

My interest in Sita was particularly aroused when as part of a gender affirmative programme, I conducted awareness sessions for adolescent girls in Higher Secondary schools in some villages in Himachal. In the course of one such participatory discourse, a student commented that she felt the same kind of embarrassment and shame on being teased by a man as Sita must have felt when Ram asked her for a second time to prove her innocence by taking the fire test. Much as I tried, I failed to convince the girls that it was anger and rejection of both her husband and the fire test, that prompted Sita to return to mother Earth.

Sita's story has important meanings to many people in various regions of Himachal. Though no single temple has been dedicated to her alone, both *Shaivites* and *Vaishnavs* relate to her as an epitome of purity and as the goddess of endurance. Allusions to the suffering that *Prithvi* or Earth must endure due to the will of the gods, as Sita did as the daughter of *Prithvi*, are common in Himachal where strong belief in village deities in local versions of gods and goddesses still remains strong.¹

In the folk songs of most districts in Himachal, the bride is almost always addressed as Sita and her friends and relatives wish that the man she is betrothed to might prove himself to be like Ram who is considered the epitome of the perfect man. In a folk song of Hamirpur district of Himachal, the groom's relatives sing for him:

If you wish to sit on the horse and bring your bride home, you must promise that you will treat her like Ram treated Sita.

In the Jain *Ramayan* of the 3rd century A.D, Sita was the daughter of Ravan and his wife Mandodari afloat and was after her birth put in a box by Mandodari, which was set afloat because the astrologers had predicted

Sita in Himachal Pradesh

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that the girl would be the cause of her father's death. The Buddhist versions of the *Ramayan* from Tibet, Malaya and, Khaitan repeat the same story.

Folk Ramayan of Mahasu

The *Ramayan* of Mahasu district in Himachal which covers large parts of present day Shimla district and that of Kinnaur district seems to have been influenced by the Jain and Buddhist versions of the *Ramayan* in the story of Sita's birth. In the folk version of Mahasu district: a daughter was born to Ravan and there were celebrations in Lanka. The astrologers predicted that she will grow up and get married to her father and bring him a bad name.

When Ravan heard this he ordered that the girl be killed. However his wife Mandodari did not have the heart to get her daughter killed. She put her inside a box with lot of gold and jewels and then let the box float in the ocean. The box was found by a fisherman and

his wife who buried it under the field that King Janak of Mithila was to plough himself to end drought conditions in his kingdom.² The next day Janak found Sita in the box that he ploughed out of the field and adopted her as his daughter.

Sita dreams that Dashrath, Ram's father, asks her to get Ram to conduct *shraddh* in the memory of his dead ancestors. Ram did as he was instructed. Sita cooked delicious food for the occasion, one part of which was served to a crow as per tradition. Sita instructed the crow not to fly with the food towards the South as the ruler there would kill him on getting the smell of the delicious food. The crow refused to listen to her and flew southwards. Ravan, the ruler of the South, declared that the food that smelled so good should be snatched from the crow and brought to him. On tasting the food he got a search conducted for the woman



Ram and Sita in the Panchvati hermitage, Pahari School painting, Kangra idiom. 1780-85

who had cooked it and then planned to abduct her. Good cooking skills in a woman are not only considered an asset but are considered absolutely essential requirement in Himachal. Also the folk tradition in Himachal gives much importance to appeasing the spirits of their ancestors.

The folk *Ramayan* of Mahasu has no role for Shrupnakha³, Ravan's sister who is conspicuous by her absence. In many other *Ramayanas*, she plays a key role in instigating her brother to abduct Sita.

Disobedient Lakshman

In Kullu and Bilaspur district's folk *Ramayan*, Lakshman deviates significantly from most popular versions in refusing to fetch water for his brother Ram, saying that his wife Sita had also come to know the forests well enough over the years and could now do that job for him. In the hills, fetching water is one of the main chores performed by women. Sometimes women have to walk long distances to get water. Men usually dismiss it as a task women are supposed to do and Lakshman's attitude is a reflection on the contemporary attitude of men in Himachal.

Frail and Vain Sita

In Bilaspur district, the dialogue goes further after Ram tells Sita to go fetch water for him. Sita says that she is of royal birth and needs a golden pitcher to get water. Accordingly it is arranged for her and she goes deep into the jungles to get cold water for Ram. There she encounters the golden deer. She is so smitten by its charm that she tells Ram:

If you refuse to get the deer's skin for me, I refuse to call you husband.

Some of the folk poets in Himachal who wrote local versions of the *Ramayan* view Sita as a frail woman with a weakness for gold, a trait they see as natural in women. These poets use *karmic* theory to blame Sita for every bit of misfortune that befell her,



The trinity of Shiv, Vishnu and Brahma, paying their respect to Sita in a painting at Tarna Mandir in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh.

while Ram is exonerated from blame as it is suggested that even in abandoning Sita he was fulfilling his duty towards his subjects which was his foremost *karma*.

While some of the women I interviewed in Himachal relate positively to Sita's passion for gold saying that it is natural in a woman, others think that it seems a paradox as Sita lived austere for the larger part of her life and insisted on leaving all royal luxuries behind to accompany her husband to the forest.

The *Ramayan* of Una district takes the story of Sita's birth directly from the *Adbhut Ramayan*. It is believed that the saint Valmiki had written this version of the *Ramayan* for the gods. In Una district's *Ramayan*, the king of Lanka's wife, Mandodari conceived Sita on drinking the blood of some saints. Her husband Ravan had collected this blood in a vessel to announce his victory over these saints without having to kill them. One of these saints had in the same vessel acquired a portion of the goddess Lakshmi through his prayers. He mixed it with the milk of Kusha grass he had meant this milk to be drunk by his wife so that his daughter would have a bit of Lakshmi in her. Mandodari drank the

milk thinking that it was poison, as that was what her husband had told her before he asked her to keep it safely. Thereafter, she conceived Sita. In this story Ravan is absolutely unaware of Sita's birth.

In Mandi district also the impact of the *Adbhut Ramayan* becomes obvious as it is on display in the Tarna Devi temple where there is a picture of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh bowing before Sita. The accompanying Sanskrit *shloka* describes Sita as

'She who has eyes as beautiful as Lotus flowers, is fair and beautiful like the full moon, she who bestows passion and understanding on her devotees, and grants them their wishes, she who is the beloved of Ram and is worshipped by the Trinity.'

In Himachal, various temples of localized versions of Durga, and temples devoted to Shiv-Shakti normally have an image of Hanuman guarding them at the entrance. The temple priests say that Hanuman was the son of *Shiv* and was given away by his father into the service of Ram who was an incarnation of Vishnu.⁴ While this view also sheds light on the fact that *vaishnavism* had taken over a *shaiv* society, another interpretation

that comes to mind is that this is a subtle recognition in Himachal of the *shakt* aspect of Sita.

The genre of myth has never been entirely abandoned in Himachal. Though it has dwindled to children's bedtime tales in some societies, in parts of the world protected by forests or deserts from international mega culture, it has continued to flourish.

During various discussions I had with women there it emerged that a good number of teenage girls and women believed that Sita had asked Mother Earth to take her because she was ashamed that her husband was still reluctant to take her back. One is forced to question whether the return to *Prithvi*⁵ was due to Sita's shame or was actually Sita's bold choice.

In the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the word Sita is given meaning as a form of land tax. The word Sita literally means furrowed land. The stories regarding Sita's birth and her return to the earth preserve the basic quality of her name. She strongly symbolizes fertility and motherhood in Himachal.

The Sita of the *Ramayan* is not identical to the Sita of the myths invoking her various traits in Himachal. Sita abiding with her mother Prithvi implies reverence to Mother Earth. Women in Himachal do more than 70 per cent of the agricultural work. Their natal families accept those who are discarded by their husbands more readily because as extra hands to work in the fields they are always an asset to their natal homes.

Sitas of Today

Virah, or separation, is a dominant theme in the folk songs in Himachal.

Women in Himachal sing of despair, of ravaged fates, of stranded loves, of Sita and Ram, of Radha and Krishna - and also of hope and reconciliation. They sing of transcendence through meeting their

idealized, spiritual lovers and husbands, as did *Vaishnavi Radha* in ages past. They believe that at some level Sita was one with Ram and only the physical manifestation of the divine union was not possible.

After intense reflections on Himachal's society it seems that at some level trust in Sita, and the strength derived from her, gives the women in Himachal a kind of an ultimate faith in the resilience of their culture. □

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Footnotes

- 1) Since ancient times in Himachal, one particular deity presides in an area, although there may be more than one god, native to it The chief deity dominates social and cultural intercourse and sets the social calendar of the festivals, forecasts weather, protects crop from disease ensures well-being; answers individual queries; hex opponents of devotees, and interact in all facets of village life through the medium of oracles. It is a standard practice for the gods to visit relatives and friends in other villages and even for specific households to invite

them. On such occasions a member of each household in their domain is obliged to accompany them. It is believed that those households that do not send a representative with the *devta*'s retinue are punished by crop failure or illness or in some other way by the divinity. The temple committee also commonly levies a fine on them.

2) The concept of the king or the master of the household taking upon himself to plough the land during times of drought perhaps emerged during the period of the growing impact of the *Vaishnav* tradition as earth is understood to be the second spouse of Vishnu and the king under the *Vaishnav* tradition was seen as an incarnation of Vishnu himself. Himachal Pradesh also has a long history of droughts.

3) Shrupnakha is a sister of the king of Lanka, Ravan. Once when during his exile Ram was sitting with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman in a place called Panchvati, Shrupnakha came and on seeing Ram expressed her desire for him. On being refused she went to Lakshman and sought to become his wife. Repulsed by him too, she went again to where Ram was sitting and tried to kill Sita. Then as the story goes Lakshman seized his sword and cut off her nose and ears, shouting that he would have killed her had she not been a woman. Shrupnakha went back to Lanka bleeding and told her brother of her misfortune. Ravan promised to avenge her insult from Ram, Lakshman and Sita.

4) Hanuman, another creation of Valmiki, is a monkey of a different order. He is the Hindu ideal of the perfect devotee who finds full realization of manhood in his love and loyalty to Ram.

5) The earlier images of Prithvi in Hindu mythology describe her as a mother. The synonym Vasudha connotes a repository of wealth. Annada, her other name, means "one who gives food." Later literature describes her as a beautiful young woman, Vishnu's wife and a spouse of all rich and victorious kings. The Rigveda recognizes Prithvi only as the spouse of the sky, drawing a similarity with ancient Greek and Egyptian mythology. □

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