

Rukmini: An Institution of Devotion against Polygyny

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Abstract: *It's not just The Mahabharata that has Rukmini's life as a subject but also the Bhakti tradition. Rukmini is the quintessential Bhakti devotee - worshipped by the devoted, all castes considered, variations of the house and sexes are the epitome of his commitment. Her tale is told through the letters that she wrote to Krishn, which reflects her agency and longing as a woman empowered to fight against the mainstream. But psychologically, being the main queen of Krishn, Rukmini had to face her trials. She entered into a polygamous marriage, where Krishn had 16,108 wives. This was coupled with an inner turmoil of having to come to terms with the fact that her beloved husband had to be shared with many others. The paper entitled "Rukmini: An Institution of Devotion against Polygyny" emphasizes how the tale of Rukmini, under feminist a lens, portrays resisting the traditional patriarchal notion of gender roles. It also portrays the multiple facets of a woman possessing spiritual agency as well as the sacrifice she makes under patriarchal bindings. This narrative emerges as a potent metaphor for the struggles and the strengths of women, thus emphasizing the power of love and devotion to elicit transformations possible against the backdrop of society.*

Keywords: Devotion, Polygyny, Patriarchal Society, Transformation

1. Introduction

Rukmini is the princess of Vidarbha and the principal queen of Lord Krishn endowed with power, intelligence, and grace. In Hindu mythology, she is presented as a symbol of devotion, courage, and spiritual surrender. Rukmini is unlike most other women in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana, for her devotion to Krishn is not that of a marriage but a pen-picture of the Bhakti tradition selfless and profound love for the divine. Her decision to put pen to paper to ask Krishn for marriage and to leave with him later for her purposes illustrates her empowerment and commitment to chart her course.

Regarding the Bhakti paradigm, Rukmini's courageous love and surrender personify the ideal type of devotee, who yearns for a relationship with the divine. This story has kept devotional literature and poetry continued for centuries, with Rukmini as a symbol of grace and love of God. This research thus aims to analyze the complex facets of her devotion, character, scripture role, and place in the Bhakti tradition. By comparing with other women who were devotees and looking into her one-of-a-kind relationship with Krishn, this study shows Rukmini's importance as a model of spiritual surrender and divine love.

Rukmini, the principal queen of Krishn, is considered the personification of Rajashakti and devotion in Indian mythologies, but her life was not easy, as she was one out of the many wives of Krishn, whose polygamous relationships stand symbolic, besides societal norms, for the divine connection. Rukmini loves Krishn, but much of her diva life becomes a burden on her mind and soul because she shares Krishn with other wives. Krishn married a total of 16,108 women (the number is largely symbolic in most interpretations), out of which there were eight special wives known as the Ashtabharyas. Rukmini was the foremost among these wives, referring to her special status. However,

polygamy leaves very painful layers of emotions, relations, and responsibilities in a woman's life.

2. Review of Literature

Rukmini has often been characterized as a symbol of devotion in Hindu mythology, Bhakti literature, and various academic works. One of the key attributes of devotion is illustrated in Rukmini's narratives found in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Purana, which showcase her spiritual love, endurance, and agency. This analysis will survey different sources that highlight the multi-faceted aspects of Rukmini's devotion.

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* has the main scripture concerning Rukmini's devotion. Rukmini's elopement with Krishn in the context makes her love and devotion go beyond social and family boundaries. Because she is described as a devoted princess already pledged to someone else, who nevertheless chooses Krishn as her divinity consort. She expresses in her letter to Krishn her deep yearning and submission:

"I am your servant, O Lord, and my soul is completely absorbed in your love. Please come and rescue me from this bondage and take me to you, for I am incapable of facing a life without you" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 10.52.34). Here, in this quote lies the intensity of feeling and desire of the Spirit that characterizes Rukmini's devotion, sets her as a prototype of the Bhakti devotee, who offers bodily, emotional and spiritual self-surrender to the divine.

Rukmini's devotion is endlessly sung about in Bhakti poetry, especially by the 15th to the 17th century poets. Tulsidas and Surdas have both sung about her as the epitome of devotion and love to Krishn. Rukmini is considered ideal in devotion in the *Sur-Sagar* composed by Surdas which is wholly devotional and centered on Krishn's love with Rukmini as the idealized devotee, her pure love transcending all worldly attachments. Surdas writes:

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“Your love, O Krishn, has filled my heart with such joy, that I feel no pain, no sorrow. In you, I see the Supreme, and in your embrace, I find my eternal rest” (*Sur Sagar*, 5.10).

A perfect devotion is exemplified by Rukmini, an installation in Bhakti that privileges emotion over ritual. Rukmini's love for Krishn is noted by scholars as valorizing the bhakti ideal: intimate, personal, and transcendental to caste, gender, or social standing. Rukmini, thus, emulates an exemplary pure bhakti relationship between the devotee and God, by love, trust, and unqualified surrender.

In Vallabhacharya's philosophy of *Pushtimarg*, Rukmini is worshipped as a great devotee, whose love for Krishn is spontaneous and selfless. Rukmini's love, according to Vallabhacharya, teaches one of the most fundamental lessons of Bhakti, which sources one's devotion directly from divinity:

“Rukmini’s heart, untouched by worldly desires, is completely devoted to Krishn, and in her devotion lies the perfect path of the devotee. She loves him not for any reward, but for the sheer joy of being in his divine presence” (*Pushtimarg Sutra*, 12.3).

Rukmini's devotion is read in feminist terms as she challenges the fatherhood and social norms of her period. Taking Krishn as her husband against the wishes of her family makes the mark of the woman of agency. In the Bhakti literature, she doesn't just express experience passive devotion, but rather an active expression of both spiritual and emotional sovereignty. Scholar Rita Kothari notes: **“Rukmini’s devotion challenges the traditional role of women in religious and social contexts. Her passionate pursuit of Krishn signifies a break from the passive, submissive role often assigned to women, positioning her as a proactive agent in her spiritual journey.** (Kothari, 2005).

Rukmini symbol mirthless devotion and bhakti even in modern bhakti literature. Rukmini has ever inspired writers and poets like Ravindra Kiran and Shashi Tharoor to explore the myriad aspects of love, agency, and even spiritual fulfilment. One of these works is that of Tharoor in *Rukmini and Krishn: The Divine Union*, which writes:

“Rukmini’s devotion is a timeless narrative of the soul’s longing for the divine. It transcends the historical, the social, and the personal, capturing the essence of Bhakti in its purest form: love for the divine that knows no bounds” (Tharoor, 2012).

In the work *"Emotional and Symbolic Role of Rukmini in the Radha Krishn Story"*, Sarad Acharya evaluates the symbolic role of Rukmini within the frame of divine love and considers her emotional bond with Krishn. It further examines how her devotion anchors an informant in the context of seeking Bhakti interpretation in the Radha-Krishn myth.

Tejoswita Saikia's research *"Sankardeva as a Religious Reformer and a Playwright with Special Reference to his*

Nat Rukmini Haran" sheds light on the religious and philosophical impact of Sankardeva as well as on his characterization of Rukmini in *Nat Rukmini Haran*. The Focus of Saikia in this case tends to be on depicting Rukmini's Bhakti within the framework of Assamese traditions of Bhakti understanding.

"Bhakti Through Literature: A Study of Poonthanam and Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri's Literary Works" by S. Rukmini is somewhat peripheral looking at various individuals but reveals much valuable insight into how devotion in Bhakti literature is shaped and reverberated through figures like Rukmini.

The literature on Rukmini's devotion reveals her as a quintessential Bhakti devotee, whose love for Krishn is an emotional and spiritual journey. From the *Bhagavata Purana* to modern interpretations, Rukmini's devotion transcends the boundaries of gender and society, offering a vision of spiritual love that remains relevant across centuries. Through Bhakti poetry, philosophical interpretations, feminist readings, and scholarly research, Rukmini's story continues to inspire and shape our understanding of divine devotion.

3. Objective of the Study

This study delves into the multidimensional aspects of emotional, spiritual, and symbolic-of devotion personified in Rukmini in Bhakti literature so that we understand her more as this archetype of devotion while continuing to highlight her power and loyalty to Krishn that resonated with many such as ourselves in their endeavours to relate to and understand the spiritual. We will seek through classical texts, Bhakti poetry, and critical interpretations to have a full understanding of Rukmini's devotion and its reflections on the primary tenets of the Bhakti movement. We will also look into how Rukmini affects feminism and modern readings of spiritual love and devotion thus making her story relevant even today. Ultimately, such a study would enrich the discussions about different representations of divine love in Hindu mythology and Bhakti traditions, making scope for readers to think about their own experiences of love and devotion.

Rukmini and Krishn – A Divine Union:

Rukmini's marriage with Krishn may be considered one of the most famous marriages in India associated with love. After her marriage is fixed with Shishupala against her will, Rukmini defied the social norms and sought assistance from Krishn, saying that she wanted to marry him. The dramatic rescue of Rukmini on the date of her wedding speaks volumes about their relationship.

Rukmini probably had to endure a lot being the wife of Krishn. It was because Krishn was a king and a warrior, one could easily imagine that the life of a god would involve endless networks of responsibilities and relations. Being a principal queen of Krishn meant that Rukmini had to handle the delicate balance of relations he had with other queens while keeping up with her duties as a wife and queen.

Rukmani's Love Letter to Krishn:

This beautiful love letter of Rukmini for Krishn as described in the *Bhagavata Purana* is one of the most touching and remarkable embodiments of her devotion, longing, desperation, in fact, an appeal to the Lord. The message conveyed through a trusty messenger contains her most profound feelings, spiritual realizations, and faithful promises towards meeting Krishn sometime in the near future. Below is such a stirring rendition:

“śrī-rukmiṇy uvāca

**śrutvā guṇān bhuvana-sundara śṛṇvatām te
nirviśya karṇa-vivarair harato 'ṅga-tāpam
rūpaṁ dṛśāṁ dṛśimatām akhilārtha-lābham
tvayy acyutāviśati cittam apatrapaṁ me”** (*Shrimad Bhagavatam* 10.52.37).

Translation: Sri Rukmini said [in her letter, as read by the brahmaṇa]:” **O beauty of the worlds, having heard of Your qualities, which enter the ears of those who hear and remove their bodily distress, and having also heard of Your beauty, which fulfills all the visual desires of those who see, I have fixed my shameless mind upon You, O Krishn”** (*Shrimad Bhagavatam* 10.52.37).

This letter is not only a letter of love to Krishn by Rukmini but the reiteration of their spiritual connection. Her plea is a manifestation of her total faith in the divinity of Krishn and her courageous taking of destiny into her own hands.

Krishn's Other Marriages and Their Influence on Rukmini:

Krishn had eight primary queens and was Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati, Kalindi, Mitravinda, Nagnajiti, Bhadra, and Lakshmana. They were different from each other and showed his life and divine mission in different aspects. Their connections with Krishn were different from one another based on their backgrounds, personalities, and roles in Krishn's life.

However, with that came the fact that these co-wives were also present in the intimacy of their mutual husband. This added a kind of psychological burden on Rukmini wherein part of her husband's attention and part of her husband's affection will have to be similarly divided with the other wives. Although Krishn usually treated all his queens alike, being senior queen placed Rukmini under additional expectations about the harmony of a royal household.

One of the most symbolic aspects of Krishn's polygamy was his marriage to the 16,100 rescued women from the demon Narakasura. These women were treated by society as impurities which brought them dignity and respect in their association with Krishn.

The Emotional and Psychological Burden of Polygamy:

However, even if these marriages were viewed as symbolic, they still placed an additional burden on the king's principal queens, and perhaps Rukmini's burden would be heavier. The senior queen would thus have to play her part as an example, showing kindness and acceptance towards them. Rukmini was the first and foremost queen, carrying within

her a weighty responsibility in the entirely polygamous household of Krishn. Apart from the royal obligations, the queen was also to handle the co-wives and their relations with each other.

While the Mahabharata and other texts seem quite reticent, almost embarrassed, in discussing jealousy and rivalry among Krishn's queens, the emotional weight of such a role cannot be ignored. Rukmini's keen surrender to Krishn would become both the source of her strength and her asset for coping with the unbearable tensions of polygamy.

As Adrienne Rich rightly puts it, **"Marriage in a patriarchal society is often a site of both power and sacrifice for women, where their identity is sculpted by the roles they are expected to perform."** And Rukmini's life epitomizes it: She fulfilled her every wish, being the queen and wife.

Life with a godlike figure like Krishn had an added dimension of complexity for Rukmini. For Krishn, marriages were not merely personal unions; rather they stood for certain spiritual and social significances. Thus, for Rukmini, Krishn became more than a personal husband; their bond flowed into his divine plan. That would elevate her status, but she would carry the expectations of Sthree Dharma regarding having to set an example of devotion, patience, and sacrifice.

Moreover, along with Rukmini and Satyabhama, the Tulabharam incident also conveys the essence of the Gita's teachings. The Gita tells in Krishn's highest part that selfless devotion or bhakti and surrender to the divine surpass materialistic possessions as well as egoistic desires.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishn states:

**“Patram pushpam phalam toyam yo me bhaktyā
prayacchati**

**Tad aham bhakty-upahritam asnāmi
prayatātmanah”** (*Bhagavad Gita* 9.26)

Translation: **"Whoever offers Me with all their heart a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water, I accept that gift from the devotee pure in heart".**

This verse compounds a single short yet very meaningful action on the part of Rukmini, who presents a single Tulsi leaf as a weighing weight during the episode of Tulabharam. That offering made with pure love and devotion far outweighed all the worldly riches of Satyabhama. Therefore, this makes it clear that true devotion (bhakti) transcends the physical-material-visible realm and goes perfectly well with Krishn's teachings on the Gita.

Adherence to Sthree Dharma:

Life without marriage was full of values according to the ideals of Sthree Dharma. It consisted of worship, sacrifice, and loyalty within a woman toward her husband. Rukmini understood this clearly despite the drawbacks of polygamy, and due to her unshaken faith in Krishn, she even managed all insecurities rising within her and did her duties gloriously.

Her devotion to Krishn is in her story and character. Her affection for Krishn did not bind them as mere individuals but was something more spiritual, accepting all the contrasting and local disadvantages attached to it, allowing her to withstand with spirit and dignity everything between them.

This is nothing but what Sthree Dharma said would require a lot of devotion, loyalty, and love from a woman for her husband to be all that could be imagined. "A woman's destiny lies in her power to love self-forgetfully and suffer silently," says Mahatma Gandhi. Rukmini's giving up Krishn to his other wives is the embodiment of Sthree Dharma. The sacrifices made by women in the texts reflect the happiness of such sacrifices, but they also remind us of the emotional burden these sacrifices would bear on women in such marriages.

That was the very nature of the divine mission of Krishn, with personal desires being unimportant in comparison with the true greater aspect; thus, Krishn's acceptance of his.

Rukmani as a Devoted Petal:

Though one extols Rukmini for her devotion to Krishn, one cannot forget the psychological effects of polygamy on her. Sharing her husband with other women will involve triggering her insecurities, isolation, and even emotional turmoil, as even a spiritually evolved being like Rukmini would feel.

Polygamy, as a social structure, generally disempowers women into emotionally uncertain situations when their worth is measured by how much they can fulfil their familial and societal expectations. In the Rukmini case, the burden of legislating tranquillity in the house of Krishn, while following the principles of Sthree Dharma, would call for a lot of inner strength. Rukmini's tale testifies to the prowess and endurance of women in patriarchal societies.

Her life leads one down a path of love, devotion, and sacrifice and carries with it precious wisdom regarding one's choices in navigating the labyrinthine patterns of relationships and social expectations. Rukmini's steady faith in Krishn, coupled with her ability to carry on with her feelings and do the same as a wife and queen, symbolizes an everlasting heroic strength and grace. Through her story, they will be reminded of the age-old struggles and strengths of women along with the importance of love and devotion in overcoming life's challenges. It was not just about her relationship with Krishn; this was representative of women's roles and expectations in such societies in general. Rukmini's legacy continues to shine through time, as it keeps giving lessons of high-end value regarding love, sacrifice, and the survival of faith in the most testing and torturous times.

4. Conclusion

Worshipped as one of the most revered figures in Hindu literature, Rukmini is known as the principal consort of Lord Krishn. The all-encompassing love and absolute surrender that she possessed define the characters of the Bhakti tradition, which embraces personal devotion on the part of

the devotee rather than ritualistic practices. Through her various actions and words, Rukmini comes to embody the very definition of bhakti: love without conditions, complete surrender, and unflinching faith in divinity.

Rukmini's audacity to oppose social norms by writing to Krishn and asking him to rescue her demonstrates her active involvement in chasing divine love. Her Bhakti is more than mere amorous attachment; it is spiritual where Krishn is her beloved and her ultimate refuge. Krishn himself recognizes this act of devotion by Rukmini in the *Bhagavata Purana*:

"Patnya ime ma iha shushruhatim bhajanti yad pada-samsraya vimukti-dhamni" (*Bhagavata Purana*, 10.60.48)

Translation: "My wife, you have taken shelter at my feet, which are the source of liberation. Your devotion is unparalleled." (*Bhagavata Purana*, 10.60.48)

Bhakti thrives through Rukmini's devotion, which has made it to be a perfect worship and love for God as divine and supreme. And her story serves as an eternal reminder of how devotion changes things. Her story teaches devotees to follow Bhakti as a path of liberation, emphasizing personal connection over ritualistic practice. The slokas and tales surrounding her emphasize love and surrender as the sources of transformation. Rukmini's legacy also continues, serving as a beacon for spiritual seekers across time.

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