

 Sita's Trials

Sita's almost absolute stillness counterbalances Rama's extreme activity. Wherever he journeys, she is "home," the place where he stops or returns to. His actions are completed by her stillness; his moves to the periphery are answered by her presence at the center. Where she is, he must go to. . . . She is a model of the orthodox Hindu construction of "wife."  
 RICHARD SCHECHNER, "STRIDING THROUGH THE COSMOS," 174

A good starting point for an inquiry into the meaning of Sita for peasant women living in Uttar Pradesh is the Ramlīla of Ramnagar, an annual ritual reenactment of Tulsidas' Ramcaritmānas performed over the course of a month. Located on the outskirts of Benaras, the theatrical action of this Ramlīla takes place on separate sites and makeshift stages erected in a vast field.<sup>1</sup> Peasant women, at once spectators and pilgrims, often choose to keep the stage Sita company, rarely leaving her side as she sits in captivity for days in the Ashoka garden of the demon king, Ravana. While the audience moves with the actors to the site where the battle scenes are staged, it is the way women express solidarity with Sita and identify with her plight that lingers in all its poignancy and pathos, inviting questions about the place Sita occupies in peasant women's consciousness.

Sita's significance for women and her continued hold on the popular imagination is a phenomenon many scholars have investigated (Kishwar 1999). Whereas Sita, and her reputedly passive personality, has been a controversial figure among (mainly upper-class) feminists in India, in this chapter I focus on the relationship that members of the intermediate and lower castes have with Sita. If feminists have largely identified Sita as the model for *pativrata*dharma,<sup>2</sup> that is, the social ideal of female chastity, what accounts for the large number of Sita songs in the repertoires of peasant and lower-caste women? Since Sita's persona is also claimed and "domesticated" by women from a range of castes, this chapter, in addition to seeking insight into peasant women's attitudes about feminine power, investigates how this domestication is achieved and what purpose it serves.

Specifically, this chapter seeks to learn about the lives of women through the alternative narratives women's songs offer beyond those of the mainstream Ramāyanā myth. I single out a range of Sita songs known as Sita Mangal, sung on ritual occasions such as weddings, for the insights they offer about peasant women's experiences of conjugality; these songs form the core of this chapter's analysis. As Usha Nilsson asserts, "in an unbounded, fluid, and flexible discourse, women have reconstructed alternate tellings of the Ramāyanā. Neither harshly nor stringently, they have refashioned them into statements from women's points of view" (2001, 158). Similarly, Velcheru Narayana Rao's findings from his fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh suggest that women "have long used this language to say what they wish to say, as women" (Rao 1991, 114).

Reenactments of the Ramāyanā myth conclude with the victorious battle and the return of the divine couple to Ayodhya, but several genres of women's songs, from the jatsār to wedding, childbirth, and ritual ceremonies, evoke, often metaphorically, Sita's suffering from the often unreenacted Uttara Kanda portion of the Ramāyanā. Interestingly, it is these later episodes of Sita's ordeal and her eventual banishment that are supposed to represent the fate of Sita in *kaliyuga*.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, these episodes are not recited, but left out of the propitious yearly ritual reenactments of the epic, spread over nightlong sessions. Thus, "the Uttara Kanda of the Ramāyanā, which is the shortest segment in the canonical versions, constitutes the longest fragments in the women's songs"

(Chakravarti 2006, 242). Since women's songs about Sita draw liberally from these episodes, we can consider these episodes unique in their resonance with women's perspectives.

#### SITA SONGS AND THE RAMĀYANĀ TRADITION

Ramāyanā scholarship has unearthed the existence of diverse Ramāyanā texts in different regions of India, as well as in Southeast Asia, each perspective reflecting different social locations, aspirations, and ideological concerns (Richman 1991, 4). Significant variations in the myth's plot in turn create new conceptualizations of its characters and meanings (Thapar 1989, 4). The women's narratives explored here exemplify the vitality and diversity of these plural traditions. Class, gender, and ethnic variations in Ramāyanā narratives are the subject of ongoing research (Richman 1991). Feminist concerns have led to renewed interest in contemporary women's performative and dance repertoires that grapple with Sita's so-called passive persona and often, as in Bina Agarwal's poem, a silenced Sita is entreated to finally claim her voice and speak out (Hess 1999, 17).

The first of the three episodes upon which women's songs focus deals with Sita's ordeal by fire, or test of chastity, after Ram's victory in the Great War and before they return to the kingdom of Ayodhya. The second pertains to Sita's subsequent abandonment in the forest when she is pregnant. The last episode in the sequence relates to Rama's request that Sita return to Ayodhya after she has spent several years of exile in the forest and her twin sons are grown, but not before she undergoes another trial by fire. In this final and conclusive episode, Sita's refuses to return and the Earth responds by granting her wish and opening to receive her. Next, I explore how these three episodes are expressed, reworked, and engaged with in women's songs.

#### EARTH, FIRE, AND SACRIFICE

First is the *agni-parīkshā* in which Sita, at the end of the great war between Rama and the demons, must undergo a test of chastity that requires her to throw herself into a blazing fire. LINDA HESS, "REJECTING SITA," 3

The ethos of pativrata-dharma places much of the power and responsibility for the husband and his social context in the hands of his wife. . . . In the wife's ideal moral universe, the husband functions as the point of orientation for her actions, as the king does for the warrior, the teachers for the student, the deity for the priest, and so forth . . . in addition to being empowered and responsible for the husband's well-being, the wife is also understood to be his "half-body" merged ontologically through the ritual of marriage.

COURTRIGHT, "SATI, SACRIFICE, AND MARRIAGE," 187–88

In Rajasthan, Ann Grodzins Gold found that the appeal of female goddesses was attributed to their inner strength in the face of adversity. She notes that when talking to informants in Ghatiyali about goddesses, they seemed to mix "familiarity and intimacy with respect for their potency and violent capacity, a capacity not necessarily embodied in weapons" (Gold 1994, 29). Gold also found that in Sita's case, while the self-restraint and suffering arising from her subordinate role were seen as the source of her uniquely feminine power, such power was understood as "analogous to the self-restraint and suffering imposed on male ascetics to increase spiritual power" (31). The conclusions Gold drew from her research in Rajasthan mirror mine in Uttar Pradesh, where Sita's persona and inner fire (*tej*) are rendered even more luminous in the crucible of adversity.

Of the three episodes from the Ramāyanā explored in women's songs, the Fire Ordeal takes precedence. Even for Ramāyanā enthusiasts, its problematic nature has provoked "creative alterations of the fire ordeal in textual traditions (that) reflect anxious discomfort with the scene" (Hess 1999, 3). So powerful has the preoccupation with Sita's fire ordeal been that it forms a recurring theme in folksongs and ballads, whose heroines' misfortunes often parallel Sita's. In Valmiki's Ramāyanā, the motif of trial by fire is as much about Rama's test and transformation in consciousness regarding his own divinity as it is about Sita (Shulman 1986, 116). In a similar vein, the grinding song of Satmal presented in chapter 1 offers a glimpse of the anguished mental state of a husband, who, like Rama, must succumb to the censorious pressures of patriarchy instead of protecting his wife against it. And just as Agni in the Ramāyanā is scorched and extinguished by the greater *tej* of Sita, who emerges unscathed, so too is this heroine unharmed by the flames as they die down on her entry into the vat. Some have even argued that, "Sita's action is self-destructive and reinforces the feminine identity of dealing with repeated humiliation through an obliteration of the self" (Chakravarti 2006, 227).

Such imagery forms an integral part of folksongs of the region, and given that these motifs are associated with upper-caste proclivities, women's familiarity with them across caste lines is striking. It could be argued that the motifs actually serve to heighten women's perceptions of societal injustice and allow them to create their own spaces within which to critique it. As Cynthia Humes asserts, "The anger of goddesses can thus be appropriated to support the validity of righteous fury against other perceived injustices. After all, the gods ask intervention against those who oppress them" (2000, 148).

If these images succeed in evoking protest at perceived injustices, then, in subtle ways, they achieve another significant purpose, namely, that of challenging stereotypes about Hindu women. In this sense, the narratives discussed here also evoke the myth of Daksha's ceremonial sacrifice and Sati's protest when her husband Shiva was snubbed by her father, Daksha, and excluded from participating in the sacrifice. Sacrifices such as these announce altered states and, like all sacrifices, must be seen as rejuvenative and transformative for the entire social order. According to this logic, transformations effected by the trial-by-fire motifs can be understood as unleashing or giving rise to new beginnings.

#### THE FIRE MOTIF AND PROOFS OF CHASTITY

The song below enumerates not one but a string of trials for Sita. In retelling the Ramāyanā with Sita at its center, folksongs depart in significant ways from both Tulsidas' Rāmcaritmānas, the narrative popular in the region, and Valmiki's classical Sanskrit version. The passive stillness of the women at the staging of Tulsidas' Rāmcaritmānas at Ramnagar is in stark contrast to the imagery of Sita's trial by fire, which is a recurring motif in the jatsār, the peasant women's ballads of the millstone analyzed in chapter 1 and undoubtedly the most tragic genre of Bhojpuri songs. Like Sita, who had to furnish proof of her chastity, heroines of the jatsār are put to various tests by fire.

I

*Jab re Sita deī Adit hāthe libali re*  
*Adit chapit hoī jāī ai*  
*Iho kiriyevā e Sita ham na patiyaibī*

*Sarap bicharvā ham lebi ai*  
*Jab re Sita dei sarp hāthe lihalī re*  
*Sarap baithēle phetā māri ai*  
*Iho kiriyavā ham na patiyaibī*  
*Ganga bicharvā ham lebi ai*  
*Jab re Sita dei Gangahi hāthe lihalī ai*  
*Gangahi pari gaile ret ai*  
*Iho kiriyavā e Sita ham na patiyaibī*  
*Tulsi bicharavā ham lebi ai*  
*Jab re Sita dei Tulsi hāthe lihalī*  
*Tulsi gailī sukhāi ai*  
*Aisen purukhvā ke muh nāhin dekhabi*  
*Jini Ram dehlen banvās ai*  
*Phāti jaitī dhartī alop hoi jaitī re*  
*Ab na dekhabi sansār ai*

When Sita Devi took the sun into her hands,  
 The sun set.  
 “This proof I will not accept, O Sita!  
 The trial of snakes you’ll have to take.”  
 When Sita Devi put her hand into the snake pit,  
 The cobra sat all coiled up.  
 “This proof I cannot accept.  
 The test of the Ganga you must take.”  
 When Sita put her hand into the Ganga,  
 Ganga dried up into a sandy bed.  
 “This proof I cannot accept,  
 The test of the sacred Tulsi plant you must take.”  
 When Sita Devi touched the Tulsi, it dried up.  
 “Such a being I never wish to set eyes on again,  
 The Rama who exiled me to the forest.  
 Let the earth part, let me disappear in it.”

UPADHYAYA 1990B, 161

In this version of the Ramāyanā story, Sita must undergo various trials to prove her chastity and yet when she emerges unscathed from each, it is the proofs that are deemed inadequate. Before reaching the moment of Sita’s final protest, women are given to explore their preoccupation with

their own chastity and the standards against which they must constantly measure themselves. Heroines of the *jatsār* are arbitrarily subjected to innovative and unexpected proofs, taken from a seemingly inexhaustible list of ways to test women's chastity. The ballad of *Satmal*, outlined in chapter 1, tells the story of a woman with seven brothers who, suspected of infidelity, takes the ultimate test. In the concluding episodes of the *Lorikāyan* (see chapter 5), *Manjari*, the chaste and long-suffering wife of *Lorik*, who has abandoned her, must nevertheless provide at least three proofs of her chastity. First, she is required to draw out coins from a container of boiling water. In another instance, as proof of her *sat*, the river parts to let her cross. Finally, ready to plunge into a funeral pyre, she is saved just in time.

In another women's ballad, *Tikuli*, the protagonist, invokes *Agni*, asking that the fire envelope her before she loses her virtue. The final lines of another ballad evoke the same tragic mood and applaud its female protagonist's decision to avoid shame by willingly taking her own life rather than enter into an illicit relationship. The recurrence of such scenes is striking in women's ballads and might even be said to define them. There may be important psychological explanations for this motif that are worth exploring, but the motif also raises questions about women's own preoccupation with the burden of having to furnish proofs of chastity. Thus even when the narratives are not directly about *Sita*, it is her trial that serves as their reference point and her humiliation that is evoked and reworked. Such parallels with the *Sita* narrative seek to explain the misfortunes, struggles, and protests of folk heroines. As *Sita's* capacity for suffering is almost as powerful as her capacity for resisting injustice, it is the inseparable combination of these two elements that contribute to the potency and appeal of the *Sita* figure as a metaphor for women's strength.

In this connection, it is useful to recall *Shulman's* observation that *Sita* partakes of the symbolism of earth, fire, and sacrifice (*Shulman* 1986, 116). *Sita's* birth from the earth and the episode of her trial by fire in the *Ramāyanā* are the rich backdrops against which the presence of these symbols in the songs of *Sita* makes complete sense. The *Sita* songs highlight *Sita's* extraordinary powers, which resemble the *tapas*, that is, the heat generated from asceticism and yogic austerities. These qualities of *Sita* remain controlled and restrained, thereby guarding against the devastation that might ensue were their enormous potency to be let loose

indiscriminately. Shulman offers the following explanation: “These associations contribute to the sense of an undercurrent of violent power in Sita, heightened and contained by her chastity and constant control (which falls under the rubric of *tapas*). There are few explicit remarks to this effect in Valmiki, for example, Sita’s well-known boast to Rāvana in the Asoka-grove in Lanka: ‘It is (only) because I have not been commanded to do so by Rama, and because I wish to preserve my *tapas*, that I do not reduce you, O Dasāgriva, to ashes by means of my consuming energy’” (Shulman 1986, 116).

While the songs outline the conditions of women’s subservience to male dominance, ultimately it is women’s superior moral and spiritual power that is evoked in the folk imaginary. Heroines modeled after the chaste Sita have a fiery, fearsome chastity that sometimes causes the spark that lights the pyre to ignite from their persons. Thus the heroines seem to embody the fire, and just as Sita was able to emerge unscathed from the fire and will herself back into the Earth, these formidable folk heroines, in a final act of defiance, summon at-will the flame that will consume them. The action, then, is tantamount to the deification of folk heroines. It would seem that, in these sung biographies, women achieve in death the power that had eluded them in life. Ironically, however, by glorifying their sacrifice, even if it was through a final act of protest, the songs reinforce the very conditions under which such heroism becomes necessary. In contrast to the fierce feminine imagery of these ballads, other songs that have Sita at their center, such as the auspicious songs sung at marriages, explore motifs of conjugality and domesticity.

#### SITA MANGAL

*Purab khojalon betī pacchim khojalon, khojalon Orissa Jagarnāth  
Charon bhuvan betī bar eik khojilā, katihen na milen Sīrī Ram.*

Searched the east, searched the west, as far as Orissa and Jagannath.  
In all four directions, daughter, searched for a groom but nowhere did I find  
Shri Ram.

UPADHYAYA 1990B, 122

This couplet captures the contradiction that despite the tragedies associated with the god, it is none other than Rama who can fulfill the role of



the ideal groom. Only through many penances, prayers, and good deeds can brides hope to find such a groom. At weddings, however, it is the auspiciousness symbolized by the divine couple Ram-Sita, the respective incarnations of Vishnu and Srī, that is invoked, and it is this image of divinity that is enacted and celebrated. Hence, mangal (auspicious) songs are a way of invoking blessings.

Vidyaniwas Mishra argues that in the folklore of the region, folk sympathies lie with Sita to such an extent that Rama's own compulsions only serve to strengthen Sita's fire of truth (Mishra 2000, 118). I therefore turn my attention to the Sita songs I commonly heard at wedding celebrations in the villages of Benaras and Jaunpur, where I conducted fieldwork, during the wedding season of May and June. I heard most of these auspicious songs of blessing at two separate wedding celebrations in Benaras: one in the multicasite village of Chaubeypur, hosted by an upwardly mobile Yadav household of prosperous peasants where a number of intermediate castes sang the songs of blessing, and the other in the Dalit neighborhood of Churamanpur, hosted by a Dalit household of agricultural laborers. It is the Dalit women of the Chamar caste who are represented in these selections. As the women who sang at these events, identified at the end of the songs below, were also guests, my interactions with them were brief.

Since the song recordings were made while the various wedding ceremonies were underway, I was often unable to include the perspectives of the singers at the time of the recordings. I therefore returned to their various households on other occasions to elicit their views. I heard some of these songs at the brides' *haldī* (*turmeric*) ceremonies, wherein the bride's female kin anoint her with herbal oils and rejuvenating scrubs. At both of the weddings, I recorded Mangal songs, the auspicious singing by women of the bride's family also heralded the arrival of the *barāt* (the groom's party). Many of the songs were thus invariably drowned out by the accompanying brass band. This cacophonous, though customary, singing, so much a feature of wedding celebrations, however, served to create the auspicious environment for the sacred rites that followed.

In the Bhojpuri region, the month of Agahan, popularly believed to be the month in which Sita was married, is considered inauspicious for weddings. Yet, paradoxically, it is the same Sita who is invoked for her auspiciousness at wedding celebrations. Another paradox lies in the ritual wherein prospective brides beseech washerwomen for a pinch of the

wedding vermilion. This ritual references Sita's tragedy, as Sita was turned out of her marital home at the complaint of a *dhobī* (washerman) (Mishra 2000, 118). Mishra suggests that the ritual underlines the deep concern within folk consciousness for the tragic wedded life of Sita and Rama. The Sita Mangal songs, however, highlight two distinct aspects of their marriage—on the one hand, the auspiciousness symbolized by the marriage of the divine couple Ram and Sita as incarnations of Vishnū and Śrī and, on the other, the struggle and hardship integral to conjugal life (as these were to the union of Ram and Sita), including the “renunciation, asceticism and sorrow [that] mark Sita's largely solitary life” (Zacharias 2001, 35). As we will see below, paradox and contradiction are the hallmarks of these songs and sayings. In the representative collection below, some predominant motifs and structural patterns emerge.

2

*Deu na morī māī bāne k daliyā phulvā lorhan ham jāb*  
*Phulvā lorhat bhayalīn dhupahriyā harava gūnthat bhailī sānjh*  
*Ghūmari ghūmari Sitā phulvā charhāve*  
*Siv bābā delan āsīs.*  
*Jaun māngan tūhun māngau Sital dei ūhe māngan ham deb*  
*An dhan chāhe jo dihā Siv bābā, svāmī diha Siri Ram*  
*Pār lagāvain je mori navariyā jehi dekhi jiyarā jurāi*

“Pass me, mother, my basket, I go to pick flowers for worship.”

She picked flowers until late afternoon, made garlands until sunset.

Again and again, Sita made flower offerings.

Siva Baba gave His blessings.

“Whatever you ask for, Sita, shall be yours.”

“Material blessings are fine, Siv Baba, but let Shri Rama be my husband.

Only he can ferry me across to the other world and fill my heart with joy.”

MISHRA 2000, 119

As in the couplet that began this section, the bride, in keeping with the cultural ideal in Uttar Pradesh, prays for a groom like Rama. The motif of being ferried across from *this* to the *other* world, namely, of achieving salvation, is a recurrent one with reference to Rama, the savior. Singing Mangal at weddings amounts to both singing about the marriage of Ram and Sita as well as invoking divine blessings. The song also recalls the

songs of chapter 3 wherein women itemize the characteristics of a good husband. Such songs are also likely to be heard during the festival of Śivrātri, an important fair relating to Sita's marriage that is celebrated all over the region. During this festival, young women beseech Śiva to grant them good grooms like Rama. The song, familiar to women in the region, exemplifies one of the ways in which the Sita motif is integrated into sung prayers.

3

*Rājā Dashrath aisan māngilā sasur ham*

*Kausilyā nihan hamri sās*

*Babu Lachman aisan māngilā devarji*

*Purush māngilā bhagvān*

A father-in-law, like Dashrath.

Like Kaushilya, a mother-in-law.

For brother-in-law, none other than Lakshman.

For husband, God himself.

CHINTA DEVI, CHURAMANPUR, VARANASI

The prayers that constitute part of the well-known versions of auspicious wedding songs often feature the above boons. The popularity of this motif cuts across caste lines. Chinta Devi, one of the singers of the Dalit women's version above, explains: "These are the things we pray for and apart from the ones mentioned in the song above, in the longer version of the song, Sita also requests *jauno vidhī hovain* (whatever the mode of worship) for two additional things—a string cot and on that, a lovely infant."

Thus, the auspiciousness of a wedding also makes it an appropriate time to seek other blessings. By emphasizing that not only the groom but also the entire set of new kin must be equally exalted, the song stresses the importance of familial life for the inmarrying bride. Moreover, when the married couple is none other than Ram and Sita, other close kin may bask in their reflected glory. Thus, with the sacredness of the divine couple symbolically transferred to the newlyweds, all who celebrate the nuptials are equally elevated.

4

*Patrī Sītā ke patrī kamariyā, lipelī dharma duvariā  
 Dharam duvariā Sītā lipahī na pavelī, āi parelā Siriram  
 Pūchi parelā sukumarī se-kekar tū hau dhiyavā e babunī?  
 Kekar hau bahuver, kavane kulavā me biāhal hau, ke lagelā devar tohār?  
 Etanā bachan suni bolalī Sītā sukumarī ho  
 Rājā Janak ke ham bāni ho dhiyavā  
 Dasrath ke bahuvar, Bharat ke kulavā me biāhal  
 Lacchman devarā hamār,  
 Etanā bacan jab sunale Siya, kabalā, Lacchman bulāy dhāi  
 ke khojā tū nauvā aur bariyā ke le jāī Awadhpur pahuncaī*

Slim Sita with her slim waist swabs the sacred space.

She has barely finished when Shriram appears.

He asks the maiden, “whose daughter and daughter-in-law are you?

Whose bride and in whose clan are you married, who is your brother-in-law?”

Upon hearing these words, Sita speaks,

“I am the daughter of Raja Janak,

Married into the clan of Bharat,

Laxman is my brother-in-law.”

When he heard these words of Sita, he asked for Laxman

To send for the barber to convey the ritual message of matrimony to Ayodhya.

PRABHAVATI YADAV, CHAUBEYPUR, VARANASI

In this song, and the one below, Sita foretells her own marriage, and it is her certitude that sets the wedding process in motion. But this foretelling is only one of several elements in the song. In the way the song poses its questions about Sita’s identity, we learn that a woman is invariably identified first through her father, and then through her father-in-law. Thus, a woman’s identity can be said to derive through the male members of her households who exercise various kinds of rights over her. In other words, men who control or provide guardianship to women also define them, so much so that these women scarcely seem to have separate identities. Once a man’s ownership over women is thus established, the rest of society is able to assign the women their place in the social universe. Indeed, no exception is made, not even for women of Sita’s stature. Through this women’s song we learn that even Sita was thus circumscribed and domesticated.

Interestingly, therefore, despite Rama's surprising lack of recognition of Sita as his bride in the opening lines, and despite his ability (as All-Knowing Rama) to easily claim her as soon as he heard about her web of relationships, he still sends for the barber, the ritual specialist associated with the task of carrying formal messages of betrothal and matrimony. On another level, then, the song seems to suggest that the performance of the wedding ceremony, with all its attendant rituals, will not only impart legitimacy to the couple but also serve to locate and firmly circumscribe the woman within a specific social milieu.

5

*Asan dasā bābā āsan dasā Muni sab  
karson vichār, kahan hoi Sītā biyahavā  
Muni sab bole ke rahlin, ki Sītā uthī bolalin  
Baba ego patrī bhejalon Ajudhiā, jahān ke rājā Dasrath  
Nāhin jāni nagarī Ajudhia, nāhin jāni Rājā Dasrath  
Betī kekarā patrī likhab a bhejab kahān re?  
Unch nagar dūr patan, ālhe base chājan  
Baba duāre candanvā ke gāch, ūhe he Rājā Dasrath  
Sānvar dekhi jin bharmayalon, Tilak chadhavalon  
Baba ūhe veer balvān, uhe var sundar  
Cācā uhe var vīr balvān, ūhe var sundar*

Seated sages, seated the ascetics,  
Reflect on where Sita is to be married.  
The sages had barely spoken when Sita spoke up.  
“Baba, send this horoscope to Ayodhya where Raja Dashrath resides.”  
“We know not Ayodhya, we do not know Dashrath,  
Daughter, whom to write and where to mail the letter?”  
“High up, far way in that land to where the birds migrate,  
The sandalwood tree at the entrance, that's where Raja Dashrath lives.  
Be not dismayed at the groom's complexion, just perform the betrothal ritual.  
Father, he is the brave and strong groom and handsome too.  
Uncle, he's the strong and handsome groom.”

NEETU YADAV, BANHWAN VILLAGE CHANDAULI

Sita's extraordinary power to foretell her own marriage are highlighted once again in the above song, offering a contrast to the quotidian reality

in which women scarcely have a say in their own marriages. The reference to the groom's complexion is suffused with irony. Women are routinely warned to avoid, when confronted with the "ideal groom," being sidetracked by irrelevant considerations such as matters of complexion and seeking to deter those conducting the search. This reversal of the ubiquitous emphasis, in the popular imagination, on a potential bride's fairness only enhances the irony. Many songs grapple with Sita's clairvoyance, taking up the motif of the *svayamvar* whereby Sita exercised her agency in choosing her groom. The song suggests the importance of paying attention to the minutest of details when searching for the perfect groom. It also invokes the enormous effort invested, and the involvement of extended families, in the search. At the weddings I attended, such songs functioned like a collective sigh of relief, which seemed especially apt, given that wedding celebrations mark the conclusion of painstaking and often time-consuming searches.

6

*Bannī hamār jaisan ho Sītā dulhā lagelā Siriram  
Aisan jodi ho khojale na milī jaisan Sita Ram hamār  
Bannī ke bābū ho jaisan Janak ji, Dashrath sasur tohār  
Gānv ghar nagar ho jaisan Mithilā ke, Ayodhyā nihan parivār hamār  
Sab ghar rāj kare hamārī bannī ho, chamkat rahī sansār  
Dev-muni sab duvāre par baithi ke sabhi karelā dulār*

Our bride is like Sita, the groom like SriRam.  
A couple like our Ram and Sita is hard to find.  
Bride's father like Janak, Dashrath father-in-law,  
Village and town like Mithila, Ayodhya-like the family of ours.  
May she reign, our bride, and shine in her world,  
As the sages, the guests, shower blessings.

SARALA DEVI KHATIK, CHAUBEYPUR, VARANASI

In this sung blessing, the entire wedding scene is transformed into the idealized wedding of Ram and Sita, thereby partaking of its prosperity. Sarala Devi, explaining the special meaning that Sita Mangal songs have for her, says that she sings these songs so that her daughter's wedded life may be ideal, like that of Ram and Sita: "All young women should be blessed with the kind of conjugal home that Sita had." Prabhavati Yadav,

the singer of the first song in this section, offered, “Sita is the ideal woman. So with the blessings of Devi Sita, may our daughter also be beautiful, well-spoken and endowed with virtues. I pray that women display the qualities of Sita.” Chinta Devi, of the Camar caste and the mother of the bride at the other wedding where I recorded Mangal, summed up the significance of these auspicious songs thus: “I sing Sita songs simply because in this world, there is not another woman with such a character as Sita’s. And I hold my daughter’s character to the standards of *satitvā* of mother Sita. For me Sita is the ideal of womanhood—in society women should aspire to emulate Sita’s character.”

7

*Chotī merī Sita re, sab gun āgar*  
*Sītā chale lin phulvarī*  
*Phulvā lodhiyā Sita ghar ke lavatlin*  
*Ram Raghubar dhailen dāhin bānhā*  
*Atanā bacan jab sune lein Rikhaiyā*  
*Baba dese dese lohavā besayā*  
*Ohī lohavā ke dhanush dihalein banāī*  
*Aur maurvā dihalein othanyā*  
*Je ehi dhanush ke nau khand kariben*  
*Ohī se karbo Sita ke biyahavā*  
*Atanā vachan Ram sunah na pailen*  
*Aai mandauvā dhaile thāth*  
*Rovlein ājan rovelein bājan rovein rājan sab log*  
*Pātar Ram pātar karihaiyān kamar lachak jin jāī*  
*Thār bhar lihalin Sita*  
*Candanvā din rāt suruj manaī*  
*Pātar Ram pātar karihaiyan kamar lachak jini jāī*  
*Torelen dhanush karelen nau khand*  
*Ā bigi dihalein āsmān*  
*Haselen ājan haselein bājan haselen rājan sab log*  
*Sita biyābhī lehi jas.*

My little Sita, blessed with the fine quilites,  
 Sita goes to pick flowers.  
 She picked flowers and returned,  
 Shri Ram held her right hand.

When the sage Rikhi heard these words,  
 The sage looked high and low for iron.  
 Of the iron he fashioned a bow  
 And stuck a peacock feather on top.  
 “Whoever breaks this bow into nine parts  
 Only he will get to marry Sita.”  
 Ram barely heard these words  
 He sat down in the sacred space.  
 All beings cried out!  
 Slim Ram, what if he were to sprain his waist!  
 Sita took her position at the sandalwood sacred space,  
 Day and night entreating the Sun.  
 “Ram is slim, may he not sprain his waist.”  
 He broke the bow into nine parts.  
 The skies fell.  
 Shouts of joy explode as he takes his bride away.

REKHA YADAV, BANHWAN VILLAGE, CHANDAULI

This song creatively integrates the bow-breaking episode into a new narrative, thereby linking the episode with the qualities a groom must demonstrate to win the hand of his bride. Only once Rama has taken Sita by the hand does the sage Rikhi set to work fashioning the bow—the breaking of which will determine Sita’s choice of groom. The song emphasizes the orchestrated and prescribed ways in which marriages must be conducted so that the appropriate social norms are observed.

The bow-breaking episode, then, serves to legitimize an existing commitment or attraction between the ideal couple. Despite the groom’s considerable attractions, he must first undergo a test to win the hand of his bride—a test through which he must adequately prove himself worthy and deserving. Surprisingly, in this women’s song, Rama is not constructed according to mainstream understandings of a mighty warrior hero. Far from dwelling on Rama’s physical prowess and strength, the narrative focuses repeatedly on his slender waist and, as a corollary, Sita’s prayers are for his safety. Thus, women’s prayers for the tests of endurance that men must undergo raise interesting questions about the masculine qualities women consider desirable. The song emphasizes the need to pay close attention to women’s perspectives, which are often wholly missing from mainstream masculine discourses about heroism.



8

*Gaunvā ūpar baba mandir khanavalā*  
*Mandir parelā lāl maidān*  
*Mandir dekhan chalelen betī ho,*  
*Sita betī, apīran ghunghrū herāi*  
*Unhavā baithe gāilen dūlhe Ram*  
*Kanhe subvā chalelu akel*  
*Aju ke ratiyā, Suhva ehvei gujarihā*  
*Bihāne jaihā apane gāon*  
*Aisan boli jin bolā ho, Ram ji abahi ta bātin kunvār*  
*Jab hamare baba ho dihein kanyādān, tab hoib subva tohār*

At the edge of the village Baba erected a temple,

A temple with a red flag.

Sita sets off to visit the temple.

Daughter Sita loses her anklet.

There Ram, the groom, sits.

“Where are you off to alone, bride?

Tonight spend the night here, go back tomorrow.”

“Do not utter these words,

Ram is still a young lad.

When my father perfoms the kanyadān ritual, only then shall I be your bride.”

KIRAN YADAV, TIRMAPUR VILLAGE, CHANDAULI

Here, an auspicious song and the sacredness of the occasion serve to harness women’s sexualities in the service of the institution of marriage. In this song, the wedding of Rama and Sita underlines an important message regarding sexual codes. The loss of anklets and other items of jewelry such as earrings and noserings is a familiar trope in songs of the region, signifying extramarital or illicit sexuality. The song therefore strikes a note of alarm about safeguarding the virginity of the bride. Kiran Yadav, the bride’s mother at the Yadav household celebrating the wedding, considers the song’s message crystal clear: “Before marriage or *kanyadān* [the ritual gifting of the daughter to the groom], it is the responsibility of the girl to maintain her sacredness in any situation. Hearing this song, girls would be influenced to follow this advice about maintaining purity [virginity].”

Kiran Yadav’s remark suggests that the sacredness of the bride extends to the bride’s observance of strict premarital codes and restrictions

on women's sexuality. When I inquired about why contemporary social mores are embedded in songs about the ideal couple, Kiran's kinswoman, Neetu Yadav, pointed out that the main message of the song is one of auspiciousness. Then, after reflecting further on my question, she added: "We are simple human beings. How can we compare ourselves with god? We sing these songs simply to bless the married couple and to express our happiness, and not to follow all the deeds of god." Taking the idea of Ram and Sita as role models one step further, Kiran Yadav reflected: "If Sita was a *pativrata*, so was Ram *ek-patnivrata* [pledged to a single wife] and therefore this, too, is our idea of the ideal couple." Kiran and Neetu Yadav explained that, through these songs, ideal models of behavior are necessary and reinforced. They concluded by emphasizing the continued relevance of these songs to their community.

9

*Gao mana cita laya gao surata samaya Sita ka mangal gāiye*  
*Kaune sāgra khudai hai kinane bandhā hai palā*  
*Kauna kahāra pāni bhare*  
*Sita baithi nahāy lado baithi nahāy sita ka mangal gāiye*  
*Dasrath sāgar khūdāi hai Lakshman bandhi hai palā*  
*Rama kahāra pāni bhare*  
*Sita baithi nahāy lado baithi nahāy Sita ke mangal gāiye*  
*Palī thī betī palī hain kacā dūdh pilāy dahiṃyā bhatā khilāi*  
*An ganvā ka chokrā le jāi rath bithalāy sita ke mangal gāiye*  
*Jo main janati betī hoengī parāi, lado hoengi parāi*  
*Aga dhātura main letī khāi*  
*Letī garbha girāy sita mangal gāiye*

Sing heartily, the song of Sita, keep her image in your heart.

Who got the lake dug out, who set the sail?

Which kahar filled the water?

Sita, ready for her bath, dearest ready she is, sing her praise.

Dasrath got the lake dug out, Lakshman set the sail.

Rama's kahars filled the water.

Sita ready to bathe, dearest ready she is, sing her praise.

I raised her, raised her on milk and pure foods.

A lad of another village takes her away on a chariot, sing her praise.

If I had known she would belong to another, become another's,

I would have consumed the *dhatūra*  
And aborted the womb, sing the praise of Sita.

SRIVASTAVA 1991, 296

The song above articulates a mother's grief and unbearable sense of loss at bidding farewell to her beloved daughter, Sita. In a song ostensibly about blessings, it is interesting to find a mother's grief at her daughter's impending departure at her wedding slipped in at the end. The last stanza evokes the mood of pathos found in similar songs sung by mothers at their daughters' departure of brides, as in the following excerpt from a song I discussed in chapter 3:

Were a daughter's birth foretold, a concoction of chillies I'd have consumed,  
or smoked chillies to abort, to escape the unbearable sadness.

These lines evoke the various strategies women adopt to get rid of unwanted pregnancies, but here, as in other songs of the same genre, we learn that the sadness derives from the departure of a beloved daughter for her marital home. It is at the moment of a daughter's final departure that her mother must confront and articulate the trauma of this parting. These songs appear to emphasize the sorrow of this impending parting and offer at least one reason why the birth of a daughter is rarely celebrated with the same exuberance as that of a son.

Given the tragedy of Sita's life, one can understand the anxieties inherent in the following intriguing and rare wedding song, which articulates an alternative viewpoint to the one advanced in hundreds of songs sung across caste divides, all of which celebrate nuptials by evoking Rama and Sita as the ideal couple.

10

*Tilak carbhāi Bābā ghare cali alien, Ama dehariyā dhaile thār*  
*Kahū kahū Raja ho Ram ke suratiyā, kavṇā nacchtare avtār ho*  
*Kā ham kahin Rani Ram ke suratiyā, Ram sūrajvā ke jot*  
*Ram ke jyoti dekhin adit chapit bhailen, mohi rahlen Pasurām*  
*Pheri avauou Baba tilak ke dinavā, balu ham rahbon kunvār ji*

The engagement settled, father returned home, mother waited at the door.  
“Tell us about Rama's beauty, under which auspicious star did he take divine  
birth?”

“How shall I describe Rani, Rama’s beauty, his countenance the rays of the sun itself.

The sun was made in Rama’s likeness, none other than Him that Parasuram adored.”

“Break off the engagement, Father, I’d much rather stay unmarried.”

Was it Sita’s tragic fate and impending ordeal that prompted her unusual request to break off her engagement with Maryada Purushottam Ram, “most exemplary among men”? The reference to the sage Parasurama evokes the moment in the Ramāyanā when Rama won both the hand of Sita as well as the blessings of the sage who arrived on the scene, roused from his meditations by the thundering noise caused by the breaking of the bow. Given that most songs seek out and celebrate the qualities of Rama in the groom, a song that questions this stereotype is both unsettling and rare. Thus, songs that appear to break from the norm pose unresolved puzzles in their refusal to endorse the received wisdom. This song asks listeners to reflect on why Rama should be considered the ideal groom, when indeed Sita suffered such humiliation and sorrow. What, then, are to be the standards against which to measure the ideal groom and, more so, what qualities should individual women search for in prospective grooms? In other words, are women’s expectations about conjugal fulfillment at odds with those of the society? Similar anxieties and misgivings permeate the next song, in which Sita reflects on the unknown future that was to follow her first meeting with Rama.

II

*Ram Lakhan duno van ke aberiā ho*

*Van baithī khele lan aberiā ho*

*Khelat aberiā ho*

*Lagī gaiel madhur piyās piyās*

*Nahī dekhlen tāl ho, nābi dekhi pokharvā ho*

*Na dekhi nīcak gaun ho*

*Ahre nirkuchavā van me, koi nahi apnā*

*Ram morai piyāsai bhailein*

*Apne rasoīyā se nikalein Sital devi*

*Hathvā gharilvā judai pāni*

*Lehu na Ram, piavahu judai pāni*

*Baithā kadamb jude chāhi*

*Kekar hau tu nātin panātin*  
*Keker janmal bhatīj ho*  
*Kaune kul me biyāh racal*  
*Kekar hi kul ujjār ho*  
*Raja Janak kul mein janam bhāil*  
*Dasrath kul mein biyāh ho*  
*Ram kul hoihe ujjār*  
*Aur Ram hauven svāmi hamār*  
*Atanā bachan Ram suni pavale ho*  
*Ban paithī candan katāi*  
*Candan katāi darvā fanvale ho*  
*Doke doke lāge lan kahār ho*  
*Jau mohi janati Ram bairī hamār hoieba*  
*Nāhi baithati jude chāhi,*  
*Na piyāvatin thandā pāni*

Ram and Lakshman are off to hunt.  
 In the forest they hunt.  
 Then a strange thirst rises.  
 Not a lake or a pond is seen,  
 Not a single village,  
 “In this deserted forest, not a soul we know.  
 My Ram is thirsty.”  
 From her kitchen emerges Sita devi  
 Holding a pot of water.  
 “Here, Ram, drink this cool water.  
 Sit under the shade of the kadamb tree.”  
 “Whose grandchild are you?  
 Where were you born?  
 In which clan were you married?  
 Whose clan will you illuminate?”  
 “Born in the clan of Raja Janak.  
 Into Dashrath’s clan I married.  
 Ram’s clan will be illuminated.  
 And Ram is my husband.”  
 Ram scarcely heard the words,  
 He sent for the cutting of sandalwood

To fashion the carriage  
 And appointed kahar carriage carriers.  
 “Had I known that Ram would become an enemy,  
 I would not have invited him to rest in the shade,  
 Nor offered him cooling water.”

DHANAWATI YADAV, BANHWAN VILLAGE, CHANDAULI

In this equally intriguing song, Sita's last lines make a riddle of all that preceded them. As Sita offers Rama shade and cool water, it is clear that she has recognized him, and yet Rama still does not know who she is. Thus, the song shifts between recognition and nonrecognition, between actions that merely follow other actions and events that have been foretold. If Sita invited Rama to share the shade because she could foresee that he would become her husband, then why did she not also foresee the rest of her life? Could it be that Sita had to live her life according to a pre-arranged script? In other words, predictions, like memory, appear to be highly selective. Thus, in the last lines of the song, Sita is at pains to point out that she did not foresee her ultimate separation from Ram and the related tragedies at this first meeting. In this way, the tragedy of Ram and Sita is an endless source of unresolved conundrums about which we might speculate. In the section below, I set such riddles aside to dwell more fully on the conjugal life of Ram and Sita. These songs focus more directly on the nature of the struggles that characterized their union.

#### CONJUGALITY AS SITE OF STRUGGLE

While a number of songs glorify Ram-Sita as the ideal couple, wedding songs also underline the difficult transition the wedded couple is to make. Like the lives of Rama and Sita, the songs strike subtle notes of warning. They suggest that far from being a bed of roses, domesticity can be a journey punctuated by hardships and many tests along the way. Sita Mangal, these auspicious wedding songs, are celebratory in nature but also hint at dark possibilities. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, everything might go horribly awry. Four themes—namely, control, vigilance, empathy, and bearing witness—surface repeatedly in marriage songs. These dilemmas and their resolutions appear to both define and illuminate conjugal life.

12

## RESTRICTION

*Sāsu tabahūn na lauten pardesiyā ho nā*  
*Phar gaiyūr nīmīyā, labasī gaiyīn dariyā ho nā*  
*Are Ramā ghorvā charhala āvai bidesiyā ho Ram*  
*Are Rama bīti gail bārah barisvā ho Ram*  
*Are Rama ghorvā charhala āvai bidesiyā ho Ram*  
*Kekeri haiyun tuhūn dulāri ho Ram?*  
*Are Rama kaune Raja ke hayu tu patohiyā ho Ram?*  
*Are Rama kekari haiyu patari tiriyavā ho Ram?*  
*Are Rama kekari re lagaayī nimi bahāraun ho Ram?*  
*Raja Janak ji ki bāri dulāri ho Ram*  
*Are Rama Dasrath ke hai ham patohiyā ho Ram*  
*Are Rama Ramchandra ke bāri biyahau ho Ram*  
*Rama unahin ke lagāī nimi baharaun ho Ram*  
*Rama kekare re adar nikriū baharvā ho Ram*  
*Rama sāsu ji ke adar nisare baharvān ho Ram*

Mother-in-law, still the traveler did not return.  
 The neem tree has flowered, the branches are laden, O Ram!  
 O Ram! Then riding a horse, returned the wanderer.  
 O Ram, twelve years passed and he returned.  
 “Whose beloved are you?  
 Of which Raja are you the daughter-in-law?  
 Whose slim bride are you, O Ram?  
 Who planted the neem tree you upkeep, O Ram?”  
 “Beloved of Raja Janak, his daughter I am, O Ram  
 Daughter-in-law of Raja Dashrath.  
 I am the bride of Ramchandra.  
 I care for the neem tree planted by him.”  
 “At whose orders did you step out of the house?”  
 “At mother-in-law’s orders, I stepped out.”

MUNRAJI AND SUBHAVATI, BARSARA 2002

The above excerpt offers an unexpected ironic twist in its last lines about a wife who was married so young that she is unable to remember the moment that transformed her life into one of anticipation of union with the traveler. The chance encounter in the field with her long-absent

husband turns out to be merely a conventional reassertion of male authority and control. The wife's endless wait and anticipation, then, produce a poignant anticlimax that captures the condition of wives abandoned by their migratory husbands. This song seems to weigh the years of loneliness and lack of companionship against male dominance, highlighting both the interrogation that reestablishes the relationship and the irony of its necessity. In women's songs, as we saw in chapter 2, migrant husbands are presented as callous, insensitive, and indifferent to the needs of the wives they left behind, and, in most cases, forgetful of them entirely.

In an unexpected twist, however, this song ends up being about Sita, and its warning note is sounded by none other than this ideal wife, who hints at the patriarchal restrictions in store for her with the return of her long-awaited husband. Even the exemplary Rama, the ideal husband, is stereotypically domineering the instant he returns.<sup>4</sup> To make its point, this song about the idealized mythic couple must depart considerably from the mainstream Ramāyanā story, which only adds to its irony.

The use of the English word *order* is noteworthy not only for its contemporary feel but also, and more importantly, for how it illustrates Narayan's argument that folksongs evolve in response to changing and contemporary realities rather than representing timeless, self-contained, village traditions (Narayan 1993, 177–204). In the colonial context, peasants' familiarity with authority and the issuing of orders are to be expected, but the everyday usage of English words is also underlined.

13

## RESISTANCE

*Na jaiba Ajudhia, na jaibe ho*

*Mori mahatāri na jaiba ho, mātā mori na jaiba na*

*Guru ji aīhen aīhen ho*

*Mori sakhīyā ho sakhī morī re, kavan lota mein paniyā deba*

*Sakhiya mori kauno lota paunva parai parva*

*Ban chorabe na, nāhin jaibe na ho Ajudhiya, nāhin jaibe na*

*Tobre aihen hain guruji*

*More sakhiya re sakhi morey, sonvā ke lota mein ho paniyā*

*Lāvo paniya, lota pani jamuna tīrai, lota pāni lāvo re*



*Paunvā dhoān munir*

*Caran dharī, dihein asīsā, asīs dehein guruji ho*

*Ab na jaibe re Ajudhiya, na jaibe Ajudhiya*

Shall not return to Ayodhya, no, never!

My mother, I shall not go, mother mine, I shall not go.

The sages come to take you back.

My friends, my dears in which pot to offer them water?

Which pot for the ritual washing of the feet?

I shall not leave the forest, not go back to Ayodhya, no.

The sages come . . .

My dear friends, friends of mine, do fetch some water in the golden pot.

From the Yamuna river, do fetch the water.

To wash the feet of the sages.

To bow at their feet and receive their blessings.

But to Ayodhya I shall not go, not go back to Ayodhya, oh no!

DALIT SINGERS, CHURAMANPUR, VARANASI

Powerfully articulated, the song stands out as a model of resistance within folk registers, as the singers appear to be saying a vehement “no” to injustice of all kinds. On no account will the Sita of this song be persuaded to return to Ayodhya, wherefrom she was exiled. Yet staying within the parameters of her culture is equally important to her, as her concerns about appropriately honoring guests and spiritual teachers and receiving sages’ blessings reflect. The Dalit women who sang this song, danced to it with gay abandon, fostering a mood of unrestrained revelry. The occasion was the celebration of a male birth, but, as the singers pointed out, the song is very popular at weddings, too, owing to its catchy and rhythmic beat. In fact, an acknowledgement of resistance offered by Sita’s story is found in a number of congratulatory birth songs.

An upper-caste version of this song, included in Krishnadev Upadhyaya’s two-volume anthology on Bhojpuri folksongs (1990b), also highlights the motif of Sita’s respect for the sages who Rama had sent to fetch her. Here, Sita refuses to return, but out of respect for the sages who have come at Rama’s behest, she does take five steps in the direction of Ayodhya. It is striking that such messages about taking a principled stance against injustice are found embedded within congratulatory songs, which

render them even more potent because of the mundane, albeit celebratory contexts, into which they are slipped.

The inner worlds of the bride and groom revealed in wedding songs underline the difficult transition the wedded couple must make. Here, the conjugal bed itself becomes a metaphor for the trials of marital life. The song below illustrates, in particular, how women internalize vigilance and control.

14

ETERNAL VIGILANCE

*Anganā me ratulī palangiṃyā*  
*Obariya mein dasavelī ho*  
*E sāsu, nānhen vidhi likhle lilār*  
*Kaise ke sejiyā dasabi ho*  
*Ram sūtele, Sita jāgeli*  
*Beniyā dolāveli ho*  
*Ai Sita, kāhe uthelu tu karvatiyā*  
*Nīndariyo nāhin āvelā ho*  
*Nāhin ham pet bhari khainī*  
*Nīndariyā bhari sovelī ho*  
*Ai Ram, ban hi ke din niyarailen*  
*Banhī raurā jaibai ho*  
*Jāhu Sita pet bhari khaibu*  
*Nīnariyā bhari soibu nu ho*  
*Ai Sita, Lachuman lākh manaihen*  
*Banhi nāhin jaibū nū ho*  
*Jab Sita bhari pet khailīn*  
*Nīnari bhari sovelī ho*  
*Arai sūtal Ram uthā bane gailen*  
*Kehu na jāgelā ho*  
*Aagi lāgasu ehi nagare*  
*T avarū Ajodhiya mein ho*  
*sūtal Ram bane gailen*  
*T kehu na jāgelā ho*

The cot is ready in the courtyard.  
 Yet how to decorate my bedchamber?  
 Mother-in-law, what is to be my fate?

How to decorate the bedchamber?  
 Ram sleeps, Sita stays awake.  
 Gently moving the fan.  
 “O Sita, why do you toss and turn so?  
 Are you unable to fall asleep?”  
 “I never had a hearty meal  
 Nor ever a full night’s sleep  
 Because Rama’s days of exile approach  
 And to the forest he will go.”  
 “Go Sita, have a hearty repast  
 Have a restful night.”  
 “O Sita, despite Laxman’s thousand entreaties  
 To the forest, you should refuse to go.”  
 But after Sita had a hearty meal,  
 Had plunged into the deepest slumber  
 Oh! That’s when sleeping Ram awoke and went off to the forest.  
 Then, not a soul was awake.  
 A curse on this city,  
 And on the city of Ayodhya.  
 That Ram awoke and went on his path of exile  
 While not a soul was awake!  
 UPADHYAYA 1990B, 420

This song is a complex meditation on vigilance that must be understood on many levels. It illustrates the Rama-Sita story’s potential and malleability in conveying deep truths about women’s existential realities. The motif of Rama leaving for the forest in the dead of night when all are asleep, a detail that starkly deviates from the Ramāyanā narrative wherein Sita is his constant companion throughout his hardships, raises questions about folk perceptions. Rama’s stealthy exit echoes both the actions of many folk heroes and heroines and women’s and men’s fears about separation. The heroine tying the hero to the nuptial bed with a red string, to prevent his escape in the middle of the night, is a recurring motif in tales of the region (as in the Lorikāyan, see chapter 5). Alas, the string is fragile and the heroes invariably escape! The song speaks volumes in Uttar Pradesh, where women appear to have been otherwise silenced or at least made invisible, in various ways, within public discourses.

Sita's shock at discovering that Rama left while she was asleep echoes the theme of bearing witness. Her remorse that Rama left while the entire city slept might serve as an indictment of indifference to the plight of others. Her deep pathos evokes the incomparable magnitude of an event such as Rama's departure. In questioning how such a thing could come to pass, the song appears to invoke a social conscience. Other songs develop a similar mood of empathy by questioning quotidian existence in the light of an occurrence such as Rama's exile.

The following song enumerates the many witnesses, both human and animal, to Sita's abduction by Ravana in his chariot. In bearing witness to Ravana's crime and in delineating the route to Rama, caste specialists and a range of creatures all secure for themselves a hallowed place in the universe, all, that is, except for a pair of Cātak birds. So engrossed are these birds in their lovemaking that they are completely oblivious to the abduction. Consequently, the birds are unable to inform Rama about the direction in which Ravana's chariot headed.

15

*Lakari cīrat tuhūn loharvā chokarvā*  
*Eihi rahibe dekhuvā Sita ho jāk*  
*Hamahun to selī Rama Sita ke palangiyā*  
*Sita ke Ravanvā hari le jāk*  
*Kaparā dhovat tuhūn dhobin bitiyā*  
*Eihi rāhi dekhua Sita ho jāk*  
*Hamahun to phichiō Rama sita ke chunariyā*  
*Sita ke Ravanava har le jāk*  
*Eihi pār jatva ho, oh pār jataiyā*  
*Eihi rahibe dekhua Sita ho jāk*  
*Hamahun to rahin Rama apanā Chakuvā jarai*  
*Ham nāhin dekhua Sita ho jāk*  
*Dīn bhar chakva ho joriyā milhiyā*  
*Sānjh beriyā rahihā ho chipāi*

The woodcutter's son, fashioning wood.

“Along this road, I saw Sita being taken away.”

“I sewed Sita's cot.”

Saw that Ravana abducted Sita along this road.

The washerman's daughter washing clothes,

“I, who wash Sita’s cunari shawl,  
 Saw Sita abducted by Ravana.”  
 On this side, Jat and the other side Jatni,  
 Saw Sita being abducted along this road  
 “So engrossed was I in my Cakvā  
 I didn’t see Sita go by.”  
 So, all day long the Cātak birds may pair  
 But at dusk must pine for each other in vain.

MEENA DEVI AND MOTHER-IN-LAW, MISRAULIA CHHPRA

The birds’ indifference to Sita’s plight, even as an oversight, is a lapse for which they must pay a heavy price. The last stanza announces the curse of separation that the species will bear for eternity. The song puts a different spin on the cries of the Cātak birds, who, distracted by love, must remain separated at night, thereby paying the price for their distraction. Ignoring the Divine leads to misfortune, and indifference to Sita’s plight to eternal yearning and separation. The judgment the song pronounces appears to be a cosmic sentencing.

#### EMPATHY

Of the long list of tragic episodes connected with Sita’s idealized persona in the Ramāyanā, her exile in the forest is one of the more major injustices she must endure. Folk narratives provide a range of alternative explanations for Rama’s compulsion to exile Sita. In the classical Valmiki version, Rama’s provocation for sending Sita into exile was the chance remark by a dhobī, who, doubting Sita’s chastity during her many years in captivity, questions Rama’s compromised honor, reminding him of a king’s moral duty to lead by example. The provocation remains equally arbitrary in the songs, highlighting the inherent injustice at the root of Sita’s exile. Indeed, these episodes in Valmiki’s Ramāyanā concerning Sita’s exile in the forest, rather than Tulsi’s Ramcaritmānas, engender the greatest empathy for Sita. While a trial by fire might address particularly upper-caste concerns, Sita’s abandonment and childbirth, episodes connected with the second phase of her life, allow women of all castes to relate to Sita’s biography. The song below picks up the story at the moment Sita is sent into exile.

16

Khoincā mein le le sarsoinyā  
 Chitat Sita nikelī ho sarson  
 Ehi rahiyā lavatihen devara Lachhman  
 Kadariyā toori khaihanī ho  
 Awadh nagariyā se Sita dei re calalī  
 Rāhe bāte bole kāga boliyā ho Ram  
 Kāg ke bachaniyā suni Sita manre jhurbe  
 Kāhe devarū nayanā mor pharke ho Ram  
 Ghorvā ke veg devarū pavan samanvā  
 Sehu ghorvā pāv-pāv calelā ho Ram  
 Toharo suratiyā devarū suruj ke jotiyā  
 Sehu kāhe dhūmil ho gailī ho Ram  
 An ban gailī dūsar ban lavalī  
 Tīsare Brindavan ailī ho  
 Devarū, ek bünd paniyā piabvahū  
 Piasiyā se biākul ho  
 Baithahu na bhaujī candan tare  
 Candan birichh tare ho  
 Bhaujī, paniyā ke khoj karai āin  
 T toharā piāin nū ho  
 Bahe lāge juruin bayariyā  
 Canan chhori chhaiyan ho  
 Sīt bhūniyan pare kumhlāī  
 Piasiyā se byākul ho  
 Tor let patvā kadam kar  
 Donvā banavalī ho  
 Tangale lavangiyā ke dariyā  
 Lakhan cale ghare orai ho

In a bundle she took some mustard seeds,  
 Stepped out scattering them along the way.  
 “The mustard seeds, this way he’ll return,  
 Brother-in-law Lakshman, by then, they’ll germinate for him.”  
 And Devi Sita left Ayodhya city.  
 On the way the crow called, O Ram!  
 Hearing the crow, Sita had misgivings.

“Why does my eye twitch so, brother-in-law?  
 The horses, brother-in-law, always sped like the wind.  
 Then why do they move so slow, O Ram!  
 Your countenance, brother-in-law, always like sunshine  
 Why has it clouded over, O Ram?”  
 They crossed one forest, then the next.  
 The third they came to was Brindavan.  
 “Brother-in-law, just a drop of water  
 I crave, the thirst unbearable.”  
 “Rest, sister-in-law, under the sandalwood tree,  
 Under the cooling sandalwood.  
 I go to search for water.  
 Then, I shall bring you some.”  
 Cooling winds began to blow.  
 The sandalwood boughs gave shade.  
 On the earth lay Sita wilting,  
 The thirst unbearable.  
 First, he picked kadamb leaves  
 Fashioning them into cups,  
 Then hanging up the clove basket,  
 Lakshman turned back homeward.

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Several elements in the song establish Sita's proximity to nature and remind us of her origins, while the image of Sita being cradled by the earth to which she will return adds to the pathos. Despite the somber nature of Sita's journey, her magnanimous act in her hour of trial, calculated to assure prosperity for her affines, emphasizes women's social conscience. Folk beliefs embedded in the narrative, such as the twitching of eyes foretelling misfortune, enhance the moment's poignancy while rendering Sita's sorrows intensely human. The details allow listeners to domesticate Sita and claim her as human, as “one of us” whose sorrows and trials resemble those experienced by peasant women across time and space and beyond the divides of caste and class.

As Sita is at once Earth, Nature, Field, and Nurturer, ecofeminist ideologies have mined the Sita metaphor to argue for a return to nature and its pristine glory in the face of industrialization's onslaught. Van-

dana Shiva, for instance, has influentially argued that women are the natural protectors of the environment. Since the 1980s, those who struggle against widespread depredations of the environment in the name of development have celebrated nature as Prakritī, the feminine principle. Women serve as representatives of this principle, and their power in collective struggle has been seen as *strī-shakti* (Rajan 1998, ws 36).

Ramchandra Gandhi's *advaita* (nondualist) perspective on the separation of Rama and Sita is instructive. He writes, "The ecologically educative separation of Rama and Sita by mutual consent became distorted into the sexist banishment of Sita by Rama for suspected infidelity in Lanka" (Gandhi 1992, 21). This separation of the divine couple, he argues, is "the price that has to be paid for the ecological violation implicit in the killing of the demon deer Marica by Rama at Sita's instigation" (21). This theme is present in the Ramāyanā's earliest episode, where the death of one of a mating pair of *kraunca* birds by a hunter's arrow is an ecological violation of such cosmic magnitude that it prompts the observer Valmiki to express himself in verse (20).

Gandhi discusses the Sita tradition within Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist folklore, where it is often overlooked and where it counters the militant masculinity of the Hindutva movement. Here, too, women are associated with nature, nurturing and motherhood, and preservation and pacifism (Rajan 1998; Gandhi 1992). The emphasis on Rama within Hindutva doctrines, Gandhi suggests, may serve to efface many elements of the Sita lore.

"The values of steadfastness, firmness, fidelity, and the devotion of the wife to the husband [the seed giver] for the sake of progeny" form the subtext evoked in the songs, and hence Sita's construction in these songs reinforces the ideology of seed and earth (Dube 2001, 123). Self-denial and sacrifice are key components of the sustained contribution the mother makes through her procreation and are found in abundance in these songs. The implications of this ideology are far-reaching since, by equating the woman's body with the field or the earth, the process of reproduction is equated with that of production and the rights of children with rights over the crop (140).

Empathy with Sita, then, is a value peasant women understand and experience deeply in their own lives. In wedding songs that celebrate the marriage of the ideal couple, Ram and Sita, and describe scenes of Sita's



devotion and domesticity and even in the pedagogical *jatsārs*, it is the peasant women's own selves that stand reflected. Hence the unique opportunity the Ramnagar Ramlilā provides women, as “spectator-pilgrims,” to silently and spontaneously express their solidarity with Sita could be described as affirming, even transformative.

In this chapter I have argued that the persona Sita belongs to no single category; rather, she embodies a plurality of voices and viewpoints. Despite her relevance as a role model for chaste upper-caste Hindu women, Sita's persona and lore have enabled the emergence of alternative models that have validity and significance for peasant women of lower strata as well. The Sita that emerges from the folklore and oral traditions suggests peasant women's nuanced and complex relationships with this figure. Given that her story is one among many within the oral folk traditions of the region, and that folk narratives are open to multiple interpretations, women of many castes can claim Sita.

Were Sita's chastity and trial by fire the only aspects of her persona valorized by peasant women, then her relevance for upper-caste women would tend to overshadow her meaning for other castes. It is owing to the flexibility of the Sita metaphor that women are able to use her narrative to reflect on their own struggles. Women's songs of Sita encompass an astonishingly diverse repertoire of experiences, voices, approaches, understandings, solutions, and expressions.

In the words of Hess, “social forces create and are created by cultural artifacts” (Hess 1988; 253); as such, one could argue that singing about Sita amounts to singing about peasant women's own lives. That Sita's persona and lifestory mirror those of peasant women becomes apparent when we consider the diverse solutions to and interpretations of life events that the songs offer. Thus, in addition to the fact that women “experience nurturing and empowerment through female divine imagery or the worship of female deities” (Hiltbeitel and Erndl 2000, 17), these songs suggest that women identify with Sita on several levels. They also show that women's identification with Sita rarely amounts to an unquestioning or uncritical acceptance of her persona and actions.

The songs evoke Sita as symbolic of *strī-shakti*, the power of women, which, unlike Western understandings of power as the exercise of control and domination (Hiltbeitel and Erndl 2000, 19) or of agency, remains

somewhat in the realm of potentiality, manifesting itself only in moments of provocation. Further, as women sing together about their lives, they create new forms of the Rama and Sita story. Nilsson notes, “They tend to emphasize the human frailties and human aspects of the divinity they sing about” (2001, 141). Rao has argued that the contents of the women’s Ramāyanā songs do not, in themselves, make the singers feminists; women sing these songs because it is the womanly thing to do. Further, the same women who sing these songs also participate in the public, often male-dominated Ramāyanā performances and recitations with great devotion, as we saw at the Benaras Ramnagar Ramlilā, which began this chapter. As Rao argues with regard to Brahmin women of Andhra Pradesh, “Perhaps the value of the songs consists precisely in the absence of conscious protest. The women who sing these songs have not sought to overthrow the male-dominated family structure; they would rather work within it. They have no interest in direct confrontation with authority; their interest, rather, is in making room for themselves to move. It is the internal freedom that these songs seem to cherish. Only when such freedom is threatened by a power exercised by the head of the household do the women speak up against him, even when subverting his authority rather than fighting openly against it” (Rao 1991, 133).