

## **‘A Woman’s Retelling of the Rama-Tale: Narrative Strategies Employed In the Chandrabati Ramayana’**

**By Nabaneeta Deb Sen**

**(Q) Who was Chandrabati? How is her ‘Ramayana’ different from that of Valmiki’s?**

**(A)** Born in 1550 to Dij-Banshidas Bhattacharya and Shulochona Das Bhattacharya in the village of Patuyari on the banks of the Fulesshori River in Kishoreganj, now in Bangladesh, Chandrabati is the first ever woman to re-write the 'Ramayana'.

Chandrabati wrote during an age when it was unthinkable for a woman to write and render religious texts in her own way. It was something revolutionary. What took her to writing was disillusionment in love: She took to writing which helped her survive her grief. She fell in love with her childhood friend, whom she dreamt of marrying. However, her love broke her heart and as a result of which she decided to never marry. Subsequently, she devoted her life in the devotion of Lord Shiva. In a dramatic twist of events, even though her childhood love returned to her repenting, she refused to accept him. Now rejected and aggrieved, he committed suicide by jumping into the River Fulesshori. Chandrabati also ended her life by drowning in the same river. She died in around 1600 when she was about fifty.

What is so important about Chandrabati is the rich legacy of an intellectual experience that we have from a woman. We see in her for ourselves how a woman thought what Sita felt, and how the social and emotional world would be if a woman became its central subject.

Firstly, through her Ramayana, Chandrabati gives us the woman’s point of view. She has lent fresh perspectives on Ramayana. Here, Sita is of the foremost importance. While Valmiki’s Ramayana

begins with janmalila, Chandrabati departs from this tradition to begin her epic by devoting its first six sections to describing Sita's birth. Sita is born as an incarnation of Goddess Laxmi. She comes into this world to bring Ravana's end. She, not Rama, therefore is the protagonist in Chandrabati's 'Ramayana'. In Valmiki, Sita is found abandoned in the fields by Raja Janak. However, in Chandrabati, Sita is Mandodari's offspring, who has no father.

Chandrabati's 'Ramayana', instead of telling us about the route of Rama, it tells us about the life's journey of a woman; a complete biological life-cycle, her birth, her marriage, her pregnancy, childbirth, maturity and death. It is a woman's text, at least for the detailing of intimate feminine experiences, like pregnancy, childbirth through the description of Mandodari's description, maternal feelings, the woman's desolation and desperation at being neglected, worship of local goddesses, and the performance of religious rituals in the style of bratakatha.

We find Chandrabati to be silent about Rama's valour, silent about his goodness, silent about his battle skills, silent about his wisdom. The only aspect of Rama she asserts here is he as a lover. But he turns out to be a traitor in love, banishing his pregnant wife unjustly. Unlike in Valmiki's 'Ramayana', here in Chandrabati's, we find Rama to be a poor husband, a poor king, a poor brother who bullies his loyal brother into acting against his own conscience, a poor father who does not carry out his parental responsibilities. Here, we also find him to be a jealous husband, who sends Sita into exile out of his jealousy. Chandrabati has discovered Rama as someone who is far from the balanced, moderate, sthitadhi we have known him to be, before.

Chandrabati's 'Ramayana' is a 'Ramayana' with a difference. It is incontrovertibly about Sita; her life, her problems and her personal experiences. Rama, traditionally, is a character in the margins. Chandrabati's 'Ramayana' is a 'Sitayana' that helps us rediscover the journey of Sita's life. To call it Ramayana, therefore, is misleading. Therefore, this Ramayana is a heroic epic with a difference. Traditionally, heroism translates into masculine valour and a fight between the forces of good and evil

which are generally violent. However, here evil and good are represented by inner conflict, as ethical and moral forces. There are no visible weapons, nor any signs of traditional warfare. Chandrabati Ramayana can safely be called a secular text since Rama's superhuman abilities and acts are wanting here.

Chandrabati Ramayana provides us with an alternative woman-centric point of view to understand, analyze and interpret religion. In this Ramayana we meet an anguished and grief-stricken Sita who is made to suffer despite being innocent. Here, the main focus is not on Rama's martial prowess or his kingly attributes but the emotional aspects of Sita's life and her very limited solace. We are made to feel the helplessness of women who are victimized as Sita herself is. Through Chandrabati, we re-visit a vulnerable Sita who yearns only to be pampered by her husband and who remains clueless throughout about her real parentage. Unlike in Valmiki's 'Ramayana' where Sita is eclipsed by her husband, Lord Rama, Sita in Chandrabati's 'Ramayana' comes out of the margins to share the centre stage with her friends and audience.