

I wish to clarify at the outset that I am going to focus primarily on the Sita of popular imagination rather than the Sita of Tulsi, Balmiki or any other textual or oral version of the *Ramayan*. Therefore, I deliberately refrain from detailed textual analysis. I have focused on how her life is interpreted and sought to be emulated in today's context.

However, there is no escaping the fact that in north India the Sita of popular imagination has been deeply influenced by the Sita of *Ramcharit Manas* by Tulsi. In most other versions of the *Ramayan*, close companionship and joyful togetherness of the couple are the most prominent features of the Ram-Sita relationship rather than her self-effacing devotion and loyalty which have become the hallmark of the modern day stereotype of Sita. The medieval *Ramayan* of Tulsi marks the transition from Ram and Sita being presented as an ideal couple to projecting each of them as an ideal man and woman respectively.

As a *maryada purushottam*, Ram's conjugal life has to be sacrificed at the altar of "higher" duties. Sita is now portrayed in a highly focussed manner as an ideal wife who acts as the moral anchor in a marriage, and stays unswerving in her loyalty and righteousness no matter how ill-matched be her husband's response. The power of the ideal wife archetype in Tulsi's *Ramayan* overshadows the happy conjugal life of the couple prior to Ram's rejection of Sita.

The Sita image indeed lends itself to diverse appeals which is perhaps why it has continued to hold sway over the minds of the people of India over the centuries. For instance, in a

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Yes to Sita, No to Ram!

The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India

Madhu Kishwar

study carried out in Uttar Pradesh, 500 boys and 360 girls between the ages of 9 and 22 years were asked to select the ideal woman from a list of 24 names of gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines of history. Sita was seen as the ideal woman by an overwhelming proportion of the respondents. There were no age or sex differences.¹ That

was a 1957 survey. However, Sita continues to command similar reverence even today, even among modern educated people in India. This paper is a preliminary exploration into why Sita continues to exercise such a powerful grip on popular imagination, especially among women.

A Slavish Wife?

I grew up thinking of Sita as a much wronged woman — a slavish wife without a mind of her own. And precisely for that reason she was not for me a symbol of inspiration, but a warning. She was all that I did not want to be. I naively believed she deserved her fate for being so weak and submissive. It was not as though I were deliberately and consciously rejecting Sita as an ideal. Fortunately, she was never held up as an example for me and, therefore, she did not seem an important reference point — positive or negative — in my life. Sita forced herself on my consciousness only after I began working on **Manushi**. The articles and poems that came to us, especially those for the Hindi edition, showed an obsessive involvement with Sita and her fire ordeal (*agnipariksha*).

My impression is that 80 to 90 percent of the poems that came to us for the Hindi version of **Manushi**, and at least half of those for English **Manushi**, revolved around the mythological Sita, or the writer as a contemporary Sita,



with a focus on her steadfast resolve, her suffering, or her rebellion. Sita loomed large in the lives of these women, whether they were asserting their moral strength or rebelling against what they had come to see as the unreasonable demands of society or family. Either way Sita was the point of reference — an ideal they emulated or rejected. I was very puzzled by this obsession, and even began to get impatient with the harangues of our modern day Sitas.

And then came the biggest surprise of all. The first poem I ever wrote was in Hindi, and was entitled, *Agnipariksha*. I give some extracts in a rough translation:

*I too have given agnipariksha,
Not one — but many
Everyday, a new one.
However, this agnipariksha
Is not to prove myself worthy of this
or that Ram
But to make myself
Worthy of freedom.
Every day your envious, dirty
looks
Reduced me to ashes
And everyday, like a Phoenix, I
arose again
Out of my own ashes
Who is Ram to reject me?
I have rejected that entire society
Which has converted
Homes into prisons.*

Not just me, even my former colleague, Ruth Vanita, who is from a Christian family, wrote many a poem around the Sita theme. Her recent collection of poems has several poems that revolve around the Sita symbol. It took a long time, but eventually I became conscious that this obsession with Sita needs to be understood more sensitively than I was hitherto prepared for. Therefore, I began to ask this question fairly regularly of various men and women I met over the years: who do they hold up as an example of the ideal man and ideal

woman? Young girls tend to name public figures like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, Indira Gandhi, and Mother Teresa as their ideals. But those already married or on the threshold of marriage very frequently mention Sita as their ideal (barring the few who are avowedly feminist). At this point of their lives, the distinction between an ideal woman and an ideal wife seem to often get blurred in the minds of women. That includes not just women

of my mother or grandmother's generations but even young college-going girls — not just those in small towns and villages, but also those in metropolitan cities like Delhi.

Even among my students in the Delhi University college where I teach, Sita invariably crops up as their notion of an ideal woman. She is frequently the first choice if you ask someone to name a symbol of an ideal wife. When I ask women why they find this



A modern calendar representation of Ram and Sita

ideal still relevant, the most common response is that the example Sita sets will always remain relevant, even though they may themselves not be able to completely live up to it. This failure they attribute to their living in *kalyug*. They feel that in today's debased world it is difficult to measure up to such high standards. However, most women add that they do try to live up to the Sita ideal to the best of their ability, while making some adjustments keeping present day circumstances in view.

Importance of Being Sita

Since I don't have the space to quote extensively from the large number and variety of interviews I have done on the subject, I merely give the gist of what emerged out of these interviews.

It is a common sentiment among Indian women (and men) that the ideals set in bygone ages are still valid and worth emulating, though they admit few people manage to do so in today's world. This attitude contrasts sharply with the popular western view that assumes that people in by-gone ages were less knowledgeable, were far less aware and conscious of their rights and dignity, had fewer options, and therefore were less evolved as human beings. This linear view of human society makes the past something to be studied and kept in museums but is not expected to encroach upon the supposedly superior wisdom of the present generation. In India, on the other hand, Ram and Sita are not seen as remote figures out of a distant past to be dismissed lightly just because we are living in a different age and have evolved different lifestyles. They are living role models seen as having set standards so superior that they are hard to emulate for those living in our more "corrupt" age, the *kalyug*.

My interviews indicate that Indian women are not endorsing female slav-



The abandoned Sita with her newborns in Balmiki's *ashram*

very when they mention Sita as their ideal. Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining. Nor does accepting Sita as an ideal mean endorsing a husband's right to behave unreasonably and a wife's duty to bear insults graciously. She is seen as a person whose sense of *dharma* is su-

perior to and more awe inspiring than that of Ram — someone who puts even *maryada purushottam* Ram — the most perfect of men — to shame. She is the darling of Kaushalya, her mother-in-law, who constantly mourns Sita's absence from Ayodhya. She worries about her more than she does for her son Ram. As the *bahu* of Avadh, she is everyone's dream of an ideal, loving daughter-in-law. To the people of Mithila, she is far more divine and worthy of reverence than Ram.

Her father-in-law, Dashrath, and her three brother-in-laws dote on her. Ram has at least some enemies like Bali who feel wronged and cheated by him. Ram can become angry and act the role of an avenger. Sita is love

Ram's rejection of Sita is almost universally condemned while her rejection of him is held up as an example of supreme dignity.

and forgiveness incarnate and has no ill feelings even for those who torture her in Ravan's captivity.

In many folk songs, even Lakshman, the forever obedient and devoted brother of Ram, takes Sita's side against his own brother when Ram decides to banish Sita. In one particular folk song, he argues with Ram: "How can I abandon a *bhabhi* such as Sita who is like food for the hungry and clothes for the naked? She is like a cool drink of water for the thirsty. She is now in full term of pregnancy. How can I cast her away at your command?" (Singh, 1986)² He is in such pain at having to obey and carry out such an unjust command of his king and elder brother that he does not dare disclose the true intent of their trip to the forest. Squirming with shame, he leaves her there on a false pretense.

She is a woman who even the gods revere, a woman who refuses to accept her husband's tyranny even while she remains steadfast in her love for him and loyalty to him to the very end. People commonly perceive Sita's steadfastness as a sign of emotional strength and not slavery, because she refuses to forsake her *dharma* even though Ram forsook his *dharma* as a husband. Most women (and even men) I have spoken to on the subject refer to her as a "flawless" person, overlooking even those episodes where she acts unreasonably (e.g., her humiliating Lakshman with crude allegations about his intentions towards her), whereas Ram is seen as possessing a major flaw in his otherwise respect worthy character because of the way he behaved towards his wife and children.

When gods go wrong

Hindus talk of Ram and Sita, Shiv and Parvati and sundry other gods in very human ways and feel no hesitation in passing moral judgements on

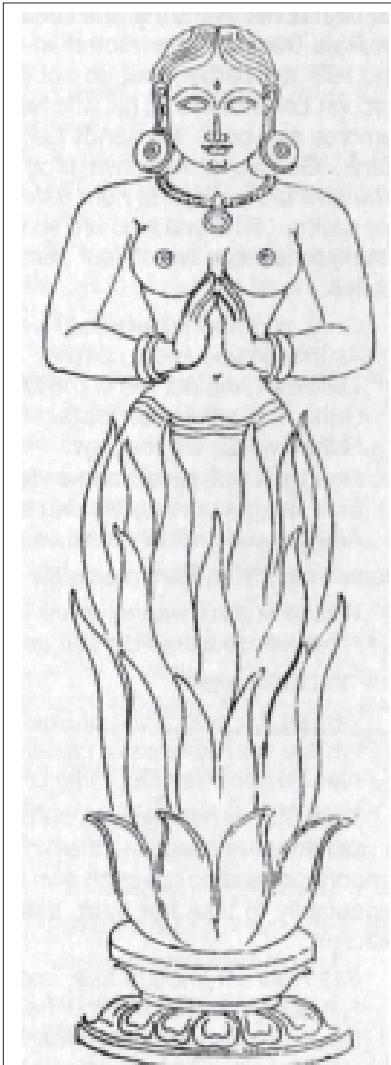
them. Very few Hindu men or women justify those actions of these deities which they consider wrong or immoral by contemporaneously upheld standards of morality. In other words, gods and goddesses are expected to live up to the expectations of fair play demanded by their present day worshippers. Their praiseworthy actions are neatly sifted from those where the gods fail to uphold *dharmaic* conduct. Such criticism and condemnation is not seen as a sign of being irreligious or irreverent but as an

acknowledgement that even gods are not perfect or infallible. This provides a far greater sense of freedom and volition to individuals within the Hindu faith than in religions where god's commandments are to be unconditionally obeyed and the god is upheld as a symbol of infallibility.

Sita's offer of *agnipariksha* and her coming out of it unscathed is by and large seen not as an act of supine surrender to the whims of an unreasonable husband but as an act of defiance that challenges her husband's aspirations, as a means of showing him to be so flawed in his judgement that the gods have to come and pull up Ram for his foolishness. Unlike Draupadi, she does not call upon them for help. Their help comes unsolicited. She emerges as a woman that even *agni* (fire god) —who has the power to destroy everything he touches — dare not touch or harm. Thus, in popular perception Sita's *agni pariksha* is not put in the same category as the mandatory virginity test Diana had to go through in order to prove herself a suitable bride for Prince Charles, but rather as an act of supreme defiance on her part. It only underscores the point that Ram is emotionally unreliable and can be unjust in his dealings with Sita, that he behaved like a petty minded, stupidly mistrustful, jealous husband and showed himself to be a slave to social opinion. Most women and men I interviewed felt he had no right to reject and humiliate her or to demand an *agnipariksha*.

Rejection of Ram

The refusal of Sita to go through a second *agnipariksha* — which Ram demands in addition to the first one that she had offered in defiance — has left a far deeper impact on the popular imagination. It is interpreted not as an act of self annihilation but as a momentous but dignified rejection of Ram as a husband. It is noteworthy that



Sita: Purna-trayisvara temple,
Tripunnitara

Sita is considered the foremost of the *mahasatis* even though she rejected Ram's tyrannical demand of that final fire ordeal resolutely and refused to come back and live with him. It is he who is left grieving for her and is humbled and rejected by his own sons. Ram may not have rejected her as a wife but only as a queen in deference to social opinion, but Sita rejects him as a husband. In Kalidasa's *Raghuvansha*, after her banishment by Ram, Sita does not address Ram as *Aryaputra* (*a term for husband that literally translates as son of my father-in-law*) but refers to him as 'King' instead. For instance, when Lakshman comes to her with Ram's message, she conveys her rejection of him as her husband in the following words: "Tell the king on my behalf that even after finding me pure after the fire ordeal he had in your presence, now you have chosen to leave me because of public slander. Do you think it is befitting the noble family in which you were born?" (Kalidasa)³

His rejection of Sita is almost universally condemned while her rejection of him is held up as an example of supreme dignity. By that act she emerges triumphant and supreme; she leaves a permanent stigma on Ram's name. I have never heard even one person, man or woman, suggest that Sita should have gone through the second fire ordeal quietly and obediently and accepted life with her husband once again, though I often hear people say that Ram had no business to reject her in the first place.

Despite the Divorce

Ram may have forsaken Sita, but the power of popular sentiment has kept them united. Her name precedes Ram's in the popular greeting in North India: *Jai Siya Ram*, as also in several *bhajans* and chants. He is seen as incomplete without her. He stands alone only in the BJP's propaganda

Sita of Folk Songs

INTERESTINGLY, the sentiments expressed in the interviews I gathered are very similar to those expressed in a folk song from Avadh, UP. In this woman's song, Sita, though hemmed in on all sides and betrayed even by Lakshman, who leaves her in the forest on false pretenses, rejects Ram even more strongly than some modern educated women do. The story as unfolded here shows Ram ordering a reluctant Lakshman to banish Sita out of the kingdom. This is the one issue on which Lakshman, Ram's devoted brother, differs strongly and expresses his disapproval of Ram's resolve to send Sita away, but still has to reluctantly obey the King Ram. On the way, Sita is thirsty and asks for some water. Lakshman leaves her sitting under a sandalwood tree saying he will be back soon with some water for her, but never returns. She is heartbroken at this treachery. In the forest when she is crying helplessly, ascetic maidens provide her support and care. After the birth of her twin sons, she sends the customary gifts through the barber for Raja Dashrath, her mother-in-law Kaushalya and brother Lakshman and tells the barber, "but do not go to my husband." When Ram learns through Lakshman that his wife has given birth to sons, he is stunned with remorse and grief. He sends Lakshman to fetch Sita. Sita refuses point blank: "Go back to Ayodhya, brother in-law, I will not go with you." (*Devra jahu lavti tu Ayodhya ta hum nahi jabe*). The sage Vashisth admonishes her saying: "Sita, you who are so wise, renowned for your understanding, have you taken leave of your senses that you have forgotten Ram?" Sita replies:

*Guru, you who know what I went through but ask me this question
As though you know nothing,
The Ram who put me in the fire, who threw me out of the house
Guru, how shall I see his face?
Guru, I will do as you say,
I will walk with Lakshman a step or twain
But I will never in my life see the face of that heartless Ram again
And may fate never cause us to meet again.*

Some years later, Ram meets his sons by accident and questions them:

*Whose sons or nephews are you, Oh children?
From whose womb did you take birth, Oh twin boys?*

Luv and Kush reply:

*We are the grandsons of Raja Janak and the beloved sons of Sita.
We are the nephews of Lakshman -
And we know not the name of our father.*

Thus Sita, in her rejection of Ram, goes to the extent of giving her sons a matrilineal heritage — they claim Janak and not Dashrath as their grandfather and do not even own their own father. And when Ram comes repentantly to take her back, this is how the folk song deals with Sita's reaction:

*Sita Rani sat under a tree, and combed her hair, combed her hair,
"Oh queen, leave now your heart's anger and come to live at Ayodhya,
Oh Sita, without you the world is dark and life utterly fruitless."
Sita looked at him one moment, her eyes filled with anger,
Sita descended into the earth, she spoke not a word. (Singh, 1986)⁴*

For a full translation of this folk song, see Manushi No.8, 1981.

and posters. Otherwise he is never worshipped without his spouse. There is no Ram *mandir* without Sita by his side. However, there is at least one Sita *mandir* that I personally know of where Sita presides without Ram. I was introduced to it by the workers of *Shetkari Sangathan*. This is in Raveri village of Yavatmal district in Maharashtra. The people of the village and surrounding areas tell a moving story associated with the Sita *mandir* in the area, about how that temple came to be. When Sita was banished by Ram, she roamed from village to village as a homeless destitute. When she came to this particular village, she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She begged for food but the villagers, for some reason, did not oblige. She cursed the village, vowing that no *anaj* (grain) would ever grow in their fields. The villagers say that until the advent of hybrid wheat, for centuries, no wheat grew in their village, though plenty grew in neighbouring villages. The villagers all believe in Sita *mai*'s curse. Her two sons were both said to have been born on the outskirts of the village, where a temple was built commemorating Sita mata's years of banishment.

Apologia for Ram

The injustice done to Sita seems to weigh very heavily on the collective conscience of men in India. Those few who try to find justifications for Ram's cruel behaviour towards Sita take pains to explain it in one of the following ways:

- Ram did it not because he personally doubted Sita but because of the demands of his *dharma* as a king; he knew she was innocent but he had to show his *praja* (subject) that unlike his father, he was not a slave to a woman, that as a just *raja* he was willing to make any amount of personal sacrifices for them.

- It was an act of sacrifice for him



The ruins of Sita mandir, Yeotmal Distt, Maharashtra

as well. He suffered no less, and lived an ascetic life thereafter;

- He banished only the shadow of Sita. He kept the real Sita by his side all the time.

Shastri Pandurang V. Athavale's interpretation typifies the far-fetched *apologia* offered by those who wish to exonerate Ram. They even drag in the modern day holy cow of nationalism in an attempt to explain away his conduct: "What we have to remember is that it was not Ram who abandoned Sita; in reality it was the king who abandoned the queen, in the performance of his duty. He had to choose between a family or a nation. Ram sacrificed his personal happiness for the national interests and Sita extended her full co-

operation to Ram. To perform his duty as a king, Ram had sacrificed his queen, not his wife.... At the time of performing *Ashvamedha Yagna*, many requested Ram to marry another woman [which could be done according to the command of holy scriptures]. Ram firmly replied to them: 'In the heart of Ram there is a place for only one woman and that one is Sita.'"

Athavale is at pains to point out that Ram's abandonment of Sita was a symbol of the highest self sacrifice. "Sita was dearer to Ram than his own life. He had never doubted the chastity of Sita ... For had it been so, he would not have kept by his side the golden image of Sita during the sacrificial rites [*Ashwamedha Yagna*]." (Athavale, 1976)⁵

However, even a passionate devotee of Ram like Pandurang Shastri finds it hard to give a totally clean chit to Ram:

"Once Ram appeared callous, even cruel. Upon the death of Ravan, after the battle of Lanka, Sita, extremely happy appears before Ram. Sternly, Ram says to her, 'I do not want you who has been looked at and touched by another person. You may go wherever you want to. You may go either to Bharat, Laxman, Shatrughan, or

In popular perception Sita's agni pariksha is not put in the same category as the mandatory virginity test Diana had to go through in order to prove herself a suitable bride for Prince Charles, but rather as an act of supreme defiance on her part.

I witnessed the power of Sita's story to move men's hearts in large areas of Maharashtra when I was working with a massive farmer's organisation, Shetkari Sangathan, on the *Lakshmi Mukti* programme as part of a campaign to empower women with land rights. The *Lakshmi Mukti* campaign tried to communicate the idea that the peasantry could not get a fair deal or be able to prosper, as long as the curse of Sita mata stayed on them, as long as they kept their *griha Lakshmis* enslaved by keeping them economically dependent and powerless in the family. In this campaign we emphasised that the followers of the Sangathan should not wait for government laws to be framed to enforce the economic rights of women, that the farmers should do it voluntarily as a long overdue gesture of gratitude towards their own Lakshmis.

The Sangathan announced in 1989 that any village in which a hundred or more families each voluntarily transferred a piece of land to the wife's name would be honoured as a *Lakshmi Mukti Gaon* (a village which had liberated its hitherto enslaved Lakshmis) through a public function in which Sharad Joshi would distribute certificates of honour to each such family. (Sita is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi). During the campaign tours to persuade the peasant followers of Shetkari Sangathan to voluntarily transfer a portion of the family land to the wife's name, Sangathan leader Sharad Joshi's speeches revolved around the Sita story, which seems to have played a big role in evoking a positive response from the men. Joshi would explain the *Lakshmi Mukti* campaign by first pointing out how a farmer's wife toils for her family selflessly and how crucial her labour and care is for the well-being of the family. Then he would go on to ask his audience:

"But then, how do we men treat our

Freeing Sitas from Bondage

Lakshmis? Often no better than Ram treated Sita, one of the best wives anyone could have."

He would then go on to recount the kind of sacrifices Sita made for Ram.

"When Ram was banished to 14 years' *banvaas*, (life in the forest) Kaikeyi had not demanded that Sita go with him. She could well have stayed

slanderous remark by a *dhobi*, Ram asks Lakshman to take away Sita and leave her in a forest. He does not even personally explain anything to her."

And then step by step Joshi would build on the cruelty of Ram, how even if his *dharma* as a king demanded the sacrifice of his marriage, he could have behaved more humanely towards her.

"In that entire capital of Ayodhya,



A couple being honoured with Lakshmi Mukti certificate, village Sonoli

back in the palace, but Sita insisted that wherever Ram goes, there goes Sita. She said, my place is by your side. She suffered numerous privations for him joyfully. Finally Ravan abducts Sita for no fault of hers but to teach Ram a lesson for his misbehaviour with his sister. Though Ravan respected her chastity and did not violate Sita, her own husband subjected her to the cruel humiliation of *agnipariksha* to prove her chastity. Even fire could not touch her but on their return to his kingdom, at the mere hint of a

this queen could not call any place her own for mere shelter. Could Ram not have told his queen that though they could not continue living together as husband and wife because of *praja's* opinion, she could live apart in another palace? Or offered her a small house? Or at least a small *kothri* (room/dungeon) where she could live quietly with her children? But no, Maharani Sita became a *bhikarin* (beggar) overnight simply because her husband turned against her and pushed her out. It did not occur to him that if his subjects

were not willing to accept her, that he too could have followed her example. He could go along with her after saying to his subjects 'If Sita is not good enough to be your queen, then my place is by her side. I cannot stay here either.' Instead he left her to live the life of a destitute beggar even while she was carrying his children."

Joshi would then go on to narrate the legend associated with the Sita mandir at Raveri and the power of Sita mata's curse to those who treated her unfairly, and go on to warn his audience that by maltreating their wives, by keeping them economically dependent, the peasantry had collectively invoked the curse of their Sitas. Hence their poverty, their inability to obtain their due and their enslaved condition. He presented the redressal of the wrongs of today's Sitas as a precondition for the peasantry being successful in their fight for justice, and effectively resisting their own exploitation.

He would conclude by saying that the purpose of the *Lakshmi Mukti* programme was to see that no modern day Sita would ever have to suffer the fate of Ram's Sita because she had nothing to call her own. By transferring land to their wives, they were paying off "a long overdue debt" to Sita mata. In village after village I would see men reduced to tears listening to the story of Sita. Hundreds of villages have already carried out the *Lakshmi Mukti* programme of land transfer to



Sharad Joshi addressing a mammoth gathering of farmer women

wives, celebrating the occasion as though it were a festival. Many more hundreds of villages pledged to do so. However the leadership could not sustain the campaign's momentum because it left them little time for their other work and agitations.

Apart from the charisma and credibility of Sharad Joshi, I also attribute the appeal of the movement to the power of the Sita story. Men were told they were atoning for the wrongdoing of Ram and they felt good about being called upon to do so. Sharad Joshi himself admits that the Sita story moves him so profoundly that he himself is reduced to tears whenever he reads those sections of the *Ramayan* which describe Ram's banishment of

Sita. In his view, Balmiki introduces the injustice to Sita *not* so much with a view to hold up Sita's dignified suffering as an example for women but to turn people against Ram-like behaviour:

"Why otherwise would he show him behave so crudely in those episodes, even though Ram never loses his dignity elsewhere, no matter how difficult the circumstances? He could have easily made Ram into as perfect a husband as he was a son. Instead, by saddling him with such a flaw, such crudity of behaviour in contrast to Sita's dignity, Balmiki wants to show how difficult it is for even supposedly perfect men to behave justly towards their wives."

...contd. from p. 25

Vibhishan and stay with any of them.' We do not know for what purpose he was so harsh, or what he intended to convey to Sita by these words, but it is equally certain that they were terrible words ... Even the people who heard Ram saying such bitter words wept. Everyone felt the bitterness of those words, the injustice that was done, but none dared to protest or plead."⁶

The most powerful indictment, however, comes from the people of Mithila, the region which is the parental homeland of Sita. We are told that Sita's being is part of the very consciousness of Mithila; she is all pervasive in the land, in the water, and in the air of Mithila. "Her pain sits like a heavy stone on the hearts of Mithila's people." (Khan, 1986)⁷

This sentiment comes through nu-

merous folk songs of the region. An account of what the injustice done to Sita means to the people of Mithila is poignantly evident in several accounts by leading Hindi writers published in the form of a joint travelogue. This project was organised by the don of Hindi literature, Sachidanand Vatsayayan, whereby a large group of Hindi writers travelled through the region connected with Sita's name

starting from her birthplace Sitamarhi on to Janakpur, Ayodhya and ending their journey in Chitrakoot. The purpose of this project was to delve into the secret of why and how the Ramayan, the story of Ram and Janaki, and the locales associated with their names, have become part of people's consciousness and how it has influenced the value system of the educated as well as the illiterate and defined their cultural identity. (Singh, 1986)⁸

Sita is not just the daughter of Janak in this region but a daughter of all Mithila because, as the folk songs of this region testify, popular sentiment maintains that, had Raja Janak by chance not gone to plough the fields that particular day, someone else from any other *jati* might have gone and found her. In that case she would have become that person's daughter. Therefore, Sita is treated as a daughter of every household in Mithila. In Mithila the entire village is considered as *naihar* (parental home) not just one's actual father's abode. (Khan, 1986)⁹ Therefore, various folk songs show the entire people of Mithila grieving over Sita's fate.

In some folk songs women of different strata plead with their respective husbands to go and fetch her back to her home after her desertion by Ram. However, Sita in her pride and dignity refused to return and brought up her two sons all on her own. Various writers of this anthology describe how the dignity with which Sita suffered privations after Ram's painful rejection has remained alive in people's consciousness as if this injustice was undergone by their own daughter. 'Even today, people of Mithila avoid marrying off their daughters in *Marg-Shish* because that is the month Sita got married. Even today, people of Mithila do not want



to marry their daughters into families living in Avadh, in fact anywhere west of Mithila.

They repeatedly recite Sita's name in marriage songs but Ram's name is omitted. At the end of the song there is usually one line which says "such like Sita was married into Raghukul [the family name of Ram]" (Dalmia, 1986)¹⁰. There is a beautiful folk song of Mithila quoted by Usha Kiran Khan in which a daughter tells her father what kind of a groom he should find for her. After describing various qualities she is looking for, the daughter advises her father: "Go search in the north, go south, or get me a groom from the east. But don't go westward, O father, get me a groom from the north." (Khan, 1986)¹¹

This daughter of Mithila has a status higher than that of Ram in her own region. In various polemical songs, Ram is shown as inferior to Sita. (*ibid*)¹² At the time of marriage Shiv Parvati songs are more popular than Sita songs. In this context it is well worth remembering that Ram had to prove himself worthy of Sita before

her father offered his daughter to him. This is how one of the folk songs of this region describes it: "Everyday Sita used to clean and smear cowdung in the temple courtyard. One day her father Janak saw her lift the heavy *Shiv dhanush* (bow) with her left hand while smearing with her right hand the floor where the *dhanush* was kept. At that very moment he vowed that he would marry his daughter only to such a man who had the valour to break that *dhanush* into nine pieces. Hence, the condition of the *swayamvar* that Sita would only be given in marriage to a man who could demonstrate such exceptional strength."¹³ People of Mithila still believe that though Ram passed the initial test for winning her, he failed to prove a worthy husband.

Another writer, Shankar Dayal Singh, commented on how he sensed the all pervasive sentiment of anguish and pain in the collective consciousness of the people of this region at the injustice done to Sita. He goes on to say:

"This region has taken a strange revenge in a silent way. From *pauranic* times, everywhere, in every village and small town (*kasba*) are found Shri Janaki mandirs where Ram and Lakshman are also present along with Janaki. But the temples are named after Sita as evidence that somewhere the pain of Sita is still hurting the folk sentiment consciousness as though saying: 'Ram, you made our Sita walk barefoot in the forests. Ravan challenged your manhood and forcibly abducted Sita. Though this mother of the universe (*Jagajannani*) went through the fire ordeal to prove her innocence, you abandoned her. Our daughter, our sister was treated thus by Ayodhya. But we are careful of our *maryada* (honour). That is why O Ram,

we will keep your idol in the temple. We will even worship it, but the temple will be known in Sita's name.' That is why the whole area is littered with Shri Janaki mandirs. There are Sita legends attached to every spot, even trees and ponds." (Singh, 1986)¹⁴

Vatsayan comments on how in Chitrakoot people offered them leaves from a tree believed to be the ones which the abandoned Sita used to eat in order to still her hunger. What is the proof offered? The leaves tasted sour and if you drink water after chewing some, the water tasted sweet. So the lore has it that Sita mai used to drink water after filling her stomach with these leaves and that sweet after-taste helped sustain her through days of destitution. Thus, her memory is kept alive in every aspect of the natural as well as the cultural landscape of Mithila. As writer Lakshmi Kant Varma sums it up: "Sita sahanshilta (quality of dignified tolerance) is written on every leaf of Balmiki Nagar" — the ashram where she spent her years of banishment. (Varma, 1986)¹⁵

The Television Ram

Even in the rest of India, very few people endorse Ram's behaviour towards Sita. He has not been forgiven this injustice through all these centuries, despite his being a revered figure in most other ways. In this context, I am reminded of the time when Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* was being telecast over Doordarshan. As the story began approaching the point when Sita was supposed to undergo her *agnipariksha* the serial makers



A modern calendar representation of Shiv and Parvati

were flooded in advance with so many letters of protest against the depiction of Sita going through the fire ordeal that Sagar was forced to deviate from his text and show the *agnipariksha* to be a mock one. The TV Ram was made to clarify that he did not doubt Sita's chastity. Clearly, Ram's injustice to Sita has hung so heavily on the collective conscience of Indians that they are willing to demand that a sacred text be altered. In this new text, determined by contemporary devotees, *maryada purushottam* Ram was being ordered to behave better.

Disqualified Husband

The final rejection of Ram by Sita has come to acquire a much larger meaning in popular imagination than

one woman's individual protest against the injustice done to her. It is a whole culture's rejection of Ram as a husband. For instance, people will say approvingly: "He is a Ram-like son, a Ram-like brother, or a Ram-like king." But they will never say as a mark of approval, "He is a Ram-like husband." If Ram had not been smart enough to win Sita for a wife by his skill in stringing Shiv's bow, if instead Janak had decided to match their horoscope and it had predicted that Sita would be abandoned by him, I doubt that Ram would have ever found a wife. No father would have consented to give his daughter to a man like Ram — his claims to godlike perfection notwithstanding. Most people I talked to echoed this sentiment: "Ram honege bade admi par Sita ne kya sukh paya?" (Ram may have been a great man, but what good did it do Sita?)

Thus, not just modern day Sitas but even traditional women and men reject Ram as an appropriate husband. Indian women's favourite husband has forever been Bhole Shiv Shankar — the innocent, the trusting, the all devoted spouse who allowed his wife to guide his life and his decisions. Unmarried women keep fasts on Monday, the day assigned for Lord Shiv and pray that they may be blessed with Parvati's good fortune. Shiv and Parvati are the most celebrated and happy couple in Hindu mythology, representing perfect joy in togetherness, including in their sexual union. Their mutual devotion, companionship and respect for each other are legendary. Shiv is not seen as a bossy husband

demanding unconditional obedience but as one who respected his wife's wishes, even her trivial whims. To quote Devyani (a middle aged woman working as a domestic help in my neighbourhood): "Bhole Shankar never caused pain to his wife. He would indulge every whim of hers. Only when a man behaves with such respect for his wife can you have a *sukhi grahasthi* (happy domestic life)."

It is significant that *pauranic* descriptions of Shiv show him as the least domesticated and the most rebellious of all the gods, one whose appearance and adventures border on the weird. He is so unlike a normal husband that Sati's father never forgives her for marrying Shiv. Yet Hindu women have selectively domesticated him for their purpose, emphasising his devotion to Sati/Parvati as well as the fact that he allowed his spouse an important role in influencing his decisions. At the same time these women conveniently overlook the many very prominent and contradictory aspects of his life and deeds.

Interestingly, Parvati is not just seen as a *grihalakshmi*, as someone whose reign is confined to the domestic sphere. She often also controls and guides Shiv's dealings with the outside world, constantly goading him to be more generous, compassionate and sensitive to the needs of his *bhakts*.

While there has been a lot of discussion and analysis of the demands put on women in the Hindu tradition, the sacrifices expected of ideal wives, we have failed to evaluate the demands put on an ideal husband. The Hindu tradition might valourise wives who put up with tyrannical husbands gracefully but it does not valourise unreasonable husbands. On the contrary, it places heavy demands on them and



Uma-Mahesvara, Khiching Museum

The Hindu tradition might valourise wives who put up with tyrannical husbands gracefully but it does not valourise unreasonable husbands

expects very high levels of sexual and emotional loyalty from them if they are to qualify as "good husbands". Shiv, for instance, is perceived as someone who cannot live without Parvati. He is said to have no desire for other women. He is supposed to have roamed around the world like a crazed being carrying Parvati's dead body on his shoulders after she jumped into the fire to protest against her father's insult to her husband. His *tandava* threatens to destroy the whole world

and he rests only after he has brought her back to life. However, most women realise that a Shiv like husband is not easy to get. Therefore, they need other strategies to make husbands act responsibly.

There are several practical reasons why Sita-like behaviour makes sense to Indian women. The outcome of marriage in India depends not just on the attitude of a husband but as much on the kind of relationship a woman has with her marital family and extended kinship group. If, like Sita, she commands respect and affection from the latter, she can frequently count on them to intervene on her behalf and keep her husband from straying, from behaving unreasonably. Similarly, once her children grow up, they can often play an effective role in protecting her from being needlessly bullied by her husband, and bring about a real change in the power equation in the family, because in India, children, especially sons, frequently continue living with their parents even after they are grown up. A woman can hope to get her marital relatives and her children to act in her favour only if she is seen as being more or less above reproach.

Most women realise that it is not easy to tie men down to domestic responsibility. You need a lot of social and familial controls on men in order to prevent them from extra-marital affairs which can seriously jeopardise the stability of a marriage. Thus, they think it is best to avoid taking on the ways of men. To respond to a husband's unreasonableness or extra-marital affair by seeking a divorce or having an affair herself would only allow men further excuses to legitimise their irresponsible behaviour. Thus, it is a strategy to domesticate men, to minimise the risk of marriage break-

down and of having to be a single parent, with its consequent effect on children. A man breaking off with a Sita-like wife is likely to invite widespread disapproval in his social circle and is therefore, more likely to be kept under a measure of restraint, even if he has a tendency to stray.

While for women Sita represents an example of an ideal wife, for men she is Sita mata (*jagjannani*), not just the daughter of earth but Mother Earth herself who inspires awe and reverence. By shaping themselves in the Sita mould, women often manage to acquire enormous clout and power over their husbands and family. □

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