

# THE RAMAYANA (“The Deeds of Rama”)

Valmiki once was wandering through the forest along the bank of a river, when he noticed a pair of curlews hopping about on the grass, singing sweetly. Suddenly a hunter came along and killed the male bird with his arrow. As the bird was weltering in his blood and his mate mourning for him in pitiful tones, Valmiki



was overcome with pity, and pronounced a curse on the hunter. But the words of the curse left his mouth in the form of a *shloka*-verse. Then the god Brahma appeared and bade the poet sing of the deeds of Rama in this very meter.

## Book I: Bala-Kanda (The Chapter on Rama as a Youth)

In the land of the Kosalas (north of the Ganges), in the city of **Ayodhya**, there ruled a king named **Dasharatha**, who was mighty and wise, but still childless. The court advisor urged him to offer an imperial horse-sacrifice. The sage **Rishyashringa**, as the chief priest of this great sacrifice, includes an especially powerful offering rite that can cause the begetting of sons. When the offerings had been placed in the fire, the remnants were divided between the king's wives, who ate them. Just at that time the gods in heaven were much troubled by **Ravana**, the ten-headed demon king of **Lanka**. They therefore turned to Lord **Vishnu**, begging him to take human form in order to defeat Ravana. Vishnu agrees and resolves to be born on earth as the son of Dasharatha. So,

after the horse-sacrifice was concluded, the three wives of King Dasharatha bore him four sons: **Kausalya** bore **Rama** (in whom Vishnu had incarnated himself), **Kaikeyi** bore **Bharata**, **Sumitra** bore **Lakshmana** and **Shatrughna**. Of these four princes Rama, the eldest, was his father's favorite, and from his youth, Lakshmana was deeply devoted to his elder brother. He was like Rama's second self, and fulfilled all his wishes even before they were uttered. As the grew up princes, were trained in all the arts, and Rama excelled in everything.

When the princes had grown to manhood, the great sage **Vishvamitra** came to the court of Dasharatha, complaining that demons were disrupting the worship at his hermitage with their persistent attacks. At his request, Rama and Lakshmana, went forth with him to slay the demons, for which they were rewarded with magical weapons. Vishvamitra later accompanied the princes to the court of King **Janaka** of Videha. Janaka had a daughter named **Sita** ("Furrow"), so named because she had come forth out of the earth when the king was ploughing in a field. Janaka had raised her as a daughter, and now was considering the question of whom she should marry. The king possessed a wonderful bow, fit for a god. He had announced that he would give his daughter Sita in marriage only to the man who could draw the bow. Many princes had already failed, hardly able even to lift it, but when Rama's turn came, he bent it so easily that it snapped in two. Highly delighted the king gives him his daughter in marriage. Dasharatha was summoned, and so the marriage of Rama and Sita was sumptuously celebrated. And so Rama lived happily with his devoted wife Sita for many years in Ayodhya.

## **Book II: Ayodhya-Kanda (The Chapter about Events in the Court at Ayodhya)**

When Dasharatha felt old age approaching, he resolved to appoint his favorite son Rama as heir to the throne, and caused Vasishtha to make all the necessary preparations for the consecration. When the hunchbacked maid of Queen Kaikeyi had heard of this, she reported it to her mistress, and she urges her mistress to

bring about the elevation of her own son Bharata to the throne, in place of Rama. The king had once promised to grant her any two wishes, which she had not yet asked for. Now she made her requests: the banish Rama for fourteen years and appoint her son Bharata as heir to the throne. The king was tortured by grief and regret, uncertain of what to do, but when Rama learned of the matter, he unhesitatingly accepted his banishment, so that his father should not be guilty of breaking his word. In vain his mother Kausalya and his brother Lakshmana tried to dissuade him, but he insisted that it is his highest duty (*dharma*) to help his father to keep his word. He informed his wife of his decision, asking her to be kind to Bharata, to live piously and chastely Dasharatha's court, and to serve his father and his mothers obediently. But Sita answered him in an eloquent speech on the duties of a woman, declaring that as a devoted wife (*pati-vrata*) nothing could prevent her from following him into exile in the wilderness.

Rama describes to her all the terrors and dangers of the forest, but she remains firm. Just as Savitri once followed her husband Satyavan even to the world of the dead to reclaim him from Yama, king of the underworld, so, she says, will she follow him wherever he must go. Nor can the faithful Lakshmana be dissuaded from joining his brother in exile. And so, stripped of all the trappings of royalty, clothed only in garments of bark, the three went off alone into the wilderness while all of Ayodhya mourned.

King Dasharatha could not bear this separation from his son. A few days after Rama's banishment, the king awoke from uneasy sleep about midnight. He suddenly remembered a crime he had committed in his youth, and tells Kausalya how he had once, while hunting, he had killed a young man by mistake, and how the boy's blind father had solemnly cursed him to die of grief at the loss of his own son. Before long, the curse had been fulfilled.

After the death of the king, Bharata, who had been staying in Rajagriha, was called to the capital and invited by his mother Kaikeyi, and by the royal counselors, to ascend the throne. But Bharata vigorously refuses, objecting that sovereignty belongs by right to Rama. With a great retinue he sets out to find his brother.

Meanwhile, Rama, camping in the Chitrakuta hills, is just describing, the beauties of the landscape to Sita, when clouds of dust are seen in the distance and the noise of an approaching army is heard. Lakshmana climbs up a tree and sees the army of Bharata drawing near. Believing it to be a hostile attack, and he becomes enraged. But then Bharata halts his army and approaches alone. He throws himself at Rama's feet, and the brothers embrace one another.

Now Bharata, with many tears and reproaches against himself and his mother Kaikeyi, reports to Rama the death of his father, and asks him to return and begin his reign. Rama says he could not reproach either him or his mother; but that which his father had commanded, must even now be dear to him, and he will never depart from his decision to spend fourteen years in the forest. In vain are all the entreaties of Bharata, who reminds him of the departure of their father.

Rama, with many lamentations, offers the funeral libation for the departed one, but remains firm in his resolve. Rama comforts his mourning brother in a magnificent speech on the natural, necessary transitoriness of existence, and the inevitability of death, which makes every lament seem unreasonable.

The counselors, too, come in order to invite Rama to begin his reign. One of these, Jabali, a great heretic and skeptic, tries to dispel Rama's moral scruples. Everyone lives only for himself, he says, one need not trouble about father and mother; death is the end of all things, the talk of a Beyond is only spread by venal and cynical priests, in order to secure their livelihood; therefore he should only consult his common-sense and ascend the throne. Rama vigorously rejects these nihilistic teachings. But even the arguments of the pious priest Vasishtha fail change his mind. And finally Bharata is compelled to consent to conduct affairs for Rama. Rama gives him his sandals as a symbol of sovereignty, and Bharata returns to Ayodhya, where Rama's sandals are solemnly placed on the throne as the representatives of the king, while he himself transfers his residence to Nandigrama, in order from there to manage the affairs of the country for Rama, as his representative.

### Book III: Aranya-Kanda (The Forest Chapter)

When the exiles had lived in the Dandaka forest for a long time, the forest-hermits living there asked Rama for protection against the rakshasas (demons). Rama promises this protection, and from that time is incessantly engaged in battles against these monsters. The man-eating giant Viradha is the first to be killed. Most important is their encounter with **Shurpanakha** (“she who has claws as big as winnowing baskets”). This hideous ogre falls in love with Rama and makes amorous proposals to him. He refers her to his brother Lakshmana (who is not yet married). Lakshmana scornfully rejects her and reviles her. Full of rage, she is about to swallow Sita, when Lakshmana cuts off her ears and nose. She flees howling to her brother **Khara**, marches against Rama with 14,000 rakshasas. Rama slays them all. After Khara too has fallen, Shurpanakha flees to Lanka, a fabulous land beyond the ocean, and incites her frightful brother Ravana to avenge her. At the same time she describes to him the beauty of Sita in exquisite terms, and incites him to gain possession of her and to make her his wife. Propelled by lust and anger, Ravana races off through the air in his golden chariot, across the ocean to where his friend, the demon **Marichi**, is living as a powerful ascetic.

With Maricha’s aid, and through magical deception, he succeeds in parting Sita from her protectors and abducting her. As he bears her away on his chariot through the air, Sita cries loudly for help. The vulture **Jatayus**, an old friend of Dasharatha’s, comes flying along. He manages to smash Ravana’s chariot, but is finally overcome. The demon catches Sita in his claws and flies away again with her. As she is borne flying through the air, the flowers fall from her hair, and the jeweled bands slip from her feet, falling to the ground. The trees, their branches rustling in the wind, seem to call to her: “Don’t be afraid!” The lotuses droop their heads, as if mourning for their beloved friend. Lions, tigers, and other beasts of the forest run raging behind her shadow on the ground. Even the hills, tears cascading down their faces, their peaks upraised like beseeching hands to the sky, appeared to moan for Sita. And the sun itself grew pale, its radiance dimmed, at

the sight of Sita being carried away, as if lamenting: “There is no more justice, no truth, no righteousness, no innocence, if Ravana steals Sita, the wife of Rama.” (III.5.1, 34–39). But Ravana carried her off across the ocean to Lanka, where he shut her in his harem. Then he conducts her round his palace, shows her all its splendors, and describes to her the immeasurable riches and marvels over which he rules. With coaxing words he tried to persuade her to become his wife. But Sita answered indignantly that she would never break faith with Rama by allowing him to embrace her.

Enraged, Ravana warned that, if she does not yield herself to him within twelve months, he would enjoy her in another fashion: he would have her cut in pieces by his cooks and he would eat her for breakfast. Then he imprisoned her in a grotto, and left her under the strict guard of the ogresses.

Meanwhile Rama and Lakshmana returned to find their hut empty. In vain they seek Sita in the forest. In horror, Rama raises a bitter lament, searching vainly in the forest for Sita. He questions the trees, the rivers, the hills, and the animals, but none can give him news of Sita. At last they find the flowers and ornaments that fell from Sita as she passed; then they come upon the ruins of Ravana’s chariot, his weapons, and the signs of a struggle. Rama fears that Sita has been killed, and in his delirium, he declares his intention of destroying the whole world: He will fill the air with his arrows, stay the wind in its course, annihilate the sun’s rays and envelop the earth in darkness, hurl down the summits of the mountains, dry up the lakes, destroy the ocean, uproot the trees, even destroy the gods themselves if they do not give him back his Sita. At last, Lakshmana is able to calm his raving and to continue the search. They come upon the dying vulture Jatayus, who relates to them what has occurred, but dies in the middle of his story. Wandering toward the south the brothers encounter a roaring, headless monster, **Kabandha**, whom they release from a heavy curse. In gratitude, he advises Rama to ally himself with the monkey-king **Sugriva**, who will be helpful to him in the recovery of Sita.

## **Book IV: Kishkindha-Kanda (The Chapter on the Alliance with the Monkeys of Kishkindha)**

The brothers reach Lake Pampa, when Rama sinks into a melancholy funk. It is spring, and the awakening of nature — the calling birds, the blooming trees — arouses in him a longing for his distant loved one. But they soon meet the monkey-king Sugriva. He tells them that he has been robbed of *his* wife and *his* dominion by his brother **Valin**, who has driven him from his own kingdom. Rama and Sugriva now form a close bond of friendship. Rama promises to support Sugriva against Valin, while Sugriva promises to aid Rama in recovering Sita. Before Kishkindha, the residence of Valin, the brothers' monkey armies meet in battle. Rama comes to Sugriva's aid and kills Valin. Sugriva is consecrated as king, and **Angada**, the son of Valin, as heir to the throne.

Among the counselors of Sugriva, **Hanuman**, the son of the wind-god, is the wisest. Sugriva has the greatest confidence in him, and commissions him to find Sita. Accompanied by a host of monkeys under the leadership of Angada, the resourceful Hanuman sets out toward the south. After many adventures they meet **Sampati**, a brother of the vulture Jatayus, who tells them how he had flown in a race with his brother, and had scorched his wings. Since then, he had been lying helpless in the Vindhya hills, but he has seen Ravana carrying Sita away to Lanka. He described to them where Lanka was located, and the monkeys set out for the coast. But when they saw the limitless, billowing sea before them, they despaired of getting across it. Angada, however, advises them: "Do not despair, for despair destroys a man as an angry snake kills a child." (IV.64.9) After much discussion, it is decided that no one can jump so far as Hanuman can. He then climbs to the top of Mount Mahendra, and prepares to leap across the ocean.

## **Book V: Sundara-Kanda (The Beautiful Chapter)**

With a mighty leap, which caused Mahendra Hill to tremble in its depths and

terrified all the creatures living on its slopes, the monkey Hanuman rose into the air and flew across the ocean. After a flight of four days, during which he had many adventures and performed miracles, he finally reached Lanka. From a hill, he surveyed the town, which seemed to him almost impregnable. He made himself as small as a cat, and after sunset, crept into the town. He examined the whole city, the palace of Ravana, and the wonderful chariot called Pushpaka, on which the demon-king used to drive through the air. He also penetrated into Ravana's harem, where he saw the king reposing in the midst of his beautiful women. After a long search, he at last found Sita, wasted by grief, in an Ashoka-tree grove. He makes himself known as a friend and messenger of Rama. She tells him that Ravana has threatened to devour her after two months, and that she will die if Rama does not rescue her before then. Hanuman assures her that Rama will certainly save her. Then he returns to the hill, flies back across the ocean and recounts everything to the monkeys awaiting him there. Finally, he returns to Rama, bringing him the news and a message from his beloved.

### **Book VI: Yuddha-Kanda (The Battle Chapter)**

Rama praises Hanuman for his success, and embraces him, but he despairs of getting across the ocean. Sugriva suggests constructing a bridge to Lanka. Hanuman gives an exact description of Ravana's citadel and its fortification, and declares that the best of the monkey-warriors would be able to take it. So Rama commands that the army shall be prepared for the march, and soon the vast army sets out southwards towards the coast.

When the news of the approaching army of monkeys had reached Lanka, Ravana summoned his counselors, all great and powerful Rakshasas, to a council. Now while all the other relatives and counselors urged Ravana in boasting speeches to fight, **Vibhishana**, Ravana's brother, points to unfavorable omens and advises him to return Sita. Ravana is much enraged at this, and accuses him of envy and ill-will; relatives, he says, are always the worst enemies of a king, and

hero. Feeling deeply offended by his brother, Vibhishana renounces him, flies across the ocean with four other Rakshasas and allies himself with Rama. On the advice of Vibhishana, Rama appeals to the Ocean-god himself to aid him in crossing the sea. The latter calls the monkey Nala, the son of the divine master builder **Vishvakarman**, and instructs him to bridge the ocean. At Rama's command, the monkeys bring rocks and trees. In a few days, a bridge is built over the ocean, and the whole of the great army passes over to Lanka.

Now Ravana's town is surrounded by the army of monkeys. Ravana gives the command for a general sortie. A battle takes place, also many cases of single combat between the chief heroes of the two fighting armies. Lakshmana, Hanuman, Angada and the bear-king Jambavan are the most prominent fellow-combatants of Rama, while on Ravana's side, his son **Indrajit** is the most conspicuous. The latter is versed in all magic arts and knows how to make himself invisible at moment.

Thus, on one occasion, he inflicts dangerous wounds on Rama and Lakshmana. But in the night, on the advice of the bear-king **Jambavan**, the monkey Hanuman flies to Mount Kailasa, in order to fetch four particularly powerful healing herbs. As these herbs are concealed, the monkey simply takes the whole mountain-peak with him and carries it to the battle-field, where, through the fragrance of the healing herbs, Rama, Lakshmana and all the wounded are immediately healed. Then Hanuman puts the mountain back into its place.

On another occasion, Indrajit, versed in magic, comes out of the city carrying, on his war-chariot a magically produced image of Sita, which he ill-treats and beheads before the eyes of Hanuman, Lakshmana and the monkeys. Horrified, Hanuman reports to Rama that Sita is killed; Rama falls into a swoon. Lakshmana breaks into lamentations and utters a blasphemous speech with bitter complaints against Fate that has no regard to virtue (VI.83.4 ff;) but he is soon enlightened by Vibhishana that the whole affair is only a delusion produced by Indrajit. Finally, Indrajit is killed by Lakshmana after a violent duel.

Furious at the death of his son, Ravana himself now appears on the field of

battle. A dreadful duel between Rama and Ravana takes place, continuing day and night. The gods themselves come to Rama's aid, especially Indra with his chariot and his projectiles. But every time Rama strikes off one of Ravana's heads, a new head grows again. At last he succeeds in piercing Ravana's heart with a weapon created by the god Brahma himself. There is great rejoicing in the army of the monkeys, and wild flight of the Rakshasas.

Ravana is solemnly buried and Vibhishana is installed as king in Lanka by Rama. Only now does Rama send for Sita, and proclaim to her the joyous news of the victory — but then, in the presence of all the monkeys and Rakshasas, he rejects her. He declares that he has had his revenge for the ignominy he has had to suffer, but he will have no more to do with her; for he could no longer accept as his wife a woman who has sat on the lap of another man, and who has been looked at with lustful eyes by another. Then Sita raises a bitter complaint against Rama's unjust suspicions, and asks Lakshmana to erect a pyre: for now nothing remained for her but to enter the fire. Rama gives his consent, the pyre is erected and lighted, and Sita, invoking Agni, the fire god, as witness of her innocence, rushes into the flames. Then Agni arises out of the burning pyre with the uninjured Sita and delivers her to Rama, assuring him, in a solemn speech, that she has always kept her faith with him, and even in the palace of the Rakshasa remained pure and innocent. Thereupon Rama declares that he himself had never had any doubts concerning Sita's innocence, but that it was necessary to prove it before the eyes of the people.

Now Rama and his people, accompanied by Hanuman and the monkeys, return to Ayodhya, where they are received with open arms by Bharata, Shatrughna, and the mothers. They enter amidst the rejoicing of the populace. Rama is consecrated as king, and rules happily and for the welfare of his subjects.

## **Book VII: Uttara-Kanda (The Last Chapter)**

One day Rama is informed that the people are expressing, their disapproval

at his having received Sita back after she (during her abduction) had sat in the lap of Ravana; it was feared that this might have a bad effect on the morals of the women in the land. The model king Rama is very sad about this; he cannot bear the reproach that he is setting the people a bad example, and requests his brother Lakshmana to take Sita away and desert her in the forest. With a heavy heart Lakshmana takes her on his chariot, leads her to the Ganges. On the further bank of the river, he discloses to her that Rama has rejected her on account of the suspicions of the people. In deep grief, but yet full of submission to her fate, Sita simply sends Rama her best wishes. Soon after, some hermit-boys find the weeping Sita in the forest and lead her to the hermitage of the ascetic Valmiki. The latter delivers her into the protection of hermit-women. After some time she gives birth, in the hermitage, to the twins **Kusha** and **Lava**.

Several years pass. The children have grown up and become pupils of the ascetic bard Valmiki. At this time Rama organizes a great horse-sacrifice, at which Valmiki and his pupils are present. He instructs two of them to recite, in the sacrificial assembly, the Ramayana composed by him. All listen with rapture to the wonderful recitation. But Rama soon discovers that the two youthful singers Kusha and Lava, who recite the poem to the accompaniment of the lute, are sons of Sita. Then he sends messengers to Valmiki and asks him to arrange that Sita may purify herself by an oath before the sacrificial assembly. The next morning Valmiki brings Sita, and, in a solemn speech, the great ascetic declares that she is pure and innocent, and that her children, the twin-brothers Kusha and Lava, are the true sons of Rama. Thereupon Rama declares that, though he is satisfied with the words of Valmiki, he still desires that Sita should purify herself by means of an oath. Then all the gods descended from heaven. But Sita, with downcast glance and folded hands, said: "As truly as I have never, even with one thought, contemplated another man than Rama, may Goddess Earth open her arms to me! As truly as I have always, in thought, word and deed, honored only Rama, may Goddess Earth open her arms to me! As I have here spoken the truth and never known any other man than Rama, may Goddess Earth open her arms to me!"

Scarcely was the oath finished, than there arose out of the earth a heavenly throne, borne on the heads of snake-deities, and Mother Earth, seated on the throne, embraced Sita, and vanished with her into the depths. In vain Rama now adjures the Goddess Earth to give him back his Sita. Only the god Brahma appears and comforts him with the hope of reuniting with her in heaven. Soon afterwards Rama gives up the government to his two sons Kusha and Lava, and himself enters heaven, where he again becomes Vishnu.

Adapted from the summary of Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, trans. by S. Ketkar, vol. 1 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1927), pp. 481-495.