

Chandrabati's Ramayan: A Gendered Re-Telling of the Rama Tale

Dr. Suddha Kalyan Mondal*

Abstract: *Ramayana and the tale of Rama, Sita and Ravan remain, till today, one of the most popular and most widely adapted narratives in India, as espoused in its translation/ adaptation in almost all the Indian languages and beyond, even in China and Myanmar. It has been also adapted in popular ballads and folk-oral tales allover India for hundreds of years. In most of these adaptations Rama is the archetype of ideal king and husband and Sita is the ideal wife, virtuous and obedient. Sita becomes the medium through whom patriarchy could exercise its ideologies. This practice is subverted in several popular ballads and oral tales which have adapted and re-textualised the Rama-Sita narrative. Chandrabati is a sixteenth century poet, the first female poet to write in Bengali, who composed a Ramayana which was written from Sita's point of view. Her contemporary Attakuri Molla composed Ramayana in Telegu, but that followed the traditional model. Chandrabati, re-writing the epic from a feminine point of view, incorporated new episodes, changed a few and made it a story of Sita's journey from her birth to death—a Sitayana(journey of Sita). This article is going to explore how Chandrabati opened Rama to be critiqued by gender and how she transformed Sita into marginalized woman, denied by patriarchy. This article is also going to focus upon what role female authorship and female audience have played in reshaping Ramayana in both content and form, and to what extent.*

Keywords: *Ramayana, Chandrabati, Gender, oral narrative, marginalization.*

* Assistant Professor of English, Rishi Bankim Chandra College for Women
E-mail: suddhakalyan7@gmail.com

Even after millenniums, the narrative of Rama and his exploits remain one of the most identifiable myths of India as testified by its translation and adaptation throughout the South-East Asia. The archetypes of Rama as the ideal king and husband, and of Sita as the ideal wife regulate all these narratives, except in the dynamic and fluid narratives drawn from folk-oral traditions, the regional variations of which open up the possibilities of gendered interpretations. Credited with being the first woman poet of Bengal to have reworked on the *Ramayana* story, Chandrabati who lived in sixteenth century in Mymensingh (Bangladesh), opened the Rama narrative to the perspective of Sita and other women characters who were more identifiable to her rural audience than the courtroom of Ayodhya. To be sung before non-courtly, chiefly female audience, Chandrabati worked on the rohstoff, a familiar narrative, brought in original characters, new situations, elements from local genres and created an “easily identifiable yet highly original rendition of the grand epical vision of Valmiki” (Sen, 2020, viii) in the language of rural Bengal.

Herself a subject of lores, Chandrabati was more famous for her other two ballads, *Sundari Molua* and *Dasyu Kenaram*, while her *Ramayana*, popularly called *Chandrabati Ramayana*, was marginalized for being a weak rendering of Ram story in Bengali, a failure. The text of *Chandrabati Ramayana* was first included in Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Maimansingha Geetika* and later, with some addition, in Khitish Chandra Moulick's *Purba Banga Geetika*. Dinesh Chandra Sen considered the *Ramayana* as Chandrabati's worst piece and it was judged as incomplete and of no merit by Sukumar Sen. Brought into critical spotlight by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, it is now considered as the first feminist text in its textualisation of Rama narrative from Sita's viewpoint and rejection of Ram's normative masculinity. In fact, “Its denouncing should be perceived as attempts at silencing the woman's voice and relegating an extremely talented individual to oblivion.” (Chatterjee, 169). This paper is going to explore this feminine voice in this text and analyse how Chandrabati succeeds in relating Sita of *Valmiki Ramayana* to every women oppressed under patriarchy(Mandodari to Sita) and to her rural women listeners(through the narrative technique of *baromasya* and regularized domestic motifs). I am going to use Nabaneeta Dev Sen's *Chandrabati's Ramayan* (2020) as the primary text for the present purpose.

Chandrabati rejects the male poet as narrator, used by Molla in her Telegu *Ramayana*, or the ideological viewpoint used by Ranganayakamma in *Ramayana Vishabriksham*. She looks at the narrative from her feminine viewpoint, and tells the story. One of the foremost mythical heroines, Sita is the epitome of gentle, submissive feminity, though Valmiki originally portrayed Sita as one not afraid to speak up to Rama (Dave, 22). She is the trope through

whom patriarchy could exercise itself. Chandrabati's Sita is a soft and submissive wife; but the criticism of Rama erupts from Chandrabati the narrator. Her criticism of Rama, at times, is candid and unique.

An epic, in its participation in the common literary culture, is a narrative model composed from a set of events extremely essential for the plot, termed by Roland Barthes as 'kernels' which can be rearranged for another narrative. Chandrabati uses the kernels from *Valmiki Ramayana*, as pointed out by Dr. Ishita Chanda, and textualises her narrative by turning away the focus of her *Ramayana* from the conflict of Rama and Ravan to the lifespan of Sita. Here the fall of Ravan is ensured through his hubris in the act of insulting and excommunicating Laxmi in her incarnation as Sita. Epic's portrayal of the birth of the protagonist focuses on how Sita was born due to Ravan's debauchery and initiates a pattern of maltreated women from Mandodari to Sita. With detailed narration of Ravan's military prowess over the three worlds Chandrabati adopts Sita to the familiar tropes of Goddess Laxmi and *Bishkanya* (poisonous daughter). After conquering the three worlds Ravan spent his time with the maidens abducted from heaven in his Nandan Kanan. This debauchery of Ravan leads Mandodari to drink the poisonous blood of ascetics collected by Ravan to destroy gods' immortality. But instead of dying, she produces an egg fated to produce a daughter who will destroy Ravan's kingdom and clan altogether. Impelled by Mandodari's pleadings, the egg is thrown into sea. Chandrabati fits the birth of Sita into the exclusively feminine trope of the Laxmi of the house being mistreated and also into the popular medieval trope of *Bishkanya*, a neglected daughter fated to destroy clans and kingdoms. Sita's journey can be read as one that avenges the injustice done to her mother, Mandodari.

The element of marginality in Sita's birth-story is retained by Chandrabati in the egg being found by a poor fisherman. In *Valmiki Ramayana* Sita was born from tilled land, a daughter of Mother Earth. Here she is appreciated by a fisherman family, incorporating the local element of rural Bengal. This fisherman Madhab and his wife Sata worship the egg and benefit from the boons of Goddess Laxmi as they are saved from dire poverty. A beautiful maiden, "like Kamala (Laxmi) herself" (Sen, 2020, 30) appears in a dream to Sata and guides her to King Janak's wife. In this part Sita is identified with Laxmi, the leaving of whom brings destruction to the family, a popular belief in Bengali households. The name Sita is derived from Sata, linking her to marginal woman, convenient for Chandrabati's female audience to identify with. Chandrabati concludes the *janamleela* with the birth of Rama. The queens of King Dasharath conceive by eating the charmed mango given by the ascetic. Kaikeyi, by eating the seed of the mango gives birth to a son and a daughter named Kukuya. Bearing phonetic similarity with

Kaikeyi, the name Kukuya is resonant with 'ku' meaning bad/evil in Bengali, intimating the readers about the evil in her nature. While Chandrabati adheres to Valmiki regarding the birth of male characters, she diverts in the case of female characters, both Sita and Rama's sister. In *Valmiki Ramayan*, Rama had an adopted sister—Shanta, who had a very limited presence in that text. Kukuya creates the rift between Rama-Sita and causes her expulsion from Ayodhya. Instead of the Rama-Ravan conflict that moves Valmiki's text, Chandrabati posits the Sita-Kukuya conflict at the core of the final part of her poem. She writes, "In the home of Lakshmi, Alakshmi was born—The bitter result of the bitter seed of the mango fruit." (Sen, 2020, 40). The Sita-Kukuya conflict also subverts the epic narrative to a familiar domestic motif. While the original text dealt with the inheritance of the throne as the catalyst of the plot, Chandrabati brings in this Kukuya as the counterpart of Sita and shifts the focus from stately things to the familiar domestic trope of jealous rivalry between sisters-in-law. Unfamiliar to the events of a royal court, Chandrabati adopts the common issues of feminine domesticity to cater to her rural audience.

From Book II onwards the narration is done by Sita herself, textualising the Valmiki narrative from her point of view. From the epical narration of the exploits of an avatar, Chandrabati makes it exclusively a woman's story. The narration henceforth is done in the format of *baromasya/baromasi*, a narrative poem transmitted orally. These songs were sung by women poets for an exclusively female audience and they usually narrated tales about the emotions of women, their pain and suffering, isolation and loneliness, relating them to the twelve months of Bengali calendar. Narrated in flashback when Sita is back from Lanka and settled in Ayodhya, Sita narrates her tragic tale while the hero of Valmiki, Rama remains in the side-lines, appreciated for his beauty and critiqued for his callous treatment of Sita.

After birth, a normative female narrative of the earlier years next focuses on marriage. From here onwards Sita begins her *baromasya*. Sita tells about her dream of a dark, handsome youth with lotus-eyes who has come to Mithila for her. She tells of her fascination about Rama's physical beauty. The romantic charm between Rama-Sita is farther accentuated in the *Banabas Parva*. The military prowess of Rama or the political game played for ousting Rama from his throne doesn't find detailed expression in Sita's narrative. Rather she is quite happy during their stay in the forest as she is able to spend lots of time with her lord, "Ram Raghuman" (Sen, 2020, 47). In a few oral *Ramayana*'s from the North-East, Sita is described as living alone in the hut, denied conjugal company (Sen, 1998). In *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, Sita and Rama slept within the hut while Lakshman stood guard outside. She writes, "Happily we used to spend the nights in our forest exile...Far more luxurious than a hundred kingdoms were my lord's feet"

(Sen, 2020, 50). A melancholic undertone permeates Sita's narrative, as she intersperses her tale with phrases like "Sita's sorrows", "suffering written in my destiny" (Sen, 2020, 51), typical to the structure of *baromasya*. Highlighting the romantic traits in Rama and depiction of happy domesticity were probably influenced by the Bhakti traditions in Bengal.

Sita's kidnapping by Ravan and her stay in Lanka is presented in melancholy tunes of her separation from Rama, having echoes of Chandrabati's own denial in love. She "hung on to... life only" (Sen, 2020, 55) to see her lord again. She continues her tales of woe month-wise in the *baromasya* about her stay in Lanka and there is remarkable silence about the battle between Rama and Ravan. Not being a direct witness to the battle, Sita is not allowed by Chandrabati to describe in detail about the battle. Furthermore, this would have taken the narrative away from the familiar territory of her female audience. Naturally Sita doesn't narrate the epic war; only two things she foresees in dreams and narrates them to her audience. One is about Hanuman's coming to look for her and the second one is about Rama's invoking Devi Ambika in order to destroy Ravan. The silence about Rama's valour farther customises Valmiki's epic hero to that of a romantic hero and the narrative of Rama is never allowed to supersede Sita as the main character. According to Prof. Ishita Chanda, "By de-emphasizing the battle and making Sita the hero of her story, we may say that Chandrabati has recast the Ram matter from the perspective of a woman" (107). According to her, Rama's valour is replaced by Sita's chastity and integrity, which are not inherent qualities but performative. In fact Sita's suffering and endurance make her a hero over time, making her song a relatable experience for future generations of women.

Comparing Chandrabati to her contemporary Attakuri Molla from Andhra Pradesh, who also adopted *Ramayana* in Telugu, Nabaneeta Dev Sen pointed considered Chandrabati's text as, "... not a devotional text, but a secular one... as a plain human drama and not as divine mystery" (1997, 171). Chandrabati's tale is that of a pregnant wife who is expelled from her husband's home, her hardships, and her pangs of separation from her husband/lover. In the last section of Book III Sita is duped into drawing a rough portrait of Ravan by Kukuya who then convinces Ram to send Sita away. In stark contrast to Valmiki's Rama who is wise, rational and calm in all adversities, Chandrabati's Rama is one without faith in his five-month pregnant wife. He "raged wild, insane...Nostrils breathed fire" (Sen, 2020, 71). In his temper he commits the same hubris as Ravan, that of driving away the Lakshmi of the house. From his exalted position of a God, Rama becomes an average fallible husband. The narrator cuts in, "Chandrabati says, poor Ram, you have totally lost your mind" (Sen, 2020, 71).

Book IV, the final chapter, was not in DC Sen's edition but was added in KC Moulik's later edition. There is a narratorial shift in this section as it becomes 'more male-oriented and

warlike' (Sen, 2020, 72), might be a result of later interpolations. Rama, in his anger, terms Sita as the cause of destruction of Lanka, Kishkindhya, and Ayodhya. Though he considers Sita as made of poisons, which ironically is true, and the sole reason of his suffering, the voice of the common men differ. Chandrabati dared not break Sita away from the mould of soft, submissive wife, so familiar to pan-Indian audience. She subverted Rama's superior masculinity through his fallibilities and the reactions of common people. She narrates, "Ayodhya became graceless, deserted by Lakshmi/ People suffer for the sins of the king, commented the wise elders." (Sen, 2020, 85). Even Hanuman considers the expulsion of Sita as "the end of Ramleela" (Sen, 2020, 90). A devoted wife, Sita is willing to enter the pyre for the sake of Rama's problems. In Chandrabati's text Rama himself lights the pyre and loses Sita forever. From a princess and a queen, Chandrabati thus transforms Sita into an everyday woman wronged upon by patriarchy and its gendered prejudices concerning women's purity and integrity. Simultaneously, the lack of erotic appeal made Sita's tale reach out only to women.

Chandrabati's Ramayan was composed for an exclusive female audience as reflected in the address *Suno sakijana* (Listen, my girl-friends) instead of the usual address of oral ballads *Suno sabhajana/ sarbjana* (Listen, members of court/ everyone). To that cause, feminine concerns replace epic events. Pregnancy and childbirth are given elaborate narrative space while battles are sparsely mentioned. As commented upon by Nabaneeta Dev Sen that this was a product of double refinement through feminine sensibility— by the narrator Chandrabati's and by the protagonist Sita's. Dr Sen comments, "It is a woman's text, an atypical retelling of the Rama tale in which Rama is first marginalised and then criticised from a woman's point of view" (1997, 171). While Molla's text depicted the normative Rama-tale in the style of Sanskrit epics narrated by a conventional male narrator, in *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, the narrator-poet, the protagonist, the audience, all were women. The narrative begins with Sita's birth and ends with her death. Therefore, literally and chronologically, Chandrabati becomes the first poet to transform *Ramayana* (Rama+ayana—the journey of Ram, ayana meaning journey in Sanskrit) to a *Sitayana* (Sita+ayana—the journey of Sita).

Reference:

1. Bose, Mandakranta and Sarika Priyadarshini Bose. *A Woman's Rāmāyana: Candrāvati's Bengali Epic*. Routledge, 2013.
2. Chanda, Ishita. Afterword. *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, trans. Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Zubaan, 2020, pp 97-110.

3. Chandrabati. *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, trans. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Zubaan, 2020.
4. Chatterjee, Ratnabali. 'Veiled and Unveiled: Women in Medieval Bengal', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2001, Vol. 62 (2001), pp. 160-179.
5. Dave, Jayanand. 'Poetic Element In The Ramayana: Appreciation and Delight', *Critical Perspectives on The Ramayana*, edited by Jaydipsinh Dodiya. Sarup and Sons, 2001, pp. 2- 45.
6. Sen, Dinesh Chandra. Ed. *Maimansingha Geetika*. Calcutta University, 1993.
7. Moullick, Khitish Chandra. Ed. *Purba Banga Geetika*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966.
8. Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. Foreword. *Chandrabati's Ramayan*, trans. Nabaneeta Dev Sen. Zubaan, 2020, pp vii-xi.
9. 'Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla', *India International Centre Quarterly*, MONSOON 1997, Vol. 24, No. 2/3, Crossing Boundaries (MONSOON 1997), pp. 163-177.
10. 'When Women Retell the Ramayan', *Manushi*, No. 108, September-October, 1998, pp 18-27.