



Prem Singh

The Sita Who Smiles

Wife as Goddess in the *Adbhut Ramayana*

○ Ruth Vanita

In Ramlila performances in India and in most retellings of the Rama story, Sita is often depicted shedding tears. These tears emblemize her virtue and her suffering, the one represented as almost inseparable from the other. Emulating Sita as ideal woman and ideal wife, many modern heroines in Indian cinema and fiction also weep copiously.¹ This stereotypical weeping that characterizes the virtuous woman is often seen as stemming from some deep-rooted Indian patriarchal misogynist tradition. One may modify that view, however, by pointing out, first, that the modern convention derives as much from a Victorian paradigm (“Men must work and women must weep”) as from a pre-modern Indian one, and, second, that traditional Indian heroes, from Rama onwards, like pre-modern European heroes, also weep a good deal.

In icons, however, Sita, like most Gods and Goddesses, is represented not weeping but smiling. The Gods’ ever-open eyes and calm smiles indicate that they radiate light, bliss, and beneficence. If Sita’s tears tend to predominate in narrative and her

smiles in icons, this paradox perhaps points to her dual status as woman and Goddess. In this paper, I examine Sita’s smiles and laughter in the *Adbhut Ramayana*, arguing that while this text focuses on her Goddess aspect, it simultaneously foregrounds the paradoxical dynamic inherent in the normative human husband-wife relationship, where the wife plays the role of social subordinate even while acting as an autonomous agent. Unlike the many *Ramayanas* wherein Sita’s agency consists primarily of her resistance to injustice, the *Adbhut Ramayana* presents Sita not as victim (whether suffering or resisting) but almost entirely as agent.²

In the debate about whether Goddess worship traditions empower or disempower women or have no effect whatsoever on them, I agree with those who argue that Hindu Goddesses and women (like Hindu Gods and men) are not seen as completely distinct entities, either in life or in texts, and that Goddess worship may and often does function to empower women, although it does not necessarily always function in this way.³

Sanskrit texts routinely refer to heroes as being like (*iva*) Gods in general or a particular God, and to heroines as being like Goddesses (thus Damayanti in the *Mahabharata* is repeatedly described as being like the Goddesses Shachi and Lakshmi). Although the gap between divine and human widens in modern perception,

a strong residual tendency to identification remains, in such practices as the naming of children and in some rituals. In examining the *Adbhut Ramayan*’s representation of Sita, I consider the ways in which her human womanhood functions in conjunction with her divinity.

Shakta Rewriting of Sita

The *Adbhut Ramayana*, composed in Sanskrit around the fourteenth century, in North India, is a Vaishnava Shakta text.⁴ By representing Sita as simultaneously herself, the incarnation of Vishnu’s consort Lakshmi, and also as Kali and Parameshwari, thus inseparable from Shiva, the text attempts to reconcile Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti, whose worshipers at this time had divided into the three mainstream trends in Hinduism, still existing today. Shakti, in a general sense, refers to female power and thus to any Goddess; however, in a more specific sense, Shakti is associated with Parvati’s many forms and is thus linked with Shiva and his worshipers. The text develops the idea of Vishnu’s consort Lakshmi, and her incarnation Sita, as Shakti associated both with Vishnu and with Shiva. Thus, in chapter 24, the gods eulogize Sita as “Vaishnavi Shakti.”(24:5).⁵

The *Adbhut Ramayana* celebrates Sita and Rama but, like many *Puranas*, is heavily influenced, structurally and philosophically, by the *Bhagavad Gita*. Its *adbhut* (strange, unique) quality lies in the way it recounts the glory of Sita and writes a virtual Sita Gita into the story

of the *Ramayana*. This quality has led commentators to read it primarily as a Shakta text, with Sita becoming Kali.

My argument, however, is that Sita through the text remains recognizably the Sita of the *Ramayana*, even when she takes on a Kali form. Hindu Gods and Goddesses may take on many forms, even each other's form, but this does not erase their identity. The way the text shows Sita taking on the form of Mahadevi is not as surprising as the way it reconfigures the ideal husband-wife relationship, by an ingenious combination of Vaishnava and Shakta paradigms.

Some Bengali *Ramayanas*, such as Rammohan's eighteenth-century *Ramayana*, imitate the *Adbhut Ramayana* in this respect, recounting Sita's exploits in the same way. Bengal's Shakta traditions facilitate the process. Bengali *Ramayanas* also rewrite women's roles in other ways. The idea of the female principle as autonomously productive, central to the story of Bhagiratha's birth to two mothers, is also found in the *Adbhut Ramayana's* account of Sita's birth.

Downplaying Sita's Abduction

The *Adbhut Ramayana* is structured to shift the focus of the story away from Rama's exile, Sita's abduction, and Rama's battle with Ravana. These events, which are central to most *Ramayanas*, occupy only one chapter (*sarga*) out of a total of twenty-seven in the *Adbhut Ramayana* places these events in a larger context, but here the context itself becomes the main story.

In the first chapter, sage Bharadvaja asks Valmiki whether the legend is true that he, Valmiki, composed the *Ramayana* in a hundred crore verses, of which only twenty five thousand appear in the *Valmiki Ramayana* known on earth. Valmiki says this is indeed true and

that the glory of Sita has not so far been narrated on earth. In the rest of the chapter, he eulogizes Sita as Prakriti and Shakti, creative principle and cause of all causes (*sarvakarana karanam*) (1:15). He also praises Rama, saying that there is absolutely no difference between Rama and Sita.

The next seven chapters recount the various reasons why Vishnu and Lakshmi were compelled to incarnate as Rama and Sita. Chapter eight is



devoted to Sita's birth (there is no parallel chapter on Rama's birth). The next seven chapters are occupied by Rama's glory. Rama displays his universal form to Parashurama and his four-armed form to Hanuman. In three verses in chapter 10 we are briefly informed that "for some reason" (*kenapi hetuna*) (10:1) Rama, Sita and Lakshmana went to the forest, from where Sita was abducted by Ravana. Addressing Hanuman, Rama discourses at length on Sankhya Yoga, the Upanishads, and Bhakti. This portion of the text is modeled on the *Bhagavad Gita*, with many verses directly echoing famous verses from the Gita. It concludes in

chapter 15 with Hanuman's eulogy of Rama and his request that Rama take on his human form once again (paralleling Arjuna's eulogy and request to Krishna in the *Gita*).

The story of Rama's exile and years in the forest is entirely missing. No details are given of Sita's abduction or her residence in Lanka. In chapter 16, Rama and his army defeat Ravana and rescue Sita. This astonishing compression makes sense in context – Bharadvaja is not interested in a repetition of the *Valmiki Ramayana* story, with which everyone is familiar; he wants to hear the parts that were supposedly left out of it. In the last chapter, Valmiki explains that for fear of repeating himself he did not recount the whole story (27:12).

In chapter 17, when Rama returns triumphant from the war, the sages praise him for having slain the ten-headed Ravana, king of Lanka. Sita smiles in amusement when she hears this praise and, when questioned, remarks that the ten-headed Ravana was nothing compared to his twin brother, the thousand-headed Ravana, king of Pushkara Island, who is a much more powerful demon. Rama immediately utters a war cry and sets out to battle this new Ravana whom he has never heard of before. This battle occupies five chapters and ends with the routing of Rama's army. Ravana's arrow pierces Rama and he falls down in a faint, seemingly lifeless.

Sita then gets aroused and assumes her divine form as a terrible Goddess. She destroys hundreds of demons, severs all of Ravana's thousand heads with one stroke, and proceeds to play with the heads like balls. At that moment, a thousand "mothers" or divine female beings spring out of the pores of her body. The names of over two hundred of these females (who, in a sense, are aspects of Sita) are catalogued,

following the convention of recounting the names of a divinity. Their various forms are also described.

Sita, now in the form of Kali, performs a dance of destruction that terrifies the Gods, who try to appease her with prayers but are able to do so only when they bring Rama back to life. Rama, who was not aware of her true identity as a Goddess, humbly asks her who she is, whereupon she shows him her universal form as Parameshwari, just as Krishna shows his universal form to Arjuna in the *Bhagvad Gita*. The *Gita*'s model is explicitly evoked through the use of near-identical language and imagery. Rama then praises her by reciting her one thousand and eight names, all of which are listed in the text, starting with Sita and ending with Akasamurti.

In the next chapter, at Rama's request, Sita resumes her human form (just like Krishna resuming his human form at Arjuna's request), and he then eulogizes her as the supreme principle, the creator, protector, and destroyer of the universe. Rama recites twelve verses, all of which express adoration and worship. Sita then returns to Ayodhya with Rama and performs her wifely role by remaining at his side.

Rama Weeps, Sita Laughs

Conventional retellings of the Rama story are punctuated by Sita's tears – she weeps when Rama is exiled, when she is abducted, throughout her stay in Lanka, and when Rama tests and repudiates her. In the *Adbhut Ramayana*, Sita is not shown shedding a single tear. Instead, this story of the thousand-headed Ravana is framed by her variously nuanced smiles and laughter. Rama weeps twice (chapters 10 and 16), due to his separation from Sita – his tears create the river Vaitarani and also fill up the depleted ocean (10:5; 16:15).

As there is no description of Sita being abducted or residing in Lanka, we never see her weeping. The effect of this is a complete shift of focus away from Sita as victim.

Her victimization, however, is mentioned in the sages' praise of Rama in Chapter 17. The sages perceive Sita as having suffered and they are grieved when they recall this. Praising Rama's victory, they say, "O lord, the great Goddess Sita has suffered a lot. Remembering this, we get agitated." (17:16). When they keep repeating this sentiment



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(*punaha punaha* 7:16), Sita laughs a little and speaks smilingly to them (17:17).

The sages' reception of Sita's suffering is analogous to the popular Indian reception of Sita's sufferings. Several feminist commentators have examined Sita's sufferings, mainly at Rama's hands but also in general, as a site for Indians' concern for women's sufferings.⁶ Valuable though this concern is, it leads to a near-exclusive focus on women's victimization and resistance, to the exclusion of women's pleasure, joy, and effective power. Interestingly, the

Indian women's movement also tends towards the same type of focus.

The *Adbhut Ramayana* develops these neglected areas in its representation of Sita. It omits Rama's mistreatment of Sita, and represents her as amused by the sages' needless concern for her sufferings at the hands of Ravana. Here termed "sadhvi" (woman ascetic), *devi* (Goddess), and *Janakanandini* (daughter of Janaka) (17:17), Sita, simultaneously Goddess, woman and ascetic, tells the sages that their praise of the killing of ten-headed Ravana amuses her, because this killing is not particularly praiseworthy in context. The sages are thrown into confusion by Sita's odd behavior, and offended by her laughing at them. She apologizes for having offended them, and then tells them about the thousand-headed Ravana.

Sita's smile is next mentioned during the battle with the thousand-headed Ravana. After many of Rama's and Ravana's followers kill one another, Ravana himself appears. Disdaining to kill Rama's followers, he sends a mighty wind that blows them back to their own lands. All the warriors and sages are bewildered at this turn of events. The gods are worried and Rama is surprised, but Sita remains next to Rama with her pure, bright smile (*shuchismita*) (21:13). This epithet is conventionally applied to heroines in Sanskrit texts. Here, however, it suggests Sita's divine serenity.

Soon after, Rama is struck by the thousand-headed Ravana's arrow and falls down unconscious. Seeing Sita's still smiling face (23:2), the sages reproach her for having told Rama about Ravana, and point out to her the misfortunes that have ensued. Sita then utters loud roars, takes on a ferocious form, and begins tearing the demons to pieces with great ease.

Finally, after Sita has killed Ravana and shown Rama her

universal form, he requests her to resume her pleasant form. She then appears in her two-armed, that is, human form. In this form, she has a “divine smile” on her lips and her smiling, pleased face has a “divine, infinite splendor” (*prasannavadanam divyamanantamahimaspadam*) (26:7). Her initial smile of amusement has given way to the standard iconic smile.

This iconic smile is, however, not entirely distinguishable from the type of pure, bright smile (*shuchismita*) conventionally attributed to heroines. Thus, even while weeping, Damayanti in the *Mahabharata* is characterized as “brightly smiling.” The Gods do not weep, but they do smile. Smiling, not weeping, thus links humans with Gods.

Sita in All Humans

Towards the end of the *Adbhut Ramayana*, Sita points out this non-difference between Gods and humans. Having adored her, Rama takes refuge in her, and she then, smiling (*sasmitam*), says to him, “Listen to one speech of mine - O king, I reside in all human beings in the same form that I assumed to kill Ravana.” (26: 39-40).

Her next statement amplifies this important point: “Your form is naturally blue but being troubled by Ravana, you have turned red. I reside with you in a blue-red form.” Rama’s blue complexion refers to his divinity, colored red by his human suffering. Sita shares with him this simultaneous divinity and humanity. Equally important, she also resides in all humans, specifically in the ferocious, violent, but creative form in which she kills Ravana.

Sita then tells Rama to ask for boons, and he asks that her divine form always dwell in his heart, and also that his destroyed companions and army be restored to him. Sita, laughing (*prahasya*) as she looks at him, says, “So be it” (26:47). This

divine pronouncement constitutes her final speech in the book. The sages weep for joy when they meet Rama and Sita again.

Rama as Sita’s Devotee

The *Adbhut Ramayana* contains two sections modeled directly on the *Bhagavad Gita*, which I shall refer to as the Rama Gita and the Sita Gita respectively. In the Rama Gita, Hanuman is the disciple and devotee, parallel to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He asks questions, receives answers from Rama, obtains a vision of Rama’s divine form, eulogizes Rama, and asks to see him again in



his original form. In the Sita Gita, Rama is the devotee. Sita inspires his devotion by saving his life.

The conventions of the husband protecting the wife, and the wife worshipping the husband as God, are entirely reversed here.⁷ The reversal places Rama and Sita on an equal plane, since the same epithets and terms of description appear in the eulogies of both. However, Sita retains an edge, because of the way the plot is structured, and because while Rama is represented as her devotee, she is not represented as his devotee in the same way. The

theological Vaishnava-Shakta significance of this dynamic is suggestive; I am interested in how it might also work to modify the ideal husband-wife relationship.

The section I refer to as the Sita Gita begins with Brahma, the creator God, telling Rama that he needs to recognize Sita’s importance: “Rama, you are not able to do anything without her. To make you realize this, Sita, who is beyond criticism, has done all these actions” (24:42). Brahma then tells Rama to actually look at Sita: “Look at Janaki, Rama, give up fear, great-armed one” (24:43). The husband is here asked to recognize aspects of his wife that he has not noticed although or perhaps because he is so used to seeing her.⁸ There is a mild irony in the injunction to Rama, the great-armed one, to give up fear (*tyaja bhitim mahabhuja*). Although mighty, the husband is afraid when these unnoticed aspects of his wife surface.

In order to give up fear, Rama has to go through a process which begins when he acknowledges that he does not really know Sita and asks her to reveal herself: “Who are you, large-eyed Goddess, crowned with a crescent? I do not know you, great Goddess. Asked by me, speak accordingly.” (25:3). After Sita has described herself she gives Rama a vision of her universal self as Parameshwari. Once again, we hear a direct echo from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “Rama saw that form which was like crores of suns...” (25:8). Rama recites a thousand and eight names of the Goddess. Many, though not all, of these names are identical with those in the Shakta text, the *Lalitasahasranama*.⁹ Sita then resumes her human form at his request.

Although he now sees her in the form he is used to, that of his wife, Rama continues to address her as a Goddess. He tells her that his life and

his austerities have borne fruit today (*adya me saphalam janam adya me saphalam tapam*, 26:9), since he has seen her normally invisible form. He eulogizes her at length as the absolute creative force, the supreme light, and the ultimate cause. Again following the pattern of the *Bhagavad Gita*, he describes her as the best in each category (Indra among the Gods, Shiva among the Rudras, Ananta among the serpents, Saraswati among speeches, and so on). He repeatedly says that he prostrates in reverence to her (*pranato asmi nityam* 26: 27-28, 30-32), and bows to her (*namami* 26: 29, 33).

Towards the end of this eulogy, Rama describes Sita's universal form as "without grief" (*prahinashokam*, 26:37). This epithet reminds the reader or listener that whatever sufferings a human may endure, the divine element in the human remains untouched. Sita immediately tells him that she resides in all humans in the divine form in which she killed Ravana (26:40).

Goddesses and Women

Does an emphasis on Sita as a fierce and powerful Goddess reflect in any way on ordinary women's lives? I suggest it does – first and foremost, just because she is Sita. The *Adbhut Ramayana* follows the standard pattern of Goddess texts. Its effect, however, is different from that of the *Devi Mahatmya* or the *Lalitasahasranama*, because other Goddesses like Durga and Kali do not have the same human status and intimate appeal to women and to men that Sita has. Sita has a unique place in the Indian popular imagination as the ideal but unjustly treated wife. Young brides are told to emulate Sita and Savitri. Therefore, to identify Sita with Kali or Parameshwari is in one sense to thus identify with all with wives. Sita's statement that she

resides in all human beings in her Goddess form emphasizes this.

Second, Sita's connection to other females is found in the thousand "mothers" or female beings she produces out of herself in battle, who proceed to play ball with her. These females, while independent entities, are also aspects of Sita. The text lists two hundred and eleven of their names. While some of these names are uncommon, many are common names of Indian women even today (for example, Jaya, Prabha, Madhavi, Kamala). Reading this list provides one with the unsettling and



pleasurable experience of reading a list of the names of one's friends and acquaintances. This is an experience provided by most Goddess texts, since they tend to list the Goddess's names. Ramchandra Gandhi has pointed out that many Indian men's names have something to do with Rama.¹⁰ One folk etymology of the name "Rama" connects it to "all-pervading"; similarly, Goddess names pervade Indian society in the form of women's names.

That a woman has a Goddess's name may not improve her social status. But many Indian narratives,

from life and literature, suggest a social awareness that Goddesses reside in women and may be aroused at any time. Modern Indian films often represent an ill-treated and submissive wife who, pushed beyond endurance, prays to a Goddess and imitates or embodies the Goddess, either by taking a terrible revenge or by performing miracles. Women may use this social expectation to their own advantage; for example, in the 1980s, while working at MANUSHI, I conducted an interview with a woman activist in a slum, who described how she decided to become possessed by a Goddess, thus compelling both her mother-in-law and her husband to stop mistreating her, and also gaining social respect.¹¹

In this text, Sita does not reciprocate Rama's gestures of adoring and eulogizing her. This non-reciprocity represents a Shakta reversal of the convention of women touching their husbands' feet.

Sita's status in this text as woman and Goddess is not so much ambiguous as simultaneous. At different junctures, various aspects of her being are foregrounded, but other aspects are kept in play by the language. Thus, when the sages reproach Sita for laughing at them, she reacts with fear as any human would, and excuses herself by bowing to them and explaining her actions. She bows to her husband, brothers-in-law, the sages and the other warriors, and tells her story respectfully. At this stage, her humanity is foregrounded.

Yet, even here, in addition to being termed "*devi*" and "Janaka's daughter," she is also termed "*sadhvi*." This term adds a third element to the duality of divine and human. Although she is a

laywoman, asceticism is an important dimension of Sita's being. She endures suffering without complaint and is amused by the sages' agitation on her account. Female sages do not appear often in Hindu scriptures, but they do make some very important appearances. One female sage is Sulabha, who, in the *Mahabharata*, debates with Janaka and decisively proves that gender difference is apparent, not real, and that women therefore need not be socially constricted by gender roles. The figure of the *sadhvi* may thus be seen as bridging the gap between woman and Goddess, just as the figure of the sage does the gap between man and God.

Feminine as Creative Force

Gods and heroes in most mythologies are conceived and born miraculously - from virgins, from human-divine intercourse, or from a single parent, male or female. The miracle functions to signal the hero's innate difference from other mortals. Thus Sita, in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, is termed *ayonija* (not born of a vagina). Like Krishna and Shakuntala, she is raised by adoptive parents. As Boswell has shown, heroes in many cultures are raised differently from other children - by adoptive or foster parents, human, divine, or animal.¹² This may signify that they belong not to one family alone but to the whole society; it also serves to mark them as different from others.

In Hindu texts, one of the most common forms of miraculous birth is a God, demon, or Goddess producing other beings from the self. When this happens in the heat of battle, these beings are born of wrath and are terrifying. They aid the parent in fighting. Goddesses usually, but not always, produce females rather than males in this manner. Sometimes, however, a female produces another being not from wrath but from other

kinds of emotion such as erotic or motherly love. Thus, in the *Padma Purana*, Vishnu, disguised as the demon Jalandhara, seduces Jalandhara's wife Vrinda. While they are engaged in love play, Tulasi, a purifying nymph, arises from Vrinda's sweat. Tulasi (identified with the sacred plant, holy basil) represents Vrinda's pure erotic desire for Vishnu.¹³ The plant is still worshiped today by devotees of Vishnu.

Parvati produces Ganesh from her body rubbings merely from maternal longing - she wants a son of her own,



who will be devoted only to her.¹⁴ In the *Krittivasa Ramayana*, Bhagiratha's mothers, although they are humans, not Goddesses, are enabled to imitate Goddesses when they produce a child from desire - desire for a child and desire for each other.

The ability to produce fully formed beings from the self appears in ancient Hindu texts to be related to the idea, also found in ancient Greek texts, that the Earth (also represented as a Goddess), produces certain types of life, such as worms, from herself. In the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Sita is born of the Earth.

In the *Adbhut Ramayana*, she is born from two female principles - the Earth and a woman's emotions. We are told that Mandodari, Ravana's wife, neglected by her unfaithful husband, tries to commit suicide by drinking the blood of sages that he had collected and told her was poisonous. But the blood impregnates instead of poisoning her. Afraid she will be accused of adultery, she aborts in a field. The foetus develops into the baby Sita, who is found and adopted by Janaka. Thus, Sita is the product of a neglected and suicidal wife's despair. The male element in her birth is an ascetic one - the blood of the sages.

In the *Adbhut Ramayana* structuring of the plot, Sita reverses the neglected wife syndrome with a vengeance. She completes the divine plan by being the cause for the death of both Ravana's, thus avenging Mandodari; she also publicly produces many female beings from herself, something Mandodari was afraid to be found doing. In her fierce Kali form, she behaves in an unconventional and unwifely manner, roaring, sticking out her tongue, dancing and playing with skulls and other body parts, and frightening all the males present, including her husband. Both in her birth and in her actions, Sita represents the autonomously creative female principle.

Sita as Cosmic Agent

Sita in the *Adbhut Ramayana* is identified with *Prakriti* (Nature or the universal creative principle). She takes on the form of Shiva, and Rama says that Purusha is one of her forms (26: 29). She kills mercilessly and creates prolifically. She also preserves the universe and acts for its welfare.

The sense of a larger cosmic plan, present to different degrees in all *Ramayanas*, is geared in the *Adbhut Ramayana* to explaining why Rama and Sita had to be born as humans

and had to suffer. The first seven chapters place them in a cosmic context, recounting stories of faults committed by Vishnu and Lakshmi, which result in their being cursed to incarnate as humans. They gracefully accede to this necessity, which is also linked to the need to curb violent and cruel demons.

In chapter one itself, the narrator rewrites a famous verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*, ascribing to Sita, who is *Prakriti*, the need to incarnate so as to uphold *dharma* and destroy evil on earth: “Whenever *dharma* declines, *Prakriti* appears on earth for the destruction of *adharmā*”(1:18). In this formulation, Sita and Rama’s sufferings are undertaken for the purpose of destroying *adharmā*. Sita, identified with *Prakriti*, is represented as an agent, not a victim. This formulation, replacing Sri Krishna with *Prakriti*, can be interpreted to mean that nature or the universal creative and causative principle itself takes on different forms to rid the universe of evil and restore balance and harmony.

Placed in this context, Sita’s actions, apparently motivated only by wifely devotion, are in fact aimed at universal welfare. Thus, in the *Adbhut Ramayana*, Sita gets aroused to battle only when her husband falls unconscious, and is appeased only when the Gods bring him back to life. In this respect, she seems similar to heroines like Savitri whose agency is directed towards saving their husbands’ lives. However, Sita is different from those heroines because her actions have a larger purpose. Unlike Rama who kills the ten-headed Ravana only after the latter abducts Sita, thus giving Rama a personal reason to kill him, Sita initiates Rama’s battle with the thousand-headed Ravana for no personal gain but simply to rid the universe of his demonic activities. This idea appears repeatedly in the text, at every important juncture. For

instance, when Janaka finds Sita in a furrow, a divine voice tells him that this girl will be “responsible for the welfare of the world” (8:40).¹⁵

It is because of this cosmic plan, wherein Sita is primary agent, that she is the only one who obtains information about the thousand-headed Ravana. As a girl, she serves a visiting Brahman with devotion; in return, he tells her all about the thousand-headed Ravana. She retains this memory and reveals it to her husband and the male warriors and sages only after the ten-headed Ravana is destroyed. None of the men have ever before heard of the thousand-headed Ravana.

As Sally Goldman has pointed out, in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, Sita has the power to destroy Ravana and save herself but she chooses not to use it, because demonstrating her own power would diminish Rama’s power as husband and king.¹⁶ In the *Adbhut Ramayana*, Sita uses her power not to save herself but to save Rama. Like Valmiki’s Sita, she first allows Rama to rescue her from the ten-headed Ravana. The difference is that she then goes on to rescue him from far greater danger. Her rescue of him puts his rescue of her in ironic perspective.

Surprising Secrets

A number of manuscripts of the *Adbhut Ramayana* are found in all parts of the country, attesting to its fairly wide popularity.¹⁷ Itself influenced by the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, it influenced Tulsi’s *Ramcharitmanas*, and also the *Sitopanisad*. It contributed to the evolution of the idea of Sita as synonymous with Shakti, and thus having an identity much larger than simply that of Rama’s wife and devotee. In South Indian Shrivaisnava tradition, Sita, as Mahalakshmi, is herself ultimate reality.¹⁸ The *Adbhut Ramayana*’s different approach to Sita’s divinity adds to her serene

Lakshmi aspect a fierce Kali aspect. Just as Rama, though an incarnation of Vishnu, the preserver God, must engage in violent destruction, so also Sita has a ferocious aspect.

The text represents this revelation as *adbhut*, or strange and a great surprise that has been kept secret (*ashcharyamascharyamidam gopitam* 1:12). This idea of a secret being revealed structures the entire text. Sita surprises the sages, warriors, the Gods, and her own husband by her revelations about Ravana, and even more by her actions. Rama does not recognize her and has to be let into the secret of her identity. When he tells his brothers and the monkey army about it, they are all astonished.

These surprised reactions mirror the expected reader response. The *Adbhut Ramayana* shows an awareness that its intervention, altering the conventional image of Sita as submissive, subordinate and dependent, will be received as amazing, and almost unbelievable. The text frames this intervention as authoritative by attributing it to Valmiki. At the close of the text, Valmiki explains to Bharadvaja that he had earlier not narrated these astonishing episodes of the *Ramayana* because Brahma had kept them hidden (27:11-12).

In chapter one Valmiki says that whoever hears it will prosper – a Brahman will attain perfection in speech, a Kshatriya will become a king, a businessman will succeed, and a Shudra will achieve greatness (1:24). In the last chapter, he amplifies this statement, insisting that the *Adbhut Ramayana* is the best of all *Ramayanas*. Residual anxiety is expressed in his remark that all the episodes narrated by him form part of the Rama story, and by reciting it, one achieves devotion to Rama; therefore “doubts regarding this should not arise in anyone”(27:30).



Prem Singh

Misleading Polarities

Despite the impressive work done recently on Sita by some feminist commentators, there is still a dominant tendency to posit village women's oral representations of Sita, in local languages, against male Brahmanical textual representations, in Sanskrit, with the former supposedly being always more positive than the latter. According to Nabaneeta Sen, the "patriarchal Brahminical system ... uses the Sita myth to silence women," while in "the women's folk tradition of India" village women speak out, expressing the sentiment that all women are "sisters in sorrow."¹⁹ This type of formulation homogenizes both the textual and the oral traditions, wrongly identifying the former entirely with Brahman males and the latter with women; it also glorifies the notion of women as sisters in suffering. Texts like the *Adbhut Ramayana* demonstrate that canonical Sanskrit texts can surprise us with their secrets, one of which is that the textual and oral, Sanskrit and local language traditions are much more intertwined than may at first be apparent.

Endnotes

1. For an account of the mainstream view of Sita as ideal wife, dependent on, and subordinate to Rama around whom her life revolves, see Chapter 5, "Sita," in David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 65-78.
2. There is a vast literature on Rama's testing of Sita and on different texts' portrayal of her resistance or protest against this injustice. See Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* March 1999, 67 (1): 1-32; "The Sita who Refused the Fire Ordeal," *MANUSHI* (1981) 8: 22-23; Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Rama: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India," in *MANUSHI* 98 (Jan-Feb 1997) 20-31; David Shulman, "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's *Iramavataram*," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition* ed. Paula Richman (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy, "Sita in the City: The Ramayana's Heroine in New York," in *MANUSHI* 117 (March-April 2000), 17-23; *Questioning Ramayanas* ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. For essays debating the question, see *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: the Politics of South Asian Goddesses* ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (New York: New York University Press, 2000). For the view that Goddess-worship has no positive effect on women's lives, see also Sukumari Bhattacharji, *Women and Society in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Basumati Corporation Ltd 1994), 86; for an opposing view, see David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), and Samjukta Gombrich Gupta, "The Goddess, Women, and the Rituals in Hinduism," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. Mandakranta Bose (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87-123.
4. V. Raghavan, in *Sanskrit Ramayanas Other Than Valmiki's: The Adbhuta, Adhyatma and Ananda Ramayanas* (Chennai: V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 1998), 71, notes that the *Adbhut Ramayana* is not popular among Shrivaisnavas, in the South or elsewhere.
5. *Adbhut Ramayana* [Sanskrit, Hindi, and English texts] ed. Shantilal Nagar (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation,

2001). All citations are to the Sanskrit chapter and verse from this text. Translations from the Sanskrit are by me, unless otherwise indicated.

6. See footnote 2.

7. As Kinsley points out, "Sita's role as devotee...casts her in a subsidiary position vis-à-vis Rama. ...Wifely devotion has here become a metaphor for ideal devotion to God" (80). The *Adbhut Ramayana* reverses these terms.

8. On the importance of sight as insight in Hindu tradition, see Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (3rd edn. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

9. See *The Thousand Names of the Divine Mother: Sri Lalita Sahasranama* with commentary by T. Narayana Menon (San Ramon, Calif.: Mata Amritanandamayi Center, 1996).

10. At a symposium at Hindu College, Delhi University, some time in the 1990s.

11. Ruth Vanita, "Sumitra: One of Many," *MANUSHI* No.14.

12. John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: the Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

13. *Padma Purana*, V. 15. 42b-46, translated Deshpande, page 2371.

14. See "Shiva Purana: The Birth of Ganesha," in Vanita and Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India*, (Palgrave, 2000; New Delhi: Macmillan, 2002), 81-84.

15. Shantilal Nagar's translation. See footnote 5.

16. Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, "The Voice of Sita in Valmiki's *Sundarakanda*," in *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 223-238; 231.

17. See V. Raghavan, op cit., 3.

18. Pointing this out, Ramchandra Gandhi also identifies her with aboriginal earth mother Goddesses. See Ramchandra Gandhi, *Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1994), 4, 16.

19. Quoted in Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita," page 22, footnote 32, from a paper presented at Columbia University's 1998 Sita Symposium.

The author is a Professor in Women's Studies, University of Montana, USA. She was co-editor MANUSHI from 1978 to 1990. □