

Uttarākāṇḍarāmāyaṇa and Mother Sītā: As depicted by Vālmīki and Sankardev

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Sankardev's Uttarākāṇḍa

Sankardev¹ of the fifteenth-sixteenth century Assam felt the lack of the first and seventh books in the then extant *Rāmāyaṇa* of Mādhava Kandali (fourteenth century), whom the saint regarded as an unerring poet (*apramādi kavi*) and allotted the task of translating the first book to Mādhavadeva. He himself took up the task of translating the seventh, which, possibly, he had the privilege of examining elsewhere in Sanskrit. In so doing, of 111 cantos in the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, he rejected altogether the first 38 cantos relating to the stories narrating the birth of the monkeys and the *rākṣasas*. In rendering the remaining 73 cantos too he adopted an economy of expression which enabled him to complete the whole book in 763 verses only, whereas there are almost 1800 ślokas in total in the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*. For instance, he passed over the cantos 60 to 72, 74 to 76, and so on. Thus, befittingly he felt that his *Uttarākāṇḍa* was just a gist of the original (*Uttarākāṇḍasāra*). The reason behind this downsizing was probably that he could feel some parts to be unnecessary or that they were interpolations, as is now considered by modern scholars who have studied the critically. This upholds the critical powers of the saint as early as the sixteenth century.

Episodes in Sankardev's Uttarākāṇḍa

It is stated that after Rama had ruled his kingdom for 10 thousand years, Sītā conceived and one day she described how she dreamt of living in the hermitage amidst the wives of the sages. She, therefore, expressed her desire to go to the hermit forest which eventually Rāma approved of. After some days Rāma heard of the subjects' doubt about the chastity of the Queen. It was rumored that

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as she had been alone in the kingdom of the *rākṣasa* king, this might have resulted in her loss of chastity. They wondered how Rāma could think otherwise. The king after much brooding over the matter called upon Lakṣmaṇa and secretly banished Sītā to the forest, which Lakṣmaṇa complied with. As she was lamenting, Vālmīki, with some of his disciples, saw her and took her to the hermitage, where she gave birth to the twins. They were brought up and educated in all the sciences by the sage himself. The sage taught them the *Rāmāyaṇa* and as they grew up, the sage sent them to wander about singing it in public and also to sing at the court of Rāma.

Rāma, on the other hand, arranged for a horse sacrifice on the banks of the Gomatī at the advice of his Minister Vasiṣṭha, keeping a statute of Sītā, beside him as was customary. In the original there is no such reference to a statute; here, perhaps, Sankardev was influenced by Uttararāmacarita of Bhavabhūti. He worshiped all the gods including Brahmā and Nārāyaṇa, who were present at the sacrificial place. The twins came up to the place and started reciting the *Rāmāyaṇa* with the permission of the king. They sang to the accompaniment of musical instruments the story of Rāma up to their own birth. Being aware of the identity of the twins and of Sītā's survival, the king seated them upon his lap. The king himself wanted to go and bring back Sītā, but at the advice of the ministers he sent Śatrughna, Vibhīṣaṇa, Suṣeṇa and Hanumat to bring her back, but Sītā refused to follow; instead, she reproached Rāma before them for his earlier ill behaviour toward her. The messengers came back unsuccessful. Vālmīki, after pacifying her, took her to the court of Rāma the next day keeping his promise to the messengers. He affirmed Sītā's chastity; but the king, though himself convinced of queen's chastity, asked her to prove it. Sītā, enraged and saddened at this, prayed to Mother Earth for transporting her to the nether-land. She then entered *pātāla* after much lamentation and pacifying the sons and bidding adieu to the mothers-in-law. Rāma, enraged by the incident, wanted to destroy the Earth but stopped the adventure at the gods' request. Sītā was, henceforth, glorified as the chief goddess of that land.

Vālmīki proposed the twins to continue their song with the future life of Rāma but they desisted at the words of the king to resume it the next day. They resumed as proposed and sang (in future tense) how Mother Earth pacified Sītā but at this the sage ordered not to continue. Rāma then ruled the kingdom unhappily amidst different types of disasters, and arranged for handing over of the charge of his kingdom to their sons. The mothers died. Then arrived Garga the priest of Bharata's maternal uncle. Bharata set out for killing the Gandharvas. Kāla came to Rāma and they together began to discuss something in secret keeping Lakṣmaṇa at the door with the words that Rāma would slain whoever enters during their discussion. Unfortunately, Lakṣmaṇa himself had to enter the house to save the family of the Ikṣvākus from the wrath of Durvāsas, who wanted to meet Rāma immediately. After satisfying the sage and his disciples with abundance of food, consequently Rāma had to desist from his dear brother's slain, but had to banish him from the kingdom, keeping the truth at the advice of the ministers, truth for which he has already suffered a lot throughout his life beginning from his banishment. Lakṣmaṇa went away. After abandoning Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma decided to leave the world and placing the sons and nephews on the thrones of the kingdoms already under their sway, he departed for the heavens along with the subjects.

Thus, it is seen that Sankardev has kept the main story of Rāma's life in the original intact without going into any detail. The stories he has accepted are the banishment of Sītā; birth of Lava and Kuśa and their reciting the *Rāmāyaṇa*, horse-sacrifice of Rāma, and Sītā's entering the nether-land; Rāma's deplorable plight after their separation; Rāma's abandonment of Lakṣmaṇa and his departure for heavens. These are inseparable events from the life of Rāma, and hence they cannot be regarded as interpolations in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Innovation of Sītā's Character in Sankardev

The central character of Sankardev's *Uttarakāṇḍa* is, thus, Sītā, for whom the poet seems to have great respect and honour. Dr W.L. Smith in one of his essays has pointed out a peculiarity of Sankardev's Sītā. In his opinion, this is the first character in any literature that presents a woman speaking out against the atrocity of any man against any woman. In this respect it is not out of place to compare the character in the original and in Sankardev's innovation.

Banishment of Sītā in Vālmīki

In the original *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, it is seen that at the time of leaving Sītā in the dense forest, Sītā comes

to know from Lakṣmana that she has been banished by her husband; that Lakṣmana has been asked by Rāma to leave her in the dense forest. Sītā is shocked after hearing this. In this state of deep shock and sadness she laments² and says:

"Wouldn't have I shunned my lives in the waters of the Jāhnavī just today, but, in that case, the family-line of my husband will come to an end.

(*'na khalvadyaiva saumitre jīvitam jāhnavījale/ tyajeyam rājavamśāstu bharturme parihāsyate'.*)³

This saying of the would-be mother explains her sense of responsibility as a mother as well as of a wife to take care of the embryo even in distress. She knew from Lakṣmaṇa that she had been shunned by her husband just at the words of some wicked people, and that too without informing her in person; that she was going to be left in the dense forest, where all sorts of danger is probable. In such a situation too she did not utter a single word of reproach against her husband.

Banishment of Sītā in Sankardev

Contrary to this, Sankardev's Sītā says:

"You may now go back to the capital; you need not think of me when Rāma himself has turned me out. In case my womb is spoiled (along with my death) there will be an end to the royal family itself. So, let Rāma enjoy the unhindered kingdom; and let me die in the wilderness."⁴

In this speech she does not behave as in the original; she expresses her displeasure at her husband's behaviour like a common woman instead. It implies that she was, as if, not at all concerned with the womb, the trace of the family of a husband so cruel to her; she does not care if the womb dies along with her. It will be a loss to the king alone if his lineage ends there. Thus, her words do not have that high moral tone as is found in Vālmīki. No responsibility of a mother finds expression here. These words give evidence of her mindset as that of an ordinary woman-folk. And, therefore, this Sītā of Sankardev, perhaps, cannot claim to be worshipped as 'Mother' by the people. Thus, Sankardev does injustice to Mother Sītā as earlier depicted by the great poet.

Sītā's responsibility as an ideal Queen, mother and wife in Vālmīki

Another point to be noted here about Sītā in Vālmīki is that she does not blame her husband. Though feeling intense sorrow at her misfortune, she feels in the core of her heart that it was natural on Rāma's part to banish her if he had to perform his duty of a king to keep the

subjects pleased. She advises her brother-in-law to follow the king's order (*nideśe sthīyatām rājñāḥ*) and she sends her message to her husband, who has banished her to the wild forest, where there was every danger of her being attacked by the wild animals, with the following words:

“O, Lakṣmaṇa, please report my salute to the king who is firm in his duties that I know very well that ‘You are aware of my innocence and that I have been very kin in your welfare.... please behave your subjects as you do to your brothers. It is the supreme duty on your part, and doing so you may attain to the best of fame’⁵

It is not a trifle matter on the part of a woman in such a state to remain so firm and steady. It was possible only for a sage of Vālmīki's stature to depict such a character. The sage could understand that one's mundane happiness was of far lower value than the wishes of the people of a country and, hence, it was not bad on the king's part even to give up his own wife. This very idea of the king finds expression in Bhavabhūti's drama *Uttararāmācarita*, wherein Rāma declares:

“I don't feel pain if I have to give up my sense of love, kindness, happiness, and even the daughter of Janaka for pleasing the people”

(*snehaṃ dayāñca saukhyañca yadi vā jānakīmapi, āradhanāya lokānāṃ muñcato nāsti me vyathā*).⁶

And Sītā, an ideal wife following the high Hindu philosophy, gives support to this act of pleasing the people by carrying out the order of the king and, perhaps, not of the husband. That is why, even at such a moment of her distress, she does not forget to express her duty towards the elders and, so, asks Lakṣmaṇa to forward her respect to the mothers in law and other older ones. She was aware of a queen's responsibility to support the king in performing his royal responsibility even at the risk of her own life. Such ideals are not wanting in Indian literature, where a father does not hesitate to slay even his son for greater interest. Such is the case with Sītā. That is why Vālmīki's Sītā, an apostle of sacrifice, is worshipped as a ‘Mother’ by the Hindus.

In case of Sankardev's Sītā, on the other hand, no such respect and honour for the mothers-in-law, no instruction to her brother-in-law to abide by the orders of the king and no advice to the king to deal with the subjects as his own brothers is met with. The speech of the queen does not have any proof of her royal responsibility, but her hatred, her displeasure at her husband finds expression here. Sankardev deals with her as a wife only, and that too as an ordinary house-holder but not as a queen, nor as an ideal wife of the Hindu tradition.

Sītā's departure

Rāma's sending messengers in Vālmīki

In respect of Sītā's entry into the nether-land, it is found that the great poet Vālmīki has depicted her with a special attention. Having known that Sītā was alive, Rāma ordered and sent some messengers to enquire whether the sage had the permission and Sītā the consent to prove her purity, and they went accordingly to the sage in the vicinity. The sage gave his consent thinking that as Sītā was true to her husband, she would agree to prove herself free of guilt. Rāma was also sure that Sītā would surely succeed in the test and their reunion was sure to take place, and that was why he asked everybody to witness the test the next day.

Rāma's sending messengers in Sankardev

In Sankardev's *Uttarākāṇḍa* the description of the scene of Sītā's departure takes much time than in the original. In the original, the messengers Hanumat and others met the sage only to ask for his permission for Sītā's test, they did not meet Sītā. But here in Sankardev's work they met her and they were very sorry to see the deplorable plight of the lady. The words uttered to them by her in reply to their message are worth noticing. She said,

“Why do you pain me so much? I was forgetting the matters, and now you put on the fire by reminding all these. Is it possible that I shall go to enjoy the royal pleasures at Ayodhyā? Is it possible for me to look at Rāma's face? Shall I then go to be the wife of the son of the Raghus now? If I do so, then there will be no shameless lady than me. Nothing has been left for Rāma to do against me. Now I request you kindly not to say any more. For what reason should Rāma keep me at his residence after keeping me in the forest with a view to killing me along with the womb? I have been holding my lives only for the sake of the twins, for otherwise they shall become helpless with my death. O my son Hanumat, my refuge during the days of distress, do away with your sorrow for me. I don't feel sorry for what I have been suffering only due to my past deeds. Separation has taken place between Rāma and me. He drove me out only at the sayings of the wicked. Therefore, for me my husband is the god of death. Knowing me not to have died in the forest, he is going to kill me with his swords. Had I been aware of Rāma to be so cruel of me I would have killed myself in Lankā itself. I abstained from doing so only at your word. Otherwise, how could Rāma have behaved me in this way? Only a shameless lady will believe the words of such a Rāma. Please, don't repeat him to me any more. You all know my condition, and therefore, don't repeat any more, I swear.”⁷

Last day of Sītā in Vālmiki

Next day, Sītā, came up to the sacrificial place following the sage. Vālmiki declared the innocence and purity of Sītā and that she would give evidence of the same. Rāma informed that he had believed all that was said by the sage, and he himself also knew Sītā's conduct to be pure, but defamation of the people was much stronger and that was why he had banished her, but he would be happy if she proves herself pure in front of the people of the world. Sītā, without raising any objection, carried out his order and spoke out:

"If I have ever thought of a man any other than the son of the Raghus, then O, Goddess Earth, split open yourself so that I may sink to the bottom; if I have worshipped Rāma in mind and by deed, then O, Goddess Earth, split open yourself so that I may sink to the bottom; if it is spoken truly that I know none other than Rāma, then O, Goddess Earth, split open yourself so that I may sink to the bottom."⁸

A hole appeared as desired and Sītā descended through it, sitting on a divine throne provided by Mother Earth. Thus Sītā proves her chastity and purity forever. People had nothing to say against her conduct and character. Vālmiki is successful in his delineating the character of Sītā, as a spotless daughter, daughter in law, sister in law, wife, Queen and, above all, a Mother, the greatest Human-goddess in the world, so to say.

The last scene in Vālmiki

The last scene of Sītā is the one that of her departure. Here Vālmiki depicts her as following the sage Vālmiki like the Śruti following Brahmā; she was following him silently, with tears in her eyes, and looking down to the ground with folding hands. This short description of the woman suggests many things. Her folding hands may suggest her grandeur as an embodiment of *vinaya*; her slow gait, her calmness; the word Śruti may suggest her sacredness, her divine knowledge, her austere penance in the hermit places on the banks of the holy Ganges and so on and so forth. Free from any pain or happiness she appears as an embodiment of Divine Peace, and that is why she is revered by all those present there. Thus it is enough to suggest her mental condition with silence. This is befittingly the style of a great poet to resort to suggestion.

The last scene in Sankardev

Sankardev's description of Sītā in this scene, on the other hand, is detailed in style as is found in the dramas of Bhavabhūti. Our poet describes that Sītā did not look at anybody or raised her head, though her emotion mounted; did not reply to anybody, not even to the mothers in law,

whom she respected so much, about her wellbeing or otherwise she moved forward with great sorrow with her face down; following Vālmiki she looked as like Lakṣmī rising out of the churning of the oceans and going forward to accept Lord Viṣṇu as her husband. After the declaration of the sage about her chastity and purity and that she was going to prove her purity the subjects were eager to see it but, to their astonishment, they found her in such a mood of fury that she did not cast her eyes to the seat offered by Bharata asking her to be seated; did not give any reply to her mothers in law to their pacifications; tears flew incessantly out of her eyes; her heart could not become steady due to intense anger and she cast her eyes on Rāma frequently with frowning, at which Rāma had to turn back his eyes in spite of his sincere desire to look at her with love, and he had to stand still with shame and fear. She shone in such a way remembering her pains that nobody could look at her as she was trembling in sorrow and anger and looked like a flame of fire. Seeing this even Rāma was afraid of her; all gods and sages trembled in fear of Sītā's curse upon her husband. She then turning her back to Rāma addressed the gathering with these words with displeasure (U.R.7046-52):

"You people, you may blame me after hearing my words. You know well what type of wife of Rāma I am. I am like a servant of his although married to him. His father sent him to live in forests and I accompanied him and lived in banishment for long fourteen years with him. I was alone. And as I was not independent, he could not keep me safe and that was why Rāvaṇa abducted me. I wanted in shame to die in Lankā there, but this Hanumat stood as an obstruction; I waited for my husband, and he saved and brought me after killing that Rāvaṇa. He tested me by throwing me into the fire and yet he was not satisfied. He accepted me only on the instruction of his father told. I served my husband earnestly, because I know that the husband is the Supreme God for me. Husband is the penance, murmuring of mantra, sacrifice, yoga and meditation for me. I never think, in dream or when awake, of others. Yet he could not be satisfied with me, and treated me badly. Moved just at the defamation by the wicked he banished me unfairly. You please notice my husband's mentality, and notice how and why he treated me unjustly. If you wanted to give me up why didn't you do so earlier? You wanted to kill my sons in the womb itself. My body starts burning to describe the qualities of my husband. You wanted to take the responsibility of the sin of killing the mother along her sons. As you did not care to take that sin of killing the mother and sons, what more remained for you to do? Everybody praises such a Rāma as a good man but it is I that know Rāma to be the god of death. Have you heard of such a cruel husband anywhere? How can I think of looking at his face yet?"⁹

Saying so Sītā cried aloud in grief, her tears flowing incessantly. Seeing this, the subjects feared that something was amiss because the grief of mother Sītā was growing

more and more. Rāma's face took such an appearance that it seemed that rice grain would have become ākḥoi (fried grain) if put on his face. Then Sītā turned her face towards Rāma and began to speak in intolerable grief:

“Why did you give me up? If you knew that you would do so why then had you accepted me earlier? I would have died before if it was in my luck. Oh, how cruel is my husband Rāma that he did not keep in mind my deeds of a single day. His heart is surely made of stone and surely that is why he shunned me just at the words of the wicked. What enemy am I of you, what ill have I done to you that you have given me such a severe punishment? You have deceitfully placed me in the forest like a low man giving up his wife for nothing. This mentality of yours is worse than that of a Rākṣasa that doesn't have the fear of the sin of killing woman. Please state, who among your predecessors did commit such a sin? Without any guilt you have ordered such a punishment. It is sure that my ill-fame will remain in the whole world for people will think I am surely guilty, otherwise, why should have the husband punished in this way. What for have you brought me this time to put balm on the burn? You are as it were bringing a wild man to show him a court. How much would you punish me, already a dead one? Still your desire has not been fulfilled. If, despite this, I go to make a wife of myself at your house, then no other shameless woman would be there like me. I am the daughter of a king like Janaka, the first daughter in law of a king like Daśaratha, and a head Queen of a king like you, and that is why you have done such a deplorable plight of mine.”¹⁰

Saying so, she fell down on the ground and cried aloud. After sometime she started shouting again and said,

“No more shall I look at this husband of mine...O mother Earth, I was born in you. Please make a crack in you and hide in to it so that I don't have to hear the name of Rāma; if and I am a chaste lady and holding my good deeds then O Moon, O Sun, O air, O Earth, you please become my witness; if my heart is fixed at the feet of Rāma then O Earth give me a way immediately; if I am true to the vow of trust to the husband and if I know none other person than Rāma then let this our defamation of ours come to an end; I will not see the face of Rāghava anymore; O Mother Earth, make a crack in to you.”¹¹

Here, Sankardev adds the rendering in his own way of simplification the famous three verses of Vālmiki cited above as the last speech of Mother Sītā. Saying so she requested the Earth to make way for her and she entered the Nether-land after declaring her innocence

Conclusion

Sankardev's Sītā: an ordinary chaste woman

It is thus noticed that Sankardev's Sītā is an ordinary Assamese woman having no experience of any complexity. It was very natural on the part of any ordinary woman

to behave to the messenger in a way as described by Sankardev at a situation as referred to. Sankardev has that image of the common woman-folk in mind; and therefore, he has been successful in delineating the character of such a woman. It has befittingly been sketched by our poet. She expresses her emotion very aptly in conformity with the state of hers. She expresses what comes to her mind after seeing that her husband has sent messengers to retake her after giving a punishment unbecoming of a wife like hers, and that too deceitfully, not straightforwardly. It would have been different in case she were a single woman but she was then in an advanced stage of pregnancy, which was not unknown to her husband. It is, therefore, natural on the part of any woman to revolt against so much of atrocity from her dear husband, whom she loves so much and whom she had suffered for, for long fourteen years in exile, giving up all mundane happiness of the palace of the great empire of Ayodhyā. It was not only out of sex-related conjugal relation that she followed her husband on every step of her life, but it was her dharma as propounded by the sages of wisdom and knowledge that she followed and took him as the part and parcel of her life. Surely as a result of this austerity of Sītā that a husband is usually taken, even today, by most of the Hindu wives as dearer than her own life, dearer than herself. The characters of Bhadarī in Lakshminath Bezbaroa and of Satī Joymotī of Assam History etc. are instances in this case. She can sacrifice everything for the sake of her husband. It is not out of compulsion, nor for sexual conjugal relation that she loves her husband. Her love is associated with the divine sacrifice advanced by the Vedic sages, and forwarded to the posterity by way of tradition. That dharma Sītā observed for the welfare of the world, not for her family alone. But it was injustice, according to her, on Rāma's part to banish such a wife in that stage of advance pregnancy to leave in the forest. He could have straightforwardly asked her to go as she liked just as he had asked her at the time of her fire-test. Then he would not have been subjected to so much of censure from her. Sankardev feels very well Sītā's grief and expresses it in plain words. It was also for the benefit of the world that the saint has depicted the character in such a novel way.

Sītā revolted and pointed out the weak points of her husband, and it is not unjust for a wife to do so. A worldly wife is bound by the chain of her family relation, and if the husband behaves as he likes then it is sure for the family to suffer disaster; therefore, it is proper on her part to remind him his proper duty at proper time. Yet we see that she did not disobey Rāma. She proved her chastity and purity as asked by him and, as a result, she had to depart. Had she not departed she would not have been free from censure of the people, and would

have remained in doubt for ever as regards her chastity. It should also be kept in mind that Mother Sītā left the world when her twins had been grown up and there was no risk to them after their union with their father.

Sankardev's Sītā is great, she is great as a chaste lady. But one should keep in mind that this does not do justice to Vālmīki, who tried to draw a heavenly character of worldly Sītā. Sankardev has made that heavenly Sītā of high order a practical worldly one understandable to the common folk.

Vālmīki's a Divine one

Vālmīki's Sītā, on the other hand, besides having all the good qualities of a chaste lady, is unique in itself. She remains unmoved in all the disasters in her life; she endures all calamities with indifference, a quality praised throughout Indian classics, not alone for women but for man and woman alike. His Sītā does not burst out in fury, does not cry aloud in grief. She does not scold anybody for whatever mischief he or she commits. No sensual emotion can move her at all. The final sacrifice she offers without a word of revolt is the instance of her sublimity. This sublimity is altogether absent in Sankardev's Sītā. It is the great poet Vālmīki that is responsible for this act of Rāma. It is Vālmīki who makes a divine woman of a worldly one. Even though Sītā was human she has gone up to the plane of a divine lady, perhaps, not available in the heavens too. And it is for Vālmīki alone that mother Sītā remained the Mother Sītā for time eternal. Vālmīki's Sītā is a classic one.

Key to Abbreviations

R= Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki (Sanskrit)

U.R. = Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa of Sankardev in Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa (Assamese)

Notes

1. Sankaradeva or Sankardev, sometimes spelt as Hunkordeb but pronounced by Assamese people as Xunkordev, was a poet, dramatist, lyricist, instrumentalist, social reformer, cultural activist and above all a religious preacher and also the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Axom, Kāmarūpa (both included in modern Assam) and Behar (modern district of Koch-Bihar in West Bengal).
2. R. 7.47.8-15
3. R. 7.48.8
4. U.R. 6716-17
5. R. 7.48. 11-15
6. *Uttararamacarita*, Act I.
7. U.R. 6990-98
8. R. 7.97.14-16
9. U.R. 7053-62
10. U.R. 7065-72
11. U.R. 7074-77

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