Rashmi Sadana and Vasudha Dalmia

Introduction

On 25 February 2008 a group of student activists, accompanied by a camera crew, charged into the office of the head of the history department at Delhi University demanding that a particular text be removed from the syllabus of an undergraduate course on ancient Indian history. The activists belonged to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), part of a larger Hindu-nationalist group of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. The text in question was A. K. Ramanujan's 'Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', an essay that documents the array of tellings of Valmiki's great Sanskrit epic, *The Ramayana*. By detailing five of these alternative *Ramayanas*, the essay brings to life different interpretations of characters and alternative narratives of the epic itself. Ramanujan (1929–93) was a translator, poet and scholar who for many years taught at the University of Chicago. In the essay in question, he writes with genuine reverence of how the 'number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing'. He goes on to list the numerous languages in which the Rama story can be found, including Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai and Tibetan –

> Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rama story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kavyas* or ornate poetic compositions, *puranas* or old mythological stories, and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of Ramayanas grows even larger. To these must be

> added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays,
> puppet plays and shadow plays. . .
>
> In these versions the story is told differently from one of the earliest and most prestigious of them all: Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramanyana*.[1]

The ABVP activists, in various retellings of that day at Delhi University, were said to have vandalized the department head's office and roughed up the head of department himself. They objected vehemently to the documentation of other *Ramayanas*, arguing that it was an insult to Hindu gods and goddesses. There was one cultural tradition and story, and any other would tarnish the Hindu cultural tradition and identity, they said. The essay was 'offensive to the beliefs of millions of Hindus', one activist proclaimed. Another likened the other tellings of the epic to nasty rumours. It was clear that the activists thought that students at Delhi University should not be reading about the existence of these other *Ramayanas*, even if, gathered together, they are far more numerous and, arguably, influential than Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Students from the afflicted history department, some faculty members and many others from the university joined in a march the following day to protest what had happened. Hundreds chanted slogans such as 'Campus Chor Do' ('Leave the Campus Alone'), held signs denouncing the ABVP's actions and called for the campus to be 'a free and democratic space', open to the discussion of all ideas. At the end of the march, a professor from the history department addressed the crowd, pointing out that the article in question was in fact arguing just how popular Valmiki's *Ramayana* was since it is a text that has been adapted by so many Indians and others, thereby suggesting Ramanujan's essay was about the spread of Hindu culture rather than an insult to it. The crux of the debate then was about the nature of culture itself, its boundaries and definitions. Are there many incarnations, and hence, interpretations of a cultural tradition, and if there are, does this dilute or diminish people's identities?

In the following days, the ABVP installed a tent at the main gate of Delhi University. People walked by and sometimes went into the tent to discuss what had happened. In the end, the ABVP found itself in the minority; its view was unacceptable to the campus majority. Nevertheless, the issue re-surfaced in October 2011 when the Academic Council of Delhi University, against the advice of the history department, decided to remove Ramanujan's essay from the BA history course syllabus. Ramanujan's essay meanwhile was sent around on numerous email lists, and links to

the article were prominent on several blogs. Columnists and bloggers shared their experiences growing up with one alternative version of the *Ramayana* or another from one end of India to the other. *Outlook*, an Indian weekly news magazine in English, reprinted part of the essay. The discourse grew. And the divide between 'secularists', or 'pseudo-secularists' (as their detractors call them), and those who believe they are defending Hindu culture and identity by patrolling its religious and literary borders, arguably remained unchanged. Controversies such as this one occur often, especially over films, but also over literature and other cultural forms. They are part and parcel of India's 'culture wars'. And they have become part of the grammar of political debate, rallying points for parties and groups. The secularists are often but not always the English-language educated, living in 'the metros', as the large Indian cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Kolkata are called. They are seen to be arrogant and out of touch with the concerns of the majority of Indians, but they often wield the reins of cultural influence and power.

This story offers an entrée into the question of not merely what constitutes modern Indian culture, but how overwhelming a task it is to try and represent even a small fraction of the plethora of cultural forms and variants that have occurred in the geographical space – with its numerous regional specificities – of the modern national entity known as India. This India was an idea, a 'wager' as Sunil Khilnani calls it, put forth by the Indian nationalist elite: 'For all its magnificent antiquity, and historical depth, contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world. The fundamental agencies and ideas of modernity – European colonial expansion, the state, nationalism, democracy, economic development – all have shaped it.'[2]

In our reading and rendering of 'modern Indian culture', we have had to make a number of demarcations, first in regard to focusing on the *modern* Indian nation-state, which before the 1947 partitioning of the Indian subcontinent into the nation-states of India and Pakistan, was a bigger geographic and cultural entity, mostly under British colonial rule. Thus, with regard to the period before partition we deal with the Indian subcontinent at large and after partition with the Indian nation-state. And even of the Indian nation-state, we cover only sections. What emerges in this volume in terms of regional specificity, then, is less by design and more by the area of focus of the particular set of scholars who responded to our invitation to participate in this volume.

If the first demarcation is about space, the second, not surprisingly, is about time. Many scholars see the 1757 Battle of Plassey as the beginning of British rule in India, yet most of the cultural formations we consider emerge from the early nineteenth century onwards. In fact, there are many transitions from the Mughal period to the beginnings of British commercial, political and cultural influence from the late eighteenth century on (first through the English East India Company and then in the form of direct Crown rule after the 1857–8 uprising), spanning at least three centuries. Thus the beginnings of what we see as modernity can be set yet further back in time, well into the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; nevertheless the colonial encounter clearly hastened the process already underway, leading to the polarization we know today as 'modernity' and its apparent opposite, 'tradition'. As many of the cultural productions discussed in this volume show, modernity and tradition create and reinforce each other. Ranajit Guha captures the dynamic nature of their interaction in 'Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography', his classic essay which includes a discussion of the interplay of what he sees as three cultural idioms.[3] One of these idioms derives from the metropolitan political culture of the colonizer, in this case, typically British; the second derives from the pre-colonial tradition of the colonized, that is, from the Indian. Since, as Guha has convincingly shown, colonial rule never achieved absolute hegemony, the indigenous Indian idiom always retained more than a measure of autonomy. The two idioms overlapped, crossed or subverted each other, in order to flow and coalesce in the third idiom, which was the modern Indian. This third idiom could be a replica neither of the Western nor of the ancient Indian it so often invoked. Instead, the constituent elements formed a new compound, 'a new and original entity'.[4] The third idiom as it emerged in a given context often carried signs of struggle and unresolved tensions.

This notion of the third idiom allows us to break down the tradition/modern polarity, and see it not only as a distinction between the indigenous and the alien, but also as part of the self-representation of those who sought to depict their tradition as being defiantly resistant to change. It further allows us to understand those who sought to transcend tradition altogether. The three idioms themselves are to be regarded as heuristic devices rather than rigidly demarcated entities, since there was incessant change and exchange between the first two idioms at all times.

The third set of demarcations we had to make for this volume concerns the cultural formations included in our selection. We do not

claim to offer a comprehensive or even partial survey of the various elements and forms that might constitute modern Indian culture. What we do aim to offer, in each chapter and in the way the chapters relate to one another, is a historical understanding of what different strands of modernity have come to signify, and how various cultural forms have been taken up and become harbingers of those modern strands. Our goal in the essays that follow, then, is to provide an entry point into topics in modern Indian culture from a variety of perspectives and approaches, and in doing so, to focus on the analysis of parts rather than surveys of wholes. Some authors use a case-study approach, others survey a particular time period, while still others offer a combination of overview and the analysis of particular cultural productions in more detail.

Some of the stories we want to tell have to do with the ways in which political power translated into cultural power under British rule, and the cultural tensions that arose in emergent Indian modernities from the nineteenth century onwards, sometimes formulated in terms of seemingly simple questions regarding what was 'ours' and what was 'theirs'. We have been interested not only in how these questions became more pressing during the nationalist movement, but also why they have remained acute even after Indian independence. For the search for 'Indian' idioms has persisted, whether in regional or national contexts, through popular, folk and urban formations, and with or without the involvement of the state.

In the first part of the book, 'Cultural contexts', each contributor provides the backdrop for a topic central to modern Indian life: caste politics, tribal identity, the changing village, the relationship between agrarian change and the cultures of food, and new forms of religiosity in the changing urban landscape. In the broadest sense, this section aims to deal with the experience of modernity; how modern ideas and practices become constitutive of politics and social life; specifically how people live and think about themselves in the so-called peripheries as much as in the centres. One could argue that the most relevant divide in India today is the one between urban and rural livelihoods and perspectives, and yet they are also continually intersecting. This topic was explored in the popular Hindi film, *Peepli Live* (2010), which in the context of farmer suicides gives a satirical portrait of how English and Hindi television journalists exploit rural Indians. Tellingly, the film is not about the causes of poverty, but rather the political shenanigans of our media age, where a farmer's potential suicide turns into a spectacle.

To start off, Ann Gold offers a *longue durée* perspective on village life from her years of fieldwork in Rajasthan in order to understand how modern goods and technologies intersect with rural ways of life. At stake here, as she shows, are people's values and ethics; the biggest conflict may not in fact be an urban–rural, but rather an inter-generational one.

Part of the imagination of the rural is the 'tribe' or 'tribal'. A good 8 per cent of India's population consists of tribal groups, scattered over various parts of the subcontinent, but found most densely concentrated in central India and in the north-east. Stuart Blackburn's chapter shows how, when faced with the pressure to accede to dominant cultural forms, language and religion can be utilized in order to express identity in the ongoing tussle with modernity. Meanwhile, Amita Baviskar shows just how interlinked the urban and rural are through her discussion of food production, distribution and changing eating habits of the rural as well as urban consuming classes.

Peripheries exist not only out there, but right in the heart of the metropolis. Smriti Srinivas's chapter on urban change in Bangalore highlights changing forms and sites for religious worship for newly marginalized groups co-existing with the globalized world of charismatic guru figures such as Sai Baba. We are reminded of the fact that 'Hinduism' is composed of sects and strains, and how religious practice and organization is not static but changes to adapt to new environments. Finally, Christophe Jaffrelot traces the nature of modern caste identities by focusing upon low-caste social movements from the nineteenth century to the present. This political history is vital to understanding the emergence of Dalit politics in contemporary India and the cultural form of the 'life history' as analysed by Debjani Ganguly later in the volume. These disparate contexts – not exhaustive but representative – become the larger backdrop for a range of cultural forms. The larger question in each chapter in Part I is about social mobility and the nature of change itself; what are the mechanisms, political and cultural, by which this might occur for the most disadvantaged in society?

The second part of the book considers specific forms of cultural production: literature, art, theatre, music, film and television. The section begins with three chapters on literature and in particular the novel, in an effort to offer diachronic as well as synchronic depth. The Bengali intelligentsia of the second half of the nineteenth century pioneered the novel as the new genre to register and herald social and cultural change. Supriya Chaudhuri's detailed narrative of modern

Bengali literature – Bankim, Tagore, Sharat, among others – documents the modernist enterprise with its touchstones of gender, class and nation formation from the nineteenth century onwards. In a parallel narrative on the English language, Rashmi Sadana shows how it goes from being a marginal presence and vexed symbol of colonial modernity to becoming central to the articulation of urban elite experience and India's entry on to the world stage of literature. English has become not only the subcontinent's window to the world but also, more controversially, its face to the world. And yet, the story of English in India is also becoming increasingly reflective of larger trends within the country, as evidenced in Sadana's discussion of the popularity of Chetan Bhagat. Debjani Ganguly's chapter, focusing on three Dalit life-writing narratives from three different regions of the subcontinent, offers insight into one of the most dynamic literary landscapes of modern India, as Dalits seek to wrest power from the dominant media and literary establishments to represent the violence and suffering of their existence themselves.

In another juxtaposition, the chapters by Sonal Khullar and Kajri Jain take up elite and popular manifestations of art. By focusing on the work of three major modern artists, Khullar shows how each one of them identified a national tradition that could serve as the ground of modernism, and indeed, a post-colonial identity in twentieth-century India, whether by taking recourse to the wall paintings of Ajanta and the miniature painting of the Rajput and Mughal courts, the crafts practices and performing arts of the subcontinent, or the visual forms and print culture of the bazaar. Their engagements with cultural production associated with pre-colonial, folk or marginal practices and life-worlds would become the hallmark of modernism in twentieth-century India. As Jain shows, from the late nineteenth century onwards, new technologies from the West introduced mass reproduction and commodification, known today as calendar or bazaar art, allowing images to become more mobile and thus circulate in an arena delinked from the territorial and symbolic control of temples and courts. These newly commercialized images then became available to the various projects of identity formation that came to characterize Indian modernity – projects of nation, region, sect, caste and language, as well as the political and ideological projects of not only the nascent nation-state but also of a resurgent Hindu nationalism. The ruthless adaptation of 'Western' and the locally prevalent Indian by popular mass media,

guided entirely by the uses to which they could be put, stands in sharp contrast to the almost painful awareness of 'ours' and 'theirs' as it found expression in elite art forms.

A similar impulse drove the theatre makers of modern India, from at least the 1940s on, to search for the 'folk' idiom in theatre as a mark of the traditions specific to the Indian subcontinent. Vasudha Dalmia's chapter traces the process over the last century, showing how the cultural and social impulse which propelled playwrights and directors as well as cultural policy makers could veer off into widely divergent political directions, into the left as in the 1940s and again in the 1970s, as much as into the radical right wing in the 1980s and 1990s, as successive Hindu-nationalist governments occupied the seat of power at the centre.

Being 'Indian' could impose restrictions as much as open up new avenues for the newly articulated 'classical' arts of India. Amanda Weidman's chapter focuses on south India and the discourses that emerged around classical and film music from the 1940s to the 1960s, with their competing notions of authenticity. Weidman examines how the genre called Karnatic classical music crystallized through the standardization of repertoire and concert format, and how it was disseminated through All India Radio. Not surprisingly, classical music was widely regarded as an authentically Indian realm, while film music came to be seen as hybrid, illegitimate and imitative of the West. Film music, however, would also come to be valued positively as a kind of music that could keep pace with and represent India as a modern nation.

Rather than try and offer a survey of the massive film industry in India, the chapter on cinema in our volume seeks to provide an entry point into the particular kind of spectacle that is the Bombay film and its particular mode of addressing spectators. As Ravi Vasudevan points out, all of India's cinemas were involved in constructing a certain abstraction of national identity, not only the pan-Indian one, but also regional constructions of national identity. Bombay crystallized as the key centre for the production of film at the precise moment that the new state came into existence, so its construction of the national narrative carried a particular force. Vasudevan focuses on issues that resonate with many other chapters in the volume – how the ideology of the 'traditional' is constituted in cinematic narration; the function of cinematic techniques of subjectivity in the construction of narrative space; and finally, how the overall representational field of the popular film system addresses the spectator.

Our volume concludes with a chapter by Amrita Ibrahim on reality television and the creation of a fictional wedding in a 2009 series about a starlet transformed into a demure bride. The show becomes a voyeuristic fantasy of the great Indian wedding as it encapsulates the unresolved tension between the traditional demeanour of the bride in an extended family and the demands of a modernized television audience. Private television production has come to be constituted, as all other forms discussed in this volume, by a process of citation from familiar genres and cultural artefacts, drawing on motifs from much-loved Hindi films, soap operas and narratives around marriage and family. The key to the show discussed by Ibrahim lay in turning a controversial, overtly sexual, Hindi film star into a respectable and decent bride-to-be, making her 'marriage' a family affair, suitable for all ages.

Cultural struggles, tensions and sometimes wars – on numerous predictable and some not so predictable fronts – are ongoing in modern India. We hope that this volume will help the reader understand multiple facets of culture in India and some of the conflicts arising from them.

Notes

1 A. K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred *Ramayanas:* Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 24–5.
2 Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 5.
3 Ranajit Guha, 'Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography', *Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha, vol. VI (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).
4 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

Part I

Cultural contexts