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# THE BUSINESS BEHIND THE BELIEF: HOW THE RAMAYANA WAS CAPITALIZED

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## Act I: Rama™ – The Sacred Bestseller

Let's get one thing straight: the *Ramayan* is no longer just a spiritual compass passed down through incense-filled evenings and hand-copied manuscripts. It's now a **cultural commodity**—a glittering, mutable, monetizable brand, rebranded for each generation and every agenda. Rama, once a forest exile and philosopher-king, is now a full-blown pop icon. And like any good icon in the 21st century, he's being relentlessly monetized.

Just look around. He appears in mega-budget mythological series, his name stamped across posters promising a "return to tradition." His story is retold in animation films, children's books, daily soap operas, WhatsApp stickers, devotional Instagram reels, and now generative AI scripts that churn out *Ram Katha* content by the hour. From temples to YouTube thumbnails, Rama sells. So does Sita. So does the burning of Ravan.

In short: **the Ramayan is India's sacred bestseller**. And like any bestseller in capitalist culture, it's been edited, abridged, aestheticized, and aggressively marketed. Morality? Optional. Authenticity? Negotiable. Mass appeal? Essential.

This is not a new phenomenon. The epic has been reinterpreted for millennia by poets like Kamban in Tamil, Goswami Tulsidas in Hindi, and countless tribal storytellers who carried the *Ramayan* into forests, deserts, and oral traditions. But today's reinterpretations are different. They come with billion-dollar budgets, sponsored hashtags, and political undercurrents. They arrive not as art, but as **assets**.

Because in India, mythology is no longer just belief—it's **business**. And that business is booming.

And if you're wondering just how far the *Ramayana* brand has stretched—brace yourself. There are **well over 300 known adaptations** of the epic across every imaginable medium: films, television serials, comics, novels, animations, radio dramas, and yes, even mobile games. In India alone, it's practically a genre unto itself. Ramanand Sagar's 1987 television series became such a national obsession that entire cities would pause; shops shut, streets emptied, and people placed garlands on their TV sets like they were altars. More recently, slick reboots with 4K visuals, slow-motion arrows, and mythic gym-bodies continue to churn out ratings gold.

But the obsession isn't local—it's **global**. Japan produced an anime film version (*Ramayan: The Legend of Prince Rama*) in the 1990s. Indonesia stages *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) Ramayans with hypnotic gamelan music. Thailand and Laos have their own literary versions, like the *Ramakien*, which are taught in schools. In Cambodia, you can watch *Ramayan*-inspired murals wrap around ancient temples. In the Philippines, there's been a Broadway-style musical retelling. There are Javanese ballets, Balinese dance dramas, and even Southeast Asian graphic novels depicting Rama with samurai swords or steampunk chariots.

The comic book world, of course, dove in headfirst. **Amar Chitra Katha** has printed countless versions since the 1960s—each one a glossy technicolor interpretation where Rama always looks like a calm superhero and Ravan like a villain from a 1980s rock band. Independent artists and graphic novelists have since taken the torch further—deconstructing the epic, flipping perspectives, and stylizing it with dystopian futurism or feminist rewrites.

If Marvel had this IP, we'd be on *Ramayan: Multiverse of Dharma* by now, with Ravan origin spin-offs, Sita standalone series, and a CGI Hanuman voiced by Vin Diesel. The only difference is: they'd at least pay royalties.

Let's not kid ourselves: in today's world, everything is up for branding. Fonts. Food. Feelings. In this globalized temple of commerce, even the sacred gets a barcode. Tech startups sue over font families. Beverage companies guard their logos like state secrets. And don't even think about using a superhero's name... unless you're ready for a cease-and-desist.

So how is it that the *Ramayana*, a 2,000-year-old epic with layers of philosophy, cosmology,

ethics, and identity remains legally unguarded? It's arguably the **single most influential narrative in South and Southeast Asia**, and yet it floats freely in the public domain, up for grabs by anyone with a camera, a canvas, or a campaign slogan.

**This is the uncomfortable truth:** Rama is free—and everyone is cashing in.

Politicians drop his name for votes, often without a clue about his dharma. Filmmakers recycle his story, layering it with overproduced VFX and marketed as “heritage meets high-definition.” Instagram influencers lip-sync to *shlokas* in reels with gold filters and hashtags like #RamVibesOnly. And each year, when effigies of Ravan are burned in fiery celebration, miniature versions of the same are sold on Amazon—with “Combo Packs” and *one-day delivery*. **Is this celebration? Or is it exploitation?** Is the epic still guiding our morals—or just feeding the content machine?

Let's be blunt: we live in a world that **hoards intellectual property like dragon gold**. Code is copyrighted. Coffee slogans are trademarked. Even gene sequences have been patented by private corporations. But here we are, letting our most profound philosophical and cultural work drift in the legal equivalent of no man's land.

The *Ramayana* has shaped constitutional ideas of justice, gender debates, nationalist narratives, and the arts for centuries. Yet when it comes to ownership, we treat it like folklore—ancient, anonymous, and conveniently up for grabs.

If someone launched a video game tomorrow called **Rama vs Ravan: Temple Combat Edition™**, complete with laser bows and downloadable weapon skins, **they wouldn't need anyone's permission**. If a Western brand decided to launch a cereal called “Sita's Sattvic Start™”—**no traditional community could legally challenge them**.

That's the **gap**: the story belongs to everyone culturally, but **to no one legally**. The result?

- No **royalties** for the *bhajan* singer who's memorized the epic since childhood.
- No **protections** for village dramatists who stage *Ramlila* every year with hand-sewn costumes and borrowed mics.
- No **recognition** for tribal artists who paint Rama's journey using natural dyes, inherited patterns, and sacred geography.

Meanwhile, **production companies** rake in profits. Streaming giants collect ad revenue. Merchandisers slap Rama's face on lunchboxes, notebooks, and devotional air fresheners. The **people who preserved the epic** are invisible. The **people who profit from it** are on billboards.

This isn't just a copyright issue. It's about **traditional knowledge**—a kind of intellectual wealth that **predates paper and patents**. Embedded in the *Ramayana* are **coded systems of living**:

- Ecological wisdom in Rama's respectful interaction with forests and animals.
- Civilizational principles in the architecture of Ayodhya and Lanka.
- Gender roles, moral paradoxes, and even medical practices that have evolved through centuries of oral transmission and regional retelling.

This is **indigenous data**. And it's just as worthy of protection as a pharmaceutical patent or a startup's source code. But try walking into a courtroom and defending that.

Modern intellectual property law isn't built for oral knowledge passed down in *paathshalas*, shrines, and grandmother's stories. It's built for *first movers*, not faithful transmitters. For *fixed authorship*, not fluid, generational contribution. It asks for originality and individual genius—two concepts utterly foreign to how the *Ramayana* has lived and thrived.

So what happens? Traditional knowledge becomes like a public water tap: open to all, managed by none, and vulnerable to pollution by those with no reverence or responsibility.

Here's where the hypocrisy gets hard to ignore. When yoga postures are copyrighted in California or turmeric is patented in a lab in Texas, we cry cultural theft—and rightly so. We write op-eds, tweet hashtags, and demand international intervention. But when Indian corporations or filmmakers sanitize, sensationalize, or politicize the *Ramayana* to suit electoral, commercial, or cinematic convenience?

We cheer. We retweet. We applaud.

We call it “modernization,” “revival,” or “cultural resurgence.” Let's call it what it really is: **self-colonization**. We're colonizing our own mythology, flattening its philosophical richness into good-versus-evil action tropes, remaking nuanced characters into merch-ready mascots, and reducing entire cosmologies into feel-good Instagram captions. The **real theft isn't**

**foreign.** It's *domestic*. It's self-inflicted. And it's disguised as devotion.

To be clear: **The Ramayana should remain public domain.** It belongs to the people. Locking it behind copyright walls would betray its essence. But **public domain should not mean public abuse.** It should mean **public stewardship**; a shared responsibility to engage with it ethically, contextually, and creatively, without erasing its origin or its keepers. *Free to retell—but not to twist beyond recognition. Free to interpret—but not to exploit without attribution. Free to perform—but not to profit without sharing.*

What India needs is a **new model of intellectual and cultural respect**—one that:

- Recognizes **community custodianship** of oral traditions,
- Supports **regional performers and storytellers**,
- Promotes **responsible reinterpretation**, and
- Draws **ethical red lines** around commercial co-opting of sacred knowledge.

Because if we continue down this road where everything sacred becomes saleable, then we'll wake up in a world where **nothing** is sacred at all.

So yes, Rama is everywhere now, on screens, in speeches, on streaming platforms, in hashtags, on stage, and in shopping carts. But where is **he** in all of this? And where are the people who have guarded his story for millennia? **Rama doesn't need protection. His story does. His keepers do.** And if we don't start asking *who owns Rama*, someone else will answer the question for us—with a logo, a trademark, and a bill attached.

## **Act II: Lawless in Ayodhya – Who Really Owns the Ramayana?**

Let's take a short detour through the courtroom—not the kind where dharma is debated by sages, but the kind where copyright, trademarks, and intellectual property are the real gods. Because for all the billion-rupee franchises, saffron-soaked storytelling, and cinematic renderings of Rama's 14-year exile in stunning high definition, here's the most inconvenient truth of all: **Legally speaking, no one owns the Ramayan.**

That's right. Not the temple trusts that build monuments in its name. Not the political parties that weaponize its verses. Not the filmmakers who milk its characters for VFX glory. Not the religious institutions that claim to be the custodians of its sanctity.

In the clinical, unblinking logic of copyright law, the *Ramayana* is a kind of legal ghost. It's ancient, influential, and omnipresent, but it doesn't belong to anyone in a way that can be protected, enforced, or licensed. It is culturally priceless, but legally, **it's up for grabs.**

Let's start at the source. The oldest known version of the *Ramayana*, traditionally attributed to the sage Valmiki, is over two millennia old. That's well beyond any conceivable copyright term in any country on Earth. In legal terms, it is **public domain**, an orphaned masterpiece floating in global legal limbo. No copyright. No exclusive license. No legal barriers. No royalties owed to anyone.

This means you can do just about anything with it. Translate it into any language. Adapt it into a gritty space opera. Turn it into a street play, a musical, or a webcomic series. Remix it with EDM beats and call it "Divine Drops: The Dharma Sessions." **Legally, you don't owe anyone a rupee—or even a *pranam*.** But of course, things get murkier the moment you move away from the original Sanskrit version and into the ever-growing ecosystem of adaptations.

Here's where copyright law re-enters the chat. While the ancient text is free to use, **modern adaptations and translations are not.** They are considered original works of authorship, and therefore eligible for copyright protection, just like a novel, film script, or pop song.

So if a writer publishes a modern retelling of the *Ramayana*—say, R.K. Narayan's elegant prose version, or C. Rajagopalachari's popular abridgement, or even Devdutt Pattanaik's illustrated, interpretation-heavy editions, those works are protected by copyright. They cannot be copied or distributed without permission from the rights holder, usually the author or the publisher.

The same logic applies to cinema and television. Ramanand Sagar's 1987 television juggernaut, for example, is **intellectual property.** Not because he owns Rama, but because he owns that specific expression of Rama: the script, the visuals, the costume designs, the soundscape, the editing rhythm. The same applies to more recent adaptations on OTT platforms or animated versions made for global audiences. So yes, you're free to tell Rama's story. But you **can't plagiarize someone else's version of it.**

You can't lift pages from a modern English retelling and pass it off as your own. You can't rip scenes from a TV show and dub them into comedy without permission. Not unless you're inviting lawsuits or, worse, DMCA takedowns.

But here's the legal twist. Even though *specific retellings* are protected, the **core content**—the characters, the settings, the basic plot is still public domain.

Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Ravan, all of them are legally unowned. They are archetypes, not trademarks. That means anyone can use them in new works. You could write a noir detective thriller where Ravan is a misunderstood genius. You could develop a sitcom set in a tech startup called *Vanara Inc.*, led by a caffeinated Hanuman. You could even animate a version where Sita rescues Rama. No one can sue you for using these characters, at least not on intellectual property grounds. That is, unless your work strays into other legal minefields, like hate speech, defamation, or incitement. But that's not about IP law. That's about public safety and political temperature.

Now comes the moral mess: just because the *Ramayana* is legally unclaimed, does that mean it's fair game for *any* kind of appropriation? Absolutely not. Because while the courts may not recognize “emotional copyright,” **millions of people do**. For many Hindus, the *Ramayana* is not just literature, it is **scripture**, a living text woven into daily rituals, family values, social customs, and religious imagination. It isn't just revered—it's **relived** across generations.

So when a director tweaks the narrative for dramatic effect, or a fashion brand releases a “Ravan Rising” hoodie collection, or a meme page makes light of Sita's abduction, outrage is not just expected—it's inevitable. But here's the kicker: **offense is not ownership**.

You can feel deeply violated by a depiction of Rama that contradicts your worldview. But unless it violates specific laws like those against hate speech, blasphemy (where applicable), or incitement you can't shut it down legally. **Hurt sentiments don't equal legal protection**. And in a democracy, reinterpretation, even unpopular, uncomfortable, or controversial reinterpretation is protected speech. Especially when it challenges orthodoxy.

This leads us to the real problem: **traditional knowledge doesn't fit modern law**.

Copyright law was built for inventors and entrepreneurs, not oral storytellers or collective cultural memory. It rewards novelty, not continuity. It protects the “first to file,” not the community that’s kept a tradition alive for centuries without documentation.

And so, traditional knowledge—like that embedded in the *Ramayana*—falls through the cracks. It becomes a cultural free-for-all. It’s shared by all, owned by none, and ripe for commercial exploitation by the well-funded and well-lawyered.

Multinationals have patented turmeric. Western yoga brands have trademarked poses named after Indian sages. And *Ramayan*? It gets stripped of context, visualized in 4K, and sold as premium content on streaming platforms with no mention of the *kathavachaks*, temple performers, or folk poets who kept the epic alive through centuries of invasion, censorship, and migration.

**We are witnessing a paradox:** We treat our most sacred narrative like its clip art. We commercialize what was once considered consecrated. And the people who have preserved the *Ramayana*—the rural performers, oral historians, tribal painters, and temple reciters—are erased from the credits. They are not protected. They are not paid. They are not even acknowledged. This isn’t just unfair. **It’s intellectual theft disguised as cultural tribute.**

### **Act III: From Ayodhya to Aotearoa: What India Can Learn from the World**

So where does this leave us? We’ve established that the *Ramayan* lives in legal limbo: priceless, beloved, but formally unprotected. We’ve watched it get monetized, politicized, meme-ified, and decontextualized while the communities that kept it alive are left out of both the credits and the profits.

But the answer isn’t to gatekeep it behind legal fences or freeze it in some museum of religious purity. The *Ramayana* thrives because it has evolved. Every generation has reinterpreted it from temple courtyards to television screens. That freedom should continue.

But **freedom without responsibility** is exploitation. And we’re already deep into that danger zone.

The question is not "**who owns Rama?**" It's "**how do we honor him and the people who have carried his story without turning him into a mascot or a money machine?**"

Here's what that could look like.

### 1. Recognize Community Custodianship

In many indigenous and oral cultures, storytelling isn't owned by individuals—it's **held by communities**. For centuries, Indian folk performers, *kathavachaks*, tribal painters, and local dramatists have passed down the *Ramayan* with regional flavor, linguistic diversity, and spiritual depth. We need a cultural shift—from "ownership" to **custodianship**. India could lead the way by formally **recognizing traditional bearers of epic knowledge**—like *Ramlila* troupes, *pattachitra* painters, or *Pandavani* singers—as **living repositories of intangible cultural heritage**. UNESCO does this globally. Why aren't we? They don't need copyright. They need **visibility, funding, and cultural credit**.

### 2. Learn from Global Models

This isn't a uniquely Indian crisis. Across the world, societies are grappling with how to protect traditional knowledge in the age of TikTok and trademarks.

- **In New Zealand**, Māori tribes have created protocols around the commercial use of their legends and sacred symbols. No one uses the word "*haka*" in advertising without permission.
- **In Australia**, Aboriginal art is protected through both moral rights and protocols developed with museums and publishers. Artists can sue if their work is copied without attribution or misrepresented.
- **In Africa**, countries like Ghana and Nigeria are working on "Traditional Knowledge Registries"—databases that document folklore, proverbs, and practices. Not for control, but for protection.

India—home to one of the richest reservoirs of myth and oral tradition—shouldn't be lagging behind. We need a **cultural IP framework** that values oral and collective knowledge, not just published and patented ideas.

### 3. Build Ethical Media Practices

This one's for filmmakers, designers, influencers, and brands. Retelling the *Ramayana*? Great. Profiting from it? Sure. But here's the rule: **credit the roots. Don't**

**erase them.** If you're adapting regional versions of the epic, mention your source—was it the *Kamba Ramayanm*, the *Tulsidas Ramcharitmanas*, the *Adhyatma Ramayan*, or a tribal oral version from Bastar? If you're using visual styles based on Madhubani or Gond art, credit the tradition. Better yet: **collaborate with artists from those communities** and compensate them fairly. Cultural adaptation without cultural acknowledgement is just elegant theft.

#### 4. Create Cultural Attribution Licenses

Here's an idea borrowed from the **Creative Commons model** used in software and digital art: a **"Cultural Commons" license** for traditional stories. This wouldn't restrict who can use the *Ramayana*, but it would **guide how it should be used**.

For example, anyone could retell the story, but if they commercialize it, they'd be expected to:

- Attribute the tradition or region,
- Donate a portion of proceeds to cultural preservation,
- Avoid distortion that violates community norms.

It's not about policing creativity. It's about **restoring accountability** in a world that rewards only visibility.

#### 5. Fund Epic Literacy & Contextual Engagement

Let's face it, most public engagement with the *Ramayana* today comes through pop culture, not scripture. The majority of Indians engaging with Rama today are doing so via film, reels, and festival dramatizations—not Sanskrit or Awadhi texts. So why not **invest in creative literacy** that doesn't dumb it down?

Imagine a national platform that offers:

- Annotated versions of the *Ramayana* across regions and languages,
- Interactive digital storytelling tools that teach the epic's philosophy, not just its plot,
- Grants for artists and performers working with traditional interpretations.

We've poured crores into mythological reboots on streaming platforms. It's time to fund **mythological understanding** too.

#### 6. Draw the Line on Political Exploitation

Let's say the quiet part out loud. The most dangerous appropriation of the *Ramayana*

isn't from foreign corporations. It's from **domestic political machinery** that recasts Rama as a warrior mascot, strips him of compassion, and sells his image as a vote-wielding weapon. This isn't just distortion—it's desecration. A healthy democracy must demand **ethical distance** between faith and power. That means **media watchdogs, public discourse, and academic institutions** must be empowered to push back when the epic is cherry-picked, distorted, and spun into propaganda. Retelling is one thing. **Weaponizing is another.**

The *Ramayana* isn't a fossil to be locked up in legal tombs. It's a living organism meant to be read, retold, argued with, sung, and loved. But that doesn't give us the license to **strip-mine it for content, votes, or merchandise**, without regard for context or consequence. This is not about banning reinterpretation. It's about building **a culture of respect around adaptation**. It's about ensuring that **the people who preserved the story get more than a footnote**, while the ones who remix it for clicks walk away with royalties.

In a world where even emojis are trademarked and chant sequences are sampled for techno remixes, **we owe the *Ramayana* better**. Not because it's old. Because it's **alive**. And because how we treat it today will decide whether it remains a guiding light, or becomes just another logo, flattened by the market.

### **Epilogue: The Final Verse Isn't Written**

Ram didn't ask to be branded. He didn't seek copyright. Or merchandise. Or mythological cinematic universes. He didn't trend. He endured. That's what made him divine. And yet, here we are, scrolling past Ravan NFTs, sipping chai from Sita-themed cafes, and watching algorithmically optimized versions of the *Ramayana* where drama beats dharma, and every bow is perfectly lit for YouTube thumbnails.

We're not just retelling the epic. We're repackaging it and shaving off its ambiguity, its complexity, its contradictions, until all that's left is a marketable mascot. A blue-skinned god flattened into a cultural commodity. But the *Ramayana* was never meant to be easy. It's not a single truth—it's a symphony of truths. It's regional, political, feminist, feudal, devotional, philosophical, and sometimes maddeningly opaque. That's its power. That's its challenge. That's its beauty. And maybe that's the answer.

Maybe the way forward isn't to copyright Ram, but to **credit him**. Not to restrict the *Ramayana*, but to **respect its keepers**. To remind ourselves that just because something is free doesn't mean it's cheap. And just because something is sacred doesn't mean it can't be questioned but it should never be **strip-mined for content** and sold with a slogan. So go ahead, retell. Remix. Reimagine. But do it with **context**, not just creativity. With **conscience**, not just clicks. Because the final verse of the *Ramayana*, the one that tells us what kind of society we want to be, is still unwritten. And the pen is in our hands.

