

RAMCHARITMANAS TO DHNORAICCHARITMANAS:

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY OF AN INDIAN AND INDIA

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95

“Probably no work of world literature, secular in origin, has ever produced so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the *Ramayana*”

A. A. Macdonnell

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson made famous the argument that the nation lives in homogeneous empty time. In this argument, he follows a dominant strand in modern historical thinking that imagines the social space of modernity as distributed in homogeneous empty space what a Marxist would call the time of Capital. Anderson explicitly adopts the formulation from Walter Benjamin and uses it to show the material possibilities of large anonymous societies formulated by the simultaneous experiences of reading the daily newspaper and following the private lives of popular fictional characters (Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* 4). But, what happens in the case of a community that is defined by an epic and that extends from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist time?

Imagine a situation where stories are shared independently of the literacy of the people and of what we understand as the media. How is this situation conducive to the construction of an imagined community? There is one such community that spans at least three-fourths of Asia, encompassing hundreds of linguistic and ethnic groups that share neither national boundaries nor a religious identity nor even the “same” story, since there was and still is not any sanction to restrict the story into one “original” version. This is the community of the living epic the *Ramayana* and its ever-present influence over the socio, political and religious lives of billions of people

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to this day. This article endeavors to show how a living epic helps in building an imagined community. I will use Satinath Bhaduri's Bengali novel *Dhnoraicharitmanas* (1949-51), one of the greatest novels about Indian nationalism, to show how it reworks the *Ramayana* and its community in pre-independent India.

96

Bhaduri, a civil engineer who worked among various ethnic groups of North Bihar, set his novel among several "low-caste" ethnic groups in pre-independent rural North India. In order to compare and contrast his post-modern hero with his epic counterpart, he uses *Ramcharitmanas* ("The Ocean of the Deeds of Rama"), the sixteenth-century Hindi re-telling of the *Ramayana* by Goswami Tulsidas. The original *Ramayana* follows the journey of Rama, a mythical king who through his exemplary life and conduct is supposed to have created the most perfect kingdom on earth. Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* is perhaps the most widely known literary work in the vast Hindi-speaking area of Northern India, providing an everyday language of moral discourse that cuts across caste, class and sectarian divides. It is also said to have been the most influential version of *Ramayana*, having affected multiple milestone events of India from the Bhakti movement (a religious reformation movement of Medieval India) to the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 (a sectarian political movement of Hindu nationalists that resulted in a series of Hindu-Muslim political conflicts that is yet to subside). *Ramcharitmanas* is believed to be the most powerful vehicle for the generalization of Brahminical caste segregation in North India; yet it is the same book from which Gandhi drew inspiration for constructing his eutopic nation of Rama, i.e. independent India. In fact, Gandhi's personal vision of India is called *Ramrajya* (kingdom of Rama). In Bhaduri's re-telling of the *Ramcharitmanas*, the hero Dhnorai belongs to a "backward class." He follows the path of Rama as part of a community that could be called the people of Rama. My query is whether *Dhnoraicharitmanas* is a precursor of post-modern South Asian novels that explore the issues of loss, separation and identity. I would also like to explore whether an ancient living epic can continue to construct an "imagined community" and a national identity. The *Ramayana* is so ubiquitous in South Asia, from comic books to politics etc., that at times it is almost impossible to analyze only a segment of its story and values in the modern context. *Dhnoraicharitmanas* provides us with a rare opportunity to explore and analyze this phenomenon.

Goswami Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* is a devotional hymn in the garb of an epic poem. It is less important for its aesthetic quality than for its influence and importance in Indian literature and culture. Tulsidas, the most prominent *Ramayana* author of Hindi Literature, was responsible for promoting the wave of Rama Bhakti across North India during the medieval age. To this day, his *Ramcharitmanas* is the single most important text in the genre of *Ramayana* literature. It is not only a scripture but also a *dharma*, a way of life. C.R. Prasad has pointed out the way people of different eras have described the *Ramcharitmanas*:

Anyone interested in the religion and culture of Northern India sooner or later encounters a reference to the epic poem *Ramcharitmanas* and its remarkable popularity. This sixteenth-century retelling of the legend of Ram by the poet Tulsidas has been hailed “not merely as the greatest modern Indian epic, but as something like a living sum of Indian culture,” singled out as “the tallest tree in the magic garden of medieval Hindu poesy” and acclaimed (by the father of Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi) as “the greatest book of all devotional literature.” (Gandhi, *An Autobiography* 47; Prasad 417)

Western observers have christened it “the best and most trustworthy guide to the popular living faith of its people” (Growse, *The Ramayana of Tulsidas* xxxviii). It must be understood that its cultural value is the reason Bhaduri deliberately uses it as a background for his novel’s exploration of the ordinary life of a subaltern protagonist who wants to follow the path of Rama in a post-modern world. Bhaduri’s novel asks whether this is possible.

Dhnorai’s life could not be more distant from that of the “ideal king” Rama; yet there are traces of the path of Rama in every step of his life. Bhaduri deconstructs the epic’s norms from the beginning of his novel. Dhnorai is not a highborn royal *Kshatriya* (the ruling or military class) but a low class *Tatma* (manual laborer) born in extreme poverty. His father was very hopeful about Dhnorai’s future but the novel does not show what might have happened if the father had lived longer. Like an epic hero, Dhnorai faces challenges very early in his life, as when his father passes away while Dhnorai is an infant and later when his mother abandons him for a happier and more secure life with another man. She leaves Dhnorai in charge of Bouka Bawa, the holy man (*baba*) of the village. Despite having taken the Hindu vow of renunciation typical of a *sadhu* or a sage, Bouka Bawa brings up Dhnorai in the same way the sage Valmiki (to whom the original Sanskrit *Ramayana* is ascribed) brought up Rama’s twin sons Lav-Kush. Like Lav-Kush, Dhnorai has been abandoned by his parents and similarly gets indoctrinated to the Ramayana from his childhood. However, unlike Lav-Kush he learns to sing the Ramayana not in Sanskrit, but in *Avadhi* Hindi (the dialect of the *Ramcharitmanas*). Another fundamental difference between Lav-Kush and Dhnorai is that while the story of Rama is merely a story for Lav-Kush, for Dhnorai it is a life lesson, a bible by which he conducts his life like so many Indians before him did and will do afterwards. However Dhnorai does not really have a concept of India or of the “fact” that he is an Indian; he will learn it as well through the Ramayana and the epic journey of his own life.

In order to understand Dhnorai’s life, a brief introduction to the story is necessary. Dhnorai is a *Tatma* from north Bihar. The district is Purnia but Bhaduri sets the novel in a fictional place called Jirania. Dhnorai grew up as a professional beggar who accompanied the *sadhu*, begging door-to-door, singing songs mostly about Rama and his perfect kingdom. His mental world is steeped in mythic time. He does not go to school but has a deep respect for education, particularly one that enables an individual to read the *Ramcharitmanas*. He knows that men who can read the scriptures of Rama are men of great merit and social authority. His village elders know the gov-

ernment's procedures and the gossip about the authorities, but their general strategy of survival, perfected over generations of experience, is to stay away from entanglements with government and its procedures and also from the upper class people who are seemingly much closer to the government. He applies this lesson when the residents of the neighboring hamlet of *Dhangars* (one of the lowest castes) set fire to Bauka Bawa's hut. The police investigate and asks Dhnorai, the sole eyewitness, to describe what he has seen. As he is about to speak, he notices Bauka Bawa's eyes. "Don't talk" the Bawa seems to say. "This is police, they will go away in an hour. The Dhangars are our neighbours, we'll have to live with them" (Bhaduri 17, my translation). Dhnorai understands and tells the police that he had seen nothing and has no knowledge as to who could have set their house on fire.

But the Tatmas would get involved with a person from mainstream India if they believed him to be an avatar of Ram. Sometime later, Dhnorai and the people of his village hear about a remarkable person called Ganhi Bawa (Mohondas Karamchand 98 Gandhi) who is seemingly a bigger holy man than their very own Bauka Bawa or indeed than any Bawa they had ever known. In fact, they believe that he is as big as the Lord Rama himself and that he has designed and fashioned his life on the holy book *Ramcharitmanas* like Dhnorai. Ganhi Bawa, they hear, eats neither meat nor fish, has never married (although this is untrue) and roams around completely naked (also untrue and ironic since Gandhi was famous for wearing a loincloth). Even the most learned man in the village, the Bengali schoolmaster, becomes Ganhi Bawa's follower. When his image miraculously appears on a pumpkin the people install it in the village temple and make offerings to him as the new avatar of Rama. So for the *Tatmas*, Gandhi, a contemporary politician, becomes the greatest living holy man of India, almost as great as the god Rama. He is a great soul, they agree, because after listening to Ganhi Bawa even the Muslims promise to stop eating meat and onions, and the village Shaman whom no one has ever seen sober, vows to drink only the lightest toddy and to stay away completely from opium. However, when a few villagers go all the way to the district town to see Ganhi Bawa himself, their enthusiasm is somewhat deflated because, like fancy lawyers and teachers in town, he wears spectacles. Who had ever seen a holy man wear spectacles! One or two even whisper that the man might after all be a fake. So when there is an actual overlap between the *Tatmas* and the mainstream, their trust in the mainstream Indian life easily shatters. They truly live the life of an "other" on the periphery of civilization and meticulously separated from the norms of a citizen's life. An ancient book that none of them can read provides their social and moral code. When they actually associate with an "Indian," that person has to be associated with their god Rama. Thus we can see in Bhaduri's novel how the stories of Rama signify life and community among millions of uneducated masses of India.

Bhaduri's intricately crafted account of Dhnorai's upbringing among the Tatmas in the early decades of the twentieth century could be easily read as a faithful ethnography of both colonial governance and the nationalist movement of northern India.

Shahid Amin's studies on the Indian nationalist movement, shows how Gandhi's authority was constructed among India's peasantry through the stories of his miraculous powers and rumors about the fate of his followers was blessed and that of his detractors accursed. Amin also shows how the Congress Party's program and objectives were transmitted in the countryside in the language of myth and popular religion. Similarly, South Asian historian Tapan Roy Chowdhury supports this theory in his autobiography *Bangalnama*. Roy Chowdhury states that in his hometown in Barishal District (now in Bangladesh), it was a common belief in the early 20s and 30s that Gandhi was as great and all powerful as Rama himself; he was in fact believed to be the last avatar of Lord Vishnu who was destined to be the all powerful ruler, i.e. Prime Minister, of independent India (Roy Chowdhury 127).

However, although Gandhi and the movements he led in the 20s and 30s were a set of common events that connected the lives of millions of people in both the cities and the villages of India, they did not constitute a common experience. Rather, even as the people participated in events that historians describe as nationally homogeneous, their own understandings of those events were narrated in very different languages and inhabited by very different life worlds. The nation of India, even if it was being constructed through such events, existed only in heterogeneous time. The nation is an abstraction, an "imagined community," using Anderson's term. This ideal and empty construct, floating as it were in homogenous time, can be given a varied content by diverse group of people, all of whom, while remaining different in their concrete locations, can nevertheless become elements in what Partha Chatterjee calls an unbound seriality of national citizens. Chatterjee argues:

99

This is without the doubt the dream of all nationalists. Bhaduri, who was himself a leading functionary in the congress organization in Purnea district shared the dream. He was acutely aware of the narrowness and particularism of the everyday life of his characters. They were yet to become national citizens, but there was a hope of change. He saw the even the "lowly" Tatmas and Dhangars were stirring. (*The Politics of the Governed*, 12)

This spirit of homogeneous nationalism is seen in the novel in one of Dhnorai's first actions of defiance of social norms when he leads the *Tatmas* into defying the local Brahmin by wearing the sacred thread *upavita* (which should not be worn by *Tatmas*). This action brings Ramayana and Indian nationalism together for the *Tatmas* and Dhnorai. The *Tatmas* wear the *upavita*, as they believe that it has been sanctioned by Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas*. The ambience of a new democratic era also makes it possible for the "lowly" *Tatmas* to think differently, to evolve and possibly become a part of the mainstream India.

In a deliberate allusion to the life story of Rama, Bhaduri now throws his hero Dhnorai into a cruel conspiracy hatched against him by his kinsmen. He suspects his wife Ramiya of having a liaison with a Christian man called Samuer (Samuel) who is a *Dhangar* (waste pickers) and hence considered "lowly" by the *Tatmas*. Dhnorai goes into exile and resumes his life in another village, among other castes. Though

not by choice, Dhnorai's world suddenly becomes bigger and broader, and he must assume several other identities before he can become himself again. The new concrete roadway, *pakki*, along with the motorcars and trucks now whizzing past him, opens up his imagination. "In his mind Dhnorai sees the shadows that suggest to him something of the vastness of the country" (Chatterjee, *Politics* 13). However, it is not clear whether Bhaduri ever wanted to construct a neat concept of a homogeneous nation that belongs to all the castes including the *Dalits*, *Brahmins* and *Kshatriya* alike. Allusions to race issues are never far from his narration and he is not shy to problematise the matter. Rather, his intention is to show how problematic homogeneous nationalism can be and that race issues challenge the very concept of homogeneous imagined community. While it is true that Dhnorai's quest is to search for and construct his identity as a citizen of India, a geo-political space evolving into a nation with finite boundaries, it still remains to be seen whether he really becomes an Indian.

100 Dhnorai continues in the 1930s to receive his education in nationalism. Loosened from his moorings, he drifts to another village and starts life afresh among the Koeri, a "backward class" of sharecroppers and laborers. Dhnorai begins to learn the realities of peasant life, of *Rajput* landlords, of *Koeri adhiars* and *Santal* laborers. He now grows jute, paddy, tobacco and maize and learns about the whole different world of moneylenders and traders. Unlike Dhnorai of old, who took immense pleasure when hailstorms destroyed the tile roofs on huts (because it brought him new business), he now worries over the fate of the crop in the field. He is part of a larger community now and along with his new people he mourns and suffers when an earthquake literally shatters the life of the farmers. After the earthquake, for more than a year, the *Koeris* hear vaguely about a relief that will supposedly make up for their monetary losses. But when the relief comes, they are told that the *Koeri* huts are built of lighter material and can be easily mended by the *Koeris* themselves while the houses of the upper caste *Rajputs* have suffered more damage and hence require the bulk of the relief. Thus begins a new and complicated chapter in Dhnorai's life and education, as he is gradually indoctrinated into Indian politics.

Dhnorai discovers that the literate Bengali lawyers and Rajputs are fast becoming followers of the Mahatma (whom he knew before only as Ganhi Bawa). Even as the old exploiters become the new saviors and messiah of the nationalism movement, Gandhi's image remains untarnished in Dhnorai's mind. One day a "bolunteer" (political volunteer) arrives in the village with letters from the Mahatma. He tells the *Koeris* that they must send their replies to the Mahatma by voting for Gandhi (i.e. for the Congress Party). Dhnorai, like many other villagers, truly believes that by dropping the white envelope in the ballot box he is actually sending a message to Gandhi. Dhnorai feels immense pride in this active participation towards building a nation and likens himself to the smallest of the squirrels that had helped build Rama's bridge to Lanka. He earnestly wishes that he were literate so that he could actually write to Gandhi. These are important life lessons for Dhnorai as it becomes

one with Gandhi's *Swaraj* and *Satyagraha* movements (self-rule and for non-violent resistance respectively). The important thing to remember from this part of the novel is that Dhnorai, illiterate Koeris, and other poor people of the village really had no notion about the concept of a nation or for that matter India. For them it is Gandhi who matters. They equate Gandhi's philosophy and nationalism with *Ramayana*. In their mind Gandhi, Ramayana and Indian nationalism become one entity, building a new imagined community.

This is not the first time in Indian history that the *Ramayana* or Rama is being invoked to ward off outside evil. In the original *Ramayana*, Rama took human form to slay Ravan, who was disrupting the cosmic peace. Some two thousand years later in the medieval age, poets writing in various regional languages of India invoked the *Ramayana* once more. In this age of religious reformation (the *Bhakti* movement), it was necessary to re-write the *Ramayana* in regional languages, making significant alterations that catered to the different regional contexts. As an ideal king, Rama filled the political and moral voids in medieval India. Muslims rulers of India who were and will always be considered "outsiders" by the Hindu majority population were ruling most parts of India. In absence of any Hindu king who could ward off the "outside invaders," people found solace in the ideal world of Rama where a subject's personal happiness was more important than the king's. Given the devotional focus of the medieval use of Rama it is interesting that Gandhi invokes him to propagate a political movement. Thus we see that the *Ramayana* signifies a national identity for a group of people who are otherwise extremely varied in linguistic and social practices.

101

For Dhnorai voting for Gandhi in affirmation of *Ramrajya* begins a new chapter in his life and the lives of people like him who had never in the history of India taken any part in the process of nation building. However this process begins with a lie. The "bolunteer" instructs Dhnorai to give a false identity since he is technically not from that village: "Your mane is Dhnorai Koeri, your father is Kirtu Koeri. Remember to say this to the office. Your father is Kirtu Koeri." Dhnorai does as he is told.

Inside the voting booth, Dhnorai stood with his folded hands in front of the white box and dropped the letter into it. Praise to Mahatmaji, praise to the Congress *bolunteer*, they had given Dhnorai the little role of the squirrel in the great task of building the kingdom of Rama. But his heart broke with sorrow-if only he could write, he would have written the letter himself to the Mahatma. Just imagine all these people writing letters to the Mahatma, from one end of the country to the other, all together all at the same time. Tatmatuli, Jirania, Dhnorai...the *bolunteer*, they all wanted the same thing. They had all sent the same letter to the Mahatma. The Government, the officers, the police, the landlords all were against them. They belonged to many different castes yet they had all come so close. They were linked as though by a spider's web; the fiber was so thin that if you tried to grab it, it would break. Indeed, you couldn't always tell it if it was there or not. When it swayed gently in the breeze, or the morning dew drops cling to it, or when a sudden ray of the sun fell on it, you saw it, and even then only for a moment. This was the land of Ramji over which his avatar Mahatmaji was weaving this thin web.... "Hey, what are you doing inside the booth?" The officer's voice broke his reverie. (Chatterjee's translation, *Politics* 18)

Since the vote was a magnificent, but anonymous indoctrination and performance of citizenship, it does not really matter to Dhnorai that he performs it under a false identity. After all, it is for a greater good. "But it did conceal the issue of who represents whom within the nation" (Chatterjee, *Politics* 18). Since the villagers do not understand the electoral system, they are naturally very surprised by the outcome of the vote. Despite their faithful votes to the Mahatma, they are disappointed to see the much hated *Rajput* landlord winning the election. This is the same landlord whom the *Koeris* had been fighting for years; now, with political support from Congress, he would eventually become the chairman of the district board. The villagers along with Dhnorai come to know that the Mahatmaji's men are now ministers in the government and notice that when the *pakki* built it passes right next to the *Rajput* quarter of the village. Although it would take much more to break Dhnorai's faith in the imagined community of Rama, perhaps this is where it begins. Dhnorai soon learns that the imagined community of a nation is different and much more problematic

102 than that of an epic.

In spite of his slight disappointment in democratic systems, Dhnorai buys a copy of the *Ramcharitmanas*, promising himself that he would learn to read it one-day. Meanwhile, the seemingly smooth passage toward building *Ramrajya* is disrupted when the British arrest Gandhi. Gandhi had announced earlier that this was the final battle and every true follower who believed in Gandhi's *Ramrajya* must follow him faithfully. Thus Dhnorai gets mobilized in the historical Quit India Movement of 1942. According to the Congress Party volunteers, this is a revolution, the final battle that true followers must go through in order to achieve *Ramrajya*. Together they would drive the British from India. Dhnorai and his comrades storm the police station, setting fire to it. By morning the District Magistrate, the police superintendent, and all the senior officers flee. Victory is restored to the revolution, to Mahatmaji and to *Ramayana*.

It does not last long though. A few week later troops move in with guns. Along with Congress *bolunteers*, Dhnorai leaves for the forest. He is now a rebel, a man wanted by the law similar to the rest of the political volunteers. Despite the differences in their castes there is a strange equality among them in the forest where they become homogenized into a single identity: Mahatmaji's Soldiers. All of them take pseudonyms and call each other Gandhi, Nehru, Azad, Patel, etc. (names of Indian political leaders of the nationalist movement). Despite the popular demand for the names of political personalities, Dhnorai decides to go by the name Ramayanji (the *-ji* suffix denotes respect in many North Indian languages). However, this exile in the forest is the beginning of the fall of the *Krantidal* (band of rebels). Sometime later, the word comes that the British have won the war with the Germans and the Japanese and will reward the support of Congress by releasing its leaders. This is confusing enough for the *Krantidal* but they are thrown into further bewilderment when Gandhi requests his followers to surrender voluntarily. Dhnorai and his comrades are thoroughly confounded and resolve not to surrender.

Thus begins the last part of Dhnorai's journey. He feels embarrassed one day when he realizes that he does not feel attached towards the *Ramayana* like he used to. Seclusion from active politics and internal strife within his group was gradually driving Dhnorai further away from the *Ramayana* and from his dreams of helping to build India. In this section Bhaduri presents a series of broken dreams and images for Dhnorai while at the same time India is becoming a Nation. These two processes somehow become inversely proportional. Through his narrative technique Bhaduri breaks both images of Dhnorai: the Dhnorai who wanted to follow the path of Ram and the Dhnorai who would be a citizen of India. Moreover, Bhaduri shatters the image of Gandhi's idealistic Ramrajya. Dhnorai is aware of this failure when he witnesses the slow decay of ideals and morals among the people of *Krantidal*. He realizes that they are all suffering but still blames the people who failed to follow the ideal path of Gandhi. This slow decay and pain is almost premonative of Gandhi's real-life assassination by a fellow Hindu in 1948, a year after India's independence.

At the end of the novel, Dhnorai has not become an Indian citizen. Bhaduri does not complete the process that began so promisingly along the fictional paths of the epic. In fact, Dhnorai ceases to be a part of any community, real or imagined. He stops the process himself by leaving behind the *Krantidal* and even his *Ramayana*, the most precious possession he ever owned. After hearing the news of the deaths of his wife Ramiya and her stillborn son, he leaves behind all that is familiar—his old village *Tatmatuli*, his comrades, even his valued identity Ramyanji—and become Dhnorai again, a *Tatma* who still nurtures the hope to find some happiness with another woman. It is unclear why he wishes to surrender to the police at the end of the novel. But it is doubtful that he does it in order to honor Gandhi's wishes. Perhaps Dhnorai surrenders because this is the last link in his life that identifies him as part of the invisible community of Ram-Gandhi-India and he wants to destroy it and be reborn as himself again. This could be his very own declaration of independence. It is after all a modern novel, and Dhnorai, a modern man, finally abandons the monogamous self-deprecating path of Rama. He does not grasp nor is he interested in the whole vision of India; this is very evident when Bhaduri states in the last episode "even the pakki looks unfamiliar to him" (my translation). This is significant because this was the road that had led Dhnorai to discover his identity and maybe India as well; possibly he even came very close to discovering a newly founded nation and his own national identity. But why does he abandon the path? Does he know that it was an imaginary construct after all? One that might be abandoned in favor of another imaginary community in future?

In the concluding part of his analysis of *Dhnoraicharitmanas*, Chatterjee quotes an impassioned speech of a *Dalit* activist. He states, "As far as he (the *Dalit* activist) could see the latter half of the 20th century had been the brightest in the history of *Dalits*, since they got rid of the worst possible form of untouchability, mobilized themselves politically as a community, and were now making strategic alliances with other oppressed groups in order to get a share of the governmental power. All this

was possible because the conditions of mass democracy had thrown open the bastions of caste privilege to attacks from representatives of oppressed groups organized into electoral majorities" (Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* 25). He further states he himself was persuaded once more thinking that, "it is morally illegitimate to uphold the universalist ideas of nationalism without simultaneously demanding that the politics spawned by governmentality be recognized as an equally legitimate part of the real time-space of the modern political life of a nation. Without it, governmental technologies will continue to proliferate and serve, much as they did in the colonial era, as manipulable instruments of class rule in a global capitalist order" (Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* 25).

104 I agree with most of his analysis. However, I must argue that *Dhnoraicharitmanas* is set in heterogeneous time and space and we must address what happens to Dhnorai as an individual at the end of the novel. Since his birth he had defined his identity according to the *Ramcharitmanas*. During his personal problems with Ramiya he had taken life lessons from the same book. Even when the dream of eutopic Ramrajya broke, Dhnorai had blamed it on the group who failed to live up to the ideals of Gandhi. But in the final episode, when he faces the biggest personal crises and losses in his life, his belief in the book is completely shattered. It is no longer impossible for him to believe that the real life of individuals can follow the story of epic heroes. Hence unlike the *Uttarakanda* (the last canto of Ramayana) Dhnorai is not united with his wife and son but instead hears the news of their death. He now knows that he made a mistake in mistrusting Ramiya (as Rama mistrusted Sita); but unlike Rama he does not have an opportunity to beg forgiveness from his wife. With the onset of this harsh reality, Dhnorai takes the most drastic step of his life, one that is not sanctioned by the *Ramcharitmanas*. He perhaps abandons the path of Rama and his identity as Ramayanji and embarks on a personal journey towards an unknown destination. He faces a dilemma similar to his fellow modern men, isolated and alienated in his own problematic state where he is both part of and not part of the imagined community (be that of Ramayana or a *nation*). Similar to the *Ramayana*, *Dhnoraicharitmanas* is after all a story about the journey of one man.

In conclusion I want to state that although Dhnorai seemingly fails to follow the path of *Ramayana* Bhaduri is not portraying the failure of a pre-capitalist epic within the Marxist time of Capital. This is the more complex matter regarding an individual's relation with a community and cannot be negotiated within the periphery of a simple dichotomy. The *Ramayana* still influences the life of individual Indians in everyday politics. Contemporary Indian politicians still have not resolved whether a Rama temple is to be built on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid. Similarly the project of demolishing a coral reef barrier that is believed to be a bridge built by Rama's army still brews socio-political controversy that affects the economy of Indian politics. The living epic *Ramayana* is still very much alive and enmeshed within the complexities

of the communal, quotidian life of South Asia in significant and complicated ways. It has undergone evolutions through centuries and will continue to evolve and survive as long as the people of Rama live and swear by the *Ramayana*.

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