

The bridge that Rama built over the ocean to reach Lanka in order to rescue his queen, Sita, who had been abducted by Ravana, was a major achievement and a matter of great pride for Rama's followers.¹ This is an analysis of how Sita defends the building of the bridge in the 15th century Sanskrit version of the *Ramayana*, the *Ananda-Ramayana*. This voluminous text has been influenced further retellings of Rama *katha* in Maharashtra such as those by Eknath, and Mukteshvar. The *Ananda-Ramayana* is still read and followed in other regions of South India and is one of the central texts of the Ramnami sect in North India. It offers a careful study of Sita's dignity and composure under pressure and gives us insights and an understanding of the continuous hold of this legendary *pativrata* on the minds of people to this very day.

Sita Lopamudra Dialouge

The debate on the building of the bridge known as the Sita-Lopamudra *samvada*, takes place in the ninth *sarga* of the fourth *Kanda*, the *Vilasa Kanda*, of the *Ananda-Ramayana*. In it, Lopamudra, the wife of sage Agasti/Agastya, questions the propriety of Rama's action. In response, Sita defends Rama's endeavour and offers a unique gloss on it.

While focusing on the propriety of a skillful action of an acclaimed hero, the two women demonstrate their talents in conversational strategies and propriety of speech. Lopamudra's playfully innocent question turns into a challenge which Sita meets head-on, using tact to convert an insult into an advantage, and scoring points by advancing several impeccable arguments about behavioral propriety. When Sita wins the debate and the older woman is silenced, it is the proper courtesy shown by the younger woman out of respect for the age and reputation of

the older woman which saves the situation.

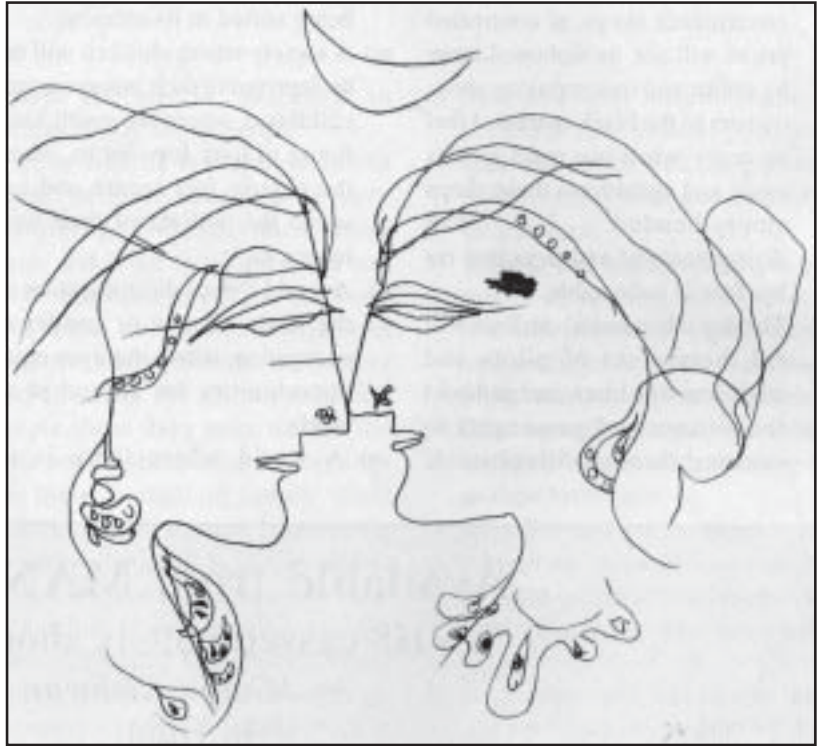
The Sita-Lopamudra *samvada* thus offers a rich context for the study of Sita's talents both in action and in speech. As the recent series of articles in MANUSHI has demonstrated, Sita uses her perseverance and regard for propriety to protect what she considers most valuable. This essay provides an example of how Sita wins the verbal battle by a gentle but firm exercise of intellect accompanied by her respect for propriety.

The entire episode is narrated in 30 verses in Sanskrit, and I offer a

Sita as Rama's Advocate

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translation before discussing it in detail further.

“At the time of a solar eclipse Rama, along with Sita, and other relatives, mounted the Pushpaka *vimaan* (aircraft) and went to Kurukshetra to bathe. The gods followed them, together with the Gandharvas, the Kinnaras, and the Pannagas. Sages from several hermitages and thousands of kings came as well. There, while the sun was eclipsed, Rama bathed along with Sita, and donated many elephants, camels, horses and chariots to those gathered there. Then the kings bearing many

gifts came to visit Raghava, and the queens came to visit Janaki. Sita greeted the consorts of the kings and offered them honoured seats alongside her friends and wives of the sages. After accepting the hospitality offered by Sita, Lopamudra (wife of Agastya), hoping to please Sita, began, 'O Sita, with eyes dark as the Kanja birds, and with a gait like an elephant, you are so fortunate. Do tell us something about Rama's valour.'²

Gentle but Firm

At this request, Janaki narrated the story from the time of her wedding up to the visit to Kurukshetra. Having heard the story, Lopamudra said to Janaki with a laugh, 'O Sita, everything that the great-soul Archive did was proper³. There is only one occasion on which I think he exerted himself in vain. What was the purpose of undertaking the great effort of building the bridge? Why didn't Raghava turn to the pot-born sage, Agasti? Agasti would have drunk the salt-ocean in just one moment and dried it up so that the monkeys would have been able to cross over easily. He made all those *vanaras* toil unnecessarily in the cause of building the bridge.'

On hearing this proud speech Sita laughed aloud and said to Lopamudra, 'O great *pativrata*³, Lopamudra, Raghava acted quite properly when he built the great bridge. I will tell you the reason. Listen with a steady mind. May all the assembled wives of kings also listen to what I have to say. If Raghava had dried up the ocean by shooting an arrow, then it was feared that many beings would have been killed. Had Rama simply managed to fly across the ocean by air, then how would Ravana recognise Rama as human? Had he sought to arrive on the other shore of Lanka by riding on the back of Hanuman, then they would have said, 'Where is Rama's greatness in that?' If you suggest that he should have swum across the



ocean, the doubt raised would be, 'How can one cross the piss of a brahmin?' If Rama were indeed to request your husband, the pot-born sage to drink up the salt-ocean in one mouthful, then this is what Rama would have considered in his heart: True, we have heard that this ocean was once drunk by the angry Agasti, and then released through his urine, which is why it has since become salty. It is entirely salty just like urine,⁴ so how can Agasti deserve to drink it now? Even if at my request, the sage should indeed drink it up, then it is I who would be the butt of ridicule everywhere. They would point to me and say, this is that Rama who for the sake of his own selfish ends, commanded a brahmin to drink urine.' It is because of this consideration that Rama, who is steadfast in *dharma*, did

not request this of the sage. Thus has Rama conducted the bridge-building with great thought, in order to advance his fame. No one has done anything like it before, nor will they do again. Now the entire world knows him and speaks of him as "The one who made the rocks float on the ocean'.

How Sita Vanquishes

With these words of Sita, Lopamudra was vanquished. She became embarrassed and remained silent for a moment before the assembly of women. Then with a laugh, Vaidehi placated Lopamudra. She also worshipped the other wives of sages and appeased them over and over again.

I have offended you today, great *pativrata*, please pardon my offence. Thanks to the occasion, and because of your friendship, I have ventured to speak of Rama's valour in front of you. I know very well that Rama owes his valour to your husbands' blessings.'

Having propitiated them thus, she bid farewell to all the sages' wives.'

[A. R. *Vilasa Kanda*, *Sarga* nine, verses 1 - 30]

This conversation between Sita and Lopamudra unfolds like a game of tennis between the champion of yesteryear and an aspiring young star. The past champion delivers a great service, but then the young star takes over and with a few well-aimed fast strokes renders the older champion completely vanquished. Like a good sport, the older champion accepts defeat gracefully, when to sweeten the sorrow, the young champion passes on all the credit of her victory to the coaching of the older star.

Let me first note the uniqueness of this episode. Such a conversation between the two women, Sita and Lopamudra, does not occur in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* or in any of the other older *Ramayanas*. None of the major *Puranas* mention it either, and it does not occur in any of the older plays

based on the myth of Rama. As far as I can tell, the *Ananda-Ramayana* is where it appears for the first time. The Agastya-Lopamudra hermitage is briefly mentioned in *Valmiki Ramayana*. Agastya's exploits such as lowering the mountain, drinking up the ocean and gobbling up demons are mentioned in the various *Puranas*. Lopamudra's birth, her wedding to Agastya and the birth of her son are mentioned in the *Mahabharata* and in some myths of the major *Puranas*. However, this sort of battle of wits between the two heroines is not to be found anywhere else. The *Ananda-Ramayana* is original in this respect.

Secondly, the locale and the time that the *Ananda-Ramayana* has chosen for the setting of this myth are fitting to the outcome. The locale is Kurukshetra, famous as the battlefield of the great *Mahabharata* war. It seems fitting that even a casual visit in this locale may somehow result in a confrontation. The time is said to be of a solar eclipse, symbolising temporary overshadowing, or eclipsing of brilliance. Lopamudra's mischievous remark, were it allowed to go unchallenged, may have eclipsed Rama's fame. Rama traces his lineage to the solar dynasty, hence the choice of the imagery of a solar eclipse is all the more befitting. Rama follows the customary injunctions of behavioral propriety in passing over the inauspicious times of an eclipse and gives several donations. Similarly, Sita gives gifts to appease everyone assembled, and hopes to come unscathed through this trial of her devotion to Rama, by using her tact in speech as a gracious hostess.

Test of Sita's Virtues

Sita is the hostess, and the sage's wife, Lopamudra, is one of several guests. Again, customary propriety of behavior demands mutual respect, polite exchanges, and gifts given by the hostess to the assembled guests.

By definition, the guests have the privilege and are honoured and pampered at all costs.⁵ Sita does that to begin with. However, Lopamudra broaches the subject of Rama's exploits, and having heard the epic story, decides to question the propriety of his celebrated feat. At this point, we enter the second ring of propriety, as now it is Rama's bridge building which has become the focus of discussion and the propriety of its construction under scrutiny. The issue of behavioral propriety here is tied to the respective accomplishments of the two husbands, bridge-building versus drinking the ocean, which establish their respective heroic worth and claims to fame. At this point, Sita faces a dilemma, as would any well-meaning hostess. She is confronted with a mischievous guest, who has asked her a seemingly innocent question, which will overshadow her husband's glory. If Sita accepts the criticism, then she will have failed to defend the honour of her husband. On the other hand, if she defends the honour of her husband, as a good wife should, then she fails as a hostess and risks offending the elderly wife of a great sage. This incident serves as a test of her hospitality, and can be regarded as her *sattiva-pariksha* (a test of her virtue).

Furthermore, the legendary relationship between Agastya and Rama is not just of the cordial guest-host variety, nor is it the common complementarity between a great sage and a great king. It is much more intimate than that. Agastya, the Brahmin sage conquered the South before the Kshatriya king, Rama ever set foot on the southern land. He lowered the Vindhya mountains, he drank up the ocean to help the gods locate the demons hidden in its waters, and he subdued demons like Vatapi by literally consuming and digesting them. In other words, the great sage

performed deeds of equally great proportions, and is venerated throughout the North and South for his extraordinary prowess and wisdom. In addition, in the epic, he helped the young hero Rama in his present victory in many ways.⁶ With all this in mind, Sita must answer his wife's question in such a manner as to erase any blemish on Rama's judgement and re-establish his wisdom without offending the guest.

Offense with Decorum

Sita accepts the challenge and, at the risk of offending the guest, manages to re-establish Rama's claim to wisdom, judgement, and propriety. The fact that Lopamudra has posed an embarrassing question in the presence of the other ladies gives Sita a justification in taking on the offensive. Nevertheless, she does it with utmost decorum, without any harsh words, ridicule, or ill feeling. All she does is to ask counter-questions. She depicts alternate scenarios and reduces them to undesirable or ridiculous situations. Thus, through a simple process of elimination, Sita establishes the inevitability and thereby the propriety of Rama's action.

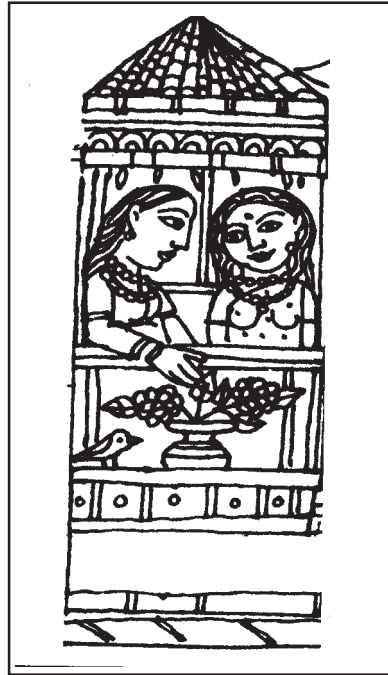
It is worthy of note that Sita does not tackle the solution offered by Lopamudra right at the beginning. Instead, she examines the other possible options which could have been exercised. The importance of her strategy will be obvious to myth analysts. These options are, in fact, other variations on the myth of *Setu-bandhanam*, as found in other versions of the epic.⁷ In considering them one by one, Sita finds fault with each one of them, and discards them as unsuitable alternatives. She then addresses the question of getting Agastya's help as suggested by Lopamudra. At this point, Sita talks of something unusual and embarrassing. She mentions what is a familiar version of an earlier myth

about Agastya's drinking up the ocean.⁸ It is a rather indecorous version and suggests humble folk-tale origins.⁹ Yet *Ananda-Ramayana* has managed to incorporate the folk version in Sanskrit verse, in the language of the gods, and thereby has legitimised it, since within the text itself, the creativity of the entire *Ananda-Ramayana* is ultimately attributed to the venerable sage, Valmiki. The later Marathi texts simply echo this version of the release of the ocean by Agastya as his urine.

By mentioning this ending of the earlier Agastya myth, Sita has killed two birds with a stone. She has ruled out several options, such as Rama's swimming across the ocean, or his drinking it, or even Agastya's drinking the waters. Regarding the last option, Sita even manages to portray the cordial relationship between Agastya and Rama, and describes as inadmissible and totally absurd the scenario of Rama asking Agastya to drink his own urine, and Agastya complying. The only inhibition which restrains Rama from taking this option, Sita says, is the consideration of propriety. Thus, Sita succeeds in answering all the unasked questions of alternate courses of action, and establishes Rama as one who recognises the proper *dharma* for a King.

Last Ring of Propriety

At this point, we enter the third and the last ring of propriety. Lopamudra, who is equal to Sita in her devotion to her husband, decorous behavior and in taking quick decisions,¹⁰ meets her match, and realises that she has been defeated. She remains silent, and is embarrassed among the gathering of women. It is at this point that Sita once again shows her exemplary tact and nobility and reverts to proper behavior as the gracious hostess. She apologises sincerely to the elderly lady, begs for forgiveness,



acknowledges the gift of grace bestowed on Rama by Agastya, and attributes the entire glory of Rama's adventures to Agastya's blessings. This humbleness on the part of the young hostess saves the situation, and the sage's wife departs with no ill feelings.

The beauty of the *Ananda-Ramayana* passage is in the total absence of male participation in the exchange of words. Neither Rama nor Agastya are present in the *Ananda-Ramayana* on this occasion. This is entirely a conversation between the two women.¹¹ Although the *Ananda-Ramayana* was a very influential text in the medieval period in Maharashtra, we find that the Marathi poets of the time, while following the *Ananda-Ramayana*, present a rather watered-down version of the incident. They do not let the women resolve the situation by themselves. Their world is entirely male-centered. In their versions, Rama either instructs Sita not to mention his bridge-building to Lopamudra, or ultimately saves the situation by propitiating Agastya and Lopamudra himself. For example,

Ekanatha (1533-99) mentions this incident in his *Bhavartha Ramayana*, in another context. Here, in the *Yuddha-kanda*, right after the actual bridge-building, when Rama goes to meet the old sages in Ramesvara *tirtha*, they congratulate him on his feat, Rama cautions Sita, 'Lopamudra will ask you to tell her of my exploits. But you should not mention my bridge-building to her or else you will be sorry.' This anticipation of future outcome of the conversation by Ekanatha's Rama may stress Rama's omniscience, but it takes the punch out of the entire incident. There is also no focus on Sita's clever verbal skills in Ekanatha's version. Instead, both Lopamudra and Sita act more like ornamental wives basking in the reflected glory of their own famous husbands. The utmost restraint exercised in the choice of words in *Ananda-Ramayana* by both women is also absent in the versions of the later poets.¹²

In comparison to such later portrayals of the two women's dependence on their husband's wisdom, the *Ananda-Ramayana*'s portrayal stands out as a refreshing battle of wits between the two heroines. This portrayal of Sita as an intelligent hostess abiding by the rules of propriety depicts her as one capable of tackling difficult situations with admirable ingenuity. Sita is shown in the *Ananda-Ramayana* as not just a passive *pativrata*, but as one who can argue with wit as well as with decorum, one who can win an argument and also win over Lopamudra's heart by her disarming humility. □

References

1. The residents of Rameshwar, a town near the southeast tip of India, fondly point out to pilgrims some great rock surfaces in the ocean overlooking the shores of Lanka as Rama's celebrated bridge. Valmiki-Ramayana describes

it as an unprecedented feat. Abhuta-purvam ramena sagare setubandhanam. Valmiki Ramayana yuddha kanda, 16.

2. Many later literary works including Hanuman nataka [8:19] and Ananda-Ramayana mention the bridge-building of Rama across the ocean as one of his major exploits. The Skanda Purana (3:1-52) spends in all 52 chapters on the description of the glory of the bridge, setu-mahatmya-varnanam.
2. Vrtha te sramitah sarve vanarah setu-bandhane. A.R. Vilasa Kanda 9.12
3. Sita calls her pativrate, which refers to her being completely devoted to her husband, a quality for which, traditionally, Sita herself is recognised as being the foremost one. The topic of conversation is the relative worth of their husband's exploits, and their own worth as pativrata is reflected in the best defence of that fame.
4. The use of urine to give saltiness to liquids is a folk motif that occurs in shocking tales told in pubs, and barrooms. The liquids may be inadvertently consume by unsuspecting victims. The most recent example of this is in a movie called Barnone from British Columbia, directed by Mark Tuit, released in the Vancouver International Film Festival in September-October 1997.
5. See on this topic, my earlier paper, Queer Guests and gracious Hosts, read at the annual South Asia conference at Madison, Wisconsin, on October 19, 1996. An earlier version of this paper was read at the American Oriental Society's 206th meeting at Philadelphia, PA, March 19, 1996.
6. Details may differ, but the acknowledgement of help from the elderly hero to Rama remains common in many Ramayanas. He has taught Rama a hymn, called aditya-hrdaya (V.R.), or has given him a great bow belonging to Visnu, or a sword, etc. (Kamban R.). In most Ramayanas, Rama stops over in Agastya's hermitage before he sets out to the deeper forests, and gains blessings from the old sage.
7. For example, [a] occurs in the Abhiseka nataka, and drying up of the ocean by Varunastra occurs in the

Padma Purana, utara kanda, adhyana 269.; [b] occurs in the Jaina Ramayana by Hemacandra, and also in the Uttara Purana by Gunabhadra. [c] occurs in the Birhor Ramakatha. See Bulcke, 1971.

8. There are at least two endings of this myth. The Mahabharata, the Agni Purana, and the Padma Purana accounts say that having drunk the ocean, Agastya refused to release it. He digested it. So then they had to rely on other figures such as Bhagiratha to refill it. This ending of the myth is consistent with another myth of Agastya's swallowing and digesting demon Vatapi in order to vanquish him. However, there is a variant version which says that Agastya released the ocean by way of relieving himself. I have not been able to trace this version back. It appears to be a well known oral tradition.
9. Motif Index of Folk Literature by Stith Thompson mentions A923.1. as Ocean from urine and also cf. A933 as River from urine of goddess (giantess) and lists myths from Irish, Nordish, French, Sudanese, Korean and Indian sources.

10. In the Mahabharata, when Agasti asks Lopamudra how many sons she wants, a thousand, a hundred, ten or one who will be equal in prowess to a thousand. MBh. Aranyaka parvan, 3.97.18-20
11. There is a slender thread in later Sanskrit literature and certainly in the Marthi literature where conversations between two women are versified. Thus we have Laksmi-Gauri-samvarfa, Ganga-Gauri samvada, Sita-Lopamudra-samvaia, and others. A Draupadi-Satyabhama samvada occurs in the Mahabharata.
12. Vamana Pandita's (1618-1695) treatment of the theme in his Sita-Lopamudra samvada is similar to Ekanatha. His Rama cautions Sita not to boast in front of Lopamudra, Sita cannot resist, Lopamudra taunts her. Rama then uses the work "ksarabdi" to refer to the ocean, and thereby again prompts Sita to refer to the release to the ocean as urine. His Sita does reply to the taunt, but after being prompted by Rama, and not on her own.s

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