

"Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla" by Nabaneeta Dev Sen

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We shall discuss the retelling of the Ramayana by two sixteenth-century women poets. Molla was a potter's daughter from a small south Indian town in Andhra Pradesh, familiar with the regional court culture of her day. Chandrabati was an impoverished Brahmin woman from a small village of Bengal, in eastern India, who had never been exposed to urban culture. We shall try to see how similar these two contemporaries were in their own cloistered cultures, and why one text is regarded as a major success while the other is considered a dismal failure by scholars of literature. To find an answer, we have to sift through questions of gender roles, silenced voices and the tensions between social versus individual priorities.

Just as Chandrabati was the first woman poet of medieval Bengal, Molla was the first woman poet of medieval Telugu literature. Both were devotees of Shiva; yet they wrote about Rama, an avatar of Vishnu. Both women remained unmarried and earned a living writing poetry—a pretty tough task even in twentieth-century India. More importantly, Chandrabati had written a short Ramayana in her mother tongue, Bengali; Molla had written one in hers, Telugu. Both women moved away from tradition by discarding the literary language, Sanskrit, in favour of the regional. For Chandrabati, choosing Bengali as the language of her poetry had no larger significance, as her knowledge of Sanskrit was minimal. But for Molla, the choice of Telugu was a conscious and subversive decision.

Having fallen prey to the literary charms of Chandrabati, I was utterly thrilled with the prospect of getting acquainted with yet another sixteenth-century woman poet who rewrote the Ramayana. I soon discovered that Molla had not been translated into English. Irrespective of the endless references to her Ramayana the text itself was not available in translation. So I set out to find her myself in Andhra Pradesh, her homeland, and finally did manage to get hold of a tattered copy of a Hindi-Telugu bilingual edition of the Molla Ramayana, long out of print. This happens to be the only available translation of the text in any language. And as I studied Molla—I discovered that this poet wasn't like Chandrabati at all. There were more differences between the two women re-writers of the epic than the few superficial similarities.

Molla's Ramayana is regarded as one of the classical Ramayanas in Telugu, ranked after the two other medieval Telugu Ramayanas by Ranganatha and Bhaskara. Molla's Ramayana is still widely available in Telugu—thin paperbacks in cheap newsprint, with a shiny colourful picture of a beautiful young Molla lost in meditation on the cover.

Hardly anyone knows about Chandrabati's Ramayana, except for researchers of medieval Bengali literature. Even then, it is known only as a notoriously weak attempt at retelling the

Ramayana. Thus, no one generally cares to read it. I wouldn't have, either, had I not felt an unholy urge to see just how bad this Ramayana was. That's when I came to know Chandrabati, in 1989. You will find Chandrabati's Ramayana either in D.C. Sen's collection, *Maimansingh Geetika*, volume IV (1916), or in K.C. Moulik's *Purva Banga Geetika*, volume VII (1976). Both scholarly editions are out of print, and therefore rare. Only the most exhaustive libraries may have them.

There is one uniform opinion in the sparse literature on Chandrabati's Ramayana: that it is her worst piece of work. Not only is Chandrabati's Ramayana regarded as incomplete, it is also labelled structurally and stylistically weak. Even D.C. Sen, who was full of praise for two of Chandrabati's other works, agrees. Sukumar Sen has ripped the text apart, and believes it to be fake. In fact, he believes the whole of the Maimansingh ballad collection poems to be fake!

Although her Ramayana is rejected by critics, Chandrabati herself commands some respect as the first woman poet in Bengali literature. And two of her ballads—*Sundari Molua* and *Dasyu Kenaram*—are rightly regarded as gems of the Maimansingh collection. They are taught in literature curricula both in Bangladesh and in India's West Bengal. However, the text of her Ramayana is not included, since it doesn't measure up to the language and style of the ballads.

Molla's father, Atukuri Kesan Setty, was a potter, a devotee of Shiva. They lived in the village Gopavaram, near Nellore, in Andhra Pradesh. It is widely believed that his talented young daughter, a rare beauty, was the concubine of King Krishnadeva Raya. Molla was well versed in classical literature and Sanskrit poetics. Her mastery is reflected in her work. Her Ramayana is brief, but it is praised for its comprehensive use of the rasas, not just *bhakti* and *karuna*, the two most often associated with women writers. She is very good at using the rasas considered typically masculine: *shringara*, *veera*, *raudra*, *bhayanaka*, *adbhuta* and *bibhatsa*. Her emphasis is only natural, since the Yuddhakanda is her longest chapter. In Valmiki's classical Ramayana too, the Yuddhakanda is the longest, since the epic battle is at the core of every heroic epic.

To the contrary, Chandrabati ignores the war and describes it only through a *Baromaasi*, a woman's song about her everyday sorrows, narrated by Sita herself. Sita devotes only two couplets to the epic battle because she saw it only in a dream. It is not surprising, therefore, that Chandrabati's retelling of the Ramayana, with its disregard for epic conventions, was quickly labelled as all wrong.

Molla, however, would have pleased Bengali critics greatly. Her pen has run dry singing Rama's praises, and establishing the kingdom of Rama. She has dealt with the first four books in 245 stanzas; whereas the fifth book of Sundarakanda alone, leading to the war and dealing with the burning of Lanka, takes up 249 stanzas. And the Book of War? It consists of 351 stanzas—a full 102 stanzas more than even Sundarakanda! But she totally omits the post-war Uttarakanda, dealing with the unfair rejection and banishment of Sita. Still, that doesn't prevent this Ramayana from being respected as a classic. It follows the structure and conventions of an epic, complete with the formal introductions and ritual dedications, in a judicious mixture of prose and verse—and in fused with reverence, for Rama, the ultimate God-King.

To whom does Molla pay her respects at the very beginning of her text? To *Mahagunashali dayavan Sri Rama Chandra* who, if pleased, will protect his subjects. The ensuing shlokas beg the blessings of the divine trinity, then she moves on to other gods and goddesses, and finally arrives at Saraswati, praying for her power over words and meaning. (One can't but be reminded of Kalidasa's homage to word and meaning at the beginning of *Raghuvamsam*, a Sanskrit classic). That done, she runs through the whole list of classical Sanskrit poets, from Valmiki and Vyasa through Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, right up to Telugu poet Tikkanna. It does not matter whether her father was a potter or a trader. That Molla was a pundit in classical literature is evident from the structure of her epic, her similes and metaphors, her control over rhetoric and the variation of metres. Her Ramayana is a superbly crafted praise-book of Rama, and wisely dedicated to him, too. By being dedicated not to any mortal king but to the king of kings, the text smoothly steered clear of political complications. It was self-consciously created in the "Great Tradition".

That Chandrabati's Ramayana is not comparable to Molla's is evident from the prologue itself. Chandrabati's attitude is very different, as is her diction and her style. Her father, Dwija Bansi Das, a wandering minstrel, lived in Kishorganj, Maimansingh (now in Bangladesh). He was an impoverished Brahmin who worshipped the snake goddess Manasa. Evidently Chandrabati was not interested in creating sophisticated urban literature as Molla was. Nor did she want her Ramayana to be a part of either the court tradition, or the devotional Bhakti tradition. Not once has she paid her respects to Rama—her Ramayana doesn't contain even a cursory dedication to the epic hero at the beginning or at the end! Nor does she mention the spiritual advantages of listening to the sacred Ramayana, as does Molla. Chandrabati's Ramayana begins humbly by mentioning the little river in her village, immediately making it clear that her work stands outside the so-called "Great Tradition".

Introducing first the poverty-stricken family of her grandparents, she dedicates her poem to the snake goddess Manasa, by the grace of whom they had escaped starvation. Then she pays her respects to her parents—her father who had taught her the Puranas and her mother who had shown her the world. She pays homage to Shiva and Parvati, and, in the same breath, shows her gratitude to the kind river Phuleshwari "who is always there to quench my thirst." She isn't concerned with the army of Sanskrit poets or the entire gamut of gods and goddesses, but is happy expressing her gratitude to her immediate family and the little river which is the lifeline of the village. In contrast, we don't know who Molla's family members were or what her financial status was. Molla's ornate poem is all dressed up in dazzling silk, ready for a visit to the king's court. And Chandrabati's poem? It is in a comfortable everyday cotton sari, with no ornaments at all, ready to husk the rice in the yard.

Although her Ramayana is no longer read or even known, Chandrabati herself is all remembered fairly well for her tragic love with Jayananda. Even after 400 years, the love story, as told by Nayanchand Ghose, holds our interest, like the story of Tristan and Isolde, or Laila and Majnu. Chandrabati, a historic character, has thus turned into a legend, and lives on in ballads herself. But in these ballads, Chandrabati the poet and the writer of the Ramayana is hardly given any importance, it is simply the sad tale of a young woman, and her lost love.

The story is that Chandrabati and her childhood sweetheart Jayananda are engaged to be married. On the wedding day she learns that Jayananda has converted to Islam and married the daughter of the Kazi, the local governor. Chandrabati's life falls apart. She asks for her father's permission to remain single and devote her life to Shiva. Her father permits her to act according to her own will, but he tells her, "Write the Ramayana". That is probably why Chandrabati in her introduction states that— "Chandra sings the Ramayana at the insistence of her father," whereas Molla declares in her introduction. "I am writing the Ramayan at the behest of Rama". One night a repentant Jayananda returns to Chandrabati when she is deep in meditation within her temple. A great storm rages outside and Jayananda's piteous appeals do not reach her ears. In the morning as Chandrabati steps out of her temple, on the door, she finds the words: "Just came to say good-bye". She goes to the river and is stunned to find his lifeless body floating in the water.

Unfortunately, while discussing Nayanchand's melodramatic ballad of Chandrabati, some literary historians tend to treat it merely as the story of a woman who took the oath of virginity. That the ballad also describes how this brave woman chose a life of intellectual fulfillment and produced a Ramayana is irrelevant to even respected scholars like Sukumar Sen. ("She remained a virgin all her life, that is the sum total of the ballad," he writes.) This I would regard as part of a denial of Chandrabati's identity as an epic writer, the same tactic that made Chandrabati's Ramayana, written from the woman's point of view, a silenced text.

Not so with Molla. Although she had a glamorous lover— probably the most famous of all Telugu kings—nobody discusses her love life. Her work is greatly appreciated although the epic was never read in court, because it was a Shudra kavya, a poem written by a non-Brahmin. Molla is doubly barred—she is also a woman. Anything she writes is bound to fall short of the court proprieties. Critics are not surprised that she didn't have her day in court. But quite overlooking the fact that Molla was very likely the concubine of the king, they are astounded by her grasp over the erotic. "How could a virgin know so much about erotic details?" We find this earnest question in the translator's introduction to the Molla Ramayana published in 1977. (It is revealing that these male historians of classical literature display such an interest in the virginity of Chandrabati and Molla. The sexual status of male writers has not, however, sparked such lively speculation in our scholars!)

Although Molla chose a classical genre, her preferred language was her mother tongue. She believed she was translating Valmiki into Telugu. Unlike Chandrabati, who just plunges into her tale of Sita without setting her work within any literary tradition, Molla makes some very interesting comments on the importance of regional language literature—how it should stand on its own strength and not lean too much on Sanskrit. But ironically Molla begins her poetic commentary with a disclaimer. She exhaustively lists the things she professes not to be aware of. She is not familiar with Telugu or Sanskrit, she claims; she cannot play the sophisticated games of grammar, has no knowledge of the sentiments, of rhetoric or of prosody, is incapable of a style of her own, cannot fashion literary conceits or poetic ornaments nor coin words of her own; she is ignorant of alphabets and scripts, verbs and nouns.... One wonders how she could have written up to this point. The writer ends with an all-too-humble confession: everything poor Molla has come to know she has learnt thanks to Lord Shiva in her home town, Gopavaram.

By the time we come to the end of the long declaration we know that educating Molla was not the job of any country Shiva lingam but most certainly that of a court pundit. Her Ramayana was clearly meant for the court. Literary pundits cannot reject it—it fits too perfectly within its chosen genre—but the court pundits could, and did. It was praised and banned from the court at the same time. As a result, the courtiers missed out on some exquisite erotic imagery! Over and over again she brings in the image of youthful vigour and erotic power to describe various aspects of life where *shringara rasa* is not exactly called for. She portrays the strong urban nature of Ayodhya by telling us how everything is brimming with sexual energy—from the strapping horses to the wily prostitutes. There is nothing that these fabulous courtesans cannot achieve: "with their honeyed words they can snatch the loin cloth away from the greatest hermit". When Molla's Surpanakha describes Sita to her brother Ravana in order to incite his lust, she uses such sensual language that it would make anyone lust after Sita.

Chandrabati, on the other hand, has no interest in eroticism. Chandrabati's main concern is singing Sita's sorrows—she describes love, longing, the pain of separation, but the erotic details of a fecund world full of sexual energy has no place in her text.

Also, Molla describes Ayodhya as a strong business centre, paying a lot of attention to commercial matters, which are of no interest to Chandrabati. Besides, there are those unladylike but truly epic details of the battlefield that Molla is so engrossed in. She has it all—the single combats, the special weapons, the catalogue of armies, council of kings, gory scenes, mutilation of bodies. Displaying a typical classical temperament, Molla seems to take as much pleasure in the details of war as in the details of the erotic. In Chandrabati, war and erotica are as absent as are the sacred spirit of homage to Rama and the courtly fineries of language found in Molla.

Molla has little poetic interest in Sita, except in her beautiful body. She makes Sita quite insignificant—her birth is not mentioned, and she is barely mentioned even in her own *swayamvara*—a ceremony that by definition should revolve around the bride.

Chandrabati couldn't care less about Sita's physical charms. As unconventional as ever, she begins her Ramayana with the story of Sita's miraculous birth. Chandrabati presents Sita, rather than Rama, as the one born to destroy Ravana and devotes six sections to it. The remaining two sections fit in the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister with remarkable ease. That takes care of the first book, Janmaleela.

In the second part of Chandrabati's epic, she does something even more drastic: she brings in Sita herself as the narrator. It is presented as a flashback. The war is over, Sita is back in Ayodhya, with her girlfriends in the palace. Chandrabati gives us the whole story through a *Baromaasi*. A *Baromaasi* is usually a women's song, belonging to the folk genre, describing the hardship of a woman all through the twelve months of a year. These are specifically songs of misery, related either to poverty or to emotional turmoil. Chandrabati chooses this vehicle to tell the story of the Ramayana. This *Baromaasi* takes us from *Balakanda* to *Yuddhakanda*. All six books are pressed into this one song—and by dint of the genre itself. Chandrabati's Ramayana becomes the song of Sita's sorrows.

And whenever Rama's heroic deeds need to be mentioned, a dream is conveniently introduced. How else would Sita know? She wasn't there! Chandrabati is meticulous in her narrative logic. Sita takes her time telling us about her own experiences from childhood to marriage and the idyllic camp life in the forest with Rama, the abduction, the separation and the rescue. The great epic battle is gently referred to in an incidental manner—after all it had to happen—"and then Rama killed Ravana in a single combat." This is really getting as far away from the Great Tradition as you can. It is using not only the folk tradition, but specifically the women's folk tradition. Epic themes like war are replaced by essentially female concerns. For instance, in the Janmaleela sections, Chandrabati carefully describes the pregnancies of Mandodari, who gives birth to Sita, and Kaushalya, who delivers Rama to the world.

Twice mediated by a feminine sensibility—first by the narrator-poet Chandrabati herself, and then by the second narrator, Sita—what remains of the epic is anything but heroic. Both in her selection of episodes and choice of poetic form, Chandrabati seems to spurn the mainstream tradition, unlike Molla. Elsewhere I have argued that Chandrabati's Ramayana was rejected not because it was incompetently crafted or incomplete, but because it was not a traditional text. It is a woman's text, an atypical retelling of the Rama tale in which Rama is first marginalised and then criticised from a woman's point of view. In fact, Chandrabati's Ramayana was never even properly read for what it actually was: the story of Sita's journey from birth to death. Instead of praising Rama, Chandrabati often intrudes into the narrative to comment on Rama's foolishness, to advise and guide him and to accuse him of the devastation that awaits Ayodhya. It is clearly not a devotional text, but a secular one; the story is presented as a plain human drama and not as divine mystery.

After reading Molla, Chandrabati's Ramayana becomes even clearer as a text. Chandrabati wasn't aligning her self with the written tradition at all, but following the oral tradition. Clearly, she was writing not for the court, but for the women folk, as is evident from her refrain: "Suno sakhijana" (listen my girl friends) and not the usual "Suno sabhajana" (listen, members of the court). Chandrabati's Ramayana was composed by a woman, singing about a woman, meant for other women. Unlike Molla's Ramayana, which, following the classical tradition, praises the exploits of a god-man, for the godly men of the court, but only happens to be authored by a woman. Chandrabati's aims and Molla's were different, hence so were their styles.

According to Molla's own claims, she wrote the Ramayana for 'self improvement'. To the discerning reader, however, her writing is clearly that of an upwardly mobile poet, her poem cleverly marketed as a devotional text. Here was a low-caste daughter of a potter, but she wrote a traditional Ramayana, appropriating a male Brahmin's job. On the other hand, Chandrabati, the daughter of a Brahmin poet, was capable of writing excellent ballads in the mainstream tradition. Yet she chose to write her Ramayana in a form that is not used by professional poets, but by illiterate village women. Why did she make this choice? To express her own sorrow and anger perhaps, and also to voice the collective tragedy of the typically unrewarded virtue of Indian women.

It is clear from its obvious silences that Chandrabati's Ramayana is a woman's text. Chandrabati is silent about Rama's valour, silent about Rama's goodness, silent about Rama's battle skills, silent about Rama's wisdom. The only aspect of Rama that we find stressed here is as a lover. But he turns out to be a traitor in love, unjustly banishing his pregnant wife. We find Chandrabati's Rama to be a poor king, a poor elder brother who bullies his loyal younger brother into acting against his own conscience, a poor father who does not carry out his parental responsibilities. He is most of all a poor husband—sending Sita into exile partly as a result of his jealousy of Ravana. The description of the jealous Rama runs like this:

Unmatta pagal pray hoilen

Ram Raktajaba ankhi Ramer go

shire rakta uthe

Nashikay agnishwash go brahmarandhra phute

Rama becomes nearly insane

His eyes are blood-red hibiscus, boiling blood rushes up to his head

His nostrils flare with breath like fire, his head is about to explode.

Chandrabati keeps stepping into the narrative to pass uncomplimentary comments on Rama, thus not merely narrating the Ramayana, but also judging and criticising a flawed man. Her Rama is thus a far cry from the balanced, moderate, *sthitadhi* image of Rama that Molla—following the dominant male tradition—presents. Also, Molla's literary personality never enters the text. Molla's voice does not represent herself, hers is the disembodied objective consciousness of the classical epic tradition. Clearly the two women poets have widely divergent aims. Molla wants to be recognised as the equal of the major Telugu poets. Chandrabati wants to give voice to the silent suffering of women. To suit their own purpose, one identified with the literary lineage of the male Brahminical tradition, whereas the other found her voice in the folkloristic world of a women's oral tradition.

When I finally made it to Bangladesh, to Chandrabati's village Patuari, in Maimansingh, I discovered to my horror that though her temple still stands, the river has dried up, and so has her Ramayana. Nobody knows it. Though people still know her ballads, minstrels don't sing her Ramayana anymore. Besides, ordinary women no longer sing the Ramayana; professional singers do. These happen to be men. "What do you sing then?" I asked the village women. "Oh, just wedding songs and lullabies!" they answered. Could they sing some of the those songs for me? "Sure!" And what do I hear? A song about Sita's wedding; a song about Sita's birth; one on Sita giving childbirth; one on Sita's banishment to the forest; some on Sita and Rama playing a game of dice; some about young Sita bathing before her wedding; and long ballad imitating a *Baromaasi* recounting the story of Sita's life, from her birth to her banishment. These women, in short, were singing the Ramayana, or rather, the Sitayana, as the episodes were all taken from Sita's life.

I recognised that many of these songs were in fact by Chandrabati. Of course, in the oral tradition, songs don't remain exactly the same, but here they were singing Chandrabati's Ramayana, though all but in fragments. The narrative was the same. The themes were the same, the formulas recognizable. As I listened, I couldn't tell whether I was in Bangladesh, Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh or Maharashtra. Having worked on women's Ramayana songs in Maithili, Telugu and Marathi, the regions seemed to merge in my head. The words sounded similar, the sentiments were the same. The choice of episodes, remarkably were identical.

In the Bangladeshi women's songs I collected from Kendua, Netrakona, and Kishorganj, the narrative is the same as that of Chandrabati: Sita is Mandodari's daughter conceived from poison, found on the seashore at Janaka's land. We also find Kukuya here—the evil sister-in-law, the one responsible for sending Sita off to the forest. The songs often use harsh words about Rama like *tobuo papishthi Ramer puri dekha jaay*: Rama the "saviour of the fallen" (*patita pavana*) is himself referred to as *papishtha* "the sinner". In another song Rama is described as *pashanda* "stone-hearted", not an usual epithet for one known as *Karunasindhu*, the "ocean of compassion" (*Panchamasher garbha Sitar Chilo rajdhame/Pashan da hoia Ram sita dilo bane*).

I had asked a professional male Ramayana singer, Khetra Pal, whether he would use such words in connection with Rama. He bit his tongue, touched his ears and shut his eyes, saying only illiterate, ignorant women could utter such blasphemous words. Well, women don't find it difficult in Bengal to criticise Rama, Chandrabati had started the tradition early enough.

However, these women singing songs that more often than not echoed Chandrabati's text, denied any knowledge of her Ramayana. I first assumed that Chandrabati had become so much a part of their cultural tradition that they didn't even know whose songs they were singing. Authorship was no longer relevant. But then, one puzzling question remained. Why didn't the women sing those sections in which Chandrabati interrupts the narrative to give Rama a piece of her mind?

Once back from Bangladesh I reread the Chandrabati along with the women's Rama songs from Bangladesh, determined to finally solve this enigma of Chandrabati's Ramayana—an enigma that is represented in a series of seemingly unrelated questions. Why did the women from Chandrabati's homeland leave out the parts in which Chandrabati comments in her own name? Why was Chandrabati's style in the Ramayana so different from the polished grace of her other ballads? What accounted for the distance of Chandrabati's Ramayana from the classical texts and its affinity to the Jaina and tribal Ramayanas? And, finally, why did the village women who sing her songs vehemently deny that the songs are hers?

Could it be that Chandra Kumar Dey, the first collector of Maimansingh ballads, was not the first one after all? Could it have been Chandrabati herself who collected some of the songs floating around and then strung them together under the epic title of "Ramayana"? The echo in the contemporary songs came from sharing the same formulae. Chandrabati had made use of the repertoire that the village women used in her times, and her vocabulary is still in use today among the women of Maimansingh. The common use of only a small number of traditional

themes and fixed formulas is typical of the oral tradition. That probably also explains why no manuscript of Chandrabati's Ramayana has been found.

And finally, this would also explain the perceived "weakness" of style in Chandrabati's Ramayana. She was not trying to be original. She was using the oral repertoire. And repetitions are not only natural but essential in oral compositions. One cannot apply the literary standards of classical epics to judge a folk oral composition. These are two entirely different genres. Chandrabati tried to lend the rural women's voice a larger identity by calling the work a "Ramayana," and by adding her own anxious and caustic comments to it under her own signature.

One cannot truly blame the literary critics for rejecting Chandrabati's Ramayana. If it calls itself a Ramayana, it is expected to follow the classical rules. An epic, according to Dandin, should possess, among other qualities, "a noble and clever hero." Chandrabati clearly accuses her Rama of having lost his mind; and the way she describes his weaknesses makes him look far from noble. Another crucial criterion for an epic—"the final triumph of the hero"—is also not fulfilled by Chandrabati. She holds Rama responsible for the fall of Ayodhya.

Molla, however, clearly fulfills each and every requirement of Dandin.

Chandrabati does none of this. Rereading Chandrabati in the light of Molla, however, revealed that her Ramayana was never meant to be an epic poem in the mainstream tradition but a collection of Sita songs in the women's oral tradition. Now we can understand why the critics termed it incomplete and incompetently crafted. According to the rules of the canon, it is both. In the women's oral tradition, however, it is neither. Chandrabati's Ramayana touches upon all the major events and experiences of Sita and the associated sentiments, turning her, rather than Rama, into the protagonist. Chandrabati's Ramayana is, in fact, an oral Sitayana. Deliberately choosing women's songs to compose an epic, Chandrabati also challenges the conventional hero's nobility and intelligence, and charges Rama with being responsible for the destruction of his land. However, Chandrabati adheres to the crucial theme of Indian epics—indeed of all epics—the battle between good and evil. Only, while in a patriarchal system this eternal struggle is represented by the male characters, in her Ramayana it is represented by the women: Lakshmi versus Alakshmi and Sita versus Kukulya. Thus, Chandrabati subverted the male epic tradition both in content and in form.

Molla, too, effectively challenged the male epic tradition, but from within, by strictly following the rules in an impeccable, superior style. Writing a perfect epic as a woman, and a lower caste woman at that, was an undeniably subversive act.

A closer look at these two audacious, single women rewriting the Ramayana in two separate parts of sixteenth-century India, shows how the mechanics of silencing change through time. Although Molla is very popular today, she was silenced in her time, her Ramayana barred from the king's court. The potter's daughter, turned classical poet, was rejected because of her caste and gender. Literary excellence was not enough to win the recognition of the court.

Today, with the framework of literary criticism changed, when extra-textual elements like caste and gender are no longer part of the criteria to judge literary works, Molla reigns supreme for her poetic excellence. Although aware of the women's simple poetic tradition in Telugu, she had chosen not to follow it. What a Brahmin man could do, she must have felt, she could do better. Molla rewrote the Ramayana in her mother tongue, summoning all the sophistication of a classical language. In her own way, by following the mainstream poetic tradition so closely, Molla too was a rebel who challenged the patriarchal system.

Chandrabati's case is different. In her own time she was not silenced. In fact, she was so popular that she became a legend after her death. She was writing in two folk traditions: in the more polished balladic tradition of her father, and in the much more humble women's oral tradition (of her mother?). She was accepted in both. It was only much later, when the literary canons had changed once again that Chandrabati's posthumous silencing began. Bengali literary historians of the twentieth century were baffled with the problem of evaluating her work, especially determining how her Ramayana would fit into the epic genre. In terms of its form, its style, its diction or even its contents, it clearly could not measure up to the traditional epics. But her ballads conformed nicely with the balladic tradition and fulfilled the criteria of the genre perfectly.

It is time to judge Chandrabati's Ramayana for what it is—a long poem composed in the oral tradition, drawing heavily on available rural women's songs on Sita. She strung the songs together, added her own outraged comments on Rama, and gave them a single corporate identity under the name "Ramayana". In one way however, Chandrabati did accommodate the dominant ideology in her poem: in the figure of her main character and narrator Sita. Sita never rebels. In Chandrabati's text we hear two voices—one rebellious and sharp, which is her own, and the other, conventional and soothing, the voice of Sita. Molla, on the other hand, writing in the male tradition, speaks in a single authoritative voice all through. We hear neither her own voice, nor Sita's. It is a faceless, disembodied poet's persona that she makes use of. A male voice, if any. Ultimately, both Molla and Chandrabati were sisters in sorrow who rebelled against the orthodoxy of their times through their art, but each woman poet chose a very different path from the other to voice her resistance. One was silenced in her lifetime, the other four centuries later.

In the Ramayana songs sung by Marathi women, we often hear lines like *Sitecha dukha baiyanu tumi batun ghiya* ("Women, share Sita's grief among yourselves" or, "Sita distributed her sorrow among us all when she walked to the forest".) The meaning of this became clear to me when in Bangladesh. I was recording a song by a woman, 79 years of age, whom everyone calls Pishima; she once owned the largest water reservoir in Kishorganj town, Paramanik Dighi, and much landed property around it. When her family moved to India she refused to accompany her sons and stayed on in her home town, all alone. Since then, the tank and all the property have changed hands, she has no roof over her head and takes turns in staying with different families. Pishima was singing the song of Sita's exile *Kichu kichujaay re Sita pichu pichu chaay/tathapi papishthi Ramerpuri dekhajaay repuri dekha jaay* ("Sita goes a few steps and looks back a few times/ the palace of the sinner Rama still rises high"). In the middle of the song she broke down, wiped a tear, and muttered to herself, "what is my grief, compared to Sita's?" This fleeting comment on my tape more than proved the point of the Marathi songs. Even to this day Sita provides a voice to our silent, suffering women. We are all sisters in sorrow, be it in India or in Bangladesh..