

Preface

The Centre for Women's Development Studies has created a fund to institute an annual lecture in honour of late Prof. J.P. Naik – a founder member of this Centre, an educationist and the first Member Secretary of the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

The Fourteenth J.P. Naik Memorial lecture on "Alternative Interpretations of the Ramayana: Views from Below" was delivered by Prof. Nabaneeta Dev Sen – a Teacher of Comparative Literature and an Academy Award winning prose writer and poet in Bangla.

The lecture is based on her continuing cross-cultural research on women's texts of the Ramayana – past and present, both written and oral – from different parts of the country.

In her lecture, she looked 'at some alternative retelling that challenge the feudal brahminical nature of the Ramayana'. First, she compared two 16th century written texts – Chandrabati's from Bengal and Molla's from Andhra. Then she looked at 'two separate groups of contemporary oral texts – the Ramayana sung by rural women and the Rama legend sung by the Adibasis' from various parts of the country. Lastly, she examined Ranganayakamma's – a Marxist feminist, interpretation of the Rama legend.

Prof. Dev Sen spoke of (village) women's Ramayanas where Sita was the central character, not Rama. Through the 'Sita myth' the village women gave 'themselves a voice'. For them, 'the myth of Sita' was a suitable mask to 'express their tensions, and critique patriarchy in their own fashion, among themselves'; they were using the Sita myth to disguise their messages, to send their warning signals to the society.

Prof. Dev Sen's choice of themes derived from the 'women's Ramayana songs' was purposive, timely and 'highly relevant to women's lives in India today'. Drawing on these songs on Sita, she drew our attention to those 'moments of a woman's life' – such as childhood, child marriage, domestic abuse, motherhood, childbirth, desertion etc. which were challenging Indian women's survival today.

The relevance or aptness of these themes was best exemplified by 'none other than the 'Sita, the foundling – the girl child as the essential orphan' through the recent results of the Indian Census on child sex ratio. Warning signals were there and were coming from below for a long time – through songs on Sita, the mask in the myth of Sita – under which village women were trying to express the concern – that India's girl children would be in real danger. We did not listen to those 'voices from below', we ignored those 'warning signals'.

The academic community, particularly the women studies scholars, will undoubtedly find the lecture relevant and interesting in many more ways. These are perhaps the essential source materials for 'Indian' women's studies. We need to discover them 'from below' before they are lost and take note of the messages and 'challenges from below'.

It gives me great pleasure to make this lecture available to a wider academic community through this publication. I am confident that the lecture will be of particular interest to women's studies scholars.

I am grateful to Prof. Nabaneeta Dev Sen for having readily responded to our invitation to deliver the lecture. I thank my colleagues, first for helping me to organize the lecture in April 2001 and second, for preparing the press copy for publication.

New Delhi

Narayan Banerjee

Prof. Nabaneeta Dev Sen is Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University, Kolkata and a Sahitya Academy award-winning poet and prose writer in Bangla. She was educated at Presidency College, Kolkata and at the Universities of Jadavpur, Harvard, Cambridge (UK) and Berkeley. Prof. Dev Sen has held the Maytag Chair of Comparative Literature and Creative Writing at Colorado College (USA) and the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lectureship, University of Oxford. She has more than fifty books to her credit and has held poetry readings extensively in Asia, Europe and the USA.

Alternative Interpretations of the Ramayana: Views from Below*

I am grateful to the CWDS for giving me this opportunity to pay my tribute to the fond memory of J.P. Naik, to whom all of us connected with women's education in India are greatly indebted in more ways than one. I am much honoured indeed, and I thank you.

I shall begin with a humble apology. I am afraid one lecture can't do justice to all the areas mentioned in the invitation card, so I shall only touch upon some of them. In our inquiry today, we are going to look at some alternative retellings that challenge the feudal-brahminical nature of the Ramayana. We start with a comparison of two 16th century written texts; then look at two separate groups of contemporary oral texts, the Ramayana sung by rural women, and the Rama legend sung by the tribals. Lastly, we will examine a Marxist feminist woman's interpretation of the Rama legend.

Women's Ramayanas

Just as the Rama myth has been exploited by the patriarchal system to construct an ideal Hindu male, Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female to help serve the system. Sita remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide, through whom women may be taught to forebear all injustice silently.

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

Ten years ago I gave my first lecture on this topic in this very room, all excited about my first encounter with an alternative text, a woman's Ramayana, not recognised as such, and rejected by scholars till then. That was by Chandrabati, a 16th century Bengali woman. Chandrabati's is clearly a woman's text; she begins with Sita's birth instead of Rama's, ends with her death, and in the middle, repeatedly steps in to make uncomplimentary comments about Rama's flaws and failures. She is not merely narrating the epic, but also judging and criticising its hero. Her Rama is a far cry from the *sthitadhi* image that Molla, her Telugu contemporary, presents, following the dominant male tradition. Chandra is constantly questioning Rama's wisdom, his integrity, both as a husband and as a ruler. Both Molla and Chandra subvert the epic in their own ways, with different intentions. Chandra uses the Rama myth to speak up for the collective tragedy of the unrewarded 'virtue' of Indian women, while Molla has a different agenda. Rebelling against her prescribed space outside the mainstream - doubly damned for being a woman and low caste - she uses the Ramayana

* A part of the research was done with a fellowship from the K.K. Birla Foundation and a part of the material was included in the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecture at Oxford University, 1996-1997.

to gain recognition as a court poet. Hence, Molla identifies with the male brahminical tradition, while Chandrabati chooses the women's oral tradition, rejecting the canon.

In the women's oral tradition in India, never mind where you are, you are all sisters in sorrow. Though the singers may wear different clothes, cook very different food, speak different languages, when they sing the story of Rama, they echo one another. Translated into English the songs sound startlingly similar. I have used women's work songs and ritual songs from Marathi, Telugu, Maithili and Bengali in this lecture.

While weeding or sowing or husking or grinding, or preparing for a wedding, women all across the sub-continent sing these songs. These are connected with different moments of a woman's life, and here Sita is the name of the woman who grows up in neglect, attains puberty, gets married, gets pregnant, is abandoned and gives birth. They call it the Ramayana but it is of Sita that they sing.

In the women's retellings the Rama myth is blasted automatically though probably unwittingly. Here, Rama comes through as a harsh uncaring and weak-willed husband, a far cry from the *maryada purushottama*, but Sita is no rebel; she is still the yielding suffering wife, though she speaks to her friends of her sufferings, of injustice, of loneliness and sorrow. Even Chandrabati, who chastises Rama under her own name lets Sita remain the timid Hindu heroine.

The topics that interest men do not interest women. They leave out the details of war, Rama's glory, the details of Brahminical rituals etc. and sing of abandonment and injustice, and of weddings, pregnancy and childbirth. Naturally, the songs centre around Sita, rather than Rama. The Ramayana sung by the mainstream bards have little in common with the women's songs. Women sing privately for themselves, male bards sing for the public. Their approaches to the epic and to the act of singing are totally different. The professional bard sings of Rama. The village woman sings of Sita. We shall touch upon a few selected themes derived from these songs which are highly relevant to women's lives in India today, especially rural women.

- i. Sita, the foundling. The girl child as the essential orphan.
- ii. Child marriage and its concerns, the giving-away songs.
- iii. The in-laws and the bride, the nature of domestic abuse.
- iv. Pregnancy – the cravings, the desire to be spoilt a bit.
- v. Childbirth under dire conditions.
- vi. Abandonment and survival.

Incidentally, there are several other themes, which we will leave for another occasion.

It is not hard to see what purpose the Sita myth serves in the life of rural women. Across the country village women have this incredible identification with Sita.

The Foundling: The Girl Child as the Essential Orphan

We begin with the theme of Sita as the foundling. Here is a Marathi song – Sita, in forest exile, talking to the birds and trees, she has no one else to talk to: “Sitabai says, ‘What kind of a woman am I? I was given away to Rama when I was five years old. What sort of mother’s love have I got?...Dear Plum tree, dear Babul tree, Sita is telling you the story of her life. Please listen...I was found at the tip of a plough/How can I have parents? I was found in a box, in the open field.” Here is the girl child as the essential orphan, one can feel the eagerness of an isolated woman to communicate. This feeling of being utterly alone and unloved is echoed in other languages. I quote Sita from Bengali:

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

I am tempted to compare a Munda tribal song here, Sita’s sighing again: “On the grassy uplands, the ploughmen found me/They took me to the King’s palace/...I grew up like an edible fruit/Though Janaka gave me in marriage to Rama/I didn’t forget my sufferings.../Never have I known happiness...”

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

Child Bride

Coming to the theme of the child bride, in songs where the women are getting Sita ready for her in-laws, we can hear the heart-beat of rural Indian women. They lament for a very young girl, not yet ready to start an adult life, being sent away in marriage, into alien surroundings. Take this Telugu song: “The tiny girl is only as tall as seven Jasmine flowers/She can stand neither the heat nor the rain/...Such a lovely child is being given away in marriage, to Rama, today”.

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

Giving Away

From the child bride, we move to the theme of giving away the bride. The tension and the anxiety of the parents come out sharply in these songs. In one Telugu song, King Janaka takes Dasaratha, Rama's father to the wedding hall and shows a small child, Sita, sleeping in a huge wedding bed. "Look, how helpless she looks in that flower-bed, - she is still an innocent child". Here is a clear hint of the possibility of marital rape; the bride's father is gently trying to make the groom's father aware of the cruelty involved.

In another Telugu song, Sita's mother Bhudevi has a woman-to-woman talk with Rama's mother - "From today Sitamma is truly your daughter/She knows nothing/..teach her to boil milk/to make ghee from butter/...she has not been taught the household chores as yet". And here is the advice she gives Sita when she leaves her mother's place:

*"Never leave your hair open in the street
Don't laugh showing all your teeth
Don't look around when you are in a crowd
Keep your eyes lowered in public"*

And the most important advice of all - "Never offer flowers to any man other than your husband". The song still has its place in Andhra weddings even among urban women, since the mother's advice is the same.

Sasurbas (Marital Home)

In spite of all the lessons taught, the child bride has a tough time at her in-laws. In Marathi, the *sasurbas* songs of Sita give a clear picture of the torture of the bride by her mother-in-law. It is the story of a girl born with a crooked fateline. I quote: "Brahma was in a hurry/Drawing the line of fate/On Sita's forehead/The line became crooked"...

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

*"Ram gave Sita his love
On a tiny tamarind leaf
Kaikeyi poured poison in Rama's ears
Like a scorpion".*

The description gets pretty graphic from time to time:

*"Sita was tortured by one and all
They fed her only bitter neem leaves for 12 years
They didn't let her wear kumkum for 12 years
Her hair is all tangled up
For 12 years they didn't let her wash it"*

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

*“Sita has been in exile
Right inside her bedroom
Rama didn't share her bed
For 12 years
Rama is absorbed in his own business
Poor Sita's youth is wasted away”.*

The story is not unfamiliar to Indian homes.

Pregnancy Cravings

To come to a lighter note, women singers pay a great deal of attention to Sita's desires during her pregnancy. They ask a question that neither Sita's husband Rama nor the epic poet Valmiki ever concern themselves with – what does Sita, the individual, desire for herself? In this Telugu song Sita is 3 months pregnant. “What does Sitamma's heart desire?” - Well, she wants nothing less than paneer made from tiger's milk! So, Lakshmana, her devoted brother-in-law gets it for her from the forest. - “But, brother Lakshmana I have one more desire in my heart” - “What is it now?” - “In the middle of the blue ocean lies a distant sandbank/In the middle of the sandbank stands a single teakwood tree. From that teakwood tree hangs a special honeycomb/With that honey I wish to eat sada dosas” - Thus the women laugh at themselves, asking for the unattainable and settling for the ordinary. On hearing this wish, Mother-in-law Kaushalya comments - “I too had my babies, but did I ask for such ridiculous stuff? All I wanted was tamarind and coconut”!

Sita's Exile

Moving to unpleasant areas again, let us talk about Sita's exile now. In this Marathi song, Rama is lamenting for Sita after he has exiled her. But what is his lamentation? Rama wipes the corners of his eyes with the end of her shawl and wails - “Where can I find a queen like Sita now? Who can sprinkle the floor with water as well as she can? Who will give me my dhotis? And who can serve me good meals as Sita can? Sita is in exile, who will make a fine royal bed for me now? And make the sandal paste? Brother Lakshmana, let us shut down the pleasure palace”. And he stands his cot up on its side with his foot while tears gush down his cheek like water from rain water pipes. Now that Sita has been driven out, Rama has lost a maid, a cook, a bed-maker, a housekeeper, and a pleasure-giver. A terrible loss, no doubt.

In a wish-fulfilling Bangladeshi song Rama's lament reaches the point when he repents having sent Sita into exile and begs Lakshmana to bring her back as she is the breath of his life. (*Sita amar jaaner jaan/Sita amar praner pran/Sita bina banche na jiban/Bhaire lakshman/tor paye pari Sita aina de/Ki kariya dilam bisarjan*).

Let us see now how Sita prepares for exile. Here is a Marathi song:

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

We can hear the voice of disenchantment and criticism, which only women can share among themselves.

In Bangladesh, too, the exile songs are heart-rending, but not necessarily softly worded. For example: *“Panchamasher garbha Sitar chhilo rajdhame/pashanda hoiya Ram Sita dilo bane!”* (Five months pregnant, Sita was in the royal palace, a heartless Rama sent her off to the forest!). In another song, *“Kichhu kichhu jayre Sita, pichhu pichhu chay/tathaapi papishthi Ramer/puri dekha jay re puri dekha jay!”* (Sita takes a few steps and looks back a few times/But oh! The palace of that sinner Rama still rises high). To call someone who is known as *Karunasindhu*, ‘ruthless’ (*pashanda*) takes a great deal of accumulated anger. But to brand the *Patitapaban*, as a sinner (*papishthi*) himself, goes that unbelievable step further. And Chandra had written, unabashedly, *“Ram go tomar buddhi hoilo nash!”*

Childbirth in Exile

Exile is mentioned as a part of the birthing songs. Take this one from Maithili:

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

This Maithili song brings out the terrible loneliness of a pregnant woman who has no one to help her in the moment of distress, thrown out of her secure home. And the next one is a Marathi song, giving us the postpartum story..

*“Sitabai has given birth
 Where will Sita find nourishment?”*

*There is no one to cook her a meal
Sita is in exile
There is no cradle for her babies"*

*"Sitabai has given birth
The hills and the forest are rejoicing
She has no one else to call her own"*

The infant mortality rate and the death rate of mothers at childbirth in India are still quite alarming. 88 per cent of pregnant women are anaemic. Post-partum care is very poor. Even today 67 per cent of women in India give birth by themselves, without the help of a doctor or nurse. This is how the women of our sub-continent sing themselves into their Ramayana:

*"Sita's exile
How many times will it happen?
Sita's exile
Is happening every moment, everywhere
When leaving for the forest
Sita distributed it amongst us all
Bit by bit"*

It is a lone struggle for Sita, expressed so well in this Marathi song:

*"How did they do it?
It melts our blood into tears...
Who is fighting so bravely in the forest?
Who is all alone?"*

*Rama is reading about Sita's exile
In a book..."*

The alienation of Rama's reality from Sita's hits us directly. When women sing the Ramayana, Rama is not part of the book, but outside it.

Tribal Ramayanas

To see how far our Ramayana tradition can move away from Valmiki, let us take a quick look at the tribal Ramayanas. Although the very idea of singing the Rama legend is itself a form of sanskritisation of the tribal culture, the tribals identify with the disempowered, some even claiming their origins from Ravana, the vanquished hero and some from Hanuman. Kumbhakarna is their great sage. Usually they have fragmented songs, very few claim to have a complete Ramayana. When they do, like the Karbis of the North East region, they quite unabashedly call it *Sabin Alum*, or *Sita Kengri alum*, i.e. *Song of Sita*. Like women of the mainstream culture, the tribals all over India share their sympathies with Sita.

They look upon Sita as the essential orphan and see Rama as the oppressor. Whether he is a king or a god, Rama remains distant, inaccessible and unaccountable for his acts. Rama is the representative of the brahminical-feudal system, whereas Sita is a child of nature, just like the tribals themselves. In the Munda tales, Ravana is described as a noble hero belonging to one of their clans, the Timling. Rama's treatment of Sita draws adverse comments and she remains the symbol of suffering in Munda poetry. In the Munda song quoted earlier, Sita is an abandoned tribal girl, found in a tribal village in a year of drought. And Janaka is a peasant. Sita is abducted by Ravana when she is grazing goats. Mundas claim Rishyashringa was a tribal priest who actually fathered Rama and his brothers, and the three queens return to him at the end of the epic. Just as the brahminical tradition has Hinduised them with the myths, they too have tribalised the Ramayana in their own fashion.

The Mundas are not alone in claiming Ravana as their clansman; a group of Gonds call themselves Ravanavamsi. The Korkus consider Ravana and Meghnada as sacred deities who guard them against all diseases and disasters. The Kuskos, and the Bhuiyans consider Kumbhakarna as a great sage practising deep penance...And in the Bhilodi Ramakatha, the Adikavi Valmiki himself is appropriated, he appears in the beginning of the tale as Valio, a Bhil.

But there are other, livelier versions of the Rama tale among the tribes. For example, the Pardhans have songs describing a physical intimacy between Lakshmana and Sita. This is not so shocking, as among many of the tribes of central India (like the Gonds, the Murias, the Parajas, the Bhataras, the Paharias, etc.) an intimate relationship between the younger brother and the elder brother's wife is permitted. But this is not necessarily true of all tribes. Here is another tale where the Baigas (a sub-tribe of the Gonds who originally came from the Dravidian culture) make poor Lakshmana go through the fire ordeals, not once but twice, to prove his chastity when Rama wrongly suspects he had an illicit relationship with Sita. After passing the two fire tests a desperate Lakshmana prays to mother earth for shelter, and she does receive him into her heart. In this most unconventional tribal story, the roles of Sita and Lakshmana are reversed.

It is interesting to note how the concept of power changes in the tribal versions. In the Mizo, Rama stories where Lakshmana and Hanuman play more important roles than Rama, the epic heroes threaten each other with guns. Bows and arrows are obsolete. But in the Dubla tales another, even more modern source of power can be seen. When he marries Sita, Rama is nine years old, going to school with a slate and an inkpot. Education, of course, is the ultimate source of power. Therefore, Rama, the tribal boy, is sent to school. The Dublas, incidentally, are a nomadic tribe and do not normally send their children to school.

The Karbi Ramayana, which is called the Song of Sita, is regarded as the very first song of the Karbis (the Adi Kavya as it were). It has several versions in different parts of the North-east. In one intriguing version, Rama has to perform a certain puja, during the epic battle for which there were only two capable priests on earth, Bali and Ravana. Bali was already killed, Ravana was the only priest left. So Rama requests him with all due honour to do the puja and Ravana accepts. Rama prostrates himself before Ravana when he comes to perform

the puja, and Lakshmana is extremely annoyed at the gesture. But Rama explains that it was not to his enemy but to his priest that Rama was paying his respect. Ravana, the priest, blesses Rama saying that victory will be his. Here is another instance of using the brahminical value system itself to subvert the classical relationship between Rama and Ravana in order to make Rama bow down to the generosity of Ravana. This is a rather sophisticated story where the concept of an enemy and the concept of a priest and the individual person are all separated. It is a most intriguing way of using the brahminical tradition itself to subvert the classical text.

In yet another Karbi version, after marrying Sita, Rama happily stays on in King Janaka's palace, because in the matriarchal social system of the Karbis, it is expected that the son-in-law should move into his father-in-law's house. But Dasaratha pleads with Janaka that Rama must return after one year, because he is the heir to his throne. So, prince Rama stays on for one year as a *gharjamai* to assist Janaka in *jhum* cultivation, a typical Karbi agricultural practice, and keeps Lakshmana to help him.

There is a beautiful conclusion to the Song of Sita...After Sita's descent into the earth, Rama dreams of Sita. He wakes up in the morning, and walks down to the sea and asks it to give way, so that he can unite with Sita. The sea obliges, and the loyal Lakshman keeps him company, the two enter the netherworld to meet Sita. So ultimately it is Sita's song.

I will wind up this section with a Mech *Rama Katha* which was collected in 1958 in the North East region. In this rather unusual Rama Katha, the tribal people have ultimately traced the communal conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims back to the Ramayana. In their version, Lakshman had eaten beef, which made him a Muslim. As a Muslim Lakshman had two sons, Hassan and Hussein, whom Rama's two brave sons Lava and Kusha fought and killed. This is the Mech Ramayana.

Now there we have a Ramayana from below indeed! Fratricide was not the theme of this epic, but thanks to the view from below it is.

We wanted to see how far our Ramayana tradition can move away from Valmiki, and we have seen it.

Ranganayakamma: Poison Tree

Let us now move back from orature to literature once again. From Molla's and Chandrabati's written texts, we had shifted our attention to the rural oral texts, women's songs, and tribal songs. In our last section, we are coming back to a written text.

Rama Katha Sudha Madhuri is how Molla described her retelling of the *Ramayana*. Ranganayakamma, a contemporary urban woman and self-proclaimed Marxist feminist, calls her 20th century Telugu retelling, a three volume magnum opus, *Ramayana Vishavruksham*. In four hundred years, from one woman writer to another, we have moved

from the taste of nectar to that of poison... While Molla announced the purifying and wish-fulfilling powers of the holy tale to present it to the royal court, Ranganayakamma critiques *Ramayana* as an unholy, undesirable and degenerating cultural influence upon the nation. (In fact Chandrabati is closer to Ranganayakamma. She announces Rama's suspicion of Sita as "*Bishlatar bish phal go bish briksher bij*" – poison fruit of the poison creeper, the seed of the poison tree.

Ranganayakamma's retelling of the *Ramayana* is harsh and satirical. She explains how the Rama myth can continue to harm the morals of a country by spreading wrong values among its citizens. By a close reading of the text, she shows that the *Ramayana* was a manifesto of the feudal-brahminical social system, one that exploited but excluded the weak from the public sphere, namely women, the lower castes, and the tribals. There was no space allotted for them in the warrior-priest power-nexus...

Incidentally, Ranganayakamma was the most popular Telugu novelist and screenplay writer once, but had to suffer a great deal of social ostracism for her scathing recasting of the *Ramayana* as *The Poison Tree*. The seed of the *Poison Tree* can be found in a novel called *Sweet Home* that she wrote in 1968. A young couple have an argument over the *Ramayana* - the husband declares it a holy book, but his feisty wife thinks it is just another old-fashioned poem and that Rama is far from divine, rather a bad sort, and she proceeds to list his misdeeds. The husband shudders to think what terrible misfortunes might befall them if Rama overheard these blasphemous words! She laughs away his worries, saying, "How can a character in a book harm real people?"

The whole of the *Ramayana Vishavruksham* (1973-76) seems to me to be an answer to this central question, pointing out how a book can really corrupt a culture. The *Ramayana* is not just any book, it is the most influential Hindu myth, a myth that people have identified with for ages. Well, we have witnessed in Ayodhya, in the ruthless massacres of December 1992 and February 1993, how a character in a poem can do great harm to a whole nation. Ranganayakamma detected this dangerous potential in the mythical hero much before the Hindu fundamentalists revived Rama as a historical being in the late 1980s. In her missionary zeal to protect her people, she tells the Rama tale from her own political angle. Let us get a taste of her method.

Book I begins with the story titled *This is Ramayana*. The great sage Viswamitra visits Dasaratha's court and offers his greetings to the king. Which means he asks questions like:

*"Are your vassals subordinate to you?
Are you performing enough sacrifices?
Are you distributing wealth to the Brahmins?
I hope caste pollution is not taking place here?
I hope the Brahmins are not being allowed to help the
Shudras in their worships and rituals?
Are the wives obedient to their husbands?
The sons obedient to the fathers?
The subjects humble and obedient to the King?"*

Ranganayakamma quotes these questions from the southern recension of the *Valmiki Ramayana*. These are enough, she explains, to tell us about the inequalities of the feudal patriarchal social system and the oppression of the shudras and women and sons and subjects by the King-Brahmin nexus. She introduces an interesting dialogue between Rama and Tadaka. When Viswamitra takes young Rama to kill Tadaka, she turns out to be an ordinary tribal woman with a lovely smile, colourful beads around her neck, flower in her hair, and a bow and arrow in her hands.-- “Why have you come to this dense forest, my child?”, she fondly asks, worried that thorns would hurt young Rama’s tender feet. Embarrassed, Rama replies with a question: why was she disturbing the sages? Tadaka has a ready reply. “Because they kill wild animals for their rituals, without reason, pour nourishing food like ghee and honey into the fire while the poor starve, can control neither their anger nor their lust, have split the people into four castes and created inequality to grab special advantages, they are greedy. Why should they be revered?” Now the young uninitiated Rama is in a real dilemma. But Viswamitra quickly steps in : “Don’t talk to that activist, a dangerous rebel! Just kill her.” “But she is a woman”, fumbles Rama. Viswamitra helps him out : “Demons have no gender my child, kill her quick!” Rama shoots his arrow.

In this critical scene of initiation, Ranganayakamma portrays a very different image of Rama than the one found in the classical texts : a weak, ungrateful and manipulatable Rama, rather than the valiant saviour of the weak. Rama is initiated into a life of inglorious activities, learning to go against his conscience to please the Brahmins and to earn fame (this is what we see in the end in the Shambuka episode of Uttarakanda).

The teenage Rama soon grew up into the Ideal Male. In her crusade against the image of the *maryada purushottoma*, Ranganayakamma portrays Rama as arrogant and callous, as a hypocrite and a narcissist. The classical texts depict with great poignancy the scene in the forest where Rama laments his loss of Sita; let us see how Ranganayakamma visualizes this key scene. Rama discovers Sita’s absence and decides to go through the ten stages of the “Art of separation” (*viraha*) according to the *Textbook of Erotic Art (Shringara shastram)*. He begins his inquiry with the trees and creepers, then goes to the birds and the beasts – giving them great details of Sita’s physical resources. The rustic Lakshmana starts to fidget and finally suggests : “Its getting late, Brother, besides plants won’t tell you anything”.

An unperturbed Rama assures him – it was too late already, the demons must have torn Sita into tiny tender pieces and gobbled up her beautiful, sandal-pasted breasts. This was too much for the simple-hearted Lakshmana, he bursts out into loud hysteric sobs. At which an irritated Rama comments: “Here I am meticulously following all the ten stages of the art of separation, trying to keep it flawless, according to the shastras, and here he goes, wanting me to *actually* go around *physically* searching for her!” A stunned Lakshmana stops sobbing and decides that Rama must have gone out of his mind. Rama, however, disgustedly grunts, “Did she listen to me, when I told her not to come?” He is placing the blame squarely on Sita’s shoulders. Sita deserved it – because she broke the codes of conduct – she has transgressed.

Our next story, Story 14, *Panchayeti*, depicts an introspective Rama after the war. He is in a dilemma, waiting for Sita to be brought to him. Should he, a scion of the great dynasty of Raghu, take back a wife who had been abducted? She cannot possibly remain chaste after such a long time, after all! His soul scolds him and tells him, he knows very well that Sita is chaste. But Rama argues: "Oh, I know, but do the people of Ayodhya know?" His soul argues they do not matter as long as *he* knows. But Rama repeats his fiendish comment: "Did she listen to me when I asked her not to come?" This arrogance irritates his soul. It blurts out: "Had Sita not followed you to the forest you would not have achieved your glory of saving the universe from Ravana, nor the pleasure of grabbing his kingdom!" An angry Rama cannot stand blunt truths and showers fierce abuse on his soul. Hence his soul abandons him forever. At this dramatic juncture Sita makes an innocent entry. And a soulless Rama lashes out: "I don't want food licked by a dog!" Great scenes follow. Sita jumps into the fire, is saved by the gods, gods hold a special council and force Rama to take Sita back. Even Dasaratha appears and pleads on Sita's behalf. A reluctant Rama watches as Sita meekly climbs into the flying chariot. But the army of monkeys and bears snigger at Sita:

*"How shameless of her!
But what else can she do? Poor princess!
Why? Had she been one of ours she would have given her wretched husband
a good piece of her mind and marched off to her mother's.
These humans! They have no shame!"*

Ranganayakamma subverts the *Ramayana* by taking the narrative apart bit by bit, by poking fun at sacred figures and their image of dignity. She pricks the balloon of grandeur in the case of Rama and that of pathos in the case of Sita.

Let us look at some of the short, crisp comments the book is strewn with. She incites the reader to answer a few questions, starting with question no. 1, - *why was the Ramayana written?*

- (a) To protect which class of people?
- (b) To make which values permanent?
- (c) To save which institutions?
- (d) For whose benefit is it being used by the media now?

Try to find answers to all these questions, Ranganayakamma advises her readers, and you will know all about your own culture... And this was in 1973, we must remind ourselves, well before the VHP chariot, or Ramanand Sagar's TV serial.

Next she asks: *Is the Ramayana a beautiful poem?* By beauty she is thinking more of ethics than of aesthetics. There is no inner beauty in it. Remember, she says, at the root of it all lies the desire for empire-building (*rajyakanksha*) and shrewd diplomatic tactics (*kutata*), selfishness (*swartha*) and a web of lies (*mithyajal*). Temptation, deception, betrayal, lust, abandonment, mutilation, oppression - are these beautiful things? This is what *Ramayana* is all about, says Ranganayakamma.

Much as I appreciate Ranganayakamma's encouraging her readers to question and judge for themselves a text that carries the unquestioned authority of the scriptures, I cannot agree that this is what the *Ramayana* is all about.

Just as in the collective voice of the powerless and the dispossessed, rural women, shudras, and tribals express their own sorrows through Sita, separatist movements, and fundamentalist political parties have always had a tendency to exploit Rama to propagate their own political agenda. They are either against Rama or pro-Rama.

Periyar E.V. Ramasami Naicker glorifies Ravana as the great Dravidian hero, the ideal, indigenous ruler unfairly oppressed and destroyed by Rama, the symbol of north Indian cultural supremacy. He in fact wanted to use Rama's image as that of a North-Indian oppressor, in order to create a Tamil ethnic identity and to incite the Tamil People against the North. He even contacted Jinnah suggesting a second partition, to create a third nation - the "Dravida nadu".

On the other hand, Rama is glorified by the Hindu revivalist political parties as an apparently unifying force. In the Bharatiya Janata Party white paper, an epic hero is turned into a national hero, representing equality and justice. For both the Dravida Kazhagam Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party Rama is made to serve as much more than an epic hero, he is exploited as a conduit to political power, a magic mantra to win votes.

Ranganayakamma disapproves of both the approaches. She hated the North-South divide suggested by E.V. Ramasami, because for her there is only one main division - the rich and the poor. For her, Ravana and Rama are but brothers in tyranny. Both represent the ruling class, dominate the weak and treat women as property. Both are equally dangerous to a healthy society as both perpetrate class, caste and gender hierarchy. Both happen to be oppressors by nature and by social sanction. Hence, Ranganayakamma believes the *Ramayana* to be a dangerous text, a retrogressive force in today's social order.

It is neither Sita nor Rama that interests Ranganayakamma, but the myth-making process, the construction of these characters, the ideological production of identities. In a way, her approach criticizes the village women's Sita songs. No, forbearance is not a good word for Ranganayakamma, it sustains the dominant ideology, and perpetrates social evils. She will say, Sita is a passive accomplice, she glorifies victimhood. No, that is not *sudhamadhuri* for Ranganayakamma, but a deadly poison that destroys from within.