The Web of Dharma: Sita's Trial by Fire and the Ramayana on the Internet[1]

by Aaron Rester

South Asian communities, particularly in the diaspora, are becoming among the most "wired" in the world. Numerous web portals, online marketplaces, and news and culture sites have arisen to serve these communities on the World-Wide Web. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the traditional narratives of South Asia have begun to appear on the Web alongside virtual bazaars and matrimonial ads. However, little work has been done on the effects that this fledgling medium has had and is having on the way that people relate these narratives. This paper will seek to provide some small remedy for this problem by examining the ways in which a specific episode of the Ramayana[2] -- Sita's trial by fire -- is portrayed on a number of different web sites. I will examine the interplay between the medium, particular narratives, and the larger traditions to which they belong, in an attempt to understand not just the ways in which different people tell different versions of the same story, but also the ways in which entrance into a new medium can affect a narrative tradition.

[1] In this paper, I will use the words "internet" and "web" fairly interchangeably, in order to reflect common usage; in fact, the World-Wide Web is just one means of interacting with the giant network of computers that make up the Internet.

[2] I use the unitalicized "Ramayana" to refer to the Ram-katha tradition as a whole, rather than to a specific version of the story.

The Fire Test in Valmiki[3]

The most wdiely-known (though least often read) version of the story of Rama and Sita is the Sanskrit epic attributed to the sage Valmiki, composed some time around the beginning of the Common Era. As the first full written account of the story, Valmiki's *Ramayana* has become authoritative. Its influence is cited by nearly all later versions, even when these significantly transform the events or the apparent meanings of those events conveyed in Valmiki, and despite the fact that most people who appeal to Valmiki's version have never read "the original" in Sanskrit.

Sita's trial by fire occurs in the Yuddha-kanda, after the *rakshasa* armies have been defeated and Ravana has been killed. Rama summons Sita to him, but instead of the expected joyful reunion, Rama speaks to her "with anger deep in his heart,"[4] challenging her chastity and renouncing any ties with her, "for when Ravana saw your captivating, divine body, he would not have held back for long when you were dwelling in his own house."[5] Sita's reaction is one of shame and embarrassment. Bursting into tears, she pleads her innocence and declares that Rama has misjudged all of womankind "because of the conduct of other individual women."[6] She instructs Lakshmana to build a pyre for her: "Destroyed by false accusations, I cannot live [*jîvitumutsahe*]; abandoned in an assembly of people by my husband, who is no longer pleased by my virtues, the only possible thing for me to do is to enter the Oblation-bearer."[7] Uttering an oath ("As my heart never wavered from Raghava, so may the fire, the witness of all people, protect me"),[8] she enters the fire.

At this moment, the gods descend from heaven to remind Rama of his divine

[3] I have consulted two versions of Valmiki's text for this paper: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's translation of the fire ordeal in *Hindu Myths* (New York: Penguin 1986), pp. 198-204 and an edition of the *Ramayana* edited by Ravi Prakash Arya, featuring the Sanskrit text and English translation by M.N. Dutt (Delhi: Parimal Publications 1998, Vol. III), pp. 349-357.
[4] O'Flaherty, p. 198.
[5] O'Flaherty, p. 200.
[6] O'Flaherty, p. 200.
[7] O'Flaherty, p. 201.
[8] O'Flaherty, p. 201.

nature as an avatar of Vishnu, and to chastise him for behaving like a "common man."[9] Rama responds that he knows himself only as a man, and asks Brahma to explain to him who he really is. After Brahma's explanation, Agni rises up and places Sita on Rama's lap, declaring her chastity and purity: "[S]he never gave a thought to that Rakshasa, for her inner soul had gone to you. Accept her, Raghava, for she is pure in her whole essence and without evil. And she is not to be struck at all; this I command you."[10] Rama then explains that he knew all along that Sita was beyond reproach, but that he had to test her to demonstrate to "all the people of the three worlds"[11] just how pure she really is.

Since most scholars agree that the Valmiki *Ramayana* as we have it today is a composite text, modified and added to by numerous authors over several hundred years, it may be tempting to see the sudden appearance of the gods *ex machina* and Rama's rather lame explanation for his treatment of Sita as later interpolations being inserted (somewhat clumsily) into an already existing episode. After all, it does not make much sense that Rama, who knows himself only as a human being until the gods remind him of his true nature, would know the outcome of the fire-test prior to this revelation, or that after he has been revealed as the supreme deity he should still be subject to the command (*âjñapti*) of Agni. This narrative inconsistency could be seen as evidence that the divine nature of Rama was patched onto an earlier version of the story in which an all-too human Rama is simply reprimanded by the god of fire for his mistreatment of Sita.

Sheldon Pollock, however, points out the problems with identifying additions and interpolations in a work like the *Ramayana*:

> [T]he reasons for identifying as insertions materials authenticated by manuscript testimony has never been clearly spelled out... Moreover, the nature of interpolation itself is complicated (though this has yet to be adequately theorized), and different kinds of motivations underlie it. Interpolation often serves, not to introduce altogether new material, but

[9] O'Flaherty, p. 202.
[10] O'Flaherty, p. 203.
[11] O'Flaherty, p. 204.

> instead to make manifest the elliptical or latent; what at first sight might appear to be innovation may in reality be amplification or elucidation.[12]

Pollock's point is that even if one had strict rules for determining what is an insertion in the text (which we do not), this "interpolation" may be nothing more than making explicit was was already implied in the text.

Looking at the text as an integrated whole, then, one can argue with David Shulman that "Sita's trial by fire is actually more a testing of Rama than of her. By undergoing this ordeal, she precipitates the momentary switch in levels that presents the hero with his own divinity."[13] The testing of Sita thus provides a pivotal turning point in the epic, in which God attains self-realization and Ramrajya can begin.

In such a reading, however, Sita becomes an object rather than an agent: she does not *choose* to enter the fire, she *must* so that Rama's divinity can be revealed. This is consistent with the androcentric (perhaps even misogynistic) focus of the entire epic. As Uma Chakravarti has written,

> An analysis of [the character of Sita] in the Valmiki *Ramayana* indicates that the text was a potent instrument for propagating the twin notions that women are the property of men and that sexual fidelity for women was life's major virtue.[14]

The fire-test is, of course, the example *par excellence* of these notions. In keeping with her image as ideal and submissive wife, when Sita hears Rama's harsh words prior to the fire test, she is "deeply ashamed and embarrassed,"[15] not angry; her rebuke to Rama is spoken in "gentle and faltering words,"[16] not in enraged or indignant ones. In Chakravarti's words, "[w]hen wronged she does not retaliate but ends her agony by a suicidal action."[17] Rama uses the possessive pronoun *mayâ* ("mine") when he refers to

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[12] *The Ramayana of Valmiki.*, Book III. Robert Goldman, gen. ed. (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1991) pp. 18-19.
[13] Shulman, "Fire and Flood: The Testing of Sita in Kampan's *Iramavataram*" in *Many Ramayanas,* ed. by Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) p. 93.
[14] "The Development of the Sita Myth: A Case Study of Women and Literature" *Samya Shakti* 1 (1983) p. 71.
[15] O'Flaherty, p. 200.
[16] O'Flaherty, p. 200.
[17] Chakravarti, p. 73.

Sita,[18] and after the ordeal, it is he rather than Sita who "was praised by the mighty" and who "experienced the happiness which he deserved."[19]

Rama's treatment of Sita (and Valmiki's treatment of the fire-test) have proven to be unsatisfactory to many. Even within the text there is a certain amount of confusion about what is actually happening. For example, if Sita was already pure in action and thought, how can she be purified (*vishodhya*) by the fire, as Rama implies?[20] Due to the problematic nature of the episode, some later authors either omit the event altogether, or, like Tulsi Das, attempt to redeem the incident by claiming that it was not Sita at all who was sent into the fire, but an illusory double.[21] In Madhu Kishwar's article subtitled "The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India," she quotes ordinary Indians who criticize Rama's behavior on grounds ranging from the interpersonal ("How dare Ram doubt her integrity in the first place!... He certainly failed in his *maryâdâ* as a husband.")[22] to the theological ("Lord Ram was Shiv's God to be worshipped according to Tulsi's Ramayana. How can he [Shiv] worship someone like Ram if Shiv is to be considered the model of an ideal husband?")[23] to the political ("Sometimes in argument young men try to present Ram as a devotee of democracy... [if so,] how do we justify the first *agniparîksha*?... Is it democracy that one man's opinion becomes so supreme?").[24] Clearly, Sita's ordeal is often, like Rama's killing of Valin, seen as a questioable act by the supposed paragon of virtue. As such, it opens a seemingly endless and eternally fruitful discursive field for debates about *dharma*, marriage, purity, and the place of women in Indian society. It is this space which many of the web-based versions of the story set out to explore.

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[18] Arya, p. 357, 119.18.
[19] O'Flaherty, p. 204.
[20] Arya, p. 356, 118.23.
[21] Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) pp. 8-28.
[22] Kishwar, "Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India" in *Questioning Ramayanas*, ed. by Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 287.
[23] Kishwar, p. 288.
[24] Kishwar, p. 293.

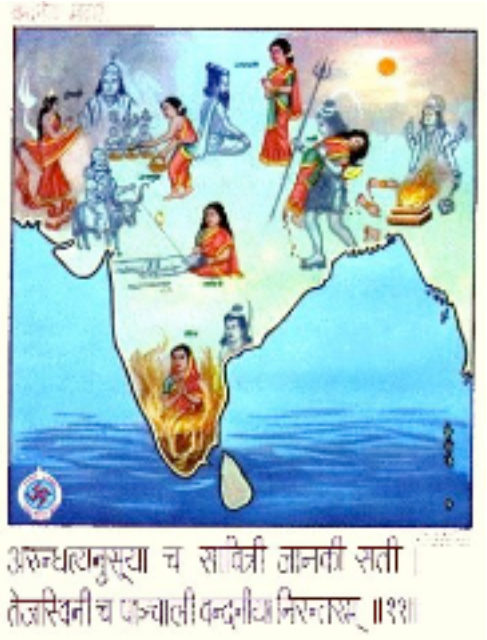
The Fire-Test on the Web[25]

There are so many types of Ramayanas on the web that it is difficult to categorize them. There are sites hosted by Western universities intended as teaching guides for introducing Western students to South Asian culture,[26] or exploring the Ramayana in a comparative context.[27] There are virtual reproductions of real-world texts,[28] and tellings consisting entirely of images.[29] The story is told in the contexts of ritual,[30] devotion,[31] and even commercial ventures.[32] There is even a "Ramayana Club"[33] on Yahoo!, where people discuss, via bulletin-board technology, a variety of topics, ranging from regional tellings of the story to the moral lessons learned from it to plans for the staging of a Ram-lila in New York City. From this wide range of choices, I have selected several different types of sites that provide very different readings of the fire-test.

To many people, certainly, Sita's character is inseparable from the fire-test. This is

[25] All websites listed here were visited on May 9, 2001. Due to the often dynamic nature of web content, websites or individual pages may no longer be available.
[26] "The Ramayana: An Enduring Tradition" (http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/maxpages/special/ramayana/) is, according to Google.com's rating system, the most linked-to Ramayana on the web.
[27] "Ramayana, Monomyth Website, ORIAS, UC Berkeley" (http://www.ias.berkeley.edu/orias/hero/ramayana/) is part of UC Berkeley's History Through Literature Project.
[28] (http://www.valmikiramayan.net/) provides Devanagari and Roman transliteration of the Sanskrit text of the first five kandas with English translation; Hindubooks.org reproduces a book-length Ramayana by Tamil author C. Raja Gopalachari (http://www.hindubooks.org/books_by_rajaji/ramayana/); the Amir Chitra Katha comic book can be found at (http://www.askasia.org/adult_free_zone/virtual_gallery/exhibitions/index.htm).
[29] Artist Bapu presents his own paintings (http://www.channel-india.com/BAPU/Rama.htm), while "Ramayana - A Picture Gallery" (http://home.att.net/~s-prasad/ramimage.htm) provides a collection of devotional images.
[30] DelhiDiwali.com explains the story in its relation to the Diwali festival (http://www.delhidiwali.com/ramayana.html).
[31] "Ramayana - A True Story of Lord Rama and Goddess Sita" (http://www.angelfire.com/folk/rambhakt/rambhakt.htm) provides one devotee's listing of the episodes that he or she found "moving" and "most touching" during the reading of an unspecified version of the story.
[32] "Thailand Travel and Hotel Guide" (http://www.inm-asiaguides.com/thailand/erama.htm) and "Spirit World Southeast Asian Crafts" (http://seasiancrafts.com/spiritworld/ramayana.htm) both use the Ramayana to hawk their respective wares.
[33] (http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/ramayana)

particularly evident in iconography, in which Sita is often identified by two elements: the fire and Rama. FreeIndia.org, for example, provides the following image as part of a prayer to Bharat Mata, in which Sita and others are invoked as a "reverenciable mothers:"[34]



Sita appears at the bottom of the image, surrounded by flames with a vision of Rama above her head, indicating her utter devotion to her husband. It is perhaps remarkable that Sita is depicted engulfed in flames, while Shiva's wife Sati, whose name provides the term for the self-immolation of widows, does not. A similar image of Sita appears in a "biography" of her on the same site:[35]

[34] (http://www.freeindia.org/bharat_bhakti/page 11.htm)
[35] (http://www.freeindia.org/biographies/gods/sitadevi/page19.htm)

As these images indicate, Sita's ordeal has become an integral (and perhaps the primary) symbol of both her literary and devotional character to many people.

Yet many versions of the story almost completely ignore the fire-test. Such is the case with "Valmiki Rishi's Ramayana,"[36] a 32-minute-long RealAudio "radio play." The site is part of RadioStories.com, which bills itself as providing "radio stories with a metaphysical twist." The play was originally produced by a Los Angeles-based group of devotees known as Lotus Roots Connections, and was modified for a UK audience by the Bhaktidevanta Players. Part of this modification included the addition of an introduction which relates the story of Valmiki's composition of the epic, and which contains the claim that all the major elements of the epic occur in the radio play. The fire-test is conspicuously side-stepped, however. After Ravana is killed, an unidentified voice intones:

> "Here is your wife, Lord Ram. There is no sin in her. She has not shown herself to be unworthy of you. Although she was kidnapped, carried off against her will by the arrogant Ravana, he could not dishonor her. The thought of you was always in her heart and your name was always on her lips. She is pure and without fault. Do not reject Sita."

To this, Rama replies:

> "Noble lady, victory is ours. You have been freed and your captors have been killed. O virtuous lady, you could never belong to any other than myself, for you are to me like the light is to the sun. I could no more renounce you than my honor or my name. I love you more than I can express. I take you back with all

[36] (http://radiostories.com/ramayana/ramayana-1a.html)

my heart."

All mention of fire is omitted, and the harsh words born of the anger that Valmiki's Rama felt "deep in his heart" become a speech straight out of a daytime soap opera. And, since there is no questionable conduct by Rama, there is no need for the intervention of the other gods to reveal his divinity.

The fire-test is also noticeably absent from a text version written by Ananda Ramasubramanian and Usha Satyam.[37] After a fairly detailed description of the battle between Rama and Ravana, we are told only that "After Sita proves her purity- Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman, Sugreeva & Vibheeshana returned to Ayodhya in Pushpaka Vamana." Apparently, the authors of both of these tellings either saw the fire-test as related in Valmiki to be unimportant or inconsistent with their visions of a virtuous Rama -- or perhaps the episode has become so well known that it is simply taken for granted.

Tellings of the story that do provide descriptions of the fire ordeal often choose very different strategies to present it. For example, I found two interestingly divergent versions of the story written specifically for children. Both are hosted by "portals" (sites that filter the vast amount of information available on the web into various categories, depending upon the audience of the portal) apparently aimed at both South Asians and Non-Resident Indians: Indolink.com and Boloji.com.

Boloji.com's version,[38] written by C.S. Shah, works from Tulsi's version and thus attempts to work around the negative aspects of Valmiki's version by removing anger, shame, and humiliation entirely from the episode:

> Then softly Rama spoke, "O Sita, you are the embodiment of tolerance and forbearance. Moreover, you represent purity at its highest. But you have lived under the shelter of Ravana. I know the fire of your chastity has prevented Ravana from even touching your nail. But I have my own limitations. As a king I am answerable to my people, and therefore, I would like you to prove your purity in front of all (publicly) so that in future people on this earth would not cast doubt - dare not put any blame - of infidelity on your noble character."

[37] (http://www.hindunet.org/ramayana/discourse/yuddhakand_99.htm)
[38] (http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/ramayana)

> Thus addressed, Sita responded by saying, "O my lord, how true you speak! Yes, by your grace, Ravana could not - dared not - come near me. I am as pure as Fire. Hence I will prove purity of my character by passing through the raging fire flames."[39]

Shah solves the problem of Rama's mistreatment of Sita by having Rama express his faith in Sita prior to the test, and by giving Sita the agency to choose to gladly enter the fire in order to help her husband. If any character appears in a negative light, it is Agni, who becomes not the protector of Sita who admonishes Rama for his misconduct, but a ravenous monster who would have harmed the virtuous woman if he had been able to: "The Fire God could do nothing in the face of the purity of Sita. Soon the raging flames reduced themselves to ashes."[40] Rama's bad *karma* has been effectively displaced onto Agni.

Indolink's version[41] sticks closer to Valmiki's telling. Spectators are horrified at the idea of Sita entering the fire and Sita is "deeply grieved," though Rama's anger in Valmiki is transformed here into a detached lack of emotion. As in the aforementioned tellings, there is no divine intervention to reveal Rama's true nature -- the presumption is that Rama knows exactly what he is doing. Significantly, Sita's decision to enter the fire is not given in her words, but in those of the narrator ("Sita... decided to end her life in the fire.") and is cast as a deliberately suicidal action, whereas the language is more ambiguous in Valmiki.[42]

The conflation of Sita's ordeal with the practice of s*atî* and the larger problem of women's rights in India is one of the key issues explored by internet Ramayanas.

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[39] (http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/ramayana/25.html)

[40] (http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/ramayana/25.html)

[41] (http://www.indolink.com/Kidz/ramaPart4.html) The story is narrated by Kanai L. Mukherjee (otherwise known as "Grandpa"), edited by Arlene Hunter, and is listed as courtesy of the Association of Grandparents of Indian Immigrants.

[42] O'Flaherty translates *jîvitumutsahe* as "I cannot live" (p. 201). According to Lawrence McCrea, "The root *sah* in general means to bear or endure, but commonly occurs with an infinitive in the sense of 'to be able to.' *Ut + sah*, specifically, can bear this sense as well, but sometimes has the sense of 'to have the will or energy to do something.'" (e-mail, 5/27/01) It is therefore not clear from this language whether Sita actually intends to kill herself.

Perhaps spurred on by colonial obsession with the practice and fundamentalist Hindus' veneration of women who commit *satî* as "symbolizing the chastity, loyalty and dedication of Indian wedlock,"[43] discourse about Sita in relation to *sati* is not uncommon on the web. "Kamat's Potpurri," for example, as part of a virtual exhibit entitled "Love? Duty? Sacrifice? The Sati System" presents the image below with a caption reading "Lord Rama's queen Sita is said to have proven her character by subjecting herself to a fire (Agni) and coming out of the fire unharmed. Was the Sati practice initiated to establish a woman's righteousness?"[44]

Even when *satî* and Sita are not explicitly linked, however, the connection is often implied, as Indolink.com's version discussed above.

Both Sita's ordeal and the practice of *satî* are often seen as extraordinary examples of an overarching idea of women's self-sacrifice that should pervade everyday life. The potential of the web for immediacy and interactivity provides an opportunity to negotiate this issue, as can be observed in messages posted to the (apparently now-defunct) newsgroup soc.religion.hindu in 1995.[45] In an unarchived

[43] Samanvaya Sewa Trust, *Bharat Mata Mandir: A Candid Appraisal* (Hardwar: Samanvaya Publications, 1986) p. 15; quoted by Lise McKean, "Bharat Mata: Mother India and Her Militant Matriots," in *Devi: Goddesses of India,* ed. by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) p. 272.
[44] (http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/women/sati/2637.htm) Kamat's, it should be noted, claims not to endorse the practice of *sati.*
[45] Messages posted to this group are archived at (http://www.hindunet.org/srh_home/). All messages reprinted here retain all misspellings and grammatical quirks contained in the originals.

message[46] whose subject line asked: "Is Sita the ideal wife?" Megumi Hayashi (mhayashi@abo.fi) wrote:

> I am doing a reserch on position of women in Hinduism. In Hindu mythology Sita is described as an ideal wife. And in a book I read, the author wrote, "In Hindu tradition, a woman is taught to understand herself in relation to others. She id to emphasize in the development of her character what others expect of her. A central demand placed on a woman is that she subordinate her welfare to welfare of others, especially her husband and children." Is this value commonly accepted? I'm waiting for reply especially from women. please send an answer.

Hayashi's name tentatively identifies her as a woman of Japanese descent, and her e-mail address affiliates her with Abo University, a Swedish-language university in Finland. She thus seems to be an academic from outside the Hindu tradition, soliciting information from "insiders." Her request sparked an interesting exchange about the place of women in Hindu family and society. On October 3, 1995, Anil Trivedi (trivedi@curie.uchicago.edu) wrote:

> Sorry, I am not a woman, but I would like to make one observation which may be helpful.
>
> Traditional Hindu society did place a great deal of emphasis on relationships, duty, and responsibility, as opposed to ones's own rights and gratification. However, whatever burdens and benefits this may have brought came to both men and women. The most basic divider in this respect has been not gender but age. Everyone, male or female, was expected to serve and obey their elders, male or female, and to nurture their youngers, male or female. I believe that in an average Hindu family this remains the norm.
>
> This is of course not to deny that after 1000 years of Islamic invasions and rule, certain good and bad characterestics of Islamic societies to our west have been absorbed too, and of these the bad ones should be eliminated. Inequality and ill-treatment of women, a very real issue, is one of these.[47]

One minute later, Dhruba Chakravarti (dchakrav@netserv.unmc.edu) wrote:

> In order to study the Hindu concepts of the ideal wife, you need to explore various Dharmashastras. I remember one line that might interest you, sorry I do not remember the name of the text.

[46] The s.r.h. archives begin in October, 1995. Hayashi's message was presumably posted before this, as it is not listed in the archive. The message is quoted in the replies listed below.
[47] (http://www.hindunet.org/srh_home/1995_10/msg00018.html)

> Sa bhAryA yA patibratA
> Sa bhAryA yA shuchirdakshA.
>
> (She who is loyal to her husband and she who is of clean habits is (worthy of the honorable mention of) a wife.[48]

On October 4, Neil Kandalgaonkar (neil@domingo.concordia.ca), replied:

> I think one has to be careful when thinking about classic literature as a blueprint for society. Certainly Sita is an amazingly popular figure among Indian women; but I don't think it necessarily means they would emulate her or that the values expressed in the classic Ramayana are commonly accepted.
>
> For me her salient characteristic is serenity and a purity that allows her to survive all hardship. It's easy to see how this moves people but I doubt they would live their lives like her. (I don't know ONE Indian woman who is particularly deferential and serene. Usually quite the opposite. :)
>
> Besides, even Sita does not completely conform to these values. The 'classic' Ramayanas have the stamp of approval by generations of male scholars. And the moral of the Ramayana for women in that story is 'don't step outside the circle your husband draws for you.'
>
> But at the level of popular storytelling, it isn't just one story but literally thousands of variations on a theme. In these stories, which more people have probably heard than the classic versions, sometimes her capture is not the same. In others she particpates more in her rescue. In a surprising number, she turns her back on Rama after he questions her virtue following her rescue. So I don't think Sita *has* to represent self-sacrifice.[49]

These e-mail postings provide three different visions of what it means to be a Hindu woman. The first posting attempts to recuperate a social system often accused of propagating the "[i]nequality and ill-treatment of women" by blaming these things on "1000 years of Islamic invasions and rule," and by claiming that relationships within the Hindu family are primarily organized by age, not by gender. The second posting, on the other hand, appeals to ancient Hindu textual sources that imply that a woman's worth is defined by her relationship to her husband. The final posting calls into question the relationship between ideal and praxis, and appeals to the multivalent nature of

[48] (http://www.hindunet.org/srh_home/1995_10/msg00025.html)
[49] (http://www.hindunet.org/srh_home/1995_10/msg00035.html)

symbolic characters. The web thus provides people separated by thousands of miles[50] the means to collectively interrogate and construct notions of "Hinduness" and "Hindu womanhood;" the story of Sita provides the impetus and the narrative materials to do so.

Conclusions: The Future of the Fire-Test on the Web

I said at the outset of this paper that I wanted to explore the ways that the transition to the new medium (or perhaps the conflation of multiple media) that is the World-Wide Web has affected the way that people tell stories about Rama and Sita. At first glance, there is little to distinguish the digital versions of the stories I have mentioned from their analog counterparts. Text-based sites differ little from traditional books or magazine articles, save an occasional nod to the short attention span of most web-surfers by breaking up text into smaller, more easily digestible chunks. Sites that add images to supplement their text are little more than digital comic books. Even the telling which I consider the most unique, that found at RadioStories.com, is really no more than a radio program broadcast by different means. I was unable to discover a single telling that could not have easily been told in the same way through the use of another medium.

Such mimesis is to be expected in the early days of a new medium. Consider the early days of the motion picture:

> Narrative films were originally called photoplays and were at first thought of as a merely additive art form (photography plus theater) created by pointing a static camera at a stagelike set. Photoplays gave way to movies when filmmakers learned, for example, to create suspense by cutting between two separate actions (the child in the burning building and the firemen coming to the rescue); to create character and mood by visual means (the menacing villain backlit and seen from a low angle); to use a "montage" of discontinuous shots to establish a larger action (the impending massacre visible in a line of marching soldiers, an old man's frightened face, a baby carriage tottering on the brink of a

[50] It is interesting to note that all three respondents are associated with North American universities; this can partially be explained by the fact that the postings were made before the internet was not yet in widespread use outside of academic circles.

stone stairway).[51]

Storytelling on the internet is currently mired in the "photoplay" stage. While millions are invested in technologies to make the internet mimic more familiar media by allowing the broadcast of audio and video, we have not yet learned to make full use of the technology that is the essential foundation of the World-Wide Web: hypertext.

The phrase, which was coined in the 1960s,[52] refers to a phenomenon with which every web-surfer is familiar: the images or underlined words which, when clicked on, can open a file on a computer down the street or on the other side of the world, "bringing" you to another "place" and allowing you to point-and-click your way through cyberspace. While hypertext's utility as a navigational and organizational tool has become commonly accepted, its potential as an artistic medium is largely untapped. Hypertext could be the most important development in narrative-creation since the book, yet it has gone largely ignored as a story-telling tool.[53] The radicality of hypertext lies in the fact that the technology gives the audience the ability to actively shape its reading/viewing/listening experience. For example, someone writing a hypertext version of the fire ordeal might tell the story from multiple points of view (those of Sita, Rama, Hanuman, or even Agni) and allow the reader to jump back and forth at will between the versions. Users could also take on the roles of different characters and be given a choice of possible actions ("Click here to enter the fire; click here to tell Rama off") so that, as in the "Choose Your Own Adventure" books I read as a child, users could construct their own versions of the story using narrative building-blocks supplied by the author.

Perhaps even more important than the internet's effect on *how* we tell the story, however, is its effect on *who* tells the story. Philosopher Gordon Graham has argued

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[51] Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) p. 66.
[52] Murray, p. 91.
[53] Murray gives a number of exceptions, which are by now probably hopelessly out-of-date; Eastgate, a company specializing in the production of hypertext narratives, provides some as well (http://www.eastgate.com/HypertextNow/Welcome.html).

that the Internet is essentially a democratizing force which (through the widespread dissemination of information and the creation of a huge, international public forum) may lead not to the broader social consensus which democratic theorists usually assume, but to greater social fragmentation.[54] While this might be worrisome in a political context, it is good news for those who value diversity in the narrative arts. Stories told in other modern media -- including television, film, and print -- usually require the patronage of a large and wealthy organization, whether a publishing house, movie studio, or, in the case of the television *Ramayana,* the Indian government. Without the economic backing of those organizations, one is often unable to gain a wide audience for one's narrative, and this tends to have a centralizing effect on storytelling -- the stories that get told to large audiences tend to be the ones that reflect the views and values of the people and organizations that are paying for them.

The internet, on the other hand, largely (though not completely[55]) rejects the hegemonic nature of other media, for "there is no Internet audience who is also not empowered to mold the space as he or she wishes."[56] Since even the most basic web browsers now come with web-page creation software, people without access to the organizations I mentioned before can publish their own stories. For example, a woman whose telling of the Ramayana might otherwise never be heard outside of her grandchildren's bedroom can, without much effort, share that telling with the rest of the (wired) world. This technology, I believe, has the potential to vastly enrich the corpus of stories we call "Ramayanas," to change how we tell them and how we think about them, and to vividly demonstrate the saying that "there are as many Ramayanas as there are Indians" -- or Thais, Nepalese, Britons, Americans and so on.

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[54] *The Internet: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 83.
[55] The "digital divide" between the poor and the middle class in the U.S., for example, still demands that Internet users have at least a certain amount of disposable income; I suspect, however, that the $800 cost of a computer pales in comparison to the production and distribution costs of even the cheapest paperback book.
[56] Ananda Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet" in *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* , ed. by Steven G. Jones (London: Sage Publications, 1998) p. 60.

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