

INFLUENCE OF 'RAMAYANA' THE EPIC ON WOMEN IN INDIA AND THAILAND

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Ramakien is the National epic of Thailand, though it has derived from the Hindu epic Ramayana. The work has had an important influence on Thai Literature, art and drama (both the *Khon* and *Nang* dramas being derived from it). Since its introduction the *Ramakein* has become a basic component of Thai culture.

This statement makes us wonder as to what is the influence/impact of Ramayana, the epic, in Thailand as far as women are concerned? Are the women and men of Thailand affected by the Ramayana myth in the same manner as in India? How is the religious dichotomy resolved considering that more than 93.2% of population practice Buddhism but also follow and participate in Ramayana actively as artists? What is the methodology or practice employed for dissemination of the Ramayana story in Thailand? If the Ramayana is taught as a part of the school curriculum then does it impact gender in the same manner as in India?

The above are some of the questions to which this research paper aims to answer. In fact the paper is based on my study visit to Bangkok under ICSSR-NRCT Bilateral Exchange of Scholars Program . The relevance and importance of this topic is very significant for society at large as women usually have myths working against them though in a subtle and inconspicuous way.

The objective of the study is to highlight the influence of Ramayana as an epic keeping gender as the central consideration. It will be interesting to know and reveal how the mythological story of

Ramayana influences and impacts women in Thailand considering their unique circumstance of having Hindu myths as a part of culture rather than religion. How the influence further impacts women's education and empowerment in contemporary times will define the current and sociological relevance of this paper.

INFLUENCE OF RAMAYANA IN INDIA

The Ramayana is one of the most revered and adulated ideological base engendering value systems in young men and women in India. The Rama legend provides a model of male valour and honour and Sita story that of female chastity, fidelity and self-sacrifice. In India Rama and Sita, in their capacity as idealized social beings, constitute the underlying foundation of the patriarchal monogamous family

Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is the consort of the Hindu god Rama (avatar of Vishnu) and is an avatar of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and wife of Vishnu. She is esteemed as a paragon of spousal and feminine virtues for all Hindu women. Sita is known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. Sita has been a much revered figure amongst the Hindus. She has been portrayed as an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, and an ideal mother in various texts, stories, illustrations, movies and modern media. The actions, reactions and instincts manifested by Sita at every juncture in a long and arduous life are deemed exemplary. Her story has been portrayed in the book *Sitayanam* ('Sitayanam-A

Woman's Journey of Strength" by Anju P. Bhargav). The values that she enshrined and adhered to at every point in the course of a demanding life are the values of womanly virtue held sacred by countless generations of Indians. Symbolically, Sita is considered to be the child of the Mother Earth, produced by the union between the king and the land. Sita is a personification of the Earth's fertility, abundance, and well-being.

In India, much of feminist study attribute discrimination, harassment against women to ideological conditioning. Pankaj K Singh and Jaidev in their paper 'Decentering a Patriarchal Myth' (in the book "From myths to Markets", edited by Kumkum Sangri and Uma Chakaravarti, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999) opine that it is seldom that ideologically neutral myths are constructed, sacralized and disseminated for legitimizing certain power filled practices, attitudes and ways of seeing. Ideologies are often aimed at naturalizing and even 'divinizing' a particular world-view. Like history, they are not easy to disown, even when they harm people. For without them, one feels culturally impoverished, strangely weightless and yet, with them one feels oppressed. Our myths can subjugate women as much as men can. The need for myths is as real for women as it is for men. Yet the situation is asymmetrical because while men have myths on their side, women have myths against them.

The ideological myth of the Ramayana has for ages espoused Sita as the ideal for female behavior throughout India. Thus the qualities exhibited by Sita are considered the norm and any deviation results in condemnation and censure by society at large. The ideals of femininity and masculinity are built up in the psychological and physiological upbringing of a child to such an extent that despite contemporary education and logical study discrimination and secondary status of women is the norm.

The obsession with son preference, control over women's sexuality, violence against women, chastity- idealized, tested and reemphasized in women, where men are conditioned to display warrior like qualities to redeem family name and

honour- are some of the values learnt by the unconscious absorbing of the epic tale of Ramayana by the men and women of India.

Gerda Lerner, a pioneer of women's history says(see V.Geetha-Gender , by Stree 2006) that traditionalists, whether working within a religious or a scientific framework, have regarded women's subordination as universal, God given or natural, hence immutable. According to her they say that what has survived , survived because it was best; it follows that it should remain that way.

The **methodology** employed for such engendering is varied and diverse. The festival of Deepawali marks the culmination of Ramlila which is a ten day continuous, dramatized enactment of the epic Ramayana mostly in northern India. The epic is also widely read and recited in original Sanskrit text and varied translations in a number of Hindu homes in India. Temples dedicated to lord Rama often depict the story in pictures or sculptures lining the precinct of the outer hall of the temple. Classical dance performances and ballet's sometimes depict the Ramayana theme. In modern times the most popular medium for propagation and transmission has been the televised series of Ramayan, having access to most urban and rural population. Compact discs of recorded versions are often watched collectively during festive occasions. Most of all parents and elders orally transmit the story as examples of ideal behavior while chiding or instructing.

Each social system or historical period throws up its own variations on how patriarchy functions and how social and cultural practices differ resulting from influence of myths.

Gender plays a role in framing society, gender identities mesh with those constituted by caste, class, religion and sexual preferences, forming a set of arrangements that have evolved through history. According to V.Geetha , religious definition and interpretations claim that men and women have innate attributes that cannot be changed. That she explains is according to them, genital and physical differences between men and women imply

that they possess different qualities. Often, such definitions are traced back to the sayings of a God or Gods, and justified by pointed references to religious texts and customs. Almost all such observances declare women's bodies to be inherently inferior and sinful, and fit to be controlled by men. Or alternatively they claim men's bodies and souls to be the measure of humanity. That is, man is the norm, the rule. Woman is a derivation, and as such is included in man. Men are granted the power to define, interpret, judge and represent the world on their own terms, while women are to be defined, interpreted, judged and represented by men. The Ramayana story as interpreted in India exemplifies the above gender bias.

RAMAYANA IN THAILAND

Ramakien is Thailand's national epic, derived from the Indian Ramayana epic. Many versions of this epic were lost in the destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767. Three versions currently exist, one done in 1797 under the direction of King Rama I. The King even wrote several parts of the story as it is told today. This epic tale has had great influence on Thai literature, art and drama. It is a very important part of Thai life. The main story mirrors the Indian version Ramayana, but many aspects were changed to fit the Kingdom of Siam; the clothes, weapons, topography, and elements of nature, all have a distinctive Thai style in the *Ramakien*.

While Thailand is considered a Theravada Buddhist society, but the Brahman mythology derived from the *Ramakien* provides Thai legends with this myth and also represents the teachings to help one along the path to enlightenment, which is the goal of all good Buddhist.

Ramakien as shown within the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha also known as Wat Po (Wat Phra Kaew) is home to one hundred and fifty-three marble carvings mounted in a wall surrounding the temple and provides the world's best pictorial record of the story of the Ramayana (see Publications by Fishing Lines, August 2007). The stones are approximately

20" x 19". These stones were located on the innermost wall of the temple, below the main building. The monks gather in there every morning to pray, by respect and observe ritual together.

The most widely known version of the Ramayana is thought to have been composed over 2,000 years ago by an Indian poet named Valmiki who lived in roughly the fifth century B.C. Valmiki reportedly combined two sets of South Asian legends, northern Aryan tales about Rama, the prince of Ayudhya, and southern Dravidian tales about demons with supernatural powers. Oral versions of the Ramayana circulated in the Sanskrit language for centuries before they were written down by Valmiki and other writers.

Both Valmiki's version of the Ramayana and other versions spread beyond India into Southeast Asia through maritime trade during the first millennium C.E. Many Southeast Asians do not even know that the Ramayana was conceived and written in India. They assume it is a story created by their own ancestors, or given to their ancestors from the gods. In Thailand (formerly Siam), they call the epic the *Ramakien* and change the names of some of the characters.

Ramayana scenes are carved into ancient Hindu temple walls throughout both Indonesia and Cambodia. In several areas of Indonesia, versions of the Ramayana still are performed in live dances and in puppet theater, and the epic also is used as the basis for contemporary fiction and drama. Thus, despite its antiquity, the Ramayana's complex plot and characters still hold great relevance for contemporary Southeast Asian arts and artists.

Many early Southeast Asian Hindu kings identified themselves as Rama, and therefore as incarnations of the god Vishnu. All the Theravada Buddhist kings of the Chakri dynasty of Thailand take the name Rama. The currently reigning King Bhumibol of Thailand is known as Rama IX.

Of all the masterpieces of poetic genius, that have left their unerasable marks on the body of the world literature, none can surpass the great epic poem of the Ramayana whose tremendous influence

had, through many a dark century, regulated the life of religion, art and literature even in countries beyond the boundary of India. (Swami Satyanand Puri 1998)

The *Ramayana* is one of the most revered and adulated ideological base engendering value systems in young men and women in India. The *Rama* legend provides a model of male valour and honour and the *Sita* story that of female chastity, fidelity and self-sacrifice. In India *Rama* and *Sita* are still looked up as ideals and they form the foundation of the patriarchal monogamous family. Throughout the ages that have gone by, poets have essayed to immortalize their patron kings, but all their attempts only culminated in producing an imperceptible, though melodious, tone in the sweet music of literature. But the song that took its birth in an obscure cradle of human civilization and in the dim days of half-forgotten history is still vibrating in the literary music of countries as distant as Thailand. (Swami Satyanand Puri 1998).

Ramakien is the National epic of Thailand. Though it has derived from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, it has had an important influence on Thai literature, art and drama. Even though 93.2% population practice Buddhism but they actively follow the *Rama* story as it is a precious gift from their King's ancestors. While the main story is identical to that of the *Ramayana*, many other aspects were transposed into a Thai context, such as the clothes, weapons, topography, and elements of nature, which are described as being Thai in style. Although Thailand is considered a Theravada Buddhist society, the Hindu mythology latent in the *Ramakien* serves to provide Thai legends with a creation myth, as well as representations of various spirits which complement beliefs derived from Thai animism. According to Srisurang Poolthupya, the *Ramakian*, based on the main theme of Indian *Ramayana* epic, is a valuable Thai heritage. The main reason for the survival of the *Ramakian* are due to King Rama 1 and his successors' efforts to keep alive the *Ramakian* as literature, a performing art as well as a fine art. The *Ramakain* was composed to serve the past and present needs of Thai society: Buddhist,

social and political Thai traditions were relates of the life of *Rama*, an ideal king. The story frowns upon treason and other bad practices. (Srisurang Poolthupya,2009).

Even those who are still doubtful whether *Rama* was an historical king- the veracity of which no Indian will deny will undoubtedly agree that the *Rama* created by the pen of *Valmiki* does live and will go on living forever and ever to come. The Indian history abounds in sons as dutiful as *Rama*, wives as faithful as *Sita* and brothers as devoted as *Lakshmana*, yet their luster fades away even as the light of the star grows dimmer and dimmer before the silvery brilliance of the moon.. (Swami Satyanand Puri 1998).

Historical, mythological explanation of masculinity and femininity are diverse. Yet they are informed by a crucial epistemological and political principal; masculinity and femininity are not aspects of biology or physiology. Neither are they God-given. Instead they are parts of thoughts and action which human beings have constructed over centuries.(Geetha.V. 2006,51)*Ramayana* in India or *Ramakien* in Thailand is an example of such constructions created in history by men in authority to steer and guide the functioning in society as per laid norms.

ACCESS TO THE RAMAYANA STORY IN THAILAND

Most Thai people and especially women in Thailand believe that *Ramakien* in Thai has no influence on them as it is a classic tale accessible to only few who can study it as a curriculum or to those who can afford to view it as an art form in the live theater. They firmly assert that it is not a part of religion but a piece of Literature written by their dear king's forefathers. Contrary to this belief an empirical view of the researcher during the celebration of Thailand's beloved king 's 88th birthday witnessed the *Ramakien* being enacted through the '*Khon*' a Thai classical rendition of the *Ramayana* story through a dance form in the precincts of the

National Museum. This play of the dramatic form was seen and enjoyed by hundreds of Thai men, women and children not only from Bangkok but also from all provinces of Thailand. There was no restriction or fee for entry to the program. The program was a part of the tribute paid to the respected and much loved reigning monarch King Rama ix, through the 'Lighting the Candle' ceremony followed by vibrant fireworks, all for the long life



and good health of the King. The 'Khon' dance drama was again enacted within a weeks' time repeatedly by the sanction of the Prince who wanted to pay his tribute to his father the King through a well-planned state sponsored program called 'Bike for Dad'. The whole program including the 'Khon' the dance form of Ramakian was telecast directly through various T.V. channels throughout Thailand.



Fig. 1.1-The 'Khon' in progress during The Kings Birthday celebrations

The celebrations also include free entry to the National Museum and the Emerald Buddha Temple for five days. In the National Museum, hall number two (2) exhibited a Buddha temple surrounded by murals, paintings.

In common knowledge in Thai society, to summarize the Ramayana story briefly, Prince Rama is exiled from his rightful kingdom of Ayudhya for fourteen years because of a conspiracy by one of the elderly king's wives, who arranges that her own son will rule in place of Rama.

Rama's beautiful and perfect wife Sita, and his faithful younger brother Laksman, accompany Rama to exile. In the forest, Sita is abducted by a demon king named Ravana (called Tosakan in Thailand) who is overwhelmed by her beauty. Ravana takes Sita to his demon kingdom, the island of Lanka.

Rama and Laksman are aided in their attempted rescue of Sita by many powerful creatures and deities including the eagle king Sadayu, the bird deity Garuda, and the monkey demi-god Hanuman.

After many trials, arduous battles, false leads, and demon tricks, Sita is saved and the royal couple return triumphantly to rule Ayudhya. There is more trouble ahead, however. After the many years of separation, Rama doubts Sita's faithfulness and puts her through an ordeal of fire to prove her purity. As the Hindu gods witness from above, Sita passes all tests, including a later misguided effort by the mistakenly jealous Rama to kill Sita when she is pregnant.

The gods repeatedly prevent disaster by protecting Sita and her son who hide in the forest with a wise hermit. The hermit even creates a second twin son when the first one is temporarily lost. In the Thai version, Rama encounters his two sons in the forest and asks Sita to return to him. The gods say that Rama and Sita were sent to this world to create harmony, so there will never be peace on earth until the royal couple rectify their marriage. Ultimately, the whole family is reunited as the righteous rulers of the kingdom of Ayudhya.

The performing arts in Thailand are greatly influenced by the Indian epic Ramayana. Most of

these dance dramas have the Ramayana theme with Ram Sita as the main protagonists dancing in the



traditional Thai dance, as is evident from the images below.



Considering the importance and relevance of the Ramayana in Thailand, one would think that it must also influence the lives of women in Thailand significantly. Yet, how much influence does it bear on the economic, financial and educational qualifications of women and resultant social status is a matter of further study and research.

VALUE SYSTEMS CODED WITHIN THE RAMAYANA AND THE RAMAKIAN FOR MEN AND WOMEN

- 1) **Respect for Motherhood and for the mother figure;** the story elaborates in detail the need for women to have children as exemplified by the great penance and sacrifice held by Dashratha, the father of Rama to have his four sons *Rama, Lakshmana, Bharat* and *Shatrughan*. All the three mothers, Kaushalya, Kakeiye and Sumitra are treated with great respect and regard.
- 2) **Respect for elders;** is a value highly idealized as is seen in Lakshmana's and Bharat's behavior towards Rama their elder brother, Ram's behavior towards his

parents and other respected elder religious heads like saints and seers.

- 3) **Chastity** idealized in women; one of the major codes of the Rmayana is the virtuousness and purity of women in practicing loyalty to their husbands. Sita exemplifies this ideal, yet she has to pass through the test by fire to prove her innocence. She is chaste and pure despite her misadventure of being kidnapped by Ravana (Totsokan).
- 4) **Childbearing;** is an important reason or purpose of marriage. Though Rama and Sita did not have children for many years they were in exile yet Sita is expecting a child before she is again forced to live away from Ayothya or the Kingdom of Ram. An heir to the throne or the continuation of family name is important thus childbearing is an important aspect of marriage,
- 5) **Codes of warfare and militarization;** this code is specifically conspicuously highlighted and presented in all forms of the Ramakain in Thailand. It is present in the Indian Ramayan too but not as strikingly as in Ramakain in Thailand. It seems that the present military rule in Thailand is a

reflection of the idealization of warfare and soldierly in the Ramakain.

- 6) **Rama as the ideal King;** King Rama has been presented as an ideal King who can sacrifice everything for his Dharma, even his immediate family. Thus Dharma or duty takes precedence for the ideal king. According to Shastri Panduran V. Athavale, a noted social reformer, "It was not Rama who abandoned Sita; in reality it was the king who abandoned his queen. In the effective performance of his duty, he had to choose between a family and the nation. Rama sacrificed his personal happiness for the 'larger' national interest." In other words, Rama wanted to set a standard, a stainless example for his subjects and followers to look up to. The psychological havoc it may have wreaked on those dependent emotionally on him was of no consequence whatsoever. Thus often does the immediate family of a reformer suffer even though the nation as a collective may gain substantially. Mahatma Gandhi says in his article 'The Law of Suffering,' "Progress is to be measured in terms of the suffering undergone by the sufferer. The purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.
- 7) **Sita as an ideal wife ;** Sita sets a high standard as an ideal wife who stays unswerving in her loyalty and righteousness, no matter how undesirable her husband's response. Her refusal to perform a second agnipraiksha and her consequent reversion to mother earth is not merely an act of self-annihilation. It is a momentous and dignified rejection of Rama as a husband. Truly Rama may have deselected her as his queen in deference to social opinion, but it is Sita who rejects him in a personal sense as a husband. By this act does she emerge supremely triumphant. If the defining scale for quantifying greatness is the amount of suffering one has undergone, it is undoubtedly Sita who is the

clear winner. It is her dignified tolerance (sahan-shilta) and self-effacing silence, which may even be termed as weakness by many, that turns out to be her ultimate emotional strength, far valorous than any assertive aggression. Rightly therefore does her name always precede that of Rama (as in Sita-Ram or Jai Siya-Ram) in India.

- 8) **The reassertion of Patriarchy;** Patriarchy is 'the absolute rule of the father or the elder male member of the family' Patriarchy is thus the rule of the father not only over women in the family but also over younger and socially or economically subordinate males.(V.Geetha, *Patriarchy*,2007, 4),Even though Ram is exiled and cannot rule his kingdom , his brother Bharata does not sit on the throne , he keeps a pair of Rama's slippers on the throne symbolizing that the eldest male is the head of a family and subsequently that of a nation.The nation is like an extended family for the King and the people like his children who are of utmost importance.
- 9) **Husband revered as God;** Husband is equal to God for women in India as idealized through the Ramayana. It is the women's Dharma (duty) to take care of husband, fulfill his wishes and bear him children to continue his family name. Sita follows her Dharma by accompanying her husband to the forest in exile. He is an incarnation of God Vishnu and she is like Lakshmi Goddess who presses his feet.
- 10) **Imbibing masculinities and femininities;** *Sita* is the epitome of feminine beauty, chastity and grace. *Rama* represents valor , honor and bravery stereotype behavior for ideal men and women both in Thailand and in India.
- 11) **Control over women's sexuality;** Women who express their sexual desires are considered immoral, debauched women and must be punished as a deterrent. Thus

when Swaroopnakha makes advances at Rama and Lakshmana, he slits off her nose there by implying defacement or censure and ridicules her for her actions.

- 12) **Righteousness;** Ramayana exemplifies the spirit of righteousness to be practiced by the king. While the people must be loyal to him he must be an ideal king and must rule righteously, be firm and act with caution, ask advice from ministers and show appreciation to those who serve him well. The Ramakian teaches the kings as well as warriors and ministers. (Srisurang Poolthupya)

OVERWHELMING INFLUENCE OF KINGSHIP OF THAILAND OVER RAMAKIAN –ITS NARRATION AND PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN

The *Ramakian* is evolving and thriving in Thailand because of the Kings patronage. The Flag of Thailand has three colours representing Religion, King and Nation. The King is a strong institute in Thailand. Throughout the world kingships are diminishing away to give way to other forms of governance. Yet the concept of an ideal King who is a beloved of his people continues to thrive in Thailand. The same ideal is presented and reinforced in the *Ramakian*. The King who is the head of the state is like the patriarch or the father figure where his people are like his children. As Prof. Srisurang Poolthupya explains the Ramayana depicts ideals and presents Rama as God Vishnu incarnate, Thai rulers, thinkers and poets value the Ramayana story as it can inspire virtues and loyalty, as well as entertain people. The moral code of the Ramayana suits Thai society very well due to its inclusion of such values as respect for ascetics, parents and elders in addition to integrity and gratitude.

The Assyriologist Bernard Frank Batto explains the position of women in a "patriarchal" style of rule. All authority is retained in the hands of the king, who personally oversaw all operations or at

least personally delegated that authority as needed. Gerda Lerner in her book "*The Creation of Patriarchy*" suggests that the women's 'stand in' role is an aspect of earlier concept of kingly rule and believes that women's status and roles become circumscribed as the state apparatus becomes more complex. In Thailand too, the Queen, thus even though holding independent power in palace, temple etc., serves as a stand-in for the king when he is absent on warfare or diplomatic mission or unwell.

The cult of the God-king suggested in the Ramayana is stressed in the Ramakian. The king is god incarnate in the same way as Rama is Narayana incarnate in the Ramakian. Although Hanuman is depicted as a very powerful warrior he is loyal and submissive to Rama. After the end of the war with Thotsakak, Rama rewards Hanuman half the kingdom. However when Hanuman sits on the throne next to Rama Hanuman feels feverish and has a headache while his eyes hurt as if they have been pierced by arrows. He then realizes his lowly position and returns the throne to Rama (King Ramal, Book VIII, 1982, pg282)

The people follow the beloved king and moreover the traditional explanation as reflected in the Ramakian too focuses on woman's reproductive capacity and sees in motherhood women's chief goal in life. Women's maternal function is seen as a species necessity, since societies could not have survived and evolved into modernity without women devoting their adult lives to child-bearing and child-rearing, Thus the sexual division of labor based on biological differences is seen as functional and just. Thus a resultant explanation of sexual asymmetry locates the causes of male subordination in biological factors affecting males. Men's greater physical strength, their ability to run faster and lift heavier weight, and their aggressiveness cause them to become hunters, As such they become the providers of food for their tribes and are more highly valued and honored than women. The skills deriving from their hunting experience in turn equip them to become warriors. Man-the-hunter, superior in strength, ability and the experience derived from

using tools and weapons , 'naturally 'protects and defends the more vulnerable female, whose biological equipment destines her for motherhood and nurturance ,Finally, this biological deterministic explanation is extended from the Stone Age into the present day by the assertion that the sexual division of labour based on man's natural 'superiority 'is given and therefore as valid today as it was in the primitive beginnings of human society.(Gerda Learner,1986,16).

Thus the Ramakian also reinforces the role of men in society. Resultantly it constructs masculinities. The manner in which men talk in public and make public space captive to their speech; the associative meanings of masculinity inscribed in everyday speech and in forms of ritual recall such as proverbs and sayings, all of which uphold or celebrate men's ability to command and protect; the metaphorical linking of manliness and 'husbandary' in our languages, which makes it appear that men are given to tending, regulating and controlling resources and people; the celebration in verse and song of not only their valour but their virility as well; the affirmation of fatherhood and of male lineage which is not only a reflection of kin structures but also a staple of everyday speech; all these naturalize men's social power and authority and render them inalienable aspects of manliness.(V.Geetha,2007,137) The constant wars at the beginning of the Bangkok period mirror the constant wars between Rama and Ravana.Thai poets even add more war episodes into the Ramakian to teach caution, daring and war strategies. The victory over the evil enemy serves to encourage soldiers to fight and show bravery.(Srisurang Poolthupya).

INFLUENCE OF RAMAKIAN ON WOMEN IN THAILAND

The women in Thailand may not be directly influenced by Sita the female protagonist in the Ramakian but they follow the same feminine structures represented by the character Sita. The Ramakian in Thailand (as viewed and experienced by the researcher many times during the week through

'Khon' played as a part of the Kings Birthday celebration), had the character of Sita only as a catalyst to war and little role in the story itself. Furthermore unlike the Indian Ramayana the emphasis on the scene of 'ordeal by fire 'or proving her chastity is not exhibited. Unlike the Indian Ramayana the story has a happy ending with Sita reunited with Rama as the Queen of Ayothya seated on the royal throne along with the three mothers and three brothers on each side.

As related before the patriarchal norm is reinforced by the Ramakian story and the role of women is stereotyped. Thus we find that Thailand has very few women in the combat forces even though women exceed men in all other fields.Also there are very few women at the decision making levels.

The cotemporary popular media has often portrayed Thai women in fragmented images concentrating on two extreme strata of Thai society. It has popularized Thai woman as either being unusually progressive and emancipated,by citing examples of successful urban female executives and business women, or being oppressed, victims of prostitution. This dichotomy has been reinforced by academic studies which focus on only one or the other aspects of position of women in Thai society. The image of emancipated Thai women has been supported by impressive data on the almost equal participation of women (vis-à-vis men) in education and the labour force, and by their high visibility in the modern economic sector. (Darunee Tantiwiranond and Shashi Pandey1987,25).

From past to present , Thai women are not equally accepted in society. Women's role in society is often viewed as less valuable, and they are often deprived of equal social, economic and political rights.(http://www.gender.go.th/publication/book/survey_harassment) However, and despite a decrease, women's rights violations remain widespread. Because of the structure of politics, the economy, discriminatory social norms, values and culture which view men as the leaders, women continue to be the victims of stereotyping in Thai society. The views of the Thai society often

assimilates men as leaders and women as followers: women are often the ones doing the housework, including cooking and looking after the children. If women work outside their home, they also have duties at home. In some cases, women have to face difficult situations, such as polygamy. (2011, "Mental health of mothers working outside the home", 16 July 2012, Thailand0.

In the past, a Thai woman had to take care of her husband and be totally obedient to him. Most men in high society had several wives, the number of whom was considered an indicator of the husbands' socioeconomic status. An edict promulgated in 1861 stipulated that men had right to have several wives. No matter whether women were born in high or low society, they all had a lower status than men. Women in high society were protected by law better than those in the lower ranks. For example, though they were regarded as a possession of their husbands, their husbands had no right to punish them severely. However, compared with men, the ladies were still in a far inferior status.

On the other hand, ordinary women had to do house chores and work in the field since men at that time were required to leave home either to do labour or guard the capital for about 4-6 months a year. Thus when the husbands were out, their wives had to bear the burden of earning a living. They had to do farming, weave cloth for their family members and looked for some odd jobs to gain some income. Western influences were the most important factor that brought about changes in the role and status of Thai women.



Fig 5.1 Thai women in the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910)

In the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) who was the first to attempt to modernize his country, women were gradually encouraged to take part in social activities. This started in high society first. Educational opportunities were offered to women of high ranks.

In the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), Queen Saovabhangsri was the first woman in Thai history who was designated as regent and was assigned full authority to administrate public affairs during the king's visit to Europe in 1896. The queen proved herself to be able to work effectively like men especially in the aspects of women's status, women's education, and medicine. This was a good sign of the development of women's status.



Fig 5.2 King and Queen Saovabhangsri



Fig 5.3 Rama V King Rama VI

The first Thai monarch studying abroad was King Rama VI (1910-1925) who went to study in England in 1893 and returned home in 1903. The king had a chance to observe the advancement of women in the Western world. So he launched a campaign to win rights for Thai women, though it was limited to high society circles.

Several articles written by the king clearly indicated that the king was not satisfied with the then status of Thai women and felt that in a thriving society men and women should enjoy equal rights. Also, the king strongly expressed his view to correct some old beliefs, values, and traditions that made women inferior to men. The king once wrote: "Women are still much oppressed. For example, they are prohibited from having long hair (after marriage) for reasons of not looking neat... Some men consider

wearing short hair and keeping teeth black suggest the politeness of women. Women are also deprived of the right to associate with men...for the reason that if women obtain too much freedom, they will be spoilt."



Fig5.4 Laksami Lawan, the queen consort of King Rama VI, in *phasin* dress initiated by the King to improve Thai women's appearance

The king also propagated his idea about the proper qualities of Thai women in several literary works of his that women should have good manners, be able to take charge of household chores, and be good at cooking. At the same time, they should be well educated, sharp-witted, and responsible, and help their country. To improve women's status, the king set an example to other men by treating women politely like in Western culture and taking his fiancée to social functions.

Other activities that the king did for this purpose included:

- Promoting education without sexual discrimination by issuing the Primary Education Decree 1921 requiring all children from 7-14 years old to study in the schooling system without paying any fee.
- Setting up Benjama Raja Lai School in 1913 for training woman teachers.
- Improving women's looks and attire by having a campaign for women to wear long hair and *phasin** instead of *chongkraben*** and to stop chewing areca nuts so that their teeth would not be black.

The revolution in 1932 resulted in the change of political system from an absolute monarchy to

constitutional monarchy. The event had much impact on the social role of Thai women. The new constitution enabled women to enjoy the political right equal to men. Moreover, the government corrected the civil law to allow a man to have only one lawful wife.

Fig 5.5 and Fig 5.6



Left : Field Marshal P. Pibulsonggram, the third Prime Minister of Thailand who had the policy to raise Thai women's status
Right : Thai women wearing hats according to the policy of P. Pibulsonggram to lift Thai women's status to be equal to that in the developed countries

P. Pibulsonggram (1938-1944), who was the third Prime Minister in Thai constitutional monarchy and a field-marshal, showed his determination to raise women's status. It was stipulated in his policy to lift Thai women's status to be equal to that in the developed countries. He viewed that women had the capability to be quality citizens, they played an important role in the family and society, and they could help the country in wartime.

The systematic implementation of this policy by making campaigns and using media made his idea acceptable to the people of the country. The prime minister's policy then had a direct effect on high and medium-class women. Women associations were set up to study and solve problems of women both in the short and long run. (Thaiways, Status of women in Thailand, Vol12)

Gender norms in Thai society are one of the main sources of discrimination against women in the labor market. There is an idiom in Thai says that "สามีเป็นข้งเท้าหน้า ภรรยาเป็นข้งเท้าหลัง" which translates as "The husband is the fore leg of the

elephant. The wife is the hind leg”, implying that men are the leaders and women are the followers in Thai society. Traditionally, daughters are prepared to be mothers and followers while sons are prepared to be leaders and in the workplaces women are given second priority for education, on-the-job training and promotion (Jermsittiparsert 2008). Another idiom in Thai cautions the women saying that if they are not are not careful they may be like Sita who was a kings wife one day and abducted another day.

Sita represents the ethereal beauty whose renown impelled Ravana to abduct her. According to Dr, Pairoj, teaching in the National School of Drama, Sita must be very fair, of small stature, not very tall and very beautiful. There is a lot of emphasis on the beauty norm in Thailand and the industry catering to beauty products must gain a lot from this.

INFLUENCE OF RAMAYANA ON WOMEN IN INDIA

Influence of Ramayana in India The Ramayana is one of the most revered and adulated ideological base engendering value systems in young men and women in India. The Rama legend provides a model of male valour and honour and Sita story that of female chastity, fidelity and self-sacrifice. In India Rama and Sita, in their capacity as idealized social beings, constitute the underlying foundation of the patriarchal monogamous family. Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is the consort of the Hindu god Rama (avatar of Vishnu) and is an avatar of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and wife of Vishnu. She is esteemed as a paragon of spousal and feminine virtues for all Hindu women Sita is known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. Sita has been a much revered figure amongst the Hindus. She has been portrayed as an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, and an ideal mother in various texts, stories, illustrations, movies and modern media. The actions, reactions and instincts manifested by Sita at every juncture in a long and arduous life are deemed exemplary. Her story has been portrayed in the book *Sitayanam*. The values that she enshrined and adhered to at every

point in the course of a demanding life are the values of womanly virtue held sacred by countless generations of Indians. Symbolically, Sita is considered to be the child of the Mother Earth, produced by the union between the king and the land. Sita is a personification of the Earth's fertility, abundance, and well-being. In India, much of feminist study attribute discrimination, harassment against women to ideological conditioning. Pankaj K Singh and Jaidev in their paper 'Decentering a Patriarchal Myth' opine that it is seldom that ideologically neutral myths are constructed, sacralized and disseminated for legitimizing certain power filled practices, attitudes and ways of seeing. Ideologies are often aimed at naturalizing and even 'divinizing' a particular world-view. Like history, they are not easy to disown, even when they harm people. For without them, one feels culturally impoverished, strangely weightless and yet, with them one feels oppressed. Our myths can subjugate women as much as men can. The need for myths is as real for women as it is for men. Yet the situation is asymmetrical because while men have myths on their side, women have myths against them.



Fig 6.1 Rama's marriage to Sita in Indian Ramayana

The ideological myth of the Ramayana has for ages espoused Sita as the ideal for female behavior throughout India. Thus the qualities exhibited by Sita are considered the norm and any deviation results in condemnation and censure by society at large. The ideals of femininity and masculinity are built up in the psychological and physiological upbringing of a child to such an extent that despite contemporary education and logical study discrimination and secondary status of women is the norm.

The obsession with son preference, control over women's sexuality, violence against women, chastity- idealized, tested and reemphasized in women, where men are conditioned to display warrior like qualities to redeem family name and honour- are some of the values learnt by the unconscious absorbing of the epic tale of Ramayana by the men and women of India.

The methodology employed for such engendering is varied and diverse. The festival of Deepawali marks the culmination of Ramlila which is a ten day continuous, dramatized enactment of the epic Ramayana mostly in northern India. The epic is also widely read and recited in original Sanskrit text and varied translations in a number of Hindu homes in India. Temples dedicated to lord Rama often depict the story in pictures or sculptures lining the precinct of the outer hall of the temple. Classical dance performances and ballet's sometimes depict the Ramayana theme. In modern times the most popular medium for propagation and transmission has been the televised series of Ramayan, having access to most urban and rural population. Compact discs of recorded versions are often watched collectively during festive occasions. Most of all parents and elders orally transmit the story as examples of ideal behavior while chiding or instructing. Each social system or historical period throws up its own variations on how patriarchy functions and how social and cultural practices differ resulting from influence of myths. Gender plays a role in framing society, gender identities mesh with those constituted by caste, class, religion and sexual preferences, forming a set of arrangements that have evolved through history. According to V.Geetha

, religious definition and interpretations claim that men and women have innate attributes that cannot be changed. That she explains is according to them, genital and physical differences between men and women imply that they possess different qualities. Often, such definitions are traced back to the sayings of a God or Gods, and justified by pointed references to religious texts and customs. Almost all such observances declare women's bodies to be inherently inferior and sinful, and fit to be controlled by men. Or alternatively they claim men's bodies and souls to be the measure of humanity. That is, man is the norm, the rule. Woman is a derivation, and as such is included in man. Men are granted the power to define, interpret, judge and represent the world on their own terms, while women are to be defined, interpreted, judged and represented by men. The Ramayana story as interpreted in India exemplifies the above gender bias.

CONCLUSION

Women's empowerment is central to the success of the development at any country level, and status of women in a society is true indicator of its level of development. Yet women are given a secondary status throughout the world because of historical and political factors but there is also a considerable responsibility of the mythological scriptures and they continue to influence the status and economic well-being of women in contemporary times too. Gender knowledge is necessary to balance the strong and controlling flow of information from mass media in disseminating knowledge that is biased and discriminatory against women.

The above statement is very relevant for India where cultural ethos and societal norms have restricted the potential of women and resultant wide-ranging level of growth/happiness of families.

Myths often reassert gender roles through religion and culture. Since women are delegated to home and reproduction they are often denied education and work opportunities for want of mobility outside the home. Each social system or historical period throws up its own variations on

how patriarchy functions and how social and cultural practices differ resulting from influence of myths.

It will be interesting to know and reveal how the mythological story of Ramayana influences and impacts women in Thailand considering their unique circumstance of having Hindu myths as a part of culture rather than religion. How the influence further impact women's education and empowerment and policy making [Women Studies Department in Thailand cites many other sources of reliable research offering strategic and practical recommendations for policy makers], decisions in law making etc though greatly influenced by the past and yet change is a gradual phenomenon.

The Ramayana in India and the Ramakian in Thailand have a very significant influence though it may not be perceptible at the surface level. The impact is layered under innumerable folds of cultural constructs and societal pressures that epitomize the current system of patriarchy and accept women as subordinates. Even though the Ramayana can be accessed through various mediums in Thailand even to the ordinary citizens especially during the Kings Birthday, the role of female characters is not only insignificant it is minimal. For example Sita is the only female character shown and that too as a catalyst to war. No other attribute of Sita is evident by the 'khon' rendition though there is much emphasis on war and war strategies and unity and loyalty among the Kings subjects. Thus the retelling of the story emphasizes masculine and court behavior rather than feminine conduct. The story of Rama also emphasizes the supremacy of the King as a patriarch who demands respect and adulation of the common public through his ideal behaviour. Yet this construct also defines the underlying aspect of subordination of women in the Thai society. In India the Ramayana is one of the most revered and adulated ideological base engendering value systems in young men and women in India. The Rama legend provides a model of male valour and honour and Sita story that of female chastity, fidelity and self-sacrifice. In India Rama and Sita, in their capacity as idealized social beings,

constitute the underlying foundation of the patriarchal monogamous family.

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