

Revisiting the *Ramayana*: A Character Cursed for Centuries! Deconstructing the Folk Poet Haldhar Nag

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Abstract: The present paper basically pertains to interpret and analyze the discussion and accelerate the search for a better understanding and appreciation of this spectacular and beautiful form of literature. Indeed, the folk poet Shri Haldhar Nag's work, in this context, is a masterpiece in the sense that the poet has shown, with brilliance and elegance through his poetic work, that our folklores could be used both to identify with today's aspirations, sensibility and our worldview to create the counter discourse to subvert it. This paper also aims at constructing identities that engages and endures with reference to our myths and legends which have taught us to protest the evil and so also promote the good in the folklore tradition. The other objective of the assignment, at hand, however, is primarily to accelerate our understanding of how our rich mythological character and philosophy have built in the collective consciousness in the creation of a new voice and the inflexions of a new sensibility. We have also to understand and examine the basic and immediate question: Does any poet have the freedom to recreate our mythological and epic characters, in a light different from that in which the original poet/author, etc. shows it, of a new dimension to such projections that have been looked down upon by us and have been cursed for centuries.

Keywords: Mythology, legend, Recreation, Counter Discourse Constructing Identities

INTRODUCTION

No one with an interest in Western Odisha, art, culture, literature and folklore can afford not to know Padma Shri Lok Kabi Ratna Haldhar Nag's poetic works. The myths that provide the source material for the poet's torrent of poems are all linked together by the theme of Indian feminism and womanhood. Shri Nag's writings, basically, deal with deep moral concerns of life that effect people permanently and help us gain insight by expanding our mind-sets and our awareness of life. To put in other words, the poetic works of the poet presents a universal truth focusing on the contemporary reality and the conditions of our life's utter desperation and obsession.

Let's have a look at the importance of these great characters of our myth. When we talk about, the *Ramayana*, we invariably recall the major characters. All of them admirably fulfill their assigned roles dutifully with a sacrificial intent. Urmila, Lakshman's wife, has always been the neglected of all characters in the *Ramayana* and the character of queen Kaikeyi, the second queen of king Dashratha of Ayodhya and the mother of Bharat, has been shown traditionally as a paragon of 'designed deadly devil' mother, an eternal curse and a bad omen to reckon with.

The above basic but complex questions and related issues need to be addressed and discussed by interpreting the existing facts with new lights. In these contexts, and perspectives, we will try to make a sincere attempt to study and analyze the present topic on the character of queen Kaikeyi by deconstructing Haldhar Nag's the

Ramayana, written in the *Koshali-Sambalpuri* folklore tradition, with a critical approach and evaluation.

Our mainstream Indian epic literature is so comprehensive and so cyclopedic with regard to the portrayal and presentation of characters and their pivotal roles in the available different classic versions of the *Ramayana*, originally written in Sanskrit and Awadhi¹ and, subsequently adapted in many Indian languages by many great poets barring a few exceptions in the writings of the much-acclaimed Hindi poet Maithili Saran Gupt and few others. Does an important epic character like that of Kaikeyi deserve such an unfortunately negative portrayal in our psyche and sensibility of the billions of Indian over the ages? The overall Indian sub-continent literary scene, at present, perpetually questions the very 'content' and the invincible 'intent' of the contemporary intellectual class and their stereotyped preferences and complete denial of a recreation of lesser-known aspects of a larger- talked about mythological character. S K Mahananda observes:

This, probably, is the precise reason why Lok Kabi Shri Haldhar Nag writes on one of the lead characters and the most stereotyped and one of the most complicated characters of the iconic queen Kaikeyi in his epic-poem through the folk tradition in the Koshali-Sambalpuri dialect².

Experimenting with many poetic devices, folk poet Shri Nag, a true balladeer of the soil, has tried not only to project in a newer dimension and but also to justify Kaikeyi as the most benevolent amongst all other female characters in the *Ramayana*.

Emphasis on instilling a progressive idea, in using poetry and thereby giving a new direction, is an obvious example of experimentation that we can see in Shri Nag's epic- poem, "Mahasati Urmila" (1995). It is pertinent here to mention that while writing the *Mahabharata*, our genius Sarala Das derives his lead from Vishakhadutta's *Mudrarakshasam*, whereas Shri Nag crafts his story from his own creative imagination, poetic skill and critical interpretation in the same characteristic style that a folk singer or for that matter a balladeer does. Manoj Das observes:

The poet seems to have wandered in an inner world of his own self- in the company of the Muse- under whose guidance he has had glimpses of aureoles around characters mythological or otherwise³.

¹ Awadhi is an Eastern Hindi language of the Indo-Aryan branch spoken in the northern India. It is primarily spoken in the Awadh region of present-day Uttar Pradesh, India. The name *Awadh* is connected to Ayodhya, the ancient town, which is regarded as the homeland of Śrī Rām. It was, along with Braj Bhasha, used widely as a literary vehicle before being displaced by Hindustani in the 19th century. Linguistically, Awadhi is a language at par with Hindustani.

² Koshali/Sambalpuri dialect: Sambalpuri is the local dialect of the undivided Sambalpur region which includes the current districts of Sambalpur, Bargarh, Debagarh and Jharsuguda in the western part of Odisha. It does not have script of its own and although some Sambalpuri writers have started writing in Odia script, it is still largely a spoken variation of Odia language. With smaller variations it is also spoken in not just the adjacent districts of Sundargarh, Bolangir, sonapur, Nuapada and Kalahandi but also in the central districts of Baudh, Kanhamal and Phulbani. Even the southern district like Koraput presents a similar dialect. S K Mahananda's essay, *Folkalization of the Ramayana: Decoding Folk Poet Haladhar Nag*.

³ Manoj Das' Foreword to *Kavyanjali* Vol I.

Lok Kabi Ratna Haldhar Nag is blessed with a rare gift of wideness of vision and creative intuition. The folk poet, in his extraordinarily uncommon poetic skill, can have us the possibility of an altogether different interpretation of the action of a major mythological character that has been seen by us as unfortunate. In his relatively longer poem with an epic touch, "Mahasati Urmila", Shri Nag projects queen Kaikeyi's role as the instrumental in causing prince Ram's exile. What Shudra Muni Sarala Das, our great poet, in his Odia *Mahabharata* shows Shakuni's role in the decimation of the Kauravas, ensuring the wellbeing of the Pandavas. Shakuni manipulates all his mischief tricks in order to take the revenge of his own sister's, Gandhari, marriage to the blind king, Dhritarashtra of Hastinapur. Ved Vyas, the original creator of the *Mahabharata*, on the other hand, has not shown any such hint of Shakuni's pretext. Like Shudra Muni Sarla Das, the folk poet, has shown Kaikeyi's unexpected action "by claiming for the two boons, as the king, Dasharatha once promised, is really meant for prince Ram's safety from a prophetic doom"⁴.

Poets do have the freedom to interpret or recreate an epic character the way they want to portray unlike the way the original poet has shown to us. Seeing in this scenario, the poet's creative faculty entirely depends on the quality of his inspiration which is a reflection of the interpreter's manner of understanding. It is not for the first time that a poet has shown an epic character in a different light. Even the poets like Kamban and Goswami Tulsi Das have explored their poetic license in re-interpreting and recreating the characters from the *Ramayana*. The pretext for such a literary endeavor is certainly of any body's guess! The re-interpretation and re-creation of a character is to feel the presence of a new dimension in the personality of the character from the subtext of the narrative, "hitting upon a hidden possibility."⁵ It is not surprising if the artist's main aim is to receive more attention and wider acknowledgement by presenting the traditionally known original stuff in a different 'avtar' of the character's projection in a such a way that would certainly shock the readers and wholesomely entertain them.

The same analogy we can establish in the re-making of Hindi feature films like Vishal Bhardwaj's recreation of Shakespearean plays or Prakash Jha's re-making of the *Mahabharata* and for that matter the re-making of many Hindi classic movies by the present-day film makers. Many writers belonging to different languages and genres have also made the 're-make' of their Draupadis portraying her in different hue and color as per their need and preferences unlike Ved Vyas' projection of the princess of Panchal, popularly known as *Panchali*, with a real 'intent' and for a specific 'purpose'. The numerous adaptations and recreations of the said legendary epic character, also called as *Yajnaseni*⁶, not belonging to a normal mortal but an unrevealed personality from a *yajna* for a particular objective, has been shown in a relatively darker light. She has amply been described as an archetype of the reflective of their narrow outlook, vested interests and utter sympathies or compassion.

⁴ Manoj Das' Foreword to *Kavyanjali* Vol I.

⁵ Manoj Das' Foreword to *Kavyanjali* Vol I.

⁶ *Yajnaseni*: the story of Draupadi is a 1984 Odia language novel by Pratibha Ray. The story revolves around Draupadi from the famous epic the *Mahabharata*. The word *Yajnaseni* means a woman born out of fire

In other words, Draupadi has been described in the frame of an insignificantly psychological scale or grade in the lens of today's notions of ethical *versus* unethical and whims and fancies of ordinary human beings. There is limit to everything including our freedom of expression. Nobody has the right to become licentious under the pretext of artistic freedom. Manoj Das observes:

Coming back to the present poet, when, in the process of singing the merits of Urmila, poet Shri Nag shows her as superior to some other great female characters, we can look at that as his exuberance, but happily acceptable application of poetic license, not a sign of questionable inaptitude; our knowledge that from another point of view each of these characters are equally lofty is not disturbed. A discerning reader or listener can feel the spirit of such recreations –can understand whether they emerged out of a feeling of compassion nor an ordinary passion⁷

In his longer poem on Urmila's iconic personage, the poet has projected the sacrifice and sanctity; dedication and devotion of the Mithila princess. He has also never failed to intimate us about his serious and deep concerns: the all-time marginalized and dehumanized portrayal of queen Kaikeyi by the classical poets and the contemporary intellectuals in acknowledging the same through his extraordinary poetic endeavor. Written in the *Bangalashree Raga*, a unique Odia poetic rhyme with a colloquially lyrical rhythm, and is composed in five cantos (*Sarga*), Shri Nag's stupendous poetic accomplishment is undoubtedly a milestone in the annals of contemporary Koshali-Sambalpuri folklore wholly for its creatively genuine adaptation and typically vernacular presentation of an original epic narrative in a different perspective of ideas, of innovations and of re-interpretations. The poet writes,

Her son will be king, excited she is,
Like a horned beast in the swamp.
What reason have you to celebrate?
You are hornless, yet you romp.
Women's ploys are unknown,
Even to Gods in heaven.

The poet's spontaneity is infectious and palpable and the metaphors he employs exposes a picturesque inventiveness.

In the poetic descriptions, we usually notice the life-style, behavioral patterns, manners and morals and the rich cultural tapestry of our land and locale, culture and cuisines. The indigenous people of Western Odisha, popularly known as the *Sambalpuria*⁸, intensely associate themselves with the writings of Shri Nag in such a way that they are the same beings, typically and essentially deep rooted with the flora, fauna and the flavor of their own soil, as it has rightly been reflected in the poet's sculpture of words.

The marvel and the magic of a *Haldharian* style of such an exceptionally spectacular poetic pageant, we find in his poem, reminds us of either a James Joyce's style of writing or for that matter a Virginia Woolf's kind novel! The place and the persons are personified! This is how the poet has so brilliantly communicated with the readers that as if he (like a cultural ambassador) has sincerely tried to strike an emotional chord of the indigenous folk- both literates and the non-literates. J K Nayak observes:

⁷ Manoj Das' Foreword to *Kavyanjali* Vol I.

⁸ Sambalpuria: Koshali/Sambalpuri Identity-Identity with reference to the mythological Koshal Pradesh/ region mentioned in the *Ramayana*. The typical indigenous folk of Western Odisha.

Such a description enables the readers to reconnect with a living human voice that invests the ordinary and the everyday with a rare depth of feeling⁹.

Shri Nag's poems are essentially the message and the medium of the common people deeply rooted in their culture and custom and with their soils and the sands- bound by a garland called the cultural consciousness- of a common myth, of a shared history, of a collective memory with the local sensibility and aspirations and, of course, a living and inspiring identity!

S K Mahananda rightly observes:

Shri Nag's poems are like deft fusions of exotic paintings with symphonies of local music, one witnesses a ringing endorsement of the poet's creative credential and which may be studied in its wider aspects¹⁰.

An epic-poem, essentially, revolves round its characters. Characterization and its significance are unique with regard to their upbringing, high social status- their knowledge and nobility; valor and virtue. Shri Nag's relatively longer poem, with an epic touch, on *Sita's Sister* is not an exception in this regard in portraying the human attributes of the character. Each character, more or less familiar with the sensible Indian folk, is endowed with their exceptional qualities of value and virtue and that of manners and magnanimity.

Needless to mention, but it is obvious that space, scale and emphasis are skillfully attributed to particular character. Since the epic-poem is pre-dominantly centered around Urmila, what we see that the poet has not only meticulously attempted to sketch the rare qualities of the elan and class of Lakshman's lady but also exceptionally placed queen Kaikeyi in the highest esteem.

The poet has, with precision and clarity, mentioned how queen Kaikeyi, the soul with a good heart of Shri Nag's one of the leading characters, has rightfully proved herself a living symbol of inner purity and a compassioned mother despite her unspeakable mental agony in leading a hatred, ostracized and eternal cursed life.

In contrast, one can find no mention of Kaikeyi's greatness with such a scale and magnitude, of inventiveness and newer dimension unlike a Haldharian poetry, in all the seven books of the *Ramayana* written in many a variety and versions by the greatest minds! Great poets have, no doubts, written volumes on the life and idea of the *Satis* (virtuous women) as per their preferences and predilections but Kaikeyi's 's rightfully deserved portrayal is hardly found to be seen except a little mention in the footnotes that too even in a derogatory and demeaning sense. It appears, such an epic character of such a sacrificial and dedicated dimension is lost somewhere in the precious pages of our shared history, collective myth, our treasured literature and epic and in the consciousness of our living memory from our great *Sanatani*¹¹ culture and civilization. A real lady, made up of uncommon living entity of a rare beauty of heart and a soul of compassion with a greater of sense insecurity of all time, is unfortunately overlooked by our literary artists and the eminent intellectuals, possibly due to their pre-conceived observations, unprogressive outlook or an invincible intent!

⁹ Comment by Prof. Jatindra K Nayak, Professor of English, Utkal University, in *Kavyanjali Voll, Selected Poetic Works of Haldhar Nag*

¹⁰ Saroj K Mahananda's *Folkalization of the Ramayana: Decoding Folk Poet Haladhar Nag* (2020).

¹¹ Sanātānī is a term used to describe Hindu movements that incorporate various teachings from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Bhagavad Gita*, which itself is often described as a concise guide to Hindu philosophy and a practical, self-contained guide to life.

A Shakespearean description of Cleopatra, though not so contextual, nevertheless deserves a must mention here: “Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.2). This shows how conservative and unprogressive our great and genius poets are as compared to their western literary counterparts with having a highly unconventional and progressive worldview.

It may also be emphatically noted here that, in no sense, we can afford to ignore Shri Nag’s poetic ingenuity and creativity of any lesser kind or class. The poet’s entirely different interpretations on the action of the character of Kaikeyi are so comprehensive and so extensive in convincing the readers, with a far-sighted insights and vision, that the protagonist deserves all the accolades and appreciations, in every respect, for being truly categorized as the quintessential of a mother with an archetype *Karma!*

The poet is of the view that Urmila, a woman of extraordinary grace and superior value, never thinks ill of others even if an enemy let alone the queen Kaikeyi. She even conveys her deepest gratitude to Kaikeyi, for who being the instrumental in sending Ram for the exile, since it is Kaikeyi who has tried to save the life of Ram (who she loved the most) by letting her own son, Bharat, assigned to rule the kingdom and face the outrage and the wrath by the people of Ayodhya. The queen Kaikeyi desperately wants prince Bharat to encounter the threats and dangers of death. In the words of the poet,

Rather I shall bear the death
Of my own son, Bharat,
Than let Ram meet with tragedy;
I will save Ram at any cost.
Out of love for Ram, mother Kaikeyi,
Has made of this pretext;
She has saved Ram, and her own son,
She has pushed to *Yama*¹² instead.

This analogy reminds us of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, where Antony says,
Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall: here is my space.

The poet, it so appears, is of the view that Kaikeyi really wants Ram should go on a noble mission, in the form of an exile for fourteen years, to destroy the evil forces and conquer the earth by establishing the order of goodness and the safe return to Ayodhya after being victorious. In other words, ensuring the wellbeing of her loved one, Ram, Shri Nag emphatically shows, in his poem, that Kaikeyi’s terrible deed was meant to assure Ram’s safety from a predictive destiny.

The world has never tried to understand the real intention behind queen Kaikeyi’s rift with her husband, king Dasharatha, while deliberately claiming for 'the two boons' that the king once promised to fulfill as and when she so desires, The poet, in his words,

¹² Yama: God of Death.

The good dove has cautioned me,
In advance of this disaster.
My dreams will be shattered,
*Ramarajya*¹³ will mix in the dirt.
Ram is my life's purpose,
Ram my favorite child".
If Ram dies then for Kaikeyi,
Life will be unfulfilled.

In the words of Manoj Das,

The source of inspiration that glorifies in the poetry of Shri Nag is undoubtedly a sign of compassion built up over time, may be in the subconscious hearts of multitudes for centuries. It does not contradict the factual elements in the original, but expresses only a human and sentimental pity for a character that had been cursed for centuries¹⁴.

Our mythological characters, especially their traditional portrayal, are highly strange and really unique. Both Shakuni in the *Mahabharata* and Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana* have been projected by our genius minds in their best possible way of 'brighter darkness'. Such characterizations, implicitly or explicitly, have been highly read and widely accepted as the canons of cultural constructs- an integral part of our social behavior and our collective consciousness. Seen in this context of tarnished textual structure, a deconstruction approach is really a progressive endeavor to revisit our age-old indigenous tradition and incredible human expression- our mythologies and our folklore. This, exactly, is the irony of the world that we look at things we want to see them as per our wishes. A person who thinks logically is a nice contrast to the real world!

It is also pertinent to know that Kaikeyi has also been gifted with the rare talent and ability to comprehend the sounds of the chirping and tweeting birds and the buzzing animals. The poet writes:

As a young girl, mother Kaikeyi,
Did receive a boon from a saint;
She understood animal talk,
To reveal she had no consent.

The exchanged tweets of warning from a pair of doves' forecast about the sudden and untimely death of the king Dashratha and after the king's tragic demise, the eldest prince who would be crowned as the king of Ayodhya, is surely going to suffer from severe heart stroke and thereafter the death. The poet describes:

A pair of doves was chatting,
* * *
A young bride the king has wedded,
When his death is not very far.
* * *
He who sits on Ayodhya's throne,
For the fourteen years next,
His hear will burst, he will die.
Do not forget this forecast.

¹³ Ramarajya: An ideal country with ideal governance.

¹⁴ Manoj Das' Foreword to *Kavyanjali* Vol I.

Hearing doves' such an unpleasant conversation, Kaikeyi, is not at all convinced about prince Ram's coronation and instead thinks the right time to claim for the realization of the 'two boons' as promised by the king long ago. Accordingly, one of the boons, the first one being-the exile for the prince Ram to the forest for a period of fourteen years; the second one, her own son, Bharat, would be the king of Ayodhya. Such a loud and clear demand, behind Kaikeyi's pretext, is to let Bharat face the fierce of the inescapable death and Ram be spared from such an inevitably looming and impending dance of death! We see a similar human situation, though in an unlikely context, in Shakespeare's inimitable lines,

The odds is gone

And there is nothing left remarkable

Beneath the visiting moon. (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15)

Urmila, well aware of Kaikeyi's real intention, tries really hard to bring calm down Lakshman's extreme anger and unruly behavior towards Kaikeyi. Urmila pursues Lakshman, "It's for you an opportunity. Such occasion comes to those, who have lived with morality", to go to the forest along with Ram, and thereby she herself invites her own destiny to be prophetically doomed in the darkness of skepticism and uncertainty, "The entire kingdom faced misfortune, For Urmila it was good luck". One should note here that Lakshman's accompanying Ram in the exile was not one of the pre-requisite conditions in Kaikeyi's two boons (promises) before the king. Blessed are those who unconditionally cares and serves the elder and the respected one, Urmila, wholeheartedly, says, "You also follow the two (Ram and Sita). Small service from Sita you snatch, Blessings will be sprinkled on you" and let Lakshman be with Ram's exile. Lakshman, finally, moves to the forest along with Ram and Sita; To their utter surprise and absolute bewilderment, the Ayodhya folks feel and realize Kaikeyi's selfishness and jealousy. How a queen like Kaikeyi of highness and stature of an exceptionally remarkable dedication, though not towards her own son, and talent can afford to ignore such a great Indian value of being loyal and respectable to one's loving husband?

In one of his longer poems, *Prem Paechan* (Manifestation of Love), based on the story of Shri Krishna, Shri Nag has shown how Krishna showers his love for all including his enemies. The poem, in an epic length, is not merely a retelling of Krishna's life as we have been associated with but have many episodes with dramatic twists at the end rightly endorsing the creative credential of the poet. In the words of Shri Surendra Nath, the English translator of *Haldhar Granthavali, Kavyanjali* Vol. I, II, and III:

Readers will be surprised to know that Haldhar's Pootna is not a devilish woman but a pretty, adorable mother, who having lost her own baby is roaming around crazed, and upon finding the new-born Krishna rushes to suckle him. By sucking the life out of her, Krishna testifies that she was devoted enough to dwell permanently within god¹⁵.

The poet seems to have described that there is a little bit of madness that we usually find in a genius. Only madness in love towards a person or an object is the ultimate goal and nothing else! She thinks that Ram can read her mind. According to her Ram is born to kill the devils and the demons and he would free the world from tyranny and terror, death and destruction, "God he was, born to kill demons and free the world of terror."

¹⁵ *Haldhar Granthavali, Kavyanjali* Vol.III.

The sub-text of the narrative is an analogical reference quite resemblance that we all know from the celebrated *sloka* (a couplet in Sanskrit verse) of the Gita:

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।
धर्मासंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥¹⁶

This shows Kaikeyi's worldview and her profound vision for a peaceful and progressive world order, of harmony and of existence, with civility and humility nonetheless her name is quite synonymous with selfishness, jealousy, a sign of bad omen, cruelty, hard-heartedness, and what not.

She remains in absolute persistent-cool and composed in the times of Ayodhya undergoing a severe political instability and serious internal turmoil. Are all these things possible for a mentally agonized mother seriously suffering for her *Karma* - right or wrong?

Kaikeyi's credibility as a woman character of rare quality of dedication despite her so-called and so acknowledged 'Devil Deeds' is reasonably presented and argumentatively substantiated by Shri Nag with utmost sincerity and subtlety.

CONCLUSION

Shri Nag, a true minstrel and a noble bard, has so succinctly and wonderfully, with precision a clarity, analysed the two extremes of the issues and events at hand that the presentation of his point of view- one is just prior to the exile and the other before the climax of the exile that he has stricken a reasonably moderate balance of the role of the queen Kaikeyi in the emergence of conflict and the position of the lead lady, Urmila, in striking the score in the resolution of the crisis in his verse narrative. This poem, a spectacularly crafted folkloric sculpture of words, of imagery and with rhythmic richness, essentially discovers a new voice and a new sensibility. As J K Nayak has rightly observed:

A typical Haldharian masterstroke, this relatively epic-poem enables readers to reconnect with a living human voice that invests the ordinary and the everyday with a rare depth of feeling. Shri Nag has a rare ability of transforming episodes from the Indian mythology into songs that reverberate so well with the local sensibility and aspirations¹⁷.

Poet Shri Nag has portrayed Kaikeyi as the pioneer and the maiden character. Had she not been there, Ram would not have been to the exile. Lakshman would not have been to the exile with Ram and Sita? Had Lakshman been not to the exile, Meghnad would not have been killed. Had Meghnad been not killed, Sita would not have been freed from Ravan's clutch and captivity. Ravan could have never been slain had Meghnad been not killed! Moreover, it must be noted here that, with queen Kaikeyi begins the exile of Ram as a prince just before the coronation and ends with Ram, the destroyer of devil and evil forces on earth, as Lord *Maryada Purusottam* Ram – a journey from a mere Prince to the ultimate *Prabhu*, one of the incarnations of the Supreme lord, Vishnu.

¹⁶ *Bhagvat Gita*, Chapter 4, Verse: 7-8 Whenever, there is decline of Dharma, and rise of Adharma, For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of Dharma I come into being in every age.

¹⁷ Comment by Prof Jatindra K Nayak, Professor of English, Utkal University, in *Kavyanjali* Vol.I, *Selected Poetic Works* of Haldhar Nag.

Kaikeyi's *karma*, therefore, is the quintessential for 'the Pilgrim's Progress' from an ordinary mortal to an extraordinary immortal icon of belief, an ideal of faith and an idol of worship for generations of human on earth ever since in the known history of mankind! Queen Kaikeyi, indisputably, is the leading and iconic epic figure as she is the instrumental in the thematic transcript and the structural texture of the folk poet Haldhar Nag's 're-make' of the *Ramayana*.

This present work of Shri Nag may be considered as one of his finest works if we look at it in a spiritual perspective with in the archetype of a social framework. Like "Sakala Ghate Narayana; Anadi Param Karana." ¹⁸ All these great sacred scriptures' pure and absolute texts can well be connected in the course of study, analysis and interpretation of the text.

On reading Shri Nag's "Mahasati Urmila", a sincere and sensible reader can also better comprehend, appreciate and inculcate the immortal *sanatani* -sayings of the treasured wisdom by our ancient sages, seers and profound philosophers, like 'Naari Narayani.'¹⁹ A woman, therefore, is the source, the sustenance, and the charioteer of the universe, with all its beauty and diversity according to our *sanatani* scriptures and the canon of our great culture.

Apart from Urmila's, most of all other major characters, exclusive of Kaikeyi, Bharat and Sulochana, are more or less portrayed as per their positions, roles and narrative significance. It would have been more appreciating and engaging had there been some added thematic portrayal given by the poet while projecting the characters of Kaikeyi, Bharat and Sulochana distinctively with regard to their value, virtue and other personal attributes. A reasonable narrative content space we find about Bharat as marginally as a patrolling guard looking after Ayodhya in the absence of Ram and Sulochana's copious details on her mere enigmatic and ethereal beauty and evasively tempting charm!

Adequately more deserved artistic space in the poem, probably, could have been given to Kaikeyi's role and character had there been a comparative description on Bharat's ideal and value, virtue and abstinence, and other responsibilities with that of Kaikeyi's role and significance. The text of the poem cannot, of course, be read as the ultimate representations of the role of these characters. It is important to acknowledge their layered, diverse traits; and the full array of riches that emerge in a careful and comparative reading of them. At least a moderate and fair artistic space, for the characterization of Sulochana as per Urmila's scale of projection, could have enriched and upgraded the overall texture and standard of the work.

Despite the marginal literary flaw, as has been observed by some literary critics, the poet has not only penned down in the language of Western Odisha, its beauty and intricate melody, but also has kept alive, revive and upheld the richness of our lesser-known dialect, in connecting to the readers to their roots, through his own creative credential in reinterpreting the lesser-known aspects of the lesser -known female characters of our mythology and epic.

¹⁸ According to Odia *Bhagavata* by Atibadi Jagannath Das, God is everywhere and He is the source of everything.

¹⁹ A woman is the Goddess, she is the Narayani, the Aadi Shakti.

A poet is a human being with his limitations let alone his artistic and creative perfection. Nothing is absolute except the truth and beauty. A poet is a creator; an artist and his ingenuity and imagination are independent to be expressed and articulated. He has the liberty to feel and the poetic licence to express the way he wants to write and present as per his vision and objective. Persistence to proximate the perfection is a poet's vision. A poet yearns to reach out the world through his works. To him, the poem is his soul's language. A poet writes what he thinks genuinely right and relevant; and if his writings are accepted and acknowledged by the reading public and the target audience, then he is extensively read and widely respected. Poet Shri Nag has accomplished this.

In the present epic-poem, essentially a recreation of the *Ramayana* by Shri Haldhar Nag, the singing bard of the Koshali-Sambalpuri soil, we largely observe that Kaikeyi's rare portrayal of her attitude, affection and action towards prince Ram, not her own son, unlike the great literary masters- ancient and modern, have considerably been spoken about. This poem, undoubtedly, has also the strength and the prospect for a wider reach and a vast readability. But the time has arrived for the rest of the world to understand and to celebrate this timeless beauty of both our age-old indigenous tradition and incredible human expressions- our mythologies and our folklores.

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