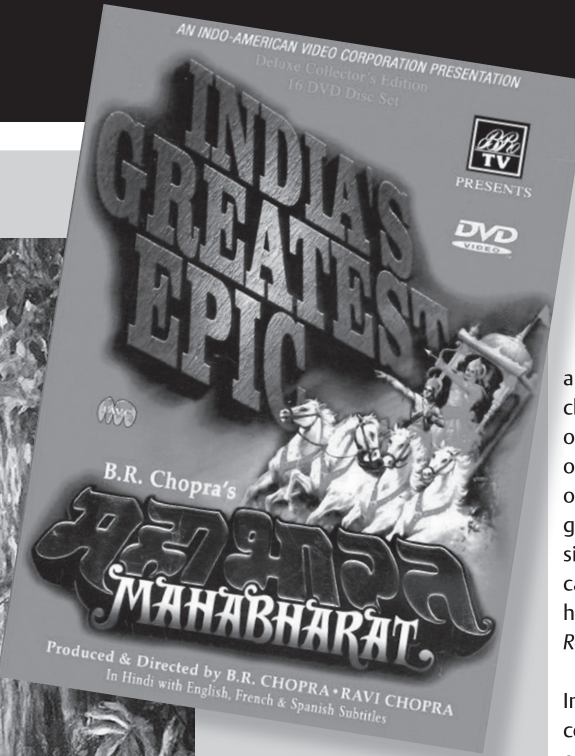


# Model mythical women



Heidi Pauwels' new book focuses on the early life of two major women figures in the mythic landscape of India, building not only on her wide knowledge of the North Indian devotional traditions, but on the awareness of their performative power and potential. She reviews the goddesses' initial meeting with their respective consorts, courtship, marriage, and their handling of the problems with other women, for the changes in their model building role through the centuries.

Vasudha Dalmia

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*The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen.*

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IN CONSIDERING THE LONG TRAJECTORY of the goddesses, and of 'myth as palimpsest' (Wendy Doniger), Pauwels takes on all three periods: the ancient, medieval and modern, to show the radical shifts in the understanding of what is often regarded as 'fixed'. Of Sanskrit texts, she considers the two that would become foundational for the medieval Ramaite and Krishnaite devotional traditions: the *Valmiki Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, taking into account both the commentarial and the modern historical-critical literature on the two works. For the medieval, she considers the 16th century vernacular devotional texts which have come to signify 'tradition' for the modern: Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Nanddas's *Dasham Grantha* and *Rukmini Mangal*, the enormous number of padas attributed to Surdas, and the works of Hariram Vyas. For the modern period, she turns to a vast corpus of films produced in Bombay and three lengthy TV serials still in circulation in India and the Diaspora – Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* (1987-88), Chopra's *Mahabharat*, which gripped the nation for two years (1988-90), and Sagar's *Shri Krishna* (1995-1996). All three explicitly invoke as their sources not only the Sanskrit but also several of the vernacular works mentioned above. Of films, she considers the vastly popular work of the 1990's – such as *Dilwale Dulhania le jayenge* (1995), *Hum apke haim kaun* (1994) but also many other earlier and later films, not ignoring the counter-message of box office failures such as *Lajja* (2001). There is careful selection of passages and scenes presented in the course of the discussion as well as a careful translation and analysis of them.

Though not explicitly social or political in the goals she sets herself, Pauwels writes with an awareness of both, showing her mastery of considerable literature on gender issues in South Asia, and the Bombay film industry, in addition to the secondary sources on the older material with which she has long been familiar. This is no mean feat.

Sita and Radha are two figures with an enormous, almost all-permeating presence in the Indian social and cultural imagination today. Their long history in text and performance suggests what could be seen as two antithetical social positions. Sita is the model daughter and wife, who remains within the bounds of convention. Radha is 'sensuality incarnate', the eternal lover, moving almost entirely outside convention, though in some later versions of her tale, there is a record of her marriage to Krishna. Their consorts, Rama and Krishna, are divine heroes who could also be seen as representing two opposing positions – the one is the very model of kingship and a princely upbringing, the other is pastoral, unruly and promiscuous. Though the 19th century reevaluation of tradition would elevate Rama to national status, as warrior, model ruler, and king, Krishna, sought to be similarly elevated as monarch and godly philosopher of the battle field, could never be entirely shorn of his wild past.

It follows that the positions of Sita and Radha would also come to be modified in the 19th and 20th centuries. Though Radha would be gradually domesticated, she would remain an awkward companion on the road to modernity, while Sita, held up as exemplary, would suffer a contrary fate, at least in some quarters. The 1970s feminist movement in India would seek to distance itself precisely from her domestic virtues and the stranglehold that they could exercise on the lives of women of all ages and at all times. Yet later, there would be some exemplary efforts to rehabilitate Sita and to project her as a potential ally in the fight for more equality and justice.

#### Empowering strands of tradition

Conventional wisdom today would see tradition as oppressive, with little awareness of the fluidity it once had and the liberating, empowering, potential of its varied strands. Pauwels accomplishes the rare feat of showing, in a nuanced and deliberately underemphasised way, how medieval *bhakti* or devotional tradition, with its loving, sympathetic description of women in a range of situations, actually privileged emotion, thus offering much space for women's subjectivity. The figures of the *gopis*, the cowherd-women, and Radha with their passionate outpouring of love for Krishna, with

a later consort, Rukmini, going so far as to insist on her own choice for partner, are a far cry from the manipulated figures on the big and small screen today, where adultery is tolerated only in the case of men. Even Tulsidas with his constant stress on propriety, often decried as conventional, can present with great openness and sympathy the romance of Sita's first sighting of Ram, allowing her a voice then and later, as she carries out her intention of accompanying her husband into his forest exile. The figure of Sita is stronger still in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

In the modern mass media, Sita is depicted as yet more conservative and Radha, when she turns up, comes to be equated with Sita, behaving with due propriety 'under the spunky veneer of Western emancipation'. Pauwels shows not only the enormous vitality of tradition but also its enormous manipulation in the modern. But she does not simply juxtapose the ancient and medieval with the modern to bring out stark contrasts. She approaches 'tradition with respect – with a listening, empathetic, yet critical ear – paying attention to multiplicity of voices, seeing each in its own context' (p.501). As she points out at some length, dating the Sanskrit and *bhakti* material remains problematic. We have then, at best, a mixed picture of the older periods. But as her detailed analysis shows, there is little doubt that the TV/film representations of women's emotionality, subjectivity, and freedom to choose, are more conservative than the older material; 'under the glossy mixture of *masala*, we find iron *maryada*.'

The depth of her scholarship makes possible not only a nuanced reading of individual scenes and an inter-textuality of which most TV viewers and film-goers are not explicitly aware, but also the wider social context. She shows both where TV and film explicitly cite the older texts and where they only mirror them in whole episodes, which are almost a replay, albeit in ultra-modern garb, of situations first accosted in the epics and in devotional verses. Two major insights emerge from this detailed study. One, the deviations in the modern versions have a larger social significance, even if at first sight they seem minor. Thus in the wedding scene in the TV *Ramayana*, Sagar glosses over the fact that Sita brings dowry with her. Tulsidas shows no self-consciousness in dwelling briefly on dowry. But precisely because it has become such a major issue in feminist debate and in the wider public sphere – given the almost constant reports of bride-burning and dowry deaths – Sagar, for all his vaunted adherence to tradition, elides it, to maintain at least the façade of a politically correct position, while at the same time doing everything else to undermine it. Thus it is that in the modern media, modernity and tradition are shown to be in harmony with each other, doing violence to both, even as the one is used to support the other in ways both problematic and politically regressive.

#### Tailored tradition

And with this we come to the second major insight of the study, that tradition in TV and film has almost always been tailored to suit a more conservative position. As Pauwels shows, there is a steady progression to a narrower conception of tradition from the medieval/early modern period to the modern. For all her frolicking on the screen, Radha is always coerced into submission, subjected to a new, constricting deification, as love comes to be subordinated to duty: 'The more Radha grows in stature as goddess, the more she starts to resemble Sita' (p.147). Correspondingly, and not surprisingly, in the films where both Rama and Krishna are invoked, Rama with his dominant moral stance and stature comes to prevail over the morally more precariously balanced figure of Krishna.

It is seldom that someone with as deep, fine, and differentiated knowledge of medieval devotional literature turns to film studies. Pauwels displays enormous erudition, which is always lightly carried. I have only one complaint about this admirable study - it is too long. It should have been pared down yet more, and the results of its investigations formulated yet more boldly, so that it reach those who have most need to acquire knowledge of it. For, I know of no other analysis which has taken 'tradition', Sanskrit, medieval, early modern, more seriously and traced the relationship with the present in such nuanced detail. Pauwels' work is of immense importance for gender and film studies.

Vasudha Dalmia  
University of California, Berkeley  
dalmia@berkeley.edu

ABOVE LEFT:

The goddesses Sita and Rama.

ABOVE RIGHT:  
B.R. Chopra's television series *Mahabharat* (1988-90) gripped the Indian nation for two years.

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