

The Rama-Fications of Myth in Modern Politics: Transformation of a Mythical Figure into an Icon of Hindu Nationalism

Authors : Sagnik Mridul

Abstract : This paper examines the evolving semiotics of the figure of Rama within the contexts of Indian mythology, cultural history, and contemporary politics. Tracing the transformation of Rama from a human protagonist in Valmiki's Ramayana to a divine figure in later Sanskrit and vernacular retellings, the study explores the shifting paradigms of his portrayal. It highlights how successive reinterpretations have inscribed new layers of meaning onto the signifier 'Rama,' reflecting diverse socio-religious and political agendas. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Roland Barthes, Saussure, Sheldon Pollock, and contemporary postcolonial scholars, the study traces Rama's metamorphosis from a literary character in classical Sanskrit texts to a powerful nationalist symbol in contemporary political discourse. The analysis begins with the portrayal of Rama as an ideal human being, embodying virtues central to his identity as a son, prince, husband, warrior, and king. The text highlights the duality of Rama's character, oscillating between human and divine traits, particularly in the context of his association with Vishnu as an incarnation. The paper also examines the politicization of Rama's image, particularly during the 12th century, when regional kings began to identify themselves with Rama to legitimize their rule amidst external threats, such as invasions by Turkic rulers. The research critically examines the transformation of Rama's narrative in modern times, how right-wing Hindu nationalist movements, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have transformed Rama from a complex mythological figure into a potent political signifier. This appropriation illustrates Barthes' concept of myth-making, where complex historical realities are simplified into narratives that serve contemporary ideological needs.

Keywords : ramayana, myth, politicization, semiotics, deification

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