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Heidi R. M. Pauwels
The Goddess as Role Model

Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen

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*Sītā and Rādhā in Scripture and on
Screen*

HEIDI R.M. PAUWELS

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Dedicated to my husband

*jinha keṃ rahī bhāvanā jaisī
prabhu mūrati tinha dekhī taisī*

Everyone perceives the Lord according to his own predisposition.

—Rām Carit Mānas

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Preface: An Auspicious Confluence

This book has been in the making for over a decade. It is a *saṅgam*, an auspicious confluence, in more than one sense. First, it brings together two prominent Hindu goddesses, Sītā and Rādhā. Second, it is a confluence of myth and real life, as it is looking at how myth “matters” in presenting role models for women. Third, it looks at the goddesses as portrayed in three different types of texts, Sanskrit, medieval Hindi, and modern film and television series. Thus it brings together “texts” of different provenance.

It was, appropriately, a confluence of circumstances that led to my being in India when the mythological series were first aired on television. This gave me the opportunity to watch them as they unfolded, an opportunity I might have missed had it not been for my Vrindāban guru, the late Shri Baldev Lal Goswami (Choṭe Sarkār), who insisted I spend some Sunday mornings in 1987 watching episodes of the televised versions of the epics with his family at his house. I confess that at the time I did so reluctantly, uneasy about spending my precious time in India watching television—of poor transmission quality to boot. I would have rather read with him the medieval Krishna poetry I had set out to translate and interpret. Now, I am grateful to him for “sowing the seed” (*bīja*) of future works, as good gurus do. He gave me the invaluable opportunity to taste firsthand the influence of these series, and to learn the valuable lesson that, while in India, be focused, but do not close yourself off from the wondrous *līlās* unfolding before your eyes, be they real life or reel life.

The seed came to fruition through another lucky confluence between teaching and research. My first research focused on the goddess Rādhā, and when I got my first teaching job at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, I was finalizing translations for my first book on a Braj reworking of Krishna's dance with the Rādhā and the Gopīs in the woods, the *Rās-pañcādhyāyī*. As I was teaching Avadhī at SOAS, I was reading at the same time with my students from Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas*—the passages of Sītā's resolve to join Rāma in exile in the woods. While preparing wordlists for the class, I was struck by the similarities in wording and sentiment of Sītā's resolve with that of the Gopīs to join Krishna in the forest. The interest in the televised versions came in that same Avadhī class. The students had been voicing a common sentiment of doubt about the usefulness of reading medieval texts for understanding contemporary India, so I showed episodes from Sagar's *Ramayana* to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the text. When doing so, I was struck by the differences with the texts we had read.

The link with popular Hindi movies came in 1995, when I had a chance to view in a crowded London theatre the full version of the hit movie *Hum aap ke hain koun . . . !* and heard recited the *Mānas* passages we had just read in class! I was delighted to have more evidence to tell my film-loving students how they would benefit so obviously from their hard work in the medieval text class. I am grateful to Munni Kabir for inspiring me with her love for Hindi movies and her message to take them seriously, and in particular to pay close attention to the song-and-dance sequences.

Thus, at the origin of this book is a desire to show the relevance of the medieval texts I love to students of modern India. I feel that my contribution to make is to share my love of these influential classical texts with a wider audience. I hope that I will not be misunderstood as intending to reduce the Hindi film to a mythological Ur-story but that I will instead alert viewers of Hindi films to a wealth of nuances and variants that might otherwise remain unmined. I think his book abundantly illustrates how study of mythology can help to understand contemporary film.

The Sītā parts of three chapters in this book (1–3) are drastically rewritten versions of papers presented at and first written up for Rāmāyaṇa conferences organized by Mandakranta Bose of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, in 1999 and 2000. I am very grateful for her and Vidyut Akujkar's encouragement and for the opportunity to sound out my ideas among specialists at an early stage in the development of the book. (These essays are published as Pauwels 2000 and 2004a.) The section on Sītā in chapter 4 in this book was first presented at a South Asia Conference of the Pacific North-West in 1996, and subsequently at a conference in Cambridge, UK, in

1997. (A short article on the topic was Pauwels 2004b.) I am grateful to Lynn Thomas and Jacqueline Hirst for their comments. A summary of chapter 1 was also presented in Paris, when I was visiting at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in 2005. I am grateful for the kind hospitality of Françoise Mallison and Nalini Delvoye and for their suggestions and those of the audience. Finally, the section on Rukmiṇī in chapter 2 is a variant of a paper first presented at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Seattle in 2005 and published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 2007. However, in the published article I do not touch upon the televised version, and instead compare the Braj version with a Marwari retelling of the story.

I am most grateful to Cynthia Read of Oxford University Press for seeing the book through to publication and for soliciting two superb anonymous readers' reviews, which were both supportive and tactfully critical with excellent suggestions. The reviewers helped me focus my argument and provided even some elegant turns of phrase that I have incorporated in the book. I am very grateful for their comments.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge Carolyn Brown Heinz, for her enthusiastic permission to use the photo on the cover, as well as for sharing with me her vast anthropological expertise on the region of Sītā's birth, Mithilā.

I want to thank especially my good friend and respected colleague Swapna Sharma of Vrindāban for helping me with the translations from the Braj texts. She clarified many obscure passages and saved me from several embarrassing mistakes. More important, in her own devotion to Rādhā, she provided me with an inspiring role model herself. There is no better way to come to understand and love a culture one has not grown up in than through a true friend.

I wish to thank wholeheartedly my colleagues at the University of Washington, especially Michael Shapiro, for taking the time to look through an early draft of this book and offering advice, and also Virginia Van Dyke for great discussions on politics and a reading of some politically relevant portions in this work.

And many thanks to the students at the University of Washington who took my classes on medieval Hindi, Indian literature in translation, Indian goddesses, and *Rāmāyana* in comparative perspective; I am especially grateful to Valerie Ritter (now at the University of Chicago) for many fascinating discussions about Rādhā and Krishna's accosting the Gopīs. Thanks to Prem Pahlajrai for his insightful comments on an early version of the introduction and chapter 6. I thank my students for their enthusiasm, keen interest, and good discussions. This book was largely written during my sabbatical in 2004–5; I am grateful to the University of Washington for teaching relief.

Last but not least, I want to thank my wonderful family, especially my husband: I have been very blessed to enjoy their genuine support and love, much more than I can say. The arrival of our little girl coincided with the sending off of the first draft of this book for review and with Durgā pūjā, so we could welcome a little Devī home as the book of the two great Devīs started its journey in the world. Today, as I prepare to send the finalized version off to press, it is the auspicious occasion of Rādhāṣṭamī.

I have benefited much from stimulating discussions with husband, friends, students, colleagues, and gurus, but all mistakes and shortcomings are my own. I can only hope that the positive points will outweigh the inevitable faults. If any offense is given in the course of this long work, I humbly beg the indulgence of all connoisseurs of the wonderful works cited and the forgiveness of the devotees of the great goddesses who have inspired it.

Rādhāṣṭamī 2007

Acknowledgments

Parts of the first four chapters in this book were published in an earlier form elsewhere. I thank the following publishers and editors for permission to publish material from the following articles.

Mandakranta Bose: “Three Ways of Falling in Love: Tulsīdās’s Phūlvārī Episode and the Way It Is Portrayed in Contemporary Electronic Media.” In Mandakranta Bose, ed., *A Varied Optic: Contemporary Studies in the Rāmāyaṇa*, pp. 55–100. Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia, 2000.

Oxford University Press and Mandakranta Bose: “‘Only You’: The Wedding of Rāma and Sītā, Past and Present.” In Mandakranta Bose, ed., *Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, pp. 165–218. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Cambridge University Press: “Stealing a Willing Bride: Women’s agency in the myth of Rukmiṇī’s Elopement.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 17.4 (2007): 407–41. Reprinted with permission.

Oxford University Press, Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, and Lynn Thomas: “Is Love Still Stronger than *Dharma*? Whatever Happened to Sita’s Choice and the Gopis’ Voice?” In Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Lynn Thomas, eds., *Playing for Real: Hindu Role Models, Religion, and Gender*, pp. 117–40. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of Sources

BDS	<i>Bhāsā Dasama Skandha</i> by Nanddās (Brajratnadās [1949] 1957)
BhP	<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i> (Goswami and Śāstrī [1971] 1982)
BVP	<i>Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa</i> (Śarmā 1970)
NP	<i>Nanddās Padāvalī</i> (Brajratnadās [1949] 1957)
RCM	<i>Rām Carit Mānas</i> by Tulsīdās (Poddār [1942] 1990)
RM	<i>Rukmiṇī Maṅgal</i> by Nanddās (Brajratnadās [1949] 1957)
RP	<i>Rās Pañcādhyāyī</i> by Harirām Vyās (Pauwels 1996b)
SS	<i>Sūr Sāgar</i> by Sūrdās (Ratnākar 1972–76)
TVR	Televised <i>Ramayana</i> , d. Ramanand Sagar (Mizokami and Bakhshi 1992)
TVK	Televised <i>Shri Krishna</i> , d. Ramanand Sagar
VR	<i>Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa</i> (Goswāmī 1969)

Abbreviations of Dictionaries

BBSK	Dīndayāl Gupta and Premnarāyaṇ Taṇḍan, eds. 1974. (VS 2031). <i>Brajbhāṣā Sūrkoś</i> . Lucknow: Viśvavidyālay Hindī Prakāśan.
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- EIC* Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen, eds. 1999. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. Rev. ed. London: Oxford University Press.
- HŚS* Śyāmsundar Dās et al., eds. 1965–75. *Hindī śabdsāgar*. 11 vols. Benares: Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā.
- MW* Monier Monier-Williams et al., eds. [1899] 1981. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages*. Rev. and enl. ed. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- OHED* R.S. McGregor, ed. 1993. *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SBBK* Vidyānivās, Miśra, ed. 1985–90. *Sāhityik Brajbhāṣā koś*. 3 vols. Lucknow: Uttar Pradeś Hindī Saṁsthān.
- TŚS* Hargovind, Tivārī, ed. 1954. *Tulsi-śabdsāgar*. Allahabad: Hindustānī Academy.

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

No translation can do justice to the charming originals considered here, with their elaborate wordplay and playful rhyme and the intertextuality of a whole rich cultural tradition—let alone a translation by someone who is not a native speaker of English. I am woefully aware of my shortcomings. My translations are intended to be functional and to convey the points I want to make. Wherever possible I have given the original in the footnotes, so readers can taste the beauty of these wonderful works for themselves.

In the transliteration, I have followed the standard conventions for the languages concerned (as in *MW* and *OHED*), with the exception of consistently representing all the *anusvāras* as *m̐*. I have transliterated the final -a for old Hindi, because it matters for the metrical sounding out of the text, but mostly left it out in modern Hindi, unless the language is deliberately archaizing. The Devanāgarī script does not have capitals, so I give lowercase throughout my quotations. I mostly follow the punctuation of the original. However, for the poetry, I consistently give a comma to indicate the caesura and a semicolon for the end of a line, rather than following the at times somewhat ad hoc punctuation of the printed sources.

It is always a difficult decision which words to give with full diacritics and which not. As it is conventional in film studies not to indicate diacritics, I use the conventional Anglicized spelling for titles of films, names of characters and actors, directors, and so on. However, consistent with the rest of the book, I give full diacritics when quoting songs or dialogue.

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The Goddess as Role Model

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Introduction

Sītā and Rādhā, Role Models for Women?

A Shadow over Sītā on the Wall?

The central question of this book is captured well by the scene depicted on the cover: a little girl in the courtyard of the village of Jitwarpur in Bihar, crying hard, with a wall painting in the background of the goddess Sītā garlanding Rāma as her husband. Is the little girl afraid of Sītā on the wall? Sītā was born in the Mithilā region, the same region as this girl. Sītā got to choose her husband, but not so her little compatriot. There is a shadow cast over the painting, as there is over Sītā's life: everyone knows she suffered hardship: first abducted by a demon, whom she resisted, and then abandoned by her husband. What about the little girl? Is she crying because if even goddesses can fall on hard times, surely she will, too? Sītā is often upheld as a role model for women. What good is a role model like Sītā for women? That is a question one hears raised among young women of Indian origin living in the West, as well as in so-called progressive circles in India. Can one generalize that the average Indian woman shares those doubts?

Carolyn Brown Heinz, who took this picture in 1984, carried out anthropological research in the Mithilā area. In her discussions with local women, she came across some strong opinions on this topic. She asked women to comment on the claim that girls from Mithilā get to select their own husbands (seeking to redress a misperception of prevailing matriarchy in the region). One of her informants, Chhaya,

wondered whether that claim might be because of Sītā's Svayaṃvara (Self-Choice), "but since her marriage wasn't a successful one, we have stopped that custom. Everything that Sita did, we have stopped doing" (Heinz 2000: 4). "Just how much choice did Sita have, anyway? Her parents had set up the conditions under which she could be won" (5). As it turned out, Chhaya's own marriage had been arranged, somewhat hastily, by her father, who had failed to notice that the household into which she married had significant problems. Continuing about Sītā, Chhaya remarked: "She didn't have a happy married life, she lost everything, she lived in the forest. But sometimes you are more happy in a forest than in a palace. Sita's father-in-law had four wives. All four lived in the palace. Do you think all four of them were happy? No, of course not" (6). Indeed, Chhaya would know, because her own father-in-law had brought his mistress into the house, which made Chhaya's life miserable. "Sita, even living in the forest, she knew that my husband is here, too. He has not taken any other wife. And I think because of that, Sita had a lot of happiness" (7). "But then it was the duty of the king that separated them. . . . It was Rama's job as king that required they live separate. . . . Just like my husband, it's the duty that separates us" (8). Chhaya's husband was a teacher in a college in a different town and only could come home on occasional weekends. Back to Sītā, Chhaya said: "This poor girl, she didn't do anything wrong. Even when she went to Lanka. She's so pure, she didn't go to Ravan no matter what he did to her. She didn't go. Didn't allow him to touch her body. So strong she was in character! . . . I tell you, Sita is *not* a model. But what was her fault? Why *shouldn't* I take her as a model? . . . I am telling you, Mithila seems to be scared of Sita" (8).

Admired at the same time as maligned. Blameless yet blamed. Loved and feared. There is a real ambivalence in this reflection on whether Sītā is or is not a good model for women. Heinz, in her discussion of the personal production of meaning, illustrates with this example how a woman telling her life story may use Sītā's myth to interpret her own life and, conversely, use her own life experience to interpret Sītā's story. Heinz perceptively points out that the situation of real Indian women trying to live up to the model of an ideal woman has its counterpart in some versions of the myth, where Sītā produces a body double, or *chāyā* (shadow), who undergoes the abduction and suffering while the real (that is, the ideal) Sītā remains untainted. Very apt indeed that Heinz gave the woman narrating Sītā's story as her own the pseudonym Chhaya! Could Chhaya be voicing what many of her sisters feel: a strong ambivalence about Sītā as role model for women?

Thus, we could imagine that the girl in the picture is crying because of the shadow hanging over her head, that her life will be a shadow version of Sītā's

unhappy story. But maybe not. The wall painting of Sītā garlanding Rāma is considered auspicious. It was purposely painted to decorate the courtyard for a wedding.¹ Still, the place where the wedding night will take place, the part of the house known as *kohbar ghar*, is usually decorated at the entrance with romantic images of another divine pair, Rādhā and Krishna.² By contrast to the virtuous, dharma-centered pair of Sītā and Rāma, the erotic, *prema*-centered pair Rādhā and Krishna are not visible in the picture, but they surely are depicted somewhere nearby. Does Rādhā, invisible here, make for an alternative role model for the women of Mithilā? A happier one, of love in fulfillment?

Why, then, is this girl crying? Heinz remembers it was because of her big dark sunglasses, which frightened the girl. Should we extend the metaphor and say that it is not the role model that is the problem but the “glasses,” the darkening lens through which the outsider is looking in, the Westernized interpretative position of the observer? Is it only when anthropologists prod that Indian women express ambivalence or burst into tears? Is it only in the books of foreign academics that Sītā as role model becomes problematic? This book will let the most influential texts of the tradition speak for themselves, as it sets out to discover how Sītā functions as a role model for women in contrast to Rādhā.

Mythological Role Models for Love

This book fits within the larger frame of studies that seek to understand the position of women in Hinduism. There has been increasing interest in this field because of the crucial role women play in influencing population dynamics, in setting consumer patterns, and as a vote bank in the democratic process. Women are important agents in these fields; thus we need to understand what they think. How do they make their decisions? What are their ideals and ideologies? Here religion comes in.

The interface of the religious and political has attracted quite a bit of scholarly attention lately because of the political support of Hindu women for the religious nationalist parties in power in the 1990s. This has inspired

1. For photos of the wedding, see Heinz's website about Mithila, www.csuchico.edu/anth/mithila/kanyadan2.htm.

2. For illustrations of the Rajnagar Palace decorated for a royal wedding in 1919, see Heinz 2006: 12-4, ill. 5-7.

several studies on women and Hindu nationalism (e.g., Bhasin, Menon, and Khan 1994, Sarkar and Butalia 1995, Sarkar 2001, Bacchetta 2004, Banerjee 2005).

This book, by contrast, is less about the role religion plays in women's political agency than about their decisions regarding their personal day-to-day life, particularly in the way they cope with issues of love. As one astute observer of popular culture has put it: "Love and romance . . . is a compelling locus to examine womanhood: how does romantic love constitute women? Does this reveal change over time? Discourses on love, romance, sexuality, and the family are sites where women's subjectivity is located, shaping how they are imagined" (Virdi 2003: 126). This book will focus on the mythical heroines who are held up as ideals and influence young women in their partner choices, their matrimonial decisions, and the ways they cope with difficulties and challenges to their marriage and the everyday indignities of unwanted sexual attention.

At this point we should pause to reflect that the term "love" is an ambiguous one. While the emotion may be said to be universal, it is culturally specific in its construction. There is a multiplicity of South Asian codes of love, each with its own history (see Orsini 2006: 1–39 for an overview; for theoretical background see John and Nair 1998). This book engages simultaneously with epic, devotional, and contemporary "lovescapes."³ Thus, we should be aware that notions of "love," "devotion," "wifehood," "marriage," and "womanhood" are to be problematized as culturally specific categories in a South Asian context, as well as in specific periods in history.

The way women cope with love is not a frivolous topic. It is obviously one of general human interest, but it also can be seen as symptomatic for the discourse of the conflict between modernity and tradition. While in a certain sense a false dichotomy (Kazmi 1999), in common parlance the two are often sharply distinguished. Modernity is often equated with individualism; tradition is seen as privileging the community. Recognition of individual free

3. The epic construct of love may be said to be twofold: (1) sexual liaisons (usually stressing the problematic of the ensuing offspring), and (2) marital bonds in the context of political alliances. However, speaking about "epic love" is itself problematic and complex, as it stretches over a long period, reflecting different sociopolitical constructs, including more or less patriarchal ones and influence from stylized *kāvya* (poetics) conventions of Sanskrit literature. The devotional construct of love is characterized by a conflation of human and divine love, often from a "female" point of view, constantly shifting focus between devotion for husband and for god (or husband-as-god). Key here is an all-consuming passion that defies societal normativity (dharma). At some points, this code seems to be influenced by the Perso-Arab one. Finally, contemporary notions of love may be inspired by all the traditional ones (including the Perso-Arab one), as well as a transnational (or "Western") discourse, which is often associated with the new consumerist middle class (Dwyer 2000).

choice is often contrasted with pride in community and privileging the communal good. This conflict is epitomized in the competing ideals of the love marriage, a union of two autonomous individuals, and the traditional arranged marriage, more a family affair. How women cope with love is indicative of how they position themselves on a scale of modern and traditional. Choosing a love marriage may be seen as a marker of modernity. The way women navigate between these ideals can be taken as a barometer of the inroads of Westernization on a traditional culture.

Often scholars are inclined to discuss the position of women in Hinduism by studying women's legislation in modern India or delving into the ancient so-called Law Books (*Dharmaśāstra*), which lay out the rules of what women should and should not do, what their rights and responsibilities are in given situations. However, one wonders what the currency of theoretical tracts is in actual situations in women's lives. One could well argue that the way precepts, whether legal or religious, make most impact on the popular imagination is not through dry prescriptions but through the popular stories of Hindu mythology. Many of the heroines of those stories set illustrious examples for a woman's duty (*strī-dharma*). Few women will actually quote the *Dharmaśāstra* with regard to why they act the way they do, but many will cite inspiration from mythological examples. To understand the motivations of Indian women, it may be fruitful to focus on these mythological role models.

Surprisingly few studies have been done on role models for Hindu women.⁴ This book is an attempt to help fill that lacuna. Its main goal is to deepen our understanding of the mythological role models that mark the moral landscape young Hindu women have to navigate.

One can say that among the most influential models for Indian women are the Hindu goddesses. Recently, some have turned their attention to the relationship between goddess worship and the position of women (King 1997, Chitgopekar 2002, Sharma 2005). Intuitively, one might surmise that a religion that worships a feminine divine must have some positive implications for women's position in society. However, such an assumption has been problematized in a recent collection of articles aptly entitled *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* (Hiltebeitel and Erndl 2000).⁵ That collection (as do the other books

4. A notable exception is a recent work on role models in general (Hirst and Thomas 2004) that includes some articles (a.o. my own) focusing on role models for women. The term "role model" seems not to have been heavily theorized (1–7). Madhu Kishwar also uses it in a recent essay (2003).

5. An earlier variant of this title is Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 31, 1998, reprinted in Rajan 2004.

already mentioned) explores the issue by turning to the example of the Great Goddess, or Mahādevī. A spate of recent scholarship likewise has focused on the powerful and independent goddesses Durgā and Kālī (Caldwell 1999, Pintchman 2001, Rodrigues 2003). As it turns out, it is by no means clear that goddess worship helps further the position in society of flesh-and-blood women. Even when the goddess is evoked as proof of women's strength, this may be in the service of an ultimate patriarchal goal (Rajan 2004). A related question, of interest here, is whether the Great Goddess is a source of inspiration for women's lives. Again, this is not self-evident. She actually seems not to be a strong role model for women (see Humes 1997).

The contribution of this book is to turn our attention instead toward the more or less great goddesses, who seem to inhabit the domain halfway between women of flesh and blood and the Great Goddess herself. These female figures unquestionably serve as role models for human females, even if the ideal they exemplify is recognized as not always attainable.

Is Sītā a Feminist?

Sītā, the faithful consort of the Hindu god Rāma and heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, undoubtedly functions prominently in the psychology of young Indian women (see, e.g., Kakar 1981: 218; for the diaspora, see Pandurang 2003: 92). As they cope with their daily life and its challenges, women frequently refer to Sītā as a role model.

It is much debated whether that is a good or bad thing. Some feminists strongly believe the latter and consider long-suffering and ever-sacrificing Sītā a restrictive role model that is harmful for women. In February 1988, two well-known Indian feminists, Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon, wrote with reference to the televised *Rāmāyaṇa*:

Eternal mythologies like the Ramayan are revived and popularized via state controlled media at the mass "entertainment" level. . . . With Sita as our ideal, can sati [widow burning] be far behind? It is this overarching ideology of male superiority and female dispensability that . . . accepts the silent violence against women that rages in practically every home across the country. (Bhasin and Menon 1988: 13)

They were writing in the wake of a controversy over a young Rajasthani woman who became *sati*, that is, she was burned on the funeral pyre of her husband. The emotional intensity of the moment may explain the strong

wording, but one also hears such evaluations at other times.⁶ There is even the term “doormat Sītā” (Derné 2000: 140). Not only foreigners or the Westernized intelligentsia have voiced protest against the Sītā model; a good example of a broader outcry is a letter written by one of the ordinary women readers of an influential magazine for women, *Manushi*, entitled “No More Sītās”: “Now we must refuse to be Sitas. By becoming a Sita and submitting to the fire ordeal, woman loses her identity. This fire ordeal is imposed on women today in every city, every home.” (translated from Hindi in Kishwar and Vanita 1984: 299)

On the other hand, there are other voices, too. Some stress the opposite and see a self-confident, gracious Sītā as an empowering and inspiring example for women. Interestingly, the founder-editor of *Manushi*, Madhu Kishwar, has been at the forefront of such a more positive evaluation in the past decade. She wrote in 1997:

My interviews indicate that Indian women are not endorsing female slavery when they mention Sita as their ideal. Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining. Nor does accepting Sita as an ideal mean endorsing a husband’s right to behave unreasonably and a wife’s duty to bear insults graciously. She is seen as a person whose sense of dharma is superior to and more awe inspiring than that of Ram—someone who puts even maryada purushottam Ram—the most perfect of men—to shame. (Kishwar 1997: 24)

Kishwar is not alone in her positive evaluation. Multiple articles echo her sentiments.⁷ Some point out that the dichotomy between a “traditional” Sītā and a “modern” liberated woman is a false one. A good illustration comes from a radio series intended for high school students in the United States:

Indian women . . . don’t need many lessons from western feminists. The examples and the message of true equality, of a genuine realization of self, are contained deep within India’s own cultural

6. Some of the more raw extreme emotional assessments are found on the Internet; see, for example, Sita Agarwal’s *Genocide of Hindu Women*, in particular chap. 7, www.geocities.com/realitywithbite/hindu.htm

7. A random example is “Sita—The Silent Power of Suffering and Sacrifice,” by Nitin Kumar, which was the article of the month in March 2005 on the website www.exoticindiaart.com/. And projects that are intended to empower women have been named after Sita, e.g. the SITA project (Studies in Information Technology Applications) of Prita Chathoth and Kamalini and Krishna Sane, which began in 1999 (Molina 2002). And there are websites like sitagita.com, which promotes itself as a website for the New Age Indian woman, with a hip blend of tradition and modernity, offering conservative advice for women within a discourse of equality.

traditions. In that sense, we ask Sita, the heroine of the epic, *The Ramayana*, to speak, to tell her side of the story, a story that most women know instinctively but have suppressed for too long, a story that has been lost from sight while men retold the story from their perspective.⁸

In turn, such positive interpretations have been problematized as going too far in condemning the insensitive feminist dismissal of Sītā (see Hess 1999: 26). “In appreciating the ‘weapons of the weak’ we should be careful not to valorize institutionalized weakness. In stepping back from a certain aggressive feminist mode that seems to attack women for not fitting some prescribed ‘feminist’ model, we shouldn’t step right back into the backlash” (27). The issue begs for more scholarly attention.

Who is right? Is Sītā as role model conducive to the oppression of women or to their empowerment? Is Sītā a feminist or an antifeminist? Does it depend on what you call oppressive and what empowering? Is it all in the eye of the beholder? Is this a matter of “Westernized” feminist views against “traditionalist” reactionary ones, as the quotation from the radio series suggests? In the case of Madhu Kishwar, the matter is complicated by the fact that she has declared herself emphatically not a feminist (Kishwar 1990), and she has evolved from something close to “anti” to “pro” Sītā over the past couple of decades.⁹ Is she a trendsetter or exemplary of a trend that seeks to rehabilitate Sītā? Should we see this evolution in the context of the conservative discourse of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, which is gaining ground in the public sphere?

But are we asking the right questions? Maybe these statements are not contradictory at all. Might different people have different Sītās in mind? Might the Sītā of the television series differ substantially from the Sītā who lives in the hearts of ordinary people? Might the question we should ask be who is Sītā to whom? And when in her story is Sītā empowering, when not?

First, whether one considers Sītā as a negative or positive role model seems to be closely connected with the particular aspect of her story one has in mind. Many feminist-oriented writers have concentrated on Sītā’s victimiza-

8. This was part of a ten-part, one-hour radio series *Passages to India* on IBA radio, intended for use in U.S. high schools and colleges, produced in 1991 by Julian Crandall Hollick, in cooperation with Rana Behal, Raja Chatterjee, and Rajasekaran, www.ibaradio.org/India/passages/passages8.htm.

9. For a more extensive assessment of Kishwar’s position on Sītā and more in general on the use of Hindu traditional images for the women’s movement, see Robinson 1999: 161–7 and 193–7. See also Hess 1999: 25–6. I come back to a more nuanced view of Sītā in the women’s movement in the conclusion.

tion: first the fire ordeal (Agniparīkṣā) she has to go through to prove her chastity, and eventually her abandonment notwithstanding the favorable outcome of the ordeal. The fire ordeal is indeed a powerful scene, and the image of Sītā engulfed with flames suffuses popular culture. However, feminists are hardly the first to question the justice of putting Sītā through the test; within the tradition itself there have been voices that object to Sītā's treatment, as differing interpretations in different versions of the story show (Hess 1999). It can even be argued that the scene has a positive effect and that women will rally behind those whose chastity is falsely questioned.¹⁰

Important as the fire ordeal scene may be, there are other powerful moments in the Sītā myth that have been relatively neglected by scholars. Arguably more relevant in ordinary women's day-to-day life are the stories of Sītā's early life: her falling in love as a young girl, her wedding, and her early married life, where she is faced with some challenges like those women more ordinarily encounter. It is on these episodes from Sītā's early life, up to and including her abduction, that this book will focus. Can Sītā be seen here to be an empowering role model?

Second, who is Sītā to whom? As the debate rages, it becomes woefully apparent how remarkably few academic studies there are about her.¹¹ It seems that hardly anyone has stopped to study just who Sītā is. Everyone refers to the remarkable impact of the *Ramayana* television series, but there are few studies that analyze how it differs from other versions of the story, and hardly anyone focuses on the portrayal of Sītā (the one exception is Barua 1996). How traditional is Sītā as she appears on television? Or how modern and new? There is

10. Leigh Minturn (1993: 217–9) in her work with Khalapur Rajputs tells of the case of a woman to whom she meaningfully gives the pseudonym "Sita." This poor and low-status (second) wife, falsely accused of being immoral by her husband and beaten, escaped to her parental village, thus "proving" her chastity (if she had indeed had a premarital affair, her father would not have accepted her back). She managed to rally the village's opinion on her side and extract a public apology from her husband. Minturn interprets this incident in the context of the Sītā story, which she considers to provide a role model for the women she studies (9).

11. Sītā has not yet been the topic of an academic monograph, but there are a few important articles. Sally Sutherland Goldman has contributed extensively, with discussion of Sītā in *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* and a contrastive study of Sītā and Draupadī (1989). A recent volume with articles on several Hindu goddesses (Hawley and Wulff 1996) does not feature Sītā at all, though she is featured in the earlier volume on a similar theme (Hawley and Wulff 1982). In 1998, a "Sītā symposium" was held at Columbia University, but only some of the papers were published (Lutgendorf 1999, Hess 1999, Murphy and Sippy 2000, Herman 2000). Still, Sītā has benefited from some of the recent surge in *Rāmāyaṇa* studies: Paula Richman (1991 and 2001) and Mandakranta Bose (2003 and 2004) have each edited volumes on the diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, containing several articles touching on Sītā. There is an intense interest in "alternative" Sītās, especially women's folk songs that tell the *Rāmāyaṇa* story from her perspective. This trend is also prevalent in more popular articles in the Indian magazine for women *Manushi*.

an urgent need for a nuanced reading of the messages sent by mass media versions of Sītā. This book is an attempt not to settle the debate but to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of who Sītā is and how she has been understood over time.

The intent of this book is not to join the voices that accuse or defend Sītā. There is no point in dragging Sītā into a feminist court and judging her by alien standards—or in defending her against those norms. She has already had to face more than her fair share of inquiry about her character within the story. She has already been sadly misunderstood many times over. She deserves to be known better. The premise of the book is to make available her voice, to stop and listen to what she has to say, and how she has been allowed to say it, differently in different contexts.

The question asked here then is not simply “is Sītā pro- or antifeminist?” Instead, we will explore *where* Sītā’s example may be oppressive or empowering for women. Do the early parts of Sītā’s life confirm the negative impression one gets from the fire ordeal? Further, how conservative is the Sītā in the normative Sanskrit text compared to, say, the Sītā of the devotional literature? What happens when Sītā is screened on television?

Chaste Wife or Sensuous Lover: Sītā and Rādhā as Contrastive Role Models

Sītā is not the only role model available to Hindu women. She is best understood in a context of competing messages. The Sītā model is all too often singled out on its own, as if it were the only one present within the Hindu tradition. This may be a case of amnesia: in response to a colonial critique of the Hindu tradition as “vulgar” or “debauched,” models perceived to be vulnerable to such critique are suppressed, and “uplifting” models are exalted to the point of obliterating the former. When the pendulum swings back, the older tradition is forgotten and the alternative is instead associated with the West. A case in point is Mira Nair’s 2001 movie *Monsoon Wedding*, where the friends of the bride-to-be cynically make fun of the “Sītā-Sāvitrī look,” knowing that she is having a premarital affair with a married man. The movie, itself a celebration of hybrid culture, self-consciously seeks to expose some taboos. It uses sexuality to configure modernity, setting up the affair of the bride as modern and at the same time criticizing the traditional example of Sītā as hopelessly old-fashioned—or maybe a hollow subterfuge to trick men who might be so naïve as to believe women can be that way. Such an attitude seems

too facile: one does not need to turn to the West for celebrations of women's desires: there are alternative role models within the Hindu tradition itself.

To do full justice to Sītā, we have to study such contrasting models. There are several alternatives,¹² but this book features the consort of Krishna, Vishnu's other avatar. Krishna is as playful as Rāma is serious. He is known for his mischief in breaking the laws of conventional morality (dharma) in the name of love. According to the myth, Krishna spent his youth incognito in the idyllic environs of a cowherding village in Braj, an area between Delhi and Agra. He is famous for his pranks and for his dalliances with the local village belles, the Gopīs, who were milkmaids or cowherdesses. His favorite was Rādhā, and she became a goddess in her own right.

In order to understand Sītā better, it is instructive to compare her with Rādhā. If Sītā is Rāma's wife, Rādhā is Krishna's lover. If Sītā is chastity incarnate (see Rao 2004 on how far this concept can[not] be stretched), Rādhā is sensuality incarnate. She is Krishna's paramour, and in most interpretations, their relationship is a clandestine one. Whereas Sītā is properly married and Rāma's own (*svakīyā*), Rādhā is often understood to be married to another (*parakīyā*), though this is a hotly debated issue (De 1961: 348–51). If the mutual love of Rāma and Sītā is an example of happy monogamy, Rādhā's relationship with Krishna is famously fraught with the issue of his unfaithfulness and her jealousy of his other lovers and wives. If Sītā is a queen, aware of her social responsibilities, Rādhā is exclusively focused on her romantic relationship with her lover. Thus we have two opposite role models. Hindu women then have to navigate between ideals from both ends of the moral universe: the loyal, chaste wife and the adulterous lover.

Still, Sītā and Rādhā have something in common, too. Many events from Rādhā's story can be compared to those in Sītā's. Rādhā, too, falls in love as a young girl. In most versions, she does not get to marry Krishna, but in some, they exchange secret wedding vows. Rādhā's relationship with Krishna is fraught with difficulties, but she, too, stands by her beloved even at the cost of personal hardship. She faces similar challenges including the threat of the "other woman." Her story makes for a good reflection on jealousy, as Krishna is frequently involved with other women, giving Rādhā plenty of occasions to cope with that.

12. Sītā has already been contrasted with Draupadī, the heroine of the other great epic, the *Mahābhārata* (Sutherland 1989). Another potentially fruitful comparison would be with Pārvatī, Śiva's consort, also seen as a devoted wife, but maybe perceived to be less "meek" than Sītā.

In Rādhā and the Gopīs of Braj, we have a set of heroines who seem to challenge the norms that Sītā's example sets. Their potential as role models for women is ambiguous;¹³ after all, the divinity of their lovers is central, and many sources hasten to specify that this is not to be read as license for ordinary women to engage in such norm-breaking behavior.¹⁴ Yet they are unquestionably celebrated by men and women alike for their unwavering love for Krishna. The very fact that Krishna is not their husband and hence they have to risk their social security for their love is seen as proof of the strength of that love.

I hasten to specify that I do not seek to retrieve a lost premodern Indian model of free love (John and Nair 1998: 11–4). Like Sītā, Rādhā means and has meant many things to different people; it is too facile to cast her in the role of “liberated lover.”¹⁵ As for Sītā, I will explore how she appears over time, taking care to read the different portrayals in their historical contexts. This project aims to understand the production of subjectivity with regard to love and romance in popular culture in India. I look at the discursive and historical processes that position subjects and produce experiences, focusing on these two influential goddesses. This analysis leads to a deeper understanding of the cultural tradition on whose basis modern attitudes toward women are derived, prescribed, and enforced.

We should not forget, in focusing on Sītā and Rādhā as role models for women, that they are two much-adored and beloved goddesses, venerated by

13. Minturn (1993: 212–6) also describes a counter-case of “the shameless daughter,” to whom she gives the pseudonym “Radha”—a young, educated, wealthy woman who had an affair and became pregnant. This case may well illustrate that Rādhā is perceived to be a counter-model (at least in Minturn's eyes).

14. Even in the classical version of the story, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (10.29–33), the role model value of the characters is questionable. The narrator, the sage Śuka, warns King Parīkṣit that Krishna's behavior is not something to be imitated by mere mortals (*naitat samācarej jātu manasāpi hyaniśvaraḥ, vinaśyatyācāran mauḍhyād yathā rudro 'bdhijam viṣam; BHP 10.33.31*). It seems obvious that the same is true for the Gopīs' actions.

15. Rādhā and the Gopīs have been the subject of much scholarship. On Rādhā in Tantra, see Dimock 1966 and McDaniel 2000. On Rādhā in the Bengali classic *Gitagovinda*, see Siegel 1978 and Miller 1977. On Rādhā in *Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa*, see Brown 1974, and in Sanskrit theological drama, see Wulff 1984. For Rādhā's South Indian origins in Ālvār poetry as Pīṁṁai, see Hardy 1983 and several articles by Hudson (Hawley 2002). An important volume that took Rādhā as the main focus of the study of Hindu goddesses is *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India* (Hawley and Wulff 1982). As is the case for Sītā, Rādhā's place is much reduced in the follow-up volume by the same editors, where she has disappeared from the title; *Devī: Goddesses of India* (Hawley and Wulff 1996). Still, sectarian interests, in particular ISKCON, keep fueling publications on Rādhā; the *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* has devoted two special issues to her: 8.2 (spring 2000) and 10.1 (fall 2001). Rādhā also is featured in studies of Braj devotional literature (e.g., Haberman 1987 and 2003; Pauwels 1996b). For a fascinating interpretation of the historical evolution of Rādhā in a Bengali social context, see Sumanta Banerjee 1993. Donna Wulff has written on Rādhā as an empowering role model for women in Bengal (Wulff 1985, 1997).

millions of Hindus: they are Śrī Sītā Devī and Śrī Rādhikā Rānī to their loving followers. First and foremost, they are role models for all their devotees, women and men alike, in their ardent devotion to God. We all should emulate their examples and shape our attitude toward God in their mold. Numerous theological works have been written on that aspect.¹⁶

However, my focus here is limited to how Sītā and Rādhā function as role models for women in day-to-day life. There is no doubt that they have a firm hold on the popular imagination. Their stories are lovingly recounted over and over again, in learned Sanskrit versions and popular bedtime stories alike. Many of these stories focus on their relationships with their divine partners: how they first met the beloved, how they fell in love, and how the courtship evolved; the trials and travails they shared with their beloved, the threats to their relationships, and the ways these got resolved (or remained simmering in the background), crises big and small—in short, how they coped with love. At once, they are larger than life and very much part of the same cycle of life and loving of ordinary Hindu women, or all women for that matter. There are surely lessons to be learned from their examples. If we want to understand how Indian women cope with love, it will be illuminating to focus on the myths of Sītā and Rādhā and how they have evolved over time.

Liberation Theology for Hindu Women?

Notwithstanding their antithetical roles, both heroines function within the strand of Hinduism called bhakti, or devotional Hinduism. Indeed, their consorts Rāma and Krishna are firmly ensconced within the bhakti tradition, so the goddesses, too, are recipients of worship within that tradition. The portrayal of Sītā in bhakti-inspired texts may differ substantially from that in the much older classical Sanskrit text, the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. The same holds true for Rādhā. Will that make them more liberating as role models for women?

Often the theology of bhakti is said to bring with it a critical approach to strict hierarchical and patriarchal social relations. Bhakti, then, may potentially be liberating for women (e.g., Lele 1981: 1–15; Vasudevan 2000: 152–3). The main reason for this understanding is that the ideology of bhakti advocates a direct relationship between worshiper and deity, without the intermediary of a Brahmin priest. This allows women to engage in acts of worship that are functionally equivalent to those of men (Robinson 1985: 195–9). Bhakti tends

16. One accessible study of this aspect as exemplified by the Gauḍīya tradition is Haberman 1988.

also to privilege vernaculars over Sanskrit, which makes it more accessible to women. Moreover, one can argue that bhakti, in privileging love over ritual, undermines dharma, which entails a possibility of critiquing its straitjacket hold over women. Indeed, the hagiographical stories of the life of women devotees often feature a rejection of the woman's duty as a devoted wife (*pativrata*) in favor of her calling to God. Thus bhakti can be said to open alternative role models.¹⁷ Finally, bhakti that includes worship of a divine consort has been seen as inherently more conducive to a favorable view of women (Young 1996: 245–50). This positive evaluation is even echoed in the 1975 report from the United Nations for International Women's Year, *Towards Equality*, which was produced by the Committee on the Status of Women in India; it points out that bhakti “brought great solace to women and presented an alternative way of life” (Guha 1975: 43). Will Sītā and Rādhā in bhakti texts be more empowering for women than in other interpretations?

Maybe not. The assessment of bhakti as liberating is not undisputed. Some have blamed bhakti for providing religious sanction for a hierarchical and patriarchal status quo. They see an elite attempt of upper-caste males to co-opt women and condemn bhakti as inculcating obedience, which is disabling in the face of an oppressor (see Guha 1992: 47–60). A more nuanced view splits bhakti up in two camps: *saguṇa* bhakti (worship of God with attributes, especially as one of the avatars of Viṣṇu), which is perceived to be elitist, and *nirguṇa* bhakti (worship of God without attributes, more abstract), which is perceived to be egalitarian (David Lorenzen 1995: 1–32). Devotion for goddesses falls under the former category, so in this case, too, one might not be too optimistic about how Sītā and Rādhā will function as role models for women.

One of the questions addressed in this book is how far bhakti texts can be said to send more or less empowering messages to women in retellings of the Sītā and Rādhā stories. To that end, we will compare vernacular devotional versions of Sītā and Rādhā with their Sanskrit equivalents. Is bhakti a “liberation theology” when applied to women? How about modern media versions?

Sītā and Rādhā on the Small Screen

In 1987, every Sunday morning a country of nearly a billion people came to a virtual standstill, with people congregating around television sets in order not

17. For an ethnographic description of women living out their lives in the footsteps of the Krishna devotee Mīrā, see Martin-Kershaw 1995.

to miss their favorite show: the televised *Ramayana* (TVR), directed by Hindi film director Ramanand Sagar. For a whole nation, for one hour, time was suspended for the virtual timelessness of the epic world. Or was it? How “updated” was this version of the epic? Some have called the series “the soap of the gods,” somewhat denigratingly identifying it as a lowbrow modern entertainment version for “the masses.” On the other hand, such qualifications came from an elite, deemed Westernized and soon to be scared out of its wits by a resurgence of tradition in the public sphere. Evaluations of the show are cast in terms of tradition and modernity. What is the real identity of these on-screen gods and goddesses? How modern or traditional are they really? And why should we care?

We should care because of the enormous impact of the televised *Ramayana*, which was not limited to the late eighties. In its video and DVD avatar, it is still a best seller, often viewed and reviewed, not only in India but in the whole of South Asia, beyond national and religious borders, as well as by Indians living in Europe and the United States. Furthermore, the trend continued, and in 1988–90 a television series based on the other epic, *Mahabharat*, was even more successful (see Mitra 1993, Majumder 1996). Sagar directed another series, *Shri Krishna* (TVK), on the life of the God Krishna. Though the media landscape had changed a lot since *Ramayana* (see Gokulsingh 2004: 7–26 for an overview) and viewers had much more choice, this series was also a great success. The list does not stop there. Since 2004, Star TV has been broadcasting an abridged version of the original television series, *Sanskshipt Ramayana*, which is doing extremely well (Sternfeld 2005: 203). This shows that its appeal is not limited to the late eighties. Clearly, “soft-soaping” mythology is a trend to stay, and something worth paying attention to. This is especially the case because of the contemporary surge in the influence of Hindutva roughly at the same time, which is often said to be related to the popularity of the *Ramayana* series (Jaffrelot 1996: 388–92, Rajagopal 2001).

Given its popularity (for viewership figures, see Rajagopal 2001: 326 n. 48), it is obvious that the televised Rāmāyaṇa hit a nerve and reflected contemporary ideals.¹⁸ It is significant that most of the “heavy viewers” of the series were women (Rajagopal 2001: 330 n. 72). Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the message of the series was targeted to some extent toward them, so looking at the televised Sītā as a role model will be rewarding. In the

18. For a brilliant general evaluation of the television series, situating it in its performative context, as well as the media in general, see Lutgendorf 1995.

case of *Shri Krishna* too, its immense popularity proves that Sagar had his finger right on the pulse of what the audience wished to see.

Amazingly, notwithstanding their abiding popularity, very little serious research has been done on these series. While the success of the televised *Ramayana* has sparked academic interest, scholars' concern has been to bring to the public's attention a multiplicity of *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions, paradoxically deflecting attention from the televised version. The pathbreaking studies by Richman (1991) and Thiel-Horstmann (1991) have between them only one article that looks seriously at the televised series (Dalmia-Lüderitz 1991). The only book-length study focusing on the phenomenon of Indian television series, foregrounding the mythological ones (Mankekar 1999), has not all that much to say about the series itself, as it is mainly a reception study. Basically, in terms of scholarly literature attempting to understand the televised *Ramayana* itself, there are only Philip Lutgendorf's two insightful articles (1990, 1995).¹⁹ The situation is yet worse for *Shri Krishna*, which has attracted hardly any scholarly attention.

Twenty years since religion burst onto the small screen, it is time to pay some sustained attention to these series and the trend they set. *Ramayana* deserves special analysis, because of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s unchallenged importance in providing moral guidance, the televised *Shri Krishna* makes a good comparison. Both are useful as we seek to understand the messages sent to women by the example of Sītā and Rādhā. How have Sītā and Rādhā been "screened" for popular consumption? Are these role models mutually contradictory?

We should keep in mind that the epics were broadcast in the context of soap series, which partook in current debates about such "modern" issues as the advantages and disadvantages of traditional "arranged marriages" and "joint-family living." The epics also shared the screen with news items featuring issues of dowry and "bride burning." All this constitutes the semantic universe in which the televised epics partake. What then do Sītā and Rādhā mean in a rapidly changing social context where the traditional ideals of arranged marriage, unconditional loyalty of wife to husband, and joint family are competing with modern concepts of love marriage, divorce, and nuclear families? Intuitively, we might suppose that these "modern" media represent more "modern" versions of the story and role models that are more "progressive." But is that really the case? This question will hover in the background of the book, and I will deal explicitly with it in the conclusions.

19. More recently there is also an insightful essay by Uma Chakravarti (2005).

Multiforms of Sītā and Rādhā on the Big Screen

The domain where Sītā and Rādhā function does not remain limited to religion and mythology per se. They are ubiquitous in popular Hindi films. Countless film heroines bear their names or variants thereof. These heroines encounter situations similar to those related in the epics, and seem to behave more or less consistently with the epic stories' norms. We could say that we constantly encounter multiforms of the goddesses in popular film. What happens when Sītā and Rādhā spill over into the domain of popular culture?

It is commonplace to relate the prevalence of references to Hindu mythology in popular Hindi movies to the fact that the earliest Indian films were mythological (e.g., Chopra 2005). Their endurance beyond the genre of the mythological is seen as a bit of an anachronism. Some have argued, somewhat cynically, that filmmakers include such references in order to expand viewership in rural areas by bringing those audiences something familiar they can relate to (Derné 1995b: 197).

What do filmmakers themselves have to say on the topic? Raj Khosla, with reference to *Do raste* and *Mera gaon mera desh*, offered the reflection that the epics are "in our blood" and hence unavoidably color his films (Raj Khosla, in Pfleiderer and Lutze 1985: 40). Interestingly, he also points out that he feels the scenarios of the gods are reenacted in his own life, from his spying while girls take their bath in the river to veneration for the eldest brother in the family (39–40). And he indicates that this is not restricted to his own experience: "It is there . . . all over India, in every home" (40). Since the mythological references are such a mainstay of the mix of ingredients of the popular movie, the audience must feel similarly positive about the relevance of such mythological allusions. Indeed, some have articulated as much in interviews (villager interviewees as analyzed in Pfleiderer and Lutze 1985: 69).

Thus, mythological references are worth paying attention to, yet few scholars have done so. Whatever little analysis has been done has tended to be from a psychoanalytical perspective (O'Flaherty 1980, Kakar 1989). Those analyses open up interesting and stimulating ways of thinking about movies, but they may also be perceived as reductionist. Myths tend to be read as universals of human experience, or at least of South Asian experience, which brings a certain timelessness to the movies thus analyzed.

One reason scholars of religion have not been interested may be that these borrowings are regarded as trivial appropriations of the tradition. Hindi films are not seen as a serious source of change of religion (Derné 1995b: 191), and the references are considered "condensed and inexplicit" (212). This is

understood to be the case because of censorship, as well as the commercial pressure to appeal to a broad and diverse audience without offending anyone's feelings (191).

It is true that the mythological equivalents of the characters are often flagged in a condensed and stereotypical way. The name Raghuvīra or another epithet of Rāma will set up the audience to expect an obedient son who is ready to place his duty before his personal desires. A scene of a man spying on women bathing or breaking women's pots as they return from the well often signals we are dealing with a Krishna type, often named Birju or another epithet of Krishna. However, it is well worth our while to pay serious attention to what happens to these characters and how they deal with the circumstances they encounter that recall the epics. It is not just that mythological themes are evoked in popular movies; they are appropriated creatively.

One reason anthropologists and social scientists are not paying attention to the epic references in films may be that viewers deny that movie characters are regarded as role models. Often they are regarded to be "mere" entertainment of a "degrading" nature, and interviewees express a sense of guilt about watching them (Derné 1995b, 207–8). Though this may have changed in more recent years, there certainly is a sense that Hindi films are not to be taken seriously; they are mere entertainment. Sometimes it is jokingly said, "You have to leave your brain at home when going out for a Hindi movie." The presumption is that viewers can pick their brains back up unchanged after the movie, that they will not be influenced by what they have seen. However, this discourse flies in the face of the role movies play as trendsetters with regard to such issues as hairstyles, dress, accessories and gadgets, mannerisms, and life styles (see, e.g., Wilkinson-Weber 2005). Certainly, movies help set consumer patterns, and changes in appearances are part and parcel of people's self-understanding and self-expression. Moreover, a certain anxiety about the impact film can have on impressionable young (especially female) minds is obvious in some "metafilms" that are preoccupied with the issue, such as Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Guddi* (1971), which problematizes a young girl's excessive interest in movie heroes (Taylor 2000: 297–9).

One reason film studies scholars are not interested in mythological references may be that film is felt to be an intrinsically modern medium, which explains the amount of energy poured into studies of film and the modern nation on the one hand and the transcultural implications and borrowings of Indian cinema on the other. However, we do not necessarily need to posit a dichotomy between rupture and continuity of Indian traditional values in film. "Tradition" is of course always a contested category, amply illustrated by the kaleidoscopic shifts within, for instance, the storytelling of the Purāṇas. The

difference may be that whereas those texts pose as and are understood to be old, as the name implies, the movies pose as and are understood to be modern. Yet circumstances are always new; they develop and call for new reworkings of old ideas. It should not surprise us that films, too, partake in the grand process of reconstituting a cultural universe, or many multiverses, if you wish. There surely is a coming-to-terms with the challenge of “the modern” in its many historically varying forms, yet this is done in a vocabulary and grammar heavily inflected with “the tradition.”

What is going on is not just mixing a preground *masala* into the cocktail or simple-minded “borrowing” to appeal to some unchanging religious sentiment. Rather, we find highly creative reworkings, some serious, others whimsical, intended to delight audiences as well as to push their thinking about how myths can be or ought to be exemplary for daily life. Films at the same time reflect changing attitudes toward religious myths and bring new lines of interpretation by applying them to “reel life” situations. That does not necessarily mean that the messages offered by the movies are widely accepted as such, but if the movie is successful, it still indicates it has hit a chord. If we want to understand fully the message of the television *Sītā* and *Rādhā*, we do well to look how that message relates to hit movies from the popular Hindi movie industry. After all the director of the television series, Ramanand Sagar, was also a director of Hindi film.

Methodology

Siting Sītā and Rādhā

In order to understand what message the mythological references in popular culture carry for contemporary South Asians, we have to start with historicizing. It is a fallacy to speak of *Sītā* and *Rādhā* as if they were monolithic characters, unchanging over time. The *Sītā* of the Sanskrit epic is not the same as that of the televised series. Role models are continually constructed and reconstructed. Epic characters may seem timeless because we cannot always point to one author as their constructor or reconstructor. However, a careful reading with close attention to variables between different versions discloses nuances in how the messages sent to women change over time.

It makes sense to start this process of decoding with the most successful modern media forms, identifying their main sources. In our case, the point of reference is the televised versions of *Sītā* and *Rādhā* in Ramanand Sagar’s series. In order to investigate what these contemporary texts have to say, we

need to determine how exactly their messages refer to, make use of, and differ from those of the earlier ones. I call this activity “siting.”²⁰

By “siting” I mean the process of uncovering intertextuality. In the first place, this involves studying the way texts “cite” one another. The television versions credit their sources: the older versions of *Sītā* and *Rādhā*’s stories. More than that, they quote them both verbatim and indirectly. In other instances, they choose not to do so and suppress or pass over certain elements in silence. Yet elsewhere, they appear to be quoting older sources when they are in fact innovating. This complex reworking of earlier versions of the stories needs unraveling. Siting is this process of unraveling some of the threads. I investigate what the contemporary texts have to say by putting my finger on how exactly the contemporary message makes use of and differs from the earlier ones. An important factor to realize here is that such use of sources is never random or value-free. It involves making moral judgments and capitalizing on the authority of the earlier texts while simultaneously feeling free to change and drop material as needed.

At the same time, when I use the term “siting” in connection with role models, I have in mind a process that situates these models, charts them on a geographic site, identifies how they fit on a three-dimensional map. Role models are like landmarks in a moral landscape. Humans travel through such landscapes and use the landmarks to navigate. Like the landscape, the landmarks change over time; they erode, or become more pronounced. Such changes usually happen slowly and are difficult to discern, while in process. To document them, we could take snapshots at different points in time and from different places. Often such changes become even more clear if we compare how they work for two different landmarks. We could, for instance, come to understand how the erosion of one has led to change in another.

What I propose to do in this book, then, is to look at changes in two such landmarks in a moral landscape, the two role models the contrastive heroines *Sītā* and *Rādhā*. So as to maximize the comparison, I have chosen snapshots that show them in a similar pose, that is, episodes from their stories that have a lot of similarities and can be fruitfully compared. My theme here is how they cope with love, and I will follow their love stories from their first falling in love (chapter 1) through the process of arranging for matrimony (chapter 2), the

20. No reference intended to Niranjana 1992, whose use of the term is different. On the other hand, my method of siting is comparable to what the historian Romila Thapar has done for the story of *Śakuntalā* though she does not use this term. My focus here though is not on the colonial intervention but on the relevance of the message sent to women. Thapar says about retold narratives that we should “treat this repetition as a prism through which to view points of historical change” (1999: 1).

marriage (or mock marriage) itself (chapter 3), their decisions to step out of the safety of home and purdah into the dangers of the forest (chapter 4), the challenge of the “other women” seducing—or trying to—their husbands (chapter 5), and finally the challenge of sexual harassment and how they cope with it (chapter 6). As I explain at the beginning of each chapter, all of these moments have everyday relevance for ordinary women today. Studying how the goddesses behave in such situations, as portrayed in the contemporary popular televised texts, helps us understand the moral landscapes ordinary women have to navigate.

For each of these snapshots, I select three points in time to compare. One reason I call this process siting rather than mapping is that I am well aware that I am leaving whole areas blank between the snapshots I discuss. Obviously, one could have looked at many Rāma and Krishna cycle retellings, but within the scope of one book it is impossible to do justice to all the versions. So I have restricted myself here to the three arguably most influential ones: the television, classical, and medieval. In addition, I have provided notes on echoes of Sītā and Rādhā in the vast corpus of popular Indian film. In this way, I am able to identify some of the changes in role models for women that are taking place right now.

In short, through the method of siting, I aim at opening new windows through which to view the “traditional” models that go into the making of contemporary discourses on gender and love in South Asia.

Lessons Learned from Media Research

Since this book takes its point of departure largely from popular television series’ depictions of the two goddesses, we should reflect on methodologies of television research. A lot has been written on the impact of television on social behavior (for a good overview, see Asami and Berry 1998). A first lesson is not to regard television—or other texts for that matter—as closed texts, a simple message to be decoded. It is important to consider “what does the viewer do to (or with) television” (Berry 1998: 4). One should not fall into the trap of assuming, for instance, that women are “manipulated by the patriarchal discourses of television.” While television programs can be said to create certain “subject positions,” viewers can affirm and appropriate or resist and negotiate (Mankekar 1993: 557–8). To explore this issue would be, however, a different study. It is interesting to consider the question of what the impact of mythological series in real life might be. Though that is not the focus of this book, I hope it will be a helpful basis to work from for anthropologists, behavioral psychologists, and social scientists who might consider such questions.

Second, one should keep in mind that the influence of the medium does not unilaterally flow from director to audience. Interaction with the viewers is an important factor for the televised *Ramayana*, even though it occurred before the advent of interactive media. Indeed, it will be clear from my analysis that I am constantly looking for how the director and his team are working with commonly held assumptions about the stories they serialize, some of which viewers communicated to them in correspondence. The viewers' concerns inspired the director to code episodes in certain ways. In fact, this is not unlike the traditional process of interpretation of religious texts, which is a dynamic exchange between the expounder and the listener. The listener may raise doubts and objections (*śaṅkā*), to which the expounder will propose solutions on the basis of his interpretation of the text (*śaṅkā-samādhān*). In retellings of myths, there may be an implicit, unstated "first part" of such questions (*pūrvapakṣa*), to which the author provides a follow-up answer (*uttarapakṣa*) by tailoring the problematic episode in a way to address the issue. The situation does not necessarily need to be a hierarchical one, in which there is a text-expounder or guru guiding his disciples, but can be one analogous to Bible study groups in Protestant traditions, where there is not necessarily a designated authoritative leader. This phenomenon has been studied for other *Rāmāyaṇa* texts (Lutgendorf 1991; Hess 2001), and is particularly relevant here. Sagar has stressed that he himself belonged to a group of *Rāmāyaṇa*-lovers that gathered regularly to discuss and debate passages from the scripture (Sternfeld 2005: 197).

Another insight to take from television studies is the importance of recognizing the medium as an art (Berry 1998: 8). This is particularly important for the televised epics, which are often disregarded as mere derivative, gaudy video versions of ancient texts. In my close viewings of the videos, I have come to respect the amount of creative thinking and originality the director and his team brought to bear on their work. My comparison with the acknowledged source texts is in no way intended to prove the derivational character of the series or to reduce them to faint reflections of the original. Rather the opposite; in paying close attention to detail, I testify abundantly to the creativity of the director.

Finally, there is the issue of the constructed audience.²¹ What audience in which circumstances perceived what part of the perceived message? The readings I present are not necessarily the ones that any of the multiple audiences who have watched the series perceived at the time of broadcasting or

21. For a sophisticated analysis of different types of constructed audiences, see Anderson 1998: 214–27; for a historical overview, see Gokulsingh 2004: 78–80.

even have come to perceive after repeated viewing. While there has been abundant evidence that at the moment of its initial screening the series were viewed literally religiously, and with a great degree of undivided attention, of course not all members in an audience perceive things similarly. What I present here is a maximally informed reading, one that takes into account all the details of the source texts. Comparing in such detail is a privileged situation, and few viewers had full access to these source texts during the viewing. It needs to be stressed, though, that many viewers know significant portions of the source texts by heart and thus are in a position to compare to a high degree. While the messages articulated here may well have remain undecoded by the majority of the audience, it is still worthwhile to strive for the maximal reading, as it may uncover some of the director's intentions. What I lay bare here are the potential meanings of the text; the estimation of the realization of these potentialities would be a different study.

The Untenable Lightness of the Popular Hindi Movie

One of the contributions of this work is to incorporate in the analysis mythological references in popular movies. Here, lessons learned from film studies come into play. In the past decade and a half, a sophisticated literature on popular Hindi film has developed (Chakravarty 1993, Prasad 1998, Kazmi 1999, Mishra 2002, Viridi 2003, to name just a few). Here I articulate only the concerns relevant to this study. First, understanding the messages of popular film is not as simple as it might appear; it requires significant sophistication. Recently a lot of work has been done on analyzing visual culture (see for instance, Dasgupta 2006). Theorizers of popular culture have pointed out that Indian viewers and spectators are caught up in an "interocular" field (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992). We should not forget that they also function in an interaural field, and here, too, "each site or setting for the socializing and regulation of the public gaze" (read also: ear) "is to some degree affected by the experiences of the other sites" (Breckenridge 1995, 12). Analyzing such sites is what my method of siting is designed to do.

Second, following from the first point, studying interaurality is especially important because Indian cinema is dominated by the genre of the musical, and thus centered around songs. Songs evoke other songs. Tunes and words echo back and forth between different milieus, from temple and folk gatherings to movie hall, cassette studio, and back (Manuel 1993). Here the interplay among devotional, folk, and popular culture is particularly relevant. Thus I particularly foreground the film songs and study their intertextuality with the tradition.

Third, we have to guard against treating popular Indian cinema as monolithic. There is a rich diversity. On the one hand, there is something of a hegemonic discourse that reinforces patriarchal values, but at the same time I will indicate “counter-moments,” attempts to struggle with challenges posed to such an ideology.²² It is important to look at both, if we seek to map a narrative of women through Hindi films, as Jyotika Viridi suggests we do (Viridi 2003: 123). Whereas she is mainly engaged in a close reading of the films’ intertextually with each other and in conjunction with the underlying “star text” (124), I offer here a reading that is intertextual with the myths and thus reveals the rich texture of these seemingly naïve movies in yet a different way.

Finally, we have to keep in mind that the audience is not merely passively taking in the discourses of the movies. Several recent studies have foregrounded the audience’s critical stance and subversion of the values depicted in the movies (Derné 1995b, Uberoi 2001a, Banaji 2005). Still, it is valuable to analyze the movies as text, while being aware of the possibility that the audience comes away with alternative interpretations.

My intent to unpack the mythological references in the movies against the background of other versions of the myths may raise objections. The project falls between disciplines, which is not always welcomed. On the one hand, scholars of religion and religious texts may object. Why look at secular Hindi movies to understand popular religion in India? Scholars of popular culture and film may take offense, too. Why look at epics to understand popular film? This book showcases the need for both. Let me explain briefly the desirability of each in turn.

The interdependence of popular film and religion has been little studied. However, occasionally attention has been drawn to it forcefully, when religious phenomena spill over spectacularly into the domain of popular culture. One example is the case of the “new” goddess Santoshi Ma, who gained rampant popularity in the wake of the unexpected success of the 1975 movie *Jai Santoshi Maa* (studied by Kurtz 1992, Lutgendorf 2002). More recently, suspicions of a growing influence of Hindutva in the visual media have inspired two brief studies, one on nostalgia as manipulated in television advertisements

22. This is along the same lines as what Jyotika Viridi is doing in her chapter “Heroines, Romance, and Social History” in her recent book, though she focuses on “critical readings against the grain” that “destabilize Hindi cinema’s hegemonic values” (2003: 121–6). She is keen to detect “lapses” and “leaks” in the prevailing discourse. The elements I discuss in this book, though, are not “lapses,” as directors’ critical engagement with mythological models is quite deliberate. Moreover, the outcome of the analysis does not unproblematically contest patriarchal values.

(Dasgupta 2006) and another on films engaging with political material (Dwyer 2006).

Obviously, there is some connection that must be more enduring than the spectacular eruptions of the religious into the domain of popular film and television. When we look up close, we find that films frequently play on the religious sentiments of their audience in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways (Kishwar 2003a). Often, filmmakers seem to have their finger on the pulse of popular religion, to show and articulate what audiences are ready to hear and see, and again adopt in their own styles of religious celebration. With regard to politicized Hinduism, it is particularly important to study the link between religion and film. Leaders of Hindutva have been engaged in many ways in the world of popular film and television (Brosius 2005). Finally, we could say that the ubiquitous presence of *filmī bhajanās* in places of pilgrimage virtually shouts it from the rooftops: there is no splendid isolation between the sacred wood of, say, Brindaban and the purportedly secular Bollywood.

On the other hand, scholars of film studies will be quick to raise the objection that an approach of studying films against the background of religious texts reeks of reductionism, something many studies of popular film warn against (see Kazmi 1999: 67, Viridi 2003: 3). They fear that such a study might perpetuate the stereotypes of “epic tropes” and “eternal Indian themes.” Of course, we should not lose track of the fact that there is a good deal more going on in Hindi movies than reworking of epic stories. However, one misses out on a lot if one does not understand the playful epic references with which these movies abound. There is no question of “unchanging archetypes” that are simply being reproduced. In fact, we may have to go as far as to say that there are no unchanging archetypes. They are constantly under construction and reconstruction. The epics themselves and their devotional reworkings are full of twists and changes, interesting shifts of focus according to time and place (for reflections on contradictions within Vālmīki’s epic itself, see Goldman 2004). As one scholar of myth has put it: “Myth is like palimpsest on which generation after generation has engraved its own layer of messages and we must decipher each layer with a different code book” (O’Flaherty 1980: 4). Film appropriations of myth are no exceptions.

What is needed then is a clearheaded understanding of the multiple shifts and twists in the old texts, as well as in television and movie versions. As I identify the changes from scriptures to screen, I am looking for which notion of tradition is invoked and articulated, and which one is suppressed or altered. I attempt to decode the message of the myths and the allusions to them in popular culture by means of a careful analysis of “what is old, what is new,” paying particular attention not only to innovations, significant as they are, but

also to what exactly is quoted and what is left out from the earlier versions. I think it is very important to do so; otherwise, we end up ascribing to say, Sagar's *Ramayan*, traits that are much older, and missing elements that are truly innovative.²³

What This Book Is Not About

Disappointing as it may be, this study has to leave out certain important subjects. One is reception history of the texts studied. For the classical and medieval texts, one can study the commentaries, and I occasionally refer to them. Even so, these are primarily authored by men, and it is impossible to get at the reactions of the women, the main audience of interest here. For the film and television sources, it would be possible to probe audience reaction, with reference to reviews, readers letters in popular magazines, and interviews with directors, actors, and screenplay writers. Another angle of approach is anthropological study of viewers' reactions (e.g., Mankekar's broader study [1999] and Derné's work on Hindi movies [1995a]). In particular, it would be revealing to test how much the audience gets of the quotations from medieval Old Hindi and classical Sanskrit texts. It is commonly assumed that the medieval devotional version of Rāma's story, the *Rām Carit Mānas*, is not easily understood today. However, it is quoted extensively in the televised *Ramayan*. In the course of my study, I have become convinced that the television series' use of the *Mānas* deliberately targets connoisseurs of the *Mānas*, which has led me to suspect that there may be a substantial number of such connoisseurs among the viewers. Still, the audience was much broader, and many of the nuances noted in this book might well have escaped the "average viewer." It would be interesting to see how much of the carefully crafted reworkings of earlier myths in the television series came across in different milieus, but obviously that is a different study that requires a different expertise.

Beyond the narrow issue of the reception of the television series, it would be very desirable to investigate the actual impact of the goddess role models on

23. One fallacy is to conflate particular *Rāmāyaṇa* versions with meta-*Rāmāyaṇa* ideas. Another is to locate ideological aspects of Hinduism in general, and TVR in particular, as originating in or responding to colonial discourse. One has to be careful in doing so. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition contains elements with a long pedigree beyond the much-studied nineteenth century. Even so careful an analyst as Purnima Mankekar conflates those when she traces the portrayal of Rāma as embodying both *sannyāsin* and *ksatriya* to Bankimchandra, whereas, of course, the combination is much older (1999: 205–7).

women. Heinz's study (2000) is a felicitous example of discovering how women make use of the Sītā story when narrating their own lives. I hope this book will be of use to researchers in social studies and women's studies who seek to understand women's responses to and negotiations of, in everyday life, the choices related to love. Recently there has been a lot of interest in how middle-class women partake in traditional and transnational gender discourses, whether in India (Puri 1999) or the diaspora (Rayaprol 1997). In such studies, notwithstanding the high degree of theoretical sophistication, sometimes the "traditional" discourse is seen as monolithic. It is hoped my contribution here will bring a more nuanced understanding, beyond unproblematic equation of the television *Ramayana* with the ancient Indian tradition.

Another limitation of this study is that it focuses solely on the "interaural" aspect of siting. It would take another volume to bring the perspective of visual arts and reveal the "interocular" experience. A comparative study with visual images and earlier films and, further back, miniature paintings, would certainly be a desideratum. An engaging example of such a study with respect to Bhārat Mātā and śakti is Geeti Sen's *Feminine Fables*, which touches just briefly on Rādhā (Sen 2000: 79–82).

Finally, related to the issue of audience response, I am not tackling the question of the use of the serialized text by agents engaged in particular political and social action. Given the rise of the Right in Indian politics and of Hindutva-inspired views of gender from around the time of the series, such a study would be very worthwhile, and the topic certainly deserves further exploration by political scientists (in the footsteps of Rajagopal 2001).

Whatever the limits of this study, its investigation of the changes in "the message" from a textual perspective is a logical first step toward understanding contemporary South Asian viewers' reactions to these texts and their political and social implications.

The Sources

There are multiple versions of the myths of Sītā and Rādhā, each important in its own right, but I limit myself here to three. I will take into account, for each episode and each goddess, as far as possible, a classical, Sanskrit version of the story; a medieval, devotional one; and finally the televised version. I also incorporate material from relevant Hindi popular movies. I give specifics about my choices in the introductions to the chapters. I have chosen the classical and

medieval sources that are most pertinent to the contemporary versions, in particular the sources that are explicitly acknowledged in the credits of the television series.²⁴ While the choice is more straightforward for the *Rāmāyaṇa* versions, I have strived to find sources that make for a good comparison for the Krishna stories.

In addition to explaining my rationale for the sources, I will in this section also provide a general contextualization for the three main reference points (classical, medieval, and contemporary), outlining authors' motives, as far as known. For the movies, I provide here a broad overview of trends in the depiction of romance in popular Hindi cinema as a guide for the reader to contextualize the movies analyzed in this work.

Classical Sources

The locus classicus of the Sītā-Rāma story, explicitly announced as one of the major sources of the televised *Rāmāyaṇa*, is undisputably what is known as the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. This work, hailed as the first Sanskrit *kāvya* (work of belles lettres) is attributed to the sage Vālmīki.²⁵ Since Vālmīki is intimately tied up with the main characters, this version has the status of an eyewitness account. Scholarly consensus regards the text as we have it now as a composite, having expanded over time, with a core dating back maybe to the fifth or fourth century BCE, but crystalized in its current form by the second century CE. I will treat the epic as a unified whole, as does the tradition and some Western scholarship (Pollock 1984: 3–6, 15–54). However, one should be aware that another line of scholarship distinguishes within the epic between many individual passages that seem to be later additions, including some passages discussed here (for a full overview, see Brockington 1994 and 1998: 377–97; for a translation of the oldest reconstructable version, see Brockington and Brockington 2006). The text used as a source of the televised version was not the critical but the vulgate edition.²⁶ Thus, and because of its widespread popularity and availability, references throughout will be to the books (*kāṇḍa*),

24. Taking TVR as a point of departure means, regrettably, that this book is limited to the North Indian sources. A study of the South Indian *Rāmāyaṇas*, taking into account Tamil and other Dravidian language texts as well as films, would make a wonderful contrast.

25. Another wonderful source for the conjugality of Rāma and Sītā would have been the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*, an extremely interesting version focusing on bliss and the domestic joy of the divine pair, see Aklujkar 2001a and b.

26. Note that the critical edition is of course not the final word, as new manuscripts are being discovered (see Bailey and Brockington 2000: 195–217).

chapters (*sarga*), and verses (*ślokas*) in the vulgate edition of the Gītā Press in Gorakhpur (Goswami 1969).²⁷

For the story of Krishna and Rādhā, or rather the Gopīs, the equivalent classical authority, acknowledged in the credits of the televised serial *Shri Krishna*, is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in particular its tenth book (*skandha*), which focuses on the story of Krishna. Authorship of this Sanskrit work is attributed to the prolific sage Vyāsa. Its dating is controversial: current scholarly consensus ascribes the finalized book to the ninth century CE (for a discussion of scholarship on the topic and an argument for an earlier date, see Bryant 2002).²⁸ Again, the text used for the televised version was the vulgate, (Goswami and Śāstri [1971] 1982).²⁹ This book is actually shown in the foreground at the beginning of the series, where Sagar welcomes his audience with the greeting “Jay Śrī Kṛṣṇa” from his personal study from behind a pile of books on his desk. So references throughout are to the books (*skandha*), chapters (*adhyaīya*), and verses (*śloka* and many other meters) of this edition.³⁰

Note that *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* only talks about the Gopīs as a group and does no single out Rādhā by name. Later theologians have done their best to find etymological cues in the text and identify the one Gopī privileged by Krishna during the Rāsa-līlā with Rādhā (Miller 1977: 26–9). In the later poets’ vision, too, there is no doubt that Rādhā is the foremost of the Gopīs, and she figures prominently in the medieval sources.

For these two classical sources, the comparison is somewhat marred, since they are widely disparate in place and time. Comparing the classical moments of the Sītā and Gopī stories is anachronistic in that sense. One might have argued instead for comparison with either the *Harivaṃśa* or *Viṣṇu Purāṇas*,

27. I have much benefited from this edition’s Hindi paraphrase, as well as the translations and notes of the translators of the critical edition (Sheldon Pollock and Sally and Robert Goldman). Of course, one has to keep in mind that the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* as received by its audience is not a version using the printed word. Rather it is received in performance, where it is recited and/or visually enacted.

28. Study of the different stages of composition of the text has not been carried out to the same degree of sophistication as for *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, and one has to be aware of a sectarian interest of some authors who keenly push for an early date for especially the Krishna-related passages.

29. This text, too, is mostly received by its audience not in the form of letters on a page but in recitation or visual enactment.

30. Again, I am much indebted to the Gītā Press translation, as well as the recent translation of the tenth book in Bryant 2003. It is unfortunate that no critical edition of this important work has been undertaken, possibly because the variants appear to be remarkably scant. No extensive manuscript study has been carried out; though there is a facsimile edition of an old manuscript in the Sharda script (Bechert 1976), hardly anyone has looked at the variants. The only exception is the nineteenth-century French Scholar Eugène Buznouv (and after his death Hauvette-Besnault and R.P. Alfred Roussel) for the French translation [Buznouv 1846.96] 1981). There is also a somewhat opinionated study attempting to reconstruct a “correct” metrical reading (Nadkarni 1975).

both of which are earlier. Rather than choose the earliest version and in that way remain parallel to *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, I have opted for what is perceived to be the classical version, in which also the Gopī story is more prominent. It is also the first source mentioned in the credits of Sagar's *Shri Krishna*, which read "Mainly based on Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurāṇ" (under which heading are also listed "Brahma Vaivart Purāṇ, Garg Samhita, Agni Purāṇ"). Only in the next credit frame are "Harivansh Purāṇ" and "Vishnu Purāṇ" listed. And *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is privileged within the story: it is the work recommended by none less than Brahmā, the creator god himself, as the sole refuge in Kaliyuga. Thus one cannot underestimate the importance of this source for the *Shri Krishna* series. In effect, the series projects itself as a version of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. One has to be aware, though, that the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* cannot be considered to the same extent the Ur-version of the Krishna story as can the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* for the Rāma story (though the latter is also problematic; see Richman 1991). It is itself a composite, informed by many other sources (Hardy 1983).

Since the episode discussed in chapter 3 does not occur in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I have taken into account another Sanskrit Purāṇa that is very important for the Rādhā-Krishna story, namely *Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa*. This book is listed second in the credits at the beginning of Sagar's *Shri Krishna*. It is interesting that this work figures so prominently in Sagar's list of sources, as it is a relatively late text and not very widely known. It seems to be a Śākta-influenced work foregrounding the Krishna story. While it may have an early core, its final redaction, as extant now, is usually attributed to the fifteenth or even sixteenth century (Brown 1974: 1, 37, and 205). I have used the editions of Rānade (1935) and Śarmā (1970); the latter contains also a helpful Hindi translation.

Medieval Sources

For the medieval retellings, I have concentrated on versions that are relatively closer to each other in date and place. For the Sītā story, evidently the choice should be Tulsīdās's influential Old Hindi (Avadhī) reworking, the *Rām Carit Mānas*. Very little is known about Tulsīdās (d. 1623) beyond the fact that he was likely a Brahmin, active in Benares and Ayodhyā (for legends about him, see Lutgendorf 1994). His *Rām Carit Mānas* dates from the latter half of the sixteenth century (it was started in 1564; see Vaudeville 1955: x). It is a widely popular text, quoted and recited ever more eagerly (Lutgendorf 1991) and was extensively used in the televised Rāmāyaṇa. I will again be quoting the most popular vulgate text, of the Gorakhpur Gītā Press, with references to book

(*kāṇḍa*), verse-unit (*kaṛavak*), and individual verse line (*caupāī* or *dohā*; occasionally Harigītikā *chand*) (Poddar 1990).³¹ I should stress that this work is received by its audience in performance, through recitation as well as the Rām-līlā dramatical tradition (see e.g. Kapur 1990).

Legend has it that there was strong Brahminical opposition to Tulsīdās's project to translate from Sanskrit. In fact, the text is hardly a translation. While *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* was a major source of inspiration, Tulsīdās abbreviated considerably, and he took significant liberties with the story line, influenced by many different sources, including dramatic reworkings and other Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇas*, such as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (Vaudeville 1955). He probably also was influenced by the Avadhī romances, most of them Sūfī in inspiration, which are in the same idiom and metrical structure as *Rām Carit Mānas* (Pauwels 2000).

The major point of Tulsīdās's work is expressing and preaching devotion to Rāma. Whether Tulsīdās belonged to the devotional sect of the Rāmānanda-sampradāya or not, there is no doubt about his bhakti agenda. Thus the work concentrates less on narrative and more on glorification, and it exploits every possible occasion to sing Rāma's praise. Notwithstanding the story of opposition by the Brahmin establishment in Benares, Tulsīdās's work is pro-Brahmin, seemingly favoring a status quo of hierarchal relations. Since Tulsīdās lived and worked in Śiva's holy city, Benares, there is also an element of accommodation of devotion to Śiva in Tulsīdās's work. No wonder Tulsīdās has been called a "theological bridge-builder" (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988: 151).³²

For the devotional vernacular perspective on Rādhā, there is an enormous corpus of Old Hindi (Braj Bhāṣā) poetry on the topic from which it is difficult to make a selection. By the end of the sixteenth century, when Tulsīdās ("Tulsī") was composing his *Rām Carit Mānas*, such Braj devotional songs had become widely popular. In fact, many aspects of his work may well have been inspired by them.³³ However, there is no single authoritative retelling in Braj of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that would parallel his work. Instead, the Sanskrit classic was

31. My translations are informed by the French translation by Vaudeville (1977) and have much benefited from the English translations by Growse (revised by Prasād, 1978) and Hill (1971). The text of this work is fairly stable, but I have on occasion consulted the critical edition by Śukla, Bhagvāndīn, and Brajratnadās (1973).

32. I treat Tulsīdās's characters in terms of gender roles because of my main interest here in role models for women. There are other possible interpretations, including seeing Sītā as representative of the female self. In an interesting article, Veena Das has argued that through "the distribution of characters... the author captures the dramatic nature of the self and the division of male and female within the self" (1998: 67).

33. One work of Krishnaita devotion is attributed to Tulsīdās himself, the *Kṛṣṇagītāvalī*; see McGregor 1976. Notably, the Gopīs' erotic love for Krishna is downplayed in this work.

the inspiration for several short poems more or less loosely based on different episodes. The Braj poets' interest veered away from narrative, concentrating instead on vignettes of love. The closest we get to a narrative is the incomplete attempt to render *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s tenth book in Braj by the late sixteenth-century poet Nanddās, sometimes said to have been Tulsīdās's brother. On the other hand, there is the more famous early sixteenth-century poet Sūrdās, who is listed in the credits of Sagar's *Shri Krishna* under "other sources of inspiration."³⁴ Surdas's poems have been collected to reflect the sequence of episodes in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and are often presented as a vernacular *Bhāgavata*. Finally, the earliest Braj translation and reworking of five famous chapters from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s tenth book, entitled *Rās Pañcādhyāyī*, is by the mid-sixteenth-century poet Harirām Vyās. I will explain in some detail each of these sources, as they are less well known than *Rām Carit Mānas*.

NANDDĀS. One of the earliest attempts at an Old Hindi systematic reworking of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is *Bhāsā Dasama Skandha*, composed by Nanddās, who was active around 1570 (McGregor 1984: 85). Nanddās was part of the "new wave" of Krishna poetry in the wake of the "rediscovery" of the Braj area as a center of pilgrimage. He is generally regarded as one of the younger of the canonical "Eight Seals" (Aṣṭachāp) poets, claimed to have been initiated by Vallabha's son Viṭṭhalnāth, and thus connected with the influential Vallabha-sampradāya, or Puṣṭimārg. That he was closely connected with the famous Śrī Nāthjī temple at the time of Viṭṭhalnāth seems to be borne out by his works, as he mentions both the image and the man frequently (McGregor 1973: 31).

The *Bhāsā Dasama Skandha* makes a great parallel to *Rām Carit Mānas* as it is in the same metrical structure (*caupāi-dohā*). Moreover, Nanddās was a contemporary of Tulsīdās; according to Vallabhan sectarian tradition, they even were brothers.³⁵ The same tradition ascribes the inspiration for the work to Tulsī's example. And like Tulsī, Nanddās is also said to have faced opposition from Brahmins to his "translation" project. However, unlike Tulsīdās, Nanddās did not persist; he obeyed his guru, who requested him to honor the Brahmins' demands.³⁶ That is the explanation for the incompleteness of his work as extant, which focuses only on the early part of Krishna's life in Braj (up to *BhP* 10.28; in some sources also 29). There is a legend that Nanddās in fact had done a

34. Sagar first acknowledges "Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu" and "Mahaprabhu Shree Vallabhacharya."

35. See McGregor 1973: 33–4. For the hagiographic stories, see the Vallabhan hagiography *Do sau bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā, vārtā 4, prasāṅga 1, 3, and 5*, in Kṛṣṇadās [1958] 1986b: 34–8, 39–40, and 41–4.

36. The story is found in, *vārtā 4, prasāṅga 4* (Kṛṣṇadās [1958] 1986b: 40–1).

complete translation, which he offered to the Yamunā (i.e., set afloat in the river). Some parts of his work were miraculously saved, and that is why only fragments survive (Brajratandās [1949] 1957: 117). Nanddās indeed also reworked other episodes from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which are usually listed as different works: *Rās Pañcādhyāyī*, *Govarddhan Lilā*, *Bhramar Gīt*, *Rukmiṇī Maṅgal*, *Sudāmā Caritra*. He himself may not have conceived of them as part of his translation project, as they are in different meters and do not follow the chapter-by-chapter and nearly verse-by-verse translation format of *Bhāsā Dasama Skandha*. I will incorporate one of those works by Nanddās, his *Rukmiṇī Maṅgal*, which is a brilliant work in the *rolā* meter throughout. I give the full quotations in Braj, so those with some ability to do so may enjoy this poet's masterwork.

Who was Nanddās's audience? Contradicting the tradition that ascribes his inspiration to write in the vernacular to Tulsīdās, Nanddās himself attributes it to a special friend who wished to hear Krishna's story but did not understand Sanskrit.³⁷ A friend is also said to have inspired *Rās Pañcādhyāyī* and all his works whose titles end with *Mañjarī*. This may be a conventional way of introducing a work (McGregor 1973: 106–7 n. at *Rās Pañcādhyāyī* 58), but there has been speculation about who this special friend was. Popularly it is believed that it was a woman by the name of Rūpmañjarī, who was a fellow-follower of the sectarian Vallabhan tradition (Viśārad 1954: 2). One hagiographic story describes a female “follower” of Viṭṭhalnāth by that name who was said to be a concubine of the Mughal emperor and a devotee of Nanddās (*Do sau bāvan Vaiṣṇavan kī Vārtā, vārtā* 232).³⁸ There is also a story linking Nanddās's work *Rūpmañjarī* with a woman of that name who seems to be from Gwalior (*gvāliyā kī beṭī*) in another sectarian text (*Śrī Nāthjī kī Prākāṭya Vārtā* 59; see Mahārāj and Śāstrī 1968: 41). Whatever may have been the identity of this “special friend,” it is interesting that she is understood to be a woman. We may well speculate that the work was perceived as intended for a female audience.

37. He does so in his humble disclaimer at the beginning of *Bhāsā Dasama Skandha*: *parama bicitra mitra ika rahai, kṛṣṇa caritra sunyau so cahai; sabada saṁskṛta ke haīm jaisaim, mo pai samujhi parata nahim taisaim* (BDS I, *caupāī* 1–2).

38. According to the hagiography, she was a Hindu king's daughter but married to the Mughal emperor (Akbar?), though she refused to consummate the wedding. Instead, every night she would visit Nanddās, thanks to a magic ball (*guṭikā*) that gave her stool the power to transport her in the air. One day, the king heard a song of Nanddās and decided to meet him. The saint first met the wife and ate in her quarters *prasād* that Śrīnāthjī himself had come to eat. Afterward, he agreed to meet the Mughal, but literally died in his embarrassment of speaking to “one who belongs to a different faith” (*anya-mārgī*). When the emperor told his wife, she, too, suddenly died, much to his consternation (Kṛṣṇadās [1958] 1986b: 461–2). Nanddās is described also as being attracted to a woman before his conversion, in the first *prasaṅga* of his own *vārtā* (4), in the same work (34–8).

Bhāsā Dasama Skandha is a free reworking that takes liberties with the text, yet Nanddās clearly knew the ins and outs of the Sanskrit work and even took into account Sanskrit commentaries, that is, he prefaces his work by paying obeisance to the earliest commentator on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Śrīdhara.³⁹ One would expect Nanddās also to know of Vallabha’s commentary, since he was initiated into Vallabha’s sect. However, his readings are not in total conformity with Vallabha’s. Still, he attributes the inspiration to “Guru Giridhara,”⁴⁰ which is generally seen to be the image of Śrī Nāthjī, which was in Vallabhite hands at this time. *Rukmiṇī Maṅgal* deviates significantly from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It is a free, creative reworking.

Unfortunately, no critical edition of Nanddās’s works is available.⁴¹ I will refer to the text of the prestigious Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā edition by Brajratnadās ([1949] 1957).⁴²

SŪRDĀS. The second medieval poet whose works are quoted here, Sūrdās, is one of the most prestigious medieval Hindu poet-saints, and occupies rightfully an important niche in the canon of early Hindi literature. The televised version of Krishna’s story cites him prominently as an important source. Sūrdās (“Sūr”) is like an older brother to Nanddās, as he is commonly seen as the foremost of the same “Eight Seals” (Aṣṭachāp) poets affiliated with the Vallabha-sampradāya. J. S. Hawley (1984) has shown this affiliation to be a late sectarian development, but to this day, the Vallabhan hagiographies are influential in the way Sūrdās is remembered. The sectarian interpretation of his life is mirrored in the arrangement of the vulgate anthology of his poetry, entitled *Sūr Sāgar* (Sūr’s ocean; Hawley 2005: 194–207). The standard edition, again from the prestigious Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā (Ratnākār 1972, 1976) arranges the poems on the model of the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, an arrangement supposedly inspired by Vallabha. However, Hawley has shown that early nonsectarian manuscripts do not arrange the poems in that pattern, and

39. *aru ju mahāmāti śrīdhara svāmī, saba granthana ke aṃtarajāmī; tina ju kahe yaha bhāgavata graṃṭha, jaisaiṃ dṛḡha-udadhi kau maṃṭha* (BDS 1.4).

40. *jyom guru girīdhara deva kī, sundara dayā darera* (BDS 1, dohā 2).

41. Stuart McGregor carried out a study of the *Rās Pañcādhyāyī* manuscripts, which he reports on (1973: 55–6), as well as of the independent *padas* (McGregor 1992).

42. This edition is based on two older editions (one by Śrīkarmcand Guggalānī and another by Śrī Murārīlāl Keḍiyā) and comparison with a manuscript from Brajratnadās’s private collection that he says was about two hundred years old. A first edition from Allahabad University, by Umāśaṅkar Śukla dated 1942, is unfortunately no longer available. There are no published translations of *Bhāsā Dasama Skandha* or *Rukmiṇī Maṅgal* (though there is a brilliant translation of *Rās Pañcādhyāyī* by Stuart McGregor [1973]), so all translations are my own.

indeed that many of the poems are later additions to the ever-growing corpus attributed to Sūr. A major problem in using the vulgate for Sūrdās is that a lot of the poems may well be later—in some cases as late as the twentieth century. A new critical edition of Sūr’s poetry is in the works (Hawley and Bryant forthcoming), and I will refer to it as it is appropriate. My references will be to the verse numbers in the standard edition. Most of Sūr’s poems that I quote have been paraphrased in Hindi in another edition by Hardev Bahri and Rajendra Kumar (1974: 962–85 for the *panaghata* poems); a few have been beautifully translated in the many articles and books of John Stratton Hawley, and by Dr. Krishna P. Bahadur (1999: 299–303 for the *panaghata* poems). When in doubt, I’ve checked my translation against theirs and the commentary, benefiting from these scholars’ interpretations.

HARIRĀM VYĀS. The last Braj work I quote from is *Rās Pañcādhyāyī*, by Harirām Vyās, one of the earliest transcreations of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* material in Braj. Vyās hailed from the small kingdom of Orccha in Bundelkhand, but moved to Vrindāban in the Braj area of North India in the 1530s. While not formally affiliated with any sect, he was part of the growing community of devotees exclusively devoted to the worship of Rādhā and Krishna. Vyās and his like-minded friends Harivaṃś and Haridās, founders of the Rādhāvallabha- and Sakhī-Sampradāya (respectively), are often classified as “the three Haris” (Hari-trayī), also called “the three connoisseurs” (*rasika-trayī*).

Vyās’s *Rās Pañcādhyāyī* (in *tripadī* meter) has enjoyed some popularity, as is witnessed by manuscript attestation from many parts of North India and its inclusion in the standard edition of the *Sūr Sāgar* (SS 1798/1180).⁴³ I prefer this text to Nanddās’s as the latter does not contain reference to Rādhā.

Again, we need to be clear that the audience of all the medieval Krishna devotional poems was likely to be acquainted with them not through the printed book but through oral performance, in *bhajana* sessions and, popularly, through the theatrical tradition of Rās-līlā (see Hawley and Goswami 1981).

Although these medieval sources for Sītā and Rādhā are closer to one another in time and place than the classical ones, there is a major difference. While Tulsīdās’s text is an extended narrative, most of the sources for Rādhā are individual poems/song (*padas*) that do not make a coherent narrative. They

43. I will refer to my own scholarly edition and translation, which also includes a detailed Braj-Sanskrit comparison with *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* parallels (Pauwels 1996b: 163–79). For clarity’s sake, I will normalize the irregular spelling of the manuscript, which I reproduced in the text edition in my book.

are like excerpts or moments in the story, known to all, but not told systematically in any source. Thus, the selection of source material is less obvious and less complete, and the choice is more subjective.

The Television Series

The major reference points of this book are the influential televised retellings of the Rāma and Krishna story, both by Ramanand Sagar (né Chopra; b. 1917 d. 2005).⁴⁴ Surprisingly, very little has been written about the director, notwithstanding the runaway success of both of his television series. One has to glean facts from the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema (EIC)*, the popular press, interviews, websites, and references in studies of politics and television. Part of Sagar's life reads like a Hindi movie scenario. His father was from a rich family in Kashmir but died destitute when Ramanand was still young, so he grew up in Lahore in the house of his maternal grandparents. He fell out with his grandparents about the marriage that was arranged for him and was thrown out of the house, compelled to sell soap and clean cars for a living. During that period he had his first experience in the film industry with a stint as a clapper boy in a silent movie. He finished his studies, winning gold medals in both Sanskrit and Persian. His first identity was as a creative writer in Hindi/Urdu (this view of himself is apparent from the organization of the official webpage, www.sagartv.com/about.asp). He worked as a journalist and wrote poetry and short stories under several pseudonyms, but his career was jump-started with his *Diary of a TB Patient* in 1942, which was published as a serial in an influential Lahore magazine. After Partition, he fled to India. His story is that of many who had to start all over, penniless (with just 5 annas, according to the website) and only tragic memories to work from. Sagar worked his traumatic experiences into a novel on the horrors of Partition, *Aur insān mar gayā* (And humanity died) in 1948, for which he gained some critical acclaim. He also wrote a drama (*Gaura*), which was produced by Prithvi Theaters. His involvement with the film industry was initially as a writer; his first success was as the story, screen, and dialogue writer for Raj Kapoor's *Barsaat* (1949). Sagar then got off on a film career, writing the script for, and later directing several movies, often with major stars, such as Dharmendra, Rajendra Kumar, Rajesh Khanna, Shammi Kapoor, Rekha, Hema Malini, Mala Sinha.

44. It would also be interesting to compare these to the way the Rāma story is filmed by another director, Ravi Chopra in his *Vishnupuran*, but I have limited myself here to Sagar's series, which came first.

He established his own film production company Sagar Art (in 1953; not to be confused with the earlier Sagar Film Company). His website has it that as a director, “the portrayal of the sensitivity of a woman’s love has remained his high point.” His penchant for depicting long-suffering heroines who remain steadfast in their love through trials is already clear in his script for *Barsaat*, which contrasts such heroines with flirty, Westernized “Rubies and Lilies.” Another film, based on a Hindi novel he wrote, the 1972 *Lalkar* (Challenge), similarly contrasts faithful Indian and flirting Anglo-Indian women. He kept making hit movies (and some flops on the side) until he transcended all that with his runaway success with television (Tully 1991: 127–52, *EIC* 202, www.sagartv.com.).

THE TELEVISED RĀMĀYAṆA. The history of the telecasting of the *Ramayana* series is an interesting case of the haphazard road to success. Ramanand Sagar’s old friend from his Lahore days, S. S. Gill, was information and broadcasting secretary in the mid-1980s. He personally invited Sagar to develop the idea of a *Rāmāyaṇa* series for television (Rajagopal 2001: 326 n. 48). The first screen script, however, was rejected (327 n. 52). Some claim that it took nothing less than a miracle and a hunger strike by the wife of one of the director-generals (Sternfeld 2005: 199), but eventually the project received the blessings of Rajiv Gandhi on the grounds that it would work to promote national unity (Rajagopal 2001: 327 n. 52). Many would say that this project backfired on Gandhi and instead created an atmosphere in which the BJP (Bhāratīya Janatā Party) could gain prominence on the political scene. It is unclear what Sagar’s own political agenda was.⁴⁵

TVR was first shown on what was at the time India’s only national television station, Doordarshan, on Sunday mornings at 9:30 from January 25, 1987, to July 31, 1988. As noted, its success was enormous and extended beyond these dates.

Sagar had cast relatively unknown actors in the lead roles: Arun Govil as Rāma and Dipika Chikhlia as Sītā. Soon these actors would be worshiped as representations of the gods, as is common in the dramatic Rāma-līlā tradition (Lutgendorf 1990: 160–3). Divine status would bring with it the responsibilities of exemplary behavior. The whole cast, in fact the whole production site, became strictly vegetarian. Interestingly for our purpose, the actress playing Sītā would see herself compelled to accept only “chaste” roles (163).

45. The issue is too complex to deal with here. I take it up again in the conclusion, but it is really a study for a political scientist.