

# *The* Renunciation

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Born and raised in India, she was deeply shaped by the ancient stories and rich cultural heritage of her homeland. *The Renunciation* is her debut novel, illuminating the quiet strength of Sita—the guiding force behind the Ramayana’s turns of fate—as seen through the eyes of a believer and a daydreamer.

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## Praise for *The Renunciation*

‘Like a kaleidoscope, where a slight twist of the hand can totally change the picture, Agrawal’s *Ramayana* changes our perception in seemingly tiny ways. The impact is as dramatically different as the best kaleidoscope.’

—**Mallika Sarabhai**,  
recipient of the Padma Bhushan, legendary classical dancer,  
actor, and social activist

‘This tenderly retold story of the earth goddess Sita and her twin sons Luv and Kush addresses the strength and vulnerability of her legacy. The foundational epic text of the *Ramayana* presents the complex moral dilemmas of the compulsions of kingship and the personal and domestic. Pragma Agrawal’s narrative evokes Sita’s resolute path through love and marriage, exile and abandonment.’

—**Namita Gokhale**,  
Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author,  
acclaimed writer, and co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival

*The*  
Renunciation

Pragya Agrawal



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To my Guru, Shrii Shrii Anandamurtiji

*Tava drawam' jagadguroh, tubhyam- eva sam'rpaye*  
Your wealth Guru of the universe, unto you only I  
surrender





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## Author's Note

The *Ramayana* is one of the oldest foundational epics of the Indian subcontinent, echoing through generations. For me, it first echoed in my grandmother's resonant voice, where Sita appeared as a figure of grace and quiet strength. In my mother's telling, her story arrived with questions—how a woman so resilient and deliberate came to be remembered as submissive? Years later, their voices found their way through me in *The Renunciation*.

Somewhere, the injustice to Sita haunts all our collective memory. From *Valmiki's Ramayana* to countless later retellings, writers have sought to fill the silences left by the great sage. In the mesmerising brilliance of Valmiki's verses, Ram shines with celebrated qualities—god, king and ideal—and it is difficult not to be helplessly drawn to him. Yet when that god subjects his wife to one of the most controversial trials in the history of literature, the conversation unfortunately collapses into one of unquestioning reverence or discomfiting silence. It is reduced to a matter of devotion over dialogue, a dulling of inquiry, a slow slide into acceptance.

Painfully, Sita occupies no more than ten percent of Valmiki's text. Though glimpses of her reasoning, defiance and presence of mind are shown, she remains largely relegated to the margins—her absence as telling as her presence. Perhaps if

it weren't so, posterity wouldn't have cast her as mainly dutiful but rarely decisive.

Her appearances largely serve the glorification of Ram—his duties, his trials, his suffering. Even the credit for their monogamous marriage is attributed to Ram alone, though Sita's extraordinary brilliance must have also contributed; inspiring devotion from Ram to make a striking departure from the norms of polygamy. We have shaped her as a pious figure, a devoted wife and mother, but rarely as a woman of beauty—though it must have been phenomenally striking, for a war of such magnitude to be waged for her.

Though my retelling is mainly based on *Valmiki's Ramayana*, I approached my research beyond the limits of an 'authentic' version to truly understand the sentiments around Sita. Across centuries, she has appeared in many lights: as the slayer of Sahasra Raavan in *Adbhuta Ramayana*, or as Mandodari's daughter in *Uttarapurana*, *Javanese Serat Kandha* and *Adbhuta Ramayana*. *Ramayana* too differs, where in some retellings Luv and Kush capture the horse and defeat Ram himself. The fact that the text has been captured differently in songs, ballads, sculpture, dance and other mediums, proves that *Ramayana* has never been a single, rigid story; rather a living one, shaped by time and imagination, each reframing the tale according to its own perspective.

Even Valmiki's text is not free from debate. Scholars question whether the *Uttara Kanda*, which narrates Sita's renunciation, was a later interpolation. If so, then how striking that the epic which ends in the *Yuddha Kanda* with a vision of Ram and Sita ruling happily for ten thousand years, begins in the *Bala Kanda* with their sons, Luv and Kush, reciting the epic to an estranged Ram, who listens intently, mourning the wife no longer by

his side. Some suggest that parts of the *Bala Kanda* too were later additions. Yet it is only when we set aside such scholarly dissection that the true essence of the *Ramayana* emerges as a treasury of moral learning, revealing human virtues as clearly as our failings.

*The Renunciation* is my attempt to illuminate Sita without ever diminishing Ram. He is a god—but so was she. They were both heroes, navigating their destinies with grace and conviction. Some may say theirs was a different era, governed by a different set of values. But for them it was a shared world—where they made different choices—each guided by their own personal sense of duty.

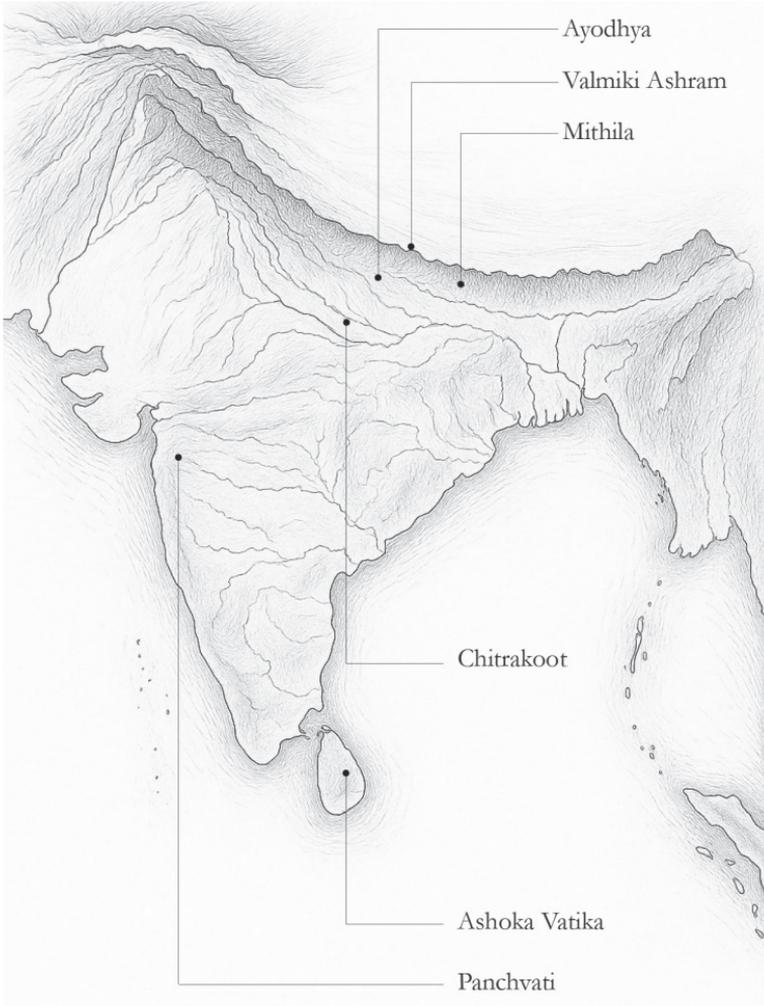
Here, it becomes important to reiterate that their love towards each other was absolute; but when we look at their separation, we inadvertently end up pitting them against each other, when contrarily, they both stood united in their vision of honouring the greater good.

That spirit of nuanced understanding is what I seek to bring; an appeal to approach our epics with reverence but remain open to questioning, and to finding answers offered by the very characters we worship as gods.

Sita's final act should not be reduced to one of private despair or even personal redemption, but an empowered visionary choice, establishing her blazing legacy as no less enduring than Ram's. Let us not remember her as someone who was renounced—for the truth of the final renunciation was altogether different.

It is time to pause and look back at Sita—not simply as a consort, but as a woman who dared to think beyond her times. Writing this book allowed me to see her, know her and love her—entirely, in her own light.

# Map of Key Sites



## Major characters

**Sita:** Divine princess of Mithila; wife of Ram.

**Ram:** Divine prince of Ayodhya; revered for his righteousness and sense of duty.

**Luv and Kush:** Ten-year-old twin sons of Sita and Ram; raised in Valmiki's hermitage.

**Sage Valmiki:** The composer of the Ramayana; guardian of Sita in his hermitage.

**Raavan:** Mighty demon king of Lanka; revered for his knowledge, feared for his pride.

**Laxman:** Ram's devoted younger brother; companion through the years of exile.

**Shiva:** Ascetic god, venerated by all, especially Raavan; bearer of the mighty bow Pinaka.

**Maharaja Janak:** Philosopher king of Mithila; Sita's father.

**Maharani Sunaina:** Queen of Mithila; Sita's mother.

**Maharaja Dasharath:** Powerful king of Ayodhya; father of Ram.

**Maharani Kaushalya:** Eldest queen of Dasharath; mother of Ram.

**Maharani Sumitra:** Middle queen of Dasharath; mother of Laxman and Shatrughan.

**Maharani Kaikeyi:** Youngest and favoured queen of Dasharath; mother of Bharat.

**Manthara:** Kaikeyi's shrewd maid.

**Bharat:** Son of Kaikeyi; younger brother of Ram.

**Shatrughan:** Twin brother of Laxman; devoted to Bharat.

**Urmila:** Younger daughter of Janak; sister of Sita, wife of Laxman.

**Mandavi:** Cousin of Sita; wife of Bharat.

**Shrutakirti:** Cousin of Sita; younger sister of Mandavi, wife of Shatrughan.

**Sage Naarad:** Celestial wanderer; messenger between heaven and earth.

**Sage Vishwamitra:** Revered sage, fierce of temper; guide to Ram and Laxman in the Tataka forest.

**Sage Sarbhanga:** Hermit of Dandakaranya; revealed to Ram the deeper purpose of exile.

**Sage Suteekshna:** Forest hermit; guide to Ram, Sita, and Laxman on their southern journey.

**Sage Agastya:** Revered sage; gifts Ram and Laxman celestial weapons.

**Anasuya Devi:** Revered ascetic woman; offers Sita counsel, gifts and blessings.

**Sage Atri:** Revered sage; husband of Anasuya Devi.

**Surpanakha:** Raavan's fiery sister.

**Khara:** Raavan's brother.

**Vibhishan:** Outcast brother of Raavan; unlike him in spirit.

**Trijata:** Chief demoness in Ashoka Vatika.

**Hanuman:** Forest warrior, devoted to Ram; blessed with the boon of giant leaps.

**Jatayu:** Aged vulture-king; heroic friend of Dasharath.

**Guruma:** Aged matriarchal figure in Valmiki's hermitage.

**Vasuki:** Spirited eight-year-old girl in Valmiki's hermitage.



*Part One*

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## I

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# An Enduring Labour

‘Ma, tell us the story of the princess who wasn’t born from her mother’s womb,’ urged the ten-year-old Luv.

‘Oh yes, the princess born from no womb at all,’ chimed in Kush, his excited twin.

Sita shook her head, and her eyes creased with warm crinkles.

‘What, Ma! Isn’t this how you always begin?’ Kush’s ears tinged with sudden heat.

Listening to stories had become a part of the nightly ritual. To settle down after a long day of lessons, the boys spread out an old reed mat, which, worsened by holes, was hardly much respite from the cold mud floor. Although winter was in its final stretch, the forest still lugged a significant chill. Outside on the verandah of their humble cottage, a fire burnt and the children crouched to splay their hands in its warmth.

‘Move aside a bit, I need to warm the oil.’ Sita placed an earthen bowl by the firelight. The boys smiled, their eyes glinting under its amber glow. But what caught her attention was the flicker over their high cheek bones and full lips. *How*

*uncanny their resemblance to their father. A father they knew nothing about.*

‘I am not repeating that story!’ retorted Sita, as she picked up a log from the pile of woods by the wall and plonked it into the fire. Seeing that it too had seared with red heat, she headed indoors to fetch the cotton blankets from the alcove. ‘You heard it yesterday only. Why don’t I tell you the story of the god who created rain or the one who created the world, including himself?’

‘Ah no!’ protested Luv following his mother inside. ‘Those aren’t half as exciting. Please, Ma, we want to listen to this one only.’

Sita hesitated, trailing her fingers over the blankets. Not because it wasn’t a good story, but unbeknownst to them, it was her own story. Now known by a new name, Vandevi, her once wondrous past had been reduced to nothing more than a fable over which she had no claim. No claim either to her name, Sita. Suppressing a wistful smile, she dropped the blankets over the mat and settled down.

On the branches outside, a *myna* called for attention, its hoot distinct in the sticky silence. Tucked in the dense solitude of Chitwan forest, life was sparing here. It was here, in Sage Valmiki’s hermitage, that she had given birth, and to her surprise, it had been to twins. *If only her husband knew.* But Ram, the infallible king of Ayodhya never came looking. For her—or his heirs.

‘Here Ma, the oil has warmed enough.’ Kush carried the bowl inside. ‘Is it okay if Ma oils my hair first?’

‘I don’t mind,’ replied Luv, pulling her by the arm, ‘as long as she lets me rest my head on her lap until then.’

Sita patted Luv’s cheeks and unfurled Kush’s top bun. The

soot-black hair tumbled down his round shoulders. The fire crackled in the quietude like it too waited in keen eagerness for her to begin the story. And this time when she did, it wasn't with the princess that she began, instead with the childless man to whom she was proffered as a blessing.



On the eastern frontier of the great big Jambudweep was the small kingdom of Mithila, ruled by the virtuous Maharaja Janak and Maharani Sunaina. Never were the rulers seen without a smile on their face, for their lands were rich and their people happy. There was no threat from enemies, no woes in court or malice in their subjects' hearts. With everything so perfect, it seemed the king and the queen had everything that their hearts desired. Everything but a child.

Irrespective of the couple's ardent efforts and numerous prayers, blessings from pious saints, or performance of great *yajnas*, Maharani Sunaina's womb never swelled with promise. It was only when most of her hair turned grey that her tears finally dried. They must accept the ordinance of fate, the king coaxed her. Was not the prosperity of their kingdom a blessing any less?

But fate, in its scorn found no joy in their inviolable contentment. It made the very object of the king and queen's solace, their kingdom, its next prey. That monsoon, when the fields were sown with crops and flower-strung swings hung down the branches in quiet anticipation, the clouds gathered, swelled, bloated and coagulated, and then, capriciously drifted away without a single drop touching the earth. Mithila managed, for the ground was pliable from prior dampness. It offered them produce, however stunted or half-sweet. The subjects thought it only a matter of time for abundance to delude their lives

again but the following monsoon brought no luck either. The sky remained dazzling. In fact, it spewed angry lines of orange. No wonder that the stunted crops then perished too.

Distraught at the vulnerability, the king decreed for the royal granaries to be opened to his starving subjects. They gathered by the heavy gate with pots in their hands and hopes in their hearts, waiting for the ornate wooden doors to creak open. When it did, they saw not the gold of wheat, or the white of rice, or even the multi-coloured promises of different pulses, but an assurance of their very life for the next few years. Gratitude rolled down their faces as the grains tumbled down their hands in a long-forgotten feeling. But they were the righteous king's subjects—weak in body yet strong in spirit—and took only what was absolutely essential.

That frugality proved to be a good thing, for it didn't rain the following year, or the year after, or, for that matter, the one after. Seven monsoons later, Mithila was afflicted with acute dryness. Hot days turned hotter, unusual for the pleasantly cool kingdom in the foothills of the great mountains. Warm air bellowed to the skies, thudding, and beseeching it to break down and pour, but no clamour could shake the sky's deaf obstinacy.

As for the earth, left ignored for too long, it started swallowing its own bounty. There started a series of disappearances: first the delicate fields and the resilient orchards, then the redolence of the air, followed by the cooling ponds, lakes and rivers. With these, happiness disappeared, and so did honour when the earth was left bereft of even a humble cover of dry leaves. Its surface broke out in reprehensible lines. The lines cracked, and the cracks deepened, and a jagged maze of ugly webs took over. The wind blew unfettered, scraping across any oddly surviving stumps of the once majestic trees. It whistled through sorrowful

carcasses, adding to the dissonant cries of jackals and vultures. The happy, thriving public squares, marketplaces, courtyards, all became deserted in fear of its wild madness, as it blew down long alleyways, thumping down closed doors and windows. Stepping out was a punishment, no less when the earth enticingly swayed and danced under the light of the vacillating sun, deceiving everyone with hollow promises of water.

Despite it, the ghostly skeletons of the subjects never complained. Their trust in Maharaja Janak remained unscathed, even with the rapid dwindling of the royal granaries. They tied their bellies to shrink their hunger, and in croaky, parched voices consoled one another that their benevolent ruler would somehow deliver them from this plight.

Their unwavering faith was precisely what haunted Maharaja Janak more than any tragic afflictions of famine. It kept him awake at night, as he lay in uncomfortable pools of sweat, well past when the lamps would have burnt low and suffused his nostrils with the pungency of charred wick. If ever he managed to fall asleep, nightmares would rouse him up with a shiver, a scream or the deplorable lament of his crushing incapability. That pattern continued for years, until there broke one such morning when the king rose instead with a vision.

As usual, the air in his chamber sweltered even though the sun had barely broken through.

‘The earth still has bounty!’ he said, turning to his wife.

‘Huh! Maharaja?’ Maharani Sunaina mumbled as she wiped sleep off her eyes.

‘The earth still has bounty and is willing to offer. In fact, it is more than eager—’ he looked her in the eye, ‘I heard the voice right in my ears. So clear.’

‘What voice?’

‘The voice. Clear as crystal. Beseeching me to come and claim it.’

‘I don’t follow—what kind of bounty?’

‘Exactly what I am wondering! What could the earth’s bounty possibly mean? Might that be...its yield? Its crops? Wait—is it hinting me to...plough?’

Maharani Sunaina looked on, dumbfounded.

‘Yes! Oh yes! It’s quite likely prodding me to struggle—plough the barren fields. Yes, that’s one thing I haven’t done. Yes, I am a warrior, but isn’t the fight against nature this time? That can’t be won with weapons. No, no. A plough. Most definitely a plough!’ The early light of the day glimmered on his face, and the king appeared strangely broad despite his frail self.

‘The famine may be a design of nature. But so am I. It’s time to test whose will is more tenacious.’

Maharani Sunaina gulped. This sounded like the unfurling of a million imagined manifestations. ‘Then hesitate no further! Let’s make it happen!’ Taking the drape of her saree, she wiped the sweat off the king’s forehead and clapped thrice. A few attendants shuffled in.

‘Maharaja is going to plough the fields. Let’s begin this endeavour with a sacrificial *yajna*. Inform all ministers and priests to start preparations. And open these windows. The stuffiness is unbearable.’

That command only had to be passed for everything to change. The attendants stared back at their king; a breach of courtesy, but today everything was pardoned. Soon, the jingle of anklets and excitement filled the air, as one by one, heavy curtains were pulled back and tied. Hungry sunlight, kept at ward for long, leapt in at the first opportune moment. It drenched the

black granite floor in intermittent patches of gold and stirred the dust, which glittered and glimmered ethereally; and finally, after a long time, the rigidly frozen palace began to thaw.

By mid-day, a sacrificial pit was readied out in the open fields and chants of a hundred and eight priests rose in the air. They fed the sacred fire in turn with *ghee*, *karpour*, *naivedyam* and scented *abootis*. Throngs of people assembled on either side; little children perched atop their father's shoulders, ladies, young and old, with the border of sarees drawn as humble shades across their heads.

The prayers lasted a *prahar*, and Maharaja Janak took a vow not to take an ounce of water until he had managed to prove his mettle—such fast not to weaken his body, rather bolster his resolve.

A tinkling of bells was heard, and all heads turned towards the pair of spotless white bulls, the king's accomplices in the task. Their horns shimmered with golden sheath—a testament that any hindrance to their path would be met head on. When the plough was mounted over their backs, and heavy that it was, it made the bulls lose their balance and buckle. But that was only for a moment, before they shot their defiant knees back up, ready despite the harsh day, and despite the sweat quivering down their flaring noses. Today, every plopping sweat was going to be a humble contribution towards their dry state.

Maharani Sunaina stepped forward and venerated the bulls. She applied them with a vermilion *tilak* and offered a sweet drink of roasted gram and jaggery which they greedily slurped. After petting them in gratitude, she made her way to the Shiva temple across the field.

Finally, Maharaja Janak stepped behind the bulls and pulled their strings in readiness. A little distance behind him, stood

other farmers, an army replete with vision and plough; and with determination fuelled by the incessant chanting of priests.

‘Come, let’s do this together.’ The king patted the bulls, and they bucked and willed their burly bodies forward. But try as they might, the buried plough did not even budge. The earth had parched into a fury of solid rocks. The bulls heaved and hmped, but every effort resulted in vain.

Maharaja Janak looked up at the heavens for mercy. Sweat prickled in the folds of his arms. It ran down his forehead and blurred his vision. With crushing pain, he realized that bringing forth the change would take a measure of his own. So, he stepped in front and sat between the bulls, ready to surrender his all. With one knee bent and the solid brace of plough balanced over his shoulders, he started to rise. The relentless earth held on to its intractable grasp. The king strained. A deep guttural sound escaped his clenched teeth. His veins throbbed, his eyes turned bloodshot and his shoulders bulged painfully. The crowd shrieked and cheered, but every sound was dulled to his being, which remained in a deep state of worship.

With tremendous might, he raised one foot in the air and landed it forward. And finally—with a clamour much anticipated—there appeared the first rip.

A collective sigh rose from the sides. Followed by a deferential silence. In only a matter of time the shock was picked up by loud cheering, thumping, cries, and the sound of conch shells. Even the sound of prayers notched higher, and everyone’s focus started to feed that one common purpose.

‘Huh! Did you see?’—‘Our king made it possible’—‘Our saviour made it possible!’ Tears rolled down everyone’s disbelieving eyes.

The king went on to drag another foot. Then another.

Slowly and steadily, markings of a furrow began to appear. Crust started to break loose, dust started to rise and along with that, what started to rise was indefatigable hope. Inspired by his infectious determination, more and more farmers followed suit. And just like that, the face of the lustreless earth began to be embroidered, with a sight so beautiful—that pattern with furrows—a long-desired reminder of prosperity.

What had lain dormant inside was at last brought back to splendidous glory. As the earth tumbled, so did the sky; it rumbled ever so vaguely, without distracting anyone's attention just yet.

*Thwack!*

That extraneous sound made the bulls freeze mid-air. They turned towards their benefactor; eyes marked with caution.

'Are you tired?' the king stroked them. 'You are doing so well, so well. Not long to go, I promise.'

But the unusual glint by their hooves caught his attention too. He placed down the plough and squinted. There was a bright glare. He started to dig with bare hands. First cautiously, then frantically, and eagerly, and ever so captivately.

The shape revealed further.

*A pot!*

*A golden pot! Out in the field?*

His heart thudded, hurrying him with unexplainable urgency. He lifted the pot; scraped off the mud. It filled his nails, scratched his palms, but he didn't care. Carefully, he untied the red cloth covering the mouth.

A child!

His eyes widened with shock, and he peeped closer. Therein, lay an infant girl, squirming, squinting to the light falling over her beautiful face. How was it even possible? Were

his eyes deceiving him? How was he to discern any sense out of this.

But never have miracles and blessings gone hand in hand with reasoning. They are simply rewards to be graced without questioning. So, with trembling hands, the king gently drew the child out into the world of light, into the world of emotional bondages, and into the world of joy and suffering.

‘Why has the king stopped?’—‘What has he found?’—‘Do you think it is some kind of treasure?’—‘Is it indeed a child in his arms?’ The denizens peered from the distance. They had witnessed the most bizarre happening of their lives; as well as the most blessed.

The child’s fists were shut tight, her skin was soft and pearly, and with her feet all curled up in a fetal position, it seemed to suggest she might have been lying inside for quite a long time. Could the voice in the dream have belonged to her? Was it she who urged the king to come and claim her? Soft tufts of deep black hair framed her head. Her eyes seemed black too but it was difficult to tell as she kept blinking, still adjusting to the newfound brightness. She wanted to be secure; she needed warmth, and let out a wail that snapped the king from a grim past to a promising future.

The fact that she demanded loosened a smile over his face. He brought her close; and she snuggled, brushing her soft little head on his beating heart. The king himself let out a great gasping cry—one of gratitude for his blessed fate, and one of disbelief for his blessed fate. She looked up at him, tiny eyebrows arched in a puzzled frown, then closed her eyes and snuggled back unaffected.

By then, the crowd had turned delirious with happiness. Finally, Maharaja Janak saw his kingdom rejoicing; at long last

he saw them dancing, frenzy with excitement, that made him aware of his own slow self. It felt like the contentment of a lifetime spooling out of that single moment.

Meanwhile, the sky too, started to darken, not in gloom but with jubilation. Cottony shapes, out of nowhere started to stretch over the clear Mithilan sky. They were the long-awaited clouds that reverberated and rippled. Streaks of celebratory silver light rushed across in jagged lines in a wondrous display of ecstatic beauty. And finally, after seven long years of immense patience and prayers, unbridled joy burst through. It ran down the heavens, as well as everyone's eyes.

The earth drank hurriedly. It drank greedily; drank all the water the sky could offer to quench its long impossible thirst. With it, the air cooled, and mingled with an intoxicating smell of wet mud to please the senses.

The king suddenly became aware of the delicate child in his arms. How could she not complain getting wet like that! Wasn't her tolerance extraordinary! He stretched his silken drape over the infant, nodded something to her, and rushed to the temple to meet his wife.

The steps leading up the temple had turned slippery. Despite the loud pour, the queen sat with her eyes closed and rolled the *rudraksh* prayer beads feverishly, like it was on the very grace of her prayers, the rains depended. Their drought thirsty Mithila needed all that water, and more, and nothing would make her stop, not even the gentle tap on her shoulder.

Only when the king placed the child on her lap that she opened her eyes. It was with a flash. She could not utter a single word, yet a thousand questions spilled out at once.

And to all those thousand questions, her husband answered with a single vehement nod, and said, 'Sita.' He took her by

the arms, 'Look, our Sita. Mother Earth has relented. She has blessed us with this child.'

The queen sat agape. Slowly she gathered the squirming child to her cheeks, feeling her soft, warm head. The child reached out with her little fingers and touched the queen's lips. Everything stopped, apart from Maharani Sunaina's swelling heart which pounded loudly in her chest, filling her entire being with unbounding maternal love. Her bosom ached, and in an inadvertent act of miracle, the golden elixir started to flow freely.

It was true that Sita wasn't born from her mother's womb—instead from a deep-seated desire, answered in the most sublime manner. While nature gives at least nine months for most mothers to sink into the realization, it was impossible to understand the state of Maharani Sunaina, who transitioned through this exultation in a fraction of a moment. As for Maharaja Janak, Sita was more than just a daughter. If it wasn't for her, he would never have realized the limitless potential of his own self.

And so, like any gruelling labour which preludes sacred sanctifications of birth, Sita's happened to be much longer, more arduous, more testing. For her blessed arrival, evidently not her mother, certainly not her father, but the entire kingdom of Mithila heaved, and heaved for seven long years, eventually to see her arrive and miraculously reverse their fates.

The pleasing winds which until now had been bringing in fine sprays of rain stopped; and the night sky, suitably clear, bejewelled itself with the twinkling of stars. However, no changes could break the stupor of Maharaja Janak and Maharani Sunaina. For them, time remained in limbo, as together they lay in an eternal state of deep embrace, with their daughter, their blessing, their bounty—their Sita.



## 2

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# Crushing Conundrum

In Sita's hand was a bowl of paste, made from grinding soaked rice. She dipped a finger into the slurry, and with assured strokes painted a fresh *alpana* onto the mud floor. This time, she drew a creeper hugging the three steps of her frontal verandah. Clustered over were dainty white flowers—the scented *raatrani*. For Sita, there were no flowers quite as cherished as the *raatrani*. After putting the finishing touches, she placed the bowl aside and leaned back; not quite expecting the commotion that followed.

'Uh-oh! Watch out, you two!'

But her warning came too late. The bowl was already toppled, and the verandah was blotched with white feet marks.

'So sorry! We are ever so sorry, Ma,' said Kush, visibly flustered.

'Here, let us clean it for you.' Luv seized the wet cloth off her hands and started to wipe. It only made matters worse.

'You know it wasn't our intention,' Kush lifted her chin and added in a placating manner, 'You will pardon us Ma, won't you? If nothing else, they will at least make up for a comforting reminder in our absence.'