

Dean Yang, U Michigan, Departmental Seminar on Wednesday 28.05.2025, **12.15**

(Host: Stefan Klonner)

**Ancient Epics in the Television Age:  
Mass Media, Identity, and the Rise of Hindu Nationalism in India\***

**Abstract**

This study examines the long-term social and political impacts of mass media exposure to religious content in India. We study the impact of “Ramayan,” the massively popular adaptation of the Hindu epic televised in 1987-88. To identify causal effects, we conduct difference-in-difference analyses and exploit variation in TV signal strength driven by location of TV transmitters and topographical features inhibiting electromagnetic TV signal propagation. We find that areas with higher exposure to Ramayan (higher TV signal strength when the show aired) experienced significant cultural and political changes. First, we document a strengthening of religious identity among Hindus: parents in these areas became more likely to give their newborn sons traditionally Hindu names, and households showed increased adherence to orthodox Hindu dietary practices. In the short term, this cultural shift led to an increase in Hindu-Muslim communal violence through 1992. Over the longer term, through 2000, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became more likely to win state assembly elections. Analyses of changes in local TV signal strength in India over decades indicate that these effects are not due to general access to TV but are due to exposure to the Ramayan TV show in 1987-1988. Our findings reveal that media portrayal of religious narratives can have lasting effects on cultural identity, intergroup violence, and electoral outcomes.

\* Joint work with Resuf Ahmed, Paul Brimble, Akhila Kovvuri, and Alessandro Saia