

The Marianna McJimsey Award Winning Paper: Countless Ramayanas: Language and Cosmopolitan Belonging in a South Asian Epic

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Abstract: The Kiski Kahani project in Pune, India, is a not-for-profit program that compiles stories of the Ramayana, a South Asian epic, and publishes them in English. Kiski Kahani's ideology rejects the Hindu nationalist master narrative of the Ramayana, and privileges an emerging genre that consists of fragmentary, improvised stories of the epics. As a socially-grounded language practice, Kiski Kahani's retellings are rooted in pan-Indian, cosmopolitan modalities that index a sense of belonging to a pluricultural nation: the use of English rather than Hindi or Marathi, and a curation of stories from diverse Indian regions and languages.

Keywords India; Maharashtra; Ramayana; language; cosmopolitanism; genre and intertextuality

INTRODUCTION: WHOSE RAMAYANA?

The stories of the Ramayana are still alive in India. Although modern textual scholars agree that the epic was first composed between 400 B.C.E. and 4th century C.E. (Brockington 1998, 26-27), the Ramayana finds its way to countless channels of transmission even in contemporary urban India: TV series, comic books, plays, novels, popular cinema, people's names, and figures of speech. Among their innumerable retellings, Ramayana stories are alternately expressed as a battle between Rama, a god incarnated as a king on Earth, and Ravana, the demon king; as a story of love and devotion between Rama and Sita, his wife; and as a story of friendship between two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, and Hanuman, a simian god. Because Ramayana stories are told so variously and through so many channels, people who grew up with these narratives modify, extend, interrupt, question, criticize, forget, and remember them in countless different ways.

Since the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1980s, questioning and retelling the Ramayana has become politically charged. Right wing, Hindu nationalist movements in India evoke the Ramayana as an exclusively Hindu text and as a sacred, historical narrative in religious and political debates. In 1992, Hindu nationalist activists demolished the Babri Mosque, which was built over the supposed ruins of Lord Rama's birthplace in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, and triggered communal riots that killed thousands of Muslims and Hindus across India. In 2011, an academic committee at Delhi University removed an essay written by A.K. Ramanujan, a renowned Indian-American folklorist, poet, and intellectual,

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from the university's undergraduate history syllabus. The Akhil Bharatiya Vishwa Parishad (ABVP), a Hindu nationalist student organization, deemed Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas" (1991), which discusses the diversity of Ramayana stories in South and Southeast Asia, offensive towards the divine characters of the epic.¹ In the essay, Ramanujan describes Hanuman, a deity worshipped throughout the subcontinent, as a "ladies' man" in the Thai story (44), while Sita, often the Hindu paragon of fidelity, is depicted among the indigenous Santals of central India as Rama's unfaithful wife (44).

Hindu nationalists allow only a single version of the Ramayana stories to be discussed in the public sphere: one that elevates the sacredness of Hindu divinities, especially Rama, beyond questioning. However, with all the debates surrounding the idea of a "proper" and "true" Ramayana, *which* Ramayana is being talked about, and *how* is the Ramayana debated in modern India? While I acknowledge that the Ramayana has been used to muster sectarian violence and to construct a vision of Hindu superiority by right wing, Hindu nationalist interest groups, I emphasize that retellings of the epic can resist such hegemonic narratives. Kiski Kahani, a Hindi phrase which means "Whose story?," is a not-for-profit public program in Pune, Maharashtra, that gathered little-known and emerging retellings of the Ramayana and circulated them through printed pamphlets and website posts throughout 2012 and the first half of 2013. This study, written after two months of ethnographic fieldwork, explains how Kiski Kahani's retellings of the Ramayana illustrate ways of belonging to a cosmopolitan, pluricultural Indian nation.

LANGUAGE, INTERTEXTUALITY, AND PERFORMANCE

Understanding the cultural significance of Ramayana stories requires understanding how a story's meaning comes from a history of interrelated narratives, or, in Becker's (1996) words, "prior texts." A retelling of the Ramayana, in other words, is not a genealogical ancestor to subsequent retellings; rather, because of the fluidity of the epic genre, retellings represent historically situated crystallizations of stories from a common pool of narratives (Doniger 1988, Doniger O'Flaherty 1991, Narayan 1989, Ramanujan 1991, Richman 1991). The creation of relationships between texts, or intertextuality, explains how any particular text is created from existing language practices and socially positioned (Bauman and Briggs 1992, Bauman 2004). Simply "counting" texts as discrete units does not allow us to see how diversity across Ramayana stories illuminates their social contexts. One must pay attention to the narratives in context.

In this paper, I use concepts of "speech events" and "ethnography of speaking" from the field of linguistic anthropology that emphasize socially grounded understandings of speech and language (Bauman and Briggs 1992, Hymes 1964). The practice of using language and language styles invites commentaries on the practice itself, or metapragmatic commentaries. I draw upon the concept of metapragmatic awareness, which is the "ability that speakers have to talk about the pragmatics of their language use" (Silverstein 1981, as cited in Duranti 2009, 16). In such "talk about talk," we find socially situated understandings about the use of language and language styles. Attention to collective beliefs about language has given rise to contemporary scholarship on language ideology, which focuses on the importance of bridging everyday speech-events with their macrosociological consequences (Irvine and Gal 2009, Kroskrity 2000, Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). In this study, I draw upon common sense ideas about Marathi, Hindi, and English as languages that my interlocutors use in their daily speech and writing. The choice of language, language variety, or language register is an element of communication that indexes social meaning.

Indexical relationships between language use and communities of practice, however, do

not form a linear correspondence. Against Anderson's (1983) notion of organized linguistic unity as the basis of imagined nationhood, scholarship on language ideology disputes a one-to-one relationship between language and identity. Instead, language ideology scholarship emphasizes the empirically multilingual and heteroglossic character of speech communities (Irvine and Gal 2009). In South Asia, and in southern India in particular, the choice of language and language registers plays a major role in forming ethnic identities and indexing different audiences (Bate 2009, Mitchell 2009). Within a communicative practice, such as the retelling of Ramayana stories, ethnolinguistic associations depend on relationships between textual units, the performer of the text, the audience, and the "nonliterary" interpretive frames of performance surrounding the text (Bauman 1984, Bauman and Briggs 1992, Bauman 2004, Goffman 1974). However, because "texts" of the Ramayana stories are interrelated, retellers and performers are not confined to producing new texts; rather, they constitute the audience of retellings, or "consumers" of the stories, as well.

In this study, critical attitudes towards the hegemonic, Hindu nationalist interpretations of the Ramayana that govern the literary and performative elements of a retelling are key in understanding the epic's different audiences. Turner's (1986) concept of performative reflexivity illustrates that performances of these narratives are not mere reflections of authority, but are often commentaries on dominant sociopolitical ideologies. Performers of a story do not merely reflect a text, but they "turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles...and other sociocultural components" (Turner 1986, 24). Therefore, to recognize the agency of retellers of the Ramayana stories as performers and critics, I emphasize the life histories and ideological configurations of my interlocutors that socially situate their textual productions.

BELONGING AND COSMOPOLITANISM IN MAHARASHTRA

In the Indian state of Maharashtra, where most of Kiski Kahani's activities are conducted, Ramayana stories are situated at an intersection between ethnoregional and national imaginings. Hindu nationalist and Maharashtrian, Marathi-speaking regionalist movements, produce narratives of mytho-historical heroic figures, such as those of Rama and Shivaji, which serve as a symbol of ethnolinguistic, caste, and religious allegiances (Laine 2003; Hansen 2001, 20-22). Thus, the presence of caste, language, ethnic, and religious diversities demands attention in the case of the heterogeneous audience who are listeners of Kiski Kahani's Ramayana stories. In mediating these tensions between the particular against the universal, and the plural against the exclusivist, concepts of vernacular cosmopolitanism accommodate culturally committed loyalties combined with translocal, deterritorialized senses of belonging (Bhabha 1996; Pollock et al. 2000; Werbner 2008, 14). My argument contextualizes cosmopolitanism not as a "destination" for a cultural trajectory, but as a way of becoming, doing, rehearsing, and performing culture from a situated historical conjuncture.

PLACING LANGUAGES IN PUNE

In October 2011, the Center for Open Society (COS), the public outreach section of a nonprofit organization, received a grant from a European development agency for the Kiski Kahani project to be conducted throughout 2012.² COS operates out of a converted apartment in the Erandwane neighborhood in the western half of Pune, which is predominantly upper-middle class and Marathi-speaking. The apartment complex is typical of the so-called "housing societies" in major Indian cities, where two or three apartment buildings housing about twelve nuclear families each are located in a walled compound. At COS's compound,

a guard, or “watchman,” is present throughout the day, paying attention to passersby and cricket-playing children while reading a copy of *Sakal*, Pune’s most popular Marathi daily. Upstairs, in a small, two-room library, COS’s subscription to six English-language newspapers nourishes thirsty young minds from nearby universities, and watching jeans-clad youth immersed in reading a Hindi or Marathi book is an exception rather than the norm.

About 300 meters away towards the main road, a “thali” or full-service restaurant describes its cuisine as authentically Maharashtrian and provides only menus printed in Marathi, yet, just across the road, a stall that serves noodles and sandwiches for students is run by a couple who always speaks in Hindi to their multiethnic customers. An article in the *Pune Mirror*, an English-language daily newspaper, describes the rapid change in Senapati Bapat Road, an adjacent neighborhood, from a residential district to a commercial area in terms of a language shift: “Now, you hardly hear people speak Marathi around here” (July 12, 2012). The city’s geography evokes ethnolinguistic associations, especially with the other, eastern half of Pune housing an established population of Urdu-speaking Muslims, Konkani-speaking Goan Catholics, and Gujarati-speaking Parsis in the neighborhoods surrounding the former British military cantonment area (Hansen 2005).

Pune is home to approximately five million people, and is considered the cultural heart of Maharashtrian, Marathi-speaking culture (Laine 2003). However, the geographical boundaries of Maharashtra were defined only in 1960 after the state of Bombay was divided along linguistic lines. Maharashtra, which contains a majority of Marathi speakers, was separated from Gujarat, a state with a Gujarati-speaking majority, although linguistic allegiances are fluid and diverse even within the present-day state boundaries (Laine 2003, 10). Pune asserts itself as a city that speaks Marathi, a Maharashtrian language. Street signs, local newspapers, and government documents are first published in Marathi instead of in Hindi or English. Nonetheless, Pune is home to a sizable Muslim, Christian, and Zoroastrian population, whose identification with different languages puts them in contrast to the Marathi-speaking, Hindu majority (Hansen 2005). Because regionalist political movements have built upon Marathi as an identity marker for local Maharashtrians, and because Hindi is associated with the ethnic groups of northern India, English is seen as a more “politically neutral” medium, although not without the connotations of British colonial legacy (Ramawamy 1999, 354) and of privileging the modes of education primarily accessible to the urban upper and middle classes (Azam et al. 2013).

In mediating this ethnolinguistic diversity, COS primarily uses English, and occasionally Hindi, in its programs and publications despite its location in a predominantly Marathi-speaking city. In Pune, those who are not Marathi speakers experience a sense of alienation from belonging to the area, and lose the capability to become completely “local,” as Aditi Kulkarni, a frequent visitor of COS’s library who grew up in Mumbai, explains:

I don’t know Marathi because there [in Mumbai] you don’t feel the need for Marathi. Even the local people will talk to you in Hindi.... You can converse with them. Here [in Pune] you feel the necessity, because [when] you know Marathi... they listen to you, otherwise they hardly entertain you....

For Kulkarni, the rootedness of an individual in Pune is expressed in terms of Marathi as a medium of speech, without which even an Indian person could experience a sense of being an outsider, whom nobody “listens to” and “entertains.” While Mumbai and Pune both house a slight majority of Marathi speakers and a vast array of other ethnolinguistic groups bound together by the common use of Hindi, Pune’s local identity, unlike that of Mumbai, uses Marathi as a language of vernacular belonging.

While being “a Maharashtrian local” and being a “cosmopolitan Pune urbanite” entail different arrays of loyalties that are more than just linguistic and geographic, using a language performs a sense of belonging to either of these loosely compartmentalized cultural modes. Yet, at the same time, these ways of speaking are not purely utilitarian; they are not used simply as strategic self-presentation in front of potential evaluators (Bauman 1984, Goffman 1959), but are also common sense ideas about how peoples, spaces, ideas, and actions are tied to these “local” or “cosmopolitan” modes.

Why, therefore, does COS choose to communicate in English more extensively than in Hindi? Although Hindi might seem to be a more “Indian” language, the adoption of English in different mediums of communication throughout India indicates that English has been rooted in nationwide language practices. Anjali Pradhan, who writes for *Kiski Kahani*’s upcoming anthology of Ramayana stories from throughout India in English, disagrees with the notion of the language as foreign to India:

I speak Hindi and Marathi, but...the language in my heart is English. I’ve grown up with English, I think in English, I dream in English, I speak English.... That’s my most...native language easily.... [Those who say that] you’re an English-speaker [so] you can’t know the pulse of the country...I really think [that] is a lot of rubbish.... My husband speaks Konkani.... His Hindi is appalling, but he communicates with everybody...and almost all of his writing was with people who did not speak English. If you have empathy with the people you’re talking to...you’ll always find a way to communicate.... I’ve found a lot of people who are...fluent reading, writing, speaking Hindi, and they know nothing about this country, and they just don’t manage to connect with people on the street.

As Pradhan explains, “empathy” is more important than fluency; both language and affective attachments are key modalities in negotiating India’s ethnolinguistic and class diversity. For her, however, Hindi and English are not interchangeable, because they perform different roles. English is an inward-looking medium of “thinking,” “dreaming,” and “speaking,” while Hindi is a way of “knowing the country.” While Pradhan attaches affective ties to English as her “most native” language, she does not disregard Indian languages as foreign or unfamiliar, because no languages are exclusively “native” or exclusively “foreign” to her.

Pradhan explains Hindi as one way of establishing relations among people of different subnational origins (“knowing the pulse of the country”) and different social classes (“people on the street”). I argue that it is not the simply the choice of a language that constitutes her social relationships, but a consciousness of the common sense ideas and understandings about language used in social interactions. Above all, Hindi and English carry intersecting associations with the collective imagination of a multilingual Indian nation. Although it is tempting to see English-speaking urban dwellers, such as Pradhan, as deterritorialized, “floating” people with no allegiances to a locality and as less “authentically Indian,” her comment on English as her “most native” language describes how simple divisions of languages as local, rooted mother tongues and foreign languages are inaccurate in describing COS’s and India’s polyglot identity.

A *Kiski Kahani* pamphlet in English describes how the project is preoccupied with imagining the Ramayana as a way of imagining India, the nation, as a place where a sense of belonging is projected:

The *Ramayana* was composed in Sanskrit some time between 200 BCE and 200 CE.... Over the centuries, the story has been re-told in almost all Indian languages.... In fact, the *Ramayana* provides the metaphors through which Indians understand themselves. Here are some of the many Ramayanas we know: Valmiki's *Ramayana* in Sanskrit, Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* in Awadhi Hindi, Kambar's *Iramavataram* in Tamil, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* in Malayalam, the *Pothi Ramayana* in Urdu, the *Krittibasi Ramayana* in Bengali, *Dastan-e-Ram-o-Sita* in Persian and Eknath's *Ramayana* in Marathi called *Bhavartha Ramayana*.

The writers, Haroon Sattar and Neha Madgulkar, conceptualize the pamphlet, "The Ramayana Project: 300 Ramayanas & Counting," as a nationwide project, and position their writing as accommodating all of India's plurality in interpreting and translating the Ramayana stories. However, although this introduction highlights the Ramayana's diversity in terms of languages, the pamphlet is written entirely in English without any translation into the Indian regional vernaculars of the individual stories. Here, the Ramayana becomes a translocal way of communication. Through these images of multiplicity, the publications do not identify particular retellings as belonging to any specific social group. Instead, Kiski Kahani advocates for transcending what appear to be ethnolinguistic and religious boundaries in the subcontinent.

In conjunction with these common sense ideas about language, the life histories of the two individuals who retell Ramayana stories at COS, Haroon Sattar and Neha Madgulkar, are incorporated in how the stories are curated and produced. The Ramayana stories and, more specifically, the Kiski Kahani retellings, are intricately tied to the personal journeys and ideological articulations of its listeners and patrons. Eliciting life histories can illustrate how individuals are agents that interact with and transform social structures, and allow subjects to speak for themselves without completely surrendering narrative control to the anthropologist (Fisher 1997, Marcus and Fischer 1986). Even commentaries on the small sections and subplots of the Ramayana's massive corpus are entangled in sociopolitical debates about India-wide issues, such as the banning of Ramanujan's essay. Drawing a boundary between text and context, and, consequently, separating processes of contextualization and entextualization, underestimates the reflexivity between the two processes (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 72-73). Therefore, in this study, I build upon the entanglements of sociopolitical ideologies, life histories, and entextualization strategies.

HAROON SATTAR: COMMUNICATING COSMOPOLITANISMS

Haroon Sattar, Kiski Kahani's project director, rewrites stories from different books and anthologies published by Indian academic publishers. For Kiski Kahani programs, Haroon gathers artists, writers, and theater directors to conduct workshops for the public. Among fellow staff members at COS, Haroon is remarkable for maintaining his interest in the "Hindu" epic in spite of his Muslim heritage, which is noticeable by the mere mentioning of his name. Ashwini Parikh, a theatre specialist whom COS invites on a regular basis to conduct workshops, once reminded me about how Kiski Kahani deals with imagining plural religiosities: "After all, what is a Haroon Sattar doing with the Ramayana?" Haroon, who grew up in Mumbai, Saudi Arabia, and Pune, classifies his own nuclear family's linguistic identity as English-speakers at home, and as Urdu- and Hindi-speakers outside.

Haroon, with his tightly-fitted jeans, checkered shirts, and bright red Hyundai hatchback that he drives to the COS office, challenges those who classify the Ramayana as ancient, fossilized, and trapped in the timeless realm of priests and academics. The Ramayana, accord-

ing to Haroon's account, is part of growing up in India, of being exposed to a nationwide literary culture, and of being able to appreciate a certain verbal artistry with language and stories:

All Indian kids grew up with Amar Chitra Katha [comic books]... It's part of... your... rite of passage....³ There was the Doordarshan Ramayana, which we all knew about....⁴ And when this controversy happened, the [banning of the] A.K. Ramanujan essay, [those who banned the essay] were clearly saying that this text does not belong to you anymore.... One of the big fears, for me, for any kind of oral narrative is that it will get lost.... I'm really keen on...people talking and thinking about...the diversity within the text. If you keep a text alive by reading and narrating constantly, people will keep in touch with it....

For Haroon, the Ramayana is a set of texts that "all Indian kids" of his generation who are within the reach of mass media encounter. Even into adulthood, the Ramayana stories are narratives that Indians still "think" about and "keep in touch" with. What is politically contentious, however, is identifying the "people" who belong to this tradition of Ramayana stories and are legitimized to express ownership. As previously described in the opening of the "300 Ramayanas" pamphlet, Haroon criticizes right wing interpretations, which advocate for a singular, authoritative Ramayana based on a conflation of Indian-nationalist and Hindu allegiances. Nonetheless, Haroon argues for "keeping the text alive" by rethinking, rewriting and retelling the Ramayana stories. For him, the Ramayana is an ever-growing corpus of stories bound together by an embedded reflection of a cosmopolitan Indian identity, and, concomitantly, a cosmopolitan way of communicating stories.

How, therefore, do cosmopolitan aspirations become cosmopolitan modes of performing culture without displacements, and without necessarily having the self-contained cultural units that represent all the enumerated parts of the Indian nation? When Haroon describes Ramayana stories as "mythology," "metaphors," and "language," he works with an audience aware of how the Ramayana is aesthetically evaluated through both literary and nonliterary framing devices. Both the holder of a master's degree in English literature and a former interior designer, Haroon not only archives and rewrites stories. He also spends many hours on the colors and designs of COS publications, and strives to keep Kiski Kahani's website visually attractive. The Kiski Kahani pamphlet, on which he has worked intensively, shows how graphic design and literary curation, which are key parts of Haroon's own life history, reframe Ramayana stories.

A multitude of pictures are present on the cover: a classical, "calendar art" painting of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman in the middle; a Ramayana panel from the English-language Amar Chitra Katha comic strip; a still from Ramanand Sagar's (2001) Hindi-language televised series; and another still picture from Nina Paley's (2008) animated retelling of the Ramayana through Sita's story.^{5,6} This eclectic assemblage of images, which spans the most "local" to the most "global" of Ramayana stories, mirrors the chaos of urban India where the stereotypically old meets the stereotypically modern, and where stories are decontextualized and recontextualized at a blinding pace as new forms of mass media are invented. Through this mosaic-like construction, Haroon argues against a monolithic sense of cultural ownership, and allows retellers to express their way of belonging to a cosmopolitan, pluricultural India. In line with his words, it is "reading" and "narrating"—the performative, audience-oriented aspects of the Ramayana—that characterize the making of a Ramayana genre at COS's Kiski Kahani.

NEHA MADGULKAR: COMMUNICATING COSMOPOLITANISMS

Neha Madgulkar, an undergraduate mass communications student and an intern for Kiski Kahani, comes from a Hindu Maharashtrian family who moved around India constantly because of her father's assignment as an air force officer. Having lived all over India, Neha discovered different retellings of the Ramayana during her internship that she sees as deviating from the Valmiki's written, Sanskrit version, which is the authoritative text used to retell the Ramayana in both Ramanand Sagar's televised series (Lutgendorf 1995, 217) and the Amar Chitra Katha comics (McLain 2009, 133-134). Neha frames the Ramayana as a genre that accumulates new sets of stories throughout her life:

When we were younger, we used to hear stories, because, we have...friends from all over the country, and people from Tamil Nadu and they would say... 'in my home village they worship Ravana and I've seen this temple where they worship Ravana....' It's typical of the epic, there are lots of stories running parallel to each other....

By knowing what "deviates" from Valmiki's text, Neha familiarizes herself with the ethnic diversity of the Indian nation, as she explains that Tamil villages supposedly "worship Ravana," who is the archetypical, demonic character in many Ramayana stories. Neha's understanding of the epic through Kiski Kahani, with its capacity to accumulate stories, often ones that are contradictory and conflicting on the surface, unites diverse ethnic and religious strands under the umbrella of a common storytelling practice. Kiski Kahani, therefore, allows these retellings, which diverge from the hegemonic, Hindu nationalist narratives that center on devotion to Rama, to crystallize into a coherent, performable corpus. The Kiski Kahani stories, while fragmentary and evocative rather than continuous and descriptive, represent a regime of cosmopolitanist ownership, where discourses of partial senses of belonging override discourses of authenticity and cultural purity.

THE MAKING OF A NEW GENRE: RAMAYANA STORIES WITHOUT AUTHORS

Kiski Kahani's curation of Ramayana stories, which builds upon difference from Hindu nationalist texts, is an attempt at widening intertextual gaps. The performances and the publications are not projects to create a master narrative of the entire epic; rather, they play upon the side stories and the characters of the Ramayana to entextualize cosmopolitan aspirations. As Ramanujan (1991) suggests, the structure of the Ramayana is such that stories can always be inserted and crystallized within the epic, thereby interrupting authoritative episodes with improvised episodes.

In the following story, taken from the "300 Ramayanas" pamphlet, the notion of independent, singular authorship of any retelling of the Ramayana is challenged:

After the epic battle between Rama and Ravana, Hanuman retreated to the mountains where he spent his time meditating and writing Rama's illustrious deeds on a rock, using his nails.⁷

In another part of the forest... Valmiki had just completed his own version of Rama's journey. Valmiki had been told that the mighty Hanuman would be the best critic of his story, so he set out to climb the mountain.... As he reached the top of the mountain, Valmiki saw, painstakingly etched on a rockface, a story so wondrous that it made him weep. And weep, and weep and weep some more, partly because the story was so beautiful but mostly because his own story was but a shadow of this

one. Seeing the “rishi” [sage] reading his story with tears coursing down his cheeks, Hanuman selflessly picked up the rock and with all his divine strength, and flung it into the ocean.

Taken aback, Valmiki swore to be reborn so that he may sing Hanuman’s praises which he had understated.... Tulsidas, the great poet who wrote [the Ramcharitmanas], is said to be an incarnation of Valmiki.

Here, the god Hanuman, the sage Valmiki, and the poet-saint Tulsidas, are not divine figures or “primordial” authors who wield authority over the “true” Ramayana. In fact, Valmiki and Tulsidas are listeners who, despite being incapable of preserving the “entirety” of the epic, become retellers whose names are embedded in iconic retellings of Ramayana stories. Even when there is a *certain* Ramayana attributed to Valmiki or Tulsidas, neither of them are authoritative creators of the text. This passage illustrates that such stories are still imperfect renditions of a mythical, inconceivable whole that nobody in particular owns.

By incorporating the “authors” themselves into a retelling and citing other retellings, this episode demonstrates how intertextual relationships and genre formations are not simply formal categories that are imposed by scholarly interpretations. Writers at Kiski Kahani internalize previous retellings of the Ramayana and create a new array of interrelated stories to comment on the sense of ownership of a text. This particular episode, as well as many other stories that Kiski Kahani generates through Neha’s and Haroon’s literary curation, question the notion of a text to which all other retellings are compared. Ramayana performances, therefore, do not start at the reteller and end at the listener. Listeners are, in fact, prolific retellers as well. There is no single author who owns the text.

CONCLUSION

My study poses two main questions: How do retellings of the Ramayana stories reflect a way of belonging to a cosmopolitan, pluricultural Indian nation? How do performance modalities contextualize the text as a socially contested space? I found that interpreting how a curation of Ramayana stories is discussed and debated does not continuously explain the epic’s social position; rather, it suggests how the Ramayana’s retellers configure their sense of belonging and identity through listening to and performing these stories. Admittedly, the Ramayana might not be easily reclaimed from its history of appropriation by Hindu nationalists during the Ayodhya incident in 1992 and its violent aftermath. Even today, retelling the Ramayana stories is still a politically vexed project. Nonetheless, understanding how the epic is retold in emerging and improvised forms allows us to see how the Ramayana stories have not been surrendered to sectarian divisions.

Ideological contestation within the formal, textual structure of the epic, however, is not the core of my analysis. Instead, I am interested in how the Ramayana stories index a sense of belonging to an India-wide literary practice. My study builds upon the ethnography of speaking approach, where the socially patterned use of language depends on the “nonliterary” context of the performance, such as the life histories of the retellers. The concept of performance illuminates broader social processes as well. My approach to cosmopolitan belonging argues against enumerating Indian nationhood in terms of discrete cultural units. The formation of a Ramayana genre from fragmentary, incomplete narratives illustrates that culture, like stories, is lived through debates and differences. Unfinished retellings and authorless stories, which Kiski Kahani compiles and frames as representations of the nation, are simultaneously a reflection and a critique of macrosocial discourses of culture. Retell-

ers of the Ramayana, therefore, are not only Indian citizens, but also innovators of a way of composing, rehearsing, and performing culture in everyday life.

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NOTES

1. See *Tehelka* (October 24, 2011).
2. The names of this organization and of individuals in this paper have been changed to protect privacy.
3. The Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) comic books are almost as popular today in urban India as they were in the 1980s. ACK, which is a colored, illustrated comic series, presents stories from the Ramayana in English. Although it has been criticized for using only "Hindu" texts, the ACK is a common way of experiencing mythological texts among upper-middle class, urban Indians (McLain 2009).
4. Ramanand Sagar's (2001 [1987]) Hindi-language television series of the Ramayana was broadcasted through *Doordarshan*, the Indian central government's official channel.
5. "Calendar art" or "god poster" is a popular genre of illustrations on mythological themes based on deities, saints, and sacred sites that are commercially produced, especially in major Indian urban centers. See Smith (1995).
6. Paley, an American cartoonist, released "Sita Sings the Blues" in 2008. The feature-length animation combines selections from the Ramayana stories with her life history as an artist.
7. Hanuman, a simian god whose virility and courage is indispensable to Rama during the numerous battles with Ravana, is said to be an ascetic that secluded himself in the mountains of the Himalaya after the battles of the Ramayana (Lutgendorf 2007,173-174).