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Ram as Cultural Construct: Folk Articulations and Narrative Pluralities in Indian Literature

Dr. Rajeev Yadav
Associate Professor-English,
Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Government Girls PG College,
Aliganj, Lucknow.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15816818

Article History: Submitted-20/05/2025, Revised-16/06/2025, Accepted-22/06/2025, Published-30/06/2025.

Abstract:

The figure of Ram, the divine prince of Ayodhya and the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, holds a singularly influential place in India's literary, religious, and cultural imagination. He occupies a central position in Indian cultural consciousness, not merely as a divine avatar in the canonical Ramayana but as a fluid and evolving symbol across regional, social, and folk traditions. The story of Ram, as depicted in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, constitutes one of the foundational epics of Indian civilization. However, Ram's presence is far from monolithic. Beyond the classical Sanskritic portrayal, folk literature across India's diverse linguistic, regional, and caste-based communities has reimagined and reinterpreted Ram in multifaceted ways. These folk versions of the *Ramayana* are not mere retellings; they are dynamic, creative engagements with the central narrative, shaped by local customs, dialects, spiritual beliefs, and socio-political experiences.

The paper primarily explores how the figure of Ram in Indian folk literature functions not only a religious myth but also a living archive of cultural negotiation, regional diversity, and ideological contestation. It seeks to critically analyze how folk traditions reinterpret Ram in ways that challenge canonical narratives, express local agency, and foreground marginalized voices

within the Indian cultural landscape. This paper also examines the diverse articulations of Ram within Indian folk literature to demonstrate how the idea of Ram has been adapted, reinterpreted, and politicized. Moving beyond the Sanskritic hegemony of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, this study explores how Ram is reimagined in vernacular performances, oral traditions and subaltern narratives, thus transforming him from a theological icon into a cultural construct shaped by pluralities.

Keywords: Spiritual Reawakening, Idea of Ram, Folk Literature, Mythology and Indian Culture.

As A.K. Ramanujan has famously argued in his seminal essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*, the Ramayana exists not as a single text but as a tradition with numerous versions, each of which is equally authoritative in its cultural context. Ramanujan contends that "no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling" (Ramanujan 134). This idea challenges the primacy of Valmiki's *Ramayana* and opens the space for vernacular Ramayanas—oral, performative, and often fluid forms that incorporate folk values and regional sensibilities. These versions are found in ballads, village theatre, storytelling traditions, devotional songs, and ritual performances, all of which continually reconfigure Ram in response to the socio-cultural environment in which they are embedded.

In the folk traditions of South India, for instance, Kamban's *Tamil Ramavataram*, largely based on Valmiki, takes significant poetic liberties to adapt the story for a Tamil-speaking, Shaiva-oriented audience. In tribal versions, such as those among the Bhil or Gond communities, Ram often becomes a hunter or forest-dwelling hero, embodying indigenous values and practices. In women's songs (Jagran, Sohar, and Kajri) across rural North India, Ram is

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remembered not only as a deity or king but also as a familial figure, invoked in contexts of domesticity, longing, and moral guidance (Narayan 48).

Furthermore, folk Ramayanas explore frequently themes and perspectives absent or suppressed in the classical narrative. For example, the emotional suffering and agency of Sita are given greater prominence in Maithili and Bengali songs, where she becomes a subject rather than a silent sufferer. Similarly, Loksahitya (folk literature) among Dalit and Bahujan communities offer counter-narratives in which Ram's divine kingship is questioned and Ravana is reimagined as a scholarly or just ruler, as seen in the oral traditions from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu (Richman 19–21).

These regional and community-based expressions of Ram reflect how Indian folk literature democratizes the divine, making the epic accessible, relevant, and resonant for the ordinary people. Through these stories, songs, and performances, Ram ceases to be a distant epic hero and instead becomes a symbol of local identity, social struggle, and lived spirituality. In doing so, the folk imagination resists homogenization and asserts the plurality and richness of Indian cultural traditions.

The Canonical *Ramayana* and Its Cultural Authority

Valmiki's *Ramayana*, composed in classical Sanskrit around the 4th century BCE, occupies a paramount position in the Indian literary and religious canon. It is traditionally revered not only as a sacred text (śruti and smṛti) but also as a moral compass, embodying the ideals of dharma (righteousness), artha (duty), and maryada (social order). In this epic, Ram is portrayed as Maryada Purushottam, the ideal man and king, whose life exemplifies perfect adherence to duty—be it as a son, husband, ruler, or warrior. This portrayal has profoundly

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shaped the moral and ethical imagination of Hindu society and has been instrumental in establishing Ram as a central figure in rituals, temple iconography, festivals, and classical performances, such as, Kathakali and Bharatnatyam (Goldman 24–26).

However, the textual hegemony of Valmiki's *Ramayana* has, over centuries, tended to overshadow the diversity of Ram narratives that flourish in vernacular and oral traditions. This privileging of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* has led to a hierarchical understanding in which folk, regional and subaltern versions are often seen a lesser, derivative and non-canonical. As Paula Richman observes, the widespread reverence for Valmiki's version has contributed to the marginalization of alternative retellings that do not conform to its narrative, theological, or moral frameworks (Richman 3). These include tribal, Dalit, feminist, and regional folk versions that articulate different value systems and contest the idealized image of Ram found in the classical epic.

Moreover, the cultural authority of Valmiki's *Ramayana* works not only on the literary or religious level but also on the socio-political level where it has been employed to legitimize hierarchical social structures. The epic's portrayal of Ram's unquestioned obedience to his father, his rejection of Sita based on public opinion, and the violent treatment of non-Aryan characters like Shambuka and Ravana have drawn criticism from contemporary scholars and marginalized communities, who see these actions as reflective of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste orthodoxy (Narayana 52–54). Such critiques have led to the reclamation and re-narration of Ramayana stories in folk contexts, where Ram is either humanized, critiqued, or even supplanted by alternative heroes.

In regions like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Chhattisgarh, folk ballads and oral storytelling forms, such as, Oggukatha, Burrakatha, and Pandavani, have preserved vibrant

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retellings of Ram's life that both revere and interrogate his character. These performative traditions are dialogic, allowing communities to reinterpret ethical dilemmas in the Ramayana through contemporary lenses. In such contexts, Ram is not a fixed divine archetype but a malleable figure whose moral decisions are up for public debate and scrutiny (Blackburn 178).

The normative weight of Valmiki's *Ramayana* also influences gender dynamics in Indian society. While the classical text tends to idealize Sita's obedience and chastity, folk traditions often amplify Sita's voice, reinterpreting her as a strong, autonomous figure who challenges Ram's decisions. This shift is visible in Maithili wedding songs, Bhojpuri lullabies, and Bengali women's storytelling traditions, which reframe Sita's exile not as submission to dharma but as an unjust patriarchal imposition (Narayan 67).

Thus, while Valmiki's *Ramayana* continues to enjoy a revered status, its cultural authority is not absolute. Folk retellings actively negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the canonical vision, offering alternate ethical frameworks and communal values. These counter-narratives enrich our understanding of Ram as a cultural construct, demonstrating that Indian tradition is not static but vibrantly plural and dialogic.

Folk Ramayanas and Narrative Diversities

While the Valmiki *Ramayana* has long been considered the canonical narrative of Ram's life, its cultural dominance belies the extraordinary plurality of Ramayana traditions found across India. These Folk Ramayanas, thriving in various vernacular languages and oral traditions, offer divergent, local and socially embedded perspectives on Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and other key figures. They reveal how the epic has culturally and ideologically been adapted to reflect the moral values, spiritual beliefs, and socio-political experiences of different communities.

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One of the most widely read and revered folk versions is the *Krittivasi Ramayan* in Bengal composed by Krittibas Ojha in the 15th century. This Bengali retelling transforms the austere and divinely distant Ram of Valmiki's text into a more emotive, accessible, and flawed human. In Krittibas's version, Ram displays intense emotional vulnerability especially in his anguish over Sita's abduction, and his decisions are often questioned by those around him. These human traits make him more relatable to the ordinary people and align the narrative with Bhakti sensibilities that emphasize personal devotion and emotional immediacy (Hiltebeitel 23–25).

In South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, the *Ramavataram* by Kamban (also known as *Kamba Ramayanam*) exemplifies how regional and cultural aesthetics shape the narrative. Kamban, writing in the 12th century, infuses the epic with Dravidian literary and theological values. His Ram is not only a warrior but also a lover, a poet, and a devotee, embodying Tamil ideals of heroism and devotion. Moreover, Kamban's treatment of Ravana is markedly more sympathetic and complex, reflecting a regional sensibility that values Ravana's scholarship and valour despite his moral flaws (Richman 54).

A.K. Ramanujan, in his influential essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,* draws attention to the fluidity and diversity of Ramayana tellings across South and Southeast Asia. He famously asserts that the Ramayana tradition can not defined by a single, original text but by a multiplicity of retellings, each with its own textual authority and cultural legitimacy. "There is no single Ramayana," Ramanujan writes, "but rather many Ramayanas" (131). His analysis includes examples from Jain, Buddhist, and Telugu traditions, which often challenge the theological and moral premises of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. For instance, in Jain versions, Ram is not divine but a noble man who ultimately renounces the world and attains liberation—thus aligning with Jain cosmology and ethics (Ramanujan 139).

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In tribal communities, such as, the Gonds, Bhils, and Santhals, oral Ramkatha traditions often present a counter-narrative that centers on indigenous worldviews. In many of these versions, Ram is portrayed as a hunter or forest-dwelling hero, deeply integrated with nature and tribal customs. His moral code is not dictated by Brahmanical dharma but by local ethics of reciprocity, survival, and kinship. Some versions even sympathize with Ravana, who is seen as a learned ruler or a relative figure wronged by Ram. Such versions subvert dominant caste narratives, offering critical insights into the politics of power, representation, and resistance in Indian society (Blackburn 172–174).

Folk Ramayanas also play a crucial role in shaping gender narratives. In women's oral traditions, such as sohars (birth songs), kajris (monsoon songs), and wedding songs in North India, the epic is reframed from a female perspective. These songs often critique Ram's abandonment of Sita and portray her as a resilient, autonomous woman whose suffering and strength become central to the retelling. Scholars like Kirin Narayan have emphasized how such renditions allow women to voice their experiences and emotions through epic frameworks (Narayan 58–61).

Thus, folk Ramayanas reveal a vibrant cultural democracy where multiple communities participate in retelling and reshaping a shared narrative to reflect their own identities and values. They offer alternative ethical paradigms, and disrupt the hegemony of the canonical text, highlighting the dialogic and pluralistic nature of Indian storytelling traditions. In doing so, these diverse Ramayanas expand the idea of Ram beyond the divine king of Valmiki's imagination, transforming him into a dynamic cultural symbol whose meanings shift with context, performance, and audience.

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Subaltern Voices and Folk Contestations

The Ramayana, as a cultural and religious narrative, has long been central to the shaping of Hindu identity and morality. However, subaltern retellings—particularly those from Dalit and Adivasi (tribal) communities—have challenged the hegemony of the canonical versions by offering radically different interpretations of the story and its characters. These folk contestations emerge as acts of resistance against the upper-caste, Brahmanical reading of Ram, revealing deep-seated tensions surrounding caste, ritual purity, and moral legitimacy in Indian society.

One of the most striking examples of subaltern reinterpretation is seen in the *Bhil Ramayana*, an oral tradition among the Bhil tribe of western and central India. In this version, Ram is not the deified, celibate king of Valmiki's imagination but he is shown a forest-dwelling hunter who eats meat, drinks liquor, and engages with the forest in ways that mirror Bhil customs. Here, Ram's actions align more with tribal cosmologies than with Brahmanical ideals of purity and renunciation. This portrayal naturalises and humanises Ram, making him culturally intelligible to the Bhils while simultaneously questioning the upper-caste moral standards that deem such behaviour as impure (Lutgendorf 279–80).

Similarly, the Ravidasis and Kabirpanthis—communities inspired by the Bhakti poets Ravidas and Kabir—offer spiritual reinterpretations of Ram that are profoundly anti-caste and anti-ritualistic. While they invoke the name of Ram in devotional contexts, their Ram is not the warrior-king of Ayodhya but a formless and omnipresent divinity who transcends caste, ritual and scripture. Kabir, in particular, denounces the Ram of the Ramayana, whom he sees as bound by Brahmanical values and social inequalities. Instead, he speaks of a Nirgun Ram—the unmanifest God who is accessible to all, irrespective of caste or gender. His verses ridicule both

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Brahmins and Kshatriyas for their obsession with external piety, and instead celebrate inner spiritual awakening (Zecchini 145–47).

These subaltern Ramayanas are not merely alternative narratives—they are ideological interventions that seek to deconstruct the dominant social order. By presenting Ram as flawed, limited, or even unjust, these versions force a reevaluation of his actions, particularly those involving Shambuka's killing, Sita's exile, and the war with Ravana. In Dalit oral traditions, Shambuka's murder—depicted as a defence of varnashrama dharma in the classical Ramayana—is reframed as an act of caste-based violence that highlights the exclusionary nature of dharma as defined by upper-caste orthodoxy. These reinterpretations restore agency to the marginalized, turning the epic into a site of protest and self-assertion (Omvedt 210).

Moreover, in some Bahujan folk performances such as Ramnamis in Chhattisgarh, devotees tattoo the name of Ram across their bodies—not to venerate the king of Ayodhya but to signify spiritual equality and the rejection to Brahmanical mediation. In doing so, they claim Ram as a universal divine force dissociated from his caste-based historical legacy. This practice embodies a quiet revolution, using the sacred name of Ram to challenge the very structures that have historically denied access to divine knowledge and temple worship to lower castes (Gold 145–47).

In essence, Dalit and tribal Ramayanas engage in a counter-discursive process, subverting the ideological functions of the epic as a tool of Brahmanical dominance. These folk versions highlight the heterogeneity of Indian religious experience and underscore the role of oral literature as a vehicle of social critique. By reframing Ram's image, subaltern communities reclaim narrative agency, carving out spaces of dignity, identity, and resistance within the broader Hindu cultural landscape.

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Gendered Revisions in Folk Narratives

The gender politics of the *Ramayana*, particularly Ram's treatment of Sita, has long been a point of tension in both classical and folk retellings. While canonical texts often uphold Ram as an exemplar of dharma, many women-centric folk narratives across India have challenged this portrayal. Through oral traditions such as songs, ballads, and performances, rural women reinterpret and critique the epic's patriarchal structures, offering a counter-discourse that centers on female agency and suffering. These gendered revisions constitute a form of folk feminist resistance, reclaiming narrative space for women's voices.

In Bhojpuri folk songs which are sung by women during rituals, childbirth ceremonies, and social gatherings Sita often emerges as a tragic figure caught in the crosshairs of male honour and dharma. Unlike the divine, submissive Sita of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the Sita of these songs is a flesh-and-blood woman—abandoned, misunderstood, and deeply wounded by Ram's actions. These songs frequently question Ram's moral authority, highlighting the injustice of Sita's exile and the societal pressures that compel women to endure suffering in silence. As Kirin Narayan notes, such songs offer a space for rural women to express anger, sorrow, and solidarity, often through metaphors and emotional appeals (Narayana 210).

For example, in one popular Bhojpuri sohar (birth song), Sita, pregnant and alone in the forest, laments her abandonment and questions the fairness of a world where a woman's virtue is proven through ordeals and exile. Ram is depicted not as a hero but as a husband who succumbs to societal pressures, prioritizing public opinion over marital love and justice. These portrayals reflect a critical awareness of patriarchal double standards, and allow women to reflect on their own lived experiences through the lens of a revered epic (Narayan 211–12).

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Similarly, in Kaisikas and Kathas performed by women in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the focus often shifts from Ram to Sita or other sidelined female characters, such as, Urmila, Mandodari, and Shabari. These performances reimagine women's roles in the epic bringing to the forefront their emotional strength, resilience and autonomy. In many South Indian traditions, Urmila's long separation from Lakshman is presented in emotional depth portraying her as a silent sufferer who is often ignored in mainstream retellings. This foregrounding of female experience functions as a critique of male-centered dharma, and restores dignity to silenced characters (Richman 102).

Moreover, women's oral traditions serve not only as critiqueas but as catharsis and cultural education. They pass down emotional wisdom, gendered knowledge, and social commentary through generations. According to Paula Richman, these performances often subvert narrative authority by emphasising empathy over obedience and emotional truth over religious idealism (Richman 101–04). The songs thus become tools of resilience, allowing women to navigate their realities through re-interpretation and re-creation of epic texts.

Through these gendered revisions, folk literature becomes a space of resistance and reinterpretation that empowers women to challenge patriarchal norms embedded in classical literature. Rather than accepting Ram as an unblemished icon of righteousness, these narratives hold him accountable, offering an alternative moral framework grounded in compassion, justice, and emotional truth. In doing so, they reclaim the epic tradition for women, transforming a historically male-dominated narrative into a multivocal, inclusive dialogue.

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Performative Traditions and Community Identity

The performative dimensions of the *Ramayana* tradition—manifested in diverse regional forms such as Ramlila, Yakshagana, Terukkuttu, and other folk dramatizations—constitute one of the most vibrant and enduring modes of engaging with the epic. These ritual-theatrical performances do more than preserve mythic content; they mediate moral, communal, and cultural identities, localizing the pan-Indian narrative of Ram in region-specific idioms. As Richard Schechner observes, these performances are not merely "reenactments" of a fixed script but are social dramas that evolve in relation to local histories, languages, political dynamics, and communal values (Schechner 45–47).

The Ramlila of North India, perhaps the most widely recognised form of epic performance, is particularly illustrative of how community identity and religious devotion are intertwined. These performances, often sponsored and enacted by local villagers, transform towns and villages into sacred geographies, replicating Ayodhya, Lanka, and the Dandakaranya forest on stage. The annual staging of Ramlila becomes a communal event, reinforcing not only Hindu identity but also social roles, hierarchies, and moral codes. In this way, the epic functions as a pedagogical tool, instructing audiences—many of whom are illiterate—in the virtues of obedience, loyalty, and dharma (Lutgendorf 236).

However, these performances are far from homogeneous. In Yakshagana, a traditional theatre form of Karnataka, the Ramkatha is told in a highly stylized, musical-dramatic mode, integrating local myths, Kannada poetic meters, and visual iconography. The characterisation of Ram and other figures often reflects regional sensibilities and theological orientations, such as the influence of Madhva philosophy, which emphasises Ram's divinity more assertively than other traditions. The costumes, makeup, and musical forms—distinct from North Indian

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Ramlila—speak to a Dravidian aesthetic that is deeply embedded in regional consciousness (Rao and Karanth 117–18).

Similarly, in Terukkuttu and Koothu performances of Tamil Nadu, Ramayana narratives are reconfigured in folk Tamil and infused with Dravidian cultural motifs. These performances often highlight Sita's suffering, Ravana's complexity, and caste dynamics, subtly differing from the Valmikian orthodoxy. In some interpretations, Ravana is valorized for his devotion to Shiva and his musical prowess, while Ram's actions are subject to moral scrutiny. These versions represent regional and ideological contestations that reflect Dravidian identity politics especially in contexts where Sanskritic, Brahmanical narratives are viewed as hegemonic impositions (Cutler 159–60).

Moreover, performance serves as a site for community bonding and moral reflection. For diasporic communities in countries like Trinidad, Fiji, and Mauritius, Ramlila performances have helped preserve cultural identity in exile, offering continuity with ancestral heritage while adapting to new political and social contexts. These performances often feature multilingual scripts, drawing from Hindi, Bhojpuri, English, and Creole, thereby attesting to the transcultural nature of the Ramayana as a lived tradition (Richman 98).

Schechner conceptualises these performances as "restored behaviours"—ritualised acts that are repeated and yet always recreated, deeply embedded in cultural memory and collective meaning-making. The idea of Ram in these contexts is flexible, mutable, and deeply localized. He is not merely the ideal king of Ayodhya but becomes a cultural conduit, embodying regional aspirations, moral codes, and theological nuances (Schechner 46–48).

Thus, performative Ramayanas represent the pluralism inherent in Indian religious culture, demonstrating that even as the core narrative remains recognisable, its interpretive

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expressions vary dramatically across regions, communities, and ideological lines. Through these enactments, Ram becomes not just a mythic figure but a living symbol of cultural pedagogy, communal identity, and moral negotiation.

Conclusion

The figure of Ram in Indian folk literature is far more than the righteous king of Valmiki's Ramayana; he is a dynamic cultural construct shaped by the regional, social, and political contours of diverse Indian communities. In these non-canonical, vernacular, and performative traditions, Ram is frequently reimagined—not as a static icon of divine perfection but as a malleable symbol subject to reinterpretation, criticism, and even rejection. Folk narratives of Ram exhibit an extraordinary range of voices, from devotional to subversive, from reverential to resistant.

As A.K. Ramanujan famously asserted in his essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas*, "No single version of the Ramayana can claim exclusive authority. Instead, it is the multiplicity of narratives—in oral traditions, regional literatures, songs, and performances—that brings out the true democratic and pluralistic spirit of the epic tradition in India" (Ramanujan 131–33). This polyphonic engagement with Ram allows communities to assert their worldviews, often challenging the normative Brahmanical order. Whether in tribal retellings, Dalit reinterpretations, women's songs, or village performances, Ram becomes a mirror reflecting the values and anxieties of each community.

Moreover, these folk reinterpretations often localise and humanise Ram, grounding him in specific regional dialects, customs, and ethical frameworks. In some versions, Ram is portrayed as flawed, emotionally complex, or even oppressive, as seen in the Bhil Ramayana, or

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sometimes he is shown in the critical perspectives offered by Dalit poets like Kabir and Ravidas (Lutgendorf 279; Zecchini 145). These counter-narratives question canonical morality and expand the discursive space around Ram, turning the epic into a site of ideological contestation and cultural negotiation.

Equally significant is the role of gendered voices in folk narratives, particularly those by women who reinterpret Sita's story. These retellings expose the gendered injustices embedded in the epic, offering alternative moral paradigms and contributing to what could be termed as folk feminism (Narayan 210–12; Richman 101–04). Through oral performances, women not only reclaim narrative space but also restructure epic authority to reflect female agency and critique patriarchal norms.

Furthermore, performative traditions such as Ramlila, Yakshagana, and Terukkuttu serve as living embodiments of the Ramayana, embedding the epic within the ritual and social life of communities. These performances act as tools of cultural pedagogy and communal bonding, enabling the continuous evolution of Ram as a figure of both spiritual reverence and sociopolitical commentary (Schechner 45–48; Richman 98).

In essence, the folk literature of India positions Ram not just as a religious or mythic hero but as a multi-vocal cultural text—one that is continuously authored and re-authored following the changing sensibilities of diverse Indian societies. The figure of Ram in folk literature suggests the vitality and adaptability of India's narrative traditions, emphasising that cultural memory is not monolithic but deeply pluralistic, contested, and inclusive. This plurality is not merely literary but politically and socially significant, offering a democratic space for resistance, reinterpretation, and renewal in the ongoing life of Indian tradition.

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