

In Search of Lord Rama's Sister

My favourite period of the year, the ten days of Sree Sree Durga Puja or Navratri, had commenced. Just a few days after Mahalaya, I paid a visit to the Ashram. During a conversation with Sadhvi Sanyuktanandamoyee, she mentioned that earlier in the week, Sree Sree Maa was talking about King Dasaratha's daughter, Shanta Devi. "King Dasaratha's daughter!!" I asked, taken quite by surprise. "Yes, Maa mentioned that Lord Rama had an elder sister, about whom there is reference in the Ramayana, though most people are unaware of her existence", replied Sanyuktanandamoyee and continued saying, "From the way Sree Sree Maa talked about Devi Shanta, it seems to me that there is more about this matter that needs to be unearthed." This was a bit too intriguing to ignore especially because earlier investigations of some of Sree Sree Maa's passing remarks have unveiled peculiarly interesting tales. On return I looked up the Internet, my easiest and quickest resource for such matters. A world of information opened up and it took quite some time to digest the inter-related events that accompanied this simple reference to Shanta Devi. I used to think that the Ramayana - notwithstanding its profound philosophical and yogic implications - has a fairly simple storyline of a few principal characters as compared to the Mahabharata, which is well-known for the complexity of its cast and the intricate threading of its plot. This side-tale of the Ramayana has all the trappings of a typical tributary of the Mahabharata - apparently obscure, yet carrying a unique element that bridges a hitherto unseen gap - thereby providing a fulfilling richness to the overall story.

The first and obvious source to look for was Valmiki's Ramayana. When I located the specific reference, I was truly amused. From my childhood I had heard that the dacoit-converted-sage, Maharshi Valmiki, through his clairvoyance had 'seen' the Ramayana before the leela of Lord Rama was actually enacted on earth. Thus his epic was apparently written prior to its physical occurrence. Now in the Bala-Kanda (or Episode of Youth), we see Sage Valmiki referring to the great sage Sanat Kumara's prediction of the way the Lord will be born!! Knowing that the Sri Rama Leela was a result of the sadhana of Brahmarshi Vashishta (as enunciated in the Yoga Vashishta Ramayana, a classic in self-realization) -

who is known to have 'directed' the Ramayana's divine play - it now seemed to me that every enlightened one except probably the principal actors knew what was going to happen. I began to concentrate on the actual text where the King Dasaratha's minister Sumantra talks to his king.

It goes as follows: "O great King, let me tell you what has been stated by the ever-benevolent great sage Sanat Kumara, the finest among the divine ones. Kindly listen to these favourable words of immense value (of the sage) - 'In the Ikshvaku dynasty will be born in future a virtuous king called Dasaratha, who will be firm and true to his words. He will forge a long-standing friendship with the king of Anga (assumed to be the region of modern Assam), who in turn will have a daughter who brings great fortune, named Shanta. In his quest for a son, the renowned King Dasaratha will approach the king of Anga, who is called Lomapada (or Romapada) and request him as follows: - O virtuous soul, I am childless. I request that the husband of your daughter Shanta performs and presides over the ritual to be conducted for the sake of progeny in my dynasty. - Hearing this request, the benevolent one (King Lomapada) thinks in his mind and then heartily agrees to send the husband of his daughter (Shanta) - the enlightened self-realized one - who has the ability to endow sons through the power of his yagnas (sacrificial rituals). Anticipating the impending visit of the virtuous Brahmin (the husband of Shanta) at the behest of the father-in-law (King Lomapada), King Dasaratha gets rid of the weariness of age and becomes full of youthful energy at the thought of successful accomplishment of the yagna, thereby feeling inwardly blessed. The great king - desirer of glory, knower of virtue and lord of the people - beseeches the finest Brahmin, sage Rishyashringa, with folded hands to conduct the yagna for progeny as well as for his eventual heavenly abode along with all the desire-boons that kings from all quarters of the earth will receive through the holy ritual that the eminent Brahmin shall accomplish. In future, there will be born four sons to King Dasaratha, who will abound with valour, enrich the reputation of the distinguished dynasty and shall be renowned among all beings.' Thus narrated the divine sage, Rishi Sanat Kumara, to other sages in the previous Yuga."

This initial reading decoded some of the mystery

but added some more to it. Most of us know about the Putra-kameshti yagna performed by the deer-horned sage Rishyashringa, from which a divine being emerged with a bowl of Param-Anna (sweet rice porridge) consuming which the queens of Dasaratha gave birth to the four princes. So Shanta Devi was the wife of sage Rishyashringa!! But she appears to be the daughter of King Lomapada of Anga? How could she be Rama's sister? Surely there was more to it. So I continued reading and, in summary, it contained the following: -

Hearing from his minister (Sumantra) and after consulting and taking the consent of his Guru (Sage Vashishta), the delighted King Dasaratha proceeded with his entourage of ministers to the kingdom of Anga to meet Rishyashringa Muni and personally place his request. There he found sitting beside his friend (King Lomapada), a radiant Brahmin - resplendent like the ritual fire - whom he made no mistake to recognize as the peerless Rishyashringa. King Lomapada greeted his friend Dasaratha with traditional puja and explained to Rishyashringa his old friendship with the king of Ayodhya. Rishyashringa too followed his father-in-law in paying his respects to the descendant of the great Solar Dynasty. Dasaratha stayed for a week as a royal guest after which he requested his friend - "O lord of the subjects of Anga, may your daughter Shanta come over to my kingdom along with her husband to perform the great deed." King Lomapada agreed. His son-in-law too acceded to become Ritwik (chief priest and conductor of the sacrificial ritual) of the Yagna with the condition that he needed his wife alongside with him as co-Ritwik, which was accepted. King Dasaratha returned to Ayodhya with Rishyashringa and his wife. In Ayodhya, Sage Rishyashringa was received by Dasaratha and his people as royally as Indra had led the great Vamana Avatara into the heavens. The sage was worshipped as ordained in the Shastras (scriptures). The spiritual greatness of the couple was seen all over. Wherever the sage and his wife went, the place glowed and became fulsome in their radiance. Inside the palace chambers when Shanta went in to meet the royal women, the ladies of the palace were delighted at the homecoming of their daughter, Shanta - the embodiment of Mahalakshmi or Divine Prosperity.

Now I had got to the point which mentioned Shanta as being the daughter of the kingdom of

Ayodhya. Also her presence as co-conductor of the famed Putra-kameshti sacrifice was not known to me earlier. Lazy as I am, deciphering the Ramayana Sanskrit with my background was getting more and more difficult. So I took the easier option of searching the web knowing that the results may be a bit fuzzy in terms of authenticity. What was revealed was fairly interesting. I relate many aspects to highlight little tit-bits which were not known to me earlier -

Among the major events in the life of King Dasaratha is an encounter with none other than Ravana, the Lord of Lanka. As the news of Dasaratha's fame spread far and wide, it reached Lanka and made Ravana jealous. He sent messengers to the court of Dasaratha asking him to accept Ravana's suzerainty and pay homage or else face the prospect of war. The angered Dasaratha apparently shot off arrows and asked the messengers to return to their homes and find that the gates of Lanka would be locked by the arrows he had shot. Humiliated at this defeat, Ravana took an alternative path. He performed severe austerities to appease Lord Brahma and as a boon sought that Brahma should never bless Dasaratha with the gift of a male child. (It is also possible that Ravana, being a renowned sadhaka himself, knew of the possibility of Lord Rama's birth in Dasaratha's family and was trying to avoid the inevitable, like he did in the case of Devi Sita.) The first child born to Queen Kaushalya was a daughter. She was named Shanta. Legend goes that Shanta was taken ill and Dasaratha was told by wise men that she would not become well unless he gave her away in adoption to one who would treat her and bring her up like a divine child. Other stories mention that wanting a son as a first child and heir, Dasaratha handed over his daughter to his friend, King Lomapada of Anga, who too was childless. It is also mentioned that Shanta fully recovered through constant service and love of Lomapada and his wife. For long thereafter Dasaratha remained childless. It was much later that Dasaratha knew from his minister of the earlier proclamation of Sage Sanat Kumara about how his own daughter, who along with her husband, would be instrumental in providing him divine assistance to get his heir and be rid of the so called 'curse of Ravana'.

Now to me, the question was - Who was Rishyashringa, the sage whose spiritual prowess could overcome Brahma's boon to Ravana and pave the way for the descent of Lord Rama? How did Shanta

Devi get him as her husband? Here are some answers I found -

Among the children of Maharshi Kashyapa were two brothers named Prabhandaka and his younger brother Vibhandaka. Vibhandaka left home early for his education. After several years of hard study he returned, much to the joy of his elder brother, who had by now married. But apparently Prabhandaka's wife found this new entrant to be a burden to her family. Noticing her displeasure, a dejected Vibhandaka left home to live alone amidst animals and birds in the forest, on the banks of the river Kaushiki Devnadi, performing severe penances. As per legend, a heavenly maiden (Deva-kanya) called Swarnamukhi - daughter of Bhaga-deva, pre-eminent among the celebrated twelve Adityas or Solar Deities - who for some reason was cursed to live the life of a doe, went to Lord Brahma for relief. She was told that she would be free once she gave birth to the son of a sage. One day, while Vibhandaka was taking bath in the great lake, he saw the apsara Urvashi passing by. Captivated and mesmerized by her unparalleled beauty, in a splitting moment of uncontrolled infatuation, Vibhandaka's heart fluttered and his mind became wayward. Through a momentary loss of self-restraint, his semen was automatically released into the waters of the lake. The cursed doe happened to drink this water, conceived and gave birth to a divine male child. It is therefore mentioned that Rishyashringa, or Ekshringa - meaning the horned-rishi or the one-horned, respectively - was born of a doe, and so carries with him the myth of the unicorn. In any case, he was a divine child of great promise. The child was left in the lone guardianship of his father since both Urvashi and the doe, now freed of her curse at the birth of Rishyashringa, immediately left for their original abodes. Vibhandaka therefore became very disillusioned of women and brought up Rishyashringa in the forests, in the complete seclusion of any other human company (except his father Vibhandaka) and trained him in severe tapas. Glowing in brahmacharya, steadfast in self-realized wisdom, powerful through penance, gentle in demeanour - the wonder that was Rishyashringa - was endowed with such supreme powers of control over nature that he seemed magical. His divinity was unquestioned. He continued to live near his father in the jungle. In the meanwhile, in the home of his parents Shanta too grew up in a chaste manner. She is known to have travelled far up to the

Uttaranchal Himalayas to a place known as Shiv Teerth (or pilgrimage of Lord Shiva) in order to perform penance for having one as divine as Lord Shiva as her husband. However, in the meanwhile, misfortune struck King Lomapada. In a split moment of greed, he tricked a pious Brahmin of his deserved prize and changed a large diamond which was the man's due to a much smaller one. When the man came to know, he was very unhappy at this behaviour of his king. The whole Brahmin fraternity was annoyed and boycotted all functions of the king. Without the performance of suitable yagnas as is expected from a virtuous king, Lord Indra's curse befell Lomapada and being the ruler, his kingdom suffered. Rains stopped and there was drought. Famine approached. Lomapada panicked and asked for advice from ministers, elderly and wise men. He was told that nature can only be turned around if one could bring a divine person like Rishyashringa to his kingdom. Such are his powers of spiritual goodness that wherever he goes he brings with him the bounty of plenty. Immediate efforts were made to induce him through requests of ministers or enticements of delightful maidens, beings which Rishyashringa saw for the first time in his life. Seeing the spiritual fire that the sage emanated and especially fearing the rage of his father, they returned unsuccessful in their attempts. Even Lomapada's soldiers returned empty-handed. Finally a veteran harlot thought deeply and then offered to send her intelligent daughter using a deceptive trick of leading the sage into a 'Boat-Ashram', especially created for the purpose, and bring him to Anga. Seeking permission of the king the lady ventured off towards the sage's arena in the 'Boat Ashram'. (Some sources say that Shanta also went along to bring the sage to Anga.) She went to Rishyashringa when his father Vibhandaka was away and beseeched the sage with humility to come to the 'Boat-Ashram'. The unthinkable happened. Rishyashringa followed her into the Boat-Ashram which immediately sailed towards Anga. As soon as they crossed the borders and the sage's holy feet touched the soil of the kingdom of Anga, weather changed, and by the time he entered the palace, rains showered copiously. The king was overjoyed. In gratitude for all the goodness and glory that the magical deer-horned one brought with him he offered the sage his daughter Shanta's hand and his kingdom to rule with him. Thus was solemnized the marriage of Shanta and Rishyashringa - as if the soul

of prosperity had found his true shakti. Through this communion the powers of the sage increased manifold and he soon became capable of changing fortunes, to the extent of being able to overturn the pronouncements of Lord Brahma himself. Sage Vibhandaka was initially very annoyed. But finally when everything was explained he calmed down and blessed the couple with all his heart. He asked them to stay on in Anga and help Lomapada till they bore an appropriate heir for the kingdom.

What happened to this wonderful couple after the Putra-kameshti Yagna? Where do we find their legacy today? -

It is said that after a child was born to them and handed over to King Lomapada to subsequently rule the kingdom, Sage Rishyashringa and Devi Shanta returned to the forest. They served their aged father, Sage Vibhandaka with great devotion till the old sage merged with the Infinite. The couple then went southwards and spent the rest of their lives in divine contemplation. The place where Sage Rishyashringa meditated till his last days was subsequently called Rishyashringagiri, Shringapura, Shringagiri and is now known as Sringeri. Finally, when the time came, Sage Rishyashringa entered mahasamadhi. As he left his mortal coil, it is said that a lighting spark emanated from him and entered into the Shiva-Linga that he worshipped and was in union with. This Linga, called Rishyashringeshwara, can be seen even today in the temple at Kigga, a village about 10 km from Sringeri. The Linga that we see today in Kigga is ancient and resembles a Rudraksha. It has a Shringa (horn) on the head. It is said that the left part of the Linga represents Shanta Devi. Even today, when there is drought in the area, it is said that worshipping Rishyashringeshwara brings rain. This amazing occurrence has apparently been observed and documented several times. Shanta Devi's Samadhi is also located in Kigga. There is another Shiva-Linga called the Malahanikareshvara Linga. This was worshipped by Sage Vibhandaka and the one into which he disappeared in the end. This was brought by Rishyashringa when he came south and the Linga is located on the summit of the hill, known as Malahanikareshvara Hill, in the centre of present Sringeri. Legend goes that, centuries later, when Adi Shankaracharya was travelling in that region, a pregnant frog was in labour on a heated rock on the banks of river Tungabhadra. Shankaracharya was surprised to see a snake open

its hood and offer shade to the suffering frog. He immediately decided that the place, where even natural enmity between creatures was replaced by love and compassion, was indeed eminently suitable one for establishing his very first monastery. This place subsequently became famous for the establishment of the Sringeri Sarada Peetham by Adi Shankaracharya and his foremost disciple Sureshwaracharya.

One question still lingered in my mind. Who are these couple? They are definitely not ordinary. We all discussed at length and then turned to Sree Sree Maa for help. She remarked, "From ancient times, the holy land of India has shone in the spiritual light of illuminated sages and their wives. Since those times several women have performed severe penance and were often on equal footing with their more well-known husbands. However, the lives of these illustrious women have not been as well documented as their famous sage husbands. We hear of some of them like Sati Anusuya, Arundhati, Gautami, Ahalya, etc; yet very little is known about them and their spiritual capabilities. Only a few rare glimpses are seen here and there. For example, among the many great sons of sage Vashishta, do we ever hear of his elder daughter Pundarika, who was possibly as equally accomplished as his celebrated sons if not more? Do you know of Vishwabara Rishi, another highly qualified woman sage? Also in those times, many kings gave their daughter's hand in marriage to some rishi or muni. How much do we hear about the lives and sadhana of innumerable such princesses who left their homes to live in the hermitage of their sage-husbands? Once in a while we hear of a Savitri or Sukanya. But there were so many of them. A society cannot become great unless it has pious women who through their special kind of spirituality form the foundation of the race, be it in fortifying their husbands or in nurturing the spirituality of their children. Devi Shanta was one such unique woman of that era. Like Arundhati was to Vashishta, Lompamudra to Agastya and Damayanti to Nala, so was Shanta to Rishyashringa - his true soul-partner. Rishyashringa himself was a special creation of the divine. They were a unique couple." She stopped. We all kept looking, waiting for more.

Sree Sree Maa continued, "Every Bhagwat-Leela (Divine play) in this universe carries with it deep spiritual knowledge. The Ramayana is no exception. Through the tapasya of Brahmarsi Vashishta-deva and his great Rishi Mandala (circle of sages), Lord

Vishnu descended onto this mortal world as Purushottama (the Supreme Purusha or Godhead) to demonstrate the expression of the Supreme Soul (Atma-Rama) within the individual being (Jiva-satta). Along with him descended the Supreme Goddess's power in the form of Devi Sita, symbolizing the divine force of Kulakundalini, the universal energy source. The leela presents a complete anthology of self-realization. Interpreted from this inner viewpoint, Maharshi Rishyashringa and Devi Shanta have a unique and significant place. Shanta is a part-embodiment of Mahalakshmi. She is the daughter of Dasaratha and Kaushalya. Dasaratha (or 'Chariot of Ten') symbolizes the worldly embodiment or vessel made of the five elements and ten principal chakras. Kaushalya or ('The Dexterous One') represents the inherent force or power that skillfully maintains and nurtures the Soul-Being (atma-satta) within this embodiment. Prior to the descent of the Supreme Soul (Atma-Rama) in the form of the Individual Soul (atma-satta) into the chariot-vessel of the physical body, the supreme force that imparts the power of pristine self-consciousness to the Atma-satta thus aiding its descent (and also subsequent ascent to self-realization) is the self-consciousness-illuminated, calm, divine, supreme Mahashakti Shanta (or 'The Calm Steadfast One'). That is why Shanta is born as the daughter of Dasaratha and Kaushalya before the birth of Lord Sri Ramachandra. From the yogic viewpoint we note that the Eternal Supreme (Paramatma) manifesting in the form of Lord Rama represents the descent of the Supreme Soul (Atma-Rama) within the vessel of the Individual Soul (Jivatma). Maharshi Rishyashringa is the form of 'Ekalinga' - a representative of Paramshiva, the Supremely Liberated Soul. Naturally he receives Mahashakti in the form 'Shanta-sree Shanta' symbolizing the 'Wealth of Spiritual Steadfastness' as his wife - resulting in the equal-union of Shiva and Shakti - the ideal combination for direct divine acts. That is why during the Putra-kameshti yagna both Rishyashringa and Shanta jointly conducted the sacrifice and invoked the holy fire, Agni-deva. That is, in order to divinely embody the Paramatma (Supreme Soul), we observe the following through the yoga of the Putra-kameshti yagna - from the Vishuddha Agni (Purified Sacred Fire), representing the Mahat-Tattwa (Fundamental Creative Elements or Principles)

emerged the Param-Anna (Blessed Food) representing the Amrita-Virya (Nectar-Semen) of Divine Life. It was after consuming this Param-Anna that Dasaratha's wife Kaushalya conceived the Paramatma-Satta (Supreme Being) in the form of Sri Rama - that is, only after the being nurtured by the Amrita-Virya from the Agni of the Mahat-Tattwa was the Atma Rama's Divine Ten-Chariot Embodiment created."

This was breathtakingly illuminating - stamped by Sree Sree Maa's authentic style. But our thirst has a special element of curiosity and I knew that while revealing so many things, Sree Sree Maa was trying to conceal many other aspects, which are more personal. In one quiet moment, when for a few minutes I found her alone, I directly asked Maa, "You are talking so deeply about the life of Devi Shanta. It now seems to me that she was one of your embodiments. Isn't it?" Maa smiled and replied, "Mahashakti takes many forms, with different shades, for a variety of purposes. To accompany the Lord's leela, she has to take multiple forms simultaneously. For example, in Sri Krishna Leela you find Radha, Revati and Draupadi. Likewise in Sri Rama Leela, other than Sita you had Shanta, with Devi Arundhati being there anyway. They manifest different perfected qualities that are necessary to balance the leela and its movement." I was immediately reminded of Sachi Mata and Devi Madhavi in Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's life and Rani Rashmoni and Mata Saradamoni in Sri Ramakrishna's life. Maa continued, "Also this cleaning of the womb by a divine force prior to the birth of an avatar is commonly seen to happen. You can observe this in the birth of Sri Krishna and Sri Chaitanya-dev too." I again recalled that similar events had occurred in the lives of our Sree Sree Maa and Sri Sri Baba. Sree Sree Maa summed up saying, "With due permission, many sparks of Mahashakti have been taken the main source to form individual embodiments and have become shakti-sattas of other great sages, thereby enabling them to achieve perfected completeness in divine fulfillment. Sage Rishyashringa is one eminently eligible divine persona who received such a spark. There are many others, but do not ask me about that now."

Sri Partha P. Chakrabarti, Her Blessed Child
References: *The Valmiki Ramayana and other online sources.*