

RESEARCH NOTE

Sītā's Birth and Parentage in the Rāma Story

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Sītā's birth and parentage are depicted differently in the various versions of the Rāma story. In Vālmīki's Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (*VR*) and Kamban's Tamil epic *Irāmāvatāram* (*KR*), Sītā is said to have sprung miraculously from a furrow made by king Janaka of Mithilā while ploughing the ground to prepare it for a sacrifice instituted by him to obtain progeny.¹ A variant of this motif, found in the North-western and the Bengal recensions of *VR*, as well as in the *Rāmāyaṇa-Maṅjarī* (verses 344–346) of Kṣēmēndra, is that king Janaka, on hearing a voice from the sky and then seeing the nymph Mēnakā, expresses his wish to obtain a child, and when he finds the child in the furrow, the same voice tells him that the infant is his spiritual child, born of Mēnakā (Bulcke 1952: 109).

The motif of Sītā's miraculous appearance in the furrow seems to be connected with an agricultural myth relating to the personification of the furrow (*sītā*) as a goddess.² An additional element in the motif of Sītā's birth in *VR* and Tamil *Uttarakāṅṭam* is that Kuśadhvaja's daughter Vēdavati³ is reborn as Sītā in order to take revenge on Rāvaṇa, because Rāvaṇa tried to molest her when she was performing penance to realize her desire to become the consort of Lord Viṣṇu.⁴ There are also references in *VR* and *KR* to Sītā being the reincarnation of the goddess Lakṣmī, who is the consort of Lord Viṣṇu.⁵

The *Rāmōpākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* and Vimala Sūri's Jaina version *Paumacariya* represent Sītā as king Janaka's real daughter,⁶ and this motif is probably based on the *Adi-Rāmāyaṇa*, or the authentic version of Vālmīki (Bulcke 1952: 108).

In Saṅghadāsa's Jaina version of the fifth century A.D., entitled *Vāsudēvahiṇḍī*, Sītā is born as Rāvaṇa's daughter and is later adopted by king Janaka. According to this version, when Vidyādharma Maya

offers his daughter Maṇḍōdarī to Rāvaṇa in marriage, astrologers predict that his first child will destroy Rāvaṇa's lineage. Nevertheless, Rāvaṇa, who is enamoured of Maṇḍōdarī, marries her on the understanding that her first child shall be abandoned. Accordingly, when Maṇḍōdarī gives birth to a daughter, Rāvaṇa orders the infant to be placed in an urn and buried in a distant land, which happens to be the kingdom of Janaka. Subsequently, king Janaka discovers the child, adopts her as his daughter, and entrusts her to the care of his consort named Dhāriṇī (Kulkarni 1952-1953: 129).

According to another Jaina version, which is to be found in Guṇabhadra's *Uttara-Purāṇa* of the ninth century A.D., Rāvaṇa disturbs the asceticism of Maṇivatī, who is the daughter of king Amitavēga of Alkāpurī, and she pledges to reincarnate herself as the daughter of Rāvaṇa and take revenge on him. Maṇivatī is later reborn as the daughter of Rāvaṇa's consort Maṇḍōdarī, and as the astrologers predict Rāvaṇa's ruin because of the child, she is placed in a casket and buried in Mithilā by Mārīca. After the infant is discovered by some of the farmers in the kingdom, she becomes the adoptive daughter of king Janaka.⁷

In the Tibetan version of the ninth century, Sītā is born of Rāvaṇa's wife as the reincarnation of the goddess Umā, who has sworn to destroy the demons, because she has been offended by them. Rāvaṇa is told by court astrologers that he will die because of his daughter, and thereupon Sītā is placed in a vessel and set adrift on a river where she is found by peasants (Raghavan 1975: 11).

According to the Khōtanese version from Chinese Turkestan, which is also believed to date back to the ninth century A.D., Sītā is born as the daughter of Rāvaṇa's chief queen, and as the astrologers predict that she will cause ruin to Rāvaṇa's city, she is placed in a box and cast upon a river, and later she becomes the adoptive daughter of a sage (Bailey 1939: 465; 1939-1942: 564).

In the Sanskrit version of *Daśavatāracarita*, composed by Kṣēmendra in the eleventh century A.D., Sītā is said to appear on a lotus blossom in a lake, when Rāvaṇa worships Lord Śiva in the form of a *liṅga*, and Rāvaṇa's wife Maṇḍōdarī adopts her as her daughter. When, however, the sage Nārada visits Maṇḍōdarī and predicts that Rāvaṇa will be enamoured of the girl, Maṇḍōdarī places the child in a casket and arranges for the casket to be buried in a distant land, where Sītā becomes the adoptive daughter of king Janaka.⁸

According to the *Adbhuta-Rāmāyaṇa* of the fifteenth century A.D., the sage Nārada, who is jostled by the attendants of the goddess Lakṣmī during a concert in heaven, curses the goddess to become incarnate as

the daughter of a demoness. Meanwhile, in the Daṇḍaka forest, a sage named Gṛtsamada, in order to fulfil his wife's desire to have a daughter, sprinkles milk into a jar with the *kuśa* grass daily, so that it will become inhabited by the goddess Lakṣmī. Around the same time, Rāvaṇa arrives in the Daṇḍaka forest, and in an attempt to make the sages of the forest submit to him, he collects a little blood with the tip of his arrow from each of the sages, placing it in the same jar in which the sage Gṛtsamada has been sprinkling the milk. Eventually Rāvaṇa takes the jar to Laṅkā and gives it to his wife Maṇḍōdarī, telling her that, as the blood in the jar is more poisonous than poison itself, she may on no account taste it or give it to anyone to taste. However, after Rāvaṇa goes forth again on his career of conquest, Maṇḍōdarī suspects that Rāvaṇa has been unfaithful to her and decides to kill herself by drinking the contents of the jar. Instead of dying, she becomes pregnant with a child, who is the reincarnation of the goddess Lakṣmī in accordance with the curse of the sage Nārada. However, she feels alarmed over her pregnancy in Rāvaṇa's absence, and therefore she sets out to Kurukṣētra under the pretence of making a pilgrimage, frees herself of the foetus, buries it in the ground, and returns home. Subsequently, king Janaka discovers the child while ploughing the ground for a sacrifice and adopts her as his daughter (Grierson 1921: 422-424; 1926-1928: 14-15, 18, 20-21).

In the Kāshmirī version of *Rāmāvatāracarita*, composed by Divākara Prakāśa Bhaṭṭa in the eighteenth century A.D., Rāvaṇa's wife Maṇḍōdarī gives birth to Sītā in the absence of her husband, and since the child's horoscope reveals that she will cause Rāvaṇa's death and that, if she is allowed to marry, she will become a dweller of the forest and will come from there to destroy Laṅkā, Maṇḍōdarī ties a stone round the child's neck and throws her into a river. When the child is washed ashore, she is discovered by king Janaka, who adopts her as his daughter (Grierson 1928-1930: 285-286).

The motif of Sītā being born as the daughter of Rāvaṇa and his consort is also found in several of the Southeast Asian versions. According to the Malay *Hikayat Sēri Rāma* (HSR), Rāvaṇa eats a portion of the sacrificial meal brought by the crow-demon Gāgaḥswāra from king Daśaratha's palace and subsequently king Daśaratha sleeps with Rāvaṇa's wife Mandūdākī, who is the replica of king Daśaratha's own wife Mandūdārī, and as a result of these two events, Rāvaṇa's wife gives birth to Sītā. Since the astrologers predict that Sītā will cause Rāvaṇa's destruction, she is placed in an iron box and set adrift on the sea, and eventually she becomes the adoptive daughter of king Mahārisī Kalī of Durwātipurwā (Ziesenis 1963: 13-16). It may be

observed in this connection that the motif of king Daśaratha sleeping with Rāvaṇa's wife and later boasting that he, not Rāvaṇa, is to be the father of her child, has been included in *HSR* perhaps with the intention of reconciling the motif of Sītā being Rāvaṇa's daughter with the motif of Sītā being the sister of Rāma, which is to be found in the Buddhist version of the Rāma story known as the *Dasaratha-Jātaka*.⁹

THE motif of Sītā being born as the daughter of Rāvaṇa as the result of Rāvaṇa's wife partaking of the sacrificial food meant for king Daśaratha's wives is combined with certain other elements in the Thai *Rāmakiēn* (*RK*). According to *RK*, Rāvaṇa's consort eats a portion of the sacrificial food brought to her by the crow-demoness Kākanāsūn and later gives birth to Sītā, who is also said to be the reincarnation of the goddess Lakṣmī. Since the astrologers, including Rāvaṇa's brother Vibhīṣaṇa, predict that the child will cause Rāvaṇa's destruction, she is placed in a glass urn and set afloat on a river. After the goddess Maṇimēkhalā causes the urn to reach the sea, it is discovered by king Janaka, who buries it in the earth. Sixteen years later, king Janaka ploughs the ground by using the sacred bull of Lord Śiva, and Sītā steps out of the urn and becomes his adoptive daughter.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that several elements such as the reincarnation of the goddess Lakṣmī as Sītā, her birth as the daughter of Rāvaṇa, the infant being set adrift on the river and later on the ocean as well, the urn containing the child being buried in the earth, and king Janaka discovering it again while ploughing the ground, are combined in *RK* to present an elaborate account of Sītā's birth and parentage.

The motif of Rāvaṇa's daughter Sītā being the reincarnation of a divine being is to be found in several other Southeast Asian versions as well. In the Javanese version of *Serat Kānda*, Sītā as Rāvaṇa's daughter is said to be the reincarnation of Lord Viṣṇu's consort named Śrī Mēndang (Stutterheim 1925: 71). According to a *Wayang Siam* version in Malaysia, Lord Viṣṇu's wife named Sītī Andāng Dēwī reincarnates herself on earth in order to take revenge on her ravisher Sērajuk (Sirancak), who is the future Rāvaṇa, and she enters the body of Rāvaṇa's wife through her mouth, causing her to become pregnant. As Rāvaṇa's brother declares that the child will bring disaster, the child is aborted and placed in a jar, which is then set adrift on the ocean. Eventually, the child is discovered by Mahārīsī Kala Api, and the child grows into a beautiful girl named Sītī Dēwī (Sweeney 1972: 94-95).

In the Laotian version *Phra Lak-Phra Lam*, Indra's wife is reborn as the daughter of Rāvaṇa in order to take revenge on him, because he assumed the form of Indra and seduced her. Soon after her birth, she

begins to attack Rāvaṇa with a knife, and Rāvaṇa orders her to be thrown into a river, but she is saved by a hermit, who adopts her as his daughter (Vo Thu Tinh 1971: 26-28).

According to the *Rāma Jātaka* of Laos, Sītā, who is the reincarnation of Indra's wife, is abandoned by her father Rāvaṇa on the advice of his brother Vibhīṣaṇa, because she is destined to bring about the downfall of Rāvaṇa. The child is at first guarded by the spirits of the forest, and is later adopted by a hermit living on an island (Dhani Nivat 1946: 7).

In the Laotian version known as *Gvāy Dvorahbī*, Indra's chief queen Sujāta reincarnates herself on the lap of Rāvaṇa in order to take revenge on him, because he seduced her. On the advice of the astrologers who predict that the child will cause Rāvaṇa's death, she is placed in a golden casket and set adrift on a raft in the ocean, and subsequently a hermit adopts her as his daughter. She is named Sītā, because after opening the casket, the hermit sees the child raising her hand and rubbing (*sī*) her eyes (*tā*) (Sahai 1976: 9, 36-38).

In the Burmese version of *Rāma-thagyin*, composed by U Aung Phyō in the eighteenth century A.D., Sītā is said to be the reincarnation of a beautiful heavenly maiden, whom Rāvaṇa tries to seduce. She escapes from Rāvaṇa, descends to the earth, kindles a fire and enters the flames. Later she emerges from the earth as an infant. When she is brought to Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa is terrified of her and orders her to be placed in a box and set adrift on the ocean. King Janaka, who is ploughing the ground nearby for a sacrifice, sees the child floating on the ocean, and he adopts her as his daughter (U Thein Han 1971). The motif of king Janaka finding Sītā floating on the river Yamunā and later adopting her as his daughter is also to be found in the Khmer literary version known as *Reamker (Rāmakerti)*, though it does not refer to Sītā as Rāvaṇa's daughter.¹¹

Now, to sum up the discussion on Sītā's birth and her parentage as represented in the various versions of the Rāma story:

- (a) In twelve out of the seventeen versions under review, Sītā is said to be the reincarnation of either a goddess (Lord Viṣṇu's consort Lakṣmī, Lord Śiva's consort Umā, or Indra's consort), or an ascetic maiden, who swears to take revenge on Rāvaṇa, because of his wrong-doing.
- (b) Several of the Hindu versions, including *VR* and *KR*, refer to the miraculous birth of Sītā from the furrow of the earth, this motif being apparently connected with the agricultural myth concerning the personification of the furrow as a goddess in the Vēdic period.

- (c) Sītā appears as the real or natural daughter of king Janaka in some versions, such as the *Rāmōpākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata* and Vimala Sūri's Jaina version entitled *Paumacariya*.
- (d) In most of the versions under review, Sītā is the adoptive daughter of king Janaka or a hermit.
- (e) In thirteen out of the seventeen versions under review, Sītā is said to be the daughter of Rāvaṇa or his consort, and on the advice of the astrologers predicting evil consequences of her birth, Sītā is abandoned, and she becomes the adoptive daughter of a king or hermit.
- (f) As regards the manner of abandoning Sītā, she is either buried in the earth or is set adrift on the river/sea.
- (g) While the Jaina versions refer to the motif of Sītā being buried under the earth, most of the Southeast Asian versions have the motif of casting the child adrift on water, and the *RK* in particular includes both the motifs.
- (h) Sītā appears as the daughter of king Daśaratha and therefore as the sister, or the half-sister, of Rāma in such versions as the *Dasaratha-Jātaka* and the Luang Prabang version of Laos.
- (i) In the *HSR*, the motif of Sītā being the daughter of king Daśaratha is combined with the motif of Sītā being the daughter of Rāvaṇa.

As regards the question of antiquity of the different motifs concerning Sītā's birth and her parentage, there is a wide divergence of views among scholars. According to Rev. Fr. C. Bulcke, the motif of Sītā being the natural daughter of king Janaka as found in the *Rāmōpākhyāna Mahābhārata* may well have been based on the then extant *Ādi-Rāmāyaṇa*, or the authentic version of Vālmiki, before the motif of Sītā appearing miraculously in the furrow was inserted in *VR* (Bulcke 1952: 107–108). On the other hand, there is also the view that the motif of representing Sītā as the daughter of king Daśaratha may have been an older motif, which seems to have been retained by the *Dasaratha-Jātaka* and that it may have been changed to one of representing Sītā as the daughter of Rāma's rival, or as one who miraculously appears in the furrow of the earth, to be adopted by a foster parent, these changes being made to obviate the offensive nature of an additional detail found in the Buddhist version ascribing the status of Rāma's queen-consort to Sītā (Przyluski 1939: 298). Furthermore, the motif of Sītā being abandoned by Rāvaṇa may have been derived from ancient folklore, in which an abandoned child was believed to cause the ruin of the original family (Thompson 1957: 326, 366).

NOTES

1. *VR.*, I, 66; *RV(HPS)*., I, pp. 131-132; *KR.*, I, 12: 16-17.
2. In the *Ṛg-Vēda* (IV, 57, 6), Sītā is invoked as a goddess presiding over agriculture or the fruits of the earth. In the *Kausika-Sūtra* (106) of the later Vēdic period, she appears as a divinity of the ploughed field, adorned with lotus blossoms. In Pāraskara's *Gṛhya-Sūtra* (II, 17, 9), she is called Indra-patnī ("the wife of the rain-god Indra").
3. According to the *Śrīmaddevībhāgavata-Purāna* (IX, 16) and the *Brahmavaivarta-Purāna* (*Prakṛit-khaṇḍa*, Ch. 14), Kuśadhvaja and his wife venerate the goddess Lakṣmī and obtain a divine daughter, and as the child chants the hymns of the *Vēda* at her birth, she is named Vēdavatī. An attempt to identify Vēdavatī with the goddess Lakṣmī is also evident in this story. See Bulcke 1952: 109.
4. *VR.*, VII, 17; *RV(HPS)*., III, pp. 420-422; *IR(OU)*., 8: 1-19.
5. See *RV(HPS)*., III, p. 506; *KR.*, I, 10: 38.
6. The *Mahābhārata*, III, 258, 9; The *Paumacariya*, edited by H. Jacobi, Ch. 26. According to the Jaina version, Sītā has also a brother named Bhāmaṇḍala. See also Bulcke 1952: 107-108.
7. *Uttara-Purāna* (Indore, 1917), *Parvan* 68; See also Bulcke 1952: 110.
8. *Daśavatāracarita*, *Śrīrāmavatāra*, verses 70-104; See also Bulcke 1952: 112.
9. *Dasaratha-Jātaka, the Buddhist story of King Rāma*, edited and translated by V. Fausboll (Copenhagen: Hagerup, 1871). See also Zieseniss 1963: 113; Raghavan 1975: 158. In the Luang Prabang version of the Rāma story in Laos, Sītā is said to be the daughter of king Daśaratha's fourth queen, and she is later placed in an urn and set adrift on the ocean, because astrologers predict evil consequences of her birth. Subsequently she is adopted by a sage (Sahai 1971: 226).
10. *RK.*, I, 290-293 and 323-332; *RAO.*, 63 and 68-69; *SSP.*, 32-33.
11. *Rāmakertī (XVI^e-XVII^e siècles)*, traduit et commenté par Saveros Pou (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1977), p. 4. The motif of Indra's wife reincarnating herself as the daughter of Rāvaṇa in order to take revenge on him because of his wrong-doing, is to be found in the popular Khmer versions. See *Rāmker (Rāmāyaṇa Khmer)*, avant-propos par M. Hang Thun Hak (Phnom-Penh: Imprimerie Sangkum Reastr Niyum, 1969), p. 35.

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(a) Abbreviations

- BEFEO* *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Hanoi and Paris.
BSOAS *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, London.
HSR *Hikayat Sēri Rāma*.
IHQ *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Calcutta.
IR(OU) *Irāmāyaṇam, Oṭṭakkūttar iyarriya uttarakāṇṭam*, Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1977.
JAOS *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, New Haven, Connecticut, U.S.A.
JOIB *Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Baroda.

- JRAS* *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, London.
- JSS* *Journal of the Siam Society*, Bangkok.
- KR* *Kambarāmāyaṇam*, edited with the commentary by V. M. Kōpālakirushṇamācāriyar. Madras, 1959.
- RAO* R. A. Olsson (Translator). *The Rāmākien*. Bangkok: Praepittaya Company Limited Partnership, 1968.
- RK* *Rāmākien Phrarachaniphon Thi 1*. 4 Volumes. Bangkok: Chabap Khruusapha, 1951.
- RV(HPS)*. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*, translated into English by Hari Prasad Shastri. 3 Volumes. London: Shanti Sadan, 1952-1959.
- SSP* Swami Satyananda Puri and Charoen Sarahiran (Translators), *Rāmākirti (Rāmākien)*, or the Thai version of the Rāmāyaṇa. Reprint, Bangkok: Thai Bharat Cultural Lodge and Satyananda Puri Foundation, 1949.
- TUK* *Tamil Uttarakāṇṭam: Irāmāyaṇam, Oṭṭakkūttar iyaṛṇiya uttarakāṇṭam*. Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1977.
- VR* *The Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*, critically edited for the first time by G. H. Bhatt and others. 7 Volumes. Baroda: Oriental Institute, M.S. University of Baroda, 1960-1971.
- ZIES* A. Zieseniss, *The Rāma Saga in Malaysia, its origin and development*. Translation into English by P. W. Burch. Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd., 1963.

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