Sita Fights While Ram Swoons

A Shakta Version of the Ramayan

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*In India and Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the **Ramayana** or the **Mahabharata** for the first time. The stories are there, "always already."*

- A.K. Ramanujan[2]

"The only reason I have not reduced you to ashes with my incendiary potential is because Ram has not commanded it and I have held my tapas (ascetic power) in check. My abduction from the illustrious Ram was possible only because it had been ordained as the means for your death."

*- Sita addressing Ravan in Lanka (Valmiki, **Ramayan** 5.2.20-21)*

"You should never assign a meaning to a myth because if you assign a meaning, the mind clamps onto just that one meaning. Then it's no longer active, because when a story is active it allows for new beginnings all the time. Don't give meanings to anything...[for] it doesn't ever mean just one thing."

- Swamiji, a contemporary storyteller[3]

SUDHIR Kakar has reported that when Indian adolescents were asked to select their ideal woman from a list of 24 gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines, "Sita was seen as the ideal woman by an overwhelming number of respondents: there were no age or sex differences."[4] Elsewhere Kakar claims that 'the hegemonic narrative' of Hindu culture as far as male development is concerned...is that of Devi, the great goddess, especially in her manifold expressions as mother in the inner world of the Hindu son."[5] One need not follow Kakar into psychoanalytic interpretation to sense that there are important issues here. When there has been so much recent scholarship that calls our attention to the breadth and diversity of the

Ramayan tradition[6], and when politicised interpretations of that epic have so rent the fabric of contemporary India, which Sita, one might ask, is the Sita so idealised by young Indians? How does the multiplicity inherent in the *Ramayan* tradition bear on understanding Sita as a role model? Similarly, since it is now common knowledge — thanks in no small part to the work of N.N. Bhattacharyya — that the great goddess as mother is not merely a benign nurturer but also a horrific destroyer, we might also ask: how is this Devi, who is often *anything but* a model wife, related to the exemplary Sita? [7]

It is my intent in this essay to explore these and related questions with primary reference to a little-studied

Shakta version of the *Ramayan*, the *Adbhut Ramayan* (The *Ramayan* of Wonders or The Astonishing *Ramayan*). The Sanskrit text appears to date from the late sixteenth century and to have originated in northeast India, though there are also resemblances to Tamil materials.[8] It runs to some 1350 verses, mostly *shlokas*, in 27 chapters. The fact that it has drawn little scholarly attention is not surprising, since it is stylistically undistinguished, repetitious, and occasionally simply lapses into lists — of demons and their weaponry, of battles, of divine Mothers (*matarah*), of Sita's names. As we shall see, the *Adbhut Ramayan* is better understood as a folk tradition, with a coherence of its own, rather than as a polished text.

This particular telling of the *Ramayan*, however, is not just an antiquarian curiosity. The Sanskrit text has been published within the last few years and remains in print with Hindi translation, not just in one but in two separate editions.[9] It may therefore appropriately serve as a point of entry into thinking about larger issues of gender identity and contemporary resonances within the *Ramayan* tradition.

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As a first approach to our *Ramayan* of Wonders, we need to take note of an apparent anomaly. How is it possible to consider Shakta materials and the Ram tradition in the same breath? Received scholarly tradition suggests that the ethos of Shaktism, particularly as it converges with the esotericism and eroticism of Tantra, is qualitatively different from that of mainstream, puritanical Vaishnavism. Representative of this view is Kathleen Erndl's observation that "the mythologies of Shiva and of Krishna allow a free interplay between eroticism and asceticism: though the two are in tension, full expression is given to both. In the character of Rama, however, sexuality appears to be almost completely suppressed."[10] Similarly, Frank Whaling, in discussing the views of Ram and Sita in the *Adhyatma Ramayan*, notes:

"...there is a deep difference between the creative Sita and the Goddess of Tantra. In the Shakta movement the Goddess often assumes not merely a creative role but also a dominant role over against the male God, and stress is placed upon a "female theology". This is also carried over into the Krishna movement wherein Radha sometimes assumes an equal or dominant role... Although Sita is sometimes seen in terms of Shakti, there is rarely any suggestion that she

In the Shakta movement the Goddess often assumes not merely a creative role but also a dominant role over against the male God

is dominant over Rama or even equal to Him. This is a difference between the Rama and Krishna movements."[11]

John Carman, too, observes that the Shri Vaishnav tradition remained faithful to the teaching of Yamuna and Ramanuja for it "never accepted the Tantric view that the Consort of Narayana was the active creative principle in Her own right, the Shakti."[12]

Armed with such expectations, my first reading of the *Adbhut Ramayan* did indeed produce the astonishment its title promised. Not only was the familiar story line of the *Ramayan* condensed almost to extinction and unfamiliar episodes highlighted, but the last half of the text was devoted to recounting how Sita vanquished the thousand-headed Ravan and glorified her as Devi, the nurturing and destroying great goddess. The most abrupt reversal of expectation occurs in Chapter 23. Sita has declined to join in the festivities upon the triumphant return to Ayodhya, after Ram has slain the ten-headed Ravan, because she has known since childhood of his thousand-headed older brother, also called Ravan (chapter 17). Indeed, she laughs derisively at those who think Ram has done something worth celebrating (17.17, 18.6). Setting out to vanquish this bigger and more dangerous Ravan,[13] most of Ram's supporters find themselves blown back to their starting point by Ravan's Hurricane-Blast arrow (21.6). Ram himself loses consciousness when his chest is pierced by a razor-edged arrow

that continues on into the nether regions (22.47-49). Chastised by attendant sages for having involved Ram in this debacle, Sita picks up Ram's bow and arrow from his chest.

Bellowing at the mighty, valorous demon,
Laughing boisterously and loudly, Sita, daughter of Janak,
The goddess, who has many hideous forms, abandoned her own form (*svarup*)
(And took on a form) fit for killing...
Gaunt, with sunken eyes that whirled in circles,
Long of leg, bellowing aloud, garlanded with skulls,
With anklets made of bone, fearsome, invincible in valour and speed,
Harsh-voiced,...with lolling-tongue...,
She was as black as the ocean at the time of *Pralay*.
Carrying bell and noose, sword and shield,
She jumped down quickly from her chariot
And fell on Ravan's chariot like a hawk.
In a flash she playfully lopped off Ravan's
Thousand heads with her sword. (23.7-13)

We recognise this figure, of course, as Kali. But in the immediate sequel, as she continues the carnage, she is explicitly called Sita and Janaki (23.15,18,20,22). What has here become of the sweet, mild maid of Maithila?

Rather than address this anomaly head-on, I propose to approach it obliquely. What appears from one angle to be an impasse may, from another, turn out to be part of a familiar logic of popular Hinduism. It may also tell us something about the question of role models and archetypes with which we began.

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Let us note, first, that the *Adbhut Ramayan* is in many respects more like the Puranas than the classical epic tradition. It is filled with tales of powerful sages, who often unleash powerful curses. It contains didactic dialogues between interlocutors, both divine and human, often dealing with cosmogony and reworking the familiar concepts of *Samkhya-Yog* (chapters 11-14). Its sometimes tedious battle scenes stupefy the reader, as they would those who hear such tales orally. The importance of devotion to a personal deity is pervasive. The theology of the *Bhagavad Gita* looms in the background throughout. Sometimes it comes to the fore. At the very beginning of the text, Valmiki promises to recount the essence of the *Sita Mahatmya*, identifies Sita with *prakriti (*material nature) and then quotes *Bhagavad Gita* 4.7, appropriately modifying the last quarter: "Whenever there comes to be a decline in *dharm,* O truthful one, and an uprising of unrighteousness, then *prakriti* comes into existence." (1.18). Elsewhere (chapters 10 and 25), the granting of a divine eye to Hanuman and Ram, respectively, recalls Arjun's vision in *Bhagavad Gita* 11. The text's account of itself is reminiscent of Puranic self-reflexiveness on the question of origins. At the beginning of the *Adbhut,* Valmiki is said to have composed two *Ramayana*s, one in a thousand million verses for the use of gods and seers and another in 25,000 verses for humans on earth; the about-to-be recited *Adbhut* is said to consist of excerpts from the former (1.3-5).

This resemblance should prepare us for the appearance of popular or folk elements, long acknowledged to be a Puranic mainstay, in post-classical tellings of the *Ramayan*, where they appear side by side with increased emphasis on devotionalism. Once we grant this, other developments in later tellings of the *Ramayan* become intelligible. Though reflecting primarily on Tamil materials, Zvelebil's synopsis of historical developments within the folk tradition is provocative:

"After the accomplished deification of Rama, when Rama the hero becomes Shri Ramaswami, the Supreme Lord..., a new hero of superhuman proportions yet not of... too distant and utterly divine proportions was needed... Since the struggle of gods against demons... is eternal, being the one basic and archetypal phenomenon of Hindu mythology, the more the god

A contemporary version of the *Adbhut Ramayan*. The subtitle reads: "In peace-time she is Siya Mata, but in crisis she is Kali"

Ramaswami... becomes divinely passive (inactive divine principle) and distantly lofty, the more active, the more dynamic become two other characters of the *Ramayana* saga in its folk versions: Sita and Hanuman. Sita is the expression of Shakti tendencies of medieval South Indian and Bengali Hinduism, whereas Hanuman becomes the ideal expression of the valour, skills and shrewdness of the medieval South India warrior class who have to keep up the struggle against a terrible foe — the Muslim invader."[14]

David Shulman gives a somewhat different slant to similar material, noting how a Tamil folk *Ramayan* strives to stay in touch with the struggles of daily life — portraying Sita "as a bold and active woman quite prepared to argue with her husband for her beliefs"[15] — while also acknowledging the enhanced divinity of the main characters. Though this Tamil telling of the *Ramayan* appears to have greater narrative unity than our text, it resembles the *Adbhut* in many ways as Sita kills a new Ravan, now with 100 heads. In Shulman's telling, however, Sita earns the right to kill Ravan as a boon from Shiv, Ram watches her battle from the palace rather than being struck senseless as in the *Adbhut*, and Sita sends Hanuman to help force *suttee* on all the demon widows. Shulman links this search for ever-new antagonists to the structure of South Indian religion:

"Sita's battle reflects an enduring struggle which one sees expressed in many South India village cults, especially those focused on the goddess. On the one hand, her defeat of the monstrous Shatakantha [Hundred-Heads] leaves the world devoid of evil... On the other hand, the very fact that the text finds it necessary to embark on this wholly new narrative of battle.... suggests that even *this* victory will be only temporary. Some day yet another threat to order will arise, and the battle will be resumed."[16]

While we cannot link our text, the *Adbhut Ramayan*, to South Indian villages, we can agree with Shulman on the transformation of Valmiki's characters when infused with either new theological or new folk sensibilities:

"Valmiki, who has the most completely human hero, also offers the most idealized portrait of his characters — as... in his chaste and gentle Sita...[Folk versions show] us a definitely divine heroine acting in a manner which cuts across the human ideal of restrained womanhood. The force of normative idealism appears to diminish as one ascends the scale from human hero to divine, or as one "descends" from classical to folk context; and it is the folk source which offers perhaps the most passionate and powerful vision."[17]

Our first conclusion, therefore, is that in the *Adbhut Ramayan* we have to do with a telling of the Ram story which, though written in the symbolically important, refined language of Sanskrit, bears resemblance to folk *Ramayana*s told in various vernaculars. It is therefore more like the women's Telugu songs studied by Narayana Rao than the *kavya* of Valmiki.[18] It is a Puranicised kind of *Ramayan*.

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There is a second helpful line of thought for approaching our text. That is the relationship between goddesses and kings. Surely no one who has lived in north India through the overlapping autumnal celebrations of Durga Puja (Navaratra), Dasara (Dusshera), and Ram Lila can have failed to muse on the logic of their coincidence.

Elsewhere I have noted how the association between goddesses and kingship tellingly recurs at many moments in the emergence of an autonomous Goddess tradition in Sanskrit.[19] In addition, when one finds that the textual "triumph" of the great Goddess, the *Devi-Bhagavat Purana*, includes a synopsis of the Ram story that attributes Ram's success to his performance of a Navaratra ceremony — just as Krishna counsels Arjun to recite the *Durga Stotra* in an insertion into the *Mahabharat* just prior to the *Bhagavad Gita* — the matter clearly calls for further investigation.[20]

Madeleine Biardeau can serve as our guide here, via her analysis of the *sami* tree and the sacrificial buffalo, even though her emphasis is on the *Mahabharat*, rather than the *Ramayan*.[21] She starts with a desire to discern two things: first, a link between the autumnal festivals just noted — Navaratra and Ram Lila — and, second, a logic for the placement of the two Durga hymns in the *Mahabharat*. The first such hymn occurs as the Pandavas begin their year in exile and put their weapons in a *sami* tree and the second, as we have noted, occurs just prior to the *Gita* and final battle. Biardeau cites an unspecified telling of the *Ramayan* that has Ram receiving the favour of killing Ravan from Durga on the eighth day of Durga Puja, the traditional day of buffalo sacrifice, and then offering a *puja* to the *sami* tree on the tenth day (Dasara) in order to remove the rust from his weapons and restore their fire after the monsoon. She discerns a structural parallel here with the Pandavas putting their weapons in the thickest part of the *sami* tree to keep them dry, so their potency will remain latent during the rains and exile.[22] The symbolic logic of choosing the *sami* tree derives, Biardeau argues, from the kindling sticks (*arani*) of Vedic ritual, where *sami* wood is seen as

female and *ashvattha* as male. "*Sami* is thus the womb of fire, in which fire dwells in a state of calm... when extinguished. It is the rubbing of the two *arani* which inflames it."[23] There is also apparently a deeper debt to Vedic ritual. "In Vedic sacrifice, the victim is seen as a substitute for the sacrificer... The victim must therefore be something of the sacrificer's, a possession or creature which he has bought, which belongs to him, which costs him something." This logic is continued in the sacrifice of battle that is the *Mahabharat*, where the sacrificial victims are one's own relatives. It is also apparent, Biardeau claims, in the Goddess's battle with the buffalo demon, Mahish, who is variously represented both as her victim and as the reincarnation of her consort: Shiv lies prostrate beneath her, begging the favour "of remaining eternally beneath her feet" and so is reborn as Mahish.[24] A king's competence, like all worldly success, is thus contingent on submission to the power that is the Goddess. In this organically interrelated vision — this "universe of *bhakti*" — "the tasks of this world are no longer opposed to the work of deliverance, they lead to it."[25] Regarding the *Mahabharat*, Biardeau can then conclude, surface appearances (and the critically edited text) notwithstanding: "The presence of the Goddess appears like a watermark at every crucial turning point in the epic story; at once submissive, bellicose and finally victorious."[26] That something similar might be said of the Ram cycle is a matter that the *Adbhut Ramayan* invites us to contemplate — as we shall now see.

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It has often been remarked that Valmiki's Sita, for all of her demure chastity and uncritical submissiveness

Hanuman being blessed by Sita, Kaviyoor temple, Kerala

to her husband, is central to the action of the *Ramayan*. Not only does she foolishly covet the golden deer in the forest, causing her abduction by Ravan, but all subsequent events are ramifications of that abduction. Beyond this, certain passages in the text imply a deliberate restraint on Sita's part, a potential to take matters into her own hands that she refuses to indulge, so that Ram might fulfill *his dharm* of rescuing her. The citation that forms one of the epigraphs to this

essay is one such passage. Such intimations lend themselves to analysis that reveals a Sita far more complex and far more powerful than is often realised. In a close examination of Valmiki's text, for instance, Cornelia Dimmitt has shown how Sita "can be seen to display the qualities of a goddess in two different modes; as mistress of the plants and animals she is intimately related to the fertility of the earth, and as *Shakti*, the energy that inspires the hero to action, she is the source of his

power as king."[27]

As we have seen, and as recent scholarship has vividly demonstrated, later retellings of the Ram story often develop such latent points in Valmiki's telling by providing dramatic revisionings of characters, particular episodes, and even the entire narrative. It is very tempting to dismiss such retellings as the *Adbhut Ramayan* because of their mediocrity as literature, their almost outlandish abbreviation of the familiar story and insertion of sometimes bizarre new episodes, their flirtation with incoherence. For instance, in the only substantial study of the *Adbhut* that I have encountered, done by George Grierson many years ago, the author disdainfully notes that "the building of the causeway, the taking of Lanka, and the destruction of Ravana... are all dismissed in a single *shloka*" and affirms that the text's "chief value is as a storehouse of folk legends."[28] More recently, W.L. Smith says of the *Adbhut*: "This modestly sized work contains a summary of the *Ramayana* sandwiched by two apocryphal episodes," the birth of Sita and her slaying of the thousand-headed Ravana, between which "there is no intrinsic connection."[29] Close analysis of what the *Adbhut* has to say about Sita, however, provides both "wonderment" and fresh insight into her broader identity in the Indian context. Let us look, then, at what the text says about Sita.

We should note, first, that Sita's identity is developed discursively, in narrative form, while Ram's is presented didactically and philosophically. In the first chapter, for instance, Valmiki, immediately after noting the existence of the two versions of the *Ramayan* and promising to tell the *Sita Mahatmya*, says of Sita: "Sita is *prakriti*, the beginning of creation..., the perfection of *tapas*, the acquisition of heaven... She is praised as knowledge and ignorance, ... consisting of the *gunas*, beyond the *gunas*, having the *gunas* as her very soul. She is Brahma and the egg of Brahma, the cause of all actions, consisting of thought [*cit*], ... the great *kundalini*, ... by whom all this moving and unmoving universe becomes manifest" (1.13-16). Immediately, he then turns to Ram, of whom he says: "Ram is the highest light manifest, supreme support, highest person. In *akriti* (form) there is no difference at all between Sita and Ram. Ram is Sita, Janaki is beloved of Ram, and there is not the slightest difference between them.... Ram is unthinkable, seeing everything through his eternal consciousness, abiding within all, the one agent in all worlds, the supporter, the destroyer..., known by *yogi*s through his union with Sita" (1.19-21). The text, it would appear, is not interested in a separate, overtly conceptual and philosophised Sita. When the subject matter inclines in such a direction, it is to Ram that it turns. The major evidence for this distinction is the extended philosophical self-disclosure that Ram gives to Hanuman in chapters 10-15, to which the text applies the label *Upanishad*. By contrast, when extended attention is given to Sita, it is in the form of the compounding of her names, found in chapter 25. If we would know more of who Sita is, we must attend to the logic that is unobtrusively woven into the narrative portions of the test.

There are three key episodes in developing Sita's identity. We shall look briefly at each of them.

First, there is a story that connects Sita with her later birth into Janak's lineage. This is the story of Ambarish (chapters 2-4). This pious king, an unswerving devotee of Narayan, has a lovely daughter, Shrimati. The sages Narad and Parvat both seek her hand in marriage, and her father agrees to allow her to choose one of them. Both saints appeal to Vishnu to sully the appearance of the other and, responsive god that he is, he agrees, placing a monkey's face on Parvat and the face of a cow-tailed monkey on Narad (Chapter 3). The faces, however, are only visible to young Shrimati.[30] Confused by their appearance, she instead chooses a beautiful youth who has mysteriously appeared, and who then carries her off. He is, in fact, Vishnu in disguise. The two saints, each humiliated by the other, complain to Vishnu. He replies that because he is unable to resist responding to fervent devotees, he had to respond to their respective requests. He denies absconding with Shrimati. The sages immediately suspect Ambarish, on whom they throw a curse of darkness. When Ambarish flees to Vishnu, taking refuge from the curse, the sages see the whole charade in the light of Vishnu's *maya*. In wrath they then cast curses both on Vishnu himself and on innocent Shrimati. Vishnu is cursed to be born as the son of Dasharath, i.e., Ram, in the lineage of Ambarish. S h r i m a t i

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by Janak as his daughter, i.e., Sita. The curse goes on: through the misdeeds of a demon, Janak's daughter will be abducted. Just as Shrimati in this lifetime has been demonically spirited away by Vishnu, so will Sita then be spirited away by a demon. Just as Narad and Parvat were made miserable on Shrimati's account, so will Ram weep and grieve on Sita's account. Vishnu then accepts this destiny for the two of them, saying that the curse of a sage can never be undone. (4.62-66)

The second episode that shapes Sita's identity also involves a sage's curse. It is part of a larger, very peculiar story that revolves around music and singing, where the most gripping image is of sage Narad in a crowd of maimed men and women — who turn out to be the various *ragas* and *raginis,* mangled by his dreadful singing (7.26)! The crucial drama unfolds interestingly. A great festival in honour of Kaushik features the Gandharv singer, Tumburu. Sweeping regally into the hall, Lakshmi has her courtiers shove the assembled gods and sages to one side with their staves, and Vishnu proceeds to reward Tumburu lavishly. Narad, seething with rage and bitterness, blurts out a curse in anger: "Since I have here been treated like a demon by Lakshmi, surrounded by her retinue, harshly beaten with blows from their sticks, may Lakshmi be reborn in the womb of a demoness (*rakshasi*). Since I was scornfully cast out by her servants, may that *rakshasi* contemptuously cast you (Lakshmi) away upon the ground" (6.16-17). Everyone, including Narad, immediately realises the enormity of this curse, but there is no calling it back. Lakshmi accepts the curse, but with a condition: she will be reborn in the
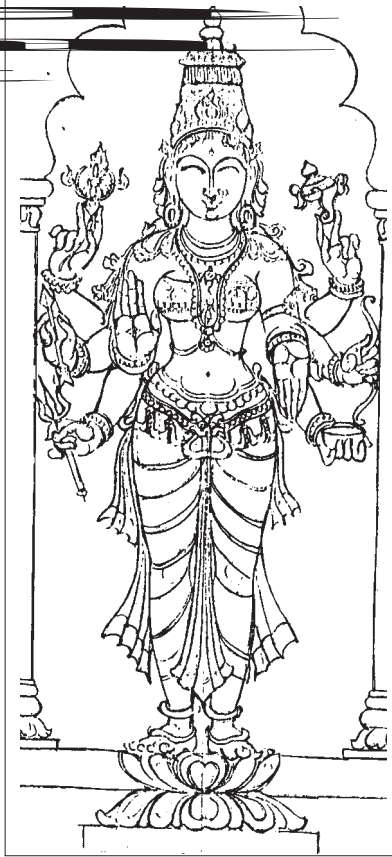
Vira-Lakshmi

womb of a *rakshasi* only after that demoness has voluntarily drunk a jar filled with the blood of forest sages, which has been put into the jar drop by drop. Narad consents to this condition (6.23-26).

The third episode brings the first two together in a clever synthesis and adds important details of its own. It begins with the ten-headed Ravan. He has practised *tapas* for many years, scorching the earth and winning a boon from Brahma (8.2-6). Ravan asks for invincibility from enemies of all sorts, but Brahma replies that this cannot be. He should pick another boon, more limited in scope. Ravan agrees, but, in good bartering fashion, adds that he then wants another boon as well. Calculating that he has nothing to fear from human beings, Ravan omits them from his first request, asking that

he be invulnerable to all assaults by non-human creatures. His second request is brief and simple — and redolent with associations from throughout the Hindu tradition. He asks that in the event he should deludedly become overcome with desire for his own daughter and she should refuse him, he will die. Fatefully, Brahma grants Ravan both boons (8.8-12).

The scene then shifts quickly to Ravan's ensuing depredations. In the course of his conquests he comes to Dandaka forest, where he finds a group of sages piously attending their fires. He poses himself a question: "How can I be the ruler of the three worlds without conquering these beings? But isn't it wrong for anyone to kill pious sages?" (8.16). The solution he devises requires each of the sages to draw a little of his own blood with the tip of Ravan's arrow, which he collects in a jar. Unbeknownst to him, however, the sage Gritsamada had been using that jar for another purpose. That sage, already having a hundred sons, had been importuned by his wife for a daughter: "May my daughter be Lakshmi herself." Correspondingly, Gritsamada had daily been putting milk from a blade of *kush* grass into the jar, accompanied by *mantra*s, to conjure Lakshmi's presence. When Ravan takes the jar of sages' blood home, he says to his wife Mandodari: "Protect this jar, Oh fair one, knowing that the blood in the jar is more powerful than poison. Do not give it away and do not drink it" (8.23-24). Ravan then continues his conquests and his ravishing of women in earthly and celestial realms. On seeing the latter, Mandodari, much in love with her husband, becomes despondent and decides to kill herself. She guzzles down the blood of the sages, but instead of dying, she becomes pregnant — with, of course, Lakshmi. The embryo begins to glow and

Mandodari is filled with wonder. She concludes that it was the sages' blood that impregnated her, but she is then immediately overcome with horror: "My husband Ravan is filled with desire for equally lustful women, and it is a year since he has lived with me. What am I, a good woman who has become pregnant, to say when I see my husband again?" (8.32-33). Mandodari's solution is to go away. Under pretext of performing a pilgrimage, she journeys to Kurukshetra, where she tears out the fetus and buries it in the earth. Purifying herself with a bath, she goes home and tells no one of the affair. Shortly thereafter, Janak comes to Kurukshetra to perform a sacrifice, and in the course of preparing the field, ploughs up a beautiful young girl. This episode then concludes in conventional fashion, with Janak taking the girl home as his daughter Sita.

From here on the text assumes familiarity with the more normative Ram story. It says nothing of Ram's childhood, marriage, Kaikeyi's plot, or the departure from Ayodhya. Chapter 10 says laconically that Ram, Sita, and Lakshman went to the woods "for some reason" (*kenapi hetuna*). The text treats Sita's abduction summarily and simply assumes Ravan's lust for her, without reminding us that this is a father's lust for his daughter. The *Adbhut*'s chief concern through the middle chapters is, as noted earlier, to convey the secret teaching about who Ram is. When Ram solicits Hanuman's help, Hanuman explains to him that the abducted Sita was not the real Sita but an illusory form — a motif that is also found in the *Adhyatma* and Tulsi Das *Ramayana*s, but that is here without any narrative or philosophical force. When the text turns, from chapter 17 onward, to the story of the thousand-headed Ravan, it tells us little more

about who Sita is than what we have noted earlier, that is, she laughs at those who think Ram's killing of the ten-headed Ravan is a deed worth celebrating, and she metamorphoses into a Kali-like form to kill Ravan when Ram is wounded and passes out. We may briefly note the aftermath of that killing. Sita goes on a rampage, slaying the remaining demons. *Matrikas* ooze from her pores to help in the slaughter. Headless corpses dance, and Sita and her companions play ball with Ravan's thousand heads. Fearing that the universal dissolution (*Pralay*) is upon them, the gods ask Shiv for help. He throws himself as a corpse under the feet of the Kali-like Sita, but still the carnage continues (chapter 23). The gods then praise Sita as the sole *Shakti* of Vishnu, the one through whom he attains his highest bliss and through *maya* causes the world to whirl around. Ram is the thinker, Sita the thought (24.3-22). Sita, however, replies: "While my husband Ram lies, as if dead, with a razor-arrow through his heart, what benefaction can I wish for the world?" (24.24). The gods then seek to revive Ram, splashing him with water, and he regains consciousness. But on seeing, not Sita, but this Kali-like figure in front of him, he thinks that the battle is still going on and takes up his weapons. The gods explain to him what has happened, and he approaches the goddess, asking who she is. She replies that she is the highest *Shakti*, and as Krishna does for Arjun in the *Gita* she gives him the divine eye, so that he may see her in her heavenly form (25.5-7). Ram then praises her with 1008 names (chapter 25), at the end of which he asks her to resume her benign form, which she does (26.3). Ram asks

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...she metamorphoses into a Kali-like form to kill Ravan when Ram is wounded and passes out.

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for the return of his brothers and army. Sita assents (26.47), they all return to Ayodhya, and Ram reigns happily, in the company of Sita and his brother, for eleven thousand years (27.9).

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What, then, can we conclude about the *Adbhut Ramayan*'s understanding of Sita? What does it tell us about the relationship of goddesses and kings, and about Sita as role model in contemporary India? Much could obviously be said about this tantalising tale, and I will limit myself here to four comments.

First, the evidence we have considered clearly indicates the necessity of thinking of the *Ramayan*, not as a text, but as a tradition encompassing multiple and diverse voices. Such a conclusion clearly places us on one side of the on-going debate over whether it is appropriate to privilege Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayan* over other tellings of the tale.[31] The *Adbhut*'s voice has been little heard in scholarly circles, and listening to it would appear to have considerable potential for shedding light on the overall nature of the *Ramayan* tradition. Whether Hindus outside scholarly circles have heard this voice more acutely than scholars is a difficult, important matter. How well known is the *Adbhut Ramayan*? Or acknowledging that the *story* is the important thing, not this particular *text*, how well known is this story today? I cannot answer this question at present, though I will surely be asking it on future trips to the subcontinent. Assuming that the story is not an utter anomaly, that it is part of the *Ramayan* that A.K. Ramanujan says is "always there" in Hindu consciousness, its significance is still not entirely clear.[32] Does it represent a "counter system," such as Ramanujan argues may be found in women's tales?[33] It is hard to argue that that is the case here. The

discontinuities within the text, the fact that the narrative is interrupted and episodes unevenly modulated, makes it difficult to discern any single, self-conscious authorial or editorial stance. Such eclecticism is, of course, familiar to those who work in Puranic materials. On the other hand, we can surely hear from time to time what seems to be a woman's point of view. This is most apparent, perhaps, in Mandodari's grief over Ravan's womanising, and in her quandary over an unwanted and untimely pregnancy. Such a perspective might be seen more broadly in the striking inversion at the heart of the tale: in Ram's martial incompetence at the head of battle, and in the benign Sita's transformation into the horrific Devi. But rather than seeing such episodes simply as contrary and counter to a Valmikian *Ramayan*, as glimmers of female subjectivity, I think we should also see them as deliberate *inversions* of the conventional story line. What the festival of Holi does for the rest of the Hindu calendar year, the *Adbhut* does for the *Ramayan* tradition: it stands it on its head, acknowledges the *maya*-like quality of all norms, and celebrates the reversal. Since Devi is herself the coincidence of opposites — both knowledge and ignorance, the cause of both bondage and release — she is a particularly apt cause of and subject for such celebration.

In offering such an interpretation, the notion of "intertextuality," which has become so useful in the study of Indian folklore and the Puranas, offers a promising theoretical stance.[34] The problem, of course, is that, unlike Narayana Rao in his study of women's oral Telugu *Ramayana*s[35] and Ramanujan in his study of women's tales in Karnataka,[36] we here lack a specific linguistic or social context for our story. I shall say more about our text's affinities with other accounts in

a moment. However, as a general principle for assessing the status of this tale in Hindu consciousness, we would do well to bear in mind what Narayana Rao says about his informants:

"Like most of the participants in the tradition, these women believe the *Ramayana* to be fact and not fiction, and its many different versions are precisely in keeping with this belief. Contrary to the usual opinion, it is fiction that has only one version; a

factual event will inevitably have various versions, depending on the attitude, intent, and social position of the teller."[37]

My second comment pertains to the remarkable lineage that is ascribed to Sita in our text. As we have seen, she is Lakshmi, but she is, by her own wish, born in the womb of a demoness. As one who is born from Ravan's wife, Mandodari, she is by implication, born in Ravan's lineage and may be seen as his daughter. Although it is Ram who

A contemporary poster of the great goddess (Devi) - in whom all other deities reside

kills the ten-headed Ravan, it is Sita who kills his elder brother, the thousand-headed Ravan, who is technically Sita's uncle but who is clearly a doublet of her father. Thus Sita avenges herself on the very family into which, and on the father to whom she was born. W.L. Smith has done valuable work on the interrelationship between the *Ramayana*s of eastern and greater India, and I here quote his treatment of this episode as an oral tradition that variously finds its way into the written record. As early as the third century *Vasudevahindi* by the Jain Sanghadasa, Sita is known as "The daughter of Ravana and placed in a box which is buried in the field where Janaka's plow later turns it up. In the ninth century the story is used in the Jaina *Ramayana* of Gunabhadra. Around the same period it appears in the Khotanese and Tibetan versions but here the box containing the baby girl is cast into a river rather than buried. The tale is also found in most of the Southeast Asian *Ramayanas:* in the Malay..., in the Lao..., in the Thai..., in the Burmese."

It is subsequent to all of this that the story finally finds its way into a Hindu *Ramayan* and that is in the very text we have been considering, the *Adbhut Ramayan*. Smith offers the following reflection on this evidence:

"The variant [of Sita being Ravana's daughter] was thus known in India for at least a thousand years before a Hindu poet chose to use it. At the same time the story is found almost everywhere in the Buddhist and formerly Buddhist countries of Central and Southeast Asia... The story seems to have no intrinsic sectarian connections whether Jain, Buddhist, or *Shakta* Hindu, rather it shares many features with the much more ancient and well-known "myth of the hero" which appears in a number of Indo-European languages; according to it

while his mother is pregnant with him, it is prophesied that the hero will be a danger to his father. The father attempts to do away with the hero..., the baby is saved..., then finally the hero returns to take revenge upon his father thus fulfilling the prophecy. Though Sita is a daughter and does not kill Ravana [except in the *Adbhut Ramayan*!], the story corresponds rather well with these schemata and in most versions of the epic it is repeatedly pointed out that she is the direct cause of Ravana's death."[38]

This evidence suggests that many audiences have known for nearly two thousand years that Sita *may* be understood as Ravan's daughter, regardless of what any particular text or story says. Why within India the story took so long to find Hindu attestation, when it had long received Jain and Buddhist recognition, is a matter that must be left for future inquiry. Such an inquiry might be part of an effort to illuminate different attitudes toward women in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu circles by noting, for instance, that, in striking contrast to the dominant Hindu ethos of India, in the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia "women are among the world's most liberated females, and in Burma, particularly, they hold a power that is awesome to behold.[39]

The remarkable lineage ascribed to Sita in our text also has a deep, but more symbolic resonance specifically

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What the festival of Holi does for the rest of the Hindu calendar year, the Adbhut does for the Ramayan tradition: it stands it on its head, acknowledges the maya-*like quality of all norms, and celebrates the reversal.*

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within the Hindu tradition. This is my third conclusion. We saw earlier that Biardeau's analysis of the *Mahabharat* invites us to see its central battle as an extension of the logic of Vedic sacrifice, where the sacrificial victims must be a part of one's own self, one's own relatives. She also argued there that the Goddess's battle with buffalo demon Mahish may likewise be seen in these terms, with Shiv as both the Goddess's consort and reborn as her victim-devotee, Mahish. The *Adbhut* suggests a similar logic at work in the *Ramayan*. Now, however, it is the Goddess herself, rather than her antagonist-lover, who undergoes rebirth. It is Lakshmi's birth in the womb of Mandodari that enables her to claim Ravan as her own lineage and therefore as her own proper victim. The *Ramayan* tradition, from this angle, is just as much about the Goddess and her importance to proper kingship and world-maintenance as is the *Mahabharat*. Both, in turn, are rooted in the older Vedic view that all sacrifice is fundamentally self-sacrifice, so vividly described in the *Purush Sukt (Rg Veda* 10.90)[40] and so vividly alluded to by Ravan in our text when he cites the destructive consequences of incest.[41] As Alf Hiltebeitel has recently noted, there is virtual unanimity in studies of martial oral epics that "females are the primary instigators of destruction". The same, he notes, is gradually coming to be seen as also characteristic of the classical epics,[42] which are themselves rooted in the controlled destruction that lies at the heart of Vedic sacrifice.

Finally, let us return to the issue of role models with which we began. Sally Sutherland has written a trenchant essay entitled "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics."[43] She offers a comprehensive interpretation of Valmiki's Sita that is encapsulated in what she says about Sita's refusal

in the *Uttarakhand* to rejoin Ram, being reabsorbed instead by the earth:

"Sita's repudiation of Rama comes to represent to the vast majority of the audience, not merely a wife refusing a husband, but an expression of a socially acceptable and highly sublimated act of counter-aggression against a figure of authority... [In contrast with Draupadi's aggression that] is directed outwards — towards her husbands, especially Yudhishthira..., Sita... expresses her anger at her love object inwardly, and this manner of aggression, i.e., through masochistic actions, appears to be more societally normative in ancient and modern India for both men and women."[44]

Such a line of thought obviously has far-reaching implications for understanding Indian behavior in a wide variety of contexts. I do not presume to reject it out of hand. The evidence we have considered in this essay, however, suggests the inadequacy of understanding any role model as monolithic, as promoting a single type of behavior. It is perhaps easier to overlook the multiple dimensions of such models if one considers but a single text, though post-modern analysis has alerted us to the presence of multiplicity even there. Certainly the *Adbhut Ramayan* invites us, both scholars and inhabitants of India, to think about who Sita is in new ways. The presence of the *Adbhut* and its kindred folk *Ramayana*s suggests that such thinking has been going on in South Asia for a very long time. It attests to the fact that, as Ursala Sharma puts it, "women in India have always been able to draw upon a stock of cultural imagery which represents women not as weak and passive but as endowed with power and energy."[45] This line of thinking is also clearly relevant to those who would change the condition of women in contemporary India for the better. And so I close with a quotation from Madhu Kishwar. She writes:

"Our cultural traditions have tremendous potential within them to combat reactionary and anti-women ideas, if we can identify their points of strength and use them creatively. The rejection of the harmful is then made much easier than attempts to overthrow traditions totally or to attack them arrogantly from the outside, as most of us westernised modernists tend to do, since we have been completely alienated from our own culture and the people who hold it dear."[46]

Sita need not always fight, nor Ram always swoon. But clearly the possibilities are much greater than most of us have previously realised.

Notes:

1. This article was conceived and written as a contribution to the *Festschrift* in honour of N.N. Bhattacharyya, edited by Rachel Fell McDermott, to be published by Manohar Publishers in a slightly different form. I am grateful to Rachel McDermott for allowing prior publication in **Manushi**.

2. "Three Hundred *Ramayana*s: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," in Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 46.

3. Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 106

4. Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 218, note 30. Kakar here cites P. Pratap, "The Development of Ego Ideal in Indian Children," unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Banaras Hindu University, 1960.

5. Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 131

6. For example, Monika Thiel-Horstmann (ed.), *Ramayana and Ramayanas* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia,* V. Raghavan (ed.), *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980).

7. For an excellent study of the qualities that Sita models in Valmiki's *Ramayan,* see Sally Sutherland, "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-Models in the Sanskrit Epics," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109 #1 (1989): 63-79. However, the inadequacy of taking a *single* text as the basis for

Devi in her warrior *roop*

understanding a role model is one of the major points I wish to make in this essay.

8. Frank Whaling [*The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), 199n] places the *Adbhut Ramayan* "slightly later" than the *Adhyatma Ramayan*, which Philip Lutgendorf [*The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7] dates to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. The argument for the northeastern provenance of the text is, as we shall see, its partial resemblance to *Ramayan* versions studied by W.L. Smith [*Ramayana Traditions in Eastern India* (Stockholm: Department of Indology, University of Stockholm, 1988)]. But, as we shall also see, there are similarities of Tamil *Ramayana*s: see Kamil V. Zvelebil (trans.), *Two Tamil Folktales: The Story of King Matanakama, The Story of Peacock Ravana* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987) and David Shulman, "Sita and Shatakanthravana in a Tamil Folk Narrative," *Journal of Indian Folkloristics* 2 #3/4 (1979):1-26. A revised version of Shulman's article appears as "Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions" in Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (eds.), *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 105-30.

9. *Adbhut Ramayan*, Ram Kumar Rai, trans. (Varanasi: Prachya Prakashan, 1989) and *Adbhut Ramayan*, Jvalaprasad Misra, trans. (Bombay: Venkatesvara Press, 1990). The two editions are in very close agreement on the number of verses per chapter as well as on the text proper. I cite the Prachya Prakashan edition below. An inquiry into the audience for these publications would clearly be a fruitful future line of inquiry.

10. The Mutilation of Surpanakha" in Richman, *op. cit.,* 82.

11. *Op. cit.*, 198-99. Whaling notes that the one exception to this pattern is found precisely in our text, the *Adbhut Ramayan:* 199n, 334n.

12. John Braisted Carman, *The Theology of Ramanuja* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 243.

13. "He plays ball with the sun and the moon" (17.45); "he regards the ocean as a puddle in a cow's hoofprint, all the worlds as bits of straw" (17.63).

14. Zvelebil, *op. cit.,* xl-xli.

15. Shulman, *op. cit.,* 3.

16. *Ibid.*, 7

17. *Ibid.*, 16

18. Velcheru Narayana Rao, "A *Ramayana* of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu," in Richman, *op. cit.*, 114-36. We shall return to this material below.

19. See my *Encountering the Goddess: A Translation of the Devi Mahatmya and a Study of Its Interpretation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 14, 24-27, 77, 153, 171, 172, 202-203 n. 35, 203 n. 40, 223-24 n. 22.

20. The label "triumph" is C. Mackenzie Brown's: *The Triumph of the Goddess: The Canonical Models and Theological Visions of the Devi Bhagavata Purana* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). See *Shrimad Devi Bhagavatam*, Swami Vijnanananda, trans. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2nd ed., 1977), 3.27-30. For textual references to these issues in the *Mahabharat*, see the preceding note.

21. Biardeau has addressed the topic at hand throughout her work. For convenience I here draw selectively on her superb article, "The Sami Tree and the Sacrificial Buffalo," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 18 #1 (1984):1-23. This is a translation by Richard Nice in collaboration with the author of her "L'Arbre sami et le buffle sacrificiel," *Purushartha* 5 (1981): 215-44.

22. *Ibid.*, 6,7.

23. *Ibid.* 4.

24. *Ibid.*, 19, 16. The best documentation, in text and sculpture, of the interplay between Mahish and Shiv remains Heinrich von Stietencron, "Die Gottin Durga Mahisasuramardini: Mythos, Darstellung und geschichtliche Rolle bei der Hinduiseirung Indiens," in *Visible Religion: Annual for Religious Iconography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 118-166.

25. *Ibid.*, 15.

26. *Ibid.*, 23.

27. Cornelia Dimmitt, "Sita: Fertility Goddess and *Shakti*," in John S. Hawley and Donna Wulff (eds.), *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1982), 210-211.

28. George A. Grierson, "On the *Abdhuta Ramayana*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 4 (1926), 12, 15. The author does, however, provide a very useful, 9.2

29. Smith, *op. cit.* 137.

30. Various motifs in this story are found elsewhere — in the *Bhagavat Purana*, the *Mahabharat,* and Tulsi Das's *Ramcaritmanas* but never in the same precise configuration. See Grierson, *op. cit.*, 16n, 17n.

31. For a useful discussion of issues in this debate, see Alf Hiltebeitel, "Religious Studies and Indian Epic Texts," *Religious Studies Review* 21 #1 (January 1995), 26-32.

32. See the epigraph to this essay.

33. A.K. Ramanujan, "Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales," in Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Miles (eds.), *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 33-55.

34. See Appadurai, Korom, and Miles, *op. cit.* and Wendy Doniger (ed.), *Purana Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jain Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

35. See note 18 above.

36. See note 34 above.

37. Narayana Rao, *op. cit.,* 115.

38. Smith, *op. cit,* 21-22. As an example of what Smith refers to in his last sentence, see the epigraph from Valmiki at the head of this essay.

39. John P. Ferguson, "The Great Goddess Today in Burma and Thailand: An Exploration of Her Symbolic Relevance to Monastic and Female Roles," in James J. Preston, *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 295.

40. See Sanjukta Gupta and Richard Gombrich, "Kings, Power and the Goddess," *South Asia Research* 6 #2 (November 1986), esp. 125-126.

41. For extended treatment of the incest motif in Hindu mythology, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), chapter IV.

42. Hiltebeitel, *op. cit.*, 31.

43. See note 7 above.

44. Sutherland, *op. cit.*, 78-79.

45. Ursala Sharma, "Foreword" to Joanna Liddle and Ram Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 1. I am indebted to Mary McGee for this and the following reference.

46. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi* (London: Zed Books, 1984), 47.□