

# Introduction to Ramayana

In India, Lord Vishnu is worshiped primarily as Avatar, or incarnations, particularly as Rama and Krishna, the principal characters of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. In both of these wonderful long stories the God takes on human form in order to heal a breach in the order of society, and thus the world in general. In doing so there is an attempt to reestablish the moral code of social conduct and proper relation of mankind to divinity.



# Shravana

Long ago, nobody knows when, in the ancient kingdom of Ayodhya, there ruled a powerful but noble and wise king, King Dasharatha. He belonged to the Raghu dynasty where "keeping promises was cherished as more important than life itself". It was all too well known a fact that his forefathers had sacrificed their lives for upholding the path of righteousness and truth - Dharma.

## Story of Child Shravana



Once during his youth, this king Dasharatha went for hunting. He was expert in archery. He had also acquired a peculiar gift of hitting the arrow even in the dark or blindfolded at the sound of the movement of the target or the prey.

On the fateful day, as it happened, the king could not hunt any animal. He was tired and was bit dejected and irritated at this failure. Just then, from a distant pond there arose the sound, as if some animal were drinking water. The king could not directly see who was there, but he guessed that it must be some animal- his hunting prey! The usually well balanced mind of the king thought for a while to reach the pond and then hunt down the prey. But the king was so much tired that he decided to use his skill of hitting the arrow at the sound and finish his job. He put the arrow on the bow, waited for the next sound to reach his ear, and hit the target in a flash.

And what a tragedy! The arrow did hit the target, but the cry which tore the peace and tranquility of the jungle was not of an animal, but of a young boy! The kind heart of the king melted like the butter over fire.

Disturbed, he rushed to the pond and saw, as feared, a young boy fatally wounded with his arrow in the chest. Tears flowed down the eyes of the king. He took the boy in his lap, put a few drops of water in his mouth to wet his drying lips, and inquired: "O, young one, what brought you to this lonely place? Are you alone or, are there any co-travelers with you? What a grave mistake I have committed! How can I rectify this now?"

On hearing the king spoke thus, the boy pacified the king and said:

"O, King, I am a Brahmin boy. My name is Shravana. My parents are old and blind. I am taking them to pilgrimage all over this noble land of Bharata (India). I carry them on my shoulders in huge baskets attached to the bamboo with the ropes (kawad in our dialect). My parents are waiting at some distance for me. I was here to fetch water for them. I am their only support. Now I am worried that they may not survive after hearing the news of my death. I am also not sure whether you can help them because sooner or later they would come to know that you are responsible for all this. O, noble king, please take me to them as I am afraid my life-force may leave the body any time now."

With these words of great remorse and pathos, the young Shravana died in the lap of the king.

Confused and with heavy heart, tortured by the thought of the ignoble deed for which his impatience and indiscretion were responsible, the king slowly went to the old parents. He put the body of the Shravana in front of them. The sensitive ears of the father immediately guessed that something was amiss.

Said the old man: "Who is there? Surely these heavy steps are not of son."  
The king replied, "O, noble Brahmin, you are right. I am king Dasharatha."  
"Where is my son, O king. What has happened to him?", inquired the mother.

With great sorrow and heavy heart the king narrated the unfortunate event that led to the sad death of their son. Hearing this tragic news the mother collapsed there only, never to come back to life again. The father, under great agitation and distress, thus cursed the king:

"O King, you have indiscriminately killed a Brahmin boy. Our sorrow cannot be described in words; our son was our only support. You have left us with no choice but to die. You have separated us from our most beloved son. I send a curse to you, O king, that you shall also die experiencing the pain and suffering of separation from your son." Soon the old man also left his body for good.

What could the king do, but shed tears and return back to his palace! Years passed by and the king started forgetting this sad incidence in his life about which he did not mention to anyone including his three wives.

# Childhood of Rama

King Dasharatha had three wives, namely Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi. The queens were beautiful, royal, graceful, and faithful to the king. Simplicity, selflessness, modesty, and willingness to sacrifice their everything for the king and the kingdom all such virtues, typical of Indian Womanhood, were embodied in them. They never complained about inconvenience, suffering, pain, and deficiencies any time, although such situations were rare in a royal house.



However, despite a long married life, none of the queens was blessed with motherhood. Silently, as is every Indian woman's wont, they longed for their own son or daughter. The king was also aware of the undercurrent of gloom all around the palace and the kingdom. As was customary in those ancient times, the king was advised to perform sacrificial rituals (called Yagna). Accordingly, arrangements were made for the vast resources required for such Yagna. Due invitations were sent to the most learned and expert 'Pandits' and Brahmins who would perform such a Yagna. Many months passed by in these rituals, and at last the Yagna-Devata (The God) was pleased and the rituals and sacrifices bore fruits. Out of the Yagna-Kunda arose one Divine Form who said:

"O king, I am very much pleased with your deep faith and devotion in me. I offer you these four fruits which would fulfill the desires of the royal family. Your queens would bear sons in due course of time after ingesting the fruit."

The king, the queens, and for that matter whole of the kingdom of Ayodhya was agog with pleasure and joy that knew no bounds. Kausalya and Kaikeyi received one fruit each, and remaining two came to the lot of Sumitra.

In due course of time Rama was born to Kausalya, Bharata to Kaikeyi, and Sumitra gave birth to two sons--Laxmana and Shatrughna.

The palace was filled with joy and merriment. The queens were overjoyed with the arrival of these four lovely princes. Rama was born of the eldest queen and hence attracted special attention, as the eldest son always had the first claim to the royal throne.

The four brothers grew under the loving care of their parents and relatives in the royal comforts of the palace. There was no want nor deficiency of any kind. All the four princes were sharp, intelligent, brave, and healthy. They were obedient and respectful towards their parents and teachers; and the love amongst these four brothers knew no precedence.

As they grew up, the old king made arrangements for their best education in humanities, art, science, and expertise in war-games. They acquired all special skills in archery, etc. at the holy feet of their teachers: Vashishtha and Vishwamitra.

Years passed by and the children grew in lovable, bold, and brave adolescence. Their command over bow and arrow was not to be equaled by anyone on the earth. (Sri Rama was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the savior of the universe, who had come to the earth to eliminate the evil and restore Dharma - righteousness. But this divine play cannot be known to many. Only a few sages were aware that Divinity had taken birth on this earth. Rest (like us) including the king, the queens, the citizens of Ayodhya took Rama and his brothers as ordinary humans.)

## Rama and Laxmana defeat the demons

Meanwhile the forest dwelling rishis and sages encountered great obstacles and difficulties in performing their rituals of Yagnas. The evil tendencies in the form of demons used to interfere in their practice and rites by way of beating up the rishis and their associates. Moreover, the demons used to pour blood and flesh in the sacrificial fire which made the Yagna 'impure'.

Therefore, a delegation of such rishis and sages led by the great sage Vishwamitra requested king Dasharatha to send Rama and Laxmana to their rescue. They convinced the king that although Rama and Laxmana were young and inexperienced, their bravery was unparalleled and unchallenged. These two brothers alone were capable of fighting the mighty demons and teach them a lesson for ever.

The tender heart of the Mother tried to resist this tough request. No mother wants her beloved son to take to such an arduous task at such a tender age. But the noble and dutiful king acceded to the just request of the rishis.

Thus the first encounter was on cards where fight between the good and bad tendencies was to occur. Of course the truth and good always prevails. And as such the young princes defeated the demons and returned to Ayodhya in due course of time. The fame



and glory of Sri Rama and his brothers spread all over Ayodhya as well as to far off places.

The mighty demon king Ravana in far off Lanka also learnt about this upcoming force, a challenge to his supremacy.

# Rama Marries Sita

Years passed by. The princes reached adulthood, and as was customary, it was felt that they should marry. The search for appropriate brides led King Dasharatha to the state of Mithila where king Janaka had four beautiful daughters of marriageable age. Amongst these Sita was the perfection of purity, grace, modesty, and beauty. King Janaka had arranged for Sita's marriage with the condition that she would marry that brave and powerful prince who would break the Bow of Shiva. This Bow of Lord Shiva was unbreakable for ordinary mortals! For the selfish person it was not approachable. Amongst the poor in spirit and cowards It created fear and terror.



All the four princes of Ayodhya led by Rama decided to participate in this marriage - Swayamvara - as is known. With great pomp and show, accompanied by their Guru (Teacher), the foursome left for Mithila on one auspicious day.

(A very beautiful account is given regarding the stay of these princess as the guests of Janaka. How accidental meeting of Rama and Sita leads to blooming of love in their bosoms; how Sita vows in heart of her heart to marry Rama and Rama alone, etc.)

And the day of reckoning dawns! One by one the princes from various states and kingdom try their luck in attempting to lift and break that Bow of Shiva. But was that ever possible! Was that ever destined! Even the most powerful amongst all the kings, all over the world, the great Ravana of Lanka could not even move the bow one inch above the ground! Everyone laughed at this tragic show and defeat of Ravana.

## Rama Succeeds

At last it was the turn of Rama. With due humility and respect, Rama saluted the Bow (i.e. Shiva Himself), and prayed to give him strength and courage to attempt and succeed in this almost impossible task. In one attempt Rama lifted and set apart the bow in two! The whole Royal Court was filled with shouts of 'Glory Unto Rama, Victory to Rama', etc. However, this made king Ravana jealous and insulted; he mentally vowed to defeat Rama some day if opportunity arose.

Thus, in most wonderful setting, the auspicious marriage of Rama and Sita took place. Along with Rama, his three brothers also got married to the three sisters of Sita. Four sons of King Dasharatha married four daughters of King Janaka!

Now this Sita, as already mentioned, was pious, obedient, intelligent, simple and sober lady; the perfect embodiment of purity in thoughts, words, and deeds. Other than Rama she could not and did not even think of other male. This faithfulness towards one man - husband - is a very special virtue of Indian Womanhood, and Sita is the true representative of this. It is, of course, also imperative that the husband should not think of other woman except his wife. Therefore, it is common in India to look upon and address every woman other than wife as "Mother or Sister".

[At the death of her husband, therefore, it was not unusual to see the widow attempting to immolate herself at the funeral pyre of her husband. Of course, later in medieval India, many instances of widow burning were related to acquisition of ancestral property etc - Sati Tradition. But that was an aberration rather than the rule. Today this system is not in vogue any more.]

Coming back to our story, the joyous marriage procession with decorated chariots, bullock carts, horses and elephants reached Ayodhya. The atmosphere was of celebration and merriment, as if the princes had returned after having won a Great War.



# Rama To Become King

To add to the joy of wedding, King Dasharatha announced that Rama, his eldest son, would succeed him to the throne of Ayodhya. Everyone, including the queens, the ministers, and the citizens of Ayodhya were overjoyed with this news. The auspicious day for this noble ceremony was decided accordingly.

## Manthara's Provocation

But there was a corner in the palace where this news caused a different reaction. Instead of joy and merriment, the chamber of queen Kaikeyi was tense. The maid-servant of queen Kaikeyi - Manthara by name - was trying to convince the queen how great injustice had been done to her and her son - Bharata. Instead of Rama, her son was the right successor to the throne.



Queen Kaikeyi was puzzled. Her love for Rama and Bharata knew no distinction; to her, her own son Bharata and Rama were equal. In fact, she was overjoyed that Rama would be the next king and Bharata would get opportunity to serve his elder brother. She thought Rama to be the proper choice because of his decent character, nobility, intelligence, bravery, and also because Rama was the son of eldest queen.

Reflecting thus, the queen said to her maid, "O Manthara, why raise this unnecessary controversy on this auspicious and opportune time? Are you not aware of my immense

and equal love for both Rama and Bharata? Moreover, Bharata also has no objection and is loyal to Rama."

But Manthara was in a different mood. Boldly she replied, "O honorable queen, pardon me for crossing my limits of modesty, but I must say what I feel to be just and correct towards my Lady and her son Bharata. If Rama becomes the king, your son Bharata would never get opportunity to occupy the cherished throne of Ayodhya. As a mother, should you not help him fulfill his ambition? And have you forgotten the past two boons the king - your husband - Dasharatha has conferred upon you!"

## The Story of Two Boons

Manthara was correct in reminding Kaikeyi about the two boons king Dasharatha had promised to her in the past. The circumstances were as follows:

Once in his youth, king Dasharatha was engaged in a ferocious battle with a powerful enemy. Queen Kaikeyi, who was young, brave, and very bold had insisted to accompany her husband in this battle. Both, the king and the queen, were in the same chariot when a major breakdown occurred as one wheel of their chariot got damaged. As such, life of the king was in great peril and danger. But the bold and brave queen was quick to throw her life for her husband's safety. She managed to control the chariot and supported the wheel with her arm! Her arm was bleeding and there was intense pain, but she endured. Her presence of mind and sacrifice resulted in not only saving the life of her husband but also his winning the battle.

So pleased was the king with Kaikeyi that he said, "O my beloved, today you have not only saved my life but also have set an example of bravery and presence of mind on the battle field. You have shown that women are not inferior in any way in the matter of bravery and sacrifice. I grant you two boons; ask for any two things or desires and I will fulfill the same for you. Whatever you shall ask I will give it to you. I promise."

With due regards for her husband, the queen told that she would seek her boons later in her life if and when she required anything. And King Dasharatha had agreed to this condition.

Thus, Manthara reminded the queen of those almost forgotten promises the king had made to her. She told the queen it was the most opportune time to claim those two promises NOW. And without any delay also suggested what should Kaikeyi demand:

1. Of the first boon, O queen, ask that instead of Rama her son Bharata be given the throne of Ayodhya, and,
2. Of the second, ask for the banishment of Rama to the forest for fourteen years. (Bharata was not present in Ayodhya during all this period.)

The weakness of human nature is very nicely described in the original text. How a small ambition and love for the son takes control of the mind of Kaikeyi that leads to major upheaval later in her own life, and in the lives of her near and dear ones. She would become a widow! as the tragic separation from his most loved son Rama was sure to take life force away from the heart of the king Dasharatha.

We must remember the first episode - story of [Shravana](#) - where the old father of dying Shravana, mortally wounded by the arrow of the king, had put the curse on Dasharatha: "I send a curse to you, O king, that you shall also die experiencing the pain and suffering of separation from your son."

# Kaikeyi's Resolve

And indeed Kaikeyi was convinced about the injustice being done to her son Bharata! She was angry and did not come out to greet her husband Dasharatha. Therefore, the king himself went to her chamber and inquired about her well being. In fact the king loved queen Kaikeyi the most!



But today the words of Manthara had done their trick. Queen Kaikeyi reminded Dasharatha about the two boons he had promised her years back. The king remembered and was in fact pleased to grant the boons on that auspicious day. And as the fate had it, Kaikeyi asked:

1. Of the first boon, O my beloved husband, I ask that instead of Rama Bharata be given the throne of Ayodhya, and,
2. Of the second boon, I ask for the banishment of Rama to the forest for fourteen years.

The king was not prepared for such unusual demands. He tried to persuade the queen to ask for something else, but no. Kaikeyi was firm in her resolve. The king went for compromise in granting the throne to Bharata but pleaded with his queen not to insist to send Rama to Forest. But still, no. Kaikeyi was firm on both the counts.

King Dasharatha was heartbroken on listening to the resolve of Kaikeyi to send Rama to the forest for fourteen years. He could not imagine even in dream that his most beloved son Rama would be put to such an acid test. He knew that the separation from Rama would be the last thing his old and frail body could tolerate. With heavy heart, he pleaded with his wife, "O Kaikeyi, what has possessed your kind heart! Why has your love for Rama disappeared! Please say that you are speaking in jest, and that you are not serious about your two demands."

"Ask for anything else. Ask for many palaces and jewelry, ask for army of thousand of elephants and horses, ask for my life, but spare my Rama from the hardships of forest and banishment to the life of recluse. I grant Bharata the throne of Ayodhya."

But, no. Kaikeyi was firm as a rock in her demands. Said she, "Come what may, you must keep your word of honour. If you fail, you will see my corpse at the sunrise next morning." She also reminded the King about the lofty tradition of keeping promises even at the cost of life in the Raghu dynasty.

The news reached the chamber of Rama and Sita, as also all around the palace, that something grossly inopportune has happened to the king, and that he is ill in the chamber of Kaikeyi. The prime minister - Sumanta - was summoned by the king to fetch Rama to the chamber of Kaikeyi.

When Rama reached there he saw his father lying semiconscious on the floor full of grief and pathos. His eyes were filled with tears of desperation and sorrow. Rama pleaded with Kaikeyi to tell him what had happened to his father. When the whole story of the promises etc. was told, Rama understood the situation very well. He knew that both King Dasharatha and himself are caught in a situation that demanded supreme sacrifice. Bharata was not present in Ayodhya during all these happenings.

Rama was full of praise for Kaikeyi. Said he,

"O mother, you have bestowed a great honour upon me by asking for these two promises. Firstly, I agree with you that Bharata would be a better king than I. Secondly, what of fourteen years of forest life! Time will fly with wink of the eyes. But I must be grateful to you for giving me the opportunity to be close with the nature. Moreover, I shall personally look after the conditions of subjects in far off places of our kingdom. I would be more than happy to redress their grievances. And most importantly, I shall get the rare opportunity to submerge myself in spiritual practices to seek the God. The daily hectic life of the king otherwise also comes in the way of God realization and meditation. And last but not the least, to uphold the word given by the parents is the duty of every son, even if it puts him to utmost suffering. It is a rare opportunity offered to anyone to die for the honor of his father."

## Sita and Laxmana Decide To Go With Rama

Thus Rama genuinely felt nothing at such an arduous predicament. Everyone present was stunned to listen to the brave and high thinking of Rama. Respect for Rama doubled in everyone's heart. But the daughter of Janaka - Janaki (i.e. Sita), the newly married wife of Rama, was not be left behind. After seeking permission from her mother-in-law, she spoke with dignity and composure to her husband, "O Lord, I will also accompany you to the forest."



Instantly many objections were raised by Queen Kausalya, Prime Minister, and Rama himself that for the newly wedded queen it would not be proper to leave the comforts of the palace and seek difficult life of the forest. Moreover, her in-laws needed her care more than the able-bodied husband. Kaikeyi has not asked her to accompany her husband.

But Sita was not to be so easily put off. With firm determination she said to Rama, "Please do not deny me the chance of serving you when you need it most. I am your shadow, I have taken wedding vows to be with you in joy and sorrow, in palace or in jungle, in life and death. I can not remain alive without you. If you still insist that I should stay here with your parents, I declare that I will jump in the river Sarayu after your departure!"

At last when every effort of persuasion failed, Rama conceded to the request of Sita, his wife, to accompany him. And then comes the extreme sacrifice of a brother for elder brother.

# Rama Banished to Forest

Laxmana who was watching all the proceedings with some emotions, said, "O brother, Sita and you are like mother and father to me. A child cannot remain alive separated from his parents. Let me accompany you both so that I not only can serve you, but also protect you from the predators and the demons of the jungle. Otherwise, who would look after you when you sleep under the open sky or a small make-shift hut? Will not the tender body of Sita-Ma suffer with efforts of labor all alone! O Rama, take me with you otherwise I would suffer like a fish out of water."

All eyes were wet with tears of distress and grief, except those of Kaikeyi and Manthara. The love between the brothers and supreme sacrifice of dutiful Sita made every heart heavy with tons of grief and pathos.

Next day the trio Rama, Laxmana, and Sita gave up the royal silk and the valuables and put on simple clothes fit for the forest life: robes of sanyasin. Sita still looked pretty without her ornaments, but every heart in Ayodhya was filled with despair and remorse. Every eye was wet with the tears of separation and sorrow. The palace was filled with the silence of grief. Around the palace every inch of land was occupied by the people of Ayodhya. Some were sitting in the path, others were lying down as if to prevent their beloved to leave. Nobody was in a mood to allow them to depart. It was difficult to control the crowd, it was equally difficult to control the emotions.

But promise was a promise, not only for the royal family, but for every citizen of Ayodhya. Everyone knew that although Kaikeyi was harsh in her demands, but she could not be faulted on that account alone. She had every right to demand her two promises which the King Dasharatha must keep, come what may. If it created tragic condition of gloom and helplessness the people were willing to suffer stoically, without violence or revenge. Kaikeyi never was threatened, no, nobody ever thought of harming her. But the crowd made the departure of our heroes very slow. Rama advised all to remain calm and collected; to support the would-be king Bharata, and to look after the ailing king Dasharatha and the helpless queens.

The night fell even as Rama-Laxmana-Sita could barely cross the limits of the city. It was painfully slow process to leave the people. At this juncture, minister Sumanta drove his chariot towards Rama and said, "My Lord, the people are asleep. Let me take you across the border quickly without much ado." Rama agreed and thus leaving all tired people behind, Rama-Laxmana-Sita fled far off under the cover of night sky.

## Story of Adivasi Chief Guhaka



Thus Rama-Laxmana-Sita reached the banks of the river Tamasa. The small, simple village was predominantly populated by the outcasts Bhilla, an aboriginal caste. The chief of this clan was Guhaka, a very wise man although illiterate. These simple, hard-working, honest and poor people were neglected as no officer would visit them in distress or want. The revenue minister and officials would be content to collect their dues and report to Ayodhya 'everything is fine there'.

Thus, although a part of Ayodhya kingdom, these people were denied any chance of contact with the royal house or the king. However, despite their poverty and inconvenience, their chief Guhaka was aware of the noble character and pious nature of Rama. He had also the news as to the recent ill-fated happenings in Ayodhya. Therefore, he was waiting for the arrival of Rama-Laxmana-Sita with great expectations and eagerness. He was keen to serve the nobility, and in particular Rama.

On their arrival, Guhaka arranged for their meals consisting of fruits and milk only as he was not sure whether other items would be accepted by the members of the royal family. He saluted Rama from a distance, but Rama went a step ahead and embraced the chief as his old friend! This unexpected gesture of solidarity beyond caste consideration on the part of Rama made Guhaka very happy. He could not control his tears that fell on the chest of Rama. Laxmana and Sita were silent witnesses to this high drama of love between the two.

The night fell and arrangements were made for Rama and Sita to retire. The bed of straw was hastily prepared as Rama refused to enter the village and accept the hospitality of the chief, saying, 'O dear friend, I have taken the vow of leading a simple life in a forest. I cannot come inside your palace.'

It is important to note that Rama and Sita did not have any physical contact during these fourteen years of forest life.

Laxmana did not sleep for he had come to protect and serve Rama and Sita. He and Guhaka had night long talk on the decency of Rama's character and divine qualities. According to Laxmana, Rama as the God-incarnate and Guhaka as the devotee made a wonderful duo of peace, love, and tranquility. Guhaka was also impressed with the insights that Laxmana offered about the real nature of Rama as Brahma-incarnate. It is the Absolute GOD that has deliberately planned all this sport of forest-treading, banishment, etc. so that more democratic, peaceful, righteous, society without caste and creed, racial or ethnic hatred should emerge.

Moreover, the king Ravana, the mighty Demon King of Lanka was too powerful wicked, and unrighteous who required to be vanquished. Only Rama was capable of defeating Ravana, and hence all this play of forest life

# Bharata

What was the reaction of Kaikeyi and others when Bharata returned to Ayodhya? What happened to king Dasharatha after Rama left for the forest?

As we know the minister Sumanta accompanied Rama and company for some time. The idea was to persuade Rama to return back to Ayodhya; the argument was that Kaikeyi would repent her hastiness and accept her mistake. She would not mind Rama coming back and stay at Ayodhya, even if Bharata be the king!

But, no. Rama flatly refused to return back. He said to his minister,

"O honorable one, I can understand your concern and love for me, but do not expect me to follow the course of action that has even minimum indication of cleverness, ambiguity, or suspicion. I have given my word to my father and people of Ayodhya to lead forest life of simplicity and renunciation for fourteen years, and I cannot think or act otherwise. It is not a question of comfort or privilege, it a matter of principle, truth, which one must even die to uphold. Don't I know that Sita who is so tender and inexperienced is suffering? But once decided let us do our duty."

## Bharata Returns to Ayodhya

Thus Sumanta, without success, had returned to Ayodhya. Meanwhile, news of these dramatic happenings was sent to Bharata who was far away from Ayodhya. He was told that king Dasharatha sought his urgent meeting. He was not told about the banishment of Rama, role of his mother, and critical condition of his father.

But when he entered the boundaries of the kingdom, he was aware that something was amiss. "Why the birds are not at their usual happy chirping? Why these cattle is dried up and thinned out? Why all people are so silent, instead of their usual fun and play; their eyes swollen as if with constant crying? Why the usual sweet music and singing at the palace not audible to his ears?"

He could guess of impending tragedy, but was not sure as to what exactly might have happened. He straight way went to the chamber of his mother and was pained to see his father lying semiconscious on the floor. He was angry as well as confused. With a firm voice he inquired of her mother,





"O mother, what is all this? Can anyone tell me what has happened to my father, who has brought this disgrace to him, and why is Rama not to be seen?" A series of rapid fire question, but no immediate answer! Who would describe this sudden catastrophe where villain was of his mother Kaikeyi only! Ultimately through the intervention of the ministers gradually Bharata came to know all the details of the happenings. He was flabbergasted that her mother would be so mean to take life of her own husband! How can she not feel the pain of separation from her son Rama! Then with language that was sharper than the razor's edge, Bharata takes her mother to the task.

Says he, "O mother, to call you mother is an insult to motherhood. Indian tradition does not allow to kill one's mother and hence I am desisted from doing so, otherwise any one other you would have not remained alive for more than a minute after doing this to my father and brother Rama. Let the world know that from today you cease to remain my mother, I will not speak to you for fourteen years. From today onwards my mother's place is taken by Kausalya and Sumitra."

Bending low down, he then lifted the head of his father in his lap and said, "O father, what should I do to pacify you? On one side there is that noble Rama and here I am so unlucky and useless to become the king at the cost of my father and brother. Why have I lived to see this unfortunate day! please tell me father what is your command for me."

### Dasharatha Dies Separated From Son Rama

Thus full of remorse Bharata did not know exactly as to what he should do. In a weak voice then, Dasharatha said, "O my son, my end is near, I cannot live where Rama is

not. The life force here draws its sustenance from Rama alone. But my request to you is to go and fetch Rama-Laxmana-Sita from wherever they may be. After my departure from this earthly bond, I do not want the people of Ayodhya and all of you to suffer the agony of separation from Rama."

All eyes were wet. Bharata vowed to seek the forest-dwelling of Rama and to bring him back and offer him his legitimate right to throne. On hearing these words the heart of Dasharatha was pacified to some extent, and he breathed his last with repetition of 'He Rama, He Rama, He Rama.

## Rishis Praise Rama

Soon the trio reached the holy Ashrama of the sage Bharadwaja. The sadhu received them with dignity and poise. The sage was already aware of the true nature of Rama and his mission:

"Whenever there is threat to righteousness, whenever vices prevail, whenever the saints and sadhus (spiritual aspirants) are threatened with unrighteousness, Brahman, with the help of His Maya-Shakti (Power) incarnates as Rama (or Krishna, etc.) on the earth."

Why?

"To show the right path to the devotees and to remove the obstacles in their way by subduing the wicked."

After accepting the hospitality of tribal -low caste- people and thereby establishing a new and revolutionary precedence, Rama-Laxmana-Sita proceeded ahead. They reached the bank of mighty and holy river Ganges. The boatman, Kewat, washed the holy feet of the trio and made arrangements for taking them to the other shore. When Rama offers him the fare, the devotee Kewat, eyes full of tears, describes the glory of Lord in a touching song. Says he,

"Sri Rama, the Almighty Redeemer, who ferries millions of souls across this ocean of worldliness seeks himself to be ferried across the river today! Lord seeks help from his Bhakta! I must have done some good work in my past birth to get this opportunity to serve Rama. O Compassionate One, to deem my fare, I will wait for fourteen years on this bank of river till your return."

Seeking tearful leave from the boatman, Rama and company reached the holiest confluence of three rivers in India - Triveni Sangam of the rivers Ganga - Yamuna - Saraswati at Prayag, North India. The confluence of Bhakti - devotion, Jnana - knowledge, and Karma - action.

# Bharata Persuades Rama to Return

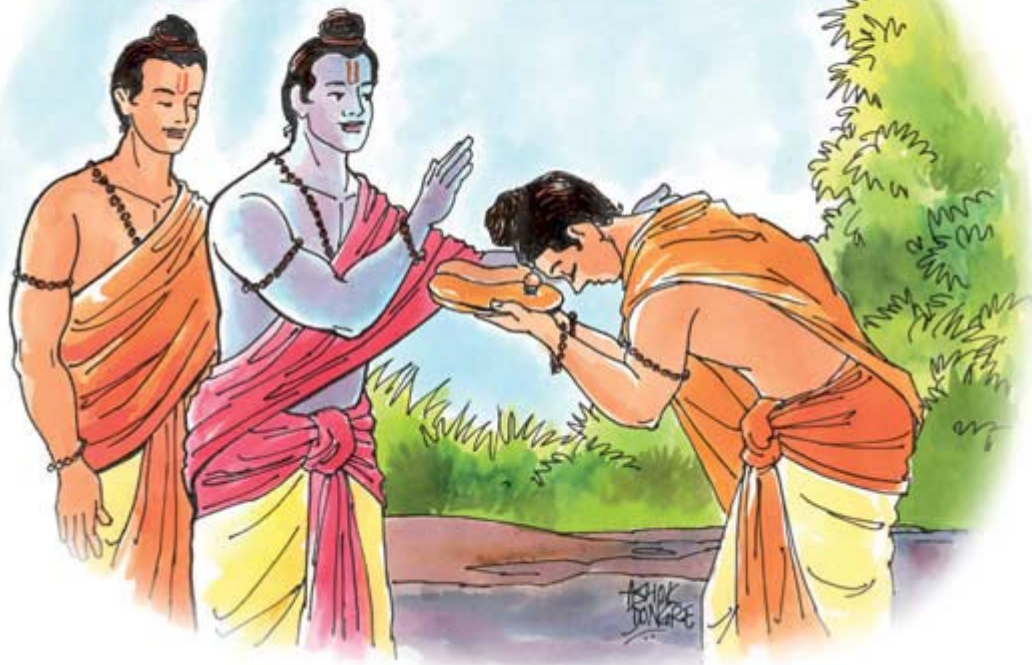
Rama, Laxmana and Sita proceed further and the Holy Trio reached the mountain top at Chitrakoot. Here they decided to stay for sometime and took last salutes from all accompanying friends and Rishis. They now wanted to remain within themselves and lead the hard and simple forest life as directed by mother Kaikeyi. The poor forest people came with fruits and other food. They saluted the trio for their benevolence.

They were ever vigilant lest the leopards and other jungle animals should hurt these royal guests. Rama also loved these neglected tribal people. He understood their plight and hardships to earn their living and food. He was highly impressed with their knowledge of the plants and herbs, and equally for their concern and care to preserve the forest - eco-friendly nature!

Bharata meanwhile was persuaded to take the reigns of Ayodhya in his hands, as it was thought unwise and improper that the throne of Ayodhya should remain vacant without legitimate king. Bharata did not agree to this. He said that only after meeting Rama this whole affair can be sorted out and settled.

Kaikeyi, Kausalya, Sumitra, Gurudev Vashistha, many officers of the royal army and a huge population of Ayodhya accompanied Bharata on his 'pilgrimage' to meet Rama. Bharata also adored simple dress of sanyasin and started on foot as directed by the minister, Guhaka, and sages Bharadwaja and Valmiki. Thus the party reached the base of Chitrakoot mountain.

The tribal eager to protect their respected Rama-Laxmana-Sita obstructed their path thinking them to be the invaders or enemy. But finding Bharata without bow and arrow and seeing tears in every eye, they desisted from attacking them. Some of the tribesmen rushed to the mountain top and explained the scene below. It took no time for Rama to know that his brother Bharata had come to meet him.



Bharata and his associates were escorted in the presence of Rama with due respect and poise. Seeing Rama-Laxmana-Sita in a simple dress without ornaments and royal paraphernalia, Bharata's heart was filled with intense grief. His eyes gave vent to flood of uncontrollable tears. Rama too could not check his emotions, and rushed to hug his beloved brother Bharata. No one spoke for a long time that appeared as eternity. Continuous flow of tears calmed their hearts and mind after a while.

Bowing down at the feet of Rama and taking the holy dust from them, Bharata politely said,

"O brother, why did you not wait for my return? Did you also think that I would be pleased to get the throne of Ayodhya? How did you forget that without you Ayodhya, or for that matter whole of kingdom of universe, is like a mud puddle for me! Did you not know that mother Kaikeyi had committed a grave mistake which I was sure to rectify? Now I invite you to return to Ayodhya and take the reigns in your hand. O brother, our father could not bear the separation from you and has left for heavenly abode. We have all become orphans now; your return is the only saving grace now. Otherwise everything is like food without salt."

Everyone was watching with dismay and respect the meeting of these two brothers. Nowhere on the earth such brotherly love was ever witnessed nor would be seen in future, they thought. Rama lifted the bent down Bharata, took him to his breast again and consolingly said,

"My dear brother, why do you also behave like common folk? Where has your bravery, discrimination, and self confidence vanished! Why do you think this to be hour of crisis? No my dear, this is not any crisis. The destiny should never be mistaken for tragedy. First of all you must never utter a single word against mother Kaikeyi. She is a lady of great honour and judgment. She has not committed any crime, he is not a sinner as you mistakenly believe. She has done a great favour to Ayodhya and mankind which will be revealed to you and others during these fourteen years.

Yes, these fourteen years are offered to me by her to spread my kingdom of peace, equality and social justice. Even though ordinary folks may rebuke her for her actions, the wise and learned would bow down to her in reverence for the unparalleled opportunity she opened up for me establishes the rule of Dharma! hence do not grieve. Go back to Ayodhya and rule as a noble, wise, and kind king for the welfare of all irrespective of caste and social status. See that injustice is firmly handled with a blend of kindness. Ensure that aspirations of all are fulfilled."

Gradually Bharata could see reason. The rule of heart shifted to rule of intellect. He took a vow in front of Rama and others, saying, "O Rama, I agree with what you said. but remember, I will take care of Ayodhya on your behalf from my ashrama in a nearby village. The throne will be decorated with the wooden sandals of your feet which I beg you to give to me. I refuse to enter Ayodhya till your return after fourteen years. If you fail to show up after fourteen years I will immolate myself on the burning pyre."

When it was found that the resolve of Bharata was final, Rama agreed to his conditions and gave away his wooden shoes to Bharata who carried them on his head to Ayodhya.'



# Shurpankha

At Chitrakoot, Rama, Laxmana, and Sita passed their time in prayers, repetition of Lord's name - japa, Yoga and meditation. Laxmana used to collect food items for morning and evening meals. Rama and Sita used to collect fresh flowers for preparing beautiful bouquets and garlands. The hut used to be decorated with these flowers, and at times Sita would be pleased to adore a flower or two in her long and beautiful hairdo.

Sita used to cook the food which consisted of roots, vegetables and milk preparations. In the evening supper consisted of fruits and milk alone. Thus they lived a very simple and peaceful life. Everyone was very happy. Thoughts of dissatisfaction, inconvenience, and longing for palace life never entered their mind anytime.

Many sages and Rishis, engaged in various spiritual practices and austerities, came to Rama for his advice in seeking God. Discussion went on the subjects like devotion - Bhakti, Karma -action, knowledge -Jnana, and meditation etc. Study of Holy Scriptures and Books was added pleasure when Rama used to enlighten them about the nuances and subtleties of the philosophical arguments therein.

Peace and tranquility descended on the land. Nature was equally hospitable to them with plenty of clean and fresh springs, healthy crop, fresh vegetables and fruits. It is believed that for more than twelve years the holy trio lived at Chitrakoot. Later they decided to move southward where the demons were creating lots of difficulties for the common folk to live peacefully. These Rakshasas (demons) used to beat up the sincere spiritual aspirants - sadhus and sanyasins - and used to obstruct their religious rituals. The purpose of Rama to incarnate on the earth was to destroy these selfish and wicked demons and free the land of evil tendencies so that righteous rule of truth, simplicity, love, and worship of God were reestablished again on the earth.

## Journey Further Southward

The party thus moved to the forest of Dandakaranya in central India. The place is known as Panchavati near present day Nasik. Two huts known as parnakutis were erected for Rama-Sita and Laxmana respectively. On their way to Panchavati Rama met sage Atri and Agasthi and discussed certain aspects of devotion and karma theory.

## Story of Shurpankha

One day Rama and Laxmana were sitting a distance apart near their forest dwelling. As it happened Shurpankha, sister of Ravana, was passing from there. She was ugly looking widow, but was ambitious and powerful because of protection assured by her brother, the mighty King of Lanka, Ravana. She fell in love with Rama at first sight!



With her maya power she changed herself in a very beautiful maiden and approached Rama with a lady-in-love like gestures. As she came near, Rama inquired, "O lady, who are you, what can I do for you?" Shurpankha replied, "O handsome, I have fallen in love with you. I am also beautiful, therefore, please marry me."

In those days polygamy was not unusual in common people, and hence such requests were natural. But Rama never dreamt of any other woman as his wife other than Sita. He had vowed to monogamy. Moreover he could very easily see through the plan of Shurpankha. It did not take him more than a second to know the real nature of the beautiful woman in front of him. But he also decided to play some joke on her. Therefore Rama said, "O lady, I am sorry I cannot marry you. I am already wedded to one wife Sita. But my younger brother, Laxmana who is sitting there is still unmarried and he may be pleased to marry you. Why don't you approach him!"

Shurpankha agreed and went to Laxmana with similar request to accept her as his bride. Laxmana also was in a jolly mood. He told her to go again to Rama because at present he did not have any plans to marry. Thus three or four times Shurpankha was shuttled between the two brothers. At last her patience gave way and she came to her original form and threatened to kill Rama and Laxmana. At this folly of her, Laxmana was irritated and as a result cut her nose and ears with the arrow. Bleeding and in rage, she fled to her one of the brothers, in nearby forest. The demon, brother of Ravana and equally powerful as Ravana, marched with huge army to put an end to the tormentors of his sister. A great fight broke out and ultimately the demons were defeated.

Seeing the end of his brother, Shurpankha rushed to her second brother Ravana and narrated the whole story. Ravana was puzzled. He could not understand that a single sanyasin like person could defeat his brother and his army. He thought over the matter and came to the conclusion that Rama must be God incarnate and nobody else. But he promised his sister that he would take revenge of her insult

# Ravana

Ravana was the king of Lanka. His prosperity could be judged by the fact that his Lanka – capital city – was built in gold. Everyone had enough of food and shelter. Except for his brother Vibhishana, and to some extent his (Ravana's) wife Mandodari, rest of the people in his kingdom followed Ravana's path of material enjoyment as the goal in life. He had a huge army to defend his kingdom which was rarely threatened and nobody even imagined in dream that it would be. Moreover, the location of his capital was such that outsiders could not venture to reach there, as a sprawling sea separated it from the far off land.

Ravana was the mightiest king on the earth at his time. He was very learned and accomplished person. He was great devotee of Lord Shiva, and had obtained the boon that he would not be killed by anyone other than the Lord Himself! He was well versed in Vedas, and other scriptures. He used to worship Lord Shiva daily. His bravery, courage, and expertise in use of all types of instruments of war like bow and arrow, mace, sword, so on was acknowledged by everyone.

Moreover, he was gifted with special supernatural powers known as Mayawi-Shakti. With its help he could fly in the air, become invisible, could throw rain, fire, or thousands of arrows in a war encounter. He had many other powers granted to him by Brahma God as well. Then, still, why call him wicked or evil? This was because he was selfish! He was interested in using all these powers for himself only, and that too to gratify his senses alone. He did not believe that all spiritual disciplines and worship are meant to seek refuge at the Holy Feet of his Chosen Ideal, but wanted to make use of all such powers to rule over the world as unconquerable King.

Thus he was full of lust, pride, anger, covetousness, infatuation, hatred, and jealousy. These tendencies, according to our scriptures, cause downfall of a man and hence such persons are called Demons. They are engrossed in a life style where they are blind to the values of compassion, kindness, and service. They practice unrighteousness, and do not allow the devotees or sadhakas to pursue their spiritual practices to seek God (or Self or Truth, or Atman or Brahman). Religion takes a downhill course.

And hence God incarnates to destroy them to establish means and ways of righteousness - Rama as Avatara.

## Ravana Becomes Furious



As Shurpanakha, his sister, narrated the insulting treatment meted out to her by the two brothers Rama and Laxmana, the anger rose high in the heart and head of Ravana. Fuel was added to fire when Ravana heard that Sita, wife of Rama, laughed at the cutting of the ears and nose of his sister. He decided to avenge this insult. Pacifying her sister, he decided to reach the Dandakaranya to kidnap Sita as a way of revenge! Ravana Plans Abduction of Sita.

## The Story of Golden Deer

Ravana made all the arrangements to start for his mission. Meanwhile, his minister, Marich, offered his help to accomplish his mission. Near the Panchavati, Marich changed himself in the form of a beautiful golden deer! Jumping here and there, it caught sight of Sita. Rama and Laxmana were also present in the hut. Pleadingly, Sita said, "O honorable Rama, look what a wonderful golden deer is roaming around our hut. I am very much desirous of having his skin for my use. Will you not bring it for me?"

Rama tried to dissuade her from such disturbing thought, but Sita did not desist. She insisted to have the skin of golden deer. Ultimately Rama acceded to her request. Calling attention of brother Laxmana, Rama said, "O brother, I am going after the deer to fetch its skin. Be vigilant and protect Sita in case of any difficulty or predicament. I do not know why I have this premonition of calamity befalling us."

Laxmana promised to look after Sita. As soon as the deer - demon Marich - got the hint of Rama coming after him, he fled with the speed unheard of. It went far away. Rama ran after the deer in great speed but could not shoot his arrow as the distance between



the two was always great. At last Rama shot his arrow which mortally wounded the deer. On falling to the ground, deer Marich shouted, mimicking the voice of Rama,

"O brother Laxmana, rush to help me, I am wounded." This he repeated thrice in a very loud voice that would reach the ears of Sita and Laxmana. On hearing the cry of her husband, Sita asked Laxmana to rush to help Rama.

# Ravana Abducts Sita

Laxmana was in a fix. He knew that Rama could never get hurt, and secondly he was specifically asked by his elder brother to remain by the side of Sita. If he leaves Sita he disobeys Rama which might bring some misfortune, and if he does not proceed to help Rama Sita is displeased!

## The Laxman Rekha

Still, as per the voice of his conscience, he requested Sita to remain calm as no difficulty can come Rama's way. She might have imagined the voice as of her husband's. However, Sita was persistent in her demand that Laxmana must go to Rama's rescue. At last with heavy heart, Laxmana decided to go in search of Rama. But before leaving Sita alone, he drew a line - Laxmana Rekha - that Sita should never cross. (In the event of any one including Sita crossed that Laxmana Rekha the person was sure to get burnt.) Sita promised not to cross the same and after that Laxmana went in search of Rama and the deer.

## Ravana Lifts Sita



Here near the hut, Ravana made his appearance as he was sure Rama and Laxmana could/would not come back soon. He also through his *Mayawi* Power changed himself into a monk - Sanyasin and as the custom went, came to the hut of Sita begging for

food. "*Bhiksham dehi mai*", said Ravana to Sita. (Give me food, O mother.) [In India, today also, it is customary to give alms and food to the begging sanyasin.]

With a tray of some fruits and food Sita came out of the hut at the call of the 'guest' at her door. However, she did not dare to cross the line drawn by Laxmana lest she should get burnt, and hence, she offered the *bhiksha* from well within the limits of Laxmana Rekha.

Sanyasin Ravana was also equally well aware of the power of that line, crossing of which was sure to see his end! Therefore, pretending to be unhappy at Sita's reservation in serving a 'holy person' from a distance, he shouted, "O noble lady, have you forgotten the lofty and honored tradition of your clan? How can I accept the alms given with reservation and insult! Please come out and give the offerings with propriety and decorum befitting your Aryan tradition."

Thus influenced, no sooner did Sita cross the line than the mighty Ravana took his chance and lifted Sita on his shoulders and fled away. The terrified lady shouted for help, but of no avail. Soon Ravana was flying high in the sky to take aerial route towards his capital city of Lanka. The cry of her help could not reach distant Rama and Laxmana.

## Story of Jatayu

But a vulture named Jatayu staying on the nearby tree, and a great devotee of Rama, was quick to respond. He could not keep quiet at the plight of helpless Sita although he knew that he was no match for the mighty Ravana. He was not afraid of him even though it was clear that he would get killed by obstructing the path of Ravana. But he decided to save Sita from the clutches of Ravana at any cost. Taking the name of Rama, he attacked the escaping Ravana within his whole might. His sharp nails and the beak tore flesh from the body of Ravana. Ravana also attacked Jatayu with his sword. The fight went on for quite some time. Jatayu was bleeding from the wounds all over his body. He was exhausted with energy drained out of his wings. At last Ravana cut off his wings and Jatayu fell to the ground.

His mission was not yet complete though. He wanted to meet Rama in his last moments and also tell him about Sita. Therefore, although on his death bed, Jatayu went on repeating the name of Rama - Rama, Rama, Rama.

Laxmana reached the spot where Rama had just killed the demon Marich. Laxmana found Rama unharmed as he expected. He told Rama how Sita forced him to rush for his (Rama's) help on hearing the cry. It did not take long for Rama to put together all the demonic tricks played by Ravana and Marich. He feared that Sita might have landed in great difficulty. Therefore, the brothers rushed to the hut at Panchavati. They were very much apprehensive at the eerie silence surrounding the hut.

"O Sita, come out; where are you", they shouted. But how can Sita respond! She was not there. The brothers began their search near and around the hut, in the nearby forest, and went on and on. With tears in his eyes, Rama asked the shrubs and the creepers if they had seen his Sita. He inquired of animals and the trees whether they had any knowledge about Sita.

Then a faint voice of Rama, Rama, Rama was discernible from a short distance. They

turn towards the voice and found to their dismay Jatayu lying on the ground reciting the name of Rama. Rama took the wounded bird in his arms and inquired as to who had injured him so ruthlessly. Jatayu told them about Ravana, how he had kidnapped Mother Sita, and had fled to the South. He exhorted Rama to follow the wicked demon and rescue the holy Sita.

At last the pious Jatayu bowed down at the holy feet of Rama and breathed his last in the lap of his chosen ideal. After performing the last rites of Jatayu, Rama and Laxmana started southwards in search of Sita

# Shabri

On their way southwards Rama and Laxmana passed through many difficult terrain. The forests were sparsely populated. Occasionally one encountered an ashrama of a sage with a small village around it. One such ashrama belonged to rishi Matang whose heart grieved for the lowly and downtrodden.

In his ashrama, one tribal devotee of Rama, named Shabri, used to stay. She used to keep the place clean and tidy, and along with that she also performed her japa - repeating the holy name of GOD, did her ritualistic worship by offering flowers etc., and sang many songs in the glory of the Lord. Her chosen ideal was Rama for whose meeting she was waiting for long time.

Years passed by; Rishi Matang became old. When he was on his death-bed, he called Shabari near him and said, "Look, O devotee of Rama, your tapasya - austerities - and spiritual longing for Rama would not go in vain. Sri Rama is sure to visit this ashrama, this I can say on the basis of my spiritual power. Therefore, after my departure, I plead you to wait for Rama's arrival. Hence take charge of this ashrama and live in peace and as a devotee of Rama. Your efforts would be rewarded in due course of time." So saying the rishi passed away.

Simple hearted, poor, and belonging to lower caste, Shabari did not know much about running the ashrama. Soon everyone left her. The birds, the flowers, the shrubs and occasional domesticated animal became her friends. But she had full faith in the words of her Guru Matang. When he had said Sri Rama would come to that ashrama, she could not disbelieve those words.

Hence Shabari used to clean the place early in the morning, collect fruits, and would wait looking at the distant road for her Rama to come. Every day this was her routine. Every day she thought "Rama would definitely come today!" In these days of eager wait and expectation of seeing her Rama, she forgot all about her rituals, worship, japa or songs! She forgot about day and night, month and year as well as the seasons. Rains were replaced by the winter, winter turned into summer of scorching heat, but Shabari had lost her interest in everything. For her the sun rose with the definite hope that her Rama would come that day and she would be able to serve him.



These long years of wait turned Shabari into an old woman. Her eye sight became dim and the hearing was affected. She had no remorse. She continued to keep her tiring body busy in her routine of cleaning the ashrama and collecting fruits for Rama.

One day, at last, Sri Rama arrived in the ashrama. Pleasure of Shabari knew no bounds. The long awaited desire was fulfilled. Falling at the feet of Rama she said, "O Rama, I cannot describe your kindness in words. When so many great sadhakas (rishis and munis and yogis), cannot seek your Grace even in many births, you have come to me so soon."

So saying she washed the holy feet of her chosen ideal and offered him berries which she had collected from the forest that morning. And the beauty of the relation between the true Bhakta and the Lord was such that Rama was happy in eating the same fruit that had been tasted by Shabari herself, lest the fruit should be bitter!

Laxmana, with tears rolling down his cheeks, was silently observing the pure love between God and the devotee. Until now he used to think that there was nobody on the earth or heaven who loved Rama as dearly as he did. But today Shabari proved him wrong. When tears dried down in the eyes of Shabari, when her voice was not choking, when she lifted her eyes from the holy feet of Rama then Laxmana bowed down at the feet of Shabari and said, "O mother, your love for Rama will be remembered for ever in this world. I bow down in reverence to the great devotee of Sri Rama."

Then Shabari inquires about the purpose of their such hard journey. Rama recounts the sad tell of kidnapping of Sita, etc. Reflecting upon the facts, Shabari directs them to go



further southwards to Pampa lake and to Kishkindha where the monkey king Sugreeva and the great Rama devotee monkey Hanuman would be of great help in their search of Sita.

# Rama Meets Hanuman

Rama and Laxmana left the ashrama of Shabari and reached the Pampa Lake further South. It was a pleasant site; the water of the lake was sweet and clear. All animals were seen drinking from the same spot. Rivalry and cruelty was foreign to the spot. Surrounding trees were blooming with fruits and flowers.

Here the two brothers rested for a couple of days. The evergreen sage Narada visited Rama to seek advice on the nuances and subtleties of Bhakti -Yoga of Devotion or Worship. The expressions of Bhakti in a spiritual aspirant were discussed. Rama told Narada about the nine types of Bhakti:

- One who enjoys the Association of Sages is Bhakta. And who is a sage? In whose presence one gets peace and happiness of mind and soul is a sage.
- Second Bhakti is to listen to the stories and glory of God with all humility and love.
- To worship the holy feet of one's Guru (Teacher) and to serve him as per one's ability is third bhakti.
- To have firm faith in the teachings of scriptures and Mantra, Japa, etc. is another form of worship.
- To control the sense organs, and to be able to stabilize the mind in the constant remembrance of the Lord is one form of Bhakti.
- To attempt to visualize the same God in everything and in all situations is the next form of Bhakti.
- To remain contented, non covetous and satisfied in whatever condition the lord has placed one in is the eighth type of devotion, and
- To lead a simple guileless life, not to injure or harm anyone, to have firm faith in the existence of God, and to be equal in pain and pleasure is the last form of Bhakti.
- One who attempts to acquire any one of these virtues is a Bhakta - devotee of the Lord.

## Meeting of Rama and Hanuman



Soon Rama and Laxmana reached the foothills of Rishyamuk mountains. Here the king Sugreeva of monkey clan was staying with his ministers and friends. One of them was mighty Hanuman, the noblest devotee of Rama. This intelligent monkey was well versed in all the scriptures and was pure by thought, words, and deeds. He had vowed to remain celibate all throughout his life, and therefore he looked at every woman as mother. His devotion to Rama was eternal, and he thought himself to be the most obedient servant of Rama! This sadhana with servant attitude is called as Dasya-bhava. Hanuman is worshipped all over in India as the deity of purity, power, and eliminator of all evils.

On seeing the two foreigners coming to the mountain, Sugreeva asked Hanuman to see with what intentions these two had come to Kishkindha. Accordingly, Hanuman came down as a Brahmin priest, and inquired, "O noble ones, who are you and what brings you here? It seems you are warriors but you have taken to life of sanyasins. Why is it so? O delicate ones of royal origin, your feet are having blisters due to this rough terrain. Please tell me about yourselves."

Thus spoken to with modesty and humility, Rama answered, "O Noble Monkey, we are the princes from Ayodhya. My name is Rama and he is my brother Laxmana. As it happens, some demon has kidnapped my wife Sita and we are moving in search of her. And by the way who are you, who speaks to us with such devotion and love?"

No sooner did Rama speak thus than Hanuman realized that he was face to face with his Ishta - Lord Rama. The amnesia of this birth suddenly vanished and Hanuman could

see the glorious form of his Master full of effulgence and grace.

With tears in his eyes, he prostrated at the lotus feet of Rama and said, "O Lord, you have taken such a long time to come to your devotee that this Hanuman has almost become ignorant fool not to recognize you. What a foolish question to ask - who are you!"

Rama lifted his devotee and put him to his breast, patting him on his back. The tears flowed freely from the eyes of Rama and Hanuman. Laxmana who was astonished to see the second devotee (first one was Shabari) whom Rama loved more than him (Laxmana). But jealousy! No. Laxmana was an intelligent devotee of Rama, capable to understand that Sri Rama had all types of Devotees who come to earth to contribute their might, and help Rama in his mission. Therefore, he also hugged Hanuman with same love and reverence

# Sugreeva and Vali

Soon Rama and Laxmana were invited to visit the camp where with the help of Sugreeva and other friends they were sure to find out some way to locate as to where Sita could have been taken away.

## Sugreeva's Story

Sugreeva had run away from his kingdom in the fear of his elder brother Vali. Vali was very powerful and cruel king of Kishkindha. He had once defeated the mighty Ravana also. As it happened, once a demon Mayavi challenged Vali's supremacy. Vali accepted the challenge and fight broke out between the two. They entered one cave and continued their fight inside. Vali specifically told Sugreeva to remain stationed at the mouth of the cave and wait for him for fifteen days. "I will kill this demon and return", Vali told Sugreeva.

But even after more than fifteen days, nobody returned. one day blood was seen flowing from the cave and Sugreeva thought that Vali must have been killed, and it was likely that the demon would kill him too. So Sugreeva ran away to his kingdom and waited for Vali. But Vali did not return even after a few weeks. Therefore he declared himself to be the new king in place of Vali.

A few months passed thus. The injured Vali recovered from his wounds and regained his strength to return to his kingdom. He was trembling with rage when he found that his unfaithful brother has acceded to his throne. He suspected foul play and thrashed Sugreeva almost to death. Somehow Sugreeva escaped and ran for his life to take shelter on the heights of Risyamuk mountains.

Further Rama was told that Vali had also forcefully taken his (Sugreeva's) wife as the new queen. Sugreeva and Hanuman pleaded that Vali was unjust and cruel king and his rule was causing immense hardship and suffering to the people of Kishkindha. Hence, Rama must put an end to his life and make Sugreeva the king again.

## Rama Kills Vali



Rama agreed as he had seen that although Sugreeva was a coward fellow he was not wicked. He had not occupied the throne intentionally or through scheme. He really believed that Vali was killed in fight. Therefore, Rama accepted him as his friend and promised to eliminate Vali. Accordingly, The party left for the capital city and Sugreeva, under the instructions of Rama, challenged his brother to come out and fight it out for the final decision as to who should rule Kishkindha. During the fight Rama put an end to the life of mighty Vali with a powerful arrow. Sugreeva thus was reinstated as the king. He promised Rama to help him in finding out the whereabouts of Sita. Accordingly plans were drawn and four groups were formed to reach out East, West, North and South territories.

### Serach for Sita Starts

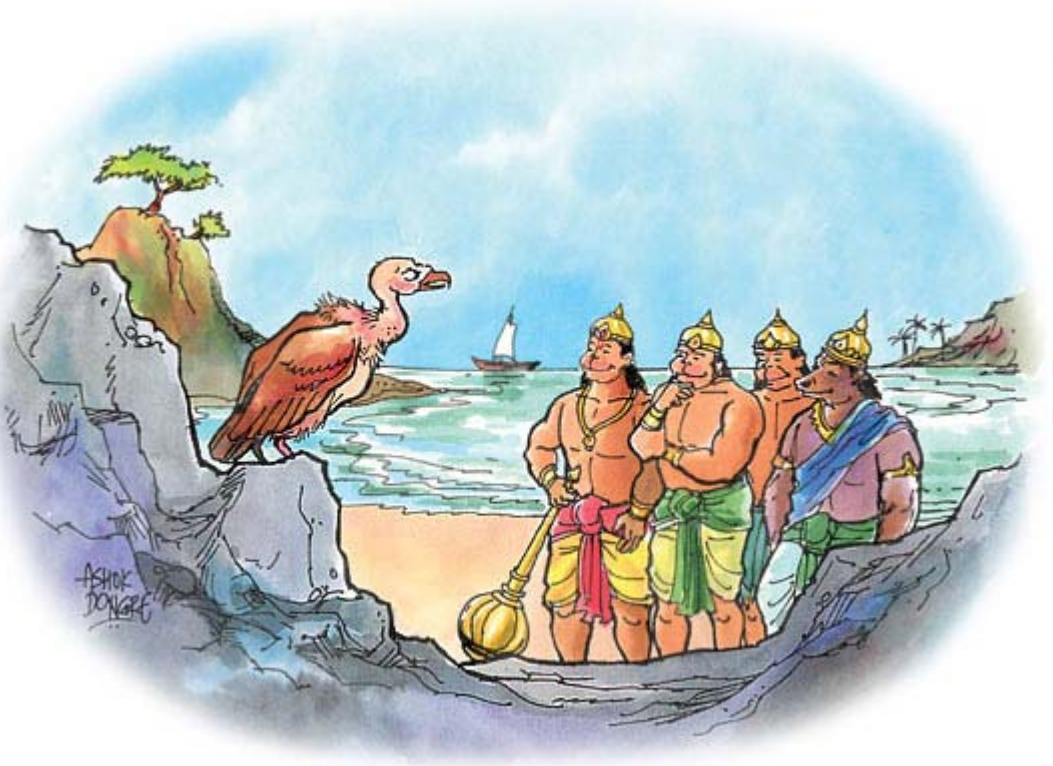
Son of late Vali - Angad - had joined his uncle and Rama in this mission. He became a great devotee of Rama. Jambuwanta, a bear, also came to help them. Thus Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman, Sugreeva, Angad, and Jambuwanta headed south where chances of finding Sita were highest.



# Search of Sita

The urgency of finding Sita was visible in the movements of these devotees of Rama. It was decided that both Rama and Laxmana should take rest and wait for them to bring the news of the whereabouts of Sita. Thus Hanuman, Angad, Jambuwanta, and others reached the southern tip of India. The vast Indian Ocean was seen spread out as limitless expanse. No one knew what to do next. Hanuman was not prepared to return back to Rama without definite news of Mother Sita. He would rather put an end to life than go empty handed to his Master.

Thus, confused and with anxiety laden heart, almost dejected, these mighty Rama Bhaktas sat down on the rock near the sprawling ocean shore. Behind them, in a cave not far off, a huge vulture, almost famished with hunger, was pleased to see these people as his prey! Sampati was his name. His sense of hearing, vision, and smell were phenomenally acute. His power was such that he could eat a person in one bite! Thus, to satisfy his age-old hunger, he decided to attack one of them.



But, just then he heard Hanuman talking about Jatayu: How he had tried to protect Sita from the hands of Ravana. The sudden surprise of Sampati was attributed to Jatayu being his brother! To know more about Jatayu and his fate Sampati went near the group and inquired, "O noble ones, who are you? From whence do you come to this remote and lonely place? And may I know the details of your reference to my brother Jatayu?"

Thus spoken to, Hanuman narrated the valiant sacrifice Jatayu made in the attempt to

rescue Sita. He further told Sampati about Rama, Laxmana, and Sita, and how Ravana had kidnapped Sita. They had come to that remote place in search of Sita. Sampati thought over the matter. When he realized that Sri Rama - the Lord Himself - had liberated the soul his brother, he also decided to help Rama in his mission to eliminate evil from this earth.

## Sita Located In Lanka!

He could see for miles ahead across the sea. His penetrating vision could visualize every tiny detail on an island there. And, yes, on the island of Lanka, was seated a lady under the tree in a beautiful garden - Ashokvan. He realized that it was the kingdom of the mighty Ravana. He could also see that Sita was under arrest and many watchful eyes were on her, mostly of demon lady servants of Ravana. He narrated the scene to others. Angad, Hanuman, Jambuwanta and others were full of joy.

But their joy was short lived. Hanuman said that it was useless to go Rama without positive proof about Sita. Someone must go there to actually talk to Sita, confirm and return after which they should inform Rama. For this purpose said Hanuman, he had already brought the royal and private ring of Rama familiar to Sita on the basis of which someone could give Sita guarantee of early help and safe return back to Rama.

However, the question as to who could/would go to that far off land sprang up as a problem for which the answer was not forthcoming with ease. Sampati said that he could not go as he had become old and the power in his wings had left him. Angad said, if I was asked to go on land I would go any distance; but water! No, it was not possible for him to swim or jump so high and long.

Then Hanuman, the great Yogi, sits in meditation, repeating the holy name of his Chosen Ideal - Rama.

# Hanuman Jumps Across The Sea

During this meditation, Hanuman became aware of tremendous physical, mental, and spiritual powers bestowed upon him by the grace of the Lord. He became conscious about his ability to fly, become as big as the mountain, or as small as an atom. If he willed he could become invisible or carry out such unusual physical feats which were not possible for an ordinary mortal.

Waking from his deep state of introspection or meditation, the humble, but brave and powerful Hanuman mentally saluted Rama with firm resolve to conquer Lanka and seek release of Sita from her mental and physical sufferings.

"Jai Sri Rama" became the inspiring slogan for everyone to fill themselves with freshness and courage. The dullness and despondency, the anxiety, apprehension, and depression gave way to hope of victory. Hanuman said, "Dear brothers, Sri Rama has infused special powers in my life. I am sure I shall be able to cross this ocean in one jump."

## Hanuman Leaps to Lanka



Everyone was delighted and shouted "Jai Sri Rama". Hanuman made himself big and tall and flew off to the distant Lanka across the ocean. He landed at the closed doors of the capital city that were guarded by the terrifying and vicious demons. He killed them

one by one and entered Lankan kingdom. He made himself small and roamed in the city for further information on the whereabouts of Mother Sita. He searched for the way to Ashokvan where Sita was held hostage.

Everywhere Hanuman saw people deeply engrossed in sense enjoyment. Physical pleasure was all that people cared for - a tamasik indulgence, hedonistic preoccupation! Temples and places of worship were deserted or filled with blood of sacrificed animals whose meat was enjoyed by noisy demons.

## Hanuman Meets Vibhishana

Hanuman could not tolerate this all. He was purity personified, being sattvika by nature. He could not find any food of his taste. He started searching for someone who would be of pious, simple, and religious by nature. Then as he was passing by a palace building, Hanuman heard a faint repetitive name of Rama - Rama, Rama, Rama!

Who could be one in this Lanka taking the holy name of Rama! Hanuman wondered. With caution and care, he opened the gate of that palace - like building to find a demon couple worshipping the Lord and singing praise in the name of Rama. Hanuman saluted them in the name of Rama. It was surprising, but true, that this great devotee of Rama was none other than the younger brother of Ravana called as Vibhishana! Hanuman was accorded a very warm welcome by Vibhishana and his wife.

The talk went on to the ungainly and self-destructive height of "pride and ambitions" Ravana harbored. He did not approve of his brother Ravana lifting Sita from Panchavati. It was sure to lead to the downfall of the person as well as the people of his kingdom. Vibhishana had tried to persuade Ravana to see reason and set Sita free. It was improper and selfish to act this way. A mighty king should not have thus kidnapped a noble queen, already married to someone else.

Moreover, despite threats, Sita was firm not to marry Ravana. And if at all Ravana forced any such move, Sita could and would immolate herself in self created FIRE OF PURITY. This fire of purity would never allow Ravana even to come near Sita or touch her. Thus all attempts of Ravana to convince Sita for marriage were futile. In addition to the opposition from Vibhishana, Mandodari, wife of Ravana was dead against Ravana's intention of taking Sita as his best wife. But all this had made Ravana angry; and as is well known anger makes the person blind to see reason and rationality.

Vibhishana told Hanuman every detail about Sita. He told that Sita at that time was kept under the care of lady servants at gardens of Ashokvan. Ravana had disallowed Vibhishana to enter that garden where Sita was kept in custody.

It was left for Hanuman to try his own way without any help from within Lanka. But he was pleased to find a wonderful 'brother devotee' Vibhishana, as his friend and informer who would prove very useful for Rama to enter and conquer Lanka, and free Sita.

# Hanuman Finds Sita

Vibhishana detailed Hanuman about the whereabouts of Sita. He showed the way to Ashokvan where Sita was kept captive. He also warned Hanuman to remain vigilant and cautious as Sita was guarded by police-women loyal to Ravana. Moreover, whole Ashokvan was surrounded by armed guards who would not hesitate to kill any intruder.

Thus forewarned, Hanuman saluted his newly formed friend and left for the garden for his first meeting with Mother Sita. It was easy for Hanuman to jump and climb the trees, to hide himself in the bushes or the leafy branches. He could, in addition, at his will, become very small and thus escape the attention of the guards. At last Hanuman entered the garden. He could see assembly of women around one Aryan lady whom Hanuman immediately recognized as Sita.



## Condition of Sita In Ashokvana

The question vexed Hanuman's mind as to how to present himself before Sita. The problem had two dimensions: (1) Sita was surrounded by many attendants, and (2) Sita might take him to be a demon in form of an impostor monkey! She would refuse to accept him as a friend and devotee of Rama. Hanuman was sure that the second problem would be solved as he had brought the ring from Rama which Sita was sure to recognize as authentic.



Just then Hanuman heard shouts of 'Lankapati Ki Jai Ho - Victory to King Ravana'. Hanuman saw Ravana approaching the garden. Immediately he jumped up the tree under which Sita was seated. He hid himself nicely on one of the branches and decided to observe the proceedings below from there.

Ravana came towards Sita. His wife, Queen Mandodari, and a few other maid servants were accompanying the King. Ravana addressed Sita thus: "O beautiful lady, why do you persistently refuse my proposal of marriage? I will treat you as the first honorable queen of this vast empire. However, if you still think that Rama would come and seek your release, I am afraid, you are sadly mistaken. Nobody ever has dared to attack my kingdom, and if anyone does dare so, he and his army will be destroyed within days."

"Probably you are unaware of my power. Therefore, for the last time, I modestly ask you to become my wife. It would be an honour to you and joy for me." So saying, Ravana gave three day's time for her to finally make her decision. The negative answer would call for Ravana's wrath. The thin and emaciated Sita did not answer. How can she utter a single word when her whole mind and heart was engaged in constant prayer and Japa of Rama!

The scene below aggrieved Hanuman very much. For him Sita was embodiment of purity, simplicity, and tolerance. Impulsively, he wanted to jump and attack Ravana, but better sense prevailed. He knew that it would be counterproductive to act in haste. With heart full of mixed feelings of anger, pity, and helplessness, Hanuman started praying to Rama to give him courage to fulfill his mission of rescuing Sita from the clutches of Ravana.

Just then Mandodari, the queen of Ravana, intervened and told Ravana not to trouble a noble married woman with his hard words and ungainly demands. He told her husband to return Sita to Rama without delay, and with full honor and grace. But Ravana called Mandodari fussy and lacking faith in the prowess of her husband. It was not unusual for a king to have two (or three or more) wives; and secondly Rama had insulted his sister Shurpanakha which required to be avenged.

## Hanuman Meets Sita

Hanuman listened to all these arguments but kept quiet. When Ravana left with his troupe, Hanuman decided to present himself before Sita. He silently dropped the ring bearing the name and seal of Rama in the lap of Sita. Surprised, Sita looked up to find a mighty monkey staring at her! But her surprise turned into emotion of joy when she found the ring to be genuine: of her Master Rama.

She therefore, beckoned Hanuman to come down. With folded hands, Hanuman presented himself before Mother Sita, tears pouring down his eyes. His voice was choked with emotion. He described how Rama was also suffering the pangs of separation. He assured Sita that soon Rama would come, conquer Ravana and take her back.

It would be logical here to think that Hanuman should lift Sita and fly across the ocean to reach his friends, and thence to Rama, and the story would have a pleasant end! But, no. Three factors are to be considered here.



1) That Hanuman was celibate from birth and had vowed to remain so throughout his life. Therefore, it was impossible for him to touch a woman without the permission and in absence of her husband;

2) That Sita also had vowed to remain loyal - faithful - to one man as her husband, and sitting over the shoulder of another person without permission and in absence of her husband would break her vow.

3) And to end the story at this juncture would be meaningless as the mission of Rama to end evil and wickedness and reestablish the rule of righteousness - the purpose of Divine Incarnation - would be incomplete.

It required putting an end to Ravana and his associates, and rewarding Vibhishana for taking side of Truth.

# Havoc in Lanka

It was decided that Hanuman should return and inform Rama about Sita's captivity so that he would come with his army and seek her release by defeating Ravana. Thus, taking leave of Sita, Hanuman wanted permission of Sita to eat some fruits from the trees around. He was very hungry. Sita permitted Hanuman to satisfy himself. Hanuman uprooted many trees so that he need not jump to pluck the fruits high up. The noise brought many guards to the scene. They tried to arrest this big mischievous monkey which was causing damage to their beautiful garden. But powerful Hanuman overpowered everyone of them and beat them up severely.

Someone ran to the royal chamber of Ravana and described how 'a monkey was causing havoc in Ashokvan'. Ravana was surprised to listen that an ordinary monkey could single handedly beat up his powerful men! He, therefore, sent his son Indrajeet to arrest the monkey and bring him to the royal court.

## Hanuman Surrenders!



As ordered, Indrajeet, the powerful and obedient son of Ravana, reached Ashokvan to find the place in the most chaotic state. The trees were uprooted and the demon guards were running here and there to save their lives. Hanuman was as if making fun of them. Full of anger, Indrajeet challenged Hanuman to fight with him instead of his servants, saying,

"O monkey, you have done a great harm and insult to the kingdom of Ravana. I have come to arrest you and if resisted, I would send you to hell by killing you." Thus saying they both were engaged in fierce fight.

Soon Hanuman appeared to tire out and was arrested by Indrajeet and his subordinates. He was tied with ropes and brought to the court of Ravana. The secret of this arrest was that Hanuman deliberately got himself arrested so that he could reach the court of Ravana.

Hanuman wanted to assess the character, strength, and weaknesses of Rama's opponent which would be useful for them to plan their strategy to defeat Ravana. Thus tied and escorted by cruel looking army men, Hanuman was brought in presence of Ravana.

## Hanuman Meets Ravana

On seeing him Ravana was furious with rage: "O insignificant monkey, who are you? And what business brings you here to get killed! Don't you know that this is the kingdom of Ravana where people like you have no place to live?"

Hanuman replied: "O proud King, how false is your claim! Till I am protected by Rama no one on this earth can injure me in the least, let alone kill me. But I will tell you who I am. Sri Rama has sent me here. He had told me to give this message to save your life by releasing Sita without any delay. It will be beneficial to you and your people. Otherwise the punishment Rama would bestow upon you will be of total annihilation! Be warned and heed this warning."

On hearing these arrogant words, Ravana was hurt to the core. He was furious that this monkey in the name of Rama had audacity to threaten him. Hence he ordered his minister to kill Hanuman on the spot. At this juncture, Vibhishana rose from his seat and politely said to Ravana:

"O mighty brother, have you forgotten the rules of treating the ambassador? What has happened to your intellect and reason that such a simple custom of honouring a messenger is lost on you. I request you to release Hanuman at most with a warning to leave Lanka and never to come back. Next time, if he is caught he may be punished more severely."

"And O mighty King", continued Vibhishana "It does not befit you to keep defenseless Sita under arrest. I support Hanuman's appeal to release her instantly with honour and dignity." At this, Ravana called Vibhishana a traitor and injured him by hitting him with his foot. Thus Vibhishana was gravely insulted by Ravana; and therefore, mentally Vibhishana resolved to join Rama in the war against his own brother.

Ravana meanwhile turned to his ministers and said, "Ok. Do not kill this monkey, but teach him a lesson for creating the nuisance in Lanka. Tie a long cloth to his most lovable tail and put it to fire."

## Hanuman Burns Lanka

As ordered, the servants brought huge length of cotton cloth and tied it to the tail of Hanuman. Fire was applied to it. Hanuman by his special power increased the length of his tail by many many yards and started jumping here and there! He ran all around Lanka and in this process set most of the houses on fire! Hanuman was not hurt at all. Rama was there to take his care! At last Hanuman jumped in the waters of ocean and decided to return to his friends on the other side of the sea.

# Rama Prepares to Invade Lanka

Hanuman flew by aerial route and reached his friends Angad, Jambuwanta, Sugreeva and others who were eagerly waiting for his return. The news of Sita was received with jubilation. Immediately they all started off to inform Rama and Laxmana about their discovery so that future plans could be drawn to seek her release.

In Southern India at the base camp, Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman, Sugreeva, Jambuwanta, Angad and others met to chalk out their plan of action to seek release of Sita, now that the whereabouts of Sita were known. It was sure that Ravana was adamant and would not release Sita without force. It was imperative wage the war against mighty army of Ravana to achieve their goal.

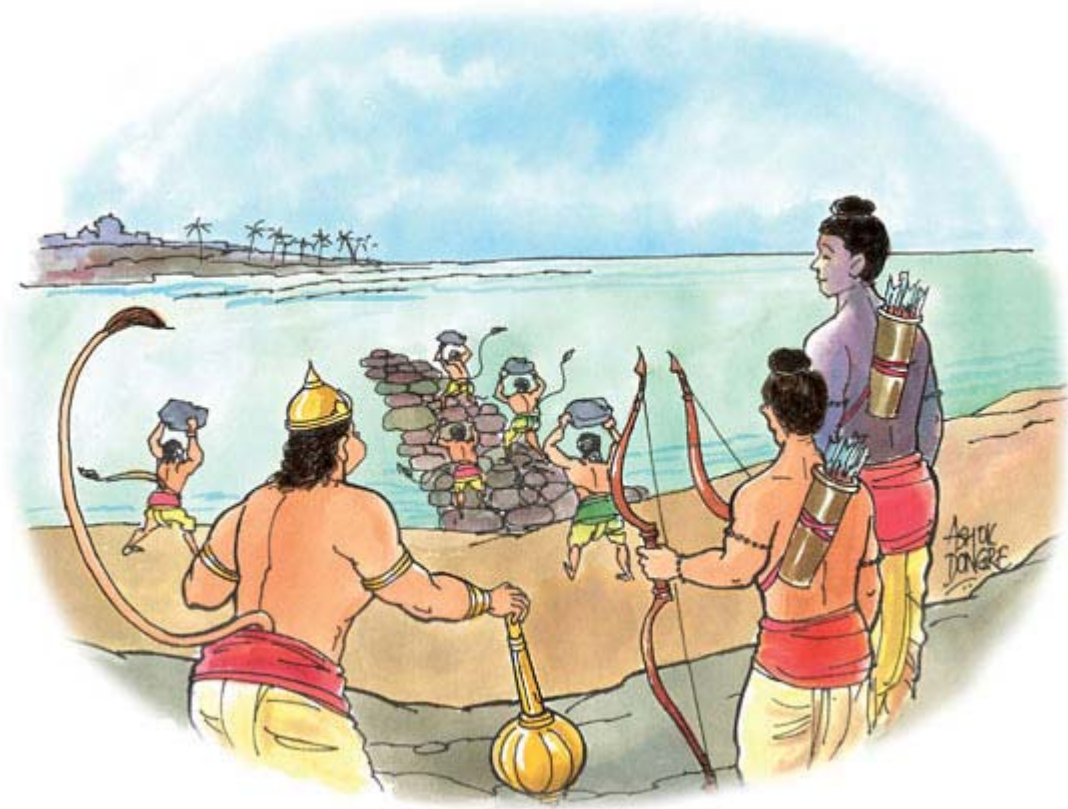
But Rama and Laxmana had no army of their own, hence Hanuman appealed to all monkey leaders to rally behind Rama in this noble war of righteousness. A huge army of monkeys and bears was thus formed and Angad was chosen its leader. Rama and Laxmana had divine and supernatural powers. They could have easily defeated Ravana and his army, but the lord Rama wanted to unite various clans into one unified people. The division of society into lower and higher caste and superior and inferior races was a taboo that Rama wanted to erase from the face of Bharata -ancient India. Therefore, he sought help of monkeys and bears (lower clans) in his mission.

All the well-wishers, full of enthusiasm, participated in the noble cause lead by Rama. The monkey brigade marched on towards Lanka. They once again reached the southern tip of India and faced the mighty sea ahead! It stood as a mighty obstacle in their march ahead. Only Hanuman was able to cross it, but it was not possible for others to do the same. How could the whole army reach the shores of Lankan kingdom.

This almost impossible task forced Rama to over the solution, but none was in sight! Everyone became depressed and despondent. The enthusiasm of having found the whereabouts of Sita was lost in their inability to rescue her.

## Bridge Over The Sea

Hanuman was restless. Constantly thinking of Rama and Sita, his mind was immersed in the depths of contemplation. He was sure that solution to this problem must be available as Rama was with them. But what would be the solution! He did not yet know. Can they all swim across the sea, no. Can they all fly over the sea, no. Engrossed in such deep thoughts and constantly taking the holy name of Rama, he threw a stone in the water in front of him. To his utter disbelief he saw that the stone was floating over the water!!!



He threw another stone and was puzzled that it sank down in the water, it did not float. He could not fathom the secret of this peculiarity: One stone staying afloat and the other sinking! He tried many times but in vain, all the stones subsequently sank down to the bottom of sea. He brought this peculiarity to the notice of his associates. But nobody could explain why one particular stone was floating when it should also have sunk. Angad, Sugreeva, Jambuwanta all tried but no stone remained afloat.

Then Hanuman took the name of Rama and also threw a stone, unintentionally though. And it stayed afloat! The mystery opened up its secret in the intelligent mind of Hanuman. "Oh, I see" shouted Hanuman in ecstasy, "Look brothers, when I throw a stone after taking the name of Rama it floats, and when I throw it without taking his holy name it sinks."

Everyone tried the same thing. And to their joy they all found stones remaining afloat when thrown in the name of Rama. Soon they decided to construct a floating bridge over the sea from Indian coast to the shore of Lanka. Rama also decided to contribute his share of labor. Therefore he threw a stone after taking his own name, but to his amazement the stone he threw did not float. Hanuman was watching this mysterious play of the Lord with great amusement. He came to Rama, bowed down in reverence, and said,

"O Rama, how can the one survive whom you reject? You are throwing this stone away, how can it float! it is surely doomed and would sink down and down. There is no liberation for any person (as well as non-living thing) who is denied your grace. Without your support nobody becomes fit to cross this ocean of worldliness! Taking your name



is, However, sufficient to prevent drowning of mortals like us"

### Story of Tiny Squirrel

A tiny squirrel was watching this divine play from a nearby tree. She also came down, rolled over the sand of sea shore, and then went over the bridge of stones. There she released the particles of sand in the name of Rama. This she continued for days together, oblivious to hunger and thirst. This was the most sincere contribution of a small animal for the noble cause. Thus every Indian takes pride in contributing, in whatever small way he/she can, in the noble spiritual mission

# Kumbhkarna

The bridge was completed and one by one all of them reached near the shore of Lanka. Ravana's spies informed him about the approaching army of Rama, but the proud Ravana did not attach any significance and importance to this. Vibhishana, on the other hand, was quick to grab the opportunity and joined Rama in his noble mission.

## Rama Tries To Settle The Issue With Peace

Angad was selected to represent Rama to give diplomacy a chance. Hence as a messenger/ambassador of Rama Angad reached the court of Ravana. He explained that Rama had sent him to seek release of Sita. Ravana should heed this last appeal of Rama so that the war could be averted. But no. Ravana did not accept the peace proposal. When he had such a great army, when he was immortal by the boon of the God, when he had all the super powers and instruments of war Ravana maintained that it was futile and immature of Rama to think of victory. Thus he took pity on Angad and his friends that they had come to Lanka to get killed.

Scornfully he also told Angad go back peacefully and forget about Sita. He would not attack the retreating army of Rama. Thus the talks failed. the war was sure to follow.

Angad returned to the camp and briefed Rama and others about the adamant attitude of Ravana not to free Sita. Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman, Sugreeva, and Vibhishana held a closed door meeting to chalk out their final strategy. Accordingly, Angad led one team of his brave soldiers and attacked the Lankan guards. After a brief fight, the guards were defeated and Angad and company entered the border of Lanka. Rama and others followed.

The news was received with mild concern by Ravana who sent more number of troops to attack the advancing men of Rama. Hanuman and his men defeated them too. Vibhishana was quick to guide Rama through the secret inroads. This disturbed Ravana and he decided to take the things more seriously. He therefore sent for Kumbhakarna, his brother with immense powers, to come to the court for urgent meeting with him. Ravana was sure that Kumbhakarna alone was powerful enough to defeat Rama and his army of 'monkeys'.

## Story of Kumbhakarna

This Kumbhakarna used to remain awake for six months and sleep for next six months! As he was preparing to go to his long spell of sleep, the message of Ravana was delivered to him. Kumbhakarna was in no mood to fight. He also thought that Ravana was in wrong in inviting this unnecessary war due to his useless insistence to marry Sita. He accordingly advised Ravana to release Sita and put an end to this avoidable conflict.



However, he was a loyal and patriotic Rakshasa. He was proud of his ancestors and glory of the demon rule and prosperity of Lanka. Hence when Ravana appealed in the name of glory of their forefathers, in the name and honour of their clan and dynasty, Kumbhakarna agreed to terminate Rama for ever. Thus full of enthusiasm and well prepared for the ensuing battle, he led his army to the battle ground.

A fierce fight raged between the two armies. Many monkeys were killed so also many Rakshasas. Even Angad and Sugreeva were on the defensive. Hanuman was helpless. Therefore, Rama took charge of the front himself. Kumbhakarna was adept in taking various illusory forms to confuse his enemy. It was difficult to attack his true body! as many Kumbhakarnas used to appear in front. All the missiles and arrows eluded him.

Moreover, Kumbhakarna could create 'rain of fire' engulfing the enemy. This caused confusion and chaos amongst Rama's army. To this, Rama replied by pouring rain of water to put off the fire. Kumbhakarna poured 'rain of stones', and Rama countered by appropriate protective cover. The battle went on for quite some time. At last Rama attacked the demon with his most powerful arrow fortified with deadly divine missile. This hit the mighty Kumbhakarna at his vital centre that led to his downfall.

On the death-bed Kumbhakarna took the name of Rama and thus he was liberated from his base instincts and tendencies.

# Laxmana Faints

The news of fall of mighty Kumbhakarna reached Ravana's court. With dismay and concern, Ravana quickly summoned his son Indrajeet and asked him to prepare for the deciding fight against Rama and Laxmana next day. Indrajeet was expert in all kinds of war games. In fact, second to Ravana, his son Indrajeet was the most powerful Rakshasa. He even easily surpassed his uncle -Kumbhakarna in many aspects. By special austerities and Tapas, he had once pleased God Brahma and had acquired special missile, as a boon, called Brahmastra. It could be used once only, but it was sure to render the opponent dead. Only rarely did it fail!

Thus armed with all these special powers and missiles, and with firm resolve to destroy Rama and his army, Indrajeet led his army to the battle ground. All Rakshasas were in joyous mood as they were sure of their victory under the leadership of Indrajeet. [The literal meaning of Indrajeet is 'one who has defeated the king of God -Indra!']

Rama and Laxmana took note of this. They knew about the special powers of Indrajeet. Rama decided to send Laxmana to face Indrajeet and advised Hanuman to accompany Laxmana. Laxmana could counter every move of Indrajeet. But failure made Indrajeet irritable and restless. His mind was not focused nor concentrated. Indrajeet, therefore, out of frustration and anger, threw the deadly Brahmastra at Laxmana. The missile was sure to hit its target. No one could have averted its impact, nor could anyone divert its course. No counter missile was discovered against Brahmastra.

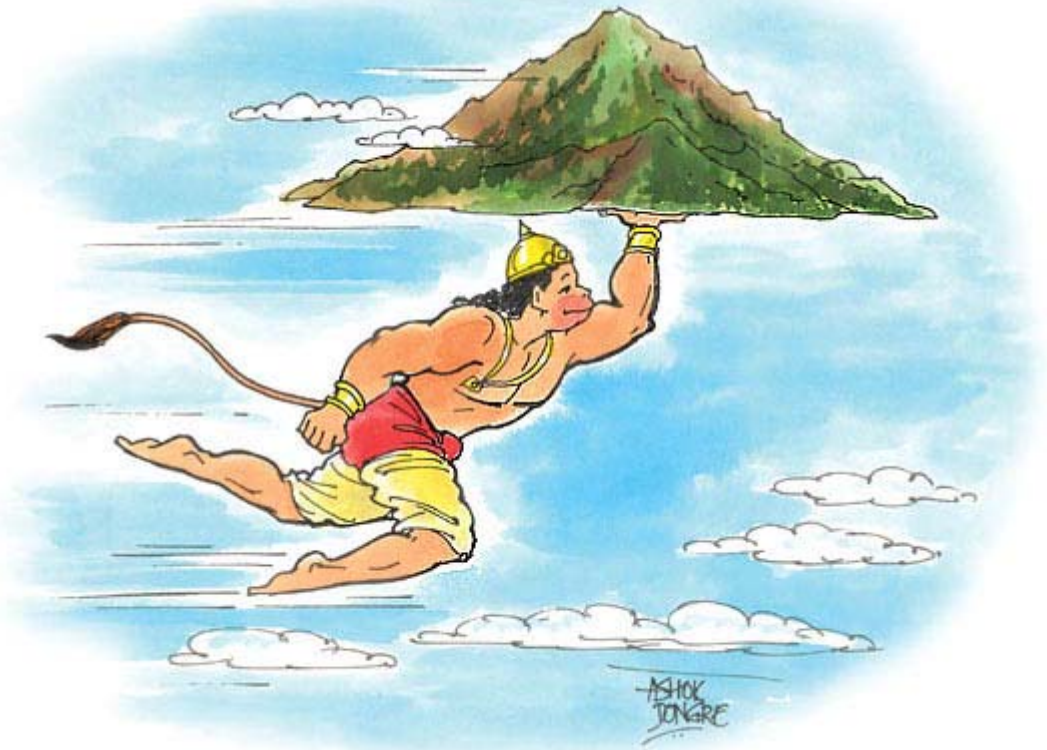
## Laxmana Faints

Therefore, Laxmana stood silently with folded hands and started mental repetition of the name of Rama. He knew it was only in the capacity of Rama to lessen its force of impact. And indeed the missile hit him with tremendous force. The nearby monkeys were also shaken. Even powerful Hanuman was put off balance! What was the condition of Laxmana! It uprooted his feet from the ground. he lay flat unconscious on the ground, almost dead. His breathing had stopped. His chest was red and swollen due to the impact. Everyone was terrified and thought Laxmana to be dead.

But Hanuman could not believe that Rama's brother could ever die under the protective umbrella of Rama. He rushed to Rama and narrated the incidence. Rama knew what had happened. He urgently sent for the physician. Rama, the physician and Hanuman rushed to the site where Laxmana lay unconscious. The physician after examination said,

"O Rama, the impact of Brahmastra leads everyone to death. I wonder how Laxmana is still faintly alive! But there is a warning. If Laxmana does not receive a particular herbal medicine within 24 hours, he cannot be revived. So, O Rama, please arrange to bring the medicine without delay."

## Hanuman Brings the Medicine



The medicine specified by the physician was a herbal medicine available on a particular mountain in the North India. Who could reach there and bring the medicine within a day! The hope that Laxmana would survive was mingled with sadness of impossibility of finding the medicine. But Hanuman was sure of one thing; he knew that presence of Rama could solve any problem. Hence, he saluted Rama and said, "O lord, I know you are putting your devotees to test. Please bless me that I succeed in my mission to bring that plant for the sure cure of Laxmana."

Rama was pleased with his most faithful and brave devotee. he blessed Hanuman and said, "O Hanuman, I am pleased with your devotion and faith in me. I know today you are the only one who could bring the plant and save my dear brother, Laxmana. I bless you, go and get the plant."

Hanuman acquired huge form and flew northwards high in the sky. Within hours he reached the destined mountain top. But to his dismay, he found innumerable plants adorning the mountain top. And imagine the confusion all those green plants created in the mind of Hanuman! Which plant would be needed for the medicine! Hanuman was not sure. Utter anxiety prevailed in the heart and mind of this noble servant of Rama.

The delay was sure to put Laxmana's life in danger, and incorrect choice of the plant was sure make his efforts useless; and moreover, would make him a laughing stock! This tragi-comic situation is very nicely described in the original text. We also feel one with Hanuman in his peculiar predicament.

The success was near and so far!

And then last minute intuition dawns in the intelligent mind of Hanuman. He decides to lift the whole mountain and take it to Lanka! Taking the name of Rama, "Jai Sri Rama", he lifted the mountain, which had become as light as a flower, Hanuman returned to Lanka in time. The medicine was prepared and put in the mouth of unconscious Laxmana. As if awakened from deep sleep, Laxmana got up yawning and said, "Where am I?"



# Indrajeet is Killed

Rama had sent Laxmana to face Indrajeet to make the Brahmastra ineffective. Laxmana alone was capable of sustaining its impact; any other person was sure to die. As that missile could be used only once, Indrajeet became helpless. Now Rama decided to come in picture.

Next day, Indrajeet came to fight with Rama. The clash of weapons, noisy fights, and destruction all around made the battle ground the last desirable place to stay in. But show must go on! The illusory forms that Indrajeet took, made him a difficult target to hit. At times he would appear on the right, at others to the left, and at times he would fight even as floating in the sky. But Rama put an end to all his Mayawi warfare and killed him with one special arrow.



## Mandodari Tries to Persuade Ravana to Release Sita

The victory cry in Rama's camp contrasted sharply with the hush in Ravana's court. The news of fall of their beloved son caused immense pain in the heart of father Ravana and mother Mandodari. Both of them rushed to battle field, took the body of Indrajeet in their lap, and cried like any other parents. Their grief and suffering brought tears to the eyes their opponents as well.

The last rite of Indrajeet were performed with full honour. Representative of Rama also attended the funeral and offered prayers to the departed soul.

With remorse Mandodari said to Ravana, "O Lord, look what your adamant nature has done. It has taken away our most powerful son in the prime of his youth. I pray to you, O Lord, to free Sita and hand over her to Rama where she rightfully belongs. There is still time to avert further destruction and peril. I do not want to lose you, O my dear husband!"

The pathetic appeal, although reasonable and rational, fell on the deaf ears. Ravana was full of grief at the loss of his son, but his pride did not allow him to see reason. He replied,

"O, queen, do not try to put me in the line of cowards. Do you think I should accept defeat when my son and brother have made such great sacrifices? You speak like the traitor brother Vibhishana who has joined the enemy's camp. Have you lost faith in my power and skill! Listen, come what may, I am determined to continue this fight to its end. Tomorrow you shall see one of the mightiest Kings victorious: either I or Rama!"

## The Final Battle

Now Ravana decided to put an end to the war. He went to the temple of his chosen deity - Lord Shiva, and prayed and meditated for whole night. There was grace and serenity on the face of Ravana. Next day he was to fight with the Master of Universe Himself. He knew his death was near as The Lord had come in the form of Rama to liberate him from the worldly bonds.

Anger, hatred, jealousy, and pride were gradually leaving him, and instead calmness and strength pervaded his whole being. He became conscious of his tremendous powers. All magical or illusory skills, knowledge of special missiles, all grace of an warrior entered his mind, body, and psyche.

The text of Vedas and Scriptures became visible to him. His Mantra flashed in front of his eyes. Lord Shiva appeared in his vision and blessed him. Ravana was to die as he wished, was to be liberated by the Lord Himself.

The sunrise made everyone aware of the reality of the day. The battle between Rama and Ravana was about to be enacted; the battle that would be remembered for centuries to come! The gods in the heaven supplied a beautiful chariot to Rama. They also sent special garlands and robes for Rama and special bow and arrows were offered.

In the morning Rama worshipped his chosen Ideal: Lord Shiva! and embarked on his final mission in his chariot to the battle-field.

# The Final Battle

Ravana was also ready in his huge chariot. The two armies arrayed themselves in special fronts. Rama and Ravana approached one another and halted at a distance. Conches and trumpets were blown, and the sound generated terror in the hearts of the opponents. Rama and Ravana saluted each other and the last fight began.

Ravana had ten heads which he had obtained as boon for his special worship of God. It also indicated extra intelligence, superhuman strength, and extra pride. It was also suggestive of long life, every head was compatible with life. Rama and Ravana hurled missiles at each other. Both were able to counter opponents attacks. When one head of Ravana rolled down, it was replaced by new one! If one arm of Ravana was cut, it was replaced by another! It was impossible to kill this powerful Rakshasa (demon).



Then Rama destroyed Ravana's chariot. But, instead of falling on ground Ravana flew high in the sky and started attacking Rama and his men with arrows and maces, and dropped magical fire and stones. Moreover, he took multiple forms to terrorize Rama's army. Some forms were having only head, while others were composed of trunks only! This "Mayawi Yuddha" -- Illusory War-- posed additional pressure on Rama to select the original Ravana and hit him. The energy was drained out from the tiring army men. Arrows and missiles made no impact on Ravana in the least. Many of the monkeys and bears from Rama's army were disheartened. They were tired and many tried to escape the rain of arrows and fire being poured by Ravana. Rama protected all his men by

counter attacks and by providing special cover against Ravana's attacks.

Laxmana, Hanuman, Angad, Sugreeva, and Jambuwanta all tried their own missiles on mighty Ravana but in vain. When the arrow of Rama failed how could any other succeed!

The day turned into night, and both the armies retreated to their respective camps. The injured were treated with potions and ointments. Rama and Laxmana with their associates discussed the way and means to put an end to Ravana. But no definite answer could be had as Ravana was adept in this kind of war games. Moreover, he had the capacity to regenerate any lost part of the body. Death of Ravana was difficult to imagine!

### Vibhishana Suggests The Trick

However, Vibhishana remembered something about his brother -Ravana - that had a great bearing on the outcome of war. He recalled how he once had faintly overheard the weakness in the body of Ravana -- and that weak spot was his umbilicus (middle abdominal region), not head, nor heart, nor neck! If Rama could hit the arrowhead in that localized spot, the life-sustaining nectar would spill and Ravana was sure to die.

Thus, armed with the special knowledge, next day, Rama put an end to Ravana's life with the arrow in his naval. The mightiest king on the earth fell. This brought to an end clanging of weapons and associated bitterness and ill feelings. The injured Ravana was counting his last breaths. Mandodari came rushing to her injured husband with eyes full of tears and heart filled with unexplainable pathos. Rama went to her consoled the lady with soft words of sympathy. He also gave her advice about the impermanence of life and reality of death as the only truth after birth. He proclaim to her and all the people around that Ravana will be remembered for eternity for his good as well as bad deeds.

### Ravana Honoured

Then turning to Laxmana Rama said, "O dear brother, look the mighty Ravana is lying on his death bed. His knowledge of Vedas and Scripture is beyond doubt. But equally true is the fact that you will not find more knowledgeable authority on politics, statesmanship, and sociology on the earth today. Please go and get the knowledge from him."

Thus Laxmana, sitting at the feet of Ravana, learnt many useful things on diplomacy, politics, tax structure, social reforms, war preparedness and many more from him. When Ravana breathed his last, Rama himself conducted the last rites befitting the grandeur of Brahmin Rakshasa King. Thus one important aspect of the Divine Play - LEELA - enacted by the Lord came to an end.

Ravana and Hanuman, Laxmana and Sita, Sugreeva and Jambuwanta, (and all others) were but the actors playing their allotted or designated role. Nobody is all evil, nobody is all good! The human form by necessity brings weaknesses to the human character. Some appear sinner, some saint!

# Fire Test for Sita

Without wasting any more time, eager to meet Sita, Rama (with his company) reached Ashokvan. Sita had heard about the battle between Rama and Ravana, and was expectantly waiting for victorious Rama to reach her. Joyous end to her suffering and grief was in sight. The sorrow was to be replaced with the joy of reunion.

Rama arrived. Emaciated but cheerful, Sita touched holy feet of her husband. The scene was too sublime; everyone watched with reverence flooding of Rama's feet with tears from Sita's eyes. Rama lifted Sita with tender love.

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."

## The Fire Test - Agni Pariksha

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."





Soon a huge fire was ignited. The flames reached high up in the sky. Everyone retreated two steps backwards. Sita approached the Fire and prayed, "O Fire God - Agni Deva -, this humble daughter of yours prays to you protect her if she is pure. But if Sita has ever thought of any other man other than Rama - in thought or word or deed, nay even in dream - O Fire God, reduce me to ashes. Of what use such a body to me that is corrupt!"

So saying Sita entered the raging flames. Everyone was tense except Rama, Laxmana and Hanuman, for they knew the truth. Sita was Shakti of Rama, she cannot be impure. No fire would hurt her. And true! Sita remained in fire unscathed and unharmed. The Fire God could do nothing in the face of purity of Sita. Soon the raging flames reduced themselves to ashes. Sita was standing there, her face shining with divine luster!

The whole scene changed to jubilant cry of 'Victory to Rama', 'Glory to Mother Sita', Long live Sita. Sita since then is ever worshipped as a Goddess of Purity, Grace, Tolerance and Suffering. Her name is taken before that of Rama; as Sitaram



# Rama Praises His Devotees

Turning to Vibhishana, Rama said, "Dear friend, you have set forth an example of loyalty to truth in face of immense adversity. Against all odds you stood behind me. As an acknowledgment of your steadfastness and devotion I would like you to take the throne of Lanka. Rule with honesty, justice, simplicity and fear of God. May you and your people prosper ever hereafter."

But Vibhishana protested. He said, "O lord, a devotee has no value for the riches, wealth, wine and woman. Let me serve your holy feet; do not burden me with this duty of a king." Rama pacified the upsurge of these noble thoughts and said to Vibhishana, "No, you are the fit person to rule your people. They have already suffered a lot. Moreover, let me show to the world through you, that my devotee can be rewarded both with love and material comfort. You will have best of both the worlds."



Then turning to Sugreeva, Rama praised his friendship and cooperation. Sugreeva was also given warm send off and was told to rule Kishkindha for the welfare of monkey clan.

## Lord Praises Hanuman

Hanuman was standing with his eyes focused at the holy feet of Rama. He was modesty, humility, and devotion personified. Rama turned to him and lovingly said,

"O my greatest devotee, what should I offer you! Your devotion for me cannot be

described in words nor can it be compared with any other. Your superhuman efforts in locating Sita and your great feat to bring the whole mountain to save life of Laxmana will be remembered for ages to come. Your intelligence, strength, and devotion will inspire many to worship you as their Ideal God. I bless you and offer a boon that you shall have a permanent seat wherever my story is recited, heard, told, read or written. You will be known as Veer (powerful) Hanuman. O son of wind, whosoever takes your name, seeks your help, prays for assistance, whosoever remembers you in distress or difficulty or calamity, that person with your blessings will become free from the trouble. Therefore you will also be known as Sankat-Vimochak, waiver of disaster and distress."

Humbly Hanuman bowed down to Rama's feet and took the dust to his head.

*(Yes, many Indians believe that when I am writing this to you and when you are reading, Hanuman is always present in the room.)*

# Return to Ayodhya

As Rama, Laxmana, and Sita prepared to return to Ayodhya, there was joyous shouts of Victory to Rama, Veer Hanuman ki Jai - Victory to Hanuman. Gods from the Heaven poured flowers and garlands to celebrate and show their pleasure. A Divine Air Plane - Pushpaka - was sent for Rama and his company so as to take them quickly to Ayodhya. Hanuman and Vibhishana also accompanied them to Ayodhya.



## Bharata Prepares To Welcome Rama

Here in Ayodhya, Bharata was waiting for the arrival of Rama, Laxmana, and Sita. He knew the day when Rama should return. He had counted every day of those fourteen years that Rama had to suffer in forest as a result of his mother's folly. He had ruled as the representative Rama, living like a monk -sanyasin. Rama's wooden shoes adored the throne during his absence.

*[This love and sacrifice of Laxmana and Bharata for their elder brother Rama is still cherished as an ultimate example of love between brothers. This glory of Indian ethos and culture is still sung in many houses as well on stages. Many plays are written and enacted now and then, in the past and present times also. But with the advent of science (materialistic, consumerist, utilitarian culture of modern times), where values like love and sacrifice are scornfully looked down upon as outdated emotionalism, many Indians too do not find anything worth while in this story of Rama.]*

Bharata encouraged people of Ayodhya to celebrate the return of Rama with pomp and

show. Actually there was no need to pass any order. The whole Ayodhya was eager to welcome her heroes. The whole city was decorated with flowers and garlands. Every house adored beautiful look of cleanliness and was lighted with candles and bulbs. Perfumes and scent filled the air. Every street was cleaned and watered, and decorated with hand-painted colorful designs.

*(We Indians today also celebrate this victorious return of Rama on the auspicious day of Diwali. There is declared as a holiday; and schools, colleges, offices, and factories are closed. There is gaiety all around. Sweets are prepared in every house and distributed amongst friends and relatives.)*

## Brothers Meet

The pleasant noise of airoplane -Pushpaka- reached the crowd below. There was mad rush to see Rama first. Bharata and Rama hugged each other, tears flowing down their eyes. Rama inquired about the well being of Kaikeyi first, then about his mother Kausalya and Sumitra. Kaikeyi had repented her harsh decision to send Rama to forest. In this act, she and the other two queens had become widows. The sobering effect of all these realities showed in Kaikeyi's changed behaviour of simplicity and humility. After salutations, Rama talked to them about his experiences of forest life. The story of Sita's kidnapping and Ravana's death were narrated. Hanuman and Vibhishana were introduced.

But all the three older queens were fade up with these worldly matters now! After praising the obedience and bravery of Rama, unparalleled love and sacrifice of Laxmana, and extreme suffering of Sita, they requested Rama to permit them to retreat to forest to lead life of renunciation. [This was quite natural in those days when elderly people used to renounce worldly pleasures and retire to loneliness of forest and Ashrams. They engage themselves in the worship of God, mediation and contemplation.]

Reluctantly Rama agreed to their request, and thus Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra left Ayodhya for forest life.

## Righteous Rule of Rama - Rama Rajya

Soon, Rama was given his due honour as King of Ayodhya. Formal sacrificial ceremony was performed with gaiety and pomp. Rama ruled wisely. Food and shelter, water and fodder, everything was aplenty. Art and literature, craft and business prospered. Justice and peace prevailed every where. In fact justice was never denied or delayed because there was no crime!!! Everyone including animals and trees were happy and contented.

# The End of the Story

Story of Rama should end here. A happy ending.

But because of some inexplicable reasons this does not happen! The story continues to its most tragic end. As if the trials and tribulations - suffering of Sita was not enough, a new and queer situation develops. I am not inclined to proceed further, but as is customary, the story, whether tragic or comic, must be told in full. Therefore, reluctantly I will tell the remaining story in brief.

In this Rama Rajya, one voice of protest and dissent was gradually making itself heard. It spread from one ear to another, from one house to the next, from one province to the next. Initially it created a faint rumble, but gradually the faint murmur acquired the intensity of audible words.

And what was this all about?

One washerman and his wife doubted the purity of Sita because she had stayed as a prisoner of Ravana! In the Royal Court, they declared:

"O Noble king, as a perfect master you should always lead the most ideal life, above any reproach. There should not be darkness under the lamp! Our culture and tradition does not allow infidel woman to stay with her husband. She must be deserted/banished. Sita has stayed in the custody of Ravana as a prisoner. What proof she has to prove her innocence and purity! Who will believe her? It will be better if you leave her. It will be in conformity with the noble tradition of Raghu Dynasty, as well as a just gesture on your part as the king of Ayodhya."

Rama and the whole court was stunned to listen to these inauspicious words of the washerman. But who can hold the tongue of the masses! Who can shut the mouth that speaketh thus! Rama tried to put an end to this useless allegation by informing the court and the assembly about the Fire Test that Sita has already gone through (passed) successfully. But this did not convince everyone. An occasional voice of protest was still heard in the court.

Then Rama offered that Sita would take another Fire Test to prove her innocence and purity. To this Sita herself took objection. She said,

"O my lord, there will always be some one who cannot be satisfied by any 'test' or any proof. Their convictions are hard-pressed in their psyche and no amount of genuine proof will convince them about the truth, for they do not want to get convinced. They are born to raise doubts about the Truth itself.

Today this washerman has stood to cast aspersions on my character, tomorrow some one else is sure to follow the suit. He would want fresh proof. Then should I continue to pass the test every day? O noble lord, I appeal to you to make your own judgment and act accordingly."

Rama passed many sleepless nights. Sita was carrying his two sons in her womb. She



was innocent, Rama knew and believed. But as a righteous king, as the caretaker of all, not only in matters of food and shelter, but also regarding their emotions and conventions he was accountable. Ultimately, Rama decided to desert Sita, the Purity personified!!!

## Rama Deserts Sita

This difficult duty fell on the shoulders of Laxmana. Only 'Sanyasin' Laxmana would be able to control his emotions at the harsh moment of leaving Sita. A chariot was arranged one day which took Sita and Laxmana to far off forest Ashrama of Sage Valmiki. The Rishi was already briefed about Rama's decision. The sage was pleased to receive Sita and promised every care for her health. Sita gave birth to two lovely sons: LAVA and KUSHA. *[Later his two sons were accepted by Rama, and were handed over the reigns of Ayodhya.]*

## Sita Departs



Sita now was tired of her difficult life. Insult, humiliation, distress did make her impact on her. And this daughter of Mother Earth prayed to Mother Earth to make room for her so that she could find peaceful rest for sometime in her life. The Earth separated into two and Sita buried herself under the protective cover of her Mother.

## And Rama Too



Rama was distressed. His golden rule and prosperity of his people, his Rama-Rajya meant little to him now; the episode of Sita hovered constantly over his heart. The folly and compulsions of authority and social welfare became clear to him. One day, all alone he drowned himself in the holy waters of river Sarayu.