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Serializing Nationalism: Indian Soaps and Border Defense

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Abstract

Since its first airing in 2016 the Indian tv series *Nāgin* (female serpent) was a success. Featuring a shape-shifting female serpent and her fictional entry in the human world to seek revenge, the *nāgin* was even more appealing because of her being a fervent devotee of the Hindu god Śiva. While the first five seasons of the supernatural soap opera were eventually a variation on the theme of the competition between the *nāgin* as newlywed daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, the sixth season, that premiered in February 2022, introduced a novel element in the plot. The *nāgin* is not anymore to avenge herself because of a personal reason, rather her mission is to defend her country from internal and external forces that attempt to undermine its integrity. A *nāgin* can be seen as a symbol of transformation, as she crosses the margins between the 'supernatural' and the 'human' dimensions at will. This paper aims to shed light on how this fluid figure is made the defender of national borders, conceived increasingly as unchanging and non-negotiable by nationalist narratives. It will investigate the multiple modalities in which border defense is blended into the plot of the series, as it nourishes in this way a form of serialized nationalism.

Keywords: *Nāgin*; Hindi TV; popular culture; hindutva; womanhood.



1. Introduction

This paper examines how the last season of the Hindi TV series *Nāgin* has made of its heroine, Prathā, a patriot fighting for her nation. Keeping in mind the evolution of nationalistic discourses on womanhood (Chatterjee 1999), it aims to delineate how the contours of her figure are retraced to mould her in the frame of cultural nationalism.

Several studies have focused on the relationship between popular culture and nationalism in the South Asian context. Restricting the field to visual representations, Purnima Mankekar's (1996) ethnographic work on women and nationalism as portrayed in TV series and its reception is crucial. The scholar notes that: "Viewers' engagement with television narratives was central to their constitution as gendered and national subjects, to their construction of national and communal pasts, and to their understanding of violence committed in the name of the nation - thus revealing the political significance of texts dismissed by many social scientists as fictive and therefore inconsequential, as 'mere' entertainment or, less charitably, as kitsch" (Mankekar 1996, 11). Similarly, in her study of melodrama in Latin America, Lopez highlights that: "Popular cultures, even in authoritarian societies that actively seek to eliminate any possible counter-hegemonic spaces, are never merely transparent. Popular culture forms may represent attempts at social control, but they also have to meet the real desires and needs of real people" (Lopez 1991, 604). With the present study, I hope to show the opaqueness of the *nāgin* in the sixth season, as she is invested in a new role which also conditions her life in her family. Where and how are the margins of the figure displaced to suit nationalistic needs? What does this shift accomplish and what kind of tensions does it generate?

To explore her persona, it is worth recalling Krishnan and Dighe's analysis of femininity on Indian television (1990). The scholars delineated the features of male and female protagonists in fiction programmes among others. They come up with a set of characteristics defining the 'ideal woman':

1 Caring, concerned, maternal,



- 2 supportive, she helped men achieve their goals and did not have any ambitions of her own,
- 3 sacrificing, empathetic, home-centered, family-oriented,
- 4 passive, accepted her wife/daughter-in-law role, accepted male control and ensured bonding,
- 5 unquestioning, naïve, submissive,
- 6 pretty, charming, retaining essential femininity,
- 7 produced sons to ensure patriliney,
- 8 devoted to her husband no matter how oppressive he was, defended her married state and died unsullied, if abandoned, and
- 9 engaged in traditional rites and rituals (Krishnan and Dighe 1990, 51).

Later on, they add some further relevant points: “10) helpless in crisis and 11) shown as longing for a male child and 12) having no control over their lives” (1990, 53). We will see throughout this article how this delineated profile aligns with the depiction of the *nāgin* in its sixth season. Aware of the critics surrounding the actual power of television in advancing the cause of feminism (Misra and Raychowdhury 1997), my point is not to discuss the direct relation of the series to women’s issues per se. Rather, I aim to uncover how the portrayal responds to a changed historical and cultural milieu where hardcore nationalism is even more at the forefront of the political scene. Therefore, I am going to analyse how hardcore nationalism is normalized through series such as *Nāgin*, which rely on a medium of transmission that is part of the daily life of people, familiar (Rajagopal 2001). In this latter sense, the analysis will resonate with Geraghty’s theorization of a shift in the definition of soap operas, based on the study of series from the USA and Britain, which distinguishes between open-ended and close-ended narratives. At first, the open ending was defended as corresponding to ideological freedom, as several soaps tended to avoid closure. Gradually, however, the open ending has become less of a defining feature. Instead, the interplay of different narratives and a multiplicity of characters is privileged. Closed endings, with their moral and ideological implications, are not avoided anymore (2005, 312-3). The investigation will begin by introducing the figure of the *nāgin* and the series itself. It will also analyse how the series relates to contemporary historical events connected to borders and the Covid-19 crisis through discourse analysis of episodes 1, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 21. This forms a necessary background for a further close-up on the snake-woman’s name, behaviour, and religious allegiance.



2. The Characterisation of *Nāgs* and *Nāgins* in the Textual Traditions, Bollywood and the TV series

Nāgs (Sanskrit *nāga*), male counterparts of *nāgins*, have been part of the Indic mythological and religious landscape for a long time. Looking at the Indic textual traditions, the *Vedas* contain references to *nāgas* and their worship. As noted by Laurie Ann Cozad, their qualities are their divine nature and their powers over the natural world. They are seen as a means to control nature as they can provide riches and fertility for their worshippers. At the same time, they are dangerous because they kill. In the epic *Mahābhārata*, their portrayal is rather negative. Apart from the sacrifice of snakes framing the narrative, we understand from the epic that they need to be controlled and this is done also by subordinating them to other gods. In addition, we get to know that they can change their form and about the existence of *nāgins*: beautiful, sensual, adorned with a brilliant jewel in the middle of their foreheads. Marriage between a mortal and a *nāgin* crosses the boundaries of mythological and historical pasts, as a large number of royal dynasties claim to have a *nāgīn* ancestress in their lineage (Cozad 2018).

The interaction between *nāgs*, *nāgins* and humans is portrayed regularly in the Hindi Bollywood movies dedicated to these figures. Focusing on the female, object of this paper, there are two blockbuster movies from which the TV series draws several elements: *Nāgin* (1976, directed by Rajkumar Kohli) and *Nagīnā* (1986, directed by Harmesh Malhotra). In the former film, an *icchādhārī* (shape-shifting, lit. who assumes [a form] at wish) *nāgin* takes revenge for the killing of her male partner by humans. The female serpent is depicted negatively once again: she lies, creates mistrust and shows no remorse in using violence to achieve her goal (Mithuraaj 2018, 98). In the latter, *Nagīnā*, interpreted by Sridevi, the snake woman's companion is killed by humans and his soul takes refuge in the body of a human. For this reason, the *nāgin* plans to kill the human host to bring back to life her lover.



However, she refrains from killing the human because she falls in love with him and marries him.

The series produced by Ekta Kapoor, broadcasted since 2015, draws the theme song from the 1976 movie and develops the plot of revenge complicated by love for a human of the 1986 movie in all its seasons. However, its 5th season witnessed a decreasing success among the viewers.¹ Some TV critics have highlighted that series like *Nāgin*, streamed twice a week on Colors TV as primetime show, are placed at the margins of cinematic quality.² Moreover its story until season 6 revolved mainly around the conflict between the snake-woman as new daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, a motive pervading multiple TV series (minus the snake).³ This paper does not seek to judge the cinematic quality or overall credibility of the series in itself. Instead, it shows how its sixth season has been renewed, resorting to its own version of history and politics which constitute a background to the main protagonist's actions.⁴

3. *Nāgin 6's* Plot, History and Politics

In the first episode of the new season, set in December 2019, we are introduced to a scientist who summons several categories of saintly people – brahmins (priests), *munis* (silent sages) and other ascetics – in a location in the Himalayas. He informs them that there is a threat upon India and the world, an epidemic (*mahāmārī* in Hindi) which will be spread by a country enemy to India, China. He reveals that spreading the virus through water, more virulent in India than elsewhere, is the only way left for China to win over India. This is because “(...) because the Indian army and people have always managed to make India

¹ The data is collected by the Broadcast Audience Research Council of India. An overview of the seasons' ratings is available on www.iwmbuzz.com (Last Access 4 October 2022).

² For example, Hazel Gandhi's review of the ongoing season 6 on *The Quint* “Naagin 6 Is a Crossover.”

³ See Munshi 2010 for a study of 21st century Indian soap operas.

⁴ Some critics have remarked the difference of the 6th season and have gone somewhat deeper in the analysis of the success it has enjoyed by comparing it with other ongoing series with a female protagonist. See Taneja's review “Nationalist” snakes, progressive values.”



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victorious.” It is difficult to gauge how this last statement relates to actual historical circumstances. India and China stood against each other in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 because of disputed borders in the Himalayas, where China attacked India whose army was found largely unprepared.⁵ However, the contrast with China surely brought about feelings of patriotism and unity among Indians (Hoffmann 1990, 167). To witness its impact on the minds of Indian people, several movies have been dedicated to it: *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Ratha Thilagam* (1963), *1962: My Country Land* (2016), *Tubelight* (2017), *Subedar Joginder Singh* (2017), *72 Hours: Martyr Who Never Died* (2019). Claims of unambiguous national boundaries were revived and skirmishes between the two countries took place more recently, in 2017, with the Doklam military standoff, where troops were injured (Karackattu 2020). Again in 2020, soldiers were killed in skirmishes for the first time since the 1962 War ended.⁶ As anti-China sentiments in India rekindled, the makers of the web series *1962: The War in the Hills*, which was to be released in 2021, seemingly thought about anticipating it to the last months of 2020 (Seta 2020).

Therefore, the intrigue of *Nāgin 6* can be seen as on the one hand continuing the trend of these movies, developing the theme of the enmity between India and China.⁷ On the other hand, its particularity is that it rides on contemporary events affecting the world. Even if Covid-19 is not mentioned as such, the reference to the pandemic is unmissable.⁸ Interestingly, it explicitly politicizes the virus matter. The open politicization, with the reference to the virus as a weapon deployed by China to undermine India, follows largely

⁵ As the Henderson Brooks–Bhagat report reported. For a summary of the report and the questions surrounding it, see Eekelen 2015, 225–8. In late 1967, the two countries clashed in Sikkim, where the advancing Chinese forces were forced to withdraw (which became a state of India in 1975). The 1987 Sino-Indian skirmish, it was a bloodless conflict.

⁶ See Safi and Ellis-Petersen “India says 20 soldiers.”

⁷ Throughout the series China is called Chingistan, which recalls Pakistan but also Hindustan (one among the common denominations of India among its citizens). Curiously, the machination against India, even if on behalf of China, is shown as brought forward also by other few characters. They are identifiable with a Muslim individual, bearded, and several Western people, representing American/British individuals, see Episode 5 and 12.

⁸ Broadly speaking, mainstream entertainment TV channels have been reluctant to tackle the virus question (Cf. Bajpai “It took Ekta Kapoor.”).



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nationalistic narrations of the events. Some official outlets in India and public figures called Covid-19, among others, “Made-in-China Virus”.⁹ However, Indian political discourse at the international level refrained from taking a position which could appear too extreme. At the BRICS summit in 2021, Prime Minister Modi diplomatically avoided any reference to a ‘Chinese virus’ but called for China to clarify the origins of the pandemic with the WHO’s collaboration (Haidar, Krishnan 2021).

Back to the series, the first episode also reveals that there is a solution to this life-threatening conspiracy and it is not vaccination, as one would expect. When the Chinese virus started spreading, tellingly tinging India’s waters red, people started dying. The professor discloses that always at a Himalayan temple in Kedarnath (Uttarakhand), dedicated to Śiva, the god disclosed to him the solution to the problem: pouring *amṛt* into the waters of India. With this reference, the series connects itself to a well-known myth: the churning of the ocean of milk to extract the *amṛt*, the elixir of immortality. Both the *devs* (gods) and the *asurs* (antigods) wanted to obtain this nectar for themselves.¹⁰ In the series, once the precious liquid is secured and poured into the rivers, the country will have new life – possibly immortal. However, the mission is not easily accomplished since 20 *asuras* need to be eliminated: they want to damage the country with the help of China. These evil figures in the contemporary world are identified, then, with none other but anti-nationals (*deśdrohī*). The *nāgin* is introduced at this point by the professor: she is powerful and “*Deś kā raṅg badal saktī hai,*” literally “She can change the colour of the country” (from red to saffron?). The *nāgin* needed is the best (*sarvaśreṣṭh*) among the species. She can be made to appear by sprinkling the country’s soil while snake charmers play the national anthem.

⁹ An example is the popular Zee News, part of the broadcasting company owned by the BJP-associated Subash Chandra, who accused China of hiding the truth about the virus and spreading it intentionally: <https://zeenews.india.com/video/india/dna-coronavirus-is-actually-made-in-china-2270288.html>. A considerable amount of references in these terms was employed by Twitter users as hashtags: “#ChinaVirus”, “#WuhanVirus” etc. See also the online newspaper article Express Web Desk (2020).

¹⁰ The myth appears in several Hindu texts like the *Purāṇas* (epic-narrative-historical accounts) with some variations depending on the dedication of the text. See, for example, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.9 in Wilson 1864-77.



The geographical setting of the series aligns it with issues with which the central government would be particularly concerned, such as borders and pandemics. Apart from the Himalayas, the urban background of the main events is in the Badarpur district, at the edge between Delhi and the state of Haryana, rather than the customary Mumbai. In this context, it is important to mention also that, in the preceding five seasons of the series, the soon-to-be human husband of the snake-woman was a businessman, belonging to a landowning family. In season 6, instead, he aptly is an army official from a rich family whose specific business is selling weapons. Through these narrative strategies, the series creates interactions between historical and contemporary preoccupations and myth.¹¹ An additional mythical allusion is accomplished through the name of the *nāgin* protagonist of the last season.

4. The Name of the *Nāgin* and the Protection of India's Borders

In the first two seasons of the series the name of the *nāgin* signaled mostly her connection to the god Śiva (Śivanyā, Śivāngī), while in the last three seasons the heroines hold common names (Belā, Bṛndā, Bānī). In season 6 she is called Prathā. The feminine noun *prathā* literally means “spreading out, extending, flattening, scattering” (MW 1899, 678). It is derived from the Sanskrit root *prath-* which means “to spread, extend, become larger or wider, increase”. In Sanskrit *belles lettres* the noun is understood as to “become known or celebrated” (MW 1899, 678). In addition, in his study about kingship, Jan Gonda comments on how verbal roots like *prath-* “served to express the idea of ‘to extend over’ [...] and also ‘to become celebrated’, the substantive *prathā* meaning, inter alia, ‘fame, celebrity’.” Further on, he observes that “the idea of room, wideness or spatial extensiveness sometimes crops up in those passages which deal with sovereignty.” (Gonda 1966, 108). According to

¹¹ Myth constantly feeds the plot of the series produced by Kapoor. For example, season 3 introduces a child character named Andhaka (lit. “darkness”) whose name recalls that of an *asura*. According to some Purāṇas, the creature was born accidentally from the contact between Śiva and his future wife Parvatī and was defeated because of its evil actions on earth (Kramrisch 1981, 374-83).



several traditional texts, Pṛthu, whose name is connected with the root *prath-*, is the first anointed king, who swears to protect the earth (*prthvī*, e. g. Wilson 1864, 177–ff.).¹² Therefore, the idea of expansion appears to be closely connected with royal power.¹³

The proper name Prathā employed for the protagonist of the series is charged with such mythical associations as the fame the king acquires through the extension of his reign. She does not expand India's borders, yet she will not allow China to get a hold of Indian territory. In this sense, the series deploys late Vedic imagery as well, where the *nāgas* were associated with protecting the four corners of the world (Cozad 2018). The epic *Mahābhārata*, later on, deprived the *nāgas* of regional placenames, while with *Nāgin 6* such geographical character is reinterpreted for the contemporary world, as Prathā states that “Who sells this country's border will be killed”.¹⁴ The chthonic dimension of the *nāgin* is exalted as well, with the evocation of their ability to purify the earth, as Prathā is made to say that she will indeed wash the motherland with the *asuras'* blood.

It appears, then, that the name of the *nāgin* in the last season is a further element through which she is constructed as inherently linked with the (re)definition and protection of borders. As such she does not resist any dominant culture, rather she participates in a hegemonic discourse of upper-caste and upper-class often channeled by national TV as normative (Mankekar 1999, 8–10). The domestication of her figure is achieved also visually as she wears traditional clothes, mostly sarees, and displays the symbols of a married woman. For instance, she wears the chain called *maṅgalsūtra*. Moreover, she lives in an enlarged family where she takes care of her elders and would do anything to protect her husband (she is a *pativrata*, a woman devoted to her husband). As such this leads to questioning: is she at all at the margins of femininity associated with nationalistic themes?

¹² Pṛthu means “broad, wide, expansive, extensive, spacious, large” and by the same token “great, important” (MW 1899, 646). *Prthvī* is also a term etymologically related to Pṛthu and *prath-*.

¹³ With the Vedic horse sacrifice, the *aśvamedha*, as a chief exemplar of this ideology (Gonda 1066, 110).

¹⁴ Episode 7, in Hindi “Jo is deś kī sarhad ko bechegā, uskā vadh hogā.”



5. The Behaviour of the *Nāgin*: Shifting the Contours of Domestication, for the Nation

On a closer look, her figure subtly shifts the contours of the habitual portrayal of feminine characters in nationalistic series. This is evident from comparison with other programmes treating similar themes. It is possible to take as an example *Param Vir Chakra* (1990) a series which fictionalised the lives of martyred soldiers, who gained the highest military recognition (homonymous with its title) for defending their nation. Mankekar has observed that, despite being dedicated mainly to male soldiers, the women of the martyrs (the wives, the mothers) are portrayed in a more nuanced manner than the men. Because of their varied and different behaviours, responding less to stereotypes than their male counterparts, it is the women represented in the series that constitute a site of debate for viewers. Still, according to Mankekar, we witness in the series “(...) the construction of nationalist zeal and the depiction or naturalization of female sexuality as a threat to masculine valour.” (Mankekar 1999, 259). In contrast, in *Nāgin 6* Prathā is not represented as a threat to masculine valour, as her actions help her husband, who is rarely seen “on a mission”. Her sexuality – and the sexuality of the couple – is disciplined because it takes place in the context of marriage. However, it is not completely removed, even if it is just to tease the viewers.¹⁵

Moreover, series like *Nāgin* have the advantage that their makers do not have to deal with the issues of women’s education, or the necessity to work outside the family. But, at the same time, Prathā is not a character who suffers abuse or injustice and is confined to silence. She reproaches her husband Rishabh for apparently flirting and, upon being interrogated about her whereabouts, she is heard saying: “It seems you are like those guys who think they can ask their wife where were you, but when asked, they can’t give an answer about where a lipstick mark came from.” She continues by saying that if he’s having

¹⁵ Earlier series, like *Urān* (Flight), centered on a female policewoman, tended to obliterate references to femininity and sexuality in portraying the heroine as a nationalist woman (Mankekar 1999, 120-1, 144-5).



an affair, she is ending the marriage.¹⁶ She fights for her marriage, answers back to her mother-in-law and orders (*hukm denā*) her husband to send people away from their house (Episode 17). In this way, she pushes the margins of what a woman can say and do. After all, if she is to protect the country, she cannot be that coy in everyday life.

Importantly, her actions threaten the unity of the family when she accuses her husband's cousin of beating his wife and proves it.¹⁷ Hence, the family only partially limits her agency. The power relations within the family seem to be put into question by her actions and words to an extent – albeit limited. The narrative then restores the margins of family relations because these television genres do not permit extreme dissent to reach its very end (Mankekar 1999, 143). Yet, it engages in its terms with such existing concerns and familiar symbols (Rajagopal 2001, 146). The identification between the family and the country is valid only if the family does not threaten the country. In this case the family confines are no longer as inviolable as those of the nation. Therefore, the defense of the nation and its borders implies that it needs to be done even at the cost of family relations. This creates multiple moments of tension and dilemma in the series, including pushing the limits of the *nāgin's* allegiance to Śiva.

6. The Religious Allegiance of the *Nāgin*: From Śiva to Rāma, for the Nation

As semi-divine figures, *nāgas* are associated with several divinities.¹⁸ One of the most famous images is that of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa resting on the ocean, behind him a *nāga* called Śeṣanāga – shielding him with its multiple hoods – at his feet goddess Lakṣmī, and the god

¹⁶ See Episode 13: “Lagṭā hai ki āp bhi unhī laḍkōm meṃ se hai jo sirf apnī patnīyōm ko pūcheṅge ke vah kahām paḍṭi. Par pūche jāne par unke pās kabhī javāb nahīm hogā ke lipstick kā niśān kahām se āya.”

¹⁷ Cf. Mankekar 1999, 160 about the portrayal of women involved with the nationalist movement in TV series: “The family circumscribed the agency of these revolutionary women: indeed, they were able to ‘step out’ as revolutionaries only because their actions did not threaten the purported unity of their families.”

¹⁸ They are present since long time in Indic sculptural art. Even outside the pale of Hindu belief strictly, they are widespread in Buddhist milieu (Härtel 1976).



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Brahmā sitting on a lotus springing from Viṣṇu's navel, ready to emanate the universe.¹⁹ However, it is Śiva who is now most commonly associated with *nāgas*. The mountain god is peculiar because he is usually depicted in an aniconic fashion, through a *śivaliṅga* (Fleming 2009). A *śivaliṅga* is an object built of stone in pillar shape, of various sizes. It has also been seen as a representation of the god's phallus as a symbol of his creative power (Hohenberger 2018). In the natural world, anthills are sometimes interpreted as *śivaliṅgas* because of their conical structure. In turn, supernatural serpents inhabit and protect anthills, according to common belief (Cozard 2018). In countless sculptural representations and ritual items of nowadays, *śivaliṅgas* are protected by cobras and the customary portrayals of Śiva include at least one cobra adorning his throat.²⁰ Secondly, the myth of the churning of the ocean also involved him in a fundamental role, that of swallower of poison. During the churning process, a mass of poison surfaced from the ocean, threatening of destroying the universe. Śiva drank it and, as a result, his throat turned blue, causing him to assume the appellative of Nīlakaṇṭha (lit. who possesses a blue throat). In the *Mahābhārata* retelling of the myth, Brahmā complimented him for his throat now looked like a serpent (Kramrisch 1981, 147, 151-2).

Prathā's devotion to Śiva is a pervading element in the series. In every confrontation she invokes the god to give her the power to carry on her duty as queen of the *nāgas* and *nāgins* (*śeṣnāgin*). In multiple instances, she refers to herself as *śivavardānī* – one who has received a boon from Śiva – and assumes the form of half woman and half serpent, with her head circled by five cobra hoods (e.g. Episode 14). Besides, her marriage with Rishab (Rṣabha) takes place on Mahashivratri, the most auspicious night dedicated to the divinity.

¹⁹ A classical rendition of the scene in print from the end of the 19th century can be seen at <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/849519> (Last Access 25th October 2022).

²⁰ See, for example, a painting conserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O72546/shiva-parvati-ganesh-and-karttikeya-painting-unknown/> (Last access 27 October 2022).



For this reason, Rishab's grandmother compares their couple to that of Śiva and Pārvatī (Episode 6).

There is, however, a precise moment in which her unwavering faith in Śiva is shaken by the events. This occurs when Prathā has to defeat the fifth *asura*, who is no one else but her (human) father. The confrontation is set in the Himalayas, at India's borders, at the source of the river Yamuna. In the background, a shrine hosts the statues of the god Rāma, along with his wife Sītā, his brother Lakṣmaṇa and his friend and devotee Hanumān. She has accepted by now that her father is a traitor to the nation for which she is ready to sacrifice her life. However, she is paralysed psychologically and physically. Her feet are stuck in the snow by her father thanks to the potency of the snake-jewel (*nāgmaṇi*) he stole from her. Her powers, bestowed by Śiva, are lost. In fact, she invokes Śiva, but nothing happens. Tellingly, her father mocks her: "What has Śiva ever done for you, for me, for us?" as earlier he told his foreign ally that "Śiva... cannot save this country today."²¹ In an extremely dramatic sequence, where the camera moves from her father's face to her face, to Rāma's, her parent dares her to invoke her god again.²² At this point, she turns towards the nearby shrine and looks at Rāma and his bow resting on the floor. Instead of calling Śiva once more, Prathā calls thrice "Jay Śrī Rām" (lit. Victory to Śrī Rām!). Immediately after she calls Rāma there is a typhoon, thanks to which her sister is saved. But she is unable to recover the source of her powers, the *nāgmaṇi* (Episode 21). Desperate, she calls to Rāma with increasing resolve. Bells start ringing because the earth trembles. Due to the commotion, she manages to recover the jewel with background voices chanting "Rāmram jay Rāmram, Rāmram jay Sītārām" louder. She also fetches Rāma's bow, but she is torn – she can't shoot her father. A further moment of tension, where the margins of familial relations are questioned: should she choose her father or her duty (*dharma*)?

²¹ Episode 20: "Kyā kiya Śiv ne, tere liye, mere liye, hamare liye?" "Koi Śiv... āj is duniyā ko nahim bacā saktā."

²² Episode 20: "Bulā le tere Bhagvān ko!"



In this dilemma, before leaving to meet her father in the Himalayas, she talks to her sister. She points out that even an elder's decisions can be wrong when it comes to the country. Prathā quotes then the first half of a well-known verse from the *Bhagavadgītā* (The Song of the Blessed One, verse 4.7): "Whenever righteousness decays, O Bharata, (...)"²³ The verse is interrupted because the hint is sufficient for the viewer to guess its missing part: "and unrighteousness grows, then I manifest/create myself." As the *Bhagavadgītā* is a poetical discourse included in the *Mahābhārata*, we know that Arjuna is on the battlefield, where the enemy is his cousins. It is a conflict about power, on who will rule over the Kuru reign. The prospect of battle with his own family weakens Arjuna's resolve. In a nutshell, Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer for the occasion, explains to him that he should carry on with his duty as a prince and wage war despite who's confronting him. Attachment to family relations only comes in the way of *dharma*, the right conduct sustained and ordained by Kṛṣṇa himself. In addition, he reveals to the prince that when *dharma* declines he manifests himself on earth to ease the burden of unrighteousness (*adharmā*). The Kauravas, Arjuna's cousins, are committed to evil actions and must be eradicated (Malinar 2007, 98-100). Eventually, the warrior is convinced, and the battle ensues. After the evocative programmatic statement by Prathā in *Nāgin 6*, we would expect a resolution in the way the dichotomy between family and duty is solved in the *Bhagavadgītā*. We would expect the snake-woman to fire at her father. However, and significantly, she is not made to choose. She is not allowed to kill her father as under Rāma's hint, the hitting arrow is propelled by a force coming from Śiva's third eye.

Further elements in the episode connect Prathā with Rāma. It opens with the celebration of Prathā's birthday, which coincides with the festival of Ram Navami, dedicated to Rāma's birth. In episode 19, during a puja to Rāma, someone tells Prathā and her husband: "May your couple be like that of Rāma and Sītā."²⁴ These scenes substitute the

²³ In Sanskrit: "Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata / abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham." Cf. Jauregui 2015, 49, for another case of use of this verse to justify vigilantism in a 2000 Bollywood movie, *Kurukshetra*.

²⁴ "Tum dono kī jodī Rām aur Sītā kī jodī kī tarah bane!"



imagery linked to Śiva with that associated with Rāma. The god at the margins of the country is not longer him, but Rāma. Much as the world-renouncer appeals to Hindutva – “Hinduness” – nationalism (Jaffrelot 1996, 40-5), Śiva the yogi, isolated in the mountains with his wife and family, is not enough for the Hindu who wants to protect the country.²⁵ He or she has to rely on Rāma. The latter is the deity armed with a bow and arrows, whom this brand of nationalism has reinterpreted into its principal model of conduct. He is conceived as the strong, muscular king able to protect with force his reign, identified by the nationalist cause as the whole of India (Jaffrelot 1996, 390-3). To my mind, the operation of the series cannot be understood as radically as a call for a boycott of Śiva, but rather for his subordination to Rāma, as the last scene of the struggle implies. In any case, it is a manner of integrating Śiva into mainstream Hindu nationalistic ideology through his devotee (*bhakta*), the *nāgin*.

7. Conclusive reflections

This paper has examined how the last season of the Hindi TV series *Nāgin* has made of its heroine, Prathā, a patriot fighting for her nation. First, it has dealt with the place of this figure in the Indic mythological and literary imagery and its representation in Bollywood cinema. This analysis has served not only to show the popularity of *nāgas* and *nāgins* but also to lay down the elements, the margins of the traditional representation, that the TV series recalls, recovers and reinterprets. In different degrees, her name, her behaviour and her religious allegiance have been rewritten compared with previous seasons. In contrast with the series of the early 90s analysed in Mankekar (1999), while the portrayal of Prathā still largely conforms to the standard of a Hindu upper-class woman, we witness new tensions in the family due to her commitment to her mission. Eventually, the dilemmas

²⁵ The detachment from worldly affairs is a characteristic of Śiva emerging from several myths of the *Purāṇas*, where the resolute action is often carried out by one of Śiva’s acolytes rather than the god himself. See Granoff 2006.



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(re)presented and (re)created may be solved because of television logic but the questions raised remain for viewers to reflect upon.

It is worth noticing that the defense of the nation is made part of the “‘repeated and repeatable scenarios’” (Geraghty 2005, 311) to which series and soap operas subject their audience. This has also to do with the construction of the *nāgin* as a determined and strong-willed woman, who doesn’t budge when she has to hit back even at her mother-in-law or husband. As stereotypical as this characterisation may be, it reflects to what extent the ideal of the “Angry Hindu” – woman in this case – has become ingrained in Indian popular culture (Rajagopal 2001, 149). A country that is shown to be every day under threat needs people who act as her protectors every day. This implied call coincides with the rise of vigilantism in India, where it is seen increasingly as a virtue (Jauregui 2015, 53). However, if soap operas were generally appreciated as they leave the viewers with a “‘sense of an unwritten future’” (Geraghty 2005, 312), *Nāgin 6*, instead, re-writes the future through myth for its viewers. The *asuras* (the anti-nationals and China), the cause of the virus and the border crises, will be defeated. The end of the virus – something its viewers have still not experienced – is also achieved, as India is said to be the first country to be freed from it. The discourse about the inviolability of the national territory in *Nāgin 6* accomplishes what diplomatic politics can’t achieve: the defeat of China at the hands of India – revenge against China.



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