

Interpreting the Muscular Ram Statue in Procession

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A distinctive Ram statue was used in Hyderabad, Telangana, in the annual *shobha yatra* (grace procession) between 2012 and 2018 for the occasion of Ram Navami, the festival of Ram's birthday.¹ This festival occurs each year in the larger program of Spring Navratri. *Yatra* translates from Hindi as "procession," and is used to refer to both religious and political variants, while *shobha* commonly translates as "grace." The two terms together highlight the religious aspects of the procession and its place in the ritual calendar. The first public *shobha yatra* in Hyderabad occurred in 2010. Previously, it was a more relaxed affair that was celebrated in private. This change occurred in response to the Milad-un-Nabi celebrations of the Hyderabad Muslim community becoming public for the first time in 2010, just a few weeks before that year's Ram Navami.² The last *yatra* I have information about is 2018. Personal and academic factors made it impractical to continue to follow the Hyderabad *yatra* after this date. However, the impact of pandemic restrictions on the *yatra* would be fascinating to discuss. A cursory search suggests that there were some changes made to Ram's face in post-pandemic

1. Robin Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice* (Santa Barbara, Cali: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 139.

2. Z. Fareen Parvez, "Celebrating the Prophet: Religious Nationalism and the Politics of Milad-un-Nabi Festivals in India," *Nations & Nationalism* 20, no. 2 (2014): 218–238; see 218–219.

celebrations.³ The uncertainties, however, caution against (most) speculative analysis. This topic is consequently beyond my capacity to address. This discussion will therefore be limited to the pre-pandemic *yatras* of the 2010s.

This article will argue that this unique Ram statue from Hyderabad communicates both political and devotional messages through its body. These messages can be further delineated according to the immediate audience: local, national, and international. This communication hinges upon people seeing Ram, and Ram communicating with them in return. This deeply visual communication extends the field of our inquiry to encompass physical, digital, and international interactions with the god. This expansive field illustrates the simultaneity of political, religious, and social dimensions. This line of inquiry leads to the preliminary conclusion that this Ram statue acts as a floating signifier for Indian culture.⁴ The particular discursive contexts interpret the content of “Indian culture” in distinctive ways. As Ram shifts between the different contexts, his specific meanings are rewritten according to the idiosyncrasies of the particular context. Yet each context maintains the connection between the signifier – Ram – and the signified, i.e., traditions in the subcontinent. The varied meanings of

3. Reddees, “View of Hindu God Rama Idol with Bow and Arrows in a Temple,” *Deposit Photos*, April 1st, 2020, <https://depositphotos.com/359549546/stock-photo-view-hindu-god-rama-idol.html>; “Happy Ram Navami 2021: Wishes, Messages, Quotes, Images, Greetings, Facebook & WhatsApp status,” *Times of India*, April 21st, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/events/happy-ram-navami-2021-wishes-messages-quotes-sri-rama-navami-images-facebook-whatsapp-status/articleshow/82159117.cms>.

4. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Silvia Elisabeth Moraes, “Global Citizenship as a Floating Signifier: Lessons from UK Universities,” *International Journal of Development Education and Global Learning* 6, no. 2 (2014), 27–42.

this Ram demonstrate the extensive range a concept like “Indian society” has, and, moreover, attests to the concept’s flexibility.

After some caveats, I will begin with a physical description of the statue. The following sections will examine the local, national, and international contexts. The first caveat relates to the preliminary and tentative nature of my analysis and conclusions. All of the information I have accessed about the statue, the procession, and the actors involved comes from online sources. The study is also restricted to English language media (except for very simple instances, like the phrase *jai Shri Ram*/ Victory to Lord Ram). This is probably not indicative of Ram’s interaction with most people online, especially with regard to the linguistic parameters. However, it provides an illuminating window of insight into the distinctions between Ram’s different audiences.

The first time a super-sized Ram statue participated in the festival was in 2012. It was one statue amongst many that participated in the *yatra*, moving on top of decorated cars. As illustrated in Figure 2, the statue was created in a workshop and painted by artists.⁵ While it is unclear from the available information whether a new statue is made every year, it is clear from the available photojournalism that there are multiple statues made in the same pose that have the same iconographic attributes, are of the same or very similar scale, and have the same colouring.⁶ Therefore, for the purposes of this essay,

5. “Artist Giving Final Touches to a Statue,” *Times of India*, March 27th, 2015, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/new-section/Artist-giving-final-touches-to-a-statue/articleshowpics/46713666.cms>.

6. Noah Seelam/AFP, “An Indian Artist Puts the Final Touches to Statues of the Hindu God Lord Ram Ahead of the Sri Rama Navami Festival at a Workshop in Hyderabad on April 13th, 2016,” *Getty Images*, 2016, <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/an-indian-artist-puts-the-final-touches-to->

the statue(s) will be taken to be the same “thing.” References to “Hyderabadi Ram,” “our Hyderabadi Ram,” or “our Ram” are made for the purposes of clarity and differentiation between the many different Rams being discussed here; they all refer to the main statue in this discussion. It is not intended to imply any particular meaning beyond that we (author and reader) are focusing on a community-sponsored Ram in Hyderabad.

Throughout this discussion I will be using Richard H. Davis’ theoretical approach to Indian religious objects. This approach focuses on maintaining the theological postulate of animate images of gods to keep the door open for “the possible agency of art objects themselves.”⁷ Throughout this discussion, I will be applying Ram’s “possible agency” in order to better describe the relationship of this statue to Indian society, politics, and religion. I find Davis’ approach particularly useful as it foregrounds the perceptions people have of the object, making the object’s “needs” entirely conditional on the construal of those around it. For example, someone who thinks Ram is a powerful Hindu deity with special significance for the Nation’s enemies will likely have specific readings of the Ram statue’s meaning and the appropriate responses. On the other hand, someone who thinks Ram is a spectacular, exotic example of Indian religiosity will likely have different readings of the statue’s meanings and place it in a different context. Ascribing agency to the Ram statue in this way helps delineate the context in which people interact with it.

statues-of-the-news-photo/520815068#/an-indian-artist-puts-the-final-touches-to-statues-of-the-hindu-god-picture-id520815068.

7. Richard H. Davis, “What do Indian Images Really Want?” in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, ed. Bruce M. Sullivan (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 10; Richard H. Davis *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: PUP, 2020), 6–8, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400844425>.

I would like to make a distinction between my approach and that of Davis before moving forward. Davis' approach to the image's identity is somewhat linear as he constructs the biographies of images and their multiple lives. This is, of course, appropriate to the kind of historical project he undertakes. It is, however, problematic when applied to the kind of digital simultaneity I wish to investigate in the life of our Ram. Digital news platforms and social media – notably YouTube – insist on the concurrent existence of Ram's many messages. They are distinguished by their geographically distinct contexts, not their time period.

In order to discuss this simultaneity with a bit more precision, I will use Laclau's concept of the floating signifier.⁸ Laclau identifies the pattern of a floating signifier as a specific sign (signifier) that has a fixed referent (signified) and gets used in a variety of often mutually contradictory discursive contexts. The conclusions that the particular positioning of a sign and referent support indicates what kind of normative dynamics are being projected. By attending to the dynamics implied by a given discursive context, the floating signifier can be very illuminating. As a contested sign that is used for distinctive ends in different sites, Ram helps indicate what "Indian society" is intended to mean for the proximate audience. These distinctive uses need not be reconciled, at least for the purposes of this article. The distinctions and/or differences are the immediate focus of this study.

I will occasionally use quotation marks around the term "restoration." This does not refer to arguments against the accuracy of Hindutva conceptions of history. Here, I am thinking of Sheldon Pollack's highly detailed and eloquent opposition to the Hindutva

8. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; also see Moraes, "Global Citizenship as a Floating Signifier."

position that Ram was a historical king whose legacy lends unambiguous support to the concept of the Hindu nation-state.⁹ I use quotation marks to indicate the constructed and contextually specific location of these conceptions of history and their impact on the present. I also use quotation marks around the term “realistic” in the same way. This discussion is about exploring the various ways that this Ram statue relates to Indian culture in the minds of his audience; this is not a discussion of how truth-apt Hindutva conceptions of history are or their rigour.

Physical description

I have so far referred to the statue as “super-sized” without being more specific. This is in part because I have been unable to determine the exact dimensions of the statue. Based on the images I have been able to find of it in the workshop, I estimate it to be 10–14 ft in height, 5–6 ft in length (hand to bow), and 2–4 ft in depth (bow to elbows).¹⁰ The materials used are even less clear than the dimensions. It seems to be some sort of solid material that likely dries or finishes white. This seems likely as the bright colours of Ram’s clothes show up very vibrantly. The actual statue is contiguous with a base or at least attached in such a way that it was more sensible to use a ladder to paint on the final details instead of laying the statue down horizontally. It is possible that the statue and the base are formed from the same larger block of material or poured into a mold.

As mentioned above, the number of statues made annually is unclear. It is possible that multiple new statues are made every year.

9. Sheldon Pollock, “Ramayana and Political Imagination in India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 1993), 261–297.

10. Noah Seelam/AFP, “An Indian Artist Puts the Final Touches.”

There could be an adjudication process that the organizing committee oversees. It is also possible that this workshop makes these statues for more than one city. This second explanation is less likely as I have been unable to find any credible claims of the statue being used in another city's Ram Navami *yatra*, although it is still possible. For the purposes of this paper, I will be working with the premise that the only statue of this kind is used in the Hyderabad procession.

All the photo and video documentation of this statue that I have been able to find depicts the same shade of blue skin, the same pink lips and cheeks, the same wide, black-lined eyes, yellow and orange *dhoti*, bare chest and arms, bulging muscles, bare feet, and the same shaped bow, quiver, and weapons (see fig. 1 and 2). These similarities, together with the evidence that only one super-sized Ram statue takes part in the procession in Hyderabad each year, are my reasons for treating these statues as if they are the same figure in this essay. I deliberately use “figure” instead of “artifact” to refer to the statue(s) to allow for the implication of possible multiple iterations.

The procession has an organizing committee called the Bhagyanagar Sri Ramanavami Utsava Samithi, but I have been unable to find any specific details about this committee's organizational structure.¹¹ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for Goshamahal, Hyderabad, has been annually involved in the *yatra* since it began in 2010. His website gives his title as: “Convenor – Shri Ram Navami Shobha Yatra.”¹² However, his exact role in the *yatra*'s organization is not explained in any detail. Regarding the route, I have found indications

11. Naveen Sangala, “Sri Ram Navami Shobha Yatra 2013 in Hyderabad,” *Hindupad*, April 2013, <https://hindupad.com/sri-ram-navami-shobha-yatra-in-hyderabad/>.

12. “Profile,” on Raja Singh's official website, accessed February 28th, 2018, <http://www.trajasingh.com/about/>.

that the 2018 *yatra* on March 25th began at the Sitarambagh temple at 11:30, made its way through many of the city's neighbourhoods, and ended at a public high school at 18:30.¹³ The routes for other years, if divergent, are less clear.

Local Hyderabad Context

The atmosphere of Hindu competition with the Muslim community is deeply intertwined with our Ram's existence. This is particularly apparent in the procession's originary circumstances. In 2010, the Muslim community of Hyderabad organized a large, public festival to celebrate Milad-un-Nabi, as mentioned above. Z. Fareen Parvez examines the relationship between this 2010 festival for the Hyderabad Muslim community and the Ram Navami/Hanuman Jayanthi festival that occurred a few weeks later. This year was the first time either of these festivals were publicly celebrated in the streets of Hyderabad.¹⁴ Parvez demonstrates that there is considerable tension between the religious aims of the festival and the political ones of the associated political party. This tension and its violent expressions can be seen in the 2012 riots that occurred two days after the Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti celebrations in Hyderabad. The events are reported to have been based on insults between individuals and groups defending their respective communities.¹⁵ This tension was still visibly felt during the 2016 celebrations, which

13. Sanagala, "Sri Ram Navami Shobha Yatra"; TNN, "Ram Navami Shobha Yatra Rolls Out in Sea of Faithful," *The Times of India*, March 26th, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/ram-navami-shoba-yatra-rolls-out-in-sea-of-faithful/articleshow/63459528.cms>.

14. Parvez, "Celebrating the Prophet," 218–219.

15. "HEY RAM," Suresh Kumar's BlogSpot, accessed February 28th, 2018, <http://sureshixp.blogspot.ca/2016/04/hey-ram.html> (discontinued).

prompted the police to go out in force during the festival and install temporary surveillance cameras along the route.¹⁶

These tensions of Hindu/Muslim relations in Hyderabad continued into the 2018 *yatra*. The day before the *yatra*, a photo of a promotional poster featuring our Ram and Raja Singh on the wall of a mosque was widely circulated on social media.¹⁷ Its circulation on social media elicited strong feelings in both communities. Members of the Hindu community lauded it as an example of Ram's pervasive power, while members of the Muslim community were deeply upset by the violation of their community's space. The police investigated the matter and dispelled the illusion within hours: the poster was, in fact, hanging at quite a distance from the mosque. No violent incidents occurred that day or the actual day of the *yatra*. The need for a quick response on the part of the Hyderabad police illustrates the continued tensions between these communities, which are still pervasive and easily rouse concerns.

The *shobha* half of the procession also indicates an important dimension of how people commonly participate in the event. Being in the deity's presence and exchanging glances with the god is a particularly intimate and potent source of blessing. Processing through the neighbourhood, or inspecting the god's property, is understood as a long-standing habit of the gods in India. Historically,

16. Special Correspondent, "Shobha Yatra Procession Peaceful," *The Hindu*, March 29th, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/shobha-yatra-procession-peaceful/article7044802.ece>.

17. Mekhala Saran, "Ram Navami Poster Hanging from Hyderabad Mosque a Camera Trick," *The Quint*, March 28th, 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/a-ram-navami-poster-did-not-hang-from-a-mosque>; Express News Service, "Rama Navami Begins On a Tense Note in Hyderabad," *The New Indian Express*, March 16th, 2018, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/hyderabad/2018/mar/26/rama-navami-begins-on-a-tense-note-in-hyderabad-1792476.html>.

common processional statues are often quite small in size (see fig. 3). These smaller processional statues also differ from our Ram statue in that a great deal less of the god's body is visible to devotees. The small statues are almost entirely covered in festive clothing, jewelry, and garlands.¹⁸ In Figure 3, only the god's face and hands are visible. Our Ram statue does wear garlands (see fig. 1), but his clothing and size give his participation different parameters. Our Ram provides his large crowds of devotees with a very different experience of *darśan*, the beatific exchange of looks between god and devotee.¹⁹ Not only does his size make him easier to spot, but a good deal more of his body is visible to the devotee. In addition, our Ram's hyper muscular physique connects him to more recent trends in how Hindu gods are depicted.

Our Hyderabad Ram was not the first super-sized muscular god to engage with devotees in India. Philip Lutgendorf traces a series of Hanumans from the 1970s through to the 1990s.²⁰ He specifically ties these large gods to the Hindutva concern with promoting physical strength and prosperity within the nation.²¹ Although the concern with preparing the Indian nation for self-rule was widespread throughout the groups advocating for national development, the Hindutva reformers were particularly focused on

18. Sushmita Sen, "Ram Navami: Why and How is it Celebrated; Wishes to Send to Family, Friends [PHOTOS]," *International Business Times*, March 28th, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.in/ram-navami-why-how-it-celebrated-wishes-send-family-friends-photos-627426>.

19. Sandhya Jain, "Hyderabad: Triumph of Sri Rama," *Vijayvaani.com*, April 6th, 2012, <http://www.vijayvaani.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?aid=2254>; Sangala, "Sri Ram Navami Shobha Yatra."

20. Philip Lutgendorf, "My Hanuman Is Bigger Than Yours," *History of Religions* 33, no. 3 (1994): 211–245, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062737>.

21. Philip Lutgendorf, "Monkey in the Middle: The Status of Hanuman in Popular Hinduism," *Religion* 27, no. 4 (1997): 311–332, <https://doi.org/10.1006/reli.1997.0095>.

the correlation between physical strength, self-defense, and international recognition.²² Lutgendorf connects this deeply rooted valorization of muscularity to these emphatically “ripped” gods.

There is a distinctive mixture of messages communicated by our “ripped” Ram to the devotees physically present at the procession. The god’s powerful physique and tensed musculature corresponds to the aesthetic category (*rasa*) of anger (*raudram*). Besides communicating Ram’s anger, his large muscles indicate that his strength and force are of the mechanical, quantifiable sort that ordinary mortals use to accomplish tasks.²³ As Ram operates according to ordinary rules of existence, the size of his muscles corresponds to the degree of protection he can offer the nation. In this frame, his flexing muscles build on the atmosphere of competition. He is able and imminently prepared to defend against any threat and cut down any enemy.

This potential action communicates a very different message from his facial expression. Our Ram’s face is rosy-cheeked and smiling, complete with shining eyes. These features correspond more closely to the aesthetic category (*rasa*) of peace (*śānti*). This mood communicates happiness, serenity, and tranquility to devotees, messages that are highly distinct from his flexing muscles. Lutgendorf’s work on super-sized Hanumans – Ram’s simian military ally and devotee – provides a suggestive frame for reconciling the different moods present in the depiction of our Ram’s

22. Sikata Banerjee, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Tapan Basu, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993).

23. Anuradha Kapur, “Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram,” in *Hinduism and Others*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1993), 93, 100; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2016), 173.

body. He discusses the epithet of the “delighted hero” as it relates to one of Hanuman’s temples, wherein there is a very large image of him.²⁴ This delighted hero is physically muscular and tensed for potential action. He is prepared to attack enemies and defend his people, presenting his followers with a message of warmth and welcome while communicating a threat to opponents. He is also blissfully happy by his devotion and the peace that follows. This figure mixes a body-builder physique with the happiness of devoted peace.

As such, he could provide an interpretive key for our Ram’s contrasts. His impressive physique communicates both his ability to protect his devotees as well as his ability to bring harm to potential enemies. His radiant smile welcomes and illuminates the devotees who have come to see the god and be seen by him in return. The kind of *darśan* our Ram has with his devotees is, then, not wholly contained between the god and devotee. He simultaneously communicates warmth to his community and a physical threat to enemies. This *darśan* is, in this sense, not simply limited to devotees. Enemies are promised failure while devotees are given encouragement. The action of physical defense becomes intimately tied to the stability of tranquility.

Returning to Laclau’s pattern of the floating signifier, some implications for the “signified” can be sketched. Ram’s actions, actualized and potential, provide normative meaning for the community of those engaging in *darśan* with the god. Ram’s tensed muscles broadcast a threat to any current or future enemies while his rosy smile shines on devotees. Their community needs protection from enemies and internal encouragement. Their communal security

24. Philip Lutgendorf, “Major and Minor: Hanuman in Hindu Life and Scholarly Discourse,” in *Hanuman’s Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (New York: OUP, 2007), 3–34.

should be safeguarded and ensured by Ram's potential for violent action. This highlights the deeply-rooted Hindutva emphasis on physical strength and the prosperity of the nation. The cultivation and maintenance of physical strength is here a guarantee of communal security and life. His community should not only be capable of effectively eliminating opponents but also actively prepared to succeed in this area. Members of Ram's community should be happily confident in their security and other communities should act with respect towards those he protects.

In Hyderabad itself, the atmosphere of direct competition between the Hindu and Muslim communities actualizes these messages. The *yatra* itself is a concrete response to the first public celebration of Milad-un-Nabi which occurred through the same streets. The procession's route – i.e., the neighbourhoods, educational buildings, and places of worship it includes – is another means for actualizing these messages of self-defense. The Hindu community is broadcasting its preparedness to answer any opposition or threat from the Muslim community. Ram is also broadcasting encouragement to the devotees who physically attended to engage in *darśan*. He looks on their use of public space and their route with his rosy smile and bright eyes. This provides a pattern for how the Ram devotees should relate to others in the city of Hyderabad. The Hindu community (although this could arguably include any devotee of Ram/God/Truth as we will explore a bit more below) should be confident in their strength and that enemies of their prosperity will be correspondingly chastened.

National Context

In the national context, our Ram finds his place on a spectrum of similarly sized and disposed versions of himself. This section will

detail the similarities and dissimilarities between our Ram and other versions of himself. This comparison will further attest to the mixture of peace (*śānti*) and anger (*raudram*) in our Ram's body. Besides the aesthetics, these other Rams are also evidence of the truly national character of this kind of communication. Two general modes of engaging with this kind of communication will also be explored: the more this-worldly mode and the more devotional mode. These modes continue to apply in both the national and local contexts.

There are two statues in the same *yatra* as our Ram which follow more historically common conventions. They operate on the premise that divine bodies are not exclusively mundane "sense organs," as in the Cartesian sense, but communicate specific meanings about the difference between the human and the divine. These statues have relaxed muscles, a tranquil expression, and a serene posture. As they do not require strong, tensed muscles to accomplish their goals, they are further away from the modern universe of mechanical causation.

The first statue of this kind is a super-sized Ram, crowned and sitting on a throne (see fig. 5).²⁵ This Ram has a serene facial expression, consistent with the *śānti* aesthetic described above. While he is carrying a bow in his left hand and an arrow in his right, any action-readiness of the mundane variety this might imply is contradicted by his jeweled ornaments and shoes. The second Ram is a bit smaller, being either of a normal human size or slightly taller than average (see fig. 4). This Ram processes as the apex of a trio with his brother on his right and his wife on his left.²⁶ Notably, he is crowned and less muscular than our Ram. Both of the Rams just

25. Dilip Merala, "Ram Navami 2017 Celebration in Hyderabad," *India.com*, April 4th, 2017, <http://www.india.com/travel/articles/ram-navami-2017-celebration-in-hyderabad/>.

26. Ghanashyam, "Sri Ramanavami Celebration in Hyderabad," *Oneindia*, April

described are crowned and ornamented with jewels, their faces serene and muscles relaxed. Their use of the aesthetic register of *śānti* extends beyond their facial expressions to the rest of their body, thus influencing their body language a great deal more than our Ram.

There are three other super-sized Rams that are further along the *raudram* side of the spectrum than the Rams which exhibit the *śānti* aesthetic. The first statue appeared in the annual Ram Navami procession in Hazaribag, Jharkhand.²⁷ The Hazaribag Ram shares many of the same attributes, colouring, and poses as our Hyderabad Ram. However, the facial expression and exact posture seem to be different. Much like the Hyderabad Ram, the Hazaribag Ram is involved in his city's Ram Navami festival, but it is unclear from the available evidence whether he actually goes on procession or is fixed to a non-mobile stage. Whichever the case, the form, colouring, attributes, and posture of both Rams are extremely similar.

Both Rams are also similar in posture and form to another Ram in Belgaum, Karnataka.²⁸ This Ram is also a super-sized statue on a similar scale to our Hyderabad Ram. He has a similar posture: bow in left hand, right hand down by his side, hair coiled on top of his head and flowing down his back, quiver of arrows on his back. His feet and chest are also bare, displaying his bulging muscles.

9th, 2014, <https://www.oneindia.com/photos/sri-ramanavami-celebration-in-hyderabad-46944.html#photos-3/>.

27. NS ki Duniya, "HAZARIBAG RAM NAVAMI 2018 – Ram Navami Dashmi – हज़ारीबाग रामनवमी दशमी 2018 | NS ki Duniya |," March 26th, 2018, YouTube video, 3:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEaYvh78y9E>. (Page discontinued).

28. Shri Ram Sena Hindustan Belgaum, "Profile Picture," Facebook, April 17th, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/srsbgm/photos/a.49015513737665002.125085.490154477665068/1328732357140605/>. The Belgaum Ram was a donation from a local business association, the Belgaum District Fort Bhaji Market Association, to the Belgaum's Ram Navami organizational committee, the Ram Navami Utsav Samiti.

However, the Belgaum Ram holds an arrow in his right hand and has a far more tense expression on his face. These differences allow us to classify this Ram as a third “form” of the statue.

This last Ram is a little different from the ones discussed above. He is part of a proposal and has yet to be constructed at the time of writing. In 2017 the Government of Uttar Pradesh, headed by Chief Minister Adityanath, proposed the construction of a temple in Ayodhya close to the site where many believe Ram’s birthplace (*Ramjanmabhumi*) on Earth was located.²⁹ An early plan for this temple includes a super-sized Ram on its roof in place of the architecturally common *shikhara* (mountain peak) that towers over the sanctum sanctorum of the Hindu *mandir* (temple). The photo released by the *Times of India* shows this Ram as entirely metallic and unpainted (see fig. 6). He is almost in exactly the same posture as our Hyderabad Ram: bow in his left hand, right hand down by his side, bare feet and chest, hair coiled on top of his head and flowing down his back, a quiver of arrows on his back. His facial expression, however, is even more tense than the Belgaum Ram. None of these Rams have the rosy smile and happy expression of our Hyderabad Ram. They are more tense and are more representative of the *raudram* aesthetic.

This range of Ram statues indicates a spectrum of different communications occurring across the representation of this god. Despite their differences, all basically participate in the ordinary mechanics of mundane causation and proportions. The range amongst the aesthetics included in each Ram’s messaging fleshes out

29. Shailvee Sharda, “UP Government Plans 100-metre Statue of Lord Rama in Ayodhya,” *The Times of India*, October 10th, 2017, <http://toi.in/2sRQla/a24gk>. See also Times of India (@timesofindia), “UP Government Plans 100-metre Statue of Lord Rama in Ayodhya,” Twitter, October 10th, 2017, <https://twitter.com/timesofindia/status/917681251934334976/photo/1>.

the variety of associations linked to these monumental representations of the god. The statues more influenced by *śānti* indicate the peaceful prosperity that our Ram communicates with his smile. Those more influenced by *raudram* indicate the imminent threat that our Ram communicates with his flexed muscles.

Beyond indicating the mixture of aesthetics present in our Ram, they also attest to the geographical range across which these messages are being communicated. These messages are not limited to Hyderabad's annual Ram Navami *yatra*; similar messages are being broadcast, received, and reacted to across the Republic. The statues discussed above indicate the conversations happening in person. Below we will discuss some of the digital conversations of our Ram as well. This larger conversation is occurring through the various media outlets and promotional materials through which the image of our Ram travels privately and publicly within the Indian social sphere. Before discussing the mechanics and features of these domestic travels in more detail, I would first like to note some of the differences from the local context.

In this context, our Ram is dis-located from his hometown and the details of those intimate roots. Part of the Ram's conversation is separated from the inhabitants of Hyderabad. His message of encouragement for Hindus is disconnected from the streets of the *yatra* route. His message of effective reaction to potential enemies of that community is disconnected from the Milad-un-Nabi procession and the Muslim neighbourhoods through which he normally travels. The action of asserting Hindu activities in public spaces as well as spaces in which Hyderabad Muslims are normally more autonomous is uprooted. In this national context, our Ram is no longer directly communicating with either the Hindus of Hyderabad or the city's Muslims. The intimacy of his gaze is no longer personal. The signifier is maintained in this new context yet the signified has been

dislocated and enlarged. Ram now simultaneously communicates directly with devotees and potential enemies across the Republic.

This shift in the terms of interaction with our Ram has at least two major consequences that I would like to highlight. The first is that the community of devotees are unified into a connected whole, an imagined community. The image of his smile and flexed muscles permits a much wider circulation than possible through physical *darśan* at the Hyderabad *yatra*. The full gamut of the Indian population can be divided according to those whom Ram smiles at and those whom he is poised to attack. Excluding the actual complications of inter-tradition devotional habits, our Ram deftly splits the social imagination into people who should feel encouraged by and those who should feel afraid by his presence. The Indians (Hindus) in Ram's good books should feel encouraged in their efforts to value their way of life and culture. Habits like highly elaborate and lengthy public processions of Hindu gods are beneficial activities that should be encouraged. The Indians who inspire Ram's enmity should not only be warned but should also accept these public celebrations, increasing both in grandeur and publicity, of Hindu festivals. In this way, Ram's activity of encouraging and warning becomes part of the distinctively Indian/Hindu way of life as well as part of the call for that culture to pervade all parts of Indian society.

Before we move on to the second consequence, I would like to draw the reader's attention to another important aspect relating to how the image of the god is made available. One of the most critical paths that Ram uses for these national travels is paved and maintained by the local BJP organization in Hyderabad. Just before the 2009 elections for the State Legislature, the city of Hyderabad's representation fragmented into more constituencies within the city itself. This change was precipitated by the inclusion of Hyderabad, formerly the capital city of Andhra Pradesh, within the newly created

state of Telangana. More immediately relevant for our Ram is the 2014 State election in which the city's constituency of Goshamahall elected the BJP candidate T. Raja Singh to the Telangana State Assembly. The rhetoric published on his website had many markers of Hindutva elements. His website details his former involvement with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), his "cow protection" activities, and his concern for protecting the Hindu community from unnamed threats.³⁰ In September 2020 he was banned from Facebook and Instagram and labelled a "dangerous individual" on account of "hate speech" following a scathing article in the *Wall Street Journal*.³¹

His involvement with Hyderabad's *shobha yatra* is also given a separate paragraph on the politician's website.³² As mentioned above, he was involved with the first *yatra* in 2010 and has been since involved in the procession's organization each year thereafter. His annual involvement in the procession is quite clear: he appears in promotional material, gives speeches, and provides commentary. The YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook pages titled "Sri Ram Channel" are all platforms for promoting the *yatra* and are also involved with the MLA's office, if not directly managed by them.³³ The YouTube

30. "Profile," on Raja Singh's official website, accessed February 28th, 2018, <http://www.trajasingsh.com/about/>.

31. Anam Ajmal, "Facebook bans T. Raja Singh of BJP, tags him as a 'dangerous individual,'" *Times of India*, Sept 4th, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/facebook-bans-t-raja-singh-of-bjp-tags-him-as-a-dangerous-individual/articleshow/77907922.cms>; Newly Purnell and Jeff Horowitz, "Facebook's Hate-Speech Rules Collide With Indian Politics," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug 14th, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg-11597423346>.

32. "Profile," on Raja Singh's official website.

33. SRI RAM Channel (@SRIRAMCHANNEL), "Home," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/SRIRAMCHANNEL/>; Sri Ram Channel (@SriRamChannel), Twitter, <https://twitter.com/sriramchannel>; RAJA SINGH

channel provides the strongest evidence that all three social media accounts are being managed by his office, as these sites are named after him and include links to his official website, his office's Twitter, an outdated link to his office's Facebook page, his official Google+ profile, and his official app.³⁴ From these digital mechanisms, the local BJP organization is critical to Ram's national travels.

These digital paving stones for Ram's travels explicitly emphasize the connection between the Hindu community's prosperity, defense, and action-readiness. As discussed above, a foundational part of Hindutva discourse centers on defense of the Hindu community from foreign domination, notably the perceived power of the Muslim community in India. This is explicitly emphasized in Raja Singh's political platform. His platform explicitly describes the *yatra* as a "show of strength by the Hindu community."³⁵ "His bravery" in defending "Hindu families" during violence after the initial 2010 *yatra* "was widely publicized and Raja Singh's Hindu seva [service] got recognized again."³⁶ The need to assert the celebration of Hindu festivals in public space is identified by these descriptions as an important marker of the community's prosperity and wellbeing. Indian society should include these demonstrations and encourage their existence. In this context, these super-sized gods are flexing to embolden the national Hindu community, inspire fear in those who would do them harm, and promote a vision of Indian society where this is normatively encouraged.

MLA, "Home," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SRIRAMCHANNEL1>.

34. RAJA SINGH MLA, "About," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/user/SRIRAMCHANNEL1>.

35. "Profile," on Raja Singh's official website.

36. "Profile," on Raja Singh's official website.

The second major consequence I want to highlight is rather the opposite from the one just discussed. The dis-location of our Ram also serves to de-personalize the enemy whom he threatens. The very concrete and distinct Hyderabad community whose neighbourhoods our Ram physically travels are not the obvious target of his dislocated wanderings. Although the Hyderabad BJP organizers from T. Raja Singh's offices might have explicitly and deliberately identified Ram's enemies with the Muslims living in India, individuals actually seeing the images they circulated might give that enemy a very different identity. Christophe Jaffrelot argues the political intentions of organizing *yatras* does not completely line up with the attendees' reasons for participating.³⁷ He discusses the famous 1990 *rath yatra* led by the then-president of the BJP, a chariot procession from Somnath, Gujarat to Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. This *yatra* deliberately used the religious form of the Hindu procession itself for the political purpose of mobilizing opinion about the solidarity of Hindus against the "yoke" of Muslim oppression.³⁸

This particular case is quite analogous to the *shobha yatra* of Hyderabad. Both events were religious in form and have apparent political purposes. Advani's *yatra* was specifically aimed at drumming up support for the construction of a temple dedicated to Ram at the site of a Mughal-era Mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. One of the ways this support was encouraged to take place was as a kind of fundraising campaign. Ordinary Hindus in India and abroad were encouraged to pay for individual bricks that would be used in the construction of the temple. Each brick bore the message "*Jai Shri*

37. Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Hindu Nationalist Reinterpretation of Pilgrimage in India: The Limits of *yatra* Politics," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1–19.

38. Jaffrelot, "Yatra politics," 11–12.

Ram” (Victory of the Lord Ram) on the side, making the donation of each an act of special devotion to the god. Despite the differences in the occurrence and distance covered by these events, a kind of model for the Hyderabad *yatra* can be seen in the 1990 *yatra*. Images of our Ram provoked similar kinds of devotion from Hindus on the internet. Our Ram’s travels through Facebook and Twitter are particularly marked by interaction with other participants on the social media platforms. It is important to note that this higher degree of displayed participation is due to the structure of the websites themselves; they are all designed to encourage observable interaction. Thus, the decision to put the image on these sites includes the intention to display others’ interaction with it, alongside whatever religious or political goals inform the post. In this way, the political uses of our Ram on the national stage are also marked by easily observable devotional uses. Devotees often interact with posts of our Ram with variations of “*Jai Shri Ram*” in the comments sections.³⁹ As Jaffrelot argued for Advani’s *yatra*, it is equally likely that viewers commenting on images of our Ram with devotional messages did not have the same perception of the *yatra* as its BJP organizers.

In addition to what I have discussed with respect to the second major consequence of dislocating our Ram from his hometown, the enemy he is poised to attack is also dislocated from that context. The enemy could be his mythical enemy Ravan or the temptation of whatever vices with which the devotees are struggling. These devotees might very well not be making the connection to Muslim bodies at all. It is important to note that Jaffrelot applied his argument to individuals attending Advani’s *yatra* in person. Of course, there is

39. Raja Singh (@TigerRajaSingh), “श्री राम नवमी शोभा यात्रा के लिए इस वर्ष श्री राम, हनुमान जी, शिवाजी महाराज, शिर राम रथ बनारसीं गयी मूर्ति,” Twitter, March 30th, 2015, 10:45 a.m., <https://twitter.com/tigerrajasingh/status/582554216230596608>.

considerable space for interpretive autonomy for individuals who are physically present at the Hyderabad *yatra* as well. Yet, the consequence of digital dis-location that I wish to highlight is the expansion of that space for interpretive autonomy through social media. The intentions of the organizers do not preclude devotees from interacting with our Ram for distinctive reasons. Indeed, the organizers' ability to determine the interpretive framework is further reduced in this context.

The other statues of Ram discussed attest to a broader conversation going on in India. Ram has an emotional range communicated through specific aesthetic conventions. This points to the increasingly mechanical and mundane depiction of gods. Ram is more like us than not, even when he is the peaceful and tranquil version of himself. His proportions and general appearance directly correspond to our own. Ram also continues to communicate messages of defense and action-readiness on behalf of his community, irrelevant of whether this be more devotional or more political. As his body encompasses both his rosy smile and his tensed muscles, so his body simultaneously broadcasts devotional and political messages to his community as well as anyone thinking of threatening that community. This gives some form to the possible range of meanings which people interpret our Ram to be saying.

There is continuity and friction in these different meanings. They assign different meanings to Ram's body, and through his body, those meanings are projected onto "Indian culture." Ram protects the distinctive "way of life" across the different physical and discursive locales he visits. He encourages it to flourish and threatens any enemies with destruction. Our Ram manages to be both flexible and rigid through his happiness and his anger.

International Context

Due to our Ram's size and photogenic appearance, he has become popular among internationally available media. While this kind of popularity in non-Indian media promises rich implications for post-colonial and related forms of analysis, the object of this section is to trace some preliminary contours of our Ram's international excursions. The following analysis is in no way intended to be comprehensive or exhaustive. I would like to focus on two examples that represent the range of contexts in which he makes digital appearances.

The first is an article designed to give *Huffington Post UK*'s non-Indian audiences the "Coles Notes" on Ram Navami (see fig. 1).⁴⁰ The article itself is a gallery post that includes factually correct, but minimal information on the actual event and emphasizes these "Stunning Images" of the celebration and Indian religiosity. This article uses an image of our Ram as its primary image, the central image accompanying the text preceding the actual photo series. Gallery articles are a useful medium for providing audiences with access to exotic, foreign, and alluring parts of the world. This article follows this format of delivering concrete evidence of what one can visually perceive as vibrant and colourful religious culture in India. The third image in the photo series is a close-up of "An Indian artist dressed as the Hindu goddess Kali" who appears to have flames coming out of her mouth.⁴¹ Pictures and articles like this one idealize

40. Sarah C. Nelson, "Ram Navami: 13 Stunning Images of The Hindu Festival Commemorating the Birth of Lord Rama (PICTURES)," *Huffington Post UK*, April 9th, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/04/09/ram-navami-13-stunning-images-hindu-festival-lord-rama-pictures_n_5116433.html.

41. Nelson, "Ram Navami: 13 Stunning."

the religious practices photographed and present them to outsider eyes while rewriting much of the local context.

Ram's physical surroundings of Hyderabadi streets, devotees, and BJP politics are infused with a different flavour. In the frame of the international media's bold, uppercase headlines and sparse, clean layout, these particulars become spectacular. This context includes them in the informational gallery of the cultured Western reader who needs to keep their conversational topics up to date. The elements in the photo become immediately accessible to the Western reader's eye. That access provides the spectator with interpretive authority over the meanings of the photo's elements. The sparse, clean format of the photo gallery stretches the range of potential meanings. The vibrant religiosity could be a positive expression of "rich cultural traditions" that are alive and well. That same vibrancy could just as easily be negatively cast as the activities of undereducated, literal understandings of reality. The photo's elements are no longer immediate interlocutors who might "talk back" to the interpreter. Ram's devotees are not in a position to disagree with the reader's interpretation. Here, Ram communicates in a different language.

The second example is hosted on the social media platform Pinterest. A solo portrait of our Ram is included in a large series of photos (board) titled "*****Hindu GodS*****" curated by an account named Anu. This account has 6.6k followers, 179.9k monthly views, and an extensive collection of boards or media collections.⁴² The specific board containing our Ram has 2.28k followers,⁴³ and the image includes a watermark from the source site, mallstuffs.com. On

42. Anu (@srinivasankls), "Profile," Pinterest, accessed December 11th, 2021, https://in.pinterest.com/Srinivasankls/_saved/.

43. Anu (@srinivasankls), "*****Hindu GodS*****."

the source site, our Ram is included in a blog post on the fabled connection between Ayodhya and a Korean princess.⁴⁴ The site itself is run alongside a YouTube and Twitter account, where the author self-describes as a “spiritual blogger” amongst other epithets.⁴⁵

The portrait of our Ram on Pinterest is much closer to the devotional engagement highlighted in the national context. In his portrait, there are no devotees present. There are some people present in the background, but they are busily engaged in some kind of activity and not engaged with the camera. Ram’s full body and green plinth are fully visible, effectively presenting the god to the viewer without any intermediary. Given the devotional tone of the Pinterest board, Ram is here to engage with the viewer intimately and individually. There is no reference to politics, local or national, amongst the photo’s elements. There is no mention of Hyderabad or any kind of community division. In this photo, Ram does not have anything to say about those topics. He is a convincing example of Jaffrelot’s contention that a diversity of motivations and meanings are present in BJP-sponsored devotions to Ram.

These recontextualizations of our Ram indicate a point at which the encoded meanings of his body are given a markedly different content. Ram communicates very differently in both the *Huffington Post UK* article and his Pinterest portrait. He is not commenting on any divisions between Hindu, Muslim, or Indian. He is not promising a robust defense against any specific enemy. In these contexts, he indicates that his messages are contextually specific.

44. Sarin, “Korean Connection with Ayodhya and Lord Rama,” Latest Hinduism news (blog), *mallstuffs*, March 16th, 2013, <https://mallstuffs.com/Blogs/BlogDetails.aspx?BlogId=259&BlogType=Spiritual&Topic=Korean%20connection%20with%20ayodhya%20and%20lord%20rama>.

45. GyanGanga (@sarinmall85), “Home Page,” Twitter, <https://twitter.com/sarinmall85>.

When Ram leaves India, he has something different to say to his audience. Not only this, but Ram has something different to say when he is in a Hindu digital context from a secularized, Western one. The sign, his bonny blue figure, remains constant across all contexts. Yet the specific meaning of the signified, his messages for the audience/viewer, shift.

Conclusion

The super-sized, muscular Ram statue from the Hyderabad Ram Navami *shobha yatra* constitutes part of the social, political, and devotional context of contemporary India. He builds on historical trends in devotional representations of divine bodies and political movements in his name. Differences between earlier examples of these trends and our Ram indicate the particular meanings communicated by his body. Both the devotional and political messages of defense and action-readiness are encoded in his body and communicated through his participation in the *yatra* and the reproduction of his participation through digital media. In the local and national contexts, his body valorizes the defense of the Hindu community against perceived threats, notably Indian Muslims and their history of political success in the subcontinent. This translates more specifically into the local community of Muslims within the city of Hyderabad and the larger community of Muslims within the Republic.

While these meanings are shared by other Ram statues used for similar purposes, they are also limited by their contextual boundaries. Digital images of our Ram are dis-located from the local and national conversations of politics and devotion. In these international travels, our Ram takes on messages of spectacle and allure. Yet even in the rough waters of international media, his body

also communicates devotional messages. He therefore communicates meanings that are at least contextually activated, if not contextually constituted.

As a fixed sign referring to the concept of “Indian culture,” our Ram’s range of meanings indicates the collaborating and contending themes that inhere in that concept. The idealized traditions that should determine the “way of life” in the streets of Hyderabad take their encouragement from the god-king who smiles upon correctly ordered societies and is also ready to destroy enemies of that order. Similar messages circulate with our Ram as well as around the Republic, encouraging the “distinctively” Indian way of life that ought to prevail all over the nation. Internationally, our Ram continues to embody the unique traditions of the subcontinent.

Our Ram, then, is a site where contemporary concerns, technology, and modes of communication impact religious, social, and political concerns of older provenance. The interaction between them produces a new, contemporary form of the god Ram who simultaneously communicates distinct messages for different people. He comes from a response to an interaction with contemporary concerns about community and nation, mediated by specific representations of reality and verisimilitude. Yet his life takes him far beyond the local meanings of his hometown, into the brave new world of social media and globalized politics.

Areas of further inquiry could include more detail on the actual *yatra*. Asking actual people organizing and participating in the *yatra* questions would be very fruitful. Specifics on how our Ram is constructed and confirming any differences in yearly iterations would also be very interesting. Comparing the pre-pandemic *yatra* with the post-pandemic one would be highly instructive. Another area of potential inquiry would be the connection between the legitimacy of Ram’s community and the push towards self-determination along

with the utilization of the State apparatus to maintain and support the national “self.” The extent to which our Ram communicates self-defense and battle-readiness strikes an interesting parallel to the nation’s right to existence and self-defense against threats.

Appendix



Figure 1: A portrait of our Ram on procession in Hyderabad. He is garlanded and fully painted. His rosy cheeks and smile are visible as are his tensed arms and torso, complete with popping veins. There are devotees decked out in orange, including orange *tilaks* on their foreheads. This image of Ram on procession provides a helpful view of the weapons in his quiver while he goes on procession, the garlands he wears, and his facial expression.⁴⁶



Figure 2: This picture shows an iteration of our Ram statue in the workshop being finished. The artist is continuing to paint details on Ram's clothing. Ram's bow is unfinished, and his feet are fully visible.⁴⁷

46. Sarah C. Nelson, "Ram Navami: 13 Stunning Images of The Hindu Festival Commemorating the Birth of Lord Rama (PICTURES)," *Huffington Post UK*, April 9th, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/04/09/ram-navami-13-stunning-images-hindu-festival-lord-rama-pictures_n_5116433.html.

47. "Artist giving final touches to a statue," *Times of India*, March 27th, 2015, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/article/showpics/46713666.cms?from=mr>.



Figure 3: A small statue of Ram and another of Sita, both fully clothed, garlanded, and surrounded by more flowers. Smaller processional icons like these were historically more common.⁴⁸



Figure 4: A human-sized Ram, Sita, Lakshman, and a smaller Hanuman on procession. Their float includes many women and boys wearing a variety of colours. These statues also participate in the Hyderabad Ram Navami yatra. The smaller and less emphatic muscles on Ram (and Hanuman's body), hand gestures, and pose are notable.⁴⁹

48. Sushmita Sen, "Ram Navami: Why and How is it Celebrated; Wishes to Send to Family, Friends [PHOTOS]," *International Business Times*, March 28th, 2015, <https://www.ibtimes.co.in/ram-navami-why-how-it-celebrated-wishes-send-family-friends-photos-627426>.

49. Ghanashyam, "Sri Ramanavami Celebration in Hyderabad," *Oneindia*, April 9th, 2014, <https://www.oneindia.com/photos/sri-ramanavami-celebration-in-hyderabad-46944.html#photos-3/>.



Figure 5: A super-sized Ram, his gold throne and crown matching on procession in Hyderabad. There are adult male devotees on the float, all wearing orange caps and two of them wearing a fully orange outfit as well.⁵⁰



Figure 6: This Ram is in a similar posture to ours, but entirely in a metallic copper or bronze. He is not smiling in the least; nor are his cheeks rosy. A garland appears to be part of the statue. He stands in the spot generally reserved for the *shikhara* in temple architecture.⁵¹

50. Dilip Merala, “Ram Navami 2017 Celebration in Hyderabad,” *India.com*, April 4th, 2017, <http://www.india.com/travel/articles/ram-navami-2017-celebration-in-hyderabad/>.

51. Picture of Ayodhya mandir proposed by Adityanath’s government and released by the *Times of India* on Twitter (Times of India (@timesofindia, 2017).