BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

RAMAYAṆA FOR THE MODERN WORLD

S. L. N. Simha

GENERAL EDITORS

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BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY

Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

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6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7. The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and

(b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher,

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 2.50.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the

PREFACE

This essay is based entirely on the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

I have no wish to offer apology for adding one more book to the vast literature on this priceless epic of ours. I am convinced that a study of the *Ramayana* is as stimulating and instructive to-day as it was at any other time. I have enjoyed immensely reading the epic and writing about it. If the readers find some merit in my book and if it helps stimulate interest in the *Ramayana,* I should feel amply rewarded. I crave the indulgence of the readers for the defects and deficiencies, considering, among other things, the fact that I have read the epic mainly through translations, though excellent ones, in the Kannada and English languages.

12, Bank House,
Backbay Reclamation,
Bombay-1.
September 9, 1965.

S. L. N. SIMHA

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THE STORY OF THE RAMAYANA ACCORDING TO VALMIKI

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THE GREATNESS OF RAMAYANA IN BRIEF

The greatness of *Ramayana* seems to lie in the appeal it has to the head and the heart of the common folk as well as the elite and the intellectuals. Its story is simple and direct. It is also an epic of very great literary merit. But the *Ramayana's* greatness does not comprise these qualities only. It is a *Dharmashastra*—a moral and religious treatise and an invaluable guide to happy living through the proper performance of one's duties as a member of the family and the community. It is an excellent book on statecraft and administration. So many side stories and anecdotes, which otherwise would not have been relevant to the main theme of the epic, assume significance if their didactic purpose is taken into account. While the significance of particular aspects of the epic may vary from time to time, depending upon the prevailing socio-politico-economic set-up of society, the epic as a whole is of eternal value; its theme is human conduct, which is a subject of perpetual interest.

In life, happiness depends not so much on material possessions and environment as human relations and conduct. The stability and progress of a society depend to a significant extent upon

human behaviour, in particular upon the observance of a right code of conduct and the fulfilment of obligations towards other members of the family and the society at large. It is worth recalling that, during World War II, when H. G. Wells asked for Gandhiji's suggestions in regard to the drawing up of a world charter of human rights, he was advised by Mahatmaji to concentrate on the preparation of a charter of *duties*. The duties of the rulers, the ruled, parents, children, brothers and sisters, spouses, friends, subordinates, attendants, elders, the teachers and the taught, allies, enemies and envoys, are matters of eternal interest to us in India and to peoples all the world over. The *Ramayana* has a great deal to say on all these matters and it is this which makes it a book for all times and all societies.

The principal characters of the *Ramayana* hail from high society, in particular the princely class. These people passed through difficult situations and had to face delicate and complex issues. But these problems and situations were no different from those which people in all walks of life and of all ages face. The sufferings all owe their origin to what we in India call the six enemies of man—desire, greed, lust, jealousy, anger and arrogance. People in high society were victims of these weaknesses, no less than the common folk. Their good and evil deeds, sufferings, trials and tribulations and the way they got over these or succumbed to them are full of in-

terest and instruction to people in all walks of life for all time.

The story of the *Ramayana** is very simple and its lessons very direct. Most of the incidents depicted therein are matters of daily occurrence. We want to get, by hook or crook, things that do not legitimately belong to us, e.g., Kaikeyi's attempt to exploit her special position with Dasaratha to prevent the coronation of Rama (the eldest prince), to get the throne for her son Bharata and to send Rama to the forest for fourteen years. Much suffering and havoc are caused by lust—Shurpanakha was overcome by lust for Rama and Lakshmana and jealousy towards Sita; Ravana's lust took such an unrighteous turn that he abducted Sita and paid dearly. The love of kingdom and property generally makes enemies of brothers and other kith and kin—Sugreeva and Vali suffered a great deal on this score. Vali was also the victim of anger and arrogance. Sita longed for something that glittered—the golden deer; Rama too succumbed to the illusion. Often we have excessive attachment to persons and things and are in indecent haste to achieve our objects even if legitimate; e.g., Dasaratha's attachment to Rama and his endeavour to instal him as the heir-apparent without consulting one of his Queens. Sita, in her excessive love for her husband, called Lakshmana names and attributed impure motives to

* The story is given briefly at the end, specially for the benefit of foreign readers.

him, when the golden deer cried "O Sita, O Lakshmana" in the Dandaka forest.

But, look what happened to these people. Dasaratha's plans to crown Rama in post-haste went awry. Neither did Kaikeyi succeed in her evil enterprise. She lost her husband and incurred the opprobrium and wrath of her own noble son, who refused to be crowned the heir-apparent and himself lived a hermit's life for fourteen years. The lust and the violation of *Dharma* ended in disaster to the Rakshasas. Ravana and his dear ones were destroyed and the beautiful city of Lanka was devastated. Among the monkey princes, Vali, who was arrogant and suspicious of his brother, met with death at the hands of Rama, though this action of the latter has been subject to serious criticism, as we shall see later. Sita's enchantment for the golden deer and her despatch of Lakshmana, through harsh and cruel words, to Rama's aid, led to disaster.

The *Ramayana* illustrates the triumph of righteousness over the forces of evil. But the battle against evil is not simple; it requires courage, confidence and determined effort. Rama and his friends had to make tremendous effort to vanquish Ravana for the recovery of Sita. The *Ramayana* has placed considerable emphasis on not falling a prey to dejection and despair and on continuing the fight against evil even in the most adverse circumstances; this doctrine is the same as the one we read in the great Indian philosophical and religious book, the *Bhagavad*

Gita (the Lord's Song). The doctrine of *Karma* (law of cause and effect), which is expounded in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is clearly seen in the *Ramayana* too. Good intentions and conduct lead to good results and vice versa.

There is so much to learn from the *Ramayana* on good conduct. First of all, take the relationship between parents and children. It is very important that children should respect the wishes of parents and save them from embarrassment. This may, however, mean some sacrifice on the part of children. Rama readily gave up the throne that rightfully belonged to him and went to the forest, in order that his father, caught on the horns of a dilemma, might be able to honour his word to his youngest wife. Dasaratha did not specifically ask Rama to do so, but the good son that he was, Rama decided on this course after getting the facts of the case from his step-mother. While Rama extolled obedience to parents, especially to father, the *Ramayana* does not support blind obedience to parents, where such obedience involves unrighteous conduct. This is brought out clearly by the conduct of Bharata, who refused to be crowned king, because his mother's conduct in this matter had been reproachable; in fact, repeatedly Bharata admonished her for her misdemeanour. While Rama decided to make a supreme sacrifice, Lakshmana did not approve of it and he was very critical of Kaikeyi's and even Dasaratha's conduct.

Then again, consider the relationship between

husband and wife. For us in India, marriage is a sacred union. Although in the *Ramayana* women are treated as the weaker and inferior sex, there is the utmost emphasis on mutual love, loyalty and sacrifice. The proper relationship is indicated by Janaka, who, while giving away Sita as a bride, tells Rama she will be his *Sahadharmacharee,* a partner in the pursuit of *Dharma*, i.e., righteous duty. Absolute chastity on the part of the wife and of loyalty on the part of the husband and the greatness of the principle of monogamy are well illustrated in the life of Rama and Sita. Disregarding the difficulties and dangers of forest life, Sita insisted on accompanying Rama to the forest. She did not try to prevail upon Rama to fight for the throne. On the other hand, Dasaratha had many wives and this led to acute distress. One of the wives did not follow the path of *Dharma;* she tried to exploit the situation to her advantage against that of her husband and family. In the result, much suffering was caused to herself and to others.

How brothers should conduct themselves is best illustrated by the lives of Rama and his three brothers. They were most devoted to one another and each was eager to serve and promote the welfare of the others, sacrificing, in the process, his own comforts and interests, if necessary. Rama did not mind Bharata's becoming the heir-apparent and the ruler, a place that was rightfully his. Bharata did not want this, although his mother had schemed for it; he lived

a hermit's life outside Ayodhya, waiting for Rama to return and meanwhile enthroning his (Rama's) sandals. Lakshmana too, instead of staying on in Ayodhya, chose to follow his brother to the forest, to serve him and his consort most devotedly, leaving his own wife and mother behind. No fight for property; no attempt to get something out of the way; absolute identity of interests. This exalted display of unselfishness on the part of brothers—let it be noted they were only half-brothers—is alone sufficient to make the epic an immortal one.

Quite different were the relations between the monkey princes. Whether Vali alone was to blame or Sugreeva was also at fault, is a controversial matter but there is little doubt that a lot of ill-will existed between the two brothers, over kingdom and woman. Both suffered a lot and one had to pay dearly with his life. The rakshasa (titan/demon) brothers, Ravana and Vibhishana, too did not get on well; this was because one brother was unrighteous. As in the case of parents-children relations, the epic places greater emphasis on righteous conduct than on mere brotherly love. Vibhishana did not hesitate to leave Ravana and join Rama's camp. In more than one instance, Valmiki, the author of the Epic, places such contrasts before the readers, in order to demonstrate the triumph of virtue and righteousness over vice and evil.

Friendship is yet another matter on which the *Ramayana* has so much to say. The need for

mutual devotion and sacrifice among friends is very well brought out in the epic. When Rama and Sugreeva became friends and allies, there was nothing which one was not prepared to do in the interests of the other. There is also much emphasis on the virtue of gratitude; ingratitude is classed among the most heinous crimes.

Likewise, there is abundant enlightenment in the great epic on the art of good Government, the importance of taking counsel from trusted friends and lieutenants and even more on the duties and obligations of a good servant. The *Ramayana,* in short, throws much light on the art of management and administration. In Hanuman, for instance, we have the example of a superior type of servant and an envoy of consummate skill, who carries out not merely what the master desires but does all that is necessary to fulfil quickly and thoroughly the main objective of any assignment or mission.

The *Ramayana* is indeed a grand treatise on personal qualities and conduct. Generosity, compassion, forgiveness, absence of jealousy and anger, truthfulness, courage, valour, pleasant speaking, speaking first (to put people at ease), non-discrimination on the count of status or riches and honouring one's pledge at all costs, are qualities that should be cultivated by us all. In the epic, the hero, Rama, possessed these qualities in an abundant measure. But many others too possessed these in varying measures. To adhere to these qualities steadfastly is not an

easy thing. Even our hero sometimes swerved from these canons of conduct, though it was not long before his true nature asserted itself. In the case of ordinary mortals, these rules of conduct have, therefore, to be assiduously practised.

In the *Ramayana* there is repeated reference to the power of destiny over the lives of people. There is an all-pervading power influencing us all. What else can explain the lightning sequence of events in the matter of twenty-four-hours—decision to anoint Rama as the heir-apparent, its cancellation and Rama's banishment to forest? There is also much stress in the epic on the results of the actions of people in their previous births. Only this can explain, often times, the wrong actions of people who are educated, intelligent and generally well-meaning. In view of this, we should have a little tolerance towards the failings of others. In the epic, we notice that even sages like Vishvamitra or the wife of a sage and a very chaste woman, Ahalya, were not above failings; if this is so, no wonder that ordinary men and women have faults and deficiencies.

A knowledge of the epic should also help people to bear with equanimity their sufferings tribulations. If, for instance, a woman like daughter of a great king and daughter-in- of another great king and wife of a noble brave prince, should suffer great hardships, not ordinary people reconcile themselves ir lot? At any rate, one should not exag-

gerate one's difficulties (which are quite often imaginary) but take consolation in the fact that one is not as badly off as many others. One should not also lose the balance in good times, for, success and prosperity are no more permanent than adversity. Evenmindedness in success and failure, joy and sorrow and opulence and poverty is what is conducive to happiness. This does not mean that the *Ramayana* preaches an attitude of helplessness, defeatism, faintheartedness and submission to the forces of evil and adversity. Far from it. One must face situations boldly and strive one's utmost to overcome difficulties. The forces of evil and injustice must be fought with all possible strength. Vibhishana did not hesitate to give up his own brother and join Rama's camp, as the brother was bent upon an evil course.

Again, the *Ramayana* places before us the ideal of a harmonious pursuit of the four principal goals of life, namely, *Dharma* (righteousness and duty), *Artha* (material prosperity), *Kama* (legitimate sex and other pleasures) and finally *Moksha* (liberation of soul). The righteousness, for instance is not confined to daily living. Righteousness is to be observed in war too. Contrary to the general misconception abroad, the Indian attitude to life is not one of asceticism and extreme austerity. It is one of enjoyment of the good things of life, in moderation and without conflict with righteousness; at no stage should one lose control over the senses.

The *Ramayana* is also a fine literary piece. The beauty and simplicity of language are most impressive. The manner in which the characters of the *Ramayana* give expression to their joys and lamentations is so natural and reflects the daily domestic life of Indians so well that the epic has direct appeal to the hearts of millions and millions. That is why, Valmiki is referred to as the *Adi Kavi* (the Premier Poet). But, as already mentioned, it is much more than a literary piece. Otherwise, it need not have run into 24,000 verses. So many incidents and anecdotes, not quite related to the main story, are given, with the object of drawing morals and providing a guide to proper conduct and attitude to people under varying circumstances. Likewise, there are very long dialogues, expounding the path of duty and righteousness. In the *Ramayana* there is also a certain amount of repetition (which is perhaps reflected even in this little book); this is no doubt deliberate, to some extent, since repetition is an important way of conveying a moral.

Such is the manifold greatness of the *Ramayana*. It is a book of eternal interest. It is therefore eminently desirable that we study the epic with serious purpose and reverence. It is customary to recommend the reading of the *Ramayana* not once or twice but again and again, in fact as a daily routine. In this busy world this may not be possible. But, reading it at least

with some concentration is a must for all Indians; it is richly rewarding.

In the following chapters an attempt is made to present in some detail the principal characters of the epic and to elaborate their main attributes, so as to bring out the great value of the *Ramayana* to the modern world.

2

THE HERO OF THE EPIC

The *Ramayana* abounds in great characters; hardly anyone is mediocre. Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Bharata, Hanuman, Vibhishana and Ravana are immortal characters. The greatest of these was of course Rama, the hero, and the central theme of the epic is to sing the glory of Rama. He was the embodiment of all the fine qualities that one could wish for. He was kind, generous, brave, considerate, pleasant, soft-spoken, brief-spoken but first to speak, unsuspecting, free from jealousy, forgiver of others' faults, full of gratitude, righteous and always he honoured his words. Deep respect for elders, especially parents, rigid adherence to monogamy and a stern sense of duty were his outstanding qualities. The poet is immensely fond of singing Rama's qualities and he uses every opportunity to do this. Rama's greatness and nobility were so transparent that everybody was struck by these qualities the instant he or she saw him.

Each one of Rama's qualities is of course worth emulating by us. But what is of special appeal in these days is the quality of speaking to people courteously and pleasantly and also speaking to them first to put them at ease. These make so much for day-to-day happiness in this world; they do not require any investment and

the returns are infinitely large. We in India, particularly in the urban areas, working in offices and establishments, will do very well to appreciate the enormous potential of a warm greeting and a kind word, to every one, our subordinates and colleagues, especially to our juniors. People like to be treated as human beings rather than as machines. They value small courtesies as much as monetary benefits. If only people are offered a seat when they call on their senior colleagues for business, the sum total of happiness and harmony in offices will increase several-fold! The poet lays much stress on these personal qualities. It is noteworthy that most of the characters in the *Ramayana,* whether human, vanara or titan, speak courteously.

Character is tested in adversity rather than in prosperity. The test for Rama came when he learnt from Kaikeyi about her two demands on his father, namely, the cancellation of the ceremony fixed for the next day to crown Rama as the heir-apparent and his banishment to the forest for fourteen years. He was not a bit perturbed and most readily gave his consent to both. He told his step-mother that even without his father's command, he would gladly give up for Bharata, the kingdom, wealth, Sita and his own life. He asked her to send messengers forthwith to bring back Bharata, who was away with his grand-father, to be coronated.

It is not that he quite liked these developments, as we see from his later reactions, but

he controlled his feelings, being most anxious to help his father keep his word. Rama attached the greatest importance to honouring one's word. To him it was the most sacred duty of a son to help his father honour his word. Besides the two boons which he had given to Kaikeyi after they had been wed, on the occasion of her saving his life in some battle, Dasaratha had promised Kaikeyi's father, at the time of their wedding, that Kaikeyi's son would succeed him as king. Rama was aware of this; in fact, he mentioned this to Bharata at Chitrakoota. In these circumstances, Dasaratha was helpless to disregard Kaikeyi's demands; at the same time, he did not want Rama to be deprived of the kingdom and banished to the forest. Rama understood this dilemma of his father. So he rose to supreme heights of self-sacrifice. Lakshmana lashed out bitterly at Rama's agreeing to the unreasonable demands of their step-mother, in terms which could not be bettered by any modern critic of Rama's action. Lakshmana said that they need not heed the promises of their aged father to the young queen and that Rama should not talk of bowing to fate but should conquer the so-called destiny by human endeavour. To this long argument of his brother, Rama gave a very short reply—the effect of which is usually considerable—that it was their duty to carry out their father's word.

Later, Rama did have moments of anguish and even bitterness about what Kaikeyi had done. Within a couple of days of leaving Ayodhya, he

remarked to Lakshmana, "What foolish man, swayed by a woman, would abandon an obedient son like me. Enraged, I can single-handed humble not only Ayodhya, but the whole world. But I am afraid of unrighteousness and the next life; so I am not installing myself on the throne." He had great capacity to master his feelings. We ought to like Rama more rather than less for such statements and reactions as they indicate that he was human rather than a machine of perfection!

There were in fact other occasions when Rama displayed ordinary human emotions and weaknesses. While generally he was calm and subdued, occasionally he could become angry. He was very angry with Parasurama when he challenged him; he was equally angry with the sage Jabali when he advised him not to bother about fufilling his father's promise. Again he became wild, rather unreasonably it would appear, with Sugreeva, for what he felt was delay in his taking steps to search Sita, as soon as the rainy season ended. Or again, when he and his brother did not find Sita in their hut at Panchavati, he said he would give up his virtues and destroy the whole world if he did not get her back. When the Sea-Lord did not give Rama's army a passage to Lanka, he proceeded to dry up the whole ocean. His anger on seeing Sita for the first time after Ravana's death was sharp and cruel.

Rama was also given to moods of despair and faint-heartedness, in the course of the search for

Sita and the campaign against Ravana. A couple of times, he even talked of committing suicide! On all these occasions, he had to be cheered by others like Lakshmana, Sugreeva and Vibhishana.

But these failings of the hero were superficial and temporary, and on every occasion it was not long before his true nature asserted itself. It is this which places him apart from others. The moral is that even if we give away to undesirable impulses, we should soon retrace and correct ourselves. After his bouts of anger and displeasure were over, Rama made handsome apologies to the affected people. There was no trace of bitterness in his angry moods. In discussing Rama's anger etc., regard must be had to the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which he had been placed. He lost the kingdom, had to reside in the forest and on the top of it, his wife was abducted. There could be no worse chain of calamities. In such a context, a little impatience and anger are quite understandable. Indeed, the surprising thing is that these moods of Rama were so brief and on the whole mild.

A quality of Rama was the sternness and thoroughness with which he carried out what he considered to be his duties. Nobody and no circumstance (such as his father's demise) could change his mind about going through the fourteen-year banishment. In fact, he would not tarry a second in carrying out his duties. While at last Dasaratha reconciled himself painfully to

Rama's going to the forest, he implored him to stay for a night in the palace, but Rama said 'no'. When he met Sugreeva and Vibhishana he promised them forthwith that he would vanquish their brothers and this he carried out promptly. However, as we shall see later, the manner in which he killed Vali has been a subject of much controversy. The same thing is also true of the manner in which he rejected Sita soon after he liberated her from Ravana and the way he later abandoned her to the forest, even when she was in the family way. These two episodes obviously strike anyone as unjust, cruel and extremely unchivalrous. But they have to be explained in terms of Rama's exalted sense of duty as a king, namely, that his standards in personal life should not only be the highest but should appear to be so, beyond a shadow of doubt. If in this process he or his near and dear ones suffered, it did not matter. He himself made a supreme sacrifice in order that his father's integrity and honour might be upheld. It is this aspect of Rama which has made him immortal, more than anything else. It will be a very good thing indeed if all those who are in public life emulate this wholesome principle.

Rama was a staunch disciplinarian and was severe on others if they did not carry out his orders. Twice this happened in the case of Lakshmana, than whom nobody was dearer to Rama. Once, at Panchavati, Lakshmana left Sita alone to go after Rama when Maricha, in the form of

the golden deer, shouted 'O Sita, O Lakshmana'. Rama learnt the circumstances in which Lakshmana had to leave his post; even so, he administered a strong admonition. Again, on the conclusion of his mission on this earth, Rama was closeted with the lord of death, who appeared in the form of an ascetic, and he had instructed Lakshmana to stand guard and not let anyone hear the conversation between him and the ascetic; violation of this was to mean death. At this moment, the proverbially angry sage, Durvasa, came to see Rama and threatened to curse everybody if he was not let in. Lakshmana thought it was better that he alone suffer than everybody; so he went in and announced the arrival of the sage. The punishment of Lakshmana had to be carried out; at the suggestion of sage Vasishtha, Rama banished Lakshmana, this being regarded the same as death 'to a man of honour'. None dared to defy Rama's orders. When Rama decided to banish Sita to the forest, none of the brothers ventured to oppose him. After he had killed Ravana and installed Vibhishana as king, Rama asked Vibhishana to bring Sita to him, bathed, anointed with celestial unguents and adorned with jewels. When Vibhishana went to Sita, the poor lady said she would see Rama first and then bathe. Vibhishana did not consent to this. Sita had to have a bath and adorn herself, before she was taken to Rama. What a contrast to Rama are many leaders and men in authority in the modern world who wit-

ness helplessly the disregard of their orders and instructions! Of course, this eminent authority of Rama was derived from his great character and the universal respect in which he was held.

The thing to note is that Rama—indeed all rulers of the Ikshwaku dynasty generally—identified himself completely with the welfare of his people. He was a dear father to all youngsters among citizens and a dear son to all the elders. He was specially kind to the meek and the humble, whom he conquered by generosity. The happiness of his people was his happiness; their sorrow was his sorrow. There was complete subordination of his interests to those of his people. The result was the greatest respect and love which the people showered on him. In turn, his joy was their joy; his suffering was theirs. When Rama's coronation was announced, the whole of Ayodhya went gay. At the sad turn of events, leading to cancellation of the coronation, the whole populace was plunged in grief. Nobody, except Kaikeyi and Manthara, wished to live in the city; all wished to accompany Rama to the forest. It was a case of conquest through love and righteousness. This complete meeting of minds and hearts of the rulers and the ruled is a glorious heritage of which we should be proud.

Rama's greatness also rests on his *Ekapatnivrata,* absolute monogamy. (In this respect, it is interesting to note that his father was a contrast, which in a sense led to all the troubles. So, apart

from moral reasons, monogamy has practical advantages). He looked upon every other woman as his mother or sister. Purity in sex life was to him of the utmost importance. One of the principal reasons which Rama gave for slaying Vali was that the latter usurped his brother's wife. Rama was most devoted to Sita and she knew perfectly that he would not look at any other woman.

A great virtue of Rama was his unsuspecting nature. This is noticed prominently on two occasions. The first is with regard to the possible role of his brother Bharata in the events leading to his banishment. At no stage did he suspect Bharata of any hand in this. When Bharata came to Rama's hermitage to take him back to Ayodhya, Lakshmana suspected Bharata's intentions. But Rama admonished him and said he was certain that Bharata had come to request him to return to the capital. Again, when Vibhishana came to seek Rama's refuge, all but Hanuman advised him against accepting Vibhishana into their camp. Rama trusted Vibhishana completely and accepted him enthusiastically.

The poet is fond of referring to Rama as one having righteous valour; the valour was employed for righteous purposes only. Even in warfare Rama was righteous. During one of his combats with Ravana, the latter was rendered chariotless and bowless. Rama did not exploit the situation to kill Ravana; on the contrary, he suspended the battle, complimenting Ravana for his

valour and asking him to come back the next day, fully rested and with a new chariot and bow. This kind of gesture may be suicidal in modern warfare, but the significance of this is much wider. It means you do not exploit even your adversary's serious handicaps. It is a very noble attitude, which we will do well to try to emulate.

Rama was also ever ready to forgive. When a titan in the form of a crow molested Sita and could not escape Rama's arrow wherever it went, ultimately it sought refuge in Rama and asked for his forgiveness, which was readily granted. When Ravana's spies, Suka and Sarana, were captured by the monkeys and were about to be put to death, Rama had them released; they were in fact permitted to move freely in Rama's camp before returning to Lanka. Again, after he came to the gates of Lanka and before he actually began the assault on Ravana, Rama sent word to Ravana that if, even at that late stage, he were to return Sita, he would forgive him. When Vibhishana did not want to perform the funeral rites for Ravana, Rama admonished him and made him perform the obsequies. Rama remarked that Ravana had been magnanimous and valiant and that in any event death terminated all hostility. What fine sentiments!

This noble aspect of Rama is also seen in his attitude to Kaikeyi. On no occasion did he utter a harsh word to her; nor did he tolerate anyone else's speaking ill of her. He admonished Bharata, Lakshmana and others whenever they started to say harsh words about his step-mother, whom he held in the same regard and respect as his own mother. In fact, Bharata stated that he should have abandoned her for her evil deed but for the fact that Rama regarded her as his mother too. Finally, when Dasaratha appeared from heaven soon after Sita went through the purificatory fire ordeal, all that Rama spoke was to request his father to withdraw his renunciation of Kaikeyi and Bharata and to give them his blessings.

The central theme of the *Ramayana* is Rama's sublime character and these few pages cannot do full justice to his greatness. It is hoped that the significant aspects have been covered and in any case in the rest of this book there will be many references to Rama, supplementing what is stated here.

The beauty of the *Ramayana* is that a number of characters rise to great heights, like Rama. The pride of place in this regard goes to his noble consort. Even as Rama was the embodiment of all possible good qualities we may expect of a man and a prince, Sita possessed in abundance the qualities to make her immortal among women. She had exquisite beauty, personal charm, chastity, supreme devotion to her husband, infinite capacity to bear suffering, courage to speak out her mind, sound practical sense, tact and a high sense of dignity and self-respect. Un-

doubtedly, she is one of the greatest feminine characters in world literature.

In Lakshmana and Bharata we have examples of two devoted brothers, but of very different temperaments. Lakshmana is a good example of a young fire-brand, impulsive and impatient. Bharata is the supreme example of non-attachment and self-effacement. Hanuman is yet another lofty character of the epic—an embodiment of selfless and heroic service. Vibhishana has also a permanent place on account of his gallant bid to espouse the cause of righteousness against unrighteousness. Sugreeva is a shining example of a trusted ally and friend.

Ravana is yet another great character. He had some outstanding qualities. He was extraordinarily brave. He was well read in all the scriptures. He practised severe penances. He was a strong and enlightened administrator and was also generous. But fate decreed that he suffer from unrighteous conduct, for which he paid dearly. As Hanuman remarked when he first saw Ravana, but for his evil nature, Ravana could have been the protector of the celestial realm.

Rare indeed is a narrative where there is such a galaxy of great and noble characters, on each one of whom a volume can be written.

3

CO-PARTNERSHIP IN THE PURSUIT OF DHARMA

A grand theme running through the *Ramayana* is the ideal of absolute chastity and devotion of husband and wife towards each other. While giving Sita in marriage, her father, Janaka, told Rama that she would ever tread with him the path of *Dharma*. This ideal of partnership between husband and wife in the pursuit of the well accepted goals of daily life, apart from its sublime conception, is the most practical way of achieving marital happiness. Janaka also told Rama that Sita would ever follow him like a shadow. This is not to be construed as an act of subordination, although, as already mentioned, in the *Ramayana* one comes across views designating women as the inferior sex. The idea of partnership is the dominant concept; a partnership so intimate that each is able to discern the thoughts of the other.

This partnership should not be a fair weather one. It has to last through thick and thin. The test came to Sita when not only was Rama's coronation cancelled but he was banished to the forest for fourteen years. This shocking news was conveyed to her by Rama himself, when she was joyously looking forward to the coronation that morning. Rama instructed Sita as to how she

should conduct herself in his absence, particularly towards Bharata. What was Sita's uppermost thought? Not the loss of kingdom to her husband nor his banishment to the forest. She did not advise Rama to put up a fight against his father and step-mother. She did not become angry with him for his acquiescence to his stepmother's demands. Lots of wives nag their husbands to try to get something which does not legitimately belong to them. Sita's sole anxiety was that she should accompany Rama to the forest. Although Rama wanted to go alone, eventually she succeeded in getting him agree to take her. This does not mean that Sita was quite indifferent to Rama's becoming king. While crossing the river Ganga in Guha's boat, she vowed silently that if Rama got back the kingdom she would offer so many hundreds of cows to Brahmins, etc etc.!

Sita argued very ably that a woman's place was with the husband, wherever he was and whatever the fortunes. She said that of all relatives, it was the wife alone that shared the fate of a person; for the wife, husband was the only support. In the impregnable forest, she would walk before him, treading upon the thorns and prickly grass; always she would take her repast after Rama had taken it. When Rama raised objections to her going with him, she employed all the means at her command to make him consent. She praised the beauties of forest life, which she said she longed for since her girlhood. Even

astrologers had told her she would spend some time in the forest! She also taunted Rama that her father would have remarked that he was a man with a woman's heart. She caressed Rama, cried a lot and finally like other women in the story threatened to commit suicide! Rama yielded. True to what she said, Sita enjoyed her forest life with Rama and Lakshmana immensely.

Sita was not merely a companion to Rama but also an adviser. This is another essential aspect of husband-wife relationship. For instance, when they were in the Dandaka forest, Sita offered some sound advice to Rama when he was preparing to destroy the demons who were obstructing and defiling the sacrifices of the sages. Sita was a very practical lady—there are numerous instances of this in the *Ramayana*; she believed in the principle of letting sleeping dogs lie. She seemed to be keen that Rama should avoid unnecessary engagement with the demons in the forest. So she gave Rama a long lecture on the dharma of non-violence. The beauty of the *Ramayana* lies in such long discourses on *dharma,* by one character after another. She remarked that a small defect became big imperceptibly. Like the proximity of faggots increasing the intensity of fire, the possession of arms (in this case, bows and arrows which the two brothers were carrying) increased the possibilities of violence and warfare. She then gave Rama the story of a sage with whom a sword had been kept as a trust. The sage was so keen

on guarding his trust that he took it wherever he went; he began to neglect his penances and to develop warlike attitude; Sita added, as fire works a change in a piece of wood, so the carrying of arms works alteration in the mind of him bearing the arms. So, in Sita we have a very early crusader against the armaments race. At the conclusion of this discourse, uttered in 'gracious and gentle' tones, Sita remarked, very tactfully, "After all, I am a woman; I cannot advise you much. Besides you know everything. Please consult your brother and do what is proper." Rama replied he must keep his word to the sages to rid the forest of the demons and that he would rather abandon her, Lakshmana and his own life than break the assurances given to the sages. He thanked Sita, all the same, for her advice, remarking that after all, one does not offer advice to those one does not love. One wishes that all people take the sincere advice given to them in the spirit in which Rama took it.

Another and a more cruel test came, especially to Sita, when Ravana abducted her and tried to win her by all possible means. Ravana offered to become her slave; he belittled Rama; he subjected her to all kinds of mental torture; he made it appear that Rama had already been killed and finally he threatened to take away her own life if she did not yield. But most resolutely she rejected Ravana's advances and remained most devoted to Rama during the whole year

that she was a prisoner of Ravana. It is said of Rama and Sita that the fact each had his/her mind fixed on the other enabled them to survive. Time and again Sita told Ravana (she considered him unworthy of being addressed directly by her; so she always placed a blade of grass between herself and Ravana) that whether poor or deprived of kingdom, her husband was her preceptor and life companion and she would not think of any other man. All the mental torture to which Ravana subjected her, not for a day or a month, but for one full year, did not swerve her even a wee bit from the path of chastity and devotion. This is the most outstanding display of wifely devotion. Sita's greatness will be appreciated even more if account is taken of the fact that when she went through all these trials she was in full bloom of youth, in her thirties.

Apart from her chastity and devotion, Sita also remained remarkably calm and collected. She had her moments of despondency and nervousness but on the whole she remained courageous and composed. She replied to Ravana's overtures in strong and spirited tones. Sita's remarkable presence of mind is also seen on an earlier occasion. When Ravana was carrying her to Lanka, Sita saw some monkeys (Sugreeva and his companions) on a hill top and in the hope that they might convey to Rama the news of her abduction, she dropped some jewels wrapped in her mantle, without Ravana's knowledge.

Not only was Sita most devoted and dedicated

to Rama, but she was also very keen to uphold his prestige. When Hanuman saw the most pitiable state in which Sita lived as Ravana's captive, he was very anxious to put an end to her sorrow quickly, and so he offered to carry her on his back swiftly to Rama at Kishkindha. However, Sita turned down Hanuman's offer very tactfully. She first mentioned the many practical difficulties involved in such a venture. In the first place, Sita doubted Hanuman's ability to carry her. Then, she might feel giddy and fall into the ocean while he was flying. The titans would attack him and tear her to pieces, and so on. But, a very important reason for Sita's rejection of Hanuman's offer was that she considered that such a course of action would not redound to the credit of Rama. He must himself conquer Ravana and take her from Lanka. Only then would Rama's honour be fully vindicated. Here was a princess whom the demon king abducted in stealth and subjected to all types of mental tortures. Ordinarily she should have been too glad to get out of the confinement in Lanka. But Sita was not; she wanted to be freed from the demon king's clutches in a very honourable way. Of course, the very practical lady she was, Sita urged Hanuman to convey her distress to Rama adequately and increase his daring a great deal.

On another occasion, she told Ravana that on account of her asceticism she could reduce him to ashes, if she had Rama's mandate. Ravana would be destroyed before long by Rama and

Lakshmana. So, even if she suffered a little longer, it did not matter, in order that Rama himself punished the titan king. Sita's claim regarding the power of chastity is no empty boast. It is interesting that the threat which Ravana held out to Sita if she did not yield to him was not that he would forcibly take her but that he would ask his cooks to mince her limbs for his breakfast. It is mentioned that Ravana was afraid of some previous curses but there is no doubt that he also felt the power of chastity and dared not molest her. This is as true to-day as it was in those olden days. If a man or a woman rigidly adheres to the path of virtue, none dare draw him or her away to vice. Sita is an exalted model in this regard.

Rama, on his part, was equally devoted to Sita. He was most eager and determined to locate Sita and rescue her. He was prepared to do anything to accomplish this. The eagerness with which he contracted Sugreeva's friendship and the haste with which he promised to kill Vali were motivated by his desire to launch the search for Sita. Although it turned out later that Rama had as much his princely honour at heart as the tender affection and devotion of a husband for wife, there is ample evidence that it was the latter feeling that was dominant. During the year that he was without Sita, whenever he saw some beautiful thing he thought of Sita and suffered intense agony.

Two episodes in the *Ramayana* cause a lot of

anguish to one and all. These have been alluded to earlier. The first occurred soon after Rama's victory over Ravana. When he saw Sita, for the first time after their separation in the forest, he was overcome by a combination of joy, sorrow and anger, as the poet aptly puts it. This was indeed natural. But it is extremely difficult to appreciate the harsh expressions which Rama used towards Sita and his asking her to go away because it was difficult for him to believe she could have preserved her chastity while she was under the demon king's bondage. On this occasion, as on others, Sita displayed remarkable calm, dignity and courage. She told Rama in plain language that it was unworthy of him to suspect her thus. But, having said this, she prepared herself for the purificatory fire ordeal; she did not leave Rama. This is the great secret of successful married life. When one partner is suspicious or unreasonable, the other, while expressing displeasure and making vehement protestations, does not precipitate matters into a crisis; he or she is prepared for some self-sacrifice. It is not long before the partner in the wrong is overcome with remorse, and harmony and happiness are restored between the couple. In these days, when misunderstanding and tension seem to be on the increase, not only elsewhere but in our country too, leading slowly to increased separation and divorce, there is much to learn from Sita's conduct.

Of course, Sita came through the fire ordeal,

with honour and glory for all time. Rama offered the explanation that while he had absolutely no doubt about Sita's virtue, it was imperative on his part to put her through this ordeal, to satisfy public opinion. To have accepted her without any reservations would have cast aspersions on him, that he was so lustful as to take her back. We may not approve of the test to which Rama put Sita—there is little doubt that on this Sita read Rama's thoughts too well—, but we should appreciate the motive behind it. The fire test was a vindication of not only Rama's honour, but even more, Sita's.

The other episode is really what one might call the second part of the same story. It is too crude, cruel and revolting to discuss; some commentators have put forth the view that this was not part of the original epic. Long after he had been coronated, Rama heard some uncomplimentary remark about his having accepted Sita. Rama considered the matter carefully. Although she had gone through the fire ordeal and he knew she was pure, Rama feared dishonour more than anything else. So, with a heavy heart, he took the decision to send Sita away, and promptly ordered Lakshmana to leave her, that very day, in the forest, though she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. But on this occasion too, Sita rose to magnificent heights. While she was of course very sorrowful at the turn of events, she told Lakshmana that she very much appreciated Rama's desire to respect the wishes

of his subjects and maintain the highest standards of conduct. There was no bitterness in her, but full understanding of her husband's position. (Sita found asylum in the hermitage of Valmiki, the bard of the *Ramayana*; there, she gave birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusa, who grew up splendidly, learning, among other things, the recitation of the whole of the *Ramayana*).

Later, while Rama was celebrating the horse-sacrifice, Valmiki sent Lava and Kusa to recite the *Ramayana,* which they did magnificently for many days. Rama recognised the boys as his own sons and naturally desired to have Sita back. However, this he had to do in an honourable way. So he sent word to sage Valmiki that if she was without sin, if she so desired and if Valmiki approved, Sita take oath, in public assembly, regarding her purity. Sage Valmiki, who had given her asylum, lead her before Rama and said that if he required it, Sita would prove her innocence. But, prior to this, he testified himself for her innocence. Rama was satisfied and desired to take Sita back. But this noble lady had had enough suffering in this world; so, swearing on her innocence and devotion to Rama, Sita went back to mother earth, from where she came. This episode is too deep, sorrowful and poignant for ordinary mortals to hear and understand. It is difficult to comprehend that an innocent person should undergo terrible sacrifice to respect ill-informed public opinion. In this, as in many other respects, the *Ramayana* poses very

interesting questions on fundamental matters of private and public conduct and we should ponder over these with seriousness and reverence and take guidance for our conduct. In particular, people in high positions and authority should consider carefully how they should not only do the right things, but what is equally important, leave no room for any doubt in this regard.

We have so far talked of Sita-Rama relations only. In the epic, we have also the contrast of Kaikeyi's reprehensible conduct towards Dasaratha. From earlier accounts, we gather that Dasaratha was a kind of slave to Kaikeyi. In utter disregard of her husband's wishes and entreaties, Kaikeyi pressed her demands for the crowning of her son and the banishment of Rama. This matter was of course a very complex one, going beyond marital relations. It was also a matter of jealousy among co-wives. Nevertheless, it is clear that Kaikeyi presents the picture of unrighteous conduct on the part of a wife, resulting in all-round misery.

In Mandodari, Ravana's queen, we have the example of another noble lady, whose husband fell into evil ways and who tried, unsuccessfully, to retrieve him from the path of vice. When Ravana lay dead, naturally she lamented a great deal, but this was tempered by a forthright condemnation of his unrighteous doings, especially the abduction of Sita.

Tara, wife of Vali, the monkey chief, is yet another great feminine character in the epic. She

was intelligent, wise and courageous to say what was proper, either to her husband or to others like Rama and Lakshmana. The very love and devotion of a wife demands that she speak frankly to the husband and say what is both proper and good to him. When Sugreeva, under Rama's protection, came to challenge Vali to a duel, Tara tried to restrain Vali. She said that Sugreeva had come escorted by Rama, who was supporter of the oppressed and who was the mine of every good quality. Vali should seek peace, not war; he should seek reconciliation with Sugreeva and win back his affection. Sugreeva was, Tara said, amiable, powerful, valuable and a natural ally. What courageous and wise words! While Tara offered this advice partly to save Vali, there is no doubt that she was looking at the matter from the wider moral angle that brothers should live amicably. This is a good code for all wives to bear in mind and practice.

Tara's skill as a conciliator is also seen when Rama and Lakshmana were angry with Sugreeva for what they considered breach of word on the part of Sugreeva in regard to sending monkeys for the search of Sita. In very sweet and conciliatory words she pacified Lakshmana, who in fact asked Sugreeva's forgiveness!

We began the chapter on the ideal of mutual devotion and fidelity on the part of husband and wife. Without doubting in any way the thesis of equality of sexes and the responsibility of both

in maintaining harmony of the home, it would not be incorrect to say that it depends a lot on the sagacity, patience and forbearance of the lady of the house. Let all womenfolk keep before them constantly the picture of Sita, the embodiment of feminine virtue and wisdom. Hanuman did not exaggerate when he said to himself in the Ashoka grove that "Were the dominion of the Three Worlds on one side and Sita on the other, the former would not equal a fraction of the latter."

4

PATTERNS OF BROTHERLY CONDUCT

One of the most striking aspects of the *Ramayana* is the extraordinary emphasis on mutual devotion, respect and spirit of sacrifice among brothers. On more than one occasion, Rama remarked that a brother like Lakshmana was dearer to him than everybody and everything in life—kingdom, riches and even Sita. When Lakshmana lay prostrate on the battle-field, Rama wished to abandon the battle against Ravana and take his own life. This spirit permeated the relations among the four sons of Dasaratha. The three brothers who figure prominently in the epic, namely, Rama, Bharata and Lakshmana, were all half-brothers only; yet, their relations were the most selfless and the most noble. We have very little account of Satrughna, but it would appear that he and Bharata, half-brothers again, had the same attachment towards each other as Rama and Lakshmana had.

In contrast to the pattern of the ideal brotherly relations among the princes of Ayodhya, we have the unhappy relations between Vali and Sugreeva and also between Ravana and Vibhishana. In one case (Vali-Sugreeva) it was largely genuine misunderstanding which led to serious enmity between the brothers; but love of kingdom and misappropriation of the brother's wife were also involved. In the Ravana-Vibhishana case, neither kingdom nor woman was involved; the younger brother (Vibhishana) left the elder's camp, because that brother's conduct was unrighteous and he persisted in the evil course despite entreaties of the younger one. In the Vali-Sugreeva case, the younger brother had been thrown out of the kingdom by the elder. The act of desertion by Vibhishana did not constitute *adharma* (unrighteousness). As in the case of the attitude to parents, no blind loyalty and devotion are prescribed in the *Ramayana*. Everything has to conform to *Dharma*—righteousness and duty. Of course, we have also the case of Kumbhakarna, another brother of Ravana, who felt that Ravana's conduct in respect of Sita was wrong and advised him to restore Sita to Rama; when his brother could not be swerved from the wrong course, he decided to stay with him and in the end laid down his life fighting against Rama. But it is clear that the emphasis is on the path of *Dharma* over everything else.

Throughout the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana stayed with Rama and served him and Sita with the utmost devotion. The way the two brothers understood each other was exemplary. Each was a tower of strength to the other and a restraining influence too. When one was feeble-minded and downcast, the other put courage and hope in him. When one was angry, the other pacified and humoured him. Rama looked upon Laksh-

mana dearer than a son and likewise Lakshmana showed respect and obedience to Rama as if he were his father. We see absolutely no traces of jealousy, covetousness, ill-feeling or misunderstanding among the brothers.

Rama's attitude was the same towards his other brothers too. In fact, in one place he remarked that he wanted kingdom only for the sake of his brothers. The real test for the brothers came when Rama's coronation as the heir-apparent had to be cancelled and instead Bharata was to be installed as the prince-consort. While Rama was undoubtedly disappointed at the turn of events, there was no trace of bitterness in him. He was ready to give up the claim to the throne and go to the forest forthwith. In the present day world, there is no question of giving up what is regarded as rightfully belonging to one; in fact, all the while lots of people seem to be keen on getting something out of the way, something to which one has no legitimate claim. Brother is jealous of brother and sister is jealous of sister. People do not hesitate to resort to litigation freely and not infrequently to questionable methods. What a contrast was Rama! He gladly gave up that to which he had a just claim. What is more, he did not at all suspect his brother Bharata's complicity in the plot. In fact, he had the nicest things to say about him. He asked the inhabitants of Ayodhya to show Bharata, who he said was far more meritorious than himself, all the love they

had for him (Rama). In more than one place, he referred to Bharata as a *Dharmajna,* i.e. a righteous man.

Bharata's conduct in the coronation episode was sublimely selfless. When he learnt from his mother (of whom he did not appear to have a good opinion) what she had done, he became most furious and his misery at what happened to his father and to Rama knew no bounds. Bharata's purity of heart is seen even before Kaikeyi told him of Rama's banishment into forest. As soon as he heard of Dasaratha's death, he wailed, saying "I repaired to Ayodhya quickly, for I had concluded that the King would install Rama as the heir-apparent and also perform a sacrifice." He desired his home-coming to be conveyed to Rama "who is at once my father, brother and friend, and whose beloved servant I am".

Bharata rebuked his mother in the strongest language. He went to Kausalya to give vent to his sorrow. Unfortunately, at first, Kausalya suspected him of complicity in Kaikeyi's plot, but it was only a matter of minutes before she saw the innocence and purity of Bharata. Immediately after Bharata performed the obsequies of the late king, he was requested by the royal preceptor and others to become king. Many others in the position of Bharata would have consented to this, even if very reluctantly. But not Bharata. At once, he made arrangements to seek Rama in the forest and bring him back to

Ayodhya for being crowned. It is an irony of fate that initially even Guha, the hunter-king and Rama's friend, suspected Bharata's intentions, especially since he went out with the whole army to see Rama. Sage Bharadwaja also enquired as to what mischief he was up to, in respect of Rama. Finally, Lakshmana himself suspected the intentions of Bharata in coming up with a huge army. But Rama knew Bharata's honourable intentions very well. So he admonished Lakshmana squarely and in this connection remarked that he would not look at wealth and power etc. that his brothers could not enjoy with him.

Bharata argued and argued with Rama to persuade him to get back to Ayodhya; sage Jabali and the family high priest sage Vasishtha also strongly endorsed Bharata's plea, but all this was of no avail. Rama said he must fulfil his father's words—'the moon may cease from shining, the Himalayas may abandon the snows or the ocean may exceed its boundary,' but he would not relinquish the vow he made in the presence of his father. So he asked Bharata to go back to Ayodhya. What a sublime example of righteousness struggling with righteousness! Finally, a happy solution was found to the deadlock. Sage Vasishtha's proposal that Bharata rule Ayodhya as Rama's deputy, till his return, was accepted. But Bharata was too humble to agree to rule even as a deputy. He took Rama's sandals as his representative and ruled the kingdom, staying on the outskirts of Ayodhya, with

matted locks and clothes of bark, to identify himself fully with Rama's forest life and apparently not to fall a victim to the temptations of power.

When the fourteen-year period of banishment was about to be over and Rama was nearing Ayodhya on the way back from Lanka, he wanted to make sure that Bharata still wanted him back as king. So he sent Hanuman in advance to Bharata to narrate to him all that had happened during the fourteen years and to observe carefully Bharata's reactions in the form of gestures, glances, the colour of his face and his words. If there was any trace of desire on Bharata's part to continue to rule Ayodhya, Rama said he would gladly let him do so. But this was not so. Bharata's joy at news of Rama's return was limitless. He was most eager to shed the burden of ruling the country, to install Rama as king and to serve him humbly. The selflessness of the four brothers towards one another constitutes one of the most glorious features of the *Ramayana*.

Let us now turn to the unfortunate affairs of the monkey brothers, Vali and Sugreeva. Once upon a time they lived together amicably, with Vali, the elder one, as the king, though even then Sugreeva lived in constant subjection to him, like one of his servants. But fate conspired against their peaceful lives. Vali went to fight a demon and did not return for long. So he was taken as dead. Much against his wishes. Sugreeva was persuaded by the ministers and

elders to be crowned king; in this capacity he also became entitled to have access to Vali's wife Tara. But Vali did return and although Sugreeva apologised most sincerely for what had happened and gave back the throne to Vali, the latter was most furious with Sugreeva and drove him out of the kingdom in utter disgrace, just sparing his life. It was now Vali's turn to live with Sugreeva's wife.

The conduct of these two brothers was in contrast to the conduct of Rama and Bharata. There, the elder gladly renounced the throne and would not accept it, despite entreaties of the younger. Notwithstanding the requests of the whole populace, ministers and preceptors, neither would the younger one agree to become the king, saying that the crown rightfully belonged to the elder. In the case of Vali-Sugreeva, the younger one was somewhat hasty in ascending the throne while the elder brother was unreasonably angry and subjected his younger brother to undeserved humiliation—Sugreeva later narrated to Rama how he was chased out with but a single garment, by Vali, who also carried away Sugreeva's consort. In fact, even in earlier times, Vali's attitude to his younger brother appears to have been one of arrogance. What a contrast was Rama, who regarded his half-brothers as his dear children. Sugreeva sought alliance with Rama (even as Rama was keen to have Sugreeva's alliance) and it was not long before Vali was slain by Rama. Whether it was proper for

Rama to have slain Vali in the manner he did is a different matter. It is very surprising that Rama, who attached great importance to brotherly love, should not have made any effort to inquire into the causes of the conflict between the brothers and try to bring about a reconciliation He was too eager to forge Sugreeva's alliance for the recovery of Sita, to consider this matter calmly; the demon Kabandha had said that alliance with Sugreeva was the only way to find and recover Sita. This is by the way; what is worth noting here is the lack of mutual faith among the monkey princes and the fact that love of kingdom and intolerance ruined their lives.

Let us now turn to demon brothers, Ravana and Vibhishana. While Vibhishana had immense love for his elder brother, he disapproved of his moral turpitude, especially concerning his abduction of Sita. He advised Ravana on more than one occasion, in the strongest possible manner, to give up the evil path, to restore Sita to Rama and beg his forgiveness. But when Ravana would not desist from the evil path and expressed his intense dislike of Vibhishana for his advice, Vibhishana decided to desert his brother's camp and join Rama's. Ravana met with his end and Vibhishana was crowned king; indeed, no sooner had Vibhishana been accepted to their camp, Rama had him crowned king of Lanka, in advance of the real coronation.

It is interesting that among the Ayodhya princes, the eldest brother was the embodiment

of righteousness and he also looked upon the younger brothers as his dear children. On the other hand, Vali and Ravana, while they were the elder ones, deviated from the righteous path and thereby lost the love and respect of the younger brothers, who in fact worked for the doom of the erring big brother. It is of course a very controversial matter whether the younger brothers were right in doing this. As already mentioned, we have the instance of Kumbhakarna, who while he disapproved what Ravana had done in regard to Sita, decided to stay with him and died for him.

What emerges from all this clearly is the need for the utmost love, toleration, understanding and selflessness among brothers. In India today, the joint family system is fast disintegrating. This may be inevitable when an agricultural society is being transformed into an industrialised modern economy. But whether members of a family live together or separately, there must prevail the utmost cordiality and mutual help. In any event, nobody should seek something that does not rightfully belong to him. In thousands and thousands of families there is constant conflict, enmity, litigation and vindictiveness, over property rights. One brother and his family are unhappy because the other brother is fortunate to be doing better in life. If only we keep in mind the noble way Rama and his brothers lived, much misery could be avoided and positive happiness gained. Not only should

one not seek what does not rightfully belong to one but one should share with brothers and sisters what one is fortunate to have. Socialism of this sort is particularly needed for a poor country like ours.

Even if one is victorious in the dispute with one's brothers and relatives, it is not long before the emptiness of the victory is realised. The lamentation of both Sugreeva and Vibhishana over the death of their respective brothers was deep and touching. Sugreeva cried that while for a moment, when he was full of anger and resentment, his brother's death had given him some satisfaction, he felt terribly sad, in the presence of the corpse. He recounted the good qualities of Vali, especially his sparing Sugreeva's life in their past combats. His guilt in being responsible for his brother's slaying was vile and ignoble, Sugreeva added, deserving of censure of the whole world. It would have been better, Sugreeva went on, to continue living on the hills of Rishyamuka than slay his brother. He wished to enter the pyre along with his brother's body. Of course, Rama consoled him.

Vibhishana's grief too was intense, when his brother lay dead on the battle-field.

It is true that to an extent lamentations of this sort are purely momentary. Our wise people have characterised them as *Smashana Vairagya*, the feeling of remorse and renunciation that comes in the burial ground. Deep reflection will, however, confirm the appropriateness of this

feeling. Nothing is worth gaining through enmity and quarrel, especially so far as the near ones are concerned.

5

THE CODE OF FRIENDSHIP

"I know well that the fruit of friendship is mutual aid", said Rama to Sugreeva, when the two made a sacred vow of friendship. Sugreeva spoke to Rama as under: "Silver, gold and precious stones are shared among friends as belonging to both. Rich or poor, happy or wretched, destitute or gifted with fine qualities, a friend is a friend. For the sake of a friend, one should sacrifice prosperity, good fortune or even one's life", and again, "Happy or unhappy, a friend is ever the refuge of a friend."

The value and obligations of friendship and alliance are brought out very well in the *Ramayana*. Rama promised Sugreeva to dispose of Vali and restore to him his wife and also the kingdom. He kept his word. Likewise, Sugreeva fulfilled his undertaking to search Sita and help Rama in vanquishing the abductor.

Everyone needs friends and it is quite legitimate to seek them, especially when one is in distress. None is too powerful or high to seek friends. Even Rama, who was brave and the refuge of all in distress, went to Sugreeva as a suppliant and sought his friendship and help.

Of course, friends and allies have to be chosen carefully. Friendship with the unworthy and the unrighteous will neither last ('as water drops do

not stick to a lotus leaf') nor does it bear good fruit ('as a summer thunderbolt does not bring a drop of rain from the heavens'). The unworthy abandon friends, even as 'bees fly away after they have sucked out the honey they have found'. Incidentally, these are the analogies given by Ravana while administering rebuke to Vibhishana. So, friends have to be selected with care. Rama and Sugreeva became friends without much of a preliminary. But after a while, a doubt seized Sugreeva whether Rama was capable of vanquishing Vali. To satisfy Sugreeva on this, Rama gave two demonstrations of his strength. With his foot, he sent the giant carcass of the titan Dundubhi flying in the air. He also pierced, with a single arrow, seven mighty (Sala) trees. But, when a friendship is contracted after due enquiries and care, it must be preserved with steadfast devotion.

It is not uncommon for misunderstanding to arise among friends or allies. For instance, as the rainy season ended, Rama began to pine more and more for Sita and in this mood he felt that Sugreeva had neglected to send the monkeys to search Sita; so he became quite angry with Sugreeva. He sent Lakshmana to remind Sugreeva of his duty and Lakshmana even talked of slaying Sugreeva, though Rama restrained him. Talking with Hanuman about Lakshmana's displeasure, Sugreeva remarked, "A friend who becomes angry without reason creates concern. It is easy to contract a friendship but very difficult

to preserve it; it can be broken for trivial reasons on account of fickleness of mind". So, although he was not in the wrong, Sugreeva was very conciliatory to Lakshmana and Rama. This is the way to preserve friendship. When one is temporarily angry or displeased, the other must remain calm and conciliatory and this will pay dividends. Later, Rama and Lakshmana felt sorry for their anger, begged Sugreeva's forgiveness and praised him a great deal.

Great importance is attached to trusting friends; mistrust is regarded as a serious crime. Vibhishana once remarked "To take possession of another's property, to look with lust on the neighbour's wife and to distrust one's friends are the three faults that cause destruction."

This does not mean that one should be wholly guided by the advice of a single friend, however good and intelligent he may be. The counsel of other friends should also be sought, especially in times of distress.

Gratitude to those who have rendered help is an elementary virtue. There is no greater sin than ingratitude. It is said that even vultures keep off the corpses of those who while they were alive were ungrateful to friends. There is no redemption for the sin of ingratitude, it is stated in the *Ramayana*.

One has an obligation not only towards friends and allies but also towards those who come to seek help and refuge. A great quality of Rama was that whoever came to him as a refugee was

accepted by him. Vibhishana broke off from Ravana and came to join Rama, who consulted Sugreeva and others about admitting Vibhishana to their camp. Angada, like the millions of his modern counterparts, sat on the fence. Excepting Hanuman, all others were opposed to taking Vibhishana to their side; but Rama gladly offered his protection to Vibhishana saying that whatever be the faults of the person seeking his refuge, he would accept him. In another place Rama stated that even if Ravana asked for his forgiveness and mercy, he would respond.

These lofty ideals of the *Ramayana* are of great practical guidance in what appears to have become a selfish and undependable world, in which insincerity, vanity, vindictiveness and ingratitude seem to be rampant.

6

THE PERFECT SERVANT

Nowadays a great deal of attention is being paid to matters relating to administration and management. The *Ramayana* has much to tell us on the art of public administration and the conduct of masters and servants. In a sense, everybody from the President/Prime Minister down to the humblest should regard himself as a servant. In this great epic, Hanuman is the example of the perfect servant—loyal, courteous, strong, intelligent, discriminating, bold, frank, resourceful, quick and tactful. He accomplished great things and yet there was absolutely no sense of vanity in him. Humility and self-effacement were his hallmarks. His devotion to Rama was unabounded and he attained everlasting glory as a *Ramabhata* (Rama's servant) and a *Ramabhakta* (Rama's devotee).

Hanuman also served Sugreeva with great devotion. He stayed with him through thick and thin. Sugreeva had lost everything—kingdom, wife and honour and in fact his life too was in constant peril. But Hanuman remained loyal to him and was a constant source of courage and help. It was Hanuman who contacted Rama and Lakshmana, won their confidence and secured their friendship for his chief. Again, it was Hanuman who helped Sugreeva to keep his word

to Rama that the search for Sita would be successfully carried out and that the whole of the monkey army would be deployed to free Sita from Ravana's hands. When the occasion demanded, he gave frank advice to Sugreeva. For instance, he got the impression that Sugreeva was not taking action with sufficient promptness to send the monkey chiefs in search of Sita. He opened out his mind frankly. The poet is fond of Hanuman as he is of the hero of the epic. He says that Hanuman, knowing what should be done and the appropriate time for it, spoke to Sugreeva, with respect and affection, in words that were pleasing, wise, true and expedient. He gave Sugreeva a long discourse on the obligations of friendship.

After he got the account of Hanuman's magnificent exploits in finding Sita and humiliating Ravana, Rama complimented Hanuman as the superior type of servant, a servant who carries out not only just what the master instructs or what he is ordinarily expected to do, but goes further and does all that fulfils the main objective or assignment. This requires first of all intense devotion to duty, but it also requires resourcefulness, courage and tact. The middle type of servant is he who carries out the bare instructions or does the minimum amount of work expected of him. The inferior type of servant fails to carry out even the bare instructions/duties.

Hanuman was asked to locate Sita, which he did very successfully. He used great tact in establishing contact with Sita and winning her confidence, lest the poor lady, whose nerves had been shattered, should be even more frightened by a stranger in the form of a monkey. He felt that it was not enough to have located Sita. He should strike terror into Ravana's heart so that the latter might, even at that late stage, think of surrendering Sita to Rama. He destroyed Ravana's favourite garden, managed to present himself before Ravana and warned him in strong terms about his misadventure and finally set fire to Lanka.

We see Hanuman's quality of a superior servant when he was asked to bring some herbs to revive Lakshmana who had fallen prostrate on the battle-field. When he found it difficult to identify the herb, he did not tarry or return empty-handed; he bodily lifted a big chunk of the hill, so that the physician himself might pick the herb.

A good servant/counsellor does not hesitate to speak frankly. We have already referred to the frank criticism which Hanuman made of Sugreeva when the latter gave the impression of not acting sufficiently promptly to launch the search for Sita. On another occasion, when the question was whether Vibhishana was to be admitted to Rama's camp, while everybody, including Sugreeva and Lakshmana, opposed, Hanuman spoke his mind in favour of Vibhishana. On this occasion, the poet tells us, Hanuman prefaced his opinion by the remark that he was speaking, not

from a desire to participate in a debate or from a sense of emulation or superiority, but on account of the importance of the matter. These words are worth marking.

Sometimes, the servant has to take action which might appear to be contrary to the master's wishes but which is in the larger interests of the master. When Ravana was exhausted in his combat with Rama and things were going bad, his charioteer drove the chariot away from the battle-field, in order that Ravana might rest and come back later to resume the battle. Ravana admonished him severely for this, as an affront to his honour and valour. In fact, Ravana accused him of having been bribed by the enemy. The charioteer replied that he had turned away solely in the interests of Ravana and on account of his devotion to him; if his commands were otherwise, he would return to the battle ground, which in fact Ravana asked him to do. We are told that Ravana praised the charioteer and bestowed on him an expensive ring, which was indeed a creditable thing to do.

The qualities which Hanuman had are needed by everyone, in public or private life, especially in the former. Performance of one's duties with devotion, intelligence and perseverance is what goes to make a sound administrative system. These qualities are required at all levels, from the highest to the lowest.

It is well to note that the master or the boss must inspire loyalty and efficiency in his sub-

ordinates and colleagues. Hanuman was of course the model servant, the ideal deputy and envoy. There is no doubt that this was in part due to Hanuman's intrinsic nature but it was also due to Rama's noble qualities, which inspired Hanuman to do his best. In the family, office and factory, people above must strive to get the best out of others. This requires fair-mindedness, friendliness and suitable appreciation of the good work done. Confidence must be reposed in one's servants and deputies. They must be allowed some freedom and initiative. Lots of bosses do not like their staff to have initiative. They want everything to be cleared with them. In the epic, we see that Rama, Sugreeva and Ravana were all good masters, enjoying the affection and loyalty of their subjects, friends and allies. When Hanuman came back after meeting Sita, Rama praised him very much for his exploits and gave him what reward he could then bestow, namely, an affectionate hug; there is little doubt that Hanuman himself valued this much more than anything else. Sita too said many good words to him. Finally, on the occasion of Rama's coronation, Sita, with the consent of Rama, bestowed on Hanuman the lovely necklace which Rama had just given to her.

There must also be a sense of discipline all round. While Rama, Sugreeva and Ravana were kind, generous and appreciative, they were also staunch disciplinarians. They took counsel with people as to what should be done and then issued

orders, which had to be carried out implicitly. There was no question of anybody arguing about them as people do in our offices. Serious consequences would follow from disobedience or failure to carry out the assignment. In India, *Sugreevajna* (that is, Sugreeva's orders) is a very well known concept, standing for a stern order which must be carried out. When the period of one month which Sugreeva had set for the search of Sita was over, even very senior monkey chiefs like Angada (Sugreeva's nephew), Jambavan and Hanuman thought of ending their lives or living in banishment than go back to Kishkindha. The same stern discipline was observed in the case of Rama's and Ravana's orders.

There is much in the *Ramayana* by way of *rajadharma* or *rajaniti,* i.e., statesmanship. There are long dialogues in the epic expounding this. For instance, when Bharata met Rama in the forest, to request him to come back to Ayodhya, Rama made various enquiries and in this process gave him a lot of guidance on administrative matters. Rama asked: "Have you appointed as your counsellors, persons who are heroic, learned, self-controlled, well-born and above bribery? And you do not counsel either with yourself alone or with a multiplicity of counsellors? And having decided upon a course, do you set about it sharply and without delay? Do you prefer the society and advice of a learned pundit to that of countless fools? Do your servants

present themselves before you boldly or do they all keep away? A middle course should be followed... (The same could be said of the bosses; they must keep moderately in close touch with all their junior colleagues, instead of moving too much with some and ignoring others altogether). Do your consellors, uninfluenced by greed, consider the conduct of both the rich and poor alike? Do you distribute remuneration in a fitting manner when they are due? Servants who are not paid at the proper season become incensed and disregard their master. Dissatisfied employees are a source of danger."

A lot of guidance is available in the *Ramayana* on the strategy for accomplishing any objective. According to Indian traditions, there are four ways of achieving a thing, namely, *Sama* (conciliation), *Dana* (gifts/bribery), *Bheda* (sowing dissension) and *Danda* (use of force). Obviously, the use of force must be kept to the last, after the other means have been employed. Even if one's cause is just and righteous—and of course eventually such causes must succeed—one must explore all avenues before resorting to force. It has already been mentioned that Rama, even after he came to the gates of Lanka, tried conciliation with Ravana. But when the other means fail, force must be used, and used vigorously. That is why, every effort was made to keep defences of a kingdom and capital strong and alert; the kingdom of Kosala had a big and efficient army; Ayodhya was enclosed by strong fortifications

and a deep moat, which no enemy could cross.

All the rulers of Ikshwaku dynasty maintained the highest traditions of personal conduct and kingly duties. They chose wise and able preceptors and counsellors. Dasaratha, for instance, was well versed in the *Vedas*, far-sighted, ever-mindful of his duties, self-controlled like a sage and governed people benevolently. The people were also happy, contended, righteous and prosperous. Nobody was given to lust and none was crooked-minded. People wore good dress and ornaments and enjoyed the good things of life abundantly. It was in fact a harmonious pursuit of the goals of life—duty, wealth and legitimate pleasures.

That country will be great and prosperous where the rulers and the ruled practise the virtues which the kings and citizens of Ayodhya possessed. We are fortunate to have had such glorious traditions as these and it is our duty to endeavour to revive them. Like the kingdom of Kosala, let us pray for being blessed with an endless succession of able and virtuous leaders.

7

FATE AND KARMA

A prominent theme in the *Ramayana* is the power of destiny or fate over the lives of human beings. Many things can only be explained thus. Nearly every important character in the epic had occasion to refer to the working of destiny. Rama referred to this when his mother Kausalya and Lakshmana were agitated about the sudden cancellation of the ceremony to install him as the heir-apparent and what was worse his having to go to the forest. Rama bowed to this gracefully, because he felt this was the working of destiny; only this could explain the strange intervention of Kaikeyi, who ordinarily had tremendous affection for Rama, who in turn made no distinction between his mother and his step-mothers, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Destiny is something beyond our comprehension and power. There is no way of avoiding it. Nobody, not even the sages, can escape its power. The *Ramayana* has many stories about sage Vishvamitra, who on more than one occasion lost his temper and balance and did unrighteous things. Rama, therefore, asked Lakshmana not to grieve over the loss of kingdom nor to blame Kaikeyi in any way.

Lakshmana did not accept the theory of destiny propounded by Rama. He condemned it much more vigorously than perhaps a modern

critic would. He said that only weak people talked of fate; the brave should not accept the dictates of destiny, which could be conquered and he proposed to demonstrate it. As already mentioned, to this long harangue by Lakshmana against fate, Rama replied briefly, "Please note obedience to father is the right path." On another occasion, when Tara lamented the death of Vali, he remarked, "Fate has no relatives and cannot be conquered by valour. It has no friends or relations to be influenced by."

Merely because destiny is something which cannot be comprehended, it does not mean it is meaningless or without purpose. It is difficult to believe that any event could be without a purpose. Much has been explained in terms of the theory of *Karma*, the law of cause and effect; happenings in this life are to no small extent the consequences of one's actions in the past life. Of course, for the ordinary mind, this is difficult to comprehend, for the question arises why did one behave like that and that in the previous birth; is it to be attributed to the birth previous to the previous one? This will lead nowhere. In view of the difficulty of comprehending all this, it is best to submit oneself cheerfully to all that happens, as something that has a deep purpose and that is in harmony with the general scheme of things like what Dr. Pangloss said, namely, that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds. The theory of destiny should also make us indulgent towards the failings and wrongs of

others; a spirit of toleration and forgiveness is indicated. We shall revert to this matter later. Let us refer to other situations when the principal characters of the *Ramayana* experienced the working of the forces of destiny and *Karma*.

After Rama left for the forest, Dasaratha recalled to Kausalya that his losing Rama thus was on account of his killing—though unwittingly—the son of an old ascetic couple, and explained to his queen the theory of *Karma*, namely, actions entail consequences.

Destiny will not of course spare anybody; Rama, Sita, Vali and Ravana were all subject to its mighty influence. This is well expressed in the famous words of Kausalya, uttered when she met Sita in Chitrakoota. "How is it that the daughter of the great king Janaka, daughter-in-law of another great king Dasaratha and the wife of no other than Rama himself has had to undergo misery in the lone forest?"

Then, after Sita's abduction by Ravana, Rama suffered intense agony and Lakshmana pacified him as under: "Which human being is not subject to adversity and destiny? Even the sun and the moon suffer eclipse." Rama remarked that he must have designed or committed innumerable evil acts earlier, whose fruits had now matured as misfortunes to him.

When Vali was slain by Rama, Sugreeva's as well as Vali's wife Tara's sorrow was most intense. Rama consoled them with these words: "Everything is ordained by the Creator; nobody

can transgress His laws. It is vain to seek to avoid fate. None is the real agent of action and none truly causes action to take place."

When Ravana tormented Sita and the titan women threatened to kill her, she recalled the saying of sages that neither man nor woman can die before the hour strikes. She wondered what heinous crimes she must have committed in a previous birth that she should be suffering so much.

When Rama and Lakshmana lay prostrate in the battle-field, and Rama revived first, he said it was not possible for mortals to avoid their destiny.

The power of destiny is also seen in the misunderstanding that arose between Vali and Sugreeva. In a sense, neither was to blame for it. Sugreeva waited for a reasonable time outside the cave which Vali had entered in pursuit of the titan Mayavi and then took it that his brother had been vanquished. Even so, he was not keen on being anointed king but he succumbed to the pressure of his ministers. The results were disastrous. Surely here was the hand of fate at work.

Ravana's life brings out even more clearly the immutable law of destiny and the working of the theory of *Karma*. Here was a person who was deeply read in all the Vedas and had done a lot of penance, for which all kinds of boons were bestowed upon him by Gods. He became invincible as it were and terrorised the whole world.

Even the sun and wind were afraid of him, it was said. He committed outrage on the modesty of innocent and helpless women, obstructed and defiled sacrifices and perpetrated many other crimes; so he was cursed by many people for his arrogance and lust. He conceived the most blind and immoral passion for Sita, carried her away in stealth, much against the advice of his uncle Maricha, and caused untold agonies to her. Except his son Indrajit, everybody including Kumbhakarna, Mandodari (Ravana's wife), Ravana's grandfather and his spies advised him to restore Sita to Rama and seek his pardon, as the only way of averting sure destruction. Ravana was not unaware of Rama's prowess; single-handed he had vanquished Ravana's army of fourteen thousand stationed in Janasthana under the command of Khara and Dooshana.

But Ravana disregarded the advice of his relatives and counsellors. It is not that he did not realise that he had erred grievously. When Kumbhakarna too admonished him for his utter disregard for the advice of his well-wishers, Ravana answered Kumbhakarna as follows: "Of course I have been imprudent, but now I must carry this war against Rama through. Please do not discuss the past, but employ your valour for my benefit." Later, lamenting over Kumbhakarna's death, Ravana regretted his evil deed and his disregard for the advice of Vibhishana, Kumbhakarna and others. But he did not think of surrendering Sita to Rama even at that late stage;

destiny dragged him towards destruction and so he continued the combat against Rama. This is what frequently happens to people; even when they realise their folly, they persist in it on account of false pride.

The ten-headed titan, who had terrorised the whole world and even humbled the planets, paid dearly for his arrogance, unrighteousness and lust. Ravana's destruction was brought about by human beings and monkeys, whereas he had obtained from the Gods invincibility against devas (Gods, the shining ones), danavas (race of giants or titans) and yakshas (supernatural beings). As Mandodari remarked in her lamentations over Ravana's death, the time was ripe for him to reap the fruits of his evil actions.

Thus, nobody can escape the consequences of his action. Pride must eventually tumble; lust and greed must ultimately get punished severely. Not always do sinful acts bring about evil consequences forthwith; they fructify after sometime, even as the harvest is reaped several months after the seeds are sown. Temporarily, the impression may be given that one is getting away with one's vices and unrighteous acts, but this only means that when the fall comes, it is very severe. Indeed, the punishment will be so severe as to evoke some sympathy from even the aggrieved persons!

The working of the principle of *Karma* is also seen very clearly in the case of Kaikeyi's evil plan to get her son crowned. The plan went

awry. She lost her husband, incurred the displeasure of her son, who had already a rather poor opinion of her, and incurred the odium of everybody, except perhaps Rama, who in his magnanimity continued to show her sympathy and respect.

In fact, one may go so far as to say that even Dasaratha paid dearly for his wrong strategy in the matter of Rama's coronation as the prince consort. Because he suspected trouble from Kaikeyi, he tried to rush things to celebrate the coronation. He made up his mind in this behalf, got the approval of his counsellors and fixed the coronation for the very next day. Earlier, he packed off Bharata (with whom Satrughna also went) to the latter's maternal grand-father's place. All this was not quite proper. Dasaratha had, as Rama himself stated later, promised Kaikeyi's father, at the time of his wedding, that the son from Kaikeyi would be heir to the throne. In these circumstances, Dasaratha should have consulted all those concerned, including in particular Kaikeyi, who, as we know, loved Rama dearly and was at first very enthusiastic about Rama's coronation when she heard about it from her maid-servant Manthara. The unfortunate thing would appear to be that Dasaratha suspected some trouble from Bharata too, that most noble son. Dasaratha's indecent haste to crown Rama as the heir-apparent recoiled on himself, with disastrous consequences. The lesson of Dasaratha's action is that even right

things should be done in the right way. That is to say, not only should the ends be good but the means too.

That good actions produce good results is also brought out in the *Ramayana*. Just when Dasaratha was contemplating the marriage of his sons, sage Vishwamitra came to ask for the services of Rama, in conducting a sacrifice. Dasaratha agreed to this reluctantly. But, after the sacrifice was successfully concluded, the sage took Rama and Lakshmana to Mithila, which visit resulted in the wedding of all the four princes. Effortlessly, Dasaratha secured the alliance of such a noble family as King Janaka's; how fortunate was he in particular to get Sita as his daughter-in-law!

The doctrines of destiny and *Karma* do not mean that one has to tolerate evil or remain passive and downhearted, without making any effort to meet the situation. Far from it. It is the duty of everyone to fight evil, with courage and confidence, regardless of the odds involved. In the epic, we have many instances when Rama himself lost heart and became despondent and it fell to Lakshmana or Sugreeva to cheer him up. It is repeatedly stated in the *Ramayana* that sorrow and feeblemindedness destroy everything and must be eschewed. It was no easy task to attack a mighty titan whose kingdom, apart from the excellent fortresses it had, lay across the sea. But Rama, with the support, in courage and man-power, of Sugreeva, launched the

mighty enterprise and was eventually victorious.

Everyone, regardless of his position, status and age, should contribute his best to the campaign against unrighteousness. We have the heroic example of Jatayu, the vulture king. Although sixty-thousand years old and very feeble, he put up a valiant fight against Ravana, who was young and armed, when he was carrying away Sita and in this he lost his life. This principle of the duty of everyone to fight the forces of evil also runs through another great Indian philosophical/moral treatise, namely, the *Bhagavad Gita* (Lord's Song). Ultimately, righteousness must triumph but even if there is some uncertainty about the final outcome, it is imperative to launch and carry on the struggle against the forces of evil.

8

BEWARE OF MANTHARA

A character in our epic to which special attention should be paid is Manthara, Queen Kaikeyi's companion and maid. For, unfortunately, the present world seems to abound in Mantharas and her male counterparts. It is good to recall how disastrous were the consequences of Manthara's intrigue.

When the evil genius Manthara learnt that Rama was to be installed as heir-apparent the next day, she rushed to Kaikeyi to say that a mighty grief and great danger was approaching her in the coronation of Rama. But Kaikeyi became exceedingly happy at this news and gave Manthara an excellent ornament as gift. She said that Bharata and Rama were the same to her and for bringing this joyful news she would give any reward which Manthara desired to have.

At this response of Kaikeyi, naturally Manthara was annoyed, but she did not give up. She painted a harrowing picture of what life would be for Kaikeyi and Bharata if Rama was coronated. But Kaikeyi's feeling continued to be one of joy. She praised the numerous qualities of Rama, remarking that Rama was dearer to her than Bharata even as Ram loved her more than he loved his own mother, Kausalya. Manthara, however, had remarkable perseverance in

her evil course. She again poured venom into Kaikeyi's mind against Kausalya and Rama; the jealousy of a co-wife and the love of a mother were roused and Kaikeyi succumbed and from then on Manthara had a fertile ground to breed her evil plan successfully. The rest of the story need not be told here.

So, everyone of us, whether at home, in the office or in public life generally, should beware of Mantharas. Many a family has been split and many a friendship broken by the mischief of a Manthara. We should stick to the righteous path and not be led astray by covetousness and usy.

's interesting how, under the influence of e self-interest and flattery, one starts g other people. When Kaikeyi was pleas- what Manthara had done for her, she the ugly and hunch-backed maid as ou look beautiful like a lotus bent by e... Your countenance is like the w beautiful you look!... I will give en necklace..." All this looks amusing is. But the poet has also a purpose this. It is to ridicule human stupi- dness for doing odd things under ating influence of selfishness, greed ry.

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At this response of Kaikeyi, naturally Manthara was annoyed, but she did not give up. She painted a harrowing picture of what life would be for Kaikeyi and Bharata if Rama was coronated. But Kaikeyi's feeling continued to be one of joy. She praised the numerous qualities of Rama, remarking that Rama was dearer to her than Bharata even as Ram loved her more than he loved his own mother, Kausalya. Manthara, however, had remarkable perseverance in

her evil course. She again poured venom into Kaikeyi's mind against Kausalya and Rama; the jealousy of a co-wife and the love of a mother were roused and Kaikeyi succumbed and from then on Manthara had a fertile ground to breed her evil plan successfully. The rest of the story need not be told here.

So, everyone of us, whether at home, in the office or in public life generally, should beware of Mantharas. Many a family has been split and many a friendship broken by the mischief of a Manthara. We should stick to the righteous path and not be led astray by covetousness and jealousy.

It is interesting how, under the influence of extreme self-interest and flattery, one starts flattering other people. When Kaikeyi was pleased with what Manthara had done for her, she addressed the ugly and hunch-backed maid as under: "You look beautiful like a lotus bent by the breeze... Your countenance is like the moon. How beautiful you look!... I will give you a golden necklace..." All this looks amusing and ridiculous. But the poet has also a purpose in narrating this. It is to ridicule human stupidity and blindness for doing odd things under the intoxicating influence of selfishness, greed and flattery.

Shurpanakha is also a type of undesirable character, who, when frustrated, tries to harm the people causing her disappointment. When she was thwarted in her amorous approaches to

Rama and Lakshmana, she tried to finish off Sita as the 'wretched thing' standing between her and Rama. Then, her ears and nose were mutilated by Lakshmana. Her efforts to get her brother Khara avenge the insult and injury to her proved disastrous. She then went to her mighty brother Ravana to provoke his wrath against Rama, and for this purpose she exploited Ravana's lustful nature. She praised Sita's beauty and told a very big lie, namely, that she tried to get Sita for Ravana as his consort and in that process got mutilated. The lustful woman, frustrated in her design, was roused to intense jealousy of another woman, who, she felt, stood in her way, and desired to have her defiled. Her endeavours met with terrible consequences. So, like Mantharas, Shurpanakhas should also be shunned.

Incidentally, while Shurpanakha was a wicked and lustful woman and lied when it suited her, she could also speak truth and utter statesmanlike words. This is the beauty of the *Ramayana*. Nearly every character has something important to say on personal conduct and/or administration. While introducing herself to Rama, she referred to her brother Vibhishana as "virtuous, stranger to our practices." The description of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita which she gave to Ravana was very accurate and perhaps generous, considering the fact that she spoke thus *after* her ears and nose had been mutilated. She called Rama, "chivalrous of soul and knower

of self"; Lakshmana was "endowed with great valour and was renowned for his virtue; was indomitable, virtuous and wise and Rama's right hand and his very life's breath." Sita was Rama's "virtuous and tender wife and surpassingly beautiful." When she met Rama, she had told him 'What is Sita to you; she is deformed and without beauty', but when she spoke to Ravana, she went to great lengths to describe Sita's beauty—her eyes, face, shoulders, nail, etc. It may be argued that Shurpanakha did this to provoke Ravana's lust. However, it would appear from the other things that she said that Shurpanakha could make correct statements. Why should even a lustful titan woman not have a streak of honesty?

Shurpanakha had also some very wise things to tell Ravana, concerning the destruction of his northern army at Janasthana by Rama. These remarks have much relevance in the modern world. For example: "Those rulers who cannot protect their land or reclaim the territory taken away from them, live without glory, like mountains submerged in the ocean." "None will help that ruler in peril, who is mean, violent, dissolute, haughty and perfidious. That ruler who fails in his duty and is lulled into a false sense of security will be swept from his kingdom like a straw. Even dry wood or dust may serve a purpose but not a king who is degenerate, who resembles a worn-out garment or a faded garland." "That king, who is awake, even in his sleep, to

the ordering of his kingdom, manifesting his anger or approval at the proper time, is respected by all." So much for Shurpanakha.

Valmiki has presented to us many contrasts in the characters of the *Ramayana.* In the case of Kaikeyi, we have the example of an initial good impulse being diverted to jealousy and greed by evil advice. In Ravana, we have the opposite case of a person, proceeding on an evil course, and refusing to listen to the good advice given by not one but several persons. When Ravana's northern commanders Khara and Dooshana and the army of fourteen thousand at Janasthana were vanquished by Rama, the titan Akampana proceeded to Lanka to narrate the disaster to Ravana. Akampana suggested to Ravana that the only way to do away with Rama was to carry away his beautiful wife, bereft of whom Rama would not survive. Ravana liked this suggestion very much and the very next day proceeded to the hermitage of his relative Maricha to seek his help in the abduction of Sita. But Maricha strongly advised him against such a plan, not so much on moral grounds as due to the fear that Rama would exterminate the whole titan race. Ravana gave up the matter and went back to Lanka.

But no sooner had he returned to Lanka than his sister Shurpanakha came to Ravana and poured mockery on him concerning the loss of his forces at Janasthana. As mentioned earlier, she also kindled Ravana's anger and lust by

speaking highly of Sita's beauty and suggesting that he get her to be his consort. Forthwith, Ravana left Lanka on this evil adventure and again sought Maricha's assistance. But Maricha advised Ravana even more forcefully than before to give up his evil purpose against a noble and invincible person and his devoted wife. Said Maricha, "Those who have recourse to flattery are easy to find; but rare are those who are willing to listen to and speak severe though beneficial words". Maricha recalled the power of Rama's arrows which he had so painfully tasted some years back when Rama stood watch over Vishwamitra's sacrifices. Besides the argument of Rama's prowess, Maricha also referred to the utter immorality of what Ravana intended to do. Spoke Maricha, "There is no greater sin on earth than consorting with another's wife."

Ravana's answer is significant. It poses a very interesting problem of the relationship between king and minister or what is more appropriate to the modern world, between the minister and the secretary or between the secretary and the big hierarchy of junior secretaries. Ravana said, "I have decided to abduct Sita. It is proper for a minister or counsellor to mention the pros and cons of a thing, *when asked,* and this must be done with due reverence. But now I am not asking you about the expediency or propriety of my conduct. I am only asking for your help. If you do not obey me, I shall slay you instantly." There is no doubt that ordinarily the ordinance of

the superiors have to be carried out without comment, but where the orders are grievously wrong and fraught with serious consequences, the subordinate official must speak out not just once but repeatedly against the decision, regardless of the consequences.

That is what Maricha *tried* to do. He stated that those who had advised Ravana on that evil course merited death; upright ministers ever restrained a king, who was the root of righteousness. Maricha said he was sure to meet with death from Rama's arrow if he complied with Ravana's request that he assume the form of a golden deer. Having stated all this, Maricha succumbed. This often happens in life. We make some effort but do not have the perseverance to stick to what we regard as right. We let ourselves be influenced by other considerations, including narrow self-interest. To an extent, Kumbhakarna also tried to advise Ravana against fighting with Rama, but when Ravana was adamant, he decided, rather cheerfully, to enter the battle.

Vibhishana, as we have seen already, held out till the end, against Ravana's villainous conduct, though Ravana was his own brother. He did not hesitate to risk everything to persist in his opposition to Ravana's evil course. There is little doubt he ran a grave risk, of not being admitted to Rama's camp, but he preferred this situation to cooperating or condoning evil conduct on the part of his brother.

The moral is obvious. We should try our utmost to emulate Vibhishana, rather than Maricha or Kumbhakarna. But any day a Manthara is far worse than a Maricha, since the former poisons the minds of the virtuous and pushes them into the path of vice.

Maricha, in his disguise of the golden deer, has also tremendous significance for all of us. We should not imagine that all that glitters is gold or that a golden deer is as charming and innocent as it looks. Sita was the victim of the illusion of the golden deer; this led to the situation when this lady of extraordinary kindness and forbearance said the harshest possible words to Lakshmana, even accusing him of lustful designs on her! Sita knew that there was no nobler and devoted brother to her husband than Lakshmana, and yet she uttered cruel words to him. Rama, while not disputing Lakshmana's view that there might be foul play by Maricha, yielded to Sita's entreaties. Perhaps he thought that he must do something to mitigate the monotony of forest life. In any case, what Rama eventually got was not even the corpse of the golden deer but the corpse of a titan, and in the bargain facilitated the abduction of his wife. If great characters like Rama and Sita could fall a prey to illusions, what about ordinary mortals like us? We should exercise the utmost vigilance against the golden deer that appears in the modern world in diverse ways.

9

THE TREASURE CHEST FOR EVERYBODY

The foregoing chapters, it is hoped, have succeeded in giving at least a glimpse of the vast treasure we have in the *Ramayana*. As a literary piece, it is of extraordinarily high quality. The simplicity and beauty of language are most impressive. Valmiki is a marvellous story-teller and an expert in human psychology. The description of people and places and the beauties of nature that we come across in the epic is most pleasing. The epic is superb in the delineation of everyday domestic life, its joys and sorrows and the inner working of the human mind and heart. The devotion and spirit of self-sacrifice of a son, the love and grief of a father and a mother, the trials and endurance of a wife of supreme chastity and devotion, the jealousies of co-wives, the false alarms of a mother, the intrigues of a vile maid, differing patterns of behaviour of brothers—selfless devotion, enmity and misunderstanding, the lamentations of a wife over the death of the husband and the dedication and efficiency of a servant, are all portrayed with consummate skill. The epic has therefore endeared itself to millions of Indians as nothing else has.

But, the *Ramayana*, as these pages have brought out, is much more than a literary classic. It is a *Dharmashastra*—a master guide to good

life; it is also a classic on the art of administration and statesmanship. Its theme is exalted and hardly any character in the epic is mediocre. Every one, from Rama down to Manthara and Shurpanakha, has something to teach us. The situations and conflicts that occur in the *Ramayana* are those that we see every day, everywhere and in every age. The varied ways in which the characters reacted to the situations and resolved the conflicts is full of instruction to us. We have been given a very clear guidance as to what is good and what is bad, what is of lasting benefit and what is of transitory benefit, and what is exalting and what is low and degrading.

The only safe and sure path is the path of *Dharma*—righteousness and performance of one's duties. Unrighteous conduct will meet with retribution and misery; it is only a question of time. Nobody can escape the consequences of his actions. On more than one occasion, Lakshmana was inclined to doubt the efficacy of the path of *Dharma*. When, for instance, the war against Ravana was not proceeding well, Lakshmana remarked to Rama that Ravana, even while he was following *adharma* (unrighteous way), was getting on well. But, as we know, this was a short-run view, even as that modern Ravana, Hitler, gave the impression to the world of succeeding, while he flouted all canons of international code of conduct. Every one, therefore, should consciously try to pursue the path of virtue.

The cultivation of righteousness is not an easy task. It requires persistent effort. Even sages have had to struggle hard to attain it, as the life of Vishwamitra amply illustrates. Vishwamitra was, at different times, arrogant, jealous, greedy, lustful and prone to anger. As a result, he suffered humiliation and defeat and only after repeated efforts did he succeed in ridding himself of these shortcomings. Even Rama slipped occasionally, becoming angry, jealous, small-minded and weak-hearted, though this happened in moments of extraordinary stress and strain and was shortlived. In view of this, one should also be indulgent towards the failings and frailties of human nature. No one, however sinful, is beyond redemption. Even Ahalya, who let herself be seduced by Indra (chief of Gods), was cleansed, by Rama, after repentance for a long period.

Daily experience indicates that much can be explained on the basis of cause and effect. Sometimes, things cannot be explained thus. May be, they are the consequences of actions in the previous birth. May be, there is such a thing as the hand of fate or destiny. It is beyond our comprehension. But the practical course of action is that we perform our duties with enthusiasm and to the best of efforts, and accept gracefully the run of things, in the hope—or what some might prefer to call blind faith—that there is a reason, proximate or remote, for everything. Under no circumstances should one abandon duty and virtue; misfortunes must be borne with endurance and faith. And the forces of evil must be fought with determination. At no time should one lose heart and give up effort. As Lakshmana told Rama, exertion is a powerful weapon.

Sometimes people talk of trying to master fate, even as they talk of conquering nature. This is not the correct way to look at the matter. There is no inherent conflict between man and nature or between man and fate. It is the aspect of co-operation rather than conflict that we should stress. We should accept things as they come and strive to perform unselfishly the duties expected of us. Therein lies the path towards peace of mind. The sum and substance of what we should all endeavour to do was well put by Lakshmana: "Have faith and trust in God, pursue virtue and engage in action."

There is a mistaken impression, particularly abroad, that the traditional Indian attitude to life is one of austerity and asceticism. Nothing could be farther from truth. The Indian view is that for happy living, what is required is a harmonious pursuit of the four goals, namely, righteous duty, material prosperity, legitimate pleasures, including sex life, and finally spiritual liberation. In the *Ramayana*, we do not come across drab austerity and asceticism. The inhabitants of Ayodhya as well as Lanka were well fed and well dressed people, living in beautiful houses and having in abundance the good things of life. In Ayodhya, everybody had ornaments of gold and used *attar* of roses and sandal paste! People even

used to sport in gardens during evenings. Beauty, whether of human beings (the descriptions in the epic of the various parts of the body of a beautiful woman cannot perhaps be improved upon by any modern writer) or of nature, was much appreciated.

The importance and influence of wealth were well understood. The poet, as usual, puts words in Lakshmana's mouth, to extol the virtues of wealth as against those of righteousness. Lakshmana remarked that he who had wealth was important, wise, brave, powerful and worthy; he went further to say, in a fit of frustration (the occasion being agony at the slaying of the illusory figure of Sita by Indrajit, Ravana's son) that prosperity eluded the virtuous.

This is of course poetical exaggeration. The emphasis is on the pursuit of the various objectives, mentioned earlier, without mutual conflict. Wealth and pleasures should be pursued in a manner that does not conflict with righteousness. If there is the possibility of a conflict, then *Dharma*—righteousness—must prevail. Thus, the inhabitants of Ayodhya were of excellent character, were not given to lust or covetousness and were of subdued senses.

For people in all walks of life and strata of society and in all situations, the *Ramayana* is a valuable guide, in the discharge of their duties, with efficiency, firmness and fairness. Its simplicity and directness are such that even the

humblest of people can appreciate its beauty, pathos and moral fervour.

Let us strive humbly to cultivate the great personal qualities of our hero Rama—courage, truthfulness, stern sense of duty, righteousness in war and peace, gratitude, absence of malice and suspicion, generosity, forgiveness, deep respect for parents and elders, courtesy to one and all, sweet speaking, conquest of the senses and honouring one's word at all costs.

Sita is a glorious model of purity, chastity, devotion to husband, courage, silent suffering, forgiveness and practical sense. Indeed, one sometimes gets the feeling that Sita is the most impressive character in the *Ramayana*.

Hanuman and Lakshmana are beacons of intense devotion to duty, efficiency, selflessness and self-effacement. What words can describe the supreme nobility of Bharata, of total absence of greed and desire for power and position and of the capacity to resist the temptation of getting a kingdom effortlessly? Let us pray for our being blessed with at least a fraction of the greatness of these characters.

Among Indians, the term *Ramarajya*, that is, Rama's regime, stands for good administration, material prosperity and moral and spiritual well-being of a country. *Ramarajya* is therefore an everlasting ideal. We should all dedicate ourselves to the fulfilment of this ideal. This is no sentimental attachment to our past history. *Ramarajya* is as appropriate for the jet, nuclear

and astronaut age as it was for a world of bows, arrows and horse-carriages. Nay, it is even of greater practical necessity, for, the consequences of unrighteousness are perhaps far more serious in the present world than in the olden days.

We must note that even Ravanarajya had much to commend itself, though the ruler was unrighteous. Lanka was an enchanting city, abounding in prosperity. The people were happy and gay. Ravana's administration was efficient. Loyalty, discipline and morale of the populace and the army do not appear to have been shaken even in the darkest days of the war with Rama.

Our country is passing through difficult times. We have launched a programme to ensure a reasonable amount of material prosperity to a people steeped in poverty. At the same time, we have to guard against violations of our territorial integrity. In undertaking the tasks of development and defence, to use modern parlance, there is little doubt that the *Ramayana* has much to guide and inspire us. Its emphasis on character, courage, generosity, efficiency, discipline and good administration is very appropriate for our situation. The building of a nation on strong material and cultural foundations requires the combination of the above qualities in every home, office, factory, legislature and cabinet.

Ours is a country of many languages and considerable cultural diversity in the midst of unity. There is often much to be desired in the realm

of national solidarity as opposed to forces of linguism and regionalism. If there could be co-operation between man, monkey and titan (i.e. Rama, Sugreeva and Vibhishana), is it too much to expect human beings of the same country to cooperate wholeheartedly? Should not the various states, for instance, learn something from Rama-Bharata relationship of unselfishness than wrangle about petty matters like a change here and there of their boundaries, a little more or less of water from a river, etc. etc?

Should not every worker in factories and every employee in offices be a Hanuman, sparing no effort to achieve good results by courtesy, devotion, efficiency and initiative? Should not the factory and office bosses be like Rama—kind, considerate, courteous, just, appreciative and with a stern sense of duty and discipline? Today, in India, to some extent, we are faced with the problem of indiscipline—in the factory, office, school, college and home. Indiscipline is essentially lack of character. In the preservation of discipline, a great responsibility rests upon the factory and office bosses and on teachers. If the managers and senior officials are efficient and just, giving fair opportunities to everybody, discontent and disharmony will diminish a great deal. This is not to say that there should be no difference between the 'horse' and the 'donkey'. If true merit is rewarded, there is not likely to be any disaffection; nobody complained about the prominence given to Hanuman by Sugreeva,

Rama and Sita, for his unrivalled merit was recognised by everybody. If teachers are disciplined, that is to say, if they teach the subject well and conduct themselves with dignity, student indiscipline will be much less than at present. What tremendous influence for good can teachers be? In the *Ramayana* we see the great importance and influence of preceptors like Vasishtha. It is time that teachers were given their rightful place in society and that they realised the great potential in them to make good citizens of our children and young men. In short, it is imperative that the standards of conduct at the top are raised, if the national level is to rise significantly.

Likewise, a great responsibility rests on parents in bringing up children and moulding their character. If parents practice virtue and provide a congenial atmosphere for children to grow up, a solid foundation would have been laid for them to blossom into good citizens, like those of Ayodhya. Parents will have to work out a delicate balance between love and discipline towards the children, besides setting a high personal example.

Our country has chosen the path of democratic socialism for achieving economic and social progress. It is necessary to appreciate that the essence of socialism does not consist of regulation, necessary as it is, but hard work, fair opportunity for everybody to participate in the national effort and reap the fruit on an equitable

basis and a modicum of selflessness. The opportunities for undeserved advantages and gains should be narrowed if not eliminated. All this again requires the pursuit of the principles of *Dharma* so well enunciated in the *Ramayana*.

We should, regardless of the odds, fight against the violations of our territory and national honour. There should be no compromise with the forces of evil and unrighteousness. Temporary reverses and difficulties should not dishearten us, even as Rama and Lakshmana were not, in the campaign against Ravana. Let us pray for able and enlightened leadership of the type provided by Rama and Sugreeva. In seeking allies and in our obligations to them, let us again keep in mind the high traditions of Rama-Sugreeva alliance and friendship. Alliance and friendship, like the pursuit of wealth and pleasures, should always be in harmony with righteousness, whether among individuals or nations.

Even if a country becomes prosperous and strong, happiness is not ensured automatically to the people. Sometimes, happiness could even be disturbed by these. Real happiness will come when we emulate the men and women of Ayodhya, who were "of excellent character and subdued senses", performing their duties as householders and citizens. There must be a combination of personal perfection and social efficiency. In all this, the *Ramayana's* approach appears to be identical with that of one of our greatest reli-

gious and philosophical classics, the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Ramayana* expounds the truth with the help of a story, in order that even the humblest and youngest of folks may follow.

It is gratifying that in the post-independence period, Government has been doing a great deal to revive the interest of our people in our culture, epics and philosophical works, music and art. Much private initiative has also been forthcoming for the wide circulation of our ancient classics like the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. It is not enough that we acquire a knowledge of these great works; they must become a living tradition and faith with us. The teachings of these are both lofty and practical to a large extent. That is why, a reading of some portion or the other of these great books as a daily discipline is recommended by our elders. It is customary for parents, especially mothers, to narrate the story of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to their children, almost from infancy. It is hard to say how widespread this practice is in present times. If the practice has declined, it deserves to be revived widely. These epics are our proud heritage and an acquaintance with them at a young age helps mould the character of our future citizens.

In concluding this little book, we must echo Valmiki's sentiments that those who hear and read the *Ramayana* with reverence will be blessed with wealth, health, long life, good spouse,

renown, wisdom and success in all undertakings. In the customary Indian way, let us close with the words:

Sarve janaha Sukhino Bhavantu;
Samasta Sanmangalani Bhavantu;
Om Shantihi Shantihi Shantihi.

That is, let everyone be happy, let there be good everywhere; and peace, peace and peace.

THE STORY OF THE *RAMAYANA* ACCORDING TO VALMIKI

Canto I

BALA KANDA

King Dasaratha, of the Ikshwaku dynasty, ruled the kingdom of Kosala, with Ayodhya as the capital city. The people of Ayodhya were prosperous, happy and righteous. Dasaratha had three principal wives, namely, Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra.

In the midst of all happiness and prosperity around him, the King had but one worry, namely, he had no children. In order to beget sons, Dasaratha celebrated the horse-sacrifice and he was blessed with four sons. Rama, the eldest, was born of Queen Kausalya and Bharata was born of Kaikeyi. Lakshmana and Satrughna, the twins, were Sumitra's sons.

The four princes grew up splendidly. They were given all the education and training prescribed for princes. They were brave, virtuous and lovable, Rama being the most accomplished and respected among the four. While all the brothers were very much attached to one another, Rama and Lakshmana were specially close to each other; the same was true of Bharata and Satrughna.

When the princes were twelve years old, Dasaratha thought of celebrating their wedding. Just then, sage Vishwamitra came to Ayodhya to see Dasaratha. The King welcomed him with due

homage and promised to do whatever the sage desired. Vishwamitra asked the King to send Rama with him for some days in connection with a holy sacrifice he was scheduled to celebrate; Rama was required to deal with the titans Maricha, Subahu, etc., who were bent upon disturbing and defiling the sacrifice. Dasaratha, who, it would appear, had the habit of promising in haste and repenting at leisure, balked, saying that Rama was too young to be able to fight the powerful titans. But, on the intervention of the royal priest and preceptor, sage Vasishtha, Dasaratha agreed to send Rama. Since Lakshmana was inseparable from Rama, he also went with Vishwamitra.

The two young princes helped the great sage to complete the sacrifice successfully. Before bringing them back to Ayodhya, Vishwamitra took them to Mithila, the capital of the kingdom of Videha, which was ruled by a sagacious king, Janaka. The King had a daughter, Sita, who was found in a field which Janaka ploughed on the conclusion of a sacrifice. Janaka had offered Sita in marriage to anyone who could string the great bow of Shiva (one of the Indian trinity, the other two being Brahma and Vishnu). No one had so far succeeded in doing it; in fact, none had been able even to lift it a bit. Vishwamitra was certain Rama could do it. So he asked Janaka to show the bow to the princes. Rama lifted the bow effortlessly, fixed the string and then drew it with such force that the bow snapped, with a

terrific bang. Janaka was overjoyed and immediately offered Sita's hand to Rama. Naturally, King Dasaratha's consent had to be obtained. Messengers were despatched immediately to Ayodhya, and, Dasaratha, who was too happy at this alliance, hastened to Mithila. The marriage was celebrated in a fitting manner. Indeed, it was not a single marriage—all the four princes were married. Lakshmana wedded Janaka's daughter Urmila; Janaka's brother's daughters, Mandavi and Srutakirti, were married to Bharata and Satrughna, respectively, on the initiative of sages Vishwamitra and Vasishtha. The princes lived happily in Ayodhya with their wives.

After some time, Dasaratha mentioned to Bharata that his maternal uncle had been waiting in Ayodhya to take him (Bharata) to his place for a visit and that he should go with him. Accordingly, Bharata left Ayodhya, accompanied by Satrughna.

Canto II

AYODHYA KANDA

Rama spent twelve years with Sita in supreme happiness and was also a source of great joy to his father, whose favourite son he was. He was the embodiment of all good qualities and won the affection and respect of one and all. One day, King Dasaratha felt that in view of his advanced age, he should crown Rama as the *Yuvaraj* (heir-apparent) and pass on to him the burden of administration. The King took counsel with his ministers, who warmly endorsed the proposal. The King then summoned the sages and wise men of the city, the subject princes as well as rulers from the different countries and placed before them his proposal to anoint Rama as the prince consort and sought their concurrence. This was given unanimously and most enthusiastically. The Assembly recounted all the great qualities of Rama, which made him a more than worthy successor to Dasaratha. Rama was sent for and informed of the decision regarding his coronation.

Dasaratha, apprehending some trouble (apparently from Kaikeyi and Bharata, for which reason no doubt he had despatched the latter to his maternal grand-father's place), decided to celebrate the coronation the very next day. Preparations were begun for the purpose and the

whole city wore a festive appearance. Queen Kausalya distributed gifts freely, hearing the glad tidings.

However, it was not destined that things should move smoothly. Manthara, the favourite maid and companion of Queen Kaikeyi, on learning about the coronation of Rama on the next day, grew jealous and angry and went to Kaikeyi to poison her mind, saying that Rama's coronation would be a disaster to her and her son Bharata. Kaikeyi at first rejoiced at the news Manthara had given. But Manthara persisted in her evil counsel and Kaikeyi succumbed. Then Manthara outlined the strategy for getting Bharata anointed heir-apparent instead of Rama. Years ago, Manthara recalled, Kaikeyi had saved Dasaratha's life in one battle, in token of which the King had granted her two boons, which the Queen had said she would ask on a suitable occasion. Manthara said this was the occasion to ask two boons, namely, that Bharata should be anointed heir-apparent and Rama should be banished to the forest for fourteen years, so that Bharata may rule the kingdom without fear of hindrance from Rama.

Kaikeyi took up Manthara's suggestion enthusiastically and before the King came to her apartment in the night as usual, she went into the chamber of wrath and lay on the floor with dishevelled hair. When the King arrived there in all anxiety, she placed before him her de-

mands. The King writhed in agony at this and appealed to her, in vain, to give up her demands. The King was powerless, for the rulers of the Ikshwaku dynasty always honoured their pledges. But it was too much for Dasaratha himself to convey the terrible news to Rama; Kaikeyi was only too ready to do this. She sent for Rama early in the morning and broke to him, in Dasaratha's presence, the demands she had made on the King in fulfilment of the boons he had conferred on her earlier. Rama was not a bit perturbed and replied that he was only too happy to carry out his father's promise to her. Forthwith, he began to prepare to leave Ayodhya, disregarding the laments of his mother.

Sita and Lakshmana, after protracted arguments, obtained Rama's consent to accompany him to the forest. Sita argued vigorously that it was the duty of a wife to be with the husband wherever he went. Lakshmana was furious at the turn of events and wanted Rama to ignore what he considered a senile King's promise to a young wife. But when Rama could not be swerved from his resolve, Lakshmana insisted on his accompanying his brother. Without lingering a bit, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana left for the forest, with matted locks and clothes of bark. The whole of Ayodhya, cast in deep gloom, tried to follow the three to the forest but were soon eluded by the trio in the thick forest.

Within a few days of Rama's departure to the forest, King Dasaratha breathed his last, overpowered by grief at the turn of events. Immediately, sage Vasishtha despatched messengers to bring Bharata to Ayodhya and Bharata hastened back, with deep anxiety, as he witnessed evil omens. He found the city enveloped in deep gloom. Very soon he learnt from his mother the chain of events; Kaikeyi tried to break the news to Bharata in what she thought was a clever way. Bharata broke down at the news of his father's death and was wild beyond description with his mother for her vile design to get him installed as the heir-apparent. He rushed to Queen Kausalya to console her and seek her forgiveness for his mother's villainy. After he had performed the obsequies of his father, the elders like Vasishtha suggested to Bharata that he be anointed king, since it was not desirable that the kingdom should remain without a ruler for long. Not only did Bharata not agree to this but he resolved to go to the forest and bring Rama back to be installed as king.

Preparations were made immediately for the whole family, accompanied by the army and a big retinue, to proceed to the forest. On the way, they rested for a night at the hermitage of sage Bharadwaja, who directed them to the place of Rama's abode in the Chitrakoota hill. Bharata met Rama and pleaded fervently for his return. But Rama did not relent. Bharata threatened to fast indefinitely but was prevailed upon by Rama to give up the idea. Rama promised to accept the kingdom *after* his return from the fourteen-year exile but not before. Finally, a

happy solution was offered by sage Vasishtha, according to which Bharata was to carry on the administration as a regent, till Rama's return from the exile. Bharata and Rama both consented to this arrangement. For this purpose Rama was asked to bless Bharata with his sandals; Bharata had specially brought a pair of golden sandals into which Rama stepped. The matter having thus been resolved fairly satisfactorily, Bharata and the whole contingent returned to Ayodhya. Bharata anointed Rama's sandals and carried on the administration with righteousness and efficiency. However, he decided not to live in Ayodhya till Rama's return but stay in the nearby village Nandigram, with matted locks and clothes of bark. He wanted to live the same ascetic life which Rama, with Sita and Lakshmana, was going to lead for fourteen years.

After Bharata's departure, Rama decided to leave Chitrakoota, partly because of the sad memories of his mothers and brothers which the place brought to him and partly because it had been defiled by the horses and elephants of Bharata's army. The three entered the Dandaka forest.

Canto III

ARANYA KANDA

Rama was welcomed by the ascetics, who entreated him to deliver them from the oppression of titans. He gave them the assurance this would be done. The first misfortune which befell the trio in the forest was the attack on them by a demon, named Viradha. But Rama and Lakshmana vanquished the demon, who it appears was a celestial being, but had taken the form of a demon under curse.

Thereafter, the trio spent ten years in the Dandaka forest very happily, going from hermitage to hermitage. They also visited sage Agastya, who offered them excellent hospitality; Agastya also gave Rama a celestial bow, two inexhaustible quivers and a sword. The sage advised them to take abode at Panchavati, on the banks of the Godavari. As they were proceeding to Panchavati, they came across a very old and huge eagle, named Jatayu. The celestial eagle told Rama that he was a friend of Dasaratha and promised to keep watch over Sita whenever the brothers went out hunting, etc. Lakshmana built a beautiful hut for their dwelling.

Life went on happily for sometime, but adversity was lurking round the corner. Shurpanakha, the younger and unmarried sister of Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Lanka, in the course

of her wanderings in the Dandaka forest, chanced to come to Rama's hermitage. She was overcome with lust when she saw the handsome Rama and Lakshmana and desired that either of them marry her. The brothers had a little fun at the expense of the titan woman, each asking her to marry the other. But things took a serious turn when Shurpanakha threatened to devour Sita, thinking she stood in the way of her getting Rama's affection. In the circumstances, Rama asked Lakshmana to mutilate Shurpanakha's nose and ears but spare her life. Lakshmana did accordingly. The titan woman rushed to her brother Khara, who was not far from there at Janasthana, to complain about her disfigurement and urged him to slay Rama. Khara and his brother Dooshana, with their army of fourteen thousand, launched an attack on Rama, who, single-handed, vanquished the entire force, including Khara and Dooshana.

One of the titans, Akampana, ran to Lanka to report to Ravana the destruction of his forces in Janasthana; Akampana also told Ravana that Rama could be vanquished not by battle but by abduction of his lovely wife, consequent to which he would not survive. Accordingly, Ravana set out to seek his relative Maricha's help on this ignoble mission, but Maricha dissuaded him from it.

Hardly had Ravana returned to Lanka when Shurpanakha came wailing over her disfigurement and taunting Ravana over the destruction

of his forces in Janasthana. She uttered a lie to the effect that she was mutilated in her efforts to bring Sita to Lanka to be Ravana's consort. Shurpanakha thus roused Ravana's anger and lust; she added that by abducting Sita, Ravana would also be avenging the defeat of his army.

This time Ravana was determined to abduct Sita and so he went to Maricha again and by threatening Maricha's own life forced him to agree to aid him in the sinister mission. The plan which Ravana outlined was that Maricha should, by assuming the form of a golden deer, draw away Rama and Lakshmana from the hermitage, so that Ravana could carry away Sita. Things happened exactly thus. When the captivating golden deer appeared near the hermitage, Sita at once desired to have the animal. Lakshmana warned that it was Maricha in the form of deer, but Sita was so enchanted by the deer that she insisted on getting it alive or dead. Rama went after it and when at last he shot at it an arrow the deer raised false alarm, shouting in Rama's voice 'O Sita, O Lakshmana'. Lakshmana knew very well this was foul play by the demon. He was confident that Rama could take care of himself and did not wish to leave Sita alone. But Sita was alarmed. By uttering harsh words and imputing unworthy motives to Lakshmana, she forced him to go in search of Rama. Sita was thus left alone in her hermitage. Ravana snatched this opportunity to abduct her. He approached her in the disguise of a hermit and then re-

vealing his identity proposed that she become his wife. At this preposterous proposal, Sita poured scorn and admonition on Ravana. He became furious, and assuming his monstrous form, lifted her by force into his chariot and began to move. Hearing Sita's cries for help, the eagle Jatayu, despite his age, gave a fierce battle, but Ravana clipped his wings and resumed the flight to Lanka, carrying Sita. On the way, Sita, with remarkable presence of mind, tied a few of her ornaments in her mantle and threw them towards a collection of monkeys she saw on the way so that the news of her abduction might reach Rama. Ravana soon reached Lanka and interned Sita in his harem under strict guard. He tried to win her affection alternately by frequent entreaties, a show of his splendour and threats of all sorts, but Sita spurned Ravana's advances with utter contempt and wrath. Subsequently, she was removed to the Ashoka gardens where she lived underneath a Shimshapa tree, surrounded by titan women guards, who tried, in vain, all means to make Sita consent to become Ravana's consort.

Here, in Panchavati, Rama killed the illusory deer and returned to the hermitage, and on the way met Lakshmana, whom he blamed for leaving Sita alone in the hermitage. Then, not finding Sita in the hermitage, the two brothers started searching for her, and asking even the trees and the beasts about her whereabouts. They met Jatayu who was lying in a pool of

blood. He had just a little energy to tell them how he was mortally injured by Ravana when he tried to combat with him; he then breathed his last.

Pursuing their search for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana then saw a queer monster of huge dimensions, with long hands and with an eye in the chest and a mouth in the stomach. This was Kabandha. He held both Rama and Lakshmana in his clutches and wanted to swallow them but they cut his hands. Thereupon Kabandha told them his life story; he was under a curse. He asked the brothers to cremate him, after which he would regain his former body and would be able to tell them how to find Sita. Rama and Lakshmana lit a pyre for the demon. Then Kabandha told Rama that the monkey prince Sugreeva, who had been banished by his elder brother Vali, would assist him in the search for Sita and her recovery. Sugreeva, he said, was brave and truthful and had a large army. He asked Rama to seek him without delay and enter into an alliance with him. This was certain to lead to success and in fact was the only way to it. Forthwith, the brothers set out to find Sugreeva, according to the directions given by Kabandha. On the way, in the hermitage of sage Matanga, Rama met Shabari, an ascetic woman who was a great devotee of Rama. She had been collecting fresh fruits for Rama, each day for several years, in the hope that he would turn up some day. Rama enjoyed her hospitality and blessed her.

Canto IV

KISHKINDHA KANDA

When Rama and Lakshmana arrived at the Pampa lake, Sugreeva and his followers, seated on a mountain, saw them. Sugreeva thought that they were sent by Vali to slay him; but his chief counsellor, Hanuman, spoke reassuringly, that there was no cause for apprehension. Then Sugreeva sent Hanuman to find out the intentions of the two lustrous young men, after inspiring them with confidence by pleasant and courteous words. Hanuman disguised himself as a bachelor brahmin, went to the two brothers and introducing himself as Sugreeva's minister, sought Rama's friendship with Sugreeva. Rama came to like Hanuman instantly and Hanuman in turn became his devotee. Lakshmana narrated to Hanuman their story and sought Sugreeva's help in the search for and recovery of Sita. Hanuman carried both the brothers on his shoulders to Sugreeva and introduced them to him, saying they desired his help and friendship. Sugreeva most warmly and respectfully offered his friendship to Rama. An alliance was forged between the two in the presence of fire. Rama promised to kill Vali and in turn Sugreeva promised to help Rama in the search for Sita. Sugreeva's monkeys brought to Rama the ornaments which Sita had thrown, tied in a piece from her

garment. On seeing Sita's ornaments, Rama wailed for Sita all the more.

Sugreeva told Rama of the quarrel between Vali and himself. Once Vali went to kill the demon Mayavi, pursuing him inside a cave. Since he did not return for quite a long time, Sugreeva, who had been asked to wait outside, thought that he (Vali) was dead and allowed himself to be installed as king of Kishkindha on the counsel of his ministers. Vali, however, returned after slaying Mayavi and in spite of Sugreeva's entreaties, turned his wrath on him. He drove him away from the city, depriving him of his wife too. Sugreeva also told Rama of the might of Vali and his exploits. In a demonstration of his might to inspire confidence in Sugreeva, Rama, with the forefinger of his toe, threw the carcass of the demon Dundubhi twenty miles away. As Sugreeva was not still convinced of his prowess, Rama, with a single arrow, pierced through seven huge sala trees. This was enough to satisfy Sugreeva. Both these feats had been asked for by Sugreeva.

Then Sugreeva, as directed by Rama, challenged Vali to a duel. Vali's wife, Tara, tried to persuade her husband not to enter the fight but he disregarded her advice and accepted the challenge. In the struggle that ensued, Sugreeva got tired and, seeing this, Rama shot a deadly arrow at Vali. Vali dropped down, and in the short time before he breathed his last, there ensued a dialogue between Vali and Rama, in which

Vali accused Rama of ignoble breach of conduct in slaying him without cause and Rama defended his action by saying that this was punishment meted out to Vali for the injustices done by him to Sugreeva, Rama's ally. The explanation apparently satisfied Vali. Rama installed Sugreeva as the king of Kishkindha. Also, perhaps in accordance with the prevailing custom among the monkey princes, even Tara, Vali's wife, began to live with Sugreeva, as she had done once before.

It was agreed between Rama and Sugreeva that the search for Sita would be launched as soon as the monsoon was over. Meanwhile, Sugreeva got engrossed in a life of pleasure, enjoying the fruits of victory after a long exile. During this period, Rama became quite desolate and melancholic and his yearning for Sita deepened. In this mood, as soon as the monsoon was over, Rama sent Lakshmana to Sugreeva to remind him of his part of the alliance, viz., the search for Sita. Lakshmana reprimanded Sugreeva for the delay in instituting the search for Sita, though it turned out that Sugreeva had taken some preliminary steps in that regard. However, Sugreeva decided to intensify the efforts and thereupon collecting his army went to meet Rama to pacify him and told him that the search for Sita was being launched earnestly. The monkey army was split up and sent in all directions in search of Sita. Sugreeva gave them a month's time to conclude the search; whoever did not return within this time was to be put to death.

Hanuman, with Angada, the son of Vali, went to the South, with a big army. Rama, who had great confidence in Hanuman, gave him a ring to serve as a token which Sita could recognise. This contingent traversed a long way without success and the period of a month fixed for the search was over. The monkey chiefs grew despondent. At this stage, they chanced to meet a vulture, Sampati, who was the elder brother of Jatayu. Sampati learnt with great sorrow the death of Jatayu at the hands of Ravana; he told the monkeys of the whereabouts of Sita. He said that Sita, surrounded by titan women guards, was in the city of Lanka in the kingdom of Ravana. Sampati urged the monkey chiefs to make the effort to go to Lanka, with confidence and without delay. As Lanka was several hundred miles across the seas, the monkeys became despondent for a while, doubting the ability of any of them to cross the sea and get back. Finally the choice fell unanimously on Hanuman, the son of the God of Wind, as the only one who could accomplish the mighty task of crossing the sea to Lanka and back. Hanuman undertook this assignment with great enthusiasm and confidence.

Canto V

SUNDARA KANDA

Before launching on the flight, Hanuman increased his size several-fold and prayed for the blessings of the Sun and the Wind. The flight was in no sense uneventful and devoid of obstacles, but Hanuman overcame them. Soon he reached the shores of Lanka city. He waited till dusk and then entered the city, reducing his size to that of an ordinary monkey. Lanka was a magnificent city, with multi-storey buildings standing on golden pillars, opulent mansions, wide and beautiful lakes and gardens. He first entered Ravana's palace, by about mid-night. Ravana was fast asleep; so were a number of women, but Hanuman could not locate anyone resembling Sita. He searched diligently for her everywhere but could not find her. He even wondered whether Sita was alive at all. He became despondent, and contemplated the disastrous consequences of his not finding Sita. However, with remarkable perseverance he continued the search and came to the Ashoka garden. Hanuman felt this could be the only place where he could find her, if she were alive, since the surroundings fitted so well for a beautiful woman like Sita.

And he did find a woman beneath a tree and it was not difficult for Hanuman to conclude that

she was Sita. She was looking emaciated and terribly grief-stricken, dressed in soiled clothes and without ornaments. Titan women were keeping watch over her.

Hanuman perched himself on a nearby tree and reflected on the greatness of Sita and the sorrow which had befallen her. Soon Ravana came to the Ashoka garden to woo Sita, but she spurned him in harsh words. Ravana, becoming furious at this, said he was giving her two months to decide; if she refused his wish, she would be cut to pieces by his cooks! After Ravana left, Sita was overcome with extreme sorrow and even thought of committing suicide, but soon many auspicious signs appeared to her. At this moment, Hanuman skilfully opened conversation with Sita, by reciting in sweet tones Rama's praise. He said that he had been sent by Rama and wished to convey to her his well-being. Sita first suspected that he could be Ravana himself in disguise and asked him to go away. But Hanuman described to her the lustre of Rama and his virtues and also showed her the signet ring which Rama had given to him for identification. Sita was convinced of Hanuman's bona fides.

Seeing Sita so grief-stricken because of the pangs of separation from Rama, Hanuman offered to take her on his shoulders across the seas to Rama. At first, Sita doubted his ability to do so, but Hanuman demonstrated to her his prowess and said he could even lift the whole of

Lanka. Sita, however, raised other objections; in particular it was proper that her lord rescued her and thus retrieved his honour and glory. So, Hanuman gave up the idea and promised to return swiftly to Kishkindha, to mobilise their ranks to launch the attack on Lanka. In token of his meeting Sita, Hanuman took from Sita a jewel which she had carefully concealed in her sari; also, she narrated to Hanuman a couple of incidents relating to their personal life which only she and Rama knew.

Before leaving Lanka, Hanuman thought he should give Ravana a glimpse into his prowess and the might of Rama's allies, strike fear into the minds of the titans and also ascertain the enemy's strength. He also wanted to see Ravana. Therefore, he started destroying the Ashoka garden, which was dear to the heart of Ravana. Soon the news was conveyed to Ravana who became very angry. He sent an army of titans in succession to fight him, but Hanuman destroyed them all.

Finally, Ravana's son, Indrajit, succeeded in binding Hanuman (who let himself be bound for a while, in deference to the Brahma-weapon which Indrajit used) and dragged him to the court of Ravana. In the court, Hanuman revealed that he had come to his court on his own sweet-will in order to see Ravana personally; that is why he had destroyed the Ashoka garden and got himself arrested. He advised Ravana to restore Sita to Rama and told him

that he could destroy the whole of Lanka but would not do it now as Rama himself would do it. Ravana flew into a rage and wanted to kill Hanuman, but Vibhishana, Ravana's younger brother, restrained him, as Hanuman was an envoy. Then Ravana ordered that Hanuman's tail be set on fire and that he be taken through the streets of Lanka before being set free. This was done, though on account of Sita's prayers and the Wind God's help, Hanuman was not troubled by the fire. As soon as he was set free, Hanuman jumped from mansion to mansion, setting them on fire and in course of time, excepting Vibhishana's palace, the whole city was ablaze. In the end, Hanuman dipped his mighty tail into the sea and quenched its fire. For a while he was seized with panic that Sita might have been consumed by fire, but this was not so. Before leaving Lanka, he met Sita again and assured her that Rama would soon invade the city with the army of monkeys.

The return flight was uneventful. Hanuman was welcomed by Angada and other colleagues, who were gladdened by the news that he had seen Sita. Soon they returned to Kishkinda and Hanuman narrated to Rama all that he had accomplished; he gave him the jewel Sita had given him in token of his having met her. Hanuman told him that Ravana would keep Sita alive only for a month before which she should be liberated. Seeing the token of recognition, Rama pined for Sita all the more.

Canto VI

YUDDHA KANDA

Rama was filled with joy at the discovery of Sita and expressed his warm appreciation of Hanuman's exploits. But soon he became despondent on account of the near impossibility of a whole army being able to cross the sea. But Sugreeva cheered him and the army of monkeys set out, with tremendous enthusiasm, towards the shores of the sea.

Meanwhile, in Lanka, Ravana held a council of his ministers, at which his brother Vibhishana advised him to give up Sita and spare destruction of Lanka. But Ravana did not heed this and in fact he rebuked Vibhishana severely for his advice. The virtuous Vibhishana left Lanka and sought asylum in Rama's camp, which was given. Vibhishana, whom Rama crowned king of Lanka in advance, was of great help to Rama in the war against Ravana. Kumbhakarna, another brother of Ravana, also felt that Ravana had erred seriously in having abducted Sita, but he said he would fight for Ravana.

Prayer having failed, Rama managed to get, by threat of force, from the sea-lord a passage in the sea for a causeway to be built up. The whole army crossed the sea and reached the outskirts of Lanka.

On the eve of the battle, Ravana tried in vain

to wean Sugreeva away from alliance with Rama. The noble Rama, on the other hand, sent Angada to Ravana to make the last effort at conciliation, but Ravana did not respond. Ravana and son Indrajit also tried, before and during the war, several deceptions, to make Sita yield and to dishearten Rama and his camp. But everyone of them failed utterly. For instance, Ravana produced before Sita the illusory head of Rama. On another occasion, the illusory Sita was slain within sight of Rama, by Indrajit.

The battle between Rama's and Ravana's forces raged fiercely for several days. Great valour was displayed on both sides. The fortunes of the war moved up and down for both sides. There were occasions when Rama and Lakshmana lay prostrate or were despondent. On such occasions, the monkey chiefs and Vibhishana offered solace and courage. But steadily the fortunes of Rama gained ascendancy, and one after another the titan warriors were killed. Ravana's son Indrajit engaged in magic warfare but was overpowered mortally by Lakshmana.

The combat between Rama and Ravana was most fierce, but finally, by the use of the Brahma-arrow, Rama vanquished Ravana, to the tumultuous joy of the vast army of monkeys and the world of celestial beings.

After the performance of Ravana's obsequies, Rama had Vibhishana crowned King of Lanka. Rama instructed Hanuman to enter Lanka, with the permission of Vibhishana, and convey to

Sita the news of Ravana's destruction. This Hanuman did. Sita was overjoyed and said she wanted to see her lord, which message was conveyed to him. Rama became thoughtful for a while and then asked Vibhishana to bring Sita to his presence forthwith, after she had bedecked herself.

When Sita was brought to his presence, Rama was overcome with many emotions—joy, grief and rage. Everyone present anticipated trouble. Rama spoke to Sita in harsh words, as follows: "I have defeated the enemy and avenged the insult to me. This campaign was not undertaken wholly for your sake; it was to uphold the honour of my illustrious family. Your very sight is now painful to me. Go where you like, for no man of honour can take back a beautiful woman who lived for a year in the house of a titan. Stay with anybody you like."

Sita was thunderstruck at these words of Rama, but she answered him in dignified and strong terms. His suspicions were most unjust and unworthy. She came from a noble family. Since he suspected her character, the only course left to her was to undergo the fire ordeal. She asked Lakshmana to raise a pyre for her; on perceiving that Rama had no objection to this, Lakshmana did what Sita told him. No sooner had Sita entered the fire, than the fire god rose from it, carrying Sita in his arms, with her clothes and jewels unscathed, and presented her to Rama. Rama accepted her, saying that he knew fully

well that Sita was pure, but the fire ordeal was necessary to satisfy public opinion. Then Dasaratha himself appeared from his heavenly abode and asked Sita to forgive Rama for what he did, the object of which was to preserve *Dharma*. Rama begged of his father to give his blessings to Kaikeyi and Bharata, whom he had renounced earlier. Dasaratha said, 'be it so'. On Rama's request, Indra, the celestial chief, restored to life all the monkeys which had been killed in the war.

Rama, accompanied by Sita, Lakshmana, Vibhishana and all the monkeys flew to Ayodhya in the celestial chariot *Pushpaka*. He sent word to Bharata in advance, through Hanuman, about his homecoming. Bharata's joy knew no bounds when he met Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. The whole of Ayodhya was bedecked to receive Rama. The joy that had been cut short fourteen years earlier was now restored in full measure.

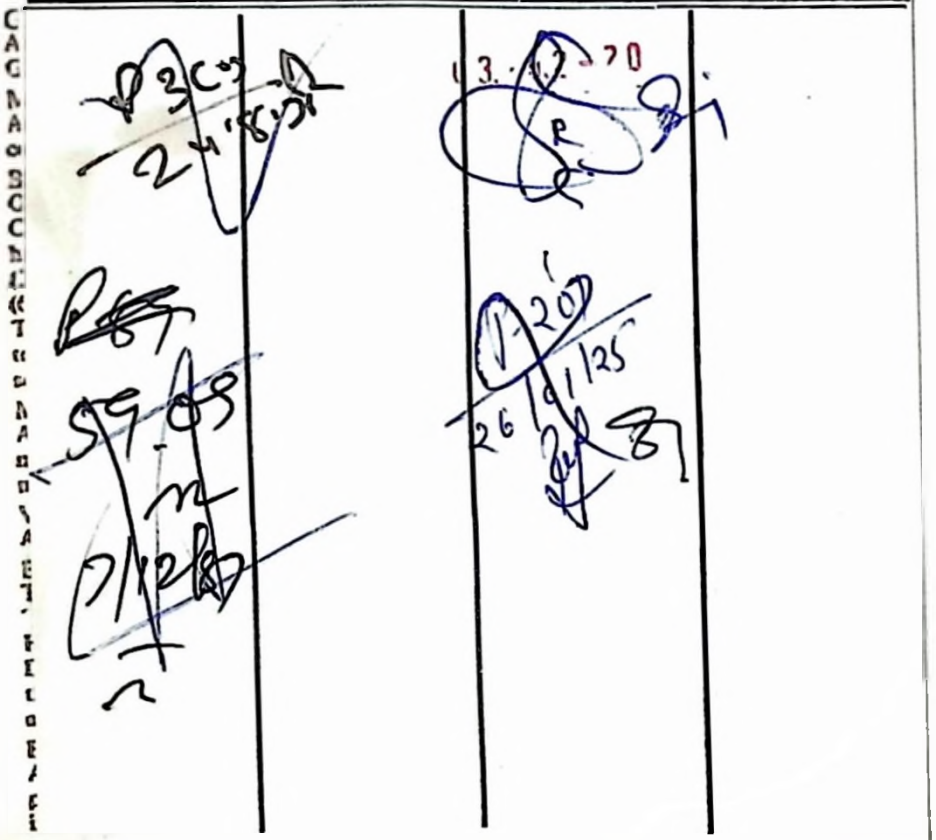
Elaborate arrangements were swiftly made for Rama's coronation, which took place with due splendour. Rama gave Sita a beautiful pearl necklace, which she, with his approval, gave to Hanuman, that supreme devotee. Rama offered to make Lakshmana the heir-apparent, but he declined; then Rama crowned Bharata as the heir-apparent. Rama ruled over the kingdom for over ten thousand years, enhancing the joy of his people, who were endowed with good qualities.

Canto VII

UTTARA KANDA

This Canto contains several miscellaneous things, such as the birth and exploits of Ravana, the fight between gods and demons and Hanuman's childhood. For our book, the main interest of this canto comprises two episodes, namely, the banishment of Sita to the forest and at the very end the banishment of Lakshmana for disobeying Rama's orders. These have been referred to in Chapters 2 and 3. There is no need to add anything here.

There is a view that this canto was not originally a part of the *Ramayana* and that it was a later addition.



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