

RAMANAND SAGAR'S RAMAYANA: A TOOL FOR PROPAGANDA

By

Anindita Basu

Pursuing Masters from Department of Comparative Literature

Jadavpur University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

E mail: anindita.basu.91@gmail.com

Television as a mode of mass communication has the power to influence millions. Propagations of all sorts and rather for all sorts are done through this medium, simply because of the sway it holds over the masses. Both political as well as commercial propagandas are put forward through television. Before plunging headlong into the topic of our discussion, let us broadly touch upon a brief history of the coming of television in India. Officially it was in the year 1959 that television broadcasting began in India. It had been a state run operation then, earning autonomy many years after its inception. Doordarshan, which is now a segment of the Prasar Bharati, launched in the year 1959, continued to be the most watched channel in India for a very long period of time. The Prasar Bharati was and still happens to be the largest broadcaster of this country. It was initially tied to the State. An appeal for autonomy was made as early as the year 1990, but it was finally granted in the year 1997. It was on the 25th January, 1987, on the channel Doordarshan, that the first episode of Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana (an adaptation primarily from Tulsidas's *Ramayana*) was aired. This serial continued to be aired and re-telecast till about the end of the 1990s. So, the Ramayana was produced at a point of time when the Doordarshan was in the clutches of the State. The main aim of the Indian government was to promote an idea of the "ideal" by broadcasting "developmental soap operas", as Rajagopalachari points out.¹ The Ramayana was a product of this national initiative of propagating the idea of the ideal Indian society with its traditional norms and values. However from the very beginning the religious undertone of the serial was there, which later on became an invaluable tool for shaping the Indian identity into a Hindu one. It was on the 25th of September 1990, that the then president of a prominent Indian political party, arranged a *Ratha Yatra*, from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Following his arrest in November, 1990, some *karsevaks* or loyalists of this movement in 1992 demolished the Babri Masjid, triggering off yet another communal riot, which has been an integral feature of the Indian sub-continent. What started off merely as communal clashes, with the passage of time, developed into a full blown riot. It is important for us to list these occurrences first because its causes and effects need to be dealt with. All this strife regarding the Babri Mosque is centred around a particular "myth" - it has been stated in the *Ramayana* that by the banks of the river Sarayu in Ayodhya is the birth place of Rama, the re-incarnation of Vishnu on earth. On this exact location had been a Ram Mandir which after the Mughal invasion was plundered and destroyed and subsequently replaced by the Babri Mosque, built on the orders of the first Mughal Emperor of India, Babur. The Ratha Yatra, a segment of the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement, was an attempt to rescue and restore the rightful honour to the birth place of Rama.

¹ Rajagopal, Arvind, Politics after Television, Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India.

It is said that when S.S. Gill, the author of the book titled *Gandhi: A Sublime Failure*, had approached the then Indian prime minister, with the idea of the televisionisation of the Ramayana, the prime minister had expressed concerns over the communal undertone of the entire project but had finally given in to the reassurances of Gill. Though it will be a little dubious to assume that Sagar's Ramayana televisionisation was a deliberate "socio-technical apparatus" as Rajagopal tends to identify this mode with, for percolating feelings of communalism amongst the masses, but nonetheless it is undeniable that this serial helped in preparing the Indian psyche for an "ideal Hindu society". This televised version, which became a daily feature of almost every Indian household, did create a longing amongst the discontent political few, the longing for an alternative, which could be achieved using the norms that define an ideal Hindu society.

The power of television during and after the liberalisation which began in 1985 and the sway it held over the masses can be fathomed from the sudden sense of religiosity that this televised version of the age old epic generated. It is basic human nature to ultimately fall back on the known or look for the known in the unknown, or to make the unknown known and this is basically the reason why such a known tale garnered such great interest all over again. For the first time people were seeing what they had heard from their elders on the television screen, translating the oral experience into a visual one, the concept of watching televised serials being a fairly recent one then. This obviously generated a fair amount of interest, but what one needs to look at here is how far reaching these effects were. People, who used to watch this serial regularly, had the habit of taking a bath, worshipping the television set and then sit down to watch that day's episode. This is a fact that is pretty well known, but rumours even go to the extent of suggesting that trains in the then states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar used to be stopped, so that the people could get off, go to the nearest locality, watch that day's episode and then board the train again. This is perhaps a tad bit too far but it gives us an idea as to the amount of popularity generated by the producers and propagated through this new found medium of mass communication- television.

The religious undertone hidden in this televised version becomes evident from the very beginning of the series. First and foremost let us consider the first episode of Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana. The title credits begin traditionally with a song singing praises of the Ramayana. Minutes into it, we find another song eulogizing Vishnu, a prominent God head of the Hindu pantheon. All these songs by form and to some extent of distorted content can be broadly considered as *bhaktigeeti* (songs of devotional praise). That there is this touch to the Ramayana comes as no surprise since this version is largely borrowed from Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas*, whose aim was to eulogize Rama, who was an avatar of Vishnu. There is a very specific reason for doing so. While in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama is a mortal who is not aware of the fact that he is Vishnu's *avatar*, in Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas*, Rama knows that he is a divine incarnation but he acts and feels like a mortal. This fact has been pointed in the last part of Sagar's Ramayana's first episode where Lord Shiva is shown explaining to Parvati that Vishnu in his mortal form Rama, acts and feels like a mortal because when he performs great and good deeds an ordinary mortal will also be encouraged to do it, stemming from the basic human psychology that if he can do it why can't I. This statement also subtly puts forward the message that this is supposed to be looked at from an educational point of view- something to learn from, something to follow.

Now, this brings us to another crucial aspect of our discussion- Who am I going to imitate, who am I going to follow? Who is going to show us what the ideal Hindu society is? An ideal Hindu nation needs an ideal Hindu man to lead the way, so who is going to be? Who, else but the ideal Hindu man himself- Rama! Valmiki's Rama travels from being the ideal man to the ideal guru in Tulsidas, who is finally translated into the ideal *Hindu* man in Sagar's televised version. This is exactly where we need

to address the question of worshipping an individual. This concept becomes true when we begin to eulogize a particular individual, placing the social context in the background. In Hindu mythology, Vishnu occupies the position of the Preserver of this universe. Sagar's televised version begins with a hymn dedicated to Vishnu as the background score, while we witness Vishnu sleeping on his lotus bed with his wife Laxmi seated by his side. In the few opening lines we learn that Vishnu will send Rama as his *avatara* to save the mortals from their terrible plight. It is Rama here who is being shown as the harbinger of change, the "good", created with the sole purpose of fighting the "evil". It is this ideal Hindu man who is out to weed out all the evils of the society. Rama continues his journey (Ramayana means Rama's *ayan* or journey) tackling the evil at each step and finally emerges victorious in this battle. However he does not do this alone; he has a band of loyalists aiding him throughout the way. It is pertinent to note here that though all these characters assisting him have their own set of beliefs and morals and they also rejoice and suffer, their significance pales when compared to Rama. For example, in Valmiki's version itself, Rama's lament upon Sita's abduction generates verse after verse, but hardly any attention is given to Urmila, Lakshman's wife, when he leaves with Rama for his *vanavasa*, leaving her alone in the kingdom. Lakshman who can be termed as the second protagonist of this televised epic is nothing but a shadow of Rama, an ideal *bhakt* of the ideal guru. Thus this notion of the all supreme individual becomes very important.

Ramanand Sagar weaves a world of a larger reality, a fantastic world through his televised epic. Residing in an age which has been touched by the light of realism, it is surprising thus that the viewers will be drawn by such a fantastic representation. What is happening in this case is that the audience is familiarizing itself with an unfamiliar, fairly recent medium (television) through a familiar story (Ramayana). In this process the latent ideas and notions within the viewers are being triggered. That the concept of an ideal man or the individual being the all in all has been there in the Indian memory since its initial days is evident from how Valmiki has dealt with his lead protagonist and how his protagonist has been dealt with over time. The position of Rama remains unnerved and unchanged in every version of the epic. It is perhaps impossible for us to imagine a Ramayana without Ram, as it becomes so evident from the very name. So this idea of eulogizing an individual above all has been there since a very long time. This idea gets triggered off with Sagar's television series. In fact, the president of a prominent Indian political party, as mentioned before, sets out on his *ratha yatra* on a chariot fashioned out of a Toyota car, which bore striking resemblances to the chariot that Rama uses in the televised version. This resemblance was a deliberate one, done in order to generate public recognition. Hundreds and hundreds turn up on this rally; it appeals to the mass since hardly a few of them are aware that it is a political propaganda, all they realize or more precisely feel is that Rama, the individual set out on a chariot and here we see another individual setting out on another chariot, akin to the ideal Hindu man and thus very naturally he must also like Rama be the one to usher in the ideal Hindu society; he, this individual has set out to lead us all on a mission to give back Rama, another prominent individual, his lost glory and honour. This notion of putting the individual above everything else has been there and continues to be there in the Indian psyche. Two recent major elections bore testimony to this fact when the individual rose above the party they represented and it was the individuals who received all the public support, which ultimately led to their victory. So, thus it can be said that this spirit of an all-in-all super human exists in the Indian mind set and this idea gets triggered off at the slightest provocation.

It was the television that brought the Babri Mosque massacre to our homes and it was this television that helps political leaders to promote themselves. Again it was this television that brought a very familiar story to our homes in a new and unfamiliar mode, which rapidly transformed from being the emergent to the dominant. The mass appeal, that medium carries with itself not only allowed the

Indians to relive the experiences of an oral tradition in a visual form, but also triggered off the latent communal feeling in them, which has very systematically been integrated into our system. Televisation of the epic did undeniably act as a reminder of the Hindu glory and the need to weed out other minorities, mostly the Muslims, in order to build a pure and ideal Hindu nation.