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Postcolonial Indian Ruling Texts: The Ramayana

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Postcolonial Indian Ruling Texts:

The Ramayana

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GPS 480 - Thesis Course

Dr. Jon Bohland

May 10, 2021

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Introduction

The Story We Tell

Once upon a time, in the Kingdom of Ayodhya, King Dasaratha reigns during a perilous time when the evil demon king Ravana terrorizes the world. King Dasaratha has three wives, Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra, who granted him four sons to carry his lineage. The eldest son, Rama, born to Kaushalya, was the successor to the throne and was deemed worthy to marry Sita, a princess from a neighboring kingdom renowned for her beauty, after winning her hand in marriage. Kaikeyi's servant, Manthara, is said to have poisoned Kaikeyi's mind with fear and doubt of Rama's respect for her, convinced her that upon Rama's reign she would be mistreated and cast aside, and that her own son, Bharat, would be a more fit ruler. Kaikeyi requests the King to honor his two boons as vowed to do long ago; she demands that Rama be exiled to the forest for fourteen years and Bharat to be crowned king instead. Rama willingly abdicates the throne and goes to the forest. His wife and younger brother, Laxman, accompany him. Word of Sita's startling beauty reaches Ravana who becomes intent on having her for himself and sets a trap for Rama and Laxman to kidnap Sita. Thus, Rama and Laxman begin their quest to save Sita. After many violent battles, Rama defeated Ravana, thus winning back Sita. Rama, concerned that she has been unfaithful during her ten-month-long captivity, rejects Sita. Sita undergoes a trial of the gods asking them to allow her to burn upon a pyre if she had been tainted and thus proves her purity. Together again, they return to rule Ayodhya for many wonderful years (Gradesaver).

That is where the bedtime story often ends. In comparison to Valmiki's original text the most significant difference is the ending. This alternate version omits the following...

After they return to Ayodhya, Rama hears rumors of his people discussing Sita's imagined indiscretions and he decides that his duty to the throne takes precedence to that of a husband. He banishes her to the forest, not knowing that she is with his children. Many years later, while hunting, Rama comes across two twin boys who claim to be his sons. The boys, Luv and Kush, take Rama to see their mother as confirmation. Sita relinquishes her duties as a mother and calls upon Mother Earth from which she was born to take her back. The earth opens and swallows Sita back into its womb.

Why Do These Stories Matter?

I have fond memories of being bundled in the warmth of my mother's lap and her reading me that bedtime story from the soft pages of *Amar Chitra Katha*. In my mind, the Ramayana was the story of our people, Indian people - whom I saw very few of in our small town Coon Rapids, Minnesota. Nonetheless, my family strived to instill Indian culture in my upbringing and so these stories connected me to every notion I had of India and what it meant to be a Hindu. Growing up, I saw the narrative of the Ramayana incorporated into the storylines of popular Bollywood movies - i.e. *Hum Saath Saath Hain*. And the few representations I had led me to believe that a proper Indian woman should act a certain way and thus there were certain expectations of me. Similarly, they formed my interpretation of Indian men. But my experiences living in India of gender-based violence were quite contrary to the fantasy I depicted.

India is a country fraught with gender inequality and sexism. This phenomenon is often chalked up as an explanation to what Indian society is, what it means to be Indian, and how we define *sanskaari* (traditional) behavior. Conversely, the way in which the political systems of power have chosen to interpret our sacred texts perpetuates gender inequality. This happens because these stories are how we teach our children their heritage and culture.

The Ramayana is a fable intertwined with nationalism as narrated in the Puranas, which contain secondary mythology and divine narrative pertaining to cosmology and the genealogy of the gods. It is told to children to convey Puruṣārtha, the Hindu objective of human pursuit composed of Dharma (duties), Artha (prosperity), Kama (desire), and Moksha (spiritual liberation). It is noteworthy that there are differing translations and interpretations of each of these words and the concepts that they describe. For example, “Artha” can be considered prosperity according to some more traditional translations or the more modern usage which means truth.*

*Many of the terms used in this paper originate from Sanskrit, thus there are several discrepancies in grammar and spelling of certain terms that change as per region, language, and author. As such, there are alternate spellings for a character’s name, for example, the hero of the text is referred to as either Ram or Rama. This also applies in reference to and conjunction of pronunciation, specifically although the title of the text is often written as the “Ramayana” in English, most Indians would opt to verbally say: “Ramayan”. In its original language, Sanskrit, the ending *-a* is not usually pronounced. For the sake of standardization and recognizing that my

paper is both in English and being published by a western institution, I have taken the liberty of maintaining a singular formatting throughout my research.

The original text consists of nearly twenty-four thousand verses in the Shloka meter, about five hundred chapters, and divided into seven books written in Sanskrit as orated by Valmiki. Naturally, when translating lengthy text into a more perceivable story, there are many details, and even considerable portions, which are omitted so that the work is still consumable. However, the elements, events, and syntax chosen reflect upon what we as a society consider to be important values. Many abridged versions do no justice to the original story, thus completely altering the moral to be interpreted.

In this thesis, I examine how abridged versions of the Ramayana impact perception of what it means to be Indian. Specifically, exploring the Indian identity, what parts of the Indian identity are affected by the Ramayana, and what it means to be Indian. I conducted a parallel mixed methods study composed of a comparative textual analysis and a strict survey of Hindu Indians raised in and outside of India. A mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative research in a single study to understand a research problem. This thesis explores how gender stereotypes are created and perpetuated through the elements of storytelling in the Indian context through the lens of a Ruling Text. I also utilize an ethnographic approach on Indian and Indian American perceptions of the Ramayana.

I introduce the Ramayana with the common bedtime story, the appended alternative ending, and the relevance of these stories to people like me. Next, I declare my research question

and provide a roadmap of my paper. The literature review consists of a section on foundational myths and narratives and their importance in identity construction, comparing western ruling texts, how the story might get lost in translation, and modern day implications of the Ramayana. Then, I delve into the methodology section in which I discuss my use of an ethnographic approach. In Chapter 1, I provide background on the Ramayana and what scholars believe in the origin of the Ramayana, its relation to national identity, and the role of the BJP. In Chapter 2, I analyze how the Ramayana shaped people, the impact, and analyze extended quotes drawn from my survey. In this section I also discuss my strategies of analysis, results of the survey, and critiques. Lastly, I conclude my paper with a prompt to further research in this area and include a copy of my survey questions and coding responses in the appendix.

Literature Review:

Foundational Myths and Narratives

Foundational myths and narratives play an important role in identity construction and nation building. Based on the workings of Reicher and Hopkins's (2001) self-categorization and social-identity framework of identity entrepreneurship and, Liu and Hilton's (2005) social representations theory of history, in *Lessons From the Past for the Future: The Definition and Mobilization of Hindu Nationhood by the Hindu Nationalist Movement of India*, the construction of nationhood is built on the foundation of identity and history (Khan et al, 2017).

It is incredibly difficult to identify and verify Indian history prior to colonization as a result of colonial powers. Not only did the British deem India's "*lack of history*" constituted an "*epistemological failure*" (Devare, 2011) that denoted Hindus as "... *a crude and credulous*

people ... who cannot estimate the use of record of past events” (Mill, 1858, p. 115), the Eastern Indian Company (EIC) also actively demeaned Indian spiritual influence, culture, knowledge, and history. In 1813, JS Mill and Charles Grant were appointed by the EIC to write the *History of British India*, which delineated almost all Sanskrit literature as merely figments of imagination and mythical (Krishna, 2020). This publication would serve as the syllabus for the India College (later known as the Haileybury and Imperial Service College) and was even taught in Indian schools and colleges (Krishna, 2020). In order to provoke the independence movement, Hindu nationalists would have to unify Indians by making “temporal comparisons in which a glorified past was compared favorably to the dominance of Britain in the present” and thus the Ramayana would become a central text of India as a nation (Liu & Khan, 2014).

A Western Comparison

In her paper, “Texts and the Ontology of Organizations and Institutions,” Dorothy Smith establishes the idea of Ruling Texts, which she defines as “core man-made texts which define gender and other power relations in society” (Smith 107). She examines the Bible, in how it villainized Eve for consuming an apple from the Tree of Wisdom and seducing Adam to do so as well. According to Smith, this influences the western societal outlook on women and as a result impacts the societal discrimination of women.

By analyzing the Ramayana as a ruling text and the postcolonial interpretation of Hindu mythology perpetuating gender roles and encouraging women to be submissive, I hypothesize that the imposition of Western ideals alters the perception of cultural expectations of women and that to behave misogynistically is to be true to traditional Indian values. What we know today as

“Hinduism” is a result of British colonialism as it was popularized by British and German scholars and cultural figures.

Devdutt Pattanaik (2014) argues that the introduction of the patriarchy altered feminism and sexuality in Hinduism, and as a result, in the telling of the Ramayana. Pattanaik refers to ideas questioning the notions of maleness and femaleness, the distinction of flesh and soul and the soul having no gender, and infers that there was no such thing as sexism in the era of Hindu mythology (Devdutt, 2014). Therefore, it is the institutionalized sexism introduced by the patriarchy that alters the way we interpret ruling texts in modern day adaptations.

Generally speaking, gender roles are the social norms that confine an individual to a range of behaviors, professions, etc that is considered the acceptable on the basis of one’s assigned sex at birth. Traditional Western gender roles dictate that the husband (or man of the house) is the provider and the wife (or woman) is the caretaker. These norms have a tendency to emerge beyond the household and occur in professional settings as well. For example, women are often expected to perform caretaker duties in the office. This tendency severely limits the prospects of both men and women in terms of economic growth and emotional stability (Cislighi & Heise, 2019).

While gender equality should be considered a human rights issue, many consider it to be an issue that only affects women. However, an act of sexism, especially one rooted in toxic masculinity, can adversely affect men as well. This is apparent considering the statistics of men who commit suicide in contrast to the number of men who talk to their doctors about depression, participate in therapy, or discuss their mental health due to stigma around men asking for help.

Just in the United States, Men (79% of 38,364) die by suicide at a rate four times higher than women (Mental Health America [MHA], 2020). Furthermore, the stereotypical gender binary fails to take account for people who exist beyond the labels of cisgendered man and woman—i.e., transgender, gender queer, and nonbinary individuals. It also maintains the dominance of the nuclear family structure, which consists of a father, mother, and their children, as opposed to other family structures, such as single-parent families, polyamorous parent families, and same-sex parent families.

Modern day Indian society still participates in perpetuating and enforcing traditional gender roles. According to a study published in 2020 by the Pew Research Center, traditional gender norms still hold sway among large segments of the population. Indians are among the most likely to say that a husband should provide for his family while his wife takes care of the house and children. The data shows that 40% of Indians prefer this more traditional family dynamic, compared to a global median of 23%.

The Pew Research Data also depicts substantial effects on the expectations imposed on individuals by Indian society regarding gender norms. It outlines that about two thirds of the participants responded that they completely agree with another quarter that “a wife must obey her husband.” The slim majority (54%) say that both men and women in families should be responsible for earning money, while many (43%) view finances as a man’s obligation. Furthermore, Indian adults overwhelmingly (80%) say that when jobs are in short supply, men should have greater rights to employment than women.

Scholarly Interpretations

Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana, was always considered the ideal woman and depicted the standard for every virtuous woman to emulate as a religious identity. In *Complications with a Feminist Sita*, Meader takes into consideration how over the years the way that the story was told and how Sita's character changed, thus changing the standards women were held to (2014). In Linda Hess's (1999) article "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," she analyzes various versions of the Ramayana, how these versions betray the cultural attitude towards Sita's treatment, and what we can learn from these variations. The narrative depicting Sita as worshiping her husband and bowing to his will, despite his abuse, is still embraced as the ideal woman by many Hindus of both sexes (Hess, 1999). Many believe that this narrative is conceived by (and only meant to serve) dominant males from ancient times to the present (Hess, 1999). In a deeper understanding of the original text, scholars claim Sita is one "whose sense of Dharma, or duty, is superior to and more awe inspiring than that of Rama— someone who puts even Maryada Purushottam Rama – the most perfect of men – to shame" (Kishwar, 1). Within Indian culture, there is dispute about what this duty is. To some, it means always putting the collective well-being of society above all else. To others, it means putting tradition above all else, and there are countless variations of these aphorisms. One could argue that the way scholars interpret the text impacts their own definition of duty.

Ultimately, the variation in how the text is conveyed juxtaposes two perspectives of Sita's character in which she is seen as "demure and restrained" and "fierce and strong" (Meader

2014). By framing the ideal woman as passive and submissive, modern day attempts to go against the status quo are destined to fail. And therefore, what began as an identity enforced by religion has become weaponized by those with political agendas. The perpetuation of gender oppression in the postcolonial era is rooted in the influence of narrow readings of the Ramayana and the depiction of ideal Indian society by Hindu nationalists.

Modern Day Implications

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has manipulated understandings of the Ramayana to best serve its political aims and to further an inherently sexist and discriminatory agenda since 1980. The Bharatiya Janata Party is the current majority party in India in the Lok Sabha (House of the People, the lower chamber of Parliament) and is the party of Narendra Modi (Prime Minister since 2014). This party has formed with connections to anti-Muslim militant group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an organization of religious leaders based on the plan to unify Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists, excluding the Muslims and Christians (Wulff 1997). These groups came to form the Hindutva ideology, which “defines India as a land of the Hindus and expresses a zealous commitment to the preservation of the cultural and geographic boundaries...by eliminating or subversively eliminating non-Hindus” (Kumar 2013). While these links may have existed since the conception of this political party in the 1980s, the rhetoric presents a more evolving attitude towards non-Hindus. The 1984 party manifesto asserts that: “Unity in diversity has been the hallmark of Indian culture, which is a unique multi-hued synthesis of the cultural contributions made over the centuries by different peoples and religions” (Choudary 1991). This stance appeals to a romanticized past and places

the foundation for the BJP to utilize doublespeak in order to reference a singular past Indian culture thus decontextualizing India's own diverse history of several dominant religions throughout time.

This quote aptly describes the phenomenon at play: "Every society writes and rewrites its history for the benefit of its people in the light of the dominant worldview. Literary traditions which disperse vibrant social ideals are defined and redefined to maintain the social equilibrium" (Gangatharan, 877). With the British colonization of India, during the era of colonialism, came a cultural reaction and recontextualization to more Western ideals, which drastically altered how India would be defined henceforth.

The Bharatiya Janata Party worked to alter the narrative between Hindus and Muslims, their stance solidifying as controversy arose over a court case involving a Muslim woman and her alimony [2]. Then a pivotal event in the history of the Bharatiya Janata Party is when they mobilized hundreds of Hindus to destroy the Babri Mosque. This mosque was built by Babur, the first Mughal emperor in 1528, and there was a rumor, either perpetuated or created by the British, that this location was also the birthplace of Rama, the hero of the epic Ramayana (Wulff 1997). The Bharatiya Janata Party had been leaning into religious symbology of the Ramayana by perpetuating this misinformation and placing the leader Advani to lead processions dressed as Rama and in a car-dressed-chariot through North India. This political procession was to end in Ayodhya where the Babri Mosque was located (Wulff 1997). The procession was halted, but in the following year Advani and followers attacked and dismantled the Babri Mosque. This was the culmination of other policies enacted by the Bharatiya Janata Party, such as exploiting

scarcity, demonizing Muslims, and stating that the fifteen percent minority will overtake as an oppressive majority since Muslim birthrates are faster than Hindus (Wulff 1997). The actions of the Bharatiya Janata Party do not align with secularism as their rhetoric suggested and gathered Hindu support by homogenizing them through the Babri Mosque issue. It is also notable that since the more recent 2014 and 2019 elections Bharatiya Janata Party member and Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi has pushed for harsher citizenship legislation and has been quite vocal about India being a Hindu state. This opposes the traditional secular government of India and the religious freedoms granted dating back to the rule of Akbar the Great. As a result, the largest democracy in the world crumbles.

Methodology:

Although my interest initially lay with the younger population's interpretation of Hindu culture, I expanded my research pool in order to receive more dense data by reaching out through my personal connections. I was able to survey fifty people, including fifty six percent female and fifty percent male respondents. Demographic information is available in the appendix. Because I had made it clear that my survey was completely anonymous and will be used only for research purposes, I was able to forgo IRB approval and a consent form from each person surveyed.

Additionally, as I continued my research, I compared common abridged media used to convey the Ramayana today, including, but not limited to, Amar Chitra Katha, Gradesaver (a summary of the Ramayana), and Doordarshan Ramayana TV serial and their usage or omission of key elements. I chose these sources because they were popular responses found in the survey

conducted when answering the question, “How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?”

I believe the questions in my survey would aptly be the most suitable approach to answering my research question: how do abridged versions of the Ramayana impact perceptions of what it means to be Indian?, as it would effectively gauge what percentage of modern-day versions of the Ramayana accurately depict the original epic and what young Indians’ perception of it is, and how it has influenced their definition of being Indian.

When coding qualitative data, I labeled and organized the responses into themes. For the question “How was the Ramayana conveyed to you?” responses could belong to several themes as there might be more than one way that someone was engaged with the text. All of the other questions’ responses were reduced to single themes based on what they symbolized. I then inserted the collected data into an excel spreadsheet and analyzed the data trends by making bar graphs.

Results of the Survey

In my survey, I asked respondents the question “How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?” in order to understand the source of the text through generations. Many responses include mention of TV series, their family using oral storytelling, and reading books and/or comics.

TV Series:

By far, the most popular TV series referenced is Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayana in the 1978 TV series which aired on Doordarshan (also known as DD National) - one of India’s largest

and oldest public service broadcaster stations founded by the Government of India. The show is primarily based on Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, they claim to also make reference to the Tamil *Kamb Ramayan*, Marathi *Bhavarath Ramayan*, Bengali *Krutivas Ramayan*, Telugu *Shri Rangnath Ramayan*, Kannada *Ramchandra Charit Puranam*, Malayalam *Adhyatma Ramayan*, and Urdu *Ramayan* by Chakbast. During the 1978 - 1988 airing, the series had a record high viewership of eighty two percent and reportedly earned about fifty thousand worth in United States dollars per episode. During the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown the series was re-aired and broke viewership records with seventy seven million views on April 16th, 2020. Arun Govil, the actor who played Rama, recalls that watching the show “was absolutely like going to the temple – people would do *pooja* (worship rituals) before the show, put garlands and *tikka* (red marks that signify purity of faith and devotion) on the TV; that was the kind of feeling people had for the show.”

Rajagopal credits the TV show as “the catalyst in sparking a Hindu awakening across India, and bringing Hindu nationalism to the forefront of public and political spheres.” According to his research, “until the Ramayana was broadcast, religious TV programming was limited because India is a secular state, with all religions treated equally...The broadcast of the Ramayana was the first major rupture of the secular consensus, it catered to the devout and ritualistic. The popular response was devotional, but the activity of political parties was necessary to translate that into something political.” Furthermore, in an interview with India’s Frontline magazine in 2000, Rajagopal said that by broadcasting the Ramayana to nationwide audiences, the Indian government “violated a decades-old taboo on religious partisanship, and Hindu nationalists made the most of the opportunity. What resulted was perhaps the largest

campaign in post-Independence times, irrevocably changing the complexion of Indian politics. The telecast of a religious epic to popular acclaim created the sense of a nation coming together, seeming to confirm the idea of Hindu awakening.”

The Sangh Parivar, the family of nationalist organizations that spawned from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), seized the chance to capitalize on the Hindu awakening that manifested and construct a national Hindu consciousness, thus unifying diverse Hindu groups and establishing the idea of a golden era of Hindu rule known as ‘Ram Rajya’ or Kingdom of Ram.

The influence of the TV show to Indian politics is especially critical to the aforementioned Babri Mosque controversy, where Hindu nationalists orchestrated a nationwide campaign called the “Ram Janmabhoomi” Movement, translated as Rama’s birthplace, in which they dressed volunteers as Ram and Laxman from the TV series and called on the construction of a Lord Ram temple in place of the mosque. These campaigns enabled Hindus all over India to contribute to the building of a Hindu temple and forged a sense of Hindu togetherness. Moreover the Ramayana TV Series echoed the national movement. Rajagopal exemplifies one scene where “Lord Ram reveals he’s carrying earth from his birthplace – this is not in any version of the Ramayana I’m aware of – and spoke to a specific political moment, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. It’s an example of how the series reflected politics, and vice versa.”

Sita’s fate was the most drastic alteration from the original text. In Valmiki’s text Sita undergoes the trial by fire in which she proves her chastity before returning to Ram. In Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayana, the fire god Agni creates Maya Sita, a shadow Sita, who is abducted by Ravana, meanwhile the real Sita hides in the fire. Then, according to the show, the

trial by fire returns the real Sita to her Ram. Sagar claims that this narrative is sourced from the Ramcharitmanas. The Maya Sita motif protects the moral status of both Sita and Rama. It explicitly states that the fire destroys the Maya Sita and the "stigma of public shame" that Sita would have had to otherwise endure. And as a result, Rama is exculpated from using harsh words to "Sita" at the time of the trials he knows it is the false Sita he is accusing.

Oral Storytelling

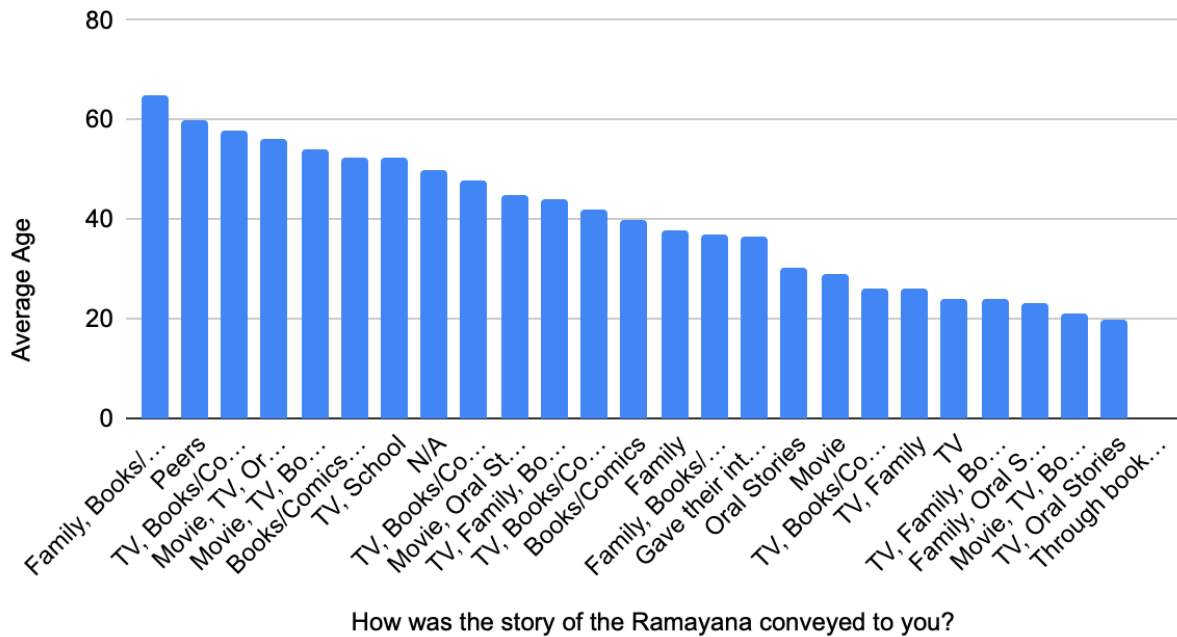
A significant number (38%) of respondents said that they heard the Ramayana at home with bedtime stories from elders of the family. In retrospect, it would have been advantageous to have asked participants which version of the Ramayana they were taught since they have such varying endings.

Books & Comics

Another common response (30%) was that they had read books and comic books growing up, mostly sourced by Amar Chitra Katha. Amar Chitra Katha is an Indian publisher of Indian comics and graphic novels, its comics are based on religious legends and epics, historical figures and biographies, folktales and cultural stories. In these comics, the storyline does not include Sita's tragic ending and concludes the comic with Sita and Rama living happily ever after.

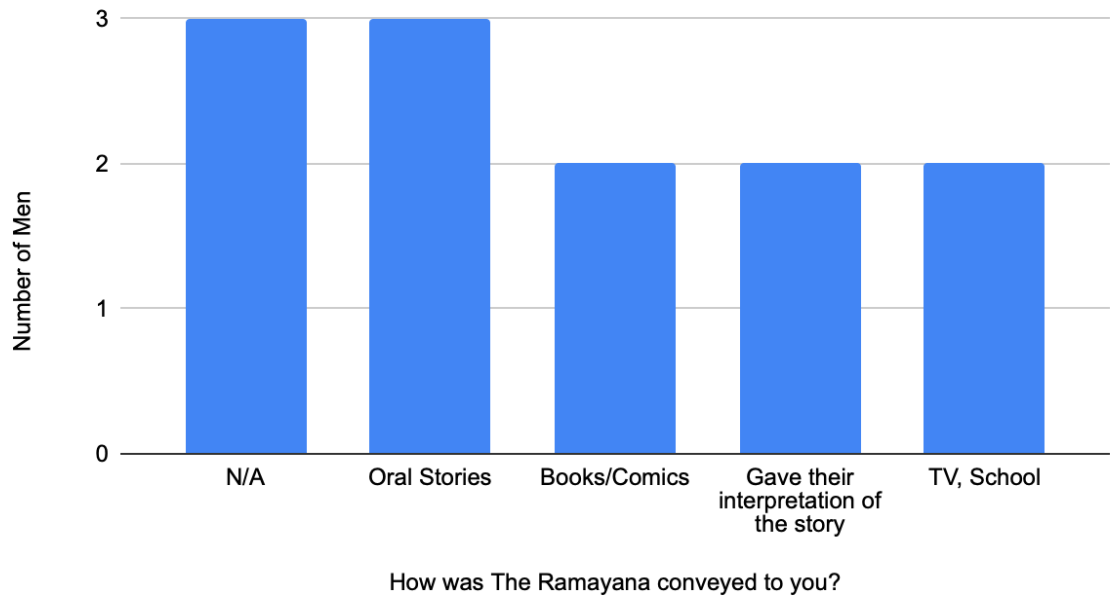
The trend in this graph indicates that older participants reported more involvement with the text in their day to day lives and suggested that it is becoming less relevant to younger generations.

Age x How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?

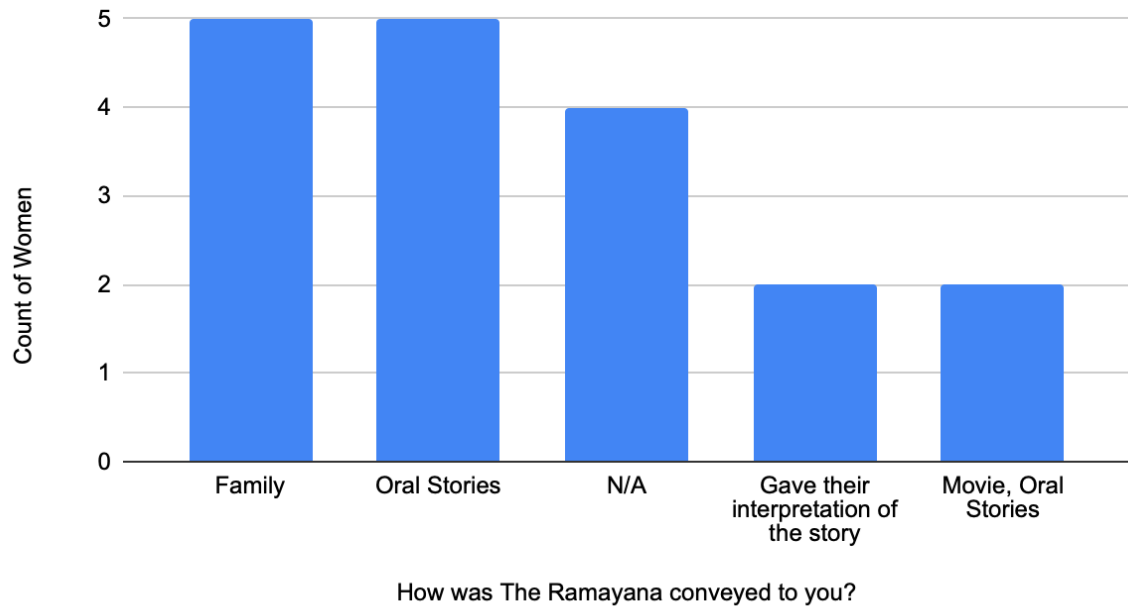


According to this data, it seems men were more likely to read about the Ramayana in books and comic books, see it on TV, or learn about it in school. Women, on the other hand, reported that it was more relevant in their families, oral stories they were told growing up, and in movies they watched.

Men x How was the Ramayana conveyed to you?



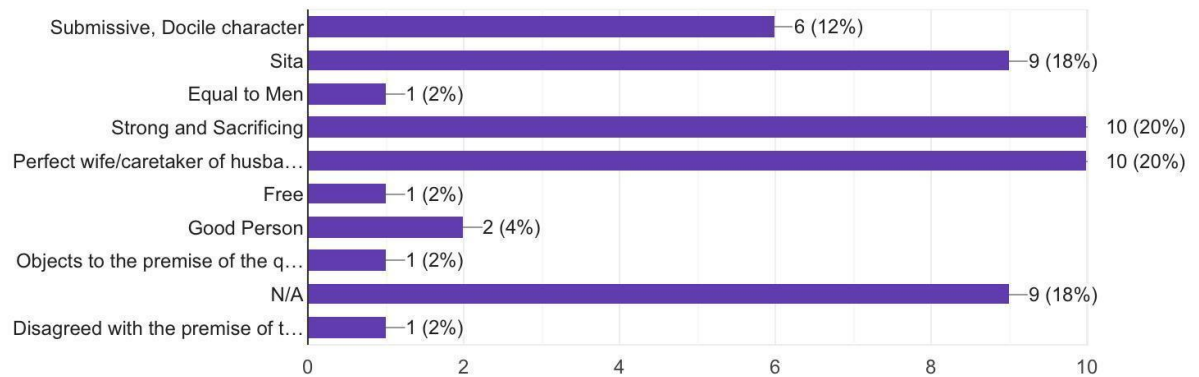
Women x How was the Ramayana conveyed to you?



When asked “According to your experience with the Ramayana, what is considered to be the ideal woman in India?” The themes that emerged were: the ideal woman is Sita, the ideal woman is a submissive and docile character, the ideal woman is a strong and sacrificing character, and the ideal woman is the perfect wife/caretaker.

According to your experience with the Ramayana, what is considered to be the ideal woman in India?

50 responses



Sita

Men and women of all ages identified Sita as the ideal woman in Indian society. This data supports my claim that Sita is the ideal woman according to Indian culture and aligns with research by Hess in 1999.

An additional source, The Sister Nivedita’s chapter The Cycle of the Ramayana in her book *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* even compares the Mary the Madonna of Christianity to Sita’s role in Hinduism and emphasizes the importance of the Ramayana as compared to the Mahabharata (another Hindu epic). She writes:

"[The] 'Cycle of the Ramayana' ... has for hundreds of years been the most important influence in shaping the characters and personalities of Hindu women. The Mahabharata may be regarded as the Indian national saga, but the Ramayana is rather the epic of Indian womanhood. Sita, to the Indian consciousness, is its central figure" (8).

"As Mary the Madonna to the women of Christendom, so is Sita, Queen of Ayodhya, to them of Hinduism. Hers is indeed a realm beyond the aspiration of merely earthly sovereigns. For she is the ideal of womanhood itself, and she wields undisputed sway, in millions of hearts, over the kingdoms of love and sorrow, and stainless womanly honor and pride (103).

Submissive & Docile

Another response was that the Ramayana portrays the ideal woman in Indian society to be a submissive and docile character. This idea that the perfect woman is submissive, docile, and sometimes even passive is reflective of the aforementioned gender stereotypes that affect women to this day and is reminiscent of a time when women were expected to obey their male counterparts. A modern day implication of this gender role is the stereotype that assertive women are unfeminine and are "bossy" or "bitches."

A very insightful quote from a survey respondent summarized the phenomena of women being viewed as the subservient sex as so:

"In some parts of India, [the] Ramayana has historically been interpreted as the lore that defines the ideal man and woman. In this context, it has also been said that Sita as a traditionalist desexualized subservient to husband is the ideal

woman, whose sole purpose is to obey and aggrandize him. This, however, might not have been the historical perception of Sita in India, rather the effect of Victorian morality (and much more), seeping into the Indian collective subconscious.”

This quote speaks to the influence modern day interpretations of the Ramayana have in gender roles to date. As well as the way that British colonization influenced those interpretations. The Victorian morality mentioned references the moral views of the middle class in nineteenth century Britain.

It is also worth mentioning that while this specific opinion from the survey mentions Sita as a desexualized woman, I have also analyzed abridgements of the Ramayana in which Sita is hypersexualized as well. For example, in *Sita Sings the Blues*, when Surpanakha entices King Ravana to capture Sita, she describes her as so with the following image below:

“She is the most beautiful woman in the world.

Her skin is fair like the lotus blossom.

Her eyes are like lotus pools.

Her hands are like, um, lotuses.

Her breasts are like big, round, firm, juicy lotuses!”

Strong & Sacrificing

The counterpart to the submissive and docile character trope is the notion that women are meant to be strong and sacrificing. In a modern day application, this applies especially to mothers who are likened to superheroes who can do it all - a full time job, childcare, cooking, housework, emotional labor. Some feminists recognise this as the patriarchal society's attempt to elude change and neglect the responsibility of unburdening women. Similarly put, a participant outlined the ideal woman as "Docile, dutiful, mentally strong, selfless, willingness to make sacrifices. All qualities that a patriarchal system demands." And goes to the extent of exemplifying that "[e]ven when Sita embraces liberation, her emancipation is likened to a *suicide*", but it is symbolic that Sita only pursued this liberation after "fulfilling her duties as a mother" to her sons Luv and Kush. This construct of women being strong and sacrificing might play a role in India's low divorce rates and high cost women pay for staying in unhappy, and oftentimes abusive, relationships.

The Perfect Wife/Caretaker

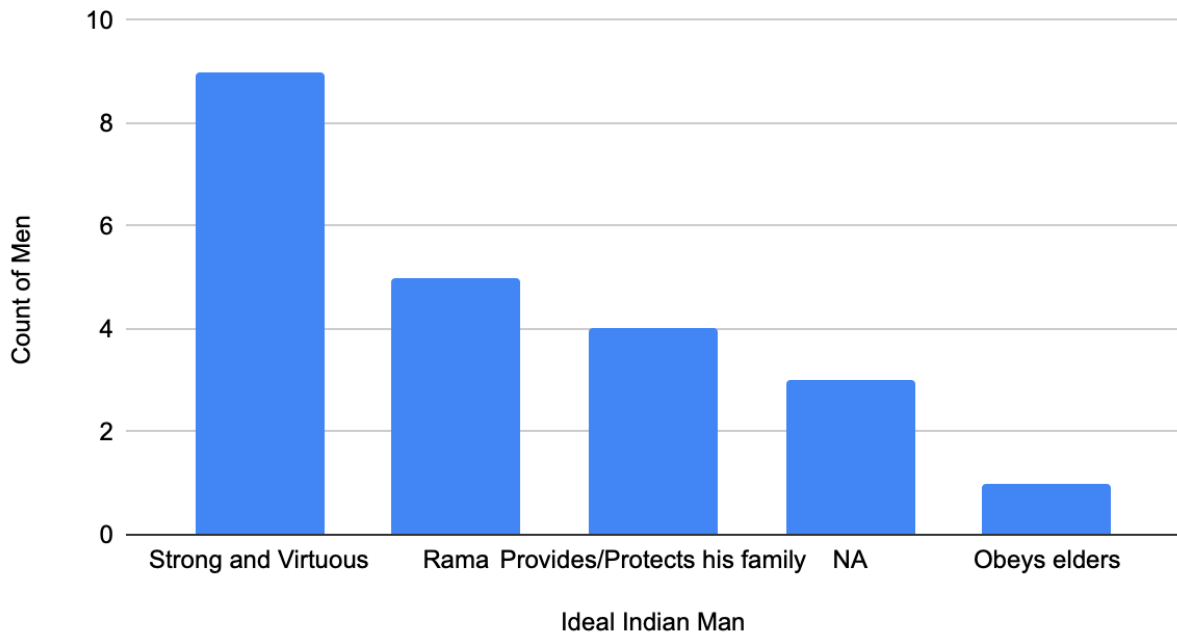
Another prevalent definition (20%), especially as seen by Hindu women (25%) according to the survey data, is that the ideal woman as depicted by the Ramayana is the perfect wife or caretaker. I say wife or caretaker because in the responses the two are almost used synonymously and are used to refer to stereotypical responsibilities of a woman according to gender roles which, to reiterate, involve primarily domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, taking care of the family elders, emotional labor, and these days an additional forty hour a week job outside of the house too. When in actuality being someone's wife or married should not automatically equate to a life of domestic work. A common stereotype that dictates this gender norm is that women are predisposed to being "natural nurturers". This gender norm claims

women are biologically wired to be more empathetic, caring, and compassionate, and therefore behaving with those characteristics is feminine.

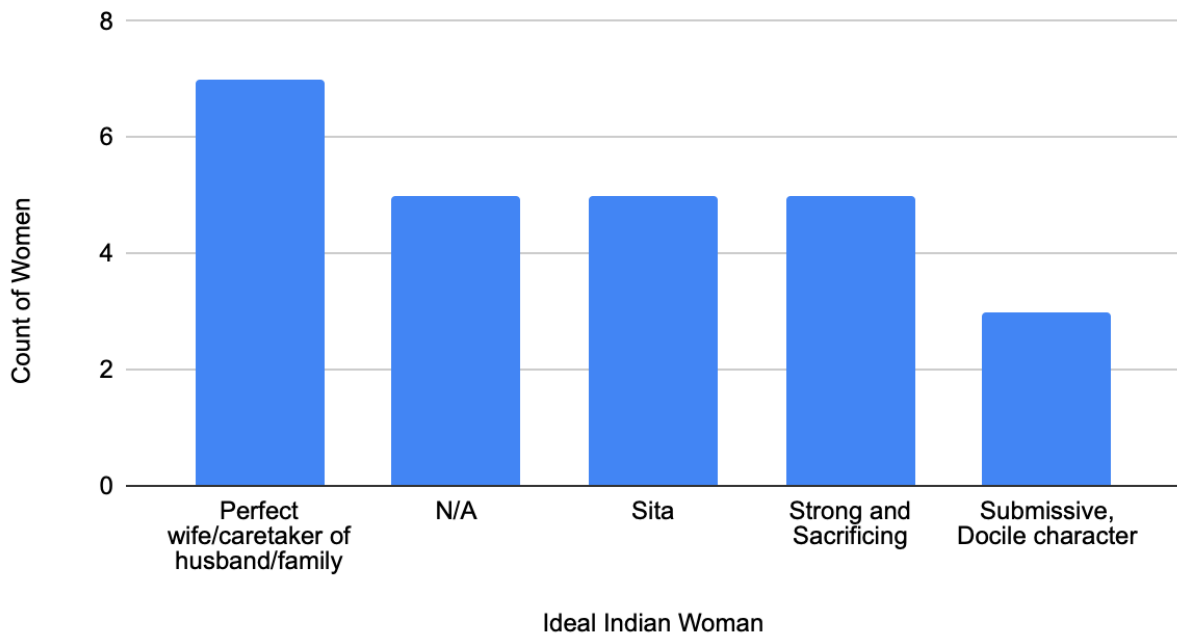
Older participants tended to either disagree with the premise of the question or refuse to respond regarding the ideal woman. Whereas more middle aged to young adults consider the ideal woman to be free, strong and sacrificing, equal to man, submissive and domicile, the perfect wife/caretaker, and a good person. Perhaps this is because older generations have been less exposed to modern feminism and have not learned to examine sexism and gender inequality.

From their experience with the Ramayana text, men who took the survey said the ideal woman is first and foremost strong and sacrificing (26%), then commonly associated with general attributes of Sita (21%), and finally either the perfect wife/caretaker (15.8%) or a submissive docile character (15.8%). Meanwhile women reported their impression of the perfect woman was firstly the perfect wife/caretaker (28%), then either associated with Sita in general (20%) or strong and sacrificing (20%), and lastly a submissive docile character (12%).

Men x Ideal Indian Man



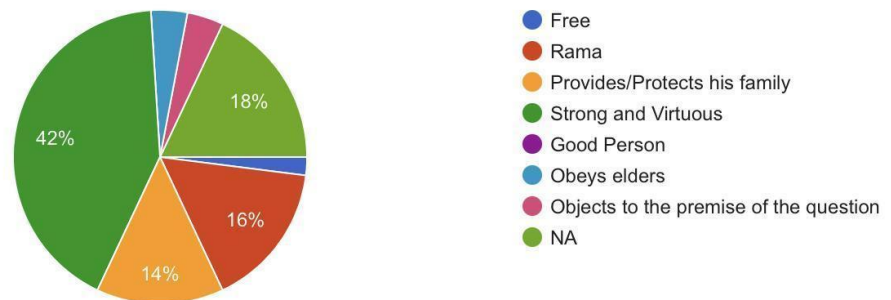
Women x Ideal Indian Woman



In my survey, I also asked respondents what they believe the ideal man is in India according to the Ramayana. Their responses could be grouped into three sentiments: the ideal man is Rama, the ideal man provides and protects, and the ideal man is strong and virtuous.

According to your experience with the Ramayana, what is considered to be the ideal man in India?

50 responses



Rama

The sheer number of people that simply state “Rama” in response to what they believe is the ideal Indian man is indicative of a general consensus that the Ramayana defines the ideal man in Indian society. Rama is known as Maryada Purushottam in Hinduism. This is a Sanskrit phrase, “Maryada” translates to “honor and righteousness”, and “Purushottam” translates to “the supreme man”. In its entirety the phrase refers to “the man who is supreme in honor”. Swami Vivekananda, a notorious modern day Indian Hindu monk and philosopher, professed Rama as “the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband and above all, the ideal king”.

This data supports the claim I made prior to conducting the survey regarding how Indians

(Hindus especially) define what it means to behave in accordance with their Indian culture. A respondent of the survey expressed it like so:

“...in some parts of India, [the] Ramayana has historically been interpreted as the lore that defines the ideal man and woman. In this context, Ram is fetishized as the uber-masculine ideal persona who does not show pain and puts state and responsibility before his wife (which I suppose he would equate with property).”

Provides & Protects

The suggestion that the ideal man in Indian society is one who provides and protects is an archetype of gender norms and supports my assertion that men are subject to gender norms influenced by the Ramayana. Rama is strongly associated with protecting because he is an incarnation of Vishnu, the God of Protection.

Some authors go to the extent of arguing that the “...conceptions of what constitutes a “real man” have been common and consistent through time and around the world. A distinct code of manhood has not only been part of nearly every society on earth — whether agricultural or urban, premodern or advanced, patriarchal or relatively egalitarian — these codes invariably contain the same three imperatives; a male who aspires to be a man must protect, procreate, and provide” as mentioned by the *Art of Manliness* which cites Dr. David D. Gilmore’s *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* published in 1991. In contrary to such postulations, taking into account our present day efforts to be more inclusive and more equitable than our yesteryears, I can not help but wonder: Where do gay men fit into this definition of manhood? What about men with disabilities? Who is benefiting from gatekeeping manhood?

Strong & Virtuous

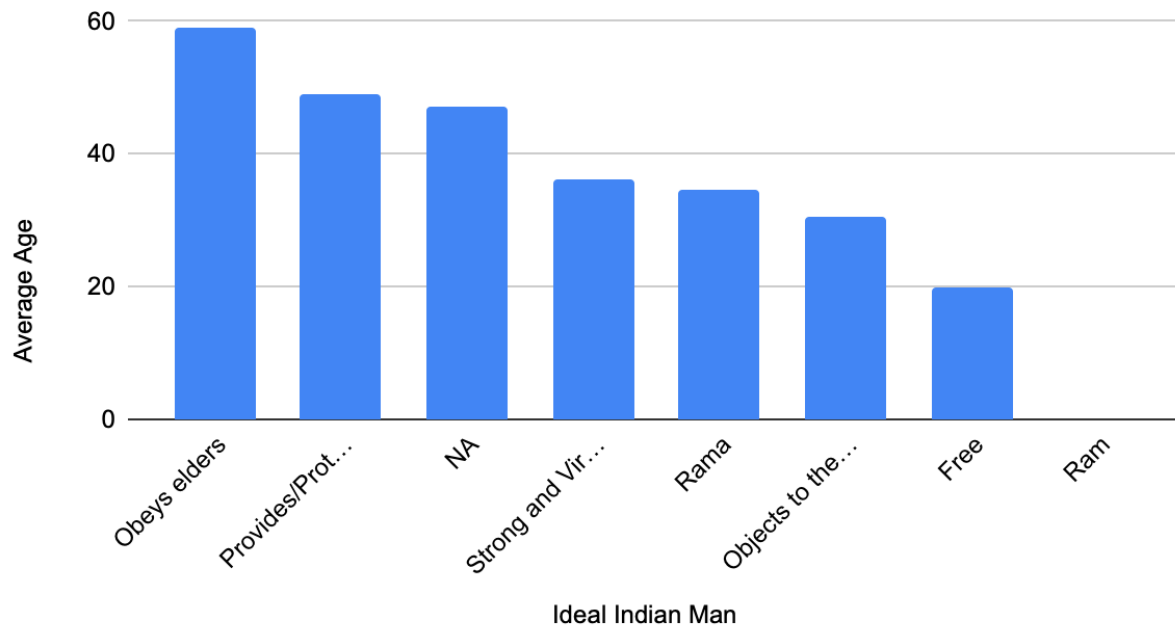
A complementary norm associated with gender roles imposed on men is that they must be strong and virtuous. This belief is established during childhood with seemingly innocent remarks such as “boys do not cry”, or later on when they are told “take it like a man”, and even the offensive “do not be such a girl”. Not only can such destructive phrases stifle emotional development, it also puts additional pressure on young boys to prove their masculinity, according to the American Psychological Association in 2016. Ultimately, such conceptions of manhood and masculinity are detrimental to men and women alike.

Ironically, depending on how the story is told, one could also make an argument that Ram was an emotional, tender, and selfless character. There is evidence in Valmiki’s original text in which four chapters are devoted to Ram’s intense separation from Sita and complete despondency until his brother Lakshman encourages him to have hope. This fact directly contradicts the chauvinistic hero who prioritizes his reputation over his wife that is often portrayed in modern abridgements of the text. For example, in *Sita Sings the Blues*, Rama is likened to a modern day cold hearted ex-boyfriend who breaks up with his significant other in an email with the subject line “DUMPSVILLE” with the message “DON’T COME BACK”.

Furthermore, the conviction that men must be virtuous begs the questions: What virtues? Where are these virtues from and how are they being taught? I argue that the Ramayana outlines the virtues many Indian men choose to act with. And while the original text of the Ramayana does indeed outline Hindu virtues and principles, if the story being told puts an emphasis on domestic violence or nationalism then that is the lesson most will learn.

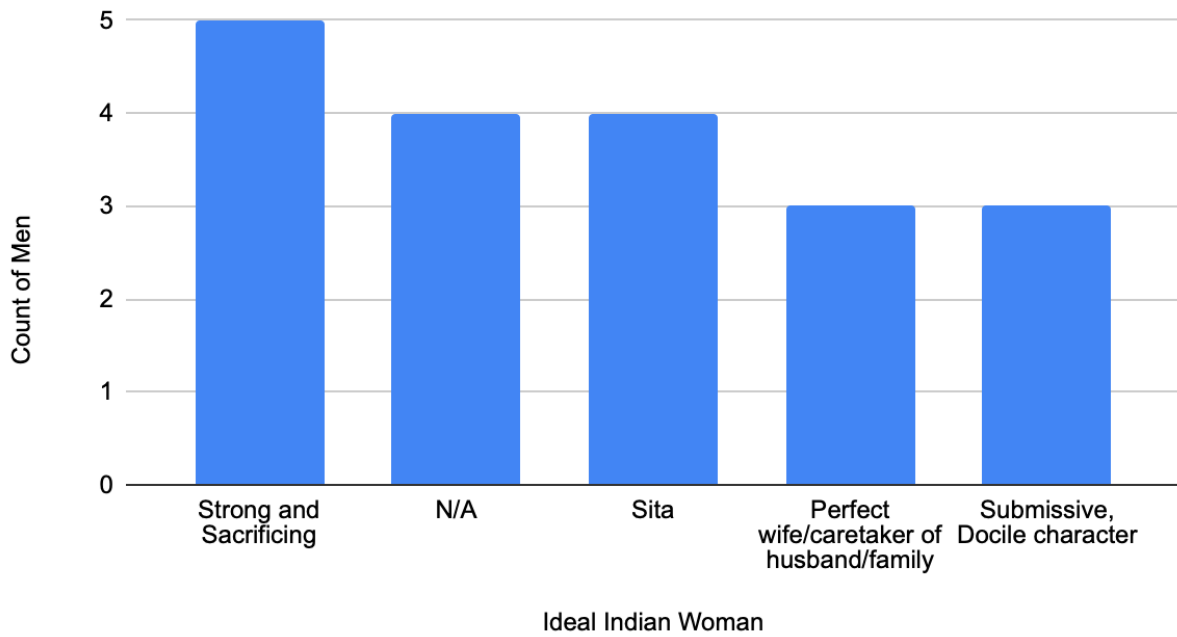
Older participants believe that the ideal man would obey his elders, whereas younger participants associate the ideal man with freedom and the general character of Rama.

Age x Ideal Indian Man

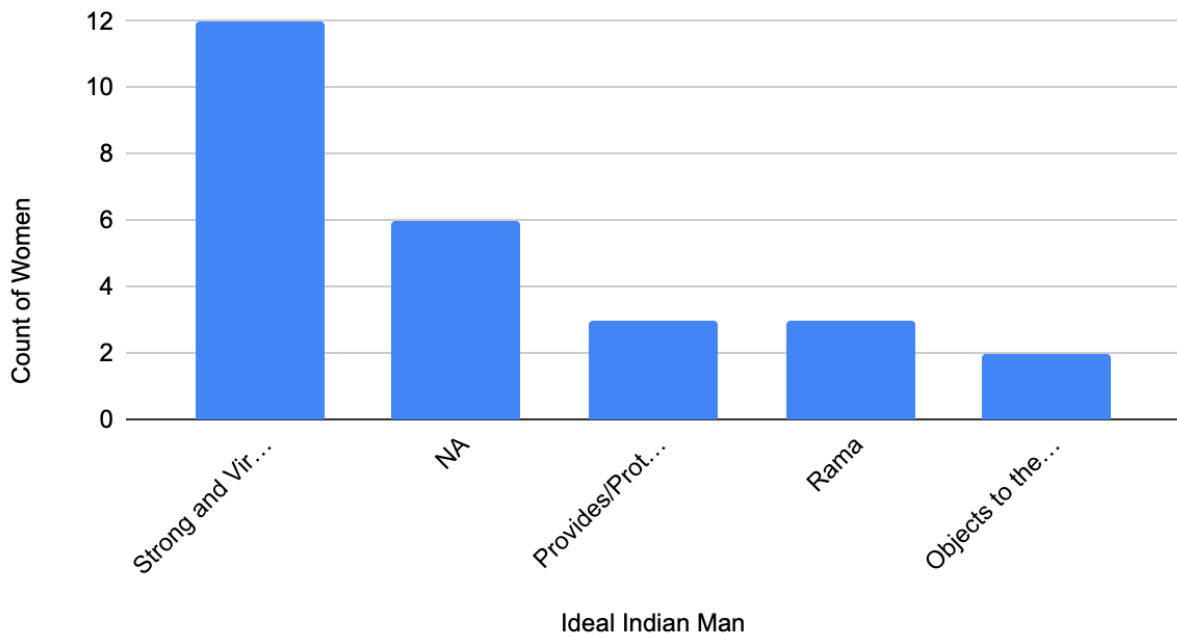


Most men in this dataset view the ideal man as a man who is firstly strong and virtuous, secondly someone who is generally associated with Rama, then one who provides and protects his family, and lastly obeys his elders. Similarly, the women who took the same survey reported that the ideal man is firstly strong and virtuous, then someone who is generally like Rama, or provides and protects his family.

Men x Ideal Indian Woman



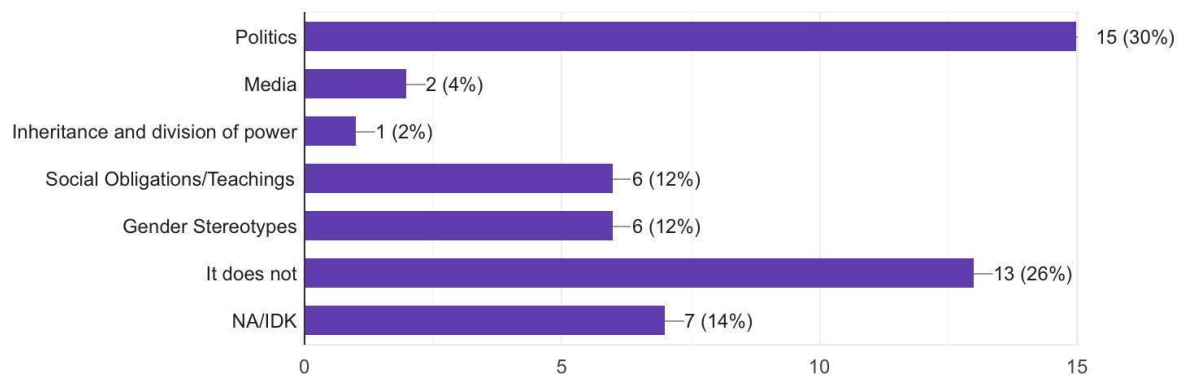
Women x Ideal Indian Man



The last question of my survey asked participants how the Ramayana influences today's world and provided examples of how the Ramayana might be relevant in India. In the results that followed I was able to determine that the respondents experience or believe there is influence of the Ramayana in politics, in social obligations and teachings, and in gender stereotypes.

How does the Ramayana influence today's world? (ie Politics, Media, etc.)

50 responses



Politics

A very common response was politics in regard to the Bharatiya Janata Party's actions and the Hindu Muslim divide post Partition. A survey response depicted the phenomena of Ramayana's role in Indian politics as such:

"With the rise of right ideologues in India, it perhaps influences in creating a rhetoric that Ram is what has historically defined Hinduism, which is factually false. However such an establishment allows for a construct of Hinduism which can posture as the Abrahamic religions which have classically celebrated only one prophet/god/important individual, something that Pagan religions and Hinduism have not had. This helps legitimize the

violence imparted by the Indian state on the poor and the marginalized, and construct a Hindu-ized definition of India that is antithetical to the original founding principles of India from a century ago, that were pluralist, secularist, liberal and socialist, at least ideologically, if not in practice. The propagandization of the celebration of Ramayana by the Indian State today only aids and abets in the killing of the ideology that was India."

Social Obligations & Teachings

Social obligations refer to the responsibilities a society member takes on as imposed by society and the ethical framework of collectivist society that prioritizes the good of the community over the individual. I received much feedback that the Ramayana's most prominent role in Indian society is impacted in concepts that can be considered social obligations and teachings, such as virtues, doing the "right" thing, and fulfilling one's dharma or responsibilities. The Ramayana and Mahabharatha collectively teach morals, ethics, and values of life and are often formatted as a child -friendly educational medium to demonstrate these teachings. While there are some reports of these epics being included in school syllabi, it remains a topic of controversy - especially when delineating between their merit as historical events or literary texts.

Gender Stereotypes

There was also a large consensus that the Ramayana is of significance to gender stereotypes, gender norms, and sexism. To this day, Indian society is still patriarchal. There historically have been rights denied to women on the basis of sex and continues to be laws based on out right patriarchal ideology. But there also exists a more subtle expression of patriarchy through symbolism via texts such as the Ramayana, which in many abridgments give the

messages of the inferiority of women through legends that highlight the self-sacrificing pure image of women. As Sivakumar and Manimekalai mention in *Masculinity and Challenges for Women in Indian Culture*, women are trained not to challenge discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation at various levels in their system and as a result these norms restrict women from having aspirations beyond marriage. Sivakumar and Manimekalai also point out that gender norms for men are constructed around masculinity and a man's sense of self hinges on his ability to control women. For example, until his daughter is married, her protection and chastity are considered as a mark of the father's honor and masculinity.

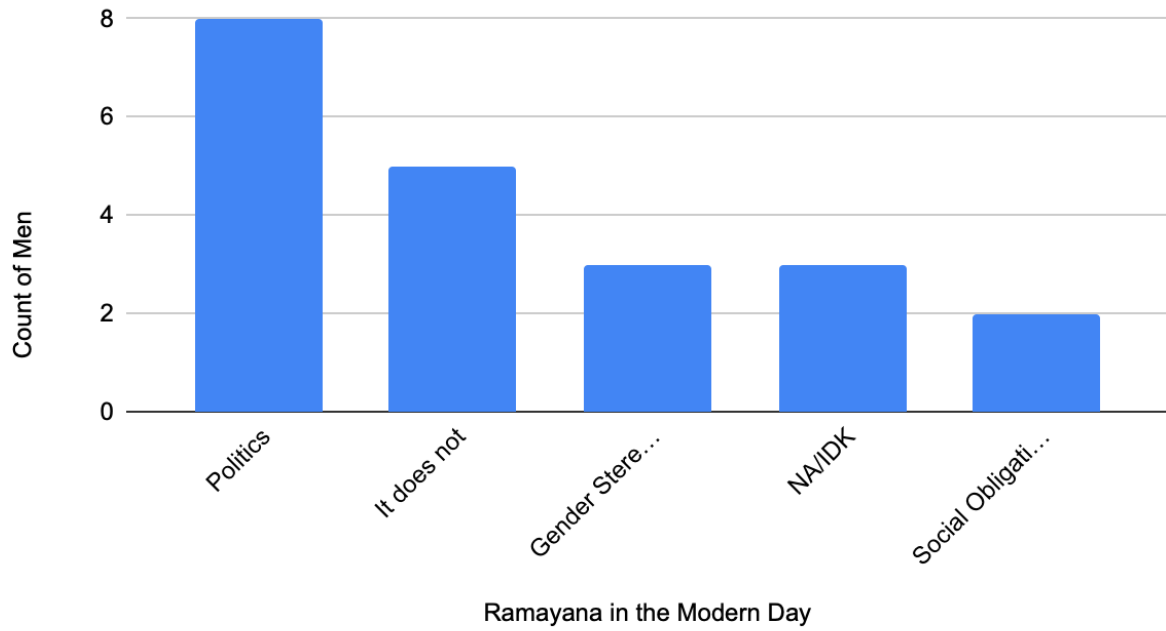
One respondent describes their sentiment about the situation below:

“...I feel like the Ramayana influences today's roles in society like the role one has to, as a “female,” play in terms of being a wife, mother, daughter etc. The media also narrates their stories in a way that is patriarchal, for example rape [cases]. It will always be that the woman dressed a certain way and way out after dark on her own, not that the man, or whoever the perpetrator is, was nasty, had no sense and was looking to cause trouble. Our media twists every story, but also we have a government and system that is so traditional that the media is left with no choice, I feel, because when you post a story that the government doesn't like, they come after you. Our society is so misconstrued and trapped in a certain way.”

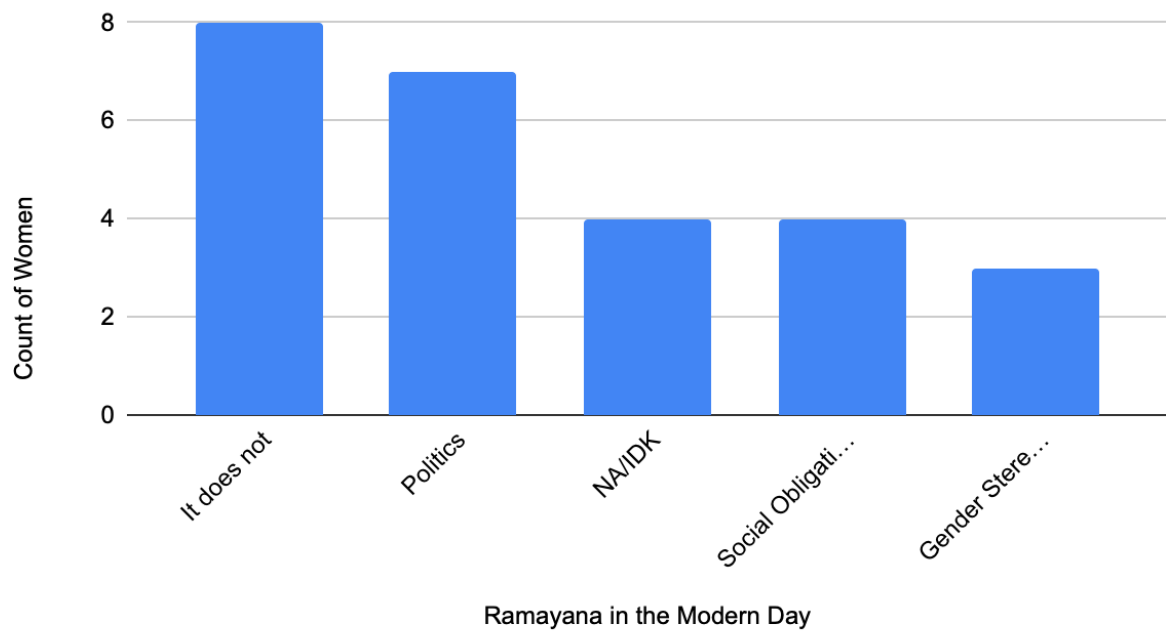
In my survey findings, women were more likely to believe that the Ramayana does not play a role in our modern day society. Furthermore, more men believed that the Ramayana has an

effect on present day politics and gender stereotypes, while women reported the text to be more relevant in social obligations.

Men x Ramayana in the Modern Day



Women x Ramayana in the Modern Day



Limitations

In order to collect more valid data to draw conclusions from, it would have been advantageous to gather data from a more even spread of ages and a proportionate male to female ratio surveyed. I sent my survey to local Indian associations and clubs at nearby colleges, posted it on my private facebook account, and sent it to my friends and family members who identify as Indian and Indian American asking them to forward it to their friends and family as well. Unfortunately the “reach” of my survey was limited to my personal sphere of influence which not only skews the data towards feminist, educated, Indian Americans like myself, it also has the potential of hindering people’s perhaps more controversial opinions due to their personal relationship with me despite the anonymity of the survey. I also limited the number of participants to fifty surveys for the sake of feasibility, but a more thorough survey would have collected a plethora more data than I have in this research project. According to statisticians, the ideal sample size is typically between one hundred and one thousand, or ten percent of the population if this number is lesser.

Future research should consider rephrasing the question “What is your current citizenship status?” to ask “Were you raised in or outside of India as a child?”. A lot of respondents had confusion about this question or were made uncomfortable by it. At this time of international politics, immigration is an especially sensitive topic and I think asking where they were raised is much more succinct to my purpose of asking what their citizenship is. I originally wanted to compare whether those who were raised within the country and those whose families had emigrated had similarities or differences when it came to their source of the Ramayana, their

opinion of it, and how it impacted their image of India. Having better insight into this data might lead to other interesting trends to research into with great potential.

In future research, I would offer options as to “How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?” rather than making the question open-ended as I did in my original survey. Doing so would make the results easier to read and sort for myself while analyzing the data but also avoids any confusion some respondents had about the question. For example, there were several respondents who answered this specific question with a simple “yes” or “no” which does not quite answer the question. Hence there is a certain margin of error in my data, which is acceptable as it is not very significant. While it is indicative that including options for the respondent to select might be considered somewhat leading if the respondents are limited to an abbreviated list, I believe offering an additional space with “Other” as an option would remedy this situation. It could also be worthwhile to either conduct interviews in addition to my survey data or in place of it as interviews may give me a deeper understanding to these questions and individual responses than a survey can with the use of follow up questions and the opportunity to ask for clarification.

While this paper chose to focus on the portrayal of Ram and Sita as the ideal man and woman in Indian society, an alternate direction that could potentially be just as insightful to the field of Gender and Women’s Studies is by analyzing the different women of the original text. To name a few that I have come across in my research, some characters to analyze include Manthara, Swayamprabha, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, and Urmila. Not only is their portrayal of interest, but oftentimes their inclusion is as well. Take Sita’s sister Urmila for example, she is hardly mentioned in most abridgements and even where her name does appear there are

discrepancies of her character. In some texts, Urmila is described as not caring for marriage and considering it a “social custom she has to follow, more than she wants to seek for a suitor she wanted to seek for knowledge like her father who was well versed with all shastras (works of scripture) and being called as Rajasri (royalty)”. In other versions of Ramayana Urmila is portrayed as a passive character who is famous for the sleep she endures on her husband Lakshman’s behalf so that he may protect Rama wholeheartedly. Including a character who has endeavors beyond marriage and pursues marriage could conceivably influence Indian society to be inclusive of women who do not aspire to be traditional wives or mothers and be an inspiration to young women who find themselves currently outcast from the standard norm.

A more extensive research project might include the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. The Mahabharata is another ancient Hindu epic which is more recent and complex. And the Bhagavad Gita is a single episode of the Mahabharata that is considered ancient Hindu scripture. In this specific chapter a dialogue takes place between Prince Arjun and Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. This conversation takes place on the brink of battle as they discuss the morality of war and Krishna explains to Arjun the philosophical ideas that outline Hinduism. In response to a question about the relevance of the Ramayana in modern Indian society, the following was suggested by a respondent who felt that these texts more aptly affected Hindu culture:

“In my opinion, Ramayana is anachronistic and doesn’t hold much relevance today. A much more realistic depiction of today’s society and mindset would be the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita outlines general principles about life and it’s a single chapter in the epic Mahabharata.”

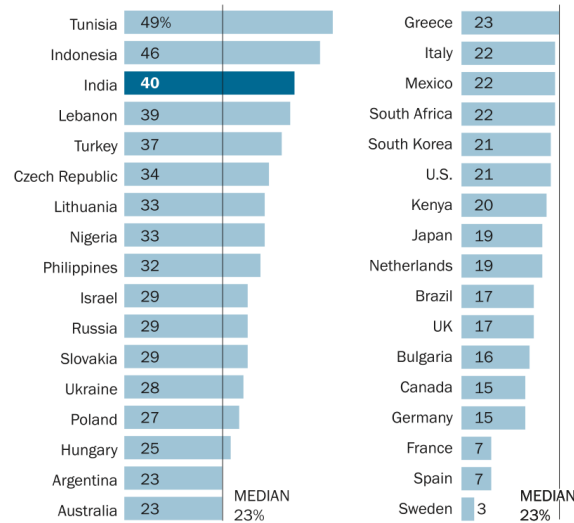
Conclusion

Religion may indeed be the opiate of the masses (Marx, 1843), but when there is so much complexity and intersectionality in a “religion” such as in the case of Hinduism, British tactics altered the religion by changing the narrative it is founded upon. By attempting to understand pre-modern Hindu texts and how they determined societal practices and norms in India for centuries to come help us understand the origins of gender conflict in our country, what affect colonization has had, and perhaps guide a way to reach gender equality.

Appendix

Four-in-ten Indians say marriage with traditional gender roles is more satisfying

% of adults who say a marriage is more satisfying if the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children



Note: Respondents were asked, "What kind of marriage do you think is the more satisfying way of life? One where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children OR One where the husband and wife both have jobs and together take care of the house and children?" The two options were randomized.

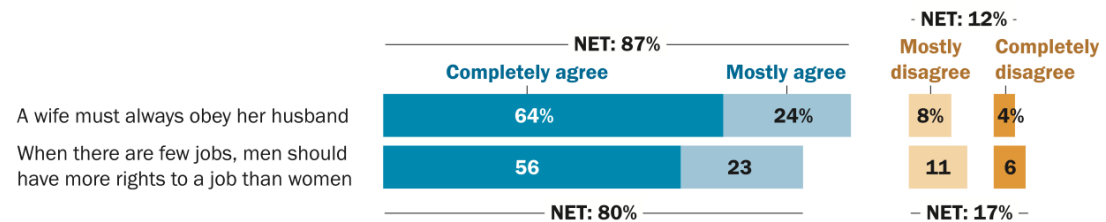
Source: 2019 Global Attitudes Survey.

"How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Indians overwhelmingly agree with the notion that wives should obey husbands

% of Indian adults who agree/disagree with the following statements



Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown. Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. See Methodology for details.

"How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Demographics of Survey Participants

Survey Response	Age	Gender	Citizenship	Are you religious?	Are you Hindu?	Do you come from a Hindu family?	Have you been told the Ramayana?
1	27	Male	Non-immigrant	Yes	No	No	Yes
2	22	Male	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	50	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	47	Female	US Citizen	Yes	No	No	Yes
5	38	Male	India	Maybe	Yes	Yes	No
6	23	Female	Not living in US	Spiritual	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	40	Male	Immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	29	Male	Non Immigrant	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	28	Female	Immigrant	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
10	42	Female	Indian	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	19	Female	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	No
12	20	Female	US Citizen	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Maybe
13	22	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	56	Female	US Citizen	No	No	Yes	Yes
15	56	Female	Indian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
16	49	Male	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	23	Male	Immigrant	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
18	68	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
19	65	Male	US Citizen	No	Yes	Maybe	Yes
20	42	Female	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
21	21	Male	Immigrant	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
22	48	Male	US Citizen	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
23	24	Male	Indian	Yes	No	No	Yes
24	45	Female	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
25	44	Female	Immigrant	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
26	22	Female	Indian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
27	29	Male	Non immigrant	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
28	54	Female	US Citizen	No	Maybe	Yes	Maybe
29	26	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maybe

Survey Response	Age	Gender	Citizenship	Are you religious?	Are you Hindu?	Do you come from a Hindu family?	Have you been told the Ramayana?
30	37	Female	Immigrant	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
31	77	Male	Indian	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
32	50	Male	Indian Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
33	25	Male	US Citizen	No	Maybe	Yes	No
34	24	Male	Immigrant	Yes	No	No	Yes
35	50	Female	Indian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
36	29	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
37	28	Male	Immigrant	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
38	32	Female	Immigrant	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
39	23	Female	India	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
40	60	Male	NA	NA	Yes	Yes	No
41	58	Female	NA	Yes	No	No	Yes
42	54	Female	US Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
43	26	Male	Prefer not to say	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
44	58	Female	Prefer not to say	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
45	57	Female	US Citizen	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
46	58	Male	Indian	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
47	55	Female	US Citizen	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
48	35	Male	Indian Citizen	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
49	56	Female	Not a US citizen	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes
50	29	Male	Prefer not to say	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

My survey, which would last between ten to fifteen minutes, consists of the following questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify yourself as?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other: _____
 - d. Prefer not to respond
2. What is your citizenship status?
 - a. US citizen
 - b. Indian citizen
 - c. Other: _____
 - d. Prefer not to respond
3. Do you consider yourself to be religious? Yes or No
4. Were you raised to be a Hindu?

Yes or No
5. Do you come from a Hindu family, even if not practicing? Yes or No
6. How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?

According to your experience with the Ramayana...
7. What is considered to be the ideal woman in India?
8. What is considered to be the ideal man in India?
9. How was the story of the Ramayana conveyed to you?
10. In what contexts do you see the Ramayana today?

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