

## Positive transformation of others by the conduct of Seetha Devi in Ashoka Vanam

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In this article, let us dwell upon the positive transformation of female demons inspired by the conduct of Seetha Devi as portrayed in Srimad Valmiki Ramayana. Only two such characters would be discussed hereunder. However, to applaud the transformation, it is essential that firstly we should understand the ordeal underwent by Seetha.

In the face of Seetha's determined denial of accepting any relationship with the abductor Ravana and her persistent caustic, sarcastic retorts demeaning him, he kept her in a secluded place in the captivating beautiful Ashoka Vanam till such time she yields to his demand. Without his permission, neither male nor female could see Seetha<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, he entrusted her to a carefully selected female demons who were capable of assuming amicable physical character and acceptable personality. However, each of these leaders had battalions of misshaped, ugly, terrifying ogresses under them to create a sense of fear, despondency, hopelessness, disgusting feeling in the mind of Seetha by their mere presence.

Ravana had given strict instructions to that chosen few that they have no authority to annoy Seetha but were vested with full power to employ tactics of giving gold or silver ornaments or apparels<sup>2</sup> and to use stern ways and means to keep her in awe about the greatness of their master. They should try to win over her and instil a feeling of friendliness towards him in her. A very tall order considering the inherent qualities of quarrelsome nature and drunken state of their life style. In fact, as Hanuman noticed from a branch of the tree, these female demons knew only to excel in doing cruelty and injurious action. Expecting semblance of kind act from them was akin to finding water drops in a desert.

Thus, chances of witnessing any friendly attitude from them was impossible. However, Valmiki do list out few telling moments of feeling pity and genuine display of sympathy expressed by these female demons. Those feeling, of course, had arisen due to the genuine affectionate admirable conduct of Seetha towards them. Though she went through severest test of grit, forbearance and tolerance, she harboured no grudge against them. She convinced herself that these female demons were only discharging their allotted duties.

When Ravana heard about the successful construction of Setu bridge over the Ocean leading to the fort of Lanka, he became pensive about the possible implications and fatal outcome. Due to his obsession with Seetha, over confidence on his prowess and utter contempt towards human beings, he ignored the sane advice of his younger brother to avert the impending war and hand over Seetha respectfully to Sri Rama. Driven by the fate, he went on a collision course towards his death. Clueless Ravana had called for a meeting of council of his ministers to discuss strategies to contain the approaching invaders.

In the meantime, the crafty Ravana being restless and driven by lust decided to employ trickery to deceive Seetha. He wanted to convey a picture of gloom and doom to the fortune of Sri Rama and his army of Vanaras to her. He summoned Vidyujjuha, an expert magician. Through his conjuring tricks, he got created an illusory head of Sri Rama along with bow and

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<sup>1</sup> यथा न एनाम् पुमान् स्त्री वा सीताम् पश्यति असम्मतः | (Aranya kanda Sarga 54)

<sup>2</sup> या च वक्ष्यति वैदेहीम् वचनम् किञ्चित् अप्रियम् ॥ अज्ञानात् यदि वा ज्ञानान् न तस्या जीवितम् प्रियम् |

arrows depicting the physical features so minutely as to look real.<sup>3</sup> He ordered him to carry and accompany him to the Ashok Vanam.

Seetha who was sitting on the ground, fully absorbed in the thought of her husband with head bend low and experiencing unconsolable unending grief within.<sup>4</sup>

Ravana had put up a face of sadness and conveyed to Seetha in a tone without evoking any suspicion. He unabashedly told her that “his warriors led by his able minister Prahasta challenged the Vanaras, Sri Rama and others last night. They could not face the onslaught. Most of the Vanaras fell into the sea and died. Importantly, Rama was killed while surrounded by his faithful ones. Vibhishana was held captive. Lakshmana and the other monkeys were made to run away in all directions. Sugreeva, Hanuman and other prominent warriors were killed. They were struck by our army like lions attacking the running giant elephants.<sup>5</sup> Out of sympathy, severed blood drenched, dust smeared head of Rama with bow and arrow was gathered to produce before you”.<sup>6</sup>

Before the utterly confused and grief-stricken Seetha, the severed head was placed on a golden plate. He then gave a false lecture on his heroism. He threatened her that now she had no choice or valid reason to spurn him. Initially she became unconscious. After regaining her posture, unconsolable Seetha started crying and vent out her heartfelt sorrows pitiably which was relished by the cruel Ravana. She wept wondering how the time, controller of the beings, didn't spare sagacious Sri Rama.<sup>7</sup> This went on for some time when suddenly a messenger approached him and conveyed that all the ministers were assembled and awaiting his audience. Though little embarrassed, he hurriedly left place without ordering the severed head to be brought back. No sooner he left, the severed head too disappeared in thin air.

At that time, one of the female demons by name Sarama approached, started appraising the reality and consoled her affectionately. She told her confidently that her master had wanted to deceive her through sorcery. Seetha told her that she could not help feeling shocked as the mere presence of Ravana itself had completely broken her mental stamina and thinking acumen. In other words, though she was aware of the witchcraft could be used by the cruel fellow, she could not overcome the uneasiness due to the presence of Ravana and look through the deception. Sarama said that she had no fear about Ravana and was telling the truth because of her unconditional true affection towards Seetha. She volunteered to carry out any wish of her. On Seetha's request, she secretly gathered and reported about the happenings in the king's assembly and Ravana's intention etc to Seetha which brought a sense of calmness and resorted confidence to her. She was much relieved by this timely and an unexpected favour by Sarama in the alien country. Not only she went on secret errands to gather Ravana's plan and activities but also, she wholeheartedly blessed Seetha for quick end of her travails and reunion with Sri Rama. Through steadfast stand and unwavering faith treading on the path of dharma, Seetha had won the supposed hardened heart of her guard.

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<sup>3</sup> शिरो मायामयम् गृह्य राघवस्य विशाचर | मां त्वं समुपतिष्ठस्व महच्च सशरम् धनुः || (Yuddha kanda Sarga 31)

<sup>4</sup> अधोमुखीं शोकपरामुपविष्टाम् महीतले | भर्तारमेव ध्यायन्तीमशोकवनिकाम् गताम् ||

<sup>5</sup> अनुद्रुतास्तु रक्षोहिः सिम्हैरिव महाद्विपाः || (Yuddha kanda Sarga 31)

<sup>6</sup> क्षतजार्द्रं रजोध्वस्तमिदं चाप्याहृतम् शिरः || (Yuddha kanda Sarga 31)

<sup>7</sup> कालो भूतानाम् प्रभवो ह्ययम् || (Yuddha kanda Sarga 32)

Sage Valmiki wrote that Sarama submitted to Seetha that she was one of the admirers of her courageous conduct and adorer her fidelity towards her husband. She also believed that only good would win and such goodness exists on the side of Sri Rama. She further added that she foresaw Ravana's death. She reassured her by pointing out the tumultuous noise made by Vanaras. She recalled that she saw with her own eyes' happy confident faces of the troop under the sagacious leadership of Sri Rama. She became very friendly with her and carried out sincerely the work entrusted to her by Seetha through regular updates on the happenings and other matters to dispel any iota of fear imagined by Seetha Devi. A true transformation of a nature of a person by the august presence of Seetha.

Another occasion involves the famous Trijata and Seetha in some other event. Indrajeet, in his very first encounter with Rama and other Vanaras in the battle field employed witchcraft to assail them. Staying in the sky incognito, he attacked and tied Rama, Lakshmana and others with a volley of serpentine arrows which pierced and fatally wounding the vital parts of body with gushing blood. Being struck by the venom, Sri Rama and Lakshmana fell on the ground motionless evoking mortal fear of unfortunate death of these two. The chances of survival appeared remote. Sugriva could not recover himself from the shock. An unbelievable thing had happened. Dreary spell of scepticism and unbelievability run across in the minds of faithful servants of Sri Rama.

Indrajeet happily reported in verbatim to his father Ravana about what he had done. He confided confidently that both the foremost enemies were sure to die with deadliest venom designed to take a toll. Happiest Ravana wanted that Seetha should see by her own eyes the dying moments of those two gallant leaders. He was conscious of his earlier failed attempt. Therefore, he ordered Trijata to take Seetha in Pushpak Vimana and show to her from the air the dying heroes. Accordingly, Trijata took her and went over the battlefield. It was one of the most painful moments for her as well as for Seetha.

On seeing the dear ones on the ground motionless and lifeless with Vanaras desperately searching for solutions, Seetha thought they were killed by deception by Indrajeet. She blamed her fate being instrumental to the untimely death of these two and to the pain and sufferings caused to Mother Kausalya and Sumitra. She blamed and wondered how the good sayings of the Veda practitioners gone wrong, blessings of the elders went false, how could she lose her husband while she was in her prime youth etc. It was a truly poignant moment of sadness written by Maharishi Valmiki.

Here, the role of Trijata, the transformation of which we were discussing about, has to be mentioned. Trijata in her very own motherly style took hold of grieving Seetha and very softly told her assuring words. She told that "She was won over by truthfulness, courage and virtue of Seetha and was truly affectionate towards her. She assured her saying that nothing worse can happen. She could see that from the facial expression of Sri Rama and Lakshmana that the life force has not deserted them. They would regain their life. Most importantly, she was in Pushpak Vimana which wouldn't carry her had she been widowed, such is the greatness of this craft. Be rest assured. No kind of lie would be told by me." Mentally satisfied but visibly agitated and disturbed Seetha returned to her place in Ashoka Vanam. Just like Sarama, Trijata too profusely blessed her for the quick end of her sorrows and confidently predicted the down fall of Ravana.

The above episodes were picked up only to underscore the imperceptible impact of character of person on others. In this case, Seetha Devi's truthfulness, steadfastness, adherence to the cherished family value against all odds, kindness even to the people who inflicts verbal abuse had sobering effect of transformation even on otherwise stone hearted female demons.

As to the fact of commandability of these two, one has to go through profound words about the general attitude perceived amongst the people of authority or those vested with the duties to enforce such authority in regard to the person dependant on them as spoken by Sri Rama to Lakshmana.

The qualities which one normally associates with the noble persons such as calmness, forgiveness, forbearance, gracious speech without any hint of hurting others' sense and sensibilities, straight forward conduct in speech, action etc always taken as a sign of weakness by the persons on whom they depend upon.<sup>8</sup>

As human beings, every one of us is fallible, comes under the sway of likes and dislikes, falls prey to the senses and above all oblivious to one's own fault and misdeeds. Despite this, our living in the society calls for certain degree of gentle characteristics which if practiced judiciously and consciously, receptivity and respect from others in all walks of life bound to happen slowly but surely in our favour.

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<sup>8</sup> प्रशमः च क्षमा चैव आर्जवम् प्रिय वादिता ॥ असामर्थ्यम् फलन्ति एते निर्गुणेषु सताम् गुणाः ॥ (Yuddha kanda Sarga 21)