



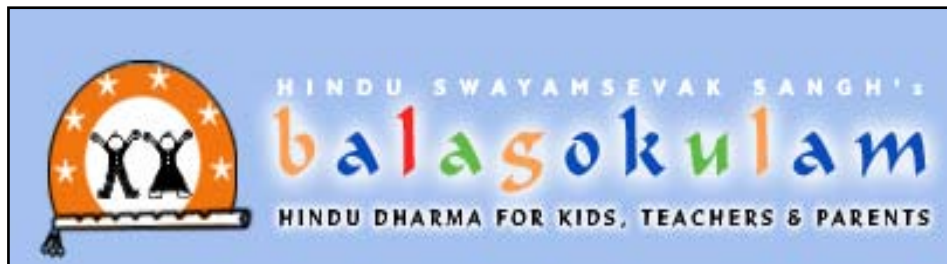
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PREFACE

Since time immemorial the RAMAYAN has been accorded the undisputed status of one of the greatest epics ever. The epic is a virtual encyclopedia encompassing within its pages, our ancient history, culture, geography and philosophy. Ramayan offers valuable guidance in all the aspects of life. The story of Shri Ram has touched millions of hearts in the nook and corner of the globe.

We have presented “Charitra Ramayan” in a storybook form. Illustrations have been placed at appropriate places. The book has been specially written for the age group 10 - 15. The language has been kept simple; sentences are short. Wherever necessary, meaning of Sanskrit words have been given in English.

Children reading this “Charitra Ramayan” will need handholding to begin with. Parents and teachers may have to sit down with children and explain certain situations and contexts of that historical period.

Finally, we may add that, we are only narrators of a great epic written by a learned and eminent sage-poet, Valmiki. It is, therefore, natural that our narration may not escape flaws, which we would like you to bring to our notice. We certainly do welcome suggestions and comments for improvement of this work.

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of RAMAYAN as an epic of the great human and moral value is confined not only to India but to the entire universe. Ramayan is the saga of Lord Shri Ramchandra's life. His reign is known as Ram Rajya. Ram Rajya means the establishment of an ideal state where contentment, peace and prosperity reign, where there is no strife and bloodshed, where people live in amity and fraternity, cooperating with one another and helping each other. It is a state where there is no want, where people's basic needs of food, clothing and shelter are met and everyone lives happily.

What was Lord Ramchandra like? What is the significance of values like adherence to truth, respect for others, tolerance, purity, patience and devotion to God? Today, in the twenty-first century, enmeshed as we are in the IT revolution, we are pursuing knowledge. This is the information age. Innovations through research seek to bring happiness to humanity and claim to do so all the time. But happiness is not necessarily contentment. And hence it is imperative to usher in Ram Rajya, which will ensure all-round happiness, peace and contentment. It was with this end in view that Lord Shri Ramchandra willingly went into exile to fulfill His father's solemn oath. By doing so, he set a shining example of upholding the perennial value systems. He demonstrated to us how to fully marshal and utilize one's faculties to attain one's goals. He showed us how to boldly approach and overcome difficult situations. Lord Shri Ramchandra proved that even God could be attained through perseverance.

The Ramayan is an unlimited source of these and several other truths. A daily study and reflection on the values propounded in the Ramayan will be a source of inspiration, guidance and a panacea for all the worries confronting us in this jet age. Short stories, attractive visuals and the messages derived from these are the highlights of the Ramayan. There is no alternative to the Ramayan to help us overcome the troubles and problems in the present day topsy-turvy scenario. Not only children but also teenagers and youth love the stories in the Ramayan and will benefit immensely from delving into the various aspects of the epic. In today's fast changing world, it is no longer surprising to see brothers become foes. The saga of love and affection between Shri Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughna will inspire them to better fraternal relations. Sita's character provides an outstanding example of a chaste, loyal and devoted wife; Hanuman's unshakable faith in Lord Shri Ram provides us an example of unparalleled devotion to the Lord. Devotion, strength, strategy and faith find unparalleled confluence in the Ramayan. The events narrated in the epic will definitely have a positive and beneficial impact on the minds of children. The chapters like the meeting of Shri Ram with Bharat, the battle between Jatayu and Ravan, building of the transoceanic bridge to Sri Lanka and the slaying of Kumbhakarn and Ravan are very engrossing. The story of building the bridge across the sea to Lanka highlights the importance of faith and is very popular with children. The story of the squirrel's help in building the ocean bridge is an objective lesson on faith for children. It also provides them a lot of joy. This assures that immense benefits will be derived from the study of the Ramayan. However, we must be able to make children take to it in a meaningful way. The Ramayan is also an ideal medium to encourage reading habits among children. Children imbibe their culture and value systems through their parents, grandparents and teachers. Every child has to read and reflect on the Ramayan. Only then will the dream of establishing Râm Râjya come true. The responsibility of encouraging the reading habit is by no means restricted to parents and teachers solely, but also to those officials, bureaucrats and functionaries connected with education. Let us pledge ourselves to propagate the message of the Ramayan in every home and school

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I. RATNAKAR BECOMES VALMIKI

Countless ages ago, there was a very dense forest on the southern side of the river Gangâ. It was infested with ferocious wild animals. There was sparse human population that also included tribes. Cultivation was very difficult. The chief means of subsistence of the forest inhabitants was fruits, roots, honey, and hunting. Some of the tougher people used to rob the travellers who had to cross the forest. Ratnakar was one such person. He was not educated and lacked proper *samskars*. He did not possess any skill. He therefore had no choice in the selection of any profession or means of livelihood. He had a strong, rugged physique and a devil-may-care tough mental attitude. That pushed him to the profession of quarrelling and thieving, waylaying and robbing people, even murdering them if they resisted. In no time, he had lost all sense of shame or guilt. He even started keeping a record of the number of people he had killed by putting one pebble per victim in a huge earthen pot. Over the years, many such pots were filled to the brim. His wife and children were enjoying a content life as he was earning a good livelihood that way.

One day the traveller on his way happened to be Narad Muni. As was his habit, Ratnakar stopped him. Narad Muni said, "I have only this *veena* (stringed instrument) and *kartal* – (two small concave shaped copper/metal pieces which when clashed over each other, produce sound and support rhythm). Narad engaged Ratnakar in conversation in a shrewd manner and casually, asked him, "You have robbed and killed so many innocent people. Why do you do this? You have actually committed so many crimes, and have accumulated so much of *paap* (sin), which fetch bad results in this life or the next. Why?"

Ratnakar had no idea of what Narad Muni was talking about. He retorted "Sin? What *paap* or sin? What bad deeds? What suffering later on for this? This is my profession. Only because of this do my family and me survive. You may call it sin but my wife and children have also to share this sin." Till this day no person had ever stood before him with such fearlessness and self-confidence and dared to question him or pass comments on his actions. This bold appearance

of Narad Muni had its effect on Ratnakar. He drooped a little and his voice became softer. Narad Muni's personality was such a radiant and effective one that Ratnakar too felt talking with him.

"Ratna, *paap* (sin) remains *paap*, whether you do it for livelihood or for fulfilment of pleasures. You cannot escape from it. But you said you are doing it for your family. Would they be ready to accept their share in this sin?" Narad asked in a kind voice.

"Of course they would share it. Why not? They know that I am doing it only for their happiness and pleasure. They would be fully aware of it." Ratnakar declared staunchly.

"You are a simpleton. This is foolish thinking on your part. Everybody wants a share of happiness, prosperity and progress but in one's hour of grief, defeat and downfall, nobody will stand by you. In the same way, nobody will share your sins. If you wish to verify what I say, go and find out from them whether they would accept to share your sin. I shall wait for you meanwhile", said Narad calmly.

Ratnakar was shaken. He could not dismiss Narad Muni's reasoning. But he also trusted his wife and his children. He dashed home straightaway, called all his family members to him. He told them what had happened in the forest and then asked bluntly "Who is ready to share the sins committed by me?"

He was to get the shock of his life. His misgivings came true. All said together, "To feed us is your duty. How are we concerned through what means you brought home the money? You alone have to take that discredit."

Ratnakar's world was shattered. "What should I do? Let me go to that sage (Narad Muni) who put this question to me" he thought, and came back to Nârâd.

"Narayan, Narayan! You are back after asking your family! So, tell me, how many of your family members are ready to share your sin? Ready to share the further consequences along with you. Do tell me." Narad's voice was as calm as before.

Ratnakar replied in great sorrow, "Maharaj, you are all-knowing. You were right. My entire family is thoroughly selfish. I am helpless. Maharaj, I salute your understanding of people and their nature. You alone can now show me the way out of this web of sin. All have let me down. I don't wish to see their faces ever again. I totally surrender to you."

Ratnakar's remorse was complete. He was now sorrowful and anxious to get rid of this burden. Narad Muni was convinced. He advised him in the right manner. Narad then asked Ratnakar to prepare a platform to sit under a mango tree. He was asked to come after taking bath in the river Ganga. Narad then advised Ratnakar to meditate, "RamRam.... Ram...." continuously without a break.

"Ratnakar, continue meditating like this till I come back. This will certainly enable you to wipe clean your past record of evil deeds and put you on the right path. I shall see you when I return."

Years passed. Narad Muni had almost forgotten this meeting. Then, once he was again passing by the same route. He heard a deep and steady repetition of "Ram...Ram...Ram..." No human being was to be seen around. After looking around, he realized that it was coming from an anthill. He pushed aside the top and sides of that anthill. He saw a person, almost a skeleton, in a rock-steady posture repeatedly uttering "Ram...Ram...." Then Nârâd recollected the incident of twelve years back. He shook Ratnakar and woke him up.

"Get up Ratna. You are free from all the *paap* (sins) you have committed. You would henceforth be known as Maharshi Valmiki because you have emerged from this *valmik* (anthill). Establish your ashram (hermitage) here, continue to evolve yourself and help people follow proper and right path in life."

Maharshi Valmiki did likewise. After some days, Narad Muni paid a visit to him. Valmiki Rishi asked him, "Devarshi, can you tell me if there is any person in this world who could be considered as ideal and perfect in all respects?"

Narad Muni told him that there is **Shree Ram** who rules the kingdom of Ayodhya. He narrated the complete life story of Ram. He also said that the peace, happiness and prosperity that abounds at this moment is due to the noble and pious deeds of that extraordinarily great person and his kingdom, which is known as **Ram Rajya**. Narad's narration left a great impression on Valmiki's mind. He started thinking continuously about it.

One morning Maharshi Valmiki was going to river Tamasa to take bath along with his disciples. There was a pair of *krounch* birds indulging in making love. At that very moment a hunter's arrow hit and killed the male bird, which fell down. The female bird's wailing for the loss of her mate was loud and pitiable. Valmiki at once became sad and angry. He uttered a curse on the hunter exclaiming, "O wicked one! You who have killed an innocent bird engaged in affection shall also suffer sorrow and affliction." It just happened that that curse was in a systematic verse form. He also realized immediately that he had cursed somebody, wished some ill for someone and for that he felt depressed. But at that very moment Brahma Dev, the Creator appeared before him.

“Oh great Rishi, you just now uttered a composition in a certain format. It would be popularly known as *Anushtup Chhand*. Narad Muni told you the life story of Shree Ram. Compose it in this *chhand* (format) and propagate and spread it amongst people.”

Following Brahma Dev’s instruction, Maharshi Valmiki composed the **Shreemad Ramayan**. It is a timeless epic, a poetic history about an extraordinarily great king and composed by equally competent personality. It is outstandingly incomparable. Brahma listened to it himself and blessed the immortal epic, saying, “Shree Ram Katha shall continue to be revered as long as the sun and the moon exist, the mountains stand erect kissing the skies, rivers flowing and the sea with all its roaring waves rushes towards the beach. Its greatness shall never diminish.”

Lesson to Ponder

A person deprived of the influence of *Samskars* may not hesitate to be involved in bad or evil actions. But if such a person receives proper guidance, then he may have a sense of repentance and proceed towards and follow the path of virtue in life. His conviction should be firm and unwavering. He must put in persistent sincere efforts. Then, he can even rise to towering heights and then may even be instrumental in a monumental achievement. Ratnâkar’s transformation to Valmiki is an apt example.

The Ramayan is outstanding since its central figure is outstanding. Himself of a noble character, he was able to perform noble deeds, noble actions, set noble precedents. The Ramayan’s author is also outstanding. To what extent a person can bring about a change in his own self, almost a turn around of 180 degrees is proven through Valmiki’s evolvement. Civilization may march on with newer and newer technical and scientific achievements and yet humans will remain humans with all the elements of sentiments and emotions, love and hatred, hope and aspirations, passions and anger. These human qualities will always be there ? then, as also now and tomorrow too. The Ramayan will stand as a guide and encyclopedia for all different human minds and shades. Take any relationship of father, son, judge, commoner, disciple, politician, warrior etc. To succeed, there could be no better guide than The Ramayan with its vast treasure of human virtues and facts.

2. PARENTAL AFFECTION

Shravan Bal

The evening was just setting. Darkness had started spreading. But that old couple ...they were just lost, lost in their own thoughts. A few guests had arrived in the afternoon for their meals. They were fully satisfied and so they had lavishly heaped praise on the hospitality of the couple. The family was neither rich nor very poor. They owned a small piece of cultivable land a couple of cows. That was enough to feed three people, the old couple and their son. All visitors, be it a traveller, guest or student were treated well and left fully satisfied. The couple was blind and handicapped. Their only son Shravan looked after them. The visitors who had just left had travelled extensively. They had described the different places of pilgrimage so well that the couple, though blind, could visualize those places as if before their own eyes. The description was so vivid that one felt like paying a visit. A reasonable six months period would be enough if one planned the visit meticulously.

As was customary, Shravan lighted the lamp and placed it in the *devgriha* (small isolated enclosure for the sacred idols-the sanctum sanctorum) and then before the *tulsi* (basil) plant in the courtyard since it was getting dark. Then he bowed low touching his parent's feet. They didn't bless him since they were all too engrossed in the narration about the pilgrimage they had just listened to. "Mother, father!", enquired Shravan, rather anguished. "What is this? Where is your attention? What are you thinking about? You have not blessed me. Normally, you smell my approach even if I am at a distance; you recognize even the faint sound of my footsteps. What has happened today, dear mother and father?"

"Oh, Shravan, don't feel bad. We are still lost in the beautiful and very engrossing description of the pilgrimage made by the visitors who came in the noon", said Shravan's father.

"We want to make ourselves happy by simply imagining ourselves there since we don't think we can ever visit those holy places" said his mother.

"Why do you say so, mother? It is your wish and my duty to fulfil it. What right do I have to call myself your son if I cannot do that? My life is then useless. Actually, I am your sight; I shall certainly take you on a pilgrimage. I can carry both of you on my shoulders in a *kawad* (a pole having two hanging platforms at either end; one can carry two persons or goods or water with it). I will prepare very comfortable seats for you in the *kawad*. I will describe every holy place I take you in such detail that you both would feel that you are actually seeing it. Luckily, we have some money saved which may be used for our pilgrimage" Shravan said.

"No, no, not at all", Shravan's mother objected. "That sum of money is kept for your marriage, for your children i.e. our grandchildren. It is not to be undeservedly spent on an old couple like us. This pilgrimage may take months together. We have planned your marriage this year. So we shall not go. Your offer and desire to take us on pilgrimage is itself a noble gesture. It shows your broadmindedness, your love and devotion to us. We are pleased. Our visit to *Chardham* (the four most sacred places of pilgrimage) is actually with our to-be-born-grandchildren. So get married and fulfil this expectation of your parents," said the old parents.

But Shravan was not happy. For him, his parents' desire came first. Actually both the parents were very considerate, not demanding or imposing anything. They were very much aware of the extra efforts their son had to put in to look after them. So he said, "Rest assured, this is not lavish spending and not much would be required for the journey. My marriage, as desired by you, is still six months' away. We would definitely come back by then. So do not worry."

Shravan started making preparations. He got ready a *kawad* with comfortable space for sitting. The seats had soft thick mattresses. To make the walk enjoyable for his blind parents, he put some tinkling bells to produce melodious sound. Then, on an auspicious day before sunrise, Shravan said his prayers, bowed to the *gramdevata* (the presiding deity of the village), offered a coconut and sought blessings. He then made the parents sit on the special seats in the *kawad* and placed on his shoulders and set out for the *teerth yatra* (a holy pilgrimage). All the villagers came up to the outskirts to see them off and wish them well. They were all praise for the Shravan's dedicated and selfless devotion for his parents. Everyone wished that they should have a son like him. Shravan took his parents in the *kawad* from one holy place to another. He had to endure a lot of trouble and hardship but he minded not. Rather, he took exceptional care so that his parents did not undergo any discomfort. Day after day passed. Before setting out on the pilgrimage a timetable was prepared. Most of the sacred pilgrimage places had been covered and they were on their way back home. Spring was now setting in. Nature all around was beautiful. But the days had started getting hot. One relieving feature was that the route taken passed through thick tall forests.

Evening dawned. Shravan searched for a good place – clean, advantageous and close to a river or pond. Then he kept the *kawad* down, prepared beds of grass for his parents and gently helped them lie down. He then lighted the fire, cooked meals

and served his parents and also himself. All the three retired for the night. Extremely tired, Shravan dozed off immediately.

The night went on. Shravan was awakened by his father's call. His father was thirsty. Water was available in a *kalash* (pot) but rolled over and spilt its contents when the blind father tried to get it himself. Shravan awoke on hearing the sound of the pot and his father's footsteps.

"Please bring me some water to drink. Unable to see, I could not locate the *kalash* due to darkness and it tumbled. I am uncontrollably thirsty, Shravan," his father said.

"Let it be! The poor fellow has slept just now. Today was very exacting. Let him rest. Control yourself. It is going to be dawn soon. He can then go to fetch water. Dear child, it's all right. Finish your sleep. It's not so urgent to bring water right now" his mother said.

"Very well, very well. Let it be. I shall be able to do without water for some more time. Shravan my son, relax and sleep for a while," said his father.

But his father's thirst and discomfort even for a while would not let Shravan sleep even for a moment. He got up immediately. A small fire was kept burning for safety and to ward off the cold during the night. Shravan picked up a burning log for finding the way, searched the pot that had tumbled and set out to bring water from the river close by. He reached the river and dipped the pot in water. It produced a sound *buduk...buduk*.

King Dasharath of Ayodhya had come to the forest that day on a hunt. He had roamed all day in search of a prey, but to no avail. He had left his army way behind and wished to return only after a kill. With this intent, he rested and lay at a place close to the river during the night with arrow ready on his bow. Dasharath was a very formidable warrior, and an expert bowman. He could hit his target by mere sound without actually seeing it. Even a bare whisper was enough for him to accurately hit his target. He knew that the hot and tiring day would certainly bring some animal to the river at night to quench its thirst.

Dasharath was proved right, or so he thought. He heard the sound *buduk-buduk-buduk*". Wasting no time, he aimed his arrow in the direction of the sound.

Dasharath's reputation as an expert archer was absolutely true. The arrow that left his bow indeed hit its target accurately. But the very next moment, Dasharath froze with horror, as he heard a shrill human cry of "Oh God! Mother, mother, I am dying!" Trembling, Dasharath ran in the direction of the sound. He was completely shocked at what he saw upon reaching the spot. His arrow had hit a young boy. He was in agonizing pain, but still held on to a pitcher of water. King Dasharath rushed to his side, and gently pulled the arrow from the boy's bleeding chest with trembling hands, and sprinkled water on the youth's face. In a voice breaking with sobs, Dasharath begged forgiveness for the deed he had committed. The youth weakly opened his eyes and haltingly said, "O King, I am Shravan from the Atri family. My parents are resting close by. Both are old, blind and handicapped. They are thirsty. Oblige me. Take this water to them. They have no one to take care of. I am dying. Now onwards it is your duty to look after them. Oh, mother, mother!!"

Shravan breathed his last in King Dasharath's arms. Dasharath was stricken with remorse. His expert archery had caused a great misdeed today, although it was by sheer accident. He was sunk in depression. His skill had uprooted the life of a young son who was happily sacrificing everything to fulfill the wishes of his parents.

Shree Ram



It was still dark. Dawn was yet to break out. The morning star was twinkling. A mild breeze caressing fragrant flowers spreading invigorating smell in the *yagya mandap* (sacrificial hall). The atmosphere was extremely sacred. Shree Ram had taken bath very early morning and was at the *yagya kund*. Guru Vasishtha along with other sages was chanting Vedic mantras. Upon the Guru's uttering "Swaahaa" each time, Shree Ram would make his offering in the sacred *agni* (fire). The air was filled happiness and excitement. Everyone present was enthusiastic and elated. With good reason; Shree Ram was being crowned *yuvraj* (crown-prince or heir-apparent to a kingdom), a decision made by King Dasharath in consultation with his council of ministers. Today was that ceremonial day. The Vedic rites in progress were a part of the ceremony. Shree Ram bore all the princely insignia and was performing the *yagya*. Every single offering to Agni Devta (The celestial deity of fire) was completed with full faith and in accordance with the Vedas.

At that moment an attendant from the palace entered hurriedly. He offered his respects. "Victory to Shree Ram! Maharaj Dasharath has sent me here. The crown prince Shree Ram has been summoned to queen Kaikeyee's palace immediately. Maharaj is waiting."

This was surprising. Actually, Maharaj Dasharath was expected to be sitting beside him in the performance of all these rituals. All were waiting for him. The function had to start at the auspicious moment and that was why Guru Vasishth, in consultation with other rishis, had made that decision. All were surprised on hearing this message.

"Oh, have I been called to mother Kaikeyee's palace for something extremely urgent?" asked Shri Ram.

"Yes, respected prince. Our revered Maharaj spent the whole night in Rani Kaikeyee's palace. The king is lying on his bed and looks rather unwell. The queen has, on his behalf, asked me to bring you there as early as possible" replied the royal attendant.

Shree Ram glanced anxiously at Guru Vasishth. The guru said, "Ram, go and find out what the matter is. The introductory part of the *yagya* has been completed. I shall make the remaining offering to Agni Devta. I shall complete the *yagya* and come there. Don't worry. Everything should be alright."

Shree Ram left for Kaikeyee's palace. The palace attendants, who were busy with festivities, were surprised to see Shree Ram walk in hurriedly. Nevertheless, they greeted him respectfully.

Ram's mind was rather pre-occupied. What was the pressing reason for Maharaj Dasharath to summon him so urgently? He saw Manthara the entrance of the palace. She was someone who most in the palace as well as the royal family despised. But she was mother Kaikeyee's maternal family and also her confidential maid and therefore enjoyed some privilege. Manthara was known as a cunning and evil character and was hated. She was hunch-backed and ugly and more her expressions and behaviour only increased her ugliness. Not bothering to speak to her, Shree Ram entered the palace.

His heart skipped a beat the moment he stepped in. Mother Kaikeyee's palace had no signs of either decoration or enthusiasm of his *yuvraj* ceremony. On the contrary, her inner chamber appeared to be in a state of gloom. The palace room was littered with garments and ornaments strewn all over the place. The flowers in the flowerpots were dried up and were scattered all over. It looked as if somebody in a fit of rage had thrown everything hither and thither. Maharaj Dasharath lay on his stomach upon his bed, his hair dishevelled and clothes scattered. Tears rolled down his cheeks. His body shook with sobs every now and then. Kaikeyee stood at one corner of the bed, with her hair untied and uncombed. She was wearing an ordinary *saree* with no ornaments, or make up.

Shree Ram took in all this in one glance. He suddenly felt very uneasy with a feeling of impending trouble. But he maintained his composure and said, "Respected father, your eldest son bows to you. Mother Kaikeyee, my salutations to you too."

Maharaj Dasharath tried to open his eyes; he couldn't since they were laden with tears. Then Rani Kaikeyee looked at Shree Ram. Her stern expression suddenly softened. Smiling, she said, "Oh Ram, you have taken such a long time to come. Your father is very anxious to see you and has not been able to sleep for the whole night."

Ram was rather disturbed when he heard this and replied, "Dear mother, I came immediately as soon as I received his message. Is father not well? Why is he lying like that? What is the reason for his weeping in apparent sorrow? Why is your palace in such a gloomy state, when the whole of Ayodhya is celebrating in happiness? And why are you too in such a dishevelled state? Is everything all right? Dear mother, please tell me. I have become very anxious on seeing all this."

Kaikeyee replied, "All is well. Your father is all right. He feels tired only because throughout last night he has been struggling to save the reputation of the Ikshwaaku Dynasty."

By this time Guru Vasishtha also arrived there along with Lakshman and others. They were all dumbstruck at what they saw. Nobody could utter a word. Shree Ram was waiting for Kaikeyee to explain. Kaikeyee remained very calm and cool. She looked at all of them and then staring Ram in the eye, spoke in a very indifferent tone.

"Ram, my son! Many years ago, before all four of you were born, your father had gone to help the *Devas* (celestials) in their war against the powerful *Asur* (a sect of demons) king Shambar. I used to assist him in battle in those days and accompanied him in his chariot by his side. During this terrible war when he was badly injured, I took over and steered his chariot away from the battlefield and thus saved his life. He recovered and resumed his part in the war. With his help, the *Devas* killed Shambar and became victorious. Maharaj Dasharath was very pleased with me and granted me two wishes as a boon. I did not want anything then and said that I would claim them later on when I so desired. Now I felt the time has arrived, and asked him for the fulfilment of those two boons. Your father wants to go back on his words. I just reminded him that in the Ragu Dynasty a promise given must be kept, even at the cost of one's life. Grief-stricken, your great father has been fighting with himself on that score. He is tired. Ram! It is your duty to fulfil the promises given by your father since

these two boons are directly connected with you.”

“Mother, what are those promises that father has made which have made him so miserable? I shall stake even my life but will certainly fulfil his words. Rest assured,” replied Shree Ram without the slightest trace of emotion.

“Ram, your father gave me his word. No one is as dear to him as you are. He agreed to fulfil my wishes swearing on your name. Only then did I remind him of his two promises. The first is that my son Bharat must be made king in your place and secondly, you must go into exile to the forest for fourteen years. Now that you know the entire situation, the reputation of the ancient and illustrious Ikshwaaku Dynasty is solely in your hands.” Kaikeyee showed no remorse for her demands.

Shree Ram was completely relaxed. He smiled and stood close his father’s side said, “Father, why do you grieve? Mother Kaikeyee loves me as much as she does Bharat. She will never think ill of me. I shall certainly fulfil your promises.”

With great effort, Maharaj Dasharath opened his eyes. He wanted to raise his hand but couldn’t. All he could utter was “Ram, Ram” and sob continuously.

Kaikeyee said in a very bitter tone, “Ram, don’t you see your father’s condition? If, like your father, you too wish to go back on your word, then say so. Your family is known for adherence to truth. Let the world know that this reputation of the Ikshwaakus is only for namesake and not the truth. My brother and son are competent enough to fulfil my wishes.”

Ram replied in a gentle tone, “Mother don’t be angry. You have unnecessarily troubled my father for such simple demands. If you had just asked me, I would have certainly done what pleases you. Mother, I hereby take an oath in the name of all the gods and goddesses, my ancestors, my gurus and elders, that my father’s word shall not be false. I herewith renounce my right to the throne of Ayodhya and shall leave for the forest by today evening taking leave of mother Kausalya, Seeta and Lakshman.”

Maharaj Dasharath cried out loudly, “Ram, Ram, my child...” and sobbed loudly.

Kaikeyee ignored him and said, “Ram, going to the forest is no joke. It is abandoning everything – these kingly robes, royal comforts servants, soldiers ... everything. You have to wear the clothes made from bark of the trees and stay away from any city, any public contact in a completely detached way. Will you be able to do this?”

“You may rest assured, mother. Ram shall not be found wanting in any respect.”

Lakshman, who was a silent spectator till now exploded with anger. He took out his sword and stood between Shree Ram and Kaikeyee. His rage was like that of a wounded serpent and he hissed, “I shall have none of this. Anyone who wants to stop Shree Ram from ascending the throne will meet his doom at my hands. Ram, go and take over the kingdom. Let us not lose the auspicious period. This wicked woman has lost all sense of right and wrong. She fancies that she can usurp Ayodhya’s throne and we shall remain mere spectators. It is a crime to meekly tolerate foul play. I will imprison or even slay our old father who does not mind committing great injustice just to please his queen. Ram! Do not fear any opposition. Not only Ayodhya, but also the entire world wishes to see you crowned as *yuvaraj*. I, Lakshman am capable of easily disposing of any enemy no matter how powerful he may be. Kaikeyee, Bharat and her fellow-conspirators shall pay dearly for this audacity. I will certainly place you on the throne of Ayodhya.”

Lakshman, in his anger, spoke very harshly. He spared none, mother, father nor brother in his anger. He loved Ram more than his own life and could not tolerate the slightest injustice done to his elder brother.

Kaikeyee was stunned into silence seeing Lakshman’s furious response. Shree Ram was however unperturbed. Looking straight into his younger brother’s eyes, he said with a smile and a soft voice, “Dear Lakshman, calm down and curb your anger. You are using a very unbecoming language and that too for our parents. Our father has given birth to us and our mothers are like goddesses. Is Kaikeyee too not our mother? How is Bharat a stranger to us? He too is our younger brother. Then what difference does it make whether he or I ascend the throne? It is all the same. Can you imagine parents thinking ill of their children? No. They always wish us well. Maybe, our mother has some different objective to be fulfilled through this. Calm down. It is not good to argue with one’s parents. We must respect them irrespective of anything they may say. We may agree or disagree with them and yet we must fulfil their wishes. We must strive hard to do this. Put your sword back.”

Lakshman cooled down when Ram spoke to him in this affectionate and brotherly manner. When he realized that Shree Ram was firm on his resolve to go to *vanvas* (stay in the forest) for fourteen years, then he too decided to accompany his elder brother. Shree Ram could not dissuade him.

Shree Ram accompanied by Seeta and Lakshman got into the chariot to proceed to the forest. King Dasharath, mothers Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyee were left behind in Ayodhya. While Kaikeyee was gloating over her imaginary success, Dasharath and the two elder queens were too shocked to say much. The whole of Ayodhya was sunk in deep sorrow.

Lesson to Ponder

We have seen two different examples of two sons, Shravan and Shree Ram. While one was a commoner, the other was a prince of huge powerful kingdom, which he was about to inherit. Both loved their parents immensely. They left no stone unturned to fulfil their parents' wishes. They were ever ready to undergo any suffering, any sacrifice for their parents and that too with a smiling face, willingly and without any feeling that they were doing anything extraordinary.

Shravan exerted himself fully to make his parental desire to go on a pilgrimage a reality. He spared no efforts, physical, financial or mental. Unfortunately, he lost his life in a tragic accident to king Dasharath's arrow. He thus sacrificed his very life performing his duty making his parents happy.

Shree Ram never thought whether mother Kaikeyee's wishes were right or wrong, proper or improper. Without batting an eyelid, he sacrificed his palatial comforts, princely rights and all family happiness. Râm shed all material comforts as though they were dust. He smilingly endured the ardour of forest life for fourteen years but never swerved from his Dharma.

Shravan set an example. So did Shree Ram like our innumerable ancestors of yore. Why can't we do the same? Be it ancient past, recent past or today, parents would remain parents. What they tell us, expect of us, must be listened to, respected and implemented.

Till yesterday, the joint family was prevalent. Grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins all lived under one roof. Nowadays, it is difficult to share space even with parents. Family members going abroad for jobs, education or business has become common. Then how can we fulfil our parental desires? How do we make them happy?

Simple. Near or far, we should not hurt them nor behave in a manner, which would make them sad or ashamed. They want everybody to praise their children, respect and honour them. If we desire to achieve this, then ideal behaviour is what is expected.

Shree Ram is a towering personality with divine ideals. His personal characteristics are the noblest of ideals. We too should strive to be like him and acquire qualities, which will make our parents happy and proud. This is certainly possible. We have to make a firm resolve and stick to it throughout our life.

3. THE IDEAL BROTHER

Lakshman ... The Trustworthy

When Lakshman reached Shree Ram's palace, he found his elder brother depressed. Shree Ram sat holding his head in hands. The light in the room was dim since all the windows were closed. The atmosphere was gloomy. Lakshman was shocked, as Shree Ram's expression was one of extreme grief and agonizing hurt. Lakshman recollected a similar expression on Shree Ram's face at Panchvati when Râvan had abducted Seeta.



Shree Ram sensed Lakshman's presence and looked up. His expression resembled that of a grievously wounded bird. He wanted to say something but struggled with words. Somehow he managed to say, "Dear Lakshman, I am very upset and sunk in grief. I think I am not able to read the mind of the people as to what they think; what pleases them. After Ravan's defeat and before returning to Ayodhya, Seeta underwent the ordeal by fire to prove her purity and chastity despite her forced stay in Ravan's custody. Agni Dev (the presiding deity of fire) himself vouched for Seeta's chastity in the presence of our entire army as also the whole of Lanka. Seeta's test took place in full public view. But it appears that some people in Ayodhya are casting aspersions on her character. It hurts me greatly to know that there are some such people in Ayodhya. It has come to my knowledge that certain *dhobi* (washerman) has been indulging in such talk considering me to be of questionable character because I accepted Seeta who had stayed in the enemy's house for a few months. Lakshman, Seeta has already undergone the fire ordeal. How many times she should prove her chastity? How else should it be proved and how many times? And why?"

Lakshman was enraged upon hearing this. He thundered, "Who is this

wretch? Let me know his whereabouts. I shall mete out such exemplary punishment to him so that neither none would dare dream of uttering nonsense ever again. Seeta ? Janaki *mata* ? is a divine woman. People will soon learn what it costs to cast aspersions on her character."

"No Lakshman, you shall not do anything in anger or out of a sense of vengeance. Kings and rulers cannot afford to behave thus. Their behaviour and character must always be above blemish or such lowly emotions. I can well imagine how tormented Seeta will be when she hears of this. She will willingly undergo any physical hardship or difficulty but will never tolerate even the slightest aspersion on her character, which she holds to be dearer than life itself." Ram was in a despondent mood when he said this.

"Are you suggesting that Seeta should undergo another ordeal by fire to prove her chastity?" asked Lakshman.

"Lakshman, as a ruler, the well-being of my people and their trust in me is my ultimate concern. No sacrifice will be too big for this purpose," said Ram. It seemed he had arrived at some extremely painful decision. He continued, "I want you to implement my orders without question. Promise me that you shall do so."

"Do you have any reason to doubt my loyalty, lord?" Lakshman was rather perplexed. Ram replied, "O son of Sumitra, I cannot even dream of distrusting you. Your faith and devotion to me are beyond doubt or comparison. You followed me into exile without a moment's hesitation, stood guard over Janaki and me for fourteen years and shared a major responsibility during the war in Lanka. Can I ever forget all that? You are my alter ego and know the innermost feelings of my mind. I hesitate because I am going to ask you to carry out the most difficult of tasks. This decision has left me emotionally broken and hence you must assist me in implementing it."

Lakshman's dismay knew no bounds as he guesses his brother's resolve. He asked hesitatingly, "Does this mean that you have decided to?"

"Yes Lakshman," replied Shree Ram in a slow and thoughtful voice, full of sadness. "I have reached an unfortunate decision of abandoning Seeta. It seems we are not destined to live together for long. Therefore, take Seeta in the royal chariot into the

forest across the Ganga and the Tamasa to Maharshi Valmiki's ashram and leave her there. You must carry out this command of mine tomorrow itself and that too without question. I have no courage to face Janaki and tell her the reason for her second banishment. It is you who will have to somehow break the news to her. I know what a painful task I am giving you. Hence you must promise me that you shall fully carry out my orders."

"How can I carry out such a hated task and that too without question or even remorse? How can you bear to live without Jânaki for even a moment? What will happen to this vast Kosal Empire without an heir? Have you considered these issues, O Ram?" Lakshman was finding it difficult to even express his anguish.

"It looks likely that Ayodhya's future king will be born in Maharshi Valmiki's ashram. Although my personal anguish is immense, I have no choice but to send Seeta to the rishi's ashram. The goodwill of my people and their welfare is my ultimate responsibility," said Shree Ram, full of remorse.

Lakshman finally had to consent to fulfil the most difficult and painful task of his life. The next morning he took Seeta in the royal chariot and left her in the deep forest, just outside Maharshi Valmiki's ashram. Seeta learnt the truth behind her second exile from Lakshman only at the last moment. It was left to Lakshman to endure her anger and emotional outburst. He had to harden his heart to face all this. Following this harsh decision, there was no personal joy in their lives of Shree Ram and Lakshman. We can only imagine Ram, Lakshman and Seeta's mental agony.

Lesson to Ponder

The physical body of a person is his visible identity. But the guiding force and the real person is the *Atman* (Soul), the **true representative** of person. It is inside us. All our emotions and feelings, values and convictions, actions and reactions, actually everything that we are, we do, we feel are a manifesting of our soul. But imagine a person having an additional or extra or a second soul and that too outside his body and in another person. The very thought seems an impossibility. But it was so in case of Lakshman. He was the second, the other self, and the other soul of Shree Ram. He lived for Shree Ram, thought about him only and never of himself. He was an alter ego, a mirror image of Shree Ram's soul. Ram had absolute faith and confidence in him. What Ram could not do was assigned to Lakshman, like the decision to abandon Seeta. Shree Ram's agony in taking this decision could be understood and felt by Lakshman alone. In duty and responsibility, devotion and dedication, he was equal to Shree Ram.

Thousands of years have passed since the Ramayan Era. Lakshman was the **ideal brother** then and after countless years of the march of civilization remains so even today. What should a brother be like? This question has but one answer "**like Lakshman.**" It was a reciprocal affection, selfless and unrestrained. Just as you love yourself, you can also love your brother with the same degree and intensity. Let Lakshman be our *adarsh*, our ideal of a brother and let us try to be close to him in this respect.

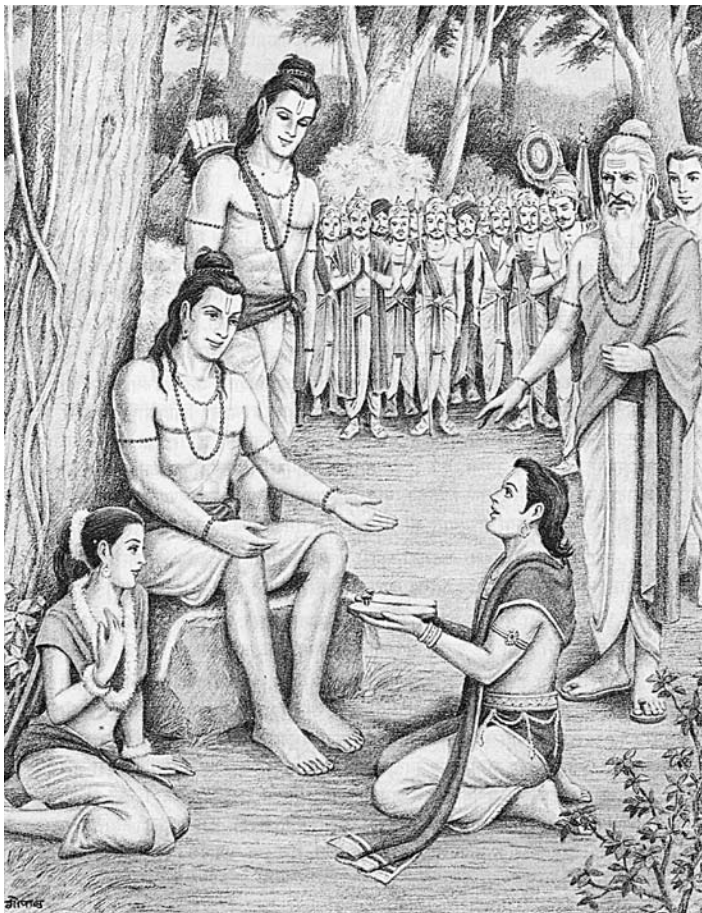
Bharat: Dedicated and Detached

Maharaj Dasharath was shocked beyond belief when Rani Kaikeyee spelt out her two demands. He was overwhelmed with grief. He repeatedly pleaded with her to relent or ask something else. But Kaikeyee was adamant. Dasharath in his grief abused and condemned her. But she wouldn't relent. Dasharath was certain that even Bharat would reject Kaikeyee's atrocious demands outright. Said he,

"Bharat would never be a party to your pursuit of these evil objectives. If he truly is my son, then he would never, never be a party to this evil plan of depriving his beloved Ram. Bharat shall never occupy the throne obtained for him in this foul manner. He will consign this crooked plan of yours to dust." Dasharath's agony was like that of a trapped elephant. No amount of pleading or lamenting was of any avail. Kaikeyee remained unyielding in her two demands. Shree Ram, Seeta and Lakshman had to go into exile. Maharaj Dasharath could not bear the painful parting from Ram who was dearer to him than life, and passed away. The royal family's guru Maharshi Vasishth sent for Bharat who was at his maternal grandfather's house in the kingdom of Kekaya. Bharat knew nothing of the events in Ayodhya till he met his mother, Kaikeyee. He learnt of her manipulations for the throne for him by sending Ram to the forest and exploded with wrath condemning Kaikeyee in the vilest of terms for her actions. He truly lived up to his late father's judgment about his character and refused outright to accept the throne of Ayodhya.

Bharat duly performed the last rites of Maharaj Dasharath. Then Guru Vasishth called a conference of the cabinet ministers, officials and prominent citizens. Everybody was of the opinion that security of kingdom was most important. If there were no king to occupy the throne, enemies would try to take advantage. Bharat was asked to immediately occupy the throne as king. But in spite of every effort to persuade Bharat, he was steadfast in refusing to accept the throne. He firmly declared, "All of you are elder to me in age, knowledge and experience. You have been instrumental in taking care of our kingdom and people. It cannot be and should not be without a ruler. I intend to leave tomorrow to meet Ayodhya's legitimate king and bring him back. No one excepting Shree Ram will sit on the throne of Ayodhya."

Bharat's resolve received an overwhelming response. He had acquired the kingdom with no effort and yet he had discarded his right as if it were no more than a piece of straw. He was firm on returning it to its rightful heir. Bharat then set out to locate, meet and bring back Shree Ram. His troupe included the ministers, prominent citizens, and the army. With the help of Guha, the boatman and others, he crossed the river. He searched for and found Chitrakoot Mountain where Shree Ram was staying in his ashram with Seeta and Lakshman.



The moment he saw Shree Ram sitting with Seeta, Bharat rushed to him as a child would, to meet his mother being missed for a long time. He fell and wept like a child. Shree Ram tried to pacify Bharat. He picked him up with great effort and held him in a close embrace. When the brothers were at ease, Shree Ram asked about their father, Maharaj Dasharath who was not seen. When informed that their father had breathed his last, Shree Ram, Lakshman and Seeta were overwhelmed with grief for a long while. Formal religious rituals were then completed for their departed father. All stayed together for some days. When it was time to return, Bharat asked Shree Ram to accompany him back to Ayodhya and ascend the throne.

"Ram, the throne of Ayodhya is yours by right. You must become the king and protect us. You must come back with us. We have come with this sole purpose."

"Bharat, our father had promised two boons to Mother Kaikeyee. To fulfil them is our joint responsibility. It will enhance the reputation of the Ikshwaaku Dynasty. You must ascend the throne of Ayodhya. I will certainly come back to Ayodhya to accept the throne but after completing these fourteen years of exile as promised," said Shree Ram.

Bharat however, was adamant and said, "I shall not return to Ayodhya without you. If you have decided to stay in the forest then like Lakshman, I too shall stay with you. I will not go back

alone.”

“Don’t be adamant, my young brother. As I have said, both of us have to fulfil our father’s promise. This is our dharma. We are just human puppets in the hands of destiny. We have to act as destined. Our father’s death or my coming to forest appears as sudden development to us but it is not so. It is according to the wishes of the Divine. Don’t be dejected. No kingdom can be without a king. It would be just like a flock of sheep without a shepherd, or a disheveled bundle of straw. You must therefore immediately go back to Ayodhya, ascend the throne and rule wisely and well. This is necessary in order to safeguard the prosperity and glory of Ayodhya and the Raghu Dynasty. Don’t blame yourself in anyway for what has happened for it is no fault of yours,” explained Shree Ram, trying to persuade Bharat to listen to him.

Bharat was steadfast in his refusal of the throne. The throne was Shree Ram’s alone. Bharat firmly stuck to his stand and refused to budge even an inch. Shree Ram had to resolve this emotional dilemma by firmly requesting Bharat to accept responsibility for ruling Ayodhya as his representative. Finally, Bharat had to relent, although with a very heavy heart. He said to his elder brother, “Ram, I shall respect your wishes and go back to Ayodhya. But I shall never sit on the throne, which belongs to you and you alone. I shall administer Ayodhya as a caretaker, as your representative. I shall wear the garb of a hermit just like you and live on a diet of fruits and roots. My residence shall be Nandigram outside the city. I shall carry out my responsibilities faithfully for fourteen years, but if you delay your return for even a single day, your younger brother will end his life by entering fire.”

Bharat’s selfless sacrifice and his supreme love and devotion for Shree Ram moved everyone. All those present shed tears of joy. Shree Ram affectionately embraced Bharat and blessed him. Bharat then said, “Give me your *paadukas* (wooden sandals), lord. They shall occupy the throne of Ayodhya until your return and be my guide and inspiration to help me fulfil this most difficult responsibility you have placed on me.” The heavens resounded with praises of Bharat.

Bharat returned with his army to Ayodhya, holding Shree Ram’s *paadukas* on his forehead as a mark of supreme devotion to Ram. He placed the divine sandals on the throne of Ayodhya but himself moved to Nandigram on the outskirts of the city, to rule the kingdom in Shree Ram’s name. Bharat clad himself in bark, lived on a sparse diet of fruits and berries and resided in a thatched hut. True to his unshakeable devotion to Shree Ram, Bharat completely gave up the material comforts of a princely life and lived like a detached soul for fourteen years.

Days, months and years passed. The period of wait, which appeared endless, finally came to an end. Fourteen years had gone by. Yet there was no word from Shree Ram. Neither did he appear nor was there any message. The evening of the last day was slowly fading into night.

“This shall be the last night. If Shree Ram does not arrive, I am going to end my life entering fire,” decided Bharat. He even ordered a pyre to be kept ready. Meanwhile, the royal attendant said, “An old man wants to meet you.” “Send him in.” The old man made his appearance. He enquired Bharat about his well-being. “With Shree Ram’s blessings, everything has gone well so far. I have looked after this kingdom, as his representative to the best of my abilities. Today marks the end of the fourteen-year period of Ram’s exile. He has not returned despite his promise. Shree Ram’s word is as true as the sun, moon and other heavenly bodies and the elements. But if I do not hear about him till sunrise, this pyre is ready. I shall enter it and end my life.” Bharat replied solemnly.

The old visitor was deeply touched by Bharat’s emotions, his sentiments, commitment and affectionate respect for Shree Ram. The very next moment, the ‘old man’ vanished and his place stood a very gigantic person. It was none other than the mighty Hanuman, the son of *Vaayu* (the wind-god), who had come in an old man’s appearance to meet Bharat.

Hanuman introduced himself. He told Bharat about Ram’s arrival, being just a mile away from Ayodhya. Then he narrated the entire sequence of events during the period covering Seeta’s abduction, the war with Ravan and his slaying. Bharat’s joy knew no bounds when he heard that his beloved Ram was coming home at last. He got up and began issuing order after order. Ayodhya woke up after years of sorrowful slumber to receive Shree Ram with unprecedented joy. The golden royal chariot was readied. The full army regalia marched ahead with singers, dancers, and musicians to receive Shree Ram, Seeta and Lakshman.

Shree Ram and Bharat had an emotional reunion. They clasped each other in a tight embrace for a long time. Then Bharat embraced Lakshman, Sugreev and Vibheeshan. Bharat then touched Ram’s feet saying, “Revered elder brother, accept back the kingdom of Ayodhya. Relieve me of the responsibilities and the promise that you had bound me with. Forgive me, if I may inadvertently have committed any blunder.” Bharat could not speak any more as he was overwhelmed with joy. The whole group proceeded towards Ayodhya immediately after that.

Lesson to Ponder

The world's history is full of instances of deceit, sabotage and treachery committed for the sake of grabbing kingdoms, wealth and power. Evil plans, murderous attempts, killings, burying or burning human beings alive and cruel and inhuman tortures like bricking up human beings alive in graves and tombs, etc. can be found in plenty throughout the history of many countries and civilizations. But it is in Bharat and Bharat alone (our India) that we can come across a Bharat who spurns a throne, a whole kingdom that has landed at his feet without even a moment's hesitation. Not only that, he returns it to his elder brother because Shree Ram's love, affections and trust mean everything to him. A mere kingdom is nothing compared to these ideals. Bharat did accept the responsibility of ruling Ayodhya but only because Shree Ram wished that he should do so.

Bharat rules Ayodhya with complete detachment, enjoying not even the pleasure of a common man's life. He stands out in a shining way as a model and an ideal of detachment, sacrifice, dedication and outspokenness.

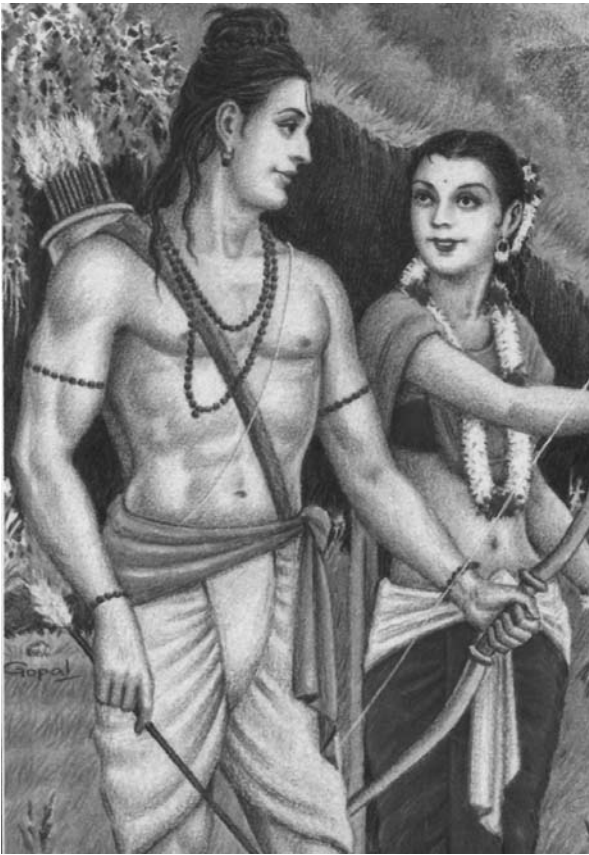
Simple and small things can create temptations in the human mind. They may be money, gifts, and power of position or many other things. The mind works, sometimes continuously, to get insignificant things in life for which designs are prepared for procurement. Temptations become uncontrollable and lead us to sin and destruction without our knowing it.

Bharat should be an example before us to teach us the noblest aspects of a human being's character. He is the ultimate example of selflessness, devotion and brotherly duty.

4. THE IDEAL WIFE

Seeta

“Shree Ram is to be anointed as a *yuvraj* (crown prince) tomorrow”, the maids told Janaki (Seeta). She was elated. Vasishth Muni was the *Kulacharya* – the advisor and Guru for the whole



family and royalty. He had come personally to tell her what she was expected to observe by way of rites, rituals, fasting and prayers since she, automatically, would also be anointed as a *yuvargyee* (crown princess). She was asked to be ready early next morning with the things told. The dawn of the ceremonial day arrived but no messenger or maid came to invite or to take her for the function. Janaki had got up early, had performed whatever she was told to. It was to be a day of celebrations but a queer silence prevailed. The wait seemed long but it ended with the announcement of Shree Ram’s arrival. Her husband came but today did not appear to be his usual self with his pleasant and smiling expression. It appeared rather brooding and serious.

Shri Ram addressed her somewhat haltingly when they were alone. He said, “Janaki, our respected Pitashree (father) has pronounced two commands. The first is that Bharat is to be anointed as crown prince instead of me and secondly, I have to go to the forest for fourteen years. I shall undertake this journey today itself.”

Seeta did not show the slightest trace of sadness or shock. She calmly replied, “Oh, so you have made a decision. It must have been after due thought. But how did all this happen, and that too so suddenly? Please do tell me.”

Shree Ram briefly narrated the entire sequence of events that had just taken place. He then asked her consent for his departure.

Janaki said, “The question of my consent for your proceeding into exile does not arise. It would have been needed if I were to stay back. But

I am not; I am coming with you. Wherever Raghav (Ram) goes, Janaki (Seeta) will be with him. We are inseparable; indeed one, be it the palace or the forest. I will always be with you, living as you would. I am coming with you.”

Ram tried to dissuade her, saying, “Seeta, your delicate body will not be able to cope with the harsh and tough forest life. No material comfort will be available to you in the jungles. There would be neither a palace for your stay nor maids to serve you. You will have to stay in the open, combating the rain and breeze, the cold and sun apart from living in fear of wild animals, not to speak of Rakshasas. There is no saying whether even food would be available daily. You will not be able to withstand all this. You must stay back and look after the king and our mother queens. Hence you should stay back.”

Seeta however was not going to listen to any argument of her husband. She firmly replied, “My body will not be affected by the rigours of nature. I can face any discomfort with you at my side. Do you imagine for even a moment that I can be happy without you? No, my lord. Seeta cannot live without Ram for even an instant. My presence will not be a hindrance to you. I shall totally adjust to your forest life and duty. I shall walk as fast as you and shall smilingly live, as you would keep me. But be assured of one thing. I shall not live for even a moment without you.”

Ram tried to persuade her to stay back. He reminded her about her duties towards in-laws, duty of being the eldest daughter-in-law, wife of the eldest prince, etc. Once again, he also elaborated the hardships and dangers to be faced in the forest life.

Janaki listened to him very patiently. But her decision was firm. She said, “You have spoken about my duties in various relationships. But lord, my duty as your wife surpasses all other roles of a daughter, daughter-in-law, princess etc. My duty as a wife is supreme for me. Although you have described in detail what I will have to face, I don’t fear any trouble when you are with me. I shall endure them all with a smile. I am also concerned about your reputation. If I stay back, people are bound to say that Ram went into exile alone because he was incompetent to protect his consort from Rakshasas and wild beasts. Any slur on your reputation will hurt me even more than death. I cannot live without you. I will not stay back. Please do not condemn me

to death like this.” Seeta shed tears while saying this.

Janaki’s arguments were flawless. Her determination was unwavering. Shree Ram had to consent to her accompanying him. When she wanted to don the bark of the tree, Maharshi Vasishtha said, “The conditions of stay in forest do not apply to Janaki. She can continue wearing royal clothes and ornaments. I order that even in the forest, she should dress and live like a princess.”

Seeta respectfully replied, “Gurudev, your order is a divine command for me. But you must forgive me. I am determined to live and eat as my husband. I do not wish to offend you. Please pardon me and do not impose such a condition on me. I will be most pleased if I can follow my husband.”

Maharaj Dasharath was listening to this conversation. He saw Janaki wearing the garb made of tree bark. He had also heard Guru Vasishtha’s order Seeta’s reply. With great effort he said in a grieving voice, “Maithili my daughter, Guru Vasishtha is right; you will wear royal clothes as well as ornaments. Your duty and love towards your husband would in no way be affected. As your father-in-law, having the same right as your father, I command you to continue wearing royal garb, even in the forest accompanying Ram.”

King Dasharath then ordered for and got the best of the clothes and ornaments. Seeta took them with her. Then she left in the royal chariot for the forest along with Shree Ram and Lakshman.

Seeta lived very happily in the forest. She was completely unmindful of any discomfort or hardship. Not only that, around their *kutee* (small hut) she planted a small garden with creepers and flowerbeds creating a heavenly atmosphere. She loved birds and animals and affectionately looked after them, playing with them and feeding them also serving her husband. Shree Ram and Lakshman, meanwhile, continuously eliminated the Rakshasas from their domain. In the process, Shoorpnakha was disfigured. This provoked Ravan to abduct Seeta. While she was being carried away by air, she tore a part of her *saree* and tied some of her ornaments and threw them down. Seeta’s ornaments landed on the Rishyamook Mountains, where the Vanars happened to see it. When Shree Ram came searching for her, these ornaments were of immense help in providing him a definite direction and clue regarding her whereabouts.

Ravan kept Seeta captive in the Ashok Van. He asked her to accept him, sometimes imploring her and threatening her at other times. But Seeta minced no words in condemning him and dismissing his entreaties and threats. She held a piece of straw in front of her face while speaking to Ravan. Owing to an earlier curse, Ravan was afraid of even touching her. He tried to win Seeta’s mind by a display of his limitless wealth and awesome power. The day Hanuman reached Lanka in search of her, Ravan visited the Ashok Van in the early hours of the morning, dressed in fine robes and accompanied by his many wives, led by his chief queen Mandodari. He ridiculed and condemned Shree Ram who, according to him was just a loiterer in the forests without any possessions or power. His message to Seeta was: “Consent to be my wife, Seeta. Look at my wealth, my golden Lanka, powerful and unconquerable. Look at these many wives of mine, each one more beautiful than heavenly damsels. Look at their robes and their ornaments. If you become mine, all of them, including Mandodari, will serve you as your attendants. Accept me as your lord and rule over Lanka as its empress. Powerful Rakshasas shall wait to fulfil each and every desire of yours.”

“Don’t waste your life pining for that Ram. What has he given you after all? A miserable forest life devoid of even the basics of simple life, a life full of difficulties! What else has he got to give you? You can forget that weakling Ram. He is a nobody when compared to me, Ravan, the conqueror of the three worlds. The *Devas* in heaven, rishis and human beings, indeed all creation trembles upon the mere mention of my name. Ram is no match for me in any respect. Be sure that he can never find you now. Therefore be wise and become mine.” Ravan was sure that Seeta had lost courage and would yield to him.

But Janaki’s reply to the Rakshasa king was according to her pious and lofty character. Holding the piece of straw, she addressed him and said in a solemn but serious voice: “O Lord of Lanka, Ravan. You have completely forsaken dharma. That is why you utter such words. What you have done is a great sin, one that will destroy you and the Rakshasa race. Do not try to impress me with your wealth and power. Remember, I am Raja Janak’s daughter and Maharaj Dasharath’s daughter-in-law. I am the consort of Lord Ram, who is my very life. I cannot even dream of being separate from him, even for a second.”

“Your powers have made you conceited and arrogant. My father-in-law Maharaj Dasharath had defeated the Asurs while helping the gods long ago. Have you forgotten that? Ram is the eldest son of Maharaj Dasharath and his power and valour have no parallel in the three worlds. You have behaved like a thief by abducting me. You cannot understand the greatness of a person who sacrifices an entire kingdom and accepts tortuous forest life to fulfil his father’s promise. These queens of yours stand here out of fear of you. Ravan, you are the son of the great Rishi Vishravas. You are yourself a learned scholar of the Vedas. So do not forsake dharma. Remember, I am Janaki, wife of Shree Ram, who is of impeccable character, unparalleled strength, and an

ideal in every respect. I am his alter ego. You are deliberately incurring his enmity. This will cause your destruction. Shree Ram will never take my abduction lying down. So be wise, restore me to him and make peace with him.”

Ravan was angry at Seeta’s reply, particularly in the presence of Mandodari and the other queens and their attendants. He said in a threatening voice, “Seeta, you have not given up your stupid obstinacy even after living in imprisonment for ten months. I give you two more months’ time. If you do not agree to become my wife then I will cut your delicate body into pieces have you for my food. Think about this carefully.”

Ravan went back to his palace after issuing this dire threat to Seeta.

Hanuman was watching the whole drama hidden in a treetop nearby. When the opportunity presented itself, he came down. He introduced himself to Seeta and spoke to her, giving her Shree Ram’s message as well as hope. Seeta’s joy knew no bounds. She got a fresh lease of confidence. Later, Shree Ram and Lakshman arrived in Lanka with the huge Vanar army, defeated and killed Ravan in war and rescued Seeta.

Seeta returned to Ayodhya with Ram. He was crowned king and Seeta became the empress of Bharat, occupying the throne with Ram. The days of trial and tribulation and turbulence were over and happy days had come again. Later, Seeta was pregnant. She then felt like moving in open places, breezy areas, and desired to roam the mountain ranges. Ram and the others were ready to do her bidding.

One evening, Lakshman came to her palace. He told her to be ready the next day. They had to leave for the banks of the Ganga early in the morning. When Lakshman arrived, Seeta was ready. She wanted to meet Ram but strangely found Lakshman struggling to even speak properly.

Seeta in her excitement joy did not notice anything. She boarded the royal golden chariot. It took more or less the same route of fourteen years back. Old memories surfaced. Lakshman hardly spoke and avoided looking in her direction. They crossed the river Ganga. It was evening when they reached Rishi Valmiki’s ashram. The chariot halted. Lakshman requested Seeta to sit under a tree. With folded hands and tears in his eyes, he stood before her.

Seeta was surprised and perturbed. She asked Lakshman, “Lakshman, what is the matter? Why are you standing like this so downcast? Why are you crying? What is wrong? Tell me.”

Sobbing, Lakshman somehow mustered courage to tell her the truth. With a voice laden with emotion, he said, “You are aware that the welfare of the people is uppermost in Shree Ram’s mind. For this purpose, even one’s own happiness or that of our nearest and dearest may have to be sacrificed without any thought or grudge. In Lanka, you were made to undergo the ordeal by fire. It isn’t that Shree Ram doubts your purity. He is absolutely certain of your chastity in his mind. He is also aware of the hurt and agony this will cause you. And yet he has made a decision to convince the people so that they may not raise a finger of doubt. And now here I am, to carry out one of his most painful orders. He did not allow me to question him, ordering me to meekly submit. Janaki, despite your purity and chastity like the Ganga, a certain washerman has made a nasty comment, casting aspersions about your character. Shree Ram decided to banish you upon hearing of this. You know him intimately. He will want an endorsement free of any blemish from the people. You must forgive him. This is the most painful moment of my life. Please forgive me, Janaki.”

Seeta didn’t understand for a moment what was said, and when she could, it was as if lightning had struck her. Her grief knew no bounds. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She wondered, “Where should I go? Where can I go?”

Lakshman, who revered her, was at his wits end. He cursed himself angry at his helplessness. Unable to bear his own sorrow, he started driving his chariot away. Seeta was left all alone in the forest with no living creature in sight.

After Seeta recovered she consoled herself saying, “Probably there was no other choice and that is why, my dearest, you must have made this decision. I am sure about it. Your duty must come first. I am not sorry at what has happened, since I know your mind. We shall always reside in each other’s heart and soul. But it would have been better if you could have told me. I could have willingly accepted this decision. This is what hurts me. I am carrying the heir to our lineage. I shall make our children as strong and competent as you. I, your wife, Janaki, affirm this with all the forest deities and our ancestral souls as my witnesses.”

Controlling herself, Seeta reached Maharshi Valmiki’s hermitage just as it was getting dark.

She respectfully bowed to Maharshi Valmiki and said, “My husband is wedded to people’s welfare as an ordained duty. I have decided to reside in the forest to help him fulfil his duties unhindered. But I am also carrying the heir apparent of the Raghu Dynasty. Please do accept me as your daughter and let me have this ashram as my own parental home.”

Maharshi Valmiki was also a seer. He blessed her by placing his hand over her head and led her inside the ashram.

Urmila

Lakshman reached Urmila's palace to bid farewell to her. His mother Sumitra accompanied him. Urmila had come to know about all the developments. So she had changed into a garb made of tree-scalp and was actually waiting for her husband. As soon as Lakshman came, she made offered him a seat and applied vermilion on his forehead and then washed his feet. Lakshman was silent for a while. Then Urmila stood before him and respectfully said, "I am fully ready to accompany you. Let us set out."

Lakshman asked her, "Urmila, what are you referring to?"

"Why, accompanying you to the forest, of course," replied Urmila.

Lakshman dissuaded her, saying, "You will not be able to cope with the hardships there. It is very risky, too. You must stay back in Ayodhya."

"I and Seeta are of the same blood. Do you think that I shall not be able to cope with the dangers and discomforts in the forest which Seeta would be easily able to? I am also made of such stern stuff. I too can stand up smilingly to the tough conditions of the forest. Hence I am also coming with you into exile."

Lakshman was quiet for a moment when he listened to this very self-confident resolve of Urmila. Then, after a little while he said, "Urmila, everybody including myself is aware of your strength. I know your mind and devotion to me. But Urmila, I have on my own undertaken the duty of serving Shree Ram and Janaki all the time, during this exile. This being the case, I will not be able to look after you. My attention and dedication towards both may suffer. It is also your duty to help me in my duty. When I am away with Shree Ram and Janaki in the forest, who would look after mothers Kausalya and Sumitra plus our Pitashree Dasharath? In my absence you will have to take over my role. You must do this for my sake. I am sure that you shall not refuse. That would be your *patni dharma* (duty as a wife). Consider this as a *tapasya* (penance). I shall be doing it in the forest while you do likewise in the palace. We will definitely be rewarded after fourteen years."

Urmila had no argument to counter this. Her husband's wish was a command, to be obeyed without question. She suppressed all her desires, emotions, words and dreams. She touched Lakshman's feet with deep respect. After Lakshman left, Urmila collapsed in the arms of Sumitra, her body shaking with sobs.

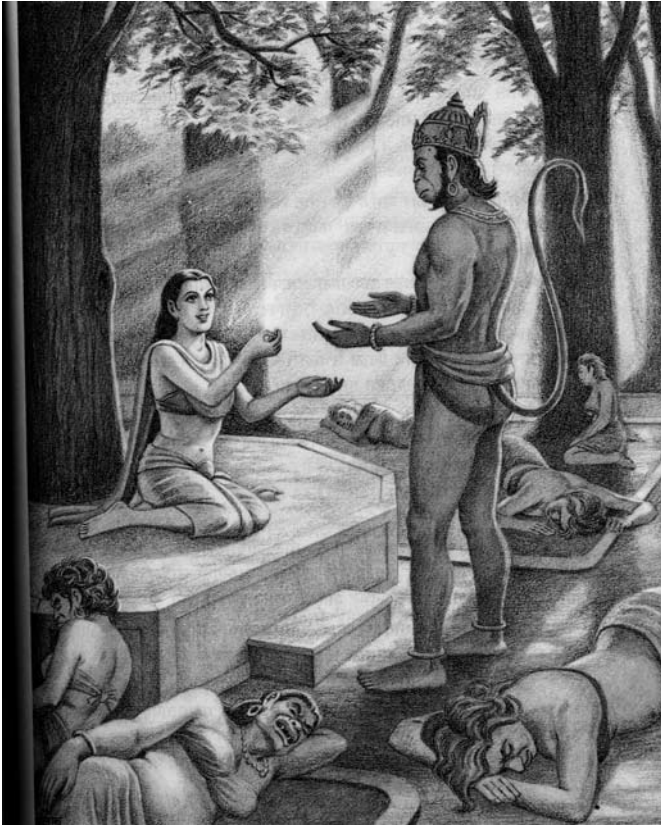
Lesson to Ponder

Two wives of two outstandingly towering personalities. Both were of firm determination, unwavering nature and tremendous self-control. One was silent in her tolerance; the other was sparkling in her dominance. Those men are able to achieve laurels whose wives know them, understand them and are with them completely.

We know of some great personalities ? Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Swatantryaveer Savarkar, Maharshi Karve and many others. They rendered monumental and unforgettable service for the community, society and the nation. One of the reasons for their glorious success is that their wives could understand the purpose of life, their mission and the attendant suffering and tolerance. Their wives remained anonymous, never came to the forefront with any mention while quietly suffering, tolerating smilingly the trials that befell them. And yet they remained firm behind their husbands for their cause throughout their lives, surrendering everything. There are innumerable such examples. How was it possible? How did they do it? From where did they derive this mental strength and determination? How could they accept all trails and sorrows with a free will? The answer lies in the examples set by Seeta and Urmila and their shining character. Rajmata Jijabai even stayed away from Shahji Raje, to mould Chhatrapati Shivaji's personality. Living her second exile, Seeta single-handedly brought up (under Maharshi Valmiki's guidance) Luv and Kush who distinguished them in all facets. The Ramayan has provided and continues to provide direction and guidelines for values, noble character, and all traits that can help one become great. The Ramayan, therefore, stands out as a pillar of guidance for immemorial human existence.

5. THE IDEAL COMMUNICATOR AND TRUSTED ALLY

Hanuman



The Rishyamook Mountains stood tall, almost touching the skies. From their tops, one could observe the surrounding areas up to a considerable distance. There were thick and extensive forests surrounding the mountains. There was a very clear and distinct path visible at the end of one of these thick forests leading toward the Pampa Lake. Anyone wanting to approach the mountains had to take this path. One day the Vanar soldier on watch noticed something different. He pointed it out to Vanar leader Sugreev. Two persons were headed that way. They were clad in robes made of the bark of tree. Both were well equipped with arms, especially mighty bows.

Sugreev lived on Rishyamook under a pall of fear from his brother Vaali. When Vanar guards brought him news of the two armed strangers approaching, Sugreev summoned his most trusted minister and companion Hanuman and said: "I think these two men have been deputed by Vaali to kill me. They are very well armed and appear extremely strong and skilled. I am terribly apprehensive. Do go and find out who they are. If they are enemies, finish them off. Or misguide them in such a way that they lose track and disappear elsewhere. Only you are capable of dealing with this situation."

Hanuman climbed down from the mountain on his king's command. The two armed strangers had by that time entered the forest's vicinity. They were a little tired. They wanted to regain

their stamina fully before starting the tough upward climb and as such had decided to take a little rest under the shadows of the trees on the edges of a small brook running nearby. Hanuman observed them from a distance. Both resembled each other in appearance but the elder one appeared more intelligent and with an impressive aura of confidence, valour and wisdom. A tall and well-built body, broad shoulders, long arms, the heavy bow and a variety of arrows in his quivers indicated his valourous background. The younger one also had an impressive aura. He appeared both modest and commanding. His forehead however spoke of his aggressive nature. Their personalities revealed them to be of persons with assertiveness and commanding authority, and certainly not those serving under anyone else. They bore a royal personality with competent grooming. They were discussing something. Hanuman wanted to hear what they were saying. He waited for a while and then came forward to meet them. He heard them referring to Sugreev, Seeta, Ravan, Ayodhya etc. Hanuman immediately knew that these two impressive persons must be the princes of Ayodhya. Seeta must be the wife of the elder one and Ravan must have treacherously kidnapped her. It appeared that they were searching for her and wished to meet Sugreev and seek his help. Their search for Sugreev must have brought them to Rishyamook.

Hanuman, the son of Vaayu (the wind god) was very intelligent and wise. Sugreev's elder brother Vaali had driven him out of his kingdom of Kishkindha. Sugreev could regain his right with the help of these two very powerful princes in return for assistance to them in their time of distress.

Meanwhile, the two were about to go further up when Hanuman approached them in the guise of a pious and learned Brahmin. He struck a conversation with Lakshman. Very shrewdly, Hanuman gathered all-important information about them. Shree Ram was also naturally drawn to the respectful, coherent, learned and focused manner of speech and presentation of Hanuman and asked Lakshman to get as many details from Hanuman as possible. After a little while Ram said, "O learned Brahmin! You speak very logically, clearly and faultlessly. You are certainly not an ordinary Brahmin. You seem to be a highly learned and well versed statesman."

Upon hearing this, Hanuman revealed his true self and bowed to Lord Ram. He said, "O Prabhu (Lord), I am Vaayuputra Hanuman (Vaayu means wind, also the wind god). I am king Sugreev's minister. His elder brother Vaali has usurped his kingdom

and wife and driven him out. Will you assist Sugreev? Please help him to regain his kingdom. Sugreev will certainly help you find out and rescue Mata Seeta.”

Hanuman then took Shree Ram and Lakshman to Sugreev. Sugreev and Ram became friends. Both swore eternal friendship in the presence of fire, and promised to help each other. With Ram’s help, Sugreev became the king of Kishkindha. Sugreev and his Vanar army then went with Ram to Lanka to slay Ravan and release Seeta.

The burning of Lanka

Hanuman surrendered to the *Brahmastra* (the supremely powerful divine weapon) out of respect, although according to Brahma’s boon, even this *astra* (weapons which are discharged) could not harm him. Ravan’s son Indrajit had used this *astra* on him to capture him. This gave him an opportunity to meet Ravan. Hanuman was tied with thick and heavy ropes and produced before Ravan. The Rakshas king was furious with Hanuman since he had destroyed the Ashok Van and killed many Rakshas warriors of repute. Ravan looked at Hanuman with fiercely burning anger, thinking how to punish this Vanar. His eyes blazed with wrath. Controlling himself, he asked Prahast, his commander-in-chief, to question Hanuman.

The son of Anjana replied, “I am Hanuman. I am the son of Vaayu, the deity of wind. I am the minister of Vanar King Sugreev of Kishkindha. Shree Ram of Ayodhya and King Sugreev have become friends. After Shree Ram slew Vali, Sugreev has been crowned king. Upon Sugreev’s orders, our huge Vanar army is on a mission to find out the whereabouts of Shree Ram’s vitruous wife Seeta, who was treacherously abducted by a Rakshas at Panchavati. Kishkindha’s Vanar army has spread out in all directions. O ten-headed Rakshas king! I have come to your kingdom Lanka in search of Seeta. I have been fortunate to meet her. Since I was hungry after my flight over the sea for a distance of over a hundred *yojans* (ancient measure of distance), I rested and refreshed myself in the Ashok Van. Unfortunately, your soldiers attacked me. I had to kill them in self-defence. I have received a divine boon that I cannot be killed or even hurt by any weapon. But I wanted to meet you and that is why I deliberately surrendered to your son’s *Brahmastra*. O King of the Rakshasas! Your personality, wisdom, valour, riches, and prowess are all unparalleled. But you lack righteousness. If you had not forsaken the path of dharma, then you would have been greater than even Lord Indra, the king of celestials.”



“Listen to me, O ruler of the Rakshas race! I speak for your good. It is unfortunate that your strong attributes and the boons you have received from Brahma have made you conceited, arrogant and sinful. This has reduced to naught all your outstanding virtues. That is why you kidnapped Seeta taking recourse to deceit, in a cowardly manner when Ram and Lakshman were not present. O Lord of Lanka, you have been involved in many improper, unethical acts of omission and commission. But this act of yours is the most inglorious. You have unknowingly carried fire in the form of Mother Seeta. This fire will certainly reduce you and your entire kith and kin to ashes. It is still not too late. Realise your folly. Return Seeta to Shree Ram with grace and dignity, seek his forgiveness, win his friendship and thus save yourself and your entire race. Otherwise, your destruction is near. Shree Ram’s bow will send all of you to your doom. Your golden Lanka would then be history. I am just a humble servant of Shree Ram and still your powerful soldiers could not capture me. Maharaj Sugreev has many more powerful warriors. They will readily lay down their lives for Shree Ram’s sake. There is time yet. Send Seeta back to Ram and save yourself.”

Ravan’s anger flared up when he heard these words of Hanuman. He ordered his soldiers to kill Hanuman. However, Ravan’s youngest brother Vibheeshan intervened and told him that such an act was against ethics and statecraft. An ambassador of even an enemy is never to be killed or harmed. When Vibheeshan stressed this aspect, Ravan reluctantly agreed and instead ordered his soldiers to set fire to

Hanuman’s tail, as it was a Vanar’s proud part. Hanuman then set the whole of Lanka ablaze and returned to Shree Ram.

Hanuman meets Bharat

Ravan was killed. Ram was victorious and Vibheeshan was crowned the king of Lanka. Ram's fourteen years of exile was about to be completed. A few more days remained. Seeta had come out unhurt through her ordeal by fire to prove her chastity. Shree Ram accompanied by Lakshman, Seeta, Vibheeshan, Sugreev, Hanuman and all prominent Vanar warriors left for Ayodhya by the *Pushpak Viman* (a divine aerial vehicle. The *Pushpak Viman* belonged to Ravan's stepbrother Kuber. Ravan had him vanquished ages ago and snatched the *Pushpak Viman* from him. After Ravan's death, Vibheeshan lent it to Shree Ram for their quick return to Ayodhya). They had now come close, just a few kilometres away from Ayodhya and halted there. Shree Ram said to Hanuman: "Hanumant, you have successfully accomplished many missions for me. You have done them very skillfully and with least exertion. These tasks required strength, intelligence and tactful handling. You have won my confidence and trust. Now I assign you a very delicate mission. You are adept at reading people's minds; you can very correctly understand and interpret any situation from a person's words or his facial expressions. You are naturally skilled in the selection and use of words. You are always on guard to prevent anything untoward happening to me. The virtues of an ideal messenger are to be found in you. You know that Bharat is staying at Nandigram, on the outskirts of Ayodhya, in a completely detached way."

"Bharat is great in character. But a period of fourteen years can bring about a change in a person's attitudes. If one gets an opportunity to enjoy power for a long fourteen years period, one may change. The eyes reveal the intentions within. So go and meet Bharat. Observe him and talk to him. By observing and interpreting his response you can gauge whether Bharat has changed. If this is indeed the case, inform me immediately."

Hanuman disguised himself as an old man and reached Nandigram. Bharat was busy preparing an *agni kund* (pit of fire). He was despondent and thought; "Shree Ram's exile ends tomorrow morning. He had promised me that he would certainly be back by the stipulated time. If he fails to reach by tomorrow morning, then I shall enter the fire in keeping my resolve."

Hanuman observed him very carefully. He assessed Bharat's mind. Bharat's sentiments and his readiness to enter fire came from the bottom of the heart. There was firmness of conviction and honesty. Bharat's actions revealed his true mind. Hanuman was fully convinced about Bharat's sincerity and frankness. He revealed himself in his original form. He told Bharat that Shree Ram had arrived. He briefly told him about the Ram-Ravan *yuddha* (war), the conquest of Lanka etc. Bharat was overjoyed. Hanuman then left to meet Shree Ram singing platitudes of Bharat.

Angad

The entire Vanar Sena was ready for war. They were waiting for the final command to proceed against the enemy. They were fired up because they were fighting for the right cause and justice. They felt very proud and happy because they were now soldiers in a war against injustice and atrocity. Their faces shone with valour. Then Shree Ram called Angad and told him, "*Yuvraj* Angad, our Vanar army is all set to uphold truth and justice, ready to fight and destroy injustice and wrong-doing. We have very towering warriors like Maharaj Sugreev, Hanuman, Nal, Neel, Jambavan and yourself. You are all eager to free this world of the Rakshasas and their ill deeds. No doubt Ravan has been following adharma and evil practices. But as he is a king we must keep in mind the principles concerning governance and rules of statecraft. We wish to give him one last opportunity. Angad, I want you to be my representative and ambassador. Go and speak to Ravan. Try to affect a compromise. If Ravan agrees to release Seeta with dignity then you may assure him that we shall not go to war against him. He will be pardoned. It is not good to have unnecessary bloodshed. So Angad, use your skills to bring Ravan around to an agreement."

Angad entered Lanka as Shree Ram's ambassador to try and make a truce with Ravan. He attended Ravan's ministerial assembly and sought an audience with Ravan. Angad then said, "O king of Rakshasas, the entire world knows that you have attained divine boons from Brahma and have become very powerful. Your prowess and ability are beyond doubt. Unfortunately, this extraordinary power of yours has not been used for the welfare of humanity, or to uphold, protect and spread Dharma (virtue). You have misused them for serving your vile desires, ambitions and vicious pleasures. You have tried to ruthlessly crush Dharma. You have attacked and imprisoned Devas, the rishis and munis and have harassed innocent human beings. You have invaded kingdoms and regions, killed people, snatched their property, kidnapped their wives and daughters and have enslaved them. To cap all these misdeeds, you have also kidnapped the pious and revered Seeta, wife of Shree Ram of the Ikshvaaku Dynasty."

"O ye powerful king of Lanka! The king of Ayodhya and Seeta's husband has crossed sea of over a hundred *yojans* by constructing a bridge across it. He has arrived here to settle his scores with you and avenge the insult and injustice done to him.

He has the extremely powerful and valourous Vanar Sena with him. Ram and Lakshman had easily killed Rakshasas like Subahu and Tadaka while they were very young. They also destroyed powerful Rakshas warriors like Khar and Dooshan along with their entire army. The same Shree Ram with his equally powerful brother Lakshman and the mighty Vanar army filled with warriors of extreme valour is ready at the gates of Lanka to wage war against you. Hanuman's single-handed burning of your golden city to ashes and destruction of many of your brave warriors happened only recently. Maybe you were too afraid of Shree Ram to stop him when he crossed the ocean with his army."

"Shree Ram has complete confidence in himself. He has faith in **Dharma** and **Truth**. He also follows the ethics of politics and statecraft. Such a noble person wishes to give you a final opportunity. Hand over Seeta with due honour to Shree Ram and prevent your own destruction and that of your entire clan. Ponder over it and act in the best of your interests."

Ravan was enraged when he heard Angad's speech. He ordered his soldiers to kill Angad at once. Angad was quick as lightning. He roared like a lion and struck the floor with his massive right foot with great force. Angad's roar and action were so terrifying that all were completely stunned. Then the son of Vaali then challenged them saying, "Ravan, your end is in sight. That is why you refuse to see reason and act accordingly. No one in your assembly has the strength to kill me. I challenge anyone to shake my foot or move it even an inch; it would be accepted as Shree Ram's defeat and he would immediately leave Lanka without attacking you."

Many Rakshas soldiers tried to uproot Angad's foot but couldn't move it even an inch. They exerted themselves to their utmost but to no avail. The Rakshasas then fell upon Angad with their weapons but he gave them a mighty push and shooed them away like mosquitoes. He then leapt up and flew through the air to return to Shree Ram.

Lesson to Ponder

To some extent, the relations between two kings or two kingdoms are dependent upon their ambassadors. They can make or unmake any relationship. An ideal ambassador is ever vigilant in protecting the interests of his country and that of his ruler in all circumstances. Hanuman, as Sugreev's ambassador won over Shree Ram and led him to form a close and intimate friendship with Sugreev. Then, as Shree Ram's ambassador, he instilled courage and confidence in Seeta, giving her Ram's message and hope. Hanuman reassured Seeta, that very soon Shree Ram would free her from captivity. Ravan was an enemy. Hanuman therefore inflicted a severe psychological blow on his pride and confidence by laying waste Lanka's Ashok Van and killing Ravan's soldiers and his younger son Aksh. That badly damaged the self-confidence and morale of Ravan and his army. Another blow to Ravan from Hanuman was encouraging Vibheeshan to surrender to Shree Ram. Hanuman was assigned a very delicate task to gauge Bharat's mind. He did it very cleverly and well. That brought out Bharat's honesty, sincerity and respect for Shree Ram.

Angad showed his massive strength and self-confidence and justified the trust Shree Ram placed in him. This also convincingly proved his and all the Vanars' loyalty towards Shree Ram.

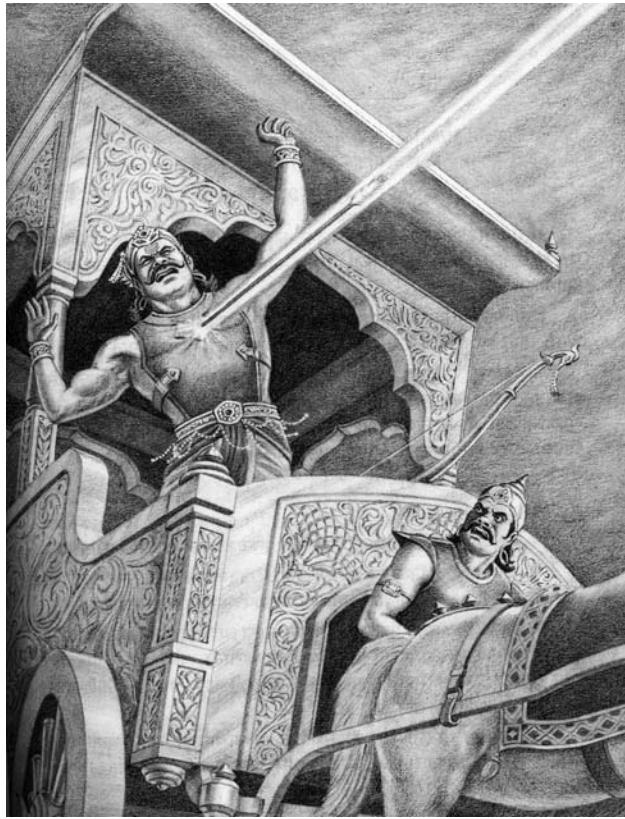
Half the success of any good ruler is dependent in the competence and ability of his ambassadors.

Monarchy has almost disappeared from the earth today. But institutions and organisations exist in some form or the other, and they require intelligent and capable representatives too. Organisations may be of class or community, city, state or nation. They may be academic, scientific or business forums. But representation is a fact. It is nothing but the duty of an ambassador. It requires skill, tremendous manoeuvring ability, understanding of human minds and interpreting situations. There have to be calculations, anticipations, moves and countermoves, a distinct manner of speech, submission and a mixture of aggressiveness and defensiveness. One has to take precaution that no damage or harm is caused to one's side. One must never underestimate a rival, never lack in self-confidence. One has to procure maximum information about one's adversaries and competitors. It may be a small school competition or debate, a college game, a plea to the principal, or vital national interests at stake. But we must remember all the tactful qualities as exemplified by Hanuman and Angad. These will prove to be of tremendous worth to our nation and us.

6. THE IDEAL FOLLOWER OF TRUTH

Vibheeshan

Vibheeshan studied the Vedas and Shastras. Ravan and Kumbhakarna too thoroughly studied the Vedas and mastered them from their father Maharshi Vishravas, who was the son of Maharshi Pulastya, one of the *Saptarshis* (the Seven Rishis). Vibheeshan attained boons from Brahma after dedicated penance. Ravan and Kumbhakarna too had obtained boons from Brahma



after severe penance and austerities. But the two elder Rakshas brothers had a malevolent mind and cruel desires. Although Vibheeshan too was a Rakshas, he was quite different in nature from his two brothers. He wanted to use his boons for his own progress and enlightenment. Ravan and Kumbhakarna wanted to use them for conquering the world, depriving people and for their own lust.

When Shoorpanakha came to Ravan after her humiliation at Panchavati at the hands of Ram and Lakshman, he was furious. He wanted to set out at once to kill Ram. But one of his ministers Akampan said, “Maharaj, Ram is a very formidable warrior. It is not possible to defeat him in open combat. Lakshman, his brother is equally well versed in the use of arms. Hence, desist from the thought of attacking Ram. Use a different strategy. Shoorpanakha has just described the beauty of Ram’s wife Seeta. Kidnap her by any means. Ram cannot bear separation from her. Her loss would make him so dejected that he would end his life.”

But Ravan liked Akampan’s suggestion very much. Acting according to his crooked advice Ravan kidnapped Seeta with the help of Marich and imprisoned her in Lanka’s Ashok Van. Vibheeshan felt angry, sad and apprehensive. He felt that Ravan’s misdeeds might have put Lanka and the Rakshas community in danger. Ravan refused to listen to his advice, which was right and according to the principles of Dharma. Even the remotest suggestion of compromise was not acceptable to Ravan. Kidnapping Seeta was the climax of Ravan’s black deeds. This act

of his upset Vibheeshan completely and he felt very dejected.

Meanwhile, Rakshas spies were gathering information about Shree Ram. As Vibheeshan learnt of this, his mind was drawn towards Shree Ram. Vibheeshan was basically a pious and spiritual Vishnu Bhakt (devotee of lord Vishnu). He foresaw the seeds of Lanka’s destruction in all these actions. He was greatly perturbed. When he had a meeting with Hanuman, he had a little peace of mind.

Vibheeshan was present in the Raj Sabha (royal assembly) when Hanuman was made captive by Indrajit and brought before Ravan. Hanuman was straight and blunt in conveying what he had come to say. Ravan became furious when he heard Hanuman’s words. He wanted to put Hanuman to death immediately. But Vibheeshan intervened to say, “Lord of Lanka, cast aside your anger and listen to what I have to say. Hanuman is Ram’s ambassador. No ambassador should be killed. It is against *Raj Dharma* (principles of statecraft) and is condemned universally. It does not certainly behoove for a great monarch like you. A certain code of conduct is expected of an ambassador. If he deviates from that then physical punishment is permitted like chopping off of limbs, tonsuring or whipping but certainly not the death penalty.”

Ravan then said, “In that case, set fire to his tail because Vanars are very proud of this part of their body.” But after his tail was set on fire, Hanuman played havoc and reduced much of Lanka to ashes.

Ravan called an emergency meeting of his Raj Sabha when he came to know that Ram was marching with his Vanar army towards Lanka. He told them of the events taking place and said, “Hanuman came alone and set Lanka on fire, killing many of our Rakshasas. Now Ram is coming with his entire army of Vanars to make war upon us. All of you are powerful warriors, with whose help I have defeated the Devas, Asurs, Gandharvs, human rulers and the three worlds. You are seized of the matter. Ponder over it and counsel me as to what should be done now.”

If a king follows a rightful path, then his advisors follow him and also tender righteous guidance. When the king himself has a tyrannical bent of mind, then his advisors too misguide him by flattering him and encouraging tyranny. In Ravan’s case, his

advisors did exactly that. They said, "O mighty and unconquerable lord of the three worlds! Why do you worry about this puny Ram? Who is he after all? Everyone fears you for your valour. You have vanquished Indra, Kuber (deity of wealth; also Ravan's stepbrother) and Yama (the presiding deity of death). What are Ram, Lakshman, Sugreev and their Vanars compared to your power? You need not lose any sleep over Ram's coming here. Leave it to us, we will certainly finish off Ram and his army in time at all."

Then all the Rakshas warriors in Ravan's assembly started boasting trying to outdo each other. All of them were of the unanimous opinion that it would be child's play to crush Ram's Vanar army. Such childish boasting finally became unbearable for Vibheeshan. He got up and standing before Ravan with folded hands, said, "Brother! It will not be proper to underestimate Shree Ram and Kishkindha's army of Vanars. If one does not assess the enemy's strength properly and becomes overconfident about one's own power, then defeat and destruction are certain to follow. The best recourse, it seems to me, is to return Seeta to Shree Ram. Ram is a follower of Dharma, the righteous path. He is completely well versed in all weapons, unconquerable in war. Lord, I earnestly request you as your brother to adopt the path of righteousness and return Seeta to Ram immediately."

Early next morning Vibheeshan met Ravan and said, "I have been witnessing many and evil omens ever since Seeta has been brought to Lanka. It will be for our good to give Seeta back to Ram."

Ravan said in a self-assured tone, "I am not afraid of anything at all. Even if all the gods come to Ram's aid I shall crush him in no time."

Then again in the assembly of ministers and advisors, Ravan flatly refused to return Seeta and decided to go to war with Ram.

Vibheeshan said, "Whatever you may say, standing up to Ram is not advisable. I once again request you to return Seeta before the Vanars enter Lanka. It is my duty to tender good advice as your brother, well-wisher and minister."

"In this entire assembly there is only one coward and that is you, Vibheeshan. The weakest of the Rakshasas amongst us can easily defeat Ram and Lakshman. You are under the spell of fear," said Ravan's son Indrajit angrily. "Indrajit, you have no manners. You do not know how to talk with elders. You are still immature not at all competent to give advice," Vibheeshan said.

Ravan became very angry to hear Vibheeshan criticising his son in this manner. He shouted, "If some one else had talked like this, he would have been killed the same moment. Shame on you, Vibheeshan! You are jealous of my prosperity, progress and prowess. Brothers and relatives happily relishing their own brother's adverse circumstances should be considered as dangerous and inimical."

When Ravan spoke thus, other Rakshasas in the assembly started abusing Vibheeshan profoundly. Vibheeshan then realised that it was dangerous to live in Lanka any longer. So accompanied by four of his trusted companions, he left Lanka flying through the skies to seek refuge at Shree Ram's feet.

Vibheeshan reached the spot where construction of the bridge to Lanka was in progress. He addressed Sugreev who was present at that time, saying, "I am Vibheeshan, the younger brother of Ravan, king of Lanka and the Rakshasas. Ravan has insulted and driven me out of Lanka because I asked him to follow Dharma and righteousness, and return Seeta to Shree Ram. There are many who will praise and flatter, but rare are those who would speak the truth bluntly, even if unpleasant, but nonetheless beneficial. Those whose destruction is near do not listen to good counsel. For this very reason, I have left behind my kingdom, wife and children and have come seek Shree Ram's refuge."

Sugreev was against Vibheeshan being refuge. However, Shree Ram asked the wise Hanuman's opinion and advice. Hanuman said, "I shall honestly say what I feel. I do not suspect Vibheeshan at all. He carries no ill will. He should be welcomed without suspicion."

Shree Ram accepted Hanuman's opinion and not only gave refuge to Vibheeshan, but also declared him the future king of Lanka. Vibheeshan certainly proved very helpful giving precious advice and guidance in critical situations. This paved the way for Ram's victory. Ravan was slain by Shree Ram. The all-powerful and great Ravan lay prostrate on the earth. Vibheeshan's grief was great. Ravan, after all, was his blood brother. Weeping, he said, "O mighty brother! You conquered the three worlds and enjoyed all prosperities. There was none to equal you. Yet you paid no heed to my advice and followed a very wrong path. The result is before my eyes; he who rested on the most palatial of beds today lies in the dust as result of his misdeeds."

Lesson to Ponder

One has to sometimes make difficult decisions in one's life. On one side, you have your blood relatives with all their selfishness. And on the other side are values that you hold dear. The first can give you temporary happiness while the second has troubles and sorrow awaiting you. But the more difficult path also leads to greater and lasting happiness in the future. Your self-esteem will also increase along your reputation. If we adopt the first path, then our so-called near and dear ones are happy. The decision to follow the other path is creates heartburn for them and they are usually displeased. Vibheeshan was in this very situation. He sided with Dharma and righteousness sacrificing all worldly pleasures, leaving behind his wife, children and his land of Lanka to which he belonged. Many considered him a traitor. He accepted all criticism coolly as a price for siding with truth and honesty. Vibheeshan had no intention of grabbing Ravan's kingdom as clearly proven by his intense grief after Ravan's death.

Sometimes in life we find ourselves at crossroads. We have to make a choice ? truth or falsehood, proper or improper, righteous or otherwise. In such a case, remember Vibheeshan. You may become a target of ridicule but in the final analysis, victory will be yours. Your chosen path would be acceptable to others. Your path will certainly be difficult, if you stand up boldly and bravely, then you will enjoy the fruits of victory.

“Wherever there is truth, there is God and wherever there is God, there is certainly victory.”

7. THE BUNCH OF IDEALS

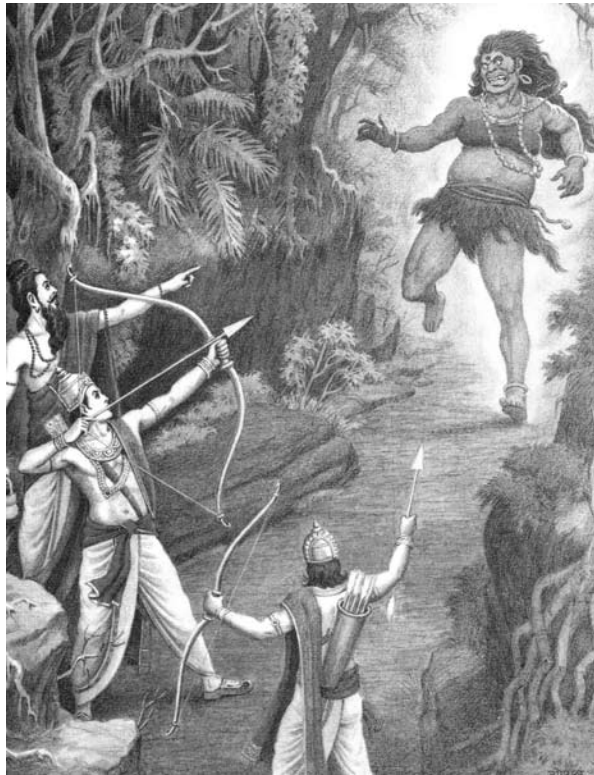
Shree Ram – Supreme Among The Ideals

By the limitless divine grace of the Supreme Almighty upon this sacred land, our timeless nation has had the good fortune of giving birth among many others, to two of the greatest characters that humanity has seen and known, whose greatness and timeless influence automatically draw the human mind and soul into awed submission. Truly, the extent of their qualities and the sheer loftiness of their characters, not to forget the glorious heights of their achievements would naturally lead one to wonder whether such beings can ever be born on this earth. Such is their greatness. As such, this divine land of ours is an ocean of illustrious gems of humanity and yet these two figures remain unrivalled throughout human history. Their deeds on earth have made human beings worship them as God Himself. The passage of thousand and thousands of years has not diminished their hallowed place in the human mind by even an iota.

These two illustrious figures are – Bhagwan Shree Ram, born in Ayodhya to King Dasharath and Rani Kausalya of the Ikshvaaku race and Bhagwan Shree Krishna born in the Vrishni race to Vasudev and his consort Devaki, in Mathura. Although Shree Ram is worshipped as the seventh *Avatar* (incarnation) of Vishnu, in Mahakavi Valmiki's Ramayan, Shree Ram is portrayed more as the ideal human being who has attained the level of divinity. After the slaying of Ravan, the Devas (celestials), Yakshas, Gandharvas, Kinnars, Rakshasas and Vanars surround Shree Ram and begin singing his praises, worshipping him as God Himself. Upon this Shree Ram calmly tells them, "I am Ram, eldest son of King Dasharath of Ayodhya, and a human being." Shree Ram's behaviour, his deeds, his actions and deeds conform to the human mode of activity. However, the greatness and loftiness of those actions are unmistakably of divine nature.

Shree Ram is portrayed in the Shreemad Valmiki Ramayan undoubtedly as the ideal human being. He is the *Maryada Purushottam*, or the embodiment of the ultimate goodness that a human being is capable of attaining. Shree Ram's character is the ideal example of how a human being can attain divinity through his actions and deeds. In the preceding chapters, we have seen a few glimpses of Shree Ram's qualities. We have also had a glimpse of several other noble characters attached to him, but Shree Ram alone is the collective embodiment of all noble and divine qualities. Indeed, if we could remember and follow at least one, if not more, of his qualities, then our own lives would become illustrious.

The Ideal Disciple



"O king, give me your eldest son Ram in order to protect my sacred *yagya*. He alone is capable of protecting my *yagya* from the evil Rakshasas.

Thus spoke Brahmarshi Vishwamitra, causing Maharaj Dasharath to tremble like a leaf in a gust of wind. The king had hoped that perhaps Vishwamitra had come to ask for a donation of land or cows, or some material needs, fulfilling which would have been nothing for the king. But no, the sage demanded nothing but Dasharath's most beloved son, and that too for a most dangerous mission. Although bound by promise to fulfil the sage's request, Dasharath's anxiety showed. So did his natural hesitation.

This did not escape Vishwamitra's attention and the rishi flared up with anger. But before any nasty incident could happen, Brahmarshi Vasisth, the *rajguru*, wisely intervened and addressed the king.

"O king! Vishwamitra is himself capable of taking on those Rakshasas as he is completely well versed in the science of all weapons. If he has invited Ram to defend his sacred *yagya*, then there indeed has to be a higher and noble purpose behind his doing so. Hence, you may send Ram with him without the slightest hesitation or doubt in your mind."

When Shree Ram set out with Vishwamitra, his brother Lakshman who loved him more than his own life accompanied him. On the journey to his ashram, sage Vishwamitra showed them the beauty of Mother Nature, apart from narrating many details to them. On their way, they crossed the

kingdoms of Malav and Karush, which looked desolate. Houses had been destroyed; bones, skulls and remains of human beings were littered all over the place. The two kingdoms were under the spell of fear and sorrow. Upon perceiving the condition of the countryside, Shree Ram asked Vishwamitra the reason for this. Vishwamitra explained thus, "Ram, there existed a mighty Rakshas called Sund. His wife and the mother of Mareech, the terrible Rakshasi Tadaka lives in this area. She is inhuman, cruel and a ferocious being and it is she who has reduced this land to this miserable state."

Even as the rishi was explaining to them thus, the Rakshasi Tadaka burst upon them, showering dust, rotten flesh and a hail of stones. Vishwamitra ordered Shree Ram to slay Tadaka at once, but Ram hesitated in doing so due to the fact that Tadaka being a woman, should not be killed. When Ram expressed his doubts to the rishi, Vishwamitra said, "Tadaka is a terror to this land and its people. In order to put an end to this terror, even of one has to kill a woman, there is no sin attached to it. It is precisely due to this reason that Indra had killed Virochan's daughter Manthara and Bhagwan Vishnu had to slay Shukracharya's mother who was trying to destroy Indra. Therefore, do destroy Tadaka without any hesitation and free the people from her evil tyranny."

A fierce combat ensued between Shree Ram and Tadaka during which Ram used one of his invincible arrows and killed the Rakshasi. Vishwamitra was highly pleased when he saw the end of Tadaka. After that, the powerful rishi taught the science and secrets of innumerable divine weapons to Shree Ram. However, before doing so Vishwamitra taught both Ram and Lakshman the divine mantras of *Bala* and *Atibala*. After learning these two mantras, Ram and Lakshman were free of hunger, thirst; they also became imperishable and invincible in war. Vishwamitra was delighted beyond words when he saw Shree Ram's grasping power and taught both Ram and Lakshman newer and more superior divine weapons, along with the science of their deployment, different uses and also the mantras to discharge as well as to retreat them. In fact, Vishwamitra taught Ram and Lakshman the entire range of weapons along with their divine mantras in his possession and command.

Soon thereafter, the brothers were required to carry out the very duty for which rishi Vishwamitra had brought them from Ayodhya. The Rakshasas, led by Mareech and Subahu attacked the rishi's *yagya*. However, they had to pay dearly this time for their audacity. Shree Ram killed Subahu on the spot while Mareech was thrown into the sea thousands of miles away. Ram and Lakshman then completely destroyed the invading Rakshas force and freed from their terror. Vishwamitra's *yagya* was a grand success.

Lesson to Ponder

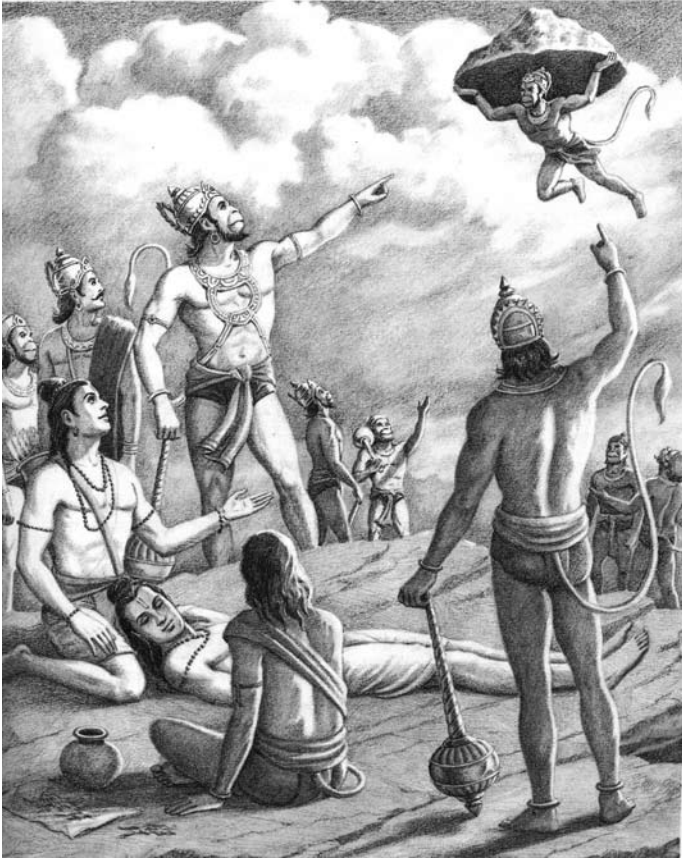
Although Shree Ram did not adopt the more prevalent practice of a prolonged stay in ashram as a student, serving his Guru and the Guru's wife by performing daily chores at the ashram, he was nevertheless able to win his Guru's approval and blessings by his deep and ardent desire for knowledge. Shree Ram displayed evidence of his yearning for knowledge, proved his ability and his prowess in mastering the most difficult of sciences and mantras, as well as winning the blessing of the quick-tempered and harsh disciplinarian Brahmarshi Vishwamitra. He was thus able to master many rare and powerful divine weapons as well as boundless knowledge. Shree Ram stands out as the ideal disciple. Holding him as our ideal, what cannot we achieve if we make our teachers happy and gain their confidence? Acquiring knowledge thereafter is certainly not impossible. We have seen that the son of a poor boatman from a small and remote place has become the President of our country only on the sheer strength of his knowledge.

The Ideal Brother

Immediately after their stay in the forest began, one fine and pleasant morning, Shree Ram and Seeta were sitting on mountain rock in the Chitrakoot forest enjoying the surrounding natural beauty. Nature was in its full bloom with many pleasing and exhilarating colours and forms. The breeze was pleasant so was the fragrance of the flowers and trees. Shree Ram was engrossed in showing Janaki the different sights and scenes in the forest. Both were also engrossed in sweet and pleasant conversation, replete with humour and delight. Lakshman, as usual, was a little distance behind them, engaged in his duty of keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings. He stood on a place, which was situated at a higher level than where Ram and Seeta were seated.

All of a sudden, Lakshman saw signs of a huge assembly of people approaching them from far. He became more alert at once and began looking more closely in that direction. Soon, the pathway to the Chitrakoot Mountain was covered with dust.

Lakshman called out loudly to his brother and Seeta and asked them to be alert. He then quickly climbed up a tree to have a better view, from where he shouted, “Ram, a huge army complete with elephants, cavalry and chariots is approaching us. I can even see its flag and standards. The royal flag of Ayodhya is in the lead on a decorated elephant. It is clear that Bharat is coming here, fully armed in order to finish us off. Therefore, let us be on our guard!”



Quickly coming down from his tree, Lakshman then approached Ram and said, “Take Seeta to the safety of the caves in the mountains. You should remain with her for her protection. I am single handedly capable of stopping and destroying Bharat’s army. Not only that, Bharat too shall today see and feel the power of my bow. But do hurry up and take Seeta to the safety of the caves.”

Shree Ram calmly replied, “Lakshman, do not be excited with anger. Bharat, after returning from his maternal uncle’s home, is coming to meet us. Be assured that there are no feelings of deceit or enmity in his mind.”

“Ram, it is because of Bharat you had to forgo the kingdom of Ayodhya and undergo exile to the forests. Bharat is our enemy and I see no wrong in killing him.” Lakshman, swayed by emotion, in a fit of righteous anger vented his feelings against Bharat, but Ram knew Bharat’s innermost mind very well. He placed his hand on Lakshman’s shoulder and pacified him, saying, “Lakshman, such anger is highly improper. This fury of yours is likely to cause a mishap someday. Bharat is coming here to meet us, as his heart is heavy with sorrow. If you are indeed so concerned about the kingdom, I shall ask Bharat to hand over Ayodhya to you. You shall yourself see that even before I complete my words, Bharat will give the kingdom to you and relieve himself of the burden.”

On listening to Shree Ram’s reasoning, Lakshman fell into regretful silence. Upon seeing Shree Ram, Bharat ran to him like

a lost child upon seeing its mother, and fell at his feet sobbing. He pleaded repeatedly with Shree Ram to return to Ayodhya, but Ram was steadfast in his refusal to break his vow of fourteen years of exile.

Bharat too was equally adamant that he would spend his days in exile in the forest, like Shree Ram. Upon this, Ram explained the dangers of a kingdom being without a ruler for too long and the results of anarchy in a kingdom and its people.

Bharat although agreeing to return to Ayodhya with a heavy heart, refused to occupy the throne. Accepting his wish, Shree Ram gave his *paadukaas* (sandals) to be placed on the throne of Ayodhya while Bharat would rule as his representative.

Lesson to Ponder

Shree Ram is fully aware of the nature of his brothers and knows their innermost minds very deeply. His love and concern for them is like that of a father and mother, i.e. parental in nature and hence his brothers not only obey every word of his unhesitatingly, but also are ready to stake their very lives for his sake. Refusing a whole empire for his sake, as if it were nothing more than a piece of straw does not require even a second thought for his brothers.

It is only when we have a deep and genuine affection for others, love and respect them as we would find our own selves, that others too reciprocate the same love and respect towards us. Shree Ram’s love and concern for his brothers is the perfect example of this. Can we not also have the same love and concern for our brothers, develop the same brotherly understanding and sympathy for their needs and feelings? Even if we may not attain the intense brotherly affection of Shree Ram for his brothers, even a portion of that would enrich our lives. Shree Ram too, lived in this human world. There is therefore no reason why we cannot attain the same ideal brotherhood.

Difficult it may be, but by no means impossible.

The Ideal Husband

After the completion of the marriage ceremony of Shree Ram and Seeta, the whole family had returned to Ayodhya. The entire city of Ayodhya and indeed the kingdom of Kosal were immersed in celebrations for the past eight to ten days.



The people's joy was understandable. All the four princes had been married at Mithila and hence, such a celebration was unlikely to be held for many years to come. For days together, the people were feasting as the guests of the king and royal family. After many days of festive celebrations, things had become quiet and people had returned to the daily routine of their lives. Finding some solitude, Shree Ram too went to meet Janaki in the privacy of their palace.

Seeta, awaiting her husband, was expecting that Ram would bring her some gift, as was the custom. She was therefore eagerly awaiting his arrival. Shree Ram placed an extremely valuable necklace of sparkling diamonds around her neck, upon which her eyes filled with tears of joy. Her face became radiant like a diamond. But Ram had an even more valuable present for his beloved. He said, "I shall present you with something that is more precious than this necklace, something which no ruler of the Ikshvaaku race, or for that matter, any king has gifted to his consort." Janaki's expectation knew no bounds. What more precious gift did her husband have in store for her? Her beautiful face lit up, dimming the lustre of the necklace just presented to her. Her eyes shone with an eagerness to perceive what her husband wanted to give her. Ram got up and stood near the window and said, "Janaki, holding the moon along with the star Rohini the seven star constellation along with Arundhati, all the Devas, the guardian of the quarters, the eight Vasus, the Maruts, my ancestors in heaven, holding them all as witness, I, Dasharath's son pledge to you that other than Seeta, daughter of

Janak, no woman shall share my life. The stars may leave their places in the universe and lose their direction, mountains may move and the oceans may dry up, but Ram shall never budge from his given word."

As soon as Seeta heard these nectar-like words of Shree Ram, she felt that all the gold and silver of the world, and indeed all its wealth was of little worth when compared to this promise of her husband. She was now the ideal queen of an ideal ruler and an ideal husband. Shree Ram lived up to his promise throughout his stay on earth.

Shree Ram had slain Mareech who had come to deceive them assuming the form of a golden deer. After killing Mareech, Ram was hurriedly returning to his cottage in the forest. There was ample reason for him to hurry. Because just as he fell to Ram's arrow, the Rakshas Mareech, imitating Ram's voice had called out to Seeta and Lakshman for help. Ram's mind was filled with anxiety and misgiving as he hastened back to the ashram. However, on the way back, he met Lakshman coming toward him. Ram exclaimed, "Lakshman, I had very clearly forbidden you to leave Seeta alone and unguarded. The forest is full of innumerable dangers and perils, apart from the threat of the Rakshasas, who may attack our cottage. Are you not aware of all this? If any Rakshas attacks the tender and defenceless Seeta and makes a meal out of her, what shall we do? You have committed a grave mistake, Lakshman." Shree Ram's anxiety and misgiving knew no bounds, and although highly angry with his younger brother for his hasty step in leaving the ashram and Seeta alone, he did not give vent to his feelings and hurried back to the ashram. Almost running, they reached the ashram only to find it deserted. Seeta was not there!

"Ah, Janaki, Janaki!" cried Shree Ram upon not seeing his beloved there. Distressed and lost, he looked for her in every possible corner, not knowing what to do, calling out, "Seeta, Seeta, my Janaki" every now and then. When he saw the trees and flowers that Seeta loved, his grief became gushed out like a torrent.

"Lakshman, where shall I now find my Seeta? Where has she gone? Has someone kidnapped her or has some evil Rakshas killed and eaten her? Tell me Lakshman, where is my Seeta? Oh flowers, creepers, trees and branches, deer and other animals, Seeta loved you all very much. Do tell me where my beloved has disappeared. O guardians of the forest! Have any of you seen

my Janaki?”

Sunk in grief thus, Shree Ram began to roam hither and thither caressing trees, touching, embracing and feeling their leaves, branches and flowers. He was completely overwhelmed by grief.

He was now behaving like someone completely immersed in sorrow, and barely conscious of his own physical self. Tears were streaming down his eyes as he kept calling for Seeta again and again. He kept stumbling and falling and Lakshman had to repeatedly support him along with his weapons. Lakshman could not find the words to console his elder brother. He was himself stunned into shocking silence when he saw what his momentary lapse in leaving Seeta alone had brought about. When the ideal of all ideals, the very embodiment of Dharma and the mightiest of all warriors, Shree Ram himself was totally lost in grief over the disappearance of his consort dearer to him than life itself, one can imagine Lakshman's condition.

The brothers then came upon the mortally wounded Jatayu, who had been struck down in his combat with Ravan, while attempting to rescue Seeta from his clutches, When they heard the details of Seeta's kidnapping from Jatayu and the direction that Ravan had taken, both Ram and Lakshman were relieved to learn that Seeta was alive. But Jatayu's heroic effort and his subsequent passing away left them grieving yet again.

After that began the search of Seeta in earnest. Ram and Lakshman entered every forest, waded through rivers, crossed mountains and lakes and visited every ashram in search of Seeta.

They searched every possible place that could be inhabited. The beauty of nature around them, the natural surroundings, flowers, trees, mountains, lakes, tender animals like deer and birds now only made Shree Ram's heart heavy with grief as these reminded him of his beloved Seeta.

Finally, both Shree Ram and Lakshman reached Kishkindha where they befriended Sugreev, king of the Vanars. Ram assisted Sugreev in regaining the kingdom of Kishkindha after slaying his elder brother Vaali, who had forcibly ousted Sugreev and imprisoned his wife. Hanuman became the foremost devotee and confidant of Shree Ram and crossed the ocean to successfully complete the search for Seeta's whereabouts. The Vanar army then constructed a bridge across the ocean and invaded Lanka. Shree Ram fought his epic war against Seeta's kidnapper Ravan and destroyed him along with the entire Rakshas race and thereby rescued his beloved Seeta.

Lesson to Ponder

In an era when having many wives was considered the accepted norm for a man, and was very much the prevalent practice among royal dynasties, and in fact a status symbol for most kings and rulers, adopting a vow to remain devoted to only one woman and observing that vow throughout one's entire life was indeed a divine achievement. So too was Shree Ram's ardent and abiding love for his wife. Such a husband is indeed rare. Later on, Shree Ram had to send Seeta away to the forest, but he could never forget her even for an instant. He had to perform the *Ashwamedh Yagya*, for which one's wife's presence by one's side is mandatory. Shree Ram got a golden idol of Seeta made and used it for his *Ashwamedh Yagya* rituals, but did not marry another woman. There is indeed no aspect of human life for which we cannot look up to Shree Ram as our ideal.

The Ideal Refuge Giver

Vibheeshan, the youngest of the three Rakshas brothers, was of a God-fearing nature and knew the divinity of Shree Ram. He was also of noble character and upright virtue. It was therefore, no surprise that he repeatedly advised his eldest brother Ravan to return Seeta to Ram and seek both his pardon and his friendship. Vibheeshan used several sound arguments and quoted the supremacy of Dharma and wise policy in defence of his stand.

Ravan, however, was sunk in arrogant confidence in his own powers, especially the boons he had obtained from Brahma. How could an ordinary human being like Ram, a wanderer in the forests, even think of challenging him? The very idea seemed laughable to him. He therefore, told Vibheeshan what he thought of his unasked for advice. Not only that, Ravan also insulted him, calling him a coward and a traitor. As if this were not enough, Ravan's son Indrajit also used foul terms to insult Vibheeshan. Ravan's ministers and courtiers too joined the chorus, labeling Vibheeshan as a disgrace to the Rakshas race, a black sheep and a traitor to Lanka. Ravan did not stop at merely abusing Vibheeshan. He kicked his youngest brother out of Lanka.

It was now no longer possible for Vibheeshan to stay on in Ravan's domain. He remembered his meeting with Hanuman, who had assured him that Shree Ram not only offered asylum to those who sought refuge in him, but also placed his trust in



them. He consulted his close companions and then made up his mind to cross over and seek refuge with Shree Ram. Four of his trusted companions accompanied him as he flew across the ocean to the other side, where work on the construction of the Ram Bridge to Lanka was in progress.

Remaining stationary in the sky, Vibheeshan called out to Sugreev. "I am the youngest brother of King of Lanka, Ravan, son of Rishi Vishrawas and grandson of Maharshi Pulastya. I have forsaken my unjust and evil brother and have also left my relatives, dear ones and all my possessions in Lanka and have come to seek refuge in Shree Ram, in order to be part of the effort in the defence of Dharma and virtue. Do therefore, take me to Shree Ram."

Sugreev ordered them to wait in midair. His apprehension was understandable. After all, the newcomer was none other than the younger brother of Ravan, the very enemy they had set out to vanquish. He then proceeded to Shree Ram and informed him of Vibheeshan's arrival and his stated purpose. Sugreev also described the treacherous nature of the Rakshas race to Shree Ram and warned him not to grant asylum to Vibheeshan. Most of the Vanar leaders and warriors supported their King's stand and requested Ram to outright reject Vibheeshan's plea for refuge. The one Vanar who had personally met Vibheeshan earlier and also spoken to him took an entirely different stand. This was none other than Hanuman the Wise. He openly supported Vibheeshan, vouching for his sincerity, truthfulness and virtuous character. Hanuman also recommended that Vibheeshan be given refuge without any hesitation.

After learning all arguments, Shree Ram said, "I cannot refuse asylum to Vibheeshan who has approached me with a desire of friendship. Maybe he has many faults, but them my own nature does not permit me to spurn him."

Sugreev however, was not easily convinced. He persisted in his argument to keep Vibheeshan away from Ram's camp. Upon this, Shree Ram firmly replied, "Lord of the Vanars and my friend Sugreev! If I merely desire, I can completely wipe out all the vampires, demons, Yakhsas and Rakshasas of the universe in an instant with only my fingertips. I am thoroughly confident of my own ability to do so. Therefore, we need not fear Vibheeshan on that score. But if someone approaches me with folded hands, and a prayer for my friendship, my Dharma does not permit me to spurn him. Not only Ravan's brother, even if Ravan himself were to approach me thus, I cannot turn him away. Let us therefore, unhesitatingly welcome Vibheeshan to our side."

As soon as he saw Shree Ram, Vibheeshan fell at his feet in complete surrender. Shree Ram granted him asylum and protection and embraced him. He then asked Lakshman to fetch the waters of the ocean and perform sacred rites, anointing Vibheeshan as the next King of Lanka. Vibheeshan lived up to his promise of being true to Shree Ram's cause, providing immeasurable assistance to the Vanar army, guiding them at every step through the deceit and treachery of the Rakshasas. After Ravan met his end, Shree Ram formally crowned Vibheeshan the King of Lanka.

Lesson to Ponder

It is absolutely necessary to have confidence in one's own capabilities. While having confidence in one's own ability, one must also be ready to accept and welcome people who approach us with sincerity, openness and steadfastness, desiring our support and assistance. It is also essential to attract and retain such companions. We should help them only if we have the ability and sustenance to do so and must do our utmost to fulfil our word. One has to set aside one's narrow and selfish objectives in order to do so. We should also develop our own abilities to such an extent that the need to seek others' help must never arise. Shree Ram defeated and killed Ravan and conquered the highly prosperous golden Lanka, but handed it over to Vibheeshan without a moment's hesitation. He took back only Seeta with him, who after all belonged to him.

Of all the countries in the world, only Bharat has the Dharmic virtue and cultural wherewithal to actually live up to this ideal. We defeated Pakistan decisively and created Bangladesh for the suffering Bengali Muslims, but did not occupy their land. This is an occurrence unheard of and unprecedented anywhere in the history of the whole world. Bharat alone is capable of such noble idealism. After all, ours is the land of Shree Ram.

The Ideal Friend

Shree Ram was the eldest son of a powerful emperor whose rule, sovereignty and influence spread far and wide. Although he had gone into exile into the forest, Shree Ram was no doubt a king. Following his renouncing the kingdom in favour of Bharat, he did not hold the royal title, but nevertheless his power and ability, as a ruler was never in question.

The examples and instances of Shree Ram's friendship are no less revealing. Shree Ram is deeply committed to the friend he makes. His companionship with Guha, Sugreev, Vibheeshan and Hanuman are but a few examples, in which one can clearly perceive the importance Shree Ram attaches to the relation of friendship. Ram's commitment goes much beyond the ordinary.

When Jatayu met a hero's death attempting to rescue Seeta from Ravana's clutches, Shree Ram performed the noble eagle's final rites with full Vedic mantras and honours. He befriended Sugreev and first helped him regain his lost kingdom before assigning him the responsibility of the search for Seeta. When Sugreev displayed laziness and forgetfulness in his commitment, Shree Ram forgave him readily, pacifying Lakshman's anger too.

Shree Ram's faith in Vibheeshan is also of an exemplary nature. Having granted him refuge and accepted him as the future king of Lanka, Ram placed his trust in Ravana's brother. He issued strict instructions to the Vanar army that himself, Lakshman, Vibheeshan and his four companions; totaling seven in all would be in human form. The Vanars too were ordered not to assume any illusory form during the course of the war.

Within a span of a few months after regaining his kingdom, Sugreev got busy in readying his colossal Vanar army to spread in all directions to find out where Seeta was. He did not bother about enjoying his newly acquired kingdom.

Vibheeshan was crowned the king of Lanka after Ravana's defeat and death. The entire Rakshas clan of Ravana and a substantial part of his army perished in the Lanka war. Lanka was in deep mourning; the new ruler was expected to consolidate things. But the first thing Vibheeshan did after becoming king was to travel with Shree Ram on the latter's journey back to Ayodhya. The reason for doing so was that Vibheeshan wanted to personally witness Shree Ram's coronation as Ayodhya's Emperor. These instances are sufficient to prove the respect and affection Shree Ram accorded to his friends and companions and the reciprocal response of the same.

Lesson to Ponder

We cannot choose our brothers and relatives but we can certainly choose our friends. We must, therefore, be careful in choosing persons as friends whose company we should not have and reason to regret later on. Once committed to a relation of friendship, we must live up to it, not allowing our personal selfish interests to stand in the way.

The Ideal Warrior and Commander

Shree Ram's entire life was one of struggle and sacrifice. Barely in his teens, he had to accompany Brahmarsi Vishwamitra in order to safeguard his *yagya* from Rakshas onslaught. He had to confront the evil Taadaka. Ram was hesitant to



kill her on account of her being a woman. It was only when his Guru Vishwamitra ordered him, pointing out that it was Dharma to slay evildoers and protect innocent people, and quoted precedents from past history, did Ram kill Taddaka. When Shoorpanakha rushed forward to devour Seeta, Ram punished her by cutting off her ears and nose at Lakshman's hands, but spared her life. Along with the protection of the weak, Shree Ram was also concerned with the well-being of women and was reluctant to hurt them.

Shree Ram's valour, strength and skill in the usage of weaponry of all kinds were in display when he and Lakshman took on the Rakshasas disturbing Vishwamitra's *yagya*. Later on, Shree Ram fought and completely destroyed the Rakshas army of Khar and Dooshan in the Dandakaranya forest. In both these tough battles, Ram's only companion and ally was his brother Lakshman. Yet, they single-handedly took on and killed thousands of Rakshasas, thereby destroying their entire army. Shree Ram had to encounter the treacherous and evil ways of the Rakshasas on many occasions but he never himself resorted to such methods, not even in war.

Of course, there are some people who accuse Shree Ram of wrongfully killing Vaali by shooting an arrow at him while being hidden behind a tree. But Shreemad Valmiki Ramayan clarifies all doubts and also removes falsehood. It clearly mentions that Shree Ram pulled the string of his mighty bow, whose sound shook the very skies. He then stood in front of Vaali. We also need to consider a very important fact. When even the powerful Ravan, who conquered the three worlds and the celestials, was challenged and was slain in open warfare by Shree Ram, there was no need for him to resort to treachery in facing Vaali.

There is yet another very important aspect of Shree Ram's qualities of military leadership. In his war against Ravan, all the top Rakshas warriors perished one by one. Ravan was slowly but surely deprived of all his important commanders. But on the other side, no Vanar commander or general of repute was killed or captured. In fact, Shree Ram and Lakshman were themselves seriously wounded twice in the course of the war, but no harm came to any Vanar commander or general. One may think this to be a mere coincidence or a divine miracle, but there is no doubt that this was the unmistakable result of the flawless military leadership of Shree Ram and his supreme mastery over the strategy of warfare.

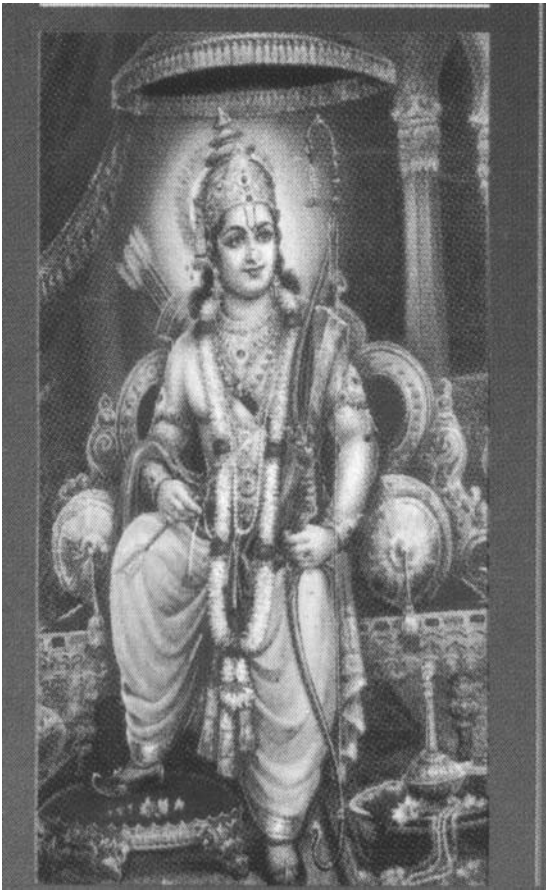
The bow in Shree Ram's hands was a message of certain death for enemies. His knowledge and mastery of divine *astras* and *shastras* had no parallel. When he picked up his weapons, death rained upon his foes. Innumerable warriors perished in battle before him. But Shree Ram never killed anyone for fun, sadistic pleasure or for any selfish motive. He never picked up his bow to fulfil any personal desire. His motive in going to war was always the welfare and protection of the people. Shree Ram therefore remains the all time ideal warrior and commander, invincible yet benign.

Lesson to Ponder

Shree Ram had to spend nearly half of his life in conflict and warfare, protecting the oppressed and destroying evildoers. His mighty bow was a natural extension of his physical self. And yet he was an ideal of the devotee of *ahimsa* (non-violence), Mahatma Gandhi, who held this ideal as very dear to him. *Ram Rajya* was the dream of Gandhi. Gandhi worshipped Ram and accepted the principle that violence committed in the defence of one's nation and values is not violence. It is important for us to recognize that the mighty armed warrior Shree Ram is the ideal of the non-violent Gandhi, not some sadhu or sanyasi.

The Ideal Ruler

The Ram-Ravan war, a conflict without parallel had come to an end. Ravan, along with his sons and other Rakshas warriors, was slain by Shree Ram and Vibheeshan was crowned the new king of Lanka. Shree Ram's victory over the Rakshas king and his evil ideology was final.



But the purpose for which the war was fought remained to be fulfilled. With Shree Ram's permission therefore, Hanuman and Vibheeshan proceeded to the Ashok Vaatika, where Seeta had been kept after she was abducted by the Rakshas king. Hanuman conveyed to Janaki the news of the war just concluded and the glad tidings of Ravan's death at the hands of Ram.

Vibheeshan, as the newly crowned king, requested Seeta to bathe and adorn herself in keeping with Ram's wishes, ordering for arrangements to be made for the same. Heeding the instructions of her consort, Seeta did likewise and came to the battlefield, duly bedecked and seated in a palanquin deputed for her by the Rakshas king. Seeta now stood before Shree Ram. Both were seeing each other after a long time and for a while were absolutely silent, not knowing what to say. Shree Ram's deep and resonant voice then rang out in the hushed silence of the battlefield. "Janaki, a terrible chapter has now come to an end. I have wiped out the insult heaped upon the Raghu dynasty and me. For your sake, the Vanars have waged war and emerged victorious. King Sugreev has covered himself with glory. His men have achieved the impossible constructing a bridge across the sea to defeat Ravan's army. Vibheeshan has become the ruler of the empire of Lanka. Maitheli, all this took place because of you. I did not fight this war simply for your sake, but because it was my duty to do so. Freeing you from the clutches of the evil Rakshas was my duty, which I have accomplished. You are now free to go where you wish to."

Upon hearing these harsh words, Seeta fell down like a tree struck by a bolt of lightning from the skies. Shedding tears, she tried to reason with her husband but he sat emotionless, like a statue of stone. Seeta's grief then yielded to anger as the proud and illustrious woman in her rose to the fore.

She said in a cold voice, "Lakshman, your brother has asked me to go wherever I please. Well. I don't see any better place to go than heaven. Therefore, make ready a pyre of dry wood at this very spot without wasting even a moment. I shall enter the sacred flames in everyone's presence."

Seeta's iron resolve stunned everyone into a shocked silence. The Vanar and Rakshas armies standing side by side were too stupefied to react. Seeta's Rakshasi companions wailed and sobbed loudly when they heard her intentions in clear words. Everyone assembled was hard put to control their grief and some even tried reasoning with Shree Ram, who however, sat like an image of stone, unmoved and unconcerned.

No emotions, neither sorrow nor anger were visible on his face. Seeing no reaction from his brother, Lakshman was forced to obey Seeta, and prepared a pyre out of dry wood and set it ablaze. Seeta circled the blazing pyre in homage and with folded hands, addressed the skies, saying, "Oh Devas, Aadityas, guardians of all the quarters, bear witness to me! Beholding you, I shall now enter the sacred flames in order to vindicate my chastity. Do thou protect my husband."

No sooner than she had ended her words, Seeta jumped into the raging fire. Lakshman almost fainted with shock. The

assembled armies let out loud wails. But lo and behold! In a few moments, Agni, the presiding deity of fire, came out of the flames, with Seeta unharmed and handed her back to Shree Ram, saying, “Ram, Seeta is as pure and pious as me. Do accept her back.”

Shree Ram paid homage to the deity of fire and then said, “O Agni, I obey your command. Rest assured, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind regarding Seeta’s chastity and her devotion to me. There is no place in either of our hearts for anyone else. Both of us know this very well. Although a king, I belong to the people. They must endorse my leadership. There alone lies my true power. I had to behave thus so that people may not entertain even the slightest of doubt regarding their queen. May Seeta and everyone forgive me. Janaki’s anger really made my resolve melt away, but how could I, as a ruler, weep in the presence of all assembled here? My tears had to be held back in my eyes. My people are everything to me. Their welfare is uppermost in my mind. If we aspire to rule people, both of us, myself and Janaki must be above all suspicion and doubt as regards our character as well as conduct. This is my unshakable principle in life.”

Lesson to Ponder

Ram’s tenure on the throne of Ayodhya was anything but a bed of roses. As a *yuvraj* (crown prince) and later on as a king, he lived solely for his people. His vow of ceaseless service to his people and his concern for their welfare governed his entire life. Shree Ram considered himself to be the servant of his people not their master. When he set out for his long exile of fourteen years following Kaikeyee’s adamant demands, the people of Ayodhya followed him deep into the forest. Similarly, when he completed his work on earth and prepared to terminate his incarnation by immersing himself in the Sarayu, the people of Ayodhya were lost in grief. In fact, many of them along with many Vanars and Rakshasas, entered *Samadhi* in the waters of the Sarayu along with Shree Ram.
