

Sita in the City

The *Ramayana's* Heroine in New York

○Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy

IN April 1998 an exhibition entitled *Sita in the City* (curated by the authors) was held in Columbia University's Low Memorial Library to explore the many ways the *Ramayana's* heroine has been imagined in New York, among the diverse South Asian communities which call the city home. Through text drawn from interviews with members of these communities, as well as with others, and through artwork and photographs which reveal the many visual representations of Sita in the New York area, the exhibition attempted to paint a portrait of the ways in which Sita is imagined and made meaningful to people in New York. The material presented in this article formed the core of *Sita in the City*, and was gathered in two months of intensive research in the New York area.

AS anyone aware of the literary and cultural traditions of South Asia knows, Sita is the heroine of the ancient epic, the *Ramayana*, and the wife of the epic's hero, Rama. The *Ramayana* is a living text, told and retold in ritual and performance traditions throughout the world. Sita too has many manifestations, like her husband Rama, and is more than just a literary figure. This is not only the case in South Asia, where the events of the *Ramayana* are said to have taken place, but also for the many South and Southeast Asians who reside outside their ancestral lands (in what is called "the diaspora"). The perspectives of people involved with South Asian traditions in New York can be added to the field of interpretations of the "Sita tradition," in a new environment.

Sita and her story have taken many forms over time,

from 500 BCE to the present day, and in different places, from Ball to London, and the Sita of New York City today is no exception. In the new interpretive and creative context that New York represents, Sita is a means through which some South Asian

immigrants understand their lives and the models that inform them. "Sita is my second mother," explains a thirteen-year-old girl at the Geeta Temple in Elmhurst, Queens, while her mother sees Sita as a perfect role model for girls, given the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and AIDS in a city like New York. For others, such as a member of a support group at *Sakhi for South Asian Women*, an organisation working against domestic violence, Sita is "a lousy role model for women." In New York City, people speak of Sita as having struggled with the same kinds of issues they now face in their own lives, drawing upon a set of "traditional" motifs from a thousands-of-years old tradition known to us through the works of Valmiki, Kampan, and Tulsidas, as well as countless other poets, religious thinkers, and artists.

The thoughts and images presented here are part of a



Sita in the Metropolis

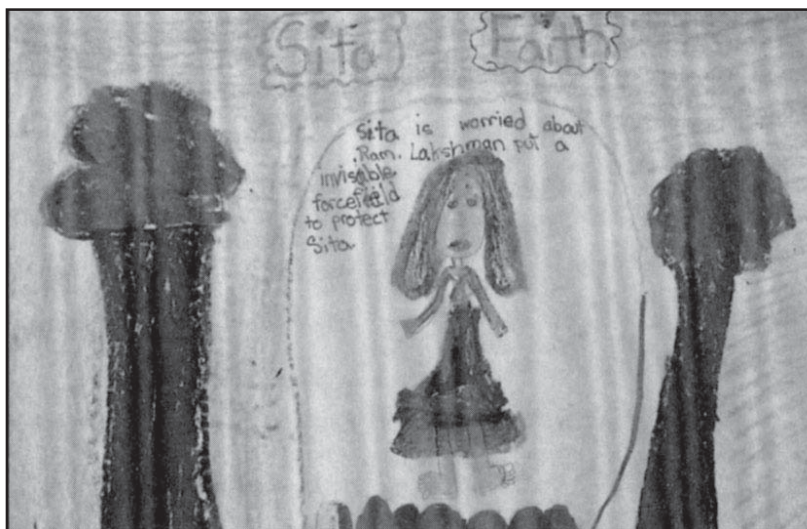
VENANTIUS J. PINTO

larger conversation: a conversation about models and ideals; models to construct and deconstruct, to emulate or reject, to reconfigure or maintain in different settings; tellings new and old. These conversations take on a distinctive form in New York, and this article provides only a glimpse into the range of meanings created about Sita.

Situating Sita

It's no surprise that Sita takes on a life in New York, as it is home to the largest South Asian community in North America. Sita was carried in the stories, images, objects, and memories of the South Asians who have come to the city in significant numbers throughout the last century, primarily since the Immigration Act of 1965. Her image and story-be it in posters, books or *murtis*-can be purchased in stores catering to New Yorkers with eclectic tastes, and in shops primarily selling Indian groceries, books, and ritual objects to South Asian immigrants. Sita is at home in many of New York's Hindu temples, on the bookshelves of libraries where her story is available in a range of languages and tellings, and in the city's art galleries and museums, where contemporary art and miniature paintings depicting her are displayed. While all those who carried Sita's story or image with them may not agree about how she should be understood, her presence is undeniable. As one artist put it, "Sita and Rama are like our family, we grew up with them."

The way in which Sita is described in the language and context of contemporary times-whether that be by calling her a divorcee, a battered woman, a strong single mother, or a woman who's monogamy and faithfulness is a model for teenagers in this day and age of sexually transmitted diseases - is conveyed in Venantius Pinto's print *Sita in the Metropolis*. This piece by the New York-based Goanese artist powerfully articulates what it means to think about Sita as a part of New York City. We can interpret



Sita Faith

this image as a representation of Sita herself, or as a window into the ways communities adapt and reformulate "tradition" in new environments. Thus, for the mother we referred to above, Sita is a powerful role model for girls in the United States, given some of the challenges that they face here. In Pinto's piece, Sita has been transformed and re-situated, and sits in Times Square, surrounded by colourful billboards which sport marriage ads. Her size and pose create a tension between her and the environment, demanding that she be taken on her own terms. With her (intentionally) unlit

cigarette, Sita sits among the buildings, adorned with a tattoo in the shape of Rama's bow and arrow. Her foot breaks the barrier of the rectangular picture frame, reminiscent of Pahari (Punjab Hills) and Rajput miniature painting conventions, and the bold colours used are clearly reminiscent of the popular poster prints of deities that are so common in South Asia and its diasporic communities. She is not dressed in the garb of Sita in ages past, but wears clothing befitting a young and trendy New Yorker. This print, then, clearly addresses the ways in which Sita is changing in the New York landscape.

It is not only here that Sita takes on a special meaning in relation to a specific set of geographically and culturally defined circumstances. In general, members of the Indo-Caribbean community speak of the importance of Sita as a model to counter British colonial power. Kama Singh of the Raj Kumari Cultural Center (an Indo-Caribbean cultural organisation) spoke of how Sita and Rama were the "most prominent role models" held up by the Hindu priests and the orthodoxy in Guyana, at a time when cultural continuity and integrity were difficult to maintain. He emphasised that Sita and Rama remain models for members of the community in the United States,

The Sita corrective can be a model for all women everywhere, on every continent, in every country. I am not talking only about Hindus or Indian women. You know, Sita is especially important because there is so many corrupting influences now — violence, drugs and all that...

amid a new set of cultural challenges. Overtly political understandings of Sita and Rama were not prevalent outside of the Indo-Caribbean communities we encountered in New York, but it is certainly the case that the *Ramayana* tradition has taken a deeply political form in South Asia in the recent past. Most tellings of the *Ramayana* begin and end in Ayodhya, and, as is well known, the city became a flash-point for conflict in connection with a particularly chauvinistic and discriminatory rendition of the story of Rama in the 1980's and 90's. Yet, although these events were mentioned in some of the interviews, discussion of nationalist issues was for the most part absent. Other issues emerged as constant themes: notions of how women "should" and do behave in society, and what it means to reclaim old role models and/or find new ones in the present day. Sita and the *Ramayana* narrative stand at the center of the discussion of these issues, and, through them, people engage in the politics of negotiating gender and tradition more generally. In this way, different descriptions of Sita and the variations in her story are often political (whether said in explicitly "devotional" contexts or not).

Many Sitas, Many Stories

The diversity of perspectives on Sita mirrors the diversity of voices in the South Asian communities of New York. Some view Sita as a "docile, subservient" wife, following her husband dutifully and suffering at his will. She is sometimes seen as a victim, abducted by Ravana and rejected by Rama. In these cases, she is often seen as a model whose time has come to be reconfigured, if not altogether rejected. For others, Sita is a cherished role model for wives and devotees, a figure to revere and emulate. She is also viewed as a Goddess, an embodiment of *shakti*. At times Sita is all of these things. A number of New Yorkers see her as "a

According to my understanding, Sita is the main figure in the *Ramayana*. I would consider her more important than anyone else... She is *shakti* (power). She's the one reason all the events in the *Ramayana* took place. The whole story, in fact, revolves around her *shakti*. She started every-thing She is the real *avatara*.

Shastriji, The Hindu Center, New York.

very strong woman," or as an assertive woman who, in the end, told Rama: "You do what you want, I am gone!" Others see Sita as an inspiration and guide for single mothers today: "she divorced Rama...[and] went all alone into the harsh forest to raise two virtuous boys." Sujata Warriar of the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, asserted that Sita has been made into a composite figure representing idealised Hindu womanhood out of a need for "national cohesion" and for "community" within India and in the



Good and Evil

diaspora. In contrast to those who evaluated Sita as a positive model, she argued that a composite figure, like Sita, is "detrimental to women's own empowerment," as women are doomed to failure when they "don't fit into the narrow boundaries" created by these idealised notions.

In visual terms, Anand Patole's painting, *Good and Evil*, highlights a tension in Sita's story: Rama and Ravana stand in opposition to each other, and Sita stands in the middle diminutively to the side of Rama. Sita acts as the battleground upon which Rama and Ravana, good and evil, fight.

This image also reflects the sentiments of many New Yorkers; when we asked people about Sita, we were, by extension, asking about Rama and the entire *Ramayana* tradition. As people speak about Sita they tend to focus on her relationships with other figures in the *Ramayana*, just as they stress key scenes in the narrative which define her character. Some speak of Sita as an ideal mother to Lava and Kusha, others emphasise her position as the ideal *bhakta* (devotee) in her relationship with Lord Rama. Still others enumerate Sita's roles as: the model wife to Rama; the victim of Ravana; the daughter to King Janaka; the daughter-in-law to Rama's parents; the Princess of Mithila and/or Ayodhya and the sister-in-law to Lakshmana. Emphasis is placed on how she negotiated her position in relation to different characters in the tale, and how she navigated the trials of her life. People are rarely exclusive when speaking of Sita as mother, wife, daughter, devotee or *devi* (goddess). Her ability to fulfill all of these different roles is highlighted as a strength. Descriptions of Sita as the ideal mother and wife often resonate with life in New York, such as in the characterisation of Sita as a "single mother," or as a devotee who was able to remain committed in the face of many hardships and temptations. To

some, however, she is *not* an ideal wife or mother, but rather a stereotype of passive wife and victim whom women should not strive to emulate.

In addition to the idea of Sita as ideal wife and mother, the controversial episodes in her story loom large. Of these, the *agni pariksha* (or fire test) is a defining moment, both in Sita's own life and in her relationship with her husband. In many ways, these incidents act as proving grounds for Sita, as the means by which her strength and virtue are tested. Thus, some emphasise her power or *shakti*, both in fighting off the advances of Ravana and in avoiding certain death in the scorching heat of fire. Others emphasise that Sita's story should be a warning sign for women. Vibha Pathak, a devotee at the Geeta Temple in Elmhurst, New York, __ identified the *lakshmana rekha* (the protective line drawn by Lakshmana), as parallel to the *sindhur* many women in South Asia wear in the part of their hair to denote their married status. She said that this line of colour acts as a form of contract or a boundary which defines the actions and rights of women. Women are not to cross this boundary which has been defined for them.

The fire test inspires theological questions among devotees; why, if Rama is all knowing and powerful, did he make Sita undergo such an ordeal? The fire test and other incidents cause some to question Rama's motivations and virtues as a husband. Yet many made clear that Sita's tests were not Rama's fault at all, and to suggest so would be to question Rama's own integrity, and by extension, God's. Some describe the fire test as a type of abuse. Like rape survivors who are forced to prove the integrity of their

I see Sita as somebody who's positive, whose quietness and passivity is a strength, not like a docile, subservient thing. Rather than being subservient she finds an area of largeness within herself...

Female Artist, New York

character, one woman said, Sita is forced to prove herself when she was wrongfully abducted. Hence, while for some her fire test is the ultimate sign of Sita's virtue, purity, and integrity, for others, it is emblematic of the widespread oppression of women in society.

Sita is often associated with other "virtuous" women of Indian mythology. Associations between Sita's story and those of the "ideal wives" Savitri and Sati are found in Valmiki's ancient *Ramayana*, as well as in contemporary discourse.



United # 24 by SUKANYA RAHMAN

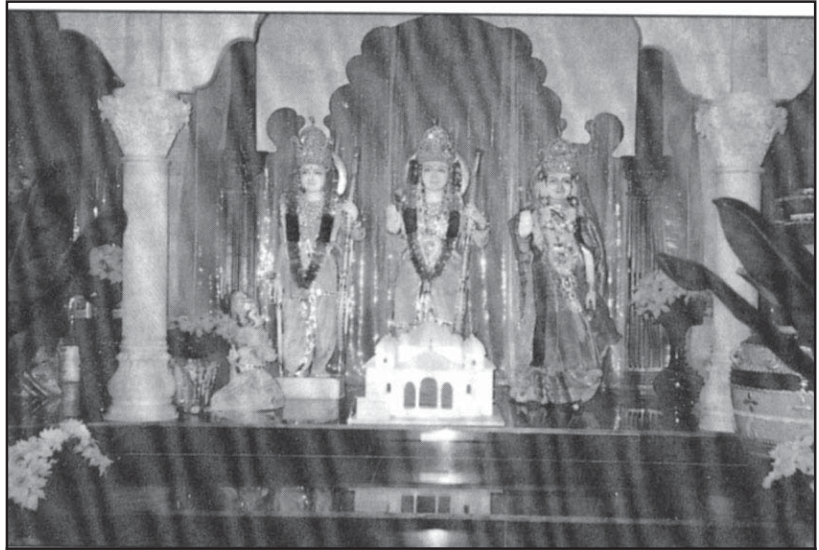
Speaking of the associations between these three ideals, a Swaminarayan devotee in her late twenties said: "In a strange way my views on marriage, and relationships were formed by the Sati-Savitri-Sita ideal. The impact of these stories [as they are] passed onto children is pretty amazing." Parallels are sometimes made between Sita's fire-test and the pyre upon which Sati, Shiva's wife, threw herself. So too Savitri, whose devotion saved her husband from the hands of death, is often likened to Sita, who exhibited endless devotion to Rama. A devotee at one Indo-Caribbean temple spoke of how Sita is the model for "family values," referring specifically to her marital love for Rama, which made her so powerful that Ravana couldn't even touch her when he tried to "rape her." However, the ways in which these idealised notions of Indian womanhood and wifely duty are linked to narratives of suffering are disturbing to some, as they are concerned that such stories promote the idea that the good Hindu woman must accept whatever her husband asks of her, and that she should literally submit herself willingly to his abuse.

For many New Yorkers, Sita's abduction is a pivotal moment in the definition of her character. This moment is captured in Sukanya Rahman's work. Like Pinto's *Sita in the Metropolis*, Sukanya Rahman's boxed assemblage, places Sita in a markedly popular cultural environment. The collage incorporates a devotional poster image of Sita's abduction by Ravana with other images from Indian and American popular culture, such as Dick Tracy. By juxtaposing a diverse set of unrelated images,

Rahman creates a new vision of Sita. In a comic book-like caption Sita speaks out, her voice calling forth as a type of wake-up call to the viewer: “What are you going to do about it?” The Sita of this piece is very different from the Sita who “seemed subservient, without opinion...soundless, voiceless,” described by a member of a domestic violence support group at *Sakhi for South Asian women*. The Sita of Rahman’s piece has a voice, even in the face of her abduction in Ravana’s chariot.

Sita’s abduction is often viewed as a point of departure, when the “real” action begins. Her forced captivity is the spark that ignites the epic battle between Ravana and Rama. One child at the Swaminarayan Temple, in fact, wrote that: “Because of Sita’s greed the *Ramayana* started,” referring to her desire for the golden deer (the ruse of Ravana) which, in this young boy’s interpretation, led to her abduction and set in motion the rest of the tale. Had Sita not crossed the *lakshmana rekha*, another child said, she “would have been safe.” She didn’t listen to Rama or Lakshmana and so “got into trouble.” This ten year old girl associated Sita’s crossing the line with warnings that her mother gave her “never to speak with strangers” and not to leave the house without parental permission.

After the abduction and the *agni pariksha*, Sita is (in some versions of the *Ramayana*) exiled and rejected by Rama. Not all the New Yorkers familiar with the *Ramayana* tradition related this part of the narrative. For instance, a group of children in Flushing, New York were unfamiliar with the incident, and many in the group emphasised that after the *agni pariksha*, Sita and Rama “lived happily ever after” and “had babies.” For those who consider this episode important, the challenges put to Sita’s character and her rejection by Rama are interpreted in both positive and negative ways. As she is sent into



The Geeta temple at Elmhurst, New York

Sita is everything and every colour.

Teenage Devotee, Swaminarayan Temple, Flushing, New York

the forest, pregnant and abandoned, a number of women likened her to single women who raise children alone and survivors of abuse who finally find the strength to leave those who victimise them. One survivor of domestic violence wrote: “I admire Sita’s strength in bearing life’s difficulties head-on, raising her kids herself without [the] support of her husband, and not falling apart. She remained a strong woman to me, who relied on herself.” Emphasising a different aspect of her story, Vibha Pathak passionately warned: “Sita has put in place a character... [to show that] if a woman has some flaw, at any time, any time at all, in any situation, people can reject her. [Sita asks us:] ‘when they can even cast doubt on a character like mine, won’t it be possible to abandon you?’”

While aspects of Sita’s story are focal points for debate, she is also celebrated by many as a wholly positive figure. In these cases, the problematic aspects of her story -

which emphasise her suffering at the hands of Rama and other male characters - are not always central. In New York’s Indo-Caribbean community, Sita is still held up as a model princess, a symbol of empowerment and Indian autonomy. Similarly, at the Hindu Center in Flushing, a large number of girls and boys drew pictures of Sita as a beautiful princess. Other children described her as “fearless” and so strong that “she could carry a bow and arrow no man on earth could.” And as one woman put it, “I want to be like Sita and have all that *shakti*.”

For some, such as Shamita Das Dasgupta of Rutgers University, Sita “is a battered woman,” while for others she is a source of strength. It is not easy to make clear distinctions between interpretations and interpreters, and between the descriptions of Sita emerging from one community or another. What may be deemed a “feminist” interpretation is heard in New York’s Hindu temples, as well as in domestic violence support groups. Images produced for mainstream fine art markets often have as overt devotional meanings as those created for the temple context.

Portrayals of Sita can change depending on the settings and moment.

Sita as Devotee and the Divine

In the diaspora (as well as in India today), Hindus of different backgrounds and affiliations tend to gather together in shared temple contexts and institutions. Images of Sita are prevalent in many, though not all, Hindu temples in New York city. In most devotional spaces, however, she is not alone, but stands flanked by her husband Rama; the loyal and devoted brother, Lakshmana; and the heroic monkey, Hanuman.

In some families, homes and communities, Sita and Rama have little, if any, importance. For example, a spokesperson for the Vedanta Society in New York, suggested that Sita “is not a central figure in [their] teaching” and that the perspective on Sita within the organisation is: “as varied as the people who come here.” It is important, therefore, not to overemphasise the significance of Sita as a subject of devotion. She is always situated within a larger context, be it with other images of Gods and Goddesses or with other devotees, and not all those in the Hindu tradition award her a prominent place.

When Sita has a presence, there are multiple ways of understanding her as well as her relationship to the Divine. At the Shri Divya Dham Mandir in Woodside, New York, a group of teenage girls stood before a large, almost life-size marble *murti* and eagerly described Sita: “Sita is the wife of God,” “Sita is our role model,” “Sita is our mother.” Children at the Hindu Center in Flushing said, “Sita is God,” and among members of the Indo-Caribbean community, Sita is often called *shakti* (the embodiment of female power). She is also spoken of as a manifestation of Lakshmi/Shri and the wife of Vishnu, or she is

Sita is a battered woman. She is a pawn in the power games – honor, nation, marriage, female chastity, fidelity, heterosexuality, abduction, revenge, rejection, class, military intervention and bravery – that men play.

**Shamita Das Dasgupta, Manavi,
New Jersey**

equated with the great Goddess herself. When she is viewed as Divine, devotees often point to stories of her miraculous birth, her survival of the fire test, and her return to the earth as indicators of her special status.

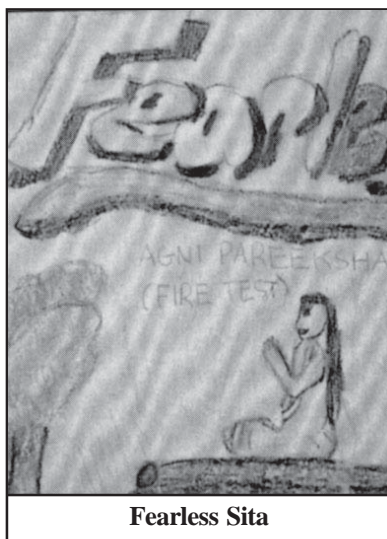
For some members of New York’s Hindu devotional communities, Sita is seen as distinctly human, and as the ideal devotee (*bhakti*). In this context, Sita is not herself Divine. Within Hinduism, devotion (*bhakti*) emphasises relationships between the devotee and the Divine, understood variously to be a devotee’s lover, parent, friend, master, or bearer of peace and compassion. Sita is emblematic of such relationality, as she is

most often represented in relation to others and is rarely seen in isolation. First and foremost, for many worshippers, she is remembered as the devoted and loyal wife of Rama and is held up as a perfect model of devotion. She is also revered as a model of wifely *dharma* (duty) and associated with other ideal wives of Hindu mythology.

New York’s Changing Sita or Sita in a Changing New York

Whether one identifies Sita as a traditional role model or a possible source of rebellion from dominant gender roles, she is a presence among the members of the South Asian community in New York. When Kama Singh spoke of Sita’s significance, he emphasised that she is not only a model in devotional contexts but that her influence is also “carved out into more secular environments.” In the Indo-Caribbean community, even progressive and radical departures from traditional customs and interpretations “presume her presence.”

Sita, then, is many things: ideal mother and wife, symbol of both female power and the oppression of women, both victim and victor. Some feel she can inspire “ideal” behaviours in women and devotees today, that she possessed qualities (such as patience, virtue, chastity, devotion, and strength) which all should strive to emulate. Yet, others believe that challenging the traditional telling of the story is important. Sita, in this respect, is like the canvas with which artists begin -depending on how her story is told and retold, she is painted in a different way. This diversity, however, is not always valued, and alternative narratives and models are not always available. Sujata Warrier has argued that there needs to be “a whole range of Sitas here,” so that “anybody can follow whichever one they want to.” Then we might see the “empowered Sita”



Fearless Sita

who dares to reject Rama and live on her own. This view of Sita is not always seen, or spoken. According to Warrior, the image of the “good Hindu woman,” who does as she is told, is very prevalent in the Indian diaspora.

Conversations about Sita sometimes become heated largely because Sita acts as a vehicle through which people speak of other issues in their lives - such as the role of women and the difficulties that South Asians face maintaining their traditions and cultural commitments in a new and diverse environment. During a visit by a class from the New York City Museum School to the Hindu Temple Society in Flushing, two devotees argued about Sita in front of the students. The older of the two women described Sita as an ideal role model, while the younger of the two (in her mid-thirties) laughed and said, “I hope not.” Yet, even though Sita’s status is contested, she remains a powerful symbol of continuity and change. At the same time that she is described in new ways, dressed in new clothing, and placed in new situations, she is also an emissary of tradition, providing a link to the rituals, traditions, and stories of generations both past and present and a culture which, at times, seems all too far away for those living in New York. Like other heroes and divinities of South Asia, Sita is engaged in a larger process of cultural transformation and articulation that reverberates through New York’s South Asian communities. □

The exhibition Sita in the City was held in conjunction with the international Sita Symposium held at Columbia University in April of 1998. This article and its related exhibition are formed by the voices and perspectives of: religious specialists and devotees in local Hindu temples; survivors of domestic violence; community activists; artists; and

children. Many, but certainly not all, of these voices come from within the South Asian Hindu communities of New York. The term the “South Asian community” refers to Americans who in some way trace their identities to South Asia, including those of Indo-Caribbean descent. Quotes referred to in the text and given in toto are drawn from interviews in English and Hindi (conducted by Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy; translated by Anne Murphy) and from written submissions in English which were collected in February and March of 1998. Words in South Asian languages are transliterated without the use of diacritic marks. All photographs, unless otherwise noted, were taken by Anne Murphy and Shana Sippy. Materials were gathered with the help of: Vibha Pathak and the Swamiji of Geeta Temple and Shri Divya Dham Mandir; Satya Narayan Mandir; America Seva Ashram Sangha; the Hindu Temple Society of North America; Shri Hanuman Mandir; Shri Aksharapurushottam Swami-narayan Temple; Shri Ram Sharanam Temple; the Vedanta Society; Brahma Kumari Global Harmony House; Sadhu Vaswani Center; Shri Shri Radha Govinda Mandir of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness; the Hindu Center; The Rajkumari Cultural Center; Seva Dev Mandir/Viswa Seva Ashram; Sakhi for

South Asian Women; Shamita Das Dasgupta and Manavi; South Asian Women’s Creative Collective; Sujata Warrior of the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence; the teachers and students at the New York City Museum School; the visual artists whose work was represented in the exhibition and/or this article; Professors J. S. Hawley (Barnard College) and G. S. Mann (University of California, Santa Barbara); Mary McGee and the staff of Columbia University’s Dharam Hinduja Indie Research Center; and others. We are grateful to the temples which allowed us to photograph images (murtis) and the Hindu Temple Society, which provided a photograph of their Sita image. We mention by name those people we contacted through their institutional affiliation; quotes from other informants are kept anonymous. We would like to thank David Wirtschafter for his support with this project.

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.

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