

Volume I, Perspectives - A Peer-Reviewed, Bilingual, Interdisciplinary E-Journal

Re-orienting Mythology: Sita and Radha

By

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Abstract

In the current times, it is thought-provoking as why TV serials on Indian mythological subjects are gaining high viewership ratings consistently. Moreover, books on mythology have proved immensely popular for the last some years. What is so compelling about the timelessness of these narratives that they become relevant again and again? I will focus on two of the key women characters in our traditional lore, and explore how the woman's perspective can be foregrounded to offer alternative readings to the ones propagated by the patriarchal mainstream. Using the recent books that I have coedited with Namita Gokhale, *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (Penguin 2009, enlarged ed.2018) and *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love* (Penguin 2018), I hope to convey the need for reorienting mythology to present women with an inherent strength which has been muted in the legacy of narrative transmissions.

Re-orienting Mythology: Sita and Radha

In the current Corona times, it is thought provoking as to why TV serials on Indian mythological subjects are gaining high viewership ratings consistently. Banner headlines declared on 2nd May: ‘Ramayana & Mahabharata Rule TRP Chart,’ (Target rating point./filmibeat.com). A slight shift occurred on 22nd May: BR Chopra’s Mahabharata overtook Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayana in the race, but Krishna, also produced by Ramanand Sagar, joined the charts at the top. Why is it that in a country so vast and diverse, these stories seem to cross boundaries and lodge in hearths, homes and chaupals everywhere? What is so compelling about the timelessness of these narratives that they become relevant again and again? It’s not just the appeal of TV serials, we know that books on mythology have proved immensely popular for the last some years, and the subject features at almost every literature festival and seminar in the country.

I’ll turn to Devdutt Pattanaik for one kind of answer: “Myths may not satisfy the demands of rationality or science, but they contain profound wisdom – provided one believes they do and is willing to find out what they communicate.” (Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent). If Devdutt’s is a statement resting on a Faith system, Amish Tripathi, another best- selling author, has this to say: “Looking at the stories of our gods and goddesses and reinterpreting them is a very rich Indian tradition. I am not doing anything new. ... The key thing is one must do it with respect. And all my books are written with respect.” (<https://yourstory.com/weekender/shiva-trilogy-amish-tripathi-raavan-mythology>). Amish’s approach is about a strategy for retelling myths.

Picking up from there let me try to present the reasons why Namita Gokhale and I chose to bring new attention to two extraordinary women through our coedited volumes In Search of

Sita: Revisiting Mythology (2009, expanded edition, 2018) , and Finding Radha: The Quest for Love (2018), both published by Penguin India. Namita believed, “Indian myth is never static, it is constantly in the process of reinterpreting and revalidating itself” (Sita,xvii),and my experience as a university teacher brought home to me that “most modern dilemmas are reflected in the mythic lore, to be interpreted in contemporary terms” (Sita p.84). Entering the details of that frame, I hope in this talk to convey the need for reorienting mythology to present women with an inherent strength which has often been muted in the legacy of narrative transmissions. I will speak first of Sita, and then of Radha, trying to map perspectives relevant to our time; feminism, environment protection, rights and duties, the problem of choice, the location of power etc. I’ll conclude with looking around us at Corona times again.

I: Sita

The book *In Search of Sita* undertook questioning the traditional representation of Sita as an “ideal wife” who is silent and self-sacrificing. Film maker, Madhureeta Anand made a documentary while our research was in progress and it showed students, policemen, community leaders, ordinary citizens of Delhi saying Sita was too weak to function as an ‘ideal’ in the modern world. We decided to capture the larger story by going into less known texts of the Ramayana— folk versions, creative writing— believing that the Ramayana constitutes a living mythology in India, with rituals and performances that are ever changing. Our research, conducted over five years for this book—and it’s an on-going interest— demonstrates Sita’s relevance to a globalising India. The contributors to the anthology interpret the Ramayana from perspectives that show the quiet strengths of Sita as a woman who is confident of her identity and has a subtle understanding of the social forces around her. She fulfils her ‘duties’ even as she asserts her choices. Moreover, the patriarchal message of mainstream renderings of the Ramayana can be offset by a forceful Sita who belongs to regional and folk versions of the

epic, and the diaspora adaptations that are emerging. Many of these versions are explored for the first time in our book.

I will take you through three perspectives to show how Sita is still relevant.

First is my own attempt to enter a major gap in the story. When was Sita born and to whom? Tulsidas has dwelt on the maternal glances of Kaushalya mata when the toddler Rama found his feet. Recall the famous rendering by Lata Mangeshkar, “Thumak Chalat Ram Chandra/ baajata pajania”. But who was Sita’s mother? Who was her biological father? The familiar tale of the baby girl found in the furrow of King Janaka’s field is a perplexing riddle to genealogical mapping. Janaka named her ‘Sita’—literally meaning ‘found in the furrow’. Others call her Janaki, daughter of Janaka, or Mythili, the princess of Mithila. Under patriarchy, women’s names—and their roles—are relational. Abandoned by a mother (presumably), discovered in a furrow, and finally, at the end of a constantly challenged life, returning to Mother Earth by an act of will, is Sita a self-progenated ‘goddess’ who can be seen through modern feminism as the ‘unitary’ woman?

Early texts might even support this view. There appears to be a Sita who existed prior to the Sita of Valmiki’s Ramayana. A verse in the Rg Veda mentions an earth goddess, Sita, who blesses the crops and brings fecundity and prosperity. But such a Sita is contrary to the Ramayana-related traditions, which prohibit certain forms of agricultural labour for women. According to farming practices in the hill regions of northern India, women are not allowed to touch or use the plough. A poignant folk tale from the upper reaches of Himachal Pradesh recounts how a devoted wife waited anxiously during the planting season, hoping that her man, a migrant worker in the city, would come back to the village and attend to the fields. The children starved, the earth turned brown, but there was still no man. One day at early dawn, she

hitched the oxen to the plough. As the sun panned over the caked earth, the village awoke to the sight of this bold, lonely woman doing an unwomanly job. There was first a sense of shock and the fear of Earth's curse, but finally there was admiration for the woman's courage in breaking meaningless traditions.

In folk tales, the ancient and the modern, the scripted and the oral are often conflated. When I came upon this story, I was fascinated by its emphasis on the Earth connections of the Sita myth. Ecology and sustenance are vital in farming communities. The ancient goddess protects the fields but is also supposed to have laid down laws of labour distribution by gender roles—these have continued in farming practices in traditional communities. Who will then operate the plough, a male symbol though it might have been in the past? The ancient Sita who blessed the crops needs to be invoked now again so that economic activity is sustainable by women and men in a farming sector which is going through some radical changes in India.

For a second perspective I contacted to New York based film maker Nina Paley who created an animation film and added Jazz, calling it 'Sita Sings the Blues'. Nina had married a US resident of Indian origin whose family lived in Kerala. When he was visiting his parents, she was inexplicably abandoned by her husband and given a divorce notice by email from India. Nina was devastated and also puzzled. In a state of such trauma, Nina Paley turned to the Ramayana which she had seen her husband reading devoutly, and she began to identify with Sita abandoned by Rama. Here are extracts from my interview with Ms. Paley:

ML. Do you think Sita in the Ramayana was a passive person, or do you believe it was merely a patriarchal interpretation that highlighted the submissive aspects of her character?

NP. The latter – I do not see Sita as passive. The Agni Pariksha I see as a metaphor for grief. I wanted to kill myself when my husband dumped me, and the unbearable pain was like fire –

I thought it was going to kill me, and I'm still kind of amazed it didn't. Sita's walk through fire was actually an active expression of a heartbreak experience. In this way Sita was far more active than most of us. In fact, Sita is a model of expressing what we often repress.

ML. *Sita Sings the Blues* blurs the distinction between the tragic story of the epic and the comedy of modern lives, specially of women caught in the binds of marital conventions.

NP. To be clear, *Sita Sings the Blues* isn't a critique of marriage or sexist social conventions: it is an anguished critique of romantic love itself. I didn't love my rejecting husband because society told me to. What blew my mind while reading various Ramayanas in the midst of my own break-up was how primal and universal the problems of love are, and have always been. I do not see Sita as a victim of society. She was not "forced" to be loyal to Rama. She could have stayed at the palace during his forest exile; she could have walked away when he rejected her in Lanka (he declares, "You are free to go wherever you want"; he also gives her permission to remarry). It was Sita's essential nature to love Rama, regardless of what the rest of society expected. At the end of her story, when she finally gives up on him, her life can end. The way I see it, she attains Moksha at that point – liberation not only from her congenital love of a man who breaks her heart, but from all of Life's sucker punches.

A third perspective comes from a pre-independence time Tamil writer, Kumudini, which was the pen name of Smt. Renganayaki Thatham, hiding her identity so effectively that even her family members, mother-in-law and other censorious in-laws, did not know that they were sharing a home with a woman of public fame, even notoriety. Her husband was her ally in connecting with publishers. Kumudini is one of the early feminists in literature who called for breaking gender stereotypes. In a series called *Letters from the Palace* (in the 1930s), Kumudini imagines Sita, newly arrived in fashionable Ayodhya, writing to her mother

in a more conventional Mithila. Initially excited about the pomp and ceremony associated with the royal household of Dasharatha, Sita writes about saris— that narrow borders are in vogue, that mayurkanthi is the popular colour. Sita laments that her mother gave her saris with broad borders and old-fashioned colours which she can't use in Ayodhya among Rama's fashion-conscious family. There is a coronation planned for Rama for which Sita requests her mother for new clothes that are in tune with modern trends.

Then comes the crisis of exile and Sita's letter to her mother says:

Mother.

No need to send any sari. All is over. We are going away to the forest. The coronation –will now be of Bharat. The person who is bringing this letter will tell you everything. I have only one dress made of bark skin. Therefore, if possible, send a bark skin... we are going to Chitrakoot. Nobody needs know this.

Yours in haste,

Sita.

PS. There is no need to worry any more about the colour of saris. Peace of mind is now mine. How helpful it would be if all women were to go to the forest! Half the worries would disappear.

Sita.

Kumudini's story is more a critique of commercialisation than about Sita's saris, but the manner of attacking modern themes such as competitiveness, marketing, advertising, social prestige, materiality is by using the perennial charm of the Ramayana.

From Sita to Radha is a risky journey but Namita and I attempted it in publishing *Finding Radha: The Quest for Love* about a year ago. If Sita is the icon of monogamous love and devotion in marriage, Radha challenges the institution of marriage and several assumptions accompanying it. According to various traditions Radha is already married to a person called Ayan, she is an older relative of Krishna, and the erotic abandon of Radha and Krishna's love gives no room for prudery. One major difference between Sita and Radha is however important that is their main source and literary density. Valmiki's Ramayana is dated about 500 BCE, whereas Radha lore comes to us much later, mostly from the *Gita Govinda* composed in the 12th-century by Jayadeva from Kenduli, (Oriyas and Bengalis continue to argue about the location of Kenduli). Valmiki's Ramayana is an epic poem of some 24,000 verses. Jayadev's lyric poem is short, just 12 cantos.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, Hindu mythology is expansive and all inclusive, inviting each one of us to partake what matches our preferences. Let me again present three perspectives on Radha.

The first. In my research I asked the same question as I did about Sita, about the birth and nurture of a girl child. Almost nothing is known of the origins of the beautiful Radha, except in the folklore of Barsana (in the Mathura district of modern-day Uttar Pradesh), said to be her birthplace. It is believed that the original temple of 5000 years ago was lost and later reconstructed, circa 1545 CA, as Radha Rani Mandir by Narayan Bhatt, one of the disciples of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. *Gita Govinda* has been written by this time and the Vaishnav sampradaya is propagating the worship of Radha-Krishna. We value the stories accordingly as a recreated geography of a lila shtal for the purpose of ritual pilgrimage. Radha, or 'Shri Laadli Laal' as she is called (meaning 'the most loved one'), resides in an elaborate temple on Brahma Parvat; a smaller temple in the palace courtyard commemorates the family—

father Vrishabhanu Maharaj, mother, Kirtida, their daughter, Sri Radharani, and son, Shridama. Designated areas recall episodes of Radha–Krishna’s legend—Maan Mandir for withdrawal in a sulk, Mor Kutir for the dance of reconciliation and, interestingly, a pond called Pili Pokhar, where Yashoda Maiya is thought to have applied turmeric paste to Shri Radha’s hands, accepting her as Krishna’s bride.

So, one way to reorient mythology is to build a literal dimension to the story for those who have problems with abstract and metaphorical concepts such as body and soul as applied to the pairing of Radha-Krishna, which transcends the ordinary values of matrimonial loyalty or physical restraint. Another way is to read metaphorical dimensions. For instance, the end of Gita Govinda, is supposed to have been scripted by Krishna himself since Jaidev couldn’t bring himself to write of Krishna’s abjection. He left the unfinished manuscript and went for a bath, came back to find those evocative lines written into the manuscript, ‘dehi pada pallavam udaram’ (Sri Krishna bows down his head at the feet of Sri Radha). Metaphorically then, Radha is a product of the poetic imagination, we need not ask about her birth and death—but I do.

Second is the subject of Radha and the gender question for which I will refer to art historian Alka Pande’s essay, ‘Becoming Radha’. She brings theoretical and visual information on Krishna and Radha’s ‘cross-dressing’, quite literally for reasons of play but also as a cultural signifier of gender parity. Pande says, “According to legend, the women of Gokul could not bear the mischievousness of Krishna and decided to take revenge by dressing him as a woman. The popular lyrics of the thumri ‘nar ko nari banao’ (make the lad a lass) have this as its history.” To dress him up as a woman, they make Krishna wear ghaghra and choli. His hands are made red with alta, but instead of getting miffed with the gopis, Krishna goes with the fun and partakes in the pleasure. He eagerly demands jewellery and asks for shringara. According to Alka Pande, “In Indian literature the sixteen traditional adornments of a woman

do not merely enhance her beauty—they are also an arpana (offering) for her beloved. This is an important aspect of shringara rasa.” The retribution of the gopis turns into playfulness, or lila between them and Krishna.

Radha in her turn:

She wears his peacock feather;

She sports his yellow garment,

He wraps himself in her beautiful sari

How charming the very sight of it . . .

The daughter of Vrsabhanu [Radha] turns [into] Nanda’s son [Krishna], and Nanda’s son, Vrsabhanu’s girl.

Alka Pande presents several examples of the exchange of attire, which visually conveys a strong message of sexual interplay but also of the psychological transference of attributes designated as masculine and feminine. Indic traditions contain the imaging of the Ardhanariswara (God as half woman and half man), generally picturized as Shiva and Parvati, the ideal marital pair. Modified into Radha–Krishna, the cross-dressing denotes empathy for the ‘other’, though Radha finally tells Krishna that he may dress as a woman but he will never experience viraha as a woman, which is the deep anguish of parting from the beloved.

For a third example I will refer to the long poem Sri Radhaby Dr. Ramakanta Rath, writer, bureaucrat from Orissa and a Padma Bhushan awardee. The poem was originally written in

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Oriya in 1984 was translated into English by Rath himself who holds a Master's degree in English. In Sri Radha, Ramakanta Rath reinterprets this myth to liberate Radha from her image in traditional literature and introduces her as an exceptional character who combines in herself the tenderest emotions of love with the yearning to discover her own identity. The poem is a celebration of both erotic love and existentialist soul-searching.

Radha speaks:

I know you will leave some day

and never come back,

my days before I met you will reappear,

and all the relationships I broke

will, however much I protest,

be reconstructed.

I know you will return every day,

though in a different body,

throughout the years I have to live.

The pain of your absence

will be your body then.

I would stand at the outskirts

of your resplendent life

like a ghost, hoping

you would put out all lamps and arrive dressed like a seeker of forbidden love.

All the elements of Radha lore are compressed in these remarkable lines; they make us ask whether Radha's love is bounded by earthly conditions or whether it transcends them to reach another supernal realm. Rath provides several details about Radha's married life—the husband, Aayan, could be caring, as in some versions; the mother-in-law and the community could be cursing her for her adultery, yet she could boldly abandon her home. The Radha–Krishna relationship is represented as love that is a fused oneness.

To conclude the section on Radha, I would like to remind ourselves that reorienting mythology is not a modern enterprise. The dynamism of Radha spans centuries, in fact one of the noteworthy facets of our research is the section called “Songs of Radha” where the earliest reference has been tracked down to a 7th century Sanskrit poet Vidya, translated by Andrew Schelling. We found a charming story about gopis in the medieval literature on Radha, the ‘bhamargeet’, or the ‘song of the bees’ in Nanda Das's poem ‘Uddhav's Message’. Krishna left his leelasthall of Vrindavan abruptly, without ever giving a reason to his playmates. Radha and the gopis await his return, certain of their bond of passion, but years go by and Krishna never returns. The all-knowing Krishna understands their puzzlement and sends Uddhav with a message that He, Lord Krishna, is permanently united with each of them, and hence he resides in their souls. The gopis refuse to accept such a false consolation about Krishna's absence and insist that Uddhav give them a better answer. When his repetitions annoy them thoroughly the

gopis call him a bhramar, a buzzing bee, that sings noisily, turning in endless circles. Finally, Uddhav realizes the infinite depth of their trust in Krishna and sees such supreme devotion from untutored village woman as superior to courtly knowledge.

III: The on-going quest

I am bringing my talk to a close. Reorienting mythology is an on-going process and will relate to the concerns of the time. Sita's portrayal has passed beyond Ramanand Sagar to the spunky version of her in the newer TV serial *Siyake Ram* scripted by Anand Nilakantan. Elsewhere, marginalised characters from the Ramayana are receiving attention as figures of oppression, such as Sabari who gave jhoota ber fruit to Rama, and Surpanakha, who was disfigured by Lakshman. With Radha, who, in tradition, is always relational to Krishna, I'd like to see someone write a novel about Radha in the phase after Krishna leaves her, a woman with character and presence and memory.

The journey into Indian mythology is also a journey of self-discovery as we each find our own stories within us to revisit, rewrite. Looking at the corona affected stories, I'm asking myself how many abandoned Sitas and Radhas will be left to manage as best they can and will call upon their inner resources rather than societal support. How many Savitris and Shraavan Kumars will ferry the ailing and the dead in the long march home? Mythology tells us that human stories repeat themselves. We may listen and learn; we may re-write for our own needs.

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