

ITIHASAS

‘IT HAPPENED THUS’

The two great epics of India

RAMAYANA

THE ADI KAVYA

The significance of the Ramayana

The Ramayana is the first of the two great Itihasas of India. It was written by sage Valmiki. It consisted of 24,000 verses. It is considered by some as mythology. But to millions of Indians, it is history and offers a guide to right living. The Ramayana is considered by all Hindus as an embodiment of the Vedas, and that Lord Vishnu himself came upon earth to show people how life is to be lived. The greatness of Dharma shines in the life of Rama.

The story of Rama

On the banks of the Sarayu river, stood the beautiful city of Ayodhya, the capital of the kingdom of Kosala. The people of Ayodhya were peace loving and happy. No one was ignorant or poor. Everyone had faith in God and read the scriptures daily. But Dasaratha, the king, was unhappy. He was getting old and he didn't have a son to inherit his throne.

One day the king called upon his Chief advisor, Vasishtha. He said. "I am growing old. I long for a son, a son who will take my place on the throne." The priest knew all too well that his king needed to have a son. He replied, "Dasaratha, you will have sons. I shall perform a sacred rite to please the gods."

At the same moment, the gods were growing more and angrier with Ravana, the ruler of the rakshasas, or demons. Ravana was no ordinary demon. He had ten heads and twenty arms. He also had remarkable powers. He and his brother Kumbhakarna got boons from Lord Siva that no god can kill him. He omitted to ask that humans or animals should not kill him, as he thought that humans and animals were too weak to be able to defeat him. But he started using his power to prevent the gods and holy men from performing sacred rituals. He defeated all the gods in battle and took away all their possessions.

Listening to the complaints from the Devas about Ravana's actions, Vishnu, the protector of the universe, decided it was time to do something. Vishnu decided to be born as a human who could kill Ravana. The gods and sages were pleased with his decision.

Vishnu sent a messenger to king Dasaratha with payasam. Payasam is a sweet made of milk and rice. The messenger came out of the fire in the sacred rite that Sage Vasishtha was performing; The messenger said, "Give each of your three wives this drink. It is a boon that will bring sons." Then the messenger disappeared.

The king gave each of his wives part of the payasam. No sooner had his wives finished, than

each shone with the glow of a divine being in their womb. The eldest wife Kousalya gave birth to the first son, who was named Rama. Then Kaikeyi gave birth to Bharatha. Sumithra gave birth to Lakshmana and Shatrughna. There was great rejoicing in the city when four sons were born.

Even as infants, Rama and Lakshmana were inseparable. It was as if they were one life in two bodies. Bharatha and Shatrughna were also inseparable. All four sons grew to be intelligent men. They learnt all the arts, sciences and administration of the kingdom including martial arts at the feet of the great sage Vasishtha. They were devoted to the welfare of all human beings. Dasaratha was finally happy. He enjoyed watching his sons grow before his eyes but he had a special place in his heart for Rama.

One day the sage Vishwamitra came to Ayodhya to see the king. The king had great respect for him. The king greeted him with great respect and asked him how he, Dasaratha, could be of service to the sage. Vishwamitra said "I have been trying to perform an important sacred rite, which is again and again being interrupted by Ravana's demons. My vows prevent me personally from fighting these demons." The king listened intently. "I pray, Dasaratha, that you allow me to take Rama with me to protect my sacred rite."

"But Rama is only a child" replied Dasaratha. He is only sixteen years of old. I shall send you my armies to battle these demons. I will even accompany you myself. I shall fight these demons with my own hands. But please do not take Rama. Without Rama I cannot live even a few minutes." The king began to weep.

Vishwamitra understood the king's pain. But the sage also had no choice. He knew that Rama was an avatar, or incarnation of Vishnu on earth. He also knew that only Vishnu in human form could kill Ravana. The king told Rama about Vishwamitra request. Rama understood and willingly went with the sage. "I shall go, too, father," declared Lakshmana. The king did not protest.

Rama and Lakshmana, weapons slung over their shoulders, and followed the sage along the Sarayu River bank. The journey was a long one. Whenever the three stopped to rest, the sage took the time to teach the boys how to use the powerful weapons of the gods to fight the demons.

They journeyed until they reached the foot of a frightening forest. They paused. The sage said, "This was once a beautiful and prosperous country. Now the terrible she-demon, Tataka, lives here. She attacks and kills anyone who enters." But Rama and Lakshmana were unafraid. The sage turned to Rama and said, "Now it is up to you to rid this forest of these demons. By doing so, you will restore the land to the prosperity and the peace it once enjoyed." Rama and Lakshmana quietly continued to follow Vishwamitra into the forest.

Suddenly there was an unearthly roar. Appearing out from among the trees, Rama saw the hideous form of the demoness, Tataka. She was enormous and around her neck was a human skull. She had sharp claws on her hands. She looked at Rama and made a growling noise. Rama hesitated because Tataka was a woman, but Vishwamitra urged him to kill her as otherwise she would kill all of them. Taking careful aim, Rama fired his arrow into Tataka's

heart killing her.

No sooner had the she-demon died, than the gods in heaven rained lotus blossoms down on Rama blessing him. The three continued on their journey deeper into the forest. Along the way, Rama and Lakshmana also attacked the demons, including Tataka's son Maricha and Subahu, who were disturbing Viswamithra's yagna. Subahu was killed on the spot and Rama's arrow chased Maricha all the way into the sea.

The three finally left the forest. They headed for Mithila to visit King Janaka. Seeing the sage, Janaka greeted him saying, "Have I told you about my daughter?" "Please tell me about her," responded the sage.

The king spoke: "A few years ago a portion of my land was being plowed and I found a divine child in a furrow. I called her Sita and adopted her as my own daughter. She has grown into a beautiful, young woman. Many princes have desired her hand in marriage. But I wanted the man who married my Sita to be a man of great strength and righteousness. To prove his strength, this man would have to lift and string the ancient bow of Shiva. No man has shown the strength to even lift this bow."

The sage turned to Rama and said, "There is a bow belonging to King Janaka that I would like you to string that bow". Rama entered a long room filled with lots of people. The bow was so heavy it took several exceptionally strong men to bring the bow and its casing into the room. Several princes, who had tried to lift the bow, looked on as Rama approached the weapon. Rama looked at Shiva's bow. First he touched it. It was beautiful. Then with no effort whatsoever, he hoisted the bow from its casing and started to string it. As he did so, the bow snapped in two and fell to the palace floor. First there was disbelief, the whole earth shook, and then, everyone stood and chanted, "Rama. Rama."

The king rose to his feet and declared, "Sita has found her spouse! Send a messenger to Ayodhya informing them of the wedding of Rama to my daughter, Sita." The wedding ceremony was held in the palace. As part of this ceremony, the worship of the sacred fire began. The holiest sages recited mantras and prayers.

After this, King Janaka led Sita to Rama. He placed her hand in his and said to Rama, "This is Sita, my daughter, O Rama, who is from today your partner in life. Accept her. Hold her hand in yours. She will always follow you as your shadow."

Along with Rama, Lakshmana also got married to Sita's sister Urmila. Bharatha and Shatrughna also came with Dasaratha and they were married to Janaka's minister's two daughters. Following the wedding everyone returned to Ayodhya. All in the city cheered their arrival. Rama and Sita continued to serve their parents and delight the holy ones and gods. Sita and Rama were the perfect husband and wife. They were exceedingly loving and devoted to each other.

Rama's parents watched him mature into a young prince. Rama had all the noble qualities. He was patient with others' wrongs, but would not do wrong himself. He enjoyed the company of

elders and wise men. He was very intelligent and courageous. He was righteous and kind. He was the perfect warrior. He knew when to use violence and when not to. He was healthy, strong and handsome. He was highly learned in the scriptures. Rama was a sat-purusha, the ideal man.

Life In Ayodhya

Now the king was growing older. He noticed omens suggesting his end was near. "I have lived long enough," he thought. "I must be sure my throne goes to Rama, the eldest and most worthy of my sons. What a great blessing it would be to see him as king before I go to heaven. "Then it will be done," Dasaratha concluded, "I shall step down and Rama shall be made king." The king told everyone about his decision. He informed the priests to begin the sacred rites that would allow Rama to assume the throne of Ayodhya.

Kaikeyi, the last and youngest of the king's three wives, had heard of the decision to make Rama king while Dasaratha was still living. This decision pleased her. But Manthara, a maid-servant, did not want Rama to be king. If she could somehow convince Kaikeyi to change the king's mind, her position at the palace would be secure.

That evening, she spoke to Kaikeyi in secret. "If Rama takes the throne, you would lose all your control over the king. If Rama is crowned, his mother will control of the kingdom Your rule will come to an end. Awake. Act now. You must convince Dasaratha that it is your son who should be king." Kaikeyi listened to and started believing Manthara. She decided to see Dasaratha.

She tried everything to convince Dasaratha to listen to her. "Dasaratha," Kaikeyi began, "Do you remember that fateful day I saved your life in battle? Do you remember how I stopped your runaway chariot? "Yes," replied the king. "And do you remember what you said after I saved your life?" Without waiting for an answer, she said, "Oh my powerful king and beloved husband you promised me two boons. Hear my boons now so that they may be granted."

The king reluctantly listened to his wife's requests. "First," she began. "I wish to have my son, Bharata, placed upon the throne of Ayodhya. Second, I want Rama banished from the kingdom for a period of no less than fourteen years."

The king fell to his knees and begged his young wife not to hold him to these dreadful wishes. As a righteous and honest man, he knew he could not go back on his word. Yet, he couldn't bear to ask Rama to forsake the throne and go away for fourteen years. He turned pale and speechless.

Kaikeyi told Rama the terrible news. Rather than argue, Rama comforted his step mother Kaikeyi, He told Kaikeyi, "my father's word is law. I shall do whatever necessary to keep his word.. It is the sacred duty of a son to respect his father." "mother, even if you had asked me to go to the forest and give the kingdom to Bharatha, I would have gladly done so".

Then, he turned to his own mother Kousalya, and requested "Please be sure that father installs

Bharata as crown prince." Rama knelt and touched the feet of his mother respectfully. He stood, turned and left the palace.

Lakshmana could not accept this turn of events. He was fuming. He declared, "I shall destroy anyone who opposes your right to the throne." Rama responded, "No, Lakshmana. You know it is my sacred duty, my dharma, to fulfill these wishes." Lakshmana said "My brother, if you must leave Ayodhya, then I shall follow you,". Rama had to agree reluctantly. Lakshmana swore to never sleep, but guard Rama and Sita, night and day in the forest.

Rama tried to convince Sita to remain, but she said sobbing, "And, it is my duty, my dharma, as a wife to be at your side. How can I live without you? I must join you." Rama tried hard to convince them to stay but they were insistent. "Then, Sita, come with me," Rama said.

As the three left the palace, they cast away their royal robes and put on the clothes of hermits. The people of Ayodhya wept as Rama, Sita and Lakshmana passed from the city. As the chariot went from sight, Dasaratha cried, "Rama! Rama! Do not leave me." Dasaratha lost consciousness and never recovered, he had lost the will to live. His heart simply gave out. Ayodhya mourned the loss of their king.

In a few days, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita crossed the river Ganges searching for a land undisturbed and isolated from everyone. Soon they reached Chitrakoota, a beautiful place with many trees and streams. It was paradise. They built a small hut near a stream.

Several days had passed. Lakshmana, while hunting in the forest, heard the pounding of a thousand hooves. He climbed a tree to see whose army was approaching. To his amazement, he saw the lead horseman carrying the flag of Ayodhya. Bharata had found his brothers. Lakshmana was sure that his brother had come to kill them.

Lakshmana called to Rama: "A great army is approaching led by our brother, Bharata. I will kill him with my own hands." "Don't be a fool," Rama said. "He is our brother and he is the king. We must welcome him."

Bharata embraced his brothers. He cried, "My heart is filled with grief and shame. Grief for the loss of our noble father. Shame for being offered the throne that you rightfully deserve. Come back to Ayodhya and be our king."

"That cannot be done," Rama said. "I gave my word and I shall stay here for fourteen years and no less. Then and only then will I return." Nothing could sway Rama. "Rama, my brother," Bharata declared, "as long as you are in exile, no one shall be king. To ensure this, give me your sandals. I will place them on the throne. For the next fourteen years I will serve our land in your name. And, if after those fourteen years, you do not return, I shall walk into a fire and die."

Bharata took the sandals, mounted his horse and left the forest. In Kosala, Bharata put Rama's sandals on the red and gold Ayodhya throne.

The Forest Life

Several days passed. Rama, Lakshmana and Sita walked south until they came upon Dandaka forest. Once a beautiful place, Dandaka was now a barren wasteland. Shreds of bark from dead trees littered the ground. Stumps of trees were all that remained of a once lush forest. The sound of the wind seemed to warn anyone who approached. At night demons prowled the land in search of flesh.

Religious men who gave up all worldly comforts and became hermits also lived in the forest. They spoke of the horrors that Ravana's demons had done. Rama and Lakshmana promised they would kill all these demons.

After ten years, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita crossed the Godavari River and reached Panchavati. Here was a magnificent forest, untouched by demons. The air was fragrant with the smell of flowers. Fruit grew on every vine. Birds sang joyfully. "Let us build a hut here." Rama said. Nearby lived the ancient vulture king, Jatayu. Jatayu made friends with them and enjoyed guarding Sita while the brothers hunted.

Just beyond the clearing lived Shurpanakha, the she-demon. She was Ravana's sister. She had a pot belly, huge ears, claws on her fingers and toes, slits for eyes, and dirty hair. One day she saw Rama in the forest. She put down the bone she was gnawing on and said, "I want him for my husband."

Using her magical powers, she turned herself into a beautiful maiden. She asked Rama, "Why does such a strong, handsome man like you live in this forest? Who are you?" Rama told her his story. Upon seeing Sita, the she-demon said, "That woman is not good enough for you." Rama responded, "And who, might I ask, is?" "I will. I can make you happy." Replied Surpanakha. "Perhaps I should introduce you to my brother, Lakshmana," Rama said half-jokingly.

Sensing that Rama was not interested in her, the demon grew angry. She assumed her original form and jumped on Sita. In an instant, Lakshmana took his gold-handled knife from his belt and cut off the she-demon's nose and ears. She howled in pain as she fled.

Shurpanaka ran until she met the leaders of the local demons in the area, Khara and Dushana who lived on the edge of the forest. Seeing Ravana's sister's bloodied face, Khara cried, "Who has done this to you?" His wounded sister whimpered, "A human." "A human!" Khara replied, "What human can do this? Take us to them. We will kill them."

Khara gathered his army of demon warriors and marched into the forest. Lakshmana noticed the sky growing darker. Day seemed to turn into night. Then he looked again. The sky was filled with flying demons. Upon seeing this, Rama told Sita to remain in the hut. With Lakshmana at his side, Rama would face Khara's forces. Rama fired his golden arrows skyward. With each shot, mortally wounded demons fell to earth.

The fierce battle continued. No magic or weapons could save the demons from Rama's divine weaponry. In the end, Khara and his thousands of warriors were slain. Surpanakha watched in

horror as a large part of her brother's army were destroyed. She hurried to Lanka to see her brother, Ravana. "Oh, Ravana. Khara and Dushana have been killed by humans. All their warriors are dead, too," Shurpanakha cried.

Ravana rose from his throne. He raised his ten left arms pointing to his disfigured sister and said, "And how many thousands of humans fought so well?" "There are but two, my lord." answered Shurpanakha weeping. "Two!" roared Ravana, his voice echoing through the palace. "The two banished princes from Ayodhya. They have done this alone," his sister said.

"What gods are on their side?" Ravana wondered. "One more thing," Surpanakha added. "Rama's wife, Sita, is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She would make you a lovely queen." "Sita," said Ravana. "Whoever Sita embraces as her husband will out gain the gods in happiness," she added.

"Perhaps there is a way to revenge my sister's wounds and avenge the loss of my two brothers," Ravana thought. "Maybe I can punish Rama in a way he will never expect." Ravana summoned his magic chariot and flew off. Over the vast ocean and great mountains he travelled until he landed at the den of Maricha, the magician. This magician was able to assume the form of any human or beast.

Ravana told Maricha about Rama. He also spoke of his desire to take Sita from the forest, carry her back to Lanka and make her his queen. Although still terrified by the astra that chased him into the ocean, Maricha replied "I shall do whatever I can to help," said the magician. He continued. "I will go to the Chitrakoota forest where I shall change into a golden deer and stand near their hut. I will lure Rama away. You will do the rest."

The next day, a beautiful deer appeared at the stream in Panchavati. Sita was enchanted by it. "Please capture that deer for me," Sita asked Rama. Lakshmana looked carefully at the creature. He told his brother, "This deer is too beautiful. It is too perfect. I have never seen a deer like that before. Brother, approach it with caution."

"Stay with Sita," Rama told Lakshmana. "I will, my lord," Lakshmana replied. No sooner had Rama taken a step toward the deer than it darted into the woods. It was taking Rama farther and farther from the hut. Then deep in the forest, the deer paused. Rama moved closer and shot the deer. As he did so, the deer changed into the form of Maricha.

"Lakshmana was right," cried Rama. His heart was filled with fear. He ran as fast as he could. Then he heard a voice that sounded exactly like his own cry out, "Lakshmana! Help me!" Rama knew he had been tricked. It was Maricha in his dying moments. He hoped his brother would ignore these cries.

"Lakshmana," cried a startled Sita. "That is your brother, my husband. He is crying for help. You must go to him." "But Rama told me not to leave your side." But Sita insisted, "You must help him." "I cannot," replied Lakshmana.

"You cannot? Are you not worried for my husband's safety? How can you just stand there? Do

you not help him because he is only your half-brother? Or because he is my husband?" "Then I shall find him," said Sita. "No!" said Lakshmana. "If you do not go after him, Lakshmana, I shall kill myself."

Finally, Lakshmana made his decision. Before he left, he drew a circle around the entrance to the hut. "Sita," he said, "do not step beyond this magical circle. Inside of it you will be safe." Lakshmana grasped his weapons and ran in the direction of Rama's voice.

From behind a tree, Ravana watched his plan unfold perfectly. In an instant, he changed himself into a sanyasi, an old wise man, clutching a begging bowl. Seeing this common sight, and knowing it was her duty to feed the poor, Sita offered the man a fruit. Then Ravana noticed the magical circle. He knew that as long she remained within the circle, he could not get her. He had to get Sita outside of it.

"Take this offering," said Sita. "I am a sanyasi. I cannot enter your home. To accept your gracious offering you must leave your home." Sita hesitated. She had always helped the Sanyasis. How could she ignore this man? Disregarding Lakshmana's warning, Sita stepped beyond the circle.

Then like a tiger springing from high grass, Ravana grabbed Sita and placed her in his chariot. Sita screamed, but it was too late. The chariot rose into the sky and sped off to Lanka. As Ravana headed south, Jatayu, the great eagle, saw Sita. Jatayu spread his huge wings and flew up to the chariot. "Free Sita," Jatayu declared "or I shall kill you."

Ravana ignored the threat. Jatayu tore off one of the chariot's railings. He gently removed Sita from the chariot and set her on the earth. In blind fury, Jatayu attacked tearing off Ravana's arms and heads. Blood spurted from Ravana's mutilated body. As fast as Ravana lost an arm or head, it grew back. Jatayu was growing tired from the fight. Sensing this, Ravana drew his sword and cut off both of Jatayu's wings. The brave bird fell to the ground dying. Sita caressed Jatayu.

She thanked him for trying to save her. In an instant, Ravana pulled Sita back into the chariot and staggered back to Lanka. Once in the city, Ravana tried to convince Sita to stay in Lanka and be his queen. But Sita would not listen. She loved only Rama. Hearing this Ravana led Sita out of the palace and into a garden. He guarded her with many demonesses.

Back in the forest, Lakshmana found Rama unharmed. Terror filled Lakshmana's heart. He, too, had been tricked. Upon returning to the hut, Rama cried out, "Sita is gone. What will I do?" Rama knelt down and cried uncontrollably. Following Sita's trail of jewellery, Rama came upon the dying Jatayu. Jatayu explained to Rama how Ravana had carried away Sita in his flying chariot. "What must she be suffering?" he wondered. Rama gathered his strength. He said, "This act shall not go unpunished. I will free Sita, and slay Ravana and his entire family."

Rama's Stay in Kishkindha

Rama and Lakshmana began their search for Sita. They entered Kishkindha, the kingdom of

the monkeys. Kishkindha was located in the southern region. Soon they came to a mountain where Sugreeva lived. He was the ruler of the monkey kingdom. Hanuman, a devoted follower and minister in the court of Sugreeva, guarded the entrance to the kingdom. Seeing the brother's approach, Hanuman ordered them to halt.

"Who are you?" Hanuman asked. "I am Rama, the exiled prince of Ayodhya. This is my brother, Lakshmana. We wish to see your king. I am hoping he can help us find my wife, Sita. She was taken by Ravana." Immediately Hanuman realized that this was Lord Vishnu in human form. He carried both the princes on his shoulders to meet Sugreeva.

Rama and Lakshmana met Sugreeva. They told their story. Sugreeva said, "I, too, am in exile. My brother seized my kingdom and my queen." Sugreeva paused. He thought about Rama's story. Then said. "Help me regain my throne and I will help you find your wife. One of my people saw Sita being carried off to Lanka. As she passed overhead, she dropped this."

Rama reached out his hand. It was one of Sita's ornaments. Tears filled Rama's eyes. Rama and Lakshmana did as they were asked. Rama killed Vali, Sugreeva's brother and won back the throne for Sugreeva. But, it was now the rainy season. Rama and Lakshmana returned to the forest. They could not begin their search for Sita until the rains stopped in autumn. Rama grew more depressed. The rain seemed to Rama like tears from the gods.

Then when the sun shone upon the land again, Hanuman was ready to go with the monkey army. Sugreeva had fulfilled his promise. Hanuman divided his troops into four divisions. Each division would go in search of Sita for one month. At the end of the month, three of the four divisions returned with no word of Sita's whereabouts. Only Hanuman's division had yet to return.

Hanuman's Prank

One day as Hanuman and his men searched for Sita, they saw a great bird on a mountainside. This bird was Sampati, the brother of Jatayu. Hanuman told the bird about his search. Then he asked, "Do you know where Sita is?" "Yes," the bird said using his long vision, "She is in the Ashoka garden near Ravana's palace."

"How do I get to her?" asked Hanuman. "You must cross the great ocean," the bird said. Hanuman's army marched to the mighty ocean. There was no way they could cross this great body of water. "We must return," said one of the monkey warriors. "How can we get to the other side?"

In a loud voice, Hanuman declared, "I will cross this ocean and rescue Sita". Hanuman prayed for strength. He saw the unhappy image of Rama. Hanuman prayed to Rama. Then incredibly, he began to grow. He grew so huge that the ground began to shake. With a great cry, "Jai Shri Ram" "Victory to Rama," Hanuman leapt into the sky. The monkey army cheered as their leader flew across the great ocean. The gods smiled down on Hanuman as they admired his courage and devotion.

Nothing could stop Hanuman. On the horizon, he could see Lanka. As he approached the city, he changed back to his normal size. Once in Lanka, he set out to find Sita. Soon he came upon Ravana's palace. He looked in each of the palace gardens, but he could not find Sita. How could he return without Sita or some word of her whereabouts. Then he saw a grove of trees. Beneath one of the trees was the most beautiful woman Hanuman had ever seen. She was crying and repeating, "Rama, Rama."

"I have found her," Hanuman declared. "Lord Rama will be so happy." Hanuman looked around. He noticed that Sita was surrounded by many she-demons. Just as Hanuman was about approach her, he saw Ravana coming. The king of Lanka was sat on the ground next to Sita. He was saying, "Sita, come with me. Come live in my palace. I will make you my queen. You can have anything you wish." Hanuman hid from view.

Sita spoke: "How dare you speak to me this way. You have kidnapped me. I am Rama's wife, King Janaka's daughter. Rama will come for me. He will rescue me and kill you and all your demons. If you let me go, I will try to spare your life." Ravana seemed hurt by Sita's words. Anger and sorrow filled Ravana's heart. He knew at that moment he would never have Sita. "Then you shall remain here," he said as he turned away.

Hanuman did not move a muscle. He waited and waited. The she-demons guarding Sita were getting tired. One by one they fell asleep. Here was his chance to speak to Sita. Hanuman approached her and knelt at her feet. "Do not fear. I am Hanuman, Rama's servant and messenger. He has sent me to find you. He cries for your return." "How do I know you are telling me the truth? You may be just another demon in disguise." Sita said. Hanuman reached into his pocket and removed Rama's ring. "Here," he said, "This should prove that Rama has sent me."

Sita pressed her hands to her face and cried. "I am sorry I doubted you. Go to Rama and tell him where I am. Tell him I will wait for him to save me." Sita gave Hanuman a jewel. "Here, Take this to my lord as proof of my love." Suddenly the demons awoke they alerted the guards. The guards attacked Hanuman. He killed them with ease.

Hanuman was finally captured by Indrajit, the son of Ravana using the brahmastra. He was taken to the palace. Ravana ordered him killed. Vibhishana, Ravana's younger brother and one of the wise advisors to Ravana, reminded the king, "It is not permitted to kill a messenger."

"Then we shall punish him. Set his tail on fire. Let him return home that way," Ravana declared. As the king's men wrapped Hanuman's tail in cloth to set it on fire he grew it longer and longer. The more they wrapped, the longer Hanuman grew his tail. Finally, Ravana ordered, "Set it on fire!" cried Ravana.

With his long tail on fire, Hanuman flew into the sky. He decided to set the city of Lanka ablaze to punish Ravana. He flew low over the city and set each building, temple, palace and garden on fire. Flames shot high into the sky. As he flew over Ashoka garden he made sure Sita was safe. Then before he headed home, he put his tail in the ocean to put out the fire.

The Great War

Hanuman received a great welcome from his warriors. They hurried back to tell Rama the good news. By now Rama had given up all hope of ever seeing Sita alive again. When Rama saw Hanuman returning, he ran to him.

"I pray you have word of Sita." Sita, I have found said Hanuman and gave Rama Sita's jewel. Rama praised Hanuman for his bravery and said, "You have given me reason to live again."

Meanwhile back at Lanka palace, Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, tried to save Sita's life. "Let her go," he said, "so we can save our kingdom from Rama's anger." Ravana responded angrily, "If I return Sita, I will be ridiculed by all the gods and demons." Vibhishana warned again, "Do not underestimate Rama's strength. It is said that Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu sent to earth to destroy all that is unholy. With his powers he will destroy Lanka. Why do you tempt such a fate?"

"I fear no one," Ravana roared. "Then," Vibhishana said, "I can no longer remain in Lanka. Save yourself brother." "Then go," shouted Ravana. "I have no place in my kingdom for the weak and timid."

Vibhishana left the palace and magically flew to Rama. Arriving at his camp, Vibhishana declared, "I am the brother of Ravana. I tried to convince my brother to return your wife. But he refused and I left Lanka. I wish to join you and fight at your side." Rama responded, "Vibhishana, you have rejected evil for good. You are welcomed here." Now Rama had to make a battle plan. Vibhishana told him that Ravana and his evil son, Indrajit, had great magical powers. His army was made up of millions of demons. For his honesty and bravery, Rama promised Vibhishana that he would become the new king of Lanka.

Rama stood on the shoreline of the great ocean and spoke to the ocean god. "Hear me," he called. "I am Rama. I have weapons that are beyond imagination. In an instant I can dry your ocean. If you wish to avoid this fate, show me how to reach Lanka". The ocean said, "Rama, here is Nala, son of the great builder. He will build you a bridge across these waters. I shall support that bridge."

With the help of the monkey army, Nala put up a bridge made of wood, rocks, and stones. Every creature helped in its own way. It took five days to complete the bridge to Lanka. Rama, Lakshmana, and the monkey army crossed the bridge by nightfall. As they crossed into Lanka they shouted "Jai Shri Ram"!

Sugreeva's army surrounded the city. Rama knew that Sita would soon be released. Ravana called for two of his demons. "Change yourselves into monkeys. Move among the monkey army and find out what you can." The demons entered The camp and Vibhishana recognized them. They were brought to Rama. He decided not to punish them. He said, "Send a message to your king. Tell him that I have come to save my wife and kill him."

Ravana was angered by his inability to learn about Rama's plans. Enraged he called upon one

of his demons. "Make me an exact copy of Rama's head. Then bring it to me," he said. Ravana took the head to Sita. "O, Sita," he said, "Rama has failed in his attempt to rescue you. His army has been destroyed. That is the end of your hope. The time has come to change your mind and become my queen."

Sita looked at Ravana and said, "I do not believe any of this." Ravana responded: "I thought you might say that. So I brought the head of your husband, soaked in blood and sand, to prove my words." Sita collapsed wailing, "Alas, O Rama, you have followed your dharma. But I have been widowed. Widowhood is a terrible tragedy in the life of a woman devoted to dharma. You came to save me, but you gave your own life.

O Rama you are happy now. You have rejoined your beloved father in heaven. But what shall I do? O Rama, I am the terrible woman who has brought all this upon you. I pray take me too. Take me with you, my love." Angered by Sita's devotion to Rama, Ravana stormed from the garden. One of the demonesses guarding Sita took pity on her and told her that this was an elaborate plan of Ravana to cheat her, and she should wait for Rama to come and release her soon.

When he returned to the palace, he ordered all his troops to march toward the city gates. For four days both armies stood poised. On the morning of the fifth day, the great battle began. Each side suffered terrible losses. Blood filled the streets of Lanka. Bodies of fallen warriors were everywhere.

Rama and Lakshmana fought gallantly. Hanuman was injured in a duel. Vibhishana showed great valor. Indrajit, Ravana's son, rained poison arrows upon Rama and Lakshmana. So overwhelming was this attack, that the two brothers suffered many wounds. "I shall send both of you to the house of death," cried Indrajit.

Rama and Lakshmana were bleeding heavily, but they fought on. Indrajit hurled even more powerful weapons at them. Each weapon took a new toll. Rama and Lakshmana fell to the ground unconscious. Vibhishana prayed to the gods for their safety. "Protect Rama and Lakshmana while they are hurt."

While the monkey warriors stood by grief-stricken, the battle raged on without Rama and Lakshmana. Ravana's demons made themselves invisible and attacked the heart of the monkey army. Ravana's forces were merciless. Thousands were killed by unseen attackers. Seeing his forces in retreat, Hanuman charged on with a great cry. "Victory to Rama! Death to Ravana!"

With his remarkable strength, Hanuman smashed the skull of every visible enemy. He challenged any of Ravana's men to advance. Seeing Hanuman's great courage, the monkey-army rallied behind their leader and fought harder. Ravana's army was losing its advantage. Angered by this news, he decided to join the battle. He climbed in his chariot and soared above Lanka in search of Rama.

By now Rama and Lakshmana, having regained consciousness but still dazed, returned to the fight. Ravana viewed the battle scene from the clouds. Then he spotted Lakshmana. He aimed

his magic bow and fired. The arrow cut through the air and struck Rama's brother in the chest. He collapsed. Hanuman rushed to Lakshmana's side. He gently lifted the wounded prince and carried him to safety. Rama saw his fallen brother and said, "The battle has been lost. What is the point of killing Ravana, if I have lost Lakshmana."

Then, Jambavan, a bear, and one of the leaders of the army, said, "No, Rama. There is still a way we can regain the advantage and defeat Ravana. Tell Hanuman to go to a distant mountain. There he will see the medicinal sanjeevini herbs. Have him bring these herbs back before sunrise and your brother will be saved."

Hanuman rose above the earth and flew off with great speed. When he reached the mountain, he saw the hill that Jambavan described. But he could not find the herbs. Realizing that time was short; he uprooted the entire hill and carried it back to Lanka. Hanuman flew off balancing the hill in one hand.

When he returned to Lanka, due to the effects of the medicinal herbs, Lakshmana recovered from his near-mortal wound other monkey warriors began inhaling the healing air of the herbs. One-by-one, they rose to their feet and regained their strength. Hanuman returned the hill to its original place. Rama embraced Hanuman and said, "I know no one who shows your valor and devotion." With that, Hanuman cried out, "Jai Shri Ram!"

Vibhishana led Lakshmana to a secret cave where Indrajit was doing a great yagna to become invincible. Before he could complete the yagna, Lakshmana defeated Indrajit and killed him.

Hearing of his son's death, Ravana woke his brother Kumbhakarna who was asleep the whole time and asked him to kill Rama. Kumbhakarna was a huge giant and caused great losses to the vanara army. Finally Rama shot an arrow through his heart and the great Kumbhakarna fell dead.

Arming himself with his most powerful weapons, Ravana left Lanka palace. He spotted Rama leading the monkey army toward the city gates. Ravana fired a magic arrow at Rama. Seeing the arrow, Rama split it with his own arrow. Ravana tried everything to overpower his foe. But each time, Rama had an answer.

The fight lasted two days. Rama could feel his strength leaving him. He turned to one of his sages and said, "My spirit is nearly gone. My arms and legs ache. My heart wants to go on, but my body can no longer respond."

The sage said to Rama: "Listen carefully to this secret. It is the heart of the sun that will bring you victory and the auspiciousness to destroy Ravana. Worship the sun, O Rama. He alone protects all beings. Pray to him."

As Ravana was reloading his weapons, Rama knelt to pray to the sun. Then the sage said, "Rama, you will this very moment conquer Ravana." After looking at the sun, Rama felt his strength return. His heart was filled with joy.

Ravana attacked again. Both armies stood by and watched. Rama reached for his most powerful weapon, the Brahmastra or the Brahma-missile, to be used only when all else had failed. He took it to his hands. As he did so, the earth shook.

All the warriors covered their eyes and fell to the earth. Rama stood poised. He aimed the weapon at the on-rushing Ravana. He fired. The missile struck Ravana's chest and exploded. Ravana fell dead. "Jai Shri Ram!" shouted his men.

The gods praised Rama. The earth became steady once more. The wind blew softly. The sun shone brighter than ever. Vibhishana knelt at the body of his dead brother and burst into tears. "Why didn't you listen to my words? Why were you so overcome with Sita and power?"

Rama touched Vibhishana's shoulder and said, "Our ancients say that you should not mourn a mighty fallen warrior on the battlefield. Victory is the monopoly of none. Weep not for one who is no more. Rise, for we still have work to do." Vibhishana prepared the funeral rites for his brother. "My brother was so evil; people will try to keep me from giving him an honorable funeral."

Rama replied, "No one will stop this rite. Hostility ends with death. He is your brother and he is mine too. You must honor him with this rite." Following the funeral rite, Rama made Vibhishana the new king of Lanka.

Vibhishana's wife and maidens took Sita from the garden. A beautiful sari was placed around her. Jewels made her sparkle. A scarlet spot adorned her forehead. Sita could not wait to see her victorious husband. Rama entered the palace and Sita bowed at his feet. He felt both love and sorrow for his wife. "We shall return to Ayodhya," he said.

Shri Rama returned to Ayodhya. Bharatha still wearing the hermit's clothes that his brother Rama wore, gladly returned the kingdom to its rightful heir. Rama's coronation took place with great splendor. Rama gave priceless gifts to all his friends. He also gave an invaluable necklace and ornaments to Sitadevi. But she remembered the great help of Hanuman and gave them to him. She even took off the necklace and looked at Rama. Shri Rama read her mind and said, "Devi, please give the necklace to the person who has brought you immense joy and in whom valor, ability, courtesy and wisdom are embedded forever." At once, she gave the necklace to Hanuman.

Rama ruled for many years wisely and with justice for all. Till this day people talk of Rama raja, the glory days when Lord Rama was the king on earth.

Quiz

1. Who was the teacher of the four princes – Rama Lakshmana Bharatha and Shatruघnha?
 - a. Vasishta
 - b. Viswamitra
 - c. Dasaratha
 - d. Sugreeva

2. Why did Rama and Lakshmana go to the forest with Viswamithra?
 - a. To protect the demons
 - b. To kill the demons and protect the sages
 - c. To study forest life
 - d. To follow Kaikeyi's demands

3. Where did Ram and Sita's wedding take place?
 - a. Ayodhya
 - b. Lanka
 - c. Mithila
 - d. In the forest

4. Who was Ravana's sister
 - a. Urmila
 - b. Tataka
 - c. Surpanakha
 - d. He did not have a sister

5. Where was Sita when Ravana abducted her?
 - a. Kishkindha
 - b. Panchavati
 - c. Dandaka
 - d. Lanka

6. Who was Hanuman?
 - a. He was younger brother of Sugreeva
 - b. He was older brother of Vali
 - c. He was forest dwelling monkey
 - d. He was the son of Vayu and a minister of Sugreeva

7. Who told Hanuman where Ravana was keeping Sita imprisoned?
- Sampati
 - Vibhishana
 - Sugreeva
 - Jatayu
8. Why did not Ravana kill Hanuman when he was captured in Lanka by Indrajit?
- He was afraid that Rama would be angered
 - It is not Dharma to kill a messenger
 - Vibhishana said that killing a messenger would bring bad luck
 - He tried but could not kill Hanuman
9. Who was the architect / engineer of the bridge to Lanka?
- Sugreeva
 - Nala
 - Hanuman
 - Jatayu
10. Who killed Indrajit?
- Hanuman
 - Rama
 - Lakshmana
 - Vibhishana
11. How many brothers did Ravana have?
- three
 - two
 - one
 - four
12. Who did the last rites for Ravana after his death?
- Vibhishana
 - Rama
 - Lakshmana
 - No one - as he was very evil