

On Fire Ordeal: Who and Why? Ācārya Tulsī's *Agni-parīkṣā* or a Modern Jain Telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

1. Contextualizing *Agni-parīkṣā*

Ācārya Tulsī (1914–1997) was one of the most prominent modern Jain teachers and religious leaders, a figure of pan-Indian stature reaching far beyond the limits of his community. In the years 1936–1994, he served as the ninth Ācārya of the Śvetāmbara Terāpanth¹ and in 1949, he initiated the Anuvrat Movement, or the movement of ‘little/partial vows’ (*aṇuvrata*) for the Jain laity as a moderate version of the five great vows (*mahāvratā*) of Jain ascetics: nonviolence (*ahimsā*), truth (*satya*), abstention from stealing (*asteya*), chastity (*brahmacharya*), and renunciation of all possessions (*aparigraha*). He was also instrumental in establishing, in 1991, the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute in Ladnun (Rajasthan), his birthplace.²

1 More on the history, doctrine and practice of Terāpanth order see Peter Flügel, *Askese und Devotion. Das rituelle System der Terāpanth Śvetāmbara Jaina*, Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien, vol. 56.1–2, ed. Albrecht Wezler and Lambert Schmithausen, Dettelbach: J.H. Röhl, 2018 (a copy by courtesy of the author), and esp. on Tulsī: vol. 1, pp. 228–232, 927.

2 The Jain Vishva Bharati Institute (now University) evolved from the Shiksha Kendra—founded in 1971—a study centre for Terāpanth mendicants that in 1977 was integrated into the Jain Vishva Bharati (JVB), also founded in 1971. In 1991, it was accorded the status of a ‘Deemed to be University’. In 2006, its name was changed to Jain Vishva Bharati University. Concentrating on the academic education of the members of the Terāpanth order, it is also open for non-Terāpanthīs and non-Jains. Peter Flügel, ‘The Codes of Conduct of the Terāpanth Samaṇ Order’, *South Asia Research*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2003, p. 8; <http://www.jvbi.ac.in/> (accessed 14.04.2018) and <http://www.jvbharati.org/activities/education/jvbuniversity/> (accessed 7.07.2018).

Tulsī is the author of many works not only on the doctrine and practice of Jainism but also of literary texts,³ one of which is his *Agni-parīkṣā* (1961)⁴, a poem written in Hindi that focuses on Sītā and events related to her banishment by Rām. It is based on the tradition of Vimalasūri's *Paūmacariya*,⁵ written in Jain Māhārāṣṭrī Prakrit (?478 AD⁶). This tradition was continued by later Jain authors, with different narrative and/or doctrinal alterations, in Sanskrit, e.g. by Raviṣeṇa (7th century) and Hemacandra (12th century), in Apabhraṃśa by Svayambhūdeva (8th century) and in Rajasthani Hindi by Keśrāj (17th century) in his *Rām-yaśo-rasāyan-rās* that has proven very popular in Sthānakavāsī and Terāpanthī Jain communities and is said to have wielded a major influence on Tulsī.⁷

The pedigree of Tulsī's poem should also be sought in Jain narratives about the lives of outstanding characters. Sherry Fohr, in her book on Jainism⁸, points to the popularity of these narratives, noting that they help explicate 'some basic Jain values, beliefs, and practices through its narrative tradition. (...) Narratives about those who are considered heroic and/or spiritually accomplished often provide models for culturally and religiously successful action in the world', and she further adds that 'Jainism is unusual in South Asia [as] the only religion in which there is an entire genre of narratives that provides paradigms of ideal religiosity for both laywomen and nuns'.⁹

Sītā occupies a special place in Jain narratives such as *kathās* or *caritras*. This is consistent with the tradition of *satīs*, or virtuous women empowered with miraculous might stemming from their chastity, where Sītā is commonly recog-

3 Many of them are available from the online library of the JVBI.

4 Ācārya Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, ed. by Sāgarmal and Mahendrakumār 'Pratham', Dillī: Ātmārām eṇḍ Sans, 1961.

5 Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 12.

6 *Paūmacariya*'s dates range from the first to the fifth centuries AD; see John E. Cort, *Framing the Jina: Narratives of Icons and Idols in Jain History*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 50.

7 Śivāśaṅkar Trivedī, *Ācārya Śrī Tulsī kṛt 'Agni-parīkṣā' kī agni-parīkṣā*, Sardārśahar: Śivāśaṅkar Trivedī, Sṛjan-Cetnā, 1970, p. 42. For *Rām-yaśo-rasāyan-rās* see e.g. Jyoti Prasad Jain (ed.), *Muni Keśrāj kṛt sacitr Rām-yaśo-rasāyan-rās jain Rāmāyaṇ/The Illustrated Manuscript of Jaina Ramayana*, Arrah: Sree Dev Kumar Jain Oriental Research Institute, [1990].

8 Sherry Fohr, *Jainism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

9 Fohr, *Jainism*, p. 2.

nized as one of the sixteen *mahāsatis* (‘great virtuous women’)¹⁰. Some of these *satī*-related stories fall within well-studied texts of ‘Jain Universal Histories’, such as Hemacandra’s *Triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣacaritra* devoting its considerable part to *mahāsati* Sītā, as well as within independent *satī*-narratives, most of which have yet to be studied or reconsidered, such as the anonymous Sanskrit *mahākāvya Sītācaritra* (n.d.), Bhuvanatuṅgasūri’s *Sīyacariya* in Prakrit (? 14th century?, before the end of the 16th century), Samaysundar’s Maru-Gurjar *Sītārāma-caupāī* (1631), or the mid-seventeenth-century Braj Bhāṣa *Sītācarit* by Rāmcand Bālak (1657).¹¹

The above-mentioned texts had a more or less direct bearing on Tulsī’s *Agni-parīkṣā* that published in book form by a well-known Delhi publisher (Atmaram and Sons) was in fact intended to reach an audience much larger than the Jain community. It is also worth mentioning here that the Jain *satī*-narratives are still told by Jain renouncers in sermons to laypeople,¹² which—as we shall see further in this paper—also fell into the lot of *Agni-parīkṣā*, a modern poem and not a traditional *satī*-narrative.

Concluding this short introduction, we can say that *Agni-parīkṣā* belongs to this thriving current of pan-Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives in which Sītā is not only given special importance but also has a fully fledged narrative subjectivity and acts in her own right as the main character. In this context, it seems noteworthy that especially in the later phase of the early modern period, outside the Jain lore, works of this kind have become of special significance in Mithilā, the birthplace of Sītā-Maithilī, in the form of *Sītāyāns* exemplified by such works as the eight-

10 The lives and deeds of *mahāsatis* are recorded both in Jain canonical and non-canonical literature which documents their transition from pious laywomen to nuns. For more see Manisha Sethi, ‘Chastity and Desire: Representing Women in Jainism’, *South Asian History and Culture* 2009, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 45. Nalini Balbir lists the following sixteen *mahāsatis*: Brāhmī, Sundarī, Candanbālā, Rājīmatī, Draupadī, Kausalyā, Mṛgavatī, Sulasā, Sītā, Damayanī, Śivādevī, Kuntī, Subhādrā, Celanā, Prabhāvatī, Padmāvatī; eadem, ‘Women in Jainism in India’, in *Women in Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 82; cf. M. Whitney Keltling, ‘Thinking Collectively about Jain Satīs: The Uses of Jain Satī Name Lists’, in *Studies in Jaina History and Culture. Disputes and Dialogues*, Routledge, ed. Peter Flügel, London-New York 2006, esp. pp. 181, 191–192 and Fohr, *Jainism*, p. 56. The most venerated of them is Candanbālā, who was ordained by Mahāvīra as the first Jain nun.

11 For the dates of these works and more on Sītā-related *kathās* or *caritras* see Adrian Plau, ‘The Deeds of Sītā. A Critical Edition and Literary Contextual Analysis of the *Sītācarit* by Rāmcand Bālak’, PhD Dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 2018, eg. pp. 10, 29, 42, 85–87. See also his paper ‘Vernacular Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* as *Satī-Kathās*: Familiar Structure, Innovative Narrative’ in this volume (p. 177–193).

12 Fohr, *Jainism*, p. 56.

eenth-century Maithilī poem by Rāmpriyāśaraṇ¹³ a *mahant* from Janakpur, or *Sītāyān* by Vaidyanāth Mallik ‘Vidhu’—an entirely contemporary epic, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976.¹⁴

In the discussion of Tulsī’s *Agni-parīkṣā* that is based on the tradition of Vimalasūri, it is essential that one is aware of the most specific features of this tradition as they translate into the narrative and the functions of its protagonists. The main characters here are: Padma, or Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa. They represent one of the nine triadic configurations of *baladevas*—*vāsudevas*—*prativāsudevas* who appear in each time cycle and belong to the group of 63 great illustrious men (*triṣaṣṭīśalākāpuruṣa*). Padma-Rāma is the eighth *baladeva*, Lakṣmaṇa—the eighth *vāsudeva*, and Rāvaṇa—the eighth *prativāsudeva*. The actual opponents are Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa—Rāvaṇa dies at the hands of Lakṣmaṇa. After Lakṣmaṇa’s death, Rāma becomes a Jain monk, attains perfect knowledge and later receives liberation, becoming a *siddha puruṣa*. Lakṣmaṇa, before he can be liberated, has to go to hell (the fourth one) as killing Rāvaṇa meant renouncing *ahiṃsā*. Rāvaṇa suffered the same fate as Lakṣmaṇa, although he went to the third hell, as he could not control his passion for Sītā, someone else’s wife. They are ethically and narratively both doomed to each other in consecutive births but finally achieve liberation. From the theological and ethical point of view, Rāma is the most important in this triad—it is only he who, as a model of Jain *dharma*, achieves liberation immediately after death, while Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa must wait with liberation until their next birth, having broken the laws of *dharma*. Sītā, in turn, becomes a Jain nun and devotes herself to terrible mortifications after which she is reborn in the twelfth, of sixteen, heaven (*devlok*). Significantly, it is her power (of chastity) that helps Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa achieve liberation.¹⁵

13 Rāmpriyāśaraṇ, *Śrī Sītāyān*, Janakpur: Janakpur: Udyog Vāṇijya Saṅgh, 1994, pp. iv–v.

14 Vaidyanāth Mallik ‘Vidhu’, *Sītāyān: mahākāvya (maithilī sāhitya kā utkrṣṭ granth)*, Rājanagar: Sītāyān Prakāśan, 2031 (1974); Mohan Lal (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature: Volume 5—Sasay to Zorgot*, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992, pp. 4114–4115. There is a number of other works focused on Sītā in different languages which could be mentioned here, such as K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar’s *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-Born in English* (Madras: Samata, 1987) or more recent Vayu Naidu’s *Sītā’s Ascent* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012), both in English.

15 Cf. V.M. Kulkarni, ‘Jain Rāmāyaṇas and Their Source’, in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. Raghavan, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980, pp. 226–241; V.M. Kulkarni, *The Story of Rāma in Jain Literature as Presented by the Śvetāmbara and Digambara Poets in the Prakrit, Sanskrit and Apabhraṃśa Languages*, Ahmedabad: Saraswati Pustak Bhandar, 1990; K.R. Chandra, *A Critical Study of Paumacariyam*, Vaishali: Research Institute

This role of Sītā draws our attention to the fact that the Jainism of the Śvetāmbara denomination came—increasingly over time—to consider women as independent subjects on the spiritual path. Although they stand lower in the community hierarchy, they have a chance to renounce their secular life and attain liberation. Śvetāmbaras, unlike Digambaras, maintain that the nineteenth *tīr-thaṅkara*, Māllīnātha, was a woman.¹⁶ It is observed by scholars that, apparently, nudity as a fundamental concept associated with the ascetic Digambara path added to the non-subjective status of nuns in their community and deprived them of the possibility of liberation, which is possible only in the next incarnation, if they are reborn a man. Interestingly, in terms of numbers women dominate Jain monastic communities.¹⁷

2. *Agni-parīkṣā*: An Overview

Agni-parīkṣā was composed in 1960 during *cāturmās*¹⁸ in Rajnagar, in Rajasthan, in an aftermath of *cāturmās* spent in Calcutta and a long walk back to Rajasthan. Tulsī would work on the poem until late at night after the evening prayers. He was assisted by two monks—one of them (Sāgarmal), thanks to his ability to write in the dark, noted down the poem, and the other one (Sohanlāl Seṭhiyā) supported Tulsī with his excellent memory.¹⁹

of Prakrit, Jainology and Ahimsa, 1970, pp. 252–265; Eva De Clercq, ‘Jain Rāmāyaṇas’, <http://www.jainpedia.org/themes/principles/sacred-writings/other-writings/jain-ramayan.html> (accessed 8.04.2018) and http://nileshpatni.blogspot.com/2017_05_09_archive.html (accessed 27.06.2017).

¹⁶ Flügel, *Askese und Devotion*, vol. 56.2, pp. 426–427 and Cort, *Framing the Jina*, p. 289, note 5.

¹⁷ For numbers see Flügel, *Studies in Jaina History and Culture*, chapter ‘Demographic Trends in Jaina Monasticism’, pp. 312–398, esp. tables on pp. 322–323 and Balbir, p. 88.

¹⁸ *Cāturmās*—‘four months’ during rainy season when Jains fast, observe austerities, take different vows, e.g. of silence or of abstaining from favourite items and/or activities, listen to religious sermons etc. It begins on the eleventh day of the light half of the month of *āṣāṛh*, known as *śayanī ekādaśī* (e.g. in 2018, it fell on 23 July), and ends on the eleventh day of the light half of the month of *kārttik* (in 2018, *prabodhinī ekādaśī* fell on 19 November). For itinerant monks—and as Fohr notes (*Jainism*, p. 27) ‘the tradition of itinerancy (...) is still preserved today from earlier periods of Jainism’—*cāturmās* means the four-month rainy season retreat, when they have to stay the entire period in one place; they devote a lot of time to teaching and giving sermons not only to the lay Jain community but also to the local public. It is said that during his lifetime Ācārya Tulsī covered over 70,000 km, walking on foot.

¹⁹ Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 17 and Lalwani, p. 127.

The immediate reason behind writing the poem, of which we learn from its second 1972 edition,²⁰ were Tulsī's many years of attempts to understand how mere gossip, the words of one person, a washerman (*dhobī*), might have caused Rām, the paragon of equanimity (*samatva*), to banish *mahāsati* Sītā. In the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Tulsī found the answer that it must have been a large conspiracy, the source of which was *antaḥpur* in Rām's palace, or the female apartments and those who lived there.

The poem was first published in 1961 with an introduction written by the editor Mahendra Kumar 'Pratham', one of the two editors (*sampādak*) of the poem; the other editor was the above-mentioned *muni* Sāgarmal (NB: there was also an editor-in-chief (*prabandh sampādak*) of this version—Sohanlāl Bāfñā). Mahendra Kumar 'Pratham' devotes some fifteen pages to different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and briefly discusses the differences between tellings of the mainstream Hindu tradition, on the one hand, and Jain (as well as Buddhist) tellings, on the other hand, underlining that Tulsī's poem is derived from and based on the tradition of Vimalasūri's *Paūmacariya*. The editor also draws the attention of the potential poem's audience to Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta's *Sāket*²¹ as a source of narrative inspiration, pointing up to the fact that *Agni-parīkṣā* begins exactly where *Sāket* ends—with Rām's return to Ayodhyā²² as well as to the closeness of both works with regard to their structure and style of language. It is worth noting here that this introduction is missing from the second edition of the poem published in 1972.²³

*Agni-parīkṣā*²⁴ is preceded with a blessing stanza (*maṅgalācaraṇ*) in which Rām is addressed as a Jain saint, 'an omniscient being (...) "worthy of worship"'²⁵ (*arhan*): 'Hail, auspicious, supreme lord, *arhan Ātmārām!*'²⁶ The titles of the following eight cantos of the poem clearly indicate their narrative content.

20 Ācārya Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, Cūrū: Ādarś Sāhitya Saṅgh, 1972, p. 6.

21 For more on the composition of this prominent Hindi poem, published in 1932, see Danuta Stasik, *The Infinite Story. The Past and Present of the Rāmāyaṇas in Hindi*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2009, pp. 176–188.

22 *Śrī Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta kā mahākāvya 'Sāket' Ayodhyāgaman ke prasaṅg par pūrṇ hotā hai aur Ācārya Tulsī kā yah pratīṭ kāvya 'Agni-parīkṣā' isī prasaṅg se ārambh hotā hai*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, pp. 12–13.

23 In this edition, unlike in the first one, there is also no mention of the editors.

24 All references in this section are to the 1961 version of the poem.

25 See e.g. the entry *arhat* in *Jainpedia*'s 'Glossary': <http://www.jainpedia.org/resources/glossary/contaggepage/2.html> (accessed 7.07.2018).

26 *jay maṅgalmay param prabhu, / arhan Ātmārām*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 2. This may also be read as referring to the name of the founder of this publishing house.

The first canto, *Śubhāgaman* ('Welcome', pp. 3–18), opens after the exiles, Rām, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇ, return to Ayodhyā from Laṅkā. It depicts their welcome by the entire population of the city and ends with installing Rām as King of Ayodhyā.

The second canto, *Ṣadyantr* ('Conspiracy', pp. 19–43), narrates the plot conceived by Sītā's co-wives (*paṭrāniyā*).²⁷ Disappointed by the fact that Rām has lost his head for her completely, especially after she became pregnant, they aim to make Rām banish Sītā and ask her to draw a picture of Rāvaṇ. At first, she refuses to do so and says that she does not know what Rāvaṇ looks like as in his presence her eyes were always downcast (which, of course, is self-evident proof of Sītā's virtue as a woman). Finally, she yields to her co-wives' repeated requests and draws a picture of Rāvaṇ's feet that, as it soon proves, is used instrumentally against her. Jealous women also spread scandalous rumours against Sītā, basing them on the fact that she was alone in Laṅkā for six months, and Rāvaṇa had always felt a great passion for her.

The third canto, *Parityāg* ('Abandonment', pp. 44–68), narrates how helpless Sītā, at the order of Rām, is left in a terrifying forest by Kṛtānmukh, a commander in Rām's army. Filled with indignation and confused as to why Rām has treated her thus, all that she really wants, quite paradoxically, is that Kṛtānmukh conveys to Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and her co-wives a message with good wishes.

In the fourth canto, *Anutāp* ('Torment', pp. 69–96), Sītā finds shelter in Puṇḍarīkpur ruled by King Vajrajaṅgha. She settles in a hut and, practically speaking, functions there like a Jain nun in an *aṇuvratī* community and is known to everyone merely as 'Sister' (*bahanjī*). When Kṛtānmukh comes back to Ayodhyā and conveys Sītā's message to Rām, he realizes with utter clarity what a mistake he has made in forsaking Sītā. He rushes to the forest to bring her back but unable to find her comes back to Ayodhyā (called Sāket this time), all the while regretting his deed. Nothing pleases him; he stops seeing his queens who, realizing to what a wretched state their actions have brought their husband, regret them sincerely.

The fifth canto, *Pratiśodh* ('Retaliation', pp. 97–120), narrates the life of Sītā's sons, Lav and Aṅkuś—their birth, upbringing and education. When the time of their marriage comes, they learn from ṛṣi Nārad about their lineage, who their father is and that he abandoned Sītā on false accusations. (NB. In this part of the poem, Nārad functions on a principle similar to *deus ex machina*—his sudden appearance is an evident narrative device in the poem, resulting in more or less unexpected twists in the course of action.) Once they get to know this, they

²⁷ This is in compliance with the tradition of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*.

vow to avenge their mother, and with this aim they get ready to proceed to Ayodhyā. Sītā tries to prevent her sons from going there but to no avail.

The ensuing fierce combat of Lav and Aṅkuś with Rām and Lakṣmaṇ is described in the sixth canto, *Milan* ('Meeting', pp. 121–150). The intervention of Nārada puts an end to it. The father and his sons are publicly reconciled.

The narrative reaches its zenith in the seventh canto, *Agni-parīkṣā* ('Ordeal by Fire', pp. 151–174), in which Rām sends Hanumān to bring Sītā back to Ayodhyā. At first, she refuses but then changes her mind, expressing her wish to undergo *agni-parīkṣā*. She thus wants to prove her purity as well as to be cleared of her ill repute.

After Sītā enters fire, it turns into water which forces the panicking people to praise her as Mahāsati. The water rises and floods everything around, which frightens everyone even more. People become aware of the fact that this is a direct result of their wrongdoing—inventing and circulating rumours about Sītā, the one who is Mahāsati. Greatly distressed, they pray to Sītā for forgiveness:

Om, hail Mother Sītā!

There is no saviour but you, oh Mother of the World!

Om, hail Mother Sītā!²⁸

Sītā is moved by the people's prayer and also sees how terrified they are—gesturing with both her hands, she makes the water start to recede. The situation returns to normal. Her sons, Rām and other family members pay Sītā due respect.

The last canto, *Praśasti* ('Eulogy', pp. 175–180), at first glance seems to have no direct relation to the poem's narrative. In fact, it can be seen as *Agni-parīkṣā*'s metatext helping its reader to understand strategies applied in the poem that enhance how its meaning can be construed. There it is stated that although there are many versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Indian culture speaks through all of them and opens 'the knots of cognizance' (*jñān-granthiyā*). Many of these tellings underline Sītā's valour (*Sītā kā śaurya*) that has always been a positive challenge for women and their awakening.²⁹ This canto also refers to the immediate circumstances of the poem's creation and the names of persons who are seen as a source of inspiration for the poet (this also includes Tulsī's mother). An important stimulus for writing down a telling earlier conceived by Tulsī was the bicen-

28 *om jay Sītā Mātā, / tere binā na koī Jagadambe! trātā. / om jay Sītā Mātā; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1961, p. 170.*

29 *vāstav mē Bhārat kī saṃskṛti / hai Rāmāyaṇ mē bol rahī, / apne yug ke saṃvādō se / vah jñān-granthiyā khol rahī. // jis mē Sītā kā śaurya bhārā, / jīvan detā sandeś nayā, / ādeś nayā, upadeś nayā, nārī-jāgrti unmeṣ nayā; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1961, p. 177.*

tenary of the Terāpanth order that fell on 26 June 1960. And the very symbolic date of its completion on 15 August 1960, or the Indian Independence Day, is followed by well-wishing verses for ruling class(es). One may read these verses as an expression of the immersion of *Agni-parīkṣā* in an entirely present-day reality but in fact, by means of a double entendre used here, the poem's audience is also immersed in the Jain context—via the multiple use of the word *vardhamān* ('increasing, growing; prosperous'), Mahāvīra—born as Vardhamāna, the great reviver of the Jain tradition and a paragon of prosperous kingship—is evoked.³⁰

3. From a Work of Poetry to 1970 Riots in Raipur: Causes and Aftermath

In 1970, nine years after the publication of *Agni-parīkṣā*, Ācārya Tulsī was spending *cāturmās* in Raipur, in the-then state of Madhya Pradesh. In his review article on *Agni-parīkṣā*, K.C. Lalwani notes that after all those years after publication, the poem:

became a victim of fanatical agitation and political action (...). If during these years the Sanatanist orthodoxy could survive despite the work, it would have remained equally unscathed even in future. But this was not going to be and the Sanatanist orthodoxy suddenly woke up. (...) behind this Sanatanist uproar there is the hidden hand of some of the leading lights of the Jaina order who never viewed the Acarya's reformist mission with sympathy and who may have provided the necessary fuel to ignite the fire'.³¹

In view of the scarcity of material available on this subject, I have been unable to determine whom Lalwani meant as 'the leading lights of the Jaina order'. At least one source mentions a religious leader who acted against Tulsī and his poem³²; Peter Flügel refers to 'the Śaṅkarācārya sect and the "Hindu government"'.³³ We also learn from Lalwani's review that when the situation had

30 *vardhamān śāsan mudit vardhamān pariṇām. / vardhamān sāhitya hai vardhamān sab kām*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 180. I would like to thank Eva de Clercq for drawing my attention to the double entendre used in these verses.

31 K.C. Lalwani, 'Agni-pariksa (a review article)', *Jain Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1971, p. 134. I express my gratitude to Peter Flügel for drawing my attention to this review.

32 It is said that this leader presented some passages from the book to the public in Raipur, 'claiming that the Acharya had insulted Sita'; <http://aryashaadi.com/svetambar/default.aspx> (accessed 3.06.2018).

33 Flügel, *Askese und Devotion*, vol. 56.2, pp. 721, cf. also p. 927.

already unfolded, Ācārya Tulsī was persuaded ‘to give a sermon on his version of the Rama-story which he did in good faith on August 16, 1970’.³⁴ Public opinion was not convinced by his narrative and fell prey to intensified agitation against *Agni-parīkṣā* (and thus against Tulsī?). All this resulted in the violent communal disturbance that broke out in Raipur on 16 August; the tent in which Tulsī was giving his sermons was burnt down and the town left at the mercy of the rioters.³⁵ The troubles continued until 8 November 1970 when Ācārya Tulsī realized that there was not much he could do to help calm the situation but leave Raipur, which he did despite the fact that Jain monks are not allowed to travel during *cāturmās*.

The book itself, or rather all its copies, were to be confiscated by the Government of Madhya Pradesh by the order of the State Government. Particular allegations were made against the verses on pages 29, 33, 38, 39, 43, 44 and 86 of the poem. A relevant section of the order in the case ‘Ramlal Puri³⁶ vs State of Madhya Pradesh’, examined by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 1970, says:

Bhopal the 28th September, 1970, No. 4581–6014-I-K-70, whereas it appears to the State Government that couplets finding place on pages 29, 33, 38, 39, 43, 44 and 86 of the book named ‘Agni Pariksha’ written by Shri Acharya Tulsī and published by Atmaram and Sons Delhi, Jullunder, Jaipur, Meerut, Chandigarh are grossly offensive and provocative and contain matters which are deliberately and maliciously intended to outrage the religious feelings of Sanathani Hindus by insulting the religion and religious beliefs of the said class and the publication of such matter is punishable under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (45 of 1860).

Now, therefore, in exercise of the powers conferred by Section 99-A of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 (5 of 1898), the State Government hereby declares every copy of the said book ‘Agni Pariksha’ to be forfeited to the Government of Madhya Pradesh.³⁷

From this order we also learn that the State of Madhya Pradesh justified its action by stating:

³⁴ Lalwani, ‘Agni-pariksa’ p. 134.

³⁵ Lalwani, ‘Agni-pariksa’, pp. 134–135 and Nirmal Baid, ‘Life of a Legend: Acharya Tulsī’, *Jaina Studies: Centre of Jaina Studies Newsletter*, March 2015, issue 10, p. 44, with two photos related to the Raipur riots.

³⁶ Ramlal Puri of Atmaram and Sons, the publisher of the first edition of *Agni-parīkṣā* in 1961.

³⁷ Section 3 of the order of Madhya Pradesh High Court ‘Ramlal Puri vs State of Madhya Pradesh on 24 December, 1970’; <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/1645758/> (accessed 27.09.2017).

6. '(...) For generations, in the hearts of the Hindus, Shri Ram and his consort Sita, were recognised as incarnation of Vishnu and Lakshmi. In matters of filial, fraternal and conjugal love, affection and devotion and above all in the discharge of the duties as a Ruler, prepared to sacrifice any and every personal pleasure, he set an ideal—Generations have deified him and his consort'.

To which Madhya Pradesh High Court responds:

7. The said book 'Agni Pareeksha' does not evidently treat Shri Ram and Sita as incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi, but describes Shri Ram as a 'Siddha Punish,' [sic DS] which means, he was a man who had attained perfection and ultimate Nirvan. Similarly, Sita is described not as incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, but as one of the 16 Maha Satis, who proved her virtues as an ideal woman by going through the ordeal of putting herself into fire.

In 1972, in the aftermath of all these events, a slightly modified, the already-mentioned version of *Agni-parīkṣā* was published by a different publisher—Ādarś Sāhitya Saṅgh from Churu in Rajasthan.

4. *Agni-parīkṣā*: What Was Objectionable?

Let us now scrutinize these verses of *Agni-parīkṣā* that were indicated as offensive by the State of Madhya Pradesh and compare them with the relevant portions of the 1972 version.

4.1. Page 29/1961

The passage on page 29 focuses on the beginnings of the scheming of Sītā's co-wives:

While returning from a meeting,
Raghuvar instinctively cast a look
At a picture put on the pedestal
Together with *pūjā* accessories.
'Feet resembling Rāvaṅ's feet here?'
Surprised Ārya began to question [the queens].
'How can we know? This is [for] the daily rite
Of [our] master's beloved chief queen'.

‘Don’t talk nonsense!’,
The Lord of Ayodhyā simply ignored them and departed quickly.³⁸

The rest of the verses on page 29 develop the thread of conspiracy against Sītā—the queens with the help of their servants spread the gossip that she worships Rāvaṇ’s feet. What is interesting, the whole content of this page has been left exactly the same in the 1972 version.³⁹

4.2. Page 33/1961

The State of Madhya Pradesh also indicated as objectionable a passage found on page 33 in which the results of the next stage of the conspiracy against Sītā are dealt with.

While in the women’s quarters respect [for her] has grown,
In the houses [of Ayodhyā] this so-called *Mahāsati* has earned ill repute.

For six months continuously, she lived all alone in Laṅkā,
How can one believe in her unshakable purity?
The heart of Daśmukh had always been drawn to her,
And he wanted to fulfil his desire being gentle and harsh.⁴⁰

Sītā, derisively referred to as the ‘so-called *Mahāsati*’, and furthermore her reputation are put to a severe test by Rāvaṇ’s scandalous attitude towards her in the original poem. The 1972 version, while still referring to people’s suspicion, does not leave the least doubt about her flawless nature and determined attitude towards Rāvaṇ.

1972
While in the women’s quarters respect [for her] has grown,
In the houses [of Ayodhyā] doubt surrounds this *Mahāsati*, Janak’s daughter.

38 *rakkhā vah citr pīṭhikā par / pūjā sāmagrī sāth-sāth, / saṃsad se āte Raghuvar kā / ho gayā sahaj hī dṛṣṭipāt, / Rāvaṇ ke se ye pair yahā / vismit ho, baiṭhe pūch ārya. / ‘ham kyā jāne’ yah to Prabhu kī / priy paṭrānī kā nitya kārya. / kyō kartī ho tum sabhī vyarth, anargal bāt. / sahaj upekṣā kar cale tvarit Ayodhyānāth; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1961, p. 29.*

39 Cf. Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1972, pp. 26–27.

40 *sarvādhik sammān barhayā apne antaḥpur mẽ. / tathākathit us mahāsati kā apayaś hai ghar-ghar mẽ. / Laṅkā mẽ ekākinī rahī satat chaḥ mās. / uske aḍig satīva par kaise ho viśvās. / ākarṣit Daśmukh hṛday rahā sadā us or. / banā vāsnā-pūrti ko, komal aur kaṭhor; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1961, p. 33.*

Sītā suffered a lot, being all alone in Laṅkā
But her virtuous nature has remained flawless.
The heart of Daśmukh has always been drawn to her
But Jānakī's heart has remained unshaken and hard.⁴¹

4.3. Pages 38–39/1961

The verses on pages 38–39 describe the growing despair of Rām, who roams around the streets of Ayodhyā and on each street corner hears about sinful Sītā and the downfall of morality in the royal house. Close reading of this section reveals that the objectionable pages belong to a much longer passage covering pages 37 to 41 that offers an image of what can be called *bhraṣṭ rām-rājya*, or the corrupt Rām's reign.

Wherever Rām goes, he overhears people talking ill of him and Sītā, of their disgrace and the loss of respect by the family of Raghu.

Alas! The delightful Solar Dynasty is being disgraced.
The ornament of the Raghu family has become a slave of the depraved one.
He is infatuated with her day and night,
With her who enjoyed herself in Lanka for six long months.⁴²

Rām goes on and comes across mothers concerned about maintaining proper behaviour in their families and thus their dignity (*kul-maryādā*); they call Sītā 'fallen' (*patitā*) and 'promiscuous (principal) queen' (*kulṭā patrānī*).⁴³ Then he chances upon a group of the elders (*vyddhjan*) who criticize Sītā's lack of restraint, ignorance of what propriety and family honour are,⁴⁴ and thus infer that she must have behaved indecently in the presence of Rāvaṇ.⁴⁵ The elders are especially exasperated by the fact that under Rām's rule, no one listens to those who, thanks to their life experience, know what the bounds of propriety (*mar-*

41 *sarvādhik sammān barhāyā apne antaḥpur mē. / janak-sūtā us mahāsatī ke prati śaṅkā ghar-ghar mē. / Laṅkā mē ekākinī, sahe bahut santāp. / lekin sītā kā rahā, śīl amal niṣpāp. / ākarṣit Daśmukh hṛday, rahā sadā us or. / kintu Jānakī kā hṛday, avical aur kaṭhor;* Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1972, p. 30–31.

42 *hāy! kalaṅkit ho rahā hai sūryavaṃś abhirām. / durācārīnī ke bane hāi Raghukul-tilak gulām. / usmē hī āsakt ve rahte hāi āṭhō yām. / jisne Laṅkā mē kiyā cha-cha māsik ārām;* Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, pp. 37–38.

43 Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 38.

44 *yō ucchṛṅkhal rahne vālī, maryādā kyā jāne? / kul kī ān aur ghar kī ujjalvātā kyā pah-cāne?;* Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, 39.

45 *Rāvaṇ ke sāth rahā niṣcit uskā anucit vyavahār;* Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961.

yādā) are. They see this situation as a result of the *kaliyug* influence. Finally, Rām encounters rebellious youths (*yuvak*) critical of his unjust rule, ready to defend justice in their motherland (*mātybhūmi*) and India's dignity (*bhārat kā gaurav*).⁴⁶

In the 1972 version, the contents of these pages (37–41) have been substantially reworked and shortened roughly to one page (34–35) with the purpose not to sully the good names of *rām-rājya*, Rām and Sītā (this order being not incidental but expressive of the hierarchy of priority).

4.4. Pages 43–44/1961

The verses on pages 43–44 refer to the climax of a quarrel between a washerman (*dhobī*) and his wife (*dhoban*).⁴⁷ She comes home late and her husband does not want to let her in. He calls her a fallen, sinful woman (*patitā, pāpinī*) and tells her to go back to her new lover.

You fallen woman, stop this idle prattle!
Go to your new beloved,
You will be treated there with [due] esteem,
There is no place for you here.⁴⁸

Dhoban does not give up. She answers back insultingly by referring to her husband's female lineage⁴⁹ and adds:

I saw your esteemed family and good lineage!
Oh, can there be anyone superior to the crest jewel Rām?

⁴⁶ Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, pp. 40–41.

⁴⁷ See Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, pp. 41–44.

⁴⁸ *patitā rahne de bakvās, / jā us nav priyatam ke pās, / hogā terā sammān vahā, / tere lie nahī sthān yahā*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 43.

⁴⁹ *terī mā, dādī, nānī kī mahimā ghar-ghar mẽ phailī hai re*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 43.

Haven't you heard of high esteem in his palace towards Sītā?
Her, who worships Rāvaṇ's feet, regarding him a god?
You wretched, in what capacity are you speaking more and more insultingly?
Stop bragging, get up and open the door!⁵⁰

This passage in the 1972 version is reworked in the following way:

I saw your esteemed family and good lineage!
Oh, can there be anyone superior to the crest jewel Rām?

Haven't you heard of Sītā's high position in his palace?
Hers, who every moment has respect for Rāvaṇ in her
heart.

You wretched, in what capacity are you speaking more and more insultingly?
Stop bragging, get up and open the door!⁵¹

The comparison of both versions makes it clear that the wording of the 1972 lines focuses on changing the nature of the relationship between Sītā and Rāvaṇ. The 1961 version must have seemed especially outraging to petitioners because of Sītā's god-like veneration of Rāvaṇ, while in the 1972 version this has been greatly softened from direct contact worship into an indirect, socially acceptable, expression of respect to a man and, a king, by a woman. It may also be noted here that *dhoban's* behaviour in both versions is expressive of the potential threat Sītā poses to the maintenance of social order if women were to behave improperly.

4.5. Page 86/1961

The lines on page 86 refer to an episode that is concerned with Kṛtānmukh's return to Ayodhyā and conveying Sītā's message to Rām. The general tells Rām of her fear, helplessness but also of a mixture of self-pity and indignation at the fact that Rām broke the relationship with her deceitfully and for no good reason.

50 *dekhā terā ucc gharānā, dekh liyā terā kul-vaṃś! / are! Rām se bhī ūcā kyā hai, koī avataṃś [sic DS]? // nahī sunā kyā unke ghar mẽ Sītā kā kitnā sammān? / pūj rahī hai jo Rāvaṇ ke caraṇ mān karke bhagvān. / tū becārī [sic DS] kis gintī mẽ bol rahā barh-barh kyā bol? / bas rahne de đīg hāknā, uṭh, jhaṭṭaṭ dravāzā khol; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1961, p. 43.*

51 *dekhā terā ucc gharānā, dekh liyā terā kul-vaṃś! / are! Rām se bhī ūcā kyā hai, koī avataṃś? // nahī sunā kyā unke ghar mẽ Sītā kā kitnā sthān? / jo pratīpal apne man mẽ detī hai Rāvaṇ ko sammān. / tū becārī kis gintī mẽ bol rahā barh-barh kyā bol? / bas rahne de đīg hāknā, uṭh, jhaṭṭaṭ dravāzā khol; Tulsī, Agni-parīkṣā, 1972, p. 37.*

She wishes him well but cannot understand why he betrayed her. From a close reading of this passage, we infer that speaking of Rām as a traitor and a partial person as well as referring to Sītā as base may have seemed especially objectionable:

1961

Why did [my] lord betray me,
Instead of openly telling what was to be told?
Sītā was not that base,
Why did [her] master show partiality towards [her]?⁵²

1972

Why did [my] lord betray me,
Instead of openly telling what was to be told?
All get justice, so why
Such partiality towards Jānakī?⁵³

5. Conclusions

In the context of Hindi literature, Tulsī's *Agni-parīkṣā* offers an original vision of the well-known course of events that finally led to Sītā's rejection by Rām. The poem speaks in a distinctive authorial voice firmly rooted in the Jain tradition. However, for some Hindu traditionalists, commonly referred to in India as Sanatanis (*sanātani*), '[Jain] deviations' in the way of presenting the characters and the narrative, and especially these sections that are underlining deep understanding for Sītā and full of compassion for her, and women in general, appeared to be an unbearable expression of open criticism of the Hindu tradition, an insult to Hindu feelings and faith, as well as to the Hindu deities—Sītā and Rām. Of special significance in this context is the fact that by specifying the date of the poem's completion and adding the wishes that follow it, by the use of the name Bhārat and by referring to Indian culture (*bhāratīy saṃskṛti*, *bhārat kī saṃskṛti*⁵⁴) in a number of instances, the author linked his poem with the actual Indian reality. All this made his work, as well as himself, a much easier prey for communal and political attacks.

52 *kyō kiyā nāth! viśvāsgḥāt / jo kahnī kahte spaṣṭ bāt / sītā na kamīnī thī itnī / kyō rakhā īś ne pakṣpāt*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, p. 86.

53 *kyō kiyā nāth! viśvāsgḥāt, / jo kahnī kahte spaṣṭ bāt. / sab pāte nyāy, jānakī ke / hī sāth rakhā kyō pakṣpāt*; Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1972, p. 80.

54 Tulsī, *Agni-parīkṣā*, 1961, e.g. pp. 164 or 177.

The foregoing analysis of two versions of *Agni-parīkṣā* reveals how the writer's technique—in this case featuring a more cautious use of language in the 1972 edition, mainly in the form of omissions, lexical modifications and reworking the implied meaning—ceases to be a mere sequence of tactical actions and becomes a strategic choice, even if forced by external circumstances, that determines the final result.⁵⁵

We may also add that the case of *Agni-parīkṣā*, on the one hand, vividly exemplifies the feeling of unintentional effect, as first of all, Tulsī did not intend to offend anyone with his poem. On the other hand, the interest in the poem—to a large extent caused by anxieties surrounding it—was significant enough to publish, as has been mentioned, its second, revised edition in a muted form meant to no longer affect traditionalists' feelings, though this attempt was not fully successful.⁵⁶ This all speaks volumes not only about their great influence, the narrative strategies adopted to meet a desired end but also, to use Peter Flügel's phrasing, 'how politically controversial the reinterpretation of traditional rites and myths is in India'.⁵⁷

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⁵⁵ Valerij Tjupa, 'Narrative Strategies', *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, p. 1 of the PDF retrieved on 17.06.2017 from <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de>.

⁵⁶ Peter Flügel mentions in this context conflicts with the Śāṅkarācārya sect and with the followers of Sthānakavāsī and Mūrtipūjaka Jain sects in Churu; Flügel, *Askese und Devotion*, vol. 56.2, p. 972.

⁵⁷ ... wie politisch kontrovers die Neuinterpretation traditioneller Riten und Mythen in Indien ist; Flügel, *Askese und Devotion*, p. 689.

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