

# The Sita Who Refused The Fire Ordeal

THIS is a translation of extracts of a folk song from UP, which presents an interestingly different version of the Ramayan story where Ram, mistrusting Sita's fidelity, forces her to go through the fire ordeal and then throws her out of the palace. Sita has always been held up as the ideal Indian woman, unquestioningly subservient to her lord's wishes, patient and uncomplaining.

In this song, Sita, though hemmed in on all sides by patriarchal control and betrayal (husband, brother-in-law, Vasistha Muni) emerges as a strong, self-respecting woman, very different from the Sita of Tulsi's Ramcharitmanas. She goes to the extent of giving her sons a matrilineal heritage (they claim Janak, not Dasrath as their grand father), and her final descent into the earth is both protest and preference of a dignified death to a life of dependence and degradation. Interestingly, the only support she receives is from the ascetic maidens who live in the forest .

The story as unfolded here explodes the classical myth of Ram and Sita as the model of marital bliss and instead shows Sita as a heroic woman waging a lone battle for survival. It is noteworthy however, that the song invents a wicked sister-in-law—thus putting the blame on a woman—who is not present in the classical version. Other folk versions relate that village women asked Sita to draw Ravan and Ram happened to catch her at it.

Though women have often been excluded from the tradition of written literature, their works devalued or deliberately "lost", they have always been chief though anonymous participants in a very rich oral tradition, expressing their experience and point-of-view through songs and stories, which develop and change over generations, thus representing a collective creativity. We need to explore and preserve such literature which often presents far more positive images of women than do better-known literary "classics." The need to do this is particularly urgent now that the media, particularly the films, are picking up and distorting ancient mythology in a violently anti-women way. We need to point out that there were many possible Sitas, Savitris, Draupadis. Do send us folk-songs, stories, legends from your region, particularly in dialects, so that they can be translated, shared with all the readers of **Manushi**, so as to stimulate the imagination of women.

*Oh the two sisters-in-law went to fetch water, went to fetch water.  
"Sita, do draw a picture of Ravan—the Ravan who took you away,  
Do let me see what he looked like, do draw his picture, Sita!"  
"Ah how can I draw his picture, how can I show you what he looked like?  
If your brother happens to hear of it, he will throw me out of the land"  
"Sister, I vow by Raja Dasrath, by Ram and by Lakshman,  
Sister, I vow by all of them that I will never tell my brother."  
"Call for a bowl of Ganga water and smooth a place on the ground,  
Sister, call for a bowl of water and I will draw Ravan."  
Sita took a bowl of water and began to draw Ravan,  
She drew the hands, she drew the eyes—and she saw Ram approaching.  
Hastily she loosened her aanchal, loosened her aanchal,  
Hastily she covered the picture and hid it from his eyes.  
Sri Ram sat down to have his meal and his sister came near:  
"Brother, your wife draws pictures of your enemy King Ravan."  
(Ram speaks)  
"Oh brother Lakshman, oh brother Lakshman, oh conqueror of all ills,  
Throw Sita out of this land—she goes around drawing pictures of Ravan."  
"Our sister-in-law is food to the hungry, she is raiment to the poor;  
How can I throw our sister in-law out of the house ?"  
"Oh dear sister-in-law, dear lady, Sital Rani,\*  
An invitation has come for you, lei us go to Vihan forest"  
"In Vihan forest live neither my parents nor my in-laws,*

*Nor is there the dwelling of my father Janak,  
 Whom shall I go and visit there, oh brother-in-law T'  
 Sita set out, scattering mustard seeds along the way,  
 "Oh mustard, when Lakshman returns this way, he will pluck and eat you."  
 They crossed one forest, they crossed two forests,  
 And the third forest was Vrindavan,  
 "Oh brother, give me a drop of water, I am parched with thirst."  
 "Sit under the sandal tree, sister-in-law, do sit under the sandal tree,  
 I will go in search of water and will bring some for you to drink"...  
 "Alas, where have you gone, brother Lakshman, where have you gone ?"  
 She looks for him to her heart's content and then she begins to weep.  
 "Alas, who will sit near me now, who will stay up nights with me!  
 Who will loosen and comb my hair, who will serve me?"  
 (The ascetic maidens speak) "Sita, we will sit near you, we will stay up nights with you,  
 We will loosen and comb your hair, we will serve you."...*

*(After the birth of her sons, she sends the customary gift through a barber)  
 "Give the first one to Raja Dasrath, the second to Kaushalya Rani,  
 And the third to brother Lakshman but do not go to my husband"...  
 Lakshman was bathing in the stream and Ram cleaning his teeth,  
 "Brother, for whom is your brow adorned, who has been blessed with a son?"  
 "Our sister-in-law Sital Rani is living in Vrindavan,  
 She has been blessed with a son and for her is my brow adorned"...  
 (The barber speaks)  
 "Wild reeds are their bedclothes and raiment, wild forest herbs their food,  
 Oh king, she gathers wood and lights aflame  
 To see the face of her sons."...  
 (Lakshman is sent by Ram to fetch Sita but she says)  
 "Go back to Ayodhya, brother-in-law, I will not go with you,  
 Bind your eyes with a cloth, Lakshman\*\*, and return to Ayodhya,  
 Go Lakshman, you go back to your home but I will not go with you."*

*(The sage Vasistha admonishes her)  
 "Sita, you who are so wise, renowned for your understanding,  
 Have you taken leave of your senses that you have forgotten Ram ?"  
 "Guru, you who know each one's state, how is it you speak  
 As if you know nothing ?  
 Guru, that Ram who caused me such sorrow, how can I see his face ?  
 The Ram who put me in the fire, who threw me out of the house,  
 Guru, how shall I see his face ?  
 Guru, I will do as you say,  
 I will walk with Lakshman a step or twain  
 But I will never go to Ayodhya,  
 And may fate never cause us to meet again."...*

*(Ram questions his sons, years later)  
 Whose sons are you and whose grandsons,  
 Whose nephews are you, oh children ?  
 From whose womb did you take birth, oh twin boys ?"  
 "We are the grandsons of Raja Janak and the beloved sons of Sita,  
 We are the nephews of Lakshman—and we know not the name of our father"*

*Sital Rani sat under a tree, and combed her hair, combed her hair,  
 "Oh queen, leave now your heart's anger and come to live at Ayodhya,  
 Oh Sita, without you the world is dark and life utterly fruitless."  
 Sita looked at him one moment, her eyes filled with anger,  
 Sita descended into the earth, she spoke never a word."*

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\*Affectionate form of "Queen Sita"

\*\*So that he can disown responsibility and say that Sita tricked him while he was blindfolded