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## Status and Representation of Women in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa: A Socio-Cultural Study Value

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### Abstract

The Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa is not only a story of Rāma and Sītā. It is also a large picture of ancient Indian life. It shows family life, social duty, moral choice, religious feeling, and human pain. This article studies the position of women in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa in simple English. It uses the supplied chapters on the introduction to the Rāmāyaṇa and on the position of women. The study looks at women in six main roles: maiden, adopted daughter, wife, mother, widow, and ascetic. It also notices the difficult and mixed nature of the epic. Women are often respected. Sītā, Arundhatī, Anasūyā, and Śabarī are shown as noble and strong figures. Maidens appear in happy public and religious occasions. Wives are called close companions of their husbands. Mothers receive deep honor. Widows are not shown as impure, and women ascetics have a clear place in spiritual life. At the same time, the text also shows the limits placed on women. The desire for sons is stronger than the desire for daughters. A girl's marriage creates anxiety for the family. A wife's life is often centered on her husband. Sītā suffers greatly because of social pressure and royal duty. The article therefore does not present a one-sided view. It argues that the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa gives both honor and hardship to women. Its women are not silent shadows. They advise, suffer, love, choose, endure, and show moral strength. By studying them carefully, we can better understand the social world of the epic and the lasting value of its female characters.

### Keywords

Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa; Sītā; women; dharma; ṛghapatnī; pativrata; mother; widow; ascetic; ancient Indian society; kāvya; social values

### Introduction

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki is one of the most loved works of India. Along with the Mahābhārata of Vyāsa, it has shaped Indian thought for many centuries. It tells the story of Rāma and Sītā, but it does much more than tell a story. It shows how people thought about family, duty, society, kingship, love, pain, and religion. Because of this, the Rāmāyaṇa is not only literature. It is also a mirror of culture.

The epic is often called an ādikāvya, the first great poem in Sanskrit. Vālmiki is remembered as the ādikavi, the first poet. This traditional view shows the high place of the Rāmāyaṇa in Sanskrit literature. Its style is clear, moving, and full of moral feeling. It speaks about the rich cultural heritage of India through the lives of Rāma, Sītā, Daśaratha, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān, Tārā, Mandodarī, Anasūyā, Śabarī, and many others.

The Rāmāyaṇa also has a strong religious meaning. Among the four aims of life, called caturvarga, the aim of dharma is very important in the epic. Rāma is honored as an ideal man and also as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. For many people, the text is a sacred book. For a researcher, it is also a useful source for understanding social ideas. It shows what people praised, what they feared, and what they expected from men and women.

A study of women in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa must be careful. The epic does not give only one kind of picture. It gives both respect and restriction. Some women are honored as wise, pure, brave, and spiritually strong. At the same time, many social rules keep women under male authority. The supplied chapter on the position of women makes this point

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clearly. It says that daughters, wives, and mothers are respected in some places, but in practical life the interest of men often gets the upper hand.

### 1. The Rāmāyaṇa as a Social and Literary Source

The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa has a special place in Indian literature. It is treated as a model kāvya. Many later works in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and modern Indian languages are based on the story of Rāma. This shows how deeply the epic entered the Indian mind. The story has been told in many forms, but its central moral force remained strong.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have also noticed that the Rāmāyaṇa exists in different recensions. The supplied chapter mentions three main recensions: the Southern recension, the North-Eastern or Bengal recension, and the North-Western recension. The Southern recension, especially the Bombay edition, is often treated as very close to the older form of the text. This point is important because social ideas may vary slightly in different versions.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the main story remains the same. Rāma is the son of Daśaratha. Sītā is his wife. Rāma goes to the forest. Sītā is taken by Rāvaṇa. Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa. Later, Sītā faces another sorrow because of public suspicion. Through all these events, the epic shows the value of dharma. But it also shows how hard dharma can become, especially for women.

The Rāmāyaṇa is useful for social study because it gives many scenes of family life. It shows parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, kings and citizens, sages and ascetics. Women appear in all these areas. They are not limited to one place. Some are queens. Some are forest women. Some are ascetics. Some are mothers. Some are widows. Some are courtesans. This variety makes the epic rich for research.

This structure is useful, because a woman's social place in ancient society often changed with age and family role. A girl, a wife, a mother, and a widow did not have the same kind of freedom or duty.

### 2. General Position of Women

The supplied chapter begins with a simple idea: men and women are like two sides of a coin. A society rests on families, and families rest on both men and women. This is an important statement. It means that women are not outside society. They are central to it. Without women, family life cannot stand. Without family life, social order becomes weak.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the chapter says that ancient Indian society, both Āryan and non-Āryan, mostly followed a patriarchal pattern. This means that men usually held the stronger position. A woman was often placed below a man in family authority. She had duties, but her freedom was limited. This is the first key point of the study.

The chapter also compares this with the Vedic age. According to Macdonell, the position of women in the Vedic period was quite good. A woman was regarded as gṛhpatnī, the lady of the house. She had control over servants and over younger members of the household. She also took part in sacrifice with her husband. Names like Apālā, Viśvavārā, Lopāmudrā, Viśpālā, Gārgī, Damayantī, and Sāvitrī show that learned and wise women were known in early Sanskrit literature.<sup>4</sup>

In the Rāmāyaṇa too, respected women appear. Arundhatī, Anasūyā, and Sītā are mentioned as women who commanded respect. Sītā is especially important. She is

shown as pure and noble. Her character has been praised for many generations. But Sītā's life is also full of pain. This makes her a deeply human character, not only a symbol.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the general picture is mixed. Women have honor, but not equal power. They are praised as mothers, wives, and moral guides. Yet their lives are often decided by fathers, husbands, sons, kings, and society. This mixed picture must be kept in mind throughout the article.

### 3. Women as Maidens

The first role discussed in the supplied chapter is the maiden, or unmarried girl. Here the Rāmāyaṇa shows both affection and social anxiety. On one side, daughters are loved by their fathers. Sītā is brought up with care and comfort in the house of Janaka. King Kuśanābha has one hundred daughters, and they enjoy singing, dancing, and playing. Girls visit beautiful places with their friends. This shows that maidenhood was not only a time of fear. It could also be a time of joy.<sup>6</sup>

Young maidens are also shown in public life. They wear ornaments. They go out for sports. They move in streets. They appear in important ceremonies. Their presence is considered auspicious. At the coronation of a prince or at the welcome of a great person, maidens are present. This shows that girls were linked with good luck, beauty, and prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

But there is another side. The society shown in the Rāmāyaṇa values sons more than daughters. Daśaratha performs the putreṣṭi sacrifice because he wants sons. The text does not show the same kind of prayer for daughters. A son brings great joy to a mother and father. A daughter, however, creates worry because she must be given in marriage. Her future happiness depends largely on her husband.<sup>8</sup>

This does not mean that daughters had no value. The examples of Sītā and the daughters of Kuśanābha show affection and beauty around daughters. But it does show that the social system placed more hope in sons. Sons continued the family line and gave support to parents. Daughters were loved, but their marriage became the family's main concern.

For a simple reader, this can be explained like this: the girl was loved at home, but society did not let her remain fully free. Her future was connected to marriage. Her honor was connected to family honor. Her happiness after marriage depended on another household. So maidenhood in the Rāmāyaṇa is both bright and uncertain.

### 4. Maidens as Adopted Daughters

The Rāmāyaṇa also refers to adopted daughters. The supplied chapter gives the example of Śāntā. Daśaratha gives his daughter Śāntā to his friend Lomapāda, also called Romapāda. The words used in the narrative suggest a formal act of giving and receiving. Terms like pradasyate, dīyatām, and pratigrhya show the act of dānavidhi, or giving.<sup>9</sup>

This example tells us two things. First, adoption was known. Second, the daughter could become part of another family through a formal social act. The chapter states that after Śāntā is given, Daśaratha himself says that she has become the daughter of Lomapāda, her adopting father. The act is peaceful and accepted by both sides.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is Sītā. The chapter notes the view that Janaka is not her biological father. In the epic tradition,

Sītā is found in the earth and raised by Janaka. This makes her a very special daughter. Her birth is not ordinary. Her life is also not ordinary. She belongs to Janaka's family by love, care, and acceptance.

These examples show that fatherhood in the epic is not only biological. A daughter may be received, raised, loved, and accepted. But even here the daughter's body and destiny are handled through family authority. The giver and receiver decide. The girl's own voice is not strongly present in the adoption scene. This again shows respect mixed with control.

### 5. Women as Wives

The role of wife is the most important female role in the supplied chapter. This is because the household, called *gārhasthyāśrama*, is central in Hindu social thought. A wife is not merely a servant in the house. The *śāstras* often call her *ardhaṅgīnī*, meaning one half of her husband. She is expected to share his religious and worldly life.<sup>11</sup>

The supplied chapter explains the closeness between husband and wife in strong words. A wife works in the house like a maid. She receives her husband's confidence like a friend. She advises him like a sister. She serves him food like a mother. She joins him in religious acts like a partner. This idea shows a deep emotional and ritual bond between husband and wife.<sup>12</sup>

Sītā is the best example of the devoted wife. She goes with Rāma to the forest. She accepts hardship. She speaks gently. Her advice is often received in good spirit. The chapter notes that a wife's advice could be welcomed by the husband. This is important because it shows that the wife was not always silent. She could speak and guide.<sup>13</sup>

### 6. Women as Wives

Tārā is another powerful example. She is wise and practical. She advises Vāli and later Sugrīva. The supplied material says that Tārā preferred her husband to her son, and that the whole world of a wife centered around her husband. Such statements show the ideal of *pativrata*, the devoted wife. The husband is even described like a *tīrtha*, a holy place, for the wife.<sup>14</sup>

But the same section also shows the heavy burden placed on wives. Service to the husband is described as the wife's penance. If a woman does not treat her husband properly, even other religious acts may not save her from blame. In this view, a wife's religious life becomes tied to her husband. Her own spiritual identity is not fully separate.<sup>15</sup>

The Rāmāyaṇa also shows painful scenes where wives suffer because of male decisions. Rāma's words to Sītā after the war in *Laṅkā* are very hard. He says that the battle was fought not simply for her but to protect the honor of the Raghu family. Sītā feels deeply hurt. Hanumān, Sugrīva, and Lakṣmaṇa are shocked. This scene shows that even an ideal woman can be made to suffer under public honor and royal duty.<sup>16</sup>

The later abandonment of Sītā is even more painful. When people in Ayodhyā suspect the queen's chastity, Rāma sends her away to the forest while she is pregnant. The supplied chapter calls this step drastic and painful. It also says that Sītā does not lose her temper. She keeps calm even in extreme sorrow.<sup>17</sup>

This is one of the most important points in the study of women in the Rāmāyaṇa. Sītā is honored as an ideal wife, but she also becomes the one who pays the highest price for social opinion. Her purity is questioned. Her pain is

public. Her endurance becomes a moral power. She is not weak because she suffers. She is strong because she faces suffering without losing her dignity.

This is also compares the treatment of other wives. It says that Tārā and Rumā appear to hold a better position than Sītā in some ways. Mandodarī, the wife of Rāvaṇa, receives respect from her husband. This is a striking observation. It reminds us that the epic world is complex. A woman's position is not the same in every family or community.<sup>18</sup>

The conjugal ideal in Ayodhyā is also important. The city is described as a place where men are devoted to their wives and wives are faithful to their husbands. This means that the ideal is not one-sided in theory. Both husband and wife are expected to show loyalty. In practice, however, the wife often bears more moral burden.<sup>19</sup>

### 7. Women as Mothers

Motherhood has a very high place in the Rāmāyaṇa. The supplied chapter says that producing a child is treated as the main purpose of marriage. The term *jāyā* is explained to mean the woman in whom the husband is born again as a son. This idea places motherhood at the center of family life.<sup>20</sup>

A mother is honored because she carries the child in her womb and gives birth. Kausalyā's joy in seeing Rāma is described with deep feeling. She believes that a son like Rāma came to her because of severe penance. Her hopes are tied to him. Like many mothers, she wants to see her son well settled and happy.<sup>21</sup>

The supplied chapter states that a mother who carries a child for ten months naturally expects devotion from her son. Vasiṣṭha advises Rāma to obey his mother. This shows that obedience to the mother is treated as a good path. The epic strongly rejects matricide. Even if a mother becomes *patitā*, fallen or morally weak, the son should not abandon her.<sup>22</sup>

The mothers of the Rāmāyaṇa are not all alike. Kausalyā is loving and dignified. Kaikeyī is powerful but also troubled by desire and fear. Sumitrā is calm and wise. Sītā herself becomes the mother of Kuśa and Lava. Her love for her sons is described as remarkable. Through these women, motherhood appears as love, hope, sacrifice, and sometimes sorrow.

Yet the value of motherhood is still tied mostly to sons. The joy of the first male child is emphasized. A childless wife is seen as unfortunate. This shows that motherhood is honored, but within a social system that gives special importance to male children. So the honor given to mothers is real, but it is also shaped by the wish for sons.

### 8. Women as Widows

The position of widows is another important subject. In the marriage system shown in the epic, the wife depends greatly on the husband. So the husband's death becomes the greatest sorrow for a married woman. Her joy, security, and social place are deeply shaken. The supplied chapter says that a widow leads a hard life.<sup>23</sup>

The widow in the Rāmāyaṇa is shown as living a life of austerity. She does not decorate herself as before. She does not comb her hair for beauty or wear ornaments. This shows grief and social restraint. But one important point must be noticed: *Vālmīki* does not describe widows as inauspicious. This is a humane feature of the epic world.<sup>24</sup>

Widows are present in ceremonies. They attend marriages, coronations, and funerals. At the coronation of Rāma, widows also take part. This is a valuable detail. It shows that widowhood does not completely remove a woman

from social and religious life. Widows can still receive respect.<sup>25</sup>

After the husband's death, the widow often depends on her son. This is shown in the case of Kausalyā. Rāma thinks about his duty to look after her. The chapter also notes that a widow could retain her *strīdhana*, or woman's property. This suggests that widows had at least some recognized material rights.<sup>26</sup>

The study of widows in the Rāmāyaṇa therefore gives a balanced picture. Widowhood is painful and limited. But widows are not treated as untouchable or cursed in the supplied material. They can be respected members of the family and society.

### 9. The Question of Sati

The supplied chapter also discusses the custom of *satī*. *Satī* means the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. The chapter clearly says that this was not a common practice in the epic period. Only one example is mentioned in the Uttarakāṇḍa, where Vedavati speaks of her mother entering the funeral fire with her husband.<sup>27</sup>

Altekar treats this story as more legendary than historical. This is an important scholarly caution. A single story, especially from a section often regarded by scholars as later, cannot prove that *satī* was common in Vālmīki's time. The chapter also mentions that the Uttarakāṇḍa is considered by many Indologists to be a later addition.<sup>28</sup>

The chapter makes another good point. In moments of grief, wives may say that they want to unite with their dead husbands. Such words may come from shock, pain, and love. But emotional speech does not prove a regular social custom. Suicide itself is treated as a serious wrong. Therefore, it is not safe to say that the Rāmāyaṇa supports *satī* as a normal practice.<sup>29</sup>

This point is important for modern readers. We must not read one emotional or legendary passage as if it were a general rule. The better conclusion is that the desire to join the husband after death may have formed a later idea connected with *satī*, but the epic does not show *satī* as a common practice.

### 10. Sexual Life, Courtesans, and Moral Order

The supplied chapter also gives a short discussion of sexual relationship. It states that desire is a natural instinct of living beings. The Rāmāyaṇa mentions courtesans and women connected with public entertainment. King Romapāda sends women to bring R̥śyaśṛṅga because the sage's presence can end famine in the kingdom. This episode shows that women's beauty and art were sometimes used for political and social purposes.<sup>30</sup>

The epic also mentions *ganikās*, who are skilled courtesans. They appear in ceremonies and public welcome scenes. A *ganikā* is described in the Kāmasūtra tradition as a woman trained in many arts. This shows that such women were not merely objects of pleasure. They could be educated in music, dance, conversation, and other arts.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the presence of courtesans shows another side of society. Not all women lived inside the family roles of daughter, wife, or mother. Some lived by performance or by sexual profession. The chapter also refers to *rūpajīvās*, women who lived by selling their beauty. These details show that the epic society was not simple. It had royal households, sages, queens, wives, widows, ascetics, and professional women.<sup>32</sup>

The Rāmāyaṇa generally values controlled family life. Monogamy is praised as an ideal, though kings often have many wives. Daśaratha has three principal wives: Kausalyā, Kaikeyī, and Sumitrā, and many other women in his harem. Rāvaṇa also has many wives, including Mandodarī, yet he desires Sītā, the wife of Rāma. Through this contrast, the epic shows the danger of uncontrolled desire.<sup>33</sup>

The Ahalyā episode also shows the moral problem of desire outside marriage. Indra approaches Ahalyā, the wife of the sage Gautama. The story is often read as a warning about desire, deception, and social shame. For women's study, it also shows how female honor becomes a heavy social issue in the epic world.<sup>34</sup>

### 11. Women as Ascetics

Women ascetics form one of the most inspiring parts of the discussion. An ascetic woman is one who practices austerity and penance for spiritual growth. The Rāmāyaṇa mentions such women through words like *bhikṣuṇī*, *pravrajitā*, *tapasvinī*, and *śramaṇī*. These terms show that women too could leave ordinary life and take up spiritual discipline.<sup>35</sup>

Sabari is a beautiful example. She lives in an āśrama near Pampā. She wears bark garments and simple coverings. She follows the path taught by her teacher Mataṅga. She waits for Rāma with devotion. Her life is simple, but her spiritual feeling is deep. When Rāma visits her, the meeting becomes one of the most moving scenes in the epic tradition.<sup>36</sup>

Anasūyā is another respected woman. She is an ascetic wife and a moral teacher. She speaks to Sītā and gives her guidance. Her presence shows that women could also become teachers of dharma. They could offer wisdom to younger women and support them in hard times.

The presence of women ascetics is very important. It breaks the idea that women in the epic are only wives and mothers. Some women stand in spiritual spaces. They practice *tapas*. They live with self-control. They are respected by men. This gives the Rāmāyaṇa a wider social and religious picture.

### 12. Sītā as the Center of the Study

No study of women in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa can avoid Sītā. She is a daughter, wife, queen, forest-dweller, sufferer, mother, and moral witness. She is not only Rāma's wife. She is the emotional heart of the epic. Her life shows both the dignity and the pain of women in the social world of the Rāmāyaṇa.

As a daughter, Sītā is loved by Janaka. As a wife, she chooses to follow Rāma into exile. As a captive in Laṅkā, she refuses Rāvaṇa again and again. As a queen, she becomes the subject of public suspicion. As a mother, she raises Kuśa and Lava away from royal comfort. At the end, she returns to the earth, which is also her mother. Her story is full of endurance.

Sītā's strength is quiet but firm. She does not fight with weapons. She fights with truth, patience, and self-respect. When Rāvaṇa threatens her, she does not bend. When Rāma speaks harshly after the war, she proves her purity. When she is abandoned, she does not destroy herself. She lives, gives birth, raises her sons, and preserves her dignity.

In simple words, Sītā shows that strength is not always loud. Sometimes strength means standing firm in pain. Sometimes it means keeping one's inner truth when the world doubts it. This is why Sītā has remained one of the most powerful women in Indian cultural memory.

### 13. Respect and Restriction: The Main Finding

The main finding of this article is clear: women in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa are both respected and restricted. They are respected as mothers, wives, daughters, queens, and ascetics. Their presence is auspicious. Their advice can be valued. Their love holds families together. Their *tapas* gives them spiritual power. Their moral purity is praised.

But women are also restricted. Sons are desired more than daughters. A daughter's marriage is a major family concern. A wife's highest duty is often described as service to her husband. Public opinion can destroy a queen's happiness. A widow's life becomes hard. A woman's honor is tied to the honor of men and family.

This double picture makes the epic real. It does not show a perfect society. It shows a society struggling with duty, love, status, and fear. Women often carry the emotional cost of this struggle. Yet they are not weak figures. Sītā, Tārā, Mandodarī, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Anasūyā, and Śabarī all show different kinds of strength.

The Rāmāyaṇa therefore teaches modern readers to read carefully. A great text can contain noble ideals and social limits at the same time. We can honor its literary and moral beauty while also noticing the pain it gives to women. This balanced reading is more useful than blind praise or blind rejection.

### Conclusion

The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa is a great kāvya and a great cultural text. It gives India's message through the story of Rāma and Sītā. It teaches dharma, loyalty, sacrifice, and moral courage. It also gives a detailed picture of women's lives in the epic world.

The women of the Rāmāyaṇa appear in many roles. As maidens, they are loved and seen as auspicious, but their future depends on marriage. As adopted daughters, they show the importance of family acceptance. As wives, they are close companions and religious partners, but they also bear the burden of pativrata duty. As mothers, they are deeply honored, though the desire for sons remains strong. As widows, they live with sorrow and restraint, yet they are not treated as inauspicious. As ascetics, they show that women can also follow the path of tapas and spiritual discipline.

Sītā stands at the center of this world. Her life shows both suffering and greatness. She is questioned, abandoned, and hurt, yet she remains firm. Her dignity makes her unforgettable. Other women like Tārā, Mandodarī, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Anasūyā, and Śabarī also enrich the epic with wisdom, loyalty, grief, and spiritual strength.

Thus, the position of women in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa cannot be explained in one sentence. It is not only high, and it is not only low. It is complex. Women are honored, but they are not always free. They are controlled, but they are not powerless. They suffer, but they also guide. They endure, but they also shine. This is the true value of studying women in the Rāmāyaṇa: it helps us understand ancient society and also think more deeply about dignity, justice, family, and human strength.

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30. Banerji, S. C. and Banerji, R., The Castaway of Indian Society, p. 3; Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I.73.38; II.14.39.
31. Kāmasūtra I.3.20; Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I.9.18; I.10.5.
32. Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa II.36.3; Upadhyaya, B. S., Women in Ṛg Veda, p. 195.
33. Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa II.34.13; see also the supplied chapter's discussion of royal harems.
34. Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa I.48.18-19.
35. Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa II.29.13.
36. Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa III.74.22.

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