

**ABSTRACT: What happened to Sita's voice? The portrayal of Sita in Three Bengali *Ramayanas***

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The common view of Sita as the epitome of wifely devotion and unquestioning submission to her husband rests on shaky grounds when we test it against the textual tradition of the epic. From Valmiki's original narrative to 20<sup>th</sup> century versions, some *Ramayanas*, many particularly from eastern India, portray Sita not as the meek and submissive wife of popular idealization but a woman who speaks her mind, often against the authority of her husband. In this discussion I shall illustrate this alternative portrayal from three Bengali versions, namely, Krttivasa's 14<sup>th</sup> ce tale, Candravati's 16<sup>th</sup> ce partial version, and the 18<sup>th</sup> ce narrative by Jagadrama and Ramprasad. Although Sita is portrayed in each text as wholeheartedly loyal to Rama, she is also shown spiritedly to question and even rebuke Rama for his unjust treatment of her. In each she thinks independently and although she accepts her fate she rejects its morality. In her active protest in these retellings of the epic, Sita is thus closer to Valmiki's regal heroine and stands as the voice of honorable righteousness against the rule of expediency followed by Rama as ruler of Ayodhya. That so many other versions since Valmiki's time, most influentially, Tulsidas's vastly influential *Ramcaritamanas*, have recreated Sita as submissive and voiceless suggests some social imperative to manufacture a role model in line with patriarchal control strategies. On the other hand, it is possible that the submissive Sita is a product of the *bhakti* worldview, which sees Visnu/Rama as the centre-point of existence, necessitating the total submersion of all else in Rama. But it is hard to disregard the gender issue, since it is only Sita who is subjected to utter humiliation, and specifically on grounds of sexual purity. Thus it is by robbing Sita of her voice that victimhood has been made palatable for women through literary manipulation.