



Gender constructs in Indian Ramayana traditions

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Abstract

India, a culturally diverse country, has a rich tradition of history recording, writing and transmission. Such historical traditions are often myriad and divergent, changing according to temporal and spatial constructs. The *Itihasa-purana* tradition is an important source for studying the diverse Indian past.

Ramayana, a part of the *Itihasa-purana* tradition, is part of a varied substratum. It is not a monolithic tradition but an amalgamation of dynamic cultures and countless community practices. It is an evolving heritage. It includes several texts, dance, drama, art forms, folk songs, theatre and puppetry, etc. It remains relevant even today as it continues to shape current notions of righteousness, duty and honor. So much so that its deep roots in Indian subcontinent's consciousness define how women and men see themselves and want to see others. Thus, one needs a deep and thorough understanding to explore different perspectives and interpretations of the *Ramayana* traditions.

Keywords: Women, womanhood, *Ramayanas*, her-story, emotions, dharma, Indian *Ramayana* traditions, deification of the husband, *patni dharma*, righteousness, son meta-preference, gender identities, gender constructs

Introduction

Ramayana is often considered to be a 'his-story' or Ram's story. This is reflected in the names of some of the texts, such as Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Tulsidas's *Shri Ramcharitmanas*, Kamba's *Ramavataram*, Bhavabhuti's *Uttaramacharita*, etc. In some of the *Ramayana* traditions, mostly the focus is on men's role, their *dharma*, their wars, and their victory. Women characters have generally not been given lead roles. Mostly their contribution, when highlighted, is overshadowed by their male counterparts.

However, over the past few decades, there have been attempts to find and highlight the several 'her-stories' in the *Ramayana* traditions. This can help provide a more accurate and inclusive understanding of our past.

With the rise of the feminist movement, attempts have been made to highlight the achievements and perspectives of women in different arenas. A similar attempt has been made to challenge traditional historiographic narratives and to address historical imbalances by including those often overlooked or undervalued. Some of these works include *Saket* by Maithili Sharan Gupta, Brij Narayan Chakbast's Urdu *Ramayana* poems, Goldman's and Sally J Sutherland's work *Women at the Margins: Gender and Religious Anxieties in Valmiki's Ramayana*, Karline

McLain's comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, Amish's *Sita* and some of the Ramleela performances.

Objectives

This paper looks at the gender constructs as reflected in some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions across diverse geographies, associated cultures and languages. Though *Ramayana* traditions are part of the pan-Asian culture, this paper only focuses on some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions.

It also explores how the gender constructs were defined, formulated and modified across different ages. It centers on themes such as- are emotions gendered? Is there a gender based differentiation in the application of *dharma*? How time and space determine changes in attitude towards adultery and desire, the process of deification of the husband, the means of control over women, and incidence of defiance in diverse *Ramayana* traditions of India. It highlights the role (at times even dominant role) played by women in arenas of war, diplomacy, and politics, arenas which are often considered to be dominions of men alone.

While understanding the 'her-stories', the gender constructs, the gender roles in the Indian *Ramayana* traditions, one has to keep in mind the socio-cultural context and the diversity

of this tradition. This means an acceptance that these gender roles themselves are dynamic and fluctuate through the historical ages. While doing so we have to be mindful not to impose current notions of gender rights, equality and autonomy on past social structures and belief systems. It is important to see these women in their own light, in their respective social-cultural milieu, bound by the social realities of their time and not from present societal perspectives.

Genderization of emotions?

Firstly, let us explore whether emotions are gendered in Indian *Ramayana* traditions. This implies whether women and men are expected to portray (or hide) particular emotions, sentiments, feelings, or *bhaava*.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, there seems to be no overt genderization of emotions. That means both women and men equally portray feelings of joy, anger, depression, fear, grief, etc. King Dashrath, grieving for his son Ram, loudly laments thinking about his impending separation from his beloved Ram. There is a detailed description of the emotional turmoil of Dashrath when sage Visvamitra asks him to give Ram so that Ram can destroy the *rakshasas* disrupting his sacrifices. Dashrath loses his wits, feels anxious, and even loses his consciousness thinking about the dangers that Ram might face in the forest (Goldman, 1984, p.163) [2]. Similarly, Ram hearing about Sita's abduction is consumed with crushing grief and laments loudly, openly expressing his sorrow and anxiety. There is heart touching description of the lamentation of Tara, the queen of Kishkindha, on the death of her husband Vali. Valmiki's *Ramayana* also depicts the emotions felt by birds by highlighting the piteous cry and wailing of the *kraunca* bird when its mate is killed (Goldman, 1984, p.127) [2].

In *Saket*, Maithili Sharan Gupt takes the audience on an emotional journey by drawing out the *bhaava* felt by *Ramayana* characters in each scene. He paints a beautiful kaleidoscope of Urmila's and Laxman's emotions- their love and longing for each other, dejection and sorrow at their separation, Laxman's restlessness and rage at the injustice meted out to Ram by Kaikeyi, Urmila choked with tears on hearing about the hardships Sita is going to face in the forest. Even inanimate objects such as Urmila's paintings are shown to be replete with sentiments (Dave, 2018, p.37) [6]. The author shows the transitions in Kaikeyi's emotions, ranging from happiness at the news of Ram's coronation, to anger for the treatment meted out to Bharat, to jealousy towards Kaushalya, to indignation and fear regarding Bharat's future. Kaikeyi's anger is depicted to take the form of Durga. It is so strong that it has the power to destroy the peace of the family and the stability of the kingdom. Her emotional upheaval leads to changes in her physical form too. Her anger resulting in her baring her lips, stomping her feet, hissing like a wounded snake (Dave, 2018, p.48) [6]. Dashrath showcases emotions of eagerness at the coronation of Ram, fear of the curse given to him coming true, and shock at seeing Kaikeyi distressed. His words 'Oh Ram' uttered at the banishment of Ram to the forest are full of pain, longing, anxiety, and distress. He faints again and again, thinking about his separation from Ram (Dave, 2018, p.59) [6]. This *bhavaa* of grief over separation from Sita and Ram is seen among the people of

Ayodhya as well. They are tearful, full of grief, sobbing inconsolably, vengeful towards Kaikeyi, and openly voice their emotional outburst (Dave, 2018, p.95) [6]. Sita and Ram on the other hand are shown to be comparatively calmer and composed, more imperturbable. Ram is sad about Bharat's absence on the eve of his coronation and concerned about the sudden deterioration of his father's health. Yet he accepts his banishment without much emotional turmoil. Similarly, Sita too is shown as steadfast in her decisions. She is not overcome with fear or anxiety when she decides to accompany Ram to the forest (Dave, 2018, p.79) [6].

Brij Narayan Chakbast's Urdu *Ramayana* poems beautifully capture the emotional conversation between a mother and her son. Both Kaushalya and Ram are overwhelmed, on the verge of tears, and understand each other's emotional dilemma (Farooqi, p.1) -

'Kadmon pe maa ke gir pada, asaun ki taur se'
'Daaman se ashk pochh ke dil se kiya kalaam'

Kaushalya in her distress curses the kingdom and all those responsible for the banishment of her son. She questions Ram's acceptance of the banishment, yet understands his motivation. Wanting her son's happiness, she ultimately gives him her blessings, though reluctantly. In *Dasaratha-Jataka* one finds a world where keeping one's emotions in check is considered as ideal. Bharat weeps informing Ram of the death of their father Dashrath. Laxman and Sita sob inconsolably hearing this news. However, Ram neither grieves nor weeps. There is not even a slightest commotion in his senses. Ram explains to others that one cannot allow oneself to be lost in sorrow (Fausboll, 1871, p.16) [1]. Thus in *Dasaratha-Jataka*, we find an underlying appreciation for those who control their emotions and try to balance them. It is a projection of an ideal world and ideal human behavior while also depicting respective social realities.

Thus the varied Indian *Ramayana* traditions project a deeply emotional world where there is an open display of emotions by both women and men. There is no masculinity attached to the non-display of emotions.

Gender-based hierarchy of dharma?

Secondly, let's take a look at whether there is a gender-based hierarchy to the performance of one's duty or *dharma*. Is there a differentiation in *dharma* defined for the wife vis-à-vis the husband, the sister vis-à-vis the brother, the father vis-à-vis the mother, and the family vis-à-vis the kingdom?

Yes, in some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions we do find some differentiation and hierarchy in the prescription of *dharma*. However, this differentiation is based not only on the lines of gender but also on the lines of caste, class, and belief systems. *Dharma* also appears to be a fluid concept as there is mention of several instances of dilemma. If we look at the instance of Ram's acceptance of the order of his banishment, one may wonder whether in doing so Ram is following his *dharma* by obeying his father's order or fulfilling the wishes of his mother Kaikeyi? Or is he simply following the order of the king or his heavenly duty as the avatar of Vishnu? Or is he fulfilling his duty as an elder brother to maintain peace in the family and the kingdom or is he doing so for honor and glory? In *Saket*, Ram says 'Will

I not maintain your command? You are my father, my most venerated.' Yet at another instance, he says 'It is my *dharma*... It is ideal for me... I was meant for this' referring to his divine duty (Dave, 2018, p.61) ^[6]. In Brij Narayan Chakbast's Urdu *Ramayana* poems, Ram goes into exile to keep intact his honor and that of his family. He also feels that he will be unable to face society's criticism if he fails to uphold the order of banishment (Farooqi, p.4). In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ram does so to fulfill the command implicit in his father's word and in order to please Kaikeyi. Laxman follows Ram to the forest out of love and respect for his elder brother (Goldman, 1984, p.122) ^[2]. On the other hand, in *Saket*, Laxman, holding *dharma* towards his brother supreme, questions the decision of both his father Dashrath and Kaikeyi. He voices his anger by saying 'I shall break her venomous fangs...and he who has become a slave to this monster...he is our father...otherwise what shall I say?' (Dave, 2018, p.63) ^[6].

Sita decides to accompany Ram to the forest leaving behind palatial comforts. The question arises whether she does so solely to fulfill her wifely duties/*dharma* or because it is considered to be righteous conduct? Is it done out of love for Ram or because society expects this from a spouse? In *Saket*, Sita opines that it is the *dharma* of a companion (so it applies to both the husband and the wife) to accompany his/her spouse in all their endeavors. When Ram asks her to stay in Ayodhya as forest life can prove to be difficult, she responds that Ram cannot fulfill his mission in the forest until he is accompanied by Sita. Even a *yajna* or sacrifice is incomplete without one's spouse. She also believes that the simplicity of forest life will give her more personal happiness than the comforts of a royal palace. Sita indicates that if she doesn't accompany Ram, society will rebuke her (Dave, 2018, pp.84-85) ^[6]. Thus there seem to be multiple layers to *dharma*. There is also the subtext of attaining respect, honor, and glory through one's righteous conduct. So much so that Kaushalya claims that Ram's deeds will bring her glory too (Dave, 2018, p.87) ^[6]. In *Saket*, Urmila uncovers another aspect of *dharma*. She says that *dharma* or one's duty can only be done by giving up desire (Dave, 2018, p.35) ^[6]. Yet it may seem that Kaikeyi chooses desire (to see her son as the King) or rather love for her son (to ensure his welfare) over her duty towards the Raghuvamsha clan or her family. She also seems to believe that injustice has been done to her son. She keeps on repeating 'Doubting his son, that too a Bharat like son, The king does not even ask him to return' (Dave, 2018, p.47) ^[6]. Thus she feels it is her *dharma* to undo the wrong.

Over time as the process of deification of the husband (i.e., as *pati* becomes *parameshwar*) gains societal acceptance and promotion there is increasing emphasis on *patni dharma* and idealization of the perfect wife. In *Saket*, there is a reference to the husband alone being the wife's salvation (Dave, 2018, p.86) ^[6]. However, there is no mention of this being true vice versa. Sita belittles her forthcoming discomforts of forest life by comparing it to the great ordeal of women (*sati*) following their husbands to death on their funeral pyre (Dave, 2018, p.86) ^[6]. This makes us ponder that if accompanying one's husband is an important aspect of *patni dharma*, then does it reflect poorly on Urmila as a wife when she doesn't accompany Laxman to the forest? In *Sita's Sister*, Urmila is said to have stayed back at the palace

for fear of distracting Laxman from his duties towards Sita and Ram (Kane, 2014, p.144) ^[7]. In *Saket*, Sita acknowledges that both she and Urmila are fulfilling their wifely duties- Sita by accompanying Ram to the forest and Urmila by staying in Ayodhya to take care of the family (Dave, 2018, p.85) ^[6]. Here, it is Urmila's decision (though a heartbreaking one) and Laxman's unspoken appeal that results in this outcome. In some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions, Urmila has been denied this choice and it is Laxman who directs her to stay back.

This idealization also extends to the idealization of Sita-Laxman's *dewar-bhabhi* relations during the British India colonial era. Given the incidents of adultery especially between *dewar* and *bhabhi*, attempts were made to invoke past Indian traditions and highlight the pious Sita-Laxman relation as the ideal *dewar-bhabhi* relation. This attempt at tighter control over the women's bodies and the sexuality of both women and men can be glimpsed through the British India colonial era magazines and newspapers. This is reflected in the work of Dr Charu Gupta - (*Im*)possible Love and Sexual Pleasure in Late-Colonial North India. This aspect of the deification of the husband will be further explored later on in this paper.

Thus, it seems that the hierarchy of performance of one's duty or *dharma* is based on several factors which go beyond the gender constructs. It is often determined by the personal preference of the individual, the social values, and the intentions of the author. It is also fluid and varies according to the changing norms of the society i.e., temporal and regional or spatial constructs.

Role of Ramayana women

Thirdly, let's see how much importance has been given to the role played by women in Indian *Ramayana* traditions, especially in arenas of war, diplomacy, and politics, arenas which are often considered to be dominions of men alone.

Kaikeyi, without holding any official post, changes the course of history by getting her son Bharat crowned as king. She not only changes the royal tradition of the appointment of the elder son as king but is also able to reverse a royal order. Manthara too, though indirectly by influencing Kaikeyi, is able to change a political decision through diplomacy and tact. In some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions, Kaikeyi achieves this by invoking her two boons. In *Saket*, it is Dashrath (not Manthara) who reminds Kaikeyi about the two boons she had procured early in their marriage. He says 'Do you not remember that battle...when I was victorious but wounded? Who had protected me then?' (Dave, 2018, p.53) ^[6]. In this battle Kaikeyi was his charioteer and was crucial to ensuring his safety. Thus, Kaikeyi was actively involved in the battlefield, she merely did not watch the war from the outskirts. This highlights the crucial role Kaikeyi, as a woman, played in war, diplomacy, and politics. However, in *Dasaratha-Jataka*, Kaikeyi is stripped of this power. It is Dashrath who, fearing that Kaikeyi might kill his beloved Ram, sends Ram to the forest along with his siblings Sita and Laxman to ensure their safety. Dashrath calls Kaikeyi 'a wretched outcast' and calls women (commenting on the entire gender) ungrateful and treacherous (Fausboll, 1871, p.14) ^[1]. Here, Kaikeyi's boon is derived not from her role in the war but because she bore the king a son. Yet in some of the Indian *Ramayana*

traditions it is Dashrath's love for Kaikeyi that results in Bharat ascending the throne while Ram is banished from the kingdom.

In *Adbhut Ramayana*, Ram kills the ten-headed Ravana. However, he faints in his fight against the thousand-headed Sahsra Ravana. Seeing Rama in an unconscious and helpless state on the battlefield, Sita takes the powerful form of Mahakali. She severs the Sahsra Ravana's thousand-heads and begins to destroy the remaining *rakshasas*. Thus in *Adbhut Ramayana*, it is Sita and not Ram that kills the mighty Sahsra Ravana.

In Valmiki *Ramayana*, it is stated that after the banishment of Ram from the kingdom, Ram and Laxman along with Sita reside in the Dandkaranya forest while Bharat and Shatrugan leave Ayodhya to rule from Nandigram as Ram's regent (Goldman, 1984, p.123) [2]. Here the question arises that after the death of Dashrath even if major administrative decisions were taken by Bharat on behalf of Ram, who was responsible for looking after the day-to-day functioning in Ayodhya? The only royalty left behind were the royal women. Kavita Kane in *Sita's Sister* shows how Urmila, like most royal women of ancient India, trained in the art of diplomacy, law, military science, philosophy, and political science, participates in the day-to-day governance of Ayodhya. We find similar instances of women playing a crucial role in such areas of politics and war throughout Indian history. Whether it be in the form of Prabhavati Gupta (daughter of Chandragupta II) governing the Vakataka kingdom or Rani Laxmibai leading Jhansi in the battle against the British. In *Dasaratha-Jataka*, Sita and Laxman tell Ram to stay safely in the hermitage while they fetch him fruits and keep him healthy (Fausboll, 1871, p.15) [1]. Here there is no differentiation of duties based on gender. Rather Sita faces the dangers of the jungle to ensure the safety of Ram, the future king.

Physical and behavioral descriptions of *Ramayana* women and men

Fourthly, let us examine the physical and behavioral descriptions of women and men in some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions. Are men always depicted as valorous, strong-armed, with well-built physiques while women are portrayed as meek, beautiful, gentle, and submissive?

Mostly, both women and men are presented with beautiful facial features, well-proportioned limbs, and fair-waist and are often compared to gods or flowers. In some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions, women are depicted as strong characters who display virtues of courage, steadfastness, fearlessness, and resoluteness. Modern-day writer Amish in his work *Sita* has portrayed Sita with the physical features of a warrior- well built, muscular stature, strong-armed. In *Dasaratha-Jataka*, Ram is described as fine-necked and great-armed (Fausboll, 1871, p.19) [1]. Dashrath in *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidas has beautiful eyes, a face resembling a fresh lotus and gods are delighted to look at him (Kale, 1922, Canto IX p.71) [3]. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, Ram is depicted with broad shoulders, mighty arms, a vast fully fleshed chest, long hands, a deeply set collarbone, powerful jaws, a finely made head, and large eyes (Goldman, 1984, p.121) [2]. A thorough detail of his physical features is given and he is shown to have perfectly proportioned and well-formed limbs. He is often described

as handsome and beautiful. Behaviorally he is described as wise, self-controlled, and grounded in proper conduct- a 'blameless man'. Yet he faces several challenges and moral dilemmas throughout the epic and his character development involves navigating through these complexities. This allows for a more nuanced portrayal of Ram as a multidimensional character rather than an entirely faultless figure.

Sita is described as the 'best of women', possessed of every grace (Goldman, 1984, p.123) [2]. There is a reference to Uma and Ganga, daughters of Himalaya and Meru. They are described to hold immense ascetic power and are worshipped by the world (Goldman, 1984, p.35) [2]. The hundred incomparably beautiful daughters of royal seer Kusanabha and Ghrtaci are shown as youthful, beautiful, richly ornamented, and multitalented in the art of singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments (Goldman, 1984, p.184) [2]. In Valmiki *Ramayana* importance is given to physical attributes, so much so that disfigurement is often used to subdue and defeat the enemy. There is a reference to Ram's disfigurement of *rakshasa* woman Surpanakha, and slewing and chopping of limbs of several *rakshasas* sent against him (Goldman, 1984, p. 130) [2]. Ram also disfigures and kills Tataka, who is fearsome, unassailable, and armed with magic powers. He says 'I will send her back without her ears and the tip of her nose', thereby blatantly talking about mutilating Tataka (Goldman, 1984, p. 174) [2].

In *Saket*, Urmila is described as radiant, beautiful, illuminated, slim, lotus-like, soft, and graceful, with gold limbs. Apart from her physical attributes, she is strong and multi-talented, she has a heart full of love and is goddess-like with sturdy virtues (Dave, 2018, pp.32-33) [6]. Laxman exalts her headstrong attitude, her beauty, and her talent as a painter. He calls her the 'incomparable one' and claims that all the strength, heroism, steadiness, and steadfastness of the universe can be sacrificed just for a single sidelong glance of her. Here he refutes her claim that she is weak because she is a woman by highlighting that her womanly beauty and wit is a power in itself (Dave, 2018, p.35) [6]. Kaikeyi is portrayed as a sharp, intelligent, and strong person. She is confident and aware of her capabilities. Thinking about the injustice done to Bharat she opines that powerful people can make even fate submissive and that if the universe has to be turned on its head to protect Bharat's interests, she will do it (Dave, 2018, p. 48) [6]. Her hold over her husband Dashrath is so strong that even he claims that he would do anything for her as he is entirely in her grasp (Dave, 2018, p. 53) [6]. Kaushalya too admits that Kaikeyi is stubborn yet strong-willed. Sumitra is projected as a lioness who constantly emphasizes on valor and does not hesitate to use force to undo a wrong (Dave, 2018, p.77) [6]. Sita is shown as soft, tender yet fearless and decisive. She is optimistic about living in the forest. Despite other's warnings regarding the dangers in the forest she is clear-minded and steadfast in her decision (Dave, 2018, p. 84) [6]. She is described as 'Mother Sita', 'Goddess like Sita', and 'a noble woman'.

In Valmiki *Ramayana*, women are depicted as embodiments of wisdom and strength. There is a reference to Tataka, a *yaksa* woman, possessed with the strength of a thousand elephants who could take on any form at will (Goldman, 1984, p. 172) [2]. Here, her strength is respected yet it is shown in a negative light as it is used to disrupt the

Brahmanical rituals. This may reflect the beliefs and leanings of the writer. She is portrayed as someone who is intolerable, terrifying, evil, and wicked. Her presence is said to have ruined the land making it inhospitable. Here, Ram expresses surprise at her immense strength and questions how a woman particularly a *yaksa* woman, can possess such power. This statement about Tataka's power can be seen as reflecting biases against women, forest dwellers, and non-Brahmanical traditions.

In Valmiki *Ramayana*, there is also a debate about whether killing a female is sinful or not? Ram says 'I dare not actually kill her, for being, a woman, she is protected. My intention is merely to deprive her of her strength and her lair' (Goldman, 1984, p. 174) [2]. Yet he ultimately kills her and the gods rejoice. Sage Vishwamitra instructs Ram not to be soft-hearted about killing a woman if it's for a righteous cause. He says that a king's son must act for the welfare of the four social orders. He quotes several great men who killed women set on the ways of unrighteousness (Goldman, 1984, p. 173) [2]. Thus, there seem to be a lot of conflicting and often contradictory statements, indicating fluctuating intentions. Women are depicted to be strong, but that strength is mostly derived from austerities, despite their strength there is surprise and doubt about their power, they are said to be protected from being killed because of their 'womanhood' yet they are mutilated and killed if they do not follow the set social customs.

Son meta-preference?

Fifthly, let's investigate whether the preference is given to the birth of a son vis-à-vis a daughter in Indian *Ramayana* traditions. Yes, we definitely find an open preference for son as a progeny. They are considered as propagators of one's lineage and *yagyas* and sacrifices are undertaken for a male offspring.

In *Raghuvamsa*, there is a statement- 'and yet he did not obtain that light called a son which instantaneously dispels the gloom of sorrow and is the means of obtaining freedom from the debt due to ancestors' (Kale, 1922, Canto X p.80) [3]. In *Saket*, there is a reference to rewards in the form of sons being gained from performing austerities (Dave, 2018, p. 30) [6]. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the righteous people are said to rejoice in heaven with their sons and grandsons. Here too there is no mention of daughters. The rule of Dashrath is glorified by saying that nowhere in his realm do men experience the death of a son (Goldman, 1984, p. 126) [2]. There is a reference to emotional turmoil and suffering due to the lack of a son- 'Sorely lamenting the lack of a son... I take no joy in anything... For I have no son to carry on my dynasty' (Goldman, 1984, p. 146) [2]. Producing a male heir is also shown to be a great accomplishment for the mother. For instance, Jaya and Suprabha, the fair-waisted daughters of Daksa, are said to have given birth to a hundred powerful, unconquerable sons and they are exalted for this achievement (Goldman, 1984, p. 166) [2]. Also these sons (especially of royal families) are often portrayed to have immense martial strength. Indicating that they are considered important not only for lineage propagation but also for victories in war.

This preference for son over time becomes so ingrained in Indian *Ramayana* tradition that it also becomes a means for controlling women's bodies. It often leads to linking

womanhood merely with producing a male heir. So much so that 'acquiring a wife' for procreation becomes important. This results in the objectification of women.

Control and defiance in Indian *Ramayana* traditions

This brings us to the sixth theme of discussion- instances of control and defiance in Indian *Ramayana* traditions. Attempt at control is reflected in some statements such as – 'thus Ram regained Sita and recovered his kingdom (Goldman, 1984, p. 126) [2]', 'In Ayodhya there was no such thing as a wicked man or a man who made love to another man's wife' (Goldman, 1984, p. 138) [2], indicating control over sexuality of women and men both. There are references to fathers offering their daughters to worthy men to please the gods. In Valmiki *Ramayana* there is mention of Suketu giving his daughter, the glorious woman Tataka, to Sunda to be his wife (Goldman, 1984, p. 172) [2]; Himalaya giving away his daughter Ganga, who moves freely by any path (Goldman, 1984, p. 190) [2]. Thus despite these women being glorious, powerful, and free they are often 'attained' or 'given away' indicating restricted freedom of choice to them. These restrictions on choosing one's spouse are often (but not always) applicable to men as well. Here we must be careful in projecting modern concepts of choice and independence to past societies.

We also find instances of defiance. For example, Sita refuses to give *agni pariksha* a second time to prove her chastity and loyalty, choosing to take refuge in the Earth Goddess instead. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, there is an episode involving Ghrtaci's hundred incomparably beautiful daughters and Vayu, the wind God. Vayu, seeing that they possessed every virtue, youth, and beauty approached Ghrtaci's daughters. He told them that he desired them all and that they shall be his wives (Goldman, 1984, p. 185) [2]. Vayu's inappropriate comment/command is challenged by these women. They rebuke him for being disrespectful and warn him that with the power of their austerities they could even topple a God from his lofty state (Goldman, 1984, p. 185) [2]. Thus, these women defied even a God who dared to make unsuitable advances toward them. Yet they claim not to be free agents. They refuse to disrespect the wishes of their father by choosing a husband for themselves. They say, 'For our father is our lord and our supreme divinity. That man alone will be our husband to whom our father gives us' (Goldman, 1984, p. 185). [2] The father appreciates the extraordinary forbearance shown by his daughters and exalts them for fulfilling their daughterly duties. He says 'Forbearance is the duty of the meek...it is an adornment to women as well as men' (Goldman, 1984, p. 186) [2]. Here there is an emphasis on virtues such as self-control, gentleness, and submissiveness. However, it is not clear whether 'meek' is an inference to women alone. This incident highlights several social norms which are applicable to both women and men- the proper way of approaching someone as prescribed in the ritual texts, the important role played by elders in the institution of marriage, the restrictions on one's choice of life partner. However, there seems to be more control placed on a women's choice.

In Valmiki *Ramayana* Somada, the daughter of Urmila, being a righteous woman approaches sage Culin in an appropriate manner. She says 'I have no husband. I am

nobody's wife. So since I have approached you in the manner prescribed in the Vedas, please give me a son...a righteous son' (Goldman, 1984, p. 187) ^[2]. This shows not only preference for a male heir but also women being either submissive to their husband or father. The reference to *laxman rekha* for the purpose of security of Sita, gives an impression of control over women's movement and the safety of women being a men's duty. Yet there is also mention of men being under the control of women. In *Raghuvamsa*, there is a reference to men being 'placed wholly in the power (sexual) of women' (Kale, 1922, Canto IX p.75) ^[3]. In *Saket*, Laxman referring to the hold of Kaikeyi over Dashrath angrily retorts by calling Dashrath a slave to the monster Kaikeyi (Dave, 2018, p. 63) ^[6]. In another scene, Laxman himself claims to be a servant of Urmila, eager to get a single glance from her (Dave, 2018, p. 34) ^[6].

Deification of the husband

Now, let us venture into the concept of the deification of the husband. The process of deification of the husband or '*pati* becoming *parameshwar*' is a gradual one. It gains more prominence in the medieval era. The influence of the Bhakti tradition on Indian *Ramayana* traditions results in the drawing of a parallel between devotion to a personal God and devotion to one's husband. This results in increasing societal focus on *patni dharma*, a woman being an ideal wife.

In the modern era, some writers have tried to lift this burden of ideal wife and *patni dharma* off the shoulders of *Ramayana* women. In Kavita Kane's work *Sita's Sister*, Urmila asks the audience 'what is the *dharma* of a husband towards his wife?' (Kane, 2014, p.220) ^[7]. Thus, Kavita Kane through the character of Urmila seeks to shift the focus on defining *pati-dharma*.

In some of the Indian *Ramayana* traditions, the husband and the wife are described to be one, with their sorrow and joy linked. Here, we see Sita accompanying Ram to the forest so that he can fulfill his duties. However, we do not see the same when the roles are reversed and Sita is banished from Ayodhya. Ram doesn't leave behind his kingdom to accompany Sita, even when he believes her to be innocent of any crime. In this instance, Ram, though may be said to have fulfilled his duty as the King, seems to have fallen short in performing his duty as a husband. In *Sita's Sister*, Laxman requests Urmila to stay back in Ayodhya. He says he will not be able to fulfill his husbandly duty of keeping Urmila safe while guarding Ram and Sita. He claims that the forest is an animal world where if not protected, a woman is anyone's for the taking (Kane, 2014, p.144) ^[7]. He also accepts that he has failed as a husband as he is abandoning Urmila while following his duty towards his brother.

The process of transition of Ram from a moral man to a God from the ancient (for example in Valmiki *Ramayana*) to the medieval period (for example in Tulsidas *Ramcharitmanas*) is a complicated one. Even within the same text or tradition, he is sometimes referred to as a man and sometimes as a God. In *Saket*, Ram is projected as an 'impeccable idol of a man' (Dave, 2018, p. 50) ^[6]. Yet his stepmother Sumitra says 'you took birth as a human and blessed this earth's soil' (Dave, 2018, p. 81) ^[6]. Sumantra addresses Ram, saying

'your inner self is otherworldly....the immortals descend to earth' (Dave, 2018, p. 82) ^[6]. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, Ram is depicted as a 'blameless man' yet Gods worship him after his victory.

One finds a similar transition of Sita from a virtuous woman to a Goddess. Thus, as Ram is elevated to the status of Devta, Sita too becomes a Devi. This process happens with Laxman and Urmila too. In Bharatpur, Rajasthan, there is a temple dedicated to Laxman and Urmila where they are worshipped as deities. In *Raghuvamsa*, there is a reference to Kaushalya and Kaikeyi regarding their husband as their deity (Kale, 1922, Canto IX p.72) ^[3]. In *Saket*, Urmila after her morning prayer touches Laxman's feet to get his blessings and calls him her lord. Laxman and Urmila both refer to each other as Goddess and God respectively, highlighting the divine aspect of a husband-wife relationship (Dave, 2018, p.34) ^[6]. There is also a reference to Kaikeyi, the goddess, taking the form of Durga (Dave, 2018, p.48) ^[6].

The idea of righteousness

Underneath the idea of referring to Indian *Ramayana* women and men as God and Goddess, lies the central concept of righteousness. In several Indian *Ramayana* traditions, we find focus on righteousness, controlling one's desire, and conquering one's sense, especially by great people, kings, queens, and sages. This may seem to be an attempt at controlling the sexuality of these women and men. Yet there is an open projection of sexuality and description of the pursuit of pleasure by women and men. In *Raghuvamsa*, Dashrath is projected as a righteous ruler who through his righteous conduct and just rule pleased the people of Kosala. He is the one who has curbed his senses and desires and has no love for hunting, gambling, wine, or mistress of fresh youth (Kale, 1922, Canto IX p.71) ^[3]. However, this doesn't mean that there is a taboo on pursuing pleasure and display of sexuality. There is a reference to sensuality and purity in companionship- 'woman having love sports with their husband', 'happiness of the coveted company of her lover', 'the young women wearing in their hair the flower implanted by their lover' (Kale, 1922, Canto IX p.74) ^[3].

In *Saket*, there is a depiction of the tenderness of love, an emotional connection between a husband and wife, a mother and son. Here too we find emphasis on righteous conduct. In Valmiki *Ramayana*, the people of Ayodhya are described to be virtuous and righteous. All the women and men are said to be self-controlled and joyful. Ram is portrayed as someone who has his senses tightly controlled and Dashrath is the one who has conquered his senses. Sage Culin is described to be pure in his conduct, retaining his semen and undertaking austerities (Goldman, 1984, p. 186) ^[2]. Yet there is mention of prostitutes and courtesans for the enjoyment of men. There is projecting of feelings of lust and desire, and use of prostitutes to destroy the chastity of Rsyasrnga, son of a great seer (Goldman, 1984, p. 139) ^[2].

Thus, it seems that these texts while displaying social realities attempt to also project an ideal world or at least some ideal women and men who have risen above these base desires. These women and men become champions of righteous conduct so as to influence the reader/audience and these texts become a source of moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance.

Conclusion

The study of these varied aspects makes one appreciate the multifariousness of the Indian *Ramayana* tradition even more. One sees diversity, not only in the storyline but also in portrayals of *Ramayana* women and men. This paper explored not only the variations in the portrayal of particular woman characters over historical ages but also their dynamism within each Indian *Ramayana* tradition. As we, our behavior, and our values change over time so did the *Ramayana* women. This breaks the monolithic way of looking at 'womenness'. This paper is also mindful of the fact that we cannot categorize all women as one. There are several identities- caste, class, tribal-non-tribal, Brahmanical-non-Brahmanical that often compete and even overshadow gender identities at times. This study sought to adopt an approach of fluidity vis-à-vis linearity by looking at the representation of *Ramayana* women and men in their respective sociocultural contexts.

Several dimensions of gender constructs were explored. This was done by looking at continuities and changes over time and space. Socially defined roles and status of women and men were looked at. Gender perceptions and expressions of femininity and masculinity in interpersonal and social interactions/exchanges were explored. These transitions reflected changes in social systems and beliefs over historical ages and regions. They were also the result of biases of the author of *Ramayana* textual traditions or a reflection of the perceptions of the perceived audience. While venturing into expressions of gender identity and ideologies attempt was made to see them in their cultural setting rather than imposing current gender ideologies on societies of the past. An analysis of the agency enjoyed by women and men, and their access to opportunities, resources and power was undertaken. It seems that the *Ramayana* women and men, both were bound by the social customs of their age. Though we find instances of attempts at subjugation of women to these norms more than men. Nonetheless, we also find *Ramayana* women and men challenging them, breaking them, and rising above them in some situations. This paper also acknowledges that often the Indian *Ramayana* traditions seek to portray an ideal world (ideal according to the author/speaker/director). This ideal world may not reflect the reality of the *Ramayana* women and men. Hence, discretion is required while exploring these traditions.

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