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Seeing is Believing

COVID-19 and Televised Hinduism

Abstract

The idea of *darshana,* implying seeing and being seen is central to the Hindu religious interaction between the devotee and the divine – an extrusive rhythm of sight which brings the two into actual contact. From religious sculpture and idolatry, to calendar art, to ritualized performances, the emphasis on the visual in Hinduism can hardly be overstated. With temples being locked down and religious gatherings forbidden in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, this important aspect of Hindu religious life was severely affected. The sights and sounds of ritualized Hinduism were attempted to be reinforced through the public instructions to clap or light candles in honor of those at the frontline of the pandemic attack. This, however, failed to engender a spirit of religious communion in the absence of an effective visual paradigm. Further, in the light of the pre-lockdown socio-political scenario encompassing anti-CAA-NRC protests across the country, leading to sporadic riotous outbreaks, keeping the Hindu religious fervor alive became a political necessity. Against this backdrop encompassing pandemic and politico-religious unrest, the decision to re-run the religious epics on State-sponsored television was taken on March 27, 2020, whereby not only were both the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* re-telecast, they also received record-breaking views. This paper attempts to compare the socio-political contexts of the first telecast of 1987-89, itself against the backdrop the Ram Janmabhumi movement and, 2020 re-telecast during the COVID-19 lockdown, so as to foreground the importance of the 'visual' in Hindu religious life, whereby the televised *darshana* becomes a means to foster the spirit of community and hope, and therefore, to reinstate the how this 'visual' paradigm is maneuvered to the attainment of specific goals of religious indoctrination. The central argument remains that televising Hinduism is a result of an emphasis on the importance of seeing and being seen as a crucial means of devotee-divine interaction, which itself becomes the epistemological foundation of religious life in times of socio-political crises.

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Introduction

Hinduism differs from the Abrahamic religions. It is a pluralistic belief system which developed primarily through a series of responses to specific socio-historical situations (Thapar 2005). It was across centuries that these belief systems were interpolated and codified into a single religious order. This paper explores the visual dimension of these responses – the importance of 'seeing' in the Hindu religious belief system, finding parallels with the contemporary social situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown. In the wake of the pandemic, Hindu religious life, with its focus on immersive visual experience encompassing temple visits, community rituals and religious performance, has encountered a definite disruption. While the pandemic is a global health crisis, within the scope of this paper, it is situated as a social crisis in the potential disruption it brings about in the 'visually' oriented life of the Hindu devotee. Furthermore, the extremely devastating pandemic in India followed two significant socio-political events chronologically: the Babri Masjid verdict and the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. Both were indicative of a growing sentiment of Hindu religious assertion in the political life of the country. In an attempt to keep the religious fervor alive, and in keeping with the visual emphasis characteristic to Hinduism, the decision to re-run the *Ramayan* (1987) and the *Mahabharat* (1988) on national television was taken on March 27, 2020, five days into the nation-wide lockdown. The re-telecast had record-breaking views.

This essay compares the socio-political contexts of the first telecast of these epics in 1987-88 against the backdrop of the socio-religious crisis of the 'Ram Janmabhumi' movement, with the 2020 re-telecast during the COVID-19 lockdown. The televised *darshana* becomes a means to foster the spirit of community and hope. This 'visual' paradigm is maneuvered to the attainment of specific goals of religious indoctrination. This essay's central argument is that, building on the importance of 'seeing' and 'being seen' as a crucial means of devotee-divine interaction, televising Hinduism was exploited by Indian state policymaking, which itself becomes the epistemological foundation of religious life in times of socio-political crises.

Situating *Darshana* – Of Seeing and Being Seen

I have seen, that is the truth. —Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Scriptural Hinduism, as well as religious practice, adopts a sensuous approach to perception of the divine, within which the primacy of 'seeing' is stark. This is distinct from the Abrahamic resistance to imaging the divine, which is allied to a distrust of the senses in Greek tradition. What the eyes reported was regarded as mere shadows of the 'truth' in Platonic imagination, and it was with Aristotle that thinking through the image began to be accepted. The Abrahamic religions trusted the scriptural word as proclaimed more than they did the image in perceiving the divine (Eck, 2007: 45). Western observers' bafflement at Hinduism's clear visual emphasis led many of them to insist on the presence of a "Book" as the key identifier of the Hindu subject. This reorientation to the textual began as part of a colonial agenda, and resulted in a what scholars have called *Gita*-centrism. It seems that the process began with the pre-Modern commentaries[1] on the various verses of the *Gita,* particularly verse 2.47.[3] In modern times, the first clear evidence of treating the *Gita* as the central text for India's

non-Christian and non-Muslim population comes with Warren Hastings's commentary on Charles Wilkins's translation, wherein he justifies the need for translation both to establish that the *Gita* tallied and reinstated the basic postulates of Christianity and to gratify the Hindu subject of the colonizer's interest in native systems of knowledge. Wilkins's translation has been published in several European languages. As Sibaji Bandopadhyay argues, the translation was then perceived in the West, as a joint venture between Christianity and its teachings which made modern Indians uneasy. Therefore, the one postulate common to all Indian symbolic exchanges around the text, ensuing from the late nineteenth century, was that the *Gita* was indeed the 'Book' of Hinduism. It was as though the population branded as 'Hindu' by the colonial administration could not be identified as such unless it possessed a 'Book' which was akin in type, if not in spirit, with the Bible or the Qur'an (Bandopadhyay, 2016, 18-27). From Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay,[3] to Bal Gangadhar Tilak,[4] to the Swadeshi insistence on *Gita*-literacy, down to M.K Gandhi's interpretations of it, modern scholarship's focus on the text of the *Gita* has resulted in its treatment as a separate gospel, often overshadowing the image-centric nature of the Hindu religion.

The philosophical teachings of the *Gita,* though severed from its original place in the *Mahabharata* and codified into a verbal discourse, have been propagated more poignantly through images, including sculptures, calendar art, performance and televised renditions. Indeed, even the *Gita,* as codified, eventually culminates in Arjun, visually experiencing the *Vishwarupa* (the supreme *avatar* encompassing the entire universe) of Lord Vishnu. Such visual experience of *darshana*— that is, of raising the eye from the book to the image—has remained central to the Hindu religious practice.

Darshana implies 'seeing', more specifically religious seeing or visual perception of the divine. The most common religious activity of the Hindu devotee is to visit the temple, the inner sanctum of which houses the idol (*murti*) of the divine. This demonstrates two aspects of Hindu religious practice. First, the central act of Hindu worship is standing in the presence of a visually objectified divine; second, the act of visual objectification is symbolic of the belief in idol worship emanating from a larger polytheistic worldview. Both aspects, therefore, reinstate the visual nature of worship and the centrality of the divine image in Hinduism, as well as the importance of 'seeing' as intrinsic to worship and devotion. *Darshana* does not imply only 'seeing', but also emphasizes 'being seen' by the divine. Sometimes translated as "auspicious sight" of the divine, the importance of *darshana* in the Hindu religious complex reinforces the idea that worship is not merely a matter of prayers and offerings and devotional disposition of the heart, but by virtue of the presence of the deity in the image, its visual apprehension is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine (Eck, 1998, 3). As Lawrence A. Babb notes, *darshana*:

> depends on the idea that seeing itself is extrusive, a medium through which seer and seen come into contact, and, in a sense, blend and mix. (Babb, 1981: 387)

This emphasis on *darshana* is manifest in multifarious ways within the Hindu religious matrix. First, it is evident from the visual imagery used in Vedic and Puranic literature, as well as in the epic narratives, the most important of which are the ten manifestations of Vishnu in the various Puranic tales before his devotees as *avataras.* Secondly, the iconographic importance accorded to the eyes of the divine which present a curious

amalgam, stretching from a third-eye located on the forehead of Lord Shiva, to Lord Vishnu's drooping eyelids imagined as the blue lotus, to the large eyes of Lord Jagannath and his kin. This extends further into the act of *chakshudana* (imparting eyesight) or *pranpratishtha* (instilling life into the idol) as being intrinsic to the consecration rituals of Hindu gods, within or outside the temple. Thirdly, there is an importnat distinction between the divine gazes of benevolence and anger. For example, Hindu gods like *Santoshi Maa* or Lord Shani (Saturn), are known for their glances of anger, cursing the devotee for causing displeasure to the divine. Fourthly, the idea of pilgrimage, itself termed as *darshan,* wherein the devotee travels across geographic hurdles to see and be seen by the divine, though the pilgrimage itself is also, in part, internal, allowing the devotee to see within. In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), Victor and Edith Turner recognize the Christian denouncement of the act of pilgrimage as wasteful; but in the Hindu tradition, in the absence of a confusion between "image" and "idol", pilgrimage becomes the natural extension of the desire for *darshan* of the divine image, which is at the heart of all temple worship (Eck, 1998, 5).

Related to the notion of visuality is the culture of "photo-iconography". Colored prints of deities have become a ubiquitous feature of Hindu life today; virtually everywhere Hindus live or work, they will have pictures of these divinities (Babb, 1981, 387). In attempting to trace a visual history of India, Christopher Pinney has recognized the emphasis on visuality within Hindu practice through the notion of *darshana,* whereby he assigns a position of centrality to it within Hindu scopic regimes, relating it with ideas of 'insight', 'knowledge' and 'philosophy'. He asserts that the visual field inaugurated in his study of mass-produced art, including calendar art and chromolithography, situates the relationship that exists between religion, politics and the "constitution of the Indian public culture" in which "visuality and other embodied practices" have played a central role (Pinney, 2004, 9).

Indeed, performance and calendar art have remained the two key manifestations of the visuality and other embodied practices in Hinduism. While the visual aspect has been foregrounded through a careful understanding of *darshana,* as well as through the brief reference to calendar art, the connetion between visuality, religion and performance also needs to be explored. Performance practices in India have remained tied up to temple festivals and ritual offerings and even though scholars have described processes of secularization of traditional performative practices (eg, Shivaprakesh, 2007), the religious aspect of performances surrounding performances like the *Ramlila* of Uttar Pradesh, or *Sri Krishna Parijatha* of Karnataka, can hardly be ignored. During my doctoral fieldwork in rural parts of North Karnataka, while studying *Sri Krishna Parijatha* performances, it was evident that financial offerings (*dakshina*) were given to the actors playing Krishna or Gopala during the live performance on stage. Moreover, these performances are part of religious festivities and therefore, cannot be regarded as having been secularized.[5]

The importance of this visual perception of the divine is most poignant in fostering a sense of community among believers and regulating social behavior. First, by 'seeing' and 'being seen', an interactive exchange is facilitated between the devotee and the divine, underlined through the belief that this visual interaction unleashes an extractive flow which brings the seer and the seen into actual contact. Under the right circumstances, the devotees are enabled to take into themselves, through the means

of vision, something of the inner virtue or power of the deity, including his own divine power of seeing (Babb, 1981: 387). Also, the consciousness of 'being seen' evokes a spirit of community and brotherhood, wherein all devotees are uniformly regulated by an all-seeing divine, thereby facilitating uniformity of belief and behavior. When this interactive flow is televised, therefore, as part of the endeavor to mitigate religious crises that arise at specific juncture within Indian political history, its function of maintaining and policing social solidarity remains the same. While on the one hand, the visual interaction ('seeing') between the televised image and its audience facilitates religious indoctrination, the televisuals themselves, carefully curated from the Hindu divine imagery spread across idol worship sculpture and calendar art, become active participants in the framing of a dominant Hindu religious discourse.

Two important points need to be emphasized here. First, the sensory perception of the divine in Hinduism, though primarily focused on the visual, also invites the other senses as part of the divine interaction process. This includes that of touch, in practices ranging from touching the feet of the divine or of elders to untouchability based on caste order; smell, entailing the burning of incense as part of the divine veneration; hearing, from chants to *bhajans* and other religious musical performances; and taste, the distribution of *prasad*, the blessed morsel for consumption by the devotees. Second, though the diversity of religions, and therefore of audiences, remains central to the Indian social scenario, the fact also remains that the dominant Hindu religious discourse – that of 'seeing' and 'being seen' – spills over. Much as casteism has gone past the bounds of Hinduism into religions which emphasize the importance of equality of human being (such as Christianity, Islam or Sikhism) so too the emphasis on the visual has become hegemonic in Indian culture even outside of a recognizeably Hindu religion. This results in the audiences' reliance upon sight as the artefact of belief systems. Thus, the religious indoctrination works best through visual media such as television, which has surpassed questions of access, especially in terms of class and location.

Televising Religion – Then & Now

This understanding of the centrality of the visual image in Hindu religious practice is key to foregrounding this essay's primary argument: televising Hinduism serves as part of a major vehicle for religious and political reconfiguration of India.

While the 1988-89 telecast of the epics on Doordarshan (Indian State-sponsored TV broadcast network) is widely accepted as a focal event in India's movement towards the Hindu right, being closely followed by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, L.K Advani's infamous *rathyatra* (chariot-drive) across the West and North of India in 1990, the re-telecast of March 2020 had its own politico-religious agenda. The Doordarshan serial's aesthetic, itself derived from chromolithography, could not be read in isolation from its religious agenda (See Rajagopal, 2004 as well as Mankekar, 1999). In the wake of the pandemic, therefore, television became one of the means to keep Hindu religious fervor alive. While the visual emphasis in Hinduism establishes the aesthetic backdrop to this televised assertion of religion, this section of the paper, explores the larger question regarding the relationship between religion and politics in the television era through an examination of both telecasts in their socio-historical contexts.

The national epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* were presented on State-sponsored Doordarshan TV in the 1980s. The serialized narration of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* was first aired between January 1987 to July 1988, and B.R Chopra's *Mahabharat* between October 1988 to June 1990; and thereafter the re-telecast of both was aired between March and April 2020. The socio-historical junctures at which both telecasts were aired present curious similarities, that of the consolidation of the dominant discourse of Hindu national assertion. The late 1980s and early 1990s was a period of Hindu nationalist mobilization in India, for which the televised adaptations of the epic laid the groundwork. Their first telecast in fact, marks the pre-publicity given to the Hindu nationalist agenda, eventually culminating into the 'Ram Janmabhumi' (Birthplace of Ram) Movement and bringing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) into political prominence. Some definitive features of the religious atmosphere, its political implications, and subsequent media projections need to be identified.

First, the salience of Hindu nationalism depended heavily upon the media and its power to re-shape the context in which politics is conceived, enacted, and understood. With respect to television adaptations of the epics, it must be remembered that during the colonial period, politics and religion remained separate, the former being put under strict surveillance and the latter having been given a certain limited autonomy, as part of the larger colonial project of building a clearer distinction between the public and the private This distinction was gradually overridden and reconfigured through visual culture (Pinney, 2004: 92). As Arvind Rajagopal notes:

> That the hitherto secular Congress Party itself introduced Hindu epics on television, only to be overtaken in its initiative by a more adroit opposition, perhaps only confirms the overdetermined nature of the shift in public culture. (2004, 121-122)

Television occupied a space within the domestic, 'private' domain, but engaged with the discourses of the 'public,' outside world. By the 1990s, therefore, as the religious serialization was televised, to separate the broadcast's private effects from its political meaning was difficult. This itself served as the chief impetus to the rise of a hegemonic Hindu nationalism in Indian politics.

Secondly, the emergence of religious nationalism marks the transition to a new visual regime, illuminating the power of a given cultural form (television) and the ways in which it rests upon a series of contingent events. As communication systems expanded, so did access and resultant political participation. The *Mahabharata,* therefore, became accepted as a tale told anew by Indian television – while some of its original contexts were lost, new socio-political contexts were added to it through both interpolations and adaptations alike. As a complex text, comprising over one lakh (100,000) *shlokas* (hymns), the *Mahabharata* is not a text that is widely read; instead, it has been passed down across generations through narration and performance. As James Hegarty notes:

> Religious epics were presented as part of the 'national programme' (on Sundays), which explicitly aimed to reach the entire nation, and thus, of course, constructed the nation as a unified audience. (2012: 192)

With the television adaptation, the narrative was standardized, and a single version of this multi-faceted tale was mass-circulated, taking advantage of the increased visual access, to further the process of religious indoctrination.

Thirdly, an attempt was made, by restructuring forms of public affiliation, to create a new populist language of politics that appealed to authoritarian rather than democratic values. The *Ramayana* presented an image of the ideal state—that of the *Ram Rajya* (Kingdom of Ram)—which, in opposition to the Gandhian model of the welfare state, does not deny its location within a heroic society and is marked by an absence of democratic rights and individual liberties. This ideal state was, moreover, popularized as 'universalist and humanist,' parallel to the assertion that its spirit was essentially Hindu, and that India itself is Hindu. Hindu myths and rituals began to be declared as legitimately belonging to the public arena, inviting the participation of one and all in their commemoration and re-enactment. (Rajagopal 2004: 84-85). This language was also essentially visual. Combining tropes of melodrama, soap-opera and calendar art, a Hindu religious imagery was evoked, unleashing the processes of a televised *darshana.*

Finally, Hindu nationalism became politically conspicuous in its relation to economic liberalization. The rhetoric of market reform and insurgent cultural politics ran parallel to one another. Radical change was promised upon the emancipation of hidden forces, whether of the profit motive or of the long-suppressed Hindu religion (Rajagopal 2001, 1-3). The televised *Ramayan* joined these two possibilities together. Audiences experienced these two forces as travelling in different directions, with liberalization as a portent of things to come, and the harkening back to the utopia of a golden age, which the producer-director, Ramanand Sagar, himself referred to as a dusty chest, which he had merely wiped clean with a cloth. They were, therefore, linked together by television, as a device that brought the past and future together while itself oscillating between past and future in a kind of eternal present (Rajagopal, 2001, 72-74).

The religious groundwork laid by the serialized adaptations of the epic was in response to the nation-wide *rathyatras* (chariot-drives), planned by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), as part of their 1984 campaign to gather support for increased access to Hindus to the Babri Mosque in Uttar Pradesh.[6] Though suspended temporarily, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October 1984, the campaign was resumed soon after. The television serials, however, clearly paved the way for a Hindu communion through the evocation of visual tropes of a televised *darshana* and cultural symbols characteristic of calendar art. This, in turn, culminated into granting the permission for *silanyas* (stone-laying) in 1989, followed by a series of communal endeavors including L.K Advani's infamous *rathyatra* (1990), leading to the *kar seva* (volunteering) in 1992 and the final demolition of this otherwise peaceful place of worship, which had been emblematic of India's spirit of religious tolerance, with Hindus and Muslims offering parallel prayers in the wake of lack of historical clarity (Patwardhan, 1992).

Pandemic & Nostalgia – Mitigating the Crisis of Faith

Upon careful observation, the context, and implications of the March-April 2020 re-telecast of the epic serials, has parallels to the first, despite them having been aired in the wake of the nationwide lockdown, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The religious atmosphere in India has remain charged since the first election of the BJP to the Lok Sabha in 2014. This was intensified by the time the second term of Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi began in May 2019. The socio-political situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s bears remarkable resemblances to the present politico-religious scenario in India.

First, the Hindu nationalist agenda pertaining to the demolition of the Babri Mosque reached fruition in the historical verdict of November 2019. Accusations of ruling-party-induced violence against Muslims and lower caste Hindus and lynchings, particularly in relation to the cow-protection agenda as part of Hindu-hegenomic discourse (Arora, 2017).[7] This is coupled with accusations of the denial of freedom of speech in an attempt to redefine nationalism,[8] ever since the Modi-led government came to power. The next episode in this political campaign was the ratification of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 (*PRS India,* 2019), which provided the path to acquisition of Indian citizenship for religious minority communities who had fled persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before December 2014. Muslims from these nations were not granted citizenship eligibility, which marked the first instance of the use of religion as a criterion for citizenship and was heavily criticized for going against the secular spirit of the Indian Constitution (see Samuel, 2019). Massive protests ensued in different parts of the country, leading to sporadic riots in parts of Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi (Pokharel, 2019).

The distinction between the domains of the political and religious, already blurred during the period of the first telecast, remains ambiguous at this time as well. Particularly after the ratification of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, religion was recognized as a criterion for citizenship and therefore, its relevance in the realm of the socio-political was strengthened. During this socio-political turmoil, the COVID-19 outbreak erupted in India. The first case was detected on January 30, 2020 in Kerala. The pandemic reached a stage of official alarm in March 2020, with the Prime Minister's appeal for "Janata Curfew" (People's Curfew) on March 22, 2020. Indian residents were ordered to stay indoors and come only to their balconies, porches and roofs at 5 pm in the evening to clank utensils, clap hands or ring bells as a mark of solidarity with those at the frontline of this battle against the virus, including doctors, nurses and providers of essential services. This was publicized across media as #5Baje5Minute (5 minutes at 5pm). The subsequent lockdown, which was to run for nearly three months, was yet to be announced. It was fairly easy to anticipate, however, that it would come, and with it, a crisis of faith in the wake of the rising atmosphere of Hindu nationalist mobilization. The curfew was observed with obedience and solidarity was demonstrated with celebratory spirit in response to the PM's call to action (Nandy and Sharma, 2020).

After the formal announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown on March 24, 2020, in his evening television appearance, Prime Minister Modi announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown starting the very next day. All public gatherings, political, religious, and otherwise, were stalled, public life was transformed into a new normal encompassing quarantine and social distancing. Television broadcast, too, was on lockdown, with channels having to run old shows and serial episodes given the restrictions imposed on shooting because of social distancing. Shortly after, the decision to resurrect the serialized epics, twice daily, was announced. In the absence

of alternative entertainment options, citizens were encouraged to watch this mythological saga heavy with visual symbolism of Hindu religious practices.

The visual regime, created through the televised epics, clearly needed to be appealed to again in the wake of a new triple-edged crisis, social, medical and religious. The decision to re-broadcast the epics offered the promise to instill fresh nationalist vigor that had been lost after the seemingly ceaseless period of lockdown that emphasized the monotony of the Indian middle class. It did this through a nostalgic indulgence into an invigorating visual extravaganza: a move from the captivity of quarantine into the world of mythic splendor, and a harking back to the mythic origins of human evolution in the golden age of the heroic society. In the first week of its re-run, Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan*, shattered previous viewing records, managing to secure 170 million views to become the highest rated Hindi entertainment program since 2015, making the re-telecast an enormous commercial success (Verma, 2020).

As part of the digitalization campaign carried out in the first term of the BJP government increased digital access was granted through cheaper internet service and broadening of the communicative reach of new media practices. Alongside television, therefore, so called 'over-the-top' (OTT) platforms, which make digital content available to viewers directly through the internet without a need for cable, broadcast, or satellite television services, also contributed to the reach of the mythological saga. This new technological regime helped further the Hindu-dominant visual ideology of the broadcast epics and assisted its propagation. The phenomena of 'seeing' and 'being seen' is set, but the platform expands to incorporate both, the domestic/familial viewing scope of television to the mobile/individual viewing of OTT platforms. The aims of the rebroadcast, therefore, cannot naively be understood to have only commercial or entertainment related motives. Instead, its central emphasis remains on the role of television in mitigating a crisis of religious faith. The Hindu devotee is expected to respond to the visual regimes as replicated on television.

Thirdly, the new populist language which was deployed as part of the first telecast of the epics, a language both visual and auditory, is sustained. Interestingly, the language used in the epic serials retains the flow of Sanskrit hymns, wherein the Hindi of everyday speech is discarded in favor a Sanskritized, refined, sometimes incomprehensible form of language. The language, in fact, was so obscure to the millennials that several memes on the linguistic aspect alone were shared.

Twitterati experimented with the archaic language being used in contemporary situations to hilarious ends. This is in tandem with the general impetus provided to Sanskrit and Indic studies since the rise of the BJP to power in 2014, with an attempt to create an alternate history, which is typically Hindu-Aryan-Brahmanical. The visual language, facilitating televised *darshana*, bore a greater appeal given the restrictions imposed on temple visits and community festivities.[9] Moreover, to assist propagation of this populist language, visual symbols, beyond the epic serial telecasts, were used. On April 5, 2020, once again in response to the Prime Minister's call, citizens came to their balconies with candles, lamps and flashlights in hands, showing solidarity with the warriors against COVID-19 for nine minutes at 9pm amidst rumors of candle heat killing the virus (Dahiya, 2020) and windfall in candle sales (Bagchi, 2020). The lighting of candles is emblematic of the Hindu belief in purgation by fire, which marked a distinct Hindu subtext to this seemingly secular act.

Finally, the location of the serialized epic at the nexus between the past and the future has been clear. The re-telecast further serves to emphasize the connection

between Hindu national mobilization and economic liberalization. The commercial success of the re-run was highlighted across news, television, and social media. The re-telecast of Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan,* reportedly amassed a viewership of 7.7 crores, creating a world record (Khan, 2020). These claims were later proved to be incorrect – the 28th February 1983 episode of the American series, *M*A*S*H* notched up nearly 106 million views – this is much larger than the views claimed by the former (Khandekar & Bhatia, 2020). The commercial agenda, therefore, serves to mask the radicalizing tendency of the hegemonic discourse propagated through the epic serials. The nostalgia for the golden past is, on the one hand, an attempt to shift focus from a present crisis through control of what one is 'seeing'. On the other hand, it stages an attempt to re-write the history of a nation, so as to regulate how one is 'being seen' with regard to his position with respect to the majoritarian discourse. Both aims, evidently, are achieved through indulgence into a visual extravaganza, therefore become an off shoot of the Hindu religious emphasis on the sensuousness of divine perception.

Conclusion

For a nation that prides itself on religious and cultural diversity, the deployment of Hindu cultural epics on Indian national television remains rather exclusionary. Its ignorance of the variety of subjectivities present within the country, arising out of cultural, religious and caste position, is rampant, and therefore, contradictory to the professed egalitarian spirit of the Indian nation. While the sensuous perception of the divine in Hinduism, and its spillover to the larger cultural milieu in India cannot be altered, this paper critiques the use of television as a vehicle for reconstitution and propagation of a hegemonic Hindu culture.

Arguments about media and its interventionist potency within political discourse achieved through its exploitation at the hands of a ruling order hardly needs to be overstated. It might be important, therefore, in conclusion, to distinguish and emphasize the arguments within this paper as distinct from the above claim. It begins and remains rooted in the assertion that a visual interaction between the devotee and the divine is an established trope in Hindu religious practice. The politicization of religion, too, therefore, springs from an affirmation of this trope. In the wake of a crisis of faith, religion by virtue of being rooted in sensuousness, has therefore, been televised to mitigate the crisis. In this medium, immanent hurdles to 'seeing' and 'being seen' can be eased out through the reinforcement of the visual tropes pertaining to *darshana*, which remain central to the practices of Hindu religious worship and devotion.

Notes

1. Classical commentaries on the Gita include philosophical commentaries by Shankaracharya (c. 800 CE), Abhinavagupta (c. 1000 CE), Ramanuja (c.1100 CE), Madhava (c. 1250 CE) and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (c. 1450 CE) among others. See Flood (1996) and Zaehner (1969).
2. This verse reads: *Karmany-evaadhikaaraste maa phaleshu kadaachana*
Maa karmaphalahetur bhoor maa te sango'stwakarmani.
[To action alone do you have the right, never over its consequences

Never consider yourself the cause of your consequences, nor remain attached to inaction. (Translation mine).

This verse has attracted most attention and is believed to be the essence of Hindu philosophy. Popular culture has used this verse extensively. The opening sequence of the televised *Mahabharat*, for instance, uses this in a sing-song way. This is the verse that speaks of *nishkaam karma* – that one has the right over action alone, and not over its consequence. Popular culture, coupled with the commentaries, have centred upon this idea heavily, whereby the other philosophical ruminations in the text are often overlooked. This is in extension of the argument that the pluralistic spirit of Hinduism is sacrificed in the attempt to have a singular narrative dominate a religious order.

3.Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) was an Indian journalist, poet and novelist. He is the composer of the patriotic song, *Vande Mataram,* which became an important symbolic of the India's struggle to freedom from British colonialism. He is also linked to the conception of India as *Bharat Mata* (Mother Goddess), which itself finds a place in the Hindutva narrative as being popularized in India today. His commentary on the *Gita* was published posthumously in 1902, and comprises his comments up to Chapter 4. See Minor (1986).

4. Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), famed as the "father of the Indian unrest" was an important leader in the Indian struggle for freedom against British colonial rule. He was the first advocate for *Swaraj* (self-rule) for India, which became the slogan under which he wished to unite the Indian populace. He sought inspiration from the epics in his unification agenda and therefore became one of the important commentators on the *Bhagvad Gita.* See Tilak (1924).

5. For a similar study, see Kaupr (2004).

6. The Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh was constructed between 1528-29 on the orders of Emperor Babur of the Mughal Empire. Ayodhya is also the mythological birthplace of the epic hero of the *Ramayana,* Lord Ram. Staunch Hindu believers were of the opinion that the mosque was constructed only after the demolition of a temple honoring Lord Ram by virtue of the fact that the mosque was located on a hill called 'Ramkot' (Rama's Fort) (Hiltebeitel, 2009, 227). As majoritarian sentiments strengthened in favor of this belief, it was wrung by right-wing organizations like the VHP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP to political ends before the 1991 elections. A mass movement of Hindu nationalists was organized in the form of a chariot-drive intended to perform voluntary service at the site, leading to its eventual demolition in 1992. Communal riots were triggered in different parts of the country thereafter. The Liberhan Commission, set up in 1992, blamed several VHP, RSS and BJP leaders for the issue, but its recommendation was ignored by the then Indian National Congress-led government at the Centre. In 2003, by orders from the Supreme Court of India, excavations were conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) at the disputed site and their findings revealed the presence of a 10th-century shrine under the temple. The Muslim groups disputed these findings and in 2010, the Allahabad High Court, while upholding the ASI findings, decided to divide the disputed land into three parts – one each for the temple of Lord Ram, the Islamic Sunni Waqf Board and the Hindu denomination of Nimrohi Akhara (High Court of Judicature at Allahabad. 2010. "Ram Janm Bhumi Babri Masjid", November). In 2019, a five-judge bench at the Supreme Court heard the case from August to October and pronounced the verdict on November 9, 2019, handing the entire land over to a trust for the

construction of the Hindu temple. The Muslim board was given a plot of land, nearly double the size (5 acres) of the disputed property at Dhannipur village in Ayodhya district of Uttar Pradesh (Supreme Court of India. 2019).

7. The origins of the cow-protection agenda in India can be traced back to the Hindu belief in associating the cow with divinity as well as with motherhood. This belief, however, has been a subject of much debate among historians. The historian D.N Jha believes that beef was very much part of the Aryan diet in anciet times. His view is, however, opposed on many levels and he was even banned from publishing his book *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (2002) in India.

Before independence, despite sporadic demands to ban cow slaughter on part of nationalist leaders, the colonial government upheld its policy to not interfere in religious affairs of the colonies and therefore these demands remained unmet. During the constitution-drafting process around 1947, several leaders petitioned to M.K Gandhi to raise this issue in the Constituent Assembly, who also paid no heed to these given their possibility of worsening the religious rift already created by the Partition. It was, however, recognized by the president of the Assembly, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who later urged for cognizance on the same. Though it failed to be included in the main body of the 1948 Constitution, it was included as part of the "Directive Principles of State Policy" and the federal states were free to legislate on the subject. The debates continued and culminated into the genesis of Article 48, which states:

> The state shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milk and draught cattle.

The cow protection question gained momentum once again in 1966 with agitations from the VHP, culminating in a huge procession of protesters marching to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's residence in New Delhi in November 1966. She set up a committee to look into the issue, but it only led to further deadlocks. Most states still have the choice to implement Article 48 or not. However, given the special status of the cow for some sections of Indian society and politics, in some parts of the country, people could be sent jail for trading in beef, though in other parts this trade is perfectly legal. Foreign trade in buffalo is allowed but there remains a ban on beef trade until today. See Komal (2021) and Deol (2021) for more.

8. The February 2016 issue surrounding a meeting held at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, following which students at teachers of the institution were branded as 'anti-national', inaugurated questions of freedom of speech on the one hand and nationalism on the other. For a nuanced understanding see Azad, Nair, Singh & Roy, eds. (2016).

9. In the later stages of the lockdown, there was news regarding the flouting of social distancing protocols in order to attend religious festivals. The construction the Ram Temple at Ayodhya also began at this critical juncture, wherein party leaders openly violated social distancing protocols in order to facilitate the construction – some even ending up COVID infected. This is particularly important given the fact that the initial spread of the COVID infection in India was blamed upon a Muslim religious gathering at Nizammudin, New Delhi For journalistic accounts, see Sohini Bose (2020), ANI (2020), HT correspondent (2020) and Bishat and Naqvi (2020).

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