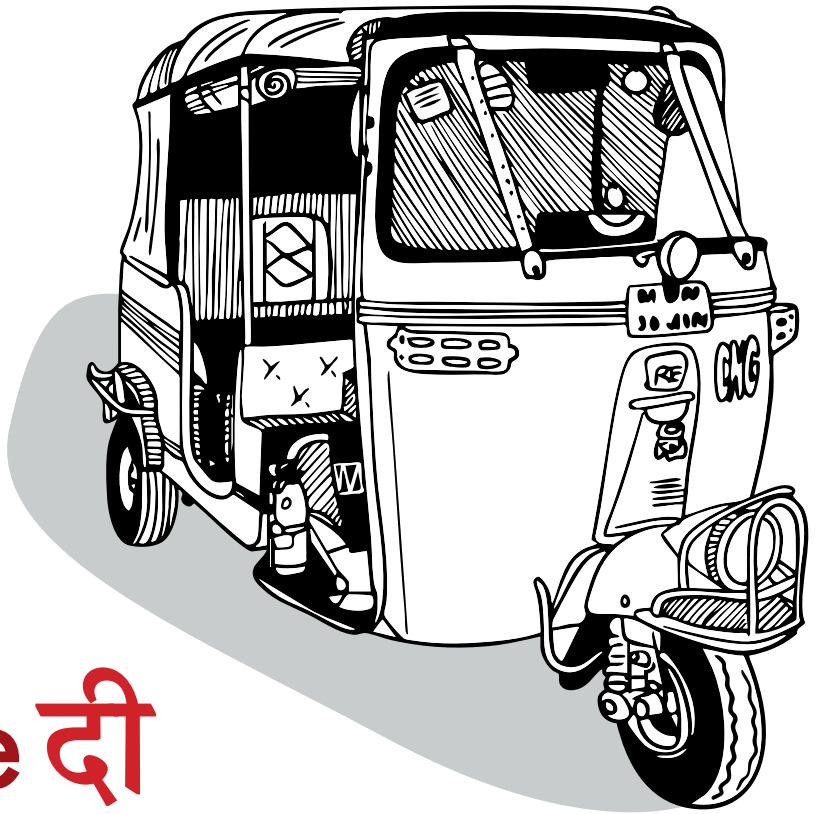


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The ദി Nation നേഷൻ Imagined ഇമജിങ്ങ്

A Critical Study of Nationhood & Identity through the Cover Art
of Indian Speculative Literature.

Nikitè K. | 2024

The Nation Imagined:

A Critical Study of Nationhood and Identity through the
Cover Art of Indian Speculative Literature.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Media Studies

at Massey University,
Wellington, New Zealand.

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2024

Abstract

Over the past decade (2013–2023), India, the largest democracy in the world, has experienced a pronounced rise in religious nationalism, marked by its entrenchment in mainstream media, visual culture, and political rhetoric. This thesis examines the role of popular visual culture in shaping ideas of nationhood by focusing on the book cover art of Indian Speculative and Fantasy Fiction (ISFF). It argues that ISFF genre art functions as a visual discourse that not only mirrors but actively constructs and contests dominant narratives of Indian identity. Drawing upon Jacques Rancière’s aesthetics of politics and Roland Barthes’ semiotics, this study demonstrates how ISFF book covers encode visual themes—such as hyper-masculine portrayals of Hindu warrior-heroes, mythological iconography, and saffronised aesthetics—that reinforce nationalist myths of a unified, Hindu-centric “imagined community”. Through detailed visual analysis, the thesis reveals the ideological significance of these representations, exposing how they contribute to exclusionary conceptions of Indianness while simultaneously providing a platform to challenge hegemonic narratives. Specifically, it identifies tensions between religious nationalism, caste hierarchies, and the commodification of mythology in India’s contemporary political landscape. By situating these visual motifs within India’s broader visual and political history, the research highlights their capacity to naturalise historical revisionism and propagate militant masculinities tied to Hindu nationalist ideologies. This thesis makes an original contribution to the interdisciplinary study of visual culture and politics by elucidating how genre-specific visual discourse in ISFF reflects, mediates, and complicates contemporary identity politics in India. It offers a critical lens through which to understand how popular culture operates as an ideological apparatus that negotiates complex socio-political narratives within a globalising and increasingly polarised society.

For my Amma
and
Maternal Grandparents.

Acknowledgement

This thesis represents the culmination of a challenging yet profoundly rewarding journey, one that would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, and guidance of many remarkable individuals. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those who have contributed to this achievement.

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my PhD supervisors—Dr. Nicholas Holm, Dr. Kim Worthington, and Dr. Pansy Duncan. Your expertise, insightful feedback, and unwavering support have been a cornerstone of my academic journey. I owe particular thanks to Nick, my primary supervisor. Your extraordinary patience, ability to demystify complex ideas, and steadfast encouragement during even the most difficult times have been invaluable. You are not just an exceptional teacher but also an unwavering guide, and I am deeply appreciative of all that you have done for me.

To my family, I cannot thank you enough for your unwavering love and encouragement. To my mom and godfather, your belief in me has been the foundation of my pursuits. Chengu Maman and Raghu, your wisdom and support gave me the courage to follow this academic path. To my partner Mark, thank you for your delicious meals, endless cheerleading, and for always keeping my spirits high. And to Nutmeg, my ever-present support cat.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful for the support system I have in both India and New Zealand. Your love, encouragement, and everything you have done for me have made this journey possible. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgement</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Nationalism and Identity	<i>2</i>
Visualising Indianness	<i>6</i>
Book Covers	<i>8</i>
Scope and Limitations	<i>14</i>
Key Aims and Framework of this Project.....	<i>17</i>
<i>Navigating the Thesis: An Overview</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Chapter 1: Theoretical Map and Literature Review</i>	<i>25</i>
1.1. Book Cover Design	<i>26</i>
1.2. The Role of Speculative Fiction.....	<i>34</i>
1.3. Semiotics and the Critical Study of Images	<i>42</i>
Method.....	<i>46</i>
1.4. Politics and Visual Culture	<i>50</i>
1.5. Visual Culture Studies of India	<i>57</i>
1.6. Indian Nation	<i>61</i>
Secular Indian Nationalism	<i>66</i>
Hindu Nationalism	<i>68</i>
1.7. Hindu Mythology.....	<i>71</i>
The Vedas and Puranas.....	<i>72</i>
The Mahabharata	<i>73</i>
The Ramayana	<i>73</i>
1.8. Conclusion.....	<i>76</i>
<i>Chapter 2: A Brief Historical Overview of Iconic Visuals of Indianness</i>	<i>78</i>
2.1. Raja Ravi Varma and National Art in the late 19 th Century.....	<i>81</i>
2.2. India as Mother Goddess	<i>88</i>
2.3. Lord Rama, Holy Wars and Militant Hindutva	<i>95</i>
2.4. Contesting images in Popular Spaces	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Mythology and Nationhood — Visual Analysis of Myth-ISFF Book Covers..</i>	<i>124</i>
3.1. Semiotic Analysis of Myth-SFF Book Covers	<i>127</i>
3.1.1. Hindu Gods as Super-heroes and an Ancient Glorious Past.....	<i>130</i>
3.1.2. Masculinity and Nationalism	<i>151</i>
Conclusion.....	<i>166</i>

Chapter 4: Visions of the Future — Visual Analysis of Dystopian ISFF Book Covers....	171
4.1. Semiotic Analysis of Dystopian-ISFF book covers	175
4.1.1. The Resilient Protagonists	177
4.1.2. Urban Cityscapes and Dystopias.....	189
4.1.3. Walls and Graffiti.....	198
4.1.4. Traditional Art Forms and Modern Stories	204
Conclusion	210
Chapter 5: One Nation. We are Many.....	212
5.1. Almost Utopian — The Hindu Nation as Hegemonic	214
5.2. There is Hope even in Dystopian Futures	220
Conclusion.....	227
Bibliography.....	231
List of Figures.....	265

Introduction

“The state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolised before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived”

(Walzer 1967, p.194).

One of the most extensively debated concepts on a global scale is national identity. Over the course of a century, its meaning has evolved, and it remains one of the most powerful and adaptable political sentiments. In recent years, the debates surrounding national identity have become very important, especially given the rise of exclusionary, right-wing nationalism on a global scale. The Indian subcontinent is no exception. This intense focus on identity in this part of the world is undoubtedly part of a global trend, but it presents a particularly precarious situation in a country as complex as India. On a personal level, the topic of nationhood and identity holds great personal significance for me. As a queer child born into an inter-caste, multi-lingual family, and a Hindu educated in an Anglo-Indian Catholic convent for most of my formative years, the concept of identity has always been a vaguely amorphous entity. The only ‘natural’ identity I was ever certain about is my Indian identity. For Indians of my generation, born in the 1990s, nationalism was not imposed or demanded by edict; it simply existed in the ambience of life. We never felt the need to define what made us Indian. However, in the last decade, with the rise of right-wing politics, questions such as “Who is Indian?” “Who is Indian enough?” and “What is the Indian identity?” have become urgent questions and permeate every aspect of Indian lives, from politics to media.

This dissertation developed out of my interest in answering questions like these. In what follows, I investigate the ways in which nationhood and national identity are constructed and

imagined through the lenses of popular visual culture, as well as the associated ideological mechanisms that shape the processes by post-millennial, urban Indians solidify and contest notions of “Indianness.” This study focuses on the front covers, illustrations, and images of Anglophone Indian speculative and fantasy fiction to explore how they express competing ideas of India in the context of the country’s shifting political milieu. This is particularly relevant given the current widespread prevalence of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, in Indian society and the growing resistance against its divisive ideologies. The contemporary resurgence of Hindutva has led to a significant transformation of the visual culture of the nation, resulting in a wealth of popular visual media — including cinema, television, graphic art, and novels — that seek to promote a dominant majoritarian view of national identity premised on Hindu hegemony. At the same time, this has (paradoxically) given rise to the emergence of dissenting visual representations of Indian identity. One of the main objectives of this research is to examine the ideological significance of the various ideas of national identity expressed by these competing visual regimes. Through close analysis, the study aims to shed light on the fundamental role that images play in the construction and contestation of identities.

Nationalism and Identity

Stuart Hall posits that identity should not be regarded as an immutable historical fact, but rather as an ongoing, often contested, process of production. His ideas emphasise the fluid, constructed, and multifaceted nature of identity and more importantly as a “discursive construct,” meaning it is formed through discourse – languages, images and cultural practices that shape our understanding (Hall, 1996). Although not synonymous with national identity, nationalism — as a sentiment or ideology — makes claims premised on an ostensibly *fixed* national identity. The meaning of nationalism has evolved considerably in its meaning over the

course of the past century (particularly given widespread decolonisation) and remains one of the most potent and adaptable political sentiments (Habib, 2022). Clearly, in discussions of national identity and nationalism, much turns of what is understood by the term “nation”. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are “imagined communities” that are shaped through discourse and narratives before they become tangible geopolitical entities (Anderson, 1983, p.6). In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), Anderson further explains that the nation is “imagined” because even the members of the smallest nation will never know or encounter the majority of their fellow members. Nevertheless, each individual carries within their mind an image of their shared sense of belonging and identity (Anderson, 1983, p.6). Anderson perceives the nation as a contemporary and dynamic phenomenon influenced by cultural and social forces. Moreover, his emphasis on culture and creative processes aligns with the field of cultural studies and media, stressing that this process of “imagination” is an ongoing one. It can be argued that the concept of the “Imagined Community” is intimately connected to the fluidity of the present era, wherein collective imagination and representation assume paramount importance. This aligns well with Hall’s theories, as both scholars underscore the role of cultural narratives and media in shaping collective identities. By recognizing the nation as a construct constantly being reshaped by cultural discourse, we can better understand the complexities and evolving nature of national identity in a globalised world.

Homi Bhabha builds upon Anderson’s argument by suggesting that the nation can be understood as a “form of cultural elaboration” and as something that “allows for the possibility of other narratives of the people and their differences” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 292). On the one hand, Bhabha contends that the concept of the nation is characterised by the conflicting interaction of two forces: the pedagogical and the performative. The pedagogical aspect refers

to the pre-existing (a priori) narratives that have accumulated over time and derive authority from the traditions of the people. On the other hand, the performative aspect relates to the present moment of enunciation, which involves repeated attempts to transform everyday elements of life into symbols of national culture. It is through the tension between these two forces that the nation takes on a liminal form of social representation — a space that encompasses cultural differences and the various and diverse histories of competing groups (Bhabha, 1990, in Lo, 2004, p. 2). Bhabha's framework highlights the dynamic and contested nature of national identity. Therefore, Bhabha argues that counter-narratives of the nation, which constantly challenge and dismantle its all-encompassing boundaries — both tangible and conceptual—disrupt the ideological manoeuvres that assign fixed identities to “imagined communities” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 300). While Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" provides a foundational understanding of how nations are constructed through shared narratives, Bhabha extends this idea by highlighting the dynamic, contested, and heterogeneous nature of national identity.

A similar conception of the nation as heterogenous and hybrid is deployed by Indian political scholar Partha Chatterjee (1993) in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, in which he examines Indian nationalism and identity and emphasises the importance of considering the diverse communities and ethnicities within the nation. He warns against the limitations of representing nationalism through a single historical narrative, particularly in the Indian context (Chatterjee, 1993, pp. 3-13). Chatterjee's asserts that there are multiple national voices or ‘fragments’ coexisting within India, including those of women, peasants, the elite, castes, and outcasts. Each group possesses its own distinct discourse, consequently resulting in a variety of conceptions of national identity (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 5). According to Chatterjee, national identity is not a homogeneous and monolithic construct, but

rather emerges from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors. Informed by the scholarly contributions of Anderson (1983) and Bhabha (1990) regarding the imagining and narrativising of the nation, as well as Chatterjee's (1993) exhortation of the heterogeneous nature of Indian identity, in this thesis I endeavour to investigate the intricate connection between the politics of representation and the different ways of imagining Indianness that we see expressed in ISFF book cover art. Specifically, I am interested in examining the visual and iconographic strategies employed in genre fiction's pictorial representations of "Indianness": strategies that either reinforce dominant ideological perceptions or enable the expression of alternative subjectivities and conceptions of nationhood. By analysing these visual strategies, the thesis aims to shed light on how genre fiction images contribute to the broader discourse of national identity, highlighting the tensions between hegemonic and subaltern narratives and exploring the potential for visual media to serve as a site of political contestation and cultural negotiation.

Chatterjee's book is only one of many interventions in the extensive debate about national identity in India, which respond to and develop larger global debates about nationalism. For instance, Sudipta Kaviraj's *The Imaginary Institution of India* (2010) explores the formation of Indian national identity through historical and cultural lenses, examining how colonial and postcolonial narratives shape the nation. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) discusses the impact of globalisation on national and cultural identities, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity formation in contemporary times. Although Appadurai's work is not exclusively only about India, his concepts of "scapes" and "disjuncture" are highly relevant for understanding the Indian context, as they explain how global cultural flows — including media, migration, and technology — create new and hybrid identities, thereby challenging traditional notions of fixed

national identities. Additionally, Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) investigates the psychological and cultural effects of colonialism on Indian identity, offering insights into the complexities of postcolonial self-perception. These works collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of national identity in India, situating the discussion within broader theoretical and historical frameworks.

Visualising Indianness

This thesis aims to explore the ways in which the concept of “Indianness” is conceptualised, challenged, and reframed through visual culture. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish a clear understanding of visual culture and its relation to questions of nationhood and identity. W.J.T Mitchell defines visual culture as the study of visual perception and representation. Nevertheless, he also emphasises that it examines “the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision” (2002, p. 6). In essence, Mitchell highlights the interconnectedness between the visual and the social, asserting that visual representations do not merely mirror society, but also play a significant role in symbolically constructing worldviews that are subsequently reflected back into society (2005, p. 334). Building upon Mitchell's concepts, Nicholas Mirzoeff defines visual culture as the examination of the origins, definition, and functions of postmodern everyday life, that are best understood and interpreted through visual means (1999, pp. 3-4). Mirzoeff further contends that visual culture is profoundly intertwined with specific economic and political structures, making an exploration of visual culture inseparable from an examination of the unequal distribution of representational power within these structures. Although these definitions may seem broad, both Mirzoeff and Mitchell argue that visual culture provides a flexible framework for understanding social groups and individuals based on their interactions and responses to visual media. Thus, the study of visual culture within the public sphere approaches images as socially

constructed entities that constantly evolve through their connections with other images, texts, users, and contexts.

Given this framework of visual culture, it is important to consider how these dynamics play out in the specific context of Indian nationalism. It can be argued that the making of modern India and the origins of its present-day nationalism began in 1947 when the British formally relinquished their imperial control over the region but not without first “partitioning” the nation — dividing it into two new nations, Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, with devastating consequences for many. Since then, various forms of national identity, including secular nationalism, Hindu nationalism, and language nationalism (majority Hindi vs non-Hindi speaking groups), have consistently competed for hegemonic dominance in shaping the grand narrative of the Indian nation. In response to this dynamic landscape, visual cultural practices in the country have also adapted to accommodate these changes. This project draws insights from several recent studies that have endeavoured to understand the contemporary culture of India in relation to national identity. All of these studies (Jacob, 2009; Ramaswamy, 2010; Khanduri, 2014; Nayar, 2016) situate contemporary Indian visual media and culture in the context of contesting ideologies of nationhood in modern India. Preminda Jacob (2009) analyses the interplay between politics and film, exploring the intersection of cinema and politics and how power and influence are transferred between these two fields. By citing several examples of Tamil cinema hoardings, Jacob argues that cinematic advertisements also serve to reinforce ideas of (Tamil) nationalist political ideologies. Alternately, Sumathi Ramaswamy (2010) traces the symbolic representation of “Bharat Mata” or the Indian mother goddess, whose life cycle closely mirrors that of modern Indian nationalism, particularly Hindu nationalism. While Jacob’s and Ramaswamy’s studies focus on different visual print media and

their approaches vary, the underlying message in both is the hegemonic nature of particular visualities in constructing a national imaginary.

On the other hand, Ritu Khanduri's (2014) interdisciplinary study on political cartooning and Pramod Nayar's (2016) analysis of Indian graphic novels examines and contemplates dissenting visual representations of Indian history and the nation. Khanduri (2014) asserts that political cartoons are not solely descriptive of news but also provide a platform for challenging dominant historical narratives and advocating for the democratisation of Indian visual culture. Meanwhile, Pramod Nayar's (2016) research draws on Marianne Hirsh's investigation into the capacity of graphic narratives to interrogate, subvert, and experiment in order to facilitate social and political intervention (p. 8), thereby engaging with themes such as alternative histories and identity politics. Although these scholars engage with different visual media, a common thread in their studies is the exploration of India's modernity, history, and national identity. In a similar way, this study aims to examine a section of contemporary Indian visual culture, specifically the intersection of visualities of post-millennial Indian society and how these portray nationhood, and ways of seeing Indianness. To achieve this, I pay close attention to contemporary Indian speculative fiction book cover images, as I believe that, like posters, cartoons, graphic novels, and billboards, book covers as visual commodities also engage in critiquing societal norms and provoke thought.

Book Covers

In my exploration of Indian visuality through book cover images, I draw inspiration from Walter Benjamin's approach to cultural analysis. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin expressed his thoughts on cultural analysis by asserting, "I have nothing to say. Only to show... but the rags, the refuse: I do not wish to inventory them, but simply give them their due in the

only possible way: by putting them to use” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 460). These words have been interpreted by scholars in a variety of ways, but for me, they serve as a source of inspiration. They inspire me to visually examine a compilation of mass-produced images, with the understanding that cultural artefacts, often disregarded due to their temporary and ephemeral nature (the rags and refuse) or as mere marketing tools, also possess significant historical and cultural value. This conviction has prompted me to consider mass-produced visual media, particularly book covers, as cultural artefacts that offer insight into the cultures and values of a particular nation: India.

Over the years, book jackets have transformed from simple protective items into visually symbolic tools of communication (Mathews and Moody, 2007). Authors, editors, designers, and publishers each bring unique perspectives to their creations, using them to reflect the text, provide aesthetic pleasure, generate publicity, and target specific audiences. The demands of multinational publishers and chain bookstores, as noted by Matthews and Moody (2007), often prioritise marketability over artistic experimentation, shaping book covers to appeal to specific target audiences. This commercial focus imposes constraints on designers, who must navigate the tension between producing innovative, aesthetically engaging designs and adhering to the publisher’s marketing strategies (Mendelsund, 2020). At the same time, book covers serve as a space for artistic freedom and cultural expression, enabling designers to engage with broader socio-political and cultural discourses. With the rise of digital platforms, book covers now exist independently of the texts they enclose, circulating widely as visual artifacts. This dual role—as both market-driven commodities and mediums of artistic expression—underscores the complexities of modern book cover design. As I delved deeper into these aspects, my fascination with book covers as a distinct medium of communication grew.

Despite the growing academic interest in book covers, there remains a limited number of scholarly works that discuss them in detail. Most academic books that do so, such as *Judging a Book by its Cover* (Moody, 2007), or *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation* (Lau & Varughese, 2006), primarily concentrate on the marketing function and success of the covers. This approach is extended by renowned graphic designer Peter Mendelsund in *The Look of the Book: Jackets, Covers and Art at the Edges* (2020) places significant emphasis on the book cover's role as a "medium" for various forms of communication. He characterises the book cover as a convergence of text and context, serving as a platform where literature intersects with visual culture, business, politics, law, and even history. Mendelsund (2020) describes it as

a thing-between-things, a middle ground between text and context, a zone of interaction between the writer's vision and the culture in which the book is published. [it is] ... a *mediator* or *intermediary* that testifies to the social dimension of writing [and emerges] through a process that involves many interested parties, not only the author and the designer, but also the editor, the publisher, the marketing director, the printer, and more (pp. 60-67).

Mendelsund argues that assessing book covers can provide valuable insights into the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape the perspectives of both the author and the artist.

Following Mendelsund, this study focuses on book covers as a medium that facilitates a dialogue between the image and the culture in which the book is written, published and consumed. More specifically, it looks at the book cover as a space to examine the visual rhetoric of Indianness within the boundaries of genre specificity. In the case of *Indian Writing in English* (2006), there is also a consideration of the inter-semiotic translation of covers in Western and Indian markets (Lau & Varughese, 2006). In Chapter Two, I provide a more detailed overview

of the existing literature on cover design. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between the visual design of book covers and society remains a relatively unexplored area in contemporary cultural studies, particularly when compared to the academic interest in other visual media practices. This is particularly true within the realm of Indian visual culture. Filling this gap is one of the objectives of my thesis.

This study focuses on the cover art of Indian Anglophone novels, particularly within the speculative science and fantasy fiction genre. This choice is made in contrast to academic or technical books, as well as other forms of non-fiction. I chose ISFF book covers, rather than (say) those of academic or technical books, or other forms of non-fiction and fiction because I believe that the cover images of Indian speculative and fantasy fiction genres are a complex fusion of Eastern and Western influences, past and present, the colony and the metropolis, as well as the National and the State traditions. Therefore, they offer a valuable perspective for studying contemporary, postcolonial Indian national identities. Furthermore, I contend that the broader speculative and fantasy fiction genre has unique qualities that make it particularly suitable for investigating these themes as they manifest visually in the books cover design. This genre often explores different political models, and the dynamics between citizens and the state, and contemplates the ethical implications of technology and the future. While it is challenging to precisely define the boundaries of speculative and fantasy fiction (SFF), I find Darko Suvin's definition to be the most productive: the works in this genre tend to defamiliarize reality in order to reflect upon it more effectively (Suvin, 1979). Additionally, the visual forms of SFF offer new opportunities to comprehend the imagining of the Indian nation, as this imagining contributes substantially to the construction of the political entity of the nation itself. In what follows, I aim to analyse the images, themes, and iconography that are typical of the ISFF genres to investigate the blending of visual strategies and symbolism that offer imagined

versions of the Indian nation and discuss the political underpinnings and effects of these configurations in the current historical moment. Such a study enables what Khilnani and Bhattacharjee, in describing their critical engagement with Indian SFF narratives, as “an imaginative conception of the Indian nation that transcends temporal divisions, encompassing the past, present, and future” (Khilnani & Bhattacharjee, 2022, p. 2). Moreover, if the political realities of nations, as Anderson suggests, rely on imaginative constructions, then the ‘imagined community’ of the Indian nation through SF visuality indeed has significant political implications.

Through a formal, aesthetic, and thematic analysis of Indian Anglophone SFF book jackets, this thesis seeks to explore and elucidate the political implications embedded within their visual configurations. I contend that notions of nationhood and Indian identity are articulated through two distinct visual registers characterised by opposing tendencies: one aligned with resurgent Hindu nationalism, and the other resisting this alignment by exploring subaltern expressions of plurality in identity and Indianness. These visual representations are neither monolithic nor unified; instead, they are fluid and continuously evolving, challenging any simplistic notions of Indianness. To support this argument, I examine a range of Anglophone Indian SFF book covers, categorising them according to their themes and subgenres. Through sustained analysis, I document how these book covers, as visual representations, reflect contemporary Indian culture. The analysis focuses on books published within the last decade, a period marked by the consolidation of power by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP-RSS, as well as the growing mainstream presence of Hindutva ideology. Notably, the Hindu mythology-themed books in this study enjoy high sales and ratings on platforms like Amazon India and Goodreads, while the dystopian books, though critically acclaimed and award-winning, do not achieve the same commercial success, although

they are still very positively reviewed. Despite the slightly differing selection criteria, these genres necessitate such distinctions. Tables 1 and 2 provide ratings, reviews, and comments for each book (see Chapter 1, pp. 23-24). The books have been selected to represent two subgenres within Anglophone ISFF, enabling a comparative study of their visual design in relation to other authors working within the same movement or subgenre. It is important to acknowledge that this thesis incorporates a level of subjective judgement in terms of the choice of texts and their interpretation, and that these judgments are influenced by my personal experiences with Indian and Hindutva nationalism, as well as the visual culture of the nation. However, I strive to offset the subjective dimension of the study employing critical theories of visual culture studies and conducting a rigorous formal analysis of the images themselves.

One of the key goals in this study is to attempt to comprehend how the visual iconography in these chosen texts combine both recognised SFF visual cues and motifs with “Indian iconography” to facilitate cultural recognition and the construction of identity. While my primary concern is the visual aesthetics of these texts, I also investigate how these images establish a visual paradigm that aligns with a nation’s need for cultural icons and artefacts. In conducting this analysis, I employ close visual analysis, complemented by recent work on the method of ‘political aesthetics.’ For the former, I draw on Roland Barthes’s semiotic approach and Stuart Hall’s work on visual culture, alongside Gunther R. Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen’s formal framework for reading the different elements within the image. The political dimensions of this analyses will draw upon the work of Jacques Rancière, who similarly explores the role of images in fostering community. Specifically, I rely on Rancière’s ideas on the political ontology of images and the distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2004).

Although the overall methodological framework of this research is largely derived from the aforementioned works, the focus of these investigations will be on the visual representation of Indian culture (s) and identity(ies). The role of images in constructing and regulating the parameters of these cultures and their identities remains largely unexplored in existing scholarship. I address this gap in my emphasis on the political functions and effects of Anglophone ISFF book covers as they contribute to the visual representations of contesting socio-political Indian identities. Furthermore, I stress the ways in which these composite identities are obscured, disseminated, and embodied at the interface between a book's cover and its contents.

Scope and Limitations

Initially, my aim was to analyse a broad range of influences on ISFF, including the role of graphic designers, the input of authors and publishers, and even conduct interviews with prominent Indian publishing houses to support my arguments. I also considered incorporating Paul Virilio's concept of dromology, which explores the pervasive influence of speed in all aspects of life, and examining how this relates to the reception of cover images in the digital age. While these additional dimensions would have enriched the study, they were ultimately excluded to ensure that the thesis remains focused on its primary objective: the semiotic analysis of ISFF book covers as cultural artefacts. Additionally, I initially considered conducting text-to-image comparisons to assess how well the jacket visuals reflected their corresponding texts. However, while this approach would have added another layer of analysis, I determined that this was beyond the scope of this study. This would have also required literary analysis expertise, which falls outside the methodological framework of this research. By focusing on how the covers function as standalone cultural artefacts, I aim to demonstrate their

significance within broader discussions of Indian visual culture and national identity, without being constrained by a one-to-one correspondence between text and image.

Determining the respective readership of each of these novels and the reach of individual covers remains a challenging task, as comprehensive sales data and digital footprint information are largely unavailable. To address this gap, I have relied on reputable news articles discussing the growth and readership of Anglophone ISFF and the broader literary scene in India. While I initially considered conducting a survey to compare audience responses to ISFF cover images in relation to ideas of Indian identity, this approach was excluded to avoid shifting the focus of the thesis toward marketing concerns rather than the cultural and semiotic significance of the covers. The number and scope of selected texts also required significant refinement. At the outset of my research, I identified over forty different book covers on Amazon India and Goodreads for potential analysis. However, as I refined my methodology, it became clear that conducting such a comprehensive study within the constraints of this thesis would be impractical. Two key factors informed this decision: first, some covers exhibited recurring motifs and visual strategies that reinforced certain analytical themes. These repetitions, far from being redundant, are recognised as indicative of prevailing trends in visual representation and integral to the study. Second, some books blurred genre boundaries to such an extent that categorising them within the parameters of this study became challenging. For instance, works leaning toward magical realism were excluded because they diverged from the explicit ideological and political discourses central to Hindu-myth fantasy and Indian dystopian fiction. However, the hybridity of genres, a hallmark of Indian speculative fiction, is acknowledged as a vital context for the selected sub-genres.

Consequently, I have chosen to concentrate solely on the covers of Hindu-myth fantasy and Indian dystopian fiction, as these two sub-genres of ISFF offer the most fruitful ground for examining “Indianness.” I selected eight to ten cover images under each sub-genre for close analysis, allowing for a focused and in-depth exploration of how visual design contributes to the articulation of national identity. This focus also permits an investigation of how the images exist and circulate independently of their texts, shaping cultural narratives in their own right. By narrowing the scope, this thesis balances methodological rigor with analytical depth, while also providing a foundation for future research on the broader intersections of text, image, and cultural politics in Indian speculative fiction.

Key Aims and Framework of this Project

This thesis situates itself at the intersection of visual culture, Indian speculative and fantasy fiction, and national identity, aiming to critically analyse how book cover designs articulate and negotiate competing narratives of Indian identity. Rather than simply acting as decorative elements, these covers serve as visual artefacts that engage deeply with ideological tensions present within the sociopolitical landscape of contemporary India. The study seeks to investigate how the visual imagery on these covers reflects two predominant frameworks of Indian identity: one rooted in multicultural pluralism and inclusivity, and the other grounded in the homogenising ideology of Hindutva. By employing a comparative semiotic analysis, this research not only examines the iconography and visual strategies deployed on these book covers but also considers their role as cultural artefacts within the broader narrative of Indian nationhood. At its core, the research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how visual design contributes to cultural and political discourses, bridging the gap between creative practice and critical scholarship. This thesis builds upon existing theoretical frameworks in visual culture, semiotics, and nationalism to highlight the symbiotic relationship between visual storytelling and ideological constructs.

Navigating the Thesis: An Overview

Following this introductory chapter, which provides a comprehensive overview of the themes explored in this study. The second chapter presents the theoretical foundations that underpin my research and their connection to the methodological framework. The following Chapter Three examines the significant visual and political influences in India since Independence, thus contextualising the book covers in visual-historical terms. Chapters Four and Five comprise on the visual analysis of the two categories or genres of Anglophone ISFF that are the central focus of the thesis. Each section of these chapters concentrates on a distinct set of cover images that I argue are representative of the visual characteristics of each genre. Throughout my discussion in these chapters, I examine key visual motifs and symbols that not only contribute to genre specificity but also serve as representations of Indian identity. A key finding of the analyses is the extent to which the two genres portray disparate conceptions of Indianness. I subsequently compare the two sub-genres of ISFF, with a particular emphasis on the diverse modes of imagining ideas of nationhood and identity they reveal and discuss the broader political implications of aesthetics in India. A brief summary of each chapter in thesis follows:

Chapter 2: Theoretical Map and Literature Review

In this section, I provide a summary of key concepts and theories from the fields of visual culture, speculative fiction, and postcolonial studies, with a specific focus on their relevance to the analysis of book cover art. I outline existing scholarship that explores images as tools for understanding political ideologies. Of particular significance are Ranciere's politics of aesthetics and the study of Semiotics as expounded by Barthes, as well as Kress and van Leeuwen. Throughout the discussion, I maintain the premise that all forms of visual culture

emerge from and contribute to the mediation of social and political forces. Each critical approach is reviewed separately, and in the concluding paragraphs, I strive to establish connections between the various lines of inquiry, combining insights from each to formulate a broader framework.

Chapter 3: A Brief Historical Overview of Iconic Visuals of Indianness

This chapter provides an introduction and explanation of primary visual influences and historical events that have shaped popular visual culture in India. Significantly, it argues that the Hindu nationalist imagination has maintained consistent iconography and visual messaging over time. The final section of the chapter highlights contemporary approaches to visualising Indianness that offer critical perspectives on the Hindutva regime and celebrates other forms of identifying as Indian while still appealing to popular imagination.

Chapter 4: Mythology and Nationhood — Visual Analysis of Myth-ISFF Book Covers

This chapter examines a collection of ISFF book covers that draw extensively on popular Hindu mythology as a source of inspiration. I argue that a new wave of fantasy books incorporating these myths in the last decade present reinterpretations of the familiar mythology, appealing to the fundamentalist Hindutva ideology of a glorious Hindu past. By evoking primary sources such as the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, these book covers offer insight into prevailing political regimes and populist ideology within contemporary Indian society. I pay particular attention to re-inscriptions and revisualisations of the concept of Ram Rajya, arguing that these book covers instrumentalise the images of a strong, decisive, hyper-

masculine leader who protects the kingdom (i.e. Indian nation) from internal and external threats. Notable book covers in this genre include:

Table 1:

List of Myth SFF books with average customer ratings from Amazon India and acclaim and/ awards.

Book Title	Year	Author
The Shiva Trilogy	2010-2013	Amish Tripathi
The trilogy is recognised as one of the fastest-selling book series, with over 2.75 million copies sold by 2015 (Economic Times, 2015).		
The Ram Chandra Series	2015-2019	Amish Tripathi
The series, the second fastest-selling book series in India, earned the author the moniker of “India’s Tolkien” (Pandey, BBC News, 2017).		
Vikramaditya Veergatha Series	2014-2020	Shatrujeet Nath
Listed among the best-selling and fastest-selling myth fiction books by <i>Deccan Chronicle</i> (Srivastava, 2016).		
Dharmayoddha Kalki: Avatar of Vishnu	2018	Kevin Missal
The series charted in the bestseller list of the HT Nielsen list, with <i>Hindustan Times</i> referring to it as a runaway success (Arora, 2021).		
Krishna: Maha Vishnu Avatar	2023	Kevin Missal
Durga	2022	Kevin Missal
<i>The Hindu</i> referred to the author’s works as national bestsellers, and the author’s books have been featured in publications such as <i>The Sunday Guardian</i> , <i>The New Indian Express</i> , and <i>Millennium Post</i> (Jain, 2019).		
Vishwamitra	2014	Dr. Vineet Aggarwal
Bharat	2017	Dr. Vineet Aggarwal

The author has been praised for fusing quantum science with mythology in both his books (*The Pioneer*, 2014). Additionally, the author appeared in a video by popular right-wing Indian *YouTube*r BeerBiceps, which has garnered 2.2 million views.

The Hidden Hindu

2022

Akshat Gupta

The Times of India referred to the series as the fastest-selling trilogy, noting that it is also being adapted for the screen (Sharma, 2024).

Project X521

2022

Sahil Sharma

The book was listed in the “10 Must-Read Indian Science Fiction Books” list (*India.com*, 2022).

Chapter 5: Visions of the Future — Visual Analysis of Dystopian ISFF Book Covers

This chapter analyses book covers of Dystopian ISFF book covers that portray potential futures for the Indian nation, often characterised by grim, dystopian scenarios. These book covers belong to the genre of ISFF, which employs a secular approach and embody a diverse range of cultural markers of the new and emergent India. Moreover, these covers establish a sense of universality by engaging in explicit dialogue with Western counterparts. This entails appropriating, modifying, and incorporating common Western SFF tropes, while infusing them with Indian iconography and metaphors that are distinctly recognisable. They explore and critique the fears and concerns arising from contemporary Indian society, without collapsing the visual representation of Hindutva to mean Indian visuality. Additionally, it is worth noting that the protagonists in these works often hail from marginalised or minority groups, which sets them apart from the myth-based fiction. Notable books within this genre for analysis include:

Table 2:

List of Dystopian SFF books with average customer ratings from Amazon India and awards and/acclaim.

Book Title	Year	Author
Chosen Spirits	2020	Samit Basu
The City Inside	2022	Samit Basu
The book was shortlisted for <i>the JCB Prize for Literature</i> , India (2020) and featured in <i>The Washington Post</i> and <i>Book Riot's</i> Best SFF 2022 lists (Wander, 2022).		
The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport	2023	Samit Basu
The book was a finalist for <i>the Locus Award (Science Fiction)</i> in 2024 and has been critically acclaimed by <i>The Wall Street Journal</i> , <i>The Washington Post</i> , and <i>The New York Times</i> (Braswell, 2024).		
The Sultanpur Chronicles: Shadowed City	2018	Achala Upendran

The book was nominated in the category of English Fiction for the <i>REC-VoW Book Awards</i> in 2019 and was described as a game changer for advancing Indian fantasy in new ways by the renowned news portal <i>Scroll India</i> (Lalwani, 2018).		
Leila	2017	Prayaag Akbar
The book won the <i>Tata Literature First Book Award</i> in 2018 and was adapted into a Netflix series in 2019.		
The Island of Lost Girls	2015	Manjula Padmanabhan
The author is an award-winning playwright, having won the <i>Onassis Award for Theatre</i> in 1997, this book was shortlisted for the <i>Hindu Literary Awards</i> in 2016 (Roy, 2016).		
Anantya Tantrist Mystery: Cult of Chaos	2015	Shweta Taneja
The book won the <i>Editor's Choice Award</i> (Singapore) for Best Asian Science Fiction and has received critical acclaim for its critique of Indian patriarchy (Vikram, 2017).		
The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay	2019	Varun Thomas Mathew
The book was shortlisted for the <i>Tata Literature Live First Book Award</i> in 2019 and the <i>Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize</i> in 2020 (PTI, 2020).		
Sharikrida	2017	Krishna Trilok
The book received critical acclaim for its portrayal of strong female characters set in an Indian dystopian future, as noted in literary reviews by news portals, <i>The Hindu</i> and <i>The News Minute</i> (Nath, 2017).		
Clone	2019	Priya Sarukkai Chabria
The author is an award-winning writer, recognised in the 2018 Best Reads by Feminist Press (New York). The book received critical acclaim for its melding of Indian history with science fiction in reviews by <i>Scroll India</i> and <i>The Hindustan Times</i> (Bhowmick, 2019).		

Conclusion

In the conclusion I consolidate and summarise the findings obtained from the visual analyses of ISFF covers. Additionally, I also discuss the broader significance of analysing book cover jackets, beyond their immediate functionality. A comparison is made between the two visual regimes I have established, with a particular focus on how one of them is hegemonic in nature and aligns itself with what Rancière refers to as the police-state, while the other challenges this Hindutva ideology by visualising alternative forms of Indianness. This second form of visibility, I attest, can be read as offering subtle critiques of shifts in Indian attitudes and value systems in relation to the nation and serves as a cautionary tale for unchecked right-wing nationalism. The resistance and contestation of Hindutva ideology in the realm of the visual ensure that discussions centred on Indian identity are not one-sided, whether at the political or cultural level. The conclusion emphasises the importance of interpreting these images and their iconography in conjunction with the approaches I have documented in the literature review and the cultural background that influenced them. Finally, I offer suggestions for future research and the implications of these findings in relation to discussions of (national) identity politics and the contestation of nationhood are explored.

Chapter 1:

Theoretical Map and Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide a comprehensive overview of the theoretical foundations that support the visual analysis of Anglophone Indian speculative book covers. The aim is to examine how these visual representations convey or challenge political ideology, particularly with regard to national identity. To do so, I first examine scholarship on cover design, semiotics, speculative fiction studies, and visual culture studies in India. The first section of this chapter addresses the significance of studying book cover design in general, and more specifically, approaches to book jackets analysis in relation to genre, context, and cultural influence drawing insights from designers such as Chip Kidd and Peter Mendelsund, as well as Gerard Genette's concept of paratext. It then explores the role of speculative fiction, particularly Indian SFF, will then be examined, emphasizing its hybrid nature. The section on semiotics and the critical study of images outlines key concepts from Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, providing a framework for analysing the book jackets.

The chapter also delves into the politics of visual culture, referencing scholars such as Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jacques Rancière, who discuss the power dynamics inherent in visual representation and the potential for images to challenge dominant political ideologies. A review of visual culture studies in India highlights the works of Sumita S. Chakravarthy, Christopher Pinney, Christiane Brosius, and Dawson Varughese, examining how visual representations shape national identity. These works illustrate how visual representations in various media shape and reflect national identity and political ideologies. The chapter concludes with an overview of India's national identity, discussing the historical development of secular and Hindu nationalism, the impact of colonialism and partition, and the socio-political complexities

of contemporary India. It also includes a brief overview of Hindu mythology, focusing on the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and their influence on Indian visual culture, particularly in how mythological narratives and iconography continue to shape contemporary representations of Indian identity.

1.1. Book Cover Design

As consumers and readers, we are all familiar with the warning not to judge a book by its cover — and yet we often do whether we view them in brick-and-mortar stores, or in a variety of cultural spaces. From the smudged pirated paperback front covers facing the crowded streets to the book cover thumbnails on websites and lifestyle posts by consumers on social media sites, they are unique visual communication devices. Chip Kidd, a notable figure in the world of literary book design and the creator of the iconic *Jurassic Park* (1990) covers, likens book jackets to “watching TV without the sound” (Vienne, 2003, p.16). Extending this metaphor Kidd suggests that viewers decode fragmented imagery and text all the time and use this principle when encountering book jackets. For him an “effective” book cover not only reflects the contents of a particular text, it also communicates what kind of audience would enjoy reading it (Kidd, 2015, p.45). While Kidd places importance on the audience engagement and role in the meaning-making decoding process, he also acknowledges the roles of those involved in the making of the book.

Designer and author Peter Mendelsund — known for his iconic designs for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo series* (2005-2007) — posits in *The Look of the Book* (2020) that the book covers “like a bag of potato chips... have an obvious mandate, which is to sell a commodity” and are “art at the edges of literature” (2020, pp. 30-31). Both Kidd and Mendelsund agree that the cover helps the reader make sense of the book and gives an

impression of its genre, its tone, and its ideal or intended audience. Mendelsund emphasises the role of collaboration in creating a book and on the “social dimension of writing — for even if manuscripts are individually authored, books are collectively made” (p. 39). He further explores in detail the cover as a ‘medium’ of communication not just of the textual content, but also of those involved in its creation. He suggests that it is a space where multiple dialogues take place between the different people involved in the creation and consumption of the book and its text. Mendelsund posits that not all covers are works of art but suggests that all covers draw content from other visual and verbal mediums, meaning the images draw inspiration from and, on occasion emulate other images, photographs, illustrations, and texts to construct their own visual narratives. Thus, in a digital culture where there is endless sharing and mixing of visual cultures, the book cover is both a vehicle for and an object in it. This notion — that visual media is recycled and repurposed — is significant in my later analyses and is explored further in the chapters on visual cultural studies that follow.

Where Mendelsund uses the term ‘medium’ as a means to assert the complex roles of the book cover, Gerard Genette classifies them as paratext. He develops this concept further by way of Jorge Luis Borges’ conceptualisation of the entrance way of a thing or place as a ‘threshold’ or ‘vestibule’ that presents the “possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (Genette, 1997, p. 2). According to Genette, the term paratext encompasses all elements at the “threshold” of a text that are offered to its readers and enable it to become a book (p. 1). Paratexts are subsequently divided into ‘peritext’ and ‘epitext.’ Peritext refers to those paratextual elements that are bound into the same book, such as cover art, titles, blurbs, and so on. These elements are designed to capture attention, convey genre, and provide a snapshot of the book’s content, thus playing a crucial role in marketing and attracting readers (p. 24). Epitexts are elements such as authorial interviews, correspondences, and reviews that are not

attached to the book but circulate “in a virtually limitless physical and social space” (p. 344) beyond it. Ultimately, for Genette, the book cover functions as a paratextual component that serves as the threshold where dialogue is had: the space where the reader negotiates potential meanings. This threshold is not solely a physical boundary, but also a semiotic one, where the cover, with its visual and textual elements, acts as a liminal space where the potential meanings of the book begin to take shape. As Genette (1997) suggests, the paratext “is not limited to the two-dimensional space of the front and back covers,” but extends to the “material and symbolic fields” that influence how a text is received and interpreted (p. 5). The audience engages with the paratext cognitively by interpreting the symbols, images, and text on the cover forming initial hypotheses about the book’s content and themes.

In today’s digital world, book covers can be viewed as both peritext and epitext because the cover art is often viewed separately from the bound, physical text. Media studies, design and cultural studies scholars’ understand and theorise paratextual matter, such as book covers as cultural products that can influence, reflect or project our social and political ideologies. A central view that is shared by many of these scholars and designers is that book covers are inherently influenced by the people and processes involved in their production. The meanings associated with the covers, meanwhile do not just reflect the text, the author, the publisher and the illustrator, but also the contexts of their reception and creation. Moreover, the digital dissemination of book covers magnifies their paratextual role by extending their reach to a global audience, thus transcending their original cultural and geographical contexts. This global dissemination necessitates that book covers navigate and resonate with diverse cultural codes and visual literacies, rendering their design a more complex and nuanced undertaking. While this study focuses on the local culture from which the paratexts emerge, emphasising localised interpretations, it is imperative to acknowledge that these paratextual elements often circulate

outside the bounds of their initial cultural contexts. By concentrating on local cultural contexts, this research aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the specific cultural, societal, and ideological factors reflected in the design of popular genre fiction book covers while acknowledging the broader implications of global digital circulation on paratextuality.

In *Judging a Book by its Cover* (2016), editors Nickianne Moody and Nicole Matthews compile a collection of essays that explore the various roles performed by the book cover as a medium. The essays in their collection examine at how book covers are not just advertising and marketing devices but also have the power to reflect, propagate, and inspire cultural values and ideals. The authors of the essays in the collection use publishing case studies, historical research, and theories from media, communication, and cultural studies to document the visual aspects of popular 20th century fiction. Of particular interest is the essay “Relocating Liverpool in the 1990s: Through the Covers of Regional Saga Fiction” by Val Williamson (pp. 31-41), which discusses how the semiology of the examined book covers appeals to local nostalgia for the lost mid-century Liverpool. Williamson further traces how the images change through the 1990s from being Liverpool-specific to more reflective of industrial towns of England in general, to cash in on a broader national nostalgia for the regions. The essay considers how genre affects the design of a cover and how this reflects and instrumentalises cultural attitudes towards national identities demonstrating the powerful role of visual elements in evoking and shaping collective memory and identity.

Another significant contribution to the field of book cover analysis is *Re-covered Rose: A Case Study in Book Cover Design as Intersemiotic Translation* (2011) by Marco Sonzogni. Sonzogni investigates book covers as a form of what he calls “Intersemiotic Translation,” with a particular focus on the deliberate selection of specific visual signs to represent verbal signs.

The study primarily examines how designers from various cultural backgrounds produce diverse cover designs for the same text, particularly when given minimal guidelines in the design brief. It does not, however, examine the role of visuals in shaping or addressing cultural ideologies. Nonetheless, it provides valuable criteria for the analysis of book covers, including: a) the description of the cover image, b) the examination of how aspects of the novel such as genre, content, and setting are visually portrayed through elements like colour, typography, and imagery, and c) the discussion of various styles of visual translation, such as the utilisation of tangible objects, abstract imagery, or a combination thereof, in order to symbolise an idea (Sonzogni, 2011, pp. 30-31). Additionally, Sonzogni asserts that a book cover functions as a reflection of the cultural assumptions held by the designer, publisher, marketers, and potential readers of the text. This reflection underscores the inherent subjectivity in design choices, as these are often influenced by the socio-cultural context and the intended audience. This approach justifies the exploration of how book covers translate the verbal signs of a text into a primarily nonverbal sign system comprised of culturally encoded images.

More closely related to the project undertaken by this thesis is *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation* (2015) by Lisa Lau and Dawson Varughese — because it emphasises the importance of recognising that the interpretation of book covers involves not only visual and cultural literacy but also political and contextual evaluation. It examines the images associated with the genre of Indian chick-lit written by and the meaning these images convey in different markets. To accomplish this, the authors make use of case studies of book cover images released by both Western and Indian publishing houses to interrogate the representation of women in genre fiction. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, this study combines interviews with individuals involved in the writing, designing, and publishing of Indian chick-lit, as well as semiotic analysis. By utilising this methodology, the authors uncover

the nuanced ways in which visual elements on book covers communicate cultural narratives and social ideologies. A significant portion of their research is centred on comparative semiotic analysis that dissects visual elements such as colour schemes, imagery, typography, and composition across different paratextual visuals. This approach reveals the consistent presence of certain visual iconography that goes beyond genre specificity and reflects specific cultural values and social messages. Lau and Varughese stress that book covers do not merely serve as marketing tools but also play a significant role in shaping readers' perceptions and interpretations of the text. Specific to their study, the authors assert that the visual representation of women on book covers often challenges or conforms to traditional stereotypes and societal norms. This finding demonstrates the role of book covers in relation to cultural representation, making them pivotal in understanding broader social dynamics. This insight is crucial as it highlights the political judgment involved in both the design and interpretation of book covers. Furthermore, this dynamic interaction between visual representation and cultural ideology underscores the importance of analysing book covers as cultural artefacts that exert influence on and reflect social values.

This idea is also explored in *Cultures in the Contact Zone* (2002) by Suzanne Reichl and "An Inter-Semiotic Study of Ideology on the Book Covers of Persian Translations of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*" (2019) by Amin Amirdabbaghian and Krishnavanie Shunmugam. Reichl's work draws attention to the ethnic identifiers on book covers and the impact of semiotic references on readers' perceptions of the author's ethnicity, particularly in relation to the Black British experience. Reichl particularly emphasises how ethnic identifiers on book covers impact the reception and interpretation of literary works by Black British authors, highlighting the role of visual iconography in reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Similarly, Amirdabbaghian and Shunmugam examine the role of political and cultural ideology

in translated books during pre-revolution Iran through the lens of book covers. Their study underscores the critical role of paratexts in the transnational migration of texts, highlighting how visual elements can influence and reflect societal values across different contexts. Likewise, the article titled “Ideology Behind the Covers of the Bestselling Books in Iran: Female Narrators in War Literature” (2019), authored by Azra Ghandeharion and Maryam Sadat, also aligns with and reiterates the broader discourse on how book covers reflect and disseminate cultural ideologies. This article investigates how popular Iranian war memorial book covers portray feminine ideology and discourse, utilising visual elements rooted in both traditional and contemporary myths surrounding Iranian Muslim femininity. This examination illuminates the intricate interplay between visual representation and cultural identity, echoing the themes explored in the other studies.

Similarly, Jayashree Kamble’s essay titled “Branding a Genre: A Brief Transatlantic History of Romance Novel Cover Art” (2016) also aligns with this discourse by examining how mid-century covers of Mills & Boon novels glamorous illustrations depicted significant plot points and reflect contemporary socio-political events. Her work, in particular, highlights the broader influence of the classic Mills & Boon/Harlequin visuality across the transatlantic exchange between America and Britain, and how its visual iconography continues to define the aesthetics of the contemporary romance genre. Her exploration of the continued influence of certain visualities on book covers underscores the interconnectedness between cover images and historical visual conventions. Finally, Kamble connects all this to the significant role these covers play in shaping and reflecting cultural ideologies. Kamble’s focus on the transatlantic exchange of visual styles complements Reichl’s exploration of ethnic identifiers and Amirdabbaghian and Shunmugam’s analysis of political and cultural ideology in translated books, collectively demonstrating the impact of visual representation on cultural and

ideological narratives. A common finding in these works is the crucial role book covers play in actively constructing and negotiating ideological messages within specific socio-political contexts.

The aforementioned works primarily address the topic of book cover images, specifically focusing on their iconography and the significant role they play in constructing and conveying meaning. This includes their use for marketing purposes, translation (such as the interplay between text and image or between different languages), and their relationship to specific ideologies. Notably, these works, particularly those authored by Mendelsund, Varughese, and Sonzogni, also emphasise that book covers are not created or consumed in isolation. Rather, various external factors influence the selection of cover designs, including the preferences of authors, editorial guidelines, marketing research, promotion strategies, and the personal tastes of individual staff members within publishing companies (Sonzogni, 2011, p. 6). By considering the diverse components and approaches to studying cover design, the main insight derived from these works is that book covers, through the negotiation of verbal and visual signs, not only reflect the cultural assumptions of their creators but also those of authors, publishers, booksellers, and (implied or ideal) audiences.

This project is focused on the evaluation of Indian genre fiction covers and the analysis of how their visual elements convey more than just the essence of the texts they adorn. The central theme of this research, along with the aforementioned works, is the recognition that the images depicted on a book cover are not consumed passively. Drawing on the works of Mendelsund, Genette, Sonzogni and Lau and Varughese, my thesis also explores a specific genre of fiction to explore broader socio-cultural concerns related to imagery. These scholars employ semiotics, as well as postcolonial, cultural, and literary theory, in their

multidisciplinary approaches in comprehending cover designs. In line with with these works, this study also incorporates the intellectual and methodological traditions of semiotics and visual culture. While I acknowledge that the covers I discuss are designed and researched to attract a particular audience, this study does not seek to evaluate their effectiveness as marketing tools. Instead, the focus lies in examining how the covers within genre-specific groups create visual realms that engage with (political) ideas and myths that extend beyond those immediately present in the texts. Fundamentally, this study aims to interpret the semiotics of the collective visual elements of Indian SFF covers and the political and ideological connotations they convey.

1.2. The Role of Speculative Fiction

In literary studies, genres serve as frameworks for organizing and interpreting texts, acting as dynamic, socially constructed systems rather than fixed categories. Frow (2015) describes genres as performative structures that organize knowledge and social meaning, actively generating “effects of reality and truth” (p. 3). He argues that genres are not merely stylistic devices but fundamental frameworks that shape how texts are created, consumed, and understood. This conceptualization emphasizes the dynamic and context-dependent nature of genres, challenging static taxonomies and highlighting their role in cultural production. This perspective is especially relevant in the case of speculative fiction, a genre marked by its diverse subcategories and resistance to rigid classification. Speculative fiction encompasses works ranging from science fiction and fantasy to dystopian narratives, each challenging traditional literary realism by envisioning alternative realities and possibilities. Gill (2013) highlights the genre’s emphasis on “modes of being that contrast with audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (p. 72), while Suvin’s concept of “cognitive estrangement” underscores its capacity to provoke critical reflection on societal norms and values. The definition and

mediation of speculative fiction genres are shaped by various actors, including publishers, booksellers, readers, and critics. Gill (2013) notes that speculative fiction often defies precise categorization due to its inherently fluid boundaries and the multiplicity of interpretive practices it invites. Publishers and booksellers frequently classify speculative works based on marketability, emphasising visual and thematic elements that resonate with target audiences. These commercial considerations create subcategories like science fiction, fantasy, and steampunk, which guide consumer choices while simultaneously shaping genre expectations. Readers and critics further influence these genres through interpretive communities that negotiate and redefine boundaries, demonstrating how speculative fiction operates as both a commercial product and a literary category.

By examining speculative fiction through these lenses, it becomes clear that its classification is not a matter of static taxonomy but a dynamic interplay of social, cultural, and institutional forces. The genre's openness to redefinition underscores its relevance as a site for both creative innovation and cultural critique (Gill, 2013; Frow, 2015). This performative aspect is evident in speculative fiction's ability to transcend mere storytelling, engaging with broader cultural and political discourses. Thus, speculative fiction exemplifies the complexities of genre as a construct, challenging scholars to consider how its diverse forms and categorizations reflect and shape broader societal values. This perspective is crucial for understanding Indian Speculative and Fantasy Fiction (ISFF), where genre boundaries are further complicated by the intersection of cultural, political, and linguistic factors. The ongoing negotiation of ISFF's genre identity offers a rich field for exploring how speculative fiction adapts and transforms within specific cultural contexts.

In what follows, I provide a comprehensive review of significant literary works that contribute to establishing the fundamental characteristics of the speculative fantasy and science fiction genre as a whole. I place particular focus on aspects that are unique to Indian SFF, and more importantly, make an argument for utilising the cover images of SF genre fiction to explore ideas related to nationhood and identity. The acronym SFF, encompasses speculative fiction, science fiction, and various forms of fantasy, and thus acknowledges the interconnected nature of these genres and sub-genres. Recognising this flexibility and interconnection is especially valuable when discussing Indian SFF, as the books within this broad genre do not easily adhere to the stricter genre conventions of Western SF. Indian SFF books often blend multiple genres, including science fiction, fantasy, and gothic dystopian nightmares. To establish a system for comparison for my subsequent visual analyses, this thesis focuses on two distinctive subgenres in ISFF: Hindu myth-SFF and Dystopian SFF. By examining these subgenres, I aim to uncover how their cover designs reflect and shape cultural narratives and political ideologies specific to India.

My use of the term “Speculative and Fantasy fiction” (SFF) thus gestures to a loosely connected group of texts in the speculative fiction, science fiction, and (various forms of) fantasy genres. According to R. B. Gill, speculative fiction challenges the reader’s perception of everyday reality: it imagines a distinct world where events and causality operate according to logics that differ from the norm, yet still retain the essence of reality (Gill, 2013, p. 73). This definition draws inspiration from Darko Suvin’s renowned concept of science fiction as a literature of “cognitive estrangement” (1979, p. 9). In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979), Suvin posits that science fiction is characterised by both estrangement and (re)cognition. His theory of estrangement in science fiction is heavily influenced by the works of Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht. Shklovsky

introduced the concept of ‘ostranenie’ (defamiliarisation or estrangement) in literary theory, positing that the purpose of art is to make the familiar appear strange, thus enabling new perspectives and understanding. Brecht adapted this concept in his epic theatre, where he used ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ (alienation or estrangement effect) to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally absorbed in the narrative and instead encourage critical reflection on the social issues presented in the play (Parrinder, 2000). Suvin combines these ideas with his own insights to develop the concept of “cognitive estrangement” specific to the science fiction genre.

This estrangement is achieved through the introduction of novum — new and innovative elements such as advanced technology, alien species, or futuristic societies (Suvin, 1979, p. 63). The cognitive aspect of Suvin’s theory emphasises that these alternative realities must be intellectually comprehensible and resonate with the reader’s understanding of the world, even if they challenge or extend that understanding. For Suvin (1979), cognitive estrangement allows readers to critically reflect on their own reality by juxtaposing aspects of the real world within the imagined world. This process of estrangement enables readers to see their own world from a new perspective, fostering a critical awareness of social, political, and cultural issues. The cognitive dimension ensures that the estrangement is not merely for entertainment but serves as a tool for critique and intellectual engagement. While Suvin’s focus is primarily on science fiction, this understanding can be extended to encompass the broader genre of speculative fiction and fantasy works, particularly in the Indian context. In *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), Suparno Banerjee asserts that “modern techno-science, dominant Indian mainstream Hindu/Vedic science, and the nebulous realm of regional folk/subaltern knowledge” have coexisted for ages (Banerjee, 2020, p. 62). This coexistence has facilitated a synthesis of “rational modernity that places its faith in techno-

utopianism and a traditional indigenous philosophy that has employed myth and folklore” to understand contemporary socio-political structures (Khilnani, 2022, p. 6). Throughout Indian history, these systems have interacted in both complementary and antagonistic ways, creating a distinctly hybridised body of knowledge that embodies Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement. This hybrid knowledge system enables the public to make sense of the world around them, blending scientific rationality with traditional and folkloric elements. SFF in India engage deeply with the context in which they are created, reflecting aspects of reality.

The first English-language science fiction tale, *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* by Kylas Chunder Dutt, was published in 1835. However, Indian literature in English was heavily influenced by social realism, particularly during British colonial rule and right after, with writers focusing on themes of social justice, independence, and the human condition within the Indian context. As a result, the SFF genre primarily developed in various indigenous languages. There was a resurgence of science fiction written in English towards the end of the last century. English-language trade publishing in India gained prominence in the late 1980s with the entry of Penguin and subsequently the other Big Five international publishers into the market.¹ This development, along with more global interconnectedness, made it possible for writers to publish and distribute their works widely. In the 1990s, English-language science and fantasy fiction began to rise. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award, marked a significant milestone.

In the last decade, various digital SF magazines that frequently publish anthologies, reviews, and short stories have also emerged, including the Kolkata-based *Kalpabishwa* and

¹ Simon and Schuster, Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, and Penguin Random House are widely recognised as the “Big Five” publishers in the publishing industry. These companies have established branches or imprints in India. The books discussed in this chapter are published by these prominent companies.

the Delhi-based *Mithila Review*. The first distinctly genre SFF writer who gained popularity in India was Samit Basu, whose *Gameworld trilogy* (2004-2007) was published by Penguin India starting in 2004. The rise of SFF as a literary movement in India, which incorporates the characteristics of its established predecessors in the Western world, owes much to this trilogy. Following this release, the output of Indian SFF has markedly increased. Works of fiction like Chatterjee's *The City of Love* (2007), Chabria's *Clone* (2008), Ramdas's *Domechild* (2012), Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), and Akbar's *Leila* (2017) provide insightful commentaries on India (often in a dystopian fashion) through the use of speculative fiction motifs and themes.

If Basu is considered the leading figure in modern Indian genre writing, then Ashok Banker's novels *The Ramayana series* (2003-2010) and *Mahabharata series* (2011-2017) have played a significant role in establishing a popular subgenre within Indian science fiction and fantasy, commonly referred to as 'Hindu fantasy' or 'Bharathi Fantasy' (Varughese, 2017, p. 29). Banker's success paved the way for other writers such as Amish Tripathi, with his *Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) and *Ram Chandra Series* (2015-2022); Kevin Missal, with the *Kalki Series* (2017-2019); and Shatrujeet Nath, with the *Vikramaditya Series* (2014-2021), to draw inspiration from Hindu religious mythology and epics for their literary works. According to Nielsen's BookScan, which monitors the sales of Indian books written in English across both online and physical stores, speculative myth and fantasy fiction books make up nearly one-quarter of the titles on the country's bestseller lists (Guardian, 2020). Given the success and sales figures of many of these books, it is not surprising that well-established publishing houses are endorsing the production of more works in this genre.

While not all works of speculative and fantasy fiction achieve the same level of success, the genre possesses a loyal and enduring readership, particularly among the English-speaking,

urban middle class, including IT graduates and young professionals who seek to reconnect with their cultural heritage (Varughese, 2014). Although the themes and narratives may differ, all these works of Indian science fiction and fantasy share a common characteristic: they achieve their objectives by displacing aspects of Indian culture and society from their established order and placing them in unfamiliar and unconventional settings. In addition, contemporary Indian science fiction and fantasy books are influenced by both Euro-American SF and the ancient traditions of Indian myths and legends, encompassing elements of fantasy, folk tales, and mythological narratives. These literary works explore various concerns deeply rooted in Indian history, culture, and politics.

Academic research on Indian SFF, or science fiction, is currently limited, particularly when it comes to its iconography and visual aspects. Nevertheless, there are two scholarly texts that offer valuable insights into this genre and its mechanisms. The first is Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), in which the author traces the evolution of science fiction in India and explores recurring thematic patterns in various Indian languages, including English. One particularly significant chapter to my concerns in this thesis is "Cognitions and Estrangements: Epistemes and World Building in Indian SF" (2020, pp. 61-95), which sheds light on Indian SF that incorporates Hindu myths within a futuristic context, or reinterprets them as reflections of the past, while also integrating mainstream scientific principles. Banerjee (2020) suggests that employing Hindu mythology in such instances serves to legitimise Hindu nationalism, and in some rare cases, acts as a subversive tool against Western perspectives. Furthermore, he outlines how Indian SF texts challenge Western perceptions of India and the world, while simultaneously establishing their own distinct visions, rooted in dominant ideologies and representational politics.

The second scholarly work directly relevant to this research is *Science Fiction in India: Parallel World and Postcolonial Paradigms* (Khilnani & Bhattacharjee, 2022). This collection examines various science fiction narratives in texts, films, and graphic novels in relation to the intersection of the Indian nation and science fiction. While the collection discusses visual forms within the science fiction genre, there is no specific scholarship on book cover images. However, the chapter “The White City Turns Remaining Humans into Machines: Urban Dystopia and Posthumanism in Appupen’s *The Snake and the Lotus: A Halahala Adventure*” by Gosh (2022) explores visuality in science fiction graphic novels. Gosh primarily focuses on how urban space is represented as a dystopian setting in graphic form but also touches upon the reuse of Western SF visual tropes, such as the vertically segregated city [as seen in works like *Metropolis* (1927) and *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899)], to depict hierarchical spaces and power structures of Indian nature. This further emphasises the idea of hybridity within Indian science fiction works, particularly from a visual perspective. Moreover, Gosh’s analysis underscores the importance of visuality in understanding the broader implications of science fiction narratives and aligns with the larger discourse on the role of imagery in understanding the human condition, particularly in the Indian context. It is important to note that despite the explicit labelling of the two aforementioned texts as science fiction, a significant portion of the analysed works can be categorised under the broader genre of Indian speculative fiction (Gill, 2013).

Considering the central focus of this thesis is the examination of how visuality in ISFF addresses the depiction of Indianness, the correlations between these two texts provide stronger literary support for the research. Additionally, they elucidate the role of Indian SFF works as a tool for comprehending the contemporary realities of India. The primary aim of this study is to delve into the representation and adaptation of dominant and counter-hegemonic notions of Indianness in ISFF book covers, particularly how these images either reinforce or challenge

prevailing constructs of Indian identity. The argument posited here is that the socio-political elements evident in these images and covers serve as a reflection of the conflicting Indian identities and directly reveal how writers, designers, artists, and publishers interpret, revise, and engage with the complex issues surrounding Indian nationhood.

1.3. Semiotics and the Critical Study of Images

Studies of visual culture and images are fundamentally rooted in semiotics: the science of signs. The study of semiotics originated with the linguistic scholar Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who treated language as a sign system. His work in linguistics provided concepts and methods that were later applied to sign systems beyond language. Semiology (or semiotics) pertains to the study of symbols and signs that possess the ability to represent something else. Umberto Eco, an Italian semiotician and novelist, eloquently captures this essence by stating that semiotics is “the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie, for if something cannot be used to fabricate falsehoods, it follows that it cannot be employed to convey the truth; ultimately rendering it incapable of conveying any message at all” (Eco, 1979, p. 7). Semiotics primarily involves the examination of the relationship between three key terms: sign, signifier, and signified. Other influential figures in the development of semiotics include Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Umberto Eco (1932) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1908).

It is worth noting that parallels to this discipline can also be found in various Eastern cultures. For instance, semiotic theory can be implicitly found in early linguistic works from countries such as India and China (Srivatsava & Kapoor, 2010). Although I am not using theories from Indian aesthetic philosophy in this research, it is crucial to acknowledge that the semiotic foundation prevalent in Indian aesthetic theories overlaps with themes used in contemporary studies of visual culture. In this study, I have primarily focused on Roland

Barthes, as his essays in *Mythologies* (1957) and *Image-Music-Text* (1977) have greatly influenced the analytical aspect of this thesis.

According to Barthes (1957), anything in culture can be a sign that conveys a specific message. He takes Saussure's concepts of 'signifier' and 'signified' and uses it to discuss the 'deciphering' of visual messages (Barthes, 1957, pp. 109-110). Barthes asserts that each sign can have two levels of signification. The initial signification (denotation) can become a signifier at a secondary level of signification (connotation). For example, the word 'dog' could have the secondary signification of an unpleasant human being. This represents the first level of the semiological system. However, certain signs can represent more complex concepts, such as the shared values and ideologies within a particular culture or group. This constitutes the second level of meaning, or signification. Barthes labels this secondary level as '*myth*' and argues that any cultural icon, be it text or image, can possess multiple meanings or significations at a given time. A sign becomes a *myth* when society believes it represents a universal truth. Barthes uses the example of a magazine cover depicting a black soldier dressed in a French uniform, saluting the French flag to explain myth. Here, the secondary signification suggests that the image portrays the idea that France is not racist and presents a message about French imperialism (Barthes, 1957, pp. 116-120). This signification is an attached 'meaning,' one that implies a type of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts or ideas, and appears inherently natural.

Barthes further posits that myth does not just add new meaning to a sign; it distorts the original meaning. This allows the myth to seem natural, despite being a constructed idea. Furthermore, he argues that myth functions as a mask, presenting a falsehood that shields people from harsh realities and thus maintains the social order. Nevertheless, these secondary significations have historical limits, and their meanings can change based on external contexts,

conditions of use, and so forth (Barthes, 1957, p. 115). Barthes' work proves beneficial to my research in two ways: First, the semiotic approach is suitable for identifying the meaning and symbolism within the visual components of book covers; second, and more significantly, his theorisation of myth is particularly relevant in examining how images can perpetuate and reinforce specific ideologies.

Umberto Eco's close reading of texts and images adds another layer of depth to this analysis. Eco emphasises the importance of considering the context in which a sign is interpreted, arguing that meaning is not fixed but can vary depending on the cultural and social context. His work on open texts, where multiple interpretations are possible, highlights the active role of the reader in constructing meaning. In his essay "The Myth of Superman" (1972), Eco explores how the character of Superman embodies multiple layers of meaning and cultural significance. Superman, as a cultural icon, functions on multiple levels: as a hero with superhuman abilities (denotation) and as a symbol of American values and ideals (connotation). Eco illustrates how Superman's stories oscillate between the mythical and the realistic, allowing readers to project their own values and fantasies onto the character. This oscillation creates a space for readers to engage with the text in a dynamic way, similar to how Barthes describes the functioning of myth. Eco's insights on the variability of meaning and the role of the reader/viewer complement both Barthes' and Stuart Hall's frameworks of semiotic analysis.

Stuart Hall's methodologies provide valuable frameworks for analysing the political implications of images, including cover designs. Like Barthes, Hall is deeply concerned with understanding the ideological impact of images and media. According to Hall, visual culture plays a central role in struggles around meaning, identity, and power. He argues that "the examination of symbolic forms and meanings is inherently an examination of power" (Hall,

1997, p. 27). Hall emphasises that culture, encompassing visual and verbal forms, is inherently political, as it engenders practices that represent and exert power, thus shaping specific identities and legitimising particular political ideologies. In this context, politics refers to the idea that culture serves as a platform for individuals and communities to define and articulate their identities, which continually evolve based on their changing needs. Similarly, culture for Hall is not fixed or always aligned with power. Rather, he views it as a site of negotiation, wherein potential meanings can be constructed, and a continuous negotiation occurs in favour of or against the culture propagated by the powerful (Hall, 1997).

Drawing on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, which explains how the ruling class maintains dominance by securing the consent of the governed through cultural institutions and practices (Durham & Kellner, 2006, pp. 13-18), Hall argues that culture and ideology should not be seen as external forces arbitrarily imposed upon individuals. Instead, he highlights their dynamic nature as arenas of perpetual contestation and negotiation in which individuals are entangled. Hall's process includes a close reading of various advertising materials (in this case featuring black athletes) to understand representation in cultural spaces (Hall, 1997, pp. 223-230). He also considers cultural and historical factors to shed light on specific assumptions and ideologies engaged in cultural representation. However, Hall asserts that the dominant cultural order is not fixed. Instead, the polysemic nature of visual media provides opportunities to contest or reclaim its meaning. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Hall builds more directly on Barthes' work to demonstrate how deconstructing myths in visual media can reveal the values and beliefs that support specific ideologies, whether political, social, or ethical. Hall's method of analysing various visual media in relation to each other and the broader cultural and historical context aligns with the approach intended for this analysis.

By combining Eco's perspective on the dynamic nature of meaning with Barthes' semiotic analysis and Hall's exploration of the ideological impact of media, this comprehensive framework facilitates a deeper examination of how visual media, specifically book covers, sustain or challenge the dominant cultural order. This intertextual reading of cover images thus enhances our understanding of the dominant ideology expressed within them and helps identify images that challenge the prevailing norms, providing a richer and more complex view of the political and cultural significance of visual representation.

Method

While Barthes' semiotics and Hall's system of decoding serve as the overarching theoretical framework for this thesis, I refer to the systematic approach to "reading" the elements and structures of visual design put forth by media scholars Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, to help me in the visual analysis. In their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (2006), Kress and van Leeuwen utilise examples from advertising, architecture, textbook art, and fine arts to establish a method for studying visuals across different media technologies. Their account emphasises the similarities between the grammar of language and visual communication, drawing heavily from English linguistic studies for its terminology. It should be noted that many of the terms and concepts used by Kress and van Leeuwen are standard within design studies and analysis. However, these authors structure their work around a visual grammar, providing a framework for the formal analysis of visuals that focuses on observable conventions. Of particular value is the chapter titled "*The Meaning of Composition*" (2006, p.175-214), which presents a clear approach to analysing the composition of an image in order to understand how different compositions create distinct relational and interactive meanings for the viewer. Kress and van Leeuwen propose that this is achieved through three interrelated systems:

- a) *Information value*: This refers to the placement of visual elements, particularly human figures and forms, within the visual frame. The positioning, whether it be left, right, in the margin, or centred, establishes zones of importance within the image.
- b) *Saliency*: The size, placement, colour values, contrast, and relative sizing of visual elements in relation to one another attract the viewer's attention in various ways.
- c) *Framing*: Design elements such as borders and lines that connect or separate parts of the image.

This concise breakdown of an image, dividing it into various elements and providing a detailed interpretation, is an analytical system that has greatly influenced my approach to visual analysis.

Kress and van Leeuwen's analytical framework focuses on the visual elements that influence viewers' perception of an image. Although it is challenging to pinpoint the exact factors that attract viewers to specific images, it is undeniable that elements such as visual arrangement, symbols, colours, and form play a significant role in shaping the viewers' interpretation of an image. In the chapter "Representation and Interaction," they provide examples of cover illustrations, popular posters, and children's drawings to illustrate how the portrayal and placement of figures convey meaning and emotionally engage or motivate viewers to in various ways (pp.114 -155). In each case, the posture, style, and positioning of the figures either draw the viewer closer or create a sense of distance. These interactions between the image and the viewer are analysed through three levels: image act, social distance, and attitude. First, the term 'image act' refers to the intended effect that the image producer aims to evoke in the viewer (p. 116). The figures, colour combinations, and typography contribute to the overall portrayal of the image act. Second, 'social distance' pertains to the

spatial arrangement of elements within the image, which reflects social relationships. It encompasses not only the interactions between characters in the image but also allows viewers to determine whether the image conveys a sense of distance or intimate social relations (p. 153). Finally, the ‘attitude’ of an image relates to its expression of individuality, subjectivity, and social values (pp. 129 -130). Their theory emphasises three dimensions: contact, social distance, and point of view. Contact relates to whether the represented participants look at the viewer, creating an interactive relationship. Social distance concerns the proximity or distance of the depicted subjects, indicating levels of intimacy or formality. Point of view involves the angle and framing, conveying power relations or alignment with the viewer’s perspective.

The first two levels of interpretation involve analysing the fundamental elements and design principles of the image in order to understand its meaning. The final level, attitude, is more complex and encompasses various aspects of the interaction between the image and the viewer. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discuss how the ‘attitude’ in images often aligns with the beliefs of the social institution in which the work is created and shared. The visual elements of contact, social distance, and point of view reflect and reinforce these institutional ideologies. By analysing how these dimensions are utilised in images, one can uncover the embedded ideologies that influence viewers’ perceptions and interpretations. This demonstrates how visual design serves as a tool for conveying and perpetuating social and cultural norms. Furthermore, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) emphasise that the interaction between the image and the viewer is influenced by pre-existing socio-cultural knowledge held by both the producer and the viewer. While the levels of knowledge may differ between the producer and the viewer, there is a certain shared knowledge between them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 115). This refers to the cultural and social context that already exists even before the image is interpreted. It is a crucial point supported by scholars Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott. In their work *How Picturebooks Work* (2013), Nikolajeva and Scott use case studies of children’s

picture books to illustrate that both words and images provide a space for the audience to fill with prior knowledge, experience, and expectations (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2013, p. 2). The viewer/reader utilises this prior knowledge to decode a given image/text.

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar offers a comprehensive framework for the analysis of visual communication across various media. Acknowledging the inherent subjectivity in visual analysis, the authors present a flexible toolkit rather than rigid guidelines. To enhance the findings of studies employing this approach, detailed analyses of representative visual examples should be conducted, and interdisciplinary theories should be incorporated. Each image analysis in this thesis is structured around three interconnected stages: descriptive analysis, interpretive analysis, and critical analysis. Descriptive analysis involves identifying visual resources, codes, or signs within and across a collection of visual examples. Interpretive analysis delves into the establishment of meaning potentials by situating visual resources within their specific historical or cultural contexts of production and use. Lastly, critical analysis connects signs and contexts to comprehend the cultural significance and ideological implications of imagery, as well as the power dynamics inherent in visual communication within politics and society. In the subsequent section, I elaborate on the cultural and political theories that I employ to accomplish this task.

1.4. Politics and Visual Culture

One can observe that both texts place significant emphasis on the role of pictures and images in contemporary society. These images not only convey meaning through a seemingly ‘universal language’ (Fromm, 1981), but they also exert a profound influence on perception and beliefs. It is through images in the public domain that individuals are trained to see in specific ways, thereby generating distinct forms of knowledge and behaviour, and establishing societal norms and habits of seeing (Hardgrove, 2003). The ‘Pictorial Turn’ (Mitchell, 1992) has led to widespread recognition of the central importance of visual representation across various academic disciplines. According to WJT Mitchell, “Images have legs” (2013, p.87), meaning that images acquire new meanings each time they enter different cultural and historical contexts, leading to new connections and associations between cultures and peoples (Mitchell, 2013). Therefore, the first step towards a visual cultural study is acknowledging that visual images are not stable but change their relationship to external reality over time. In other words, studying images also means examining a particular historical period, one that explores the spatial and temporal circulation of images and their migration from one location or era to another. This idea that images can undergo changes in meaning becomes increasingly significant in my analysis of visual iconographies that have remained relevant across different time periods in India.

The cultural battle surrounding the definition of an ‘authentic’ representation of a nation is a significant topic in academic discussions on visual culture. One area of concern in this regard is how various forms of identity can either foster unity or create divisions among people. Two texts of particular academic importance in this context are the anthology *Visualising Empire: Africa, Europe, and the Politics of Representation* (2021) and Jurgen Spitzmuller’s essay “Floating Ideologies: Metamorphoses of Graphic Germanness” (2012). *Visualising*

Empire consists of essays that study various visual media from the French colonies to examine how official French visual culture normalised France's colonial project and exposed citizens and subjects to racialised ideas of life in the empire. The essays conclude that through the normalisation of colonial conquest and racist stereotypes in the images, viewers learned colonialist patterns of interpretation that have retained their potency to this day. Conversely, Spitzmuller analyses the graphic ideology associated with the concept of Germanness. He suggests that specific visual styles or "graphic means" can become closely associated with particular cultural groups, thus being perceived as representative of those groups by both the citizens of a country and external observers. Spitzmuller utilises Kress and van Leeuwen's visual analytical frameworks to defend the claim that ideological function of graphic elements is dynamic and influenced by multimodal context construction (2012, p. 279). Based on various contextualisation cues, the overall setting, the text genre, and specific graphic elements can elicit very different and sometimes overlapping associations, such as Nazism, Gothic, or medieval mythology. Both of these texts analyse the influence of visual culture on specific and distinct national experiences. Specifically, they illustrate that visual relationships are intertwined with power dynamics and underscore how these images are not mere reflections of dominant visualities; but rather actively contribute to and advance specific political ideologies.

In this research, I investigate how ideas surrounding Indianness are mediated and materialised through the covers of ISFF books. An essential aspect of understanding this is recognizing that the visual realm is inherently political in nature. While not all images hold the same significance, it is widely accepted that visibility is closely tied to social, cultural, and political experiences. In *The Right to Look* (2011), Nicholas Mirzoeff explores the continuous struggle between "visibility," which "sutures authority to power and renders this association natural," and counter-visibility, or the "right to look" (Mirzoeff, 2011, pp. 1-16). Visibility

pertains to what is familiar and understood, representing the established way of seeing and focusing on preserving and upholding the authority of those in power. Conversely, counter-visibility consistently disrupts, challenges, and opposes the solidification of prevailing visual norms (pp. 20-25). Mirzoeff draws on the works of Jacques Rancière, W.J.T. Mitchell, Jacques Lacan, Gayatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and others to position his research within a broader intellectual framework. Consequently, Mirzoeff's work facilitates the convergence of various disciplines in exploring politics and aesthetics.

In *The Right to Look* (2011), Nicholas Mirzoeff presents a nuanced argument regarding visibility and its role in shaping power dynamics. He identifies three historical complexes: the era of plantation owners (1660-1860), colonization and imperialism (1860-1945), and the era of military-industrial surveillance (1945-present). Mirzoeff contends that visibility is the process through which authority is made to appear natural and self-evident. This dominant visual perspective, which he terms the "complex of visibility," (p.4) organises social hierarchies and legitimises power structures. However, Mirzoeff argues that this visual hegemony is inherently unstable and continually challenged by counter-visualities — alternative modes of seeing that resist and subvert the dominant visual order. These counter-visualities manifest through various creative and visual forms, such as depictions of slave revolts, public displays, art, and parody. He argues that these visual expressions should be seen as attempts to present different ways of imagining and modes of resistance that aim to confront and dismantle authoritative regimes. By examining these counter-visualities within specific historical contexts, Mirzoeff deepens our understanding of how visual representation shapes and contests power relations (Mirzoeff, 2011, pp. 1-25).

Although Mirzoeff clarifies that *counter-visibility* is not merely the binary opposite of visibility but encompasses a range of perspectives from opposition to neutrality (p. 65), his discussion often emphasises antagonism as the primary cause of counter-visibility, sometimes overlooking more complex and ambivalent negotiations. This antagonistic focus can lead to a binary understanding of the *visual* and the *counter-visual* which is what the author actually disavows. He observes that in reality, the political landscape is far more pluralistic and heterogeneous. However, Mirzoeff emphasises that conflicting forms of visual representation are constantly contested, particularly in determining what is visible and part of the established order. This focus on the potential for challenge in varying visual forms is important in contemporary visual studies such as this, as it directly engages with challenges to existing power structures. Mirzoeff's analysis aids in comprehending the ongoing impact of historical power dynamics on contemporary politics and aesthetics. His work highlights how visual representation continues to play a crucial role in shaping and contesting social and political realities, reflecting the enduring influence of past ideologies in the present. This is particularly relevant in understanding how contemporary Indian visual culture navigates and challenges established norms and power relations because the present continues to exhibit traces of the past in its cultural and social structures.

Similar to Mirzoeff, Jacques Rancière considers the visual as a site of political contestation. He emphasises the importance of visibility and visual forms as public spaces where histories are debated, contested, and transformed. Rancière's work offers opportunities to affirm the power of visual studies to intervene in the creation of the visualities we inhabit. According to Rancière, politics is aesthetics, and vice versa. He argues that politics and aesthetics are "two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification" (Rancière, 2009, pp. 25-26). Rancière's perspective can be

better understood by examining his view of social formations. He asserts that every society is inherently hierarchical and structured according to a distinct “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2004, p. 12). This distribution determines who has the authority to participate in the collective common. In this framework, the term “sensible” refers to that which can be perceived through the senses. Therefore, the distribution of the sensible establishes distinctions between the visible and the invisible, delineating the boundaries of what is perceptible and what is excluded from collective recognition, thus shaping societal hierarchies and power structures. In essence, Rancière argues that politics and aesthetics both shape and are shaped by the sensory experiences and perceptions that define social life. They are mechanisms through which power is both asserted and contested, influencing the visibility and legitimacy of various identities and actions.

Rancière uses the term “police order” to describe the overall system of practices and relationships that support and reinforce the existing social order and dominant ways of seeing and understanding the world. According to Rancière, the police order encompasses the manner in which distinct societal groups “are assembled and classified, how power and authority are structured, and how functions, positions, and systems of legitimacy are distributed” (Rancière, 2010, pp. 27-28). On the other hand, dissensus refers to the process of disruption of a specific police order, leading to a reconfiguration of the dominant space or visibility. Politics is understood as the successful disruption and resistance to the “natural order” (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). Put simply, politics involves challenging and opposing the distribution of the sensible. This rupture reveals the contingent nature of the supposedly natural order established by the police. Ultimately, for Rancière, the act of political dissensus, taken to its logical conclusion, opens up possibilities for new ways of seeing.

The term aesthetics, as used by Rancière, goes beyond the realm of the senses. Rather, he connects aesthetics to the very act of dividing and distributing, which enables it to be perceived through the senses (Rancière, 2006). Therefore, it can be said that there are two types of aesthetics: one that adheres to what is already accepted and common, and another that is political in nature. The aesthetics of the police order refers to the system of practices and relationships that reinforce the existing social order and dominant ways of seeing and understanding the world. This type of aesthetics essentially perpetuates the existing social hierarchies and power structures by defining what is perceptible and what is excluded from collective recognition. In contrast, political aesthetics challenges and modifies sensory perception, making it a crucial tool in creating dissensus. Dissensus refers to the process of disruption of a specific police order, leading to a reconfiguration of the dominant space or visibility (Rancière, 2010). This rupture reveals the contingent nature of the supposedly natural order established by the police. Ultimately, for Rancière, the act of political dissensus opens up possibilities for new ways of seeing, enabling the emergence of alternative social arrangements and understandings. However, it's important to bear in mind Rancière's caution that aesthetics that contribute to "the fabric of dissensus" are rare, as many more conform to existing power structures and authorities (2010, p.95). This insight is particularly useful when examining visual cultural artefacts such as book cover images. These images may not immediately present themselves as political statements, but they operate within the interactions where the political and the visible influence each other. By analysing these visual elements, one can uncover how they might subtly reinforce or challenge existing social norms and power dynamics.

Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" is particularly useful in the Indian context for critically examining the social and political divisions and disparities that are deeply ingrained and often presented as natural in everyday aesthetic experiences. It

encourages us to question how notions such as Indianness and nationhood are perceived and the inherent exclusions that are embedded within them and made natural. In the context of this thesis, Hindu-SFF images can be framed through Rancière's concept as being a space of "police order," where the visual sensibilities of Indianness are shaped, defined, and expressed through dominant values of nationhood and identity. This perspective highlights how visibility privileges particular ways of seeing while repressing others. Meanwhile, non-myth ISFF cover images can be framed within Rancière's concept of political dissensus. These images challenge the dominant visual order by presenting alternative representations of Indianness that disrupt and contest the established norms, opening up space for new ways of understanding and interpreting Indian identity and nationhood.

The central focus of this project is an investigation of the realm of images as a space where new counter visualities and identities may be formed, particularly in relation to national identities. This occurs, I argue, through the use of specific iconography, art styles, and notably, through the repurposing of existing visibility to represent ideas of Indianness. The investigation also aims to clarify to what extent these visual representations are hybrid, drawing upon influences from both Eastern and Western sources to envision a contemporary Indian sensibility. The key steps in my approach to visual analysis, then, involve, first, shifting critical attention from the images themselves to the social and political processes within which they are embedded and, second, using semiotics to analyse and discuss these processes. This research will refer to and expand upon Rancière's politics of aesthetics, Barthes' studies on signs and symbols and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to analyse ISFF cover design as paratextual sites where multiple modes of meaning-making are enacted.

SFF's ability to employ imaginary worlds to reflect on our reality extends to and is intimately linked with the jacket covers of these texts. Together, they invite exploration of

themes crucial to the ‘imagined community’ of India — or rather its multiple imagined communities. While the general methodological framework of this research is derived from the aforementioned works, the emphasis of this study will be on understanding the role played by images in constructing, contesting, and regulating the parameters of Indian identities in the context of contemporary notions of nationhood. It will focus on the visual tropes of Hindu myth and non-myth Indian Speculative and fantasy fiction cover art, and their engagement with identity and nationalistic ideologies. Through this analysis, I aim to understand the dominant and counter-hegemonic ideas of Indian identity that populate the visual and political realm.

1.5. Visual Culture Studies of India

Visuality and the realm of the image have played a significant role in shaping Indian public culture. The study of contemporary visual cultures in India is a relatively new but nonetheless well-established field of scholarship. It brings together the analysis of popular visual culture with the disciplines of art, film, and media studies, drawing from cultural theory and interdisciplinary fields of postcolonial scholarship. India is often regarded as having a unique connection with the visual, offering abundant research opportunities in the field of visual culture (Eck, 2007). Although there is extensive research on Indian visual culture as a whole, there is relatively limited literature specifically dedicated to Indian book cover design. In the following sections, I discuss seminal works and theorists who have theorised popular Indian visual media and have deeply influenced my understanding of the field, particularly in relation to visuality and nationhood and their place within the broader field of postcolonial visual cultural studies.

Images that depict “Indianness” are commonly found in certain cultural productions, particularly in cinema. In her book *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*

(1993), for example, Sumita S. Chakravathy extensively discusses the presentation of specific visual representations of Indianness in popular post-independence Bollywood films. Chakravathy's study focuses on how the visual aspects of cinema construct the ideological concept of Indian national identity. She also examines how Bollywood movies use images of the nation-state, such as readily identifiable landscapes, locations, clothing, and dialogue, to evoke a sense of easy identification of an India following independence. Chakravathy's observation that Bollywood's condensed portrayal of Indianness differs from the more elaborate expressions found in other art forms or works of fiction that were not influenced by British imperialism is particularly noteworthy. This idea that some popular visual cultures of India still have strong traces of the colonial past — is something I discuss in my analysis of Hindu-myth SFF cover imagery. While Chakravathy's primary focus is on film and questions related to collective identity, it raises issues and concerns similar to those addressed in the research on book covers. It is particularly useful in my examination of how the collective representations of the (Indian) people function to legitimise certain defining notions of Indianness.

Christopher Pinney's *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (2004), is widely recognised as the foremost comprehensive history of India's popular visual culture. Pinney examines sensory aesthetics and the potential for alternative, counter-hegemonic historical narratives through mass-produced visual culture, with a particular focus on calendar art and chromolithographs. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Anderson, Mitchell, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Bhabha, Pinney offers a nuanced analysis of popular images and their connection to political struggles in the nation. Pinney organises Indian visual culture into distinct historical periods: the colonial period, early 20th century, post-independence era, and late 20th to early 21st century (2004), with the aim of envisioning history

as shaped in part by visual conflicts. This study aligns with Pinney's methodology by delineating key historical and visual moments in Indian visual culture in a similar fashion. While Pinney's work covers a broader scope, this research specifically focuses on the visual iconographies that directly influence postmillennial Indian SFF cover art, and contemporary visual cultures related to Indianness. Pinney presents a model for critically examining the role of images in Indian politics, even when those images may not appear overtly political. He achieves this by first incorporating examples of explicitly political images into his analysis of mass-produced images and lithographs. By contextualising his analysis within significant historical periods, Pinney effectively illustrates how popular print media contest ideas of Indian nationalism. A substantial portion of my third chapter on the visual history of popular visual culture in relation to Indian nationalism draws on Pinney's groundbreaking work and serves as a starting point for tracing the visual manifestations of Indianness, particularly the prevailing dominant visualities that have persisted over time.

In contrast to Pinney, Christiane Brosis's work focuses on analysing visual culture as political propaganda. In her book *Empowering Visions: The Political Representation in Hindu Nationalism* (2005), she examines the role of visual media, specifically propaganda videos, in the Hindutva movement. Brosis discusses how these persuasive videos encourage and enable various Hindu nationalist groups and organisations in politics, religion, and economics to unite under one ideology. Brosis's research engages with the concepts explored by Hall in his analysis of representation and media. Hall argues that representation does not simply present an existing and unchanging meaning. Instead, he suggests that representation is a process of signification within a specific discourse, which constructs reality and shapes collective "identities-in-the-making" (Hall, 1990, p.23). Brosis's investigation builds upon Hall's account of representation and identity construction to demonstrate how Hindutva politics employs

dynamic intertextualities of aesthetics, symbolism, and social practices to mobilise and reinforce dominant notions of Hindu nationalism. Furthermore, her study demonstrates how certain popular visual media becomes hegemonic and can function as tools of the state, for example by promoting narratives with Hindu protagonists and marginalising minority groups. Brosis acknowledges the presence of various forms of nationalism within India but focuses her research on the Hindutva aesthetic. In contrast, my analysis will encompass both Hindutva and opposing nationalisms present in the aesthetic domain.

Dawson Varughese's *Visuality and Identity in Post-millennial Indian Graphic Narratives* (2017) and *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More Than a Book by Its Cover* (2015) by Lisa Lau and Dawson Varughese are invaluable reference sources for this research. Varughese's work examines the interaction between Indian society and 'ways of seeing' as portrayed in Indian graphic novels, discussing the representation of the 'inauspicious' and its challenge to dominant visual modes of representing India. Meanwhile, Lau and Varughese, utilising semiotic analysis and a 'discursive approach' that prioritises the effects and consequences of specific representations, explore the significance of book covers in relation to the politics of identity and representation. *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More Than a Book by Its Cover* is one of the few academic texts that directly engage with Indian book cover art as a medium for visual analysis of identity. While its primary focus is on the representation of Indian women on the cover images of Indian English books published by Western and Indian publishing houses, Lau and Varughese also provide a comprehensive overview of book publishing in India. This volume informs how I understand the capacity of literary images to represent vision and visuality, as well as how they portray different ways of seeing Indianness. Their analysis delves into how these images serve as sites of ideological negotiation, where notions of Indianness

are contested and redefined. They emphasise the role of visual representation in constructing cultural narratives and identity politics, demonstrating how book covers function as significant cultural texts that influence readers' perceptions. This volume informs how I understand the capacity of literary images to represent vision and visibility. Through detailed analysis, it highlights the political implications of visual representation and its role in shaping cultural identity, providing a critical framework for examining the visibility of ISFF book covers in this research.

The works discussed illustrate that the notions of India, Indianness, and modernity in India are crucial and debated subjects. These works highlight how India's diverse artistic and aesthetic productions mirror broader tensions and concerns regarding identity and politics. They explore the juxtaposition of India's unique self-definition, its national visibilities, and its aspiration to integrate into the modern global community. Additionally, they examine the various internal and external influences — both artistic and political — on the nation's visual discourse. This research leverages these theoretical and cultural frameworks to demonstrate how aesthetic expression informs and shapes the "Imagined Communities" of national identity in India.

1.6. Indian Nation

Given the primary focus of this study is to examine the conflicting notions of Indian nationhood and identity, it is also important to provide a concise overview of India and Indian nationalism. In particular, this overview will highlight the two prominent forms of nationalism that dominate in the current movement: secular and Hindutva. The colonial encounter in the 19th century was a multifaceted historical process that inevitably influenced nationalist thought,

both in terms of content and form (Bose, 2017, p. 12). The emergence of Indian national consciousness during this period can be characterised as a fusion of post-Enlightenment European liberal thought with various local traditions, indigenous circumstances, and events. In other words, the anti-colonial nationalist movement in India can be best understood in terms of hybridity: ironically, Indian nationalism often used Western concepts and terminologies to challenge colonial rule, while also incorporating indigenous ideas that were interpreted through a native lens and even employed to assert “cultural distinctiveness or emphasise an irreconcilable divide between the coloniser and the colonised” (Loomba 2004, p.146). Conventionally, this phenomenon is perceived to be correlated with advancements in print technology and the rise of newspaper journalism. The dissemination of shared cultural and political discourses in English through print media facilitated the development of a collective political discourse, while vernacular texts contributed to cohesion among diverse linguistic groups (Dasgupta, 1977).

Additionally, the 19th century witnessed the widespread adoption of print technology and improved means of transportation, enabling the country to easily share a universally understandable visual language across the length and breadth of the nation. This visual language was disseminated through popular art forms and media, thereby reinforcing common values and aspirations (Mitter, 1994). Initially, mechanical reproduction techniques such as engraving, and lithography were employed to introduce Western illustrative art to India. However, later on, these methods were utilised to circulate prints featuring Hindu religious subjects, revered leaders, and, to a lesser extent, other minority religious figures and sentiments. Collectively, these images played a significant role in the development of a pan-Indian visual culture that fuelled the growth of nationalism towards the close of the 19th century.

Such factors contributed to the emergence of pan-Indian nationalism by cultivating a sense of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983).

Anti-colonial nationalism in India aimed to achieve self-determination and liberation from foreign governance, while also transcending linguistic, cultural, religious, and other social identity boundaries. Some Indian nationalist leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) and Maulana Azad (1888-1958), were staunch proponents of the complete separation of state and religion. They asserted that religious customs and dogmas were best relegated to the homes. The period leading up to Indian Independence (1930s to 1940s) witnessed significant social reform, spearheaded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1881-1956), who fervently campaigned to eradicate the caste system. Additionally, E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar (1879-1973) advocated for rationality within Tamil society, while Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928) called for an end to birth-based discrimination in Kerala. These reform initiatives across the length and breadth of the country all shared the common objective of promoting non-discrimination and secularism.

However, scholars of Subaltern studies, such as Partha Chatterjee (1986; 2020) and Ranajit Guha (1991; 1998), contend that while Indian nationalism emerged from the anti-colonial movement, Hindu nationalism and Muslim nationalism also emerged simultaneously. As a result, the ostensibly homogenous discourse of Indian nationalism was susceptible to fragmentation as a result of deep divisions within the nation. This divisive framework, profoundly influenced how Indian society perceived and defined itself. Furthermore, the partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan added to the chaos. The primary objective was to geographically segregate the populace into regions where Muslims and Hindus constituted the majority in each case. Nevertheless, the territorial division was hastily executed without adequate consideration, leading to bitter, violent in-fighting and tremendous loss of

life, with long-term consequences still evident today. These divergent perceptions of nationhood and identity, primarily formulated along religious lines, find expression in the artistic creations of the nationalist era.

Another significant issue arising from colonialism was the establishment of social categories based on religion and caste. This resulted in the ‘semiticisation’ of indigenous local religious traditions. This refers to the simplification of these religious traditions’ complex internal structures to fit into a universal religious framework derived from Abrahamic traditions (Bhatt, 2001; Hansen, 1999; van der Veer, 1994). Furthermore, in the colonial imagination, Hindus were perceived as ‘Aryans’ who had colonised and subjugated the inferior Dravidian people of South Asia. The Dravidians comprised ‘tribal’ and ‘untouchable’ groups that existed outside the caste system, while Muslims were perceived as ‘invaders’ from Central Asia who were racially distinct from Hindus (van der Veer, 1994, p.29). These social categories collectively formed the foundational narrative of Indian history and set the nation on a trajectory of ever-expanding identity politics.²

When India gained independence in 1947, the nation underwent a division, resulting in two separate countries: India and Pakistan. The period leading up to 1947 witnessed frequent and large-scale outbreaks of organised violence between Muslim and Hindu nationalists. The partition itself sparked a prolonged period of violence, affecting over 400 million individuals and giving rise to riots, sectarian conflicts, loss of life, and a massive influx of migrants. The partition of colonial India, which resulted in the predominantly Hindu state of India and the

² See: Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindu: An Alternative History*, United Kingdom, OUP Oxford, 2010 also Yengde, Suraj. *Caste Matters*, India, Penguin Random House Private Limited, 2019.

predominantly Muslim state of Pakistan, is widely regarded as one of the most significant upheavals in human history (Brass 2003, p. 75). The consequences of the partition continue to resonate in India today, as evidenced by periodic communal riots between Hindus and Muslims and strained regional relations. Both India and Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities and have engaged in warfare three times since the partition. It would be fair to assert that the partition has played a significant role in shaping India's national identity.

Deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of the subcontinent, it stands as a defining moment that continues to influence how India (and Pakistan) envisions the past, present, and future.³ After gaining independence, India made a democratic choice to uphold inclusivity for all inhabitants within its geographical boundaries, regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliations. However, there have been instances that have disrupted this secular framework. India and Pakistan have engaged in three armed conflicts over the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, with ongoing military clashes between the two nations persisting to this day. Within India itself, religious tensions have persisted, often resulting in communal riots. Notable instances of such riots include the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujarat riots in 2002. Throughout it all, the two main forms of nationalism have continued to evolve and contest for hegemony. All of these historical instances contribute to the complexity of India's present-day public, political, and cultural spheres. However, in the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift towards Hindu nationalism and its rhetoric, which prioritises Hindu interests. This shift has involved disregarding the principles of secularism and abandoning India's heritage of cultural and religious pluralism in favour of the ideology of Hindutva, which

³ See: The Bloody Legacy of Indian Partition. (2015). *The New Yorker*. Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/06/29/the-great-divide-books-dalrymple>

seeks to redefine India as a Hindu nation. Nevertheless, India's democratic spirit remains resilient as its citizens actively participate in political discussions and assert their rights.

This thesis aims to examine the visual cultures that emerge from a nation grappling with its own identity. The visual culture that emerges from the contrasting concepts of Indianness and the Indian nation is of great academic importance. I believe that conducting a comprehensive comparative semiotic analysis of the visual representations stemming from these conflicting conceptions of Indianness would significantly contribute to our understanding of the contemporary Indian psyche. In the subsequent chapter, I provide a concise overview of significant visual influences and major movements in popular Indian print media that continue to exert influence in the present day. This will enable us to better comprehend the historical (visual) precedence that shapes and informs the contemporary visions of Indianness, specifically in the cover images of Indian speculative and fantasy fiction.

Secular Indian Nationalism

Secular Nationalism has been the official doctrine of India's national identity since its independence. Essentially, it encompasses all ethnic and religious communities, acknowledging and honouring their respective beliefs and cultures. In light of this political framework, it is possible to be a devout Muslim or a proud Tamilian while simultaneously being a patriotic Indian. Fundamental to Indian secular nationalism is the conviction that unity can be found through shared culture rather than religion. The nation is not viewed as a sacred holy land, but rather as a diverse civilization that has historically embraced a wide array of beliefs and customs, even fostering their pluralistic expression (Nehru, 1946). The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, enshrines the principles of secularism, democracy, and social

justice and the Preamble explicitly declares India to be a “sovereign socialist secular democratic republic” (Austin, 1999).

However, like the concept of nationalism, secularism is widely acknowledged as an externally imposed framework on postcolonial nations. In the case of India, secularism has only been in existence since the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 (Alam, 2007, p. 4). According to political theorist Ashish Nandy, Western secularism is strictly defined as the separation of state and religion in the public sphere, while non-Western secularism emphasises equal respect for all religions and does not necessarily require a complete separation of religion and state (Nandy, 1988, p. 88). Nandy argues that although India’s secularism draws inspiration from Western models, it is fundamentally grounded in religion. In fact, the urban educated elites who led the Indian National Congress and the independence movement were faced with the challenge of striking a balance between the democratic British legal and political structure inherited from colonial rule and the religious foundations of the nation that influenced significant aspects of the Indian Independence movement (Tudor, 2013, p. 256). Several scholars (Varshney, 1993; van der Veer, 2008; Christina Mendes, 2012) argue that despite the flaws of Indian secularism in practice, it has mostly operated successfully, and it is undeniable that Indian society continues to be diverse and pluralistic. Despite the division of inhabitants of British India based on religion during Partition, the postcolonial Indian state has effectively developed a secularist model that acknowledges and safeguards the multiple cultural and religious identities of the country, at least in principle (Ruparelia, 2016, p.317-337).

However, the exact nature of India’s secularism is a contentious issue in both the academic realm and the country’s political structures. It is crucial to acknowledge that the

secularism practiced in India is neither purely secular nor entirely devoid of religious influence. Rather, it exists within a fluid spectrum where religious identities often intertwine with political ideologies, creating a mosaic of overlapping and sometimes conflicting narratives. This dynamism underscores the complexity of India's multicultural pluralism, where secularism does not entirely negate religious discourse but attempts to integrate it within the democratic framework. This study focuses particularly on the doctrine of multicultural pluralism, which is a cornerstone of India's secularist framework. Multicultural pluralism underscores the secularist ideal of embracing diversity and fostering coexistence among India's myriad communities. It represents the vision of a nation that thrives on its cultural multiplicity rather than seeking homogeneity, making it an essential aspect of the secular nationalist identity. The ambiguity surrounding secularism, and the secular nationalist cultural narrative, is partly why Hindu nationalists have been able to establish their own national narrative, notably through the utilisation of Hindu religious epics and mythological texts. This contestation over the meaning and application of secularism reflects the broader tensions within Indian society between maintaining a pluralistic identity and the pressures of majoritarian nationalism.

Hindu Nationalism

Hindu nationalism is a contemporary political movement that seeks to establish its roots in an ancient and glorious national past. In present-day India, it is represented by three main organizations: the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP), or World Hindu Council, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), or National Volunteer Corps, and the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), also known as the Indian People's Party. Collectively, these organizations and their various branches and affiliates are commonly referred to as the *Sangh Parivar*, or 'family of organizations.' The ideas of the Sangh Parivar can be traced back to the early Hindu nationalist

thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who responded to British colonialism and, more significantly, expressed concerns about the intentions of Indian Muslims.

One prominent thinker of early Hindu nationalist thought was V.D. Savarkar, who first associated the term *Hindutva*, a form of religious fundamentalism, with the ideology of Hindu nationalism. It is important to note that the RSS draw explicit inspiration from the principles advocated by Adolf Hitler and Nazism. According to this ideology, India inherently belongs to Hindus and the country's minority communities are reviled in a manner reminiscent of attitudes towards Jews during the Nazi era (Casolari, 2000, pp. 218 - 228). A less extreme form of Hindu nationalism does not exclude Individuals of other faiths and groups, their inclusion in the nation is contingent upon assimilation and acceptance of the cultural and political centrality of Hinduism. If minorities refuse assimilation, then Hindu nationalism becomes exclusionary (Varshney, 1993, pp. 227-261). The ultimate goal of Hindu nationalism is to establish a unified, homogeneous cultural, political, and national identity that prioritises *Hindutva* and the Hindu religion.

Following India's independence in 1947 and the traumatic partition, the newly formed nation faced the daunting task of nation-building amidst deep-seated communal tensions. Despite the constitutional commitment to secularism, religious identities continued to influence political discourses. The rise of the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (BJS) in 1951, which later evolved into the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), marked the formal entry of Hindu nationalist ideology into mainstream politics (Graham, 1990). During the 1970s, the political landscape was further polarised with the emergence of the Emergency (1975-1977), declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984). This period of authoritarian rule and suspension of civil liberties intensified opposition, including from the RSS, which had a history of strained relations with

the Congress-led government. The post-Emergency era saw a revival of Hindu nationalist sentiments. The transformation of the BJS into the BJP in 1980 under the leadership of figures like Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1924-2018) and Lal Krishna Advani marked a significant shift in Indians political landscape. The BJP adopted a more explicit Hindu nationalist agenda, focusing on issues like the Ayodhya campaign. Led by Hindutva groups in the late 1980s and 1990s, the campaign escalated into violence as they demanded the replacement of the Babri mosque with a Ram temple (van der Veer, 1994). Supporters of the campaign argued that the mosque was built on the birthplace of Lord *Rama* (*Ram Janmabhumi*), after demolishing a Hindu temple. This process of Hinduisation reached its peak with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 which led to the culmination of Hindu-Muslim violence and served as a manifestation of this Hindu nationalist ideology. This event not only marked a turning point in the communal relations in India but also set the stage for the rise of populism as a dominant force in Indian politics.

In recent years, the rise of populism has significantly influenced the discourse around nationalism in India. Populism, characterised by its “us versus them” rhetoric, has been effectively used by Hindu nationalist movements to galvanise support and reinforce the idea of a unified Hindu identity (Jaffrelot, 2017; Chacko, 2018). Under the leadership of Narendra Modi and the BJP, populism has taken on a distinctly majoritarian tone, promoting the interests of the Hindu majority while marginalising minority communities (Gudavarthy, 2019). This form of populism is often intertwined with Hindu nationalism, using cultural and religious symbols to create a sense of unity among the Hindu population and to portray the BJP as the true representative of the Indian nation (Anand, 2016). The use of populist rhetoric has also contributed to the erosion of secular values, with increasing instances of communal polarisation and intolerance towards religious and cultural diversity (Rao, 2021). The BJP’s success in

mobilising mass support through populist strategies can be seen in its emphasis on “vikas” (development), coupled with strong nationalist appeals, such as the promotion of symbols like the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir (Varshney, 2019; Palshikar, 2020). These actions are framed as correcting historical wrongs, further entrenching a narrative that aligns with Hindutva ideology (Gittinger, 2018). Populism has thus become a powerful tool in shaping contemporary Indian nationalism, drawing on historical grievances and cultural narratives to construct a vision of India that is exclusive rather than inclusive.

1.7. Hindu Mythology

It is necessary to provide a brief overview of key narratives in Hindu mythology because these are closely intertwined with Indian visual culture. A clear outline here facilitate navigation through the later chapters. Although the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” were coined by the British in the early 19th century, they are used to refer to a vast and diverse tradition of texts and practices (Kuiper, 2010, p.83). The primary mythological narratives of Hindu texts consist of the Vedas, the Puranas, as well as the two epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Indian scholars have demonstrated how the epics function as “meta-universes that provide pools of signifiers for new compositions” (Ramanujan, 1991 as cited in Chatterji, 2020, p. 232). This characteristic allows the epics to take on new meanings in different time periods, leading to new opportunities for circulation and subsequent adaptations to cater to the preferences and demands of contemporary audiences. Throughout the course of Indian history, Hindu myths have been a significant wellspring of inspiration, even in the narrative and visual construction of the Indian nation itself, a subject that will be explored in Chapter 3. These texts present numerous narratives including gods, goddesses, concepts of duty, ethics, the creation

and destruction of the cosmos, and the eternal struggle between order and chaos. These stories are expansive and subject to multiple interpretations and perspectives. However, certain readings and understandings of these tales have become prominent in the popular discourse. The stories discussed below belong to this prevailing group and are the ones that are somewhat familiar to everyday people in India, regardless of their religious affiliation.

The Vedas and Puranas

The Vedas and Puranas provide accounts of various Hindu deities, and the devotional practices associated with them (Doniger, 2004, pp 70-75). Among the Vedic gods are Indra (the god of thunder/war), Agni (the god of fire), and Surya (the sun god). The Puranas, on the other hand, focus on narratives and rituals concerning the male Trimurti and the diverse manifestations of the goddess Durga/Kali, along with numerous other smaller celestial gods. The Trimurti, consisting of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, epitomise the cosmic forms of creation, preservation, and destruction. The divine energy of the Trimurti is transmitted to their incarnations or avatars, who often descend to Earth to impart wisdom to sages, kings, and warriors. These avatars can be gods, demigods, or individuals possessing god-like virtues. Some of the most well-known avatars include Krishna, Kalki, Bheema, and Rama. The Tridevi, the female divinities, are considered to be the feminine counterparts or consorts of the Trimurti and consist of Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Parvati. They, too, are born as divine mortals and possess powers that complement those of their male counterparts. For instance, Sita, the wife of Rama, is regarded as an avatar of the goddess Lakshmi.⁴

⁴ For more on this subject see: Doniger, W. (2004). Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit. United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited.

The Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* holds great importance in Hinduism as a work discussing *dharma* (moral law) and serving as an *itihasa* (history, literally "that's what happened"). Its central plot revolves around the fraternal rivalry between two powerful clans, namely the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. The narrative is believed to have originated from the sage *Vyasa*, who narrated it to the elephant-headed deity *Ganesha*. Within the story, a great war unfolds as these two groups contend for the throne of Bharata. This struggle reaches its climax in the grand battle of *Kurukshetra*, where the *Pandavas* ultimately emerge as victorious, with *Lord Krishna* acting as the charioteer for the protagonist *Arjuna*. *Lord Krishna* is recognised as an incarnation or avatar of *Lord Vishnu*, and the teachings bestowed upon *Arjuna* during the battle form the *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of God), a significant religious text for *Hindus*. The *Mahabharata* has been regarded as an exploration of the challenges involved in establishing and applying *dharma* in various circumstances. The term *dharma* lacks an exact equivalent in English, but it can be broadly interpreted as "the righteous or just way to maintain order in the universe."

The Ramayana

The *Ramayana* is widely regarded as a testament to the significance of *dharma* in all aspects of life (Vanamali, 2014). The epic narrates the divine birth of the deity Rama in the kingdom of Ayodhya, his tutelage under the sage Vishvamitra, and his triumph in successfully bending Shiva's mighty bow during the contest to win Princess Sita as his spouse. After Rama is unjustly banished from his rightful position as the heir to the kingdom, he withdraws to the forest with his wife and beloved half-brother, Lakshmana, and endures a 14-year exile. It is during this period that the demon-king Ravana of Lanka abducts Sita and takes her to his capital. Sita, however, steadfastly rejects Ravana's advances. Through a series of trials and

adventures, Rama and his brother, aided by the monkey-general Hanuman and Ravana's own brother, Vibhishana, launch an assault on Lanka. Rama slays Ravana and rescues Sita, who then undergoes an ordeal by fire to prove her fidelity. However, upon their return to Ayodhya, Rama discovers that doubts regarding Sita's purity still persist among the people, leading him to exile her to the forest. There, she encounters the sage Valmiki (the presumed author of the *Ramayana*) and gives birth to Rama's twin sons at his hermitage. The family is eventually reunited when the sons come of age, but after asserting her innocence once more, Sita vanishes into the earth, with the mother goddess receiving and enveloping her. Rama, who is an incarnation of Vishnu, is venerated as the epitome of an ideal man and king, while Sita is revered as the embodiment of the ideal woman.

The narratives of mythological texts and epics are accompanied by intricate systems of visualisation. Treatises dating back to the time of the Vedas provide comprehensive explanations of the iconography and symbols used to depict these tales of gods. These treatises delve into the specifics of creating images and sculptural forms of deities, categorizing every aspect from accessories to attributes to accurately represent each particular deity and assign significant meaning to the symbolism embedded in these images. For instance, Lord Krishna is always portrayed with a peacock feather adorning his hair and carrying a flute, while Lord Vishnu's eight arms symbolise the four cardinal and four intermediate points of the compass. A sharp weapon symbolises the forces employed to defeat evil, and multiple heads symbolise omniscience. These symbols convey the qualities and attributes of the deities they represent. Each iconographic detail carries its own symbolic value, and for many Hindus, a consecrated image is considered a vessel of concentrated divine energy. In the public sphere, outside of temples and holy spaces, these images do not hold the same level of sacredness. While certain popular images may attain sacred connotations, the portrayal of Hindu deities in popular mass

media allows for a greater degree of adaptability, which can be leveraged for various purposes, including political ones.

Sheldon Pollock's analysis in *Ramayana and Political Imagination in India* (1993) highlights how the *Ramayana* has historically been used for political purposes. Pollock argues that the structure and narrative of the *Ramayana* lend themselves to mytho-political interpretations that reinforce specific ideological agendas. In the *Ramayana*, the character of Rama is depicted as a divine king who embodies both humanity and divinity. This portrayal has been historically used by ruling elites to connect political leaders with transcendent qualities and divine authority. By doing so, it reinforces the legitimacy and power of the ruler, linking political leadership with religious prestige (Pollock, 1991).

Additionally, the narrative of the *Ramayana* incorporates the concept of "othering," where antagonists like Ravana are portrayed as deviants in terms of sexuality, diet, and politics (Pollock, 1991, p. 283). By portraying the "other" as a threat, it solidifies the identity of the in-group and justifies the exclusion or suppression of out-groups. Scholars suggest that ruling elites in the subcontinent responded to emerging political forces by militarising the structures of Hindu realms and emphasising religious prestige and the ruler's connection with divinity (Rothermund, 1986; Pollock, 1991). According to Pollock, the significance of the *Ramayana* for political groups in India does not solely arise from the original myth, but rather from its historical use as a symbolic work to encode "the concurrent forces of othering and theocracy" (Pollock, 1991, pp. 283-285). The continuous reinterpretation and adaptation of these themes help to maintain their relevance and power, enabling them to reflect and shape contemporary cultural and political identities.

1.8. Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical groundwork for analysing Anglophone ISFF book cover images. The initial section has emphasised the significance of book cover images as cultural artefacts, drawing on insights from designers like Chip Kidd and Peter Mendelsund, as well as Gerard Genette's concept of paratext. This highlights the multifaceted roles book jackets play as visual communication devices that reflect the societies they come from. The examination of speculative fiction, particularly Indian SFF, has highlighted its hybrid nature and supports the argument that this genre is well-suited for exploring contemporary notions of national identity through cognitive estrangement. Key concepts from Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Gunther Kress, and Theo van Leeuwen have provided a methodological framework for the close reading of the iconography and design on book covers.

The discussion on the politics of visual culture, drawing from scholars like Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jacques Rancière, has provided a theoretical foundation for the analysis. Mirzoeff's notions of 'visuality' and 'counter-visuality,' along with Rancière's idea of the 'distribution of the sensible,' are crucial for understanding how book covers can either perpetuate or disrupt prevailing cultural narratives. This theoretical lens is further enriched by reviewing visual culture studies in India, where contributions from Christopher Pinney, Christiane Brosius, and Dawson Varughese have elucidated how visual representations shape and reflect national identity and political ideologies. Additionally, this review outlines two forms of Indian nationalism — secular and Hindutva — that influence the visual iconography in ISFF cover images. It is important to note, however, that these two ideologies are not fixed binaries but exist within a spectrum of political, cultural, and social contexts. There are instances where secularism and Hindutva intertwine or overlap, creating hybrid narratives that challenge the strict categorisation of book covers under one or the other. This porous boundary

between the ideologies further enriches the analysis by highlighting the complexity of cultural representations in contemporary India. Moreover, this study does not focus on how the images depict secularism per se, but rather how they reflect multicultural pluralism as a counterpoint to the homogenised narrative of Hindutva. This approach shifts the emphasis from ideological constructs to the cultural and visual diversity embodied in these artefacts, demonstrating how book covers negotiate and mirror India's pluralistic identity.

By integrating these diverse theoretical perspectives, this chapter has established a comprehensive foundation for analysing ISFF book covers. It highlights the interconnectedness of visual culture, political ideology, and national identity, emphasising the importance of examining book covers as cultural artefacts that both reflect and shape societal values. This approach is crucial for understanding the dominant and counter-hegemonic ideas of Indian identity prevalent in the visual and political realms, setting the stage for a nuanced exploration in subsequent chapters. In the forthcoming chapter, I provide a detailed visual history of Indianness, drawing particular focus to the pivotal role that Hindu myths have played in the construction of a visual identity for the nation. Additionally, noteworthy moments in Indian visual and cultural history that still exert a profound influence on the contemporary national identity will be elaborated upon.

Chapter 2:

A Brief Historical Overview of Iconic Visuals of Indianness

Post-millennial India's socio-cultural makeup bears the markings of colonial influence and represents a continuation of colonial practices of the past (Spivak, 1999, p.35). Therefore, any analysis of contemporary visual cultures of India would not be complete without offering insight into the antecedents that have become a part of the collective memory and continue to shape the present visual cultural discourse. This chapter presents an overview of the visual cultural history of India since its independence in 1947. Considering the existence of eighteen regional languages and an equal number of oral, visual, and written traditions, it is virtually impossible to present a comprehensive perspective on contemporary Indian popular culture. Therefore, I focus here on the most influential instances of static images that are disseminated through print (and later digital platforms). The objective of this chapter is to provide a contextual understanding of the complex historical, political, and cultural realities that underlie contemporary Indian visuality and identity. It is also important to note that the visual representations discussed below do not encompass the entire spectrum of influences on current aesthetics and politics. Nevertheless, they do highlight significant shifts, themes, and visual practices within specific political periods that exemplify diverse strategies and definitions of Indianness.⁵ These same aspects are reflected in the ISFF cover images discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

⁵ It is crucial to emphasise that, in this context, the popular visual media being referred to are those that, to some extent, reflect a pan-Indian identity. It should be noted that these visuals do not consistently embody regional sentiments, which have a more pronounced influence on politics and aesthetics at the state level.

In this chapter, my objective is to offer a more in-depth analysis of the distinct visual iconography derived from the visual culture archives of India, which continue to hold significant influence in the present day. The images and illustrations discussed in this chapter primarily serve as a medium for conveying the messages of the state apparatus, particularly Indian nationalism initially, and later Hindutva nationalism. However, in the concluding section, I also examine contemporary popular visuality that actively resists the tendency to homogenise Indian identity. To identify and understand the specific visual elements from the past that continue to shape present-day visual culture, I refer to previous scholarly works that have focused on Indian print media from specific epochs in Indian history. These works include Kajri Jain's *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economics of Indian Calendar Art* (2007), and Sumathi Ramaswamy's *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India* (2003) and *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (2010). These works are essential for understanding the historical and socio-political dimensions of Indian visual culture, as they provide detailed analyses of how visual media has been employed to shape and communicate notions of national and religious identity.

Gods in the Bazaar offers a scholarly exploration of calendar art, a prevalent form of printed imagery in India. These vivid and exceptionally colourful mass-produced pictures are commonly featured in calendars and advertisements, portraying gods, religious symbols, nationalistic figures, movie stars, cherubic infants, and seductive women. Within India, these calendars can be encountered in a variety of settings, ranging from affluent living spaces to middle-class homes and urban slums. Jain investigates the influence wielded by these images, asserting that their significance arises not solely from their visual content, but also from their

distribution across diverse social strata.⁶ Meanwhile, the book *Beyond Appearances* provides insight into the ubiquity of visuals or images in everyday life in India. The essays explore a wide array of visual artefacts, media, and practices with the aim of understanding the fundamental characteristics of visual practices and ideologies that characterise modern Indians. Additionally, the volume critically examines the role of visibility (which is broadly understood as systems of seeing and being seen) in the formation of national, ethnic, religious, and community identities in contemporary India. In contrast, *The Goddess and the Nation* (Ramaswamy, 2010) traces the emergence and evolution of the mother goddess image in relation to the Indian struggle for nationhood. Of particular significance is Ramaswamy's analysis of the portrayal of the Other (such as Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and other minority groups) during the early stages of nation-building because it highlights the exclusionary and homogenizing tendencies inherent in the process of constructing a national identity. By examining these portrayals, Ramaswamy reveals how certain groups were marginalised or negatively represented in the visual narratives that contributed to the formation of India's national identity.

These studies shed light on important facets of visual culture within pan-Indian society that have greatly enriched my comprehension of pan-Indian conceptions of nationhood. Firstly, there exists a coalescence of seemingly contradictory elements, wherein both the sacred and the modern coexist in harmony in dominant visualities; Second, religious iconography frequently intertwines with secular themes in these depictions; Third, the influence of colonialism on the visual representation of Indian nationhood cannot be overemphasised; Fourth, distinct regional, religious, and social frameworks hold equal importance; and last, the

⁶ For more on the bazaar and calendar prints of Hindu gods see: Pinney, C. (2004). *Photos of the gods: The printed image and political struggle in India*. Reaktion.

production of mass-distributed visual artefacts plays a crucial role in shaping public sentiment. These scholarly works identify recurring visual motifs, influences, and themes that are fundamental in representing and communicating ideas related to nationalism and national identity. In the following sections, I present a selection of key visual media, motifs, and styles based on these texts that exemplify the diverse landscape of media production in relation to Indian nationhood. I address four key moments: The influence of Raja Ravi Varma, the nation as Mother Goddess, the militant representations of Lord Rama and Hanuman, and the post-millennial digital graphics of resistance. To facilitate the understanding of the impact of political events on changing visual representations, an appendix provides a chronology of significant political events in the nation from 1947 to 2020. The main objective here is to make a case for enduring visual elements that continue to inspire present-day depictions of Indianness and are frequently used in the cover designs of Anglophone ISFF books.

2.1. Raja Ravi Varma and National Art in the late 19th Century

In a country where illiteracy is prevalent, visual imagery plays a crucial role in affirming cultural values and aspirations that transcend geographical, religious, linguistic, and caste boundaries. During the late 19th and early 20th century, India's history and the concept of nationhood were widely discussed among the general population through diverse mediums, including dramas, songs, and particularly through mass-produced visual representations like posters, advertisements, and calendars, rather than being solely dependent on print media. The development of India's popular imagery can be attributed to significant cultural and technological shifts that took place during the 19th century. These transformations included the influence of colonial art schools that emphasised realism and perspective, exposure to European visuals in the Indian market, the introduction of new artistic materials, advancements in engraving techniques such as lithography and oleography, and the impact of photography.

These artistic strategies were later adopted by Indian art schools through various forms of ‘colonial mimicry’ (Bhabha, 1994, p.89). Collectively, these elements converged to give rise to a new genre of popular iconic, mythological, and nationalist imagery that played a crucial role in shaping and navigating the intersections between the sacred, the political, and the colonial.

Figure 1:
Ravi Varma Lithograph Print of Goddess Lakshmi,
1894. Source: Google Art & Culture.



Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), a distinguished artist and a minor prince from Travancore (now Kerala) in South India, is renowned for his synthesis of European academic realism and neoclassical aesthetics with distinctly Indian subjects. He masterfully incorporated Western romanticism and realistic techniques to infuse his works with lifelike vitality. Varma’s historical paintings, which vividly depicted ancient Hindu epics and literary classics, garnered acclaim from early Indian nationalists who viewed his art as a vehicle for fostering new national imagery (Figure 1). During a period when Indian arts and cultures were considered inferior to their Western counterparts, Varma’s mythological paintings and lithographic prints played a significant role in instilling a sense of national pride among the Indian public. These artworks not only served as a reminder of the value of Indian culture but also helped to bolster a sense of cultural heritage.

Figure 2:

Sita's Ordeal, Ravi Varma, 1880. Source: Google Art & Culture.

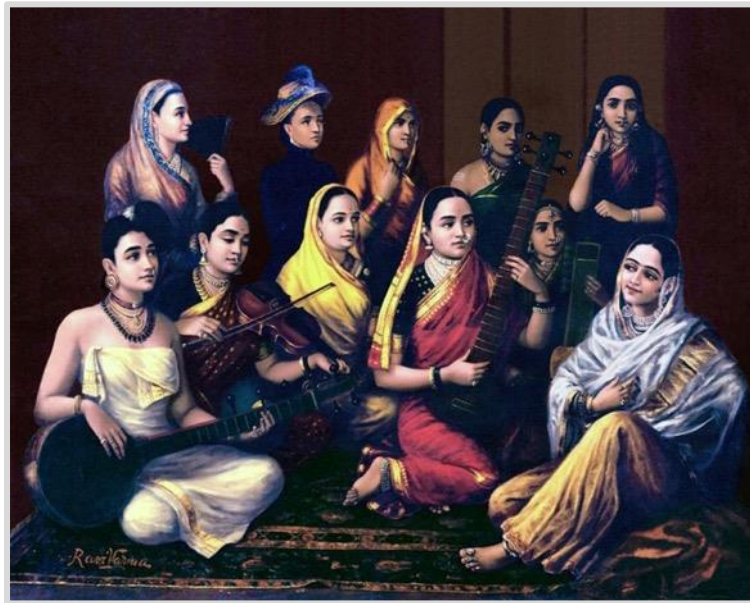


Varma's portrayals of female protagonists from mythologies, in particular, evoked strong national sentiment among the masses. The lithograph depicting *Sita's Bhumi Parvesh* (Sita's Ordeal, Figure 2) captures a moment from the *Ramayana*, specifically the instance where *Sita*, having returned to *Ayodhya*, disappears into the earth while being embraced by *Bhoomi Devi* (the earth goddess). This occurrence transpires as a result of *Sita's* inability to endure the incessant questioning regarding her chastity following her abduction by *Ravana*. According to Christopher Pinney, the majority of Hindus who are familiar with the narrative would interpret the painting's message within the context of their own times, perceiving Sita as an embodiment of the motherland and her violation symbolising the desecration of the Motherland by a foreign ruler (Pinney, 2009, p.34). In a similar vein, Varma's depictions of *Draupadi*, a prominent figure from the *Mahabharata*, frequently portray her in situations where she requires rescue or protection from oppressive men. The images assume fresh significance in the context of British India. The images represent straightforward depictions of episodes

from Hindu mythology, yet the viewers are cognizant of the fact that the antagonists symbolise the British rulers, notably Lord Curzon, who was responsible for the partition of Bengal in 1905 (Kaur, 2005, pp.70-73). In contrast, *Draupadi* serves as a symbolic representation of India itself.

Figure 3:

Galaxy of Musicians (1889), Raja Ravi Varma. Source: Wikipedia.



Varma's paintings primarily revolve around the romantic portrayal of women, which was deeply influenced by his growing perception of India as one unified nation. He specifically associated the nation with femininity, as women were believed to embody and preserve the country's traditions in terms of clothing and customs, thus representing the essence of Indian life (Venniyoor, 1981, p.31). An illustration of this can be observed in his artwork "*Galaxy of Musicians*" (1889, Figure 3). Originally commissioned by the Maharaja of Mysore, this painting depicts a gathering of Indian women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, all engaged in playing traditional musical instruments. However, it is worth noting that the combination of dresses and instruments portrayed in the painting largely deviates from reality

and leans towards an imaginative representation. This deviation highlights Varma's artistic interpretation rather than strict adherence to historical or cultural accuracy. Moreover, by blending different elements from different cultural backgrounds, Varma constructs an idealised vision of India that serves his broader purpose of fostering a sense of national identity. Recognising this deviation invites a critical examination of the romanticised nature of national imagery, as such portrayals influence collective memory and obscure or simplify the complex reality of cultural and social dynamics in the nation.

Varma's art style exemplifies the incorporation of three fundamental pictorial structures in 'classical Indian art' that are commonly found in Western classical art: spatial depiction, chiaroscuro, and chromatic tension. Chromatic tension refers to the intentional use of contrasting colours within an image to evoke a sense of dynamism. One of the distinctive aspects of Varma's paintings is his skilful utilization of vibrant colours. According to art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta, the colouring takes on bold and fantastical qualities, as seen in the remarkable blue complexions of the Hindu deities Rama and Krishna. The use of colour in these depictions undeniably transcends the limitations of reality, immersing the images in a realm of mythical exuberance (Guha-Thakurta, 1992). Furthermore, Varma draws inspiration from the artistic works of two prominent French academic painters of his time: Gustave Clarence Rodolphe Boulanger (1824-1888) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905). He specifically finds inspiration in their paintings of dramatic poses of nude figures, such as Venus and Psyche, and their allegorical representations of Chastity and Charity. Varma incorporates this evocative romanticism that underlies these artworks into his own portrayals of Indian women (Vishwanathan, 2010, p.94).

In addition, Varma employs the technique of breaking the proscenium stage, enabling the viewer to have a voyeuristic glimpse into the depicted world of the models. However, the models themselves avoid direct eye contact with the viewer, instead fixing their gaze just beyond the viewer. This approach of actively engaging the observer while maintaining the subjects' lack of acknowledgement is reminiscent of practices found in 18th century French historical painting (Van Der Linden, 2024). Conventionally, making eye contact between the model and observer was reserved for venerating an image of a deity. This holds significance in Varma's reproduced images that do not depict 'real' gods (Pinney, 2004, pp. 22-26).⁷ These seemingly foreign Western influences were adapted and utilised to serve different purposes within the realm of popular Indian iconography (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p.101). Lastly, Varma integrates these techniques with the opulent clothing and jewellery characteristic of Tanjore paintings, as well as the theatrical and stage framing devices prevalent in southern India, to create a distinctive vision that is uniquely Pan-Indian and a mosaic of its intricate culture and history.⁸ These chromolithographs depicting Hindu deities, stories, and Indian women continue to exert a lasting visual impact on the collective imagination of the nation.

⁷ See Fig.1: The gaze of the Goddess is directed at the viewer, her devotee. This act of seeing between the representation of the deity and the devotee is commonly known as Darshan (meaning sight or perspective). According to Hindu beliefs, not only do the gods themselves need to keep their eyes open, but we as well, in order to establish a connection with them, receive their blessings, and gain insight into their mysteries. All of the devotional lithographs created by Varma and subsequently by other artists guarantee that the gaze of the deities remains unobstructed. For more, see: Eck, D. L. (2007). *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. India: Motilal Banarsidass.

⁸ Varma's paintings demonstrate a remarkable level of intricacy in the depiction of clothing and jewellery. This attention to detail can be attributed, in large part, to Varma's early training in Tanjore painting techniques, which originated in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. Traditionally used for worship purposes, these paintings often feature a central deity portrayed in a serene pose, surrounded by avatars, consorts, attendants, or devotees arranged within a single plane. The distinctive style is characterised by tonally flat yet vividly coloured backgrounds, as well as the use of gilding and gem-setting methods to depict the intricate jewellery worn by the subjects.

Varma's artistic vision, rooted in Hindu mythology and fantasy, transcended social boundaries and promoted an aspirational form of nationalism. The dissemination of lithographic prints depicting Varma's artworks, as well as those of other artists, in public spaces such as bazaars, contributed to the establishment of a horizontal axis of nationalism (Jain, 2007). This later facilitated the exchange of information among diverse social classes and mobilised the community as a whole. Through the incorporation of shared iconographic elements imbued with sacred meanings, nationalist messages successfully reinstated the mythical potency of pre-British Hindu traditions. Despite Varma's significant contribution to the development of a national imaginary, subsequent artists and nationalists dismissed his work as only superficially Indian because it imitated Western painting styles. This perspective played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Bengal School of Art. Its members sought to explore ancient Indian artistic traditions through a modernist lens. These artists, known as the Bengali neo-traditionalists, critiqued Varma's work and oleograph prints in general as kitsch. The rejection of the neo-classical European aesthetic and the subsequent re-evaluation of the influence of British modernity marked a significant shift towards a new conception of Indian nationalism (Mitter, 1994, pp. 262-266). In the following section, I discuss the movement's contribution to the image of Mother India, which became a unifying symbol during the independence movement and later as an embodiment of Hindutva nationalism.

2.2. India as Mother Goddess

The Bengal School of Art emerged in the early 20th century as a rejection of colonial influences, spearheaded by a group of nationalists. This collective consciously distanced themselves from Western naturalistic art forms and romanticism, seeking inspiration instead from pre-colonial Indian aesthetic practices, including regional and tribal art forms, Hindu sacred art, and Mughal miniature paintings (Van der Linden, 2024). They aimed to establish links between pre-colonial and pan-Asiatic artistic traditions, with a particular focus on Japanese art from the Nihonga movement.⁹ Executed on paper, the paintings of the Bengal School employed ‘Oriental’ techniques, such as the use of organic pigments, calligraphic brushwork, and multiple layers of watercolour washes. The subject matter often depicted historical or mythological themes, showcasing a glorious, pre-colonial Indian past marked by spirituality. Ultimately, the art of the Bengal School embodied a shared nationalist aesthetic, characterised by its departure from realism and its embrace of Asian spirituality. The art style received significant support from Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and his nephew Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951). Rabindranath Tagore, the first Nobel laureate from Asia, regarded Western art as materialistic and advocated for the revival of spiritual values in India

⁹ The concept of Pan-Asianism emerged in the 1870s and was adopted by Asians as a response to the age of European imperialism. During this epoch, intellectuals, artists, and authors advocating for Pan-Asianism depicted Asia, including India, as intrinsically spiritual in nature, positioning it in opposition to Western materialism. The Nihonga movement emerged in direct response to the influence of Western imperialism and artistic styles in Japan. Its main objective was to revive and restore traditional Japanese painting techniques, with a particular emphasis on emotion and feeling as integral components of Japanese painting. Furthermore, the Nihonga movement also incorporated Western principles of perspective in their works. This movement can be regarded as a significant precursor to the renowned Ukiyo-e tradition that followed. For more, see: Carroll, A. (2020). *Modern art exchanges in Asia-an unlikely beginning?*. Art Monthly Australasia, (326), 86-91.

by reclaiming its own traditions.¹⁰ Consequently, he and his followers promoted a romantic aesthetic that prioritised emotion over form (Van der Linden, 2024).

Figure 4:

Bharath Mata (1905), by Abanindranath Tagore. Source: Wikipedia.



Figure 5:

Durga lithograph (c.1910), Raja Ravi Varma Press. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

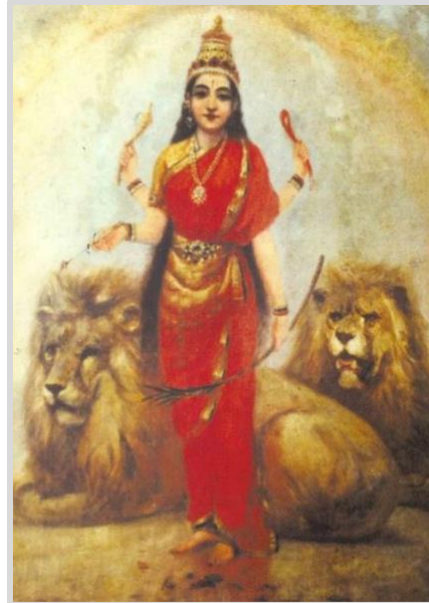


Figure 6:

Kalighat Kali (c.1880-1890), unknown artist. Source:UWA



During this period, Abanindranath created his painting “*Bharat Mata (Mother India)*” (1905) (Figure 4). The artwork portrays a goddess-like figure that resembles a more subdued and less extravagant version of female deities in the Hindu pantheon. Notably, Abanindranath employed the Japanese wash technique to depict the goddess suspended in a yellowish-pink glow in this particular piece. Abanindranath Tagore’s painting of *Bharat Mata* can be

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, a prominent figure during the Indian nationalist period, played a pivotal role in India’s Swadesi (freedom) movement. He spearheaded public protests and utilised his talents in composition to create protest songs that portrayed the endangered state of Mother India, once united but now in jeopardy. Tagore’s objective was to foster unity among the populace and inspire them to fight against colonialism. Moreover, he composed ‘Jana Gana Mana,’ a song that became a symbol of Indian unity. In fact, the first stanza of this song was subsequently adopted as the national anthem of an independent India.

interpreted as a fusion, combining elements from both the mythological heritage and the evolving visual language and iconography used to represent Mother India. In this artwork, Tagore skilfully personifies the concept of motherhood in his portrayal of India, drawing inspiration from Ravi Varma's lithograph of *Goddess Durga* (1910) (Figure 5), as well as the Indigenous representations of *Kalighat's Kali* (1880-1890) (Figure 6).¹¹ As a result, the painting presents an ostensibly secular visualisation of the nation, although it is undeniable that the image carries an underlying Hindu sensibility. The female figure in the painting appears to be floating, giving her a haloed presence that accentuates the idea that Bharat Mata is a spiritual deity deserving of reverence (Thakurta, 1995, p.26). Furthermore, she is depicted holding symbolic objects in the same manner as the Hindu goddesses. These objects themselves serve as emblems of nationalist sentiment. For instance, rice symbolised aspirations, white cloth represented domestic production, manuscripts depicted knowledge, and prayer beads denoted spirituality. Another notable distinction lies in the fact that Varma's "Galaxy of Musicians" presents a diverse and multicultural depiction of India, while Tagore's portrayal emphasises a singular anthropomorphic embodiment of Mother India as a symbol of national unity. Tagore's image prominently adorned placards during the Swadeshi (freedom) rallies, serving as a spiritual focal point that conveyed the mythology and spirituality of India's Hindu heritage, now metaphorically embodied by the female figure (Ramaswamy, 2008, pp.818-853). Over time, Bharat Mata became a significant national symbol.

Tagore's portrayal of Bharat Mata was not the sole interpretation of the mother goddess. In fact, in the late 1930s, another depiction of Bharat Mata gained more popularity among the

¹¹ Goddess Durga is a prominent deity in Hinduism, often venerated as a maternal figure. She is depicted usually mounted on a lion, symbolizing her strength, while employing her divine powers to vanquish malevolence and secure the emancipation of the marginalised. Furthermore, Kali, an alternate appellation for Durga, is occasionally perceived as her more formidable embodiment in certain mythologies.

Figure 7:

Unknown print of Bharat Mata as a Hindu Goddess (1920). Unknown artist.

Source: Wikimedia Commons



general public. This particular representation drew upon the concept of Shakti, which signifies the empowering material power of the Hindu deities (Ramaswamy, 2010, p.30). The mother figure, rooted in the concept of Shakti, symbolises power, rejuvenation, and formidable strength. This representation of Bharat Mata heavily drew inspiration from the images and artwork of Hindu goddesses, particularly Goddess Durga, from whom Bharat Mata also adopted the lion as a symbol (Figure 7). This concept of Shakti, combined with the portrayal of Bharat Mata as a fierce warrior deity

adorned and armed, ready to rally her sons for battle, was embraced and disseminated during the nationalist movement, particularly by Hindu nationalist thinkers. This representation of Mother India as a strong warrior figure shares similarities with other female figures such as Britannia, Columbia, Germania, Marianne, Guadalupe, and others, who also personified their respective nations as motherlands across the globe (Sinha, 2009).

The portrayal of Mother India has varied depending on the prevailing political climate, ranging from the artistic treatments by Varma and Abanindranath Tagore to the commercial calendar art and subsequent RSS posters. For example, in the 1930s, representations of Bharat Mata acquired more pronounced political connotations, images of prominent political leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru or scenes depicting anti-colonial leaders like

Figure 8:

*Mother India and Shaheed Bhagat Singh,
Unknown artist. Source: Ramaswamy (2008).*



Bhagat Singh in prison were depicted alongside Bharat Mata (Figure 8).¹² Such portrayals visually aligned the nationalist struggle with divine sanction, symbolising it as a sacred duty to the nation. These visual depictions redefined symbols of Indian suffering as heroic in the semiotic space (Jha, 2004). In these portrayals, the hero took centre stage, while Bharat Mata assumed a secondary role, serving as an inspirational force for political figures. An important transformation in the semiotic realm around this time (1930's) was the inclusion of the tricolour flag, or

alternatively, positioning of Bharat Mata in front of an image of India.

Post-independence, particularly from the 1950s onwards, there was another significant shift in the perception of India. The concept of Bharat Mata transformed from being a warrior figure to a depiction of a Hindu mother and housewife. This portrayal often showed her as nurturing and compassionate, surrounded by her multicultural and cherubic children, or in the company of revered national leaders. However, it is important to note that this transformation did not eliminate the visual representation of Bharat Mata as a warrior goddess. On the contrary, it continued to be present and acquire new meanings. In fact, the militant portrayal of Bharat Mata regained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, becoming the dominant visual form used by

¹² Bhagat Singh, a 23-year-old anti-colonial revolutionary, was executed in 1931 for the accidental killing of a British police officer in 1928. Subsequently, he attained martyrdom and achieved the status of a folk hero in North India, with narratives and pictorial depictions of his courageous defiance against the British gaining widespread popularity.

Hindu nationalists to promote their ideology of a powerful Hindu nation. The key difference was that these depictions often replaced the secular motif of the Indian tricolour flag with the saffron flag of Hindutva. According to Christiane Brosius, the nationalist symbol of Bharat Mata plays a crucial role in the Hindutva ideology as it allows for the conceptualisation of the Indian geographical space as a distinctly Hindu mother (2005, pp. 160-180). This, in turn, supports the argument for the existence of a distinctly Hindu nation. Furthermore, by linking the visual icon of Bharat Mata to the cartographic maps of India, Hindu nationalists can make claims about the territorial extent of this Hindu nation (Brosius, 2005, p. 169).

Figure 9:

Bharat Mata (2005), Unknown artist.

Source: Pinterest.



In this way, the meaning and connotations of Bharat Mata's iconography evolves over time. What remains the same is the presence of Hindu goddess-like attributes and traits. This continuous process of accumulation and assimilation in the representation and conception of Indian identity continues into the 21st century. Present-day portrayals of Bharat Mata still depict her as a Hindu deity. The prevalent depictions now, often show her as a bejewelled goddess, with her body superimposed on the map of India, encompassing important regions of the country (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 39) (Figure 9). Interestingly, newer "traditional images" continue to bear a resemblance to the realistic style pioneered by Varma. This resurgence of Varma's visual style in contemporary portrayals of Bharat Mata, particularly following the economic

liberalisation of the 1990s, can be seen as a multifaceted reaction. Economic liberalisation marked a significant shift in India's economy and promoting modernisation. This period of rapid economic growth brought about substantial social and cultural changes. As India embraced globalisation, there emerged a simultaneous concern within the many in the Hindu populace about preserving cultural identity amidst these sweeping transformations. Varma's realistic and romanticised portrayal of Hindu deities, which emphasises traditional aesthetics and glorifies Hindu civilization, offered a comforting return to cultural roots during this period of change. His style became a visual anchor that symbolised an idealised and unified Indian past, resonating deeply with the collective Hindu psyche that felt threatened by the encroaching global influences. In this case, the primary focus of using the art style is to glorify an ancient Hindu mythological past rather than the colonial encounter.

Originally, the image of Bharat Mata emerged as a means to challenge colonial censorship and persecution. The visual representation of Mother India employed mythological symbols and the goddess archetype as a façade for expressing anti-colonial resistance. Yet, with the recent rise in right-wing fundamentalist nationalism in India, historical sources of communal, religious, and racial tensions have resurfaced, and the image of Bharat Mata as a Hindu goddess has acquired new connotations. It is now utilised as a tool to enforce a singular religious identity under the guise of nationalism (Sen, 2002). Ironically, while it was once the colonial state that initiated sedition cases against these mythical portrayals of the Indian motherland, today it is the nation-state that levels such accusations against those who refuse to show reverence to this national symbol. It is important to recognise that the images and references discussed thus far represent the dominant visual portrayal prevalent in public realms. There are, however, alternative representations of Bharat Mata found in other art forms, folk styles, and subaltern visualities, which actively question and critique the prevailing perception

of Bharat Mata as a saffronised figure. My primary aim here is to outline the visuality of the common representation. Nevertheless, it is striking how India's national identity remains deeply entwined with its colonial past even in the present context. The evolution of Bharat Mata's iconography from a symbol of anti-colonial resistance to a tool of contemporary nationalist discourse underscores the complex interplay between visual representation, religion, and politics in India. The continued prominence of Bharat Mata in public imagery reflects the ongoing struggle over national identity and the ways in which historical symbols are reinterpreted to serve current ideological needs.

2.3. Lord Rama, Holy Wars and Militant Hindutva

The visual representations of Hindu gods associated with nationalist ideologies differ from the traditional ritualistic portrayals of Hindu deities. Walter Benjamin's concepts of "cult value" and "exhibition value" in art objects, as outlined in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), are instrumental in understanding this distinction. Benjamin posits that art possesses two types of value: "cult value" and "exhibition value." Cult value refers to the ritualistic significance of an art object, where it serves as a vessel, symbol, or marker for worship or veneration. However, with the rise of mass production, the purpose of art shifts away from the ritualistic purpose (Jain, 2007, 180-182). Whether one is observing the original print of an artwork or a reproduction, it no longer holds significance in terms of cult rituals. Instead, the paramount importance lies in its exhibition value. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that within the realm of photographic and mass-produced images, "the work of art takes on entirely new functions" (Benjamin, 1935, p.4).

Mechanical reproductions of Hindu deities, such as lithographs in the mid-19th century and the emergence of bazaar art in the early 20th century, gave divine images entirely new roles as images of political dissent during the period of anti-colonial nationalism (Mitter, 2002). Previously, the sacred icons representing gods were confined to regional temples, pilgrimage sites, or domestic spaces. However, mass-produced images and visual artefacts of Hindu deities are now extensively marketed as commodified goods and can convey diverse significations. These art objects are replicated throughout the entire country, making them accessible to large audiences and in the case of anti-colonial nationalism, embody a powerful political statement of dissent against the colonial regime, rather than solely expressing religious devotion.

Moreover, the practice of incorporating images with mythological connotations into nationalist discourse gives rise to what Walter Benjamin referred to as ‘wish images’ (Benjamin, 1999, p. 110). Wish images are visual representations that contain hidden utopian ideals. Benjamin argues that images serve as a conduit for the desires and aspirations of the collective unconscious. Drawing upon a cultural repository of myths and utopian symbols from distant antiquity, the collective imagination endeavours to make a revolutionary break from the recent past (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 211). Benjamin suggests that wish images situate the present moment between a nostalgic past and a utopian future, with the intention of eliciting wonder, desire, and fear, and ultimately instigating revolutionary action among its viewers. Nationalists employ images depicting mythological narratives and deities to imbibe the national identity with symbolic meaning. By referencing the myths of ancient India, these images not only shed light on current challenges but also envision a different future. The concept of the wish-image manifests itself at various junctures in Indian history, coinciding with moments of cultural and political turmoil. In each instance, it becomes evident that these images derive their essence

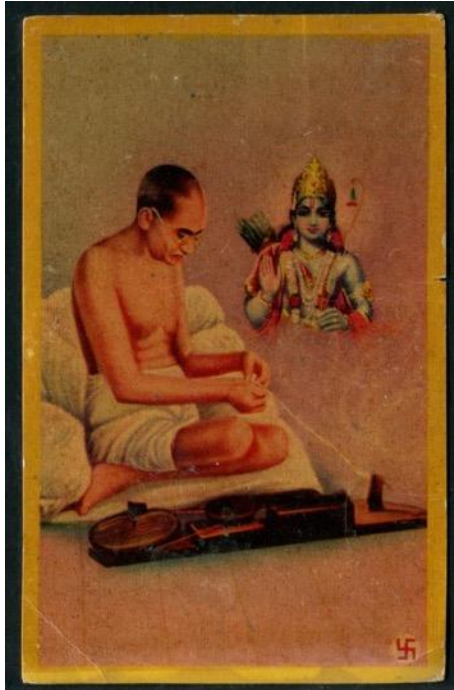
from mythology and ancient Indian civilization's rich cultural past, thereby asserting their significance.

The focus on ancient Hindu myths and the revival of the concept of an older Indian civilization, as embodied by Bharat Mata, is a powerful idea portrayed through various iconographies that have become intertwined with the Indian national identity. During the period of colonialism in India, the nationalist movement aimed to establish a distinct Indian identity that was separate from the identity and culture imposed by the colonial powers. In order to achieve this objective, anti-colonial nationalists reclaimed texts and visual motifs from India's rich historical and dramatic traditions, which primarily encompassed popular Hindu mythologies and narratives. They adeptly infused these media with Indian nationalist sentiment. This endeavour was manifested in various cultural forms, including cinema, theatrical productions, protest songs, and visual art. Additionally, audiences actively engaged with and interpreted mythological texts as narratives that championed nationalist ideals (Van der Veer, 2024, p. 68). The portrayal of the mythological triumph over evil in the arts became synonymous with the downfall of the empire, serving as an inspiring anti-colonial visuality for viewers with nationalistic sentiments (Mitter, 1994, pp. 179-181).

Among the various mythic narratives, the *Ramayana* has had a significant impact on nationalist sentiment and has played a pivotal role in India's nation-building endeavours during the independence movement. Throughout this period, numerous Indian politicians expressed their aspirations and concerns by framing the struggle against British rule as a cosmic battle between good and evil. The desire of political leaders during the years surrounding Indian independence and Partition to establish a secular state was fundamentally compromised by the need to create a coherent master narrative to unite large swathes of the population. This national

Figure 10:

A vintage Postcard featuring Gandhi and Rama (c.1920). Unknown Artist. Source: Indian History Collective.



discourse (in visual and prose form) allowed for the continued use of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as unifying myths for the nation, while also working towards the goal of a secular society. Images of national leaders juxtaposed near images of Hindu gods were used as a means to relate the national discourse with a spiritual and religious ethos too (Figure 10). One prominent figure who subscribed to this perspective was Mahatma Gandhi. An analysis of the mainstream nationalism embodied by Gandhi reveals that his model of nonviolent resistance was deeply influenced by Hindu scriptures. Therefore, it is not surprising that Gandhi frequently invoked the

Bhagavad Gita and the *Ramayana* in his efforts to mobilise his followers towards achieving his ideological goals (Chakrabarty and Jhap, 2013, pp.13-15). Gandhi redefined British rule as *Ravanrajya* (the rule of the demon king Ravana), portraying it as a malevolent and immoral regime. In contrast, Gandhi advocated for *swaraj* or independence, which he also referred to as *Ram Rajya* (the rule of King Rama) and *dharma* (righteousness): an idealistic concept symbolising the rule of the people (Lutgendorf, 1991, p. 374). In this particular context, *Ram Rajya* symbolised moral principles such as justice, equality, and truth, which were intended to be extended to even the most marginalised members of society.¹³

The cultural and nationalist sentiment associated with *Ram Rajya* was subsequently invoked in post-independence India by the Congress government under the leadership of Rajiv

¹³ Nonetheless, this vision sought to preserve the deeply hierarchical and patriarchal institution of caste.

Gandhi in the 1980s. As a means to foster national pride, Rajiv Gandhi made the deliberate decision in 1987 to televise the serialisation of the *Ramayana* on the national broadcasting network. This series swiftly gained immense popularity, captivating an estimated 100 million viewers. Gandhi's celebration of the *Ram Rajya* legend sought to shape the trajectory of India's future by accentuating the perceived scientific, military, and economic achievements of ancient India's (mythical) glorious past. The televised serial *Ramayana*, produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar, attained widespread popularity, transcending linguistic boundaries and establishing a centralised 'pan-Hindu' public sphere (Kasbekar, 2006, p. 152) (Figure 11).

Figure 11:
Advertisement of the television serial *Ramayana* (1987), Ramanand Sagar. Source: IMDB.

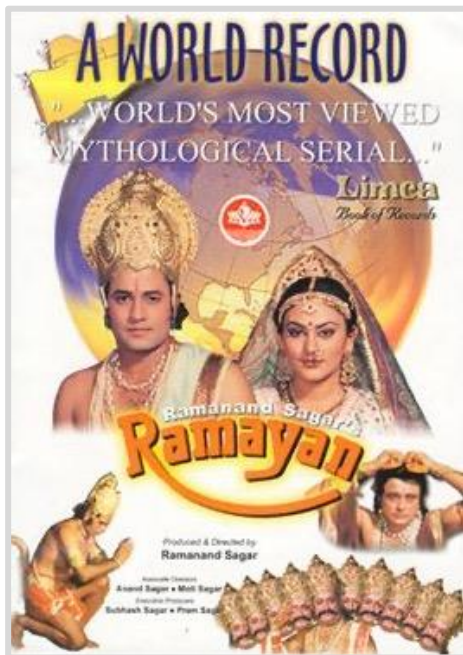


Figure 12:
Ram Darbar (date unknown), Ravi Varma. Source: rajaravivarma.net.

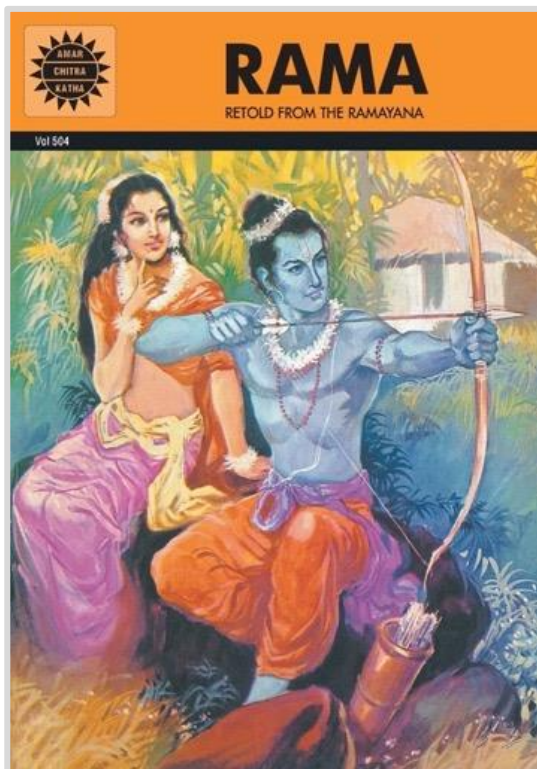


In this series, the primary character, Rama, is portrayed as a fair-skinned individual from North India. He embodies various virtues, including moral and physical courage, a strong sense of duty towards his kingdom, heroism, unwavering devotion, and loyalty towards his

wife, Sita. For Hindus in particular, the weekly watching of the show became something of a collective national ritual. Furthermore, the series served to cement the conventional practice of hero worship towards the deity Rama, as it depicted him with as muscular and aggressive, while also loving to his family and followers. The iconography presents the mythic Lord Rama as an ideal archetype of the Indian (Hindu) man. The visual aspects of the show, such as the scenery, vibrant colour palettes, clothing styles, and selection of actors, were influenced by Varma's Europeanised depiction of Rama and the prevalent calendar art of that period (Figure 12). Additionally, Ramanand Sagar incorporated the concept of 'Janmabhoomi' (birthplace) into the storyline (Rajagopal, 2004, p. 155). This concept finds its roots in Hindutva ideology rather than the traditional texts. Ultimately, the Janmabhoomi inclusion transformed Rama into a symbol of a militant campaign that purportedly encompassed the nation and symbolised unity among its citizens.

Figure 13:

Cover image of an ACK comic depicting Rama and Sita (1970), Anant Pai. Source: Amazon.in.



Around the same time, Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), which was established in 1967, emerged as one of India's most successful and prolific comic book publishers. It was the first to incorporate the superhero culture typically associated with US comics into Indian comics. The narratives of ACK primarily revolved around divine heroes from Hindu mythology, as well as kings and famous historical figures such as Gandhi. The visual aesthetic they developed aimed to embody a pan-Indian nationalism rooted in myth and history. As

ACK continued to expand, the creators introduced numerous historical and mythical titles in an effort to promote national integration and marketed the series as “the route to your roots” (McLain, 2009). Through the amalgamation of mythology and history, these books established a national canon of Indian heroes. The visual style of ACK drew significant influence from American comic books and the works of artist Raja Ravi Varma. Anant Pai (1929-2001), the founder of ACK, looked to Varma’s body of work to shape the visual narratives of his comics (see Figure 13). When the ACK artists adopted Varma’s style, they adhered to what was then considered a traditional Indian style for depicting Hindu mythological and classical characters. The ACK artists utilised Varma’s art as a reference for portraying bodies, expressions, attire, decor, and landscapes. ACK’s comic art directly echoed Varma’s allegorical transfer of the heroic ages in the context of cultural resurgence (Chandra, 2008).

Figure 14:

Film poster for Tarzan (1934), Cedric Gibbons.

Source: Rottentomatoes.com.



In the images created by ACK, the deity Rama departs from earlier two-dimensional, iconic portrayals which often depicted him in a serene or motionless state. The incorporation of realism and narrative in ACK’s depictions of Rama grants the deity a new presence through his muscles, weaponry, and emotions. Artistically, the ACK comics also derived inspiration from the American comics popular from the 1950’s to 1970’s, especially Tarzan, Phantom and Mandrake (McLain, 2009). The

ACK style also draws inspiration from Hollywood icons. For instance, Rama was modelled after Johnny Weissmuller, the athletic actor who portrayed Tarzan (Figure 14), further

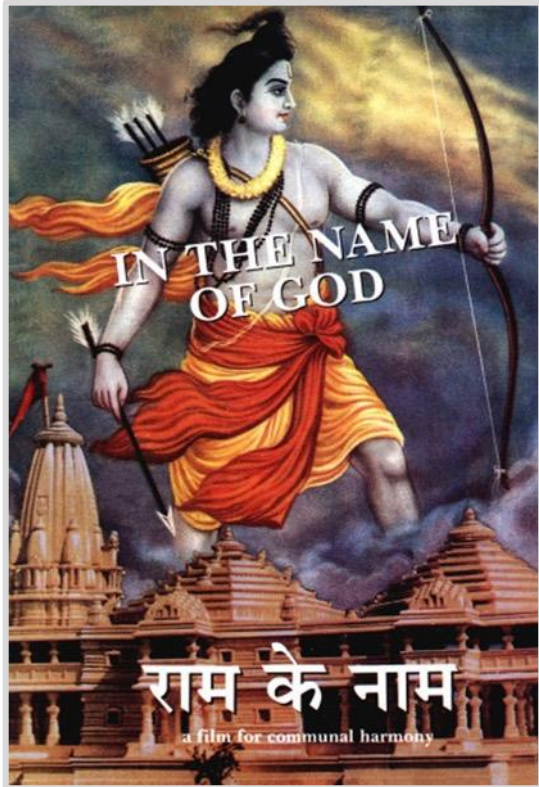
accentuating the utilization of Western visual paradigms to convey ideas of Indian national identity (Chandra, 2018). These Hindu icons are adorned with intricate details, and over time, the depicted bodies assume a more muscular and angular style, especially when portraying the heroes. This blend of Western and Indian visual styles and artistic elements in ACK comics modernised the visual representation of Hindu mythology further, creating a unique visual language that resonated with the upwardly mobile middle-class Indian audiences. The integration of Western elements into ACK's visual style not only modernised the depiction of Hindu mythology but also made the narratives more appealing to contemporary audiences who were increasingly exposed to global influences. This hybrid visual language allowed ACK to bridge traditional Indian storytelling with modern visual sensibilities, thus reinforcing a national identity that was both rooted in ancient mythology and attuned to contemporary cultural trends.

The slippage between Hindu and Indian nationalisms, while not unprecedented, acquired tremendous potency in the late 1980s and 1990s. The popularity of the *Ramayana* and the growing influence of Hindu beliefs in the public sphere eventually opened up political opportunities for the Hindutva movement, a right-wing Hindu nationalist movement. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hindutva organizations (collectively called the Sangh), which included the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and the *Bajrang Dal* (Army of Hanuman), strategically established the cultural foundation for their subsequent rise to power. This was accomplished by employing visual rhetoric, with the figure of Lord Rama assuming a prominent role. This movement utilised various visual media forms, such as print and video, to promote the idea of ancient Hindu civilization. The traditional iconography, which typically depicted a calm and smiling Lord Rama accompanied by Sita and his brother Lakshmana, with the monkey god

Hanuman seated at their feet, took a backseat. Instead, militant images gained prominence in

Figure 15:

Propaganda image turned Film poster Ram Ke Naam (1992), Anand Patwardhan. Source: IMDB.



the streets and public spaces, particularly in the context of the *Ramjanmabhumi* and right-wing Hindu nationalist movements taking to the streets (Figure 15).¹⁴ In these images, Lord Rama is portrayed standing alone, heavily armoured, and displaying anger. These portrayals depict Rama as a god ready for battle: embodying a distinctively masculine national ideal. The muscular representation of Lord Rama, which emerged in the late 1980s, can be interpreted as “images produced by a moment of violence”, reflecting a specific form of aggressive Hindu absolutism (Sreenivas, 2013, p. 72).

The promotion of the Hindutva nationalist ideology relied heavily on audio and visual media, specifically television and art in public spaces such as posters, calendars, and stickers. Television serials featuring Hindu epics like *Ramayana* and *Ramayana*, as well as propaganda videos and posters, gained significant attention and played a crucial role in the success of the campaign (Favero, 2020, p. 47). While not all viewers of these television shows necessarily endorsed the hardcore Hindutva ideology, the concept of reclaiming the Hindu identity became

¹⁴ This particular depiction of Lord Rama also gained popularity among the masses through the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comics, which can be seen as the Indian equivalent of Marvel and DC superhero comics.

Figure 16:

Poster of Five-headed Hanuman (1997), signed Shivas. Source: Lutgendorf (2002).



widely accepted. Concurrently, within the Hindutva movement, there was an increasing fascination with the iconography of Lord Hanuman, the Monkey King, who served as the commander of the monkey army and a devoted companion of Rama. Hanuman is often revered alongside deities like Shiva and Durga in the devotional practices of Hindutva militants. The proliferation of images and statues depicting Hanuman with a progressively muscular physique in public spaces symbolised his role as a formidable defender against opposing forces (Lutgendorf, 1994, pp. 211-217) (Figure 16).

Hanuman's significance lies in his relationship to Lord Rama. Among his various roles, Hanuman serves as Rama's enforcer and helper. He is a powerful character, possessing great physical strength and eloquence. The depictions of Hanuman often portray him as powerful and masculine, representing celibate energy and righteous anger, and appear to address chauvinistic anxieties surrounding vulnerability and subjugation by minority groups (Pollock, 1993, p. 272-277). Anxiety in relation to masculinity is fundamental to the Hindutva movement. In her book *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (2001), Charu Gupta writes, "These groups constructed Hindu masculinity as a contrast to the colonial image of the emasculated, effeminate, and militarily incompetent Hindu male. For militant Hindu organisations, a display of physical strength was

their psychological defence, a response to the images of the powerful, rational British and the lustful Muslim” (p. 234). The increasing prominence of militarism in the muscular representations of Lord Rama and Hanuman signifies the belief of Hindu nationalists that such visuals would effectively symbolise Hindu bravery and power, thereby aiding in the galvanisation and organisation of the Hindu community. This ideological perspective of hyper-masculine aggression was particularly pronounced in the period leading up to and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992.

Coincidentally, the increasingly hypermasculine portrayal of Lord Rama has become more widespread, as the Hollywood ideal of masculinity, embodied by actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger, has gained global influence (Baas, 2016, p. 416). In India, this trend was further fuelled by the popularity of action films featuring Bruce Lee and Sylvester Stallone, which were widely distributed on videotapes. Consequently, public spaces began featuring film posters of Lee, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Stallone flaunting their bare chests, alongside pictures of muscular Hindi (and regional) film stars, as well as depictions of warrior versions of Rama, Hanuman, and Lord Shiva. In Bollywood, male heroes became more muscular and frequently exhibit their well-toned torsos while engaging in intense workouts and pursuing love interests. Local gyms even use images of testosterone-pumped Hanumans to advertise their services. Rupal Oza also suggests that the rapid pace of globalisation in India is another factor contributing to the increase in conservatism and the reinforcement of cultural and religious national identity (Oza, 2006, p.2). What this demonstrates is that the contemporary representation of Lord Rama as the ideal Hindu male in various visual media has been influenced by different dominant constructions of masculinity, both colonial and otherwise.

Figure 17:

Poster depicting PM Narendra Modi as Lord Rama and the Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif as Raavan (2016). Source: TOI.in.



Over the course of three decades, the Sangh (an umbrella term encompassing right-wing Hindu nationalist groups), have utilised epics to mobilise a Hindutva community. Today, depictions of Lord Rama are accompanied by elaborately staged presentations of politically charged mythical

cosmologies. The objective of these depictions in the contemporary public sphere is to portray a triumphant Hindu-first nation. Often, these images of Rama (or Hanuman in some Hindu nationalist parties) are juxtaposed alongside political party leaders and Hindu ideologues, aiming to evoke a mythical golden era for a Hindu nation (Figure 17). The posters suggest that supporting the real-life leaders depicted alongside Lord Rama is crucial for realising and maintaining this vision of a Hindu nation. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss note that Hindutva groups were pioneers in employing “mass-mediated imagery” of Lord Rama to symbolise a return to origins, as well as the revitalisation and renewal of the national endeavour (2000, p.73). The current cultural campaign also aims to depict the perceived “protection of a nation under threat... [and] fatally weakened from within” (Corbridge & Harriss, 2000, in Guha-Thakurta & Zamindar, 2022, p. 208).

Since the 1920s, proponents of Hindu nationalism in India have bided their time, and at no point in the history of modern India have they wielded so much, or such legitimate power within the Indian state and among India’s middle classes as they do now. Currently, the concept of Ram Rajya and Lord Rama as a warrior has deeply permeated saffronised public culture,

effectively reinforcing the authoritarian and anti-minority politics of the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). It is worth noting that the aforementioned images are reflective of the prevailing visual discourse within the nation. However, this does not imply that only one representation has emerged as the exclusive portrayal of the nation, or that there is only a single image of a nationalised Rama. Images of powerful deities exist alongside their youthful counterparts (as shown in Figure 18, where Modi is depicted walking alongside a young Lord Rama towards the Ayodhya Temple) and with subaltern interpretations (such as Rama's depictions in tribal paintings). Nevertheless, the narrative of the muscular Hindu Hero as the saviour of the nation remains a dominant visual narrative in the country, which reflects how the discourse of Hindu nationalism in India encompasses a collection of ideas, images, and practices that are connected to the long-term vision of a Hindu India. The inauguration of the new Ram Mandir in Ayodhya by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in early 2024, along with televised celebrations, is seen by many as the pinnacle of this vision because it encapsulates the Hindu nationalist movement's

Figure 18:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi leading a young Lord Rama towards the Temple of Ayodhya (2024), image tweeted by BJP MP Shobha Karandlaje. Source: TheWire.in



historical, political, and cultural aspirations, marking a significant milestone in its journey to redefine India's national identity.

In contemporary popular culture, whether it is through visual media such as images, Instagram posts, streaming video platforms, or cinema, mythological epics and heroes remain a significant source of inspiration. For example, the depiction of a muscular Shiva indulging in the consumption of marijuana has emerged as an iconic representation of a new, relaxed interpretation of Hinduism. Additionally, stickers featuring an angry Hanuman can be observed adorning the windshields of automobiles, while mythological narratives presented through artificial intelligence offer vivid imagery of a glorified past. These phenomena collectively signify the construction of an image of Indian nationhood, one that is modern in nature (through its use of technology) yet rooted in an idealised and imagined singular Hindu tradition. Renowned Indian graphic artist Orijit Sen, the creator of the first Indian graphic novel *River of Stories* (1994), expressed in a recent interview: “There exists a fictional construct to which these figures belong, and it does not truly align with an Indian identity. However, the proliferation of this construct is undoubtedly influenced by the Hindu right-wing movement, which actively fosters and promotes it” (quoted in Nooreydzan, 2024). As Homi Bhabha (1990) asserts, the nation is constructed through narratives, and the visual and cultural elements discussed herein, play a crucial role in reinforcing the power of Hindutva nationalist discourse. Importantly, these visual media aim to create an imaginary origin story for Indian nationalist politics in the public consciousness. Understanding how they work offers insights into the contemporary political landscape of right-wing nationalist politics in India, as well as their support base within Hindu society, all in pursuit of a utopian India.

2.4. Contesting images in Popular Spaces

In the previous section, I examined three significant visual-historical moments India's cultural landscape: the emergence of an Indian classical art form through Ravi Varma and the revival of Hindu mythology, the Bengal Renaissance and the creation of the nation as a mother goddess, and the mainstreaming of a militant Rama and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. It is important to recognise that alongside these dominant narratives, there were also visual and socio-political resistances that challenged these conceptions of nationhood. These counter movements often drew inspiration from regional visual cultures and alternative interpretations of Indian mythology. While a comprehensive analysis of each instance is beyond the scope of this thesis, I conclude this chapter by exploring some contemporary visual representations that challenge a singular (Hindu) nationalistic portrayal.

The establishment of a unified Hindu identity through narratives like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* has been instrumental in shaping national identity, particularly with the rise of popular media. However, the advent of digital and social media has introduced complexities, offering spaces for diverse perspectives that contest dominant visual cultures. These platforms have become arenas for personal reflections, group discussions, film critiques, and notably, political debates. In this section, I examine visual representations from graphic novels, comics, posters, and photographs that challenge dominant ideas of Indianness and circulate within digital spaces. The shift from print to digital media is intentional, as the images discussed here are more contemporary and reflect the current political climate, which is marked by stronger resistance to the state-sanctioned visuality of Hindu nationhood. Additionally, like the book covers analysed in subsequent chapters, these images are disseminated in both digital and print formats.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige introduced the concept of “noise” as a form of subcultural force that disrupts the dominant aesthetic tradition of a society (p. 1970). Subcultures have the power to challenge and disrupt existing norms and traditions. In contemporary India, particularly in the post-millennial era, social media platforms have become significant tools for cultural disruption within the dominant culture. They empower marginalised communities and oppressed groups to share contesting and subversive comics, art, and memes, amplifying their voices and providing them a platform for expression. The emergence of graphic art that reflects alternative perspectives and different imaginings of Indian identity is not a sudden or isolated phenomenon. It can be attributed, at least in part, to the widespread availability of broadband internet in both urban and rural areas, the growth of online platforms, and the increasing prominence of social media communities that amplify minority voices. The rise of a new generation of digital artist-activists, referred to as ‘artists’ (Weij & Berkers, 2021, p. 1619), who leverage social media as a means to articulate and document their dissenting viewpoints, is particularly notable. Two significant events that sparked widespread response from artists on social media were the protests against the Indian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 and the Indian Farmers Protests of 2020-2021 (Both protests came to an abrupt end due to Covid lockdowns). Both events led to a proliferation of comics and graphic artwork from artists across the nation in support of the protestors.

In December 2019, India experienced widespread protests in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a controversial piece of legislation introduced by the Indian government. The CAA seeks to provide a pathway to citizenship for specific religious groups—Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsees, and Jains—who fled religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan before December 2014. Crucially, the

Act excludes Muslims from these provisions, raising concerns about religious discrimination (Malik et al., 2019). The requirement for government-issued identity documents as proof of citizenship further exacerbates the risk of exclusion, particularly for marginalised communities who may lack such documentation due to illiteracy, poverty, or homelessness. Critics argue that the CAA undermines the foundational principles of religious diversity and secularism in India, while promoting the notion of a Hindu-centric national identity. The enactment of the CAA on December 12, 2019, triggered widespread protests, catching Prime Minister Modi's government by surprise due to the scale and intensity of the public outcry (Sharma, 2020). The protests were marked by significant participation from students and Muslim women, who were joined by a diverse coalition of journalists, celebrities, activists, and academics (Malik et al., 2019). These demonstrations, both within India and internationally, prominently featured protest art, which was used extensively in both physical spaces and on social media to voice opposition to the legislation and to express solidarity with those affected.

These artworks played a crucial role not only in drawing attention to the protests themselves but also in highlighting the individuals actively participating in them. These protestors largely belonged to marginalised groups within India, including women, Muslims, Dalits, and students. The visual representations employed in these protests frequently incorporated national symbols such as the Indian map and flag, which reinforced the protestors' claims to their rightful place within the nation. However, what stood out most prominently in the artwork inspired by the anti-CAA movement was its predominantly Muslim and female-centred visual iconography. This imagery directly challenged the hypermasculine and militant version of citizenship promoted by the Hindutva project, offering an alternative vision of Indian identity that is inclusive and diverse. The prominence of Muslim women in these visual narratives, often depicted in hijabs and traditional attire, subverted the dominant narrative that

associated Indian identity exclusively with Hindu nationalism. These images not only defied the exclusionary politics of the CAA but also asserted the rightful place of marginalised communities within the national fabric, presenting a powerful counter-narrative to the aggressive and exclusionary nationalism championed by Hindutva forces (Figure 19).

Figure 19:

Women of Shaheen Bagh (2020), by Anirban Ghosh. Source: AlJazeera (courtesy of Artist).

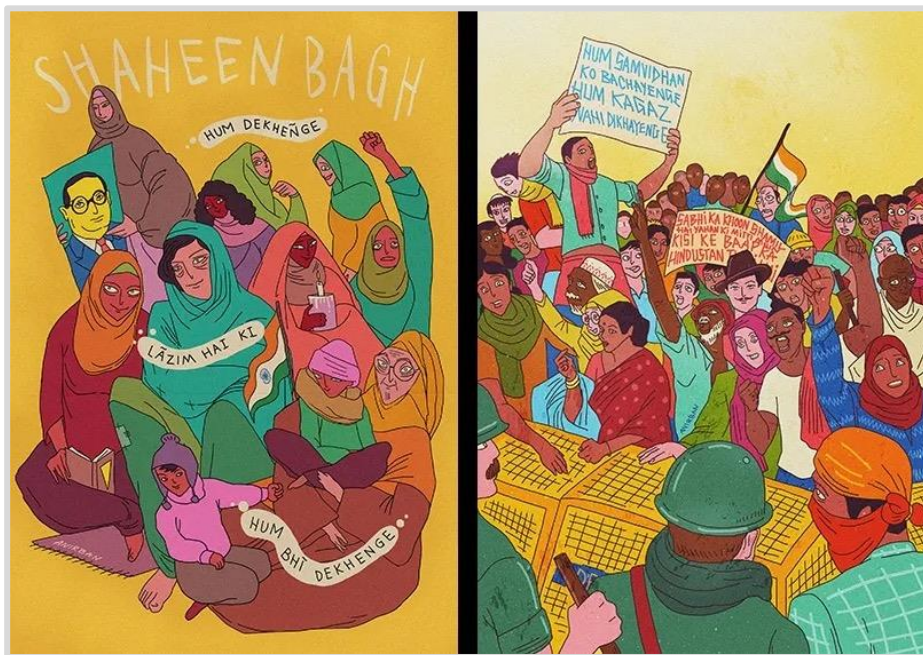


Figure 20:

Oru viral puratchi (One finger protest, 2020), by Ponvannan. Source: TheNewsMinute.in.



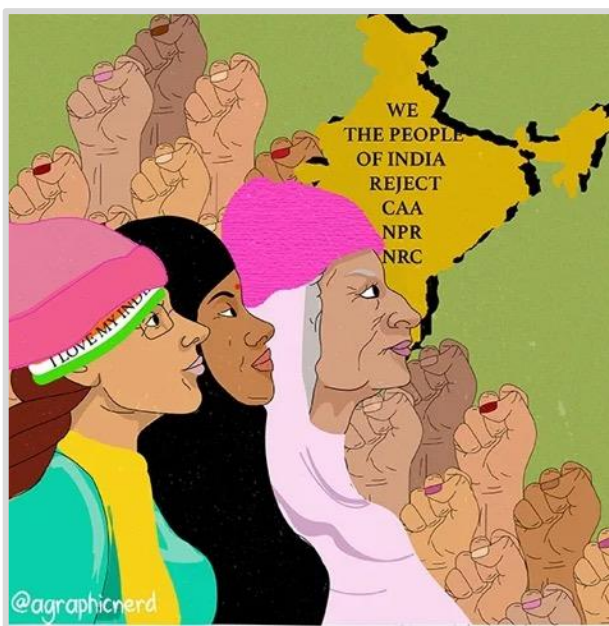
Figure 21:

Woman student berating a police man during protests against the CAA law, New Delhi (2019). Source: Ghulam Hussain/via Reuters.



One of the most iconic images associated with the anti-CAA movement was the widely circulated illustration known as “the one finger revolution” (Figure 20). This artwork was inspired by an incident at Jamia Millia Islamia University, where female students courageously shielded a male student from police brutality, ultimately forcing the police to retreat (Rao, 2019) (Figure 21). The image quickly went viral, resonating with many across the nation. The artist Ponvannan, who created the illustration, noted in an interview with *The Print* that it felt as though “the entire country had unanimously connected,” not only with him but also with the movement itself (Agarwal, 2020). The visuals of hijab-wearing students standing up against an oppressive state, police, and Hindutva violence came to symbolise not only the protests themselves but also the broader national discourse on what constitutes the Indian nation. This image, along with others from the anti-CAA protests, played a significant role in reframing the narrative around citizenship, nationalism, and resistance in contemporary India.

Figure 22:
An illustration of the resilience of women at Shaheen Bagh (2020), by Lamyia Khan. Source: Aljazeera.



The protests and the resulting images dismantled many prevailing stereotypes about Muslim women, challenging the widespread belief that “Indian Muslim women are uneducated, burqa-clad figures without a voice” (Hasan, 2020). Instead, these visuals depicted them as vocal, resilient, and active participants in the fight against oppression. Many of the protest images prominently featured the phrase “We the people of India” (Figure 22), the opening

words of the Indian constitution. This Incorporation serves to reinforce that the protestors were defending the secular principles of the nation and upholding the Constitution as their civic duty. Additionally, the images centered visual motifs and symbols like the hijab and bangle, transforming them from perceived symbols of weakness into powerful symbols of resistance against the muscular politics of the Hindu nation. With remarkable clarity, these diverse images, created using various techniques, convey the idea that the young students and women at the protests are advocating for constitutional values, inclusivity, and justice. This stands in stark contrast to the ideology of Hindutva, which views a loyal citizen as someone who can “liberate” the country from long-standing, inefficient, liberal-democratic politics and establish a “truly patriotic” Hindutva (Kumbamu, 2000, pp. 161-177). In contrast, the protestors assert a vision of India grounded in its secular and democratic foundations.

Similar to the anti-CAA protests, the Indian Farmers’ protests in 2020-2021 garnered widespread support across various segments of Indian society, the Punjabi diaspora, and even international figures like Greta Thunberg. These protests were in response to three farm laws introduced by the Modi government, which farmers feared would leave them vulnerable to exploitation by large corporations and threaten their livelihoods. The protests persisted for a year, with thousands of farmers setting up encampments at the borders of the capital, New Delhi, demonstrating their resolve and commitment. The government's decision to repeal the farm laws on November 19, 2021, after months of steadfast protests, was celebrated as a significant victory for the farmers and showcased the power of mass mobilization in holding the government accountable. The lack of accessibility, misinformation, and censorship by mainstream media led many to turn to social media platforms for reliable updates on the protests (Chisti, 2023). Protesters and supporters from India and its diaspora used social media to share videos, speeches, and updates, as well as to circulate paintings, cartoons, and songs

that documented and provided insights into the events at the protest sites. The artistic expressions that emerged from these protests, including paintings, illustrations, and cartoons, were often inspired by photographs of the protesting farmers, the Sikh practice of langar (a communal kitchen that serves food to all), and the brutal police responses to the protests, serving as powerful tools of communication and resistance in the face of state opposition.

These images collectively aim to bring visibility to the diversity within the nation and to highlight the marginalised farmers, while also presenting alternative visions of Indian democracy. Government posters and advertisements often depict farmers as contented symbols of prosperity, reinforced by slogans such as "backbone of our country." In stark contrast, the imagery emerging from the farmers' protests presents a more nuanced reality. These graphic artworks not only highlight the challenges faced by farmers but also maintain a sense of optimism and resilience through vibrant illustrations and cartoons. Many of the protesting

Figure 23:

I Stand with Farmers (2020), by Jag Nagrav©.

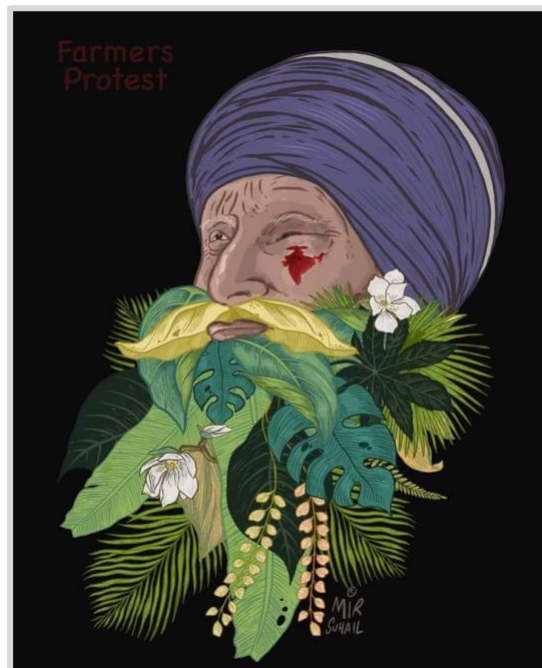
Source: itsnicethat.com.



Figure 24:

Farmers Protest art (2020), by Mirsuhail.

Source: Scroll.in.



farmers were Sikhs from Punjab, and their regional and ethnic identities were prominently celebrated through vibrant images that depicted their traditional attire and cultural practices, featuring the phrase “I stand with Farmers.” (see Figure 23). The representation of diverse cultures within the Indian community coming together under the collective identity of farmers acknowledged differences and emphasised a common cause. Women, minority religions, and the elderly were prominently featured in these images. While creative portraits of elderly farmers drew attention to their resilience in the face of state-sponsored violence (Figure 24). This emphasis on diversity in the visual narratives underscores the inclusive nature of the protests, uniting various segments of society under a shared identity rooted in common struggle.

Figure 25:

Cartoon of Farmer offering food to a Lathi Charging police officer (2020). By Satish Acharya. Source: Artists Twitter Feed.



The use of colours in the illustrations served as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant saffronisation of visual media in India. Artists employed cartoons and satire to vividly depict instances of police brutality, obstructing protesters from reaching the capital. One striking image shows an elderly farmer peacefully offering food to a police officer who had previously assaulted him. This image starkly contrasts the prevailing visual representation of militant discipline with the peaceful nature of the protesters (Figure 25). The farmer’s use of the term ‘son’ symbolised the nurturing and inclusive spirit that farmers extend to all individuals without distinction or prejudice. These images ultimately reflect and shape spaces of diverse political subjectivities. They demonstrate that strong solidarities built on

inclusive social practices and norms can be forged in a country marked by differences. By highlighting these elements, the images underscore the potential for unity and collective action across diverse communities, promoting a vision of inclusive democracy and social cohesion.

In addition to the art and graphics that arise during major crises, such as protests against specific governmental laws and practices, there exist numerous images that actively engage with the politics of the nation, particularly offering critiques of the Hindu nationalist state. Notable among these are the works of graphic artists George Mathen, known by his pen name Appupen, and Orijit Sen. Mathen, through his webcomic *Rashtraman*, published both in print and as single-panel art on social media platforms, offers a satirical critique of the Hindu nationalist state and its prominent figures. The title itself is telling: *Rashtra* means nation in Hindi, and *Rashtraman* translates to 'man of the nation,' thereby situating the work squarely within the discourse on nationalism. Mathen's artistic style, heavily influenced by German expressionism and woodblock printing, creates a stark visual contrast to the more realistically

illustrated fantasy styles typical of Rama posters.

This divergence in style underscores the thematic differences, with Mathen's work focusing on contemporary right-wing political situations.

Figure 26:

Rastraman (2017), by George Mathen.

Source: homegrown.co.in.



In one particular image (Figure 26), the character *Rashtraman* asserts that the exercise of free speech will come at a cost in “*Rashtriya*,” a satirical representation of Hindutva India. The content depicted in this image alludes to the numerous detentions and charges foisted against journalists,

activists, and opposition leaders by the Indian government under the UAPA act (The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act of 1967), thereby emphasizing the precarious condition of free speech in India (Varadarajan, 2022). Appupen’s artwork takes inspiration from Indian public spaces, as well as Western popular culture and political arenas, enabling him to establish connections between the events unfolding in India and other parts of the world. For instance, his illustration titled ‘Kow Klux Klan’ establishes a correlation between cow vigilantism targeting minority groups in India and the American KKK group (Figure 27). Through his graphic art, Mathen engages with and challenges dominant narratives, offering a counter-visibility that critiques the hegemonic ideologies perpetuated by Hindu nationalism.

Figure 27:
Cow is the new scapegoat (2018), by George Matthen.
 Source: *ThePrint.in.*

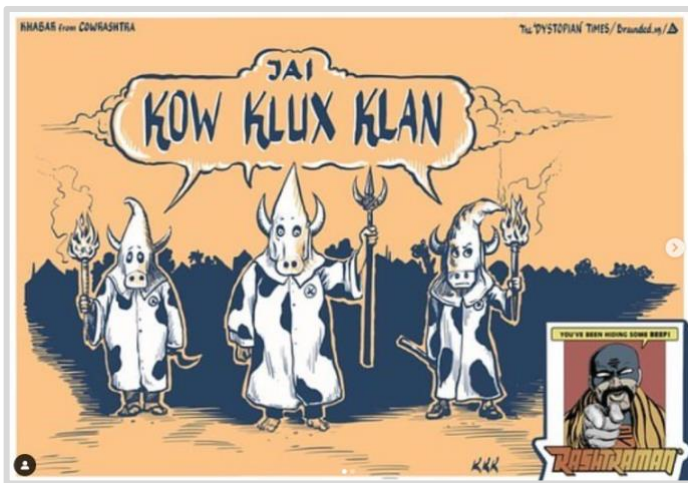
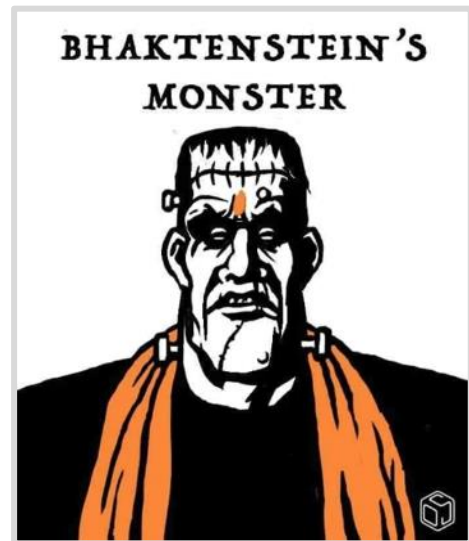


Figure 28:
Bhaktenstein’s Monster (2020), by Orijit Sen.
 Source: *Indiaculturalforum.in..*



Orijit Sen’s work, similarly, utilises a combination of Western popular culture and Hindutva motifs in his satirical critiques of the right-wing political climate in India. For example, one of Sen’s illustrations features a character reminiscent of Frankenstein, adorned with a saffron scarf and a religious bindi on the forehead. The character is accompanied by the words *Bhaktenstein* prominently displayed (Figure 28). The term ‘*bhakt,*’ which translates to

‘devotee’ in Hindi has recently acquired a negative connotation referring to uncritical followers of Hindutva ideology. The phrase ‘*Bhaktenstein*’ plays on the term Bhakt while also commenting on the thoughtlessness of Hindutva supporters through the portrayal of a Frankenstein-inspired figure. In contrast, the webcomic *Sanitary Panels* by Rachita Taneja utilises stick figures to address political issues. Taneja’s four-panel comics, featuring childlike stick figures, subtly criticise the immature nature of right-wing media and politics (Figure 29). These works have even garnered attention on university walls as a potent form of resistance.

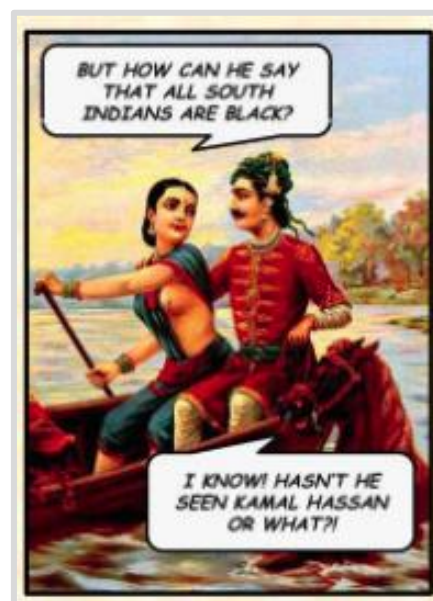
Figure 29:

Journalism is not terrorism (2023), by Swetha Taneja
(*Sanitary Panels*). Source: TNM Instagram feed.



Figure 30:

Inedible India (2017), by Rajamani.
Source: *Inedible India*'s social media page.



Meanwhile, the comic series *Inedible India* by Rajesh Rajamani incorporates the renowned paintings of Raja Ravi Varma in its visual narrative. Varma’s artwork has significantly influenced various right-wing portrayals of Hindu mythical heroes, yet Rajamani reclaims these paintings from their Hindutva context, transforming them into vehicles for social satire (Figure 30). Through his works, Rajamani vividly portrays social inequalities and the hypocrisy that exists within the broader society. In an interview, Rajamani explains that he

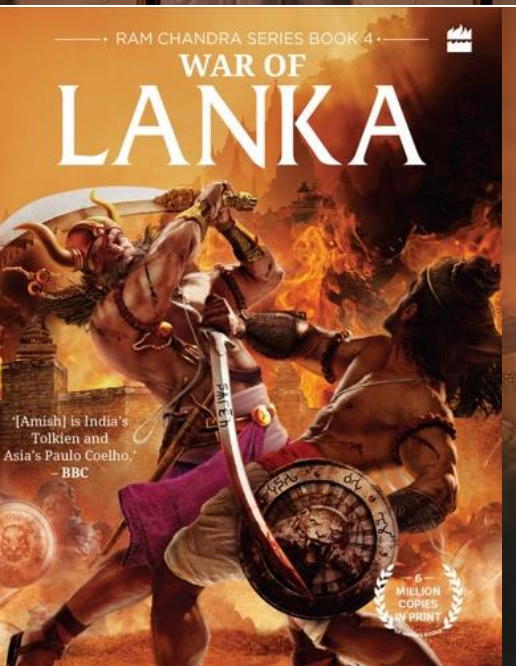
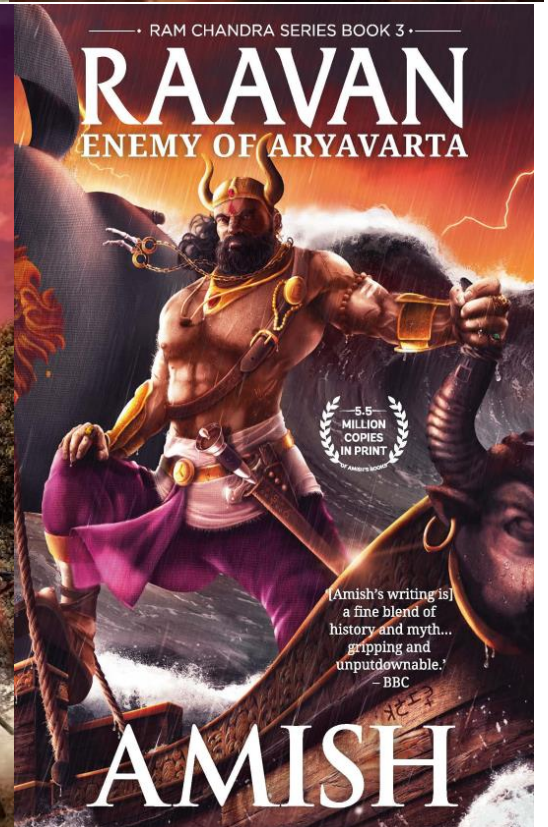
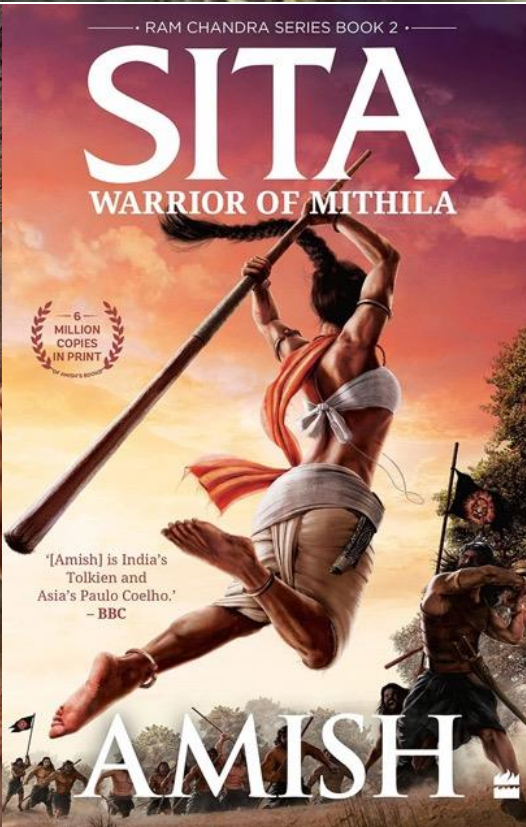
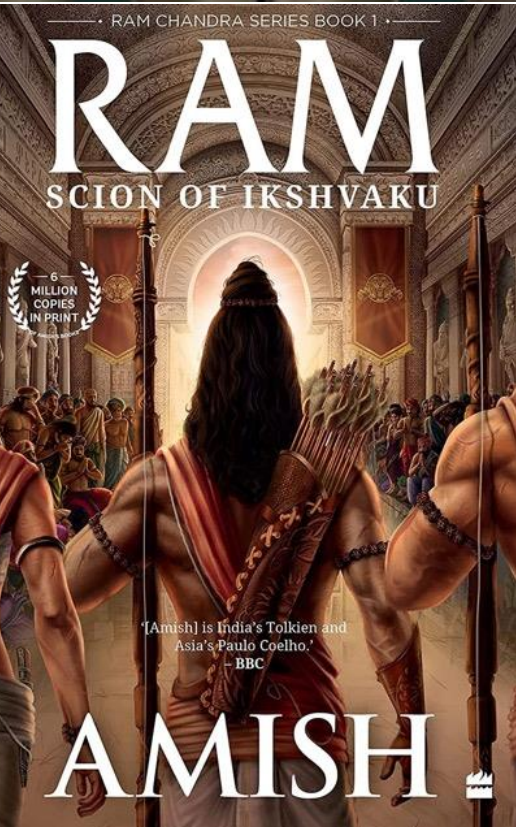
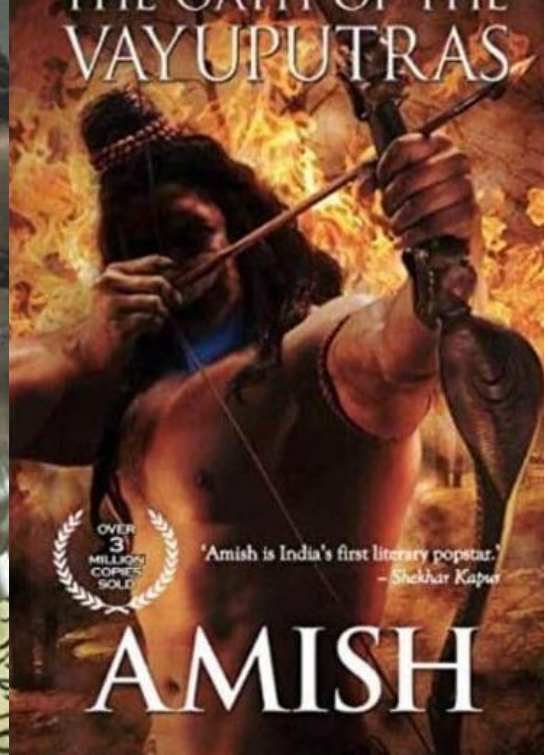
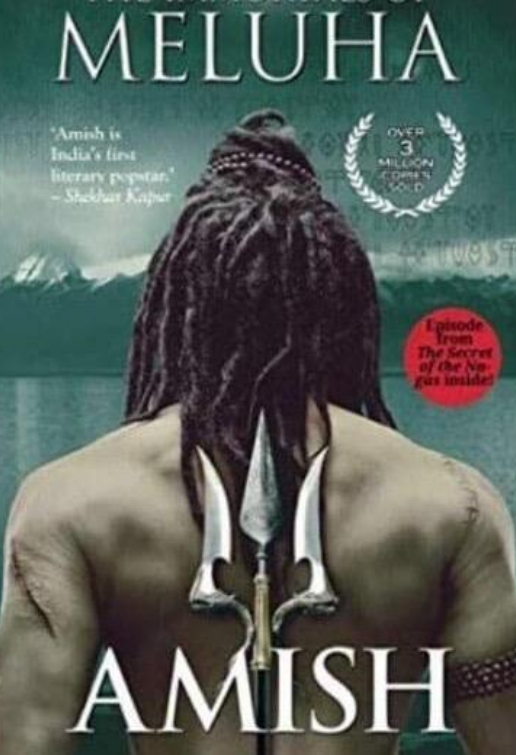
deliberately employs familiar paintings to evoke a sense of recognition among his audience (in Mitra, 2016). This subversion is evident in the series' title, "*Inedible India*," which mocks the Indian government's *Incredible India* tourism campaign, highlighting the stark contrast between the marketed image of India and the socio-political realities faced by its citizens.

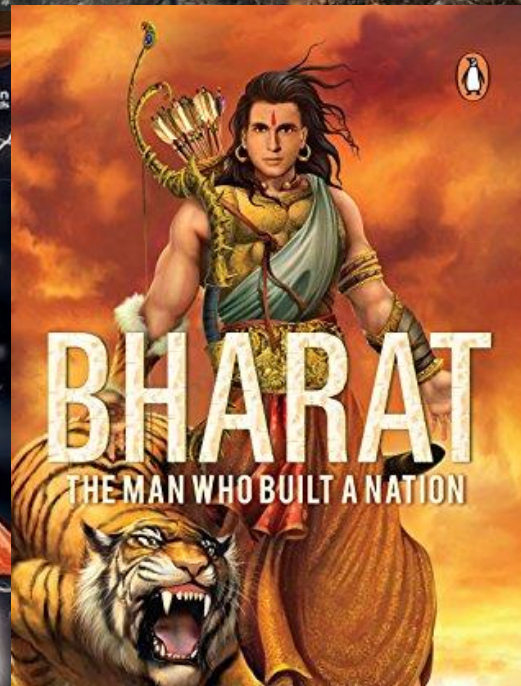
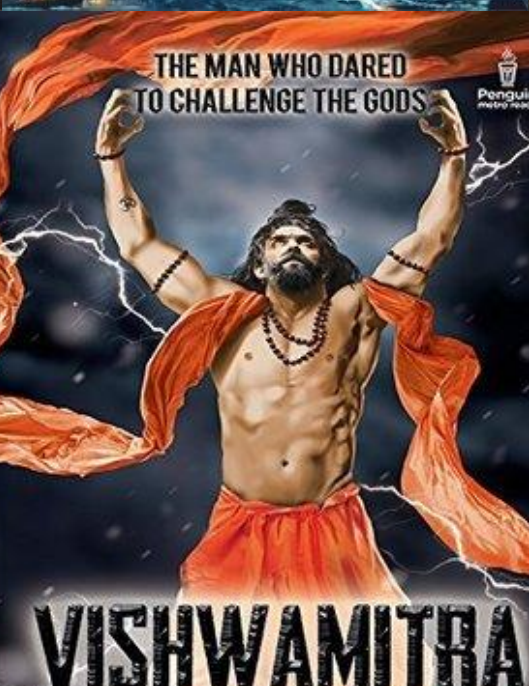
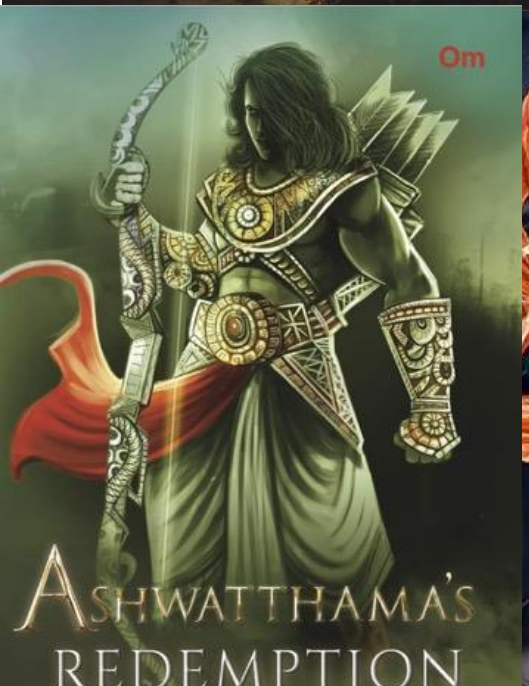
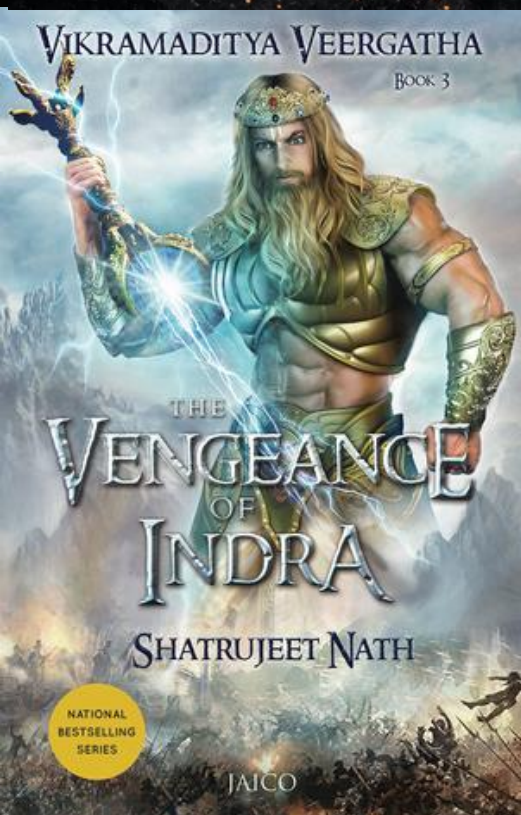
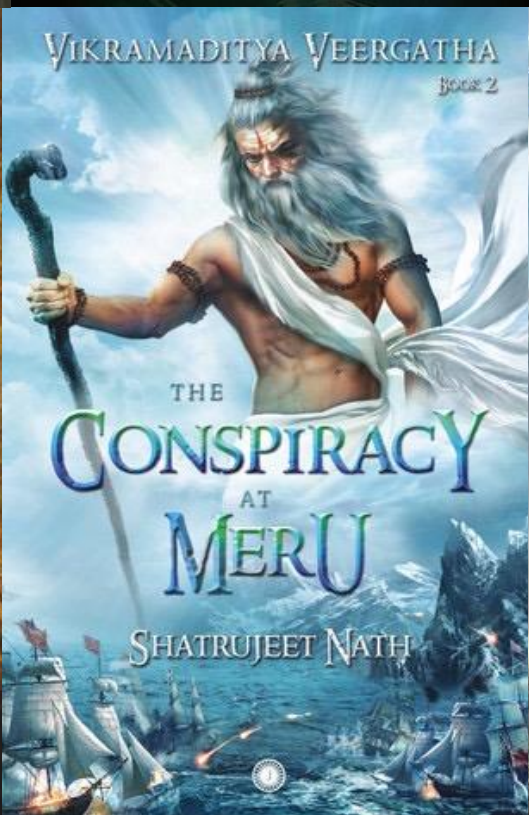
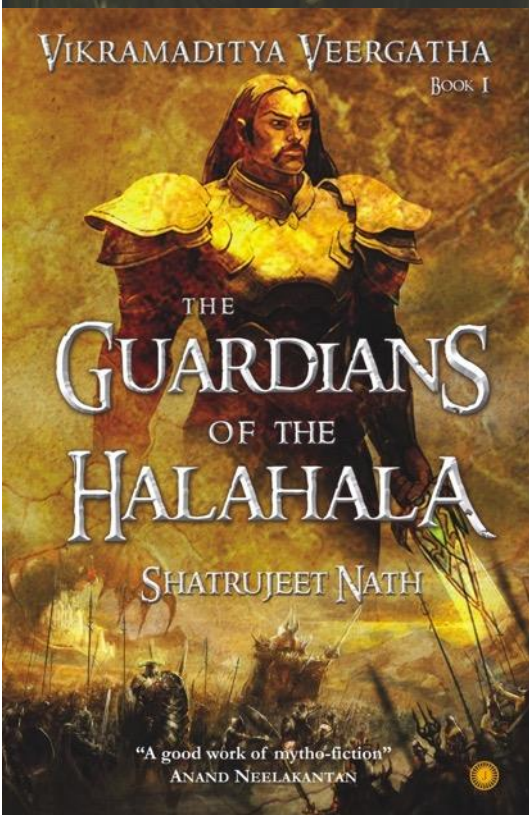
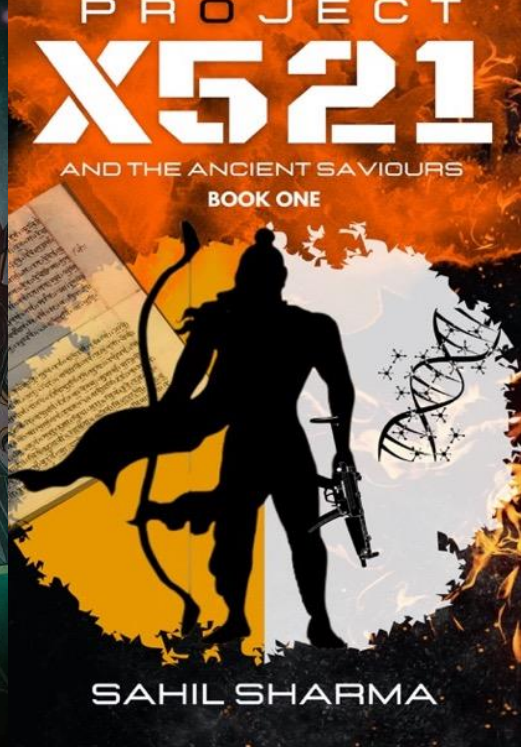
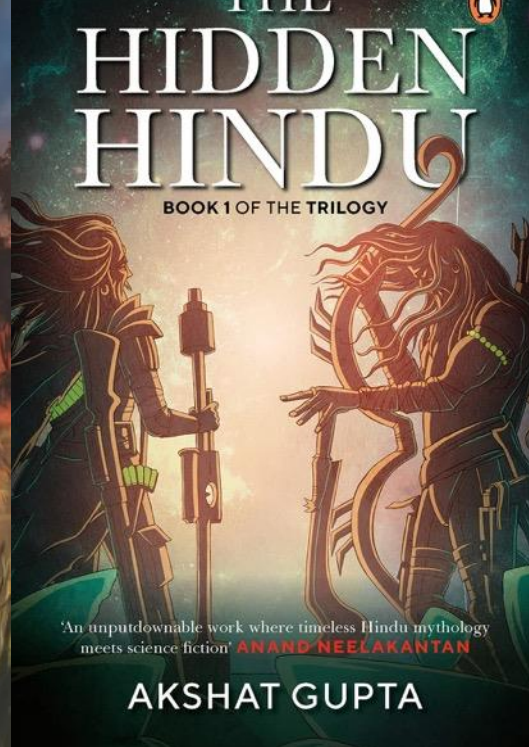
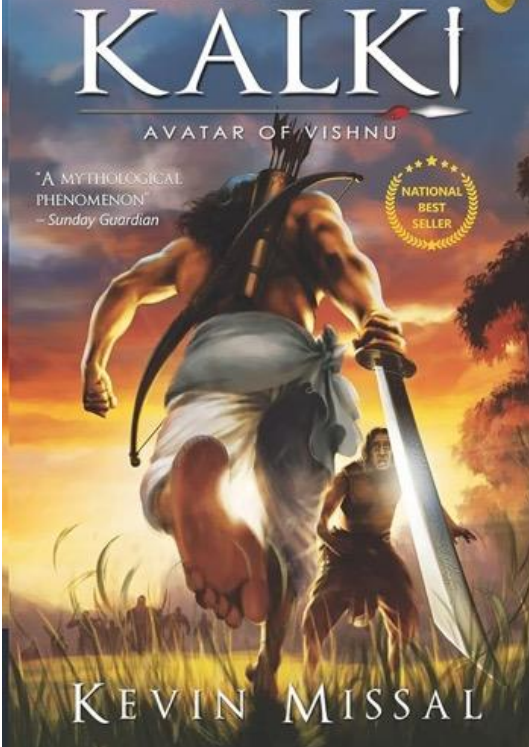
Varma's original works, such as his depictions of Hindu deities and epic narratives, were instrumental in crafting a visual narrative that supported the emergence of a national identity during colonial times. His style, which merged Western realism with Indian subject matter, helped to standardise and disseminate a cohesive image of Indian culture. This visual standardisation played a key role in the nationalist movements of the time and later still, becoming a template for visualising Hindu nationalist imagery. Rajamani's reinterpretation of Varma's imagery in "*Inedible India*" not only underscores the enduring influence and endurance of certain forms of Indian visual culture but also demonstrates their potential for contemporary critique. By reimagining these iconic images, Rajamani provides a counter-visibility that challenges the status quo and offers a platform for alternative narratives. This dynamic interplay between past and present visuals serves as a powerful tool for social commentary, reflecting the evolving nature of cultural symbols and their role in shaping and contesting collective identities.

The comics, illustrations, and graphic art discussed in this section encompass a wide range of styles and themes, offering insights into various societal issues. These artworks and artists give a voice to and unite different marginalised groups, including feminists, Dalits, Muslims, the working class, and journalists, among others. Through their diverse visual styles and subjects, these works present alternative ways of seeing and becoming Indian and therefore challenge dominant power structures. Additionally, they share a common objective of

celebrating and amplifying the diversity of cultures and voices within Indian society. This is achieved by incorporating visual elements and motifs from popular culture, both Indian and Western, that resonate with a large urban Indian audience. Moreover, these works often subvert the very elements used by the Hindutva visual regime. Consequently, the subcultural space of digital visual art becomes a potent platform for visual resistance against the homogenised visual culture of Hindu nationalism. The collective aesthetics and ideology of these images can be seen as a more inclusive reflection of the India envisioned by early anti-colonial freedom fighters, particularly Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's socialist politics. The heterogeneity of this space, where individuals do not define themselves solely by markers such as gender, faith, language, or visual style, embodies the collective identity of the Indian nation.

In this chapter, I have deliberately juxtaposed various visual cultural movements and historical timelines to facilitate an understanding of India's unique visual landscape and the political mobilisation it has undergone. It is clear that Hindu nationalists employ numerous mythological themes and iconography in their visual rhetoric of a unified Hindu nation, while other perspectives on "Indianness" are more secular and diverse in their choices. Given the proliferation of images in public and digital domains, as well as the increased utilisation of visuals for civic engagement, it is crucial to understand how notions of Indianness manifest in the everyday visual representation of cultural artefacts, such as book covers. In subsequent chapters, I analyse Indian SFF book covers that exemplify the two primary ideologies of nationhood that shape Indian politics.





Chapter 3:

Mythology and Nationhood — Visual Analysis of Myth-ISFF Book Covers

“Those who control the past control the future, those who control the present control the past” (George Orwell, 1984).

This chapter is the first of two analysis chapters that comprise the major analysis contributions of the thesis. These chapters will: (1) address the visual motifs present in book covers art of Indian speculative and fantasy fiction, (2) conduct a semiotic analysis of these visual representations, and (3) the wider ideological implications of these signs with regard to the politics of national identity. The primary focus of this first chapter is to conduct a detailed examination of the visual iconography found in key ISFF book cover images that are either inspired by or rooted in popular Hindu mythology. The overarching goal is to explore how the concept of the nation is envisioned through dominant visual registers that convey notions of heroism, masculinity, and militancy.

To achieve this, the present analytical investigation centres on a series of books published by esteemed Indian publishing houses, where collaborations with diverse designers have resulted in the production of a distinct style of artwork. While there may be slight variations in artistic styles across different publishing houses, the prevailing visual themes remain relatively consistent. Thus, the discussed cover designs serve as representative examples of this specific genre. These books, along with their corresponding covers, form part of a broader collection of popular visual media that draws inspiration from Hindu mythology and epic narratives, with the aim of reintroducing ancient myths to contemporary urban Indian audiences. This creative endeavour is regarded as a subtle manifestation of saffronisation

(Khandy, 2021, pp. 111-130), making it critical to understand how these visual representations contribute to the construction of national identity through specific ideological lenses.¹⁵

As discussed in Chapter 2, Hindu mythology as expressed in the major epics has played a significant role in shaping a nationalist Indian identity during the colonial era and later in the visualisation of a Hindu nationalist ideology. Aijaz Ahmad, an Indian literary theorist, attributes the enduring popularity of these epics to their inherent potential for continuous retelling and performance (1992, quoted in Singh, 2019, p. 232). In more recent times, there has been a resurgence of interest in myths, with mainstream media — such as books, news media, and cinema — turning to mythological narratives to advocate for and naturalise the power and actions of Hindu nationalist groups, often at the expense of others. To support this observation, I examine the visual tropes employed in Indian speculative and fantasy fiction (ISFF) cover art that draws inspiration from popular visualizations of Hindu epics. Orwell's assertion underscores the importance of controlling cultural narratives to shape national identity. By reimagining and controlling the mythological past, contemporary visual media can influence the future, promoting specific ideologies through the aesthetic portrayal of these narratives.

The cover art discussed in this chapter is commonly referred to as 'Bharati fantasy' which represents a significant component of the broader ISFF genre (Varughese, 2014, pp. 350-361). Bharati fantasy specifically pertains to Bharat, the name associated with early Hindu India (Varughese, p. 352). This genre encompasses works of fantasy fiction that extensively draws inspiration from the Hindu epics. The novels, written in colloquial English, often explores themes of powerful heroes, occasionally heroines, and their allies who engage in

¹⁵ Saffronisation is a political neologism used to describe policies, media production, and prevailing trends that promote the ideology of Hindutva, which lies at the core of Hindu nationalism.

battles and triumph over evil. Throughout the protagonist's journey, there is an exploration of karmic good, the discovery of his (or her) "purpose" (typically being a just ruler for his people), and the utilisation of formidable weapons. All these events unfold within a meticulously crafted pseudo-ancient-India high-fantasy setting, drawing inspiration from historical events and geography. Furthermore, the narratives of the books are set in early Bharat — referring to the medieval landmass, parts of which became modern-day India — aligning with the Hindu epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and the Vedas. The popularity of this genre can be attributed to its ability to reintroduce ancient myths to modern readers, providing a sense of cultural continuity and national pride.

The book covers and texts addressed in this chapter are Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) and *The Ram Chandra Series* (2015-2019), both of which have consistently topped bestseller lists and sold millions of copies, as well as Shatrujeet Nath's *Vikramaditya Veergatha Series* (2014-2020), Kevin Missal's *Dharmayoddha Kalki* (2018), *Krishna* (2022), and *Durga* (2022), as well as Gunjan Porwal's *Ashwatthama's Redemption* (2018), Dr. Vineet Agarwal's *Bharat* (2018), Akshat Gupta's *The Hidden Hindu* (2022) and Sahil Sharma's *Project X521: And the Ancient Saviours* (2022). These works exemplify a specific type of fiction that will be analysed in detail in the following section. Moreover, myth-SFF shares visual and thematic conventions with the Western fantasy genre, particularly in terms of art styles and visual tropes. However, it presents a hybrid visuality that combines Indian (Hindu) symbolism with archetypal Western fantasy visual tropes, reflecting a range of iconological influences. Additionally, Hindu-myth SFF shares many resemblances with the Amar Chitra Katha comics discussed in Chapter 3. In fact, both myth SFF and ACK display numerous similarities, including epic storylines, comparable visual aesthetics and formats, a focus on upper-caste heroes, and, more importantly, both reflect an underlying Hindu nationalist sentiment.

I argue that by recontextualising traditional religious symbols and portraying Hindu deities and avatars as native rulers of India, these book covers emphasise and reify the idea of the native Hindu warrior. These images evoke a sense of nostalgia for a utopian mythical past, particularly through visual themes that depict the emergence of *Ram Rajya* through epic battles. *Ram Rajya* represents an idealised archetypal imaginary of the past and the future, that embodies the ethos of Hindu nationalism. The covers in question tap into these imaginings, thus serving as a significant means of promoting hegemonic ideas of nationhood and Indianness. Additionally, the depiction of warrior heroes and potential utopias on the covers aligns with the utilization of the mythological genre in various forms of media that highlight a hypermasculine, strong Hindu pride and aggression as integral aspects of Indian identity. Applying Rancière's concept of "police order", and Kress and van Leeuwen's semiotic framework, I demonstrate how the covers represent the overall "police order," thereby endorsing and reinforcing dominant ways of seeing and defining Indianness as one that is deeply rooted in a singular Hindu identity.

3.1. Semiotic Analysis of Myth-SFF Book Covers

According to Kress and van Leeuwen's framework, the composition of book covers can be systematically categorised into three to four "zones of interest" (2006, p. 177). These zones include the title and subheading, the hero/protagonist, the background, and supporting elements such as weapons and secondary characters. Among these zones, the depiction of the main character or hero holds the greatest visual prominence, which Kress and van Leeuwen refer to as a 'salient' sign (p. 178). This prominence is achieved through several visual strategies: the character's placement in the foreground, its status as the largest and simplest element in the

image, and the amount of light it receives. These features collectively endow the character with significant ‘informational value’ (p. 177). When positioned in the centre right or the centre of the frame, the character serves as the nucleus of the composition, with all other elements subordinate to it (p. 196). Moreover, the centre right side of the visual frame is typically reserved for new and important information that demands the viewer’s attention (pp. 180-188). In the context of myth-based ISFF cover images, this placement often serves as an invitation for the viewer to identify with the hero figure.

Conversely, textual elements are typically positioned at the top or bottom of the image, presenting factual or ‘real’ information (p. 186) such as the book’s title, the author’s name, and any secondary title or subheading. As Barthes posits, images are inherently polysemic, meaning they can have multiple interpretations, therefore the textual elements serve to “fix the floating chain of signified” (Barthes, 1999, p.37). These linguistic elements are known as ‘anchorage’ and play a crucial role in the interpretation of the image, as the textual elements solidifying the meanings conveyed (Barthes, 1977, p. 39). The titles and subtexts on the covers contribute to this anchorage by providing additional layers of meaning and symbolism to the cover image. According to Barthes, even in the absence of linguistic signs, images contain recognisable and nameable objects that enable viewers to read and understand the visual content. Additionally, the background provides contextual information for the salient elements and offers insights into the setting of the events depicted (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 161). In myth SFF cover images, backgrounds are often intentionally blurred or lack detail, achieved through overexposure (resulting in luminous brightness), underexposure (resulting in murky darkness), or the strategic omission of visual details. Nevertheless, these backgrounds provide sufficient information to situate the character within a specific setting, such as ancient Bharat.

The cover images employ a combination of common visual tropes such as mystical fantasy landscapes, heroic figures, enigmatic symbols, and weapons, that are widely prevalent in fantasy genre images worldwide. This broad use of familiar fantasy elements helps establish a broad cultural context. Additionally, the images incorporate themes, motifs and symbols drawn from popular visual representations of Hindu epics and deities, imbuing the aesthetic with a identifiable Indianness. These elements are easily recognisable to audiences because they approach cover images with pre-existing historical, social, and cultural contexts already embedded in their understanding (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 46). Kress and van Leeuwen refer to this identification as an ‘attitude’ (p. 115). This attitude reflects the preexisting socio-cultural knowledge shared by both the viewer and the creator, which exists prior to the decoding process and allows specific meanings to be deciphered over others. In this context, the “Indianness” encoded within these covers is often interpreted as rooted in a (caste) Hindu-Indian identity, as I will evidence through a detailed analysis of specific cover designs in the subsequent paragraphs. Given that the most salient visual element in myth-SFF book covers is typically the depiction of the hero, my examination of these covers in relation to notions of Indianness will also begin with this central visual focus.

3.1.1. *Hindu Gods as Super-heroes and an Ancient Glorious Past*

Indian fantasy literature and its cover images can be viewed as a continuation of the exploration of Hindu mythology, now reinterpreted for a modern, globally oriented Indian audience. These literary works reinterpret Hindu mythology to align with contemporary sensibilities (Valančiūnas, 2023, p. 192). One prevalent approach in the cover images is the humanization of Hindu gods and avatars, depicting them as extraordinary humans or superheroes who ultimately transform into deities through their valiant battles and journeys. This method of representing the divine through humanization is not entirely novel and has historical precedents in Indian culture. Examples include the paintings by Raja Ravi Varma, as well as art found in calendar art, Amar Chitra Katha comics, and Bollywood cinema.

Figure 30:

Calendar art of Lord Shiva (c.2000), Artist Unknown.

Source: Maha Eeswaran Temple social media page.



Figure 31:

AI generated art of Lord Shiva (2023), Artist

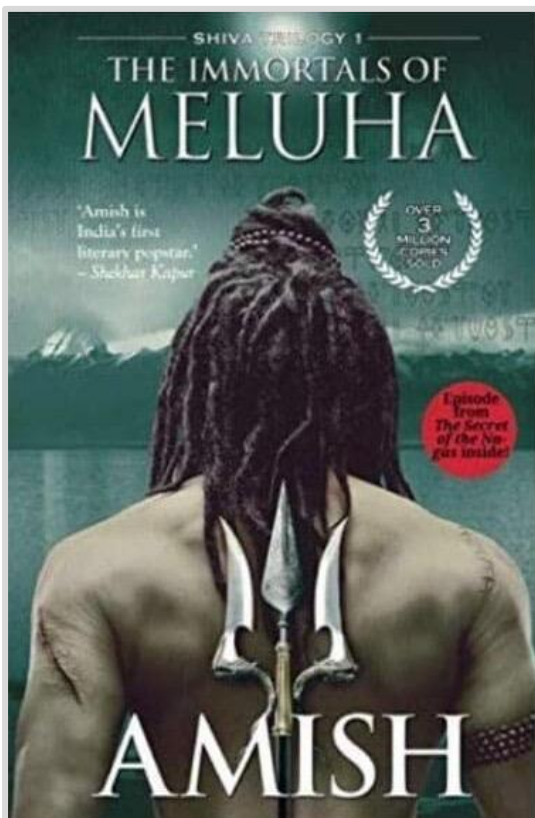
Unknown. Source: Pinterest.



In addition to the deconstruction and reconfiguration of the hero figure in myth-ISFF covers to create new and distinct characters, it is crucial that these covers integrate various characteristics associated with the religious iconography of Hindu gods into the hero's design. This integration serves to reinforce the readers' pre-existing knowledge of the deity. For instance, both Figure 30 and Figure 31, which depict images of Lord Shiva from different periods, consistently incorporate religious iconography associated with him: a glowing blue neck, long matted and coiled locks styled into a half bun, Rudraksha prayer beads, a trishul (trident), bow and arrows, attire made from tiger skin, and the presence of a snake — all of which are associated with the deity (Mitter, 2001, p.31). These visual elements ensure continuity and recognisability, grounding the new interpretations in familiar religious and cultural symbols.

Figure 32:

Cover image of *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.



This adherence to familiar aspects of religious iconography is particularly evident in the cover art of texts that centre on popular Hindu deities, such as Shiva, Rama, Ganesha, and Krishna, for all of whom have established iconography associated with their portrayal. For example, in the cover art of Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy series* (2010-2013), the salient image of the hero is clearly identifiable as Lord Shiva. Although portrayed as a human leader with extraordinary strength, the covers incorporate accessories and weapons conventionally associated with the

deity. The hero image featured on the cover of the first book in the series, *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010) (Figure 32), includes some of these visual markers, such as Rudraksha prayer beads encircling the hero's neck and arms, as well as the trishul positioned at the centre of the hero's back. The cover also employs secondary signifiers in the background — snow-covered mountains on the horizon, clouds suspended in the dark sky, a lake, and a shoreline. These topographical motifs represent mount Kailash in the Himalayas, historically and mythologically understood be the abode of Lord Shiva, further solidifying the identification of the protagonist and contextualising the location of the story.

Figure 33:

Cover image of *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.

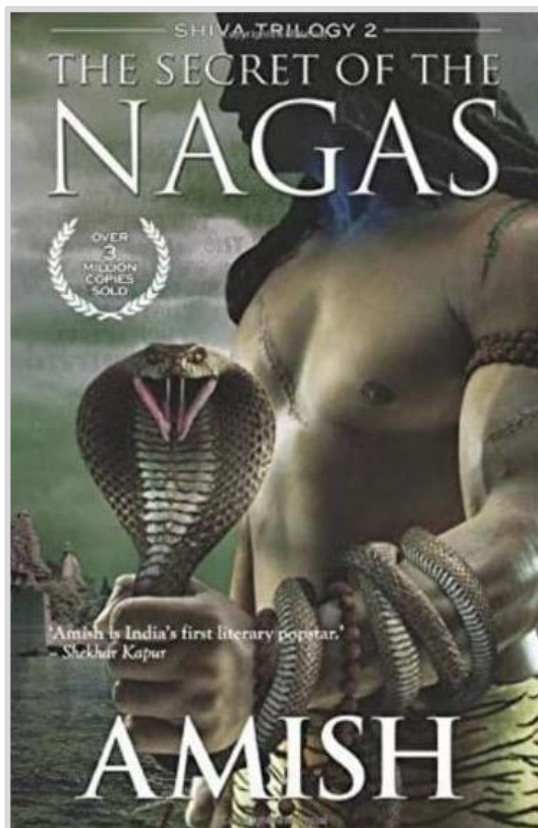
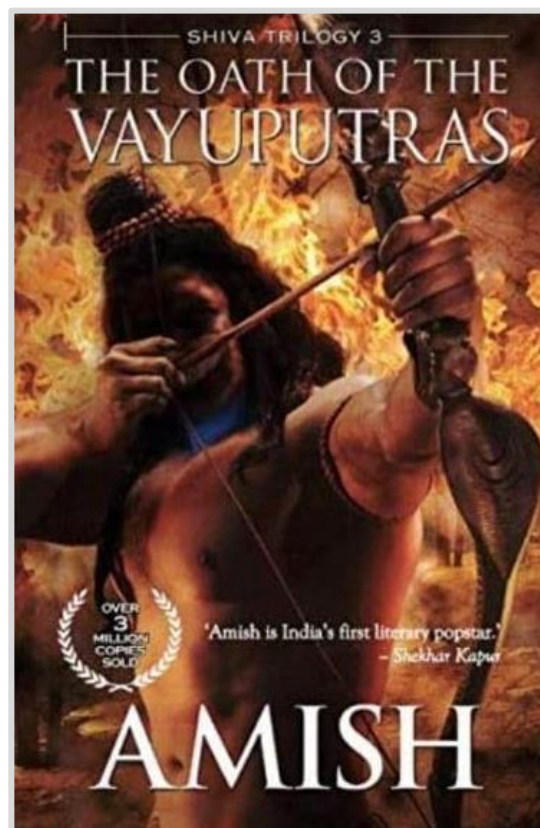


Figure 34:

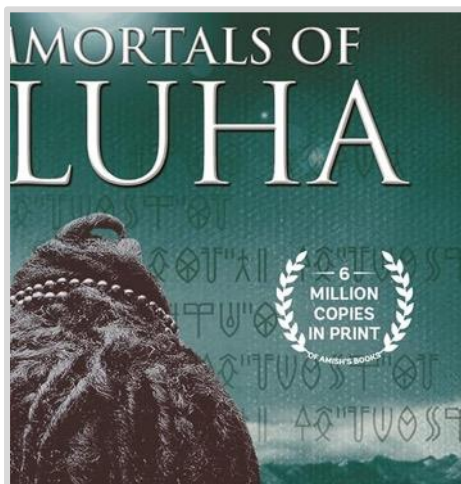
Cover image of *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013), Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.



The initial portrayal of the hero intentionally positions him with his back turned towards the viewer. However, as the visual narrative unfolds across the other covers in the series, the

hero's physical appearance becomes increasingly prominent, incorporating visual signifiers commonly associated with Lord Shiva. This gradual metamorphosis serves to highlight the hero's journey towards his ultimate divine potential; therefore, he gets closer to looking at the viewer. In the cover art of *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) (Figure 33), the hero is depicted holding a serpent in one hand, with a radiant blue neck, and wearing a tiger skin around his waist. Ultimately, in the final cover art of *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013) (Figure 34), the hero directly faces the audience, displaying all the physical attributes emblematic of Lord Shiva, including a *pinaka* (celestial bow) adorned with an intricately designed snake motif. The inclusion of the subtitle *Shiva Trilogy* in smaller print above the title provides additional context.

Figure 35:
Close up of pictographs and glyphs on Shiva Trilogy cover image, Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.



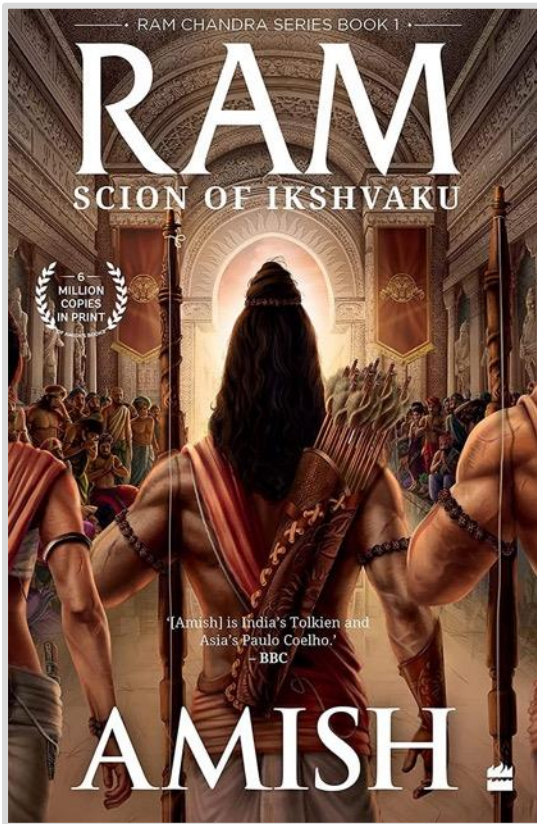
As the image of the hero undergoes transformation, the background depicted in the covers also undergoes a corresponding evolution. The cover image for Book 1 in the series depicts a mountainous landscape. The cover image for Book 2 transitions to portray human civilization, featuring ancient structures and boats anchored by the sea (Figure 33). The architectural style of these buildings resembles the prevalent ancient temple architecture found throughout the country. Scattered throughout the front and back covers are faint symbols that seem to be pictographs (Figure 35). These symbols evoke a sense of antiquity, prehistory, and intrigue, inviting the observer into a mystical and otherworldly pre-Indian (Bharat) setting. In the cover of the third book in the series, the houses in the background are predominantly

engulfed in flames, indicating a state of warfare (Figure 34). This evolving backdrop serves not only as a means to contextualise the primary sign (Lord Shiva), but also as a signification of the inner workings of the hero's psyche. It humanises the god-like figure as an individual who experiences personal growth and grapples with human problems, ultimately displaying heroism by overcoming these challenges.

Outside of the familiar religious identity markers, all other visual signs indicate that Shiva is portrayed as a hero, notably in relation to his physical appearance. Shiva is depicted as possessing a youthful physique, characterised by well-defined muscles, and adorned with numerous scars that symbolise his experience in combat. These physical attributes bear resemblance to the depictions of muscular protagonists found in both domestic and international films and comics, thereby encouraging the audience to identify Shiva as a heroic figure. Furthermore, the utilisation of recognisable religious iconography, in conjunction with the portrayal of a muscular hero, function to aid immediate identification, like Superman's instantly recognisable red cape or Thor's hammer, both of which are immediately associated with their respective characters. Shiva is distinguished by his trident and snake. What sets this ISFF cover depiction apart from such Western counterparts, however, is the fusion of iconography and textual inspiration derived from the living Hindu religion, which is followed by the majority of the Hindu population. While Superman draws inspiration from figures like Zeus, and the Marvel hero Thor is based on the Norse god sharing the same name, the source material in these instances is not grounded in present-day religious practices. However, in the case of Shiva, the hero undeniably signifies the Hindu deity as revered in the present.

Figure 36:

Cover of *Ram Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015), by Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.



This deliberate reimagining of a Hindu deity into a muscular and heroic character, reminiscent of action-hero film characters, is also evident in the covers of Amish Tripathi's four-part series, *The Ram Chandra Series* (2015-2022). The cover art for the first book, *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) (Figure 36), primarily focuses on the protagonist Ram, who embodies the ideals and virtues of the Hindu deity Lord Rama. The cover's art style is vibrant, realistic, and detailed, with shading and highlights that accentuate the protagonist's fair and well-developed physique. Once again, the protagonist is positioned at the centre of the visual frame with his back facing the viewer, showcasing his chiselled form and bearing visual markers associated with the deity Rama — such as the bow and arrows, the saffron-coloured *angavastram* (a shoulder cloth worn by men in India), a *upanayana* (a sacred thread worn by upper caste Hindu men), and partially tied hair in a top knot — that would be widely recognised by an Indian audience.

Traditional devotional images of the god Rama often portray him accompanied by his wife, Goddess Sita, and his brother, Lakshman, standing beside him. The cover image draws from this tradition to reinforce the association between deity and hero. On either side of the protagonist, we see a woman and another man, dressed and armed similarly to the hero, although their bodies are largely cropped out of the frame. These secondary figures, along with

the title, act as contextual clues, confirming that the hero depicted on the cover is indeed based on Lord Rama. Furthermore, the background features a foreshortened long corridor with many people bowing their heads in reverence towards the trio. The light streaming into the passageway forms a halo of illumination around the hero's head, strengthening his association with divinity. The presence of weapons implies that they are prepared for challenges ahead, highlighting their readiness for a heroic journey. Collectively, these visual cues signify that the depicted scene is a reinterpretation of a well-known (in India) mythological event: Lord Rama's departure from his kingdom of Ayodhya for his fourteen-year exile, accompanied by his wife and brother. This allusion, of course, relies on the viewer possessing a deeper pre-existing knowledge of the *Ramayana* mythology. However, even for an audience unfamiliar with the specific storyline, this image can still be recognised as depicting Rama based on visual iconography such as the attire, weaponry, and accessories. Ultimately, the cover merges traditional religious symbolism with a modern heroic narrative, making it accessible and meaningful to a broad Indian audience.

The Ram Chandra Series, unlike the *Shiva Trilogy*, takes a different approach on its covers. Instead of showcasing a linear progression of the protagonist's journey, the cover images serve as cutaway scenes that highlight significant moments for both the hero Ram and the supporting characters. In the second book, *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017) (Figure 37), the cover features an illustration of a dynamic action scene. The central and salient feature in the image is a woman shown mid-leap, wielding a long fighting staff. The contortion of her body accentuates her well-defined physique. Facing away from the viewer, she propels herself towards her attackers, who appear in the background of the image. As she moves, her *Upanayana* (sacred thread) can be seen fluttering away from her torso, while her *angavastram* (saffron cloth) billows outwards. The heroine Sita, much like the goddess she is based on, lacks

distinctive visual markers that define her. However, the title and subheading displayed at the top of the image anchor the signification that the depicted warrior woman is indeed Ram's wife, Sita. Additionally, visual continuity is established with the previous book, as Ram and Sita are portrayed wearing similarly coloured attire, further emphasising their connection. Notably, Sita is portrayed in a much more assertive manner compared to traditional religious depictions of her as a goddess in need of rescue. The cover image underscores her strength and agency, presenting a reimagined visual that highlights her warrior attributes. This approach not only emphasises the thematic and visual coherence of the series but also reinforces the concept of Hindu deities as warrior heroes.

Figure 37:
Book cover image of *Sita Warrior of Mithila* (2017),
by Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.

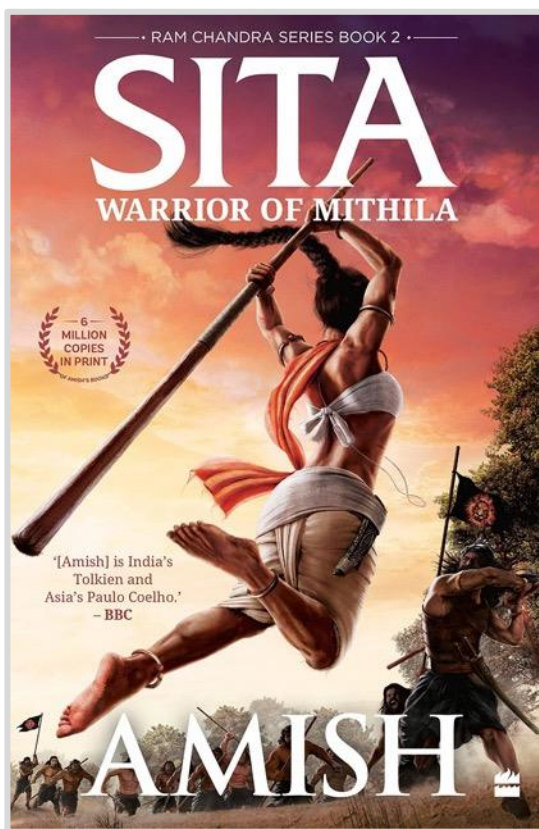
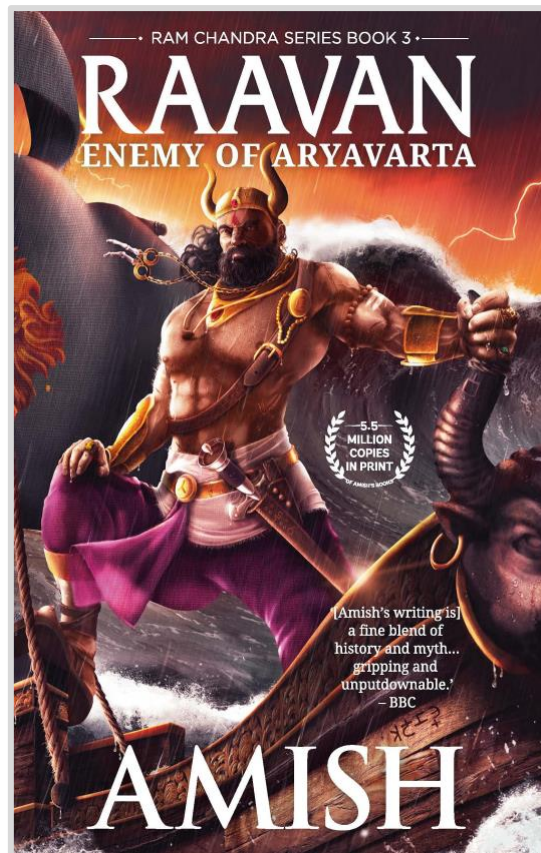


Figure 38:
Book cover image of *Raavan* (2019), by Amish
Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.

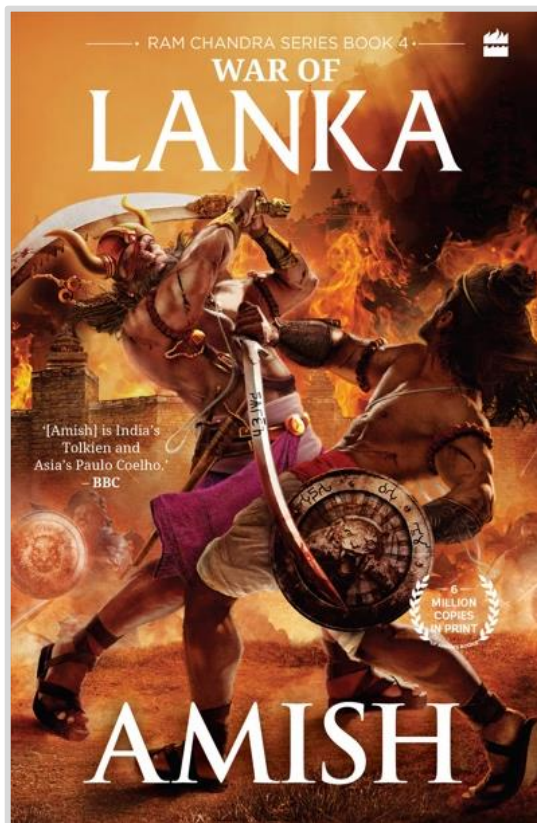


Unlike the previous two books in the *Ram Chandra series*, the cover image of the penultimate book, *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019) (Figure 38), places significant emphasis on the main antagonist. The most salient feature on the cover is a dark-skinned, bearded, muscular character adorned with gold bracelets, chains, and a golden helmet with bull horns. The book's title anchors this character's identity, while the subtitle links the cover image to the rest of the series. Raavan is depicted in a pose that exudes power, with one hand resting on his knee and the other gripping the bull figurehead at the bow of a ship. His expression remains unperturbed as he gazes into the distance, while a turbulent sea with towering waves and streaks of lightning pierce the dark sky in the backdrop, creating a dramatic and menacing atmosphere. Traditional depictions of the demon king Raavan typically illustrate him with ten heads and twenty arms, symbolising his god-like strength, extensive knowledge, and demonic nature. While his extravagant attire and jewellery underscore his vanity. However, this cover image (Figure 38) presents Raavan in a more human-like form. Despite this humanisation, his role as the antagonist is reinforced through specific visual markers, particularly his darker skin and burlier, bearded physique. These physical attributes are deeply rooted in the long-standing stereotyped imaginings of villains within India's visual culture, prominently featured in media such as ACK comics and Bollywood cinema. The use of light and dark skin colour functions as a symbolic means to articulate a series of binary oppositions: good versus evil, valour versus brutality, beauty versus ugliness, upper caste versus lower caste, and success versus failure (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009).

In this cover image, the physical and appearance choices are used to underscore the ethical distinctions between the protagonist and the antagonist. Raavan's portrayal as a dark-skinned, imposing figure contrasts sharply with the fair-skinned, muscular, and serene depiction of Ram, who embodies upper-caste Hindu ideals. Ram's simpler attire and lack of

lavish adornments underscore his more ‘desirable’ qualities. The cover image is angled to make Raavan loom large over the viewer, amplifying his dominant presence in contrast to the serene composure of Ram or the righteous fury of Sita. This artistic choice humanises Raavan but also accentuates the villain’s negative qualities, making the ideal Hindu warrior hero embodied by Ram appear even more aspirational and worthy of emulation.

Figure 39:
Book cover image of *War on Lanka* (2022), by Amish Tripathi. Source: Amazon.in.



In the final cover, *War of Lanka* (2022) (Figure 39), the hero’s journey concludes. The cover image depicts a fierce battle between the hero, Ram with the antagonist, Raavan. Ram’s gaze is fixated on Raavan, who appears worn and battered, with an eye patch and battle scars. Ram, too, shows a more battle-weary appearance, yet his dynamic posture reflects his determination to overcome his adversary. *War of Lanka* features two salient points, with Ram positioned towards the centre right of the frame, making that image sign serve as the locus of new information. This occurrence is presented as an event that is happening,

something that “demands attention from the viewer” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.181). In this context, it is interpreted as Ram transforming into his idealised heroic self through a battle. Conversely, Raavan is situated towards the left of the frame, representing the “already given,” where the information remains unchanged (p.180). This visual arrangement signifies that Raavan undergoes no transformation in his journey and continues to serve as the antagonist.

Although the placement of the characters may not have been an intentional decision, the resulting composition still conveys the depiction of a heroic journey for one character, culminating in his idealised embodiment, while portraying a less favourable path for the antagonist. Ultimately, the cover image highlights Ram's virtues, serving as a visual reinforcement of the ideal powerful Hindu warrior.

This representation of gods as warrior heroes is not new; it conforms to the long-standing traditions and visual norms of 20th century Hindu visuality (Sharma, 2019, p. 159). The visual rhetoric transitions from serene to militant, evident in the dynamic poses of the heroes and the background settings, progressing from mundane scenes to fiery battles. In both the Ram Chandra Series and the Shiva Trilogy, the hero's journey is fulfilled through combat. These visualisations are reminiscent of contemporary Indian visual culture that depicts divinity in a muscular form, particularly resembling the portrayals of Lord Ram as a militant warrior god that became naturalised in the public sphere starting in the 1980s.

The book covers employ graphic styles that incorporate perspective, pronounced shadows, and vibrant colour palettes to depict Hindu deities as valiant heroes in a realistic manner. This reimagining upholds traditional religious iconography while simultaneously portraying these figures as muscular action heroes reminiscent of popular visual media. As additional examples, the cover images of Kevin Missal's *Krishna: Maha Vishnu Avatar* (2023) (Figure 40) and *Durga* (2022) (Figure 41) both depict Hindu deities as warrior heroes, characterised by well-defined and athletic physiques while still bearing the symbols and iconography associated with their respective gods. Additionally, these covers celebrate a 'Hindu-Indian heritage' by employing traditional attire and jewellery that is often depicted in popular visual media as worn during India's medieval past. Thus, the visual tropes and motifs

used in the covers can be understood as being influenced by codes shaped by broader visual and social contexts.

Figure 40:

Cover image of *Krishna* (2023), by Kevin Missal. The hero is portrayed adorned with a peacock feather in his hair and a Sudarshan Chakra (a divine discus), both of which are religious iconographies associated with the deity Krishna. Source: Amazon.in

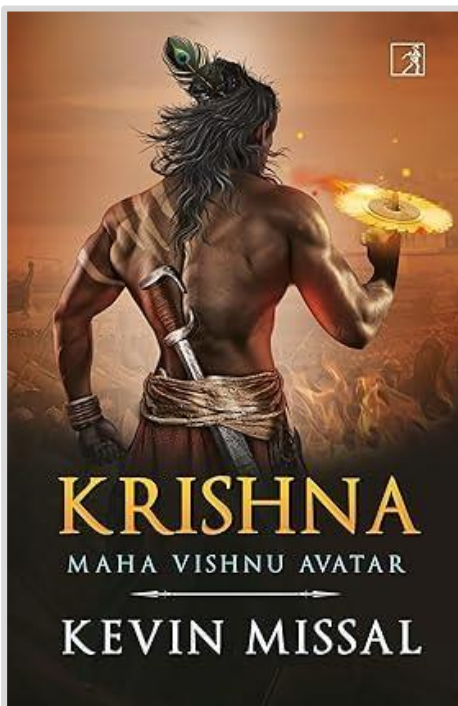


Figure 41:

Cover image of *Durga* (2022), by Kevin Missal. The goddess Durga is reimagined on the cover art as a valiant warrior princess, adorned with the iconic visual elements associated with Durga, such as the trident and a vibrant red saree. Source: Amazon.in.

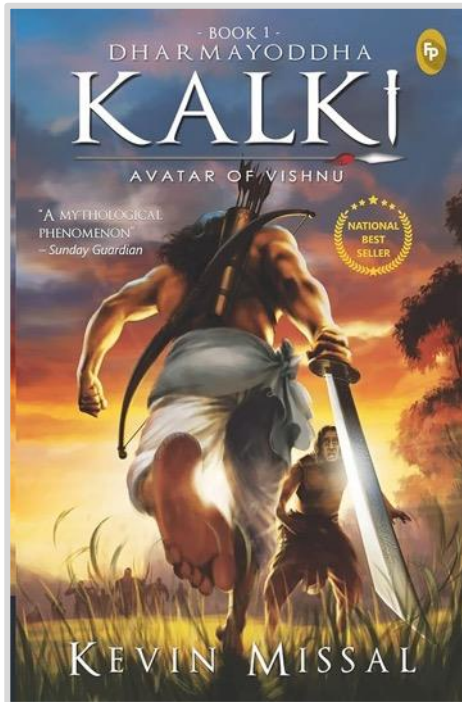


A particularly important visual code that influences these images is the concept of *darshan* or the lack thereof. The absence of eye contact between the image of the warrior god and the viewer is notable in these depictions. In traditional portrayals of deities, devotees are able to directly gaze upon the god's face, a practice known as *Darshan* or "the act of seeing" (Eck, 1985 in Mankekar, 1999, pp. 199-200). In India, the concept of *darshan* is widely understood, and a crucial aspect of this practice is the belief that the deity "presents itself to be

Figure 42:

Cover image of *Kalki* (2018), by Kevin Missal.

Source: Amazon.in.



seen” (Prasad, 2021, pp. 253-256). This act of seeing is considered auspicious and relies on the ability to have a direct view of the idol’s face. However, in the discussed covers, this auspicious viewing is not possible. The warrior-god’s face is either concealed by depicting them facing away from the viewer or by being obscured by shadows. This technique of obscuring the hero’s face is employed not only for major gods such as Shiva, Rama, Sita, Krishna, and Durga but also for avatars like Kalki (an avatar of Vishnu, see Figure 42) and mythical characters. Through their altered iconography, these myth-ISFF covers can be interpreted as replacing the darshan

frontal viewing with a more cinematic/televsual style, where gods are designed to emanate machismo and evoke fandom rather than bhakti (Varughese, 2018).

This shift towards a cinematic and televisual style is deeply rooted in the visual traditions established by artists like Ravi Varma and popularised further by the ACK series, both of which have had a profound influence on contemporary visual representations of Hindu gods and heroes (Chawla, 2010). The visual approach of these myth-ISFF cover images significantly draws from Varma’s and ACK’s methods, which adhere to strict guidelines dictating that gods and mythic heroes in popular visual media should avoid making direct eye contact with the viewer (McClain, 2009, p. 16). When the heroes’ faces are revealed, their gazes are either distant or introspective. Kress and van Leeuwen describe this as an ‘indirect’ form of address, where the viewer is not the object but rather the subject of the gaze, while the depicted

participant becomes the object of the viewer's detached scrutiny (2006, p. 57). This influence is evident in the Myth-ISFF cover images, where the hero's gaze is often obscured from the viewer. Additionally, the cinematic style of the heroes' poses, battle-ready stances, and heroic action sequences, combined with the more humanised depictions of the deities, further blurs the distinction between a 'divine' darshan tradition of representation and a more popular, profane visual language. This blurring reflects the broader style of these cover images: Hindu gods are depicted not as objects of worship but as muscular superheroes who embody Hindu nationalist ideals of militant heroism. This transformation emphasises a shift in representation, highlighting the deities' physical prowess and heroic qualities over their spiritual and divine aspects.

Moreover, the depiction of Hindu deities as 'real' heroes, with humanised traits and extraordinary physical abilities, serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it bridges the gap between the imagined ancient past and the nationalist present, reinforcing the ideological objectives of Hindu nationalism. Secondly, by embodying contemporary notions of heroism and strength, these visual narratives transform the gods into accessible figures that resonate with modern audiences. Historian Romila Thapar has stressed the importance of establishing the lineage of the first inhabitants of the land for nationalists. According to Thapar, "If Hindus are to have a dominant position as citizens in a Hindu Rashtra (kingdom), their foundational religion cannot be of foreign origin" (as quoted in Jain & Lasseter, 2018). Therefore, asserting this position requires nationalists to claim descent from indigenous ancestors and a religion with indigenous roots. The rewriting and visualisation of mythological characters as warrior heroes precisely serve this purpose. The cover images that depict Ram (Figure 36 and Figure 39) as a warrior hero exemplify this ideal, carrying significant meaning in contemporary Indian visual cultural and political spaces as they relate to the concept of Ram Rajya, an idealised vision of

governance often invoked in contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse. The cover art not only appeals to this concept by highlighting Ram's virtues and his readiness to embark on a hero's journey but also serves as a visual reinforcement of the ideal of a just, powerful, and divine ruler. By representing Ram as a human hero, the image makes the possibility of a Ram Rajya seem even more real. This notion resonates with Hindu nationalist ideologies, which assert that the present-day Hindu populace directly descends from the original inhabitants of the land, symbolised by the warrior gods depicted on these covers.

This reflects a broader pattern in South Asian literary traditions. This approach, which intertwines mythology and history, is deeply rooted in the region's cultural narratives. The fusion of *itihasa* (historical) and *purana* (mythological) genres has long served as a powerful tool in South Asian literature, often used to blur the lines between myth and reality. During the colonial era in India, nationalists strategically conflated these genres to craft a vision of an Indian nation that stood independent of British imperial rule. By positioning ancient Hindu texts and artistic expressions as historical and cultural evidence, they sought to affirm the existence of a unified and enduring Indian identity. This conflation not only provided a historical foundation for the nationalist movement but also established a cultural continuity that resonated with the broader Indian populace (Kaviraj, 1995, as cited in Chattopadhyay, 2019). In contemporary times, this blending of myth and history continues to play a significant role, particularly in the visual representations found in mythological ISFF. The covers and texts within this genre glorify Hindu nationalism by envisioning an idealised Hindu past, one where events from epic narratives are depicted as tangible and authentic moments in history. The depiction of warrior-God heroes, set against the backdrop of a medieval Hindu past, serves to make these ancient tales feel immediate and real to modern audiences. Furthermore, some covers within this genre often extend this fusion of past and present by incorporating elements

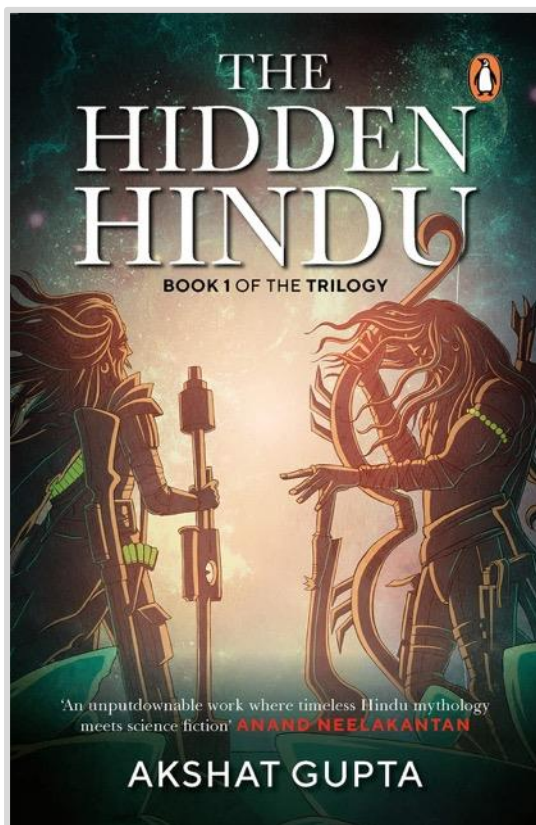
of science fiction, blending myth with contemporary science and technology. This combination not only modernises the depiction of these deities but also reinforces the narrative of an advanced ancient civilisation, an idea popular in Hindu nationalist rhetoric.

Building on this narrative, contemporary Hindutva nationalists argue that contextualising myths within history alone is insufficient; their ambition is to position India as a superior nation, a *Vishwaguru* (World leader). This aspiration involves not only a cultural renaissance but also a technological and scientific one, aimed at competing with Western civilisation. In this ideological framework, Hindu nationalists assert that the advanced scientific knowledge and technological innovations attributed to the West were already achieved by Vedic India thousands of years ago. They claim that ancient *rishis* (Hindu saints or sages) possessed profound knowledge in areas such as genetics, physics, military technology, and avionics long before these disciplines were recognised by Western science (Srivastava, 2023, pp. 457-474). The cover art of *The Hidden Hindu* (2021) by Akshat Gupta and *Project X521 and the Ancient Saviours* (2023) by Sahil Sharma serves as suitable examples that embrace the fusion of modernity and mythology through a visual collage of familiar modern weapons, Western sci-fi aliens, and Hindu myths.¹⁶ These covers do not merely depict deities in their traditional forms; instead, they reimagine them as figures who straddle both ancient wisdom and futuristic technology, thereby asserting the timeless relevance of Hindu mythology in contemporary times.

¹⁶ The Hidden Hindu and Project X521 are both the first books in their respective series. However, for this analysis, my focus is solely on the initial instalment of this series, since the covers of the latter books share visual similarities with the covers discussed in this chapter.

These covers depict more than just deities in their traditional forms; they reimagine these figures as entities that bridge ancient wisdom and futuristic technology. The visual compositions incorporate elements such as modern weapons, Western sci-fi motifs like aliens, and traditional Hindu mythological symbols, thus asserting the timeless relevance of Hindu mythology. Through this visual strategy, the covers not only celebrate the ancient past but also project it into the future, implying that the wisdom and power of these mythological figures are as crucial today as they were in ancient times. This approach not only resonates with nationalist aspirations but also serves to legitimise and assert a continuous lineage of Indian superiority from the Vedic era to the present and beyond.

Figure 43:
Book cover image of *The Hidden Hindu* (2021), by Akshat Gupta. Source: Amazon.in.

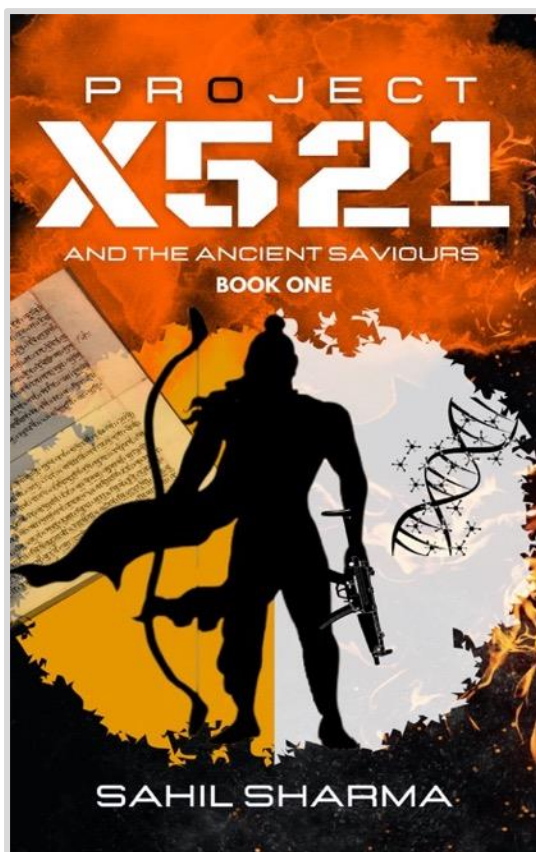


The Hidden Hindu (Figure 43) combines elements of mysticism and science fiction, as depicted in its cover art, which features two figures resembling Hindu sages wielding modern weaponry, while also dressed in traditional Vedic attire. The narrative of the book revolves around Prithvi, who embarks on a quest to find Om Shastri, a devotee of Shiva who has lived through the four yugas (epochs of Hinduism) and has been a part of both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The cover art is composed in a manner that divides the visual frame into two distinct ‘informational zones’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). On the left side, there is a depiction of a Hindu sage

with flowing locks, dressed in futuristic battle armour and armed with heavy firearms and ammunition. This figure's profile is turned towards the figure on the right, who is depicted as a muscular Aghori with dreadlocks and Rudraksha beads adorning his arms, symbolising his devotion to Shiva. The second figure is also equipped with a futuristic utility belt, multiple guns, and a giant bow with a quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder. The composition of the cover art symbolises the mixing and blurring of the sacred and the profane, of science and myth: the iconography and visual markers associated with the deity Shiva, such as Rudraksha beads, the Aghori's dreadlocks, and traditional Vedic attire, are juxtaposed alongside modern weaponry, highlighting the convergence of ancient mythological elements with advanced technological themes. This fusion represents a blending of ancient spirituality, militant muscularity, and contemporary science and warfare.

Figure 44:

Cover image of Project X521 and the Ancient Saviours (2023), by Sahil Sharma. Source: Amazon.in.



Similarly, the cover art for *Project X521* (Figure 44) serves as a compelling example of how Hindu spirituality, militant masculinity, and modern science and technology are visually intertwined to create a narrative that bridges past and present. The artwork does not rely on a traditional realistic style but instead employs a collage of contrasting visual motifs that highlight the intersection of ancient and contemporary themes. The composition is symmetrically divided, with the left half of the hero's silhouette representing a mythical warrior

equipped with a bow and arrow, a powerful symbol of traditional Hindu valour. This side of the image invokes the ancient and spiritual aspects of Hindu culture, reinforcing a connection to a revered past. Conversely, the right half of the silhouette transitions into the figure of a modern man, armed with a heavy-duty gun, symbolising present-day military power and technological advancement. The backdrop plays a crucial role in accentuating this duality: the left side features sepia-toned sheets of ancient scriptures, grounding the image in historical and religious tradition, while the right side presents a DNA strand, emblematic of cutting-edge scientific progress.

The incorporation of saffron hues, a colour deeply associated with Hinduism and often linked to Hindu nationalism, further reinforces the visual identity of the hero as embodying Hindu ideals. This use of colour is not merely aesthetic but serves to assert a specific cultural and political identity within the narrative. The visual composition as a whole underscores the idea that ancient Hindu culture was not only spiritually and morally advanced but also possessed sophisticated scientific and military knowledge — a narrative that aligns with contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse. By juxtaposing these conventional and modern elements, the cover art emphasises a theme of continuity and progression, suggesting that the ancient Hindu past is directly linked to the contemporary Indian nation. This visual strategy effectively reinforces the idea that the nation's future is a continuation and realisation of its glorified past, a key tenet of Hindu nationalist ideology.

Such adaptations and reimagining of gods as heroes are influenced by what Laurie Patton describes as the 'imaginaire' (2008, p. 54). This term refers to a collection of tropes and symbols widely recognised by the public and carrying specific associations (Patton, 2008, p. 56). This concept aligns with the theories proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen, which

suggest that viewers bring prior knowledge and understanding to their interpretation of visual images (2006, p. 3). In the context of Myth-ISFF book covers, this shared cultural knowledge becomes particularly significant. While viewers may possess varying degrees of familiarity with specific mythological references, there exists a collective cultural memory within the majority Hindu community that informs the interpretation of these images. This memory, as Barthes (1972) notes, is often romanticised, constructing an idealised historical narrative filled with heroic figures, epic events, and sacred rituals. Such narratives are not merely neutral or benign but are deeply embedded within the broader ideological landscape of Hindu nationalism. The militant imagery frequently found in these covers serves to reinforce these romanticised memories, positioning the depicted heroes not just as mythological figures, but symbolic of a glorified Hindu past (that must be reclaimed in the present).

The portrayal of Hindu gods, and occasionally goddesses, as muscular and heroic embodies a specific ideal of militancy and divine heroism. This idealism is easily recognised and understood by viewers familiar with the mythological and cultural context. This interpretation aligns with Hall's (2004) concept of audiences interpreting media texts based on their cultural backgrounds and ideological frameworks (p. 64). Thus, these book covers not only draw from but actively reinforce the dominant Hindu mythic visual discourse prevalent in the Indian public sphere, effectively creating new myths for contemporary audiences. This reimagining resonates with today's urban Indian audience, presenting these figures as aspirational heroes embodying the essence of a "glorious Hindu heritage," thereby reinforcing dominant ideas of Indianness. This approach is not merely a continuation of cultural practices from the early 20th century; it also aligns with the current Hindu nationalist discourse that seeks to assert India's supremacy by intertwining myth with historical and scientific advancements.

This visual representation blurs the line between the sacred and the profane, as well as between myth and history (McLain, 2009). By combining traditional sacred iconography with modern elements, these covers make ancient myths relevant to contemporary audiences, serving as powerful tools for ideological expression. The result is a visual culture that not only reinforces but perpetuates the narratives of Hindu nationalism, embedding these ideas more deeply within the public consciousness. Thus, Myth-ISFF emerges as a powerful medium for projecting the visual discourse of the Indian nation as one rooted in a Hindu past. The covers of these books act as visual reinforcements of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1992), presenting contemporary interpretations of age-old myths while solidifying dominant ideas of Indianness and Hindu nationalism in the public sphere. This makes them not just covers, but active participants in the broader ideological project of reimagining and reinforcing a particular vision of Indian identity.

3.1.2. *Masculinity and Nationalism*

The hyper-masculine portrayals of Hindu gods on book covers are not isolated depictions but part of a broader cultural phenomenon that intertwines national identity with ideals of physical prowess. These depictions align with the growing popularity of gym culture in India, where the pursuit of muscular physiques is often framed as a reclamation of masculinity in response to societal shifts (Baas, 2020). Gym culture operates as a space where individuals embody discipline and strength, traits closely tied to the ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism. Furthermore, these representations echo the fascist glorification of the male body as a symbol of authority and national strength, positioning muscularity as an essential attribute of an ideal citizen (Koonz, 2003; Mosse, 1996). The iconographic shift in the representation of warrior gods is facilitated by the presence of a “virile Hinduism” that aims to project a physically strong and masculine appearance in the iconic representations of deities (Kapur, 1993 in Jain, 2007, p.199). The heroes depicted on these covers embody an ideal Hindu male physique, which has been influenced by long-established hegemonic constructions of masculinity, both colonial and otherwise (Nagel, 2005; Connel and Messerschmidt, 2005). The connection between gym culture and the iconography of muscular Hindu warriors is especially evident in the emphasis on physical transformation as a metaphor for national rejuvenation. Likewise, Fascist regimes of the 20th century also utilised such representations to propagate a vision of unity, dominance, and exclusion of “others” (Koonz, 2003; Mosse, 1996). These parallels highlight how the book covers participate in a visual discourse that normalises militant masculinity while marginalising alternative masculinities.

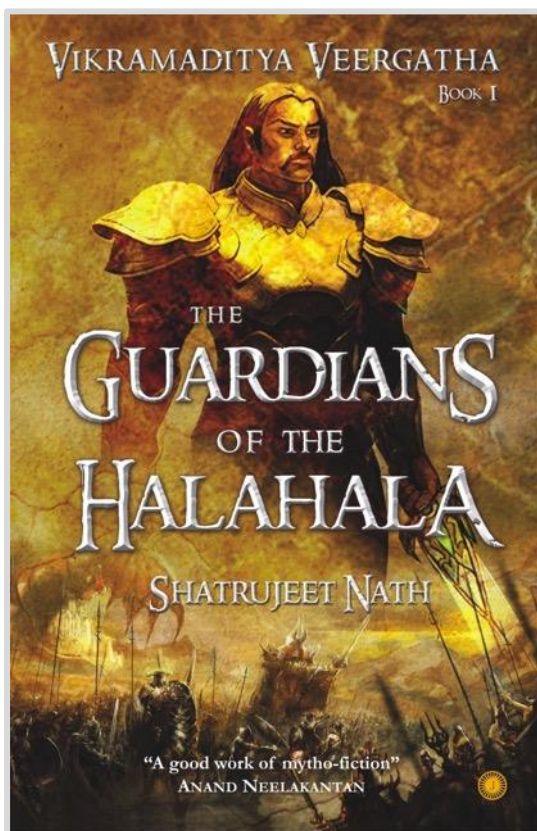
Through an analysis of the inherent masculinity and physical attributes of the male hero, we can gain insight into how the desired trajectories of the nation are being imagined. The connection between the hero character and the kingdom, often seen as a representation of India's past, serves to define both the Hindu male and the nation in distinct ways. Although the muscles are more pronounced and the choice of colour and weaponry may initially appear to be a fusion of Western fantasy clichés, and incongruous, a closer examination reveals a visual style that is distinctively 'Indian,' and representative of the idealised Hindu man, which is part of the dominant visual discourse. This connection between religion and nationhood fosters ideas of the nation as resembling an individual's identity.

According to Craig Calhoun (1993), nationalism, in particular, remains the dominant rhetoric for defining political communities and justifying governance by referencing "the people" of a country (p.211). He argues that modern nations are viewed not merely as a collection of diverse individuals and ethnicities, but as a unified self-contained individual (p.231). Historically, the personification of India has often been visualised through the figure of Bharat Mata (Mother India), who is typically depicted as a nurturing and maternal figure or as the mother goddess and depicted with a serene and composed demeanour. However, in the context of myth-ISFF book covers, this "Individual" is portrayed in explicitly masculine terms. This shift from the maternal Bharat Mata to the muscular warrior gods exemplifies a strategic reimagining of the nation's identity, prioritizing virile masculinity and militant prowess as defining characteristics. Moreover, the categories of "Hindu" and "Indian" are collapsed within these covers and their narratives.

This martial, muscular physicality can be observed in the portrayal of kings, heroes, avatars, and even saints on the covers of this genre. One notable example of this can be found

in the *Vikramaditya Veergatha series* (2014-2018) by Shatrujeet Nath. The cover art for this series takes the form of a photo montage, featuring two distinct ‘zones of interest’ within the frame. The upper half of the frame showcases the titular hero, while the lower half presents a tableau of an ongoing war. It is worth noting that, similar to the cover design for *Raavan* (Figure 38), the faces of the heroes are visible to the viewer. However, this gaze remains indirect, allowing for detached scrutiny on the part of the audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.57). Moreover, each cover portrays a distinct character, each exhibiting a unique set of visual signs, yet exuding an underlying hypermasculine aura.

Figure 45:
Cover image of *Guardians of Halahala* (2014), by Shatrujeet Nath. Source: Amazon.in.



The first book cover in the series, *The Guardians of the Halahala* (2014) (Figure 45), depicts King Vikramaditya as a poised and muscular figure, with a “pensive yet perceptive expression, and authority rested easily on his broad shoulders” (Nath, 2014, p.37). In addition to his exaggerated muscular physique, the character’s facial features display distinct angularity, enhancing his manly and masculine appearance. Adorned in battle armour reminiscent of medieval Indian kings and wielding a luminous, gem-encrusted dagger, the hero exudes an air of preparedness for battle. The gem stores the Halahala, a lethal poison that Lord Shiva drank in Hindu mythology to save the universe, thereby

augmenting the weapon's lethality and symbolising the protagonist's extraordinary strength. The composition at the bottom of the frame further reinforces this interpretation, presenting a chaotic battlefield filled with soldiers, colossal weapons, and animals against a smoky backdrop. The hero's composed confidence as he carefully observes this war-torn landscape serves as a significant juxtaposition, further emphasizing his militant masculinity.

The second cover, entitled *The Conspiracy at Meru* (2016) (Figure 46), features an aged Hindu sage with long white locks and prayer beads adorning his neck and arms. In contrast to the conventional depictions of sages as thin and ascetic, the protagonist's physique is noticeably well-toned and muscular. His mystical and sage-like persona is visually reinforced by the choice of a long staff as his weapon, in addition to his white dhoti and *angavastram* attire. However, the protagonist's muscular build and intense facial expression as he observes the battle below him immediately evoke associations with militant strength, despite his sage-like appearance. This concept is further emphasised by the depiction of a battle scene in the lower half of the composition, where warships navigate massive tidal waves and engage in combat. As a result, it can be inferred that regardless of whether the protagonists are deities, saints, or ordinary men, the consistent visual portrayal of a Hindu man is that of a muscular hero ready for battle.

Figure 46:

Cover image of *The Conspiracy at Meru* (2016), by Shatrujeet Nath. Source: Amazon.in.

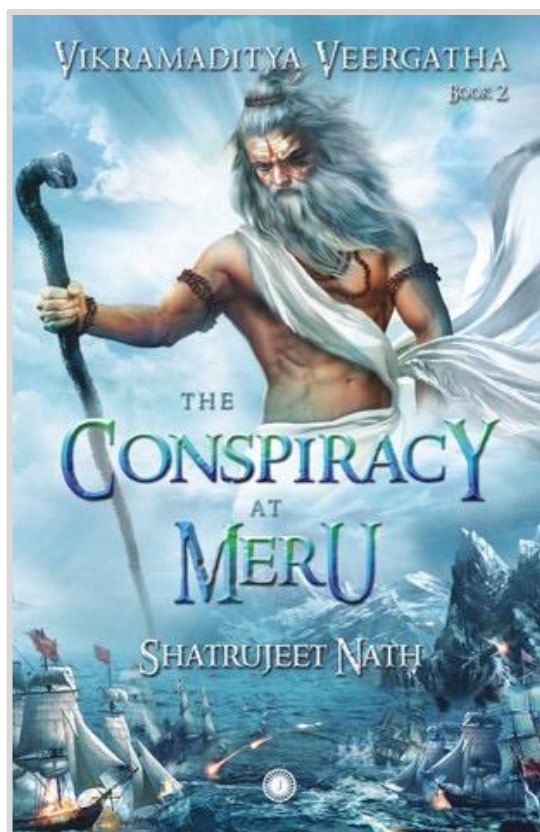
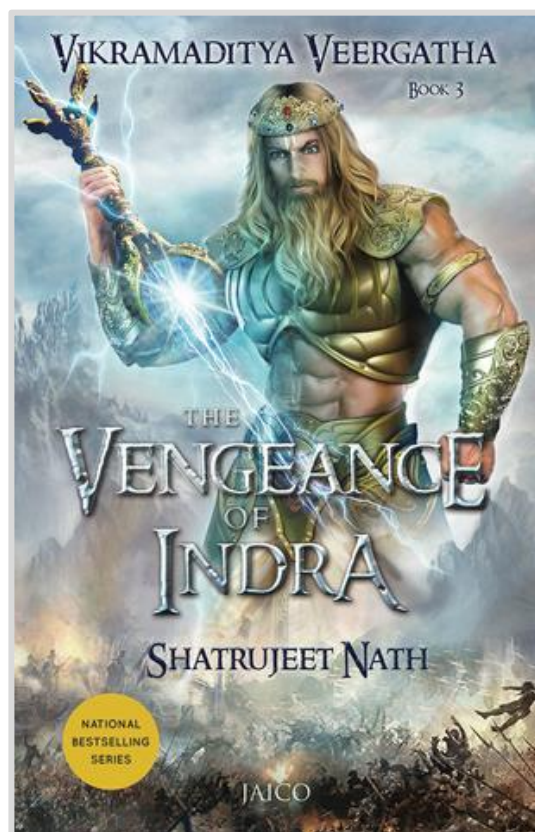


Figure 47:

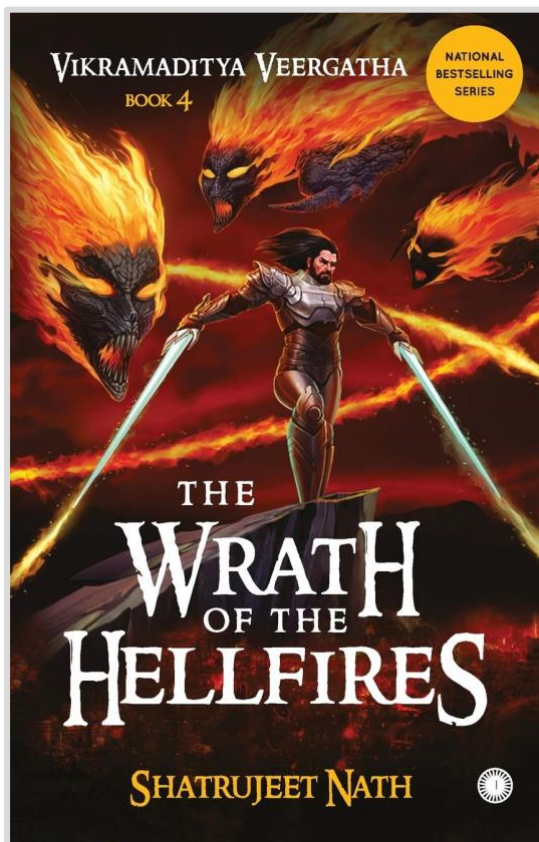
Cover image of *Vengeance of Indra* (2018), by Shatrujeet Nath. Source: Amazon.in.



Unlike the earlier covers, which portrayed the warrior with Indian characteristics such as darker hair colour and clothing, the penultimate cover and the last cover in the series adopt a more overt American superhero aesthetic. In the cover art of *The Vengeance of Indra* (2018) (Figure 47), the warrior hero is depicted as fair-skinned, with long blonde hair and striking blue eyes. While the other covers subtly incorporate visual elements from the Western fantasy genre, this image employs Westernised features to idealise an Indian warrior hero. This imagery is consistent with the other cover art, which also showcases heroes with uniformly lighter skin and represents archetypes from northern India. The character's Indianness is emphasised through the white holy ash on his forehead and his attire — dressed in a dhoti and adorned with jewellery reminiscent of Indian royalty, as depicted in mytho-historical films and comics.

Figure 48:

Cover image of *The Wrath of the Hellfires* (2020),
by Shatrujeet Nath. Source: Amazon.in



combined with the glowing green swords he wields, aligns the visual style more closely with that of a Marvel superhero. The background, featuring monstrous demons with menacing expressions, further enhances the atmosphere of combat readiness, with the hero poised to engage in battle. The demons themselves resemble generic otherworldly creatures, serving more to highlight the valour of the solitary hero rather than contributing to the narrative.

For both these books, the title and subtitle firmly anchor the image within an Indian visual context, despite the increasingly global aesthetic influences. While the covers evolve to adopt certain global visual elements, the most prominent motif remains the increasing muscularity of the characters, which underscores the emphasis on Hindu militant masculinity

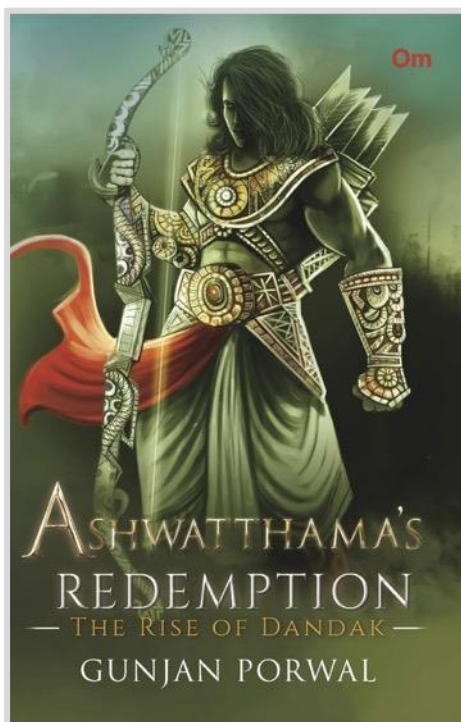
Similarly, *The Wrath of the Hellfires* (Figure 48) continues the theme of presenting the hero in a hyper-masculine, militant form. The protagonist is depicted with fair, angular features, black hair, and a highly muscular physique, which aligns with the general aesthetic of the series. Despite the Western influences, the hero's facial features retain an Indian identity, reminiscent of the character from the earlier books in the series. Unlike previous covers, which often portrayed the protagonist in medieval traditional Indian attire, this cover presents the hero in a generic metal suit of armour that appears more contemporaneous. This shift in attire,

as a central theme. This trend aligns with the prevalent aesthetic preferences for Indian heroes, particularly in contemporary Bollywood films and comic books (Banerjee, 2011, pp. 112-115). Overall, these visual choices not only draw from global superhero and fantasy tropes but, more importantly, reinforce a specific ideological construction of Indian identity, blending traditional cultural symbols with contemporary visual elements to project the image of Hindu militant warriors.

While the last two book cover images of *The Vikramaditya Veergatha Series* illustrate the intersection of Indian masculinity with global aesthetic influences, the cover art for *Ashwatthama's Redemption* (Figure 49) emphasises the muscular physique as a strategic symbol of power. The central focus of the cover is Ashwatthama, who occupies the most prominent position within the visual composition. The protagonist's face is partially obscured

Figure 49:

Cover image of *Ashwatthama's Redemption* (2018), by Gunjan Porwal. Source: Amazon.in.



by thick black locks, with one hand clenched into a fist and the other firmly gripping a sturdy bow. His well-built frame is enhanced by an ornate chest plate, and a dhoti covers his lower body. The cover's green, sepia gradient imparts a greenish hue to everything except the saffron fabric tied around his waist. This deliberate choice of colour and clothing style resembles depictions in mainstream Indian media of attire worn by Hindu rulers during the medieval period. The primary focus here is clearly on the towering warrior figure, symbolising Hindu identity. Although the hero appears motionless, his posture and attire suggest the potential for destruction, with

his physique promising irresistible violence if provoked. This attribution of agency to the male body, capable of exacting vengeance, serves to “legitimise and reintroduce righteous violence” (Mubarki, 2020, p. 237). The visual portrayal of Ashwatthama thus intertwines physical strength with cultural and religious symbolism, reinforcing the ideals of militant Hindu masculinity.

Righteous violence is a concept that pertains to the moral justification of using violence to defend or promote a noble cause, protect the innocent, or preserve social order. This notion often emerges when individuals or groups believe that their actions are sanctioned by a higher moral, religious, or legal authority (Zacharias, 2017, p.70). In the context of the images depicting muscular and militant Hindu warriors, the concept of righteous violence can be traced back to Hindu epics and myths, particularly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. These mythological narratives present scenarios where violence is portrayed as a necessary duty (dharma) that restores balance and upholds justice. For instance, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna advises the warrior Arjuna to engage in the battle of Kurukshetra, as it is his duty to uphold righteousness. Consequently, cover images depicting warrior heroes like Ashwatthama, prepared for combat, reinforce the notion that the violence carried out by these warriors is divinely authorised and therefore morally justifiable.

This phenomenon can also be observed in the cover art for *Vishwamitra* (2014) (Figure 50) and *Bharat: The Man Who Built a Nation* (2017) (Figure 51). The cover art for *Vishwamitra* showcases the titular character, evoking imagery of a mythical priest fused with a Hindu sage. The central and most salient feature on the cover is the muscular, bearded figure of the protagonist, dominating the visual frame. His pose is dynamic, with arms raised and muscles flexed. His intense expression, coupled with his upward gaze, conveys determination and a challenge to higher powers, as anchored by the subtitle “The man who dared to challenge the gods.” The character is dressed in traditional saffron robes, with Rudraksha beads around his neck, which are common iconographic elements for sages and ascetics in Indian art. The dark, stormy background with streaks of lightning adds a dramatic and supernatural atmosphere to the cover, highlighting the figure and adding to the dramatic tension. Additionally, the saffron shawl swung around his shoulders is exaggerated in scale, flowing out in twisting shapes to enhance the dramatic effect of the protagonists’ actions. Vishwamitra is not looking directly at

Figure 50:

Cover image of *Vishwamitra* (2014),

by Dr. Vineet Aggarwal.

Source: Amazon.in.

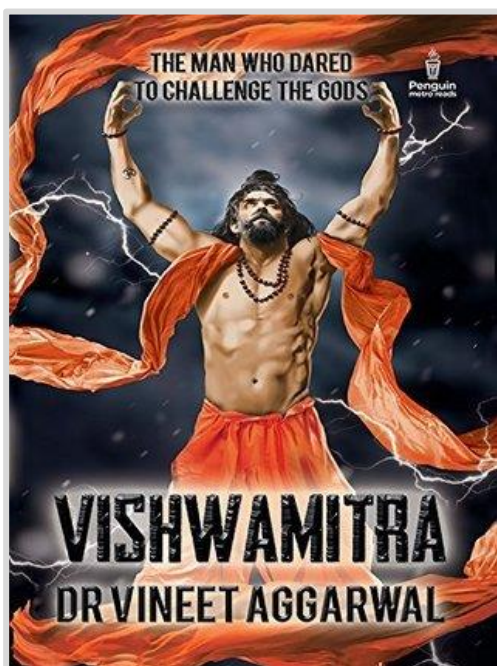
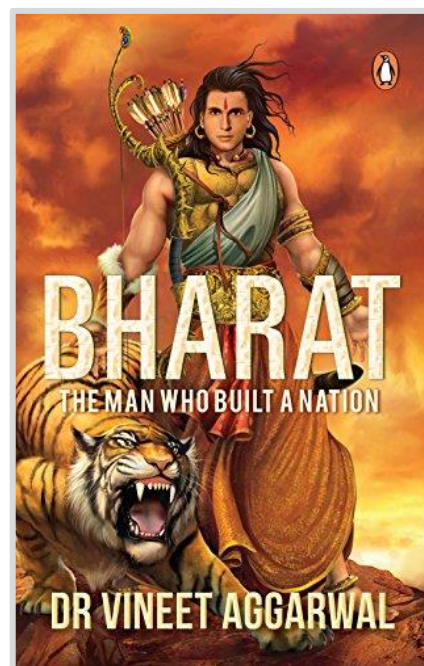


Figure 51:

Cover image of *Bharat* (2017),

by Dr. Vineet Aggarwal.

Source: Amazon.in.



the viewer but instead seems to be engaged in his own world, inviting viewers to observe his defiance and strength. Despite being depicted as a sage, Vishwamitra's muscularity and dynamic pose suggest a readiness for action, reinforcing the idea of righteous violence.

Likewise, the cover art for *Bharat* exemplifies the archetypal portrayal of a Hindu warrior character Bharat draws inspiration from a legendary emperor, from whom India derives its alternative name.¹⁷ Traditionally, the character of Bharat is portrayed as a young child proficient in the use of weapons, subduing wild tigers and lions. However, in this particular cover art, the protagonist Bharat is depicted as a fair-skinned and muscular man, likely of North Indian descent. He is adorned with jewellery, and metallic armour, and armed with a bow and quiver of arrows. Standing alongside Bharat is a large tiger. Often a symbol of power and royalty in Indian culture, the tiger's aggressive posture contrasts with Bharat's calm yet authoritative stance, suggesting that he commands and controls this powerful creature, thereby reinforcing his power and authority. A red tilak, a spiritual symbol, graces his forehead, specifically applied in a manner associated with *Kshatriyas*, the warrior class. Furthermore, a red chakra tattoo on his right palm serves to signify his identity as a warrior hero. The inclusion of the tilak iconography underscores Bharat's status as an upper-caste Hindu warrior, thereby normalizing the idea of upper-caste dominance in leadership roles and acts of heroism. This portrayal reinforces the existing social hierarchy and lends legitimacy to the power and privilege associated with upper-caste Hindus. The background is minimalist, lacking

¹⁷ In the *Mahabharata*, Bharata is portrayed as being born bearing the chakra symbol, symbolizing his divine selection by the deity Vishnu and his predestined fate to rise to the role of an emperor. As per the Vishnu Purana, Bharata's reign endured for an astonishing span of twenty-seven thousand years, resulting in the kingdom he ruled being designated as Bharata Varsha, or Bharat. It is noteworthy to mention, nonetheless, that Bharata Varsha does not precisely correspond to the geographical landmass of India. For further information, please refer to Daniyal, S. (2023, September 5). A short history of 'India' versus 'Bharat'. Scroll.In. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/1055455/a-short-history-of-india-versus-bharat>.

extraneous details, and the entire image is suffused with saffron hues. The choice of colours and the portrayal of a powerful, upper-caste hero suggest that leadership and heroism are inherently linked to muscular masculinity. This representation indicates that regardless of the specific identity of the hero — be it sage or king — the ideal Indian hero is envisioned as a strong, masculine figure, reinforcing the broader cultural and ideological narratives of Hindu nationalism.

The book covers mentioned above collectively serve to reinforce an idealised portrayal of Hindu masculinity. An examination of these images reveals a number of prominent characteristics: a strong emphasis on hyper-masculinity, explicit or implicit depictions of warfare or combat, and a clear association between the hero and the nation. By means of personification, the nation is depicted as possessing a distinctive religious and gendered identity. The narratives themselves revolve around conflicts that have an impact on both the hero and the nation.¹⁸ As the protagonists strive to overcome the challenges they encounter; the plot of the books also unfolds towards the resolution of the nation's conflicts. In a similar vein, the book covers portray their heroes' journeys as intimately intertwined with the nation's evolution from danger and adversity to resolution, valour, and renewed strength. The hero actively contributes to this process of transitioning from conflict to resolution through the utilization of righteous violence, as symbolised by their attire, muscular physique, and imagery associated with readiness for battle.

¹⁸ The stories are set in fictitious kingdoms or a medieval Hindu nation, with the names of these kingdoms derived from the Puranas and Vedas. These fictional kingdoms are juxtaposed against actual geographical landscapes of India.

This well-sculpted and physically fit male physique is not merely a matter of genre specificity. In sharp contrast to the prevalent trends in popular and public art trends in India, where women are highly visible in various forms as goddesses or vamps, it is men who are given prominence in patriotic imagery. This visually reinforces the prevailing idea that nationalism is a project rooted in masculinity (Ramaswamy, 2008, pp.819-853). Although the nation is often associated with the figure of the mother or Bharat Mata, here (referring to the book covers and their text), the male hero represents the aspirations of the nation, and men are positioned as protectors and the focal point of authority. In the rare instances where female heroes are depicted, such as in the cover images for *Sita* (Figure 37) and *Durga* (Figure 41), the portrayal tends to borrow the words of John Berger “women appear, but men act, to such an extent that even the few women who appear to act are often treated as honorary men” (1972, p. 1). Indian nationalism, as reflected in these covers, remains a predominantly masculine discourse, where the nation-state is imagined as a mother figure safeguarded by its male progeny (Ramaswamy, 2010, p. 183). Notably, within the Indian context, masculinity plays a crucial role in visual analysis due to the connections between notions of nationhood and maleness within the framework of postcolonial discourse.

The significance of these representations can be comprehended more thoroughly when considered alongside historical portrayals of Indian masculinity. The present visual depiction of robust Hindu-Indian heroes deviates significantly from the frail and lean physiques that were idolised during the colonial period, as exemplified by the images of Mahatma Gandhi from that era. Furthermore, it stands in stark contrast to the images of corpulent and well-fed bodies that were prevalent during the Nehruvian era, a time characterised by efforts to promote socialist prosperity (Mubaraki, 2020, pp.225-253). Moreover, during the later part of the colonial period, there emerged nationalist endeavours aimed at contesting the perceived sedentary characteristic

of the male Hindu physique that was subject to ridicule by the colonists, through the implementation of physical education. These initiatives flourished alongside the emerging aspirations of the nation and in conjunction with the RSS movement, which placed significant emphasis on activities such as bodybuilding, wrestling, and lathi-wielding, all of which were regarded as “psychological defences against the formidable image of the rational British and the lascivious Muslim” (Gupta, 2001, p. 232). Thus, the contemporary portrayal of muscular Hindu-Indian heroes on Myth-ISFF book covers can be seen as a continuation and intensification of these historical trends, aligning with current Hindu nationalist ideologies that valorise physical strength and militant masculinity as essential attributes of national identity.

In post-liberalisation India, with the decline of traditional masculine roles and the country’s shift towards a knowledge-based economy, men increasingly prioritised muscularity as a significant cultural symbol of masculinity. This visual representation is in alignment with the Hindutva narratives that assert the restoration of the defiled motherland to its former glory by the vigorous sons of India (Oza, 2006, p. 75). Hindu nationalists have consistently emphasised the portrayal of a male warrior as a symbol of strength and military prowess. The artistic depiction of flawlessly sculpted bodies, inherently gendered bodies embody a distinctly masculine national ideal, wherein the hero’s virility serves as a safeguard against threats of cultural effeminacy and racial degeneration (Mirzoeff, 2006, p. 59). As art history scholar Mrinalini Rajagopalan posits this visual aesthetic exemplifies an emergent rhetoric of masculinity and valour as a crucial facet of citizenship within a dynamic Hindu nation (2011, p. 273). Moreover, this testosterone-fuelled muscular physicality gained further prominence in Indian visual media in the late 1990s, coinciding with the ascent of the American ideal of muscularity. The emergence of a distinctly defined male physique during the 1990s catered to

both the worldwide desire for American norms of masculinity and the muscular militant narrative of Hindutva.

These hyper-masculine portrayals, reveal a strategic reimagining of masculinity. The emphasis on muscularity as an aesthetic and ideological tool not only projects an idealised Hindu man but also serves as a psychological defence against colonial emasculation (Baas, 2020). By visually connecting these portrayals to national identity, the book covers reinforce a singular vision of India that prioritises physical strength, militant readiness, and exclusionary ideals (Ramaswamy, 2010). Such depictions effectively consolidate the political aspirations of Hindutva ideologies, presenting an image of India that is both ancient and futuristic, spiritual and militant, grounded in mythology yet aligned with global trends in masculinity (Mosse, 1996). As a result, the myth-ISFF book covers depict bodies that align with contemporary trends in Hindu nationalist iconography. According to Rancière, aesthetics plays a crucial role in shaping the distribution of the sensible, determining who is visible and who is not, and what can be seen or said (2013, p.89). This visual regime marginalises other forms of masculinity and identities, emphasizing a singular, hegemonic vision of a national hero. The dominance of muscular Hindu warriors on these covers reinforces the visibility of a particular form of masculinity, aligning with the dominant Hindu nationalist ideology that seeks to assert Hindu cultural and political discourse and shape the narrative of Indian identity. The images consistently depict men poised for action, with their poses and the presence of weapons emphasizing their preparedness to defend their kingdom or nation. In addition to depicting warrior heroes, the compositions on these covers meticulously evoke themes of warfare, often featuring battlefield scenes or ongoing conflicts, prominently highlighting themes of militant masculinity through the use of symbols, iconography, and mythological motifs. This demonstrates that these covers are firmly embedded within the dominant Hindu nationalist

political narrative. Hindutva-oriented cultural nationalism aims to construct historical narratives that serve as sources of inspiration, bridging present aspirations with past accomplishments to shape future trajectories (Murthy, 2000, p.280). The appeal of these images within a Hindutva or Hindu nationalist context lies in their ability to envision a nation characterised by antiquity, a unified present, and a projected future of strength. Therefore, the aesthetic choices in these book cover images privilege a particular vision of Indian masculinity and nationalism, shaping and reinforcing the dominant cultural and political discourse of the nation.

Conclusion

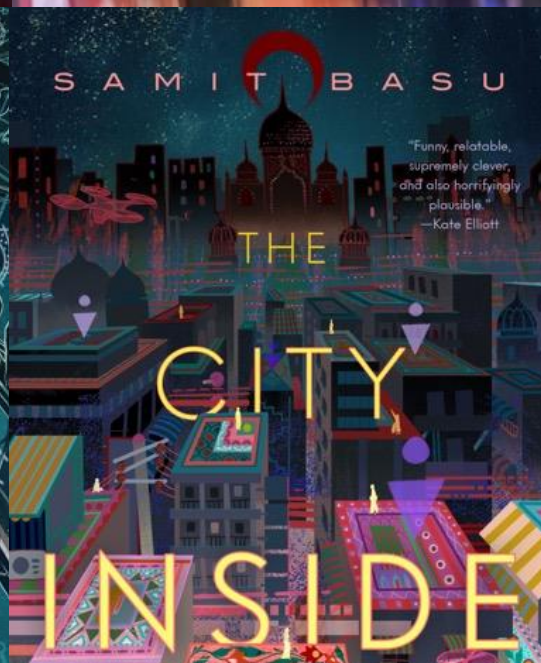
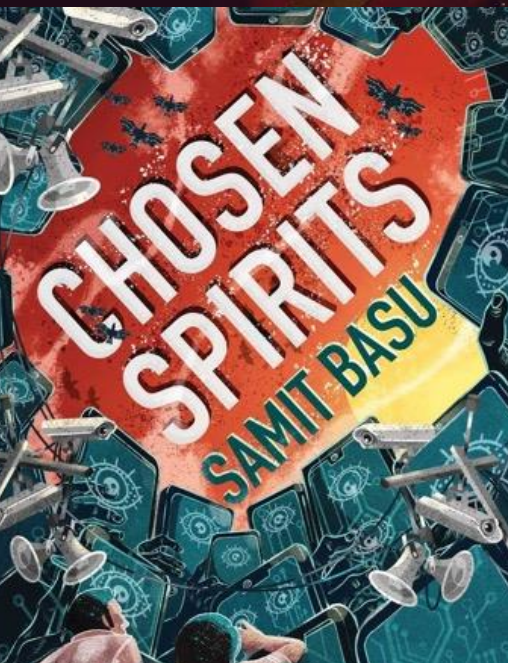
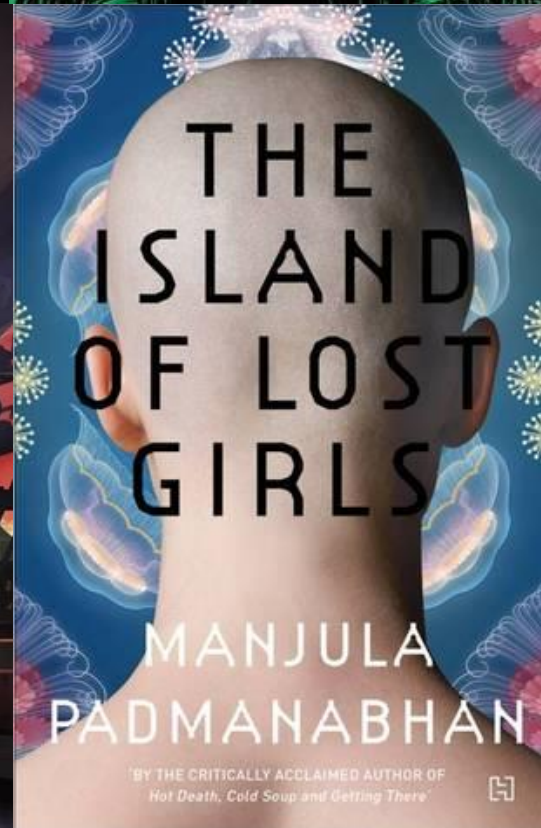
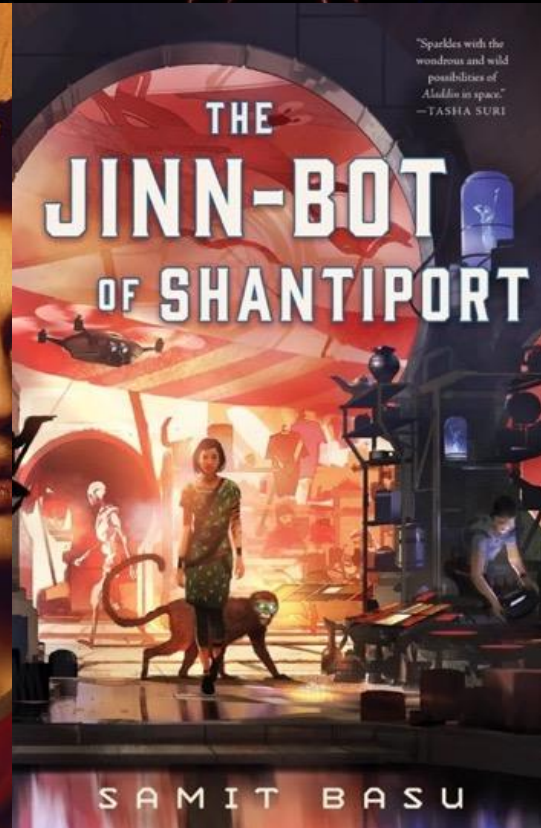
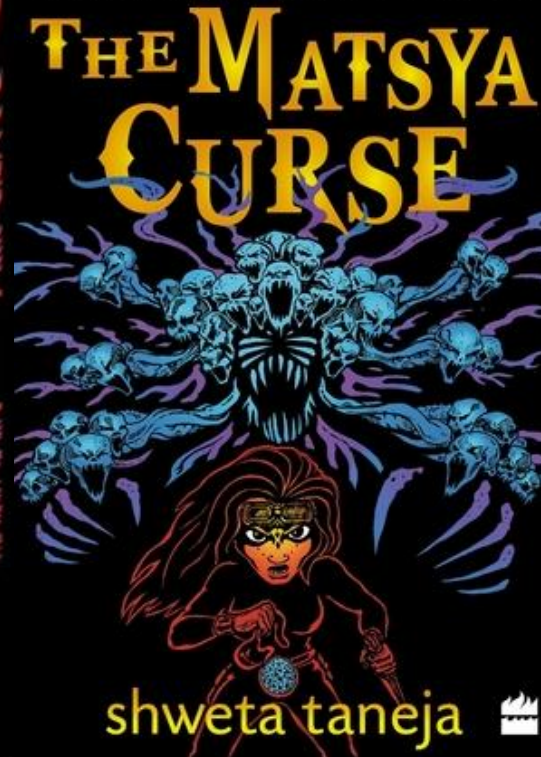
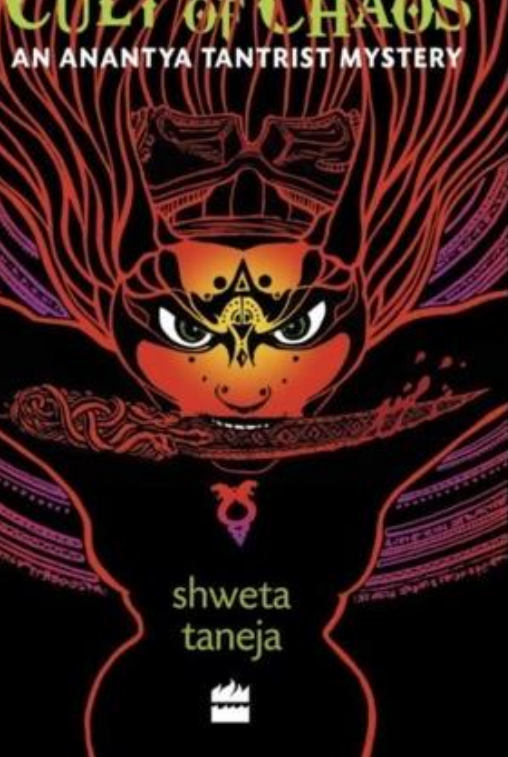
This chapter has conducted a critical examination of the visual motifs and overarching themes present in the book covers of Myth-based ISFF literature, demonstrating how these images reinforce Hindutva narratives in conceptualising the Indian nation. The visual iconography and motifs operate as intricate semiotic systems that actively construct and propagate a Hindu nationalist vision of India. Through a detailed visual analysis of key cover images, this investigation reveals how themes such as heroism, masculinity, and militancy are visually encoded to align with and support dominant ideological discourses. This analysis provides valuable insights into the aesthetic strategies employed in these visual narratives and highlights the broader ideological implications of such representations in shaping and influencing national identity politics. By examining how the nation is visually imagined through these popular representations, we gain a deeper understanding of the critical role visual culture plays in the formation and perpetuation of national ideologies.

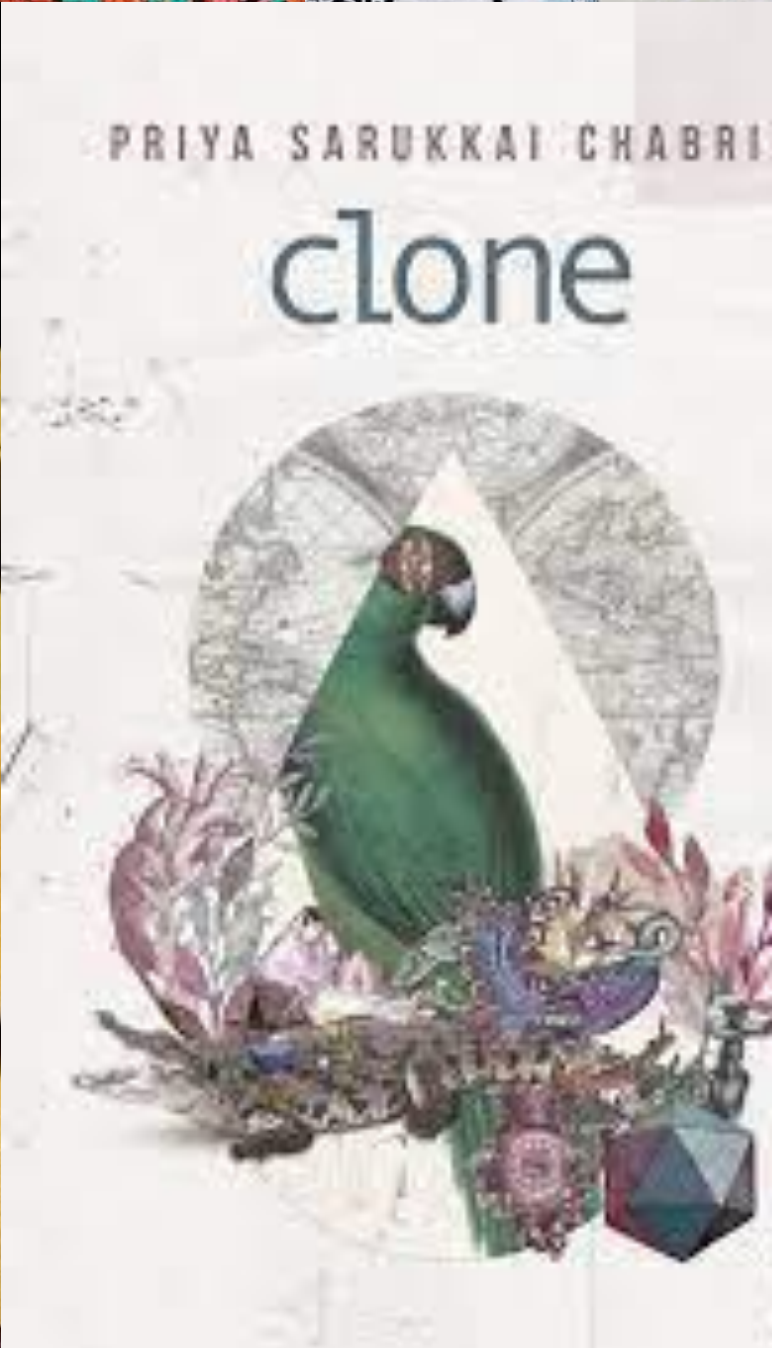
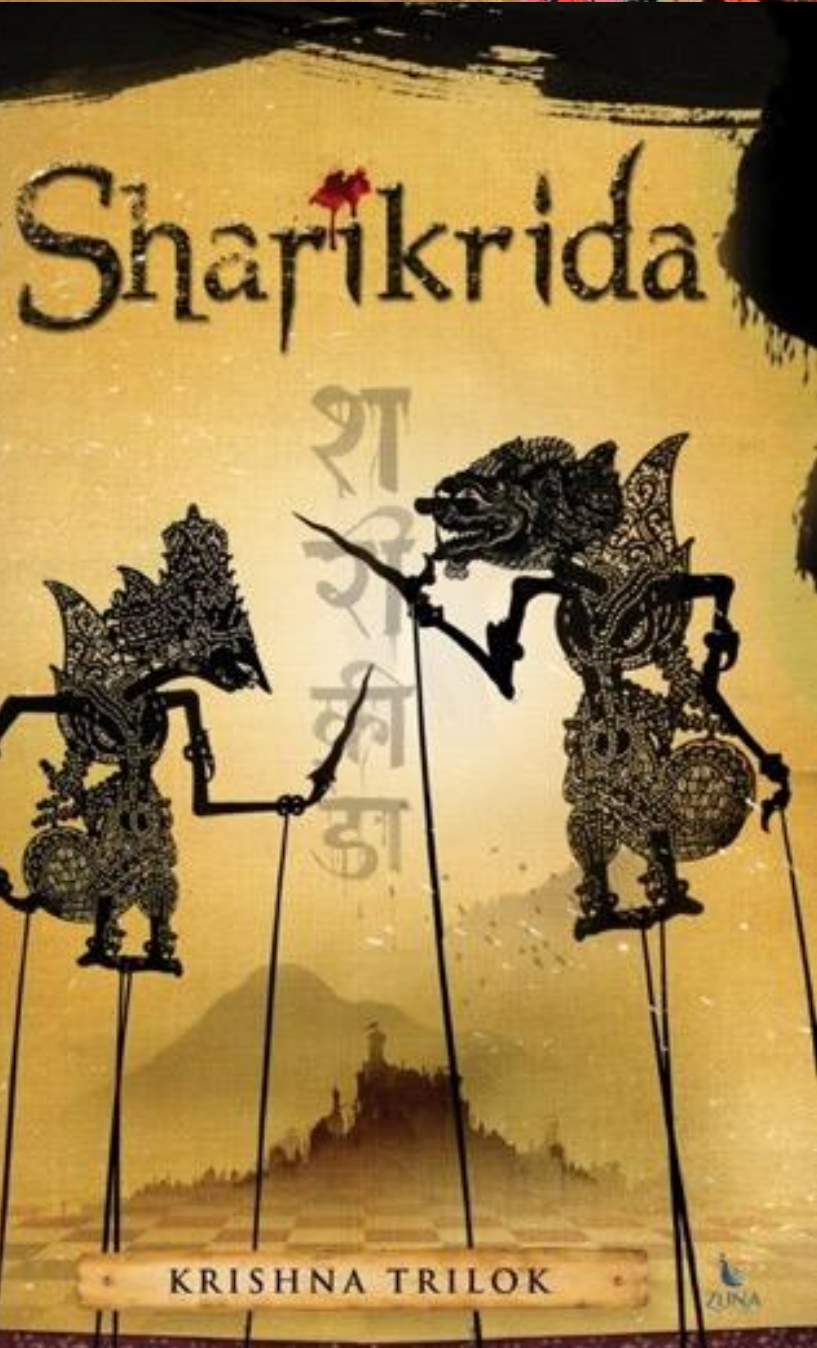
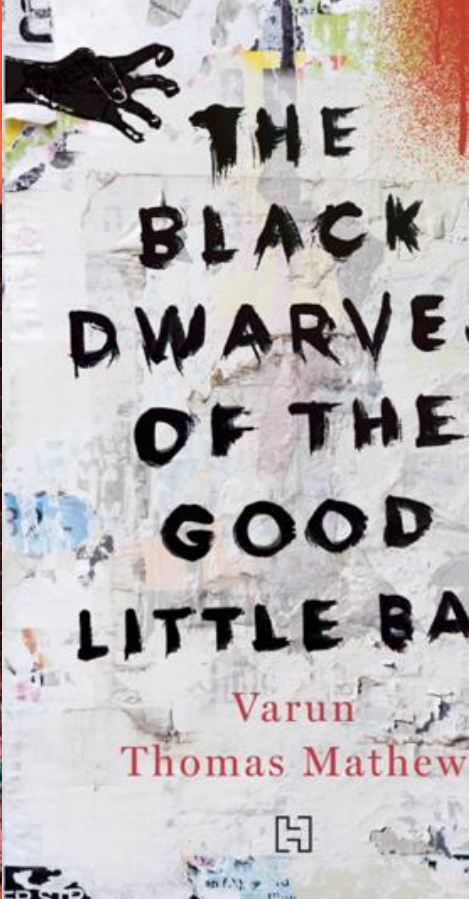
Rancière employs the term “police order” to characterise the overall system of practices and relationships that uphold and reinforce the existing social order and dominant ways of seeing and understanding the world (Rancière, 2010, p. 48). According to Rancière, the police order encompasses the assembly and classification of distinct societal groups, the structuring of power and authority, and the distribution of functions, positions, and systems of legitimacy (Rancière, 1995, p. 28). Aligned with this idea of a dominant police order is the notion of a dominant visual aesthetic, which society employs to establish a consensus and from which both society and its popular culture draw. The dominant aesthetic regime can shape society as it permeates through popular culture, ultimately solidifying it into a seemingly natural meaning (Rancière, 2006, pp. 92-95). In India, the dominant cultural discourse frequently revolves around the narrative of national origin derived from Hindu mythological texts. Within the

context of ISFF covers, this theory aids in understanding how visual representations of Hindu mythology define and legitimise a hegemonic vision of Indian identity. By focusing on militant, muscular heroes from Hindu mythology and an ancient Hindu nation, these covers naturalise a connection between a Hindu mythic past and contemporary narratives, contributing to the “distribution of the sensible” that privileges Hindutva ideologies while marginalising alternative cultural expressions.

Mirzoeff (1999) contends that visual representation plays a crucial role in reinforcing and presenting authority as an inherent and natural entity. He argues that this dominant visual perspective establishes a “complex of visibility” that seeks to legitimise its own viewpoint through the organisation and categorisation of social hierarchy (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 4). In the same vein, the visual narratives featured on the covers of *Mythological Indian Speculative and Fantasy Fiction* not only align with Rancière’s concept of the police order but also Mirzoeff’s notion of the complex of visibility. By reinforcing a homogeneous visual narrative, these representations of Indian identity, deeply rooted in Hindu mythology, shape social hierarchies and cultural perceptions in contemporary India. They emphasise hypermasculine, militant figures who are upper-caste Hindus with connections to the ancient Vedic tradition as central characters capable of overcoming internal and external threats, thereby implying that other forms of Indian citizenship are subordinate. Even books that aim to explore social and political issues with some complexity employ cover images that perpetuate this discourse. Furthermore, these works implicitly suggest that the Indian (specifically Hindu) tradition should serve as a guiding force for the world at large. By employing such visibility and iconography, these cover images contribute to the saffronisation of Indian visual culture — an ongoing process that imbues contemporary cultural expressions with Hindu nationalist ideology, resulting in a monolithic and exclusionary vision of Indian identity.

The impact of these visual narratives extends beyond the realms of literature and art, permeating broader cultural practices and everyday life. The visual motifs and symbols featured on ISFF book covers also appear in cinema, television, and advertising, fostering a pervasive visual culture that reinforces these ideals. This visual culture significantly shapes individuals' perceptions of their cultural and national identity, thereby influencing their beliefs, values, and actions. Additionally, as these books reach international audiences, they construct a global image of India that is heavily influenced by Hindu mythology and nationalism. This global dissemination of visual culture further reinforces these narratives while marginalising alternative cultural expressions, shaping a stereotypical understanding of India worldwide. In the digital era, the rapid dissemination of these covers amplifies their ideological impact even more, consolidating the visual and cultural dominance of Hindu nationalist ideology. In conclusion, the covers of ISFF serve as powerful semiotic tools that disseminate Hindu nationalist ideologies through their visual rhetoric. These covers do not merely illustrate stories but actively participate in defining and asserting a vision of Indian identity that is deeply rooted in Hindu mythology and aligned with the political aspirations of Hindu nationalism.





Chapter 4:

Visions of the Future — Visual Analysis of Dystopian ISFF Book Covers

“Our lives are not our own. We are bound to others, past and present, and by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future”.

- *Cloud Atlas* (2004), David Mitchell.

This chapter focuses on significant dystopian ISFF book cover images that present oppositional ways of envisioning Indianness. Drawing from Mitchell’s quote in *Cloud Atlas*, which poetically conveys the interconnections of human lives, the influence of past and present relationships, and the profound impact of our actions in shaping the future, I argue that speculative dystopian book covers invite contemplation on the potential consequences of present and past socio-cultural and political narratives.¹⁹ The previous chapter examined the illustrations on Myth-ISFF book covers, which serve as examples of the dominant discourse on Indian identity. The analysis primarily focused on how these covers draw on prevalent Indian mythology and traditional visual conventions to reinforce existing ideas about the nation as inherently Hindu, militant, and hyper-masculine. These tendencies perpetuate a homogenous visual aesthetic that confines the portrayal of Indianness to a narrow perspective, thereby marginalising or erasing alternative representations. In contrast, this chapter explores how dystopian ISFF book covers challenge these conventional portrayals, offering a broader and more inclusive vision of Indianness.

¹⁹ I employ the term “dystopian SFF” to describe the works being discussed in this context, as they frequently incorporate elements from diverse sub-genres of speculative fiction. By employing the term “speculative” in conjunction with “dystopian,” I acknowledge the amalgamation of different sub-genres in these covers.

The primary objective of this chapter is to examine a collection of cover images of books that share narrative tropes commonly associated with the dystopian ISFF genre. This genre has become a crucial literary space for exploring themes relevant to contemporary Indian society, its speculative nature allowing for the interrogation of current realities and future possibilities. This analysis will examine the iconography and themes of this genre as sites of dissensus (Rancière, 2006) against dominant depictions of Indianness and national identity. The visual motifs of these works encompass thematic elements such as state surveillance, inequality, loss of individuality, advanced technology, scarce resources, and resistance to the prevailing social order. In my analysis, I demonstrate how these cover designs construct a hybridised model of Indian visual representation by melding global (Western) SF visual conventions with distinct Indian graphics that do not stem from hegemonic Hindu nationalist visual tropes. While certain covers may incorporate mythological and epic iconography, they do so in a subversive manner that prompts viewers to reassess their ideas of desirability — traditionally associated with the idealised hyper-masculine, militant bodies prevalent in dominant visual discourse — rather than privileging the dominant culture. The overarching goal is to study how these counter-visuals provide alternative narratives that reflect a more inclusive and multifaceted Indian identity, while also addressing the contemporary anxieties of the urban population. It is worth noting, however, that these works do not strictly adhere to the conventional definitions of Western speculative and dystopian literature. Instead, they frequently incorporate high fantasy, satire, or even detective fiction elements. In doing so, they effectively convey a distinct sense of dystopia and Indian identity through both their narratives and cover art.

This dystopian category of Indian SFF is deeply influenced by both the “cognitive estrangement” mode of Euro-American science fiction and the rich ancient traditions of myths and legends in India. These traditions encompass a range of storytelling forms, including fantasy, ghost stories, folk tales, and fairy tales. Suvin’s (1979) concept of cognitive estrangement involves presenting a familiar reality in an unfamiliar or defamiliarised manner, thus creating a sense of distance for the readers. By combining this technique with rational and plausible speculation, cognitive estrangement challenges readers to think critically about their own world and imagine alternative possibilities. In the Indian context, the emergence of speculative dystopian ISFF in the post-millennial era can be attributed to a society that has been shaped by a rapidly growing industrial economy as well as longstanding metaphysical and pastoral traditions (Khilnani, 2022, p.41). The books in this tradition and which are explored here have garnered critical acclaim and prestigious accolades. For example, Bhatia’s novel *The Wall* (2020) was awarded the *Tata Literature Live! First Book Award* for Fiction. Additionally, Indian speculative fiction, such as dystopian works written in English, has cultivated a devoted readership. This genre is often associated with urban settings and consequently, the readership of these works tends to share similar demographic characteristics (Khilnani, 2022, p. 193). The genre’s popularity has been further heightened by the production of a Netflix series based on Akbar’s novel *Leila* (2017), increasing its prominence among a wider audience. A prevalent theme in these stories is the rejection of a repressive Indian state that prioritises tradition and homogeneity over multiculturalism and equality.

The cover images themselves exemplify a convergence of Western SF and urban Indian influences. In contrast to the covers of myth-based ISFF, which depict a romanticised and valorised vision of India’s Hindu mythological past, these ISFF covers portray prospective futures that aptly mirror the prevailing contemporary anxieties in the country. These covers

present visual motifs and themes such as artificial intelligence, surveillance drones, mindless clones, barren landscapes, neon cities, state surveillance, inequality, and resistance to authoritarianism. These visual representations serve as metaphorical references to the prejudices and challenges that confront society in the present day. Moreover, the images prominently feature diverse individuals and subcultures, thereby highlighting a more inclusive and multifaceted conception of Indian identity.

To substantiate my argument, I analyse the visual tropes employed in a selection of dystopian ISFF cover art. These works include *The City Inside* (2022), *Chosen Spirits* (2020), and *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* (2023) by Samit Basu, *The Sultanpur Chronicles: Shadowed City* (2018) by Achala Upendran, Krishna Trilok's *Sharikrida* (2017), Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017), *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (2019) by Varun Thomas Mathew, Shweta Taneja's *The Matsya Curse* (2017), Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Clone* (2019), and Manjula Padmanabhan's *Island of Lost Girls* (2015).²⁰ To ensure consistency with the previous selection of cover images, I have opted for books that have been published within the past twelve years. This time frame coincides with the period marked by the consolidation of power by Narendra Modi and the BJP-RSS, as well as the growing prevalence of Hindutva ideology in mainstream discourse. . Furthermore, these books have garnered critical acclaim in notable newspapers and literary blog sites, received high ratings within this particular sub-genre (on Amazon India), and have either won or been shortlisted for literary awards.

²⁰ It is worth noting that *Chosen Spirits* and *The City Inside* by Samit Basu are essentially the same story, with *The City Inside* being a republication that incorporates additional content related to significant events that occurred in 2020 and 2021, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Basu, 2022). Both covers will be discussed as they are both still in circulation. Additionally, it should be mentioned that *Leila* has multiple cover designs, including one created after the release of the Netflix show, as well as two others for print and digital copies of the novel. All three covers will be addressed in this chapter.

4.1. Semiotic Analysis of Dystopian-ISFF book covers

This section continues the analytical methodologies used in the previous chapter to examine the cover designs of dystopian ISFF, dissecting them into distinct "zones of interest" as outlined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 177). These zones encompass the title, background illustration, foreground figures, as well as supporting characters and motifs. Although the covers of Indian dystopian SFF literature do not adhere to a uniform standardised format, identifying general configurations is useful for understanding the significance of specific signages within the overall visual framework. In the case of Dystopian ISFF cover images that feature human characters, these visual signs possess the highest degree of "psychological salience," a trait that is further influenced by aspects such as intricacy in design, colour contrasts, placement, and scale (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). Psychological salience, denoting the innate tendency of our visual focus to be drawn towards human figures in images, even when such figures are abstracted, can be partially attributed to their social relevance and recognisability (Mather, 2014, p. 45). Hence, even abstract forms function as visual devices that contribute to our comprehension of the surrounding visual imagery. It is worth noting that the protagonists depicted on Dystopian cover images often assume the form of female-presenting characters, who play pivotal roles within both the visual and textual narratives presented in these books.

The titles on dystopian ISFF cover images are another salient zone of interest that conveys significant "informational value" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). These titles are typically positioned at the top (Ideal) half or within the centre of the layout (p.186). By overlaying the image, the text presents the idealised or generalised essence of the visual information, contextualising the image within an Indian or at least South Asian setting (this is

particularly useful when visual significations of Indianness are not as overt). In addition, the covers include a range of secondary salient iconography that draws from recognisable Indian urban motifs, providing familiar imagery for the Indian audience and helping situate the unfamiliar SF iconography within an Indian context. These urban motifs may include familiar elements like cityscapes, cultural symbols, or even subtle nods to Indian architectural styles, all of which contribute to a sense of place and cultural specificity.

Moreover, the images also employ various artistic styles and layouts to encode different elements of dystopian Indian visuality. Each image, through its unique aesthetic approach and compositional structure, encapsulates specific aspects of the dystopian narrative, reflecting various dimensions of societal, cultural, and political commentary. By utilising distinctive visual techniques, the images communicate not only the themes of dystopia but also embed nuanced messages about contemporary Indian society. This layered encoding process ensures that viewers receive and interpret the visual content from multiple perspectives, resonating with Hall's (1997) theory that media texts convey embedded messages shaped by the creators' intentions, which audiences decode based on their own cultural and social contexts. Drawing on Rancière's (2010) politics of aesthetics and Mirzoeff's concept of counter-visuality and employing Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) semiotic framework, I demonstrate how the covers exemplify an overarching "politics of dissensus" (Rancière, 2009). As a result, these dystopian ISFF images prompt viewers to question their preexisting beliefs and foster a critical understanding of the socio-political realities of the nation, all while shedding light on the multifaceted nature of Indianness, rooted in a multitude of cultures, histories, and identities.

4.1.1. *The Resilient Protagonists*

In this section, I conduct an analysis of the portrayal of the main characters and protagonists in the cover images of speculative dystopian literature. These protagonists typically belong to social groups that are frequently marginalised or undervalued in Indian society. The deliberate prominence given to these characters on the covers serves the purpose of drawing attention to their narratives and experiences, thereby offering alternative perspectives on seeing, and imagining “Indianness.”

Figure 52:

Cover image of *Cult of Chaos* (2015), by Shweta Taneja. Source: Amazon.in.

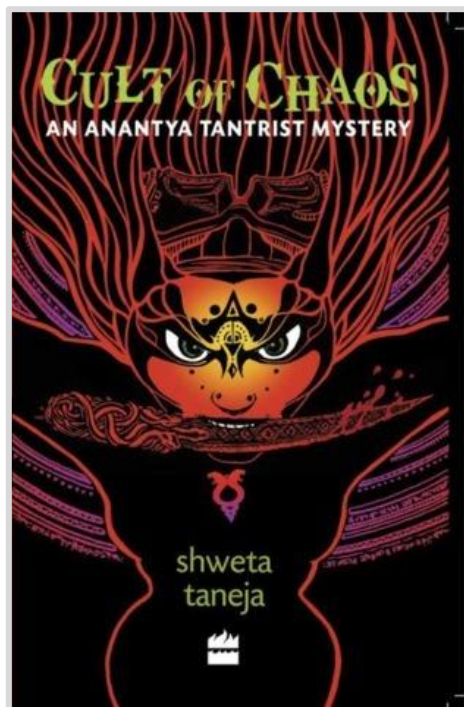


Figure 53:

Goddess Kali (1910), by Ravi Varma. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



The first case in point is the cover image for *The Cult of Chaos* (2015) (Figure 52). The image depicts Anantya, the central figure, whose facial characteristics draw inspiration from popular renderings of the goddess Kali (Figure 53). The title “Cult of Chaos” is prominently displayed at the top of the cover, employing a bold typeface with strands of hair intertwined

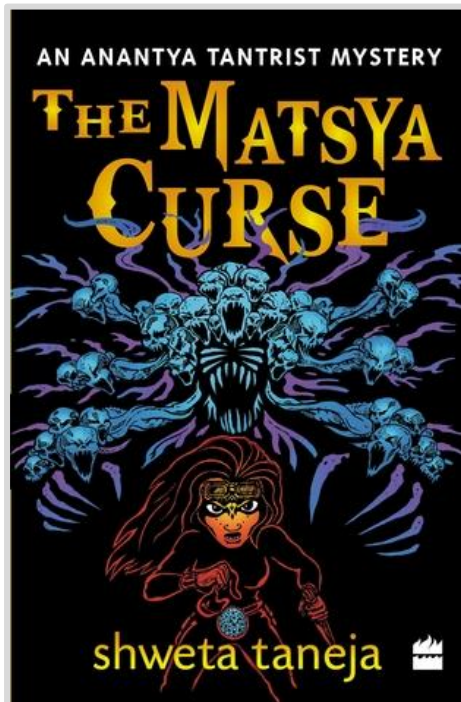
around the text. This placement adheres to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006, p. 186) notion of 'Ideal,' positioning the title in the upper region of the composition to indicate its significance and convey the overarching essence of the visual content. The cover art combines linocut and digital art techniques, integrating sharp lines in a gradation of vivid reds, oranges, and purples set against a dark black backdrop. The image skilfully presents the unsettling countenance of the protagonist, evoking a resemblance to the goddess Kali, and uses this visual connection to challenge traditional ideals of femininity and power.

The use of sharp lines and a centrally aligned full-frontal view creates a sense of audience engagement with the image, while the intense gaze of the character directly confronts the viewer. The character's eye contact with the viewer represents a departure from the mythic covers where warrior heroes frequently do not establish a direct visual connection. This use of direct gaze aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) notion of "demand," where the subject of the image demands the viewer's attention, establishing an interpersonal interaction. In this particular case, the viewer is compelled to confront an "inauspicious" (Varughese, 2018) image of a woman who challenges the idealised portrayal of Indian women. The conventional ideal of Indian women typically draws a parallel to Goddess Sita, who is traditionally depicted as beautiful and virtuous, often submissive, symbolising unwavering devotion to her husband Lord Rama and adherence to dharma (righteousness). However, the protagonist in these covers is portrayed as a modern, independent woman and a virago. Moreover, the protagonist's flowing and untamed hair serves as a symbol of her rejection of societal norms and her untamed nature. In Indian culture, loose hair is traditionally associated with unmarried women and considered improper and inauspicious. The intricate occult symbols and designs in the background further imply mystical and tantric elements. Tantra is viewed by mainstream Hindus as being associated with occultists, tribal groups, and practices that pose a threat to the

patriarchal social order. This further reinforces the idea that the protagonist on the covers represents those who exist on the margins of society.

Figure 54:

Cover image of *The Matsya Curse* (2017), by Shweta Taneja. Source: Amazon.in.



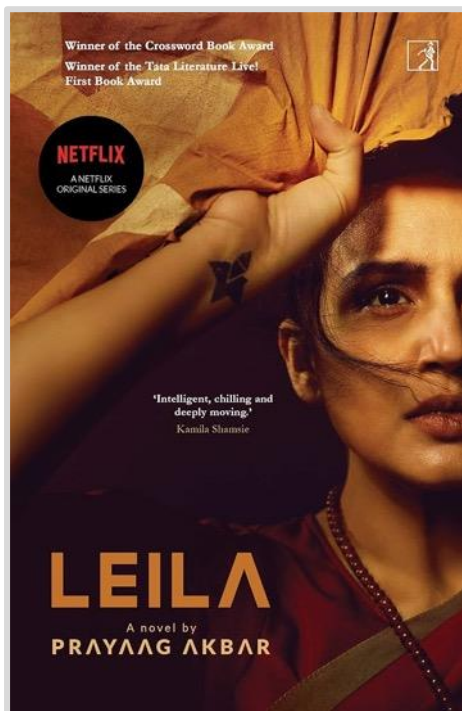
In the second book of the series, titled *The Matsya Curse*, (2017) (Figure 54) the protagonist is depicted in greater detail. Specifically, she is shown wearing jeans and a T-shirt, holding an ornate knife, and sporting goggles on her head. This attire signifies her as a modern urban woman and situates the story in an alternative present setting of India. The cover image portrays the protagonist being pursued by a large skeletal monster with multiple heads and powerful claws, set against a black backdrop. The contrasting warmer colours used for the protagonist against the cooler shades of blue and purple employed for the demon effectively direct the viewer's gaze back to

the protagonist, as emphasised by the concept of salience proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 171). More importantly, both book covers pay homage to popular depictions of the goddess Kali. Kali is commonly depicted with fiery eyes, dishevelled hair, and bared teeth. However, it is Kali's exceptional abilities in fighting monsters, her non-Vedic origins, and her embodiment of female power and agency that distinguish her as an icon for feminism and a symbol of Indigenous assertion for tribal communities (Mohanty, 2009). Therefore, Kali here emerges as a personification of resistance. These aspects of Kali's persona are also reflected in the portrayal of the protagonist Anantya, who embodies Kali's iconography and tantric visual motifs.

The protagonist Anantya represents individuals who exist on the fringes of society, challenging and disrupting mainstream societal norms. The cover images question and challenge the traditional cultural constructs of female identity and present this inquiry within a fantastical urban setting. Consequently, the cover images of Shweta Taneja’s books create what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms “counter-visibility.” This concept refers to the practice of visualising alternatives to the dominant, hegemonic representations, thereby enabling marginalised voices to assert their presence and perspectives. Mirzoeff’s counter-visibility (2011) is evident in how these covers subvert traditional depictions of female power and challenge the patriarchal visual regime. Anantya’s portrayal not only defies conventional norms but also reclaims space for alternative narratives of female empowerment and resistance. Thus, disrupting expectations and offering a counter-narrative to the dominant visibility in Indian culture.

Figure 55:

Cover image of *Leila* (2019), by Prayaag Akbar. Source: Simon and Schuster..



Similarly, the book covers *Leila* (2019) by Prayaag Akbar and *The Jinn-Bot of Shantipor* (2023) by Samit Basu depict women as agents of resistance. The *Leila* cover image (Figure 55) under discussion is the reissued cover from 2019, following the release of the corresponding Netflix series. A salient feature of the cover is a close-up photograph of the protagonist’s face, a technique employed in photography to foster a sense of intimacy between the image and the viewer. Additionally, the cropping of the protagonist’s face introduces a sense of claustrophobia and immediacy, signifying a lack of spatial freedom for the character in the world she

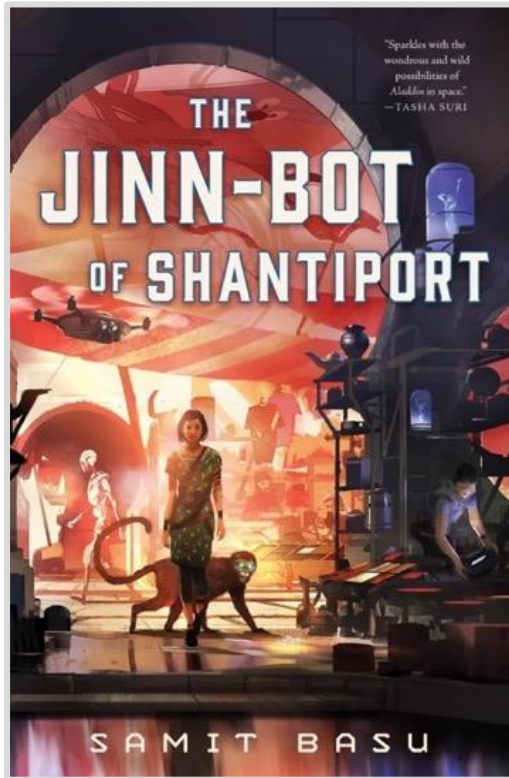
inhabits. This approach immerses the viewer in the protagonist's world and positions her as the focal point of the cover. Positioned on the right side of the frame, this visible segment of her face corresponds with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of the "new," denoting information that necessitates the viewer's focus. By situating her face on the right side of the frame, the cover underscores the significance of her story and experiences, thereby demanding active contemplation from the viewer.

Viewers decode visual cues according to their personal cultural and societal backgrounds. Individuals familiar with the Netflix series or the novel can easily identify the woman on the cover as Shalini, the central character. This recognition aids in their understanding of the visual elements in relation to her struggles and defiance. However, even without prior knowledge of the story, viewers can interpret the image on the cover as symbolic of resistance against oppression. The editing choices and tight framing are particularly significant as they evoke a sense of confinement for the woman represented. This portrayal conveys her hardships, while her gaze towards the light and the act of lifting the saffron cover away from her face symbolise her resistance against oppression, rendering her a symbol of defiance. This interpretation is made possible due to the cultural codes embedded in the colours used in the image, which convey specific meanings (Hall, 1997). The overwhelming presence of saffron tones, associated with the dominant Hindutva regime and the existing anxieties surrounding the saffronisation of the nation, reinforces the idea that the protagonist's world is oppressive. Furthermore, the realistic depiction of the woman, combined with the naturalistic lighting, heightens the image's "modality" — a term used by Kress and van Leeuwen to describe the degree to which an image represents reality (2006, p. 154). This increased level of realism helps anchor the dystopian narrative in a relatable human experience, thereby making the cover's themes more immediate within the Indian context.

Furthermore, the cover image of *Leila* conveys an additional layer of meaning by depicting an 'inauspicious woman,' similar to the covers of the Anatyia Tantrist series. The central character, Shalini, is a widow, and the cover image portrays a widowed woman who strives to regain her autonomy in a repressive society. The modest maroon saree she wears and the Rudraksha beads around her neck symbolise her status as a Hindu widow, emphasizing the societal restrictions imposed on her because she deviated from established norms (initially demonstrated by her marriage to a Muslim man). While the treatment of widows in modern India has improved compared to the past, they still face discrimination and are considered impure within certain Hindu communities. For example, they are often prohibited from participating in auspicious events such as weddings. Placing a widow at the centre of the cover image brings attention to a community of women who are typically marginalised. Through Shalini, we are able to see the numerous women who are sidelined in Indian society. Therefore, the cover highlights the significance of small acts of resistance against oppressive systems. The widowed Hindu woman, despite having her autonomy and privileges stripped away, refuses to be pushed aside. Thus, the cover challenges prevailing visual narratives and presents an alternative perspective that empowers the marginalised. This act of counter-visual representation reclaims the visibility of those who have been rendered invisible and underscores their resilience and resistance within Indian culture.

Figure 56:

Cover image of *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* (2023),
by Samit Basu. Source: Amazon.in.



The cover of *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* (Figure 56) features a digital illustration portraying a young girl as the protagonist, accompanied by a robot monkey. This narrative reimagines the original folktale of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*.²¹ In this reimagining, the character of Aladdin is depicted as a girl born into a family of revolutionaries. Abu, the monkey, is reimagined as her half-robot, half-simian brother, and the Magic Lamp is represented by a magical AI being. In this narrative, the three characters join forces to liberate their city from oppressive colonisers in a surveillance state. The image centres on a

teenager dressed in a modernised version of traditional Indian saris, wearing a shorter wrap-around dress with tights and walking shoes. The medium shot framing allows viewers to observe both the girl and her surroundings. A robotic monkey with glowing green eyes is positioned slightly lower in the frame, symbolising companionship and an extension of the girl's identity. The cover art presents a futuristic and

²¹ The origin of Aladdin comes from a 10th century tale, with roots in North African, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Indian, and East Asian cultures. It has a pan-Asian appeal, with some versions even claiming to be situated in ancient China. There is also an Indian variant titled *The Magic Lamp* that has been collected among the Santal people, an ethnic group largely based in the states of Jharkhand and West Bengal in India. Of course, the Disney version, with its Oriental gaze, is the most popular visual rendition of this story, reducing it to a pastiche that generalises and combines cultures to fit a Western fantasy of the Orient. This aligns with Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, where the West constructs a simplified and exoticised image of the East. The story of *Shantiport* is far removed from the Orientalist view, instead drawing on the pan-Asian tradition to create a narrative specifically situated within India.

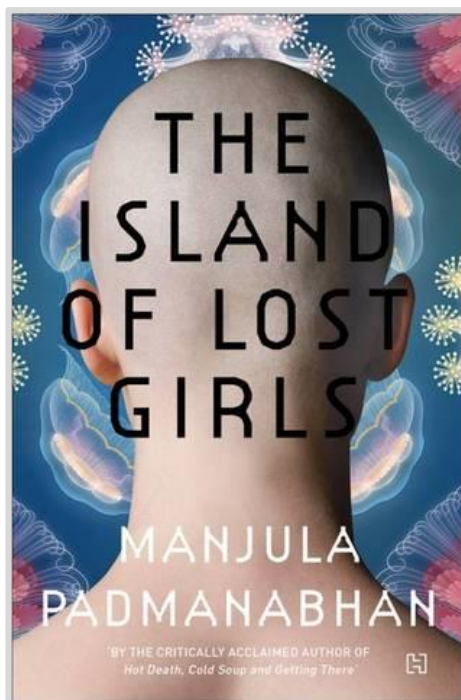
somewhat chaotic urban setting filled with technological elements, including drones and humanoid figures. Despite the busy scene, the overall colour scheme is vibrant, featuring warm shades of orange and pink, and the diffused yellow and white lighting around the girl, draws attention back to her as the focal point of the composition.

The bustling urban scene in the background, filled with market stalls, vendors, and a variety of goods, vividly mirrors the lively and chaotic atmosphere typical of street markets in Indian cities. This setting situates the visual narrative within a familiar Indian context, enhancing the relatability of the protagonist's journey. This is further emphasised by her modest appearance which includes practical clothing like tights and walking shoes, suitable for an everyday urban environment. Her attire and the backdrop of a reimagined urban Indian bazaar (market) place the story within an Indian dystopian context. A surveillance drone hovers above the scene, but the girl continues to walk forward, undeterred by its presence. This portrayal of a confident young woman, embodying tradition and futurism through her attire and her companion, challenges prevailing visual narratives.

Drawing on Nicholas Mirzoeff's concept of counter-visibility, the cover of *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* presents a powerful challenge to traditional visual narratives by centring an ordinary girl as the protagonist and saviour. This artistic choice diverges from the more common visibility that often emphasises militant Hindu men as the protectors of the nation. Instead, the girl's prominent role on the cover acts as a potent counter-visual, reclaiming visual space for those who are typically marginalised. This imagery not only highlights her resilience and resistance within a dystopian setting but also subverts conventional portrayals of heroism by presenting an empowered female figure as the central agent of change. Furthermore, viewers interpret visual elements based on their cultural and societal contexts (Hall, 1997), meaning

that for those familiar with narratives of Hindu nationalism, the cover offers a transformative perspective that reimagines the nation through a broader lens, emphasising inclusivity and diversity. This alternative depiction of Indianness showcases a shift from a singular narrative to a more pluralistic view, where an ordinary girl emerges as a central figure. This challenges the hegemonic cultural narrative and invites viewers to reconsider who can be seen as a hero within their societal constructs.

Figure 57:
Cover image of *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015), by Manjula Padmanabhan. Source: Amazon.in.



While the previous book covers have primarily focused on depicting marginalised women, particularly those deemed inauspicious, Manjula Padmanabhan's *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015) (Figure 57) removes almost all gender identity markers from the depiction of its protagonist. This book cover utilises a combination of photography and vector illustration. The central and most salient element of the image is the back of a shaved head, symbolising the character's significant role in the book's themes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For an Indian audience, this image has the potential to hold multiple meanings. It may evoke associations with Hindu devotees who shave their heads at temples as a symbol of renouncing worldly possessions and ego, the non-violent principles embodied by Mahatma Gandhi, and the monastic lives led by Buddhist monks. However, within the context of the book cover, the primary signification relates to gender and identity politics. The ambiguous and androgynous appearance of the protagonist prevents viewers from ascertaining

their gender and identity, effectively erasing the typical physical indicators used to identify gender. This emphasis on the fluidity of gender challenges societal norms of gender binaries.

The meaning of this image is further reinforced not only through the shaved head but also through the backdrop, which features abstract pastel flowers and sea creatures such as anemones and jellyfish, known for their gender-fluid or hermaphroditic nature. These visual cues reiterate an alternative perspective on gender identity, empowering and highlighting the experiences of individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles. This interpretation challenges hegemonic visual narratives of gender and promotes a broader understanding of gender inclusivity. The juxtaposition of natural motifs in a mirrored and precisely arranged geometric layout can signify an attempt to impose “order” on something inherently natural. Here, the image of the tonsured head can be decoded as a renunciation of stereotypical notions of gender identity, akin to the actions of Buddhist monks, serving as a non-violent form of protest against the dominant ways of seeing Indian identity as inherently gendered within a binary. This counter-visual strategy reclaims visual space for those typically marginalised, subverting conventional depictions of gender and identity. Furthermore, it aligns with a secular perspective on imagining Indian identity by emphasizing inclusivity and diversity over religious and traditional gender norms. This secular approach highlights a more pluralistic view of Indian identity, embracing various forms of existence and rejecting rigid categorisations. Consequently, the book cover offers an empowering alternative that broadens the viewer’s perspective on gender inclusivity and resistance against normative structures, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and diverse imagination of Indian identity.

While the cover art of *The Island of Lost Girls* deliberately removes typical markers of identity to draw attention to transgender individuals who are often overlooked and rendered

invisible in mainstream Indian visual media, other covers use abstract human illustrations to represent marginalised individuals as a collective rather than focusing on individuals. For example, the covers of *Chosen Spirits* (Figure 57), *The City Inside* (Figure 58), and the first edition of *Leila* (Figure 59) feature abstract human figures to symbolise marginalised individuals. These book cover images operate on two levels of visual denotation (Barthes, 1997). First, abstract human forms can be used to represent a collective of identities by acting as representatives for various cultural and social groups one may encounter in the Indian public sphere. Second, the use of abstract human forms depersonalises the characters in the specific texts, enabling a more objective viewing experience of the challenging and problematic situations they face in a dystopian world. In this way, the abstract nature and absence of identity markers in the image not only prompt the audience to acknowledge the negative aspects of the dystopian world but, more importantly, to recognise within those abstract images those who exist on the fringes of society.

These Dystopian ISFF book covers, through the use of abstract human figures, challenge conventional aesthetic norms that typically render marginalised individuals invisible. Subverting the customary notion that abstract human forms homogenise representation, this approach reads against the dominant visualisation of Indianness as being tied to a gendered, predominantly militant masculine Hindu visuality. Such abstraction acts as a disruption and aligns with a secular perspective on Indian identity. This representational strategy highlights a more pluralistic understanding of Indian identity: one that embraces various forms of existence and rejects rigid categorisations based on gender, religion, or social status. Additionally, representing marginalised groups through abstract forms encourages viewers to recognise the universal human experiences that underlie the specific dystopian narratives, fostering empathy and understanding. Consequently, these book cover images not only broaden the viewer's

perspective on identity but also thereby contribute to a more inclusive and diverse imagination of Indian identity.

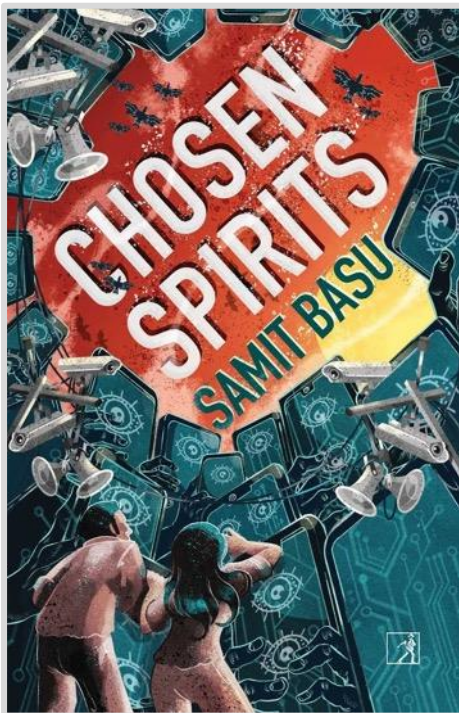
The covers discussed in this section, irrespective of the underlying themes and narratives, make visible marginalised groups such as widows, transgender individuals, women, religious minorities, and the lower classes, among others. These images serve as a counter-visual to the dominant visuality. The narratives themselves are set in dystopian Indian settings that actively propagate misogyny, homophobia, and caste discrimination, exploring the intricate realm of biopolitics and the political struggles surrounding the human body. Within these narratives, the protagonists are portrayed as individuals who resist and challenge oppressive power structures or as subversive entities striving to survive within the confines of the system. Reflecting these narratives, the covers depict women and transgender individuals as catalysts for change and symbols of resistance, thereby contradicting traditional visual representations of identity and Indianness. By utilising various artistic styles and hybridised motifs that blend Western SF and Indian elements, these covers establish visual systems that contest hegemonic ideas of gender, patriotism, and cultural identity deeply rooted in the dystopian world of the books and, consequently, contemporary Indian society.

4.1.2. Urban Cityscapes and Dystopias

The cityscape is a recurring visual motif in many Dystopian ISFF cover designs, even though the covers discussed in this chapter do not visually conform to a single template. These covers employ urban motifs and landscapes to convey the anxieties and aspirations of contemporary Indian society. The cityscapes often carry dystopian connotations, highlighting the local expression of global concerns such as technological singularity, ecological catastrophe, and class-based inequality that deeply resonate with India's rapid urbanisation. While historically the nation-state has dominated discourses of citizenship and national identity (Holton, 1996, p. 11), these urban depictions challenge this dominance by foregrounding the city's role in reflecting and critiquing societal issues. The futuristic Indian cities portrayed on these covers do more than depict a bleak future; they encapsulate the complex, often contradictory feelings of contemporary India. These visuals blend Western sci-fi conventions with Indian elements and cultural themes, creating a hybrid aesthetic that mirrors the nation's plurality. These images suggest that India's future, and humanity's, depends on addressing these pressing issues. While some covers lack overt "Indian" aesthetics and are more universally urban in nature, they still evoke a sense of Indianness by reflecting contemporary concerns, such as the tension between tradition and modernity and the struggle to maintain a secular and diverse national identity amid growing polarisations. These collective emotional and cultural experiences, often not fully articulated on the covers themselves but felt and lived by Indian audiences, enable them to decode these images based on their own lived experiences (Williams, 1977). Consequently, the city becomes a site of critique and, more importantly, possibility, thus challenging the hegemony of the nation-state and providing a space to imagine the Indian nation in new and alternative ways.

To illustrate these claims, the analysis will commence by examining the book covers that portray Indo-futuristic cityscapes, specifically Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (2020) (Figure 56) and *The City Inside* (2022) (Figure 57), the latter of which is a modification and extension of the earlier book. The narrative centres around two main characters residing in the capital city, which faces challenges such as a water crisis, hazardous air quality, gated communities, and a surveillance state. The story alternates between allusions to real-life events and a futuristic portrayal of New Delhi in the 2030s, creating a dystopian atmosphere. However, the novel concludes with an optimistic outlook by emphasising the characters' journey as they find ways to resist and challenge oppressive structures through the power of community-building and personal agency.

Figure 58:
Cover image of *Chosen Spirits* (2020), by Samit Basu. Source: Amazon.in.



Basu's *Chosen Spirits* (Figure 58) cover image evokes a dystopian cityscape through the use of visual elements such as a dense network of machines including mobile phones, CCTV cameras, loudspeakers, and electric wires. The recurring motif of staring eyes superimposed on the mobile phones creates a sense of menace, symbolising the constant surveillance present in the city. These eyes, representing the invasive gaze of an omnipresent surveillance state, contribute to a pervasive feeling of paranoia and loss of privacy. Additionally, the white fumes rising towards a red sky, with a yellow sun resembling a larger eye, and black crows, further

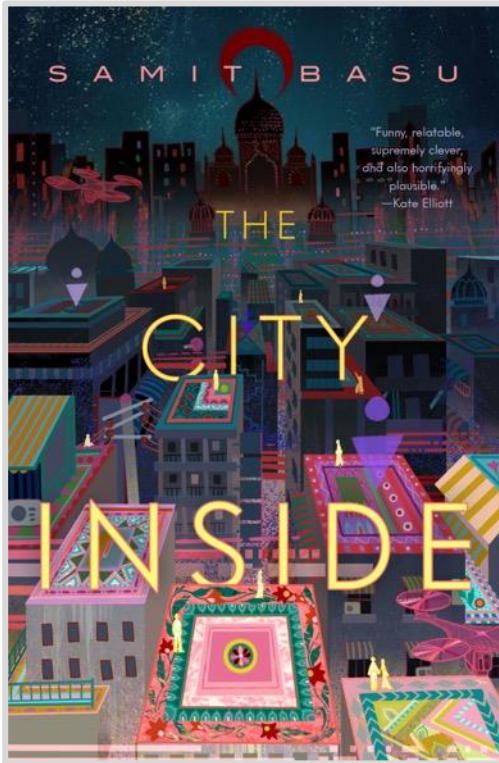
contribute to the ominous atmosphere. The metaphorical city envisioned through the towering

mobile phones appears to encroach upon the two human figures in the bottom left corner of the foreground. This effect is accentuated by the angle and foreshortening of the image, distorting the scale and creating the impression that the people are small in comparison to the imposing phones. The design style of the image is graphical, incorporating textures such as grainy spatters, washes of colour, and bold lines reminiscent of retro posters, adding to the overall feeling of crowding. The composition disorients the viewer as their gaze travels from one eye to another, attempting to comprehend the entirety of the image. This disorientation mirrors the confusion and chaos experienced by the individuals in the cover image, thereby enhancing its thematic impact.

The technological elements within the image serve as symbols of pervasive surveillance, with their densely packed arrangement framing the human figures and reinforcing a sense of confinement. The figures, representing the main characters, are portrayed with minimal detail and are dressed in sepia-coloured clothing. This minimalistic depiction hints at universal struggles, while also suggesting that they stand for marginalised individuals (as discussed in the previous section, see p.17). The figures' gaze is directed towards the eyes and the sky beyond, suggesting awareness and, more importantly, representing an act of resistance against established power structures. The image is particularly impactful for urban Indian viewers who are familiar with crowded cities laden with surveillance. For example, Delhi reportedly has over three lakh surveillance cameras in operation at any given time (The Hindu, 2021). As a result, these viewers interpret the elements in the image through the lens of their own experiences and societal context (Hall, 1980; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This interpretation enhances the image's impact, making the themes of control and resistance more resonant for those familiar with such environments. Therefore, this dystopian image not only depicts a possible future but also critiques current trends in Indian society. In doing so, it

provides a powerful commentary on contemporary ways of seeing and understanding the Indian nation in an era of rapid technological advancement and increasing surveillance.

Figure 59:
Cover image of *The City Inside* (2022), by Samit Basu. Source: Amazon.in.



The cover design of *The City Inside* (2022) (Figure 59) contrasts with its predecessor by depicting a dystopian city that incorporates recognisable Indian motifs, thereby immediately situating the image within a future Indian context. The cover presents a high-angle isometric view of a futuristic city with intricate floral patterns, neon lights, and architectural details, establishing the image as a night-time scene of an Indian cityscape. The use of a single point perspective guides the viewer's gaze towards the distant centre of the visual frame, where a crescent shaped red moon hovers above the silhouette of a dome shaped mosque, surrounded by numerous high-rise

structures. This juxtaposition of traditional Mughal Islamic architecture and modern concrete skyscrapers highlights the Indian cityscape, reminiscent of cities like Delhi and Hyderabad, where historical and contemporary structures coexist. In the foreground, small, yellow silhouettes of people gaze out into the city from the rooftops of select buildings, while intricate and colourful kolams and rangolis adorn the grey rooftops. These patterns, commonly found on the rooftops of middle and lower-middle-class apartments, serve as familiar motifs for most Indians, as these traditional decorative art forms are used outside homes to bring good luck. This idyllic scene is disrupted by the presence of translucent red camera drones illustrated in

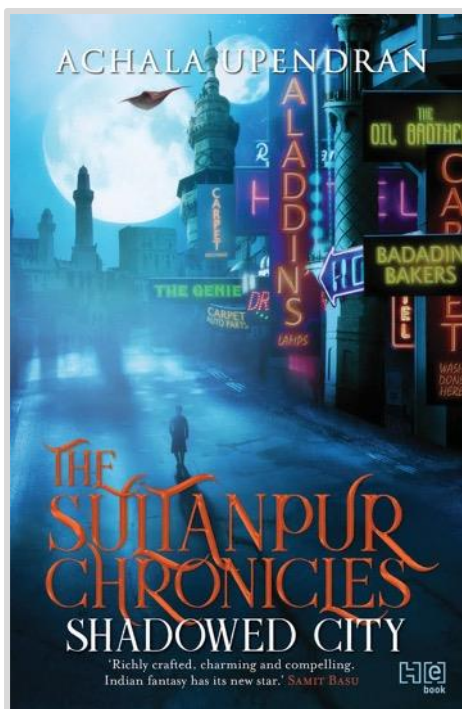
bold red outlines hovering above the city. Additionally, semi-transparent glowing purple icons resembling location trackers float above certain buildings, emphasising the concept of a futuristic surveillance state. The recognisable Indian motifs, such as kolams and Mughal architecture, provide a familiar cultural context for the viewer. Simultaneously, the presence of surveillance drones and location trackers creates a sense of cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1979). This visual dissonance prompts viewers to engage critically with the image and question the implications of surveillance and control in contemporary society.

However, the vibrant floral patterns on the rooftops stand out against the mundane buildings, serving as acts of resistance. These traditional Hindu ritualistic art forms, typically created by women during the early morning hours as auspicious gestures to bring good fortune, symbolise hope and defiance. Their transient nature, becoming blurred and erased throughout the day due to human activity and traffic, challenges the rigid notions of authority embodied by drones and surveillance cameras. Additionally, the inclusion of both the mosque and Hindu practices in the same visual frame reflects a more accurate representation of the city's identity as multi-cultural, while the minimalistic silhouettes of people on the cover symbolise the broader population's anonymity and the marginalisation of individual identities in a surveillance state, metaphorically addressing socio-economic disparities in India. By combining these elements, the cover image of *The City Inside* serves as a lens through which contemporary notions of Indian identity can be understood. By combining traditional motifs, familiar urban architecture and futuristic visual elements, the composition encapsulates the complexities and nuances of what it means to be Indian in the contemporary world, highlighting the dual pressures of maintaining a unique national identity while integrating into a globalised world. This resonates with contemporary India's challenges of balancing tradition and modernity, local customs, and global influences.

In a similar fashion to these early examples, the cover image of Basu's latest publication, *The Jinn-Bot of Shantiport* (2023) (Figure 55), showcases intricate digital artwork that combines traditional Indian motifs with futuristic technology, placing the narrative within a futuristic Indian cityscape. Unlike the abstract and contemporary styles of the previous covers, this digital illustration employs watercolour-style shading and layering of colours to create a visual representation of an Indian dystopian technological future. This visual hybridisation draws from familiar images of Indian city alleyways and street-side bazaars, along with sci-fi iconography such as cyborgs, glowing blue containers containing magical beings, and omnipresent surveillance drones. The mix of cultures is evident: a vendor in the far back wears a kufi (a hat worn by Muslim men), the girl is dressed in reimagined Indian attire, and Western-style T-shirts hang outside the stalls, while the arches in the image reflect remnants of Mughal architecture still visible in Indian cities.

Figure 60:

Cover image of *The Sultanpur Chronicles* (2017), by Achala Upendran. Source: Amazon.in.



These diverse visual motifs emphasise the multicultural nature of the Indian city. However, there is a sense of estrangement due to the juxtaposition of futuristic technology and surveillance tech, creating a layered narrative that invites viewers to critically engage with the socio-cultural and technological changes depicted (Suvin, 1979; Hall, 1997).

Similarly, the cover design of Achala Upendran's *The Sultanpur Chronicles: Shadowed City* (2017) (Figure 60) also presents a futuristic and fantastical interpretation of contemporary Indian

urban landscapes. This cover uses neon signage with phrases such as ‘Badadin Bakers’ and ‘Aladdin’s Lamps’ alongside towering buildings and minarets to create a world resembling the streets of Delhi or Hyderabad. The image is rendered more alien by the inclusion of a flying red carpet suspended high above the deserted streets. The eerie emptiness of the streets and the presence of two sizable moons emitting soft light in the clear night sky contribute to the overall sense of estrangement within the image. The visual elements add a touch of magic and tradition, infusing the scene with elements reminiscent of classical Arabian Nights tales while maintaining a distinctly Indian urban atmosphere. Despite the fantastical and sci-fi elements in this cover image, the visual motifs firmly establish this futuristic world within the Indian context. Prior knowledge of urban Indian cityscapes provides additional cultural information that enables viewers to decode the images as exaggerated representations of modern Indian cities.

The cover images of *The Sultanpur Chronicles* and *The City Inside* feature fewer explicitly dystopian visual elements, though their narratives are set in dystopian worlds. *The City Inside* incorporates visual motifs such as drones and neon lines to suggest at the surveillance state. In contrast, *The Sultanpur Chronicles* appears more alien and magical, through the inclusion of flying carpets and double moons, rather than focusing on the narrative themes indicative of a dystopian world. However, the covers employ cognitive estrangement, a characteristic common to all the dystopian/speculative cover images discussed. Additionally, by presenting urban spaces replete with visual iconography that is pluralistic and based in minority cultures, these images contribute to our understanding of contemporary conceptions of Indian identity by presenting a more diverse and multicultural portrayal of Indian society. This multicultural depiction challenges the dominant visual culture that often emphasises Hindu-centric imagery, offering a broader perspective on what it means to be Indian (Khilnani,

2022). Furthermore, these dystopian images address various issues prevalent in the futuristic worlds they depict, such as surveillance, technological intrusion, and socioeconomic disparities, thus reflecting real-world concerns in modern-day India (Holton, 1996). The visual narrative of multicultural urban life coexisting with dystopian elements underscores the ongoing struggle to reconcile tradition and modernity, unity and diversity, in the face of rapid technological advancements. Ultimately, these covers facilitate a critical examination of Indian identity, encouraging reflection on its preservation, adaptation, and transformation in a globalised world.

In essence, regardless of the individual themes and narratives depicted on these covers, they primarily feature cityscapes. The covers exhibit a combination of contemporary illustrative styles, abstraction, and a fusion of modern, sci-fi, fantasy, and traditional visual iconography. The artistic modes and styles overlap in a manner similar to how ISFF encompasses multiple (sub) genres. Consequently, these covers possess a distinct visual identity that defies classification within a single aesthetic style. They represent a blend of influences that integrate Euro-American sci-fi tropes with contemporary Indian urbanity and visual motifs. While the cover art of *Chosen Spirits* employs symbolism to evoke a cityscape that emphasises the anxieties associated with living in a surveillance state, the other covers offer glimpses of utopian visions that have gone wrong. These visual representations serve as a foil for their individual texts, which, although displaced in time and space, directly engage with the realities of contemporary Indian society. These images demonstrate the existence of multiple ways to envision Indianness, particularly those that do not rely solely on the dominant visuality of a glorified Hindu Indian past.

The incorporation and visibility of the typical hybrid Indian urban space — featuring both Mughal era architecture and modern high-rise buildings — the juxtaposition of street vendors with advanced technology, the use of traditional art forms that are often marginalised because they are practised by women, and the inclusion of Aladdin as a source of inspiration rather than figures from Hindu epics can be interpreted as acts of resistance against the dominant power structures within the texts as well as in the larger social context. From the perspective of Mirzoeff's counter-visibility, these choices represent a form of visual dissent (Mirzoeff, 2011). They challenge the dominant 'Indian Hindu-scopic regimes' and offer alternative narratives that reflect India's diverse, often problematic, and multicultural reality. By utilising Islamic symbols, images of streets, and marginalised communities who are typically overlooked, these covers disrupt the conventional aesthetic order and propose a more inclusive vision of Indian identity. Thus, these dystopian cityscapes serve as a lens through which to examine and critique the present-day socio-cultural landscape of India. Furthermore, they emphasise the secular and multicultural aspects of Indian identity while addressing contemporary challenges, offering a complex and nuanced portrayal of what it means to be Indian in a rapidly evolving world. Consequently, these dystopian images serve not only as a critique of contemporary socio-cultural issues but also as a powerful assertion of a pluralistic and multifaceted Indian identity.

4.1.3. *Walls and Graffiti*

As an urban phenomenon, walls play a crucial role in delineating boundaries within urban spaces and determining who belongs and who does not. They visually distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of societal membership. The cover designs for Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) (Figure 60 and Figure 61) and Varun Thomas Mathew's *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (2019) (Figure 62) use the specific urban iconography of walls as a means to depict ideas of Indianness. As is common with dystopian fiction, these worlds are imagined utopias gone awry, based on concepts of order and purity. Akbar's *Leila* portrays a society where intrusive surveillance reinforces social segregation and categorisation. The novel presents a divided society with walled sectors that separate the 'uncontaminated' and 'pure,' constantly threatened by class warfare, identity politics, communitarianism, and violence. Similarly, Varun Thomas Mathew's *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* explores these themes using super-tech and digitally altered realities to foster 'civility' and 'accord' within society. The covers themselves offer subtle visual cues that suggest Indianness through Indian visual motifs, textual anchoring, and font choices. This is further reiterated through the collective emotional and cultural experiences of the Indian audience. Viewers draw upon their felt and lived experiences to interpret and connect with the imagery, recognising the underlying Indianness embedded within the dystopian themes (Williams, 1977; Hall, 2005). This subtle yet powerful method leverages the viewers' intrinsic understanding and personal experiences, making the imagery resonate deeply with notions of contemporary Indian identity.

Figure 61:

Cover image of *Leila* (2017), by Prayaag Akbar. Source: Amazon.in.

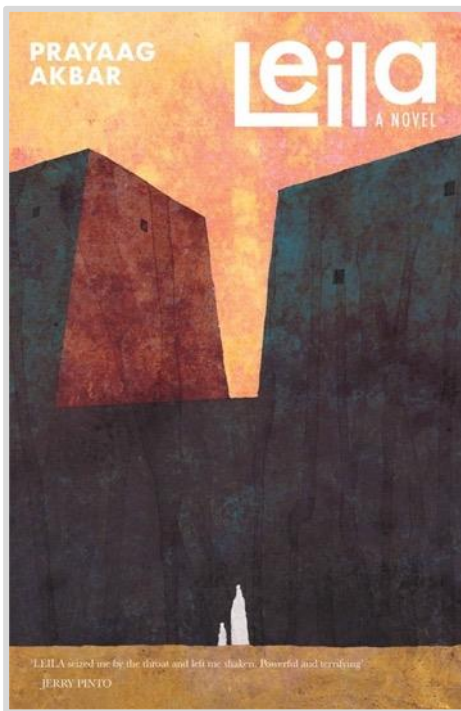


Figure 62:

Second edition cover image of *Leila* (2018), by Prayaag Akbar. Source: Amazon.in.



The cover design for the first edition of *Leila* (Figure 61) features a minimalist illustration that uses a limited colour palette, strong contrasts, and scale to depict a dystopian walled city. The towering structures dominate the visual space due to their size, colour, and central placement. These structures resemble a minimalist version of the *Gopurams* of South Indian temples — monumental entrance towers situated at the entrance of a Hindu temple. Additionally, the font of the title mimics Tamil script in the way the text is aligned. This choice of typographical design and architectural forms situates the narrative within a recognisable yet estranged Indian context. Indian viewers may perceive these structures as reminders of societal divisions and the ongoing struggle against segregation based on class and caste, as evidenced by the historical and ongoing restrictions on temple access for certain classes and castes. This difference in power is reiterated through the contrast in scale and colour of the walls and the human figures at the bottom of the composition, symbolically highlighting disparities in power,

while the warm, muted colours convey an arid dystopian environment. This visual arrangement reinforces the themes of segregation and social isolation central to the novel. Consequently, the cover counters the idealised imagery often associated with Indian culture and, instead, offers a critique of the prevailing social order and the pervasive nature of surveillance and control.

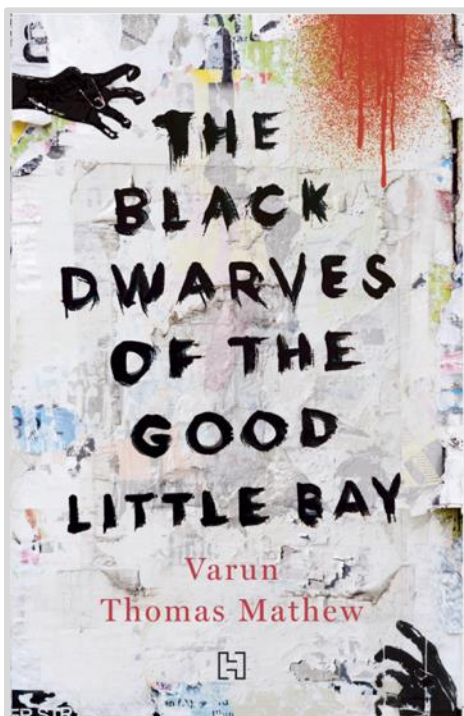
The second edition of *Leila's* cover design (see Figure 62) embodies the concept of segregation while incorporating visual motifs that signify resistance to prevailing norms. The cover features a digital illustration of a brick wall adorned with vibrant handprints at the lower part, with a solitary handprint positioned slightly higher. The height of the wall obstructs the view beyond, concealing the partially visible orange sky at the top of the frame. The handprints, though small, gain salience through their vivid colours against the dark background of the wall, drawing the viewer's attention. The assortment of colours signals diversity, while their placement on the brick wall suggests a struggle to break free and an act of protest against the dominant power structures that the wall represents both literally and figuratively. This symbolism relies on viewers' ability to decode the image based on their cultural and social contexts. Indian viewers may associate the colourful handprints with the festival of Holi, where people leave handprints as a form of signature on different surfaces. Holi, a celebration of the arrival of spring, symbolises the triumph of good over evil. Consequently, the colourful handprints can be interpreted as the marginalised community's response to oppressive systems, conveying a message of resistance and resilience.

By encouraging viewers to look beyond these barriers and acknowledging the presence and struggles of diverse individuals, the cover challenges mainstream narratives and presents a more comprehensive understanding of Indian identity. Moreover, the cover emphasises themes of segregation and resistance, providing a nuanced perspective that encompasses

multiple voices and experiences often disregarded in dominant narratives. In examining modern India through the lens of this dystopian world, the cover image of *Leila* (Figure 61) highlights the ongoing struggles and conflicts that shape contemporary Indian society. It reflects the realities of social segregation, identity politics, and communal tensions that persist in the country. The vibrant handprints against the oppressive wall serve as a metaphor for the resistance and resilience of marginalised communities in the face of systemic oppression. By presenting these dystopian elements, the cover prompts viewers to contemplate the current state of Indian society and the significance of acknowledging and addressing its diverse and multifaceted nature. Furthermore, the cover of *Leila* not only critiques dominant socio-political ideologies but also celebrates the diversity and resilience of Indian identity. It offers a counter-narrative to hegemonic discourses, underscoring the need for inclusivity and equality in an ever-evolving Indian nation.

Figure 63:

Cover image of *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay*, (2019), by Varun Thomas Mathew. Source: Amazon.in.



Likewise, the cover design for *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay* (Figure 63) employs street art to visually depict resistance. The cover features a textured background reminiscent of a weathered wall covered with layers of posters and graffiti, a common sign of urban decay in Indian cities. The title is boldly splashed across the centre in a distressed, hand-painted style, with the words appearing slightly chaotic and uneven. The layers of peeled posters suggest an ongoing cycle wherein new posters are promptly pasted over the wall whenever old ones are removed, reflective of the real-life

persistence of voices that fight against erasure. In a final act of resistance against the wall's presence, someone has painted and stencilled onto it the title of the book and a pair of hands. The top right corner of the cover features a splash of red paint, dripping down like blood. This visceral element introduces a sense of violence and urgency. Additionally, the black, slightly clenched hand stencils scattered across the cover create an unsettling effect and symbolise human presence and struggle. The handprints, similar to those on the cover of *Leila*, signify protest and resistance against oppressive forces. Moreover, by presenting a chaotic, decayed environment, the cover depicts a desanitised visuality that reflects the harsh realities faced by many. Consequently, it can be argued that the book cover uses urban dystopian iconography as a means to critique dominant social structures.

Historically, walls have been justified as a means of safeguarding and regulating conflicts (Callahan, 2018). All three book cover images employ the tangible and metaphorical concept of a 'wall' as a mechanism for creating cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1979) and as a platform for exploring utopian and dystopian possibilities. Although the cover art of these science fiction books may not explicitly resemble an Indian city, they still incorporate subtle iconography that is recognisable to the urban Indian demographic. This subtlety ensures that the imagery resonates deeply with those familiar with Indian urban spaces while maintaining a universal appeal. Consequently, the visual motif of walls in these covers becomes a signifier of the socio-political tensions prevalent in the country. The walls, as significant social structures, serve as physical barriers that segregate. It is not uncommon to see in Indian cities spaces that are completely off-limits to certain groups, such as housing colonies designated for specific castes. Therefore, it is easy to identify the Indian urban condition within the visual frame. It is important to highlight that these walls also possess mythical, metaphorical, and ideological implications. In the Indian context, these concerns are explicitly linked to caste, class, and

religious identity, which are portrayed within the texts themselves through their oppressive dystopian settings.

These cover images not only represent a dystopian world but also include visual motifs that can be viewed as resistance against the oppressive systems signified by the walls. Graffiti and words on city walls are spontaneous collective political acts and are often associated with a subculture that rebels against authority. Moreover, they offer an alternative history by mapping social struggles and challenges without relying on mainstream or official narratives. In the case of *Leila*, the handprints on the wall serve as a visual memorial for those who refuse to accept the status quo and can be seen as a deliberate act of rebellion against the ruling elite. Similarly, in *Black Dwarves*, the repeated pasting of posters on the same wall to create endless layers, as well as the painted-on text and hands, also reflect the same sentiments. Additionally, the art on the walls serves as a counter-visual to dominant sanitised urban aesthetics. The graffiti, when viewed in context, draws attention back to what the wall represents. The wall art captures attention precisely because it appears out of place in a space that is fixated on maintaining order. Consequently, it raises questions about the nature of the dystopian city and the right to the city, particularly whose right it is. In conclusion, the images on these covers suggest a conscious attempt to perceive and examine India's future. By using a more generic art style, it encourages viewers to re-evaluate the future within the framework of emerging socio-cultural concepts, such as social inequality, national identity, political systems, justice, and fairness.

4.1.4. *Traditional Art Forms and Modern Stories*

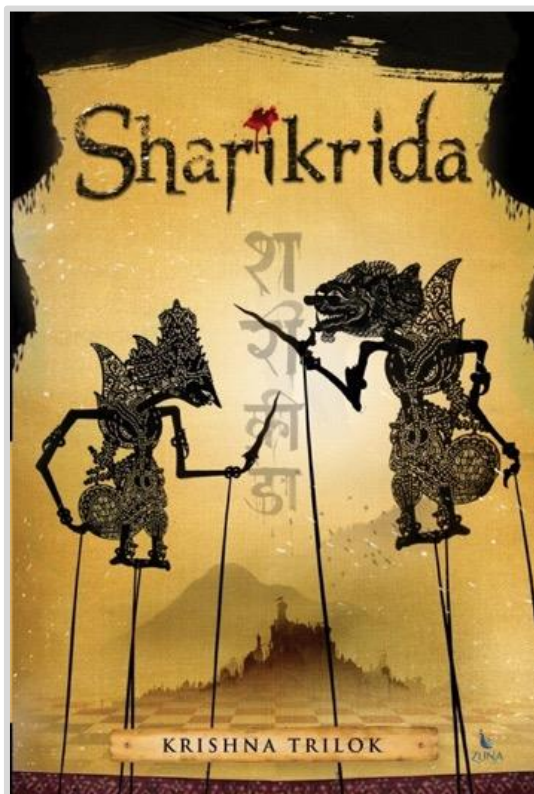
Adding to the already complex amalgamation of identities, culture, and influences, there are ISFF book covers that push the boundaries so much that determining their specific categorisation within the ISFF genre becomes challenging. Within this set, three book covers emerge as particularly noteworthy owing to their design choices and the implications they have regarding identity and Indianness. These books are *Sharikrida* (2017) by Krishna Trilok, *Liars Weave* (2017) by Tashan Mehta, and *Clone* (2019) by Priya Sarukkai Chabria. By combining elements of fantasy, magic, science fiction, and dystopian fiction, these books not only challenge conventional genre classifications but also convey bold visual statements in relation to ideas of nationhood and identity. Like all the other book covers in this chapter, these covers and the narratives they convey indicate a diverse range of visions and texts, ultimately reflecting the multiplicity and richness of contemporary ISFF, thereby broadening our understanding of what constitutes Indianness in the modern era.

For instance, in *Sharikrida* (Figure 64) presents a future where monarchy and kingdoms reign over Vehya (the new name for India in the book). The central plot revolves around a strategic chess match with actual individuals as the playing pieces. The outcome of this match determines which of the five kingdoms will emerge as dominant in this post-modern land. The cover image of *Sharikrida* conveys the theme of manipulation through the depiction of two shadow puppets in the foreground. This imagery symbolises the control exerted over people. In the background, a checkerboard path extends towards the silhouette of a kingdom. The overall composition of the image resembles a scene from shadow puppetry, with the shadows

Figure 64:

Cover image of *Sharikrida* (2017), by Krishna Trilok.

Source: Amazon.in.



of the visual elements cast upon a parchment-coloured fabric. By employing the art form of shadow puppetry, specifically *Tholpavakoothu*, the cover image and the narrative contextualise themselves with an Indian cultural framework. Notably, the translucent vertical text, which is the title written again in Hindi, further reinforces the connection between the novel and its cover image, firmly situating both within an Indian backdrop. Shadow puppetry, as an art form, is a dying folk tradition primarily associated with lower caste individuals and this, particular version is predominantly practised in South India.

Puppeteers employ leather puppets to convey narratives based on epics and also explore contemporary political and secular themes. The choice to incorporate this traditional cultural practice in the novel prompts' contemplation of the implications of change and the resulting political consequences within the text. The cover design avoids a strict dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Instead, it effectively employs the traditional art form in a contemporary manner to make sense of the complexities of our bewildering world.

While *Sharikrida* reflects on contemporary issues by utilising traditional artistic forms, the cover design for *Clone* presents a collage of visual motifs inspired by both popular Indian history and visuality. The design draws influences from both local and global visual cultures.

Figure 65:

Cover image of *Clone* (2019), by Priya Sarukkai Chabria. Source: Amazon.in.



Priya Sarukkai Chabria's novel *Clone* (2019) (Figure 65) showcases a cover image that encapsulates the complexity of Indianness and national identity. This image combines various visual motifs, themes, and tropes to create something entirely new. Sarukkai Chabria's novel tells the story of a fourteenth-generation female clone in an unsettling dystopian India, presenting a vision that is both unfamiliar and bleak. The narrative seamlessly integrates customs from the Vedic age, norms from the Mughal era, and elements of twenty-first-century language within a futuristic setting. This amalgamation of three distinct timelines

creates a coherent and immersive whole, reflecting the complex layering of historical and cultural influences in the narrative.

Reflecting the narrative of the book, the cover image, exemplifies a convergence of various visual motifs and seamlessly juxtaposes them to create a singular image that embodies the complexity of postcolonial identity. The collage of images comprises a blend of photographs and illustrations, featuring a diverse range of elements such as a vibrant green parrot, a world map, a courtesan from the Mughal era, scientific equipment, a robotic dog, a Barbie doll, as well as a heart, among others. Analysing and assembling these diverse visual components offers a captivating tapestry of nationhood and identity. The choice to adopt a collage-like style aligns with the concept of fragmentation and connection. The most salient

feature on the cover, the visual motif of a vivid green parrot holds significant historical and artistic value in medieval and early modern Indo-Persian storytelling and art (Kinra, 1994). Likewise, the motif of the peacock, another emblematic symbol of Indian culture, is observed across various Indian religious traditions like Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism. Notably, this visual motif carries multiple meanings within the country. Notably, these visual motifs carry multiple meanings within the country, reflecting its rich cultural heritage. This multiplicity is beneficial as it integrates various influences to form something new. In the case of the cover of *Clone*, this multiplicity reflects the layered and multifaceted nature of Indian identity, creating a visual narrative that acknowledges the complexity and hybridity of identity.

Alongside the wildlife illustrations, the collage also incorporates depictions of women. Positioned to the left of the parrot, there is a cut-out representation of a Mughal-era courtesan, while on the other side, one catches a glimpse of the head of a tiny Barbie doll. Courtesans during the Mughal era were women of power and highly skilled artists who played a consequential role in shaping the culture of India during that time (Inzamam, 2021). This symbol of powerful women is juxtaposed against the widely recognised plastic doll, symbolizing not merely consumerist and commodified cultures, but also the reinforcement of Western cultural values and ideals of beauty. The artwork for *Clone* adopts a chaotic composition, incorporating a combination of images depicting robots and scientific experimentation, symbolizing progress and rationality, alongside watercolour representations of flowers and the human heart. This combination suggests the existence of a diverse spectrum of visual and cultural aspects, ultimately contributing to the creation of a patchwork quilt that represents an array of identities.

The use of collage as a design choice simplifies the process of creating visuals that reflect the complexity of Indianness. By cutting and pasting incongruous elements to form a new whole, it serves as a method of negotiating and reflecting on existing culture, and perhaps even as a means of resistance. Collage, through its selection and arrangement of images, exposes ruptures and critiques existing representations while simultaneously preserving nostalgia for what has come before. These characteristics suit the concept of understanding contemporary Indian visual culture well, as it is not rooted in populist or hegemonic ideologies but rather encompasses a pastiche of existing images that represent Indianness. However, as art scholar David Banash (2013) pointed out, collage, despite its ability to deconstruct prevailing ideology, still relies on pre-existing images (p. 151). This paradoxical nature of collage means that it can be critical within a specific consumer culture but cannot transcend it or present an alternative world beyond the available images. The cover artwork of *Clone* exemplifies this idea precisely by selectively choosing specific images and juxtaposing them alongside contradictory visual motifs to generate new meanings while simultaneously critiquing them. Additionally, the artwork suggests a certain nostalgia for earlier meanings by assembling these particular images. Ultimately, the cover art effectively portrays the protagonist's journey of creating her own identity by transforming the fragments provided to her. In a similar vein, it implies that a nation, such as India, also constructs a unified identity from its diverse components, drawing upon its multiple histories and sociocultural influences. In conclusion, the cover image of *Clone* presents a cerebral exercise in unravelling and collecting the multitude of apparently disparate elements and fitting them together, resulting in a remarkable tapestry that reflects a boundless sense of Indianness.

Just as the cover image of *Clone* employs the technique of collage to integrate disparate visual motifs into a cohesive image, this approach metaphorically encapsulates the broader

aesthetic and conceptual strategies characterising the dystopian ISFF book covers discussed in this chapter. These book covers blend various cultural and historical elements to craft complex narratives of Indianness. This visual amalgamation reflects the hybrid nature of post-millennial Indian identity, intertwining past and present, tradition and modernity, minority cultures and majority traditions, and local and global influences. Each cover unifies seemingly incongruous elements to represent contemporary Indian identity in a multifaceted manner. These covers not only illustrate the narratives within the books but also engage in a broader dialogue about the nature of identity itself. They challenge the viewer to consider how different cultural and historical elements coexist and interact, offering a nuanced portrayal that resists simplistic categorisations. This underscores the idea that Indian identity, much like a collage, is an ongoing process of negotiation and synthesis, constantly evolving and reshaping itself in response to changing socio-political contexts. This visual approach critiques dominant socio-political ideologies while celebrating the diversity and resilience of a multicultural Indian identity, presenting a complex, inclusive, and dynamic vision of what it means to be Indian in a globalised world.

Conclusion

The visual analysis of dystopian speculative fiction cover images reveals significant insights into the representation of nationhood and Indianness. Key findings include the absence of a singular visual style, the juxtaposition of Western and Indian influences, the nation depicted through the microcosm of the city, and the emphasis on women and subaltern groups as agents of change. These images reject monolithic notions of Indianness, acknowledging the plurality of contemporary perceptions. They embody a collective cultural identity that is pluralistic, multifaceted, continuously evolving, and “imagined” through various ideological perspectives. These covers challenge dominant visual narratives by offering alternative viewpoints that reflect India’s diverse cultural, historical, religious, and socioeconomic contexts. This aligns with Rancière’s concept of the politics of dissensus, emphasizing the role of aesthetics in contesting the established order and creating spaces for alternative voices (2006). By disrupting the normative distribution of the sensible, these images make visible marginalised groups within Indian society, providing a more inclusive and multifaceted representation of Indianness. These images reject hegemonic visual regimes that often sanitise and homogenise Indian identity, instead presenting an unfiltered, diverse, and complex portrayal of urban realities in the nation. By incorporating visual motifs from different cultural and social strata, these covers resist dominant narratives and propose a more pluralistic vision of Indian identity. The integration of traditional art forms, modern urban imagery, and dystopian themes creates a hybrid visual language that reflects the complexities of contemporary India.

The dystopian worlds depicted on these covers critique the socio-political issues and anxieties prevalent in contemporary India. These images emphasise ongoing struggles against

social oppression, technological intrusion, and socioeconomic disparities, providing a powerful commentary on the present state of Indian society. They advocate for marginalised individuals, highlighting their resilience and resistance in the face of systemic oppression. By presenting these dystopian elements, the covers encourage viewers to reflect on the significance of inclusivity, equality, and diversity in shaping the future of the Indian nation. Ultimately, the cover images of Indian dystopian SFF serve as a lens through which to scrutinise and evaluate the current socio-cultural landscape of India. They offer a nuanced portrayal of what it means to be Indian in a rapidly evolving world, highlighting the dual pressures of maintaining a distinctive national identity while assimilating into a globalised context. Through their visual narratives, these covers capture the complexities of contemporary Indian identity, resonating with the challenges of balancing tradition and modernity, local customs, and global influences. By engaging in a politics of dissensus and counter-visibility (Rancière, 2006; Mirzoeff, 2011), they present alternative narratives that reflect a more inclusive, secular, and multifaceted Indian identity.

Chapter 5:

One Nation. We are Many.

The graphic designer Chip Kidd is quoted as saying that “a book cover is a distillation. It is a Haiku of the story” (2012). In this dissertation I have argued that book covers serve a more complex function beyond merely distilling the story or acting as marketing tools. As cultural artefacts, they also encapsulate and distil significant aspects of the society from which they originate and thereby give expression to politically meaningful ways of visualising the world. The importance of this project lies in its comprehensive exploration of how visual culture, specifically through the medium of book cover designs, plays a crucial role in the construction and contestation of national identity in contemporary India. The concluding chapter of this dissertation synthesises the insights gained from the examination of book cover images of ISFF. It provides a concise overview of the findings and illuminates the broader visual culture in India, as well as the portrayal of Indianness in popular visual media. The analysis of the previous chapters focused on the visual themes, signs, and symbols depicted in paratextual images of two Anglophone subgenres of ISFF — Mythological and Dystopian ISFF — to explore how these images reflect, create, and imagine the Indian nation and its people.

The analysis of a diverse range of visual examples reveals the presence of two distinct visual registers that convey specific mediated interpretations of Indianness. The covers of Hindu mythological ISFF adhere to a discernible visual style and aesthetic, resulting in a series of homogenous images characterised by the consistent portrayal of a glorified militant Hindu visuality. Conversely, the covers of dystopian ISFF exhibit varying visual styles and reflect a wide range of subjects and identities. Ultimately, both types of images represent distinct ways of seeing and envisioning India’s present state. This moment is characterised by the dissonance

between two visions for the nation and two political endeavours. One vision looks towards the future, employing the iconography of counter-hegemonic pluralism, diversity and grounded in a desire to address contemporary issues within a linear time framework. In contrast, the political project within Hindu mythological ISFF aspires to a politics of timelessness, one in which a homogeneous visuality of mythic scenes is reimagined and reenacted in a cycle of violence and subsequent restoration of glory. This contrast underscores the ongoing tension between progressive and regressive forces within contemporary Indian visual culture, mirroring broader socio-political conflicts. Additionally, this study highlights how visual culture is not merely reflective but actively participates in shaping and contesting national identity, making the struggle between these two visual regimes a significant cultural battleground.

As I have illustrated, a dichotomy is clearly evident in the visual strategies employed by the two subgenres. Hindu mythological ISFF covers incorporate identifiable symbols, visuals, and themes that unequivocally signify their connection to popular Hindu mythology and epics. These elements collectively forge a visual narrative that underscores a singular, homogenised vision of Indian identity rooted in Hindu nationalism. In contrast, dystopian ISFF employs a visual approach that represents the multiplicity of Indianness, showcasing a wide range of subjects and identities. Both subgenres draw inspiration from global visual influences, particularly Western science fiction and fantasy cover art. However, this is not mere imitation; rather, it develops its own distinct visual language — one that reflects the complexities of Indian visual culture as a whole. While both systems coexist, the Hindu-nationalistic aesthetic represented in Myth-ISFF holds dominance, while the other subgenre represents the secular nationalist ideology and embodies various counter-visuals that challenge and resist the hegemonic visual narratives of national identity within the same cultural landscape. This

coexistence of visual languages underscores the complex and contested nature of Indian identity, highlighting the cultural negotiations that occur within the broader framework of national discourse.

5.1. Almost Utopian — The Hindu Nation as Hegemonic

The first visual register examined in this study pertains to the cover images of ISFF books that reimagine Hindu myths and epics. These cover images actively promote political agendas that have been prevalent for the past century and are endorsed by the current government. They incorporate familiar symbols and iconography from popular comics, images, and films associated with Hindu epics, adapting them to create new images of heroes and role models that act as aspirational figures. By humanising mythical gods and characters and depicting them as noble heroes adorned in attire reminiscent of medieval India, these covers create a sense of realism that suggests these myths are not purely fictional but rather rooted in history. In doing so, the visuals construct an idealised vision of the Hindu past. Consequently, these images serve as a form of “utopianism that skilfully utilises myth and folklore to navigate contemporary socio-political structures” (Khilnani, 2022). This visual strategy reinforces a singular, homogenised vision of Indian identity that aligns with the ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism. Ultimately, these cover images not only perpetuate a specific political narrative but also shape the collective imagination, influencing how the nation and its cultural heritage are perceived and valued. The pervasive use of such imagery illustrates how visual culture functions as a powerful medium for constructing and disseminating nationalist ideologies, embedding these narratives into the everyday cultural experience.

The reimagining of Hindu myths is not a recent phenomenon. Instead, it is a longstanding tradition that is deeply rooted in the use of mythological visuals and narratives to

envision a pan-Indian visuality. This tradition was initially conceptualised by Ravi Varma and his contemporaries in the late 19th century. They employed realistic artistic styles to depict Hindu deities in idealised human forms, while also preserving their divinity. These techniques have transformed the relationship between Indian (Hindu) tradition and what is considered to be 'real.' The realist style, whether it is in the visual, performative, or literary sense, serves as a bridge between the 'mythic' and the 'historical' (Pinney, 2004, p.66). The cover images of Myth-ISFF incorporate elements of realism and draw influences from popular Indian macho hero films, as well as the fantastical imagery found in Western comic books and fantasy genres. This fusion of styles facilitates the convergence of reality and magic, allowing the mythic to take on a more tangible and immediate form, while the historical assumes a more mythological essence. Consequently, a semi-realistic world is created within these cover images, where new myths coexist alongside traditional ones, blurring the boundaries between the past and the present, as well as between nation and religion. Moreover, the consistent visual style and continuous depiction of reimagined religious iconography on these covers contribute to and reflect the prevailing visualisation of a unified and homogenised portrayal of 'pan-Indianness,' deeply rooted in Hindu visuality. These cover images therefore reinforce a singular cultural identity as hegemonic in contemporary media.

This singular, homogenous, muscular militant and gendered identity is in line with the visual and political ideology of present-day Hindu nationalists, who argue that the nation is inherently Hindu. The visual aesthetic can be understood as *Barthesian myths* that reflect significant socio-cultural changes and dominant political ideologies. Barthes (1993) states that *myths* serve as a way to perceive or express certain ideas. What distinguishes *myths* from other forms of cultural narratives is their ability to present an ethos, ideology, or set of values as if they were natural and objective conditions, even though they are actually man-made constructs

shaped by specific perspectives.²² In the case of Myth-ISFF, the images employ familiar mythologies, symbols, and archetypes of heroes and heroines to imagine a specific perspective of Indianness. Specifically, Hindu nationalism is portrayed as natural through the recurrent *mythologisation* of certain visual elements. This particular framing makes Hindu nationalism appear natural and inherent to Indian identity through the repeated *mythologisation* of these visual elements.

The primary signifier in nearly all Myth-ISFF cover images are reimagined depictions of Hindu gods as warrior heroes engaged in heroic acts, often positioned for battle and embodying lofty moral virtues such as honour, duty, loyalty, and righteousness. The images glorify hyper-masculinity by depicting the heroes with muscular physiques, thereby exemplifying hegemonic notions of masculinity — strong, rugged, physically and emotionally resilient, unafraid of violence, and willing to fight to establish dominance. Even the warrior heroines depicted in these images conform to the dominant visual narrative of militant Hindu nationalism. This reimagining of mythical gods and avatars as ancient Hindu militant heroes establishes a specific sort of connection with the past, invoking the nation by linking ‘mythological’ subjects to ‘historical’ subjects and locations in their presentation. This visualisation of the nation as rooted in Hindu cultural traditions is also apparent in the supplementary iconography and visual elements depicted in these myth-ISFF cover images. The incorporation of period-specific accessories, weaponry, attire, and backdrops featuring castles and pristine landscapes collectively contribute to a perception of historical veracity.

²² I italicise the word “myth” in certain instances in this paragraph to distinguish between Barthesian myth and Hindu mythology for the sake of clarity.

Consequently, this portrayal represents a departure from the nation's prior image as meek and non-violent, now presenting it as assertive and masculine. The prominence of the heroic figure in these images serves to simultaneously celebrate and sanctify the nation by elevating these reimagined gods and heroes as paragons of virtue and national pride. This recurring imagery consolidates the notion of a Hindu nation-state. Thus, the *myth* of militant masculinity and the *myth* of the Hindu nation become intertwined, firmly establishing it within the collective consciousness. As argued by Barthes, over time, the process of *mythologising* becomes natural, facilitated by the established conventions from earlier television and comic-book adaptations of the Hindu epics during the 1980s and 1990s. These conventions are drawn upon by myth-ISFF covers, thus incorporating the paratextual elements into a broader meta-narrative centred around nationhood. By presenting mythology and epics as 'real' through aspirational heroes, these cover images not only introduce the epics to new audiences but also reinforces prevalent notions about the nation. On that account, the images serve a dual purpose: establishing a new hegemonic interpretation of the epics and aligning the visual imagery in support of hardline Hindutva nationalism. Messages regarding national identity that are conveyed through non-political images possess significant potency precisely because they are not presented in an explicitly conclusive or authoritative voice. The paratextual medium allows the audience to feel a sense of autonomy. However, a prevailing visualisation of Indian identity emerges, one that is characterised by an eternal past of militant Hindu glory. As a result, these cover images help create a dominant and mythical visual representation of a Hindu-centric India.

The visual aesthetics of Hindu myth ISFF can be understood within Rancière's concept of the "police order" (2004). This term pertains to a domain wherein the prevailing values of citizenship and the state shape, define, and regulate the cultural perceptions of existence and

moral geographies. Rancière (2004) contends that dominant aesthetics can be regarded as “the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (p. 13). In the case of India and its visual identity, the established “police order” as conceptualised by Rancière can be understood as the dominant socio-political and cultural norms that define and regulate what the national identity looks like. This order delineates the boundaries of perception, dictating which narratives, symbols, and images are legitimised and which are marginalised. The prevailing police order in India is heavily influenced by Hindu nationalist ideology, as espoused by the current government and the RSS ideologues. According to this ideology, India is fundamentally a Hindu nation. Its objective is to promote (upper caste) Hindu cultural and historical narratives, while marginalizing sub-altern identities. Through the strategic use of visual and cultural narratives, the police order reinforces a romanticised image of ancient Hindu civilization as the authentic essence of Indian identity. Similarly, the cover images of myth-ISFF — which depict Hindu epics and militant heroes — endorse and mirror dominant cultural practices and adhere to the existing police order. By employing Rancière’s framework, one can articulate how the abstract concept of nationhood and “Indianness” is policed and assembled to conform to a specific appearance.

Rancière (2004) additionally, posits that the police aesthetic practices are meticulously moulded and confined within a closed system, in which a specific group or ideology exerts control over the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of visual content. These networks are inherently exclusive, meaning they do not embrace diverse or alternative perspectives, instead reinforcing and upholding their own viewpoints and values. In the Indian context, the exclusive networks of production generate content that reflects and perpetuates a Hindu-centric understanding of Indian identity. The interconnectedness and intertextuality of these productions ensure the consistent replication and endorsement of similar themes, symbols, and

narratives within this network. This is evident in the cover images of myth-ISFF, where the style and visual themes are strikingly similar. The covers' depiction of powerful, muscular Hindu warriors and heroes reinforces the narrative of a strong, assertive Hindu nation, further legitimising the prevailing socio-political ideology. Consequently, the portrayals of India's past and present become self-referential, affirming the notion of a timeless Hindu glory.

Following Rancière's framework, the historical conditions that make such a choice possible are rooted in the specific characteristics of Indian nationalism, which is defined by both "an epistemic break from the past, specifically the colonial past, and a desire to reclaim certain aspects of that past" (Lothspeich, 2009, p. 12). Indian nationalism, therefore, is a complex interplay of rejecting the legacies of colonialism while simultaneously embracing and reinterpreting cultural and historical heritage that predates colonial intervention. In times of crisis, the nation turns to the symbols, narratives, and visual representations of Hindu mythology. Starting from the early 20th century, when Bharat Mata was conceived as an inclusive and maternal figure symbolising spirituality and motherhood, with the intention of conveying a secular message and symbolising the struggle for independence against colonial rule, to the present portrayal of Hindu nationalism as militant and exclusionary, there is a consistent element: the *mythic* reinterpretation of Hindu epics. This reinterpretation constructs an imagined past that predates colonisation, portraying the nation as triumphant.

Over the past two hundred years, the *mythic* in the Barthesian sense visualisation of epics tied to Indian nationalism has navigated the violence of colonialism, embraced revitalisation, witnessed the development of secular nationalism, and currently exists within a post-millennial, Hindu nationalist present. This shift in visual representation is not just a change in aesthetic preference but a deliberate political strategy to shape and control the cultural

perception of national identity. This sustained and strategic use of visual myth-making underscores the role of cultural narratives in not only preserving but actively constructing a specific vision of the nation's identity.

In a broader sense, the visual aesthetics of Hindu myth ISFF illustrate how visual culture and aesthetics, particularly those that combine traditional and modern forms and content, remain a socially, politically, and historically compelling force. While it may be simplistic to interpret the presence of muscular Hindu hero images as evidence of widespread belief in an aggressive Hindutva ideology in present-day India, this analysis demonstrates that by drawing on established conventions, the visual narratives in Myth-ISFF books reinforce the prevailing social order and perpetuate dominant socio-political ideologies of Hindu dominance, militant nationalism, and the masculine ethos of Hindutva and the BJP.

5.2. There is Hope even in Dystopian Futures

If we adopt Rancière's perspective, politics and the political can be understood as the ongoing tensions that arise from shared, everyday experiences and the actions that disrupt or challenge this commonality produced by police aesthetics. In Rancière's account, politics involves the interplay between the tangible reality of objects and the abilities and perceptions of individuals within society (Rancière, 2006). An essential aspect of this thesis, then, is to demonstrate how various visual aesthetics can function as tools for political intervention. These aesthetic forms contest and disrupt the "police order," thereby subverting prevailing socio-political norms and facilitating new ways of seeing and understanding the nation. To understand the mechanics of resistance or counteraction within the context of visual nationhood, it is crucial to acknowledge the disparity between politics as dissensus and the bureaucratic organisation of the "police order." In other words, the intervention and potential of dystopian

ISFF images to present alternative depictions of Indianness can only be fully grasped when contrasted with the dominant visibility and iconography of myth-ISFF images. This suggests that a politics of aesthetics can encompass both the dominant images and the interventions that aim to reconfigure the overarching structure (Jazeel and Mookherjee, 2015). Additionally, Rancière's scholarly inquiry centres around the genesis of specific visual and cultural depictions, the historical and social forces that shape them, and the potential presentation or concealment of truths or falsehoods within them. This approach aids in comprehending the wider ramifications of dystopian ISFF cover images within their particular historical and social milieus.

Throughout the course of Indian history, various visual strategies have been employed to challenge power. These strategies have been situated within their respective historical periods while also drawing upon universal visual imagery and concepts to subvert the dominance of particularism. The contestation over nationalistic ideas and images, specifically imagined geographies, is enacted through the visual design that constitutes contemporary dystopian ISFF cover images and, by extension, the broader subaltern Indian popular cultural landscape. The cultural values and norms within any given society serve as a backdrop against which individuals interpret and navigate their daily lives. Appadurai (1995) argues that global influences and changes, such as economic trends, technological advancements, and cultural exchanges, interact with local traditions and contexts, ultimately giving rise to the emergence of new and distinct identities and localised subjectivities. These interactions between the global and the local profoundly impact how individuals imagine and understand their world, leading to transformations in cultural practices and the emergence of more dynamic forms of differences (Appadurai, 1995).

This intense struggle against Hindutva nationalism, particularly in its political and visual cultural structures, is engaged, as Edward Said (1994) reminds us, through the deployment of ideas, images, and imaginings. While Hindu ISFF presents a window into an exceedingly hegemonic and unchanging police order, the visual representations in dystopian ISFF interact with visibility in ways that assert multiple forms of resistance. The collection of works I have classified here as dystopian ISFF constitutes part of a postmillennial counter-visibility that disrupts hierarchical visual aesthetics. These cover images contribute to a substantial and evolving body of Indian visual expression, offering alternative perspectives on Indianness that are not rooted in a Hindu-centric vision. These covers present unsettling visions of a near-future India, often achieved through the visual abstraction of symbols and/or the juxtaposition of the incongruous with the ordinary. More specifically, these visions draw upon historical and contemporary social concerns, touching upon themes such as gender, class, technology, and the environment. By employing a visual mode that portrays a fictional yet plausible future, this body of work generates a sense of “what could be,” thereby displacing and situating the world of the image within our present reality, ultimately evoking a feeling of unease. This unease stems from the displacement of familiar urban iconography and symbols into unfamiliar “otherworldly” spaces and engages to varying degrees with the dystopian mode. Moreover, and of significant importance, the familiar iconography within non-myth ISFF does not exclusively represent a singular Hindu-Indian identity; instead, it adopts a more inclusive and expansive visual language.

In the case of dystopian ISFF cover images, the iconography and themes can be understood as a critique and reaction to the Hindutva movement in both political and aesthetic realms. These cover images depict a potential outcome of what may happen in India if Hindutva gains unchecked power. By combining widely recognised symbols of dystopia or science

fiction, such as robots, surveillance machines, and walled cities, with urban Indian iconography that represents diverse people, religious traditions, and architecture, these covers allude to important aspects of resistant political aesthetics. Firstly, the cover art uncompromisingly foregrounds those who are marginalised and disenfranchised due to the effects of nation-building and state formation. Consequently, the use of dystopian and science fiction imagery emphasises the violence inflicted upon the bodies of the dispossessed underbelly of the nation, which cannot easily fit into Hindu India's idyllic pastoral kingdom. These cover images also emphasise the universal nature of certain issues, as the utopian-dystopian dichotomy is not unique to India. The covers employ recognisable urban and regional iconography that stems from the diverse religious and cultural practices of the nation — including clothing, folk art, and architecture — along with the marginalised characters as symbols of resistance and hope. The characters portrayed in these images do not merely accept their dystopian visuality; they likewise refuse to be invisibilised in the contemporary political-visual sphere. Rather, this platforming of the marginalised, and the multiplicity of cultures, is crucial in altering and contesting the police order.

According to Rancière, politics revolves around dissensus, which refers to the disruption of the sensible order that defines the distribution of roles, positions, and ways of being within a society. Within this framework, dissensus emerges from aesthetic interventions that question the prevailing order, or the “police order.” Dystopian ISFF imagery, by prominently featuring marginalised and “other” aspects of Indianness on their covers, serves to highlight concealed elements of the dominant visual culture, particularly those considered unpleasant (as the mainstream tends to avoid acknowledging the nation's flaws). This form of dissensus is particularly evident in the portrayal of women who are regarded as inauspicious and do not conform to the ideal image of an upper-caste Hindu woman or the heroic militant

Hindu warrior archetype depicted in myth ISFF covers. Instead, the characters depicted on dystopian cover images represent those who face various forms of prejudice. By placing them as central protagonists on the cover images, even within a dystopian Indian society, grants them greater agency and voice, thereby challenging the dominant visual narratives that perpetuate their oppression. Furthermore, the cover images, through the dystopian urban mise-en-scène in which the nation and the protagonists are situated, offer a critique of the deliberate efforts exerted by those in positions of power and authority to control and shape the representations of space. This control encompasses not only spatial practices but also extends to the spaces of representation for the city's residents, particularly those who are marginalised. By presenting alternative futures that amplify the current socio-political conditions, these images prompt viewers to critically examine the potential consequences that would arise if the current state and societal apparatuses were allowed to operate without constraints. By doing so, they encourage individuals to interrogate the naturalised and dominant portrayals of national identity propagated by the Hindu nationalist ideology.

These book cover images unveil the tensions that exist between the utopian vision of a homogenous Hindu nation and the dystopian realities of exclusion and marginalisation. In addition, the expressive variety of graphic styles, motifs, and characters depicted on these covers symbolically represent the diverse and complex nature of Indian identity. Consequently, these images resist the simplification and reduction that is inherent in the dominant visual representation of Indian identity. By prominently featuring aspects of Indianness that deviate from traditional myth ISFF imagery, these cover images become symbolic representations that resist the visual dominance of Hindutva that aims to present a singular expression of Indian identity. The expressive diversity of these visuals, therefore, serves as a counterpoint to the prevailing symbols of Hindu nationalism, exemplifying how aesthetics can be utilised as a

potent tool for political intervention. Consequently, these visuals create opportunities for dissensus and foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of nationhood.

Myth and dystopian ISFF book covers serve as examples of Barthesian *myths*, emphasizing the social, cultural, and political changes of the present century. Each cover image represents a unique combination of political, cultural, and historical conditions and conveys meaning through visual codes and conventions. This research project has investigated the expansive and intricate realm of visuals in contemporary India, examining the connection between the visual and the political by studying paratextual images as sites of political contestation. To achieve this, insights from Jacques Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible, as well as the semiotic analytical frameworks developed by Barthes, Kress, and van Leeuwen, and Mirzoeff's formulation of visibility and counter-visibility, have been employed to comprehend the interplay between mass-produced visual media and politics. While book cover art is not typically recognised as a public art form that conveys political messages, this study has demonstrated that these everyday images provide a valuable reflection of societal dynamics.

The analysis of the two types of ISFF book covers has brought several key observations to light. Firstly, the covers exemplify divergent notions of patriotism and national identity that are deeply embedded in both the fictional visual realms and contemporary Indian society. The myth ISFF cover images demonstrate that the construction of an imagined community through artistic portrayal inevitably entails the exclusion of minority groups and interests, as the dominant group seeks to establish a homogenous identity. Conversely, the dystopian ISFF cover images draw attention to the perils of religious nationalism and serve as a testament to the coexistence of "multiple realities and tendencies" within the nation (Singh, 2016, p. 313).

The latter underscores the aspiration to generate and engage with conceptions of Indianness that visually depart from conventional state representations of the country.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity emphasises the complex layering and negotiation of multiple identities within the nation, arguing that national identity is not monolithic but formed through a dynamic process of cultural exchange, resulting in a hybrid identity that reflects both continuity and difference (Bhabha, 1994). This study has shown that the visual realm in contemporary India is a dynamic and contested space where symbols and imagery are constantly at play in the politics of identity. The divergent visual representations in ISSF book covers reflect and shape ongoing debates about national identity. By highlighting these contrasting visual narratives, this research underscores the power of visual media as a site for both reinforcing and challenging dominant socio-political norms. Beyond the scope of this analysis, one can observe the repetition and transformation of these ideas in other types of book covers and various forms of visual expression. Through this exploration, the dissertation demonstrates that the visual realm has become a critical arena for articulating and shaping divergent visions of Indian identity. Ultimately, it sheds light on the ongoing struggle between two opposing political identities – one subscribing to the hegemony of visuality in Hindu nationalism, and the other embracing the multifaceted visuality associated with secularist notions of India.

Conclusion

At the start of this research, I began with a quote from Walzer, who underscores the importance of tangible visual and symbolic representations to make the abstract concept of the nation both relatable and emotionally resonant. This necessity becomes particularly crucial in the Indian context, where the notions of Indianness and the criteria for defining Indian citizenship remain deeply contested. Within the ever-evolving discourse on Indianness, contemporary ISFF and its visual representations assume a pivotal role in shaping, challenging, and expanding our comprehension of national identity. By embodying, symbolising, and conceiving the nation in diverse forms, ISFF not only mirrors ongoing debates but also contributes to the larger processes of nation-building and identity formation. Paratextual elements, such as book cover images, hold a crucial function in this visual and symbolic representation. These covers, with their imaginative portrayals and visual narratives, function as a threshold to the complex worlds contained within, providing a realm for negotiating and reimagining the Indian nation and its multiplicities narratives.

This discussion on contrasting perspectives regarding Indianness calls to mind the writings of two influential figures: V.D. Savarkar and Rabindranath Tagore. Savarkar, a prominent leader of the Hindu right, conceptualises Indian nationalism as deeply rooted in the interplay between territory, history, and culture, particularly in relation to a shared religious affiliation. He argues, “This Bharatbhumi (India), this land of ours is our Punyabhumi (holy land), for it was in this land that the Founders of our faith and the Seers to whom ‘Veda’ the Knowledge was revealed” (quoted in Tharoor, 2018, p. 134). Here, Savarkar blurs the distinction between India and Hinduism, prioritising the Hindu identity. This enables him to determine who should or should not be considered part of India. In another section of the same text, Savarkar defines the Indian nation as one with an enduring existence since ancient times,

characterised by a shared history, mythology, religious figures, and heroes (Tharoor, 2018). Savarkar's portrayal of India presents it as a land of mythology, abounding with sanctity and ancestral connections, and he identifies (upper caste) Hindus as the authentic denizens of India. In doing so, Savarkar effectively marginalises and excludes individuals and groups who do not conform to this narrowly defined identity, such as Muslims, Christians, and lower-caste Hindus, thereby oversimplifying the complex, diverse, and varied histories of the Indian subcontinent. This ideology, which associates "Indianness" with "Hindu-ness" and reimagines the "glorious Hindu past" of the nation, is reflected in populist visual representations, exemplified most vividly by the myth-ISFF book covers.

In stark contrast to Savarkar's conception of India as a Hindu nation is that of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). He writes:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,
Where knowledge is free,
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls (...)

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake (Tagore, 1946).

Widely taught in Indian schools, the simplified English rendition of the poem "Indian Prayer" encapsulates the essence of India's transformative journey. Tagore's visionary portrayal envisions a future characterised by a harmonious and integrated India, emancipated from fragmentation and conflict. This utopian yearning ardently emphasises the fraternity of the nation and embraces the rich diversity of its people under the overarching canopy of the Indian identity. Though the Dystopian cover images reflect the anxieties of the present nation, there still exists within them this very same utopian longing for brotherhood and multiculturalism.

Both texts were written prior to Indian independence and offer contrasting perspectives on India's postcolonial identity. Today, they exemplify the coexistence of two contrasting conceptions of the nation, as reflected in mythological and dystopian ISFF book cover images. These representations not only shape cultural and political discourse by visually conveying the essence of India's identity and potential but also actively engage with the ideological struggles that define India today. The enduring tension between these perspectives underscores the importance of ongoing dialogue and critical evaluation of the cultural symbols that shape our understanding of national identity.

In recent years, India has witnessed significant conflicts stemming from symbols and imagery. The visual realm has emerged as a fertile ground for the dissemination of rumours and the suppression of dissenting opinions. With the ubiquitous presence of mobile technology and social media, coupled with the enduring power of the pictorial as a mirror of reality, the political impact of visual media has surpassed that of oral and written forms. This thesis explores the expansive and dynamic world of visuals in contemporary India and their relationship with the political sphere. In the preceding pages, I have presented a comprehensive examination of the role of book covers in influencing the nation and identity in ideological terms has been presented. This study has addressed the wider context of Indian identity and nationalism by analysing the visual strategies employed in Indian Speculative Fiction and Fantasy (ISFF) book covers. It has shown how these covers not only reflect but also shape the socio-political narratives surrounding Indian identity, particularly through the contrasting lenses of Hindu mythological and dystopian subgenres. By drawing on the works of theorists like Rancière, Barthes, and Mirzoeff, this research situates itself within broader scholarly discourses on visual culture, politics, and postcolonial studies. The insights from these works

have been instrumental in understanding the complex interplay between visual representation and national identity in India.

As an illustrator and designer, this study holds personal significance for me. It reflects not only my academic interests but also my professional practice. The exploration of visual culture in India is not just a theoretical exercise but a lens through which I approach my own design work, aiming to create visuals that are mindful of the cultural and political contexts they inhabit. Thus, it is crucial to conclude with a contemplation of my own conceptualizations regarding the essence of India. This can be most effectively exemplified by a memory from my childhood—the autorickshaw that served as the mode of transportation to and from school. This particular rickshaw was operated by a follower of Buddhism, and the eight children onboard hailed from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The entire surface of the vehicle was adorned with an assortment of religious stickers. These stickers coexisted alongside quotes concerning caste reformation from noteworthy Indian figures such as B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar. The gravitas of these stickers was balanced out by the presence of posters featuring popular South Indian film stars, like Rajinikanth, as well as Western celebrities such as Tom Cruise, on the sides of the rickshaw. In addition to these, we kids also contributed to this collection, my own addition, a series of Dragon Ball-Z stickers. This vivid and chaotic image from my memory which I later used as inspiration for the preliminary sketches of a design project (see Figure 66) exemplifies the vibrant, complex, and multifaceted nature of being Indian. The numerous stickers and posters on the sides of the rickshaw extol a plethora of ideas and ideals and represent the epitome of Indian visuality. In an era when distinguishing between the rise of visuality associated with the Hindu Right and Hindutva politics, which promote a narrow ideology of Indianness in politics and culture, proves challenging, the vivid, multi-hued, and multicultural image of the stickered auto rickshaw

reflects the vastness, intricacy, and joy associated with being Indian. May we always celebrate and preserve this diversity.

Figure 66:
Illustration rough sketch for Chennai and I visual identity project (2012), by self.



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