



Society with Indian Characteristics: Caste, Class, and Species in Contemporary Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the construction of Indian society in retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* published in India between 2010 and 2020. I focus on the concepts of caste, class, and mythological species. Through discourse analysis of a *corpus* of retellings, nonfiction works by the same authors, and comparisons with secondary literature, I show how specific castes, classes, and species are assimilated to one another and contrasted with competing identities. I also show how such representations define positive traits of Indianness and contrast them with the opposite negative traits of *Otherness*. I conclude that, despite differences in style, the retellers imagine an ancient pre-colonial India imbued with the modern neoliberal values of freedom of choice and social mobility.

Keywords *Rāmāyaṇa* · Caste · Class · *Rākṣasa* · *Deva*

Introduction

The *Rāmāyaṇa* has had great importance for Indian and Hindu culture. It has offered quintessential ideals to be followed and counter-ideals to be avoided. Since the rise of Hindu nationalism and neoliberalism in the 1990s, the relevance of the epic in the public sphere has increased. Free-market economy has resulted in the emergence of a new globalized middle-class. Contrary to the older middle-class, which had launched the independence movement, the new one has attained worldly success through individual effort rather than privileged birth (Fernandes, 2006). This class has been influenced by liberal ideas. According to Appadurai (1996), such ideas comprise elements of the Western Enlightenment worldview: freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, and the master term “democracy” (36). Given the existence of India as an independent nation and ancient civilization and of Hinduism

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as a world religion, members of this new class have resorted to local concepts and ideas in order to 1) define what distinguishes India and Hinduism from other nations and religions and 2) show that this worldview was not imported but already existed in precolonial India.

The past decade (2010–2020) witnessed a rise in the publication of English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written by commercially successful writers: Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*; Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*; Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*; Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *Forest of Enchantments*; and Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess*.

Neelakantan represents himself as a creator of alternative versions to the monolithic major retellings of the epic. *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* began the trend which the author has followed until now: turning the villains and the subaltern characters into idealistic defenders of “true” Indian values and the traditional heroes as unfair hegemony who have destroyed such values. Rāma is a barbaric Aryan conqueror from North India who disrupts Rāvaṇa's advanced Dravidian civilization in the south. According to Neelakantan (2015), contrary to what happens in the West, in India, nothing is ever absolutely right or wrong. For this reason, he considers that Hinduism does not possess a concept of blasphemy and is open to criticism and that reducing Hindu tales to dichotomies between Semitic ideas of good and evil would do injustice to Indian culture (8–12). Therefore, by inverting the traditional views, Neelakantan manages to be celebratory of his views of Indian tradition while seemingly criticizing them.

Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* includes several scenes and characters invented by the author. However, this novel accepts the major difference between the main characters, the good Rāma and the evil Rāvaṇa, as well as their good and evil peers. Tripathi (2017) writes that Indians can choose to tap into the “traditional Indian way” and lead better lives by following the rules from Rāma (108). Even though he follows all the social mores, Tripathi paradoxically describes Rāma as a cultural agitator and innovator. This is also the way the author describes himself in his nonfiction works, given that he states that he is “by nature a rebellious person, slightly anti-elitist” (Tripathi, 2017: 42). Tripathi's anti-elitism implicitly refer to the old middle-class. The author states that he would not be a suitable author for the English-language publishing industry because he does not come from that class (163), which means that he regards himself as belonging to a new class which is displacing the previous one. In any case, it is often underscored that Rāma's agitations consist on his deep devotion to India and to his ancestors, which is also what Tripathi urges his readers to do in his nonfiction. In short, while the old middle-class is accused of being Westernized, the new one is said to both follow ancestral traditions and globalized values.

Pattanaik's (2013) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* is comprised of short narrative chapters mixing classical tales with folk ones and followed by explanations derived from Indian folklore or scholarship. Pattanaik therefore represents himself as a cultural transmitter and not as a writer of fiction. In fact, most of his works are categorized as nonfiction. Like Neelakantan, Pattanaik is suspicious of Manichaean interpretation and fond of what he calls “psychological” interpretations,

which are conflated with Western epistemology and Indian values (Pattanaik, 2015: chapters 1 and 2), respectively. In his books and social media accounts, Pattanaik has often criticized Hindu nationalists, whose interpretations of Hindu myths are not merely psychological and has also been criticized by figures with Hindu nationalist leanings.¹ Even though Pattanaik criticizes the worldview of some Western scholars, he follows others. He often quotes Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell and resorts to Campbell's common strategies of comparing myths from different cultures without taking notice of their cultural setting. He points to the timelessness of Indian mythology when stating that the Sanskrit term *itihāsa*, a category to which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to belong, may be translated as "History," that is, as a record of events that happened in a specific time and place, and as "story," a psychological interpretation in which characters represent "archetypes" (Pattanaik, 2013: 314). Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to be a symbolic tale in which devotion (Hanumān) gets the individual soul (Sītā) to meet the cosmic one (Rāma) through the overpowering of the ego (Rāvaṇa) (*Ibid.*: 267). Pattanaik adds that, while it may be easy to interpret Rāma's incursion into the south as an act of colonialism, as many Orientalists (and Neelakantan) have done, it may also be interpreted psychologically. The forest is the "undomesticated mind" and the arrival of Rāma marks the gradual awakening of "human potential" (111). Finding one's "human potential" is a common idea in New Age spirituality. Even though influenced by Orientalist ideas, New Age spirituality originated in the West and has been influenced by Jung and by liberal values.

Despite their differences, Neelakantan, Tripathi, and Pattanaik share some features. They write about the same topics. They are both Hindu and patriotic Indians, even though they convey their patriotism in different ways. Finally, they regard the ancient Indian culture encoded in the epics as adapted to the contemporary global world and as possessing positive traits that other nations lack.

Divakaruni and Kané do not discuss the concept of India as a nation. While not explicitly patriotic, the fact that Divakaruni and Kané opted to adapt the *Rāmāyaṇa* reveals that they also regard it as an influential living tradition. While male authors are concerned with Indians as defined against foreigners, Divakaruni and Kané are concerned with Indian women defined against Indian men. As a result, their novels always portray the empathy which exists among women characters and the conflict between them and male characters.

Divakaruni's (2019) *Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* told by Sītā, who is contrasted with the male characters of the novel. While men follow the rules of social divisions, Sītā thinks in individual and humane terms. She feels empathetic towards all creatures, including traditional villains and subaltern characters. In the preface, Divakaruni (2019) states that there has been a disconnect between the true Sītā and her popular representations as a passive character (viii). Divakaruni represents her as an intelligent woman able to think for herself. However, knowing that she is unable to counter patriarchy, most of the times Sītā ends up

¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtkMFLuOa3M> (accessed on 7/6/2023).

playing along with it. This means that she mostly acts in a passive way, even though in the novel the reader has access to the reasoning for her (non-)action.

Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* retells the epic from the perspective of Śūrpaṅkhā, traditionally regarded as the main female villainess. Contrary to the male authors and Divakaruni, Kané does not depict Śūrpaṅkhā as a lascivious and violent demoness. Like Divakaruni's Sītā, she is a sensitive woman who is unable to follow her dreams because of patriarchy. Even though powerless, Śūrpaṅkhā is imbued with great agency. Through her cleverness, she manages to set the main events of the epic and turn the male characters against each other as revenge for the deaths of her son and husband, who are killed by Rāma and Rāvaṇa, respectively.

Besides discussing nation, religion, and the female condition, these five retellings discuss important social themes, such as caste and class, as well as mythological beings, which are important to the Hindu mythological universe. The first important distinction between characters in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that between human/culture and non-human/nature. Human beings are said to possess culture, while non-human beings, who live close to nature, are said to lack it. In order to construct this dichotomy, the retellers resort to the dichotomy of civilization/barbarism. Due to their importance in Western discourses, it is difficult to dissociate such terms from their Western intellectual history. Historically, the European concept of civilization has referred to "Western civilization." This is one of the hegemonic ideas that has been criticized by postcolonialism, particularly by Orientalism, which has tried to reestablish non-Western cultures as civilizations on par with the West.

Given that contemporary India tries to both maintain native traditions and to globalize itself, how are the concepts of caste, class, and mythological species inter-linked? How do they relate to wider dichotomies: human/non-human, culture/nature, *Self/Other*, and Indian/foreigner? How do they construct Indian modernity? In order to answer these questions, I analyze the five novels I have introduced through the light of qualitative discourse analysis.

Caste

Caste refers to social endogamic groups defined by ideas of ritual purity. Given that, defined as such, this concept violates the contemporary global value of equality, and it has been outlawed. Blank (1992) states that, according to Indian urban dwellers, caste does not exist anymore (122). However, the idea has kept haunting the minds of contemporary Indians. The English term *caste* does not have a counterpart in Indian languages. In Sanskrit, it includes two different realities: *varṇa* and *jāti*. *Varṇa* refers to endogamic social groups. *Jāti* includes a larger number of social groups divided by profession, religion, ethnicity, region, and/or other social clues. *Jāti* has been more socially relevant than *varṇa*. However, literary texts, which often create simplified representations of society, have focused more on *varṇa*.

Attitudes towards caste in Indian society have changed throughout time. From the period of independence until the 1990s, caste was one of the few traditional Indian

institutions which was described as negative (Deshpande, 2003: 98–100). Recently, Hindu nationalists have turned the concept into: 1) a benign division of labor, 2) a principle of race harmony, and/or 3) a meritocratic system perverted by the colonizers (Connerney, 2009: 152). According to such views, before the arrival of foreigners, India possessed a social system comparable to the contemporary globalized one. For that reason, *jāti* is mostly dismissed, while there is an emphasis on *varṇa* and *caste* as precursors to the idea of a “free-market” in which talent and diligence are rewarded.

Caste is one of the most debated topics in Tripathi’s (2017) collection of articles and interviews *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation*. The author claims that “the heinous caste system” was one of the many “corruptions” that have crept into Hinduism (xxv). In his view, the contemporary concept of caste consists of a distorted merger of the concepts of *jāti* and *varṇa*, which Tripathi translates as “birth-community” and “personality, nature” (82), respectively. He adds that these ideas were merged into the Portuguese term *casta* (82), which mixes “personality, nature” with “birth.” Given that the term *caste* is neither an original Indian term nor concept, the author concludes that Indians should dismiss it (83).

Pattanaik (2015) states that *jāti* was neither as rigid as it has often been described to be nor as flexible as one would have liked it to be. He argues that the term *varṇa* originally meant “color” and referred to the “color of thought.” According to Pattanaik, Brahmins and Western academics have tried to force categories of *jāti* into that of *varṇa*, which means that certain birth-communities (*jāti*) have been considered to possess intrinsic mindsets (*varṇa*). The author accuses globalization of turning contemporary societies into “neo-caste” systems in which people are not valued for who they are (*varṇa*) but for their lifestyle (*jāti*) (63). This global tendency, the author adds, occurs in modern business contexts, in which one’s *curriculum* is more important than one’s potential. Both Tripathi and Pattanaik therefore invert the common Orientalist argument. Indian culture did not have a social structure based on birth and it is contemporary global culture which has introduced this structure and stifled traditional Indian meritocracy.

The retellings confer a narrative shape to these modern views. In Pattanaik’s (2013) novel, Vasiṣṭha instructs king Daśaratha not to confuse *brāhmaṇa-jāti*, a person who is born into a Brahmin family, with *brāhmaṇa-varṇa*, a person who strives to achieve one’s unlimited potential (34). Pattanaik mentions a character who is a Brahmin by birth but who has never sought the *Brahman* (245). This means that belonging to a specific *jāti* is neither sufficient nor necessary to reach enlightenment but that possessing a specific “color of thought” is.

Tripathi’s (2015) Rāma states that the concept of being noble (*Ārya*) refers to how one conducts oneself and not to birth (119), which is said to be “completely unimportant” (264). Rāma expects people to rise above their limitations and become better (288). According to the character, in the “Middle Ages,” the caste system became rigid and degenerated. In Rāma’s view, the bowdlerization of *caste* weakened Indians and made them be conquered. However, when the system became flexible again, Indians regained their strength to defeat the foreigners (220). While Tripathi’s novel takes place in 3600 BCE, the concepts of “caste,” “native people,” “foreigner,” and “reform” are not supposed to point to this obscure period. They

summarize contemporary Indian anxieties in relation to the past (*caste*), present (*native people* and *foreigner*), and future (*reform*).

Tripathi's *Sītā* comments that everybody is different, which invalidates the concept of *jāti*. People should therefore pursue their talents (*varṇa*) rather than the professions of their parents (*jāti*), which may lead to unhappiness, chaos, and to talented people doing lowlier works (289). *Sītā* concludes that the caste system must be destroyed, lest foreigners might take advantage of the divisions created within society and invade it (290). Bharata and Śatrughna, who are Rāma's half-brothers, discuss the same topic with Vasiṣṭha. Bharata believes that, as natural law states that the strong always win, the government has to protect the weak. Śatrughna states that it is better if the strong win, given that, if natural laws are contradicted, the weak will oppress the strong and society will collapse. Vasiṣṭha then states that Śatrughna has "carefully studied the reasons for the decline of India" (83–85). This means that, according to these characters, India has declined because the weak had unrightfully been privileged. According to this discourse, those who should be helped are the talented, irrespective of strength.

Neelakantan (2012) creates a similar discourse when stating that, contrary to Rāvaṇa's people, which emphasizes individual talent, Rāma believes that he has to make rights equal for everybody and becomes obsessed with minority rights (302). In one scene, Rāvaṇa's son Meghanāda invites Bhadra, a lowly character invented by Neelakantan, to ride a horse with him. People feel impressed that a prince shares a ride with a "stinking beggar" (378), but Bhadra understands that Meghanāda is merely scoring political points. These scenes in Tripathi and Neelakantan's novels criticize contemporary phenomena related to caste, such as the Mandal Commission. The authors hint that such policies have disrupted the Indian way of privileging talent over birth and have caused India's present weakness. Even if the intentions of such policies may have been noble, they seem to have strengthened the negative interpretation of *caste* and turned it into a hegemonic resource in reverse (Das, 2000: 157). This means that, instead of destroying *jāti*, the concept of equality may foment its development.

The story of Śambūka is the most cited *Rāmāyaṇa* episode for the purpose of discussing *caste*. Śambūka is a *sūdra* who begins acting like a Brahmin and who, as punishment, is slain by Rāma. In older retellings, Śambūka is stigmatized and despised for departing from acceptable caste norms (Richman, 2008: 27). However, since the eighth century, there has also been criticism of Rāma's actions (112). In modern *Dalit* discourses, as this episode proves that Rāma murdered lower caste people and suppressed their rights (142), it has been regarded as a *charter* for the modern mistreatment of lower castes (Goldman and Goldman, 2017: 110).

In Pattanaik's (2013) novel, Śambūka refuses to be inferior to the higher castes. He asks Rāma why such a hierarchy needs to exist. Rāma kills him with the excuse that the king has to uphold the rules of society and not let hierarchic boundaries be crossed, lest society crumbles. When returning home, Rāma meets a Brahmin child who states that he would rather be a Brahmin like Śambūka, who follows *brāhmaṇa-varṇa*, than like his father, who follows *brāhmaṇa-jāti* but has no knowledge (287–288). In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Śambūka is a child who learns that, contrary to what the Brahmins state, the *Vedas* are not the monopoly of a single

caste, given that they have been composed by poets from different *jāti*. Śambūka reverts to the previous situation by translating the *Vedas* into a language that the common people understand and singing about a borderless world with no wars or discrimination. A Brahmin then incites Rāma to kill Śambūka (478–485).

Rāvaṇa is also depicted as defying hierarchy and prizing merit. In Kané's (2016) novel, the character Kārtavīryārjuna is said to seek immortality by virtue of birth, while Rāvaṇa does so through worth (34). In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa initially dismisses the *Vedas* as "humbug." Later, he finds out that what they discuss is unrelated to the knowledge propagated by Brahmins and that they do not mention the "curse of caste," which gives Rāvaṇa determination to destroy the caste system (35). Rāvaṇa often states that he has the duty of "civilizing" Indian society and thwart caste from expanding from Rāma's kingdom to other parts of India (212–213).

There are frequent critiques of the appropriation of *jāti* for the personal gain of Brahmins. Pattanaik (2013) states that the Brahmins were the transmitters of Vedic knowledge and not its interpreters or owners, which is the same position defended by Neelakantan's Śambūka. Nevertheless, according to Pattanaik, the Brahmins used their power to dominate. The author remarks on the irony that the carriers of knowledge on mind expansion ultimately failed to do expand their minds (20–21). The negative portrayal of Brahmins is even more evident in Neelakantan's works. Brahmins are blamed for destroying the old sense of equality that existed in Rāvaṇa's kingdom and for imposing untouchability (345). Priests are described as hypocrites, given that they preach poverty while never practicing their precepts (38). Rather, they are said to be "high class robbers" (177) who destroy Rāvaṇa's culture by taking hold of the temples and important positions, as well as by driving away other groups (302).

Class

Materially, class refers to the amount of money an individual, family or social group possesses. This amount is often correlated with a specific lifestyle. Immaterially, the concept may also be correlated with a specific political/cultural worldview. Recently, caste and class have been regarded as complementary. The main difference between them has been said to be that caste is a closed system and class an open one (Brosius, 2010: 17). For this reason, it has been argued that the two concepts may be analyzed together (Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008: 17).

It sounds anachronistic to mention class in the *Rāmāyaṇa* universe. However, the retellings are conscious of this social category and refer to it by its modern name. Descriptions reveal that, like caste, class is related to one's outward appearance and behavior. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that differences in attire in Lānkā suggest differences in "social class" (175). When she sees the *rākṣasī* Trijaṭā for the first time, she states that she is not beautiful as Mandodarī, Rāvaṇa's wife, though "clearly of the same class" (183). Tripathi (2015) mentions the undyed garments of the "common class" (228) and Neelakantan (2012) states that different standards of behaviour are expected from the nobility and from commoners (394). Sometimes,

the retellers mix *caste* and *class*. Tripathi (2015) writes that Daśaratha feels a “kṣatriyan disdain for the trading class” (7). Given that *kṣatriya* refers to *varṇa*, it seems that “trading class” would point to *vaiśya varṇa*. In another passage, when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa go to the hermitage to be educated, they live not like “nobility” but as “children of working-class parents” (52), which refers to the *śūdra varṇa*. Neelakantan (2012) mentions the social evils “being propagated by the priestly class” (35), which refers to the Brahmin *varṇa*.

Neelakantan’s (2012) descriptions of the middle class are mostly negative. Members of this class are said to use their status to break rules and/or exert hegemony on both rulers and commoners. Rāvaṇa, portrayed as an idealist who fights for the rights of commoners, ultimately forgets such ideals and becomes intoxicated with the compliments which the bourgeoisie showers on him. In order to comply with their wishes, Rāvaṇa displaces the poor and rewards the middle-class with their land. The poor are said to have no choice but to flock to the cities and work as servants to the privileged, a description which mirrors contemporary suburban slums in Indian metropolises.

In Tripathi’s (2015) novel, it is “nobility” which is described as plotting to enrich itself on account of Daśaratha, who is said to be a weak ruler (43). Even though the characters (Rāvaṇa and Daśaratha) and the names given to the larger identity groups (*middle-class* and *nobility*) are different, the representation of their relationship is similar. Neelakantan refers to the middle-class as a stereotyped mixture of the old and new middle classes, while Tripathi, who explicitly identifies himself as belonging to the new middle-class, uses the term *nobility* only to refer to the old one.

The retellings are also conscious of the powerlessness of the common people, a category which includes lower castes/outcastes and lower classes. Commoners are described as being in perpetual conflict with the elites. Even though the protagonists of the epic belong to the latter, they are said to lean towards the common people and to be against powerful groups. In Tripathi’s (2015) novel, Rośnī, a female character invented by the author, is said to be a rare figure because she is “popular with the masses as well as the classes” (115), which implies that the masses and the classes are ontologically different. In conversation with Rośnī, Rāma states he is unsure whether he will be a good chief of the police because people do not like him. Rośnī tells him that he has only interacted with the elite in control and that there is another side of the city which belongs to those who were “not born-right” and who, Rośnī adds, will be sympathetic towards those whom the elite ostracizes (113–115). Later, the elite becomes unsatisfied when Rāma enforces similar laws for everybody (115). Tripathi’s Rāma is therefore described in an opposite way to Neelakantan’s Rāvaṇa. While the latter pampers the “elite,” the former creates a system according to which the classes and the masses are judicially equal.

Divakaruni (2019) creates a Rāma who belongs more to the people than to the elite. Vasiṣṭha makes a bed of grasses for Rāma and Sītā on the grounds that, before being crowned as king, Rāma should experience the hardships of his poorer subjects. As Rāma lies down, he promises Sītā that every man shall have a voice and receive justice (96). Later, when coming back from exile, he orders the creation of organizations to house, feed and teach the destitute (287). According to the retellers, the gap between the elites and the commoners gives rise to opposing characters:

a hegemon who endorses the elites and oppresses the commoners and a populist who criticizes the elites and identifies with the commoners. In the end, though, the majority of the protagonists are Brahmins and *kṣatriyas*, which makes them high caste and upper-class.

Neelakantan's (2012) novel, which focuses on subaltern groups, is an exception. In its pages, commoners are referred to by several epithets which point to their condition. Neelakantan writes that commoners constitute "black-skinned, low-living, simple-minded, illiterate and innocent millions" (243) who, while invisible to them (303/376), have "to toil, to live, to strive, and to die, for the high and mighty" (283). Bhadra, one of the narrators, is low caste and low-class. He is said to have bow legs, a pot belly, curly hair, a skin "as dark as midnight" and to have no respectability whatsoever, given that he is the "commonest among common people" (80). Such descriptions are espoused by Bhadra himself. He states he feels like a lowly creature, a small worm, an "impotent, good-for-nothing bastard" who dreamed of dining with kings and of changing history but who has been forgotten and cast away by the powerful (127). According to him, virtues such as kindness, courage, morals, principles, sympathy (culture) constitute the luxuries of "the rich, the noble, the high-caste, the fair-skinned" (279), while the common people just wish to ensure meals, sex and a chance to improve their lives (183–185). Such descriptions make commoners seem closer to nature and animality than to culture and humanity.

Mythological Beings

The retellings also include non-human (but humanoid) mythological species with no obvious counterpart in reality. Most academic studies and contemporary retellings have tried to "demythologize" the plot and compare such species with existing human groups.

Asuras/Rākṣasas

Neelakantan's (2012) novel departs from the premise that Indian society is structured around different species associated with existing social groups, including those related to caste and class. When Rāvaṇa invades Ayodhyā, the reigning king Anaraṇya refuses to shake his hand and to fight him. He states that he will not be polluted by a *śūdra*, a concept related to caste. Rāvaṇa answers that he is not a *śūdra* but an *asura* (210), a concept related to species. I follow the retellers in using the term *rākṣasa* and *asura* interchangeably. As Pattanaik (2013) makes clear, though, they refer to different beings (50). Goldman and Goldman (2017) describe the *rākṣasas* as weak creatures who never threaten *dharma*, while the *asuras*, who are half-brothers of the gods, are powerful and threatening (55).

The *asuras/rākṣasas* have been identified with native tribal peoples of South India and Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese Buddhists and even the aboriginal population of Australia (Goldman, 1986: 49). Pollock (1991) adds cannibals, primitive cave-dwellers, animal-like shamans, tribal masked dancers, Indian communities whose

name have derived from the many names by which *rākṣasas* have been called, and Muslims (69–70). In Pollock’s view, as these associations point to specific geographic regions, religions, and to autochthonous groups, they attest the ease with which Indian imagination has transformed the foreign into the monstrous (*Ibid.*: 83). It may be said that the Goldmans and Pollock are mainly translators of the canonical versions of Indian myths who have had limited experience with Indian commoners. The same could be said about the contemporary Indian retellers. While not Sanskritists, they are well-off urbane middle-class individuals who are not in touch with most of the subaltern groups they portray. Furthermore, they write in English. Even though English is an official Indian language, it is mostly spoken by the old and new middle-class and not by the majority of Indian commoners. For this reason, from the perspective of Hindu city-dwellers and English-speakers from North India, most of the categories listed by Goldman and Pollock could be said to point to an exotic *Other*.

In Divarakuni’s (2019) novel, *Sītā* states that *asura* is the name that “militant” *rākṣasas* call themselves, which means that the difference between them is not one of species but of ideology. The character acknowledges behavioural differences between them. *Rākṣasas* are said to be bestial and *asuras* to be civilised and sophisticated. For this reason, as *Sītā* claims, they do not seem to belong to the same “race” (174–175). Goldman and Goldman (1996) speak of such differences between the *asuras* and *rākṣasas* as one of class (66). *Asuras* are regarded as upper class and upper-caste, which explains their increased civility. Contrarily, *rākṣasas* are regarded as lower class and lower-caste.

Pattanaik (2013) derives the term *rākṣasa* from the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{rākṣ}$, “to guard.” This popular etymology is likely false. However, false etymologies may point to true representations. Pattanaik adds that the *rākṣasas* are the “guards of the forest,” a lawless way of life which favors strength, brute force, and competition (48). Humans are said to be the only ones able to abandon nature and follow *dharma* (292). Therefore, *rākṣasas* follow no cultural rules (57), which means that Pattanaik describes them as non-human. The author claims that the *othering* of *asuras* and *rākṣasas* is a technique that “civilized” nations use in order to justify warfare (111). Nevertheless, he adds that, while Western scholars tend to regard such creatures from a sociological perspective, Indian scholars prefer to see them psychologically (219). In his view, the dividing line between an *asura/rākṣasa* and a human being consists of “mindset” (*varṇa*), which means that the concept of *asura/rākṣasa* is fluid. While this may be true for some cases, it is also true that Hindu nationalists have used similar tales, characters and representations to humanize Indians and dehumanize foreigners. This means that abstract psychological interpretations may turn into ones with real social and political outcomes.

Asuras/rākṣasas are said to be in permanent conflict with humans. In Divarakuni’s (2019) novel, the *rākṣasa* Tāraka fashions clothes out of the skins of the Brahmins she kills (38), so Rāma is sent to destroy the *rākṣasas* who get stronger, organized and disrupt the rituals of the Brahmins (34/130). It is often stated that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa slaughter thousands of *rākṣasas*, actions for which they are praised (12/38). Lakṣmaṇa states that *rākṣasas* cannot be treated with courtesy because they are inhuman and neither understand nor appreciate courtesy. Rāma

confirms by stating that *rākṣasas* cannot be trusted and that the best thing to do is to kill them (150).

The *asuras* are said to have originally been divided. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṅakhā wishes to marry Vidyujjihva, but Rāvaṇa refuses such union because, he says, Vidyujjihva is a brutal and boorish *asura* clan with different rules and values (97). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, *rākṣasas* are said to have many unique tribes calling themselves different names and looking differently from others (127). Such descriptions of counter-ideal species are antithetical to descriptions of ideal characters, who look and act in the same way and shape a unified concept of normativity.

The behavior of *asuras* reveals their lack of culture, which means that the difference between them and humans is comparable to the difference between nature and culture. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṅakhā describes her own people's "savage manners" (80). In Neelakantan's (2012) version, Rāvaṇa states that *asuras* behave like children, so the *devas*' mission is to "civilise them" (73). Rather than seeing *rākṣasas* as a different species, one could say that humanoid *asuras/rākṣasas* are human beings who are unable to exert rational self-control, given that members of these species are overcome by emotions and ignore social rules. The main differences between humans and the *asuras/rākṣasas* seem to be psychological and/or cultural. Other than that, the latter often look, behave, and sound like human beings. Thapar (1989) has stated that, while Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* obscures their identity by turning them into demons, they are clearly "people" with ways of life different from those of Ayodhyā (8).

Accordingly, Pattanaik (2013) interprets stories of the *rākṣasas* meeting Rāma as ones of "mind expansion" (163). Sage Viśvāmitra states that "demons" are only humans that others refuse to tolerate and that being like them is *adharmā* (111). For that reason, when Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa and gives his kingdom to Vibhīṣaṇa, who is a *rākṣasa*, he tells him to expand his mind and encourage other *rākṣasas* to follow *dharma* (249). Contrary to other *rākṣasas*, Vibhīṣaṇa exerts self-control and defects to Rāma's side. His representation is therefore more humane than that of other *asuras/rākṣasas*. The only exception is Neelakantan's (2012) novel, in which Vibhīṣaṇa is a traitor who destroys his brother's dream of creating a free society and who, out of a desire for power, helps Rāma establish the caste system in Laṅkā.

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, lack of culture is associated with religion. The *asuras* are "demonic fanatics" who have been expelled from India by the *devas* (87), just like the English Christians were "expelled" by Hindus. Lakṣmaṇa states that they are "savages" and "animals" with whom communication is impossible (193). They worship one single God (*Ekam*, Sanskrit for "one"), just like the followers of Abrahamic religions follow "one" God. In one passage, an *asura* warrior states that the *True Lord* is with him and that the false gods cannot protect the *devas* (186). The expression *True Lord* often refers to Jesus and Allah and is less commonly used to refer to Indian deities. *Asuras* preach their religion and consider those who follow it to be their equal. This description reminds one of Christian missionary efforts and of its counterpart, the self-representation of the non-missionary tendency of Hinduism. The main role of the *rākṣasī* Tāraka in attacking the forests is to "save the souls" of those who live there (194), a description which, given the Christian association, makes her look more like a Christian missionary than a *rākṣasī*. *Asuras* consider the

“infidels,” another term often associated with the Abrahamic religions, to be inferior. This belief leads them to intolerance and violence (91–92). Finally, the actions of the *asura* are said to be wrong and evil (196–197). Such examples show that such species are not merely psychological. They point to existing groups and establish clear frontiers between what is good/desirable and evil/undesirable. In another passage, Viśvāmītra states that the *asuras* are not uncivilized. It is their understanding of *dharma* that is old-fashioned (201–202). They would reveal their goodness if they became more enlightened and had effective leaders (207). These descriptions conform with the idea that the colonial period is past and mankind is now living in a postcolonial world in which the old center (the West) is obsolete and alternative centers arise (the postcolonial nations, in this case, India).

All the discourses I have been considering reveal how the themes of religion and “autochthony” are interrelated. In Neelakantan’s (2012) novel, the *asuras* are said to constitute the original inhabitants of India. In this regard, non-*asuras* are “foreign,” even though they are not compared to Muslims or to the British as *asuras* are in Tripathi’s retelling. The *asuras* are said to be a decentralized, democratic, and free society in which an elected village *pancāyat* holds power. The king only has nominal power (21/427). Compared to the *devas*, *asuras* are said to be economically, culturally, and technologically superior (425). Contrary to Tripathi (2015), though, Neelakantan (2012) states that *asuras* lack unity (24), given that they always fight between themselves and cannot agree on a decision even during war (63).

Devas and Ṛṣis

While the terms *deva* and *ṛṣi* refer to unrelated phenomena, the retellers often use them interchangeably as beings defined in psychological opposition to the *asuras/rākṣasas*. In Kané’s (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā states that being a *deva* or an *asura* is more a matter of attitude involving beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions to act in certain ways (69). The *devas* are described as human due to their intelligence. In Kané’s novel, just like the *asura* are said to be warriors with propensity for violence, the *devas* are said to be wise, spiritual scholars. Such differences lead Viśravas, a *ṛṣi* who marries into an *asura* family and goes to live in the *asura* kingdom of Laṅkā, to be regarded as an outsider (68–69). Viśravas plays in this novel a narrative role similar to the one played by Vibhīṣaṇa in all retellings, given that he is said to possess a unique trait among a group characterized by the opposite one.

In Tripathi’s (2015) novel, the *devas* follow several gods and are divided, given that they are unable to agree on their way of life (92). It is clear that they embody the inclusive, tolerant, and diverse society common in representations of India and of Hinduism (Sharma, 2003). As Tripathi adopts the concept that the worldview of the *asura* is “obsolete,” this means that the alternative (the traditional Indian values of the *devas*) constitutes the best alternative for the contemporary world.

The only exception to the civilized nature of the *devas* is found in Neelakantan’s (2012) novel. Here, the *deva* invasion of *asura* lands is described as an instance of colonialism. An oppressive society (the *devas*) conquers a free and just one (the *asuras*). Contrary to the democratic *asuras*, the *devas* are said to have an advanced

and centralized administrative system in which a king reigns supreme. This system is said to enable the quick implementation of decisions (63) and to allow social cohesion. In contrast, the *devas* are said to be “exotic, semi-civilized, nomadic, and barbaric” (379). They are regarded as ruthless barbarians without a sense of *dharma*, given that they resort to Machiavellian ways in order to achieve their goals (365). Neelakantan’s *devas* and Tripathi’s *asuras* are opposite sides of the same coin. Both constitute groups that possess unified beliefs which allow them to unite society. Such union allows them to physically conquer weaker but psychologically more virtuous groups.

In Neelakantan’s novel, the fault for the substitution of mental abilities (*varṇa*) for birth (*jāti*) is attributed to the *devas*, who are said to divide between the pure and the impure based on birth (352). When Rāma conquers Laṅkā, he divides society into the four *varṇa*, assigns a profession to each (452), and creates a rigid *dharma* in which everyone knows one’s place (455), which means that, before the invasion, Laṅkāns must have followed an “eternal dharma” (*sanātana dharma*) that did not make distinctions based on birth and was comparable to contemporary liberal values.

Rāma tells outcastes not to grieve, given that their condition is the result of previous lives and that the fulfilment of their duties might ensure a better future life (*Ibid.*). Life within the social system brought by Rāma is described as simple and static (471–472). *Static* was a common description of Indian civilisation in Orientalist discourses (Inden, 2001). Conversely, the *asura* kingdom, who are said to value people based on talent and hard work (292/352/376/447), form a dynamic, competitive, and materialistic society (471–472). According to Rāma, this world is dangerous and disrupts social order (456). One could equate Rāma’s kingdom with the caste system of India and Rāvaṇa’s kingdom with both a fictive “Golden Age” which mirrors post-1991 India. Even though the expression “competitive and materialistic world” sounds pejorative, it is clear that Neelakantan endorses these modern ideas and not the unambiguously negative caste ideas of traditional India.

The discourses on the *asuras/rākṣasas* against *devas/ṛṣis* makes one think of Orientalist discourses of the historical division of India between Aryan and Dravidian linguistic/ethnic/cultural groups. Thapar (2014) acknowledges that, while the concepts of Aryan and Dravidian races may not possess scientific validity, they are embedded in Indian minds, given that popular Indian imagination considers Aryans to be superior and Dravidians inferior (305–322). While the Aryan-Dravidian opposition was first endorsed by missionaries in order to convert Dravidians to Christianity, this opposition had political repercussions when Dravidians began using it to demonstrate that they were the native Indian inhabitants and had greater legitimacy than the Aryans (49/140–142). The Orientalist Christian Lassen (1800–1876) transposed this interpretation onto the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He considered that the tale described the Aryan invasion of Dravidian lands. The Aryans were symbolized by the society of Ayodhyā and the Dravidians by the wildness of the *rākṣasas* (Thapar, 1989: 8).

The Aryan/Dravidian opposition is also related to caste. By regarding high castes as Aryans and lower ones as Dravidian, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827–1890), one of the most important anti-caste activists of colonial India, drew on the opposition to explain the suppression of lower castes and untouchables (Rao, 2009: 12). Later,

Dalit activists followed Phule's ideas and began claiming the glories of pre-state tribals and opposing them to those of the invading Aryans (xi). Similarly, the first Western anthropologists analyzing caste regarded the untouchables, who were conflated with the Dravidians, as uncivilized. Later anthropologists reversed this evaluation and established an opposition between the oppressive culture of the Brahmins and the free nature of the untouchables (Michael, 1999: 26).

By respectively equating the *asuras/rākṣasas* and the *devas/ṛṣis* with the Dravidians and the Aryans, Neelakantan creates an historicist interpretation based on controversial history, even though this literary work adds to the linguistic evidence and makes up for the lack of archaeological one. In sum, Neelakantan's representations of *asuras* and *devas* are not innovations but follow and condense Indian activist and Western anthropologist approaches, which often reverse traditional and hegemonic approaches, while leaving the structural dichotomies intact.

Neelakantan also mirrors modern *Dalit* discourses, such as those of Ilaiah (2009), who discusses how non-Hindu castes were responsible for the technological innovations of ancient India and how they were later thwarted by priestly Hindu castes (xii-xxi). Ilaiah regards Hinduism as the most casteist and sexist religion and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the ultimate *charter* to oppress untouchables (xxiv). As representative of "fascist Aryan traditions," Rāma is said to be unable provide an integrative, social model of living (271), a role which must be delegated to the "spiritual proto-democratic traditions" of native Indians (279).

One should also consider the intermingling of the major "pure" species of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As the concept of caste purity is implicit in all retellings, different castes and races are regarded as unrelated, to the extent that they possess different physical and intellectual features. Cross-breeding among different species is often said to produce a hybrid race. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa is a half-caste born of a Brahmin father and an outcaste mother. He complains that his father revered the Brahmins and despised outcastes and half-castes, who would never mix with Brahmins (11). Mahābalī, Rāvaṇa's spiritual mentor, states that Rāvaṇa is incompetent due to his mixed blood (29). These descriptions show that, when two pure individuals from the same community breed, they give birth to a "complete" being who fits into the social system. Conversely, when two impure individuals or individuals from different communities breed, they give birth to an "incomplete" being.

In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā and her brothers are born of a *ṛṣi* father and an *asura* mother. It is said that Kaikasī, an *asura*, married Viśravas, a *ṛṣi*, in order to give birth to children with a *ṛṣi* brain and *asura* blood, that is, great warriors with great minds (18). By joining the best halves, the end result would seem positive. However, Kārtavīryārjuna states that, except for Vibhīṣaṇa, the siblings are more *asura* than *ṛṣi* (31), which means that they are more emotional than rational. Vibhīṣaṇa's exceptionality is therefore justified by biological arguments. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Sītā learns that she may be Rāvaṇa's daughter, she states that she would kill herself if she had *rākṣasa* blood (194). In short, it does not matter whether cross-breeding is regarded as desirable or undesirable. *Mestizo* children are stigmatized and their fate is invariably unfortunate, given that, in Kané's (2016) novel, the so-called best warriors with the best minds are defeated by the "pure" *ṛṣis*.

Other Species

The *vānaras*, often described as monkey-like who help Rāma rescue Sītā, constitute another important mythological species. As Goldman (1986) has stated, while the *asuras* and *rākṣasas* are often interpreted as hostile aborigines, the *vānaras* are regarded as primitive aborigines who are well-disposed towards Aryans (27). Pattanaik (2013) suggests that the Sanskrit term *vānara* may mean “less than human” or “forest man” (157) and adds that, from a rational perspective, they may point to forest tribes who had monkeys as totems (*Ibid.*). From both perspectives, *vānaras* are regarded as monkey-like humans. However, Sanskritist Rosalind Lefebber (1994) claims that in Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* *vānaras* are unambiguously monkeys (38). This confusion between the human and animal kingdoms is also evident in the contemporary retellings. In Divakaruni’s (2019) novel, when Sītā sees the *vānaras* for the first time, she is unsure whether they are monkeys or hairy men (172).

Pattanaik (2013) interprets the concept of *vānara* psychologically when stating that the monkey is a symbol of the “restless mind” (6) unable to exert self-control. In this description, the concept points more towards animality. Pattanaik’s interpretation of the *vānaras* is Darwinian-like. They are said to be a step away from animality, given that the strongest male tries to keep the territory and the females for himself by killing opponents (170). Sugrīva, however, states that he will outgrow his instincts, become human and submit to *dharma* (179), a description which reminds one of Pattanaik’s portrayal of Rāvaṇa. The main difference between the *vānaras* and the *asuras* is that the former serve humans unquestionably (219). This may be interpreted as a symbol of devotion (*bhakti*). One may consider how Hanumān is revered in contemporary India. However, this difference may also be regarded as oppressive. Rāvaṇa states that the *vānaras* are Rāma’s servants and that, if they follow him instead, they will be free (221). In my view, this representation of the relationship between the *vānaras* and Rāma is similar to that between Rāma and the Brahmins, one of unconditional and irrational subservience, which, in a contemporary context, may also be regarded as negative.

In Neelakantan’s (2012) novel, the *vānaras* are semi-civilized half-breeds who have arisen in Central India due to miscegenation between *devas* and *asuras* (24/232). They are said to be ugly, hairy creatures who use primitive weapons, while trying to emulate the advanced *asuras* (450). This means that, even though born of “pure” *asuras*, their “impurity” makes them physically and mentally less capable than their ancestors. The *vānaras* are also regarded as impure by the *devas*. *Monkey-man*, one of the etymological interpretations of the term *vānara*, is a common insult in Neelakantan’s novel (10/272). It is used by *asuras*, *devas*, and by the *vānaras* themselves. Even though monkeys do not possess a negative representation in Hinduism, the English epithet “monkey-man” hardly sounds positive.

In Tripathi’s (2015) novel, the *vānaras* do not play a preponderant role. However, similar subaltern species appear, such as the *nāgas*, who constitute a mysterious race “of people born with deformities” (5/80). Deformities predict several non-physical traits. *Nāgas* are said to be hated, feared and ostracised throughout India (*Ibid.*). While in most retellings, Jaṭāyu is a vulture who can fly; in this novel, he is a *nāga* whose deformities make him look like a vulture. He has a hard

and bony mouth like a bird's beak and fine and downy hair-like feathers. Just like the *vānaras* are derisively called *monkey-men*, Jaṭāyu is called a *vulture-man* by Lakṣmaṇa, who is said to hold superstitions against the *nāgas* and to be unable to trust them (333–334).

As there exist the official designations *Scheduled Castes* (SC) and *Scheduled Tribes* (ST), the category of *Ādivāsī*, “original inhabitants,” the tribal people of India, is defined independently of caste. Colonial thinking distinguished between two groups of Indians: the civilised, who had a religion, lived within territorial boundaries and were “superior,” and the primitive, who had none of these features, were scattered throughout the forests and were “inferior” (Thapar, 2014: 305–322). During the colonial period, elite Indians tried to represent themselves as normative and the tribal groups as their primitive and sexual *Other* (Banerjee, 2006). This means that the same distinction that most Orientalists were making between Europeans and Indians was applied to Indian society, with the elites and the subaltern, respectively, occupying the place that Europeans and Indians played in the wider discourse. However, for purposes of nation-building, tribal groups had to be integrated through “civilizing missions” and through the learning of India’s “national” language, history, culture, and traditions (Xaxa, 2019: 49–53).

Defining concepts of tribe and caste may not be clear-cut, given that *Scheduled Tribes* have been integrated into local hierarchies and have formed the lower caste *Niṣāda* (Doniger, 2009: 38). However, the lower castes are numerous enough to gain a political voice, tribal groups do not constitute a significant vote bank and are more easily discriminated against (Guha, 2011). It is for this reason that, even though a considerable part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* takes place in the forest, the concept of “tribe” is seldom mentioned and tribal characters are rarely defined as such in contemporary retellings.

The most common stereotypes about tribals are that they are either less-than-human savages or, conversely, “noble savages” uncorrupted by modernity. According to Pattanaik (2013), tribals live in harmony with nature, while non-tribal societies always seek something new in intellectual and material terms, often at the cost of nature (26). This description fits the stereotype of the “noble savage.” In Tripathi’s (2015) novel, when Rāma and his brothers are being educated in the forest, they intermingle and train with local tribals. Like everybody in Tripathi’s works, they are “brilliant warriors” (52). One of them, a character with whom Rāma spars, is called Matsya. As *matsya* means “fish” in Sanskrit, this name mixes ideas of humanity and animality. Rāma begins the battle by uttering “[t]ruth. Duty. Honour” and Matsya responds “[v]ictory at all costs” (53). Such mottoes conform to the human ideal of self-restraint and obedience to social rules and the counter-ideal animal instinct to dominate through strength. Tripathi’s description therefore fits the stereotype of the “less-than-human savage.” However, Tripathi also resorts to the more benign stereotype when claiming that tribal traditions are more “liberal” than urban ones because they empower women and let them marry for love (75/77). While hovering between negative and positive representations, Tripathi underscores that tribals live unbound by the rules of non-tribal peoples. The second description reveals how unwesternized tribals preserve traditions, which are regarded as contemporary, “liberal” and as existing long before the encounter with the West.

In the retellings, tribals are often conflated with the *asuras* and the *vānaras*. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Śūrpaṅkhā appears to Sītā for the first time, her description sounds more like that of a tribal than that of an *asura*. Sītā states that Śūrpaṅkhā is naked, possibly because the "tribe" to which she belongs does not "believe" in clothing (142). The idea of belief implies that Śūrpaṅkhā's tribe knows the concept of clothing, but does not endorse it, perhaps because they are more "liberal." Śūrpaṅkhā then asks Sītā what "tribe" she belongs to (143).

Conclusions

I have considered how the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* join ideas associated with caste, class and species into similar categories. The retellers try to explode the myth that "pure" Indian culture is oppressive and recreate fictive (neo)-Orientalist Golden Ages when individuals and groups were free to pursue contemporary liberal values. These periods were later displaced by outsiders, such as the Aryan invaders from North India in Neelakantan's novel or the Muslim and/or British foreigners in Tripathi's one. Even though the time of this Golden Age may vary, it is always present. The retellers argue that contemporary liberal values existed in the deep past and were reflected in the social concepts of caste, class and species. Such liberal values consist on the possibility to pursue one's talents and to change one's social position, just as the new middle-class has been doing since the neoliberal turn.

The gap between the ideal and the counter-ideal is defined by a series of external/physical and internal/cognitive symbols. Humanity, culture, and India are associated with the Brahmins, the ideal of mental and spiritual abilities, and even more with *kṣatriyas*, the ideal of good looks and strength. Both castes are associated with the *devas*. Both high castes and *devas* are associated with the new middle-class. Bestiality, nature and foreignness are associated with the lower castes, outcastes, and tribal people, which are also associated with the *asuras/rākṣasas*, *vānaras*, and lower classes.

Most retellings call for social justice for certain social groups, including the lower castes and the poor. However, such groups are never described as ideal. At best, they are said to have the potential to achieve the traits associated with the higher castes, middle-classes, and "civilized" humans. They are actively encouraged to do so by sages and warriors, who are high caste and high-class. The same could be said about the retellers, who do not belong to the subaltern groups they often claim to defend. Perhaps they often deal with subalterns due to the anxiety to include them into the pan-national ideas of India and Hinduism. By focusing on similarities and differences, such subalterns are simultaneously included in the hegemonic group in a quantitative manner and distinguished from it in a qualitative one.

Whatever virtues or defects may be attributed to different castes, classes, or species, the discourses propagated by the retellers and their retellings are more homogeneous than they intuitively sound like: India was once a great "liberal" civilization, but conquest by some internal or external group has thwarted progress and has instituted the anti-liberal values of *jāti*. Even though the retellings describe the different

castes, classes, and species in different and often opposite ways, their roles remain unchanged. There is always a caste, class or species that is inclusive, divided, civilized, and liberal and another that is exclusionary, united, barbaric, and oppressive. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the former group is represented by Dravidian India and the latter by Indo-European North India. In Tripathi's (2015), the former role is attributed to modern Hindus and the latter to the Muslim and the British. In Pattanaik's (2013) discourse, the former group is made up of sages who look at reality from a psychological perspective and the latter by materialists who interpret everything literally. Pattanaik clearly conflates the former tendency with Indians and Hindus and the latter mainly the West and Abrahamic religions. Divakaruni and Kané are more concerned with feminist issues. However, they also use similar literary tropes: ideal human groups possess the features associated with traditional India and Hindu values, while counter-ideal *Others* are associated with opposite foreign values. This means that, despite the sympathies that any single author may have or not have towards Hindu nationalism, their works can easily be interpreted through a Hindu nationalistic perspective and be used for its propaganda.

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Declarations

Consent to Publish This study did not require the participation of any human subjects.

Consent to Participate This study did not require the participation of any human subjects.

Ethics Approval This study did not require ethics approval.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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