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## Global Form, Orthodox Content: Banker's *Ramayana* and the Conservative Imagination

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### Abstract

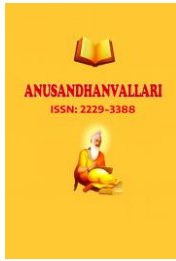
This paper analyses Ashok Banker's *Ramayana* Series, one of the earliest English retellings of the epic to achieve significant popular reception both in India and beyond in the twenty-first century. Its success laid the foundation for a broader tradition of English-language *Ramayana* retellings, works that do not merely translate the epic but reinvent and reframe it across new forms and mediums for a readership more at home in English than in the languages in which the *Ramayana* has traditionally lived. The paper examines how Banker's series intervenes in and extends the *Ramayana* tradition while simultaneously positioning itself as a global cultural commodity. It further analyses how, beneath this cosmopolitan surface, the text reaffirms and reasserts conventional orthodox Indian social and cultural values, naturalizing caste hierarchy, consolidating a singular Brahmanical worldview, and reaffirming conservative gender roles, even as it borrows the grammar of contemporary western fantasy to package the epic for a new generation of readers.

**Keywords:** Ramayana, Retellings, Popular Literature, Fantasy, Brahmanism, Patriarchy

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### Introduction:

The past two decades have witnessed the Indian popular literary world being inundated with retellings of mythological and epic tales. Among these, the most dominant narrative thread has been that of the *Ramayana*, retold across languages, media, and forms. Of all its contemporary avatars, it is the English-language *Ramayana* that has proven most prolific and most visible. Multiple *Ramayanas* now exist in English, narrated from varying perspectives, repackaged and retold with contemporary audiences and readerships in mind. These retellings have found an enthusiastic reception among the English-educated middle classes of India and the Indian diaspora, perhaps precisely that class which has limited access to folk, oral, or regional renditions of the epic. Their popularity also speaks to a deep and urgent desire within this class to encounter their own history, culture, and literature on their own terms. It was Ashok Banker who, in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, inaugurated this tradition of the English *Ramayana* with his multi-volume *Ramayana* Series. Banker positions his *Ramayana* as a cosmopolitan, liberal retelling of the epic, translating the ancient tale into the grammar of contemporary Western fantasy and adopting the idiom of the global English-language literary market. Yet beneath this modernized and cosmopolitan surface, the series reproduces and reaffirms a conservative ideological architecture, one that naturalizes caste hierarchy, reaffirms orthodox and oppressive gender roles, and consolidates a traditional image of India and its culture. While the series departs from earlier renditions of the *Ramayana* at the level of form, at the ideological and cultural levels it presents a deeply conservative and orthodox vision of

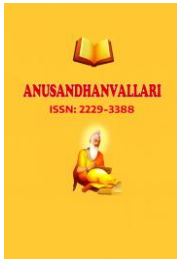


India. This article unravels that contradictory movement at the heart of Banker's *Ramayana* Series, tracing how the series simultaneously globalizes its form and conserves an orthodox idea of India.

### Globalising the *Ramayana* for a Local Readership:

Banker recasts the *Ramayana* within the idiom of global popular fantasy, borrowing liberally from the grammar of series like *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Sword of Truth*. The effect is deliberate, by situating the epic within a recognizable fantasy universe, Banker makes the *Ramayana* feel familiar and immediately accessible to a readership that may have come to mythology through Hogwarts rather than Ayodhya. The debt to Harry Potter in particular runs surprisingly deep, operating not merely at the level of atmosphere or tone but at the level of plot architecture itself. The *Purana Wafadars*, a regiment of seasoned warriors who fought in the last *Asura* wars and specialize in combating dark creatures, bear a striking resemblance to the Order of the Phoenix. When Ram deploys the Brahmastra against the Asura force, Ravana is not killed but reduced to an almost embryonic state, stripped of his physical body for thirteen years, able to communicate but incapable of action. The parallel with Voldemort's condition following his failed attack on infant Harry is unmistakable, and Banker sustains it with considerable detail. Just as Harry's blood is used to restore Voldemort to full power, it is Surpanakha carrying Ram's blood to Lanka that enables Ravana's recovery. The resurrected Ravana, like the resurrected Voldemort, is more dangerous than his earlier incarnation, more cunning, more restrained, relying on propaganda and manipulation rather than brute force. Manthara, his fanatical and sadistic lieutenant who performs child sacrifices and dark rituals on his behalf, occupies much the same narrative function as Bellatrix Lestrange. The *Asura* hordes that Ravana extracts from Patal, paying for their release with fragments of his immortal *aatma*, function as a rough equivalent of horcruxes. Even the motif of a hero gradually awakening to the scope of his own powers finds its echo here, just as Harry accidentally sets a boa constrictor free before he understands what he is capable of, Ram, newly infused with the powers of *Bala* and *Atibala*, unwittingly transforms the smell of *gau-mutra* (cow-urine) into rose fragrance simply by willing it, arriving at an awareness of his abilities only by degrees.

These borrowings from western fantasy, however, are not applied uniformly across the narrative. Banker's deployment of the fantasy mode is in fact deeply selective, and that selectivity is itself ideologically revealing. Banker creates an interesting binary in his descriptions of Ayodhya and Lanka as everything supernatural is explained as scientific or divine in the former whereas the fantasy mode is exploited to create an ominous otherworld in the latter. If a fantasy story takes place wholly or partly in our world, it is what one would call low fantasy. High fantasy, on the other hand, is the term one would use for the story that takes place completely within a secondary, invented and fictional world, the otherworld. Banker's text is a borderline case between these subgenres of high and low fantasy. Interestingly the text functions on two levels simultaneously and while Ram and his story is firmly anchored in the ancient past of the nation, Ravana is the character on whom the fantastic elements of the text are concentrated. When he speaks about Ram, Banker tries to stay strictly in the realm of mythology. The stories he dictates form ordinary tales for words, things and places that still exist. For instance, he recounts that *Sitaphal* is named thusly due to Sita's liking for the particular fruit. But when talking about the *Asuras*, he uses concepts such as magic, time travel and so on. For instance, Taraka's *asura* hordes are mutant beings created by crossing *rakshasas* with animals using dark powers, as opposed to any "scientific" principles. Similarly, Ravana creates an army out of beings "cloned" to his likeness by misusing the divine energies of the universe. He even attempts to use biological weapons to attack Ayodhya and tries to eradicate the entire population by unleashing a deadly virus and travels in time through vertical portals called 'vortals.' Each sub species that fights along with him be it *Vetaals*, *Nagas*, or *Ugras* are imaginatively characterised by the author and inspired by a *mélange* of fantastic creatures. The influence of western fantasy writing is palpable in Banker as Indian counterparts are created for western mythical creatures so that *Pishaachs* and *Vetaals* stand in for zombies and dementors. Allusions to *Harry Potter* can be traced in the repeated designation of Ravan as the 'Dark Lord,' who

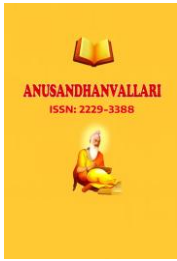


is at work even before Ram is born. The corrupt soldiers who misuse law are called *Dharmanators*. Rama's administration of justice termed 'sword of *dharma*' is also a reference to 'Sword of Truth' series by Terry Goodkind.

Banker's borrowings are not limited to plot and structure. At the level of language itself, he experiments considerably, "chutnifying" his prose, to borrow a term that feels entirely apt here, by weaving a generous quantity of Hindi and Sanskrit terms into the English text, giving it an Indianised texture that marks it as distinctly local even as it speaks to a global readership. The Indian words imported into the narrative are however drawn singularly from the world of Hindu myths and folklore. Since names are strongly linked to both identity and heritage, this serves to reaffirm a specifically Hindu-Indian identity. The use of token Urdu words such as *Diwan-e-Khas* for the King's meeting chamber serves an assimilatory function, folding Urdu into the larger rubric of a Hindu identity and claiming it as an Indian language on those terms. Similarly, as Lutgendorf observes, "Indo-Saracenic watchtowers loom over Mughal pavilions and gardens of bougainvillea vines", a plant introduced into India during the colonial period, all contributing to the new "Indianness" that is being constructed ("(Too?)" 207). The idiom Banker reaches for, when he wants to evoke the familiar cadences of the epic, is that of last century's most widely watched retelling, Ramanand Sagar's televised *Ramayana*, which shaped the imagination of an entire generation. The influence shows not just in language but in visual sensibility. In Sagar's serial, auspicious moments are blessed by the gods above with a ceremonial shower of flowers upon the mortal characters below. Banker retains this tradition but updates it, the flowers become butterflies hovering around members of the royal household, recast as emblems of Prajapati, sanctifying the actions of those they surround. At the same time, to ensure that the text does not feel too local for its intended global and urban audience, certain phrases are quietly Westernised, even Christianised in their cadence, "By Devi," "May Vishnu take his *atma*," "Vishnu be praised", constructions that carry the ring of "By God" or "God rest his soul." The result is a careful balancing act maintained throughout: enough of the traditional and the familiar to satisfy readers who grew up with Sagar's *Ramayana*, and enough of the globally legible to keep the international reader from feeling shut out. All of this, the selective Indianisation, the assimilation of Urdu and Mughal aesthetics, the nods to Sagar, becomes a way for Banker to stake a claim to a carefully constructed cultural capital in an increasingly globalized literary market.

If fantasy provides Banker's series its global template, it is the setting, the locale in which the narrative unfolds, that anchors it firmly in Indian soil. Rather than placing his story in a wholly imaginary secondary world, as high fantasy conventionally does, Banker maps his *Ramayana* onto a geography that is unmistakably and deliberately the Indian subcontinent. Ayodhya sits in central northern India. The Kishkindhans are stationed somewhere on the Deccan plateau. Lanka is a teardrop-shaped island off the subcontinent's southern tip. Kausalya hails from 'Banglar', clearly Bengal, whose people live in reasonable fear of typhoons and tidal waves. When the Asuras attack, they make landfall in 'Keral' and march northward toward Ayodhya. Neighbouring nations are named and placed. Birds migrating from the north are identified as Chinese, marking the land they come from and will return to. Characters casually mention Myanmar in conversation. The contemporary political boundaries of the Indian nation are, in other words, quietly but consistently written into the fabric of an ancient epic.

This is not a neutral narrative choice. The closest and most charged debate surrounding the figure of Ram in recent times has been precisely over geography, over the location of *Ramjanmabhoomi* in the modern town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, and over whether the *Ramayana* belongs to the realm of myth or to the lived history of the subcontinent. To map the epic so insistently onto recognizable contemporary locations is to nudge it away from the free-floating space of mythology and toward the contested terrain of history. Banker's remapping of the epic onto identifiable Indian geography can only reinforce those popular histories, particularly since, for the English-educated urban readership that is his primary audience, this retelling may well be their principal textual encounter with the *Ramayana*. The "realms of history, myth, socialization, and governance," as Udaykumar observes, cross over and interconnect in precisely this way (13). By grounding myth in cartography, Banker makes it harder, not

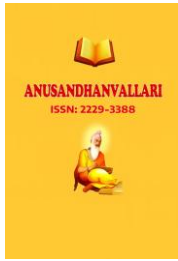


easier, to see the *Ramayana* as imaginative literature, and that difficulty has consequences that extend well beyond the page.

These parallels to both western and Indian popular literary traditions are not incidental. They represent a conscious strategy of transcreation, not linguistic but cultural (Mukherjee; Lal). Banker is not simply retelling the *Ramayana*; he is re-encoding it within a globally legible fantasy framework so that it can travel, be marketed, and be consumed alongside Tolkien and Rowling on the same bookshelf, while remaining, at the same time, deeply rooted in Indian popular culture. At the level of form, Banker manages to fuse the two worlds – the Indian and the western – with considerable dexterity. The *Ramayana* is thus inserted into the global fantasy circuit, its ancient narrative architecture dressed in the conventions of a contemporary western genre. What remains to be examined, however, is what this cosmopolitan packaging conceals, because beneath the borrowed grammar of western fantasy, the ideological content of Banker's retelling is anything but global or liberal.

### **Flattening the Epic: Orthodox Characterization and the Vilification of Plurality**

Although fantasy elements have been grafted onto the plot and narrative architecture of the epic, the socio-cultural and political milieu that Banker constructs tells a rather different story. At the level of form and plot structure, Banker succeeds in making the text feel contemporary and globally accessible. But in terms of social values and cultural imagination, the series presents a strikingly regressive picture, and nowhere is this more visible than in the characterization of its principal figures and the ideology that underwrites it. Banker's treatment of Ravana and the Asuras, for instance, amounts to a quiet but unmistakable celebration of cultural singularity over multiplicity. Several characters observe that one of Ravana's defining weaknesses is his ten heads, each speaking a different language and frequently pulling in different directions. When Dasharatha confronts Ravana, the realization dawns on him that Ravana is at his most vulnerable precisely when he speaks, because coherent speech demands that he suppress nine other voices, an act of immense and debilitating concentration. What is true of the leader is equally true of his armies. The Asura forces are a varied and heterogeneous species, each sub-group distinct in physical form, social organization, and cultural practice. Against this fractured multiplicity, the Arya nations stand unified, bound by a common tongue, a shared culture, and a singular moral code. Their strength, the text suggests, lies as much in this uniformity as in their martial prowess. Diversity, in Banker's telling, is not a strength but a liability. The flattening of the epic's multiplicity is equally visible in the manner in which Ram and Ravan are portrayed. The nuance that makes both characters so compelling across the many versions of the epic is entirely absent here. In its place, Banker offers a straightforwardly Manichean picture, Ram and Ravan as black and white, good and evil, with nothing in between. The Asuras are framed as aggressors, greedy invaders bent on conquering and annihilating the Arya nations and the human race at large. Ram exists to protect his world, and ostensibly the entire Indian subcontinent, from these forces that are diabolical to the core. The contrast is drawn with some insistence: where Ram espouses monogamy, Ravan represents promiscuity; where Ram withholds his special powers until absolutely necessary, Ravan misuses his at every turn. Ram, in short, is everything that Ravan is not. This is a significant departure from the wider tradition. Across many versions of the epic, Ravana is a great scholar and an ardent devotee of Shiva. In some, he is a tragic hero who ultimately acknowledges his own failings and comes to accept his defeat. Banker allows none of this complexity. In his telling, Ravana's scholarship is nothing but the misuse of Brahman power, and his Shiva bhakti a mere disguise adopted to deceive the gods. Shiva, being of superior intelligence, predictably sees through the ruse and turns the deception back on Ravana in favour of the righteous Ram. Ravan is reimagined as a supernatural creature whose magical powers, the dark obverse of the Brahman Shakti wielded by pious Brahmins, allow him to open a portal into hell and raise an army from its depths. Among the mortals, it is the sadhus, specifically the practitioners of Tantric traditions, who are his followers. They are the uncivil fringe of an otherwise orderly Ayodhyan society, given to drug abuse, drunkenness, and dark magic. This characterization of Tantric practice as inherently sinister is prejudiced and reductive, recycling a

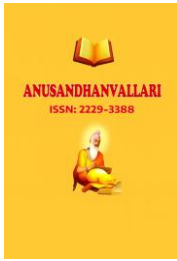


prudish Victorian understanding of the tradition while quietly equating Hinduism with Brahmanism alone. The implications extend beyond the textual. Ravan continues to be worshipped by certain communities in India, the Gonds among them, and the deeply unflattering image of his devotees that Banker sketches amounts to a thinly veiled judgment on those communities. Alternate Hindu traditions are thus vilified, and a classical Brahmanical worldview is installed in their place as the only legitimate version of the faith. Sita is provided with an interesting reason for refusing to go back with Hanuman and choosing to wait for Ram to come and fight Ravan in Lanka. Her actions are motivated not by some dated concept of a man's honour in fighting to protect his wife but in order to undo Ravan's political agenda. We are told that Ravan has spread slander against Ram who has to therefore come and clear his name in front of the people of Lanka. In Ravan's version, Sita has willingly sought asylum with Ravan as her husband is an exploitative, brutish aggressor. Ram is therefore portrayed as a victim of this propaganda. His crimes are his violence towards forest creatures/demons, his mistreatment of Sita and cruelty towards Surpanakha. Since these are the lines on which contemporary critics also draw to criticise the figure of Ram using feminist frames of reference, this aspect of the text can be understood as an extended comment on the quagmire of controversies that the figure of Ram is entangled within in the contemporary times. In the narrative his name is cleared and the people of Lanka witness his righteousness, as the author seems to suggest will be done in the real world also. Treatment of Ram as the 'chosen one' by characters like Jambavan, Vishwamitra and Anasuya, as well as the humility and servitude of Hanuman towards him further serve to mark his divinity. While placing the *Ramayana* in the realm of fantasy, the religious undertones of the text are thus revived all the same. Although Ram keeps insisting that he is not a god, everyone treats him like one. Much like in Valmiki, he is unaware of his own divinity that everyone else however seems to be able to sense.

### **Naturalising Caste: Brahmanism and the Orthodox Social Order in Banker's *Ramayana***

Where many contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana* actively problematize the conservative and orthodox elements of the epic, subverting its hierarchies and unsettling its assumptions, Banker's series, for all its globalized packaging, moves in the opposite direction. Beneath the cosmopolitan surface, the text quietly reestablishes and reaffirms the traditional caste and class hierarchies of orthodox India. The glorious Arya nations, we are told, follow the Brahmanical religious order, adhere to the caste system, and are populated by a superior race of "clear-eyed Aryas" animated by an unshakeable patriotism. Caste is explained away as an "efficient division of labor equivalent to the guilds of Western nations," social mobility is declared merit-based, "even a sudra could rise to kshatriya status through diligent effort", and the city's people are regularly seen "totally united, all caste, class, and other petty differences forgotten" (Banker Vol 1, 170, 61, 183). The strategy is unmistakable. Rather than confronting the malpractices associated with the caste system or questioning its fundamental premises, Banker reframes it as a rational, efficient, and ultimately benevolent social arrangement. Perfectionism is made the alibi for hierarchy, caste divisions existed, he argues, "so that individuals in any Arya community or kingdom were capable of doing their given vital task even under the most challenging circumstances and conditions." They are deemed not merely useful but "vital for survival" and the very secret of Aryan greatness (*Prince* 82, 240). The result is a sanitized account of Hindu social history, one that presents the caste system not as a structure of oppression but as a finely tuned instrument of collective excellence, and in doing so, lends the weight of ancient authority to a deeply conservative vision of society.

The Shabri episode is a telling example of how Banker re-imagines familiar moments from the epic to arrive at a conservative rendering. Shabri, the old woman who encounters Ram, Lakshman and Sita during their exile, is deeply apologetic about her lower-caste status and afraid of coming too close to upper-caste Kshatriyas. She is convinced of her own inherent impurity and hesitates to offer Ram the berries she has already tasted. Ram and Sita respond with kindness, making physical contact with her without hesitation, and it is only at Ram's insistence that she finally parts with the food. At this point, Shabri reveals herself to be the sage Anasuya in disguise, the



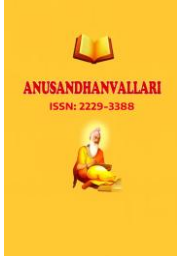
entire encounter was a test. Satisfied by the trio's uprightness, she rewards them with gifts that prove instrumental in the eventual defeat of Ravana. The ideological work this episode performs is quite precise. By transforming Shabri into a disguised sage who is testing Ram and Sita rather than a marginalized woman whose dignity is genuinely at stake, the text sidesteps any real engagement with caste discrimination. What it offers instead is a reassuring picture, that true followers of Hinduism are not bigoted, that untouchability and similar practices are merely corruptions of an otherwise sound and efficient system, and that Hinduism in its pristine form is an egalitarian religion. Ram and Sita emerge as the ideal custodians of a just Hindu society, and the caste system itself walks away unquestioned.

The prominence of the Brahmins in Banker's text is impossible to miss. Their influence over the Aryan courts is pervasive and uncontested, kings such as Janaka and Dasharatha constantly bow before them and defer to their guidance on all matters of consequence. As Udaykumar observes of Sagar's *Ramayana*, "in most of the crucial situations in Ayodhya, it is a Brahmin, Vashishtha, who decides things and gives commands to the king and others...the king remains the 'kshatriya hand' but the priests stay the 'Brahminical brain' and pontifical rulers all through" (67). Banker takes this a step further. In his series, the Brahmins are not merely spiritual authorities, they are also endowed with superhuman physical prowess. The sages Valmiki, Vashishtha and Vishwamitra engage in direct physical combat with demons such as Kalanemi and Ravana, at times simultaneously immobilizing an entire army and its king in order to shield those under their protection. Their supremacy is thus not confined to the spiritual realm but extends into the physical domain as well. They stand taller, move faster, and prove stronger than virtually any other mortal in the text.

Although a few habits such as their greed for food and the love for telling stories is indulgently and light heartedly poked fun at, the clear message untrivially being reiterated all along certainly seems to be that the Brahmins ought to be respected and revered. Their ultimate authority is unquestionable and knowledge uncontested through their pervasive presence in the text and enumeration of the wisdom of their tales. Their centrality to the Arya society is even understood by Ravana who instructs his ally Jatayu, to aim at and eradicate all the Brahmins first and foremost because he believes that without their presence, the Arya will be spiritually and mentally crippled beyond repair and thus much easier to defeat. Despite the claims of non-discriminatory caste divisions, Vishwamitra's Sudra disguise in Book 1 is treated with enough revulsion by the palace guards to belie any such claims. Similarly, when Sita and Ram try to leave Ayodhya without getting detected and disguise themselves as lower castes, the behavior of their own servants towards them till their true identities are revealed clearly marks out the differential treatment doled out to members of different castes. The text thus unwittingly disproves its own claims of egalitarian caste divisions. Distinctions and hierarchies that still hold are thus traced on multiple levels- national, ethnic and caste throughout the text in a subtle manner and dominant frames of inclusion and exclusion are reiterated in the fabric of Banker's fictional Ayodhya.

### **Valorizing Rama: Moral Rehabilitation and the Restoration of the Divine**

The text traces the story of the epic tale in the traditional manner with the focus on Ram, but all the problematic aspects of his character are conveniently glossed over. Many of the acts committed by Rama that spark controversy are suitably explained away. To begin with, the onus of teasing and humiliating Surpanakha lies with Lakshman solely who attacks her despite Ram's warnings. In order to make the killing of Vali less problematic (an episode that otherwise raises uncomfortable question regarding the moral righteousness of Ram's character) Vali is cast as an evil tyrant, a practitioner of dark arts and an ally of Ravana. The cruel banishment of Vibhishana from Lanka at the hands of Ravana makes his alliance with Ram seem less treacherous and more an act of magnanimity on the latter's part. All the chinks in Ram's moral armour are thus covered with ingenious narrative choices and conscious efforts on behalf of the author.



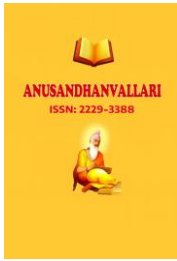
The Ayodhya that Ram rules over, after banishment of Sita is one rampant with corruption and intrigue. Ram is distanced from his people as well as his family and completely under the control of cunning politicians like Jabali, until Luv and Kush break the spell and Ram regains control over his senses. It is owing to the advice of evil statesmen that he decides to undertake an overtly expansionist *Ashwamedha Yagya* with the help of the largest army ever assembled. The politicians who aid him function on muscle power by terrorising the subjects as well as the smaller neighbouring kingdoms. The expansionist politics of the *Ashwamedha Yagya* are undeniable, yet the onus of these activities lies on select people from the kingdom. It is on bidding of the likes of Jabali that Ram asks Sita to undertake *agni-pariksha* for the second time. The association of Ram with these factions is what drags him into controversy, the text claims. However, it stresses that Ram himself is not to be blamed. Kausalya, Sumitra and his own brothers Shatrughan and Bharat whom he almost arrests, all profess ardently that Ram is no tyrant and completely good at heart. The text actively discourages any debate about Ram's intentions. When Luv and Kush hear Ram's tale from Valmiki, they judge him for all the violence that it entails. However, their guru reminds them that to judge Ram is impossible, because no one but Ram can have the full knowledge of his intentions and actions, and not even Valmiki can truly gauge them.

The singular criticism of Ram that the text allows for works ingeniously to assure his godhead as well. When he questions Sita's purity for the second time at the conclusion of the series in the volume entitled Sons of Sita, Sita berates him for his desiring "a queen, not a wife, a pure perfect idol of a woman, not a woman herself" and pronounces that for this particular act, he shall always remain a "broken god, revered and worshipped, honoured and admired but also doubted and despised." As in the traditional narratives, Sita returns to the earth but Ram still remains, protesting feebly that he is not a god, Sita's statement presumably incomprehensible to him. This can again be read as a comment on the political controversies that the otherwise great, the otherwise just Ram is surrounded by. Thus if at all something is wrong with Ram, the tragic dignity of his character is retained and his claim to godhead strengthened even more as the entire populace of Ayodhya decides to take samadhi with their beloved king at the very conclusion. True, he is a broken god, sunk in a history of political debates, but he is a God all the same, Banker seems to assert.

### **Aryan Masculinity and the Civilizational Hierarchy**

*Ramayana* as a text has also served in Hindu discourses as the vehicle of socialization and exemplar of ideal gender roles in a traditional society. Though there has been fair amount of criticism of the patriarchal structure expounded by the epic tale in folk and oral versions, the classical written texts vouch for Ram and Sita as the ideal male and female. In terms of gender, Banker's retelling fails to break any radical ground. The conservative understandings of gender roles are reaffirmed in the manner in which the epic tale is retold. The four sons of Dasharatha are marked out as superior warriors, which is both their identifying feature and their most admired trait. *Bala* and *Atibala*, the superpowers granted to Ram and Lakshman by Vishwamitra are scientific formulae to be mastered that transform the physiognomy and alter the cellular structures of the two brothers making them more powerful. The *deva-astras* that they call upon are divine weapons, each a deity in itself, residing in *Swargloka*, taking form of a weapon to come to their aid. The hyper masculinity of Rama as with the powers of *Bala* and *Atibala* turns him into a "perfectly efficient fighting engine," a perfect weapon who not only fights to protect oneself but in fact charges in order to enforce maximum damage onto the enemy (*Prince* 454).

Virility and militancy are identified as essential and prized characteristics as although Vishwamitra asserts that Janaka's acceptance of principles of *Ahimsa* and peace is just as brave as taking up of arms, it is amply evident that a land based on these principles cannot sustain, and requires courageous warriors such as Ram and Lakshman, the epitome of Aryan masculinity to protect and save Mithila from the approaching *Asura* armies and without their aid the land would lie to waste despite all its knowledge. Both the brothers together embody traditional Indian



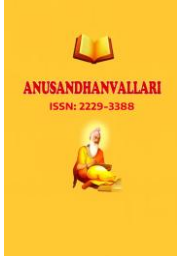
notion of valour and its "glorification of physical and military strength" and insistence that *Kshatriya* men "prove their manliness through violent encounters with the demonized" others, and "its implicit agenda for the subordination of the lower classes and religious minorities to a benign but absolute authority" especially in their treatment of Hanuman in service of creating "a primordial and monolithic" India "ruled largely by upper-caste leaders" (Lutgendorf, *Interpreting* 261-2). The character of Hanuman as conceived by Banker also serves to idolize Ram. The *vanar* begins his journey in the series as a rather comic character who talks in a funny manner, and lurks in the corners trying to spy on Ram on behalf of his master Sugreeva who wishes to harness Ram's superior prowess to make things right in the Kishkindhan kingdom by disposing his tyrannical brother Vali. Needless to say, Ram knows of his presence right from the beginning and in his very first meeting with the exiled prince, Hanuman is completely won over by him. With the progress of the text, Hanuman easily and eagerly slides into the *Bhakti* mode. His faith in Ram becomes the mainstay of his character, and chanting Ram's name is what enables him to unlock his super powers and achieve great feats.

His outstanding feature in the series is not his *Shakti* (prowess) but his *Bhakti* (devotion) towards Ram. His obsequious nature is highlighted in each of his actions not only throughout the war against Ravana but also later in his decision to leave the *vanar* community and stay on in Ayodhya in service of Ram. Once in Ayodhya, he expresses an ardent wish to be schooled in Aryan ways, Aryan culture and mannerisms. We see Ram correcting his language and the palace guards giving him lessons in proper conduct as he makes his way in the court of Ayodhya. Taking cue from the popular Tulsidas *Ramayana*, Banker restricts Hanuman's importance to his relationship with Ram although the popular culture easily attests to a much wider appeal for the character. Unlike Bharat, Sita and Laxman, Wolcott notes "Hanuman has a firmly fixed folkloric position, even apart from his role in the *Ramayana*" (Wolcott 655). His "birth, his magnificent leaps in the sky, his mighty feats, his enormous size, his ability to change his shape and assume any form at will" are the characteristics that endear him to the people at large, not his *Bhakti* towards Rama (Wolcott 657). Wolcott's work with Bhojpuri speaking communities and Lutgendorf's interviews and fieldwork conducted "in urban or semi-urban locations in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh...in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Karnataka" attest to the popularity of this hero independent of his master. In the folk imagination, Hanuman is much more than "the misty-eyed subaltern Rama devotee" ("Five Heads" 272).

As a part of his civilizing program, we are told that Hanuman tries to walk upright like mortals rather than clinging and leaping on all fours, tries to perfect his greeting style of folding his hands in *Namaskaram* and transforms into an "almost hairless" being by the end of the project. The characterization of the *vanars* in Banker's text seems to work towards cementing such associations. The *vanar* community is a far cry from the civilized Aryan nations. They are characterized as being highly superstitious and simpleminded. Though loyal, they certainly possess no leadership qualities whatsoever and would be lost without the control and command of Ram. Lakshman's constant exasperation at the utterance of their irrational beliefs, their chaotic manner of functioning, and his distrust in their fighting abilities highlights the unbridgeable gap between the two communities of mortals and *vanars*. Despite the great sacrifices made by them in the war against Ravana, the status of the numberless *vanars* as witnesses to Sita's *Agni-pariksha* is completely rubbished and discounted summarily by the Ayodhyan ministers when her purity is questioned again at the conclusion of the epic tale. Such a representation unfortunately lends itself easily to a euhemerist reading of the text representing Arya nations at the pinnacle of the ladder and their eventual civilizing of aboriginal peoples that the *vanars* then seem to stand in for.

## Conclusion

The formal story ends with prayers to Vishnu, Lakshmi and Hindmata. In the epilogue, Ram takes Samadhi in the river Sarayu to wake up as Lord Vishnu, who is reminded by Brahma that this was only his 7th avatar and there



are three more to go, suggesting that Buddha and Rishabhanatha, the founders of Buddhism and Jainism respectively, are also avatars of Vishnu, and thereby assimilating these once renegade religions into the umbrella of a larger Hindu identity. It is a quietly telling moment, and one that encapsulates the larger project of the series, the absorption of difference, the smoothing over of dissent, and the consolidation of a singular, Brahmanical Hindu identity out of a tradition that has always been plural, contested, and multivocal.

This is precisely the contradictory movement that this article has traced across Banker's *Ramayana Series*, how the series globalizes its form while conserving an orthodox idea of India. Finer details of the original Sanskrit text are surrendered by adding recognizably fantastic elements, but the cultural hegemony of the epic tale is reaffirmed in this adaptation and the dominant Brahmanical ideals can be readily gleaned from it. The caste system is naturalized as an efficient social order, gender roles are reaffirmed beneath a modernized surface, myth is mapped onto history and geography in ways that have real political consequences, and alternate Hindu traditions are quietly marginalized in favour of a classical Brahmanical worldview. In the final analysis, Banker's series lets go of the overt expression of Bhakti sentiment only to create what Lutgendorf calls a "youth friendly version of Arya triumphalism" ("(Too?)" 209). It upsets the pious version of the text by describing palace intrigues, rivalries amidst members of the royal household, sexual escapades of the kings and queens, and its use of explicit language and curse words that ought not to find any place in a sanitized religious text, but the underlying conservative values that the text is used to support are left unhampered at best and subtly encouraged at places. Stuart Hall states that hegemony has constantly to be "worked on," maintained, renewed and revised. Banker's *Ramayana Series* is one such attempt, it updates the narrative of the *Ramayana* to align itself with the tastes of the present generation while complicitly serving to maintain and strengthen the hegemonic Brahmanical discourse. That it does so in English, in the idiom of global fantasy, and for a readership that may have no other textual encounter with the epic, makes the stakes of that complicity considerably higher.

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