

HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN: A STUDY IN SHRI RAMCHARITMANAS

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The universal Declaration of Human Rights holds all human beings as free and equal in dignity and rights. Article 2. Of this Declaration reads, "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, Without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."¹

The fight for women's rights in India is usually limited to crimes against them such as violence, female infanticide and the like but no woman organization in India has even questioned the basis of discrimination in India. The basis of this discrimination in the theocratic mode of Indian society in which right from infancy the girls are taught to be subservient to their husband and not to disobey or insult him under any condition.

वृद्ध रोगबस जड़ धनहीना | अंध बधिर क्रोधी अति दीना ||

ऐसेऊ पतिकर किए अपमाना | नारी पाव जमपुर दुःख नाना ||²

But, this is one respect only described in scriptures where human rights are limited to the rights of men only. In the story of Parashuram, his mother Renuka experiences a momentary desire for another man. For this crime of 'thought' his own son beheads her at the behest of his father Jamadagni. Due to these much acclaimed stories of Ramcharitmanas, no reform movements can do their bit to lessen the slavery of women and the idea of women liberation remains elusive.

But, when we want to put Hinduism on the defensive, and want to establish Indian traditions as patriarchal we quote these examples. We do not tell such tales from the same scriptures that tell altogether a different condition and status of women in the society. We do not highlight those aspects of women where they enjoyed equal status with men and sometimes they were even privileged ones.

The women of Ramcharitmanas, especially Sita, have become benchmarks for Indian women as they exercise incomparable influence on the way of thinking of an Indian. Indian girls are preached to follow the footsteps of Sita and Parvati, as they are often considered as the embodiment of virtues, upholding the ideals of a woman for whom her husband is the entire world. This holy scripture portrays Sita as a wife who follows her husband when he has been exiled for fourteen years, upholds her chastity when she is abducted by Ravana, goes through the ordeal by fire to prove her chastity,

later on, turned out by Rama, the 'Maryada Purshottam' when an ordinary washer man of his kingdom has doubts about her chastity. Though the hidden story of fire ordeal or Agnipariksha is something different, that once upon a time after passing 13 years in exile Ram had seen that deities were worried as 13 years of exile had passed and their arch-enemy Ravana was alive. Therefore, Ram asked Sita to perform an act for the welfare of people and enter into fire. Sita did that accordingly

तुमपावक मंह करहूँ निवासा | जबलगि करहूँ निसाचरनासा ||

जबहिं राम सब कहाबखानी | प्रभु पद धरि सिय अनल समानी ||

निजप्रतिबिम्ब राखि तहँ सीता | तैसेईसीलरूप सुबिनीता ||

लछिमन हूँ यह मरम न जाना | जो किछु चरित रचा भगवाना ||³

This is the same maya Sita who asks Ram for the skin of golden deer and sends even Laxman to assist his elder brother and eventually abducted by Ravana. After Ravana has been killed the same 'Maya Sita' is put or ordeal by fire wherefrom original Sita comes out. But, when taken at surface story, Sita is every woman of Indian society, expected to pass fire ordeal not once but time and again. There is no such test for man. She has the ability to bear every consequence. Sita is 'Shakti' who had put aside 'Shiv Dhanush' which Raavan could not move. Hence, Sita is more powerful than Raavan and could kill him herself. But, Sita is shown in scriptures as a mean to an end and that is what women had become for ages. A woman, who has even the potential of Goddess, should never use that strength, but wait for a man or say dependable husband to rescue her. But, I want to know why this fire ordeal is much discussed time and again. Why her other virtues are not discussed. How brides were treated in there in-laws' house can be seen in the lines when Sita, Urmila, Maandavi & Shrutkirti reach to their in-laws' house in Ayodhya-

बधूलरकिनी पर घर आई | राखेउ नयन पलक की नाई ||⁴

Such care is taken account of in Ramayana that all brides feel at home at Ayodhya. Actually, in the Ramayana period, women enjoy rights equal to men. It was the pious duty of the males to make arrangements for the education and welfare of women. Though, Ram did not wish to fetch Sita along with him to the forest in exile, but due to the reasoning presented by Sita, Ram was compelled to accompany her to the forest.

Saving the life of Dashrath by her wife Kaikeyi in one of the battles shows the bravery and skills of women in warfare and how they went to the battlefields along with their husbands. Later on, how Kaikeyi catapulted the whole situation of Ayodhya with her two boons shows how they enjoyed the

privileged position in society. Then, there are Kaushlya and Sumitra who are very intelligent but keep mum at the time of exile of Ram followed by Sita & Laxman. Their intelligence is par- excellence. When Rama asked for the permission of mother Kaushalya to go to the forest for fourteen years in exile, Kaushalya says-

जो केवल पितु आयसु ताता | तौ जनि जाहुजनिबड़ी माता ||

जो पितु मातु कहेउ बन जाना | तौ कानन सत अवध सामना ||⁵

Wife had equal rights as her husband & checked him at his faults. When ravan entices as well as threatens Sita at Ashoka Vatika & Sita rebukes him-

सठ सूने हर आनेउ मोही | अधम निलज्ज लाज नही तोही ||⁶

Ravana tries to kill her, at that time Mandodari, his wife tells him the directive principles for a man-

सुनत वचन पुनि मारन धावा | मयतनयाकहि नीति बुझावा ||⁷

Mandodari advises Ravana again and again to give up animosity with Lord Rama whose messenger even bought destruction lo Lanka. The only way for the welfare of Ravana was to return Sita to Rama otherwise not even Brahma or Shiva himself could protect him.

When Baali tries to kill his brother Sugreev, his wife Tara also advises to behave himself-

सुनतबालि क्रोधातुर धावा | गहि कर चरननारि समुझावा ||⁸

Taara advises Baali that Rama and Laxman whom his brother Sugreev has made alliance with, are very brave and courageous. They are the sons of Dashrath but can overcome Death itself in the battle field.

But, Baali did not follow to the advice of his wife and meets dust and shadow. Therefore, he is rebuked by Rama also that he was such an egotist who didn't follow to the advice of his wife -

मूढतोहिअतिसय अभिमाना | नारि सिखावनकरसि न काना ||⁹

Hence, ultimately killed by Rama. These incidents show that women were good counsellors of their husbands as well as good comrades at the time of crisis in the life of their husband.

Even Shabari – an untouchable by caste, was an ascetic and could predict about search for Sita that lord Rama should go to Pampasar where He will befriend Sugreev who will help Him in His search for Sita by sending a number of monkeys here and there in her search –

पाम्पासरहिं जाहु रघुराई | तहँ होइहि सुग्रीव मिताई ||

सो सीता की खोज कराइहि | जहँ तहँमर्कट कोटिपठाइहि ||¹⁰

Rama followed her advice and found Sita.

Then Swayamprabha, another woman character was another ascetic who was busy doing 'tapas' in cave. It was due to her mere power of 'tapas' that she welcomed all the monkeys who got astrayed in their search for Sita and asked them to close their eyes and sent them at sea beach.

Lankini, the she-demon of Lanka was so powerful, that Ravana had put her a female as a watch woman for his fort Lanka and she performed her duty so well that even Hanuman who assumed the shape as short as a mosquito to cross the sea in search of Sita, couldn't evade her ever watchful eyes

नाम लंकिनी एक निसिचरी | सोकहचलेसि मोहि निंदरी ||

जानेहु नहिं मरमसठ मोरा | मोरअहार कहाँ लागि चोरा ||¹¹

It is not so that these were only selected few woman who enjoyed power and equal status with men. All the women at that time enjoyed liberty of every kind –

सबनिर्दम्भ धर्मरत पुनि | नर अरु नारि चतुर सब गुनी ||¹²

पुर नर नारि सुभग सुची सन्ता | धरमसील ज्ञानी गुनवंता ||¹³

But such position of women, their liberty, equality, bravery, education are not given much attention in a patriarchal society, rather it is repeatedly reinforced that ancient times were misogynist and modern secular laws will repair the damage. The Divine biased has been a huge burden on Indian women. The modern women must be freed from the dual burden of being a career woman and being a free domestic servant. In this capacity, she doesn't differ much from an ancient slave. Several steps are being undertaken for the amelioration of women to allow them liberty and equality and their position has drastically changed but, if we go through the soul of Shri Ramcharitmanas, we will never harp on the single tune –

ढोलगंवार सूद्र पसु नारी | सकल ताइना के अधिकारी ||¹⁴

Rather, we will realize that that society was really enlightened one when each and every man and woman enjoyed, every type of liberty, equality and fraternity.

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