



Chandrabati's *Ramayana*: Subverting Patriarchal Interpretation of the *Ramayana* by Bengal's First Woman Poet

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Abstract

India has a long history of epic literature that people still love today. *The Ramayana* by Sage Valmiki is one of the country's national epics. It shows the ancient and diverse nature of Indian culture. For hundreds of years, people across India have also shared this story through folk songs and oral traditions. The story is not just one single version; it has many different forms. In most versions, Rama is seen as the perfect king and husband. Sita is portrayed as the perfect wife who is virtuous and obedient. In these traditional stories, Sita's character is often used to support patriarchal ideas. However, their stories left out certain details. These gaps allowed later authors to ask questions and create new versions of the epic. Some folk songs and oral stories change this narrative also. For example, Chandrabati was a 16th-century poet and the first woman to write in Bengali. She wrote a version of *the Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. While her contemporary, Aatukuri Molla, wrote a traditional version in Telugu, Chandrabati chose a different path. She used a 'woman's language' to challenge how women were treated poorly in traditional versions. Her story gave a voice to female emotions that were usually ignored. She rewrote the epic through a feminine lens. She added new scenes and changed others to focus on Sita's life from birth to death. Because of this, her work is often called a 'Sitayana' - the journey of Sita instead of a *Ramayana*. The objective of this article manifold; first intends to explore how Chandrabati's version portrays Sita as a woman marginalized and rejected by an androcentric society. Second, delve into how Chandrabati expresses the pain and sadness of women, especially Sita. Finally, the article examines how female authors and female audiences have helped reshape the content and style of *the Ramayana*.

Keywords: *Ramayana*, Chandrabati, Sita, Bengal, Gender, Interpretation.

Introduction

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita is seen as a goddess and the perfect wife, while Rama is the ideal man with god-like qualities. Later versions, like Kamban's, went further by portraying Rama as a divine being whose actions were beyond question. By reimagining the ancient epic through a specifically feminine discourse, Chandrabati became the first woman to dismantle patriarchal biases. Her counter-narrative functions as reclamation of the female experience, articulating the emotional depths silenced by traditional male-centric storytelling. Chandrabati, however, focuses on their humanity rather than their divinity. Our knowledge of Chandrabati's life comes from a ballad titled *Chandrabati*, written by Nayan Chand Ghosh about a hundred years after her death. The poem focuses more on Chandrabati's personal tragedies than on her literary work. It tells a story defined by love, betrayal, duty, devotion, and death. Chandrabati was born around 1550 in Patuyari village, located near the Fulesshori River in Kishoreganj in present-day Bangladesh. She did not grow up in royal courts or with exuberant patrons. Instead, her world was filled with folk songs, river life, local rituals, and oral traditions. Her father, Dwij Banshidass Bhattacharya, was a prolific writer who composed the Manasa's ballads - called *the Manasa Mangal*. In her essay, "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla", Nabaneeta Dev Sen explicitly brings out her despondency in how Chandrabati survived in the memories of the common people in Bangladesh as a historic character, not for her *Ramayana* but for her personal life: "Although her Ramayana is no longer read or even known, Chandrabati herself is all remembered fairly well for her tragic love with Jayananda. Even after 400 years, the love story, as told by Nayan Chand Ghose, holds our interest, like the story of Tristan and Isolde, or Laila and Majnu. Chandrabati, a historic character, has thus turned into a legend and lives on in the ballads herself. But in these ballads, Chandrabati the poet and the writer of

the Ramayana is hardly given any importance, it is simply the sad tale of a young woman, and her lost love" (p.168).

This story, told in fourteen parts, follows the tragic love of Chandrabati and Jayananda. Childhood friends Chandrabati and Jayananda fall in love while picking flowers. Jayananda writes her a love letter on a flower petal, and she secretly returns his feelings. Chandrabati's father, the poet Banshidass, seeks a match for her. Jayananda's family proposes marriage, and the wedding is set. Chandrabati is overjoyed. Jayananda sees a woman named Asmani and falls for her, writing her a love letter. When Asmani discovers he is marrying another, she shows her father the letter. Her father forces Jayananda to convert to Islam and marry Asmani. The wedding preparations are ruined when the news of Jayananda's betrayal reaches Chandrabati's family. Devastated, Chandrabati refuses to marry anyone else. Her father builds her a temple to worship Lord Shiva and write the *Ramayana*. Years pass, and a repentant Jayananda writes to Chandrabati begging to see her before he ends his life. She refuses to see him. Finally, Jayananda goes to her temple door, but she does not answer. After he leaves, she finds his farewell note on the door. She goes to the river to purify the temple, only to find Jayananda's body floating in the water. This prompted her to draw parallels between her's and Sita's plight. Her personal pain and her protagonist's sorrow eventually merged, making her own life synonymous with the tragedy of Sita. Nabaneeta Dev Sen rightly articulates, "Sita, then, offers a voice to the silenced women of the subcontinent. Through her, women express fears and sorrows, their hopes and wishes." (*When Women Retell the Ramayan*, p. 26) Thus, make her the first woman poet in the Bangla language to present a retelling of the Rama story from the point of view of Sita.

Chandrabati's Ramayan: A woman's retelling of the Sita-tale as her own

Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is told from Sita's perspective to highlight her personal tragedies. Unlike other writers of her time, she did not seek the support of kings or nobles. The work is a Pala Gaan, a traditional folk ballad genre originating from the eastern districts of Bengal (now Bangladesh). While folk narratives typically follow the core plot of the *Ramayana* but alter the finer details, Chandrabati's version is unique for its scale. She elevated the genre beyond simple domestic storytelling, expanding it into a universal tragedy that mirrors the collective suffering and moral decay of an entire society. Traditional critics, rooted in patriarchy, struggled to accept a woman-centered *Ramayana* that prioritized secular, human emotions over martial glory and jingoistic nationalism. Nabaneeta Dev Sen assures that, "In fact, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* was never even properly read for what it actually was: the story of Sita's journey from birth to death. Instead of praising Ram, Chandrabati often intrudes into the narrative to comment on Rama's foolishness, to advise and guide him and to accuse him of the devastation that awaits Ayodhya. It is clearly not a devotional text, but a secular one; the story is presented as a plain human drama and not as a divine mystery." (*Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla*, p. 171) The story written by women and articulated by women to an audience comprising women is human drama and not divine mystery. She began her songs with "*Suno Sakhijana*" (listen, my friends) instead of the traditional "*Suno Sabhajana*" (listen, courtiers) or '*Shuno Sarbajana*' (listen one and all) as the regular formulae goes. She wrote for ordinary people who saw their own struggles reflected in her stories. Dev Sen, in her essay, "Lady Sings the Blues: When Women retell the *Ramayana*", refers to the revisionist approach commonly observed in the appropriation of the *Ramayana* done by the rural women in India. She opines, "Rural women do not care for the court nor the critic. What they

care for is something with which they can identify themselves. Therefore, Sita and her suffering becomes an inseparable part of their existence. They sing songs on Sita, not on Ram. They are not interested in Ram as an ideal man, nor as a valorous warrior or a just king. The interest of rural female folk tradition lies in episodes like, Sita's birth, her marriage, her love life with Ram, her abduction, her childbirth, and most importantly her abandonment, injustice and suffering, hence the Balakanda and Uttarakanda of *Ramayan* are favourites" (Dev Sen, p.18-19). She has not followed Valmiki's pattern in so far as the structural pattern and narrative tone are concerned; her story can be considered to be an abridgement of the epic, divided into three books. Unlike Valmiki's *Ramayana* which starts with Rama's birth, *Chandrabati's Ramayan* breaks the accepted pattern by beginning the epic with Sita's birth story.

Chandrabati herself is the narrator of Book I. Lanka is a golden city of eternal beauty, built by the divine architect Vishwakarma. Its king, Ravana, is an invincible ruler protected by a boon of immortality. After plundering heaven and enslaving the gods, he turned his cruelty toward earthly sages. He famously collected a vial of the ascetics' blood, claiming it was poison. Ravana's neglected wife, Queen Mandodari, drank the 'poison' to end her life but miraculously became pregnant with an egg. An astrologer warned that the child within would destroy Lanka. To save the baby from Ravana's demons, Mandodari set the egg adrift in a golden casket. A poor, honest fisherman named Madhab and his wife Sata found the casket. Their poverty vanished instantly as the 'Goddess Lakshmi' blessed their home. Following a divine dream, Sata delivered the egg to King Janaka. When it hatched, a beautiful girl was born and named Sita in honor of Sata. "Chandrabati says this girl will be worshipped throughout the world." (Dev Sen, p. 36) Chandrabati allocates only two brief, concluding sections to the births of Rama and

his siblings. This includes their sister, the malevolent Kukuya, whose name significantly doubles the Bengali and Sanskrit prefix for 'evil' (*ku*), linguistically marking her as doubly wicked. In Ayodhya, King Dasharatha received a divine fruit to end his childlessness. His three queens shared the fruit, but the jealous Kaikeyi demanded the fruit's seed as well. This led to the birth of four brothers: Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Shatrughna. However, because Kaikeyi ate the seed, she also gave birth to a daughter named Kukuya, an ill-omened child whose arrival brought darkness to the land. Sita's origin is tied to Ravana's sins, which differs from Valmiki's *Ramayana*. In Valmiki's version, she is linked to civilization because she was found while plowing the earth.

In the next section, Book II, Sita herself is now the narrator. The Great War has ended, and Rama and Sita have returned to Ayodhya as King and Queen. While sitting with her friends, Sita looks back on her life, describing it as a story of fate where sorrow followed her like a shadow through Sita's 'Baromasi' - the song of twelve months, relating the incidents of one's life to the seasonal changes. Sita recalls her mysterious birth - found in an egg by a queen - and her youth in Mithila. Her father vowed to marry her only to the man who could break Shiva's mighty bow. After seeing Rama in a dream, he arrived the next day, shattered the bow and they were wed. Their happiness was cut short by the schemes of Manthara, which forced them into exile. Despite the hardships of the wild, Sita found peace in a simple forest hut, finding joy in serving Rama and befriending the animals. This peace shattered when she spotted a golden deer and begged Rama to catch it. A trap was set - Rama chased the deer, and a demon's cry lured Lakshmana away. Left alone, Sita was approached by Ravana disguised as a holy beggar. When she stepped out to offer food, he abducted her and flew to Lanka. Sita endured a year of misery in the Ashoka garden, kept alive only by her devotion. She tracks her journey through the seasons - She hears of Hanuman's

arrival and receives Rama's ring. She dreams of Rama praying for strength and the monkeys building a miraculous stone bridge across the sea. After months of war drums and demon deaths, Rama's arrows finally kill Ravana. Sita concludes her 'Song of Twelve Months,' a tale of profound suffering that eventually led her back to her Lord's side: "...Sita's Song of Twelve Months is a song of suffering,/ A tale of sorrows round the year, Chandrabati sings." (Dev Sen, p. 59) Chandrabati crafts a distinctively 'feminine' text, lingering on experiences often ignored by male poets - such as a pregnant woman's craving for burnt clay or the specific desolation of being neglected. She grounds the epic in the local reality of her time, incorporating 'women speak,' the worship of local goddesses, and the formulaic language of *Bratakatha* (ritual storytelling). While Sita remains the character bound by dominant social codes, Chandrabati acts as the dissenting outsider. She frequently intrudes into the narrative to directly address her characters, using these interruptions, along with strategic silences and meticulous detailing, to puncture the patriarchal ideology of her era. Notably, she does not blame Sita for her conformity; instead, she critiques the system that demands it.

While Valmiki frames Sita's insistence on joining Rama's exile as a testament to her devotion, the Bengali poet Chandrabati offers a more subversive critique. Chandrabati suggests Sita's choice was driven by a patriarchal society that stripped virtue from women living apart from their husbands. This version highlights the double standards of *Dharma* - while Sita and Rama are bound by marital duty, Lakshmana abandons his wife, Urmila, to serve his brother without facing the same moral scrutiny. Interestingly, Chandrabati portrays Urmila - marginalized in Valmiki's epic - as a figure who advises Sita toward liberation rather than just silent penance. Ultimately, the forest served as a paradoxical sanctuary, offering Sita a brief escape from the rigid social expectations of the court. Chandrabati's retelling strips the

Ramayana of its traditional heroism, reframing Sita's abduction as a metaphor for the daily confinement of rural women. She argues that Rama's war was not an act of love, but a calculated move to reclaim his personal honor, highlighting a patriarchal system where a man's status depends on his control over 'his' women. In this version, Sita is the true protagonist and the catalyst for Ravana's destruction. Chandrabati celebrates women as the real heroes of the epic, presenting Ravana's downfall as a rare instance of divine justice where a man is finally punished for the systemic mistreatment of women.

In Book III, once again Chandrabati returns as the narrator but a male character finds his way in too, Lakshmana. During a happy springtime in Ayodhya, Rama and Sita played a game of dice in their palace. They made a playful bet - if Sita won, she would take Rama's ring; if she lost, she would give him an embrace. Sita won the first round and claimed the ring, but when she lost the second, she fulfilled the bet. Rama then offered her a boon, and Sita asked to return to the forest hermitage to visit her old friends and the river. Rama promised she would go the next day with Lakshmana, unaware that fate was turning against them. While Sita rested, her sister-in-law, Kukuya, arrived. Kukuya was a malicious woman born from a bitter seed, raised by the wicked Manthara, and known for destroying the happiness of others. She pressured a reluctant Sita to draw a picture of the demon Ravana. Sita eventually drew his shadow on a palm-leaf fan and fell into a deep sleep. Kukuya immediately placed the drawing on Sita's chest to make it look like an act of devotion. Kukuya then went to Rama and poisoned his mind with lies. She claimed Sita was unfaithful and secretly loved Ravana. She led Rama to the bedroom, where he saw the drawing on the sleeping Sita's breast. Devastated and enraged, Rama felt his heart shatter. Chandrabati critiques Rama for his madness in listening to gossip, noting that Kukuya's fire would soon lead to the

destruction of both the couple's happiness and the entire kingdom of Ayodhya: "...Paying heed to others' words leads to your own destruction./ Chandrabati says, poor Ram, you have totally lost your mind." (Dev Sen, p. 70)

This version of *Chandrabati's Ramayan* is based on the *Maimansingha Geetika* edited by Dinesh Chandra Sen. Originally collected by Chandramohan Dey in 1916, the narrative likely ended there because it was meant to be a women's song. Dinesh Chandra Sen considered the *Ramayana* as Chandrabati's worst piece and it was judged as incomplete and of no merit by Sukumar Sen. Brought into critical spotlight by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, it is now considered as the first feminist text in its textualisation of Rama narrative from Sita's viewpoint and rejection of Rama's normative masculinity. However, a later version found in Kshitish Chandra Moulik's edition extends the story. In this version, the tone shifts significantly, becoming more male-focused and warlike. This change likely occurred because male performers and *Gayens* (medieval village bards) adapted the epic to be sung in public marketplaces.

As Rama ordered Sita's banishment, the speaker pleaded with the natural world - the river, sun, and wind - to mourn her innocence and hide her suffering. Rama, tormented by guilt and convinced his home was 'on fire' due to the curses of virtuous women, commanded a heartbroken Lakshmana to abandon the pregnant Sita at Valmiki's hermitage. Unaware of the betrayal, Sita awoke from troubling dreams and happily boarded the chariot, believing she was going on a simple visit. Despite witnessing many evil omens on the journey, she did not learn the truth until they reached the forest. Lakshmana, weeping, confessed that Rama had exiled her. Sita accepted her fate without bitterness, blaming only her own 'drifting' destiny, and sent her respectful greetings to the husband who had rejected her. The sage Valmiki welcomed Sita as a daughter, providing her a peaceful sanctuary where even wild animals lived in harmony. In

time, Sita gave birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusha. The priest Vashishtha performed their birth rites but kept their existence a secret from Rama. Meanwhile, Ayodhya fell into ruin. The land became barren and the people sinful. Vashishtha advised Rama to perform a great sacrifice - *Ashwamedha yajna* to restore the kingdom, but noted it required a Queen. He revealed that Sita was alive with Rama's sons. Rama agreed to bring them back, but only on the condition that Sita prove her purity through a public trial by fire. Before the royal summons arrived, Hanuman visited the hermitage. He was playfully captured by Lava and Kusha, who did not recognize the great hero. After Sita intervened and explained their bond, Hanuman realized the boys carried Rama's spirit. Lakshmana soon arrived to bring the family to Ayodhya. In the royal court, Rama addressed Sita coldly, demanding a test of her chastity. Sita, weary of a life defined by pain, agreed to the trial. She declared her innocence but warned that she would never return to him. When the wicked Kukuya tried to light the fire and accidentally set herself ablaze, Sita's first act was to save her enemy, proving her divine kindness. Despite this, Rama lit the pyre himself. As Sita stepped into the flames, a miracle occurred - the earth split open, and the goddess Vasumati appeared. Rejecting the world that had mistreated her daughter, the goddess took Sita into her lap and vanished into the earth forever. Mandakranta Bose, in *A Woman's Ramayana*, has aptly stated that: "Chandrabati's Sita has no such queenly temper. Rather, she fits the image of her cultivated in popular belief as an infinitely submissive wife. By foregrounding her virtuous resignation, Chandrabati so glaringly spotlights Sita's victimhood that is seen against Rama's tyranny and shows in the darkest belief." (p. 32) Rama, his sons, and Hanuman were left in a state of inconsolable grief. Chandrabati concludes that while the characters wept, these sorrows were the inevitable fruits of karma and fate.

Chandrabati glorifies Sita's suffering and devotion, framing her limitless sacrifices as symbols of moral perfection. However, this canonization comes at a cost - Sita is silenced exactly when she should be heard. She is presented not as a woman with a voice, but as an archetype of the 'ideal' submissive female, tailor-made to fit a patriarchal social structure. Nabaneeta Dev Sen asserts - "It is time to judge Chandrabati's Ramayana for what it is - a long poem composed in the oral tradition, drawing heavily on available rural women's songs on Sita. She strung the songs together, added her own outraged comments on Rama, and gave them a single corporate identity under the name "Ramayana". In one way however, Chandrabati did accommodate the dominant ideology in her poem: in the figure of her main character and narrator Sita. Sita never rebels. In Chandrabati's text we hear two voices - one rebellious and sharp, which is her own, and the other, conventional and soothing, the voice of Sita." (Rewriting the Ramayana, p. 176-177) She shows how Sita's life was filled with earthly suffering - she was exiled, kidnapped, and eventually rejected by a husband who did not trust her. For Chandrabati, being a goddess did not protect Sita from the hardships of living in a world ruled by men. She points out a harsh reality- while society may compare women to goddesses in theory, in practice; they have very little power and face many social barriers. In Chandrabati's incomplete version, Rama and Sita are simply human beings trying to survive the difficult circumstances life has thrown at them.

Conclusion

In traditional epics, the struggle between good and evil is a masculine conflict. In *Chandrabati Ramayana* also, there is this war of good and evil - but both are represented by women, Lakshmi and Alakshmi, Sita and Kukuya. By framing the epic through these feminine archetypes, Chandrabati transforms a martial saga into a profound exploration of female agency and societal tragedy. The *Chandrabati's*

Ramayana holds significant cultural value by offering a woman-centric perspective that allows us to interpret religion through an alternative lens. Rather than focusing on Rama's military achievements or royal status, this narrative prioritizes the emotional depth of Sita's life and her fleeting moments of happiness. We encounter an innocent, grief-stricken Sita whose suffering highlights the profound vulnerability of women within a patriarchal society. Through this lens, the text exposes the helplessness of women whose morality is constantly scrutinized by male authorities who possess the power to sentence and punish. This relentless harshness ultimately shatters a woman's peace and stability. Chandrabati portrays a deeply human, pregnant Sita who longs for her husband's affection while grappling with a lifelong sense of displacement due to her unknown parentage. Ultimately, while Valmiki's traditional epic often leaves Sita overshadowed by Rama, Chandrabati's version pulls her from the margins. By centering her experiences and her relationships with her female companions, the narrative places Sita firmly at the heart of the story. Bose and Bose enunciate, "But Chandrabati's work further distinguishes itself by going beyond the usual domestic or local ambit of folk narratives to venture upon the epic theme of the catastrophe that overtakes an entire people. Even though it side-lines battles, the typical subject of the epics, and turns away from Rama, the conventional hero of the *Ramayana*, to his wronged wife Sita and centralizes her agony, it no less urgently concerns itself with the public doom that falls upon Lanka, where she is incarcerated, and upon Ayodhya, of which she is the queen. Chandrabati's poem is indeed about Sita, but it is no less about her world" (Bose and Bose, p.1)

After Sita's return from Lanka, the four important events in Sita's life, namely - pregnancy, betrayal and exile, childbirth, voluntary death or entry into mother Earth occur without the husband's support. These

events and her voluntary death are linked to the life of all women. Towards the end of her essay, "Rewriting the *Ramayana* - Chandrabati and Molla", Dev Sen writes, "Even to this day Sita provides a voice to our silent, suffering women. We are sisters in sorrow, be it in India or in Bangladesh" (Dev Sen 177). For rural women in Bengal and Bangladesh, Rama is neither a hero nor a god; he is a symbol of the structural injustice they face daily. These women identify with Sita's suffering - her exile, abduction, and ultimate abandonment - rather than the 'glory of the throne'. Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes: "... If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice". (*When Women Retell the Ramayana*, p. 19) By centering Sita's perspective, Chandrabati's version becomes a powerful social critique. She uses the epic to label patriarchal expectations as abhorrent, providing a medium - through song and oral tradition - for women to safely express discontent and name their oppressors. Ultimately, Chandrabati upholds Sita as a model of resilience while flatly rejecting Rama as an ideal husband. To call this text the *Ramayana* is a misnomer: "Chandrabati's *Ramayana* is, in fact, an oral *Sitayana*" (Sen, *Rewriting the Ramayana*, p.175) - the journey of Sita. Rama is displaced from the center as the narrative shifts to map the complete biological and emotional life cycle of a woman - from birth and marriage to the intimate details of pregnancy, maternal longing, and death.

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