

Representatives of Indian Womanhood (Râmâyana) : Making Tradition

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Abstract

This paper is a visit to Râmâyana to meet those women characters who have lived through millennia. We carry in us civilization that is thousands years old. The ancient lives in us through traditions, conventions, those pass on from generation to generation, through words, practices. The future is built with visions that are borrowed from past again. There are certain characters in tradition, in history that have been able to influence our minds in such a way that they have lived on to become ideals. The paper will try to inquire into the features that have made certain women survive hundreds of years in the minds and hearts of an Indian. Anasûyâ and Savari are ascetics living in forest, but each lady exhibits distinctive characteristic feature.

Key Words: Râmâyana, Women Characters, Conventions, Influences

In Râmâyana, if there is a woman who is working for the welfare of others, then it is Anasûyâ. She is shown as the selfless lady using the power earned by her hard asceticism to remove suffering of the people around her. When land was affected by draught and people were suffering from lack of food and water, it was Anasûyâ who with her power made the fruit grow and water flow through the asylum. Of Anasûyâ Râmâyana speaks through Atri: ‘The people were ceaselessly burning in consequence of a drought extending over ten years. O sinless one, that one resembling your mother is this, by whom furnished with rigid asceticism and adorned with voluntary penances, were created fruits and roots and the Jâhnâvi was made to flow through the asylum; by whom were performed mighty austerities for ten thousand years, in virtue of whose penances, disturbances to asceticism of the sages ceased, by whom ten nights were brought within the compass of a single one’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.117:9-12).

About Savari Râmâyana says ‘old Siavari of accomplished asceticism and recognized by the siddhas’ (Aranyakândam.74:10) telling us of what she is – a recognized ascetic. We

also learn about her as a recognized virtuous human being from her own words: ‘Those great ascetics, cognizant of virtue, said to me, Râma shall come to your holy asylum. Do you receive with great reverence that guest together with Laksmâna. On beholding him, you shall attain to that best of land of the celestials whence none return’ (Aranyakândam.74:15-16). But what makes her special is her devotion to her guides and her trust in them. As she was asked to receive Râma with reverence, she had collected fruits for Râma to welcome him: ‘for you I have collected various wild fruits growing on the banks of Pampa’ (Aranòyakanòddam.74:17). She was told by her guides that on beholding Râma she would attain the best land of the celestials. Thus having met Râma, she now expresses her desire to leave this life to go and meet the pure-souled ascetics: ‘I wish to approach those pure-souled ascetics, whom I used to wait upon’ (Aranyakândam.74:29). Savari is elated to have met Râma because she was told of him by her preceptors. Having full faith in their words, Savari prepares to leave for that land with Râma’s permission: ‘Being thus addressed and ordered by Râma, Savari wearing matted locks, rags and the skin of an antelope, surrendered herself to fire and rose high up in the welkin like to blazing fire’ (Aranyakândam.74:33). Siavari definitely is the ascetic, but she is more adored and remembered with admiration for her own faith and reverence for her preceptors.

Ahalayâ, an ascetic herself, unlike the other two forest women, shows marks of weakness in her character. And yet she comes forth as a woman to be remembered. We come across Ahalyâ first as agreeing to respond to Indra’s seduction. Ahalyâ appears to have known that it was Indra in the guise of her husband requesting for her company – thereby demonstrating a weakness in her character. Râmâyana says about her that ‘Thereupon, out of curiosity, that one of perverse understanding consented to the proposal of the chief of the celestials’ (Bâlakândam.48:19). She is not only shown as agreeing to Indra’s scheme but also trying to save both of them by sending away Indra before Gautama comes: ‘Then, having attained her object, she spoke to the foremost of the celestials, saying, ‘O best of the immortals, I have obtained my desire, do you speedily go from this place, O lord. Do you, O lord of the celestials, from a sense of respectability preserve yourself and me also’ (Bâlakândam.48:20). However, if Ahalyâ has a ‘perverse understanding’ for which she commits an offence, then she also is gracious to take on the punishment without any complains. She was cursed by Gautama to be invisible to anyone for a thousand years feeding on air: ‘These weary thousand years you shall pass, feeding upon air, without food, snagged in asceticism in the dust, and you shall remain in this hermitage unseen of any’ (Bâlakândam.48:29-30). We finally come across Ahalyâ as the woman who has undergone atonement. If she did falter, she also had the strength to rise again. And it is this Ahalyâ which makes her unforgettable. She stayed in her invisible state till Râma came to announce the end of her plight. When Râma and Laksmâna touched her feet as she regained her form when Râma entered the woods she lived in, remembering Gautama’s instruction - ‘ministering to

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him [Râma] the rites of hospitality with a mind free from ignorance and covetousness, you shall in your own form with joy regain my side’ (Bâlakândam.48:33) – Ahalyâ offered them her hospitality: ‘and with collected mind she gave them water for their feet as well as Arghya, and extended to them the rites of hospitality’ (Bâlakândam.49:18).

Tara, queen of Vâli and later of Sugriva makes herself unforgettable among female characters of Râmâyana with her exceptional commonsense. We first meet her when Sugriva calls out Vâli for a fight on the advice of Râma. As predicted by Râma, Vâli could not resist the call for battle. Seeing her husband about to go out to meet Sugriva we find Târâ asking Vali to postpone the fight. She gives good arguments as to why Vâli should not respond to Sugriva’s call. Sugriva has just been wounded and defeated by Vâli; it can hardly be expected that the same Sugriva comes back calling out his vanquisher for another fight without assistance and without being sure of the power of that assistance. We find her uttering: ‘Formerly this Sugriva invited you angrily to battle and being defeated and wounded by you fled away. That one, who had been defeated and harassed by you formerly, is now calling you. Indeed it has excited my fear. His pride, his energy, and his terrible uproar do indicate that there is nothing insignificant (at the bottom). I do not think Sugriva has come here without any to assist him. Forsooth he has taken shelter of somebody, and securing which he has been setting up such a terrible uproar. That monkey is clever by nature and gifted with intellect. And Sugriva shall not desire friendship with anyone without having a test of his prowess’ (Kiskindhâkândam.15:10-14). Her argumentation is based on information provided to her by their son Angada. She advises her husband to consider friendship with Râma and not to quarrel with Sugriva. She says: ‘I do consider it your welfare to contact friendship with Râma and regain Sugriva’s affection, renouncing all your inimical feelings. This your younger brother, even when remaining at a distance, should always be maintained by you. Whether by you, or at distance, he is always your best friend- I do not find his equal on earth’ (Kiskindhâkândam.15.24-26). She is sure that enmity with Râma is not going to bring Vâli any good: ‘It does not behove you to yield to the influence of ire – your conflict with that son of king of Kosala, gifted with the prowess of Sakra, will not conduce to your welfare’ (Kiskindhâkândam.15.30). While lamenting her husband’s fall, we find her referring to her advice to her husband not to have taken away his brother’s wife- ‘Sugriva’s wife was carried away and banished by you and this is the result of your action, O foremost of monkeys. O lord of monkeys, out of your ignorance you didst neglect all my well meaning words which I said, being intent on your welfare and benefit’ (Kiskindhâkândam.20:11-12). We find Vâli describing his wife in the following words: ‘Surasena’s daughter is wonderfully expert in ascertaining subtle things and giving counsels at the time of danger. Do you, without the least doubt perform what shall the chaste lady instruct you to do; for Târâ’s advice never goes without effect’ (Kiskindhâkândam.22:13-14). We once again come across Târâ as Sugriva sends her to deal with Laksmana’s anger. Laksmana is angry and comes also to convey

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Râmâ’s annoyance as Sugriva become forgetful of his promise to help Râmâ. We find Târâ trying to lessen Laksmana’s anger by reminding him of his virtuous nature: ‘O prince, who, accomplishes with excellent virtues, gets enraged with one of inferior merits? O prince, who, like you, an offspring of asceticism, is worked up with ire against the virtues of forgiveness’ (Kiskindhâkândam.33:42); trying to reduce his anger by telling him of Sugriva’s shortcoming and that it can be forgiven: ‘Do you forgive that lord of the monkeys race, your brother influenced by carnality, who is by you, and who through the urgency of lust, has banished shame. Even Maharsis finding delight in religion and asceticism, setting their hearts upon satisfying lust, become fast bound by ignorance. But his is a monkey, volatile by nature, and has, furthermore, been enjoying regale state – why should he not act thus?’ (Kiskindhâkândam.33:56-57). At the same time she does not forget to tell Laksmana that Sugriva still does remember his duty though may not have fully worked on it: ‘O foremost of men, although Sugriva has come under the sway of desire, he has, to secure your good, ere this issued orders for preparations to be made. And monkeys by hundreds and thousands and kotis, inhabiting various mountains, possessed of exceeding prowess, have already arrived (here)’ (Kiskindhâkândam.33:59-60).

Râmâyana places Kausalyâ, Kaikeyi, Sumitrâ, and Sitâ under restrictions that are associated with women of royalty. There are not many opportunities for these royal ladies to exhibit their womanhood except in their relations to regale male counterpart. Thus we see them as revealed in their roles as mothers and wives.

Kaikeyi probably is one of the infamous lady characters of Râmâyana. A reading of her character reveals a feature she seems to be sharing with Ahalayâ. Both are influenced to act to bring infamy upon their own selves. While Ahalyâ could be influenced because of her conceit on her beauty, Kaikeyi gets influenced as she loves to occupy position of importance. That she is the most liked of the three queens is uttered by Dasaratha himself: ‘Kausalyâ serves me at the same time like a slave, and a friend, and wife, and sister, and mother. Ever studious of my welfare, dearly loving her son, and speaking everyone fair, that exalted lady, although deserving of homage at my hands, has up to this time not been regarded by me, because of you. That I so long sought your welfare, afflict me now’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.12:68-69). It is also repeated by Mantharâ: ‘You have always been the favourite wife of your husband. Of this I have not the least doubt. For your sake the monarch can enter into a flame’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.9:24). A society that does not seem to permit a woman to live an independent life, Kaikeyi comes forth as an epitome of passion for self-preservation. Kaikeyi is happy to have heard the news of Dasaratha’s decision to install Râma as heir-apparent to the throne. However, repeated arguments put forward by Manthara for objecting to Rama’s installation finally penetrate the mind of Kaikeyi. Mantharâ seems to know Kaikeyi’s weakness and appeals to it – she paints picture of her life when she is not in power: ‘Your co-wife, Râmâ’s mother, had formerly through pride and good fortune been slighted by you. Why will

not she upon you wreak her revenge now' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.8:37) and her son's suffering: 'And when Râma will obtain the earth, Bharata will certainly meet with destruction, therefore do you ponder as to how you can place your son on the throne and banish your enemy' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.8:39). If on one hand, self-love plays a role in Kaikeyi's change of mind, then on the other hand, it is also love for her son, Bharata, which influences her in decision-making. However, we get an opportunity of seeing another Kaikeyi. She accompanies her husband to war and when he is hurt it is she who saves him by taking him out of the battlefield and tending his wounds: 'The king Dasaratha warred with the Asuras most heroically. And that mighty armed one, O worshipful lady, losing his senses in consequence of wounds received from weapons, was removed from the field by you. In that imminent danger, your husband, sadly cut by weapons, was preserved by you' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.9:15-16). And it is for this that king Dasaratha grants her two boons which now she is about to utilize. Kaikeyi does not change her mind even as she finds king Dasaratha distressed having been asked to install Bharata as heir-apparent to the throne of Ayodhyâ in place of Râma and for banishing Râma to the forester's life for fourteen years. She still says to the king: 'Having promised to grant me the boon, how distressed do you lie on the ground, as if you did commit some sin? It behove you to keep untainted your dignity by performing what you have promised' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.14:2). Kaikeyi becomes cruelty personification as she becomes intent on getting her way. When Râma comes to meet Dasaratha having been told by Sumantra of Dasaratha's desire to meet him in Kaikeyi's quarter, and having seen Dasaratha in a pitiable state inquires what caused it, we find Kaikeyi not only telling him of her two boons but also asking him to hasten his departure to the forest. She says to Râma: 'As long as you shall not hurriedly depart from his presence, Oh Râma, your father shall not bathe, or eat anything' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.19:16). Kaikeyi becomes deaf to any advice to change her mind. When Sumantra tries to make her see sense she turns deaf ear: 'Sumantra with clasped palms, with soft yet uttering words endeavoured to strike Kaikeyi with regret. But that noble dame did not feel any compunction, nor was she touched with regret' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.35:36-37). Kaikeyi even opposes king Dasaratha's proposal that an army follows Râma in the forest. She says: 'O righteous one, like to the liquor whose lees have already been left, Bharata will not receive the kingdom tasteless and denuded of all substance' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.36:12). Again it is her who brings the garments for Râma, Lakshmana and Sitâ as they prepare to go to forest (Ayodhyâ Kândam. 36). She is lost in her own desire so much that she cannot even see that her son Bharata may not approve of what she has done when he learns about her conduct. As Bharata returns from his uncle's place and inquires about his father we hear Kaikeyi saying: 'O son, as soon as I heard of Râma's (coming) installation, I asked for the kingdom to be conferred on you, and Râma be banished. Thereupon, he, staying by his promise, did accordingly: Râma has been banished along with Sumitrâ's son and Sitâ. Not seeing his beloved son, the illustrious lord of earth, stricken by

grief on his account, has breathed his last' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.72:49-51). That Kaikeyi comes back to her previous self is depicted in Râmâyana by showing her accompanying the group that goes with Bharata to bring Rama back to Ayodhyâ: 'Kaikeyi and Sumitrâ and the highly famous Kausalyâ rejoicing at the prospect of bringing of Rama, went in an effulgent car' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.83:6).

Like Kaikeyi, even in Kausalyâ, the two features that influence her conduct are consideration of self-preservation and love for her son. We meet Kausalyâ as the wife dedicated to her husband when Dasaratha describes her in his lamentation in front of Kaikeyi. There is, however, no occasion to meet Kausalyâ except as a mother. We find Râmâyana saying about her that she has kept awake the night prior to Râma's installation as heir-apparent: 'Worshipful Kausalyâ, seeking her son's welfare, kept up the whole night being absorbed in meditation, and was in the morning, worshipping the God Visnu' (Ayodhyâ Kândam. 20:14). She is a religious lady: 'Wearing silk cloth, pleased, and accustomed to the performance of religious rites every day, she performing benedictory ceremonies, was offering oblation to the fire' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.20:15). However, as she hears the news of Râma's banishment to forest we not only see a lamenting mother in her but also a woman afraid of her own future: 'Those who serve me or are obedient to me, shall not even speak with me when they will see the son of Kaikeyi (installed). She is always of fretful temper, how shall I, reduced to misery (on account of your exile), eye the face of Kaikeyi, uttering harsh words' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.20:43-44). Drawing strength from Lakshmana's words that even Dasaratha should be punished accordingly for listening to Kaikeyi's words, we find Kausalya appealing to Râma to stay back and serve her: 'As the monarch is worshipful to you, so am I. I do not permit you, to repair hence to the forest. Separated from you I do not need life or happiness; with you I would prefer faring on grass. If do you depart to the forest leaving me troubled with sorrow, I shall resort to the vow of fasting and shall not be able to sustain life. And then you shall receive penalty of hell, well known to the people, as did the ocean, the lord of rivers, for like unrighteousness, suffers the agony of Brahmanicide' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.21:25-28). The mother, however, becomes prominent over the woman in distress as she sees her son getting ready to depart for forest: 'How shall this virtuous-souled one, beloved of people and who has never experienced misfortune before, live on grains gleaned, being born of me to Dasaratha? How shall that Râma live upon fruits and roots, whose servants and attendants fare on well-cooked rice' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.24:2-3). We see Kausalyâ regaining her composure as Râma reminds her of her duty as a wife. When Râma says that she should not think of leaving for forest to accompany him, we find Kausalyâ agreeing to what he says: 'Truly it is' (Ayodhyâ Kândam.24:14). It is mother no doubt, but a composed one, who performs religious rites and allows her son to go to forest: 'Oh my son, Oh Râma, have your desires attained, and do you go, wherever you like. I shall see you oh my darling with great delight, when shall you returning Ayodhyâ in excellent health and

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having all your ends satisfied, resume the administration of your kingdom’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.25:40-41). Kausalya is the one who loses most as Râma leaves for forest – her one son on whom she depended has gone with his wife. As Râma leaves for forest Dasaratha wanted to be with Kausalya. And we find Kausalayâ once again going back to her lamentation in front of Dasaratha blaming him for her grief. We find Kausalyâ a little more concerned about herself than about anybody else. She does not leave the opportunity of hurting the king even when he is ‘stupefied with grief’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.43:1). Moreover, her cry of self-pity and jealousy for Kaikeyi keep recurring as she laments her son’s going to forest. She says to Dasaratha: ‘O best of men, having vented her venom upon Raghava, the crooked Kaikeyi will go about like a serpent that has cast off her slough. And that fortunate one having by her endeavours attained her end, will frighten me the more like a wicked serpent in one’s house’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.43:2-3).

Of the three wives of Dasartha, unexpectedly, it is Sumitrâ who comes forth as the strongest with befitting etiquette of a queen. True that she has one son to be with her while the other has gone to forest with Râma, still her composure makes her the most appreciable as the noblest of the queens. When Laksmana comes to bid her farewell as they prepare to leave for forest we find Sumitrâ advising him on his duty - to take care of his elder brother and sister-in-law. She says: ‘O sinless one, whether in prosperity or in adversity, even this one is your way. That a younger brother should follow his elder is in this world the duty of the righteous. These are the legitimate duties ever observed by this race, charity, initiation into sacrifice, and renunciation of the body in the field of battle. Do you consider Rama as Dasaratha, and Janaka’s own-begotten as myself; do you regard Ayodhyâ as a wilderness, go my son, at your sweet pleasure’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.40:7-9). We meet Sumitrâ once again as she tries to bring out Kausalyâ from her persistent lamentation having to bear separation from her only son. It is more her than Ramâ’s own mother who shows respect and faith in his qualities. She speaks to Kausalyâ: ‘O worshipful one, your son is crowned with all qualities, and is the best of men. Why then do you bewail thus, or weep bitterly? Since, O revered one, renouncing the kingdom, your mighty son wendeth (to the woods) with the view of fulfilling the intention of his high-souled and truthful sire, the worthy Râma staying in the duty that is completely observed by the good and the performance of which always bringeth welfare in the next world, should by no means be lamented’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.44:2-4). Sumitra also comes forth as the most adorable of the mothers with her pride, trust and confidence in her own son: ‘That sinless one, Laksmana, kind to all creatures, will minister to Râma in the best way possible, and this is to the advantage of the high-souled one’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.44:5).

Sitâ stands out among the Ayodhyâ ladies, and in fact among all ladies in Râmâyana for her unconditional love towards her man. Sitâ convinces Râma that she should be taken to forest with him. She puts forth arguments expressing her love for her husband that she may

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be taken. The convincing nature of her strong desire to accompany Râma wins over all his objections. Râma finally agrees to take her: ‘Not apprised of your full intention, O you of beautiful countenance, I could not, though capable of escorting you, desire your abode in the forest. When you are determined O Maithili, repair to the forest with me, I cannot leave you behind, as one possessing self-knowledge cannot renounce munificence’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.30:28-29). Sitâ is obedient to her husband but she has proved that her compliance is an outcome of love. She does not listen to Râma’s command to stay back as he goes to forest and yet she is found happily distributing her personal wealth at Râma’s order when she gets her desire to accompany him granted: ‘Convinced that her going to the forest was desired by her husband, Sita began to distribute them speedily with a delighted heart’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.30:47). Sita exists in her love for Râma. In her conversation with Anasuyâ we find her saying: ‘What my mother-in-law instructed me at the time that I was leaving for the lonely and fearful forest, is constantly present in my mind. And what also my mother taught me in presence of fire on the occasion of bestowal of my hand, is also remembered by me. And, O you engaged in acts of righteousness, I have not forgotten the words that my relative said to me, viz., the asceticism of a woman is ministering to her husband. They did not teach anything else’ (Ayodhyâ Kândam.118:7-9). Sita is not without a woman’s yearning for the beautiful. It is she who urges Râma to get the beautiful deer that finally will bring her own misfortune. She tells Râma ‘O son of worshipful Sire, this deer has attracted my mind, get it for me, pray, O you of mighty arms: it shall be an object of sport for us’ (Aranyakândam.43:10). She is also shown to be acting without reason. When she hears Marica’s cry in Râma’s voice calling her and Laksmana she provokes Laksmana with harsh words to leave her side: ‘Verily are you a monster of wickedness, that Râma repairing to woods, you have, being lustful for me, followed him alone. Or hast you been engaged by Bharata to act thus?’ (Aranyakândam.45:24). Laksmana describes Sitâ in the following words: ‘What you have spoken, O Maithili, is nothing surprising for females. Such is the nature of womankind on this earth. Women by nature are crooked, fickle, devoid of religious knowledge, and bring about difference between father and sons’ (Aranyakândam.45:29-30). But it is her love for Râma that shines forth in all her actions. She reproaches Râma for treating her like an ordinary woman when he doubts her virtue having lived in Râvana’s place for long. She tells him that had he conveyed his feeling earlier through Hanumana, she would have given up her life then. And in fact she prepares for her own death by asking Laksmana to arrange he funeral pyre. As she gets ready to enter the fire we hear her saying: ‘As Raghava consider me vile, who have got a pure character, may fire, the witness of people, protect me on all sides’ (Yuddhakânda.116:26). Fire himself testifies for Sita’s purity of heart: ‘With the daughter of king Janaka, the receiver (Fire) of sacrificial offering, being incarnate rose up’ (Yuddhakânda.118:2); ‘Thereupon the Deity of Fire, the witness of the people, spoke to Râma, saying, O Râma, here is your Vaidehi – no sin has visited her. Neither by words,

mind, understanding nor eyes, she, good-natured and beautiful – has deviated from you who has got a good character and is heroic’ (Yuddhakânda.118:5-6). In fact Râma himself is found commenting of her: ‘I know it full well that Maithili, the daughter of king Janaka, has her mind devoted to me and has not given it to anyone (else)’ (Yuddhakânda.118:15). Again, as she is about to be left by Laksmana in the forest, we find Sitâ once more standing as an example of love for Râma. As she comes to know of Râma’s order to Laksmana to leave her in the hermitage, she asks Laksmana to convey her words to Râma: ‘Thereupon saluting the pious king do you address him, in my name, saying – You know O Raghava, that Sitâ is pure, ever devoted to you and engaged in your well-being. She knows it full well, that afraid of a bad name you have renounced her. It is her duty to put a stop to your ill-name and censure; for you are her excellent refuge’ (Uttara Kândam.48:12-13). Sitâ once again gives proof of her purity in the sacrifice arranged by Râma. There Valmiki vouched for her purity and for her sons as Râma’s. But this time, it appears, feeling her duty towards Râma done, Sita asks for place in the bosom of Earth not to return anymore. She calls on mother Earth to find a place for her if she is pure: ‘I have always with my mind, body and words prayed for Râma’s well-being and by virtue hereof may the goddess Vasundhara give me room in her womb’ (Uttara Kândam.97:15). We find Sitâ finally being taken in by her mother: ‘Having stretched out her arms and taken Maithili, the goddess Earth welcomed her and laced her on the throne. And while seated on the throne she was entering the earth, she was covered with the continued showers of celestial flowers’ (Uttara Kândam.97:19-20). Sitâ’s life and death are for Râma. And this love, Râmâyana shows she has carried from her past life. In the story of her past life, Sitâ was Vedavati, the ‘word-impregnated daughter’ of Kusadhavja. Kusadhavja wanted to bestow Vedavati on Visnu. This angered Sambhu, king of Daityas who slew Kusadhavja in his sleep. Knowing the wish of her father Vedavati fixed her heart on Visnu and carried on rigid austerities. However, Ravana seeing Vedavati wanted to possess her and even after hearing her story, intent on his desire ‘seized the girl by the hair’. Vedavati having been thus treated decided to end her life. However, she told Ravana that she would be born again and be the cause of his death. Vedavati before entering into the funeral pyre says to Ravana: ‘As I have in this world been dishonoured by you, I shall again be born to compass your destruction. It lie not in a female to slay a male intent on sin; and if I utter a curse, it shall cost my asceticism. But if I have done anything, given away anything, offered oblation to the fire, then I shall be the chaste daughter of some virtuous person, albeit unborn of any female vessel’ (Uttara Kândam.17:30-32). And this is Sitâ in her next birth: ‘O lord, this is she that has been born as the daughter of king Janaka’ (Uttara Kândam.17:34).

Interestingly, it is in the women of Lanka, in Sarama and Trijata, that we find a woman’s concern for another woman. And it is in Mandodari that we come across a woman who believes in sanctity of moral values.

Sarama is a character who appeals by her friendly and compassionate nature. As

Sitâ loses her sense in grief being shown the slewed head of Râma by Ravana through illusion, Sarama appears in the scene as Sitâ’s consoler. She says to Sitâ: ‘Râma, acquainted with self, is incapable of being surprised in sleep; nor does the slaying of that tiger-like one commend itself to me as probable’ (Yuddhakânda.33:8). Sarama tells Sitâ that it is an illusion created by Ravana. She tries to lift Sitâ’s spirit by informing Sitâ that Ravana has left in a hurry precisely because he is in consultation with his counsellors regarding crossing of the ocean by Râma. She puts her own life at danger for removing a fellow being’s suffering. She tells Sitâ: ‘Having come to the solitary wood for protecting you, I, renouncing all fear of Ravana, have remaining hid, heard everything that the addressed to you, as well as what you have replied to him. For you, O you of expansive eyes, I have no fear of Ravana’ (Yuddhakânda.33:5-6). At Sitâ’s request she goes to find out what Ravana is upto and comes back to relate everything she learns to Sitâ. Sarama is truthful: ‘O Maithili, without renouncing his life, he does not intend to liberate you. Even this is the determination which that cruel one has arrived at along with his advisors. This intent is in consequence of their coveting surcease. He cannot yield you up from sheer fear; nor is he backward in battle, or shirk his own destruction or that of all the Raksasas’ (Yuddhakânda.34:24-25). At the same time she tries her best to keep Sitâ’s spirit up: ‘O dark-eyed lady slaying Ravana in battle with sharp shaft, Râma will take you back to Ayodhyâ’ (Yuddhakânda.34:26).

Like Sarama, Trijata too makes her place in our heart with her expression of care and affection towards Sitâ. As Sitâ gets saddened to see Râma and Laksmana lying in the battlefield thinking them to be dead, it is Trijata who reasons with her not to think thus as Ravana wants her to believe. She has good argument to suggest that Râma and Laksmana are alive: ‘An army that has its heroes chiefs slain becoming dispirited and drooping, range the field, like a vessel on water that has lost its helmsman. But, O lorn one, these troops, be trying neither agitation nor anxiety, are guarding the Kakutsthas. This I tell you of them out of affection. Do you at this conclusion bringing in joy, take comfort; and behold the Kakutsthas unslain. This I tell you from affection’ (Yuddhakânda.48:26-28).

Mandodari, the beautiful wife of Ravana comes forth as a woman with a clear understanding of what constitutes righteousness. We meet her once in her palace as Hanumana mistakes her for Sitâ: ‘The monkey saw there the yellow-hues Mandodari, having the splendour of gold; the object of (Ravana’s) desire; beautiful exceedingly, the mistress of the inner apartment, lying down. And seeing (Mandodari) adorned with ornaments, the offspring of the wind-god guessed. This one endowed with the wealth of youth and beauty might be Sitâ’ (Sundarakândam.10:53). That beautiful Mandodari is met second time as she laments the death of her husband. It is in her lamentation that we learn that she tried to prevent Ravana from continuing in creating enmity with him: ‘I prevented you from creating enmity with Raghava but you did not pay heed to my words and this is the result (thereof)’ (Yuddhakânda.111:18). Mandodari was married to Ravana, but she was not blind to his

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faults: ‘Having brought in a false guise from solitary forest the sorrowful and chaste Sita, having a blameless person, you did bring destruction of your family. You failed to encompass your desire for the company of Sita’ (Yuddhakânda.111:22-23). She blames Ravana for the destruction of Raksasas: ‘This destruction of leading Raksasas has proceeded from the disaster arising from your anger and lust. For your vicious deeds all our good fortune is lost – (and from them) has proceeded the great disaster exterminating the race. And by you all the Raksasa families have been deprived of their lords’ (Yuddhakânda.111:73); ‘Maddened with your own prowess you did not hear the word of Marica, Kumbhakarna as well as those of my father – and this is the result thereof’ (Yuddhakânda.111:78). She even claims that she is not lamenting evil Ravana’s death: ‘You well-known for your strength and manliness, are not being worthy of being grieved by me. On account of my effeminate nature my understanding is possessed of sorrow. Carrying your pious and iniquitous deeds you have attained your own state- I am only lamenting for me who have been sorry for your destruction’ (Yuddhakânda.111:74-75).

Râmâyana shows clearly that it is an inescapable fact of life that each being is placed under the constraints decided by one’s environment. And yet, each woman character discussed above demonstrates how with undeniable facticity one develops and builds one’s own distinct personality. If it is Anasuyâ’s compassion for others that creates a place in people’s hearts for her, then it is devotion that makes Sîavari unforgettable. In spite of her mistake, we still find a place for Ahalyâ as she bears courageously the responsibility of her own doing and reforms herself. Anasuyâ, Sîavari, Ahalyâ – all three might have led their lives in forest, yet each developed her own nature. Of the royal ladies - Kausîalayâ, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Sitâ, Târâ, and Mandodari – it is not their regal birth which makes them live in one’s memory. Each reader can find a spot in their hearts for even Kaikeyi. Kaikeyi acted for what she thought right for her son and herself within her total lack of freedom in decision making. Kausalyâ’s cries of self-pity get dimmed as we try to feel the suffering of a woman whose son is banished to forest. Of the regal ladies both Sumitra and Mandodari stand out – relegating their feelings to the background and standing for that which is right. Sitâ, in spite of being a princess overcomes her restraint to follow her love; she does not make her presence felt as a royalty, but as a woman for whom life and death revolves round her love. Târâ remains engaging not because of queenship, but because of her ability to read situations and act accordingly. And it is Sarama and Trijata who show us that one’s station has nothing to do in making one special - it does not stand on the way of turning oneself into a single unique person.