Rewriting the Sacred: Mythic Structures and Political Praxis in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
	Vikram Chandra's Sacred Games is a sprawling narrative that intertwines crime, politics, history, and religion to present a richly layered portrait of contemporary India. At its core, the novel is not only a gripping detective story but also a profound meditation on the sacred and the profane, the mythic and the political. This paper explores how Chandra reconfigures mythic structures — drawn from Hindu cosmology, epics, and archetypes — to critique and reinterpret political praxis in modern India. Through an analysis of narrative form, character development, and thematic symbolism, the study argues that Sacred Games functions as a postmodern rewriting of the sacred, destabilizing conventional notions of divine order and moral clarity. In doing so, it exposes the ideological apparatuses that underpin political authority, religious identity, and nationalist rhetoric. By foregrounding the interplay between myth and praxis, Chandra invites readers to reconsider how sacred narratives are weaponized in public life, and how individual agency can persist within — and against — these inherited structures. Ultimately, this paper contends that Sacred Games is a vital literary intervention that dramatizes the political consequences of myth while reimagining the possibility of ethical action in an ethically compromised world.

INTRODUCTION

In the early years of the twenty-first century, Indian literature witnessed a resurgence of politically charged narratives that grappled with the transformations wrought by globalization, religious fundamentalism, and postcolonial identity crises. Among these, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* stands out as an ambitious and densely layered work that resists simple classification. At over 900 pages, the novel blends the tropes of crime fiction, political thriller, spiritual allegory, and historical epic, crafting a narrative that is both intensely local and global in its concerns. While it is often discussed for its compelling portrait of Mumbai's criminal underworld and its sprawling cast of characters, what demands deeper exploration is Chandra's use of mythic structures and religious motifs to interrogate the political and moral conditions of contemporary India.

The very title *Sacred Games* suggests a paradox: the fusion of divinity with deception, of the spiritual with the strategic. This ambiguity sets the stage for a novel where characters are constantly negotiating between fate and free will, belief and skepticism, violence and redemption. The figure of Ganesh Gaitonde, the gangster-turned-prophet, exemplifies this intersection. His narrative arc echoes mythic cycles of

rise and fall, salvation and damnation, while also reflecting the grim realities of communalism, political corruption, and global terrorism. Meanwhile, Inspector Sartaj Singh's journey resembles a modern-day dharmic quest, fraught with moral ambiguity and institutional compromise.

This paper takes as its starting point the premise that *Sacred Games* is a postmodern epic that rewrites the sacred in order to expose the moral and ideological fissures of political praxis. "Mythic structures," in this context, refer to the recurring narrative forms, archetypes, and cosmological frameworks that Chandra borrows and subverts from traditional Hindu texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Puranas*. "Political praxis" denotes the live enactment of political ideologies and the real-world consequences of power, especially as seen in the actions of state actors, religious leaders, and criminal networks. By mapping these mythic structures onto the machinery of contemporary politics, Chandra reveals how the sacred is often co-opted to serve violent and exclusionary ends.

Through a close reading of the novel's characters, structure, and symbolic systems, this paper will explore how Chandra challenges the reader to confront the ethical complexities of belief and action. The central argument is that *Sacred Games* does not simply reproduce myth; it rewrites it, turning the sacred into a critical lens through which the contradictions of modern political life are made visible. In doing so, Chandra not only revitalizes the epic form but also posits literature itself as a site of political and spiritual inquiry.

Mythic Structures in Sacred Games-

In *Sacred Games*, Vikram Chandra deftly weaves mythic structures into a contemporary narrative, reconfiguring traditional Hindu cosmologies and epic motifs within the framework of postcolonial, globalized Mumbai. These mythic layers do not function merely as aesthetic or cultural ornamentation; rather, they form the very architecture of the novel's ethical and political inquiry. Chandra draws from the archetypal patterns of Indian myth — cyclical time, divine avatars, cosmic battles, prophetic revelation — and situates them within a gritty realist narrative populated by gangsters, policemen, intelligence agents, and spiritual charlatans. The effect is a narrative that collapses the divide between the sacred and the profane, suggesting that myth is not something archaic and distant but deeply embedded in the contemporary Indian psyche and its political realities.

The Epic as Form: *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and Beyond-

The structural and thematic influence of Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* is immediately apparent in Sacred Games. Like the *Mahabharata*, Chandra's novel resists closure and moral simplicity. Its polyphonic structure — with alternating narratives, parallel timelines, and numerous embedded vignettes — echoes the sprawling, dialogic form of the epics. The novel's multiple voices and moral ambiguities foreground the impossibility of a single, authoritative truth, a theme central to the *Mahabharata*, where even gods are morally compromised and dharma is context-dependent.

Characters in Sacred Games map onto mythic archetypes in complex, sometimes ironic ways. Ganesh Gaitonde, for instance, evokes the name and attributes of the Hindu god Ganesha, the remover of obstacles and patron of beginnings. Yet Gaitonde is no benevolent deity; he is a ruthless criminal who, over time, becomes a self-styled prophet and savior figure. His spiritual delusions and claims to divine insight parody the idea of divine authority, exposing how myths can be appropriated to legitimize violence and domination. His trajectory — from orphan to underworld don to apocalyptic visionary — traces a distorted version of the hero's journey, as described in mythic and folkloric traditions, but subverts the redemptive telos typically associated with such narratives.

Similarly, Sartaj Singh, the weary and morally conflicted Sikh police officer, functions as a kind of Arjuna figure — called to act in a world where the lines between justice and injustice are blurred. His meditative dialogues with his inner self and his dead father resemble the discursive structure of the *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein Krishna imparts ethical and metaphysical wisdom to the hesitant Arjuna. But Sartaj receives no divine guidance — only a slow, painful accumulation of insight born of suffering, failure, and moral compromise. The absence of a clear moral compass suggests a world in which divine

certainties have eroded, leaving individuals to navigate meaning through intuition and flawed action.

Cyclicality and Cosmic Time-

One of the most significant mythic structures Chandra employs is the concept of cyclical time—kalachakra—which underpins much of Hindu cosmology. The narrative structure of *Sacred Games* reflects this cyclicality, with events repeating in new forms across generations, and with past and present bleeding into one another. Gaitonde's rise and fall mirror the rise and fall of cities, nations, and even gods in Hindu myth. His vision of an impending apocalypse evokes the mythic idea of pralaya (cosmic dissolution), a time of destruction that precedes renewal. But in Chandra's retelling, pralaya is not a divine reset—it is the consequence of human hubris, political manipulation, and nuclear terror.

The novel's formal structure reinforces this theme. The interleaved timelines—the present-day investigation by Sartaj, the retrospective confessions of Gaitonde, and the philosophical interpolations—mirror the layered temporalities of mythic texts. Chandra frequently interrupts the forward motion of the plot with seemingly tangential digressions: tales from India's partition, theological musings, backstories of minor characters, and reflections on karma and rebirth. These digressions, rather than distracting from the narrative, work to situate individual lives within larger mythic and historical cycles, suggesting that all action is part of an endless repetition of suffering, desire, and violence.

The Prophetic and the Apocalyptic-

A recurring motif in *Sacred Games* is the prophetic revelation. Gaitonde believes himself to be the recipient of divine messages through his association with Guruji, a spiritual leader whose vision of a purified, Hindu-fundamentalist future becomes the ideological engine behind a planned apocalyptic act of terrorism. This vision is couched in mythic language, referencing the destruction of evil and the restoration of cosmic order. Yet, Chandra presents this revelation as deeply suspect—a manipulation of sacred discourse to justify genocidal violence.

Guruji's teachings synthesize elements of Hindu eschatology with fascistic political ideology. His utopian vision of a spiritually cleansed India echoes the mythic promise of the Kalki avatar—the final incarnation of Vishnu who is prophesied to arrive at the end of the Kali Yuga to destroy evil and restore dharma. However, in *Sacred Games*, this eschatology is stripped of divine legitimacy and becomes a political tool for rationalizing mass murder. The appropriation of sacred myth for political ends here critiques the real-world rise of religious nationalism and the ways in which ancient myths are reconfigured to serve modern ideologies.

This theme is further complicated by the novel's engagement with global apocalyptic fears—nuclear terrorism, ecological collapse, civilizational decline—which intersect with indigenous mythic tropes to create a narrative that is at once intensely local and global. Gaitonde's belief in his own apotheosis and sacrificial destiny becomes the engine of mass destruction, revealing the dangerous potential of myth when untethered from ethical scrutiny.

The Sacred and the Secular: Politicizing Myth-

One of *Sacred Games'* most powerful insights lies in its exposure of how myth, far from being an inert cultural artifact, is actively mobilized within political and ideological struggles. Chandra's narrative shows that myth does not merely shape personal worldviews—it is embedded in the structures of governance, violence, and control. In contemporary India, where religious identity has become deeply entwined with political rhetoric and where Hindu nationalism seeks to define the contours of the public sphere, Chandra's exploration of the sacred becomes a pointed critique of the ways in which myths are politicized, instrumentalized, and weaponized.

Myth as Political Currency-

Ganesh Gaitonde's self-mythologizing is the most immediate example of how sacred discourse is used to gain power. Gaitonde is not merely a gangster; he is a political actor, one who understands that control over narrative—particularly sacred or divine narrative—is a powerful weapon. His adoption of the name "Ganesh," invoking the deity associated with auspicious beginnings, wisdom, and the removal of obstacles, is not accidental. It is part of his larger strategy of establishing himself as a divine figure—a redeemer, a god among men. In doing so, he mimics the performative rituals of both political leaders and

religious figures in India, who often invoke divine sanction for their actions.

Gaitonde's growing association with Guruji and the ashram represents a confluence of the criminal underworld and the spiritual-political elite. Guruji's ashram is not a space of contemplation and asceticism; it is a center of ideological production, one that reinterprets Hindu mythology and metaphysics to justify violence against the perceived enemies of the nation. The sacred, in this context, is no longer a personal or transcendent pursuit—it becomes a symbolic system used to authorize political action, especially violent, retributive action.

Chandra's portrayal of this alliance between spiritual discourse and political power resonates deeply with real-world analogs in Indian politics. Organizations such as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and political entities like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) have long employed the language of myth and religion to shape nationalist ideology. Narratives of Hindu glory, divine ancestry, and civilizational struggle are used to define citizenship, belonging, and legitimacy. By embedding these themes within a fictional narrative, Chandra is able to both mirror and critique this ideological apparatus.

Religious Violence and the Language of the Sacred:

Religious violence—particularly communal violence between Hindus and Muslims—is a recurring theme in Sacred Games. The novel does not present such violence as aberrational or spontaneous; rather, it reveals the systemic, planned, and ideologically sanctioned nature of such conflict. Gaitonde's participation in communal riots, as both actor and observer, demonstrates how sacred language can be manipulated to incite hatred. He witnesses how crowds are mobilized not through appeals to political ideology per se, but through the invocation of divine injury, sacred duty, and historical grievance.

Guruji's eschatological vision—a final purification of the Indian nation through mass destruction—is couched in mythic terms. His rhetoric draws heavily on the Hindu notion of yugas (cosmic ages) and pralaya (apocalyptic destruction), presenting himself as a harbinger of a new spiritual order. Yet the spiritual veneer barely conceals a genocidal logic. His ultimate goal is a nuclear attack that will destroy India's cities and "cleanse" its impure elements. This

use of the sacred to justify political annihilation is one of the most chilling aspects of the novel, and it reflects the dangers of uncritical reverence for spiritual authority when divorced from ethical responsibility.

The novel also explores how the state responds to such forms of violence. Police officers like Sartaj Singh are caught between their duty to uphold secular law and the informal, religiously inflected ideologies that govern political power. The state, while nominally secular, is shown to be deeply complicit in religious violence—either through inaction, active participation, or ideological alignment. Sartaj's disillusionment is emblematic of the larger crisis facing secular institutions in a context where sacred narratives dominate public discourse.

Populism, Nationalism, and the Sacred Symbol-

Populist leaders in *Sacred Games*—whether they be gangsters, politicians, or godmen—are all adept at manipulating sacred symbols. Whether it is the use of saffron robes, Vedic chants, images of deities, or invocations of dharma, the sacred is repackaged into a visual and rhetorical arsenal designed to evoke fear, loyalty, and righteousness. Chandra's Mumbai is not just a battleground of crime and corruption; it is a symbolic landscape saturated with religious imagery, from temple processions to sectarian graffiti.

One striking example is the use of mythic symbols in the narrative of Gaitonde's television series— Dangerous Minds. The show is a metafictional element that functions as a propaganda tool, dramatizing Gaitonde's own rise to power in epic terms. In doing so, it mimics the real-world phenomenon of mythic storytelling in Indian cinema and television, where gangsters are portrayed as heroic figures and political narratives are cloaked in the language of destiny and divine justice. This blurring of entertainment, politics, and the sacred highlights the contemporary function of myth as spectacle—a tool for mass manipulation and ideological consolidation.

The sacred symbol is also invoked in nationalist visions of India as Bharat Mata (Mother India), a divinized figure who demands both reverence and sacrifice. This image, though absent as a literal presence in the novel, looms in the background as a latent ideological force—fueling patriotism, justifying exclusion, and shaping gendered expectations of duty

and martyrdom. In *Sacred Games*, those who claim to defend this sacred motherland do so not through compassion or justice, but through purges and violence.

Mythic Legitimacy and Political Violence-

Chandra is particularly interested in the question of legitimacy: What makes violence legitimate? What makes a leader believable, even worthy of devotion? In Sacred Games, legitimacy is derived not only from coercive power or charisma but also from the invocation of sacred myth. Gaitonde believes himself to be chosen, even blessed, and this belief—reinforced by Guruji—allows him to act without remorse. His crimes become sacralized through narrative; he is not simply killing for gain, but fulfilling destiny.

Guruji's discourse also reflects this logic. His spiritual teachings are a hybrid of ancient Hindu texts and fascist ideology, blending metaphysical abstraction with real-world political aims. This combination renders him particularly dangerous: his followers believe they are not committing crimes but performing sacred duty. This fusion of sacred and political legitimacy undermines moral reasoning, allowing horrific acts to be committed in the name of cosmic justice.

Chandra's depiction of this phenomenon is especially relevant in the age of global extremism, where religious narratives are used to inspire acts of terror across the world. Whether in the rhetoric of jihadist movements or Hindu nationalist militias, the invocation of the sacred to justify violence remains a potent and troubling force. *Sacred Games* does not offer easy answers, but it lays bare the mechanisms by which such ideologies take root and flourish.

Political Praxis: Action, Agency, and Moral Complexity-

While *Sacred Games* intricately maps the mythic structures that shape Indian cultural and political life, it is equally invested in dramatizing how individuals act within these structures. This is where the concept of political praxis—that is, the embodiment of political theory and belief in action—becomes central. Chandra does not reduce his characters to victims of larger ideological or mythic systems; instead, he focuses on the difficult, often contradictory decisions they make in pursuit of justice, power, or survival. Political praxis in *Sacred Games* emerges not as a coherent ideological program, but as a field of ethical struggle, where each decision is compromised by the weight of history, belief, and structural violence.

At the heart of this ethical struggle is Inspector Sartaj Singh, whose trajectory represents the clearest meditation on political action and moral ambiguity. In contrast, Ganesh Gaitonde's practice of politics through spectacle, crime, and self-mythologizing presents an opposing mode of praxis—nihilistic, charismatic, and deeply destructive. By juxtaposing these two figures, Chandra creates a dynamic framework to explore the moral complexities of agency in a society where the sacred and political are deeply entangled.

Sartaj Singh and the Ethics of Secular Action:

Sartaj Singh is not a mythic hero in the conventional sense. He is world-weary, physically deteriorating, emotionally scarred, and increasingly disillusioned with his role as a police officer. Yet it is precisely his ordinariness that makes him compelling. As a Sikh in a predominantly Hindu police force and a son of a man who was both a patriot and a moral exemplar, Sartaj is deeply invested in ideals of justice and integrity. But the India he inhabits is not the idealized postcolonial nation of his father's dreams—it is a fractured, corrupt, and spiritually exhausted society.

Sartaj's praxis unfolds through a series of compromises. He takes bribes, turns a blind eye to institutional violence, and participates in morally dubious operations. Yet these compromises are never romanticized; they are depicted as deeply painful and psychologically corrosive. Chandra uses Sartaj's internal monologue to highlight the constant moral accounting that defines his experience. Unlike mythic heroes who act with divine clarity or historical certainty, Sartaj acts in uncertainty. He is perpetually unsure of whether he is doing the right thing—even when his actions are legally or ethically justified.

His slow unraveling of Gaitonde's legacy, through documents, recordings, and cryptic clues, is not just a detective plotline but a philosophical journey. As he pieces together the motivations behind Gaitonde's actions and Guruji's apocalyptic vision, Sartaj is forced to reflect on his own passivity, his failures, and his complicity in the systems he serves. In this way, his praxis is a lived form of inquiry—an imperfect but

sincere engagement with the moral demands of his time.

Sartaj's struggle also evokes the figure of the modern Arjuna: caught between duty and doubt, between action and contemplation. But unlike Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Sartaj receives no divine counsel. He must navigate a world where the gods have gone silent, or worse, have been hijacked by politicians and criminals. His final acts in the novel—working to prevent the nuclear catastrophe engineered by Guruji—are not acts of heroism in the grand mythic sense. They are acts of responsibility, undertaken with full awareness of the moral costs involved.

Ganesh Gaitonde: Political Praxis as Self-Mythology-

In contrast, Ganesh Gaitonde embodies a radically different kind of praxis—one that fuses crime, spectacle, and religious ideology. Gaitonde does not act out of civic responsibility or moral conviction; he acts to construct himself as a godlike figure in a world he perceives as chaotic and meaningless. Yet even Gaitonde's actions are not entirely nihilistic. In his own mind, he is on a quest: to overcome the humiliation of his origins, to assert control over history, and ultimately to redeem himself through sacrifice.

His praxis is performative and self-referential. He constantly narrates his life to himself and others, shaping his identity through language and myth. He sees himself as a tragic hero, a man who dared to act when others cowered, who saw the rot in the system and used its tools against it. But Chandra gradually dismantles this self-image. Through flashbacks, alternative perspectives, and narrative irony, Gaitonde's motivations are shown to be rooted in fear, trauma, and a desire for validation.

The pivotal moment in Gaitonde's transformation is his encounter with Guruji, who provides him with a new cosmological framework for understanding his life. Guruji offers not only spiritual solace but also a political mission: to become the agent of a new order. This is where Gaitonde's praxis shifts from self-preservation to messianism. He begins to believe that his violent past has been preparation for a divine purpose—that he is the chosen one who will usher in a new age. In this delusion, Gaitonde becomes a case study in how myth can corrupt political agency, transforming a wounded man into a fanatic.

Ultimately, Gaitonde's praxis culminates in self-destruction. His suicide, timed and staged for maximum theatricality, is not an act of despair but of symbolic transcendence. He seeks to inscribe himself into history not as a criminal but as a martyr, a visionary who saw the future and acted accordingly. Chandra's portrayal of this moment is deeply ambivalent: while it is emotionally powerful, it is also a damning indictment of political egoism masquerading as spiritual destiny.

Narrative as Political Space-

A key implication of this mythic rewriting is the elevation of narrative itself as a space of political praxis. *Sacred Games* is deeply self-reflexive about the act of storytelling. Gaitonde tells his own story in a first-person voice, shaping his myth through confession. Sartaj reconstructs a story from fragments, documents, and silences. Other characters—Jojo, Guruji, the intelligence agents, even anonymous TV producers—contribute to a vast network of stories that overlap, contradict, and refract one another.

This narrative complexity is not just formal experimentation; it is a philosophical claim. In a world where sacred myths have been politicized and corrupted, storytelling becomes a way to recover multiplicity, complexity, and ethical nuance. Chandra's polyphonic structure mimics the structure of Hindu epics, but it also updates them for a world where the sacred is no longer a given. The novel itself becomes a sacred space—not in the religious sense, but in the sense of being a site for critical reflection, ethical engagement, and political imagination.

By embedding sacred motifs within a postmodern narrative framework, Chandra effectively reframes the sacred—not as a source of absolute truth, but as a contested terrain. The "sacred" is no longer what is unquestioned or eternal; it is what must be questioned, negotiated, and reimagined. In this way, *Sacred Games* joins a broader tradition of Indian literature—exemplified by writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh—that seeks to unwrite and rewrite foundational myths in the service of justice.

Implications for Contemporary India-

The implications of this rewriting are especially resonant in the context of contemporary India, where the boundaries between religion and politics have become increasingly blurred. The rise of Hindu nationalism, the politicization of sacred symbols, and the marginalization of minority communities are all real-world phenomena that Chandra addresses through fiction. *Sacred Games* does not present itself as a political manifesto, but its mythic deconstructions are unmistakably political.

In highlighting the dangers of unchecked spiritual authority, Chandra also implicitly calls for a reinvigoration of secular ethics. Characters like Sartaj Singh, who attempt to act with integrity even within compromised institutions, represent the possibility of a politics that is grounded not in divine mandates but in human responsibility. This is not an easy or triumphant politics—it is marked by doubt, failure, and compromise. But it is, perhaps, the only politics that can resist the allure of totalizing myths.

Moreover, Chandra's portrayal of myth as both a weapon and a mirror invites readers to reflect on their own complicity in the narratives they consume and reproduce. The sacred, in this view, is not something that exists outside of us; it is something we participate in creating. Whether through ritual, storytelling, or ideology, we constantly rewrite the sacred— sometimes to heal, sometimes to harm.

CONCLUSION

Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* is a monumental literary achievement that blends the conventions of crime fiction, political thriller, and spiritual allegory to produce a deeply philosophical meditation on myth, violence, and ethical action in contemporary India. At its core, the novel is a sustained engagement with the idea of the sacred—not as a fixed set of religious truths, but as a dynamic and contested set of narratives that shape both personal identity and collective political life.

This paper has argued that Chandra reconfigures mythic structures in order to interrogate the mechanisms of political praxis. Drawing on Hindu cosmology, epic archetypes, and religious motifs, *Sacred Games* rewrites the sacred not to dismiss its significance, but to challenge its appropriation by power. Figures like Ganesh Gaitonde and Guruji

illustrate how myth can be harnessed for domination, violence, and authoritarian control, while characters like Sartaj Singh embody the fragile, uncertain possibility of ethical action within corrupted systems.

By framing political praxis through the lens of myth, Chandra reveals the ideological underpinnings of state power, religious nationalism, and organized crime—showing how these forces often rely on sacred symbols and narratives to justify their actions. At the same time, *Sacred Games* offers a counter-narrative: one that values ambiguity over certainty, reflection over dogma, and responsibility over destiny. This is particularly evident in Sartaj's gradual transformation—not into a hero in the mythic sense, but into a flawed individual willing to act ethically despite the absence of divine guidance or institutional support.

Importantly, the novel situates its mythic engagement within a contemporary context marked by globalization, surveillance, terrorism, and mass media. Myth, in this world, is not confined to temples or scriptures—it circulates through television, cinema, politics, and even organized crime. Chandra's Mumbai is a mythic city not because it is timeless, but because it is saturated with competing narratives of origin, identity, and destiny. In this way, *Sacred Games* aligns with other postcolonial literary projects that seek to deconstruct master narratives and reassert the complexity of lived experience.

The implications of Chandra's mythic-political synthesis are far-reaching. In a time when religious ideologies continue to inform nationalist rhetoric, and when authoritarian regimes increasingly appeal to mythic pasts to legitimize their rule, *Sacred Games* serves as both a warning and a guide. It warns against the seductive power of myth when weaponized for political ends. But it also gestures toward a more responsible engagement with the sacred—one that acknowledges its cultural power while resisting its totalizing tendencies.

In rewriting the sacred, Chandra does not seek to erase it. Rather, he insists that myth must be reinterpreted through an ethical lens—one that is attuned to historical violence, structural injustice, and human suffering. This is a profoundly literary and political act. By reclaiming the sacred as a space of inquiry rather than certainty, *Sacred Games* invites

readers to imagine new forms of political praxis that are not rooted in divine authority, but in empathy, reflection, and moral courage.

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