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Revealing Anxieties and Insecurities of Different Characters of the *Ramayana*: A Subversive Reading of the Telegu Folk Song "Lakshmana's Laugh"

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Abstract

The existence of countless versions of the *Ramayana* reflects its massive cultural influence among the general population as well as its tradition of plurality, which has not only enriched mainstream literature, but also added valuable pearls to the folk tradition of the subcontinent and beyond. The folklores humanise the gods and the so-called grand characters of authoritative versions, concentrate on what was missed out in popular narratives, bring to light different aspects of women's issues, question Rama's values, sympathise with Sita's plight and narrate tales related to her wedding, her relationship with Kaushalya, her bittersweet banters with her sister-in-law, and also prioritise the previously ignored characters like Shambuka, Shanta, Urmila, Surpanakha, delineating interesting tales such as the story of Urmila's sleep, Surpanakha's evil ploy for sending Sita to lifelong banishment and so on. Oral songs relating several scattered but significant incidents of the *Ramayana* are an intrinsic part of the Telegu culture. One such song is "Lakshmana's Laugh", which, under the pretext of Lakshmana's sudden bursting into laughter, foregrounds the inner conflicts and insecurities of the so-called virtuous figures in mainstream versions, including gods. The sub-themes of this song include Rama's characterization as a terrible brother, Urmila's suppressed sexuality and Lakshmana's indifference to his wife even after a prolonged separation. This paper uses "Lakshmana's Laugh" as the primary source and intends to make a comprehensive analysis of the core theme and sub-themes of the song to point out how the folk narrators, though not in a radical manner, have subverted the traditional mythmakers who have put these characters (e.g., Shiva, Rama, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Bharata) on a pedestal, suggesting that no one is perfect and how these characters, though aware of their follies and limitations, try their best to conceal them.

Keywords: The *Ramayana*, Folk song, Subversion, Insecurity.

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The *Ramayana*, which is known for its tradition of plurality, has been remoulded and recreated by tellers and re-tellers down the ages. Multiple Sanskrit, regional and folk versions of the epic are known to exist, which is evidence of its massive socio-cultural impact among the masses. This has enhanced both mainstream literature and the folk traditions of the subcontinent and beyond. "The Ramayana literature is a great banyan tree that is constantly growing. It has deep roots and many branches" (Tharuvana xx). Unlike the grand narratives that start with "Bala Kanda" and end with "Uttara Kanda", these folklores focus on specific incidents and delineate them from fresh perspectives; sometimes the folk narrators even create imaginative situations for revealing new shades of already known or not-so-famous characters without tampering with the basic storyline of the epic. To quote from "One Text, Multiple Oral Narratives":

> In the reciprocity between civilization and culture, we see that while civilization depends on written texts, culture spreads through oral traditions. The written texts of the epics are the ideological products of civilisations, constructed by individuals with extraordinarily gifted minds. However, in oral traditions, the authorship rests with community spirit and tradition. Since the stories are not written down and are retained in memory alone, they are constantly reconstructed and revived. They are built and re-built based on the exigencies of time and space, as well as race and individuals. As opposed to the monologicity of a written text, they are polyphonic, with constantly changing polarities. The staticity of the written epic is continually demolished by oral traditions. (Nujum xiii-xiv)

The folk versions of the *Ramayana*, which capture the local traditions and belief systems of the communities from which these narratives emerged, are a key area of academic study and research, as the tellers and re-tellers of these songs tend to locate the gaps in mainstream *Ramayana*s, question those gaps, reconstruct the previously ignored characters, criticize patriarchal doctrines, depict local customs and rituals, and throw light on certain aspects of the struggle and lifestyle of their communities through the medium of these folklores. As Tharuvana posits: "All communities with oral traditions express their beliefs and practices mostly through songs. These songs give us useful insights into their existence, socio-anthropological identities and consciousness" (77).

Numerous tribal communities and groups of village women have collected materials from the epic and subverted them in their oral renditions. Through this process, they have foregrounded the ambivalent shades of the so-called monumental characters of grand narratives and thus offered a critical interrogation of the dominant ideologies propagated by the populist narrators of the traditional versions of the *Ramayana*. Folk songs, as opposed to their written counterparts, are not static, as they are products of various communities, and therefore, it is not unnatural if a folk song is interpreted differently when sung by

different individuals. In this context, the following excerpt from "Ramayana Tales in the Folk songs of Wayanad" can be quoted:

> Orally transmitted or inherited folk songs are not the creations of any particular individual; rather, they originate in the collective consciousness of communities. Therefore, additions and deletions are normal when songs are handed down from generation to generation. Folklore is a constantly evolving thing. Unlike the written tradition, orally transmitted songs are continuously revised and brought to life. (Tharuvana 77)

Amid the myriad interpretations of folklore stemming from the *Ramayana*, the ballads rendered by women hold a special mention. While they manifest in an ostensibly lucid and unembellished manner, beneath their surface lies a potent reservoir of subversive thoughts. Such songs, though draped in the garb of simplicity, often conceal layers of hidden meanings. Herein, in this intricate dance of word and melody, lies a symbiosis of ancient tradition and subtle defiance, showcasing the layered profundity and resilient spirit of women across generations. As Rao argues:

> The underlying meanings reveal an atmosphere of subdued tensions, hidden sexuality, and frustrated emotions. On occasion, even the gentle words acquire the sharpness of darts, hitting their targets with precise aim. Under the pretext of family members teasing each other, every character is lampooned. No one's character is untainted; no person loves another unconditionally. ("A Ramayana of their Own" 129)

These songs bring to light different aspects of women's issues. In her article "When Women Retell the *Ramayan*", Nabaneeta Dev Sen has depicted a number of women's songs that deal with various facets of Sita's life, such as her "birth, her wedding (with a touch of pre-marital romance), her abduction, pregnancy, abandonment, and childbearing" (19). Instead of taking interest in Rama's greatness, warfare, bloodshed, and state politics, these lyrical compositions elegantly unfurl the myriad dimensions of a woman's universe. The female narrators tell tales of Sita's close connection with nature, her *Swayamvar*, the problems she faced as a child bride, her *Kanyadaan,* her relationship with her mother-in-law, her sacrifices for her husband, her *Agnipariksha,* and her life as a single mother, reflecting her tragic life in a way as if they are sisters in sorrow. V. R. Rao, an eminent *Ramayana* scholar, has translated several Telegu women's songs into English. In one such folklore, titled "The Song of Urmila's Separation", the characters of Urmila and Shanta are gracefully elevated, becoming the focal luminaries of the narrative. Urmila's long slumber and her psychological state in Lakshmana's absence, Sita's bittersweet banters with her sister-in-law Shanta, the lack of privacy for women in a joint family setup—such sensitive issues have been highlighted in this song. In his paper "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telegu", V. R. Rao has made a comprehensive analysis of several folk songs where previously marginalised

characters like Urmila, Kaushalya, Surpanakha, Shanta, and others have been given prominence. Stories like Surpanakha's evil ploy for sending Sita to lifelong banishment, Rama's fight with Sita and Kaushalya's intervention, Urmila's attempt to protect Sita from public scrutiny etc have been narrated in these songs. However, though subversive in nature, these songs have an innocently lovely, cosy tone; there is neither coarse language nor hostile criticism of patriarchal policies. Rao aptly posits:

> The *Ramayana* songs also make a statement against the public *Ramayana*s, the bhakti *Ramayana*s, which glorify the accepted values of a male-dominated world. In the songs, it is the minor or lowly characters who come out as winners. Urmila, Laksmana, Lava and Kusa, Santa, and even Surpanakha have a chance to take their revenge. (129-30)

As already discussed, women's songs relating several scattered but significant incidents of the *Ramayana* are an intrinsic part of the folk culture of the subcontinent. One such song "Lakshmana's Laugh" which originated in Telegu women's folklore, has been selected for the study. According to the renowned mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, "The story of Lakshmana laughing comes from the Telegu *Ramayana* of Buddha Reddy and is popular in Telegu folklore and folk songs" (*Sita* 265). This song has been orally transmitted among several South Indian communities since ages, and in 1955, V. R. Rao translated the song in English and published it under the title "Lakshmana's Laugh", which has been used as a primary source in this paper. Also, certain references have been taken from the Bengali story "Lakkhaner Haasi" by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, which is a fusion of the aforementioned folk song along with the author's imagination. This song, under the pretext of Lakshmana's sudden bursting into laughter, foregrounds the inner conflicts and insecurities of the so-called virtuous figures in mainstream versions, including gods. "Everyone in the court has some secret action of which to be ashamed, and Lakshmanaa's laugh brings their insecurities to the surface. One after the other, they imagine that Lakshmana is laughing at them" (Rao, "Lakshmanaa's Laugh," 221). The song reflects that no character is above criticism, not even Rama, who, for a moment, attempts to murder his brother and, after coming back to his senses, feels remorse for his action. Also, though this song is not directly based on women's issues and no character is allotted much space here, a glimpse of Urmila reveals her suppressed sexuality and Lakshmana's indifference to her desires. This paper attempts to make a comprehensive analysis of the core theme and sub-themes of the song and intends to point out how the so-called great characters of mainstream *Ramayana* narratives (e.g., Shiva, Ramaa, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Bharata) are conscious of their limitations and how they are insecure about getting exposed in front of society.

The discussion begins with Lord Shiva. Shiva, the householder as well as the ascetic, is revered as the god who unifies a variety of contradictory aspects. In mainstream mythological tales, he is sketched as the divine, the three-eyed Hindu

deity, who is revered as *Adi-Yogi*. In a number of ancient narratives (e.g., the *Valmiki Ramayana*), it is described how he allowed Ganga to land on his hair when she dropped to earth, thus sparing humans and other species from the adverse consequences of her fall (Valmiki 1:88–89). Curiously, while these manuscripts remain reticent about an intimate bond between Shiva and Ganga, other scriptures like the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* depict her as Shiva's consort. Taking a cue from this, this ballad subtly deviates from Shiva's illustrious representations in mainstream mythology. Instead, it unveils a lesser-known vulnerability—Shiva's clandestine enchantment with Ganga. Here, Shiva is ashamed of how he is smitten with Ganga, who stealthily accompanies him to the festivity, ensconced within the labyrinthine recesses of his matted tresses.

In this folk song, Ganga—a figure often used as a symbol of purity in popular culture—is depicted in a different way. Given that *Devi* Parvati is worshipped as Shiva's lawfully wedded wife, the river deity grapples with profound sentiments of desolation and indignity upon discerning her secondary status in Shiva's life. In her Bengali reconstruction of this song, "Lakkhaner Haasi", Dev Sen brings out Ganga's state of mind in the following words: "Her crystal-clear water turned pale in sorrow, her flow became slow, and her melodious sound stopped" (translation mine 89).

While, in mainstream mythology, Vibhishana is revered for prioritizing *Dharma* over his family responsibilities, he is ridiculed in this song. Here, seeing Lakshmana bursting into laughter, he is consumed by a sense of ignominy, perceiving it as derision for his perceived betrayal of his elder sibling, Ravana. While Lakshmana abandoned his wife for fourteen years and embraced a life of poverty in a perilous forest for the sake of his brother Rama, Vibhishana left his brother at the hour of crisis. Not only that, while Lakshmana risked his life and fought against the demons to support his brother, Vibhishana revealed the secret of his brother's life to Rama and helped him kill Ravana. Also, Lakshmana treats his sister-in-law, Sita, as his mother, but Vibhishana has married Mandodari, the former wife of his elder brother. The hidden guilt consciousness of the demon king comes to the fore, as it becomes evident that he bears a profound sense of shame for both the destruction of his clan and his marriage with his sister-in-law.

The monkey king Sugriva feels equally remorseful for similar reasons. He, driven by the greed of political power, sought Rama's assistance and adopted immoral means for assassinating his elder brother. In addition to this, he harboured a secret passion for his sister-in-law, Tara, whom he married after Bali's death. Dev Sen writes: "Sugriva feels ashamed, as he believes Lakshmana considers him a power-hungry, characterless, lustful person, guilty of committing fratricide" (translation mine 90). Sugriva's nephew Angada, who joined Rama's team and fought against Ravana, assumes himself the potential target of Lakshmana, as he (Angada), despite knowing that Rama killed his father Bali in an unethical manner, extended his support towards him, and not only that, he has come to attend Rama's coronation and taken part in the celebration.

In "Lakshmana's Laugh", Rao makes Hanuman feel ashamed because of his defeat against Ravana's son, Indrajit. However, in "Lakkhaner Haasi", Nabaneeta Dev Sen provides entirely different reasons behind Hanuman's anxiety. She refers to the story relating to the *Vishalyakarani* medicine and argues that Hanuman thinks he is being laughed at because he could not recognise the medicine and carried the entire mountain on his back to bring Lakshmana back to life. In mainstream *Ramayana*s, it is mentioned how Hanuman was instructed by Jambhuvana to bring four types of herbs: *mritasanjivani*, *vishalyakarani, souvarnakarani,* and *sandhani* from the medicine mountain, which was situated between Mount Risabha and Mount Kailasa, when Lakshmana was seriously injured and was on the verge of death. Unable to identify these herbs, Hanuman brought the entire mountain to Lanka (Valmiki 3: 173-74). But Hanuman, like the rest, did not feel humiliated and laughed off the joke because, despite his ignorance of medicine, he did the work with good intention. Like Hanuman, Jambhuvana also feels annoyed as he thinks Lakshmanaa is ridiculing him for being overweight, but he does not take it seriously.

It is noteworthy to observe that, in Hindu religious practices, *Vahana*s—the celestial vehicles or mounts associated with deities—are not merely ancillary beings but revered figures themselves. Adishesha, the snake king and a devoted follower of Lord Vishnu, is one such *Vahana*. When he uncoils, time advances and the creation begins; conversely, when he coils back up, time halts (dolls of India). In this narrative, Adisesha, who served Lord Vishnu since the beginning of creation, feels ashamed because he has switched sides and now is serving Vishnu's rival Shiva.

In male-centric versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita is sketched as the calm and obedient daughter, the soft and submissive wife, the personification of sacrifice, and the epitome of purity and chastity. However, it is to be noted that the depiction of Sita in folk songs diverges from her portrayal in predominant narratives, wherein she is conceived as the quintessential paradigm for Indian women. In her essay "When Women Retell the Ramaayan", Nabaneeta Dev Sen rightly points out: "The male Sita myth, where she is a "devi" (deity), continues in the mainstream. In the women's retelling, Sita is no rebel; she is still the yielding, suffering wife, but she speaks of her sufferings, of injustice, of loneliness and sorrow" (19). In this context, it is worth highlighting that, in *Chandrabati's Ramayana*, which is a Bengali Sita-centric folk version of the epic, Sita is a helpless victim abandoned by her abusive husband. Such a representation of Sita's tribulations resonates profoundly, enabling common women to draw parallels between their own experiences and those of Sita. It is true that, unlike several folklores based on the *Ramayana*, in "Lakshmanaa's Laugh", Sita is not the centre of attraction, but she is not a mere reflection of her traditional counterparts as well.

Seeing Lakshmana burst into laughter, Sita blushes in this folk song, under the impression that his jest is borne from observing her seated on Rama's lap.

Moreover, it is mentioned in mainstream *Ramayana*s that, before her abduction, Sita had a misunderstanding with Lakshmana as he refused her order to go in search of Rama. Considering her brother-in-law a traitor, Sita abused him in this way: "O ignoble one! O one who lacks compassion! O cruel one! O worst of your lineage! I think that you love me and that is the reason you have spoken in this way" (Valmiki 2:94). This particular incident has not been described in detail in this ballad but has been slightly hinted at. Remembering her ill treatment of her innocent brother-in-law, Sita shudders in embarrassment, speculating that perhaps Lakshmana's faith in women has been tainted due to her actions. Furthermore, the fear that the conservative Aryan society is secretly gossiping about her for staying at Ravana's place for a long time worries Sita.

Rama has been portrayed in two slightly different ways in two different renderings of this folk song. In both cases, the narrators point out that Rama wishes to kill Lakshmana with his sword, as laughing without any reason is against the decorum of the palace and the guests might feel offended. When Rama comes to know the actual reason behind Lakshmana's laugh, he feels guilty. "Rama cried out in grief, thinking of his hasty action and wanting to kill himself to atone for his sin" (Rao 224). However, while Rao's Rama makes a grand bed for Lakshmana's sleep, massages his younger brother's feet, and thus tries to make amends for the mistakes committed by him, Dev Sen's Rama is too egoistic to ask for Lakshmana's forgiveness and to belittle himself in front of his younger brother. However, he openly shares with Sita his feelings of guilt for trying to murder his beloved brother, who remained devoted to him in tough times.

The folk narrators also reveal the guilt consciousness of Bharata and Shatrughna, the other two brothers, who think that they are being made fun of as Kaikeyi plotted to have Rama exiled for fourteen years. Otherwise, Rama would have been crowned long time back. It would not be wrong to quote Rao in this context: "In a skillful way, the song suggests that no character in this story is free from blemishes or anxieties about these blemishes." ("Lakshmanaa's Laugh" 221)

It seems the folk narrators of "Lakshmanaa's Laugh" have referred to incidents from another folk story ("The Song of Urmila's Separation") where Lakshmana's wife Urmila is given Lakshmana's share of sleep as per his pact with *Nidra Devi*. As a result, Urmila spends the fourteen years of Lakshmana's exile sleeping, while he devotes the time to the service of his brother and sister-in-law. In this context, Pattanaik observes:

> Songs sung by Telugu women focus less on the adventure of the Ramayana and more on the relationships and the corresponding intimate emotions, often witnessed only in the privacy of the home. Thus, there are songs describing Urmila's fear when she finds herself being woken up by a man she cannot recognize and how Lakshmana combs Urmila's hair after his return. (*Sita* 263)

In "Lakshmana's Laugh", the titular character bursts into laughter because the goddess of sleep has returned to him again after more than a decade. However, in the previously mentioned folk song about Urmila's sleep, Lakshmana romantically wakes up Urmila and makes love with her, but in "Lakshmana's Laugh", he is completely indifferent as a husband. After returning to Ayodhya, he attends his brother's coronation, but he does not feel the urge to meet his wife. But Urmila, in the hope that she will be reunited with her husband, decks herself up with precious jewels. She had no conjugal life despite being married for so long. Like a so-called good wife, she accepted her fate without any complaint and lived like a *Kumari* all these years. Seeing Lakshmana lying on bed, she walks gently towards him and lovingly approaches him, letting her saree fall from her shoulder as a sign of her desire for him. She believes that now that her spouse is back, she will finally be able to embrace her sexuality after suppressing it for so long. But Lakshmana turns her down, saying, "Woman, this is not the time for you to come" (Rao, "Lakshmana's Laugh," 225). It seems that he is more interested in sleeping than getting close to his wife. However, Urmila's reaction to her husband's refusal is not reflected by the folk narrators, except that she silently leaves the room, with words unsaid and desires unfulfilled.

There are a few aspects of this song that stand out in particular. First of all, it seems that the folk narrators are familiar with all the characters as they are depicted in mainstream renditions of the *Ramayana*. This deep knowledge is evidenced by their ability to critically assess these characters, bring out their flaws, and elucidate previously unexamined facets of their personalities. Secondly, despite the fact that the song was originally sung by the village women of South India, not much is said about the problems that women face in a patriarchal society and how their lives are affected by the forceful imposition of chauvinistic norms. Although Sita and Urmila are briefly introduced to the audience, the story is not limited to their difficulties and tribulations in life. Thirdly, instead of revolving around one character and his concerns, the story brings out the hidden anxieties of a bunch of characters with a stroke of few words. Fourthly, assuming that the listeners are familiar with the plot of the mainstream *Ramayana* narratives, the folk narrators have made references to various incidents from the epic, but none of these events are explained in detail. And, last but not the least, the narrators have made an attempt to subvert certain ideologies popularised by the mainstream mythmakers in a very sophisticated manner without being overtly radical. Rama, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Shiva, etc., the larger-than-life figures of traditional *Ramayana* narratives, are presented as beings of flesh and blood, with their shortcomings, limitations, anxieties, and insecurities. Therefore, it would not be wrong to conclude that "Lakshmanaa's Laugh" is undoubtedly a valuable asset of the *Rama-Katha* tradition, offering an alternative reading of the epic. Folk renditions of the *Ramayana* offer a window into the lived experiences and socio-cultural norms of diverse groups. These ballads reveal how a story can be revised, reimagined, and celebrated in myriad ways across different cultures and communities. The *Ramayana*, owing to its

heritage of multiplicity, has enjoyed enormous popularity in India and Southeast Asia for so many centuries, though, in recent times, efforts are being made to market it as a singular narrative for fulfilling certain political propagandas. The numerous folk songs composed about various characters and incidents of the *Ramayana*, together with the countless Sanskrit scriptures and regional versions of the epic, have kept the flow of the *Ramayana* river intact down the ages. "Just as a living being constantly interacts, engages with, modifies and is, in turn, modified by the environment around it, the Ramayana, as a living text, continues to transform and be transformed by the social worlds in which it exists, and in which it will continue to exist" (Tharuvana 218).

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