DISCOURSE OF SATITWA IN THE EPIC RAMAYANA: A MECHANISM TO CONTROL WOMAN'S SEXUALITY IN HINDU SOCIAL SYSTEM

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'What is important is that sex was not only a question of sensation and pleasure, of law and interdiction, but also of the truth and the false'. – (Foucault M., 1978)

Abstract

This paper explores how the discourse of sexual purity (satitwa) is constructed in the Hindu epic Ramayana as a mechanism for regulating female subjectivity. In the Hindu social system, controlling female sexuality is not merely a matter of personal virtue but is deeply tied to maintaining familial harmony, preserving caste lineage, and fulfilling spiritual ideals such as purity and liberation. For centuries, Hindu norms have mandated that women bear the same bloodline as their husbands and undergo prescribed samskāras and rituals to ensure social order. Within this framework, a husband's role extends beyond physical protection to guarding his wife's sexual integrity, thereby safeguarding the moral and genealogical legitimacy of the family.

The Ramayana exemplifies this sexual grounding of social order, where any suspicion regarding a woman's chastity invites scrutiny, trials, and public judgment. By employing Foucauldian discourse analysis, this paper critically examines how satitwa is discursively produced and how violence against Sita becomes justified as a necessary act to reassert male authority and affirm the husband's role as the 'protector of truth.' Conceptually, the study argues that the discourse of sexual purity in the epic internalizes power, diffuses it into everyday life, and legitimizes structural violence under the guise of dharma. Theoretically, the paper challenges conventional gender relations in Hindu society and seeks to interrogate the normalized violence against women through the lens of contemporary feminist thought.

Keywords: Discourse, Hindu society, power, Ramayana, sexual purity

Introduction of the epic Ramayana

The Ramayana—literally "Ram's journey"—is one of the oldest and most revered epics in world literature. Attributed to the sage Valmiki, the Sanskrit Ramayana is believed to have been composed before the Mahabharata, and it holds an esteemed status among Hindus, often equated with the Vedas in terms of its philosophical and moral significance (Acharya, 2063 B.S.; Gyanwali, 1954). While disucssing about the importance of the story of *Ramayana* the Poet Bhanubhakta himself presents the importance of the epic in the opening section (i.e. *Balkanda* of the Epic) bring the importance of the epic more than any other religious texts and the rituals to get free from all vice in the world and be liberate from the soul. In the the poems of first section, it praises the importance of the book as the outmost among the Hindu texts including the Vedas, the most sacred tests of the Hindus. It also praises the character of Ram as the supreme lord in the form of human being.

Tradition holds that the original Ramayana consisted of 24,000 shlokas (couplets) divided into seven kandas (books or sections). It narrates the life and trials of Ram, the eldest son of King Dasharath of Ayodhya, and his battle against the demon king Ravana of Lanka. While commonly dated around 300 BCE in its written form, the epic likely existed in oral tradition for centuries before being codified (Pokharel, 2045 B.S.). The author of the epic is Valmiki, who is celebrated not only as the first Sanskrit poet called as *adikavi* but also as a Himalayan sage and ascetic lived somewhere in the subtropical forest in Shiwalik range within presentday Nepalese territory. While later Indian narratives portray him as a reformed dacoit named *Ratnakara*, Nepali traditions—especially those informed by Bhanubhakta—challenge this image and affirm his status as a virtuous sage, emblematic of Himalayan strength, wisdom, and resilience (Acharya, 2062, B. S.).

Across South Asia, following the plot, theme and traditions of Valmiki Ramalayna its numerous vernacular versions have emerged over the centuries, each reflecting the linguistic, cultural, and devotional nuances of their respective regions' cultural and historical contexts. Among these are Kamban's Tamil Ramayana, Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas in Awadhi, Krittibas's Bengali Ramayana, and Madhava Kandali's Assamese rendition. The wide range of popularity of the epic shows that it transcends the boundaries of religion and literature to engage with philosophical, historical, geographical, political, and psychological themes, making it not only a sacred text but also a civilizational document of the ancient Indian world.

In Nepal, the most revered adaptation is Bhanubhakta Acharya's Ramayana, composed in the mid-19th century. Considered a chhāyānubād (thematic translation) of both the

Valmiki and Adhyatma traditions, Bhanubhakta's version successfully embedded the epic into the poetic and moral imagination of Nepali-speaking communities, making it both spiritually resonant and widely accessible to the Nepali speakers of Himalayan foothills of Nepal, India and beyond (Chhetri, 2070 B.S.). Scholars consider that Bhanubhakta retained the structural essence of the ancient Sanskrit epic—its metrical form (chhanda), thematic coherence, and philosophical depth—while carefully preserving the narrative flow and metaphysical portrayals of Ram, the main character of the epic. On top of that, they also argue Bhanubhakta's Ramayana adds a uniquely Nepali layer to this epic. To emphasize the significance of the Ramayana, Bhanubhakta himself presents it as the most revered of all texts of the Hindus. It is reflected on the opening section of the epic. In the first book of Verse-12 he writes:

चारै वेद पढेर शास्त्रहरूको ब्याख्यान गर्दा पनि ।
पाईदैन उ फल् त पाउँछ सहॉ पुस्तक दिनाले पनि ॥

Handing the epic Ramayana book to another person is much more important and have merits then reading the entire four Vedas

--Balkanda (Verse-12)

Gyanwali (1954) opined that this Nepali version emphasizes not only Ram's virtue but also Sita's Nepali roots—bringing local cultural pride into a pan-Hindu narrative. Through poetic language, it moralizes conduct, elevates familial duty, and intends to promote harmony, justice, and spiritual strength in society. It may be a reason that the Bhanubhaktiya Ramayana became deeply popular across all social classes in Nepal and the Nepali speakers beyond Nepal, with many people reportedly committing large portions of the text to memory. One important point to highlight at this juncture is the role of Motiram Bhatta, who played a crucial part in preserving and popularizing Bhanubhakta's Ramayana. In the late 1880s, Bhanubhakta's Ramayana was largely unknown. Motiram undertook journeys—famously to Tanahun—to collect lost manuscripts and poems. He published the first section (Balakanda) in 1884 and the complete Nepali Ramayana in 1887, making the epic accessible to Nepali-speaking audiences (Parajuli, 2023).

The story of the epic Ramayana opens in the city of Ayodhya, ruled by King Dasharath. His first son, Ram, is born as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, meant to restore dharma (cosmic order) in a world increasingly besieged by adharma (chaos). Ram's marriage to Sita, daughter of King Janak of Mithila (present-day Nepal), signifies a divine union of moral virtue and spiritual purity. However, due to palace intrigues—specifically the scheming of Queen Kaikeyi and her maid Manthara— the King Dasarath, father

of Ram, orders him exile for fourteen years. He departs to the forest accompanied by Sita and his loyal brother Lachhuman. The plot thickens when Ravana, the mighty and erudite yet demonic king of Lanka, abducts Sita, setting off a cascade of epic events.

Ram's search for Sita leads to the formation of powerful alliances, most notably with the vanara (monkey) king Sugriv and the devout warrior Hanuman. With their help, Ram wages a colossal war against Ravana, ultimately defeating him and rescuing Sita. However, Sita's abduction raises questions about her purity, prompting her to undergo a trial by fire (Agni Pariksha) to prove her chastity. The return to Ayodhya marks Ram's coronation, but societal doubts force him to banish Sita while she is pregnant. She finds refuge in Valmiki's ashram and gives birth to twins—Lava and Kusha—who later confront their father in dramatic fashion. The epic concludes on a note of sacrifice and divine fulfillment, with Sita returning to the Earth, her original mother, and Ram renouncing his kingship.

The Hindus conceive that the Ramayana is more than a story of divine heroism—it is a moral and ethical guide rooted in the tension between dharma and desire, duty and devotion. They consider Ram is held as the *maryada purushottam*, the ideal man who upholds righteousness even at great personal cost. Sita is revered as the epitome of feminine virtue, though her narrative also raises critical questions about gender roles, obedience, sacrifice, and voice.

In the history of world literature, the Ramayana is often compared to Homer's Iliad—another epic centered on the abduction of a woman (Helen) and the ensuing destruction of a city (Troy). Yet, what sets the Ramayana apart is not merely its heroic exploits, but its profound engagement with ethical dilemmas, self-sacrifice, and the complex challenge of upholding dharma in a morally fraught world (Chhetri, 2070 B.S.). This paper seeks to critically examine this iconic epic through the critical lens of Foucauldian discourse analysis, focusing specifically on the Nepali rendition by Bhanubhakta Acharya, in order to explore how the discourse of *satitwa* (meaning chastity or sexual purity) operates as a mechanism of gendered control within the broader Hindu social system.

Dominant perspectives on the Epic Ramayana and the need for a Foucauldian re-engagement

The Ramayana, as a civilizational epic, has been interpreted through multiple lenses—devotional, ethical, managerial, and feminist—each offering valuable insights into its moral, literary, and cultural significance. However, these dominant perspectives often leave unexplored the deeper mechanisms through which truth and power operate in

the construction of ideal femininity. This paper intervenes in that discursive space by uncovering the Ramayana not only as a sacred or moral text but as a site of gendered power, where subjectivities like that of Sita are produced, regulated, and disciplined through culturally embedded discourses.

A conventional approach within orthodox Hindu traditions is rooted in spiritual and devotional hermeneutics, as outlined by Das (2025), who proposes the LEAD method—Literal, Ethical, Allegorical, and Devotional readings. This approach prioritizes *bhakti* (devotion) and moral instruction over political or gendered inquiry. While such readings affirm the sacredness of Ramayana and aim to protect the dignity of divine characters, they also tend to idealize and dehistoricize these figures. The characters, especially Sita, are rarely seen as subjects formed by discourse and power, but instead are treated as flawless embodiments of divine virtues. This approach resists secular critique**,** and in doing so, evades crucial questions of gender, justice, and subjectivity.

Another contemporary application is the management perspective, such as Palit's (2025) theory of Dharmic Management, which views Rama as a model of ethical leadership, strategy, and governance. This utilitarian reading extracts moral and managerial lessons from the epic, positioning it as a sourcebook for leadership ethics. However, this framework erases female subjectivity almost entirely. Sita, if mentioned, is relegated to the background of the male protagonist's journey. While useful in corporate ethics discourse, this approach fails to engage with gender, cultural politics, or symbolic violence—all central to understanding how the Ramayana governs gendered lives.

Feminist critiques—such as those by Bhattacharjee (1996) and Majumdar & Shaikh (n.d.)—provide a far more critical lens. Bhattacharjee's analysis presents Sita as a symbol of national-cultural purity, her body functioning as a vessel through which patriarchal and nationalist ideologies are transmitted and preserved, especially in diasporic and postcolonial contexts. Women who do not conform to this ideal (e.g., Surpanakha, Kaikeyi) are narratively or symbolically punished, demonstrating how myth becomes a mechanism of gender discipline**.**

Majumdar and Shaikh (n.d.) extend this critique through a feminist recovery approach, interrogating how Sita's voice has been marginalized in mainstream patriarchal versions and how alternative texts (e.g., Madhava Kandali's Assamese Ramayana) offer empowered re-imaginings. Their work resonates with Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics, seeing traditional texts as instruments of unconscious gender hierarchies. These feminist perspectives are vital in rethinking the role of Sita as a thinking subject rather than merely a passive victim.

However, while feminist readings reclaim Sita's voice and expose patriarchal misreading, they often stop at representation. They do not fully theorize the mechanisms by which such representations are produced, maintained, and made to appear true within cultural systems. They emphasize what Sita symbolizes, but do not adequately unpack how the discourse of sexual purity becomes a regime of truth that disciplines and constitutes feminine subjectivity across time, particularly in Hindu and Nepali contexts. Therefore the authors brings the Foucauldian approach to understand the feminine subject position in the epic.

Based on the Focauldian analytical approach this paper critically examine how the *Ramayana*—particularly Bhanubhakta's 19th-century Nepali rendition—produces and regulates gendered subjectivities through the cultural discourse of sexual purity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discourse, power, and knowledge, the study interprets the representation of femininity in the Ramayana not merely as literary or religious symbolism, but as a historically embedded regime of truth that enacts disciplinary power on female bodies and subjectivities.

Foucault conceptualizes discourse as a system of statements, practices, and rules that not only express knowledge but actively construct what is socially accepted as truth. Within this framework, truth is not absolute or neutral, but an outcome of power relations embedded in discourse (Foucault, 2010). Miller (1990) interprets, discourse as more than language; it is a dynamic structure that shapes how individuals think, behave, and understand themselves in relation to the social world. Discourse constructs subjectivity, meaning that individuals (such as Sita) do not exist outside discourse but are *produced* by it (Miller, 1990).

While the intention of this paper is not to undermine the faith or devotion that Hindus hold toward the Ramayana and other sacred texts—and indeed, the authors comes from Hindu background—it is crucial to critically examine how such texts have historically functioned as instruments of power. The objective is to understand how specific discourses, such as that of sexual purity, have been deliberately constructed to serve the interests of dominant social groups—particularly high-caste priests, Brahmanical scholars, and politically powerful elites—while simultaneously marginalizing lower castes and subordinating women.

Discursive formation of *satitwa* in the epic *Ramayana*

The discourse of sexual purity, loyalty, and moral integrity as the defining virtues of the ideal woman—is not a peripheral concern in the Ramayana; rather, it is embedded at the very foundation of the text's narrative architecture. From the outset of Bhanubhakta's

Ramayana, the conversation between Narad and Brahma in the Balkanda functions as a discursive site through which the discourse of sexual purity is constituted as both a moral truth and a regulatory ideal.

The opening conversation, thematically translated from Bhanubhakta's Ramayana, depicts Kaliyuga as an age of moral and sexual decline. People, it warns, will descend into depravity, engaging in unethical and sinful acts (pāpa), forsaking virtue and righteousness. While opening the conversation with Brahma in the opening versers of the epic, Narad laments Oh Brahma:

कोही ऍन् त परस्त्रिमा रत हुनन् कोही त हिंसा महाँ 1

देहैलाइ त आत्म ऍानि रहनन् नास्तिक् पशु भैं तहाँ ॥

Many will indulge in adultery, crime, and violence. Mistaking the physical body for the soul, they will consider body to be soul like beastly atheists.

- Balkanda (Verse-3)

This utterance, though brief and connection within the broader domain of Kaliyuga, constructs sexual misconduct—particularly female infidelity—as a major character of the epoch. Foucault (1977) reminds us that discursive objects often emerge through opposition; the meaning and value of sexual purity as truth are intensified through its contrast with the immoral, the deviant, or the polluted. In this way, sexual purity is not simply an abstract virtue—it is a truth regime that must be protected, produced, and enforced by social and divine power.

By having Narad—the ever-wandering sage and cosmic messenger—raise the concern, and Brahma—the creator—respond to it, the text positions the anxiety over sexual order at a cosmic level, not merely a human one. The use of these mythic authorities to inaugurate the discourse of sexual control signals the delimiting function of discourse: certain truths are legitimized precisely because they are spoken by those in power. In Foucauldian terms, this marks the ritual of enunciation—the right to speak truth—which is restricted to specific subjects of power.

To bring Brahma in the conversation and to whom Manusmriti, traditionally attributed to Manu—the first man and son of Brahma—codifies the same concerns visible in the Ramayana. Both texts exhibit deep anxiety over grihastha Dharma (family dharma) and the Verna system. While earlier Vedic and even Mahabharata-era traditions offered more female-centric cosmologies, the Ramayana and Manusmriti reflect a transition in ideological priorities: from matrilineal cosmology to patrilineal control (Hess, 1997).

Therefore this, conversation between Narad and Brahma in the very beginning of the epic in the Balkanda is not merely a cosmological prelude; it is the discursive foundation upon which the entire logic of sexual purity is constructed. Through a network of narrative events, character trials, and social rituals, the Ramayana constructs sexual purity as a truth regime—one that disciplines the female subject and reproduces normative gender roles under the guise of cosmic and moral order. The use of mythic authority to establish this discourse reflects a deliberate alignment of power, knowledge, and truth, ensuring that the ideal of sexual purity remains not only morally desirable but ontologically necessary within the Hindu cosmos.

Regulating Sita's *satitwa*: Trials of the feminine subject in the Ramayana

One of the most enduring narrative threads in the Ramayana—and one that reveals the deep entanglement of discourse, power, and gender—is the repeated questioning of Sita's chastity. These moments are not incidental moral crises, but rather ritualized mechanisms of disciplinary power that serve to construct, scrutinize, and control the feminine subject within a Brahmanical-patriarchal order. In Bhanubhakta Acharya's Ramayana, this disciplinary mechanism is evident in three key moments where Sita's sexual purity is problematized and subjected to public trial, each reinforcing gendered hierarchies and masculine sovereignty. Through the lens of Foucault's discourse theory, we can see how these trials function to produce gendered subjects, normalize obedience, and institutionalize moral surveillance in Hindu social life.

First trial by fire

The first challenge to Sita's sexual purity arises immediately after the defeat of Ravana in Lanka. Despite her rescue, Ram refuses to accept her back without proof of chastity, stating that she has lived in another man's territory and could be impure. Hurt and humiliated by this public doubt, Sita voluntarily enters the *agni pariksha* (fire trial) to prove her sexual purity where she expresses in the verse 294 in *yuddhakanda*. In the verse, the fire god Agni returns her unharmed, signaling her innocence.

अर्काका घरमा बस्याकि भनि यो दोषै दिनु भो ऊँसै ।

लऍमण्लाई हुकुम् दिइन् ऊँननिले विश्वास खातिर् तसै ॥

Ram, you charged me as living in 'others' house in Lanka. So I order Lachhuman to prepare for the fire I go through.

– Yuddhakanda (Verse-294)

The discourse of sexual purity that emerged in the battlefield of Lanka after the war over shows a specific character of the discourse. This moment constructs sexual purity not as an inherent quality but as something that must be proven through bodily risk, publicly validated through a ritual of pain. Here, the female body becomes a site of moral truth, while Ram emerges as the arbiter of that truth, despite professed detachment. Furthermore, Sita's body is subjected to ritualized scrutiny to reinforce Ram's moral authority and to sustain public trust in his role as protector of *dharma*. This reflects Foucault's notion that truth is not discovered but produced through procedures of power.

Second trial of political exile

Upon returning to Ayodhya, Ram and Sita begin their rule. However, rumors begin to circulate among citizens questioning Sita's chastity. Although she had already proven herself through *agni pariksha*, the public voice reactivates the discourse of suspicion. In response, Ram decides to exile a pregnant Sita to the forest, claiming that as king he must uphold the moral sentiments of his subjects above personal feelings.

Ram abandons Sita while she was pregnant saying his brother;

हे भाई ! इ सिताꣳलाई अहिले त्याग गर्नु मैले पर्यो ।

चोखी ꣳनि लिदा त दुर्यश बहुत् लोक्ले मलाई गर्यो ॥

Hello brother Laxuman, I need to abandon Sita now. I know she is chest but the people of my kingdom continues to question upon her purity.

– *Uttarakanda* (Verse-115)

At this second event, the public's perception becomes the new apparatus of surveillance, where societal norms—anchored in patriarchal suspicion—demand continual performance of female virtue. Based on the surveillance, Ram exercises institutional power masked as duty, sending Sita into exile not for personal belief, but to appease the moral order, which he is expected to represent. Here, the king's duty becomes a tool for gendered expulsion, reinforcing how female sexulity is socially contingent and always fragile.

Third trial of final judgment and refusal

In the last part of the *Uttarakanda*, Sita's twin sons, Lava and Kusha, raised in Valmiki's ashram, emerge as powerful and virtuous youths. When Ram learns of their lineage, he invites Sita to his court, but demands yet another trial to formally validate her purity

before the public. This time the sage Valmiki and his sons themselves defends Sita's characters and virtues to defy the requirement of the trial. But all their attempts go in vain and Ram asks to have one more trial. However, this time, Sita refuses. Instead, at this moment Sita raises the question of justice, the justice she asks with the mother earth. Therefore, she calls upon Mother Earth to receive her if she has truly remained faithful to Ram, maintained her sexual purity. The epic tells that the earth splits and Sita disappears. This refusal is expressed in verse 188 of *uttarakanda* as follows:

मेरै पुत्र त हुन् दुवै इ कुशलव् ऍम्ल्याह पैदा भया ।

सीताऒी पनि सुद्ध छन् सब बुभ्र्या सन्देश मेरा गया ॥

हुकुम् यो रघुनाथको हुन गयो हुकुम् भयो ता पनी ।

सीताऒी त तयार् भइन् तस बखत् पछ्छु म नीया भनी ॥

I know these two are my twin sons, and I have no doubt about Sita's chastity. However (as the debate proceed) Sita interrupts the dialogue and demands that justice be delivered—not upon her, but for her.

- *Uttarakanda* (Verse-188)

And, the way she explored her justice was unexpected for the audience including Ram himslef -to die under the earth. In this way, Sita asks mother earth to open her passage to death in verse 189 as follows:

ऍसुतो भक्ति छ रामका चरणमा मेरा उ ऍानी लिउन् ।

साँची छू त मलाइ ऍान अहिले बाटो भूमिले दिउन् ॥

O Mother Earth, if I have remained true to the path of Satidharma towards Ram, then take me back into you.

- *Uttarakanda* (Verse-189)

Following Ram's acknowledgment that Sita is both chaste and the mother of his sons, the narrative reaches a climactic moral impasse. While Ram claims he has no doubt about her purity, he still insists that justice must be publicly demonstrated. However, Sita—having endured repeated trials and the weight of a discourse that continually questions her virtue—refuses to submit to another fire trial or a patriarchal process of judgment.

Instead, as mentioned in Uttarkanda, Verse 189, she takes justice into her own hands and appeals directly to Mother Earth. This plea is not simply a prayer—it is a declaration of her own truth, beyond institutional or patriarchal validation. The Earth responds, splitting open and swallowing Sita, bringing her physical life to an end. In one reading,

this is a suicide, but more critically, it is a radical act of self-erasure—a refusal to continue existing within a discursive order that has repeatedly denied her agency and humanity (Foucault, 2000).

From the perspective of discourse theory, Sita's refusal of the final trial is a radical rejection of the discourse of Satitwa. By removing herself from the realm of public judgment, she disrupts the very apparatus that seeks to produce her as a regulated subject. Her self-erasure serves both as a critique and an escape from the cycle of disciplinary power. It symbolically challenges the legitimacy of Ram's authority and the ideological structure of *satitwa* itself.

These three trials illustrate how the discourse of sexual purity functions as a cultural apparatus of surveillance and control, particularly over female sexuality and agency. The trials do not merely reflect concerns about individual morality; they serve a larger ideological function—to reinforce Brahmanical patriarchy (as mentioned in Manusmriti) by scripting ideal womanhood in terms of loyalty, purity, and silence. Additionally, Ram's authority is constructed and sustained through these events— not simply as a ruler or a husband, but as the supreme judge of feminine virtue, a position deeply aligned with high-caste ideological interests. By continually testing and regulating Sita, the discourse constructs her as a subject whose truth lies not in her voice, but in her compliance.

By presenting Sita's death going into the earth has a mythical resonance as well. According to the myth, Sita is believed to be the daughter of the Earth (Bhūmi Devi)**.** It is said that King Janak discovered her while ploughing a field**,** symbolizing her divine origin from the soil itself. This origin myth is deeply intertwined with the manner of her death—her final act of returning to the Earth is seen not as a mere death, but as a return to her primordial mother, the very source from which she emerged into corporeal form. By carefully architecting this cyclical narrative of emergence and return reinforces her symbolic association with purity, fertility, and the sacred feminine, however, the epic does not debunk the question on female sexuality and takes the side of women's sexual decision and choice asserting the domination of patriarchal power over female subjects.

The idealization of Ram within the discourse of sexual purity : Truth, power and divine masculinity

In the Ramayana, Ram is not merely portrayed as a righteous king or valiant warrior— he is idealized as the divine embodiment of *dharma*, a masculine figure elevated to the apex of moral, political, and cosmic hierarchies. This idealization is not simply

narrative embellishment; it is central to the discursive structure of the epic, where truth, virtue, and power are closely aligned and gendered. The discourse of sexual purity plays a crucial role in this system: it produces and regulates female subjects like Sita while simultaneously legitimizing Ram's moral supremacy and divine status.

Ram as the guardian of *satitwa*

Through his repeated enactment of judgment—whether of Sita or other characters—Ram emerges as the ultimate arbiter of virtue. Sita is constructed as the primary site upon which this moral order is ritualized: her body becomes the ground on which truth is tested, doubted, and finally inscribed. She is required to prove her purity not once, but multiple times, under Ram's authority. This repetition reveals that *satitwa* is not a static virtue but a perpetual performance, necessitated by the constant scrutiny of patriarchal power.

This aligns with Foucault's concept that discourse does not merely describe reality—it produces it (Foucault, 2010). Power, Foucault argues, "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault, 2000). In this light, *satitwa* is not just a moral value but a discursive object—a construct around which norms, punishments, and expectations are organized. Ram, in this system, is not only its protector but its institutional manifestation—he is the truth-bearer, and the narrative constructs him as its exclusive judge.

Ram's moral superiority is further reinforced through his treatment of other male characters who transgress sexual codes. For example: Bali (in Kishkindha Kanda) is condemned for violating marital boundaries by detaining his brother's wife. Ravana (in Uttarakanda) is portrayed not just as a demon but as one who violated the sacred boundary of another man's wife—Sita. In both cases, Ram punishes the transgressors with death, framing his violence as a divine duty, and elevating himself as the supreme moral sovereign. Significantly, after their deaths, he shows magnanimity toward their widows—Tara (Bali's wife) and Mandodari (Ravana's wife)—reinforcing his image as a just and benevolent king. This gesture is not just compassion; it is symbolic purification—Ram becomes the one who purges impurity, reinforcing his mythic authority over both male and female moral order.

Ram's purifying gaze also extends to women outside Sita. Characters like Surpanakha, Kaikeyi, and even Mandodari are situated in proximity to transgression—either through their desires or associations—and the epic establishes Ram's centrality by defining these women as either "fallen" or "restored" through his presence or absence. In this way, the Ramayana crafts a gendered ritual order where women are either ideal (Sita)

or failed (Surpanakha) embodiments of sexual purity and Ram remains the constant against which all virtue is measured.

Violence as the cost of perfection

The paradox of Ram's idealization lies in the violence required to sustain it. While he is revered as *Maryada Purushottam*—the embodiment of ethical perfection—this ideal comes at the cost of Sita's repeated humiliation, exile, and eventual self-erasure. Her suffering is not viewed as tragic but as necessary—sacralized within the logic of duty (*dharma*) and justified by her role in reinforcing Ram's image as the perfect man.

This tension exemplifies what Foucault refers to as a "regime of truth"—a system that not only establishes what is true, but also determines who has the authority to define and enforce that truth. Ram embodies this regime; he speaks with divine authority, and his actions are rarely questioned within the logic of the epic. Sita, by contrast, becomes a sacrificial subject—her agency reduced to endurance, her voice overwritten by the moral requirements of the discourse. Her trials are less about her virtue and more about reinforcing Ram's symbolic centrality.

Conclusions

The Ramayana, one of South Asia's most enduring and influential epics, has long served as a foundational text for moral, spiritual, and social values across regions, castes, and communities. Traditionally revered as a religious scripture, a *dharmic* guideline, and a cultural archive, it continues to shape gender roles, family ideals, and political imaginaries throughout the subcontinent. However, drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, this study has interrogated how the Ramayana, particularly in its Nepali rendition by Bhanubhakta Acharya, constructs the discourse of sexual purity as a regime of gendered discipline. This discourse does not merely describe the virtue of female chastity—it produces it as a moral truth, and regulates women's roles and conduct through its normative claims. Through characters like Sita, who becomes the ultimate embodiment of sexual purity, the epic constructs a moral economy where a woman's virtue is defined, tested, and often punished by the male figure who stands at the center of epistemic and political power—Ram. As demonstrated in the analysis, his character cannot be fully understood outside the discourse that sustains him. He becomes a living instrument of the truth regime of sexual purity, performing rituals of judgment and punishment that inscribe power onto Sita's body. Her repeated trials, abandonment, and eventual death are not merely events in a myth—they are ritualized expressions of gender discipline, justified through the sanctity of *dharma* in Hindu social system.

This paper also exposes a significant analytical gap in mainstream South Asian scholarship on Ramayana, which has often prioritized devotional, ethical, or even feminist recovery readings. While feminist critiques have rightly challenged the silencing and marginalization of Sita, they have not always fully interrogated the mechanisms of power that make her subjectivity legible only in relation to male virtue and public scrutiny. What this Foucauldian reading offers is a deeper understanding of how truth, power, and discourse interact to naturalize gender hierarchies. In particular, this paper contends that the discourse of sexual purity is not simply a generalized male construction, but a strategic product of a particular male figure—Ram—at a particular historical and narrative moment. Through this construct, the epic legitimizes a form of gender violence that is not only moralized but celebrated, thereby entrenching power in the very structure of divine masculinity. Furthermore, in the Nepali context, Bhanubhakta's Ramayana continues to play a powerful role in national moral discourse, shaping ideals of womanhood that are both spiritualized and politicized. To fullfill this objective Sita becomes a metaphor not just for female virtue, but for the moral purity of the nation, echoing what Bhattacharjee (1998) observes in postcolonial constructions of femininity.

These discourses have contributed to the formation of a deeply divided and discriminatory social order in South Asia, becoming significant obstacles to progress, harmony, and justice within the social system. Rather than being questioned or transcended, these ideas are often repeated and normalized, reinforcing outdated hierarchies under the guise of tradition. Ironically, such discourses also obscure the rich philosophical and ethical insights embedded in Hindu sacred literature, rendering them inaccessible to broader publics. As Regmi (2024) points out, the domination of caste- and gender-based knowledge systems continues to limit not only social equality but also access to the deeper treasures of Hindu thought.

Finally, this Foucauldian approach on the epic Ramayana underscores that myth, far from being a neutral or sacred story, is a potent technological instrument of power. The Ramayana, when subjected to discourse analysis, reveals itself not as a timeless tale of good and evil, but as a historically situated text that constructs gendered truths with lasting consequences. To truly address ongoing gender violence and inequality in South Asia, we must not only critique external patriarchal structures but deconstruct the cultural discourses that authorize and sustain them. Only then can we begin to dismantle the symbolic violence embedded in our sacred texts—and re-imagine narratives where women like Sita are not reduced to vessels of male morality but are recognized as full subjects in their own right.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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