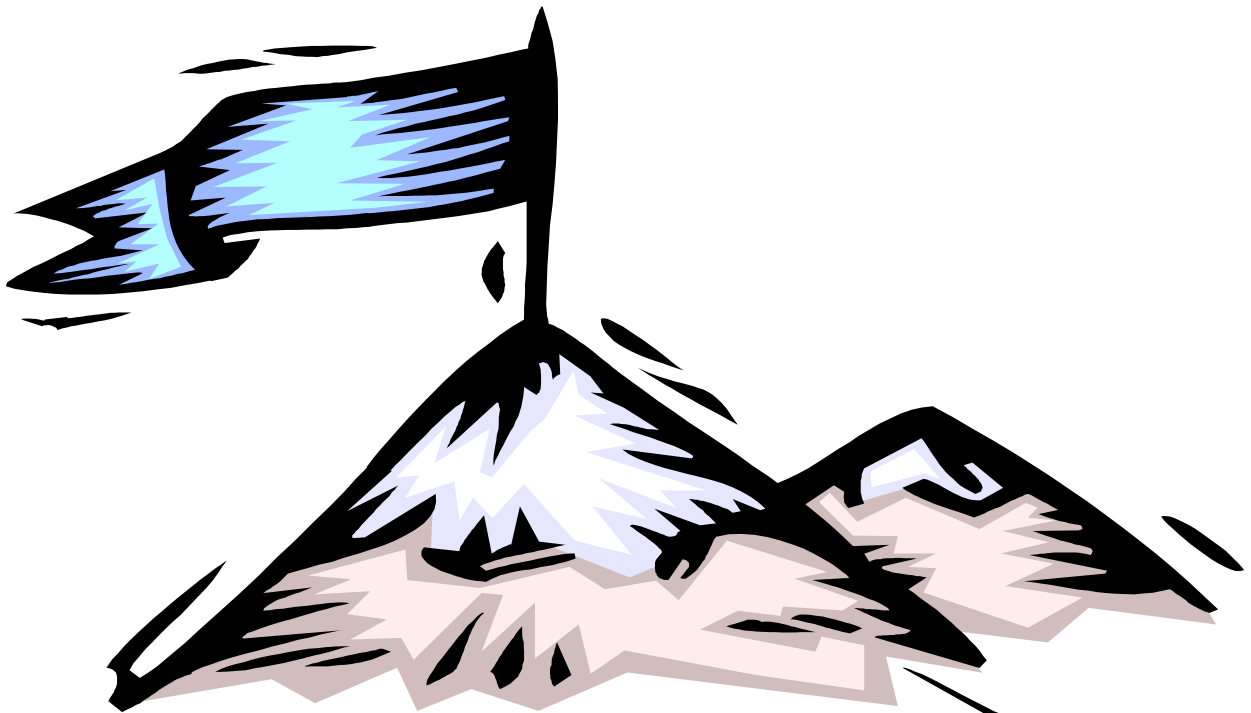




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*Ramayana for Children*

### The Birth of Rama



Ayodhya was a magnificent city on the banks of the river Sarayu in Kosala Country. It had wide roads, huge buildings, beautiful parks and glittering shops. The people of city lived a happy and contented life as they were ruled by a wonderful king called Dasharatha. He fir his people very deeply.

King Dasharatha had three wives Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. Kaushalya was the eldest queen. Though the king loved all his wives deeply, it was Kaikeyi, his youngest queen, who was his favorite. But inspite of leading such a good life, Dasharatha was still an unhappy man. He was getting old and had no son to ascend to the throne.

Unable to see the king being sad, the sages advised him to undertake a Yagna and pray for children. Heeding to their advice, he performed the Yagna and pleased with him, Agni, the fire God, emerged out of the firepit, handed over a cup containing sweetened muke to the king and told him "O King! This kheer is the nectar of life. It was prepared by the gods in heaven. Distribute it among your wives. You will be blessed with sons.

Dasharatha was delighted. He thanked Agni for this boon and in the royal chamber. He divided the remaining Kheer into two portions and gave one portion to Sumitra and the other one to Kaikeyi.

Subsequently all the three queen gave birth to sons, Kaushalya gave birth the Rama, after birth Bharata was born to Kaikeyi and later on Sumitra gave birth to Lakshmana and Shatrugna. King Dasharatha was very happy and so were the people of Ayodhya. With great rejoice, they celebrated the birth of the four princes.

Dasharatha loved all his sons but was his dearest. He was very proud of his handsome eldest son and could not bear to be away from him even for a moment.

## The Valiant Princes



The four princes grew up to be strong and handsome. Under sage Arista's guidance, they excelled themselves in archery, reading and hunting. They also learnt about the holy books and how to look after the welfare of the people. They respected their Gurus and the elder and gained the love and affection of people of Ayodhya.

The brothers loved each other very much too. Lakshmana was a very close companion to Rama, Bharata, and Shatrugna were the other two inseparables.

King Dasharatha fell very proud of his son. One day he was discussing with sage Vashishta about finding suitable brides for his sons. At that time a great sage called Vishwamitra came to the court of Dasharatha. The king was very happy to welcome him to Ayodhya. After extending a warm hospitality he asked Vishwamitra "O great sage! Your visit has made me very happy. Pray, tell me the purpose of your visit. I shall dream it a great honour to abide by your wish."

Vishwamitra, pleased with the king's world told him "King Dasharatha! I am pleased with your hospitality. I have heard that you always keep up your word. That's why I am here. I am about to perform a Yagna but two Rakshasas, Mareecha and Subahu, pour blood and human flesh on the fire pit and pollute the Yagna. I cannot cast any curse on them, as I am involved in a sacred work. But I cannot perform the Yagna till those demons are killed. Rama, your son, is the only valiant person

who can kill them. Hence, please send him with me for ten days. As soon as the Yagna is completed, I will send back Rama to Ayodhya.”

When the aged king heard this request, he felt nervous about sending his young son to fight against the demons. “Respect sage”, he pleaded with Vishwamitra, “My dear son Rama is still very young. How can he fight against the Rakshasas? Instead of Rama, I will send my entire army to help you and conducting the Yagna. I cannot bear to be separated from Rama and hence please spare me this agony.”

Vishwamitra was angry at Dasharatha’s words. “O king, you are going back on your word. I do not want anybody except Rama”. So saying, he decided to walk out of the court. At this juncture, Vashishta pacified him and told Dasharatha. “ Do not hesitate to send Rama. It is a not difficult task for Vishwamitra to kill the Rakshasas because he himself is very powerful. He wants to take Rama with him so that son can learn to fight the Rakshasas

Even at this young age. Send Rama with him.”

Without any more hesitation, king Dasharatha blessed Rama and also Lakshmana who wanted to be with his brother and sent them with Vishwamitra.

Vishwamitra and the two princes traveling barefoot first crossed the river Sarayu and then, the river Ganga. Rama and Lakshmana did not mind the hardship at all, as this was their chance to learn about many things from Vishwamitra. After many days of walking, they entered a thick forest where a Rakshasi called Taraka lived. She had terrorized all the sages in the forest and hence Vishwamitra instructed Rama to kill her.

Rama drew out his arrow and aimed it at Taraka. The ugly looking demoness charged towards him but was killed by Rama’s arrow. Vishwamitra was very pleased with Rama and gifted him many powerful weapons. Rama accepted them gracefully and learnt from Vishwamitra about their use.

The trio continued their journey and reached the spot where Vishwamitra was to perform the Yagna. The Rishis of the Ashram were happy to have Rama in their midst. The princes rested for the night and from the next morning protected the Yagna against the Rakshasas. Everything went on smoothly till the last day.

On the last day of the Yagna, suddenly, pieces of flesh and blood fell into the sacred fire. When Rama looked up, he saw Mareecha and Subahu rushing towards the fire pit. A horde of Rakshasas followed them. Without a moment’s delay, Rama drew out his arrows and killed Mareecha and Subahu. The weapons were so strong and powerful that Mareecha was thrown into the sea hundreds of miles away while Subahu engulfed in a ball of fire. All the Rishis relieved that these evil demons were destroyed by Rama and joyously completed the Yagna.

After conducting the Yagna, Vishwamitra and the other Rishis left for the city of Mithila. Rama and Lakshmana accompanied them.

This city was ruled by Janaka, loved and respected for his goodness. He had a daughter by name Sita. Janaka had found her in a ploughed field and had reared her as his own daughter. Sita was the loveliest princess and was also renowned for her strength of character. When she was of the marriageable age, Janaka had announced that whoever could string the Siva bow would wed her.

This bow was not an ordinary bow. It was so huge that five thousand

People were needed to lug it. Sage Vishwamitra knew about this bow and had purposely taken the young princes to Mithila.

On their way to Mithila, they halted at an Ashram where Gautama, a sage, had once lived. Gautama had a wife called Ahalya who was extremely beautiful. Indri, the king of the heavens, desired her and in Gautama's absence, made love to her. The enraged Gautama cast a curse on Indri. He also cursed Ahalya "As you have cheated me, may you turn into a stone. You will be rid of this curse only when Sri Rama touches you." So saying, Gautama had gone away to the Himalayas to observe penance.

Vishwamitra narrated Ahalya's tragic story to Rama and instructed him "Ramachandra! Rescue Ahalya from this curse and give her a new life."

Rama followed this advice and as soon as he touched the stone statue, Ahalya was re-united thus.

## Sita's Swayamvar



Vishwamitra, Rama and Lakshmana reached Mithila in time for Sita's Swayamvar\*: As per Janaka's wish, the mighty Siva bow was hauled to the wedding hall. The hall wore a grand look and was filled with many kings and princes. Ravana, the king of Lanka was also present and was confident that he could win Sita's hand easily. For, Janaka had announced that to win Sita's hand in marriage and king or prince had to lift the bow and string it. Many tried, but failed. Even Ravana fell down while trying to lift the bow and had hurriedly disappeared from the hall out of shame. Vishwamitra turned towards Rama and told him gently "Son! I am sure you are keen to examine the bow. Why don't you lift it and see how heavy it is?"

King Janaka was quite doubtful whether a young person like Rama would be able to achieve where the others had failed. But he felt very impressed by Rama's noble looks and hence allowed Rama to contest.

Rama bowed before Vishwamitra to seek his blessings and walked up to the mighty Siva bow. He lifted it up effortlessly and strung it. The entire hall echoed with the sound of the bow being strung. Except for Rama, Lakshmana and Vishwamitra, everybody else turned pale. Rama lifted the bow now like a toy and broke it into two. King Janaka was extremely happy that Rama, the eldest prince of Ayodhya, was to wed his daughter Sita.

On Vishwamitra's advice, Janaka sent messengers to Ayodhya to convey this happy news to Dasharatha. Rama, Lakshmana and Rishi Vishwamitra are now in Mithila after successfully completing the Yagna. Sri Rama has gained the hand of my daughter Sita in marriage by lifting the Siva bow. I am therefore inviting you and your family to come to Mithila and except Sita as your daughter-in-law" was the message sent by Janaka.

King Dasharatha was delighted to hear this news and reached Mithila along with his wives, his ministers, Sage Vashishta and others to take part in the wedding.

While Rama wed Sita, Urmila was married to Lakshmana and Janaka's nieces Mandavi and Shrutakirithi to Bharata and Shatrugna.

These wedding were performed no a very grand scale. Dasharatha donated cows in the name of each of his sons and not to be outdone, king Janaka made cash presents to all the Brahmins. A grand feast had been arranged for all the citizens. The newly wed couples were blessed by one and all.

Sita was devout wife who always stood by her husband. The extremely beautiful Sita made an ideal couple.

The day after wedding Vishwamitra returned to his Ashram (hermitage). Dasharatha with his son and daughters-in-law, along with his entourage left for Ayodhya. Halfway through their journey. Severe storm broke out. The entire atmosphere was filled with dust and was enveloped in darkness. At that time, a Rishi by name Parasurama appeared before them. His face was full of rage. He carried an axe on his shoulder. He also had an enormous bow with him. His awesome appearance proclaimed that he was no ordinary Rishi. He was the mighty Parasurama who had conquered several Kshatriyas and had voyaged round the earth twenty-one times.

Parasurama went straight to Rama, and said in a sarcastic voice "Rama, I heard that breaking the Siva bow was very easy for you. I have a bigger and a mightier bow. Let us see whether you can string it." Dasharatha, who was watching Parasurama, came running to him and prayed to him "Parasurama please calm down. My children have not done any harm to you. Bless them. Spare Rama". Parasurama ignored Dasharatha's plea. He taunted Rama again and again.

Smiling gently at this, Rama picked up the bow very easily and fixed the arrow to it. He then asked Parasurama "Sri, you are a Brahmin and it would be improper for me to use the arrow on you. Hence please tell me. At what do I aim the arrow at?"

Parasurama was stunned with Rama's mastery over the weapon. He could not even say anything. He gazed at Rama. It dawned upon him that Rama was no ordinary person. He bowed his head and said "Rama, I am no match for you. Hence this mighty bow belongs to you." He then departed for the Himalayas to continue his penance.

King Dasharatha felt relieved; he then continued his journey towards Ayodhya.

At Ayodhya, a grand reception awaited the newly weds, for many days, this happy event was celebrated with pomp and pageantry. Dasharatha was very happy that his sons especially Rama, were loved so much by the citizen of Ayodhya.

## Kaikeyi and her wishes



Soon after Rama's marriage with Sita, king Dasharatha wanted to crown him the king, as he himself was getting older. Dasharatha therefore consulted his ministers about this. All of them wholeheartedly welcomed this decision. Dasharatha felt very happy and enthusiastic. He looked forward to the coronation of Rama. He therefore immediately made announcements to this effect. He

invited all the important people of Ayodhya and told them "I have decided to crown my eldest son Rama. This is my ardent desire. If all of you agree, I will go ahead with the arrangements". Everybody was delighted. The people of Ayodhya rejoice that Rama was to be their king.

Hectic preparations were on. Singers, dancers and other artists were invited to the city to provide entertainment to the people. The chiefs of the city were instructed to decorate it on a very grand scale. Even while these preparations were going on, Dasharatha had a talk with Rama and advised him about how a king should conduct himself. "A king should never fall a prey to vices; He should treat each and everyone with respect and rule the kingdom well" was Dasharatha's advice to Rama. He also talked to his son about the duties of a king.

Kaushalya was very happy to hear that Rama was to be crowned shortly. She generously gifted valuable jewellery to those who conveyed this good news to her.

At the time of proclaiming that Rama was to be crowned, Bharata and Shatrugna were away from Ayodhya. Sumithra, Shatrugna's mother, was also happy to hear the news.

When this news reached Kaikeyi, she was delighted that Rama was to be the king, but soon, Manthara, her maid poisoned her mind.

"Kaika, have you forgotten that you also have a son? Your son Bharata has equal rights over this kingdom. If Rama becomes the king, then Kaushalya's haughtiness will know no bonds. You will be her maid and Bharata will be treated like Rama's servant. You are supposed to be king Dasharatha's favorite. But how has he proved it? By making Rama the king and by ignoring Bharata totally? Is it fair? "Just think about the future. "

"Why should I think about the future?" replied Kaikei, "Manthara. Rama is the eldest born. He is virtuous; he is valiant and is thoroughly well versed in all sciences and all arts. People love him. So do I. Because I love him more than my own son."

Manthara would not give up. Speaking in a loving tone, she told Kaikei "Dear child! I am old enough to know the ways of the world. I can only pity you for your misplaced love towards Rama. Just imagine! What will be the fate of Bharata! And look at your husband. He has taken this decision at a time when Bharata and Shatrugna are away from Ayodhya. The king knows that Lakshmana will be acting now, you will be sending Bharata to exile."

Provoked by Manthara, Kaikeyi thought about what she said. No, she did not mind Rama being the king. But could she, the favorite wife of Dasharatha, be a slave to Kaushalya? "Never" decided Kaikeyi's mind. So she immediately asked Manthara "I agree with you. But how do we prevent Rama from becoming the king?" "Simple" answered Manthara, "Send him to the forest."

"But how?"

"Don't you remember that Dasharatha had agreed to grant you two wishes when you saved him in the war against Devas and Asuras? Ask them now. Dasharatha will come to your chambers to talk about Rama's coronation. Show him that you are angry. And demand your two wishes. First of all, demand that Bharata should be crowned the king your second wish should be to banish Rama to the forest for 14 years."

Kaikeyi was totally changed. She forgot about Rama's love for her or that she had looked upon him as her own son. At that moment, Rama appeared to be her enemy, someone who was usurping

Bharatha of the kingdom. Filled with hatred and anger, she tore up all the fine clothes she had worn; she pulled out the jewelry and threw them on the floor. And she sat huddled in a corner.

The old king came to Kaikeyi's chamber to share his happiness, to tell her about the grand preparations for the coronation. But he was upset when he saw the strewn jewellery and the torn clothes. And when he saw his dear queen in tears he was puzzled. He gently wiped her tears and asked her "O, precious one! Why are you angry? I will do anything to make you happy. I love you very dearly. Tell me. Why are you so upset?"

Kaikeyi grabbed opportunity. "Will you grant me the two wishes due to me long ago?" she asked.

"Have no doubt. Dear" said the king. "I swear on Rama that I will keep up my word. "

Feeling bold, Kaikeyi demanded, "My first wish is that Bharata should be crowned the king. To fulfill my second wish, Rama should live in the forest like a hermit for fourteen years. Grant me these wishes rite." king Dasharatha could not believe his own ears. He was horrified that Kaikeyi could be so mean and ruthless. "Are you playing a joke on me " he asked her.

"No, I am very serious", Kaikeyi said, laughing cruelly.

The king was shocked. He fainted. After a while, he regained his consciousness and pleaded with "Kaikeyi, give up these wishes. What you ask for is totally unfair. You have always told me that you love Rama as your son. Bharata has been very devoted to Rama and when he comes to know of your treachery, he will never forgive you. Don't Kaikeyi, don't! Give up such dangerous thoughts. I cannot bear to be separated from Rama. Don't inflict this agony upon me in my old age. If you insist, I will crown Bharata as the king but please do not banish my Rama to the forest". King Dasharatha just could not control his emotions and wept bitterly.

Kaikeyi was unmoved. She did not want Rama in Ayodhya because she felt only then Bharata would be able to gain the love and respect of the people of Ayodhya. So she was adamant. "Keep up your word" she insisted. The king went pale with anxiety. Rama was born as a result of the Yagna and that too, after being childless for a very long time. How could Dasharatha betray such a precious son? Why was Kaikeyi behaving in such a wicked manner? Who provoked her into this?

Tormented with these thoughts, the king again tried to change Kaikeyi's mind "Kaika, are you angry that I decided on Rama's coronation without telling you? If so, please forgive me. I beg of you. Agree to this coronation. Please will love and respect you for this."

Kaikeyi did not budge. Dasharatha spent that night in Kaikeyi's chamber, pleading with her, begging her and crying for mercy. The coronation was to take place the next morning.

The morning dawned. The city of Ayodhya wore a gay look. People were getting ready to take part in the coronation ceremony. Vashishta and other sages were busy with rituals. Sumantra, the ministers, who was told that the king was in Kaikeyi's chambers, reached the room, only to find the king in a sad state. Kaikeyi stopped him from talking to the king and ordered him "Sumantra, go and fetch Rama here. I want to talk to him".

Sumantra conveyed this message to Rama and Rama reached Kaikeyi's chamber immediately. On seeing him, the old king just could not control his tears and cried out 'Rama! My dearest son Rama!"

"Mother, why is father looking so pale and grief-stricken. Have I caused him any anguish?" asked Rama politely.

Kaikeyi's told him about her two wishes and about the king's reluctance to the agree to them.

Without any hesitation Rama at once agreed to carry out her wishes "Mother, you want me to live in the forest like a hermit. Is that all? I will do anything for you. I will leave to day itself. Bharata is my brother. I will be the happiest person to see him as the king. I will sacrifice even my life for him." Rama continued and said in a very calm voice. "For such a minor matter, I do not want to see my dear father unhappy. Please console him and please summon Bharata to Ayodhya at once."

Kaikeyi was delighted that Rama had agreed to carry out her wishes "Rama, I will send word to Bharata. Meanwhile you can leave Ayodhya."

On hearing this Dasharatha cried out once again "Kaika, Kaika, don't be so cruel". He could not even stand up properly.

Rama hurried to his father and hugging lovingly told, "dear father, it is my duty to honour any promise you have made." He turned towards Kaikeyi "Mother, please own mother and my wife Sita". He touched his parent's feet in salutation and left the chamber in a very dignified manner.

Kaushalya on hearting the news lamented "Rama, my child! How can I live without you? Take me along with you to the forest." Lakshmana who heard this was enraged. "Why is father banishing Rama to the forest? Is she afraid of Bharata? In that case, I will wipe out Bharata and his supporters". He shouted in anger. But Rama spoke in a calm and firm voice that it was his duty to carry out his father's promises. Kaushalya felt very sad. Should a prince like Rama live in a forest eating simple food and sleeping on a rough-straw mat? But Rama would not hear of any such argument and so, with a heavy heart, she did farewell to her dearest son.

After taking leave of his mother, Rama went to talk to Sita. As soon as she heard that Bharata was to be the king and that Rama was to live in the forest, she decided to go with her husband. Rama tried to prevent her by saying "Janaki, don't worry about me. Please stay back in the palace and take care of my mothers. Treat my brothers well. At the end of the fourteen-year period, I will return safely to Ayodhya. No harm will come to me."

Sita replied "Lord, I will follow you like a shadow. I do not want the comforts of the palace without you. Nothing can give me greater happiness than being with you. Rama tried his utmost to dissuade her "Wild beasts roam around in the forest. You will not there be good food to eat. Your tender feet will hurt when you walk on the thorny paths".

Sita did not lose courage "Aryaputra, how can the beasts attack me when you me when you are there? Without you, even the softest bed will be like a bed of thorns. It is my duty to be with you. Please let me come with you," pleaded Sita softly. So Rama agreed to Sita's request.

Lakshmana, who heard about Rama and Sita's decision, came running to him, fell at his brother's feet and begged of him "Please not leave me behind. I will also come with you to the forest. Ayodhya will be like hell to me without you." Rama hesitated, for, there was a very strong bond of love and affection between the two of them. But at the same time, why should Lakshmana undergo such exile for the sake of brotherly love, thought Rama. So he said, "Sowmithri\*, if you come away with me. Who will protect and after our parents? But Lakshmana refused to stay back "Bharata will look after



our parents, whereas, you will have none with you in the forest. I can fetch you fruits and water look after you and my respected sister-in-law.” So saying he went to his mother to break the news to her.

Sita, Rama and Lakshmana discarded all their royal clothes and wore rough saffron clothes. All the Rama and Lakshmana carried with them were their bows and arrows by that time; this sad news had spread like fire all over Ayodhya and people wept at the thought that Rama would not be their king. None could witness the scene of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana walking barefoot, dressed like hermits. “Fate is so cruel” thought many. “Will these three be able to face the dangers of a forest” was their worry.

As Rama, Sita and Lakshmana entered Dasharatha just could not control his anguish. “Rama, my dearest son, I wish I was robbed of my eye sight than to witness such a cruel scene. Will you ever forgive me, my son?” said Dasharatha.

Rama wiped his father’s tears softly. “Father, I am duty bound to fulfill your wish. Please bless us.”

Dasharatha released that he could not make Kaikeyi change her mind nor could he make Rama go back on what he had said. In a trembling voice, he asked Sumanthra, the minister, to send to troops and servants along with Rama to the forest. This made Kaikeyi all the angrier. “O king! Is it fair on your part to send the troops away? Do you want my son to rule over an empty Ayodhya? No, no one should go with Rama,” she said in a final tone.

Utterly defeated, Dasharatha ordered that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana be taken by chariot at least till the outskirts of Ayodhya. “I cannot bear to see them walking through the streets of Ayodhya. Since Kaikeyi did not object to this, Sumanthra got a chariot readied.

Sri Rama, Sita, Lakshmana touched the feet of all their elders to seek their blessing. As Rama, Sita and Lakshmana got into the chariot, the entire population of Ayodhya wept. “How could the king behave so foolishly?” ridiculed some. “Will the old parents bear the separation from their dear son” was the anxiety upon many faces.

The chariot started moving. The king Dasharatha, wanted to have a Rama wanted the chariot to move faster but the old king ran behind it crying out Rama’s name. Kaushsalya also tried to follow the chariot; people averted their eyes, as they could not withstand such a pitiable scene. Rama’s eyes were filled with tears. As the chariot moved faster, Dasharatha collapsed on the streets. When Kaikeyi tried to help him, he cried, “Don’t ever touch me. I don’t want to see again. Just go away.”

Even when the chariot began to move faster, people followed it, Rama again appealed to them “I know of our enormous love and affection towards me. From now on, Bharata will be your king. Please show him the same love and affection that you have towards me.” The citizen insisted that they would follow him to the forest. By that time, the chariot had reached had run behind the chariot for a long distance, they were all tired and soon fell asleep under the trees. Taking advantage of this, Rama the ordered Sumanthra to take him to the borders of Kosala country and before dawn, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had reached the banks of the river Ganga. When the citizen woke up in the morning. They released that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were nowhere in the vicinity. They had no other option than to return to Anybody.

Rama decided to cross the Ganga and continue their journey. In the nearby forest live Guha, the king of the hunters. He was a friend of Rama and so, he was very happy to see him. Welcoming Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, Guha offered them many delicacies to eat. But Rama refused these saying that since him exile had begun, he would only eat simple food. He stayed there overnight and

slept on the hard floor. He was very worried about his father. So, the next morning, he requested Sumanthra to return to Ayodhya and to take care of his parents. Sumanthra reluctantly agreed to return to Ayodhya on crossing the river. The three travelers did good-bye to Guha and walked through the dense jungle. Lakshmana walked in front, clearing the jungle path, Sita walked in-between and Rama walked behind her. It was not easy for to the walk bare-foot on the thorny paths. But they walked on cheerfully, admiring the way huge trees grew, how the insects collected their food. In the night they slept on the grassy slopes of a tree and at dawn, started their journey again. On the way, they halted at the hermitage of Bharadwaj. Sage Bharadwaj was delighted with his guests and extended a warm hospitality to them. He then suggested that they live in Chitrakut region, which was full of enchanting scenery.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, followed his advice and reached Chitrakut by crossing the river Yamuna.

Rama liked the areas very much. So, he decided to live there and asked Lakshmana to set up Parnakti, a thatched hut, Rama performed rituals and offer prayers to his elder and entered his new home Malyawati river flowed nearby. Flowering trees, fruit trees were found to be in plenty. There were so much beautiful butterflies around. The sweet singing of the birds lent an enchantment to the area. Sita loved to place.

In the meantime, Sumanthra had returned to Ayodhya. By then, he had received news about Rama, Sita& Lakshmana having reached Chitrakut. Without Rama's presence, the entire Ayodhya looked like a ghost city. People seemed disinterested in everything. And when he saw Sumanthra return in an empty chariot, they wept.

Sumanthra's return to Ayodhya kindled a small hope in Dasharatha. "May be Rama was return to the kingdom" he thought. "I do not want to live without my Rama" he carried. He could only think of Rama's birth, his childhood and his marriage to Sita. "I have lost such a wonderful son. I do not know what sin I committed."

Then, he suddenly remembered an incident, which occurred when he was young.

Dasharatha had once gone hunting and had reached Sarayu river. It was a dark night and he heard a sound of splashing in water. He thought that a wild beast had come to drink water and aimed his arrow in the sound emanated. When Dasharatha tried to trace his victim, he found that his arrow had hit a young lad by name Sravanakumar, this boy was fetching water for his blind parents. Dasharatha at once picked him in his arms, but by the time he took him to the blind parents, the boy was already dead. The grief-stricken father of Sravanakumar cursed Dasharatha "O king! You have killed my son and thus separated me from him. This grief will be the cause of my death. You shall also die, pining for your son."

Dasharatha told Kaushalya about this incident and holding her hand, said, "The sage's curse had come true now. Please forgive me for all my sins."

The king recalled each and every feature of the handsome Rama and with tears blurring his eyes cried out "I wanted my son to be near me when I die. Kaikeyi's has destroyed even this. She is my true enemy Kaushalya! Sumatra! I do not want to live any longer. My eyes are failing. Rama, My son!, Rama, my son!" The king died.

Ayodhya which was still grieving over Rama's exile, was plunged into sorrow as the news of the king's death spread. "But what a tragedy? The king who had four mighty sons died when none of them

were near him. Who will perform his funeral rites” debated the people. Sage Vashishta there for made arrangements for the body to be preserved for a longer time.

Dasharatha’s ministers hurriedly called a meeting and on Vashishta’s advice, sent word to Bharata who was visiting his maternal relatives. But the messengers were instructed not to disclose to Bharata about Rama’s exile and the king’s death.

On receiving the message, Bharata immediately hurried to Ayodhya. Just the previous night, he had some evil omens and he was anxious to return home at the earliest.

On reaching Ayodhya, Bharata was shocked to see people huddled in corners and weeping. No prayers were offered. No chanting of Vedas could be heard. Even one child could not be found playing in the park. There was a deathly silence everywhere. The worried Bharata first went to his father’s chambers but found it empty. So he went to Kaikeyi chambers hoping to find his father there, but only Kaikeyi was there. “Mother, where is my father? What has happened in my absence” he asked.

Kaikeyi thought that Bharata would be very pleased to hear the she had got him the kingdom of Ayodhya. In a gentle tone she said “Son! Nobody can prevent death. Your father has passed away”. Shocked by this news Bharata collapsed. The death of his father, whom he loved so dearly, brought tears to his eyes. “I wish I was with my father when he died” he thought, “Atleast Rama and Lakshmana have had that great honour” he said aloud. “Mother, have to go and see Rama and findout if my father had any last message for me.”

Kaikeyi stopped him from leaving and said “Son, wait, your father cried out only for Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. He said he could not live without them.”

Bharata felt that there was more bad news. “Why, mother? Isn’t Rama in Ayodhya? Where has he gone?”

Kaikeyi then had to tell him everything. Placing her hand over his head, she said, “Bharata, your brother Rama along with Sita and Lakshmana are now living in a forest. I have got you the kingdom of Ayodhya.”

Bharata was stunned to hear this, Enraged, he told this mother, “I a, ashamed to call you as my mother. You are nothing but evil. How could you banish Rama to the forest? **Had’nt** you loved him more than you loved me? Alas! You have killed my father, just to make me the king. And do you except me to wear the crown that rightfully belongs to Rama? Shame on you!”

Full of scorn and anger towards his mother, Bharata decided to atone for her sins. “I will go to the forest and live there for the rest of my life. But before that, I will bring back Rama and make him the king.”

He then went to Kaushalya and sobbing bitterly, he fell at her feet and said “Mother, I am the sinner. I have been the cause of my father’s death and my brothers’ exile to the forest. Will your ever forgive me and my own mother?” Kaushalya consoled him that none can change the course of destiny. She knew of his pure mind.

Bharata met the ministers. He offered his salutations to sage Vashishta made arrangements for the funeral of Dasharatha. With a heavy heart, Bharata performed all the rites a son ought to do.

Shatrugna wanted to punish Manthara for evil thoughts and for provoking Kaikeyi. But Bharata did not want to subject an old woman to cruel treatment and so, she was pardoned.

Bharata lost interest in everything. For hours, he sat alone and in shame and anger thought about his father's death and about Rama. He refused to be crowned as the king "In Raghu dynasty, none has witnessed a younger son becoming the king. I have decided to bring back Rama. I will go to the forest in his place."

So, the next day Bharata left Ayodhya with a large army. The people of Ayodhya followed him. The queens including Kaikeyi went with them. By that time Kaikeyi realized that she had committed a grave mistake. She was very repentant and wanted to please with Rama to forgive her.

When this huge group of soldiers and people reached the area where Gahu lived, he at first thought that Bharata had brought his army to kill Rama and retain the kingdom even after the period of fourteen years. So, he asked Bharata "Why have you brought such a huge army? If you plan to attack Rama, you will have to defeat me first."

Bharata was extremely hurt by Guha that he would take Rama back to Ayodhya and crown him the king. Guha was very happy to hear this. So he helped Bharata, his army and his retinue to cross the Ganga.

As Bharata and his army approached Chitrakut, Lakshmana saw them coming. He recognized the flag fluttering atop Bharata's chariot and at once informed Rama about this "Brother, take up your bow. Bharata is coming here with a big army to kill you. His mother banished you to the forest. He will not hesitate to kill you. I will fight against him and kill him," he said angrily.

Rama listened to Lakshmana calmly and said "Lakshmana, you have misunderstood Bharata. He also has a lot of love towards him. He probably has come here to ask me to return to Ayodhya. Don't talk hastily. And don't talk ill of Bharata".

Lakshmana never disobeyed his brother. So he kept quiet. As soon as Bharata saw Rama, he ran towards him and fell at his feet. Shatrugna also offered his salutations to Rama.

Rama embraced his brothers and was concerned to see agony on their faces. So he asked Bharata "How is father? Have you taken over the affairs of the kingdom?" Bharata could not control himself any longer and sobbing he said, "Our father died heart-broken. He could not bear the grief of your exile."

On hearing this news, tears welled up in Rama's eyes. "Bharata, how unfortunate I am! I could not look after my father at his deathbed. Neither did I have the opportunity to perform my father's last rites." Sita and Lakshmana were also shocked to hear about king Dasharatha's death.

Bharata who had come dressed in the clothes of a hermit told his brother. "Rama, please return to Ayodhya and rule over it, instead of you. I will stay back in the forest. Rama was deeply moved by Bharata's love for him. But he said in a firm voice. "No, Bharata I am here to fulfill my father's promise. You should also respect his wishes. We should not disobey our father. I will rule over Ayodhya only after completing my exile in the forest."

Bharata tried his level best to make Rama change his mind. The sages also tried to influence Rama but in vain. Rama's only answer was "It is my duty to carry out the wishes of my parents."

Bharata made one more attempt to persuade Rama. "I do not have the capability to rule over the kingdom. Come back to Ayodhya atleast for my sake." Rama smile gently at this and said "Bharata, you are very intelligent and capable person. You have the expert knowledge of your ministers with you. And the responsibility of ruling over Ayodhya is yours. Go back and rule over it well."

With no other option Bharata said "Brother, I will rule over Ayodhya on your behalf. So please give me your sandals. I will place them on the throne." Rama agreed to this, speaking again Bharatha swore, "I hereby take an oath that I shall await your return and for this period of fourteen years I shall not wear any royal clothes and I shall subsist only on fruits and tubers. If you do not return on the appointed day, I will jump into the fire and end my life."

Such was the love between the two brothers. Hugged his brother and advised him "please treat our mother Kaikeyi well. Be happy. Be kind to others."

Bharata placed his brother's sandals over his head and carried them to Ayodhya. He did not like to live in Ayodhya without Rama. So he chose a small village called Nandigram near Ayodhya. He placed the Padukas (sandals) in the throne and coroneted them. "I am merely a servant of my brother" he announced. "These Padukas are the true masters" he said. He showed due respect to these Padukas and remembering Rama at each and every step, ruled over Ayodhya. People felt safe and happy under him.

Sri Rama wanted to go away from Chitrakut as the place reminded him of Bharata and his mothers. So he decided to leave the area and move on. The three of them wandered through dense forest, leading a peaceful, contented life.

## The demons in the forests



Many of these forests had sages living. Many more had demons in them, destroying everything and at times even disrupting the lives of the sages. Dandakaranya was one such forest.

When Rama, Sita and Lakshmana entered this forest, the Rishis welcome them, offered them fruits and nuts. A thatched hut was specially erected for them. Happy and contented, Rama decided to spend the night there.

All of sudden, a very ugly creature appeared before him. It had a body of a demon. With huge, bulging eyes. A big mouth its stomach was a big mound. This demon was Viradha. He had a Trishul\* in hand, several dead animals were pierced onto it. Viradha was a terror to the Rishis. Brahma that no weapon would kill him had granted him a boon.

As soon as Viradha saw the beautiful Sita, he grabbed her and thundered that Sita would be made his wife. Enraged, Rama used a sharp arrow could not kill Viradha, it caused him severe injuries. Viradha put down Sita and fought with Rama. Rama and Lakshmana used their weapons and injured Viradha's body. Viradha could not be defeated. Soon he tucked Rama and Lakshmana rounder his arms and started running. At once Rama and Lakshmana chopped off his arms. Viradha fell to the ground. Lakshmana

broke all his bones. But in vein. Finally Rama and Lakshmana dug a pit and buried Viradha. They covered the pit with huge boulders.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana continued their journey through the forest and reached Panchavati. It was a lovely spot and Sita liked very much. So, on Rama instructions. Lakshmana built hut. Nearby flowed the river Godavari. Flowers bloomed everywhere and their fragrance filled the air. All of them lived peacefully and happily.

Not for long. One day a demon by name Surpanakha passed by. She saw Rama and Lakshmana talking to each other. The handsome Rama caught her attention and she fell in love with him. Surpanakha was ugly and hideous. She had rough, red hair. She had a massive body and a huge tummy. Her eyes were red and evil looking. Her voice was so powerful that the whole forest seemed to vibrate whenever she opened her mouth.

She went straight to Rama and asked him “who are you?” Rama replied that he was the son of Dasharatha and he then asked her who she was.

Laughing hoarsely she said, “I am Surpanakha. I am the only sister of king Ravana of Lanka. Kumbakarna and Vibhisana are my brothers. The mighty Khara and Dushaba are also my brothers. Rama, I am desirous of you. I have never seen anyone so handsome. Marry me. Be my husband.” She paused for a moment and said, “please don’t think I am ugly. I can turn myself into a beautiful girl. I can make you very happy.”

Rama smiled and replied “Surpanakha, I am already married. Do you see the beautiful lady over there? She is my wife Sita. As I told you earlier, this is my brother Lakshmana. He is married but has left his wife behind. I suggest you propose to him.”

Surpanakha thought it to be a good idea and went to Lakshmana “O Lakshmana, did you hear about what your brother said? Come, let us get married and lead a happy life.”

Lakshmana said jokingly “My dear lady, I am a humble servant of Rama. If you marry me, you will have to be a maid here. Rama will be a king in a few years. It’s best if you marry him. You can then be the queen.”

Surpanakha pestered Rama again “Rama, marry me. Otherwise I will gobble up Sita and then force you to marry me.”

Rama refused and the angry Surpanakha tried to attack Sita. But Lakshmana quickly drew out his sword and cut off her ears and nose.

Screaming with pain and rage, Surpanakha ran to her brother Khara and told him about how Rama and Lakshmana ill-treated her. “I want to drink Sita’s blood. Also want the severed heads of Rama and Lakshmana. My dear brother please fulfill my wish” she said.

Khara who was infuriated on seeing the condition of his dear sister ordered fourteen of his fellow-demons to kill Rama and Lakshmana. But Rama knocked them down. Within moments, all of them were dead.

Khara then took a large army of Rakshasas with him and promised his sister that he would gift her Rama's head. Each of the Rakshasas of the army charged menacingly towards Rama. Rama fought against them single-handed while Lakshmana stood guard near Sita. Rama destroyed the entire army and soon killed Khara and Dushana also. The Rishis and the Suras who were watching this battle showered petals on Rama and hailed his victory over the demons. They were grateful to Rama for bringing peace to Dandakaranya.

Sita was very happy that fought valiantly against the powerful Khara and Dushana. So did Lakshmana.

Surpanakha who also witnessed the mighty power of Rama fled to Lanka. When she reached the court of Ravana, he was conducting a meeting with his ministers about an important matter relating to Lanka. Surpanakha entered the court in a dramatic way, crying loudly and trying to cover her gaping nose with her hand. Ravana was horrified to see his sister in such a condition. Even before he could say anything Surpanakha burst out talking. "Ravana, my brother! All the Rakshasas have been killed. Khara and Dushana are dead. And imagine! Just one human being is responsible for all this disaster. A man by name Rama has killed fourteen thousand Rakshasas and also Khara and Dushana. Rama is no ordinary person. When he uses his arrows, it appears as though there is a rain of arrows. And here you are leading a life of luxury, not caring about your brothers who died at the hands of Rama."

"But dear sister, who caused you all these injuries and why" asked Ravana.

"Dear brother, Rama has a very lovely wife called Sita. She is so very beautiful. That's why I wanted to bring her to you as a gift. Rama got angry and ordered his brother Lakshmana to chop off my nose and ears" laid Surpanakha.

"Just to please me, you faced such danger, is it?" asked Ravana.

"Yes. Even our brother Khara and Dushana and a great number of Rakshasas sacrificed their lives to bring you the lovely Sita."

Surpanakha continued to provoke Ravana's anger. "Brother, you are so strong and mighty. Kidnap Sita and keep her with you. Only then can you take revenge against Rama for his misdeeds."

Ravana, who had attended Sita's Swayamvar, had not forgotten her immense beauty. Nor had he forgotten how Rama had won her hand by humiliating all the other kings and princes. His wicked mind urged him not to lose this chance to take revenge. So he thought of a plan to kidnap Sita.

The next morning Ravana flew in his Pushpak Viman and reached the home of Maricha, Taraka's son. He described to Maricha the way in which Surpanakha was disfigured and how Khara and Dushana met a cruel death. "I have to take revenge against Rama. Only then will my brothers find peace in heaven. That's why I want to separate Sita and Rama" said Ravana.

Maricha, who had earlier faced Rama's arrows, trembled with fear just at the mention of his name. "Ravana, you are ill-advised. Carrying away Sita is another man's wife. Give up such wicked thoughts and go back to Lanka" advised Maricha.

Ravana would not listen to Maricha. He insisted on Maricha's help and then explained his plan. "Maricha, if you are so afraid of Rama's arrows, you need not face him at all. You have magical powers and can turn yourself into any other form. All that I ask of you is to turn yourself into a

beautiful golden deer and roam in front of Sita's hut. Sita will definitely want you. So she will ask Rama and Lakshmana to catch you. When they try to chase you, you can run Panchavati. With none to protect her, Sita can be easily kidnapped. And unable to bear the separation, Rama will die."

Maricha once again told Ravana "O king! You already have so many beautiful wives. Do not lust for Sita. She will be the cause of your death and destruction of Lanka."

"Hs... Ha..." laughed Ravana scornfully. "How can an ordinary man like Rama cause my death? I live across the ocean and he cannot even reach me there."

"I am warning you Maricha," he continued. "If you do not help me in this plan, I will kill you at this very spot." Maricha knew that either way he would be killed. He preferred to die at Rama's hands and so agreed to Ravana's plans. Ravana took him in his Pushpak Viman and dropped him near Panchavati.

## The Kidnapping Of Sita



Maricha turned himself into a golden deer and roamed in front of Sita's hut at a time when she came out to pluck flowers. Sita was enchanted to see such a beautiful creature and called out to Rama "Can you please catch this exquisite creature for me?" she asked. "Let us take it to Ayodhya when we get back" she suggested.

Lakshmana who also saw the golden deer was cautious. So he told Rama "Brother, somehow I feel that this is not a real animal. I feel that this is not a real animal. I feel that this is some Rakshasa in the guise of a deer."

Sri Rama had also taken a great liking for the deer and he brushed Lakshmana's advice aside.

Lakshmana, this deer is rather unusual. I also like it as much as Janaki. If, as you say, it is really a Rakshasa. I can kill it and get rid of the Rakshasa. Be careful. Look after Sita till I return." So saying Rama went in pursuit of the animal.

Rama ran behind the deer and just as he was about to catch it, it ran faster and faster. Rama chased it on and on but he still could not catch it. Tired and unable to catch it alive, Rama used his arrow. As soon as the arrow hit the deer, it fell down and its body turned once again into the body of a Rakshasa. Before dying Maricha imitated Rama's voice and cried out "Ah Sita! Ah Lakshmana!" Rama at once realized that this was a trick of the Rakshasa and fearing for the safety of Sita, hurried back to the Ashram.

When Maricha's cry reached Sita's ears, she felt scared and told Lakshmana "Your brother is in danger. Please go to his rescue."

Lakshmana tried to calm her by assuring that no harm could ever come to Rama. When she insisted that Lakshmana leave at once in search of Rama. Lakshmana refused. She got angry. "Lakshmana, didn't you hear what I said? Instead of going to Rama's help, you stand here like a stone statue. Are you Rama's enemy? Have you no concern for the safety of your brother?" Lakshmana was hurt by Sita's words, but still he said calmly "Rama is very valiant. No harm can



come to him. As I told you earlier, the golden deer was probably Maricha. My brother Rama has instructed me not to leave you alone. I shall follow his orders.”

In her anxiety about Rama’s safety Sita accused Lakshmana of evil intentions and threatened to end her life if Lakshmana did not go to Rama’s help.

Lakshmana was extremely hurt by Sita’s accusations and so, decided to go in search of Rama. Before he went, he warned Sita to be careful about strangers. He also drew a line just outside the door of the hut with his arrow and told her “Respected sister-in-law! Please do not cross this line on any event. I will soon be back with Rama. May God protect you!”

Ravana, who had hid behind a tree waiting for Sita to be left alone, turned himself into a poor Sanyasi and called out in front of the hut. “Alms for a poor Sanyasi!” Thinking that a hungry person was at the door, Sita opened it with the food vessel in her hand. Ravana found her even more beautiful than ever and this made him determined to have her at any cost.

Sita stood at the door not wanting to cross the line Lakshmana had drawn in front of the hut. So, to make her cross the line, Ravana pretended to be very weak with hunger and said “My lady, please hand over the alms to me here.”

As soon as the unsuspecting Sita walked across the line, Ravana grabbed her hand and revealed his true identity. “O beautiful Sita, I am Ravana, the mighty king of Lanka. I have come here to take you to my kingdom. Forget about Rama, who cannot even feed you well in this forest. I will treat you like a queen and give you all the luxuries of life.

Sita was very angry at such indecent talk. She tried to pull away her hand. But Ravana ignored her warnings and pleas and forcibly dragged her to his Pushpak Viman. Soon he was air-borne. Sita, who was trembling like a fawn cried out “Rama, Rama Lakshmana. Where are you? The wicked Ravana is taking me away”. But there was no response. So, she made a fervent plea to the trees and the bird to convey the message to Rama that she was in distress. Jatayu, the king of bird, heard her cries. As soon as she saw him, she pleaded with Jatayu. “Will you please tell Rama about my kidnapping and save me from this wicked man. Jatayu blocked Ravana,s way and advised him “Leaves Sita alone. A king of your stature should not resort to such wicked act. Sita is another man’s wife. What would you have done if another man kidnapped your wife? Rama will certainly kill you for this. But before that, I will fight against you and rescue Sita”.

Ravana laughed at Jatayu. “You are nothing but a bird. Are you going to rescue this beautiful lady?”.

“I will show you my strength” challenged Jatayu. And then they fought with each other high up in the skies. Jatayu scratched and injured Ravana’s body with his sharp claws. He was deeply touched by Sita’s tears and her helpless conditions. So, even at the cost of his own life, Jatayu fought with Ravana. With his powerful wings, he broke Ravana’s bow. This made Ravana very angry and he chopped Jatayu’s wings with his sword. He cut off the legs too. Jatayu lost the power to fly and fell to the ground. Sita was dismayed that Jatayu died for her sake. She plunged into immense sorrow. Ravana again flew to Lanka along with Sita.

On the way, the hapless Sita cursed Ravana.” Wicked Ravana, you have invited death, for, my husband is not an ordinary man. He is the bravest among the brave. He is unrivalled in the art of warfare. He can kill you with a single arrow.” Threatened Sita. None of these words had any effect on Ravana. He was mighty pleased with himself that he was about to enjoy Sita’s company.

Feeling desperate, Sita down and noticed a group of Monkeymen sitting atop a hill. Without losing any more time, she removed all her ornaments, wrapped them in a portion of her upper garment and threw down the bundle so that it fell amidst the Monkeymen. The surprised monkey men looked up but by that time Ravana had zoomed past them. He crossed the ocean and reached Lanka.

Ravana kept Sita in his royal chamber and appointed Rakshasis to guard her. He instructed them, to look after Sita well and not to hurt her anyway. Ravana thus hoped that Sita would eventually change her mind about him and agree to be his queen.

That's why Ravana made it a habit to visit her everyday, carrying expensive gifts with him. He pestered her, pleaded with her and tried all sorts of methods to make Sita agree to his desire.

Sita was disgusted by the way he talked. As soon as Ravana came to the chamber, she would close her eyes and close her ears with her hands.

"Ravanasur, you are talking to me in an immoral way. Whatever you say or do, I won't even look at you or listen to you. You tricked me into believing that you are a Sanyasi. Alas! I did not listen to Lakshmana's advice", lamented Sita. Everyday she wept bitterly at her misfortune.

Irritated with her persistent refusals, Ravana warned her "Sita, I will allow you one year's time. If by then, you do not change your mind and wed me, I shall cut you into pieces. He ordered the Rakshasis to guard Sita in Ashoka garden and to try to make her agree to his proposal.

## Rama searches for Sita



When Lakshmana reached the spot where Maricha lay dead, both Rama and Lakshmana at once knew that Sita was in danger. So they hurried back to Panchavati but were shocked to find it empty. They searched and searched for her. Rama went to the Godavari bank but could not find her there.

Rama was heart-broken. Life seemed meaningless without Sita. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he recalled the way in which Sita would stroll in the garden, how happy she was in Panchavati and so on. At times, he turned his wrath on Lakshmana for leaving Sita alone. Lakshmana tried to explain to Rama about how reluctant he was to leave Sita alone and about how Sita insisted that he go in search of Rama.

But this did not console Rama in any way. He roamed through the forest like a madman, calling out her name so often, talking to plants and animals about Sita. All their efforts to trace Sita were in vain. Rama and Lakshmana did not give up their efforts to find Sita. They kept on walking and suddenly they noticed Jatayu, who was wounded and was bleeding profusely. Rama at first thought that this was a Rakshasa in the form of a bird and drew out his arrow to kill Jatayu. Just then he heard Jatayu say in a feeble voice "Rama, I am Jatayu. I tried to prevent Ravana from abducting Sita and just look at my condition! I am about to die at the moment now. Sri Rama, are you going to kill me".

Rama kept aside his weapons, picked up the bird in his arms and gently touched his body. Jatayu told Rama! I tried my best to save Sita. Please kill Ravana, free Sita and lead a happy life". He died in Rama's arms, contented that he had the good fortune of rendering some service to Rama.

Rama performed Jatayu's last rites, as a son would do for his father. Then Rama and Lakshmana continued their journey westwards.

On their way, a cruel looking Rakshasa stopped them. He had arms, which were several miles long. With one sweep of the arm, this Rakshasa, whose name was Kabandha, lifted Rama and Lakshmana up in the air. He was about to gobble them up when both of them chopped off his arms. Screaming with the pain, Kabandha wanted to know who they were. When Rama revealed his identity, Kabandha bowed before him and narrated his story.

Kabandha was once very handsome. But he would turn just to scare the Rishi and kill them. Once a Rishi cursed him "May this hideous form stay? Only when Rama comes to this forest and chops your arms will you be able to regain your good-looks".

Kabandha got back his good looks and commanded a flying machine to take him to heaven. Before departing, he wished Rama and Lakshmana well and said "Rama, Sugriva is a monkey king who lives in the hills of Rishyamukha by the side of Pampa lake. Make him your friend. He will help you to know the whereabouts of Sita."

So the two brothers proceeded towards Rishyamukha. Tired and hungry, they walked on and in the midst of a forest, they noticed an Ashram. Sabari, a Sanyasini lived here. She was very old and could hardly see or walk. But still she had gathered nuts and fruits hoping to feed them to Rama. Hence when she saw Rama along with his brother at her doorsteps, her happiness knew no bounds. She extended her hospitality to them.

Sabari's love and devotion towards Rama earned her a place in heaven.

From Sabari's Ashram, Rama and Lakshmana reached the hills of Rishyamukha and rested for a while near Pampa lake.

## **The land of the monkeys**



Even when Sri Rama tried to take some rest, he always pined for Sita. He could not eat. Nor could he sleep. Lakshmana who sadly watched his brother's condition, tried to instill some hope and confidence in him, "Dear brother" he told Rama "Please do not lose heart. I am sure we can trace Sita and free her from Ravana".

"Then, let us not waste any more time" said Rama and soon they reached Rishyamukha.

Rishyamukha was a hilly region where many Vanaras\* lived. Sugriva was their leader. He had the assistance and friendship of Hanuman, a valiant and highly intelligent Vanara.

Sugriva had an elder brother called Vali. Vali was the king of Kishkinda. The two brothers loved each other. Once Vali had to fight against a demon and chased him into a cave, before entering he asked Sugriva to stand guard at its entrance. Sugriva waited there patiently but since Vali did not come out of many days, he was worried. To add to his worry, he heard the demon roar and also saw blood flow out of the cave. So he thought that Vali was dead, closed the cave with a huge rock and returned to Kishkinda. Since the kingdom was without a king, people crowned Sugriva as the king.

One day all of a sudden Vali returned. When he came to know that Sugriva had become the king, he was very angry. He banished Sugriva from the kingdom and even kept back Sugriva's wife for himself.

Sugriva took shelter in Rishyamukha, as Vali could not enter the area because of a curse.

When Rama and Lakshmana reached Rishyamukha, Sugriva at first thought that they had come on behalf of Vali to kill him. So he sent Hanuman to find out who they were.

Hanuman introduced himself to Rama and told him about himself and said "O Vanara! A Rakshasa called Ravana has abducted my sister-in-law. We do not know where he lives. We are here to ask for Sugriva's help to know more about Ravana. We are not here to kill Sugriva".

Satisfied with this reply, Hanuman carried Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders and with a powerful hop, reached the place where Sugriva lived.

Sugriva, on hearing about Rama's plight, embraced him warmly and told him "Rama, I will help you in your search for Sita. Wherever she is, we will find her. Oh Yes! Now I remember. A few days back, we saw a woman being abducted by a Rakshasa. And we heard her cry "Rama! Lakshmana! Please save me". She then threw down some of her ornaments tied in a piece of cloth. I will fetch these for a piece of cloth. I will fetch these for you. Please see whether they belong to Mother Sita". So saying Sugriva asked one of the Vanaras to fetch the ornaments.

As soon as Rama saw the ornaments, tears welled up in his eyes and crying out Sita's name, he fainted. After a while he regained consciousness and asked Lakshmana "Brother, please make sure that these belong to Sita". But Lakshmana could not identify any head ornament or ear ornament. He bowed his head and said, "I have never looked at my respected sister-in-law's face or any other portion of her body. I can only identify the articles worn by her as I have noticed them while touching her feet everyday." Such was the respect Lakshmana had towards his brother's wife.

Rama then looked at the ornaments and knew for certain that they belonged to his dearest wife. He swore "I will kill Ravana who has separated Sita from me".

Sugriva consoled his friend Rama and promised him that he would send the Vanara army to trace Sita and then help in killing Ravana. In return, the grateful offered to kill Vali and help Sugriva in regaining his kingdom.

Sugriva who was still not aware of Rama's enormous skill and bravery was doubtful whether he could fight against the very powerful Vali.

"Dear friend" he told Rama "I am glad with your offer to kill Vali. But I know my brother well. I have seen with my own eyes how Vali knocked down a line of seven trees with a single arrow. If you can also prove your skill, I will feel assured."

Upon this, Rama felled seven trees in a line with a single arrow. This made Sugriva very happy. So he went to Kishkinda and challenged Vali to a duel. This angered Vali a lot and he accepted Sugriva's challenge at once. But in no time at all, Vali overpowered Sugriva. Just at that time, Rama, who was hiding behind a tree, used an arrow capable of killing Vali. It hit him on the chest and Vali fell to the ground. Stunned by such an unexpected attack Vali looked around and saw Rama. "Rama, is it fair on your part to hide behind a tree like a coward and kill me?" accused Vali. He added, "You are a righteous man. How could you stoop to such level? And moreover, what grudge do you bear against me? Your enemy? Answer me, Rama. Without any reason you have killed me. What you have done is wrong".

In reply Rama said "Vali, Sugriva is my friend. Infact, he is like a brother to me. You had forcibly taken away his wife. So I had to kill you. Moreover you are not a human being. You are a Vanara. So I am justified in killing you in a surprise attack".

Vali could not say anything against this argument. So, he took Sugriva's hand in his own and asked him to look after his own son Angada well. In a few moments Vali was dead.

Sugriva, who regained the kingdom, soon forgot all about helping Rama to trace Sita. While Rama and Lakshmana lived in a cave, waiting for sugriva's help, Sugriva lived the life of a king, enjoying all the luxuries. This annoyed Lakshmana very much as he could no longer watch his brother pining for Sita. So he immediately rushed to Kishkinda swearing that he would kill Sugriva for breaking his promise. Alarmed at such anger, Hanuman hurried to Sugriva and reminded him about his promise to Rama. "Hasn't Rama proved his friendship to you? Shouldn't repay his gratitude? He asked.

Realising his mistake, Sugriva hastened to Rama and begged for forgiveness. He then ordered Hanuman to summon all the Vanaras to kishkinda, soon thousands of Vanaras assembled at kishkinda and Sugriva instructed them to search for Sita in all the four directions. He separately instructed Hanuman "Marathi! You are the most capable of all the Vanaras. I am sure that you will bring us the good news very soon". Rama also agreed with Sugriva. He called Hanuman aside and gave him his ring. "When you meet Sita, please show her this ring. She will then know that you are truly my messenger". Hanuman accepted the ring with devotion and after touching Rama's feet in reverence, left on his mission.

Sugriva had given one month's time to the Vanaras to trace Sita. They searched and searched and searched but just could not get any news about her. One group of Vanaras, which had gone in the southerly direction under Hanuman's leadership, was also unlucky. Tired and dejected, they sat on the seashore wondering what to do next. None of them dared to go to Sugriva for he had warned them not to come back without news about Sita. As they were unsuccessful in their aim, "Yes! Let us end our lives. Atleast we have the satisfaction that we were in Rama's service atleast for a short time. Wish we could have died like Jatayu, fighting for Sita's rescue" they said loudly.

At the mention of the name Jatayu, a sea bird came out from atop the sea boulders and asked the Vanara prince Angada, "Sir! I am Sampati, Jatayu's elder brother. Did I hear you say that the ten-headed Ravana killed Jatayu? I wish I could also have fought against Ravana because I saw him cross the sea along with a beautiful lady. May be she was Sita".

Sampati continued and said, "I know where the wicked Ravana lives. It is an island called Lanka, which is very far away. Strong walls have been built around the city and it is difficult to cross them unnoticed".

The Vanaras felt happy that atleast they knew where Sita was. But at the same time, they wondered how they could possibly cross the vast ocean and reach Lanka. Several of them tried to jump across but only landed on water. They were again disappointed.

Jambavanta, an elderly bear-like being advised Anjaneya “Son! You have the speed of wind. You have the strength to destroy and entire city. You are the only one among us who can jump across the ocean and land on Lanka.

Enthusiasm welled up in Hanuman. He expanded his chest and sucking in the air, grew bigger and bigger till he seemed to touch the sky. With courage burning in his eyes he proclaimed, “I shall fly across to Lanka and return along with Mother Sita”. He then strode atop the tallest peak and with a powerful thrust of his legs, took off. This vibration was so very strong that it rattled the entire hill. Soon he was airborne and looked as if he was the moon traversing across the skies.

The Vanara army that watched Hanuman’s feat with wonder danced with joy and blessed this son of Vayu for saving them from humiliation.

## **Hanuman meets Sita-Lanka is destroyed**



Hanuman was also applauded by Suras who showered flower petals on him. The Sun God silently blessed Hanuman by radiating less of heat. The Wind God Vayu turned into a gentle breeze and wished his son success.

To test Hanuman’s devotion Surasa, who obstructed Hanuman’s flight? She turned herself into a demoness and opened his mouth wide. Hanuman grew bigger in size she opened her mouth several miles wide and challenged Hanuman that she would let him pass only if he could enter her mouth. Hanuman at once shrunk his body to the size of a thumb and even before Surasa could realize what was happening, got in and got out of her mouth. Surase regained her earlier form and wished him well.

Hanuman encountered several more obstacles but he overcame all of them. He finally landed on Mount Trikuta on which the city of Lanka had been set up.

Lanka city was a dazzling city. It had beautiful gardens and parks. Forts, fierce looking Rakshas kept watch day and night and never let any stranger enter the city, surrounded the city. So Hanuman decided to turn into a very tiny being and slip past the guards. Soon, it was dark all over and Hanuman tried to climb over the fort wall and enter Lankini, the protector of Lanka and she tried to stamp him with her massive feet. The enraged Hanuman punched her very hard and with blood running out of her nose and ears, Lankini slumped to the ground. He then quickly entered the city.

Bearing in mind Rama’s description of Sita. Hanuman searched for her all over Lanka. But everywhere he found only hideous looking Rakshasis. He then peeped into each and every house but could not find Sita. “Ravana might have forced her to stay in the royal chamber. Let me check there” thought Hanuman but could not find her there. He closely examined each wife of Ravana including Mondodari but none could match the description of Sita. Hanuman got worried. If he were to go back to Rama empty handed, Rama would die. This would lead to Lakshmana’s death too. Unable to bear the news, Bharata, Shatrugna, Kaushalya .... And the entire Ayodhya will die mourning for Rama. Sugriva will end his life unable to bear his friend Rama’s death. Hanuman

trembled to think of the consequences if he could not find Sita. "Whatever happens, I will not return to Kishkinda unless I have news of Sita," swore Hanuman.

Searching for Sita, Hanuman entered the Ashoka garden. With hundreds of trees, the garden looked beautiful. All her clothes were torn and faded. She looked pale. Ugly looking Rakshasis who kept on praising Ravana in front of her surrounded the beautiful lady. By then, Hanuman recalled seeing Sita when she threw down the ornaments. He felt happy and relieved that Sita was alive. But at the same time he felt sorry for her condition and also felt sad that a person like Sita had to undergo such cruelty. Hanuman decided to talk to her when she was alone. So he climbed the tree above her and hid himself amongst the branches.

In a short while, Ravana reached the garden and tried his best to make Sita like him. Hanuman was so furious to hear such talk that he wanted to kill Ravana at the very spot. Sita even refused to listen to what Ravana was saying, and closing her ears said in a firm voice "I belong to Rama totally. Rama will definitely come and rescue me. That will be the final day of your life. Get out". The irritated Ravana ordered the Rakshasis to make Sita change her mind with the exception of a kind Rakshasi called Trijata, all the others pestered Sita but in vain. Finally they gave up and went off to sleep. Unable to bear the situation any longer, Sita decided to hang herself from the tree and die.

Hanuman who was watching Sita said softly "Rama, Rama", Sita stopped and looked up. She saw a monkey. She thought that Ravana was up to some magic tricks. Hanuman then talked about what Rama liked and what he did not. Sita's hand, which was about to tie the noose, stopped. Hanuman slowly got down from the tree and bowing his head before Sita, introduced himself as Rama's humble servant. To remove any doubts from her mind, Hanuman showed her the ring sent by Rama. Tears of happiness filled up Sita's eyes as soon as she saw her husband's ring. She could then believe Hanuman when he told her that Rama would soon be waging a war against Ravana and rescue her from Lanka. She gave Hanuman one of her ornaments and blessed him "Please convey my love to Rama. Let him kill Ravana and rescue me from here very soon. Let there be no obstacles in your way. Be successful".

Now that Hanuman had met Sita, he decided that he would find out about Ravana's army and his strength and inform Sugriva of them. He had a plan. He provoked all the Rakshasis to attack him and when they did, he jumped and trampled all the trees in Ashoka garden. The Rakshasis rushed to capture him but he killed them, when Ravana's commanders-in-chief and other able soldiers tried to catch the monkey but were defeated and killed by the mighty monkey. When Ravana heard about the destruction caused by a monkey, he sent his son Indrajit to capture the monkey.

Indrajit was a very skilled warrior, who, at one time, had even defeated Devendra. He used one of his powerful weapons on Hanuman, imprisoned him and dragged him to Ravana's court. When Hanuman was brought before the king, he was very impressed with the ten-headed Ravana. His court was very grand and dazzling. Ravana was sitting on a high throne. As soon as Hanuman came face to face with Ravana, he freed himself from chains and ropes, prepared a high swat out of his very long tail and sat on it.

"O Monkey! Who are you? And why did you destroy the Ashoka garden" asked Ravana.

"Sir" replied Hanuman "I am Rama's messenger. I came to Lanka in search of Sita. You have committed a great mistake by abducting Sita. If you want to live, you return Sita to Rama gracefully and seek refuge in him. Otherwise you are sure to die".

Having warned Ravana thus, Hanuman added, "Listen! I myself could have rescued Sita from here and carry her on my shoulders. But I do not have such orders. Only Rama should do this. And don't underestimate Rama. He is the Lord of the entire universe. Don't seek your own destruction by angering him".

Ravana was very angry "How dare a monkey talk to a king like me in such a way" he thundered. He ordered his soldiers "kill this arrogant Vanara". But Vibhishana, his brother, stopped him. "Brother, he is after all Rama's messenger. A king does not kill a messenger. Instead, you can punish him suitably and let him go back to Rama. He can tell Rama about your strength and power.

"Yes brother" agreed Ravana "what you say makes sense". He then ordered his servants to set fire to Hanuman's long tail and make him walk in the streets of Lanka.

The Rakshasas dipped the monkey's tail in oil and set fire to it. Anjaneya used it as a whip and lashed all the Rakshasas. He then jumped from building to building and reduced them to ashes. He did not even spare Ravana's palace. The whole of Lanka looked like an enormous fire pit.

He only spared the Ashoka garden. He made sure that Sita was safe and after seeking her blessings, left Lanka. He dipped his tail in the seawater, expended his body, climbed a nearby mountain and with a powerful thrust, flew off. Hanuman reached Kishkinda and told Rama all about Sita's safety. He conveyed her message also. He then handed over the ornament Sita had sent as a memento.

Sugriva and the entire Vanara army felt very proud that Hanuman was able to accomplish his mission. Sugriva hugged Hanuman and congratulated him.

## The War



**R**ama too was very happy that Hanuman was successful in finding Sita. Sugriva had kept up his word and Rama now had to plan about reaching Lanka, kill Ravana and rescue Sita. He therefore talked to Sugriva about this. "Sugriva, you have proved to be my true friend. I want more help from you because I am afraid that Ravana might kill Sita to take revenge. Hence, please get your army ready". Rama called Hanuman also to his side and holding his hands warmly said "Maruthi I am so grateful to you for your help. You are the only one among us who is capable of flying across the ocean. So, please tell us how we can get there". Rama also asked his trusted friend about Lanka's city plan, about its main gates, about the trenches built around the fort and many more such information to plan the attack; Though Hanuman had burnt down Lanka, Ravana had the city rebuilt immediately. Anjaneya who was aware of this told Rama "Lord! Once we cross the ocean, Lanka will be ours. Have no doubt about it. I shall summon Angada, Neela, Jambavanta and many more valiant Vanaras and bears and be ready to leave".

Upon Sugriva's orders, thousands of Vanaras formed a huge army and walked towards the ocean. But the vast expanse of water stopped them in their march. They just could not think of any method by which they could cross the ocean. They were afraid that they would drown in the water.

In Lanka also, many people were afraid of the consequences of war. They had seen the power of just one monkey. If thousands of such monkeys attacked Lanka, what would be the fate, many wondered. The Rakshasas tried to talk courageously and boasted "Rama and his Vanaras will be like insects in our hands.



Only one person among them was wise. He was Vibhisana, Ravana's younger brother. He was a devotee of Lord Vishnu and a very righteous man. While the others were advising Ravana about preparing for the war, Vibhisana stood up at the meeting and told his brother "Ravana, do not act in haste. First and foremost, you have been responsible for this danger. You have sinned in longing for another man's wife. So, let us send back Sita to Rama before he attacks".

Ravana did not like Vibhisana's words "I am not a coward. I am not sending Sita back to Rama. Please don't interfere in our plans" he scolded his brother.

Kumbakarna, another brother of Ravana, was also present at the meeting. He was a Rakshasa who slept for six months at a stretch. On waking up, he would eat lots and lots of food and go back to sleep again. Just that day, he had finished one round of sleeping. Though he did not like Ravana's behavior, he decided to support him out of brotherly love and loyalty.

Vibhisana could not tolerate his brother Ravana being provoked to war. He again advised him "Ravana, king of Lanka! Do you know who Sita is? She is a Goddess who can destroy evil. Her husband Sri Rama is the Lord of the Universe. None can fight against him. Not even Kumbakarna or You. So, act sensibly and send back Sita.

Ravana, his son Inderjit and the Rakshasas thought that Vibhisana was behaving like a coward. Vibhisana's frank talk was not like by anyone. When he once again suggested that Ravana should avoid war with Rama, Ravana was very angry.

"Vibhisana, are you really my brother? You talk as if I am your enemy. I feel you are very jealous of me. I have spared you because I still have some affection for you. Otherwise I would have killed you this very moment. Don't ever step into Lanka again. Get out from her".

Feeling sad that his brother ignored his advice, Vibhisana, with four of his followers, went to Rama and sought refuge under him.

"Sir" Vibhisana introduced himself to Rama, "I am Vibhisana, Ravana's brother. I have come to seek refuge under you. I tried my level best to make Ravana realise his mistake. I told him to hand over Sita and make peace with you. He ridiculed me and drove me out of Lanka. Rama, please accept me as your humble servant".

Sugriva and the other Vanara leaders did not like this request. So they told Rama "Rama, Vibhisana belongs to the enemy camp. Moreover he is a Rakshasa and a trickster. So, please think about this before you come to any decision. Hanumanth then remembered how Vibhisana had sided him in Ravana's court. So he told Rama "Rama, Vibhisana has probably approached you as he can become the king of Lanka after Ravana's death. He expects you to help him just the way you helped Sugriva against his brother Vali. In my humble opinion, we should accept Vibhisana's friendship".

Rama agreed with Hanuman and said, "It is my duty to protect those who seek refuge in me". One hearing these words and thanked him for this gesture.

Sri Rama embraced Vibhisana and promised him that upon Ravana's death he would be the king of Lanka. He then asked his friend about Ravana's army and Vibhisana explained everything in detail to him.

Under Vibhisana's guidance, the Vanaras built a bridge across the sea by placing logs of wood and big stones. In a few days the bridge was ready and cheering with excitement, the Vanara army crossed the sea and reached Lanka.

As soon as the Vanara army reached the gates of Lanka, Rama divided them into battalions and placed each group at important places. The whole area echoed with the sound of conches being blown and bows being stringed. These sounds created a scare even in the minds of the Rakshasas.

A fierce battle broke out between the Vanaras and the Rakshasas. Each one of the Vanaras fought bravely and injured or killed many Rakshasas. Sugriva, Hanuman, Angad, Neel killed many Rakshasas and everytime they killed, cried out "Victory to Sri Rama!".

The Rakshasas fought equally well. Especially at night, they used their magical powers and were responsible for the death of many Vanaras. But the death toll in Ravana's army was very, very high.

This upset Ravana very much because he had thought that it was very easy to defeat an army of monkeys. But his son Indrajit swore that Rama and Lakshmana would both be dead before the morning. This filled Ravana with delight. He embraced his son and told him "Indrajit, I am very proud of you. May success be yours!"

Indrajit used the darkness of the night and waged the war with skill and valour. Many Vanaras died at his hands. Indrajit then employed serpent-like arrows, which entwined themselves around Rama and Lakshmana as snakes. The poison emitted by these snakes made Rama and Lakshmana lose consciousness. Both of them fell to the ground. Taking them to be dead, Indrajit conveyed this good news to his father. Needless to say, Ravana was extremely happy. This news conveyed to Sita and she was brought in a flying machine to show her the fate of her husband and her brother-in-law. She was grief stricken that her dearest husband was dead.

Soon the whole of Lanka was agog with the news that Rama and Lakshmana were found dead in the battle. But only Vibhisana knew that Rama and Lakshmana had lost consciousness. Soon Rama regained consciousness but Lakshmana had not recovered from the snake poison. His body was slowly turning blue and Rama was extremely worried. The Devas who were watching this from the heaven instructed Garuda\* to save Rama and Lakshmana from the snakes. When the snakes saw that Garuda was about to swoop down on them, they unwound themselves and disappeared into snake pits. Rama and Lakshmana soon came back to normal. Garuda warned them to be careful about Indrajit and flew into the high skies again.

Ravana sent many more Rakshasas, who were very good at warfare. But each one of them died at the hands of Hanuman, Neel and other valiant Vanaras.

Ravana felt very humiliated. He immediately rushed to Kumbakarna who was fast asleep. With great difficulty, Ravana woke up his brother.

"Kumbakarna, if you love me, go and kill my enemies" he ordered.

Kumbakarna, had to obey his brother. So he got out of his enormous bed and walked towards the battle field. He was so huge and massive; it appeared as if a big mountain had entered the battlefield. Kumbakarna lifted Sugriva and Hanuman easily. He thrashed Hanuman on the ground and tugged Sugriva managed to escape by leaping high into the sky and stood behind Rama. The enraged Kumbakarna challenged Rama and a fierce battle was waged. Rama used one of his powerful weapons and chopped Kumbakarna's arms and legs. He used another weapon, which

separated Kumbakarna's head from his body. Kumbakarna died. The Vanaras felt very happy at this success.

Ravana was shocked to hear about Kumbakarna's death. Even then, he decided to continue the war. So he sent his sons Devanthaka, Naranthaka, Trishiraska and Atikaya to the battle. But they were no match for the Vanaras and soon Ravana received news about their deaths too.

Ravana was terribly shaken by these losses. Grief-stricken, who saw his father lose courage, tried to instill some confidence in him and said, "Father, as long as I am alive, please do not think of defeat. This time, my arrows will not spare Rama and Lakshmana. I will soon be back victorious."

Apart from being very brave and good at warfare, Indrajit also possessed immense magical powers. While his arrows hit Rama and Lakshmana and caused some injuries, he used his magical powers upon the entire Vanara army. This spread a poisonous gas in the air and soon most of the Vanaras tumbled down. Even Rama and Lakshmana were not spared. Jambavanta, who was fighting at the other end quickly called Hanuman and told him, "Maruthi, you cross the ocean and go to Kailash mountain. From there bring a rare herb called Sanjivini. We can then bring back all the Vanaras to life. But be very quick". Even before Jambavanta finished saying this, Hanuman flew across with the speed of wind and since he could not find Sanjivini, transported the entire, mountain to Lanka. Very soon, Rama, Lakshmana and the Vanaras were up on their feet, fit and fighting.

Inderjit once again used his magical powers and turned a Rakshasi to look exactly like Sita. He then took this fake Sita to the battle-field and in full view of Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Sugriva and others, severed her head.

The Vanaras were aghast. Rama turned numb with shock and Lakshmana vowed to kill Inderjit then and there. He chased Inderjit to a temple where Inderjit acquired more secret powers. Lakshmana destroyed this secret power by using a suitable weapon and also struck down Inderjit's head.

The Vanaras rejoiced at this triumph. Rama felt very relieved that Lakshmana had come to no harm and also that it was not Sita who died at Inderjit's hands.

Inderjit's death was the severest blow to Ravana. He had lost all his sons, his brothers and his army in the war. The whole of Lanka plunged into sorrow. Sita. Others cursed Ravana for his misdeed "His lust for a woman has caused us so much agony" lamented the citizens for; there was death and destruction in each and every house in Lanka.

Ravana climbed into his chariot and entered the battle field with a fierce determination to kill Rama. But first of all, he had to encounter Lakshmana. Ravana stopped the arrows used by Lakshmana in mid-air. He then turned his attention towards Rama. Severe fighting broke out between Rama and Ravana. Ravana used many powerful arrows but Rama could stop each one of them in mid-air. The arrows would become useless and fall down. But then, even Rama's arrows were futile, as they could not penetrate the Armour worn by Ravana. This was Armour granted to Ravana by Brahma as a boon and ordinary arrows could not penetrate through it.

With Ravana and Rama both being equally powerful, the battle between them was very fierce and raged on for several days. Even the celestial gods watched them anxiously as the war did not seem to end at all. But slowly Ravana felt drained of energy and knew that his end was close at hand. Still he fought. Finally Rama used Brahmastra, the mightiest of all mighty weapons. It tore the armour

worn by Ravana and hit him in the chest. The mighty Ravana fell down and died. The evil was vanquished.

The Devas rejoiced over the death of this wicked Rakshasas. The Vanaras went beserk with joy. Only Vibhisana, Mandodari and Ravana's other queens were plunged into grief.

On Rama's advice, Vibhisana performed Ravana's last rites.

Rama who was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu brought peace to the land. All the Rishis and Devas rejoiced that the Rakshasas had been wiped out.

Rama kept up his word and crowned Vibhisana as the king of Lanka.

Sri Rama then sent Hanuman to fetch Sita. Sitadevi was very happy that atleast the wicked Ravana had been killed. She looked forward to rejoin her beloved Rama. But he did not accept her immediately. He wanted to test whether she had remained devout to him. So he said "I find it impossible to believe that a womanizer like Ravana had not touched a beautiful woman like you. You are impure, So, I cannot accept you back as my wife". Rama's cruel words filled Sita's heart with sadness. She had given up food and water and had barley kept herself alive only to reunite with Rama. If he suspected her virtue, then life was not worth living for her. So the distressed Sita turned towards Lakshmana and asked him to prepare a pyre for her. Rama did not object.

Sita jumped into the pyre and prayed to Agni, the god of fire to rescue her only if she had remained pure. Kubera, Yama, Varuna, Indra, Shiva, Brahma and other gods and goddesses who witnessed this scene from the sky, came down to earth and conveyed their displeasure to Rama. "Ramachandra! You are the wisest among the wise. You are the lord of the universe. How could you behave like a mere human being? How could you watch Sita jump into the fire?" they asked him. Brahma placed his hand on Rama's shoulder and told him "You are Narayana. Sita is Lakshmi. As a divine couple, you are far above suspicious and distrust". By then, Agni gently carried Sita out of the pyre and told Rama "Ramachandra, Sita is chaste. Please accept her". Rama's doubts were cleared and joyfully he accepted Sita.

All the Gods blessed Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. Rama's exile had come to an end. So he bade good-bye to all his Vanara friends. He thanked Vibhisana for his help. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, accompanied by Ayodhya in a Pushpak Viman arranged by Vibhisana. On their flight, Sita and Rama identified the places they had stayed during the Rshyamukha, Pampa Lake, Sabari's Ashram and Kishkinda and the forests where he had roamed pining for Sita.

The Pushpak Viman reached Ayodhya. Bharata was waiting for Rama's return. He prostrated before his brother and begged him to take charge of the kingdom. Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, Sumitra and Vashishta blessed Rama and with their consent, Rama agreed to become the king.

Soon Rama was crowned the king of Ayodhya. The coronation was conducted on a grand scale. Rama and Sita were seated on the throne. Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrugna stood behind them. Hanuman sat at Rama's feet.

People rejoiced about this happy event. The festivities continued for a week and Rama made generous gifts to everyone.

Sri Rama ruled over Ayodhya for many years. People lived a happy, contented life in the Kingdom and this glorious reign was hailed as Rama Rajya.

This is the story of **Ramayana**. Maharshi Valmiki wrote this epic. Reading Ramayana will help us to follow Rama's ideals, his devotion towards his parents, his values and his truthfulness. Let us all strive to be better human beings.

