

The Kashmiri *Ramayana*: Voices and Silences

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Abstract: Prakash Ram Kulgami, the devotional Kashmiri poet composed *Ramayana*, The *Ramavatarcharit* in the 19th century. Though his mission seems to be similar to Tulsidas's, a devotional poet of the 16th century, his text is not. *Ramavatarcharit* is the first written epic of the Kashmiri language and is unique in many ways. Out of the seven *Ramayanas* of Kashmir this was the only one to be published. The text is a dialogue between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati and does away with multiple tellers and listeners. There are a large number of deviations and diversions from the popular *Ramkatha* as most people know it. Why? What was the poet's agenda and how did he fulfill it? The shift between both the Bhakti poets was of 300 years; hence the characters differ in their portrayal. What is also different in the text is that Sita gets a voice. She speaks and recounts all injustices meted out to her. Sita's silence has been frustrating for many a writer and poet. Perhaps it was time to provide this epic heroine with a voice. The paper examines the peculiarities of the text, also highlighting the fact how a pan Indian tale has been appropriately localized and regionalized. The epic does not claim to change the tale, but it does change the way its readers now look at the *Ramayana* characters. It augments the tale, localizes it, abstracts its characters and yet raises some meaningful and pertinent questions. The paper is an endeavour to answer the same.

Keywords: Kashmiri *Ramayana*, Sita's characterization.

When the *Ramayana* is mentioned what comes to mind is the well-known *SriRamcharitmanas* of Tulsidas. It will be an engaging exercise to cast a glance at the Kashmiri *Ramayana* by Prakash Ram Kulgami a devotee of Ram in the nineteenth century and though his mission seems to be similar to Tulsidas's, his text is not.

The variety that exists in the *Ramayana* tradition and also in Sita's character in the *Ramayanas* is perplexing. The portrayal of Sita by the poet Tulsidas in his medieval text *SriRamcharitmanas* is familiar to all north Indians. The author interpreted her on the basis of socio-cultural realities that existed in the sixteenth century when he wrote a lyrical text using imagery and metaphors in Awadhi, a dialect of Hindi which pulled the *Ramayana* out of the elite circles and brought it to the masses. Tulsidas made the text comprehensible to the common man and his Sita, at a cursory look, appears to be an ideal and conforming woman, wife and daughter-in-law, self-sacrificing and obedient. She exists solely for others and operates in subjugation, placed secondary to Ram as his *Bhakta* or devotee.

Is this Tulsidas's politics of repositioning Sita, who is a woman of substance in Valmiki's *Ramayana* which he considers his source text? If yes, why so? Is it because he was a devotee of Ram and had an agenda to establish him as a perfect reincarnation of

Vishnu and the giver of salvation, worthy of worship? It seems it is for this purpose he has muted many aspects of the Valmiki story as Sita's birth, her abduction, trial by fire, abandonment and disappearance. Was it the demand of the time he wrote in? If not, then does a deeper analysis show that Tulsidas is a clever poet who wrote a text for the common man but as far as Sita is concerned he wrote for the smart reader who can read between the lines. He has hinted at five places that Sita was greater than Ram and has placed her at par with the holy Trinity. Tulsidas's text can be compared and contrasted with the Kashmiri text of Prakash Ram Kulgami, a devotee poet of Kashmir in the nineteenth century, tracing the shift the character has taken in the gap of just three hundred years. The pan-Indian text acquires the rainbow folk colors of the Kashmiri life and gets contemporized, humanized, localized and augmented in this process making it a living text, sung and recited in Kashmiri homes even outside Kashmir on a daily basis.

Prakash Ram (1819-77 AD) wrote *Ramavatarcharit* which is considered to be the first epic of the Kashmiri language. It was translated into English by George Abraham Grierson in 1893. His text compiles the *Sri Ramavatar Charit* and the *Lavakusha Yuddha Charit* which is the second section or the *Uttarkand* and is divided into seven cantos. The second section is about Lava and Kush, Sita's sons. The text is in the form of a dialogue between Shiva and Parvati when the latter enquired how people would be saved in Kalyuga. Tulsidas's *Uttarkand* is the take-off point for the poet Prakash Ram. His poem has many deviations and divergences.

The *Ramavatarcharit* carries forward and expands what Tulsidas started and is more sympathetic to Sita. It is very vocal at acknowledging the injustice done to her, and melodramatic at places. Full of similes and metaphors, it shows Ram as gentle and loving, but retains the destiny motif. It also localizes the text greatly in describing locales, the bountiful and beautiful nature, the clothes and dresses, food, marriage ceremony, local Gods and Goddesses and Kashmiri rites and rituals. Even names of characters have been Kashmirified, e.g. Kekeyi becomes Kiki. A Kashmiri feels at home while reading it and totally identifies with the tale while the non-resident reader feels he is travelling through the valley. It has its own story to tell in its own way, making it a characteristic text of its environment and age, making use of songs and lyrics, vandanas and prayers and embedded myths and tales. In the Kashmiri text the characters are abstracted and Sita is seen as a "pious desire" (Grierson 23). There is a shift in her depiction as she stands more for an abstract virtue than a person. Lord Shiva is the teller of the tale and Devi Parvati is the listener.

The very first stanza is didactic and seems to be motivated by the purpose of raising the level of human consciousness, sending out metaphysical messages making the Sita story its medium. Not only does it make it more personal, it also provides the tale a higher, more pious plane. At Ram's birth nature becomes miraculous, opposites reconcile. Dialectic ideas suggest that the world is seen as composed of binary forces by the poet. Imagery of flora and fauna is employed and with the divine introduction the text attempts to follow epic traditions. There is an absence of divine invocation though. Sita's birth is described in detail, an event many other texts are silent about. It is also significant that it allots primacy to Mandodari who plays a large role in the text. The suggestion is of a pre-ordained destiny and divine machinery playing its role in Sita's life. All major male

characters know what is to happen in future, except Sita. It is not clear why she is kept in the dark. In the Shurpanakha episode Laxman also tears her garment. This disrobing of a demon woman in the wilderness to teach her a lesson is pregnant with meaning. Politically it could be the princes' way of establishing their supremacy and an indication of their authority over the space but it signifies total and absolute lack of restraint. If viewed from the gender angle it shows the empowerment of man as the physically stronger sex. The scene of Sita's abduction has lord Indra, the king of Gods, offer her drops of *Amrita* which makes her immortal. The tale is thus being enacted at two levels simultaneously, the human and the divine. Though crying for help during her abduction, Sita has the presence of mind and keeps her wits about her. In his fight with Jatayu, Ravana accepts Sita's suggestion which shows she is capable of quick thinking even in a crisis.[§]

After she is taken to Lanka, there is a moving scene between Sita and Mandodari. The poet's depiction of the emotional motherly aspect of female nature is touching. Also Sita's strong bond with nature is highlighted, the moon is eclipsed and flowers weep. Nature's empathy with Sita is mentioned in *SriRamcharitmanas* also but here it is clearly more pronounced and Nature has been used as an active agent. Lanka is seen as a holy place by all the Gods as Sita was born there and is expected to be brought there again. Two things are striking here: first an elaborate description of Lanka full of grandeur in the Beauty canto and second, the place being guarded, revered and served by Gods and Goddesses in anticipation of Sita's arrival. It places Sita over and above all divine entities and gives her the most exalted status. Poet Ashok Chakradhar commented in the Literature festival of Jaipur 2012, that Lanka became Sri Lanka because "Sitaji" stayed there. Hanuman is surprised to find the presence of divinities from the Hindu pantheon in Lanka. It could also be taken as a hint of Ravana's exalted stature, like in "Lanka Chadhai" a Rajasthani oral text, where the Gods serve Ravana because he is mighty and respectable. An interesting myth is embedded here about the origin of Lanka and how it got its name. The embedded tales in the Kashmiri *Ramayana* do not take a sharp diversion but are related to people and places mentioned in the text. The myth mentioning the tree Parijata which signifies sadness (known as the sad tree), depicts that the poet has localized the tale.

Kashmir is a place laden with flowers so the poet's choice of flower similes is not surprising. Mandodari, though prominent, is not a very strong figure; she does not feel free to speak about everything to her husband and withholds information, e.g. when she tells him about Sita being the cause of his ruin, she cannot muster up courage to tell Ravana that Sita is their daughter. There is a place in North of Kashmir known as

[§]This is a very interesting incident in the Kashmiri *Ramayana*, as Sita is being abducted she is scared that jatayu may either be killed by the mighty Ravana or badly injured. Then who will tell Ram what happened and who abducted her. So she suggests that Ravana should throw large stones at Jatayu to pin him down, as that would prevent Jatayu from fighting with Ravana. Ravana does so and Jatayu cannot fight anymore. Ravana is happy and Sita is content that she has saved his life as well as ensured Ram will be informed of all details of abduction.

Nilamata which is called the Sand Ocean. This is again localization of the text. Many novel incidents are entwined in the text. It is notable that the Kashmiri poet does not mince his words in mentioning that Ram is hesitant about accepting Sita, wondering if she has been faithful to him. Mandodari sings a song in which she intercedes for Sita, addressing the song to Ram (Grierson 40). It is employed to show the love between the mother and daughter and two women empathizing and bonding together, bringing out the pathos in the story. Apart from the pattern of destiny that the poet underscores time and again, the text also brings to light the fondness of the Kashmiri people for songs and poetry, lyrics and ballads. The rich tradition of music and dance in Kashmir is age old and their folk tradition is full of songs that describe their motherland equating it with heaven and its rich flora and fauna. Songs of flowers and bumble bees are commonplace in Kashmir. Description of nature in the text is rich and contributes further towards the localization of the tale. The fire trial is followed by a total contrast of setting and environment and the reader learns about the onset of the spring season, one of the most beautiful seasons in Kashmir. There is a long description of the blooming and rejoicing of the flowers. Kashmir valley's socio-cultural and geographical environment influenced the poet's writing at every step.

The second part starts with Ram being childless. It is subtly suggested, though underplayed, that Ram probably had many wives. Sita is very vocal about the injustices done to her. She sings a song giving the summary of the main events. From here on the *Karuna Rasa* or pathos takes over in the story completely and becomes predominant. The exact same situation is described in an *Awadhi* folk song with the same sequence of events. She deliberates upon various facts which establish her as a woman capable of thinking and not being blinded by love and affection; she recollects and puts together the facts of her life: abandonment by parents and husband, the trials and tribulations she faced thereafter, and the fire trial.

The differences between the Kashmiri text and others may not be earth shaking but they are considerable and substantial because this epic provides voice to the voiceless. This shift in three hundred years of time gap on the part of a devotee poet is a step further and the poet is clearly very sympathetic to Sita. The shift also lies in the fact that the poet has not minced words about Ram anywhere, gives Sita a larger depiction in the narrative than Tulsidas, and is quite vocal about it through other characters like the sages Valmiki and Vasishtha. Additionally, Sita is shown as a woman who rationalizes and ponders over the fact that all those people who supposedly loved her were not fair to her.

Consequently, Sita is capable of rebuffing Ram who is full of regret after he abandons her. Consoled by Vashishtha, Sita is totally humanized by the poet and her behavior can be called spontaneous, logical and hence understandable by the reader. Valmiki plays a bigger role in the *Prakash Ramayana*; Ram is a loving husband who beseeches Sita again, distressed at her refusal but imploring it was God's will. The last scene is a celebration. There is glory invested in the episode turning Sita into a living phenomenon shifting from a human role. She does not die of despair but the scene has been used to establish that she was a divine entity in human form and returns home showing her actuality to all those present – an idea explored in the modern graphic novel by Saraswati Nagpal, *Sita - Daughter of the Earth*. Gods shower flowers at the divinity of

Sita and the poet says that ever since the Holy Trinity is searching for Sita but cannot find her. Valmiki informs those present that Sita has descended to Shankerpore, four miles from Kulgam district of Kashmir, forty miles from Srinagar, Shankerpore had a sacred spring and this area was inhabited formerly only by Hindus (Brahmins) with a reputation for sanctity. Hindus visited this spring for religious ablutions but now the area is populated entirely by Muslims. A natural water spring is shown to display anger at the treatment meted out to Sita. The poet adds that Sita can be invoked with love, true faith and respect in the heart and would certainly appear for such a devotee. She has been elevated to the status of a divine entity that is alive but invisible.

Grierson has summarized the story episodically, omitting all details that make the document Kashmiri, e.g., details of the flora and fauna, songs of love, of disenchantment and disillusionment, of lovers' imploration and rebuttal, sub-stories and myths, prayers and details of food, music, Gods, Goddesses, wedding ceremony and so on. It is contemporized, localized and augmented with details. Time is handled on an epic scale saying Ram ruled for a thousand years before Yama came to take him. The *Ramayana* concludes with a final song, which highlights the predominance of music in Kashmiri life. Sita, though humanized at places, is treated as a diminutive double of Goddess Laxmi. The text, unlike *SriRamcharitmanas*, is largely Sita-based and not Ram-centric. The *Ramayana* did contribute significantly in establishing the Vaishnavite tradition in predominantly Shaivite Kashmir. "Classical Shaiva and Vaishnava traditions merged with Goddess dominated folk traditions and spread across the land" (Pattanaik, 28). Kashmir does have a rich Goddess tradition as it is the abode of Goddess Vaishnodevi in Katra Jammu, the Kheer Bhawani or Ragya Devi in Tulmul and the Sharika Devi on Hari Parwat, Srinagar. Every episode is titled which shows the Persian influence of the Masnavi style in writing Hindu epics. Some words also have been Persianised by prefixing 'Ba' meaning 'with', some Hindi words like Ba-Aakash make the text sound odd and forced. It hints at gradual replacing of Sanskrit words in Kashmiri language with Persian words suggesting cultural terrorism which requires research in the context of Kashmir.

In the Kashmiri *Ramayana*, Sita has biological parents unlike the other two texts. Its *Uttarkand* also has the sister-in-law's tale. Shabri and Anusuya are absent. The Ahalya episode is condensed, but Ahalya is respected by the poet. Mareech tells Ravana about Laxman's might and hence if he is around, a thousand Ravana's cannot abduct Sita. This highlights Laxman's role which is not so common in Ram-centric texts. The same episode is found in the drama script of NSD (the National School of Drama) Delhi titled *Mareech Samvaad* which is a dialogue between Ravana and Mareech.

The Bali episode is dealt with in detail. Bali realizes that he committed a sin by abducting his brother's wife (Ruma). Sita refuses to accompany Hanuman to save Ram's name and honor as she wants to keep her abduction a secret, also because she knows she is Ravana's daughter and hence she must not defy the patriarch. Here the influence of contemporary society on the poet can be gauged. *Laxman-rekha* is absent in Kashmiri *Ramayana*. It speaks of other peculiar incidents as how and why Lanka came into existence, Ravana goes to Kailasha and appeals to Lord Shiva to help him after Indrajeet is killed by Laxman, Mandodari is insulted by Hanuman so she disturbs Ravana even as

he is engaged in a secret sacrifice to win the battle against Ram. The characters of Ahiravana and Mahiravana, Ravana's cousins, are incorporated. The poet has not minced his words about Ram's doubt about Sita's faithfulness. It is significant that Prakash Ram, from a pan-Indian text, has transformed and transcreated the *Ramayana* into a folk text with the help of localizing devices such as rich and elaborate description of local food, clothes, dresses, ceremonies, Gods and Goddesses, locales, flora and fauna, thus taking it closer to a folk epic, intertwining prayers and songs, giving it a totally different texture, and yet revitalizing it and making it easier for a Kashmiri to include it in his day-to-day life. Whether these songs found their way into it or are popular and commonly sung because they are a part of it, cannot be ascertained. The author's aspiration is towards an epic but he takes it forward and incorporates folk flavor in it to make it a living, identifiable text.

The shift from Tulsidas to Prakash Ram took three hundred years and characters, too, shift in their depiction including Sita who, the author suggests, returns home when she sinks into the earth. Nevertheless she is victimized. She may not sit under the Ashoka tree, she pines under the Parijata or the sad tree but sad she is. Also, she is divine but does not know it and acts as human, only after her disappearance does she become divine. May be the poet was influenced by the other Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, and just as Kunti abandons Karna, Mandodari also abandons Sita, though for a different reason. There is overlapping and reverberation of the story of Lord Krishna who came to destroy Kansa as Sita comes to destroy Ravana. This story is found in many other Indian and international texts; all these versions may not be influenced by the *Mahabharata* but since this is a Kashmiri text such a possibility cannot be ruled out. If Sita has to destroy Ravana why does Mandodari abandon her in the first place, more so when she was also was a *Pari* or angel incarnated for the same purpose? It is possible these characters act in alternate roles, divine and human and keep forgetting their divine mission often.

So it can be said that there is no correct or incorrect version of the Sita Ram story as Tulsidas acknowledges the existence of a variety in the *Ramayana* tradition, obvious even from the Shiva-Parvati conversation, and that the story undergoes a change from time to time adapting itself to new locales and diverse tellers of the tale.

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