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Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India

SHELDON POLLOCK

FROM DECEMBER 1992 THROUGH JANUARY 1993, more than 3,000 people were killed in "communal" rioting across India, from Surat to Calcutta, from Kanpur to Bangalore. The likes of this rioting had not been seen for generations; in Bombay, for example, more than 600 people died, and the city was brought to a standstill for a week and a half. These recent events were related to but exceeded even the gruesome slaughters that took place in the last quarter of 1990, when a communal "frenzy" took hold that was then viewed as unprecedented in post-Partition India (Engineer 1991a, cf. 1991b).

It is impossible, even irresponsible, to generalize about the causes of what were very disparate acts of violence, unquestionably inflected by local factors that usually had little or nothing to do with antagonism between Hindu and Muslim communities. Yet however complex the causal nexus of these events may be, the occasion and excuse—the symbolic nexus—is simple.

This nexus was first announced in the act that precipitated the earlier violence, the "Chariot Procession" (*rathyātra*) undertaken by the then-president of the Bharatiya Janata Party ("Indian People's Party," BJP), L. K. Advani, in October 1990. In a Toyota truck turned into an epic chariot, Advani traveled from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhyā in north India, the putative birthplace of the hero-god Rāma. As court documents submitted subsequently by the BJP's ally, the Vishva Hindu Parishad ("World Hindu Council," VHP), put it, Rāma is an immemorial object of worship basic to Hinduism, and this worship was being impeded by the presence of a mosque built on the site of his birthplace temple ([Vishva Hindu Parishad] 1991:4, 70). It was this *yātra* that led, with the force of logic, to the event that inaugurated the most recent riots, the actual demolition of the mosque on December 6, 1992, not by a mob but by what appears to have been a trained group of Hindu militants. Far from damaging the BJP, this most dangerous symbolic act since Partition has only served to enhance its stature; it is now thinkable that this organization—which calls for, among other things, the immediate "nuclearization" of India's war capability—may become the next ruling party of the country.

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It is the symbology of these events that I want to examine in what follows. For whatever ideological cohesion the BJP secured, and the primary impetus for political mobilization—in the name of a Hindu theocratic politics and against the Muslim population—derived in large part from the invocation of a specific set of symbols: the figure of the warrior-god Rāma, his birthplace temple in Ayodhyā, and the liberation of this sacred site.

The ready availability to reactionary Indian politics of central cultural icons like the Rāmāyaṇa text has proved challenging to understand and explain. It seems incomprehensible that a divisive contemporary political discourse is so accessible to, or may be shaped by, what is commonly viewed as a narrative of the divine presence and care for the world. It seems improbable that a heroic tale of love, loss, and recovery from the classical past should be invoked to empower and give substance to the politics of the present. It seems perverse that what have usually been taken to be the utopian impulses of social harmony resonating in the symbol of Rāma and his dominion should be directed and directable toward dystopian, indeed, homicidal ends as happened in late 1990 and again in late 1992.

There is a long history to the relationship between Rāmāyaṇa and political symbology. From an early period the story supplied, continuously and readily, if in a highly differentiated way, a repertory of imaginative instruments for articulating a range of political discourses. In fact, it may be doubted whether any other text in South Asia has ever supplied an idiom or vocabulary for political imagination remotely comparable in longevity, frequency of deployment, and effectivity. This is a history, however, that for premodern India, at least, remains largely unwritten.

About the earliest course of the political life of the Rāmāyaṇa theme, especially its genetic history in contrast to its receptive history, we know little at present, in part because our sources are so few, but also because the sources we do possess have never been read mythopolitically. Little systematic research has been devoted to the politics of the narrative in the thousand-year period from the putative origins of the Sanskrit version to the flowering of the regional-language treatments of the tale (Kamban, Kīrtibās, Tulsi Dās, etc.). Nor have we learned much about the specific historical locations of this vernacular language production itself. We know, for example, that a large number of dramas and other forms of narrative based on the Rāma theme in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional languages were commissioned by, performed before, or indeed composed by kings over a thousand-year period: from the court of the Vākātaka (less likely Kashmiri) king Pravarasena in the fifth century (*Setubandha*), to that of Yaśovarman of Kanauj in the seventh (*Rāmābhūdaya*), Bhīmaṇa of Kālañjara in the eighth (*Svapnadaśānana*), Bhoja of Dhārā in the eleventh (*Campūrāmāyaṇa*), to that of Śivājī in the seventeenth (the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Rāmdās). But of the social and political ontologies of most of these texts, we understand little to date beyond the fact that they occupy a central position in elite forms of cultural activity.¹

The gaps in our present knowledge about the political life of the Rāmāyaṇa theme, then, make it risky to talk of sudden, discontinuous revaluation or appropriation. Yet that is what I think happened. For I believe I can show that at a particular historical juncture a Rāmāyaṇa imaginary came more centrally and dramatically to inhabit a public political space, as opposed to simply a literary space, than it ever had done before, while at the same time its social and political

¹Note also Kulacekarālīvār (ca. A.D. 800, but cf. Dasgupta and De 1962:381n.), a king of the Kongu-Chera line and author of some of the most notable devotional poetry to Rāma, to whom Zvelebil is prepared to ascribe the founding of Rāma worship in Tamil country (Zvelebil 1974:102).

valences were endowed with a more concrete referentiality than ever before. In fact, after tracing the trajectory of the historical effectivity of the Rāmāyaña mytheme—tracing, that is, the penetration of its specific narrative into the realms of public discourse of post-epic India, in temple remains, “political” inscriptions, and those historical narratives that are available—it is possible to specify with some accuracy the particular historical circumstances under which the Rāmāyaña was first deployed as a central organizing trope in the political imagination of India.

I should make clear that when I speak of “Rāmāyaña” in the context of north India and the Deccan in the middle period, I am referring to the basic structure of the story as transmitted in Vālmīki’s poem. This is the text that lies at the heart of all the material I discuss below, from the external frieze on the central shrine of Vijayanagar, the Rāmacandra temple, to Jayānaka’s great biography of Pr̥thvīrāja III. One may readily concur that the Rāmāyaña can interestingly be viewed not as a fixed text but as a “multivoiced entity, encompassing tellings of the Rāma story that vary according to historical period, regional literary tradition, religious affiliation, genre, and political context” (Richman 1991:16). But these tellings are always *retellings of a text everyone knows*. Moreover, it is hard to find evidence of effectivity in the realm of literary, let alone public, discourse of these “many” Rāmāyañas in Rajasthan, Gujarat, or the Deccan in middle-period India. (This holds true for the highly “oppositional” Jain versions, which were something of a local specialty.) In short, the foundational version, the version everyone knows in A.D. 1000–1400 and for the whole millennium preceding this period, is that of Vālmīki and his epigones, where the Rāma presented is *kodandarāma, dharmabhr̥tāṁ varah*, “Rāma with the curved bow, the chief of the righteous,” and Rāvaṇa is always *lokarāvana, sarvalokabhayāvaha*, “He who makes the world weep, who fills all the world with terror.” It is the political valences of this version, which I detail later in this article, that are its most important distinguishing feature.

Unquestionably, the discourse of the epic had already intersected with, or reprocessed, or perhaps even provided an idiom for, the ideologies of early Indian imperial polities, especially that of Aśoka (Pollock 1986:9–24). Yet if one actually plots a history of the Rāmāyaña in the two realms of the political and literary imaginations, one finds a stark disparity. For a thousand years from at least the fourth century A.D., the literary imagination of India received undiminished stimulation from the Rāma legend, even to the point of hypertrophy (as many later poets themselves came to recognize, e.g., *Ullāgharāghava* 2; *Hammirāmadamardana* 1.8). This begins as early as the second or third century with Bhāsa, continues with Kālidāsa and Kumāradāsa in the four and fifth, extends through to Bhavabhūti, Bhatti, Murāri, Rājaśekhara in the seventh to ninth centuries, and onward into the next millennium—the list is almost endless and seems at times an entire library of Sanskrit literature. In striking contrast to this, however, the political imagination during the first thousand years of the life of the Rāmāyaña is only superficially affected by its existence. The epic may have inflected or embellished the political imagination, supplying an epithetical paradigm of, or argument for, royal sovereignty and indeed royal divinity; it certainly does not shape this imagination. But something very different happens early in the next millennium; at that moment the tale comes alive in the political sphere and for the first time, perhaps, kings *become* Rāma. Although the logic of my argument might entail that these political-cultural processes of middle-period India should themselves recuperate, indeed imitate, earlier ones, all my evidence suggests that this is not the case; the tradition of invention—of inventing the king as Rāma—begins in the twelfth century.

It is this historical moment and its cultural representations that provide the starting point for this article. Initially, I was interested only to discover when, in what circumstances, and with what significations the *Rāmāyaṇa* entered the arena of political discourse in South Asia, to become a language in which the political imagination expresses itself. But the materials and the historical specificity they reveal became intriguing in their own right. They also raised questions that were larger and more puzzling, questions for cultural theory generally and for our theorization of forms of Indian culture, and to some extent even for the self-understanding and sense of purpose of critical-historical Indian studies.

One of these questions is the problem of what may be termed historical imitation. What concerns me under this rubric is why and how it is that people seem to bring to consciousness or even enact world-historical events only or especially through a revivification of a cultural past; why “revolution,” in the sense of profound and sudden social-political change, is often conceptualized by its agents as a kind of repetition. A second and more specific question relates to the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative itself. Can we identify any conceptual or imaginative resources it may provide that made this narrative in particular the representational instrument of choice for figuring forth the historical events that are at issue here? More difficult still is the question of what, if anything, this evidence suggests for our understanding of the modalities of relations between communities in western and central India in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. Finally, since all historical work is informed by, if not an argument about, the present, what difference does knowing this past make in comprehending the present-day redeployment of *Rāmāyaṇa* symbology, let alone in addressing the current crisis? What critical value can attach to historiography, and what are the possibilities of historicist intervention in the social-political world of the present, especially given the role of objectivist history in creating that world? In short, why should we want any longer to be historical?

I suggest in what follows that the *Rāmāyaṇa* came alive in the realm of public political discourse in western and central India in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries in a dramatic and unparalleled way. I believe the text offers unique imaginative instruments—in fact, two linked instruments—whereby, on the one hand, a divine political order can be conceptualized, narrated, and historically grounded, and, on the other, a fully demonized Other can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned. The makers of elite culture in medieval South Asia chose these instruments for the work of divinization and demonization at this historical moment because of the emergence of two enabling conditions. One was the peculiar salience that a far older political theology now seems to have achieved in the service of the legitimization or enhancement or perhaps just self-understanding of kingship. The other was the appearance of Others who—whether, in fact, they presented an unprecedented unassimilability or could opportunistically be represented as such—were especially vulnerable to the demonizing formulation the *Rāmāyaṇa* made available. All this I feel reasonably confident in arguing. What remains far less easy to figure out is how this material is to be interpreted in understanding community interaction and what pertinence this kind of genealogy has with respect to the problems of the present. The proper and critical task of history here may be not what “really happened” but how people come to believe what happened. The symbolic meaning system of a political culture is constructed, and perhaps knowing the processes of construction is a way to control it.

Rāma in the World: Temple Cult

The cult of *Rāma*, its role in the ideology of kingship, and the expression of this doctrine in temple worship have not been mapped for the subcontinent in any

historical detail. What I present here, consequently, will no doubt bear supplementation as this mapping takes place, but I doubt that the main conclusions will be seriously affected: The Rāma cult in South Asia is almost totally nonexistent until at the earliest the eleventh, or more likely the twelfth century, and the growth of this cult took place in virtual synchrony with a set of particular historical events.²

It is many years since R. G. Bhandarkar first made the point that, while the divinity of Rāma was known from quite early on, the temple cult of Rāma was very slow to develop (Bhandarkar 1913:47). Yet just how limited this development was prior to the twelfth century and, what is more significant, the conditions under which it was initiated after that date have been little explored.

Early evidence for cultic practice devoted to Rāma is sparse, as we can now judge, thanks to Hans Bakker's careful work. There is inscriptional testimony for the founding of a Śāringadhara temple during the early Gupta period (Skandagupta), and were this in Ayodhyā (and, more, were it a Rāma temple) it might suggest a royal cult of Rāma in the late fifth century. But there is really little reason to believe that it was or to accept the hypothesis of a relocation of the Gupta court to Ayodhyā (cf. Bakker 1986:24ff.). Aside from this instance, itself dubious, the evidence prior to the twelfth century that Rāma may have been the object of worship is scanty indeed. There is a well-known fifth century charter issued by the Vākāṭaka queen Prabhāvatīgupta from "Rāmagirisvānipādamūlāt" (recalling Kālidāsa's *raghupatipāda*, *Meghadūta* 9), which is taken to be "Nandivardhana" in northern Maharashtra. But even if this were to be accepted as a Rāma shrine (there are problems here, too, which I notice below), this remains a single instance, in a very limited geographical area and narrow temporal frame (ca. A.D. 400–65; Bakker 1986:62). From that point on for the next 700 years, we hear nothing anywhere of Rāma sanctuaries.

This is not, of course, to say that we do not encounter in temples throughout this period scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa and occasional sculptural representations of Rāma. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, reliefs bearing Rāmāyaṇa themes are found in the rock-cut caves at Undavalli (10 kilometers from Vijayawada in coastal Andhra) that may reach back to Viṣṇukūṇḍin times (fourth to fifth centuries A.D.; Rajendra Prasad 1980:72). Yet no epigraphical testimony attesting to any temple explicitly dedicated to Rāma is found in Andhra until far later. Throughout the Deccan, the same situation presents itself. From the seventh century on, substantial interest in the Rāmāyaṇa tale is attested, as in the Cālukya temples of Virūpākṣa and Pāpanāth at Pattadakal, which are among the first to attempt any kind of systematic narration (some even provide identifying labels in Prākrit), or in the great frieze on the *vimāna* of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa temple of Kailāsanātha at Ellora, A.D. 757–72 (Nagarajarao 1978:306; Sivaramamurti 1980:638). From around this period individual scenes also begin to appear in the east and south of the subcontinent—in the late seventh century Paraśurāma temple at Bhubaneshwar; the eighth century Kailāsanātha temple at Kāñcī, and the Olakkaneśvara temple at Mahaballipuram (Nagaswamy 1980:409ff.). Yet nothing in all this indicates dedication to or a cultic significance of Rāma. On the contrary, all these temples are Śaiva, and the majority of Rāmāyaṇa scenes selected for representation are likewise Śaiva in character (the ubiquitous Rāvaṇa-shaking-Kailāsa, for example).

In the north, so far as I can tell, the situation is no different. Again, we find Rāmāyaṇa representations from an early period but nothing to suggest a Rāma cult.

²This, I now see, is also the tentative if undeveloped suggestion of Hans Bakker, at least for north India (he cites no evidence from the south), in Bakker 1987:21–22.

The well-known Viṣṇu shrine at Deogarh (ca. A.D. 500), for example, has some eight Rāmāyaṇa panels; similarly embellished is the recently discovered Viṣṇu temple at Aphṣad, thirty kilometers northeast of Nawadah in the Nawadah District, Bihar, which arguably was erected by the Gupta king Ādityasena in the seventh century (cf. Simha 1968:216ff.; *CII* 3:202ff.). But the Deogarh temple has many other Viṣṇu motifs, and in view of the fact that a large Varāha image was also found in Aphṣad, it is likely that this, too, was a standard *daśāvatāra* temple. The same is true in the west. Throughout the vast Gurjara-Pratihāra empire (ca. 725–1000), for example, which at its height extended out from Rajasthan beyond Kanauj in the east and south to the Vindhya range, there are no Rāma temples to be found.

By the mid-twelfth century, however, the situation began to change, with a sudden onset of activity of building temples to Rāma, which intensified over the next two hundred years. Among early examples of temples dedicated to Rāma are two built under the Kalachuris of Ratnapur (Raipur district, Madhya Pradesh), a first one at Rājim in A.D. 1145 by a minister of King Pṛthvīdeva II, and a second (in Rewa near Makundpur) in 1193, by a feudatory of Vijayasiṁha of the later Kalachuri dynasty ruling at Tripurī. The first bears an inscription that, although obscure in places, helps us begin to situate the politics of the Rāma cult as it develops in this period: “Through fear of [this King Jagapāla], the formidable foes—the Māyūrikas and the valiant Sāvantas—the lords of *maṇḍalas* completely submitted to him. Just as the *kṣatriya* Rāma, (best of) warriors, destroyed the families {sc., of the demons; or: families of bowmen}, even so did this [King Jagapāla] kill the forces of his enemies with multitudes of arrows. . . . Reciting all [works] such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, [being] the support of living beings, self-respecting, con-ferring gifts on Brahman families for their learning—such is Jagapāla. He has caused this beautiful temple to be constructed for manifesting the splendor of Rāma.” Although the identification of the enemy is unclear here, what is important to register is the explicit comparison of the king with Rāma and the establishment of a cult to celebrate, if not operationalize, their relationship (Mirashi 1955:450ff.; the temple was originally built as a temple to Viṣṇu, 451 n.2; 346ff.; Bakker 1986:64–65).

It is around this same time—between the mid-eleventh and the end of the twelfth centuries—that the Gāhaḍavāla dynasty begins to develop Ayodhyā as a major Vaiṣṇava center by way of a substantial temple-building program. Unfortunately, the inscriptive record here is very disappointing, but it seems likely that a Rāma temple was constructed at the Svargadvāra ghat, probably by Candradeva. (And was a birthplace temple built by the last Gāhaḍavāla king, Jayacandra? Cf. Bakker 1986: 51ff., 1987:17ff.; contrast Sharma 1990:10.)

At the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, several major cultic centers devoted to Rāma are created or reinvigorated. I’ll look at only two of these, rather different in character but, I think, identical in their mythopolitics, the Rāma complex at Rāmtek (Rāmatekdi, “Rāma’s Hill,” forty-five kilometers northeast of Nagpur) and the Rāmacandra shrine at Vijayanagar.

According to “local legend” recorded by Henry Cousens, Rāmtek is the place Rāma executed the outcaste ascetic, Śaṅbūka. “Afterwards one Hemāḍpant (some say a Rākshasa, and others a Brāhmaṇa) built the following five temples on the Rāmtek hill: one dedicated to Rāma, and containing images of Rāma and Sītā; one dedicated to Lakshmaṇasvāmi; one to Hanumān; one temple dedicated to the goddess ‘Ekādaśī’; and a temple of Lakshmī-Nārāyaṇa” (Cousens 1897:7ff.; this is what is known as a *pañcāyatana* complex). The site has recently been studied in much greater

detail by A. P. Jamkhedkar and by Bakker (Jamkhedkar 1986; Bakker 1989a). There are perhaps as many as five structures dating from Vākāṭaka times on Rāmtek, and a Cālukyan-era temple, in addition to the several Yādava structures. None of these Vākāṭaka temples, although Vaishnava, gives iconographic or inscriptional indication of dedication to Rāma (they are dedicated instead to Narasiṁha, Varāha, Bhagavān); those associated with Rāma are of the Hemāḍpant style, and we have little reason to believe these replace any earlier Rāma structures.

Since Cousens's time, an undated inscription, unfortunately in a state of decomposition, found on the *garbhagrha* of the Laksmaṇasvāmi temple has been published (*EI* 25:7ff.; cf. Bakker 1989b). The identity of the ruling house hinted at by the mention of *yādavo vamśāḥ* and, further on, of "Śimhana," is made clear in line 17, where we find the name of "King Śrī Rāmacandra, who made [the subordinate official in question] the repository of a royalty brilliant with the prosperity of empire." The record is referring to the Yādava king of Devagiri, Rāmacandra (great-grandson of Śimhana), who ascended the throne in A.D. 1271. Among the records of this king we read elsewhere, "How is this Rāma to be described . . . who freed Vārānasi from the *mleccha* horde, and built there a golden temple of Śāringadhara."³ Although he is said to be a *mahāmāheśvara* or "great devotee of Śiva," who "anoints eight icons of Śambhu with the milk of his fame," he is also called *rāyanārāyaṇa*, "a very Nārāyaṇa among kings," while his minister is described as a descendant of Vasiṣṭha, the family priest of Rāma and the whole Raghu clan (*EI* 25:199ff. vss. 18ff.; *IA* 14:314ff., lines 47, 58).

Now, while there is no contemporary archaeological evidence, the textual sources cited above—Rāmtek and Rāmagiri (of the Vākāṭaka grant) being identical—could suggest that Rāmtek was a site of Rāma worship prior to the time of this grant. What is in any case indisputable on the evidence of this praise-poem (*prāstuti*) is that King Rāmacandra empowered his viceroy substantially to embellish the Rāma cult there. And the fact that some major investment in the site took place near the end of the Yādava dynasty is a historical conjuncture unlikely to be coincidental.

There will be occasion below to return to this Yādava king, but before leaving the question of the Rāmtek center, I want to tie up the loose end in Cousens's report of the figure named Hemāḍpant. There is no doubt that this name—associated with other temple projects dating from the Yādava period (although not with other Rāma temples, since none exist in the area; see Verma 1973)—refers to the celebrated Hemāḍri Pandit, the *mantrin* of the Yādava king Rāmacandra and his father. It is to him that we owe a text (a *dharmanibandha* or "law code") that provides liturgical instructions for worshiping Rāma as an incarnation, and describes a ceremony connected with his birth, the *rāghavadvādaśīvrata* (*Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, Vratakāṇḍa: 1034–35). Hemāḍri also reproduces a part of the *Agastyasamhitā*, the first work to treat of the most important festival associated with Rāma, the *rāmanavamī*, and which itself cannot be dated before the twelfth century. It is Hemāḍri's "law code" that provides the cult of Rāma with brahmanical sanction for the first time (Kane 1962–75, Vol. 5:84–88; Bakker 1986:153ff., 1987:15).

The apogee of the growth of a royal cult of Rāma suggested by the foregoing material is reached in the middle (or end) of the fourteenth century with the founding of the Vijayanagar empire in the Deccan. Prior to this, Rāma temples in the region of northern Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh are as rare as they are in other parts of

³Sāringadhara Viṣṇu ("Viṣṇu bearing the bow *sāringa*") likely becomes an allomorph of Rāma in this period, as later (*sāraṅgāpanī* is an epithet of Rāma in *Bhaktamālā*, vss. 55 and 128). The historical context of Rāmacandra's claim to have "liberated" Banaras is unknown.

the subcontinent. The earliest I can locate dates from Guntur district in the Kākatīya period, with an inscription of Śaka 1245 (ca. A.D. 1323) declaring that the inhabitants agreed to give to the temples of Varada Gopinātha and Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa a portion of their incomes for the merit of Pratāpa Rudradeva (*SII* 10:288).

With the establishment of Vijayanagara, however—at a site, “Kiṣkindhā” and Lake Pampā, permeated by Rāmāyaṇa lore—we find incorporated into the very structure of the imperial city a temple devoted to Rāma. Situated at the nucleus of the royal center, the Rāmacandra temple (before A.D. 1450, cf. Fritz et al. 1984a:62), probably the “state chapel,” is at the same time the focal point of a spatially articulated political theology. First noticed by A. H. Longhurst in 1917, the political-theological code of the city has been best analyzed by John Fritz. He argues that urban form itself—such features as the movement dictated by the plan of the city, with the Rāma temple as the destination of the “sacred way” orienting the city, and the mythological associations of the site itself—was designed to establish a homology of the king and the divine hero-king Rāma and a congruence between the terrestrial realm of the king and that of the god. “The king’s actions were a manifestation of Rāma’s and he participated in the sanctity of the deity.” As an inscription of A.D. 1379 puts it, “In that same city (Vijayanagar) did (King) Harihara dwell as in former times Rāma dwelled in the city of Ayodhyā” (Fritz 1986:53, 1985:266; Fritz et al. 1984a:146–54).⁴ In the subsequent Vijayanagar/Nāyaka period separate temples with Rāma as the main deity become somewhat more common, but are still strikingly few (two important examples are the Rāmasvāmi temple in Kumbakonam built by Raghunātha Nāyaka in the sixteenth century, and the Bhadrācalam temple on the Godāvarī in Khammam district, Andhra Pradesh, built in the eighteenth century with the end of the Qutb Shahi dynasty, but almost certainly dating back to Kākatīya times).

What may constitute the sole, yet still a minor, exception to what must thus be viewed as a twelfth-century date for the origin of the temple cult of Rāma is found in the early Coḷa realm.⁵ Attention is often called to several Coḷa bronzes of Kodanḍa Rāma, but these seem to have been highly restricted in both time and place, to tenth-century Thanjavur district and the reign of Āditya, who apparently assumed the title “Kodanḍa Rāma.” Whether these figures were “made under the influence of Kamban’s *Rāma-Kathā*”—or, more interesting, whether the great Tamil poem was composed in that political context—depends on the notoriously uncertain dating of that text; anywhere from the late ninth to the late twelfth century has been suggested, the latter end of this range being most generally accepted. But it

⁴The narrative followed in the frieze on the central shrine is that of Vālmīki (A. L. Dallapiccola, personal communication, cf. Dallapiccola 1992; this applies to the outer walls of the main shrine. “A change occurs with the set sculpted on the inner face of the enclosure wall of the same complex,” writes Dallapiccola, for which she suspects the influence of Telugu versions). Stein 1980:388ff. points to the particular importance attached in the Vijayanagar empire to the Mahānavamī festival, which commemorates Rāma’s propitiation of Durgā before marching out to defeat Rāvaṇa. A tenth day commemorating Rāma’s victory (*vijayadaśamī*) may actually have been invented in Vijayanagar. The identification between the Vijayanagar king and Rāma will be strengthened in the following century, when the usurper of the Vijayanagar throne, Narasa (1486–1508), is represented in the *Acyutarāyābhyudaya* as “an avatar of Him who built the bridge over the ocean, and who, perhaps by virtue of powers stored from this former birth, laid down a bridge over the waters of the Sahyajā [= Kāverī] and took the city of Śrīraṅga” (1.30).

⁵N. P. Unni of the University of Kerala (personal communication) refers to the existence of a Muṣikavarmśa temple dedicated to Lakṣmaṇa according to an inscription dated A.D. 920 (the inscription is unavailable to me).

certainly remains possible that Āditya prefigured the political instrumentation of the Rāmāyaṇa (Nagaswamy 1983:7, 154–59).

How far beyond this one case we can go in Tamil country is uncertain. To infer from temples bearing Rāma reliefs that a cult of Rāma existed in the ninth and tenth centuries is not possible; even to attribute a special significance of Rāma for Coḷa kingship is difficult. The positive evidence for such a significance is scant for the early Coḷa domain and weakened by negative comparative evidence: Nothing in the epigraphical record of the Bādāmi Cālukyas, for example, indicates a political valorization of the Rāmāyaṇa, yet the same area, as already noted, produced some of the earliest plastic representations of the epic. Furthermore, the Rāmāyaṇa competed with a variety of other epic friezes—the *Mahābhārata*, the Kṛṣṇa-cycle—in places like Ellora and indeed in the Coḷa country itself, which certainly seems to diminish the position of centrality some have striven to establish for it (Sanford 1974). The epigraphical remains, too, as I show below, contain little beyond the standard rhetorical ornamentation.

Additional support for the development of the Rāma cult sketched above is provided by the history of Rāma cultic sculpture, that is, works designed for worship and not simply associated with temple narrative panels. This, too, remains largely untraced, but as far as I can see, nothing would contradict the chronology of Rāma-dedicated temples. Such sculpture is extremely rare prior to the twelfth century and, in fact, continues to be rare until long after that date.⁶ Bruno Dagens's findings for western Andhra may be somewhat atypical—this is admittedly a strongly Śaivite region—but they confirm in important ways the differential development of the purely decorative and more centrally cultic dimensions of the figure of Rāma: Whereas Rāmāyaṇa episodes play a considerable role on the pillars of temples throughout the area between Alampur and Śrīsailam from at least the tenth century on, cultic images of Rāma are found only far later. In this region, in fact, Rāma appears not to have gained full autonomy as a major god until perhaps as late as the eighteenth century (Dagens 1984:614–15; cf. 63 and 174–75).

I am not asserting, then, that Rāma was never the object of cultic worship prior to the period with which I am concerned here. Even less am I claiming that the Rāma cult, when it did arise, superseded all others; in Vijayanagar, for example, Virūpākṣa remained what might be called the *rāstradevata* (“imperial deity”), whereas many of the kings identifying themselves with Rāma through inscriptions or patronizing his temple cult are thoroughly Śaiva (the Yādava king Rāmacandra already noted, for example, or others I mention below, such as Jayasimha Siddharāja, whose most famous architectural achievement is the Sahasraliṅga tank at Anahilavada, and Pṛthvīraja III himself, who is described as a lifelong devotee of Śiva in *Pṛthvīrajavijaya* 11.105). What is certain, however, is that the cult of Rāma has a history. At first extraordinarily restricted in time and space, it exhibits striking efflorescence and assumes a prominent place within the context of a political theology from the end of the twelfth century onward, achieving in some instances a centrality by the middle of the fourteenth. This development is paralleled in other areas of cultural production as well.

⁶The terracottas of the fifth century found in the northeast (Saheth-Maheth, etc.) hardly constitute an exception, given that they almost certainly formed friezes on the walls of buildings. See Pal, 1986–87, Vol. 1:232 (a fifth century Rāma terracotta bearing a verse of Vālmīki's); cf. also Vogel 1906–8:96 and pl. xxvii, p. 155 (fifth century Hanumān); Sotheby's Sale Catalogue for March 1990, No. 236 (Hanumān speaking to Sītā in the *asokavana*). But note the prescription in the (ninth century) *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* for the *svarūpa* of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (cited *Caturvargacintāmaṇi*, Vratakāṇḍa:1035).

Rāma in the World: Inscriptions

If the architectural remains associated with Rāma have yet to be systematically worked through and synthetically analyzed, this is even more the case with the inscriptional materials (beyond those associated with a temple cult) that refer to or invoke the god-king or in one way or another process Rāmāyaṇa themes (Sircar 1980 and Diskelkar 1960 are the sole, unhelpful guides). So here, too, my findings have to be regarded as provisional, but again I would be surprised if further work would require fundamental revision of my conclusion: The Rāmāyaṇa supplies serious material to the political imagination of premodern India as coded in the inscriptional record only from the later medieval period on; references in the first millennium are remarkably few but gain in frequency and complexity especially after the twelfth century. I will glance at the quality of the earlier material, and then go on to examine in more depth a few examples of the very different discourse we encounter later.

Rāma, to be sure, furnishes a standard of comparision (*upamāna*) in hyperbolic inscriptional discourse from an early period, but these are static, formulaic allusions. Their quality may be gauged from what is perhaps the earliest instance, the Sālivāhana *prāśasti* at Nasik (ca. A.D. 150), where Rāma is simply one among a series of heroes: *nābhāga-nahusa-janamejaya-sakara-yayāti-rāma-abarīṣa-samatejasa* ("equal in majesty to Nābhāga," etc.). Hardly an exception to such uninteresting formulae in the early period is the comparison with Rāma of the Gupta emperor Skandagupta, "equal to Rāma in his great offensive power" (CII 3:318.5; he is likened to Yudhiṣṭhira in the same line). This is, in fact, the single time Rāmacandra is mentioned in the entire corpus of Gupta inscriptions, and if we knew nothing about the putative move of the Gupta capital to Ayodhyā, the reference would hardly claim our attention at all.⁷

The public discourse of major dynasties for centuries made virtually no appropriation of the Rāma thème. In the records of the Gurjara-Pratihāra empire (ca. 725–1000), for example, it seems that reference to Rāma is altogether absent (Puri 1986:211). There is one exception, however: the ninth-century Gwalior *prāśasti* of King Bhoja. This record, commemorating the construction of a domestic Viṣṇu shrine, reads in vs. 3, "In their family [i.e., the family of the solar kings], [in which] the luster [of Viṣṇu, *dhāma*] eventually set foot, Rāma of auspicious birth made a war of destruction and slaughter against the demons . . . in which Rāvaṇa was killed." This is followed by a verse on Nāgabhata I that alludes to the campaign of the Arab army of Junaid against Ujjain (ca. A.D. 725): "In that family . . . a shelter of the three worlds, there miraculously appeared the image of the Ancient Sage [Nārāyaṇa] [in the person of] the god-king [*devaḥ*] Nāgabhata. For when crushing the large armies of the powerful *mleccha* king, a destroyer of pious deeds [*sukṛta-*], [Nāgabhata] shone with four arms brilliant with glittering terrible weapons." This meaning-conjunction occurs nowhere else in India before the twelfth century; it is a prefiguration, I think, of a political semiotics to come.

⁷Pal 1986–87, Vol. 1:74 (cf. 232), asserts that "Ardent Vaiṣṇavas, the royal Guptas would naturally have chosen to model their standard portrait type on the idealized image of Rāma." But what evidence do we have that there existed an "idealized image" of Rāma in Gupta India? The paucity of representations in a recent survey (Williams 1982) implies instead the figure's irrelevance to Gupta-period artists.

Further to the west, among the Śilahāras, contemporaries of the Pratihāras, Rāma is never mentioned (Mirashi 1977). This is true, too, for the Bādāmi Cālukyas (ca. 500–750), who, despite their well-attested knowledge of and respect for the Sanskrit epic (e.g., IA 7:161.3), make no reference to Rāma in their charters. Among the Gaṅgas, their neighbors to the southwest, a single, pedestrian allusion is found (Ramesh 1984:196), and only one in the entire extant corpus of inscriptions of the north-central Paramāras (*EI* 2:15). Besides these cases of simple similes, the most common reference to Rāma in early inscriptions is a minatory verse that begins to appear commonly at the end of land-grants from the early ninth century on, in Rāṣṭrakūṭa regions: “Common to (all) kings is the dam [*setu*] of *dharma*; you should abide by it moment by moment. Again and again Rāmabhadra [v.l., Rāmacandra] implores all future kings to do this” (the first occurrence is *EI* 23.212, a record of A.D. 807 of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas of Gujarat). Still, all this presents us with in the end is an image of Rāma as superordinate king, an image the literary texts had already been promulgating for centuries.

More complex in their referentiality are inscriptions that exploit the narrative of the poem with a historicist turn. Although Rāma is otherwise absent from Pallava records, an inscription of King Nandivarman (undated; ca. eighth century) describes Narasiṁhavarman as surpassing “the glory of the valour of Rāma by (his) conquest of Laṅkā” (*SII* 2:348. 22), the same boast Rājendra Coḷa I was to make two hundred years later, taunting the Sinhalese with the mytheme when referring to his general’s defeat of the king of Laṅkā: Rāma needed the help of monkeys to build his *setu*, and only with great effort could he slay the lord of Laṅkā; “but my general crossed the ocean in ships and easily destroyed the lord of Laṅkā—and so put Rāma to shame” (*SII* 3:421. 80, ca. A.D. 1018; Pr̥thivīpati a feudatory of Parāntaka I, is awarded the sobriquet *samgrāmarāghava*, “Battle-Rāma,” for his defeat, again, of a Sinhalese king, *SII* 2:383.10). Considerably more informed by the Rāma tale is the Kanyakumārī inscription of Vīrarājendradeva (ca. 1030), which contains a fascinating *praśasti* on the Coḷa dynasty. After praising Rāma in several striking verses, the account goes on to provide a history of the first Coḷa king: While out hunting he is led astray by a magical deer-*rākṣasa* (as Rāma was), to the banks of the Kāverī River. He finds the region to be devoid of brahmans, relocates many from Āryavarta southward and thus establishes the Coḷamandalam (*EI* 18:21ff., 37.139ff.).

Not unrelated to the Coḷa discourse is the *praśasti* of the reconstituted Cālukyan dynasty of Kalyāṇi (northeast Karnataka) under Vikramāditya V (reigned A.D. 1008–15): For the first time the dynastic history seeks to establish a connection with the solar kings of Rāma’s lineage, describing how, after fifty-nine kings of the Cālukya *vamsa* had ruled in Ayodhyā, the family emigrated southward to its present location (IA 1887:15ff.; p. 21.11–12).⁸ Vikramāditya VI of the same dynasty comes to be referred to as “Cālukya-Rāma” (*EI* 15:348ff. vs. 20, Kannada) and, as in the Coḷa records, Rāmāyaṇa narrative elements are used to frame historical events: The first political-historical claim in the narrative of Vikramāditya VI, in a record of A.D. 1077, is made by means of a complex punning verse on the Rāma story (which beyond the obvious allusion to an alliance with a southern power, no doubt against the Coḷas, is hard to decode): “He went to seek Lakṣmī [royalty/Sītā] produced

⁸The impulse to establish this sort of lineage may be as old as the Andhra Ikṣvākus (Sircar 1939:10ff.). It is found elsewhere in middle-period India, for example among the Pratihāras, who represent themselves as descendants of Laksmana, the *pratihāra* or “door-keeper” of his brother Rāmabhadra (*EI* 18:95. 4, 107, vss. 3–4). But note that their political discourses, like their ritual practices, are otherwise devoid of Rāma.

by his [her] father (Janaka); along with his brother, the son of Sumitrā, and with a force of monkeys; to the banks of the ocean came the vast royalty of Vibhīṣaṇa (the lord of Dravida) out of fear of the Many-headed, and the Cālukya-Rāma bowed to him [in compliance with his supplication?]" (*EI* 12.269ff., lines 88ff.).⁹

Yet again, in virtually all the inscriptional materials considered thus far, the semiotic situation is analogous to what we find in the development of temple representations: Rāma and Rāmāyaṇa mythemes function as peripheral rhetorical embellishments, inflecting and texturing a given discourse but not constituting it. Very different are the materials of the succeeding period. Again, I will examine here only a couple of examples, where we can see how the political world comes to be read through—identified with, cognized by—the narrative provided by the epic tale.¹⁰

The Dabhoi (Darbhavatī) stone inscription of *samvat* 1311 (ca. A.D. 1253), composed by the poet Someśvaradeva, describes, among other members of the Vāghela dynasty of Gujarat, Lavaṇaprasāda, a feudatory and minister of the Caulukya/Solanki king, Bhīma II (A.D. 1178–1242), who was eventually to establish the Vāghelas as an independent ruling house (*EI* 1:20ff.; *HIG* 3:46.6ff.):

He [sc., Arṇorāja] placed upon his son, Lavaṇaprasāda, the burden of the land of the Gūrjaras. . . . While he was ruling this land . . . was not the the Gūrjara-rājya even greater than rāmarājya?¹¹ . . . So many the immortal kings on earth, yet virtually all of them were beside themselves with fear even to hear mention made of the king of the Turuṣkas. When he came for battle in a rage it was [Lavaṇaprasāda] alone (lacuna). {The Turk who} dyed the earth with blood dripping from the severed heads of many kings, even he, when he came before this [King Lavaṇaprasāda], went dry-mouthed in fear. And [Lavaṇaprasāda] defeated him (lacuna) with his pillar-like arm terrible for the sword it held (lacuna). How could he be a mere mortal who defeated the king of the *mlecchas* whom no other mortal could defeat?

A more elaborate variation on this theme is contained in an inscription published by D. R. Bhandarkar in 1912, although never translated and never discussed in

⁹In the *Vikramāñkadevacarita* Bilhaṇa describes the father of Vikramāditya VI: "Then came Āhavamalladeva, also known as Trailokyamalla [Someśvara I]. . . . Because of his purifying history [*pavitracāritrata*] he has been represented by poets as a second Rāma in stories, tales, poems, and plays" (1.87–88).

¹⁰I forgo here detailed consideration of those many inscriptions asserting the identity of the king and Viṣṇu, although I believe, as in the case of the Gāhadavālas, these are almost certainly intended as references to Rāma (who is otherwise, strikingly, absent from their records). Cf. *EI* 9:319ff., vs. 16, "Asked by Hara to protect Vārānasi from the foul Turk warrior [*dusṭāt turuṣkasubhatāt*]—for he alone was able to guard the earth—Hari came into being here, with the illustrious name of Govindacandra"; and the copper-plate inscription of his grandson Jayacandra (cited in Bakker 1986:53 n. 4): "From him, a man of miraculous power, there arose Jayacandra, lord of kings, who was [in fact] Nārāyaṇa descended to save the earth."

¹¹The history of the appropriation of this term in Indian polities has not been traced; as for Gujarat, this is almost, but not quite, the first instance. In a record of Mūlarāja II, dated v.s. 1232 (= ca. A.D. 1176), we find, in reference to Ajayapāla, that "he caused rāmarājya to descend to earth" (-*avatāritarāmarājya-*, ed. Gadre n.d.:73.9). There is no record of Ajayapāla's having fought with the Central Asians. It may be, however, to his notorious reassertion of Śaiva Brahmanism as against the very public Jainism of his predecessor Kumārapāla that the epithet refers; elsewhere he is said to have "planted once more the trees of vedic *dharma*" (*bhuvāṁ babhārājayadeva<bhūpah/> <ucchārayan bhūpa-?>taruprakāñḍān uvāpa yo naigamadharma-vṛksān*, *EI* 2.442, vs. 21). See further on *rāmarājya* below.

later literature with reference to the specific and really quite striking claims of its discourse. The inscription, dated *samvat* 1224 (ca. A.D. 1168), was originally found near Hānsi (appearing as Āsi or Āsika in the inscription), a town in Haryāna of strategic importance for controlling the western approach to Delhi, and an object of struggle since at least the middle of the eleventh century (Sharma 1975:67). The record is a *praśasti* of the Cāhamāna king Pṛthvīrāja II, which recounts how he put his maternal uncle Kilhaṇa in command of the fort at Hānsi, concerned as he was about an attack of the Turks ("in his belief that the mighty Hammīra warrior was a thorn in the side of all the world," lines 4–5). Kilhaṇa fortifies the stronghold, and checks the advance of the invaders ("You there, Hammīra! Where is your greatness now!" line 7; cf. *EI* 9:77 vs. 34, where Kelhaṇa [sic] is described in a record of the Cāhamānas of Naḍḍula: "Having soundly defeated the mighty Turuṣka, he built a tower of gold, like a crown of the dwelling of Someśa"). We are then told how Kilhaṇa received a letter from one Vibhīṣaṇa, who reminds him how the two of them once had aided Rāma in the building of the *setu*. Then he declares: *pṛthvīrāja mabārāja rāmo 'sau samśayam vinā/banūmān niścitam vīra bhavān adbbutavikramah*// "And that Rāma has without doubt become Pṛthvīrāja the great king, and certainly Hanūmān has become you, great hero, a man of miraculous deeds" (line 14). What is implicit in the fragmentary remains of the previous record is here made absolutely clear: the thorough identification (*pace* Bhandarkar 1912:17) of a historical ruler with the divine king Rāma, and what will become an increasingly explicit demonization—"rākṣasization"—of the agents of the profound historical changes effected during this epoch, the Turkic peoples from central and western Asia.

Rāma in the World: Historiography

I want to adduce one last genre of evidence, the historiographical (or "textualized," to distinguish it from the "documentary" inscription), in support of the argument I have been making here, that the period of some two hundred years starting around the mid-twelfth century witnessed a coding of political reality via Rāmāyaṇa themes such as did not exist—or at least not to anywhere near the same degree—in any previous era. I'll cite only two Sanskrit documents, the one a brief episode from a Jain anthology of historical accounts (*prabandha*), the other a full-scale historical poem contemporary with the events it narrates.

In the *Dvyāśrayakāvya* of Hemacandra, a poem that recounts the history of the first patron of this Jain polymath and poet, the Caulukya/Solanki king Jayasiṁha Siddharāja of Gujarat (A.D. 1094–1143), the king is identified as an incarnation of Rāmacandra (15.56–57), as others have already noticed (Majumdar 1956; note that in his actual inscriptions, like the just-published Bilpalk *praśasti*, he is called "the Supreme Person himself[Viṣṇu] come as avatar to earth," *EI* 40:27ff., vs. 15). We can, however, flesh out the brief allusion of Hemacandra's by means of a passage in Merutunga's *Prabandhacintāmani* (A.D. 1304), the earliest of a new genre of Jain historiographical texts that appears to have come into being in the fourteenth century. The section in question occurs in the *Siddharāja* chapter, and is called the "Narrative of the Prevention of the Invasion of the Mlecchas":

While the chiefs of the lord of the *mlecchas* were assembling as a host, the king summoned some spies who had come from Madhyadeśa, gave them secret instructions

and dismissed them. On the following day at twilight, when a wind as wild as the wind at the end of time began to blow, the king went off to his assembly hall—like the gods' hall Sudharmā it was—and as he looked on, a pair of Palādas, each carrying a gold brick on his head, descended from the sky. The crowds of people were overcome with fear on seeing them. The two presented their gift at the footstool of the king, and falling at his feet, they said, "Today while paying worship to the gods, the great king of Laṅkā, Śrī Vibhiṣaṇa, called to mind the one who put him on the throne, the crest-jewel of the Raghu clan, the glorious Śrī Rāma. And with his eye of wisdom Vibhiṣaṇa at that moment realized that his own master Rāma had descended into the avatar [*°avatāre vatīrṇa-*] of Śrī Siddharāja, crest-jewel of the Caulukya clan. His first thought was how deeply his heart desired to come and pay you homage, but he sent us to inquire whether the lord himself would favor him with a visit. May your Highness indicate your decision through your royal mouth." [The king declines, presents the golden chain on his own neck as a return gift] and when they asked leave to go he gave them a special message, to the effect that he shouldn't be forgotten by their lord on any other occasion when help was needed. The two *rākṣasas* disappeared into the air. From then on, the *mleccha* chiefs were filled with fear, they lost their courage, and summoned before the king they spoke words laden with devotion for him. They presented to the king appropriate tribute, and then Śrī Siddharāja dismissed them.

(Jinavijaya 1933:72–73)

This arresting intermixture of fantasy and concrete local particularity, a sort of proto-magical realism that we find elsewhere in Merutuṅga's engaging work, resists easy historical interpretation. But several elements of the new code of interest to me are easily identified: the historical king as incarnation of Rāma—Merutuṅga's Siddharāja cycle ends with the verse, "Just as Rāma, a treasure of virtues, was born of Daśaratha, so the world-conquering Jayasimha was born of him (i.e., Karna)" (Jinavijaya 1933:55, vs. 88); the threat of the *mleccha*; and the reading of the historical event through the narrative of the old epic poem.

Far more fully developed is this code in the key text for my argument, the long-ignored *Pr̥thvīrājavijaya*.¹² A historical *kāvya* by a Kashmiri poet resident at the Ajmer court named Jayānaka (or perhaps Vināyaka Pāṇḍita),¹³ the *Pr̥thvīrājavijaya* deals with the life of the last independent "Hindu" king of Ajmer. It was written between 1178–93—the dates of the defeat of Muhammad bin Ghur by Bhīmadeva of Gujarat (*Pr̥thvīrājavijaya* 11.9) and Pr̥thvīrāja's own defeat by Muhammad bin Ghur in 1193—and quite likely between the years 1191–93, a specificity we can achieve with few other historical poems. Admittedly this was not

¹²The work, already famous by A.D. 1200 (it is quoted by Jayaratha on Ruyyaka's *Alamkārasarvasva*, Dasgupta and De 1962:360n.; Sarda 1913:261), survives in fragmentary form in a single birch-bark manuscript. Serious analysis of this crucial text is nonexistent. Besides the superficial notices of Sarda 1913:259ff.; Sharma 1975:112, 220, 378.; Prabha 1976:145–78; Lienhard 1984:219, see Pathak 1966:98–136, who manages to ignore the mythopolitical equivalence that is the central and informing theme of the poem.

¹³"Jayānaka," a Kashmiri poet introduced in the poem itself (12.63, 68), is usually taken as the name of the author. Note, however, that to one Vināyaka Pāṇḍita is attributed a striking verse in praise of Pr̥thvīrāja found in the *Sāringadharapaddhati* (No. 1254): "I have little relish for paying homage to Śiva, no desire to worship Krishna; I am stiff when it comes to bowing down to Śiva's consort, indifferent to the temple of Brahmā. It was through King Pr̥thvīrāja, by his sacred sign upon our face [?], that we were protected from enemy destruction [*asmākam paramardano 'sti vadane nyastena samrakṣitah pr̥thvīrājanaresvarat*], and so I worship the very grass on the streets of his capital." One Kavināyakaviniñāyakabhaṭṭa is credited with completing Bhavabhūti's early Rāma play, *Mahāvīracarita* (ed. Todar Mall, London, 1928, ms. ad 5.46).

the first literary-historical text to imagine the career of a king from within a Rāmāyāna framework. One important predecessor is the *Rāma[pāla]carita* of Saṃdhvīkaranandin (another Pāla text from two centuries earlier, the *Rāmacarita* of Gauda Abhinanda, has no recoverable connection with any historical king). The *Rāma[pāla]carita* has nothing to do with Central Asians, but rather concerns political developments in eleventh-twelfth century Bengal; the slot of Rāvaṇa, minus demonization, is filled by the Kaivarta king Bhīma (cf. 1.12 and com. ad loc.). But there the epic narrative provides only a rhetorical vehicle, if even that, for the exposition of the life of the Pāla king. Indeed, the very form of double entendre that constitutes the discourse (the work is technically a *slesakāvya* or paronomastic poem) serves to establish difference of reference rather than identity. Moreover, the lives of Rāmapāla and Rāmacandra are not presented as parallel, let alone identical. In the political imagination informing Jayānaka's history, by contrast, Pṛthvīrāja III (like his ancestor Pṛthvīrāja II) systematically and throughout the poem is Rāma.¹⁴

The mythopolitical equivalence that informs the entire poem is made clear from the start. After a prelude in which Jayānaka calls Vālmīki's poem "as true as the Veda" (com. on 1.5), he moves in his apologia to address the king himself before whom he is reciting his work: "Let him alone who resides in my heart hear me, he who has entered a body consisting of Rāma" (i.e., who is Rāma reborn, *jagāma yo rāmamayam śariram śrotā sa evāstu hrdi sthito me*, 1.33). In keeping with the actuality of this address, the work is very much a history, a highly referential history, of the present. The *avatāra* of Viṣṇu/Rāma as Pṛthvīrāja is preceded by an account of the pollution by *mlecchas* of the region of Ajayameru, especially the *tīrtha* Puṣkara. Brahmā, as per convention, is represented as beseeching Viṣṇu to descend to earth: In this, the Kali age, Śiva has become indifferent, his bull [here, *dharma*] having only one leg to stand on (1.44); the ascetic Buddha avatar is devoted to peace (1.45); Indra is too weak for lack of sacrificial offerings (1.46); while "having seen his clan as shocked by the birth of the Buddha as it was energized by the birth of Rāma, the sun doubts his own ancestry now and has lost his glow" (1.48). But at this point the poet departs from formula, to have Brahmā describe what is happening at the most celebrated pilgrimage site in Rajasthan:

With you become an ascetic [i.e., become the Buddha]—with you become a friend of the deer, Viṣṇu—my dwelling place Puṣkara has been overcome with terror of the *mātaṅgas* [= "outcastes," i.e., Turks]. The place where I myself performed the final ablutions after the great sacrifice of world creation, the *mleccha* army now uses to refresh themselves after their violent destruction of temples and brahman settlements. The place where Śacī forbids even heavenly courtesans to bathe . . . there now bathe the menstruating wives of these lowest of men. Half dead with thirst from their ride across the desert those evil men slit their horses' throats and drank their blood. But their thirst was still not slaked, and they now drink the waters only those who feed on nectar should drink.

(1.49–50; 53–54)

The first third of the poem is taken up with an account of Pṛthvīrāja's ancestors, with the immediate genealogy of Pṛthvīrāja given in chapter 6. King Arṇorāja had two wives, one of whom was the daughter of the celebrated king of the Gujarat

¹⁴Such total identification seems not have been made without some resistance. In both the *Prabandhakośa* of Rājaśekhara (Jinavijaya 1935:81–82), and the *Purātanaprabandha-saṃgraha* (Jinavijaya 1936:8–9), the story is told of "Vikramāditya," who sought to arrogate to himself the title "Abhinava Rāma." He is disabused of his arrogance by a display of the power of the real Rāma.

Caulukya/Solanki dynasty (whom we have already mentioned), Siddharāja Jayasimha. This wife gave birth to Someśvara, whose own first son, the astrologers predict, will be an incarnation of Rāma:¹⁵ “[Your] son will be Rāma himself, born [again] in his desire to complete the task he had started” (6.35). The son eventually born is “the enemy of Rāvaṇa, become an earthly king in the Kali age” (7.6), “a form of Viṣṇu become a man” (8.10), “an avatar of Rāma” (*rāmāvatārasyaiva prthvīrājasya*, 8.62), while his ministers, Kadambavāsa and Bhuvanaikamalla, are avatars of Hanumān and Garuḍa, respectively (9.38–39; 86–89). When Pṛthvīrāja becomes king, “the earth becomes a site of the riches and joys of *rāmarājya* in the very midst of the Kali age” (9.35). In chapter 10, after consolidating his power by the defeat of his regional enemies, Pṛthvīrāja returns to his capital and first hears mention of Muhammad bin Ghur:

The victorious king entered the town, where a wreath about the city tower of Ajmer—a terrible wreath made of his enemies’ heads—stopped the Goddess of Royalty from ever leaving. Now, every king in the northwest is as powerful as the wind; but the Lord of Horses had true courage to boot, and so surpassed all others. But even such a king as this had been robbed of rule in Garjani [Ghazni], and rendered empty and light as an autumn cloud by the evil Gori—him who was given to eating foul foods, the enemy [*ari*] of cows [*go-*], from whence he got his very name.¹⁶ They say he strove to become Eclipse itself, to darken the royal fortune of the entire circle of kings. . . . What more to say? Heedless that the king [Pṛthvīrāja] had vowed to exterminate all demon-men [“*nārarakṣasāṁ*” *mlecchānām*, according to the commentator], he sent an ambassador into the presence of this lion in his den—King Pṛthvīrāja in Ajayameru.

(10.38–42)

The Ghurid ambassador is then described in what may be the first and is certainly the most detailed early representation of a Central Asian in Indian literature, one that provides almost a paradigm of xenophobic differentiation:¹⁷

His head was so bald and his forehead so broad it was as if God had intentionally made them thus to inscribe [as on a copper plate] the vast number of cows he had

¹⁵ Pṛthvīrāja’s father Someśvara married the daughter of the Kalachuri king of Tripurī, in whose realm some of the earliest Rāma cultic activities have been traced. (There seem to have been earlier marriage alliances here as well: the fact that the queen of the Kalachuri king Jayasimhadeva of Rewa [A.D. 1167] is named Kelhaṇadevī [EI 21:92], links her with the Ki[e]lhana who was minister to Pṛthvīrāja II.)

¹⁶ The reference is, of course, to Muhammad bin Ghur. According to Bosworth’s reconstruction, the first major success against Ghazna on the part of the Ghurids, a local family of central Afghanistan (Islamized first by Mahmud of Ghazna), was in late 1148 when Saif al-Dīn Sūrī captured the town. For some 12 to 15 years (perhaps 1160–73) Ghazna was then occupied by Oghuz “military adventurers,” until captured by Muhammad bin Ghur, who used the town as a springboard to the Punjab first in 1178 (Bosworth 1977:5, 68–69, 111–29). These Oghuz horsemen, rather than the Ghaznavids, may be the referent of *hayapati* in verse 39 (although this is not, admittedly, a rare epithet of Turkic kings, and is applied to Ghori himself in 11.12). The accession of Pṛthvīrāja III seems to have taken place by 1178 (Sircar in EI 32:299ff., esp. 302), not in 1180 (Sharma 1975:81).

¹⁷ In the drama *Lalitavigraharāja* of Somadeva (A.D. 1153), composed in honor of Vigraharāja IV, two Turuṣka prisoners are introduced at the beginning of the fourth act (they speak Māgadhī but are not described), and later an ambassador from Hammīra, who speaks Sanskrit and, indeed, cites the *purāṇas* (“[no king] is not [in part] Viṣṇu” [read: *nāviṣṇuḥ prthivīpatir ity eva*]), ed. Kielhorn 1901:10–15. Incidentally, this drama is preserved engraved on stone used by Qutbuddīn Aibak to build a mosque in Ajmer after its capitulation, ca. A.D. 1200 (EI 29:178).

slain. The color of his beard, his eyebrows, his very lashes was yellower than the grapes that grow in his native region [of Ghazni]—it was almost as if even the color black had shunned him in fear of being stained by his bad reputation. Horrible was his speech, like the cry of wild birds, for it lacked cerebrals; indeed, all his phonemes were impure, impure as his complexion. . . . He had what looked like skin disease, so ghastly white he was, whiter than bleached cloth, whiter than the snow of the Himalayan region where he was born.

(10.43–46)

The poet then summarizes:

Ten-fold have these Goris harassed the world and so earned their name: speech they destroy by their faulty language; the directions, waters, eyes, rays of the sun by the clouds of dust raised by their armies; the very heaven and earth by the weight of their crimes; lightning they destroy by [= exceed in] their cruelty, arrows by their attachment to murderous ways [?]; and cows they destroy by slaughtering them.¹⁸ News came that the fort of the Gūrjaras at Nāḍvala [Nāḍqula in Marwad] had been overrun by these demons with the bodies of men (*nṛtanubbir asuraiḥ*), who fill to overcrowding the prisons of the God of Death, and drive Him to distraction. And there appeared on Pṛthvīrāja's face a terrible frown—the boundary line of security for the world—announcing it was now the moment to span the bows of war.

(10.49–50)

In the following, penultimate chapter of the extant text, after learning that “Gori” has been defeated in Gujarat (11.9), Pṛthvīrāja enters his picture gallery (like the Rāma of earlier poets such as Bhavabhūti) to view a full exhibition of scenes of his earlier life as the divine king Rāma (11.24–11.104).

Plotting Against History

Whereas the Rāmāyāna may certainly have played a substantial role, in some instances a central role, in the political imagination of earlier India, it comes to be deployed with a fuller and more referentially direct expression—in royal cultic, documentary, and textual representations—from the twelfth century onward. The temporal trajectory of this development, especially plotted against the spatial, suggests compellingly that it was in reaction to the transformative encounter with the polities of Central Asia—with Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Khaljis (and perhaps even earlier, with the Arabs, as the Gwalior *praśasti* cited above suggests)—and the resultant new social and political order instituted by the establishment of the Sultanate that the Rāmāyāna lived anew in royal discourse. A minimal correlation of the reasonably secure (and generally well-known) historical record of the invasions with the half-dozen or so important materials adduced above suffices to show this.

In 1008 Mahmud of Ghazni defeated at Peshawar a confederacy of kings from the subcontinent under the leadership of the Shāhi Jayapāla, which included the rulers of Ujjain, Gwalior, Kālañjara, Delhi, and Ajmer. Over the following decade Mahmud made repeated raids over the Punjab as far as (but not into) Kashmir and eastern Rajasthan; by September 1018 he penetrated east of Delhi and Mathurā; in

¹⁸All ten items are possible meanings of the word *gauḥ*, to whom the Turks are “enemies,” *ari*, whence they are called “Gori” (an etymological scheme found also in vs. 40 above).

December of the same year he entered Kanauj; thereafter he moved toward Kālañjara, capital of the Candellas of Bundelkhand, but was repulsed;¹⁹ in 1026 he raided the great temple at Somnath-Prabhāsa in Gujarat. Although Mahmud died in 1030, Ghaznavid military campaigns continued, and within half a century or so of the death of Mahmud, the Gāhadavālas begin to transform Ayodhyā into a major Vaiṣṇava center, a building program that was to continue for a century. Within three generations, the first dedicated Rāma sanctuaries are attested just to the south of Kālañjara among the Tripurī Kalachuris, whose own king Jayasimha boasted in 1167 that by his doing “the Turuṣka has lost the power of his arms” (*EI* 21:95 = *CII* 4:327; Jayasimha’s son Vijayasimha repeats the claim in A.D. 1180, *CII* 4:649 and n. 3).

Turkic campaigns continued throughout the period from the death of Mahmud to the rise of the Ghurids in the last third of the twelfth century. We have no direct evidence of any military actions in the realm of Jayasimha Siddharāja of Gujarat, but Persian sources suggest that the general of the Ghaznavid Bahram Shah may have assembled an army to attack him, and this the *prabandha* material cited above would corroborate (Majumdar 1956:495–96).²⁰ His near contemporary, Vigraharāja IV of the Cāhamāna dynasty of Śākambharī (reigned ca. 1152–67), fought frequently with the Turks; he is once described as “the god who made Āryavarta once again true to its name [i.e., making it “the land of the Aryans (alone)’] by extirpating the *mlecchas*,” and as a king “of whom no doubt can be entertained that he is the Primal Person” (*Saṅkā vā puruṣottamasya bhavato nāsty eva*, *IA* 19:218).²¹ It was his successor Pṛthvīrāja II who in 1168 took the Hansi fort over which Ghaznavids (and Tomaras and Cāhamānas) had fought for some generations. Within a decade, the ascendant power of the Ghurids burst into Gujarat, when Bhīma II (or his brother Mūlarāja II) met in battle and defeated Muhammad bin Ghur in 1178, and was himself defeated by Muhammad’s viceroy Qutb al-Din Aibak in 1195–96. Bhīma II was the nominal sovereign of Lavaṇaprasāda, and it is likely to Lavaṇaprasāda’s expulsion of Aibak from Gujarat that the inscription noticed above refers (*EI* 1:22–23). Further to the east, Muhammad suffered another defeat in 1191 at the hands of Pṛthvīrāja III at Tarain (125 kilometers west of Delhi), only to return the following year to crush him and 150 chieftains in his alliance. Within two years the last king of the Gāhadavāla dynasty, Jayacandra, was slain in battle with the Turks, Banaras was raided and, two years later, Kanauj. Malwa and Bundelkhand continued to be targets; in 1202 Muhammad bin Bakhtyar Khalji entered Bihar and established himself in Bengal several years later (an inscription from Kanaibarshi, Assam, reads,

¹⁹As his father had earlier been; cf. the Candella inscription from Mahoba: “There appeared [in the Candella dynasty] a blessing for the earth called the illustrious Dhaṅga, who . . . by the strength of his arms equaled even the powerful Hamvīra [sic], who had proved a heavy burden for the earth” (this may refer to Sabuktagin, cf. *EI* 1:217ff.).

²⁰It remains uncertain whether the mysterious *rāksasa* named Barbaraka, whom Jayasimha defeated and with whom he is ever associated in legend, is, in fact, to be identified with Bahalim, the viceroy of the Ghaznavid Bahram Shah, A.D. 1116–57 (cf. also Majumdar 1956:408–9). Another of Jayasimha’s contemporaries was the Paramāra chieftain Dhāravarṣa, who helped defeat Ghori’s soldiers at Mount Abu in A.D. 1178 (Bhatia 1970:176), and of whom it is said in an Abu inscription of 1230, “Evidently it is the son of Daśaratha [i.e. Rāma] that has been born again on earth as this (prince) of unchecked strength” (*EI* 8:211 vs. 37).

²¹The pillar text is reproduced in the fourteenth-century poetry anthology from Śākambharī itself, the *Paddhati* of Sārnghadharā No. 1255–56). In the palace library of this king was a prized manuscript of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, the source of a copy now in Bonn (Katre 1954:13).

with annalistic simplicity: “On the thirteenth day of Chaitra of the Śāka [sic] year 1127 [ca. A.D. 1205], the Turuṣkas came to Kāmarūpa, and went down to defeat,” *IHQ* 3:843; *JIH* 15:175). By 1206 almost all of north India from the Ravi River to Assam had come under Turkic military domination.

The last phase of these political events pertinent to my argument begins near the end of the thirteenth century, when Jalaluddin Firuz became the first Khalji sultan of Delhi, followed by his nephew ‘Alā al-Dīn. Within a few years (A.D. 1296–1309), and with spectacular success, ‘Alā al-Dīn subjugated the kings of Anahilavāda (the Caulukya/Solanki Karṇa II), those of present-day Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, and, notably, the Yādavas of Devagiri, who as we saw had begun around this time the construction (or substantial reconstruction) of the Rāma sanctuary on Rāmtek, under the patronage of Rāmacandra, the last Yādava king of Devagiri. ‘Alā al-Dīn’s general Malik Kafur began his campaign against the Kākatīyas of Warangal in 1302, and in 1309 finally defeated King Pratāparudra, with whom, as I noted earlier, one of the few Rāma sanctuaries in Andhra is associated, and at whose court it is likely that the first major Sanskrit poem on Rāma in Andhra country was composed (the *Udārarāghava* of Śākalyamalla, cf. Venkatacharya 1990:ivff.). Governors of the Delhi Sultanate were appointed throughout the Deccan, and soon thereafter the Vijayanagar kingdom was established (1346), with a Rāma temple at its city core.²²

There are cases, let me repeat, where Rāmāyāna mythemes in inscription and possibly in temple cult had played a role in texturing the political imagination prior to or outside of the coming of the Turks and the founding of the Sultanate; such may be the case in the early Coḷa realm, for instance. Conversely, this political narrative apparently failed to make an appearance in a number of places where these events had as profound consequences as anywhere else; Bengal is such a case. There is also a disquieting neatness to the concomitance I have drawn between the activation of the political imaginary of the Rāmāyāna and the historical events of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries that brings to mind Bacon’s “idols of the tribe” and his admonition that “the human Intellect, from its peculiar nature, easily supposes a greater order and equality in things than it actually finds.” Granting that, the concomitance remains striking and invites some attempt at explanation.

Historical Imitation

One of the most suggestive features of this whole problematic, to my mind, is the very fact that imagining and representing the political present in twelfth-century India was enabled by a recuperation of the past. The figures of the Rāmāyāna were as fully historical and real for non-modern India as Achilles for the Alexandrians or Brut for the early Britons (“Everything that happened in the [Vālmīki] *Rāmāyāna* was absolutely real,” says the sixteenth-century commentator Maheśvaratīrtha [ad 2.41.10 vulg.]). More than this, they seem to play a role for the kings of middle-period Rajasthan, Gujarat, and the Deccan rather similar to that of Cato and other Roman

²²J. G. de Caspari and I. W. Mabbett, in referring to the single temple “foundation (*pratiṣṭhā*) devoted to Rāma as a deity” in Indonesia (recorded in an East Javanese inscription of A.D. 1486), point to the “revival of Hinduism” in Vijayanagar at the same time and argue that “it is likely that there was a direct relation between the developments in South India and eastern Java at a time when both were confronted with the expansion of Islam” (Tarlind 1992:307–8).

republicans for the French revolutionaries of 1789. In a celebrated passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx ascribes an almost lawlike character to this process of historical imitation: With the weight of the dead generations on their brain, the living “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history.” This points, in a way, to what I intend by the term “imaginary,” the construction and representation of reality through a more or less systematic historical fantasy. For Marx, further, the “awakening of the dead” in the French Revolution “served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles . . . of magnifying the given task in imagination . . . of finding once more the spirit of revolution” (Marx 1963:15, 17).

Those who have considered the problem of “historical revivification” since Marx’s formulation have expanded the focus to include more complex questions of intention and self-understanding in human agency. The most acute analysis in this spirit is probably that of Jean-Paul Sartre. In an effort to combat the apriorist economism of 1950s French Marxism and to develop a more nuanced psychosocial conception of agency, Sartre wanted to find in Marx’s meditation on the relationship between the “subjective drama” and the “real” a “new idea of human action.” The bourgeois of 1789, says Sartre, both “pretends to be Cato in order to stop the Revolution by denying History and by substituting virtue for politics,” and also “gives himself a mythical comprehension of an action which he carries out but which escapes him” (Sartre 1963:45–46; cf. Jameson 1971:225ff.). I think it may be possible to identify, following Marx, some functional dimensions of the representational gestures based on the Rāma theme, and I suggest two below. One remains troubled, however, by what Sartre persuasively argues is the reduction of “significations” to “intentions” that such functionalist analysis invites.

A less risky, though hardly a less complex, question concerns the orientation toward the past that this sort of imaginary comprises, and the wider cultural significance of a historicizing conceptualization of the present. Some suggestive analysis has recently been given of the ways in which, and the degree to which, action, especially in moments of historical crisis, presents itself to human consciousness—or may be so represented—as a repetition or return of the past. In reference to 1789, for example, Pierre Vidal-Naquet has explored how the revolution was conceived of as a “return, with classical antiquity as the privileged instrument of this return . . . marking the reappearance of the ‘happy days of Greece and Rome’” (Vidal-Naquet 1990:215). More generally, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have argued that this phenomenon is somehow peculiar to, even constitutive of, the world of modern Europe: “The fact is . . . that since the collapse of Christianity a specter has haunted Europe: the specter of imitation—which means, above all, the imitation of the ancients. The role played by the classical model (Athens, Sparta, Rome) in the construction of nation-states and of their culture is well known: from the classicism of Louis XIV to the Antique posturing of 1789 or the neoclassicism of the Empire, an entire process of political structuration unfolds, as a national identification and a technical organization (of government, of administration, of hierarchization, of domination, and so on) are simultaneously realized. It is in this sense that it would be necessary to give *historical imitation* the status of a political concept, as Marx, in fact, once thought of doing” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990:299). I am clearly not prepared to extend the political imitative imaginary of twelfth-century India this far, but something analogous, I think, is taking place, which along with other evidence—from the early Guptas who pretend that they’re the Kushans (or Mauryas) to the tenth-century Kannada poets who transform their

royal patrons into the heroic figures of the *Mahābhārata* —would prompt us to give historical imitation “the status of a political concept” in India, too.²³

But I cannot pursue that question further here, nor those stimulated by Sartre’s complex meditation on Marx. I want to push instead on the question implicit in all that has gone before, namely, why it is the Rāmāyaṇa in particular that is selected—suddenly selected, as we’ve seen, and with little precedent—as the privileged instrument for encoding or interpreting the political realities of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. There were other choices available, not just great martial and dharmic characters from the other epics (I’ve just alluded to the epic transformations into Arjuna and Bhīma of the patrons of the great poets Pampa and Ranna), but a Vaiṣṇava figure ready-made for an end-of-time narrative of the coming of the barbarians: Kalki, who is found numbered among the Vaiṣṇava incarnations from at least the seventh century, and who is described by an anonymous poet at the court of Ajmer in the middle of the twelfth century as “the form of Viṣṇu who will come on horseback, spurning Garuḍa; he will carry a black sword in his hand to destroy the Kali age, will join bull with cow, bring back the best of times, the Kṛta age, and put an end to the *mlecchas*” (*EI* 29:181). It may be argued, of course, that one cannot mobilize political sentiment (assuming for the sake of argument such a necessity in twelfth-century India) on the basis of a future incarnation such as Kalki, no more than one can on the basis of one such as Krishna, the divine child (and quasi-fratricide). But I suggest there are positive, narratological reasons why it was Rāma and no other figure who became the object of cult and the paradigm of royal identity for kings of the period.

Imaginative Resources

The Rāmāyaṇa narrative seems to me to offer special imaginative “resources,” which though perhaps shared to a degree by other mythopolitical narratives, are present in distilled form in this particular story. They are constitutive of it and remain stable, as semiotic slots, however differently interpretive communities will specify their contents. I think these can be categorized under the two broad headings of divinization and demonization. The first points to the fact that, although the political as in so many other Indian texts is at the heart of the narrative, this text offers for the first time a special assessment, or resolution, of the paradox that the political comprises in premodern India. It does this by way of what I think is a new mediation of the religious, that is, the divine or numinous, and the political, by which I mean the nature of life in the human polity. The second heading, the demonization of the Other—a shopworn yet still indispensable phrase—relates to those who stand outside this theologically sanctioned polity. Not only are these two thematics the defining theapeutics of Vālmīki’s epic, they are two of the most powerful conceptions of the social-political imagination. The first proclaims that the order of everyday human life is regulated by the active, immanent presence of the divine; the second, that those who would disturb or destroy that order must be enemies of God and not really human.

Elsewhere I have explored what I take to be the basic set of social questions toward which all early Sanskrit epic literature directs itself—the two great epics as

²³As, of course, elsewhere in the non-European world. See for example Grabar and Blair 1980:46–55, for epic “mythification” of the early Mongol rule in fourteenth-century Iran, and, more generally, Harth and Assmann 1992.

well as many subnarratives within these texts—so I can be sketchy about it here (Pollock 1986:9–25). Above all, and beyond the admitted profusion of other motifs, the informing problem is that of political power, especially the maintenance and transfer of political power. How does this principal problem—as the *Mahābhārata* puts it, obsessively, in those dreadful moments before the Bhārata war is begun, “Man is slave to power, but power is slave to no man” (6.41.36, 51, 66, 77)—how does it work itself out in the *Mahābhārata*? As we all know, it is resolved through fratricidal struggle, leading to the death not only of the defeated, but also of the victors: “We are the living dead,” Yudhiṣṭhira reflects when, after the battle, the brothers return to Indraprastha (15.46.8). In addition to the tragic outcome, there is a tragic dilemma repeatedly suggested throughout the poem: In part the political dilemma is intractable because it results from a fundamental bifurcation of the (hegemonic) spiritual and the political, symbolically coded in the bifurcation of the principal characters (Yudhiṣṭhira, son of *dharma*, here as superordinated “righteousness,” and Arjuna, son of Indra, as representative of the subordinated *dharma*, *kṣatriyadharma*). It is this intractability that the great ninth-century Kashmirian critic, Ānandavardhana, had in mind when arguing that the global meaning of the poem is profound disenchantment with the world (*vairāgya*): “The great poet himself is explicit on this: ‘The more the systems of this world fail, and fail miserably, the more transcendent aversion toward them inevitably arises’ [*Mahābhārata* 12.168.4] (*Dhvanyāloka* 4.5).

Presupposing, responding to, and advancing upon the *Mahābhārata*’s tragic aporia, the *Rāmāyaṇa* offers a complex set of solutions. One component of this, I think, is the promulgation of a new form of social and political subordination and hierarchy, whereby the claims of a younger brother—that is to say, divisive political interest—become, in fact, unthinkable. Considerably more important, however, is what appears to be the incorporation in the person of the king of a spiritual moment, whereby he becomes at times sage-like, almost renunciant. In fact, it is more than this: Vālmīki’s solution to the political paradox of epic India is the divinized king.

Far from being a later graft—the virtually unchallenged view in the West from the time of Wilhelm von Schlegel onward—the divinity of Rāma is, I have argued, constitutive of the text. Not only is it a theme that nothing in the vast text-critical materials now at our disposal challenges, but a little thought suffices to demonstrate how central Rāma’s divinity is to the logic of the narrative. The poem is, in brief—and much of its aesthetic power derives from this—an adaptation of an ancient mythopoetic morpheme (found in such tales as the birth of Skanda, Nṛsiṃha, and countless others) that requires the existence of a new life-form to destroy extraordinary evil. This must be no simple god or man but an intermediate, combinatory being that draws from and transcends the powers of both realms. The *Rāmāyaṇa* articulates this as clearly as its conceptual and aesthetic constraints allow, at a key moment (key at least in view of the interest that other cultural production, temple sculpture for instance, evinces in it), the death of Vālin: “It is kings—make no mistake about it—who confer righteous merit, something so hard to acquire, and precious life itself. One must never harm them, never criticize, insult, or oppose them. Kings are gods who walk the earth in the form of men” (4.18.37–38; Pollock 1991:15–54). The *Rāmāyaṇa* thus presents a very powerful—because direct and unequivocal—imaginative formulation of the divine king as the only being capable of combating evil.

The second feature I want to underscore is precisely the constitution of this evil—what I’ve called the demonization of the Other. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is profoundly and fundamentally a text of “othering,” if I can use this awkward neologism. Outsiders

are made other by being represented as deviant—sexually, dietetically, politically deviant. Rāvaṇa is not only “other” in his reckless polygyny—“others” always threaten to steal “our” women—but is presented without question as a tyrant, perhaps even as a kind of “Oriental despot” constructed by a preform of Orientalism. To appreciate this othering, we need only think how very different it all is from the *Mahābhārata*, where the shared identity of the antagonists is nearly total; not only are they not “othered,” one group from the other, but instead they are “brothered,” whereby the fundamental problem of the story becomes all the more insoluble and terrible.

The question of the demons (*rākṣasas*) of the *Rāmāyāna* has tested the interpretative ingenuity of generations of Indian and European scholars. In my view, all the positivistic attempts at concrete identification—with this or that shamanic, tribal, Dravidian, Buddhist group, what have you—are irrelevant to our understanding of their function within the confines of the poem itself. There, as I’ve argued, one productive way to think of them is from a psychosexual perspective, as representing all that certain traditional Indians—within a Sanskrit cultural formation—might most desire and most fear, concretized both together in a single symbolic form (Pollock 1991:68–84). However, from the point of the *receptive* history of the *Rāmāyāna* the *rākṣasas*, too, provide a framework for conceptualizing or representing historical political experience.

But what does all this have to do with the world of the twelfth century?

A dominant scholarly opinion holds that ruling elites in the eleventh and following centuries often met the challenge posed by the new political presence in the subcontinent not just by a militarization of the structure of the Hindu realms but also by a renewed emphasis on religious prestige and the legitimization of the ruler via his unique relationship with divinity (Kulke and Rothermund 1986:196). If this is the case, and if—a bigger if—there is any value to a functionalist analysis of a symbolic system, it is clear the *Rāmāyāna* could do powerful ideological work. First, it is the privileged, if not, in fact, the sole South Asian narrative of a hieratic politics. At the heart of the tale, or rather in its logic, is not just a spiritualization of the king, but an ontogenetic argument: The king is a consubstantial entity participating in both the human and divine worlds. The identification of the king with Rāma would thus suggest a wide range of transcendent qualities and powers.²⁴

Moreover, the *Rāmāyāna*, with its demonizing imaginary, provides, as does no other Indian text, a conceptual instrument for the utter dichotomization of the enemy. True, the Cālukyas could imagine the Coṭas as *rākṣasas*, or the Coṭas could thus position the Sinhalese. Conversely, other evidence does show that non-*Rāmāyāna* mythemes could on occasion be used to narrate the encounter with the Central Asians.²⁵ But the peculiar apparatus of othering offered by the *Rāmāyāna*,

²⁴The name “Rāma” and its various homologues become statistically very common among kings during this period. These include Rāmarāya, the last king of the Vijayanagar empire (1564), and Rāmacandra, the local king said to have rescued what could be saved of Gajapati power and restored the Jagannāth cult at Puri around 1590.

²⁵Jaitrasiṁha of Mewar is “the sage Agastya to the ocean-like armies of the Turuṣkas”; Samara, son of Tejaḥsiṁha, is “in very person the primal Boar, whose sword was, as it were, his outjutting tusk, and who rescued in an instant the submerged land of Gurjara from the ocean-like Turuṣkas” (cf. *EI* 1:327 in reference to Trailokyavarman [1203–41] of the Chandella dynasty); Kumbha is “a Garuḍa in destroying the hordes of the snake-like *mleccha* kings” (*A Collection of . . . Inscriptions*: 93, vs. 42, 94, vs. 46). I find only one Śaiva trope, from eastern India, perhaps late twelfth-century: Viśvarūpa Sena was the “Rudra of the end of Time” to the lineage of the Yavanas of Gargya (= Gharjistan, *JBORS* 1918:171; Majumdar 1929:124, vs. 21). When it comes to non-Turkic references, *Mahābhārata* or related allusions are found: King Maṇṭṭa of the Sisodia kings of Chittor, for instance, was

along with the political theology it provided, seems to have been particularly well suited to the political tasks confronting an embattled cultural formation for representing—and perhaps activating—the conflicting agencies of the period.

Communities or Communalism?

Beyond the level of representation and activation, I think, we cannot easily penetrate. It is not possible, that is, to distinguish between representation and reality in the adoption of the demonizing formulation of the Rāmāyaṇa—to separate out some authentic categorical response of otherness from its construction; historical reality only comes to us in forms of textual representation. Even the evidence provided by non-Indian observers themselves, as for example al-Biruni (fl. 1030), which seems to be almost a gloss on the political imaginary I have been mapping, does not escape this constitutive equivocation. In the masterpiece on India he wrote at the court of Mahmud of Ghazni, al-Biruni comments in a famous passage:

In all manners and usages they [the “Hindus”] differ from us to such a degree as to frighten their children with us, with our dress, and our ways and customs, and as to declare us to be devil’s breed, and our doings as the very opposite of all that is good and proper. [He adds, “We must confess, in order to be just, that a similar depreciation of foreigners not only prevails among us and the Hindus, but is common to all nations towards each other.”] . . . Mahmud [of Ghazni] utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people. Their scattered remains cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims. . . . The antagonism between them and all foreigners receives more and more nourishment both from political and religious sources.²⁶

(Sachau 1910:20–22)

Any easy assumption of natural hostility suggested by the beginning of this passage is canceled by the cultural propagation identified at the end. We cannot, then, take a representation for a “real”—yet can we say nothing whatever about the reality that informs it? Can we not at least complicate the picture so far projected by “official” thinking?

The representation of invader as demon and defender as the divine king Rāma, in royal temple cult, documentary inscriptions, and historiographical texts, arising as it seems to do first in the wake of the political events of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, might suggest to some that it is a response to what was perceived to be a new and special sort of threat. But was it new and special? Surprisingly little, so far as I can see, has been written on the cultural processes of the initial stages in what John Richards nearly twenty years ago properly described as one of the most complex, prolonged cases of “cultural encounter” to be found in world history (Richards

a Pārtha to the kings of Malwa (*A Collection of . . . Inscriptions*: 80); Madanavarma of the Chandellas “defeated the king of Gūrjara as Kṛṣṇa in former times defeated Kaṁsa” (Majumdar 1956:77).

²⁶That the “othering” of the Turks is highly relational becomes evident also in visual representations. In the one attempt I am aware of to explore this question, Hermann Goetz reviews their sculptural representation in Vijayanagar temple panels and concludes that they are viewed as grotesque, rude, awkward, and wild except for those in state service, in which case they are presented with the same “sympathy” as the “Hindus” (Goetz 1965–66:199).

1974:91).²⁷ For this reason, and also because data are devilishly hard to find (in some of what I address below I have been anticipated by Athar Ali 1990), what can be said at present, especially from the perspective of a Sanskritist, has to be tentative indeed. I want to concentrate here on what I'll call textual events, certain new kinds of textual practices and the cultural processes they presuppose that may invite wider social inferences.

Despite al-Biruni, there is evidence for long and, as far as we can tell, reasonably peaceful coexistence with Arab communities in the subcontinent from even before the beginning of this period (communities that, to be sure, were likely to have been demographically minute). New ways of life, Arab, Turkic, Parsee, could be accommodated rather comfortably within preexisting conceptual frameworks of culture—by no means were these incommensurable worlds in collision. Some especially suggestive data include a land-grant, of the time of Arjunadeva of the Vāghela dynasty, to one Nuruddin Firuz of Hormuz (*EI* 34:143–52; Majumdar 1956:330ff.). He is with effortless reconceptualization incorporated as a “deeply religious man” (*paramadhārmika*) who “in accordance with the dictates of his own religious codes” (*svadharmaśāstrabhiprāyena*) wished to build “a ‘mosque,’ that is, place of worship” (*mijigitidharmasthāna; mijigiti = masjid*) in “the Year 662 of the Enlightener-Prophet Mahammada, that is to say, Year 1320 of King Vikrama [ca. A.D. 1264]” (*bodhakarasulamahammadasamvavat vikramasamvavat [rasula < Arabic rasūl, “messenger”]*). Other evidence shows that attempts at communication were made from the other side, too, even from the seemingly unlikeliest quarter. For example, in 1027, near the end of his life, Mahmud of Ghazni had a *dirham* struck at Lahore that carried on the reverse, in *Sāradā* script, a colloquial Sanskrit rendering of the confession of faith, the *kalima*: *avyaktam eka muhammadā avatāra nrpati mahamuda*, “The Unmanifest is one; Muhammad is [its] incarnation; Mahmud is king” (Deyell 1990:346, pl. 66; 73–74). Shihabuddīn Ghori also, for a short time, issued bilingual gold coins with images of a seated Lakṣmī (Sircar 1983:652ff.). The Qutb Minar itself was interpreted simply as another victory pillar (*kirtistambha* or *jayastambha*) by the workmen who once repaired it, as they wrote, “during the victorious reign (*vijayarājye*) of Śrī Suratrāna [“sultan” as well as “savior of the gods”] Pherojaśāhi by the grace of Viśvakarma” (Prasad 1990:3, 19, 34–35). Full-dress Sanskrit *prāśasis* were composed in honor of later sultans such as “Śrī Hammīra Gayaśadīna” (Ghiyāsuddīn Balban, reigned 1266–86) and “Kuddī Alāvadīna” (Alāuddīn Khiljī, reigned 1295–1315); regardless of the material motives underlying the discourse, these demonstrate a sustained and largely successful effort at intercultural translation (*JASB* 43:104–10; Prasad 1990:3ff.; *EI* 12:23ff.; *JIH* 15:181–83).

It was an effort, however, in the face of obstacles, as other evidence suggests. The current textbook view of Indian history holds that prior to the medieval invasions, “Neither religious wars nor other wars involving fundamental principles had ever been waged in India” (Kulke and Rothermund 1986:166). The question whether the coming of the Central Asians did provoke “religious wars” or touch on “fundamental principles” is altogether unclear (as unclear as whether or not such wars antedate this period); in fact, it has proven one of the deeper ideological divides in the historiography of the period. One thing we can say is that these historical events had textual effects in the domain of elite Sanskrit cultural production that were to a degree unprecedented. For instance, whereas India had witnessed earlier immigrations that made lasting impressions in the popular imagination (that of the Partho-Scythians in the first century B.C., for instance, or the Ephthalite Huns in

²⁷The ongoing work of André Wink (1990ff.) will fill many of the enormous gaps that now exist at least with respect to the political and economic history of this encounter.

the sixth century A.D.), we have little in literary texts of those earlier periods that is comparable to the ethnically coded representations of difference and visions of martial ferocity found later. We have seen a telling example of this in the tenth chapter of the *Prthvirājavijaya*. Another is provided in a contemporary description of the invasion of Mewar ca. 1220 from Act 3 of the *Hammīramadamardana*, "Crushing the Pride of the Amīr [i.e., the Turk]," a drama of the "historical present" with hardly a precedent in Sanskrit literature for the historical specificity of its violence. By contrast, however—and I would lay stress on this—the *religious* identity of the Central Asians is not once thematized in Sanskrit sources.

In the case of earlier newcomers, moreover, within a generation or two at most, these seem not only to have been assimilated but largely Sanskritized. With the events in western India of the eleventh and following centuries—which in addition marked the first time Islamic culture entered "Āryāvarta" (the events in Avanti in A.D. 725 aside), despite a presence on the western border of the subcontinent throughout the previous 300 years—something new was encountered: A cultural force possessed of an apparently secure identity (or, perhaps, in the case of Turkic peoples recently converted to Islam, a particularly assertive identity), largely unassimilating in such crucial areas as linguistic and religious practice. As A. B. M. Habibullah has put it, "For the first time in her history, India was to reconcile herself to the existence of a separate culture-community" (1961:53). Again, the discernible textual consequences suggest a sense of destabilization among the elites of the period whose intellectual as well as political dominance was being challenged by an unfamiliar cultural formation, coupled with that kind of self-recognition made possible only by a contrastive Other. It is, for instance, during this period—just in advance of the temporal and spatial progress of the Sultanate—that the *dharmanibandhas*, those great encyclopedic constructions of "the Hindu way of life," achieved perhaps their first and certainly their most grandiose expression: the *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Lakṣmidhara at the court of the Gāhadavāla king Govindacandra in Kanauj and Banaras (ca. 1130); that composed at the court of, or perhaps even by, King Ballālasena of Bengal (ca. 1175); the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* of Hemādri at the Yādava court in Devagiri (ca. 1270), and the *Parāśaramādhavīya* of Mādhava at the Vijayanagar court of (probably) Bukka Rāya (ca. 1400). Totalizing conceptualizations of the society, one can argue, became possible only by juxtaposition with alternative life-worlds; they became necessary only at the moment when the total form of the society was for the first time believed, by the professional theorists of society, to be threatened.²⁸ In such a context the threat was easily imagined, or imaged forth, as the threat of an antiworld.

In the face of substantial political uncertainty, then, and consonant with other kinds of cultural representations, the Rāmāyaṇa was repeatedly instrumentalized by the ruling Indian elites of the middle period to provide a theology of politics and a symbology of otherness. One index of such instrumentalization may well be the final textual event I want to notice, the vast vernacularization of the epic. For it is now, from about the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries, and on the periphery

²⁸I say "believed . . . to be threatened" because it is difficult to locate fundamental cultural discontinuity caused by these events. Al-Biruni's well-known remark that "Hindu sciences have retired far away from those parts of the country conquered by us, and have fled to places which our hand cannot yet reach, to Kashmir, Benares, and other places," bears more a figurative than a literal interpretation. From what I know at present it certainly seems that various forms of Sanskrit cultural production even in places at the center of the maelstrom like Ajmer and Partan remained largely unimpeded after their absorption into the Sultanate (see, for example, the brief family biography of the court pandits of Ajmer reproduced in *IHQ* 16:569ff.). This was largely the case in Bengal as well.

of the Sultanate, that *rāmakathā* first appears in many regional languages, even in those with long antecedent literary histories. In Marathi, for instance, prior to Rāmdās's version ca. 1680 we find only the 1599 adaptation of Eknātha, which itself has a complex sociopolitical agenda (Tulpule 1979:355ff.). The long literary history of Kannada does not produce a vernacular Rāmāyāna (beyond the Jain adaptation of "Abhinava Pampa," ca. 1150) until 1590, the so-called *Torave-Rāmāyāna* of "Kumāra Vālmīki." The earliest Rāmāyāna in eastern India is the Assamese version of Mādhava Kandalī, composed at the request of the Barāhi king Mahāmāṇikya, ca. 1350 (cf. Smith 1988:27, 35). Like the *dharmanibandhas*, these textual effects followed the trajectory over space and time of political change.

More important than this, however, the valences now formulated and established—of the divine Hindu realm and the demonic "outsider," a political mythology of efficacious simplicity—acquired a stability unlike any other representations, to be resorted to time and again over the coming centuries. The very fact that earlier powerful groups had deployed them made these symbolic properties all the more ready to hand, and all the more univocal. The identification of the Muslim as *rākṣasa* or *asura*, for instance, begins to find its way into the later commentaries on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyāna* itself: When in the third book of the epic the demon Virādha asks to be buried in a pit—for such, says the poet, is "the immemorial custom with respect to dead *rākṣasas*"—two Decanni commentators of the early eighteenth century note that "the Yavanas [i.e., Muslims] who are the *rākṣasas* of the Kali age still follow this custom" (Pollock 1991:251). The image becomes almost automatic from the end of our period onward. In the western Rajasthani narrative *Kānḥadadeprabandha* of Padmanābha (A.D. 1455), for example, the poet tells how "the *asura* stone-breakers climbed up the *śikhara* of the temple [of Somnāth]," and how Kānḥadade returned home "after destroying the *asuras*. . . . He has secured freedom to Lord Śaṅkara from the bonds of the Turks" (Bhatnagar 1991:10, 28). In the late seventeenth century, Rām Das rewrites the Rāmāyāna for Śivājī, king of Mahārāshtra, casting Aurangzeb as Rāvaṇa, while Kavī Bhūṣan does likewise, although for him, Aurangzeb is the incarnation of Rāvaṇa's gigantic brother, Kumbhakarṇa (Ahmad 1963:476).

In this light, too, we may wish to view it as an attempt on the part of the Mughals to neutralize by appropriation this meaning system of the Rāmāyāna when, in the miniatures accompanying the Persian translation of the epic prepared at his court, Akbar is projected as King Rāma and the *rākṣasas* recoded as Persian *dīv*s. A little later, however, in his letter of 1665 to Raja Jaisingh, Śivājī uses just this Persian term to refer to Muslims generally (they are "demons in the guise of men," *ki dīv ast dar śūrat-i ādāmī*), and Aurangzeb in particular ("[let us] devise some spells against that mad demon," *fusūnī bar ā dīv-i mast āvorim*; Sardesai n.d: 163, 169). And around the same time, Jagat Singh of Mewar (A.D. 1628–52), who traces his lineage from Rāma (*EI* 24:65 vs. 5), commissions an illustrated Vālmīki *Rāmāyāna* of unprecedented grandeur (Andhare 1987:74ff.; Losty 1978:3–14).²⁹ The Mughal revalorization, it would seem, did not go uncontested.

Whatever the "real" state of affairs, the ruling elites of the period were clearly committed to drawing as keen a dichotomy as they could between a troubled present and an unknown future, and a recreation of the imagined past of the Rāmāyāna was the sharpest instrument they could find.

²⁹On Dassehra, as witnessed by Tod, before the Rana of Mewar and his troops the bards would celebrate "the glories of the past, the fame of Samra . . . Sangran, Pratap, Umra, Raj, all descended of the blood of Rama, whose exploits, three thousand five hundred years before, they are met to celebrate" (Tod 1884, Vol. 1:620).

Historicist Interventionism

If the adoption of the Rāmāyaṇa to process the events of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries suggests a complex interplay of culture and political power, equally complex is the problem of the present with which I started, the reappropriation of this imaginary in contemporary India. And, indeed, all that I've recorded seems to have little directly to contribute to this question, to making sense of the display of cultural symbols in the pursuit of political objectives in contemporary India. There are at least two questions here, both difficult to answer: What possible relationships, if any, can be posited between the reemergence of Rāma—the Rāma of L. K. Advani of the BJP (illustration 1)—and an earlier political semiotics of Rāma—the Rāma, say, of Pṛthvīrāja III (illustration 2)? And what does it mean to seek to intervene in the present via an archaeology such as I have presented; what is the role of history in the current contention?

Can one argue that, precisely because it had been one of the principal components in a political imaginary repressed or displaced during British colonial rule and the nationalist movement—a nontheocratic movement led by a westernized elite—the Rāmāyaṇa mytheme has returned with vigor in the post-Independence, or rather post-Partition, period marking the quest for India's political self-understanding?³⁰ If the Rāmāyaṇa has served for 1,000 years as a code in which protocommunalist relations could be activated and theocratic legitimation could be rendered—if it constitutes an imaginary within which the public sphere is not sundered from the religious, and at the same time cannot be conceptualized without a concomitant demonization of some other—it makes sense that it would be through this mytheme par excellence that reactionary politics in India today would find expression in the interests of a theocratization of the state and the creation of an internal enemy as necessary antithesis.

A second thought cautions that it is conceptually impossible even to link these two historical moments. For one thing, the deity Rāma in his abstract (*nirguna*) form had intervened, occupying in different degrees and for some four centuries starting with Kabīr, a focal point of almost supracommunal religious devotion. This is a phenomenon difficult to correlate with a communalist coding of the personalized form (*saguṇa*) of Rāmacandra, although I don't think impossibly so (it is not clear that "Rām" ever means Rāmacandra for Kabīr; Vaudeville 1974:115). A rather stronger reason for caution is that the Rāmāyaṇa—a work whose fluidity and linguistic variability I alluded to at the beginning of this essay but have a priori bracketed—is, to be sure, more than a single text. For some scholars it rather approximates a literary genre, library, or language, added to, reworked, rewritten in every region and every community, and in every century for perhaps the last twenty; the tradition of the Rāmāyaṇa, it is often argued, has been a tradition of contestation rather than a tradition of canonicity, starting at least with the Jain *Paūmacaria* in the fourth or fifth century. For this reason, and because of even the Sanskrit text's instability (often exaggerated, though), some hold that there may no longer exist any such thing as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, if ever there did (Rao 1991).

Furthermore, literary meaning is historical, not essential, at the end of the millennium no less than at its beginning; it is generated by interpretive communities,

³⁰Several colleagues (including Jonathan Parry of the London School of Economics) do, however, tell of oral Rāmāyaṇa narratives that projected the colonial administrators as rākṣasas (specifically descendants of Mandodarī), and England as Laṅkā. None has been recorded to my knowledge.

not by texts in themselves, and these communities are always changing and repositioning themselves. Beyond all this, the Rāmāyaṇa has been the object of numerous, sustained attempts at reconceptualization. All the reworkings I mentioned are, of course, themselves new interpretations, but the past century has also witnessed new critical reassessments and conscious retargetings of the epic. This might lead to the argument that any notion of a divine political order has already been neutralized for a secular society by such reinterpretations as that of Mohandas Gandhi, for whom “Rāmrāj means rule of the people. A person like Rām would never wish to rule” (Lutgendorf 1991:381); or that the Rāmāyaṇa’s demonization of the other has been neutralized for a pluralistic society by such reallegorizations as that of Aurobindo, who somewhere asserts that “the incarnate *rāksasa*” is the “huge unbridled force . . . of the exaggerated ego.”

Yet it seems to me possible to reason otherwise. Consider how the Rāma legend has continuously been subject to a process of canonizing purification. The Ramanand Sagar television version is only the most recent in a long series of attempts, of which Vālmīki’s monumental text is doubtless the starting point, to establish a hegemonic version, and it is this, I’ve contended, all oppositional versions presuppose in their opposition. A similar recirculation of energy seems to be detectable with respect to the narrative’s putative communal reading. Medieval codings of the Rāmāyaṇa are an instance of a mythopolitical strategy available for recurrent deployment, such as is taking place in India today. This is clear not only in the tactical choice of Ayodhyā itself and the birthplace of Rāma as the site of struggle, but in the attempt on the part of the BJP and Vishva Hindu Parishad to represent Muslims as demonic (Hess 1992; the VHP’s *Hindu Vishva*, August 1990:42ff., reprints the letter of Śivājī noted above).

Yet even if this is all true, it is by no means self-evident what historical analysis of any sort, including the sort I have just made, can add by way of critique to the political conversation of the present. It’s rather surprising, actually, to find the question of the relationship of history and cultural critique so rarely posed amid the ever-proliferating historicizations and genealogies of both literary and social texts. At issue are not only complex philosophical and psycho-social questions of the relationship of historical knowledge and political action, although analysis of these questions seems usually to be foreclosed by shibboleths about ignoring and repeating history, or knowing and changing history. There are also equally difficult problems of the public uses of textual forms.

How complex the question of critical interventionism of textual scholarship can be is exemplified by the fate of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. It does little good to try to demonstrate by a close reading of the novel that textually it escapes the charge of blasphemy leveled against it. For, after all, the novel itself—the “object-text”—has never been the issue; it is an occasion rather than a cause. Those who insist that the novel be banned admit freely that they have not, and would not, read it. “I do not have to wade through a filthy drain to know what filth is,” Rushdie’s main opponent in India famously proclaimed. Similarly, those who have now made Ayodhyā an issue—the BJP and VHP—seem less interested in the text of the history of Ayodhyā than in the divisive politics it can articulate. The scientification of the problem advocated by progressive historians at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi was shown for the misdirection it is when the BJP and VHP indicated their refusal to abide by court adjudication based on “historical” evidence. In a newspaper advertisement taken out after the demolition of the mosque, the VHP declared, “We expect others to respect the Hindu faith that Lord Rama was born at the spot where the Ayodhya structure stood. Matters of faith are beyond the

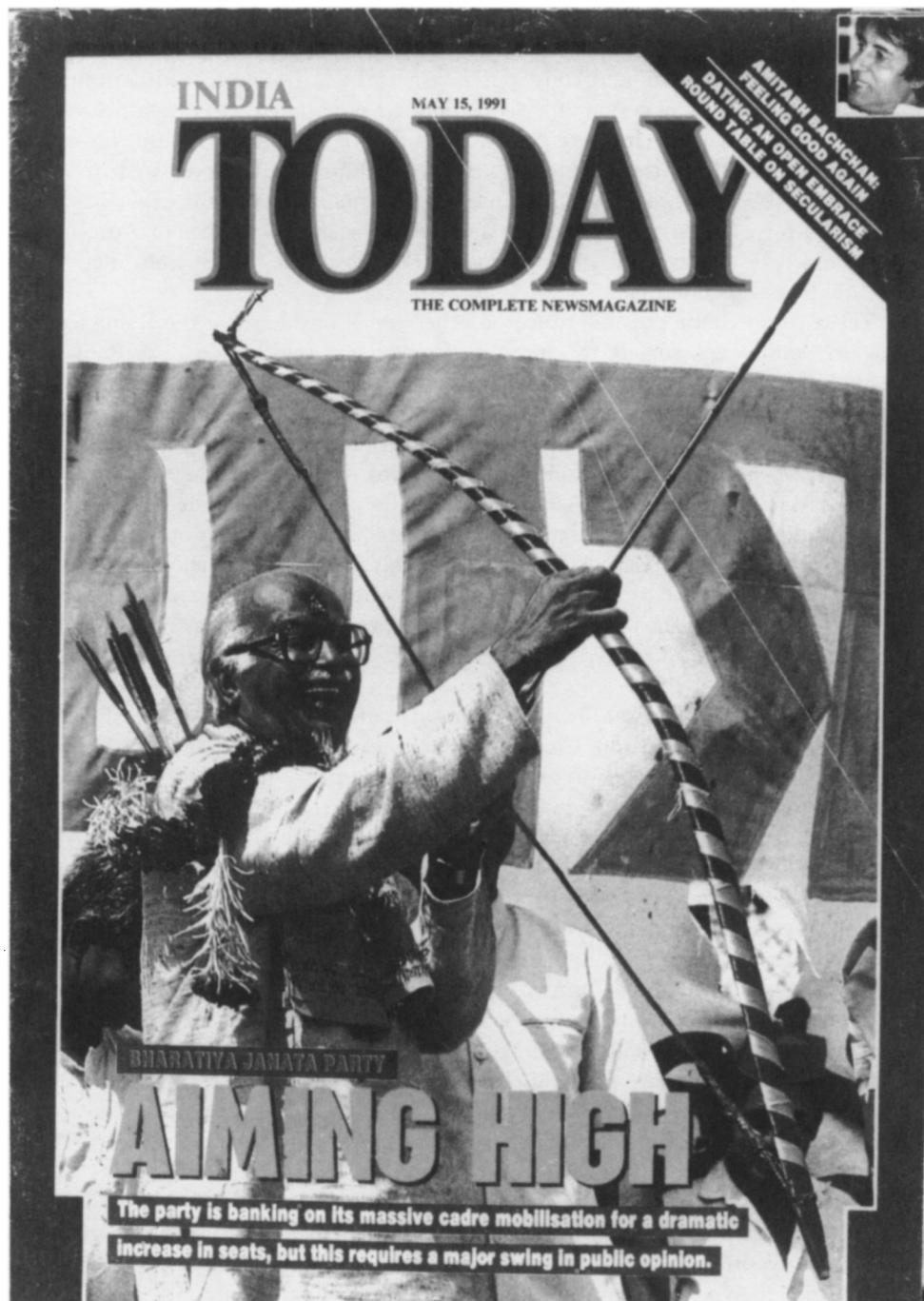


Illustration 1. The then-President of the Bharatiya Janata Party, L. K. Advani, pictured as Rāma on the cover of one of India's largest news magazines in May 1991.



Illustration 2. Portrait of "Cavāṇa Prathī Rājanī," i.e., Cāhamāna Pṛthvīrāja III, Deogarh, ca. 1810 (possibly by Bagatā; see Daniel J. Ehnbom, *Indian Miniatures: the Ehrenfeld collection*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 1985, no. 54).

jurisdiction of Courts, acceptance by historians, or approval of government agencies.” Thermoluminescence dating of archaeological remains is hardly pertinent here.

It is not easy, then, to sustain a claim for literary-critical or historiographical intervention in the face of problems that are not, in fact, literary-critical or historiographical but something else, whether postcolonial nativism, religious identity crises, political mobilization, or a new phenomenon that awaits categorization. One would think that our target should be the “denunciation-text” rather than the object-text to which the former refers by what are often most tenuous representations. What, then, grounds the logic of, let alone justifies faith in, critical historiography in such crises?

Not only is the relationship between history and political action problematic, but so is history itself. The very conceptualization of the JNU scholars—of “the political abuse of history”—ignores the fact that objectivist history has been one of the principal knowledge-forms in which post-Enlightenment politics has expressed itself. The very subject-matter of history is the state, as Hegel put it, which “involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being.” One can sooner argue that, far from enabling emancipation, historical writing itself—the positivist-objectivist historiography of Western science, what Hegel might call “historical History”—bears a substantial measure of responsibility for the reactionary politics and the romantic historicism driving them for the past century, in Europe as well as Asia. Ayodhyā would hardly have assumed the dimensions of the present problem were it not for scientized historicality itself (objectified in such texts as the archaeological reports and colonial gazetteers constantly cited by the parties to the dispute) and the pursuit of origins it delusively inspires. When we consider parallel if more apocalyptic cases such as the role of historicist nostalgia in postcolonial Cambodian politics—the link between modern French historiography of precolonial Cambodia and the political program of the Khmer Rouge (Barnett 1990)—it is difficult not to wonder how a mode of inquiry partly responsible for the problem can be expected to solve it.

Perhaps it cannot, in fact. As if in desperate acknowledgment of this incapacity, colleagues in India have recently begun to speak of an “ethics of forgetting,” an almost postmodern abandon and “dememorization” (Lyotard 1973:303), as if realizing that it is not those who forget, but those who “remember” the past that are condemned to repeat it. But, alas, forgetting history will never be a matter of ethics. History will always remain a site of struggle since, as Nietzsche said, “only the beast lives unhistorically.” What seems to me worth considering is how to change the terms of this struggle. Part of the difficulty in confronting a complex and ongoing event like the growth of a multicultural society such as India’s is the ever-renewed recognition of the aporia of narrative, of finding the one true narrative configuration of facts. There are no grounds free from the politics of the present to determine what story to make this material tell. It’s a truism worth repeating that not only don’t facts speak for themselves, they’re not even facts. The “documents” of political events of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and the Deccan are themselves representations, constructions, arguments, which offer only as transparent a vision of “reality” as the contemporary reader wants to attribute to them.

There seem, then, to be cases, not all cases but some like “Ayodhyā,” where wisdom lies in turning from the historical to the metahistorical. Abandoning the dangerous and chimerical quest for the originary in history in favor of charting the ways in which meaning has been created and promulgated in history at least acknowledges the past as something both the objects of our historiography and we its subjects create; the past as something constantly *practiced*. This isn’t a brand new

program; Marc Bloch seemed to envision something of this order fifty years ago: “The [real historiographical] question is no longer whether Jesus was first crucified and then resurrected, but how it came to pass that so many fellow humans today believe in the Crucifixion and Resurrection.”

However unsuccessfully I may have gone about it here, such a project remains for me compelling. If the grand Rāmāyaṇa continues to be a language of mythopolitics—not because it is inherently such a language but because there is now a history of its doing that specific symbolic work—available for encoding the paired forces of xenophobia and theocracy, one way to begin to neutralize those forces is through analysis of the construction and function of such a meaning system, and of its contemporary redeployment. As their portraits suggest, my two historical moments might be viewed, to return to the great Marxian tropology, as historical repetition: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. But we have already seen that the first time around may have had less of the tragic about it than is usually supposed. As for the farce, Ernest Gellner warned recently that we shouldn’t trust Marx’s aphorism too much; the real tragedy may come the second time.

List of Abbreviations

<i>BI</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Indica</i>
<i>BORI</i>	<i>Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>CII</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Critical Inquiry</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
<i>EPW</i>	<i>Economic and Political Weekly</i>
<i>HIG</i>	<i>Historical Inscriptions of Gujarat</i>
<i>IA</i>	<i>Indian Antiquary</i>
<i>IHQ</i>	<i>Indian Historical Quarterly</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JASB</i>	<i>Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal</i>
<i>JBORS</i>	<i>Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society</i>
<i>JBRS</i>	<i>Journal of the Bihar Research Society</i>
<i>JIH</i>	<i>Journal of Indian History</i>
<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JSAS</i>	<i>Journal of South Asian Studies</i>
<i>NLR</i>	<i>New Left Review</i>
<i>SAS</i>	<i>South Asian Studies</i>
<i>SII</i>	<i>South Indian Inscriptions</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Social Scientist</i>
<i>WZKSA</i>	<i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens</i>

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