

WHEN WOMEN RETELL THE RAMAYANA: MYTH, AGENCY, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF SITA IN BHOJPURI FOLKSONGS

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ABSTRACT

The *Ramayana* has never existed as a single, culturally uniform narrative in South Asia. Its characters and episodes have been repeatedly appropriated by communities occupying different social, regional, religious, and gendered locations. This paper examines how Bhojpuri women's folksongs reconfigure the figure of Sita and, through her, create an imaginative space for articulating women's desires, judgements, and negotiations with patriarchy. Drawing upon four Ram-Sita-based songs recorded during fieldwork in Hurmujpur, Ghazipur district, the paper focuses on four stages of Sita's life: marriage, pregnancy, abandonment, and refusal of reconciliation. In the first song, Sita instructs her father to seek Ram as her husband, thereby transforming the *svayamvar* motif into an assertion of female choice. In the second, a pregnant Sita voices her craving for Rohu fish and obliges Ram to respond to her desire, relocating the epic within the everyday material world of Bhojpuri women. The final two songs radically revise the aftermath of Sita's abandonment: rather than returning to Ram's kingdom, Sita chooses to enter the earth or declares that she would rather become an ascetic than return to him. Drawing upon Paula Richman's concept of multiple *Ramayana* traditions, Nabaneeta Dev Sen's analysis of women's *Ramayana* retellings, Smita Tewari Jassal's ethnography of North Indian women's folksongs, and feminist conceptualisations of agency by Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod, the paper argues that these songs should not be read simply as oppositional or "resistant" texts. Their significance lies in the ways they negotiate patriarchal structures from within culturally familiar frameworks. The Bhojpuri Sita is neither simply the obedient wife nor an uncomplicated rebel; she is a daughter who chooses, a wife who desires, a woman who remembers injustice, and a wife who can refuse reconciliation. Myth consequently becomes a vernacular resource through which women transform inherited cultural authority into a language of agency.

Keywords: Bhojpuri folksongs, Sita, *Ramayana*, women's agency, oral tradition, mythology, gender, folk culture

INTRODUCTION

The *Ramayana* occupies a central place in the cultural imagination of South Asia, but its cultural authority has never depended upon the existence of a single, immutable version of the narrative. The story of Rama and Sita has travelled through literary texts, oral traditions, performance, ritual, popular culture, and regional languages, acquiring different meanings in the process. Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* is particularly important in establishing that the *Ramayana* tradition is constituted by multiple tellings rather than by a single authoritative narrative. The volume demonstrates how different historical periods, regions, genres, religious affiliations, and social groups have refashioned the Rama story according to their own circumstances and concerns.

Such multiplicity is especially significant when the narrative enters women's oral traditions. A canonical text may establish a particular image of Sita as the ideal wife, but oral performers

can appropriate that figure and make her speak within an entirely different experiential universe. The fieldwork on which this article is based demonstrates that Ramayana episodes constitute a recurrent motif in Bhojpuri folksongs, particularly songs performed during marriage ceremonies and other ritual occasions. Sita's presence in these songs is paradoxical: she is invoked as an auspicious model of marriage even though her own marital life is marked by exile, suspicion, abandonment, and separation.

This paradox is precisely what makes the Bhojpuri Sita so productive. She is culturally authoritative enough to be invoked without immediately appearing transgressive, yet sufficiently flexible to accommodate women's experiences that the idealised image of the devoted wife cannot contain. The songs examined here demonstrate that women do not merely reproduce Sita as a model to be imitated. They reconfigure her. In one song she is a daughter who explicitly tells her father whom to approach for her marriage. In another she is a pregnant woman who expresses a craving for Rohu fish and expects her husband to satisfy it. In two songs concerning her abandonment, she becomes a woman who evaluates Ram's actions, refuses reconciliation, and chooses separation over a return to the marital household.

This article therefore asks: What happens when women retell the Ramayana through the figure of Sita? More specifically, how does the movement of Sita from canonical narrative into Bhojpuri women's oral tradition transform the meanings of marriage, desire, conjugal duty, abandonment, and female agency?

The argument advanced here is that these songs do not simply replace a "submissive Sita" with a "rebellious Sita." Such a binary would inadequately account for the complexity of women's negotiations with patriarchy. Instead, the songs produce multiple forms of agency from within familiar social and cultural structures. Sita remains a daughter, bride, wife, and mother, but these identities no longer imply silence. She speaks through them. The folk tradition consequently converts mythology into a vernacular language of negotiation.

This argument is particularly relevant to the study of women's oral traditions because, as Smita Tewari Jassal demonstrates in *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India*, women sing what they often cannot talk about, "The power of these songs also lies in their ability to hint at and suggest, rather than directly address, social themes" (3). The present study extends this insight to the Ramayana tradition. It argues that the reconfiguration of Sita in Bhojpuri folksongs is simultaneously a reconfiguration of the possibilities of female speech.

MYTH, MULTIPLICITY, AND WOMEN'S RETELLINGS

The idea of a "Ramayana" in the singular is complicated by the extensive history of its vernacular and performative retellings. Paula Richman in his book *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* foregrounds the multivocality of the tradition and demonstrates that communities have repeatedly refashioned the Rama story according to their own social and ideological concerns. He says, "The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated" (Richman 7). This perspective is particularly useful for examining oral traditions because it shifts attention away from questions of fidelity to a canonical text and toward questions of cultural appropriation: who tells the story, from what location, and for what purpose?

Nabaneeta Dev Sen's essay "When Women Retell the Ramayan" provides an especially pertinent framework for the present study. Sen notes that women tend to select episodes corresponding to the stages of women's lives—puberty, marriage, pregnancy, abandonment, and childbirth—rather than the heroic episodes of warfare and masculine conquest that

dominate many conventional retellings (9). The difference is not merely one of emphasis. It changes the nature of the narrative itself. The Ramayana ceases to be primarily a story of kingship, exile, warfare, and masculine heroism and becomes a story of domestic experience.

Sen's argument also helps explain the paradoxical relationship between patriarchy and women's retellings. The Sita myth has historically been mobilised to establish an ideal of feminine conduct, yet village women can appropriate the same myth to speak about their own lives. This appropriation should not, however, be understood as an uncomplicated rejection of tradition. Sita remains a revered figure. The singers do not need to abandon the cultural authority of the myth in order to transform its meaning. On the contrary, it is precisely because Sita is culturally recognisable that she becomes such an effective vehicle for female speech.

Jassal's work further complicates any assumption that women's songs constitute a unified or uniformly oppositional voice. Her study shows that folksongs can reproduce, negotiate, and contest gender relations simultaneously. This approach resonates with Saba Mahmood's critique of models of agency that equate agency exclusively with resistance to domination. Agency can emerge through practices that inhabit, negotiate, or reinterpret existing norms rather than simply overthrowing them.

Sita as a Choosing Daughter: Reconfiguring the *Svayamvar*

The first song examined here radically alters the distribution of authority within the marriage narrative. Recorded from Rinku in Hurmujpur, Ghazipur district, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the song represents Sita as a daughter who actively participates in the selection of her husband:

*Jaai na baba ho Ajodhya
nagariya raja dashrath ke duwar he
unka hi baare baba chaar betwa na chaaro hi
baare kunwaar he
saanwar dekhi mat jhijakab ho baba saanwar
hauve shri ram ho
saanwar ke maathe tilak balu shobhela hriday
chandan mukh paan he
jhetka se lagan hamaar ho*

(Go to Ajodhya father and at the
doorstep of king Dashrath

are his four sons, who are all unmarried

a tilak on dusky face, chandan on chest and
betel leaf in mouth are his adornments

and with the eldest one fix my marriage) (my trans.; Rinku, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur
District)

The importance of the song lies in the fact that Sita does not merely wait to be selected. She gives her father explicit instructions. She identifies Ajodhya as the destination, directs him toward King Dashrath's household, observes that his four sons are unmarried, describes Ram's appearance, and finally specifies that her marriage should be fixed with the eldest son.

The song thus transforms the *svayamvar* into a vernacular representation of female discernment. The song highlights Sita's extraordinary capacity to foretell or participate in

determining her marriage and offer a contrast to the everyday reality in which women's participation in marital choice may be severely constrained.

Significantly, Sita's agency does not require the rejection of her father. She does not challenge the institution of marriage, nor does she demand that the family withdraw from the process. Instead, she negotiates her preference through the very institution that governs her marriage. Her father remains the agent who will formally arrange the match, but Sita establishes the criteria according to which he should act. This analysis resonates with Smita Tewari Jassal's articulation of the multifaceted nature of agency. She says, "As women always play active parts in accepting, accommodating, ignoring, resisting, or protesting—sometimes all at the same time—one might take for granted that 'resistances, of whatever form, signal sites of struggle'" (Jassal 14–15).

The song therefore produces a complex relationship between obedience and autonomy. Sita remains a daughter, but daughterhood does not silence her. She speaks to her father with sufficient authority to transform him from decision-maker into facilitator. The shift is subtle but important: the father's role is not eliminated but redirected by the daughter's desire.

Her description of Rama is equally significant. The song gives Sita the ability to look at the prospective groom and evaluate him. The dusky complexion, *tilak*, sandalwood, and betel leaf are not incidental descriptive details; they establish Sita as an observer, whose aesthetic judgement matters. She is not simply the object of matrimonial exchange. She is also a subject capable of assessment.

The song consequently provides an imaginative counterpoint to the limited participation of women in marriage negotiations. Its performance during wedding celebrations makes the intervention particularly meaningful. A song about a mythological bride who chooses her husband is sung precisely at the social moment when an actual bride is being transferred from natal to marital household. Myth therefore becomes a space in which the possibility of female choice can be articulated, even if actual social structures remain more restrictive.

SITA AS A DESIRING WIFE: PREGNANCY, FOOD, AND CONJUGAL RESPONSIBILITY

If the marriage song gives Sita authority over the choice of a husband, the pregnancy song gives her authority over her own bodily desire. The song, recorded from Seema in Hurmujpur, relocates the mythological Sita into the material world of Bhojpuri life:

*sone ke kharawa (wooden sandal) raja
ram chandra chutoorachu
toor chale ho
more mata hamau jaayib ba madhubanwa
sita ke kaise raakhelu*

*aetni bachana raja
sunlo ho sunaahi naahi
pavela ho more bachwa
tore dhan ghara bheye
sampatti ho madhuban kaise
jaiba na ho*

*aetni bachana raja
sunlo ho sunaahi naahi
pavela ho more dhaniya*

kavan kavan fal khailu ho
kaha ho ruchi aapan ho

aetni sampatti raja
raur ghare ekahu na man bhaave ho
more raja lei aava rohua machariya
ho machariya hoyien sagun

(King Ram chandra tip-toes
wearing a *kharawa* made of gold
“My mother I too will go to the forest
tell me how you treat Sita.”
“Pay heed to my question king
do the kids get to eat enough
you have plenty of wealth
but nothing in the forest
tell me king
pay attention to my request
do the little ones get enough fruit.”
“Tell me what you are yearning for
tell me which fruits interest you?”
“You have tremendous wealth king
but nothing interests me
bring me the delicious Rohu fish.”

The Bhojpuri folksong reimagining Sita’s pregnancy offers a striking departure from Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, particularly from the emotionally and ethically charged episode of her abandonment in the *Uttara Kāṇḍa*. Rather than reproducing Sita as a woman subjected to Rama’s decision and public suspicion, the folk tradition relocates her within the intimate world of pregnancy, domesticity, food, and conjugal interaction. In doing so, it does not simply alter an episode of the epic; it brings Sita closer to the experiential world of ordinary women and allows her bodily desires to become narratively significant.

The opening of the song establishes a markedly domestic atmosphere. Rama is imagined as moving “tiptoe” in his golden *kharawa*, while Sita’s concern is not royal duty or social reputation but the immediate condition of her children: “Sita ke kaise raakhelu / aetni bachana raja” (“Tell me how you treat Sita, / pay heed to my question, O king”). Her repeated questioning about whether “the little ones” receive enough food places pregnancy and maternal care at the centre of the narrative. The epic heroine, therefore, ceases to be primarily a symbol of chastity whose fate is determined by royal morality and becomes a recognisable pregnant woman whose bodily and emotional needs demand attention.

This transformation becomes particularly significant when Sita asks for *Rohu* fish. Her statement, “raur ghare ekahu na man bhaave ho / more raja lei aava rohua machariya” (“Nothing in your house pleases me, / my king, bring me Rohu fish”), localises the epic narrative within Bhojpuri culinary culture. The choice of Rohu is not merely an ornamental

regional detail. It gives Sita a culturally specific appetite and, consequently, a culturally situated body. The exalted figure of the epic is brought into the everyday world of women who experience pregnancy through cravings, hunger, domestic negotiation, and embodied desire. The folk song thus performs a subtle process of humanisation: Sita is not only the virtuous wife of Rama but also a pregnant woman who wants a particular food.

The contrast with Valmiki's narrative is especially revealing. In the Gita Press edition, *Uttara Kāṇḍa*, Canto XLV, Rama instructs Lakshmana to take Sita to the hermitage on the bank of the Ganga. Rama explicitly recalls Sita's earlier desire to visit the hermitages and uses this desire as the pretext for sending her away, while simultaneously insisting that Lakshmana must obey him without resistance (Gita Press 999–1000). The poignancy of the episode lies in the dramatic irony: Sita believes that her wish is finally being fulfilled, whereas Rama has already decided that she must be abandoned because of public suspicion. Her desire to visit the hermitage is consequently appropriated into a decision made without her knowledge.

The Bhojpuri song radically reverses this emotional structure. Here, Sita's desire does not become the means of her abandonment; it becomes the reason for Rama's care. When she asks for Rohu, Rama does not silence, reinterpret, or weaponise her desire. Instead, he attempts to fulfil it, even approaching a boatman and offering jewellery in exchange for the fish. The husband who, in Valmiki's narrative, ultimately prioritises the demands of public opinion over Sita's presence, is transformed in the folk song into a husband who responds to the immediate needs of his pregnant wife. The contrast is therefore not simply between two versions of the same event but between two different moral imaginations of marriage.

The song's representation of agency is particularly productive when read through Saba Mahmood's critique of the tendency to equate female agency exclusively with resistance. Sita does not resist Rama, reject marriage, or openly challenge patriarchal authority. Her agency operates differently: she articulates a desire, makes a request, and expects that request to be taken seriously. Her statement of preference mobilises Rama and even extends into the wider economic and social world represented by the boatman. Her desire consequently possesses relational power. Mahmood's formulation is useful here because it permits agency to be understood not only as resistance to domination but also as the capacity to act meaningfully within existing relationships (Mahmood 2, 7, 9).

This form of agency is particularly significant in an oral tradition shaped by women's everyday experiences. The song does not need to make Sita rebellious in order to make her audible. It gives her a voice through ordinary speech and bodily desire. Her question—*“kavan kavan fal khailu ho, kaha ho ruchi aapan ho”* (“Which fruits shall I eat? Tell me what you desire?”)—creates a conversational space in which the pregnant woman's needs become worthy of response. The folk Sita therefore possesses a form of authority that is intimate rather than confrontational.

The song also demonstrates how Bhojpuri oral tradition can appropriate a pan-Indian myth and refashion it according to local social experience. Its emphasis on Rohu, pregnancy, food, maternal concern, and conjugal care reflect a world in which epic figures can be imaginatively incorporated into everyday life. If Valmiki's narrative foregrounds the tragic consequences of royal duty, reputation, and patriarchal responsibility, the Bhojpuri song foregrounds the ordinary woman behind the mythological figure. Its radical intervention lies precisely in this ordinariness. By replacing the spectacle of abandonment with the intimacy of appetite, the song restores to Sita a body, a voice, and a desire—and, most importantly, makes that desire matter.

Sita as a Woman Who Judges: Rewriting Rama's Moral Authority

The most significant transformation of the Sita figure occurs in the songs concerning her abandonment. In one song, Rama travels through the forest with Lakshmana and encounters his sons, who do not recognise him. When asked about their father, they describe him as the man who abandoned their mother while she was pregnant. The children consequently inherit not Ram's authority but Sita's grievance.

The song concludes with Sita seeing Ram and choosing to enter the earth:

*... pichwa ulati jab chitweli sita ramji ghoda aswaar
fatti ho dharti navahi khand hoti dharti mein jaito samaay
lapki ke ram dharele bahiyaan
sita ji gaili samaay*

(When Sita turned around, she saw Ram alighting from the horse
that very moment the earth cracked open and Sita wished to be buried
Rama jumps and catches hold of her hand
but Sita gets buried deep into the earth.) (my trans.; Seema, Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

The song's most consequential alteration is that Sita's disappearance becomes an act of choice. This paper explicitly observes that the confrontation between Rama and Sita does not culminate in reconciliation: Sita chooses burial in the earth rather than returning as Rama's queen.

The significance of this ending lies in the rejection of the assumption that a husband possesses an automatic right to reclaim his wife. Rama may approach Sita, but the encounter does not restore his authority. Sita's decision takes precedence. The song also undermines Rama's moral exceptionalism through the voices of his sons. In the later section of this song, they refer to their father as a sinner because he abandoned their mother while she was pregnant. This is an extraordinary reversal of the conventional hierarchy: the children judge the father, and the father becomes the morally questionable figure within the narrative.

Such a reconfiguration has important implications for the cultural ideal of *maryada Purushottam* (an ideal man) title associated with Rama. The paper notes that in these women's retellings Rama appears harsh, uncaring, or weak-willed, while Sita becomes vocal about the treatment she has received. The folk song does not necessarily deny Rama's divinity; rather, it subjects his behaviour as a husband to ethical scrutiny. This distinction is important. Women can worship Rama while simultaneously criticising him.

"I Would Rather Be a Saint": Sita's Refusal

A second abandonment song makes the politics of refusal even more explicit. In this version, Lakshmana approaches Sita and tells her that Rama has sent him to bring her back to Ayodhya. Sita responds:

*chaar charkhand more baba ka pokharwa taahi par sita nahaay
agwa ka kesh sita paache jhatkaare padwa hi lakshman thaad
kya tuhu ae babu rasta bhulaila kya tohe lagela piyaas
naahi hum ae bhabhi rasta bhulaili naahi mohe laagela pyaas
bhaiya ka bhejal aili ae bhabhi tohke liyaay hum jaab
jeth baisakhwa ki jarti bhabhuriya ram dihal banwaas
ram ke madaiya jogin hoi jaibe ayodhya lavti nahi jab*

(In a big pool of water beside the village, Sita takes bath
she splashes her hair behind while Lakshmana stands in the front
“Have you forgotten your way lad or are you thirsty?”
“Neither have I forgotten my way nor am I thirsty sister-in-law
I have been sent by brother to fetch you back to Ayodhya.”
“At the peak of Baisakhi your brother banished me
I would rather be a saint than return to Ram’s abode!”) (my trans.; Sangeeta,
Hurmujpur, Ghazipur District)

The concluding declaration is perhaps the most explicit articulation of female refusal in the corpus. Sita does not merely express anger. She establishes a choice between two possible futures: return to Ram or live as an ascetic. She chooses the latter.

The temporal specificity of her response is significant as well. She remembers that Rama abandoned her during *Baisakhi* (spring harvest festival). The injury has not disappeared simply because Rama now wishes to restore the relationship. Memory becomes a form of agency. Sita retains the right to determine whether an earlier violation can be forgiven.

The song consequently refuses the assumption that marital reconciliation is inherently desirable. A woman's return to her husband is not automatically the appropriate resolution to abandonment. Sita evaluates the relationship and finds it wanting. Her refusal also repositions Lakshmana. He is not the bearer of a legitimate command that Sita must obey; he becomes a messenger whose request she can reject. The patriarchal chain of command—King to brother to wife—is therefore interrupted at its final point. Sita refuses to receive the command as binding.

The statement “I would rather be a saint” is especially powerful because it imagines an identity outside conventional wifehood. Yet even here the song does not construct Sita as a modern individual liberated from all social relations. Her choice remains articulated through culturally familiar categories of asceticism, honour, and marital morality. This is precisely why the song is better understood through a contextual theory of agency than through a simple resistance paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The Bhojpuri women's folksongs examined in this article demonstrate that the cultural life of the *Ramayana* cannot be understood through canonical texts alone. The epic continues to acquire new meanings as it moves through oral traditions and enters the experiential worlds of communities that have historically occupied marginal positions within literary and cultural archives. The persistence of Sita within these traditions is particularly significant because, as Madhu Kishwar observes, “The Sita image indeed lends itself to diverse appeals which is perhaps why it has continued to hold sway over the minds of the people of India over the centuries” (20). It is precisely this capacity for multiple appeals that enables Sita to move beyond the confines of the canonical text and become available for reinterpretation within women's everyday lives.

The figure of Sita is particularly productive because her conventional association with feminine chastity, endurance, and devotion provides her with enormous cultural legitimacy. Yet this very figure is repeatedly transformed in Bhojpuri women's songs. She is made to speak in a different register and about different concerns. The songs do not discard the culturally familiar Sita; rather, they appropriate her authority and place it in the service of women's experiences.

In the marriage song, Sita is not simply a bride awaiting selection. She tells her father where to go, whom to approach, and whom to choose. The *svayamvar* motif is thereby converted into a culturally familiar language of female preference. In the pregnancy song, Sita's craving for Rohu fish brings the mythological heroine into the everyday material world of Bhojpuri women. Her desire becomes legitimate enough to command Rama's attention and action. In the abandonment songs, the transformation becomes more radical. Sita judges Ram's conduct, refuses to return to Ayodhya, and chooses either to enter the earth or to embrace asceticism rather than resume a relationship marked by betrayal.

This final transformation resonates particularly strongly with Kishwar's observation that popular imagination does not necessarily regard Sita's rejection of Rama as an act of defeat. On the contrary, "His rejection of Sita is almost universally condemned while her rejection of him is held up as an example of supreme dignity. By that act she emerges triumphant and supreme; she leaves a permanent stigma on Rama's name" (Kishwar 23). The Bhojpuri songs similarly reverse the conventional hierarchy of victim and moral authority. Sita's abandonment does not permanently define her as an abandoned woman; instead, her response to abandonment becomes the source of her moral authority. The woman who has been rejected acquires the power to judge the man who rejected her.

The songs therefore do not offer one coherent model of emancipation. Their significance lies in their plurality. Sita's agency appears as choice, desire, judgement, memory, and refusal. Sometimes she negotiates with patriarchal structures; sometimes she works through them; and sometimes she rejects the terms they impose upon her. This complexity makes a contextual understanding of agency indispensable. To define agency exclusively as overt resistance would obscure the significance of Sita's earlier acts of choosing and desiring. Conversely, to interpret her participation in marriage and family as evidence of submission would erase the ways in which she exercises authority within those relationships. The songs instead reveal agency as relational and situated.

The most significant intervention made by these songs is therefore not that they create an entirely new Sita. They create multiple Sitas. The Sita who speaks through Bhojpuri women's folklore is simultaneously daughter, bride, wife, mother, abandoned woman, judge, and refuser. Her meanings shift according to the social and emotional context in which the song is performed.

The question, then, is not simply what the *Ramayana* says about women, but what women do with the *Ramayana*. Bhojpuri women take an inherited mythology and turn it into a vernacular archive of experience. They transform Sita from an ideal to be passively emulated into a persona through whom women can articulate desire, negotiate expectations, remember injury, evaluate male conduct, and refuse an unwanted return. Her rejection of Rama, as Kishwar demonstrates, can even become a source of dignity and moral triumph rather than a marker of feminine failure.

In this sense, the act of retelling itself becomes an act of agency. The myth survives, but its meanings do not remain fixed. Every performance creates another Sita, another Rama, and another relationship between them. What emerges from the Bhojpuri folk tradition is therefore not merely an alternative *Ramayana* but an alternative way of understanding women's relationship to myth: women do not simply inherit mythology; they inhabit it, negotiate it, and remake it.

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