

When Women Retell the Ramayan

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Epic poets the world over are men singing the glory of other men—armed men, to be precise. In a study I did a couple of years ago, I noticed that out of the thirty-eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there—other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other. So, what happens when women choose to retell an epic? There are many alternatives.

1. You could tell it like it is, by borrowing the traditional eyes of the male epic poet, as Molla does in her 16th century Telugu *Ramayan*.

2. You could tell it like it is, looking at it with your own women's eyes, as Chandrabati does in her 16th century Bengali *Ramayan*.

3. You could tell it like it is by borrowing an ideological viewpoint as Ranganayakamma does in *Ramayan Vishabriksham*, rewriting the Ram tale from the Marxist point of view.

4. You could tell your own story through the story of Sita, as the village women of India have been doing for hundreds of years.

For me it all started in 1989 with an accidental re-reading of the text of Chandrabati *Ramayan*. That is where I discovered that a women's *Ramayan* tells a different story. Since then, I have been fascinated by women's retellings of the Ram tale. My studies on Chandrabati's, Molla's and Ranganayakamma's *Ramayans* have been published.

Chandrabati and Molla are the very first women to retell the *Ramayan* in their regional language, and they have amazing similarities. Both remained unmarried out of choice in order to become professional poets, both worshipped Shiva, yet wrote a *Ramayan*. But here they took different routes. Molla, a woman and Shudra,

threw a challenge to the Brahmin court poets by writing a perfect classical *Ramayan*. Chandrabati, on the other hand, composed a *Ramayan* which told only the story of Sita and critiqued Ram from a woman's point of view. The Brahmins did not allow Molla's work to be read in the royal court. And critics have rejected Chandrabati's as a weak and incomplete text. Ranganayakamma suffered a great deal of social ostracisation for her attack on the 'Holy Book'.

The village women care neither for the court nor for the critic—and they are not out to change the world. They continue to sing for themselves. I am grateful to the late A. K. Ramanujan for his encouragement of this work. He was vastly enthusiastic after reading my paper on Chandrabati *Ramayan* in February 1991, and told me about Professor Narayana Rao's unpublished work on Telugu women's *Ramayan*. Ramanujan felt that a lot of Chandrabati's perceptions were shared by these Telugu women. Chandrabati also supported Ramanujan's view that women's traditions held an alternative perception of Indian civilisation. Thus, the connection was made in my mind. With references from Professor Rao, I went to Andhra Pradesh looking for more material. Then to Bangladesh and



Illustrations : BADRI NARAYAN, *The Ramayana*

to Chandrabati's village. Gradually my interest spread its wings wider. Here I focus on contemporary rural women's *Ramayan* songs in Bengali, Marathi, Maithili and Telugu.

Just as the Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female, to help serve the system. The impact is far-reaching. Several years ago, Sally Sutherland showed that for 90 per cent of the Indians she interviewed, Sita was their favourite (mythical) woman. No one blesses a bride by saying, "Be like Draupadi". It is always Sita and Savitri. They are the saviours. Savitri saved her husband from death, Sita saved him from disgrace. Although Sita's life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide and through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently.

But there are always alternative ways of using a myth. If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice. They have found a suitable mask in the myth of Sita, a persona through which they can express themselves, speak of their day-to-day problems, and critique patriarchy in their own fashion.

In the women's retellings, the Brahminical Ram myth is blasted automatically though, probably, unwittingly. Here, Ram comes through as a harsh, uncaring and weak-willed husband, a far cry from the ideal man. The women do not mind calling him names such as *pashanda* or *papisthi* or directly attacking him by saying, "*Ram, tomar buddhi hoilo nash*" (Ram, you've lost your mind). This is possible because the women's songs are outside the canon. Women's Sita myth, where Sita is a woman,

flourishes only on the periphery. The male Sita myth, where she is a "*devi*" (deity), continues in the mainstream. In the women's retelling, Sita is no rebel; she is still the yielding, suffering wife, but she speaks of her sufferings, of injustice, of loneliness and sorrow.

In the women's folk tradition in India, never mind where you are, which century you belong to or what language you speak, you are all sisters in sorrow. Though the singers may live in different parts of the subcontinent, wear different clothes, cook very different food and vote for totally different political parties, when they sing the story of Ram, they are astonishingly close to one another. In their feelings, their perceptions, their expressions, their choices of events and their responses, they echo each other. So much so that it took a good deal of careful screening and categorising of the songs to keep their identities clearly separated in my mind.

These work songs and ritual songs have opened up a rich world of women's *Ramayans*. While weeding or sowing in the field or husking or grinding in the courtyard, or preparing for religious ceremonies, the women all across the country sing these songs. These are connected with different moments of a woman's life, and here Sita is the name of the woman who attains puberty, gets married, gets pregnant, is abandoned and gives birth. They call it the *Ramayan* but it is of Sita that they sing.

In their retellings of the *Ramayan* for women naturally to pick and choose their episodes; they are not interested in the heroic epic cycle, which has no relevance to their lives. If what they create is fragmentary, it is because their lives are fragmentary. For them, it is the whole story. It reflects a woman's world in its entirety. These are the four language of my present area of interest: Bengali in the east (Bangladesh), Marathi in the

west, Telugu in the south and Maithili in the northern Hindi belt.

The favourite episodes of the women singers seem to come mostly from the *Balakanda* and the *Uttarkanda*, the two so-called spurious books, excluded by strictly classical *Ramayan* scholars. The *Balakanda* deals with the birth and marriage of Sita and what happened before Ram's coronation plans were made. And the *Uttarkanda* tells us what happened after the war, after Ram-Sita's return to Ayodhya. *Uttarkanda* is not a flattering book for Ram. The topics that interest men do not seem to interest the women. They leave out the details of war, Ram's glory, Brahminical rituals, and so on. The women seem to sing mostly of abandonment and injustice, and of romance, weddings, pregnancy and childbirth. Naturally, the songs centre around Sita, rather than Ram. The areas where Ram usually shines brilliantly, those of moral strength (like father worshipping) and of physical prowess (like demon killing), do not seem to interest the women at all. One area of Ram's moral judgement does bother them though—his wife-testing (*agnipariksha*) and abandoning of Sita. Incidentally, the man who seems to appear most in the songs is Lakshman, the brother-in-law and forest companion of Sita (the other slave of Ram). He appears to be the only man whom the rural women of India and Bangladesh care for, with whom Sita can communicate.

The six major themes in these songs are: Sita's birth, her wedding (with a touch of pre-marital romance), her abduction, pregnancy, abandonment, and childbearing.

The rural women in India and Bangladesh have shared the same historical experience, the same socio-economic situations, and their response to an elitist patriarchal text naturally shows a great deal of

commonality. Their values are not very different from each other's, but are very different from those of their ruling males, which are the concerns of an epic. Hence, the *Ramayana* sung by the mainstream bards have little in common with the women's songs. Women sing for themselves, the male bard sings for the public. Their approaches to the epic and to the act of singing are totally different. The professional bard sings of Ram. The village woman sings of Sita.

Ten common sub-themes may be derived from these songs which are highly relevant to women's lives in India today, especially rural women:

1. Sita, the foundling. The girl child as the essential orphan.
2. The worry of the parents over getting their daughter married.
3. Child marriage and its concerns.
4. The giving-away songs.
5. The in-laws and the bride, the nature of domestic abuse.
6. The golden deer. Blaming the victim. The 'she asked for it' mentality.
7. The woman's desperate need to bear a son to keep her place in patriarchal society and the value of male life.
8. Pregnancy—the cravings, the desire to be spoiled a bit.
9. Childbirth under dire conditions.
10. Abandonment. Facing rejection and dispossession of one's social identity.

It is not hard to see what purpose the Sita myth serves in the life of rural women. It offers them a persona and a voice.

These themes, obviously, have no religious significance, and do not concern men very much. These are songs that deal with the most difficult or dangerous areas of a woman's life, the intense moments of insecurity or physical risk. They do not complain about hard work or poverty; all the songs complain about neglect and denial of their rights. The songs show

us that a woman has no social identity of her own, her husband lends her his identity and defines hers by it. The Sita songs are the songs through which we can hear the voice of the silent majority, whereas the epics sing the glory of the powerful few. Let us see how these songs deal with the topics we have just indicated.

Each language seems to have its own special touch while dealing with Sita's travails. For example, Marathi seems to be the only one of these four languages which has the detailed accounts of Sita's sufferings at the hands of the in-laws and the useless husband who plays into their hands. And songs depicting Janak's desperation for finding a husband for Sita recur the most in Maithili. The support that Sita receives from all the women of the household when she is being sent off to the forest is to be found only in Telugu songs. The Bengali songs probably use the most harsh words about Ram, although practically every woman worth her salt in the other languages criticises him too. In Bengali, he is portrayed as not only jealous and suspicious, but termed 'stone-hearted' and a 'sinner'. Chandrabati calls Ram a deranged wimp, and to make the picture clearer, describes him in a way that makes him appear closer to a dragon than a king. She also holds him responsible for the fall of Ayodhya. Ironically, this did come true 400 years later in 1992, with the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Ram-worshipping fanatics. Across the country, village women have incredible identification with Sita, and though they have affection for Ram the child, or Ram the lover, they do see him as a tyrant and an unjust husband. Never mind that Ram is a god and is presently on a comeback trail to save the world. In these women's folk songs, he will always be less than a perfect man, and a far cry from a hero.

Sita the Foundling

Now to consider some songs. We begin with the theme of Sita as the essential orphan. There is a Marathi work song—Sita, in forest exile, is talking to the birds and trees as she has no one else to talk to:

“Sitabai says,

*‘What kind of a woman am I?
I was given away to Ram when I was
five years old.
What sort of mother’s love have I got?
...Dear Plum tree, dear Babul tree,
Sita is telling you the story of her life.
Please listen... I was found at the tip
of a plough
How can I have parents?
I was found in a box, in the open
field.’ ”*

One can feel the eagerness of an isolated woman to communicate. This feeling of being utterly alone and unloved is echoed in other languages. I quote from Chandrabati's Bengali poem, where Sita tells Lakshman:

*“I have no father, no mother
I was found at the tip of a plough
I don't know who my parents are
Or who my brother is
Like moss in a stream
I float from shore to shore...”*

In a contemporary Marathi work song, Sita echoes her 400-year-old Bengali self:

*“I have no father, no mother
I have lived my life in forests, eating
wild fruits
I have no sister, no brother
My soul has become an exile
Living in the wilderness.”*

And now as we consider this Munda tribal song from Chhotanagpur (very close to Mithila), we hear Sita's sigh again:

*“On the grassy uplands, the
ploughmen found me
They took me to the King's palace...
I grew up like an edible fruit*

*Though Janak gave me in marriage
to Ram
I didn't forget my sufferings...
Never have I known happiness..."*

Why is it that all these women choose to sing of Sita as an orphan, rather than a princess? The commonest epithet for Sita in Bengali (also found in Maithili) is "Janam-dukhini" (born to suffer). In the fundamental insecurity underlining life, all of these songs see the universal woman as an essential orphan, as a being without an identity, an ever-alienated self in exile.

Finding a Groom

Even though these women empathise with Sita as an orphan, they still show great sympathy for Sita's foster parents, who had the responsibility of finding a suitable match for their girlchild, which to this day is seen as a terrible burden all over India.

Here is one song about looking for a groom.

*"Princess Sita is scrubbing the floor
Her sari slips off her shoulders,
and her mother the queen tells
the father*

*Up, up, King Janak! What are
you doing here?*

Go, get a groom for Sita.

She is ready for a husband.

*So Janak gets up, puts on a
clean dhoti,*

*ties his pagdi on his head
and takes his peasant's staff in
his hand*

*and sets out towards Mungher
and Maghadha." (No.508).*

Clearly, here we have a Bihari peasant father, looking for a groom for his daughter, not preparations for royal matchmaking.

In another song, young Sita, while cleaning the courtyard, comes across a hefty bow and

lifts it with her left hand while sweeping with her right. Janak faints on seeing this as he had never been able to move it himself. Later, he bursts out into a loud lament —"Ab Sita rahali kumari, yo!" (Now Sita will remain unmarried, woe!). Since a woman needs a husband stronger than her and Sita has such extraordinary power, would she ever meet her match? Sita's suitor must be able to string that bow! A *Swayamvar Sabha* is called, and suitors arrive from all over. The same story appears in Maithili, Bengali, Telugu and Marathi, with variations. In Maithili, Sita plays an active part. This episode is not found elsewhere. For example, when one after another, suitors fail to string the bow, Sita's parents are in a panic—"Ab Sita rahala kumari, dhanusha na tootala he!" (Now Sita will remain a spinster, the bow remains unbroken!). But a broken-hearted Sita climbs to the rooftop and shouts: "Unchi jharokhe chadi Siya Chahundishi Chitvathi he/Mai he, nai koi duniya me bir pita-pran rakhata he?" (Oh, mother, is there no one strong enough in this world who can string the bow and keep my father's vow?) A

naturally bad-tempered Lakshman is most annoyed when he hears this—"Why is she so desperate? Ram will come in his own sweet time and string the bow." Well, Sita obviously didn't want to take a chance.

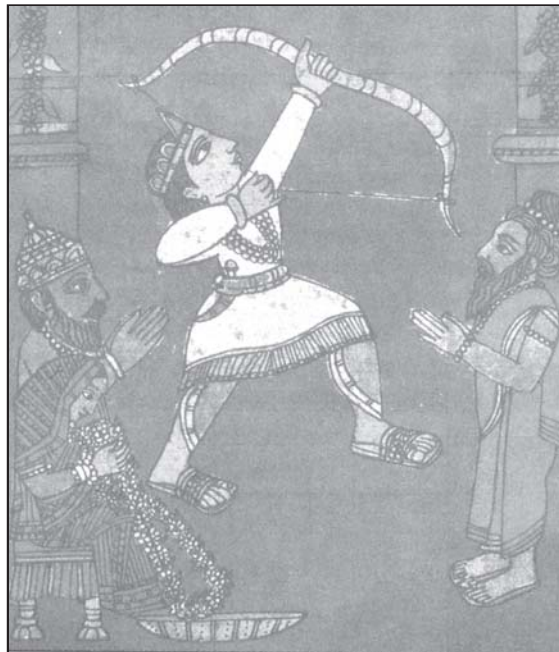
Another Maithili song begins without any preliminaries: Sita herself goes to her father and says—"Sunu Baba araji hamari yo, kumari katek din rakhava? Iho ne uchit vyavahar yo!" (Listen father, I have something to tell you. How much longer do you plan to keep me unmarried? This is not right behaviour!). Thank God, Lakshman didn't get to hear this conversation. Janak of course reacted promptly and got the astrologers over.

In almost all these songs, Ravan comes to the gathering of princes as a suitor, and falls on his face, unable to lift the bow. Sita cannot help laughing, and a humiliated Ravan takes an oath to get Sita by force some day. The women take great pleasure in describing how the ten-headed demon failed miserably—in Telugu, in Marathi, in Bengali, in Maithili, it is the same. As opposed to Ravan, there is Ram, a tender teenager, tall, dark and handsome. Sita is worried that

this lean and dreamy-looking sadhu may never be able to lift the bow. She even expresses her anger towards her father for taking such a harsh vow. But lo and behold! The tender boy does it. He breaks the bow.

Sita as Child Bride

Now let us come to the theme of child bride. Getting Sita ready for the wedding, getting her ready for the in-laws. In these songs we can hear the heart of the Indian woman. The lament for a very young girl, not yet ready to start an adult life, being sent away in marriage into an alien environment. Take this Telugu song:



"The tiny girl is only as tall as seven jasmine flowers.

She can stand neither the heat nor the rain...

Such a lovely child is being given away in marriage, to Ram."

Then, this Bengali song, from Bangladesh: "*alpo alpo dhailo re ja / Sitar hoibo sardi jar / gamchha diya tuilo kesher jal go*" (Little by little pour the water, let's dry her hair with a towel, or Sita might catch a cold). Sita's aunts are bathing her—the basic paradox of child marriage is exposed in this song. A mere child, who is not yet even physically capable of taking care of herself, is being forced to take up the social responsibility of wifehood.

The Giving Away of Sita

From the child bride, we move to the theme of giving away the bride. Here, the anxiety of the parents comes out sharply. In a Telugu song, King Janak takes Dasarath, Ram's father, to the wedding hall and shows a small child, Sita, sleeping in a huge wedding bed. "Look, how helpless she looks in that flower-bed—she is still an innocent child." There is a clear hint of the possibility of marital rape, and the bride's father is gently trying to make the groom aware of the cruelty involved in such an act. In all the songs about the child bride, the parental tension comes out strongly.

In another Telugu song, Sita's mother, Bhudevi, has a woman to woman talk with Ram's mother—

"From today Sitamma is truly your daughter.

She knows nothing—teach her to boil milk, to make ghee from butter ...She has not yet been taught the household chores."

And here is the advice she gives Sita when she leaves—making it clear that the time has come for the girl to act like a woman :

"Don't visit your neighbours after sunset

Don't go to the washerman in the evenings

Never leave your hair open in the street

Don't laugh, showing all your teeth

Don't look around when you are in a crowd

Keep your eyes downcast in public

Never step upon the rice husks

Strewn on the kitchen floor."

And the most important advice of all: "Never offer flowers to any man other than your husband." The song has its place in Andhra weddings even today, since the mother's advice is still the same. It reads more like a book of etiquette for middle-class housewives, than the wedding song for a future queen.

Sasurbas Blues

But in spite of all the advice, the child bride has a tough time at her in-laws. In Marathi, the *sasurbas* songs of Sita give a clear picture of the torture perpetrated on the bride by her mother-in-law. *Sasurbas* is an important category of Marathi women's songs. When the *Ramayana* is retold by women, it is the story of a girl who was born with a crooked fateline. "Brahma was in a hurry/Drawing the line of fate/On Sita's forehead/The line became crooked..."

Here is a taste of Sita's *sasurbas*:

"Ram gave Sita his love

On a tiny tamarind leaf

Kaikeyi poured poison in Ram's ears

So he chews his paan all alone

All by himself

While Kaikeyi waits behind the door

Like a scorpion."

Tamarind leaves are minute—Ram clearly didn't have much to offer Sita. "Chewing his *paan* all alone" means Sita doesn't enjoy Ram's company even when he is relaxing—his step-mother doesn't allow it.

The description gets pretty graphic from time to time:

*"Sita was tortured by one and all
They fed her only bitter neem leaves
for twelve years*

*They didn't let her wear Kumkum for
twelve years*

Her hair is all tangled up

*For twelve years they didn't let her
wash it."*

A clear picture of domestic abuse, both physical and mental. She is not allowed to eat, nor to groom herself. She is not allowed sexual pleasure either.

*"Sita has been in exile
right inside her bedroom*

Ram didn't share her bed

For twelve years

She was locked up behind seven doors

Ram is absorbed in his own business

Poor Sita's youth is wasted away."

Not only does Sita not share her husband's bed, she is not allowed to step out and make friends. While her husband is busy with his kingly responsibilities, she leads a life of total imprisonment. A very common picture, quite a familiar scene, in fact; only slightly exaggerated. As the singer says, "Sita's exile was right in her bedroom." This kind of torture may sound unrealistic but it is not unknown to Indian women, even in the cities today.

Torturing, even killing the wife, usually for dowry, is not uncommon among the educated urban middle class. Quite often it is not dowry but plain jealousy that leads to the torture of the bride by women. As the suffering of the Indian wife at the hands of the in-laws is as real as it was centuries ago, these songs are not relics but a part of women's condition today. When the women cry for Sita, they cry for themselves. Like Sita, they too have been conditioned to emulate the ideal Indian woman who suffers in silence and doesn't complain. Sharing the

pain among friends is the only source of relief.

Pregnancy Cravings

To come to a lighter note, women singers pay a great deal of attention to Sita's desires during her pregnancy. They ask a question that neither Sita's husband Ram nor the epic poet Valmiki ever concern themselves with—what does Sita, the individual, desire for herself? In this Telugu song, Sita is three months pregnant. "What does Sitamma's heart desire?" Well, it is nothing less than tiger's milk, and Lakshman, her dear brother-in-law, gets it for her from the forest. "But, brother Lakshman, I have one more desire in my heart."

"What is it now?"—"In the middle of the blue ocean lies a distant sandbank.

*In the middle of the sandbank
Stands a single teakwood tree.*

*From that teakwood tree hangs a
special honeycomb.*

*With that honey I wish to eat sada
dosas!"—*

Sita's exotic taste doesn't please her mother-in-law. She comments:

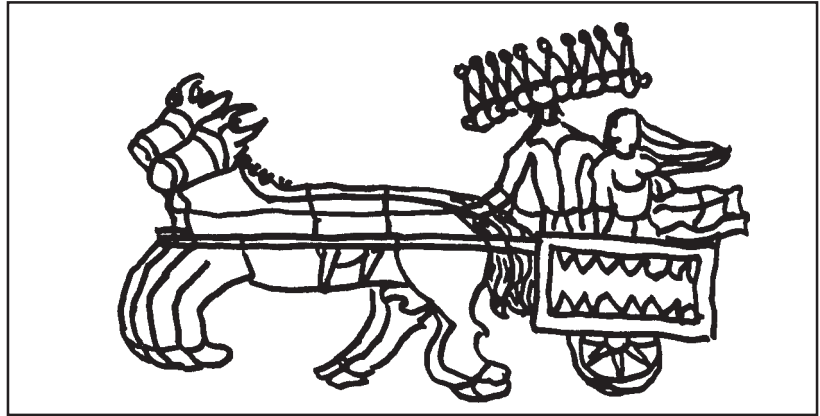
*"Hmph! I too was pregnant once, and
delivered Ram and Lakshman all right.
But did I ever ask for such outlandish
stuff?"*

*All I craved for was green mangoes
and coconut..."*

In a Marathi song, Sita craves for various fruits and vegetables, including something very exotic, viz, carrots, for which Ram has to go to the market. Clearly, these are wish-fulfilling songs. Lakshman appears frequently in these songs but Ram rarely does.

Sita's Exile

What happened to Ram after he sent his wife away to the forest? Women have their answers. In this Marathi song, we find Ram lamenting for Sita after he has exiled her. But what is his



lamentation? Ram wipes the corner of his eyes with the end of his shawl and wails—

*"Where can I find a queen like Sita
now?"*

*Who can sprinkle the floor with
water as well as she can?"*

Who will give me my dhotis?"

*And who can serve me good meals as
Sita can?"*

*Sita is in exile, who will make a fine
royal bed for me now?"*

And make the sandal paste?"

*Brother Lakshman, let us shut down
the pleasure palace."*

And he stands his cot up on its side with his foot while tears gush down his cheek "like water from rain water pipes". Now that Sita has been driven out, Ram has lost a maid, a cook, a bedmaker, a housekeeper, and a pleasure-giver. A terrible loss, no doubt. In a wish-fulfilling Bangladeshi song, Ram's lament reaches the point where he repents for sending Sita into exile and begs Lakshman to bring her back as she is the breath of his life. "Sita amar jaaner jaan/Sita amar praner pran/Sita bina banche na jiban/Bhaire Lakshman, paye pari Sita aina de/Ki kariya dilam bisarjan". (Sita is the life of my life; I cannot live without Sita. I fell at your feet brother Lakshman, bring back Sita. Oh, how could I send her off?)

Let us now examine how Sita prepares for the exile. In a Marathi song, the chariot has to wait, there are a few errands that she must get done first. She tells the maid to pick Ram's shawl from the clothes line, wait on him at his meals, gives her a cake of soap to wash Ram's clothes with, orders the grocer what to send, tells the water carrier to fill Ram's bathtub daily, asks the oilman to fill Ram's lamp with oil every day, and just before the chariot leaves, she turns back and checks once more—"Are my Ram's fresh clothes kept in his bathroom?" Before we get too exasperated with Sita's obsession with her wifely duties, we consider the end of this long song. The singer turns around and tells us, her women companions:

*"Sita is going to the forest.
She is pouring out her heart
only to you and me (saying),
'Ram has no compassion
I am five months pregnant.'
Sita is leaving home.
She is sharing her sorrow with you
and me (saying),
'No one felt any pity for me here.
I am carrying a little baby in my belly.'"*

We can hear the voice of disenchantment and criticism, which only the women can share with Sita, or Sita with the women.

The Golden Deer

There are many variations in the story of the golden deer and the abduction of Sita. In Bengali, Sita wants the beautiful animal as a pet to keep her

company in the desolate forest. In Marathi, Sita wants a golden blouse made of the golden deer's skin. In a tribal song, Sita wants to cook venison for a change, after long years of fruit and roots. In a Telugu song, Sita has been taking care of a small plant that a deer comes and chews up every day. She wants the deer caught and the plant saved. Whatever the reason, Sita wanted her husband to chase the golden deer, and sent her brother-in-law after her husband, although he had been specifically requested by Ram not to leave Sita alone. So she breaks the female code of behaviour more than once. One, at the *Swayamvar Sabha*, when she had laughed at Ravan—a strict 'no, no' for a woman; two, again by forcing her brother-in-law to disobey his elder brother; and three, when she crosses the magic circles, the boundary line drawn by Lakshman on the ground (not to be found in Valmiki, like the vow of Ravan).

In most songs, Sita steps out in order to give alms to the monk-mendicant as it is sinful to refuse a *sadhu* his alms. In Bengali, it is just a single line, while in Telugu and Marathi it involves crossing three or seven protective circles. In this Telugu song that women sing while sowing seeds, Sita asks Lakshman what will happen if she steps out of the magic circles. "You will be abducted," he says. When Ravan comes in the disguise of a *sadhu* and asks her to step out, she puts the same question to him. Ravan says: "If you cross one circle, you get one son, if you cross two, you get two sons, if you cross three..., and so forth. Sita takes no chances and greedily crosses all seven circles. Because she wants sons. But she also knows of the abduction. So, What do we make of it?"

In India, producing a 'son' is an essential duty of the wife. Failing that, women suffer tremendous physical and mental abuse and, most often, abandonment. The social and familial

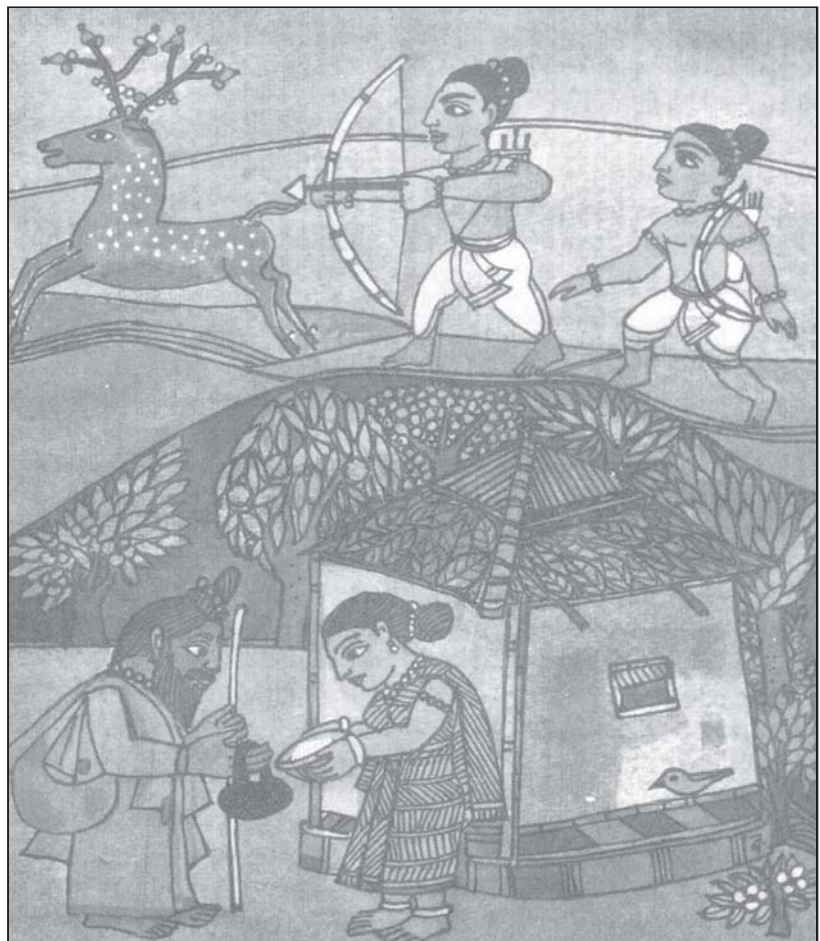
persecution also leads to frequent suicides. The rate of female infanticide after birth, and now even before, with the help of amniocentesis, is alarmingly high. It is not surprising, then, that Sita took the risk.

An alternative reasoning is found in a Bengali women's song. Ravan blackmails Sita into crossing the *Lakshmanrekha*, by threatening to kill himself at Sita's door if she does not come forward and hand him some food and water. Sita is afraid—*Purush-hatya maha paap*—of the great sin of taking a male life. So she steps across the line to save a male life at the risk of her own. It shows how male life is valued and female life is not, as seen in the practice of female infanticide.

In both cases, the value of a male life, be it a son, seven sons, or a begging

sadhu, is considered greater than her own life by Sita. Women provide many reasons for Sita's transgression but the general consensus is against her. Because Sita broke the codes of behaviour—she had asked for the deer against her husband's advice, stepped across the line, sent her guardian away, laughed publicly at a man—she was punished. This is what I call the "she deserved it" mentality that surfaces in society when a woman is molested. She had engineered her abduction.

Similarly, she had deserved her abandonment. The fact that Sita was in fact not raped is a mere technicality. In the eyes of society, she has lost her honour. As it happens all over the world to this day, the victim is blamed and the injustice is thus doubled. The rape victim must suffer not only the pain and humiliation of violation but



the pain of social and even familial rejection. In India, this may sometimes lead to suicide; so too in the case of Sita. Forced to undergo the chastity test a second time, an exasperated Sita decides to disappear from the earth forever, and does so.

It is a lone struggle for the woman. Even her nearest ones choose to remain outside her painful experience, as expressed so well in this Marathi song:

*“How did they do it??
It melts our blood into tears...
Who is fighting so bravely in
the forest?
Who is all alone?
Ram is reading about Sita’s
exile
In a book...”*

The alienation of Ram’s reality from Sita’s hits us directly. Ram is totally detached from Sita’s suffering. He reads about it in a book. He is not part of the book but outside it, when women sing the *Ramayan*.

Child Birth in Exile

The exile songs are probably the ones which touch the very core of a woman’s heart, as the Marathi and Telugu songs seem to indicate. In Maithili, exile is mentioned as a part of the birth songs. Take this one:

*“Sita leaves the palace, opening the
golden gates.
Sita walks to her forest exile
Girls, exile is written for Sita.
Sita goes one mile, she goes two
miles, girls,
In the third mile the pain arises.
Now life wishes to be born, girls,
Call the midwife, quick!
The tree came out of the forest.
So, you are my friend, my well-
wisher?
You take my golden bangle then,
And cut the cord of the baby...”*



Alas! if only Ram would understand!”

This song brings out the terrible loneliness of a pregnant woman who has no one to help her in a moment of distress, thrown out of her secure home.

The loneliness of a woman giving birth alone in the jungle haunts women’s folk *Ramayans*. Let’s take another example, this one from Marathi:

*“Where is the smoke coming from, in
the dense forest?
In the dense forest, Sitabai has given
birth.
Water is being boiled
Sitabai has given birth.
Where will Sitabai find a bed?
Dark beauty Sitabai,
You better make a bed of rocks
And sleep on it.
Sitabai has given birth
Where will Sita find nourishment?
There is no one to cook her a meal.
Sita is in exile, there is no cradle for
her babies.
Sita made a bed of flowers
And placed her twins in it.
Sitabai has given birth.
The hills and the forests are rejoicing.*

She has no one else to call her own.

Sita says, ‘I have lived a life of rejection.’

*All her life she has been neglected by Ram,
Yes, all her life.”*

This is how women sing themselves into their *Ramayan*.

The wretched condition in which women in rural India give birth to their babies, the insecurities, the lack of help, lack of comfort, lack of a healthy environment, all come out in Sita’s birthing songs. The only sign of any care is in the heating of the water, found in Telugu, Marathi and Maithili. The infant mortality rate, and the death rate of mothers at

childbirth in India is still quite alarming. Eighty eight per cent of pregnant women are anaemic. Post-partum care is very poor. Even today 67 per cent of women in India give birth by themselves, without the help of a doctor or nurse. The maternal mortality rate is 570 per 100,000 live births. Is it surprising then that these village women sing about the pain and fear of a lonely childbirth? About the lack of nourishment of the mother? Sita is their voice, for they like Sita have been programmed not to rebel.

*“For twelve years she has been alone
in the forest.*

Sita is hunting for roots.

She must eat something.

She has given birth.

*For five days Sitabai has had
nothing to eat.”(Marathi)*

No one to brew a tonic, no one to cook special confinement food for her.

*“Ram has given me this gift of exile
Like a sudden gust of wind...”
(Marathi)*

Sita complains to the trees and the birds and then asks the crucial

question about the kingdom of Ram, (*Ramrajya*): “Where is my Ram reigning now?” We must note the juxtaposition of Ram’s public responsibilities with his familial responsibilities. “Ram, how could you do this to me?” Sita exclaims in the next line.

The blackberry bush does have an answer for Sita’s question. In another Marathi song:

*“Sita is nine months pregnant and in forest exile.
Because Sita is a woman
She had to face such rejection, such neglect
And so much pain,
Because Sita is a woman...
Ram, just because some wild people talked
You have sent virtuous Sita into the forest!”*

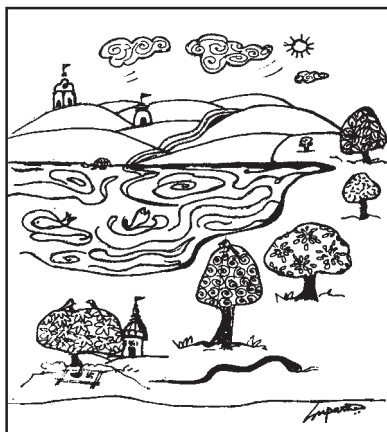
The wilderness’ sympathies are with Sita, the child of nature. In Bengali too, the exile songs are heart-rending, but not necessarily softly worded. Bengali women freely use very harsh words, including expletives in Sanskrit, for Ram. Example: “*Panchamasher garbha Sitar Chhilo Rajdhame/ Pashanda hoiya Ram Sita dilo bane!*” (Five months pregnant, Sita was in the royal palace, a heartless Ram sent her off to the forest!). In another song, we find princess Sita going off into exile like a ‘golden idol immersed before its time’. “*Kichhu kichhu jayre Sita, pichhu pichhu chay/Tathaapi papishthi Ramer/Puri dekha jayre puri dekha jay!*” (Sita takes a few steps and looks back a few times/But oh! the palace of that sinner Ram still rises high). To call someone who is commonly known as *karunasindhu* or the ocean of kindness, ‘ruthless’ (*pashanda*), takes a great deal of accumulated anger. But to brand the *patitapavan*, one who redeems the sinners, as a sinner

(*papishthi*) himself, goes that unbelievable step further.

Voss of Identity

In a Marathi song too, Sita looks back at every step as she leaves home. She keeps stopping Lakshman for things she has left behind. Wait! her blouse is on Ram’s bed. And oh, her saree is there too. Then her box of *sindoor*. Finally, she says: “I have forgotten my face on Ram’s bed.” Presumably, the ‘face’ is her mirror. And most certainly it is her identity that she has left behind. For in Indian society, even today, it is believed that the wife’s identity is derived from her husband. And when he throws her out, she does have reason for existential crisis.

That a woman’s identity is defined by her husband is beautifully stated in a Telugu song: Sita walks into Ram’s bedroom and finds a lovely girl. She is shocked and hurt and complains to Ram till he comes up and embraces her. Sita sees the pretty girl in Ram’s embrace now, and recognises herself in the mirror. She is a woman without an identity till Ram affixes it for her. To send her into exile, away from her husband, is to deprive her of that borrowed identity. What remains is the foundling. From the *Mahabharata* to *Moby Dick*, exile has always been a symbol of disempowerment—of dispossession of rights, of exclusion from society.



SUPARNA

The forest for Sita—or the desert for Sarah—serve the same purpose. Wilderness is the opposite of society, exile is the annihilation of all social relations. For Sarah, as for Sita, it shows the fragility of woman’s status. In epics, exile and abandonment are not exactly the same thing. There can be heroism and dignity in exile—it can be a male experience. Ram himself is sent into exile, but there is no question, of course, of his being abandoned. For Sita, as for Sarah, exile equals abandonment. Not just being dispossessed, but being rejected and driven out of home forever. There is nothing heroic in being abandoned; it can only bring shame. Abandonment happens to women, to those who are weak. Deserted wives are a common concepts but how often do we hear of a deserted husband? A man’s identity belongs to himself, but a woman’s identity is lent to her by a man—with abandonment that identity is snatched away from her.

It is a humiliation experienced by all women.

*“Sita’s exile,
Let us share it among ourselves.
Sita’s exile,
How many times will it happen?
Sita’s exile,
Is happening every moment,
everywhere
When leaving for the forest
Sita distributed it amongst us all
Bit by bit.”*

In this Marathi song, women see Sita as a symbol of the suffering that is inextricably linked with womanhood. Sita, for them, is the universal woman. Through her songs, the women sketch out the stark reality of their own lives.

The Good Housewife

Sita, then, offers a voice to the silenced women of the subcontinent. Through her, women express fears and sorrows, their hopes and wishes.

Sita is just any other hardworking woman, ill-treated by in-laws, neglected by her husband, with nobody to fall back on, punished for no fault of hers. But till the end, Sita remains a good housewife. Take this Telugu song: the war is over, Ravan is dead and Sita has just been rescued and is being gently led to Ram. On the way she points to a stone lying half-buried in the ground and says shyly to Hanuman: "What a lovely grinding stone that will make! I would like to take it back to Ayodhya." So Hanuman starts digging. But then Jambuban finds out and quickly stops Operation Grindstone, since such greed was below the dignity of a queen. An embarrassed Sita hangs her head in shame. It's a song in which women laugh at themselves.

Whether it's a comic greed for domestic appliances or the fear and agony of giving birth alone and unattended, the women's songs reveal genuine concerns.

One can understand why Sita is the favourite mythical woman in India, the ideal woman. Sita has lent dignity, even glamour, to suffering. When there is no escape from suffering, one prefers to accept it with grace. Sita helps one do just that. She is a victim who suffers in grandeur, without being vengeful. She is a prey who never turns into a predator. Usually in epics, preys turn into predators and vice versa. And when a woman turns from prey to predator, out of anger or vengeance, she doesn't win. Even if she does on the surface, her victory leads to total disaster. Those who remained victims, like Andromache or Helen, pose no threat. Draupadi, a victim who turns aggressive and urges her five husbands to avenge her humiliation, wins the battle of nerves but loses all her five sons.

No, a revengeful woman cannot win. An angry Dido killed herself in the *Aeneid*, leaving her dream city of Carthage incomplete. Nothing

happens, however, to the hero Aeneas, who abandoned her. He fulfils his mission to start his own dynasty and build his own city. The anger of Amata is looked upon as madness, and derided. In *Nibelungenlied* Part I, Kriemhild is clearly the prey. But in Part II, a revengeful Kriemhild is portrayed as a near demon and her whole family is wiped out, just as Draupadi's is. Sita remains a prey, and her sons live to become heroes.

Draupadi is too dramatic to be a role model for the weak and the exploited. Women cannot identify with Draupadi, with all her five husbands, and with Lord Krishna for a personal friend. With her unconventional lifestyle and thirst for vengeance, Draupadi inspires awe. Sita is a figure closer home, the girl next door, a person they know too well, a woman whose pain they can share. She is not part of the elite, and she never rebels. Sita symbolises sacrifice, a woman's greatest virtue according to patriarchal traditions. She laments but does not challenge Ram in the songs. Other women speak

for her just as they expect others to speak up for them. So even in Chandrabati's poem, where Ram is severely criticised, Sita remains a docile wife while Chandrabati, the narrator, lashes her whip under her name. Sita is the one with infinite forbearance and thus a winner even when she loses. She lends dignity to suffering, makes forbearance a heroic quality. This is what makes her a role model for Indian women. For, in spite of the sweeping changes across the subcontinent in the last decades, for the silent majority of Indian women, justice remains a dream, equality an absurdity and suffering an everyday reality.

When women retell the *Ramayan*, Sita is the name they give themselves: the homeless female, the foundling, unloved, rejected and insecure. □

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The Dilemma

and Other Stories

By Vijaydan Detha

Translator: Ruth Vanita

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