



The
Rāmāyaṇa
of
Vālmīki

An
Appraisal

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TO THE READER

If you are a scholar looking for a scholastic treat here, you are sure to be disappointed; because this is not a learned treatise written by a scholar for the benefit of other scholars.

If you are a researcher interested in unearthing new facts or discovering new theories, you will find nothing here that can excite you or whet your appetite for a deeper understanding of *Ramalogy*.

If you are a 'gay as a lark' sort of person, seeking entertainment here, thinking that it contains the exploits of monkeys, bears and hideous demons, you are in for a shock, since this booklet contains more serious things that can make you do some self-introspection.

However, if you are a simple devotee of Rama, believing in the Hindu scriptures as a source of strength and inspiration for life, and the Ramayana of Valmiki as such a scripture, we can assure you that you will not be disappointed.

If this little brochure can induce you and inspire you to read Valmiki's original work, we deem that our task is done!

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1

Introduction

If there is one holy book that has profoundly influenced the life, the thought and the culture of millions of Hindus over the millennia, it is, undoubtedly, the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. No aspect of Hindu religion and culture, whether it is literature, drama, music, art or sculpture, has remained unaffected by it. There also seems to be, apparently, no place in the Indian sub-continent that has not had the privilege of being visited by Rama and Sita or Laksmana and Hanuman. This rock contains the foot print of Rama; that mountain split into two, unable to bear the weight of Hanuman; the water of this rivulet is coloured since Sita had washed her clothes- This is how, even now, the simple folk of rural India weave an affectionate bond between themselves and the immaculate heroes of the Ramayana. Hence, a reverent study of this wonderful work can certainly contribute to the leveling up of our culture in the social field and add an inch or two to our inner evolution and elevation.

2

Historicity of the Rama Story

There is a fundamental difference between the occidental and the Hindu concept of history. For the former, an incident that had really occurred, its date or time or period as also the location, is all-important. An implement of stone, a piece of pottery or an ancient coin discovered during archaeological excavations are more valuable as 'evidence' for the existence or the occurrence of that incident than whether it has left its imprint on the future generations or not. On the other hand, the existence of persons or the occurrence of incidents in the past are completely ignored by the Hindu psyche if they have not had any impact-good or bad on the life and manners or the culture of the future generations.

Another basic difference should also be noted. If the West looks at time as a linear thing with a beginning and an end, the Hindu mind views it as cyclic and hence without beginning or end. The division of time into Yugas and Manvantaras, of immense durations, should be looked at from this angle.

Due to this inherent (self-imposed?) limitation, the occidental scholars do not accept the historical existence of Rama and just pass off the *Ramayana* as a poetical work with mythical contents.

From this, one should not jump to the conclusion that the Hindus have never paid any attention to history in their literary works and accounts. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,- which are specifically termed as 'itihahas' ('thus, verily, did it occur')- as also a number of puranas have given enough astronomical data connected with all the important incidents narrated by them that it is possible to work upon them and extract the exact dates in terms of the Gregorian Calendar. According to one such attempt, the following are the dates specified for some of the incidents in the *Ramayana*):

Birth of Rama	-	4439 B.C.
His Banishment	-	4414 B.C.
His Coronation	-	4400 B.C.

Suffice it to say that the Hindu religio-cultural tradition has accorded the Rama story a far greater reality, which does not preclude the historical aspect.

3

Valmiki and His Work

Maharsi Valmiki the celebrated author of this great Poem, the Ramayana, is also one of the personages: appearing in the Rama story. He is one of the earliest sages whose hermitage Rama visits in his sojourn through the forest after leaving Ayodhya. When Rama banishes Sita, it is Valmiki that shelters her and rears up her twin sons. Though the author and a contemporary of the heroes in the Ramayana, he gives pretty little information about himself. This is as it should be, since he was a sage who had dedicated his life to contemplation on God and service to humanity.

He has revealed that he is a son of the sage Pracetas (sometimes identified with Varuna). Lava and Kusa, his disciples who sang the epic poem in the court of Rama himself, introduced themselves as the pupils of Bhagavan Valmiki, a Bhargava (of the lineage of the sage Bhrgu).

Piecing together the stories given in other works like the Adhyatma Ramayana, the Ananda Ramayana and the Bhagavata this much can be said about him: He was a brahmana by birth belonging to the lineage of Bhrgu. Fate consigned him to a family of robbers which brought him up. Accidental contact with the Saptarishis (the Seven Sages) or with the sage Narada changed his life. By the repetition of Ramanama (The name of Rama) he attained the supreme state of a Maharishi or 'great sage'. Since a valmika or an anthill had grown over his body during his long period of austerities and since he emerged out of it when called, he came to be known as 'Valmiki'.

The story of the origin of the *Ramayana* is given in the epic itself, in the beginning. Once, Narada arrived at the hermitage of Valmiki who received him with due honour and courtesies. Then he put a question to Narada enquiring whether there was anyone living at that time, embodying in himself sixteen great and noble qualities that go to make a perfect man. In reply Narada gave him the story of Rama in brief.

Then, immersed in the thought current of this story, Valmiki left for the river Tamasa for his ablutions. There he witnessed the killing by a hunter of a male bird that was in love with its mate. The piteous wailing of the distressed female moved the heart of the sage so much that he spontaneously uttered a curse on the hunter. However, this curse came out of his mouth in the form of a 'sloka,' a perfectly metrical composition, which surprised the sage himself. When he returned to his hermitage, Brahma (the four faced God, the Creator) appeared to him and commanded him to compose an epic poem on the story of Rama as he had heard it from the great sage Narada, in this newly discovered meter. He also gave him the boon of the visions of all the incidents and the revelation of all the secrets connected with the story.

Accordingly Valmiki composed this epic, christened it as Ramayana ('The Way or the Conduct or The Life story of Rama') and taught it to Lava and Kusa, the twin children of Rama and Sita, through whom it gained wide currency and acclamation.

4

Date of the Composition

If the Hindu traditional view is accepted, then the date of Valmiki and his composition will be around 4400 B.C.

However, the modern Western scholars and their Indian counterparts are wont to assign a much later period to this scripture, 400-200 B.C. Theories are also not wanting that try to trace the *Ramayana* to the *Dasaratha Jataka* of the Buddhists or identify Rama with a Pharaoh of Egypt. They deserve to be ignored.

5

The Text

The text as available to us now consists of 24,000 verses- 24, 253 to be exact -and is divided into seven Kandas or Books. Each Kanda is subdivided into sargas or chapters (total number of sargas = 647) and these comprise slokas or verses. Though the work is almost entirely in the sloka or the anustup metre, bigger metres like indravajra or upendravajra have also been employed.

Three pathas or recensions of the *Ramayana* have been discovered so far: the Daksinatyā (southern), the Gaudiya (Bengali) and the Vayavya (north-western).

There are some well-known commentaries in Sanskrit. They are:

<i>Tilaka or Ramabhirama</i>	<i>by Nagoji Bhatta</i>
<i>Siromani</i>	<i>by Sivasahaya</i>
<i>Bhusana</i>	<i>by Govindaraja</i>
<i>Tattvadipa</i>	<i>by Mahesvara Tirtha</i>
<i>Ramanujiyavyakhya</i>	<i>by Kandala Ramanuja</i>
<i>Vivekatilaka</i>	<i>by Varadaraja</i>
<i>Dharmakutavyakhya</i>	<i>by Tryambakaraja</i>
<i>Ramayana-kuta-vyakhya</i>	<i>by Ramananda Tirtha</i>

Most of these have been printed.

Over the years, the Ramayana scholars have struggled to discover which part of the text is the original and which is prakṣipta or the interpolated part. However, there has been no unanimity among them. Though the possibility of interpolations has to be conceded, it is not correct to say-as some opine-that the entire *Uttarakanda* is an interpolation. It is a genuine part of the original text. It may not be out of place to mention here that a ceremonial recitation of the text, especially during the Ramanavami (in April), and the Navaratri (during September-October) celebrations, is believed to confer great religious merit.

6

The Story in Brief

BALAKANDA

Dasaratha the king of Kosala, was ruling from Ayodhya, the impregnable and matchless capital. An invincible warrior, a just and kind ruler, he had everything in life except worthy sons to succeed him to the throne in course of time. As per the advice of the sage Vasistha, the royal priest, he performed the Asvamedha sacrifice followed by the Putrakamesti rite, under the guidance of the well-known sage Rasyasinga. From the sacrificial fire there arose a divine being who delivered a vessel of payasa or pudding to Dasaratha, instructing him to give it to his three queens -Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi-so that they could bear him virtuous sons.

In course of time Kausalya, the chief queen, gave birth to Rama, Sumitra to the twins Lakshmana and Satrugna, and, Kaikeyi to Bharata.

Under the loving care of the parents and the watchful eyes of the preceptors, the children grew into boyhood. Laksmana was very fond of Rama and liked to be with him always. Satrugna was more attached to Bharata.

One day Visvamitra, the warrior turned sage, arrived at the court of Dasaratha and asked for sending Rama with him to protect his sacrifice against the depredations of the demons Maricha and Subahu. Hesitant at first, the king yielded and sent Rama and Lakshmana with him. The two brothers successfully completed their assignment. And, in the company of that great sage, through his various journeys up to Mithila, the capital city of the King Janaka, they gained a vast knowledge of various subjects including the science of archery, of weapons and of war.

At Mithila, the capital of Videha, Visvamitra took Rama and Lakshmana to the king Janaka and requested him to show the Sivadhanus, the massive bow of Lord Siva, to the boys.

Janaka had a daughter Sita, the paragon of feminine grace and virtues. He had declared that any prince of warrior, who could string the Sivadhanus, would get her hand. Since a host of princes and warriors including the mighty ones had miserably failed to pass the test, Janaka was a worried person. He now got it brought to the assembly hall and showed it to Rama and Lakshmana. At the instance of Visvamitra, Rama effortlessly lifted it up and tried to string it. In the process, unable to bear the pressure of his might, the bow broke into two with a thunderous noise. Janaka and his family were extremely pleased.

Dasaratha and his queens were summoned to Mithila and the marriage, not only of Rama but also of the other three princes with suitable brides, was celebrated with due eclat.

All of them returned to Ayodhya. On the way, Rama vanquished Parasurama, the ruthless exterminator of the Kshathriya race. He retired for penance.

AYODHYKANDA

After a few years, Dasaratha, who was getting old, decided to anoint Rama as the Yuvaraja (heir apparent) and retire. As the news got wind, the whole of Ayodhya went agog over it. Kaikeyi, the

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youngest of the queens who had captivated the heart of Dasaratha by her beauty, was incited by Manthara, her crooked maid, to intercede with the king on behalf of her son Bharata and demand the kingdom for him. Simultaneously, Rama was to be banished to the forest for fourteen years. An unfulfilled boon given by Dasaratha to Kaikeyi came in handy at this juncture and the physical absence of the noble prince Bharata- who was away at his uncle's place-made things easy. Caught in a trap as it were, Dasaratha had to helplessly acquiesce in.

Rama readily agreed to fulfill his father's word. Along with Sita and Lakshmana, who importuned him to accompany him, he left for the forest. Dasaratha, unable to bear the separation from Rama, his dearest son, passed away in great agony.

Meanwhile Bharata and Satrughna were called back urgently by Vasistha, the royal preceptor. After returning to Ayodhya and learning of the tragic events, Bharata, nobility incarnate, railed against his mother Kaikeyi, refused to accept the kingdom and started for the forest, vowing to bring back Rama.

When, at last, Bharata succeeded in meeting Rama at Chitrakuta in the forest and begged him to return, Rama refused. Since it was equally incumbent on Bharata to rule the kingdom for fourteen years, to fulfill the word given by Dasaratha to Kaikeyi, Rama persuaded him to return to Ayodhya. Bharata did so, taking the padukas or the sandals of Rama, which he coronated as the 'King.' He lived at Nandigrama, a little village, away from Ayodhya, like a forest recluse, managing the affairs of the State as Rama's regent.

ARANYAKANDA

Now Rama, along with Sita and Lakshmana, started moving in the forest going deeper, and farther towards the south, visiting the hermitages of many a great sage. Finally, after spending more than ten years, they settled down at Panchavati in the Dandaka forest.

One day Surpanakha, an ugly demoness with uglier intentions, came there. Captivated by Rama's matchless beauty she beseeched him to marry her. When Rama and Lakshmana were having some fun at her expense, she tried to attack Sita. At this, Lakshmana cut off her nose and ears as a punishment, as per Rama's directions. She went to Khara, the demon chief, and an overlord of this area of the forest and complained to him against Rama. However, when Khara came and attacked Rama with his huge army of 14,000 demons, Rama, single-handed, decimated them. The enraged and hapless, but vengeful, Surpanakha, approached Ravana her brother and the king of Lanka, to avenge her humiliation. However, knowing Ravana's weakness for women, she was wily enough to describe the bewitching beauty of Sita, the spouse of Rama. Roused more by lust than by anger, Ravana approached Marica, his erstwhile lieutenant and a past-master in cheating, to assist him in abducting Sita from the Panchavati. Failing to dissuade Ravana from his nefarious designs, Marica assumed the form of a golden deer, enticed Sita to hanker for it and beg Rama to catch it for her. Rama pursued it endlessly. Failing to capture it alive, he killed it. Marica, while dying uttered a loud cry, 'Oh Sita! Oh Lakshmana' imitating the voice of Rama. On hearing this, Sita, out of consternation, forced Lakshmana much against his will, to go to the rescue of Rama. Finding her all alone, Ravana abducted her and took her away to Lanka, in his flying machine (Pushpaka-vimana). Jatayu, the giant vulture, a friend of Rama, fought with Ravana in vain to rescue Sita and became a martyr. Keeping her presence of mind, Sita while being abducted, dropped some of her ornaments among some monkeys perched on a mountaintop. Ravana, after reaching Lanka kept her captive in his pleasure garden, the Ashokavana.

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Rama and Lakshmana returned to their hermitage, found Sita missing and started a vigorous search. In this process they encountered a demon Kabandha and killed him (thereby redeeming him from a curse). Then they met Sabari, a woman-hermit of the forest tribe, accepted her hospitality and started towards the Rsyamuka hill as per her advice with a view to meeting Sugriva, the Vanara or monkey chieftain.

KISHKINDHAKANDA

Sugriva, of the royal family of the kingdom of Kiskindha, was living on the Rsyamuka hill, being banished by his elder brother Vali, who had also taken away his wife. Rama forged friendship with him, killed Vali and restored the Kiskindha kingdom to Sugriva who was duly crowned. Sugriva promised to search for Sita and help Rama to recover her.

Later, Sugriva despatched his monkeys in all directions to find out the whereabouts of Sita. Since he and his able minister Hanuman, had seen a lady in distress in an aircraft, along with a monstrous figure, flying towards the south, he sent the more able of his troops to the south under the leadership of Angada (Vali's son) and Hanuman. This group arrived at the shore of the southern sea and started deliberating as to how to cross it.

SUNDARAKANDA

After some discussions among themselves, it was finally decided that Hanuman should be deputed to go to Lanka on behalf of them all. Accordingly he enlarged his body to massive proportions, using his special yogic powers, and crossed the ocean in one leap, overcoming all the obstacles on the way. After a thorough search, he found Sita in the Ashoka grove, successfully talked to her, delivered to her the signet ring of Rama, took her Cudamani (crown jewel) to be given to Rama as also her message and returned to the other shore after doing immense havoc to the city of Lanka and its ruler. When Rama got all the news, he ordered Sugriva to mobilise his troops and march to the seashore.

YUDDHAKANDA

When the army was camping on the seashore, Vibhishana, younger brother of Ravana, alighted there from Lanka and sought refuge at the feet of Rama along with his four comrades. He had tried hard, but in vain, to prevail upon Ravana to return Sita to Rama and gain his friendship, thereby saving himself, his city and his subjects from utter disaster. Ravana had not only spurned his sage advice but had positively humiliated him. Hence Vibhishana, being a righteous person, had abandoned Ravana and joined Rama.

After successfully building a bridge across the sea, the entire army of Rama crossed over it, reaching the outskirts of Lanka. Rama's final efforts at peace by trying to induce some sanity in the heart of Ravana and get back Sita without war and bloodshed, failed due to Ravana's obstinacy. A terrific war ensued resulting in immense loss of life on both sides. There were periods of great tension and anxiety for Rama and his army, as for instance when Rama and Lakshmana were downed by the serpent missiles of Indrajit or when Lakshmana was struck unconscious by the shakti-missile of Ravana. However, all such crises were overcome and all the dead in Rama's army were restored to life

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by the breeze of the Sanjivini Mountain brought by Hanuman. All the great warriors of Ravana's army including Kumbhakarna (the giant brother of Ravana) and Indrajit (Ravana's son) were slain. Finally Ravana too was killed by Rama thereby bringing the war to a close.

Then Rama put Vibhishana on the throne of Lanka and accepted Sita, after she underwent the fire-ordeal. By this time, fourteen years of banishment had been completed. All of them now returned to Ayodhya and met Bharata and the, queen-mothers.

Rama was then crowned as the king and Sita as the queen at a joyous, and pompous ceremony.

The reign of Rama (Ramarajya) was ideal in every sense of the term and all were extremely happy. It lasted for a long time.

UTTARAKANDA

Being overjoyed at the destruction of Ravana and the establishment of Ramarajya, a number of sages, under the leadership of Agastya arrived at Rama's palace. After Rama duly honoured them, Agastya narrated the stories of Ravana and others in detail, just to make him understand how powerful and formidable they were. Then they returned to their hermitages.

One day Rama learnt from his spies about the rumours current in Ayodhya and elsewhere accusing him of impropriety in bringing back Sita to his house even though she resided in Ravana's house for quite some time. Shocked at this, Rama decided to banish Sita to the forest and accordingly instructed Lakshmana to implement it. Sita, who was then pregnant, was given shelter by the sage Valmiki whose hermitage was near the place where she had been abandoned. In course of time she gave birth to twins. They were named Lava and Kusa, and were brought up by the sage in a manner that befits princes.

Some sages under the leadership of Bhargava and Cyavana came to Rama and complained to him against the demon Lavanaasura. Rama instructed Satrugna to go to Madhupuri, the capital city of Lavana and destroy him. Satrugna accomplished the task easily and was crowned as the king there. He ruled for twelve years.

Once the young son of a brahmana died and the brahmana blamed it on Rama since it was an untimely death. Such deaths could take place only when there was adharma or unrighteousness in the kingdom. It was found out that a sudra, Sambuka by name, was practicing severe austerities, which was against the norms of that age. Hence Rama was obliged to kill him.

Years passed. Rama decided to perform the, Asvamedha sacrifice in the Naimisa forest. All arrangements were made. Valmiki decided to attend the sacrifice along with his disciples including Lava and Kusa. They were instructed to sing the Ramayana in all places of the sacrifice. They did so. Even Rama heard it and was charmed by it. Later, when he learnt that they were his own children he sent word to Valmiki that Sita should come to his court and reassert her purity. Though Valmiki brought her and she did reassert her fidelity to Rama she also prayed to Mother Earth from whom she had emerged at the time of her supernatural birth, to take her away! The ground split into two and from it emerged Bhudevi (Mother Earth) with a throne. Seating Sita on that throne, by her side, she disappeared forever.

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The period of Rama's life on earth was fast coming to an end. So, the Kalapurusha (personified time) arrived at Ayodhya to remind Rama that his play on earth was over and that it was time that he returns to his abode.

Due to the intrigue of the inexorable fate, Rama was obliged to banish Lakshmana who was taken away by Devendra to heaven.

After coronating his sons Lava and Kusa, Rama retired to the Sarayu river and then to his divine abode, after giving salvation to all the people of Ayodhya and others who had accompanied him to the banks of the Sarayu river.

7

The Characters of the Ramayana

Before delving into the study of the various characters of the Ramayana, especially of Rama, one should carefully note the main purpose of the work itself. Valmiki was a tapasvi, a holy man, who had practised severe austerities to realise the Truth within and to serve the society through the power of that realisation. It was not his intention to compose this epic poem nor was he a poet, competent enough to accomplish it. The simple question he put to Narada, the great sage, was to know out of curiosity, whether a perfect man existed then, who had in him all the great qualities that bespeak of a perfect being. He himself listed sixteen such qualities. If one did exist, he could as well become a model for the whole humanity to emulate. While admitting that it was difficult for a human being to possess even a fraction of these great qualities, Narada gladly confessed to the existence of such a remarkable man, Rama by name, the king of Ayodhya, of the race of Ikshvaku, who possessed these qualities in abundance and gave his story in brief. He even indicated the divinity of that personage.

Brahma, the Creator, chose Valmiki as the instrument through whom the story of Rama the perfect being, was to be widely disseminated, infilled him with the necessary power and commanded him to compose this great work. Hence, the Ramayana that issued forth was a divinely ordained work, aimed at providing an ideal man to the world so that all the human beings could shape their own lives in his mould.

Dharma is the keynote of this lyric poem. It is the basic principle that supports the whole universe. It expresses itself as conscience within and duties and obligations without. Rama is its most complete representation so much so that he has become synonymous for dharma for ages at a stretch. Other characters like Lakshmana, Bharata or Hanuman reflect different aspects of that dharma in their life and doings, whereas Ravana and his ilk exhibit the tragic consequences of its not being followed.

Let us now deal briefly with these characters of the Ramayana.

RAMA

Rama was extremely handsome. Rama was extraordinarily strong. Rama was *par excellence*, in the use of weapons and missiles, especially in archery, which was his forte. Hence the use of the world

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'ramabana' for any unfailing remedy in any field. He was a past-master in the science of war or the art of peace.

He was deeply learned in the scriptural lore. His knowledge of literature or music or logic was astounding. None could beat him in the finesse of conversation or consultation or negotiation.

Yet, he was humble, affectionate and easily approachable. He rejoiced like a father in the happiness of his subjects and felt grieved at their sorrows and sufferings. Above all, he was deeply devoted to satya, truth. He spoke nothing but truth and, once word was given, he would keep it at all costs.

He loved and served his parents. He was fond of his brothers, his wife and even his friends. But, when it came to the protection of satya and dharma, he would exercise his adamant will and show that no sacrifice was too great to preserve these principles. To protect the truth of the word given by Dasaratha to Kaikeyi he gave up the kingdom in a trice and that too when he was about to be crowned! To protect the honour of his race and that of the crown and set an example in dharma to his subjects, he subjected Sita, his dearest wife, first to the fire-ordeal and then, later, abandoned her even though he knew in his heart of hearts that she was pure and innocent!

Dasaratha, who was a prisoner of his own, making, urged Rama to disobey him and even imprison him Bharata offered back the kingdom to him and earnestly importuned him to return. Even Vasistha, the royal preceptor concurred with Bharata! Not withstanding all these pressures put on him by these beloved ones, Rama not only refused to budge but also successfully convinced them of the correctness of his decision!

When he returned to Ayodhya after successfully completing the period of banishment, he did not hesitate to take back kingdom and rule over it. However, he was even prepared to abdicate his right to the kingdom in favour of Bharata, if Bharata had by that time, become attached to it. This only shows his extreme nobility and supreme indifference towards mundane comforts.

While living in the forest, he adopted the way of life of the rsis and munis (sages). And yet, as a ksatriya warrior and an envoy of the ruler of the land, he did not forget his duty towards the helpless forest dwellers, especially when they beseeched him to protect them against the depredations of the raksasas (demons). When Sita protested that he was misusing his might against the raksasas who had done no harm to him, he unequivocally declared that it was his duty to chastise or even destroy the evil-doers who harmed the law-abiding citizens. He was prepared to abandon even Sita and Laksmana, If need be, in the process, but not his dharma! And this he did, when the need arose.

In friendship also Rama was absolutely loyal and steady. Sugriva sought his friendship. Rama reciprocated. He killed Vali and got Sugriva crowned as the king of Kiskindha, thereby fulfilling his part of the covenant. But, Sugriva on his part faltered. On being pulled up by Rama, he corrected himself and then plunged himself wholeheartedly in the service of Rama.

Now, a few words about the Vali episode that has raised a lot of hue and cry in the academic circles, accusing Rama of adharma or unrighteous conduct. It should be remembered that the basic source of the whole story is the Ramayana of Valmiki. In this work Valmiki himself has solved the problem by showing that the very Vali who raised the objections first, accepted Rama's answer *in toto* and asked for forgiveness! Since Valmiki did not create either Vali or Rama but has only narrated whatever had happened between them, there is no need for anyone else, much less the persons of our

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generation, removed as we are from them by a few millennia, to take up the cudgels on Vali's behalf and run down Rama! Suffice it to say that Vali knew better.

Rama was a great leader who knew the pulse of his followers very well. When Vibhishana arrived in his camp and sought refuge, Rama placed the problem before all of them and gave them full freedom to express their views fearlessly. Finally when he did take the decision, it was in perfect accord with his svadharma, of not refusing shelter to anyone who sought it, even if it be Ravana himself! We should note that this decision of his was against the overwhelming-almost unanimous-decision of the war council he had called! Apart from his svadharma, he had so much confidence in his own immense might that he was least afraid of even the mightiest of the enemies. Since he was sure of his victory over Ravana and the conquest of Lanka, he then and there got Vibhishana crowned as the king of Lanka, so that Lanka and its innocent citizens would not suffer after the war.

In the war with Ravana and his army, Rama always followed the path of rectitude even though the enemies often adopted unfair or even foul means and crooked strategies. Though he had to suffer in the process, he never wavered from it! During the very first combat with Ravana, Rama had worsted him so much that he could have easily killed him. However, his sense of dharma was so strong that he permitted the enemy to escape from the battlefield with his life and limb intact, but also challenged him to come again after recouping for another round. When Ravana was finally killed and when Vibhishana refused to perform his last rites, Rama admonished him and declared that he himself would undertake it if he did not! (Compare this with the present day war ethics!)

Sita was liberated. Rama was happy. However, having known the psychology of the common masses who could crucify even a saint, he refused to accept her, The huge crowd comprising the vanaras and the raksasas was watching with bated breath. Sita rose to the occasion. Her whole life was for Rama's sake. If he disowned her, she had no other alternative than death. To immolate herself in fire was her decision. Rama did not object. He knew that her blazing purity would protect her from the fire. The fire that did not burn Hanuman's tail because of her command, how could it consume *her* at all? As expected, she was restored to Rama unscathed.

This was Rama's masterstroke that publicly proved the greatness of not only himself and his spouse, but also vindicated dharma itself, that it protects those who protect it!

Once Rama assumed the reigns of the kingdom, he ruled it like a father and a mother rolled into one. Punishing the wicked, protecting the good and affording all opportunities to the subjects to lead a virtuous life was the hall-mark of his administration. Since he meticulously followed dharma in his own life, even nature-which is also ruled by *rta*, the cosmic aspect of dharma- was kind to his country.

However, even in the Ramarajya- the country ruled by Rama- there were people whose tongues wagged a little more than Rama's goodness and greatness could withstand. The central figure of this calumny was again the poor Sita! To protect the honour of the Ikshvaku race and to keep his subjects within the limits of dharma, the dharma of family life, Rama banished Sita to the forest where Valmiki gave her shelter. Sita knew her lord's compulsions and fully cooperated, never being bitter against him for this unkind act.

The beheading of Sambuka, the sudra ascetic, by Rama has drawn the ire of many a critic of the Ramayana story. A look at all the facts of the story and a dispassionate analysis of the same will reveal that Rama acted in the best interest of the society and in accordance with the dharma of the times. The sudras were not prohibited from performing tapas or austerities provided it was for self-purification or

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self-realization. And, even for this they were expected to follow the injunctions of the sastras (the scriptures honoured by the society) and Sistasara (conduct set up by the tradition of the good in the society). Sambuka was performing severe austerities with the intention of ascending to heaven in the human body! This was clearly against the scriptural injunctions and the norms for entry into heaven, which required the acquisition of a divine and subtle body to fit in with the heavenly creation. It is obvious that Sambuka was very much attached to his physical body and- perhaps, against the wiser counsels of the wise ones of the society- was trying to force his entry as it were, into heaven. That means, the rules of the game had to be relaxed to cater to his whims, thereby disturbing the cosmic balance. It is akin to someone insisting on admission into the intensive care unit or the operation theatre of a hospital with his polluted clothes on, refusing to change over to the sterilized dress! If such a behaviour, that too if it is accompanied by an agitational approach, is condoned, the consequences would be catastrophic. The untimely death of the brahmana boy was only the first stirring of this since the subtle cosmic structure was getting loosened. Hence Rama was right in doing what he did. If we remember Rama's affectionate treatment meted out to Guha and Saban, who were also from the sudra class, we can appreciate his conduct better. And, the revival of the dead boy back to life, confirms the rightness of Rama's conduct.

Rama was the personification of infinite compassion, love and consideration, and gratefulness. That is why when he ascended to his heavenly abode, he granted liberation to all the citizens of Ayodhya who had accompanied him till the end.

Whether Rama was God become man or man become God, Valmiki's Rama is intensely human. He loves, rejoices, weeps or gets angry or exhibit many other human moods like anyone of us. However, in and through all these, he has shown to what limits we can expand and evolve. That is why he has been called-and rightly so-'Maryada Purusottama,' the best of men who has expanded the human possibilities to infinite limits (maryada = limit, border). The tribute paid by Maricha, a demon and an erstwhile foe of Rama, viz., that he was *vigrahavan dharmah* (Personified Dharma), speaks volumes for Rama's greatness.

LAKSHMANA

If there is anyone in the Ramayana who lived for Rama and for nothing else or none else, it is Laksmana. He was a paragon of loving service to Rama. He was deeply attached to Rama right from the childhood days. Rama too was equally attached to him.

Was Laksmana irascible? Was he an agnostic who cared a fig for dharma? Was he a disobedient and heartless son who despised his own father? Was he suspicious by nature? What were his achievements in life? Almost nothing?

This description, this list of 'vices,' may appear to fit in well with Laksmana as long as one does not understand the intensity or the depth of his love for Rama. The one and only purusartha or purpose of his life was to keep Rama happy. Keeping that end in view, he was ever prepared for any service, any sacrifice, in his life.

No one asked him to accompany Rama to the forest. But he was ready even before Rama was! He walked in front clearing the path. He built the huts for the comfortable living of Rama and Sita. He gathered the articles of food for them, cooked for them, served them and stood guard when they slept or rested. The hut he built at Panchavati pleased Rama so immensely that he saw in Laksmana his own father's love.

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When Bharata came to the Citrakuta with his huge army and retinue Lakshmana flew into a rage suspecting harm from him for Rama. When he learnt of his noble intentions he was ashamed and melted in love.

Rama had hesitated to kill the demoness Tataka since she was a woman and since killing a woman was considered to be a grave sin. But Lakshmana did not waver in the least to punish Surpanaka since Rama had commanded him to do so. His duty was just to implement Rama's orders!

Lakshmana was very intelligent and thoughtful. He could easily see through the maya or the deceptions of the raksasas behind the golden deer. He warned both Sita and Rama about it. Unfortunately he did not succeed in preventing what actually happened.

When Sita castigated him and threatened to commit suicide if he did not go to the rescue of Rama (after the deer had been killed), he left with a heavy heart thinking that disobeying Rama's command was better than allowing the self-immolation of Sita. Yet, he could not escape the censure by Rama!

When Rama was inconsolable due to the loss of Sita it was Lakshmana who stood by him like a rock, often giving the healing touch by his mature advice and timely consolation.

In the war with the raksasas, Lakshmana fought bitterly not caring for his own life. His conquest of Indrajit was considered by the sages of the day, even more difficult of accomplishment than that of Ravana by Rama.

His feelings, when he had to prepare the pyre for Sita- during the fire ordeal- and be a mute witness to it, can better be imagined than described.

When Rama returned to Ayodhya and was coronated as the king, he offered Lakshmana the position of Yuvaraja (heir apparent), which he flatly refused to accept since it would interfere with his service to Rama!

At the time of banishment of Sita it was again the poor Lakshmana that had to carry it out. It was worse than hell for him.

Just as Rama was closeted with the Kalapurusa and Lakshmana was guarding the place with strict instructions not to allow anybody inside, Durvasas, the sage known for his volcanic temper, appeared on the scene and, insisted upon being admitted into the presence of Rama. Lakshmana had only two alternatives before him: To admit him and face death as punishment at the hands of Rama or prevent him, thereby subjecting all to destruction by the wrath of the sage's curse. Lakshmana made the supreme sacrifice by choosing the former alternative since he did not want the entire Ayodhya to be annihilated.

As soon as Rama expelled him as a substitute for punishment with death, Lakshmana went straight to the Sarayu river and gave up the body since there was no use living any more without his Rama!

BHARATA

Though Bharata was only next to Rama in age, he conducted himself as the least of the brothers. If Rama accepted the loss of the kingdom and expulsion to the forest stoically, Bharata gave up the kingdom that was placed in his lap as his, since he could never accept the injustice done to Rama. After severely reproaching his mother Kaikeyi for all the havoc that had been wrought by her, he tried his best to bring back Rama and coronate him as the king. When he did not succeed, he consented to rule as Rama's regent by installing his sandals on the throne and himself living in a Village like a hermit, denying all the pleasures of life that had been denied to Rama.

Bharata had ruled the kingdom so efficiently that its properties and resources had been multiplied ten times. When Rama returned, Bharata offered the kingdom back to him immediately and felt greatly relieved. Rama made him the Yuvaraja. An ideal brother and an ideal devotee of Rama, Bharata continues to live in the hearts of Indians forever.

DASARATHA

The picture of Dasaratha that we get while reading the *Ramayana* is that of an old man, a weak king, a lustful prisoner of Kaikeyi's beauty and a father doting on his son Rama.

However, in his younger days, he had proved to be a 'great warrior, capable of driving his ratha or chariot in dasa or ten directions- hence the name Dasaratha- and an able as well as popular ruler.

His greatest defect was his impulsive nature, of giving promises without discretion or discrimination. It was this that made him promise Asvapati Kekaya, father of Kaikeyi, that her son would be crowned as the king. Again it was the same trait that made him promise Visvamitra to give whatever he wanted and then try to back out when he wanted Rama to be sent with him. It was again the same story that repeated with Kaikeyi, leading to untold misery and even his own death under tragic circumstances.

SUGRIVA*

On returning to Ayodhya after the exile, Rama introduced Sugriva to Bharata as their fifth brother. He fully deserved that remark and status by his surrender to Rama and dedication to his cause. However, it took quite some time for him to rise to that level.

Though Sugriva was himself a strong man and a great warrior, the repeated defeats and hammerings he had received at the hands of the powerful but vicious Vali had made him extremely suspicious, nervous and cowardly. That is why he suspected Rama and Laksmana at first sight as Vali's spies. He gained full faith in Rama's prowess only after testing him in more than one way.

He was intelligent, shrewd and worldly-wise. He was also addicted to the lower pleasures of life like sex and drinking. However, by the deft handling of Rama he came round quickly and proved to be a great asset.

After being crowned as the king of Kiskindha, Sugriva made arrangements to gather all the vanara warriors from different places at Kiskindha to help Rama in his search for Sita. He then retired into his harem and forgot all about his responsibility as the king and his duty towards Rama. When

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Rama sent Laksmana as his envoy to caution him and even warn him, Sugriva pacified the irate Laksmana through Tara. Then he plunged into his task earnestly.

Once the whereabouts of Sita were known, Sugriva mobilised his forces and marched towards Lanka under the leadership of Rama. The help he rendered to Rama both personally and through his army of monkeys was invaluable. He even fought a duel with Ravana on seeing him for the first time and returned after inflicting humiliation upon him. This being an impulsive and rash act, he was pulled up by Rama.

Ravana tried to entice Sugriva away from Rama but got a sever rebuff. His loyalty to Rama was, by now, absolutely firm.

He fought bravely and killed many a raksasa, warrior.

His eagerness to witness Rama's coronation made Rama bring him and all the vanara heroes to Ayodhya. He was honoured suitably.

When Rama decided to leave for his heavenly abode, Sugriva also accompanied him.

(* The denizens of Kiskindha were known as vanaras. Who exactly they were, will be discussed later.)

HANUMAN

Hanuman can be considered as the brightest jewel, a veritable diamond, in the necklace of Ramayana characters. His physical strength and prowess were proverbial. His mastery over the scriptures was unmatched. His speech was not only faultless but also elegant. His intelligence and shrewdness were, by any standards, extraordinary. His common sense was uncanny. Even his facial appearance, though belonging to the race of the vanaras, was bright and pleasant. Above all, his devotion to Rama was supreme, towering far above all other qualities. Anyone, as Rama himself admits, who has such an one as his servant or envoy or minister, should deem himself as the luckiest of beings and there is no task that he cannot accomplish.

Hanuman was the son of Anjanadevi, born as a result of the grace of Vayudeva (the god of wind, also known as Marut). Hence the appellations Anjaneya and Maruti. The blow delivered by Indra, by his Vajrayudha, on his jaw (= hanu) when he was a baby, to check his menacing prowess, left it swollen and hence he came to be known as 'Hanuman,' 'one with a prominent jaw'. He was educated by no less a person than Surya, the Sun-god and acquired immunity from various weapons, as per the boons of the gods in heaven. Once as a child, he incurred the wrath of some sages by his mischievous pranks that were too much to bear. They cursed him that he would not remember his strength until someone reminded him about it. This silenced him, preventing him from harassing the hapless sages.

When Sugriva was driven out by Vali from Kiskindha, Hanuman chose to leave the country along with him, even though Vali begged him to stay on, since he knew that dharma was on his side. He voluntarily underwent all the hardships for his sake.

When Rama and Laksmana arrived at the foot of the hill Rsyamuka, Sugriva deputed him to find out who they were. His manner of approach- reverent and courteous- as well as his refined speech impressed Rama so much that he gave vent to his admiration. Convinced of their nobility and greatness Hanuman carried them to Sugriva and eulogised them before him. The attraction of Hanuman for

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Rama and Rama's special affection for him that sprouted on that first meeting grew to phenomenal proportions and have now become a legend.

When Vali was killed by Rama, and Tara, his queen, was inconsolable with grief, it was Hanuman who succeeded in restoring her mental balance and peace by timely advice with an effective philosophical discourse.

Again, when Sugriva had steeped himself in sensuous pleasures neglecting his duties of the State, it was Hanuman who roused him out of that stupor and advised him to apologise to Rama through Laksmana.

When Sugriva sent four batches of his troops in the four cardinal directions in search of Sita, He sent Hanuman as a leader of the southern batch, since the possibility of finding Sita in the south were the brightest.

Rama too gave his signet ring to Hanuman with the necessary instructions of what to communicate to Sita when found. This clearly shows the faith that they reposed in him.

After reaching the southern shore of the land mass the vanaras became despondent. Angada, their leader, even spoke of staying back permanently! Hanuman effectively intervened and through his wise counsels successfully prevented, what might have resulted in a division of the country of Kiskindha. This shows his farsightedness and loyalty to the cause he had committed himself.

Hanuman crossed the vast ocean with a mighty leap, overcoming all the obstacles on the way. He entered the city of Lanka after vanquishing Lankini, the protectress of the fort-city. He searched for Sita in every nook and corner, especially in Ravana's palace and the harem but was disappointed. That the seeing of the women of the harem in various uncouth postures did not upset his steady mind in any way is a tribute to his brahmacarya or celibate life. Realizing that such a pativrata (a chaste lady deeply devoted only to her husband) like Sita could never consent to be in the palace of an abductor, he started searching for her elsewhere. Finally he found her in the Ashoka grove, the pleasure garden of Ravana behind his palace.

Hanuman had to use all his wisdom and tact to establish contact with her and to develop a personal rapport. Once that was done, the rest was easy. He gave her Rama's signet ring and message, and, reassured her of Rama delivering her very soon. He took the cudamani (crest jewel) from her to be delivered to Rama as also her message.

Hanuman, though his task was fulfilled, did not want to leave, without leaving a mark, a warning shot as it were, to the enemy. So he contrived to meet Ravana and also have a surveillant view of his city by destroying his favourite pleasure garden and killing all the raksasa warriors that came to capture him. Later, wilfully submitting himself to Indrajit's Brahmastra, he succeeded in meeting Ravana in the courtroom of his palace, admonished him severely and advised him to return Sita honourably to Rama or be prepared to face decimation at his hands. Due Ravana's wrath, when Hanuman's tail was set on fire by his aides, the vanara hero destroyed the city by that very fire. He then triumphantly returned to Rama and Sugriva who immediately started on an invasion of Lanka.

During the war, Hanuman's heroic exploits were many. Even the mighty Ravana could not stand the intensity of his blows!

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After the death of Ravana at the hands of Rama and the formal coronation of Vibhishana as the king of Lanka, Sita had to be given the good tidings. This privilege was naturally conferred on Hanuman who did it so successfully and gracefully that Sita was all praise for him. Out of his intensity of devotion to Sita and his sensitivity to her intolerable suffering under the raksasis (demonesses) Hanuman offered to punish them severely. The offer, however, was rejected outright by Sita, the compassionate mother of all.

Along with Vibhishana and Sugriva, Hanuman also went to Ayodhya to attend the coronation ceremony of Rama. When the Puspaka-vimana, the divine aircraft, alighted in the hermitage of the sage Bharadvaja, it was again Hanuman's prerogative to act as the messenger of Rama to Bharata, then living at Nandigrama. In this he endeared himself to Bharata almost instantaneously.

After the coronation, Rama gave a priceless necklace to Sita giving her the freedom to grant it to anyone she deemed fit. Again, it was none other than Hanuman who received the gift.

Since Hanuman decided to stay back in this world as long as Rama's legendary story was recited and listened to, Rama blessed him before he left for his heavenly abode.

Though coming from the Kiskindha culture, considered to be a little lower than that of Ayodhya, Hanuman stands as the brightest example of human excellence.

VIBHISHANA

Vibhishana is one of the dazzling gems not only among' the raksasas but also among the other votaries of Rama. Bhisma and Drona of the Mahabharata, though they knew that Duryodhana was morally wrong in usurping the kingdom of the Pandavas, ultimately sided with him. True, they advised him and even admonished him. But, to them, obligation to a person became more important than commitment to dharma! Vidura was a little better. He not only severely admonished Duryodhana and his tribe but also stayed away from participating in the iniquitous war. But Vibhishana of the Ramayana made history by deserting the camp of the wicked and fighting against it from the camp of the good and the noble. No doubt he had an ambition for becoming the king of Lanka as Rama himself has admitted. But, coming from the royal race, he could not abdicate his claim to the throne and responsibility to the kingdom since it involved saving Lanka ultimately, from ignominy. Being sattvika by nature, goodness and devotion to dharma were natural to him. Even when he practiced severe austerities along with Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and Brahma appeared before him to bless him, he asked only for his mind being firmly established in dharma! Brahma, pleased with him, granted him the additional boon of being immortal even here.

Surpanakha too and later on Ravana himself, concede his righteousness and goodness.

In Ravana's caucus of sychophants he was the first to boldly declare Ravana's abduction of Sita as utterly wrong and sinful and to exhort him in various ways to send her back to Rama with all honour due to her and to Rama. In this battle for righteousness he had many an encounter with Ravana's aids and even with Indrajit, his own young nephew. Yet, he successfully stuck to his guns and silenced them all.

But for the utter humiliation and positive insult heaped upon him by Ravana in his insolence, Vibhishana might have continued to live in Lanka, persevering in his efforts to bring back sanity into his behaviour. But that was not to be.

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When he finally decided to cross over to Rama's side, he never hesitated, since he knew in his heart of hearts, that Rama would neither punish him nor desert him. His innate faith in Rama's greatness and nobility was his forte.

The first thing that Rama did was to symbolically crown him as the monarch of Lanka. This automatically enhanced Vibhishana's faith in him.

Since Vibhishana's surrender and Rama's acceptance were both complete and perfect, Vibhishana spared no effort in helping Rama to overcome all the obstacles created by the rakshasas, especially the ones centred in maya or delusory powers. His help to Rama particularly during the beheading of the Maya-Sita (illusory Sita), was timely and invaluable.

After Ravana's death, Vibhishana at first, refused to perform the last rites for him. Being admonished by Rama and realizing his duty, he completed it as per the dictates of the scriptures. The lifelong bonds of brotherly affection then made him break down with sorrow and lamentation. However, he quickly overcame the same and regained his usual composure.

He too attended Rama's coronation at Ayodhya, enjoying his loving hospitality.

When Rama finally departed from this world, he commanded Vibhishana to return to his kingdom and rule over his subjects by dharma. Vibhishana was not allowed to open his mouth and protest, because Lanka needed his benign rule!

RAVANA

Even the strongest of chains breaks at its weakest link with little effort. Even the mightiest of men gets liquidated by his own mortal sins. Ravana the 'lokaravana', 'who shook the worlds' once, is the supreme example of this eternal principle. He had great physical strength, was handsome and stately in appearance, possessed vast knowledge of the Vedas and was an expert in the use of weapons and in waging wars

However, his uncontrollable lust, as also his arrogance, brought about his utter ruination.

Endowed with natural strength and prowess, and boosted further by the boons he had secured from Brahma, the Creator, he was a terror to the whole world. There was no warrior whom he had not vanquished or killed, no sage whom he had not humiliated, no woman whom he had not molested during his nefarious invasions and victory marches. He was shrewd enough to forge friendly ties with those, who were a match to him so that his evil deeds could go on unhindered. Kartavirya and Vali belonged to this category.

But neither mercury nor sin can be digested that easily! The tears of the chaste women and the anguished cries of the holy hermits along with their curses weighed heavily upon him, finally bringing him down.

Sita proved to be his nemesis. From the day she was brought to Lanka, its fate was sealed. Odious omens started to appear in abundance foreboding evil to the whole society and its king. Not only Vibhishana, even the trusted lieutenants of Ravana, had noticed them with dismay and had warned him of the impending disaster if the remedial measure of returning Sita was not implemented immediately.

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But the die had been cast. Being a prisoner of inordinate lust and an aggressive ego, Ravana could never get out of his self-created and self-nurtured predicament.

He never hesitated to sacrifice the lives of his trusted generals, his near and dear relatives, even his own brother and sons, for bolstering his position. The very fact that he got Kumbhakarna woken up before the allotted period of six months, eventhough he knew well that, that would mean his sure death, is proof enough for this.

In his fight against Rama and his army, Ravana employed every means fair or foul, to defeat or destroy the enemies. When nothing worked and his own forces were steadily getting decimated, Ravana realised that he was now paying through his nose, for all his sins and misdeeds. But it was too late. In desperation he even tried to behead the poor Sita-, since she was 'responsible' for all his ills! Timely intervention by the saner elements around him saved her life.

Ravana had been worsted in his battle against Rama earlier, who had mercifully let him off the hook. But, when the final battle ensued, there was no escaping.

He fought bravely and bitterly, but was brought down by the infallible missile (Brahmastra) bearing the name of the very person who had endowed him with many boons and powers!

Ravana stands today as the supreme example of the tragedy that can strike anyone who misuses and abuses his talents and powers, against the good and the noble, against the innocent and the holy.

KUMBHAKARNA

Endowed with a mountainous body and an appetite of astronomical magnitude, Kumbhakarna possessed a simple heart and an intellect tempered with a sense of justice. When his very existence in the waking state- he used to eat up the living beings by scores at a time to satisfy his ravenous appetite- became a disaster for the world, the gods successfully worked out a stratagem with the assistance of SarasvatI (the goddess of speech) and the concurrence of Brahma, the Creator, to put him to sleep most of the time. He would wake up once, that too just for a day, after a sleeping bout of six months. This saved the lives of millions of beings and salvaged the honour of the Creator himself.

Kumbhakarna was present in the second advisory council called by Ravana. He boldly admonished him' and even gave a discourse on the duties of a king! However, his own nature soon overtook this streak of wisdom in him and he promised Ravana to 'set right' everything by his own prowess. He then went to sleep.

Within nine days after this, tragedy after tragedy struck Ravana and he lost a good number of his sons and generals. So, he was obliged to wake up Kumbhakarna from his phenomenal sleep, eventhough he knew of its disastrous consequences, since rousing Kumbhakarna half way through his sleep would mean his certain death.

This time also Kumbhakarna was amazingly frank and gave the same advice. Ravana frowned upon him. Seeing that he was in no mood to listen to words of sanity and wisdom, Kumbhakarna confessed to having given that advice as a matter of duty but agreed to do his bidding. Ravana, of course, commanded him to fight.

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Kumbhakarna landed on the battlefield like an avalanche and started destroying the vanaras by catching them and eating them up. He almost succeeded „in capturing Sugriva but the latter managed to escape after successfully amputating his earlobes and nose bridge.

As he was rushing towards Rama, Vibhishana accosted him. Kumbhakarna's heart melted out of love and compassion for him and advised him to make himself scarce lest he might be killed. Kumbhakarna appreciated and approved Vibhishana's decision to join Rama and blessed that the rakshasa race be saved by him.

Kumbhakarna was finally mowed down by the powerful arrows of Rama.

Verily, he strikes us more like a tragic hero. By siding with the unrighteous conduct of his elder brother, although out of brotherly love, he sacrificed himself. It was, however, in vain.

VALI

Vali was the son of Rksarajas, born by the grace of Indra. Sugriva was his younger brother. He was the king of Kiskhinda.

He was extremely strong and had even routed Ravana once when he had dared to battle with him.

Vali had been blessed by Indra with a golden necklace that would add not only grace but also strength to him.

Though Vali and Sugriva lived together in peace and harmony with mutual love and affection, fate brought about a deep chasm between them which persisted primarily due to Vali's intransigent and vengeful nature.

Once, Vali, accompanied by Sugriva, went in hot pursuit after a demon Mayavi by name who had challenged him. When the enemy entered a cave, Vali kept Sugriva at the entrance as guard and went inside. He did not return even after a long time. When blood flowed out of the cave, and Sugriva heard the noises of the rakshasas, he apprehended that Vali might have died. To prevent them from escaping, Sugriva blocked the mouth of the cave with a boulder and returned to Kiskindha with great sorrow. The ministers crowned him as the king. Sometime later, Vali returned after killing Mayavi and was furious to see Sugriva on the throne. Though Sugriva surrendered and explained what had happened that it was a genuine case of misunderstanding-the suspicious and vindictive Vali ruthlessly drove him out. He also usurped Ruma, Sugriva's wife, in spite of the pleadings and the sensible advice of Tara, his own queen. He thus incurred a great sin equivalent to incest, for which he had to pay with his life at the hands of Rama.

While accusing Rama for having killed him in this manner he had said that he himself could have recovered Sita for him. Rama who knew better, had chosen Sugriva as his ally rather than Vali, because the former was a dharmatma, a righteous person and the latter was not. Being lewd by nature and a committed friend of Ravana, the consequences for Rama would not have been very pleasant.

Either due to Rama's greatness or due to a streak of goodness in Vali's own personality, Vali realized his mistake, accepted Rama's explanation, asked for his forgiveness and died a peaceful death.

SITA

Sita, the immaculate, the ideal of Indian woman-hood for ages, was the adopted daughter of Siradhvaja- Janaka, 'Janaka' being the surname of the family. She was found by him in a box of iron below the ground while ploughing it, as a part of sacrificial rites. Hence she was also called Bhumija or the daughter of Mother Earth. Keeping her divine origin in mind, Janaka had pledged to give her in marriage only to him who would string the Sivadhanus (the great bow of Lord Siva) that was in the possession of his family. Many a warrior- prince had tried his hand at it but none had succeeded. Rama did. And, the marriage was performed with due eclat. Sita lived happily with Rama for a quite a few years in Ayodhya.

When Rama gave up the kingdom, chose to retire to the forest, Sita automatically followed him. That was how she had been trained by her parents in her svadharma.

Sita was an ideal match for Rama whether in physical beauty or education and culture or wisdom or steady faithfulness. Though she was obedient and ever ready to serve him, she freely expressed her opinion- what she thought was right-when the occasion demanded it. When Rama gave word to the sages of Dandaka forest that he would destroy the demons of the forest, she protested gently saying that the demons had done him no harm and reminded him that he had come to the forest like a hermit! However, when Rama replied to her objections she accepted the same gracefully. The appearance of the golden deer at Panchavati was a turning point in her and in Rama's life. The extraordinary beauty of the golden deer was so enchanting that she fell a prey to it in spite of the timely warning given by the shrewd Laksmana. Though Rama too was carried away by its beauty, he was more eager to satisfy the desire of Sita who had sacrificed everything for his sake and had never asked for a thing. The consequences were of course disastrous. When Sita heard the distressed voice of 'Marica- Rama,' she was no unnerved-as women under such situations do-.that she goaded Laksmana to go to Rama's rescue. But; Lakshmana the wise one, did not want to stir out, leaving her unprotected. Then she openly accused him of the vilest of intentions, and even threatened to commit suicide if he did not go! Poor Laksmana chose the lesser evil and departed. All the same he did not escape from severe admonition by Rama.

When Ravana appeared on the scene in the guise of a monk, she, in her innocence, treated him with all the respect due to a monk. When he made his intentions known and then abducted her, she was shocked. She then realized her fatal mistake and repented for having accused and taunted Laksmana. But it was too late!

While being carried away and when she noticed some persons sitting on a hill, she had the presence of mind to drop some of her ornaments amidst them. This, later on, helped Rama and Sugriva to locate the abductor's place.

While in Ravana's captivity she lived a very austere life. She ruthlessly spumed all his advances and treated him like straw. She was bold enough to advise him on dharma and forcefully suggest that she be returned to Rama with due honour. She even threatened to burn him up by the very power of her chastity but held herself since she did not have Rama's permission, nor did she want his prowess to go waste.

Her mind, all the while, was dwelling on Rama and Rama alone.

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Once Hanuman appeared on the scene and she got the news of Rama, her spirits got buoyed up.

Her refusal to go With Hanuman back to Rama, bespeaks volumes of her sense of honour and propriety.

Her prayer to Agni, the fire-god" to protect Hanuman when his tail had been set on fire, and her refusal to permit Hanuman to punish the wicked raksasas reveals her motherly love and compassion.

After Rama killed Ravana and crowned Vibhishana as the king of Lanka, Sita was brought to Rama at his bidding. But when Rama spoke very harshly and disparagingly, she gave a spirited reply and chose to die on the funeral pyre rather than suffer ignominy. No sooner did she enter the fire, than she was brought out unscathed, endowed with even greater beauty and grace, by Agni himself. After this fire-ordeal, when Rama accepted her, her joy knew no bounds.

Following the coronation of Rama she enjoyed peace and bliss, However, when Rama banished her to the forest even though she was pregnant-being shaken by the insinuations of the people of Ayodhya, she took it in its stride, appreciating Rama's standpoint and reaction.

The sage Valmiki, who sheltered her and nurtured her children, was eager to reunite her with Rama. However, Rama's insistence on her proving her purity once again in public, brought the curtain down on her life once for all. She gracefully chose to leave the world rather than face the humiliation of proving her innocence and purity, time and again. But, even in her final moments, her only concern was Rama, her lord.

KAUSALYA

Valmiki does not give any information about Kausalya's antecedents. Though she was the chief queen of Dasaratha, he had ignored her, due to his infatuation with Kaikeyi and the fear of incurring her wrath. Having been deprived of his love, she lived more like a recluse or a nun, sustaining herself on the meagre funds granted to her. She used to spend a substantial part of this on the maintenance of Vedic students in a part of her palace. She was often harassed by the servants and others of Kaikeyi's household.

On hearing that Rama would be coronated as Yuvaraja, she started ceremonial worship and giving gifts in a big way. When Rama broke the tragic news, she was naturally affected like any mother. Her great disappointment made her speak very harsh words to Dasaratha wounding him deeply. However, his remorse and pitiable remarks begging for pardon, made her retract and apologize. She even remonstrated with Rama saying that as his mother, her command- Do not go to the forest!- should get precedence over his father's! When Rama gave convincing reasons she accepted the same and cooperated.

On the arrival of Bharata who was eager to make amends for all the havoc perpetrated by his mother, she spoke harshly at first, wounding his tender heart further. But, when she discovered his magnanimity, she immediately responded and treated him with the same affection that she showered on Rama.

How she greeted Rama, when he returned to Ayodhya, can better be guessed than described.

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She was a simple woman with a golden heart who suffered much in life but maintained her nobility and dignity throughout.

SUMITRA

Sumitra, the second wife of Dasaratha, was superior even to Kausalya in her equanimity, nobility and recognition of the divinity of Rama. She did not weep and wail when Laksmana decided to accompany Rama to the forest. On the other hand she profusely blessed him, advising him to treat Rama and Sita as his parents, Dasaratha and Sumitra. If Kausalya, even Sita, found occasions to vent their bitterness against Kaikeyi, it was Sumitra alone who never did it. She bore all the hardships and ignominies, created by Kaikeyi's jealousies, with stoic heroism. That is why Dasaratha called her as 'tapasvini,' a hermitess. She solidly stood by Kausalya, giving solace and comfort by her timely advice. By her words and deeds, she stands out as a remarkable woman.

KAIKEYI

Kaikeyi presents herself to us as an enigmatic personality. However, piecing together all the information we can gather about her, we can solve the riddle to a great extent.

She was the daughter of a woman-the queen of Asvapati, of Kekaya kingdom-who had been banished by her husband for her ill humoured nature. She had inherited her mother's temperament, who had not cared even for the life of her husband! If physical beauty had equipped Kaikeyi with the power to ensnare Dasaratha, her impetuous nature had made it worse. All the persons in the palace, as also Vasistha the royal preceptor, Sumantra the chief minister and Siddhartha (another minister) knew it and had taken her to task severely on various occasions. Even Bharata did not have many kind words to spare for her!

Bharata and Satrughna seem to have lived with Asvapati most of the time. This loss of the company of her dear son, had perhaps, been compensated by her by immersing herself in the pleasures of the palace and harassing her co-wives. One thing however was certain: -She loved Rama as she loved Bharata and was all praise for his noble qualities. Whether she too had a better side in her personality or whether Rama's sterling qualities could penetrate even her irascibility is -left to one's discretion to judge.

But for the Manthara factor, her reaction on hearing the news of Rama's prospective coronation might have been pleasant. It was Manthara who stoked the fires of her innate jealousy towards Kausalya, the chief queen, which ultimately developed into a conflagration resulting in all the havoc.

Dasaratha loved her intensely. But his love and attachment for Rama were even more intense. Had he not been trapped by his own words and the boons he had granted earlier, he might have dismissed her demands and even disowned her unceremoniously. All his entreaties and piteous lamentations had no effect on her. Any woman, and a favoured wife at that, would not have been that bad. Extremely harsh accusations or harsher invectives, even by Sumantra and Vasistha, fell on deaf ears.

All that she did, was for her dear son Bharata. But she had not obviously, expected his adverse reactions. When Bharata too joined the chorus of criticism against her and decided to bring back Rama,

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she must have repented for her hasty actions, since she too formed the party that went to the forest with him.

She was also one of the persons in the forefront, to greet and welcome Rama, on his triumphant return.

She is a good example of persons spoiled by indiscriminate pampering by the loved ones.

SABARI

Sabari is the only character in the Ramayana which is 'small' but 'beautiful!' She stands as the supreme example of a person attaining beatitude by devotion and surrender to the guru or spiritual preceptor.

Her real name is not known. The word 'Sabari' just indicates that she was a woman belonging to the sabara caste. Sabaras were a forest tribe, classed among the sudras and living by selling honey and fruits gathered in the forest.

She had a guru, Matanga by name. He was a very great person, a knower of dharma, who had practiced severe austerities. He was perhaps the same sage who had cursed Vali for his evil deeds. Sabari was living in his hermitage as per his command given at the time of his departure from this world. Having directed her to wait until Rama and Laksmana came there and then leave the world after worshiping them, he himself had cast off the body in his Vedic fire. She too did the same thing after honouring Rama to her heart's content.

There is a popular (mistaken) notion that Sabari gave Rama fruits after tasting them, thereby implying that she gave uchhista (food or eatable soiled by one's saliva) to him. There is absolutely no basis for this belief either in the Ramaya or in the allied works. As per the descriptions given by Valmiki, she knew the manners and etiquette (yathavidhi) of honouring guests. Rama's questions posed to her touch upon her austerities only.

Once the purpose of her long wait was over by meeting Rama and worshipping his feet and honouring him by giving the fruits she had gathered, she expressed her blessedness and bliss.

It should specially be noted that the caste factor never came in the way of her honouring Rama or Rama responding to her service or her attaining liberation.

TARA

Tara, the queen of Vali and the mother of Angada, is the only woman character of Kiskindha about whom Valmiki has given some details. She was the daughter of Susena, a vanara hero.

Tara was very beautiful and was also very intelligent; a combination not always very common. She was also good in the art of talking wisely and logically, with proper regard to time, place, person and situation.

When Sugriva challenged Vali a second time, Tara appealed to Vali, not only not to fight with him-since he had secured the friendship and protection of the extraordinarily powerful Rama-but to bring him back and make him the Yuvaraja and live in peace with him. However, her sensible counsel

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was not relished by Vali as he was being driven by his inordinate hatred towards Sugriva and his own super-ego.

When Vali was mortally wounded, she was inconsolably griefstricken. Words of advice by Hanuman and of consolation by Rama brought her back to normal state.

When Sugriva took over Kiskindha as the new king, Tara also became his wife as per the custom prevalent among the vanaras.

When an infuriated Laksmana sent by Rama, entered Sugriva's palace, it was again Tara who spoke very sweetly and pacified him.

When Rama was crowned as the king, Tara also attended the coronation ceremony along with Sugriva and other vanara heroes as also their womenfolk.

MANDODARI

Mandodari, the chief queen of Ravana, was the daughter of Maya, the silpi or architect of the raksasas and the most brilliant exponent of the science of architecture now known as Mayamata. She bore Ravana a heroic son-Meghanada or Indrajit. She was so beautiful and resembled Sita in so many ways that Hanuman mistook her at first, when he saw her in Ravana's harem, for Sita herself. She knew the evil nature of Ravana, and in all probability, had tried her best to bring him to better ways of life. Her lamentation at the death of Ravana, over his dead body described in a long passage, brings out her character brilliantly. She could easily intuit that Rama was none other than Vishnu and Sita was Lakshmi, his divine spouse. She regrets that Ravana by his evil deeds such as destruction of the sacrifices of the rishis, upsetting the wheel of dharma, employing dubious methods in warfare and molesting numberless women of all classes brought about his own ruin since the consequences of sins can never be escaped.

By her dignity and sagacity she stands out as a rare exception among the women of the raksasas race even as Vibhishana, does among the men of the same race.

8

Civilization and Culture as Depicted in the Ramayana

Civilization and culture need not, or, do not, always go together. Advancement of civilization does not necessarily contribute to a refinement of culture. Civilization makes our life here and now, more easy, more comfortable. But, culture inspires us to use the good things of life that civilization keeps in our hands, in the best interest of all and in a way that brings long-term benefits. Civilization can, like the weeds that grow along with the crops, contribute to profanity too. Culture, on the other hand, with its stress on the moral and ethical values, and a holistic approach to life, can not only tone down its evil effects, but also elevate it to more sublime levels.

The Ramayana of Valmiki mirrors both these aspects of life. It presents us with three typical and distinct civilizations and cultures: those of Ayodhya, Lanka and Kiskindha.

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The description of Ayodhya, first under Dasaratha and later under Rama gives us an idea of its advanced civilization and culture. The city was full of palatial buildings elegantly decorated. The roads were well laid-out, broad and kept clean by periodical watering. There were strong and well-designed forts filled with all the articles essential for the guards and their assistants. Armed forces were ever kept in combat-readiness. They contained many heroes who were experts in the use of weapons, especially archery. However, they were magnanimous in battles and followed the rules of dharmayuddha, like not attacking an unarmed enemy or one fleeing from the battlefield. People led a happy, peaceful and contented life. Study and propagation of the Vedas as also the performance of sacrifices went on unhindered. The king administered the country very efficiently, ably assisted by the ministers, advisors and sages who acted as royal priests. Satya and dharma (truth, and righteousness) were the basic principles upon which the whole edifice of the State rested. The duties of the four varnas and the four asramas were scrupulously kept up and were also enforced if and when necessary. Dasaratha being bound by the word he had given to Kaikey, Rama's immediate compliance by renouncing the throne and going to the forest, Sita and Lakshmana following him of their own accord, Bharata's exemplary behaviour in trying to bring back Rama, Vasistha's ever watchful eye in protecting the interests of the kingdom and its subjects-all these bespeak of a highly cultured society.

Lanka under Ravana was a very rich and prosperous city of dazzling splendour. But almost all its riches were the result of robbery or booty plundered in wars. The city abounded in palaces and huge buildings, as also gardens. The citizens were physically giants with fierce appearance and ruthless behaviour. Drinking as also cannibalism was quite common. There were also yagasalas (sacrificial sheds), but the brahmanas were devoted to magical rites and sorcerous rituals. The temples were mostly dedicated to certain fierce deities like Bhadrakali. Ravana and Indrajit were wont to worship this deity called Nikumbhila, before a war, to acquire supernormal powers and weapons. Hence they were experts in mayayuddha, wars using the magical powers of illusion to deceive the enemies. Enjoyment of sensual pleasures was the main concern of the people.

The city of Kiskindha has been described as a guha or a cave. It was probably situated within a mountain range, the passage to which lay through a cave. The city itself was quite spacious, well-designed and beautiful, provided with all the necessities for a comfortable life, revealing an advanced civilization.

Valmiki has described the denizens of Kiskindha as 'vanaras' or monkeys with all the characteristic features of the monkeys or apes throughout the work. If we analyze the various facts provided in the epic, we have to come to the inevitable conclusion that the word is to be taken, not literally, but symbolically. The word 'vanara' may mean 'or, perhaps, he is a human being'. The facial features of these vanaras might have approached those of apes by the rather prominent lower jaws. Since they spoke a human language and since the women had no tails and have been described like other women of the human species, we can conclude that the vanaras were also human beings but accustomed to live in the hilly regions, forests and banks of rivers. May be, they painted themselves like apes and wore a dress leaving a part of it at their backs or loins like tail. May be, the ape was their national symbol.

They were physically very strong and used their own teeth and nails or implements of stone or branches of trees while fighting. They were, obviously, not used to warfare with artificial weapons, though they were experts in wrestling.

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The wearing of the yajnopavita (sacred thread) and performance of the sandhya ritual was current among them. However, rules of marriage and the regulation of man-woman relationship do not seem to have been governed by the higher ethical codes as in the Ayodhya culture. Drinking seems to have been quite common, even among women. The level of their civilization was perhaps midway between those of Ayodhya and Lanka.

Lanka was rich and prosperous. Ravana was a mighty king. He had learning and power. He could even practise severe austerities if and when needed. But his inordinate concupiscence and intense selfishness ruined him, destroyed his kingdom and almost decimated his subjects.

Vibhishana the lone crusader for dharma, managed to save of Lanka what little he could, by joining Rama. But for him there would have been no Lanka.

Kiskindha of Vali would have met with the same fate but for Rama's intervention brought about by the surrender of Sugriva to him. Sugriva's sense of dharma, however feeble it might have been in the beginning, and his devotion and dedication to Rama, saved it from disaster.

Ayodhya under the noble Ikshvaku princes, but-tressed further by Rama's personality and example, rose to glorious heights, making it a place of pilgrimage for ages.

This, then, is the philosophy of the Ramayana Wealth and power cannot save either an individual or a nation. It is devotion to satya and dharma, character, that saves, that protects!

9

Ramarajya-the Ideal State

Rama's rule was so ideal that the word 'Ramarajya' has now become synonymous with an ideal kingdom or an ideal State. We can get a fairly accurate description of an ideal State by putting together the three accounts given in the Ramayana: a narration of Dasaratha's rule, the questions posed by Rama to Bharata at Citrakuta to find out how he is ruling and the graphic description of Ramarajya itself.

Since the 'Ramarajya' hinges on the 'Rama' (the king) that rules, he should be an ideal person deeply devoted to the practice of satya and dharma in his personal and social life. He should be ever vigilant in the welfare of the State. He must have a small group of ministers and advisors of proven character and competence. He should employ persons in jobs suitable to their temperament and capacity. There should also be a well-organised espionage system, preferably of three tiers. The ruler should disburse salaries on time and honour the heroes learned in the martial arts. He should confer rewards or mete out punishment to persons in proportion to their acts of commendation or blame. People having faith in God and the value-system based on the holy books should be protected and supported at all costs. Atheists and agnostics who cared not for this, should be put down with an iron hand.

He should rule in such a way that the income is always in excess of expenditure. All those engaged in the production and proper distribution of wealth-the agriculturists, the traders, the dairy farmers and other persons in similar vocations-must be meticulously taken care of .

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More than everything else, it was the supremely sacred duty of the king to maintain the socio-ethical balance by protecting the varna-asrama-dharma of the subjects, punishing the transgressors severely when necessary.

Since Rama was an ideal man and an ideal king, his rule also was ideal. When he was ruling, people lived happily to a ripe old-age, without the fear of diseases or dacoits, wild animals or poisonous reptiles. All were devoted to dharma and led a contented and peaceful life sans greed and sans violence since they could always see Rama the ideal person before them, to emulate. Even nature was gracious unto them by giving them timely rains conducive to the good growth of crops and vegetation.

10

Literary grace

If Hindu religious tradition treats the Ramayan of Valmiki as a smṛti (a secondary scripture next only to the Vedas), the literary tradition accords it the title 'adikavya' (primeval classic) and calls Vaimiki himself as the 'adikavi', the patriarch of poets. The work richly deserves this epithet and has been a model to be emulated by the later poets of the classical age.

Valmiki's genius lies in his masterly use of the similes and metaphors. Whether it is the human sentiments of love and attachment, hatred and detestation, valour and fearlessness or the beauties of nature as the descriptions of the seasons or even the comical featuring of grotesque figures, his similes are always most apt and can conjure up the objects very well.

11

Ramayana Literature

The influence of the Ramayana of Valmiki has been so powerful and deep that quite a few other Ramayanas have come into existence in course of time, thereby enriching our Ramayana literature. Of these, mention must be made of the Adhyatma Ramayana (4200 verses) considered to be a part of the Brahmananada Purana. Modern scholars however feel that it is an independent work of an unknown author and assign it to the 14th century. Cast in the form of a dialogue between Siva and Parvati, this work is highly devotional and is dedicated to the spreading of the cult of Rama. It abounds in beautiful hymns and quite a few philosophical discourses including the well known Ramagita.

The Ananda Ramayana (12,000 verses), also called Manohara-Ananda-Ramayana is another popular work. It is also in the form of a dialogue, first between Parvati and Siva and later between Ramadasa and his disciple Vishnudasa. This work contains a number of stories popular even now, such as those of Gokarna, the famous pilgrimage centre in Karnataka and of the raksasa brothers Ahiravana and Mahiravana of the nether world who tried to help Ravana. This work also is assigned to the 14th century or even a later date.

Then there are some other Ramayanas, also in Sanskrit, like the Adbhuta Ramayana (1355 verses) the Yogavasistha Ramayana (32,000 verses), the Tat-

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tvasangraha Ramayana and the Sangraha Ramayana which have been printed but have not become popular except in limited circles.

Quite a few puranas also contain the story of Ramayana, though briefly. Some minor upanishads like the Ramapurvatapaniya, Ramottaratapaniya and the Ramarahasya deal with Rama as Paramapurusa the Supreme Person himself. As regards the Sanskrit literary works based on the Ramayana themes, they are legion.

Other Indian languages also have been enriched by the Ramayanas based on Valmiki's Ramayana or its adaptations. The Ramacaritamanasa of Tulasidas (in Hindi), the Ramayana of Kamba (in Tamil), the Ramayana of Krtiivasa (in Bengali), the Ramacaritam and the Kannassa Ramayanam of Ceraman and Kannassa (in Malayalam), the Ramavatar of Guru Govind Singh (in Punjabi), the Ranganatha Ramaya1} (in Telugu), the Ramacaritra of Girdhar (in Gujarati), the Saptakanda Ramayana of Sarala Das (in Oriya), the Ramayana of Madhava Kandali (in Assamese), the Torave Ramayana of Narahari (in Kannada) are some of the more wellknown Ramayanas in the vernaculars.

12

Ramayanas outside India

The story of Rama, either in its original form as depicted by Vaimiki or in a metamorphosed form, has travelled widely outside India, to Tibet and Eastern Turkestan, to South East Asian countries, Japan and even Mongolia. The following list of works-by no means exhaustive-gives an idea of this movement:

Ramayana Kakawin (Javanese)
Hikayat Seri Rama (Malaysian)
Ramakien (Thai)
Fha Lak Fha Lam and Khvay Thuaraphi (Laos)
Hobutsushu (Japanese)
Ramasvamedha (Nepali)
Janakiharana (Sinhalese)

13

Conclusion

If the worth of a literary composition has to be judged by the effect it has had on a whole generation, the Ramayana of Adikavi Valmiki stands out as supreme since it has influenced and is continuing to do so even now, generation after generation. Its tremendous impact on our religion,

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social values, literature, music, drama, dancing, painting and sculpture-in fact, on all aspects of our life-is very palpable.

It has given us an ideal man who stood for satya and dharma come what may. It has given us an ideal woman, the paragon of feminine grace and virtues. It has shown us an ideal family system where everyone thought of the welfare of everyone else first. It has given us the models of ideal brothers, ideal friends and ideal servants who spared no effort to bring comfort to the loved ones. It has put before us an ideal State. In other words, it has placed before us enough ideas and ideals to inspire us, to rise from the human level to divine heights. If this spirit is imbibed, a study of this scripture will be immensely profitable.