

From Scroll to Screen: Cinematic and Digital Renditions of the Ramayana and Ramcharitmanas

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ABSTRACT

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RAMCHARITMANAS

The Ramayana as an evolving work of literature

The Ramayana and Ramcharitmanas have always remained two of the most popular and powerful literary and cultural relics in South Asia, spanning across the landscapes of language, religion, culture and media for centuries. The fact that the Ramayana exists in more than 300 versions across South and Southeast Asia, is proof of its magnanimity. It ceased to be tucked away under the ownership of the ruling Varnas when Tulsidas produced Ramcharitmanas in the 16th Century and vernacularized the Sanskrit epic for an audience that was devotional and bhakti-driven. Throughout history these epics have been reinvented and moulded into a myriad shapes and forms. It is only fair, then, to affirm that the Ramayana is a living epic. These epics have defied the vagaries of time by remaining eternal throughout the ages, that is to say that they are not static works of literature. On the contrary, they exist as ever-evolving cultural processes constantly reimagined by oral performance, regional storytelling, ritualistic practices, and in the contemporary world by cinema, television, gaming, and digital media. Italo Calvino reiterated this constant need for epic tradition to evolve through time. He writes, "The function of literature is communication, and the function of the epic is to preserve memory. But memory itself must be reinvented, reimagined, restructured." In this manner, every adaptation, be it stitched in the colours of devotional, commercial, feminist, or revisionist aspects, constitutes an act of interpretation, illustrating not only aesthetic choices but also ideological, political, and technological conditions. (Richman, 1991; Ramanujan, 1991; Lutgendorf, 1991).

The objective of this paper is to analyse the shifting trends in the narrative structure of the Ramayana across the fabric of cinema, animation, and digital platforms from the 1960s to the postmodern age of Artificial Intelligence. This paper argues that audiovisual retellings of the Ramayana reflect shifting cultural anxieties, evolving gender politics, and the reconfiguration of sacred narratives within globalized media ecologies through close analysis of major adaptations, including Sampoorana

Ramayana (1961), Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan (1987–88), Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama (1992), Sita Sings the Blues (2008), Bollywood reinterpretations, and emerging digital and gaming cultures.

Exploring the mythological devotion as portrayed in the Sampoorana Ramayana (1961)

The very first attempt at representing the classical model of mythological cinema was manifested in Babubhai Mistry's Sampoorana Rmayana, which merged theatrical aesthetics with the intention to portray devotion on the screen. Drawing inspiration from both Valmiki's Sanskrit epic and Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas. The film incorporates tableau-style compositions, frontal shots, and long takes that mirror traditional stage performances. Its visual poetry is reflected in golden lighting, symmetrical framing, and divine iconography that represented Rama and Sita as objects of darshan, in alignment of cinematic spectatorship with ritual practice. The film's heavy use of bhakti music and devotional chants positions cinema as an extension of temple culture, transforming the film-viewing experience into a collective spiritual ritual. (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen, 1999).

In this mode, the screen becomes a hallowed space, and the audience becomes a congregation. The film thus exemplifies how early Indian cinema was able to amalgamate modern technology with religious devotion, offering a visual and moving scripture that was made accessible to mass audiences.

A watershed moment of televised ritualization in Ramanand Sagar's Ramayan (1987–88)

Turning motion picture into devotional poetry, Ramanand Sagar's televised Ramayan marked a watershed moment in India's media history. It aired on Doordarshan to more than eighty million weekly viewers, and in doing so, transformed Sunday mornings into a national ritual. Viewers reportedly bowed down to their television screens in devotion, offered prayers, and treated actors like divine incarnations of the Supreme deities they played on screen. The show was greatly influenced by Ramcharitmanas, adopting the tones of devotion, hieratic dialogues, and darshan-like close-up cinematography that elevated the blessedness of the characters. When the show

ended its initial run, it emerged as one of the most successful television series, and its protagonists, Arun Govil and Deepika Chikhalia, who portrayed Sita, were literally admired and worshipped as the very incarnation of the divinity they played on screen. With the sole exception of B R Chopra's Mahabharat that was released a few years later, Ramayan would undoubtedly qualify as perhaps the world's biggest mythological show. (Lutgendorf, 1990; Rajagopal, 2001).

The series was not bereft of political discourse that was prevalent during its time. Produced at a time when Hindu nationalism was on the rise and the onset of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the series became enmeshed with political discourse, inadvertently enabling the growing majoritarian ideologies. However, the show's massive reception demonstrates how mass media can act as a powerful tool for cultural consolidation and the formation of a religious and cultural identity.

The cross-cultural collaboration of mythology and anime in The Legend of Prince Rama (1992)

A landmark in mythological narration was the 1992 Indo-Japanese animated film Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama, directed by Yugo Sako. The anime is a portrayal of a cross-cultural collaboration that melts the aesthetics of anime with Indian iconography. The film employs minimalist storytelling, restrained emotional expressiveness, and stylized motion which is typical of Japanese animation, all the while maintaining narrative loyalty to both Valmiki and Tulsidas. The anime, to this day, remains a legendary Indo-Japanese animated film famous for its breathtaking Japanese anime-style cinematography. Its highlights include the vibrant, ghibliesque hand-drawn animation. It brought to life emotive character designs, and an intricate visual narrative that was a melting pot for both Eastern and Western influences. The film's cinematography is remembered for its craft that brought the mythological epic to screen with detailed backdrops of locations like Ayodhya, Mithila, and Lanka. (Sako & Mohan, 1992).

The film faced political resistance in India due to concerns about foreign involvement in sacred Hindu stories despite a respectful approach. It was way later that the masses embraced and even celebrated the animated Ram and his story. Owing to the appreciation in the educational context, it reveals how transnational media can revamp and render traditional narratives modern, by introducing them to new audiences and the language of the visual.

The intersection of Feminist Criticism and Aesthetic Experimentation in Sita Sings the Blues (2008)

It was Nina Paley's Sita Sings the Blues that marked a radical shift from the generational and devotional retellings of the Ramayan. Achieved through a mixture of vector animation, shadow puppetry, and 1920s jazz by Annette Hanshaw, the film reinterprets the episode of Sita's abandonment with Paley's personal chaos. It was a staunch statement against the patriarchal depictions of Sita, and on a parallel plane, a portrayal of Paley's emotional suffering with irony and empathy. (Paley, 2008; Dubey, 2010).

There was an instant outrage and public outcry against the film. The movie's satirical themes and portrayal of Ram as emotionally distant and one who had abandoned Sita in the name of dharma sparked controversy in India, leading to widespread bans and protests. On the contrary, it was a hit globally, as it widely celebrated as a feminist intervention that reclaimed Sita's voice. Paley's rendition illustrates how contemporary media challenge canonical narratives, paving the way for marginalized perspectives and exploring diverse interpretive possibilities.

Bollywood and its myriad retellings

Bollywood has mostly displayed a reverential approach when dealing with the source material, however many adaptations take the path of revisionism. Movies such as Luv Kush (1997) and Sri Rama Rajyam (2011) follow the devotional scriptural models quite closely, illustrating moral clarity and divine order of the mythological text. On the contrary, Mani Ratnam's Raavan (2010) subverts the ideals of the epic through morally ambiguous characters: an authoritarian "Rama," a complex rebel "Ravana," and a Sita figure enmeshed between loyalty and selfhood. (Dwyer, 2006).

Another, highly controversial adaptation of the epic, Adipurush (2023) furthers the idea that reinterpreting a scared narrative with the intention of a commercial breakthrough is a risk unworthy of attempting. It was criticized for its poor CGI, modern slang replacing divine dialogue and subtle Islamophobia. This backlash for a what could have been a magnum opus, underscores how an epic demands aesthetic sensitivity and an accountability towards the culture, even during the contemporary times.

Digital Short-Form Retellings: YouTube, Instagram, and Regional Reels

The quick success of short-form digital platforms has democratized Ramayana storytelling and brought it to the masses. YouTube shorts, Instagram reels, and regional platforms like ShareChat host thousands of micro-adaptations ranging from comedic skits to devotional animations and even sketches doctored by AI. These local retellings diversify the epic's narrative, paving the way for subaltern interpretations such as the glorification of Ravana as a revolutionary figure or the critique of caste injustice in the Shambuka narrative. (Jenkins, 2006).

The objective of the digital creators is to contest the canonical versions of the epic and at the same time reinforce dominant ideologies for clout. They tend to explore the feminist or the LGBTQ+ reinterpretations that stem from various episodes of the epic. The images of Ram and Sita are reframed to portray metaphors for contemporary gender roles. These micro-narratives exhibit the manner in which algorithm-driven platforms enable the subversion of the generational narrative for the sole purpose of virality.

Gamified Epics and OTT Platforms

A new experiential dimension has been introduced through interactive media to the Ramayana. The animated series The Legend of Hanuman (Disney+ Hotstar, 2021) identifies Hanuman as a superheroic figure in a serialized narrative. Hanuman, here is imbued with divine powers in

a modern context as opposed to the God figure in the source material. Mobile games translate epic battles into action gameplay. Some popular examples of the aforementioned games are Ramayana Wars and Rama Force. (Ryan, 2015).

Virtual Reality platforms have made possible virtual pilgrimages through apps such as Ayodhya Darshan and Hanuman Chalisa VR, completely transforming mythic devotion into immersive sensory experience. These gamified and OTT platforms shift the epic from passive viewing to active engagement, in accordance with global trends in interactive storytelling and digital spirituality.

Visual Symbolism Across Media

Colour and visual symbolism remain central to the representation of the mythic divinity across cinematic and digital retellings. Golden, blue, and white tones symbolise Rama's purity and sacredness, while Ravana is often depicted through red, black, and jagged shadows. Sacred motifs such as lotus blossoms, halos, and firelight recur across media, reinforcing moral dichotomies. (Eck, 1998).

Modern adaptations, particularly anime and CGI, use hyper-real abstraction or stylize divine characters to evoke transcendence, such as Sita dissolving into petals during her entrance into the earth. These visual codes and symbols maintain continuity and coherence with traditional iconography while evolving with and adapting to new technological landscapes.

Gender Ideologies and the Feminine Divine

Sita's portrayal across adaptations underscores broader cultural discourses on gender. Traditional versions depict her as obedient, passive, and devoted, a sojourner to Lord Ram reinforcing patriarchal values. Subverting this narrative, feminist retellings, especially Sita Sings the Blues, illustrate her suffering and agency, all the while, challenging Rama's moral authority. (Richman, 1991; Tharu & Lalita, 1993).

Contemporary reinterpretations also reexplore overlooked and subaltern female characters such as Mandodari, Urmila, and Shabari, revealing the epic's suppressed feminine histories. Ravana, on the other hand, is linked to hypermasculinity or complex desire. These reconfigurations reflect changing social attitudes toward gender, power, and emotional agency.

Platform Politics and Algorithmic Visibility

In the contemporary digital age, algorithms increasingly influence how audiences encounter and visualise the Ramayana. Platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+ give preference to content based on engagement rather than cultural nuance and religious wisdom, often amplifying nationalist or devotional narratives while ignoring feminist or critical retellings. (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Censorship mechanisms whether driven by state politics or by major platforms further influence visibility, as seen in the ban induced on Sita Sings the Blues in India. Digital "Hindutva ecosystems" promote ideologically aligned content, demonstrating how sacred storytelling has become entangled with data capitalism and political identity.

A Perpetual Evolution of the Divine

From bhakti-era poetry to anime collaborations, feminist animations, Bollywood reinventions, and VR temple apps, the Ramayana remains a living, evolving cultural marvel. Modern audiovisual retellings not only preserve devotional traditions but also challenge, subvert, and reinterpret them in response to contemporary concerns. Each new version reveals layers as much about the society producing it as about the epic itself. (Richman, 1991; Jenkins, 2006).

As the Ramayana enters the metaverse, gaming worlds, and algorithmic feeds, it becomes increasingly evident that the epic's survival lies in its capacity for reinvention. Its sacredness endures not through static preservation but through continual reinterpretation, a dynamic interplay of power, devotion, and imagination.

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