



**Sita - the Silent Pillar of Strength
in Ramayana**

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Devi Sita is the consort of Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of Sri Maha Vishnu, in Hindu mythology. Sita Devi is one of the main characters in the Ramayana, a major Hindu epic. Born in Sitamarhi (Punaura) in Bihar (India), Sita was taken to Janakpur (in the present day Nepal) soon after her birth by her father, Maharaja Janak. Sita is considered to be one of the Sreshta Naris (most chaste women) and is respected as the epitome of all womanly virtues for Hindu women. Devi Sita is also considered an avatar of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and the consort of Sri Vishnu during the Treta Yuga.



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SITA, RAMA, LAKSHMANA AND HANUMAN

Devi Sita is indeed the ideal example of a woman and possesses all the good qualities that a traditional Indian woman is expected to possess. She was the ideal daughter to her parents, ideal wife to her husband, Rama, and the ideal mother to her twins, Luv and Kush.

Devi Sita had to undergo a lot of trials and tribulations in her marital life and it was her courage, chastity and adherence to Dharma (righteousness) that finally made her emerge the ultimate winner. Through her life story, Sita showed how a strong woman should be and that she need never let go of her principles in life. Probably, the whole mission of Sita's birth on Earth in human form was to destroy the arrogant Ravana, the demon King of Lanka.

Legend of Sita's birth

Sita was found as an abandoned child, discovered in a furrow while ploughing in a field. Due to this legend, she is often referred to as the daughter of Bhoomidevi or Mother Earth. As she was adopted by King Janaka, she is also called Janaki. King Janaka was the ruler of Mithila in present day Nepal. Hence, Sita is also referred to by the name of Mythili. Sita's father, Janaka, was known for his ability to transcend body consciousness. He was therefore popularly referred to as "Videha". Hence, Sita came to be known as "Vaidehi" (the daughter of Videha). As Rama's wife, she is also called "Ramaa".

Sita meets Rama and they fall in love

One day, Princess Sita walks on the terrace of her quarters, when she sees Rama standing just below. Their eyes meet and it is love at first sight for both of them, almost as if Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi realize they have met again in their human avatar. Sita shyly runs back inside and silently prays that Rama should end up becoming her husband in her forthcoming Swayamvara.

Sita's Swayamvara

When King Janaka realizes that Sita has come of marriageable age, he arranges her swayamvar (a ceremony where the bride is allowed to choose her groom from among the group of men assembled at that place). Many named kings attend the grand event from all over India. The swayamvar mandap is decorated beautifully and shines with the sheer splendour of the princes and kings assembled there.

Rama and his brother, Lakshmana, arrive at the venue too, along with sage Vishwamitra. So does Ravana, the mighty, ten-headed demon King of Lanka.

Stringing Shiva's bow

Kept in the center of the mandap is a gigantic bow, gifted to Janaka by Lord Shiva. There is an associated legend, which relates that Lord Parashurama had once been witness to Sita playing with this mighty bow as a child. The Lord had been stunned by the little girl and had then advised Janaka that when the right time arrived, he should marry off his daughter only to the man who could lift the bow.



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SITA WEDS RAMA

The swayamvar ceremony commences and King Janaka welcomes everyone assembled at the venue. He declares that he would give his daughter's hand in marriage to the person who would be able to lift the bow of Shiva and string it. Many princes and kings try their hand at it in vain. Each one comes forward to the mandap with great pomp, but is forced to retreat in defeat.

The egoistic Ravana then decides to take up the challenge, saying that he was so strong that he would be able to lift it with the little finger of his left hand. Having failed in many attempts though, he decides to put all his strength on the bow and tries to lift it with both his hands. But the bow does not budge and Ravana is finally forced to admit defeat.

Rama then comes forward to lift the bow at Vishwamitra's command. He first offers his obeisance to Shiva and the bow and then proceeds to lift it. To the utter surprise of all present there, he lifts the bow with remarkable ease and strings it with a resonant twang. Sita is very pleased that

her prayers are answered and coyly garlands Rama with the varamala.

The wedding of Rama and Sita takes place with great pomp and show and soon thereafter, Sita leaves for her new marital home at Ayodhya.

Sita renounces the comfort of the palace

King Dasaratha announces his plans to crown Rama, his eldest son, as Yuvaraja or heir to the throne. This news upsets queen Kaikeyi, whose mind is poisoned by her wicked maid-servant and confidante, Manthara. Kaikeyi, who is initially very happy for Rama, is made to fear for the safety and future of her son Bharata. Kaikeyi had once been granted two boons by Dasaratha, when she had saved his life in battle. She had then said that she would avail the boons when she needed them.

Kaikeyi now lays claim on the boons and demands that Dasaratha banish Rama to a forest exile for fourteen years, and that Bharata be crowned in Rama's place. The king is heartbroken, but realizes how helpless he really is. He is forced to grant the boons to his wife and with a pained heart, bids goodbye to his beloved son, Rama. Rama's brother, Lakshmana, decides to permanently escort Rama during his Vanavasa (tenure in the forest).

Rama tries to discourage Sita from joining him in exile, but she is adamant and says that she would be with him, no matter what, as it was the duty of the wife to be at his side at all times. The people of Ayodhya are angered and saddened at Dasaratha's decision. Dasaratha, in utter grief and guilt, collapses and dies by the next day. Though Rama is horrified at his father's demise, he does not want to break his dead father's word and so, continues with the Vanavasa.



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SITA, RAMA, LAKSHMANA IN EXILE

Sita, who has been used to living in the lap of luxury, willingly sacrifices everything for the sake of her husband and happily joins her husband on his Vanavasa. This is only the first of the sacrifices she makes for her husband. Rama, in turn, is assiduously protective of his wife, takes good care of her and fulfils her every wish during the time of the Vanavasa. They go on to share many happy and peaceful moments in the wonderful locales of the Dandaka and Panchavati forests.

Sita is attracted to Mareecha, the Golden Deer

Rama and Sita spend some wonderful days while at Panchavati. But that happiness does not last long. Trouble starts brewing when Sita lays her eyes on the Golden Deer, Mareecha. Mareecha was in actuality, Ravana's uncle, who was leading an ascetic life in the forest.



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SITA REQUESTS RAMA TO FETCH THE ILLUSORY GOLDEN DEER

Ravana requested Mareecha to take the form of a beautiful and attractive Golden Deer in order to lure Rama away from the hermitage, so that he could come into the scene and abduct Sita while she was by herself in the ashram. Mareecha tried his best to convince Ravana that Rama and Lakshman were divine powers and not just ordinary mortals. But Ravana was insistent with his wish and even threatened to kill Mareecha if he did not co-operate with him and abet him with his plan. Ultimately, Mareecha decided to go to Ravana's side, thinking that it would be better to attain Moksha (liberation) at the hands of Lord Rama than this terrible demon who happened to be his own nephew.

When Sita sees the golden deer, she is totally charmed and asks Rama to capture it and bring it to her. Though not very pleased about it, Rama entrusts her to Lakshmana's care and goes in search of the deer that had, by then, run away into the forest. He makes Lakshmana promise that he would not leave Sita alone under any circumstance, but still feels uneasy while leaving. Once into the deepest wooded area, Rama is about to hit the deer with an arrow, when Mareecha, still in the form of the deer, loudly cries out, "Oh Lakshmana, Oh Lakshmana". Mareecha imitates Rama's voice so well that both Sita and Lakshmana are convinced that it is indeed Rama asking for help. In spite of Lakshmana's refusal to leave Sita alone, she persuades him to go and aid Rama.

Lakshmana tries very hard to explain to Sita that Rama would never ever be in danger and that this must be some trick to dupe them. Sita, though, gets even more upset by this and accuses Lakshmana of not going to save Rama on purpose. Lakshmana finally has to break the promise given to his brother and decides to go in search of Rama.

Before leaving though, Lakshmana takes out an arrow and draws a line just outside their

hut, requesting Sita never to step out of the line. This Lakshmana Rekha is drawn in order to protect her and act as a barrier to some outsider wanting to step inside.

While Sita waits all alone in the ashram, Ravana takes the disguise of a sadhu (mendicant) and stands in front of the hut, calling for alms. Sita tries to give the sadhu the alms from inside the line drawn by Lakshmana, but he insists that he would accept the bhiksha (alms) only if she stepped forward and handed it to him. As soon as Sita crosses the Lakshmana Rekha, the terrible Ravana takes his original form, lifts the entire piece of earth with Sita standing on it and whisks her away on his aerial chariot. Ravana realizes that he cannot lay his hands on Sita directly and that is why he is forced to lift the entire land she stands on. He then races in the southward direction.



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ABDUCTION OF SITA BY RAVANA



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RAVANA SLASHES JATAYU'S WINGS

When Rama and Lakshmana come back to the hermitage, they are appalled to find Sita missing. Rama at once suspects foul play and starts in search for her, crying out her name. As they proceed to search deep into the forest, they see Jatayu, their beloved eagle, who is critically wounded, lying there helplessly bleeding, his wings cut away cruelly. He reveals to a dishevelled Rama that while fighting Ravana to rescue Sita from his clutches, Ravana had cut off each of his wings, thereby making it impossible for Jatayu to retaliate any further. Then pointing in the direction which Ravana took, the elderly Jatayu places his head on Rama's lap and breathes his last. A shocked and tearful Rama bids his feathered friend a fond goodbye and grants him Moksha.

Sita held captive in Ashokvan

Ravana takes Sita to Lanka and holds her captive there, in the Ashokvan or garden of Ashoka trees. He delegates many demonesses to guard the area and prevent Sita from escaping. Before leaving, he also instructs Trijata and other demonesses to threaten Sita into marrying him. Throughout her one year of captivity in Lanka, Ravana keeps expressing his desire for her, but Sita refuses to heed his advances and maintains her chastity.

Meanwhile, Rama meets Hanuman and the rest of the Vanara Sena (army of monkeys) and they hatch a plan to rescue Sita Devi from Lanka. The mighty Hanuman jumps over the sea and manages to locate Sita being held prisoner in Ashokvan. Sita is delighted to meet Hanuman and gives her Chudamani (an item of her personal jewellery) and asks him to give it to her husband. While Hanuman tries to head back to Rama, he is captured by Ravana's forces. Hanuman is almost executed and burnt, but he cleverly escapes out of there and burns the capital city of Lanka while leaving instead.

Rama wages war against Ravana

Rama builds the Rama Sethu (a bridge) with the help of the Vanara Sena, connecting South India to Lanka. Interestingly, this bridge is supposedly in existence under the water even today and there are supposedly satellite images to prove the same.

Rama then wages a terribly long and violent war against Ravana and eventually victors and slays the demon King Ravana. Rama then rescues Sita from her long period of captivity. But Sita's troubles do not end there either.



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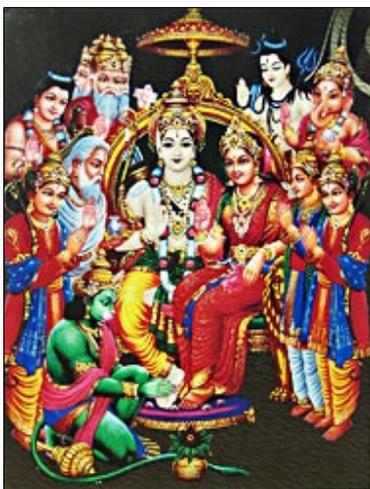
HANUMAN AND THE VANAR SENNA BUILD A BRIDGE OF ROCKS ACROSS THE SEA TO LANKA

Sita's Agni Pariksha

Since Sita was kept in captivity by Ravana, she has to go through the 'Agni-Pariksha', the test of fire, in order to prove her chastity to the world. Some versions of the story claim that the Sita who entered the fire was a duplicate, who had been there in place of the actual Sita, in order to protect her from the harassment inflicted by Ravana while in Ashokvan.

Some others relate that Sita voluntarily entered the fire, in order to cleanse herself from her ordeal. This story also says that the coals in the fire turned to soft lotuses when she stepped on them. Yet others say that Rama ordered that Sita take the trial by fire as a punishment for her questioning Lakshmana's integrity, just before forcing him to go in search of Rama, in the Mareecha episode.

The Pattabhishekham



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RAM AND SITA AS THE KING AND QUEEN AND AYODHYA

The couple comes back to Ayodhya, where Rama is coronated as King of Ayodhya, at a grand Pattabhishekham ceremony. Rama happily rules the kingdom with Sita at his side for a while, but it soon comes to light that some residents of Ayodhya could not accept Sita's captivity in Lanka under Ravana and also questioned her chastity.

Sita undergoes yet another cruel ordeal

Though Rama knows that Sita is innocent, he is forced to heed the words of his praja (citizens he ruled over) and sends Sita off into an exile all over again. This he does without even informing her or safely leaving her in some sage's ashram. Instead, Rama sends Lakshmana to accompany her into the forest and leave her there.

Sita is also pregnant at this time and yet, is left to roam around the forest without any escort whatsoever. She is spotted and rescued by sage Valmiki, who gives her refuge in his own ashram, situated at the banks of the Tamsa river. There, she delivers her twin sons, Luv and Kush.

The twins are educated and taught military skills under the able guidance of Valmiki and grow up to be brave and intelligent warrior princes, unparalleled in their archery skills. Valmiki also trains them up in music and the art of playing the Veena. The twins additionally learn the Ramayana, penned by Rishi Valmiki himself, keeping sharp focus on Rama as the central character.

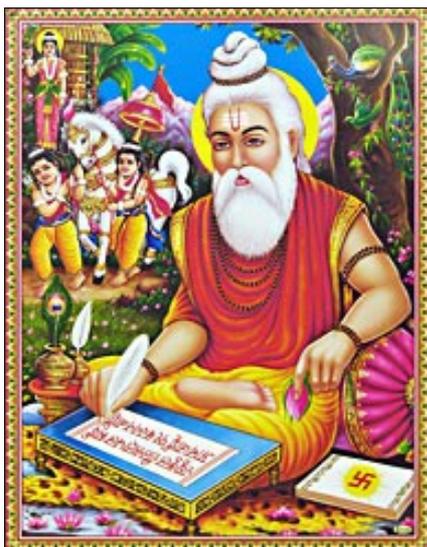


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SITA WITH HER SONS - LUV AND KUSH

Rama meets his sons

Rama, who is still grief-stricken at the loss of his family, decides to perform the major Ashwamedha Yagya on a grand scale. The Yagya or sacrificial ritual requires that the one who conducts it, lets a horse roam around the surrounding provinces. The regions where the horse roams free without being captured, automatically goes into the ruler's control.



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**LUV AND KUSH CAPTURE THE
ASHWAMEDHA HORSE OF RAMA IN
VALMIKI'S ASHRAM**

The horse in question wanders into the area housing the hermitage. Luv and Kush fight against and capture the horse effortlessly. This brings the twins in direct conflict with their father, without their realizing it.

The boys capture the horse and refuse to release it. Rama orders his three brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna, to go fight the twins, but the young boys easily defeat them as well. Eventually, Rama decides to personally confront them in battle. Rama expects to win by an easy margin, but is stunned to witness the boys' prowess. Humbled, he invites them to Ayodhya. It is at that point that he comes to know their true identity; that Luv and Kush are as his own sons.

Sita returns to her mother, Bhoomidevi

When Sita realizes that her sons have been united with their father, Rama, Sita considers her life's mission complete. Rama approaches her and requests her to come back to him. But Sita is no longer willing to return to Rama or Ayodhya and instead, chooses to seek final refuge in the arms of her loving mother, Bhoomidevi, or Mother Earth.

Sita requests Bhoomidevi to have mercy on her and give her release from this unjust world and a sadness-filled life. The earth suddenly and dramatically splits open and Bhoomidevi appears from inside. She takes Sita by the hand and lovingly ushers her away to a better world. This incident marks the end of Sita Devi's avatar on Earth.



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SITA BEING TAKEN AWAY BY MOTHER EARTH

This incident marks the end of Sita Devi's avatar on Earth.

Significance of Maa (Mother) Sita's Avatar

Not for nothing is Mata Sita regarded as the epitome of womanhood. Sita's life was filled with trouble and turmoil and yet, she stoically maintained her calm and dignity throughout. Her story has been narrated in entirety in the book, Sitayanam. The values that She adhered to and represented at every point in the course her arduous life have now translated into becoming the values of womanly virtue, held sacred by all generations of Indians, past, present and future.

Interestingly, the name, "Sita", was in existence much before Valmiki's Ramayana. She was considered a female deity of agricultural fertility, but was overshadowed by more popular goddesses associated with fertility.

As mentioned earlier on in this article, Sita was discovered in a furrow when Janaka was ploughing. The term, "Seet" in Sanskrit means "furrow". Janaka was the head of the royal family. From this we can probably understand that ploughing was part of regular royal duties and was undertaken so as to ensure fertility of the land.

Sita is also said to be the daughter of the Mother Earth, produced as a result of the holy union between the king and the land. Hence, Devi Sita is a personification of the Earth's fertility, abundance, peace and prosperity.

Some believe that Devi Sita may have been named after a very ancient Vedic Goddess, Sita. This deity has been mentioned in the Rigveda as the Earth Goddess, who blesses the land with fertile soil and good crops. During the Vedic era, hence, this Sita was one of the goddesses associated with fertility.

Devi Sita's powerful speeches



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STORIES FROM THE LIFE OF RAMA

The Ramayana mostly centres around on Rama's actions, relegating all else to the background. Here, Sita is sometimes even considered to be a quiet and submissive figure, who keeps to herself most of the time. But this is not quite the case. There are instances in the Ramayana when Sita speaks out powerfully in favour of or against some principle.

In the first such instance, during their stay in Chitrakuta, Sita enters a discussion with Rama, after which Rama solemnly vows that he will never slay anyone without extreme provocation.

The second time, Sita strongly debates with Ravana when he comes to her hermitage in the guise of a Brahmin. She flatly tells him that she cannot easily trust him, since he does not look at all like a Brahmin.

Sita even subdues Hanuman with her powerful words. When Hanuman manages to locate her in Ashokvan, he is intent of immediately taking her with him, so that she can escape from there and be together with Rama. Hanuman offers to take Sita on his back and transport her to his Lord. Sita, however, declines and states that she would never want to run away like a cowardly thief and that she would want her husband to battle and victor against Ravana instead.

Two uncommon legends about Sita Devi

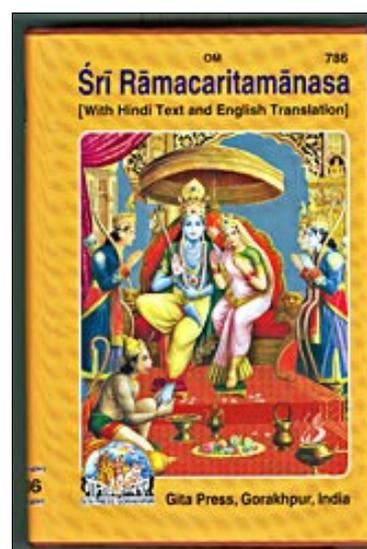
There are two tales about Mata Sita that not too many people know about. Here are those two legends:

Sita as Vedavati

Certain versions of the Ramayana relate that Sita was actually a reincarnation of Vedavati, an avatar of Goddess Sri Mahalakshmi. The story goes thus:

Sage Kushadhwaaja is pious man and a very learned scholar, living in a hermitage deep into the forest. His daughter Vedavati, who lives with her father, grows up into a beautiful young woman and an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu. Earlier on if life, she resolves never to wed anyone other than her chosen Lord. Her father understands her feelings, supports her ideals and even rejects marriage proposals from many powerful kings and celestial beings who seek his daughter's hand in marriage. One powerful individual among those rejected is Sambhu, a powerful king of the Daityas. Treating this rejection as an outright insult and swearing vengeance, Shambhu murders Vedavati's parents on a moonless night.

Vedavati is alone and grief-stricken, but still continues to reside at the same hermitage and meditates upon Vishnu. She radiates ethereal beauty, dressed simply, in the hide of a black antelope, matted hair tied above her head, her beauty and youth actually enhanced by her severe austerities.



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RAMCHARITMANASA BY TULSIDAS

Ravana once spots Vedavati seated thus in meditation and is totally enamoured by her beauty. He propositions her, but as usual, is immediately rejected. Ravana mocks her austerities and her devotion to Vishnu and gets even more upset while being firmly rejected each and every time. At his wit's end, he tries to molest Vedavati, pulling her hair. This greatly angers her, and she immediately cuts off her hair.

She also states that she would enter into the fire before his eyes and adds that she would be born again just to become the cause of his destruction. Saying thus, she prepares a pyre and fearlessly enters it. Legend has it that it was Vedavati who was born again as Sita, and was the root cause of Ravana's destruction, though Rama was the medium here.

By being reborn as Sita, Vedavati also receives the boon she so single-mindedly sought in her previous birth. Rama, the avatara of Vishnu, becomes her husband. Some versions of the Ramayana talk of sage Agastya relating the entire story of Vedavati to Rama.

Sita as Ravana's daughter

Some legends consider Sita to be Ravana's daughter. Below is a list of some versions of this legend:

- Ravana and his queen, Mandodari, were issueless in spite of having been married for many years. When the Maharani did finally become pregnant, an astrological prediction indicated that their first-born child would be the cause of Ravana's destruction. Warped by insecurity, Ravana threw the child away in a basket. Instead of dying, though, the baby was rescued by Mother Nature and kept in safe custody, inside the earth, to be later discovered by King Janaka. Ravana, while lusting after Sita, never had the slightest idea that she was his own daughter. This turned out to become an even bigger sin than abducting Rama's wife.
- The second version of the legend goes to portray Sita only indirectly as Ravana's daughter. It is said that Ravana killed many saints and sages and buried their "blood and remains" in the ground. Before dying, these sages had cursed Ravana that his first-born would become the reason for his own death. King Janak found the very same "blood and remains" in the form of a little girl, who later came to be called "Sita". Thus, in the karmic sense, Sita was born out of Ravana's sins, and so, she could be considered Ravana's daughter in this way. Sita's abduction and captivity was also primarily responsible for Ravana's death.
- Yet another version makes Ravana even more of a villain. It is believed that Ravana would kill saints and sages and then take their blood from the arrow tip and save it in a pot. Once, desirous of bearing a child like Goddess Lakshmi, he stole sacred milk from a sage and mixed it with the blood of the sages and gave it to his wife to drink. Mandodari hated her husband for this and thought of ending her life by drinking this mixture. Instead, she became pregnant with Sita and buried the fetus in King Janaka's land in India. This makes Sita the child of Ravana's wife. This relationship, as described by ISKCON, still establishes Ravana's lust for Sita as a form of incest. Since Sita was Mandodari's child in this case, she would also become Ravana's child in a way.

This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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