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# MODERN MYTHOLOGY: EPICS THROUGH THE IDIOT BOX

Arvind N. DAS\*

## 1. Introduction: Religion On The Electronic Highway

A Mobius strip, named after the mathematician August F. Mobius, is a one-sided continuous surface which is formed by joining together the two ends of a long rectangular strip with one end twisted through 180 degrees before the joint is made. This strip that traverses planes could well be an analogy for post-modernity, a *weltanschauung* that traverses time as it twists between pre-modernity and modernity and constitutes a continuity which is both fascinating and mystifying. A mixture of instrumentalist high technology and primordialist low culture has created an electronic highway whose twists and turns give an impression of a smooth ride into the future even though the traveller traverses the same ground over and over again, passing from the past to the present and into the past once again.

The phenomenon is partly on account of the technology itself and partly on account of the “software” of political culture. While technology has created the ultra-modern global village, the predominant sounds are still those of the tribal drumbeats announcing ethnic strife. People ultimately get the television they deserve.

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In India, the enormous spread of television in the last decade or so has been marked by three simultaneous software phenomena : the flowering of the relatively mindless entertainment industry based on the gargantuan film world; the hamhanded attempt by the State and statal institutions to fashion political culture through “democratic control”; and the assertion of ethnicities and other primordialist identities. All three have found their confluence in the epic boom on television. It is not that ordinary film-based programmes and voyeuristic peeps into current events or plain and simple soap operas have not had conspicuous success; indeed, satellite television-notably STAR: Satellite Television in the Asia Region-has flourished by universalising the taste for cinema-based entertainment. It is just that the elements of all these *genres* have been combined most dramatically in the religious epics that have been telecast in the last few years. These have provided entertainment, commented on current events and have even contributed to the creation of a particular political climate which has contributed to social fragmentation and have used all the techniques of television soap to encourage consumerism and communalism simultaneously.

Among the many “epic soaps” which have been telecast, the television versions of the Hindu religious epics *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* have been the most significant although others too have been part of the same process. Thus, *Chanakya*, which was premised on the invocation of “nationalism” in the proto-historic period, *Bible ki kahaniyan*, which sought to bring the tales of the Old Testament to modern and supposedly syncretic milieu, and *Krishna*, which merely tried to cash in on the mushrooming of electronic religiosity in the monsoon of mythology, were all of the same *genre*. The “secular” but message-ridden soaps like *Hum Log* and *Buniyad*, “value-free” lifestyle-led ones like *Khandan* and *Junoon*, pseudo-historical serials like *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*, *Akbar the Great*

and purely fantastic costume dramas like *Chandrakanta* also enjoyed great popularity. However, they achieved much lower rating than the epic-based serials.

There were many reasons for this. Apart from the fact that the epic-based serials were more accessible to the viewers because of the already existing familiarity with the story outlines, the religious and even communal appeal of these soaps added to their draw particularly since it matched a significant element of the obtaining political mood in the country. The fact that they were, by and large, crude representations even of the complex epics and presented abysmally crude stereotypes of depiction did not detract from their appeal. Indeed, if anything, the simplification and the stereotypical iconography derived from Raja Ravi Varma's early twentieth century paintings and the calendar art popularised by the Gita Press, Gorakhpur, which peddles religious literature, only added to their accessibility.

However, as is discussed in the following sections, these epic-based serials, and in particular the *Ramayan* also subtly distorted elements of the original myths and helped create an entirely new articulation of religion which had little to do with spirituality and more relation to communal politics. The destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fanatics in 1992 was in an atmosphere of religious atavism to which such television had contributed significantly.

## **2. Electronic Religiosity: The Meaning of Goswami Ramanand Sagar**

A significant aspect of the last part of *Ramayan* is that, in the manner of total theatre, the dramatist himself becomes a character in the drama. In the *Lav-Kush Kand*, the narrator Valmiki becomes an important actor himself and the tale becomes told in a way which social anthropologists say is the result of participant-observation.

In this respect, the creator of the electronic *Ramayan*, Ramanand Sagar, has jumped the gun. In the last episode which was telecast, he made an appearance not only as the producer of the series but as a character himself, appropriately dressed as a divine creature floating in the skies and singing benediction on the occasion of Ram being anointed king of Kosala. The tale itself, its characters, its narrator, the fact that it came to the viewer in his home and the overwhelming response of the millions of viewers, all created a unity which is exceptional in the context of India's fragmented culture.

The TV *Ramayan* marked a qualitative leap in India's cultural progress and like all such leaps it also represents a dramatic discontinuity.

The characterising features of Indian cultural development have been assimilation and gradualism. India has not witnessed, nor perhaps could it afford, the trauma of a cultural revolution. Indeed, the process of slow transformation through evolution has almost become an article of faith in a civilisation whose watchwords have been "play safe". The predominant belief has been, as G.K. Chesterton remarked in another context, that "if we change, we must change slowly and safely, as the animals do. Nature's revolution are the only successful ones. There has been no conservative reaction in favour of tails."

Through the electronic *Ramayan* though, this happy state of things has been undone. Tails are making their appearance again and the Indian juggernaut is moving at a frenetic pace--backwards. Paradoxically this is happening even as the cogs of the nation's cultural and economic machinery are engaged with the gears that are supposed to take it onwards into the brave new 21st century. And one of the persons who epitomises this curious phenomenon of negation of historical process of progress, albeit at an evolutionary pace, is none other than the sage of the electronic age, "Goswami" Ramanand Sagar who has also popularised *Ramayan* in a far

more effective manner than his vernacular predecessor Goswami Tulsidas.

Ramanand Sagar, of course ably assisted by the mandarins of Mandi House who manage state-owned television in India, the dons of Doordarshan and their political masters, has done to Hinduism what has never been done before. With the help of the electronic medium and the language of kitsch cinema, he has created congregational worship for Hindus all over the country. Between 9.30 and 10.15 every Sunday morning, for 78 weeks, millions of Hindus gathered together to take part in a new form of idol worship. For the first time in the ancient and pluralistic tradition of Hinduism, a church was created and its Pope was Ramanand Sagar, a far more effective shepherd of the flock than Tulsidas or Valmiki, Kampan or Eknath. Such was the impact of the serial that it is now being repeated on several private channels in India and abroad and its video cassettes are sold widely to Non-Resident Indians.

But the latest version of *Ramayan* has done more than create idolatry of the idiot box. It has also marked the interaction of popular tradition with elite culture and vice versa. Tulsidas had begun the process by appropriating the language of the common man of north India, Awadhi, to tell the tale which had been available in classical form till then only to Sanskrit scholars. At the same time, his depiction of Ram -- *Jharokhe baith kar sabka mujra lait* -- borrowed from the image of the Mughal court under Akbar when *jharoka darshan* (the emperor appearing on his balcony) became an important mode of personalised rule. His popularisation of the epic was a dialectical process: even while the story became available to the people, they added to it their own concerns and gave it their own colours which came out when it passed through the prisms of the many versions of the *Ramlila*. The text was one, discourse remained many and de-construction retained the possibility of plurality.

The telecast of a uniform version of *Ramayan* over the length and

breadth of the country however marks a process of unitarisation, simplification and centralisation which makes serious inroads into the cultural autonomy of the people even with regard to religion. And, it is not superior philosophical content or greater sophistication of form that marks the superordinate status of the TV *Ramayan* over the popular *Ramlilas*: the tails of its characters are just as ludicrous. It is largely the superiority of technology that has once again led to the conquest of "cultures" by "civilisation". The importance of being Ramanand Sagar is not that he has the bliss of telling the tale of Rama (Ramanand) but that he is able to ride across the ocean (Sagar) of electronic waves.

And yet the popularity of the latest version of *Ramayan* cannot be explained only in terms of technology. There are many reasons for it which need to be explored. Perhaps the popularity of the serial came out of the fact that, by and large, its viewers were familiar with the story outline and they found in the serial the details that they were looking for. Thus it had both an element of familiarity as well as newness and surprise--a dramatic mix with which the intellectually lazy viewer is most comfortable.

That the serial thrived on the passivity of its viewers is emphasised by the fact that it has put paid to *Ramlilas*. Indeed, the purveyance of *Ramayan* through television has destroyed the very concept of *lila* where either divinity acted in human form or human beings enacted the doings of gods and goddesses. In either case there was effort put into the act and realisation of the actual character of the play came through that effort. Thus, when Narayana was incarnated as Ram, his first, natural, appearance was in his original form--four armed and carrying his special marks *shankha* (conch shell), *chakra* (discus), *gada* (mace) and *padma* (lotus). It was on the entreaty of Kaushalya that the normal appearance was given up for the *lila* of playing the human child. (*Mata puni boli so mati doli*,

*tajahu taat yah rupa, keejay sisu lila ati priyasheela yah sukh param anoopa ...*) Similarly, Krishna too when he enacted his *lila* had to make effort, go to the Yamuna *ghat*. In the case of Ram, it was the supreme effort of imposing limits on his own powers that made him the *Maryada Purshottam* (the greatest man who knew his limits).

On the other side, when human beings recounted the epics through play-acting *lila*, there was also a major effort in which the players, spectators and sponsors all became intense and active participants. The Ramnager *Ramlila*, carried out under the aegis of the Raja of Benaras, where the play and reality merge into each other, has been extensively analysed by the experts on theatre but all other Ramlilas, howsoever humbly staged, have this element of active participation.

The TV *Ramayan* however in this respect too has reversed the element of active participation, and with enormous success. The action is elsewhere, the viewer is merely an adjunct to what is appropriately called the broadcast receiver. The alienation between humanity and divinity is now absolute and the distance can only be bridged by Doordarshan. In this respect the appropriateness of calling radio Akashvani (the voice from the skies), with all its implicit connotation of *devavani* (voice of the gods), is brought out sharply.

At the same time, the essential element in the popularity of the TV *Ramayan* is unquestionably the religious and utopian appeal of omnipotent divinity in an age when humanity finds itself increasingly powerless and passive.

But what of millions of religious viewers who are also hooked on to Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*? Why is that not one Muslim thought it necessary to obtain a *fatwa* from Deoband or elsewhere on whether viewing the serial was *kufr* or not? What about the Westernised elite which is not elementarily religious but nevertheless almost religiously



viewed *Ramayan* in spite of making snide comments about its poor production? The answer to these too is to be found in a complex situation where mass culture, the search for roots, entertainment and education have all got mixed into an addictive and soporific compound which forces intellectual passivity. That this compound is available without much effort by the recipient adds to its ethereal charm as the medium itself becomes the message.

Such is the potency of this mix that Doordarshan itself has started realising that it may have created something much more than for what it had bargained. Now it is almost beyond the television authorities to put the genie back into the bottle. Dr. Frankenstein had a similar experience.

### 3. Mythology On the Tube: Vyas Resurrected as B. R. Chopra

When the telecast of *Ramayan* came to an end, the nation suffered a collective withdrawal symptom. It was assumed that the very passivity that the epic serial thrived on would prevent active campaigning for its resurrection. The efforts of the Balmikis of Jalandhar who agitated for the telecast of the *Lav-Kush Kand* seemed to be marginal for they were asking not for the showing of the last, rather sordid episode in the life of Ram in which he abandoned the faithful but hapless Sita, but for the depiction of Valmiki who they considered to be a forebear of the Sanskritised untouchable. However, such was the national hangover of easily supplied doses of modern-day mythology that not only was Ramanand Sagar's saga revived as *Uttar Ramayan* but simultaneously Doordarshan began the telecast of another old tale, the *Mahabharat*, an epic of sex and violence, of passion and intrigue, of a-moral action and pragmatic ethics doled out in encapsulated form. India got another fix.

Compared to the electronic *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat* was in fact a non-religious epic. As such, it did not have the advantage of drawing the

devout to the television screen. What religiosity it was able to inspire was indeed only through interpolating the *Bhagwat Khatha* into the *Mahabharat* and of course making elaborate use of the earlier interpolation of the *Gita*. Nevertheless, the very intricacy of the story, the travails of the various protagonists, the masterly use of using classical allusions to make relevant contemporary comment and the simplified kitsch style of dramatic discourse, once again relying on the by-now classicised forms popularised by Raja Ravi Varma through his paintings: all these made for considerable mass appeal. Indeed, some accounts hold that the appeal of B.R.Chopra's *Mahabharat* has been even wider and more pervasive than that of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*.

This is quite an extraordinary development. One would have imagined that the *Ramayan*, with its simpler narrative, fewer and less complex characters and the uncomplicated nature of their dilemmas and emotions, would have had a greater potential to sway the spectators. Indeed the spirit of the *Ramayan* epic--piety and devotion--would appear to be more telling to a people whose spiritual and religious life has been conditioned for several centuries by the *bhakti* cult. On the other hand, the *Mahabharat*, as the anthropologist Iravati Karve has argued in her classic *Yuganta*, excels on account of its complexity. Its ethos, too, is different altogether. If the *Ramayan* is rooted in piety and devotion, the *Mahabharat* is marked throughout by a rugged common sense which is both mundane and sometimes even skeptical. Its meandering plots and sub-plots, like its myriad characters unfold and develop on the strength of doubts and questions raised about the nature of human destiny. Realism and even a certain hardness are the hallmarks of its overall philosophy.

All in all, the *Mahabharat* is a less accessible work. To its intellectual complexity occasioning its relative inaccessibility is added the effect of the popular superstition that keeping a copy of the *Mahabharat* in the house

is not correct as it causes domestic discord, the central feature of its content. The phenomenal success of the television serial which intruded into the domesticity of millions of viewers is therefore quite baffling even if one takes into account the fact that people have been familiar with the epic because of the numberless, if highly simplified, stories inspired by it and transmitted down the generations.

The popularity of the TV *Mahabharat* was even more surprising because, Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* which was seen as a majoritarian morality play, B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* crafted to be a 'republican' serial. Nevertheless, and perhaps consequently, its overpowering appeal cut across the lines that keep the nation in a fractured state: across castes and classes, languages, faiths and regions.

Despite its garish excesses, despite the cardboard characters that Chopra erected, despite even the fact that he too was not entirely able to resist the lure of religiosity, his televised version managed to project the essential secular spirit of the original epic. The characters are eminently this-worldly: they have their strengths and failings, they drink their fill of joys and sorrows, they struggle and sacrifice and, no less important, they follow not the fiats of sundry *sadhus*, *mahants* and *gurus*, but the dictates of their conscience such as it is. Their emotions are those we even nowadays experience ourselves. Their concerns are our concerns: power, wealth, status, desire, happiness.

The *Mahabharat* has thus forcefully driven home the point that morality is not the same thing as moralising, that divine diktat need not be a substitute for or superior to or even more popular than enlightened reason, that doubt and dialogue can be more effective to resolve conflict than blind devotion. For people resigned to living according to what fate decrees for them, even B.R. Chopra's TV *Mahabharat*, with all its compromises, offered a powerful antidote.

The enthusiastic response of the audience to the serial suggests that it readily identified itself with the epic's complex situations and equally complex characters. The process of identification was greatly accelerated by Rahi Masoom Raza's subtle allusions to our contemporary preoccupations--dynastic rule, arrogance of power, plight of women, lack of respect for institutions, the responsibilities of an enlightened state and so on. In that respect, B.R. Chopra did attempt to become a modern-day Vaishampayan Vyas. (Let it also be mentioned in passing that more than all the Hindi language 'akademies' and Hindi language zealots put together, it is Rahi Massom Raza, a Muslim who wrote the dialogues for the serial, who has single-handedly contributed to making the nation realise the wealth and dignity of Hindi.)

By the same token, the success of B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* cannot be hailed, or for that matter, berated, as evidence of the burgeoning attraction of *Hindutva*. The sparkling ethical and philosophical concerns of the epic are a far cry from the hectoring propaganda of the *sants* and *mahants* now trying to set the agenda for the nation. The epic's appeal is national and, as the triumph of Peter Brooke's version demonstrates, even universal. It cannot be equated with a religious majority or with a particular caste or region. And for this very reason the great success of even the simplified television serial very much constitutes a vote for the nation's republican goals and values.

#### 4. Epic Dimensions Of The Idiot Box

The massive response inspired by TV epics, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* has encouraged the coming of age of this *genre* of mass culture. The telecast of *Vishwamitra* and other epic tales like the *Bible*, the life of the Buddha, the story of Ashoka and of course, the relatively modern but no less epic *Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru is part of the process of

the nurturing of this *genre*. Such a cultural phenomenon has several implications.

The nation-wide viewership of epics like these does willy-nilly create elements of a homogenised culture which is simplistic, often even vulgarised, but its unitary nature is for that reason not any less significant. Of course, there are some regional variations in response. For instance, the viewership of even the *Mahabharat* varied quite widely over the country: if it was 91% in Delhi, 85% in Calcutta, 76% in Hyderabad, 71% in Bombay and 68% in Bangalore, it was only 46% in Madras. The overall general viewership was 77%. In the first week of June 1990, when the serial was about to come to an end, the general viewership rose to a phenomenal 96 % over the country. The over all general viewership of the *Ramayan*, on the other hand, was 65-70%. Given India's enormous population, such percentage figures make the numbers of people who have watched these serials enormous: perhaps much more than any television programme made anywhere in the world.

A part of the regional difference within India itself has been attributed to the language issue but some of it also has been explained in terms of different local cultural perceptions. Elaboration of those 'local' elements of mass culture would be the matter of another full-fledged exploration altogether, suffice it for the present to merely note that pluralism is not yet obliterated in India.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that TV epics have created a relatively unitary form of cultural expression. Its impact and use have been further reinforced by the manifestation of the all-India market through the spate of advertisements which have taken advantage of the 'prime time' created by TV epics. Whether this is a "good thing" or a "bad thing" is not for us to pronounce on now. For the present, in any case, it is a fact of life: the message is in the medium itself. Whether the message will be taken to

be one of an artificially created new religiosity or one of sectarianism or a "pure entertainment" type is beyond the scope of television. For eventually, social action takes place outside the confines of the small screen. And the social action ensuing from this may well be inspired by the secular but no less insidious modern mythology of consumerism of epic proportions. It is also not unfounded to conclude that what the idiot box creates most successfully is idiots.

### Notes

Sho Kuwajima

This is a critical review of the Indian epics, *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* which appeared in the *Doordarshan* (Indian Television) and attracted so many people for some years.

The author discusses this theme in a broader context of history and culture. Though he admits that the TV epics have created a relatively unitary form of cultural expression, he still notes that pluralism is not yet obliterated in India.

TV epics or contemporary 'documentaries' on the electronic highway is not an event of another world for the Japanese. This paper gives a warning to those who already have a tradition of 'relatively unitary form of cultural expression'.

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His main books are: *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Change in Bihar, 1900-1980* (New Delhi, 1983), *India Invented-A Nation-in-The Making* (New Delhi, 1992) and *The Republic of Bihar* (Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 1992). His writing of his own village is very impressive ("Changel: Three Centuries of an Indian Village", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 15, Number 1, Oct. 1987).

It is expected that he will enlarge the theme of this paper to discuss the possibility of frontier-less communication and the meaning of state media control in Asia-Pacific Region in the context of the New Economic Policy of India.