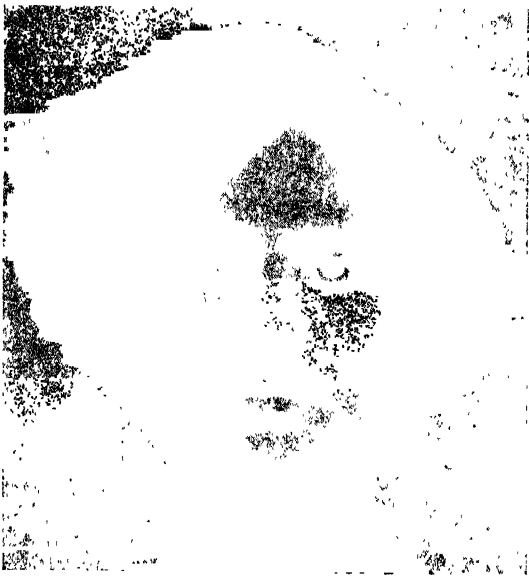


# URMILA'S SLEEP

## An Andhra Folk-Song

By DEVENDRA SATYARTHI

LIKE a fairy godmother, the ancient story of Rama and Seeta presided over my infancy. Along with scores of village boys, my imagination was reared in the tragic tale of Ramachandra's banishment, his wife Seeta's sufferings and the self-effacement of his devoted brother, Lakshmana, voluntarily following him in his exile. To me Lakshmana was noble, but somehow, as the story proceeded, his brave little wife Urmila faded into the background; my desire to see her accompanying her husband found no scope in the story. Only if Lakshmana would not have forbidden Urmila to follow him, I would have offered myself for Urmila's role in the *Rama Leela* performance.



Sri Krishna Sastri

- With love that a poet alone can bestow on a folk-song, Sri Krishna Sastri, worthily called 'a new voice in Telugu poetry,' praised *Urmila's Sleep*

However I wished I could not get to know her closely. Even the *Ramayana*-reciter, in our village, seemed unable to satisfy my inquisitiveness. "It is more of a story of Rama and Seeta, my boy, now listen," he would say. My precocity gave me a clue. Urmila must have swooned as soon as Lakshmana left Ayodhya

with Rama and Seeta: the wives of Bharata and Shatrughna, Rama's brothers, shudderingly rushed in to put drops of water in her mouth and fan her face; slowly that lady of red and gold revived. But after that how did Urmila pass her days?

Later I read an essay by Rabindranath Tagore, in his *Prachin Sahitya*, where he pointed out Valmiki's indifference towards Urmila. It seemed to me like a revelation, and once and again I read it with renewed zest.

And when I heard of *Urmila's Sleep*, an Andhra folk-song, originally known as *Urmiladevi Nidra*, in 1932, at Berhampur, Gunjam, it spurred my fancy. The year 1939 saw me once again approaching the Andhra folk-song. Sri Krishna Sastri, worthily called "a new voice in Telugu poetry", spoke of Urmila's song very highly. With love, that a poet alone can bestow on a folk-song, he praised its ancient theme. Time and again he gave his ear to it. Every time it renewed his interest. "It is already in print", he told me, "surely I'll get you one tomorrow."

## II

Like all genuine folk-songs, Urmila's Sleep is anonymous. There are slight verbal differences here and there in different editions that have hitherto been published by different firms. I procured three different editions. Sometimes the text differs to the extent of one full line or even more. And on the living lips of old grannies the difference might have been greater. But all the variants harmonize in most of the texts. The song suffers in print. There is a mass of printing mistakes; it needed a great discernment on the part of my interpreters to free it from mistakes, so that I might enjoy the content of the genuine revision.

## III

The song opens with the court scene at Ayodhya with Ramachandra sitting on the throne. It is rather conventional and even distorted.

The coronation being over,  
King Rama sat in his durbar,



[ Photo : N. S. Chouhan

## Bride and bridegroom

The middle class bride loves the old panorama of tradition and legend. Modern scepticism has not yet disturbed totally her fancy for Urmila

Bharata, Shatrughna and Lakshmana  
duly serving him,  
Hanuman, the offspring of the Air-God,  
pressing Rama's feet respectfully,  
Sugriva kneeling reverently,  
Tumbura and Narada entertaining them  
with their songs.  
Rambha and her partners,  
the dancers of heaven,  
performing their dances,  
Sanaka and many renowned seers  
immersed in discussion,  
religious and philosophical;  
flowers rained over them that morning.

Then, as if through some mystery-door,  
enters Seeta; she looks rather modest, and lends  
a new colour to the miracle-play.

Having a full view  
of the whole durbar,  
and turning to her husband,  
Seeta, with a heavy heart  
came to Rama,

and folding her hands,  
she said, "O god of gods!  
Please hear me,  
pray let me have my say,  
please hear and take into consideration,  
as even the divine serpent Shesha would hear;  
mine is just a small plea.  
With your brother Lakshmana,  
when we were leaving for the forest,  
Urmila, his wife, so dear,  
seeing him accompanying us,  
became anxious to follow him.  
But Lakshmana said,  
'No, you'll remain here,'  
left her and proceeded to serve us.  
Since that day,  
Urmila has been lying  
on her bed unconscious in deep slumber.  
Command your brother Lakshmana,  
pray do send him  
at least now  
to Urmila—that moon-faced lady!"

We see Seeta's heart in her words. Seeta's  
words had their effect.



#### Contemplation

The middle class girl has not yet discarded her old ways. She loves the songs of her grandmother, and will not easily forget Urmila

When Seeta closed her speech,  
brooding over it  
Rama felt greatly sad.  
Wonderingly he addressed Lakshmana :  
"Brother, just come near,  
O hurry up,  
brother, come here.  
Is it fair  
to keep away from your wife—  
that beautiful woman ?  
It is high time,  
do go to her even now !  
With your words,  
sweet and lively,  
O mitigate all her pangs of grief even now."

Lakshmana only knows to follow Rama's order.

Since he made Rama speak thus,  
soon Lakshmana left the durbar,  
saying, 'great is your kindness,'  
agreeably in reply.  
Crossing the yards  
he reached his palace.  
Entering his bed-chamber,  
he saw his parrot-throated wife;  
putting her *San* in order.  
Then wearing the befitting garment,  
sprinkling water cool  
on Urmila's face,  
Lakshmana sat down  
on his life-partner's bed,  
with the words of a deserter on his lips:  
"The moon craves, O lady,  
to have a glance  
of your kissable face !  
Though you gave up betel-chewing long ago,  
Your smiling under-lip  
looks fresh like a new leaf's tip !  
O speak to me  
like the pouring down of nectar;  
pray appease my soul !"

Urmila rubs the sleep out of her eyes. She discovers, to her astonishment, that some stranger—some trespasser—has stepped in. Sheepishly she still lies on her bed, her eyes not yet opened.

Urmila, who had long lain asleep,  
forgetting herself,  
began to quiver.  
"Who are you, O man !",  
she broke forth,  
"O you came for mischief-making !  
Searching through passages,  
small and narrow.  
You came to do such a wrong !  
Knowing that none else is near,  
O did you start  
for this solitary corner ?  
If my father, King Janaka, will hear,  
He won't keep quiet  
till he passes upon you his order.  
If my sister and her husband  
King Rama will hear,  
O in danger to your life it will result;  
even if my sister alone will hear,  
your life on the face of the earth  
certainly she won't spare.  
Ah me, what disgrace  
descends on the fair name  
of a great lineage !  
O what shall I do !  
Though born in a family of fame,  
now comes to me a bad name !  
O what shall I do !"

Urmila's speech continues. Here the folk-poetess, in the course of Urmila's further words, goes rather astray from the original technique of the legend of the long unbroken sleep of Urmila for fourteen years, when we find that she is aware of Seeta's capture by Ravana.



[ Photo : Devendra Satyarthi  
 (From left to right): Sri Srinivasacharya, M. Krishnamurti, Devendra Satyarthi and Sri Singaracharya.  
 It was rather like a syndicate when at Ellore Sri Krishnamurti, Srinivasacharya and Singaracharya  
 helped me in the translation of *Urmila's Sleep*. I based my rendering on the literal translation  
 mostly, and for it the sole responsibility is mine

Urmila's argument presents the orthodox Hindu view.

Isn't it by having the desire  
 of acquiring another's wife  
 that Indra's body was spoiled ?  
 Isn't it by having the desire  
 of acquiring another's wife  
 that Ravana suffered utter destruction ?  
 And knowing all this before,  
 O you came to do such a wrong !  
 O have you no sister  
 or mother like me ?

Urmila had not yet opened her eyes; her blood was all aflame within her.

As Urmila closed her speech,  
 Lakshmana, who heard it  
 with due attention,  
 and felt sorry,  
 began to say :  
 "I'm Rama's own brother,  
 who else is like him  
 in the whole creation ?  
 And am I not the son-in-law  
 of King Janaka ?  
 O graceful one, born of a hundred-petalled lotus,  
 am I not Seeta's own brother-in-law ?  
 O they call you Urmila,  
 and I swear by your name  
 and tell no lie !  
 Leaving father Dashratha,

as we went to the forest,  
 there Seeta was captured.  
 Putting Ravana to death,  
 we brought our Seeta back.  
 If I wrongly raised my hand,  
 O moon-faced woman,  
 I'd myself become infamous !  
 Am I not Seeta's own brother-in-law ?  
 Lady, be kind now and get up.  
 Since I departed from you, my sweetheart,  
 I knew no food nor sleep !"

With a pleading voice Lakshmana continued :

"If you won't get up, my love,  
 I won't live any longer !"  
 With tears in his eyes,  
 Lakshmana again broke forth :  
 "I'll kill myself !"  
 and he suddenly took his sword  
 out of its sheath.  
 As he argued thus,  
 Urmila got up with a shock.  
 Knowing for certain that he is her lord,  
 And lotus-eyed Urmila then bowed down  
 on her husband's lotus feet.

Lakshmana consoled his wife.

Lifting her up with his hands,  
 Lakshmana embraced Urmila,  
 and wiped her eyes,  
 wet with tears !

Urmila had well thought over what she would say.

"My father, King Janaka,  
wrongly took you in confidence,  
and married me to you;"  
(Urmila went on to say),  
"thinking that his son-in-law was a prince,  
how immensely he rejoiced!"

In a very pleading voice, Lakshmana took to a traditional argument.

As Urmila stopped speaking,  
Lakshmana, overwhelmed  
with sorrow, perceived the meaning  
of the fine-toothed woman's comment,  
made in a sorrowful mood.  
"O why still feel sorry?"  
he began in a soothing tone.  
"In some previous birth, my love,  
we might have separated  
some pious husband and wife;  
what if several ages pass,  
we can't resist the law of *Karma*!"

The scene that follows is rich in life and poetry.

When Kaushalya found  
the husband and wife, immersed in sorrow,  
the *champak*-sented oil she brought;  
and seating them on gemmy *peethas*,  
she smeared it on their heads.  
A maid of honour then brought  
sandal-paste for them;  
in lavender-water she bathed them,  
with a silk towel she wiped Lakshmana's body.  
The maid then dressed Urmila  
in gold-flowered silk;  
the blouse she gave her to wear  
shone as if with rays  
of one crore of suns!  
She adorned Urmila,  
who looked another goddess of wealth,  
with many an ornament and jewel;  
and she gave a *tilaka* mark  
on Lakshmana's brow.  
Urmila, a precious gem of a woman,  
looked along her image along with her husband  
standing before a large mirror;  
shyly she bent her head  
and stood there with a smile.

The next scene brings us to the royal dining-hall. Urmila's personality is brought out in good relief.

Then Rama came  
and sat in the dining-hall  
luxuriously like the god Indra  
on a *peetha*, bedecked with pearls.  
"Come in, O gem of a sister-in-law,"  
with these words Rama welcomed Urmila.  
All lovely shyness,  
Urmila looked like a parrot,  
while she bent her head  
on the other side:  
sweetly tinkled the anklets  
on her feet,  
as she walked in:  
like an image of beauty

how graceful she looked!  
To Urmila, briskly smiling,  
Sumitra gave a seat  
near her son:  
in gold plates she served them,  
in silver cups  
Kaushalya brought *ghee*:  
Sumitra put cow's *ghee*  
before her son:  
Shanta, so fond of flowers,  
then spoke to Lakshmana,  
Sumitra's affectionate son,  
"Brother, for fourteen years  
in the forest,  
you lived without food and sleep;  
all fatigue you'll forget, brother.  
O do take sweets and *ghee* and cakes"  
"Take cream and butter you all,"  
again said Shanta,  
"and after your own hearts  
drink the buttermilk."

The dinner concludes rather abruptly.

Lo! they finished off the dinner:  
to their hearts' content  
they ate and got up:  
with the water of the Ganges  
they washed their hands.

Entertainment comes in next.

As they all took to betel-chewing,  
(Shanta remarked smilingly):  
"Give audience to me, O Seeta,  
O daughter of King Janaka,  
O what a good genius is Urmila!  
On her gold bed lay she  
for full fourteen years in swoon!  
All the charm  
of this gold image,  
O where had it been hiding!  
O Seeta, perform  
around Urmila's face  
the ritual of auspicious *Arati*,  
then would harm her  
no evil eye!"  
When Shanta closed her speech,  
Seeta, who understood it,  
commented laughingly:  
"O your brothers are moons!  
they are worthy  
of inducing even gods like Indra  
and the moon itself  
to feel a sort of love for them!  
So that no evil eye  
would harm them!"  
Soon as Seeta thus spoke,  
Shanta resumed laughingly:  
"O what a beauty is Urmila,  
and what a beauty indeed you yourself!  
Beware of an evil eye,  
O you coquettes,  
you winners of my brothers' admiration!"  
Soon as Shanta closed,  
Seeta commenced smilingly:  
"Your husband, Rishi Shringi,  
who is a brother to me,  
leaves not your company  
in the hermitage  
even for a minute,

and you, O Shanta, mock  
at the simple-minded Rishi !"  
Her ear she gave fully  
to Seeta's words,  
and then Shanta began :  
"O Seeta, O you my sister-in-law !  
O you daughter of the Earth !  
How sacred became our family,  
O soft-skinned Seeta,  
since you became our daughter-in-law !"

The next scene moves like the flowing water. Full of absorbing interest, it is instinct with the raciness of folk-poetry.

Sumitra provided a couch then,  
with fluffs of swans spread on it,  
for her fatigued son :  
placing on it silk-pillows,  
lavendar-water she sprinkled on it :  
lo ! a parrot-throated maid of honour  
brought a *Vatti* fan ;  
sandal-paste and musk  
and scents, *Punugu* and *Javaddi*,  
she brought in cups  
and put them beside the couch ;  
betel nuts and green leaves, too,  
she put beside the couch ;  
and pearl-dust she placed  
to be used instead of lime.

Urmila and Lakshmana come in. The song holds our attention. The breeze that comes from champaks and jessamines plays its miracle on love-lit hearts. And we find Lakshmana engaged in combing and braiding Urmila's locks.

Lo ! the champak-ladden breeze blows,  
lo ! Urmila and Lakshmana rose  
to shut the outer door.  
Lo ! the breeze blows  
that came from the jessamines,  
lo ! they sat on the couch.  
As to dress her hair  
after the *Koppu* coiffure,  
lo ! Lakshmana braids Urmila's locks ;  
and with *Bodu* jessamines and *Jaji* flowers,  
her long braided hair he adorns  
with all the art he knows.

Urmila asks her husband about Seeta's abduction by Ravana, and Lakshmana tells the story in detail. He seems to be missing the perspective when he forgets to tell the moving story of his own life in the forest—that life without food and sleep, so well-known to Andhra legend. Nor does he care to properly comprehend the vital importance of Urmila's long sleep for fourteen years.

Lakshmana and Urmila,  
both together chewing betels,  
and exchanging words in sport,  
"How it was," asked Urmila,  
"my sister was stolen ?  
Brave as lions you were there,  
O how was Seeta captured ?

You both were by her side,  
how was captured the beautiful woman ?"  
Thus spoke Urmila and Lakshmana then re-  
plied :  
"To escape from what is destined, my dear,  
O is it possible even for god Brahma, tell me ?  
Setting out from Ayodhya,



The village temple  
The temple-going women dream of antiquity more  
than anything else. Urmila lives in the twi-  
light of their legends

in a hut of leaves our days we passed :  
a golden deer of illusion one day  
came near the door of the hut :  
asking for that deer your sister bowed down  
at her lord's feet :  
and taking his arrows and bow,  
Rama proceeded to hunt the deer.  
Drawing the bow as he shot his arrow,  
the deer made a peculiar sound,  
'Alas, O Seeta, alas, O Lakshmana !'  
Seeta got frightened and spoke to me ;  
'no, revered lady,' I said, 'you don't know,'  
after Rama as she asked me to go.  
O she said many a word,  
each word, to my ear, an arrow ;  
drawing a boundary line around her,  
I went after my brother :  
Ravana, in disguise, soon after,  
stood, saying '*Narayana*, O Almighty God !'  
in front of the good-eyed Seeta :  
a devotee of god Vishnu he was she thought,  
and readily she gave him alms :  
soon as he showed his ten heads,  
Seeta swooned with fear :  
To Lanka Ravana carried her away.  
Rama returned with the golden deer,  
but Seeta was not there.  
We searched the hut,  
and we searched the forest.  
On Kishkindha mountain we met  
the great King Sugriva.  
'We are Dasharatha's sons,' we said,  
and a bundle of presents he gave us ;  
and as the bundle was opened,  
Seeta's ornaments were found ;

'Come, brother,' thus calling me,  
 Rama showed me the ornaments.  
 'I know not,' I said,  
 'all these ornaments, brother Rama :  
 these anklets alone I recognize indeed;  
 every morning I saw them,  
 while I bowed down at her feet.'  
 Then calling Hanuman,  
 giving him his ring,  
 and telling him about Seeta's distinctive marks,  
 Rama sent him in search of Seeta.  
 Hanuman crossed the sea,  
 searched Asoka garden,  
 and met my sister-in-law Seeta :  
 he gave her the ring,  
 got from her in return a gem :  
 and a long talk he had with her.  
 Soon returned Hanuman,  
 and stood before Rama :  
 'How am I to bring Seeta back, O king ?  
 How disarranged were her locks !  
 In her heart burnt what a fire !  
 To think about Seeta's hard lot,  
 O how unbearable it is !'

Engrossed in sorrow Rama heard and swooned ;  
 and as the fit was over,  
 Lanka's secret he perceived,  
 and he killed Ravana along with his armies,  
 strong and huge.  
 'Adorn Seeta and bring her  
 before me,' he said :  
 and as she was brought said Rama :  
 'O she was for ten months  
 in the enemy's possession,  
 O I won't speak to her !'

Then follows the story of Seeta's ordeal by fire, out of which she came quite unscathed.

Urmila and Lakshmana retire. And the song ends with a conventional epilogue that transforms Lakshmana into a god—a god who is empowered to bless the singers and listeners of the song of *Urmila's Sleep*.

Urmila symbolizes to the imagination of the Andhra woman a loyal wife who outshines even a goddess.



Dr. Robert A. Millikan  
 [After a sketch by S. N. Swamy]