



illustration: **MOYNA CHITRAKAR**

text: **SAMHITA ARNI**

The Ramayana is an epic poem by the Hindu sage Valmiki, written in ancient Sanskrit sometime after 300 BC. It is an allegorical story that contains important Hindu teachings, and it has had great influence on Indian life and culture over the centuries. This version of *The Ramayana* is told from the perspective of Sita, the queen.

Events that are not given as much importance in the better-known versions—such as Sita's banishment—are explored here from her point of view. Her perspective of the epic may be less well-known but has, in fact, long been a part of women's oral tradition in the different regions of India, including among the Patuas. Songs of her suffering are sung by women working both at home and outside. Epics such as *The Ramayana* are part of a collective consciousness for many people in the country and the figure of Sita is held up to be the ideal wife. Yet, it is not her qualities as a wife but her suffering at the hand of territorial men that women continue to identify with.

Moyna Chitrakar, the artist, drew from Patua traditions of scroll painting to create the art for the book. These scroll paintings are a living tradition from Bengal, where performance, storytelling and art meet. The story is recited or sung as the narrator holds up a painted scroll pointing to the image that goes with words. *The Ramayana* is one of the most popular stories performed by them. For this book, the artwork was painted before the text was written. After it was painted, Samhita Arni, a young feminist writer with an interest in epics gave words to it. Finally, all these aspects were woven together by the book designer to form the final graphic novel.

Here are some talking points, questions and activities to explore the book with students and to discover how the different elements came to form one book.

Talk about the story

- Epics are typically long poems narrated in a grand scale about the heroic deeds and adventures of a legendary figure or the past history of a nation. There are wars, divine elements and larger-than-life heroes and villains. The Ramayana is one such epic. Are there any clear heroes and villains in this version of the epic?
- Find out more about the most famous version of *The Ramayana* written by Valmiki.
- This book is the epic from Sita's perspective. How has the story changed because of this? How would the story change if another character narrated the story? Which character and why?
- Sita empathises deeply with the people who are affected by the war. She feels for the pain and sufferings of their families. War and violence remains an important part of our present day life, as well. How is this relevant to us?
- Which is your favourite scene to do with war or suffering from the book, and why?

Talk about the art

- Look up other examples of the Patua art. For a performance of a Ramayana scroll by the artist of the book, Moyna Chitrakar, visit <http://bit.ly/1Y3M2Mf>. Refer to The Patua Pinocchio, I See The Promised Land, The Enduring Ark, etc. for more examples of this style.
- The Patua art tradition is an extremely stylised one. The less a work of art resembles something in the physical world, the more stylised it is. The figures are not as they appear in real life, and you can see this in how their faces are drawn, which features are emphasised and which are left out. Notice how they are almost always shown front facing and how the arms and legs, angled. Even though only a few features are picked up to depict the different figures, they are all easily recognisable. Look at the different species such as the humans, the rakshasas and the vanaras. They have some features in common but they are clearly different. Discuss how they are differentiated.
- The Bengal Patuas specialise in the drawing of birds and animals. Some of these creatures are a part of the story and some of them are just part of the landscape. Look through the pages and pick out which play an active role. What role do the others play?

Talk about the Graphic Novel

- Graphic novels can be compared to comic books because they too use pictures, which follow one another in a sequence to tell a story. Have you read any comic books or graphic novels and what do you think about them? Are they different, if so how?
- Graphic novels use different panels to convey movement of time and distance. Keeping this in mind, look at pages 48-49. Notice how the distance is showed by the different panels of the see show the long distance covered by Hanuman. Now look at about pages 56-57. Is it distance that is being covered in these panels? Or is it something else?
- 'Panels' are the boxes that contain a single scene. Look at some of the interesting ways a single image has been repeated in different panels to bring forward the story. Go to page 116-117. A single image has been cut up and used several times, creating a cinematic close up for dramatic effect. Now look at page 127 and 129. What is going on here?
- 'Gutters' are the spaces between the panels. Flip through the book and look at the different colours being used for the gutters. Look at pages 72-109, where the gutters are all black, for example. What does this represent? Are there other such instances? What could those mean?

Activities

- Choose a character from the story who is neither Rama nor Sita. Then, choose a scene from *The Ramayana* and write it from their perspective. How does the story change, with the major events remaining the same?
- Sita hears the parts of the story that she isn't present in through Hanuman, Trijatha and Vibhasana. How else could she have learnt about it? Choose one scene in the book where Sita is not present in and re-imagine the scene on how she learns about it. (Hints: Maybe she sees it in a dream? Do little birds come and tell her? Does she have a telescope to watch what happens?)
- Patua scroll art is used to narrate a variety of stories—such as stories from village life, epics such as *The Ramayana* and even modern day news. Choose a classmate to collaborate. One of you can do the drawing and one can make up the story, or both can do both. Make your own Patua scroll. It can be a story you know, news you have heard, or something completely new. This has to be told in 8 panels. After these panels are done, you can either point and narrate the story like the traditional Patua artists or paste the panels and create a book—with captions placed to explain the story.