

Ram as Abductor

Subrahmaniya Bharathi's *Ramayana*

○ Introduced and Translated from Tamil by Paula Richman

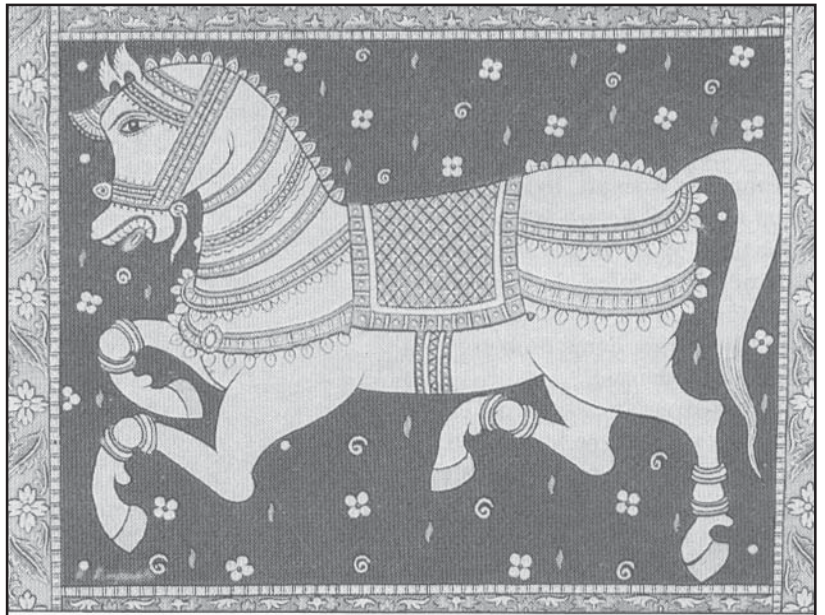
C Subrahmaniya Bharathi wrote a whimsically idiosyncratic treatment of the story of Sita and Ram. Entitled *The Horns of Horse*, the story has been published in several formats, including as part of a collection of didactic tales. *The Horns of the Horse* appropriates the narrative format of an animal fable, slyly satirizes religious conventions, and reverses standard expectations about gender. Although many Indians know of Bharathi's nationalist poetry composed in Tamil, Sanskrit and English, *The Horns of the Horse*, translated below, is little known either inside or outside of Tamilnadu.

Born on December 11, 1882 into a Shaiva Brahmin family in Tinnevely District (in present day Tamilnadu), C. Subrahmaniya has earned a reputation as the greatest Tamil poet of the twentieth century. He worked in a number of literary capacities over the course of his life - as a court poet for a zamindar, a high school teacher, journalist, translator, and cartoonist. An assembly of poets bestowed upon him the title by which he is commonly known, "Bharathi" (a Tamil name for Goddess Sarasvati), in recognition of his literary talent. His notoriety grew as he became more deeply involved in political journalism against colonial rule. When the British government cracked down on "seditious" writings, he fled to nearby Pondicherry, where he remained for a decade and wrote many of the works that later won him literary fame. C. Subrahmaniya Bharathi returned to British India in 1918; he passed away three years later, at age 39.

In *The Horns of the Horse*, Sita's abductor is not Ravan but Ram, who tries in vain to seize the kingdom of Koshala from his father. In the forest, Sita turns to Queen Shurpanakha for aid; the helpful queen sends the young woman to Lanka to take refuge from the persistence of Ram. Furthermore, Shurpanakha cuts off Lakshman's nose and toes, in a comic reversal of Lakshman's more familiar mutilation of Shurpanakha. The queen's martial prowess excites Ram's desire, but she spurns his offer of marriage and orders him out of her palace to avoid the appearance of scandal. Ravan not only defeats Ram's army but saves Ram, out of respect for his youth and noble birth.

Bharathi wrote *The Horns of the Horse* and several other stories for a

collection he called *Nava-tantra*, which he envisioned as an updated version of *Pancha-tantra*, an ancient collection of Sanskrit animal fables created to impart practical wisdom to members of the royal family. Although the *The Horns of the Horse* contains the nested structure of many animal fables, beginning with a question about how a particular animal gained one of its characteristics, the framed tale belongs in the category of *Ramkatha*. The narrator's name, Pandit Crooked Face, however, hints that the story might be somewhat unreliable, a suggestion strengthened by King Reevana's susceptibility to flattery and his willingness to reward fawning storytellers with large amounts of gold. Reevana's name sounds quite similar



to that of his ancestor Ravan, the exemplary ruler of ancient Tamilnadu - at least according to Tamil cultural nationalists writing during the period when Bharathi lived.

Both in the framing of the story and in the tale itself, Bharati makes fun of Brahmanical and courtly conventions: the Vedic rites described require absurdly large numbers of sacrificial items, and instead of bringing about auspicious

results, a ridiculous fate befalls the sacrificial items sent from Sugreeva's court to that of Ravan. Those setting out on both military and domestic journeys incur major delays due to unavailability of auspicious days. Disastrous consequences follow minor events, for instance, the Sun tumbles to earth after a king laughs out loud.

The bizarre premises of this story provided Bharathi with the chance to recount a story of Sita,

Ram, Shurpanakha, and Ravan - a version that differs radically from those dominant tellings by authors such as Valmiki, Tulsidas, or Kamban. Bharathi plays with many dichotomous cultural categories in this story, including "good" women vs. "bad" ones, humans vs. demons, and forest vs. kingdom. Yet Bharathi's story ends on a familiar note, with Ram marrying Sita in a proper ceremony in Mithila, thus limiting the extent of transgression contained in the story.

The Horns of the Horse*

IN Andappura City, in the land of Sind, lived a king named Reevan Nayakkar. He prided himself on his descent from the lineage of Ravan, who ruled as the King of Lanka several *yugas* ago. His court was renowned for its many pandits who had thoroughly mastered all the *shastras*. One day, the king demanded of his court, "Why doesn't a horse have horns?" All of the pandits were taken aback. Only Pandit Crooked Face, who had come from Karnataka to receive gifts from the king, offered to answer the question. When the king gave his assent, Pandit Crooked Face began this story: •

"Emperor Reevan, listen! In ancient times, all horses had horns. In the time of Lord Ravan, your ancestor who ruled in Lanka, Brahmadeva, put an end to the practice of having horns on horses, at the king's command."

When Reevan Nayakkar heard [of his ancestor's power], he was thrilled. "What's that? Tell me the whole story." Pandit Crooked Face continued as follows:

During the time of Ravan's *dharmic* rule in Lanka, rains fell three times a month. In those days, every year uniformly contained thirteen months

and each month had thirty-three days. So annually, thirty-three rains fell at the rate of one every eleven days.

The Brahmins were so skilled that they could recite backwards - without missing even a single syllable - the four *Vedas*, the six *shastras*, the sixty-four kinds of learned arts, 1,008 *puranas* and the 10,080 *sub-puranas*. Everyday, in every Brahmin house-without fail - 24,000 goats were sacrificed and a variety

ofyajnas were performed. In the same way, members of the other *varnas* performed their duties properly. Everyone was virtuous and charitable, enjoying all the pleasures of this world and then attaining the shade of Paramashiva's holy feet in the next world.

At that time, in the city of Ayodhya, King Dasarath's son, Ram, did not want his elder brother crowned. Since he desired the crown himself, he revolted against his father. Dasarath, enraged, threw Ram and Lakshman out of the country. From there they fled to the city of Mithila and took refuge with King Janak. While the king was sheltering them, Ram saw and fell in love with the beautiful Sita, daughter of Janak. He abducted her and entered the Dandaka Forest.

There Ram and Lakshman tortured the sages in all sorts of ways, ruining their sacrifices. Shurpanakha Devi, who ruled the forest, came to hear of this. Because she was Ravan's sister and because she was of Brahmin lineage, she couldn't tolerate the trouble Ram gave the *rishis*. So she ordered her army to catch Ram and his brother Lakshman, tie them up, and bring them to her. Exactly as she had ordered, the



soldiers caught Ram and Lakshman, bound them with a rope and brought them into the presence of Shurpanakha.

Commanding that the two be untied, she threatened them with harsh words: "Because you are princes and because you are young, I will forgive your past depredations. However, if you ever perform such actions again, you will be severely punished."

After giving this advice, she welcomed them to stay for a few days in the palace and enjoy her hospitality. One day, when Sita was speaking to Shurpanakha privately, Sita told her that Ram had abducted her and that she wished to return to her father in Mithila. Out of sympathy, Shurpanakha sent Sita to Lanka and requested that Ravan have her brought to Mithila. As soon as Sita reached Ravan's palace, the ministers awaited an auspicious day to send her to Mithila. There wasn't an auspicious day during the entire year. It was the same thing during the following year. So Ravan ordered Sita to stay at his palace for two years.

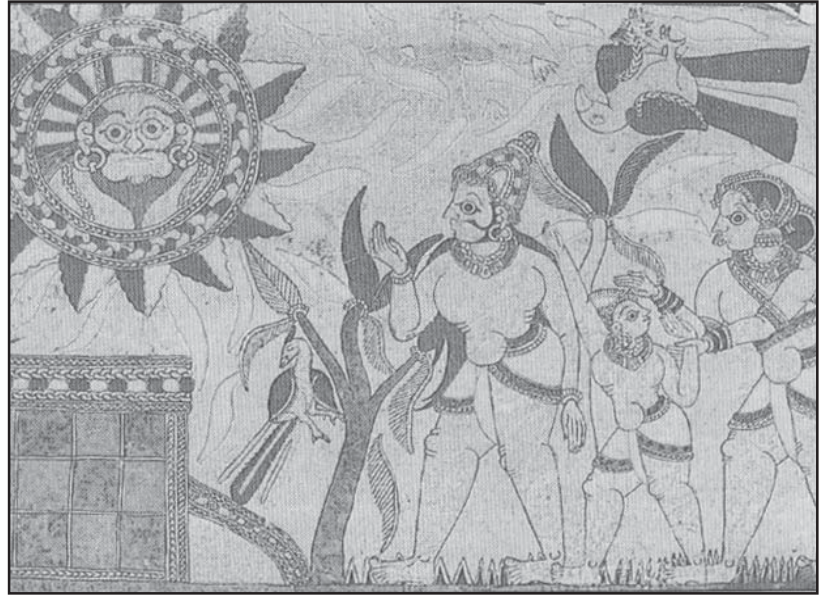
Back in Dandaka Forest, Ram asked Shurpanakha, "Where is Sita?"

Shurpanakha told him that Sita had been sent to Mithila. Angrily, Lakshman began to rebuke Shurpanakha, asking, "How could you do such a thing?"

Immediately Shurpanakha grab-bed the knife tucked at her waist, which she usually used to cut down fruits and eat them. Then she slashed off Lakshman's two ears and toes.

Infatuated by her heroic act, Ram said, "Oh my! Since you sent Sita to Mithila, why don't you marry me now?"

As soon as Shurpanakha heard this, feeling embarrassed she blushed and said, "It's true that you are a handsome boy. I could marry you. But my elder brother would get angry, so don't stay here any longer. If you do, it will give rise to scandal."



Ram asked, "When did you send Sita to Mithila? With whom did you send her? How far would she have gone by now?"

Shurpanakha replied, "From now on, abandon all thought of Sita. I have sent her to my elder brother in Lanka. Maybe he will send her to Mithila, maybe not. He can do whatever he wants. He's the king of the three worlds. Forget Sita."

When Ram heard that, he set out, planning to rescue Sita from Ravan, and arrived in Kishkindha. At that time, a king named Sugreev was ruling Kishkindha. He had been preceded by his elder brother, Vali. Ravan and Vali were great friends; they had studied arithmetic in the same school. Even though Ravan exacted tribute throughout the three worlds, he had exempted Vali from paying any tribute for Kishkinda. While Vali was sleeping, his younger brother Sugreev cut his neck with a spade and then forced his brother's wife, Tara, to marry him. Through the cunning of his minister Hanuman, Sugreev took possession of the kingdom. When Ravan heard this, he became furious and immediately wrote the following letter to Sugreev:

"Ravan, King of Lanka, writes to Sugreev of Kishkindha: You killed our friend. You killed your elder brother. You stole the kingdom. As soon as you read this letter, you should send Tara to a nunnery in Lanka. You should give the kingdom to Angada, the son of Vali. You should become a *sanyasi*. Renounce the kingdom and leave immediately. If you refuse to obey my commands about these matters, I will lead my army to attack you."

As soon as Sugreev read these orders, he became frightened, looked for Hanuman, and asked him, "What are we going to do?"

Hanuman gave this advice: "You must pacify him by sending him Tara, whom you took from Vali, as well as seventeen and a half women under seventeen years of age as slaves. And for the expenses incurred for the sacrifices performed by the acclaimed Vedic *rishis* whom Ravan venerates and worships, send forty crores, eighty lakhs, 34,240 goats and cattle. Also send enough of the juice called *soma-rasa* to fill 400 crores of leather bags, each of which holds 4,000 measures of liquid. Inform Ravan that Angada will receive

the title of crown prince and that every year he must pay 4,000 crores of gold as tribute. If you do all this, we can survive,” said Hanuman.

Exactly as Hanuman had directed, Sugreev collected and sent, in the custody of messengers, the slave girls, goods and cattle, the juice, and the total tribute for the first year, along with a message.

The messengers delivered the goats, cattle, and juice to Ravan’s palace. They gave the slave girls and money to the sages, and gave the palm-leaf letter to Ravan. Because some messengers drank some of the *soma-rasa* from the leatherbags on the way, they became intoxicated and failed to perform their work properly. Ravan and his friends immediately killed and ate all the goats and cattle, and then drank the juice. Only afterwards did Ravan open the letter and read it.

He demanded of the messengers, “Why didn’t the money and slave women who were in your custody arrive?” They responded that they had delivered the money and slave women to the monastery of the sages. Since the sages had taken all the money as *dakshina* (priest’s payment) for the sacrificial ritual, they said it would be contrary to the scriptures to return it. And most of the slave girls had run off.

Ravan gave the command to kill all the messengers immediately and ordered the commander-in-chief of his army to leave at that very minute and make war against Sugreev.

His commander-in-chief said, “Fine!” and collected his troops.

Spies conveyed all this information to Kishkindha. Immediately Sugreev mobilized his army, as Hanuman had advised. After getting ready, Ravan’s army waited for an auspicious sign before setting off.

Meanwhile, since Hanuman’s *jati* was that of an agile monkey, he quickly set out with his monkey army for Lanka. Ram and Lakshman

both joined his army. It included forty-nine crores, ninety-four lakhs, thirty-seven thousand, three hundred and fifty-six foot soldiers, twice the number of cavalry, four times that in chariots and seventy times that in the elephant corps.

Even before Ram’s army came to Lanka, a section of Ravan’s army attacked them and finished them off. Only Ram and Lakshman kept some sections of the army and secretly entered Lanka.

This news reached the ears of Ravan. Immediately, he began to roar with laughter. “Hahaha! Has the human army entered our city? What amusement! Hahaha!” The sound of his laughter was so loud that it deafened Adishesha and made the solar disk fall to the ground.

Afterwards, Ravan destroyed Ram’s army and had Ram and his younger brother brought to him. Out of compassion for the royal princes, he didn’t kill them; instead, he handed them over to some servants and sent them to Janak for custody.

Afterwards, Sita too reached Mithila. Janak also had compassion, so he gave Sita to Ram in marriage. Then Ram and Lakshman went to Ayodhya and submitted themselves to Bharata.

“This is the real Ramayan story,” concluded Pandit Crooked Face in the court of Reevan Nayakkar.

Reevan then said, “Venerated Pandit, I asked why horses don’t have horns, but you haven’t answered that question yet, have you?”

Crooked Face Pandit said, “Didn’t I say that when Reevan heard the news that Ram had come to invade Lanka and cried ‘Hahaha,’ the sun couldn’t bear the noise and fell down? At that time, the horns of the sun’s seven

horses broke. The sun came and fell at the feet of Ravan, beseeching him tearfully:

“My horses possess the boon of immortality. Other horses don’t have the swiftness that they possess, but their horns have broken. From now on, everyone in the world will laugh at me. What shall I do?”

Feeling compassion for the sun, Ravan ordered Brahmadeva: “From now on, you must create horses without horns. That way, there will be no reason for laughing at the sun’s horses.” Since that day, Brahma has created horses without horns.

When he heard what Pandit Crooked Face said, Reevan Nayakkam was delighted and gave the pandit a gift of a lakh of gold for each letter in each word of the story. □

* Translated from *Paratiyar Kataikal: Stories of Bharathi*, Madras: Poompukar Press, 1977, pp. 285-292. Reprinted from *Kataikkottu: Collected Stories*, Issue 17 (Madras: Parati Piracuralayam, 1938). I am grateful to Prema Nandakumar for her suggestions of ways to improve my translation of this story. Any errors that remain are mine alone.

Paula Richman, Associate Professor of South Asian Religions at Oberlin College, is the author of *Women, Branch Stories, and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text* (Maxwell school, Syracuse University, 1988) and editor of *Many Ramayans* (University of California Press, 1991).

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