

Five Holy Virgins, Five Sacred Myths

A Quest for Meaning

○ Pradip Bhattacharya

When Vyasa asked Ganesha to become his amanuensis, the elephant-headed god agreed, provided the dictation proceed without pause. Vyasa, in turn, laid down a condition of his own: nothing should be transcribed without comprehension. To wrest breathing space, he often composed shlokas so abstruse that even the elephant-headed god had to pause, before writing them down, to plumb their meaning.

It is not only these Vyasa-kuta in the Mahabharata that challenge comprehension. Even a traditional saying can pose an enigma, raising questions that have no simple answers. We begin a five-part series on the Panchakanyas of the Indian epics, taking as our starting point a Sanskrit verse in praise of these five women, all dancers to a different drum. In their stories, in their choices and the consequences these led to, we find upheld a pattern of values quite other than is conventionally understood to be the case.

There is an ancient exhortation¹ naming five maidens as *pratah-smaraniya*, urging that they be invoked daily at dawn:

*Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara
Mandodari tatha
Panchakanya smaranityam
mahapataka nashaka*

(Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari: constantly remembering these virgins five destroys great failings.)

The verse poses a puzzle worth grappling with. Two things strike us in this verse: the use of the epithet *kanya* (virgin, maiden), not *nari* (woman); and the unusual combination of names that redeem, of whom at least two – Ahalya and Draupadi – are *ayonijasambhava*, “not-of-woman-born”. Of the five *kanyas*, none quite measure up to the standard of monogamous chastity, commended so overwhelmingly in our culture. Each has had either an extra-marital relationship or more than one husband. Why should invoking

these *panchakanyas* be extolled as redemptive and why, indeed, is the intriguing term *kanya* applied to them? As we shall see, the key to the mystery of these five ‘virgin’ maidens lies in the type of sexual encounters they have with non-husbands, encounters that are neither rape nor adultery but are, in fact, quite unique.

Of this group three – Ahalya, Tara, and Mandodari – belong to the *Ramayana*, the epic composed by Valmiki, the first seer-poet. Draupadi and Kunti are celebrated in Vyasa’s *Mahabharata*. At the outset, we need to keep in mind that Valmiki and Vyasa’s great compositions are

designated as *kavya*, truth perceived by a *kavi*, a seer-poet. Hence, in evaluating the characters they have created, it is necessary to probe consciously beneath the surface appearance to reach the underlying meaning. When such an exhortation has come down the centuries, it cannot be dismissed as a meaningless conundrum, specially when it combines, as this one does, as many as five myths in one verse.

Ahalya: Crime and Punishment

It is the nobility of her character, her extraordinary beauty and the fact of her being chronologically the first *kanya* that places Ahalya at the head of the five virgin maidens. She had been true to her independent nature, fulfilling her womanhood in a manner that she found appropriate, though, finally, she is unable to assert herself.

The name Ahalya itself has a double meaning: one who is flawless; it also means un-ploughed, that is, one who is a virgin. Her origin-myth² states that, having created this flawless



beauty from what was unique and loveliest in all creatures (as was later done to create Tilottama), Brahma handed her over to the sage Gautama for safe custody until she reached puberty. When Gautama handed her back to the Creator, he was so pleased with the sage's self-restraint that he bestowed Ahalya upon him. Indra, lord of the gods, enamoured of her beauty, had presumed that this loveliest of women was meant for him and resented a forest-dwelling ascetic becoming her spouse. In the *Adi (Bala) Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, Vishvamitra tells Rama and Lakshmana that, assuming Gautama's form in his absence, Indra approached Ahalya saying, "Those craving coitus cannot wait; I crave union, slim-waisted one!"

Though Ahalya saw through the disguise, yet out of curiosity (*kutuhalat*) – the same impulse that impels Kunti to summon Surya – she granted him sexual favours and said, "I am gratified. Now leave this place quickly, best of gods! Protect yourself and me from Gautama in every way." As Indra was leaving, however, Gautama returned. By his curse, Indra's testicles fell off. Another version in the *Mahabharata* (12.342.23) states that Indra's beard was turned yellow by the curse. Ahalya was condemned to perform penance in that terrible forest, hidden from all, fasting ("subsisting on air"), sleeping in ashes, tormented by guilt. Gautama ordained that, purified of delusion (*lobhamohavivarjita*), by offering hospitality to Rama, she, fairest of all (*varavarnini*³) would be redeemed to rejoin him.

This account is frank regarding Ahalya's deliberate choice to satisfy her curiosity. Creation's sole beautiful woman, she is the archetypal feminine responding to the ardent, urgent, direct sexual advances of the ruler of heaven who presents such a dazzling contrast to her ascetic, aged, forest-dwelling



The Ahalya myth in Orissi patachitra

husband. Mortal woman welcomes the intimate touch of heaven's immortal, driven by that irrepressible curiosity for varied and unusual experience, and a willingness to take risks for it, which is said to characterise the feminine.

Although Ahalya already had a son, Shatananda, yet the deepest urges of her femininity remained unfulfilled. The *kanya* is not just mother but is also beloved, and it is this aspect that had not been actualised in her relationship with Gautama. The first *kanya* not-born-of-woman, Ahalya has the courage to respond to the call of her inner urge, but does not challenge the sentence pronounced on her by patriarchal society.

The Backlash

The *Uttara Kanda*⁴ version is exculpatory, as may be expected of a later addition to the epic. Here Agastya states that, infuriated at Brahma bestowing Ahalya upon Gautama, Indra raped her, thus absolving Ahalya of any active role in the liason. Gautama cursed Indra to suffer imprisonment (by Meghanada), bear half the guilt of

every act of rape and lose all peace of mind. As for Ahalya, she would cease to be unique as the only beautiful female – other lovely women would be born. (That is why men fall in love with different women, projecting their *anima* on to them.) When Ahalya protested that she could not recognise the disguised Indra and was not guilty of wilful wickedness, Gautama relented and said that he would take her back after she had been purified through Rama accepting her hospitality.

In popular retelling of the myth, depicted often enough on stage and in films and television serials, Ahalya is turned to stone. She regains her form only when Ram, reluctantly, places his foot on her head. In Valmiki, however, there is no petrification nor does Rama restore the stone-Ahalya to flesh and blood. These are *Katha-Sarit-Sagara* innovations. We witness here a male backlash that condemns the woman as soiled even though she may not be at fault, as Rama does with Sita.

The opposite occurs in the *Mahabharata* version, told in the *Shanti Parva*, where the furious Gautama commands his son Chirakari to slay his polluted mother (as Jamadagni ordered Parashurama to behead Renuka), but later regrets his rash command, realising that the fault lies not with his wife but with the lustful Indra. The *Brahma Purana*⁵ has Gautama turn Ahalya into a dry stream and disfigure Indra – who, terrified, has become a cat – with a thousand marks of the vulva. When Ahalya pleads her ignorance, Gautama grants her redemption upon her mingling with the Gautami River. By bathing in the same river, the marks on Indra’s body turn into eyes and he becomes “thousand-eyed” like the Greek Argus.

The *Shiva Purana*⁶ features Ahalya in an incident said to have occurred in another epoch (*yuga*). During a hundred year drought, Gautama’s asceticism resulted in Varuna gifting him an inexhaustible well, because of which his hermitage became a refuge for the distressed, including the Seven Sages. The wives of the Seven Sages abused Gautama’s disciples, insisting on having access to the well first. When Ahalya went to resolve the dispute, they abused her as well and lied to their husbands about what had happened. Blinded by passion for their wives, these sages turned to Ganesha, the *vighna-karta*, god of obstacles. They had him turn into an illusory cow that fell dead at Gautama’s touch, whereupon they stoned Ahalya and Gautama, driving them out of the hermitage. Shiva cursed the sages and their wives to be outside the Vedic pale, dooming them to perdition. Here Ahalya is a foil to the wickedness of the sages’ wives, instead of being the ‘fallen’ one. The *Shiva Purana* being later than Valmiki’s composition, it is probable that here we see a later

Tagore’s *Ahalya*

“What were your dreams,
Ahalya, when you passed
Long years as stone,
rooted in earth, prayer
And ritual gone,
sacred fire extinct
In the dark, abandoned
forest-shram? Earth
Merged with your body; did
you know her vast
Love, did hazy awareness
haunt your stone?
...And keep you blindly, dimly,
half-awake?
...When life’s excited zest
Rushed along branching paths
in numerous forms
To conquer the desert, did it
rise in outrage,
Circle your stone and crush
your sterile curse?
Didn’t its pounding blows
shake you awake?...
Did you, long asleep on her
breast, enter
That place of oblivion, cool as
endless night,
Where millions sleep forever
without fear,
Resting their life’s exhaustion
in the dust,
Where withered flowers fall in
the day’s heat,
Burnt-up stars and meteors,
crumbled fame,
Sated pleasure, grief too tired
to sting?
There, Earth smoothed with
her soothing hand

Your lines of sin and stress. Today
you shine
Like a newly woken princess, calm
and pure.
You stare amazed at the dawn
world. The dew
Which moistened your stone at
night shimmers now
On your black, loosely-flowing
hair. The mosses
Which clothed you with the green
mantle of Earth,
Thickened and brightened by each
fall of rain,
Are now a sari lightly placed by a
mother’s
Loving hand on your glorious
naked limbs.
The world smiles; you
recognise that smile.
You gaze; your heart swings
back from the far past,
Traces its lost steps. In a
sudden rush,
All round, your former
knowledge of life returns...
...Like first
Created dawn, you slowly rise
from the blue
Sea of forgetfulness. You stare
entranced;
The world, too, is speechless;
face to face
Beside a sea of mystery none
can cross
You know afresh what you
have always known.”

Extracts from “Ahalya”
Rabindranath Tagore
(trans. William Radice)

redactor's attempt to re-write the Ahalya myth to remove the stigma of adultery.

The *Katha-Sarit-Sagara*⁷ version provides a clue to the psychological condition of Ahalya. The story is told to illustrate how evil acts lead to suffering for evildoers. On Gautama's return, as in the *Brahma Purana*, Indra flees in the form of a cat and is cursed to be covered with the marks of the vulva he had so coveted. Replying to the sage's enquiry about who had been in the cottage, Ahalya dissimulates, saying that it was a *majjara* (in Prakrit meaning both "cat" or "my lover", because of which a synonym for Indra is *Ahalyayajjara*). She is punished by being turned to stone, reflecting the social ostracism of transgressing women and their consequent psychological trauma. In the *Adi Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, Vishvamitra, who praises Ahalya to Rama, condemns the *apsara* Rambha to a similar fate for disturbing his asceticism at Indra's behest. He curses her to become a stone until some sage of great spiritual prowess should redeem her. These are not simply physical transformations (as in the Grimms' fairy tale of "Faithful John" or Hatim Tai's "Seven Riddles"), but a deep psychological trauma, in which oppressive guilt virtually throttles the vital spirit, "freezing" the emotions and making the woman socially into a non-person. Ahalya becomes an automaton, denying her emotions, feelings and self-respect, shunned by all. Even as a mother, she finds no fulfilment. Shatananda, her son, abandons her in the forest, despite referring to her as renowned (*mama mata yashasvini*).

Ahalya's Redemption

On the other hand, Rama, at Vishvamitra's behest, regards her as blameless and inviolate, as her name

connotes. When he and Lakshmana touch her feet in salutation, this recognition restores her self-respect and her status in society, so that she truly lives again. (It is ironic that though Rama's visit redeems Ahalya, it is because of his suspicions that Sita decides to suffer fire and later enters exile and oblivion.) Vishvamitra repeatedly refers to Ahalya as *mahabhaga*, most virtuous and noble. In the eyes of this mighty rebel who proved that



Ahalya meeting Ram, Deogarh, 5th c.

a *kshatriya* could transform himself into the greatest of seers, who presented the world the *Gayatri mantra*, saved Sunahshepa from being sacrificed and created a second heaven for the outcaste Trishanku, Ahalya was not a fallen woman. Valmiki's description of Ahalya as Rama sees her needs to be noted (my translation):

"The Creator, it seems, with utmost care had perfected this form, divine, enchanting. Like a tongue of flame smoke-shrouded, Like the full moon's glory ice-reflected, Like blinding sunlight mirrored in water."

Among the *panchakanyas*, Ahalya remains unique because of the nature of her daring and its consequence. Her single transgression, for having done what her femininity demanded, calls down an awful curse. Because of her unflinching acceptance of her sentence, both Vishvamitra and Valmiki glorify her. Chandra Rajan, a sensitive modern-day poetess, catches the psychological nuances of her situation:

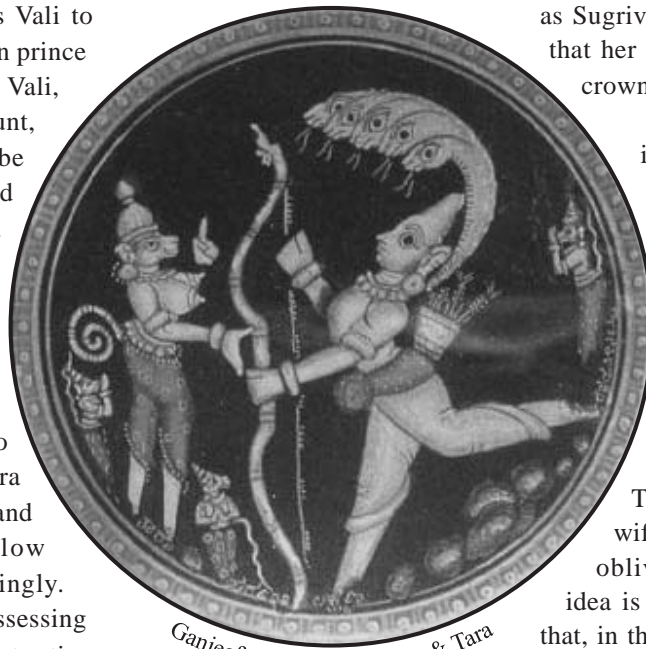
*"Gautama cursed his impotence and raged... she stood petrified uncomprehending in stony silence withdrawn into the secret cave of her inviolate inner self... she had her shelter sanctuary benediction within, perfect, inviolate in the one-ness of spirit with rock rain and wind with flowing tree and ripening fruit and seed that falls silently in its time into the rich dark earth."*⁸

Tara: Bold Statecraft

Tara,⁹ wife of Vali and daughter of the *vanara* physician Sushena, is the next *kanya* we meet in the *Ramayana*. She is a woman of unusual intelligence, foresight and self-confidence. In the *Mahabharata* she is called *sarvabhutarutajna*, able to understand the language of all creatures. In the *Kishkindha Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, we see her warning Vali against Sugriva when he comes to challenge Vali for the second time. Appearances are deceptive, she points out; normally no contestant returns to the field so soon after having been soundly thrashed. Moreover, she says, she has heard that Rama, prince of Ayodhya, has

befriended him. She urges Vali to anoint Sugriva as the crown prince and live in peace with him. Vali, in the *Mahabharata* account, suspects that Tara might be favouring Sugriva and therefore rejects her advice. By brushing aside her wise warning, he walks into Rama's arrow, as he himself admits while he lies dying. He pays a fine tribute to his wife, imploring Ram to ensure that *tapasvinim* Tara is not insulted by Sugriva and advising Sugriva to follow Tara's advice unquestioningly. She is skilled, he says, in assessing a situation and deciding what action should be taken; she never judges the merit of anything wrongly.

After Vali's fall, Tara not only rallies the fleeing subjects, but also shows great political sagacity. When Hanuman asks her to stop grieving and place her son Angada on the throne, she refuses, since, with his uncle Sugriva alive, this would be inadvisable. Then she rushes to Rama and, in an extremely forceful speech, demands that he kill her too. The strength of her personality in facing up to the prince of Ayodhya is strikingly portrayed. In Krittibas' Bengali *Ramayana*, Tara curses Rama to be slain by Vali in a future birth. This is confirmed in the *Mahanataka* and the *Ananda Ramayana* where the hunter who causes Krishna's death is Vali reborn. In several vernacular versions of the epic, Tara also curses Rama that he will not be able to enjoy the company of Sita for long. Tara's upbraiding elicits Rama's assurance that Sugriva will protect both her and her son's



Ganjeefa Card: Lakshmana & Tara

rights. To ensure that her son Angada is not deprived of his father's throne, she becomes her brother-in-law Sugriva's consort.

When Lakshmana storms into the inner apartments of Kishkindha, to upbraid Sugriva who has reneged on his promise to track down Sita, it is Tara who is sent by the terrified Sugriva to tackle this rage-incarnate. Approaching Lakshmana with intoxicated, half-closed eyes and unsteady gait, lovely, slim, unashamed, Tara effectively disarms him. She gently reprimands him for being unaware of lust's overwhelming power that overthrows the most ascetic of sages, whereas Sugriva is a mere *vanara* (a forest dweller). When he abuses Sugriva, Tara fearlessly intervenes, pointing out that the rebuke is unjustified and details all the efforts already made to gather an army. Once again, as when tendering advice to Vali, Tara displays her superb ability to marshal information and to intervene in a crisis. Thus, she acts

as Sugriva's shield while ensuring that her son Angada becomes the crown prince.

In the *Mahabharata* there is an interesting statement in the *Vana Parva* that Vali and Sugriva fought over a woman. Surely that woman was the remarkable Tara for, the *Ramayana* tells us, when attendants report Lakshmana's arrival, Sugriva is so engrossed in Tara (and not his original wife Ruma) that he remains oblivious to the news. This idea is reinforced when we find that, in the Balinese dance Kebyar, "Rama helps Sugriwa get his lover, Dewi Tara, back from his brother, SuVali."¹⁰ In both the *Nrisimha Purana* (50.21-27) and the *Mahanataka* (5.51), Tara is actually Sugriva's wife whom Vali forcibly took away.

The Telegu *Ranganatha Ramayana* (4.4) has an even more interesting account of Tara's origins that aligns her more closely with Ahalya, by also depicting her as not born of woman. In this account, Tara is said to have emerged along with the other *apsaras* during the churning of the ocean for *amrita*, the nectar of immortality. Tara was then gifted to Vali and Sugriva for the help they had given the gods. Subsequently, Sugriva married Sushena's daughter Ruma. The Thai *Ramkien* states that Vali was given a trident and Sugriva got Tara, but Vali snatched her away and married her.¹¹ Dr. Ratna Roy, in her performance of the *Pancha Kanya* dance in the Mahari Odissi tradition, interprets Tara's predicament as a story that reflects our present crisis, telling of the plight of women during war.

Brihaspati's Tara

The earliest bearer of the name "Tara" is the wife of Brihaspati who runs away with his disciple Chandra, causing the Tarakamaya war between the *devas* and their stepbrothers, the *asuras*. The name Tara, therefore, carries an aura of internecine strife. Tara, like Helen with Paris, let herself be ruled by her preferences, ignoring social conventions in choosing to leave her ascetic husband for the young and irresistibly handsome Chandra. Even after the war, when the *devas* and the *asuras* fight again over possession of her son, it is she who has the last word. As this second war is inconclusive, Brahma himself requests Tara to declare who is the father of her son. Once again, Tara chooses to announce the truth instead of hiding behind the safety of conventions and declares that Chandra, not Brihaspati, is the father. That is how she becomes the ancestress of the Lunar dynasty, the *Chandra Vamsa*, whose fortunes are the stuff of Vyasa's epic.

Let us not forget that Tara is the name of the second of the Ten Mahavidyas (the ten Transcendental Wisdoms). Erich Neumann, while discussing the highest form of the feminine archetype, the Goddess of Spiritual Transformation, views Tara as the highest evolution of this universal aspect of consciousness. Her name signifies both 'star' and 'the pupil of the eye', conveying the idea of a focal point, which suggests that Tara is in some manner a very concentrated essence. We can also interpret her name as coming from the causative form of the verb *t.r*, meaning 'to cross', 'to traverse' or 'to escape'. Like Draupadi, as we shall see later, Tara is 'she who ferries across', 'she who saves'. Indeed, by her intrepid

actions Tara, the wife of Vali, saves the kingdom and her son from ruin.

Mandodari: The Frog Princess

It is with Mandodari, Ravana's wife and the last *kanya* portrayed by Valmiki, that we face a problem. There is hardly anything special that Valmiki has written about her except that, like Tara, her assessment of the enemy is shrewd and correct. She warns her husband to return Sita to avoid destruction and has enough influence to prevent him from raping her. Of her birth, the *danava* Maya states in the *Uttara Kanda* (canto 12) that she is born to him from the *apsara* Hema who left him after giving birth (as *apsaras* do). The *Mahari Panchakanya* dance composition, however, provides the following myth of her origin:

"A snake poisons the milk of a hermit as a frog watches. Realising the consequences, the frog jumps into the bowl of milk and dies instantaneously. The hermit, on his return, sees the frog in the milk and curses it for its gluttony. The curse reverses a former curse and the frog turns into the beautiful maiden,

Mandodari, who is pure, fair, slender and sharp, with voice like that of a vina (somber and majestic), with the gait of a white swan, flashing and restless eyes, and desired of all men."¹²

The story appears to be a version of the Oriya *Dharma Purana* (canto 5).¹³ Two hermits, Mandar and Udar, refuse to share with the earth any part of their cow's milk. Angered, she despatches her son Maninaga to poison the milk. A female frog resident in their ashram notices this and jumps into the vessel of milk to save the sages. By their curse, she turns into a *kanya* whom they name Vengavati and affianced to Vali. He, however, has sexual intercourse with her before marriage and she becomes pregnant. Ravana asks the hermits for her hand. When they refuse, he assumes Vali's form (like Indra with Ahalya) and spirits her away. Pulled in opposite directions by Ravana and Vali, she splits into two, giving birth to Angad Yama and Vayu revive her. Thus, she is a double of Tara. Being obtained through ill means, she was named Mandodari; or perhaps she was



Ravana and Mandodari, Rajasthani traditional painting

named after the two sages who turned her from a frog into a woman.

The *Ananda Ramayana* account (1.9.33-57) has Vishnu create her from the sandalwood paste smeared on his body to delude Ravana into believing that she is Parvati, whom he has asked for from Shiva. According to the Ranganath *Ramayana*, it is Parvati who makes the doll and Shiva breathes life into it. The doll is Mandodari, whose beauty causes Parvati concern; she has Shiva turn Mandodari into a frog. When Maya begs for children, Shiva restores the frog to human form and gives her to the *danava* as his daughter. Like Ahalya, Tara and Draupadi, Mandodari is also *ayonijasambhava*, once again, not-of-woman-born.

There is an analogous myth about her origin in the Telegu *Uttara Ramayana*.¹⁴ Once, when Parvati was away, Shiva had intercourse with the *apsara* Madhura, who came to Kailash to worship him. On her return, Parvati turned Madhura into a frog. After twelve years, by Shiva's grace, the frog took the form of Mandodari who was adopted by Maya and Hema and became the wife of Ravana. "The sperm of Shiva which remained dormant in the womb of Mandodari when she was a frog began to develop, and finally gave birth to Indrajit. Thus, the so-called son of Ravana – Indrajit of Lanka – was an intelligence son [*sic*] of Shiva."¹⁵

Here we find another clue to the reason behind her name. Desiraju Hanumanta Rao, translating and commenting on the epic, writes, "When Shurpanakha was claiming herself a befitting female for Rama, and belittling Seetha she uses words like *krishodari*, *shaatodari* meaning "a female with feeble

womb". So also *manda udari* "slow, womb...lady with slow conception..." Mandodari gives birth to one Indrajit, son of Ravana, an extraordinary fighter, and all-conquering warrior. Had Mandodari given birth to one or two more Indrajits, a dozen Ramas have to take incarnation."¹⁶

In Rajasthan, the Sri Alvar Tirth of the Jains celebrates the power of Mandodari's chastity:

"Ravana, the king of Lanka observed the vow of taking meals only after worshipping God. Once he was going in a plane [*sic*] to a foreign country. When it was time for lunch, he landed near Alvar to take rest. He remembered the vow of worshipping God but he had forgotten to bring the idol with him. In order to keep the vow, Mandodari made an idol of sand and invested it with life by reciting the *mantra* of *Namaskar*. Having worshipped God with devotion, Ravan and Mandodari kept their vow. By virtue of the vow and Mandodari's chastity, the presiding deity made the idol adamant. Thus, the idol of Parshvanathji worshipped by Mandodari and Ravan began to be known as 'Shri Ravan Parshvanath.'¹⁷



Kadambari Misra

Not Her Husband's Shadow

Mandodari's importance for Ravana is highlighted in certain recensions which describe Ravana performing a sacrifice after his son Indrajit's death. Vibhishana advises Rama to prevent him from completing the ritual. When Hanuman fails to disturb Ravana's meditation, Angada drags Mandodari by her hair to Ravana, tearing off her bodice and girdle so that her skirt slips. Upbraiding her husband for shamelessly countenancing all this, she exclaims that such a husband were better dead and calls on her dead son to protect her honour. That arouses Ravana who attacks Angada to free his wife, leaving the ritual incomplete and sealing his fate.¹⁸

The Khmer *Ramakerti* account has Hanuman snatch away Mandodari's clothes to break Ravana's meditation. The Thai *Ramakien* provides a fascinating parallel with the Ahalya story and the myth of Vishnu assuming Shankhachuda or Jalandhar's form to seduce his wife Tulsi. According to this telling, Mandodari had learnt the secret of preparing *amrita* from Uma. Assuming Ravana's form, Hanuman embraces her. By thus sullyng her purity, her *sanjivani yajna*, performed to make her husband immortal, is rendered fruitless.¹⁹

Like Tara, Mandodari accepts Vibhishana, her husband's enemy and brother, as spouse, either at Rama's behest or because it was the custom among non-Aryans for a new ruler to wed an enthroned queen. In the *Mahabharata*, the *rakshashi* Hidimba has no hesitation in pursuing her desire for Bhima, who has just killed her brother, and she even has a son by him. In the *Mahanataka*, when Mandodari asks Rama what her fate

will be after the war and the death of her husband, he prohibits her from committing *sati* and advises her to rule by Vibhishana's side. The Bengali *Krittibas Ramayan*, the Oriya *Balaramdas Ramayan*, the Thai *Ramkien* and the Mahari dance composition all refer to Mandodari marrying Vibhishana.²⁰ Vernacular versions of the epic have Mandodari curse Sita that she will be abandoned by her husband, complementing Tara's curse on Rama.

The *Adbhut Ramayana* (canto 8) provides more insight. Ravana had stored blood drawn from ascetics in a pot and kept it with Mandodari, telling her that it contained deadly poison. Furious with his violating women during his conquests, she broke his injunction not to drink from the pot. By doing what she felt moved to do, Mandodari shows she is not her husband's shadow. The consequence is that she becomes pregnant, and, like Satyavati and Kunti later, discards the newborn infant in the field Janaka ploughs to discover the orphan Sita.²¹ This is perhaps the reason why we see Hanuman in the *Sundara Kanda* of the *Ramayana* mistaking Mandodari ("resplendent in bejewelled ornaments, fair, golden-complexioned, beautiful, mistress of the royal inner apartments, embellishing the palace with her loveliness") for Sita in Ravana's palace.

Tara and Mandodari are parallels. Both offer sound advice to their husbands who recklessly reject it and suffer the ultimate responsibility for the deaths of their husbands. Thereby, they are able to keep their kingdoms strong and prosperous as allies of Ayodhya, and they are able to continue to have a say in governance. Tara and Mandodari can never be described



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as shadows of such strong personalities as Vali and Ravana.

To be continued

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Endnotes

1 "Ahinik Sutravali", cf. *Bharatiya Sanskriti Kosh* by Liladhar Sharma 'Parvatiya', (Delhi: Rajpal & Sons, 2nd edition, 1996) p. 502. Sharma also cites the *Brahmanda Purana*, 3.7.219, but has not seen it himself (personal communication). The verse was not found in the editions of this *Purana* available in Calcutta. Sudhirchandra Sarkar's *Pauranik Abhidhan* (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1963) has an entry on "Panchakanya" (p.287) giving these five names. This *shloka* forms part of Orissa's dying Mahari dance composition, kept alive by Padma Sri Guru Pankaj Charan Das, his disciple Dr. Ratna Roy and Ritha Devi. The Guru told Dr. Roy that the text was by Ratnakar Bandhu (personal communication). Dr. Jan E.M. Houben notes (<http://listserv.liv.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0302&L=indology&D=1&F=P&O=D&P=8493>) a similar *sloka* in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana, Prakriti khanda* (16.68), celebrating famous women as emanations of the goddesses Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Durga, Savitri, Radhika, etcetera. All these are aspects of the supreme Prakriti herself, not created by Brahma, and they are the cause of all that is auspicious. Three of the five *kanyas* (Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari) are mentioned

here, along with Arundhati, Mena, Damayanti, Vedavati, Ganga and Yamuna (Manasa in the Bengal recension) – *Ahalyarundhati mena tara mandodari para Damayanti vedavati ganga ca manasa tatha*.

2 *Ramayana: Adi Kanda* 48.15-34 (Aryashastra recension, Kolkata 1964) also known as *Bala Kanda*. *Brahma Purana* 87.7 specifically mentions puberty as the time when Ahalya is to be returned to Brahma.

3 *Ramayana: Uttara Kanda* 30.46. In *Harivamsa* 31. 31-34 she is one of the twins (king Divodasa being the other) born to Vadhyashva and Menaka. Vadhyashya is the son of Maudgalya who is one of the five sons of Vahyashva after whom the kingdom was named "Panchala". There is no encounter with Indra in this story, nor is Menaka called an *apsara*, so this must be another Ahalya.

4 *Ramayana: Uttara Kanda* 30. Also *Brahma Purana* 87.44, 62 where Ahalya cites the ashram guards as witnesses that Indra deceived her by assuming the sage's form and therefore she is not at fault.

5 *Brahma Purana*, canto 87 (Aryashastra recension, Calcutta, 1983).

6 *Shiva Purana*, 4.25-27 summarised by W.D. O'Flaherty in *The Origins of Evil in Hindu mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988) p. 298.

7 *Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara, Taranga* 17 translated by V. Balasubrahmanyam (Calcutta: M.P. Birla Foundation, 1994), p.113.

8 Chandra Rajan: *Re-visions* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1987) p. 12.

9 Not to be confused with Tara, wife of Brihaspati, preceptor of the gods who elopes with his disciple Chandra, or with Taramati, wife of king Harishchandra in some Puranas and an example of a *sati*.

10 <http://www.murnis.com/Valinesedances.htm>

11 *op.cit.* p.469.

12 Parts III and IV of Guru Pankaj Charan Das' repertoire presented by Dr. Ratna Roy. She states that the five elements – earth, water, fire, air and ether – represent the five virtuous women (www.olywa.net/ratnadavid/panchakanya.htm) and that the emphasis is on the purity of these women because they did not break any humanistic codes, only the strictures of an orthodox patriarchal society. Rama sanctifies Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari at the climactic moment of the dance drama.

13 Fr. Camille Bulcke: *Ramkatha—utpatti aur vikas* (Hindi Parishad Prakashan, Prayag Vishvavidyalay, 3rd edition., 1971), pp. 636-7.

14 Vettam Mani: *Puranic Encyclopaedia* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975) p. 476.

15 Dr. Abraham Kovoov: *Gods, Demons and Spirits*, quoted www.uni-giessen.de/~gk1415/amorous-gods-and-goddesses.htm.

16 www.valmikiramayan.net/kishkindha/sarga58/kishkindha_58_prose.htm However, Vettam Mani's *Puranic Encyclopaedia* states on p. 476 that Mandodari has 3 sons: Meghanada, Atikaya and Akshakumar.

17 www.jaintirth.org This ancient temple survived till the fifteenth century. The new temple was built in the year 1654 of the Vikram era, and the idol was reinstalled in the year 1983 of the Vikram era. Ravan Parshvanath is mentioned in many ancient scriptures and *tirthmalas* written from 1422 to 1689 of the Vikram era.

18 *Adhyatma Ramayana* 6.10. Bulcke *op.cit.* (p. 579) refers to the Telegu

Dvipada Ramayana 6.133-135, *Ananda Ramayana* 1.11.229, *Padma Purana Uttara khanda*, canto 269 as having the incident as well.

19 Bulcke *ibid.*

20 Bulcke *op.cit.* p. 540; S.D. Singh, *Polyandry in Ancient India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978) p. 141. Dr. Ratna Roy writes that, in Part X of the Mahari *Panchakanya* dance: "In celebration of his victory, Rama places Bibhisana, Ravana's brother, on the throne of Lanka and blesses Mandodari as his bride and queen, virtuous in spite of her second marriage."

21 Bulcke (p.362-4) provides several references to Jain versions and the *Mahabagavata Purana* canto 42 that tell of Sita as the daughter of Mandodari. □

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