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The Rama Story of Brij Narain Chakbast

RECENT WORK has brought an awareness of the multiplicity of Rama stories throughout the areas where Sanskritic culture flourished. For close to a thousand years, Sanskrit dominated public discourse in South and Southeast Asia. Even after regional languages supplanted Sanskrit and developed their own literatures, Sanskritic tropes and tales continued to captivate the imaginations of literary élites.

In the twentieth century, Brij Narain Chakbast composed his own Urdu telling of the Rama story. That he chose to interpret Hinduism through the idiom of Urdu high literature at a time when language and religion separated the Hindu and Muslim communities of his time supplies yet another example of the historicity and cultural construction of the notion that Hindi and Urdu belong to the Hindu and Muslim communities, respectively. Chakbast also secularizes Rama throughout his trilogy of *Ramayana* poems, prompting an investigation into the reception of the Rama story throughout history.

This paper will argue that at the turn of the twentieth century, Hindu poets like Chakbast could still identify as Urdu speakers and resist its designation as a Muslim language. This paper will also explore the reasons for which Chakbast deprives Rama of any direct theological import. To accomplish the former, I will review key texts which interrogate the development of Hindi and Urdu as modern languages. To address the latter, I will intertextually read Chakbast's Rama poems with his poem on Krishna, Masih's Persian *Ramayana*, and secondary scholarship on other Rama stories to adduce explanations as to his motivations.¹ Because Chakbast's language, culture, and theology resist easy classification, this paper is not meant to advance any final word on the subject, but to open further lines of inquiry.

¹I am grateful to Professor Ajay Rao for our many discussions on different Rama stories and his constant encouragement throughout the conceptualization of this paper.

The Historical Context

Throughout history, the *Ramayana* has entertained and intrigued populations exposed to Hindu or Sanskritic culture. The epic's centrality within the classical literary culture of South Asia remains incontrovertible.

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are, it must be remembered, essentially aristocratic; they correspond to the Iliad and the Odyssey, and like them became the objects of the deep interest of wider circles. In recent times, no doubt, the epics have been unintelligible to the audience, to whom interpretation has been requisite, though delight is still felt in the sound of the sacred language (cf. Keith 1928, 13).

From the millennium between 200/300 and 1300, Sanskrit emerged as the language of cultural and political discourse throughout South and Southeast Asia (Pollock 1998). In this period, no other literary text exerted more impact than the *Ramayana* in the transmission of mores and values between ancient India and the rest of Asia (Desai 1970). Controversy surrounds the missionary motives of those involved in the diffusion of Sanskritic customs (Sharma 1992), but it is undeniable that intellectuals adapted the Rama story to reflect their own localized contexts. Scholars have begun to analyze the diversity of texts on the Rama story by probing into the aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, political, social, and religious ambitions of their tellers (Richman 1991, Richman 2001, Bose 2004). Several generations ago, scholars spoke of Valmiki's *Ramayana* as the "original" and all others as "variations" (Hopkins 1926), a tenet which Ramanujan later disputed in his suggestion that texts be treated on their own terms as "tellings," to be read intertextually to examine "what gets translated, transplanted, transposed" (1991, 24).

Brij Narain Chakbast should be approached with intertextuality in mind. Chakbast was born in 1882 to a Kashmiri Pandit family in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh. In 1887 following the death of his father, he and his mother relocated to Lucknow where they settled with her brother Pandit Lalit Prashad. His father's death having delayed his education, he began to learn Urdu and Persian in 1890 from a maulvi who would visit the home. In 1894, he read his first *nazm* at the fourth meeting of the Kashmiri Pandit Social Conference. In 1897, the family's financial situation improved after Brij Narain's older brother Mehraj Narain found employment with the Lucknow municipality. Brij Narain enrolled in King's College in 1903, graduated with a B.A. degree in 1905, and stayed on for an L.L.B. In 1905, he married the daughter of Prithvi Nath Nagar and started to work in the office of his father-in-law. The following year, both his wife and child

died following pregnancy complications. He graduated with his L.L.B. in 1907 and apprenticed with Shahenshah Husain Rizvi for six months before starting work as a lawyer. He also remarried that year. In 1908, he wrote the first verses of his ghazals. In 1919, his daughter Maharaj Dulari was born, the first child to have survived. In 1926, Brij Narain died from paralysis and his poems were published posthumously in 1931 under the title *Ṣubḥ-e-Vaṭān* (The Dawn of the Motherland).

Chakbast devoted much of his literary output to political and social reform: there are poems to nationhood such as “Ḥubb-e Qaumī” (National Love), “Lārḍ Karzan sē Jḥapaṭ” (A Dispute with Lord Curzon), “Khāk-e-Hind” (The Dust of India), and “Faryād-e Qaum” (Lament of the Nation). There are also elegies to national figures such as Ranade, Gokhale, Asafu’d-Daula, and Tilak. To commemorate the first widow remarriage within the Kashmiri Pandit community in 1916, he authored the poem “Barq-e Iṣlāḥ” (The Lightning of Reform). Prior to Chakbast, few poets so consistently articulated concerns of a pan-Indian nature.

Chakbast came to feel the full force of the national aspirations which the Russo-Japanese War had quickened into life all over India. There is no other poet who responded with greater enthusiasm to the new inspiration. Patriotism is only a minor feature in the verse of most other poets; Chakbast, however, has no other interest; he is the poet of Indian nationalism par excellence (cf. Sadiq 1995 [1984], 493).

Chakbast treats the Rama story in three poems: “Rāmāyan kā Ēk Sīn” (One Scene of the Ramayana), “Māñ kā Javāb” (Mother’s Response), and “Banbās Hōnē par Ajōdhyā Nagari kī Ḥālat” (The State of Ayodhya City Upon Being Exiled). In the first poem, Rama notifies his mother of his decision to leave the kingdom for the forest, she objects, and he supplies his rationale. In the second poem, she responds and he concludes the discussion. Although the second poem commences where the first leaves off, they each function as independent units. The first two poems contain dialogue between mother and son, but in the third, an omniscient narrator depicts the emotions of Sita and Ayodhya as the time of exile approaches.

The Craft of Chakbast’s Poems

Chakbast lived at a time when Kashmiri pandits supported Urdu literacy. As expected, he reveals his considerable knowledge of the Urdu literary canon through his manipulation of poetics common to the Indo-Persi-

anate cultural landscape. He adhered strictly to meter. He employed established tropes and symbols innovatively, an acceptable practice which showed a mastery of previous Urdu poets (Pritchett 1994). Examples abound, but a few will suffice to show his virtuosity. One prominent theme refers to the drainage of blood and discoloration of the skin, a symbol of love as a sickness demonstrating the anxiety of Rama and his mother, drawn from Greco-Arab concepts of humoral medicine (Biesterfeldt and Gutas 1984). Another recurrent theme juxtaposes the beauty and fertility of the garden with the desolation and barrenness of the desert since the garden epitomizes cosmic order and the paradise of God on earth (Meisami 1985).

From the vantage point of today's Hindu-Muslim biases, it may seem exceptional that Chakbast wrote in Urdu. A subtlety lost in translation, but surely significant, is the Persianate register from which Chakbast addresses God: *parvardegār* (Nourisher), *kerdegār* (Creator), *rabb-e karīm* (the Generous Lord), *Allāh rē* (Oh God). Indeed, after the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605) Hindu castes involved in governance, notably Kayasthas and Khatri, learned Persian to such an extent that they adopted expressions normally associated with Muslims and translated their own religious scriptures into Persian (Alam 1998). The term “Urdu” originally entered public discourse in the sixteenth century as the language of the royal encampment while “Hindi” referred to the language spoken in *Hind*, with Hindi and Urdu only assuming their current connotations at the end of the eighteenth century (Faruqi 2001). In 1837, after the British replaced Persian with Hindustani as the language of administration in North India, debates over script, differential employment opportunities, the role of religious institutions as sites of education, indigenous cultural nationalism, and British perceptions of Urdu and Hindi as Muslim and Hindu languages, respectively, led to progressive polarizations in vocabulary and grammar (King 1994). Although these issues raged in Chakbast's day, he could still identify as a Hindu Urdu poet before contestations over language, religion, and nationalism communalized politics and identity with the independence of India and Pakistan almost twenty years after his death. His linguistic loyalty was such that he declared Urdu to be a Hindu language in response to Abdul Halim Sharar's characterization of Urdu as Islamic (Faridi 1966, 22), an act virtually inconceivable today.

The Content of Chakbast's Poems

Although Chakbast's preference for Urdu may surprise the contemporary

reader, it becomes reasonably clarified in the backdrop of the sociocultural and historical forces of his era. Less explainable are his artistic liberties concerning the Rama story. Chakbast situates the characters within a setting thematically and theologically different from more identifiably Hindu renditions. Given the paucity of his oeuvre and critical secondary scholarship, an examination of text within context may explicate his innovations.

Most noticeably, Chakbast does not invest his Rama with any divinity. Rama exists as a mortal, subject to the laws of a supreme, impersonal God. In "Rāmāyan kā Ēk Śin," Rama advises his mother to defer to the will of God:²

Perhaps some prudence of this is from the Nourisher.
This forgery, this deceit, this collusion, this commotion,
What comes to pass is in this justification completely.
The causes are apparent, don't consider them.
Who knows what beauty lies within the curtain of power?
Especially since no one approaches His prudence.
No one knows what is acceptable to Him.
Relief or pain, happiness or anxiety
Obligatory in all circumstances is gratitude to the Creator.
(1981, 163–64)

For Rama, submission to God leads to His compassion:

That lonely one upon whom the load of pain and suffering rests,
The Creator Himself gifts him with endurance.
Becoming despondent, men become sinful.
They do not know that He is the Knower of Fortune.
May man walk assuredly in this path.
The neck indeed is that which bows to the command of His will.
And you have no place for sorrow.
(*ibid.*, 165)

Rama ends his speech with God's ability to transform the plights of his devotees, a demonstration of God's omnipotence and clemency:

"If He is kind, the desert will become a meadow.
Be it jungle or hill, travel or rest at home
He does not remain unaware of man's condition.

²I thank Professor Wheeler Thackston and Aliya Iqbal for our discussions on approaches to translation. All translations in this paper are mine.

If His grace is present, then there is no sorrow.
The lap of the plain is no less than the lap of the mother.”

(*ibid.*, 166–67)

The multiple tellings of the Rama story variously attend to the divinity of Rama. When viewed as an evolving text with a historical trajectory, the texture of the Valmiki *Ramayana* has raised doubts as to whether the apotheosis of Rama was an inherent theme of the plot structure (Pollock 1984) or a later insertion after the rise of Rama worship at the end of the first millennium (Brockington 1985). Hindu groups like the Srivaisnavas (Mumne 1991) and Ramnamis (Lamb 1991) integrated the *Ramayana* within their religious canon and developed doctrines around it. On the contrary, the decision to humanize Rama aided Buddhist and Jain authors who offered moralities and cosmologies alternate to Hinduism through their own tellings (Ramanujan 1991, Reynolds 1991, Raghavan 1992). Chakbast wrote in the United Provinces at the turn of the twentieth century, a region so strongly identified with the Tulsidas *Ramayana* since its publication in about 1574 that nineteenth-century British scholars termed the work “the Bible of North India” (Lutgendorf 1989, 272). Chakbast’s choice to defy the commonplace conception of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu would seem to entail no innocent act of creativity, but a radical reconsideration of established tenets.

To complicate the matter, Chakbast left no prose behind detailing his personal views. Kaif (1986) has noted this peculiar absence and attempted to derive Chakbast’s religious beliefs from his poetry. He starts by shielding the poet from any charge of communalism:

Certainly Chakbast wrote a few poems on Hindu religious themes like the Vedas, [the] cow, Krishna, and parts of [the] Ramayana and he wrote nothing on Islamic themes. But this fact does not necessarily mean that he was a communal poet. Chakbast had more Muslim friends than Hindu ones and no Muslim at that time thought that there was anything communal in the above-mentioned poems of Chakbast. They were more clear-headed than some present-day critics who see ghosts everywhere; they knew that communalism did not consist in praising certain features in one’s own religious beliefs.

(Kaif 1986, 36)

It is possible that Kaif overestimates the forces of religion and nationalism by projecting his historical context onto Chakbast. Such a defensive posture may have colored his reading. By presenting Chakbast as a pluralist, Kaif splits the difference among a number of disparate opinions.

He first proposes a cryptic statement: “But Chakbast did believe in the Vedic pantheism which was later developed as Vedanta and Sufism” (*ibid.*, 35). Later, Kaif puts forth another argument which contradicts his earlier assertion:

As I see it, Chakbast in these observations looks like a tough soldier in the battle of life. He is inspired by reason and a robust view of life which is the specialty of the British philosophical thought. At the same time he cannot shut his eyes to the hard realities of life. This, perhaps unconsciously, leads him to accept a philosophy of contradictions. Besides these three predominant notes there are secondary notes of realism bordering on materialism (despite his belief in the Vedic monism), traditionalism, and ethical urges.

(*ibid.*, 54)

The Chakbast of Kaif synthesizes conflicting ideologies. A number of inaccuracies bedevil Kaif's contention. Not all would concur that “Vedic pantheism” occasioned the births of Vedanta or Sufism. An overwhelming literature attests to the existence and flourishing of Sufism well before Islam reached the Subcontinent. Moreover, a number of philosophers of atheism, theism, dualism, and qualified non-dualism constructed their own unique hermeneutics to study the Vedas, none of whom would agree that the Vedas are pantheistic or monistic. Finally, Chakbast reveres the Vedas several times, but stops short of pledging explicit religious devotion to them. One must not similarly assume that Chakbast worships the national leaders whom he eulogizes.

Chakbast's poem “Krishan Kanhaiyā” (Lovely Krishna) serves as a helpful point of comparison to his interpretation of Rama. He first evokes a world on the eve of Krishna's birth, drawing upon stock Indo-Persian symbols such as flowers, meadows, peacocks, candles, fireflies, and goblets. The sound of Krishna's flute repeats as a leitmotif in the background. Chakbast juxtaposes the looming storm of the night with the burgeoning excitement towards Mathura. Chakbast then directs the narration from Mathura to Kurukshetra. War between the Pandavas and the Kauravas supplies the basis for Krishna's role as counselor to Arjuna. Chakbast uses this scene for metaphysical speculation on the migratory nature of the soul and the illusiveness of the world. He describes the boundless non-dualism of divinity:

He indeed is the helper of friend and foe in battle.
A painter of existence who is in all colors.
He is the slaughtered and also the luster of the sword.

He is the flame of the candle and also the candlesnuffer.
 He himself is depicted and he is also the depiction.
 He is the ruler, he is the prisoner, and he is also the chains.
 He is a jeweler and also the essence of the world.
 He is also the flowers and the gardener of this garden.

(1981, 283)

Chakbast divinizes Krishna as an all-encompassing, transcendent being. In this passage, Krishna surpasses enmities and opposites. He unifies subject and object, cause and effect. No qualifying attributes can be ascribed to Krishna that limit his potentiality. Although many Hindus believed that Rama and Krishna represented two incarnations of Vishnu, Chakbast assigns them varying narrative functions. Such a practice runs counter to current Hindu observance and popular discourse.

However, when Chakbast is located intertextually within larger Indo-Persianate trends, it becomes evident that former artists manipulated the Rama story as a secular tale to showcase their talents. Akbar (1556–1605) may have started the practice of supplying state patronage to court *litérateurs* for the purpose of translating Hindu religious works given his devoted interest in the religions of his subjects, yielding completed Persian editions of the *Mahabharata* in 1584 and the *Ramayana* in 1588 (Das 1983, 147–48). The manuscripts of the Rama story from this time evidence paintings in the style of the court, with the characters dressed in Mughal costumes, bearing Mughal weaponry, and inhabiting palaces and cities which resemble Mughal environments (*ibid.*, 152). Quite unlike the Valmiki or Tulsidas *Ramayanas* in which the characters operate in a distant epoch, Mughal interpreters placed their tellings within a contemporary frame.

The Masihi *Ramayana* from the time of Jahangir (1605–1627) maintains the Persianization of the narrative.³ Masihi's text follows the standard format of opening praises to Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and his patron, Nuru'd-Din Jahāngīr. He sees no disparity in rendering a Hindu story within an Islamic framework. Under the heading "Dar Şifat-e Mulk-e Hindustān" (On the Characterization of the Land of Hindustan), Masihi emphasizes his work as fiction:

I spoke of that, the tale of Ram and Sita
 This story is not history here.

(Masihi 1899, 24)

³I am grateful to Supriya Gandhi for bringing this reference to my attention.

It is noteworthy that Masih distinguishes between *afṣāna* (story) and *tārīkh* (history). By this time, many Hindus accepted that the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* formed the two great works of *itibās*, epic histories which elaborated on the political dynasties from which Krishna and Rama, respectively, would emerge as gods. Masih's disclaimer of his poem as a story might have freed him from any charge of religious slander and furnished him with a degree of creative liberty.

In fact, Masih implies that the Rama story falls within the genre of tragic love poetry which heavily influenced literature in Persian and the South Asian regional languages. In the following heading "Dar Mazammat-e Ḥussād" (On the Censure of the Envious Ones), Masih defends himself from those who would label him an infidel for his interest in the Rama story. He answers the charges illustratively:

I did not see the beauty of Lailā or the coquetry of Shīrīn.
I do not know that she went to Hell.
I do not want to burn in the fire of Ram.
Nor is there sleep or rest in the tomb of Majnūn.

(*ibid.*, 26)

Masih canonizes the Rama story among the other Islamicate legends as a tragedy of love. Rama and Sita come to embody the similar trope of a lover and beloved who must surmount numerous obstacles. The theological divestment of Rama and Sita affords Masih a necessary space for creativity.

Chakbast likewise continues this tradition of drawing on the Rama story for literary currency. The secularization of the characters allows him to personalize the story. Along with dissociating his characters from divinity, Chakbast tempers the dispositions of his female characters. Rather than endow them with the independence to defy Dasaratha's oath, Chakbast portrays them as resigned. In contrast to the Kausalya of the Valmiki *Ramayana* who summons arguments of filial piety and maternal authority to implore Rama not to undertake exile (Goldman 2004, 25–27), Rama's mother is unhappy, but ultimately aware of his plight in "Rāmāyan kā Ēk Sīn":

Crying, she said, "My dear, why are you standing there silently?
I know why you have come here.
Everyone will be happy if you depart for the wilderness.
But I will never say 'yes' from my own mouth."

(1981, 161)

Her later speech reflects painful acceptance more than blatant objection:

“Things came to a head from me; God knows what my sins were.
In the middle of the stream, as my boat was destroyed,
No road of safety or peace comes into sight.
Now if you depart, I will find shelter in non-existence.
May the Creator of the world pardon my transgression,
And banish my difficulties of loneliness!”

(*ibid.*, 162–63)

Rama ends the poem by mustering theological arguments to justify his actions. In “Māñ kā Javāb” she retorts:

You are a child, you don't have this knowledge without belief.
Your heart is not a partner of this pain.
You have no idea of the flame of maternal affection.
Life is at its end. This is my time of return.
Whatever consideration exists today in the world is not there
tomorrow.
But that day will come, this heart is certain,
You will think, “My sad mother cried.”
Whenever you will see the faces of children
Then you will remember the cry of this lonely one.
You don't know the worth of these tears.
Whatever you may understand of words is not this heart's
attachment.
But that you should face pain is not my happiness.
Go. Depart. Be happy. I won't stop you.
I will live in the world with lifelessness.
I have raised you, so I will endure sorrow.

(*ibid.*, 167–68)

Chakbast portrays Rama's mother as dejected and forsaken at her son's decisions rather than angry or defiant. She appreciates the gravity of his situation, but refuses to grant approval to his actions. She centers her arguments on love, not duty. She also questions whether this unfortunate situation has stemmed from God's retribution. This soteriological dimension relieves Dasaratha of direct responsibility and emphasizes her morality and relationship with God. In addition, it is remarkable that Chakbast does not actually name Rama's mother. No reader could learn from Chakbast's poems that Rama's mother is named Kausalya. Having suffered the deaths of several of his own children, Chakbast may have

wanted to universalize the predicament of an anonymous mother witnessing a son's departure in order to induce tenderness within the reader.

In Chakbast's telling, although Rama's mother may ultimately relent after putting forth convincing arguments, Sita is assured no such opportunity to object. In "Banbās Hōnē par Ajōdhya Nagarī kī Hālat," Sita follows her husband to the forest without complaint:

In the commotion of this journey, there is suspicion about Sita.
Like a lotus flower in the midst of waves.
She is innocent hearted, happy to bear pain.
The dress of poverty on the body is not the least bit heavy.
Downcast gaze, eyes fixed upon the ground.
On the head, only marriage's remaining redness.⁴

(*ibid.*, 173)

The demure Sita of Chakbast falls within the convention of reinforcing Rama as the ideal man and Sita as the ideal woman, an innovation which has drawn criticism for restricting her "versatility" (Kishwar 2001, 285). Chakbast's Sita diverges considerably from the Valmiki Sita whose assertive language challenges Rama's gendered assumptions of valor and duty. Throughout history, authors of other Rama stories from medieval to modern times have fashioned their tellings empathically around Sita, whether it is the Adhyatama Ramayana's *ĉhāyā* Sita or an Assamese Rama story in which Sita berates Rama as she enters the earth (Hess 1999). "Banbās Hōnē par Ajōdhya Nagarī kī Hālat" conjures emotions of uncertainty and sorrow, so Chakbast may have wished to avoid the portrayal of an intransigent Sita.

It is precisely this poetic tool of *kaifiyat*, the emotional tone of the poem, which Chakbast wields with such skill. As Pritchett specifies:

The term *kaifiyat* has a central meaning of "state" or "condition," with a tendency to mean a desirable state: an exquisite, inwardly flourishing, even ineffable mood, sometimes with mystical overtones. While *shorish* is a quality of passion shown by the lover, who is the protagonist of the ghazal world, *kaifiyat* is a quality of response located in the hearer or reader of the poetry; it is a mood evoked by the verse as a whole.

(1994, 119)

⁴The original word, *lālī*, means both "redness" and "honor." Although lost in English, the wordplay evokes the redness of vermillion in the hair of a married woman with her good name.

Chakbast's use of *kaifiyat* spans all three poems. In "Rāmāyan kā Ēk Sīn," Chakbast chronicles the condition of Rama's mother before Rama addresses her:

Who knows in which thoughts this faultless one was lost?
 She looked at the light of vision⁵ with the eye of regret.
 A movement took place; she filled her lips with the sigh of woe.
 Tears traversed upon her face from the corners of her eyes.
 The color of her face divulged the condition of her heart.
 Every hair on the body began to speak like the tongue.
 Finally, the locked mouth of the captive of grief opened.
 The tale of severities of pain and sorrow opened.
 An account book of oppressions of ancient fates opened.
 A mouth of wounds opened when the gate of speech opened.

(1981, 160)

Her speech disquiets Rama:

Having heard from his mother's tongue this lament of outpouring
 pain
 Sorrow's sharp sword swung upon that weary soul's heart.
 The world was of such deceit that his eyes became full of tears,
 But, from a thousand restraints, was released from crying.

(*ibid.*, 63)

In "Māñ kā Javāb," after Rama rationalizes his actions, she consoles him:

The darkness of reproach disappeared from the clouds of sorrow.
 Greatly moved, endurance did not remain constrained.
 Moving her feet aside, she raised his head to her lap.
 She embraced close to herself that portion of herself.
 Both of their hearts were deeply moved and alike.
 Tears flowed like the Ganga and the Yamuna.
 To each eye, fortune. Where, this tear of fidelity?
 If these tears have a price, it is money of the soul.
 Their value exists only in the realm of the heart.
 There was no other gem in the crown of Dasaratha.

(*ibid.*, 170-71)

⁵The word in Urdu is *nazar*; conveying a host of meanings such as: sight, look, opinion, vision, discretion.

Finally, in “Banbās Hōnē par Ajōdhyā Nagarī kī Ḥālat,” Chakbast paints the somber mood of the kingdom after news of Rama’s expulsion:

Today, a new season comes in place of joy and merriment.
 The sound is of the bell, not of Vedic exposition.
 There are no baskets of fruit or flowers in the market.
 The florist does not open his shop on the banks of the river.
 There is no prayer of incantation upon the lips of the Brahmins.
 The doors of the temple are closed without any news.
 Thus, a movement became obvious in many assemblies.
 As the wind meets the leaves of the jungle.
 Oh God! That last time of anticipation!

(*ibid.*, 172)

In each of the poems about the Rama story, Chakbast devotes considerable attention to the tone of his narrative. These descriptions are not meant to propel the narrative. On the contrary, the slow pace of action is permitted by the linguistic pragmatics of *kaiḥiyat*, “a very simple vocabulary and an air of innocence—with great depths behind it, but generally not ones acceptable to rational analysis” since the poet produces a mood of “melancholy” pleasing to the reader (Pritchett 1994, 120). Chakbast casts Rama, his mother, and the population of Ayodhya through the *kaiḥiyat* of tragedy with forthright sketches of mood, reinforcing the drastic nature of Rama’s circumstances.

Discussion

It is clear from the above discussion that Brij Narain Chakbast offered a novel telling of the Rama Story through his three poems in Urdu. Adamantly opposed to narrow sectarian debates, Chakbast maintained his literary and linguistic independence until his death. His very enterprise of creation becomes a form of resistance against the prevailing social norms of his time. After his death, independence movements to free South Asia from British colonialism would result in India and Pakistan adopting Hindi and Urdu in the project of nation-building, eradicating any sense of shared culture.

Nonetheless, the Chakbast telling of the Rama story has continued to intrigue contemporary audiences. The three poems altogether comprise fewer words than this paper, but they depart from more popular tellings to merit consideration on their own terms. It is worth mentioning that

Ramanand Sagar deemed Chakbast's rendition of the Rama story so sufficiently important and exceptional that he included it in the list of the "major Ramayanas" from which he created his enormously successful television production of the *Ramayana*, aired in India to record audiences in the late 1980s (Rajagopal 2001, 102).

While this paper has specifically concentrated on the work of Chakbast, it has also provided a glimpse into how communities accepted the Rama story. Perhaps unlike other tales which have now become markedly associated with Hinduism, the Rama story exercised tremendous impact and became the substrate for a number of tellings across South and Southeast Asia. In the past two decades, the movement to build the Rama temple in Ayodhya has led to the instrumentalization of the *Ramayana* for political mobilization (Pollock 1993). In reflecting on the myriad Rama stories in circulation, it may be useful to consider how in the same century of Chakbast's death, the *Ramayana* was transformed from a narrative of inclusion inviting inter-religious engagement into a narrative of exclusion delimiting social and religious boundaries. □

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