



Final Report

Asura: Myths and Modern Representations in India

(เทพปกรณัมและการเสนอภาพแทนสมัยใหม่ของอสูระในอินเดีย)

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(The views expressed in this research do not have to reflect the views of the TRF)

Abstract

Asura is a term associated with demon in Hindu mythology. However, this study has revealed that at one particular time in Indian Vedic society, Asuras were highly worshipped deities, and at another time they were linked to the indigenous people. In literary and religious realms, they have become the epitome of evil or villain who embodies dark forces or bad qualities. In the context of modern India, Asura has become a denomination for self-respect of Dalit-Bahujans and other marginalized groups who are not identified with Hindu-Brahmanical culture. These people deploy myths and cultural history of suppression to (re)construct their own discourse for political struggles and expressions. This research project aims to find out first, who the Asuras are in both mythical and social senses of the term; second, how politics of representation of the Asura operates and third, how Ravana, a demonic figure in Ramayana epic, and being Asura are represented in the modern context. Regarding methodology, the study employs textual analysis and certain cultural studies concepts including subaltern studies, autonomy and lack, representation and affect theory.

Keywords: Asura, Ramayana, Ravana, myths, representation

บทคัดย่อ

อสูระหรืออสูรเป็นคำที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเป็นปิศาจในเทพปกรณัมฮินดูของอินเดีย อย่างไรก็ตามงานวิจัยนี้พบว่า ช่วงหนึ่งของสังคมยุคพระเวทย์อสูระเป็นเทพที่ได้รับการเคารพบูชาอย่างสูง ทว่า ณ อีกเวลาหนึ่งอสูระถูกเชื่อมโยงกับกลุ่มชนพื้นเมือง ในทางวรรณกรรมและศาสนา อสูระคือตัวแทนแห่งความชั่วร้ายหรือผู้ร้ายที่เต็มไปด้วยพลังมืดและคุณสมบัติที่ไม่พึงประสงค์ ในอินเดียสมัยใหม่ อสูระกลายมาเป็นคำเรียกขานเพื่อความเคารพ頓ของกลุ่มดาลิต-บาहुจัน (กลุ่มชนชั้นจัณฑาลและฮินดูวรรณะต่ำ) รวมทั้งกลุ่มชนชายขอบอื่นๆที่ไม่เห็นพ้องกับวัฒนธรรมพราหมณ์-ฮินดูกระแสหลัก กลุ่มคนเหล่านี้ใช้เทพปกรณัมและประวัติศาสตร์วัฒนธรรมการถูกกดทับ ถูกเอาเปรียบมาสร้างวาทกรรมใหม่เพื่อใช้ในการต่อสู้ทางการเมืองและการแสดงออกทางความรู้สึก วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้คือ ข้อแรกเพื่อศึกษาว่าอสูระคือใคร ทั้งในเชิงเทพปกรณัมและเชิงสังคม ข้อสองเพื่อวิเคราะห์ว่าอสูระนำเสนอภาพแทนของตนในเชิงการเมืองอย่างไร และข้อสุดท้ายคือเพื่อสำรวจว่า ในบริบทสมัยใหม่ มีการนำเสนอภาพตัวละครราวณะหรือทศกัณฐ์ในมหากาพย์รามายณะและความเป็นอสูระเช่นไร วิธีวิทยาที่ใช้ในการวิจัย ได้แก่ การวิเคราะห์ตัวบท และแนวคิดต่างๆทางวัฒนธรรมศึกษา ประกอบด้วย แนวคิดของกลุ่มคนไร้เสียง แนวคิดเรื่องเอกราชแห่งตนและความพร้อม การนำเสนอภาพแทนและทฤษฎีอารมณ์ ความรู้สึก

คำสำคัญ: อสูระ รามายณะ ราวณะ เทพปกรณัม การนำเสนอภาพแทน

Executive Summary

โครงการวิจัย เรื่อง “เทพ/ภรณ์และการเสนอภาพแทนสมัยใหม่ของอสูระในอินเดีย”
(Asura: Myths and Modern Representations in India)

1. ความสำคัญและที่มาของปัญหา (Introduction to research problem and its significance)

The story of Ramayana has been told innumerable times and in various versions. This mythology is glorious in its literary status as it is considered to be the first Sanskrit epic poem or song, which recounts a legendary tale of a hero, Rama (Noonsuk 1981). Moreover, it reveals, what is believed to contain, some archeological linkages to the ancient history of India and influences several important social aspects of the Hindu life, be it politics, philosophy or religion. All of which have academic repercussions and remain open to critical discussions and investigations until the present day. In Thailand, the story of the great battle between the hero Rama, who represents the gods or the Devas tribe and the villain, Ravana, representing the demons or the Asuras tribe is familiar to the general public as it is taught in school and performed as a stage play. In addition, the story's theme, on which religious connotation is emphasized, is ingrained in the Buddhist discourse of dhamma (moral) versus adhamma (immoral) dichotomy. Invariably, it is the former that has been victorious. Thus, as far as the story of Ramayana is concerned, whether it is of the original rishi Valmiki's version of Ramayana or the Thai version of “Ramakien”, compiled by King Rama I, among others, what always resonates in the public recognition of the epic is the glory of Rama, the man of nobility and the defeat of the demonish Ravana.

What makes this epic even more appealing and worthy of critical exploration, however, goes beyond its moral theme and mere literary masterpiece status. The existence of numerous textual versions of the epic as well as the diverse forms of modern dissemination (e.g. cartoons, tv. series and animation films) suggests that each Ramayana story produces different meanings to different groups of audiences. This implication, on the one hand, reflects on social and political conditions of the society on which that particular version of Ramayana is built. For example, in Thailand, the term “Rama” is adopted to address all of the Chakri Dynasty's kings as a way to legitimizing the monarchy power (Bose 2004). On the other, the diversity of Ramayana indicates the complexity of its reception. Ideologically, the connection with Rama, which extends to his virtues and godly character, has often been associated with both political and moral hegemony.

With multiple readings in mind, this research project has taken the question of political representations to the fore and sought to find out how reading a different version of Ramayana can entail alternative meanings and effects, which speak to social reality of its relevant subjects/citizens. This would help, to a certain extent, demystify the enigma of Ravana, the formidable, yet intriguing villain, who has relatively been revered and worshipped as well. The researcher has chosen a popular Indian novel, “Asura”, written in 2013 by a South Indian novelist, Anand Neelakantan as a central text of investigation. The novel *Asura* can be viewed as an alternative, counter-hegemonic version of Ramayana. That is to say, what makes the story uniquely different and appealing is that it is told by the two antagonists, King Ravana and his servant Bhadra. Both characters belong to the same clan, Asura, which represents “the oppressed outcastes”. According to the author (as written on the back cover of the novel):

Asura is the epic tale of the vanquished Asura people, a story that has been cherished by the oppressed outcastes of India for 3,000 years. Until now, no

Asura has dared to tell the tale. But perhaps the time has come for the dead and the defeated to speak.

It is the reverse form of retelling of Ramayana in *Asura* that calls for our scholarly engagement here. Hence, an inquiry into the tale will not only allow for different, unfamiliar voices to be heard, it will also accommodate political expressions of the defeated, which represents the underrepresented class in the Indian society. Being a South Indian, the author, has explicitly taken a chance through his writing to critique the dominant Brahminism and Hindu authority, which are more pervasive in the North. The reading of the novel shall also be taken as a dossier for us as a world literary audience and a researcher to critically engage in the task of understanding and unravelling the hidden meanings of the Indian literature and to see how ‘the others’ are making sense of the world.

2. วัตถุประสงค์ (Objectives)

1. To find out who the Asuras are and how their social identity in the novel, *Asura*, and other regional forms of representations such as poems or folk tales, are constructed.
2. To explore how the politics of representation plays out.
3. To examine whether Ravana figure is used for any political cause and how.

3. ระเบียบวิธีวิจัย (Methodology)

The primary method will be textual analysis, in which the narrative and structure of *Asura*, along with other non-literary texts (poems and folk tales) related to the retelling of Ramayana will be closely read and analyzed. In order to achieve the research purposes, theoretical frameworks usually employed in Cultural Studies to inquire into social phenomena and identity including Representation and Subaltern Studies will be used as well. Salient features of the mentioned approaches can be briefly described as follow:

- **Representation** is an approach primarily conceptualized by Stuart Hall (1997) who played a key role as a founding figure of an intellectual school of thought referred to as Cultural Studies, which privileges the use of interdisciplinary approaches to social and cultural inquiry. Hall proposes three approaches to representation including reflective, intentional and constructionist. Each approach defines differently how meaning can be made. The reflective approach focuses on the mirror like quality of the text that shows what already exists in the world. The intentional approach focuses on the author or individual user of language who conveys the message, thus believingly holds the meaning of it. The last one, constructionist approach takes social structures and conceptual systems of one particular culture into account and maintains that meaning is socially constructed.
- **Subaltern Studies** emerged in the 80s to contest against the mainstream historiography which is believed to be the history writing of the elite. This kind of historiography, despite premising on the Enlightenment rationalism that privileges the narrative of modernity and democracy, fails to take the ‘subaltern’ or the ‘people’ into account. Accordingly, Subaltern Studies was inaugurated by Ranajit Guha to produce “historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subject of history” (Dipesh Chakrabarty 2004: 7). Taking up from Antonio Gramsci’s account of how the Italian peasants under Mussolini could free themselves from the capitalist bourgeoisie hegemony Guha (1982) believes there was a kind of an *autonomous* domain that allowed the subaltern to play their politics (in the sphere of political society), which is in parallel with the constitutionalist-oriented style of elite politics. Even though the subalterns were scattered, ununifying in character, their commonly shared ideology was a notion of resistance to elite domination.

In addition, interviews will also be used as a complementary method in order to find out how a particularly kind of representation of Asura/Ravana myth is made sense of by the real audiences who are identified with and affected by the retold stories.

4. แผนการดำเนินงานวิจัยตลอดโครงการในแต่ละช่วง 6 เดือน (Schedule for the entire project in each 6 months period)

1 st – 6 th month	Study the main text, <i>Asura</i> , and relevant literature and do some ethnographic studies which include traveling to collect data in India and discussing with a few scholars and interviewing local people there.
7 th – 12 th month	Analyze the data and write an introduction and draft chapters (1 and 2). Have the written drafts edited for language accuracy by an English specialist.
13 th – 18 th month	Travel to India to gather additional data and start writing chapter 3, conclusion and bibliography.
19 th – 24 th month	Have the rest of the written drafts edited for language accuracy by an English specialist. Present the completed research finding to the public via conference/publication. Submit the completed research to TRF and Chiang Mai University.

5. ชื่อเรื่องที่เราคาดว่าจะตีพิมพ์ (Expected title of the publication)

ชื่อเรื่องที่เราคาดว่าจะตีพิมพ์ (Title): *Asura : The Myth in Ramayana Retellings*

ชื่อวารสารที่เราคาดว่าจะตีพิมพ์ (Journal): *Asian Review*

6. งบประมาณโครงการ (Budget details)

งบประมาณ	ปีที่ 1	ปีที่ 2	รวม
1. หมวดค่าตอบแทน			
- ค่าตอบแทนหัวหน้าโครงการ	156,000	156,000	312,000
- ค่าตอบแทนผู้เชี่ยวชาญ	35,000	35,000	70,000
- ค่าตอบแทนผู้ให้ข้อมูล (6 คน โดยประมาณ)	1,500	1,500	3,000
2. หมวดค่าวัสดุ			
- ค่าหนังสือ	20,000	10,000	30,000
- ค่าวัสดุสำนักงาน	2,500	2,500	5,000
- ค่าวัสดุคอมพิวเตอร์	2,500	2,500	5,000

3. หมวดค่าใช้จ่าย			
- ค่าเดินทางเข้าร่วมกิจกรรมของฝ่ายวิชาการ สกว.	7,500	7,500	15,000
- ค่าเดินทางไปพบที่ปรึกษาโครงการ	3,000	3,000	6,000
- ค่าเดินทางลงพื้นที่เพื่อเก็บข้อมูล	20,000	20,000	40,000
4. หมวดค่าจ้าง			
- ค่าจ้างผู้แปลภาษา(เตลูกู- อังกฤษ)	5,000	5,000	10,000
- ค่าจ้างผู้เชี่ยวชาญภาษาอังกฤษ	10,000	10,000	20,000
รวมงบประมาณโครงการ	263,000	253,000	516,000

รายละเอียดโครงการ

ชื่อโครงการ (ภาษาไทย): เทวปกรณัมและการเสนอภาพแทนสมัยใหม่ของอสูระในอินเดีย

(ภาษาอังกฤษ): Asura: Myths and Modern Representations in India

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เวลาทำงานวิจัยในโครงการประมาณสัปดาห์ละ 18 ชั่วโมง

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Introduction

Asura: Its connection with different Ramayanas

Unlike demons as imagined in other myths, Asuras— the demons who are generally known as enemies of Hindu deities have taken quite an active, yet controversial role outside the textual form where they originated. Through the process of structural changes, the Asuras have embodied real living people who take pride in their cultural heritage and political identity. *Who are the Asuras?* is a primary question taken up for the purpose of our inquiry. Following this question, the history of their origin and the rise of modern Asuras are traced and discussed. The findings have shed light to some historical facts rooted in Indian mythology which inevitably involved Aryan invasion theory and Aryan/Dravidian conflicts. On the other hand, what has become poignant and relevant to the contemporary context is how the idea of being Asuras has been appropriated by the oppressed minorities to assert their social and ideological positions. For this, being Asura is not an inherent identity one was born with, rather it is an identity one has consciously constructed. Asura then should not be seen exclusively as either a demon or a race of people, but it would be more useful to take into account a wider concept of the term conceptualized by the marginalized people to represent and express themselves.

The task of investigating the Asura is a complicated and difficult one as it requires reading some parts of the Vedic text written in Sanskrit. The investigator, who has no knowledge of Sanskrit could only resort to the translated version of the Veda which is debatable in terms of meaning and interpretation. This is the most serious constraint of this study. In addition to some English translation of the Vedic hymns, other primary sources of this project include a popular novel titled “Asura Tale of the Vanquished” by Anand Neelakantan, a cultural event called “Asura Week” and a film titled “Ravaanan” by Mani Ratnam. These examined texts are constitutive of three different dimensions of representation of the Asura: being portrayed as demons in Vedic myths, as villains in Ramayana tellings and as idols of marginalized people in political arenas. Conveniently speaking, Asura is a story of demons, villains and common folks who are socially disadvantaged and excluded. They have played important part in the making of Indian history since primordial time; however, have not received recognition and equal representation they deserve from the Indian public. Historical pain caused by caste oppression and Hindu-Brahmin domination are the main factors central to the Asura’s agenda for self-expressions.

Regarding modern representations of the Asura, this study has drawn largely from Ramayana tradition, which serves as a solid platform for further analysis of the Asura. Ramayana story is an original source which emerged, constructed and transformed the life of Asuras in different ways depending on how it is articulated by each teller or community. It is therefore relevant to discuss the significant contribution of Ramayana epic and its other tellings, which has made up of a rich reservoir in literature referred to as “Ramayana tradition” (Richman 2000). The origin of Ramayana tradition is often attributed to the Sanskrit version composed by sage Valmiki, given that the story of Rama was prevalent even before Valmiki’s time. There is no intention here to chronologically discuss the coming of various Ramayana versions. However, it is useful to begin our discussion of Ramayana with the Sanskrit version.

Ramayana and Ramayana Tellings¹

It is known that Ramayana epic was composed in Sanskrit *slokas* (verses) by the sage Valmiki sometime around 5th BCE. The verses are divided into chapters called *sargas* in which a specific event is told and *sargas* are further grouped into *kandas* (sections). It is composed of 24,000 verses and is divided into seven *kandas* that recount chronologically the major events in Rama’s life including:

Bala Kanda (about Rama’s childhood up to his marriage),

Ayodhya Kanda (about Rama’s life in the palace until his exile to the forest),

Aranya Kanda (about Rama’s life in the forest until Sita’s abduction by Ravana),

Kishkinda Kanda (about Rama’s journey to Kishkindha, where he allies with the monkey king, Sugriva and Hanuman becomes his devoted servant),

Sundara Kanda (about Rama’s journey to Lanka),

Yuddha Kanda (about Rama’s battle with Ravana, the recovery of Sita, and the return to Ayodhya) and

Uttara Kanda (about Rama’s life in Ayodhya as king, the birth of Rama’s sons and Sita’s test of purity and her banishment)

(Das 2019, Sethirakoset 1972)

The name Ramayana has derived from two words, *Rama* and *Ayana* which means ‘Rama’s journey of virtue to annihilate vice’. The Ramayana contains the teachings of ancient Hindu sages and presents them through allegory. The epic has been translated or reproduced

¹ According to Ramanujan, he prefers the term “telling” to versions or variants because the two latter terms suggest that there is an invariant or original text to refer to whereas tellings have story of their own. See Ramanujan in “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” (1999).

into different regional versions such as *Ramcharitmanas* in old Hindi by Tulsidas, *Iramavataram* in Tamil by Kamban, and *Krittivasi Ramayan* in Bengali by Krittibas Ojha. These other versions or *tellings*, as preferred by A. K. Ramanujan (1999), allow for greater accessibility of the epic to common audience who do not know Sanskrit. For Ramanujan in his remarkable essay titled “Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” (1999), translation need not maintain resemblance of the original text. Different translations cater to different reasons and aesthetic expectations of the reader, thus the task of translating one text (Text 1) to another (Text 2) should not be limited to being ‘iconic’ or faithful to the original text. Each individual translator may incorporate local elements such as imagery, customs, folklore motifs and so on into his/her reproduction, which renders the translated version *indexical*, rather than merely iconic. Similarly, translation can be *symbolic* when Text 2 preserves some structural relations to Text 1, that is, the use of plot and names and events. However, they make use of these minimally to create totally new things with intention to “subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text” (Ramanujan 1999, p. 157). Reflecting on Ramanujan’s thoughts on translation, we can see why there can be as many *Ramayanas* as three hundreds or more. In the same essay, one interesting example given is the differences between Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Kampan’s *Ramayana*, which differ in the use of discourse and style and some details even though the same structure of events are similar. Here, the differences between the same episode narrating the story of Ahalya’s infidelity in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Kampan’s *Iramavataram* can be observed. One difference is psychological subtlety and the deployment of folklore elements available in the Southern literature are reflected in Kampan’s telling. In Valmiki’s, Indra seduces Ahalya who is willingly submitted to the god’s sexual advance. Indra is castrated and a ram’s testicles are replaced for his lost ones. In Kampan’s, Ahalya is conscious of her wrongdoing but is “unable to put aside what was not her” (1999, p. 139). As a consequence, Indra is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed to eyes, and Ahalya is turned to stone. Both kinds of punishment, according to Ramanujan, are suitable for the nature of their offences. Indra bears the mark of the object of his lust and Ahalya is deprived of her sense of physical response. When this is coupled with the idea of Guatama being depicted as a spirit, and representations of Tamil Bhakti, which portray Rama as a divine figure who redeems all sinful souls, Kampan’s telling is enriched with religious passion. Thus, Kampan’s play on folklore motifs and religious connotations makes his telling more atheistically pleasurable than Valmiki’s. Ramanujan explains further that given the iconicity or faithfulness to the original text is not fully exercised, Kampan’s translation is indexical and valuable on its own terms, which is different than that of the

original. Unlike Ramanujan, Swami Vivekananda considers Valmiki's Ramayana to be incomparable as he reasoned that "[n]o language can be purer, non chaster, none more beautiful, and at the same time simpler, than the language in which the great poet has depicted the life of Rama" (cited in Das 2019).

In Thailand, the country of the investigator, Ramayana is known as "Ramakien". It is considered a literary cannon which has a great influence on Thai literature, painting, sculpture and stage performances. Such significance renders Ramakien high art and national heritage. Just like in India, though not as many in number, there are several versions of Ramakien including official and regional ones. When it comes to a question as to where the Thai Ramakien was taken from. One of the answers attempted to respond to this question is that Ramakien was adapted from either a story of Ram/ Rama already existing in common folklore or in *Dasaratha Jataka*, which was prevalent in most countries in Southeast Asia (Setirakoset 1972). This story depicts Ram and Sita as a brother and sister and there is no reference to the battle between Rama and Ravana. To briefly recount the story, Rama is the eldest son of Dasaratha, the king of Varanasi. He was born to Dasaratha's first queen. His siblings include Lakshmana, Sita and Bharata, a step brother born to another queen who influences Dasaratha after Rama's mother dies. The new queen, Bharata's mother, is much favored by the king and is offered a boon to, which she requests the throne for her son. Perceiving the queen's treachery and possible threat to his three children of his first wife, Dasaratha asks the three children to escape to Himalayan forest and live in hermitage there for 12 years until he dies. However, when Dasaratha dies before the 12th year, Bharata who has a good heart refuses to take up the throne. He goes to the forest to fetch his siblings. At first Rama refuses to return reasoning that there are two more years left before the 12th year as per the schedule promised to Dasaratha. Bharata then brings Rama's slippers to the palace and place them before the throne as a symbolic reign. When the 12th year actually arrives, Rama returns to the kingdom in a gracious style and later he makes Sita his queen consort. It seems that this sort of story has been long circulated since the Sukhothai period when a reference to prince Rama was found on a stone inscription. Other textual versions were also found in Ayuthaya and Thonburi periods, albeit only in chapters (Ramet 2015).

Another influential source of Ramakien is of course the Sanskrit Ramayana which was disseminated to Thailand via Java and Khmer kingdoms, as a result of growing influence of Hinduism. Concrete evidences of such dissemination are pieces of bas-relief carvings showcasing important events in Ramayana, at the ancient Phanomrung (Prasat Hin Phanomrung) and Pimay (Prasat Hin Pimay) Temple Complexes, located in the Northeast of

Thailand. At each place, exquisite lintels depicting occurrences in Ramayana are found. These occurrences include the scene when Lakshmana is fallen after he is shot by Indrajit's arrow called "Nakhbas" and the scene in which Hanuman and his monkey army are constructing the bridge across the river to Lanka. According to Rama IV (Singhto 1975), Valmiki's Ramayana provided for a structure of the main events appearing in Ramakien, given that miscellaneous details concerning superstitious beliefs were possibly taken from *Vishnu Purana* and the part dealing directly with Hanuman was taken from *Hahuman Natak*² text. When textually compared, however, the version of Tamil Ramayana is found to be more similar to Ramakien than that of Valmiki's. One example is whereas the two characters: Mahiravana (Maiyarap) and Manimekhala, which are prominent in Ramakien, are absent in Valmiki's version. However, they exist in the Tamil version. Moreover, Tamil and Ramakien also share certain similarities in terminology including names of places and characters (Setirakoset 1972).

There seems to be no inclusive evidence regarding the original sources of the Thai Ramakien. However, one thing that is certain is it is King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty who first compiled and standardized the text to make it suitable to Thai beliefs and social contexts³. This has led to the complete version of Ramakien (1797) most widely known to the public till date. According to Reynolds (1991), Rama I also established the Rama cult in the country through his appropriation of a Saivite "Holy Jewel" (Reynolds 1991, p. 58) tradition and the dynastic cult which had long been practiced in Khmer capital of Angkor. Having integrated into Theravada Buddhism, such a combination of both Laotian rituals and Khmer royal tradition have transformed and subsequently became influential in religious life of the Siamese people. The installation of the Emerald Buddha in his new royal temple (Wat Phra Kaew) in 1784 was accompanied by regular cultic activities, and a commission of a set of murals depicting some of the Ramakien episodes. These activities connoted on the one hand the "Glory of Ram" (Reynolds 1991, p. 58), and they were incorporated into the Buddhist ideal of royal supremacy to legitimize the reign of the Chakri dynasty on the other. Ramakien in both versions of text and performances such as Khon, Nang Yai or Nang Ta Lung may be seen as representing two dimensions of the Thai social life; the life that is invested in the culture of fun and entertainment and the life as a subject of the monarch.

² *Hanuman Natak* is the verse work in praise of Hanuman, a monkey god who is a central character in Ramayana epic. He is depicted as an ardent devotee of Rama. The popular versions of Hanuman Natak are written in Sanskrit, Panjabi and Hindi. See Sujit Mukherjee (1998), in "A Dictionary of Indian Literature: Beginnings – 1850."

³ This also implies that the text might have been a collaborative work of more than one poets working under the king's patronage.

In her postgraduate's thesis, Jeennoon (2004) has given a number of interesting accounts of Ramakien's relevant studies conducted in Thailand, which can be put into three main categories. The first one is a comparative study which involves literary quality and literary elements. Here, two different versions were compared and analyzed to find similarities and differences. For example, a study conducted by Somporn Singhto (1974, cited in Jeennoon 2004) compared the two versions by Rama I and the original version by Valmiki. Singhto suggests that the former is more realistic in its presentations of narrative and characters than the latter. To give one example, the protagonists in Ramakien are not devoid of vices whereas in Ramayana, the protagonists embody ideal virtues making them static characters. Similarly, Chanthat Thongchuay (1979, cited in Jeennoon 2004) compared the royal version with the Southern one and discovered that there are commonly shared elements such as the advent of things and beings in the story and the encounter of Ram and the character of Phra Kusol. However, the Southern version is more influential to the people in its respective locale. The second category focuses on a study of major characters. Jeennoon (2004)'s elaborative study on analyzing Hanuman portrayal in different versions of Ramakien is a good instance. It was found that some ideological connotations are attached to each of a different Hanuman character, which is intended for didactic purposes. Another example of character study is an investigation of Ravana by Navin Wannawetch (2014). Based his study strictly on Sanskrit's literary theory of pratinayaka character or antagonist character, Navin argued that the portrayal of Ravana in Valmiki's version does not wholly correspond to the characteristic criteria given in the pratinayaka theory. That is, given his antagonistic attributes such as being aggressive, greedy, and arrogant, among others, Ravana is far from being inherently vicious. In certain circumstances, he is coaxed, rather than willingly, into committing bad karma. Thus the arising question is whether pratinayaka theory would accommodate the complication of this antagonist character. The last category of Ramakien study in Thailand is grounded on contextual analysis. This kind of study engages in critical and careful reading of the narrative in order to explain how certain aspects or situations within the text are related to or reflect on those existing in social reality. Saowanit Junlawong (1993, cited in Jeennoon 2004)'s research, for instance, explored social structure depicted in the royal version by Rama I. The finding was that social order in the story was achieved through regulations of social norms, social positions and roles of members in society. Another similar study by Maneepin Promsuttirak (1983, cited in Jeennoon 2004) was to see the social effects the Ramakien's story have on Thai way of life. It was concluded that Ramakien relates profoundly and significantly to all aspects of Thai people's lives and society.

The large number of serious studies on Ramayana in Thailand as briefly described above suggests two important approaches. The first one, which is quite extensive, deals with literary devices and aesthetic trajectories. The second approach, which we lack, is the type of inquiry that seeks to challenge or explore critical issues such as patriarchy, politics of class and gender in both textual versions and other diverse forms of retellings of the epic. Given less studies on the second approach, the shift has taken place which can be observed from the following works to mention here. Wathanyoo Faktong (2015)'s study on reading of Myanmar's Ramayana entitled "When Ravana is a Hero: Anti-Colonialism in the Contemporary Myanmar Novel *Lin-gar Di Pa Chit Thu* by Chit Oo Nyu" is remarkable because it investigates how the anti-colonial writing is appropriated to effectively challenge the British colonial power. Adapted from the Valmiki's Ramayana, the Myanmar popular novel, *Lin-gar Di Pa Chit*, reverses the roles of the main characters. Hence, in this version, Ravana is reconstructed to be a hero, who fiercely fights to defend his motherland from Yama Mintra or Rama's invasion, however, has to succumb to the mighty force and be slain by the latter. Another point that makes Faktong's work notable is the fact that while it examines how the anti-colonial rewriting is used as a political strategy to subvert the British domination, it also implicitly questions Ramayana's association with political legitimacy whether it is always justified or problematic.

Another remarkable study on Ramayana retelling is "The Legend Retold 4 Sita: The Honor of Ram?" (2006) by Pornrat Damrhung. In the study, Damrhung deconstructed the traditional story of Ramayana first by shifting the focus from the idealistic god-like character of Rama to the human-like Sita in seven different Ramayana tellings so that other sides of her characters and her suffering, other than her ideal images of physical beauty, love and devotion to Rama, were explored. Second, a story theatre based on Damrhung's discovery of different Sita was reconstructed, incorporating interviews, workshop and media representations of today's women. Then the remaking of new Sita, reinterpreting seven different portrayals in Ramayana tellings, was enacted on stage using Western theatre techniques to communicate with the select audience. To give one poignant example, in the reading of *Adbhuta Ramayana*⁴, Sita transforms into Bhadrakali or the goddess Kali upon seeing Rama and Lakshmana lying unconscious. Enraged by the sight, she takes charge in fighting against Sahastravana violently and is able to defeat him. Such a transformation of beautiful, gentle Sita to ugly and violent avatar was interpreted as Sita *other* or her alter ego. Such reading allows us to see Sita's anger,

⁴ *Adbhuta Ramayana* is Sanskrit literary work adopting Rama's philosophy. It served as a primary source for the well-known Valmiki's Ramayana. See website "Hindupedia" for details, <http://www.hindupedia.com>.

vengeance and aggression, which breaks away from her commonly perceived ideal images. Here, Sita in the form of Kali is a powerful woman exercising her agency to defend the loved ones. The arising question was why power or desire of a woman has to deform or turn her into an unpleasant condition. In the same way, why female characters should be punished for embodying such properties; for instance, in the case of Ahalya, who is turned into stone due to her adultery and Surpanakha whose nose and ears are cut off due to her sexual advance. Damrhung, however, did not seek to answer these questions. Rather, she incorporated this reading of Sita's alter ego into issues experienced by today's women and then created a new story based on her interpretation. It was expected that through the play, the audience would be able to see how such refiguration of Sita interacts with any given situations in her life and how the audience relate to her choices and decisions. These new representations of the modern Sita can, in effect, offer new values and expectations the audience can question and reflect upon.

Damrhung's research is not only critically contributive to the literary world of Ramayana scholarship but is also inspiring to subsequent studies on Ramayana or Ramakien in Thailand. On the one hand, Damrhung rigorous yet creative work provides us with insights into different Sita as told through various Ramayana tellings. This allows us to appreciate the characterization of Sita in aesthetic terms. At the same time, the new Sita, reinvented by the researcher, provokes us to question stereotypical images of women and also engage us, as an individual, into the process of becoming Sita as a part of our identity.

The multiplicity of Ramayana tellings as discussed not only enriches the literary world of myths, which are embedded in Indian beliefs and ways of life. The story of Rama itself is inherently political and this is where the Asura issue emerged. According to Richman (2000), there are three reasons as to why Rama's story is political. Firstly, Ramayana tradition idealizes the notion of "Ramraj" (2000, p.6), which sanctifies the sovereign power of the monarch who is expected to follow certain codes of conduct of a just, noble king. As such, practices, principles and functions of the king as laid out in the text are emphasized and preserved. Secondly, Rama himself is depicted as an archetype of propriety and dharma, his relations to family, caste and gender hierarchy are taken as examples to be followed. Thirdly, Richman (2000) sees that the vision of Ramraj is utopian, hence, unattainable. Given its illusory nature, the allure of this utopian project is so great that it is able to garner support from different groups of people in society, mainly the privileged and powerful. This political dimension of Ramayana then invites questioning from those tellers, authors and audiences who come from different

social and ideological positions, and they are neither convinced of Ramraj or regard Rama as the ideal archetype of man and king.

This is especially the case for social groups collectively associated with Raksasas (demons) who feel uncomfortable with the influence of Sanskrit, Brahminical culture of the Ramayana text (Richman 2000). Perceiving Rama as Aryan Kshatriya king, some authors of Ramayana tellings do not see every Rama's action in a positive light. His killing of Vali, his killing of a Shudra and his consent to Surpanakha's mutilation by Lakshman are controversial incidents most often discussed among Ramayana's critics in the South of India. Among many critics, two names stand out when it comes to Rama's questionable dharmma. Tripuraneni Ramaswami Chudari (1887-1943) who was a Telugu poet and playwright living in Andhra Pradesh during his time and E.V. Ramasami (1879-1973), a Tamil social activist from Madras, Tamil Nadu.

Tripuraneni Ramaswami Chudari or shortly Ramaswami Chudari is known to be an early literary figure who introduced anti-Brahminical discourse of Ramayana to local Ramayana's readership. He wrote a play "Shambuka Vadha" (Shambuka Murdered, published in 1920) (Rao 2000, p. 159) which reinterpreted the death of a Shudra character in Ramayana as being conspired by a Brahmin priest. In his play, Shambuka is a Dravidian performing religious asceticism to attain spiritual liberation. Taking this as a serious offense, Vasishtha, a royal priest, conspires with physicians to cause a temporary death to a young Brahmin boy. This is then claimed to happen as a result of Shambuka's practicing the sacred ritual reserved for the Brahmins. Through his clever ploy, Vasishtha is successful in having Rama persecute Shambuka reasoning that Shambuka's act is the violation of dharmma and a threat to the bond between Brahmins and Ksatriyas. It is the mutual relation of the two castes which has maintained the stability of the kingdom. Thus, Rama is obliged to perform his royal duty by punishing the Dravidian who wants to disrupt the state's harmony. Such a presentation, which involved Aryan/Dravidian conflicts, was found disturbing to Telugu people who were familiar with Bhakti or devotional style of the text. It was condemned and sparked serious discussions widely among Telugu readers and scholars. Chudari made a great effort, by travelling from place to place, in arguing for his position, which questioned Ramayana's truth value and Brahminical orientation of the text (Rao 2000). Questions concerning Rama's act for the interest of the Brahmins, whether Rama rules with compassion and justice according to Ramraj and why certain religious practices are exclusively preserved for Brahmins were raised. After several years, Chudari's attempt eventually became fruitful as his oppositional reading received

more attention from wider readership including educated, non-Brahmin and modernist groups in Andhra Pradesh.

Another notable critic of Ramayana is E.V. Ramasami or E.V.R., a founder of Self-Respect Movement of the Dravidians called in Tamil as 'Dravidar Kazhagam'. E.V.R.'s exegesis of Ramayana was apparently politically motivated and infused into his campaign of anti-Brahmanical Hinduism. Meanwhile, the campaign was conducted in the context of assertion of Dravidian identity which includes South Indian languages and culture. Drawing from his life experience as a merchant, a sadhu and a politician, E.V.R. became aware of and sensitive to the plights of non-Brahmins and untouchables. He once protested against a Congress-run school's decision to establish segregated eating facilities between Brahmin and non-Brahmin students. He sees Brahminism, which is associated with Sanskritic culture of the North India as exploitative of the masses. Regarding Ramayana, perceiving it as a text of political domination by Northern Indians, E.V.R. reads it as a way to awaken South Indians to realize their oppression and their unique Dravidian identity (Richman 1991). In his own published pamphlet, *Characters in the Ramayana* (1930), with North-South divide in mind, E.V.R. observes that Ramayana is used as a vehicle of cultural domination and perpetuation of Brahminical supremacy so he exposes Brahminism's superficiality and Rama's greed for power. Rama is criticized harshly when it comes to his treatment of Shudras. In part where a Shudra boy, Shambuka, is killed due to his attempt of practicing asceticism, which is thought to be violating Vedic codes if performed by Shudras or untouchables. E.V.R. strongly remarks "If there were kings like Rama now, what would be the fate of those people called Shudras?", knowing that his target audience made up of a large number of Shudras (Richman 1991, p. 185). There are also other incidents in the story such as Rama's eating meat and killing women where E.V.R. closely examines and draws a conclusion that Rama is far from being a virtuous person. This reemphasizes his antagonism toward Northern Indian values which he equates with being "Brahminical, caste-ridden and Sanskritic" (Richman 1991, p. 181).

Ramaswami Chudari and E.V.R.'s anti-Brahminical interpretations of Ramayana have done little in diminishing people's faith and devotion to Rama and Ramayana as a whole. However, they have complimented to the richness of Ramayana tradition and made a great contribution to political, modernist reading which has become popular among educated audiences. This research project explores such modern representations of Ramayana in which Asura related issues and characters are featured. It is enlightening to find out how the mythical

demon has become so well alive outside the Vedic texts. This paper is divided into three chapters which are summarized as follows.

Chapter 1 outlines a brief history of the Asura as mentioned in Vedic myths. The Asura refers to gods which, like Deva gods, were widely worshipped in early Vedic texts. Some scholars believe that the idea of the Asura as god has historical connection with a religious tradition of the ancient Iranians as described in the Avestan text. Given their early godly position, certain changes in social structure have somehow transformed Asuras into demons, who often had conflicts with the Devas. Theoretically, such a transformation could have been caused by serious issues between the indigenous groups called Dasas or Dasyus and the migrating warrior tribe, the Aryan, who later became a ruling class of the Vedic society. As to what the issues were and how serious they were remain topics of discussion and debate among Indology scholars. In addition to historical and mythical aspects, Buddhist and social perceptions of the Asura are included. According to Buddhism, particularly Teravada sect, the Asuras are popularly known as Yaksas who are demonic semi-deity. The Yaksas are not comparatively equal to demons, rather they are the epitome of dark forces, which are functioned to challenge the Buddha and his methods of teaching. In terms of social contexts of India, Asuras are related to lower-caste Hindus and minorities who have different religious beliefs. Specifically, they are the *Hindu others* who have been socially disadvantaged and underrepresented as a result of discrimination and casteism. Recently, Asura has become a collective term used by Dravidians or Southern people, to assert their collective identity and political beliefs.

Chapter 2 analyzes the ideas of good and evil as portrayed in a popular novel, “Asura Tale of the Vanquished” (2012), by Anand Neelakantan, a South Indian novelist. Here, Neelakantan narrates Ramayana from a point of view of a defeated villain, Ravana, who is also a popular Asura king. The reader comes to know what motivates him and what makes him tick. In the story, the author demystifies Rama’s goodness by analyzing the portrayals of the two main characters from two different social backgrounds: Ravana and Bhadra. Employing a subaltern studies approach and concepts of anatomy and lack, it is revealed that Rama’s goodness is in question as it merely reflects a Brahmanical worldview that actually stands in contrast with those of the Asuras and other non-Brahmin-Hindu believers. The novel is considered oppositional telling of Ramayana, which caters to the ‘other voices’, who have alternative opinions of Rama and who happen to perceive the epic from differing ideological positions that are in contrast to the original version.

Chapter 3 investigate modern, political representations of the Asura. It is generally known that in modern India, the term Asura remains applicable to demons in a mythical sense. However, in social contexts, many groups of Indian minorities, especially the Dalits and members of marginalized communities living in the South are associated with the Asura. For these people, the term Asura has become a denomination of self-respect suggesting that they are anti-Deva or, ideologically, anti-Brahmin. The rise of the Asura is associated with feelings of political activism, which is perceived as counter-cultural and thus, antagonistic to mainstream Hindu cultural beliefs. In this chapter, two forms of modern representation of the Asura are closely analyzed, including the “Asura Week”, an event organized by marginalized students at the University of English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India in September 2013, and the Tamil film, “Raavan” (2010, Dir. Mani Ratnam). This analysis seeks to understand how the two modes of representation function as both political and affective tools that are used against oppressed minorities, particularly the Asura. Two theoretical frameworks are employed in this study including the concept of representation and the affect theory, which focuses on the feelings of mental anguish experienced by the minority class.

Chapter 1

Asuras: Myths and Contexts

Introduction

The legendary antagonism between the two clans in Indian mythology, the Devas and the Asuras, has long been told, retold and recognized by authors and general public in India and other regions where Hinduism has its influence. Such familiarity of the two clans, their characters, conflicts and aspirations have become a source of popular imagination that generates seemingly endless literary interpretations and forms of artistic expressions. Inside the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, a famous tourist attraction in Bangkok, Thailand, there are 12 iconic statutes of the semi-divine figures (Yaksas) including Ravana (or Tossakanth in Thai), his son, Indrajit and his other relatives standing 6 feet tall guarding the 6 (out of 7) gates of the temple. The 12 figures are not only popular among tourists visiting the temple, their iconic significance has a big part to play in the presentation of Thailand tourism. Another mythical sculpture influenced by Hinduism to mention is “the Churning of the Ocean of Milk” (The Samudra Manthana), which is exhibited in the departure hall of Suwannabhumi airport. Such a grandeur display of the Devas vs. Asuras collaborative effort in churning the milk ocean as per the myth reflects how Hindu’s world view resonates with Thai culture in realms of artefact creation and certain belief systems. Keeping mythological view in mind, there are some reasons why “the Churning of the Ocean of Milk”, taken metaphorically, can be a site of critical inquiry into the Asura myth and their politics and popular representations which are the main focuses of this study.

According to the Hindu mythology, the Devas or deities who represent goodness, nobility, or dharma persuade the Asuras who represent the opposite others — demons, evilness and adharma, to ally with them in the task of churning of the ocean of milk. The ultimate goal of this operation is to attain the heavenly nectar of immortality called the amrita, upon which immortality is guaranteed to its consumer. The Asuras agree to take part in this elaborate process believing that they are promised of their consequential fair share of immortality. The churning, which lasts a thousand years, undergoing several obstacles gives birth to other 14 varieties of items in the process, both auspicious and inauspicious, in addition to the most desirable fruit—the amrita. However, it is the Devas, with the lord Vishnu’s assistance, who claim total access to the amrita which makes them powerful and immortal. The Asuras, given their equal contribution, are deprived of the fruit of their productive labor. One Asura, Rahu,

who attempts to get his rightful proportion is severely decapitated. The legend of the churning of ocean milk which textually appears in Bhagavata Purana, the Vishnu Purana and the Mahabharata, also finds its resonance in other artistic forms such as a sculpture in the Suvannabhumi airport as aforementioned and a bas-relief carved on the walls of the Angkor Wat in Cambodia, to name a few.

Taking a dialectic approach in viewing the Samudra Manthana phenomenon, we can get a glimpse of the underlying philosophy of dualism reflected in the story, which is suggestive of many ontological conditions of human beings and worldly situations. That is to say, any history making almost always involves two driving forces. Just like the Samudra Manthana legend which can be viewed, on the one hand, as a joint effort of the two rival groups working together, despite interfering barriers and contradictions, for their common goal. Here the Samudra Manthana is a platform for teleological mission involving the two major contending groups of people. On the other hand, the Samudra Manthana can be read as a site of continual strife for limited resources and power between the two rivals, which cannot be shared together but be won decisively by only one side. In addition to the two readings, some other interpretations are also possible. What is critical about the historical Samudra Manthana process is that whereas both the Devas and the Asuras are relatively engaged in the same project, motivated by the same goal, it is the former that is entitled to the amrita and has more of other auspicious items. This seems to suggest that in this particular process, a *privilege* is given, if not already predetermined, to only one side which is *represented* as the good. The question of representation is thus important and is taken as another focus of this study, in addition to its mythological aspect.

Who are the Asuras? who are prevalently represented as demons and equated with adharmā, yet has a very important role in the making of the symbolic Samudra Manthana history. This research question is thus aimed to unravel this mythical other, the Asuras, drawing on various texts and previous studies. Depicting the evil and the darkness, what is interesting about the Asuras, which marks them critically distinctive from other myths is the fact their infamous association with the inferior race or ethnic group has political ramifications which remains perennially controversial in the modern day's India. Unlike myths of other lands, the Asuras as being the gods' enemies in the Hindu myth, are identified by a large number of the populace, particularly those living in the central and Southern regions of the country. One tribal

minority called “Gonds”⁵ revere and worship Ravana or Ravan, who is believed to be their ancestral king, as their deity. The Gonds, living in different districts along the borders of the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana not only have their own version of Ramayana, they also celebrate Ravan’s festival which coincides with the Dussehra⁶, the annual Hindu festival which commemorates the victory of lord Rama over Ravana. Such practices, though countering mainstream Hindu beliefs, help to preserve their tribal traditions, which are dying as well as to assert their cultural and political pride.

The exploration into the story of the Asuras involves different dimensions of the myth which traverses through times and places and undergoes transformations and reconstructions. This chapter deals specifically with literary and social aspects of this myth.

Asuras in Hindu Mythology

The discussion of the Asuras, the popular demons in Indian mythology has to involve not only textual aspect in which the Asura appears in the Vedas, the Puranas and the Epics. It also concerns historical aspect particularly “the Aryan question” as it is often referred to. This is due to the fact that the Vedas were composed by Aryan speaking poets or the poets who speak Aryan language which is one of Indo-European languages. Moreover, the Asura issue requires a look into the changing perception of the Asura image which differs from one period to the next. This is a result of the socio-political context of the relevant period whereby the Asura image is perceived. The politics and society of the Vedic period may well considerably differ from the modern period, for instance. The concept of the Asura is, thus, not monolithic and stable but it is transformative and seemingly constructive, particularly where political modern context is concerned. The Asura topic has been extensively studied, contributing to a good number of often cited scholarly works. However, certain ambiguity concerning who the Asuras are and why they have been demonized remains debatable. The term “the Asura”, as a

⁵ Gonds refers to tribal people who live in different areas of the Deccan’s Peninsula in India. There are currently about 13 million Gond population, making them the largest indigenous group in India. The Gonds speak Gondi which is closely related to Telugu, one of Dravidian family languages. Now Gondi people are officially designated as Scheduled Tribe. See Online Encyclopedia of Britannica.

⁶ **Dussehra**, or **Vijayadashami** in Hinduism is a public holiday marking the victory of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, over the 10-headed demon. King Ravana kidnapped Sita, Rama’s wife. The festival’s name is derived from the Sanskrit words *dasha* (“ten”) and *hara* (“defeat”). Symbolizing the victory of good over evil, Dussehra is celebrated on the 10th day of the seventh month (September–October) of the Hindu calendar, during the full moon. Dussehra coincides with the culmination of the nine-day Navratri festival (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

political identity asserted by a lot of Indian citizens, which has gained much presence and momentum in the political arena of the modern India, does not seem to receive much scholarly attention. All of these are the voids where this study aim to fill.

The term Asura is not etymologically attached to the idea of ‘demon’ or an enemy of god, Deva— an association which is popular in the public mind. Asura, along with its plural form, Asuras and other variants like Asurya or Asuratva and its adjective forms, Asuric connote a concept of lordship or powerful spirit according to earlier Vedic texts (Hindupedia 2011). In some of the oldest hymns in the Vedic texts, the Asuras are spiritual, divine beings who possess both good and bad quality. Asura is indicative of lordship and leadership (Hale1999, cited in Nayak).

Among a number of scholarly studies on Asura, W. E. Hale (1986)’s comprehensive book entitled “Ásura in Early Vedic Religion” is often referenced when it comes to the Asura topic. In the first chapter of the book, Hale provides summaries of important arguments made by a number of Vedic scholars on Asura studies and offers his own criticism. To mention a few, F.B. J. Kuniper is of the view that the Asuras were the first group of gods associated with the first stage of creation when the earth was floating on the water. It was Indra who initiated the second stage of creation when he killed Vrta, a dragon, in order to split the hill and get access to the water. Then, he also separated earth from heaven, making the upper world an abode of the Devas where the underworld is for the Asuras. Indra is thus seen as a chief of the Devas who resides in the upper world and manages to recruit some Asuras to align with them. The Aditayas is an example of the Asuras who later take side with the Devas, making them Deva Asuras. This suggests a close connection between the Devas and Asuras which, according to Kuniper, represents the two fundamental contrasting entities of cosmogonical concept. Such a concept can be traced back to Indo-Aryan period. However, Hale differs from Kuniper’s position mentioned here. For Hale, the Asuras of the Rig Vedic mythology are not comparative to other primordial cultures like that of Egypt or Mesopotamia. The Asuras were not the group of gods, representing the underworld. He also maintains that apart from Indra, other gods like Varuna (RV 7.86.1), Soma (RV 9.101.15), Agni (RV 6.8.3) are also seen as setting apart the heaven and earth (1863: 3). Thus Indra should be far from being the mere chief creator. Moreover, Hale disagrees with Kuniper that the Asuras have become Devas or allied with the latter. It was the misconception of Kuniper caused by his erroneous translation which led Kuniper to believe in the realignment of the Asuras with the Devas.

W. Norman Brown's position on the Asuras as a group of gods is also objected by Hale. According to Brown, there are two groups of divine beings in the Rig Veda, the Devas and the Asuras. Some gods are referred to as both Devas and Asura, however, Asuras are also used to address malevolent beings. In addition, the Asuras are divided into two classes, including the good ones identified as Aditayas and bad ones called Danavas. In the Rig Veda, the word Asura and its derivatives are used predominantly of Varuna, Mitravaruna, and Aditayas as a group, Indra, Agni, and Rudra, the gods and opponents of gods. However, the term Asura is never used with Aswins and Usas, who are the Devas. This leads Brown to conclude that the Asuras are distinct from the Devas. Such a conclusion is not accepted by Hale who thinks that the given evidence is not sufficient, even though Hale agrees with Brown's definition of Asura which means "lord". Another interesting review is made of Huang and P. von Bradke's positions, which similarly support the idea that the development of Asura was due to a split in the religious belief of the Indo-Aryan people which happened alongside the worship of Ahura, the Indo-Iranian supreme deity. P. von Bradke specially explains the degradation of the Asuras, from being gods to demons, which it is due to the hostile encounter between the Indians and Indo-Iranians in the past. Sometime in the history there was a clash between Indians and Iranians. The Indians encountered the Iranians, who worshipped a god name Ahura Mazda, recognized *Ahura-* as their word *Asura-* and thus demonising the god of enemy, causing Asura became a pejorative connotation to Indians since then. It is this idea of hostility between the Indians and Indo-Aryans where Hale objects as he asserts that there was no evidence of confrontation between the two groups during the period of the Rig Veda composition.

According to Hale's review of other's theories on the Asura, it is obvious that he objects the idea that the Asuras are a group of gods, clearly differentiated from the Devas. Asura, as analyzed by Hale, appear more frequently in the individual context rather than in the group. Therefore, it is unlikely that Asuras refers to a group of divine beings. He is not convinced with how history was reconstructed to relate the Indic belief to Indo-Iranian's as many other scholars have suggested, believing that Indic mythological views should be seen as differing from others. The occurrences of the Asura in the early books of the Rig Veda indicate that Asura is addressed a lord, ruler or master. The Asura is a respected leader who is supported by the army, he may also have magical powers. Asuras can refer to human being, but more often than not, it is referred to the gods.

According to W. J. Wilkins (2013), the term Asura not only refers to all gods including Devas but also encompasses sacrificial priests. This association of Asuras with gods and priests

is found to appear in more number of vedic texts than those texts which relegate the Asuras to being demonic and ungodly. Malati Shendge (2011), citing two hymns devoted to the concept of Asura in the Rig Veda, III. 38 and X. 177, explains that while the former hymn emphasizes the role of Asura in creating the world, the latter recognizes Asura magic or in this case, their creative power. Shendge's analysis of Rig Veda book III. 38 corresponds to Nayak's (2018) who describes Asura as a solar-deity, who is the father of all creation and is associated with heaven and identified with the sun. He is deity who has magical power called maya.

HYMN 38. Indra.

1 HASTING like some strong courser good at drawing, a thought have I
imagined like a workman.

Pondering what is dearest and most noble, I long to see the sages full of
wisdom.

2 Ask of the sages' mighty generations firm-minded and devout they framed
the heaven.

These are thy heart-sought strengthening directions, and they have come to be
sky's upholders.

3 Assuming in this world mysterious natures, they decked the heaven and
earth for high dominion,

Measured with measures, fixed their broad expanses, set the great worlds apart
held firm for safety.

4 Even as he mounted up they all adorned him: self-luminous he travels
clothed in splendour.

That is the Bull's, the *Asura's* mighty figure: he, omniform, hath reached the
eternal waters.

5 First the more ancient Bull engendered offspring; these are his many
draughts that lent him vigour.

From days of old ye Kings, two Sons of Heaven, by hymns of sacrifice have
won dominion.

6 Three seats ye Sovrans, in the Holy synod, many, yea, all, ye honour with
your presence.

There saw I, going thither in the spirit, Gandharvas in their course with wind-
blown tresses.

7 That same companionship of her, the Milch-cow, here with the strong Bull's
divers forms they stablished.

Enduing still some new celestial figure, the skillful workers shaped a form around him.

8 Let no one here debar me from enjoying the golden light which Savitar diffuses.

He covers both all-fostering worlds with praises even as a woman cherishes her children.

9 Fulfil, ye twain, his work, the Great, the Ancient: as heavenly blessing keep your guard around us.

All the wise Gods behold his varied actions who stands erect, whose voice is like a herdsman's.

10 Call we on Indra, Maghavan, auspicious, best Hero in the fight where spoil is gathered,

The Strong, who listens, who gives aid in battles, who slays the Vṛtras, wins and gathers riches. (Translated from Sanskrit by Ralph T. H. Griffith 1896)

abhi taṣṭeva dīdhayā manīṣāmatyo na vājī sudhuro jihānaḥ |
 abhi priyāṇi marmṛṣat parāṇi kavīnrichāmi sandṛṣe sumedhāḥ ||
 inota pṛcha janimā kavīnām manodhṛtaḥ sukṛtastakṣata dyām |
 imā u te prāṇyo vardhamānā manovātā adha nu dharmaṇighman ||
 ni śmidatra ghuhyā dadhānā uta kṣatrāya rodasī samañjan |
 saṃ mātrābhirnamire yemur urvī antar mahī samṛte dhāyase dhuḥ ||
 ātiṣṭhantaṃ pari viśve abhūṣaṇchriyo vasānaścarati svarociḥ |
 mahat tad vṛṣṇo asurasya nāmā viśvarūpo amṛtāni tasthau ||
 asūta pūrvo vṛṣabho jyāyānimā asya śrudhaḥ santi pūrvīḥ |
 divo napātā vidathasya dhībhiḥ kṣatram rājānā pradivo dadhāthe ||
 trīṇi rājānā vidathe purūṇi pari viśvāni bhūṣathaḥ sadāṃsi |
 apaśyamatra manasā jaghanvān vrate ghandharvānapi vāyukeśān ||
 tadin nvasya vṛṣabhasya dhenorā nāmaabhirnamire sakmyaṃghoḥ |
 anyad-anyadasuryaṃ vasānā ni māyino mamire rūpamasmin ||
 tadin nvasya saviturnakirme hiraṇyayīmamatim yāmaśisret |
 ā suṣṭutī rodasī viśvaminve apīva yoṣā janimāni vavre ||
 yuvaṃ prasnasya sādhathe maho yad daivī svastiḥ pari ṇaḥ syātam |
 ghopājihvasya tasthuṣo virūpā viśve paśyanti māyinaḥ kṛtāni ||
 śunaṃ huvema ... || (Internet Sacred Text Archive 2010)

HYMN 177. Māyābheda.

1 THE sapient with their spirit and their mind behold the Bird adorned with all an *Asura*'s magic might.

Sages observe him in the ocean's inmost depth: the wise disposers seek the station of his rays.

2 The flying Bird bears Speech within his spirit: erst the Gandharva in the womb pronounced it:

And at the seat of sacrifice the sages cherish this radiant, heavenly-bright invention.

3 I saw the Herdsman, him who never resteth, approaching and departing on his pathways.

He, clothed in gathered and diffusive splendour, within the worlds continually travels. (Translated from Sanskrit by Ralph T. H. Griffith 1896)

patamṅhamaktamasurasya māyayā hṛdā paśyanti manasāvipaścitaḥ |
 samudre antaḥ kavayo vi cakṣate marīcīnāmpadamichanti vedhasaḥ ||
 patamṅho vācam manasā bibharti tāṃ ghandharvo.avadaḥ gharbheantaḥ |
 tāṃ dyotamānāṃ svaryaṃ manīṣāṃ ṛtasya padekavayo ni pānti ||
 apaśyaṃ ghopāmanipadyamānamā ca parā ca pathibhiṣcarantaḥ |
 sa sadhrīcīḥ sa viśūcīrvasāna ā varīvartibhuvaneṣvantaḥ ||

(Internet Sacred Text Archive 2010)

According to Shendge (2011)'s interpretation, the divine nature of Asura is emphasized in both two hymns above. The ideas of both hymns correspond to one another. In the opening verse of X.177, "the Bird adorned with all an *Asura*'s magic might" [patamṅhamaktamasurasya māyayā], can be clearly understood when being related to III.38 where the original concept of Asura is explained. Rig Veda X.177 describes Asura as the sun-god, represented by the bird. In the first verse the sun-bird is said to be smeared or anointed with the creative power (maya) of Asura (the god). In this context maya can be the creative capacity, which is emphasized in III.38.4. The sun bird, in the ocean, is discerned by the sages. They search for the track of the rays of light, which is a part the creation myth. The poet wishes to uncover the secret tracks which the divine fathers have left behind, after dividing the two rodasis (heaven and earth). The seers in X.177 also try to discover the track of the rays of light (marīcīnāmpadamichanti vedhasaḥ). The ultimate origin of these rays of light is supposed to lead to the matrix of the universe, the one that existed in the beginning. Thus the concept of the ultimate reality is born

(Shendge 2011, p. 40). In short, it can be said that the Asura is the most powerful deity who created the universe and keeps it functioning through his creative power, which manifests in the form of natural phenomena. He may appear in animal forms such as a bull or a bird. Whatever form the Asura may take, it is likely that he is adorned with rays of sun light. His appearance often left the sages and seers in awe and wonder of the path he was taking. This path is a gift to mankind, to Shendge (2011, p. 40), as it unfolds the ultimate reality of the universe. The secret of discovering the path is known only to the gandharvas⁷ who revealed it to the seers.

The idea of Asura as the solar deity and its association to divinity and ultimate reality of the universes as analyzed by Shendge (2011) and Nayak (2018), shed light to the possibly shared mythical beliefs the Vedic peoples had with the Indo- Iranians. As far as the Rig Veda X.177 as quoted above is concerned, one may be reminded of a religious symbolism of Zoroastrianism called “the Faravahar”⁸, which professes the Zoroastrian faith in their only god known as “the Ahura Mazda”. This symbol, coincidentally, looks like the combined images of the sun (represented by the disc), the god or man (represented by a torso of a man) and the bird (represented by the wings). In addition to this, there is a historical link between the Avestan text of the Iranians and the Rig Veda as both the Indo- Iranians and Vedic Aryans shared cultural heritage of the Harappan civilization together. According to the Avestan mythology, the supreme deity is identified as Ahura Mazda, meaning lord or spirit (Cristian 2017). Ahura Mazda is believed to be the creator of the universe, he is the greatest being who created the dualistic spirits: the good and destructive, and is worshipped in Zoroastrianism. Hence, whereas, Ahura is regarded as godly, Deva (or Daeva in ancient Iranian), is perceived as demonic, which is a twist in Hindu Vedic texts. Some scholars have traced the concept of Asura far back to the time of ancient Mesopotamia, through Babylonian and Assyrian connection.

⁷ Gandharvas are semi-divine beings who prepare and guard the soma, which is an intoxicated ritual drink favored by both gods and men as it is believed to bestow power and immortality. According to the early Hindu conception of the term, gandharvas act as messenger between the divine and human worlds. They commonly hold the secrets of the gods and reveal them to select beings. See New World Encyclopedia (2008).

⁸ Faravahar is a spiritual symbol of Iranian Zoroastrianism. It has a figure of an old man in the middle representing wisdom of age, the three layered bird wings representing good thoughts, good words and good deeds. The two loops at the wings represent positive and negative forces. The disc or the ring in the middle symbolizes eternity of the universe or the eternal nature of the soul. See Wikipedia (2018).

According to Sinha (2014), the term *Assur*⁹ which is very close to Asura has positive connotations in many Mesopotamian languages. It was also the name of the Assyrian capital (Assur or Ashur) and formed the name of the great Assyrian kings such as Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE) and Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BC). Trade relations between kingdoms and migrations or invasions that happened in the ancient time may have resulted in cultural exchanges which influenced language transition and myth dissemination (Sinha 2014). Worth noting is that when it comes to Asura distinctive characteristics— powerful, perseverant, antagonistic to the Devas and on a quest of immortality— which were formulated in later Vedic texts and matured in the Puranas, Sinha believes it is Gilgamesh¹⁰, the most prominent hero in the Mesopotamian mythology who provides the stereotypical attributes to the Asuras.

The references to Asura in the Rig Veda seem, on the one hand, to suggest a close connection of cosmogonical and spiritual world views of Indo- Iranian and Indo-Aryan peoples. On the other hand, it is also possible that early Vedic poets or priests in particular were in harmony and viewed gods, both Devas and Asuras as undifferentiated beings. Each of their worshipped god has roles to play in maintaining the universe, thus deserving sacrifice and supplication alike. The following verses which make references to particular gods including Agni, Rudra, Mitra and Varuna testify to the importance of the notion of Asura in the Vedic priest's life- world.

4. The people prospers, *Asuras!* whom ye dearly love: ye Righteous Ones, proclaim aloud the Holy Law. (Book 1 HYMN 151. Mitra and Varuna)

In the following verse, Varuna is specifically regarded as the Asura:

4. The other, *Asura!* too was born of Heaven. thou art, O Varuna, the King of all men. (Book 10 HYMN 179)

⁹ Assur or Ashur, Anshar is the god of the Assyrian. He was elevated from a local deity of the city of Ashur to be the highest god in the Assyrian pantheon. See Mark, J.J. (2017, January 27) *Assur*. Ancient History Encyclopedia.

¹⁰ Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic King of Uruk in Mesopotamia. He is popularly known from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (written c. 2150 - 1400 BCE) the great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work which was written about 1500 years before Homer's writing. This marks it the oldest piece of epic world literature. See Mark, J.J. (2008, March 29), *Gilgamesh*. Ancient History Encyclopedia

Apart from Mitra and Varuna, the term Asura is also applied to Rudra and Agni in the two following verses:

6. Rudra, art thou, the *Asura* of mighty heaven: thou art the Maruts' host, thou art the Lord of food. (Book 2 HYMN 1. Agni)

14 Served by the seven priests, he shone forth from ancient time, when in his Mother's bosom, in her lap, he glowed. Giving delight each day he closeth not his eye, since from the *Asura's* body he was brought to life. (Book 3 HYMN 29. Agni)

Another possible interpretation is that, according to the quoted verses above, the four deities (Agni, Rudra, Mitra and Varuna) belong to the Asura clan, which is the Deva's enemy—led by Indra. In the following verse, the two clans are as popular among their worshippers, which may consist of two cults, and are closely related to one other.

1. THOU art the King of all the Gods, O Indra: protect the men, O *Asura*, preserve us. Thou Lord of Heroes, Maghavan, our saver, art faithful, very rich, the victory-giver. (Book 1 HYMN 174. Indra)

Given such a relatively equivalence in power of two clans of gods and their seemingly peaceful relationship, the Devas and Asuras, sometimes engage in battle as the following verse depicts.

6. As first I said when choosing you, in battle we must contend with *Asuras* for this Soma. (Book 1 HYMN 108. Indra- Agni)

Obviously, the quoted verses above accentuate positive attitudes of the early Vedic poets toward the Asuras who they believed to be creators of natural forces, providers and are as powerful as their Deva counterparts. Accordingly, it can be said that such a Deva-Asura concept/conflict has evolved across differing spaces and times since the Mesopotamia to early Vedic texts to the Epics and the Puranas. The conflict may have been due to some confrontation between two cults of worshippers/ priests or some internal conflicts within the same clan or caste, in which some members of the clan defied against a certain ritual and thus being made an outcast and demonized¹¹. Such a conflict, whatever it/this may be, results in ambiguity and

¹¹ According to Nayak, the Aryans were civic- conscious people who, were in order to maintain their society, strict with their social order. Thus social disruption was not tolerated. But when transgression occurred, they applied punishment. See Nayak "The Asuras", in *Evil in the Mahabharata* (2018: 79).

inconsistency in the usage of the Asura concept. In later texts, such as the Puranas and the Mahabharata with the interpolated Bhagavad Gita (16.6-16.7 cited in Hindupedia 2011), the Devas represent the good, and the Asuras the evil. Even though these texts suggest that all beings in the universe possess relatively commonly shared qualities of being divine and demonic, here the distinctive dichotomy of terms was used. Divine qualities were referred to as *daivi sampad*, whereas the demonic qualities were referred to as *asuri sampad* (Wikipedia 2018). Hence, Asura/ Asuric was given a new avatar, which later on was connected to Rakshasas or Yaksas — malevolent, bloodthirsty demons. Such a shifting process of the Asuras from formerly being divine beings to demonic enemies of the Devas has received much scholarly attention and yet has remained debatable.

According to what many scholars believe, the concept of good vs. evil is primarily non-existent in Hindu mythology (Doniger 1975, Pattanaik 2017, Nayak 2018). Nayak (2018) argues that, there is no “the opposite side of the ethical paradigm— good and evil” (2018, p. 61) in early Hindu myth unlike god vs. satan in the Christian bible, in which the latter embodies evil sources effecting the fall of mankind. As such, the moral content is absent in the battle between the Devas and the Asuras. Their constant battles then should not be seen as a representation of good fighting against evil forces, but rather a “cyclical archetype of a conflict” (Nayak 2018, p. 61) or the two forces which are complementary to one another. Similar to Nayak, Doniger (1975) argues that even though the battle between gods and demons are considered the central theme of Hindu mythology, the battle lines between the gods and demons are usually blurred as both sides share moral ambivalences. Moreover, as Doniger (1975) has observed, the heroic strategies once employed by Vedic gods were replaced by treacherous ploys in the Epic period and “outright elaborate deceptions” (1975, p. 270) in the Puranas. Such actions were of course anti-heroic and originally associated with demonic category. What happens in the Samudra Manthana phenomenon as earlier mentioned may well resonate with Doniger’s claim.

Given several studies on Asuras as discussed above, there seems to be no conclusive agreement on what Asuras exclusively are but what Asuras possibly mean in a particular literary or social context. As the debate continues, what is worth exploring, in my view, is how the Asura related concepts play out in popular representations and politics. It is this orientation that immortalizes the demons on the public mind and will be specially discussed in later chapters of this research.

Asuras in the Buddhist Context

Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism is a non-theistic religion whereby the idea of god as a creator who is immortal and omnipotent is not typically acknowledged (Rungruangsri 1980, Nayanaponika Tera 1996). For Gunasekara (1993), Buddhism is not just non-theistic but also anti-theistic because the idea of god conflicts with some fundamental Buddhist teaching. However, unlike other atheistic beliefs such as modern secularism and rationalism, Buddhism is not primarily concerned with refuting the existence of god but rather with a method of freeing one's self from worldly attachment and overcoming one's own suffering through methodical means which requires certain codes of conduct. As a matter of fact, the Buddha's teaching discourses regarding the question of god are found to be very little (Gunasekara 1993). Given such a rare presence of god in canon Buddhist scriptures, Buddhism recognizes the idea of Devas or god-like creatures who reside in different realms of heaven or other higher planes (similar to angels in Christianity). These Devas come into existence due to the karmic factors they have accumulated in their past lives and once these karmic factors are expended the Devas may take birth in any kind of living form just like other creatures. This suggests that they are not immortal but have finite life-span just like any human beings. In short, they are subject to the cycle of samara, which is the Buddhist cycle of existence. In addition, they are not endowed with supernatural power to influence or interfere with human's lives, perhaps merely having some kind of guarding power the way Christian angels are believed to possess. Thus, markedly different from their Hindu counterpart, the Buddhist Devas are neither worshipped nor sacrificed. They are, however, on the mind of the Buddhists. During the time of escalating Hindu revival in India, in particular, Buddhist opposition to Hindu god cults was strongly articulated as manifested in the following remark by Nagarjuna (c.150 – 250 AD.), one of the most important Buddhist philosophers:

The gods are all eternal scoundrels
 Incapable of dissolving the suffering of impermanence.
 Those who serve them and venerate them
 May even in this world sink into a sea of sorrow.
 We know the gods are false and have no concrete being;
 Therefore the wise man believes them not.
 The fate of the world depends on causes and conditions
 Therefore the wise man may not rely on gods.

Mahâpajâpâramitâsh (Lamotte trans. I, p, 141, cited in Gunasekara 1993)

According to a study of the main Theravada Buddhist scripture, Suttantapitok, Phramaha Siriwatthe (2013) observes the roles the Devas have in the Buddhist spiritual world. He comes to a conclusion that there are both positive and negative ones; the positive ones include watching over a good man and soliciting him when necessary. They also pay a regular visit to the Buddha and his disciples in order to listen to their teaching and ask questions. This connotes their inferior position to the latter. In the same token, this by no means suggests that the Buddha is elevated to the Supreme Being and is equated to god figure, as popularly misconceived. Indeed, according to Theravada tradition, Buddha is regarded as “a supremely enlightened human teacher who has come to his last birth in *samsara*” (Gunasekara 1993). Hence, regarding him as god, a supreme creator, is irrelevant. Speaking of negative roles of the Devas, they may well disguise themselves in a form of ‘Mara’, an evil being, or a personification of all things that are evil-related, to steer man away from his righteous path. Those who are morally and mentally weak are likely to succumb to the Mara’s deception whereas the Mara’s devilish intention cannot do harm to those who have calm and strong mind and are determined in their moral purposes and practices. Thus, the existence of Devas and Mara alike seems to valorize on the one hand the transcendental position of the Buddha, and the significant role of dharma as the righteous path to follow on the other.

Regarding the Buddhist concept of Asura, it should be noted that Ravana, who is a demonic figure and is a Rakshasa in the Indian epic Ramayana, sometimes popularly represented as an Asura, is known to belong to a category of inferior deities referred to as Yaksha in Pali Buddhist literature. Yaksha is one among other demonic semi-god categories including Mara, Asura and Pisaca which are familiar to the Buddhist public. According to the canon Buddhist text, the Tipitaka, the reference to these demonic beings often occur alongside the Devas as the latter’s dualistic opposition. Just like Mara as noted above, their existence merely functions to highlight the wisdom and intellect of the Buddha. The Asura is thus not projected to be a demon proper but only a personification of dark forces to challenge the Buddha and his way of teaching. Certain Asuras are shown to be accepting and understanding of the Buddha’s teaching, hence they are welcome to change their path to Dharmma. Regarding the Asuras’ origin, influenced by Vedic myths, the story is told that the Asuras share a similar mythical abode with the Devas, which is the second of the six Deva’s realms called Tavatimsa. Once their co-dwelling with the Devas caused displeasure to Indra, they were tricked into taking a drink called *gandapāna*. When drunk, the Asuras were thrown down from Sumeru or Mount Meru by Indra. Half way down to earth they regained consciousness and then made a vow never to touch intoxicants again. Thus, they were called Asura (Malalasekera n.d.). They have

since then been dispossessed in an abode of evil spirits beneath the water abyss called Asura loka and have been ferociously prevented from re-entering their former heavenly realm (Rungruangsri 1980).

Similar to Hindu Asuras (in later Vedic texts and Puranas), Buddhist Asuras are often depicted as being addicted to passion, envy, wrath, conceit and falseness. Zhiyi, the founder of Tiantai tradition of Buddhism in China once made a remark on Asuras; “Always desiring to be superior to others, having no patience for inferiors and belittling strangers; like a hawk, flying high above and looking down on others, and yet outwardly displaying justice, worship, wisdom, and faith — this is raising up the lowest order of good and walking the way of the Asuras” (Wikipedia 2018). This remark is just another emphasis of the Asura’s powerful dark forces— the forces within any ordinary man. However, within the Buddhist discourses, as the Asuras are found being frequently engaged in conflicts with the Buddha or his disciples, the vices they possess render apparently their negative, anti- Buddha’s symbolism. In short, given a strong position regarding the god question in Buddhism, the presence of the Mara, Asura and other demons classified as semi-god beings in Pali Buddhist texts seem to suggest something quite paradoxical. These demons indeed embody Satanic- like attributes or the Devil which often appear to obstruct god’s mission according to Christian and Islamic texts. Their appearance in Buddhism, thus, can be read as elevating the Buddha to god position. However, this seeming contradiction is not taken up here as our main focus is on the Asuras.

Asuras in the Social Context

In the early books of Vedic scriptures, the term Asura is associated with powerful gods or powerful spirits mainly due to the influence of Zoroastrianism as practiced by ancient Iranians, or Indo- Aryans who migrated to the region extending from the present day Northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and Northwest India. Subsequently, these Indo-Aryans were integrated with indigenous peoples of the Indus Valley. The Vedas, which were presumably composed around 1500- 1000 BCE after the Aryan migration, was thus attributed to the creation of Aryan priests/ poets. As time passed and for some critical reasons, the concept of Asuras has markedly transformed into god opponents and has later developed into Rakshasa and Dasas or Dasyus. This transformation, in which the Asuras are enemies of gods, can be observed in several hymns of the Atharva Veda, even though the precise nature of these enemies are not defined (Hale 1986). The Asuras relation to the Dasas is particularly interesting because the latter were regarded as a group of living people who were opposed by Indra—the chief of Deva god (Hale 1986). This human dimension of the Asuras instigates a question concerning whether Asuras

were mythical gods constructed by the Aryan or real people who were their enemies (Nayak 2018).

To establish human identity of the Asuras, perhaps a question to ask is *Who are the Dasas/ Dasyus in the Rig Veda?*. According to Kosambi (1962), among other scholars, the Dasas were the descendants of the Indus settlers who had dark skin, as reflected by the often used word ‘krishna-tvac’ which means dark skinned. The Dasas had no property and no right to own weapon. They were a common property of the Aryan tribe as a whole, and which could be gifted the same way as horses or cattle by the King or chief of the tribe. In religious faith, the Dasas did not observe the Aryan rituals and customs. They worshipped lingum or phallas which is not approved of by the Aryans. For these reasons, they were treated as an outcast. In the Rig Veda, there is a certain moral righteousness that occurs in the hymn in the killing of the dasa because he is avrata, which means the one without the correct rites. However, this began to change when the Dasa chiefs started performing Vedic rituals as rituals were approved by the Arya(n) and started giving gifts to the priests (Thapar 1999). This indicates that the Dasas may be accepted to the Aryan’s fold once they conform to the latter’s rites.

Given possible opportunities to be included into the Aryan community, the Dasas remained enemies to Indra, who represents the Aryans. The latter were quite greedy as they often resorted to robbing and burning the Dasas’ houses, the ultimate target is the Dasas’ cattle. Inferior in the warfare, the Dasas were often killed and those who survived were taken as slaves (Dasa means slave or helot, whereas Dasani, as a verb, means to treat with hostility). Such fighting is occasional and depicted in several verses in the Vedic texts. At one point Hale (1986) observes that there is a parallel pattern between Indra being depicted as defeating Dasyus in the Rig Veda, and the fight of gods and the Asuras in the Atharva Veda. In one verse as shown below the reference to Asuras and Dasyus appear together as gods’ rivals.

yâthâ deva ásurá pranudanta
 yáthéन्द्रo dásyūn adhamám támo babādhé
 táthâ tvám kāma máma yé sapátnās
 tan asmal lokat prá nudasva dūrám.

AV 9.2.18

“In which way the gods drove away the *asuras*, in which way Indra drove away the *dasyus* away to the lowest darkest, in that way, O Kama, may you drive those who are my rivals far away from this world.” (Translated by Hale 1986)

There is also a verse in Paippalāda Samhitā (AVP 19.13.8) in which Asura and Dasyu appear side by side leading Hale (1986: 116) to conclude that the poet not only intended to compare Indra's killing the Dasyus and his killing the Asuras but also to identify both the Asuras and the Dasyus as the same group of people. After the Atharva Veda the usage of Dasyus becomes rare and it disappears just as the same time the Asura begins to be used in derogatory term. Hale, thus, believes the term Asura comes to replace Dasyu in the later Vedic texts (1986: 130).

If Hale is right in assuming the replacement of the term Dasa or Dasyu by Asura, it indicates that the Asuras earned some new identities shared by the previously known as Dasas. First, they come to denote slaves or helots or those who are antagonistic to the Aryan. Second, they must be those dark skinned, aboriginal peoples of a different race and third, they had their own spiritual beliefs, rituals and perhaps their own language as well. These attributes, to B. R. Ambedkar (2003 cited in Siddharth 2017), mark the Asuras, Nagas and Dasas as the four groups of non- Aryan peoples frequently mentioned in the Vedic texts, synonymous to Dravidians. This is to say (that) they are different names of a different group of peoples belonging to the same race. Ambedkar first establishes relationship of Asuras, Dasas and Nagas and then links them to the Dravidians, who are a majority of population living across the Indian subcontinent including some areas of North India. Therefore, Ambedkar is not convinced with the idea of Aryan-Dravidian as representing North and South India on racial basis. He argues that those Dravidians including Nagas, Dasas and Asuras living in the North adopted Sanskrit language so that explains why they are not called Dravidians. At the same time those living in the South of India continue speaking Dravida languages such as Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam, thus the name Dravidian still applies to them. As such, Aryan-Dravidian concept should be seen as an aspect of a linguistic difference rather than racial distinction, of which the latter serves as a platform for caste system. Ambedkar's proposition on linguistic base of the Aryan-Dravidian concept is supported by a recent study of Indian genomes which claims that the Indian genotype is fairly mixed between Ancestral North Indians (ANI) and Ancestral South Indians (ASI). This results in genetic variation of today Indian population. It is the ASI that is native to India. However, this does not suggest that both groups are relatively homogenous. The ANI may be formed by peoples of Indo-European or Eurasian speakers who came to India through several waves of migration whereas the ASI are plausibly composed of native peoples and immigrants from Africa who have long settled along coastal areas. Thus, if we agree with Ambedkar's view of the Indian history and the recent genetic study as mentioned, the Aryan-Dravidian concept

which identifies the Dasas/Dasyus or Asuras as dark-skinned aboriginals of the South, who are inferior to the fair-skinned Aryan of the north should be critically reconsidered.

Given the racial base of North and South Indian divide is refuted, what remains relevant is the notion of caste. The point is the genetic study also reveals that those with the ANI ancestry are more related to Hindu upper castes than those of the ASI ancestry, who are likely to belong to lower castes or tribal groups. Critically, it is this caste- oriented relevance that has become pivotal in establishing the Asuras as the Dravidians. Similar to what happened in the Vedas, the Asuras are made to become ‘the others’ of the Hindu’s fold. This may explain why Asuras are depicted as demons or evils in Indian mythology. However, such a depiction is far from subjugating the Asuras into a position of passive, voiceless objects. In contrast, the peoples who are identified as Asuras— lower caste Hindus, Dalits, Adivasis or tribal minorities— have resorted to the Asura identity as a tool of cultural and political empowerment. The case of tribal groups called Gonds or Gondis is particularly interesting as they believe they have descended from Asura ancestry and found in Ravana, the Asura’s demonic king of the Ramayana, their patron saint. Some of them even called themselves ‘Ravanvanshis’ to identify their unique identity. During the Dussehra festival, in parallel with other mainstream Hindu communities around India that celebrate the victory of Ram over Ravana, the Gonds celebrate their venerated patriarch, chanting *Jai Gondwana!*, *Jai Seva*, *Jai Raja Ravan!*, *Jai Ravana!* (Rashid 2015) instead of *Jai Shri Ram!*. In addition to performing their own rituals, the Gonds, whose communities are scattered in different states in central and South India, have recently come together formally with an attempt to form a cohesive Pan-Indian identity through their language (Dasgupta 2014). It is hoped that once the Gondi language is standardized, there will be interest in education and research in the language, which will ultimately benefit the cultural heritage of the Gonds.

Conclusion

Mythology has indeed important roles to play in our life, even though at times we are not quite conscious of it. In a society permeated with and driven by faith in gods and goddesses like India, the roles of myth is particularly critical for two reasons at least. First, it not only influences individual people’s world views which in effect results in their particular moral and political choices. It also determines a structure of social power relations at large. Asura(s) is a case in point as it is now instrumental in the game of nationalist and identity politics. Initially due to the shared theological view with Zoroastrian and Mesopotamian traditions, Asura was associated with gods in the early books of the Vedas. However, the term, Asura, has evolved

to be a demon or god enemy in the later Vedic texts. This evolution should not be seen only as arbitrary will of the poet who composed the texts, but it actually reflects a conceivable image of social structure and conflicts of the Aryan and the other indigenous groups at the dawn of the Indian history. One thing we can be sure about is there were numerous worshipped gods, among which Indra reigned supreme. Once the Asuras used to enjoy their deity connection and the endowed supernatural power before their demotion to be either god dualistic counterparts or Aryan living enemies or both. Another thing comes to be of our knowledge is there was a sacred ritual, performed by the Aryan priest to please gods, this ritual have continued to be performed strictly by today's Brahmins. Those non-Aryan groups like Asuras, or Dasas were either not allowed or even resisted to conform to such ritual, thus they were eventually excommunicated. As a consequence, they were spread out across the Indian subcontinent. The group of dark-skinned native peoples in the South who speak Dravidian languages have been identified, willy-nilly as the Asuras, the non- Aryan other. At a first glance this designation seems depreciatory as it connotes a sense of inferiority. However, the term Asura has relatively developed in the same way as in the Vedic texts, yet in an opposite direction. That is, it has become a term of self- assertion of the indigenous pride of their culture. The term has also gained momentum and become a political instrument for the powerless groups of today's modern India.

Chapter 2

Representing Asura Identity and Revisiting Good and Evil Dichotomy in *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012)

Introduction

The transformation of the concepts of the Asura in both mythical, religious and social dimensions as discussed in the previous chapter has two significant implications for understanding Indian society. First and foremost, it has geared the society which was prevalently syncretic in nature towards a more polarized one, revolving around the dichotomies of deity vs. demon or good vs. evil. This is reflected on numerous literary works in which good and evil is markedly featured such as the two well-known epics: The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The representation of good and evil in these two epics are not only literary devices employed to convey allegorical message to the public audience. It indeed has important influence on moral and political perceptions of the people. On the one hand, the goodness or virtue of Rama, a hero-god in Ramayana, for instance, is what is highly uphold and is aspired to by a large majority of Hindus. Ramayana is the source of “Rama Dharma” or righteousness of Rama which has become the foundation of social order and moral values. *Rama* and *Sita* are both held up as role models of Hindu virtue. Rama has become an archetype of the righteous king and an ideal man/husband whereas Sita has become embodiment of a good, loyal and chaste woman/ wife. Similar to Christian Bible, Ramayana serves as a religious text. Reading certain key passages is believed to be meritorious and blessing to the audience (Chouksey, Sethirakoset 1972). On the other hand, it has also privileged one concept over another. To give one example, the concept of varnadharma (Brockington 2004) which established casteism in Indian society is still relevant given the notion of equality promoted by modern value of Indian secularism. When such a concept is concretely practiced by Brahmins, their mastery in Sanskrit and capability of performing rituals allow for the propagation of Brahmanical worldview and their sanskritized ideology as mainstream social norms given that Brahmins are actually a minority of the Indian population. This process, thus, is viewed by some, especially intellectual and political groups, to legitimize the supremacy of Bhraminism.

One of the Indian performance traditions that has testified to and strengthened the influence of Brahmanical worldview is a stage performance of traditional Ramayana story. Such a performance is referred to as Ramlila or Ramleela, which is shown as part of a

celebration of the annual autumn festival called Dussehra¹². The play dramatizing the life of Rama is quite popular in the Northern region of India where it is performed on the last night of the festival. The story is based on the well-known narrative of the lord Rama's victory over the demon Ravana. The thematic message of good winning over evil is usually signified in a grand and spectacular ending culminating in the literal burning of an effigy of Ravana. The play series, which is part of the evening festivities, is considered the heart of the festival due to its moral significance and the theatrical experience it offers to the public audience. Thus, when any Indian Hindus are asked what Dussehra is all about, the most likely response would be the celebration of triumph of good over evil. Here Rama represents the good and Ravana whose effigy is burnt represents the evil. However, despite the cultural appeal of the Ramlila, it has become an object of political criticism. For one reason, India is a pluralistic society with diverse religions, meaning that there are millions who are not identified with practices of mainstream Hinduism. To those people comprising other religious faiths such as Islam, Christianity, and non-established beliefs like animism may not regard Rama's righteousness as being superior or ideal. Promoting one model of goodness (of Rama) is thus anti-secular and unhealthy to the development of Indian democracy.

In addition, as the dramatic theme emphasizes on the idea of Bhakti¹³, which is the Hindu concept of devotional worship to god, such an enactment of Rama's story as a public feast, officially sponsored in some locations, can be seen as advocating Hindu Nationalism. This is especially the case when supporters of the BJP and their allied organizations attempt to interpret Ramayana in ways that justify their project of making India a Hindu nation. Nevertheless, this tendency is not welcome or is even resisted by many groups of people including tribal minorities and people in the South who identify themselves as Dravidians. They feel that the Hindu Nationalism or popularly dubbed as 'Safronization' has systematically

¹² Dussehra, or Vijayadashami in Hinduism is a public holiday marking the victory of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, over the 10-headed demon. King Ravana kidnapped Sita, Rama's wife. The festival's name is derived from the Sanskrit words *dasha* ("ten") and *hara* ("defeat"). Symbolizing the victory of good over evil, Dussehra is celebrated on the 10th day of the seventh month (September–October) of the Hindu calendar, during the full moon. Dussehra coincides with the culmination of the nine-day Navratri festival (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

¹³ Bhakti is defined as "a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in Love" (Swami Viveknanda 2003, p. 3). In *Ramayana*, Rama is viewed as an avatar of God Vishnu who incarnated in a human form to eliminate the Asura King, Ravava. Thus, those who are unconditionally devoted to Rama such as Hanuman, Bharata and Vibhishana denote their performing of Bhakti or observing Bhakti yoga. Bhakti also suggests the idea of self-surrender. Once one surrenders to the lord, he or she (called Bhakta) is provided with his protection, a sense of fearlessness and emancipation in return.

worked to suppress the different voices of the religious and political others. This discord has created some tension in national and regional politics which will be discussed in the next chapter. This is the main reason why the concept of Asuras is critical and useful to our understanding of the modern context of Indian culture and politics. The idea of Asuras is ushered as a part of political mobilization to counter the rising influence of the Safronization on the one hand. On the other hand, it is aimed at empowering the cultural and political others in the Indian society to find their own voices. When it comes to art and literary creation, the practice of retellings and adaptations of Ramayana, which have emerged in a variety of forms, is one of the tools readily accessible to various groups of people in the Indian subcontinent to make use of in making sense of their socio-political realities. Peoples have incessantly reused and recreated the epic to reflect on their beliefs and values of a particular milieu. Not surprisingly, the number of Ramayana retellings in India alone is found to be incredibly numerous and still increasing. This suffices to say that until the present time Rama and Ravana have never died and their battles remain relevant.

Oppositional tellings

A diversity of Ramayana tellings both inside and outside the Indian subcontinent are developing into two directions (Damrhung 2006). The first direction refers to tellings which are influenced by Vaishnavism¹⁴, thus the main message highlighted is the greatness of Vishnu, the supreme god worshipped by Vaishnavite followers and his avatars, in which Rama is one. These tellings conform to the traditional Hindu version in terms of structure of plot, main events and main characters even though some details may differ or are enmeshed with some local materials of each particular location where the story is retold. The main purpose of this tradition of tellings is to glorify Rama and popularize his goodness. Examples of this kind of tellings include those popularly known versions in Hindi by Tulsidas, in Tamil by Kampan and in Bengali by Krittibas Ojha. The Thai Ramakien and Lao Phra Lak Phra Lam also belong to this category.

Another direction in Ramayana tellings is oppositional which refers to a way of telling a story that seeks to contest the traditional depiction of characters, values and thematic

¹⁴ Vaishnavism or Vishnuism is one of the major sects of modern Hinduism. It is characterized by the worship of and devotion to Vishnu god and his different forms of incarnation (avatars). Vedic and puranic texts are the main sources of the beliefs and practices of Vaishnavism. Another major sect widely practiced by Hindus is Shaivism which acknowledges the god Shiva as a supreme deity. For more information, see <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Vaishnavism>.

messages of the traditional story. Those tellings that oppose influential Hindu tellings can be called “oppositional tellings” (Richman 1991, p. 11). Drawing from different Ramayana literature, three reasons can be attributed to the coming of oppositional tellings. Firstly, given that Rama in the Hindu Ramayana acts as the embodiment of righteousness, his moral ambiguities revolving around some of his actions are often questioned. The notorious ones include his setting for Sita’s trial by fire (akni pariksha) after she returns from Lanka, his approval of the mutilation of Surapanakha by his brother, Lakshmana, due to her boldness and sexual advance. Another issue, concerning the projection of Rama as a just and virtuous warrior monarch, is his stealth killing of Bali, without giving the latter a chance neither to defend himself nor fight back. These incidents challenge Rama’s pious image of being both an ideal husband and moral king to be aspired by all Hindu men. This is the case in point when Rama ideology has been normalized and politicized by a group associated with a powerful political party. Accordingly, there has emerged various renditions and commentaries to investigate and comment on those controversial aspects. Secondly, oppositional tellings stemmed from colonial context as in the case of the Myanmar popular novel, *Lin-gar Di Pa Chit*, as aforementioned. This telling reverses the role of the main characters by making Ravana a hero, who protects his motherland from Rama’s invasion. Ravana’s death at the end of the novel connotes the native people’s great sacrifice and struggle in their fight against the British colonizer (Faktong 2015). The telling by Michael Madhusudan Dutt titled “Meghanadavadha Kavya” reflects the complicated nature of contact the Indian had with the colonial culture. Dutt wrote his Ramayana in Bengali prose, based on the plot of Krittivasa’s Bengali version. He then subverted the image of Rama by integrating three additional stories that identify Ravana with Rama. Out of the reader’s expectations, this technique renders the reader’s admiration and sympathy for the villain. Dutt cited his contempt for the Hindu values as the reason for his change of character portrayals (Richman 1991). Similar reasons seem to be shared by other religious minorities who embrace Ravana as their hero. The last reason giving rise to oppositional tellings concerns socio-cultural identity of those belonging to non-Hindu communities, who make use of Ramayana retellings as a tool to understand their own positions to power and as a way of making sense of their realities. These people usually come from lower caste Dravidian groups or people of less privileged social positions or gender. Whereas the mainstream tellings of Ramayana speak for the dominant male, Hindu culture, the richness of Ramayana tradition makes possible oppositional tellings to serve to identify with female characters including Sita and Surapanakha or even the villain and his tribe, Ravana and the Asuras.

In this chapter, I hope to complement to Ramayana scholarship, yet still relevant to the focus of this research, the *Asura*, by analyzing a popular novel entitled “*Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012)” by Anand Neelakantan using subaltern studies approach and psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lack. The novel is based on Valmiki’s Ramayana, however, the author employed oppositional telling as discussed above in rewriting the story. If we follow Ramanujan on his thoughts on translation of Ramayana as mentioned above, the work such as this novel may be called *symbolic* telling as the same plot structure and most characters of the original text are used to tell the same story, however, through a totally different perspective. Neelakantan did not simply reverse the roles of the main characters. Rather, he let the villain, Ravana, narrate the main events so that we, the audience, can see things the way he see them. This does not warrant Ravana a hero in place of Rama. He may appear as villainous as he is but through the author’s oppositional technique, we come to understand what makes him the way he does. Ravana himself made an interesting point why his tale has to be told:

For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor’s tale, the Ramayana. Now hear the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished. I am a non-entity invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me.

(as appears on the back cover of the novel)

Another character who narrated the story is Bhadra, who is a new character created by the author to represent a common man from a lower class among the Asuras. Bhadra is a village man who fights bravely for the survival of his tribe but he is later betrayed by Ravana. Despite his struggles to get out of destitution and hardship, being hailed from the lowest stratum of society hinders any progress he is attempting to make. Thus, the stories of the two Asura figures account for a brief historicity of the “*Asurayana*” (James 2015, p. 12) and their respective classes which are worth our exploration.

Neelakantan’s *Asura* is a symbolic tale of the subaltern in a sense that it let the mythical defeated king of the Asura, the Hindu other, speak. *Asura* allows Ravana’s humanized sides to be exposed for the public reconsideration of his notoriously demonic image. The act of representation here is critical as it suggests autonomy or agency one can exercise for one’s self-

determination. One who represents himself makes his/her own voice heard, hence making a political assertion for his/her own end. In effect, the public receive alternative views to take into their account. The Hindu poets and authors have spoken for Rama for ages. Accordingly, Rama's stories told from merely one angle has set him up as a standard criteria for moral judgment. Public festivals like Dussehra and Diwali celebrating "good over evil" testify to such a process of Rama idolization, which are mythically and religiously charged other than entertainment and cracker burning. It is the diversity of the Ramayana tradition that makes questioning Ramayana through Neelakantan's *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* possible.

Objectives

1. To explore how the portrayals of Ravana and Bhadra represent Asura's identity.
2. To examine how the idea of good is redefined in the novel.

Methodology

This study mainly employs Subaltern Studies approach and psychological concepts of autonomy and lack, which are briefly discussed below.

Subaltern¹⁵ Studies

Concepts of subaltern subject by Ranajit Guha

Subaltern Studies is an approach to history study emerged in the 1980s by a group of Indian intellectuals including Ranjit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Spivak and Gyanendra Pandey, among others, to contest against the mainstream historiography which is believed to be the historical writing of the elite. It is believed that the mainstream historiography, despite premising on the Enlightenment rationalism that privileges the narrative of modernity and democracy, fails to take the 'subaltern' or the 'people' into account (Guha 1982). Accordingly, the Indian history of nationalism was written as an achievement of the mere elite class. For this reason, the main aim of Subaltern Studies is to produce "historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subject of history" (Dipesh Chakrabarty 2004, p. 7). Taking up from Antonio Gramsci's account of how the Italian peasants under Mussolini could free themselves from the capitalist bourgeoisie hegemony or

¹⁵ *Subaltern* is the term coined by an Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, to identify the social groups whose political voices are denied as a result of their exclusion and displacement from socio-economic institutions of their society. The term subaltern was later appropriated by post-colonial scholars to refer to colonial population who are socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power of a colony.

even the anti-colonial movements in colonial India itself such as the anti-Rowlatt upsurge of 1919 and the Quit India movement of 1942 (Guha 1982, p. 3), Guha believes that there was a kind of an *autonomous* domain that allowed the subaltern to play their politics (in the sphere of political society), which was in parallel with the constitutionalist-oriented style of elite politics. Even though the subalterns were scattered, ununifying in character, their commonly shared ideology was a notion of resistance to elite domination. For this purpose, they were able to rise against the Raj in the form of peasant insurgency during the colonial period.

Borrowing from Marxist tradition, Guha has proposed two concepts of subaltern subjects. In “The Small Voice of History” (1996), he presents a *humanist concept* of subaltern subject. He argues that traditional historiography fails to recognize *agency* of subaltern subject, not as ‘principal actor’ on their own but only as instrumentality. That is, they are only acting in complement to the middle class’ leadership, or as a subset of them. Therefore, the history of colonial India is equivalent to statism or state discourse in which the subaltern movements were not included. This suggests that on the one hand, the history has neglected both the agency and autonomy of the subaltern. On the other hand, history has recognized only the middle class ideology and their simplified version of social contradiction. On the contrary, Guha believes that the subaltern occupied the domain of autonomy which was independent from elitist politics. However, subaltern politics relied on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class associations, rather than colonial adaptations of British parliamentary institution and the residual of the old feudal political strategies. Hence, the subaltern is actually both an active and independently principal agent of the history.

To simply put, history is the story of the state which has bourgeoisie to speak for the whole nation, for all citizens. However, unlike civil society in Europe, this scenario could not be applicable to colonial India because there were no citizens but only subjects ruled over without consent. Hence the British rule over India was dominance which would never gain hegemony. Historiography appropriated for the Indian case, accordingly, should not follow the Western model as it was not inclusive of the Indian past. In other words, it did not recognize “the myriad voices in civil society” (Guha 1996, p. 3). Moreover, it oversimplified the many contradictions of the power by reducing them to “principal contradiction” which was only between the colonizers and the colonized. Given that mainstream historiography suffers such inadequacy, it has become the accepted norm in history writing, to which any later historical work has to conform. Even the ones written about situations in postcolonial India is no exemption from this convention. Example given is the Telangana uprising written by P. Sundarayya, which also adopted the ‘totalising’ approach of the movement by demonstrating that the whole struggle was committed in order to win the state

power by means of armed resistance. Thus, it appreciated certain values such as heroism, sacrifice, and martyrdom over the others. These values emphasized the role of male leadership while the women's participation and agency were not acknowledged. The cases of colonial peasant insurgents and Telangana women alike were seen as the negligence of statist historiography. In short, what is lacking in history writing is the recognition of *subaltern consciousness*, which exists as a substantive content and has a force to play in the game of the national history. Having the idea of agency and autonomy of the subaltern in mind, Guha maintained that *there is a subaltern consciousness to recover*; like a positivist object which exists outside history. Therefore one of the subaltern studies' projects is to rewrite history.

Another kind of subaltern subject premised on *a constructionist concept* which holds that meaning is not produced by the subject but it is coming from the outcome of structural contradictions. Based on Louis Althusser, subject is the effect of structure and it is the structure that determines the course of history. Following this, the subaltern consciousness is not there to be recovered but rather it is constituted in the same fashion the state is constituted. This concept has marked the shift in position of Subaltern Studies from the Gramscian Marxist to the Althusserian overdetermination. In "Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography" (1989), Guha attempts to situate Indian historiography by examining different colonial conditions. His point of departure—"There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past" (1989, p. 210). — has led him to unravel certain power relations that allowed the British, with their universalizing project of capitalism, to have dominance over India but failed to exercise their hegemony. Drawing from what happened in some European countries in terms of "the universalizing tendency of the capital" (1989, p. 222), Guha points out that not every bourgeoisie revolution had met with victory due to some tendency (of the bourgeoisie) to compromise with the old orders. This suggests that liberal universalizing project is flawed because it failed to realize its own ideal in reality which is challenged by diverse conditions. This has a significant implication for colonial India. Invoking Althusser, there were multiple contradictions within various classes which could not be reduced to economy. Similarly, in the colonial history there was a very complex situation which entailed different kinds of economic conflicts between the exploiters and the exploited, the power conflict of feudal modes of production, the zamindars (landlords) and laborers, and capitals within classes of people (middle class and subaltern classes between various strata of these classes, and among individuals). The accumulation of multiple contradictions as such is termed 'overdetermination', and only when it is coupled with conjuncture in time and critical mass can make revolution possible. In short,

overdetermination is a prerequisite factor for any revolution. In addition, overdetermination helps to explain two kinds of failures happened in the history of colonial India. On the one hand, it explains why India failed to gain independence earlier despite at least two major people's movements occurred before nationalist movements and on the other hand, it clarifies why the British hegemony failed.

Concepts of autonomy and lack

Autonomy is actually a contentious concept which can be defined differently in various particular contexts. The folk concept of autonomy, for example, suggests a primary desire for freedom regardless of moral concern. Moral autonomy, derived from Kantian tradition, is the capacity to deliberate and to give oneself the moral law, rather than merely conforming to the majoritarian others. Political autonomy is the ability to have one's voices heard and respected within a political context. Personal autonomy can be defined as an individual's capacity to decide for oneself and to pursue one's own course of action (Dryden 2017). For the concept of lack, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, when the subject enters the symbolic order, it has to sacrifice the feeling of oneness it once has in the imaginary realm where the subject has no distinction between itself and other. When the subject enters into the symbolic order, the subject experiences a sense of lack and start longing for self-completion (Mansfield 2000). In other words, it is the process of the child's entry into the social world in which he is subjected to language, conventions and law. The child's relationship with such systematic bodies deprives him of the feeling of completion he once had, causing him a sense of lack. The lack emanates desire, which propels the subject into the symbolic world where we exist. Humans, unfortunately, are drawn endlessly toward desire which is insatiable.

Analysis of *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012 by Anand Neelakantan)

Asura Tale of the Vanquished (Asura) is a novel based on Valmiki's Ramayana story. It is divided into 65 chapters, each chapter contains events in the story narrated by two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra. Ravana in this telling is not painted as a flat black character, not an absolute villain but rather a fallen hero. The author attempted to portray his humanized sides so that the reader can see him in a different light; as the king of the Asura, not as the enemy of the Deva's king, Rama. The character of Bhadra is not present in the traditional Ramayana version. He was created to represent downtrodden Asura people. Each character takes turn narrating important events occurring to the Asura and how they experienced them. Ravana was born as a half-caste Dravidian but later rose to power and became the king of

Lanka. Bhadra was born a lower-caste, common man who was throughout his life being devoted to his clan. Despite his sacrifice and devotion to the freedom of the Asura, however, Bhadra social condition has deprived him of being someone other than a marginalized subaltern. Whereas Ravana had his fair share of glorious and gloomy days, Bhadra remained in destitution throughout his life. Given their differing conditions, difficulties and destinies, both figures reveal to us how they have fought against the powerful other in their respective terms. The following analyses concern portrayals of Ravana and Bhadra, respectively. Drawing on the two concepts of subaltern subjects: the humanist and the constructionist, and the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lack as above discussed, we shall see how Ravana and Bhadra speak of different subaltern subjects.

Portrayal of Ravana

The novel's first chapter is titled "The End", here Ravana narrated the last moment in his life after he was defeated and left to die along with the bodies of his slain cousins. In subsequent chapters he began to reminisce his past which then sparked memories of his childhood, youth and adulthood when he rose to be the emperor of Lanka. These recollections were ingrained with conflictual moments in the palace, his emotional turmoil and some larger than life experiences of Ravana himself. It all began when he was a poor boy, raised inadequately along with the other three siblings, Kumbakarna, Soorpanakha¹⁶, and Vibhishana by an Asura mother. Being born to a Brahmin father and an Asura mother made Ravana a half-caste boy, who was subjugated in a caste-ridden society, as a result of Brahmin ascendancy. When such a social position was coupled with poverty, and his father's negligence, Ravana and his siblings did not get access to education. "My brothers and I never had access to education to speak of. No Brahmin was ready to take us for free even if we worked for them.", deplored Ravana of his childhood deprivation. These limitations subjected him to subalternity if we are to follow the basic concept of the subaltern in a sense that they are excluded from the domain of socio-economic structure. Ironically, Ravana has a step-brother, Kubera, who was a prince of Lanka. Kubera's wealth and social privileges were anything lacking in Ravana's early life. Kubera's superiority, his contemptuous and unkind expressions towards Ravana and his family became a point for his collective angst and vengeful desire toward the former. These suppressions were eventually translated into dethroning his step-brother and making himself

¹⁶ Soorpanakha is Ravana's younger sister. She saw Rama in the forest and felt a strong affection for him, and to whom she expressed her feeling directly. However, her advance was denied. After some exchange of conversations with both Rama and Lakshmana she turned to her Rakshasa form and posed some threat toward Sita. Then Lakshmana cut off her nose and ears. In other versions, her name is spelled "Surapanakha".

king of Lanka. However, an ill relationship with his father and various forms of childhood's marginalization had a great toll on Ravana's psychological condition. On the one hand, it turned him to be a repressive subject incessantly grappled with fear of castration. Such fear caused Ravana to develop inferiority complex which reflected on his cynicism, self-contradictory and even psychopathic inclination that appeared in several occasions throughout the novel. It also made him loathe his father and the institution the father stands for— *Brahminism*. On the other hand, the same fear also equipped him with a strong sense of ambition to not only achieve something great in life but also to reform social conditions he feels not serving the Asura's ideas of good and justice.

Ravana's angst and suppression he had felt for the Asura race sublimated into constant criticism towards the dominant other, the Deva. Ravana felt that the Deva's most powerful tool was their religious texts, the Vedas, which were the source of all traditions and belief systems. The Deva's way of life was governed by the texts, which were regarded as sacred and not to be challenged. As such, he often used questions as a method to challenge Brahmin hegemony of his time. Reflectively, those questions resonate with social issues of the present day where casteism along with other oppressions are still much relevant. The reader is then invited to participate in pondering over those posed questions.

But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions, all conspired to crush together the humble majority.

Why couldn't there be a more just way of living (p.19).

The silent hatred for his father makes him a hard critic of Brahminism and anything associated with it. Criticizing Brahmin rituals and its scriptures became his common habit.

I thought the Vedas were a load of humbug and it didn't matter which way you recited them. Some jobless Brahmin like my father, created them thousand years ago. Instead of making themselves useful, the Brahmins prayed to Gods they themselves invented for the rain, the sun, horses, cows and money and many other things.

Therefore, what Ravana did was not only laying bare what he saw as being objectable and unfair. He also redefined certain norms and concepts which reclaimed his Asura identity. Take one example of moral principle which were uphold strongly by the Asura, Ravana asserted:

Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong.

One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight at all costs (p. 17)

According to the quote, Ravana redefined the notion of righteousness, the value readily attached to Rama's image. Here, he made references to Rama's mistreatment of Sita and Sooparnakha in the traditional Ramayana. He also questioned the way Rama shot Bali to death from behind while the latter was fighting with Sugriva. Invoking a warrior's principle (yuddha), Ravana affirmed that "[o]ne should not cheat even if one was sure to fail." Such criticism of Rama's actions, which is commonly practiced in oppositional tellings of Ramayana, was reiterated in *Asura* for two interesting reasons. First and foremost, the legitimacy of Rama dharma is exposed for our revision and challenged by alternative Asura dharma, which was not popularly represented. This suggests that one supreme type of dharma was irrelevant and no longer valid. Referring to warfare strategy deployed by Rama's army when they attacked Lanka at night time while people were asleep, Ravana remarked "[w]e are dealing with an enemy who has no scruples, no sense of fair play and dharma. They are ruthless barbarians who will stoop to any levels to achieve their goals" (p. 365). Aversion caused by unfair techniques was similarly shared by Bhadra, a common Asura man who witnessed what his king (Ravana) was up against, "[a]t the same time, he faced a sly and ruthless enemy who did not care even when civilians were killed and burnt enemy cities through arson and treachery" (p. 367). Bhadra's objection on Rama's warfare had a double fold effects here. First, it directly put Rama's heroic embodiment, in particular an aspect of his righteousness or Dharmavira into question. Here, such Dharmavira has to be skeptical as what Rama's army did was "the sudden attack in the dead of night, flamed-tipped arrows were shot towards the marketplace" (p. 355) which caused "people ran out. Screams rang through the sky. Flesh burned. Houses were gutted and thick, black smoke swirled upwards. It was like being in hell" (p. 355). This unfair play as described by Bhadra while he was running for his life cast shadow on Rama's reputation of compassion. Another surfacing question to ask is if he is a compassionate figure, why the thought of possible civilian death was not considered before offsetting the war. What his army did to the common Asura people seemed to undermine this Dharmavira stature as it was contrary to how one website advocating Rama¹⁷, described his quality as: "Shri Ram is full of mercy, care and compassion. He had mercy towards the meek. He knew what was to be done (righteous). He always has self-control and he is always pure (in conduct)".

¹⁷ See website "Rama", <http://lordrama.co.in/index.html>.

Another reason why Rama's Dharmavira being brought up was that it is pertinent to the ancient history or say, mythical history concerning the Deva versus the Asura conflicts. Even though the questions concerning who the Aryan are and how they are connected with the Indus Valley Civilization have been debatable till now. What was presented in the novel *Asura* is clear where the author stands. Anand Neelakantan believes that the Asuras were the civilized people of the Harappa, who had lived peacefully until in the invasion by the Deva or Aryan, led by their supreme god Indra. The unfair strategic attack of Rama's army on the Asura kingdom was used comparatively as a point of reference in explaining the cause of decline of the Indus valley civilization. Identifying himself with the Asura, the tribe that settled by the river banks and were civilized, Ravana recounted that the Asura civilization was at its peak before the Aryan's invasion and the society was much culture-oriented that there was no efficient leadership or plan for national defence. This made the city an easy target for the invader. Ravana reminded himself of the ancient history of his Asura tribe as if he wanted to suggest that the history has now repeated itself when the same group of people resorted to the same tactic in conquering the other's land. Lanka was now brutally attacked by the Deva army in exactly the same fashion how things happened to the Harappa. What arose in Ravana's mind was the memory of the horse riding nomad tribe invading the Asura (people of the Harappa) which led to the decline and destruction of their civilization.

The mighty Asura army met the horse-riding savage tribes near the river Jhelum. The leader of the plunderers was named Indra....Thousands were slain; women irrespective of age, were gang-raped, children burned alive and granaries plundered. Magnificent cities crumbled (p. 22).

Connotatively, Ravana meant to stress that the Deva/ Aryan tribe, in which Rama, belongs to, was uncivilized and how they invaded the Asura (comparatively, the Harappan) in order to usurp the city was blatantly barbaric. Therefore, the badge of righteousness (Dharmavira) attached to Rama was questionable.

It is quite obvious from the above discussion that Ravana is a subaltern subject who can speak clearly of his dissent and desire. *What enables him to speak?* is the question to deal with shortly. For my attempted answer, I have to follow Guha's concept of humanist subject which holds that the subaltern is not merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie's political project. Actually, they occupy the domain of autonomy which is independent from elitist politics and thus can realize their political goals on their own. However, the subaltern has to ally with traditional organizations and maneuver class associations effectively for their gain. When Ravana's struggle to represent his tribe (alternatively, race) is seen within this conceptual

framework, it is not difficult to determine how his autonomy takes effect. Given that Ravana was half-caste and disadvantaged, as he described how difficult his early life was economically and socially, he was not totally left out of socio-economic institutions. Even if he seemed so in his early life, he managed to resume his circle of powerful network later on. Ravana was linked to a learned Brahmin father, a rich and royal step-brother (Kubera) and a powerful, spiritual guru who was a former king (Mahabali). These three people played important roles in shaping his personality and making him king at last. Neglected by his biological father, Ravana found a paternal figure in Mahabali, who taught him useful lessons on life and war. He consoled Ravana from fear of being castrated by his estranged Brahmin father who saw him as being “good-for-nothing evil-spirited loser who was a burden to the world” (p. 31). Mahabali inspired Ravana to achieve his dreams and assured him of his potential within.

I can see a spark, a small one perhaps, but a spark indeed, which with the right breeze can be blown into a raging fire. I do not know, whether you are a promise of our miserable people or their curse. You could be both and many things beyond (p. 29).

Having spent time with Mahabali, Ravana became an educated man and skilled warrior. The childhood's lack was somehow compensated and his long subjugated subaltern consciousness was resurrected accordingly. Psychoanalytically speaking, he was now in control to pursue the *phallus*, a symbol of totality and power. Mahabali was instrumental in helping Ravana recover such autonomy which enabled him to harness it for the good of himself and his tribe. Kubera is not only Ravana's step-brother, he is also his rival— the threat to Ravana's quest of the *phallus*. As such, he had to be eliminated. Ravana allied himself with his siblings and cousins, including Maricha, Prahastha, Sumali and Jambumali who had connection with official authorities. The support from Rudraka, a former commando who used to serve the previous king, Mahabali and the loyal, devoted Asura soldiers were the key to his victorious mission. To add to Ravana's fortune, his maternal uncle Maricha was willing to die for him and he did sacrifice his life when he accompanied Ravana to abduct Sita. In short, Ravana was successful in mobilizing his allies and together the collective Asura consciousness was strengthened by invocation of historical discourses regarding the war of the ten Asura kings who fought against the Deva army. Unfortunately, the last war against the Devas was a failure and which brought to the notorious defeat of the Asuras. The main cause was the abduction of Sita, a personal affair, rather than a racially or politically motivated one. As a consequence, the Asura collective strength failed to sustain. The Asura consciousness which was once held together solidly became expired and scattered into fragments mainly as a result of Maricha's death and

Vibhishana's alliance with the enemy. The tragic loss of the Asura lives and the downfall of the empire were thus inevitable.

Portrayal of Bhadra

Bhadra is depicted as a poor, common Asura man whose life has been affected by wars with the Devas as much as Ravana. However, unlike Ravana, his voice is never heard. Bhadra, an untouchable, represents a subaltern who was double –marginalized by caste and class. He was underprivileged in both social and economic terms. He once was a peasant who lived a simple farm life with his wife and a young daughter in a peaceful, self-sufficient village.

My village was small but it has everything- the sacred grove, a small shrine for Shiva, a toddy shop and a small school...I live like my father, who had lived like his father. My children would also live like me growing up in the same street, bathing in the same pond, falling in love with dusty beauties of the village (p. 43).

Bhadra never suffered from a sense of lack or inadequacy the way Ravana did. He was satisfied with whatever life offered. However, the war with the Deva had caused a radical change to his life as the village was ravaged; his wife was raped and killed along with his daughter. This traumatic experience led Bhadra to a revengeful mission which was to reclaim the Asura's pride and freedom from the Devas. Such determination had brought Bhadra to serve under Ravana's command for his revolutionary army as a loyal soldier. This was where the uncanny relationship between the two Asura men from two different classes started. According to Ravana, Bhadra was the last person who came to his sight just before his last breath. Bhadra held Ravana badly injured body closely and said to him, "I will complete your work, your highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race" (p.13). Bhadra embodies a lower-class nationalist who was relentlessly devoted to his superior and living for the purpose of the Asura's glory. Given his marginalized background, Bhadra, who had fought under Mahabali, manifested military prowess and intelligence. Surprisingly, when such qualities were coupled with his honest, unafraid expressions of thought and feelings, it disturbed Ravana. "I was surprised and irritable to find the man show no fear of my authority and did not act humble. It was absurd. It was absurd; the very notion that he was my equal was absurd" (p. 65). As such Ravana never recognized Bhadra's capability but an inferior folk who was always subjected to his authority. Bhadra became an object of Ravana's anxiety; someone he wished to get rid of but ironically could not live without. Once Ravana presented Bhadra's idea to his army council as if it was his own and the idea was approved. Bhadra suggested that some soldiers disguised

as traders and pretended to exchange goods with Lanka. This way the troops could set up as a guild and got weapons transported into their areas inside the city. Nevertheless, for no reasonable grounds, Ravana considered Bhadra a traitor and got him detained.

Later on in the story we come to see that Bhadra's dedication and sacrifice to fighting for his race were never recognized by the powerful Asura elites. He was exploited and then expended again and again but Bhadra did not have power to protest or revolt. He continued to fight the enemy on his own for all he wanted was "to see the Devas ruined" (p.100). Once he disguised himself to work as an employee for the enemy and was caught up in trouble. He wanted Ravana to help but was dismissed and scolded nonchalantly "You traitor, son of scoundrel! Go rot in hell!" (p. 101) Ravana also kicked him hard on the face but it was those words that hurt him most. Such ill treatment Bhadra had been receiving, never affected the fierce loyalty he had for his Asura clan. The contempt toward him was fleeting but the Asura has to be liberated. Accordingly, Bhadra's pain was quickly brushed off as he often reminded himself that he "was too small for kings and the relatives of kings to be bothered about" (p.196). Given subsequent unfortunate events he experienced in his later life such as his wife being raped by Ravana, having to raise Ravana's son as his own, his son not publicly respecting him as a father, Bhadra was not agonized by them as he was gradually coming to terms with normalcy of his destitution and oppression. He once revealed the joy he felt towards Maricha's funeral because it means the poor like him would be fed and new clothes would be supplied.

Drawing from the concept of autonomy, we can see that Bhadra's autonomy was always at work. His Asura consciousness propelled him toward living life for the purpose of the Asura progress. However, despite all odds he had undertaken: becoming a revolutionary soldier, a efficient army man of Lanka under Ravana's rule, a foster father of Ravana's son, Bhadra lamented that "[n]o bards will ever sing paeans to the selfless act done by common people like us" (p. 334). Bhadra's important role in the history of Asurayana was never mentioned. For one reason, personal autonomy he exercised lacked sufficient force to develop itself to become political autonomy, which is one's ability to have his voices heard and respected within a political context (Dryden 2017). Bhadra's significant contribution was relegated to being instrumentality of the Asura elite's political project. As such, unlike Ravana and other Asura elites, his political voices were muted and his subaltern consciousness was never resurrected. Another reason for Bhadra's historical misrecognition is that he had no linkages to the dominant group— the Brahmin. Unlike Ravana, given his being a half-caste born, he was connected to a Brahmin father, a formidable king, Mahabali and powerful figures of the old regime who were mobilized to make his rise to power possible, Bhadra was a poor untouchable who was just

serving those elites and excluded from the network of power those elites were playing. Hence, Bhadra represents a subaltern, to borrow Spivak's famous words, who 'can't speak' (Spivak 1994). In his later years, Bhadra had come to learn that no matter how many wars the Asura had lost or won, the battle of a common man like him would continue as he grumbled "millions like me would continue to wage their little wars in the different corners of the earth, for food, water, air, shelter, and a little dignity" (p. 378).

Conclusion

The richness of Ramayana tradition has generated countless tellings and retelling of Ramayana stories to cater to diverse groups of people with different social positions and ideologies. Each telling, be it mainstream or local alternative, has its own literary value and offers certain issues for the audience to reflect upon. Oppositional tellings, which seek to defy Hindu dominant tellings, are of focus in this chapter as they are relevant to our questions of modern values and conditions. One critical question deals with the Hindu other, as in the case of the Asuras. In traditional tellings, the Asuras are represented as evils or demons, or anything related to those forces which are opposite to Rama's goodness. These representations, however, fail to do justice to the Asuras, who are in this case the subalterns in the society, who practice different traditions and have different stories to tell. However, their stories are often misrepresented or underrepresented. Accordingly, the Asuras remain the second class citizens who have to struggle harder to offer different definitions of goodness/righteousness, among other definitions. It is within the conceptual framework of subaltern studies that allows the Asuras to speak. When the subaltern subject is located in *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) by Anand Neelakantan, a positional telling of Ramayana, we come to see two subaltern figures who relatively represent Asura identity, yet in different ways. Ravana, an Asura king, represents ideological aspects of the Asura which is advocated for equal, casteless society which has its own version of justice and virtues, independently from Brahmin hegemony. Another subaltern subject representing Asura identity is Bhara, who is a common, low-caste man. Bhadra speaks for the realistic material condition any common Asura people have to confront on a regular basis. His autonomy which stems from his strong nationalist sentiment is always in a proactive mode, but it is never made to achieve its highest potential for two reasons. Firstly, the lack of powerful network limits Bhadra's autonomy to the level of personal, which is not forceful enough to revolutionize the condition of his being or shift the course of his destiny. Secondly, there are no overdetermined occurrences critical enough to lift Bhadra out of a domain of servitude. As such, given his bravery, loyalty and sacrifices to his race and

kings, Bhadra remains a subservient subaltern of the higher-class Asuras. In addition, the portrayal of the two main characters serves to reflect Asura identity, which is markedly distinct from that of the Devas who are the dominant group. It also presents the two different kinds of subaltern subject/consciousness which equally contribute to historicity of the subaltern. However, it is only the performances of higher-class or elitist subalterns that are recognized as historical facts. The contribution of lower-class subalterns like Bhadra has become just a personal memor

Chapter 3

Modern Representations of the Asura

Introduction

Through reinterpretations and retellings, the Ramayana epic has served as a platform for a remarkable variety of meanings. Oppositional depictions as discussed in the previous chapter are among many modern representations of the epic tale that seek to counter the dominant Hindu reading. However, being written in English in a textual format, the novel's capability of reaching a wider readership has been limited. Oppositional tellings presented in a textual form, thus, may not be an effective tool in representing the Asura. What has emerged along with movements for political assertions among Dalits, the former untouchables and tribal communities of India, are those that are currently referred to as Dalit-Bahujans¹⁸ who identify themselves with the Asura is the idolization of the mythical Asura figures. This is particularly evident with the two Asura kings: Mahishasura and Ravana. Recently, this tendency has been gaining momentum as it has been employed as a counter-hegemonic strategy against the Hindu Nationalist movement or what is referred to as the Hindutva¹⁹ movement (Garalyté, 2015, Pathania, 2016). Such idolization was much more active in the South of India where Rama is juxtaposed against Ravana, whose identity is defined by those belonging to the marginalized groups that venerate him (Thapar, 2000). What follows is the assertion that the invocation of self-identity has become integrative with cultural based-activism among the marginalized students that are studying at some Indian universities. On university campuses in Hyderabad located in the state of Telangana, such as The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU)²⁰, Osmania University (OU), and the University of Hyderabad (UoH), activities such as 'Asura Week', 'Mahishasura Martyrdom Day' or 'Beef Festival' have been organized by students based on their belief that worshipping the two mythical Asura kings in the public, secular space of a university campus is a rightful practice of self- dignity and respect. More

¹⁸ Dalit-Bahujans is an alternative or official designation of Dalits, which connotes wider political mobilization of various groups of peoples from lower strata of society such as tribal communities and other backward classes (Garalyte, 2015).

¹⁹ Hindutva (Hinduness) is a political doctrine initially formulated by V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966), a Hindu nationalist politician. It is a conceptual framework that connects Hinduness with Indian nationalhood, focusing on one language and culture. In other words, it is a form of Pan-Hindu mobilization that advocates majority homogenization and cultural hegemony.

²⁰ The author was studying for a PhD. in Cultural Studies during the years of 2010-2014 at this university (EFLU).

importantly, it has become the primary agenda of the Dalit's struggle for political and cultural inclusivity (Pathania, 2016). The counter-culture activities mentioned above have been activated on a regular basis even though they have been met with aggressive opposition from right-wing groups who refuse to tolerate differing interpretations of this mythical tale. Even more critically, they strongly oppose the celebration of any mythical icons that have been pejoratively classified as "demons" in the public arena. These activities are often relegated to cheap identity politics or pseudo-reinterpretations of relevant myths (Singh, 2013). The students associated with right-wing groups on their respective campuses see them as provocative acts that were intended to insult and challenge certain long upheld Hindu beliefs. The *Asura Week*, which was performed on the EFLU campus beginning on 9 September, 2013, was interrupted when a criminal case was filed against some students who served as the event's organizing committee. Likewise, *Mahishasur Martyrdom Day*, which was organized on 9 October, 2014 on Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) campus in New Delhi, shared the same fate. Given such opposition, the rise of new Dalit activism, especially in the South of India, remains active and viable in the political sphere, within academia, and in the film industry. The release of the film *Raavan* (2010, Dir. Mani Ratnam) has contributed to the ongoing controversial resurrection of the Asura King, Ravana. The film, produced in the Tamil language, depicts Ravana as a tragic hero. It reinterprets the dichotomy of Rama vs. Ravana, or hero vs. villain, as told in the Ramayana epic. Importantly, the film presents a different and critical way of looking at the so-called *villain* based on his motives and socio-political background. Such a cinematic representation has a great impact on how people come to revisit/reimagine 'Ravana' as a classic demon. How the film is received thus affects the general perception of what is good or bad among the public. At the same time, the villain in the film also ushers critical voices of the Asuras—as marginalized minorities—who have long been kept silent and underrepresented.

The ongoing trend of the glorification or idolization of the Asura icons is critically interesting, but not only for its political significance. Equally important is the emotional appeal that permeates the public space. When an event or activity has been held, it can serve to unite the collective consciousness, particularly of the marginalized. Here, I would suggest that such collectivity may be viewed in a similar manner as to the way Ramlila, or a stage drama of Rama's life, is viewed by Hindu believers. In other words, if a popular stage performance such as Ramlila is played during the Navaratri festival, it can encourage devotionism or bhaktinization among Hindu believers. Similarly, the advent of Mahishasura and Ravana

festivals, or any other counter-cultural types of activities, are intended to accomplish a similar goal. That is, they communally and affectively unite the Dalit-Bahujans and those who identify with the Southern Dravidians or ‘Asuras’. To emphasize this point, the telling of the resurrection of the two Asura kings is a spiritual performance that simultaneously speaks for the Dalit-Bahujans in a political context. Other than having political connotations, this would be indicative of a spiritual pursuit and an emotional engagement with object of one’s idolization. Whether such a spiritual and emotional demand can be accomplished seems to depend on how the idea of secularism is approached or practiced by a nation and its citizens. Following this premise, my purpose for this chapter is to look at how cultural representations of the Asura are operated to make both political and affective impacts on certain marginalized groups. This would employ cultural concepts of representation and affect and emotion. In this chapter, two types of modern representation of the Asura will be discussed. One is an event entitled *Asura Week*, which was organized on the EFLU campus, Hyderabad, in September 2013 and the other is the cinematic depiction of Ravana in the film *Raavan* that was released in 2010.

Objectives

1. To analyze how the Asura are represented in modern Indian contexts.
2. To examine the effects of *affect* or in this case, the feeling of pain, in the two modes of representation including the “Asura Week” and the film, “Raavan”.

Methodology

Two theoretical frameworks are used in my analysis of the two depictions of Asura.

Representation

Representation is an approach primarily conceptualized by Stuart Hall (1997) who played a key role as a founding figure of an intellectual school of thought referred to as Cultural Studies. This concept favors the use of interdisciplinary approaches to social and cultural inquiries. Hall has proposed three approaches to representation including reflective, intentional and constructionist. Each approach defines differently just how meaning can be achieved. The reflective approach focuses on the mirror like quality of the text that conveys what already exists in the world. The intentional approach focuses on the author or individual user of language who ultimately conveys the message, and who thus believably holds the meaning of it. The last one, the constructionist approach, takes into account the social structures and

conceptual systems of one particular culture and maintains that meaning is socially constructed. Thus, social actors, including “people, events, and experiences” (Hall, 1997, p. 61), are always relevant and should be considered when it comes to understanding the meaning of a cultural text and practice. Drawing from Foucault’s concepts of power and knowledge, Hall (1997) explains that an act of representation occurs through the process by which subject positions are produced following an established body of knowledge or discourse. There can be more than one subject position that emerges from the process of representation but how we, as the spectators, make meaning or choose to identify with any subject position is dependent upon how we are influenced by or how we subject ourselves to the discourse. In brief, “the discourse constructs the spectator as a subject” (Hall, 1997, p. 60). Only by taking a position in the discursive formation operated by power/knowledge do we become the subject capable of making meaning. Following this notion, representation is political in nature because it seeks to convey a certain meaning to a specific spectator. The meaning is never complete in and of itself, hence, there exists a site of contestation. In this study, the constructionist approach will be primarily used to analyze the operation of the “Asura Week”.

Affect and emotion

What representation does is not only to produce meaning but it also has the power to influence the spectator emotionally. For this reason, emotional effects or affective dimensions involved in the act of representation is relevant. Through emotional engagement, the audience is empowered to become an agent of their own actions. It is at this juncture where the audience encounters a specific object in the media text that gives rise to an affect or bodily sensation. That is to say that ‘affect’ is an outcome of the interaction between the specific object of the text and the embodied subject. This affect outcome is interesting and relevant as we are constantly bombarded with ubiquitous visual media. As a consequence, we tend to rely on our bodily senses when we come into contact with other people. However, this does not mean that our reactions to empirical stimuli and media have resulted in us becoming more emotional beings rather than rational beings. It is only that, as Sara Ahmed (2014) has recommended, we should pay attention to emotions so that we can be aware of how subjects are invested in particular structures that make up and permeate our society. The task at hand is then to follow Ahmed (2014, 2010) in recognizing the emotionality of texts and the role emotions play in cultural or collective politics.

Affect, or the turn to emotion-studies, has gained much attention lately due to the important roles it plays in thinking, reasoning and reflection (Leys, 2011). Such roles have long been subdued under the dominance of Kantian and Cartesian traditions, which privilege the mind or cognitive capabilities as the primary elements in our ability to make sense of the world. The interest in affect and emotion has shifted our focus from the faculty of reason to corporeal dispositions or bodily sensations, as it is believed that the latter impinge upon our political decisions and judgments. A political theorist, William Connolly, is among those who criticize the inadequacy of a purely rationalist mode of thinking. He asserts such a position in the following passage.

Culture involves practices in which the porosity of argument is inhabited by more noise, unstated habit, and differential intensities of affect than adamant rationalists acknowledge. (cited in Leys, 2011, p. 436)

The rising question then is *what is affect?* Affect may be described as the visceral forces that drive us toward movement, whilst at the same time tying us to a specific object. It is the reaction of a body encountering an intensity of force and then resonating with the matter that surrounds that very body. Affect is non-linguistic, non-textual and non-representational (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010 and O'Sullivan, 2001); thus, in order to know when affect arises, one needs to be present and to precisely experience it. Moreover, given the scholarly recognition it has received, conceptual frameworks concerning affect studies remain diverse and debatable largely due to its abstract and highly dynamic or even paradoxical nature. According to Gregg & Seigworth (2010), there is no single, generalizable theory of affect but only “infinite iterations of affect and theories of affect” (2010, p. 4). The warning notice received from following this observation is that upon encountering affect theories for the first time, one can feel like they are experiencing a momentary free fall. Gregg & Seigworth, following Brian Massumi (2002 cited in Gregg and Seigworth, 2010, p. 4), respectfully recommended that in order to escape from such a conceptual free fall, our inquiry should begin with “movement rather than stasis, with process always underway rather than a position taken” (2010, p. 4).

Affect studies play a crucial role, particularly in media, literary and cultural studies mainly due to the connection they have with emotions. This seems to imply that locations of emotion in the texts are relevant; thus, the importance of the text cannot be dismissed. Such connection has given us at least two orientations of *affect studies*. These include first, affective science, which draws on cognitive science and psychology. Within this approach, it is believed that emotions are inherently independent of intentions and thus affects are a set of innate, brain-

body behaviors and expressions performing outside the realm of consciousness. (Leys, 2011). What is explored is how a body, which is lived and felt, can affect and can be effected, independently of any cognitive meaning and intention. Here, the body is not only a human body within its fixed anatomical boundaries, but also a form of matter with the capability to automate itself. Another approach, which is less pervasive in the recent turn to affect studies, is influenced by poststructuralist thought. It is a shift of focus from text to affect or subjectively felt as an emotion that seeks to unravel the socio-cultural structures beyond the discursive domain and the area of representation. More specifically, it is primarily concerned with how affect or, interchangeably, emotion, works to trigger actions and the implications that are involved with understanding the contemporary social and cultural ethos. This latter approach suggests that there is an interplay between emotions (body) and actions (mind), which means that they collaboratively play roles in forming social structures.

The myth of purity and pollution

The notions of purity and pollution are cultural categories that are related to Brahminical belief and rituals in India. These concepts are critical for understanding caste hierarchy and the Indian social life. The caste system is performed according to a degree of purity and pollution. Derived from the *Shrastra*, an ancient religious text, social hierarchy is arranged following the idea of *Chaturvarana*, which divides people in the society into four different hierarchical orders including Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Shudras. According to this division, the Brahmins hold the highest rank and highest degree of purity, whereas the Shudras are positioned at the lowest level in the caste hierarchy. Accordingly, the Shudras' duties are meant to serve the three higher-castes who try to maintain their ceremonial purity (Sociology Guide, 2019). Other than the Shudras, it is the untouchables²¹, who were outside the Hindu's fold, who have been subjected to the domain of pollution which rendered them socially disabled in many aspects of life. Their living conditions were made even more restrictive under the colonial rule as they were literally enumerated and identified with traditional impure occupations. Occupations characterized as ritually polluting such as butchering, sweeping and scavenging are reserved for them. Worse still are the land tenure policies of the colonial state that benefit only the caste

²¹ Untouchability refers to a form of pollution caused by touching a person who was born to a particular caste or family. This leads to what is considered pollution and defilement. Being outside the Hindu fold, the untouchables are included in the Hindu society for political reasons. Nowadays, they are commonly referred to as *Dalit* (a term of self-respect) or *Scheduled Castes* (SC) in a political context.

Hindu groups, while excluding the untouchables or Dalits from this advantage (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). This has resulted in their economic deprivation, in addition to their social discrimination. At present, the dichotomy of purity/pollution remains relevant and can be relatively applied to many other practices of the higher castes who consider themselves as purists. This can be true with vegetarianism, in the way that it is a commitment to refraining from having food outside one's household, as well as by following principles of endogamy, bathing in a scared river, or by maintaining a required distance from lower caste Hindus and untouchables. Such practices not only support the operation of casteism but also disrupt the real relationships among various groups of people in a secular democratic society.

With the implementation of the Indian Act in 1935, untouchability was made unconstitutional and equal rights were guaranteed to the former untouchables who were classified as Scheduled Castes under the constitution. Given such a legal sanctity, distinction of purity and pollution has remained relevant and has made a critical impact on the public life of the Hindu people until the present day. The Dalits still suffer discrimination in various forms, explicitly and implicitly (Garalyte, 2015). According to Pathania (2016), even though the upper-caste Hindus consist of only about 15% of the population, they are a dominant minority who maintain hegemonic power. India, as such, is widely recognized as a Hindu nation, where Hindu customs and beliefs are integrative into the people's way of life. The ascendancy of Brahminical culture, which is practiced by higher-caste Hindus, was strengthened through a process termed "Sanskritization" (Srinivas, 1956). This is a process by which the lower caste Hindus adopt the lifestyles, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins. By following Brahminized rituals and customs, they are believed to be purified; however, such practices are not theoretically acceptable by the Brahmins. The influence of Sanskritization may explain why many lower caste Hindus wear sacred threads and refrain from eating beef. It is worth noting that in several states, such as Maharashtra, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh²², the slaughter of cows is legally prohibited (Tripathi, 2017). This consequently impacts upon the beef industry and affects consumption in those regions. The law was enacted as a result of the Sanskritized ideology of the current Indian government, which is led by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). The cow, a mythical carrier of the god Shiva, is regarded to be holy and deserves protection. The prohibition of beef consumption inevitably limits people's food choices, which particularly concerns lower-caste groups whose main diet is not vegetarian and whose livelihoods often

²² This is understood given the fact the state of Andhra Pradesh is a major hub of the meat industry.

revolve around cattle. Such a restriction and the prevalent availability of vegetarian menus seem contradictory to statistics that report that less than half of the Indian population are actually vegetarian (Lokniti, 2006 cited in Pathania, 2016). Food has then become a commodity that is used to maintain purity and has been taken up by the marginalized groups to challenge the Hindu cultural hegemony (Pathania, 2016).

Similarly, celebrating the Hindu festivals, whereby worshipping certain gods or goddesses is highlighted, has also become another notorious site of contestation between dominant Hindus and the marginalized communities. Popular festivals such as Dussehra and Divali, where Rama and Durga are worshipped, are juxtaposed by the worship of Asura figures²³ such as Mahishasura and Ravana, who are considered demons according to Hindu mythology. The latter performance is then perceived as a threat and can be strongly opposed if it is seen to be done in public spaces. Hassles and tussles often happen as a result of such a conflict, which shortly disrupt or halt activities organized at the festival. This implies that the public space, far from being secular, is subject to the religious control through hegemonic power. This form of control regulates how the public space can be used and by whom. The rise of Dalit-Bahujan movements, especially among the educated youth in the South, who want to reinvent their identity along with express anxiety and pain, is somewhat challenging to the Nationalists and right-wing groups who are campaigning not only to maintain the social status quo but also to reinforce existing hegemonic practices.

Asura Week: Humiliation and self- therapy

The Asura Week was organized on the EFLU campus through a collaboration of several marginalized student organizations. The students of these organizations address themselves as the 'EFLU Asura Community'²⁴. The event was scheduled to take a week from 9 September to 13 September, 2013 and was comprised of a series of activities including a face painting competition, an art installation and academic seminars. The main purpose was to celebrate Asura cultural history and mythical figures, and to expose casteist and patriarchal ideologies that are invested in dominant Hindu festivals such as Vinayaga Chaturthi or Ganesha Chaturti, Durga Puja and Divali. These well-planned activities were arranged in accordance with the concept of minorities' rights including the right to have access to secular spaces and the right

²³ They are often linked to Raksashas, the category of demons which are associated with flesh and blood.

²⁴ The Asura community mainly includes students belonging to Dalit Adivasi Bahujan Minority Students' Association (DABMSA), Students' Islamic Organisation (SIO), and the Telangana Students' Association (TSA). For more details see De (2018) and Galaryte (2015).

to a reinterpretation of mythology. Drawing on popular myths in which the Asuras are depicted as demons is in conflict with notion that the Devas are perceived as deities. In fact, the former are often suppressed or defeated. However, through the revisiting of some episodes in certain epic tales like Ramayana and Mahabhrata, the Dalits, who identify themselves with Dravidians, are perceived as Devas and as cruel and dishonest. What has emerged, accordingly, is a different, alternative version of a myth that celebrates certain Asura figures, such as Ravana, Mahisaura and Surparnakha, and regards certain values as their virtue/dharma. This is different from the popular perception of the Devas or the Aryans.

In her article on Dalit's subaltern autonomy and politics in India, Garalyte (2015) closely observed the Asura Week held on campus of the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad and commented that all of the activities organized sought to question the popular representations of Asura figures in the Hindu dominant culture. Through reinterpretation of Hindu myths, particularly those concerning such iconic representations, the Dalits were empowered to assert their autonomy for a double-fold effect. This was done as a political strategy to introduce their cultural history to the public, which is useful in uniting subaltern collective consciousness. It also serves as a critique of Hindu festivals and the nationalized symbols that are influenced by those myths which, according to the student organizers of the Asura Week event, have been further consolidated in the oppression of members of the lower caste, especially women. Upon witnessing a spectacular display of Vinayaka Chaturthi worship performed on the campus in September 2012, the organizing students of the Asura Week were dismayed by the prospect that a secular space on the campus of a university was being exploited to serve one particular religious purpose. They claimed that such a form of worship had never happened before as it was against the idea of secularism that was upheld by the EFLU student communities. The official permission and support of Vinayaka Chaturthi worship, thus, was seen as perpetuating a projection of the imagined Hindu national identity of all Indian citizens. Taken as an act of resistance against the university's administration complacency over their objection, students from minority backgrounds (Dalit-Bahujans and others) then proposed a counter-culture celebration which was promoted as "Asura Week". The written statement explaining the rationale of the celebration appeared as follows:

Vinayaka Chaturthi has historically evolved as a public declaration of this fascist Hindu ideology. We must resist its emergence on this campus; a campus that for years has struggled to democratize its space for participants

from marginalized backgrounds. On this “occasion”, we propose the celebration of the EFLU Asura Week. This celebration presents us with the prospect of a resistance, an unlearning and a reclamation. We resist the occupation of our public sphere by dominant Hindu patriarchal practices. We strive to unlearn hegemonic histories that ritually suppress memories of other communities. We reclaim the public sphere for an actual democracy through articulations of suppressed cultures.

(EFLU Asura Community Facebook Page, 2013)

To briefly recount some of the major events occurring during the Asura Week, on day one, it began with a “Raavan” face painting competition in which 19 participants were to paint the face of their models that would be intended to depict the imagined face of Ravana— a demon/villain from the Ramayana epic. There were no specific rules required, however, one of the mentioned judgment criteria was how an ‘Asura’ was portrayed as a subversion to a dominant ideology. The painted faces of all participants were showcased on the event’s Facebook webpage to be voted on by EFLU students (see Image 1 and Image 2 below). Subsequently, the votes would be included as part of a broader judgment process in which the scores submitted by a group of elected judges would be used to select a winner.

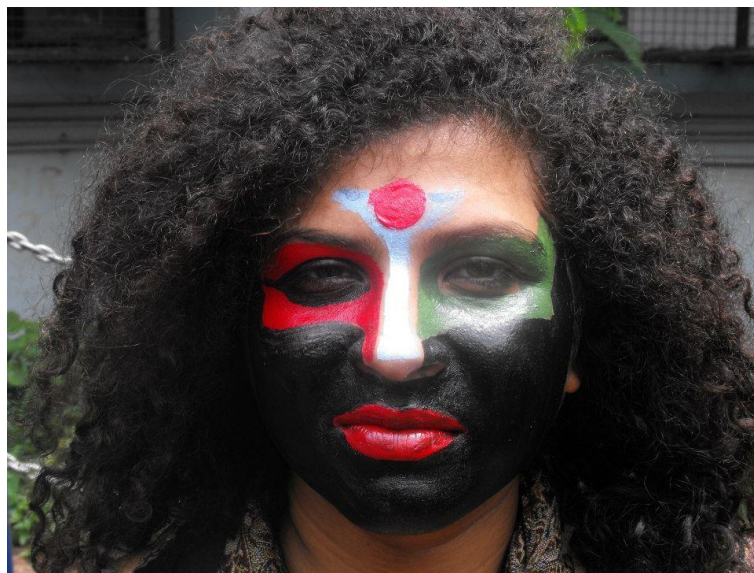


Image 1: Ravana, Courtesy EFLU Asura Community Facebook Page (2013)



Image 2: Ravana, Courtesy EFLU Asura Community Facebook Page (2013)

Day two included the making of an art installation featuring Surpanakha's gigantic nose. This was done to celebrate the Surpanakha character, whose nose was cut off by Lakshaman as a result of her sexual advances toward Rama and her possible threat to Sita in Ramayana. The underlining messages of Surpanakha's theme is on the one hand, a denial of patriarchal, nationalist configuration of women as being maternal, sexually reserved, interiorized and etc., and on the other hand, an acknowledgement and embrace of a large number of Indian women whose lives and livelihood exist outside this nationalist trajectory. This group of *other* women with whom Surpanakha is identified include workers, farmers, prostitutes, etc. However, in popular representations, Asura women like Surpanakha and Hadimba are often ridiculed and derided, hence, this event was aimed at reclaiming their dignity while criticizing one dominant representation of the mainstream culture that has sustained the exploitation of marginalized women. Drawing upon acts of contemporary sexual violence against those women in different parts of the country, such as the Delhi rape (Nirbhaya's case), the public shaming of tribal women in the Northeastern region, and army violence against Kashmiri women, day two of the event resonated with this type of thematic significance.



Image 3: Surpanakha's nose, Courtesy EFLU Asura Community Facebook Page (2013)



Image 4: Surpanakha's nose, Courtesy EFLU Asura Community Facebook Page (2013)

The making of Surpanakha's iconic nose continued until day three when a canvas painting activity entitled "In the Memories of Oppression" commenced. Here, several students came together to produce a number of beautiful paintings with political messages on a large piece of canvas. Day four and day five of the Asura Week were comprised of an academic seminar entitled "Reinterpreting Indian History: Redefining Secularism in University Spaces" and an open forum entitled "Resisting Dominance: Articulating Cultural Resistance". According to the organizers, even though the primary purpose of the program was to uphold the Dalit culture of the Adivasi and Bahujan communities, the arranged activities received attention from a large number of participants from various social and religious backgrounds and also the media. Before the week of celebration was through, however, it was disrupted by a group of right-wing students who demanded that the painting be removed, claiming it was hurting their sentiments. Later on that same day, the university administration filed a criminal charge against six students involved in the festival, alleging that their activities were offensive and promoted communal enmity on the campus (The Indian Express, 2013; The Hans India,

2013). The accusation, which according to the organizers, did not follow any legal procedural protocol (as per the university ordinance), caused much discontent and anger among marginalized students. Consequently, the Asura students issued a letter of petition which condemned the administration for exercising “Hindutva forces” along with demanding a withdrawal of the charges against the six students.

Drawing on the writings of Dalit scholars and activists, Rawat & Satyanarayana (2016) suggest that the rise of Dalit Studies and Dalit political struggles have originated from feelings of humiliation. Humiliation, due to the loss of dignity that Indian nationalists came to experience, had become a strong force in the fight against colonial domination. Ironically, this humiliation long suffered by the Dalits was never taken up as a serious nationalist agenda. The Dalit’s situation was thus confined to the realm of religious pollution, which connotes social subjugation and the denial of their active roles in making Indian historiography. The political contexts of the 1990s, particularly with regard to the contentious political reservations, have somehow reinforced the Dalits’ intention to analyze the notion of human dignity that was previously absent from both their social life and the studies of Indian cultural and social formation. Dalit activism that has happened since the 1990s, including the Asura Week as discussed above, can be considered a part of the long process of the political struggles for social inclusivity and equal representation. Moreover, in my opinion, such a form of counter-culture activism may function as an affective agent that influences the potential for self-healing from humiliation and from a loss of dignity.

As far as Stuart Hall’s constructive representation is concerned, a particular work of representation can be meaningful only when a spectator takes up the position of a subject of the representation. As such, when Indian nationalist discourses failed to take account of the Dalit issue, it is inevitably necessary that the Dalits themselves take charge of their own affairs. Invoking myths and the Aryan Invasion theory was one strategy employed to construct their own discourses. Such discourses are the only channels which allow the Dalits to position themselves in the course of the history-making of the nation. From a secular point of view, it is a necessary step towards the making of secular citizenship which requires one to feel belonged and connected to his/her nation in one way or another. For the Dalits, it is through a history of oppression and alienation that translates to how they connect with social institutions from the periphery. As such, the task of reinventing their own discourse based on myths and cultural memory are relevant in the process of playing their part in the making of Indian citizenship. Whereas Dusshera celebrates the victory of Rama over Ravana, according to the

mainstream Hindu belief, how Ravana is celebrated by the marginalized student communities, despite a notably different degree of pomp and extravaganza, is often seen as being disruptive to the social order or provocative to the sacred religious beliefs of the Hindu dominated majorities. Such a hostile reception of the Dalit-Bahujan's self-expressions is perpetuated exclusivity on the minorities on the one hand and undermine the idea of secularism on the other. According to Reju George Matthew (2013), a PhD. student at the Department of Comparative Literature, EFLU who identified himself as an Asura, it was frustrating how the expressions of the Dalits/Asuras often invoke antagonistic responses from institutional and authoritative bodies. Concerning the Asura Week, which became a serious issue, Matthew's lamentation on how the Asura's expression of pride is either disapproved of or dismissed is as follows.

When the marginalised, the Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans and others, give voice to their identities, their concerns, their struggles, it becomes a matter of law and order. The police are being called in by the administration without even engaging with the students. The administration avoids the questions of the students and gets the police to answer them. The administration and the Savarnas are fine if I am an Asura, if I am a Dravidian, but they shudder when I take pride in what I am. For them, differences are not to be celebrated, but they are to be ashamed of. I am different and I don't attempt to fit in. I'm proud to be an Asura and my pride doesn't allow me to be silent (Mathew, 2013).

When one identifies himself with Asura figures through artwork and other cultural activities as it happened during the Asura Week, one was engaged in the process of recollecting his/her memory and self-healing from humiliation. This method of self-healing as such was performed collectively by the marginalized students and other participants who came to embody the feelings of humiliation and pain that were inflicted upon their bodies. Thus, representing Asura identity in this way has served as a therapeutic tool for both personal and social healing. To further illustrate this, if the Dalit's humiliation matters at all, Talal Asad's (2006) notion of pain as a secular power is useful in helping us to understand the nature of pain and how it can be taken as an agency for action. Asad (2006) proposed that pain has two significant elements; firstly, it has its own way of working autonomously as an agency or action. One given example of this is religious pain as reflected in the idea of martyrdom found in both Christian and Islamic traditions. In this instance, what Asad is concerned about is not the symbolic significance of martyrdom *per se* but its "effectiveness in creating new spaces for

secular action” (2006, p. 86). Another type of significance is that pain is a living relation which is integral to an activity that produces and sustains human relationships. Here Asad gives the example of childbirth, in which pain is directly involved. For some religious women (of North America), giving birth naturally at home without taking any pain-relieving drugs, is seen as both an act of empowerment and salvation. Asad’s point is that pain as experienced by the women giving birth is more than a negative act which must be eliminated by modern biomedicine through chemical or surgical intervention. It is a form of human relationship that is involved in childbirth which helps to alleviate pain.

To slightly modify Asad’s concept, this can be applied to the experiences of the Dalit’s humiliation, which is actually a form of mental pain. The Dalit’s long endured humiliation cannot simply be dealt with through rhetoric of political equality as long as the Dalits’ expressions of their identity, pride and pain are obstructed, and their roles as actors in the making of Indian history are denied. What is required, in addition to political rights, is social recognition and the pedagogy of their cultural history. This would include myths, customs and beliefs. In other words, the rights of the Dalits to express their pride and humiliation to the secular public requires legitimization and legal protection. When this is taken into consideration, counter-culture activism, rather than political subversion, should be perceived as a ritual of self-care and a form of treatment of the ‘defeated’ (as the mythical demons’ destiny) and in the way that humiliated minorities have deliberately performed to cure themselves. The coming together of the Dalit-Bahujan students to paint Ravana’s imagined face and to remake Surpanakha’s cut-off nose or the painting of their own story on canvas are all poignant acts as they convey two important messages. Firstly, the Dalit-Bahujans were political subjects or actors of their own autonomy, who have actively played important roles in both the making of myths and the forming of the nation, but which have gone unacknowledged. Secondly, counter-culture activism was in part a communal sharing among sufferers of humiliation. It was a spiritual method by which the mental pain is alleviated and relationships among the members of the Asura communities are strengthened and sustained. In the process, humiliation has become an empowering force for the Dalit’s agency in their continued political struggles as well as a spiritual practice of self-treatment.

***Raavanan* (2010, Dir. Mani Ratnam): Pain of the villain**



Image 5: A still poster for the film

Whereas Dalit's counter- culture activism like the Asura Week as discussed above seeks to justify Dalit's rights to equal representation and self-remedy in secular spaces, cinematic representation of the Asura character in the film, *Raavanan*, to be discussed shortly, will shed light on another shade of pain. It is the pain which is originally embodied by the main character of the film but can be collectively shared by the audience who is identified with the 'villain'— the main character representing the Asura. Employing mainly affect theory, we shall now look at how the feeling of pain in the film operates.

Popular performances of Ramayana, such as a stage drama called Ramlila, may generate some kind of effect upon the audience. The theatrical spectacle and live acting, when incorporated within the play's thematic faith and virtue, can easily move the spectator who is religiously minded and is well familiar with the story. The audience does not come to the play in a cultural vacuum. In point of fact, the story and its didactic lesson, as well as the ceremonial act of burning Ravana's effigies at the end, are well-known to them. Thus, the audience's encounter of the spectacle, through their cultural schema, is likely to cause positive emotions. Moreover, given Ramayana Ramlila's tremendous popularity in India and other Hindu-dominated regions, its epitomization of Rama as goodness and Ravana as badness is reproduced, upheld and idealized. Such ideological reproduction, though widely accepted, is viewed as a myth that seems to preserve pervasive "structures of feeling", to use Raymond William's term, which sanctify the particular kind of dharma—or truth as practiced by

Rama— while undermining others. In order to contest those structures, we have to turn to popular media such as cinema, where alternative “structures of feeling” can be located as it allows for other creative expressions that challenge dominant or hegemonic discourses. Thus, a popular film such as *Raavanan* is one, (among other popular formats) that resonates with such skepticism of goodness readily attached to the figure of Rama. Interestingly, the film calls for our attention to observe closely the antagonist of the film, who embodies Ravana’s character and his motives. Only through our embodied contact with the villain and the film’s emotions, can we come to feel either empathetic or apathetic towards him.

Based on Valmiki’s Ramayana epic narrative, the familiar love triangle of Rama, his wife, Sita and Ravana, is retold cinematically by Mani Ratnam, a Tamil film director and producer. The story is about Veeraiya or Veera (Vikram), an epitome of demonic Ravana, a formidable local gang hero who resides in the deep forest together with his people. Veera is known to be a ruthless, violent, lawless bandit, who is blacklisted and sought after by the police. However, the former is loved and adored by his people who are tribal poor and have to depend on Veera’s protection. One day during his sister’s—Vennila (Priya Mani)—wedding ceremony, as the guests are joyfully celebrating, Dev Prakash (Prithviraj Sukumaran), a Superintendent of the Police, who represents Rama, storms into the crowd and shoots Veera. The bullet shot grazes his neck and injures him, so he is hurriedly taken away by his henchmen on a truck. His sister is interrogated as her bridegroom runs away. Upon her refusal to tell the police the whereabouts of where her brother might be going, Vennila is sexually assaulted. Veera returns home in the next day to find out what has happened from her traumatized sister who shortly after commits suicide by drowning herself in a nearby well.

Devastated and enraged, Veera decides to wage war against the police in revenge for Vennila’s death. He kidnaps Rangini (Aishwarya Rai Bachchan), Dev’s beautiful wife, who represents Sita. Dev is informed of his wife’s abduction and he starts to hunt down Veera mobilizing the whole police force at his command. In the forest, Veera first wants to kill Rangini but she jumps off a cliff. Impressed by her strong will and grace, he dares not harm her but starts to develop affection for her. While Rangini, despite the harsh condition of her confinement, exudes charm and mental strength, she also starts to develop feelings for Veera upon hearing what has happened to his sister, which intensifies after she has witnessed how compassionately he treats his people and children.



Image 6: Veera telling Rangini why he kidnapped her

Sakkarai (Munna), one of Veera's brothers, is worried about the way his brother is antagonizing the police, so he secretly meets Dev to negotiate a deal. Dev kills him, showing that he does not want any peaceful resolution but merely to eliminate Veera. This incident aggravates Veera and his another brother, Singarasu (Prabhu), so they decide to attack Dev's camp and wipe it out completely. Dev finally confronts Veera on the ruining bridge over the river, whereupon they have a brutal battle in which Veera wins but also saves Dev from falling off the bridge for the sake of Rangini. The whole village is ravaged by the police force and Veera sets Rangini free to meet her husband before he disappears. During the train journey back to their hometown, Dev is suspicious of Rangini's chastity, so he starts raising insensitive questions. He lies to her by informing her that Veera has told him of her infidelity. Rangini is furious and suddenly leaves the train. She goes to find Veera to ask him about such an accusation. However, Veera tells her the truth, which is that he has told Dev that he merely protected her safety. Upon seeing Dev and his police army, Rangini realizes that Dev has lied and she has been used to locate Veera. She tries to shield Veera from her husband's bullet but is pushed away. Veera is shot multiple times before his lifeless body falls off a cliff.

If we locate the emotional core of this film, it is obvious that the main character, Veera, suffers from pain. *What is pain?* is the question to begin with. Pain is generally perceived as an objective bodily sensation, something to be located within an anatomical boundary. Pain that happens physiologically or emotionally can afflict the mind. Thus, it is not a passive state, but is "agentive" (Asad, 2006, p. 79) which means it can be enacted. How pain, physical or mental, is conceived and how one responds to pain, depends to some extent upon socio-cultural factors, rather than merely an individual experience. Social relationships or political structures have a role to play in one's pain and healing because they are constitutive of a particular culture of suffering (Wilkinson, 2005).

In *Raavanan*, it is the emotion of pain that keeps the narrative in progress and engages the spectator in identifying mostly with the film's antagonist, Veera, whose antagonism invites our critical reflection. Epitomizing evil, he is portrayed as a beastly kind of guy, who acts instinctively and aggressively—but purely from the heart. He bearded, masculine appearance and his intense glare are very reminiscent of the Asura's king of Lanka in Ramayana. He is sometimes portrayed as shirtless and at other times as wearing simple clothing like a shirt and jeans or a worn-out t-shirt/ vest. His home is the deep, luscious jungle in Southern India, where only basic necessities are available to the destitute people living there under his sovereignty. Such imagery succinctly portrays Veera's animalistic tie with the archetypal (or Rousseauian) 'noble savage', whose pain has no place in modern, secular discourse. Being at enmity with a law enforcement agent is difficult, not only because one can never win but also because one has to relentlessly endure different kinds of suffering as inflicted by the institutional body. The only choice or actual means of survival for an outlaw like Veera to choose is confrontation—to live or to die. Devastated by his sister's tragic demise, he becomes vengeful and starts a counter-attack right away. "Your women are diamonds. But our women are just stones, right?" asks Veera. Kidnapping a senior police officer's wife is not a wise action but it is the only way in which he can inflict pain on Dev, who represents the state, and find justice. But for Dev, Rangini is more of a source of pride and honor, which must not be tarnished, than an object of love and affection. We are not very convinced of his pain in losing her for 14 days as Dev reflects only fierce intensity and single-handed focus in bringing Veera to justice—the only truth known to him. His refusal in negotiating the deal offered by Gnanaprakasam, a forest ranger who represents Hanuman figure, to find a peaceful resolution rather than a ravaging war and his suspicion of his wife's loyalty and his ultimately releasing her to go back to Veera make us ponder over Dev's association with any purported "godly status". It also carries our curiosity well beyond the film's ending with regards the question as to whether Dev would take Rangini back after witnessing her attempt to protect Veera.

Following Asad, pain is not a private individual affair, but it is sharable. How one's pain affects others depends on the kind of relationship they share. Importantly, relationships have a role to play in how one can respond sympathetically to the pain of the original sufferer. A mother can feel the pain of her wounded child, for instance. In *Raavanan*, Veera's pain of his sister's traumatizing (and fatal) experience resonates so powerfully in the sequence in which he comes home a day after he is shot in the neck and his sister's wedding is discontinued by the police team led by Dev. Listening to his sister's account of her ordeal, at one point his face is twisted, his lips are tightened, and his eyes are closed while his hand covers his sister's

bruised mouth as if to signal “that’s enough, sister”. Then he bangs his head against the house’s corridor in anguish. In a subsequent montage Veera hurries to the village’s well after being alarmed of his sister’s suicide. Upon seeing her dead body being hauled up from the well, he screams insanely. This is a major scene of anguished insanity in which pain infliction is powerfully delivered. As spectators, we cannot help but come to absorb these *affective* forces.

In the secular context, active actions/ agency which include one’s resistance to power are valued as they are considered an empowering force. Notwithstanding, Veera’s resistance by the action of revenge is mute and can be viewed as a form of false consciousness, since violence is rarely socially sanctioned or justified if it is committed by those standing against the state. This is a case in point for Veera, who is considered an insurgent or even a terrorist. His outcry of pain will never be heard. On the contrary, Veera himself is considered a danger that must be removed from the social body politic. It is in this light that the Superintendent of Police, Dev, executes his search and kill operation, as he is absolutely certain and confident of the righteousness of the object of his quest. Representing the state law (the regime of truth), Dev cannot be wrong.



Image 7: Dev searching for his wife, Rangini

Pain, which is embodied by the villain (or Veera) is intensified through cinematic techniques and musical scores that sustain the tension of the movie. We are made to enter into the jungle universe, inhabited by the villain’s body, where a dark noir-like lighting and water-drenched atmosphere are deployed throughout the film. The filmic noir element seems to suggest the ambiguity of the three main characters, and helps in questioning the dualism of good/ bad in relation to the moral theme of the original text in which Rama represents dharma and good virtues, the things ordinary people should aspire to achieve, whereas Ravana represents adharma and sins, which are to be refrained from. Moreover, Sita is the epitome

of faithfulness and purity: a chaste wife, embodying virtues which good women and wives should regard highly. In *Raavanan*, we have come to be doubtful of such an absolute distinction of moral association between these characters. Our structures of feeling are thus affected as we come to encounter the strong visceral forces emitted by the villain. The use of the water motif in the film, including waterfalls, rivers and rains all add to the film visual intrigue as well. Water makes up of 70% of our living body and our planet. Scientifically speaking, water conditions whether inside our body or on the planet earth reflect our well-being and our corporeality. Water resources are indicative of the abundance of the land, of human community and of life. In the spiritual traditions of the East, water has always been associated with the realm of the sacred, purification and healing. In astrology, the water element represents emotions and feelings. The marked quality of the water element is the capacity to feel internal experiences and sensitivity to others' feelings. Therefore, the water symbolism in the film represents the antithesis of formal structure, as the fluid quality of the water itself suggests. Veera, as a villain, has shown that he chooses to defy the state and the formal structures of its architectonic altogether.

Conclusion

The two forms of modern representation of the Asura, embodying agentive power, has two significant implications. Firstly, the act of reliving and healing from the memory of humiliation during the Asura Week and the coming of the audience to empathize with the villain's pain in the film, *Raavanan* is a political voice the Dalits and other marginalized groups have made so that they could have a safe place where they can tell their stories. Given the unfamiliar or anti- dominant characteristics of the stories of myths, gods/ goddesses, it is only through the secular value of the society and the state that make possible such counter-hegemonic expressions of the oppressed. Secondly, in a certain context, some negative emotions such as humiliation or pain can be even more powerful than positive ones because they are indicative of one's position in society or of the values or ideology one upholds. How one feels humiliated and whether one's pain can be cured is dependent not only on the individual approach to pain and its overall healing process, but also upon other socio-cultural factors. Humiliation as mental pain, relatively shared by the Dalits, Veera in *Raavanan* and other minorities, speaks to and often mirrors the kind of culture and social structure in which we find ourselves. We can never be certain that bodies inflicted with pain, particularly those of the marginalized and the socially excluded will ever have a fair proportion of self-expression in the secular realm. For this reason, while we are relentlessly moving through modernity, it

may be useful and ethical to include a horizon of pain and other emotions, especially of those who are exploited and subjugated in our overall progressive picture.

Conclusion

Even though Asura is generally recognized as a demon in Hindu mythology, this study has revealed that both the Asura and the Deva were highly worshipped deities in the early Vedic period. This indicates that the idea of demon was developed much later in the Vedic period. Changes in the societal structure and conflicts between major tribes in the Aryan society serve as major factors that have affected the Asura's position. The demonization of Asura is clearly emphasized by a portrayal of Ravana character, the Asura king, in the well-known Ramayana epic. As a canonical text, Ramayana not only has aesthetic values that appeal to audiences from various social backgrounds but its underlying moral message becomes influential to people's beliefs and ways of living. Moreover, the many tellings of Ramayana, be it authoritative or oppositional variants, contributed by authors and tellers from different parts of the world, are a driving force which keeps the Ramayana tradition active and vibrant. Worth noting is the multiplicity of Ramayana tellings has engaged their readership into creating a political, modern space out of the Ramayana tradition. Such a space is desirable for two purposes; firstly, it allows for critique and questioning of the authority of Ramayana text, which is often criticized as perpetuating dominant, Bhraminical discourse. The openness of Ramayana makes possible for such a discourse to be discussed and challenged. Then, notorious dichotomies displayed in the text such as dharma or goodness of Ram versus evilness or adharomma of Ravana, and being Asura (or Dravidian) versus Aryan are reexamined, for instance.

In modern India, the term Asura remains connected with demons, in a mythical sense. However, in social contexts, many groups of Indian minorities, especially the Dalits and members of marginalized communities, officially referred to as Dalit-Bahujans, living in the South are identified with the Asura. For these people, the term Asura has become a denomination of self-respect suggesting that they are anti-Deva or, ideologically, anti-Brahmin. Within a context of secularism, these people of "Asura" believe that they are entitled to freely express themselves through cultural activities and political campaigns as equally as those of the mainstream are. However, such a thought is often discouraged or opposed by the dominant groups which refuse tolerating differences of myths and culture other than their Hindu-Brahmanical ones. Counter -cultural activism such as the Asura Week that was performed on a secular space of the university campus as discussed was strongly opposed and disrupted. This has made it obvious that the battle of the Asura for equal expression and

representation in the modern day will be a herculean mission, perhaps metaphorically comparable to the mythical ‘Churning of the Ocean Milk’.

Recommendations for further research

Firstly, this study mainly focuses on the Ramayana text and how Asura characters are portrayed in the selected presentations to support, challenge or oppose the dominant, authoritative discourse of the Ramayana. It would be useful to find out how Asura characters are depicted in other texts such as Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita or other Indian myths. The finding would reaffirm or refute the changing role or social position of the Asura. It would also shed light to social structures of the post-Vedic period.

Secondly, I have observed that there are a number of Dalit-Bahujan groups operating quite actively on social media because this channel offers safety and convenience for their gathering and exchanging of ideas. Therefore, it would be interesting to see how these online groups operate and how they make use of the social media to speak politically of their problems and anxiety.

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Output จากโครงการวิจัยที่ได้รับทุนจาก สกว.

ในเชิงวิชาการ การวิจัยโครงการนี้มีประโยชน์อย่างมากในด้านวิชาการ โดยเฉพาะเชิงสหวิทยาการสาขามนุษยศาสตร์ เพราะเกี่ยวเนื่องกับอินเดียศึกษา วัฒนธรรมศึกษา และวรรณกรรมศึกษา เป็นเรื่องที่ยังไม่มีการทำวิจัยอย่างกว้างขวางนัก อสุระหรืออสูร มีอัตลักษณ์ที่หลากหลายซึ่งความหลากหลายนี้เองมีนัยสำคัญทั้งในเชิงเทพปกรณัม ประวัติศาสตร์ และการเมือง ความเป็นอสุระสามารถตีความได้ทั้งความเป็นเทพ เป็นพลังแห่งจักรวาลตามความเชื่อของชาวอินเดียยุคพระเวท ในขณะที่เดียวกันอสุระก็อาจจะหมายถึงชนพื้นเมืองผู้มีอารยธรรมซึ่งอาศัยอยู่กันอย่างสงบในอาณาจักรที่รุ่งเรืองมาก่อนการบุกรุกของชาวอารยันผู้แข็งแกร่ง ความขัดแย้งที่เกิดขึ้นในสังคมที่ชาวอารยันเข้ามามีอำนาจทำให้เกิดการเปลี่ยนโครงสร้างสังคมที่ส่งผลให้อสุระกลายเป็นอื่นที่ไม่ใช่เทพ หรือกลุ่มคนที่ได้รับความนับถืออีกต่อไป อสุระกลายมาเป็นทาส และต่อมาถูกผลักดันให้เป็นตัวแทนแห่งความชั่วร้าย การกลายมาเป็นสภาวะต่างๆ ดังกล่าวของอสุระเป็นสิ่งที่สร้างความฉงน และสร้างคำถามมากมายให้กับนักวิชาการอินเดียศึกษา/การตะวันตก ซึ่งในปัจจุบันก็ยังมีคำถามอีกมากมาย งานวิจัยนี้ไม่ได้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการหาคำตอบที่ชัดเจนว่าอสุระคือใคร (เพราะคงหาคำตอบได้ยากหรือแทบเป็นไปไม่ได้) แต่ได้นำเสนอให้เห็นการอธิบายของนักวิชาการในสิ่งที่ส่งผลต่อกลายเป็นสิ่งต่างๆ และการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของอสุระ ทั้งโดยสังคม และตัวอสุระเอง เมื่อกล่าวถึงตัวละครอสุระ ที่เรารู้จักกันมากที่สุดคือทศกัณฐ์หรือราavana ผู้อ่านรามเกียรติ์ไทยจะรู้จักกันเป็นอย่างดีในฐานะที่เป็นตัวร้ายของเรื่อง แต่คงจะมีคนไทยน้อยคนที่จะรู้ว่าทศกัณฐ์คือพระเอกและผู้นำที่คนอินเดียยวณะต่ำและชนกลุ่มน้อย(โดยเฉพาะกลุ่มคนทางใต้ ที่ใช้ภาษาตระกูลดราวิเดียน) ที่ถูกกดขี่เคารพ บูชา และพวกเขายังใช้คำ อสุระ ในการเรียกขานตนเองเพื่อแสดงความนับถือตนเองและเพื่อวัตถุประสงค์ทางการเมือง ผู้คนเหล่านี้มีความเชื่อเรื่องตำนานเทพปกรณัมและมีวัฒนธรรมเป็นของตนเอง แต่ด้วยความที่เขาเป็นชนกลุ่มน้อย ไร้เสียง พลังอำนาจ ทำให้ต้องลุกขึ้นมาเรียกร้องการแสดงออกความเป็นตัวตนผ่านความเป็นอสุระ ฉะนั้นในบริบทอินเดียสมัยใหม่จึงมีการใช้ความเป็นอสุระในรูปแบบต่างๆ เพื่อเป็นภาพแทนของชนกลุ่มน้อยเหล่านี้

ผู้วิจัยมุ่งหวังที่จะนำเสนอเรื่องราวเหล่านี้ผ่านบทความวิจัยให้เป็นที่รู้จักในวงกว้าง ได้ส่งบทความหัวข้อ **"Representing Asura Identity and Revisiting the Good and Evil Dichotomy in "Asura Tale of the Vanquished" (2012)"** ซึ่งเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของงานวิจัยไปยังงานประชุมวิชาการนานาชาติทางวัฒนธรรมศึกษา ที่ตามหมายกำหนดการเดิมนั้นจะจัดขึ้นระหว่างวันที่ 28-31 กรกฎาคม 2563 ณ มหาวิทยาลัยลิซบอนด์ ประเทศโปรตุเกส บทความที่ผู้วิจัยส่งไปได้รับการตอบรับมาแล้ว แต่เนื่องจากสถานการณ์การแพร่ระบาดของไวรัสโควิด-19 ทำให้งานประชุมดังกล่าวต้องเลื่อนออกไป (โปรดดูภาคผนวก) นอกจากนี้ผู้วิจัยยังได้ส่งบทความอีกชิ้นหนึ่ง หัวข้อ **"Modern Representations of the Asura"** เพื่อเสนอในการประชุมวิชาการทางสังคมวิทยาและมานุษยวิทยาที่จะจัดขึ้นที่มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ ระหว่างวันที่ 6-7 สิงหาคม 2563 ทั้งนี้จะมีการพิจารณาบทความที่จะได้รับการ

คัดเลือกให้เข้าร่วมในงานประชุมในเดือนมิถุนายน ในฐานะผู้วิจัย ดิฉันก็หวังเป็นอย่างยิ่งว่าจะสามารถเผยแพร่ผลงานวิจัยไปสู่สาธารณะชนทั้งในประเทศและต่างประเทศได้ในเร็ว ๆ นี้

ภาคผนวก

จดหมายตอบรับการนำเสนอบทความในการประชุมวิชาการด้านวัฒนธรรมศึกษา ณ มหาวิทยาลัยลิซบอนด์โปรตุเกสพร้อม Manuscript (ปรับจากบทที่ 2 ของงานวิจัย)



Dear Natawan Wongchalard,

Thank you for your abstract submission.

We are pleased to inform you that your abstract **14897 - "Representing Asura Identity and Revisiting the Good and Evil Dichotomy in "Asura Tale of the Vanquished" (2012)"** has been **accepted for presentation at the 13th Crossroads Conference.**

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The 13th Crossroads Conference Organisation Team

Conference Website: <https://www.crossroadslisbon2020.org/>

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Representing Asura Identity and Revisiting the Good and Evil Dichotomy in *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012)

Abstract

Ramayana is a well-known epic in India. It is also widely recognized in many other regions around the world. The myriad forms of presentation of this epic allow for a collective audience's imagination to thrive and rise. Oppositional tellings of the original storyline make the epic even more intriguing as it caters to the 'other voices', who have alternative opinions of Rama and who happen to perceive the epic from differing ideological positions that are in contrast to the original version. This article is an attempt to represent the identity of Asura (the Deva's enemy) and also to demystify Rama's goodness by analyzing the portrayals of the two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra, in Anand Neelakantan's popular novel, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012). Employing a subaltern studies approach and concepts of anatomy and lack, the study reveals that Rama's goodness is in question as it merely reflects a Brahmanical worldview that actually stands in contrast with those of the Asuras and other non-Brahmin-Hindu believers.

Key words: Ramayana, oppositional tellings, subaltern studies, autonomy, lack

Introduction

The transformation of the concepts of the Asura in both mythical and social dimensions has two significant implications for understanding Indian society. First and foremost, it has geared a society that was prevalently syncretic in nature towards a more polarized one, revolving around the dichotomies of deities vs. demons or good vs. evil. This is reflected in numerous literary works in which good and evil are markedly featured, such as in two well-known epics: the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The representation of good and evil in these two epics is not only a literary device that is being employed to convey an allegorical message to the audience. It indeed has an important influence on the moral and political perceptions of people as well. On the one hand, the goodness or virtue of Rama, a hero-god in Ramayana, for instance, is highly upheld and is a quality that is aspired to by a large majority of Hindus. Ramayana is the source of "Rama Dharma" or righteousness of Rama which has become the foundation of social order and moral values. *Rama* and *Sita* are both held up as role models of Hindu virtue. Rama has become an archetype of the righteous king and an ideal man/husband, whereas Sita has become the embodiment of a good, loyal and chaste woman/wife. Similar to the Christian Bible, Ramayana serves as a religious text. Reading certain key passages is believed to be meritorious and a blessing upon the audience (Chouksey, Sethirakoset 1972). On the other hand, it has also privileged one concept over another. To give one example, the concept of varnadharma (Brockington 2004), which established casteism in Indian society, is still relevant given the notion of equality that is promoted as a modern value of Indian secularism. When such a concept is concretely practiced by Brahmins, both their mastery in Sanskrit and capability of performing rituals allow for the propagation of a Brahmanical

worldview, while their sanskritized ideology emerges as a mainstream social norm given that Brahmins actually represent a minority of the Indian population. This process, thus, is viewed by some, especially those in intellectual and political groups, to legitimize the supremacy of Brahminism.

One of the Indian performance traditions that has been testified to and has strengthened the influence of the Brahmanical worldview is a stage performance of the traditional Ramayana story. Such a performance is referred to as Ramlila or Ramleela, which is shown as part of a celebration of the annual autumn festival called Dussehra²⁵. The play that dramatizes the life of Rama is quite popular in the Northern region of India where it is performed on the last night of the festival. The story is based on the well-known narrative of the lord Rama's victory over the demon Ravana. The thematic message of good winning over evil is usually signified in the grand and spectacular ending which culminates in the literal burning of an effigy of Ravana. The series of plays, which is part of the evening festivities, is considered the heart of the festival due to its moral significance and the theatrical experience it offers to the audience. Thus, when any Indian Hindus are asked what Dussehra is all about, the most likely response they would give is that it is a celebration of the triumph of good over evil. Here Rama represents good and Ravana, whose effigy is burnt, represents evil. However, despite the cultural appeal of the Ramlila, it has become an object of political criticism. For one reason, India is a pluralistic society, the members of which follow a diverse range of religions, meaning that there are millions who are not identified as followers of mainstream Hinduism. Those people are followers of other religious faiths such as Islam, Christianity, and non-established beliefs like animism. Consequently, they may not regard Rama's righteousness as being superior or ideal. Promoting one model of goodness (of Rama) is thus anti-secular and unhealthy to the development of Indian democracy.

In addition, as the dramatic theme emphasizes on the idea of Bhakti²⁶, which is the Hindu concept of the devotional worship of god, such an enactment of Rama's story as a public feast, which is officially sponsored in some locations, can be seen as advocating a sense of Hindu Nationalism. This is especially true in cases when supporters of the BJP and their allied organizations attempt to interpret Ramayana in ways that justify their objective of making India a Hindu nation. Nevertheless, this tendency is not always welcome or has even been resisted by many groups of people including tribal minorities and people in the South who identify themselves as Dravidians. They feel that Hindu Nationalism, or what has been popularly dubbed as 'Safronization', has systematically worked to suppress the voices of other religions and of those with differing political views. This is the main reason why the concept of Asuras is highly relevant to our understanding of the modern context of Indian culture and politics. On

²⁵ **Dussehra**, or **Vijayadashami** in Hinduism, is a public holiday marking the victory of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, over the 10-headed demon. King Ravana kidnapped Sita, Rama's wife. The festival's name is derived from the Sanskrit words *dasha* ("ten") and *hara* ("defeat"). Symbolizing the victory of good over evil, Dussehra is celebrated on the 10th day of the seventh month (September–October) on the Hindu calendar, during the full moon. Dussehra coincides with the culmination of the nine-day Navratri festival (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

²⁶ Bhakti is defined as "a real, genuine search for the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in Love" (Swami Viveknanda 2003, p. 3). In *Ramayana*, Rama is viewed as an avatar of the God Vishnu who was incarnated in human form to eliminate the Asura King, Ravava. Thus, those who are unconditionally devoted to Rama, such as Hanuman, Bharata and Vibhishana, denote the importance of their performing of Bhakti or of observing Bhakti yoga. Bhakti also suggests the idea of self-surrender. Once one surrenders to the lord, he or she (called Bhakta) is provided with the lord's protection, along with a sense of fearlessness and emancipation in return.

one hand, the idea of Asuras was ushered in as part of a trend of political mobilization to counter the rising influence of the Safronization. On the other hand, it has been aimed at empowering the cultural and political voices of citizens who feel marginalized in Indian society. When it comes to art and literary creation, the practice of retelling and creating adaptations of Ramayana, which have emerged in a variety of art forms, is one of the tools that is readily accessible to various groups of people on the Indian subcontinent. This has been employed in an attempt to make sense of their socio-political realities. People have incessantly reused and recreated the epic in order to reflect upon their own beliefs and values within a particular milieu. Not surprisingly, the number of ways that Ramayana has been retold in India alone has been incredibly numerous and is still increasing. Suffice it to say that until the present time, Rama and Ravana have never died and their battles remain relevant.

Ramayana Tellings²⁷/Retellings

It is known that the Ramayana epic was composed in Sanskrit *slokas* (verses) by the sage *Valmiki* sometime around 5th BCE. The verses were divided into chapters called *sargas* in which a specific event is told. Additionally, *sargas* are further grouped into *kandas* (sections). The entire epic is composed of 24,000 verses and is divided into seven *kandas* that recount chronologically the major events in Rama's life including:

- Bala Kanda* (Rama's childhood up to his marriage),
- Ayodhya Kanda* (Rama's life in the palace until his exile to the forest),
- Aranya Kanda* (Rama's life in the forest until Sita's abduction by Ravana),
- Kishkinda Kanda* (Rama's journey to Kishkindha, where he allies with the monkey king, Sugriva, and Hanuman becomes his devoted servant),
- Sundara Kanda* (Rama's journey to Lanka),
- Yuddha Kanda* (Rama's battle with Ravana, the recovery of Sita, and the return to Ayodhya) and
- Uttara Kanda* (Rama's life in Ayodhya as king, the birth of Rama's sons, and Sita's test of purity and her banishment)

(Das 2019, Sethirakoset 1972)

The name Ramayana is derived from two words, *Rama* and *Ayana*, and means 'Rama's journey of virtue to annihilate vice'. The Ramayana contains the teachings of ancient Hindu sages and presents them through allegory. The epic has been translated or reproduced into different regional versions such as *Ramcharitmanas* in old Hindi by Tulsidas, *Iramavataram* in Tamil by Kamban, and *Krittivasi Ramayan* in Bengali by Krittibas Ojha. These other versions or *tellings*, as preferred by A. K. Ramanujan (1999), allow for greater accessibility of the epic to a common audience who may not be able to follow Sanskrit. For Ramanujan, in his remarkable essay entitled "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1999), a translation need not maintain resemblance of the original text. Different translations cater to different reasons and aesthetic expectations of the reader, thus the task of translating one text (Text 1) to another (Text 2) should not be limited to being 'iconic' or faithful to the original text. Each individual translator may incorporate local elements such as imagery, customs, folklore motifs and so on into his/her reproduction, which then renders the translated version *indexical* rather than merely iconic. Similarly, a translation can be *symbolic* when Text 2 preserves some structural relations to Text 1, that is in regard to the use of plot along with names and events. However, they make minimal use of these to create totally new

²⁷ According to Ramanujan, the term "telling" is preferred to the terms 'versions' or 'variants' because the two latter terms suggest that there is an invariant or original text to refer to, whereas the term 'tellings' seems to suggest that these depictions have a story of their own to tell. See Ramanujan in "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1999).

things with an intention to “subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text” (Ramanujan 1999, p. 157). Reflecting on Ramanujan’s thoughts on translation, we can see why there can be as many Ramayanas as three hundreds or more. In the same essay, one interesting example given focuses on the difference between Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Kampan’s *Ramayana*. These representations differ in the use of discourse, style, and some details, even though the same structure of events is employed. Here, the differences between the same episode narrating the story of Ahalya’s infidelity in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Kampan’s *Iramavataram* can be observed. One important difference is that the psychological subtlety and the deployment of folklore elements that are available in the Southern literature are effectively reflected in Kampan’s telling. In Valmiki’s telling, Indra seduces Ahalya who willingly submits to the god’s sexual advances. Indra is castrated and a ram’s testicles are replaced for his lost ones. In Kampan’s, Ahalya is conscious of her wrongdoing but is “unable to put aside what was not her” (1999, p. 139). As a consequence, Indra is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed to eyes, and Ahalya is turned to stone. Both kinds of punishment, according to Ramanujan, are suitable for the nature of their offences. Indra bears the mark of the object of his lust and Ahalya is deprived of her sense of physical response. When this is coupled with the idea of Guatama being depicted as a spirit and with representations of Tamil Bhakti that portray Rama as a divine figure who redeems all sinful souls, Kampan’s telling is enriched with religious passion. Thus, Kampan’s play on folklore motifs and religious connotations makes his telling more atheistically pleasurable than Valmiki’s. Ramanujan explains further that because the iconicity or faithfulness to the original text is not fully exercised, Kampan’s translation is indexical and valuable on its own terms, even though it differs from that of the original. Unlike Ramanujan, Swami Vivekananda considers Valmiki’s *Ramayana* to be incomparable as he reasoned that “[n]o language can be purer, non chaster, none more beautiful, and at the same time simpler, than the language in which the great poet has depicted the life of Rama” (cited in Das 2019).

Oppositional tellings

The diversity of the different tellings of *Ramayana*, both within and outside the Indian subcontinent has resulted in the development of the presentation of this epic in two separate directions (Damrhung 2006). The first direction refers to the tellings that have been influenced by Vaishnavism²⁸, thus the prevailing message seems to highlight the greatness of Vishnu. Vishnu is perceived as the supreme god and is worshipped by Vaishnavite’s followers and his avatars, of which Rama is one. These tellings conform to the traditional Hindu version in terms of the structure of the plot, the main events and the main characters, even though some details may differ or are enmeshed with other local materials that are pertinent to each particular location where the story is being retold. The main purpose of this tradition of telling this epic is to glorify Rama and popularize his goodness. Examples of this kind of telling include those popularly known versions in Hindi by Tulsidas, in Tamil by Kampan and in Bengali by Krittibas Ojha. The Thai Ramakien and Lao Phra Lak Phra Lam also belong to this category.

Another direction in the *Ramayana* tellings is the oppositional approach which refers to a way of telling a story that seeks to contest the traditional depiction of the characters, values and thematic messages of the traditional story. Those tellings that oppose influential Hindu

²⁸ Vaishnavism or Vishnuism is one of the major sects of modern Hinduism. It is characterized by the worship of and devotion to the god Vishnu and his different forms of incarnation (avatars). Vedic and puranic texts are the main sources of the beliefs and practices of Vaishnavism. Another major sect that is widely practiced by Hindus is Shaivism, which acknowledges the god Shiva as a supreme deity. For more information, see <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Vaishnavism>.

tellings can be called “oppositional tellings” (Richman 1991, p. 11). Drawing from different elements of Ramayana literature, three reasons can be attributed to the coming of the oppositional tellings. Firstly, given that Rama in the Hindu Ramayana acts as the embodiment of righteousness, his moral ambiguities revolve around some of his actions that are often questioned. Some of the most notorious examples of this include his setting for Sita’s trial by fire (akni pariksha) after she returns from Lanka and his approval of the mutilation of Surapanakha by his brother, Lakshmana, due to her boldness and sexual advancement. Another issue concerning the projection of Rama as a just and virtuous warrior monarch is his stealth killing of Bali, which is done without giving the latter a chance to either defend himself or fight back. These incidents challenge the pious image of Rama in terms of being both an ideal husband and a moral king. These are traits that are aspired to by all Hindu men. This is the case in point when Rama’s ideology has been normalized and politicized by a group associated with a powerful political party. Accordingly, there has emerged various renditions and commentaries to investigate and comment on those controversial aspects. Secondly, the oppositional tellings have stemmed from a colonial context as in the case of the popular Myanmar novel, *Lin-gar Di Pa Chit*, as has been previously mentioned. This telling appears to reverse the role of the main characters by making Ravana a hero who protects his motherland from Rama’s invasion. Ravana’s death at the end of the novel connotes the native people’s great sacrifice and struggle in their fight against the British colonizers (Faktong 2015). The telling by Michael Madhusudan Dutt entitled “Meghanadavadha Kavya” reflects the complicated nature of the contact the Indians had with the colonial culture. Dutt wrote his Ramayana in Bengali prose and based the plot on Krittivasa’s Bengali version. He then subverted the image of Rama by integrating three additional stories that identify Ravana with Rama. Out of the reader’s expectations, this technique renders the reader’s admiration and sympathy for the villain. Dutt cited his contempt for the Hindu values as the reason for his change of character portrayals (Richman 1991). Similar reasons seem to be shared by other religious minorities who embrace Ravana as their hero. The last reason gives rise to the oppositional tellings that reflect the socio-cultural identities of those belonging to non-Hindu communities who make use of Ramayana retellings as a way to better understand their own attitudes toward power and as a way of making sense of their own realities. These people usually come from lower caste Dravidian groups or people of less privileged social positions or those who are members of certain disenfranchised gender groups. Whereas the mainstream tellings of Ramayana speak for the dominant male within Hindu culture, the richness of Ramayana tradition makes it possible for oppositional tellings to allow other members of society to identify with specific female characters including Sita and Surapanakha, or even the villain and his tribe such as with Ravana and the Asuras.

In this paper, I hope to complement the Ramayana scholarship by analyzing a popular novel entitled “Asura Tale of the Vanquished (2012)” by Anand Neelakantan. In so doing, a subaltern study approach and the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lack are used. The novel is based on Valmiki’s Ramayana, however, the author employed an oppositional telling approach, as has been discussed above, in rewriting the story. If we follow Ramanujan on his thoughts on the translation of Ramayana, this novel may be called a *symbolic* telling, as the same plot structure and most characters of the original text are used to tell the same story, albeit from a totally different perspective. Neelakantan did not simply reverse the roles of the main characters. Rather, he let the villain, Ravana, narrate the main events so that we, the audience, can see things the way he sees them. This does not depict Ravana as a hero in place of Rama. He may actually appear as villainous as he is seen through the author’s oppositional technique. Consequently, we come to understand what makes him the way he is. Ravana himself made an interesting point about why his tale has to be told:

For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor's tale, the Ramayana. Now hear the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished. I am a non-entity invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me.

(as appears on the back cover of the novel)

Another character who narrated the story is Bhadra, who is a new character created by the author to represent a common man from a lower class among the Asuras. Bhadra is a village man who fights bravely for the survival of his tribe, but he is later betrayed by Ravana. Despite his struggles to get out of destitution and hardship, hailing from the lowest stratum of society hinders any progress he attempts to make. Thus, the stories of the two Asura figures account for a brief historicity of the "Asurayana" (James 2015, p. 12) along with their respective classes that are certainly worthy of our exploration.

Neelakantan's *Asura* is a symbolic tale of the subaltern in the sense that it lets the mythical defeated king of the Asura, the Hindu other, speak. *Asura* allows Ravana's humanized sides to be exposed for the public reconsideration of his notoriously demonic image. The act of representation here is critical as it suggests the autonomy or agency one can exercise for one's own self-determination. One who represents himself and makes his/her own voice heard, makes a political assertion for his/her own end. In effect, the public are given alternative views that allow them to take into account and reflect upon their perceptions. Hindu poets and authors have spoken about Rama for ages. Accordingly, Rama's stories have been traditionally told from one angle. This has set him up as the subject of a moral judgment. Public festivals like Dussehra and Diwali that celebrate "good over evil" testify to such a process of Rama idolization. These presentations are mythically and religiously charged other than serving as a form of entertainment. It is the diversity of the Ramayana tradition that makes questioning Ramayana through Neelakantan's *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* possible.

Research questions

1. How do portrayals of Ravana and Bhadra represent Asura's identity?
2. How is the idea of 'good' redefined in the novel?

Methodology

This study mainly employs the subaltern study approach along with the psychological concepts of autonomy and lack. This approach is briefly discussed below.

Subaltern²⁹ Studies

Concepts of subaltern subject by Ranajit Guha

²⁹ *Subaltern* is a term that was coined by the Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, to identify the social groups whose political voices are denied as a result of their exclusion and displacement from the socio-economic institutions of their society. The term subaltern was later appropriated by post-colonial scholars to refer to the members of the colonial population who have been socially, politically, and geographically displaced outside the hierarchy of power of a given colony.

Subaltern studies was developed as an approach to the study of history that emerged in the 1980s by a group of Indian intellectuals including Ranjit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Spivak and Gyanendra Pandey, among others. It was developed to contest the mainstream historiographical approach that has been acknowledged as the preferred mode of historical writing of the elite. It is believed that the mainstream historiography, despite being premised upon the Enlightenment rationalism that privileges the narrative of modernity and democracy, fails to take the 'subaltern' or the 'people' into account (Guha 1982). Accordingly, the Indian history of nationalism was merely written as an achievement of the elite class. For this reason, the main aim of Subaltern Studies is to produce "historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subject of history" (Dipesh Chakrabarty 2004, p. 7). Taking up from Antonio Gramsci's account of how the Italian peasants under Mussolini could free themselves from the capitalist bourgeoisie hegemony or even the anti-colonial movements in colonial India itself, such as in the anti-Rowlatt upsurge of 1919 and the Quit India movement of 1942 (Guha 1982, p. 3), Guha believes that there was a kind of an *autonomous* domain that allowed the subaltern to play their politics (in the sphere of political society), in parallel with the constitutionalist-oriented style of elite politics. Even though the subalterns were scattered and un-unified in character, their commonly shared ideology was a notion of resistance to the elite domination. For this purpose, they were able to rise against the Raj in the form of a peasant insurgency during the colonial period.

Borrowing from the Marxist tradition, Guha has proposed two concepts of subaltern subjects. In "The Small Voice of History" (1996), he presents a *humanist concept* of the subaltern subject. He argues that traditional historiography fails to recognize the *agency* of the subaltern subject, not as 'principal actors' on their own but as instruments. That is, they are only acting in complement to the middle class' leadership or as a subset of that middle class. Therefore, the history of colonial India is equivalent to statism or state discourse in which the subaltern movements were not included. This suggests that on the one hand, history has neglected both the agency and autonomy of the subaltern. On the other hand, history has recognized only the middle class ideology and their simplified version of social contradiction. On the contrary, Guha believes that the subaltern occupied the domain of autonomy which was independent from elitist politics. However, subaltern politics relied on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class associations rather than colonial adaptations of the British parliamentary institution and the residual notions of the old feudal political strategies. Hence, the subaltern is actually both an active and independent agent of history.

Simply put, history is the story of the state that empowers the bourgeoisie to speak for the whole nation and for all citizens. However, unlike civil society in Europe, this scenario would not be applicable in colonial India because there were no citizens; there were only subjects who were ruled over without giving their consent. Hence, the British rule over India was a form of dominance that would never gain hegemony. Historiography was appropriated for the Indian situation accordingly, but it should not follow the Western model as the Western model is not inclusive of the Indian past. In other words, it does not recognize "the myriad voices in civil society" (Guha 1996, p. 3). Moreover, it oversimplifies the many contradictions of power by reducing them to "principal contradictions". This depiction was only displayed between the colonizers and the colonized. Given that mainstream historiography suffers such inadequacies, it has become the accepted norm in history writing to which any later historical work has to conform. Even the depictions written about situations in postcolonial India are not exempt from this convention. An example of this is given in the Telangana uprising written by P. Sundarayya which also adopted the 'totalising' approach of the movement by demonstrating that the whole struggle was committed in order to win the state power by means of armed resistance. Thus, it embraced certain values such as heroism, sacrifice, and martyrdom over the others. These values emphasized the role of male leadership, while the women's acts of participation and agency were not acknowledged.

Cases of colonial peasant insurgents and Telangana women alike were seen as the negligence of statist historiography. In short, what is lacking in history writing is the recognition of *subaltern consciousness*, which exists as a substantive content and has a role to play in the game of recording national history. Keeping the idea of agency and autonomy of the subaltern in mind, Guha maintained that *there is a subaltern consciousness to recover*; like a positivist object which exists outside history. Therefore, one of the objectives of the subaltern studies is to rewrite history.

Another kind of subaltern subject is premised on *a constructionist concept* that holds that meaning is not produced by the subject but comes from the outcome of structural contradictions. Based on the work by Louis Althusser, subject is the effect of structure and it is the structure that determines the course of history. Following this, the subaltern consciousness is not there to be recovered, but rather it is constituted in the same fashion that the state is constituted. This concept has marked a shift in the position of Subaltern Studies from the Gramscian Marxist to the Althusserian overdetermination. In “Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography” (1989), Guha attempts to situate Indian historiography by examining different colonial conditions. His point of departure—“There was one Indian battle that Britain never won. It was a battle for appropriation of the Indian past” (1989, p. 210) — has led him to unravel certain power relations that allowed the British, with their universalizing project of capitalism, to have dominance over India. However, it failed to exercise the hegemony of the colonizers. Drawing from what happened in some European countries in terms of “the universalizing tendency of the capital” (1989, p. 222), Guha points out that not every bourgeoisie revolution had only met with victory due to some tendency (of the bourgeoisie) to compromise with the old orders. This suggests that the liberal universalizing project is flawed because it fails to realize its own ideal in reality which is challenged by diverse conditions. This has a significant implication for colonial India. Invoking Althusser, there were multiple contradictions within various classes which could not be reduced to impacts of the economy. Similarly, in the colonial history there was a very complex situation which entailed different kinds of economic conflicts between the exploiters and the exploited, the power conflict of feudal modes of production, the zamindars (landlords) and laborers, and certain capitals that exist within different classes of people (middle class and subaltern classes that exist amongst various strata of these classes and among individuals). The accumulation of multiple contradictions as such is termed ‘overdetermination’, and only when it is coupled with conjuncture in time and critical mass can it make revolution possible. In short, overdetermination is a prerequisite factor for any revolution. In addition, overdetermination helps to explain two kinds of failure that have happened in the history of colonial India. On the one hand, it explains why India failed to gain independence earlier despite at least two major people’s movements that occurred before the nationalist movements, and on the other hand, it clarifies why the British acts of hegemony failed.

Concepts of autonomy and lack

Autonomy is a contentious concept which can be defined differently in various contexts. For example, the political autonomy is the ability to have one’s voices heard and respected within a political context. Personal autonomy can be defined as an individual’s capacity to decide for oneself and to pursue one’s own course of action (Dryden 2017). For the concept of lack, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, when the subject enters the symbolic order, it has to sacrifice the feeling of oneness it once had in the imaginary realm where the subject had no distinction between itself and others. When the subject enters into the symbolic order, the subject experiences a sense of lacking and starts longing for self-completion (Mansfield 2000). In other words, it is the process of the child’s entry into the social world in which he is subjected to language, conventions, and law. The child’s relationship with such systematic bodies deprives him of the feeling of completion he once had, causing him to experience a sense of

lacking. The sensation of lacking instigates desire, which propels the subject into the symbolic world where we all exist. Humans are drawn endlessly toward desire, which is insatiable.

Analysis of *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012 by Anand Neelakantan)

Asura Tale of the Vanquished (Asura) is a novel based on Valmiki's Ramayana story. It is divided into 65 chapters. Each chapter contains events in the story narrated by two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra. Ravana in this telling is not painted as a flat black character, not as an absolute villain but rather as a fallen hero. The author attempts to portray his humanized sides so that the reader can see him in a different light; as the king of the Asura and not as the enemy of the Deva's king, Rama. The character of Bhadra is not present in the traditional Ramayana version. He was created to represent downtrodden Asura people. Each character takes turn narrating important events occurring to the Asura and how they experienced them. Ravana was born as a half-caste Dravidian but later rose to power and became the king of Lanka. Bhadra was born a lower-caste, common man who was throughout his life devoted to his clan. Despite his sacrifice and devotion to the freedom of the Asura, however, Bhadra's social condition has deprived him of being someone other than a marginalized subaltern. Whereas Ravana had his fair share of glorious and gloomy days, Bhadra remained destitute throughout his life. Given their differing conditions, difficulties and destinies, both figures reveal to us how they have fought against the powerful others in their respective terms. The following analyses concern portrayals of Ravana and Bhadra, respectively. Drawing on the two concepts of subaltern subjects: the humanist and the constructionist, and the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lacking that has been discussed above, we shall see how Ravana and Bhadra speak of different portrayals of subaltern subjects.

Portrayal of Ravana

The novel's first chapter is entitled "The End". In this chapter, Ravana narrates the last moment in his life after he was defeated and left to die along with the bodies of his slain cousins. In subsequent chapters he began to reminisce about his past which then sparks memories of his childhood, youth and adulthood when he rose to be the emperor of Lanka. These recollections were ingrained with conflictual moments in the palace, his emotional turmoil and some larger than life experiences of Ravana himself. It all began when he was a poor boy, raised inadequately along with three other siblings, Kumbakarna, Soorpanakha³⁰, and Vibhishana, by an Asura mother. Being born to a Brahmin father and an Asura mother made Ravana a half-caste boy, who was subjugated in a caste-ridden society as a result of Brahmin ascendancy. Because such a social position was coupled with poverty and his father's negligence, Ravana and his siblings were not given access to education. "My brothers and I never had access to education to speak of. No Brahmin was ready to take us for free even if we worked for them," deplored Ravana of his childhood deprivation. These limitations subjected him to a place of subalternity if we are to follow the basic concept of the subaltern in the sense that they are excluded from the domain of the socio-economic structure. Ironically, Ravana had a step-brother, Kubera, who was a prince of Lanka. Kubera's wealth and social privileges were anything but lacking in Ravana's early life. Kubera's superiority, his contemptuous nature, and his unkind expressions towards Ravana and his family became a point for his collective angst and vengeful desire toward the former. These suppressions were eventually translated into dethroning his step-brother and making himself king of Lanka. However, an ill relationship

³⁰ Soorpanakha is Ravana's younger sister. She saw Rama in the forest and felt a strong affection for him, and to whom she expressed her feeling directly. However, her advance was denied. After some exchange of conversations with both Rama and Lakshmana she turned to her Rakshasa form and posed some threat toward Sita. Then Lakshmana cut off her nose and ears. In other versions, her name is spelled "Surapanakha".

with his father and various forms of childhood marginalization took a great toll on Ravana's psychological condition. On the one hand, these situations caused him to be a repressive subject who incessantly grappled with a fear of castration. Such a fear caused Ravana to develop an inferiority complex which was reflected in his cynicism, self-contradictory attitude, and even in his psychopathic inclinations that appear in several occasions throughout the novel. It also made him loathe his father and the institution his father stands for— *Brahminism*. On the other hand, the same fear also equipped him with a strong sense of ambition to not only achieve something great in life but also to reform the social conditions he felt do not serve the Asura's ideas of good and justice.

The angst and suppression that Ravana felt for the Asura race sublimated into constant criticism towards the dominant other, the Deva. Ravana felt that the Deva's most powerful tool was their religious texts, the Vedas, which were the source of all traditions and belief systems. The Deva's way of life was governed by the texts, which were regarded as sacred and not to be challenged. As such, he often used questions as a method to challenge the Brahmin hegemony of his time. Reflectively, those questions resonate with social issues of the present day where casteism along with other oppressions are still much more relevant. The reader is then invited to participate in pondering over the meaning of those posed questions.

But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions, all conspired to crush together the humble majority.

Why couldn't there be a more just way of living (p.19).

The silent hatred for his father makes him a hard critic of Brahminism and anything associated with it. Criticizing Brahmin rituals and its scriptures became his common habit.

I thought the Vedas were a load of humbug and it didn't matter which way you recited them. Some jobless Brahmin like my father, created them thousand years ago. Instead of making themselves useful, the Brahmins prayed to Gods they themselves invented for the rain, the sun, horses, cows and money and many other things.

Therefore, what Ravana did was not only to lay bare what he saw as being objectionable and unfair. He also redefined certain norms and concepts which reclaimed his Asura identity. Take one example of a moral principle that was strongly upheld by the Asura. In this instance, Ravana asserted:

Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong.

One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight at all costs (p. 17).

According to the quote, Ravana redefined the notion of righteousness, the value readily attached to Rama's image. Here, he made references to Rama's mistreatment of Sita and Sooparnakha in the traditional Ramayana. He also questioned the way Rama shot Bali to death from behind while the latter was fighting with Sugriva. Invoking a warrior's principle (yuddha), Ravana affirmed that "[o]ne should not cheat even if one was sure to fail." Such criticism of Rama's actions, which is commonly practiced in the oppositional tellings of Ramayana, was reiterated in *Asura* for two interesting reasons. First and foremost, the legitimacy of Rama dharma is exposed for our revision and challenged by the alternative Asura dharma, which was not popularly represented. This suggests that one supreme type of dharma was irrelevant and no longer valid. Referring to the warfare strategy that was deployed by Rama's army when they attacked Lanka at night time while people were asleep, Ravana remarked "[w]e are dealing with an enemy who has no scruples, no sense of fair play and dharma. They are ruthless barbarians who will stoop to any levels to achieve their goals" (p. 365). Aversion caused by unfair techniques was similarly shared by Bhadra, a common Asura man who witnessed what his king (Ravana) was up against, "[a]t the same time, he faced a sly and ruthless enemy who did not care even when civilians were killed and burnt enemy cities through arson and treachery" (p.

367). Bhadra's objection on Rama's warfare had a double-fold effect here. First, it directly brought Rama's heroic embodiment, in particular an aspect of his righteousness or Dharmavira, into question. Here, Dharmavira is to be skeptical about what Rama's army did. He states that it was "the sudden attack in the dead of night, flamed-tipped arrows were shot towards the marketplace" (p. 355) and went on to say "people ran out. Screams rang through the sky. Flesh burned. Houses were gutted and thick, black smoke swirled upwards. It was like being in hell" (p. 355). This unfair play, as described by Bhadra while he was running for his life, casts a shadow on Rama's reputation of compassion. Another surfacing question would be to ask if he is such a compassionate figure, why was the notion of the possibility of civilian deaths not considered before starting a war. What his army did to the common Asura people seemed to undermine this Dharmavira stature, as it was contrary to how one website advocating Rama³¹ described his quality. It was described in the following way: "Shri Ram is full of mercy, care and compassion. He had mercy towards the meek. He knew what was to be done (righteous). He always has self-control and he is always pure (in conduct)".

Another reason why Rama's Dharmavira is being brought up is that it is pertinent to the ancient history, or say, the mythical history concerning the Deva versus the Asura conflicts. The relevant questions concerning who the Aryan are and how they are connected with the Indus Valley Civilization are still debatable today. From what was presented in the novel *Asura*, it is clear where the author stands. Anand Neelakantan believes that the Asuras were the civilized people of the Harappa who had lived peacefully until the invasion by the Deva or Aryan that was led by their supreme god Indra. The unfair strategic attack of Rama's army on the Asura kingdom was used comparatively as a point of reference in explaining the cause of the decline of the Indus valley civilization. Identifying himself with the Asura, the tribe that settled by the river banks and were civilized, Ravana recounted that the Asura civilization was at its peak before the Aryan's invasion, and the society was much more culture-oriented as there was no efficient leadership or plan for national defense. This made the city an easy target for the invaders. Ravana reminded himself of the ancient history of his Asura tribe as if he wanted to suggest that the history has now repeating itself when the same group of people resorted to the same tactic in conquering the other's land. Lanka was now brutally attacked by the Deva army in exactly the same fashion as how things had happened to the Harappa. What arose in Ravana's mind was the memory of the horse-riding nomad tribes invading the Asura (people of the Harappa), which ultimately led to the decline and destruction of their civilization.

The mighty Asura army met the horse-riding savage tribes near the river Jhelum. The leader of the plunderers was named Indra....Thousands were slain; women irrespective of age, were gang-raped, children burned alive and granaries plundered. Magnificent cities crumbled (p. 22).

Connotatively, Ravana meant to stress that the Deva/ Aryan tribe, to which Rama belongs, was uncivilized and the way that they invaded the Asura (comparatively, the Harappan) in order to usurp the city was blatantly barbaric. Therefore, the badge of righteousness (Dharmavira) attached to Rama was questionable.

It is quite obvious from the above discussion that Ravana is a subaltern subject who can speak clearly of his dissent and desire. *What enables him to speak?* is the question that will be dealt with shortly. For my attempted answer, I have to follow Guha's concept of the humanist subject which holds that the subaltern is not merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie's political project. Actually, they occupy the domain of autonomy which is independent from elitist politics and, thus, they can realize their political goals on their own. However, the subaltern has to ally with traditional organizations and maneuver through class associations effectively for their own gain. When Ravana's struggle to represent his tribe (alternatively, his race) is seen within this conceptual framework, it is not difficult to determine how his autonomy takes effect.

³¹ See website "Rama", <http://lordrama.co.in/index.html>.

Given that Ravana was half-caste and disadvantaged, as he described how difficult his early life was economically and socially, he was not totally left out of many socio-economic institutions. Even if it seemed so in his early life, he managed to resume access to his powerful network of social contacts later on. Ravana was linked to a learned Brahmin father, a rich and royal step-brother (Kubera), and a powerful, spiritual guru who was a former king (Mahabali). These three people played important roles in shaping his personality and making him king at last. Neglected by his biological father, Ravana found a paternal figure in Mahabali, who taught him useful lessons on life and war. He consoled Ravana over his fear of being castrated by his estranged Brahmin father who viewed him as a “good-for-nothing evil-spirited loser who was a burden to the world” (p. 31). Mahabali inspired Ravana to achieve his dreams and assured him of his potential within.

I can see a spark, a small one perhaps, but a spark indeed, which with the right breeze can be blown into a raging fire. I do not know, whether you are a promise of our miserable people or their curse. You could be both and many things beyond (p. 29).

Having spent time with Mahabali, Ravana became an educated man and a skilled warrior. What he lacked in his childhood, was somehow compensated for later in life, and his long subjugated subaltern consciousness was resurrected accordingly. Psychoanalytically speaking, he was now in control to pursue the *phallas*, a symbol of totality and power. Mahabali was instrumental in helping Ravana recover such autonomy, which then enabled him to harness it for the good of himself and his tribe. Kubera is not only Ravana’s step-brother, he is also his rival— the threat to Ravana’s quest of the *phallas*. As such, he had to be eliminated. Ravana allied himself with his siblings and cousins, including Maricha, Prahastha, Sumali and Jambumali, who had connections with official authorities. The support from Rudraka, a former commando who used to serve the previous king, Mahabali and the loyal, devoted Asura soldiers, was the key to his victorious mission. To add to Ravana’s fortune, his maternal uncle Maricha was willing to die for him and he did sacrifice his life when he accompanied Ravana to abduct Sita. In short, Rava was successful in mobilizing his allies, and together, the collective Asura consciousness was strengthened by invocations of historical discourses regarding the war of the ten Asura kings who fought against the Deva army. Unfortunately, the last war against the Devas was a failure and brought about the notorious defeat of the Asuras. The main cause of this was the abduction of Sita as a personal affair, rather than a racially or politically motivated one. As a consequence, the Asura collective strength failed to sustain. The Asura consciousness which was once held together solidly, expired and broke into fragments mainly as a result of Maricha’s death and Vibhishana’s alliance with the enemy. The tragic loss of the Asura lives and the downfall of the empire were thus inevitable.

Portrayal of Bhadra

Bhadra is depicted as a poor, common Asura man whose life was affected by the wars that took place with the Devas in much the same way that Ravana was affected. However, unlike Ravana, his voice is never heard. Bhadra, an untouchable, represents a subaltern who was double-marginalized by caste and class. He was underprivileged in both social and economic ways. He once was a peasant who lived a simple farm life with his wife and young daughter in a peaceful, self-sufficient village.

My village was small but it has everything- the sacred grove, a small shrine for Shiva, a toddy shop and a small school...I live like my father, who had lived like his father. My children would also live like me growing up in the same street, bathing in the same pond, falling in love with dusty beauties of the village (p. 43).

Bhadra never suffered from a feeling of lacking or from a sense of inadequacy the way Ravana did. He was satisfied with whatever life offered to him. However, the war with the Deva had

caused a radical change in his life when the village was ravaged; at this time, his wife was raped and killed along with his daughter. This traumatic experience led Bhadra to undertake a vengeful mission to reclaim the Asura's pride and freedom from the Devas. Such determination had brought Bhadra to serve under Ravana's command in his revolutionary army as a loyal soldier. This was where the uncanny relationship formed between the two Asura men who came from two different classes. According to Ravana, Bhadra was the last person who came to his side just before his last breath. Bhadra held Ravana's badly injured body close and said to him, "I will complete your work, your highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race" (p.13). Bhadra embodies a lower-class nationalist persona who was relentlessly devoted to his superior and to the idea of living for the purpose of the Asura's glory. Given his marginalized background, Bhadra, who had fought under Mahabali, manifested military prowess and intelligence. Surprisingly, when such qualities were coupled with his honest and unafraid expressions of his own thoughts and feelings, it disturbed Ravana. "I was surprised and irritable to find the man show no fear of my authority and who did not act humble. It was absurd. It was absurd; the very notion that he was my equal was absurd" (p. 65). As such, Ravana never recognized Bhadra's capability but saw him as an inferior individual who should always be subjected to his authority. Bhadra became the object of Ravana's anxiety; someone he wished to get rid of but ironically someone he could not live without. Once Ravana presented Bhadra's idea to his army council as if it were his own and the idea was approved. Bhadra suggested that some soldiers should disguise themselves as traders and pretend to exchange goods with Lanka. This way, the troops could set up a guild and have weapons transported into their areas inside the city. Nevertheless, on no reasonable grounds, Ravana considered Bhadra a traitor and had him detained.

Later on in the story, we came to see that Bhadra's dedication and sacrifice to the fight for his race were never recognized by the powerful Asura elites. He was exploited and then expended again and again, but Bhadra did not have the power to protest or revolt. He continued to fight the enemy on his own terms, for all he wanted was "to see the Devas ruined" (p.100). Once he disguised himself and went to work as an employee for the enemy and was caught up in some trouble. He wanted Ravana to help him but was dismissed and scolded nonchalantly "You traitor, son of a scoundrel! Go rot in hell!" (p. 101) Ravana also kicked him hard in the face, but it was those words that hurt him the most. The ill treatment Bhadra had been receiving never affected the fierce loyalty he had for his Asura clan. The contempt toward him was fleeting, but Asura had to be liberated. Accordingly, Bhadra's pain was quickly brushed off as he often reminded himself that he "was too small for kings and the relatives of kings to be bothered about" (p.196). Given the subsequent unfortunate events that he experienced in his later life, such as his wife being raped by Ravana, having to raise Ravana's son as his own, and his son not publicly respecting him as a father, Bhadra was not agonized by these misfortunes as he gradually came to terms with a sense of normalcy about his own destitution and oppression. He once revealed the joy he felt at Maricha's funeral because it meant that poor people like him would be fed and new clothes would be supplied to them.

Drawing from the concept of autonomy, we can see that Bhadra's autonomy was always at work. His Asura consciousness propelled him toward living his life for the purpose of Asura's progress. However, despite all the odds he faced, becoming a revolutionary soldier, an efficient army man of Lanka under Ravana's rule, a foster father of Ravana's son, Bhadra lamented that "[n]o bards will ever sing paeans to the selfless acts that are done by common people like us" (p. 334). Bhadra's important role in the history of Asurayana was never mentioned. For one reason, the personal autonomy he exercised lacked the sufficient force to develop itself as a form of political autonomy, which is one's ability to have his voice heard and respected within a political context (Dryden 2017). Bhadra's significant contribution was relegated to being an instrument of the Asura elite's political project. As such, unlike Ravana and other Asura elites, his political voice was muted and his subaltern consciousness was never resurrected. Another

reason for Bhadra's historical misrecognition is that he had no linkage to the dominant group—the Brahmin. Unlike Ravana, given the fact that he was born a half-caste, he was connected to a Brahmin father and a formidable king, Mahabali, along with other powerful figures of the old regime who were mobilized to make his rise to power possible, Bhadra was a poor untouchable individual who was just serving those elites and who was excluded from the network of the power those elites held. Hence, Bhadra represents a subaltern, to borrow Spivak's famous words, who 'can't speak' (Spivak 1994). In his later years, Bhadra had come to learn that no matter how many wars the Asura had lost or won, the battle of a common man like him would continue as he grumbled "millions like me would continue to wage their little wars in the different corners of the earth, for food, water, air, shelter, and a little dignity" (p. 378).

Conclusion

The richness of the Ramayana tradition has generated countless tellings and retellings of Ramayana stories that cater to diverse groups of people with different social positions and ideologies. Each telling, be it mainstream or a local alternative, has its own literary value and offers certain issues for the audience to reflect upon. Oppositional tellings, which seek to defy the dominant Hindu tellings, are the focus of this article as they are relevant to our questions concerning certain modern values and conditions. One critical question deals with the Hindu 'other', as in the case of the Asuras. In traditional tellings, the Asuras are represented as evils or demons, or anything related to those forces which are in opposition to Rama's goodness. These representations, however, fail to do justice to the Asuras, who are in this case the subalterns in society who practice different traditions and who have different stories to tell. However, their stories are often misrepresented or underrepresented. Accordingly, the Asuras remain second class citizens who have to struggle hard to offer different definitions of goodness and righteousness, among other definitions. It is within the conceptual framework of the subaltern studies that allows the Asuras to speak. When the subaltern subject is located in *Asura Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) by Anand Neelakantan, a positional telling of Ramayana, we come to see two subaltern figures who represent the Asura identity in a relative manner, yet in different ways. Ravana, an Asura king, represents the ideological aspects of the Asura, which involve advocating for an equal, casteless society that has its own version of justice and virtue and functions independently from the Brahmin hegemony. Another subaltern subject representing Asura identity is Bhadra, who is a common, low-caste man. Bhadra speaks of the realistic material conditions that any common Asura people have to confront on a regular basis. His autonomy, which stems from his strong nationalist sentiment, is always displayed in a proactive mode, but he is never able to achieve his highest potential for two reasons. Firstly, the lack of access to a powerful network limits Bhadra's autonomy to a personal level, which is not forceful enough to revolutionize the conditions of his own being or to shift the course of his destiny. Secondly, there are no overdetermined occurrences that are critical enough to lift Bhadra out of a domain of servitude. As such, given his bravery, loyalty and sacrifices to his race and kings, Bhadra remains a subservient subaltern of the higher-class Asuras. In addition, the portrayal of the two main characters serves to reflect the Asura identity, which is markedly distinct from that of the Devas who are the dominant group. It also presents two different kinds of subaltern consciousness, which equally contribute to the historicity of the subaltern. However, it is only the performances of the higher-class or the elitist subalterns that are recognized as true historical facts. The contributions of a lower-class subaltern like Bhadra is seen as little more than a personal memory.

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