

The Wrath of Sita :

Sankaradeva's Uttarakanda

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www.tributetosankaradeva.org feels proud to present before the readers Dr William L. Smith's brilliant piece on Sankaradeva's *Uttarakanda* Ramayana. Although adhering to Valmiki's original, Sankaradeva makes some 'alterations' in the story-line and "his personal innovations result in an approach that is unusual in Ramayana literature". The current piece is reproduced from Mahapurusa Jyoti, Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Vol. VI, 2004.

The *Uttarakanda* is the most uneven of the books of **Valmiki's Ramayana**. Essentially a jerry-built afterthought, it serves both as a postscript, relating the events which transpired between **Rama's** triumphal return to Ayodhya and his death, as well as a prelude, providing accounts of the earlier careers of Ravana and of the childhood of **Hanuman**. The critical edition of Valmiki¹ contains exactly 100 sargas: 47 of these are devoted to narrative digressions (sargas 1-36; 68-72; 75-81), 20 to the account of Sita's second exile ending with her return to the bosom of her mother, the earth (sargas 41-49; 58; 82-89), 14 to the martial exploits of Rama's brothers Satrughna and Bharata (sargas 52-57; 59-63; 90-92) and final 8 to Rama's ascent to heaven (sargas 93-100).

Since the greater part of this matter in this *kanda* is peripheral, later poets dealt with it in various ways. Some merely retell it without much change; others enlarge it, adding considerable amounts of new material; not a few ignore it completely. The heart of the *kanda* is story of Sita's second forest exile and her final separation from Rama, a story which provides an excellent opportunity for poets to display their mastery of the *karuna rasa*, the pathetic sentiment, as Sita bewails her desertion. At the same time Rama's actions could be seen in an unflattering light; thus some writers felt impelled to devise ways to exculpate him. The easiest way to do this was to simply omit the story altogether, as for

¹ Chief ed., G.H. Bhatt, Baroda, 1960-75. In the eastern or Gaudian recension the Uttarakanda contains 115 sargas and in the southern recension 111.

example, **Tulsi Das** does. Another method would be to explain away Rama's actions, as is done, for example, in the *Adhyatma-ramayana*. The Assamese poet-saint **Sankaradeva**, on the other hand, takes a much different and rather unusual approach.

According to Valmiki, Rama exiles his wife because of the doubts about her chastity voiced by the evil-minded (durjana) amongst his subjects who remember that Sita was the prisoner of the lustful demon Ravana for many months; even the fact that Sita had been proved innocent in fire-ordeal attended by the gods themselves has not convinced them of her purity. Afraid of the effect of the slander among his subjects (apavadabhitah, a compound used repeatedly), Rama, without saying a word to Sita himself, orders Laksmana to drive Sita out to the forest in a chariot and abandon her there. The pregnant Sita finds refuge in the hermitage of the sage Valmiki and there gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusa (7.42-49). The *Adhyatma-ramayana*², perhaps the most influential of the Ramayanas after that of Valmiki neatly circumvents others: Rama's career in the mortal world is presented as lila, divine play; He and Sita are consciously acting out their roles for the benefit of their unsuspecting bhaktas. They are, in essence, playing a game. In the *Uttarakanda* they decide that it's time to bring their earthly sojourn to a close and for Sita to return to Vaikuntha, where Rama will later be reunited with her. To accomplish this, Rama explains, He will behave as if he were ensnared in a (samsara) and afraid of the slander of his subjects (lokapavadabhita) and exile Sita to the forest because of it; there she will take refuge in the asrama of the sage Valmiki and bear his twin sons. Later swearing her innocence with the earth as her witness, she will disappear into a chasm, and, Rama concludes,

**bhumer-vivaramatrena vaikuntham yasyasi drutam /
pascad-aham gamisyami esa eva suniscaya //**

By way of the chasm in the earth - you will swiftly go to
Vaikuntha, later I will assuredly follow you.

The abstract tone of this devotional approach can be seen in the short shrift given to Sita's reactions when she is abandoned in the forest by Laksmana. The poet merely notes

² Gorakhpur, Samvat 2001.

that “she lamented very distraughtly” (vilapa-atimugdha-vat, 7.4.60). The curt treatment of this tempting scene of separation, viraha, demonstrates a remarkable indifference to the conventions of Indian poetry. By way of contrast, Radha’s lament at her equally abrupt abandonment by **Krsna** is a theme very much cultivated by devotional poets.

Sankaradeva (traditional date 1449-1568) was a near contemporary of Vallabhacarya and Caitanya and founded the *eka-sarana dharma* sect which has dominated Vaisnavism in Assam ever since his day. A skilled and prolific poet, he produced works in Maithili, Sanskrit and Assamese. The greater part of Sankaradeva’s production was in the latter of these languages and consists of Assamese renderings of portions of the *Bhagavatapurana*, the *Hariscandra-upakhyana*, the *Rukmini-harana-kavya* and various other Sanskrit works.

The Ramayana had been rendered into Assamese in the 14th century by the poet **Madhava Kandali** (*making it, incidentally, the oldest Ramayana in a New Indo-Aryan language*), but while Sankaradeva much admired his predecessor for his literary skill, Madhava Kandali’s Ramayana had two serious flaws: it did not contain the first and final Kandas and more importantly it made no reference to bhakti. According to tradition, Madhava Kandali appeared to Sankaradeva in a dream and asked him to save his Ramayana from oblivion. So the saint added devotional exhortations to Madhava’s epic to make it more acceptable to Vaisnava devotees and complemented it with an *uttarakanda*, which he wrote himself, and an *adikanda* (as the balakanda is known in Eastern India), which he had **Madhavadeva**, his foremost disciple and successor, compose.

Sankaradeva bases his *uttarakanda* on Valmiki’s original. While this might seem the obvious thing to do, in his day it was not. Ramayana poets writing in New Indo-Aryan languages were influenced by and borrowed from the dozens of other versions of the epic which had been written since Valmiki’s day, especially devotional treatments of the theme. There was, in addition, a considerable amount of oral Rama lore in circulation which most poets freely drew upon. Sankaradeva, however, unlike his peers, apparently depends on Valmiki and on Valmiki alone. This seems even more remarkable when one considers the

amount of apocryphal Rama lore current in Assam exploited by later poets³, as well as the fact that **Madhavadeva** in his *adikanda* includes much apocryphal matter. Sankaradeva does, however, make some alterations in the story-line and his personal innovations result in an approach that is unusual in Ramayana literature.

Sankaradeva begins his *uttarakanda* in the traditional manner with a *mangalacarana* on the greatness of the **Name of Rama**: -

Ramanama bina nahi samsara nistara /
hena jani Ramara caritra kara sara //
Ramanama pramatta simhara mahanade /
palay papahastiyutha parama bisade / (p.467)⁴

There is no salvation in the world without the **Name of Rama**; knowing this, heed the
essence of Rama's tale.

The **Name of Rama** causes sin to flee in great distress like a herd of elephants at the mighty
roar of an enraged lion.

Ignoring the stories related by the sage Agastya which fill the first 36 sargas of Valmiki, Sankaradeva begins his account in *medias res* and on an ominous note. Sita is pregnant and the kingdom rejoices, but “then a misfortune took place because of an ill turn of fate” (milila duryoga pace bidhira bipake). Significantly, Sankaradeva makes no mention of the golden age of the *Rama rajya* as is common in introductions to the episode elsewhere. Perhaps Sankaradeva felt this inappropriate in view of the tragedy that was about to unfold. Sita tells her husband of her desire to visit the hermits in their forest ashrams and, a few verses later, Rama hears the slanders circulating amongst his subjects and decides to have his wife abandoned in the jungle. He summons his brother Laksmana and tells him in secret (birale) to take Sita to the forest and deceptively (chalabade) leave her there. Seeing the look in Rama's eyes, Laksmana is too afraid to utter a word in protest⁵. Laksmana fetches Sita in his chariot, drives her to the forest and abruptly abandons her there, informing her that Rama had ordered him to do so. Sita is shocked to realize that her husband has

³ For these see W.L. Smith, *The Ramayana Tradition in Eastern India: Assam, Bengal, Orissa*, Stockholm : Studies in Indian Languages and Culture, 1988, p.27 ff.

⁴ All quotes are from *Saptakanda Ramayana*, ed. Harinarayana Duttabaruah, 3rd Edition, Gauhati 1972.

⁵ Ramara kataksa dekhi Lasmanara dara (p.468)

commanded that she be left to die in the forest. This is a point which Sankaradeva stresses: Sita has not simply been exiled to the forest (banabasa), but abandoned there to perish. Rama has not simply repudiated her; he has tried to murder her. This is not an exaggeration since the jungle has always been described in the Indian literature as the ‘terrifying’ or ‘terrible’ (ghora) forest, a dangerous wilderness filled with wild beasts and savages⁶.

Meanwhile, back in Ayodhya, Rama is racked with guilt: -

karilo pataki garbhavati strira badha /
tejilo pataki main nidaruna mane // (.....)
Sita bine Ramara nuguce hrdikheda / (p.469)

I, a sinner, have slain my pregnant wife,
I, a cruel-hearted sinner, have abandoned her. (.....)
Bereft of Sita, grief did not leave Rama’s heart.

Sankaradeva, however, does not dwell on this; his account of the abandonment of Sita is told with great brevity in a mere thirty-four verses.

Later Rama decides to perform a horse sacrifice (Aswamedha-yajna). Meanwhile Lava and Kusa are born to Sita in the hermitage, grow up, learn the Ramayana from their mentor Valmiki, and the two of them, now wandering bards, appear at the sacrificial ground to recite the epic to the astonished and delighted citizens of Ayodhya. Sankaradeva includes a brief synopsis of their recitation, replete with its stutis to Rama. Towards end of their recital the two boys include the stories related by the sage Agastya about Ravana’s career and Hanuman’s youth i.e. those found at the beginning of Valmiki’s *Uttarakanda* but, as has been noted, omitted by Sankaradeva. By shifting the stories forward to this point, Sankaradeva remolds the clumsy structure of the original kanda into one unbroken narrative, neatly encapsulating Agastya’s digressions in the main theme, instead of allowing them to dangle awkwardly at its beginning **Lava** and **Kusa** end their recital on the same note that Sankaradeva’s *Uttarakanda* begins: -

⁶ In the Sanskrit original, Rama tells Laksmana to leave Sita near the ashrama of Valmiki. He remains, however, unaware of her fate.

**milila duryyoga pace paileka bipake /
janabade dila Rame nirbbasa sitake //
tahanko badhibe Raghagara bhaila mati / (...)
bhaila Rama svami Janakira yamakala // (p. 483)**

Then a misfortune took place from a turn of fate, Rama exiled his wife.

Hearing this, the audience bursts into tears and Rama faints. Coming to, he realizes that the two boys are his sons and expresses his desire to be reunited with Sita providing she proves her innocence again, this time to the satisfaction of his subjects.

According to the Sanskrit original, Rama sends unnamed messengers, not to Sita, but to the sage Valmiki, asking indirectly that she submit to a new test, with the permission of the sage (anumanya mahamunim⁷). The message is conveyed to Valmiki and he assents. The negotiations are between Sita's former and present guardians; she herself remains behind the scene, presumably at the ashram of Valmiki, and her comments about the arrangement are not mentioned. The next day Valmiki appears with Sita, who stands before the assembly with downcast eyes. Rama apologizes for his behaviour - not to Sita, but to Valmiki: -

**Seyam lokabhayad-brahman-na-papapi pura sati /
Parityakta maya Sita tad-bhavan ksantum-arhasi // (7.104.4)**

Earlier, O Brahman, I abandoned Sita
Because of fear of the people,
Even though this good woman was without sin.
Please forgive me for that.

In the Assamese version of the story, in great contrast, Rama is overwhelmed by guilt at having abandoned Sita:-

⁷ 7.102.9. We will from now on refer to the eastern or Gaudian recension since that is the version which Sankaradeva would have relied upon. Ed. Gaspara Gorressio, Madras reprint (1867) (1982).

**henaya priyaka mai tejilo kamane /
candala buliya garhibe yiba sune //
ehi buli Ramacandre karanta bilapa /**

How did I abandon such a wife?
Whoever hears of it will condemn me as a *candala*. In these words
Rama lamented.

At the advice of Vasistha, his chaplain, Rama then dispatches negotiators, here not to Valmiki, but to Sita herself. They are four: Rama's brother Satrugna, the virtuous raksasa **Vibhisana**, Susena, physician to the apes, and **Hanuman**. The quartet finds Sita in a sorry state.

In sharp contrast to the conventional descriptions of the sylvan idylls in which hermits were supposed to live, Sita has, quite realistically, suffered physically from the deprivations of her forest banishment. She has been evicted from the luxury of the palace to waste away in a bleak and difficult life in the jungle.

**malina basana besa klesa deha ksina /
dhuliye dhusara tanu tapasira cina //
phala mula bhaksana sukhaila sarira / (p. 487)**

Her clothes were soiled, she was miserable, gaunt
Her body was pale (or covered in dust)
Showing her to be a hermit woman.
Her limbs had become emaciated
Because of the diet of fruit and roots.

The four emissaries are distraught at the sight. When they regain their composure Hanuman explains their mission: -

marasiyo dosa mava Prabhu Raghavara //

**sumarite tomaka Ramara hrdikheda /
dine ratri netrara lotaka nahi cheda //
ha Sita Sita buli tejanta nisvasa /
banato adhika tana sito grhabasa // (p.487)**

Mother, forgive Rama's transgressions.
Rama grieves as he thinks of you.
Night and day his tears never cease falling
And he sighs, calling your name.
This house-exile of his is worse than your forest-exile.

Though Rama is suffering as much as her, Sita's response is not positive: -

**jano moro mane Rama swami yamakala /
mai yeve jano Rama enuva nirddaya //
lankate tejilo hante pranaka niscaya / (p.487)**

In my mind Rama seems like the god of death.
Had I known that he was so heartless,
I certainly would have ended my life in Lanka.

Her response leaves Hanuman and His companions speechless. They make no further attempts to persuade her; instead Hanuman goes to Valmiki and tells him that Sita will not listen to them. Valmiki in his turn asks Sita to forgive all Rama's earlier offense (purbba yata dosa), and Sita merely weeps in response. Valmiki then promises the party that he will bring Sita before the assembly the next day.

In Valmiki's version of the final scene, Sita does not speak a word to her husband. She swears her innocence, calling upon Madhavi, her mother, the Earth goddess, to open a fissure in the ground and admit her as she has never had thoughts of a man other than Rama⁸, and so it happens, Sita disappears triumphantly into the depths of the earth. In Sankaradeva's rendering Sita has far much more to say. She is humiliated and enraged at the

⁸ yathaham Raghavad-anyam manasapi na cintaye /
tatha me madhavi devi vivaran datum-arhati // (7.104.12)

necessity of having to undergo a second public test of her chastity and her rage is obvious to the crowd which has come to witness the spectacle: -

**dukhasaba sumari jvalila ati sati (.....)
mahasoke kope ati kampamana kaya //
jajvalya samana aganira sikha praya //
antargata Ramara milila mahabhaya / (.....)
arakata akhi mukha kope apamane //
Ramara bhitika pithi krodhabhave /
cai samajyaka laja eri jagamava // (p. 492)**

Thinking of all she had suffered,
That good woman flared up in anger, (.....)
Her body shook with rage and grief
Like the flame of an intense fire.
Rama felt great fear in his heart, (...)
Her eyes and face were scarlet with rage and indignation.
In her anger she turned her back to Rama and laying
Aside her shyness, she looked at the crowd.

Thus, standing before an intimidated audience, Sita finally speaks her mind: -

**chale niya diyalanta amaka nirbbasa // (...)
garbhate maribe caila duiguti poka / (...)
sabe bole aji milibe pramada / (...)
dhana dile hove akhai Ramara mukhata /
balkibe lagila devi dushmana dukhata //
Raghavaka cai kope kataksa nirekhi / (p.492-3)**

“By a ruse he had me abandoned in the forest (...)
He wanted to kill the two boys in my womb.”
Everyone said, ‘today a calamity will take place,’
If paddy had been put into Rama’s mouth,

It would have turned into puffed rice.

(i.e. he was burning with shame)

The queen, in her great sorrow,

Began to revile him.

Angrily she looked at Rama from the corners of her eyes.

Though Sita does protest her devotion to Rama's feet in conventional terms, this is drowned out in a long (longer, in fact, than the story of her exile) and very unconventional harangue in which she vents her bitterness. Sita then swears the same oath as in Valmiki, the earth heeds it, splits open and accepts her. She is gone and Rama is crushed with grief.

In Sankaradeva's treatment of this episode, notes Maheswar Neog, "Rama with all his superhuman greatness, becomes a weakling with self-reproach and an impotent love for Sita"⁹. It can be pointed out that portraying Rama as a frail and flawed human is not at all exceptional in vernacular Ramayana literature, even in devotional versions of the epic. Sankaradeva is far from alone in this. But here Rama seems more dutiful than weak and his rejection of his innocent wife is quite in harmony with ksatriya ethics. A ruler cannot keep a wife whom subjects do not respect, and as a ksatriya it is Rama's caste duty to do as his subjects wish. Caesar's wife must be above suspicion. And so Rama chooses to do the right thing rather than let his personal feeling determine his decisions. This is karma yoga, not weakness. Rama is righteous - dharmic - and this is, after all, what the Ramayana is all about.

The tragedy is explained repeatedly by the actors themselves in terms of fate and karma. In their human-like incarnations Rama and Sita are no more immune to these forces than anyone else, Attachments are illusions. As Rama's brothers point out to him: -

asara samsara ito sabe mayamaya //

putra dara bandhava yateka parikara /

hena jana sabe soka santapara ghara // .

ksaneke samyoga have ksaneke biyoga /

micha bisaya kichu nahi sukhabhoga // (p.484)

⁹ Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times, Delhi (1965) reprint 1985.

The world is insubstantial; all of this is illusory.
Son, Wife, relations, friends, know that
All of these are sources of grief and suffering.
One moment one is united with them
And the next separated.
In the vessels of illusion no pleasure,
No happiness is to be found.

In the beginning of his *uttarakanda* Sankaradeva announces his intention: biracibo *uttarakanda* sara, “I will write the essence of the *uttarakanda*” (p.467)¹⁰. This is exactly what he does. He not only keeps to Valmiki, but as has been seen, keeps to what is essential in Valmiki and therefore, on the one hand, decides not to adopt the often rather radical narrative innovations characteristic of devotional treatment of the epics - as in works such as the Adhyatma-ramayana as well as the Hindi, Kannada, Telugu Malayalam, and Marathi Ramayanas, and at the same time he chooses not to include the popular apocryphal tales so frequent in Bengali and Oriya treatments of the epic. The *uttarakanda* is, in fact, the only book of the Assamese Ramayana free of such borrowings. Sankaradeva thus remains faithful to the “original”. The narrative is given a devotional gloss, but not an intrusive one. In this way Sankaradeva avoids a common “fault” of the devotional Ramayanas which, very often, rob the story of its human interest¹¹. Human interest means dramatic interest as well, and what minor changes Sankaradeva - introduces, are introduced for this reason.

Here the banishment is presented, and considered both by Rama and Sita to be, if not a callous act, an act very callously carried out. Elsewhere it is usually portrayed simply as a regrettable necessity. What is exceptional here is Sita’s reaction. Sankaradeva’s great sympathy for Sita’s plight leads him to portray her not as the passive victim as in Valmiki, but a person of “flesh and blood,” justifiably enraged at the way she has been treated. He is writing a real story about real people, not about a deceptive Charade acted out by playful deities (lila). The point Sankaradeva is trying to make is one of compassion, compassion for Rama’s dilemma, of course, but much more for Sita sufferings. Sankaradeva’s sympathies

¹⁰ Spelled uttarakanda in the Assamese Ramayana

¹¹ Cf. Smith, op. cit, p. 102ff.

are with her. After all, what is the story of Rama all about if not devotion, and what is devotion if it lacks compassion?
