



Of Humans and Divines

Feminine Role Models in Hindu Tradition

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I am one of those who grew up oblivious of and somewhat indifferent to religion. Therefore, during my childhood years, secular figures like Gandhi and Nehru were more important as symbols of inspiration than our vast array of gods and goddesses. However, our *devis* and *devatas* do not presume to punish us or even get angry with us if we choose to ignore them.

Undemanding Deities

The Hindu deities make no moral demands on us. No matter what one does, they do not retaliate by rejecting or threatening to excommunicate us if we work out our own code of morality rather than follow their precepts. And yet they have clever ways of quietly intruding into our lives and knocking at the doors of our consciousness. It is very common, for example, for a dutiful son to be praised as Ram incarnate, or a talented daughter commended as a virtual Saraswati. I have often heard a happy and satisfied mother-in-law refer to her son's wife as the 'coming of Lakshmi incarnate' into her home. One constantly meets their living incarnations in everyday life. Frequently their worldly behave-alikes are genuinely

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loveable and even inspiring in the way they live up to their chosen commitments.

Thus, Hindu *devis* and *devatas* are not distant heavenly figures, but a living presence in most people's lives. They hold a powerful sway as moral



Saraswati, goddess of learning

exemplars, who are believed to have standards of morality that even ordinary people can aspire to emulate, in whatever doses they think appropriate. But the codes of morality they live by are not prescriptive. They are simply there to provide valuable insights that people use in their own lives in an extremely flexible way, keeping the contemporary situation in mind. Hindus usually do not fall in the trap of replicating the behaviour of the deities they revere, for that would produce absurd or tragic results.

Divines Descend as Humans

A special feature of Hindu *Sanatan Dharma* is that there is no sharp divide between the divine and the human. Various gods and goddesses take an *avatar* and descend on earth to appear before you like ordinary mortals in an intimate familial relationship. They are often willing to be judged by the same rules and moral yardsticks that one would use for any fellow human being. Devotees and non-devotees alike have the right to judge them by how well they perform or fail to perform those roles. They neither claim perfection nor do they command us to unquestioningly approve of all they do. They allow us the freedom to pass judgements on them, to condemn those of their actions that one considers immoral or unfair or to praise those actions one finds honourable or benevolent.

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For instance, Vishnu's *avatar*, Ram is revered as *Maryada Purushottam*, thereby acknowledging the fact that Ram - the hero of the epic *Ramayan* — becomes reverence-worthy by proving himself to be “the best of men” in upholding *maryada* or dignity of diverse social roles he is expected to perform. He is an ideal son not only to his doting father, but even to his spiteful stepmother. As an elder brother, his actions command love and devotion. As a king, the wishes and interests of his subjects are far more important than his own. But where he fails, as he does in his treatment of his wife Sita after her release from Ravan's captivity, he has to accept condemnation like an average human being.

Deities Accept Punishment

In fact, one is even allowed to punish Hindu gods for misbehaviour or for failure to keep a pact. For example, Krishna as the son of Yashoda, has to take many a beating like any ordinary child or adolescent for playing naughty pranks on his mother and other women. This right to punish gods is exercised not just in legends, but by ordinary people in real life as well.

For example, in drought prone villages of India, when rains are delayed, it is not uncommon to find villagers keeping the *shivalinga* (or the icon of whichever deity they worship) submerged under water as punishment to the god till the rains actually materialise.

From Human to Divine

Thus, while the celestial figures don't claim special privileges on account of their divinity, human

beings are allowed the possibility of being elevated to the divine, overriding gods and goddesses in matters ranging from valour to morality by excelling in their chosen *karma*. A powerful route to divinity is also through *bhakti* or devotion — not just to some god or goddess, but even to some human being. For example, Hanuman became worship-worthy on account of his total devotion to Ram. Others have achieved divinity by being devoted



Hanuman—devotee turned deity.

sons or brothers. It is, for instance, common to hear grown up men proudly declare: “My mother is more important to me than any god” or “in our family we worship ‘so-and-so,’ who could be an uncle, an elder sister or a grandmother.

The Hindu deities thus enter into an intimate kinship type of relationship with their devotees. The deities do accept gifts and devotion, but in return are expected to grant wishes and give boons. The human-god relationship is collaborative and reciprocal, as between relatives, where there is regular exchange of gifts and mutual gesture of caring. Even affection and loyalty are expected to be reciprocal. The *ishta*

dev or *devi* is expected to come to the rescue of the devotee in times of need, just as relatives are expected to do all they can to lend a helping hand in times of distress.

Thus, every village in India has its *gram devi* or *devata*. The *gram devatas* are usually connected with extreme piety, but myths of *gram devis* tell us of ordinary women who rose in rage because they were cheated or sought to be ravished by some evil male. Out of such desecration, they rise in terrible fury and thereby grow in stature to span heaven and earth. Their power of destruction, born out of righteous indignation, terrorises everybody into submission. But once their rage has achieved its purpose and when devotees are ready to propitiate them, they can be relied upon for protection from enemies as well as for healing both physical and psychic illnesses. Theirs are myths of ascent from human into divine forms, rather than of descent from divine to human.

Any woman who manifests extraordinary strength and is believed to be her own mistress and totally unafraid of men begins to be treated with special awe and reverence and often commands unconditional obedience in her own milieu. Indira Gandhi was often referred to as Durga incarnate, because all her male colleagues were mortally afraid of her and rarely dared challenge her commands. She began to lose her hold only after she let it be publicly known that she had become

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dependent on her younger son, Sanjay, who was beginning to call the shots in politics and governance. Women of even humbler origins have this choice. For example, India's first woman police officer, Kiran Bedi, is an all-India cult figure and is often referred to as a Durga because she too projects the image of a woman who can out-perform men in every way and is fearless even in dealing with criminals.

One comes across such mini-Durgas all over the country. Every other village and urban neighbourhood would have some such women who command respect and deference, at least within their own kinship group, if not in the public domain.

I remember as a child, whenever I got into one of my righteous rages, my mother would warn others, saying: "Don't provoke her into manifesting her Durga-Chandi roop." Thus, very early on, my relatives understood that it was best to be careful about stepping on my toes. Even without being a Durga devotee, I unconsciously began to successfully "play Durga" in dealing with a whole range of situations, from sexual harassment to intervening between two groups of riotous men, and to bringing under control neighbourhood drunkards and wife beaters.



Durga in battle slaying evil in the form of demons.

The Feminine Force

One essential tenet of Hinduism pre-Vedic, Vedic and post-Vedic is that Shakti, the feminine energy, is believed to represent the primeval creative principle underlying the cosmos. She is the energising force of all divinity, of every being and every thing. Different forms and manifestations of this Universal Creative Energy are personified as a vast array of goddesses. Shakti is known by the generic name, Devi,

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derived from the Sanskrit "div", meaning "to shine." She is worshipped under different names in different places and in different appearances as the symbol of life-giving powers as well as the power to destroy creation itself.

Epic and *pauranic* literature gives a whole new array of names and attributes to the universal feminine power and the various goddesses take on distinct iconographic forms. For example, Sri Lakshmi is celebrated as the goddess of wealth and prosperity, Saraswati as the presiding deity of the arts and learning. Usha as the goddess of dawn is the dispeller of ignorance. Durga is the vanquisher of evil. Earth itself is worshipped as the goddess Prithvi. The knowledge aspect of the Devi is represented by a Shakti cluster of ten goddesses known as *Dasa Mahavidyas* the Ten Great or Transcendental Wisdoms which encompass the entire universe of knowledge. Their consort gods are placed much lower in status and

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power. The energy of god is feminine and almost every god is static even dead without his Shakti. But Shakti is complete in herself because her existence does not depend on extraneous force. The male gods are incomplete without a consort, even powerless, barring rare exceptions like Dattatray, who also remained single. But the goddesses become even more powerful in their non-consort *avatars*. When the energies of male gods prove inadequate, they have to turn to the female for protection.

For example, the great goddess Durga who was born from the energies of the divinities when the gods became impotent in the long drawn out battle with *asuras* is believed to be the vanquisher of evil. Her battle represents a universal war between knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsehood, the oppressor and the oppressed. But she also promises that as Sakambari she would nourish the world in time of need with the vegetation grown from her own body, and that in her terrible form she would deliver her worshippers from their enemies. She needs no male to legitimise her power, nor is she dependent on the need to conciliate any male divinity. In her Mahakali *roop*, she is awesome, ruthless and completely uncontrollable.

Thus the manifestations of the Devi are in response to different requirements and times. The all-powerful feminine force assumes diverse forms, taking different *avatars* to fulfil diverse purposes at

different times. Sometimes she is frightening and even vengeful, like Chandi; often she is the unconditionally nurturing mother, like Parvati; an ideal daughter, wife, daughter in law and a compassionate, forgiving mother figure like Sita; a dominating and demanding wife like Draupadi; or a besotted beloved like Radha.

Creating New Deities

Even though goddess worship is a living and growing tradition in India starting as early as the Harappan culture of 3000 BC (if not earlier), there have been a good deal of fluctuations in the fortunes of various goddesses. Some ancient ones have continued



Krishna washing Radha's feet.

to hold sway and others have lost some of their pre-eminence. While some reappear as newer versions, there are also instances of brand new goddesses being invented. Two examples of such new births: Bharat Mata invented in the late 19th century during the freedom movement to represent the enslaved Mother India calling out to her sons to free her from colonial bondage. And Santoshi Ma — a hitherto unknown goddess who gained popular currency, thanks to a

Bollywood film released in the early 1970s called *Jai Santoshi Ma*.

Santoshi Ma combines some of the qualities of non-consort goddesses with those of consort goddesses. The Shakti form of goddesses come to the aid of human beings and gods in periods of cosmic darkness by killing the demons who threaten the cosmic order. But Santoshi Ma, being a modern goddess, does not establish herself by annihilating any particular demons. Instead, her miraculous powers come to the rescue of her devotees who are being harassed and tyrannised by fellow human beings. She is particularly popular among women who observe fasts on Fridays as symbolic penances in order to achieve their desired goals in this life and bring about general contentment. Devotees of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Jayalalitha have built temples for her worship in her own lifetime. India abounds in such examples of new deities being invented every day in virtually every region of India. I often say it jokingly, but the statement itself is serious, that we could solve all the financial problems of MANUSHI by building a shrine of Manushi Devi, a new goddess who would combine the qualities of Saraswati, Durga Lakshmi, Joan of Arc and more.

Range of Moral Exemplars

The range of moral exemplars available to Indian women is indeed spectacular. Apart from goddesses who work hard to win respect as wives, at the other end of the spectrum are those who consider it an affront that any male should dare consider them sexually accessible or that they would condescend to be mere consorts. Radha's complete abandon to her extra-marital love with Krishna is no less deified than Sita's steadfast devotion to her husband.

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Yet another category of women exemplars are those who spurn the bond of matrimony, either by refusing to get married at all, despite social expectations, or by disowning the marital relationship after being forced into it for a while. Almost all the women saint-poets who have built religious cults around them chose to either walk out on their husbands or never get married. Mirabai, the 16th century saint-poet of Rajasthan and Lal Ded of Kashmir gave free vent to the suffocation and tyranny they experienced in their respective marriages and broke out of them. They became roving mendicants and rose above all social constraints imposed on women in the name of family honour. Women like Mahadevi Akka, the 6th century saint-poet of South India, never married at all; she, too, like Lal Ded, shed all clothes. Their nudity was an assertion of their refusal to abide by social conventions and norms with regard to a woman's role in society.

I remember that when as a child I read the stories about Mirabai, I wasn't quite able to grasp the meaning and power of *bhakti*. I was, however, much inspired and influenced by what appeared to me a clever ploy on her part in getting herself married to a stone image of Krishna and using him as a shield against demands of her real life husband. A stone image cannot order you around, dictating do's and don'ts, the way a human husband can. In the name of devotion to

Krishna, she acquired the right to go where she pleased, when she pleased, intermixing freely with people of all castes and classes. She sang, she danced and declared herself beyond the restrictive norms expected of a Rajput queen.

My interpretation is not too far fetched, given that I saw the living example of one of my grand-aunts who, in her own way, did many of the things Mirabai had done. She was a fashionable socialite in her youth, but was married to an unsociable, scholarly type of man.



Mirabai : freedom through *bhakti*.

Marriage with him was too dull an affair for her. So she adopted the white robes of a *sanyasin* and took to singing devotional music. Her *bhakti* songs brought her numerous invitations from near and far, from the wealthy and the poor. That gave her ample opportunities to travel on her own, build friendships, enjoy the hospitality of a vast range of people who invited her for singing *bhajans* all this without invoking any social stigma. The whole family understood that her *bhakti* was in response to an oppressive marriage, but she did not suffer the censure she would have, had she followed the same free and roving lifestyle without adopting a Mirabai-like persona.

Mirabai, thus, became a symbol of feminine freedom in my own life. Even though devotion to a deity of the Mira variety is not the route I could choose with any honesty for my personal freedom, I interpreted her life to mean devotion to any idea which is larger than yourself, including devotion to a social or political cause. It was heartening to discover that Mahatma Gandhi often projected Mira as a role model to exhort women to break out of the narrow confines of matrimony and devote themselves to social reform. For himself too, Gandhi translated Ram *bhakti* to mean working for the freedom of his motherland and an exploitation-free life for farmers, for lower castes and women.

My own life and that of many other women I personally know, confirmed over and over again that once people in India are convinced of your commitment to a higher cause- be it religious, social or political- and your strength to live by it, you can break out of all the restrictions meant for ordinary mortals with impunity, and yet be respected for it.

Non-Consort Goddesses

The lives of non-consort goddesses and women saint-poets creates a unique kind of a social space in our otherwise marriage-obsessed culture for women who wish to opt out of matrimony altogether. This has also made voluntary celibacy a very respected choice for women in India. In many modern cultures, especially

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those influenced by Freudian theories, sexual abstinence is seen as an unhealthy aberration that is supposed to lead to all kinds of neuroses and a disoriented personality. In India, however, we are still heavily inclined towards the opposite tradition that holds that voluntary sexual abstinence bestows extraordinary powers on human beings.

Not just men, but many of the most revered women in Indian religious history opted out of sexual relations altogether. They have been treated as virtual goddesses. So much so that gods come to fear and are compelled to do the bidding of such women. During the 19th century reform movements, and even more so during the freedom movement led by Gandhi, many of the male leaders exhorted women to follow the example of Mirabai and follow the call of their conscience rather than the beaten track of matrimony. A large number of women who became active in these movements were thus encouraged and chose to stay single. In the tradition of non-consort goddesses, many came to be treated as symbols of feminine power in their respective regions. A woman who becomes sexually inaccessible like Durga, consort of none, nor in search of a consort, tends to command tremendous awe and reverence in India.

Non Jealous Deities

While Hindu deities are not permitted to be jealous gods demanding exclusive loyalty from their devotees, the latter do occasionally come into conflict with each other, as for example in the historic clashes between Shaivites and Vaishnavites. But there are no comparable ego clashes between various goddesses or their devotees. They do occasionally get into competition with each other over who is more virtuous or whose husband is more powerful. But these stories invariably end with

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their reconciliation and acceptance of each other's worth. (See, for example, Philip Lutgendorf's analysis of Santoshi Ma in Issue No. 131).

Our goddesses believe in peaceful co-living, in graceful acceptance of each other's worth rather than claiming or establishing superiority over each other. For example, a martial goddess like Durga does not consider herself superior to a patient sufferer like Sita. Nor is Radha treated with disdain for being lost in Krishna's love despite his polygamous dalliances. It is accepted that they represent diverse aspects of feminine *shakti*, and diverse responses to similar and varied situations. Therefore, devotees of one are not expected to disparage other manifestations of *Shakti*.

Uses and Abuses of Gods

Our goddesses, like our gods, allow their devotees and non-devotees a great many liberties, including the freedom to demand responsive improved behaviour on their part, as also the right to rewrite and redefine their roles for them. That is how there

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are hundreds of known versions of the *Ramayan*, the *Mahabharat* and other such texts. Even the numerous *shastras* repeatedly emphasise that codes of morality are time, place and even person specific, that they must evolve with the changing requirements of human beings. Hence there is great variation between different *shastras* and *smritis* produced in different regions at different times. Keeping that in view, our gods allow us to rework their responses according to the changing demands of the times. They have successfully lent themselves to numerous social causes and become powerful allies even in contemporary movements for social justice and are accepted with ease in those new roles even by their traditional devotees, provided the devotees are convinced of the sincerity of the effort and the good faith of the reinterpreter or recreator. There are also various examples of our gods being used for bad purposes, as the Sangh Parivar members continue to do with the Ram Mandir issue.

Allies in Good Causes

I would like to illustrate my point by describing some positive movements for women's rights that made creative and progressive use of traditional religious symbols. I deliberately pick on the use of the Sita symbol, because for most of those who consider themselves as progressives and feminists, Sita is considered a very negative role model, the hallmark of wifely slavery. Needless to say, this projection is altogether contrary to the popular perception of Sita.

The *Ramayan* tells the story of a whole spectrum of voluntary sacrifices and hardships endured by most of the main characters in their resolve to adhere to their *dharmic* codes. Dashrath, for instance, sends his beloved son into exile for 14 years rather than break a promise to his misguided wife, Kaikeyi. Ram's mother,

Kaushalya, lets a co-wife condemn her only son to be banished to the forest like a hermit. Lakshman and Bharat, Ram's younger brothers, voluntarily take on a life of difficulty, solely in order to help Ram honour his *dharma* of parental worship.

Many different versions of the *Ramayana* rework various characters and reconfigure their responses to the same situation. For example, Rabindra Nath Tagore's and Maithali Sharan Gupta's rendering of the *Ramayana* revolves around the pain and sacrifice of Lakshman's wife, Urmila. However, compared to all other sacrifices made by a whole range of main and subsidiary characters, Sita's sacrifices and the raw deal meted out to her looms much larger in the Indian consciousness. Sita emerges as the final moral touchstone of the epic. Her pain and sorrow hang heavily on the collective consciousness of the Indian people like that of no other character, divine or mortal.

Sita makes her first major impression when she insists on sharing Ram's exile despite the advice of her husband and other family members, who suggest that she stay back in comfort. This affirms her credentials as a devoted partner with a strong mind of her own. However, this is not the reason for her being enshrined in the Indian psyche, since there is no dearth of devoted, dutiful wives in the Hindu *pauranas* and myths. Up to this point, Ram is an appropriate match for her. If she is an ideal wife he, too, is an ideal husband and lover, so it is not particularly noteworthy if she chooses his company, albeit in a forest, rather than living without him in a palace.

Unlike many other gods like Krishna and Shiva, who are allowed to retain their imperfections, Ram has been compelled to undergo countless improvements.

The popular obsession with Sita's predicament is rooted in the three episodes after the liberation of Sita from Ravan's captivity. The first is the *agnipariksha* (ordeal by fire), which she must undergo to prove her purity, and so publicly display her worthiness in order to be taken back as Ram's queen. The second is the way she handles her banishment by Ram in deference to public doubts about her chastity. The third is the manner in which she rejects Ram's demand for a second fire ordeal, through an appeal to her mother, Prithvi (the Earth), to receive her back into her womb.



Abandoned Sita in Balmiki's ashram. Her dignified suffering inspired many a rewriting of Ramkatha.

These episodes, as depicted in the Valmiki *Ramayana*, have disturbed devotees and non-devotees alike through centuries — so much so that numerous attempts have been made to reinterpret, rewrite and re-examine the three events. Hardly anyone has tried to create a new Dashrath, who would refuse to make himself and so many others suffer to satisfy the whims of a jealous queen; or create a new Ram, who chose to disobey the dictates of a misguided stepmother, dictates which actually cost his father's life. But Ram's treatment of Sita, in the latter parts of the *Ramayana*, demanding the two *agniparikshas* and abandoning her in a forest, remains immensely controversial and has provoked innumerable attempts by successive generations to critique and rework their relationship.

Ram Reform Efforts

Unlike many other gods like Krishna and Shiv, who are allowed to retain their imperfections, Ram has been compelled to undergo countless improvements. Even at the popular level, there is great uneasiness at Ram's behaviour. One common feature of many of the reworked *Ramayanas*, including the most famous of them all, the Tulsi *Ramayana*, is an attempt to reform Ram's behaviour to prove himself a more worthy husband for Sita and, thereby, mitigate or undo the injustice inflicted on her.

This obsession with reforming Ram has to do with the popular perception of Sita as perfection incarnate, so much so that even *Maryada Purushottam* Ram does not measure up to her. Sita is seen as flawless, despite the fact that she brings about trouble for everyone by crossing the *lakshman rekha*. In this

projection, people have voluntarily glossed over those few occasions when Sita behaves unreasonably as in her castigation of Lakshman, accusing him of lustful intentions towards her at the time he refuses to follow her dictates and go to help Ram in the forest.

Ila Dalmia sums up the popular sentiment in this regard very well. Even in a situation of grievous hurt and misery, there is no *dainya* (undignified anger) in her. Janaki is like the Mother Earth, the epitome of compassion, tolerance, forgive-ness." (See "Sita Samaropit..." in *Jan Janak Janaki*, edited by Sachidanand Vatsayan pp.28-33)

Sita may have forgiven Ram, but most people in India have not really made peace with him on account of her being made to undergo needless suffering. I quote from a couple of typical interviews with people from fairly traditional families to illustrate how strong the sentiment of censuring Ram's behaviour is, even by those who are otherwise deeply pious.¹

Surubhi comes from a Brahmin family of Ram devotees, but is unsparing about this one aspect. "Ram sounds like a raving lunatic when he subjects Sita to that nasty harangue about her not being pure enough for him on account of her being in Ravan's captivity. He loses both his reason and his dignity in the process. How did he dare to even suggest the first *agnipariksha*? He is supposed to be *antaryami* (all-knowing). Then how come he didn't know and understand that Sita is above suspicion?"

Interestingly, I find no real gender divide on this issue in India. Most

Hindu men relate to her as a long-suffering but awe-inspiring mother whose hurt they have to alleviate, in much the same way that Lakshman and Luv-Kush were willing to battle on her behalf with Prabhu Ram himself. A peon in my office described Ram as "suspicious, unreasonable and *kaan ka kaccha*" (someone who is easily swayed by any floating rumour or talk). "A man who needs other people to give his wife a good character certificate is no man at all," is how he summed up Ram's character, adding that he did not deserve Sita as a wife in any case, whatever else he may have deserved.

It is not just women who disapprove of her, and see Sita as an ideal. Even the most devout of Ram devotees among men feel embarrassed and uneasy about Ram's sudden change in behaviour towards Sita in the latter half of the *Ramayan*. Hindi writer Pandit Buddhinath Mishra describes Sita Marhi, the birthplace of Sita, as the most important *teertha* (pilgrimage centre) on this earth because "*Adyashakti*" appeared in this land as the daughter of Earth and went back to mother Earth after scornfully rejecting all of the luxuries and riches of "Raja Ram" (*Jan Janak Janaki*, p.25).

Most feminists are prone to interpret Sita's offer to undergo *agnipariksha* as an act of surrender to the whims of an unreasonable husband. But in popular perception, it is seen as an act of defiance that challenges her husband's aspersions. Sita emerges as a woman that even Agni (fire god) — who has the power to destroy everything he touches — does not dare touch or harm her.

Sita, in fact, is often used as a symbol of Indian womanhood and is, as such, the most common reference point both in literary writings as also in writings of social reformers to drive home the point that even the best of

men — the *Maryada Purushottams* — find it hard to do justice to the best of women like Sita. In this way she has been kept alive as a powerful reminder that men need to be seriously reformed in order to become worthy of Sitas.

Devotees Force Changes

This uneasiness has found expression in numerous reworkings of the *Ramayan* by male authors where they try to do one or the other: → Show a genuinely reformed Ram who does not maltreat Sita. For example, Kalidasa's Ram remains a trusting and loving husband. He does not entertain the slightest doubt with regard to his beloved and breaks down at the news of the slanderous talk with regard to Sita among his subjects. And yet, when he is compelled to abandon her, Kalidasa's Sita makes a powerful indictment of Ram in her own dignified way. Her way of disowning Ram is to bring up her children as her sons, without acknowledging their paternal identity, while she resumes her identity as Vaidehi, daughter of King Videha, rather than the wife of Ram.

→ Ram is reimagined as making amends for all the wrongs done to Sita. For example, Bhavabuti's Ram is first and foremost a lover. His duties and obligations as a king do not come in the way of his commitment to Sita. And yet, when he has to abandon Sita, Bhavabhuti creates a whole new set of characters to counter the impression left by Valmiki's *Ramayan* that Ram's action was necessitated by his regard for the opinion of his subjects. His own mother, Kaushalya, is so upset at Ram's cruelty to her beloved daughter-in-law that she vows never to see the face of her son again, or even live in Ayodhya, until Sita is brought back with due honour. Finally, Mother Earth, Arundhati, convinces Ram of the injustice of this

¹ Another set of interviews are quoted in *Questioning Ramayanas* Paula Richman (ed.), University of California Press, 2000.

action and tells him he is unfit to perform any *yagna* (religious ritual) till he restores Sita to her rightful place. Thus, family and public pressure make him realise that his notion of duty towards his subjects is in itself faulty, that he can not be a *kirtimaan* king if he fails to be a responsible lover and an honourable husband.

Many other male authors, including several contemporary ones like Bharat Bhushan Agarwal, have used Lakshman, his devoted brother, to challenge Ram's behaviour towards Sita. In some other versions, his own subjects and soldiers are shown disapproving his behaviour.

Texts such as the *Adhyatam Ramayan* a canonical book of the Vaishnavas use a clever ruse to let the world know that their Ram is an altogether improved version. Tulsi borrows from this to create his ideal Ram who does not demean himself by subjecting Sita to any *agnipariksha*. The popular TV serial of Ramanand Sagar also pegs itself onto this version because the producer realised that most of his viewers weren't willing to accept a repetition of Ram's disgraceful treatment of Sita. This sanitised Ram is shown entering into a pact with Sita so that all travails would be borne by a shadow Sita, while the real Sita stays in the Fire god's safe custody for a certain period during which Ram is expected to kill Ravan and other demons to restore righteousness on earth. Sagar's Ram is not allowed a moment of doubt about Sita's purity.

Men Making Amends

These literary reworkings of the *Ramayana* as part of the Ram Reform Campaign have found their counterparts in the efforts of numerous social reformers in India who, at different points of time, have played leading and pioneering roles in seeking to strengthen women's rights, enhance their status in society

and demand a change of attitudes from contemporary Rams.

It is noteworthy that a majority of women's rights struggles and movements in modern India have been initiated, led and often sustained by men. On the one hand, our traditional culture trains men to accept the multi-dimensional power and manifestations of the feminine principle. Even in real life they are taught and conditioned to be reverential to women in their roles as mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers. On the other, the traditional literature, including the great epics, makes them aware of, and guilty about the many ways in which men have wronged women; the numerous *pauranic* tales of women's strength, loyalty and *dharmic*

The literary reworkings of the *Ramayana* as part of the Ram Reform Campaign have found their counterparts in the efforts of numerous social reformers in India

steadfastness are constant reminders that men need to make amends for historic and continuing wrongs against women.

Many people in India find it difficult to justify or reconcile themselves to the fact that in a culture which worships Saraswati as the goddess of learning, so many girls are deprived of even primary education; in a culture which worships Lakshmi as the goddess of wealth, so many modern day Lakshmis live a slavish life of economic dependence; in a culture where male gods have had to appeal for perfection to the feminine *shakti*, women among many communities are not allowed to venture out of the domestic confines without male protection.

This bewilderment and guilt has compelled numerous men to pick up cudgels on behalf of women, throwing up important social movements, especially since the 19th century, considered by many as the period of severe erosion of women's rights among many communities of India. Men like Vidyasagar in Bengal, Ranade and Phule in Maharashtra, Veerasalingam in Andhra, Lala Devraj in Punjab and a host of others committed their entire lives to the cause of women.

In the writings of these social reformers, cutting across regional and caste boundaries, women as the wronged *matri shakti*, is a recurring metaphor. A good part of their efforts went into convincing other men that Indian society could not make progress as long as their partners stayed oppressed, that the country's freedom could not be won as long as women were denied their rightful due in the family and in the society. To the women, their message was that they should recognise their own feminine *shakti* and become modern day Durgas without, of course, losing the qualities of Sita, the perennial favourite.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi used the Sita symbol to advocate the idea of women's strength, autonomy and ability to protect themselves rather than depend on men for safety. His Sita was like a "lioness in spirit" before whom Ravan became "as helpless as a goat." For the protection of her virtues even in Ravan's custody, she did not "need the assistance of Ram." Her own purity was her sole shield. "Ravan dared not touch her against her will." (For a detailed analysis see *Gandhi and Women* by Madhu Kishwar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nos 40-41, 1985).

Gandhi's Sita was "no slave of Ram". She could say "No" even to her husband if he approached her carnally against her will. His message that

women had the right to define and follow their own *dharma* rather than be constricted to wifehood brought hundreds of thousands of women out of domestic confines into the political arena. He wanted to create a whole army of new Sitas who were not brought up to think that a woman “was well only with her husband or on the funeral pyre.” Gandhi’s Sita also became a symbol of *swadeshi* or decolonisation of the Indian economy. He asked the women of India to follow her example by wearing Indian homespun and boycott foreign fineries because Gandhi’s Sita would have never worn imported fabric.

Gandhi also emphasised that rules of social conduct have to be framed by “mutual cooperation and consultation rather than unilaterally imposed on women by men”. Gandhi often admitted that he learnt his first lesson in *satyagraha* from women like his mother and wife, both of whom were indeed Sita-like in their steadfastness and commitment. The essence of *satyagraha* (non-violent truth force) lay in securing a moral victory over one’s opponent by winning over his heart rather than vanquishing or humiliating him, as well as the sympathy and support of all those who witness the conflict. Gandhi worked to ensure that he got sympathy from all in his battle of right against might. That is exactly how his favourite heroine, Sita managed to be one-up on Ram.

Even those who are put off by Gandhi’s use of Hindu religious symbols for political mobilisation and have problems with many of his views on women and sexuality, do not deny that more than any other modern leader, male or female, he helped create a favourable atmosphere for women’s large scale and respectful entry into public life and legitimised their right to hold political office



Dhanyalakshmi

without having to wage long drawn out battles, like the Suffragists in the West had to do to win simple things like the right to vote and equal political participation. His Sitas were encouraged to break the shackles of domesticity, to come out of *purda*, to lead political movements and teach the art of peace to this warring world.

Liberating Lakshmis

In recent years, the Shetkari Sangathana leader Sharad Joshi also used the Sita symbol to drive home a radical message of gender justice among the farmers of Maharashtra. It was in 1986 that I was first invited to come and work out a programme of action for the Shetkari Sangathana’s women’s front, the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi. Sharad Joshi willingly accepted my suggestion that the organisation should:

- Give emphasis to women’s economic rights, especially land rights, given that they were mobilising women from farmer families;
- Not depend on statist interventions for empowering women, but work towards building a new culture, a new social consensus for strengthening women’s rights in the family and community.

An important outcome to my inputs and interactions with Mahila Aghadi was the *Lakshmi Mukti Karyakram* (Programme for Liberating Lakshmis - the goddesses of wealth. Sita is believed to be the incarnation of Lakshmi and an ordinary wife is also referred to as a Lakshmi of the household- a *grihalakshmi*).

The Sangathana announced in 1989 that any village in which a hundred or more families transferred, of their own accord, 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. This would be done through a public function in which certificates of honour would be awarded both to the village as well as each such family.

Curse of Mother Sita

The *Lakshmi Mukti Karyakram* revolved around the idea that the peasantry could not get a fair deal for itself and would remain exploited by urban interests as long as the curse of Mother Sita stayed on them, as long as they kept their wives or *grihalakshmis* enslaved by keeping them economically dependent and powerless in the family.

This campaign became the real turning point in my understanding of the powerful emotional hold of certain traditional symbols on the psyches of men of all ages and varied communities in India. During the campaign tours, while I would use images and examples from contemporary life, Sharad Joshi’s speeches revolved around the Sita story which seems to have played a crucial role in striking a deep emotional chord among the Sangathana followers. I quote from his very evocative speech which first establishes a link between the daily privations, drudgery and acts of

loyalty of the wives of ordinary, poor farmers and the privations suffered by Balmiki *Ramayan*'s Sita:

“During our struggle for remunerative prices I taught you to calculate the cost of production of farm produce and asked you to get into the habit of noting down each and every item of agricultural work and the cost involved. I would now suggest another exercise: On an off day, just sit down in a quiet corner of your house and start noting down on a long sheet of paper the various tasks your Lakshmi performs from as early as five in the morning to late at night: feeding the cattle, followed by all the chores required for the upkeep of the house and its surroundings, cooking, fetching water, and the care of children. All these by themselves represent a full day's work. But she goes on non-stop.

After completing housework, she goes to the fields and, at the end of a back-breaking day of work, on her way back home, she tries to scrounge around and collect anything that can be used as firewood for the evening meal. Then she follows with a second round of tasks—cooking the evening meal, looking after little children, feeding the animals, and tending to the needs of other family members including the old and sick. From the time she wakes up to feed the cattle to the time she lays down to sleep, she has probably put in no less than 15 hours of work. How do you calculate in rupee terms the love, care, and affection that she puts into all these tasks? How do you put a money value on the services of a person who saves the honour of the family by going and stealthily borrowing milk or sugar from the neighbours so she can provide tea for your guests who come at an unexpected hour at a time when the

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house does not have those provisions? Let us put the value of all these acts of loyalty and love at zero. But shouldn't she get at least as much money as a person working for the Employment Guarantee Scheme gets for simply moving earth from one place to another?

Let us figure out the value of her labour on the basis of a minimum wage of Rs 12 per day. She works 365 days a year. Let us say she has been married to you for 20 years. Given that she has worked 365 days a year for 20 years, the amount comes to more than Rs 160,000. She has never tried to demand this amount you owe her, nor sent a notice with a jeep load of people to come, seize and take away your household utensils as the bank officials do when you owe much smaller amounts as agricultural loans to government banks. On the contrary, to save you from other creditors, remember how often she even sold off the little bit of jewellery she was wearing? If we calculate the total, along with the interest on the minimum amount you owe her, it comes to a minimum of Rs. four lakhs. What have you given her in return? Two *saris* for a whole year and that, too, forgotten

if there is a drought. No guarantee of even adequate food. If there is not enough food in the house, the husband's share is not reduced. And a mother will hardly snatch food away from her own children's mouths. She makes do with whatever is left over— a half or a quarter *chapati* and fills the rest of her stomach by drinking water. This has been her fate so far.”

Having thus established the credentials of their wives as no less self effacing than Sita *mata* herself, Joshi goes on to show them that they are emulating a very negative role model and being as ungrateful and uncaring as was Ram:

“That this situation is not new is certain. But how and when did it start? Prabhu Ramchandra is considered a *purushottam*. But think of how he treated Sita *mata* who joyfully embraced exile in the forest for 14 years to be with him.

As soon as Ram was appointed as king, he decided to cast her off. It is not necessary for us to get into a debate on whether it was right or not for Ram to give up Sita. But was it not necessary for him to at least take the trouble of explaining to Sita why, as a king, he was compelled to abandon her? He could have assured her that she need not lack anything after his parting company with her, that she could continue living respectably in Ayodhya. Better still, Ram should have told his subjects: ‘If she is not good enough for you as a queen, I will go along with her.’ After all that is what she had done when Ram was banished by Kaikeyi who had told Sita she could continue living in the palace. But Sita had said, ‘*Jithe Ram, tithe Sita*’; (wherever Ram goes, there goes Sita). Even if Ram was not ready to leave his kingship for her, surely there were less cruel ways to deal with the situation. Sita

was pregnant at that time. If Ram had provided her a small straw hut till the time of her delivery, he would not have lost any of his greatness by doing so.”

Joshi then links the story to an architectural relic which stands as testimony to the injustice done to Sita in popular imagination:

“There is a Sita temple at Raveri village of Maharashtra. The villagers in that area tell you that Sita *mata* delivered her two sons on that very spot. She was in such a destitute condition that she went begging for a handful of grains. The people of village Raveri spurned her and refused to give her any. Sita *mata* cursed them in her grief. Such was the power of that curse that not a grain of wheat would grow in that village for centuries (until the arrival of the hybrid variety), even though the neighbouring villages produced plentiful harvests of wheat. In other words, the poverty of Indian farmers will not go away unless they get rid of the curse of Mother Sita by atoning for the misdeed of Ram. They can do so by repaying their debt to their own Lakshmis and free themselves of her curses. After all the husband of a slave cannot be a free man.”

Sharad Joshi would conclude his speech by saying that the purpose of the *Lakshmi Mukti* campaign 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, no house or property of her own. By transferring land to their wives, they were paying off ‘a long overdue debt’ to Mother Sita *mata*:

“Through this gesture you, my farmer brothers, will be vanquishing that monster of male tyranny which even *Prabhu* Ram could not vanquish though he slayed a greater warrior like Ravan with ease.”

In village after village I saw men reduced to tears listening to the story of Sita. Within a couple of years, hundreds of villages had already been honoured as *Lakshmi Mukti* villages and hundreds more had volunteered to carry out *Lakshmi Mukti*. Most of the villages that carried out *Lakshmi Mukti* celebrated it as though it were a big festival. The entire village would be spruced up and decorated, with men dancing to the beat of drums and women performing *arti* and singing songs. Men seemed even more elated than women and much of the initiative for preparing villages for *Lakshmi Mukti Karyakaram* was taken by

young male cadres of the Sangathana. Some of the men I interviewed described the whole campaign as a *mahayagna*.

The occasion would attract many people from neighbouring villages. After each public meeting, men from surrounding villages would come up and volunteer to effect similar transfers of land in their own villages, provided Joshi joined them for a similar celebration. The Sangathana campaign became such a wave that the organisation found it hard to cope with the growing number of villages claiming Joshi’s visit. Thus, the leadership could not match the ground swell it created and other pressing priorities of the organisation began to take precedence.

Needless to say, that this campaign for women’s economic rights could take off in rural Maharashtra mainly due to Joshi’s charisma and credibility as a leader who had sacrificed his family life and a lucrative personal career to devote his life for the rights of exploited and debt-ridden peasantry. However, as the Sangathana gravitated more and more towards electoral politics and began making opportunistic political alliances for narrow electoral gains,



**Above : Sharad Joshi presenting a *Lakshmi Mukti* certificate.
Below : One of the many *Lakshmi Mukti* meetings in which thousands of Maharashtra’s Lakshmis listen to the promise of their economic freedom.**

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it lost a good deal of its credibility and the power to evoke similar enthusiasm for such non-partisan, moral causes. For as long as it lasted, this unique campaign was able to draw deep emotional response because Mother Sita has the power to guilt-trip the most hard-hearted Hindu men to respond to her plea for justice.

There is a long history of men, like Joshi, playing a leading role in the movements for women's rights in India. Because of this active male involvement, it is not surprising that women's rights struggles have rarely acquired the dimensions of gender warfare in our country.

Negative Fallouts

However, this has also produced two negative fallouts:

- Modern day Sitas tend to be overdependent on men to right their wrongs. When they feel such help is not forthcoming, often they don't fight on their own strength. Even in the case of Shetkari Sangathana, when the male leaders resumed other political priorities, women activists of the Mahila Aghadi also let go of the *Lakshmi Mukti* campaign.
- Men and even women tend to expect women to be really Sita-like in order for them to pick up cudgels on their behalf. All those women who betray ordinary human failings are less likely to find such strong support among men.

Sita Reformers

So far I have described efforts to reform Ram but, as mentioned earlier, the continuing hold of Sita on popular

imagination is interpreted by many Indian feminists and other modernists as proof of Indians not having broken the hold of crippling traditions. Sita is seen as a harmful role model—one that culturally enslaves women and conditions them into accepting subordination and maltreatment at the hands of men and leaves them without the courage to protest or retaliate. She has been condemned by them for her passivity and subservience. Her suffering is seen as a product of masochism, lack of selfhood and supine surrender to patriarchy.

Therefore, she is seen by many "progressive" as an adversary whose influence among people is to be countered. The association of the

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feminine with nurturant mother figures is seen as a patriarchal conspiracy to put women in restrictive and self-effacing roles. Most feminists identify with the aggressive, militant goddesses such as Durga and Kali. Goddesses who are content with matrimony are viewed with disapproval, even if they are honoured as spouses, as was Parvati and even Sita for most of her life.

The broad thrust of feminist politics has been to goad modern day women to revolt against social norms and encourage them to reject the Sita mould. As opposed to the mainstream society's effort to reform Ram and make him worthy of Sita, the feminist

project tends to be "Sita Reform" and to make her forget Ram. This school of thought would like to see Sita emulate Ibsen's Nora and defiantly walk out on her husband to build a new life for herself or, better still, be an Erica Jong. If she has to stay within the traditional framework, she becomes acceptable only in a Kali-Durga *roop*.

A good example of the Reform Sita Campaign is Deepa Mehta's film, *Fire*, where a modern day Sita is made to use a radically different shock therapy to walk out not just on Ram, but also give up the traditional role of a wife. She does a one up on Ibsen's Nora by choosing lesbian love as a mode of self-assertion and defiance of social norms. Feminist writer Snehlata Reddy's Sita also provides a similar shock by building a close emotional bond with Ravan and declaring that he would have made a much better partner than Ram.

The traditional Sita is not a slave, but a loved and loving spouse. Mehta's Sita makes it clear that she continues living with her husband only because she has no viable option. As soon as an alternative appears, off she runs. The film *Fire* rejects not just the bad part of Ram's behaviour, but all the social norms and ideals represented by the worldview of the *Ramayan*, and the value system that Sita lives by.

My assessment is that while no one in India feels offended if Ram is asked to improve, reform and change some of his anti-women notions, people unencumbered by "isms" are not enthusiastic about Sita being subjected to "improvements" which make her behave altogether out of character. Not surprisingly, despite all the high profile hype accompanying the release of the film, the accolades it won abroad, and media hype around the bedroom scenes, the film was a box office flop in India. Compare that

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to what happened during the telecast of Sagar's *Ramayan*. Streets in the cities of India and even Pakistan would be deserted on Sunday mornings during the telecast time of Sagar's *Ramayan*.

The traditional Sita jolts Ram and all others into recognising their own faults and compels them to make amends. The Sitas of the Deepa Mehta variety may cause momentary shock and solicit some sympathy, but command little admiration and, therefore, tend to get socially marginalised. They may become symbols of individual protest and assertion, but are not able to force people around them to rethink their own attitudes. By contrast, the traditional Sita shakes the very moral core of her society.

Monotheistic Pressures

This is not at all to suggest that I object to the modernising of Sita or that I share the objection of *Hindutvavadis* to Mehta making her Radha and Sita turn to lesbian love. Since in the Hindu tradition no one dare assume the final authority in defining our gods and goddesses, each one of us has the freedom to make them behave in ways we find necessary or inspiring. However, when *Hindutvavadis* create a Durga Vahini whose members enthusiastically lead riotous mobs against Muslims, it becomes a gross

distortion of the very quintessence of Durga as the destroyer of Evil. She simply cannot be cast as a murderer of innocents. So also politically inspired attempts to make Sita lose the very qualities that make her a Sita are resented or simply dismissed by those who have some roots in their culture and tradition.

In any case, why force Sita to act like Ibsen's Nora or insist that Sitas and Radhas turn into Durgas and Kalis, especially since the choice of inventing new goddesses as new moral exemplars is available to all of us, if the existing array of them fail to satisfy us? Such monotheistic, unidimensional, standardised behaviour is neither good for ordinary women nor for goddesses nor, for that matter, good for men or gods.

If we want people to gracefully yield space for our new goddesses, we have to learn to be tolerant and respectful of those worshipped by others. There is no need to treat them as adversaries, simply because they do not conform to our newly acquired ideologies, especially considering that our traditional gods and goddesses are willing to come a long way to support our causes. At the heart of this controversy between these two opposing approaches to social and religious reform is the key question: How do we relate to our cultural

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heritage and define our relationship to our own people and the values they cherish?

Do we disown tradition and position ourselves outside it, or do we accept it as our own in the way we accept our gene stock? Accepting as your own gene stock does not mean that you do not try to cure the physical diseases you may have inherited from your parents and other ancestors.

This kind of distinction is even more necessary for cultural inheritance. Owning it up does not imply subscribing to every one of its pathological norms and endorsing even harmful practices. It simply means learning to distinguish between inherently unjust practices and those that you don't like because you have adopted a different value framework.

Social reformers can be effective only when people see them as caring insiders who have stood by them in their various trials and tribulations, as shown by the earlier success of the Sangathana campaign. Even I would not have been taken so seriously on women's rights issues if I did not prove my credentials as a supporter of Sangathana's overall work for farmer's rights. But if we descend as attacking outsiders, focusing solely on practices we disapprove of, we are not making much of a dent. Only by creating a shared sense of right and wrong with the people whose lives we wish to change for the better can we create a new social consensus for a more just and humane society within our respective communities. □