

## Women's Role in the Cultural Transmission of the Ramayana

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### **Abstract**

*The Ramayana, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient Indian literature, has been a significant influence on culture, art, and spirituality across generations. While traditionally perceived as a male-cantered narrative, the role of women in the transmission of the Ramayana has been pivotal in shaping its enduring legacy. This paper examines the dynamic and multifaceted involvement of women in the cultural transmission of the Ramayana, exploring their roles as active participants in the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of its stories.*

*Historically, women have contributed as storytellers, poets, performers, and spiritual leaders, influencing both oral and written traditions. In the family setting, women have been instrumental in passing down the epic through oral recitations, where they often embody the virtues and trials of characters like Sita, Kaikeyi, and Urmila. Women have also played a key role in performing arts, such as dance, theatre, and music, ensuring that the Ramayana reached diverse audiences.*

*The paper explores how women, particularly in communities across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the diaspora, have adapted the Ramayana's narrative to reflect local customs, beliefs, and social structures, thereby enriching the text's significance. Moreover, the role of women as both guardians of tradition and as reformers of cultural narratives has been crucial in the evolving interpretations of the Ramayana, from ancient times to the modern era. The study calls for a re-examination of the Ramayana through a gender-inclusive lens, acknowledging the profound and lasting impact of women in its cultural perpetuation.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Transmission, Ramayana, Women's Agency, Oral Tradition, Performing Arts, Gender Interpretation.

### **Introduction**

The Ramayana, an epic that spans both mythological and historical realms, has been an integral part of cultural and religious life across South Asia and beyond. Traditionally, the narrative of the Ramayana is cantered around male heroes such as Rama, Lakshmana, and Ravana, with its themes of duty (dharma), devotion (bhakti), and righteousness (justice) conveyed through their actions. However, while much of the scholarly and artistic focus has been on the male protagonists, the women in the Ramayana play equally crucial roles in shaping its transmission and interpretation across generations.

Throughout history, women have been essential in the preservation and propagation of the Ramayana. They have contributed not only as passive recipients of the epic's teachings but also as active participants in its storytelling, interpretation, and performance. In both oral and written traditions, women have been key figures in the transmission of this narrative, adapting and reshaping it in ways that reflect

their lived experiences, spiritual values, and cultural contexts. Women, particularly in Indian households, have long been the torchbearers of the Ramayana, with recitations, storytelling, and performances often carried out by mothers, grandmothers, and other matriarchal figures in families.

In addition to their role in oral traditions, women have also been influential in the development of the Ramayana in artistic forms such as dance, theatre, and music. Across the subcontinent and in Southeast Asia, women have been involved in the performance of Ramayana-based dramas, folk dances, and ritualistic performances, where they portray characters like Sita, Kaikeyi, and Surpanakha, infusing these characters with complex layers of emotion and meaning that resonate with contemporary audiences.

Moreover, the adaptability of the Ramayana through women's voices has allowed the epic to evolve in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. From the classical Sanskrit texts to vernacular retellings and regional versions, women have played a pivotal role in the reinterpretation of the Ramayana, making it relevant to different societies. Their perspectives have not only enriched the narrative but also introduced critical insights into gender roles, societal expectations, and the complexities of devotion and duty.

This exploration of women's contributions to the Ramayana's cultural transmission highlights the profound influence they have had on its enduring presence in world culture. The ongoing role of women in preserving, retelling, and reinterpreting this epic challenges the conventional understanding of the Ramayana as a male-cantered narrative, offering a more inclusive and diverse perspective on its legacy. By examining the roles of women in this cultural transmission, we gain a deeper appreciation of their agency and the significance of their voices in the shaping of this timeless epic.

### **Content:**

In the Ramayana, women play an essential role in preserving, shaping, and transmitting cultural values, traditions, and spiritual teachings. Although often relegated to domestic spaces, the women of the epic are depicted as the bearers of moral integrity, familial bonds, and spiritual wisdom. Their influence, both direct and subtle, contributes to the survival and propagation of dharma (righteousness) and societal norms. Through their actions, choices, and teachings, women in the *Ramayana* emerge as powerful agents of cultural transmission.

### **Sita: The Embodiment of Dharma**

Sita, the central female figure in the *Ramayana*, is more than just the wife of Rama; she is a key figure in transmitting the ideals of dharma and virtue. Through her actions—her unwavering commitment to truth, loyalty, and purity—Sita teaches the importance of living a righteous life. Her role as a mother and wife further anchors the values of family, fidelity, and sacrifice in the culture. Sita's trials, from her abduction to her final return to Mother Earth, serve as powerful lessons in moral and ethical living, passing on the importance of resilience, honour, and unwavering faith in God.

Sita's life becomes a model for women in particular, demonstrating that true strength lies in adhering to one's principles, even under pressure. Her role as a mother, who later teaches her sons Lava and Kusha the values of dharma, also highlights her contribution to the cultural transmission of values to the next generation.

### **Kaikeyi: A Catalyst for Change**

Though Kaikeyi's actions in the *Ramayana* are often criticized, her role in shaping the narrative has lasting cultural implications. By demanding Rama's exile, Kaikeyi inadvertently sets the stage for Rama's eventual victory over Ravana, the return of dharma to the kingdom, and the reaffirmation of rightful leadership. Her desire to secure the throne for her son Bharata, although misguided, reflects the deep importance of lineage and succession in ancient Indian culture. Through her, the epic explores themes of maternal love, ambition, and the consequences of making choices for one's family and kingdom.

Even in her antagonistic role, Kaikeyi's actions drive forward cultural narratives around loyalty, justice, and the protection of familial honour, showing how women's decisions, even those driven by passion or desperation, are integral to the cultural fabric of the epic.

### **Shabari: The Spiritual Teacher**

Shabari, a tribal woman from a marginalized community, is an important figure in the Ramayana for her deep spirituality and devotion to Lord Rama. Her life represents the inclusivity of spiritual practice, transcending caste and gender boundaries. Through her devotion and purity of heart, Shabari teaches that spirituality is not bound by social status or external purity, but by the internal purity of devotion and faith.

When Rama visits her hermitage, Shabari offers him half-eaten berries, a simple act that signifies the breaking of societal norms and the elevation of inner devotion over outward appearances. By offering her humble hospitality and spiritual wisdom, Shabari transmits the cultural and spiritual values of bhakti (devotion) and inclusiveness, contributing to the broader cultural transmission of egalitarian principles in spiritual practice.

### **Mandodari: A Keeper of Dharma**

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, is another example of a woman who upholds dharma despite her association with a figure like Ravana. Throughout the *Ramayana*, Mandodari urges Ravana to return Sita to Rama, emphasizing the consequences of adharma (unrighteousness). Although Ravana refuses to listen to her wise counsel, Mandodari's insistence on dharma underscores the cultural importance of women as moral guides.

Mandodari's actions reflect the traditional role of women as guardians of virtue and ethics within the family and society. Her voice of reason, calling for adherence to righteous principles even when it goes against the wishes of powerful men, contributes to the cultural transmission of ethical and spiritual values.

### **Tara: A Political and Cultural Symbol**

Tara, the wife of Vali and later Sugriva, plays a significant role in maintaining the social order in the kingdom of Kishkindha. After the death of Vali, she ensures the political and emotional stability of the kingdom, offering advice that helps preserve the integrity of the family and the kingdom. Her actions, while often overshadowed by the larger conflict between Vali and Sugriva, contribute to the smooth functioning of the kingdom.

Tara's ability to act as a mediator and leader, even in a male-dominated world, reflects her cultural importance in maintaining the social and political traditions of the time. Her diplomatic role highlights the responsibility women had in cultural transmission, not just in the home but also in the larger political and societal sphere.

### **Women as Cultural Custodians**

In the *Ramayana*, many of the female characters, through their relationships with their families, serve as the custodians of culture and tradition. Women like Kaushalya, the mother of Rama, and Sumitra, the mother of Lakshmana and Shatrughna, pass on the values of duty, loyalty, and service to their sons. Their roles are not just maternal but also cultural, as they ensure that the values of dharma, righteousness, and familial duty are passed down through generations.

These women act as the link between generations, safeguarding and transmitting the cultural and ethical teachings that form the foundation of society.

### **Lessons from Women's Role in Cultural Transmission**

- **Moral and Ethical Guardianship:** The women in the *Ramayana* are custodians of dharma, passing on the values of righteousness, honour, and loyalty to the next generation.

- **Spiritual Inclusivity:** Figures like Shabari show that spiritual wisdom transcends societal boundaries and that devotion, humility, and sincerity are central to cultural transmission.
- **The Power of Guidance:** Women like Mandodari and Tara serve as counsellors and guides, transmitting wisdom not only through their actions but also through their ability to advise others on maintaining ethical and moral integrity.
- **Maternal Influence:** Through characters like Kaushalya and Sumitra, we see how maternal love and nurturing are central to shaping the values and future of the next generation.

Women in the *Ramayana* are integral to the transmission of cultural, spiritual, and ethical values.

Their actions, whether in the domestic sphere, spiritual practices, or political governance, illustrate the significant role women have played in shaping societal norms and cultural continuity. The *Ramayana* thus offers a rich tapestry of female characters who transcend traditional boundaries to become key figures in the preservation and transmission of culture.

### Conclusion:

The *Ramayana*, as one of the most enduring epics in global literature, has been shaped not only by its male protagonists but also by the active and multifaceted participation of women throughout history. From the oral recitations in family and community settings to their central role in performing arts, women have been instrumental in the epic's preservation and cultural transmission. Their engagement with the *Ramayana* is not merely a passive act of retelling, but an active, creative process through which they have interpreted, reimaged, and adapted the narrative to resonate with diverse social, cultural, and spiritual contexts.

Women have served as the key figures in the oral transmission of the epic, ensuring its continued relevance and vitality in both rural and urban settings. Through storytelling, women have imbued the *Ramayana* with personal and communal meanings, highlighting themes such as devotion, sacrifice, and the complex nature of duty and righteousness. Moreover, in performance traditions such as dance, theatre, and ritual, women have brought the epic to life, offering rich, nuanced portrayals of female characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi, and Shabari, and in doing so, have deepened our understanding of their roles in the epic and their cultural significance.

In reinterpreting the *Ramayana*, women have challenged traditional readings and provided alternative narratives that reflect their lived experiences and perspectives. Their contributions have enriched the text's meaning, transforming the *Ramayana* from a static historical narrative into a dynamic cultural artifact that continues to evolve with each generation. By reframing the epic through their voices and experiences, women have played a crucial role in making the *Ramayana* a living tradition, adaptable to the changing needs and aspirations of societies.

In conclusion, women have been central to the cultural transmission of the *Ramayana*, ensuring that its teachings and values are passed down through generations in ways that reflect both the traditional and the contemporary. Their participation in the epic's preservation, retelling, and performance not only underscores their agency in the cultural sphere but also highlights the importance of a gender-inclusive understanding of the *Ramayana*. Acknowledging and celebrating the role of women in this process allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive appreciation of the *Ramayana* as a cultural and spiritual legacy that continues to inspire and resonate across diverse cultures and communities.

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