Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. You see, Hindus have
>
> never been rigid and that is why so many religions have flourished here. We
>
> are not against any religion, but conflict happens only when they (Muslims)

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[558] Mukherjee, "How Will Women in India Fare under a Modi BJP Government?"

[559] Ronald C. Wimberley and James A. Christenson, "Civil Religion, Social Indicators, and Public Policy," *Social Indicators Research* 10, no. 2 (February 1, 1982): 63.

[560] Devika Saha, "In 5 Years, Private Schools Gain 17 Million Students, Government Schools Lose 13 Million," Hindustan Times, April 17, 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/in-5-years-private-schools-gain-17-million-students-government-schools-lose-13-million/story-6FV1ic7RLttmWc0ZkhBQBM.html.

[561] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 75.

are rigid. If they become more tolerant and less rigid, what's wrong with that?[562]

Sharma also noted several references to the *Ramayana* in school materials and activities; she described a performance of the Hanuman Chalisa, a well-known devotional hymn celebrating the god Hanuman and his devotion to Rama, which some Muslim children were involved in. Drawings of Rama and Sita were pinned on noticeboards, and textbook questions included "which ideal woman sets an example for virtuous women?"[563] RSS schools have even introduced some gendered classes, where girls are taught 'household' skills such as sewing and cooking – with the implication that these are necessary to be "good housewives and mothers".[564] This reinforces the gender divide perpetuated by BJP education and rhetoric, which is focused on discouraging women from engaging in the public sphere in favour of confining them to the household in line with 'traditional' understandings of gender.

Schools managed by Sangh Parivar organisations – and mostly overseen by the RSS – were heavily driven by religious and nationalist ideology. Unsurprisingly, considering the earlier part of this chapter, the state of Gujarat was one of the first to see revisions of their textbooks by the BJP government along *Hindutva* lines.[565] One of these revisions is referenced earlier in this chapter, where the false understanding that there had been a temple underneath the Babri Masjid has been inserted into a textbook as fact. A mathematics exam question given in the state of Uttar Pradesh in the early 2000s asked "if it takes four *sevaks* [followers or volunteers] to demolish one mosque, how many does it take to demolish twenty?"[566] Mridula Chauhan lists some problematic elements with the syllabus issued by

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[562] Betwa Sharma, "In RSS Schools, Muslim Students Are Learning To Live With Hindutva," December 9, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/09/18/in-rss-schools-muslims-students-are-learning-to-live-with-hindutva_a_23155028/.
[563] Sharma.
[564] Sundar, "Teaching to Hate," 1610.
[565] Visweswaran et al., "The Hindutva View of History," 105.
[566] Morey and Tickell, *Alternative Indias*, xxiii.

the RSS such as: the introduction of alphabets and phonetics via the names of religious texts; gender construction in instructional narratives and pictures; and the introduction from kindergarten of religious rhymes and stories.[567]

Chauhan also details the intensive study of the *Ramayana* which begins from Grade Two. Unsurprisingly, the textbook used emphasises the traditional and narrow reading of the Ramayana perpetuated by Hindutva ideologues since its rise. Rama is presented as virtuous, obedient, physically strong, attractive, kind, and a powerful leader. Sita's virtues, however, mostly relate to her obedience and devotion to Rama. Moreover, there are few mentions of any love or devotion felt by Rama towards his wife. The textbooks also emphasise the importance of chastity and the severe punishment that women may incur if their chastity is compromised.[568] The introduction of these concepts from such a young age (as in Australia, Grade Two children in India are seven years old on average) instils fundamentally sexist and patriarchal worldviews, as well as presenting the Hindu nationalist version of history and Indian culture as fact.

Another issue which is seemingly minor but quite telling is that of sex education, which is regarded as essential by women's rights organisations but criticised by other social groups as an example of the corrupting influence of Western colonialism.[569] The BJP and RSS have strongly opposed sex education in schools. The president of the state of Tamil Nadu's BJP claimed that sex education in state run schools was "a conspiracy of the US to bring in degraded values under the guise of AIDS awareness".[570] The prioritisation of vague notions of tradition and reactive nationalism over public health (especially as it primarily affects women) indicates that the party is willing to sacrifice the wellbeing of female citizens.

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[567] Mridula Chauhan, "Gender Construction Through Religious Narrative in Saraswati Shishu Mandir School," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 71 (2010): 1189–90.

[568] Chauhan, 1191.

[569] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 78.

[570] S. Anandhi, "Sex Education Conundrum," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 33 (2007): 3368.

Equality in the workplace is somewhat more common among the upper class in urban areas. As of 2010, women comprise 36% of the total Indian workforce, 6% of senior management roles, and 4.9% of board of director positions.[571] The low percentage of women in leadership roles is hardly surprising, as masculine hegemony in the workplace is an issue even in countries which have a higher level of female representation in senior management.[572]

Women have higher representation in non-profit organisations; however even in these, they are under-represented in senior management and do not have gender parity.[573] This further emphasises the recurring theme throughout this chapter, where women are typecast into 'carer' roles even in full-time professions. The arts/science divide is also one which plagues the Indian education system; boys are encouraged to study 'hard' subjects such as science and engineering, while women are encouraged to study 'soft' subjects such as domestic sciences, history, and languages.[574] The exception to this is medicine, as the seclusion of women has necessitated the training of women as doctors and other medical professionals.

For many women, particularly those involved with *Hindutva* ideologies and the BJP, the areas of employment and the social intersect in a manner which perpetuate sthe social understanding that women are unable to perform 'hard' tasks – those that are intellectually or physically heavy. This particular approach to women in work was reflected in the passive involvement of women in the Ayodhya campaign; their roles were primarily centred around activities like making food for the Hindu volunteers and militants.[575]

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[571] Triparna Vasavada, "A Cultural Feminist Perspective on Leadership in Non-Profit Organisations: A Case of Women Leaders in India," *Public Administration Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2012): 463.

[572] Vasavada, 466.

[573] Vasavada, 464.

[574] Rohini Sahni and V. Kalyan Shankar, "Girls' Higher Education in India on the Road to Inclusiveness: On Track but Heading Where?," *Higher Education* 63, no. 2 (2012): 248.

[575] Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India," 947.

Just as female politicians in the BJP are often allocated 'soft' portfolios, working women in India have a tradition of being cast in narrowly defined 'feminine' roles. In the federal government in 1992, for instance, Chhaya Bera was the only woman in a Cabinet of twenty-three, and was assigned the Relief and Social Welfare portfolio.[576] While there have been powerful women in government in India (notably Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her daughter-in-law Sonia Gandhi who was President of the INC from 1998 to 2017), the role of family connections and political dynasties have been a significant part of their success.[577]

Just as there exists a dichotomy between the role and involvement of women and men in the workplace, so too is there one between men and women in social, cultural, and political life. In a reflection of the level and nature of participation of women in workplaces and employment, women tend to occupy a more passive role in social life. Working outside the home (particularly for lower-class women) continues to carry a certain social stigma. The patriarchal assumption that women should stay at home (or, as is the case with high-caste women, within the protective field of family companies and enterprises,)[578] is driven by two key factors. The first is that paid work is not considered the purview of the woman unless necessary; therefore, it is associated with familial financial trouble, and thus with lower caste, 'shameful' behaviour.[579] The other is somewhat reflective of Sita's situation in the *Ramayana*, where her time spent away from Rama is automatically assumed to equate with infidelity. This follows on to her exile after the citizens of Ayodhya assume that her children cannot be Rama's. Reluctance to allow women outside of the domestic or familiar fear continues to be driven in part by a desire to preserve traditional lines, and by the fear that

[576] Amrita Basu, *Two Faces of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women's Activism in India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992), 67.
[577] Pail, "From Dynasty to Legitimacy," 108.
[578] Micheal, *Dalits in Modern India*, 241.
[579] "Women and Gender in a Changing India," 5.

with female autonomy naturally comes an increased chance of infidelity and disruption to the paternal lineage.[580]

This is reflected in the participation of women in not only employment roles with NGOs, but also in volunteer positions, thereby removing a significant number of 'workers' from the formal economy.[581] The lack of remuneration for their work emphasises and perpetuates the social understanding that women are natural carers and therefore do not need to be paid for this work. By doing so, women are likely to sacrifice education and career opportunities, even while often volunteering in endeavours which aim to empower women. Aditi Mitra observes that many of these women are upper-class citizens, while lower-class women (who need to work to support their families) have more freedom to participate in wider society.[582] As a woman's early adulthood is expected to be devoted to childbirth and parenting, urban Indian women often enter the workforce at a much later age than most men.[583]

Educated working women undoubtedly enjoy a higher status than economically dependent housewives, however, working women are also expected to adhere to the patriarchal social structure and often must occupy dual roles of housewife and employee.[584] Domestic work and family responsibilities (including taking care of elderly relatives) still remain in large part the purview of female members of the household. In addition to this, familial and social pressure coerces mothers to impart the same expectations of submissive behaviour and devoutness to daughters, to avoid facing judgement as a 'bad' parent.[585] Even

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[580] Visweswaran et al., "The Hindutva View of History," 314.
[581] Hindustan Times, "How Indian Men Are Keeping Women out of the Workforce," Hindustan Times, May 30, 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/how-men-are-keeping-indian-women-out-of-the-workforce/story-LY9nlpnJpzQWAleVBUGCFO.html.
[582] Aditi Mitra and J. David Knottnerus, "Sacrificing Women: A Study of Ritualized Practices among Women Volunteers in India," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 19, no. 3 (2008): 245.
[583] Raka Ray, *Fields of Protest: Women's Movements in India* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2000), 26.
[584] Vasavada, "A Cultural Feminist Perspective on Leadership in Non-Profit Organisations," 467.
[585] Chandran, "A Woman's World," 296.

women who are able to earn an independent income and who hold full-time professions cite Sita as a role model; while they are aware of the unfeasibility of the Sita ideal in contemporary everyday life, there is still a strong social pressure not to question problematic and oppressive aspects of that very ideal.[586] The model of the virtuous woman in religious narrative is only augmented by opposing models of women who forsake their *dharma* to their husbands, or break the model of prescribed womanhood.[587] An example from the *Ramayana* of the former is Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana*, who forces her husband to follow her bidding and finds herself consequently despised by her family and the kingdom. The latter is best epitomised by Surpanakha; not only is she physically unattractive, but she openly approaches Rama and Lakshmana. As a result, she is verbally humiliated and physically mutilated.[588]

The expectation that women should place family first, Kanchan Mathur observes, also extends to women's health. According to Mathur, women are "…expected to eat last, leave the best food for the men of the family and to ignore their own illnesses, while managing the entire household."[589] This also ties into the problem of domestic and sexual violence, which also plays a part in shaping the autonomy of women in Indian society. The continued perception that a woman must eventually marry – and stay in that marriage – means that women are often compelled to stay in abusive relationships, particularly when this coincides with a lack of property rights, education, or employment.[590] The role of the domestic sphere in constraining and oppressing women even when they have legal rights in the fields of education and employment is similarly mirrored in the *Ramayana*. Sita is powerful with her own birthright and royal lineage; however, she is ultimately forced to be subservient to Rama. Meanwhile, Rama is consistently compassionate and respectful to almost every character

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[586] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 286.
[587] Krishnan, "In the Idiom of Loss," 107.
[588] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1991, 124.
[589] Mathur, "Body as Space, Body as Site," 57.
[590] Mahendravada, "Public Policy," 65.

other than Sita; reflecting the notion that men are judged on their actions as active social and political players, while the value of women is ultimately tied to their ability to abide by a strict model of virtuosity and obedience.

6.7. Conclusion

So far, this thesis has emphasised that the BJP narrative relies an essentialist historical vision which venerates a pre-colonial pure 'original' Indian nation.[591] As this chapter has demonstrated, there are two key reasons for the success of this narrative.

Congress's decentralisation as a political party, which started centre-left but has become a representation of bureaucracy and vague secularism absent of any clear ideology or clear program for India's future, left a void in political power that allowed for the exponential growth of the BJP through the 1980s and 1990s.[592] They have, in direct and deliberate opposition to Congress and the secular narrative, been calling for a national culture which privileges the "Hindu" origins of the nation.[593] Evoking Islam as an aggressive force threatening the sanctity of Mother India as a Hindu state, the BJP were able to use events which would normally be extremely detrimental to a political party – namely the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots – to support and advance their own agenda.[594]Amalendu Misra refers to the idea that "…India is the only country where the majority community is still afraid of the minorities."[595] The claim that India is the only country with this problem is no longer necessarily true (Misra's paper was written in 2000).

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[591] Doshi, *Revolution at the Crossroads*, 23.
[592] Randall, "Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism," 73.
[593] Doshi, *Revolution at the Crossroads*, 24.
[594] Mazzoleni, Stewart, and Horsfield, *The Media and Neo-Populism*, 108.
[595] Misra, "Hindu Nationalism and Muslim Minority Rights in India," 2.

Nevertheless, it is significant that those words are applicable to the entirety of postcolonial Indian history.

It is important to note that the women's movement has been instrumental in pushing for dramatic legislative reforms and drawing political and social attention to gender inequalities. Along with this, they have focused heavily on the importance of empowering women in personal and family life. At the same time, however, research continues to show that gender discrimination is still pervasive in the social and cultural conditions of women from all castes and classes in Indian society.[596] Irma Clots-Figueras suggests that this is a cyclical problem, pointing out that female political representation actually increases the level of educational attainment in the district represented by those politicians.[597] Educational disadvantages to women, however, limit the pool of female political candidates as well as their potential to advance to senior political positions. When access to education is available, the use of the *Ramayana* as a conservative education tool further entrenches rigid gender structures and prioritises the maintenance of Hindu tradition over women's rights and inclusive secularism.

This problem is one which reflects key issues that plague efforts to bring women into the workforce for longer-term periods, especially in middle class and/or leadership positions, as well as a primary reason for the continuation of roadblocks on the path to encouraging personal autonomy among Indian women. The issue is that culturally, women do not have agency in the public domain, and even in the domestic sphere they take on the roles of caregivers rather than leaders.

Despite a sizeable body of feminist writings and numerous well-known female politicians, women have continued to be largely absent on a national level in debates about economics,

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[596] Mitra and Knottnerus, "Sacrificing Women," 247.

[597] Irma Clots-Figueras, "Are Female Leaders Good for Education? Evidence from India," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 4, no. 1 (2012): 213.

trade, and global politics. Once again, Spivak's theory that women may talk but, for the most part, not speak and be heard, appears to ring true.[598]

Moving into the second decade of the twenty first century, it has become all the more important to unpack the extent to which the BJP and its associated organisations and ideologies are embedded in the political and cultural fabric of modern India. There was violence around the polling stations in the 2014 election where the BJP took federal power.[599] The regime has been facing a swell in criticism from cultural and literary figures in India, as well as from human rights watch groups outside of India, and has been compared to the Taliban in a number of recent publications.[600] Since before the election of Modi, however, there have been numerous attempts to re-examine or rewrite the *Ramayana* with the aim of addressing the assumptions of gender and patriarchal social structure that continue to shape modern gender relations in India.

Mangala Subramaniam makes the claim that all social and cultural movement in India since the 1980s has been to some extent influenced by the rise of *Hindutva* organisations and the BJP.[601] In the next chapter, I will explore some of these efforts in India, before examining issues of obstructionism on a microcosmic level.

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[598] Subramaniam, "The Indian Women's Movement," 638.
[599] Mukherjee, "How Will Women in India Fare under a Modi BJP Government?"
[600] Anish Kapoor, "India Is Being Ruled by a Hindu Taliban," *The Guardian*, November 12, 2015, sec. Opinion, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/12/india-hindu-taliban-narendra-modi.
[601] Subramaniam, "The Indian Women's Movement," 637.

7. Fighting and rewriting tradition in society and culture

Do you remember what my father said when you took my hand in marriage?

She will follow you like a shadow. That is what he said.

(*Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita*, Act 1 Scene 9.)

7.1. Introduction and context

Opposition and problematising of the *Ramayana* is not actually a new development. Indeed, the highlighting of the Valmiki *Ramayana* at the expense of the others is a method by which oppositional narratives and tellings of the *Ramayana* are sidelined and dismissed. Part of this is due to the fact that Sanskrit has been elevated as the language of Hinduism and of scholarship, meaning that other tellings are restricted to certain groups without pan-Indian significance and limited dissemination.[602] There are exceptions to this; the final book, where Rama banishes Sita from the kingdom, is left out by both Kamban and Tulsidas, who end their works with the triumphant return from Lanka and the coronation of Rama and Sita.[603] Moreover, cultural and ethnic differences mean that concepts of class and gender have evolved and shifted in the treatment of the *Ramayana*.[604]

The opening of English schools and colleges in the colonial period, furthermore, led to a generation of students trained to question key elements of the story. Whether these were issues with the narrative (how there could have existed a complex civilisation of monkeys able to communicate with humans), or thematic issues such as those of Brahminic elitism and patriarchal structures, by the start of the twentieth century a tradition of questioning the *Ramayana* had begun to develop.[605] In doing so, the social issues explored in earlier chapters

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[602] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 11.
[603] Hess, "Rejecting Sita."
[604] Hess, 4.
[605] Rao, *Text and Tradition in South India*, 290.

which has persisted due to the norms established and emphasised by conservative readings of the *Ramayana* have also come to face strong opposition.

The reclamation of womanhood and the process of separating female life and identity from its relation to men has been an ongoing process since the advent of early feminism in India. Part of this has involved a need to distinguish Indian feminism from Western feminism, and to develop an understanding of feminism and gender equality moulded to the internal framework of India and Hinduism as distinct from an enforced by-product of colonialism. Therefore, rather than simply discarding elements of culture and history generally viewed as 'native' to India – namely, those embedded and represented in the canonical philosophies and narratives of Hinduism – there has been a strong history of reimagining these narratives.

In 1993, part of the Indian Independence Day celebrations included an exhibit centred on a traditional Pali narrative, *Dasaratha* Jataka, which tells a Buddhist version of the *Ramayana* where Rama is an incarnation of the Buddha.[606] In response, fifteen members of the VHP destroyed this part of the exhibit, and BJP members later attempted to charge the organizers of the festival for misrepresenting the *Ramayana*. In doing so, both the VHP and BJP expressed the notion of the *Ramayana* as inherently "Hindu", and this "Hinduness" as being intrinsically wound with ideas of Indian nativeness.[607]

Their actions also reflected a dislike of associations between the *Ramayana* and other countries; the Hindu nationalist agenda relies heavily on the exclusivity of the narrative to the mythic history of Hindu India. A sometimes-neglected aspect of the study of gender and religion in India is the way in which it feeds into and is in turn fed by its impact on the diaspora community and Hindus with limited ties to the 'homeland' of India. A long history

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[606] Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas*, 1.
[607] Richman, 2.

of Indians in England and a growing presence in Western countries (especially Australia, the USA, and Canada) has resulted in the rise of Hindu communities where a significant number may not have been born in, or even ever been to, India. Nevertheless, their lives are still impacted by practices and gender constructs at work in India.[608]

This chapter focuses upon three specific endeavours to represent the *Ramayana* in consideration of its rich multi-narratival history, and their results. Each of these has been chosen for their reflections of different aspects of the *Ramayana* tradition in unconventional and non-normative settings.

The first is the 2008 film *Sita Sings the Blues* by the American animator Nina Paley in collaboration with Indian actors and artists, which received international attention after premiering at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival. The second is the late A.K. Ramanujan's 1987 essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation", an academic contribution to the field of Ramayana studies which was placed on the University of Delhi's history syllabus in 2006. Finally, I will outline and reflect upon the 2014 play *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita* which I wrote and directed in conjunction with the University of New South Wales Indian society after struggling to do the same with the organisation Chinmaya Mission Australia (established by VHP founder Swami Chinmayananda). The play was a one-off performance to an audience of approximately four hundred and fifty Australians, most of whom were members of the Sydney Indian-Australian community. Here, I will apply an auto-ethnographic lens to analyse the production of this play within the context of the diaspora and how it demonstrates the reverberations of Hindutva and Hindu nationalist ideology across national borders.

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[608] Marian Aguiar, "'Forced Marriage' and a Culture of Consent," in *Arranging Marriage*, Conjugal Agency in the South Asian Diaspora (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 70.

Each of these works and their reception indicate the multiple ways in which the *Ramayana* can be – and has been – read and interpreted, the reception that they receive in the longer term, and the difficulties presented by conservative Hindus. I will explore the microcosmic experience of Hindu nationalism and prevailing gender paradigms as perpetuated by the conservative reading of the *Ramayana*, what these reflect in parallel with the wider social actions of Hindu nationalists, and the difficulty that single oppositional voices face in making meaningful change.

7.2. *Sita Sings the Blues* (Nina Paley, 2008)

In 2008, the cartoonist Nina Paley wrote and directed the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*. The work, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, retells the *Ramayana* through a framework of colourful animation and musical interludes. The film uses a mix of animation styles including the manipulation of painted figures in in the 18th century Rajput painting tradition, Balinese shadow puppets, and modern vector animation. *Sita Sings the Blues* positions Sita as the protagonist of the film. As the film uses copyrighted music by American jazz singer Annette Hanshaw, Paley released it under a Creative Commons license, meaning that it free to access and view.

The narrative starts from Rama and Sita's exile, and follows their return from Lanka after Rama defeats Ravana. The film includes the sometimes-ignored seventh book Valmiki's *Ramayana* when Sita refuses to return to Ayodhya with her children and is swallowed by the earth. This pared-down telling of the *Ramayana* intertwines with a semi-autobiographical excerpt from Paley's own life. In this second narrative, a woman named Nina moves to India

from New York to join her husband who is temporarily employed there. However, he treats her callously and ignores her, eventually ending their relationship by email.[609]

Paley attributes the story to Valmiki in the opening credits, and covers most of the poem's narrative. While this would normally be difficult, the story is narrated in the style of a conversation between three shadow puppets, who bicker over more nuanced aspects of the narrative and explain certain details that are otherwise often glossed over. For instance, one of the puppets criticises Sita's decision not to allow Hanuman to rescue her, instead preferring to wait for Rama to defeat Ravana.

These puppets also question areas of the story that Paley clearly finds problematic; most notably, Rama's treatment of Sita. The film depicts Sita as self-sacrificing and devoted, in sharp contrast to Rama who treats her largely with indifference particularly after he defeats Ravana. After Sita survives the funeral pyre, the film's dialogue is as follows:

> Rama: Oops, I guess you were pure after all…so, will you forgive me Sita?
>
> Sita: Of course, Rama, I live only for you.

One of the puppets points out that Rama is still not convinced by the trial. Another protests that Rama was convinced, and that "peer pressure" was the reason that he exiles Sita years later. The animation indicates that the puppets are not convinced. This scepticism only strengthens when Sita is banished by Rama, his demands represented as unrealistic and hypocritical in consideration of Rama's behaviour and Sita's unwavering devotion.[610] As in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Paley's Sita is later tested once again in public and humiliating ways, is banished while pregnant, and constantly faced with suspicion.[611] The puppets observe in response to this that "she shouldn't love someone who doesn't treat her right." This is both an

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[609] Sharmila Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues: Questions of Mis/Representation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paley's Ramayana," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 394.

[610] Lodhia, 396.

[611] A. O. Scott, "Nina Paley's Epic Breakups: Good Women Done Wrong in India," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2009, sec. Movies, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/25/movies/25sita.html.

acknowledgement of Sita's devotion and a criticism of the constant theme in the *Ramayana*

that women should, as Valmiki says in the original text, "…a woman who has regard for

righteousness should hold her husband, whether he is virtuous or not, to be a deity

incarnate…" (II:56:5.)[612]

It is unsurprising that Paley's film would receive public scrutiny, as a somewhat

eclectic interpretation of a religious text. Sadly, the backlash she received was significant.

Critics of the film accused Paley of desecrating the *Ramayana*, and she received hate mail

and death threats.[613] The San Jose Museum of Arts (SJMA) announced an intended screening

of the film in 2011; a decision which earned the museum protests from local Hindu groups, as

well as pan-American organisations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) of America,

and the Forum for Hindu Awakening.[614] While the SJMA went ahead with the screening, a

screening in New York City earlier in the year was cancelled.[615]

There were likely other elements at play than a disagreement with the portrayal of

Rama and Sita. There were significant differences between Paley's criticism of Rama and

those that were mentioned above. Firstly, the film was a blatantly transnational product; it

was a classical religious narrative written and animated by an American, voiced by Indians,

featured 1920s jazz music, and used representations of Balinese shadow puppets to depict its

narrators. Thus, it was aimed at a more international and probably more Western audience

(especially considering that it premiered at the Berlin Film Festival).[616] While this in and of

itself might not necessarily have incurred outrage, Sharmila Lodhia points out that the film's

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[612] Vālmīki, Pollock, and Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1986, 202.
[613] Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues," 373.
[614] Lodhia, 398.
[615] India-West, "Hindu Groups Protest Screening of 'Sita Sings the Blues,'" The Times of India, August 18, 2011, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Hindu-groups-protest-screening-of-Sita-Sings-the-Blues/articleshow/9648895.cms.
[616] Bill Benzon, "Sita Sings the Cosmic Freakin' Blues," *Huffington Post* (blog), September 12, 2011, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/network-awesome/sita-sings-the-cosmic-fre_b_957576.html.

availability to a larger audience may have exposed "…certain religious and national insecurities".[617]

There are legitimate criticisms of Paley's film that may be made; the work received accusations of cultural imperialism – Paley is a white American of Jewish descent – and the commodification of the *Ramayana* through associated merchandise which is available for purchase on the film's website.[618] Nevertheless, rather than engaging Paley in active conversation about parts of the film that were offensive, protesters took an approach that is all-too familiar in incidents relating to perceived insults to the *Ramayana*. This reflected a fervent desire to silence Paley's views rather than objecting to them, indicating a lack of interest in active engagement with her ideas. The unwillingness to accept alternative readings or presentations of the *Ramayana* also reflects the fact that Hindu nationalists believe themselves to have ultimate and unequivocal ownership of the *Ramayana* and arbiters of its 'true' meaning.

7.3.　"Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (A.K. Ramanujan, 1987)

The essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" ("Three Hundred Ramayanas") was written for a University of Pittsburgh conference in 1987 by the late scholar AK Ramanujan. The work explores the multiplicity of *Ramayana* traditions across religions, languages, and countries. Ramanujan bookends the essay with two folktales; the first about the fact that there are thousands of *Ramayanas* and

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[617] Lodhia, "Deconstructing Sita's Blues."

[618] Aarttee Kaul Dhar, "The Ramayana and Sita in Films and Popular Media:: The Repositioning of a Globalised Version," in *The Return of the Epic Film*, Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 211.

thus thousands of Ramas, and the last about the power of the *Ramayana* to entrance till "…the line between fiction and reality is erased."[619]

The opening of Ramanujan's essay asks the following questions:

> How many *Ramayanas*? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some *Ramayanas*, a question is sometimes asked: How many *Ramayanas* have there been?[620]

This establishes the main theme of the rest of the essay, which goes on to list a long list of languages across South and Southeast Asia in which versions of the Rama story have been told. He also points out that, including mediums such as the various popular and classical theatrical and dance tradition, at least three hundred tellings (at least) of the *Ramayana* may be counted.[621] The essay explores the various pathways that the story followed in being disseminated throughout the subcontinent and into Southeast Asia, as well as suggesting the trade and sea routes along which the narrative travelled.

Unsurprisingly, Ramanujan's essay was somewhat controversial when it came to the attention of Hindu nationalists. As this thesis has established, the *Hindutva* ideological view in regards to the *Ramayana* has been focused on unity and the maintenance of one clear narrative path, intertwining the *Ramayana* with the story of India as one nation. Ramanujan's essay, in pointing out the multiplicity of languages and locations in which the story has been situated over history, discredited this. By outlining different tellings of this story and alternate interpretations of characters, "Three Hundred Ramayanas" was also seen to undermine the veracity of the *Ramayana* as a 'true' religious text, particularly through its exploration of versions of the narrative where Rama is depicted as flawed and human, and where the treatment of Sita is criticised rather than justified.

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[619] Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," 47.
[620] Ramanujan, 22.
[621] Ramanujan, 24.

One key focus of Ramanujan's is that the normative understanding of the *Ramayana*, particularly when the Valmiki *Ramayana* is viewed as the 'original' text, ignores and erases the narrative's presence in South India, as well as the fact that Valmiki's version is quite focused on North India to the exclusion of the South. Kamban's twelfth century Tamil-language poem incorporates several the regional folk *Ramayanas* from South India, and generated its own adaptations and interpretations.[622] For instance, the Tamil *Satakantharavana* depicts Sita as an active heroic character; when Rama kills the ten-headed Ravana, a hundred-headed version manifests, terrifying Rama. Sita therefore takes up arms and destroys this new evil in her husband's place.[623] "Three Hundred Ramayanas" emphasises the fact that these narratives are all not only important in their own right, but also vital to the perpetuation and wide-spread appeal of Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Ramanujan also focuses on the example of the Thai *Ramakirti* or *Ramakien*, which is similar to Valmiki's *Ramayana* but adds dramatic alterations to the reunion between Rama and Sita after the battle of Lanka, and Sita's banishment. These alterations cast Rama in a much more critical light, as well as giving Sita a much more active role. The *Ramakirti* is regarded as a popular text rather than a religious work, and Rama is depicted primarily as a human hero rather than the incarnation of Vishnu as identified as Valmiki.[624]

It was the second part of Ramanujan's claim, however, which was particularly challenging to the normative view. This thesis referred earlier, in passing, to the presence of the *Ramayana* in other religions than Hinduism. "Three Hundred Ramayanas" does not shy away from this. Ramanujan explores the significant differences between Jain tellings of the *Ramayana* and Valmiki's own. Jain texts "…express the feeling that the Hindus, especially

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[622] Vinay Dharwadker, "Guest Column: Censoring the 'Rāmāyaṇa,'" *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 438.
[623] Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," 43.
[624] Ramanujan, 38.

the brahmans, have maligned Ravana, made him a villain…"[625] In this story, Ravana is killed by Lakshmana, who goes to hell for breaking the primary Jain edict not to take a life. Rama, meanwhile, is on his final birth and has reached enlightenment, meaning that by leaving the slaying of Ravana to Lakshmana, he is able to find release.[626]

"Three Hundred Ramayanas" was first published in 1991, and was primarily of interest as a significant work in the relatively niche academic field of *Ramayana* studies.[627] However, in 2006, the essay was added to Delhi University's history syllabus. By 2008, protests against its inclusion began, spearheaded by the student wing of the RSS (who were supported by the BJP) who claimed the versions of the narrative explored in the essay were offensive to Hindu beliefs.[628] The *Organiser*, an online weekly publication by the RSS, claimed in 2008 that "Rama is worshipped by all believing Hindus. For us he is God…Hence it hurts the sentiments of Hindus when Rama is spoken of with anything but reverence".[629] The emphasis placed on this was likely driven by the fear that the introduction of questioning this central narrative into the university syllabus could very well destabilise the basis for the 'imagined community' of the *Hindutva*.

After the Supreme Court ordered that an expert committee of academics be formed to look into the essay's inclusion, in 2011 Delhi University's academic council decided to remove Ramanujan's essay from the syllabus; even though three out of the four committee members decided that the essay should remain in the curriculum, and the one who voted against it had only done so due to a worry that teachers at Delhi University would be able to adequately explain the complex backgrounds of the versions of the *Ramayana* depicted.[630]

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[625] Ramanujan, 33.
[626] Ramanujan, 35.
[627] Dharwadker, "Guest Column," 433.
[628] BBC News, "India's Delhi University in Row over Ramayana Epic Essay," *BBC News*, October 18, 2011, sec. South Asia, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-15347430.
[629] Dharwadker, "Guest Column," 439.
[630] Dharwadker, 436.

BBC journalist Soutik Biswas noted shortly after the removal of "Three Hundred Ramayanas" that the successful application of pressure for censorship by right-wing Hindu groups was not an isolated occurrence. In 2010, Mumbai University removed the Booker Prize-shortlisted novel *Such a Long Journey* (Rohinton Mistry) from their curriculum after protests by the regional Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena.[631] In the same year, Gujarat banned the book *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India* (Joseph Lelyveld) on the basis of false claims that the work denigrated Gandhi.[632] As with Ramanujan's essay, it is unlikely that the *Hindutva* activists actually read the works they were protesting; K Paddayya points out that if they had, then it would have been obvious by the conclusion of "Three Hundred Ramayanas" that Ramanujan recognises and respects the "enthralling effect on the minds of people" that the *Ramayana* produces.[633] Despite this, the RSS and other Hindu nationalist groups were successful in having the article removed against the wishes of the committee assigned to examine it. This indicates that the Sangh Parivar, who have in the years since independence increasingly represented themselves as the custodians of 'correct' Hinduism and protectors of Hindu tradition, are powerful enough to impede academic freedom to further their own agendas based on the maintenance of hegemonic Hindu tradition.[634] That this occurred four years before the rise of Narendra Modi's popularity and his election victory in 2014, moreover, is further proof of the fact that Hindutva ideologies have maintained a popular appeal in Indian society. The university's decision to capitulate to Hindu nationalist forces is another example of the power of those

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[631] Prachi Pinglay, "Booker Author Rohinton Mistry in Mumbai University Row," *BBC News*, October 19, 2010, sec. South Asia, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11572445.

[632] Soutik Biswas, "Ramayana: An 'epic' Controversy," *BBC News*, October 19, 2011, sec. South Asia, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-15363181.

[633] K Paddayya, "The Ramayana Controversy Again," *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 72/73 (2012): 348.

[634] Ashwin Anshu, "Ramkatha, Rambhakts and the University," *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 46 (2011): 14.

same political and cultural beliefs, and their impact even in spheres that might be expected to resist them.

7.4. *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita* (Suvarna Variyar, 2014)

In 2013, the organisation Chinmaya Mission Australia announced its intention to stage a production of the *Ramayana*, to celebrate *Ramayana* week leading up to Ram Navami. Chinmaya Mission was established in 1953 in India, by followers of Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati (born Balakrishna Menon.) The organisation has become a worldwide non-profit with branches in a number of countries, including the USA, the UK, and Australia, and is currently headed by Swami Swaroopananda. Its mission, as provided on the organisation's official website, is:

> The inner transformation of individuals through knowledge of
> Vedanta, spiritual practices and service to society, resulting in a happy
> world around them.[635]

The organisation runs classes for children, teenagers, young adults, and adults, which all place a strong emphasis on the study of the normative Hindu texts and derive many of their philosophical teachings from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The mission emphasises that its teachings are not only for Hindus and are applicable across faiths and philosophical beliefs. However, Swami Chinmayananda was conferred with the Hindu Renaissance Award and the "Hindu of the Year" title in 1992 by *Hinduism Today*, a quarterly US magazine aimed at promoting an understanding of Hinduism.[636] While Chinmaya Mission has no official political affiliation, Swami Chinmayananda was one of the founders of the

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[635] Chinmaya Mission, "Chinmaya Mission Australia," Chinmaya Mission Australia, 2016, http://www.chinmaya.com.au/.

[636] Himalayan Academy, "Chinmayananda: 1916-1993," *Hinduism Today Magazine*, October 1993, https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1176.

VHP. Indeed, the first World Hindu Conference held by the VHP in 1966 was planned and negotiated at a Chinmaya Mission property centre in Bombay.[637]

As an Australian with Hindu Indian-born parents from the state of Kerala, I was exposed to Hinduism from a young age. Due to my family's involvement with Chinmaya Mission both in India and abroad, I participated in classes with the Sydney branch of Chinmaya Mission Australia from a young age. This was the method by which I became deeply familiar with the normative Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as well as other narratives relating to the polytheistic pantheon. It was also my primary interaction with the Sydney Hindu Indian community. However, I was in a somewhat unique situation where my parents had only limited involvement with Chinmaya Mission and the social life in which most of its members partook. I was therefore not exposed to the same degree of interaction and communal time as the majority of my peers. As my parents are from South India and speak Malayalam (the official language of the state of Kerala), moreover, I could not speak or understand Hindi. This augmented my disconnect from a significant number of Australian-Indians, and also meant that I did not experience Indian cultural products like Bollywood film, television, or music in the same quantity or depth. The slight bias against South India by North Indians and Hindi speakers, as touched upon in earlier chapters, further strengthened feelings of isolation from the broader Indian-Australian community.

From a young age, I was uncomfortable with the subtle gender biases that were displayed, often in the form of rituals – many of which may only be performed by men. This issue became more prominent after a change of leadership, to a *brahmachari* (a man who has taken vows of renunciation and is in training to become a *guru*), who will be referred to by

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[637] Katju, "The Early Vishva Hindu Parishad," 34.

his chosen name at the time, Br (*brahmachari*) Gopal.[638] Despite this, I was encouraged by my family to continue classes, which I did until 2013, when the intention to stage a 'new interpretation' of the *Ramayana* was floated. My proposition of a gender-swapped production was immediately rejected by Br Gopal despite initial support from other members, on the grounds that Rama and Sita's identities and virtues were inherently linked with their genders. While I did not truly expect my proposal to be accepted, I was taken aback by the ease with which both Br Gopal and young men in the organisation fell back on gender essentialist arguments that would have been easily refuted in other creative spaces in Australia.

Br Gopal instead requested the creation of a production focused on Sita's life, intended to clarify discrepancies and questions surrounding Sita's role in the narrative and its negative portrayal of women. After I persisted in asking that I be given a significant role in the production, Br Gopal allowed me the position of director. The written script when it was provided to me, however, represented Rama and Sita in a similar light to that of the original narrative. The following is an email from Br Gopal to myself and other members of the production team:

> August Play will be through the eyes of Sitaji hence appropriately called "Sitayana". Where we will look at how equality was shown, how the decisions were made looking different dharma etc as well as the actual story thru sitaji's eyes starting from her birth from King Janaka. We will not be modernising the play etc or having scenes in current life but we are planning to show the authentic story which will automatically show us application in our life.[639]

This script continued to perpetuate the narrative of Rama as the infallible representative of masculinity, while forcing Sita – as the focus of this play – to highlight her

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[638] Karen Pechilis, *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

[639] BR Gopal Chaitanya, email to author, Sunday, 20 January, 2013.

own perceived flaws and weaknesses, while simultaneously extolling and justifying Rama's treatment and abandonment of her. This reflected the relationship between Chinmaya Mission and its founder Swami Chinmyananda, the VHP, and the RSS. While the VHP has been more inclusive and less blatantly male-driven than the RSS, the organisations are fundamentally still closely linked by *Hindutva* ideologies.[640]

Moreover, the inexperience of the writers and the local leadership's insistence on a script which did not allow for Sita's experiences and emotions outside the original text meant that sustaining a coherent narrative rather than simply portraying the segments of Valmiki's narrative within which Sita features was extremely difficult. Finally, the implication both in the above email and throughout the time I worked with Chinmaya Mission was that the values of the *Ramayana* as framed by Valmiki were automatically and universally applicable, rather than to a large extent the product of historical and cultural context.

This culminated in my being fired from the production by Br Gopal, partially at the behest of elder members of Chinmaya Mission. I was however almost immediately given the opportunity by the lead actor (who quit his role in protest) to write and direct my own script for the UNSW Indian Society, of which he was President, and access to the society's funding. The society had previously staged productions relating to significant figures, specifically Gandhi and Ashoka. The play I was to write would be the first staged by the society that was based on a religious text, as well as the first with a female protagonist.

I was given almost unlimited creative license in the writing and directing of this production, titled *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita* (*Fire to Earth*).[641] Instead of focusing purely on scenes featuring Sita, I decided to write a script which explored the personal dynamic between Rama and Sita as individuals rather than framing them as avatars

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[640] Katju, "The Early Vishva Hindu Parishad," 35.
[641] Suvarna Variyar, *Fire to Earth: A Story of Rama and Sita* (2014).

of gods. Therefore, the script begins with the first meeting of Rama and Sita, and ends with Sita's return to the earth. This means that a number of storylines and characters from Valmiki's *Ramayana* are (deliberately) excised: most notably Hanuman and the other monkey characters, and Ravana's brother Vibhishana.

The script grants Sita an active voice. While still extremely devoted to Rama, she directly questions his actions and language. Her decision to step directly into fire to prove her purity and fidelity to Rama is a decision driven not only by love and submission, but also as a need to defend her own dignity and name. In light of this, Rama's (and Valmiki's) justification of Rama's refusal to take Sita back until she proves her purity as one that is rooted in his own ego and fear of judgement by his populace. In *Fire to Earth*, Lakshmana's devotion to Sita is amplified; he actively attempts to dissuade Rama from exiling Sita, and shows active resentment over Rama's treatment of Sita. The aim here was to retain the key themes and character traits of Valmiki's text as well as drawing directly from the Sanskrit poem, to demonstrate the inherent flaws of the normative *Ramayana*.

I met with not insignificant opposition on some of these interpretive decisions from members of the Indian Society, particularly from students who had lived in India for some time.

; most significantly my representation of Rama as inherently flawed, and the criticism of particular elements of judgement making. The original text praises Rama for abandoning his duty to his wife in favour of a perceived duty towards his kingdom. *Fire to Earth* aimed to demonstrate the inherent flaw in this – that Rama's inability to fulfil his personal *dharma* had negative effects on his consequent ability to establish a positive precedent for the state. By depriving Sita of the equal personhood she should have shared with him in an ideal utopia of equality and fairness – which Valmiki claims Rama's kingdom was – Rama becomes a

flawed character, rather than the idolised god which proponents of *Hindutva* and of normative Hinduism hold him up to be.

The excision of Hanuman also received criticism, particularly as Hanuman is a revered figure who appears in both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and who has a body of oral and written literature in his own right. The choice was primarily made because Hanuman did not add to the dynamic or personal narrative of Rama and Sita in any meaningful way that could enhance the thematic exploration that the play intended.

This was particularly controversial to some cast members as the key reason I gave for removing Hanuman was to make room for Urmila, Sita's sister who marries Lakshmana but is left behind when the main trio go into exile. Urmila's conspicuous absence from both the wider story and Lakshmana's own narrative is further indicative of the fact that the ideal woman, according to Valmiki, is one who sacrifices her own interests and desires to accommodate the men in her life. Indeed, some observers of the *Ramayana* believe that Urmila is a better example of ideal womanhood than Sita, as she obeys without question Lakshmana's directive that she stay in Ayodhya, whereas Sita demands that she be allowed to accompany Rama on exile.

My efforts to overcome the opposition I faced during staging the production were eventually largely overcome, albeit with a certain amount of resentment at the way in which I exercised my leadership role. This was not unexpected, particularly considering the text we were interpreting. A considerable proportion of production members were either born in India or raised in Australian-Indian households, and therefore exposed from a young age to the gender constructs engrained in understandings of Hinduism and Indian identity that have been discussed in this thesis.[642]

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[642] Deo, *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India*; Chauhan, "Gender Construction Through Religious Narrative in Saraswati Shishu Mandir School"; Hasan, "Gender, Religion and Democratic Politics in India"; Zacharias,

In the post-production period, other issues appeared which were indicative of the difficulties inherent to problematising and questioning accepted normative narratives that are socially embedded. A review of the production in *Indian Link*, an Australian newspaper targeted at Australian Indians, stated in its opening that "…the essence of the Hindu epic Ramayana lies in its prescription of rules for a healthy and ordered society."[643] Though the premise of *Fire to Earth* had been to question that very statement, the journalist went on to focus on elements such as costuming and music, rather than the interpretive approach itself. The review also took pains to point out that the actress playing Kaikeyi was "a student of Asian origin" – once again situating the text firmly within a specifically *Indian* Hindu context, implicitly tying nationhood and religion together.

Also troubling was the fact that funds from the production were donated to the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation (EVF).[644] The foundation is a non-profit organisation addressing literacy among children in India which is associated with the RSS. However, the EVF has been criticised numerous times for openly promoting Hinduism, often at the expense of minorities. In the early 2000s, a study revealed that government funds were being misappropriated to support EVF schools, and to "…generate hatred toward minorities, and condition the minds of children".[645] Despite my heavy involvement in the production, and my vocal opposition to the BJP, RSS, and other members of the Sangh Parivar, I was not consulted in this decision and did not discover this until a week after the staging of the play.

"Trial by Fire"; "Women and Gender in a Changing India"; Sreenivas, "Women's and Gender History in Modern India."

[643] Astha Singh, "Epic Revival | Ramayana," *Indian Link* (blog), October 17, 2014, http://www.indianlink.com.au/epic-revival/.

[644] Singh.

[645] Anita Joshua, "The Hindu : National : Centre Stops Grants to `one-Teacher Schools'," May 19, 2005, http://www.thehindu.com/2005/05/19/stories/2005051907291200.htm.

7.5. Conclusion

In each of the efforts outlined above, it is obvious that there have been sincere individual efforts made to combat – or at least question – the social and cultural narrative of the *Ramayana* in consideration of the elements most likely to perpetuate issues of gender assumptions and roles. However, all of these were obstructed (or in some cases derailed) by similar issues reflecting larger-scale issues on the individual and local level.

Nina Paley's film aimed to make the *Ramayana* available to a wider audience, while problematising the depiction of Sita in the original text. Her film was quite successful on an international front; however, its reception by right-wing Hindus was excessive. It raised the valid argument that Western attempts to reinterpret or problematise the *Ramayana* will be less potent, as cultural imperialism and appropriation is an issue that extends to academia as well. Nevertheless, the willingness of Hindu groups in Western nations to call for the film to be banned on hearsay indicates that the concern was not so much with the actual content, but with the fear that it could deviate from their established narrative of the *Ramayana* and the gender constructs it entails.

Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas" was a landmark piece of academic writing, and was lauded as such to the extent that it was placed on the history curriculum at the University of Delhi. K Paddayya points out that Ramanujan made no attempt whatsoever to support or detract from any of the versions of the *Ramayana* he chose for study, and that it was primarily a contribution to the field of literature more than any other discipline.[646]

While Ramanujan's essay did not criticise Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the fact that it faced significant enough opposition that it was removed from the university's curriculum is telling. Hindu nationalists objected to the notion that the *Ramayana* is not only not a singular narrative, but also that it has strong affiliations with other religions and countries. This, to

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[646] Paddayya, "The Ramayana Controversy Again," 347.

them, undermined the place of the *Ramayana* as vital to their narrative of India as intrinsically Hindu.

In the case of *Fire to Earth*, the second attempt at a production after the failure with Chinmaya Mission was considerably more successful. However, resistance by some of the male cast members to the critical elements of the script meant that the desired effect on the audience was minimised. Its aftermath was undermined both by the review the play received and by the donation of funds to an organisation with close links to the very problem that the production was aiming to confront. This demonstrated that efforts to subvert traditional narratives, while sometimes effective on a local scale, are often derailed or rendered unsuccessful in the face of system and institutional biases.

The next, and final, chapter, examines the key issues that have been highlighted both above and throughout this thesis. It highlights some of the recent advancements in gender equality, the BJP's attempts to distance itself from the exclusionary rhetoric of the wider Sangh Parivar, and continued problems faced by the complicated interactions of Hindu nationalism, gender, and narrative.

8. Conclusion

…Thus did Rama regain Sita and recover his kingdom.

(*The Ramayana*, Bālakāṇḍa, 1:70.)[647]

8.1. Summation of Argument

In 1981, the Supreme Court Justice Hidayatullah opened a national conference on the *Ramayana* with the following quote from a Hindu scholar:

> "The Ramayana is a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilisation. Herein is described the ideal hero Sri Ramachandra who is not only the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but who is the ideal husband and king…Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed…There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideals of conduct and character."[648]

In many ways, this encapsulates the place of the *Ramayana* in the postcolonial Indian landscape. Hidayatullah was the first Muslim Chief Justice of India; a secular role in a multifaith country. Yet his words explicitly tied in Hinduism with India, positively framed the restrictive gender binary inflicted upon women, continued the Hindu nationalist narrative of classical India as a 'golden age', and reinforced the notion that the *Ramayana* is a moral and ethical textbook. In doing so, the BJP have perpetuated and promoted a monotheistic form of Hinduism, one which is inextricably intertwined with what it means to be a 'true Indian'. This has been further emphasised and strengthened by the stigmatisation of Muslims, in order to consolidate the image of India as being a fundamentally Hindu nation.

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[647] Vālmīki, Goldman, and Pollock, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, 1985, 126.
[648] Hess, "Rejecting Sita," 2.

Hidayatullah said these words almost four decades ago, and only one year after the formation of the BJP; but the implications for wider Indian society remain disturbingly relevant. Since independence, India has continued to cling to a rigid and gendered interpretation of the *Ramayana* as a community-binding narrative, which is used by *Hindutva* organisations and the BJP to serve an exclusionary and traditionalist agenda at the expense of India's multi-faith community. Christophe Jaffrelot, in examining the rapid growth of militant Hinduism from the 1950s to the 1990s, points out that "the essential characteristics of Hinduism scarcely lend themselves to a closed and monolithic radicalism of the type associated with Muslim, Jewish or Christian 'fundamentalisms'".[649] By reframing Hinduism along monotheistic lines through, among other things, the centring of the *Ramayana* as a primary religious tract, the Sangh Parivar and BJP succeeded in overcoming this hurdle.

This thesis has established that Hindu nationalism was deeply entrenched in the independence movement, both in the form of radical Hindu nationalists who were fighting for cultural and religious hegemony, and in the rhetoric of Indian National Congress secularists. *Hindutva* ideology has been demonstrated to be undeniably potent. I have argued that without a significant power vacuum and continuous mistakes by the INC, the Sangh Parivar's *Hindutva* vision could not have flourished in the way it has.[650] By framing the Independence movement with Hindu-based rhetoric, Gandhi and Nehru (however well-intentioned) set the scene for the establishment of a secular state with a national identity formed through the evocation of religious ideals.[651]

This thesis has further contended that Hindu nationalism has been based on the idealisation of an imagined 'golden age' of Hinduism, which is apparently depicted in

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[649] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s : Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilisation (with Special Reference to Central India)* (Penguin Books India, 1999), 2.
[650] Ruparelia, "Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation," 320.
[651] Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," 60.

religious texts such as the *Ramayana*. By evoking the image of a shared past, the *Hindutva* ideology has used the *Ramayana*'s pervasiveness as a narrative embedded in regional and widespread culture and language to establish and reinforce an 'imagined community', which was augmented considerably by the enormous reach and popularity of Ramanand Sagar's 1987 television serial *Ramayan*.

The imagined shared traditions and culture promoted by the BJP and other organisations of the Sangh Parivar have, since the beginning of the independence movement, been deeply intertwined with patriarchal and oppressive gender narratives. Part of establishing a normative understanding of Hindu tradition has been the evocation of normative gender roles and an emphasis on notion that a woman's primary function is motherhood and caregiving. In relegating women to the domestic and private spheres, their voices have been significantly minimised even as they have been granted legal equality in the postcolonial period.

By framing the construct of 'real India' as intrinsically Hindu and based on Hindu tradition and culture, Hindu nationalism has framed, and continued to frame, the state as inherently feminine and need of protection from outside forces. This has further fuelled their exclusionary attitudes and actions, particularly towards Muslims. The combination of xenophobia and sexism has meant that attacks against Muslims are in many ways expressions of male chauvinism – based as they are on a vague desire to protect the feminine, thus justifying their violence to themselves. This has also resulted in the weaponisation of sexual violence, where women are injured, assaulted, or killed because they represent a slight to the ideal of the Hindu feminine embedded at the core of Hindu nationalism.

8.2. The Bharatiya Janata Party in 2018

The culpability of this, however, ultimately rests with the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar. It is telling that during both the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat riots, the Chief Ministers of the states involved were BJP members. It also cannot be a coincidence that in both cases, the situations and consequent violence were exacerbated considerably by the slow reaction of government forces to quell violence and enact legal actions.

While the BJP has made efforts to shift towards some level of moderation, it is still difficult for the party to shed the baggage of anti-minority, cultural nationalist and conservative politics that has defined it since its inception.[652] Despite general assumptions by spectators and other politicians that the BJP's popularity would wane – particularly as Hindu nationalism seemed to operate in absolute contradiction to the post-independence secular political sphere – the party continued to attract support without having to move away from defining itself as a Hindu nationalist party.[653] The fact that Narendra Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat during the Gujarat riots was a key point of criticism during the 2014 election – however, it was not enough to stop the party from achieving a landslide victory of 243 electoral seats to the INC's 44, and handing Modi the prime ministership.[654]

Token nods to secularism are also undermined by the fact that it is common for BJP leaders to lace public addresses and stump speeches with direct references to and quotations the *Ramayana*.[655] Modi spoke in October 2016 at a Ramlila event in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, where he performed *aarti* (ritual of worship) to Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, and accepted a

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[652] Das, "A Tale of Two Incidents," 2372.
[653] Basu, "Caste and Class," 28.
[654] Vanaik, "India's Landmark Election," 54.
[655] Jonah Blank et al., *Look East, Cross Black Waters: India's Interest in Southeast Asia* (Rand Corporation, 2015), 28.

model of Hanuman's *Gadaa* (mace).[656]Additionally, in a departure from tradition, Modi aschewed the customary three loud chants of *"Jai Hind"* (Victory to India) with "*Jai Sri Ram*" (Victory to Rama).[657]

The success of the attempt to establish an imagined community of Hindu India, reinforced by narrative of the *Ramayana* particularly in the aftermath of Sagar's *Ramayan*, indicates the increasing power of media in informing and influencing understandings of national identity. Increasingly, however, this has been complicated by the explosion of the digital and social media landscape, which has the potential in its diversity, and ability to represent previously unheard voices, to challenge dominant cultural understandings in India. This thesis highlighted *Sita Sings the Blues* as an example of the ways in which digital media, intertextuality, and the global accessibility of the internet have provided a platform to communicate anti-establishment and non-dominant forms of interpretation and thought.

8.3. Looking past 2018: what now for women's affairs?

In 1950, the Indian Constitution prohibited discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Nearly seventy years later, in 2016, the Government of India's Ministry of Women and Child Development released the draft National Policy for Women. The document stated that "…the growing acknowledgement of gender rights and equality is juxtaposed against increase in reporting of various forms of violence against women such as rape, trafficking, dowry etc…"[658] *The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act*

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[656] "The Text & Context of PM Narendra Modi's UP Ramayan," News18, October 11, 2016, http://www.news18.com/news/india/the-text-context-of-pm-narendra-modis-up-ramayan-1300749.html.

[657] "Four Key Takeaways from PM Narendra Modi's Ramlila Speech in Lucknow," News18, October 11, 2016, http://www.news18.com/news/politics/four-key-takeaways-from-pm-narendra-modis-ramlila-speech-in-lucknow-1300747.html.

[658] Mahendravada, "Public Policy," 71.

2006 came into effect in November 2006, and prohibited the marriage of men under twenty-one and women under eighteen. Until 2017, however, it was legal for men to have sex with their underage wives, so long as the wife was over fifteen years old.[659] The Supreme Court decision overrode the loophole to age of consent laws – marital rape is still not considered an offence under Indian law. While arranged marriage has come under increased scrutiny from feminists and the global community, the practice still occurs regularly.[660] Increasingly, women are resisting pressure from relatives and social circles to abort female foetuses or kill female babies; but the pressure and stigma is still widely prevalent.[661]

There are certainly several advances that have been made over the past decade. The number of women in education has risen dramatically, particularly at the tertiary level, with 42% of graduates being women in 2017. Despite this, the World Bank's India Development Report 2017 ranked India's female participation in the workforce at 120th among 131 countries.[662] This is most likely due to the continued prioritisation of marriage, domestic life, and motherhood, even in upper classes. Another key reason for this is that employers often tend to hold conservative views regarding female employees. In early 2017, a legislative panel in Bangalore, Karnataka, recommended that information technology companies should assign night shifts to men where possible, despite the state government's landmark decision in 2016 to remove restrictions on women working night shifts, which had been in place since the under the *Shops and Commercial Establishments Act 1961*.[663]

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[659] BBC News, "India Supreme Court Rules Sex with Child Bride Is Rape," *BBC News*, October 11, 2017, sec. India, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41578800.

[660] Marian Aguiar, "Regenerating Tradition through Transnational Popular Culture," in *Arranging Marriage*, Conjugal Agency in the South Asian Diaspora (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 181.

[661] Udas, "Challenges of Being a Woman in India."

[662] Hindustan Times, "How Indian Men Are Keeping Women out of the Workforce."

[663] ManuAiyappa Kanathandai, "Don't Assign Night Duty to Women: Karnataka House Panel to IT Companies - Times of India," The Times of India, March 28, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/dont-put-women-on-night-shifts-karnataka-house-panel-to-it-companies/articleshow/57859623.cms.

Social media has also made a significant impact on Indian feminism and the ability for women to both speak and be heard. Devaki Jain states that "social media has given a voice to those who were previously denied one…given individuals a chance to express their opinions…and potentially reach out to other feminists."[664] This was clearly demonstrated after the highly-publicised vicious gang rape on December 16, 2012 of young female student Jyoti Singh on a bus, who later died as a direct result of injuries sustained during the attack. Increased access in India to global media networks and online social platforms meant that the Indian government was, for the first time in years, forced to address the issue of gender violence and injustice. World media did move away from the issue in a few months, unsurprisingly when considering the increasingly fast-paced news cycle.[665] Simultaneously however, the spread of the internet has meant that women increasingly face significant levels of online abuse, ranging from sexual harassment to rape and death threats.[666] This is reflective of the fact that Indian women live in a paradoxical society; increasing gender parity is being matched by increasing gender-based violence.[667]

There is substantial literature on the cultural and political underpinnings of sexual offences, domestic abuse, and dowry. For instance, Veena Talwar Oldenburg's *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* considers the links between cultural changes in the colonial period, masculinity, and economics in shaping phenomena of dowry death and female infanticide.[668] A key lacuna here, however, is the lack of current quantitative data relating to these problems. While a number of small-scale and subnational studies do exist, there are obvious numerous difficulties in endeavouring to conduct nation-

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[664] Devaki Jain, "Understanding Leadership: Lessons from the Women's Movement," *India International Centre Quarterly* 39, no. 3/4 (2012): 8.

[665] Tara Atluri, ed., "Can the Subaltern Tweet?: Technology and Sexual-Textual Politics," in *ĀZĀDĪ: Sexual Politics and Postcolonial Worlds* (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016), 57.

[666] "Women and Gender in a Changing India," 6.

[667] Poulami Roychowdhury, "'The Delhi Gang Rape': The Making of International Causes," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 1 (2013): 286.

[668] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 18.

wide statistical analyses of these issues.[669] It remains difficult, however, to ascertain the actual rate of sexual violence, as the majority occurs within the private sphere, and the population of India is rapidly expanding. Moreover, women are still not valued in the same way as men, and gendered violence in the domestic sphere is still not widely considered worth combatting.[670]

Even without delving into the myriad other religious narratives available under the umbrella Hinduism – both those considered part of the core popular canon, and those that are less-known – Valmiki's *Ramayana* is a rich source which holds the potential for alternate, inclusive interpretations. Mukti Lakhi Mangharam, among others, stresses the fact that Valmiki's text is open to sexual, feminist, and queer readings which draw the *Ramayana* away from the patriarchal, intolerant, and exclusionary narrative promoted by Hindu nationalists and the BJP.[671] However, so long as India's 'imagined community' impinges upon inherently gendered readings of narrative and the idealisation of traditions that are fundamentally discriminatory, conceptions of Hindu and Indian nationalism will be intrinsically rooted in the confinement of women to domesticity and motherhood. Without rewriting and reinterpreting the basis of Indian national identity, women will either be pressured to adhere to an idealised mould of purity, motherhood, and obedience. Or, failing to meet that standard, they will inevitably continue be silenced and devalued by proponents of 'Hindu' India, as Sita is by Rama.

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[669] Hackett, "Domestic Violence against Women," 268.
[670] Once again, I refer to the fact that marital rape is not a criminal offence in India.
[671] Mangharam, "Rama, Must I Remind You of Your Divinity?," 76.

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