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English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh**

Narrative, Norms, and Nation: Exploring the Prospect of 'Sitarajya' through Devdutt

Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*

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The ideal Indian nation, the state of *Ramrajya*, is no more a fictional idea as it has not only found a contented explanation in discourses of religious and political gurus but has also crept in official political manifestos. In a land of 'Ramrajya', 'Ramkatha', 'Ramleela' and 'Ramcharitra' the women characters are continually read and understood as an appendage to Rama's chronicle. The Indian nation that crucially conceives and meticulously practices its gender and political narrative based on the mythical account of Rama's legend, is partially oblivious of the grander existence of its erudite daughter- Sita, a true representation of Nature in its quintessential form. Valmiki scripted the larger-than-life *Ramayana* in Sanskrit in the 2nd century and owing to its resplendent delineations, it was re-scripted further by many other writers (Vyasa, Kamban, Bhavabhuti, Krittivasa, Tulsidas, Bhoja, Eknath, Torave and several more) in many languages, dialects, and forms with numerous revisions and additions. Spread across the Indian subcontinent as a diverse textual narrative and a libretto for dramatization, this epic has primarily been the means of constructing gender norms and roles in India, especially in apprehending the larger concept of womanhood. Ergo, Sita has emerged as a worthy model of emulation for feminine principles, suitably aligned with oft-quoted incidents from the classic text. However, the publication of *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik (2013) challenges the conventional image of Sita and proposes a distinct illustration than the previous accounts offered thousands of years ago.

The academic paper aims to establish the significance of Pattanaik's retelling of the *Ramayana* with particular emphasis on Sita's construct which consequently influences the Indian narrative, norms and nation. The objectives include; exploration of the potential of 'Sitarajya'- a potential model of governance and existence analogous to the fictional concept of 'Ramrajya' exhibited in the ancient chronicles, re-comprehension of the principles of gender training especially for the female, and plead a case for the deconstruction of Sita's conventional



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representation. The same shall be done through the descriptive and exploratory analysis of events illustrated in Pattanaik's *Sita*.

Diverse than the other retellings of *Ramayana* that build the narrative paraphernalia around the male protagonists, Pattanaik's storyline is constituted around Sita, carefully constructing her as human and humane as possible, in contrast to the Goddess images portrayed through ancient texts and their dramatization. In her review on the book, Arundhati Venkatesh opines, "He reveals details that we seldom hear about, lesser-known back stories ... the Sita who questions grows into the Sita who understands and accepts unquestioningly ... She has grown up listening to the sages discuss the Upanishads. She lifts Shiva's mighty bow with ease and kills Ravana's twin in a fierce battle... A single mother to her sons, she is independent, not abandoned. Rediscover the Ramayana and yourself" (Venkatesh, 1). The powerful writing of this book reveals the details that are seldom heard about in Valmiki or Tulsidas's versions of the *Ramayana*, which only appear as tales that venerate and eulogize King Rama and the Ikshvaku clan with no particular emphasis on smaller incidents related to the female characters.

Though the socio-cultural conditions of the ideological Ramrajya are always sought after, the paper aims to explore the manifest mechanics of 'Sitarajya', which could perhaps be the land of academic, political and philosophical sovereignty. The social, cultural, economic and educational prospects offered by it build the hypothesis of an ideal state (as promised by Ramrajya). The comparative analysis of the two concepts can be drawn from the nascent stage, even before the protagonists were born. In the benign Raghu clan, Shanta was the first sacrificial scapegoat. "Dashratha, the King of Ayodhya, in the land of Kosala, also had a daughter. Her name was Shanta, she was peaceful. But she did not bring Dashratha peace, for he wanted sons... Dashratha was filled with despair. Who would he pass on the crown to? ... That is when Rompada, King of Anga, came to him and said, 'My kingdom is struck with drought... the crisis will end only if my daughter succeeds in seducing a hermit and turns him into a householder, thus tempering his powers to Indra's satisfaction. But I have no daughter, Dahrata, let me adopt yours. And if she succeeds in bringing the rain to Anga, I will make sure that Rishiyashringa compels Indra to give



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you sons. Suddenly, the daughter became the answer to Dashrata's problem" (Pattanaik 10, 11). This major incident and minor character is by and large shelved from portrayal, and appears as corroboration to the projected simulacrum of the Indian woman. However, not very far away from Ramrajya, one reads another description, incongruent in image and exemplary in nature.

At the onset of the sowing season, the farmers of Videha invited their King Janaka to be the first to plough the land with a golden hoe. As he started, the furrow revealed a tiny golden hand, and he stopped. He removed the earth, to discover a baby! The farmers were convinced that it wasn't an abandoned child and was indeed a gift from the earth-goddess to their childless King. "But this was not the fruit of his seed-How could she be his daughter? Fatherhood, said Janaka, springs in the heart, not from the seed...Placing her close to her heart, he declared, 'She is Bhumaia, daughter of the earth, You may call her Maithili, the princess of Mithila, or Janaki, who chose Janaka. I will call her Sita, she who was found in a furrow, she chose me to be her father'...No harvest could be better" (Pattanaik, 9, 10). This occurrence helps recognize that fatherhood is a sociological concept and not merely biological (what better example!). Janaka responds to the situation in a phenomenal manner, "The earth grants Janaka what he deserves, the fire grants Dashrata what he wants. I choose the destiny of daughters. He submits to the desire of sons" (Pattanaik, 17). Two approaches are etched with this episode; adoption of the female child and choosing her as a political heir. Conversely, the negligible adoption level of the female child, the displeasure at her arrival, and the bare minimum participation in politics in India is a clear indication of the fact that the cultural presentation of this tale is flawed. Devdutt's *Sita* questions the existing norms relatively and persuades to deliberate over real records. No woman in India has governed the country as its Prime Minister, other than Ms. Indira Gandhi. Women's participation in the realm of administration and politics has seen a dismal low even after thirty three percent reservations. The latest records establish the same, "This election, women candidates from 22 states and one union territory have been elected. According to the last census, 48 percent of India's population is female, which makes the percentage of women representatives -- 14.36 percent -- in the Parliament abysmally low" (Dantewadia, 1). To bring out equality in political participation, this incident could be staged as a significant part of



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Ramleela (dramatization of Ramayana across India) and possibly used as a tool for creating social and political responsiveness.

In the last seventy years, the Indian government has launched varied schemes and missions for promoting the education of the girl child considering the low percentage of female turnout. However, their crucial presence in the education scenario as learners, researchers, educators and mentors, can be read through Pattanaik's *Sita*. At the behest of Sulabha (a visionary and therefore unique woman), king Janaka wanted to inquire into the human mind, human flesh and the world around the flesh, and all that was *Veda* (wisdom). He invited all the sages of Aryavrata to share their knowledge of the Vedas. They emerged from all parts of the country; forests, mountaintops, riverbanks, kingdoms, and seashores to Janaka's court, to build a correspondence of ideas and discover other ways of observing the world. Fertile, prosperous, yielding, and not yearning, Sita's land held the world's first international conference of intellectual conversations that eventually broadened the gaze of humanity. For four years, Sita attended this world conference with her father clinging on to his shoulders, graduating to his lap, observing, understanding and grasping the views of thousands of intellectual gurus (including Ashtavakra, Gargi and Yagnavalkya), thereby becoming the first and youngest Indian woman to absorb, comprehend, and help in the compilation of the most outstanding academic treatise, known to the world as *The Upanishads*. At the conference, Gargi played the moderator and asked questions on existentialism, Dashratha's yearning for sons and norms of governance. Her levelheaded spirit and unrelenting questions perturbed many, and she was even threatened with decapitation. However, the intellectual soul was unflustered, for she was sure that she would grow a new head, and a wiser one!

Devdutt's *Sita* evidently speaks of women's education as central to Indian culture, and their instrumental role in the compilation of the *Upanishads*. However, the present generation that understands the mythological texts through folk presentations, never witnesses the same happening in Videha rather, they observe the womenfolk being kept away from the higher orders of intellectual learning. The number of female philosopher-cum-writers was limited then as



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compared to thousands of male sages, and those who received the opportunity of reading and learning were venerated as Goddesses and lost the human equation. Micheal Witzel from Harvard University notes, “A number of such female Ṛṣis clearly are goddesses. They include: Aditi, Indrāṇī, Urvaśī, Yamī, Yamī Vaivasvatī, Saramā Devaśunī, Sārparājñī, Sūryā Sāvitrī” (Witzel 2). With a handful of them in the first place, the limited number was soon lost and the grounds of women’s education gradually diminished. John Stuart Mill affirms, “Nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women...They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education” (Sangari, 46). The statistical accounts of female enrolment in primary, secondary, and higher education and even their dropout rates reflect poorly on the educational scenario of the country. The primary barriers to women's education in India are deeply entrenched in gender-stereotyping and role-segregation.

An antithesis of gendered role-division can be read in Pattanaik’s *Sita*. The inquiry about how the visiting sages were fed lead Sita to her mother Sunaina's kitchen. “Before long, Sita found her feet around the kitchen; peeling, cutting, churning, pickling, steaming, roasting, frying, pounding, mixing, kneading, experiencing various textures, aromas, flavors...and every kind of nourishment provided by the plant and animal kingdom. Sita's father never knew of the world that was the kitchen. Sita's mother never knew the world that was the court. But Sita realized she had both... This is how the mind expands, and Brahama becomes Brahman” (Page 22, Pattanaik). She realized that she was both the seeker and transmitter of wisdom. However, the story takes a different course in the realm of reality. According to varied data collected through Higher Education Institutions, women choose vocations that keep them closer to the domestic space (teaching, nursing, fashion industry) and only a limited few decide to decipher the complex conceptualizations like the primary model. “Interestingly, more women are enrolling themselves for post-graduation Courses than men. However, there isn’t much change in the nature of courses that women are pursuing. More women are seeking admission in courses that have traditionally been considered women’s forte, like M.A., M.Com., M.Sc. (Nursing), Master of Library Science, Master of Physiotherapy, architecture, hospital administration and fashion management. Courses



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like business administration, law, financial management and computer administration still continue to have more men than women” (Sharma, 1).

Why did we fail at real simulation? Parental reluctance, physical limitations, looming threats of all kinds of hostility, brutality and discrimination play a significant part in inhibiting the female's access to education, but the primary role as child-bearers and nurturers as seeded by several ancient texts including *Ramayana* and *Manusmriti*, were prima facie reasons in limiting the expanse. In the present scenario, the deconstruction of these texts and their re-telling (also re-reading) with variable emphasis on varied concepts becomes all the more pertinent to formulate newer dimensions of existence. *Sita* elaborates that women's education can be seen as an investment as the principal model was not only educated but was trained and skilled at almost everything. This illustrated retelling of the *Ramayana* by Pattanaik builds highly upon the scholarship of women. ‘Sitarajya’ could possibly focus on equal opportunities of education and profession without the constraints of conformist gender practices.

A similar incident facilitates annotation of women's participation in the arena of sports as well. Shiva's bow Pinaki was a perfect combination of *yagna* and *tapasya*. Since it was dreadfully heavy and needed a dozen men to lift it, the kingdom of Videha flaunted the same in Mithila's armory every year to attract warriors and scholars from across the nation and beyond. One day Sita was given the task to clean the place, and while doing so, she effortlessly picked it up with one hand, and the news quickly reached the corridors of Videha's court. This led to an immediate scare, and the story was carefully safeguarded by all. Why was her physical strength a marker of her limitation, whereas the same was considered fortitude in men? Women sportspersons in India, even after winning international laurels for the country, are termed as unappealing and mannish and are not eulogized as the male players. The heroism of Jhansi ki Rani, a gleaming example of patriotism and valor exhibited by a queen, was catered to every Indian household as ‘mardaani’ by a female author. The pictorial narrative of the wrestler duo, the Phogat sisters and boxing champion Mary Kom speak volumes regarding the same. If this incident mentioned in *Sita* is considered as a significant part for presentation and is integrated



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with the importance of women's physical strength, the prospects of female sportspersons might receive its due encouragement.

While the young princesses were learning lessons of world politics, culinary skills, and martial arts, Rishi Vishwamitra was training the four sons of Raghukula in the art of archery and rules of society. The King himself was training the sisters and they retained firsthand knowledge. When the crown-princes slaughtered Tadaka, the Videha sisters challenged the process of her last rites and asked a lot of questions regarding birth, death, nature, equilibrium, and resurrection. "It did not escape Vishwamitra's notice that Janaka's daughters asked questions like Gargi of the Upanishad while Dashratha's sons preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed" (Pattanaik, 41). In the ideal *Ramrajya*, such talent was befitting only to fetch a suitable groom but in the hypothetical 'Sitarajya', the sisters (read female scholars) could possibly be sages theorizing concepts and producing academic treatises. This enormous intellectual base was not put to the purpose of national development or larger comprehension. The repositories of such knowledge were given away in marriage, and the academic and martial intellect was neither employed for domestic bliss nor compilation of national framework of laws.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* illustrates women as vulnerable beings; Sita as a trailing entity that only followed orders, Urmila as someone who slept for fourteen years while waiting for her husband, and Mandavi and Shrutkriti are not even mentioned after marriage. Nevertheless, they find a crucial existence in Devdutt's *Sita* as educated women who liked to build a discourse. While encountering the curious sociological predicament of Ahilya, where she was redeemed to life and probable reverence by Lord Rama, the younger princess of Mithila (Mandavi) posed her doubts. As Vishwamitra poured water over their joined hands so that the two could begin anew (Ahilya and her husband Gautama), the curious and scholarly cousin of Sita questioned the significance of fidelity in marriage. This incident is played upon as an intellectual exercise in Pattanaik's *Sita*. Mandavi deliberates that the Rakshasa women (as she had heard) did not restrict themselves to their husbands and vice versa. Her argument is validated with the apparent



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knowledge that all kinds of unions exist in nature, "Swans are faithful to each other, the male monkey has a harem of females that he jealously guards and the queen bee has many lovers. Why then fidelity was so important to the rishis" (Pattanaik 43). And the line of arguments that follow in this particular chapter, are full of societal and familial wisdom driving home the fact that erudite women are more sagacious and prudent to comprehend their social space. This extremity of knowledge was, however, not put to any use for the benefit of the nation for it would have lead to the promotion of a multi-partner culture, which is seen as a threat to the social fiber woven by the *maryada purushottams*. Considering the same, the legal process of divorce is still considered a social stigma, and sexual conformity remains a vital clause in pre and post-marital relationships. If this scholarly debate is incorporated as an essential part of the larger storyline such social issues will no longer remain a taboo in the Indian domestic space. *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, structures the minor discourses so well that one draws 'Sitarajya' as a utopian state that lays equal concentration on all relevant paradigms.

The understanding of women as dependents; in the form of daughters, wives and mothers is subverted through Pattanaik's text. During the period of exile, Sita does not behave as a reliant at all (in his retelling). Unlike the ancient chronicle where she is projected as tiresome, dependant and trailing, *Sita* brings her forth as someone who continues presenting her acquired and assimilated intellect to the deprived brothers. Her debates on Dharma, nature, charity, exploitation, selflessness, and other ingredients of society make her a perfect companion. "Conversations such as these reminded Sita of the conversations of sages she had overheard in her childhood. Often they were the only ones around the fire. Sometimes sages joined them and told those stories, full of heroes, villains, victims, and martyrs. Sita enjoyed the tales but realized how each tale contained a measuring scale that converted one into a hero and the other victim. All measuring scales are human delusions that make humans feel good about themselves. In nature, there is no victim and villain, just predator and prey, those who seek food and those who become food" (Pattanaik 116-117). This supreme intelligence seems befitting for; a philosopher, a visionary, a ruler and a nurturer accountable for the needs of a nation.



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Post the Agni-pariksha (a popular incident that has been the fuel of varied debates), just as Sita took her place next to Rama, they were attacked by a thousand-headed demon from Pushkara island and, she took the shape of Kaali and exterminated the demon in the bat of an eyelid, even before the mighty warriors could pick their arms. "No words were spoken. Everyone was stunned by the realization that Sita was Gauri and Kaali. She had allowed herself to be abducted. She had allowed herself to be reduced. She was the independent Goddess who had made Ram the dependable God" (Pattanaik 254). The meaning of their strength and willingness to serve (both women and tribals) has been misconstrued into submission. If only one could reverse the image; and imagine that Rama was abducted, then Sita too could have raised an army and brought him back, after all, Devdutt's Sita has better military familiarity and finer resource management skills. However, this is not in line with the 'damsel in distress, locked up in the tower by the dragon' stereotype and is therefore not included in folk presentations. With modern women joining the armed forces, NSS and NCC units, paramilitary services, firefighting, and other rescue operation teams, this occurrence from *Sita* should be considered for illustration. This shall provide the much-desired impetus on female's physical strength and intellectual perseverance.

The Agni-*pariksha* is not only a legendary episode; it holds a crucial connotation in limiting and defining the boundaries for the female in India. Nonetheless, Pattanaik 's *Sita* brings us closer to meaningful conversation between Sita and Lakshman, post the Agni-pariksha and her abandonment. "Ram is dependable, hence God. I am independent, hence Goddess. He needs to do his duty, follow the rules, and safeguard reputation. I am under no such obligation. I am free to do as I please. Love him when he brings me home, love him even when he wants me to go.' 'But you are innocent, said Lakshman, tears streaming down his face. 'And if I was not? Would it then be socially appropriate and legally justified for a husband to throw his woman out of his house? A jungle is preferable to such an intolerant society.' With a smile, she said, 'I know the forest well. I remember more years here than in the palace. Do not worry about me. I am not happy with the situation, but I accept it and will make the most of it. Thus I submit to Karma without letting go of Dharma.' Sita stayed back in the forest, smiled and unbound her hair, for



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when the farmer abandons the field; the field is finally free to return to being a forest" (Pattanaik 278-79). This excerpt closely links the benign queen to the *Prakriti* Principle, one who understands herself and her potential, way beyond the societal norms. In the most generic form of understanding, women have always been equated to Nature (*Prakriti*), in practice and cultural understanding. Nurtured by the feminine principle, women perceive nature, resources, and world dynamics more than the *Purusha* that has always focused on the material-culture of life. "Nature herself is an experiment and women, as sylviculturalists, agriculturalists and water resource managers, the traditional natural scientists" (Shiva, 40). This man-woman correspondence in *Sita* is indicative of the fact that the female is a 'natural scientist' who understands the principles of cultivation of individual personality as a medium to achieve larger social equilibrium. She could choose between being a manicured garden or a feral forest whenever required, which leads the readers to believe that this retelling of the mythological text sows the seeds of feminism!

Devdutt's *Sita* comes across as the first text to speak highly of the female sorority within the ancient storyline. The idea of collective womanhood based on the ideations of egalitarianism, can be understood better with Sita-Sarupnakha rendezvous in the forest. "Under the berry tree, Sita found Sarupnakha, full of hate and rage, gloating. 'They rejected you as they rejected me. Now you suffer as I do, stripped of status as I was stripped of beauty'... she had expected to derive pleasure from Sita's pain. But Sita was not in pain. 'Sarupnakha, how long will you expect those around you to love you as you love them? Find the Shakti within yourself to love the other even when the other does not love you. Outgrow your hunger by unconditionally feeding the other'... 'I refuse to submit.' replied the demon-queen. Sense prevailed with Sita's words, "You trap yourself in your victimhood. Then be like Ravana. Stand upright while your brothers die, your sons die, and your kingdom burns, imagining your nobility. Who loses, but you? Cultures come and go. Ram and Ravana come and go. Nature continues. I would rather enjoy nature" (Pattanaik, 281). Peace is restored in mind and nature through this particular instance that builds upon the design of a collective understanding of the core issues that affect women universally and their probable solutions. This incident comes across as an excellent prototype of constructing



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peaceful relations with neighboring enemy states and a fine exemplification of a dissertation on salvation, all offered through a dialogue between two women.

The paper recommends a re-reading of the *Ramayana* which particular emphasis on pertinent concerns of narrative, norms and nation, as offered by Devdutt Pattanaik in the shape of *Sita*. Through the comprehensive mention of unfamiliar tales and corresponding incidents the readers can draw the image of a theoretical 'Sitarajya' that; brings the desired equilibrium in political participation, lays the basis of a modernistic socio-cultural setting for both genders and creates newer paradigms of social comprehension. 'Sitarajya' essays a new nation that has manifold potential to rewrite the norms of governance, philosophy and existence.

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