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When Rāma Met Viṣṇu: Problems of Transforming a Heroic Narrative into a Devotional Text

Abstract. In this contribution I plan to examine the metaphorical "encounter" between the view of Rāma as supreme warrior-king presented in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, and the understanding of him as a god in various more developed sectarian instructional treatments. This process often amounted to a collision between the inherited narrative (too popular to be discarded) and the new religious context. Some changes could be absorbed without too much difficulty; as a minor example, the human Rāma's original final departure to the world of Brahmā left very few traces in the text when it was replaced by his triumphant return as Viṣṇu—but the identity and nature of his wife Sītā is much more complicated, often producing a view of Rāma at odds with the original concept. The ways needed to accommodate such a wide-ranging transformation had profound and sometimes startling consequences on the well-loved traditional narrative.

Keywords. Rāma, *Rāmāyaṇa,* Viṣṇu, Sītā

I count it a great privilege to have been asked to pay tribute to my long-standing friend, Maya Burger, and to honour her in a chapter designed to compliment and to complement her valuable work on the Rāma story in New Indo-Aryan (NIA) languages. I well remember her wide-ranging survey of the field in a keynote lecture she presented at Liverpool in 2013.

The plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is—thankfully—now widely known throughout Europe through the agency of the South Asian diaspora, not merely by those students who have profited from Maya's teaching; it is also much used in primary schools as part of their programmes to promote inclusive race relations. Should there, however, be any of my readers ignorant of the most basic details of the story, perhaps I should explain that Prince Rāma is unjustly banished to the wilderness, accompanied by his wife Sītā and his brother Lakṣmaṇa, when one of his stepmothers, Kaikeyī, persuades King Daśaratha against his will to make her son, Bharata, his heir (*yuvarāja*, or "young king"). All goes well until Sītā is abducted by the lustful Rāvaṇa, king of the *rākṣasas* (monsters) with the help of a decoy deer; Rāma makes an alliance with *vānaras* (mostly anthropomorphised

monkeys and bears) and succeeds in recovering her, largely thanks to the exploits of Hanumān.

The Rāma story was conceived, about the fifth century BCE, as the story of the human Rāma's struggles against almost impossible odds. Over the subsequent two-and-a-half millennia, no matter what additions were incorporated, the main lines of the narrative had to be retained. Rāvaṇa must always be defeated. The human must always win. The earliest Sanskrit tellings, themselves compiled over nearly a thousand years, are now collected into seven *kāṇḍas*, or books, known for convenience as the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* (*VRm*), of which the first, the *Bālakāṇḍa*, and the last, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, are widely accepted by scholars to be additions to the basic narrative.[1]

When the tale had been well known and well loved for about five centuries, a drastic change began to take place in the developing narrative, with the human Rāma gradually but unequivocally being presented as Viṣṇu and eventually as Rām, a God in his own right. Of course, this status was utterly incompatible with the original narrative, where Rāvaṇa had a boon that guaranteed that he could only be defeated by a man, not a god. I shall examine the paradox involved in the metaphorical "encounter" between Rāma and Viṣṇu, and detail a few of the attempts that have been made to resolve it, focusing on a representative sample of the later devotional texts, particularly but not exclusively the Sanskrit *Adhyātma*[2] and *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇas*, after the original tale had been circulating for something like two thousand years within the now fluid Rāma narrative tradition.[3]

The author of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (*AdhyRm*) chose to focus on devotion to the god Viṣṇu, now unambiguously identified as the hero, rather than on the narrative as such. Substantial differences from the original *VRm* narrative are rare; his plot is interspersed, and frequently interrupted, by philosophical reflections and hymns of praise to Rāma.[4] The author of the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa* (*ĀRm*) gains his impact from a much more adventurous narrative technique, with unfamiliar episodes intertwined and recounted at length, many of them analogues of existing

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1 References to the *VRm* are all to the critical edition.

2 The *AdhyRm* is particularly well known to scholars of NIA languages for its influence on the narratives of such authors as Tulsīdās. Fuller details of similar motifs in other pre-nineteenth century versions can be found by searching the Oxford Research Archive for *Development and spread of the Rāma narrative (pre-modern)* deposited by John Brockington and Mary Brockington (section C. "Narrative Elements").

3 Scholars of ancient and mediaeval Sanskrit will recognise the impossibility of providing completely authoritative dates of composition of any constituent part of the now extant texts. Scholars of traditional narrative development and of motif transfer will recognise the additional impossibility of dating particular areas of content, even of supposedly datable texts.

4 I deal only with the narrative, not any of the theological or philosophical elements involved in such a profound and far-reaching change of direction.

episodes almost amounting to parody. Some of the insertions give a more homely, human touch to the *ĀRm*'s now-divine characters.

Reflecting the religious understanding of the time, the metaphorical "encounter" between Rāma and Viṣṇu is no secret in either the *Adhyātma* or the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇas*: both are completely permeated with the knowledge that Rāma is Viṣṇu on earth. Not only does the audience know the hero's identity, so do every one of the characters; commonly, each of the *Adhyātma*'s episodes is rounded off by a hymn of worship offered by the one he encounters. Svayaṃprabhā, a female ascetic who has met only Rāma's representatives—the *vānaras* searching for Sītā, whom she helps when they enter her cave—must undertake a long journey to meet the god in person; she is not satisfied by an encounter by proxy.

Grafting one more of Viṣṇu's repeated interventions on earth on to the existent story of the human Rāma's deeds proved a deceptively simple task, creating many anomalies. Within the established *VRm*, references to the hero's identity with Viṣṇu had been rare, limited to his incarnation, his return to heaven, and a few areas of Agastya's post-victory narratives,[5] with Rāma himself unaware of any non-human identity. As Viṣṇu, he is now fully aware of his divinity, and that its implications involve a revision of the hero's purpose: no longer to rescue Sītā from Rāvaṇa, but to use her abduction as a pretext to enable him to rescue the whole cosmos from the all-powerful *rākṣasa* king. Before his aborted consecration as *yuvarāja*, Rāma assures Nārada that he has not forgotten his duty to kill Rāvaṇa and is preparing to embark upon it the next day.[6] So what now is the point of the immediately succeeding summary of the exile episode, evoking in the audience's minds the form established long before in the *VRm*? With its stress on upholding personal integrity whatever the cost, with all its drama, with Daśaratha's dilemma and death so pathetic and degrading, now with the added intervention of the gods via Vāṇī to ensure that it occur with the minimum damage to the human characters' reputation, that episode had secured the moral and ethical high ground for the heroes. It is now worse than unnecessary. It is all false. And Viṣṇu callously allows this torment to be inflicted on his earthly family: Rāma has already decided to leave for Daṇḍaka.[7] The three-way encounter between tradition, author, and audience expectations far outweighs the logical consequences of this "encounter" between Rāma and Viṣṇu.

It is clear that such a radical transformation of the main character in the narrative could only have been made with a corresponding transformation of the two chief subsidiary characters, Rāvaṇa his enemy, and, more especially, Sītā his wife. The rest of this chapter will focus on them.

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5 *VRm* 1,14–16; 6,105; 7,1–36 (see M. Brockington, forthcoming); 7,94–100.

6 *AdhyRm* 2,1.36–1.39.

7 *AdhyRm* 2,2–3; cf. *ĀRm* 1,6.33–73.

1 Rāvaṇa

The effect on Rāma's adversaries, above all Rāvaṇa himself, is particularly striking. No longer are evil-doers punished by being automatically consigned to Yama's abode, but are governed by the belief that any sinner who has ever thought about Rāma, even if only in anger or fear, enters into him after death.[8] This belief has a startling—even ludicrous—effect on the traditional narrative, particularly in the *AdhyRm*, where death at the hero's hands is now universally welcomed, for example by Mārīca, the decoy deer,[9] and actively sought by Rāvaṇa.

Realising that the man capable of slaughtering Khara, Dūṣaṇa (two of Rāvaṇa's brothers) and their whole *rākṣasa* army can only be Viṣṇu incarnate, Rāvaṇa resolves to abduct Sītā, arrogantly assuming that death or triumph are equally likely and equally rewarding.[10] At a late stage in the development of the *VRm*, an episode in which Rāvaṇa was declared to have lost all desire to rape another victim entered the tradition,[11] so a new excuse for his menacing behaviour to his captive is clumsily devised: impatient when Rāma does not arrive on Laṅkā as quickly as he hopes, and having dreamt about the imminent arrival of Hanumān, he decides to allow the monkey to overhear his threats, assuming that they will be reported back and hasten Rāma's arrival.[12] Towards the end of the final battle, he reveals to his wife his plan to achieve liberation (*mokṣa*) when he rejects her pleas that he make peace with Rāma[13]; the equivalent scene in the *ĀRm* is followed by Rāvaṇa's instruction to share his bliss by entering his funeral fire, an instruction she piously observes.[14] Rāvaṇa's faith has not been misplaced, and he duly gains liberation.[15]

Despite this radical modification of Rāvaṇa's objective, as far as the basic narrative is concerned nothing much changes. Anomalies abound. Rāvaṇa continues to urge his troops to action, despite—perhaps reinforced by—warnings of Rāma's divine identity,[16] mourns the deaths of his warriors,[17] and displays increasing personal anxiety, fear and dejection as his own defeat approaches.[18] Is this emotion

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8 *AdhyRm* 6,11.88.
9 *AdhyRm* 3,6.36–37.
10 *AdhyRm* 3,5.58–61; 3,6.30–32. Another version of this motif involves Sanatkumāra (*AdhyRm* 7,3.29–43, cf. *VRm* 7,App.3.131–340).
11 *VRm* 7,26.47; cf. *MBh* 3,264.58–59; 3,275.32–33.
12 *AdhyRm* 5,2.15–20.
13 *AdhyRm* 6,10.55–61.
14 *ĀRm* 1,11.242–244, 285.
15 *AdhyRm* 6,11.79–89; *ĀRm* 1,11.283.
16 *AdhyRm* 6,2; 6,5.37–40.
17 *AdhyRm* 6,6.1; 6,8.53.
18 *AdhyRm* 6,3.58–59; 6,11.44; 6,11.58.

all sham? Does he not want his family and followers to share his eventual bliss? Does he not trust them to make the same necessary self-sacrifice? There is no indication in the text of any such devious subtlety in the *rākṣasa* king's nature. Will his plan fail if his opponent no longer perceives him to be a serious threat to the cosmos whose safety he has become incarnate to secure? Evidently the pull of the traditional narrative is too strong for such a wholesale re-direction.

In fact, neither the "encounter" between Rāma and Viṣṇu, nor the "encounter" between Rāvaṇa and Viṣṇu, have much impact on the plot-line of *kāṇḍas* 1 to 6. Rāma still goes to the forest; lustful or not, Rāvaṇa still abducts Sītā; Rāma still defeats Rāvaṇa, rescues Sītā, and becomes king of Ayodhyā. What leads to major, far-reaching—sensational even—developments of plot and character is the "encounter" between Sītā and Viṣṇu, on which the rest of this chapter will now focus.

2 Sītā

The Sītā of the earlier stages of the Rāma story had always been portrayed as a strong woman, assertive but dutiful, and capable of enduring severe hardship. At first she is simply Janaka's daughter, but soon recognised as daughter of Earth, to whom she defiantly returns when the purpose of her birth has been fulfilled and her sons have been acknowledged as Rāma's true-born successors.[19] Only when the logical consequence of her husband's unequivocal identification as Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is acknowledged does she begin to be identified as a personification of Śrī or Lakṣmī,[20] necessarily undergoing striking developments in character and narrative.

As a woman and a wife, preserving her chastity in reputation and deed from Rāvaṇa (and even from Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān)[21] had been of paramount importance to her; as Rāma takes up his duties as a human king (as explored particularly in the *VRm Uttarakāṇḍa*), he must not be polluted by an impure wife. Now that he is a god, the pressures are much more urgent. The steadfast human Sītā had protected herself by strident words and by placing a blade of grass between herself and her assailant (a widespread apotropaic symbol).[22] Viṣṇu's wife evidently could not be trusted to succeed in her resistance, and a stark dichotomy in portrayal now begins to develop: on the one hand, she becomes weaker; on the other, morally

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19 *VRm* 7,86–88.
20 This identification had been suggested at only two verses of the *VRm* (6,105.25 and 7,99.6).
21 *VRm* 3,43.1–24 and 5,35.30–68 respectively.
22 *VRm* 3,54.1; 5,19.2–3. Motif retained at *AdhyRm* 5,2.31; *ĀRm* 1,9.77. See J. Brockington 1985–1986; Thompson no date [1955–1958] motif G.272.2 *Protection against witches*.

and sometimes even physically superior to Rāma, she learns to demonstrate her independent status. But both she and her husband are demeaned.

The sexual behaviour of the heroes and heroine is regularly a matter of deep sensitivity. In the *Ānanda*, the sage Mudgala informs Daśaratha in strict secrecy, before Rāma is exiled, that Rāvaṇa and one of his brothers will abduct Sītā, then be killed by Rāma, but that she will remain chaste:[23] clearly, this consideration outweighs any concerns about her suffering. Cursed and no longer lust-driven, Rāvaṇa has not lost his sexual desire; he still wants Sītā to become his wife. The basic plot-line of the exile, abduction, search and war of rescue remains largely unchanged.

What is changed is Rāma's behaviour. Scandal regarding Sītā must be avoided at all costs—short of destroying the traditional narrative; evidently the goddess, unlike her human counterpart, cannot be trusted to resist Rāvaṇa's advances. She can no longer be abducted—or not completely. The *Adhyātma* and *Ānanda* present two different ways of achieving this object.

3 Substitute Sītā (*AdhyRm*)

For a reason not explained in the texts, Rāma knows about Rāvaṇa's plan to abduct Sītā, and instructs her to take counter-measures. The long-established narrative, and his need for an excuse to kill Rāvaṇa and annihilate the *rākṣasas* will not allow him to ensure that no abduction takes place at all, so in the *AdhyRm* he tells Sītā to create an identical substitute of herself; it is this counterfeit Sītā who is abducted, while the real one is kept safe by Agni.[24] It is this counterfeit who eventually immolates herself in the sacrificial fire so that Agni can return the real one, unpolluted and unpolluting. To make doubly sure of her purity (or more probably, merely to retain the earlier motif) Rāvaṇa is said to treat the substitute Sītā "as if she were his own mother";[25] his motive is no longer personal lust, but to provoke Rāma to kill and liberate him.

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23 *ĀRm* 1,4.111–114.
24 *AdhyRm* 1,1.38; 3,7.1–4. A substitute Sītā also appears in a number of Purāṇas, some occurrences possibly earlier than when the motif comes to the fore in the *AdhyRm* (see footnote 2 above); the motif is a particular feature of the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās (3,23.1–3).
25 *AdhyRm* 3,7.65.

4 Narrative adaptation of the concept of the three *guṇas* (*ĀRm*)

A more fanciful and highly-developed form of this protective device, equally dependent on Sītā's possession of supernatural powers, is adopted in the *ĀRm*. Instructed by Rāma, she transforms herself into the three *guṇas*: it is in her form as *rajoguṇī* that she safeguards herself by entering the fire[26] and as *tamoguṇī* that she remains in Pañcavatī, asks Rāma to follow the marvellous deer, abuses Lakṣmaṇa, and is abducted by Rāvaṇa;[27] but as *sattvaguṇī* she resides in Rāma's left limbs.[28] Again, after vindication by Agni, the three forms reunite:[29] presumably the impurity suffered by the abducted *tamoguṇī* (unlike that of the *AdhyRm's* counterfeit) has somehow been mitigated.

The "encounter" between Rāma and Viṣṇu has become fraught with difficulties. To save the whole cosmos from destruction, the god is to undertake a devastating war, to rescue a woman whom he knows is not his wife, from the lust of a monster now devoid of lust, but simply wishing to be killed by the god. The Rāma story was conceived as a Wonder Tale, a genre that by its very nature cannot be governed by logic; now that the narrative is being transformed into a serious theological and devotional treatise, it is in danger of subsiding into absurdity. In an ill-conceived effort to rescue the beloved tale from degenerating into complete farce, the concept of *līlā* (or "motiveless play") is introduced. Rāma, Sītā, and Rāvaṇa all attain their ends by deliberately acting a part. As far as the basic inherited narrative outline is concerned, nothing much changes; but the new approach is in danger of ruining the reputations of hero, heroine and villain alike, almost to the point of caricature.

Anomalies continue to abound. It is not only Rāvaṇa who is robbed of all humanity. Sītā is now admired as a wonder-worker, no longer valued for her staunch virtue. Worst of all, Rāma himself is made to seem indifferent to the feelings and sufferings of Lakṣmaṇa, in a way that accords poorly with the image of benevolence currently being projected to his devotees and enemies alike. The ever-loyal, self-sacrificing brother is still required to mourn and search for Sītā while bearing the guilt for her [non-]abduction, supporting and consoling his apparently-mourning brother, and he still fights to the edge of death to recover a woman who has not been lost—all because Rāma has not told him of the substitution and the *līlā*. And Rāma is no longer required to yearn for the physical presence of his wife, so movingly portrayed by the erotic symbolism at *VRm* 4,1 and 4,27; in the *Ānanda*

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26 *ĀRm* 1,12.7–10.
27 *ĀRm* 1,7.94–96, 107–108.
28 *ĀRm* 1,7.67–68, 89–90; 4,3.52–54.
29 *ĀRm* 1,12.11.

he can enjoy her presence any time he desires her (preferably in the absence of Lakṣmaṇa).[30] Indeed, the traditional Rāma story has been robbed of much of the poetry that made it great.

5 *Uttarakāṇḍa*

In the *VRm,* the basic narrative of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (*sargas* 37–100) explores the theme of sovereignty, leading to the succession of the next generation. Kuśa and Lava and their cousins must be enabled to grow up before their parents leave them, so Sītā, still the humanoid daughter of Earth, is called upon to defend her conduct during captivity. When her sons are old enough to be recognised as undoubtedly Rāma's sons (not Rāvaṇa's) they are accepted back into Rāma's court from banishment. Sītā is still under some suspicion, and Rāma unreflectingly invites her to make some public attestation of her virtue that will leave no doubt as to her sons' legitimacy. Sītā, however, has both outlived her usefulness to the narrator and has learned much in her years of exclusion, dramatically and defiantly outwitting her unsuspecting husband to vindicate her conduct but also to return to the safe care of her mother, Earth.[31]

Once Sītā has "encountered" Viṣṇu and become Śrī, this plot is no longer appropriate, but it is a beloved element of the inherited narrative, and must be retained in some form. The *Adhyātma* and *Ānanda Rms* elaborate the banishment motif in very different ways, each bringing Sītā to the fore and giving her a much greater role in directing her own destiny. The author of this part of the *AdhyRm* tries to reconcile Sītā's return to Earth with her status as Śrī. Pregnant, she has been asked by the *devas* to return to Vaikuṇṭha (Viṣṇu's heaven), in order to entice Rāma to follow her and resume his role as Viṣṇu; together the devoted couple plan their strategy. In the full knowledge and approval of each other, he will banish her on the pretext of the townspeople's gossip; eventually she is to enter the earth in the traditional way (i.e. as daughter of Earth), but then gain as it were a back-door

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30 This situation inevitably leads to the standard discovery scene, that backbone of the bedroom farce genre. During the monsoon delay, the *sattvaguṇī* is once discovered by Lakṣmaṇa in company with Rāma; she hurriedly disappears back into his left side: *ĀRm* 1,8.74–76. On the comic possibilities of counterfeit characters in some classical *Rāmāyaṇa nāṭyas* see M. Brockington 2020.

31 *VRm* 7,86–88. Thompson no date [1955–1958], Thompson/Balys 1958, motif: *F 942.3.1.* There can be little doubt that this episode antedates the fire-suicide and restoration now incongruously inserted into the end of the *VRm Yuddhakāṇḍa*. I have a study of the narrative structure of the *VRm Uttarakāṇḍa* in preparation; I hope to publish the results in a future update of our ORA archive (see footnote 2, section F. "New Beginnings").

entry into heaven as Śrī, where he will later rejoin her.[32] Still engaging in *līlā*, all emotion—Sītā's despair at banishment and Rāma's rage at her disappearance into Earth—will again be feigned. The ploy, however, is not implemented in every detail. The pull of the received narrative is too strong. Sītā disappears into the earth,[33] but is also present when Rāma leaves for heaven in the traditional mass suicide in response to Brahmā's summons via Kāla, flanked by Lakṣmī and Earth.[34] This anomaly is resolved in the *Ānanda*: when Sītā is received into the earth, Rāma's rage is so extreme that Earth is frightened into returning her daughter so that she may later return to heaven in the Sarāyu at Rāma's side as Lakṣmī.[35]

The *ĀRm's* treatment of Rāma's life post-consecration is much more relaxed and all-inclusive. The account contained in the first six *kāṇḍas* of the *VRm*, ending with his triumphant return to Ayodhyā, is reflected in all but the last *sarga* of the first of the nine *kāṇḍas* of the *Ānanda Rm*, the *Sārakāṇḍa*; the rest of the text (about three-quarters of the whole) is a sprawling compendium, loosely corresponding to the *Uttarakāṇḍa* material but supplemented by many unfamiliar episodes that sometimes seem incompatible with the traditional picture of Rāma and Sītā, whether human or divine. The understandable suspicions voiced by a washerman that caused her banishment in the *VRm* and the *AdhyRm* are repeated at *ĀRm* 5,3.21–31, but incongruously supplemented by a calumny perpetrated by Kaikeyī in a renewal of her plot to disable Rāma and place Bharata on the throne. Sītā is tricked into an appearance of hankering after Rāvaṇa as a lover. This motif is shared in many forms with a wide number of other versions, and particularly developed with savage consequences in Southeast Asia; but this is the only one I have met that is robbed of all drama and pathos because the two victims (Rāma and Sītā) are well aware of the deceit aimed at them, while themselves practising a huge deceit upon the guileless Lakṣmaṇa and the population as a whole.[36]

We are now presented with a fundamental modification of the character of Rāma. Known from his earliest appearance as a human to be both sexually passionate and the model of endurance, constantly supported in the absence of Sītā by his understanding brother, now that he is a god he admits to being too weak to be capable of any self-control when presented with the social restrictions commonly associated with childbirth and nursing mothers; in a polygamous culture one wife can be secluded for a considerable time, protecting her health and that of the child until a second pregnancy can be contemplated; the husband is not deprived, but the monogamous Rāma cannot trust himself to deal with such a long abstinence. The

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32 *AdhyRm* 7,4.36–44.
33 *AdhyRm* 7,7.16–20,40–45.
34 As *VRm* 7,99.6; *AdhyRm* 7,9.39–40, 58.
35 *ĀRm* 5,3.9–11; 9,6.1–30; cf. *VRm* 7,App.13.
36 *ĀRm* 5,3.36–59; 4.1–20.

banishment therefore becomes a pretext to allow Sītā to retire to live in luxury for five years cared for by her parents in Vālmīki's hermitage,[37] while Rāma's difficulty is solved by resorting again to the device of *guṇas*. This time, instructed by Rāma, Sītā transforms herself into two *guṇas*, one to retire to Vālmīki's hermitage to keep up appearances, and the other to remain in his left side—the third not being needed at this stage of the plot.[38] Rāma is not deprived of sexual comfort during her seclusion, nor Sītā of luxury. Nonetheless, Rāma keeps in touch with the banished Sītā, and visits her secretly after the birth of Kuśa.[39]

Even when we first meet her in the *Vālmīki* text Sītā exhibits an assertive side to her nature, while never lacking in respect to her husband, until her defiant re-entry into the earth. Throughout the tradition, instances of this characteristic begin to become more marked: the *ĀRm* has two of very different tone. In a surprisingly indelicate episode Sītā questions Rāma's sexual restraint, in a parody of the unwarranted allegations to which she had been subjected: wrongly suspecting Rāma of adultery with the prostitute Piṅgalā, she demands he make a solemn declaration of his innocence before Vasiṣṭha. That he agrees to perform this act of abasement accords ill with his position as a powerful and righteous king; it also covers Sītā with shame, and she punishes Piṅgalā spitefully,[40] in a stark contrast to her earlier forgiving nature when she refused Hanumān permission to wreak vengeance on her *rākṣasī* captors.[41] Husband and wife are both demeaned in this male-centred episode: the blame rests squarely on both women, but the man, though virtuous, is spineless.

6 Sītā-centred narratives

In a Kāśmīrī reworking of lengthy devotional songs, the late-eighteenth century poet Prakāśa Rāma presents a defiant but essentially feminine Sītā. Many parts both of the narrative and the devotional songs are specifically Sītā-centred, bringing her sufferings to the fore, while many others demonstrate an understanding of a female approach to life; it is sometimes hard to believe that they were composed by a man.[42] Torn between duty to her family and appraisal of the realities of her

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37 *ĀRm* 5,2.33–54, 3.1–13.
38 *ĀRm* 5,3.14–17.
39 *ĀRm* 5,4.21–35.
40 *ĀRm* 4,8.48–99.
41 *VRm* 6,101.23–39.
42 Hanumān, for example, shows a tender concern for the young assailant (his unknown son) who tries to prevent him entering Mahīrāvaṇa's subterranean realm to rescue Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa from captivity, in an affecting, extensive passage (*Rāmāvatāracarita*: 79–82) more typical of a mother than a warrior. The terror of the distraught Mandodarī (Sītā's

own situation, Sītā at last refuses to return to Ayodhyā after her sons have been acknowledged by their father, but remains in her hut in the hermitage, adamantly refusing to unbolt the door, leaving the King of All the Earth outside, humiliated and desperate, begging her in vain to admit him.[43] Prakāśa Rāma presents Sītā in a moving evocation of the female condition. This is no comic parody. This is not *līlā*. It is not feigned. This emotion is real.

The work of Candrāvatī (end of sixteenth century) presents another moving and undeservedly little-known example of a woman at last finding a voice: a rare example of a woman's *Rāmāyaṇa* still extant, with the focus largely on Sītā and her sufferings, rather than on Rāma's military achievements. The translators present a searching and illuminating examination of this Bengali reworking of the traditional narrative, together with information about her other two known works.[44]

7 Militant Sītā

In an entirely different revisioning of Sītā's submissive character, a number of tellings attribute a physically militant component to Sītā's nature, both in relation to Rāvaṇa himself and to newly created would-be avengers. In the *Ānanda* this motif had been linked to the episode where Sītā is born as the daughter of Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī, as a rebirth of the abused Vedavatī/Padmā;[45] at verses 246 to 247 the newborn baby had threatened to return, after causing the slaughter of Rāvaṇa, to personally kill a number of *rākṣasa* monsters (some of them multi-headed), a threat which initiates a chain of incidents leading to her adoption by her foster-father, Janaka. A similar threat is repeated by Sītā as a captive.[46] Later in the narrative Rāma himself easily disposes of one new enemy, a Rāvaṇa with one hundred heads,[47] but is thwarted by Mūlakāsura (posthumous son of Kumbhakarṇa, one of Rāvaṇa's brothers, anxious to avenge his father's killing by Rāma); his secret

birth mother), mingled with a sense of responsibility both to daughter and to unknowingly incestuous husband (Rāvaṇa) are repeatedly explored with sensitive understanding (e.g. *Rāmāvatāracarita* 2001: 37–39, 55–56, 98–104).

43 *Rāmāvatāracarita* 2001: 131–142. This motif of the once-submissive wife, now distrustful of her husband and happy with the independent life she has built for herself in the forest is shared with many other versions, within India and beyond; it is particularly developed in the Southeast Asian Buddhist-derived texts, unhampered as they are by the concept of Rāma as God.

44 Candrāvatī 2013. A large number of further studies, by Mandakrānta Bose, too many to list here, can be found by consulting our ORA archive: Section B. "Bibliographic Inventory".

45 *ĀRm* 1,3.222–254.

46 *ĀRm* 1,9.91–97.

47 *ĀRm* 7,4.80–85.

weapon is not multiple heads, but a boon from Brahmā that he can be killed only by a woman.[48] With Rāma's active encouragement, Sītā again resorts to her *tāmasī guṇa*, which fights Mūlakāsura (alone) for seven days before beheading him with an arrow, to the delight of the gods.[49] A more elaborate narrative relates essentially the same tale in the *Jaimini Bhārata*.[50] In both, the terrific form adopted to perform this feat by Sītā as Śrī/Lakṣmī, but now as a form of the Devī, clearly reflects *śākta* influence. Her status has now become so high that she can be unquestionably accorded any of the attributes of divinity.

This process is carried to the extreme in the *Adbhuta Rm,* a text devoted to extolling Sītā as the Supreme Goddess, with the Rāma-based *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative abbreviated almost to extinction (so well was it known that this narrator felt no need to repeat its details). It is not a magic boon that prevents Rāma from defeating his multi-headed adversary in this text: Rāma is defeated by military power. The supreme warrior's supremacy is questioned, and he falls unconscious[51] until revived by the touch of Brahmā after the victorious Sītā has exterminated the demon.[52] Trampling Śiva beneath her feet,[53] Sītā is then engaged in such a ghoulish dance of triumph that the stability of the world is threatened. Rāma learns from Brahmā that he can do nothing without her[54] and recites her one thousand and eight names to praise her;[55] appeased, she reverts to her pleasing form in the next *sarga*. This Sītā has the power to become Parameśvarī Kālī and rule supreme over the whole cosmos.[56]

It seems almost as if Rāma's "encounter" with Viṣṇu has presented him, in different narrative contexts, with two wives of diametrically opposite natures. Both natures are based on the character of Sītā as originally presented in the *VRm*, where she is not only submissive to Rāma but unashamedly assertive. When developed to the extreme, it is not just Sītā who is affected. The "encounter" can leave Rāma himself, acknowledged first as Viṣṇu incarnate, then as the God Rām, on the one hand indiscriminately benevolent, but also sometimes pietistic rather than trustful, uxorious rather than loving; at other times the supreme warrior is impotent, terrified by his wife.

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48 *ĀRm* 1,3.246–247; 9.94; 7,4.86–89.

49 *ĀRm* 7,4.84–144; 5.74–77; 6.1–23.

50 *JMbh* vol. 2, *Sahasramukharāvaṇacaritam* 1.16; 10.28–30; 6.16–30; 8.8–9; 26.16–17; 44–47.

51 *AdbhRm* 22.50.

52 *AdbhRm* 24.26.

53 *AdbhRm* 24.30.

54 *AdbhRm* 24.42.

55 *AdbhRm* 25.

56 Examined by Raghavan (1988: 3–22); for further treatments of this episode see Smith 1988: 136–145.

But Rāvaṇa Daśagrīva has got what he wants out of the "encounter". He is in heaven. So has Rāvaṇa won?

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