Chapter V

CONCLUSION

Any literature, if it is to fulfill its aim as literature, should go beyond the restricted limits of its peculiarities and endeavour to portray the feelings and sentiments common to humanity, and also demonstrate the essential universality of man. Only thus can a national literature maintain its special character and yet fulfill its role as a part of world literature. India’s mythological epic Ramayana occupies a position not only of a national epic but also enjoys a distinguished position in the world literature. Ramayana (as discussed in the introductory chapter to my thesis) is prevalent across the boundaries of culture, race, language and nations. The epic was presented in a new format (television) by Ramanand Sagar in the 20th century. The serialized form of Ramayana (by Ramanand Sagar) crossed the boundaries of the Indian subcontinent and entered the international world creating an eminent position for itself on the international screen. Sagar brought out special video tapes with English subtitles for the release in the international market and the animated films produced on this story in Japan and China confirm its presence in the international market.

The last two decades of the 20th century witness a spectacular return of national consciousness, and not only in India. The audiences in China were viewing a government sponsored serialization of Hong Lou Meng (The Dream of the Red Chamber) and the Soviet television was programming serializations like Middlemarch, Jesus of Nazareth and Tolstoy’s War and Peace. Culture as used in this framework refers to the formation of national identity: to the way in which we perceive ourselves in relation to the country. Culture here is not that inner refinement, the grooming of a deep enriching sensibility with which the concept of sanskriti is associated. Increasingly culture has come to be associated with the theatre of politics and rhetoric – as we are affected profoundly by outer influences which shape the way we speak, educate our young, and profess allegiance to ‘national’ icons. From the 1980s this program has grown significantly, with dramatic mega-serials, ritual performances and spectacles, and popular public response. The religious icons
became the means to introduce national unity, and cultural nationalism became the strategy to induce religious unity.

Culture is not a static entity; it is dynamic and alive, at least in a country like India. All the popular icons register change, moving from religious to national leaders to movie-political giants and now to cricket megastars. Indian cinema reaches out to millions all over the world, to become a significant marker of cultural trends. In the 1980s Indian culture witnessed a major transformation; this was when mega-serials like Ramayan and Mahabharata were formed. These serials especially the Ramayan attracted significant crowds and experienced a unique public response. This serial became a marker of a cultural trend; religious symbols became political and in a distinctive manner led to the formation of a national identity.

In the evolving New Age of multimedia literature goes beyond books, and has very well manifested itself in the audio-visual; the e-libraries, e-books etc. The religious and political implications of a text which is a piece of literature are enforced on the spectator/consumer by means of the visual. The visual has always been a part of literature and occupied a significant place in the study of literature. We have always had books with illustrations (caricatures, landscapes) because they have a visual impact. Even early literature goes beyond words; lots of dramatics have always been invested with literature. Hence, the visual has always accompanied literature. Imagination is now given a concrete shape with special effects. It is literature but literature for the age of multimedia. In this age it is not the reader who draws meaning from a text but the audience. Hence, the director incorporates things which appeal to the audience so that the audience’s social and emotional memory is fed and satiated.

In this project I have tried to present the journey undertaken by this epic which led to the formation of a television serial on Ramayana. The transformations which the tale witnesses in its production in a new format moving from an oral tale to a television serial have been brought out in the serial. Ramanand Sagar during the formation of this serial borrowed from various cultural traditions existing in India. Culture laid its impact on the serial in the form of the performance traditions. Ramanand Sagar borrowed extensively from the existing modes of performance. Ramayan (serial) borrowed form the katha traditions which were prevalent in India, Ramanand Sagar tried to imitate the kathavachak’s style. Every now and then Ramanand Sagar would appear on the screen narrating the forthcoming events to the
audience. It was not only the katha which had an impact on the serial; Sagar’s serial had thoroughly incorporated the style of the Ramlila productions. All the episodes were framed in a manner similar to the Ramlila, which takes place in almost every village or town in the north India. Sagar has also tried to incorporate the culture of the Ramayanis singing the epic; passages from the Ramcharitmanas (its dohas and chaupais) are sung in the background in this television production. Almost every episode in its presentation takes cue from the Ramlila productions.

A significant amount of importations have been borrowed from the existing forms of cinematic (audio-visual) presentations of the story. The visual art which is manifested in the paintings, posters and calendars which existed prior to the serial and carried mythological images helped a great deal in the making of the serial. Many films were produced on Ramayana and related themes and these mythological films contributed to the serial in the form the many changes suggested by them. Many interpolated episodes were introduced in the Ramayan serial which were not present anywhere in the Ramayana by Valmiki or the Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas. The interpolations introduced to the story by Ramanand Sagar have either been borrowed from the Ramlila tradition (a form of performance which stages the Ramayana story and exists in almost every north Indian town) or the mythological films existing in cinema and the probable reason for the same is the inculcation of the bhaav of devotion and religiosity in the mind of the viewers.

The basic mode of presentation, architecture, costumes and designing was copied from the mythological cinema which existed before this serial. The calendar art and the popular comic series brought out by the Amar Chitra Katha also had an immense bearing on the making of the serial. The depiction of Gods in human form and even dressed as normal human beings was established by the Amar Chitra Katha. The presentation of the entire serial has been in a great way influenced by the Amar Chitra Katha, be it the depiction of rakshasas, the monkey army or the Gods all were depicted in a humanoid manner by Sagar. Therefore, the existing performance traditions and other forms of the presentation of this story had a great impact on the formation of this serial. A great deal of the serial’s popularity and acceptance by the general public rested in the incorporation of narrative strategies used by Hindi cinema, performance traditions and religious iconography (calendar art and Amar Chitra Katha).
Life in India is in the street. Shops, stalls, rituals, bathrooms are exposed to the sun and to the glare of the people. So is the folk theater. The idea of a closed theater is almost foreign to the Indian masses. In the nineteenth century, when the British introduced their educational system, they also brought in the concept of the picture-frame stage. In big cities where the amateur movement developed, a few theater halls were built in mid-Victorian style with plush curtains, embellished furniture, and chandeliers. But in seven hundred thousand villages of India the traditional dance dramas, pageants, operatic ballads, and folk plays continue to entertain audiences in the open air. A study of all these forms of the folk theatre was not possible. In this project I have not dealt with the multiple performing arts in India; this would have almost been an entire project in itself and hence I have limited my discussion of the performance traditions to katha, ramlila and some general concepts confirming to Bharata’s Natyashastra. However, I have tried to sum up the pre-textual or the impact of the traditional theatrical elements on the formation of this serial. From the pre-textual or the elements which went into its making I move on the textual analysis. Herein, I move to the technological facet of the serial after discussing the classical. I have tried to present an analysis of the impact of communications technology on religion and the manner in which communications technology has affected our perception of religion.

I have attempted to analyze the effect of communications technology in the projection of our religious symbols and culture. A televised performance of a religious drama may well adhere to traditional performance conventions to an impressive degree, but will inevitably abstract the performance from the social and ritual contexts that, in traditional settings, invest the experience with its full range of meaning to audiences. The cinema technology increases the mobility of religious symbols to penetrate social networks. And as discussed by me earlier as well, the power of new communication media transforms the entire scene in which the presentation is experienced. The televised presentation with the complex celluloid medium and the techniques of cinema made its imprint on the minds of almost every average Indian. The new medium not only gave a concrete shape to the otherwise abstract pictures of our Gods, but also made the presentation legendary in the history of Indian television.
India has always witnessed a culture of the Visual. The visual has been identified with names like darshan, pratyaksh or sakshaat which climaxed naturally into the transformation of the sacred into a teleserial. Religion in India has always attached great importance to the visual or the darshan of the lord. Therefore, the unparalleled hysteria attached to the epic was due to an existing culture emphasizing the visual.

The epic *Ramayana* in its new avtar - the mixed media, the visual along with the aural (oral) led to new and unusual manifestations of the sacred lore. The serial with its unique auro-visual characteristic engages the viewers mind and has an immediate effect on our perceptions. By the means of television, *Ramayana* experienced a greater mobility as far as the transmission of information is concerned, and through this medium the channels for the dissipation of information are various. The cinematic codes provided a new dimension to the religious story.

When a written text gets transformed to a new medium (television or the screen in this case) it passes through many changes. These transformations are, sometimes the requisites of the medium itself and sometimes the creations of the writer’s/director’s mind. The changes imposed by the medium, along with the changes deliberately incorporated in the epic give a new dimension to the earlier existing phenomena; such was the effect of medium on *Ramayana* as well. The aids of the television/ cinema (music, imagery, camera, costume, action, computer/ digital graphics, characters and character portrayals etc.) all have a significant role in the transformative process. Camera tricks like the close-up technique, repeated zoom (zoom in/out); shot-reversal exposed the epic to new dimensions. These new facets brought forward by the television were exploited in unique and new directions, for example, the close up technique and the focus on the facial expressions was a feature which was unknown to earlier performance modes.

From the written text by Valmiki, the *Ramayana* and its characters in the faces of Arun Govil and Dipika Chiklia were imprinted on the minds of people and this happened mainly through the cinematic aids. These techniques have a significant role, the unconvincing has been presented to the audience through the aids of the new medium. The heightened imagery and music (the background ‘dohas’ and ‘chaupais’) experienced throughout the serial has an impact not visibly possible through any other modes of performance. By means of this visual imagery the tale is
embedded in the mind of the viewers. The camera tricks, digitally assorted graphics and the action scenes all elevated the epic in a significant manner. All this provided a sense of authenticity attached to the serial; the people viewed it as if real Ram and Sita were shown on their television sets. This kind of presentation/ performance of the epic could be attained only through the means of television. This new presentation of the story hence, achieved a captivating effect surpassing that of the earlier performances. Moving images accompanied by music have a matchless ability to engage the minds of the viewers; these moving images have the power to make possible the impossible. In the serial Ram bhakti was constructed on television by means of these images and the viewers were enamoured by the darshan of their lord.

The Ramayan serial was presented through a series of images that could be identified both with the magical spell of television and with the affective charge of the narrative itself. As a story tradition, the Ramayana encloses key narrative tensions, between models of obedience and devotion, of reciprocity and mutual acknowledgement, and between images of a male dominated, warlike culture and those of a more effeminate and gentle one. Different political possibilities were in fact contained in its contemporary meanings. Television’s invocation of the Ram story straddled these divides, ensuring that the aggregative power of its symbols was not lost to varying interpretations. The medium served as a nodal point where different temporal flows were tied together in one symbolic event, the majority of viewers looking back to the idyllic past while a minority perceived it as a resource to represent social consensus for new political initiatives. Television extended the reach of the prevailing political terrain, bringing into one orbit the zones of society that seldom encountered the same ideas simultaneously.

Another contention in this chapter was that Ramayan on television is able to use a variety of narrative strategies that are specific to television in order to reproduce the well known story in the cultural space of India. In re-plotting the tale, Doordarshan is also able to circulate a preferred set of practices (actually ideas) as the dominant and good practices in India represented by the everyday activities of the Raghu family.

Television entwines the diversity of different fields through the means of images. These images introduce a system of representation; the varied symbols of each social field can be realistically portrayed through television. The same thing
happened when the epical characters were screened on the television. The serialization of the *Ramayana* popularized and gave a form to the otherwise abstract iconography of Ram. Ramanand Sagar’s serial on the story of Ram not only popularized but served as a campaign for the epic to attain political implications. The religious symbols were now blended with the political symbols. Simple religious connotations were adulterated with political meanings. The alternate blending and separation of religious and political appeals, and the oscillation between them, often seemed to presume that one or the other appeal was illegitimate. There was a strategic submergence and deployment of the boundary between religion and politics, as the campaign shifted across different regions of society. What varied were two factors: the orientation of the boundary vis-a-vis the audience, which is, whether the idiom of discourse was religious or political, and the prominence attributed to the boundary. The boundary between religion and politics is slight if not altogether visible – the right of political parties to champion devotional causes is treated as self-evident. In Sagar’s *Ramayan* unconsciously religion and politics are intertwined, though it is religious rather than the political idiom that predominates.

Sagar’s serial gave the religious images a new meaning by transforming them into political symbols. The images of Ram served as a means of political mobilization; votes were cast simply on the notions of *bhakti* and the state of mind framed by the serial: ‘*sita maiya vote maangne aayi hain...*’. All three – Dipika Chikli who played Sita, Dara Singh who played Hanuman and Arvind Trivedi who played Ravan – won the elections in 1991. The epic which was purely a sacred text has today been transformed into a political and commercial tool. The serial led to a wider mobilization of the symbols associated with the *Ramayana* and these symbols were exploited for political agendas.

It was not surprising that the Hindu nationalists would choose the story told in the *Ramayana* as a mobilizing myth, or that their rhetoric would appeal to religious piety for God Ram. The *Bharatiya Janata Party, Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, and its allies did not create this popular religiosity; it was the modernization which has led to the growth, not the diminution of, the appeal of traditional and assorted new – age Gods. Neither are the Hindu nationalists the first to exploit the popular religiosity for political purposes – the secular congress party, under the reign of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi had already honed the art of religion card for the votes.
These were the few findings my research project has proposed. There are many aspects which have not been dealt with in the thesis: the study of the multiple versions of the epic, the contrasts existing in all these various versions of the epic and no comments are given on the script used by Sagar in the serial. The multiple variants of this epic and the multiplicity of the episodic events have not been touched upon in the research and have the potential to form a good research project.

The full thesis as a whole also has a lot of potential to be exploited and further studied in a specifically detailed manner. Every chapter Tradition Revisited: Emergence of the Video Epic (Ch I), Katha and the Camera: Transformation of the Sacred into a New Medium (Ch II) and Reception of the Text: Amalgamation of the Sacred, the Political, and the Commercial (Ch III) has the prospective of a more detailed study. Each chapter has the potential of forming a thesis in itself.

This project of mine in a linear fashion discusses the production of this serial and its repercussions, wherein, as a research scholar I have tried to bring out the pre-textual, textual and post textual elements which went into the making of the serial or were affected by the telecast of the serial. All the three components (the pre-textual, the textual and the post-textual) have been approached in a manner which deals mainly with the performance aspects. While talking of the pre-textual components I have strictly adhered to performance and performance traditions; hence, bringing to light the pre-existing, in fact classical/ traditional performance traditions incorporated in the serial. The serial has been claimed to be an authentic retelling of the traditions of the past. However, I have not dealt with the multiple folk theatres and traditions existing in India, but have tried to incorporate the borrowings from the katha and the ramlila traditions which have influenced the serial in a significantly major ways; since, my focal point and intention behind this study was the impact of the classical theatre and the modern techniques of cinema on the presentation of the serial; moving on to the impact levied by Sagar’s Ramayan on the political scenario in India which was greatly affected by the serial and the art produced after the broadcast. Hence, not digressing from the issue I have discussed the impact of tradition as well as technology on this serialized production of our revered ancient epic. In other words I have tried to discuss media and the transformation of religion (in reference to the Ramayana), and also the impact of such a production on the boundaries of political sphere in a country like India.
Though Ramanand Sagar has been accused of charges like – ‘butchering the art,’ ‘vulgarization of the epic’ and his production was almost dumped by critics as a low form of art. one can not ignore the pioneering effort made by Ramanand Sagar. Any theatre artist or art critic would not deny the fact that his production was worth of appreciation considering him to have formed a new genre in Indian Cinema, the genre of Mythological serials. The production of the Ramayana was followed by the production of Mahabharata, Shree Krishna, Chanakya, Veer Hanuman, Jai Santoshi Maa and many more less popular religious serials. Therefore, Ramanand Sagar had a deep and significant impact on the Hindi Cinema.

Here we have an ancient epic tradition thoroughly scrambled with a national origin-myth of more recent vintage. In asserting the compatibility, indeed the mutual dependence of faith and reason, throughout the serial Sagar offers an improbable couplet. In conventional understanding, faith requires the suspension of reason, and reason dissolves the certitude of faith. They may of course co-exist, but the persistent assertion that they are united or continuous with each other requires clarification, at the very least. But over and over it is offered as a self-evident truth, presenting the nation’s past as already scientific and progressive, yet steeped in a devotional, spiritual culture. In a state sponsored serialization of an epic, the apparent endorsement not only of one particular religion but also of deeply anachronistic values of an ancient work understandably requires tact and negotiation. The Ramayana is a story in which the characters may each rise to heaven but belong to emphatically different groups on earth, whether female, low caste, tribal, monkey, or demon requiring different codes of conduct and summoning different forms of behaviour from their superiors and inferiors. The translation if this deeply hierarchical conception into the universalized category of “humanity,” with democratic aspirations and scientific capabilities, is to extend the devotional bhakti philosophy of Tulsidas into a new, perhaps awkward, territory.