

Sita's Suicide: How the Ideology of Pativrata Sati Destroys Indian Women

by Ankur Betageri (July 2015)



*To the memory of my great-great-grandmother, Hakmi Bai,
who was whipped to death by her husband for eating paan (betel leaf).*

O foolish race of mortals, that gave gods such jobs to do,

Then went and made them fierce with anger into the bargain too!

What groans you purchased for yourselves, what grievous injury

For us, what tears you fashioned for the children yet to be!

—Lucretius,

The Nature of Things[\[1\]](#)

Trans.

by A.E. Stallings

The relationship of Rama and Sita in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, though not a happy and harmonious one by any stretch of imagination, has always been projected as the ideal husband-wife relationship in Hindu society. What was their relationship really like? Contrary to the evidence present in *Ramayana*, Rama is seen as a monogamist, and not just as a monogamist, but as a loving and devoted husband. Since he is a glorified *maryada purushottama*, the embodiment of decency and the best among men, he is an ideal to all Hindu men – just as Muhammad is to Muslim men – and following him they become not only patriarchal husbands eternally peeved by

their wives' independence but also possessive husbands paranoid about their wives' chastity—roles that Rama performed to perfection in the *Ramayana*.

Sita, on the other hand, is a *pativrata sati*, a 'husband-worshipping', 'self-sacrificing' wife. Women, it is true, are highly respected in the Hindu society, but *only when they are self-sacrificing wives or satis*. The word 'sati', meaning wife, (etymologically, 'the truthful'), comes from goddess Sati who was the first consort of Lord Shiva. (Shiva is a middleclass post-Vedic deity equated with the more subaltern and mercurial Vedic deity Rudra, while Sati, as a reincarnation of the all-powerful goddess Adi Parashakti, is a house-wifey version of her former self.) Goddess Sati is the daughter of king Daksha (therefore also known as Dakshayani) and the granddaughter of one of three supreme deities of Hinduism, Brahma. By declaring himself superior to all the gods, Brahma had once angered another supreme deity, Shiva, who, in his anger, had chopped off Brahma's fifth head. But despite this ancestral antagonism Brahma's granddaughter Sati falls in love with Shiva and marries him leaving her father Daksha fuming. Daksha doesn't hide his displeasure and when he performs an Ashwamedha Yajna (grand horse-sacrifice) he invites all the gods except Shiva and Sati. In spite of not being invited Sati decides to attend the horse-sacrifice ceremony only to hear abuses from her father about her and her beloved husband. Disgusted with her father and convinced about her husband's unquestionable greatness Sati then immolates herself wishing that she be reborn to a more worthy father. Sati's wish is granted and she is reborn to King Parvat, the mountain god, as Parvati. Parvati then goes on to become the second consort of Lord Shiva. This is only the mainstream narrative of who Sati is; there are many other legends and stories of Sati, all extolling the self-sacrificing nature of the devoted wife. The Lambani legend of the beautiful Bheema Rani married to the short-tempered hukka-addict Teeta Raja, who rips open his stomach when his pregnant wife and father prevent him from going on a hunting expedition, and Bheema Rani immolating herself after failing to save her husband's life, and thereby becoming Bheema Sati, is one such non-mainstream narratives.[\[iii\]](#) But all these narratives are disturbing evidence of the systematic attempts made by the patriarchal Indian society to establish self-denial as the supreme virtue of the wife and the act of sacrificing herself by burning to death on the husband's pyre as the highest expression of this virtue.

Most readers would know the word sati through its Anglicized form of 'suttee' which perhaps brings to mind horrid images of the long-abolished practice of self-immolation of women on the husband's pyre. Though the practice of sati was legally abolished in British India through the Sati Regulation Act of 1829, largely due to the efforts of the Renaissance man Rammohun Roy, the funeral ritual continued to be practiced, most notably in the state of Rajasthan, which made the Rajasthan Government pass the Sati (Prevention) Act in 1987. The main reason for this

was the immolation in 1987 of Roop Kanwar, the eighteen-year-old widow of Maal Singh Shekhawat, belonging to the Rajput community of Rajasthan. While the sati immolation was horrifying in itself what disturbed most people was the sickening and obscene glorification of this act not only by those who had witnessed it but also by those who were under the influence of the television Ramayana series telecast at around the same time. Anand Patwardhan in his brilliant 1995 documentary film, *Father, Son, and Holy War*, brings us face to face with this medieval horror when he shows a bearded middle-aged man, the coordinator of a Kshatriya organisation in Delhi, justifying the practice of sati as a matter of *aan*, *baan* and *shaan* (honour, glory and prestige) for the Rajputs.

The Sati Prevention Act of Rajasthan, adopted by the Government of India as 'The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987' has been a serious legal deterrent to the practice since 1988 as it awards death sentence for anyone abetting the commission of sati. As there are no reported incidents of sati after 1988 it is safe to assume that the practice of sati has stopped but it would be hard to deny the existence of sati-ideology as a subterranean current in the patriarchal Indian psyche. The concept of sati as the ideal Indian wife is ideologically so well-entrenched that it wouldn't be wrong – not at all – to see most dowry-deaths as the reenactment of sati-immolation. Though, instead of being 'voluntary self-immolation,' (sati, in reality, was rarely voluntary; it was brutally enforced by the patriarchal community in the name of honour) it is forced immolation, or battering-to-death, of women by the husband and husband's family. My claim is that while it is indisputable that the all-pervasive legend of Sati has been the root-cause of the oppression of women in India, it is the projection of the Rama-Sita relationship as the ideal marital relationship, and the image of Sita as the ideal self-sacrificing wife, which has normalized and naturalized the subjugation and oppression of women in post-Independence India.

The key to Sita's condition is in her very name, and whose daughter she is said to be. Sita is so named because King Janaka, her adopted father, found her in a *Sita*, a furrow. This makes her the daughter of Bhumi or Mother Earth. Now, no name could make a more direct reference to feudal agricultural society and the kind of female fantasy that this society engenders. This makes the obvious sexual connotation of the name all the more powerful. Sita is the furrow made to take the plough, swallow the seeds and produce crops. Sita, in other words, is a fertility deity, whose one glorified function is to have sex and reproduce. If the whole of female personality is reduced to her sexual and reproductive function, given the passive sexual role that is accorded to woman in an agricultural society, she becomes the one who is dominated, and not merely dominated which is still 'understandable', but one who is aggressively violated. This is the ideological creation of a woman who is primordially

helpless in relation to man and who is the eternal victim of his blind 'agricultural' lust. It is this deep-rooted anti-woman stereotype which has naturalized crimes against women in the Indian feudal society.

Let us now look at the Rama-Sita story as narrated in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the earliest existing version of the Rama legend.

Rama, who is said to have been devoted and loyal to his wife, is the jealous and insecure husband *par excellence* for he is bound more by the societal code of honour – being the typical male subject of what Ruth Benedict calls 'culture of shame' of the East (as opposed to 'culture of guilt' of the West) – than by the principle of truth and integrity. The relationship of Rama and Sita is not an equal relationship. Rama is always more powerful than Sita, and Sita, as the willingly dominated wife, celebrates as her extraordinary virtue this very willingness to be dominated, punished and psychologically and socially abused until she finally rebels by committing suicide.

When the 'villain' Ravana abducts Sita, to avenge the facial mutilation of his sister Shurpanakha by Lakshmana, the abduction, instead of being blamed on the male (and Brahmin) abductor Ravana– or the (Kshatriya) instigator Lakshmana – is blamed on the victim (and Shudra^[iii]) Sita. Her crime? Crossing the Lakshman-rekha, the magic-line of female containment drawn by her brother-in-law Lakshmana. Ravana would not have crossed the Lakshman-rekha and abducted Sita as crossing that line would have destroyed him; it is Sita's crossing the line – her foolish and innocent trust of a male stranger – that enabled Ravana to abduct her.

After abducting Sita Ravana holds her captive in Ashoka-van (etymologically, 'the forest of sorrow-less trees'—is Valmiki suggesting that Sita was 'sorrow-less' there?) Here Sita rebuffs repeated attempts of the married Ravana to seduce her while Rama in faraway Dandaka forest, overcome by grief, goes about asking trees and birds whether they have seen Sita. He finally vows to reclaim his wife and gets King Sugriva's monkey-army to build a bridge on the sea between "the mainland" and Ravana's kingdom of Lanka. (Pamban Island or Rameshwaram, the "mainland" from which Rama is said to have built the bridge, is itself an island separated from the mainland of Tamil Nadu. Were Rama, his entourage and the monkey-army airlifted to Pamban Island on the pushpaka vimana so that they could build the bridge from half the distance? Rama devotees, convinced about the historicity of the Rama story, would nod; they don't need evidence to be convinced, they want 'evidence' and 'explanation' – no matter how ridiculous – to validate their conviction.)

When Rama finally reaches Lanka and defeats Ravana— after his loyal devotee Hanuman has burned down a good part of Lankapuri, the capital of Lanka – he, instead of directly going to Ashokavan where his beloved and long-suffering wife is held captive, spends time in the coronation ceremony of Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana who has sided with Rama in the war. So much for Rama being a loving and anguished husband!

And when he finally goes to claim Sita, instead of embracing her and showering her face with tears and kisses, as one would expect a long-separated, pining husband to do, Rama-of-the-long-arms makes the most obscene demand imaginable: he suspects Sita of infidelity with Ravana and asks her to prove her chastity. Now how does a married woman prove her chastity? In the days before birth-control the fact that she is not pregnant or has not had children should be sufficient proof. But no, Rama wants a more exacting proof: he wants her to undergo an *agnipareeksha*, a fire-ordeal. And *Ramayana* tells us that Sita underwent this ordeal, walked into a blaze of fire and came out unscathed, as she was indeed a pure and chaste pativrata. This convinces Rama for the time being and the forest-exile now being over, he takes her back to Ayodhya as his wife and the legitimate chaste queen.

But poor Sita cannot enjoy this status for long. One day while walking the streets of Ayodhya city Rama overhears people gossiping about him: How disgraceful of the king to have taken back a fallen woman—a woman abducted and almost certainly ravished by Ravana. Rama is sucked into a vortex of shame and humiliation and suddenly the trial by fire, which the citizens of Ayodhya have not witnessed, is no longer proof of Sita's chastity. But who or what is the source of Rama's disgrace? No, it is not the ignorant, malicious and misogynist public of Ayodhya, not their destructive rumour-mongering and character assassination. It is Sita, his wife, who made the horrendous life-altering mistake of crossing the line of female limits, the Lakshman-rekha. So Rama does the unthinkable: he instructs Lakshmana to take the pregnant Sita and abandon her in the forest, to die of starvation or to become food to wild animals. But Sita is lucky, at least for a brief period. She is saved by the forest hermit Valmiki, the author of *Ramayana*, and it is in his care and in his hermitage that Sita gives birth to the twins Lava and Kusha, and brings them up with all the tribulations of a single parent. But Sita is not to enjoy for long this little happiness that she has created for herself in the midst of wilderness.

Rama, after killing the Shudra ascetic Shambuka for breaching the varna code and performing tapas, gets down to perform the Ashwamedha Yagna to become the sovereign of the world. The Ashwamedha sacrifice, other than sitting in front of the fire-altar, involves letting a horse wander the lands for a year and usurping any kingdom that the horse walks into. Valmiki, who in the meantime has composed the *Ramayana* and taught them to Lava and Kusha brings them to the

place of sacrifice and it doesn't take Rama long to recognize his sons. Valmiki now goes and fetches Sita. This poses a problem for Rama: being an exemplary husband he has the moral obligation to take her and his children back, but since he is also a *maryada purushottama*, and the King of Kosala, he must make absolutely sure that Sita is chaste—otherwise people will gossip again and bring him shame. So he asks Sita to undergo another *agnipareeksha*. But this is the last straw for Sita; betrayed and disillusioned she is now lucid enough to sense the profound rock-like indifference of Rama; she can finally see what a cold, sick and predatory relationship she has been in. And realization firms her resolve: she is not going back to this man, she is not going to sit next to him on the throne, smile, and pretend to be a happy queen. But being a sati, a self-sacrificing wife, she cannot challenge Rama's command to undergo the fire-ordeal. She cannot grab her sons and go back to the forest dwelling. As a good Hindu wife, she has only one option: to submit to the intractable laws of patriarchy. And she submits by undergoing the *agnipareeksha*, but this time instead of emerging out of the fire unscathed she allows it to turn her into ash. Sita rebels against Rama the only way she could: she commits suicide.

This is not just a story. Like the legend of Sati, this is a myth, an *urplot* that has unfolded, with different variations and endings, in the lives of millions of Hindu women. It has not only reinforced the patriarchal stereotype of the submissive, self-sacrificing wife, thereby destroying the freedom and agency of the Indian woman, it has also made *agnipareeksha*, the trial by ordeal, a routine traditional practice adopted to test the chastity and truthfulness of women. Abbe Dubois, the nineteenth century French Catholic missionary who lived in Tamil Nadu, presents the following case in his *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*[\[iv\]](#) which is emblematic of the condition of the traditional Hindu housewife.

A certain young woman who lived close to my home became the victim of her husband's jealous suspicions. To prove her innocence, he forced to plunge her arm up to her elbow into a bath of boiling oil. The unhappy woman, sure of her inviolable virtue, did not hesitate to obey, and the result was that she was most frightfully scalded. The wound became inflamed, and blistered, finally mortified, and caused the unhappy woman's death.

No doubt the disregard of the sanctity of an oath prevailing among the Hindus has, to a certain extent, necessitated the adoption of this system of trial by ordeal.

My question is, why should we celebrate this mythology as central to Indian (Hindu) ethos when it perpetuates such a dangerous stereotype and robs the Indian woman of her independence,

dignity and self-respect? Many alternative Ramayanas, including a few feminist “Sitayanas,” it is true, have been written to resist the pernicious anti-women stereotype of pativrata sati created by Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, but as far as I can see it has had no effect on the status of women in the “cow-belt” region of North India, though the version of *Ramayana* popular here, *Sri Ramcharitamanas* written by the sixteenth century Awadhi poet Tulsidas, does not even mention the suicide of Sita. I see this as symptomatic of the ‘North Indian’ mindset; *Sri Ramcharitamanas* by erasing the incident of Sita’s suicide seems to pretend that Sita’s oppression itself does not exist. Like a typical “Ma”-worshipping religious fanatic, Tulsidas sublimates and poeticizes Sita’s suffering and is incapable of seeing on her face a real suffering which could be – and should be – prevented. To employ Bengali phraseology, Sita for Tulsidas is a *manashi*, an idealized woman, and not a *manushi*, an actual and real woman. The same mindset which worships Sita eventually destroys her—it is this fact that Tulsidas does his best to cover up. No wonder it is the same Tulsidas who said, “Drum, rustic, Shudra, animal, woman: one has the right to beat all these.”

Ramayana is a troublesome text not only because it is patriarchal but also because it is racist. Without doubt the most disturbing aspect of *Ramayana*, whether that of Valmiki or of Tulsidas, is its incredible Aryan racism and Aryan supremacism. The description of Kishkindha, a place near present-day Hampi in Karnataka, as the kingdom of monkeys ruled by monkey-kings Sugriva and Vali, the characterization of Hanuman as a monkey-diplomat who becomes devoted to the Kshatriya Rama, of Jambuvan as the king of the bears, the depiction of a Dravidian king as the demon Ravana, the brutal facial mutilation (cutting off of ears and nose) carried out on Shurpanakha for the innocent act of expressing her desire for Rama—all these are so virulently and sickeningly racist that I am surprised how *Ramayana* even came to be accepted as literature in South India. Yes, there are many South Indian retellings and famous regional adaptations, like those of Kambar, Eluttachan, Nagachandra, Narahari and Kuvempu; yes, the Rama story – like the Sati legend – is much older than Valmiki’s and different oral versions of the legend might have existed in South India prior to the composition of Valmiki’s epic, but given the obvious narrative bias I don’t think anyone can seriously dispute A.L. Basham’s claim that *Ramayana* is the glorification of the victory of a minor Aryan chief over his Dravidian counterpart.

Religious ideology as the larger meta-narrative into which our own lives fit in has not been sufficiently understood and appreciated in India. That the social unconscious of North Indians is still largely shaped and influenced by the patriarchal stereotypes and the racist, Aryan-supremacist ideology embodied in texts like *Ramayana* and *Sri Ramcharitamanas* is not even

acknowledged. This denial of the all-pervasiveness of religious ideology is at the very heart of what has been called the 'crisis of Indian secularism'. Religion as a 'matter of faith' has always been out-of-bounds for the Indian intellectual forcing him to play the boring secular game of establishing, with each new book and article, what I would call 'the secular status quo-ist intellectual history of India'. The greatest exemplar of this trend is Amartya Sen. He maintains: Indian culture is a syncretic culture; Hinduism has always been open to external influences and is fundamentally pluralistic; Hindu fundamentalism is the 'cognitive problem' of a few who are blind to the extraordinary diversity and heterogeneity of this religion—if they manage to see the diversity they will be cured of extremism; there is nothing wrong with religions, they are essentially benign and have nothing to do with social problems; social problems like gender inequality, caste discrimination, sectarian violence, untouchability, poverty and bonded labour can be solved purely through legislative and legal interventions; it is indecent and unbecoming of a civilized person to criticize religions and hurt religious feelings (irrespective of whether these feelings exist or not); it is okay to state that Charvaka or atheist-materialist school of philosophy forms the first chapter of Madhava Acharya's *Sarvadarshana Samgraha*^[v] without bothering to inform that it occupies that place because it is considered the most rudimentary form of philosophy and that it is refuted in the very next chapter on the Bauddha System, it is also okay not to mention that it is Advaita Vedanta, not dealt with in that book, which is celebrated as the crest-jewel of all Indian philosophies.^[vi] Amartya Sen's brand of secularism is not the answer to Hindu supremacist tyranny nor is his manner of preaching to the choir the way to counter it. It is also no way to approach the problem of religion-sanctioned social injustice that is still oppressing such a large section of Indian population. Power and hegemony have been systematically coded in the Hindu religion and only a remarkable mental resistance would make a person not see how these hegemonic structures are played out in Indian social life and politics.

The criticism of religion is at the very heart of secularism and as long as we consider religious criticism improper and unacceptable, while at the same time allowing religion and religious fanaticism to influence all aspects of our social and political life, we will only be pretending at being secularists. Religious tolerance in our country has become complicity with the powers that be, a conspiracy of silence; it is used to create the false sense of harmony, filled with the stifled cries of the oppressed. This is not tolerance but a systematic form of violence. Religious tolerance in a democracy is not blindness to dogma; it is not a helpless passivity to the vicious imposition of dogma on our social and cultural life. Tolerance in a democracy means open-mindedness and a willingness, and ability, to examine the unfair, dogmatic positions taken by oneself, one's community, one's state and history. Real tolerance, in other words, is tolerance of religious criticism; to create this

state of tolerance in Indian society, we have to let go of Gandhi's absurd and otherworldly formulation of 'truth is god' (if truth is god it is irrelevant, or of little use, to the people of this world) and replace it with the rational, materialist and honest formulation of 'truth is justice'. It is only this drastically changed orientation which will make us see the real pain and suffering inflicted on ordinary citizens in the name of god and religion.

[i] Lucretius. *The Nature of Things*. Trans. A.E. Stallings. London: Penguin Books, 2007, p.186

[ii] Naik, Lalitha. *Banjara Hejjegurutugalu*. Bangalore: Karnataka Rajya Patragara Ilakhe, 2009, pp.97-101 (in Kannada)

[iii] Women are considered Shudra because they do not have the right to undergo upanayana ceremony and wear yajnopaveeta (cross-string). While Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya men are considered *dwijas*, or twice-borns, because they can observe the upanayana ceremony. Manu in his *Dharmashastra* clearly states that marriage is the only rite a woman can undergo. See: Kane, P.V. *History of Dharmasastra: Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law, Volume 2 Part 1*. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941, pp.292-295.

[iv] Dubois Abbe J.A. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*. Trans. by Henry K. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, p.662.

For a critical analysis of Rama's personality see B.R. Ambedkar's brilliant essay "The Riddle of Rama and Krishna" in *Riddles in Hinduism*.

[v] Acharya, Madhava. *The Sarva-darshana-samgraha*. Trans. by E.B. Cowell and A.E. Gough. London: Trubner and Co, 1882.

[vi] Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.

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