

Important Female Characters in the Ramayana: Their Relevance in the Modern Society

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The *Ramayana*, written and composed by *Valmiki*, is one of the greatest works of literature in the history of ancient India. It has survived the test of time, and still continues to be one of the most critically acclaimed works of all generations. The characters in *Ramayana* are seemed to be inspirational figures in all our lives. Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman epitomize all the virtues that should be present in all human beings in the planet to achieve the state of continual peace.

Sree Rama was about to be crowned as emperor. Narada arrived and reminded Rama that his sole work in this incarnation was to kill the asuras and bring peace in the universe. Sree Rama replied that he was aware of the purpose of his incarnation. Devas approached SaraswathyDevi and requested her to go to Ayodhya and enter the tongue of Mandhara.

In Ayodya *Kandam* Mandhara made her appearance with three bends on her body. She, crooked and very cunning with her talk, climbed the stairs of the palace and observed the streets of Ayodya decorated and the people in celebration mood. There she got the news that tomorrow Sree Rama is going to be crowned as king. She got disillusioned and thought of her position in the palace. At once she rushed to the palace of Kaikeyi and informed her of the coronation ceremony of Rama. Kaikeyi actually delighted so much. She took a necklace from her neck and gave to Mandhara. But Mandhara continuously scolded Kaikeyi and compelled her to think of the steps to stop the coronation. But Kaikeyi replied that Rama was the dearest to her. She loved Rama more than Bharatha and Rama loved her more than Kausalya. Not an unpleasant word came from him. He was the darling of the people and did only what was right. Mandhara started to inject venom in to the mind of Kaikeyi. She argued that by birth Rama is the eldest and had the right to the throne. If it happened Kaikeyi will become a slave to Kausalya and Sumittra. The two brothers who have all the powers may even send Bharatha to the forest. Kaikeyi in effect will be a slave to Kausalya and Bharatha will suffer in the forest and told her to take efforts to save Bharatha right now. Mandhara made Kaikeyi aware of the tricks to send Rama to the forest and Bharatha the king. The next minute a sudden change occurred in Kaikeyi and got angry.

Even if a man has all good qualities, if he is in wrong company, he will also become bad. But the story of *Ramayana* will not happen without a character Mandhara. Rama should go to forest with Sita, then only Ravana could commit the mistake of misbehaving to Sita and give Rama the reason for wiping out the scourge of Ravana and all the asuras from this planet and bring peace and happiness to the righteous. *Parithranaya saadhunaam vinasaya chadushkritham dharma samsthapanarthaya ssambhavami yuge yuge*. If anything is created by God, he knows the reason and purpose of it.

It can be said that Kaikeyi is held responsible for all the misfortunes that happened in the royal family of Ayodhya such as exile of Rama and death of King Dasaratha. Everyone in the kingdom except Rama despised her.

Kaikeyi was the princess of Kekaya Kingdom before she married King Dasaratha and became his second queen. She was a beauty with masculinity. She was a good warrior who once saved King Dashratha in the war and thus was bestowed with two boons by the King. She was the favourite of the King, who used to love Rama more than her own son. It was Mandhara who changed the joyful atmosphere of the palace and urged Kaikeyi to make use of her two boons asking to make Bharata as the king of Ayodhya and to exile Rama for 14 years. This was what Kaikeyi did to make her look evil, but all she did was for the betterment of her son Bharata. And if Kaikeyi had not done this, *Ramayana* might not have existed either.

What we need to understand is that Kaikeyi was just playing her role in this world to help complete the mission of Lord Vishnu who incarnated as Rama. However, the things that we need to learn from Kaikeyi is to never keep yourself with a bad company. A negative company can erase all the good within a man and can poison his thoughts with evil as Mandhara did.

The ideal characters of the Ramayana were the epitome of devotion and are worshipped till date; such as the ideal son Lord Rama, ideal wife Devi Sita, ideal brother Lakshmana and other brothers of Rama, ideal devotee Lord Hanuman etc. Apart from the other characters, women in the Ramayana are portrayed as mentally strong beings who were never left alone by their society and culture. They were either blamed for their beauty, blamed for being abducted, blamed for openly expressing their feelings, or blamed for being themselves.

Sita was said to be the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi and consort of Lord Rama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Being found under the ground by King Janaka, she was also said to be Bhumi Devi. Sita was pictured as a character with all the great qualities, and those qualities made her a great woman. She was more characterized as a lady with emotional and mental strength. She stood like a rock with her husband in the hardest time and never turned her back from facing challenges and problems.

Ravana tried all measures to captivate Sita. But Devi Sita didn't lose her hope, she patiently waited for her husband. Her courage, dedication, faith, and purity were also some of the reasons for the victory over Ravana. Despite all those hardships and devotion Devi Sita was doubted by the society and her own husband. Sita calmly prepared for *Agni Pariksha* to prove her loyalty.

She taught the whole world to face hardships while not losing faith. She personified how a human being should be and how they should live their life. Nobody can *find any other woman like Devi Sita in the real world and in epics*. She really was a great woman.

Sita, the meaning of an ideal woman, was filled with loyalty for her husband. Meaning of her name was "furrow" that symbolized the place where she was found by her father. When we heard of Sita, the first thing that came to our mind was her unconditional bond of love with Lord Rama. In the face of extreme hardship, Lord Rama's queen displayed extraordinary character, founded on her pure devotion to the Lord. Sita embodied the character of an ideal woman to an ideal man, containing the right thoughts and actions.

In Valmiki's Ramayana, Sita's origin was depicted to be from Mother Earth itself. Thus, Sita is a part of Nature, and is always shown to be in harmony and at peace with Nature. When Rama was denying her not to accompany him to the forests, she said that she would remain happy merely by gazing at the hills, lakes and rivers. This exhibited her immense love and oneness with Mother Earth and all its natural elements. Throughout the Ramayana she has been referred to as "golden-skinned" and "doe-eyed". The golden deer symbolizes an image of beauty and forest wildness.

In spite of all these difficulties, Sita was calm both outside and inside. Her soul was in absolute harmony with nature and this gave her the tolerance and resistance to face the terror of Ravana and his fellow demons. She constantly told Ravana to give up even a shimmer of hope that she would give in to him as his intentions were evil and actions perverse and that she was inseparable from Rama as sunlight is from the Sun. Her unequivocal devotion for Rama had been derived from her oneness, harmony, inner peace and stability with Nature. Nature gave her the strength to tolerate her stay at Lanka. Nature gave her the self-belief that Rama would vanquish Ravana and rescue her from that unholy kingdom replete with devils, filled with cruel intentions.

It is this inner harmony that breeds other good qualities of Sita. One could see her extreme forgiveness, when she pardons all the female guards, when Hanuman offered to kill them. She understood that what they did was a consequence of Ravana's orders. She was also very generous, when it comes to gratitude. She willingly gifted Hanuman the necklace, that Rama gave her, as a token of appreciation for all the help that he and his army provided to Rama to rescue her back. Her generosity was also highlighted when she asked the wives of all the monkey warriors to accompany them back to Ayodhya, to participate in the grand celebrations there with them.

Surpanaka, one of the most important characters of Ramayana, was the one who instigated the battle between Rama and Ravana. Being presented as an ugly woman in Valmiki Ramayana, she actually was said to have the power of changing herself to different physical appearances or forms. Surpanakha was the rakshasa princess and a sister of Ravana. Her husband was killed by her own brother Ravana.

Without Surpanakha, Ramayana might not have come into existence, it was her who fell attracted to Lord Rama in the jungle in the first place. She showed some courage, expressed her feelings, and tried seducing Rama. But her demonic behavior and remarks regarding Devi Sita made Lakshmana cut off her nose. Therefore, as a revenge, she forced her brother to start a war with Rama by abducting his beautiful wife.

The Story of Surphanakha taught us that we should have devotion, purity, and ethics in life and in the relationship, otherwise one will be led towards their own destruction. One cannot get love with force, hurting others will lead to nothing and one should never pressurize others to stay in their life.

Surphanaka gave a talk on administration after her mutilation by Lakshmana for her foolish misadventure. She rushed to Ravana's court and criticized his lack of ability in public administration and rendered him advice on good government. A greedy king who is addicted to sensual pleasures and acted at his sweetwill and pleasures will be avoided by his subjects like the cremation fire. A king who is failed to attend to his duties personally at proper moment will have to face his downfall abruptly and ruin himself and his realm.

An unsung hero of Ramayana, Urmila, was the younger sister of Devi Sita who was married to Lakshmanon the same day of Rama and Sita's marriage. Princess Urmila was the biological daughter of King Janaka and Queen Sunanya. Even though Urmila was not highlighted in the epic, she was a woman with a great personality. It was her sacrifice which helped the forefront characters in the successful completion of their journey. Urmila's sacrifice was so ultimate that it could not be comparable and even could not be describable. She was the one at the most disadvantage yet she accepted all that came her way. That's why she is said to be the great hero of the epic who stayed by the Kingdom in the verse of fulfilling her duties.

Urmila also had wanted to accompany her husband in exile as Sita did. But she was asked to stay back and take care of the people of Ayodhya by her husband. Her first sacrifice was to let her beloved husband go away for 14 years to help him stick with his duty. Her other major sacrifice was to share the sleep of her husband for 14 years. In the course of protecting Rama and Sita, Lakshman refused to sleep and requested God of Sleep not to come for 14 years, and that's why Urmila agreed to share the sleep of her husband too. It was because of Urmila that Lakshman was able to kill Meghnath, son of Ravana. Meghnath had a boon that he could only be killed by the one who had defeated sleep, and it was Lakshman who had conquered sleep as his sleep was shared by his wife. Urmila, silent warrior in Ramayana, helped the central characters win their battle. She could teach us about the actual sacrifice, devotion, dedication, and love.

Mandodari, the beautiful, intelligent consort of Ravana, was the daughter of Mayasura, the king of Asura and Hema, Apsara. Her role in the Ramayana was short but very important. She had warned her husband not to abduct Sita, but Ravana had turned deaf ear to her words and was captivated by the beauty of Sita and also decided to start a war as commanded by his sister Surphanakha.

Despite whatever the personality her husband has possessed, whatever mistakes he did, she loved him wholeheartedly. She tried her best to stop her husband from the wrongdoings. But it's the fate that nobody could escape. It was also said that, because of Mandodri's intervention, Sita was left to stay peacefully in Lanka for such a long time. Because of her husband's ill intention, she lost both her son and husband. She was a faithful wife who tried her best to make Ravana the better person but she accepted the result as fate, as a cruel destiny that cannot be escaped.

Mandodari taught us that being on a good path is all about one's choice. Being from a demon family, she chose to become *Saatvik* (pure, natural, energetic, vital, and clean). She was announced as one of the *Panchakanyakas*. *Panchakanyaka sthothram* can give a man salvation from all his sins.

According to Valmiki it is the duty of a woman to lead a society, a country to the path of *Dharmam*. Sita's sacrifice to go to forest with Rama offered value of marital bond. Rama and Sita set the ideal of conjugal love. Kaikeyi's selfishness lead to the anguished death of her husband. It taught us to safe guard ourselves from selfishness.

The most important shloka in Ayodhyakandam, "*Raamad dashartham viddhi, maamvidhi janakathmajaam, ayodhyam attviim viddhi gachchha tat yathasukham*". Here Sumitra advised Laxmana to look upon Rama as Dashratha, Sita as Sumitra and forest as Ayodhya and depart happily. Noble mothers like her are needed today.

Almost all the female characters of the Ramayana are portrayed as the ones who speak boldly and stand firm on the path of Dharma. In all the kingdoms, whether it is *vanara's* or *rakshasa's*, it is seen that usually men follow the path of *adharmam*. But here all these female characters tried their best to bring their men back to the path of *Dharmam*.

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