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## **Religion and Neoliberalism: TV Serial *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Becoming of an Ideology, 1980-1990**

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In a milieu inundated by ever more striking and sophisticated technologies, television may appear to us a dated medium, too familiar to provoke any special interest despite its pervasive influence. But when in the 1980s in India the TV started to become a feature of middle-class homes it was no less than a magical device –on one hand, treasured by the state (which controlled broadcasting rights) for its instant effects and extensive reach and, on the other, its rationed telecasts eagerly awaited, and gaped at, by fascinated masses. This technological development coincided with a period of important upheavals in the nation’s nascent postcolonial history and politics. Till the 1970s, the Congress had ruled as the preeminent national party, the overarching vanguard “uplifting” India and its populace into the committee of nations and peoples of the world. By then, however, the limitations of a putative democratic socialism had combined with other national and global developments to undermine the prepossessing significance of this vanguard (itself split into several fractions), thereby opening the political field to a plurality of social forces. With its ability to channel collective affects across the breadth of the nation, the television emerged as a novel technology to address this conjuncture, both in terms of a new nationalist imaginary and to advance a new era of consumption, and thereby

economic liberalism.

Along with the fetish of the commodity, at this stage, religious imagery served as a major source for re-defining the nation. The opening of the Indian economy and the surfeit of commodities that followed, thus, converged with the rise of Hindu religious nationalism and an unprecedented surge in the political fortunes of right-wing groups (see e.g., Hansen 1999; Rajagopal 2001; van der Veer 1994). As Rajagopal (2001) has shown, the television serial *Rāmāyaṇa* –a wildly popular program based on the eponymous epic screened from January 1987 to July 1988 – is a condensed example of the social transformative effect of this peculiar combination of forces. While the political transformations triggered by this telecast of complexly coded religious imagery in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (as well as the *Māhābhārata*, based on the other major epic, screened shortly after), are well recognized in scholarly literature (Lutgendorf 1990; Richman 1990; Rajagopal 2001; Mankekar 2002), this article analyzes the subjective experience of these forces.

Analyzing the inter-subjective structure of the TV serial and the audience it creates in reference to the Ramayana serial, this article teases out the complex play of commodity fetishism and mythopoeic investment in the experience of the audience, and how the political right capitalized on these processes. I argue that television and the *Rāmāyaṇa* serial operated as mediums participating in the formation of a new ideological force in India of the 1980s. Several Scholars have criticized the producers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for conforming to dominant renditions of the epic while marginalizing other versions (Richman 1991; Rajagopal 2001; Mankekar 2002). However, I argue that given how intensely this presentation of the epic as a soap opera in a synchronized nation-wide telecast in the homogenous time of the nation is determined by the mechanisms and ideologies of capitalist production, the choice of version can be a matter only of secondary significance. Engaging the reception of the serial from a psychoanalytic perspective, this article shows how the compulsion to repetition, and the *jouissance* of the *darśana* (vision) of the God, and his words, factored in this transformative process. In the context of a majority living under dire economic conditions, subjected to a ravishing encounter with an extravaganza of the commodity form, and yet slowly weaned off the visions of a modernist dream and a socialist utopia, the TV God worked to sublimate the traumatic moment in the very moment and medium of its inception.

## **The political field of the TV God**

Following a confrontation with the judiciary over electoral malpractices, in 1974, the Congress Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, declared a National Emergency and assumed autocratic powers.

This event may be seen as a consequence of India's evolving political scenario –a first response to a rapidly changing political landscape, where a previously undisputed vanguard had been challenged. The reactionary excesses of the Emergency involved a blatant use of force against political and ideological opponents. From an analyst's perspective, this was a rather uninteresting movement as much in terms of semantic complexity, as for its social potential.

The second movement, however, was significant. The Emergency did not survive long, and in the following elections, the Congress government was thrown out of power; however, only to return in the next elections. In terms of historical significance, this implied a rejection of fetishized ideals and absolute authority as effective techniques of power, thereby leading into a rather novel step in the technology of liberal democratic politics. Political parties, it seemed, could no more generate power through ideals and institutions so removed from the masses. A politics of engagement had become necessary –power now had to be derived in mediating the active constitution of the subject population. It is important to note here that the “third world” or postcolonial subject of liberal democratic politics was at this point not a discursively familiar or “known” entity, her whims not quite predictable from extant Western liberal democratic technology. The arrival of the television on the social scene as a powerful means of mass mediation exclusively controlled by the state, both signaled and defined the complexity of this historical juncture.

The governmental employment of this medium may be separated into three different forms (see Rajagopal 2001). First, its employment as a pedagogical medium disseminating expert knowledge and cultivating social ideals – such as lessons in farming technology, science lessons for school children, messages of recommended social and patriotic values. Second, the TV screen became a regular host to solemn images of state figures, mirroring the (mis)recognitions of popular representation: political leaders dressed in immaculate white, extravagantly coded attires announcing schemes of social upliftment, while cutting ribbons in various inauguration ceremonies as if unleashing the nation's potential in the form of ever new institutions and opportunities. The addition of television's visual dimension to the existing means of mass mediation, like radio and newsprint, provided a remarkable opportunity for the fetishization of these images of the ideal, eventually to be retrieved as political dividends. In this form, however, the fetish does not as yet belong to the genre of fetishes proper to the culture of liberal capitalism, nor represents an alternate social constitution of capital. This is more a first order fetish, a fetish of interpersonal relations, which to our times is perhaps the correlate of an obstructed political formation belonging to the same register as the hypothetical, pre-modern fetish of the king (see Zizek 1997: 100-105). In these two modes, the space of the television may be described as an extension of existing political technology, a quantitative accretion whose qualitative effect will have to be recognized elsewhere, in another moment.

The third mode included commissioned, state-ratified “entertainment” programs. Here, in the mode of play or entertainment, television’s contribution in the configuration and evolution of political technology is at its most significant. The screening of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (and the multitude of soap operas to follow suit), with its immediate and future political correlates belongs to this category. The screening of the epic marks an instance of the tapping or the engagement of mythico-imaginary traces in the cause and politics of the symbolic network –in other terms, the (re)generation and mobilization of one network of symbols in the terms and cause of another. As mentioned previously, this situation developed at a time when the Indian political elite was forced to enter the public fray for the constitution of political power. At first sight then, as several scholars have argued, such religious marketing was supposed to indulge adherents of Hindu culture and beliefs to win their approval for the ruling party, the Congress, which had heretofore projected itself as a bastion of secular ideals and minority rights (see Rajagopal 2001; Mankekar 2002). For the Congress, this marked a shift in political orientation –fearing the erosion of its political monopoly, it attempted a new motif, a new technique toward consolidating its political base. The question, however, is: In what economy of the libido, in what mechanisms of signification, are we to locate the political efficacy of this move to mythico-religious entertainment? To respond to this question, one needs to first consider the magnitude of the event.

The serial’s popularity paralleled the epical significance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself to the Indic traditions. In a time when televisions were in India rather rare, within months of its inauguration, the viewership for a *Rāmāyaṇa* episode added to 40 to 80 million (Rajagopal 2001). On Sunday mornings, *Rāmāyaṇa* fever seized the country, in particular the north. Thus, Lutgendorf observed:

Visible manifestations of the serial’s popularity included [...] cancellation of Sunday morning shows in cinema halls for lack of audiences, the delaying of weddings and funerals to allow participants to view the series, and the eerily quiet look of many cities and towns, especially in the North during screenings [...]. Bazaars, streets, and wholesale markets became so deserted they appear(ed) to be under curfew [...] trains were delayed when passengers refused to leave the platform until a broadcast was over. (1990: 136-7)

The exemplarily fetishist character of this popularity is evident from the piety that the series and the TV screen aroused. “Crowds gathered around every wayside television set, though few could have seen much on the small black and white TV sets with so many present. Engine drivers were reported to depart from their schedules, stopping their trains at stations en route if necessary, in order to watch” (Rajagopal 2001: 84). Further, as Melwani observes:

In many homes the watching of the *Ramayan* has become a religious ritual, and the television set [...] is garlanded, decorated with sandalwood paste and vermillion, and conch shells are blown. Grandparents admonish youngsters to bathe before the show and housewives put off serving meals so that the family is purified and fasting before *Ramayan*. (cited in Lutgendorf 1990: 136)

The virtual reproduction from the mythico-religious realm surely incited a passionate response. I propose that this striking appeal of the mythico-religious virtual production, this unbridled attachment is but an instance of *jouissance*: the promise of an ultimate association, a final identification of the subject with what it perceives as its constitutive – and, as I later suggest, historic – beyond. However, we should not hastily identify, categorize this, as is so often the case, as yet another instance of the ubiquitous appeal of “religion.” For *jouissance*, like most Lacan, may not be understood beyond the structure in which it generates. The audience of the *Rāmāyaṇa* should be analyzed not as a general, pre-existing audience of the religious myth or performance but as an audience co-produced in the tele-performance of the fantasy particular; the audience, the desire that animates it, is dialectical. The analysis of the phenomenon thus has to be as much an analysis of the product, this object that is the regulating center of the phenomenon.

## **The television serial: an analysis**

In the *Puppet and the Dwarf*, Žižek characterizes Bataille as pre-modern for the latter’s critique of the sexual revolution under the premise that prohibition was a necessary condition to transgression. Conversely, Žižek avers that the super ego injunction “Enjoy!” of the late capitalist permissive society that “elevates excess into the very principle of its normal functioning” (p.56) plays a homologous role although at a different level. Paraphrasing Brecht, he says “What is a poor Bataillean subject engaged in his transgressions of the system compared to the late capitalist excessive orgy of the system itself.” Žižek locates the anxiety characteristic of our age in an effect of “this elevation of transgression into the norm, the lack of the prohibition that would sustain desire” (p.56).

The Bataillean field is defined by a prohibition, there to be transgressed. In transgressing, the subject marks her agency, ‘enjoyment’ be the product/residuum. Conversely, in the late capitalist world, the social field is itself structured on the model of enjoyment, that is, surplus enjoyment, which the Bataillean subject transgresses for, here defines the very substance of the field. The difference between the two operations of desire correlates with the

difference in the two types of economies. In the earlier social formations, the economy is primarily guided by the logic of utility – better, use-value – orientation, while under the late capitalist apotheosis of exchange, the prime organizing theme of the economy becomes, in a rather ironic sense, play. In other words, under late capitalism, “to enjoy” is not just an injunction to consume, it organizes the field of production itself.

The TV serial is an instance of this structure of production. The psychoanalytic trope of ‘repetition’ is useful in analyzing the mechanism of this phenomenon. Serial enjoyment is constituted through the insistent rupture of the fantasy bond by the peremptory intrusions of the Big Other. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud speaks of the little game of *fort da* he saw his grandchild play. The child, in making up for the mother’s absence, would repeatedly hide and pull back a cotton-reel that he held by a thread, letting out a sound of “fort” as he threw it away, and “da” when pulling back. Here, Freud recognizes the ‘drive’. The serial performs a similar game of supply and denial but in an inverted form. In this later edition, the sides have changed: no longer is it the subject who finds/hides the reel, rather it is the Big Other that in a reverse function supplies/denies the object of the libido. If the game is the child’s mechanism of generating enjoyment through a dialectic of possession and dispossession of the object-cause, the TV serial realizes this mechanism of production of surplus enjoyment in the form of a commodity. Like most human potentialities, the drive here is accommodated as a productive factor in capital’s exploits.

The solid presence of the social order and its call on the superego is affirmed in the structure of the serial as a piece-meal product divided on the basis of the pragmatics of a capitalist social order. The *Rāmāyaṇa* used to be telecast weekly on Sunday mornings, with commercial breaks every few minutes. Watching this serial as a teenager on a small black-and-white set, huddled in the living room of a neighboring family, one of my strongest impressions is the intense waiting during the week, as well as during the commercials. The fantasy supply thus is continuously interspersed with bursts of “reality”<sup>1</sup> in the form of commercials –or in the form of everyday life – which are involved like a super ego reminding us of the fantastic quality of the viewing experience and our obligations to the commercial sphere making it possible. More importantly, however, the episodic telecast allows the TV serial to employ the ‘repetition compulsion’ in its productive strategy. The enjoyment of this fantasy commodity thus does not lie just in the creation of the audiovisual product but follows right up to the form and moment where it is served for consumption.

This structure where the subject’s cathectic bond with the fantasy is broken after fixed intervals and held in suspension after every episode is part of the structure of the viewer’s *jouissance*. In psychoanalytic terms, different episodes of the serial are *repetitions*. No doubt every new episode is a performance of the same material – it is even the same serial after all –

but more significantly, it is a repetition of the difference the first made. As Constantin Constantius, the pseudonymous author of Kirkegaard's *Repetition*, unable to repeat the experience of the first holiday, concludes in a "sudden shift of perception": "the only repetition was the impossibility of repetition" (Pound 2007: 58). And, as Pound elaborates, "one can (only) repeat the holiday by having an entirely different holiday but which nonetheless recreates the initial difference the first holiday made, that is, one establishes continuity in terms of difference" (p. 58). Repetition is the labor of the attempts to retrace the neural network in trying to bring about an identity of memory and perception. In the case of the TV serial, we may suggest, it is the pleasure and the labor of attempts to retrace the fantasy experience of previous episodes. The repetitive process sets up a concatenation of cathectic departures. Since TV serials in any case extend forever, these pleasures or stimulations of neural re-traces may be expected to subsist even where one may not actually be vis-à-vis a performance.

A feature of repetition (after all, why is Constantin dying to repeat?) is that the *jouissance* it is after is always an excess, it is not to be achieved. Repetition is properly speaking the repetition of the failure, of the lack in the subject; it is "what goes against life" (Lacan 2007:45). The subject keeps re-enacting the action, a step ahead each time, if only to continuously lose what is repeated; throws itself toward a *jouissance* never any longer there. As Freud shows in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the subject is driven by "an urge...to restore an earlier state of things," a compulsion to repeat, driven by "repressed memory-traces of his primeval experiences" (1989: 612). The common melodrama of the soap opera is an example of such compulsion. As though compensating for the repression of emotions in modern life, every act of the soap opera is steeped with sentimentality: emotions amplified, shown in repeated close-ups<sup>2</sup>, satiating the subject. The lack that the subject experiences in reality is compensated as an excess in the virtual; excess that performs on the model of repetition, that is, by means of the primal lack in the subject. In a late capitalist culture steeped in excess consumption, then, it is hardly surprising that the structure of *jouissance* but drives the production chain.

The excess supplied in the virtual sphere is compensation for the lack in reality at the same time as it is a factor to the production of late-capitalist reality; the virtual excess is born as the necessary supplement of contemporary reality. It may never detach from the logistics of capital that has a constitutive role in its production. Reality is most vividly visible in the commercials interspersed in the fantasy product, continuing as a subtext to the designated fantasy experience. The temporal contiguity of the fantasy product and the reality (or the fantasy!) of the commercial ensures that both affect the reader together, that they enframe each other. Thus, images of bombs dropping on a city or people dying of starvation share fantasy space with advertisements of shoes and shampoos. The real becomes imaginary, it is delivered as a fantasy, as virtual; the fantasy space is more or less phenomenologically homogenous.

## Rememberance, *Jouissance*, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*

There are supposed to be hundreds of versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, rendered primarily in oral traditions and through religious rituals<sup>3</sup>. Of these, the Valmiki and Tulsidas versions enjoy a canonical status. For all his demurrals<sup>4</sup>, Ramanand Sagar is often blamed for adopting these canonical versions –which, following Redfield’s (1965) distinction, we may classify as parts of the “great tradition”– for his serial. This issue of the choice of version has attracted significant scholarly attention (Rajagopal 2001; Lutgendorf 1991). Yet, the problem of the presentation of the epic as a soap opera in a synchronized nation-wide telecast, in what Anderson (1991) called the homogenous time of the nation, operates at a level altogether different. So intensely determined is this product by the factors of capital and ideological conventions that the implications of the choice of the version may by themselves only be of secondary significance.

The interlacing of economic factors and the virtual rendering of the mythology is central to the structure of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, its effects, its politico-economic operation. These effects need to be analyzed in the structure of desire. The exploits of the god-king Rāma, we may suggest, have featured in the Hindu collective consciousness for ages. For the viewing subject, the (tele)vision or *darśana* of the deity and his divine escapades in the TV serial is, therefore, always an event after the original. It is always a recollection, a re-remembering –that is, it has an attached historical dimension. This is characteristic of the drive that marks *jouissance*. As Lacan says,

The drive... embodies a historical dimension whose true significance needs to be appreciated. This dimension is to be noted in the insistence that characterizes its appearances; it refers back to something memorable because it was remembered. Remembering, “historicizing”, is coextensive with the functioning of the drive in what we call the human psyche. (2007: 209)

The televised narrative of the deity utilizes the structure of *jouissance*. As *jouissance* appears as the beyond of a drive, the elusive end of an insistent excess, so the virtual commodity-object (the TV serial) is excessive. In Sagar’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, the divine gestures, Rāma’s acts of passive grace, are repeated in endless close-ups, allowing us to immerse in the grace of the otherwise inaccessible god-head. But the paradox of *jouissance* is such that it may only be encountered in its inaccessibility. The immersion in the divine is, in the manner of the psychoanalytic session, cut short after definite intervals when the viewer/devotee is thrown back into the world. The repetitive mode of the drive is thereby structured into the concept of the TV serial, as a factor of capitalist production. The response of the viewer/devotee may be represented by the Lacanian



formula for fantasy,  $\$ \diamond a$ , as the roundabout relation between the empty, barred subject and the *objet petit a*, an element in the object that represents the subject, though only as far as it is lost on her. The fantasy-object produced as a commodity in a dominant ideological schema, however, is always already a subversion of the subject's particular fantasy. This is illustrated, for example, in the Lacanian matheme of the master's discourse (refer section 4, fig 3), where the two fantasy components are submerged in the tête-à-tête between the master signifier (S1) and the battery of signifiers (S2). The manufacture of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an ideologically located audio-visual product employing the repetition compulsion is an instance of the master discourse's functioning. Like commodity fetishism, the fetish of the TV god provides the foundation for the master's discourse –supports it on its back, as it were –while the founding fantasy gropes about in the interstices. In the serial, thus, primeval historical traces are deployed in constituting an economically successful product.

As I indicated earlier, in the 1980s conjuncture in Indian society the problematic of the economy is implicated in the rise of the political right. The *Rāmāyaṇa* serial is not simply an instance of an economic operation, it metonymically represents a new ideological becoming. The following section analyzes the structure of 'religion as ideology' using notions of 'surplus' and 'trauma' in Lacanian theory.

## Exploits of the Surplus

If ideology designates "*a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility*" (Žižek 1989: 49), the commissioning of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an exemplary instance of an ideological operation. As scholars have shown, the serial was commissioned at a historical juncture where the extant ideology of the ruling disposition had been ruptured, would no more close in on itself (Van der Veer 1994; Rajagopal 2001). The screening of the *Rāmāyaṇa* thereby marks the moment of an ideological shift, an instance where the ruling ideology has to include another element to maintain the fiction of totality. This chink in the ideological enclosure that necessitates the incorporation of a radically new factor is what makes this a period of transition; a conjuncture where component factors reassemble and are hauled as new social forces. The question is: what is the particular significance and function of the *Rāmāyaṇa* serial as this ideological re-equipment?

To put it simply, the function of the *Rāmāyaṇa* serial was to employ god in the ideological cause; supplement the ideological totality with the name of God. At the same time, however, as part of the larger television phenomenon, the serial brought home tantalizing commodity images into the greater Indian landscape. This arrival of God and the commodity (in

its new, liberal form), two of humanity's cardinal achievements, in the same moment, is what makes this conjuncture so pregnant. God comes to be employed as an intermediary, a space (and time) that will allow the transition from one mode of the economy (and an attendant ideology) into another. He operates as a surplus; the role of the surplus is not to be underestimated. The Lacanian concept of surplus *jouissance* or surplus value is helpful in understanding this function. "Surplus-enjoyment is not a surplus which simply attaches itself to some 'normal', fundamental enjoyment, because *enjoyment as such emerges only in this surplus*, because it is constitutively an 'excess'" (Žižek 1989: 52). The religious surplus is constitutive of the project of the new economy. Religiosity is not an external element that attaches itself to the new economic project; it is an excess, a surplus that constitutes it. I would contend that in the context of widespread deprivation in India of the 1980s, the fetish of the commodity was by itself not enough to legitimize a free market culture. Where most people would have little access to commodities that were to soon saturate the landscape, the proposition of free market ethics would have been an electoral disaster for any political agent. Indeed, given the political agent located within the structure of the society, an agency with such an agenda would be unviable. The religious discourse was necessary to this transitional structure. In other words, the liberal economic order could only be ushered in the name of God, this latter was the necessary supplement of a culture apropos the new economy.

Nonetheless, as the new economy takes shape, the surplus has to attain a consistency that is internal to it, that is, find itself an ideology. Right wing religious ideology –religious nationalism, as it is called in India –is this ideology of the surplus that effaces the lack that constitutes it while giving a twist to its engagement with the economic externality (see Van der Veer 1994; Hansen 2001). The religious ideology, with its repetitive message, thus functions as a cover. Its social function –and here I include the political parties with their vested agendas and agentic dimensions et cetera – is to hide something that may not be countenanced. It is founded on a necessary denial. Yet, is it not that in psychoanalytic theory, such distortion or dissimulation is itself treated as "revealing"? As Žižek aptly puts, "what emerges via distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the Real –that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured" (1994: 26). What then is the traumatic core that will only be recognized in the consistency that it gives to this social phenomenon of a sudden religious upsurge and the ideology that attends to it? What does this sudden, insistent attachment to religion, this almost new disposition, signify? It certainly arrives with the new economic order, but where precisely should one locate the lack or surplus in this order that warrants as fundamental a support as God's?

For the present exercise, I suggest we search for the traumatic Real that gives rise to the dissimulating assemblage in precisely what is new to this moment: the ravishing entrance of

the market. The fetish of the commodity – this object that “fascinates the subject, reduces him to a passive gaze impotently gaping at the object”, (Žižek 1997: 115) – is a powerful effect, not to be underestimated. So bewitching is this object built after, in the image of, one’s fantasies (themselves constituted as part of a signifying structure) that in this relation, it assumes a position no less than the subject’s. Žižek, in the notion of ‘interpassivity’, offers insights into this effect of the commodity become subject:

The substitution of the object for the subject is thus in a way even more primordial than the substitution of the signifier for the subject: if the signifier is the form of ‘being active through another’, the object is the signifier in the form of ‘being passive through another’ – that is to say, the object is primordially that which suffers, endures it, for me, in my place: in short, that which *enjoys* for me. So what is unbearable in my encounter with the object is that in it, I see *myself* in the guise of a suffering object: what reduces me to a fascinated passive observer is the scene of *myself* passively enduring it. (1997, 116)

Yet, commodity fixation is not traumatic by itself. In the Lacanian analytical structure, to be so fixed on something or the other is part of the subject’s constitution; the commodity belongs to the realm of signifiers. Neither should the trauma be traced to the denial, the inaccessibility of the fantasy object, that is, in the condition of being deprived the commodity, or ‘being poor’. The concentration of the trauma is rather in the inability to face this denial of the object, it is the refusal to countenance this denial, the inability to provide it a signifying structure. “Freud defines the pathogenic nucleus as what is being sought, but which repels the discourse, what discourse shuns. Resistance is the inflexion the discourse adopts on approaching the nucleus” (Lacan 1988: 39). In our analysis, the name of God, the religious hyperbole, signifies this resistance – it is the inflexion of the discourse of the commodity itself. The religious ideology enacted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is but the discourse of the commodity constituting itself as resistance, about the gap in the subject. This explains why an ideology like religious nationalism never really goes too far from the dominant ideology of capital, how it spins about the same center (see, for instance, Hansen 1999). It also indicates why the television god, Rāma, is in the end little more than an ideological caricature.<sup>5</sup> The following discussion on discursive production using Lacan’s quartet of discursive compositions and articulated in reference to the Marxist discourse should further elucidate my argument.

# In absence of the analyst: The hysteric, the master and the production of religious ideology

Speaking of 'discourse' then, would it be too much to suggest – even for our short analytical operation – that the radical historical achievement of 'class analysis' is the analysis itself; the discourse that provides a signifying structure to the "traumatic social antagonism" (Žižek 2003) or alienation in the heart of society? One has to be careful here, for to say that such is the real achievement of this analysis, is already to go against the grain. The analysis only makes it to its historical significance as long as it extends toward a core that is always outside it, that is, it is not fore-closed as knowledge but extends toward a little something, the *objet petit a* that is beyond it. Marx's concern is work or labor, not knowledge. "Even if work is accomplished by those who have knowledge, what it produces can certainly be truth, it is never knowledge – no work has ever produced knowledge" (Lacan 2007: 79). Marx's work is thereby work in the 'true' sense. What it is at pains to master is the enigma of the worker's condition or his labor, as far as the worker becomes only in his labor; the enigma of this lack in symbolic representation, that continues to echo in the term, alienation. It is the *a*, inaccessible of the capitalist's discourse and to knowledge (at least before the discourse which, in due course, comes to be called the Marxist discourse), setting this signification chain in motion in the very act or instance of its exclusion, that Marx addresses himself to. If "the reference of a discourse is what it acknowledges it wants to master" (Lacan 2007: 69), in Lacan's four-legged schema of discourses, Marxist analysis – like the analysis of that other master who spoke of the *a*, of *jouissance*, Lacan – is the discourse of the analyst.

A major historical significance of Marx's analysis is in the signifying structure that it produces in its attempt to master the traumatic core of the condition of the working class. The trauma, as Lacan shows, is not of the nature of a pathological blow that as if distorts the subject's history ever after. The historicity of trauma functions in the other direction. It is the signification system that retroactively constructs the primeval moment as traumatic in the deal that it makes with the subject. The object of trauma is thus a consequence of a discursive treatment, or a lack thereof. In the analyst's discourse, the *objet petit a*, the alien object that is non-assimilable in the system of signification, enjoys the place of pride. This discourse is driven towards the *objet a*; repeats itself about it.



Fig. 1 The Analyst's Discourse

Lacan identifies the *a* as surplus *jouissance* or surplus value. The surplus value, which is also the surplus *jouissance* of the master, is, I suggest, but strictly the worker's alienation converted. In the nature of the analyst's discourse (Fig 1), here the *objet a* addresses the split subject (the alienated worker, \$) by subverting the new master's (capitalist's) knowledge (S2). Class consciousness is this address. The residue of the analysis, what drops out, is the worker's status (the signifier of the worker, S1) in the capitalist schema. The value of this discourse is in where it situates itself, at the core of the trauma. "It is not very comfortable to be situated at this point where discourse emerges, or even, when it returns here, when it falters, in the environs of *jouissance*" (Lacan 2007: 71). As Lacan shows us, the analyst's discourse is but a quarter turn in the hysteric's discourse (Fig. 2). "...it's the hystericization of discourse...the structural introduction of the hysteric's discourse" (Lacan 2007: 33). Marxism is thereby primarily a project of the transformation of the suffering worker's hysteric discourse into a class-consciousness whose first addressee is the traumatic content of the worker's condition. This Lacanian reading also problematizes Althusser's categorization of the "early Marx" as ideological, as opposed to his later works (Althusser 1969). The note on the alienation (surplus *jouissance*) of the worker that Marx began with in works like the German ideology and the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts was the very kernel of the Real that would structure the rest of Marx's *oeuvre*. To realize the full significance of the analyst's treatment of the hysteric's discourse, we have to see what happens to this discourse in the hands of the master. The ideology of religious nationalism which is one of the motifs in this essay provides an example.



Fig 2. The Hysteric's Discourse

The religious discourse, the name of God, is, by itself – to this analysis – the discourse of the hysteric (Fig. 2). It is the split, barred subject (\$) shouting out to the subject's signifier (S1) in the name of an excess, a nothing, a power that is beyond time and reason, yet enjoys the force of history.<sup>6</sup> The religious imagery/themata is constituted where the split subject addresses the signifier (S1) by excluding the dominant symbolic system. In the Lacanian schema, powerful where this cry is, it emanates out of the repression of the *objet a*. In the religious field that has been the focus of this paper, the hysteric's religious discourse (Fig 2) emanates from the repression of the assault from an inrush of inaccessible fantasy objects following the neo-liberal opening. However, as I have maintained, the traumatic assault is a consequence of a discursive treatment, the traumatic moment is the symptomatic sediment of a discursive lack. Here, in the

repression of this lack, which is the *objet a*, the hysteric shouts out in the name of God. But no sooner has she spoken than her discourse is reverted into the original (default) form of the master's discourse in the ideology of religious nationalism.



Fig 3. The Master's Discourse

In this discourse (Fig 3), the signifier that the split subject of the hysteric addresses himself to is instead turned toward the very symbolic system or knowledge (S<sub>2</sub>) that was excluded in the hysteric's discourse. The split subject is repressed, as the discourse is concerned with mastering the subject's signifier. The primeval lack, the *objet a*, that the analyst's discourse tried to bring into the fold is, in this discourse of the master, reproduced, as usual, as residuum.

## Conclusion

The ideology of Hindu religious nationalism thus functions, to use a Deleuzian metaphor, as a retrogressive machine that turns the outrageous sequences springing out of the moment of crisis back into the master's fold. Toward this purpose, it comes up with a mythological structure to assure itself a minimum discursive consistency. Hindu religious nationalism does so by configuring itself around an axis composed from the construction and exploitative maneuvering of what may be called the Hindu-Muslim factor, the incitement of a Hindu identity against the Muslim as the immediate other. This ideological discourse is actively produced, and tapped by political parties. The function of the party thereby has precisely been to *displace* the hysterical structure of the religious phenomenon into an ideological structure.<sup>7</sup> The political agency absorbs the religious surplus (here, stray myths/acts/evidences of Hindu-Muslim antagonism) in the economy of its own strategy, generating in the process an ideological structure in which this surplus is given the cardinal location where the cause of the social phenomenon can be identified with the party's own political cause or objective. And thereby, a new ideological force enters the domain of Indian politics and culture.

This article has argued that in India of the 1980s, television and the *Rāmāyaṇa* serial operated as mediums participating in the formation of a new ideological force. The human compulsion to repetition and a *jouissance* consequent to a pre-existing collective unconscious were harnessed as able allies in this transformative process. While television, by itself, belonged to the realm of commodities and their mediums, whose ravishing encounter factored in the traumatic constitution, the name of God (or the acts of the god, *Rāmalīlā*) in the *Rāmāyaṇa* serial worked to sublimate the traumatic in the very moment and medium of its inception. The *Rāmāyaṇa* serial may thus be seen as metonymic of the ideological appropriation of the hysteric's scream for god at the traumatic moment of neo-liberal arrival, both as a flood of commodities and as discursive hegemony. The serial and its effects foreshadowed the era of Hindu religious nationalism, which has continued loom over the society and its democratic promise ever since.

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<sup>1</sup> ...in the sense of its economic logic.

<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. See, Rajagopal (2001).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, various essays in Richman (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Episodes of the serial would often close with a personal address by Ramanand Sagar narrativizing the production process, including vignettes on how the serial depictions had been corroborated via a plethora of sources.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive description of the ideological location of the character of Rāma, see Rajagopal (2001).

<sup>6</sup> For the existential significance of religion in contemporary India, see author (2011).

<sup>7</sup> A structure that has to be rock solid in its insistence. As Žižek illustrates in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* through the example of the ideologically mature anti-semitic who, finding a nice amiable person in his Jewish neighbor, reasons that these masks are precisely what make the Jew so dangerous. "An ideology only succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor (1989: 49)."