Newsletter Archives

Sita - The Silent Power of Suffering and Sacrifice
An ancient Indian folk song depicts a young girl describing to her father the kind of husband she wants. After narrating his various qualities, she says in the end: "Go north, go south, or get for me a groom from the east, but don't ever go westwards."

Significantly, this song belongs to the region of Mithila, where Sita, heroine of the epic Ramayana was born. More interestingly, Ayodhya, where lived her husband Rama, lies to the west of Mithila. Thus, what this lyric is effectively saying is that a girl from this region would not prefer to have a groom like Rama, which is ironical considering the fact that he is considered the 'perfect man' in the annals of Indian thought. Further, though the numerous temples in this region contain images of both Sita and Rama as a couple, they are invariably named Janaki Mandirs (Temples of Sita). Janaki being another epithet for Sita signifying that she is the daughter of king Janaka. Even today, the people of Mithila consider it inauspicious to marry off their daughters in the month of Marg-Shish, which is the season when Sita and Rama tied the knot.

These traditions seem less odd when we realize that people all over India will say approvingly for someone: "He is a Rama like son, a Rama like brother, or a Rama like king. " It is rare however to hear the following as a compliment "Rama like husband or son-in-law."

Intriguing as this phenomena is, the reasons for this all-pervasive sentiment are readily understood when we recall the life adventures of this couple. As is well known Rama, even though he was its rightful heir, abdicated the royal throne in favor of one of his younger brothers. In addition, he was banished to the forest for fourteen years by his stepmother. Sita, the devoted wife that she was, also accompanied him to his exile. Later, a demon named Ravana carried her away forcefully and it was only after a fierce war that Rama could regain his virtuous wife. Before accepting her as his queen again however, he asked Sita to publicly prove her chastity, witnessed by all those present in the battlefield.
Thus it is obvious that Sita's trials did not end with her liberation from the demon's captivity. All versions of the Ramayana are unanimous in reiterating her fidelity and devotion towards Rama even in times of extreme adversity. For example, when the hero is preparing to go to exile in the forest all alone, she addresses him thus: "O son of an illustrious monarch, a father, a mother, a brother, a son or a daughter-in-law, all enjoy the fruit of their merits and receive what is their due. It is only the wife who actually shares the fortunes of her husband. When you depart this day for the dense forests which are difficult to penetrate, I shall walk ahead of you crushing under my feet, all the thorns that lie on your way." This is just one of the many expressions Sita used to convince Rama to take her with him. She considered it her privilege to share in his misfortune and suffered the consequent trials and tribulations in equal measure throughout their sojourn in the forest. However, being exiled in the forests was the least of her troubles.

In fact, not even her kidnapping by Ravana could break Sita's immense will-power, constantly nourished as it was by the memory of her beloved Rama. Ravana too, fearing the accumulated merits of a chaste woman did not dare touch her; he nevertheless did try to make advances. What was Sita's reaction to his overtures? The great sage poet Valmiki (author of Ramayana), has captured her wretched condition vividly, through a series of inspired metaphors. For example, on viewing Ravana: "She seemed like a flame wreathed in smoke; a great fame which had dimmed; a lotus pool stripped of its blossoms; like Rohini pursued by Ketu (a metaphor for the eclipsed moon); a traditional text obscured by a dubious interpretation; a faith that has been betrayed; an order that has been flouted; a hope which has been frustrated and an understanding that has grown feeble."

Witnessing her appearance, Hanuman, the loyal monkey ally of Rama says: "For a woman the greatest decoration is her lord and Sita, though incomparably beautiful, no longer shines in Rama's absence."

Although her physical beauty undoubtedly dims on account of the enforced separation; she keeps her mind fixed upon Rama, and thus radiates with an inner beauty as a result of this steadfastness. "Though that blessed one was shorn of her own beauty, yet her own soul did not lose its transcendency, upheld as it was by the thought of Rama's glory and safeguarded by her own virtue." Truly she remained chaste in both thought and deed and the various recensions of the epic recall episodes where even the mighty Ravana had to bow before Sita's piety. Once for example, when the demon approached her, she placed a single strand of straw in between them and challenged him to cross the "proverbial last straw." Predictably he did not dare to do so. He knew that the chastity of a
A virtuous woman was like a fire that could reduce to ashes anyone who tried to violate her against her will.

All of Sita's miseries in the confinement of Ravana pale in comparison however to the emotional trauma and humiliation she was subjected to by Rama himself. In a bitter irony, what was to be her moment of deliverance, turned out to be the beginning of another trial.

Standing before him, her eyes raised expectantly to his face, the innocent Sita wept, overwhelmed at the prospect of a joyful reunion with her consort after his victory over Ravana. The latter however remained formal and aloof and set out to articulate his heartfelt thoughts (hrdyaantargatam bhavam):

"Today I have avenged the insult to my honor and fulfilled my promise. You stand unabashed before me, even though suspicion has arisen with regard to your character. Today you seem extremely disagreeable to me even as a light to one who is suffering from sore eyes. Therefore go wherever you like, O Janaka's daughter, the ten directions are open to you today. What man born in a noble family would take back with an eager mind a woman who has dwelt in another's house, simply because she has been kindly disposed towards him in the past? How can I accept you, who were squeezed into the arms of Ravana while being borne away by him and who regarded you with a lustful eye? There is no more attachment for you in my heart. You may therefore go wherever you like."

Harsh words indeed, which pierced Sita's tender heart like arrows tipped with poison and shrinking within herself, the sensitive lady shed profuse tears, saying: "I was helpless when I came into the contact of Ravana and did not act of my own free will on that occasion. My adverse fate alone is to blame on that score. That which is under my control, viz., my heart, eternally does it abide in you."

The South Indian Ramayana, authored by Kamban, sums up her situation graphically:

Like a deer
on the point of death,
tortured by terrible thirst
in the middle of a desert
who sees a lake
just beyond reach,
she grieved at the barrier
that rose before her.

Addressing her brother-in law Lakshmana, she says: "Raise for me a pyre, which is the only antidote against this calamity. I no longer desire to survive, smitten as I am with false reproaches." Lakshmana looked at his brother, half-expecting him to put an end to this bewildering public spectacle. Scrutinizing his elder sibling's expression, Lakshmana realized, to
his horror, that this was exactly what Rama expected.

Not one of the assembled warriors, who just moments before had proved their mettle in the battlefield, had the courage to dare open his/her mouth opposing the grave injustice being perpetrated. The obedient Lakshmana set out to prepare the pyre. As a mark of respect, Sita circumambulated Rama, who, as the ancient texts put it - stood with his head bent low. As she approached the blazing fires, the world went into a crisis: the immortal gods and living beings, the cosmic elements, the four Vedas and Dharma, all cried out in horror. Then:

As if she were going home
to her place on the lotus
that rises up from the flooding waters,
she jumped in;
and as she entered, that fire was scorched
by her burning faithfulness.

The lotus here refers to Sita being an incarnation of the great goddess Lakshmi, who is typically associated with this auspicious flower.

Here, to highlight the extremely pure bearing of Sita, the poet has innovatively depicted the moment as being one of an excruciating, fiery torment. Fire is burnt by the heat Sita holds within herself; generated by a lifetime of chastity, self control, faithfulness, suffering and sacrifice, which are represented here not as abstract ethical virtues but rather as part of the substantial and dynamic reality...
that suffuses the inner being of a faultless woman like Sita. It was this same heat that had earlier terrified Ravana against coming near her.

Her trial-by-fire is portrayed evocatively in the ancient texts and she not only emerges unsinged, but also manages to scorch the god of fire (Agni) himself, who, according to Kamban, screams out in pain and protest. Lifting Sita in his hands, Agni points out that the beads of perspiration formed on her body due to anger directed at her husband were not dried up by his flames while the flowers she wore in her hair still continued to bloom as freshly as ever. Sita's accumulated spiritual force of concentrated energy (tapas) proved too much for even the fire-god, who emerged saying: "I had to materialize because I could not bear the blazing fire of faithfulness in this woman."

He also asks Rama:

Didn't you hear
when the gods and sages
and all that moves and is still
in the three worlds
screamed, as they struck their eyes?
Have you abandoned Dharma
and resorted to misery instead?

Will rain fall,
will the earth bear its burden
without splitting in two,
will Dharma go the right way,
or can this universe survive
if she becomes enraged?
if she utters a curse,
even Brahma on his lotus will die.

Rama is overjoyed at the developments and the public display of his wife's unblemished character: "Sita undoubtedly needed this purificatory ordeal in the eyes of the people inasmuch as this blessed lady had lived for a long time in Ravana's confinement. The world would have murmured against me saying that my mind was so dominated by lust that I actually accepted the daughter of Janaka without proving her chastity. I too knew Sita to be undivided in her affection to me. Ravana couldn't violate her, protected as she was by her own moral power. In order, however, to convince the inhabitants of the three worlds, I ignored Sita even while she was entering the fire. She is as inseparable from me as sunlight from the sun."

That Sita herself volunteered for the agni-pariksha speaks for the high volume of understanding
between the couple since she understood Rama's wish without him explicitly stating it. Her action was not a surrender to the unreasonable whims of a husband rather a supreme act of defiance that challenged the aspersions cast on her, by the means of which she highlighted the superficiality of his doubts, so that even the gods had to materialize and point out the apparent fallacy in the indignity he had so unceremoniously cast on her. She emerges as a woman that even Agni - who has the power to reduce to ashes everything he touches - dare not touch or harm. Eminent Indian poetess Bina Agarwal has pulled no punches while narrating Sita's dual victimization:

With your husband you chose exile:
suffered privation, abduction,
then the rejection -
the chastity test on scorching flames,
the victim twice victimized.
Could those flames turn to flowers
without searing the soul?
they say you, devoted wife,
questioned him not
and let him have his way.

The Desertion of Sita

Thus reconciled, the contended couple repaired back to Ayodhya and Rama continued to rule as an ideal monarch over his extensive rein.

More misfortune however was in store for Sita. No sooner had the couple settled down than rumors started in the capital questioning the propriety of having a queen who had spent a year in a villain's captivity, putting her chastity under doubt. Surprisingly for a clear-headed individual, Rama took these allegations to heart and asked his younger brother Lakshmana to banish Sita (this time alone), to the forests. Rama did this even though he was well aware that his wife was well advanced into the family way.

Thus Lakshmana carried Sita the next morning, on the pretext of visiting the hermitage of a sage, to the forests. The unknowing, innocent lady cheerfully boarded the chariot. Little did she know what travails lay in store for her. Once they reached the wilderness, her brother-in-law informed her thus: "You have been forsaken by the king who is afraid of the ill-report circulating among his citizens. You are to be left near this hermitage by me."

Hearing these cruel words the crestfallen Sita fell swooning to the ground. However, it was not long before the valiant lady composed herself and addressed him thus: "This mortal frame of mine was indeed composed by the creator for bearing sorrow only. What sin was committed by me, that though being of good conduct, I should be forsaken by the king? I cannot give up my
life since I carry within myself the seed which will carry forward the lineage of my lord. Do then as you are ordered O son of Sumitra (Lakshmana's mother), forsake me the miserable one, obey the orders of the king, but do tell him this on my behalf: If to preserve your good name among your people, I must be sacrificed, I am content to let it be so. As you serve your subjects, so I serve you."

One jarring feature of this whole episode is the role of Lakshmana who is often deified not only as the ideal brother, but also the perfect brother-in-law.

He was known to vent his quick temper whenever he perceived an injustice being perpetrated. In fact when, against the norms of natural justice, Rama was exiled for fourteen years, Lakshmana advised his elder brother to take up arms against their father's decision and seize what was rightfully his by force. Yet when this grave impropriety was being committed on Sita, he was silent, why? In the immortal words of Bina Agarwal:

Your brother-in-law, so quick to anger on his brother's behalf, left you, mother-to-be, alone in the dark forest, exiled again. His brother's command! some citizen's demand! was injustice to you not worthy of his anger? you, loving sister-in-law, bore this too is silence and let him go away.

Sita - The First Single Mother in the World

Thus abandoned, Sita gave birth to twin sons in the wilderness and brought them up all alone, without the protective presence of a father, hence becoming the first single parent in history.

When these worthy sons entered their teens, tales of their valor spread far and wide, and it was not long before Rama realized that they were his own offspring. This knowledge prompted him to immediately call his beloved Sita and the two boys to his court. In front of the assembled subjects, tributary kings, ministers and merchants from all parts of his empire, he asked her to undertake the fire ordeal again for the benefit of these venerable gentlemen, who had missed the earlier spectacle in Lanka.

Sita's reaction however was different from that earlier occasion. The emotional scar had obviously not healed. This time she did
not ask her brother-in-law to prepare a funeral pyre for her. Nor did she circumambulate her husband in meek submission. Rather, with folded hands, she merely uttered the following words: "If I have remained true to Rama in mind, speech and action, may the Mother Earth embrace me in her bosom." No sooner had she spoken than the ground beneath her feet split wide open, and before anybody had the time to react, she entered the depths. A dejected and helpless Rama was engulfed in grief. Thus did end the exemplary life of Sita, with fate pursuing her to the bitter end.

In the televised version of the Ramayana, shown in serialized form on Indian television, the Earth Goddess is shown emerging from the ground seated on a bejeweled throne. Spreading out her arms she beckons Sita saying: "Come my child, this world is not worthy of you." Sita does as she is told, leaving behind her, the lamenting assembly.

It is interesting to connect the above episode with the fact that Sita was not only metaphorically (as all women are), the daughter of the earth, but also literally so, since she had not materialized out of the human womb in the 'normal' manner, rather, she had been found by her father, king Janaka, when he was tilling the fields with a golden plough in fulfillment of a sacred ritual. This is also the reason why the people of Mithila (the place where she was so 'discovered') think of her as the daughter of the whole village because, if Janaka had not ploughed the grounds that day, someone else from the region would have definitely found her and thus she would have become that person's daughter.

Sita's appeal to Mother Earth to reclaim her was not the helpless reaction of slighted woman. It was a spirited, self-effacing statement of protest, when things went beyond endurance. For those of us living in this technologically advanced modern age, Sita's message is extremely significant. As we continue to assail the earth, taking her for granted, she is bound to someday lose patience and cleave open her chest in trepidation, leading to goddess knows what calamity.

**Did Rama Really Doubt Her Chastity?**

Rama's conduct vis-a-vis Sita leaves many questions unanswered. The most significant is of course whether he really doubted her fidelity. Even if we disregard the traditional sentiment believing otherwise, there is a strong logical basis supporting the conventional view:

1). Some time after he abandoned her, Rama decided to perform the horse sacrifice (ashvamedha yagya) which is the highest ritual a king can strive to. There was a technical snag however. Of the hundreds of ceremonies a Hindu has to perform, not one can be performed without a wife. Therefore many in Rama's retinue suggested that he remarry. A suggestion he firmly rejected: "In the heart of Rama there is place for only one woman and that one is Sita." He therefore had a golden image of his wife made and completed the sacrifice. Would anyone thus give his wife a position of such supreme respect if he doubted her chastity?

2). After the vanquish of Ravana, when she was first brought into his presence, Rama compared
Sita to a "light," which was hurting his "sore eyes." Thus it is his vision, which finds defect in the bearing of the noble lady, that is at fault, and not the "light" itself, whose natural function is but to illuminate.

3). On the same occasion, before entering the fire, Sita circled Rama clockwise, in respectful homage. What was Rama's reaction during her circulation? Well, he kept his head down (adhomukham). Is this not a gesture of self-indictment and contradiction? The ostracized victim is boldly performing what she has set out to do, while her accuser stands with a hung head.

**Lord Rama and Mahatma Gandhi: A Shared Obsession**

According to Shastri Pandurang V. Athavale, a noted social reformer, "It was not Rama who abandoned Sita; in reality it was the king who abandoned his queen. In the effective performance of his duty, he had to choose between a family and the nation. Rama sacrificed his personal happiness for the 'larger' national interest."

In other words, Rama wanted to set a standard, a stainless example for his subjects and followers to look up to. The psychological havoc it may have wreaked on those dependent emotionally on him was of no consequence whatsoever. Thus often does the immediate family of a reformer suffer even though the nation as a collective may gain substantially. Mahatma Gandhi says in his article 'The Law of Suffering,' "Progress is to be measured in terms of the suffering undergone by the sufferer. The purer the suffering, the greater is the progress. Hence did the sacrifice of Jesus suffice to free a sorrowing world. In his onward march he did not count the cost of suffering entailed upon his neighbors, whether it was undergone by them voluntarily or otherwise."

Recall in this context the Mahatma's own neglect of his children, and his imposition of a strict disciplinarian regime on his wife in a drastic manner without preparing her slowly and steadily like he did the entire nation. This is but another instance of the better half being taken for granted, being treated as another experiment in the moral evolution of humanity rather than as a free-minded individual who could have a viewpoint of her own. Likewise Rama never cared to personally explain anything to his wife; he knew she would understand. These virtuous ladies suffered in silence. What did Kasturba Gandhi as a mother, as a woman, gain out of the high moral pedestal her husband bagged for himself? Her children lacked the presence of a simple, loving father whom they could look up to in an ordinary way. Indeed, it is their 'extraordinariness,' that often distances the path-breaking revolutionaries like Rama and Gandhi from their children who have their own normal, 'selfish aspirations.' In such circumstances a rebellion definitely brews beneath the placid surface. It culminates into the supreme sacrifice of Sita leaving a distraught Rama behind, or it may find expression in objectionable actions (as those of one of the Mahatma's sons), whose sole aim is to bring grief.
to the 'larger than life' parent. In either case it is the woman of the house who pays the heaviest price. It must be realized here that engrossed in this program of social reform, stress is placed not only on merely being fair, but equally important is to appear to be 'fair' and 'impartial,' and being theoretically rigid in setting high standards for their own families while being practical and flexible when applying these same principles to the general populace. However, it must go to the credit of both of them they set an equally, if not sterner, moral regime for themselves.

**Conclusion: Who is Greater? Rama or Sita?**

Sita sets a high standard as an ideal wife who stays unswerving in her loyalty and righteousness, no matter how undesirable her husband's response. Her refusal to perform a second agnipraiksha and her consequent reversion to mother earth is not merely an act of self-annihilation. It is a momentous and dignified rejection of Rama as a husband. Truly Rama may have deselected her as his queen in deference to social opinion, but it is Sita who rejects him in a personal sense as a husband. By this act does she emerge supremely triumphant. If the defining scale for quantifying greatness is the amount of suffering one has undergone, it is undoubtedly Sita who is the clear winner. It is her dignified tolerance (sahan-shilta) and self-effacing silence, which may even be termed as weakness by many, that turns out to be her ultimate emotional strength, far valorous than any assertive aggression. Rightly therefore does her name always precede that of Rama (as in Sita-Ram or Jai Siya-Ram).

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, "There may have been several Ramas, perhaps, but only one Sita."

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**References and Further Reading**

This article by Nitin Kumar.

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