

Knowing Sita, from the Perspective of Bali

By

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Abstract

We grew up listening to stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata from our grandparents and parents. We know Ram as Maryada Purushottam and Sita as his obedient wife who followed the naari dharma till her last breath. Little do we know about the strengths of Sita, which make her a feminist and stand tall against a patriarchal world. While Ravana was the demon, Sita had the power to fight for her dignity and save it herself instead of waiting for her husband to come to her rescue, according to the Balinese version of Ramayana.

She lived as a single mother and raised her two boys into capable princes without depending on a man. Sita had the power to walk through the flames and the courage to submerge in the earth. She made choices and stood by her decisions against all odds. She was determined, chose to be subservient to the other gender, but she wasn't docile. Sita is not what we know through Ramayana; Sita is what we should understand from the perspective of Bali, the Indonesian province.

Keywords

Bali, Indonesia, Kecak Performances, Ramayana

Introduction

Bali is one of the most famous spots in the Indonesian province. While the place attracts many tourists around the year, Bali offers a delightful experience to everyone, starting from

young backpackers to loaded families, budget tours to luxurious stays, and adventurous days to serene evenings.

Accommodating approximately 4.22 million people who follow Balinese Hinduism, believe in Ramayana, Ram, and Sita. However, Buddhist inscriptions found in small clay stupa figurines mark the presence of Indianised kingdom in Bali's ancient history. However, as we advance, the Majapahit dynasty describes Bali's middle historical period while Marco Polo was responsible for adding the European touch to the Balinese soils.



Image 1: A Balinese Temple

Depiction of Sita in Kakawin Ramayana

The Kakawin Ramayana is the Indonesian version of Ramayana. The epic Ramayana came to Bali in the 8th or 9th century, and the Kakawin Ramayana is written in Javanese. The Kakawin Ramayana was developed and evolved to another version called Balinese Ramkavaca. While the first half of the Kakawin Ramayan is similar to Bhaktikavya in Sanskrit, written by Indian poet Bhatti, the latter half is identical to the Indian Ramayana.

Most notable characters like Rama, Lakshmana, Hanumana, and Ravana, in Balinese Ramayana, stick to the Indian narrative, while there is a significant difference in the depiction of Sita. We know Sita as a soft, beautiful, demure, loyal, patient woman, making her subservient to the other gender. She is weak enough to long for a golden deer and get abducted by Ravana as she helplessly waits for Rama to save her dignity.



Image 2: Balinese Painting of Sita and Hunumana

Sita – A Strong Independent Woman and A Single Mother

However, in Kakawin Ramayana, Sita lives with her head high and chin up, not waiting for a man to rescue her and fighting with asuras in Ravana's Lanka. Though Sita lived in a patriarchal world like most women live even today, she had clarity about what she wanted and what she didn't want in her life. Sita didn't want a man who didn't respect a woman's choices. Hence, she never gave in to Ravana's advances even when he was ready to do anything to get her love.

Sita didn't depend on a man for her decisions even when she faced a difficult choice of living a luxurious life in a palace or spending fourteen years in exile under challenging circumstances.

The social censure made her robust as Ram couldn't stay tall with her and banished her. While Ram only fathered her twin sons and left her midway to be the Maryadapuroshottam, Sita didn't ever seek his help during the pregnancy or childbirth. Instead, she gave birth to her twins and raised them well without depending on a man for support.



Image 3: Sita in Kakawin Ramayana

As a single mother, Sita gave them the best education meant for princes of Ayodhya but never took them as her pillars of support. Years later, when Rama intended to reunite with his lost family and asked her to prove her purity again, she chose to submerge in the earth instead of satisfying a male ego.

What We Know About Sita

If we look at the Indian version of Ramayana, we often miss seeing the steal in a robust character like Sita. However, the Kakawin Ramayana depicts Sita as steadfast, decisive, differential, submissive, but not docile or weak. She owns the strength to decide and stand by her decisions with conviction, courage, and dignity. She possessed all the strength to stand up with a man who believed other people and not his wife. Sita was not just a woman but the power to beat the flames and walk like a queen when she was not accepted as one.

Kecak Performances and Narration of Balinese Ramayana

Ubud, Bali is famous for its Kecak performances. Kecak is a Balinese version of our own Ramlila, narrated with a significantly loud twist, and it's indeed fascinating. The narration involves around fifty to sixty performers wearing only loincloths with bare upper bodies, singing (repeating the word Kecak) in the background. The repetition of the word "*chak ke-chak ke-chak*" sounds melodic with the only use of human voice and no musical instruments.



Image 4: Kecak Dance, Ubud, Bali

The Ramayana is narrated through dance-dramas that continue for an hour. However, "kecak" is chanted and sung in sync with the mood and milieu of the story. These performances are held every evening at Balinese Hindu Temples like Uluwatu Temple and Tanah Lot. Other than these temples, you may find exclusive dance performances in Ubud, Garuda Wisnu Kencana, Batu Bulan, Pandawa beach, and other places in Bali. Your trip to Indonesia is futile if you have not witnessed Sita in a new, vibrant color that depicts a Superhero.



Image 5: Sita, during Kecak Performance in Uluwatu Temple, Bali

Balinese also believe in karma. As a result, it's not uncommon for vendors to leave the shop at night thinking that there won't be any theft since "Karma takes a full circle."

While we also see stories of Mahabhartha in Indonesia, which are nothing less than the mirror version of Srimad Bhagvat Gita, the portrayal of Sita is fascinating since it allows us to see the flip side of the character.

We believe Ram to be the Maryada Purushottam while we chant "Siyavar Ram Chandra Ki Jai", we often forget that Rama is known as Siya's Var, i.e., Sita's husband. Sita, the woman of substance, could make any man feel proud to be her husband. A power-packed Sita from Bali's perspective.

About the Author

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