

# All Compassionate and All Powerful

## Sita of South Indian Stories

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I did ask her then as to why then Rama was on Sita's left side. I don't recall if I got an answer. My grandmother's answer, and the many stories that she and my mother told me were immensely influential on my life. I grew up thinking that Sita was not just very special, but very powerful.

The songs that I heard women sing at joyous occasions, too, told me that Sita's marriage was a happy one. On birthdays, festivals, and other auspicious days, young girls and boys are adorned with coloured powder on our feet (*nalangu*) and given a ritual bath. *Nalangu* is also done for weddings. During the *nalangu* ceremony, women rub turmeric paste on the bride's feet and massage oil into her hair. Finally, two women bless the girl by waving a dish of red water (called *arati* in south India; waving of camphor or fire is called *karpura arati*). All the while, they sing songs appropriate for the occasion. The most popular refrain are the lines everyone knows: *sita kalyana, vaibhogame, rama kalyanam, vaibhogame* - "Rejoice, it is Sita's wedding, rejoice it is Rama's wedding." Long before I heard of Sita's unhappiness, these songs had already made their impression on me.

And then there were the Carnatic music songs that my grandmother and

aunts sang regularly. I did not know the meaning of these songs at the time, but they sounded beautiful. Tyagaraja (1767-1847), one of the greatest South Indian music composers had sung in Kambodi raga: *ma janaki, chetta battag...* In this song, Rama is praised for becoming great by taking the hand of Sita. Tyagaraja also hailed Sita as a source of refuge and salvation. In his song *Sri Janaka tanaye*, Tyagaraja asks Sita, the beloved daughter of Janaka, to protect him.

Although I loved the songs, it was the stories that held me spellbound. My grandmother and mother told me many stories of Sita's strength and her desire to protect us. I have chosen to retell just three of these narratives here. I had grown up thinking that everyone knew these stories, only to later realise that they are apparently well known mostly in the Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh region.

As a child, my favourite was the story of Sita and the ball. When Sita was a little girl, she and her friends loved playing with a ball. One day, it fell under the immense bow of Shiva that King Janaka had on display in his palace. The girlfriends were unhappy—who could ever extricate the ball from beneath this bow? Sita

**T**HE picture of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in my maternal grandmother's house was different than the one in my paternal grandmother's house. As a child, I commuted between the two houses almost every other day and the difference was palpable. The Sita in my father's house was from somewhere in the north - Sita's hair was covered and she sat on the left side of Rama. The Sita in my mother's natal home, however, was in the typical style of Tamil Nadu: her head was not covered and she was on Rama's right side. It was this configuration that I saw in the Hanuman-Rama temple in Royapettah High Road, Mylapore, that we visited regularly as well as in all the major temples of Tamil Nadu - Madurantakam, Vaduvur and Tillai Vilagam. When I asked my grandmother about this, she said, "The right side is the auspicious side — we keep all good things to the right side. That is why we go around the temple clockwise."

was not worried. She ran to the bow that no human being could lift, the bow that not even a team of people could lift. Happily Sita lifted it with her left hand, picked up the ball, gently put down the bow and went back to play. It so happened that her father, Janaka, had been quietly observing her. Astonished, and marvelling at the ease with which Sita had handled this bow, he resolved that only a man who could also lift it was Worthy of her.

I loved the idea of Sita effortlessly picking up the bow to retrieve her ball. Now, when Rama lifted it, he was not the first to do so. She had already done it. It almost seemed like it was their shared secret. Years later, in the United States, I saw this story gracefully performed by some young Indian students in a classical Bharata Natyam dance. Its visual presentation in this performing art made it come alive even more forcefully.

There were two other stories that emphasized Sita's power in saving her devotees. One tale was set in Madurantakam (Tamil Nadu) around 1884 and focussed on the residents of Madurantakam and a British administrative official.

Lionel Price was the Collector of Chengelpet district in Tamil Nadu. He would visit the city of Madurantakam (50 miles south of Chennai) regularly. There is a famous temple for Rama and Sita here and also a very large lake. The local people call this "Rama Eri kaatha Raamar," the Rama who protects the lake. Apparently, every rainy season (October to December in this area), the wall near the overflow area of the lake would collapse and the local area would be flooded.

Lionel Price himself supervised the building of the best walls for this reservoir, only to have them all collapse.

On one visit, he went to the outer perimeters of the temple and saw that the construction of a shrine had been halted. The local people told him that they were building a shrine for Sita, but had stopped because of a shortage of funds. One of them proceeded to describe the grace and grandeur of Sita. The written account of this that appeared in 1904 narrative: "Then another began to expatiate on the great merits of their Janaki-Devi (Rama's wife), how she chased away sorrow, poured plenty over all, and was ever solacious for her devotees... "(Go vindacharya a 1906: 63). Mr. Price exclaimed that if indeed their Goddess was that

powerful, she would protect the reservoir walls from breaking down. If she did so, said Mr. Price, he himself would build a temple for her!

The monsoon that year was particularly severe. For days there was no respite. One day, the reservoir was almost full; Mr. Price knew it was only a matter of hours before it would overflow. The strong walls constructed for the fourth time in four years would be destroyed yet again. At 11:00 p.m. there was a thunderclap and an enormous breaking sound-the sound he had heard year after year, signaling the collapse of the walls. The rains slowed a bit after an hour. Lionel Price dressed and went to examine the devastation. To his astonishment, the walls had not crumbled-the roaring sound was the water being contained within the lake-reservoir. Near the wall, he saw an ethereal blue light (my hair would stand on end every time I read this part) and when he went nearby, he saw two men with bows and arrows. There was a woman and a monkey nearby. He went closer but could not touch them. The light shone through them. The other workers could not see anything. Lionel Price was filled with an unnatural joy; he fell on his knees and prayed.

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita had been there to protect their people from floods. Lionel Price was convinced about the "authenticity" of his spiritual experience. His heart and mind had no doubt that this was a religious vision. The next day, he started to build the shrine for Sita. Such stories, strengthen the popular image that Sita's power can work any miracle. Sita can do anything. To protect her children in Madurantakam, she sent Rama and Sita to guard the lake from flooding.

While I had been to the temple



**Shadow play puppet in leather, illustrating Sita; Andhra Pradesh, 19th century**

Courtesy: Crafts Museum, Delhi

many times, it was only a few years back that I saw the inscriptions on the wall in Lakshmi/Sita's shrine. Since Sita is identified completely with Lakshmi, the shrine here is simply known as *tayar sannidhi* or "mother's shrine." The donor's name is clearly inscribed over the lintel of Sita's shrine: "This [act of] *dharma* [donation] is that of the Company official, the Collector Lionel Price."

While most of the local children around Chennai have heard this story there are few written versions of it. Apparently the incident took place somewhere in the early 1880's. It was retold in the Central Hindu College magazine (vol. IV, 1904) and the original account is quoted at length by A. Govindacharya in his *Life of Ramanuja*. The story ends with Lionel Price exclaiming: "I solemnly tell you that I have received a lesson tonight that I will never forget. I always more or less believed that God was not the monopoly of the Christian Church. I am sure of it now. Early in the morning shall the Devi's temple begin to rise."

No dramatic conversion experience from one religion to another, just a quiet acceptance of the manifestation of divinity. From my narrator's point of view, Sita gets a temple, her children in the village are saved and once again we are treated to an example of Sita's protection, a theme also reflected in classical narratives about her.

The last story concerns Sita's compassion to Ramdas. Bhadrachalam Ramdas is a famous composer who sang panegyrics in praise of Rama. Not to be confused with the Ramdas of Maratha-empire fame, this Ramdas was born in the seventeenth century and worked under the Qutb

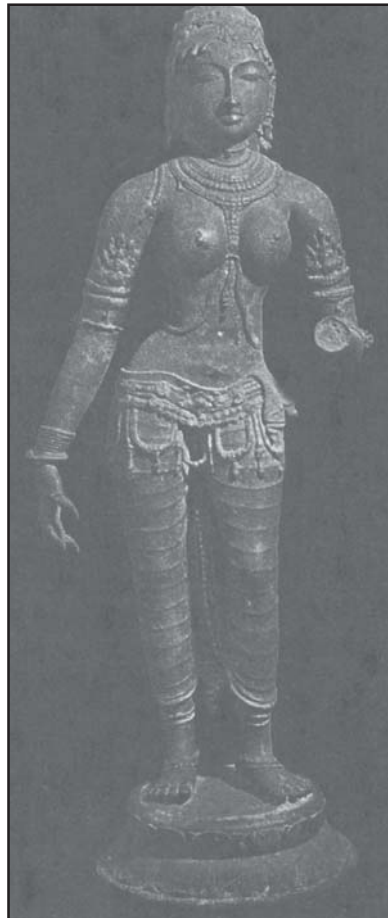
Shahis of Golconda in modern Andhra Pradesh. Ramdas is known in the South for his beautiful songs to Rama and Sita. Apparently the Qutb Shahis were literary connoisseurs who encouraged the development of Urdu, Persian and Telegu. From written accounts we know that they seem to have been on very good terms with their Hindu subjects. One of the kings, Mohammed Quli, had married a Hindu woman called Bhagmati or Bhagyavati. He had built a town eight miles from Golconda; he called it Bhagyanagar in honour of his wife; this is the town that is known today as Hyderabad. But my grandmother's version bypassed these details and focussed just on Ramdas' *bhakti*.

Gopanna (b. 1630) was a revenue

collector (*tahsildar*) of the Muslim king. He became a devotee of Rama and thereafter was called Ramdas. According to the story, he (mis)appropriated the money's collected from tax revenues and used them to build a temple for Rama in Bhadrachalam. (Sometimes my grandmother would say that this was under the express command of Rama, and was all done to "test" Ramdas. I was not sure if Rama should have done this and this line of the story was not emphasized much). The king incarcerated Ramdas. This was to give him time to come up with the money he owed to the government. As the amount was about six lakhs and Ramdas was in prison, prospects of repayment seemed somewhat remote. For twelve years, Ramdas suffered. The king reluctantly set a date to have Ramdas put to death.

The night before he was to be executed, Ramdas called upon Sita for help. He sang to her, calling upon her as Janaka's daughter (*Janaka tanaye*). He also told Sita to communicate the news of his plight to Rama and complained that Rama might not hear him. But what about her? Ramdas pleaded for her help.

Janaka's daughter came through. She hauled out Rama and Lakshmana from bed (the colloquial nature of the narrative is spellbinding) and told them to get their act together. She dispatched them to save Ramdas, right then and there, in the middle of the night! The brothers arrived at the king's palace and knocked on the door. Rama and Lakshmana then entered his chambers and told him that they were friends of Ramdas; they were there to pay up the "loan." They asked the king to count the money, and when he said it was in order, they



asked for a receipt. They obtained one (my grandmother would say that it was a signature with *paan* juice), placed the receipt under Ramdas' pillow in the prison and went home to sleep. Sita told Ramdas in his dream that he was not to worry. The next day, Ramdas was released.

For my grandmother, this was yet another act of protection in the busy life of Sita. She saved Ramdas; two centuries later Sita shields the children in Madurantakam. It seemed perfectly natural that she was accessible to anyone, anytime. She listened and acted. In the language of today, she was "mighty powerful."

While Sita's strength and maternal love were highlighted in these stories, I was also fascinated by a tangential issue -that Rama and Lakshmana appeared and gave "darshari" to Lionel Price and the Muslim king -and not their devotees. My grandmother, however, felt that Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita are there, all the time, giving *darshan* to everyone in Madurantakam and in Bhadrachalam.

These stories of Sita's protection and strength are already present in Sri Vaishnava literature between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Pillai Lokacharya, a thirteenth century philosopher, asserts that while Sita had the power (*shakti*) to save herself, she deliberately let Rama come and rescue her from

Illustration by BADRI NARAYAN, Courtesy: The Ramayana



protected 'the demonesses at the very time they were tormenting you, even when they did not ask for protection.

In the classical literature of the Sri Vaishnava tradition, Sita's grace is paradigmatic; she saves and causes Rama also to save. Her grace is even more important than that of Rama because while Rama needs a "reason" to save- perhaps some semblance of humility on the part of the human devotee - Sita protects them spontaneously and unconditionally - with no strings attached. It is after her that Rama saves those

Ravana's custody. Pillai Lokacharya's contemporary, Vedanta Desika(1268-1368)says that Lakshmi/Sita never punishes the human soul. He refers to Sita many times in his writings, for in the narrative of the *Ramayana* one is made pointedly aware that Sita was ready to forgive even those who harm her. He recalls several times that Trijata could confidently encourage the demonesses who had tried to intimidate Sita, saying that they simply had to bow down before her and she would protect them from Hanuman's acts of revenge. Desika also quotes a verse of Parasara Bhattar, a twelfth-century Sri Vaishnava philosopher; this verse is in the form of a prayer to Sita:<sup>1</sup>

O Mother Maithili! Even while the demonesses were harming you, you saved them from the wrath of Hanuman. Because [of this act] Rama's actions seem trivial, for He only protected Vibhisana [Ravana's brother] and the crow who had sought refuge. But you blessed and

in need.

While many tellings of the *Ramayana* focus on Sita following Rama, the stories I heard growing up highlighted the quality of her gracious and compassionate leadership. I recall the episode where it was only after Sita picked up the Shiva *dhanush* that Rama lifted it. Many years ago, when my first son was two years old, I told him stories while feeding him. I had not planned on it, but the first tale he learned to tell was how Sita lifted the bow so she could play ball with her friends. □

We invite our readers to send us material on Sita from the fold songs or their region or Sita's portrayal in different versions of *Ramayana* for possible inclusions in our forthcoming book on Sita.

<sup>1</sup> *Sri gunaratnakosa*, verse 50, quoted by Desika in *Rahasya Traya Sara*, 1:126