

Traditions Versus Misconceptions

Romila Thapar
talks to
Madhu Kishwar
and **Ruth Vanita**



Romila Thapar



**Shadow play puppet in leather
illustrating Sita; Andhra Pradesh, 19th
century (Crafts Museum, Delhi)**

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The situation of women in India today is often characterised as being heavily influenced by tradition. How do you look at traditions and how they affect our life ?

Very often, when we wish to insist on a particular form of behaviour or attitude or value system, we simply say, "this is traditional", the assumption being that it has been handed down to us, unchanged, over a long period of time. That assumption is incorrect. Because traditions, even when they are handed down, do not remain frozen.

In the sheer process of handing down a tradition from one generation to another, it is bound to change. Also, what we regard as tradition today may in fact be something that was invented four or five generations ago. Nothing comes to us in a completely pristine form through the centuries.

Once we recognise that traditions change, we have to ask when and why a particular change occurred. Take the example of the depiction of women in different texts, which have come to be regarded as depictions of traditional Indian womanhood. In the *Mahabharata* version of the story of Shakuntala, when Dushyanta meets Shakuntala at Kanva's hermitage, they have an open and frank conversation after which he proposes that they enter into a *gandharva* marriage which does not require any rituals or ceremony. Shakuntala says she will agree only on condition that her son be declared the heir to Dushyanta's throne. They marry, he leaves, and a son is born to her. After some years, she takes her son to Dushyanta's court to claim his right as heir apparent. Dushyanta spurns and abuses her, until a voice proclaims from the sky that the son is Dushyanta's legitimate child. He then states that he had merely pretended not to recognise Shakuntala because he wished his people to have proof that the child was indeed the legitimate heir.

But when the playwright Kalidasa picks up the theme, he completely changes the character of Shakuntala.

From an assertive young woman who enters into a marriage on her own strength and makes a precondition, she becomes

a submissive, obedient, retiring young woman. She is so overwhelmed by her love for Dushyanta that she is incapable of arguing for her rights. Also, later, it is not so much Shakuntala who demand her own and her son's rights as it is Dushyanta who, after he fails to recognise her and she leaves the court, becomes desperate to recover the lost heir apparent as well as his love.

I think it is interesting that today, whenever we talk about Shakuntala, we talk about the Kalidasa version. But if one talks about tradition, the audience for the *Mahabharata* version would have been much larger. There would have been many more people listening to that version. The, Kalidasa version was only available to a small court circle.

By projecting today only the Kalidasa version, we have exercised a choice in its favour. Obviously, we choose this version and project it as traditional because for our society today, it is more useful to project a version in which the

woman is shy, reserved, obedient than one in which she is assertive, insists on a condition before accepting a marriage proposal, and defends herself with great vigour when the king refuses to recognise her status. So, the way in which present day society picks up a tradition is determined by present day attitudes to women.

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What we regard as tradition today may have been invented four or five generations ago. Nothing comes to us in a completely pristine form through the centuries.

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Would you say that similar choices of versions have been made in the case of the 'Ramayana' ?

The versions that are always talked about today and are popular, the version projected on television, for example, are the Valmiki version and the Tulsidasa version. People are not told that there were many versions of the *Ramayana* story. Some of them may have been prior to the Valmiki version.

In the Buddhist *Jataka* literature, there are brief stories that relate closely to the episodes in the *Ramayana*. In one such story, we are told that Rama and Sita were brother and sister, and they were exiled together with Lakshmana, due to the fear of their wicked step-mother. Then, after Dashratha's death, their younger brother came to Rama and asked him to return. Rama refused to do so until the stipulated period of exile was completed. Eventually, after they returned, Sita became Rama's queen consort.

This relationship between brother and sister tells us a great deal about the assumptions of society at that time. The origin of the Shakya clan, to which the Buddha belonged, is, in Buddhist texts, traced back to a brother-sister union. The relationship need not necessarily be taken literally. What is being suggested symbolically is that there is something



Sinhalese artist George Keyt's Shakuntala — docile and curvaceous



Rama and Sita—from an illustrated manuscript, date unknown. The artist's conception of their features, figure and costume is very different from the version popularised today, for example, through the current TV serial.

special about this lineage and perhaps a social demarcation is being established between it and others.

Therefore, when a popular version of the *Ramayana* claims to be projecting a tradition, the *Ramayana parampara*, it is absolutely necessary that people be told that alternate versions also exist, that it was not a single tradition, but a floating tradition of stories which were picked up by different groups of people and changed in different ways. This is the way epics are usually created. Stories are picked up and collected and put together. So, if the Valmiki version puts together the floating tradition from one point of view, the Buddhist and Jaina versions put it together from other points of view.

There are many folk variants too, and

also south east Asian versions. In some, Sita is the daughter of Ravana ; in others, she has some sort of kinship relation with him. As the story travelled to a new area, the social structure of that area, the kin relations, ethnic relations, and belief structures of the people there, influenced the way in which they reconstructed the story in accordance with their own system of values and beliefs.

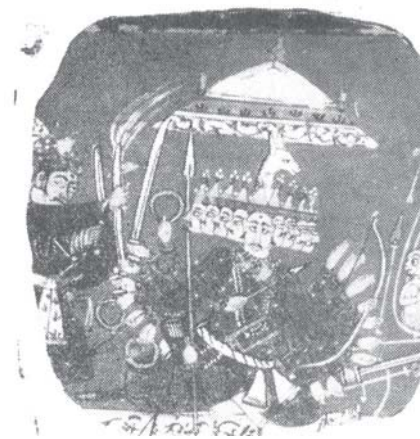
This is the much more exciting part of the *Ramayana*. At formal conferences scholars tend to concentrate discussion on the uniformity of the text, the similarity of the different versions. In fact, the disparities are much more crucial and contribute to the richness of the texts and need to be explored. The Jaina version, for example, is an important alternative version. It is called the

Paumacharyam and is written in Prakrit. It projects a different point of view from the Brahmanical view projected in the Valmiki version. Of course, we are not certain as to the details of the original Valmiki version because the version we now have has been worked over by the Brahmins at some point and what was in origin a secular text converted into a sacred text.

How does the Sita of the Jaina version compare with the Sita of the Valmiki version ?

In the Jaina version, Sita is a much more assertive person. The kidnapping occurs but it is not the central event. Rama and Lakshmana visit a number of royal courts. They do not just travel through forests. So the kidnapping is one event in an eventful story, not the sole focus of the story.

Second, the relationship between Sita and Ravana is also different. Ravana is not a demon. He is a Jaina who has



Detail front a Malwa painting, Circa AD 1650, showing Ravana with a donkey's head atop his 10 heads. Originally, the 10 heads symbolised Ravana's multifaceted wisdom. Portraiture of this kind reverses their significance.

(Courtesy National Museum)

practised austerities that give him command over himself and others. He is attracted to Sita as a person and there is no leering or vulgarity in the relationship. He is really concerned that she should respond to his love and upset

that she does not do so. Sita is not faced by a demon of whom she must be terrified. She has to react as one person to another person. She has the right to respond or not to respond.

In the end, both Rama and Dashratha become Jain *munis*. It is Lakshmana, not Rama, who kills Ravana so Rama is not

सहज अपावनि नारि

पति सेवत

सुम गति लहइ ।

—Tulsi Ramcharitmanas

responsible for taking life. The Jaina ethic triumphs, not the Kshatriya ethic, as in the Valmiki version. Sita does not have a very major role in the Jaina version, yet she is not a cardboard figure.

What do you think of the Tulsi version in this respect ?

Well, I think the Tulsi version is a very depressing version as far as women are concerned. Quite apart from the now famous verse where he refers to women and Shudras deserving to be beaten, there are many other disparaging comments about a woman's nature. Tulsi's Sita is also submissive and the delineation of character in general tends to be weak as there is too much emphasis on the godhead all the time, so that the characters become, as it were, stereotyped. In the Tulsi version, the notion of the illusory Sita is an important difference from the Valmiki version.

How do you account for the transition from the story as poetic epic to one that is overshadowed by *divinity*?

Probably, there were different cycles of stories floating *I* around, stories about Ayodhya and stories about Lanka, which got linked together as the *Ram Katha*. The first change that occurred, roughly in the period before the early centuries AD, was that the hero became an incarnation of the deity. This is how the Indian epic became different from the Greek epic tradition. In the Greek epics, gods participate with the heroes, but in the Indian epics, at a certain point in the process of their being rewritten, the heroes became the incarnations of the

Eighteenth century Maharashtrian Paithan painting, showing Rama shooting Bali from the front. The artist has altered the text to enhance Rama's image as an honourable hero, in modern day terms



gods.

Thus, the whole function of the epic in India changed. What at one time was regarded as a secular text, recited at courts, festivals and assemblies, took on with the rewriting a sacred character and the hero was completely transformed. There are remnants of the old *katha* even in the later texts, such as the episode of Rama shooting an arrow at Ball from the back, which is considered unheroic behaviour, but might not have been considered so in earlier times when rules of combat were differently defined.

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What do you think accounts for the continuing fascination the Sita figure exercises over women's imagination ?

Sita is a very interesting figure. She is not an ordinary Kshatriya woman. She is born out of a furrow. So there is something unusual about her. One cannot be sure whether she will accept the mores and behave as a Kshatriya

Janak finds the baby Sita in a furrow
—Mewar painting, circa AD 1680.
(Courtesy Udaipur Museum)

woman should, or whether she will be in some way nonconformist. And, ultimately, after all the trials and tribulations, she, in a way, triumphs, because she goes back to mother earth. She says, in a way, "Enough of you", and goes back to her origins.

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Like all the women who burn themselves to death in a sort of protest ?

In the case of Sita, it is something more than suicide or that kind of vindication. It is an unwritten, unspoken statement of "I am different. I was born of the earth. I have been through all this and proved myself. But now I go back where I belong. I don't belong to you." I think this has a great, even if subconscious, appeal.

So, although, at one level, the popularity of Sita is due to the deliberate propagation of Sita as an ideal woman in preference to so many other female figures that were available, yet at another, subconscious, level, her popularity among women may be due to seeing her as a woman who finds her own way of

release from hardships. Sita thus provides a compensatory model as well.

What is the significance of the fire ordeal

There are many layers of symbol-ism. Fire is the purifier ; rites are conducted around it. The dead body is polluting, but is purified by being cremated. The soul is released. So too, only the woman who is pure survives the fire. In the case of Sita it is a test of chastity. Of course, the notion of the ordeal in various forms as a means of proving guilt or innocence in a variety of crimes was familiar to the process of justice in early Indian society. It is still practised in some remote areas.

But I think the idea of the fire ordeal is also tied up in a way with the later notion of Sati. Is the woman willing to prove and demonstrate her faithfulness to her husband to the extent of going through immolation ? This notion of the fire ordeal as a method of demonstrating the chastity of a woman does not occur in the Vedic texts.

Curiously, in some late first millennium versions of the *Ratna-yana*,



the fire ordeal takes on a different character and, this is also, reflected in Tulsi's version. Prior to her being kidnapped, Rama, who is by now the all-knowing deity, puts her through a fire rite in order that the real Sita remain safe and only an illusory Sita remain on earth and suffer the tribulations of kidnapping. After the victory of Rama over Ravana, the fire ordeal is performed at which the real Sita returns to earth.

Apart from the obvious explanation that this had to do with *advaita* philosophy and the concept of *maya*, this substantial change in the story may well reflect a concern with questioning the notion of Sita having to undergo a fire ordeal. Was this because the act of becoming a Sati, although seemingly similar, was in fact an immolation to death and not an ordeal and therefore confusion had to be avoided? Or was it because, with the growing popularity of female consorts of the gods and female deities as part of the Shakti cult, it was felt that Sita could not be treated in so casual a fashion?

Since we are on this topic, what is the evidence for the 'Rama janamsthari'? Can the exact place where Rama was born be determined?

For historians, it is problematical because even the historicity of Rama or Krishna or the Pandavas and so on, has not been established. We have no absolutely conclusive evidence to prove that there was a family in which Dashratha was the father, Rama the son and Sita, daughter of Janak, the daughter-in-law.

Even if we assume that there was a small kingdom at Ayodhya, or what I would prefer to call a chiefdom, it is virtually impossible to pinpoint the exact place where Rama was born. By comparison, even though we do have historical evidence of the existence of the Buddha and his birth at Lumbini, we cannot pinpoint the exact place in Lumbini where he was born. How then can we locate an exact birthplace for Rama even if we assume his historicity? Traditions regarding the precise



Sita's fire ordeal—Malva painting, circa AD 1680. The god Agni hands Sita back to Rama from amidst the flames while the gods rain down flowers. (Courtesy National Museum)

locations of the birthplaces of those connected with various religions are frequently, the world over, created many centuries after the event and for a variety of reasons.

Why then do you think the whole controversy erupted?

I am mystified in terms of history. I think some urge towards defining a birthplace might have developed after the *Ramcharitmanas* was composed in the vernacular and widely recited. My colleagues in medieval history tell me that

there does not seem to be any specific location for *Ramjanambhumi* until almost the nineteenth century. If that is so, this is an ideal example of the invention of a tradition. It needs to be researched further.

It is interesting that no one has suggested excavating at the supposed *Ramjanambhumi* location because that would be one way of finding out whether there is evidence of earlier habitations at this site. So far, the attempts to excavate the places associated with the *Ramayana* have shown dismal results in Ayodhya where the earliest signs of habitation go back at most to about 700 BC and no earlier. These excavations are not near the *Ramjanambhumi* location but are at

some distance, along the river bank.

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Could you comment on the possible origins of Sati ?

Sati began as a ritual confined to the Kshatriya caste. In the first millennium AD Brahman women were discouraged from becoming Satis. The argument for Kshatriya women was that just as a warrior who died in battle went straight to heaven, so also, his wife, if she immolated herself on his pyre, would join him in heaven. But, in later centuries, women of other castes also took to this ritual. In more recent times Brahman women were also known to have become Satis.

A historian who has worked on Sati during the late first millennium AD has argued that there seems to be some kind of correlation between the decline of *niyoga*, the system of a widow marrying her dead husband's brother, and the rise of Sati. In the Vedic period, *niyoga* was practised but it went into decline in the period when Sati was introduced.

So Sati could have been encouraged as a means of cutting down the possibilities of the women marrying within the family and of creating complications regarding inheritance. The implications this has for kinship and property need to be looked at more closely. However, one must remember that all this refers only to a part of Indian society and not to the whole of it

I also don't think I am being unduly hysterical when I say that there is an element of fear of female sexuality, apart from other factors, in encouraging women to become Satis. Female sexuality is suppressed by holding out the idea that a woman will become at least a saint if not a deity by immolating herself.

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The notion of 'pati parmeshwar' that a husband, any husband, is god for his wife, seems to be unique to the culture of certain communities in certain parts of India. How important do you think it is for the specific oppression of Indian women ?

Well, it is no doubt important. But

one must distinguish between women mouthing this ideology and actually believing it. Secondly, in India, anything can be deified. We do have a propensity to daub a stone with red paint and say it is sacred. So why not a husband ? But, more seriously, I think it is also partly tied up with child marriage. How do you socialise a young girl, just past puberty, to allow the consummation of the marriage and to accept subordination to a husband ? Perhaps such a marriage can work only if the woman is brought up to believe that the husband has a very special status so she cannot question the marriage.

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How old do you think the notion of 'pati parmeshwar' is?

I should imagine it existed by the early first millennium AD. *The Ramayana* has many references to the wife regarding her husband as a god.

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But it is not in the 'Mahabharata,' for instance ?

Probably not in the earliest version. On the contrary, I have often compared the *pati parmeshwar* ideal held by Sita who has been picked as a role model, with Draupadi who is so much more

volatile and thinking a person. For example, in the famous episode of the game of dice, Draupadi questions her husband's right to place her as a stake when he has already lost his freedom to do so—a fundamentally logical question that knocks the whole assembly of kinsmen into a quandary. She has no illusions about husbands being all-wise or all-powerful, even though her husbands are literally the sons of gods.

Radha too is basically a nonconformist woman. She is a married woman who carries on a ragingly passionate affair with Krishna. In some ways, it is surprising that the Radha-Krishna cult survived with such popularity because if you translate the implications into literal terms people would be scandalised.

But it survives, partly because it encapsulates the sublimation of eroticism, romantic love or what you will, to a religious experience, and partly because it is interpreted as the spiritual yearning for union with god, of the soul

Madhubani painting, by Jamuna Devi, of Radha and Krishna dancing. Both figures are dynamic although Krishna dominates the canvas



for the universal soul. The sacred is demarcated from the normal. Anything can happen in the sacred sphere but the same thing is not allowed to happen in the normal. This is what happens in much Christian and Sufi mysticism too.

But it was accepted partly because Hindu sects have not associated sex with sin and guilt as have Christianity and the, Semitic religions. The notion of fertility is still very strong in many Hindu cults and the acceptance of sexuality is facilitated by this. These fertility and sexuality cults are articulated in various ways, in the erotic sculptures on medieval temple walls, for instance, and also in the Tantric tradition.

But, today, middle class puritan morality finds it difficult to come to terms with the fact that a religious system can be based on an acceptance of sexuality. There is an attempt to ignore or disguise certain aspects of the religious and cultural past.

Attitudes towards women are complex. They range from a subordination of woman in reality to a world of fantasising in the spheres of supernatural belief. Situations of the subordination and oppression of women especially in social practice are known from the past. But the comprehension of such a situation must seek for more than just a single plane of explanation.

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How and why is it that the various goddess cults grew and flourished even in periods and in areas where women were more subjugated ?

I think it is a question of balance. The goddess cult is a very fundamental cult of religious belief and practice going back to earliest Indian society. Some would even argue that at another level it is very important for the psychological and mental make up of the Indian male. Perhaps for some there is a balance in placating the goddess while you beat your wife !

But, seriously, I would argue that the goddess cult will probably continue, and certainly until such time as the actual relationship between man and woman

changes.

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What changes have these goddess figures undergone in the course of time?

The goddess is essentially a mother figure, who is to be respect-ed. This springs from a notion of fertility. That reality is the essence, whether the goddess is a beneficial figure or a destroyer.

Most of these fertility goddesses earlier were independent, separate figures. Gradually, as the Puranic religion prevailed and its texts came to be written and rewritten, some of these goddesses were turned into consorts of various gods or new goddesses were invented as consorts. For instance, in the Vedic texts, Vishnu has no consort, but in the Puranic texts, Lakshmi appears as a consort.

Around the middle of the first millenium AD, the major male deities are given female consorts. Shiva acquires a whole range of female consorts and so does Vishnu in each incarnation. Clearly, what is happening is that various female deities are being picked up and incorporated into the system. For example, a deity like Durga in her role as Mahishasurmardini was probably an independent goddess with an independent cycle of myths until she got associated with Shiva.

Given the origin of Sita from a furrow (which, as a symbol of the female genitalia, is a fertility symbol), we may have here, as was argued many decades ago, a kind of conflict between a solar deity, Rama, and an agricultural goddess. If one reads the text in those terms, the agricultural goddess has an independent origin, displays her power and purity, and finally goes back to her origin., resisting absorption into the solar cult.

With the introduction of consorts as important in their own right there was a gradual and increasing emphasis on the domestic context, on the household as a symbol of fertility rather than the woman as the symbol of fertility. The growth of some divine families, with their having children and so on, is also a part

of the same process. For instance, it is only from the middle of the first millenium AD that there are references to Ganesh, as son of Shiva and Parvati.

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What about Saraswati ?

She remains independent. There are some occasions when she is referred to as the wife of Brahma but, by and large, she does not develop as a major consort.

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Are there any legends about goddesses having extramarital relations ?

No, I don't think so. But the male gods can always take human form and have sexual relations with women.



Eighth century AD sculpture, showing Vedic deity Varuna, provided with a consort. (Bombay Museum)

Kunti's relationship with Surya is a clear example of this.

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The Vedic age is widely referred to, even in textbooks, as a golden age for women, when they were equal and free. What do you think of this perception ?

I think this perception originated in the nineteenth century. It is the result of a nationalist search for a golden age in the past. Such a search for a golden age is a feature of nationalism everywhere,

not just in India. It is easiest to generalise about a remote past and to project it as a Utopia, because closer to one's own age, more evidence is available which contradicts notions of a golden age.

Before the discovery of the Indus valley civilisation, the "Vedic age" used to be projected as the foundation of Indian culture, particularly Hindu culture. In the nineteenth century, when what we today call Hinduism was confronted with Christianity, Hindus reacted by trying to prove that Hinduism was as good as Christianity.

Christianity and the Semitic religions generally have a holy book but Hinduism does not. At this time, there was a drive to define certain texts as the infallible holy books of Hinduism. First, the texts chosen were the *Bhagvadgita* and the *Vedas*. The emphasis on the *Ramayana* developed later.

In north India, the Arya Samaj made a tremendous effort to give central importance to the *Vedas* and to ignore the Puranic texts, the worship of the images of gods and so on. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the question of the status of Women was assuming importance so, once the Vedic age had been defined as a golden age, it was found necessary to indicate that in that age women had equal status with men.

If one goes by historical facts, the society described in the *Rig Veda* was essentially a pastoral society with elements of agriculture. It consisted of tribes and clans. In that kind of society, the status of women would be better because it is not a sedentary or settled society. A nomadic society involves the control of the children, the baggage and the setting up of settlements which are generally managed by women. The produce of the dairy which was the substantial produce of pastoralism was also handled by women.

In the Vedic texts of a later time there is a gradual transition to a sedentary, agricultural society. In this society, there is a tendency for men to assume

superiority and for women to have a secondary position. In the early texts, women are referred to as working, looking after herds, grinding the corn, being present in the general assemblies of the clan.

In the later texts their role gets increasingly ritualised. They participate less in clan activity and their main symbolic role is as fertility figures. In the sacrificial ritual, for example, the fertility role of women is emphasised, and little else.

Among female deities, Aditi was a major mother goddess. Interestingly, learning and speech are anthropomorphized as female goddesses—Saraswati and Vac. Ushas, the goddess of dawn, was popular in the early texts but gradually sank into insignificance.

This change of status is explained as an indigenous or Dravidian matrilineal society giving way to Aryan patriliney. But I don't accept that. I don't think patriarchy was suddenly introduced by some people called the Aryans. The transition took place because of processes of change which the society was undergoing.

But even in the earlier society, women were not in all respects free and equal. One cannot pick out isolated instances and generalise on their basis. I am tired of hearing Gargi cited as evidence of women's scholarship. A scholarly tradition has to be sustained through generations and regarded as normal for women. Gargi was certainly not regarded as a normal, average, conventional Vedic woman. She was regarded as something quite exceptional.

I think we can say that probably women had a slightly better status at that time than they were to have later. But it is not as if there was a given equality written into the system. It is much more a case of society being so organised that women then participated more in areas which gradually became the domain of men.



You referred to the Aryans. Who were

they and where did they come from ?

I think the Aryan as a racial entity is an invention of nineteenth century Europe. It started with the nineteenth century European concern about the origins of European peoples. A theory was invented of an original Aryan race which was located somewhere in Central Asia or near the Danube. It was argued that the aristocracy of Europe were the descendants of the superior Aryans and were of pure blood, the peasantry of Europe were descendants of non Aryans and hence were not of pure blood, while the most inferior were those outside this stream, such as the Semitic groups who,

A scholarly tradition for women would be one that is sustained through generations Gargi was certainly not regarded as an average Vedic woman She was regarded as something quite exceptional.

in Europe, were the Jews.

European orientalist scholars working on early Indian texts applied the notion to the Indian situation because of the references in the Vedic texts to *arya* and *dasa*. This was immediately translated in racial terms—the *arya* is the Aryan and the *dasa* the non Aryan who was then identified as the Dravidian.

Now there certainly is a linguistic link between Sanskrit, old Iranian, Greek, Latin, and various European languages. They have a common ancestor which is termed the Indo-European language. At some point, the speakers of these languages got diffused. But this relationship of language was confused with a relationship of blood and it was argued that all the people who spoke these languages were racially the same and related by blood. The theory took on a racial connotation and expanded into the theory that these racially superior Aryan people came to India and conquered the racially inferior Dravidian people.

Today, the racial basis of this theory

has been disproved. All the physical measurements of men and women that were carried out in an effort to prove that certain categories of Indians, for example, the Brahmins, were of Aryan descent, failed. There is no way to identify an Aryan racially. The most we can talk about is the coming into India of a new language, Indo-Aryan, probably some time in the late second millennium BC. It did not necessarily come through conquest. It may have been brought by small groups of Indo-Aryan speakers who were migrants, pastoralists or itinerant traders.

Many people have the notion that Sanskrit was brought by the Aryans, remained unchanged and spread rapidly through (the subcontinent, but this is just not correct. Sanskrit itself evolved and changed as all languages do. Vedic Sanskrit is different from classical Sanskrit and classical Sanskrit is

different from the Sanskrit of this later period. The relationship between Sanskrit and the regional languages which evolved some centuries ago, varies in closeness and form. So the historical problem to be studied is a problem of the history and spread of languages, not of race.

In the context of India, then, what does one mean by the term 'Aryan'?

One means certain social groups, who speak a particular language and observe specific social conventions. It is certainly not a racial group having a racial affinity with Europeans. When the Vedic texts refer to someone as *arya*, they mean a person who is respected and honoured in society, and, later, someone who observes the *varnashrama dharma* and speaks Sanskrit.

In Buddhist and Jaina texts, an *arya* is anyone who is respectable and has

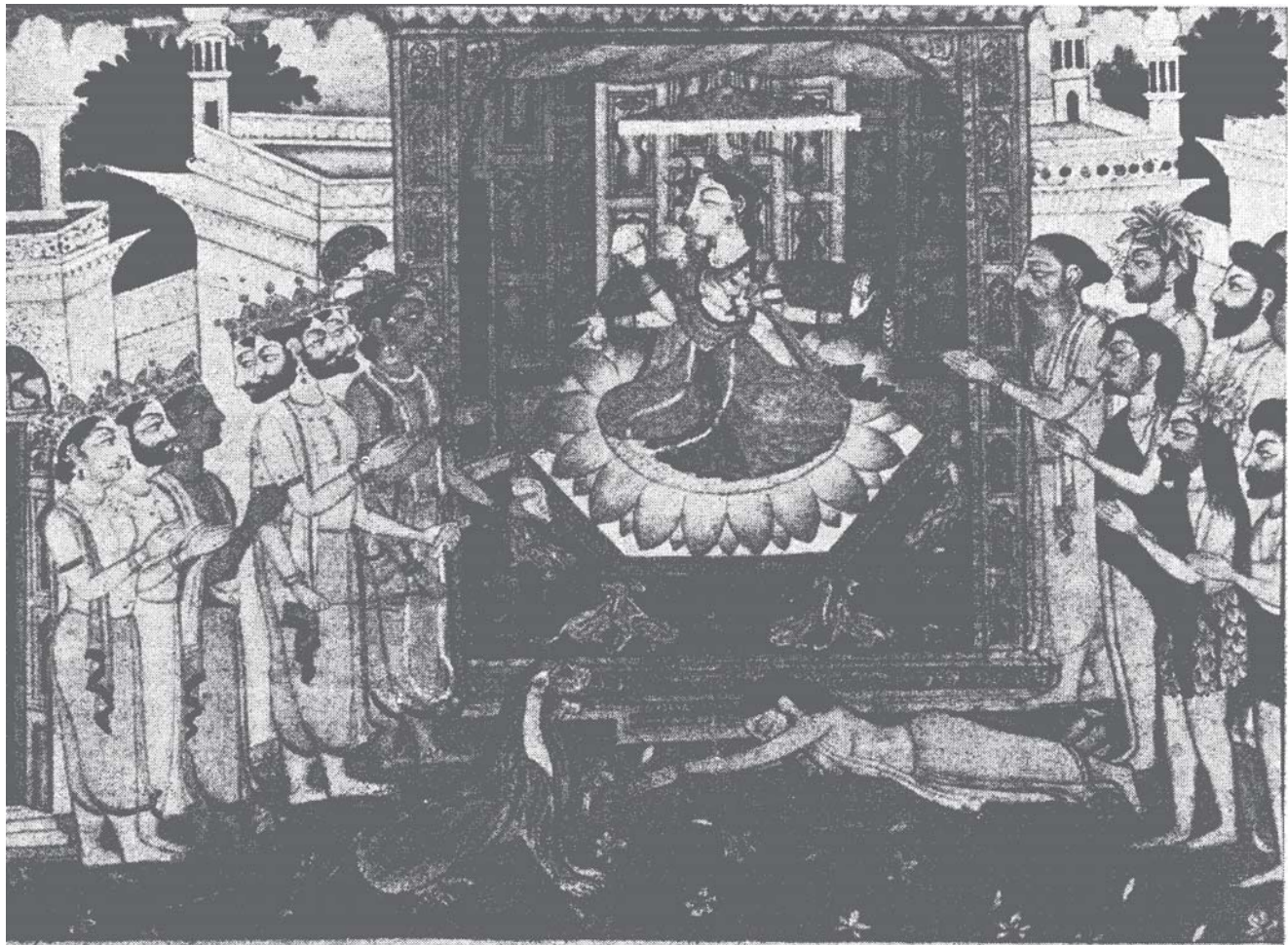
high status, even if he or she does not speak Sanskrit but various forms of Prakrit. The person may be a landowner or a wealthy trader. Whoever was honoured was an *arya*.

So the term indicated not a racial but social status and cultural identity.

It is widely believed that the coming of Islam to India was responsible for a decline in the status of women. Is there any historical evidence of this?

I do not think the coming of Islam was responsible for the decline in women's status, because the evidence available from the period of, say, 500 AD to 1000 AD makes it clear that fundamental changes in the status of women in India took place before the

Devi worshipped by the gods, Kangra circa AD 1800. (Courtesy National Museum)



coming of Islam.

The first point to be remembered is that in Indian society, from a very early period on, there was a difference in the situation of women of higher status social groups and women of lower status social groups. Often, women of lower status participated more in productive work such as farming or crafts and so had a relatively better status. Women of higher status were generally more subordinated to the men of their group. This is true not just of India but of most premodern societies.

In the second half of the first millennium AD, there is evidence of the growing subservience of women, visible even in the increasing references to *sati*. There are also references to the seclusion of upper caste women in demarcated areas within the palace and the homes of the wealthy and to women going around veiled. All this was before the coming of Islam.

Towards the end of this period, these references coincide with the coming of Islam. Often, Islam is made out to be the factor that caused the change, whereas in fact the factors of change had already come into existence and Islam, in a sense, emphasised these factors. Though we must remember that even in Islamic society, women of lower status groups had much more freedom of mobility and were less secluded than women of upper status groups.

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Why is it, then, that Islam is so often blamed for the decline in women's status whereas the British rulers and Christianity are not similarly blamed?

This is an important question : why is the impact of Islam viewed negatively and sought to be rejected while the impact of British rule is internalised and the Hindu attempt is to prove that we are or once were as good as the British ? I think that the difference is that British rule was colonial rule whereas Islamic rule was not.

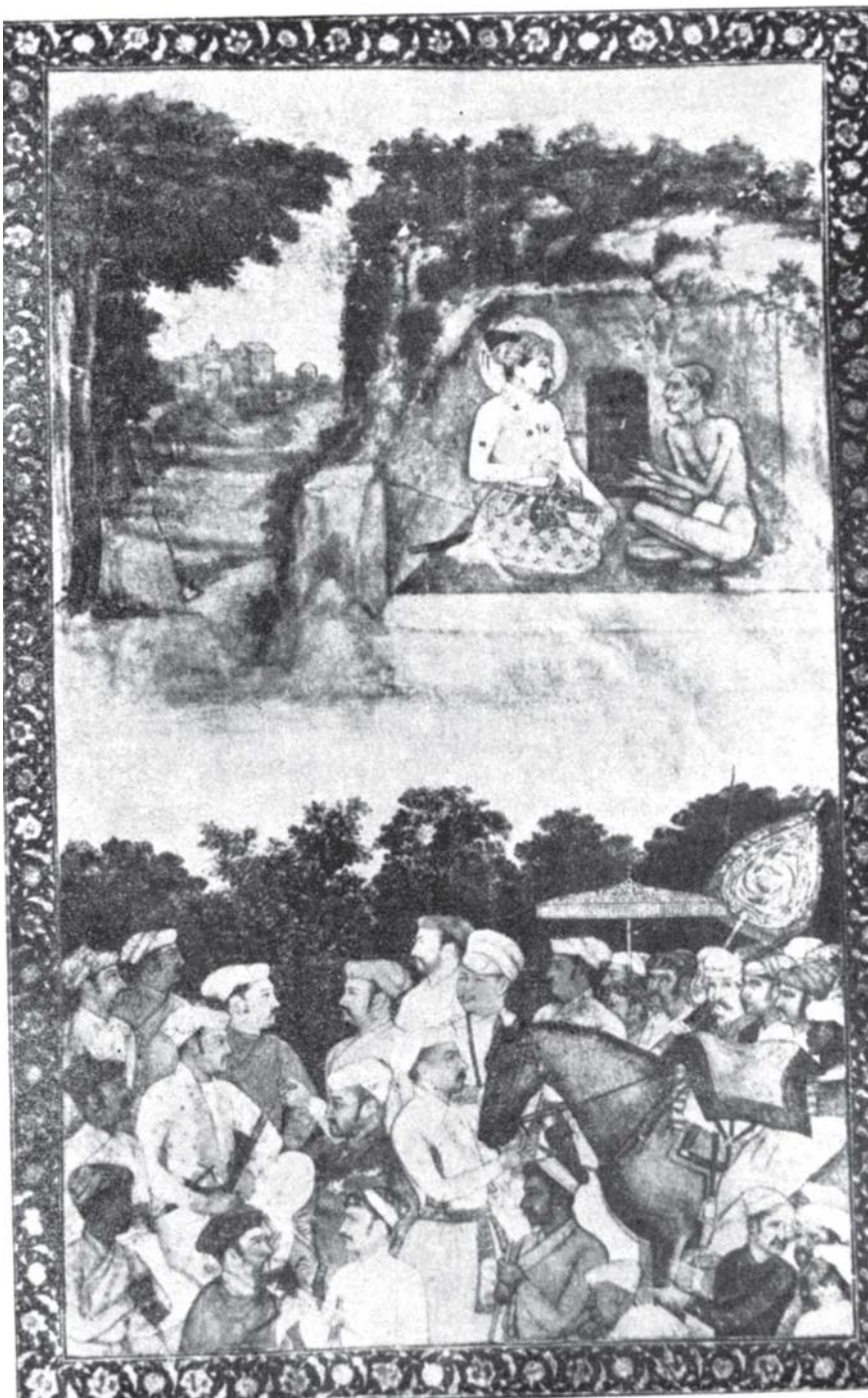
We have had, through the centuries, people coming from outside our present

boundaries, as migrants, traders or conquerors and settling down here. Now all these people who settled here became a part of Indian society. They were no longer foreigners.

It is an expression of communalism today when we talk of Islamic rule being a period of foreign rule. The families of those who ruled became part of Indian

society and ceased to be foreigners. One measure of the degree of assimilation of foreigners who had settled in India is that sometimes their clan names eventually became caste names, in some cases even Hindu caste names, with now virtually

Jahangir visiting a hermit. Indo-Persian painting, 17th century AD



no memory of the original clan or ethnic group.

This was not the case with the British. They remained aliens because they never settled here. For them, India was a colony. They came here to work, took Indian wealth back to their home country, used it to develop their country and settled there. The Islamic rulers did not take Indian wealth outside India to develop another society or country.

Given a colonial situation, such as that of British rule, nationalism is the reaction, anywhere in the world. Given nationalism as a reaction, there is always a tendency to argue that today we have been subjugated but earlier we were as good as the colonial rulers. The value system, the mores of the colonial rulers are seen as a norm, and the subjugated people argue that they earlier had a system exactly like that of the colonial rulers.

For example, right through the 1920s and 1930s, Indian historians kept arguing that the ancient Indian monarchical system was a constitutional monarchy. The notion of the constitutional monarchy which comes from Britain was the dominant political model at the time and it was argued that this existed in India long ago.

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Dowry is often made out to be an Indian tradition. Verses are quoted to argue that Indian parents always give away their daughters decked with jewels and so on. In what form has dowry existed? Was it universal?

First of all, we must remember that dowry was not the only prevalent system. The system of bride price was also prevalent and is referred to umpteen times. In the *Mahabharata*, for example, bride price is a Kshatriya practice. This has led people to argue that probably various systems of matrimony existed simultaneously at that time. No one system was dominant.

Of the eight forms of marriage that were acknowledged in the *dharma shastras* the four higher ones—*brahma*, *daiva*, *prajapata* and *arsha*—were

Dowry was not the only prevalent system The system of bride price was also prevalent

heavily patriarchal. The father arranged the marriage, it was conducted with rituals often involving a Brahman priest, and a dowry was given.

But the other four forms are different. *Gandharva* marriage, recommended as appropriate for Kshatriyas, is marriage by mutual agreement or love. In the *Mahabharata*, Dushyanta, when proposing to Shakuntala, says that the *gandharva* marriage is most appropriate for Kshatriyas.

This was probably because it was convenient for Kshatriyas, who were warriors and later landowners and chiefs or kings, to conduct fresh marriage alliances in the new areas which they entered. These were political alliances which helped them extend their sway and assisted diplomatic connections. Arjuna, in the *Mahabharata*, for example, makes several marriages on his travels. There is no question of dowry in this form of marriage.

The *rakshasa* form, which is marriage by capture, was also open to Kshatriyas. The *paishacha* form, which was considered base, was meant for Vaishyas and Shudras. It is a living together arrangement which is considered a marriage although there is an absence of rituals. It is almost a marriage by default. Yet it is acknowledged as marriage.

In the *asura* form of marriage, bride price is important. In the normative texts, it is said that this form is for lower castes. But, in fact, the epic literature does refer to the giving of bride price amongst Kshatriyas. In the *Mahabharata*, for example, Richika, who wants to marry a princess, Satyawati, is asked by her father to bring 1,000 horses, all of them white with one black ear.

One suspects that the systems of dowry and of bride price coexisted. Some people observed one and some the other. Gradually, dowry became the dominant form amongst some high status groups.

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What form did the dowry take? What were women's rights in stridhan and in inheritance of property?

The form we have today, where household goods are given, is possibly an imitation of a late Rajput, Kshatriya form. In early texts, there is not much itemising of dowry. We are simply told that the father decked his daughter in jewels or bestowed wealth on her.

A distinction is also made between dowry and the true *stridhan* which is what the mother gave the daughter and which, technically, no one could take from the daughter. It was a part of the inheritance which passed from the mother to children. Of course, it is possible that men did actually relieve their wives of this wealth but the tradition was that they were not supposed to do so. In the four higher forms of marriage it was sometimes permitted for husbands to take their wife's *stridhan*, but most *dharma shastras* do insist that the *stridhan* was solely the property of the wife. The property of prostitutes, however, was automatically inherited by their daughters or sisters.

In the texts on custom and social codes, the *dharma smritis*, degrees of inheritance clearly support inheritance by sons and sons' sons. If there are no sons and sons' sons a daughter's son may inherit. But daughters rarely inherited in their own right until much later when the *dayabhaga* and *mitakshara* systems developed.

Many of our ideas about the status of women, dowry and inheritance derive from statements in the *dharma shastras*. But we must remember that these texts do not cover the whole range of social practices prevalent all over India and in all sections of society. In fact, they are the required social law for only particular sections of society. Many other social norms were prevalent which are either disapproved of and therefore dismissed or are ignored by these texts. This dismissal did not apply only to lower caste practices. Even among Brahmans where cross cousin marriage prevailed,

relatively few details are given about it in these texts. The historian has, therefore, to examine other sources of information as well.

There are many references in inscriptions to women making big donations to the Buddhist Sangha. Some of them are women giving donations as part of a household. But some are donations by Buddhist nuns. How did these women have access to wealth? Did they inherit as daughters, and then donate the money to the Sangha? It is possible.

Alternatively, it is possible that the wealth coming from mother to daughter was a much more effective form of wealth in these communities. It seems to me that the inheritance system must have varied considerably from community to community.

Let us not forget that in many parts of western and southern India, there was a system of cross cousin marriage which involved inheritance from uncle to nephew, and this was through the women. The whole of the northeast would have had different systems. So when one talks about the normal process of inheritance, it is important to remember that there were substantial variations.

The multiplicity of systems in the Indian subcontinent has not yet been properly projected in public consciousness. Even we historians tend to uniformise, to generalise from the system and then apply it to the whole subcontinent as if it were uniform.

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There is a recurrent story in the epics, Puranas and other texts which revolves around a celibate ascetic who acquires tremendous power by his austerities, until the gods, growing afraid of his power, send a nymph to entice him and diminish his power. What do you think this story suggests about the society's view of women?

Renunciation, in my opinion, is a civilisational feature of Indian society. The renouncer sets up a third authority system which is different from the

political or royal and the religious or priestly authority systems. The renouncer has a kind of moral authority which makes him a very important person. The introduction of the nymph is a kind of safety valve.

Curiously, the gods tend to fear the ascetic, who, through ascetic practice, aspires to extraordinary powers. Where there is a danger of this, the intervention of the nymph can break the power, if the ascetic succumbs to seduction. It also demonstrates that the power of the *tapasvin* is not really so superior. It brings him down to earth, as it were.

But what is interesting is that many major characters in these texts are born of a union between a nymph and a *tapasvin*. Thus, Bharata, who is absolutely crucial genealogically, because his name is given to the ruling clan and the territory, is the son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, and Shakuntala is the daughter of Menaka the nymph and Vishvamitra the ascetic. This kind of ancestry indicates that the person has a very special status, has access to an authority different from political authority alone.

Bharata is therefore not just any hatriya prince. This is indicated in the play of Kalidasa when the attendants keep remarking on the fantastic prowess of the child Bharata who, quite unafraid, puts his hand into the mouth of a lion cub. The genealogical function of such parentage would be to emphasise the special status of the persons who claim this parentage.

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Does the story suggest that the nymph or the woman has a greater power than the ascetic?

Not necessarily a greater power. But she does have a special power which is feared. It is not merely the Christian kind of association of sin and guilt with the woman and with sex so it is not as if he falls from grace or commits a sin by succumbing to her charms. But he does regret having succumbed because his power accumulated through ascetic practice is lost and he has to start his

austerities again from square one.

There is, however, a fear of female power which comes up again and again in many customs, rituals and concerns of Indian society, both past and present. Anthropologists and psychiatrists have referred to this but it has not been discussed more fully. □

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