Chapter III

KATIKA AND THE CAMERA:
TRANSFORMATION OF THE SACRED INTO A NEW MEDIUM

Of all the communications media, television has the most far reaching and widespread impact on the audience. There is something special about media that transmits moving visual images. The moving visual images have a unique capacity to engage the emotions and imagination of the viewers. This new media has the increased capacity to penetrate social barriers and to bypass social bottlenecks.

It is likely that, of all the senses, the visual sense is the most consequential in the interaction of human beings with their environment. This is quite obvious by the enormous popularity and impact film and television have on the popular culture everywhere in the world. Visual images have an immediate effect on our perceptions. The immediacy of visual images in our perceptions of the world probably has much to do with the enormous popularity and impact on popular culture of film and television everywhere in the world. When moving images are combined with sound, the result is the closest approximation to actual experience of the real world. Even when the content conveyed is known to be fictional, the sense of verisimilitude is great. Film and technology can convey quite complex messages in a simple format, which would otherwise be inaccessible to non-reading audiences. These characteristics have important implications for the role of film and television in the propagation of religious symbols.

From the early days of Indian cinema, religious films were a part of India’s cinematographic culture. The financial pressures that force filmmakers to appeal to the full breadth of the Hindi film market encourages them to lure religious-minded
Indians with explicitly religious ‘mythological’ films and to intercalate subtle religious motifs into the crazy salad of popular ‘social’ films.

The religious themes introduced in ostensibly ‘social’ films tend to dawn on a repertoire of mythological images that have been proven to offend neither conservative Hindus nor government censors. Thus, filmmakers create a ‘film religious culture’ that develops around a standardized repertoire of mythological images presented as merely part of the ‘mix’ of rousing fights, dances, slapstick humor, nationalist sentiment, and family dynamics that make up secular Hindi films.

The serial’s success came after the genre of mythological films, which used to dominate the Hindi film industry’s output. It is arguable that the first genre of films to be made in India, beginning with Dadasaheb Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1914), *Shri Krishna Janam* and *Lanka Dahan* (1919), were all contributing to an indigenous national culture, wherein ordinary people would be able to draw inspiration from their own epic traditions. Vijya Bhatt’s *Ram Rajya* (1943) and Babubhai Mistry’s *Sampoorna Ramayana* (1961) were the films that followed; around this time, the story was told in a more devotional vein.

Market pressures lead filmmakers to produce this mixed bag of ‘something for everyone’, presenting religious themes not as the centre of attention but in context of diverse secular themes. In the late 1980s, more innovative programming began, including the immensely popular productions of the major epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Babb and Wadley in the Introduction to their book *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* discussing the impact communication technology has on religion write:

It is possible to say that if one takes an extremely inclusive view of what a religious tradition is, a view that includes its total range of manifestations in belief, patterned behavior, written records, ceremonial performances, iconography, traces in human memory and so forth, then one can visualize any particular religious tradition as a sort of ‘system’ that retains and transmits information. The information is encoded in the form of symbols that can be propagated in various media: speech, writing, ritual gesture, iconography, and others. Thus
conceived a religious tradition can be regarded as a reservoir that retains such information, which is deposited in human memory, books, durable artifacts, carved images, and so on. But a tradition actually lives only insofar as it informs the thoughts, feelings and conduct of persons belonging to a community of some kind, which is simply to say that its content must be socially transmitted as well as retained. This aspect of a religious tradition is its most visible surface. At one level, a tradition’s transmission of its content is diffuse and pervasive; it occurs constantly in the talking, acting, and reacting of persons in ordinary social life. The most focused transmission, however, occurs mainly in what have been called ‘cultural performances’: the rituals, discourses, tellings of myths, recitation of texts, and the like that we normally consider manifestations of ‘religion’. In such performances the channels through which information is conveyed are various. Verbalizations are often basic, as are the visible symbolizations of ritual and iconography. But the scent of the incense can also carry a message, as can the taste of a food offering retrieved from the altar and consumed by the devotees. Utilizing this general perspective, one can construct a model of a religious tradition’s career in flow of time based on the notion of information transmission. Often borne by the verbalizations and other performances of religious specialists, symbols are propagated. Members of such audiences, however, are performers themselves; indeed, everyone in the system is both performer and audience depending on the context (1-2).

The term new communications media also represents new techniques for the transmission of symbols; these symbols bear information. These are techniques that in one way or another enhance the capacity of symbols to be projected from one place to another. This is precisely what the new media has done. In various ways and by different means they have greatly increased what might be called the mobility of religious symbols in south Asia. If a religious tradition can be viewed, as a system that retains and transmits information, then we can say that the principal effect of new communications media has been to attenuate the barriers that inhibit the projection of
symbols and to dilate the channels through which symbols turns out to be a more subtle matter than one might suppose.

Along with their ability to increase the mobility of religious symbols another factor of great importance is the extent to which the mechanical or electronic exigencies peculiar to a given medium may affect the content transmitted and the way that content is perceived by the audience. A televised performance of a religious drama may well adhere to traditional performance conventions to an impressive degree, but it will inevitably abstract the performance from the social and the ritual contexts that, in traditional settings, invest the experience with its full range of meaning to audience.

Ramanand Sagar was aware of the power of the new means of communication, the television. He was aware that films can be read as a language, the corollaries of “signs” or “codes” of cinema were not new to him. The physiology of perception, dual meaning of cinema (images) as that of language, and the culture specific or culture altered viewing were at work in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayana. The cinematic codes provided a new dimension to the religious story or the ‘ram-katha.’

On January 25, 1987, Ramayana was premiered on the Doordarshan, India’s government run television network. It was for the first time that the medium of television was to be used to present a serialized adaptation of one of the great cultural and religious epics of India. The chosen work was the Ramayana – the story first narrated in Sanskrit some two millennium ago by the poet Valmiki. The television adaptation, produced and directed by Bombay filmmaker Ramanand Sagar was originally slated to run for fifty two episodes of forty five minutes each, but had to be extended because of popular demand, and eventually grew into a main story of seventy eight episodes, followed after an interval of several months by a sequel incorporating the events detailed in the seventh book (the Uttarakand, or the epilogue) of the Sanskrit epic. Long before the airing of the main story concluded on July 31, 1988, Sagar’s Ramayana had become the most popular program ever shown on Indian television, and something more: a phenomenon of such proportions that intellectuals and policy makers struggled to come to terms with its significance. Observers wondered, how had this serial been almost universally dismissed by critics as a technically flawed melodrama.
Sagar had shrewdly perceived that the bulk of his audience, accustomed to the modest stage craft of nautanki and ramlila would be adequately dazzled by cheaper effects. The poor quality of special effects was another fixation of critics. The urban Indian viewers found the pulsating, garishly tinted ‘divine weapons’ and the hovering demons of the television serial laughable. Though some scenes – such as the burning of Lanka, were admirably executed, there were still others like the war scenes which put an ordinary viewer to sleep.

The Burning Lanka, Hanuman can be spotted in the picture
(Ramanand Sagar Ramayun)

In Lutgendorf’s words:

The iconography of the serial combined Ramlila conventions with the visual vocabulary of the mass produced religious art. For the consecrated boys of Ramlila, Ramanand Sagar substituted adult actors and actresses to reinforce popular conceptions of each character’s appearance. In casting his principals, the producer aimed for ‘exactly the same Ram, and Sita, which is in the hearts and minds and perhaps in the souls of millions of people’ – and, one might add, on the walls of tea shops and the pages of comic books. That he was extraordinarily successful is attested to by numerous posters and calendars featuring garishly colored stills from the serial or costumed close ups of Arun Govil with his now famous enigmatic smile (“Raghu Family” 229).
Sagar must have also realized that special effects were not crucial in maintaining the viewers’ interest in the saga; instead, it was the religiosity, the faith attached to the serial. People watched the serial as the darsan of the lord. The emphasis in the Ramayana was squarely on “seeing” its characters. Not “seeing” in the quick-cut, distracted fashion, in which modern western audiences take in their heroes and heroines, but drinking in and entering into visual communion with epic characters. That generous smile Arun Govil became famous for was seen as similar to the darsan of the almighty. People glued to their television sets to watch their Ram; the Ram (image) established in their minds and hearts.

Ramanand Sagar’s Modus Operandi

When a written epic is transformed to a new medium (the celluloid or the television screen) it passes through many mutations. These changes introduced are sometimes the requisite of the medium itself. These changes may give a new dimension to the earlier existing view or simplify the existing complex phenomena. In this journey of transformation from the word format to the codes of cinema the epic Ramayana witnessed a similar fate and faced many changes at the hands of the medium. A few of these changes gave new facets to the existing Ramayana while there were others which limited its scope. All kinds of changes which this epic underwent on behalf of the medium shall be discussed in detail in this chapter. The aids of the television like music, imagery, camera, costume, characters etc. all helped in making this serial a legendary epic.

Heightened Visual Imagery

The incorporation of heightened visual imagery reinforced the impact and resulted in a hypnotized audience. Ramanand Sagar knew the power of imagery. He was aware that an image has two conjoined meanings, an optical pattern and the meaning invested by it as a mental experience. He provided the viewers with almost the pertinent imagery, fed their imagination to the degree where nothing haunted their creative energies. The very first episode used a combination of imagery and music to establish the purportedly pan Indian character of the Ramayana. Early in its prologue, we find saints and poets from all over India writing and singing passages from
regional tellings of the Ramayana. In all instances, images of the poets and saints are superimposed on still photographs of temples. In the first instance, we see Tulsidas sitting on the banks of the Ganges, writing the Ramcharitmanas. His image is accompanied by a voice-over singing passages from that work.

A couple of frames later, we see an image of Valmiki while a passage from the Valmiki Ramayana is sung in the background. Here we can see a sage sitting in a secluded place in the mountains alongside a temple. It is portrayed as if the great sage Valmiki is writing the Sanskrit Ramayana, while a passage from the Valmiki Ramayana is sung in the background. The effect of the entire scene is overwhelming, (the ‘dhoop’ (incense sticks) spreading its incense should not be ignored) it gives an intricately sacred feel to the entire episode. The kinds of tactics employed by Ramanand Sagar are simple but effective.

The next few frames aim to establish the pan Indian character of the epic. First, we see a poet singing in Telugu, (implying that this is poet Ranganath who wrote the Ranganath Ramayana). The camera zooms in on his hands as he writes,
then pans back to show him against the backdrop of a south Indian temple. The next few frames depict Krutivas, Kamban and Eknath who wrote in Bengali, Tamil and Marathi respectively, and use identical techniques of song and image. Ramanand Sagar has very smartly crafted the scene, exploiting the finer shades of cinematic techniques pretty well. The camera sometimes zooms on the face of the saints and sometimes on the hand which writes. In addition, the temples selected in the background differ in architecture hinting at the difference in geographical areas.

In this manner, the combination of audio and visual techniques (the songs, the camera movements and the image of the temple in the background) posit the authenticity of Ramanand Sagar’s claims that the television Ramayana drew on regional tellings and tradition.
Computer Simulated Graphics

The computer simulated graphics used by Ramanand Sagar in the serial increased the mesmerizing impact of the serial on the audience. In some episodes, we have scenes that are beyond our imaginative powers. Ramanand Sagar (in the Ramayan) has sagaciously exploited the potential of the camera to establish an impact of the supernatural, divine and something much distinguished from the world of the mortals.

For instance, this can be observed in the episode when Hanuman tries to enter the Lanka bearing a miniature form. Hanuman was blessed with special powers; he could change his form, attain an enlarged form at will and could also become as minute as an insect crawling on the ground. The manner and the style in which the director (Ramanand Sagar) has presented Hanuman’s paranormal command over his size and shape is worth an applause. In the given frame he is trying to enter the Lanka; attaining a miniature body form in contrast to his true giantsly body form. The episode has been aptly presented, Hanuman’s insect-like, undersized form has been contrasted to a demoness’ foot. Even the foot looks quite big as compared to Hanuman’s form.

In another scene we can observe a demoness stopping Hanuman from crossing the sea and going to Lanka. The demoness’ giant visage and Hanuman’s small bird like (flying) stature makes for another computer simulated graphic worthy of appreciation.
Another scene where computer simulated graphics go beyond the limits of our imagination is the scene presenting Ram’s battle with Taaraka. We learn of Taarka’s supernatural powers easily by the manner in which she is depicted. She occupies the entire scene, the camera zooms on to her visage. Ram and Vishvamitra appear like ants in comparison to Taaraka.

She first exhales smoke which envelops them both. Next, we are given a close up of Ram’s face, his expression is calm and self confident. Then we get a medium shot that shows him taking aim at Taarka, who has lifted a huge boulder to throw at him. In the following frame we see Taaraka uprooting a tree and hurling it towards Ram and Vishvamitra. Again, Ram’s arrow meets the tree in mid air and destroys it. Vishvamitra then commands Ram to kill Taaraka. This frame is followed by a medium long shot of Ram as he takes aim, closes his eyes in prayer, and shoots an arrow toward Taaraka. This arrow has even greater supernatural powers than the previous ones; it proliferates into several small arrows pierces Taraka’s stomach and kills her. All the above given pictures and their presentations are perfect examples of Computer Simulated Graphics resulting into a hypnotized audience.

Below are presented to more pictures which reinforce the effect of computer simulated graphics on the televised version of the Ramayana. In the first one we can see Hanuman carrying the brothers, Ram and Lakshman on his shoulders, whereas in the second we find both Ram-Lakshman along with Sita, Sugriva, Vibhishan, Jambvan and others riding the ‘pushpak vimaan’.
Focus on the Divinity and Grace of Ramji’s form:

In the serial there is a special focus on the divine grace of Ramji’s form which induced bhakti and devotion in the audience. There are many scenes in the serial which accompanied by music focus on the divinity of the lord. In the beginning of every episode we find a frame in which Ram-Sita dressed and bejeweled, are sitting on the throne with Hanuman bowing at their feet and Lakshman standing by their side. To heighten the imagery we find Brahma and other Gods showering flowers. For instance, the prologue to episode 4 consists of a four minute hymn. Ram has just completed his education. This scene introduces him to us as an adult. However, he is no mere adult; he is godhead in human form, an incarnation of Vishnu, an embodiment of virtue. A frame by frame examination of this prologue reveals that its explicit purpose is to induce Ram bhakti or devotion. The first frame consists of a long shot of Ram as he appears among the clouds: the camera takes in his dazzling gold crown and his bow and arrows. Next, the camera zooms in to give us a close-up of Ram: his expression, which combines serenity, self-confidence, masculinity, and dignity and grace. As the camera pans back to portray him in his entirety, it seems to take its cue from the hymn
in the background and reverentially caresses his form, his bow and arrows, his “mighty arms,” and his “bejeweled limbs, splendid in proportion.” The following frame portrays Lord Brahma in the sky floating toward Ram; other gods, all of whom praise Ram, accompany Brahma. The scene then shifts to lord Shiva smiling benevolently down on this scene of adulation from the skies. The camera then zooms in to give us a close-up of Ram and the expression on his face. Then, as the hymn reaches a crescendo, the camera movements pick up speed and zoom between Ram’s face and his entire form. With his eyes half-closed, a hand rose in benediction and a faint smile playing around his lips, Ram was often shown in the peaceful form (shaant mudra) in which gods are portrayed in popular iconography.

Even if I recall those Ramayan days and my fascination with the television serial as a 6 year old child I still remember the astonishment, the astounded sensation left by every episode. The amazement remains till date, though the reasons differ. What surprises me today is the familiarity with these television characters felt by the general public. The depiction of Ram, Sita and Lakshman seemed so familiar in those days and so do they even today. Being kids they were received as real gods by us (at least me and my friends). The familiarity had plausibly been shaped in my childhood by the voracious consumption of Amar Chitra Katha, whose brightly coloured illustrations had brought many Hindu gods to life for so many Indian children. The calendar art (God Posters) is the other means which played a great part in Ramanand Sagar’s depiction of Ram and Sita. It was through these God calendars which made Ram and Sita (Sagar’s) look very conventional and traditional.

**Incorporation of Music**

Music played a very important role in the Ramayan’s ability to create specific structures of feeling and modes of viewing. Many episodes had prologues consisting of a bhajan or a devotional hymn, whose purpose was to produce a devotional bhaav or a structure of feeling, in viewers. If we try to examine the first episode of Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan in the very first scene we find a sage sitting at a secluded place in the mountains along side a temple; portraying sage Valmiki writing the Sanskrit Ramayana. A very melodiuous sound just like the bell in a temple is rung at every pause which the sage takes while he sings a hymn from the story of Ram. The
same pattern is repeated for all the other saints (Tulsidas, Krutibas, Eknath, Kamban, Ranganathan etc.). Their images are also accompanied by a voice-over singing passages from their own works. The song aims both to establish the serial’s authenticity and to invoke the religiosity of the viewers. In some folk plays and Hindi films, background music was deployed to induce a particular mood or to emphasize a character’s emotional state. Ramanand Sagar adopted the same pattern to stress on some of the emotional scenes in his Ramayana. For instance Dashrath’s grief at Ram’s exile, Sita’s fear when she is abducted by Ravan, or Ravan’s rage when he hears of Shurpanakha’s mutilation by Lakshman. A mournful chorus sings of Kaikeyi’s pain as the queen collapses into the palanquin and is brought back to the city. The incorporation of music played an integral part in the anchorage of the serial.

In another scene when Vishwamitra brings Ram and Lakshman with him to the forest, to kill the demoness Taaraka, and once the target has been achieved Vishwamitra rewards Ram with special weapons. These are the weapons which he has obtained after years of prayer and austerities. In the scene, Vishwamitra and Ram are seated facing each other, seen in silhouette, with a dim, mysterious light illuminating them from behind. The sound of drums beating and other martial music can be heard while Vishwamitra gifts a trident to Ram. These are a few examples of background music in perfect harmony with visual imagery being used by Ramanand Sagar. Many more such incidents can be extracted from the serial and are worth a mention.

In television serials because of the segmented and repetitive nature of the story, the same music returns in every episode, and in every opening sequence, thus constantly emphasizing the way a particular event or character should be understood. Music, therefore, also offers an on-going commentary and a connection between parts of the narrative.

Each ‘Bhaav’ of the Classical Aesthetic Theory is conveyed visually

Very meticulously, the director cum producer Ramanand Sagar has tried to convey every ‘bhaav’, the mental state of each character. The camera focuses on the facial expressions of all the characters to intensify the effect of the visuals. The televised Ramayana tries to record the nuance of every emotion of the principal character’s; grief, surprise, anger, calm. Every effort was made to capture a
character’s facial expressions, his mood for a particular scene or a particular *bhaav*. “The producer aimed at a definitive portrayal of every character’s emotional state and this was conveyed especially through close-ups, and in moments of intense emotion, repeated zoom shots. This was also an advantage of the camera; since it helped the producer to reinforce the *bhaav*” (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 230). Sagar exploiting the full potential of the medium tried to present every character’s facial expressions. The projection and emphasis laid on every character’s facial expression led critics to the conclusion that, “...for a large amount of time the TV screen is occupied by large heads, either verbalizing or silently miming their responses to events... The television screen is particularly suited to this kind of close-up mime...” (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 230). The nuances of emotion of each character, every ‘*bhaav*’ of the classical aesthetic theory – was conveyed visually, and in scenes involving many characters, the camera focused in turn on the face of each principal character to record his or her response to every new advancement.

Commenting on the style of presentation and the emphasis laid on the visual by Ramanand Sagar, Rajagopal writes:

> It is so well known that Sagar can afford to bypass all dialogue. The characters simply mime their responses, and the chorus singing provides the audio background. Dialogue may be superfluous, but facial expression is everything: it is the central selling point of Sagar’s production. Even unnamed secondary characters are not passed over. Every incremental progression of the plot, pleasure, surprise, disbelief,
or shock of each person is serially recorded; several movements have as many as thirteen reaction shots, of which five could be of one person alone. One critic described it as “reaction mania.” The seamless editing technique of Hollywood soap operas is adopted, master shot followed by shot-reverse, shot sequences and alternating close-ups. This leads to the viewer unobtrusively occupying a privileged vantage point, from which “everything” about the characters can be known (116-17).

On closely examining the details of Shabari story as presented by Ramanand Sagar in Episode 34 of the serial one can say that the usage of close-ups can change the narrative account of the story. Below I provided excerpts from the script used in the episode along with the changing visual description and other devices used by the director.

**Shabari:** Who are you?

**Ram:** We want to go to mata Shabari’s ashram. Could you take us there?

**Shabari** (filled with emotion): To mata Shabari. But who are you?

**Ram:** I am Ram and this is my brother Lakshman?

A sitar begins to play. Camera cuts to Shabari, zooms into a close up.

Close up .... Ram with his mystifying smile.

Close up..... Shabari, in an extreme close up position.

Close up..... Ram, generously smiling at her.

Close up..... Lakshman.

Close up..... Shabari, in an extreme close up.

Close up..... Smiling Ram.

Close up..... Shabari.

Close up..... Ram.

Hence, the sequence continues and brings out how the technique of close up has been employed by Sagar in this serial.

Close up.....Shabari, zoom....

**Shabari:** You have come my lord! You have come to Shabari’s hut! I did not
recognize you. Forgive me.

Close up..... Ram, smiling again at Shabari.

Close up..... Ram’s feet. Shabari’s head above it. Tear drops fall on his feet.

**Shabari:** Today my hut has become pure. My lord you must be hungry?

**Ram:** Yes.

**Shabari:** I’ll get fruits. I’ll get fruits. Everyday I bring sweet berries for you from the Forest, my lord.

(she brings a tray of fruit and places it before Ram and Lakshman)

Close up..... of the fruits, which have been bitten. Shabari (the tribal woman) wanted to ensure that the fruits were sweet and therefore tasted all the fruits and selected the sweet ones.

Close up..... Ram.

Close up..... Shabari.

(the sequence of close-ups continues)

**Shabari:** Please eat my lord. They are very sweet. I have tasted them.

Close up..... Ram, once again smiling at Shabari.

Close up..... Tray.

(Ram picks up a fruit and slowly starts eating)

**Shabari:** Eat my lord. Take one more, take one more.

Close up..... Lakshman, who wrinkles his face, on seeing the bitten fruits which are offered by Shabari.

The above dialogic (visual/ the close up) account of the Shabari episode details the reader with the amount of close-ups invested in the serial by Ramanand Sagar. The copious use of close-ups, extreme close-ups and further zooming in would have been redundant in the linear account of the story. But Sagar is using the small screen to advantage, to suggest the visual capture of emotions by deep and prolonged close ups, allowing viewers to have a glimpse of their own feelings onto the characters and also emphasizing upon the emotions of every character.
**Slow Camera Movements**

The camera movements are very slow in some of the scenes and this has been a special attraction of the serial. In the major part of the narrative, the movement of the camera remains extremely slow, which according to critics butchered the art and aesthetics of the serial. However, probably this visual aesthetic was derived from the indigenous theatre. Scenes were long and the movement of the camera was slow. It zoomed either on Ram’s or on one of the other principal character’s face. This must have been suitable to the Indian audience, wherein for most of the viewers Ramayan was a feast of ‘darsan’. People would sit glued to their television sets even if Ram’s portrait was shown on the television for more than 2-3 minutes; for them this was lord Ram in human form in front of them. It is quite astonishing that some of the viewers would sit in front of the television screen with folded hands, as if sitting in prayer. Hence, it was only the art critics who did not approve of this practice, for the common people it was the ‘darsan’, darsan of the lord. “Arun Govil would forever be remembered for his celluloid smile. Can any one of us forget that ‘divine smile’ which would fill the screen for a good 20 minutes out of the 45 minutes of each episode” (Balancing life: The soap epic, para 9).

Viewer perceptions of the pace and duration of the *Ramayan* varied greatly, while reviewers in the English language press complained about the agonizingly slow advance of the narrative such criticism was less common in Hindi publications, and many viewers protested that the epic was ending too quickly. Perceptible beneath the various responses were varying conceptions of the *Ramayana* itself. The English-language critics repeatedly referred to it as a ‘literary treasure’ which Sagar was butchering by dragging it out to enhance his own and the network’s profits. For an audience accustomed to such handy condensations, the pace of the serial was irksome indeed. Yet there exist other performance genres in which revered scriptures like Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas* are treated less as bounded texts than as outlines for imaginative elaboration, and if a storyteller’s patrons and audience are willing (as Sagar’s were), such performances can be extended almost indefinitely. Indeed, the television version’s rambling main narrative, weighing in at just under sixty hours, is far from being the longest popular serialization. The *ramila* of Ramnagar, which tells roughly the same story, averages three hours per night for thirty-one nights, and has been playing to enraptured audiences for a century and a half. And an oral expounder
like Ramnarayan Shukla, who proceeds through the epic in daily installments at the Sankat Mochan temple in Banaras, may take more than seven hundred hours (i.e., two years or more) to complete a single “telling” - a feat that makes Sagar’s effort seem like a condensation. Along with the slow camera movements the production’s tendency to periodically halt the flow of its narrative to focus on stylized, poster like tableaux, accompanied by devotional singing is also noteworthy. By using this stylized methodology a striking visual imagery is created which has been a part of the popular art since ages and is accentuated.

Omnipresent Eye of the Camera

Here I shall attempt to analyze, how through the medium of television the perception in our mind changes and how through the tool of imagery, the character’s character gets transformed. The point dwells on analyzing the impact of television (imagery) on the character’s character and the impact of the medium on the viewer’s mind. It deals with, how mutations occur even in our preconceived notions, thoughts and views through the communication channel. This can be best exemplified in the portrayal of Kaikeyi’s character in Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan.

The depiction of Kaikeyi presented Ramanand Sagar with a challenge to make the audience believe in her transformation from a loving mother (for Ram) to a cruel enemy, and then reintegrate her into the hearts of the viewers. Ramanand Sagar accepted the challenge and made an effort to redeem Kaikeyi through his presentation on screen and was quite successful in achieving his target.

This has been possible only through the eye of the camera which takes the liberty of being the invisible omnipresent narrator. In the serialized form of the story, when Bharat learns of the King’s demise and is back to Ayodhya he renounces his bond to Kaikeyi and leaves her chamber vowing never to set foot there again. As expected the story should move and the camera should be following Bharat but the camera lingers on in the Queen’s chamber, showing her weeping in the deserted room. Another innovation is used by Ramanand Sagar as Bharat plans a journey to the forest in search of Ram. As he strolls across one of the corridors of the palace he encounters a guilt ridded Kaikeyi, and he coldly addresses her as “Queen Kaikeyi”. Kaikeyi begs to be allowed to accompany him to the forest, to ask Ram’s forgiveness for her sins. When he coldly refuses, she weeps piteously and then Kaushalya touched
by Kaikeyi’s desperation pities her, the one who sent her son on a fourteen year exile to the forest. Kaushalya orders Bharat to concede, Bharat obeys his mother’s orders. The director further strengthens Kaikeyi’s piteous, guilty persona; on the way to Chitrakut, the townspeople are shown debating the issue of Kaikeyi’s guilt. The last speaker expresses deep sympathy for her, “How she must be repenting now, poor thing!”

Another scene which further develops and deepens our sympathy for Queen Kaikeyi is when she pays a visit to her son’s ascetic ashram on the outskirts of the city. Bharat addresses her as ‘Queen Kaikeyi,’ when pleaded by Kaikeyi to call her ‘Mother’, he replies ‘Queen Kaikeyi killed my mother’. By this time in the serial the viewers’ sympathies are likely to be with the Queen. She begs to be allowed to stay with him and do penance for her sins. Bharat sternly orders her to return. A mournful chorus sings of Kaikeyi’s pain as the queen collapses into the palanquin and is borne back to the city, where the camera follows her as she wanders through the empty corridors of the palace, alternatively laughing and weeping.

Ramanand Sagar’s portrayal of Bharat’s rigid and guilt ridden personality, his prolonged treatment of Kaikeyi’s redemption through suffering satisfies popular longing to salvage Daahirath’s youngest queen. The viewer’s curiosity about the domestic aftermath of the banishment is more than satiated, and he is left with a feeling of intimate knowledge of the royal family. Female viewers are presented with a story in which women are more pervasively present and forcefully active than in
most written versions. More than ever, this ultimate soap opera emerges as a family saga, in which the members of the sundered royal clan are shown as united in their emotions even though physically apart. Thus it will come as no surprise, in Episode 28 (when the princes and Sita are deep in the Dandak forest) to find the camera whisking us back to Ayodhya to focus on the loneliness of Lakshman’s wife, Urmila and later, to show us Kaushalya standing at the palace window, visibly graying as she endures her long vigil of awaiting Ram’s return. These scenes reflect Ramanand Sagar’s exploitation of a narrative convention common in modern prose literature, which developed to its logical conclusion with the advent of film. The oral storyteller generally unfolds his narrative by focusing listeners’ attention on a single location and withdrawing to a narrative frame in order to announce the transition of another scene, as when Tusli informs us, “I’ve told of Ram’s lovely journey to the forest; now hear how Sumantra came back to Ayodhya”. Such shifts are usually kept to a minimum, and it is almost as if the story teller (and with him the audience) must physically accompany some character. There are many examples of such a narrative style in the serial - Sumantra on his return to Ayodhya, Bharat on his journey to Chitrakut, Hanuman on his quest for Sita – in order to move about within the geography of the tale (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 236).

The camera’s portrayal of the Queen’s remorse, her being rejected by the family and further her gradual integration into the family is commendable. Through the techniques of television: the close up technique, the emphasis on the facial expressions of the character and the camera acting like an invisible, omnipresent narrator the director has been able to present a redeemed Kaikeyi in front of his audience.

Another example of the same is the story of Shabari as presented by Sagar (episode 34). The story of Shabari was a short episode in the Forest Book of Valmiki Ramayana, but, gained popularity in the folk retellings. Tulsidas in his Ramcharitmanas presented a different version to the story and Sagar provided a lengthy, embellished version of Tulsi’s story in the serial.

Shabari is strewing flowers on the path leading to her hut, three sadhus are passing by. The youngest of them says:
The young sadhu: you mad woman! How many years will you spend like this, waiting for your Ram? Has your Ram come yet?

Shabari: No, but he’ll definitely come.

The sadhu laughs.

Shabari: My guru-dev Matanga’s words cannot be wrong. So every day, every moment I prepare for his visit... please donot step on these flowers...

(The sadhus walk on along another path.)

The young sadhu: "sometimes it seems to me that the old woman is mad."

The oldest replies: “It’s possible. But don’t forget that bhakti and madness are not so different. If you look at it in a worldly perspective, the bhakt is just like a mad person.”

Cut to Shabari, who continues to strew flowers and call out Ram’s name (Rajagopal 110).

In the presentation of this episode the camera takes us along with the sadhus, as they take another path and discuss Shabari. Then, suddenly the camera gets back to Shabari... ‘cut to Shabari’.

Television provides ultimate license and liberty to the camera which acts as an invisible omnipresent narrator. The quick cuts, the close-ups, different shades of the same aspect as produced in the television version can not be produced in the written text by any means. Camera’s eye anticipates and indulges in our every curiosity; right from the symbolic display of two flowers coming closer when Ram and Sita see each other for the first time to the conversation held by them on their wedding night, the audience’s every desire has been fulfilled. The camera even gives us an insight into Ram’s intuition about Ayodhya and his father Dashratha while in exile and the thoughts that flash through Dashratha’s mind as he lays dying. Through the camera’s advantage the director has even been able to show us Urmila’s grief, Mandavi’s reaction to Bharata’s self imposed exile and many more. Hence, the camera tries to
provide a multidimensional view, satisfies all the doubts, curiosities of its viewers, presents the unsaid and undone acts in all its totality.

**Choreographed Dance Versions: Glimpses of the Theatre**

Classical dance in India originated in the temples of our country. All classical dances are embedded in the mythology and religion of India; the roots of these dances are embedded deep in the very foundation of the Indian temples. These dances were performed in the temple courtyards in front of the main deity and the devotees considered it as a form of worship.

Most of the classical dances in the earlier days were performed by the dancer, usually a female who would dedicate herself to the chief deity of the temple. She would sing and dance in the temple hall to appease the God. Traditionally, in ancient India, these dancers were known as *devadasis*, literally meaning servants of God. Under feudalism, this tradition got distorted and the term *devadasi* came to be associated with royal courtesans who appeased the indulgent kings, landed aristocracy, and ministers of the royal courts, and became a symbol of the evil effects of affluence. The same tradition is sustained in the *Ramayan* serial as well, we find dancers dancing in the court of Ravan. The costume of the dancers shown by Ramanand Sagar is made of silk, and draped in such a way that it opens out into a fan. This is almost similar to the *bharatnatyam* costume, when the artists is in the aramandi posture. It is accompanied by special jewellery; the hair is decorated by flowers and jewellery. We also find a ‘*kamarbandh*’ at the waist and the forehead is adorned with a stylized ‘*tilak*’.
Above can be seen pictures extracted from the serialized *Ramayan* in contrast to the photographs of a classical dancer during a *bharatnatyam* performance. In the first and the second picture we can find analogies with the pictures taken from Sagar *Ramayan* as given above. In one of the pictures, the trained dancer shows one of the *mudras* to a spectator. In the serial, we find several episodes where the girls sing and dance in the court, in the honour of the lord (king). This practice is quite in keeping with the tradition of the *Ramlilas* where, often these dance sequences were staged in order to keep the public's interest alive. In the *ramlilas* these dance sequences occupied an important place because they kept the audience busy, during the time required by the performers to prepare the sets and change their costume. However, these dance sequences appearing in the middle of the television show are not rightly justified.

**Alluring Costume Display**

*Ramayan* - the serial is essentially the televised version of a poet’s creation. The serial borrowed extensively from all known and popular sources of information. The information thus gained is bordering on legendary knowledge and appealing the general masses of the Indian subcontinent with little or no consideration for the technological status of the period in question. The opulent lifestyle of the princes, kings, and other principal characters of the story is brought forth in its televised *avtar* by use of costumes, jewellery and an extravagant ambience. The costumes play the
most important part of this make believe “land of plenty.” The kings and queens are shown bedecked with heavy jewellery of gold ad pearls. The head gears are a work of great artisanship in gold with intricate carvings and designs. The apparel worn throughout the serial has a feel and look like silk. The colours chosen are in consonance with the legend of the hero and other characters. Ram for instance is shown in yellow signifying his godliness with an enforced reference to Vishnu being called ‘pitambar’. Evidently much research does not seem to have been conducted in the costumes if one were to watch period cinema from Bollywood made in the black and white era or from Bollywood (Madras) then the similarities of costume would become evidently and abundantly clear. Below are given a few pictures from the cinema of the black and white era. In the pictures given below we can find Ram and Sita as dressed in the early 1900s.

Below can be seen a few more pictures of the costumes used by the heroes of mythological films produced prior to the Ramayan by Ramanand Sagar. The first picture shows the Queen (Kaikeyi), Sita and other mythological heroines in their costumes. The second picture depicts the palace of ‘Raja Janak’ and the king himself with his queen.
The basic pattern for the costumes used by Sagar seems to be inspired from these Mythological movies produced much before the serial’s telecast. As far as Ramanand Sagar’s costumes are concerned the fundamental underlying reason appears to be pure logistics and economics. The makers simply acquired the shelf from “Magan Bhai Dress Wala” with perhaps some considerations for the changing trends and times. Thanks to ‘Magan Bhai’ the dresses fitted nicely into the public perception unlike the case of critically acclaimed “Chanakya” wherein the makers placed more emphasis on the historical facts and the result was that the public had a tough time accepting the characters. The dresses in Ramayana cue, in mythologicals the characters are richly adorned and hence manage to project their godliness and legendary character easily. The costumes follow the popular folklore to the hilt. In the male costumes: the hero is attired in a flowing silken dhoti, and an angavastram and is bedecked with jewels and pearls in perfect consonance with numerous posters found in almost every Indian household. The makers of the serial sought to build the godliness of the hero by retaining his popular image. The whigs used are also the ones used in the regular ramlilas around the subcontinent. It is pertinent to mention here that the serial makers correctly decided upon depicting the hero and the other characters as typical Aryans or north Indians. Thus we find the hero attired in a dress that is closest to the one actually used by brahmans and the upper caste kshatriyas in “gangetic plains” on the major “Hindu belt”.

Pictures from Ram-Bharat Milap
Costumes used by Ramanand Sagar have been a matter of controversy for quite a long period of time. There is something special about Ramanand Sagar’s costumes in the serial; it seems as if the costumes used by him in the serial would any day be a substitute to the latest fashion show’s collection. Sagar is reported to have mentioned that although “during that period women did not cover their torsos… it was impossible for him to allow that on the screen since the image of Sita as a pure, chaste and ideal wife was so strong and important that showing her without a blouse would violate the moral message of the serial” (qtd. Mankekar 212). Ramanand Sagar did show Sita with a blouse but, the blouse used by him competes with any of the present day’s fashion collection with the entire back being naked. It seems as if instead of the blouse, a cloth is tied with a knot at the back which is easily visible through the dupatta.

If we pay attention to the costumes used in the serial, they are all made of silk. In an interview with Mark Tully Subhash Sagar said that, “there was a lot of gold around in those days, so we have to make everyone look very splendid” (qtd. Tully 135).

Another point of due consideration is, ‘where were Ramanand Sagar’s costumes borrowed from?’ If we compare the costumes used by Ramanand Sagar to the pictures shown in the comic magazine Amar Chitra Katha we find abundant similarities in both. There is every possibility that Ramanand Sagar borrowed his costume designs from Amar Chitra Katha; below can be seen two sets of pictures, the left ones are from Amar Chitra Katha and the right ones from the Ramayan (Ramanand Sagar’s). In the first picture we can see Kaikeyi, who is wearing almost similar hair accessories in pictures from both the presentations of the story (Amar Chitra Katha and Ramanand Sagar Ramayan). The second picture shows all the three queens (Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi) wearing a similar costume; a pleated dhoti, a sleeveless blouse and a dupatta covering the upper part of the body. In the below given pictures the armlets and the ‘tikka’ are prominently visible and found in both.
Though everything about Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan - the dresses, the choreography and the stagecraft has been praised throughout but still many objectionable issues can be brought to light if the serial is carefully studied.

Something very surprising about Ramanand Sagar’s costumes in the serial is that both Ram and Ravan are dressed in the same manner; however, Sagar claims the authenticity of the serial. Nevertheless, these costumes very validly question the realism of the serial. From a researcher’s point of view, the Aryans and the Dravidians could have never dressed in a similar manner. The costume design remains similar for both, in Sagar’s Ramayan. The males of both Ram’s and Ravan’s clan were seen wearing a dhoti and a long dupatta (the angavastram) folded and
placed in the arms, the upper torso being covered only by pearls and other necklaces. The jewellery and the style everything remains similar, just like Ram and Lakshman we find even the Rakshasas clean shaven. Ravana could have been shown in a different dress, as is done in a few regional theatres and dance dramas. For example the dance drama - ‘Ram’ being screened every autumn by Shree Ram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi shows Ravan dressed in the type of costume used by the rakshas in Yakshagana (folk drama). Whereas in Sagar’s serial except for that big moustache on the ten-headed demon’s visage, no other difference is found in the God (Ram) and the Devil (Ravan). Ravan belonged to the Dravidians, geographically the southern part of India whereas Ram, was an Aryan; how could both of them look similar.

Despite the fact that Ramanand Sagar tried to present his actors in the best of costumes, a trained eye would not miss the glimpses of the cheap material used by him even in the extravagantly dazzling atmosphere of his sets. He could not maintain high standards even when it comes to the portrayal of his principal characters Ram and Sita.

On the day of the coronation Ram was dressed in a yellow dhoti as told by the established authentic Ramayanas (Valmiki and Tulsidas’s) but in the serial even that colour has been compromised with. Ram’s dhoti instead of being ‘pitambari’ is a little creamish-yellow in tone, strings of pearls hung over his bare chest and on his head he wore a pointed gold crown. The crown looks like being made of ‘paper mache,’ splendidly glittering in the bright lights. Sita’s sari was pink with a silver border. Her head was covered with a matching long, pink dupatta, embroidered with silver.

On closely examining Sita’s costume, we can spot her wearing a very simple or in other terms, a plain dress. The dupatta which covers her head is a very simple dupatta, according to the traditional Indian costume standards, Sita’s dress did not suit the occasion at all. Some art critics might agree with me that on a day like Ram’s coronation, Sita being so simply dressed seems a little odd; the costume was inappropriate for the occasion.
Captivating Architectural Display

The director has used extravagantly flashy and richly adorned sets for his production. It is the result of his refined crafts that in Scene 1, where all the saints are shown reading the *Ramayana*, in order to bring out the difference in geographical areas - the temples screened in the background are carefully selected with architectures resembling their respective areas. This point is worth an appreciation; this is one amongst the many examples pointing at the special care taken by Ramanand Sagar while selecting the sets for the serial.

Amidst Sagar’s meticulously designed sets one can easily get glimpses of cheap materials being used. Though there’s none denying the overall spellbinding effect of the well designed sets but the low cost and low quality materials used can be easily spotted. On analyzing the sets used by Ramanand Sagar, especially the palaces of Ram and Ravan, we get an essence of his architectural craft. These pictures given below give us glimpses of the extravaganza of his sets. However, Ramanand Sagar has been accused of using cheap materials but he was able to create an impression on the simple Indian public.

Critics have cited that “Raja Janak’s palace looks like it’s been painted with cheap lurex paint and the clothes look like they’ve been dug out of some musty trunk in Chandni Chowk’s costume rental shops” (Lutgendorf “Raghu Family” 230). This evaluation is quite true if we look at some of the *arte facts* used by Ramanand Sagar in the serial. Ramanand Sagar tried to give a very extravagant, garish and kitschy look to his sets but the cheap materials used by him could be spotted and were critically
examined by a few viewers as well. Given ahead are the pictures of toys shown by Ramanand Sagar in the serial which are depicted to be gold/silver toys but they look like the low priced toys made out of plaster of paris and sold in the roadside pottery stalls.

![Golden horse (toy for lord Ram)](image1)
![Silver elephant (toy for lord Ram)](image2)

Though Ramanand Sagar has tried to depict his enhanced architectural skills, a point he leaves us to ponder upon is – how could Ram and Ravan’s palatial architecture be similar? On careful examination we find both Ram and Ravan have a similar palace architecture. One cannot really find any stark contrast between these palaces. There is no such demarcation which can differentiate the Aryans (Gods) and the Dravidians (rakshasas); and this forms another point which questions the authenticity of the serial.

**Sequential Climaxes**

Sagar’s narrative strategy of sequential climaxes that repeat the same point is the one used throughout the serial. The fire ordeal is an excellent example for the same. At first, Ram sternly orders Lakshman to prepare a fire, saying that Sita would have to be tested. Lakshman launches into a furious protest at this mis-treatment of a woman who sacrificed everything to accompany her husband. Ram lets him finish, and then reveals that he had actually entrusted Sita to the fire God, and now had to retrieve her. The mention of a test is thus proved to be misleading. There follows an extended flashback of the transaction. Then for a third time, when Sita arrives, and Ram sternly orders a fire to be prepared, we are led through the same elements, although with a different set of characters. The remarkably repetitive way in which the narrative progresses and the prodigious wealth of detail deserves a brief glimpse,
to appreciate an essential aspect of the serial’s importance, namely the technical mastery through which the facts have been conveyed to viewers (Rajagopal 114).

All these techniques like imagery music, technologically supported graphics, costumes, dances, camera movements – close ups, sequences etc. were used by Ramanand Sagar to heighten the effect of his narration of the Ramayana story. In many ways these techniques were successful in making Ramanand Sagar ‘a modern day Tulsidas’. Therefore, apart from the earlier discussed changes which the new world of communications technology brought to this epic there were other reasons which gave a new dimension to the existing Ramayana story. These were the decision of cast, dialogues and action.

**Decision of Cast**

As far as the choice and decision of the cast for the serial was concerned, special attention was paid on selecting all the actors for each character portrayal. Unknown and new faces were selected even for the major roles. Ramanand Sagar and his son Subhash Sagar, who was the in charge of production, in an interview with Mark Tully, said “We chose unknown actors because we wanted people to think of them as gods. We didn’t want people saying, that’s Amitabh Bachan, that’s Dharmendra, that’s Mandakani” (qtd. Tully 129).

Sagar assembled a cast that combined relatively unknown principal actors (such as Arun Govil as Ram, Sunil Lahri as Lakshman, and the twenty year old Dipika Chiklia as Sita) with veteran actors (former wrestler Dara Singh – the serial’s monkey hero Hanuman – had appeared in some two hundred action adventures). At the secluded hamlet of Umbergaon, on the Gujarat coast some three hours north of Bombay, Sagar laid out *Vrindavan Studios*, where the entire crew lived for two weeks each month for the duration of the project.

All the principal characters Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Ravan, Hanuman, and even the others gained heaps of popularity while the serial was being aired. People started regarding them as Gods. In public gatherings, they enjoyed undue attention and had to follow some traditional norms of social discipline.
I had asked Deepika, who plays Sita, how the public reacted to her. She replied, ‘People definitely treat us differently - not like other film artistes. They feel that anyone from *Ramayana* is someone from outside. They look on us as a God or Goddess. At functions, really grown-up people come and touch your feet’ (qtd. Tully 132).

The characters of the serial had a great impact on the general public. The greatest success of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* was Ravan (Arvind Trivedi), who played Ravan, a mild, middle-aged man then. Arvind Trivedi’s walrus moustache, his bloodshot eyes and his pot belly made him all too human - especially in comparison with the overdone divinity of Ram. When Ravan rated against Ram in his magnificent bass voice, he was every inch a furious and frustrated ruler. Kaikeyi’s portrayal by Padma Khanna exemplifies the serial’s overall excellent casting and fine acting. Manthara is played by Lalitha Pawar, an actress known for her portrayal of villainous women. Hence, on the whole the cast was well accepted by the audience in India, the characters were treated like Gods in their real lives as well. People touching their feet or paying regards to them in itself confirms their wide acceptance by the viewers in their own respective roles.

**Use of Sanskritized Dialogues**

According to Ramanand Sagar, the script for the serial, and the diction used by the artists was rightly chosen and delivered by the artists in the serial. He justifies the use of Sanskritized Hindi and tells us that it was deliberately written in an epical manner. If the regular day to day language had been used the impact would have faded; these actors would not have been treated the way Ramannd Sagar wanted them to (like Gods and not humans). Hence, this choice of diction was to emphasize the paranormal or supreme characteristics of the principal characters of the serial. “If it had been colloquial, the impact would have been lost. These are Gods you know and not human beings” (qtd. Tully 128).
Action

Mark Tully in his, *No Full Stops in India*; gives us an account of an interview with the Sagar family wherein he discusses the action employed by Ramanand Sagar:

When it came to violence, the Sagars relied on crude electronic tricks, especially in the great battle between the armies of Ram and Ravan, which turned into nothing more than a video comic. The protagonists never came near each other - they shot electronic arrows sparking like fireworks and sending out highly coloured rays. After protracted flights, the arrows would collide in mid air, spit at each other and then return to their quivers. When the time eventually came for someone to die, his enemy’s arrows would slowly dismember him. An arm might be sliced off first - the viewer would see the whole limb flying away. Then perhaps another arm would soar into the sky, then the head, then the torso. Neither Moti Sagar nor Ramanand Sagar, was apologetic about this, ‘There again, don’t you see, we couldn’t have the gods behaving like ordinary Hindi film actors. All that ‘disham disham’, that crude violence with people kicking each other in the crotch, punching them and throwing them over their shoulders. This had to be something quite different’. ‘But were you confident that the audience would want to see something as essentially unreal as your violence?’ ‘We were, but we knew that we would be attacked by the elite. After all, the *Ramayana* is about everything that the elite doesn’t like, considers awful - religion, superstition, women obeying their husbands, dynastic rule’ (qtd. Tully 128-29).

The kind of action employed by Ramanand Sagar and its execution might have been attacked as a video comic by critics but it enamoured the kids. The children were full of admiration for the war scenes, the special type of arrows, an arrow multiplying
into hundreds, an arrow emitting fire and many more such effects. I can till date recall my fascination with these special effect and the anxiety with which we awaited these war scenes incorporating the magical, divinely powerful arrows.

According to Rajagopal Sagar was a “romanticist,” who rendered the story in sentimentalized fashion, with a glacially paced script, and copious use of deep close ups. He introduced the conventions of Hollywood soap operas to an epic tradition, with shot-reverse shot sequences and alternating close ups following every master shot. This replaced the embodied narrator of poetic convention, of a Valmiki or a Tulsidas rendering a highly personalized story and making his direct address to the audience a thread parallel to and interwoven along the entire length of the epic. Sagar’s production positioned a disembodied, omniscient spectator akin to that of the conventional cinema. This paralleled a certain voyeuristic emphasis in presentation. Emphasizing the idealized behavior of the story’s protagonists, Sagar used the small screen to advantage: the deep and prolonged close ups suggested the visual capture of emotions, and the extraordinary bhaav, associated with each act of feeling. The repeated reactions shots served to reinforce the sense of a tightly homogeneous moral community with the entire cast unfailingly responding in a like fashion (100).

The predominant mood of the serial cannot be conveyed by a discussion of its component parts. The impact created and the message conveyed cannot be expressed in words. It can only be felt the way it is communicated in the expressions and gestures of the actors, in the camera angles and the cutting and zooming, in the timely coordination of pictures and music. A key component of the mood is one of reverence and devotion. This mood of reverence alternates and intermingles with the engagement induced by the narrative itself.

Admiration for the Serial

The Sagars’ judgment proved to be precisely accurate. The admiration for the televised Ramayan became legendary. It occurred as if a new history was being created on the television. At first, it looked like just an endeavor to emulate Hindi movie adaptation of the epic on television. However, then the reports started appearing in the press about the impact of the series. Tully writes, “An electricity
A cooperative society of women took out half-page advertisements in the national press when the *Ramayan* ended, saying,

> For seventy-seven weeks, Sunday mornings of great many families were adorned with the atmosphere of *Ramayan*, brought alive by the galaxy of mythological characters, reviving the times millennia back. Here is a day to say goodbye, to that blissful nearness. Yes, that immortal world will no more be before our eyes. However, down the memory lane this world will accompany us with all its splendor and shine (qtd. Tully 129-30).

A careful study of the television epic throws a thud of light on the transmutations faced by the epic when it is transformed from the script to the screen. When something travels from the written word to the television world, many changes take place in this journey from ‘the katha to the camera’. A lot of changes are imposed on it by the new medium while there are others which are brought about by the period in which it is telecast.

The changes hereditarily imposed by the medium along with the changes deliberately incorporated in the television *Ramayan* take the epic into a new realm; a new dimension is provided to the existing epical story. All the techniques of cinema (imagery, music, computer graphics, camera movements, choreography, costume, duration...
architecture, action, dialogues, script) which have already been discussed play a significant role in the whole journey (from the written epic to the television, (oral) to aural-visual epic). The impossible and unconvincing is presented to the viewers by means of lifelike imagery. Music effects the overall presentation of the epic, strengthens the impact made on the viewer’s mind and further reinforces the entire episode. Computer simulated graphics which is a special advantage of the medium and can not be employed through any written or oral communication medium makes the story imprinted in the minds of the audience. Further talking about slow camera movements, close ups, repeated zoom shots, all led to an overwhelming impact on the audience which has its effect till date. Since the time of Ramanand Sagar’s serialization of the epic, Ram and Sita (Arun Govil and Dipika Chiklia) have been impressioned on the minds of the viewers as the incarnations of God (God swarups). The costume display visible throughout the serial has been an aid in making these ordinary human beings Gods. The characters dressed in a style which was different from the ordinary mortals; this style of costume was an added advantage which made the presentation of Ram and Sita acceptable to the world. The architectural designs also contributed heavily in the creation of this legendary epical history on the television screen. It was only through the aid of cinema that the architectural aspect could be presented in its true grandeur; the earlier performances (be it in the form of Ramlila, dramas, yakshagana, kathakali or the street theatre) lacked this captivating architecture and its display due to the constraints of time it was not possible in the live performances to have such a diverse and magnificent architectural designs. The action though has been condemned for the slow pace and having soporific effect but it was atleast a feast for the children. The children were enamoured and attracted to the action scenes present in the television version of the epic. Different patterns of action, like an arrow multiplying into thousands, producing fire or sometimes rainfall when left from the bow, acting like a shield etc. could be witnessed in the serial. All this provided the viewers with a new kind of imagery style. Therefore, the techniques of the camera invested many new avenues in the epic which were neither visible nor possible in the live performances. All these changes revolutionized the existing epical phenomena.

Amongst the many transformations brought about by the television Ramayan one of the major concerns of the critics is that the television series (of Ramayan)
homogenized the *Ramayana* tradition by imposing a hegemonic north Indian, upper caste narrative on its captive audience. They assert that it excluded regional and folk traditions and critical heterodox interpretations. For instance, in some versions Sita is Ravana’s daughter while there are others in which Ram and Sita are siblings; some other versions adopt the perspective of Sita, who is constructed as an emblem of harsh treatment of women. All these various facets of a single character were not a part of Sagar’s *Ramayan*; just like Sita, the heroine of the epic even other characters have more than single story in their account.

The *Ramayana* (the televised version), used the rituals, traditions, dresses and the language (sanscritized Hindi) associated with upper-caste north Indians. Mankekar writes, “the wedding rituals portrayed in the Doordarshan *Ramayana* were those of upper caste north Indians, and the verses (chaupai) framing every episode were those from Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas’* (172). Some critics criticized the *Ramayana* as a text propagating the north Indian traditions and practices. Critics contest that there were many more regional tellings of the epic which almost vanished in the heaps of popularity gained by this new telling which catered to the north Indian public. According to Mankekar *Ramayana* tellings have been a crucial site for the contestations of north Indian cultural hegemony. There were many more stories for instance, Dravadian nationalist E.V. Ramasami’s exegesis of the *Ramayana* focused on the moral failings of its Brahman characters in order to emphasize the moral inferiority of north Indian, brahmanical Hinduism (172).

Since this television *Ramayana* was watched by most of India’s population it did diminish the multiplicity and variety of traditions existing in the folk performances of the epic. The television serial with its unique characteristic dominated, almost hegemonised the minds of the Indian people. The images projected on the television *Ramayana* have occupied a significant place in the minds of people. But we forget that *Ramayana* can never be limited to a single text, Mankekar writes:

Unlike, for instance, the compositions of Homer in Greek tradition, the *Ramayana* has never been frozen into a single literary text. The *Ramayana* has always recast to comment on the ongoing cultural developments. Various versions, refracted by local histories and commentaries and expressing the aspirations and struggles of the
communities that articulated them, were created at different times and places (e.g., the Bhargava narrative, the Buddhist rendering in the Jatakas, and the Jaina narrative) (171).

There occurs a unique relationship of narrative to history. A revolutionary change can occur in the whole process in which new media abruptly obliterates those that have preceded it. In a different kind of an association the tellings may come and go but the story remains. Hence, we can have many versions of the story but the story remains. As Tulsidas in his *Ramcharitamanas* writes, *Ram ananta, Ram katha ananta*... However Lutgendorf in his article “Ramayan: The Video” writes:

The fact that a single version of the *Ramayana* was accorded high status by virtue of being aired on state-run television and was presented to an audience of unprecedented size, was the single most ominous aspect of the production. It was seen as not only threatening the nation’s modern “secular” ethos, but as overwhelming and potentially obliterating, a vibrant and multivocal cultural tradition. In short, such critics feared, or more often assumed, that Sagar’s *Ramayan* was to end all *Ramayanas*. However, the ‘Ram story’ has never had a single form, nor has everyone recited and understood it in one distinct regulated context (165-66).

I would like to emphasize the point that, the adoption and promulgation of individual versions of the epic has always been a means of (or a discourse of) assertion of cultural hegemony. The same thing can be said for Valmiki’s and Tulsidas’s texts as well, they had their hegemonic implications. Yet even such influential versions never fully obliterated their variants instead, continued to co-exist with them, through the dialectic of performance and commentary (not to mention the fact that the texts themselves were found in variant recessions). As Roland Barthes in his popular essay “Death of the Author” writes, “text is not a line of words releasing a single theological meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (para 5).
But, the critic Arvind N. Das writing for the Times of India, has a different opinion. Shortly after the airing of the final episode he wrote:

Ramanand Sagar, of course ably assisted by the mandarins of Mandi House 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 all Hindus all over the country. [...] for the first time in the ancient and pluralistic tradition of Hinduism, a church was created and its pope was Ramanand Sagar, far more effective shepherd of the flock than Tulsidas or Valmiki, Kamban or Eknath. While conceding that the Tulsidas version also achieved a normative status in earlier centuries, Das observed that ‘the people [...] 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 Ramliha. The text was one, discourse remained many and de-construction retained the possibility of plurality.’ But such deconstruction is no longer possible, because the impact of Ramanand Sagar Ramayana ‘has paid to Ramilis. Indeed the purveyance of Ramayana through television has destroyed the very concept of lila [...]’ (qtd. Lutgendorf “Ramayan: The Video” 166).

The critic Arvind N. Das believes that Sagar’s version acted as a hegemonic version which destroyed the inherent multiplicity of the text. But, the Ramayana has never been frozen into a single literary text. The Ramayana was always recast to comment on ongoing cultural developments. Various versions refracted by local histories and commentaries and expressing the aspirations and struggles of the communities that articulated them, were created at different times and places (e.g. The Bharagava narrative, the Bhuddhist rendering in the Jatakas, and the Jaina narrative). Texts like the Ramayana can never be monolithic, nor can their interpretations be. Every text has multiple meanings invested in it; there are many layers of meanings which are left for the reader to unveil. Hence, the reader enjoys the liberty to interpret the text in his/her own way and give a new direction to the text.
As even Roland Barthes in his essay ‘Death of the Author’ remarks: “in the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of the stocking)...” (Para 6).

Therefore, the text enjoys full freedom to be interpreted in varied forms and have multiple meanings. The same happened with Ramanand Sagar’s epic as well, it does not have the capacity, and neither tried to homogenize or standardize the *Ramayana* tradition. Philip Lutgendorf pronounces:

The adoption and propagation of individual versions of the epic has always been related to assertions of cultural hegemony and has indeed had the effect of suppressing other variants. This was certainly true of the Valmiki and Tulsidas texts. Yet even such influential versions never fully obliterated their variants, but continued to coexist with them, through the dialectic of performance and commentary, not to mention the fact that the texts themselves were often found in variant recessions. It is always remarkable to note the extent to which individual Hindus, though often fervently devoted to a particular text, remain conversant with - and even delight in - variant strands, and themselves feel free to take liberties with the story. Nor are the texts themselves monolithic in their interpretations; many of them continue to hint at narrative detours they choose not to explore, but to which they leave the way open for others (“Ramayan: The Video” 168).

Rather than treat the serial as either an aspect of unchanging tradition, or as an interesting but epiphenomenal event, it is a useful commentary on the present.

In commenting that Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan* functioned as a hegemonic text, we must not forget that every version of the story has some authoritative power embedded within itself. Every performance is woven and guided by the dominating local cultures and the local network of power and hegemony. Although urban intellectuals now idealize the diversity and creativity of folk performances, most of them do not take the pains of watching these performances. They are more likely to watch the television or go to a cinema show. If we view local genres in detail, we would find such performances, as the celebrated *Ramlila* of Ramnagar, and perhaps
even tribal tales and village folksongs to be bound in local networks of power. Hence, a charge, almost similar to what the TV version is accused of doing nationally (Ramanand Sagar was catering to a huge audience spread throughout the nation). They would also find such performances, by and large, exceedingly dull, for most folk singings of the epic are lengthy, slow moving, highly contextualized, and very demanding of their audiences. Intellectuals might enjoy watching an artistic documentary on the Ramnagar Ramila, glorifying its performers and showing a few highlights from its episodes; an airing of the complete 31-day cycle is quite boring and demanding.

There are many critics who grieve for the serial as a vulgarization of the literary treasure; they cite the Ramayana as one of the Great Books, a monument to be enshrined on the shelf. They overlook the fact that millions of people recite, sing, enact, and in their own words retell the epic every day, generating a powerful cultural meta-text. Hence, a new Ramayana being created every now and then, quite similar to Barthes’ viewpoint when he writes, “every text is eternally written here and now” (para 4). The Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas, for example, was long scorned by Sanskrit pandits as a crude popularization of the elegant Classic of Valmiki, concocted to please the sensibilities of illiterates. Yet the same text, patronized by royal dynasties expounded by scholars, and celebrated in voluminous commentaries, has come increasingly to be viewed as a hoary masterpiece of India’s “classical” heritage. Though Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan has been ridiculed as an offensive narrative; a vulgarized form of our epic, with a motive similar to Tulsidas’ (when he wrote the Ramcharitmanans), Sagar created the television series of the Ramayana. There seems no reason to assume that the video and written texts cannot continue to coexist in their respective spheres.

Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan aided and supported by technology created not only an overwhelming impact but even popularized the epical story. He brought a version of Ramayana for all the generations. The serial in no way served as a hegemonic text, bulk of the audience will continue to regard Sagar’s Ramayan like the Tulsi, Valmiki and many other versions of the Ramayana as an enthralling but not exclusive rendition of the story. It would remain just amongst the numerous existing versions. They will continue, in short to owe primary allegiance to what A. K. Ramanujam calls the “meta-Ramayan” incorporating the versions of countless tellers.
but never fully encompassed by any one of them. This meta-*Ramayan* includes, for example, the story of Ram and Sita’s romance in a flower garden (told by Tulsi and Sagar but not by Valmiki), of Shabari’s sampling the fruits she offers to Ram, and Hanuman’s writing Ram’s name on the stones of the monkey-bridge (told by Sagar but not by Tulsi); it also includes the stories of Ahi Ravan, and of the self-immolation (*sati*) of Indrajit’s wife, Sulochana (told by none of these three, yet known to every North Indian villager). The tale that contains all these and more is alive and unlikely to succumb quickly to the assault of either intellectuals or TV directors. The success of the serial, once again forcefully demonstrates that throughout much of the subcontinent *Ramayan* remains, a principal medium not only for the expression of individual and collective religious experience, but also for public discourse, social and cultural reflection.

**The Effects of Television**

In the ongoing debate among intellectuals throughout the world over the value and effects of television, both sides are inclined to stress the revolutionary nature of its impact. Media enthusiasts like Marshall McLuhan and the detractors like Neil Postman both posit the transformation of the universe into one dominated by moving images. Another impact of television is that it brings the trivialization of information. Sometimes very serious and important discourses also seem trivial when presented on the television. The communications technology also leads to the passivisation of the audiences; the audience is no more an active audience which participates in the performance. The television audience is not just viewing whatever is being presented on the screen; they simply watch it without much participation. As television does to any other thing which functions through its medium, the same happened with *Ramayana* (Valmiki’s epic) when it was transformed into a tele-serial. The iconography of the serial, the dialogue delivery and the setting all made the real information seem a little trivial. The original epic in Sanskrit has a lot of ritualized reverence attached to it, the recitation maintains it’s sacrosanctity. People prefer reciting it after bathing and without having their meals; it is equivalent to a prayer. However, with the television series being launched it can be viewed anytime of the day, anywhere and hence the trivialization occurs. Earlier the narration of the
Ramayana used to be a grand event, a celebration in itself (as it is to some extent today as well) but with these video tapes and cds (compact discs) the market is now flooded with it looks like an ordinary, routine affair.

What is absent from the TV version is the incorporation of the folkways and the comedy of the Ramlilas. Local issues and local commentary gave a flavour and vibrancy to these performances. If the literary version in Sanskrit attempted to freeze the rendering of earlier centuries, the TV version may have the same effect on future Ramlilas [... ] (qtd. Lutgendorf “Ramayan: The Video” 167-68).

Therefore, some critics believe that Sagar’s Ramayan along with being influenced by the ramlilas intum also laid its influence on the future performances of this dance drama. Herein, lays the unique quality of Sagar’s Ramayan which emerges from the folk traditions and also leaves an impact on these folk traditions.

On one hand television offers respite from the compulsions of existing social relations; creating a space outside the inhibitions and proscriptions imposed on any member of the society. Television with its unique capacity to penetrate social barriers, bypasses the existing societal blockage. On the other hand, it evokes feelings of closeness and reciprocity to unknown participants who may exist only in imagination. When dialogues, music, and images are carried as modulations of electromagnetic radiation, they offer the viewers an experience of intense union with the television characters or the images presented on the television screen. The experience of television communication is more of connection than of alienation. When moving images are combined with sound, the result is the closest approximation to actual experience of the real world. Hence, media has the power to engage the imagination of viewers and displace the existing symbology. With electronic media, the institutionalized production and circulation of images and symbols displaces and transforms the boundaries of the political sphere, and reshapes the flow of information society depends on.

Television yokes together different temporalities in one communicative event. Television acts as a medium for the flow of both technology and cultural forms. It has a dual character and this flow of information from the television screen straight into...
people's minds, is a distinctive characteristic of television. Ramanand Sagar has aptly exploited television's distinguishable character which lies in the medium serving both as 'technological and cultural form'.

Hence, to sum up, television gave the form of an entertainment series to the otherwise serious notes of the epic. The epical character of the Ramayana narrative was blended with street-theatre, folk culture, prevalent and popular iconography to give it a new form. The katha presented on screen not only had its repercussions on the future ramlilas but also laid its influence on the existing political scene. The next chapter moves in a linear fashion from the pre-textual elements to the post-textual elements of the television text. Therefore, the next chapter discusses the ramifications of this television text on the society. The effect of this serial and its reception by the general public has been dealt with, in the following chapter.