On Sunday mornings from January 25, 1987 to July 31, 1988 between eighty and one hundred million Indians watched *Ramayan*, a seventy-eight episode television series directed by Ramanand Sagar (Kumar 2006). This was a realisation of the *Ramayana*, one of India’s most loved stories, an epic regarded as *smrīti* (“that which is recollected”) scripture, and was shown on Doordarshan (the national broadcaster, founded in 1959). Though derided by critics for its gaudy costumes, extremely slow narrative pace, and low quality special effects (Lutgendorf 1990) *Ramayan* evoked spontaneous outbursts of popular piety and became an important focus of devotion, with viewers performing purification rituals before the programme began and adorning television sets with flowers and incense, consecrating them as altars (Mitchell 2005).

Further, *Ramayan* coincided with a sharp upsurge in Hindu nationalism and religious fundamentalism, which was partially fuelled by the series’ presentation of a Hindu world menaced by demons (the “Other”) (Wu 2008). The presence of a mosque, the Babri Masjid, on the site of the alleged birthplace of Rama (who is an *avatar* or human manifestation of the god Vishnu) in Ayodhya was a particularly inflammatory issue (Rajagopal 2001). This mosque was demolished by Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992 (Karner 2005). In the wake of the demolition, “riots across the country…left 2,026 dead and 6,957 wounded” (Rajagopal 2001: 17). Although the destruction of the Babri Masjid took place four years after *Ramayan* ceased being screened, there is evidence that the serial’s presentation of Rama and Sita as Hindu exemplars of morality and
honour, and of Ayodhya as a perfectly governed kingdom, fuelled anti-Muslim (and anti-non-Hindu generally) feelings and actions.

The stars of *Ramayan* attempted to carry their popularity from television into politics, with Deepika Chikhalia (who played Sita) being elected in the 1988 by-elections to a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party, seat. Other members, including Arun Govil (Ram) and Dara Singh (Hanuman) also flirted with politics. The Hindu tradition has always allowed for the presence of gods on earth, through the concept of the *avatar*, and television simply allowed a larger number of people to focus that belief on the cast of a religious programme. Enormous crowds gathered wherever the stars (particularly the actors who played Ram, Sita and Lakshman) appeared, in order to receive *darśan*, the “auspicious” seeing of the deities (Eck 1985: 3), and riots and even terrorist bombings were among the more unfortunate side effects of the *Ramayan* phenomenon.

This chapter argues that *Ramayan* concretised a religious and aesthetic vision that was deeply imbricated with Hindu nationalism, and that its enthusiastic viewers received it religiously in their daily lives. Watching television became for many a religious act, and personal devotion to the actors playing the gods emerged as a form of popular piety. Ritual and practice marked out *Ramayan*-watching as an act of worship. This devotional attitude was also in evidence among viewers of the ninety-four episode serial of the *Ramayana*’s sister-epic the *Mahabharata*, which was directed by B. R. Chopra and screened from 1988 to 1990 (Gillespie 1995). Further, many were moved to political action, including violence, as seeing the gods on television drew attention to the perceived enemies of *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) that existed within India itself. This response was possibly, and even probably, deliberately engineered, as television is “an obvious means of projecting a glorified vision of national identity” through a national broadcaster which is “an arm of the nation-state” (Rajagopal 1993: 92).

Previous studies of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan* have been scattered and fragmentary, concentrating on specific aspects of the phenomenon, such as the aesthetics of the video release (Lutgendorff 1990), gender issues in the responses of female viewers of the serial (Mankekar 1999), and the ways in which televised religious epics interact with popular politics (Rajagopal 1993, 2001). To date there are no published studies of *Ramayan* from a religious studies perspective, or that focus on the serial as the begetter of a distinctive form of popular piety. This volume analyses case studies of contemporary religions that are deeply imbricated with popular cultural forms. Adam Possamai calls these phenomena “hyper-