



Ramakatha Rasa Vahini, Vol 1

Divine Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

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The Inner Meaning

Rama is the Indweller in every body. He is the Atma-Rama, the Rama (Source of Bliss) in every individual.

His blessings upsurging from that inner spring can confer peace and bliss. He is the very embodiment of dharma, of all the codes of morality that hold mankind together in love and unity. The Ramayana, the Rama story, teaches two lessons: the value of detachment and the need to become aware of the Divine in every being. Faith in God and detachment from objective pursuits are the keys for human liberation. Give up sense objects, and you gain Rama.

Sita gave up the luxuries of Ayodhya so she could be with Rama, in the period of "exile". When she cast longing eyes on the golden deer and craved for it, she lost the presence of Rama. Renunciation leads to joy; attachment brings about grief. Be in the world, but not of it.

Each brother, comrade, companion, and collaborator of Rama is an example of a person saturated with dharma. Dasaratha is the representative of the merely physical, with the ten senses.

The three qualities (gunas) - serenity, activity, and ignorance (sathwa, rajas, thamas) - are the three queens.

The four goals of life, the purusharthas - i.e. righteousness, riches, fulfilment, and liberation - are the four sons. Lakshmana is the intellect; Sugriva is discrimination (viveka); Vali is despair; and Hanuman is the embodiment of courage.

The bridge is built over the ocean of delusion. The three Rakshasa chiefs, Ravana, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhishana, are personifications of the active (rajasic), ignorant (thamasic), and pure (sathwic) qualities.

Sita is the Awareness of the Universal Divinity (Brahma-jnana), which the

individual must acquire and regain while undergoing travails in the crucible of life.

Make your heart pure and strong, contemplating the grandeur of the Ramayana. Be established in the faith that Rama is the Reality of your existence.

- Baba

This Book

This For millions of men, women, and children, The Rama Story, Stream of Sacred Sweetness, has been for many centuries the perennial source of solace during sorrow, vitality when floored by vacillation, illumination while confounded, inspiration in moments of dejection, and guidance while caught in quandaries. It is an intensely human drama in which God impersonates man and gathers around Him, on the vast world stage, the perfect and the imperfect, the human and the subhuman, the beast and the demon, to confer on us, by precept and example, the boon of Supreme Wisdom. It is a story that plays its tender fingers on the heartstrings of people, evoking lithe, limpid responses of pathos, pity, exultation, adoration, ecstasy and surrender, rendering us transformed from the animal and the human into the Divine, which is our core.

No other story in human history has had such a profound impact on the mind of people. It transcends the milestones of history and the boundaries of geography. It has shaped and sublimated the habits and attitudes of generations. The Ramayana, the Story of Rama, has become a curative corpuscle in the blood stream of mankind over vast areas of the globe. It has struck root in the conscience of peoples, prodding and prompting them along the paths of truth, righteousness, peace, and love.

Through legends and lullabies, myths and tales, dance and drama, through sculpture, music, painting, ritual, poetry and symbol, Rama has become the breath, the bliss, the treasure of countless spiritual seekers. The characters in the Rama Story have invited them to emulation and to be elevated themselves. They have provided shining examples of achievement and adventure. They have warned the wavering against vice and violence, pride, and pettiness. They have encouraged them by their fidelity and fortitude. To every language and dialect that the tongue of man has devised for the expression of his higher desires, the Story of Rama has added a unique, sustaining sweetness.

Sai (Isa, God), whose thought is the universe, whose will is its history, is the author, director, actor, witness, and appraiser of the Drama that is ever unfolding in time and space. He has now deigned to tell us Himself the story of this one epic act in that Drama, wherein He took on the Rama role. As Rama, Sai instructed, inspired, invigorated, corrected, consoled, and comforted His contemporaries in the Thretha Age. As Sai Rama, He is now engaged in the same task. Therefore, most of what the readers of Sanathana Sarathi perused month after month (during these years) with ardour and pleasure, as instalments of this narrative - the Ramakatha Rasavahini - must have appeared to them "contemporary events and experiences", and "direct counsel to them in the context of contemporary problems and difficulties." While reading these pages, readers will often be pleasantly struck by the identity of the Rama of this story and the Sai Rama they are witnessing.

"Science" has moulded this earth into the compactness and capsularity of a spaceship in which mankind has to live out its destiny. "Sai-ence" is, we know, fast moulding this spaceship into a happy home of Love. This book must have been willed by Sai as a paramount panacea for the removal of the ills that obstruct that Universal Love - the morbid itch for sensual pleasure, the mounting irreverence toward parents, teachers, elders, spiritual leaders, and guides, the disastrous frivolity and flippancy in social, marital, and familial relationships, the demonic reliance on violence as a means of achieving immoral ends, the all-to-ready adoption of terror and torture as means of gaining personal and group gains, and many more evils besides.

Sai Rama has recapitulated herein, in His own simple, sweet, and sustaining style, His own divine Career as Rama! What great good fortune to have in our hands, to inscribe on our minds, to imprint on our hearts this divine narrative! May we be processed by the study of this book into efficient and enthusiastic tools for consummating His mission of moulding mankind into One Family, of making each one of us realise Sai Rama as the Reality, the only Reality that IS.

Sai has declared that He is the same Rama come again and that He is searching for His erstwhile associates and workers (bantu, as He referred to

them, in Telugu) in order to allot them roles in His present mission of resuscitating righteousness and leading humanity into the haven of peace. While ruminating over the first half of this Story, let us pray that we too be allotted roles, and may He grant us, as reward, the vision of that haven.

N. Kasturi

Editor, Sanathana Sarathi

1. Rama - Prince And Principle

The name Rama is the essence of the Vedas; the story of Rama is an ocean of milk, pure and potent. It can be asserted that no poem of equal grandeur and beauty has emerged from other languages or from other countries until this very day, and it has provided inspiration to the poetic imagination of every language and country.

It is the greatest treasure inherited by their good fortune by every Indian.

Rama is the guardian deity of the Hindus; the name is borne by the bodies in which they dwell and the buildings in which those bodies dwell. It can safely be said that there is no Indian who has not imbibed the nectar of Ramakatha, the story of Rama.

The Ramayana, the epic that deals with the story of the Rama incarnation, is a sacred text. It is reverently recited by people with all varieties of equipment, the scholar as well as the ignoramus, the millionaire as well as the pauper. The name glorified by the Ramayana cleanses all evil and transforms the sinner; it reveals the form represented by the name, the form that is as charming as the name itself.

The azure ocean and the almighty Lord have much in common. Just as the sea is the source of all the waters on earth, all beings are born from "Rama". A sea without water is unreal; a being without "Rama" is without existence, now or ever.

The ocean is the abode of the Almighty, as myth and legend proclaim; they describe Him as reclining on the ocean of milk. This is the reason behind the title of each canto (kanda) given by Valmiki (son of Prachetas), the great poet who composed the epic.

Kanda means water, an expanse of water. Kanda also means "sugar cane". However crooked a cane may be, whichever section you chew, the sweetness

is unaffected and uniform. The stream of Rama's story meanders through many a curve and twist, but the sweetness of compassion (karuna), tenderness, and pity persists without diminution throughout the narrative. The stream turns and flows through sadness, wonder, ridicule, awe, terror, love, despair, and dialectics, but the main undercurrent is the love of dharma and the compassion it fosters.

The nectar in the story of Rama is as the Sarayu river, which moves silently by the city of Ayodhya, where Rama was born and ruled. The Sarayu has its source in the Himalayan Lake of the Mind (Manasa-Sarovar), just as this story is born in the lake of the mind! The Rama stream bears the sweetness of compassion; the stream of Lakshmana (Rama's brother and devoted companion) has the sweetness of devotion. Just as the Sarayu river joins the Ganges (Ganga) and the waters commingle, so too the streams of tender compassion and devotion (the stories of Rama and Lakshmana) commingle in the Ramayana. Between them, compassion and love (karuna and prema) make up the composite picture of the glory of Rama. That picture fulfils the heart's dearest yearning of every Indian, and to attain it is the aim of every spiritual striving.

The effort of the individual is but half the pursuit; the other half is the grace of God. People fulfil themselves by self-effort as well as divine blessings; the fulfilment takes them across the dark ocean of dualities to the immanent and transcendent One.

The Ramayana has to be read not as a record of a human career but as the narrative of the advent and activities of an incarnation of God (Avatar). One must endeavour with determination to realise through one's own experience the ideals revealed in that narrative. God is all-knowing, all-pervasive, and all-powerful. The words He utters while embodied in the human form, the acts He deigns to indulge in during His earthly sojourn - these are inscrutable and extraordinarily significant. The precious springs of His message ease the path of deliverance for mankind. Don't look upon Rama as a scion of the Solar dynasty, the sovereign of the kingdom of Ayodhya, or the son of Emperor Dasaratha. These correlates are but accessory and accidental. This error has

become habitual in modern readers; they pay attention only to the personal relationship and affiliations between the characters of the story they read; they don't delve into the values they represent and demonstrate.

To elaborate this error: Dasaratha, Rama's father, had three wives; the first was such and such, the second was of this nature, the third had these traits! Her maids were of this ugly type The wars fought by Dasaratha were characterised by these peculiarities ... those specialities ... In this manner, fancy leads people astray into the region of the trivial and colourful, making them neglect the valuable kernel. People do not realise that the study of history must enrich life and make it meaningful and worthwhile, rather than cater to the appetite for paltry facts and petty ideas. Their validity and value lie deep within the facts and fertilise them like subterranean water. Wear the glasses of reverent adoration (bhakthi) and steady dedication (sraddha); then, the eye will endow you with the pure wisdom that liberates you and grants you eternal bliss.

Just as people squeeze juice out of the fibrous cane and drink only the sweetness, just as the bee sucks the honey in the flower, regardless of its symmetry and colour, just as the moth flies toward the brightness of the flame, ignoring the heat and the inevitable catastrophe, so the spiritual seeker (sadhaka) should yearn to imbibe the expression of the emotion of tenderness, pity, and compassion with which the Ramayana is saturated, paying no heed to other subjects.

When a fruit is eaten, we throw away the skin, seeds, and fibre. It is in the very nature of nature that fruits have these components! Nevertheless, no one eats them on the plea that one paid for them! No one can swallow the seeds and digest them. No one will chew the outer rind. So too, in this Rama fruit called Ramayana, the tales of demons, ogres and the like (rakshasas) form the rind; the wicked deeds of these evil people are the hard indigestible seeds; sensory and worldly descriptions and events are the not-too-tasty fibrous stuff; they are all sheaths for the juicy nourishment.

Those who seek the expression of compassion in the Rama fruit should

concentrate more on the central narrative than on supplementary details that embellish or encumber it. Listen to the Ramayana in that mood; that is the best form of spiritual listening (sravana).

The role of sages in royal courts

On one occasion, Emperor Parikshith fell at the feet of sage Suka and asked for instruction on a point that was causing him dire doubt. "Master! One riddle has been worrying me for a long time. I know that you can solve it for me and that no one else can. I have listened to the narratives of the lives of my forefathers, from the earliest, the great Manu, down to those of my grandfathers and father. I have studied these stories with care. I observe that in the history of every one of these, there is mention of sages (rishis) attached to the monarch, some learned scholar-saints who are members of the court, attending court sessions and sharing the business of government!

These scholars have renounced all attachments and desires and have realised that the world is a shadow and a snare, that the One is the only Reality. What is the real meaning of this amazing association of scholars with kings and rulers playing subordinate roles and being counseled? I know that the revered elders won't engage in any activity without sufficient and proper reasons. Their behaviour is ever pure and unsullied. But this makes my doubt unsolvable. Please enlighten me." Suka laughed. He replied, "You asked a fine question, no doubt. Listen! The great sages and holy scholars are always eager to share with their fellow people the truth they have grasped, the sanctifying experience they have won, the elevating deeds they have been privileged to perform, and the divine grace they have been chosen to receive. They seek nearness to those who are in charge of administration and those who are adepts in ruling over peoples, with the intention to use them as instruments for establishing and ensuring peace and prosperity on earth. They implant high ideals in their minds, and holy ways of fulfilling them. They prompt the performance of righteous actions, in accordance with just laws.

"The monarchs invite and welcome the sages, seek out the scholars, and plead with them to be in their courts, so that they can learn from them the art

of government and act according to their counsel. The monarch was the master and guardian of the people; so, the sages spent their days with him for the estimable purpose of realising, through him, the yearning of their hearts: May all the worlds be happy (lokassamasthah sukhino bhavanthu).

The sages were eager to see happiness and peace spread over the world. Therefore, they tried to equip the kings with all the virtues, fill them with all the moral codes of discipline, arm them with all branches of learning, so that they may rule efficiently, wisely, and with beneficial consequences to themselves and their subjects.

"There were other reasons, too. Listen! The sages knew that the Granter of joy to humanity, the Mentor of human morals, the Leader of the solar line, the Dweller in the Heaven of eternal bliss will take birth in a royal line. The sages with foresight to anticipate events gained entry into the courts of rulers so that they might experience the bliss of contact with the incarnation when It happens. They feared they might not get such access later, that they may miss the bliss they could well garner. So they profited by their vision of the future and established themselves in the royal capital, in the thick of the community, longing for the advent.

"To this venerable group belonged Vasishta, Viswamitra, Garga, Agastya, and the other sages (rishis). Monarchs of renunciation, they had no wants, sought nothing from anyone, and were ever content. They appeared in the audience halls of the emperors not for polemics and the pomp of panditry, or to collect the costly gifts offered to such disputants and guests, or to decorate themselves with the burdensome title those patrons confer on people they preferred. They craved rather the bliss of the vision of the Lord (darshan) and for a chance to uphold dharma in human affairs; they had no other objective.

"The kings were also immersed in divine thoughts in those days! They approached the hermits and sages in their retreats in order to discover from them the means of making their subjects happy and content; often, they invited them to their palaces and consulted them about ways and means of good government. In those days, there were sages with no attachment to self

and scholars with no craving for power; such were the people who tendered advice to the kings. As a consequence, there was no lack of food, clothing, housing, or good health for the people of the realm. All days were festival days; all doors were decorated with green festoons. The ruler felt that his most sacred duty was to foster his people's welfare. The subjects also felt that the ruler was the heart of the body politic.

They had full faith that he was as precious as their own hearts, and they valued him as such. They revered him and paid him homage of gratitude." Suka explained the role of the sages in the royal courts in this clear downright manner before the large gathering that was sitting around him.

Rama's story is the story of the universe

Have you noticed that whatever is done by the great, whichever company they choose, they will ever be on the path of righteousness, on the path of the Divine. Their acts will promote the welfare of the entire world! So, when the Ramayana or other narratives of the Divine are recited or read, attention must be fixed on the majesty and mystery of God, on the truth and straightforwardness that are inherent in them, and on the practice of those qualities in daily life. No importance should be attached to extraneous matters; the means and manner of the execution of one's duty is the paramount lesson to be learned.

God, when appearing with form for the sake of upholding dharma, behaves in a human way. He must! For, He has to hold forth the ideal life before people and confer the experience of joy and peace on people. His movements and playful activities (leelas) might appear ordinary and commonplace to some eyes. But each will be an expression of beauty, truth, goodness, joy, and exaltation. Each will captivate the world with its charm and purify the heart that contemplates it. Each will overcome and overwhelm all the agitations of the mind, tear the veil of illusion (maya), and fill the consciousness with sweetness. There can be nothing ordinary and commonplace in the careers of Avatars. Whatever is seen and taken as of that nature is really super-human, super-natural, deserving high reverence!

The story of Rama is not the story of an individual; it is the story of the universe! Rama is the personification of the basic Universal in all beings. He is in all, for all time, in all space. The story deals not with a period that is past but with the present and future without end, with beginningless eternal time!

No ant can bite without Rama's will! No leaf can drop from its branch without Rama's prompting! Sky, wind, fire, water, earth - the five elements that compose the universe - behave as they do for fear of Him and work in tune with His orders! Rama is the Principle that attracts the disparate elements in nature and endears through that attraction. The attraction that one exerts over another is what makes the universe exist and function.

That is the Rama principle, without which the cosmos would become chaos. Hence, the axiom: Without Rama, there would be no panorama (universe).

2. The Imperial Line: Raghu

In the immaculate, pure Solar Dynasty was born the highly mighty, the far famed, the strong armed, the intensely loved and revered ruler Khatvanga. His rule showered supreme bliss on the immense population under his throne and persuaded them to pay homage to him, as if he were himself God. He had a "one-and-only" son, named Dilipa. Dilipa grew up, shining in the glory of knowledge and virtue; he shared with his father the joy and privilege of guarding and guiding the people. He moved among his subjects, eager to know their joys and sorrows, anxious to discover how best to relieve pain and distress, intent on their welfare and prosperity.

The father watched his son grow straight and strong, virtuous and wise. He sought a bride for him so that, after marriage, he could place part of the burden of the sceptre on his shoulders. He sought her in royal houses far and wide, for she must be a worthy companion for the prince. At last, the choice fell on the Magadhan princess, Sudakshina. The wedding was celebrated with unsurpassed pomp and exultation by the people of the court.

Sudakshina was endowed with all womanly virtues in ample measure. She was saintly, simple, and a sincere votary of her husband. She served her lord and poured love on him, as if he were her very breath. She walked in his footsteps and never deviated from the path of righteousness.

Dilipa, too, was the very embodiment of righteousness; as a consequence, he saw that neither want nor disappointment affected him in the least. He held fast to the ideals and practices of his father as far as the administration of the empire was concerned, so he could slowly and without any dislocation take upon himself the full responsibility of administration. Thus, he was able to give his father rest in his old age. Khatvanga rejoiced within himself, contemplating the great qualities of his son and observing his skill, efficiency, and practical wisdom.

Some years passed thus. Then, Khatvanga directed the court astrologers to

select an auspicious day and hour for Dilipa's coronation, and on the day fixed by them he installed Dilipa as the monarch of the realm.

From that day, Dilipa shone forth as the Lord and sovereign of the empire, which stretched from sea to sea, with the seven islands of the ocean. His rule was so just and compassionate, so much in conformity with the injunctions laid down in the scriptures, that rains came as plentifully as needed and the harvest was rich and profuse.

The entire empire was green and glorious, festive and full. The land was resonant with the sacred sound of the Vedas recited in every village, the purifying rhythm of the mantras chanted in the Vedic sacrifices performed throughout the land; every community lived in concord with all the rest.

Nevertheless, the king was apparently overcome by a mysterious anxiety; his face was losing effulgence.

The lapse of a few years didn't improve matters. Despair wrote its deep lines firmer on his brow. One day, he revealed the cause of his gloom to his queen, "Darling! We have no children, and sadness is overpowering me as a consequence. I am even more affected when I realise that this Ikshvaku dynasty will terminate with me. Some sin that I committed must have brought about this calamity. I am unable to decide how to counter this malign destiny.

I am eager to learn from our family preceptor, the sage Vasishta, how I can win the grace of God and make amends for the sin. I am very much agitated by grief. What do you suggest as the best means to win grace?" Sudakshina did not take time even to think out the answer. "Lord! This same fear had entered my mind, too, and caused me much grief. I had not given expression to it. I smothered it in the mind for I cannot, I know, reveal my fears, without being prompted by you, my Lord. I am ever willing and eager to support and follow implicitly what appeals to you as the best means of overcoming our sorrow. Why should there be any delay? Let us hasten to consult revered Vasishta." Dilipa ordered the chariot to be brought for the pilgrimage to the preceptor's hermitage.

He directed that no escort or courtier should accompany them. In fact, he drove the vehicle himself and reached the simple cottage of his beloved guru.

At the sound of the chariot, the hermits on the outskirts of the hermitage went into the cottage and made known to their master the arrival of the ruler of the empire. Vasishta showered his blessing on him as soon as he saw him near the door and lovingly inquired about his health and the welfare of his subjects and his kith and kin.

Sudakshina fell at the feet of the sage's consort, the famed Arundathi, embodiment of all the virtues that adorn the noblest of women. Arundathi lifted her into her arms and fondly embraced her, prodding her with questions about her welfare. She led her into the inner part of the hermitage.

As befitted the monarch of the realm, Dilipa asked Vasishta whether the rituals and sacrifices the ascetics had to perform as part of the cultural tradition were being carried out without any handicap, whether the anchorites were experiencing any difficulty in acquiring food and carrying on their studies and spiritual practices, and whether their sylvan campuses were terrorised by wild beasts. He was yearning, he said, to make their studies and spiritual exercises progress well without any distraction due to adverse environment or counter-influences.

When the king and queen entered the cottage and sat down, with the assembled sages and seekers, Vasishta suggested to the latter to move into their own hermitages and then asked the king why he had come accompanied by the queen and no one else. The king told his preceptor the nature and depth of his grief and prayed for the only remedy that could remove it, namely, his grace.

The curse of the sacred cow

Listening to that prayer, Vasishta was lost in deep meditation. Perfect silence prevailed. The king too sat in the lotus posture on the bare floor and merged his mind in God; the queen attuned her mind with the Divine.

At last, Vasishta opened his eyes and said, "King! The will of God can be thwarted by no person, whatever their might or authority. I have no power to override the decree of the Divine. I cannot manifest enough grace to confer, through my blessings, the son you desire. You have drawn on yourself a curse. On one occasion, when you were approaching the capital, during your journey home, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow Kamadhenu was reclining in the cool shade of the divine, wish-fulfilling tree, the Kalpataru! Your eye fell on her, but caught up in the tangle of worldly pleasures, you ignored her and passed on, in pride, to the palace. Kamadhenu was pained by the neglect; she was hurt that you had failed to honour her; she felt that your people would start dishonouring the cow, since the king himself had failed in his duty. When rulers who do not revere the Vedas neglect the cow, which sustains humanity, continue to rule without restraint, she argued, there will be no dharma in the land.

"Kamadhenu cursed you that day that you should have no son to succeed to your throne; she declared, however, that when you take the advice of the guru and start in humility and reverence to serve the cow and worship her in gratitude, the curse will be rendered infructuous and you will be rewarded with a son and heir.

"Therefore, worship the cow from this moment, with your queen, as laid down in the sacred texts, and you are certain to have a son. The hour is near when cows start returning home from the pasture. My treasure, the divine cow Nandini, is fast approaching the hermitage. Go, serve her with devotion and steady faith. Give her food and drink at appropriate hours. Wash the cow and take her out to the pastures and see that no harm comes to her while she grazes." Vasishta initiated the King and Queen in the ritualistic vow of "cow worship"; he sent them into the cowshed with holy water and offerings for the worship and himself walked toward the river for ablutions and evening prayers.

One day, while Nandini was grazing happily in the jungle, a lion spied her and followed her in order to allay his hunger. Dilipa saw this. He used all his skill and might to foil the lion from pouncing on her. He resolved to offer his own

body in exchange. The lion, though feline and ferocious, was a strict follower of dharma. Moved by compassion at the sacrifice that the king was willing to make, it released the cow and the king from its clutches and left the place.

Nandini was filled with an inexpressible sense of gratitude and joy at Dilipa's self-sacrificing gesture. She said, "King! This moment the curse that afflicts you is lifted! You will have a son who will subdue the whole world, support the principles and practice of dharma, earn renown on earth and in heaven, enhance the fame of the dynasty, and, more than all, continue the Ikshvaku line, wherein the Lord Himself, Narayana, will one day take birth! May this son be born soon." Nandini blessed the King. Attended by the King, the sacred cow returned to Vasishta's ashram.

Vasishta had no need to be told! He knew all; as soon as he saw the faces of the king and queen, he surmised that their wish was fulfilled; he blessed them and let leave for the city. After Dilipa and Queen Sudakshina prostrated before the sage, they returned to the palace, full of joy at the happy turn of events.

Emperor Raghu's ideal rulership

The child grew in the womb, as the blessing guaranteed. When the months had run their full course, at an auspicious moment, the son was born. When the happy tidings spread over the city and kingdom, thousands assembled before and around the palace in great joy. The streets were festooned with flags and green leaves; groups of people danced in glee, calling on all to share in the thrill and waving camphor flames to mark the occasion.

Huge crowds exclaimed "victory! victory! (jai jai)" and moved on toward the palace grounds.

Dilipa ordered the minister to announce the birth of the heir to the empire to the multitude gathered in the vast grounds of the palace, and when the minister did so, the joyous acclamation of the throng hit the sky. The applause was loud and long, and the hurrahs echoed and reached from one

street to another. It took many hours for the gathering to disperse and reach home.

On the tenth day, the King invited the guru and celebrated the rite of naming the newborn. The name Raghu was selected, on the basis of the asterism under which he was born. The child gave delight to all by its prattle and play; he was liked by all as a bright and charming youngster; he crossed his teens and became a brave, resolute, efficient helpmate of his father!

One night - no one could guess why the king felt so - while conversing with the Queen he said, "Sudakshina!

I have achieved many a grand victory! I have succeeded in celebrating many a great ritual sacrifice. I have fought many a grim battle with mighty invaders and triumphed over them all, including even ogres and subhuman Titans! We are blessed with a son who is a precious gem! We have nothing more to gain.

"Let us spend the remainder of our lives in the adoration of God. Raghu is the repository of all virtues; he is fit in all respects to take up the burden of ruling over the Empire. Let us entrust the realm to him; we shall retire into the silence of the forest, live on roots and fruits, serve the sages who lead austere lives filled with godly thoughts and godward aspiration, and sanctify every moment with listening to the sacred teachings (sravana), meditating on their inner meaning (manana) and practicing the path laid down (nidi-dhyasana). We shall not yield for a minute to sloth based on dull and ignorant (thamasic) qualities." As soon as it was dawn, he called the minister to his presence and directed that arrangements be made for the coronation and marriage of the prince. Full of the spirit of renunciation, he asked the queen what her plans were.

She shed tears of joy and gratitude and said, "What greater good fortune can I gain? I am bound by your order; proceed with your plans." Her enthusiasm and willing acceptance strengthened the emperor's resolution.

Dilipa called his ministers, scholars, and sages and told them his intention to

celebrate his son's coronation and marriage. They wholeheartedly agreed, and the two functions were held with great pomp. The father then gave the prince valuable advice on governance, emphasising the need to promote the study of the Vedas and the fostering of scholars learned in Vedic lore and to lay down laws that would promote popular well-being. After this, he moved into the forest, with the queen, bent on acquiring the grace of God.

Emperor Raghu ruled the kingdom from that day in accordance with the directives given by the pundits and with twin objectives: the happiness of his subjects and the promotion of righteous living. He believed that these two were as vital as breath, and he spared no pains in pursuing these ideals and making his ministers also adhere to the path. Though young, he was rich in virtue. However tough a problem happened to be, he grasped it quickly and discovered the means of solving it; he made his subjects happy and contented. Wicked kings were taught severe lessons by him. He won them over by a peaceful approach and clever diplomatic tactics, or by fielding a little army in order to win them over, or by openly breaking with them and defeating them on the field of battle.

He was engaged in activities that ensured the people's welfare and promoted the culture enshrined in the Vedas. All classes of people extolled his rule, regardless of age, economic status, or attainments. They said he was proving himself superior to his father in physical prowess, courage, righteous conduct, and compassion. Everyone said he brought lasting significance to the name he bore.

Raghu paid special attention to the care and comfort of the hermits engaged in asceticism in the forests; he saw to it that they were saved from harassment and himself supervised arrangements for assuring them protection and encouragement. So, he received their blessings and grace in ample measure.

One day, the student hermit Kautsu, disciple of Varathanthu, came to the Court after finishing his studies.

He prayed to the King to help him in securing the thanks offering that he had to submit to his preceptor. Raghu gave him the money he wanted. Kautsu was happy that the gift he received was pure, collected from the people without causing them any distress and paid by them gladly and gratefully, for Raghu did not collect even a paisa more than was absolutely needed, since his main goal was the grace of God. The money was handed over with great love and consideration, so Kautsu was overwhelmed with joy and gratefulness. His heart was full, and he spoke lovingly to the King. "May you be blessed soon with a son who will achieve worldwide fame." With this he left the ruler's presence.

King Aja

True to his words, ten months later, Raghu was blessed with a son, dazzling like a diamond! The rites of baptism and naming were performed by the palace priests; he was named Aja. He was a very charming babe. He grew into a sprightly boy, eager to learn all the arts and sciences. He became an adept in each of them. His fame as a great scholar and a very accomplished lad spread throughout the land.

In the course of time, Raghu also felt his father's urge to place on the prince's head the burden of the sceptre and retire to the forest for the contemplation of God. He too called on the ministers to arrange for the transfer of authority by means of the rite of coronation and to synchronise that rite with the marriage of Aja with a suitable bride. Indumathi, Bhojaraja's sister, the ruler of Magadha, was chosen to be Aja's life partner. After the installation of Aja on the throne, the royal parents left for their forest hermitage.

Aja, with the queen as his loving partner, won the loyalty of the subjects by his wisdom and sympathy: they scrupulously followed the advice given by Raghu on the ways and means of administration. Aja loved and revered the world and its inhabitants as the reflections and images of the Indumathi he loved so deeply, so he was full of happiness and exaltation. They used to spend days and weeks in beautiful sylvan retreats, admiring the glory and grandeur of nature.

Meanwhile, the queen gave birth to a son. The parents were overjoyed at this happy event and had the news communicated to their revered preceptor, Vasishtha. They wanted ceremonial rites to be done for the newborn baby. He was named Dasaratha.

Dasaratha was the pet of everyone who saw him and who had the privilege of fondling him. The child waved and tossed its limbs about as if he was all vitality and joy. He appeared as if fed on spiritual bliss (ananda) and lived only for imparting spiritual bliss to all.

One day, Aja and Indumathi betook themselves into the forest, as was their wont, for recreation in nature's lap. The silence and the sublimity of that day were even more appealing than on other days. They sat in the shade of a tree and conversed endearingly, when a wind rose heavy and strong. It brought a fragrance, sweet beyond description. And, they could hear the captivating strains of divine music! They rose and searched all around them for the cause of these mysterious gifts. They found high above their heads, between the clouds in the sky, Narada, the "mental son (manasa-putra)" of Brahma, moving fast somewhere. Even as they were watching him, a flower from the wreath he was wearing on his tuft unloosened itself and, wafted by the wind, fell right on Indumathi's head. Aja was amazed at this incident and shocked to find that the queen fell instantly on the ground in a faint and closed her eyes forever!

The secret of Indumathi's death

The death of the woman he loved as intimately as his own breath caused desperate grief to the ruler; his lamentation shook the forest from end to end. The earth quaked in sympathy; the trees stood still, rooted in wonder at the sorrow that filled the royal heart and overflowed it.

Narada heard the wail of the king - his sobs and groans - as he wept over the corpse of his beloved. He came down to console his agony. "King! Sorrow is of no avail when death strikes; the body is prone to birth and death. What brings about birth brings about death too, and to seek to know why they happen is

an exercise in insanity. The acts of God are beyond the chain of cause and effect. Ordinary intellects cannot unravel them; they can at best guess the reason, as far as their faculties can reach. How can the intellect grasp something out of its domain?

"Death is inevitable for each embodied being. However, since Indumathi's death is resonant with strangeness, I have to tell you its reason." Narada drew Aja near and said, "Listen! In former days, the sage Thrinabindu was engaged in extreme asceticism, and Indra resolved to test his attainments and the depth of his equanimity. He despatched a divine enchantress, Harini, to attract him into the world of sensualism. But the sage was immune to her wiles and remained unaffected. He opened his eyes and said, 'You do not seem to be an ordinary woman.

You are perhaps a godly damsel. Well, whoever you are, you must suffer the penalty for resolving to execute a foul deed, a nefarious plan! Be born as a human being, fallen from heaven; learn what it is to be a mortal human.' Cursing her thus, the sage closed his eyes and plunged back into meditation.

"Harini shook with fear and shed profuse tears of repentance; she prayed for pardon and for cancellation of her exile from heaven, she pleaded pathetically for the removal of the curse. At this, the sage melted a little and said, 'O weak one! It is not possible for me to take back my words. But I shall indicate an occasion when you will be released. Listen! The moment a flower from heaven drops on your head, your human frame will fall and you can return to heaven.' Indumathi is that divine damsel and she has found her release this day. When a flower I wore fell on her, she rid herself of the curse. Why grieve over this? It is of no avail." Narada spoke of the duties of a monarch, his responsibility, and the example he must set before all; he spoke of the evanescent nature of life and the mystery of death, the ultimate fate of all beings that are born. Then, Narada wended his way across the sky.

Unable to save his beloved, Aja performed the obsequies and went home. He was heavy with grief, and only Dasaratha could give him some consolation and renew his will to live. He spent his days in morose dreariness.

Since Dasaratha was now a full-grown youth, Aja made over the kingdom to him and sat on the bank of the Sarayu river, bent on fulfilling the vow of "nonacceptance of food". Denying himself the sustenance to continue, he caused his life to ebb away.

When Dasaratha heard the news, he hastened quickly to the Sarayu bank and bewailed the loss of his dear father. He arranged for the funeral without delay and felt some relief that his father had given up life through a ritualistic vow. He drew some strength from this fact and resumed his duties as the ruler, with full mastery of all his varied faculties.

3. Curse Of No Progeny For Dasaratha

The envy of Ravana

Within a short time, Dasaratha's fame illumined all quarters, like the rays of the rising sun. He had the intrepidity and skill of ten charioteers rolled into one, so the name Dasa-ratha (the ten-chariot hero) was found appropriate. No one could stand up against the onrush of his mighty chariot! Every contemporary ruler, mortally afraid of his prowess, paid homage to his throne. The world extolled him as a hero without equal, a paragon of virtue, a statesman of highest stature.

Ravana, the demon (rakshasa) King of Lanka, heard of Dasaratha and his fame. He was so envious that he determined on a sure plan to destroy him, by means fair or foul. Ravana sought for an excuse to provoke Dasaratha into a fight; one day, he sent word through a messenger that unless tribute was paid to him, he would have to meet Ravana on the battlefield and demonstrate his superior might in war. This call was against international morality, but what morality did a demon respect?

When Dasaratha heard the messenger, he laughed outright, in derision. Even while the messenger was looking on, he shot sharp deadly arrows, which reached Lanka itself and fastened the gates of that city!

Addressing the envoys, Dasaratha said, "Well, Sirs! I have now made fast the doors of your fortress city.

Your master cannot open them, however hard he may try. That is the 'tribute' I pay to your impertinent lord." When the envoys returned and informed Ravana of this, he was shocked to find all the doors closed fast. The desperate efforts made by Ravana and his men met with failure; they could not open the gates. When Ravana was struck with shame, strangely enough, the arrows returned to Ayodhya and the doors flew open.

Ravana, however, decided that he must overpower all the rulers of the world. Realising that he could do so only by winning divine grace, he went to the depths of the forest and selected a favourable, auspicious spot for his ascetic practices.

Ravana's asceticism was so intense and satisfying that God Brahma was compelled to appear before him and offer to grant him whatever boon he desired. "Ravana! Ask for anything you want! I shall give you your heart's desire," said Brahma.

Ravana was revolving in his mind the insult he suffered at Dasaratha's hands. He argued that Dasaratha might get even mightier sons from whom he might suffer more, so he asked for the boon he wanted, "Lord! Bless me with this gift of grace: let no child be born from Dasaratha's loins." At this, Brahma said, "So be it," and immediately vanished from the scene, lest Ravana might frame another foul request if He were present before him! Ravana strutted about, proud and devoid of fear, exulting over his prowess and success.

Meanwhile, another project entered his head! "Dasaratha is of marital age now; if I so contrive that he does not marry at all, it will make my safety doubly sure," he thought within himself! Looking about with the aid of his demon (rakshasa) skills, he discerned that there was a great likelihood that Dasaratha would wed the daughter of the King of Kosala. So, he decided to put an end to that princess! As the saying goes, when one's own destruction is imminent, reason turns crooked. He entered the Kosala kingdom stealthily in disguise and kidnapped the princess. Placing her in a wooden box, he cast it over the waves of the sea.

Dasaratha's three queens: Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika

Ravana could not see the truth that nothing can ever happen without the concurrence of the divine will.

Brahma willed otherwise, and the box was carried by the waves on to the shore. The place where it landed was a fine recreation area. The next day,

Sumanthra, Dasaratha's Prime Minister, happened to visit the place on a quiet holiday, to be spent in discussing within himself the problems of the state. His eyes fell on the box; he retrieved it and opened it. He was surprised to find in it a charming girl, with attractive shining eyes and a halo of divine splendour. Sumanthra was overcome with pity. He spoke soft and sweet to the girl, "Little one! How did you get placed inside this box?" She replied, "Sir, I'm the princess of the Kosala kingdom; my name is Kausalya. I don't know how I came inside this box or who placed me in it. I was playing with my companions in the palace gardens, and I don't remember what happened." Sumanthra was moved by her simple and sincere statement. He said, "Such barbarian stratagems are resorted to only by demons (rakshasas); they are beyond the ken of men! I'll take you to your father. Come with me. Let us go without delay." Sumanthra placed her in his chariot and went to Kosala, where he restored her to the king and recited before the court the details known to him.

The king questioned Sumanthra in various ways. He discovered that he was none other than the minister at the court of Dasaratha, Emperor of Ayodhya, and that his master was still unmarried. The discovery filled him with joy. He said, "Minister! You brought back my child, saving her from destruction. So I resolve to give her in marriage to your master himself. Please inform the king of my offer." He honoured Sumanthra with due ceremony and sent him with the court priest and appropriate presents.

Sumanthra told Dasaratha in detail all that had happened. In order to confirm his acceptance, Dasaratha sent with the court priest of Kosala his own court priest with gifts of auspicious nature. The date and time were fixed; Dasaratha proceeded to the Kosala capital accompanied by a magnificent array of elephantry, chariotry, cavalry and infantry. The paean of music that marched with him reached the sky and echoed from the horizon. The marriage of Dasaratha and Kausalya was celebrated with resounding grandeur and splendour.

The king of Kosala took Sumanthra near him and said, "You brought about this glory. Of course, nothing ever happens without God's will; nevertheless,

how can I repay the debt I owe you and demonstrate my gratitude to you? Please honour my offer and accept it; be wedded this day itself in my capital city. If you agree, I'll arrange the celebration of that joyous event this very day." Dasaratha and Sumanthra gave their consent to the proposal. Sumanthra was married to the daughter of Veeradasa, of the clan of Ganga. The news of the marriages of both king and prime minister at the same place, on the same day, spread throughout the kingdom! The land was filled with wonder and delight. The festival lasted three days; the populace were treated to music, drama, dance, and other forms of entertainment. Night and day were packed with excitement and joy.

On the fourth day, Dasaratha started back for Ayodhya with his queen and courtiers as well as minister Sumanthra and his bride and entourage; they entered the city amidst the acclamation of the people, who exulted at the marriages of both king and minister. Dasaratha's subjects danced in the streets and shouted "hurrah, hurrah" till their throats got hoarse. They lined the streets to see their queen; they sprinkled rosewater on the roads by which they came and welcomed them waving flames of camphor.

Dasaratha resumed his royal duties and ruled with love and care. Often, he went with his consort on excursions into the forests and spent his days happily. But, as time sped through days, months, and even years, the shadow of distress darkened his face, for the pang of being childless saddened him.

The king consulted priests, pundits, and ministers, and when he knew that their desire confirmed Kausalya's earnest prayer, he married another wife, Sumitra. Sumitra lived up to her name, for she was indeed full of companionable virtues. Kausalya and Sumitra were bound to each other by ties of affection far stronger than those between a mother and child. Each yearned to give joy to the other; each had deep fortitude, detachment, and sympathy.

But in spite of the lapse of many years, there were no signs of the king having a successor to the throne.

Moved by despair and at the insistence of the two queens, the king married a third wife. She was Kaika, the exquisitely charming daughter of the king of Kekaya in Kashmir.

The King of Kekaya, however, laid down certain conditions before agreeing to give his daughter away in marriage! He insisted that the son born of Kaika should have the right of accession to the throne; if the king of Ayodhya could not agree to this, he would not consent. Garga, the court priest, brought back the message to Ayodhya.

Kausalya and Sumitra recognised the ardour of the king to wed the princess of Kekaya, whose beauty was being extolled highly by all; they felt that the duty of a true wife is to obey the least wish of the husband and do her best to help the realisation of that wish; they also knew full well that the imperial line of Ayodhya could never be polluted by a son who would transgress dharma. Though Dasaratha might promise that the son of the third wife could succeed to the throne, the son of Kaika born in the dynasty would certainly be an embodiment of righteousness, free from such blemish. So, they pleaded with him, with palms meeting in prayer, "Lord! What greater happiness have we than yours? Accept the conditions laid by the king of Kekaya and wed his daughter and ensure the continuity of this dynasty of Raghu. There is no need to spend even a minute's thought upon this." The words of the queens fanned his native ardour to an even brighter flame; the king sent Garga back with many presents, agreeing to the terms and informing the king that he was following fast for the wedding ceremony.

The ceremony itself was celebrated with lavish magnificence.

Dasaratha returned to his capital, shining like the moon amidst the stars, as he passed through the streets in procession, accompanied by the three queens. The king treated each of them with equal consideration; they, too, evinced equal love and respect toward each other and the king. They adored him and were afraid to displease him.

They did their best to carry out his wishes and not to hinder his desire, for

they revered him as their God, in the tradition of the true wife. They lived with such intimate mutual love that it appeared as if all three had but one breath, though they moved about as three bodies!

Performance of a sacrifice for begetting a son

Years passed. The king and queens crossed the bounds of youth and middle age and approached the realm of old age, but there were no sign of a son. Therefore, though the women's apartments of the palace had all the comforts and accessories needed for happy existence, the hearts of the queens were torn by unrest, anxiety, and despair.

One evening, the four (the king and his queens) sat in a room of the palace spending hours of anxiety over the future of Ayodhya and the prospects of its prosperity and safety, and each attempted to answer intelligently and pleasantly. At last, unable to resolve the problem, they rose, heavily dejected, and decided to consult the family preceptor, Vasishta, and accept his advice.

At break of dawn, Vasishta was invited to grant his presence; many pundits and counsellors were also called for consultation. The king placed before them the problem of finding a successor to rule the vast realm between the two seas, the imperial domain under the sway of the Raghu dynasty. Overcome by despair, Dasaratha prayed to the elders in plaintive terms for beneficial suggestions.

Vasishta dwelled long in thought. Finally, he opened his eyes and spoke. "King! You need not grieve thus.

Ayodhya will not be rendered masterless. She will not suffer widowhood. This domain will be gay, happy, and prosperous, in unbroken festivity and evergreen with festoonery. She will be the guardian of right living, reverberating with music and joy. I will not agree to raising a prince from some other dynasty to Ayodhya's throne.

The grace of God is a gift inscrutable. The vow of righteousness that you are

fulfilling will surely bring you the supreme joy of having a son. Don't delay any further! Invite sage Rishyasringa, son of Vibhandaka, and perform the sacred sacrifice prescribed for those who want to beget a son with him as the high priest. Make all the necessary ceremonial and ritual arrangements for the sacrifice forthwith. Your desire will be achieved without fail." The queens listened to these reassuring words, spoken so emphatically by Vasishta. They were filled with bliss (ananda)! The bud of hope bloomed anew in their hearts. They retired into their apartments, praying earnestly.

The king searched among his entourage for the most appropriate emissary to send to invite Rishyasringa to the imperial capital. At last, he called his old friend Romapada, king of the Anga State, and sent him with necessary instructions and equipment. Meanwhile, arrangements for the sacrifice were made on the bank of the sacred Sarayu river. Attractive sacrificial altars were constructed, in conformity with sacred injunctions. The city was decorated with flags and festoons.

As anticipated, the great sage Rishyasringa entered the city of Ayodhya with his consort Santha, to the great delight of all.

Emperor Dasaratha welcomed the sage at the main palace gate and ceremonially washed his feet. He placed on his own head a few drops of the water sanctified by the sage's feet and then fell at Vasishta's feet and prayed to him to enquire from Rishyasringa the proper procedure for the contemplated sacrifice.

Rishyasringa asked the ministers and scholars to sit in appointed order and directed the king to sit on his throne. Then he described the various processes of the ceremony, so that the court priests could note them for their guidance. He gave them in such detail that everyone even knew exactly where he was to sit in the sacrificial hall!

The sage decided that the sacrifice should begin at the stroke of seven, the very next day. The news spread all over the city in a trice. Before dawn, every street was decorated with green festoons, every road was packed with people

pressing forward to the vast open space on the bank of the Sarayu, where the sacrifice was to be performed.

The river bank was thick with the eager populace.

Rishyasringa, with his consort Santha, entered the specially built sacrifice hall (yajna mantap) with the king and queens, while Vedic chanting and the music of bugle, trumpet, and clarinet and the cheers of the people resounded from the sky. Rishyasringa was installed as the "Brahma" or chief organiser for the sacrifice; he assigned various tasks like worship, recitation, chanting, and propitiation, to scholars, in consideration of their qualifications.

The offerings were placed in the sacred fire with the prescribed formulae by Rishyasringa himself, with scrupulous exactitude, deep devotion, and faith.

From the fire that was scripturally fed there arose before all eyes a divine person, who shone with the blinding splendour of a sudden stroke of lightning! He held a bright vessel in his hands. At this, the vast concourse, including the priests, were petrified with wonder, awe, fear and joy. They were overwhelmed by the sudden onrush of bliss and mystery. The king and queens shed tears of joy; they cast their looks upon the divine person and prayed to him, with folded palms.

Rishiyashringa continued the formulae with undisturbed equanimity, as the texts prescribe, offering oblations in the fire. Suddenly, a voice resounded from the dome of the sky, as on the day of merriment. Rishyasringa sat aghast and sought to listen to the message from above. "Maharaja! Accept this vessel and give the sacred sweet milk pudding (payasam) in it in appropriate shares to your three queens," the voice announced. Placing the vessel in the king's hands, the mysterious person who had emerged from the flames disappeared into them.

The joy of the people, princes, pundits, and priests who witnessed this great manifestation knew no bounds.

Soon, the final rituals were completed and the maharaja returned in procession to the palace, with the sacred vessel gifted by the Gods in his hands.

4. Birth Of Dasaratha's Four Sons

The queens finished the ceremonial bath (as advised by the preceptor) and entered the palace shrine, where the altar of the family deity was. There, Vasishtha completed the worship ceremony. The food (payasam) presented by the divine person was placed in three golden cups. Then, Vasishtha called Dasaratha in and said, "King!

Give these cups to your wives - first to Kausalya, next to Sumitra, and last to Kaika." The King acted as ordered.

The queens took the cups and fell at the feet of Vasishtha and Dasaratha. Then, Vasishtha told them to partake of the food - but only after touching the feet of Rishyasringa, who officiated at the sacrifice.

Kausalya and Kaika kept their cups safe in the shrine and went to their maids to dry their hair, before attending to coiffure. Meanwhile, Sumitra stepped onto the terrace and, keeping her cup on the short parapet wall, dried her hair in the sun, ruminating all the time on her peculiar plight: "I am the second queen! The son of the eldest queen will ascend the throne, as of right; the son of Kaika, the third queen, can ascend the throne according to the promise made by the King at the time of his marriage to her!" But, Sumitra wondered, "What will happen to the son I would get? He'll be neither here nor there. Why have a son at all, to suffer as a nobody without status and sovereignty? Far better that a son is not born than be born and get neglected." But that was only for a moment. Soon she reconciled herself; she felt that what the gods decide must happen; none can stop it. Remembering her preceptor's command and the king's order; she went toward the cup, determined to eat the contents, when lo and behold, an eagle flew in and whisked it off in its beak, far, far into the sky.

Sumitra repented for her negligence of the precious food; she felt that the king would be very upset if he came to know of the mishap. She couldn't decide what to do, so she went straight to Kausalya and told her the story.

Just then, Kaika came with her gold cup, after tying up her dried hair. The three were very loving to each other, like sisters bound by one single silken thread of affection.

To avoid breaking the sad news to the king, they had another gold cup brought. Kausalya and Kaika poured into it a portion from their own shares so that all could take their seats together in the shrine. They ate the food (payasam) while Rishyasringa pronounced his blessings and other elders and scholars chanted auspicious Vedic hymns. The queens then sipped sanctifying water and prostrated before the altar. They fell at Rishyasringa's feet and proceeded to their own palaces.

Time rolled by. News that the queens were pregnant spread among the people. The bodies of the queens took on a shining complexion. The tenth month arrived. Maids and nurses awaited the happy event and watched over the queens with vigilant care. Meanwhile, they came to know that Kausalya had labour pains. On the way to her palace, they learned that she had delivered a prince! On the second day, Kaika brought forth a son. The glad tidings filled the entire country with joy. The next day, Sumitra had her labour pains and delivered twin sons.

Auspicious signs were seen everywhere. The happy news filled all with immeasurable joy. The earth covered herself with green; trees blossomed all over! Music filled the air and clouds showered fragrant drops of rain - but only on the apartments where the babies were laid in their cradles! Dasaratha's joy knew no bounds. For years he had been immersed in agony that he did not have even a single son, and the birth of four sons gave him indescribable satisfaction and happiness.

The king invited brahmins and gave them gold, cows, and land gifts in plenty. He arranged for distribution of money and clothes to the poor and gifted houses for the homeless. He gave food to the hungry. Wherever one cast his eye, he could see people acclaiming the happy event, shouting hurrah! hurrah! The subjects gathered in huge assemblies to express their joy in music and dance. "We now have princes in the royal line," they prided

themselves; they were more exhilarated than when they themselves had sons born to them. Women offered worship to God in gratitude for this act of grace, for they were sure that the birth of the sons to their king was a signal act of divine mercy.

Dasaratha invited the preceptor of the royal dynasty, Vasishta, to the palace and, according to his suggestion, got a learned astrologer to write down the horoscopes of the newborn. He announced that Kausalya's child was born at a most propitious moment - the divine half-year of the sun's northward path (uttarayana), second spring month (Chaithra), the bright fortnight, the ninth day, the Punarvasu star, Monday, the zodiacal sign of the lion (Simhalagna), and the lunar mansion (abhijith), when the world was resting happily and the weather was pleasant.

Kaika's son was born the next day - the second spring month, the bright half, tenth day, Tuesday, under the yoga of fragrance (gandha-yoga).

The twins were born on the third day - the second spring month, the bright half, eleventh day, Aslesha star, the eleventh astrological yoga of prosperity (vridhhi-yoga). These details were communicated to the astrologer, who was asked to chart and write the horoscopes in consonance with astrological science and inform the king of his inferences therefrom.

The naming ceremony

Then, Dasaratha prayed to Vasishta to fix the auspicious time for the childrens' naming ceremony. The family preceptor sat still for a few seconds, lost in meditation. He saw the future years revealed in his yogic vision.

Rousing himself from the vision, he said: "Maharaja! Your sons are not just ordinary mortals. They are incomparable.

They have many names and are not human. They are divine beings who have assumed human forms.

They are divine personalities. The world's good fortune has brought them here. I consider it a great chance to officiate at the naming ceremony of these divine children." The mothers were three, but the father was one, so Vasishta laid down that the ten-day period of "impurity" be counted from the day when Kausalya delivered her child. So he declared the eleventh day after the birth of Kausalya's son to be auspicious for the naming ceremony.

The king fell at Vasishta's feet in thankfulness for this favour, and the preceptor left for his hermitage.

The astrologer also approved the day and started writing the list of materials to be kept ready for the ritual. He gave the list to the chief priest and left, loaded with presents that the King granted him. Dasaratha had invitations written for the ceremony and sent them to the feudatory rulers, nobles, courtiers, sages, and scholars throughout his empire, addressing them as befitted their rank and status. The messengers who carried the invitations were ministers, court pundits, officers, and brahmins, their status being suited to the rank and status of invitees.

Ten days passed. The city of Ayodhya was brightened and beautified and made most charming to the eye.

Music filled the air and spread over the length and breadth of the kingdom, making people wonder whether celestial angels were singing above. Fragrance was sprinkled on the streets. The city overflowed with visitors. The sages and courtiers, and no others, could enter the inner apartments of the palace. The rest, whether prince or peasant, had separate quarters arranged for them. Stands were erected in the courtyard of the palace to seat all the guests and invitees. They were accommodated there to watch the naming, with all its attendant ceremonials.

Very soon, music rose from the court hall and the chanting of Vedic hymns by brahmins could be heard. The three queens entered the elegantly decorated hall with the babies in their arms. They shone like divine mothers carrying the Gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva. The bliss and splendour that pervaded their

faces were beyond man's powers of description.

When the people noticed their entry, acclamations of "victory" rose from their hearts. Women waved auspicious lamps before them. Three special seats had been set up for them. Kausalya took her seat first, followed by Sumitra and Kaika. Emperor Dasaratha sat by Kausalya's side, on her right.

The brahmins started the ceremony, with due attention to detail. They lit the sacred fire and poured oblations with the recitation of appropriate formulae. Rice grains were poured and spread on golden plates, soft silk cloth was spread on the rice, and the babies were placed on the cloth by the mothers. Kausalya's child stared at Vasishta as if he was a familiar acquaintance! He tried to go near him, as if he liked his company and would fain be near him! Everyone wondered at this strange behaviour.

Vasishta was overwhelmed at this and shed tears of joy; he had to wipe his eyes and control himself with much effort. Holding a few grains of rice in his hand, he said, "King! The child born to promote Kausalya's joy will do the same for all mankind. His virtues will bring solace and contentment, joy and happiness, to all. The yogis and seekers will find a great source of joy in him. Therefore, from this moment, his name will be Rama, or 'he who pleases'." The sages welcomed the name as very apt and meaningful, exclaiming, "Excellent, excellent!" Then, Vasishta gazed upon Sumitra's twin children. The elder one, he felt, would be a hero, a stalwart fighter, and endowed with vast wealth. He knew that he would take delight in the service of God and His consort, Lakshmi, and that service would be the very breath of life for him. So, he gave him the name Lakshmana. His younger brother, Vasishta knew, would be a formidable destroyer of enemies, a contented follower in the footsteps of his elder brothers. He therefore blessed him with the name Satrugna (the slayer of enemies).

Later, he gazed on the child that was the source of Kaika's joy. This child, Vasishta knew, would fill all hearts with love and joy; he would amaze all by his unbelievable adherence to dharma and would rule his subjects with great compassion and affection. So, he gave him the name Bharatha (the devoted

one).

The people were happy when they heard the preceptor dilate on the glorious future of the children. They were filled with love for the princes and called them from that day as Rama, Lakshmana, Satrughna, and Bharatha.

Dasaratha had arranged elaborate banquets for all who attended the ceremony; he filled everyone who had come with joy. He offered each one the hospitality and presents that their status deserved. He showered enormous gifts as charity and, as ritual penance, distributed cows, lands, gold, and other valuables to the poor and the needy.

He paid attention to everyone, so no one was discontented or disappointed. After the ceremony, he gave them leave with due civility to return home.

Unhappiness at separation

The children grew fast on the fond care of the mothers. But a curious thing was noticed very early: Lakshmana always sought Rama and Satrughna always sought Bharatha! Since the day of his birth, Lakshmana was always wailing! The nurses and others tried various remedies and palliatives, but nothing would alleviate his misery or stop his wail. Internal pain was suspected, and medicines galore were tried, but to no avail. Sumitra was certain the child's pain was beyond the reach of drugs.

She sent for Vasishta and fell at his feet when he entered the room. "Master," she appealed, "Lakshmana has been weeping since birth, clamouring for something I am not able to discover. I have consulted doctors and treated him as advised, but the wailing increases day by day. He doesn't even relish mother's milk! As for sleep, it is totally absent. How can he be healthy and hearty if he goes on like this? Kindly tell me why he is behaving so, and bless him that he may give up this continuous wail." Vasishta thought for a while. Then he said, "Oh Queen! His pain is unique, and you are trying to cure it by familiar means and drugs! His yearning is beyond the ken of mortals to understand. Do as I tell you and the child will be quiet and happy. The

moment you do so, the child will cease wailing and begin playing about with gusto.

Lay him beside Kausalya's child, Rama. This is the panacea." Vasishta left, leaving his blessings on mother and child. Sumitra took her child to Rama's cradle and laid him beside Rama. From that very moment, the wailing stopped! Laughter and play began!

Those who saw this transformation took it as a great wonder! Lakshmana, who until then was suffering, began to prattle aloud in joy, kicking his feet about, waving his hands in glee, as fish do when thrown back into water, gliding gleefully along, in quick darts. He was in Rama's presence, immersed in bliss and aware of the grace Rama showered.

Satrughna's story was similar. He was melancholic and averse to food and play. He appeared very weak and tired. Sumitra was worried at this development. She invited the preceptor to the palace and asked him the reason.

Vasishta smiled again. "Mother! Your children are not of the common stamp. They are born to enact a divine drama! Place Satrughna on the same bed as Bharatha! Then his daily routine will be joyful and extremely happy.

Don't worry any more." Vasishta blessed her and left.

Sumitra followed his instructions immediately. From then on, Satrughna spent time in Bharatha's company.

The children were in unbounded bliss together; their progress was beyond measure! Like the splendour of the sun, they grew in intelligence and glory from hour to hour.

Sumitra now had nothing to do for her twins; but, since she loved them as her dear life, she spent some time with Kausalya and some with Kaika, fondling the children and attending to their needs. She moved from one palace to the

other, relishing her chore as a maid caring for the comforts of children. "I am not destined to mother them," she sometimes pined in solitude. Often she wondered how this strange situation arose of her children being happy with those mothers and not with her.

At last, she went to the preceptor and prayed to him to allay her anxiety. He laid bare the real reason: "Mother, Lakshmana is a 'part' of Rama; Satrughna is a 'part' of Bharatha." Even as these words fell from his lips, Sumitra exclaimed, "Yes, yes! I realise it now! I am glad I learned the truth from you." She fell at Vasishta's feet and left for the inner apartments.

She said to herself, "When the eagle carried away in its beak the precious gift of divine food (payasam) given by the divine messenger, I was so frightened at the prospect of the king becoming angry at my negligence that I told Kausalya and Kaika about the calamity; they shared the food from their cups with me, so I had twins as a result of the twin shares I consumed! O, the will of God is mysterious. It is beyond anyone to know His might and majesty. Who can alter His decree?" "Yes," she consoled herself, "I bore them for nine months. I went through the pangs of delivery. But their real mothers are Kausalya and Kaika, without a doubt." She was confirmed in this belief; she gladly entrusted her children to Kausalya and Kaika and joined them in fondling and fostering them.

Kausalya's experience with Rama

The maids, as well as many kinsmen of the royal family, derived great joy watching the children at play.

After they left, Kausalya used to insist that rites to ward off the evil eye be performed scrupulously. She was so affectionate and considerate toward the children that she never recognised the passage of day and arrival of night or the passage of night and dawn of a new day. She could not leave them out of sight even for the fraction of a second. While taking her bath or worshiping in the shrine, her mind was on them, and she would hasten toward them as quick as feasible. All her work she did in a hurry, so that she could spend

more time on their care.

One day, she bathed Rama and Lakshmana; she applied fragrant smoke to their curls in order to dry them and perfume them; she carried them to the golden cradles; she sang sweet lullabies and rocked them to sleep. When they went to sleep, she asked the maids to keep watch, went to her rooms, and prepared the daily food offering to God in order to complete the rites of worship. She took the golden plate of food and offered it to God.

Some time later, she went into the shrine in order to bring the plate out and give a small quantity of the offering to the children. To her surprise, she found Rama sitting on the floor before the altar, with the offering before Him, eating with delight the food she had dedicated to God! She couldn't believe her eyes! Kausalya wondered, "What is this I see? Do my eyes deceive me? Is this true? Can it be true? How did this baby, who was sleeping in the cradle, come to the shrine? Who brought it hither?" She ran toward the cradle and peeped into it, only to find Rama asleep therein! She assured herself that hers was but delusion; she went into the shrine to remove the vessel of curds (payasam) she had placed before the idols, but she found the vessel empty! How could this be, she wondered! Seeing the child in the shrine might well be a trick of the eye, but what about the vessel being empty? How could that be an optical illusion?

She was torn between amazement and disbelief. Picking up the vessel with the remnants of the offering, she hastened to the cradle and stood watching the two babes. She could see Rama rolling something on his tongue, evidently enjoying its taste; she was amusingly watching his face, when lo, she saw the entire universe revolving therein. She lost all consciousness of herself and her surroundings and stood transfixed, staring with dazed eyes, on the unique panorama that was revealed.

The maids were astounded at her behaviour; they cried out in their anxiety, but she didn't hear them. A maid held her feet and shook her until she awoke to her surroundings. She came to in a trice, with a quick shiver. She saw the maids around her and, stricken by wonder, she sat on a bedstead. Turning to

the maids, she asked, "Did you notice the child?" They replied "Yes, we have been here for a long time. We haven't taken our eyes away from him." "Did you notice any change in him?" Kausalya enquired in eager haste.

"We didn't notice any change; the child is fast asleep as you can see," was their reply.

Kausalya had her problem: Was her vision a delusion or fact? If true, why didn't the maids notice? She thought about it for long and finally consoled herself with the argument that since the children were born as products of divine grace, divine manifestation was only to be expected of them. She nursed them and nourished them with deep maternal solicitude. They grew day by day, with greater and greater splendour, as the moon does in the bright half of the month. She derived immeasurable joy in fondling them and fitting clothes and jewels on them.

Rama's childhood was a simple but sublime part in his life. Very often, forgetting that He was her child, Kausalya fell at His feet and folded her palms before him, knowing that He was divine. She feared what people would say if they saw her bowing before her own child and touching Its feet in adoration. To cover up her confusion, she looked up and prayed aloud, "Lord! Keep my child away from harm and injury." She used to close her eyes in contemplation of the divine child and begged God that she might not waver in her faith through the vagaries of His power to delude (maya). She was struck by the halo of light that encircled His face. She was afraid that others might question her sanity if she told them her experiences. Nor could she keep them to herself. She was so upset that she often behaved in a peculiar manner, as if carried away by the thrill of her child's divine sport. Sometimes, she was eager to open her heart to Sumitra or Kaika, but, she controlled herself, lest they doubt the authenticity of the experience and attribute it to exaggeration or her desire to extol her own son.

At last, one day, she made bold to relate the entire story of wonder and thrill to Emperor Dasaratha. He listened intently and said, "Lady! This is just the creation of your fancy; you are overfond of the child; you imagine he is divine

and watch his every movement and action in that light, so he appears strange and wonderful. That is all." This reply gave her no satisfaction, so the emperor consoled her with some specious arguments and sent her to her apartments. In spite of what Dasaratha affirmed, the queen, who had witnessed the miraculous incidents with her own eyes, remained unconvinced. She was not convinced by Dasaratha's words.

She approached the preceptor Vasishta and consulted him on the genuineness of her experiences. He heard her account and said, "Queen! What you have seen is unalloyed truth. They are not creations of your imagination.

Your son is no ordinary human child! He is divine. You got him as your son as the fruit of many meritorious lives. That the Saviour of humanity should be born as Kausalya's son is the unique good fortune of the citizens of Ayodhya." He blessed the queen profusely and departed.

Kausalya realised the truth of Vasishta's statement! She knew her son as divinity itself; she derived great joy watching the child.

The four sons grow close together

Months rolled by. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna, learned to crawl on all fours, sit on the floor, and move about. Special arrangements were made to keep watch over them at all times, lest they fall and hurt themselves. Many varieties of toys were procured and placed before them. The children, with the mothers and nursemaids, spent the days with no sense of the passage of time, in one continuous round of joy. The children could raise themselves up and stand, holding fast to the fingers of mother or maid. They could hold on to the wall and get up. They could toddle a few steps forward on their feet. Their efforts and achievements gave merriment to the mothers. They lisped a few indistinct words in sweet parrot voice, making the mothers burst into laughter. The mothers taught them to say mom and dad and were happy when they pronounced the words correctly.

Every day at dawn, they rubbed medicated fragrant oil over the children's bodies, applied detergent powder, and bathed them in the holy waters of the Sarayu. Then, they dried their curls in perfumed incense, applied collyrium to their eyes, placed dots on their cheeks to ward off the evil eye, and put ritual marks on their foreheads.

They dressed the children in attractive soft silk and helped them to recline in swings, where they slept soundly to melodious lullabies. Engaged in this pleasant task, the mothers felt that heaven was not far off in space and time; it was there all around them.

And what of the jewels for them! Oh, they were newer and more brilliant each new day! Anklets, tinkling wrist strings of gold and precious stones, necklaces of the nine gems! For fear that the jewels might hurt their tender bodies by their hardness, they were set on soft velvet tapes and ribbons.

The plays and pastimes of the little boys defied description. When they were able to walk, boys of the same age were brought from the city, and they played games together. The city children were given tasty dishes to eat and toys to play with. They were also loaded with gifts. The maids who brought them to the palace were also fed sumptuously. Kausalya, Kaika, and Sumitra had no care for their own health and comfort while bringing up their children, so happy were they with them.

After this period of nourishment and growth in the interior of the palace, at the age of three, the children were taken by their governesses to the playground, where they ran and rollicked to their hearts' content. When they returned, the mothers welcomed them and fostered them with great love and vigilance. One day, while conversing with his queens, Dasaratha mentioned that the children would not learn much worthwhile if they moved about with only the maids; their intelligence and skills couldn't be developed that way. So, an auspicious hour was fixed to initiate them into letters, and preceptors were called in to inaugurate the studies.

From that day, the charming little kids took residence in their teacher's home;

they gave up the costly royal garments and wore a simple cloth wound round their waists and another thrown over their shoulders. Since education cannot progress well if children are in the atmosphere of parental love and care, they lived with the teacher, imbibing lessons all through the day and night, for more is learned by service to the teacher, by observing him and following his example. They had to live on whatever the teacher gave them as food. They shone like embodiments of seekers of truth and celibacy (brahmachari). When the mothers felt the anguish of separation and wanted to see them, they went to the teacher's house and made themselves happy, noting the children's progress.

The teacher was also quite happy when he observed the steadfastness and enthusiasm of his wards; he was surprised at their intelligence and powerful memory, and he was filled with wonder and joy. Among the four, he noticed that Rama had outstanding interest in his studies. He grasped things so quickly that he could repeat any lesson correctly after hearing it just once. The teacher was amazed at Rama's sharp intelligence; he resolved that his advance should not be slowed down by the need to bring the others to his level. So he grouped the other three separately and paid individual attention to Rama, who learned very fast.

Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna also learned admirably well, but they pined for Rama's company and comradeship so much that, as soon as Rama was out of sight, they lost interest in study and in their duties toward their teacher. As a result, they couldn't catch up with Rama but were always a session or two behind him.

Lakshmana dared to tell his teacher once or twice that they had no need for any lessons or learning; they would be happy if they could but get Rama's company! Rama was the very life of Lakshmana. The teacher observed this strange relationship between the two and drew much inspiration contemplating on it. He reminded himself of the statement of the sage Vasishtha that they were no other than primeval man and God (Nara and Narayana), the inseparable divine forces.

5. The Guru And The Pupils

The brothers lived in the preceptor's house and served him with devotion. They renounced the palace comforts and gladly underwent the hardships. They carried out the wishes of the master in humility and with loyalty.

They finished their studies in a very short period and mastered the subjects they were taught. One day, Dasaratha came with his minister to the home of their teacher. He was beside himself with joy when he saw them reciting Vedic hymns and heard the sacred formulae rolling off their tongues, clear and fast, like a cascade of bright pearls.

He was happy that his sons had learned so much.

Rama rose and fell at his father's feet. Seeing this, the three brothers also came forward and prostrated before him. The teacher invited the emperor and minister to sit on raised seats covered with deerskin. Dasaratha began conversing with the teacher in order to find out how far the children had advanced in studies. Rama signed to his brothers that they should not overhear their talk; he left the room, with the teacher's permission, carrying his books and calling on the others to follow him. The brothers took the cue from Rama in all matters, so they silently obeyed his merest gesture.

Vasishta and Dasaratha noted this incident; they appreciated Rama's upright conduct, his understanding of the trend of the teacher's conversation, his immediate reaction of humility, and the example and ideal he set for his three brothers. They were glad that the children had learned so much discipline.

Vasishta couldn't contain himself. He said, "Maharaja! Your sons have mastered all the arts. Rama has mastered all the scriptures (sastras). He is no ordinary mortal. As soon as I began teaching him to recite the Vedas, he repeated them as if he knew them already. Only He who has inspired the hymns can repeat them so, not any other. The Vedas are not 'books' that he could have perused while at leisure! They have come down from guru and

disciple, only through recitation and listening. They are not available anywhere, except from the preceptor!

That is why they are referred to as that which is heard (sruthi). The divine breath of God has shaped itself into these mantras. So far, I haven't seen anyone who has mastered them as Rama has done. Why should I say 'seen'?

I haven't even heard of anyone who has accomplished this remarkable feat!

"I can tell you of many more of your son's superhuman achievements, maharaja! When I think of my good fortune in securing these boys as my pupils, I feel it is the reward for the asceticism I practised so long. They need learn nothing further. Now they have to be trained in bowmanship, archery, and similar skills appropriate for royal princes. They have completed their studies under me and have become efficient in all that I can teach. Today is very auspicious. Take them back with you to the palace." Dasaratha, who for months was afflicted with the pain of separation, shed tears of joy. He could not contain his delight. He turned toward the minister at his side and directed him to convey the good news to the queens and ask them to come over to the hermitage with the offerings that pupils have to present to the preceptor when leaving his custody. Sumanthra went very fast to the palace and communicated the news. He got the gifts ready and returned quicker than anticipated.

Meanwhile, at Vasishta's suggestion, the boys had their belongings packed, and the articles were loaded into the chariot. As directed by their father, the children worshiped the guru according to prescribed ceremonial, gave him the gifts, and fell at his feet, asking his permission to leave for home.

Vasishta drew the boys to his side, pressed their hands, and patted them on their heads. He blessed them and most unwillingly allowed them to leave. The pang of separation brought tears to his eyes. He walked up to the chariot with his pupils. The boys ascended the vehicle, and it moved away. They turned back toward the guru and looked in his direction with folded palms, for a long distance. The preceptor also stood there, his cheeks wet with tears.

Dasaratha noticed this bond between the teacher and the pupils and was greatly pleased.

The guru entered the hermitage with a heavy heart. Wherever his eyes were turned, he noticed darkness and no light. He feared that the attachment he had developed might confirm itself as a shackle; he decided to sit in meditation in order to suppress the rising tides of memory. Soon, he overcame the outer illusion and merged himself in inner spiritual bliss (ananda). He realized that the boys were embodiments of righteousness, prosperity, fulfillment, and liberation (dharma, artha, kama, moksha) - the four goals of human life - and that they had taken human form in order to reestablish on earth these grand ideals of gracious living. This gave him unruffled peace.

Dasaratha resolved to supplement the boys' education by training them in the use of arms, so he called in expert archers and others and made arrangements to teach them the science of attack and defence. But who can claim to be the teachers of these boys, who were already past masters in every field of study? They were only "acting" the roles of humans and pretending to learn.

Who can teach the One who holds the strings of this puppet show how to pull the string? Men who could not recognise their reality underneath the camouflage of illusion (maya) sought to train them and teach them the objective skills useful for external living. They had come to save the world from disaster, so they had to be in and of the world, respecting the conventions of the world as far as they served their purpose. People could not understand their acts, for they were beyond human intellect or imagination; people would be helpless if asked to explain them. But people must learn the ideals they put into practice. So, Rama was presenting himself as a cinder covered with ash, on a lake with a thick float of moss or the moon hidden by a curtain of cloud. The brothers were following Rama's footsteps.

Rama and Lakshmana were revealing knowledge of stratagems and skills that even expert instructors did not know. They were wonderstruck and even a

little fear-stricken. But the four princes never shot an arrow at an animal or bird. They never broke their vow, taken solemnly, to use arms only on occasions of great urgency, not for the pleasure of killing or wounding.

The trainers took them often to the forest for hikes and gameshooting. But when they spotted animals or birds and invited them to shoot, the four children remonstrated and desisted, saying, "These arrows are not to be used against innocent targets; they are to be used for the protection of the good, the welfare of the world, and the service of the people. That is the purpose for which they are with us; we won't insult them in using them for these silly pastimes." The teachers had to accept their arguments. Every word and deed of Rama demonstrated his compassion.

Sometimes, when Lakshmana aimed his arrow at a bird or animal, Rama came between and protested, "Lakshmana!

What harm has it done to you or the world? Why do you long to shoot it? It is against the code of prescribed morals for kings to punish innocent beings; don't you know?" The emperor often sat among his ministers with the princes near him and discussed the problems of political administration, judicial trials, and the application of moral principles in the governance of the state. He related stories of their grandparents and others of the royal line - how they earned the love and loyalty of their subjects, how they fought wars with "demons" and for "gods", and how they won the grace and support of God in their endeavours. The father and his sons were exhilarated when these tales were told. Many a day, the ministers took turns in this pleasant task.

As the brothers grew with the passage of years, the ministers became confident that they could be entrusted with some fields of governmental activity. The people dreamed that when they came of age and took hold of the reins of government, the earth would be transmuted into heaven. When people saw the princes, they felt a bond of affectionate attachment springing among them. The conversation that ensued among them was marked by sweet concord. The city of Ayodhya had no one who did not love those simple, humble, virtuous, selfless Princes, or who did not evince a desire to

watch them. They were as dear to the people of Ayodhya as their own bodies, as precious to the city as its own heart.

The pilgrimage

One day, when the princes were in their eleventh or twelfth year, Dasaratha commissioned minister Sumanthra, who was the repository of virtue, to arrange for teaching them the spiritual science of liberation (para-vidya).

He said that however proficient a person might be in secular sciences (a-para-vidya), only spiritual science could give the strength to carry out the person's dharma (rightful duties). The highest moral culture must be imparted to them at this tender age.

Success or failure in later life was built upon the impressions and experiences gained in the early stages of life. The early years were the foundations for the mansion of later years. Therefore he said, "Take the princes around the kingdom and let them learn not only the condition of the people but also the holiness of sacred places.

Describe to them the sanctity of holy places, the history of the temples, and the saints and sages who have consecrated them, and let them drink deep the springs of divinity that hallow those spots.

"I feel it will be good for them. As they grow, they will be prone to sensual desires and urges. Before they fall prey to such tendencies, it is best to implant in them reverence, awe, and devotion to the divine that is immanent in the universe. That is the only means to save their humanness from demeaning itself into animality. And for rulers of kingdoms, it is essential. Consult the guru and the preceptors and arrange the tour without delay." Elated at the prospect of the princes getting this great opportunity, Sumanthra had all preparations made to his satisfaction and got ready himself to accompany them. The queens came to know of this pilgrimage. They were delighted that the princes were going on such a holy venture, and they made many things ready to render it as happy and useful as possible.

They arranged a few nurses for them and some comrades of their own age to accompany them. The princes, too, were beside themselves with joy at the prospect of visiting the sacred places of the land. They enthused their companions and sought equipment and clothes for them from the king.

The next day, when the auspicious hour selected for the journey had come, the princes bowed before their parents, touching their feet with their foreheads, and fell at the preceptor's feet. The mothers placed holy dots on their foreheads and cheeks to ward off the evil eye and guard them against evil. The princes discarded royal robes and put on the dresses of pilgrims, that is to say, a silk skirt (dhoti) around the waist and a silk shawl wrapped around the shoulders and, taking leave of all, they ascended the chariot. The palace resounded with shouts of victory rising from thousands of citizens who had gathered to see them off. The chariot moved on with guards before and behind.

Days, weeks, even months rolled by! They went to every temple and sacred spot; they imbibed the holiness of each place; they worshiped at each shrine with faith and devotion, they learned, after deep enquiry, the history of each place and the antecedents of the shrines; they ignored every other thought or activity during all that long period. Sumanthra described to them the sanctity of each place so graphically and intimately that their hearts were thrilled. The princes plied him with questions demanding further and deeper elaboration of his narrations. Sumanthra was overjoyed at the insatiable yearning of the boys, and he gave even more information and inspiration.

Thus, they journeyed from Kanyakumari to Kashmir, and from the eastern sea to the western, spending more than three months. They had their eyes open to the sufferings of the people and the discomforts of the pilgrims in every region of the empire, and whenever they observed these, they pleaded with Sumanthra, the minister, to set things right and to provide the needed amenities.

They were responsible for the repair and improvement of many temples, the provision of drinking water wells, the planting of avenue trees, the opening of

centres for the distribution of water to thirsty wayfarers, the building of caravanserais, and the establishment of health centres. Whenever Rama expressed a desire that such amenities be provided, Sumanthra never hesitated to agree; he saw to it that they were immediately provided to his satisfaction. The princes derived great comfort that the empire had such a loyal and efficient minister; they said to each other that when they had such ministers, welfare and progress were assured.

Accounts of the princes' pilgrimage were conveyed to Ayodhya by special couriers, who ran in relays, back and forth, with news they collected. Whenever delays occurred, the queens were weighed down by anxiety. They prayed to the preceptor Vasishta to give them correct information regarding them. Vasishta had the yogic attainment to discover what was happening to the princes, so he used to tell the queens the reassuring news that they were happy, healthy, and hearty and that they would soon be returning to the capital. The mothers derived courage and confidence therefrom. The preceptor blessed them and repaired to his hermitage.

Meanwhile, the news gatherers brought good tidings: The princes were nearing Ayodhya and would reach the city within two days! Arrangements were made at the main city gate to welcome the four princes, who had successfully gone through their long and arduous pilgrimage and had earned meritorious renown by their devotion and compassion during their triumphal tour. Rosewater was sprinkled on the roads to make them dust free. Arches and festoons were put up. On both sides of the road, women stood with plates with lamps on them, with bright flames, which they wanted to wave before the princes as they passed along.

The princes arrived at the gate as announced. Lamps were waved before them. They moved along the main highway, which was strewn with petals of fragrant flowers, with parties of musicians and singing minstrels proceeding slowly in advance. Brahmins recited hymns invoking the blessings of God upon the distinguished scions of the imperial family. Sumanthra was alongside the princes, who were shining with an ethereal glow on their faces.

When they reached the palace gates, many rites were gone through to ward off the effects of the evil eye, and then they were led into the inner apartments. The mothers awaited them there, with eyes longing to look upon them. The boys ran toward them and fell at their feet. The mothers raised them up and held them fast in close embrace for five or six minutes and lost themselves in the thrill of joy, which enveloped both mother and son in the bliss of merriment with the divine! The tears that rolled from the mothers' eyes out of the upsurge of love bathed the boys' heads. The mothers wiped their heads dry with the ends of their saris. They stroked their hair, fondled their heads, seated them on their laps, and fondly fed them sweet rice and curd-mixed rice.

Ah! The mothers' thrill and excitement were indescribable. The pang of separation they had suffered for three long months could be assuaged a little, and only by having the children in their care and custody day and night for a few days. They wanted them to relate the story of their pilgrimage, and the boys narrated in a sweet, simple, sincere style the sacredness of each holy place, as explained to them by Sumanthra. The mothers listened with such ardour and faith that they too seemed to experience the exhilaration each shrine provided for the earnest pilgrims.

Dasaratha celebrated the return of the young princes from their holy journey by offering oblations to the Gods and arranging a magnificent banquet for all brahmins who had successfully completed the pilgrimage to Kasi and Prayaga. He gave the latter monetary gifts, too.

Thus, since the day when the princes were born, it was one continuous round of festival and feast in the capital city and kingdom. Ayodhya shone with uninterrupted rejoicing. Feasting and festive entertainment knit the populace into a family, bound by love and gratitude. Every month, the days on which the children were born (the ninth, tenth, and eleventh days of the bright half) were filled with gorgeous ceremonies to mark the happy event. Even when the boys were away on pilgrimage, these days were celebrated as grandly as if they were in the city; except for functions where their physical presence was needed, all else - the feasts, the gifts, the games, the dance - were gone

through with enthusiasm.

The boys are transformed after the pilgrimage

But the parents noticed a change in the boys as a result of the pilgrimage. The transformation was surprising, and they hoped that the strange ways of life they had assumed might weaken with the passage of days. They watched their behaviour and attitudes with great attention. But they continued, with no sign of diminution.

Rama stayed mostly indoors. He did not bathe at fixed hours, as he had done before. He disliked wearing royal robes; he desisted from delicacies; he never sat on the golden throne; he appeared as if immersed in contemplation of the Absolute, of something beyond the senses and the mind. Since their brother appeared so morose and was ostensibly sulking, the three younger brothers always kept near him. They never left his presence, for games or for any other reason.

The four used to gather in a room and bolt themselves in. The mothers had to tap the door at intervals to bring in their food! However hard they tried to discover why they behaved so, they never revealed the reason! Rama alone deigned to answer their queries thus: "This is my nature; why seek to know the reason for my being so?" The mothers soon felt that this state of things could no longer be kept hidden and informed Dasaratha, who sent word for the boys to be brought to his apartments. Finding that the sons, who previously would have rushed in, took a long time to come, he was filled with wonder and worry. He made ready to proceed to their room himself.

Just then, the attendant announced that the princes were approaching! The father was overwhelmed with bliss; he embraced them and held them tight to his breast. He sat with the sons on both sides; he asked them about things, light and serious. Formerly, if he asked just one question, the boys used to reply to ten, but that day, when asked ten, they scarcely replied to one.

Dasaratha drew Rama to his lap and pleaded fondly with him, "Son! Why this

refusal to talk? Why this silence? What do you want? Tell me what you need, and I'll fulfil it immediately, without fail. Since you don't mix with your brothers and play with them as before, they are also unhappy." Though the King lovingly stroked his chin and looked at Rama's face, Rama said nothing more than that he was quite content and needed nothing.

Watching this strange behaviour, Dasaratha grew anxious and agitated; tears welled up in his eyes. The boys remained unaffected by his grief. The father spoke some soft words to them about how sons should conduct themselves and sent them to their apartments in the Palace.

Dasaratha called Sumanthra to confer with him; he asked him whether anything had happened during the pilgrimage to put the boys out of gear or whether he had brought them back too soon when they were eager to visit a few more places of interest to them. Dasaratha plied him with so many questions that Sumanthra was filled with surprise and apprehension. His lips quivered as he replied, "Nothing happened during the journey to displease the princes, no difficulty was encountered. Their every wish was honoured and carried through. I gave away in charity as much as they wanted; wherever they suggested, I got houses built for pilgrims, without hesitation or delay.

They never told me about any happening that they did not like. Nor did I notice any such. The pilgrimage was one long journey of joy and adoration." Dasaratha knew his Minister well. He said at last, "Sumanthra! You are a good man. I know full well that you are incapable of neglect or error. But, for some inexplicable reason, I find the boys have undergone a transformation after the pilgrimage. They have developed distaste for food and fun.

"However much the people around him persuade him, Rama doesn't answer and doesn't indicate the reason for his strange behaviour. He is immersed in his own awareness of the falsity of things. I am surprised at this. The queens, too, have taken this so much to heart that they are being consumed by anxiety." The loyal minister replied, "If permitted, I will meet the children and try to diagnose the ailment." Dasaratha said, "Quite right! Proceed at once.

Once we find the cause, the remedy isn't difficult, the cure isn't far." Sumanthra hurried to the child's apartment, heavy with a load of anxiety in his heart. He found the doors bolted from inside, the guards standing outside. When Sumanthra tapped, Lakshmana opened the door and let him in. Sumanthra closed the door behind him and talked with the boys for long on various matters, in order to draw out the reason for their malady. But he couldn't delve into the mystery. He noticed the difference between the confiding spirit of camaraderie that he enjoyed during the months of pilgrimage and the distance that had grown in recent months. He pleaded with Rama with tears in his eyes to reveal to him the reasons for his melancholy.

Rama smiled and said, "Sumanthra! What reason can be given for something that is my very nature? I have no wants; I have no desire. Have no anxiety on that score." Unable to do anything else, Sumanthra went to Dasaratha and sat beside him. "I feel it would be good to invite the guru tomorrow and consider which measures are proper," he said and, after taking the king's permission to leave, departed.

The king was sad; he neglected everything else; he ignored the demands of the empire and spun many stories in his mind to account for the children's behaviour. "They are entering the years of adolescence, so such temperamental revolutions are natural," he surmised. He shared this opinion with the queens and set his mind at rest for a little while.

When they learned that Vasishta was arriving at the palace, the queens made the necessary preparations and waited for him at the family altar. The guru arrived, and they fell at his feet, showering him with eager questions about the boy's peculiar malady and the change that had come upon them. They were all in tears. Noticing the agitation of the king and the queens, Vasishta turned his attention inward and sought the reason for the sorrow, through inner vision. The truth was quickly revealed to his penetrating purity. Within seconds, he turned toward the queens and assured them, "There is nothing wrong with the boys. These are not just ordinary children. They are free from the least trace of worldly desire. Their minds are untarnished. Don't be

anxious. Bring them to me; you can retire now to your apartments." The king and queens were happy at this assurance; they sent for the princes and left. Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna quickly got ready to meet the guru when the news that he wanted them reached their ears. But Rama evinced no haste. He was immersed in himself, as usual. So, Lakshmana touched his feet and prayed. "It is best we go without delay; otherwise, our parents will grieve that we dared disobey the preceptor's command." Lakshmana pleaded with Rama insistently for a long time, advancing various arguments. Finally, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna were able to proceed to the altar room with their eldest brother. There, they fell at the feet of the guru and reverentially stood before him.

Rama exhibits profound wisdom

Seeing them, Vasishta asked them with great affection to draw near and sit beside him. They all sat close to him, but Vasishta wanted Rama to come still nearer. He fondled Rama lovingly, playing with his hair and patting his back. He said, "Rama! Why have you become quiet and silent? Your mothers and father are suffering from grief and fear, unable to explain this inscrutable change. You have to pay heed to their happiness too, don't you?"

You have to demonstrate the validity of the precious axioms, 'Treat the mother as God (Mathru devo bhava). Treat the father as God (Pitru devo bhava)' by your own action, right?" Vasishta placed many such lessons and truths before Rama for his consideration.

Rama sat smiling and listened. When the guru had finished, Rama spoke calmly, "Master! You speak of mother, but who exactly is 'mother'? Who exactly is 'son'? Why, what exactly is 'body'? And what is the individual (jivi)? Is this objective world real? Or is the Supreme Soul real? This body is but the image of the Supreme Soul, isn't it? The five elements that comprise the substance called 'body' are also the substance of the entire universe. This universe is but the concatenation of the five elements, isn't it? The elements persist, in spite of all permutations and combinations. They also have a deeper base. Without realising this, if this created universe is itself assumed

to be real, and if one yields to the fascination of this falsehood, if the truth be discarded for the sake of the lie, what are we to say of such colossal ignorance? What can the individual gain by ignoring the eternal absolute real reality, the Atma?" As Vasishta observed Rama raising such profound philosophical problems, he noticed a halo of bright rays of spiritual splendour emanating and surrounding his face! He knew that the light was an indication of divinity attempting to surge outward! So he wanted Rama himself to provide the answers to the questions that Rama put forward. And the replies and explanations Rama gave were verily the voice of God. Vasishta could see this fact clearly. He bowed his head before him, mentally, for fear of being noticed. He said, "Son! I shall see you again in the evening." He left the palace without even meeting Dasaratha; he was so overcome by the illumination of the occasion. He fondled the children with a joyous sense of gratitude and love.

Dasaratha saw the princes after some time; he also saw the strange flow of divine awareness shining in their countenances. He could not understand how it happened, and he awaited Vasishta's arrival in the evening. No sooner did he enter the shrine than the children, the mothers, and Dasaratha fell at his feet and sat in their places with palms folded in prayerful humility.

Suddenly, Rama surprised everyone by asking a series of questions: "The individual soul, God, nature (jiva, Deva, prakriti) - what is the interrelation between them? Are these three one? Or are they distinct entities? If one, how did it become three and for what purpose? What unifying principle underlies them? What benefit is gained by recognising them as different, by giving up the cognition of the unity?" The parents were aghast at the profundity of these questions and the tender age of Rama. They became fully merged in that stream of instruction and inquiry, which showered precious axioms that shed light on the problems raised, as if heaven answered the questions raised by earth! They forgot that Rama was their own child; the hours of the night rolled by in the analysis and understanding of the great monistic wisdom.

Vasishta saw that the words flowing from the lips of Rama were indeed drops of the nectar of immortality, which can ensure peace for mankind; he blessed

the king and queens and returned to the hermitage. The dialogues between Rama and the preceptor form the text of Yoga-Vasishta, a meaningful and mellow treatise. It is also referred to as the Rama-Gita.

Rama spent his days immersed in Vedanta, communing with himself, talking while alone to himself, silent in company, and often laughing at nothing in particular. Dasaratha grew concerned. He was worried about the brothers and tried to keep the younger three apart, but they never agreed to be isolated from Rama and always had to be left in his company.

The king and the queens were very much depressed, for all their dreams of joy and glory had come to naught.

They became desperate, for they saw no signs of recovery or transformation in the sons. They counted hours and minutes, passing the time in anxiety and prayer. Rama had no interest even in food, and, with irregular and indifferent meals, he appeared weak and wasted in health.

6. The Call And The First Victory

In those days in the region east of Ayodhya, the royal city, the sage Viswamitra was engaged in rigorous asceticism.

He resolved upon a holy rite (yajna). But however often he inaugurated it, the demons desecrated it and fouled its sanctity. They showered pieces of flesh on the sacred area and made it unfit for Vedic ceremonies. In many other ways, they cast obstacles and halted the holy mission. Viswamitra was at his wits' end; he went to Ayodhya, to meet the ruler himself.

When reports arrived of his coming, the King sent his ministers to bring him with due honours into the palace.

They welcomed him at the city gate and accompanied him right up to the palace door. At the palace, brahmins recited Vedic hymns, while Dasaratha washed his feet and, as laid down in the sacred texts and as is customary in receptions of sages, sprinkled upon his own head drops of the water so sanctified. Viswamitra was led into the inner apartments and seated on a high chair, with the members of the royal court standing reverentially round him. "This is indeed a great day!" exclaimed Dasaratha. He expressed his joy at the unexpected arrival of the holy personage and the opportunity he gained to serve and honour him. Viswamitra directed the king and the ministers to sit, and they obeyed.

The sage graciously asked about the health and welfare of the king and royal family and about the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. He asked the king whether his reign was marked by strength and security and whether his government was ensuring the continued progress of his subjects. Dasaratha replied that, as a result of the grace of God and the blessings of saints and sages, his subjects were dutifully and gladly engaged in their tasks without fear of failure and that the administration had before it the steady promotion of the people's welfare. He said that his government was serving the people in many ways to promote and preserve their happiness and security.

Dasaratha yearned to know why the sage had come. He assured him that he was ever ready to fulfil his least desire. He declared with great devotion that he would discharge earnestly any duty that the sage may cast on him.

He was only waiting to know what he could do for him.

Viswamitra nodded his head in approval and turned toward Dasaratha, "I won't declare now, before you, that you are a very righteous ruler, that you revere guests and supplicants, and that you are the embodiment of faith and devotion. The happiness of the empire under your rule is enough evidence of this. The welfare of the subjects depends on the character of the rulers. People will have peace or suffer anxiety depending on whether the rulers are good or bad. Wherever I have enquired, I was told it is only in Ayodhya that we have a people full of love and loyalty to the sovereign and a sovereign full of affection and regard to his people. In every nook and corner of your kingdom, I hear this heartening news! Therefore, I know that your words come straight from the heart. I have not the least doubt; you will not deviate from your promise. You will adhere to the word once given." These sage's words moved Dasaratha deeply. "Great people will engage themselves only in activities that help the world. And, whatever they do, they will not stray from the injunctions of the scriptures. There must be a good reason for whatever they contemplate, since they are prompted by the divine will in every act. So, I am ever willing, with all the resources at my command, to serve you and fulfil your slightest wish." Dasaratha vowed again and again to carry out the sage's command.

This made the sage very glad. "Yes! As you said, we do not emerge from our hermitages without reason. I have come to you on a high purpose! Listening to your enthusiastic response, I am doubly happy! I am filled with joy that my errand has borne fruit. You will stand by your promise, won't you?" asked Viswamitra.

Dasaratha replied immediately. "Master! Perhaps you should ask others such a question, but Dasaratha is not a person to break the pledged word! He will give up his life rather than bring dishonour on himself, going back on his

promise. What greater treasure can a monarch have than morality and integrity? They alone stand by him as sources of strength while discharging his manifold responsibilities. If these two are lost, the kingdom would become a mansion without light, a wilderness beset with apish vagaries and factional fights. It would be torn by anarchy and terror. In the end, the king would meet with disaster. I am certain that such a calamity could never overwhelm my dynasty for ages to come. Therefore, without entertaining any shadow of doubt, tell me the mission that brought you to Ayodhya, and accept the service that this devoted servant is ready to offer." Viswamitra said, "No, no! I had no doubt in my mind. I simply uttered those words in order to hear this assertion of your steady adherence to truth! I know that the Ikshvaku rulers are intensely wedded to the duty of fulfilling the spoken word. Well! I require from you only one thing now. It is neither wealth nor vehicles, neither cows nor gold, neither regiments nor attendants. I need only two of your sons, Rama and Lakshmana, to accompany me. What do you say to this?" the sage asked.

At this, Dasaratha lost balance; he fell back and could not recover soon. Regaining his composure after some time, he gasped for courage to utter a few words. "Master! What use will those boys be to you? The mission on which you intend to take them can be better fulfilled by me, don't you think? Give me the chance. Let me make my life worthwhile. Tell me what it is; I will derive joy from it." The sage replied, "My firm belief is that no one but these boys can fulfil this task. Only they can accomplish it; neither your millions nor even you can carry it out! Boys such as these have not been born before! Nor will such be born again! This is my conviction.

"Listen! I resolved to perform a celebrated sacrificial rite (yajna). But as soon as I enter upon its preliminaries, evil spirits and demons assemble from nowhere and cause sacrilegious obstruction. They cause interruptions and pile hindrances. I want these boys to ward off the demons and save the sacrificial rite from these abominations, so that I can bring it to a successful conclusion. This is my purpose, my desire. What do you say now?" asked Viswamitra, in a serious voice.

The king replied, "Master! How can these tender little boys perform such a tremendous task? I am here, most willing and ready. I will come with my chariotry, infantry, cavalry, and elephantry and guard the area of the sacrifice and your hermitage; I will see that the ritual is conducted with full success without the least interruption. I have some experience in fighting against these demoniac forces, since, as you know, I fought for the Gods against them and brought them victory. I can do it quite easily. I shall make arrangements to accompany you even now.

Permit me to do so," he appealed.

The sage said, "O king! I am not satisfied in spite of all you say. I assert once again, you cannot accomplish this assignment. Don't you realise that it is beyond even me who is acclaimed as well-nigh omnipotent and omniscient?

How then could you succeed? You consider these boys just ordinary children; this is a mistake resulting from the affection you have as the father. I know full well that they are the Divine Might Itself in human form. Do not hesitate. Keep your word so solemnly given and send them this very moment with me. Or else, accept that you are not true to your word, and I will depart. Do either of these, quick! This is no occasion for wavering and delay!" The king was frightened by the sharpness of the sage's voice. He was overwhelmed by fear. In despair, Dasaratha wanted to invite his preceptor to court. Vasishta came in and, on seeing Viswamitra, exchanged smiles and words of mutual respect with him. Vasishta heard from the king an account of all that had happened. Of course, Vasishta knew quite well the divine reality of the boys, so he advised the king not to have the least worry and to entrust the boys gladly to the loving custody of the sage.

Dasaratha pleaded that the boys had not kept good health for some months and that they didn't have even the physical stamina to engage in battle with the demons. "We have been concerned for a long time about their health, and now this demand comes like a jab on a painful sore. My mind does not agree in the least to send them forth to encounter the demons. I will guard my children even at the risk of my own life," lamented the king.

Viswamitra intervened. "King! Why do you foolishly lament in this manner? You should have desisted from making promises that you could not fulfil. It is an act of dark sin when a ruler makes a promise without considering the pros and cons and then, when asked to execute it, to delay, retract, and even to go counter to the promise.

This is most unworthy of kings like you. I spurn the help you offer, sorrowfully. Help rendered, however small, if it comes from the deeper urges of service welling in the heart, is as good as the offer of life itself. Half-hearted and hesitating help, however great, is deplorable. I have no desire to cause pain and extract help from you. Well!

Be happy with yourself and your sin, I am leaving."

Viswamitra rose and attempted to move off. The king fell at his feet and prayed for more light and more time. He asked to be taught his duty. He pleaded with the sage to convince him of the fairness of his demand, so that he could fulfil his plan.

Vasishta counseled him. "King! You are coming in the way of an imminent cosmic revelation, a mighty fulfilment. Since your heart is affected by parental affection, the truth is veiled before you. Your sons will come to no harm. No, never. No height of heroism is beyond them. Formidable divine forces have taken these human forms for the very purpose of destroying demons and demoniac powers. So, without further delay, send for the boys. Don't calculate their physical strength or the measure of their intelligence. Calculate rather the divine that is bubbling up from them every minute of their lives. No strength can stand up to that, remember!" After some more advice on these lines, Vasishta sent for Rama and Lakshmana. As soon as they heard that the sages Viswamitra and Vasishta wanted them, they rushed along and, entering the hall, bowed in reverence.

First, they fell at the father's feet, then at Vasishta's feet, and next Viswamitra's feet. With a smile playing on his lips, Viswamitra addressed the boys when they rose and stood reverentially on one side. "Boys! Will you

come with me?" The boys were elated at the prospect.

On hearing this, Dasaratha was further disheartened. His face turned pale. Rama saw his father sorrowing over his approval, approached him softly, and said, "Father! Why are you sad when I am going with the great sage? Is there any better way of utilising this body than putting it at the service of others? This body has been given to us for that very purpose. To share in the holy tasks of ascetics and to be able to grant them some relief from harassment, is this not high use? There is nothing impossible for us, is there? We will destroy the demons (rakshasas), however fierce they may be, and bring peace to the sages. If permitted, we are ready to start off this very minute." These words, charged with courage, served to reduce Dasaratha's anxiety to some extent.

But the king was still struggling; he couldn't decide what to say. He drew Rama to himself. "Son, the demons are no ordinary foes! Reports say that among them are Sunda, Upasunda, Maricha, and Subahu. They are atrociously cruel. Their physical appearance is indescribably horrid; you have never seen such terrifying forms. I cannot contemplate the moment when you come face to face with them. How can you battle with those tricksters, who are adepts at camouflage and physical transformations? So far, you haven't even heard the word 'battle' or seen actual combat on the field! And you are now suddenly called to fight such formidable foes! Alas! Destiny is indeed very cruel! Alas! Have my sons to face on the very threshold of their lives this monstrous ordeal?" With these thoughts revolving in his mind, Dasaratha shed profuse tears out of the anguish of his heart.

Lakshmana noticed his father's mental weakness. He said, "Father! Why these tears! We're not timid girls! The battlefield is our legitimate arena; war is our rightful duty; the safeguarding of righteousness is our genuine responsibility.

The service of sages and the maintenance of moral codes are our very breath. I am surprised you are sad that we go on such a glorious errand! The world will laugh at you for this display of weakness. Send us with your love and blessings. I will accompany my brother and return with the glory of

victory." Rama saw his father overpowered by affection for him; he moved toward the throne and held his hand lovingly.

"Father! It appears you have forgotten who you are. Remember who you are, in which royal family immortalised by which forefathers you were born, and how much fame they had attained. Then you won't weep as you are doing now. You took birth in the Ikshvaku dynasty. Till this day, you spent your years as the very embodiment of dharma. The three worlds have acclaimed you as the dutiful observer of vows, as the guardian and practitioner of dharma, and as the most redoubtable hero on the battlefield, as well as elsewhere.

"You are aware that there is no greater sin than retracting the word once given. Going back on the word you have given to the sage will tarnish your fair fame. Your sons cannot tolerate this ill fame. When you cannot act according to your word, you can have no share in the merit of the sacrifices performed by you or even of the beneficial acts done by you, like digging wells and planting trees. Why dilate? We, your sons, feel that it is a mark of disgrace for which we have to bend our heads, even to listen to the talk that Dasaratha broke his plighted word.

This is an indelible blot on the reputation of the dynasty itself. Your affection for your sons is blind; it is not based on discrimination. It will bring on us punishment, not protection. If you are really moved by affection toward us, shouldn't you pay attention to the promotion of our fame?

"Of course, we are in no position to advise you. You know all this. Your affection has drawn you into this miasma of ignorance and has made it difficult for you to recognise your duty. As for us, we haven't the slightest shred of fear. The bride of victory will certainly espouse us. Don't hesitate, but bless us and entrust us to the sage." Rama pleaded thus and, bending his head low, touched the father's feet.

Dasaratha drew Rama near and fondled his head. "Son! All you have said is true. Your words are gems of great worth. I am not a fool to deny them. I will

proceed this moment with my four-winged army and protect the sacrificial ceremony of this sage at the cost of all that I possess. But my mind does not accept the proposal to send you, just now being trained in the arts of war and weaponry, into the arms of those demons. No father will knowingly offer his sons into the tiger's paw. And, is it right for you to plunge us into the flames of grief? We gained you through austerity and fostered you as the very breath of our lives. Alas! What can anyone do when destiny itself is against us? I won't blame you or anyone else; it is the consequence of the sins I myself committed." Dasaratha bewailed thus, with his hand upon his head. Rama broke into a smile. "Father! What is this weakness?"

You speak of thrusting us into the tiger's mouth. Haven't you realised yet that we are not goats to be so offered? Believe us to be lion cubs, send us on this sacred task with your blessings. Kings must not delay sacred tasks!" Hearing Rama's rather sharp remarks, Vasishta rose, saying, "Excellent! Dasaratha! Did you hear the lion's roar? Why the jackal howl hereafter? Arise! Send a message to the mothers and fetch them; place your sons at the service of Viswamitra." Dasaratha felt he could do nothing else but obey; he sent word for the queens come.

The queens came with veils over their heads; they touched the feet of the sages and of Dasaratha and then moved toward the children and stood by their side, fondling with loving fingers the crown of their heads. Vasishta spoke first. "Mothers! Our Rama and Lakshmana are ready to leave with Viswamitra in order to guard his rite (yajna) from interference and obstruction by demoniac hordes; bless them before they leave." Kausalya raised her head in surprise, saying: "What? Are these saplings to guard and protect the rite that the great sage is celebrating? I have heard that the mantras themselves with their divine potency will be the best armour; how can a mere mortal dare take upon himself the burden of saving the rite from harm. The responsibility for the successful conclusion of the rite lies on the rectitude of the participating priesthood." This appeared to Vasishta as correct, but he thought it best to shed a little more light on the situation.

"Kausalya! Mother! Viswamitra's rite (yajna) is no ordinary one! Many

obstacles are affecting it and creating anxiety." Vasishta was continuing with his explanation when Kausalya intervened, "I am really amazed to hear that anxiety overshadows the rituals performed by sages. I believe that no power can stand against any sacred resolve.

The sage is nursing this desire and craving its fulfilment in order to manifest the supreme light and peace; that is my surmise. He might have put forward this request in order to test the king's attachment to his children. Or else, how can we believe that these tiny sprouts of tenderness will guard from harm the rite that this sage, endowed with all mystic and mysterious powers, is proposing to celebrate?" While Kausalya was saying this, her hand caressing Rama's head, Dasaratha, who was listening to her talk, suddenly realised the truth in a flash and arrived at a bold decision. He said, "Yes! Kausalya's words convey authentic truth. This is but a plan to test me; I am certain about it. Master! How can I, a weakling, encounter your test? I will abide by your wish, whatever it is!" With these words, Dasaratha fell at Vasishta's feet.

Vasishta looked at him and said, "Maharaja! You have proved yourself worthy. These boys are not of common stamp. Their skills and capacities are limitless. We know this. Others do not know. This occasion is but the inauguration of their triumphal march; it is the prologue to the history of their victorious career. It is the taking on by them of the vow of the guardianship of righteousness (dharma-rakshana). They will return soon with the bride of victory. Therefore, without further thought, hand them over gladly to Viswamitra." Vasishta called the boys to his side and, placing his auspicious palm on their heads, recited some hymns that pronounced his blessings on them. The boys fell at their mothers' feet and received their blessings. Then they stood, ready to depart.

Dasaratha noticed the glow of joy and courage on their faces and suppressed the grief that was surging within him. He placed his hands on the boys' shoulders. Then he went to Viswamitra, fell at his feet, and said, "These two, Oh master, are from this day your sons; their health and happiness are dependent on you; if you order a few personal guards accompany them, I will gladly comply." Viswamitra burst into laughter. "O! King, you are really

insane! Can anyone guard them, these heroes who are coming to free the rite from obstruction? Do they need any? They are out to guard the rite, which we cannot guard; do such mighty heroes need someone to protect them? Of course, your affection has blinded you. King! I will bring them with me when the task for which I am taking them is accomplished. Don't worry. Rule over the kingdom without injustice or interruption." Viswamitra rose, and everyone offered reverential obeisance to the great sage. He walked out of the hall first, with the two princes following. As soon as they reached the main gate of the palace, people heard heavenly drums and clarions resounding from the sky. A shower of flowers rained upon them. As they moved along, the music of conches rose from every doorstep; the peal of trumpets was heard from every few yards of the road. They appeared to men, women, and children, to the citizens of all ages, as two cubs trotting behind an elderly lion. No one knew why the princes were walking barefoot and leaving the palace with the celebrated sage, so each one started asking his neighbour what their mission was. The ministers, courtiers, and citizens accompanied them only as far as the city gate, for that was the royal command. There, they bade farewell to the princes and turned back.

They continued their journey, with Viswamitra leading the way, Rama close behind, and Lakshmana bringing up the rear. They saw the lines of charming trees on both sides of the track; they filled themselves with the beauty of nature revealing itself before their eyes. When they had trekked some distance, they entered a jungle devoid of human habitation. Viswamitra told Rama and Lakshmana to wear wrist guards and finger guards of leather from then on. He asked them to take on hand the bows slung on the shoulder and hold them in readiness.

Thus equipped, they moved along the silent terror-striking forest, through the tangled bushes, fearless and effulgent, as if they were the monarchs of the region.

The lesson for the world

Soon, they reached the river Sarayu. The sun was preparing to set, so

Viswamitra called to Rama and Lakshmana and spoke to them softly and sweetly.

"Darlings! Go to the river without further delay and do the ceremonial washing of hands and feet. I will now impart to you two mystic mantras that form the crown jewels of all mantras. They are named strength and super strength (bala and athibala). They are both charged with tremendous power. They will restore freshness to you, however exhausted you may be; they will prevent exhaustion, however heavily you exert yourselves; they will not allow illness to approach you; they will save you from demonic forces. Whenever you are journeying, they will, if you recollect them, keep hunger and thirst away, bestow exhilarating health, and shower joy and enthusiasm.

They will strengthen limbs and minds. Rama! These two mantras are supreme over all others; they are more effulgent and efficacious than the rest." Viswamitra expatiated upon the potency of the mantras for a long time. Rama didn't need to be told of them; he listened with apparent surprise and with wonder-filled eyes. Meanwhile, Lakshmana was watching both the sage and Rama, laughing within himself!

This incident is a good lesson for the world, wherein Rama had come to revive dharma. Rama taught this lesson by his behaviour, rather than by words. "Illusion (maya) is inescapable for anyone, however great; it will turn them upside down in a moment, it will not loosen its grasp as long as the victim is engrossed in the belief that he is the 'body'; it will not be frightened by the name or fame, the skill or intelligence of the person it seeks to possess. Only when the individual discards name and form, releases itself from body consciousness, and establishes itself in the Atma can the individual escape from the misconception that illusion inflicts." This was that lesson! For note this! Viswamitra had these two powerful mantras in his control; he had accumulated a great store of spiritual treasure; he had realised, in spite of his own far-famed resources, that Rama alone had the might needed to outwit and destroy the demonic hordes intent on disrupting the rite he was set on celebrating; he had counseled Dasaratha against overaffection toward the son, blinding him to the divine majesty of Rama; he had announced that

Rama was the guardian of the entire world; he believed that there was no height of heroism that Rama could not reach. Yet he was preparing to initiate those very princes into some mystic mantras, as if they were children of common stock. Surely, Viswamitra was shackled by illusion (maya)! He had yielded to the delusion of judging by apparent attributes.

Rama laid bare the strength of the stranglehold of illusion on the sage. For it was He who had shrouded Viswamitra's mind and made him enter proudly upon these initiation rites! Rama and Lakshmana finished their ablutions in the river, as directed by Viswamitra. The sage initiated Rama into the two mantras. Rama pronounced the formulae after the teacher and nodded his head, as a novice should do when a mantra is taught. Lakshmana did the same. They bowed their heads as if they had agreed to be Viswamitra's "disciples".

Siva's hermitage

Soon it became dark, and the brothers arranged beds from the grass that grew thick on the ground. After they lay down, Viswamitra sat by their side and related tales of olden times. Soon the boys appeared as if they had gone to sleep, apparently as a result of the exhaustion of tramping long distances on foot. Viswamitra stopped his story and was lost in thought about his own destiny and destination.

Daylight broke across the land. Multicoloured birds flitted from branch to branch on the tree under which the two brothers were sleeping, singing sweetly, as if they were intent on awakening Rama and Lakshmana! To the ear, it was the music of aerial minstrels. But they could not rouse the sleepers! Viswamitra accosted Rama and announced the arrival of dawn. "Awake," he said. Rama sat up; he awakened Lakshmana, who was in bed by his side, and both fell at the sage's feet.

They finished their morning ablutions in the Sarayu river; they took the sacred water in their palms and let it down again, uttering hymns in praise of the goddess of the river. Then, they bathed in the river and performed the

early morning (sandhya) rite, involving the recitation of the Gayatri mantra. Soon they got ready for the journey and stood before the sage with arms folded. Viswamitra asked, "Dear ones! Now we can move toward our hermitage, can't we?" Rama replied, "We await your command!" So, they started walking, with the sage in front and the brothers behind. Soon, they reached the confluence of the Sarayu and Ganges (Ganga) rivers. The brothers prostrated before the holy river and cast their eyes all around the holy spot. They saw a hermitage, with heavenly vibrations pervading the surroundings. It struck them as very ancient and full of hoary associations.

Lakshmana asked the sage, "Master! Who lives in that holy hermitage? What is the name of the great personage who dwells there?" The sage smiled at the inquiry and said, "Dear ones! God Siva came here long ago with His divine attendants, to engage in austerities prior to His wedding Parvathi. While He was fulfilling His divine obligations from here, Manmatha (the God of Love) obstructed the spiritual practices and caused anger to sprout in the divine heart.

He opened His third eye, which threw such searing flames that Manmatha was burned to ash. His body was destroyed, so he is now known as 'limbless (an-anga)'. The word for a limb is anga; since Manmatha lost his limbs here, in this region, this part of the country has been known ever after as Anga! This is a rich region.

"This hermitage was used by Siva and has been used by generations of His devotees, each of whom has merged in Him as the fruit of arduous asceticism. This hermitage accepts as residents only strict followers of the dharmic path. If you want, we will spend the night here and start out again, after a bath in the Ganga." Rama and Lakshmana could not contain their delight with Viswamitra's proposal. They said, "We're very happy" and accepted the idea. They bathed in the holy Ganga. Meanwhile, the news that Viswamitra was available near their residences and had with him two heroic sons of the emperor spread wide, and many rushed to welcome them and receive them in their own hermitages.

That night, the sage and the princes stayed at Siva's ashram. They fed on fruits and roots and watched the activities of the hermitage with interest. The princes listened to the stories narrated by Viswamitra; time floated fast in that flood of bliss. When day dawned, they had their bath and ablutions and lovingly took leave of the hermits. Then they walked on, the two disciples following the guru. They had to cross the Ganga river, so some people rowed them across and set them on the other bank. Then the people reverentially bade farewell and fell at Viswamitra's feet before returning. Viswamitra was gratified at this act of hospitality; he appreciated the depth of their devotion and their sense of surrender; he allowed them to depart, loaded with blessings.

The story of Malada and Karosa

Just then, a noise as of a rumbling subterranean flood sweeping over the land battered their ears. They saw the waters of the river raging and rising, with long chains of white foam on the crest of the waves. Rama asked, "Master! Why has the angry flood filled the basin so suddenly, and how could the waves surge so fast and so high?" The sage replied, "Rama! The full and furious Sarayu falls into the calm quiet Ganga at this place; hence this reverberation and this rumbling!" The sage uttered these words coolly and casually. It was a familiar scene for him. He continued, "Rama! In ages gone by, on one occasion, Brahma willed, and a great lake was immediately formed near Mount Kailas. This is known as Manasa-Sarovar, meaning lake (sarovar) of the mind (manasa).

The gods named it so. When the snows melt and the rains fall, the lake gets overfull, and the flow out of the lake becomes the Sarayu river, running by the side of Ayodhya toward the Ganga. The Sarayu is sacred, because the waters rise from the lake willed by Brahma Himself." They proceeded on their way listening to the thrilling stories that lighted every river and spot of land.

Now they entered a thick dark forest. It aroused a sense of terror. Rama asked the master, "Why is there no sign of humans having ever traversed this forest!" Before he could get the answer, an eerie succession of roars from the

angry throats of a huge herd of animals - tigers, lions, leopards and a host of lesser wild life - captured their attention. It appeared as if the earth was being torn asunder! They also saw wild animals engaged in mortal fight, some running into thickets, away from the scene of violent death. The forest was the home of close-grown trees that reached the skies and spread their shades thick over the ground - the banyan, the deodar, the pine, the holy fig.

There was no path to guide their feet, and they had to clear a track for progress. Lakshmana could not contain his curiosity. He asked Viswamitra, "Master! Who rules this fearful forest? What is its name?" The master replied, "Lakshmana! Where this jungle has grown were formerly two little kingdoms, Malada and Karosa. They shone like the region of the gods; in fact, people spoke of the area as having been specially created and fostered by the gods. They relate a story about the place. When the god Indra killed Vritra, Indra suffered contamination of sin and consequently was stricken with insatiable pain of hunger. He was brought in that pathetic condition by the sages to this region and given a bath in the holy Ganga. Afterward, they poured pots and pots of Ganga water on His head, uttering all the while holy hymns and formulae. With that, the sin (of killing a person of high caste) was washed away.

"Brahma was delighted that the contamination (mala) as well as the pangs of hunger ended. So, He named these kingdoms Malada and Karosa. The kingdoms rose to fame with his blessing. The gods willed that the two areas be resplendent with grain and gold and with all means of plenty and prosperity.

"Meanwhile, a cruel ogress named Thataki appeared in this region and started laying waste the rich and peaceful land. She was a Yakshini, who could transform herself into any form she liked. It is rumoured that even as she was born, she was endowed with the prowess of a thousand elephants! She brought forth a son named Maricha. He had the might and heroism of Indra himself. Together, mother and son caused tremendous havoc and disaster. The jungle in which that vile ogress lives is thirteen and a half miles from here. She reduced these wealthy valleys, Malada and Karosa, to this dreaded

wilderness.

"The cultivators of its fertile fields fled in terror at her approach, so the jungle crept on and on. The thickly populated cities and villages were deserted and ruined, leaving no trace of human habitation. She couldn't be captured or destroyed, for she could escape from all attempts to destroy her. No one has yet dared to put an end to her depredations. I can't think of anyone except you (yes, my deepest intuition says so), no one except you can destroy this monster, who has such overwhelming might. This vicious mother and son lead and guide the demons to disrupt and pollute the hermits' rites and sacred rituals." Viswamitra's words moved Rama's feelings. He could not contain within himself the anger that surged up.

With great humility and reverence, he said, "O great among ascetics! I have heard that the Yakshas are of poor might; besides, this Thataki is a female, of the weaker sex; how could she terrorise entire populations so? Where did she get all this power? How could she reduce this region to rack and ruin when it was blessed by Brahma and the gods? This is indeed astounding. It is beyond belief." Viswamitra said, "Rama! I will explain. Listen! There was, in the past, a Yaksha named Sukethu. He was as rich in virtues as in prowess. He had no child to succeed him, so he practised severe austerities to propitiate the Gods and receive their blessings. At last, Brahma was pleased with his austerity and He appeared before him. He blessed him that He will get a daughter, with extraordinary strength, cleverness, and skill. Sukethu was elated at this boon, though it was to be a daughter, not a son.

"Sukethu returned, and a daughter was born to him, as anticipated. The child grew fast and strong. Though she was of the weaker sex, through the grace of Brahma, she had the might of a thousand elephants; she moved about with no law or limit, as if she owned all she saw! She was a very charming girl, so Sukethu sought far and wide for an equally charming groom. Finally, he found Sunda and gave her in marriage to him. Three years later, she gave birth to a son, Maricha, about whom I told you. Mother and son have become invincible in combat.

"Sunda, her husband, started off on his demonic adventures and attempted to ruin the rites (yajnas) of sages.

He incurred the wrath of the great Agastya, who hurled a curse on the vile fellow, killing him and saving the sages from further grief. In revenge, Thataki and her son fell upon Agastya's hermitage. Agastya had forewarning of this attack, so he cursed them both to be reduced to the status of ogres. This enraged them more, and they roared abuses and advanced frightfully with blood-red eyes against him! Agastya felt that delay would be dangerous; he cursed Thataki that she should lose her charm and become an ugly fright! He willed that she become a cannibal!

She was not subdued by the curse but continued the attack with renewed ferocity. But Agastya escaped from the ravage and went to a safer place. Angered by this disappointment, Thataki spent her ire on this region (Malada and Karosa) destroying crops and gardens and reducing it to a big jungle." Rama kills Thataki When this tale was told, Rama said, "Master! Since she was born as a consequence of Brahma's boon, and as a gift for austerity, she had all these skills and strength. She misused them, drawing upon herself the wrath and the curse. The sin of killing a woman is, as mentioned in the scriptures, very heinous, isn't it? Agastya must have let her off with the curse of ugliness for this very reason. Or else, couldn't the great sage who caused the husband to die kill the wife also? I have heard that warriors should not be so mean as to kill women. Tell me what I should do now; I am prepared to obey." Viswamitra was happy that Rama put forth these qualms dictated by dharma. "I'm not ignorant of the fact that killing a woman is a heinous sin. Nevertheless, the protection of spiritually progressive people - the brahmins, the virtuous - as well as cows is important. Dharma is intertwined with these three. There is no sin when the act is done for the promotion of dharma and the removal of wickedness (a-dharma). Don't you know the dictum, 'dharma saves those who save it (dharmo rakshathi rakshithah)'? This is not violence used for one's aggrandisement.

"I assure you: When violence is used for preserving the peace and prosperity of the world, it cannot draw down any bad reaction. Moreover, creation,

preservation, and dissolution are expressions of divine law; they happen according to divine will and are not bound by the whims of people. You are divine manifestations. You have the authority and the duty. No dirt can stick to fire; so too, no sin can contaminate the divine. The will that creates, the obligation that protects, can also carry out the duty to punish.

"The punishment that awaits the sins of the mother and her son cannot be avoided; it must be considered fortunate for Thataki to end her life at your hands today, before she adds to the heap of sins for which she has to suffer much. You will only be serving her best interests and the interests of the country. It is neither wrong nor sinful. To entertain feelings of compassion now would cause unlimited damage to the world; it would promote the decline of dharma and would help Thataki to indulge in more sins.

"Why should I dwell more on this point and relate to you a thousand arguments? I have seen all through my spiritual eye; you have incarnated in human form to destroy the demon (rakshasas) brood. This is your mission, your task. You have to carry it out today and throughout your career. The guardianship of dharma and the destruction of the demons, or people with demonic tendencies, are the very purposes that persuaded you to take birth! I knew this truth; that is why I rushed to you for help. Why else should I seek your support and service?

"Hermits, anchorites, and those performing austerities in forest retreats entreat the help of the rulers of the land for the sake not of themselves but of the whole world. They give up attachment and sustain themselves on the roots and fruits gathered by them; after some months or years of the regimen, they harden their lives even more, so that they may lose body consciousness and merge in the Light. Why should such people worry over what happens to the world? But the wise, the realised, besides saving themselves by the illumination of revelation, try to tell others the path they have trodden, the glory of the goal they have reached, to persuade others to practise the disciplines that made them ready to receive the truth.

If the wise cared only for themselves and their liberation what would happen

to the world? People would descend further into iniquity, that is all. Dharma would be submerged. Hermits keep up relationship with the world for this reason, not for quenching any private craving of theirs. They live as the lotus on water. They may be entangled in the world, for all appearances, but they have no attachment with the world. They will not allow the world to tarnish them. Their aim is one and one only: the progress and welfare of the world. They attend only to the fostering of dharma. They depend only on God." When Viswamitra bared the truth in these words, Rama responded as if he was a novice, unacquainted with all that he had heard. He said: "The world will not understand that the words of hermits and sages have holy significances embedded in them. I interrogated you on the morality of this act so that we may know how you elaborate on the justice of the act. Do not read any other meaning into my question. My father, Dasaratha, told me to obey Viswamitra, the sage, and do what he commands. I wish to follow my father's orders.

"You are a great sage (rishi). You have undergone severe austerities. When such as you declare that Thataki can be killed without incurring sin and that the act is just and moral, I know I do not commit wrong. I am ready to carry out any task you impose on me for fostering dharma and for promoting the welfare of the people." So saying, he held the bow in his hand and tested the tightness of the string, producing a sound that echoed and re-echoed from the ten directions. The entire jungle was awakened; wild animals fled far and wide. Thataki was shocked by the unusually loud and awesome sound; she was inflamed with rage at this disturbing phenomenon.

She rushed toward the place wherefrom it emanated!

Rama saw the monster move toward him like a mountain lurching or a huge wild elephant charging. He smiled and told Lakshmana, "Brother! Look at this mass of ugliness! Can common people survive the sight of this devilish personality? The very appearance is terrible! What are we then to say of its might? And it is a woman!

My mind does not fully cooperate with me when I resolve to kill it! I believe

this monster will die if its hands and legs are cut apart; that may be enough to destroy it." Thataki rushed toward Rama with outstretched arms, so she could grasp him and put him into her mouth like a piece of cake! She was roaring wildly and in terror-striking excitement. Viswamitra was praying, with eyes closed, that the brothers would not suffer harm in this combat. Thataki moved nearer and nearer to Rama, but with greater and greater reluctance, for, in his presence, she felt a strange kind of shock. Once or twice, she went near Rama, but she had to retreat fast. She jumped about in fury, angry at herself! The dust kicked up by her rendered the area dark and suffocating.

Rama, Lakshmana, and Viswamitra stood silent and inactive for a while. Thataki was adept in the art of delusion and destruction. She created a heavy rain of rocks. Rama now decided that the ogress should no longer be allowed to live on earth; she could not be pardoned on the score of femininity! So, he drew his bow and shot an arrow at the body of the invisible Thataki, identifying exactly where it was at the time. At this, she rushed once again at Rama. Her two arms were cut down by his arrows. She fell on the ground, crying in agony and pain.

Lakshmana cut off her limbs, one by one.

But Thataki could adopt form after form, as she liked. And she gave up one form and assumed another quickly and reappeared fresh and furious before them! She pretended to be dead, but soon came up alive! She adopted a variety of forms at the same time and started her old trick of the shower of rocks. She exhibited her wicked talents and evil tricks. Rama and Lakshmana received a few injuries, however watchful they were.

Seeing this, Viswamitra felt that there should be no more delay; she must be killed straightaway. "Rama," He said. "Don't hesitate. This is not the moment to consider her womanhood and show concessions. Removal of her limbs will not benefit. As long as there is life, these demons (rakshasas) can adopt any number of forms.

Kill her! When evening approaches, her dark rage will swell even more. After

sunset, it becomes impossible to encounter demons, whoever might attempt to do so. She must be destroyed within the hour." Viswamitra uttered some sacred mantras to ensure protection and great safety.

Rama too directed his own thoughts. Through his power to guide arrows in the direction from where the sound emanates, he recognised where Thataki was and shot an arrow fast at that target. The arrow had the effect of binding her limbs, preventing her from making the slightest movement. Thataki shrieked ferociously and, putting out her terrible tongue, attempted to fall on Rama and Lakshmana and crush them under her weight. Rama decided that delay would invite worse consequences. He shot a fatally sharp arrow into Thataki's chest, and she rolled on the ground and gave up her life.

The earth showed a huge crater where she fell. Trees were uprooted by the impact of the gigantic mass when she rolled in agony. Her last gasp of breath was so weird and loud that the wild beasts of the forest fled; herds of animals ran helter skelter.

When the awful demoness fell dead, Viswamitra called Rama near and, stroking his hair lovingly, said, "Son, were you afraid? No! No! How can the saviour of all the worlds be afraid? This feat is the foundation stone; it ensures the stability of the mansion. Come, you are tired. The sun too has set. Perform the evening worship and rest awhile. Come with me." He took them to the river. Later, he told them, "Children! We'll rest here for the night; we can proceed to our hermitage at dawn." They spent the night listening to the stories that Viswamitra related; the master also revealed to them their own faculties and latent majesty.

Viswamitra offers Rama his weapons

The dawn broke. The sage went through the morning ablutions and approached the sleeping brothers with a benign smile. He spoke softly and sweetly to them. "Rama! I am delighted at your heroism! When you were overcoming Thataki, I comprehended the truth of your being the Absolute. Really, I'm very fortunate." Viswamitra shed tears of joy. He held forth all the

mystic weapons he possessed, and the mantras that shaped and sustained them, and, in a swift act of dedication he placed them all in Rama's hands. "I have no authority to wield these weapons; of what avail are they for me, even if I have them in my possession? You are the master and wielder of all weapons. They too will be most pleased when they are with you for they can fulfil their destiny best while with you. Note this! From this moment, all the weapons I commanded so far shall be your instruments, available for the mission on which you have come." He poured holy water with appropriate mantras, indicative of an irrevocable surrender of their ownership.

Thus, he offered Rama the mace weapon of punishment, the weapon of justice, the weapon of time, Indra's missile, the thunderbolt missile, the Siva-inspired trident, the principal missile of Brahma, the Siva weapon, and the most mighty and destructive of all, Brahma's weapon (the danda-chakra, dharma-chakra, kala-chakra, Indrastra, vajra-astra, trisula, Brahma-sira-astra, aikshika-astra, Brahma-astra).

Viswamitra sat silent for a while, with his eyes closed. He rose with the words, "Now, what have I to do with these two?" And he gave Rama two powerful maces, Modaki and Sikhari. He said, "After reaching our ashram, I will bring out other weapons too - the fire (agni) missile, the poison (krauncha) missile, the Narayana missile, the wind-blowing (vayu) missile, and others. Son, all these weapons are at the beck and call of the master; they are amazingly overpowering." Thus saying, he whispered into Rama's ear the mystic formulae to materialise, activate, and direct them toward the targets with incalculable fury. He asked him to recite the formulae under his supervision. Before long, Rama was able to visualise the deities presiding over each of the divine missiles and weapons and receive their grateful homage. Each deity presented itself before Rama and fell prostrate before him. Each one said, "Rama!

We are your servants from this moment. We vow and affirm that we will abide by your commands." Then they disappeared, awaiting further summons.

Rama was glad at this development; he touched the sage's feet, saying,

"Master, your heart is the treasure chest of renunciation. You are, I realise, the divine embodiment of detachment (thyaga) and yoga (conquest of the senses). Would anyone else renounce and gift away such an array of potent hard-won weapons? Master! Please delight me by counseling the manner in which I can withdraw the weapons after they have wrought the intended havoc. You taught me the formulae for unleashing them. I want to know how I can recover them." Viswamitra was elated. "These forces and weapons - called Sathyakirthi, Drishta, Rabhasa, Pitrusomasa, Krishana, Virasya, Yougandha, Vidhutha, Karaviraka, Jrimbhaka, Vairagyam, Padmanabha, Sunabham, Dashaksham, Shathodharam, and Rutharam - are automatically recoverable by the exercise of the will of the Bowman using them, expressed through mantras that I communicate to you now." He then initiated him into these formulae.

When they were pronounced, the deities so propitiated appeared and prostrated before their new master. Rama told them that they have to be ready when called and that they could meanwhile be at ease.

Viswamitra performs the religious rite

Viswamitra then proposed to resume the journey, and the three of them started walking. A little distance later, they entered a region of high-peaked hills, and their eyes fell on a charming garden, whose fragrance welcomed them and refreshed their bodies and minds. The brothers were curious to know who owned the lovely spot and asked the sage to enlighten them.

Viswamitra replied, "Son, this is the holy area that the gods choose when they come down on earth to practise austerity for the success of their desires. The great Kasyapa did penance here and won his goal. The place confers victory on all holy efforts. So it is named Siddhasram, the hermitage of achievement! I took residence here myself, with the intention of cultivating dedication and surrender. This hermitage is the target of attack for demons who intercept and befoul every holy rite done here. You have to destroy them when they attempt their nefarious tactics." So saying, Viswamitra entered that heartwarming seat of peace. He placed his arm on Rama's shoulder ca-

ressingly, saying, "This hermitage (ashram) is as much yours from today as it was mine until now." The hoary sage shed tears of gratification as he uttered those words.

Even as they stepped into Siddhasram, the residents ran forward with eager haste to wash the master's feet and offer water for ablutions to Rama and Lakshmana. They scattered flowers along the path toward the ashram and led them to the door. They offered them fruits and sweet cool drink. They proposed that Rama and Lakshmana rest in a cottage specially allotted to them and made ready for their use.

Rama and Lakshmana did accordingly, and after the rest, which refreshed them a great deal, they washed their feet and faces and came to the Sage Viswamitra, to know his instructions. They stood before the teacher with arms folded and said, "Master! Can the rite (yajna) that you have willed to perform be inaugurated tomorrow?" Viswamitra was elated at this query and replied, "Yes! Everything is ready! In this Siddhasram, it is so always.

There is no need to wait for preparations to be completed. We are always ready. I will take the prescribed vow when dawn breaks tomorrow." The news spread, and everyone set about the task of collecting everything necessary for the great event.

Dawn broke. Viswamitra took the vow of initiation and the rite began. The two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, with bows and arrows, stood guard like the gods Skanda and Visakha, resolutely determined to encounter all who attempted to interfere with its due performance. Since it was improper to speak to Viswamitra while he was engaged in the sacrificial ceremony, Rama gestured to the other participants to find out when and from where the demon horde could be expected. They could only answer, "It isn't possible to say when and from where! The demons have no regular timings and could attack any moment. Who can predict the time of their onslaught?" The hermits spoke to Rama about the demons, each according to his estimate of their character and habits.

Rama was delighted at their replies; he decided that the wise course was to be ever vigilant and ready to beat back the demon forces that attempted to frustrate the sacred ceremonies. He alerted his brother. They watched the four quarters carefully and paid attention to the slightest sound indicative of approaching danger. Recognising their bravery and earnestness, the ascetics derived vast joy and wonder, for they were of tender age and lovely complexion, barely out of the stage of boyish pranks!

For five days and nights the brothers kept unremitting guard over the sacrificial site and the hermitage without a wink of sleep or a moment of rest. The sixth day started on the same routine. Viswamitra was engaged in the rite, immersed in the ritual exactitude of each item of the ceremony. The reciters of hymns (rithwiks) and other participants were engaged in their tasks of recitation and oblations.

Suddenly, they were astounded by a thunderous noise that broke from the sky, as if the firmament itself was exploding into fragments! Fire emanated from everything on the sacrificial platform - the kusha grass, the plates and cups, the holy vessels holding ritual objects, the dry sticks that had to be offered in the holy ritual fire, the flowers, the kumkum, and other auspicious articles collected for the sake of worshiping gods! The flames rose on all sides!

Soon, the sky was overcast by dark fearsome clouds, and the bright day became a night of pitch darkness.

Mysterious evil fumes spread fast toward the place where the rite was being performed! The sinister clouds started raining blood, and the drops when they fell were welcomed by tongues of flame that rose to receive them!

Rama and Lakshmana sought to locate the enemy demons amidst the phantasmagoria of cruelty and hate.

Rama, through His divine vision, knew where the leading ogres, Maricha and Subahu, were, and he released the mind (manasa) arrow in that direction. It

struck Maricha's breast, stopping any further mischief from him. Next he shot the fire weapon (agni-astra) at Subahu, and it lodged in his heart. Rama understood that if their corpses dropped on the holy region the hermitage itself would be polluted. To prevent that sinful contact, Rama's arrows carried the vicious bodies hundreds of miles afar and cast them into the ocean! Maricha and Subahu shrieked and groaned in unbearable agony and struggled desperately amidst the waves, but they did not die.

The other leaders of the demon hordes fled for their lives beyond the horizon. Lakshmana said that it wasn't advisable to allow any demon to survive, however cowardly they might appear, for they would soon return to their wicked practices. So, he prompted Rama to kill off the entire gang. The hermits who watched this great act of heroism were elated with admiration; they believed that the brothers were really Siva Himself, in His terrorstriking, boon-conferring form. They bowed in reverence to them - in their own minds, for the brothers were too young to accept their homage.

In a moment, the forest put on the vesture of brightness and joy. Amidst all the distractions, Viswamitra continued steadily and without interruption the meditation on the deities and the recitation of the holy hymns that were enjoined for the rite! He never made even the slightest movement of body or mind; such was the depth of his concentration. The valedictory offering in the sacred fire was fulfilled with correctitude and thankfulness.

Then, Viswamitra came smiling to Rama and Lakshmana. "O praiseworthy heroes! You brought victory to my vow! Through you, I have realised my life's desire. The name of this ashram has been justified; it has become truly the hermitage of achievement!" The sage shed tears of joy and fondled and caressed the boys. He proceeded toward the hermitage with his hands on Rama's and Lakshmana's shoulders; there, he gave them the share of the holy offerings made at the sacrificial fire. He asked them to retire and refresh themselves with a little rest.

Though the fulfilment of the purpose for which they had been brought was itself the most effective restorative for their limbs and minds, they felt that it

would be improper to discard the command of the master, so they retired and slept soundly a long while. The master removed himself to another thatched cottage, to ensure undisturbed sleep for them; he also instructed some men to keep guard so that no one unwittingly created noise that might awaken them. While the brothers slept, Viswamitra exalted over the successful conclusion of the rite (yajna) and the divine prowess of Rama and Lakshmana.

Rama and Lakshmana woke up and, after washing their faces, hands, and feet, came through the door to find the boys of the hermit families keeping guard, lest their sleep be disturbed! They were informed that the master was conversing with the ascetics in another cottage. So, they moved thither and fell at the sage's feet. Rising, they stood with arms folded and said, "Great teacher! If these servants of yours have to do any other task, please inform us and we shall gladly carry it out." At this, an ascetic from the group stood up and addressed them, "With the destruction of the demons, everything has been accomplished. What else is there to be done? The desire entertained for years by the Master has been fulfilled. Nothing higher is needed. You two are of the form of Siva-Sakthi. That is how you appear to our eyes. You are no common mortals. Our good fortune has given us this chance to see you. Our gratitude knows no bounds." At this, the residents touched the feet of Rama and Lakshmana.

7. Winning Sita

Meanwhile, one young student-disciple ran in with a bundle of palm leaf scripts and placed it in Viswamitra's hands. He turned over a few leaves and passed it on to a reverend old hermit sitting by his side. The master asked the old man to read it aloud, so that all might hear.

He read that Emperor Janaka of Mithila had resolved to perform a celebrated rite (yajna), expressive of the highest glory of righteousness, and that he was praying to Viswamitra to give him joy by his gracious presence with his disciples. When they heard this, all exclaimed, "May it attain fulfilment!" Viswamitra said, "Sons! Now that we can travel through the forests free from fear of demonic gangs, I have decided to start traveling tomorrow to Mithila with all the ashram residents" When he heard this, Rama said, "Master! It is really a source of delight. Since you don't need us for anything more, we'll return to Ayodhya, if you permit us to do so. Please allow us to leave." Viswamitra said, "I gave word to Dasaratha for a few more things; I have to keep these word too! I promised him that I myself would bring you back, so you can't return without me! A unique rite is taking place in Mithila.

There isn't enough time for me to take you to Ayodhya and then reach Mithila on the day the rite begins. If you two accompany me to Mithila, you can witness the rite and then proceed to Ayodhya with me from there." Hearing these words, which had no trace of hesitation or doubt, Rama too answered decisively, without weighing pros and cons, "Master! Since my chief vow is obedience to my father's orders, I have to submit a prayer before you." Viswamitra asked, "Tell me, what is the prayer?" Rama replied, "My father directed me to guard Viswamitra's rite (yajna) from defilement and sacrilege and to make the great sage happy. He asked us to return victorious; he didn't direct us to attend other rites. Shouldn't I receive special permission from my father before moving on to Mithila?" Viswamitra replied, "Rama! Dasaratha didn't stop with that only! No! He said, 'Go and obey all that the sage commands you to do; do not transgress his command by even the width of a grain.' He told me, 'Master, you must yourself assume full responsibility for

my children; you must yourself bring them back to me.' You listened to what he said when we left Ayodhya. So, follow my word now; come with me to Mithila, and from there we will go to Ayodhya, I and you and all my disciples." Rama realised the truth inherent in this plan. Nodding in agreement, he said, "We will do as you desire." Instructions went forth for everyone to get ready before daybreak for the journey to Mithila. Viswamitra rose early and led the boys to the river for ablutions. He was thrilled at the chance of telling them of the hardships he encountered from the demons whenever he attempted to celebrate sacrificial rites (yajnas) in the past; he related to them how all his counter measures failed to achieve their object; he expressed his gratitude for the destruction of the demons, which had ensured safety for the hermitage as well as the surrounding regions. He described how the people were happily relieved of fear and had unalloyed peace and joy.

The story of Siva's bow

The place was silent, calm, comforting. Sitting on the soft sands, Viswamitra related to the two brothers he had drawn close to him the special features and significance of the rite contemplated by Emperor Janaka.

During the description he referred to a precious bow that Janaka had in his possession, a bow that was uniquely potent and shone with rare splendour. He declared that they must not miss seeing it. At this, Rama asked how the bow happened to reach Janaka.

Viswamitra answered. "Listen, son! Years ago, the Emperor of Mithila, Devaratha, celebrated a great rite, the like of which no mortal could dare to perform, a rite that could confer vast spiritual benefits, a rite that pleased the Gods so highly that they gifted him this divine bow, as a mark of appreciation. It is the bow of Siva. It is worshiped with due rites by Janaka every day. He offers flowers and sandal paste and waves camphor flame and incense in its honour; he places eatables and fruits before the divine presence in the bow, in reverential homage.

"The bow is so loaded with divinity that no one can raise it and string it, be he

god, demon, angel, or spirit.

Many princes who attempted to string it have met with disgraceful disappointment. Rama! You are worthy heroes; you can examine it. During this coming rite, the bow will most probably be on show, so this is certainly a good chance." Viswamitra went on describing the wonderful potency of the bow. Lakshmana turned his eyes as if searching for the direction in which Mithila was. Meanwhile, Rama said with delight, "Certainly! We must see it. We'll come with you tomorrow." Viswamitra was elated.

Viswamitra vacates his ashram

Darkness fell, and everyone rose and moved toward Siddhasram. Viswamitra called the residents of the ashram together and ordered them to be ready to leave for Mithila at dawn. Some of them asked, "Master! How can the routine of the ashram be observed without interruption if there is none left here?" The sage replied, "If each one carries on his duties wherever he is, that itself is the proper observance of the ashram routine. There is no special routine for the ashram apart from the ashramites. Those who seek support make up the ashram; without the dependents there can be no ashram. When the dependents are with me, why worry about the ashram and the routine? The disciples are those to be cared for, those that have to observe the disciplines. Moreover, since the place has now become free from the fear of demons, the ashram cannot come to harm. The Creator of all is our refuge, and when we depend on Him He will foster all." Viswamitra spoke in this rather unfamiliar strain and continued, "Take with you the things needed for your daily rites, as well as all the tools and vessels belonging to the ashram. There is no need to leave anything here." Some noviciates asked, "Master! When will we return? If you tell us, we can select as many articles as will suffice for that period of absence; why burden ourselves with more than what is essential?" Viswamitra replied, "Time is no servant of the body; the body is the servant of time. Therefore, one can ever say when! Will I come here again? I doubt it!" When they heard this the hearts of all the residents suffered a shock.

The clothes, vessels and tools they held in their hands slipped and fell on the

ground. They could not find words to reply. They could not protest, nor could they muster courage to question the master. So, they bundled up kusha grass, sacred sticks for the sacrificial fire, ceremonial ladles, and vessels, as much as they could carry. The meaning of Viswamitra's words was a mystery, and each interpreted them in his own way.

The night rolled by and dawn broke. Everyone was ready. When the doors were being closed and bolted behind them, Viswamitra said, "Don't fasten the doors! Leave them open. This is not ours; anyone who comes can enter. This ashram must welcome all who arrive at all times. This day, the bond between us and this ashram has snapped. Grow in happiness hereafter, ye patron gods of this holy area. I have achieved success in my endeavour; accept my grateful appreciation in return. No more will you be troubled by demon hordes; you can now live in peace, with ample progeny, prosperous and happy. I am going out of Siddhasram, renouncing it. I have resolved to take residence in the region of the Himalayas, north of the sacred Ganga River." Viswamitra prostrated on the ground as a mark of respect for the forest deities.

Then, he started on his journey, with Rama and Lakshmana and the senior monks of the ashram. The residents of the hermitage realised that their place was where Viswamitra was, and not the forest or huts where they had lived so long. They felt that the Himalayan region was equally suitable for them, so they also offered gratitude and reverence to the forest deities and the grass-thatched dwellings and walked on behind the sage.

While they were walking in the northerly direction, they saw behind them, following their trail, thousands of deer, peacocks, birds, and beasts of the jungle, running with raised tails, in eager haste of yearning. Viswamitra stopped and turned toward them. "O denizens of the jungle! The places to which I am going are not congenial for your style of living, for your safety and security. This forest is your natural habitat. Do not be sad at the separation; do not follow us; remain here. God will grant you peace and joy." He took leave of them too, before resuming the journey.

Sage Viswamitra's story

The day's journey brought them to the bank of the Sona river; they had perforce to spend the night there.

They took their bath in the river and finished the evening ablutions. Then they gathered around the master eager to listen to his tales. Rama asked: "Revered Sir, this region appears rich and prosperous; what is its name and history?" Viswamitra replied, "Rama! Brahma had a son, Kusa, through sheer will. Kusa was a great ascetic, steadfast and strict in vows, heroic in spiritual adventure, learned in the science of morals. He wedded the daughter of the noble ruler of Vidarbha. The two lived in awareness and practice of the four ends of human life: righteousness, prosperity, affection, and liberation. They had four sons - Kusamba, Kusanabha, Asurtharajasa, and Vasu - each one equal to the father in virtue and highly evolved in righteousness, integrity, and other excellences of the warrior caste.

"Kusa divided the world into four parts and assigned one part to each of them, directing them thus, 'Sons!

Rule over the part assigned to you and prosper!' They entered upon their new duties and carried out their father's command. Each started constructing a capital city for the kingdom: Kusamba built Kausambi, Kusanabha built Mahodaya, Asurtharajasa built Dharmaranya, and Vasu built Girivraja.

"Rama! This area is part of Vasu's kingdom. There are five hills around us, so this city is called Girivraja (collection of hills). This auspicious Sona river is also known as Sumagadhi, so that this region is named Magadha.

The Magadhi river flows from east to west here, like a jasmine garland placed among the mountain valleys.

The majesty of Vasu has blessed the land on both banks of this river to be ever green and plentiful.

"The second son, Kusanabha, was well established in dharma; he was a pillar of righteousness. He had a number of daughters, but no son. He taught them right conduct and behaviour according to the rules and disciplines laid down in the scriptures. He emphasised that forbearance is the grandest gift one can give another; it is the most prolific fruit-bearing rite (yajna), the most beneficial way of being honest and the root of all right thought and action. He gave them this lesson even from the days when they were fed at the mother's breast. They were later given in marriage - all of them - to the ruler of Kampilya city, Brahmadata by name. When they left for Kampilya, his house became empty and barren.

" 'Alas,' he moaned, 'This house, which was so bright and resonant with wit and laughter, has today become dark and dumb, dull and deep in gloom. Daughters, however many you may have, have to leave the parental home and render it drab and dreary. If only I had a son this calamity would not have overpowered me.' Thus, he entertained the longing for a son.

"Just then, his father, Kusa, happened to visit, and he asked why Kusanabha looked sad and full of concern.

The son laid bare before him his mind and its anxieties. Kusa chided him for becoming so worried for this reason; he blessed him that he would get a son soon. And, as he blessed, so it happened. The son, named Gadhi, grew up a very devoted virtuous prince. Gadhi had several children, including Sathyavathi and Viswamitra. Since Viswamitra was born in the lineage of Kusa, he was known as Kausika.

"Kausika's sisters lost their husbands after some time and, as dutiful wives, immolated themselves and gained heaven. They were born on the Himalayas as sacred rivers that joined together to form the famous Kausiki river. Kausika was attached very much to the eldest of the sisters, Sathyavathi by name, so he took residence on the bank of this river and established himself at Siddhasram and celebrated the sacrificial rite (yajna) he had resolved upon with ceremonial rectitude.

"Rama! Through your immeasurable heroism, the rite I had resolved upon has come to its successful conclusion.

It has borne fruit; my rigorous vows have been fulfilled."

At this, the monks who had gathered around the sage exclaimed, "O, how wonderful! Really, we are fortunate that we could listen to the story of the hoary ancestors of our master! O, what a great source of joy the story is! The Kusa line is indeed consecrated. Those born in it are equal to Brahma Himself in sanctity. How lucky we are to have this singular chance to serve the one visible embodiment of all that the line represents, the sage Viswamitra; this chance must be the fruit of merit accumulated through many past lives." Viswamitra interrupted, saying, "I wouldn't have dwelt on all this, but Rama, your question prompted me to reply; I don't give details regarding this body and its antecedents. It is already night, so let us rest. Delay in going to sleep might slacken the speed of our journey tomorrow. Rama! See! The moon is peeping through the branches of yonder tree to catch a glimpse of you! It sends down cool rays to refresh the earth that has suffered the hot rays of the sun for so long." That night, everyone ruminated over the tales of the master's forefathers.

The story of the Ganga

They awoke from sleep pretty early and finished their morning ablutions. They performed the daily rituals, too, and got ready in time to continue the journey. They came near Viswamitra and fell at his feet. Then, they stood one behind the other on one side, awaiting orders. Rama said, "Master! The river Sona is not deep at this place.

The water is clear, we can wade across. No boat is needed!"

Viswamitra replied, "Son! You are strange to this place, so you don't know the exact place to cross. I'll go first; you follow me." The sage walked into the river bed and moved on. Everyone had his bundle slung on his shoulder. The pace was slow, and it was noon when they reached the river Jahnvi (the

Ganga, or Ganges).

The first intimation they had about the river was sweet "kuhoo" notes of swans, parrots, and other birds on the bank. Every heart was filled with delight at the entrancing beauty of the scene. They bathed in the pure, pellucid stream and, aware of the hallowed story of the river, offered oblations to departed ancestors and gods.

They lit the sacred fire on the bank and performed ritual sacrifices enjoined by the scriptures (sastras). Then, they collected edible fruits from the trees and, after assuaging their hunger, drank the nectarine water of the Ganga to slake their thirst.

Rama and Lakshmana walked toward the tree under whose shade Viswamitra was reclining and sat beside him, reverentially. Rama asked him, "Master! Why does the Ganga flow as three streams in the three worlds? How does the Ganga reach the ocean, which is the Lord of every stream and river throughout the world! Please tell me and make me happy!" Viswamitra said, "Son! The Himalayan range is the basis of all this world: it is the home for all animals and all herbs. It has two daughters, Ganga and Uma; Ganga is the elder of the two. Both are adored by the entire world.

The gods asked that Ganga be given to them so that they might have prosperity. So, Himavan (the deity of the Himalayas) gifted Ganga to the gods in order to secure their blessings and benefit the three worlds.

"The younger daughter, Uma, entered a life of extreme asceticism. She immersed herself in hard spiritual discipline, prompted by supreme detachment from everything worldly. So, Himavan sought to settle her in the world as a wife; in spite of strenuous endeavour, he could not succeed in this for long. At last, he persuaded Rudra to wed her. Thus, she too became entitled to the adoration of the three worlds.

"The Ganga you see here is the Ganga that the gods took with them, that has come down to Earth, and that has three steps, one in heaven, one on earth,

and one subterranean." Viswamitra was journeying toward Mithila city with Rama and Lakshmana, as well as a few of his disciples, regaling them throughout the day and far into the night with picturesque descriptions of his own previous history, the historical events connected with the places through which they passed, and the annals of the various dynasties that ruled over the regions that they crossed.

That evening, he was seated on the sands of the bed of the Ganga, after the ablutions and rites. Rama reminded him that they would be happy to know about the origin of that holy stream. Viswamitra responded, "Ramachandra!

Your ancestors are responsible for Ganga coming down on earth. As a result of their good deeds, the peoples of the earth are sanctifying themselves, bathing in the sacred waters and performing morning and evening ceremonial rites and ablutions therein.

"The Ganga is the supreme stream of divine purity. The nectarine waters can confer immortality. She dwelled in the matted locks on Siva's head, and for that reason, she is most auspicious. She grants all that is beneficial." Hearing Viswamitra extol the river in such superlative terms, Ramachandra said, "How did my ancestors manage to lead down to earth a river with such amazing attributes of power and purity? If you can describe to us the story, we can derive great joy therefrom." When Viswamitra heard this request, presented with such humility, he said, "Rama! Listen! In ancient times, Ayodhya was ruled by an emperor named Sagara. He was a righteous ruler and a valiant hero. Fascinated by his qualities of head and heart, the king of Vidarbha gave him his beloved daughter, Kesini, in marriage. She too was a strict follower of dharma and never wavered from the path of truth.

"But even after the lapse of many years, they were not blessed with progeny. Sagara then married the charming daughter of Arishtanemi, Sumathi, as his second wife, with the concurrence of Kesini. She too proved barren, so the king decided to spend the rest of his life in asceticism. He went to the bank of a stream, where the sage Bhrigu had his hermitage, and with his two wives, he plunged into the most severe disciplines of the anchorites.

"A long time elapsed. One day, at the break of dawn, the sage Bhrigu, staunch upholder of truth, appeared before him and said, 'O King! End this tormenting of the body, this asceticism. You will earn unparalleled renown in this world. Before long, you will be endowed with the bliss of a son!' As soon as these words of compassion and grace fell upon his ear, Sagara opened his eyes and saw the sage standing before him. Immediately, he fell at his feet and signed to the wives to do likewise. He prayed that the sage may bless them direct.

"The senior queen, Kesini, bowed her head low and fell at his feet, with many an adulatory hymn emerging from her lips. Bhrigu asked her, 'Mother! Do you want a single son, so that the thread of continuity not be broken, or do you want a large number of sons, who would be endowed with enormous physical valour and vast renown?' She replied that a single son would satisfy her and prayed that her wish might be gratified. Bhrigu accepted her request and blessed her likewise.

"The second queen, Sumathi, prostrated before him, and he asked her the same question. She craved for strong, brave, celebrated sons in plenty, so the sage granted that desire and blessed that it be fulfilled.

"Elated by the sage's blessings, Sagara returned to his capital, accompanied by his wives. They fixed their minds on the boons they received and spent their time happily. Within a few months, both queens conceived and awaited the happy events. When nine months had passed, Kesini delivered a son and Sumathi gave birth to many.

"As the days sped by, the sons romped about and played excitedly with children of the same age and, later, started moving out beyond the palace in search of companions and for the sake of games. Kesini's son, Aswamanja, took the children to the sands of the Sarayu river; he used to take delight in throwing the children into the river, and he laughed outright in glee when a child was drowned! Soon, he earned an infamous reputation as the worst criminal in the kingdom!

"When they emerged from their teens, Sagara selected suitable royal brides for them and had the marriages celebrated. Aswamanja continued his wickedness, however, and the residents of Ayodhya had heart-rending grief as a result of his incorrigible viciousness. One day they approached Sagara and, amidst loud wailing, told him of the atrocious acts of his eldest son. At this, the king ordered Aswamanja to leave the city immediately and be exiled into the forest. Aswamanja already had a son by then, so he had to leave his wife, son, and parents behind.

"Years passed. Aswamanja's son, Amsumanta, grew up and won renown throughout the world as loveable, virtuous, and valiant. Once, Sagara decided on the performance of the great horse sacrifice (aswamedha) and fixed an auspicious moment for starting the rites." Rama interrupted with a question. "Master! Was the horse sacrifice performed in Ayodhya, or did he choose some holy river bank for the purpose?" Viswamitra smiled, and replied, "Rama! I realise how earnest you are about sacrifices and how reverent your attitude toward sages is! I will describe it in detail as you desire. Listen! There is a holy range facing the Himalayas from a distance, called the Vindhya range. The region in between is sacred for all rites and sacrifices (yajnas and yagas). The horse sacrifice was done in that region. Experts in the recitation of Vedic hymns gathered there, and the mountains echoed and re-echoed to the loud and correct recital of the prescribed ritual formulae.

Thousands watched the unique ceremonial with great joy.

"Just then, the beautifully caparisoned horse was led in and worshiped. Later it was left to roam where it willed. In order to overcome (indicative of an ambition on the part of the ruler who so opposes to be free from the domination of their suzerain, Sagara), Amsumanta followed its footsteps, with his army fully equipped to meet all contingencies. After an unopposed round of the entire country, the horse was led back. The exact moment when the sacrifice had to be done in orthodox Vedic style approached, and the people went to bring the animal in.

"But the horse was nowhere to be seen! It is laid down that the loss of the

sacrificial animal and its nonavailability at the auspicious moment bodes ill for the organisers of the rite! So Sagara was naturally upset. He sent the numerous sons of his second wife, armed and equipped, to find the horse and bring it back to the sacrificial altar. They sought the help of the gods and the demons. They searched everywhere and even dug the earth up to see whether the horse was kept hidden below by the captors. But they had to return and report that their mission had failed.

"Sagara was enraged. 'Of what avail is this numerous progeny if you announce only your incompetence to me? Why stand before me with faces darkened with disgrace? Go, and don't come to me until you recover the horse.' "The sons reacted sharply to these angry words; they went back into the world determined to leave no spot unexamined. Mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, caves, towns and villages, forests and deserts - why lengthen the list? They looked closely at every yard, every foot of ground. Finally, they found a hermit, deeply immersed in meditation; the horse was near him, calmly nibbling grass!

"They were overcome by delight when they saw the horse and by anger when they saw the hermit; they were tossed between two conflicting emotions. They lost their sanity as a result of the irrepressible feelings. Their reason failed; their hearts were petrified. They shouted in the hermit's ear, 'Villainous brute! You stole our horse and hid it in your back yard'! The sage Kapila slowly opened his eyes and looked around. Sagara's sons stood around him, pouring abuses on his head; some even got ready to give him a heavy thrashing!

"Kapila saw that words and arguments were futile weapons against such bullies; he would have to deal with them differently. He burned them into ash merely by casting his eye on them.

"Sagara was greatly distressed and agitated at the inordinate delay caused by their failure to return. How could he stop the half-finished sacrifice? How could he continue and finish it? Seeing his plight, his grandson Amsumanta fell at his feet and offered to search for the horse and his uncles and bring

news about them. Sagara blessed him and sent him on that errand.

"Amsumanta was at his job day and night. At last, he was rewarded by success. He saw signs of his uncles having been reduced into a heap of ashes! He was anxious to perform obsequies for the departed souls; but he couldn't see any well, tank, lake, or stream. This was essential for depositing the funeral offerings. Heavily laden with sorrow, he moved some distance forward.

"A reverend old man came across his path and told him, 'Don't allow grief to overpower you, dear son! Your uncles were reduced to ashes by sage Kapila with the welfare of the world also in view! Do not be content to offer the ritual obligations in mundane waters. Get the holy water of the celestial Ganga. Bring the Ganga down to earth and let the sacred waters flow over the ashes. Then, the souls of the ancestors will be saved. But first take the horse with you and perform the sacrifice unto its glorious conclusion. Thereafter, you can think of ways and means to bring the heavenly Ganga to the Earth.' "Amsumanta fell at the hermit's feet and hurried to his grandfather, where the rite was being held up for want of the consecrated animal." "Sagara was awaiting its arrival with sleepless anxiety, both night and day. When the horse was brought, he and the Vedic scholars (rithwiks) who officiated as priests were filled with delight. Amsumanta felt that it would not be proper to announce, during the auspicious festival, that his uncles had an untimely death through the sage Kapila's curse. So he allowed the valedictory rite to finish. The priests and guests were given their share of votive gifts.

"Then Amsumanta gave a detailed account of what had happened to the uncles and exhorted his grandfather to bring the heavenly river of unique sanctity down to the place where the ashes were lying. Sagara was delighted at the suggestion. He engaged himself in many ascetic disciplines and ritual ceremonies, which, according to the elders' advice, would induce Ganga to give him the boon he wanted. But he could not succeed. He waned in health day by day as a result of grief at the loss of his sons and the failure of his attempt to ensure a bright future for them.

At last, he cast off his body, a disappointed man.

"Rama! The ministers then crowned Amsumanta, after consulting the will of the people. He ruled over the kingdom without the slightest error or fault, for he was strong in morality and spiritual excellence. The people were fostered as if they were children born from his own loins. When old age crept on him, he offered the throne to Dilipa, his son, and proceeded to the Himalayas for the ascetic disciplines he wanted to impose on himself. His aim was not only self-realisation; he sought to bring down the Ganga for the sake of the salvation of his departed uncles. But he too had to give up his body without fulfilling the desire.

"Dilipa was also moved by the same wish, for he knew how deeply his father and grandfather had longed for the consummation, bringing the Ganga down on earth! He tried various means. He performed many abstruse rites (yajnas) on sages' advice. Pangs of sorrow that he could not fulfil the family ideal invaded him, and he became chronically ill. Seeing that his physical strength and mental stamina were declining, he placed his son Bhagiratha on the throne; he entrusted to him the mission that was beyond his grasp, namely, bringing the Ganga down. Soon after, Dilipa left the earth.

"Bhagiratha, bright with spiritual splendour, vowed to succeed in the task given him by his father. Though he ruled the kingdom very satisfactorily, he was sad that he had no children to maintain the line. This, as well as the supreme task of getting the Ganga, forced him to hand over the reins of government to the ministers and retire into the silence of the famous Gokarna region. He stood there, practising austere penance, like bearing the heat of the sun and taking food only once a month! At last, appreciating his austerity, God appeared before him and said, 'Son! Bhagiratha! Ask any boon and it shall be granted.' "Bhagiratha had the vision of the One with the brilliance of a thousand suns. He fell prostrate, overwhelmed with gratitude and devotion. He prayed, 'Lord! Cause the celestial Ganga to flow on earth, so that my greatgrandfathers might be saved from perdition and be restored to heaven. And, favour me with children so that the Ikshvaku royal line might not be rendered extinct, with me as its last representative. May the dynasty continue

and flourish.' He held fast to the Lord's feet and submitted his supplication.

"The Lord replied, 'Son! The first of your wishes is very hard to fulfil. Nevertheless, I shall grant you that one. The boon for the royal line? Yes, you will have a noble son and your dynasty will continue and flourish.

Arise!' Bhagiratha rose, and the Lord continued, 'Bhagiratha! The Ganga is swollen and swift; when it falls from heaven, the earth will not be able to bear the impact. So, as ruler of the Earth, you have to ponder over the problem and discover how to avoid the dire disaster. When Ganga descends upon the earth, the effect will be calamitous.

So the river must be made to fall first on Siva's head; from there, the waters may be led on to earth with lessened impact. This is the best course, from the point of view of the inhabitants of the earth. Consider this well.' After saying this, the Lord withdrew.

"From then on, Bhagiratha began austerities to propitiate Siva; at last, he succeeded in winning His favour and His consent to receive Ganga direct on His Head when it descended from heaven. And so it happened that the Ganga fell on Siva and flowed down from His head on to the earth, in seven distinct streams - Hladini, Nalini, and Pavani flowed east; Subhikshu, Sita, and Sindhu flowed west; and the seventh stream followed Bhagiratha's footsteps to where he led it, namely, the place where his great-grandfathers' ashes lay in heaps, awaiting rescue from hell.

"It flowed along the route that Bhagiratha took, and all along the route, people benefited from the sacred stream and sanctified themselves. They were released from the effects of sins by the cleansing influence of the celestial Ganga. The great-grandfathers too were redeemed by the performance of obsequies on the bank of the thrice-holy stream, and with its waters.

"Since Bhagiratha brought the Ganga to earth, the river got the name Bhagirathi! After the ceremonies for the forefathers were over, Bhagiratha

returned to Ayodhya. Happy that he could fulfil, through divine grace, the keenest wishes of his father and grandfather, he ruled over the empire for many years, receiving the spontaneous homage of his contented subjects. At last, he too left the body." When Viswamitra narrated the story of Rama's forefathers, Rama and Lakshmana were all attention; they were enraptured with the incidents. But the sage said it was already midnight and they could all go to bed. So, they prostrated before the preceptor and laid themselves on the thick sands of the river. Rama and Lakshmana could not sleep; they reclined on the sands only in obedience to their preceptor's order, not because they needed rest!

They lay picturing to themselves the wonderful story of the descent of Ganga from heaven to earth, till they found that morning had arrived! There they performed the ablutions and morning rituals in the river and prepared for the journey ahead. As soon as some teenage disciples announced that the ferryboat was ready, all moved toward it, took their seats, and crossed the holy river. They reached the northern bank and started on the further stages of their journey, admiring the heartening forest scenery through which they passed.

Diti, Aditi, and the city of Visala

When they had covered some distance, they came upon a vast city full of beautiful buildings. Rama turned to Viswamitra, and asked him, "Master! Look! There's a vast city in this exquisite forest. To what kingdom does it belong?" The sage replied, "Rama! It appears to be near, but in fact it will take quite some time for us to reach it!

Perhaps we'll arrive there in the evening. I'll tell you the story of the city's origin and fortunes when we reach it.

Meanwhile, let's proceed." Rama heard Viswamitra's words, spoken with a twinkle in the eye and a smile on the lips; he grasped the meaning of his directive and walked on without a word in reply.

When they descended into the valley, there was no sign of any city or human habitation; but on rising to the heights the city could be seen very near! Moving forward like this, they found that though evening drew near they could not reach the city. As Viswamitra had already indicated, the city was still far away! As evening fell, they halted; and after bathing, they performed the evening rituals as laid down in the scriptures. While resting, Rama returned to the question he had already asked. "Master! Will you kindly tell us about the city!

Viswamitra said, "Rama! I was also just thinking about that matter! Though I know that you are aware of the working of every mind, still, the veil of illusion (maya), taking the appearance as real, hides the fact and precipitates people into misleading tracks. All cannot be masters of the mind. When people like me find it impossible to keep it under control, there is no need to dilate on the fate of ordinary people! The very moment the thought flashes in my mind that you had forgotten to ask about the story of the city, you question me about it. No further proof is wanted to show that you are the All-knowing!

"Rama! In ancient times, Kasyapa had two wives, Aditi and Diti. Diti's sons were repositories of physical might; Aditi's sons, of moral grandeur. They grew up mightier and mightier with each passing day. The parents derived great joy, watching them grow up so fair and fast.

"One day, both Diti's and Aditi's sons gathered together and entered into a discussion on how to avoid old age. Finally, they came to the conclusion that the nectar (amritha) that can be secured by churning the ocean of milk would prevent the physical calamities of disease, senility, and death. Soon, they set about that task. The Mandara mountain was plucked and placed in the ocean as the churning rod; the serpent Vasuki was chosen as the rope to be wound around the rod so that the rope might rotate quick and fast. While the churning continued for a long time, the Vasuki began vomiting its poison. It was enraged so much as a result of the pain that its fangs struck against the rocks of the mountain peak. The poison fume raged as a huge fire!

"Seeing this, Diti's and Aditi's sons became mortally afraid; they felt they

would be burned to ashes in that holocaust! They prayed for the Lord's succour. When Lord Vishnu appeared before them, Diti's sons pleaded pathetically, 'Lord! Save us! Put an end to this dreaded disaster.' The Lord changed into Siva and said, 'Dear Ones!

I am the eldest of the gods, so I am entitled to receive the first fruit of this churning process.' And He drank off without delay the demonic poison that was causing the panic.

"Thereafter, the sons of Diti and Aditi continued the churning of the ocean. Another calamity threatened them: the Mandara Peak started sinking! So they prayed again to Lord Vishnu. He appeared again and assured them, 'Darling children! Don't be frightened.' The Lord assumed the form of a tortoise and, getting underneath the mountain peak, raised it on His back and kept it safe on the hard shell as long as the churning lasted. Kasyapa's sons were immensely grateful and happy. They extolled the Lord in profusion.

"From out of the ocean of milk a god emerged, with a stick (dhandu) and water pot in His hands! His name was Dhanvantari. Even as Diti's and Aditi's sons were looking at Him, there emerged again from the ocean thick sweet juice (rasa), which got rolled into a ball, which in turn swelled and broke, disclosing a bevy of maidens.

Since they were born of rasa (juice), they are named apsaras.

They tried in many ways to persuade the sons of Diti and Aditi to wed them; they prayed and petitioned; but all their efforts were of no avail; so they lived without being wedded, free and fickle. Then, from out of the waves rose the daughter of the watergod, Varuni, and she had a chalice full of intoxicating liquor! Diti's sons refused to have anything to do with the liquor; Aditi's sons quaffed it. Those who didn't accept the liquor (sura) were known as demons (asuras), and those who accepted it, as gods (suras).

"At last, the nectar (amritha) arose from that ocean of milk. Who should drink the nectar? A huge conflict broke out between the sons of Diti and Aditi. In

the terrible fight that ensued, Aditi's sons began destroying Diti's sons. The battle threatened to become a battle of extinction. The earth shook under the thrust and counterthrust of weaponry in that battle. Fear and anxiety spread their dark clouds over the world.

"Suddenly, Vishnu appeared before the contending parties as an entrancingly charming damsel, who captivated the hearts of all and led their minds away from the combat into which they had plunged! She charmed everyone and, during her appearance, the precious holy nectar (amritha) disappeared! Diti's sons had all died.

Their mother's grief was beyond consolation. Kasyapa failed to bring her to the state of normalcy. His attempts to teach her the evanescence of things failed to convince her. She wailed aloud and lamented most excruciatingly, as if the end of the world had come.

"At last, Diti brought herself round; she approached Kasyapa and, submerging her agony deep into her mind, said, 'Lord! Is this just? We both had children by you. Now I have been made childless. Is this fair, must I grieve eternally thus? Not even one of my sons is alive. Rather than have many short-lived sons, one long living one is more desirable isn't it?' When she wept aloud in this manner, Kasyapa consoled her and told her to enter on the discipline of austerities to propitiate the Gods, so that she might have a son who would live long. He advised her to give up her grief, which could never fulfil her desire. Encouraged by him and seeking his blessings, she left immediately and started austerities with the professed aim of securing from the Gods the boon of a son who would be able to defeat the lord of gods, Indra Himself!

"Kasyapa told her, 'Asceticism is no easy discipline. One has to be pure until the very end; one has to observe the vows and fasts without the least infringement; only then will the gods be pleased and grant the boon.' "Diti reached the holy region known as Kusaplava and entered upon rigorous asceticism. Knowing her resolve, Indra wanted to test her. He came to her in the guise of her attendant. Diti's prayer was answered; she became pregnant with child through divine grace. Days passed, months rolled by, Indra was

beside her, as attendant!

One day, in the hot hours of noon, overcome by sleep, she lay on the bed with her hair loose and her head where the feet were usually placed. This was against the strict rules of ceremonial purity, which she had to observe with tenacity, so Indra got his chance. He noted that her posture was heterodox and contrary to scriptural injunctions.

So he punished her by fragmenting the foetus in her womb. The fragments started weeping inside the womb for their limbs and segments, which had broken away; the attendant, Indra, spoke softly to them, 'Don't weep'!

Diti had terrible bouts of bleeding. She lamented her fate and wept most pitifully.

"Indra stood before her with folded palms and pleaded, 'Mother; pardon me. You acted contrary to the rules of ceremonial purity and broke the vow. Your hair was unbound and loose, and your head was on the bed where the feet are normally placed. When you slept thus, your ascetic practice was defiled; when the enemy who is waiting for a chance to foil your fortune gets such an opportunity, will he keep quiet? I am Indra, come in this form.

You prayed for a son who would kill me, didn't you? The foetus in the womb was to destroy me, so I took that chance to foil my foe. And I did not destroy him through condemnable tactics. You know that strict observance of the vow was essential for the success of your plan; you had to ensure that you did not violate the code. The foetus has been cut into seven fragments, and I have told them not to weep. So they will be born as the seven godly Maruthas (wind gods). I confer this boon on you.' Indra then returned to heaven.

"Rama! This place is where Indra and Diti had this dialogue and compromise. Here, Ikshvaku had a son, Visala, by Alamba Devi. This kingdom is called Visala after him. Visala begat Hemachandra, the mighty. He begat Suchandra, who had a son, Dumraswa, whose son was Srinjaya, whose son was Sahadeva.

"Sahadeva was very rich and prosperous. A strong pillar of morality and righteousness, he was a valiant ruler of the kingdom for a very long period. His son Somadatta had Kakuthstha born to him; Sumathi was the son of that heroic monarch. He too was a very upright virtuous ruler; in purity and holiness he was equal to the gods.

"Rama! Today, we enter this Visala city and sleep there; tomorrow we'll reach the city of Emperor Janaka." These words made them all happy.

A short stay in Visala

The news of Viswamitra's arrival was communicated to Sumathi by messengers, and he rushed forward to the sage with a retinue of courtiers, ministers, scholars, and priests, praying for him to enter the city and sanctify the royal palace by his stay.

Viswamitra was pleased with his humility and reverence. He enquired sweetly about his health and happiness, as well as about his kingdom. They were engaged in conversation for some time on the affairs of the kingdom and dynasty when Sumathi's eyes fell on Rama and Lakshmana. He was so enchanted by their charm and dignity that he asked Viswamitra who these "lion cubs" were.

Viswamitra replied, "Sumathi! I don't have time to tell you the long story now. Wait until we reach your place." He then directed the monks and ascetics who had accompanied him, as well as Rama and Lakshmana, to proceed to the city of Visala; he too rose and walked, Sumathi talking with him all the while on matters pertaining to the kingdom. When they reached the city gate, music from many voices and instruments rent the air, and brahmins recited hymns of welcome and good wishes from the scriptures.

After partaking of the reception feast arranged by the King of Visala, Viswamitra described to the gathering of royal kinsmen, priests, and pundits, his own Siddhasram and the rite (yajna) that he had celebrated, as well as the heroic way in which Rama and Lakshmana stood guard to defend the

sacrificial precincts from marauding demons. The listeners were struck with wonder and boundless spiritual bliss (ananda) at the skill and courage of the princes. They looked on them with admiration, and they felt that they were Nara-Narayana come again. They prostrated before them, overcome by feelings of reverence.

Since it was already late, Rama and Lakshmana fell at Viswamitra's feet and, taking his permission, went to the house that was specially set apart for their rest. Even before dawn they rose, went through the morning ablutions, performed the matinal rites, and came to their preceptor in good time to proceed on the next stage of the journey. They expressed gratitude to King Sumathi and moved on toward Mithila.

Rama rescues Ahalya

Sumathi accompanied them for some distance and then took leave of the sage and others. Viswamitra walked on with his disciples and the princes, and by noon they reached an expansive park. It appeared as if it could boast of a number of hermitages years ago, but now the dwellings had crumbled. One could also see altars once maintained with loving attention, and spots where the sacred fire was once lit and fed. Rama noted that the place was sanctified by ascetics and sages, and he drew Viswamitra's attention to his surmise. Viswamitra smiled and said, "Rama! How correctly you have observed! I am very glad. I'll tell you why the great personage who lived in this place left it and went away. Listen!

"Even the gods used to acclaim this hermitage. This is the hermitage of the great sage Gautama. For many years, he resided here with his wife, Ahalya. He gladly underwent the most severe austerities, and he did many elaborate rites. This park was resplendent with spiritual grandeur; it was bright and full of peace and joy. Every day was a holy day for the people here.

"Ahalya, the sage's wife, was a woman of great virtue and a perfect paragon of beauty. No one was equal to her in personal beauty and charm, so Gautama kept her ever under watch, guarding her with vigilant care. One

day, while Gautama was absent, Indra, the chief of the gods, came into the hermitage in the guise of Gautama himself! The virtuous spouse took him to be her lord, and she served him reverentially. But the real Gautama entered and discovered her apparent faithlessness. He recognised Indra, in spite of his disguise, and became terribly enraged. 'Evil-minded fellow!' he shouted, but Indra had suddenly disappeared.

"Gautama turned toward Ahalya in anger, roaring, 'You vowed to destroy this hermitage by indulging in vice, is it? I won't stay a minute longer. I can't tolerate the sight of your face. Be prostrate behind some bush, living as a sprite on air, with no food or drink. I am off.' He hated the place that had been desecrated by deceit.

"Ahalya wept her heart out and pleaded that she was innocent of sin, that she was deceived by the disguise and activated only by reverence toward her lord, that she was carried away by the duty of loyalty to him. She held his feet and prayed for pardon.

Gautama melted a little at her importunities as the truth became clear to him. But, since words once spoken could not be withdrawn, he said, 'Ahalya! You know that I vowed never to go against the spoken word. Therefore, you have to lie in bush and briar, sad and starving, until Rama, Dasaratha's son, comes this way. Seeing you, He will shower grace on you, allowing you to touch His feet, and He will speak with you in great compassion. The vision (darshan), touch (sparshan), and speech (sambhasan) of the Lord will cleanse you, and you will shine forth in your real form and charm. I will then rejoin you.' So saying, Gautama left this place and hastened to the Himalayan region. From that moment, Ahalya lost her name and form; she lives on air and is deeply lost in austerity, eager to rejoin her lord. And this once lovely park suffered neglect." Ramachandra expressed great surprise, "What! You are telling me that she is waiting for me! Poor thing!

If you can let me know where she is, deep in austerity ... tell me where." As Rama moved on, Viswamitra and Lakshmana followed him at a distance. He passed through tangled bushes and entered a hut, behind a briar bush.

Until that moment, Ahalya was immersed in austerity; she was far away from the eyes of gods, demons, and men; she had forgotten her name and lost her form; she had no concern with food and sleep; she was merely existing as a piece of rock! She appeared like the moon's orb, well hidden by clouds, or like the sacrificial fire, covered by thick curtains of smoke. As Rama neared her, his foot touched her.

Ahalya raised her head and, seeing Rama's divinely charming form, held his feet, exclaiming in ecstasy, "Ah! I am saved. O God come to save me from sin! Your heart is moved at last." She poured out her gratitude in many hymns of praise. She rose, like the moon from behind the clouds, effulgent and fresh. At that moment Gautama, too, who was a master of the mysteries of yoga, appeared before them, for he knew that Rama had come and rescued his wife. He accepted her, purified by rigorous austerity and blessed by Rama. Both husband and wife fell at the feet of Rama and Lakshmana, who were overwhelmed by the spiritual bliss (ananda) they had. Gautama offered reverence and homage to Viswamitra.

The band of disciples was amazed at the wonder they had witnessed; they looked at the brothers with a fixed gaze of wonder. Viswamitra took leave of Gautama and walked on, in the northeasterly direction, with Rama and Lakshmana by his side.

The city of Mithila

By evening, they neared a city. The sage pointed to it, saying, "That is Mithila, that vast concourse of magnificent buildings!" At this, the brothers, as well as the sage's disciples, jumped with joy; they could not contain their happiness. From that spot, they walked faster. Forgetful of physical exhaustion, they quickly reached the main entrance of the city.

Wherever they turned, they saw ascetics and brahmins engaged in the recitation of the Vedas. They saw many houses where sacrificial fires were fed with ritual offerings. Under every sheltering tree were groups of people around the bullock carts that had brought them from the country side. There

were men and women, old and young, with children belonging to all castes and professions, people from all stages of life assembled at every corner. It was like moving in a stream of joy. The city was packed with eager people moving crisscross on all the roads. The sage and his followers reached the embankment of a tank, which was comparatively less crowded, for they had to decide where to stay and were not yet quite sure where. The time for evening ablutions had drawn near, so they kept their belongings on the bank, took their bath, and finished the prescribed rites.

Since a rite (yajna) was imminent, courtiers and warriors from the palace were moving among the monks that were arriving every hour, trying to find out their names, the gurus and hermitages with which they were affiliated, their spiritual status, and whether they had been specially invited for the occasion. Emperor Janaka insisted that all such information be communicated to him without delay.

Viswamitra finished his ablutions and rites and sat on the embankment with his disciples and the brothers, who looked like twin stars fallen from heaven upon the Earth. He was describing to them the glories of Mithila.

Meanwhile, a courier from the court approached them very politely and enquired, "Master! Please tell me who you are. Where have you come from? We are the king's messengers and are only obeying orders and carrying out our duty. If you tell us your name, we can inform the king of your arrival." When the messenger hurried straight to the palace and told the Emperor Janaka that the sage Viswamitra had arrived, he made arrangements appropriate for the reception of the great sage and sent the chief brahmins, priests, and pundits of the court under their leader, Sathananda, to Viswamitra.

The group from the palace approached the embankment, reciting Vedic hymns of welcome and good wishes, and Viswamitra realised that they were coming to take them to the emperor's presence. He directed Rama and Lakshmana to prepare themselves to go with him. Everyone got ready. Meanwhile, Sathananda honoured Viswamitra in true Vedic tradition, as

befitted a great master. He fell at his feet, offered refreshments consecrated with Vedic formulae, and announced with exemplary humility that he had come with others, under orders from the emperor, to accord him and all those with him the most sincere welcome. They left a palanquin at the place to bring the bags and baggage of the party and took the sage and others into the city, preceded by bands of musicians playing on their instruments.

As soon as they entered the royal road, Emperor Janaka moved toward them, accompanied by ministers and courtiers and his nearest kinsmen. Janaka fell prostrate before Viswamitra, saying, "Lord! Today, I realised my greatest ambition. Mithila has acquired, with your arrival, a unique splendour." He then enquired about the welfare of the sage, his pupils, and disciples. His eyes fell on the two boys, Rama and Lakshmana. They struck him as embodiments of solar effulgence. He could not find words for a few seconds. He knew not where he was at the time.

With great effort, he recovered enough awareness to ask Viswamitra, "Master! Who are these? They strike me as the twin gods. It looks as if they have just come down from heaven in order to confer grace on me. They have the tender divine charm of those gods. Or perhaps they are the sun and the moon come upon the Earth. How did these juvenile embodiments of beauty happen to come, walking the distance as members of your group? Or did they develop acquaintance with you near here and come with you?" Janaka poured out one query after another, as if he was talking to himself, forgetful where he was or what he really wanted to know.

Viswamitra saw his plight and could not restrain his smile. He said, "These are sons of Emperor Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Their names are Rama and Lakshmana. The valour and skill of these boys are amazing and miraculous." The sage wanted to say much more, but he thought it better to tell him all about them after reaching the place where they were to stay. So they walked on toward the quarters set apart for Viswamitra and his entourage.

It was a pretty little new temple-like structure, situated in the centre of a lovely garden; it was tastefully decorated with greens and festoons. The place

was heavy with silence; it was as if peace fell in heavy showers there from the wings of grace from heaven itself. It was quite adjacent to the royal palace.

After showing them in, Janaka fell at the sage's feet again, saying: "Your arrival has given me immeasurable strength and joy. I am sure this fortune came to me as a result of the merit earned in many lives. I will now take leave. For the rite (yajna) to begin, there is an interval of twelve days, according to the priests (rithwiks). Therefore, please stay on in Mithila and bless me." Viswamitra assured him that he had no objection to his proposal and removed all apprehensions on that score from Janaka's mind. Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other as if that was too long a time to be away!

Arrangements were made to give them rest and undisturbed sleep that night; milk, fruits and other articles were provided for them from the palace. "I will take your darshan at dawn tomorrow," said Janaka. "It is not proper to delay your rest any longer, for you had a long and tiresome journey." Janaka returned to the palace with the pundits, priests, and scholars.

Rama and Lakshmana talked among themselves about the devotion and humility of the emperor and the light of peace and joy that shone on his face. They sat by the master's side and ate fruits and milk. Then, after receiving permission, they went to their apartment to rest.

That night, they slept well. When daylight spread slowly over the city, the music of pipe and drum rose from their doorstep. Brahmins recited Vedic hymns. Rama and Lakshmana rose, finished their bath and other rituals, and approached Viswamitra. The sage gave them cups of milk to drink and said, "Sons! Janaka will be here any time now. Take breakfast and be ready." Soon, they as well as the sage's younger pupils repaired to the apartments and partook of fruits and milk. They washed their hands and quietly gathered around their preceptor, sitting reverentially near him.

Meanwhile, it became known that Emperor Janaka was arriving with the royal preceptor, in order to pay homage; the blowing of conches and the play of the traditional nine instruments heralded the approach of the ruler of the realm.

Janaka entered with auspicious sandal paste and rice grains in his hands, while Sathananda and the entourage entered the sacred residence. With the delight of gratitude he washed the sage's feet.

Then Janaka fell at Viswamitra's feet and stood by the side of the high seat that had been placed in front of the pedestal for the sage. When Viswamitra directed him, Janaka occupied his own seat. Rama and Lakshmana sat on the carpet laid to the right of their master.

Janaka said, "Great sage! What is your command? I am ready to accept and honour it. Please tell me." Janaka folded his palms in prayer.

At this, Viswamitra smiled, and said, "Last night, since there was no time, I could not tell you in detail. I will now tell about these princes, Rama and Lakshmana, since you desired to hear their story. If you have no leisure now, I can tell you some other time." Janaka exclaimed, "Master! what more important work have I than experiencing the ecstasy of conversing with you? This chance can be the fruit only of age-long austerity. I'm filled with spiritual bliss at the expectation of hearing about them; I consider it great good fortune." Viswamitra narrated the events that had taken place beginning with his appearance at Dasaratha's court up to the sacrificial rite (yajna) and the heroic way in which the young boys had stood guard and foiled the demons' attempts to desecrate the rituals. He described the bravery and skill of the boys in their battle against the demons and praised their achievements. During the narration, tears of joy and gratitude welled from the sage's eyes, which he frequently wipe away with the end of his garment.

Hearing these words and filling his eyes with the majesty and charming loveliness of the boys, Janaka experienced supreme delight, the delight he often derived in samadhi! He felt that the boys were actual embodiments of divine splendour. Though he often tried to look somewhere else, his eyes thirsted only for the sight of those charming lotus-like faces, which showered Brahmik illumination. Janaka suppressed with great difficulty the outward expression of his inner ecstasy and sat looking intently at them, in humility and reverence. He did not feel for a moment that he was an emperor and that

these boys were the princes of another imperial monarch. He had an incredible impression that they had come down from Heaven to Earth, and the feeling was strengthened and increased by the description of their superhuman might and skill. He realised that they were rare beings, akin to God himself, for, even before becoming teenagers, they successfully guarded a rite that the renowned Viswamitra could not carry through unimpaired. What a marvel, he wondered!

The narrative was resumed by the sage with the start of the journey toward Mithila. The stories related by the sage to the brothers were also explained to Janaka. At the story of the purification and liberation of Ahalya, the consort of sage Gautama, Sathananda was surprised beyond measure,, "What! Has my mother been freed from the curse? Did these divine personalities render my mother holy and restore her to my father? Ah! Without doubt they are divine." While streams of tears of gratitude and joy fell down his cheeks, he became so overcome with emotion that he was unable to move, like a pillar.

Viswamitra observed him and said, "Son! Do not be so overwhelmed with the little events that have happened so far! In the coming days, many events vastly more amazing will happen; they will cause amazement and ecstasy by their superhuman glory. Your parents too will arrive at Mithila tomorrow or the day after. You can hear the marvelous story of Rama and Lakshmana direct from them. Calm yourself." Emperor Janaka replied, "Master! How fortunate are the parents who have such divinely endowed sons. Oh how fortunate I am that they stepped into my house!" He turned to Rama and Lakshmana, "Darlings! Pardon me if the residence I arranged for you is not quite to your liking or in keeping with your status. If you desire, I am ever ready to arrange more appropriate accommodation. If you like, I will facilitate 'sightseeing' in the city, for you are strangers to Mithila. Ask for anything you require, without reservation; I will feel happy only when you so ask." To those words, spoken with exemplary goodness and humility, Rama replied in a manner that revealed the respect he wanted to offer Janaka. "Maharaja! We are but boys. We don't feel anything wanting in the arrangements made. We are quite happy. There is no need to arrange something more for us. If, however, you have such great affection toward us, you can fulfil one wish that

we have â€”!" and without mentioning what it was, he turned toward the preceptor, Viswamitra.

Breaking the Siva-bow

Viswamitra spoke, "Janaka, the mission on which these princes accompanied me from Ayodhya was over when the rite (yajna) I had resolved upon was accomplished without the least desecration. Rama and Lakshmana pleaded for permission to return home. Meanwhile, I received your invitation regarding the rite that you decided upon, so I asked the boys to accompany me to Mithila. Rama pleaded that, since his father had deputed him only for safeguarding the rite at my ashram, he was reluctant to proceed further and be away from his father longer than permitted.

"But I spoke to them of many divine weapons you have, objects that they are naturally eager to see and handle. I described the Siva bow, which you have here and which deserves to be seen by them. I told them the story of that bow. Then they agreed to accompany me hither, longing to see it. They have no yearning to go round the city or visit interesting places; bows, arrows, weapons that can guard the right and punish the wicked - these claim first consideration for their attention." Janaka felt he had no need to hear more. "In that case, I will make arrangements to have the bow brought to the rite (yajna) hall soon," and instructed that the preceptor, Sathananda, be consulted about an auspicious hour for it to be brought there.

Meanwhile, Rama asked Janaka, "Maharaja! If you can tell us how that divine bow came into your possession, we can derive great joy." Janaka gave the details with evident joy. "Darlings: Six generations after Nimi, the great ancestor of my dynasty, king Devaratha, ruled over this kingdom. The gods placed this bow of Lord Siva in trust in his palace. It has been with us since then. It's a weapon of the gods, so I assert it is no ordinary bow! It weighs some thousands of tons! No one has held it in the erect position so far, for who can lift that weight? Many times in the past, I tried to discover who could bend the bow and use it or hold it for public gaze. I invited people to try. But I have yet to see one who could do it. Every king and prince who attempted the

feat failed and returned humiliated. They couldn't bend the bow or even move it ever so slightly.

"One day, when I was turning the sod on the grounds where I had resolved to perform the rite (yajna), a vessel was revealed in the furrow. When I removed and examined it, I found in it a charming female child. Since the child came to us from the furrow (sita), we named her Sita. We brought her up as our own child. One day, when she was playing with her companions, her toy rolled underneath the long box within which the bow was kept. The more they tried to remove the ball with the help of various contrivances, the farther it rolled under the box! Sita laughed at the discomfiture of her companions and the palace guards. She pushed aside the box with her tender hand and recovered her toy, to everyone's astonishment! I heard about this through the queens, who came to know of it from the wonderstruck group around her at the time.

"That day, I resolved to give Sita in marriage to one who proves himself worthy to wed her by stringing that bow. Many a prince tried to lift and bend it, in order to win her, but all faced ignominious defeat! They felt hurt and insulted; they said I had purposely humiliated them. In their resentment and despair, they grouped their forces and fell upon Mithila. The siege lasted one full year. All my armoury was exhausted, and I was concerned about the fate of the city. I had no other recourse but austerity to win the grace of the Gods. The gods were pleased; they blessed me with traditional reinforcements of infantry, cavalry, elephantry, and chariotry. That is to say, help came to me from regions behind the besieging forces who, attacked from behind, were scattered. During these campaigns of vindictiveness, I was able to preserve the bow; I guarded it like the apple of my eye. Its mysterious might is beyond description.

"Rama! Ramachandra! I won't deny you the fulfilment of your wish; if you but agree, the bow will be brought to the rite (yajna) enclosure. I will also announce that anyone who dare lift and bend it can try to do so." When Janaka spoke so authoritatively, Rama and Lakshmana looked at each other but did not reply, for they were waiting for instructions from the master whom they had followed so far.

Just then, Viswamitra, who knew the brothers' skill and strength, said that what Janaka proposed could be done, and that he need not apprehend any obstacle coming his way. Janaka also announced that he would give Sita in marriage to whomsoever lifted the bow and stringed it, for he had vowed that Sita would be wedded only to such a one. Viswamitra approved that procedure too.

Janaka took leave of the sage and returned to the palace. He set upon the task of taking the bow into the rite (yajna) hall. A proclamation was issued to expose the bow to view, and it was communicated to as many kings and princes as possible. The eight-wheeled vehicle containing the box with the bow was pulled and pushed into the enclosure by a large band of hefty heavyweights; but they couldn't even move it a step. More men of gigantic mould had to be called in to lend a hand, dragging the heavy chains attached to the vehicle and pushing it from behind. When at last the bow moved into the sacred enclosure, the priests recited hymns of auspicious welcome.

Day dawned. The nine traditional musical instruments raised a paean of harmony that rose to the vaults of heaven. Conches were blown in peals. The auspiciousness of the day was declared through song and ritual. Emperor Janaka entered the enclosure, accompanied by a group of priests and with attendants carrying materials for ceremonial worship of the divine bow. Long before that moment, the enclosure was filled with kings, princes, ministers, courtiers, sages, and Vedic scholars. When Janaka came in, the entire gathering stood up to honour the ruler of the realm. Vedic pundits declaimed aloud hymns invoking the gods to shower grace; their voices rose up to heaven in exclamatory unison. Others recited passages from the Vedas. All were so filled with expectancy that they looked on in wonder, without even a wink.

Janaka walked in reverence around the vehicle with the bow and offered floral homage to it, while chants were recited to propitiate it. He bowed before the divine bow and spoke to the distinguished assembly. "Prostrations to the sages! I welcome all who have come to this assembly! For many years, my forefathers as well as many other monarchs have been, as you all know,

worshiping this divine bow. Besides, it is already well known that no one, be he god or demon, Yaksha, rakshasa, Garuda or Gandharva, Kinnara or Mahoraga, has so far been able to lift the bow, hold it, and string it! All who attempted have turned back, humiliated. In spite of this, this day, I have again resolved to bring the bow into the sacred enclosure. Whoever among you lifts this bow or lifting, strings it, or stringing it, fixes an arrow on to it - or even who can hold the weight of the bow in his hands - can come forward and take this chance; the bow is before you." Janaka bowed before the gathering with his palms folded and sat on the lion throne.

Viswamitra cast a glance, with a smile, at Rama. Rama quickly approached the vehicle and lifted up the iron cover with his left arm. With his right, he raised the bow from its box, with no concern or exertion! Holding the bow erect he looked around, while amazement was on every face! The thousands who witnessed the wonder - citizens, kings, princes, sages, and elders - raised such an applause that the sky echoed the exultation! Soon Rama strung the magnificent bow! With delightful ease he fixed an arrow! He drew the string back up to the ear in order to release it. But the bow snapped!

Everyone was shocked into confusion and fear by the strange, unexpected explosion. Many fainted; some cried out in terror; some fled in panic. The sages uttered prayers to God. Why dilate further? Except for Janaka, Viswamitra, Rama, and Lakshmana, everyone was plunged in inexplicable inconsolable dread!

Dasaratha is invited

Janaka rose from his seat, fell prostrate before Viswamitra, and said, "Master! No one on earth can claim greater strength than Rama; such strength is not of the earth. I will fulfil my word; I will give Sita in marriage to him who lifted, bent, and broke this bow." Viswamitra replied, "Janaka! It would be good to send this news to Emperor Dasaratha and celebrate this auspicious event after he comes. This is my desire; Rama is such a deeply dutiful son that he would not agree to the marriage until Dasaratha gave his approval!" So, Janaka called the brahmins of the court to his presence, along with some

ministers. He set them on the journey to Ayodhya as soon as day dawned. They sped on in their chariots, drawn by swift horses, for three days and nights and reached Ayodhya on the morning of the fourth day. They halted the chariots right before the main entrance of the imperial palace, so that there could be no delay in taking the news they had brought to the emperor.

When the guards asked their names and purpose, the ministers asked them to announce their arrival to the emperor. They informed Dasaratha, and the ministers were immediately called into the palace and the presence.

In spite of old age, Dasaratha was a divinely splendourous figure when the brahmins and ministers of Mithila saw him on his throne. When they stood before that bright venerable face, they fell at his feet without any hesitation or reservation. They stood up and said, "Maharaja! We are messengers from Emperor Janaka of Mithila. He commissioned us to enquire and learn from you about your welfare and the welfare of your realm. We have been sent with the approval of sage Viswamitra and with the consent of the royal preceptor, the great Sathananda, by Maharaja Janaka to communicate to you an important message." Dasaratha's face was brightened by smiles; his assurance was unshaken. He was struck by the humility and good manners of the envoys from Mithila. He said, "O greatest among brahmins! O ministers of the Mithila court!

There is no deficiency in the administration of the kingdom of Ayodhya, no obstruction anywhere for rituals like the oblation to Agni (Agnihotra); no diminution in the happiness of any of my subjects, no obstacle from any quarter in the path of their moral and spiritual advance. My subjects are prosperous; they are progressing steadily toward the highest goal. I am glad to tell you this. I wish to know about Janaka's health and welfare, the emperor of Mithila, about the uninterrupted performance in his kingdom of the religious rites prescribed in the Vedas. You can communicate your message to me, without any reservation. I am eager to hear it." When Dasaratha granted permission so softly and sweetly, the ministers signed to the brahmins to speak.

The chief priest rose from his seat and delivered the message. "Great sovereign ruler! Our Maharaja Janaka has vowed that his daughter, the goddess Sita, would be given in marriage only to heroic might. No doubt you are aware of this, and you might also know that many princes have tried to prove their prowess and were humiliated.

By divine will, your two sons Rama and Lakshmana accompanied the sage Viswamitra, eager to see the great rite (yajna) that our Maharaja is celebrating, and your eldest son Rama won the goddess Sita by means of his incomparable valour!

"Maharaja! What shall we say? How shall we describe it? In full view of the distinguished gathering of sages, kings and princes, Rama, who has attained the highest pinnacle of valour, lifted and held Siva's bow by its middle, kept it erect, and stringed it! More than this, he broke the indomitable sacred bow, as if in play, into two pieces! Since Sita is to be given in marriage to him who lifts Siva's bow, the sages who had assembled, as well as our Maharaja, have decided to give her hand to Rama.

"We have been sent to request and receive your assent, to offer you cordial welcome, to invite you, with the preceptor, priests, ministers, courtiers, kith and kin, and attendants and followers, to the city of Mithila. Our Maharaja desires to celebrate his daughter's marriage after receiving your presence (darshan). We were sent by him to inform you of this." The priests and ministers stood with folded hands, reverentially awaiting Dasaratha's reply. But Dasaratha thought it over with earnest care and sent for the sages Vasishta, Vamadeva, and others for consultations before speaking a word in reply. He also invited the foremost among the brahmins of the court. When they all arrived, he asked the party from Mithila to repeat their message. When they had listened to the news, Dasaratha wanted their comments. But first, he fell prostrate before sage Vasishta and prayed for his approval. Vasishta, Vamadeva, and others responded with joyous acclamations, "Hurrah! Hurrah!" They asked, "Why spend further thought on this?

Make preparations to go to Mithila!"

The ministers jumped in joy; news of Rama's wedding spread in a trice all over the city and into the inner apartments of the palace, where the queens were. The citizens raised exclamations of "Hurrah! Hurrah!" in their exultation. Attendants and servants quickly made preparations for the journey. Jewels, silk brocades, and other gifts were packed in large quantities and varieties; countless chariots were loaded with them.

The emperor and the imperial escort, royal preceptor Vasishta, the chief priests, and other brahmins and pundits, ascended their chariots and took their seats. It was as if Ayodhya itself was moving to Mithila to witness the marriage. For all who longed to join, Dasaratha made suitable arrangements. No one eager to go was left behind!

The horses seemed to share the joy that filled the hearts of the inmates of the chariots, for they trotted fast, without slackening speed or showing signs of exhaustion. Two nights and two days they spent on the road, and the third night they reached Mithila!

Dasaratha in Mithila

Maharaja Janaka welcomed Emperor Dasaratha at the very entrance gate of his city. He welcomed the ministers, sages, and priests as befitted their position and status. He arranged for them to rest for the night in allotted residences. As soon as day dawned, Dasaratha sent for the priests (rithwiks) who specialised in ritual lore, the queens, and the kinsmen and alerted them to be ready and available the moment they were wanted. Meanwhile, Janaka arrived at the mansion where Dasaratha was and took him to the special enclosure where the rite was being celebrated. Seats had been allotted there for the preceptors, the emperor, and his entourage, according to their rank and authority.

When all had occupied their seats, Janaka welcomed Dasaratha. "Your coming to Mithila with these great sages, these foremost brahmins, and your kinsmen and escort augurs great good fortune for us. It marks the fruition of the good we have done in past lives. I am sure great joy has filled your mind at the

valour and victory of your son. I am about to enter into relationship with the great Raghu dynasty, resplendent with the boundless heroism of its scions. My dynasty is about to be sanctified more than ever before by this kinship. I believe this is the result of the blessings showered on me by my forefathers. Maharaja! This morning, the sacrificial rite (yajna) we have been celebrating is coming to a close. I have thought of celebrating the marriage of Sita and Rama after its conclusion. I plead for your assent." Dasaratha thrilled with bliss (ananda). His face was lit by bright smiles. He said, "Maharaja! You are the donor; elders declare that a gift is to be received at the sweet will and pleasure of the donor! So I am ever prepared to take the gift whenever it pleases you!" When Dasaratha spoke with such wit and wisdom, with such heart-melting warmth of affection, Janaka was overwhelmed with spiritual bliss surging within him.

By then, Rama and Lakshmana had entered the enclosure with sage Viswamitra; they prostrated before their father and their preceptors - Vasishtha, Vamadeva, and others. Dasaratha's eyes glistened with delight as they fell upon the sons he had missed so long. He drew them to himself; he placed his hands on their shoulders and pressed them to his bosom. Seeing the father's bliss while fondling his sons, the brahmins and ministers forgot themselves in appreciation of the depth of his affection. They were lost in admiration.

Dasaratha conversed intimately with his sons and listened to their sweet simple descriptions of the rite they had guarded from desecration by demonic forces. They told him the incidents of the journey from Viswamitra's hermitage to Mithila. The narrative was heard also by Vasishtha, Vamadeva, and other sages, as well as by Bharatha, Satrughna, Sumanthra, and many ministers, courtiers, and nobles. They spent the night recapitulating the wonder and mystery that formed the warp and woof of that narrative.

Meanwhile, Janaka was immersed in preparations for the wedding. He was mostly in the palace itself; he invited the chief priest, Sathananda, to the court and prayed to him reverentially to start collecting men and materials for the various rites preliminary to the actual wedding rite. The sage replied,

"Maharaja! The rite concluded just today. During the next two or three days, there are a few hours that are auspicious for the ceremonials. I can give details, if you want to know." Janaka saluted Sathananda and, standing with folded hands, said, "Master! I received Emperor Dasaratha's assent last night. This is indeed a sign of extreme good fortune. My younger brother Kushadwaja is not presently here; he has been very busy supplying provisions for the sacrificial rite (yajna) as and when the high priests asked for them. I am reluctant to celebrate this most auspicious ceremony without his presence at my side. I don't want to deprive him of his share of joy. I have set afoot plans to get him here quickly. I feel it would be best if we fix the day and hour after his arrival." Sathananda responded, "Good! That would make us all happy beyond calculation!" And he left the palace.

Janaka sent messengers with instructions to bring his brother to Mithila, with expedition. They found him in his capital city, Sankasya, for they were taken thither by fleet-footed horses, which sped faster than others. They reported to him the developments at Mithila. Kushadwaja was overcome with the flood of spiritual bliss (ananda) that surged through him. He collected his kith and kin, as well as his entourage, in great haste; he had chariots loaded with gifts and presents, offerings, and precious materials. He started off that very night and quickly reached Mithila.

Janaka hastened to meet him, for he was counting the minutes that were hurrying by. He clasped his brother in fond embrace and was filled with inexpressible delight. Kushadwaja fell at his elder brother's feet and prostrated before Sathananda; then, all three sat on raised seats and deliberated on the course of action. After deciding on what had to be done, they sent for the highly respected elder statesman, Sudhama, and told him, "Minister of state! Please go to Dasaratha and pray to him to come here, to this palace, with his ministers, priests, courtiers, kinsmen, and others he would like to bring with him. Bring him with due honours." Sudhama took with him a group of courtiers, scholars, and royal priests; he got tastefully decorated chariots ready to bring the imperial party and reached the palace where Dasaratha was staying. He submitted sweetly and softly to him the message he had brought and, with profound obeisance, invited him to

Janaka's palace. Dasaratha was ready; he moved out with his entourage and reached Janaka's court hall very soon. They greeted each other as befitted the occasion and their respective status and occupied the seats laid for them.

Narrating the dynasties

Then Dasaratha rose and said, "Janaka! For the Ikshvaku dynasty, the sage Vasishtha is god on Earth! He is our supreme preceptor. He can speak with full authority on the traditions of our dynasty." Dasaratha sat down, and Vasishtha stood before the assembly and spoke. "Royal sage! Listen, all those who have assembled! Brahman! The unmanifested Supreme, the Eternal, the Pure, created Marichi through the exercise of will; Marichi's son was Kasyapa, whose son was Surya; Surya's son was Manu, Manu had a son named Vaivaswatha Manu; he ruled over the people and earned the appellation Prajapathi. A son Ikshvaku was born to him, who was the first overlord of Ayodhya, so the dynasty itself came to be called the Ikshvaku Line.

"Ikshvaku's son was Kukshi. Kukshi's son was Vikukshi. His son was Bana, and Bana's son was Anaranya.

Anaranya had a son named Trisanku, and Trisanku's son was Dhundhumara; Dhundhumara's son was Yuvanaswa; Mandhata was the son of Yuvanaswa; his son Susandhi had two sons, Daivasandhi and Prasenajit. The famous Bharatha was the son of Daivasandhi. Bharatha's son was Asitha. When Asitha ruled the kingdom, a coalition of Haihayas, Thalajanghas, and Sasibindus invaded the realm, and Asitha had to flee to the Himalayan region with his two queens. He took refuge in the region called Bhrigu-prasravana and after a few years passed away there.

"Both his queens were pregnant when he died. They sought asylum in Chyavana's hermitage, who was filled with compassion at their plight. He consoled them, saying, 'Mothers! Don't entertain any fear. This is your home.

You will have safe delivery and strong splendour-filled fortunate babies.' His blessing came true. Within a few days, the elder queen delivered a son

named Sagara, who was installed as the emperor of Ayodhya.

"Sagara's son was Aswamanja, whose son was Amsumanta; Amsumanta's son was Dilipa, and his son was Bhagiratha. Bhagiratha begot Kakuthstha. Kakuthstha's son was Raghu, and Raghu's son was Pravardha. Pravardha had Sudarsana as son and Sudarsana, Agnivarana. Sigaraga was Agnivarana's son, and Sigaraga's son was Maru. After him, the throne came from father to son, to Prasusruka, Ambarisha, and Nahusha in succession.

"Nahusha's son was Yayathi, and Yayathi's son was Nabhaga. Nabhaga had Aja as his son. Dasaratha is the eldest son of Aja, and his four sons, each a precious jewel, are Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna.

Rama, the eldest of the four, raised, bent, strung, and broke the bow of Siva.

"O Royal sage! This royal dynasty is sacred and pure. Every one born in this line has earned spiritual illumination and has shone in spiritual splendour. They are rooted in righteousness and are in the front rank of heroes.

Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna are precious lamps that shed lustre on the annals of the clan.

"I suggest that it would be desirable to have this auspicious marriage ceremony celebrated for Lakshmana also, for he is the reflection of Rama. Your daughter Urmila can well shine as Lakshmana's spouse. Don't hesitate; resolve accordingly and make the necessary preparations." Vasishta blessed the gathering and resumed his seat.

After listening to the narrative of the Ikshvaku Dynasty from the lips of the great sage Vasishta, Janaka rose from his throne and said, "O great sage! When the scion of a noble clan intends to gift his daughter in marriage, he has to announce the historic glory of his clan, doesn't he? I have resolved to follow your example and recite the story myself, for it gives me great joy to recapitulate the names of my forefathers and recall their majesty.

My birth with this body happened through the blessings of forefathers of this dynasty. It will be justified and its purpose fulfilled only if I describe them myself to this vast gathering." Janaka stood prayerfully before all. Vasishta agreed with the request and gave the permission sought. Janaka then began the narration. "Great sage! Revered preceptors! Maharaja Dasaratha! In the very distant past, an emperor named Nimi adhered firmly to the path of righteousness and was therefore famous for might and foresight.

His son Mithi built this city, Mithila, to serve as the capital for this kingdom. He was the first sovereign of this region. His reign was very popular, and his subjects were happy and prosperous.

"Mithi's son, Sudhavas, had a son Nandhivardana, who ruled after him. Nandhivardana's son was Sukethu and Sukethu's son was Devaratha. Brihadratha was Devaratha's son, and Mahavira was Brihadratha's son. Mahavira had vast prowess, as his name indicates. His son Sudrithi had a son, Dhrishtakethu. Dhrishtakethu's celebrated son was Haryasva; Haryasva had a son, Maru; Maru's son was Pratheendhaka; Pratheendhaka's son was Kirthiratha, and Kirthiratha's son was Devamedha. Devamedha's son was Vibudha; Vibudha's son was Kirthiratha; Kirthiratha's son was Maharoma and Maharoma's son was Hriswarupa. He was a talented ruler, a strict adherent of dharma. He was acclaimed as a great soul (a mahatma).

"Hriswarupa is my father; I am indeed very happy to acknowledge that my father was an ideal personage.

The truth is that I now rule happily over this city of Mithila as a result of the merit acquired and handed down as heritage by my forefathers.

"My brother Kushadwaja is much more to me than a brother. I revere him as a divine personality. He is more of a friend to me than a brother. I brought him up with such love and affection that I have developed great attachment to him. Years ago, when the King of Sankasya demanded that I yield the Siva's bow to him or else meet him in battle, I refused, and he laid siege to Mithila City. This was the signal for a bitter war between us, during which Sudhanva

was killed and I made my brother the ruler of Sankasya. That city shines bright on the banks of the Ikshumathi river. Seen from afar, it reminds one of the famous celestial chariot of the gods! Let me tell you of another auspicious idea that the gods have inspired in me.

Four weddings are proposed

"I have brought him here today, so that he might share in the joy of the wedding celebrations. Brahmarshi!

You commanded that Rama wed Sita and Lakshmana wed Urmila, my other daughter. I accept the command with immeasurable joy. Sita is a celestial damsel, and she will wed Rama as the hero's gift. And I bow my head in all humility and gladness and give Urmila to Lakshmana.

"I have another representation to make for your consideration. Maharaja Dasaratha! You have four sons, all born of the same heavenly gift of grace. Why allow two to remain single? It will contribute to our happiness fully if they too are wedded. Today is the asterism of Magha. This is a good day to commence the rites and have the preliminary ceremonies. The day after, under the asterism Uttaraphalgun, I seek your assent to gift in marriage my brother's two daughters: Mandavi to Bharatha and Srutha-keerthi to Satrughna." At this, everyone in the huge gathering acclaimed the proposal, exclaiming, "Most welcome!" Their applause rent the sky.

Upon Emperor Janaka's suggestion of the marriages of Bharatha and Satrughna, the sages Vasishta, Vamadeva, Viswamitra, and others deliberated among themselves. Dasaratha was easily persuaded to assent, and they informed Janaka. "Oh King! The two royal clans, the Ikshvaku and the Videha, are filled with holy traditions, the sanctity of which is beyond measurement. The greatness of these two dynasties cannot be measured and described by anyone, however learned or proficient. Dynasties of this status, or any that can be pronounced equal to them in nobility, have not appeared on earth before. It is indeed a very auspicious event that these two are now brought together by these bonds of marriage.

"This is highly appropriate, laudable and holy. In addition, we are glad that the brides and grooms are fit in every way for each other. Janaka! Your brother Kushadwaja knows and practises dharma. It is really good that he too should become related to Dasaratha through the marital bond of his daughters. It is a source of immense joy. Hence, we are ready to bless the marriages of his daughters, Mandavi and Srutha-keerthi, with Bharatha and Satrughna. Our wish is that these royal dynasties be bound close by these marriages." Janaka and Kushadwaja fell prostrate before the sages, overcome with delight at their wish being fulfilled.

"This is no ordinary event. How fortunate we are to have been blessed with this consummation! How lucky that the sages agreed to this proposal and eased the path. Sages never encourage inauspicious happenings. We will reverentially obey all your commands," they said.

Vasishta then said, "Why should we postpone these two weddings to the day after or some later day! Tomorrow is auspicious for all. It will be very good if all four weddings are celebrated on the same day." Janaka replied, "I am blessed, indeed! Worthy preceptor. Emperor Dasaratha has long been your disciple, executing whatever you commanded. From this day, we brothers are also your disciples. All our burdens are on your shoulders; direct us how to proceed and how to act; we will follow unquestioningly." They stood, awaiting his reply, with hands folded in utter humility and reverence.

Dasaratha rose and said, "Ruler of Mithila! The virtues I find in you two I cannot describe in words! You have made excellent arrangements for the stay and reception of such a magnificent array of maharajas and great sages, as well as of the vast mass of people who have thronged this city. I will go back to my residence now and carry on the rites of prosperity and completion of studenthood (nandi and samavarthana) in full concordance with Vedic prescription." The brothers honoured him duly as he emerged from the hall and took leave of him at the main entrance, as befitted his status. They then went to their own palaces to fulfil their assignments.

Dasaratha performed the prosperity (Nandi) rite. Very early in the day he

made all four sons perform the completion of studenthood (samavarthana) rite. He fixed golden ornaments on the horns of cows selected to be given away to pious brahmins, along with costly vessels for milking them. It was a feast for the eye, the scene of the boys giving the cows away! The citizens of Mithila felt as if the deities of the four quarters were before them, with Brahma in their midst; the four sons around Dasaratha appeared thus to them.

While this gift was going on, Yudajit, the prince of Kekaya, the brother of Queen Kaika, and mother of Bharatha arrived. His father yearned to have his grandson, Bharatha, with him for some time, so he had hurried to Ayodhya, but he learned there that the royal family had left for Mithila for Rama's marriage. His father, he said, had no knowledge of Rama's wedding. He also had no idea that it was happening. He had come to Mithila to witness the marriage and to communicate the grandfather's desire to have the grandson with him for some time.

Dasaratha was glad he could come.

That night, Dasaratha spoke endearingly to his sons and others on a variety of pleasant topics. No one in the camp slept. Everyone was impatiently awaiting the dawn of the happy day, when each could witness the wedding ceremony of their dear princes. Each was overwhelmed with joy, as if his own son was the bridegroom or his own child the bride. Their spiritual bliss (ananda) can be compared only to the bliss of realizing Brahman; that was the measure of their love toward Rama and his brothers.

The four weddings

Early in the morning, Janaka proceeded to the special dais on which the rituals of the wedding were to be gone through, accompanied by a highly spiritual splendour-showering group of sages. He completed the preliminary rites and was awaiting the arrival of the bridegrooms and their parents and kinsmen. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna had their ceremonial baths; they wore yellow silken dresses and had silk cloth wound around their

heads. They were bedecked with many ornaments studded with diamonds and sapphires and gave the impression that they were alluring, heart-captivating gods come down from heaven.

The auspicious hour named Victory (Vijaya) drew near, and they approached the dais preceded by musicians, whose instruments struck up a melody that reached the dome of heaven. The councillors of the court, the feudatory rulers, and their attendants followed them, carrying huge plates of jewels, silk clothes, gold coins, and other auspicious articles essential for the ceremony.

The populace gazed upon their beauty and prowess without even blinking an eye; they confided to each other that the dignity of their bearing marked them out as divine and not human at all. "What charm! What a surge of beauty! They are denizens of heaven come down on earth," they whispered among themselves as the bridegrooms passed between the thick rows of onlookers. Women swore they had never cast eyes on such charming princes.

Every window and terrace was packed to overflowing. At last, the princes reached the dais and sat down.

Janaka and Kushadwaja brought their daughters to the dais. They had been given ceremonial baths and had been elaborately and beautifully decorated as befitted brides on the wedding day; they wore veils and followed their fathers, with thousands of maids following them, carrying fruits and flowers, heaps of red and yellow cosmetic fragrances, rice grains, jewels, and gems. It seemed as if the treasures of Mithila were flowing in a full scintillating stream in the wake of the wedding.

The four brides shone like magnificent lamps. They sat face to face, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna on one side and Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutha-keerthi opposite them. A velvet cloth was held as a screen between. The residents and nobles of Ayodhya sat behind Dasaratha, and the residents of Mithila and those invited for the wedding ceremony by Janaka sat behind him on the elevated dais.

The eyes of all were drawn by the elaborate artistic and rich decorations that distinguished the marriage shamiana. It was all gold, silver and flower and silk and velvet, festoons and flags, candelabras and columns, arches and finials. One could not take an eye off any of these once it drew one's attention. The vast area was filled to overflowing with kinsmen and well-wishers. It looked as if Mithila itself was experiencing the thrill of the wedding and enjoying the celebrations as if they were her own.

Soon, Dasaratha rose and politely reminded the preceptor Vasishtha, "Why should we delay?" Hearing this, Janaka stood before Vasishtha with folded arms, praying for him to officiate at the ceremony.

Vasishtha agreed, and with Viswamitra and Sathananda accompanying him, he lit the sacrificial fire in the centre of the dais while Vedic scholars and experts in Vedic recitation raised their voices and repeated hymns appropriate for the auspicious ceremony.

They arranged around the altar of fire golden plates decorated with flowers and sandal paste and full of tender sprouts of nine species of grains. There were also incense burners, sacred spoons for offering oblations in the holy flames, golden water pots, cups, and such other articles essential for the rite. They spread the holy kusha grass thick on the floor, so that it lay as level and as smooth as laid down in the texts. Then, they began to pour oblations into the fire while reciting the hymns that assure happiness and prosperity to the brides and bridegrooms; every rite was gone through with meticulous accuracy and correctitude. The initiatory threads were tied on the wrists of the princes and princesses.

The next rite was the rite of gifting the brides. Vasishtha asked Janaka to come forward; he came near the sacred fire enclosure dressed in regal splendour and wearing all the regal jewels. As directed by the sage, he held Sita's hands and placed them in Rama's outstretched palms. Rama's eyes streamed tears of joy. Coconut, symbolising prosperity, had already been placed in Rama's palms, and after Sita's hands rested on it, milk was poured on the hands by Janaka as part of the ceremony of gifting.

Janaka spoke these words, "Rama! Here is Sita, my daughter. She will tread your dharmic path from now on. Accept her. She brings prosperity, peace, and joy. Hold her hand with yours. She is highly virtuous and true.

From this moment, she will follow you like your shadow, forever." With these words, he poured water on Rama's hands to set the seal on the gift.

Then he came near Lakshmana. "Lakshmana! I give you this bride, Urmila; accept her." With the prescribed mantras, he completed the ceremony of gifting her to the bridegroom. Similarly, he approached Bharatha and pronouncing the Vedic mantras traditionally used for the wedding and gifted Mandavi to him as his bride. In the same manner Srutha-keerthi was gifted by him to Satrugna with the pouring of holy water and Vedic recitation.

After this, scholars well versed in Vedic lore completed the customary rites and rituals for drawing upon the wedded couples the grace of the gods.

Then Janaka rose and, standing in the centre of the dais, announced to the bridegrooms, "Darlings! Our daughters are to be installed as mistresses of your households. The auspicious moment has come." As soon as he said this, with the blessing and approval of Vasishta, the four brothers each held his bride by the hand and circumambulated first the sacred fire and then Janaka and Vasishta the preceptor, and prostrated before them.

While they were doing so, showers of flowers fell upon them; joyous music rose from a galaxy of instruments.

The distinguished gathering acclaimed the moment and scattered rice grains on their heads, wishing them all the best in life. The jubilation with which they cheered "hurrah! hurrah!" shook the sky and filled all ears with delight. The gods played divine music in heaven, elysian drums were beaten in ecstatic exaltation, and minstrels of heaven sang hallelujahs.

On the dais, court musicians sang the traditional wedding songs describing the splendour of the marriage ceremony, extolling it as on a par with the

marriage of Lord Siva and Gauri. They sang it in a rich variety of ragas and melodies, filling the atmosphere with vibrations of delight. The four brothers and their brides stood on the dais facing the vast gathering and bowed in acknowledgement of their cheers and greetings: "May you be happy forever," "May everything auspicious be added unto you." The brothers, resplendent in their youth, heroism, and beauty, went with their brides into enclosures behind the curtains from where their mothers were watching the ceremony, in order to prostrate before them and be blessed by them. Then, they returned to the palace allotted for the stay of the royal party. From that day, for three days, the populace witnessed a magnificent variety of ceremony and festival, packed with joy and jubilee. The people of Ayodhya who had come to Mithila as well as the inhabitants of Mithila itself could not distinguish night from day! It was festivity without intermission.

Taking leave

The day after the wedding, Viswamitra went to Dasaratha and told him that the mission upon which he had resolved had been fulfilled. He called the brothers close to him, fondled them very affectionately, and blessed them profusely. Turning to Dasaratha, he expressed his intention to proceed to the Himalayan regions. At this, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna fell at the sage's feet. Viswamitra then went to the palace of Janaka and told him also that his desire had fructified triumphantly! He blessed Janaka and the brides, Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutha-keerthi and also announced that he was proceeding to the Himalayas. Dasaratha and Janaka and many others of Ayodhya and Mithila were in a fix; they could neither let the sage depart nor persuade him to stay.

At last, they laid their load of gratitude at his feet and took the dust of his feet when he left, blessing everyone.

The third day, when Dasaratha expressed his desire to leave for Ayodhya, Janaka did not interpose any obstacle, but made all arrangements for their departure. He gathered the courtiers and attendant maids that were to accompany the brides; he collected and filled many chariots with the articles

they had to take with them. He gave as presents large numbers of elephants, chariots, horses, and cows. He presented to the sons-in-law jewels and precious gems in plenty, as well as a vast variety of priceless gifts that could be used in daily life. With the dawn of the next day, the caparisoned chariots were ready for the journey. The women of the court were in tears; indeed, to speak the truth, all the women of the city were weeping at the departure of the four dear princesses.

Unable to bear the pangs of separation from Sita and Urmila, many nurses and maids broke down with grief.

The mothers held the hands of the sons-in-law and prayed to them to treat their daughters gently and with affection.

"They know no hardship or sorrow; they have grown up soft and tender," they pleaded in pathetic appeal.

They wept as if they were losing their very eyes. At last, they ascended the chariots and moved off. The city was filled with gloom - as much gloom as the ecstasy with which it was filled for the three previous days!

Janaka found it hard to take leave of Sita and tried his best to curb the flow of tears. He accompanied Emperor Dasaratha for some distance, describing Sita's virtues to him and pleading with him to treat her with loving tenderness. With tears in his eyes, he prayed that he may be informed frequently of her welfare and happiness. He spoke also of the other brides and evinced great anxiety on their behalf.

Dasaratha responded most sympathetically and spoke soothingly, trying his best to allay the agitation of his mind. "Janaka! We have no daughters of our own. So, these are the daughters whom we longed to fondle for so long! They are both daughters and daughters-in-law for us. There will not be anything wanting for them; all things necessary for their joy and happiness will be provided. Do not worry or grieve in the least. Return fully assured of our love and affection for them." Dasaratha ordered his chariot to halt. Janaka alighted

from the chariot and approached the brides, who were seated with the bridegrooms. He consoled them in various ways to bear the pang of separation from the home where they had been reared so lovingly. He imparted courage and quoted many dharmic texts that enjoin loyalty to the husband and the husband's kith and kin. He reminded them how to treat the servants of the households they were entering. He accepted their respectful prostrations and caressed them once again and blessed them. When he turned his back on them to return to Mithila, he burst into sobs; nevertheless he ascended his chariot and moved toward home. The chariots sped toward Ayodhya and Mithila, and very soon they were miles apart.

When Janaka reached Mithila, the apartments of the palace were empty, with no signs of life, no shine of joy, no sound of elation. He could not be there for even an instant. Mithila was a city of grief. Janaka sent for sage Sathananda and the ministers and, in order to free his mind a little from the upsurge of sorrow, had a number of items of business discussed and settled with them. In the midst of the discussions, his mind would wander into sadness again, and he would give replies unrelated to the problems raised.

One minister said, "O King! The separation from Sita seems to have caused great grief in your heart. No father can escape this separation and this grief. Once she is gifted to the bridegroom, the father's duty is to reduce the attachment gradually; this is not unknown to your majesty. And we know that Sita is no ordinary maiden but a divine angel! So, separation from her must cause you great agony. O King, the daughters are divine, and the sons-in-law also have divine splendour! They appear to have descended from heaven.

"In Mithila, everyone, young and old, had that feeling and that reverence toward them. It is really a wondrous coincidence that such bridegrooms have been wedded to such brides, worthy in every way, in physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual characteristics, in status, wealth, power, family honour, dynastic sanctity, and religious faith. This cannot happen to all. Therefore, the daughters will have happiness, without the least diminution. Their lives will be filled with greater and greater joy as the years roll by." The ministers recalled the grandeur of the marriage celebrations and calmed the

agitated mind of Janaka.

8. Another Challenge To Rama's Prowess

Meanwhile, Dasaratha proceeded toward Ayodhya with his sons and daughters-in-law, the sages and scholars, army units of infantry, elephantry, cavalry, and chariotry, and citizens of his empire. Suddenly, they observed certain bad omens, and they had a premonition that something serious was about to happen. Dasaratha approached Vasishtha. "Master! What a surprise this is! Dark clouds are thickening and howling; the beasts on earth are tramping around us full circle. They shouldn't behave so, should they? What can be the reason? What does it indicate? I am apprehensive about these omens." Vasishtha could see the meaning of these portents by means of his divine insight. "O King! These are signs of some terrible event nearing us. The clouds are roaring frightfully. But, since the beasts on earth are circumambulating our chariots, this much can be inferred; the disaster that threatens us will be averted. Therefore, you need have no anxiety." Vasishtha instilled faith and confidence in Dasaratha, and they awaited events.

Suddenly, the wind grew into a fierce cyclonic storm! Even as they were looking on, giant trees were pulled by their roots and fell with alarming noise. Even the mountain peaks rolled one over the other. Thunderous explosions rent the air, as if the earth itself was breaking into pieces. Those in one chariot could not see the vehicle before or behind them; so thick was the dust that rose all around! Horses and elephants started running wildly in panic. Foot soldiers dropped unconscious; others stood petrified by a weird fear.

Vasishtha, Dasaratha, and the four sons were the only ones who were unafraid in all that huge concourse! All the rest were drained of vigour and vitality. For good reason, too. For the ground and air were enveloped in darkness.

The darkness was heightened by blinding flashes of light! And, a dreadful figure, with terror-striking eyes, stood before them.

His head had a crown of thickly matted hair. He had a giant double-edged axe on his shoulder. He had on another shoulder a bag of arrows that shone like

lightning streaks. He appeared to them like the forehead-eyed Siva on His way to destroy the mighty demon rulers of the Triple Fortress (Thripura)!

Vasishta recognised him immediately as Parasurama. But he wondered why he was so fierce with anger that day, even though all his rage against the warrior (kshatriya) clans had long ago subsided as a result of the campaigns in which he had destroyed them. He tried to discover what could have kindled the flame again from the cooled embers.

Vasishta moved toward Parasurama with the traditional signs of welcome, like inviting him to wash his hands and asking permission to wash his feet. Though he accepted these marks of good will and heartfelt reception, Parasurama stared at Rama with eyes like glowing cinders! Rama, however, reacted with a charming smile, a smile that only fed the fumes of his anger! He raved loudly, "O son of Dasaratha! I listened to your exploits being praised by a thousand tongues. I also heard how you broke Siva's bow, as if it was just child's play. But all that is hearsay not directly seen by me. I have come to personally examine your valour.

"I brought this divinely consecrated bow, which belonged to Jamadagni, my revered father. Show me your might - string and fix an arrow on it. Or else, fight me!" He challenged Rama, in passionate anger.

Rama was unaffected by this demonstration of anger. He smiled coolly. "O Bhargavarama! I thought that the vengeance you had nursed against the warriors (kshatriyas) had ended long ago. Why this relapse? Why this downfall, this absurdity?" Just then, Dasaratha bent low and appealed to Parasurama in plaintive tones, "Bhagavan! You are a brahmin.

You have won great renown. My sons are tender teenagers. Why develop vengeful hatred against them for no reason whatever? This ill becomes the high status of your lineage. Your forefathers studied the Vedas without intermission and performed rites and ceremonies with elaborate care. You yourself declared that day, when you entered on the ritual of penance, that you would not handle any weapon thereafter; you said that your desires had

been fulfilled. You did this before no less a God than Indra, gifting all the territories conquered by you to Kasyapa, yourselves resolving to spend the rest of your days in the performance of righteous deeds and the gaining of equanimity.

"You were all along engaged in austerities on the Mahendra Peak! Now, quite contrary to your declared intentions, your mind is set upon destroying my dynasty and family. Isn't it a terrible sin to act against one's given word? At this breach of promise, of what use is austerity? There is no god higher than truth, is there?"

You challenge only Rama, and you say you will fight only with him! If anything injurious happens to him, my entire family will be plunged into dire calamity. Our lives will end the moment danger harms him. A brahmin like you should not become responsible for the loss of so many lives! It is not only a sacrilege on brahminhood; it is a heinous sin." Parasurama paid no heed to Dasaratha's words. He looked only at Rama. "The bow you broke and this one have both come from heaven; Viswakarma, the divine artificer, made them both. One was offered to Siva for use against the demons of the triple fortress; the other was entrusted to Vishnu. Once the demons were destroyed, Siva sent the bow to Emperor Devaratha, with the arrows that were used for the fight. Perhaps the bow had become frail and feeble, since the purpose for which it was offered had been accomplished. It is no proof of might and heroism if such a bow is broken. This bow has work yet to do, so it still retains its vigour and vitality.

This bow is surcharged with efficacy and power. Take this, string it, and break it as you did the other. That is the way to prove your strength and heroism. Do not strut about in pride that you broke the bow of Siva! Break this and write your name in the annals of the brave." "You may doubt my words that this is the bow of Vishnu," he continued. "Vishnu Himself kept it in the custody of Hrishika, a great sage. He handed it over to his son, Jamadagni. Jamadagni is my father. He was the repository of tremendous merit acquired by austerity; he was so pure hearted that he had no trace of hatred or vengeance in him.

My father had renounced the use of weapons; yet, Karthaviryarjuna, the wicked, killed him. It was a crime of unprecedented cruelty; no one had killed another so atrociously. I decided that I should not show mercy; I had to teach him a lesson; I vowed that I would destroy not only that monster but all unrighteous kings. From that day, I have been cutting them to pieces and playing ball games with their heads.

"This bow was with me in all those campaigns. I killed many wicked monarchs. I brought the entire world under subjugation. My anger at those who had killed my father cooled a little with this. I gave up the vendetta and started a Vedic sacrifice. I invited Kasyapa for that rite (yajna), since he was a great saint immersed in meritorious activity. I gave him the Earth, which I had conquered, as ritual fees for supervising the rite. Since then, I have been spending my days on the Mahendra Peak, with my mind immersed in peace and my intellect shining in spiritual splendour.

"Your father asked me why I took up this weapon again and put on a challenging pose, in spite of having renounced the path of vengeance and hatred. I'll answer him now, Rama! Two bows were created in heaven and came upon the earth. You broke the Siva bow. This one alone remains now, intact. If this too is broken (it does not serve any purpose being with me, for its work is over), then my renunciation will be complete. So I want you to break it and keep it. I'm waiting for this consummation. The moment has come; I'm determined to utilise it, rather than let it go by or allow it to be misused.

"Perhaps, you doubt whether fighting is the best use that time can be put to? But the significance of the fight has to be looked into. It may be for the progress and welfare of the world; it may promote the suppression of the unrighteous and the encouragement of the good. You cannot pronounce war as undesirable, judging from a superficial point of view.

"Analyse the purpose. When a knife has to be sharpened, one has to hone it on a grindstone. No one can condemn the process as injurious to the knife. If the body is to derive strength from food, the food has to be placed between

rows of hard teeth and ground into paste mercilessly. No one can condemn this process as violence exercised on the material. It may become necessary in order to provide pure (sathwic) food for either the body or the body politic, to have recourse to struggle, conflict, and the apparent infliction of pain.

"Well, we're in the middle of the road, halfway through a journey. It's not proper to indulge in talk, standing here. Let's get to action. We should start straightaway. Come on! Either string this bow and break it in the process or fight a duel with me!" This was Parasurama's call.

Lakshmana fumed with anger while listening to Parasurama's challenge. He was about to intervene with a hot retort when Rama quietened him. "This matter does not concern you. I myself have to answer the questions asked of me. It is against good manners for you to come between us; let me handle the situation." His affectionate and soft counsel made Lakshmana desist.

But when Parasurama started laughing at Rama and ridiculing him for not accepting his challenge, Lakshmana couldn't control his resentment. He shouted, "O Bhargava! This is not much of a task for Him who broke the bow of Siva! To break this little bow, why do you challenge Rama? This is a brahmin weapon! It is just a blade of kusha grass. I can break it myself in a trice, effortlessly, even while playing with it; for this petty task why ask Rama. I have no need to transfer the assignment." Lakshmana's words inflamed Parasurama even more. However, Rama took things coolly and calmly; he smiled at Lakshmana and pacified him by his soft speech. The more enraged Parasurama became, the quieter and more restrained was Rama's reaction.

Soon, Parasurama lost control. He gave free reign to his tongue and started pouring rank abuse, which caused some consternation in Dasaratha's heart. The maids and servants hid themselves from the furious onslaught. The four arms of the army were shaking with fear. The pundits were terrified. But Sita was not in the least agitated and watched the scene with amusement. She was not affected by the slightest apprehension. She instilled courage and confidence in the hearts of Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutha-keerthi, telling them that he was a lame jackal before the lion Rama.

When they saw Rama reprimanding Lakshmana, Bharatha and Satrughna had no mind to intervene. Or else, they too would have joined the fray and asked Rama for permission to fight or take up the challenge. They awaited Rama's orders and kept away. Vasishta could know the past and future, so He realised that the incident was but a scene in the divine drama. He was silent and unshaken.

Ramachandra spoke with profound calm. "Parasurama! You are a brahmin. For a kshatriya you are an object of worship, on the basis of caste. You are a kinsman of the revered Viswamitra. I don't feel it proper to kill such a high caste brahmin or to aim this holy weapon against you. You yourself declared just now that it belongs to the realm of the gods, that it has so far destroyed every enemy, city, and fort against which it has been used, and that it can overwhelm and defeat the strength and pride of whomsoever it encounters. Isn't it sheer waste to make it unserviceable?"

"So, choose either of these two alternatives and tell me: Shall I use it to prevent you from moving about on your feet? Or shall I prevent you from attaining the higher worlds that you have earned by means of austerities?" These words enraged Parasurama even more. His eyes turned red with anger, and he rushed toward Rama, exclaiming, "What are you prattling?" Rama took hold of the Vishnu bow that was slung on his shoulder, with a derisive laugh, which hurt his pride.

Lo! No sooner did the weapon reach the hands of Rama than Parasurama got debilitated. He lost all energy and vitality. Rama shone in such added splendour that no one could stand that blaze. He stood there as if countless lamps were lit on one spot, radiating blinding light all around. When the authentic wielder of that bow, Narayana Himself, held it in His grasp, the bow too acquired added lustre; a triumphal aura surrounded it and lightning streamed from it. The gods gathered in the sky and showered flowers on Rama holding the bow. The auspicious sound of music filled the sky.

Meanwhile, Parasurama was full of smiles. He said, "Rama! Did you notice what happened! I have experienced the delight of the divine manifestation,

your divine splendour. In days gone by, I gifted this earthly region to Kasyapa. Receiving it, the sage Kasyapa declared that I should not enter his dominion again, and even if I did, I should not spend a night therein; he pronounced a curse upon me, on these lines. Well. It is already getting dark.

I can no longer be present here. I have to hurry fast to the Mahendra Mountain. Through my incomparable austerity, I have won high heavenly regions. Break the bow and, with it, break all the power I had won. All the power I have in me is yours. O Rama, watch this, I am offering to you the power earned by me." Thus saying, he came near and embraced Rama with both hands clasped firm around him. At that moment, three facets of Divinity that had subsisted in him so long came forth from him and merged in Rama. Parasurama addressed Rama. "Rama! The world cannot easily understand the mystery of the divine; even those like me who have earned great power through denial and detachment and ascetic practices rely more on their own spiritual achievements, ignoring the influence of the divine strategy of Vishnu.

"Therefore, I set about to make known your reality and genuine power to the world; I have given you my powers as an offering; I also proved once again that you are the mighty Vishnu, the God endowed with unique power, the God who directs the drama of the universe. There is nothing that is devoid of you, nothing that is not you. You are all. Yours is all. I had the good fortune to wield your divine bow for some time, and as a consequence, I earned some reverence from the world. That is the merit I have won. This is my offering." With this Parasurama disappeared.

Rama gave the bow and arrows to the God Varuna, with an unperturbed smiling countenance. He prostrated before Vasishta and Dasaratha, who were by his side.

Home at last

All the while, Dasaratha was shivering with fear, apprehending what might happen to his son from this apparition, what calamity might land on him. Now, he was free of anxiety. He drew Rama near and fondled him

affectionately. He raised the son's face toward him, holding it by the chin and, finding it rather difficult to express his feelings in words, said, "Dear Son! I am indeed lucky; I was afraid I might not see you again. Your resolute courage, your heroism is beyond imagination." He praised Rama and appreciated his exploit in many ways.

Rama replied, "dharma has to win: Victory is the inevitable concomitant of righteousness. In the preliminary states of the struggle, it may create some fear and obstacles, which might appear formidable. It will cause even weakness of mind. It might arouse suspicions of defeat and failure. But, instead of bowing or bending before it, one has to fix his attention on the goal itself. Then it can never fail. Failure can never affect it. People do not peer deep into the truth of dharma's might. They are carried away by superficial handicaps and worries, so they give up the path and suffer. What has happened is for the best; I ascribe this to your blessings." Rama again fell at his father's feet, saying, "The armed forces are awaiting your orders to resume the march toward Ayodhya. Kindly give them your commands." Dasaratha was filled with delight. "Son! Why should we delay further? Grief and joy afflict us one after the other and cause distress to the person and his body. We can go to the capital city and seek to live there happily in the best manner possible." He called the ministers to his side and told them to order the troops to march.

The soldiers cheered in joy and began to move forward. The interlude of fear had ended. Dasaratha spent the remainder of the journey describing and enjoying the description of the amazing events of the day.

As they neared the city, some regiments were sent in advance to inform the citizens of the arrival of the party, with the sons and daughters-in-law. The memory of the grandeur and glory of what they had experienced at Mithila and on the way home gave speed to the feet, and the advance party flew like arrows from bowman's hand into the city. They announced that Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna were entering the city with their brides and that Dasaratha had sent them to give the glad tidings.

The citizens of Ayodhya decorated the streets and houses in a variety of attractive styles. Plantain trees were tied to posts on both sides of the road. Bunches of coconuts were hung from the posts. Rosewater was sprinkled.

The entire city was made charming and attractive.

Musicians took positions all along the route. Fireworks were collected and distributed all along the line, so that it could be made one continuous stream of colour and cheering noise. They awaited the party with the deepest feeling of joy, counting the minutes as they looked into the distance to catch the first glimpse. Women in veils crowded the windows and terraces of the mansions and peeped from behind curtains tied across them.

Emperor Dasaratha entered the city with his sons and their brides. Music rent the air as soon as they were sighted. People cheered enthusiastically, shouting "hurrah! hurrah!" till their throats were hoarse. Women waved lights, threw flowers on their path, and sprinkled rosewater. The young men were like bright stars. When the populace saw the ennobling scene, many forgot where they stood or who they were; their joy knew no bounds.

Their thirst could not be quenched, however long they gazed, so they walked long distances backward in order to keep their eyes fixed on them! Thus, the entire route was covered and they reached the gates of the palace. There, brahmins had stationed themselves, so they could recite Vedic hymns invoking good fortune and prosperity on the newlyweds. Maids waved lights and performed rites to ward off the evil eye. They prayed for the daughters-in-law to come in, placing the right foot first.

Meanwhile, Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika stood at the entrance to the zenana (woman's quarters) awaiting their approach with avid eagerness. They sprinkled sandal scent, tucked flowers in their hair and placed red dots on their foreheads. When the sons came, the queens were overwhelmed with joy; they drew them near and fondled them, patting their heads and chins and blessing them profusely. Then the four sons and daughters-in-law prostrated before the three mothers, whose eyes streamed tears of joy, for

their happiness knew no bounds.

The maids brought rice boiled in milk on golden plates; the mothers placed the food in the mouths of the newlyweds and persuaded them to eat. They gave them milk to drink and then took them to the inner apartments.

In the evening, ladies from Ayodhya were invited to the palace to share in the auspicious ceremonial of welcoming the newlyweds. An imposingly beautiful dais was readied, and golden seats were placed upon it. The queens brought costly clothes and jewels with precious gems set on them in artistic patterns; they commissioned talented maids-in-waiting to help the daughters-in-law to put them on, and they themselves supervised the wearing of the costume and jewellery. They held them by the hand and led them to their seats.

By that time, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna had come and taken their seats, wearing princely robes, costly jewels, and crowns. Each sat to the right of his bride. The mothers, as well as the ladies invited from the city, feasted their eyes on the splendour of the scene, and their bliss was immeasurable. While they were going through the ceremonial, gifts were distributed outside the palace to people in profusion. Cows, cash, gold, land, grain, vehicles, and horses were given away in plenty.

Brahmins came before the dais and cast auspicious rice grains on the heads of the newlyweds, to the accompaniment of the recitation of Vedic hymns. Then, married women waved 108 lamps before them to ward off the evil eye. After this, the sons rose and with their wives they prostrated before the mothers, the father, and the guru, Vasishta. Then, they retired to their own apartments.

9. Preparations For Rama's Coronation

Meanwhile, the prince from Kekaya, Bharatha's maternal uncle, approached Dasaratha and said that a long time had elapsed since he had come from his kingdom. "Father is waiting to see me back. He would have been very happy to be present for these festivities. He doesn't know about Bharatha's wedding, and he will be very disappointed when he hears that his grandson's marriage was celebrated in his absence. His disappointment can be assuaged to some extent if Bharatha comes with me now, so that some festivities can be arranged there for his satisfaction and pleasure." Dasaratha consulted his wives and called Bharatha. "Son! Your maternal uncle, Yudajit, came to take you with him from Mithila, but I didn't agree. I learned that your grandfather is very anxious to see you. So make yourselves ready to accompany him," Dasaratha ordered.

Bharatha said, "Father! It would be very good for Satrughna to come with me." So, he was also ordered to prepare to leave.

Moved by his respect toward elders, Bharatha made preparations to leave Ayodhya with his wife. No objections were raised or arguments presented against their leaving. Bharatha was endowed with the highest intellect; besides, he was master of himself, his senses, and desires. Bharatha, Satrughna, and their wives, journeyed quite happily and reached the city of Girivraja. The grandfather was longing to see him and fondle him, and he enquired about the health and happiness of people in Ayodhya. He asserted that they looked exhausted by the long hours of travel and insisted they should rest, and he led them to the residences allotted to them. From that moment, he treated them more affectionately than his own children and paid close attention to their smallest needs.

Though the grandfather cared for their comfort and joy, the brothers appeared to suffer from some secret discontent, for they could not bear separation from their aged father and Rama, who was the very breath of their existence.

They conversed among themselves constantly only about Dasaratha and Rama. Off and on, anxiety about the health and welfare of the father tormented them, in spite of themselves, and deprived them of peace of mind.

While their feelings in Girivraja were such, in Ayodhya, not a single moment passed without Dasaratha pining for them. He sensed a void without them. Many times, he asked himself the question, "Why did I send them away? It would have been good if I had not sent them." The four sons were as four arms for Dasaratha. Now he had been deprived of two.

One day, Rama saw his father plunged in thought about the separation from Bharatha and Satrughna. He approached his father and, sitting near him, spoke soft and sweet words, making him happy.

Rama's qualities

Rama was supremely gentle. However harsh others might speak, he used to reply soft and sweet. Though others might do him harm, he never remembered it against them. He sought only to be good and to be of service to them. Whenever he found time, he discussed codes of good conduct and rules of morality with aged monks, revered brahmins, and learned scholars. He analysed the mysteries of Vedantic thought in simple words and, like an ordinary enquirer, posed problems before pundits for elucidation. The sages and scholars who had mastered the science of spirituality, Vedanta, and philosophical enquiry were elated at Rama's elaborations of the knotty points he himself raised; they praised his intelligence and scholarship in a thousand different ways.

Rama spoke to his subjects even before they spoke to him, so ardent was his love toward them. He lovingly enquired about their welfare and was full of sympathy for them. So the subjects also loved him as their staunchest friend and dearest kinsman, and they revered him for his affectionate interest in them. Rama followed strictly the various rules of living, dictated by tradition, whatever the inconvenience or discomfort. To whomever he spoke he had a charming smile on his face, a merry twinkle in the eye, and lasting sweetness

in his words. No one noticed the slightest trace of anger, dislike, despair, or hate in his face.

Rama was the embodiment of compassion and sympathy. He was full of eagerness to rescue those who surrender their wishes to his will. Undesirable habits to which royalty is an easy prey never dared approach him. He was not a victim of the evil habit of garrulity and dalliance. In spite of this, if anyone displayed before him his cleverness in argument, he would never fail to foil him by cleverer counter argument and put him in his place.

He never knew illness of body or anxiety in the mind. He recognised the needs of the people, and even before they represented them to the ruler, he considered the response that could be made and remedied the grievance, after getting Dasaratha's permission and making the ministers interested in the solution. Dasaratha, too, did not obstruct his wishes in any way; he put them into execution the moment he came to know about them. Rama paid attention to even the smallest detail of administration and took adequate precautions to see that problems and complexities did not raise their heads once they had been solved and set right.

Another quality evident in Rama was: He never revealed in advance what he had resolved in his mind. Until it took final shape, no one could make out his will or wish. And his anger, resentment, or satisfaction would never be futile. He would not delay or allow himself to be diverted or deceived. With such supreme characteristics, Rama shone in glory. Dasaratha was delighted, observing the way Rama was winning the love and loyalty of his people. He heard from ministers, priests, and others of the growing popularity of Rama and was thrilled.

Dasaratha decides to give up the throne

One night, Dasaratha was thirsty and wanted a drink of water. He did not like to awaken the sleeping queens, so he poured himself a small cup of water from a jar near the bed. While drinking it, he observed that his grasp was not firm - the fingers were shaking! He had no sleep after that. His mind sank into

a variety of thoughts. Finally, he inferred that old age had brought on debility, and he decided that he should no longer rule over the empire. Any attempt to govern the people without strength of limb and will could only spell confusion and calamity. He was counting the minutes, so that as soon as day dawned, he could communicate his resolve to his ministers. At last, night melted away and there was light.

Finishing his morning ablutions and completing his rites of daily worship, he directed the chamberlains to call together the ministers, the leaders of the people, and the priests for a special meeting at the palace. Bowing to the command of the emperor, all whom he wanted gathered very soon and awaited him. Dasaratha fell at the feet of Vasishta and informed him of the happenings during the night and the stream of thought that they aroused in him. He said he had decided to place the burden of imperial administration on Rama. He prayed that no objection be raised against his proposal. He wanted all arrangements to be made soon for the realisation of his desire.

The chief minister, Sumanthra, announced this decision to the gathering; the ministers, courtiers, citizens, priests, and scholars who were gathered there acclaimed the news with joyful approbation. They cheered, "O most auspicious! How fortunate we are!". Their applause reached the heavens.

Vasishta rose from his seat. "Emperor! you need not worry over this in the least. Rama is fit in every way for this great role. But we can well afford to wait a little and celebrate it on a grand scale, inviting all those whom we wish to be present. I suggest that we wait for a month or two, so that Rama's coronation is done as magnificently as we would like to." But Dasaratha exclaimed, "Mahatma! Nothing is beyond your ken; you are omniscient. When the king loses strength of limb, he does not deserve to hold the reins of high office. It is a bad sign when a king, whom old age has debilitated, entertains the greed to continue on the throne. It indicates avarice in the heart. Knowing all this, if I oppose it, I would have failed in the duty I clearly envisage. Pardon me; do not try to adjourn this ceremony.

Grant me permission to appoint Rama as the heir-apparent (yuvaraja) within

the next two or three days." He pleaded thus, in great humility and with deep reverence.

Vasishta lifted Dasaratha up and conferred blessings on him. "O King! Rama's wedding also happened on the spur of the moment! It dropped from heaven as grace. So the people of the kingdom, your subjects, had no chance to share in the joy of that momentous occasion. If the coronation is also resolved upon and celebrated suddenly, it would pain not only the rulers of many parts of this land, but, even more, would be a source of great sorrow for Bharatha and Satrughna. And Janaka, who has become your kinsman and friend, might not be able to attend! I suggest that you ponder these considerations before settling the date." The chief among the ministers then rose. "May the revered family preceptor pardon me! The decision of the emperor has the appreciation and approbation of everyone. Ramachandra is, as the name indicates, as the moon, which repels the burning heat and restores coolness and comfort to all. He removes the pain caused by hate, malice, greed, and envy. There should be no delay in crowning him as the heir-apparent (yuvaraja), for whatever reason. Please issue necessary orders in this behalf, O Emperor! I pray for this on behalf of the entire population of this empire." Vasishta couldn't hold onto his attitude any longer. He said that it was necessary to know what the people themselves thought about it. At this, Dasaratha stood up and, with one sweep of his eye, looked at the ministers, leading citizens, pundits, and priests, as well as others of the vast assembly. The assembly was acclaiming the auspicious proposal in a voice of thunder.

In the midst of the excitement, one citizen, who belonged to a very important group, rose and exclaimed, "Maharaja! The mighty emperors of your line fostered us, the subjects of this empire, as if we were their own children. This Kosala realm attained prosperity and peace through the care and affection of Ikshvaku. Your eldest son Rama is rich in virtue, highly devoted to the ways of righteousness, as heroic as the chief of gods. More than all, he has the ability to rule over the three worlds. It is indeed our good fortune that you entertain the idea of crowning him as heir-apparent. This is undoubtedly our fortune." When the citizen spoke thus, on behalf of all the subjects of the realm, Dasaratha addressed the gathering.

"Members of this assembly! All these years, I have ruled over this empire along the path laid down by my forebears and guarded its welfare and prosperity to the best of my abilities, with a sincere desire to promote the good of the entire world. All the years of my life I have spent under the shade of this white umbrella that is over my throne. I am now an old man. I have realised that the vigour and vitality of these limbs have declined. This dilapidated body has to be given a little rest. I have decided on this.

It is not an easy task, not an insignificant mission, to rule over a kingdom, for it calls for dedication of oneself to dharma. Dharma can be maintained unbroken in the running of the government only by one engaged in constant spiritual practice and who is endowed with rigorous control of the senses. I have borne this burden so long that I am exhausted with the effort. If all of you approve and appreciate my plan, I will tell you all about it. I will never act against your desires and preferences.

"There is no pressure on you; do not fear that I am forcing my wishes on you, or that this is a royal command that you have to obey. I leave you to your own free will and judgement. In case some other arrangement strikes you as more beneficial, you are at perfect liberty to present it before us for candid consideration. Therefore, confer among yourselves and inform me by nightfall what you have agreed upon." Even before Dasaratha concluded his address, the assembly became restive and excited, as a flock of peacocks under a cloud-ridden sky that promises copious thundershowers! They shouted aloud their assent, gratitude, and joy, in unmistakable terms. "You desire just what is our own desire. We don't want any other gift; give us this gift. O this is indeed great good fortune. O hurrah! Crown prince (yuvaraja) Ramachandra jiki hurrah hurrah!" Dasaratha Rama." The acclamation rent the firmament.

Dasaratha was tossed between joy and apprehension. He stood petrified by this spontaneous outburst of loyalty and affection. Recovering composure after some time, Dasaratha gazed upon the assembly and spoke. "Members of this assembly! No task is more important to me than acceding to your wishes. I shall, without fail, crown Rama as the heir-apparent. But I have some

little apprehension, too. I want to explain it to you and receive from you consolation on that point. I want you to tell me your correct assessment and give me the satisfaction I crave.

While I was about to lay before you the proposal to crown Rama as heir-apparent, even before I spoke about it, you proclaimed that I must crown him without fail and that he had unbounded capabilities to rule over this realm efficiently and well. Looking this fact in the face, it is obvious that you are a little dissatisfied with my rule, or that some of my laws are against your interests or inclinations. Or did I exhibit any tendency opposed to dharma? Are you yearning for the coronation of Rama as heir-apparent because you doubt my ability to govern you for your good? Please point out my faults or the errors I have committed, fearlessly and fully. I welcome this frank recital." One of the people's leaders rose and replied. "Rama's capacity and intelligence are beyond description. And you, O king, are equal to the God of Gods; you are like Sankara, with the same divine compassion and readiness to confer whatever is asked on behalf of the subjects. You are Vishnu in your ability to protect us. We would be awfully vile and wicked to cast aspersions on your rule. Those who do so are atrocious sinners. You have arrived at this resolve because you are eager to do us good and are anxious to make us happy. We obey unquestioningly your command." Dasaratha, thrilled with the excitement of anticipation, turned to the chief priest. "O greatest of brahmins, you heard the expression of the wishes of the people. Don't delay any further; collect all the materials and ritual requirements for the coronation ceremony. Erect the enclosures and platforms prescribed by the scriptures for the component rites, sacrificial sites, and other sacred structures." He fell at the feet of the family preceptor, Vasishta, requesting him to supervise the process. "Master! All those who can make it will be present; let's not wait for those who have to come from afar. They can derive equal joy when they hear that Rama has been crowned. Don't suggest, as a reason for postponement, the need to invite and wait for the Kekaya ruler or Janaka. Grant permission to have the holy rite of coronation performed as early as possible," he pleaded and prayed with folded hands.

"Maharaja!" Vasishta responded, "I have everything ready; we can get going

as soon as you want. I directed that the hundred sacred pots, the tiger skin, the covered sacrificial enclosure with its adjuncts, the materials laid down in the scriptures for the rituals of worship, the herbs and flowers, will all be available by dawn tomorrow.

"Nor is this all. I have intimated the four wings of the armed forces to be in good trim; and also the elephant, Satrunjaya, the one with every auspicious mark that the scriptures (sastras) lay down, to be caparisoned most magnificently. The white umbrella of splendour and the royal flag of the imperial dynasty will also be ready at the palace. The auspicious moment has been selected: tomorrow." When Vasishta announced the good news, the populace was overcome with grateful ecstasy and leaped in joy.

The roads were scrupulously swept and cleaned. Elaborate designs were painted on them and on the walls and buildings facing them. Festoons were hung, and arches, awnings, and shades were erected over the roads; every citizen was busy and happy. The entire city was working fast and excitedly. The brahmins and the leading citizens took leave of Dasaratha and emerged from the palace, a veritable stream of exhilaration and excited conversation.

The ministers and Vasishta proceeded to the inner halls with the emperor.

Dasaratha sent for Rama. Meeting him in the court hall, he explained to him all the ceremonial formalities and rituals connected with the coronation. He reminded him to be ready before sunrise, and described the preliminaries he had to observe.

Lakshmana heard the news. He ran toward Kausalya, the mother, to convey the joyful tidings and communicate his exultation. She couldn't contain her happiness and waited for Rama to appear before her. There was little time before them, so the entire city was agog with excitement. The villagers around for miles, and even neighbouring states, knew of it pretty soon, for good tidings spread quick and fast. And no one waited for another; no sooner did he hear than he hurried forward to the capital city. The flow of humanity along all the roads leading to Ayodhya became an uncontrollable surge.

Ramachandra listened to Dasaratha explaining details to him but did not reply; his feelings were beyond words. He could not express what passed in his mind, so he stayed silent.

Dasaratha accosted him. "Son! why don't I see any sign of joy in you at the prospect of being crowned tomorrow as heir-apparent (yuvaraja)? Don't you want to become heir-apparent? Or is it a sign of anxiety or fear that we are placing the burden of the state on your head?" In spite of long questioning and fond appeals, Rama appeared tongue tied before the emperor. At last, he said, "Father! I don't understand why you are acting in such a hurry. My dear brothers, Bharatha and Satrughna, are not here. Grandfather is far away and may not be able to reach in time. Father-in-law also might not be able to come.

And rulers of other states, princes, and vassal kings may also find it difficult to attend. My mind is heavy because we are disappointing such large numbers of people. It does not accept the idea of celebration when so many are certain to feel pained." Pleading pardon for his sentiments, he fell at the feet of Dasaratha.

It was Vasishta who replied. "Rama! These objections were raised even by us; don't think that we quietly acceded to the wish of the emperor. We thought of all the arguments for and against, and we consulted the opinion of the people before we decided. Don't raise any objection now; respect the wish of the emperor. The coronation and anointment have to take place tomorrow. You have to observe certain vows; this day you should not use a cot or a soft bed. You and Sita must fast. As soon as day breaks, after applying sacred oil on your heads, you must both take a bath, for the auspicious star Pushya, which has been selected for the holy rite, rises at that time. So retire into your residence now, without demur." As soon as the preceptor finished, Rama fell at the feet of his father and Vasishta and proceeded to his palace, accompanied by Sumanthra, the trusted minister. He had no hesitation this time. He conveyed the news to Sita and then moved on fast to the apartments of his mother. He prostrated before her; she raised him tenderly and fondled him affectionately, overwhelmed with joy; she directed him to

give away cows that she had collected for the purpose and decorated with costly ornaments to brahmins, as a mark of thanksgiving. She made Rama give many other varieties of gifts to others.

Lakshmana and his mother were there. Kausalya had Rama seated by her side, and, wiping away feely flowing tears of joy, she said, "Son, I waited a long time for this precious moment, and my yearning is now fulfilled.

I am happy; my life is rendered worthwhile. O dearest jewel! My golden son! Beginning tomorrow, you are the heir-apparent! Live long. Rule over the empire. Let the welfare of the people be ever your ideal. May your rule be happy and secure, in accordance with the dictates of justice and morality. Accumulate untarnished fame and maintain the reputation and glory earned by the kings of this line. Attain might and majesty more than even your father. The day you achieve that position, I will feel that my life has attained fruition; my vows, fasts, and vigils will have then borne fruit." Kausalya, the mother, caressed Rama, stroked the curls of his hair, and spoke sweet words of benediction.

She gave him very valuable counsel, to which Rama paid meticulous attention. Rama chuckled at Lakshmana and teased him in innocent fun. "Brother! Can you tell me which goddess of the kingdom (Rajyalakshmi) will be delighted at this lovely taunt?" Lakshmana retorted, "Brother! I need no goddess of the kingdom to wed me. In your kingdom, if you assign me any responsibility, I shall fulfil it; that is enough fortune for me." With that, he prostrated at Rama's feet!

Rama said, "Lakshmana! You are my breath, so half the responsibility of governance is yours. So, you should also get ready, with me, wearing jewels and regal robes. You have a half share in my burdens and in my happiness, fame, and fortune. You have a half share in all that I am and will." While Rama was speaking, Sumitra was shedding tears and showering blessings on both Rama and Lakshmana.

"Rama," she said. "The love that subsists between you and Lakshmana gives

me great happiness. My son needs no higher status than being your servant. It is enough for him to have your love and affection forever." When she finished, Rama fell at the feet of the mother and rose. Lakshmana did the same and accompanied Rama to his palace. The vow of ritual fast was begun by Rama at nightfall. He lay upon a mat made of the sacred kusha grass.

10. Kaika's Two Boons

Manthara schemes

Vedic hymns echoed everywhere. For Rama's and Sita's ceremonial bath, the holy water of the Sarayu river was brought in pots of gold by attendants. Pundits recited hymns calling down benediction on them, and the recitation was most heartening and pleasant to hear.

While Manthara, Kaika's maid, was returning the previous night, she saw the excitement of the populace and asked someone the reason. She came to know about the cause of all the joy and exultation: the imminent coronation of Ramachandra. She also saw the maids of the palaces of Kausalya and Sumitra dressed in jasmine-white saris and bedecked in costly jewels, hurrying hither and thither. She couldn't bear the sight any longer. She had creeps all over her body, like scorpion stings in plenty. She ran toward Kaika's palace and, finding that the queen had already retired into the inner apartments, neared the door and shrieked, "Mother! Mother! Open the door! A very urgent matter! Your life is in mortal danger! An earthquake is afoot." The queen hastily opened the door and asked in fear, "Why? What happened? What's the calamity? Has anything caved in? Why this anxiety and pain?" "No, nothing of mine is destroyed. Your life is being destroyed, that's all. You have to live from now on as a crazy careworn woman," Manthara said. In tears, she elaborated the pitiable state that awaited the queen, and with many a gesture and groan, she lamented loud and long.

Kaika could not make out why. "The Maharaja is quite well, isn't he? And Rama? Lakshmana? Kausalya?

Sumitra? There is nothing the matter with them? Well! If they are quite well and no danger threatens them, I'm not worried at all. What can happen to me? Has any danger come to them, tell me, Manthara! Tell me soon!" She turned the maid's head toward her, held her chin in endearing appeal, and pleaded for an answer.

Manthara replied, "Nothing evil has happened to the ones you mention! But, they have decided to wring the neck of your son!" She broke into a pathetic wail.

Kaika retorted "You're making a mistake, Manthara! The Maharaja is not such a person; nor is Rama, Lakshmana, or my sisters Kausalya and Sumitra! My sisters love my son even more than their own sons. Your statement reveals your warped mind, that is all. It is not the truth! Well, you haven't told me yet what the matter really is; come on, tell me the full story." Manthara said, "Matter? At dawn tomorrow, Ramachandra is to be crowned heir-apparent (yuvaraja)! The senior queen, her mind full of unrestrained joy, is giving away costly silk saris and jewels to her maids. She is asking Rama to give away gold and cows in plenty. Engaged in all these activities of celebration, they are neglecting you! I can't bear this in silence; I can't tolerate it.

"You are unable to understand the implications. You revel in the empty boast that there is none so fortunate.

Your fortune is drying up fast. For your husband and co-wives, you have become a negligible person. Before long, you will be reduced to the despicable status of a maid. Be advised to be a little alert before that humiliation overtakes you. Awake from sleep; plan your course of action with full awareness of the consequences. Decide upon the means by which you can escape from the calamity that yawns before you; it is approaching you fast.

"When Rama becomes heir-apparent the entire empire will be held in Kausalya's grasp, remember! Just as everyone else, you will also have to dance to her tune." Manthara was acting her role and shedding false tears to reinforce her wily stratagem.

Kaika was impressed by her loyalty but was not convinced by her arguments. "Manthara! What happened to you? Have you become insane? Why do you talk madly! Rama becoming the heir-apparent is the happiest augury for the entire empire. Here, take this necklace of mine, as a reward, a gift, for

bringing me this great good news first! Be happy, be full of joy! The coronation of Rama as heir-apparent gives me even more joy than perhaps Kausalya. My joy at this good news is boundless. Rama loves me more than he does even his mother. He reveres me more. I will not listen to such imputations against such a pure, loving person. You seem to have lost your wits; your reason has taken leave of you." Kaika reprimanded Manthara sharply.

Manthara became more demonstratively aggrieved. She got more excited and clamorous. "My reason is clear and fresh, but yours has suffered!" she ejaculated. "You are not concerned about the evil fate that awaits you.

You hug your old faith and fond attachment blindly. I'm anxious and worried for your happiness and self-respect.

The others are play-acting and pretending, just to deceive you. They have no respect for you in their hearts. The Maharaja has no love toward his other queens: he is enamoured only of the senior queen, Kausalya. He might use endearing words now and then just to please you, but he has no love in his heart toward you.

"Consider this. These people didn't inform or consult you about this proposal. Have they spoken to you about it even once? Consider how many months they usually deliberate and plan in order to come to such a decision.

You cannot have a coronation so suddenly; it doesn't drop from the sky one fine day on its own ... can it?

But, they have decided silently and secretly. The whole thing is Kausalya's intrigue." Kaika could not suffer it any longer. She burst out, "Stop that stuff, Manthara! My sister is incapable of intrigue and would never descend so low. It could never be. And the Maharaja? He is much nobler, more righteous than even my sisters! You cannot find a trace of subterfuge or meanness in him. They must have resolved upon the coronation quickly, for good reason. Rama's wedding celebration, which would have involved months of

preparation, took place at short notice, didn't it? Rama's coronation could also have been decided at short notice - why not? The Maharaja himself will reveal to me what induced him to arrange it so. You haven't cared to know the truth; you've conjured up all kinds of absurd reasons and baseless fears and cast doubts on the motives of innocent persons! In a few minutes, things will be clarified; have patience." Kaika admonished the maid severely.

Manthara feared that her stratagem would fail ignominiously, so she stooped to even worse tactics of persuasion.

"Dear Mother! Ponder the matter a little more deeply. I listened to many things while moving about, outside the palace. In fact, this coronation affair was decided upon months ago. That is why Bharatha and Satrugna were packed out of the capital. They apprehended that their presence here would cause complications. And there must be good ground for such fears, or else who would arrange for the coronation when they are away? Have you become incapable of asking yourself this simple question?

"When you married, Dasaratha promised and gave his plighted word that your son would be crowned king.

You might forget it, but I refuse to. The fear that Bharatha's presence at this juncture might rouse the memory of that promise and prove an obstacle to their plan made them keep Bharatha out of the way, by sending him to his grandfather.

"Once the coronation is accomplished, it can't be undone. To promote this mean trick, they kept the idea secret and kept it from you so long. Think about this for a while, the inner design. You don't spend any thought on such matters; you believe 'all that is white is milk!' Others take advantage of your foolishness and innocence.

You simply exult in your love for Rama and recite 'Rama, Rama' in your infatuation. Well, leave everything else aside. Did Rama, whom you love so greatly, at least inform you of this great good fortune happening to him?" The

crooked-minded Manthara used many specious and cunning arguments to cloud and poison the pure unselfish mind of Kaika.

She said, "Mother, who in Ayodhya is willing to pay us a little regard? Who treats you as worthy of count?"

They are all one, united against you. You are a stranger here. They might even throw you out of Ayodhya shortly; they won't desist from even such meanness. The emperor is a crafty trickster, a clever juggler; when he approaches you, he speaks soft endearment to satisfy his whims, and then he departs triumphant! You don't realise the fault in you that is preventing you from attaining the high status you deserve. Mother! You may remember that kings are ever ruled by lust, and not by love. Your father knew this fact, so he did not agree to give you in marriage to this aged suitor. After prolonged negotiations and confabulations, through the intercession of sage Garga, when it was decided that you were to be given in marriage, the suitor was compelled to agree to many conditions.

"Today, those agreements have been cast into flames and your son has been cheated; all the while, they are quietly playing their merry drama! Why else should they take advantage of this chance of your son being away?"

Why should they be in such hurry that no ruler from any state beyond the bounds of the empire can attend the coronation? Consider how their low mentality reveals itself! How full of mischief and deceit are they!

"When neighbouring rulers are invited, your father will certainly not miss the opportunity to attend. Naturally, he will then bring to the notice of all the promise made to him. So, the plan is to get through the coronation without informing anyone, and once that is over, they know, nothing can be done to undo it. This conspiracy is hatched by the wily with this objective, so be warned in time. Once this moment is missed, your fate will be as contemptible as that of a dog.

"Don't delay; ponder deeply and decide on how to prevent the coronation

from taking place." Manthara fanned the flames of anger and hatred.

Kaika succumbs

Kaika succumbed to Manthara's machinations at last! "Hearing your words, I feel that each statement is more convincing than the previous one! Yes, indeed! This matter can't wait. What has to be done? If you can indicate the step I have to take, I will put it into action." When Kaika gave this clear sign of having been won over by her wiles, Manthara was overwhelmed with pride and joy. She spoke with greater assurance. "Mother! There is no need for further thought. The arguments that can support your demand are ready and strong. That day, when the emperor thankfully accepted your timely help, didn't he offer you two boons, any two you might demand of him? And, didn't you tell him that since you had no need for anything, you would reserve the gift and ask for the two boons when the need arose? This day, these two will serve a thousand purposes! You can demand that they be granted now, can't you?" When Manthara spoke thus, plainly and emphatically, Kaika raised her head as if startled. "O Manthara, how clever you are! Though in appearance you are an ugly hunchback, in resourcefulness and intelligence you are extremely charming. Though wanting in beauty of body, you make up by being an expert in intellectual attainments.

Tell me how to secure these two boons and what the boons should be."

"Mother! One boon should be that your son shall be crowned heir-apparent (yuvaraja). The second can well be that Rama shall not stay in the empire." Listening to her suggestions, given on the spot, without a moment's thought, Kaika fell into a trough of reflection; she said, after recovering herself, "Manthara! It may be a just demand that my son should be crowned, but my mind will not agree to send Rama out of the kingdom. I am pained at the very thought." With that, she dropped into a seat.

Manthara saw she must act quickly. "Mother! This is no occasion for sentimental qualms. Procrastination turns even ambrosia into poison. You have to be a little firm, or else we can't succeed in our plan. For the cruel

wrong done by them this is no adequate reprisal. If you want your son to rule as king and want to have the status of queen mother, then act this way; otherwise, I will end my life by taking poison. I can't bear to see you suffer while I am alive." Manthara wept aloud, as if she was carried away by intense love and attachment toward Kaika.

She was the nurse who had brought up Kaika from childhood; she had petted her, played with her, and fondled her all these years. Toward Manthara, Kaika had great affection and regard; she raised no further objection; she started to calm her sorrow instead. "Manthara! Rest assured! I will, without fail, act in such a way that you're pleased. Tell me what I should do now." Manthara replied, "When I suggested asking for Rama to be sent into exile into the forests beyond the realm, don't imagine that I hadn't weighed the consequences. I did it only after due deliberation." Since Kaika was a child in political affairs and legal lore, she said, "The law declares that unhampered possession and enjoyment of usufruct for twelve continuous years give the person ownership of the property. So, it is better to fix a length for the exile, say fourteen years. When he returns after that period, he can't claim the kingdom; it becomes the unquestioned property of your son." Manthara noticed that the queen had accepted the proposal to ask for the two promised boons in the form suggested by her. So, she said, "Mother! Don't delay further! If you beg him for the boons, just as you are now, the emperor will not be persuaded to yield. You must work up a wave of rage; scatter the pillows and sheets in your bedroom; throw your jewels into the corners; loosen your hair and make it wild and disheveled; act as if you have resolved to give up your life! Go and lie down on the floor of the Hall of Anger, the room where queens who are overcome by anger and grief retire, so that they may be discovered and consoled. You can't just go to him as you are and straight away ask for the boons. Pretend that you are in desperate agony and that only granting the boons can save you from death. Then only will your demand be worthy of consideration and acceptance. Rise! Take the first step for the work ahead!" Kaika yielded to her persuasion. After carrying out her directions, she entered the anger hall and lamented her fate and the impending calamity. Manthara flopped on the floor outside the door of the hall, after drawing the doors together, as if she were unaware of what was

causing all the furor inside.

Kaika asks for the boons

Meanwhile, the emperor had finished making arrangements for the coronation. When he emerged from the court hall, he felt that, instead of going to Kausalya's apartments, he should first communicate the happy tidings to Kaika, so he hurried toward her palace. The maids standing at attention along the passage appeared upset with anxiety. The emperor argued within himself that they had not heard the good news, for it would have lit up their faces! He pitied them that they did not know that Rama was to be crowned the next day! He went to the bedroom where he expected the queen to be.

There, his eyes fell on the scattered jewels, the unkempt bed, the heaps on the floor, and the general state of untidiness and distraction. He was surprised and searched for the queen in the room, peeping into the corners. A maid-in-waiting announced, "Maharaja! Her Highness Kaikeyi-Devi is now in the Hall of Anger." Dasharatha was gravely upset and turned his steps in that direction. Kaika was sprawling on the floor in the blinding darkness of the room, wailing and weeping. He said, "Kaika! What ugly scene is this! Why are you so angry? Who caused you so much sorrow? Tell me, I shall kill them this very moment, I shall confer joy on you.

You have only to tell me what you desire; I am ever ready to fulfil your wish. Your joy is my joy. Don't you know that I have nothing in this world higher and dearer than you? Come, do not test me further." The emperor sat by her side and, caressing her head, consoled her in various ways and asked her for the reason for her anger and grief.

Kaika was in a fit of rage. She gnashed her teeth noisily and threw aside the Emperor's hands when he tried to fondle her. She said angrily, "Enough of this false pretence! I put faith in you so long and brought this degradation on myself! I don't trust you any more. I could not believe that you are capable of this hypocritical game. Is this the punishment for putting faith in you? Go, go

to your favourites; why sit here by my side? You mortgage your mind in one place and your tongue in another. Give your tongue to the place where you have given your mind. I'm not in a mood to place faith in your words any more. Don't inflict more sorrow on me, but go back the way you came. What do you care what happens to me? Better to die as a queen than drag on as a slave! This day is the last day of my life." These wailings heard between the sobs and sighs conveyed no meaning to Dasaratha. He was utterly confused, and tried to console her and assuage her anger. "Kaika! What do these words mean! I don't understand.

I never use false hypocritical words; nor can I ever use them. My mind and my tongue act in unison; they will ever be the same; where my love is, there my sweet expressions will be. My tongue will not falsify my mind; it is impossible for it so to behave. I don't know how it has happened, how you have not been able to know me and my sincerity in spite of the lapse of many years. Don't torture me like this. Tell me what happened, why are you behaving like this? What has caused you this agony?" Dasaratha pleaded piteously for a long time, with no effect! The queen only retorted sharply, brushed aside with effrontery, ridiculed sarcastically, and turned a deaf ear to the importunities of the emperor. She pretended as if she treated his words as of no worth. Dasaratha was wounded very deep in his heart. Not knowing what to do, he called Manthara in. She rushed in, play-acting her conspiratorial role, shrieking for help for the queen, her mistress. "O King! Save my mother!" she cried and clasped the feet of the emperor.

The emperor was really the embodiment of innocence; he had no trace of duplicity in him. So he could not see through the drama they were enacting. He feared that some calamity must have happened to make his beloved so perverse and stern. So he asked Manthara again to tell him what exactly had taken place.

"Maharaja! What can I tell you? I am not aware of the least bit of what happened. Mother does not divulge the reason for her anger to anyone. All of a sudden, she hastened from the bedroom into this Hall of Anger. Noticing this, I came hither. People prayed and pleaded in various ways, but she

doesn't disclose the reason. She doesn't confide even in you; would she then reveal it to poor me? We see her suffering and in agony; it is unbearable; we cannot simply look on any longer! We are afraid of what might happen to her, so we have been waiting for your arrival. Unless you comfort her and bring joy into her mind, her condition might become critical. She has suffered too deeply and too long. Her condition grows worse every moment. We will retire now." Manthara left with the other maids, saying, "Please find out from her the reason for her grief and anger and pacify her soon by appropriate remedies." Manthara's statements only added to the mystery and confused Dasaratha. He sat by the disconsolate queen's side. "Kaika! Why do you keep me in the dark?" He gently lifted the queen's head from the bare floor, placed it on his lap, and sought to persuade her to reveal the reason for her inconsolable suffering.

After some time, Kaika shook off her silence and began to speak. "Maharaja! You haven't forgotten, have you, the two boons you promised to confer on me that day, during the battle between the gods (devas) and the demons (asuras)?" Dasaratha was relieved. He said, "Kaika! Why have you put yourself into all this temper and pain for the sake of this simple thing? I will not forget the promise of the two boons as long as there is life in me. That promise is as dear to me as Kaika herself; you are the breath of my life, and the promise too is as the breath.

"Queen! Has anyone harmed you? Is your health affected adversely? Or has any wicked person dared act against your will? Speak! For your sake, I will face even mortal injury and punish them so that happiness may be restored to you. Don't doubt me. O embodiment of charm, why do you suffer thus? Are you unaware that the entire empire is at your beck and call? Whatever you wish to have, from any region, you have only to tell me, I will secure them for you and bring you joy. Inform me: what do you fear, what has brought this sorrow? Don't withhold anything or hesitate to speak out! As the sun scatters the mist, I will shatter the grief that smothers you." Dasaratha fondled and flattered her, trying various means of consoling her and restoring her spirits.

Kaika kept Manthara's advice in mind. She resolved to secure from her

husband a promise on oath, before revealing her bitter wishes to him. To induce it out of him, she displayed exaggerated and seductive love and wiped the tears from her eyes; she held firm the hands of the king, so pitiably enslaved by her enchantments and so greatly enamoured of her charms.

"Lord! I have no resentment against anyone, nor has anyone done me any harm or dealt me any insult. I have no craving for anything from any distant region of the earth. But I have a long-nourished desire, I must admit. If you swear on oath that you will fulfil it, I'll tell you what it is." She enticed him with a smile playing on her face.

Dasaratha too smiled in response and, sidling a little toward her, said, "O, you foolish queen! For this one simple affair, why was it necessary for you to put on so much of temper and cause so much of anxiety and anguish?"

Hear this: Among women, you are the most dear to me. And among men, Rama is most dear to me. You are both my very breath. You know this well, don't you? I can't survive a single day without feasting my eyes on you and him. Therefore, I swear on Rama himself. Tell me your wish, and I will fulfil it without fail." When he declared thus on oath, with both her hands in his, Kaika was overwhelmed with joy! She sat up and demonstrated even more love toward him, for she was glad he had changed into her well-wisher.

"O King! You swore on Rama; he is the witness to the oath; is this genuine?" She made her position doubly secure, saying, "Lord! You are a votary of truth! You are the highest among the righteous! You are endowed with sovereign might and majesty! You must remember the war between the gods and the demons. But let me remind you of that exploit once again. That day, when the demon Sambara slaughtered all before him, you struggled desperately to defeat him. Had I not guarded and nursed you into life, keeping myself vigilant and alert, you know what would have happened to you. You appreciated my devoted sacrifice and declared, 'Kaika! you rescued me from death itself. What can I give you in return! Whatever it may be, ask me two boons. I shall fulfil them and repay the debt I owe you, the gratitude I have to evince.' "You wanted me to name the boons you offered to grant. But I felt

then that your coming back to life was itself the most precious boon for me, so I replied, 'Lord! I have no boon to ask from you now; I will present my request for them some time later; keep them with you in reserve for me,' I pleaded with you.

"You were elated at my attitude and expressed your admiration! You said you liked my renunciation and declared that the boons would be kept on trust as long as life lasts, and they could be drawn upon with no objections raised. All this must be fresh in your consciousness, right? You are the monarch of the earth. You are faithful to the plighted word. Therefore, give me my two boons, which you kept in abeyance on my behalf. Make me happy.

"I don't demand any new boon from you. I ask only for what is really mine. I needn't remind you; you know very well that it is a heinous sin to refuse to give back riches placed in trust in one's hands for safe custody. If you say now that you cannot grant them, you will be injuring me with that breach of faith. I can't bear the disappointment; rather than live with that sense of defeat, I consider getting rid of life is more honourable.

"When the husband does not honour the word given to the wife, how can the wishes of the people in the kingdom be realised? An emperor who stoops to deceiving his wife, making her believe him and then acting against that belief, doesn't deserve the position of protector of his subjects, does he? You know that the law-giver sage Manu has laid down that such ungrateful prevaricators should not be treated as monarchs. Why should I dilate further on this point and repeat a thousand arguments? In case my boons are not granted this day, Kaika will not be alive at dawn." She burst into loud weeping and wailing. Dasaratha was rendered helpless and weak by her histrionics; like an innocent deer that is drawn into the net spread for his capture by the imitative cries of the hunter, like an insane ineffective man, he was overcome by cooings of love and the entrancing gestures of the queen and fell into the trap. He vowed solemnly "I will certainly give you the two boons," holding her palms tightly in his.

No sooner were these words uttered than Kaika's eyes bloomed wide and

bright. She watched his face intently for some time, and said, "O King! This day I realise how good you are! This day, you have proved the genuineness of your claim that you would never break a promise once made." She started extolling Dasaratha in this and other ways.

The lovelorn Emperor was highly elated by her praise and urged her on with the prompting, "Kaika, why delay further? Ask! Ask for the boons!" Kaika hesitated. She stuttered, "With the arrangements made for Rama's coronation, perform Bharatha's coronation: this is the first boon I demand! Next, Rama, wearing matted hair and deerskin, and dressed in treebark raiment, shall go to the Dandaka forest and remain there for fourteen years, as a forest dweller; this is the second boon I ask.

"Bharatha must become the heir-apparent, with no one obstructing his path. Rama must be sent into the jungle before my very eyes. Grant these two boons and maintain the honour and dignity of your line untarnished, or else assent to the extinction of my life this very moment." Thus declaring, she stood up and stared wildly in a determined stance, like a demoness.

Kaika and Dasaratha argue

The emperor was crushed by the cruel bolts that rained on him. Was it a dream? Could it be true? Was it Kaika who asked for these boons? Or was it a bloodthirsty monster? Could it be a terrible hallucination? Was it a vile trick played by some horrid illness? He couldn't gauge! He cried, "Kaika! Is it you, there? Or has some ogress assumed your form? Tell me first who you are." Like a person who has lost control of their limbs, he tottered, unable to mouth the words he wished to speak.

He rolled listlessly from side to side like mad, his eyes looking wildly all around. Suddenly, sparks flew from his eyes as he gazed at Kaika. He exclaimed in terrible anger, "Vile woman! What exactly is your aim? Is it to uproot the entire royal line? What injury has my dear son Rama done to you? He loves you even more than he does his own mother. How could your heart agree to send my Rama into thick dark jungle? I took you so long to be a

princess; now, I find you are a venomous cobra. I allowed you to infest my home, out of sheer ignorance.

"How could such a sinful idea enter your head when Rama, the very breath of my life, is being acclaimed by every being that breathes? If imperative, I am prepared to give up the empire or even my life; but, I cannot give up Rama; no. You crave that your son be hailed as emperor. Well, have him so. I shall hie to the forest, with Kausalya, Sumitra, and others, taking my Rama with me. But I can never send Rama alone into the jungle. That is impossible. Give up this atrociously sinful desire. Give up the hatred of Rama that you have cultivated.

"Kaika! Tell me frankly, do you really want these things to take place? Or is all this merely a stratagem to find out whether I have affection toward your son, Bharatha? If so, you can ask for Bharatha to be crowned heir-apparent, but there is no meaning in asking for Rama to be exiled to the forest. Such a desire should not be entertained or expressed lightly.

"Kaika! Rama is the firstborn son. He is the repository of all virtues. The years of his reign will be most glorious; you told me often that you were looking forward to the time when such golden dreams would come true. Now you want this selfsame Rama to go into the forest! What is the deeper meaning of this request? Are you joking with me? If it is all a joke, why this scene in the Hall of Anger? Why this rolling on the hard stone floor?

Jokes have limits beyond which they become pitifully cruel. I can't entertain the idea, even as a joke. No. I can never be separated from Rama.

"Kaika! You have been behaving like an intelligent woman all these years. But now your intelligence has become crooked and wicked. Such perversions are always harbingers of self-destruction. It is a heinous sin to injure the good. Of course, the good will not be affected by these tactics; the stratagems of the wicked will only promote the fame and glory of the good. They might appear hard to bear, but only for some little time.

"Your wicked plans appear to me to be fraught with disaster to the Ikshvaku dynasty itself. Until this moment, you never spoke an unpleasant word or thought of an inauspicious act. I find it impossible to believe that it is the same one who is asking me such things today! Kaika! You were all along afraid of transgressing the codes of moral law; you were anxious to win the grace of God by means of each little thought, word, and deed. Where has that fear of unrighteousness gone? What have you done with that devotion to God, which kept you on the path of righteousness?

"What do you want to gain from sending Rama to the forest for fourteen years? His body is soft and tender, like the petal of a freshly blossomed flower; he is most charming to behold. Rama is so enticingly beautiful. What profit is there for you from him suffering unbearable pangs of pain in the forest? In this palace, there are many thousands of attendants and maids. Can one of them point a finger at a fault in him, in any respect? Well. Leave alone our palace. Can you bring from the capital city anyone, can you name anyone who blames Rama? He has discovered many a misery and relieved them with gifts and riches; he has shown great consideration for them. He has noticed many who are homeless and provided them with houses. By his love and care, he has won the affection of all people. That you should harbour hate against such a loveable son strikes me dumb; I cannot find words to describe your devilish cruelty.

"Many exploit their own subjects and act only to foster their own selfish interests; such demons appear in good numbers today. But in your eyes, due perhaps to the age or your own past sins, people who assuage the wrongs done to the poor and the distressed and foster their advancement, those who directly enquire into their difficulties and problems and afford relief - such good people appear bad, deserving exile and punishment!

"Everyone in this empire relishes listening to Rama's virtues and takes great delight in recounting his goodness.

When they feel exhausted in the fields, farmers and labourers sing songs of Rama and his charms to make their tasks lighter; when I learned of this, I was

filled with joy. How can your heart agree to inflict this excruciating sentence on such a compassionate soul?

"This very evening, when I placed the proposal for Rama's coronation before a gathering of sages, elders, ministers, leading citizens, scholars, and many experts in statecraft, no one raised a note of dissatisfaction or dissent. On the other hand, they praised Rama in countless ways and declared that it was the fruit of the merit accumulated in many past lives that they could now secure as heir-apparent and lord a spiritual hero who had mastered his senses, an embodiment of selfless activity, intelligent detachment, and unflinching loyalty to Truth.

They indicated their joy by continuous cries of "hurrah, hurrah!"

"Is it this treasure of my love, this favourite of my people, whom you seek to send into the forest? Whatever you may say, this is certain, I will not send my Rama into the forest. And listen to this also. Rama's coronation shall take place tomorrow; it cannot be canceled." Dasaratha announced this in an outburst of pride and courage.

Kaika assumed a terrific mien and retorted: "Maharaja! Remember, a few moments ago, you vowed under many oaths that you would grant me the boons I ask. Now you are going back on your word. Now who is dragging the glory of the Ikshvaku line in the dust, you or me? Ponder this. It is the pride of the Ikshvaku line that no one of that dynasty would go back on his word, once given. You are soiling that fair fame. Without weighing the pros and cons, you promised to grant without fail the boons I wanted. The mistake, if any, is yours, not mine. You gave me the boons; then, you promised to grant them today. You gave your word twice. Consider your honour, your status, your dignity, when you deny the very words you spoke then and now." "It may be common usage for rulers to injure and insult the weak and act contrary to promises solemnly made. But it cannot promote self-respect. Those who break their promises and cheat women are savages, not sovereigns.

When rulers slide into this savagery, the subjects will naturally resent and

revolt, and the kingdom will fast become demondom!

"All these years, you have striven to acquire honour and renown, and you have won them to a large extent.

Now the infamy of breaking the plighted word is on your head, not on mine. Recollect the careers of the kings of old. Take good care that you do not act counter to your vows and oaths. Ponder well. You are proceeding along an atrociously bad path! Beware! You are moving against the dictates of dharma.

"Well. Were you as intelligent as you are reputed to be, you would have first ascertained fully the nature of the boons I wanted before you gave the promise. You did not look before and after; you were enchanted by my words, and you gave word that they would be granted. Now you blame me when I ask you to fulfil that promise!

Consider how seriously you are mistaken in this! How foolish you proclaim yourself to be!

"You accuse me for having given up my fear of the unrighteous act, my devotion to the divine, and my counting this reprehensible cruelty. But, what about you? You are acclaimed as Dharma-vratha (a strict adherent of the vow to be righteous in word, thought, and deed), and Daiva-samana (equal to a God); what name can you claim now when you retract your oath?

"Pronounce judgement on yourself. The cleverness that dives and discovers the faults of those before you isn't commendable; diving into one's own faults and failings and being vigilant that they do not lead one astray into wrong and sin - that way of using the intelligence is commendable. Kings and rulers are highly intelligent; they are taken to be all knowing. If such as you do not benefit by self-examination, but are concerned only with selfish interests, what right have you to blame us as selfish and narrow-minded?

"You granted the boons; it is a fact. You took an oath; it is a fact. You broke the oath and went back on your given word; it is a fact. Reflect within yourself

whether these three are true. You are deluded by attachment to the son and enslaved by fondness for the wife, so you dump your promise into the waters!

"I'm not the culprit; it is you who have done wrong. It's natural for a mother to be attached to her son. Every mother wants her son to rise to a position of highest authority, to the monarch of the realm. It is the prompting of nature. It is her bounden duty to see that her plan is unassailed by others; it is only natural that she plan in advance to counteract all possible assailants. I am only carrying out my natural duties and responsibilities; there is nothing unnatural or wrong in my conduct.

"When Rama is crowned as heir-apparent, his mother, Kausalya, will become the Queen Mother. My son will stand with folded arms, awaiting Rama's command, ready to run errands for him. He will fall at Rama's feet while reporting to him about the task he has accomplished for him; perhaps he will be reprimanded. No; I cannot witness such scenes; I would be so humiliated that I couldn't live a day longer. Far better to drink poison now and die than look on at the shameful condition of my son. I declare this solemn oath, taken in the name of my son Bharatha, whom I value as much as my breath. I won't be satisfied with anything less than exiling Rama to the forest." With these agonisingly harsh words, Kaika fell on the floor, sobbing in a fit of heart-rending sorrow.

Dasaratha beat his head in despair. "Kaika! Has any one advised you that this calamity will benefit you? Or has some evil spirit possessed you and forced you to utter these desires? What is this absurdity, this ridiculous madness, sending Rama into the forest and crowning Bharatha? Why not wish well for me, your husband, for Bharatha, your son, and this kingdom of Ayodhya? Give up this desire fraught with certain calamity. Think deeply over the consequences. Or else, you, I, and your son, all three, will become targets for the direst infamy.

"It will not end with that. The entire kingdom will be ruined, and many more tragedies are bound to take place. Mean, degraded woman! Can we ever believe that Bharatha will agree to accept the crown even if I now accept your

request and promise to do so? Bharatha is a true adherent to dharma; he is intelligent and a model of rectitude. He will not agree either to exiling Rama to the forest or to himself becoming the heir-apparent. Not he alone, but, the ministers, courtiers, vassals, allies, sages, and citizens - everyone will oppose your desire. How can you be happy when so many are unhappy?

"Consider the situation. The elders and sages endorsed it; they were all of one mind. This evening, at the Grand Assembly of Citizens, I announced that I would celebrate Rama's coronation. If I act counter to that announcement, I will be counted as a coward who runs back from the battlefield at the sight of the enemy. All arrangements have been completed for the coronation, and all have been informed about the festival. The people have started preparing the city for the celebration, and the streets are already packed with happy throngs, with faces shining in expectant joy. If I send Rama into the forest now, won't the people laugh at me, saying, 'What! This man has finished three chapters all in a single night - the coronation, the rulership of the realm, and the exile!' "How can I explain my action to them after what I had publicly declared in the midst of the mammoth gathering of the populace? How harshly the people will blame me, feeling that their king is such a big fool. I ruled over them all these long years and won their applause as a consistent adherent of dharma, as an embodiment of high virtues, and as a redoubtable hero, brave and full of courage. But now, how can I bear the dishonour of being talked about as a fool who plunged into this low level of conduct?" Dasaratha spoke in this strain, reminding her of the hard blow that his fair name and unblemished fame would receive if he acted according to her desire. Nevertheless, Kaika transformed herself into a demoness of destruction, and she brushed aside Dasaratha's importunities as if they were empty words that had no value for her. She refused to yield or loosen her hold. Indeed, her grip became tighter every moment, her greed more deeprooted.

She spoke quite contrary to his appeals and insisted on reminding him only of the promise from which he threatened to resile.

Dasaratha said, "Kaika! If Rama goes to the forest, I will not be able to live a

moment longer. And I need not tell you what will happen to Kausalya. She will draw her last breath that very moment. And, Sita? She will be mortally shocked; she can't live even a second away from Rama. Will the people look upon all this with equanimity?

When the great hero, the paragon of wisdom, Rama, is being sent as an exile into the forest, can Lakshmana keep quiet? Why detail a thousand things. The very next moment, Lakshmana will cast off his body. This is the bare truth. Thus, our kingdom will have to suffer all these catastrophes and calamities.

"You too are aware of this string of tragedies. I cannot understand why you are attempting, with eyes open, to win a widow's role. O, wicked, vile soul! I was deceived by your charms; it was like cutting one's own throat while charmed by a sword of gold. I drank the cup of milk, unaware that it had poison in it. You cheated me, with many a winsome trick. At last, you have planned to consign my dynasty to the dust.

"Shame on me! What a fool I am! I secured this son, after performing a scriptural sacrifice (yaga). Divine grace gave him to me. Am I to barter away his fortune and his future for the paltry pleasure a woman gave me? Is this worthy of His Majesty Emperor Dasaratha? Will not the meanest being in my kingdom hurl stones at me, in derision? Alas! Is this to be the fate of Dasaratha in his last days? I clasped a thing round my own neck, not realising that it was a rope that strangles. I never knew that it was the deity of death with whom I dallied and diverted myself so long. Alas! I flirted with death and fondled it on my breast. I treated her as my favourite comrade and companion. Surely, the weight of my sins are recoiling on me now. Or else, was there anywhere, at any time, a father who, for the sake of a woman's bed, drives his son into the fearful forest as an exile?

"Ah! What strange behaviour this is for a human being! I don't believe this, in spite of everything. Kaika!

Change your foolish thought. Rama will not go against any word of mine. The mere report of these happenings is enough. He will prepare to move into the

forest! He won't even ask why are you anxious to send him into the jungle!

He is of such sterling virtue. Why mention only Rama! None of my sons will disobey any of my commands.

"Bharatha will be disgusted when he hears of your plan. He may even ignore the fact that you are his mother and behave quite inexplicably. He may be ready for any dire step. Rama is his very life, his vital breaths, all the five put together. He may do something to defeat your pet desire - he may exile himself into the forest and ask that Rama be crowned. He is of that stamp of goodness and rectitude. I wonder at your crooked intellect, which cannot grasp the workings of Bharatha's mind.

"Kaika! Wicked designs are precursors of self destruction, as the saying goes. This design has entered your head, presaging your ruination, remember. You are bringing on the fair name of the Ikshvaku royal family an indelible blot; you are plunging so many into fathomless depths of grief; you are bringing about their end. Can so many lives be hurt for the sake of this fell desire? What happiness do you hope to have, after perpetrating all this?

"Even if you do achieve your goal, will that be bliss? Can you call it so? O shame! Those who exult over the sorrows of others are in truth sinners of the darkest hue, of demonic brood. Those who strive to cause joy to others, those who yearn that others be happy, they are the holy ones. You are a queen; you are a princess, born of royalty; yet, you are not conscious of this elementary truth. You are a disgrace to royal blood.

"One final word! Rama is my very life. Without him, I cannot hold on to life. No! I cannot continue to live.

He will not disappoint you, so though I may not order him by word of my own mouth to go into the forest, on hearing of my oath and your desire, he may himself proceed thereto in order to make my word valid; he will brook no delay or debate. As soon as I hear news of that event, know that I draw my last breath.

"Lakshmana, Sita, and Kausalya may, in all likelihood, follow Rama. Kausalya cannot exist alive, apart from Rama. Sita won't stay away from Rama. Lakshmana cannot walk except along Rama's footsteps. Urmila too may proceed along with Lakshmana into exile. Then there will be none here to perform the funeral rites of this body, and days will elapse to get Bharatha and Satrughna from the Kekaya Kingdom. Till then, this body will have to lie without the ceremonial.

"Perhaps the people will rise against me for having descended to this low level of wickedness and condemn my body to be thrown as carrion for crows and vultures, since it does not deserve decent disposal. Perhaps not, for my subjects will wait until Bharatha arrives, embalming the corpse by some means or other. Bharatha will never agree to accept the throne and be king. Under such circumstances, he is not entitled to touch the body or perform the funeral rites.

"Come! At least, promise me that you will have my funeral rites performed by him," he pleaded. "Of course, I am sure you are ready to promise me that, for you are after the spiritual bliss you hope to derive from a widow's life. What do you hope for? Tell me, O vile viper! You have turned into a demon, at last! Are you undermining the Raghu clan, this royal line, and laying it under the earth? Is this the upsurge of your basic nature? Or is it some mysterious divine fate that dogs your thought and forces you to act against your will in this strange way? I find it beyond me to gauge the secret." While Dasaratha was being tortured in his mind like this, the night rolled on into the third quarter. He groaned like a man in great pain, afflicted with some mortal illness. He was caught in the coils of agony.

Dasaratha tried his best, now, to win the affections of Kaika and persuade her to accept Rama's coronation.

He began to flatter her, in honeyed words. "O, queen! You are the very embodiment of auspiciousness and prosperity.

I treated you so long as my very breath. You too fostered and guarded me as

if I was your very heart. Come, let us spend the remaining years without giving room for scandals about differences between us; let us be peaceful and happy during the rest of our allotted lives. O, charming princess! I won't live many more years. Throughout my life, I was famed as a steady adherent of truth, and all people honoured me on that account. I have sworn at the public gathering that Rama would be crowned tomorrow as heir-apparent. Consider how my subjects will despise me if the function does not take place! Consider how they will cast insults at me! You saved me that day, during the battle between the gods and the demons. Are you giving me up now, when something worse is threatening me? This is not just or proper.

"Well, I shall endow on you this entire kingdom as dowry. Crown Rama yourself, tomorrow. Bharatha will also be very happy if you do this. Not merely he; ministers, sages, elders, scholars, common citizens, the entire populace will appreciate and thank you for this. Your fame will last eternally on this earth. Instead, if you create obstacles to Rama's coronation, the whole world will castigate and condemn you. Even your son will find fault with you and fall foul of you. Your cruel fancy will bring ruin on you; besides, it will cover this royal line with shame. You will become the target of the 'fie' that the smallest of the land will fling at you. Reflect over these possibilities!

Earn eternal renown; stop the stratagem to prevent the coronation. Crown Rama with your own hands, tomorrow!" Dasaratha described the joy she could derive from this generous act in sweet enticing words, artfully put together. He hoped to enrapture her at the prospect of herself crowning the heir-apparent. But Kaika interrupted him, "King! Your words strike me as strange and meaningless. You're trying to slide back from the promise made on oath; to cover up your sin, you are spinning fascinating yarns! No. A thousand such tricks will not induce me to change my stand. You said, on your own, 'Ask any boons you desire; I shall grant them,' and now, instead of acting on that promise, you exhibit a fine bunch of sighs and groans. This does not become you. You are, by your own conduct, undermining your reputation and honour.

"I am not in the least responsible for your distress. Recollect the

pronouncement of those who are masters of virtue (dharma) that truth (sathya) is the highest dharma. I too, based my request for the promised boons on the same principle of dharma, and, as befits a follower of dharma, you agreed and said, 'Right! They shall be granted.' Nevertheless, you have started imputing motives to me, that I am thrusting you into unrighteousness, that I am set upon committing an unpardonable sin, that I am attempting to bring lasting infamy on your name!

This is most improper; it is thoroughly unjustifiable.

"I am absolutely innocent of any wrong, in this affair. You made the solemn promise without a thought on the past or the future, and, when that promise had to be put into action, you suddenly become confused and desperate.

The fault is yours, not mine. Those who promise and are not willing to act accordingly are sinners of great magnitude. Act as the promise directs; then the truth you have maintained will itself wash off any related sin.

"Don't you remember? Emperor Sibi sliced flesh from his own body as food for an eagle pursuing a dove for prey! So too, Emperor Alarka, a king of unique splendour, had pledged his word that he would give whatever was asked from him; to keep his promise, he plucked and gave a brahmin his own two eyes! Look at the Ocean. It is the Lord of all the rivers; yet, bound by its vow, it limits itself between the shores, instead of transgressing them.

"Why repeat a thousand examples? For all things, for all people, truth is the highest authority; the highest ideal. Truth is Brahman. Truth is the primeval sound. It is dharma; truth alone undergoes no change or diminution.

Royal majesties like you should not give up the Imperishable for the sake of the perishable. Hold fast to the promise you made and ensure lasting fame and glory for yourself. That is the right thing to do. Don't yield to delusive attachment to the son or deceptive sympathy for women. Don't overrule the dictates of political idealism and royal obligation. Don't tarnish the Ikshvaku dynasty with irredeemable dishonour!

"Don't plan otherwise; call Rama to your side and tell him to get ready to proceed to the forest; set on foot preparations to call Bharatha to this city. Instruct the minister concerned to attend to these matters without delay.

See! The eastern sky is getting bright. These two boons must be realised before dawn. However long you argue, I will be content with no less. If, on the other hand, you are adamant and you consummate Rama's coronation, I am determined to end my life in full view of the thickly packed assembly. This is my vow; this shall happen." Dasaratha watched Kaika raging and swearing, angry and fearful. He could neither demonstrate nor suppress the rage that was surging within him. He was like Emperor Bali, who promised three feet of land to God (in the form of Vamana) but discovered that he could not fulfil that promise, for Vamana measured the entire earth with one foot, the entire sky with another foot, and stood asking for the third foot of land that had been gifted to Him!

Dasaratha dreaded the curse that awaited him for breaking the rules of dharma. His eyes were dimmed with doubt and despair. His head became heavy on the shoulders. He fell on the floor.

At last, mustering up some courage, he shouted, "O sinful woman! If the coronation of Rama is canceled, my death is a certainty. After that, you can rule over this kingdom as a widow, as freely as you wish." Giving vent to his anger in this strain, Dasaratha cried out, "Alas! Rama! Has it come to this that I have to send you, with my own consent, into the forest? No, I will not send you. I would rather give up my life; I cannot keep alive a moment, apart from you. O, vicious demon! How could your heart entertain this dark plan to send my lovely and tender Rama into the thick, dark, wild jungle? Horrid fury! What a monster have you become!" With that, Dasaratha swooned and soon lost consciousness.

Sumanthra is perplexed

Night was melting before the brightening dawn. The nine instruments of music at the palace gate heralded the day of joy. The roads started getting

showers of rosewater. The air was thick with fragrance and festive noise.

The sky was charged with hope and excitement. The constellation Pushya rose as the star of the day. The sage Vasishta proceeded with his group of disciples to the Sarayu River for the ceremonial bath and returned with the consecrated water necessary for the coronation ablutions. He passed along the royal road where the citizens had gathered to witness the sacred articles, and the palace guards cleared the way for the holy group. At last, they entered the royal palace through the richly decorated main gate.

Even at that early hour, the open spaces inside the palace were filled with priests, vassal rulers, representatives of the people of the realm, and elders. They occupied the seats allotted to them. The rhythm of Vedic hymns being recited by scholars along the streets echoed from the skies. Meanwhile, Vasishta beckoned Sumanthra, the minister, and said, "Go; the auspicious hour fixed for the rite of coronation is approaching; many preliminary rituals have to be attended to; go and inform the Maharaja that his presence is urgently needed. Convey the message that Vasishta is waiting for his arrival." Sumanthra, being an old faithful, had the freedom to enter any of the inner apartments of the palace, so he hurried to Queen Kaika's chambers in search of the emperor. Entering the hall where the royal beds were, he was shocked out of his wits. He was aghast at the sight of the emperor on the floor! "Are my eyes seeing right," he wondered; he lost his moorings. He went near the king and said, "King! This morning must find you like the sea at moonrise, heaving with ecstasy. I can't understand why you're lying prostrate on the ground. The auspicious hour is approaching. The great sages, learned in Vedic lore, are ready in their roles, waiting your arrival at the Hall of Ceremonies. Rise and wear royal robes and jewels, and come into the hall, accompanied by the queens, in lustrous imperial splendour. The sage Vasishta bade me hither to bring you into the holy precincts of the throne." Listening to his importunities, Dasaratha could not restrain the outbursts of his grief. He wept aloud and spoke to the minister between sobs. "Sumanthra! Your adulation pierces my heart." Sumanthra could not take a step forward or backward. He stood transfixed where he was. He prayed with folded hands, "Maharaja! Why this turn of events? At a time when you have to be immersed in spiritual bliss

(ananda), why this grief, this piteous weeping? What is the reason behind all this? It is beyond my understanding." When Sumanthra stood hopeless, sunk in sorrow, Kaika intervened. "O best of ministers! The emperor spent the entire night without sleep, in anxiety about Rama. If you go immediately and bring Rama with you here, the mystery will be unraveled. Do not misunderstand me, but bring Rama here quickly." Sumanthra took her instructions as the commands of the sovereign; he hastened to Rama's residence. At the entrance of that palace, he saw long lines of attendants and maids on both sides, carrying huge plates containing gifts of silk, brocade, jewels and gems, garlands and bouquets, scents and sweets. It was a delight to the eye, but Sumanthra didn't stop to cast a look at them. When he hurried into the palace, he felt something precious lacking in all this festivity; he was overwhelmed and nonplussed. His earlier joy had turned into sorrow.

Riding in his chariot toward Rama's palace he had noticed how the hundreds of thousands of loyal subjects filling the streets talked among themselves that he was on his way to bring Rama to the Coronation Hall for the ceremony. He saw their faces blooming in joyous expectation; they scarcely winked their eyes, lest they miss some incident or facet of joy. At last, Sumanthra stepped, without any question asked, into all sections of that seven-storied mansion. As a fish dives noiselessly through the depths of a flooded river, Sumanthra glided through the corridors and halls of that palace!

11. Lakshmana Goes With Rama

Within the palace, Rama's companions, elated and happy, ready with bright countenances and splendid robes, were waiting to accompany him to the Festival Hall. Sumanthra went into the apartments that lay still deeper inside the palace. There he saw Rama, seated on a golden cot, scattering divine light around him, and Sita standing by his side, gently fanning him. He shone like the moon with the star, Chitra.

Sumanthra, in a hurry, could no brook delay. "Rama! Mother Kaika and your father asked me to bring you quickly to her palace; they sent me here on that mission, and I hurried for that same purpose." Rama turned toward Sita. "Sita! This is a sign of some obstacle, and of nothing else. I'm not unaware of this, but I kept silent and said, 'Yes' for everything, so that father might be happy. Father's orders are to be honoured, lest he be pained." While Rama was talking in this strain, Sumanthra's heart was pounding fast inside him. He was trying to interpret Rama's words and the picture of Dasaratha lying wailing on the floor. He was now convinced that the obstacle Rama spoke of was genuine.

But Sita interrupted Rama, "Lord! What are you talking about? On this auspicious occasion you should not speak thus. Whatever the obstacle, father-in-law's words must be honoured. If he is content, we are content. For his sake, we must renounce whatever has to be. Don't hesitate even a little; go immediately. We will be equally happy whether the coronation takes place or not. Mother Kaika has inordinate affection toward you; anything she directs us to do, any order she gives us, will be for our good beyond doubt. No one here on earth is as solicitous for our welfare as mother Kaika. When father and such a mother send word that you should hasten toward them, how happy we should be!" Sita followed Rama to the main door of the hall and wished him well.

Rama told her, "Sita! Don't I know all this? For me, the days of the past, the days around us, and the days yet to come are all the same. I welcome each

day with full joy. I'm prepared to do anything to uphold father's reputation.

I'm prepared to go anywhere. I'm immensely happy that you share my feeling and second my resolve." Rama moved out, accompanied by Sumanthra. When they ascended the chariot waiting on the road in front of the palace, people raised shouts of "Hurrah, hurrah! Ramachandra, dear Lord." The acclamation shook the skies.

Sumanthra announced to the populace, "Now the chariot is not taking Rama to the Coronation Hall but to the Emperor. So allow the chariot to go as fast as it should. Rama will return in a few moments, so wait here." Sumantra explained the reason for the hurry and drove in hot haste. As Rama drove along the city streets to Kaika's palace in his divine chariot, those seeing him cheered like lions. Minstrels and courtiers started paeans of praise. The strains of many instruments of music filled the sky. Acclamations of "hurrah, hurrah" rose from the thick masses of people on both sides of the road. Women in their best clothes and bedecked with jewels thronged the terraces of the houses and filled the windows, eager to wave lamps when Rama passed by.

Rama talks to Kaika

As he approached the palace, they showered floral petals and waved sacred lamps. They gazed upon the Prince until he passed beyond reach of the eye; then, they relished with joy the picture of "Rama in the chariot" that they had imprinted on their hearts and stood without stirring wherever they were, like idols of themselves, lost in contemplation of the bliss that filled them.

The chariot rode into the precincts of Dasaratha's palace, named Vardhamana and as imposing as Mount Kailas itself. It passed through the three quadrangles guarded by vigilant bowmen.

Rama alighted from the vehicle and moved through two more quadrangles on foot. While walking, he told his companions and even Lakshmana to stay back, for Rama knew what was about to happen soon. In spite of this, he was

acting like a mortal, as naturally as any would under the circumstances! Finally, Rama entered the apartments of the queens and the place where Dasaratha had fallen on the bed. His hair was disheveled, and he was wearing clothes of 'yesterday'. He was lying on the bed without any regard to propriety. Rama was astonished at the spectacle. Kaika was standing by the side of the bed.

Dasaratha's face had lost all trace of brightness; he was lamenting and wailing. He raised his head, and his eyes fell upon Rama. His tongue failed to spell out what he longed to say. Tears streamed from his eyes. Though he tried to speak, no sound came. Rama had never before seen or experienced such a fearsome scene. He was filled with anxiety; he hastened to the presence of his father and held both his feet in his hands. "Tell me, father, why do you lament so? What's the cause? I'll try to confer joy on you in the best manner possible. I'll dedicate my very life to restoring your bliss (ananda). Tell me what has caused this grief; don't weep," he pleaded.

Dasaratha exclaimed, "Rama!" and broke into tears again, unable to continue. He lost consciousness. Rama tried to revive and console him, but he fell deeper into grief and could not be pacified.

Rama mustered courage and took his father to task, "Father! what is all this? You have to instil courage in young people like me; instead, you are weeping and wailing and filling us with fear! No. This is not right. This is the occasion to be happy. Is it dharma, is it proper for you to sink into grief? Till this day, whenever you were angry or worried, my coming to you removed in a trice all signs of those troubles and made you beam with spiritual bliss (ananda). You used to gain peace when you drew me near, didn't you? How is it, then, that the longer you look at me the more you suffer from sorrow? This too makes my grief more painful. Can't you mention the reason for this strange behaviour and bring solace to me? Won't you tell me? Has any wrong been committed by me? Or, if there is anything I have to do, tell me and I shall do it without fail. I shall correct myself, if you tell me my faults.

Don't grieve; don't doubt or hesitate; tell me with the authority of affection

what I have to do, and I will bow to the order. Father! Your being plunged in grief is not good augury for you, for me, as well as for the empire." Rama turned toward Kaika. With folded palms, he asked her, "Mother! Have I committed any wrong? Tell me who that execrable sinner is who caused such grief to father! The moment father saw me, he used to beckon me lovingly, draw me close to him, and fondle me caressingly! Now he doesn't even look at me! Why? He doesn't utter a word; he keeps his face turned away from me!

"If the fault, the crime, is mine, I am ready to suffer any punishment to atone for it. It is enough for me if father is happy. Or, is he suffering from any illness or disease? Have my brothers, Bharatha and Satrughna, sent bad news? They are well, aren't they? Mother Kausalya and Sumitra are well, I hope!

"I'm overcome with grief, since I'm unable to understand the reason for father's agony! I'll do whatever is needed to bring joy back to him, however hard it may be. However painful, I'll discharge his command to the full, most loyally, with bowed head. Whoever is born, the father is the cause of his birth. Therefore, the father is everyone's visible God. I seek nothing higher than his happiness. Have compassion on me; tell me what happened.

"Mother! Was your self-respect hurt by any incident, resulting in your speaking some harsh words against father? Or, did my mother act against his will and hurt his feelings? Mother Kausalya would never behave like that. And, Sumitra? I am more certain about her. She would not at all act so. And father would certainly not lament so distressingly, even if either of them acted so foolishly. There must be some very serious reason for his plight.

If father is reluctant to tell me what it is, at least you can tell me about it and console my grief." Looking at Rama, who was so pathetically praying to her, Kaika gave up all sense of mercy and moderation, all consideration for the husband who might be plunged in deeper misery when he heard her words spoken in utter disregard of the calamities they were sure to usher in. She didn't stop to ask whether the words could be uttered or were better left unspoken. She didn't discriminate between the fleeting present and the

oncoming future. She brushed aside the claims of love and cast off her own innate dignity and motherly status.

"Rama! Listen! Years ago, during the battle between gods and demons (devas and asuras) your father was wounded by demonic arrows and suffered unbearable pain. I nursed him back to health and happiness. He appreciated my sacrifice and service and promised to grant me two boons. At the time, the only thing I craved was his recovery and victory, so I replied, "I don't desire my boon now, I will ask you for the promised boons when I feel the urge later." Your father said, "Right! Whenever you like, ask me for two boons, and I will certainly grant them and fulfil your desire. These boons have no limit of time and are bound by no condition. Whenever you ask, whatever the boons, I will give them." he vowed.

"You know that scions of the Ikshvaku line never break their promised word. Putting faith in that well-known fact, I asked now for those two boons: one, that my son Bharatha should be crowned emperor, and two, that you should be sent into the Dandaka Forest for a period of fourteen years. As a result, your father is creating this hubbub!

Why elaborate further? I won't modify or withdraw my demands. If your father is an adherent of truth, and if you desire to prove that you too are an adherent of truth, you have to go this very moment to the Dandaka Forest, wearing deerskin and matted hair. You have to reside there for fourteen years.

"Since you are his very life breath, he doesn't like to send you into exile; he's reluctant to ask you to go. He apprehends you may take it amiss; that is the reason for his grief. Rama! No other calamity or deluge has happened.

It is meaningless to exaggerate this minor matter and make out that a mountainous catastrophe has landed on us. Rama! The father can be saved from the sin of breaking his word only when his very image, the son, resolves to fulfil the vow he fails to fulfil. Otherwise, if he who vowed and he who is his son both neglect it, then the father has to meet the doom of eternal downfall.

You are not unaware of this." Rama was not at all affected by these words uttered with such deliberate hard-heartedness. With a smile playing on his lips, he replied, "For this reason, it is not proper that father should lament." He nodded his head as if to signify his approval of the proposals made by Kaika.

But, when this conversation fell on his ears, Dasaratha felt as if his heart was being sawn within. He rolled and groaned in extreme agony. Rama turned toward Kaika. "Mother! It will happen as you have contemplated!

I am reverentially placing on my head the promise made by my father. It is enough if father draws me near him as he so lovingly used to do, speaks to me affectionately, and blesses me. Well, if I am at least told that I don't deserve these, that I have not earned that merit, I'll accept it without demur and with equal joy and satisfaction.

Father always wishes the best for me. He blesses me always and desires that I progress ever. He is a great seer; for me, he is not only the father but the preceptor who teaches the highest path.

"What responsibility and duty have I other than conferring joy on him, who is both father and teacher? This is my dearest duty, my dharma. I will derive immense spiritual bliss (ananda) in the forest for fourteen years. Not merely fourteen; if father's wish is such, I am prepared to live all my life in the forest itself!

"But, why does father hesitate to tell me about the two boons? This is what pains me. Will I ever say no to what he says? Rama is the servant and support of the parental word, not its opponent. Is there any act of gratitude nobler than dedicating this body, which was received from the father, to his service alone? I will offer it with spiritual bliss; I'm not one who waits to be told to do so.

"Mother why didn't you mention to me that Bharatha is to be crowned? I and my brother - there is no difference between us! We know no distinction

among ourselves. Also, why do you say, "This is your father's command"?

Do I ever disobey your command? No. Never. Whether you or my father says it, I unhesitatingly carry it out. I leave Ayodhya this very day and go to the forest. Mother! Send proper messengers to bring Bharatha back from grandfather's. It is best to get him quickly. If my moving into the forest and Bharatha's coronation happen at the same time, father will be saved from physical strain, mental anxiety, and a sense of void. And you too can be fully content! Who can say how events will shape themselves?" When Kaika heard these words from Rama, she was filled with happiness (ananda) and apprehension. She feared what might happen if Bharatha arrived while Rama was still in the city and concluded that it was best to insist on Rama leaving for the forest that very day. She replied, "Rama! It's possible to make arrangements to get Bharatha to Ayodhya, but there is no need for you to stay here until he arrives. Since you have decided to start the hermit life, why should you delay your departure? The longer the start is delayed, the longer your return is delayed! You get ready to leave even now.

"Your father is eager to tell you this himself, but he is unwilling to express his command directly. Though his heart insists that he should say it, he is bothered by a sense of shame, for he loves you much. He is reluctant to inform you of his promise to me; that is the reason for his distress. He has no other grief. The quicker you leave, the sooner he will recover from agony. Until you leave, I'm afraid, he won't take food or bathe. So, if you yearn to restore his happiness, the sooner you depart the better." Dasaratha, lying prostrate on the bed, heard Kaika's heart-piercing words and couldn't contain his anger and sorrow. He burst into indistinct fury, "Fie on you, traitorous demon!" Turning to Rama, he cried "Rama" twice, and fainted again.

Rama sat on the bed, with the head of his father on his lap; he stroked the forehead and consoled and comforted him with sweet lovingness. He spoke to Kaika. "Mother! I am not a covetous fellow poisoned by worldly ambition. I have no desire to win over the people and establish my rule over the kingdom. I wish to live like a hermit; I yearn to foster and maintain righteousness (dharma), that is all. I have also one more resolve: to confer joy

on my most revered father. To realise these three objectives, I am prepared to undertake any task. A son has no greater duty, no higher good, than serving the father.

"Mother! Though father has not directly spoken to me, you are telling me what his command is, aren't you?"

This is quite enough. Besides, you are speaking in his very presence, and, despite his hearing what you say, he is unable to alter or deny anything. Therefore, I infer that your words are virtually his. So, I bow to the order and will leave as directed.

"Mother! I have one little wish, which I hope you will fulfil. When Bharatha rules the empire, see that he obeys father's orders in every way and that he contributes to father's joy and satisfaction by his acts. For me, for Bharatha, indeed for every son, there is nothing more holy and fruitful than the vow of filling the heart of the father with contentment and happiness. Service of the father is the son's eternal duty (sanathana dharma)." Rama fell prostrate and touched Kaika's feet. Dasaratha, who heard his son, writhed as if the dharma that Rama expounded and the equanimity that he revealed aroused his love even more and thus aggravated his sorrow beyond control. Knowing that Rama would not stay in Ayodhya any longer, he lost all sense of propriety and status. He shouted "Rama!" and slumped on the hard floor. Women in their quarters heard the thump and were stunned into grief and wonder. They lamented loudly among themselves at the turn of events. Rama realised that it was not advisable to delay any longer. He prostrated before his father and touched his feet. Then, he walked out of the apartment.

Rama talks to Kausalya

Lakshmana was standing at the door, listening to the words spoken inside the room. He was in tears; he was furious with Kaika and angry with father. He found it impossible to give expression to his feelings, so he followed Rama with arms folded, head bent low, and eyes on the ground. Though he had lost a kingdom and had to exile himself into the forest, Rama's face shone like the

moon behind thick dark clouds, unaffected by the black veil.

The splendour of his countenance was unaffected, for he faced honour and dishonour with equal serenity. He behaved like a veteran yogi, with no trace of agitation in thought, word, and deed; he walked as if nothing had happened to cause him worry.

However, Sumanthra guessed that some transformation had happened inside the palace. The guess soon grew into certainty. When his eyes fell on Lakshmana, his heart suffered a shock. To add to his fears, Rama brushed aside the white umbrella that was held over him by the attendant. He ordered that the ceremonial whisks not be used for him. He declared that he did not deserve the silver chariot anymore. Sumanthra lost strength of body and will. His worst fears were confirmed.

Rama didn't speak a word to those around him or to the citizens he met. Not that he was sad - no, he knew that others would be hurt if they heard the news. For if he spoke, he would have to speak the truth, and he would be spreading sadness through his own words. In spite of this, his style of walking back to the palace announced the sad news to all onlookers.

Rama didn't go directly to Sita's apartments. Instead, he walked to Kausalya's palace, which was resplendent with flags and festoons and other marks of jubilation. The women and other attendants of the palace got intimation of the approach of Rama and Lakshmana; they readied lamps on plates and arranged themselves in rows to welcome them. Old and trusted guards at the main entrance rose sharply when they espied the brothers, and exclaimed, "Victory! May it be victory to you!" They bowed low and offered homage.

When Rama entered the second square inside, the brahmins who had gathered there showered their blessing on him. On entering the third square, the young maids in attendance rushed in, carrying the happy tidings that Rama and his younger brother were arriving to offer reverence to the mother. They themselves were delighted at the sight of the princes. From the outer door right up to the mother's room, maidens standing on both sides of the

long passage waved ceremonial lamps as signs of welcome, to ward off evil and welcome joy and prosperity.

Queen Kausalya had observed vigil all night, preparing for the holy day that had dawned. She was engaged since dawn in worshipful rites. Aged brahmin priests were propitiating the god of fire with Vedic hymns when Rama was announced.

The mother was overwhelmed with joy, since she could witness with her own eyes the coronation of her son.

She had been celebrating her joy by means of several rites and by giving away plentiful gifts. She had fasted and kept vigil; spiritual bliss (ananda) was enough food for her, the bliss she shared with all.

She ran forward to clasp Rama in her arms; she caressed the curls on his head and led him by the hand into the shrine room where she was spending the morning. She had no knowledge of the somersault events had taken.

Innocent and simple-hearted as she was, she wore the white sari of purity and, with the sacred silk cord tied round her wrist, she was gratefully engaged in worship of the gods. Looking at Rama's face, she noticed an added splendour illumining it. So she could not contain within herself her bliss (ananda).

"Son!" she said, "your forefathers were all royal sages. They were strong upholders of right and were supersouls (mahatmas) each one. You shall be as long-lived as they, as renowned as they; your glory must reach the ends of all the quarters as their glory did. Son! Follow the ideals of righteousness held high by this dynasty; do not neglect them, even in a fit of absence of mind. Hold on to them, without wavering in the least." She placed a few grains of rice on his head, in token of her blessing on the auspicious day. She placed a golden seat near hers, saying, "Son! You observed the ceremonial vigil last night, didn't you? And, you fasted yesterday, according to rule. You must be exhausted. Sit here for a while, and eat a few fruits." So saying, she held forth

a gold plate of fruits that she had made ready for him.

Rama was thrilled by the spiritual bliss of the mother and the love she showered on him. He wondered how he could communicate to her the turn of events; he was unwilling to destroy the atmosphere of joy. To give her satisfaction, he sat on the golden chair, fingered the contents of the plate, and said, "Mother! From this moment, I should not touch gold. I should not sit on golden chairs. I'm awaiting your blessing, for I have to go in exile to the Dandaka Forest. I came to you to take leave." Kausalya couldn't understand a word he said. She could only say, "Son! Within a few minutes you are to be crowned king, and you talk of the Dandaka Forest! I can't make sense of what you say." She thought her son was teasing her with a joke. "Son! In this auspicious hour, even in fun you shouldn't talk of things of bad omen. Give it up, my lovely gem!" She scooped with her fingers a little from a plate of rice, boiled in milk and sweetened with sugar, and placed it on Rama's tongue! Observing her love and her bliss, Lakshmana's eyes were spontaneously filled with tears.

Kausalya noted it, turned to him, and asked, "Lakshmana! Why are you sad?" She hurried toward him and tried to caress him, but Lakshmana couldn't suppress his grief any longer. He wept aloud and sobbed. The queen stood aghast, not knowing why he sobbed. Rama's words and Lakshmana's grief confused her much.

Rama interceded, "Mother! If you promise not to grieve, I will tell you one thing." He held her hands in his, very firmly. "This will endow me, you, and our entire family and dynasty with imperishable glory. So don't give room for any anxiety, doubt, or distress. Agree to it with alacrity and affection. Doesn't it give you great joy for me to obey father's command? He has resolved to crown my brother, Bharatha! He has resolved to send me, in the habiliments of a hermit, into the Dandaka Forest for fourteen years. I have bowed to his command, and I came to take your leave." Kausalya shrieked, "Rama," and fell on the floor. "What turn of events is this? Is my tender child to be sent into the dark jungle? What crime has my Rama done to deserve this? Can this be true? Or, is it meaningless jabber coming out of my own brain, since I had

no sleep and no food?" While she was trying to explain to herself and consoling herself, the happenings at Kaika's palace had spread throughout the zenana (women's quarters), and the noise of wailing and lamentation rose from maids and attendants everywhere. All faces streamed with tears in great sorrow. Cries of "Rama! Don't leave us" were heard on all sides. Grief-stricken groups hurried to Kausalya's palace. Kausalya was overwhelmed with astonishment, sorrow and fear. She could not unravel the mystery of it all. She could not rise from the floor, for she was weighed down with anxiety and despair. Nevertheless, she longed to understand what had really happened to cause this universal agony.

She drew Rama onto her lap. Caressing his curly hair, she asked, "Son! What is this I hear? This news? Tell me clearly what took place. I cannot bear this suspense any longer." Rama told her, "Honouring the two boons that father had promised Kaika once upon a time, father granted her those two wishes." Rama told Kausalya that the first boon she was granted was, "Bharatha is to be crowned," and the second was, "I should be sent to the forest for fourteen years." Kausalya exclaimed, "Rama! Did Kaika really demand such boons? Kaika had unbounded love and affection toward you. She would not have wished for these things any day. Let that rest. Even if she has, I'm sure it must be only to test the king! For this simple thing, why should there be so much confusion and anxiety? Or, assuming she asked for the boons; would your father agree to grant them? I refuse to believe this. Would your father, who cannot tolerate your absence from his presence for a single moment, send you away to the forest for fourteen years?"

This plunges me into more confusion."

Seeing his mother doubt the truth of the incidents that actually took place, Rama again held her hands in his and pleaded, "Mother! Believe me! Father had already promised to grant her whichever two boons she desired.

After she asked for these two, he had no inclination to break his plighted word. Nor could his mind agree to order me into the forest and be without me. He is suffering great mental distress. I can't bear the sight of his

affliction.

I just returned from that palace. He is stricken unconscious and in terrible anguish. This is the truth. I'm not so cruel as to cause such anxiety in you over a light laughable matter, believe me. I accepted father's order, I came for your permission." Rama fell at her feet.

Kausalya lifted him tenderly. "Rama, what strange behaviour! However barbarian a person may be, will he demand these horrible boons? Can any human being ever think of sending you, who is to be crowned in a few minutes, to the forest for fourteen years? Am I to suffer throughout my life? I got a son after observing many a vow and ritual. Looking on your lovely face, I overcame the pangs of those years of sorrow. I have no other desire; I ask for no other boons; enough for me if my son is with me, near me. Have I become unfit for this little gift? Did I deliver a child only to throw it into the forest? Would any mother agree to send her son into the jungle? Alas, what sin did I commit in the past? In which of my precious lives did I keep a mother apart from her son?

"Since the day you were initiated into Vedic studies, every moment I derived happiness from the thought of your coronation drawing near. Have those sweet dreams of mine come to naught? Have all my hopes been dashed to the ground and broken to pieces? Have all the vows, vigils, rites, and rituals I so scrupulously observed and performed for ensuring your joy and happiness been in vain? O! What a big sinner am I? Why hasn't my heart broken on hearing this news?

"Perhaps, I have to hear and bear many more heart-breaking news! Death doesn't help me! My heart still beats, in spite of this shock. Alas, even death awaits the allotted moment. He comes but, on seeing my plight, leaves me alive, postponing the moment of my release. Yama has no mercy toward me. I'm undeserving of even the realm of death. O Rama! That this calamity should happen to us!

She lamented and fell on the floor in a faint. Coming to, she rolled on the

floor, pressing her heart with the palm of her hand. Rama couldn't quietly look on the scene. The wailing of the maids, who gathered around blasted his ears like thunderbolts.

Rama didn't utter a single word. He sat near his mother and stroked her forehead, caressing her hair and consoling her. He brushed away the dust that covered her clothes. Like a huge well-set rock struck deep in the sea, Rama sat unhurt by the lashing of the surging billows around. He was above and beyond the blows of grief and the blandishments of joy. He was filled with as much equanimity now, when he had to leave for the forest for fourteen years, as he had a few moments ago, while going to the court hall to be crowned ruler of a great empire!

Kausalya knew that Rama would never swerve from his path of duty, that he would never break his plighted word, and that he would not stray a hair's breadth from the path laid down by his father. She was certain that her lamentations would not induce him to turn back. So she gave up all attempts to persuade him to give up his resolution. "Son! What use is it to blame others when one is destined to meet these tragic developments? No. It is sheer waste of words. Everything is for our own good. No one can say 'no' to the dictates of the divine. I have had no happiness in this Ayodhya, in this palace. I can be happy only where my Rama is. So, I'll come with you; take me with you." She attempted to rise on her feet. The maids held her and seated her leaning against the wall.

They spoke softly and sweetly to bring her round.

Lakshmana enters the argument

Lakshmana watched Kausalya's anguish and listened. He couldn't control his emotions. He was bursting with anger. Holding his hands tight over his chest, he said, "O revered Mother! I'll never accept this. Is Rama to leave the kingdom and betake himself to the forest, yielding to the prattle of a woman? I can't tolerate it. Father has become too old and his mind is unsteady. He's entangled in sensual pursuits and has become a slave to Kaika's enticements;

he's pitifully uxorious and has no sense of discrimination about the consequences of his actions. He's liable to issue any kind of order in his infatuation.

"Orders of such type should not be obeyed. The king is in a state of feeble-mindedness, unable to distinguish the real from the unreal, the momentary from the momentous. When such rulers give orders out of infatuation, they can well be disobeyed. What crime did Rama commit that he should be sent into the forest? Even Rama's cruellest enemy (if he has any), or even the most hard-hearted barbarian suffering punishment for his crimes, can't point his finger at the slightest slur on his behaviour or action. No king on earth has the authority to drive a person of such unquestioned innocence, purity of intentions, and holy sanctity into the forest as an exile. Rama is steady in his straightforward path; he is the master of his senses; he honours and treats with respect enemies of every type. Will any father drive such a son into the jungle?

Moreover, the king is most attached to dharma; he is a hero full of sacred ideals; he is an adherent of the best in all faiths. Can such a king issue this command? Judging from this, it is certain that Dasaratha is either insane or enslaved by passion. Any command from a person who is either of these is unworthy of consideration. The words of a king who behaves like a lunatic or an infant need not be honoured at all. Forgetting the dictates of political morality, giving up the path of worldly wisdom, throwing to the winds the demands of paternal affection, he has become mad, giving free vent to his whims and fancies. Need his command be treated as valid? I won't agree that it should be respected." Lakshmana turned toward Rama, clasping his hands in reverence. "Rama! Pardon me! Assume the rulership of the realm before news of this spreads and becomes known to all. I will be by your side, with my bow. Whoever stands up against you will have to meet arrows from this bow. Of course, there is no such in Ayodhya or elsewhere.

But if any opposition develops, this great city will become a desert, with no human inhabitant. My sharp arrows will see to that. Why repeat a thousand things? If Bharatha or anyone on his behalf opposes, I will destroy him, root

and branch. I don't care. Even if Dasaratha stands forth as Kaika's supporter in this struggle, I'll capture him and shut him up in prison." While Lakshmana was holding forth in this strain, Rama looked at him sternly, intercepting the flow of his feelings, and admonished him. "Lakshmana! Your words are crossing the bounds. No one can deny me what I wish. None can change the march of my will. My exile in the forest cannot be avoided. You talking is prompted by your love toward me and the desire to prevent your separation from me. Forbear! That will save you against all anxiety and fear. Be patient. Don't get agitated. Don't entertain ideas of hatred against either father or brother Bharatha. They are pure, holy persons.

"Kaika is also highly venerable and is to be honoured and worshiped. The boons she asked are also blameless.

She loved me, caressed me, fondled me, nursed me, played with me, derived more joy from me than her own son, Bharatha. When the mother prays today for such boons from father, boons quite contrary to the ways of the world, surely there must be some hidden significance in the affair. This must be the divine plan, not mere human tactics. Be quiet, give up your fears and hatreds. We will await what happens next." Lakshmana fell at Rama's feet. "Rama! On what basis, under what authority is Bharatha to be given the crown that ought to be yours? Which other son has the right that the eldest has not? You are obeying this absurd, unjust order because of father; but I won't approve of it, whatever you may say in justification." Lakshmana turned to Kausalya. "Revered mother! To tell you the truth, I am devoted to Rama. I speak this on oath; I can't exist even a single moment apart from Rama. If Rama has no desire for the kingdom and moves into the forest, I will follow him. I will walk in his footsteps, I will be his shadow. If he orders it, I will jump most joyously into the blazing fire. I will heed only his orders, no one else's. Mother! I cannot bear the sight of your sorrow. He is your son; he is my Ramachandra. How can anyone be away from his own life-breath?" Listening to Lakshmana, Kausalya was a little comforted. She stroked his head, saying, "Your love gives me much consolation. Your words give me great strength. Brothers of your kind are rare indeed! The world considers the mother who has borne such children as venerable and holy, but we are afflicted now with the feeling

that we are great sinners. Rama won't desist from his resolve. Exile is inevitable for him. I want only this now: Take me also with you," she wailed.

Rama looked at Lakshmana and said, "Brother! I know the extent of your love toward me. I am not unaware of your heroism, your ability and glory. Mother is suffering great grief, since she is unable to understand the true facts and the value of self-control. Besides, since I am the child born of her loins, grief is natural. But consider.

For all values of life, dharma, is the very root. And, dharma is secure only on the foundation of truth.

"Truth (sathya) and righteousness (dharma) are interchangeable. One can't exist without the other. Truth is goodness; goodness is truth. I am now achieving both truth and dharma, while acting in accordance with the command of father. No one dedicated to the good life should break the word pledged to the mother, father, or esteemed preceptor. Therefore, I won't overstep father's orders. That is certain.

"Kaika didn't order me; she only communicated father's command to me. And she did so in his very presence, so one has to bow in reverence to it. If it wasn't father's command when Kaika was telling me that it was, he could have declared that it wasn't, couldn't he? He didn't; he simply bewailed and groaned. For this reason, it is as authentic as his own command. So I won't deviate from any resolution. There is no possibility of my going back on it. Don't allow your reason to slide into this terror-creating, warrior (kshatriya) mentality. Give up violence and cruelty and adopt my stand." Lakshmana was weighed down by anger and sorrow, and Rama stroked his back and spoke soft loving words to assuage his grief. Then, turning to his mother, Kausalya, Rama said, "Don't obstruct my resolve and cause breach of my vow. Whatever may happen, my exile to the forest cannot be averted. Send me with your love; bless my vow, my resolution." He fell at her feet and prayed for permission to leave.

She was shaken by the agony that was torturing her; she placed her hands on

Rama's back and wept aloud.

Seeing her plight, Rama was unable to restrain his emotions. He held her feet and said, "Mother! My word is supreme truth. Listen. No hardship will happen to me while in the forest. I'll spend these fourteen years with the largest measure of happiness and joy. I'll come back and fall at these feet again. I'll fulfil all your hopes about me.

Mother! It is Dasaratha's command! It is a command that not only I but you, Lakshmana, Sumitra, and Bharatha have to carry out to the very letter. This is the ancient and eternal law (sanathana dharma).

"Mother! I will make another appeal; pardon me. The arrangements made by you and others for crowning me must be used by you, with equal joy and enthusiasm, for Bharatha's coronation. Father has entrusted the forest region to me. It is best; it is in accordance with the highest dharma, that each should do the duty allotted to him.

Trying to avoid one's duty, as hard to accomplish, is to entertain the idea of difference between me and Bharatha.

You have to bless us both, asking each to carry on successfully the responsibility entrusted to each." Listening to Rama, Kausalya couldn't bear the grief that descended on her. She groaned in great pain. "O my son! Father brought you up and helped you grow and was happy to see you tall and strong. So he deserves reverence and obedience. Am I too not worthy of reverence? And obedience? And consider this! The wife is the husband's half. The husband is the wife's right half. Thus, when each is the half of the other, I am half of Dasaratha, am I not? That is why the wife is named half the body of the husband. When you say you have been commanded by Dasaratha, it is only the command of half of him. It did not originate from all of him. It will become authoritative only when this half also agrees. When I do not, it is not valid as a command.

"You know the meaning and significance of dharma in all its varied aspects,

so you must be aware of this too. Without the mother's acceptance, no duty can be binding and nothing deserves the name dharma. More than the father's command, the mother's is to be followed. That is the more important duty, for it is the mother who nourished you into childhood and boyhood, not the father!

"Had the mother not borne it for nine months, there would be no child at all! You are now throwing that mother into the flames of grief and proclaiming, "O, it is my father's command. I must obey it at all costs." I won't accept that conduct as correct. No treasure is richer to the mother than her son. And, for mothers such as I, the son is all. When the son looks askance at me and considers the father's order superior, what benefit is it for me to secure heaven and live on divine nectar there? I would rather be in hell. I deem it heaven wherever my son is with me.

"Rama! What can I do here? I haven't tasted a moment's happiness throughout my life! From birth, I was bound by the limitations imposed by mother and father; then, caught in anxiety about what kind of husband I would get and what his character and behaviour would be, I was at last wedded to your father. For years, the agony of childlessness afflicted me. Then I had to suffer from conflict with your father's other wives. I have had no relief from that battle, from that day to this. As a result, I don't know what merit in my previous life secured you as son.

And now, separation from you is happening to me.

"When have I been happy? My life has become a vast stream of grief; I am struggling in it, unable to swim.

I sink in it without any hope of being saved. I had you as a branch that I could hold on to, to save myself. If you deny me that, what will happen to me? Your father won't suffer any feeling of loss from my absence. He has his bliss in Kaika; none else is needed by him. Therefore, instead of hanging on here, and broiling in agony and finally, giving up breath, I prefer looking at the charming face of my dear son. Though I may not have food and drink in the forest, I will

sustain myself on that joy." Though Rama felt that there was some validity in her plea, he was forced by the need to obey his father's wishes and his promise that he would not fail in that duty.

Lakshmana intervened. "Brother! Mother's words are the highest truth. The mother deserves even more reverence than the father. The scripture has laid down "Let the mother be your God; Let the father be your God (Mathru devo bhava, Pithru devo bhava), thus placing the mother first and the father second. It's not proper for you to stick so firmly to your resolution and cause so much grief to mother." Rama turned to him and interrupted. "Lakshmana, you are supporting the statements of a mother who is suffering from the clouding effect of a strong attachment to progeny. Consider the order of the father, which concerns the welfare of the empire, the world in its entirety, and the human community. You haven't understood the inner implication and meaning of that order.

"Only dharma can ensure the other three goals: wealth, happiness, and liberation. There is no need to doubt this or argue about its correctness. When activity is merely devoted to the earning of riches, the world hates the individual. When it is devoted entirely to the selfish fulfilment of one's desire, the world condemns it as contemptible.

Therefore, activity has to be in conformity with dharma, Lakshmana! This is not all. Dasaratha is our father, preceptor, and monarch. He might give us a command, through either desire for something, anger against somebody, or attachment with and love toward someone; that is not our concern! We have only to obey; there is no justification for discarding it.

"A son who delights in sin might act against the command; I am not such a son. Whatever father commands, I bow my head in reverential homage. Regarding this, you might have a bit of doubt. Suppose a father, a fool blinded by lust, devoid of intelligence to discriminate between the momentary and the eternal, intent only on his selfish aggrandisement and putting his trust on the stratagems of others, inflicts injuries on his own son. Should the son put his trust in him and obey him? Without fail he ought to! He may be a

fool or a cruel tyrant, but aren't you his son? When that is so, your status is ever lower and his is ever higher. This decides all duties and rights.

The son can at best try to clarify and explain according to his light what appears to him confused or complicated.

He should not refuse to obey, dismissing it as foolish or absurd.

"Consider this aspect also. Dasaratha is a very talented person, a great warrior, heroic fighter, and a pillar of righteousness. And, he is struggling in agony to keep his plighted word! He wasn't deluded by Kaika or blinded by lust! No. He was moved by the supreme need to abide by his promise, a promise he had solemnly made. He had told her that he would grant her two boons, whatever they be, even if the grant involved injury to his own life!

I can never assent to the view that he is overcome by lust. Father is in misery because he sees no escape from the consequences of that assertion, and his heart does not agree to send me into the forest.

"Lakshmana! Father is a staunch supporter of dharma, more staunch than his predecessors on the throne. His fame has echoed and re-echoed from every corner of the three worlds. Wouldn't it be a bad example to humanity if his queen, the anointed queen, left him and accompanied her son, deserting the husband? Life is short; its span is limited. To lose one's reputation forever by resorting to unrighteous acts is not good, either for me or for you." Then, turning toward the other, he pleaded pathetically, "Mother!" Before he could continue, Kausalya was numbed into stiffness by sorrow. She realised that her efforts to change Rama's stand were fruitless. She found that she could not escape the obligation to give him leave to go with her blessings. She felt that the more she lamented, the more Rama was pained.

Lakshmana was greatly moved. His eyes turned red; he lost all awareness of where he was and amidst whom; his lips became dry; his tongue was tied; he had a fixed stare; he bowed his head and looked on the ground; tears flowed without let or hindrance. Rama felt that it would not be proper to leave him in

that state. Besides, Lakshmana might do something to himself, if left alone; he might even do injury to others. And, those acts would be deemed to have happened on account of me, he thought.

So, Rama questioned Lakshmana. "Brother! The fumes of anger are as incense to the horde of sins. Suppress them. You might be distressed at the thought that Rama was so grossly insulted and dishonoured. But the path of truth and righteousness (sathya and dharma) heed no honour and dishonour; it does not crave for one and shy away from the other. Be brave. Fill your heart with courage. Remain here and serve father; use your days thus for the fulfilment of the highest purpose of life." Lakshmana was startled into speech. "Brother! When Rama, my very breath, proceeds to the forest, whom am I to serve here, with this inert material physical object called the body? This Lakshmana has no desire to serve anyone except Rama. You value your dharma, your sense of duty; I too have my sense of duty, and I value it equally. Therefore, I will come with you. I don't need to await anyone's order. I'm not included in the people bound to the boons claimed by Kaika. Even if I am involved with them, I won't pay heed to her commands or to the directives of her henchmen.

"Only Rama has the authority to command me or issue directives about my movements or conduct. So, here and now, I will also don the hermit's habiliment of bark, tie up my hair into matted locks, and prepare myself to follow you." With these words, Lakshmana divested himself of the jewels and regal paraphernalia he had burdened himself with while proceeding to the Coronation Hall; he threw the jewels and silken robes in disgust. The ear ornaments and the necklaces fell in the far corners of the room. He was fretting to accompany his brother.

Rama's heart softened at Lakshmana's spontaneous devotion and dedicated loyalty. He went close to him and, placing his hand on his shoulder, spoke softly, "Brother! My joy has no bounds, since I have such a brother as you! This is my great good fortune. By your coming with me, mother Kausalya will also gain some peace of mind. She is very much agitated by fear and doubt about how I will spend fourteen years in the forest, and whether I will return

after the exile is over. So, tell mother to be free from fear. Go and soothe her. While we spend the hours like this, Father must be suffering more and more anxiety. Kaika will suffer from the welling doubt that I may not leave at all! Therefore, I will go to Sita and inform her; I will go to Kaika's palace, to take leave of father.

Meanwhile, you go to your mother, Sumitra, and receive her consent to join me."

Rama went around Kausalya full circle and fell flat at her feet in reverence. At that, the maids and attendants, as well as the other inmates of the women's quarters, set up a loud wail, as if the deluge had come upon them.

Kausalya bravely drew Rama toward her when he stood up awaiting her blessings. She embraced him and caressed his hair. With her hands on his shoulder, she said, "Son! Rama! you are the staunchest adherent of dharma.

You are a resolute hero. You can have no cause to fear life in the forest. You have resolved on exile in the forest; it has become impossible for me to dissuade you from that decision. May it be well with you. Fulfil your ideal, your yearning, to respect the wish of your father! Repay the debt that you owe your father by acting according to his command.

"As for me, I wish only one thing: return happy to Ayodhya. I will be happy on that day at least. Rama! The decree of destiny is indeed inscrutable. Its text cannot be reshaped, even by the most powerful. The dharma for whose sake you are now leaving us will certainly guard you and guide you while in exile.

"Rama! How nice it would be if at this very moment the fourteen years would roll by, and I would see your return rather than your departure. Alas! Pardon my madness! Son! How shall I convey to you my blessings? Shall I say, let the fourteen years pass by as fourteen days? No, no, as fourteen winks of the eye! Come safe, come soon.

And be crowned emperor, O, jewel of the Raghu dynasty! O, my dearest son!

The goddess of dharma will surely shelter you during the years of exile, for it is to propitiate Her that you are entering the forest. She is the strongest and most steadfast of guardians. I will be propitiating the gods here these fourteen years and praying that no harm comes to you.

"The service you have offered to your mother, father, and preceptor will confer long life, health, and happiness on you. Your loyalty to truth will grant you impregnable courage. The mountains, rivers, bushes, anthills, beasts and birds of the forest - these will approach you in kind affection, cater to your needs, and fill you with joy. The sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies will ward off all evil and protect you. Even the demons of the forest, intent on heinous acts of cruelty, will be drawn toward you, for your heart is full of cool comforting love, and they will surrender at your feet, accepting you as master." Blessing Rama, Kausalya, with some effort, gulped down the sorrow that was overwhelming her and put on a calm brave face. She smelled the crown of Rama's head and she held him hard and close in loving embrace. She kissed his cheeks. Her lips quivered, when she spoke the parting words, "Rama! Proceed in joy and return safe." Rama knew the depth of affection that the mother was bestowing on him. He touched her feet many times in reverential gratitude and said, "Mother! Don't grieve. Don't reduce sleep or food; Don't injure your health.

Remember me at all moments with a joyful heart. Your thoughts will be reflected in my safety and prosperity.

When you grieve here, how can I be happy there? If you want me to be happy there, you have to be happy here.

And, with all your heart, you must bless me from here." Praying thus, he moved out of the place, averse to leave her thus, and yet, anxious to do his duty.

Rama stepped on the royal road and started walking along, barefooted, through the concourse of citizens who had filled it. People were petrified at the sight of that resplendent symbol of truth and virtue. The citizens had

heard rumours floating over the streets that Rama was leaving for the forest, and they were unable to believe it. They prayed it might be false. But when they saw him tramp barefooted, their hearts sank; the exaltation they experienced at the news of the coronation plunged into the depths of misery. Faces that bloomed in joy suddenly faded and dropped, wan and withered. Rama didn't raise his head to look at any of the faces around him. He proceeded to Sita's apartments.

12. Sita Insists On Going With Rama

Sita was watching the entrance door, for she was anxious to learn what had happened at Kaika's palace and why Rama had not come yet, though the auspicious hour for the coronation was fast approaching. She had finished her own rites of vigil and fast, and she held in readiness a plate of sandal paste, flowers, grain, and other prescribed articles so that she would not be the cause of delay. Her heart beat fast in expectancy of Rama's arrival.

Her maids and attendants were overcome with the ecstasy of the coming hour of triumph. Lovely maidens were ready with sparkling lamps for the ceremony of waving them before Rama as he entered the decorated hall shining in unprecedented charm. Suddenly Rama stepped in, unheralded, with bowed head and bare feet.

Everyone was shocked. Sita moved forward toward her Lord; she could scarcely believe her eyes. Her body shivered like a leaf in the wind. She bit her lips and swallowed her surprise. "Lord! What is the meaning of this?"

Why are you thus? You said this day is dedicated to Brihaspathi, preceptor of the gods. You said it is a very auspicious day. The star is Pushya, and you're to become the crown prince of this empire.

"Why aren't they holding over your divinely beautiful self the white umbrella of imperium with the brilliance of sunlit pearls, with its hundred ribs of gemset gold? Where are the resplendent whisks with their feather-pure sheen that appear like moons? Why aren't they accompanying you today? Why are the minstrels of the court silent as you proceed to the court hall? O, Lord! Why haven't the masters of Vedic lore, the brahmins, anointed you with consecrated honey and curds? And the ministers, vassal kings, and leaders of the various communities in the state aren't walking behind you, as usage requires! The majestic royal elephant, a mountain peak on the move, Satrunjaya, trampling the ground, making people mistake it for a dark blue cloud flowing over the road - shouldn't he come first, announcing your

arrival?" While Sita was raining questions like these, Rama could not decide how to answer them. The matter could not be explained quickly in a few words. Rama entered an inner hall and drew Sita nearer. "Sita! Revered father has willed and resolved at this very auspicious hour to send me to the forest, and it has become urgent to honour his command." Sita heard the words but could not believe them. "Lord! What crime did you commit to deserve this punishment, this exile into the forest? Dasaratha is the embodiment of justice. He would never issue such an order without legitimate reasons! What is the real purpose, the inner significance, of this order?" Rama smiled at her question. "Sita! Long ago, father promised to grant mother Kaika two boons, but the promise had not been fulfilled so far. This day, she asked for them both. They were, first: Bharatha must be crowned as heir-apparent (yuvaraja); second: I should move into the forest and live there with matted hair and vestments of bark for fourteen years.

"Father is supremely righteous. He never acts against the plighted word. Therefore, he bowed his head to dharma and acceded. I felt I should see you before leaving! You were born in a greatly revered family. You know and value all the moral codes and goals. Janaka Maharaja, master of the inner mysteries of the highest morality, is your father. You too walk steadily on the path of dharma. I have to leave for the forest this very day.

"Dasaratha has given this empire, inherited by him through many generations, to Bharatha; from now on, he is the lord over this realm. Immediately after being crowned, he will come for your blessing. Don't extol me before my brother or exhibit any trace of sorrow or displeasure at my being sent to the forest. Don't slight him or look down upon him. Kings appreciate only those who adore them and serve them. So don't praise me or decry him. He is my brother and your brother-in-law; but, that is only with reference to physical kinship; with reference to kinship, Bharatha is your monarch and mine. Give him due honour. Don't cause any displeasure or distress to him by word or deed.

"Fair one! Follow not only Bharatha's directives but also those of the father, Dasaratha. Serve also mother Kausalya, who is suffering unspeakable agony

because I am leaving her. Take all appropriate measures to keep grief away from her. Also, please obey and please the other two mothers, Kaika and Sumitra.

"Sita! Bharatha and Satrughna are to me as dear and close as my very breath. Treat them as your own brothers; foster them lovingly as your sons. O charming damsel! Don't leave this place and go to Mithila because I am not here. Remain in Ayodhya and comfort mother and father, serving them in suitable ways to remove the sorrow from their hearts. With love and care, confer comfort, courage, and contentment on them." When Rama was instructing Sita on her duties, she could not contain her laughter! She also felt a sense of shame at the turn of his arguments. She couldn't remain silent for long. "Rama," she interrupted, "Rama! you are Dasaratha's. I have not heard at any time words unworthy of that lineage fall from your lips. Mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter-in-law - everyone has to experience a quantum of happiness and misery, in proportion to the good and bad done by each. But the wife has a special source of fortune, good or bad; she has a share in the good and bad for which her husband is responsible. She is endowed with a part of his joy or grief. So, if Emperor Dasaratha ordered you to go into the forest, he also gave me that order.

"A woman may be fed and fostered by her mother and father; she may be revered by her son; she may be served by her maids. But they can never be her shield and support. The trinkets and toys with which you try to convince me serve only to arouse amusement in me. During the years preceding my wedding, father taught me all the duties that should guide and bind me. I am neither an ignoramus nor a seeker of power. And, more than these, let me tell you, I do not cling fanatically to any opinion because it is mine.

"There is no need for you to point out my special duty, for I know them all. Isn't it only when I decide to remain here that you have to tell me how to serve the parents-in-law, sisters-in-law, and ruler of the land? But when I'm with you, what chance is there, what need is there, for me to take on the service of others? I'm coming with you in full joy! For a long time, I have had an unfulfilled desire to spend some years in forests. My good fortune now

gives me the chance to satisfy that desire, in the company of my Lord! I won't listen if you tell me not to express my point of view in this great matter. Don't be angry with me for disobeying you. It is not just and proper for you to throw me aside here, as one throws out water from the cup after quaffing a mouthful. Believe me! I won't stay in Ayodhya even for a moment; take me with you." Sita fell at his feet and held them tight. "I haven't the slightest sorrow that you were not crowned. I hold you dear, crowned or uncrowned. Wherever you are, that is my empire. There is my treasure. That is my glory," she pleaded and prayed.

Rama told her that forest life was fraught with fears and dangers. The forest was infested with wild animals and wilder men, demonic predators, and bandits. One encountered river floods and thick thorny undergrowth. She was not used to going places on foot, so she would undergo great exhaustion. He described various other forms of fear and anxiety that would confront her.

But Sita was unmoved. She replied, "Lord! However wild the animals, however thick and terror-striking the forest, what harm can they cause, what injury can they inflict on me when you are by my side? I can walk through forest tracks; it will be no trouble for me. I will be happier if you ask me to walk first, preparing the path smooth for you to tread. I will pick and cast away stones, pebbles and thorns to lessen pain, making your journey easy. Let me be with you, so I may render this service and be happy.

"Here, in the palace of Ayodhya, and in the women's quarters, I wouldn't get the chance to serve you. I would feel worried and miserable that all services for you were undertaken by attendants and aides. There will be no attendant, no aide in the forest! So I can be happy, doing all the services myself. That is my great good fortune!

Make my life worthwhile, Lord. Give me that glorious chance!" Sita asked in a variety of ways, pleading for mercy and justice.

Rama was moved to compassion. "Sita! Living in the forest, you cannot be happy, you have to suffer greatly in the coming days." Rama expatiated on

the horrors of jungles and the sufferings that one has inevitably to meet there.

But Sita stood firm. "Rama, I won't be an obstacle in the observance of your vows. From your words, I infer that you are hiding something from me, some objection that you don't like to raise before me. I will observe along with you the vows of personal austerity incumbent on a person on the brahmachari path. I too will live on tubers and fruits. I too will discard the use of scents, and we will inhale only the fragrance of forest flowers.

"You are a scion of the Ikshvaku line, which has saved millions from danger and disaster! Can't you guard me against them? Are you so weak of hand? I won't give you trouble; through me, you won't have the slightest worry. Lord! I cannot but follow you. I will lay myself down and sleep at your feet; that will give me the fullest bliss. Rama! I know and recognise none except you. I cannot exist alive for a moment apart from you. If you hold fast to your resolution and leave me in Ayodhya, Sita will have drawn her last breath before you reach the forest.

Take this as Truth." Sita's eyes shed streams of tears as she spoke these words.

Rama tried to pacify her. "O Sita, you are a very staunch adherent of dharma. It is best for you to stick to your righteous qualities, maintaining them at this place. You can't act as your will dictates; you have no freedom to behave as you want. Your dharma is to act in accordance with my words. Therefore, give up this idea.

"I am saying this for your own good. Guarding you will be a burden for me. Streams rolling down from mountain peaks, wild beasts that dwell in the caves, lions and tigers roaming without let or hindrance amidst the hills and valleys - these have to be overcome. Rivers in spate will have to be forded. We may have to leap down from huge boulders and rocks. Considering these difficulties, I have to tell you in such emphatic terms to stay.

"You have to wear matted hair and clothes of the bark of trees. When men go to some river or lake for the evening rites of worship, who will watch over you against any calamity that might happen? Whatever may be the crisis, we cannot give up those rites. You know how strict that rule is, so every day you may have to be alone for some time. We can't say what will happen when." Rama tried to picture before Sita fearful scenes of forest life, but Sita was not affected in the least. "Rama!

Why tell me these things, as if I am a simpleton of some backward village or an ignorant, stupid woman, unaware of the teachings of the scriptures (sastras)? I am well aware of your skill and prowess. Nothing is impossible for you on earth, nay in all the fourteen worlds! And, when you are with me, what fear can disturb me? Well, if a wild beast attacks me and I fall a prey to it, I will be happy to die in your presence, rather than anywhere far! I shall die happily then.

"I shall never agree to a life spent without you. You said I have no freedom to do as I wish. Did you say that with full consciousness of its meaning? Or was it just a remark to test me? I am half of you; it is my right to name myself as your half. You too have the same right. That is the truth. You are not fully free, nor am I. I have as much right over you as you have over me. But I don't plead for my rights or claims. I am yearning to be near you, to be ever in your presence. My words arise from that craving." Listening to Sita revealing her hard determination, Rama continued. "Sita! You are entangling yourself in the complexities of rights and claims! When I proceed to the forest, the aged parents will wail and weep for me. At that time, you can console and comfort them, with gentle assurances. That is your duty. You must conduct yourself according to the needs of each occasion. Be with them; serve them; that is the way to please me and give me spiritual bliss (ananda)." Rama spoke as if his decision was final, and in a tone of command.

Sita responded only with a smile. "When the son born of these very parents plunges them in deep grief and goes away, clinging with a bear's grasp to his adamant resolution, and when the very son whom they love so much gives everything up and goes into the forest, what responsibility does the daughter-

in-law have, who has entered this household from her own, a stranger in the family, what responsibility does she have to console and comfort those deserted by the son? Ponder this!

"I am told you insisted on your mother remaining here, serving her husband, though she wept out her eyes in bitter tears and prayed to be allowed to follow you to the forest! You told her that her duty of serving her husband is predominant. You declared that it would bring untold disgrace on the Ikshvaku dynasty if she abandoned the lord she was wedded to out of affection for the son she had borne and brought forth into the world! You dilated on such moral rules of inestimable value before her. But, as soon as you come near me, you reverse the advice and tell me that my predominant duty is service to the parents-in-law and not to the husband! Think it over! Which is the correct advice?

"For the wife, the husband is God - this was laid down not only for Kausalya; it is the guide and goal for women, all over the world, without exception. Evidently, you have forgotten this truth, for it doesn't suit your present wish. You are unable to explain how the moral rule you quoted before Kausalya doesn't apply to me "However long you argue, whatever you assert; I will not leave off treading along your footprints. You may kill me for transgressing your order, but I assert I can never be without you. Ramachandra! No sooner did you speak of the exile in the forest you are entering upon than I had such an upsurge of joy, remembering an incident that took place in my childhood! You cannot understand the extent of that joy!

"My mother, with me seated on her lap, was immersed in anxiety about the husband destiny had in store for me, whether he would be morally upright and endowed with excellent attributes. She was stroking my hair, lost in thought. The maid appeared just then and announced that a woman ascetic wanted an audience with her. She lifted me, gently placed me on the floor, and went forward to meet her. Mother fell at her feet and directed me to do likewise. I did as she directed. The woman eyed me closely from head to foot and said, 'Mother! Your child will spend years with her husband in the forest.' "My mother replied, with a laugh. 'Not married yet, and you talk of her

spending life in the forest!' "However, the woman did not keep quiet. 'After marriage! She will have to live in the forest with her husband, for some time!' Then she went her way! Ever since, I have looked forward excitedly to living in the forest with my Lord! Make me happy, take me with you." Sita fell at his feet, sobbing.

Rama was moved to pity. He raised her gently. "Sita! To whom else am I to confide the secret spring of my decision? Listen! You are young; in the forest there are many hermitages full of ascetics, hermits, and sages. I will have to go to them in order to be of service to them and to offer my reverence to them. Kings and princes may also be present (since they come to hunt) and honour them and be blessed by them. Their eye may fall on you, and consequential complications and conflicts may arise. And, since I will be wearing the apparel of an ascetic, it may not be proper to fight with them. At least for this reason you will have to remain in Ayodhya." Sita had her own reasons to protest at this. "Rama! It isn't just for you to deceive me, spinning such fairy tales, as if you are of common stock! When you are by my side, can even the ruler of the gods cast his eye on me?

If he does, won't he be reduced to ashes that very moment? No, for this reason, you can't leave me here; you can't escape your duty and responsibility on this score!

"Let me also tell you something: If you are not with me, what will be my fate? I will have to be alone in Ayodhya; the kind of incidents you just dilated upon can happen here! Or else, I may suffer inner agony not being able to bear the conjugal happiness of others! So, don't leave me alone. Take me with you, and let your renown and mine spread for all time over the entire world.

"Let me add: You are dear to all as Ramachandra, Rama the moon! I am Sita, which means cool, the cool moonlight! How can the moon be in the forest and its cool light be in Ayodhya? Where the moon is, there must be its light! So this separation can never be. The two shall ever be together, never apart! If the two happen to part, it is but evidence of the approach of some unnatural catastrophe, a world-shaking tragedy. Or, it may happen for the sake of an

epoch-making endeavour to destroy the wicked and save the good from extinction! Since no such crisis is evident now, our separation is impossible. It cannot happen." Sita, the supreme mother, spoke these words in a resolute voice, as if she would brook no objection.

"Sita! You will have to sleep on hard rocky ground, wear apparel made of fibre or bark, live on tubers and roots. Even this food might be difficult to get every day. Their availability depends on the seasons of the year.

When they are not procurable, you might have to be hungry for days. The forest is infested with demonic tribes who are masters of a million stratagems and who eat human flesh with delight. O! It is impossible to describe fully the travails of life in the forest! You can't bear these terrors and tribulations. If you accompany me into exile, people will condemn me and pour abuse on me. How can the celestial swan that lives on the ambrosial waters of the Manasa-Sarovar (Lake of the Mind) survive drinking the brackish waters of the sea? How can the cuckoo sporting in the garden that is full of tender-leafed mango trees be happy and carefree in a patch of low grass?

Reflect on these matters. It is most desirable that you stay at home."

Sita listened to Rama's words, spoken so softly and sweetly, but all the while she stood with her eyes on the ground and tears streaming down her cheeks. She stood like a pillar, unmoved and immovable. Her tears fell continuously on the floor. Rama could not bear the sight of her distress. Sita could find no word to answer the objections Rama raised. Finally, she managed to control her emotions, and swallow her grief.

"O Lord of my life! You are the treasure-house of everything good and auspicious. When I am separated from you, even heaven is horrible hell. Parents, brothers, sisters, parents-in-law, sons, preceptors, kinsmen - all these might be resplendent repositories of goodness, but for a woman, her husband is the only source of strength, joy, and fortune. He alone can grant her happiness and delight. Except for the husband, she has none to guide and guard her; he is her refuge, her only resort. Lord! When the husband is away

from her, the wife will find the body, the home, city, kingdom, the wealth heaped around her - everything as sources of grief and sorrow. They cannot confer joy on her stricken mind. Sweetness will turn bitter when her Lord is away. Delight will be curdled into disease. All the joys I crave are centred in you. Nothing can equal the ecstasy I derive when I fix my eyes on your face, which shines so bright and comforting like the full moon in autumn.

"When I'm with you there, the birds and beasts will be my kith and kin. The forest will be the city I love.

The apparel made of tree bark will be silken clothes. The hermitage with the thatch of leaves will be as delightful a home as a heavenly mansion. The fairies and angels of the forest, the sylvan deities will be parents-in-law. I will revere them with equal awe. When I am with you, sheaves of grass and heaps of floral petals will give much softness for the bed - the God of love could aspire for more. And the tubers, roots, and fruits you speak of will be as sweet and sustaining as divine nectar itself! The mountain peaks will gladden me as much as the towers of Ayodhya. I will come down one slope and climb another as gladly as coming down one flight of stairs and getting up another here. It will be so easy and delightful.

"Every day, I will derive the thrill of delight at the sight of your lotus feet. Besides, this will be a golden chance for me to serve you at all times in every way. How can I survive the agony of losing this precious chance?

O, treasure-chest of mercy! Don't leave me here; take me with you!

"Really there is no need for me to pour these importunities into your ear; for, you reside in all beings and are aware of all that they feel and think. It isn't proper to inflict such pain on me, when you know how my heart yearns for the chance to be with you.

"Lord! I am downcast, miserable. If you leave me and go, it will bring your name down. You have all the noble attributes; why then deny mercy to me? Can I keep alive for fourteen years, separated from you? I find it impossible to

keep alive even for ten winks of separation! Accept my prayer, show me a little kindness. When I am with you, how can anyone dare harm or attack me? Why? No one dare cast a glance at me. Can the jackal or the hare open its eye and dare look at the lion? I am not a tender fragile person. To speak the truth, you are tenderness personified!

"The Earth is my mother, so I have every right and every strength to traverse it. Really, happiness is your share in life; my lot is to suffer. When such is the case, why do you invent facts and cause disappointment to me.

It is not correct. I declare that I can carry out with ease tasks that are beyond you! You know full well that I lifted up and placed aside Siva's bow, which no king, however proud of his prowess, could lift. I am surprised that you doubt my capabilities! My valour and skill are not inferior to yours. So, give me permission and make arrangements to depart with me in great joy." Sita bowed low and fell at Rama's feet.

Rama felt it would be improper to continue resisting her wishes. He resolved to yield. "Sita! Give up your grief. Don't give way to sadness. As you desire, I will take you with me. Engage yourselves quickly in preparing for the journey to the forest!" Hearing his sweet words, Sita was elated, filled with boundless joy. She said, "Preparation? What has one to prepare to live in the forest? I am always ready, with whatever I need, for I need only you. I have no other want. I follow you this moment. In you, I have all I need. You know I have no desire for anything other than you." With these words, she held Rama's hand in hers and stepped forward.

"Sita! Consider this: You will not be in Ayodhya for fourteen years. Therefore, go and release the parrots and birds you have reared as pets with love and care. And the cows you fostered with affection. Give them away to brahmins, so they might be treated lovingly. Distribute the various articles of dress, the vehicles, and other articles used by you to the people, or else they will be ruined by time. It is better far that they be used rather than get disintegrated." Sita immediately ran toward the cages, and addressing each pet bird in loving accents, told them; "Go! Like us, roam freely in the beautiful

forest." With her own hands, she opened the cages and set them free! Then she went to the cowshed. She fed the cows with various tasty foods and talked to the brahmins who were to receive them as gifts. Her charming face beamed with joy. Spectators watching her give the things away felt their hearts melt with sorrow at her impending departure. They shed tears in streams, for they were moved by the large-hearted generosity and, more than all, by her exultation at the prospect of accompanying her husband into exile in the forest. Her ecstasy was beyond the pen of any poet.

13. Entering Into Exile

Thousands had gathered in the palace quadrangle. Their grief was immeasurable. Meanwhile, the minister went in and aroused the emperor, who had fallen unconscious on the floor. He made him sit up, placed him in position, and told him that Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had come to talk with him. Rama already stood near his father, speaking words of soothing love. Dasaratha's grief knew no bounds when he saw Sita and Lakshmana.

He embraced Rama closely and fell on the floor. Anguish choked his throat; he pressed his hands on his chest and tried to suppress the agony. Sita and Lakshmana couldn't look at the suffering emperor.

Lakshmana saw Kaika standing by with an air of authority. His eyes became red with rage, and he looked daggers at her, as if he would kill her on the spot. But he controlled his anger and cooled his emotion, watching Rama's serenely calm face. Kaika said, "Rama! You are plunging your father into deeper grief! The sooner you leave and reach the forest, the quicker your father will be relieved of anxiety. Don't delay any longer! Prostrate before your father and go." Her words, so devoid of elementary kindness, seemed to split Dasaratha's heart. He suddenly shouted, "Demoness! Evil spirit! How hard and adamantine your words are," and fell in a faint.

Just then Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana fell at his feet. Rama said, "Father! Bless us and permit us to leave.

This is a time for rejoicing, not pining and grieving. Over-attachment brings infamy in its train." Rama pleaded for him to be courageous and give up the delusion that made him dote on him. Rama clasped his father's feet and then knelt on his knees, caressing and consoling.

Dasaratha opened his eyes and looked at his beloved son. He sat up with great difficulty and, holding Rama's hands, said, "O my darling Son! Listen to me! You have self-control and discrimination. You know what is right; it is

proper for you to do only the right thing. But it's not right when one person does wrong for another to suffer from its consequences, is it? The play of fate is unpredictable, it's a riddle beyond solution." The emperor began to pile argument on argument in his innocence and love, to dissuade Rama from his resolve to go to the forest.

Dasaratha, the father, knew Rama as a master of the codes of morality and as a strict adherent of these codes; he was skilled in justifying his acts; he was unafraid of the consequences of his resolve. Dasaratha read from Rama's face that he had come to take leave of him for the journey into exile. When he saw Sita also before him, he called her near, and when she knelt by his side, he stroked her head softly and described to her the travails of forest life. He told her that the best course for her would be to stay back, either with her parents-in-law or with her own parents. His words came through groans of unbearable sorrow. He gnashed his teeth in rage when his eyes fell upon Kaika; all the while, he was fuming and fretting within himself, unable to contain his grief.

Sita fell at his feet. "Revered father-in-law! I long only for the service of Rama. That good fortune awaits me in full measure in the forest. I can't stay back, losing this precious chance. Service rendered to parents or parents-in-law cannot give the wife the joy of fulfilment that service rendered to her husband can give. There is no joy or happiness greater or higher than that. Don't oppose me or present arguments against my leaving. Confer on me your blessings, and send me with Ramachandra." Dasaratha could well understand and appreciate Sita's yearning. He extolled her virtues with genuine enthusiasm, for the edification of Kaika, standing before him. Meanwhile, the wives of royal ministers and the wives of royal preceptors who were in the room gathered around Sita; in turn, they too described the hardship inherent in forest life.

The court preceptor's spouse sought a cleverer ruse to dissuade her. "Sita! You weren't required to leave and go into the forest. It is your task to remain here and comfort your husband's parents, who are sunk in sorrow. You are half of Rama, aren't you? So, this half must stay in order to alleviate the sorrow caused by the departure of the other half. Moreover since you are half

of the eldest son, the heir to the throne, you have the right to rule over the empire. If Rama moves into the forest and lives there to honour his father's word, stay and rule over the realm and uphold Rama's renown, filling his parents with delight. As Rama's wife, this is the correct step you should take; this is your legitimate duty." These words were spoken as soft and sweet as the whispering of autumn moonbeams into the ears of chakravaka birds, but they made Sita reel in misery. She was so overcome that no reply came from her.

Meanwhile, Kaika had secured hermit's robes of fibre as well as rosaries of tulsi; she held them before Rama and said, "The emperor holds you as dear as his very life, so he is bringing down eternal infamy on his head, unwilling to let you go. His affection for you is clouding the righteousness of the course. He won't utter the words 'Go into the forest,' at any time, under any circumstances. It is fruitless to await his agreement and his permission.

So, decide on one of these two steps: Do you court infamy and dishonour and stay to rule over the empire? Or, do you leave for the forest and bring eternal glory to the Ikshvaku dynasty? Decide and act." Rama was glad that she spoke so. But the words entered Dasaratha's heart like sharp nails driven in by heavy hammer strokes. "Alas! What cruel fate is mine! That I should live even after hearing such harsh words!" And he rolled to the floor in a faint. Regaining consciousness, he recalled the words he had heard and again became unconscious.

Rama couldn't bear the sight of his father's helplessness in the face of this situation. He felt he should accept Kaika's suggestion and leave; the sooner he left, the better it would be for all concerned.

He wound one of the fibre robes his step-mother had brought around himself and gave the other to Sita. She stood holding it in her hands, with her head bent in embarrassment, for she didn't know how to wear it or fasten it around her. It looked too short. Rama, who already had his robe on, came near and spoke to her in a low voice.

She was ashamed to confess that she didn't know how to wear the garment, which hermit women draped around themselves so elegantly. She whispered, "Besides, this is not like the ones we wear; it is too short and not wide enough!" Rama consoled her and, giving her courage, took her aside. Saying that it could be worn 'thus-wise,' he wound it round her himself. Seeing this, the wives of the hermits and other women of the palace shed tears of sympathy.

At this point, Vasishtha, the royal preceptor, arrived at the scene; he stood aghast, taking in the situation at a glance. He fell foul of Queen Kaika. He declared that Sita need not wear the fibre garment. He asserted that Kaika had asked for and had been granted two boons only - Bharatha to be crowned and Rama to be sent into the forest.

He said that Sita could go into the forest with all regal paraphernalia and every requisite for a comfortable sojourn there.

At this, Rama unwound the garment he had placed over her dress. But Sita came forward and fell at the sage's feet. "Master! Of course, my wearing that garment is not the direct consequence of mother Kaika's desire.

Can't I follow the ways of my Lord? Would it be proper for me, would it bring credit to me, to live in the forest bedecked in jewels and costly silken garments when my Lord is wearing the garment of a hermit? Wouldn't it be absurd for a dutiful wife to adopt this attitude? Give me permission to put these garments on, so I may maintain the wife's code of conduct and carry out my duty." The adherence to righteous conduct that prompted this prayer moved the mighty sage to tearful compassion.

With sorrow stuttering his voice, he said, "Sita! This line of thought comes quite naturally to you, since you are the embodiment of virtue. But, just as with kings and rulers, you and others must respect certain principles. The crooked and wicked brain of your mother-in-law Kaika needs some correction and warning. As a matter of fact, this day your husband was to be crowned emperor of the realm. Though the event didn't take place, as a result of a

combination of circumstances, including promises made long ago, I must say that it is against political justice to crown Bharatha. Only the eldest son has the right to the throne; no one else has the claim. If he gives up the right for any reason, through his own free will, as he has done now, you, as the other half of his person, have the right to wield that authority; no third party can exercise it." Kaika was visibly affected by fear. But she was not unaware that Sita didn't want to exercise regal authority and power, however long Vasishtha elaborated on her rights and claims. Sita refused to pay attention to them; she was yearning for the chance to wear the fibre garment of the hermit in preference to the robes of imperial splendour.

The wife of the royal preceptor felt that Sita would never retract from her resolve, so she and others took the garment and wound it round her, in correct hermitage style.

The journey begins

Meanwhile, Lakshmana also wore the same sylvan garments. Rama decided that there should be no more delay. The three prostrated reverently before Dasaratha, who fainted away at the sight of his sons in their ascetic attire. They prostrated also before Kaika who was standing nearby. They fell at the feet of sage Vasishtha and his consort. And they started toward the forest.

Citizens of Ayodhya who had gathered at the palace gates saw them walking as hermits and broke into bitter sobs. Many were so shocked that they fell unconscious. Many beat their heads in sheer despair. At the doorstep of the royal gate, Rama once again prostrated before sage Vasishtha, and he spoke a few words exhorting the people to remain calm and to uphold virtue. He told them that they should not grieve over the turn of events, that he would return to Ayodhya after the fourteen years of stay in the forest, and that the order of exile was only for their good, his own good, and the good of the whole world.

Then he distributed largesses to the poor. He gifted houses as well as gold, lands, and cows to brahmins, so they could perform ritual worship and sacrifices without stint. He prayed to the sage to arrange for the performance

of Vedic sacrifices on appropriate occasions. He stood with folded palms before him and said, "Holy sage and preceptor, for these, the people, and for my parents, you are the real parents. Advise the king, admonish the king to rule over the people as he would treat his own children." When the people heard this prayer repeated on their behalf, they became sad, heart-broken. Some of them beat their breasts, cursing themselves for losing the fortune of being ruled by such a prince. Some inflicted injuries on their own heads. Some rolled on the ground and wailed aloud.

Rama turned again toward the mass of citizens and, with palms folded, spoke a few words to them. "My dear people, you are as dear to me as my very life. Our sovereign ruler has sent me to protect and foster the forest region.

Do not entertain any animosity against him for this reason. Guard him and pray for him at all times. Adhere to his commands; make him happy and be happy yourselves. Your love for me should not lead you to dislike the king. Never wish ill for him. Only those are dear to me who work for the happiness of the king, after I leave for the forest. Those are the people who are really devoted to me, who do what I really like. Fulfil this my desire; honour these words of mine; make me happy. My dear people! Being separated from me, my mother Queen Kausalya will naturally be immersed in grief. Every mother in a similar situation will have unbearable agony. I plead with you, since you are intelligent and full of sympathy, do your best to alleviate her sorrow and to comfort her." Then he called minister Sumanthra near and said, "O Sumanthra! Proceed now to father. Advise him and quiet him. That is the task with which you have to busy yourself." Sumanthra was overcome with grief and stood silent, with tears streaming down his cheeks. He could not restrain his sorrow; he sobbed and wept aloud. Other ministers who were standing around him, as well as the aides in attendance, attempted to bring him round into a state of calmness and courage. But they were too sad to stand there, so they went into the palace, in accordance with the directive given by Rama. The entire city was sunk deep in a vast sea of sorrow.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha had recovered from his faint and became conscious of what had happened. He lamented, "Rama! Rama!" and tried to raise himself

up. But, heavy with grief, he fell on the floor again. He rose and tried to walk but could not; he moved falteringly around.

At that moment, Sumanthra entered the room, and endeavoured to hold and console him. But, with huge outbursts of anguish surging in him, how could he convey consolation to his master? However, he remembered Rama's order to that effect, so he dutifully swallowed the sorrow overwhelming his heart and sat by the emperor's side with tears still flowing in streams. He could not utter any word for a long time.

Dasaratha opened his eyes. He saw Sumanthra by his side. Exclaiming "Rama!" in uncontrollable grief, he fell into the old minister's lap and sobbed. He rose and groaned, "Sumanthra! Rama has gone into the forest, but my life has not gone out of this body! What can my life gain by sticking to this body?" Then, getting a little calmer, he said, "Here! Hasten behind Rama! Take a fast chariot and go. My daughter-in-law can never bear the heat of the sun. She will soon have blisters on those lotus petal soles! Go! Go with the chariot!"

14. Into The Forest

Dasaratha said, "Sumanthra, my Ramachandra is an unshakeable hero; he will not turn back. His resolution cannot be shaken or suppressed by anyone. Efforts made for modifying it will be futile, and we will only be causing him distress by our attempts. Besides, Rama is an unswerving adherent of truth. Don't delay, for if even a little time is spent in getting the chariot ready, you may miss his trail. My subjects cannot bear the sight of Rama walking along the royal roads of Ayodhya. Go, go!" The emperor hurried him out with the words, "Carry with you in that chariot a few hampers of food and a few weapons and give them over. Sumanthra! I forgot to tell you this. Plead as strongly as you can, mention also that I told you to pray for Sita to be directed to return to Ayodhya. Take them into the chariot and let them go with you some distance toward the forest. Go into the forest with them, for if Sita is frightened at the sight of the jungle, and you become aware of her fear, you can immediately ask Rama for orders and pray for Sita, the tender princess of Mithila, to return to Ayodhya, bringing to her mind that it is also my wish. Tell her that, if she can't agree to stay in Ayodhya, I will arrange to send her to her father, Janaka." Dasaratha repeated these words often; laden with grief at the pictures they evoked, he lost consciousness and rolled on the ground.

Rising soon, he exclaimed, in great distress, "Sumanthra! Why waste words and time? Bring my Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita before me now; let me look at all three. Decide on doing that, and make me happy." Then, he plaintively requested Sumanthra, "Go fast, don't delay, take the chariot to where they are and drive the vehicle as far as it is possible for it to proceed, to the spot beyond which it cannot go. Perhaps, it may be possible to journey in a chariot for three or four days. At the end of that period, let them alight; stand there watching them until they move beyond the reach of your eyes, before you turn back to bring me the news of their health and safety. Now, go. Don't stay near me. Go." Dasaratha asked the minister to hasten.

Bowing his head in acceptance of the emperor's order, Sumanthra fell at his

feet and got the chariot ready.

He caught up with Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana, who were going along the city roads on foot. He told them what the Emperor had said. He had them seated inside the chariot; then, he drove off in the direction of the forest.

On both sides of the royal road, masses of citizens were weeping and wailing, and Sumanthra tried to exhort them to control their emotions and be calm. They crossed the city limits and moved a little distance further. The populace from the capital ran behind the chariot, all in one panic-stricken mass, raising clouds of dust that reached the high heavens. There was no sign of road or ground; it was one vast plain of distraught humanity. Old men, women, men young and strong, brahmins, all with one voice screamed amidst sobs, "Rama! Rama! Take us with you! Don't leave us behind!" The streets of Ayodhya were empty; the city was as silent as a city in sleep. Darkness fell, like a heavy weight, on every roof.

Some men and women who couldn't travel stood like stumps, helpless on the road. Many bolted doors and spent the days suffering utmost anguish; avoiding food and drink, rolling on the floor, in whatever place they were when Rama left. Some awaited the return of Rama at nightfall, hoping he might be induced by compassion to come back to his beloved people.

Meanwhile, Dasaratha had himself seated in a chariot! He shouted aloud, "Rama! Rama! Sumanthra!

Sumanthra! Stop that chariot! I will look at the treasure of my love, just once." He quickened the pace of the horses and came faster and faster. The mass of citizens following Rama were caught between his chariot and the chariot of the emperor, and many of them were so exhausted that they fell on the ground. When they saw a chariot passing by with speed, they raised their heads to find out whether Rama was returning seated in it; they rose and tried to stop it, to have a glimpse of Rama, their beloved prince. But, when the groans of Dasaratha fell on their ears, they too broke into sobs and allowed the chariot to pass, pleading pathetically, "O King! Go soon, go and

bring back our Ramachandra!" Dasaratha saw Rama's chariot speeding along the sand dunes outside the city. He cried out, "Sumanthra!

Sumanthra! Rein in. Stop!" and himself commanded his charioteer to speed up. Sumanthra looked back and saw the chariot following his. He told Rama, "Ramachandra! Father Dasaratha is behind us; let's stop and find out what his orders are." Rama also saw the huge mass of citizens and the chariot carrying his father, fast hastening behind him. He knew that if he stopped now, they would surround him and break into uncontrollable grief, that those who sat exhausted on the sides of the road would rise and race, impelled by a new hope, which would be giving them hopes without any benefit. It would also injure the realisation of his promise. If the subjects witnessed the wailing of Dasaratha, it would bring him down in their estimation. Weighing all these considerations, he told Sumanthra, his charioteer, that there was no need to stop - it was best to drive on even faster.

Sumanthra prayed with folded palms, "Rama! I was ordered to be with you for only four days. Then I have to return to Ayodhya, don't I? On seeing me, the emperor will certainly reprimand me for not stopping the chariot, as commanded by him. What shall I tell him in reply? Kindly keep me with you, throughout all the years of exile in the forest. I will deem my life well and happily lived if I am allowed to be in the forest with you. If you agree, I won't stop; I will drive as fast as you wish. Kindly communicate your order on this." Rama thought about the problem presented by Sumanthra and its implications. "Sumanthra! He who ordered you to get into the chariot and take us in it into the forest, as far as it could negotiate, was your own master, the emperor. He who now follows this chariot, weeping and pleading with you to stop, is Dasaratha. You have to listen to and obey the command of the emperor, not the orders of Dasaratha. You are the minister of the country, of its ruler, and of an individual named Dasaratha. As individuals, between us, there is the body of affection that ties the son to his father. But, as emperor, he has imperial authority over you and me, equally. Your loyalty and my loyalty toward him are the same. You have to carry out your duty. When Dasaratha chastises you for not giving ear to the request he is now making, tell him that you did not hear him; it is not wrong to say so." Rama asked him

to drive faster, without caring to stop the chariot.

Sumanthra drank in with avidity the nectar of moral analysis that Rama had vouchsafed to convince him.

When Dasaratha saw that Rama was driving on, he stopped his vehicle and turned back toward Ayodhya, moaning his lot and wailing aloud.

The people, however, followed the chariot undaunted by physical exhaustion, urged on by their determination to hold on to their beloved Rama. Some of them who were ready to sacrifice their lives for him and die in their effort to reach him trudged along, breathless and broken, their feet devotedly stepping on the track left by the chariot in which he sat. Rama saw them trekking behind him, drawn by the love they bore him, and was filled with compassion. He stopped the chariot and spoke to them sweet and soft words that touched their hearts. He discoursed on the various moral aspects of the situation and pleaded with them to return to Ayodhya.

They replied that separation from him was unbearable agony, that they couldn't reside even for a moment in an Ayodhya without Rama and that they were prepared to die in the forest rather than live in Ayodhya! While many among them asserted thus, the younger among them declared that a city from which the divinity of dharma had disappeared was more horrible than the jungle and that they could not live in such a frightful place. The forest where you reside is the Ayodhya for us, they said. Don't be worried in the least about our exhaustion or travail.

Observe your vow, your duty, as you have resolved; we too will observe our vow. You have decided to honour the wish of your father as a sacred duty; we too have a sacred duty, to honour the wish of the Rama in our hearts, the Atmarama, our master, the authority we loyally revere. We will not falter in our resolution. We won't return.

Death alone can defeat us," they said, amidst sobs and tears of despair.

Rama's compassionate heart melted at those words of love and loyalty. Sita shed tears in streams. Lakshmana watched the upsurge of devotion rising from the common people of the realm. His eyes turned red with anger, his tongue was tied with emotion, when he thought of Kaika, the step-mother, who did not have even an iota of this sentiment toward Rama. He sat on the ground, his head heavy with sad thoughts.

Rama felt it was best to persuade them, by whatever means, to return home. He consoled them, sympathised with them, and reminded them of the rites and rituals they had to perform every day and the consequences of non-observance. He described the horrors of forest life and the handicaps they would encounter when trying to live there as hitherto. He advised them to perform rites and rituals correctly and without break, so that his years of exile might pass off quick and smooth and he could return to Ayodhya at the proper time, fresh and fine. They would be helping him to spend his exile in peace and joy.

The brahmin youths weren't convinced by this argument! Rama pleaded with them. "Your aged parents will miss your devoted service; it is wrong to leave them unaided and alone." At this, they said, "Rama! Our aged parents are weak and dispirited that they cannot follow you to the very forest; they came thus far and turned back, pouring their mental anguish in streams of tears. They directed us to follow you and be with you. 'We are too weak,' they said, 'you are strong and young; Go! Serve Rama on our behalf.' Those aged people are distressed more because you are away from Ayodhya than because we are away from them. They will be happy if their sons are with Rama, a fortune they could not enjoy. Take us with you for this reason at least, to shower joy on those aged people." Praying thus, they fell at Rama's feet and wept.

Rama was struck silent at this sincere expression of love and reverence. He was thrilled by the spirit of renunciation of these young men, which he felt was grander even than his own renunciation of the throne. His joy was not unmixed with a sense of pride at being surpassed by his subjects in filial piety. Darkness descended on the Earth while the pleadings and rejections

were going on. So, Rama asked them to take rest and refreshment for the night, rather than trek back in the darkness.

In order to encourage them to do so, Rama bathed in the Thamasa river, which flowed by, partook of a meal of roots, tubers, and fruits, and rested awhile. The people who had followed him over long distances were so tired physically that, after the meal, they fell into deep undisturbable sleep.

Rama knew that, on waking, they would all insist on accompanying him, so he woke Sumanthra up and directed him to get the chariot ready without the least noise and drive the vehicle so that its track could not be recognised. Sumanthra recognised that there was no other way. He drove so that the tracks were confusingly complex and even gave faint indications that the chariot had turned toward Ayodhya itself! After skillfully laying these tracks, he drove forward in the direction of the forest.

The day dawned, and the citizens of Ayodhya rose and looked around. There were no signs of the royal chariot, Sita, Rama, or Lakshmana! They were thrust into deep agony; they aroused the sleeping; they sought to trace the wheel marks on the ground. They ran wildly in all directions, seeking to spot the vehicle.

One among them said, "Brothers! Rama saw how tired we were, how we were sleeping out of sheer exhaustion, so He left this place without taking us with Him." Then they started blaming each other, for showing signs of exhaustion and inducing Rama to leave them and go alone. Others condemned themselves as inferior to fish.

"Fish can't live without water, but we are alive, though Rama has left us stranded. Fie, fie, on our lives," they cursed. "We brought this separation from the person dearest to us on ourselves. Why aren't we bringing death on ourselves to end sorrow?" they moaned.

But soon, they felt that since the Self (Atma) in them was Rama, the act of self-destruction was unthinkable.

It was also not a meritorious act. And suicide can succeed only when one's destiny is to die by one's own hand!

So, another among them suggested that they could pray to destiny to sanction that kind of end for them all.

They got involved in these pathetic discussions and doubts. They were anxious to decide on the next step to take. Before long, someone announced that the tracks left by the wheels were traced. It was good news indeed!

For the tracks showed that the chariot had proceeded toward Ayodhya! They followed the track for some distance, but soon it could not be seen any longer; it had faded out. It became impossible to guess what had happened, so they returned to the city, their thoughts all in a mess.

Many consoled themselves, saying that Rama would certainly return to the palace, for he had seen their plight and his heart was full of compassion toward the broken-hearted. Rama would return within two or three days, they said. The women entered on various vows and types of worship in order to propitiate the gods to persuade Rama to return to his subjects.

People lived thereafter like chakravaka birds that have no lotuses to live on, since the sun is absent and lotuses would not bloom without its warmth.

Guha, chief of the Nishadas

While the people were suffering, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana reached the outskirts of the town of Sringeri.

Rama noticed the river Ganga and immediately directed Minister Sumanthra to stop the chariot. He alighted and prostrated on the bare ground before the stream of holiness. Sita and Lakshmana, as well as Sumanthra, did likewise.

Rama told the others that Ganga was the source of all wealth and prosperity, all the peace and plenty that shone around. Ganga gave all beings supreme

bliss and the highest spiritual boons. They decided to bathe in the holy waters.

Rama asked Lakshmana to find a place where Sita could get down from the bank to where she could safely take a bath. The banks of the river were soft and slushy in the jungle area, so Lakshmana chose a spot, which he reinforced by placing stones and rocks so that she could descend safely and ascend in comfort after her ablutions.

He prayed to Sita, the mother, to use this temporary ghat for her bath. She took great care while stepping down, and before she entered the river, she too prostrated to the goddess Ganga. Lakshmana went into the jungle to gather some edible fruits so that Rama and Sita could recoup with some food after bath. He offered them reverentially, and they partook of them.

Meanwhile, a few boatmen had gathered. Their eyes fell on the royal chariot, as well as on the princely forms of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana. They inferred that they must have come on a picnic, so they hastened to their chieftain, Guha, and told him that some royal visitors were near. Guha sent a messenger to enquire and ascertain who they were and what their purpose was, in the forest, by the shore of the Ganga.

He brought back the information that they were none other than the sons of Emperor Dasaratha, that the princess was Sita herself, and that they were accompanied by the royal minister, Sumanthra. Guha felt that the supremely delightful moments should not be enjoyed alone! He informed his kinsmen and comrades and friends that the great Prince, Rama, had come to the Ganga with his brother and wife. He collected fruits and flowers in plenty, and the entire party proceeded in reverential humility toward the Ganga. Guha placed the fruit and flower offerings at the feet of the royal visitors and fell at Rama's feet, as did his kinsmen and friends.

Watching the joy that thrilled them, Rama called Guha near and asked him how they fared and whether they were all happy and peaceful. He asked the chieftain how far his administration was helping the community to prosper.

Guha answered, "Lord, Ramachandra! We have all derived limitless spiritual bliss (ananda) from beholding your feet. We achieved this great good luck only through merit accumulated by us, by good deeds in the past. Or else, could we, who spend our days in this inaccessible forest, ever hope to be blessed by your visit and the sight (darshan) of your lotus feet? From now on, this region is certain to enjoy plenty and peace, for your feet have trodden this soil. There can be no doubt about this, the transformation is bound to happen." Lakshmana, Sita, and Sumanthra noted the sincere expression of his joy and the tears of spiritual bliss. They were astonished at his devotion, humility, and wisdom. Guha held fast to Rama's feet and said, "Lord! All this is yours; all the riches, territory, and authority that I have as chieftain, as well as all my subjects, are yours. They are awaiting your commands; they are at your disposal, usable for your purposes, your services. I am your servant.

Accept me as such, accept all that I am offering and enter the city where we dwell."

Rama smiled and replied, "Guha! you are a staunch devotee. You are deeply virtuous. Your heart is very pure.

But listen, I have to roam the forest as an exile, wearing the habiliments of a hermit, in obedience to the command of my father. I should not step into a town or city. I must take only the food prescribed for monks engaged in austerities. I have to live in accordance with regulations laid down for ascetics doing penance. For these reasons, I can't fulfil your wish." Guha was stricken with sorrow. The large gathering of people who had come from the city, Sringeri, whispered among themselves about the divine charm of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. One of them wondered how the parents of those lovely brothers and that angelic lady could exile them into the forest. "How could their tongue ever pronounce such a sentence?" At this, another retorted, "Keep quiet, you fool! Those parents have really done good. Had they not spoken that sentence, we couldn't have feasted our eyes on their divine forms. This day, our eyes are enjoying a rare festival." This filled many with satisfaction and joy. The Nishada tribesmen who comprised the gathering spoke among themselves words of worshipful admiration of the royal visitors.

They extolled the beauty, tenderness, and soft sweet natures of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana.

Guha was immersed in sorrow that he had lost the fortune of welcoming Rama to the capital city of the Nishadas, whose chieftain he was. He felt that even if the city was "seen" by Rama, even if his eyes glanced at it once, it would be blessed with peace and prosperity forever. So he suggested that Rama walk up toward a gigantic but gorgeous shimsupa tree that grew nearby. Rama agreed. Guha knew that Rama's eye had fallen on the city from that spot. He was pleased at the thought. Rama was also happy when he saw the city from a distance. He allowed the Nishadas to touch his feet and directed them to return to their homes, since nightfall was imminent.

Then Rama went through the holy rites that had to be observed at dusk. Meanwhile, Guha gathered quantities of soft grass and tender leaves and prepared soft beds. He sent his subjects to collect tubers and fruit, tasty and fresh, from the trees and creepers of the forest and to bring them packed in leaves, to be offered to the distinguished visitors. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana as well as Sumanthra, ate the frugal meal and retired for rest and sleep.

Sita slept on the soft bed of grass. Lakshmana sat at Rama's feet in order to massage them tenderly, to relieve the tension of exertion. Rama realised that Lakshmana would continue the service as long as he appeared to be awake, so he pretended to go into deep sleep. Lakshmana feared that any further pressing of the feet might disturb his sleep, and he quietly slipped into the distance. There, he sat in the "hero" posture, so that he could gaze intently at the four directions and recognise at once any wild animal approaching the spot, or any demon or demonic person bent upon disturbing Rama's sleep; he was all attention and vigilance.

Seeing this, Guha instructed his faithful lieutenants to guard the area and ensure that nothing happened to disturb Rama's sleep. He put a pouch of arrows on his shoulder and, holding the bow in readiness, sat near Lakshmana, eager to share his vigil.

Guha, his eyes filled with tears, held his palms folded before him and asked, "Lakshmana! Emperor Dasaratha's palace is, I guess, grander and more magnificent than the divine mansion of the ruler of the Gods, Indra.

In that palace, everything is charming and beautiful; everywhere there is fragrance and sweetness; soft feather beds and lamps embossed with precious gems add to the grandeur and comfort of the palace. The beds have sheets light and white like froth on fresh milk, and pillows to match. Sita and Rama, who used to sleep on such luxurious beds, are now lying on a grassy heap with no coverlet or pillow, sleeping through sheer physical exertion! It is insufferable agony for me to contemplate this scene. There, his father and mother, his aids and maids were looking after his needs and comforts in various ways. Sita and Rama, who lived royally until yesterday, are now lying on the ground! Alas, my heart is torn to pieces by grief.

"Sita is the beloved daughter of the world-renowned Emperor Janaka; yet, she is now lying on a dry grass.

What a strange turn of fate is this! Are Sita and Rama fit for life in the forest? Oh, it is now being proved true that the consequences of one's acts are binding, in spite of everything else.

"Kaika is the daughter of the King of Kekaya state. No one can believe that she is capable of this atrociously sinful act. These two are at a period of their lives when they have to be happy together. What a reprehensible act it is to inflict this hard sentence on them! Such a fate should not overtake even one's worst enemy.

"The Kekaya Princess has proved herself to be the axe that would cut asunder the very roots of the tree of the solar dynasty. Her selfish greed has sunk the world in sorrow. Ah! My horrid eyes are destined to look on this pathetic sight! What despicable sin did I indulge in to deserve this punishment? Whose happy life caused my eyes in the past to become red with envy, that I had to see my beloved Rama in this plight?" Guha wailed; unable to stop the onrush of the surging waves of grief. He kept his mouth shut and sat with head

bowed in irrepressible agony. At this, Lakshmana was also plunged in gloom.

Lakshmana gathered courage and said, "O! chieftain of the Nishadas! One doesn't get happiness through another or become miserable through another. One can't get good fortune or bad fortune through another. There is no possibility for such indirect means to succeed. Nor can one really be either happy or miserable.

Each one comes for some purpose, urged by the potentiality of his acts in previous birth or by some sovereign will and resolution. In the course of fulfilling that purpose, they appear to be happy or miserable, that is all. A beggar dreams he is a king; a king dreams he is a beggar. When they awake, they find that happiness and misery were unreal and short-lived. So too, the world is a dream, unreal, illusory. It is a mixture of truth and falsehood (mithya).

You feel sorrow because Rama is in this plight, but Rama is above and beyond grief and joy. For those who watch him, according to good fortune or misfortune as decided by the merit or demerit acquired and accumulated, he may appear to be happy or miserable; what you see as joy or grief in Rama is only the reflection of your own mental state." At this Guha calmed himself and gave up his rage against Kaika of a little while ago. He understood that it wasn't proper to find fault with another and assign blame.

"People are all laid up in the sleep of delusion, and they are engaged in witnessing a variety of dreams. This is the way they spend the night called 'life'. Only yogis, self-mastered people, keep awake in the night without being caught up in or enchanted by dreams. They have no use for the world and its contents. They have turned away from all sensual pleasures and entanglements. Until this stage is reached, people cannot refer to themselves as 'awake'. When wisdom (jnana) is attained and the reality is realised, then the bonds of delusion fall off and love is fixed on the lotus feet of Sai Rama." Guha's thoughts ran on in this strain. He was comforted and strengthened by them. Guha and Lakshmana spent the rest of the night telling each other the super-human attributes of Rama and the fullness of the glory that was latent

in Him.

Sumanthra is sent back to Ayodha

Dawn came. While one of them stood guard where Rama slept, the other finished his morning ablutions and returned. Soon Rama moved his limbs, rubbed his eyes, and, sitting up, looked at the four quarters. He awakened Sita, and both wended their way to the river Ganga. After bathing and completing the morning rites, they came back to Guha and Lakshmana. Rama asked Lakshmana to bring a quantity of the milky juice of the ficus tree.

Lakshmana moved off without murmur into the forest nearby and, without much delay, brought with him a leafbowl full of the juice. Rama applied the juice to the locks of hair on his head, which turned into a thick matted lump, the like of which is generally worn by hermits.

Looking on at this act, Sumanthra could not restrain his sobs. He was shocked that the head that had to wear the jewelled crown was now carrying the burden of matted hair. He lamented that his eyes were destined ever to see this tragic sight. His heart was scorched by agony. "I can't be with you any longer in the forest; it has become impossible. I have accomplished the orders of the emperor. Fate is cutting short my stay in your presence. He ordered me to take you in the chariot until we arrived on the banks of a holy river and then leave you there and return. I have to inform you of this fact; now, it is your turn to tell me what I have to do," said Sumanthra, standing before Rama with head bent in sorrow, in humility, tears flowing freely from his eyes.

"Don't grieve," Rama said, "Accomplishing the emperor's orders is your duty, and mine too. I am very happy that you carried out the orders he gave you. Thenceforward, I will carry out the order he has given me. I will follow his directions with the greatest reverence, and in scrupulous detail. Don't delay; return to Ayodhya.

My parents will be awaiting your arrival with unbounded anxiety. They are longing to hear your description of your journey so far. So take the chariot

back and proceed fast," Sumanthra pictured to himself the place he had to go back to. He pleaded pathetically, "O Ramachandra!

Don't let Ayodhya become an orphan city. The emperor will find it difficult to hold himself together in your absence.

Bharatha will find it impossible to reign." Sumanthra fell at Rama's feet, unable to bear his sorrow.

Rama lifted him up and, holding him by the shoulder, consoled him. "Sumanthra! No principle of righteousness is higher than truth. The Vedas, the Puranas, the epics, all assert and proclaim this, as you know. Now, I have been assigned the task of following this supreme principle of righteousness! What great good fortune this is! If I miss this chance and lose this fortune, I and my dynasty will earn eternal infamy in all three worlds. Infamy will burn the righteous more excruciatingly than a million deaths and cremations. Go, fall at my father's feet and make clear to him my determination and joy. You must be vigilant to see that my father is not worried about me, Sita, and Lakshmana." Guha and his followers heard Rama's words and were visibly affected by them. Without being aware of it, they started shedding tears. Lakshmana couldn't bear the anguish and uttered a few words of anger and bitterness against those who had caused this tragedy. But Rama realised his temper and stopped him forthwith. Then, he turned to Minister Sumanthra.

"Sumanthra! Lakshmana is a stripling; don't attach importance to his words. Don't communicate them to father. Lakshmana's mind is undergoing such suffering because he has great affection for me and because he is affected by the troubles that afflict Sita. He gave vent to such expressions, for he has a mistaken notion about those who sent me to the forest in exile. By nature, Lakshmana is endowed with very good qualities." And Rama began to describe the virtues of his brother.

Sumanthra raised his head and pleaded with Rama. "Lord! Sita is tender and soft-natured. She cannot brave the travails of forest life. Advise her to return to the city, and convince her that it is the proper thing to do. She's the life-

breath of Ayodhya. She's the goddess of prosperity for the empire. If she can't come to Ayodhya, the inhabitants will suffer like fish in a dry tank. Let her return and reside, as she desires, with her mother-in-law or her parents. The emperor commanded me, again and again, to tell you this in these very words. When you return to Ayodhya at the end of the fourteen years, Sita could be brought from her father's palace." While Sumanthra was importuning in this manner, Rama signed to Sita, as if to draw her attention to his yearning and prayer. When Sumanthra had concluded, Rama addressed Sita, "Sita! Did you listen to father's message?

Go home and let my parents forget at least a part of the agony they feel at my separation. In their old age, they are too weak to put up with this terrible situation. So you must go back with the minister to Ayodhya." Rama used various other arguments to persuade her to accept the request of father.

Sita replied, "Lord! You are omniscient. You know the ideal moral conduct prescribed for each section of mankind. I don't need to remind you. Please listen for awhile to my prayer. The shadow has to follow the substance.

Can it be away from it? Solar rays cannot exist separate from the sun. Moonlight cannot exist separate from the moon. Similarly, this Sita shadow cannot live and exist after leaving Ramachandra, the Rama-moon." She turned to Sumanthra. "Sumanthra! To me, you are as venerable as my father and father-in-law. You are my well-wisher. Please consider this: I don't seek any other refuge except the lotus feet of my Lord. The world knows that the daughter-in-law who is brought into the family cannot be any nearer than the son born in the family. The statement that they will forget their agony at the separation of the son, if the daughter-in-law return, has no meaning. Regarding the wealth and comfort of my father's palace, I have enjoyed them enough in my childhood days. Now, they appear to me as dry and as cheap as grass, without my Lord being with me. I have no other path, except the path that he treads. Therefore, without misunderstanding me, please agree to my words; drop your attempt to take me back to Ayodhya. Forget it.

"Convey my prostrations to my parents-in-law and assure them that there is

no cause for anxiety about us.

Tell them that Sita is happy, many thousand times happier than when she was in Ayodhya or Mithila. I am with the Lord of my heart, with the great hero, the best of warriors, his brother, Lakshmana; so, I pass these days in the forest happily, undisturbed by fear, anxiety or agitation of mind. Tell them I am not tired in the least by the journey, that I am very happy, that I consider this exile a great piece of good fortune." Sumanthra was so overwhelmed with admiration and grief that he couldn't look up at Sita's face; he couldn't listen any more to such profoundly moving words; he couldn't himself find words to speak to her. He reflected on her virtues, pure feelings, and steadfastness; he deplored the fate that deprived Ayodhya of the presence and inspiration of a lady of such supreme character.

He spoke to Rama: "Rama! In that case, accept one prayer. Keep me with you in the forest and allow me to serve you for the fourteen years." Rama replied: "Sumanthra! You are well-versed in law and the rules of morality. You are the minister of Emperor Dasaratha, not a minister under me. It was he who commanded you to come back, so how can I permit you to stay? Even otherwise, it is not desirable for you to stay away from the emperor right now. You are as his right hand. Don't pay attention to your own happiness (ananda) and try to keep away from him; go, go to him, without further delay. Going soon would give me and my parents a great deal of consolation and assurance." Rama persuaded him to go, using various other argument and examples. Finding it impossible to resist, Sumanthra wept aloud and prostrated before the three; his steps were heavy and hesitant when he turned back; both his mind and his body were unwilling.

Rama caught his hand and helped him to walk to the chariot and ascend to his seat. Rama spoke sweetly and softly to him, as well as to the horses of the chariot, to induce them to proceed toward Ayodhya.

Sumanthra drove back to Ayodhya. The horses were reluctant to retrace their steps; they turned back toward Rama, longing to be with him and loath to move away. Despite prodding and persuading, they could scarcely move on.

They neighed pathetically in protest, and they stopped off and on, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Rama.

Sumanthra too was turning back in unbearable sorrow; he wiped the stream of tears that flowed down his cheeks; he kept his head hanging as if unwilling to show his face to people. After sending the aged minister back, Rama proceeded to the Ganga with his wife and brother.

When Guha saw Sumanthra's plight, he was so overpowered with agony that he leaned on a tree, sobbing, with his head pressed against its trunk. He thought, "When even dumb animals find it impossible to live away from Rama, what can be said of the anguish suffered by his parents, who bore him and brought him up lovingly and with such great hope, and by the subjects of the realm, who adored him with loyalty and love. Alas! Who can measure the grief that harrowed Queen Kausalya's heart?" The sorrow seared Guha's soul.

The boatman's ecstasy

Guha's eyes soon fell on Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana walking toward the Ganga, so he hurried toward them.

Realising they wanted to cross the river, he shouted to the boatman on the opposite bank to bring the boat. The boatman hastened across, and, within moments, the boat was ready where Rama awaited its arrival.

Guha called the boatman aside and told him to clean the boat and make it fit for the Prince of Ayodhya, son of Emperor Dasaratha, and his consort and brother, who were crossing the Ganga on their way to the forest where they intended to spend some years. The boatman had heard from his Nishada brothers the sad tale of the exile of the heir-apparent to the throne, so he had lost no time in coming over.

But he had a disturbing doubt that had to be resolved. He had come to know that Rama had placed his foot on a rock and that it was suddenly transformed into a woman; was this the same Rama, or was he a different person?

That was the question he asked Guha.

Guha said, "My dear boatman, what a strong memory you have! I am glad you remembered that incident, which happened long ago, and have reminded me too of it!" He turned to Rama and said, with great exultation, "Rama! Listen! This man, my tribesman, has treasured your majesty and glory in his mind; he has brought back to my memory how you released Ahalya, the wife of Sage Gautama, from the stone into which she was cursed. My subjects were very much agitated over the terrible curse that was inflicted on that lady and were delighted when they knew of your divine power that liberated her. Oh, how fortunate are my people to be aware of your divinity!" Guha described the faith and devotion of his boatman with great joy.

Rama moved toward the boat, and the boatman stood before Rama with folded palms and said, "Ramachandra!

All the years of my life have become worthwhile with the good fortune that has come to me today. Today I am able to look upon the Rama of whom I had heard long ago. That I could row you, your consort, and your brother across the Ganga is the reward I have earned by accumulating merit through many previous lives. Let me pray for one blessing; allow me to sprinkle on my head the water sanctified by washing your feet, before I row you across." Guha had not realised that his servant, the boatman, was so deep in devotion to Rama. He was surprised at the request he had so humbly laid before Rama; he was supremely delighted that the man had prayed so. "Listen to me, brother! Let Rama take his seat in the boat; then you can wash his feet with the waters of the Ganga taken in a vessel, it is not good manners to wash them while he is standing on the bank." Guha reprimanded him for his obstinacy and simplicity.

But the boatman wouldn't yield. He pleaded, "Lord! You possess vast wealth. I'm helplessly poor. I'm scraping together the wherewithal to maintain my family through the fees I get ferrying people across. I find my daily income insufficient even for running my little family. How could I be happy if even this income is lost? Therefore, please don't misunderstand me. Let me wash your

feet, even before you step into the boat." Rama grasped the undertone of the boatman's strange request, smiled, and turned toward Sita, saying, "Did you notice the boatman's fear?" Guha could not understand what it all mean, and why Rama had smiled. He was perplexed at the fellow's behaviour. He said, "Hello, boatman! I don't understand what you are talking about.

How is the cost of maintaining your family related to this present duty of yours - taking Rama across the Ganga so he can enter the forest and live there? Are you demanding more fees from Rama for this hereditary task? If so, you are only revealing your greed! If your earnings are not enough to support your family, I am ready to supplement it, as the chief of this realm. Don't yearn to get it from Ramachandra. Attend to your business and get the boat ready." Guha grew angry at his persistence.

The boatman said that he had heard people say that the feet of Rama had some peculiar power. They say when the feet contacted a stone, the stone turned into a woman. My boat is made by putting together many pieces of timber. If each piece becomes a woman, my Lord would leave them all to my care, for they were born from the parts of my boat! How can I bear the additional burden?

"But, if the feet are washed before he places them in the boat, I can be free from fear. Besides, when I sprinkle the wash on my head, my sins would vanish. So please permit me to have my wish fulfilled." Guha was lost in thought. But, Rama called the boatman near him and said, with a smile lighting up his face, "My dear man, come, wash my feet." He placed his feet in the palms of the boatman! His joy knew no bounds. He kept the feet within his palms and washed them both very carefully and lovingly, not missing the space between the toes, using the sacred Ganga water. Then, he sprinkled the wash on his own head and over all parts of the boat, to guard them against malefic powers. He was immensely delighted at the success of his plan.

He held Rama's hand as Rama placed his foot in the boat and got in. Rama helped Sita to board, holding her hand firm in his grip. He made Lakshmana

sit beside him on one of the cross planks.

They spoke to each other of the devotion and childlike innocence of the boatman and enjoyed the movement of the boat over the waters. They conversed with Guha on various topics, and the time passed so quickly that they found themselves on the other bank without being aware of the journey. Rama pretended to be ashamed of himself when he found he didn't have even a cowrie shell to offer the boatman, in lieu of the fees due him. Sita knew the feeling of her Lord's heart, by instinct. She removed a ring from her finger and placed it in Rama's hands. Rama hailed the boatman and said, "Here, boatman! This is your fee. Take it." The boatman fell at Rama's feet. "O Rama! This day I achieved the gift of gifts. All my sins have been smashed into dust. I am liberated from the awful doom of birth and death. The pangs I endured for many lives on earth have borne fruit; my God has blessed me; my forefathers and my progeny have been freed from sin by this blessing. Lord! Enough for me if I receive and deserve your blessings. When you return, O Lord, come this way and confer on me the chance to do this service. That is the reward I value most in life." He fell prostrate on the ground before Rama, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Rama and Lakshmana consoled the boatman and tried to assuage his ecstasy. They tried to persuade him to accept the gift. But he protested, saying, "If I accept fees for taking you across this tiny stream, tell me how much you receive as wages for taking generations of my line, and billions of my fellowmen, across the vast and terrifying ocean of worldly existence (samsara), which involves all beings in the fast moving current of change. I have been immersed in bliss since I got this chance; please don't bind me further by forcing me to accept wages for this lucky chance that fell my way." These words touched Rama's heart; he felt that it would not be good to pressure him. Rama blessed him most liberally and let him depart.

Guha pleads to stay with Rama

Rama and Lakshmana placed their bows and arrows on clothes spread on the bank and stepped into the river for a bath. When they had finished, Sita also

stepped into the sacred river and, after her bath, offered prayers to Ganga, vowing to return after spending fourteen happy years with her Lord and again sprinkle the sacred water on her head, in thankfulness for the end of the exile.

Rama called Guha near. "Dear friend! I have already used too much of your time for my own purpose. Now, go back to your town." When this command fell on his ear, Guha's face fell. Tears flowed down the cheeks in streams. With palms folded, he prayed, "Rama. Please listen. I shall be with you for some time in the forest; I know all the paths of the jungle; I can give you useful information. I want to serve you this way. Please don't say no." Rama was happy with Guha's love and devotion, and he took him with him. Walking some distance, they rested when evening fell, under the shade of a wide-spreading tree.

Guha and Lakshmana hurried to sweep the area clean and make it fit for Rama and Sita to rest. The fruits on that tree looked very eager to fall and be of service to the divine visitors; they turned red with excitement and joy.

Guha and Lakshmana collected the fruits and placed them on broad leaves before Sita and Rama.

But Rama asked, "Lakshmana, can we eat these fruits without first performing the evening rites?" So, they went to Prayag, the confluence of the holy rivers, which was nearby, and had the holy sight before they took their bath; Rama described to them the glories of the spot, while returning from the river. He said that the efficacy of the waters at the confluence of the three holy rivers was so potent that it could cleanse people of all sins that tarnish their minds.

15. Among Hermitages

The hermitage of Bharadwaja

Thus, Rama entered the hermitage of Bharadwaja, taking Sita with him and accompanied by Lakshmana and Guha. The sage appeared at the doorway and walked forward to welcome him, as if he had been waiting for a long time to be blessed by the sight of the Lord (darshan). Rama prostrated before him, and when Bharadwaja lovingly embraced him and invited him to enter the hermitage, he was very happy to comply. The sage made them sit on seats he had spread on the floor, for each according to his status.

He asked after the welfare of every one of them and declared that his heart's desire was now fulfilled. He asked his pupils to bring fruits and roots, and, placing them before his guests, he pleaded with them to eat. They spent the night in the hermitage, accepting the sage's hospitality and service.

When day dawned, Rama proceeded to the confluence of the three rivers at Prayag, asking the sage to accompany him. Bharadwaja said, "Listen, O Lord! I chose this holy spot for my hermitage and austerities because I knew that here I could get the sight of the Lord, which I had longed for for many years. To get this thrill, I undertook vows and performed Vedic rites (yajnas) and sacrifices (yagas). I immersed myself in chanting divine names and in meditation on the divine form, so that I might be rewarded with the chance to converse with you. I was awarded the sight of all three of you. I have no more wants. I am no more concerned with bath or with food.

I don't want to be reckoned as a fool who continued consuming drugs even after being cured of illness. I am free now from the fell disease of birth-and-death. I have seen God." Seeing him filled with ecstasy, with tears flowing, Guha was overwhelmed with surprise. He said to himself, "O! What great good fortune is mine!" He was overcome by supreme joy.

Meanwhile Rama suppressed His divinity and acted as if he was just a man

with common human attributes.

While sage Bharadwaja was dilating delightedly on the Rama principle, Rama listened, as if it all related to another person called Rama and not to himself! He replied, "O! Foremost among sages! All those who are recipients of your hospitality are, for that very reason, adorable. All such are full of virtue and wisdom." The pupils, ascetics, sages, and monks of the hermitage who heard the words of Bharadwaja and Rama were struck with wonder and filled with joy.

After the holy bath at Prayag, Rama left the hermitage with Sita, Lakshmana, and Guha and entered the deeper recesses of the forest. Bharadwaja followed them as far as the river bank. There, he clasped Rama in loving embrace, wishing them a happy journey. Rama prayed for the blessings of the sage and said, "Master! Tell us which direction is best." The sage replied, with a laugh: "Lord! There is no path unknown to you in all the worlds, is there? You are playing the role of a mere man, in this habiliment. Well, since I have been asked, it is my duty to reply to the best of my knowledge." Thus saying, he beckoned to four of his pupils and sent them with Rama to show him the track that led to the next hermitage complex.

The boys were delighted at the chance to journey with Rama for some little distance. They felt that it was a gift earned in previous lives. They walked in front, showing them the track. Behind them, Rama went with Sita, Lakshmana, and Guha. The boys went as far as the bank of the Yamuna river, where they took leave of Rama and turned back, without the least will to do so. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana were very pleased with the pupils for the help they rendered; they blessed them with all their hearts and allowed them to leave. Then, they got ready to have the holy bath in the sacred Yamuna.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the villages on the bank noticed these visitors of extraordinary charm and splendour and gathered around them, wondering who they were, whence they came, and what their names were.

They were too shy and too afraid to ask and talked in whispers among

themselves.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana finished their bath without paying heed to them. Coming on to the bank, Rama called Guha near and said, "Dear one! It is a long time since you joined us; it is not proper for you to spend so much time with us. You must carry out your duties to your subjects. Go home now, to your post of duty." He gave him permission to leave.

Guha found himself helpless to answer. "Can anyone give up the wish-fulfilling gem that I had come by?

How unfortunate I am to be forced to do so!" he wailed. He couldn't disregard Rama's command, so he prostrated before Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana and showered the dust of their feet on his head. He left their presence, most unwillingly.

The city of Amaravathi

A short time after Guha left them, the three resumed their journey. Soon, they saw before them a city, which shone brighter than even the city of the nagas. As they neared the light, they wondered which city it was. The nearer they came, the more delighted they were at the grandeur and charm of the city and its suburbs. Reaching quite near, they took it to be Amaravathi, the city of the gods, and they were still more delighted. They felt that the citizens must be gods, not people. They sat under a tree in its cool shade and admired its splendour and magnificence.

The people came around them and asked among themselves whether they had come down from "heaven" and were they immortals themselves. They ran into the town and spread the good news that some divine personalities were coming into the city, bringing great good luck with them. Everyone who heard ran toward the visitors and vied with each other in attending to their comforts. Some placed milk before them; some spread fruits; all looked at them without even a blink! No one could leave them and go back. They stood unwilling to depart.

One of them, bolder than the rest, came forward, and spoke; "Sirs! Your charm and imposing personality make us infer that you are princes of royal blood. But you are journeying by foot along these rough jungle paths, with this damsel. You are climbing mountains and crossing rivers. You are hard travelers braving all the dangers of the trek, so we have to conclude that you are like us, mere citizens. We don't understand how you manage to travel across this forest, where lions abound and herds of wild elephants roam. And you have with you this tender embodiment of loveliness and beauty. Have you no kith and kin, no friends and comrades, no well-wishers? If there were any such, certainly, they would not have allowed you to venture on this journey." He enquired into the nature and cause of the journey and put a number of other questions to Rama.

Meanwhile, a woman advanced and addressed Rama. "O Prince! I place a prayer before you. Woman that I am, I am afraid to express it. Pardon my effrontery. We are common folk, unacquainted with verbal finesse. Your physical charm reflects the lustre of emerald and gold, which seem to be the source of your brightness. One of you has the complexion of the rain cloud, while the other is resplendent white. Both are as enchanting as a billion gods of love moulded into human bodies. Also, we don't know how this sweet damsel is related to you. She has the exquisite charm of the goddess of love, Rathi Devi. Watching her modesty and innate humility, as well as her charm, we women are ashamed of ourselves. Kindly tell us who you are and why you have come like this." Listening to their prayers and watching their eagerness and joy, Rama and Lakshmana were very much amused. Sita turned toward the women and spoke. "Sisters! This simple, sincere person with the golden complexion is Lakshmana. He is my Lord's brother, a younger brother. Then about the dark-blue person; he with the lotus-petal-eyes that enrapture the worlds, with the long, strong bow-arms, (here, she turned toward Rama), this is my Lord, the very breath of my life." Saying this, she bent her head and looked at the ground.

A young maiden interjected, "Ma! You haven't told us your name!"

Sita said, "My name is Sita. I am known as Janaki, the daughter of Janaka."

The women looked at each other in wonder and appreciation and, with one voice, blessed Sita profusely, saying, "May you both be as happy a couple as God Siva and Goddess Parvathi, and may you live together as long as the Sun and Moon, as long as the Earth rests upon the hood of the snake Adishesha, in harmony and unbroken joy." Rama spoke to the men and informed them that they had come to see the grandeur and beauty of the forests and that their journey so far had been quite comfortable and useful, that they were not in the least exhausted or inconvenienced. He asked their permission to leave, and they turned to the forests again. Having nothing left to do, the men and women hied homeward.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana wended their way, talking among themselves about the citizens, their questions, the affection they manifested, and the joy that glinted in their eyes. Suddenly, Rama noticed signs of exhaustion on Sita's face and proposed that they rest awhile under a shady tree. A cool broad stream flowed near by. Lakshmana ventured into the jungle and soon gathered some fruits and tubers, which all three ate with relish. They spent the night there, quite happily.

The hermitage of Valmiki

At dawn, they awoke and, finishing the morning ablutions, started off on the next lap of their journey. Soon, they entered the fearsome recesses of the forest. The towering peaks, dark dreadful tangle of trees, and deafening roar of flooded streams produced a queer feeling of awe and mystery.

Right in the midst of that frightful area, they came upon a patch of garden, nursed and fostered by humans, and upon it, a hermitage that was charming to behold. It was the ashram of the sage Valmiki. On one side of the hermitage rose the cliffs of a tall mountain; on the other side, far below, at the bottom of a deep trough, flowed a murmuring stream. The hermitage was a picture of beauty; it shone like a gem on that green carpet. Sita felt considerably relieved and assuaged when her eyes fell on that picture.

Learning from his pupils that they had entered the garden, Valmiki appeared

at the door of the hermitage.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana hurried forward and fell at his feet. The sage also moved forward and, as if he had known them long, welcomed them with fond embrace. He invited all three to enter the hermitage. Valmiki provided comfortable seats for Rama, whom he loved as his very breath, and for Lakshmana and Sita. He called for fruits and edible tubers and placed them before the three. As desired by Valmiki, they partook of them and expressed their pleasure. Valmiki sat before them, watching Rama and quenching the thirst of his eyes. He was filled with inexpressible delight.

With utmost humility, Rama addressed the great sage. "Most venerable sage! You are conversant with the past, the present, and the future of all, so the reason I have entered this forest must be as clear to you as the berry in one's palm. Nevertheless, I feel it right that I should discharge my duty of informing you why I am here, with my wife and brother." Then Rama described how Queen Kaika sent him into exile in the forest and how brother Bharatha was crowned as ruler of the realm, according to the promise made by the father.

The sage listened to the story and communicated his joy with a face lit with smiles. "Rama! As you fulfilled their desires then, you have satisfied my desire now. My austerities, vows, and yearning have at last yielded fruit today. I must confer on Kaika my heartfelt gratitude and a share of the bliss I am now enjoying." Valmiki sat long in silence, with his eyes closed, trying to control the emotions of gratitude and joy surging inside him. Tears gathered in his eyes, tears of spiritual bliss (ananda), and they rolled down his cheeks in big drops that chased each other.

Rama broke the silence. "We will reside where you direct us to live. Indicate to us a place where we won't cause any trouble to anyone and won't come in the way of hermits and hermitages; give us proper advice. We will put up a 'thatch' of leave and spend some time therein." These words from a pure sincere heart moved the sage. "O Rama! I am indeed blessed. You are as the flag that proclaims the glory of the Raghu dynasty. Why are you talking like that? You are the force that fosters the path laid down in the Vedas, the

power that safeguards it from harm. Sita is the deluding half of your personality, your illusion (maya). She creates, maintains, and destroys (as you 'will') worlds beyond worlds. And, Lakshmana is the very basis of the movable and immovable, the 'thousand-hooded serpent', the primal SeshaNaga, which upholds the universe.

"You have assumed forms in order to carry out the wishes of the Gods - to re-establish righteousness in the world. You will pretty soon, I am sure, destroy all demonic hearts. You will protect the good and the compassionate.

Rama! You are the eternal witness of the play named 'The World'. The universe is the 'seen'; you are the witness. Even the gods fail to gauge your reality and glory, so how can ordinary mortals understand your mystery?

Only those who have received your grace, namely, wisdom, can claim to have known something of your truth and majesty.

"You took this human form in order to promote the peace and security of good people and gods; as a consequence, you converse and behave like one of us. Only fools are misled into believing that you are a man among men! We are all puppets who play about as you direct, as you pull the strings. Who are we to direct you to act thuswise or to stay at a certain place?

"Rama! Are you planning to delude us, ascetics, by your words? O, how wonderful is your play! How realistic is your acting! Don't I know that you are the director of this cosmic drama? I can't understand why you ask me to select a spot where you can stay for some time in this forest. Which spot can I choose and recommend? Is there any spot in the whole universe where you are not already? Answer this question, and thereafter I will point out the place where you can stay." Valmiki said this while looking at Rama's charming face; in the extremity of his delight, words melted away on his tongue.

Rama laughed within himself, listening to the revered sage. Meanwhile, the sage spoke again, softly and sweetly, with a smile beaming on his resplendent face.

"Rama! I know in reality that you reside in the hearts of your devotees. Now, I will tell you the best place for this form of yours to stay. Listen. You can reside there with Sita and Lakshmana. Select those whose ears, like the ocean, receive gladly the streams of stories recounting your exploits and who are ever happy listening to the narrative of your divine acts and words; whose tongues are busy repeating your name and tasting its nectarine sweetness; whose throats recite and revel in the recitation of your praise and of your words; which are soft and refreshingly sweet; whose eyes yearn to see your cloud-blue form as the chathaka bird yearns for the first cloudburst; whose ever-present longing is to discover you anywhere, in any quarter, and delight in the discovery when you find any such. O! Rama, dwell there with Sita and Lakshmana.

"Rama! If you want me to elaborate further, listen. Stay in the heart of the person who discards evil in others and loves them for the good they have, who trudges along the journey of life in the path of morality and integrity, who observes approved limits of conduct and behaviour, and who has faith in thought, word, and deed that the universe is your creation and that the entire objective world is your body.

Residing on Chitrakuta Hill

"Nevertheless, since you have assumed this human body and come here to carry out the commands of your mother and father, and questioned me in that role, I venture to answer as if that role were real. You can reside on Chitrakuta Hill. It has all the facilities for a comfortable stay. It is a holy place, a charming beauty spot. The atmosphere is saturated with love and peace. Lions and elephants roam together there, with no trace of rivalry.

The river Mandakini, extolled in the Vedas, flows round the hill. Sages like Athri live there in hermitages, which you can visit and render more sacred. Confer your blessing on that sublime spot and on that dear divine river." Rama agreed and, receiving his permission to leave, resumed his journey with Sita and Lakshmana. Within a short time, they saw the Mandakini and were happy to bathe in its sacred waters and perform the prescribed ceremonial

rites. They rested under a shady tree and ate some fruits before walking over the grass for some distance, admiring the verdure and the scenery.

Then, Rama spoke. "Lakshmana! I am at a loss to decide on the exact spot to erect a cottage of leaf-thatch and bamboo for our stay here. I don't find it easy to say which place is good and which isn't, so you select a spot." No sooner did these words fall on his ears than Lakshmana crumpled on the ground right at Rama's feet. He was in evident anguish. "What wrong have I committed that you should speak to me thus! Is this a sentence for any sin? Or are you testing me and my nature? Are you joking and making fun of me?" In great sorrow, he stood with his head bent with fear and anxiety.

Rama was surprised. He went to him and clasped him to his bosom. "Brother! What happened to make you so sad? I can't guess why you are so heart-broken. Tell me," he pleaded, "tell me why; don't prolong my astonishment and sorrow." Lakshmana replied. "Brother, I surrendered everything to you. I have no likes and dislikes. What is pleasing to you is, on that account, pleasing to me. You know this. Yet, you ask me to select a place that I like and erect a cottage for you thereon! My heart received a shock when you directed me to exercise my will. Order me where to raise it and I will do so. Be merciful, don't speak to me in this strain; bless me in accepting the surrender I offer at thy feet - the surrender of all of me, the will, the intelligence, the mind, the senses, the body, all with no exception and no reservation. I am your servant, following you in the hope of having the chance to serve you. Use me.

Command me, and have the command obeyed and the action accomplished."

Rama consoled him and pacified his feelings. "Lakshmana, why are you worried so much on this little matter?

Don't take it so much to heart. I gave you that direction in just a casual way. I am not unaware of the loyalty that fills your heart. Well. Come along with me. Right, I shall select the spot myself." With Sita by his side, he took the forest track, along with Lakshmana, and soon they sighted the northern bank of the

Mandakini river. This length of bank was curved like a bow; it appeared as if the bow was held by the Chitrakuta peak standing behind it like a hero. One felt that the arrows it was ready to let loose were sense control, mind control, charity, renunciation, and so on and that the target they were intended to destroy was the gang of sin.

Rama described the spot thusly and added, "This hero will not withdraw from the fight!" He directed the cottage to be built on that captivating spot.

Lakshmana asked Rama and Sita to rest awhile under a tree and set about collecting poles, leaves, creepers, and fibre from tree-barks from which to spin ropes. In order to raise a hut spacious enough for three, he dug pits, planted poles, and laboured quickly. When Sita and Rama rose from the shade after some rest, they found the cottage rising before their eyes, a thing of beauty, certain to be a lovely home by all counts. Rama felt he should help Lakshmana in his work, so, seeing his brother on the roof, giving the finishing touches, he handed him from the ground bits of string to tie the bundles of dry grass to the crosspoles in order to thicken the thatch. Sita also wanted to help; she plucked long leaves from the tree branches Lakshmana had brought and gave sheaves of them to Rama to be passed on to Lakshmana.

The house was ready for occupation even before sunset. Rama looked often and long at the neat little cottage, and he praised the devotion and skill of his brother to Sita, in high terms. Sita also appreciated the house and said that she had yearned for a long time to live in just such a habitation. She told Rama that her long-cherished desire was fulfilled that day.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana came down from the roof; he went round the cottage to examine whether anything was wanting. Then, he asked permission from Rama to proceed to the Mandakini for a bath. A short while after, Sita and Rama went to the river and had their bath; they returned to the cottage and partook of the fruits that Lakshmana had gathered in the morning, and they slept soundly on the floor of their new home.

Before another day passed, the news that Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had

taken residence on Chitrakuta Hill spread among the hermits of the forest, and groups of them, bringing their pupils and comrades, approached the sacred cottage; after seeing the Lord (taking darshan), they left for their hermitages. Rama asked them about their health and progress and also asked about the difficulties they encountered. Rama assured them that whenever they required his service, he was ready, with his brother, to go to their rescue.

But they mentioned no difficulties and referred to no troubles. They said, "Rama! The fact that we have been able to see you is enough to make our lives trouble-free. We have no difficulties, nor can any difficulty come into our lives. Your grace is enough protection for us." They sat petrified with wonder at the charming personality of Rama. Rama welcomed the ascetics and treated them with affectionate regard. Seeing him and being in his presence cooled the pining hearts of the ascetics and gave them immense consolation and confidence. A deep calm descended on their consciousness.

Rama is predominantly love. He made every one of the forest-dwellers happy. He discoursed with them and slaked the thirst for love that was tormenting them. Those who came to him, whether ascetics or hunters, received from him instruction appropriate to their aspirations. Rama elevated their occupations into a higher level by his sympathy and counsel. Those who went to him and returned from his presence talked among themselves of his virtues and compassion; they reached their homes extolling him and congratulating themselves.

The forest where they had resolved to reside shone with a new glory and thrilled with a new joy, right from the day they entered the cottage. It was charming to the eye and saturated with a coolness that delighted the mind.

The ascetic communities that lived in the forest had fear and anxiety removed from their lives; in their place, spiritual bliss (ananda) grew and flourished. Even the hard-hearted hunter clans started observing the rules of morality and soon became ornaments of the human race. The Vindhya mountain range was sad that the Chitrakuta Mountain had won this fortune.

Why? Not only the Vindhya range; all mountain ranges continued to be sad, for they could not attract Rama to select them for his residence.

Lakshmana had the unique chance of feasting his eyes upon the lotus feet of Sita and Rama and imbibing the affection they bestowed on Him, so he forgot everything else and immersed himself in supreme spiritual ecstasy.

His mother, Sumitra Devi, wife Urmila, and his other kinsmen did not appear before his vision, even in dreams.

So austere was his refusal to remember them.

Sita also never recalled, even for a fraction of a second, her relatives or parents or the cities of Mithila and Ayodhya. She fixed her eyes and attention on the lotus feet of Sri Ramachandra. That was the veritable festival for her eyes; she watched the stream of sages and their consorts who came to Rama for instruction and guidance.

Time flowed by without her noticing the passage of night and day. The chakora bird delights to the point of selfforgetfulness when the moon shines in the sky; so too, Sita reaped delight, fixing her eyes intently on the face of Rama. For Sita, the lovely little grass-thatched bamboo cottage was so attractive that she forgot the palace of Mithila, where she grew up, and the palace of Ayodhya where she spent years as the princely daughter-in-law.

That cottage was to her more pleasing and palatial than all the mansions she knew.

Off and on, Rama related stories of ancient heroes famed in Puranic lore and described the varied achievements of people who had mastered the mysteries of austerity. Sita and Lakshmana heard them eagerly and enthusiastically.

In the midst of these narrations, Rama would remember his parents and remind them of their grief at being separated from them, and Sita's eyes

would fill with tears at the thought of her father-in-law and mother-in-law.

Drops rolled down her cheeks when she pictured the plight of Queen Kausalya. Suddenly, she pulled herself up, with the thought that she was with Rama, the lion among men, that it wasn't proper to give in to sadness or anxiety in the forest while in his presence, and that whatever happened must be welcomed as the cosmic play (leela) of her Lord.

Thus, Sita spent her days in undiluted happiness in the cottage, with Rama and Lakshmana. And they guarded her like the lids of the eye against the slightest disturbance or noise that might affect her equanimity and raise fears in her mind. No worry affected them; no grief or pain or shade of sadness marred their happiness at Chitrakuta.

16. Gloom Over Ayodhya

Sumanthra reaches home

Meanwhile, the ruler of the Nishadas, who was returning to his kingdom after accompanying Rama for some distance into the forest, saw Minister Sumanthra sitting in his chariot on the bank of the Ganga, the horses having been tied to a shady tree. Sumanthra was alone, weeping and wailing inconsolably. Guha himself couldn't control any longer the anguish he had restrained so long. "Rama!" he cried out, and ran toward Sumanthra. He embraced the old man, and both sobbed aloud in agony, unable to put their grief into words. They stood under the tree together, but fell on the ground as if they were themselves trees felled by an axe. They lamented the fate of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana and poured abuse on Kaika, who was the cause of the calamities.

The horses stopped grazing and drinking water. Tears rolled from their eyes. Whenever they heard Sumanthra and Guha utter the names of Sita, Rama, or Lakshmana, they raised their heads aloft and peered into the distance, anxious to catch a glimpse of those whom they adored and loved with as much zeal as the two men in the agony of separation. Sumanthra noted the grief that tormented the animals, and his anguish became even greater.

Some hours passed in this heart-rending way. At last, Guha managed to recover a little; he mustered some courage, as needs someone must; and addressed Sumanthra. "Ah, minister! You are profoundly intelligent, steadfast in morality, and a person who has identified the reality behind all this passing show. Fate plays strange tricks, so one has to learn to put up with them. Rise! Return to Ayodhya! Convey the news to Kausalya and Sumitra, who are yearning to see you and listen to your account." He raised Sumanthra forcibly from where he had fallen and seated him in the chariot. He brought the horses and yoked them to the central pole.

Sumanthra realised that Guha was correct. Moved by a spurt of blind courage,

the old man signed to the horses to move forward. His body lost strength as a result of the anguish of separation from Rama, so however much he tried, he could not drive the chariot as of old. He rolled down inside the chariot and rose in his seat many times in a few minutes. And the horses? They too would not move. They were set on turning back, straining their necks to see the road behind.

Sumanthra cursed himself and his fate. "Fie on me," he said. "May this horrid life of mine be ended. This body has to be burned to ash some day. Far better if, instead of dying through some disease or some worldly calamity, it died as a result of unbearable agony at separation from Rama. That would have made my life worthwhile.

That would have made my fame everlasting; earning that fame is enough compensation for all the ills of life. No, Sumanthra," he said to himself. "Had you good luck, you would have stuck to Rama; when bad luck haunts you, what else can you do than come away and be alive? What use is it to pine and blame yourself?" Sumanthra chided himself most mercilessly in this strain.

He started a dialogue with himself again. "With what face am I to present myself in Ayodhya? When the citizens ask me where Rama is, what can I answer? When they ask me, 'how could you come away leaving Rama in the jungle?' what can I tell them? Won't I be overcome with shame and sorrow? O, my heart has become stone.

Else, why hasn't it split into fragments at all that I have gone through?" Sumanthra was disgusted at his own meanness. He wrung his hands in despair. He decided that he couldn't enter the city during sunlight, when people would be moving about. It would be less humiliating, he felt, to enter the city at night, after everyone had gone to bed and was fast asleep.

But soon, his inner voice told him, "What! Can the people of Ayodhya ever sleep? No, no. They can't. It's just my foolishness and ignorance that make me imagine they do. They would be awake, awaiting news of Rama's return or, at least, any news about him. I can't escape the humiliation and shame,

whether I enter the city at night or during the day. Well! For me, who did not deserve the grace of Rama, this ill fate is the proper meed. I better go through it and bear the burden of the blame." Sumanthra wended his way slowly and haltingly, spending time in framing questions to himself and answering them.

At last, he reached the bank of the Thamasa river. He decided to spend a few hours there, allowing the horses to graze a bit and preparing himself for the entry into the city after nightfall, when the people would be safe in bed and not on the streets. Finally, the chariot rolled into the gate of the city and began to move through thoroughfares.

Sumanthra took extra care to ensure silence from wheel and hoof; the chariot moved at the pace of a snail.

But, who could silence the agony of the horses? They recognised the streets through which they had taken Rama and groaned aloud at their present fate, when their dear Rama was far, far away.

The populace of the city heard this pathetic neigh; their ears were set to hear this piteous cry; they told each other that Sumanthra had returned with an empty chariot; they ran into the streets and stood pathetically on both sides to witness the sad spectacle.

When he saw the crowds, Sumanthra bent his head low. Seeing him in this pitiable posture, they guessed that Rama had not returned and swooned on the spot, falling wherever they stood. Many wept aloud. The residents of the palaces of the queens, when they heard the neighs of the grief-stricken steeds, sent maids in haste to ask why; they hurried in groups toward Sumanthra and showered questions on him. He sat dejected and crestfallen, like a mute person, unable to find words to answer them. He sat unmoved like a broken pillar, as if he was deaf and could not hear what they were so earnestly asking him.

From his behaviour, the maids inferred that Rama had rejected all

importunities to return. They lamented, "Oh minister! Did you leave Sita in the terror-striking forest and come back alone?" and broke into a sudden sharp wail.

One maid was more courageous than the rest. Kausalya, she told the minister, had ordered him to come straight to her palace.

Sumanthra describes his journey

There, Sumanthra found the emperor prostrate on the floor, in disheveled clothes, exhausted for lack of sleep and food. Sumanthra mastered the surge of sorrow within him and, uttering the words "Victory! Victory (jai, jai)," which are traditionally to be pronounced first in the imperial presence, stood by, shaking head to foot. Recognising his voice, Dasaratha sat up quick and plaintively asked him, "Sumanthra! Where is my Rama?" Sumanthra clasped the emperor in his arms; the emperor clung to him as a drowning person clings to a blade of grass. Seeing them weeping with immeasurable sorrow, Kausalya was submerged in grief. She could scarcely breathe; she gasped and was pitifully suffocating with agony. The maids noticed this and lamented loudly the misfortune that had overtaken all, and they struggled to console the queen and restore her.

Dasaratha pulled himself up a little; he made Sumanthra sit right in front of him. "Sumanthra! Tell me about my Sita and Rama. Tell me all about them. How is Lakshmana? Alas, tender Sita must indeed be very tired. Where are they now? Tell me." Noting that Sumanthra was not eager to reply, he shook him by the shoulders and pleaded most piteously.

Sumanthra was too full of shame to look the emperor in the face; he bent his looks toward the floor. With eyes streaming with tears, he could scarcely speak. Dasaratha continued his sobs. "O Rama! My breath is still lingering on in this frame, even though a son like you left me. The world has no sinner equal to me in heinousness.

Sumanthra! Where exactly are my Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana? Take me

without delay to them. Do me this good turn. Fulfil this desire of mine. Without seeing them, I can't live a second longer." And, like a person infatuated and desperate, he shouted in pain, "Rama! O Rama! Let me see you at least once! Won't you give me the chance to see you?" The maids standing outside the hall were so sunk in sorrow at the emperor's plight that they couldn't eat or sleep.

Sumanthra replied, "Imperial monarch!! You are extremely wise; you are made in heroic mould; your abilities are profound. Your lineage is divine. You have always served ascetics and saints. You know that as night follows day and day follows night, wealth and want, happiness and misery, nearness and separation come one after the other, with a certain inevitability. Only fools are carried off their feet in joy when happiness comes and are dispirited and down-hearted when misery comes. Learned people like you should not be affected by either; they should be full of equanimity, whatever might happen.

"I have no credentials to advise you to face this situation courageously, for you know the need for courage very much more. O benefactor of the world! Heed my prayers. Give up this grief. I will describe the details of my journey with them now. Please listen calmly." At this, Kausalya struggled to raise herself up, with the help of the maids; she leaned on them and made herself ready to listen to what Sumanthra had to say.

Sumanthra began, "O master! The first day we journeyed up to the bank of the Thamasa. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana bathed in the river and, after drinking water, rested under a spreading tree. The next day, we reached the Ganga River. Darkness was invading from all sides. I stopped the chariot according to Rama's command. All three bathed and rested on a stretch of sand. When dawn broke, Rama asked Lakshmana to bring him the juice of the banyan tree, and when he did so, Rama applied it to his hair and matted it, so that he could wear it on the crown of his head.

"Meanwhile the ruler of the Nishada tribe, a friend of Rama, brought a boat. Sita got into it first; then Rama; and then, honouring Rama's order and carrying the bow and arrows, Lakshmana. Before he sat in the boat,

Lakshmana asked me to convey prostrations and homage to the parents and his prayer for blessings. He also asked me to ask you to put up with things boldly and wisely." Sumanthra continued his account of what Rama had asked him to announce at Ayodhya. "Master, Rama said, 'Communicate my homage to the preceptor. Advise my father not to grieve over what has happened.' After this, Rama called me near him and directed me thus, 'Call together the ministers and citizens of Ayodhya and the kinsmen of the royal family and tell them of this request, specially made by me: only those among them who help to make my father's life happy are dear to me.' Rama said, 'On Bharatha's arrival, convey my blessings to him and direct him to accept the burden of ruling over the empire, to conserve and promote justice and integrity, and to foster the welfare of the people through means that are pure in thought, word, and deed. Tell him that I want him to serve the parents so well that they forget their agony at separation from me.' "While Rama was engaged in commissioning me thus, Sita approached and told me to inform you she was happily spending time with Rama, with nothing wanting. She wanted me to offer her prostrations at the feet of her father-in-law and mothers-in-law. She wanted me to tell them not to be anxious about her, to be assured that she was happy with her lord and eagerly expecting them to bless her always. She requested me to tell them that she enquired often after their health and welfare.

"Meanwhile, the boatman realised that Rama did not want to delay any longer, so he started to dip the oar in the river. Soon, Rama moved off. I looked on at the receding boat with my heart literally petrified; I must have spent a long time standing on the river bank. I had to return perforce to this place to carry out Rama's orders; otherwise, I would certainly have drowned myself in the Ganga, I had become so desperate. I had to continue my life, just for this purpose - to convey Rama's message to you. This Ayodhya, which has no Rama in it, appears to me forlorn and fearful as a forest." The curse on Dasaratha Listening to Sumanthra's words and the soft sweet messages from Rama and Sita, Dasaratha couldn't restrain his anguish; he couldn't forget all that had happened, and he fell in a faint.

The Emperor's breath was suffocated, like a fish that struggles to wriggle out

of the dense slush into which it has fallen. Seeing his plight, the queens burst into heartrending wails. Words cannot describe that moment of desperate distress. Seeing their sorrow, even sorrow could not restrain its own sorrow. The agony of the queens, the agony of the Emperor, the agony of the maids of the palace spread confusion and consternation over the entire city. The residents of the capital scattered in terror, just like birds of the forest frightened at midnight by a sudden thunderbolt.

Like a lotus stalk that, plucked and thrown out of the water, fades fast, the emperor was fast leaving the body. Words couldn't emerge from his throat, and his tongue became dry. The senses turned dull and ineffective.

Kausalya watched the emperor and noted that the sun of the solar dynasty was setting.

She mustered courage and, stepping near, placed her lord's head on her lap and tried to make him listen to a few words of consolation and comfort. She said, "Lord! Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana will arrive soon and see you.

Hear me; take courage; strengthen yourself." When she prayed so compassionately into his ear, he opened his eyes and muttered audibly, "Kausalya! Where is my Rama? Show me, show me, where is he? Take me to him. Alas!

My sweet and tender daughter-in-law isn't here. And Lakshmana, where is he that I don't see him?" Dasaratha bent his head, unable to hold it up any more. The burden of grief was so heavy. A few minutes later, the emperor remembered the curse pronounced on him by the blind hermit, Sravana's father. He sat up with a struggle and began telling Kausalya, in feeble accents, the story of that curse.

"Kausalya! On one occasion, I had gone into the forest on a hunting expedition. A large number of soldiers and huntsmen followed me there. We couldn't find a wild animal the whole day, but I felt that I shouldn't return to the capital empty handed, with nothing bagged. We entered the forest in the

night and waited and watched for some luck. The dawn was about to break the darkness around us on the brink of a vast lake, when something moved on the edge of the water. I could also hear the sound of the movement.

"I inferred that it was a big beast of the jungle, and since I could shoot an arrow straight at the sound and effect a kill, I drew my bow and let go the sharp, sure arrow. It flew fast and furious and hit that animal already on the move. Suddenly! I heard the cry of pain, 'Ah,' emanating from the place where it fell. I ran forward with the soldiers and lo, I found it was not a beast I had hit, but the young son of a hermit!

"I bent by his side and prayed for his pardon for the tragic error. He told me; 'Emperor! Don't grieve. Fulfil my request, which I will presently tell you, and that will be enough requital for the sin you have perpetrated. My name is Sravana. My father and mother are both blind. I was spending the days of my life serving them both; that service was granting me all the happiness I needed. I was blessed with even the highest knowledge, the realisation of the reality. They are now suffering from excruciating thirst. I came here to this lake to take some water to them.

You shot me, imagining me to be an animal of the forest. Who can avoid the decrees of destiny?

"In my present condition, I can no longer walk with this water to my parents. Therefore, take this vessel of water to them; go in the northerly direction until you come to a lonely thatched hut. After they have slaked their thirst, describe what happened to me here. Don't tell them anything about me before they slake their thirst." Saying this, he placed the vessel in my hands, and passed away.

"Kausalya! O, how pathetically anxious he was for his parents! He never worried about his life, which was fast ebbing away; he didn't speak a harsh word to me; those soft sweet loving words he uttered are still echoing in my ears. With his last breath, he repeated the sacred sound (pranava) 'Om, Om, Om' clearly, three times. Seeing him and his calm courageous death, I

decided to make amends for my sin by fulfilling his last desire. I hurried to the hut he had mentioned and gave the vessel into their hands, without uttering a single word. But those parents started asking many questions; they asked, 'Son! Why did you take so much time? Why this delay?' They moved their hands forward and waved them about, so that they might touch him and feel his presence before them. I stepped back a little. The aged couple wailed, 'Son! Why aren't you speaking to us today? We won't drink the water you brought unless you talk to us and answer our queries!' "I had directed the soldiers to bring Sravana's body to the parents' hut, and they arrived at this time with the corpse. I placed the body within reach of the mother. She wept most pathetically over the body; I could not look on. Some time later, the mother established some little mastery over her grief and told me, 'Emperor! There is no use extending our lives hereafter, since our son has left us. We have grown old, and who will serve us and foster us? Kill us too, as you killed him. Or else, erect a pyre, so that we can immolate ourselves with our son.' I bowed my head, and accepted their command. I heaped dry wood and piled up a pyre. The son's corpse was placed on it. They sat on it, and by sheer exercise of yogic power, they created fire in themselves and burned themselves.

"Before they immolated themselves, they addressed me and spoke a few words. Their holy curse is proving true today." At this point, Dasaratha stopped some time, in order to take rest and to compose his agitation.

Kausalya pacified him, giving him consolation and mental calm. "Lord! What did the parents say? Tell me, I am anxious to hear." Dasaratha stayed silent for a while and replied, "Kausalya! What can I say? How can I repeat those words?"

Those old people, the aged couple spoke thus, 'You will end your life, as we are doing now, out of unbearable agony at separation from your son.' Then, they breathed their last, amidst the rising flames.

"At that time, I had no son, and I wondered how their curse would affect me. How could their word come true? But I also thought that being the words of

an aged sage, they had to become true. That meant I must have sons, so that I could be separated from them. You know how sad we were, for we had no sons then. I felt that the curse might prove a blessing; I prayed it might come true so that, even though I may have to be separated from them, I would have sons. I couldn't tell you this secret till now. Now, I understand that the words of that holy hermit represented genuine truth. The agony of separation from Rama is bringing about my end. I have recalled to memory the tragedy of Sravana. My courage is spent. I can't muster it any more." Dasaratha passes away Dasaratha was lost in contemplation of the incidents of the past. "Rama! Rama! Rama!" he cried, and leaned back on Kausalya, who noticed the change that had come over him and screamed. The attendants and maids gathered around. They found that the emperor had drawn his last breath. The city was turned into a vale of tears, a seething pool of grief. Crowds surged into the palace. The streets became fast-moving torrents of weeping humanity.

People cast curses on Kaika, for they felt that the city had lost its eyes as a result of her machinations.

Bharatha and Satrughna return

Vasishta, the royal preceptor, arrived at the hall where the emperor's body lay. He spoke appropriate counsel and tried to assuage the sorrow of the queens. He consoled Kausalya and Sumitra, telling them about the deceased forefathers and how they too couldn't escape death, in spite of their might and majesty. Since no one was present who could officiate during the obsequies, the body was, according to instructions given by Vasishta, immersed in oil to keep it from disintegrating. Vasishta beckoned a courier and told him. "Here! Go quickly to Bharatha; don't tell him a word about the emperor's death; but tell him only this: the preceptor wants you and your brother to return immediately to the capital." The courier fell at the preceptor's feet and took leave of the minister, before starting on the long journey in a fleet chariot.

Ever since Ayodhya was plunged in sorrow, Bharatha had experienced various

premonitions in the form of ominous dreams. He was awakened by the terror and turmoil that the dreams presented before him. Many nights, Bharatha hadn't even a wink of sleep. He sat up in bed in an eerie state of expectation, fearing that some bad news was coming fast toward him. He got up even before dawn and, after an early bath, performed various rites and ceremonies in order to propitiate the gods and avert the expected calamity. He sat long in the shrine, praying for relief. Nevertheless, he was haunted by a mysterious fear.

The dreams persisted for fourteen days, and Bharatha had reached the very bottom of his courage and faith.

The courier from Ayodhya managed to reach the city of Kekaya, where Bharatha was, on the fifteenth day of his long journey. Upon being informed of his arrival, Bharatha ordered him to be brought in immediately.

The courier prostrated before Bharatha and prayed that he and his brother start without the least delay, according to the command of the preceptor, to Ayodhya. Bharatha asked about the welfare of people in Ayodhya, plying the courier with a variety of questions. He replied that there was nothing special to report, except that the preceptor wanted them to return without delay. This was the task on which he had come, and he had nothing more to say. Nor did he know anything more.

Bharatha knew that couriers would speak only few words before their royal masters and that the royal masters also should not keep on talking to them intimately for long. Etiquette demanded that he not converse with him for more than a few minutes. The courier, too, had his code of discipline. So, he rose and left the chamber.

That very moment, Bharatha entered the inner apartments and took leave of his maternal uncle; along with his brother, Satrughna, he got into the waiting chariot and hurried it to move forward faster and faster. Like an arrow from an intrepid bow, the chariot flew over mountain paths, hill tracks, and jungle roads. Grief was surging in Bharatha's heart, as fast as the chariot itself. He

couldn't explain why or wherefore. Some inexplicable agony afflicted him. Bharatha didn't wish to delay on the road for food or even for a gulp of water to assuage his thirst.

Satrughna noticed the sense of alarm and anxiety that had overcome his brother; a few times, he suggested making a halt for food and drink, but Bharatha paid no heed and he remained silent. Moreover, they observed a series of bad omens encountering them as they drove along. Crows cawed raucously from positions and directions foreboding evil. Dogs howled piteously, in an eerie tone. These signs of calamity ruffled the calmness that Satrughna had heroically maintained until then.

When they arrived at the main gate of Ayodhya and looked up, the fear was confirmed, for the festoons of mango leaves hadn't been renewed for days. Only dried leaves hung across the moaning gateway, beating against the wind as if gnashing in anger and sorrow. Why weren't green leaves hung across? What had happened to the city? Why this neglect, this sign of distress? They guessed that some terrible bolt of sorrow had fallen on the capital.

They entered the city and drove on. The royal stables for horses and elephants were at the entrance, and when Bharatha's saw them, his heart broke and he lost control over himself. For the animals were standing without moving a muscle, heads bent and eyes streaming tears. The trainers and grooms stood with heavy loads of grief, unable to lift their heads. Driving further into the city, they found the doors of all the mansions closed, as if the people inside declined to welcome anyone in. The roads themselves were dusty and unswept. The few citizens who were up and moving suddenly turned their gaze away when they saw the chariot that was coming in. Recognising Bharatha, they shed tears.

The diamond bazar was closed, as were all the shops. Bharatha couldn't find the tongue to ask anyone the reason for the pall of gloom that hung over the city. He was petrified at the unforeseen signs of distress. The chariot entered the royal palace. The guards received them silently, with no acclamation of

joy, no traditional shouts of Hurrah! Hurrah! They stood mute and bent and couldn't raise their eyes, for there were tears overflowing.

Convinced that some unspeakable calamity had overtaken the city, the brothers alighted from the chariot and ran into the palace.

Bharatha learns of Dasaratha's death

Kaika noted her son's arrival and went forward with great joy to receive him. The bevy of maids who rose with her and walked behind her were groaning in sorrow. Bharatha looked at their faces and stood stunned, unable to speak even a single word. But Kaika began speaking. "Son! Is your uncle well?" Bharatha gave some indistinct reply and pressed forward with his own query, "How is father? How is my eldest brother, my other brother? How are my aunts, the queens?" At this, Kaika was rendered mute. Tears gathered in the eyes of the maids who stood around. He realised that some terrible news was being hidden from him. "Mother, where is father?" At this, the maids burst into sobs and tears. Seeing them, Kaika too sensed that she should not delay any longer; she too shed tears and acted the role of a grief-stricken woman. Bharatha couldn't unravel the mystery unaided; he asked his mother to explain what had happened to whom and why everyone was so overcome with sorrow.

At this, Kaika replied, "Son! What shall I say? I was very happy that with the help of Manthara, I was able to achieve all that I desired, but with the very first step, my success has broken into bits; the gods cast an unpropitious eye on it. The emperor, your dearly beloved father, has left for heaven." Kaika started sobbing aloud.

As soon as these words fall on his ear, Bharatha rolled on the ground like a she-elephant at the roar of a lion.

He cried out, "Alas, father!" as he fell. Like a plantain tree cut asunder, Satrughna also fell flat on the floor. Their agony was indescribable, immeasurable.

Bharatha sat up pressing his head with both hands and wept aloud. He cried out, "Father! We could not be present round your bed when you drew your last breath. O! what great sinners are we? Of the four sons, all four could not reap the same merit. And this Bharatha and Satrugna are the worst, the most unfortunate. During the last moments, you would have talked so lovingly to us. You would have given us invaluable blessings and directions for life. Well, we must be grateful that Rama was there with you. You would certainly have told him what you wished to convey to us. Brother! Rise. Come with me. We will go to Rama and find out what message father left for us. Mother! Tell us where Rama is." Bharatha stood up, ready to go, waiting only for his mother's reply.

Kaika said, "Son! If Rama were here, your father would not have breathed his last, don't you realise that?"

Rama is not in the city, don't you know?" This was like pouring poison into a wound; Bharatha was shocked by the new blow. "Mother, Rama is my very breath. Where has he gone?" Bharatha was on the brink of collapse.

Kaika replied quick and fast: "Where to? Do you ask where he has gone? Well, to the forest." "Perhaps," Bharatha intervened, "But, why hasn't he returned yet?" Kaika's answer was delivered calmly and with deliberation. She said, "Son! We have no time to relate and listen to that long story. First, busy yourself in arranging for the last obsequies of your father!" From this, Bharatha learned that his mother was trying to hide some unpleasant secret from him, so he asked the whereabouts of Sita and Lakshmana, one after the other. The mother replied, "They followed Rama into the forest. They won't return to this city for fourteen years. Thus did your father command." Kaika delivered this statement with a firm, hard voice.

Kaika saw that Bharatha was rendered increasingly desperate and distressed by her statements, so she drew her him near and, stroking his head, started consoling him saying, "Son! There is no need to lament over your father.

While alive, he engaged continuously in meritorious activities, so his soul

would have attained heaven. Your duty is to follow the ideal he set before you, to earn similar fame by meritorious deeds and rule over the empire happily. Increase his fame and renown by your own wise and merciful rule and maintain the great name of the dynasty." Kaika endeavoured to heal the lacerated heart of her son by these and similar words.

But her words struck his heart like a dagger thrust. Each word hit him like a hammer stroke. Satrughna developed a burning sensation all over his body as he listened to her. But he kept quiet; he didn't scream. Bharatha, however, rose suddenly, deciding to discover the truth, for he felt that Kaika was deceiving him by her words, keeping some facts away from him and talking in riddles. He drew Satrughna along and rushed out of the room toward the apartments of Kausalya, the eldest queen and Rama's mother.

And what did he see there! Kausalya was rolling on the floor, in her dust-ridden clothes, lamenting aloud, "O Lord! Lord! Rama, Rama!" Her maids, sunk in sorrow, were nursing her into some sort of courage.

Bharatha could not restrain himself. Crying out "Mother! Mother!" he collapsed on the floor at her feet.

Queen Sumitra was also there, with Kausalya. Both of them recognised Bharatha and Satrughna and fainted. Recovering, they clasped each other in a fit of agony and wept aloud; the scene would have melted the hardest stone.

The brothers could not bear the weight of sorrow; they fell on the floor.

"Mother! Take me to father; tell me why he passed away. Why did my dear brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, go to the forest with Sita? It's all a mystery to me; tell me why and save me from this agony." Bharatha pleaded pitifully, clasping Kausalya's feet.

Kausalya embraced him tenderly. "With your return, my son, I am consoled a little. Seeing you, I can forget the pang of separation from dear Rama. You

are as much as Rama to me; I make no distinction." Even while saying so, she interrupted her words with sobs and groans and the cry, "Ah! Rama! Can I keep alive for fourteen long years, while you spend them in the forest? Have you resolved that I should be reduced to ashes by the sorrow of separation, just as your father was? Alas how unfortunate am I?" Bharatha suffered even more at these outbursts. His imagination pictured all kinds of tragedies and miseries, for he was not yet aware of the truth. He prayed: "Mother! Don't keep fact away from me. Trust me. Tell me why Rama went into the forest and why father breathed his last; tell me and save me from this tangle of confusion." Kausalya was simple and straightforward and very compassionate by nature. She took Bharatha to be Rama himself returned. She drew Bharatha near her and, wiping her tears, said, "Son! Bharatha! Be bold. Don't grieve over the past, for such grief is useless. Strange things do happen when times are not propitious and circumstances so conspire. What good is it to lay the blame on someone? No one should be found fault with. It is my destiny to live on with this load of sorrow. This cannot be avoided; it must be endured by me. But you are young. You are like the sun at the hour of early dawn. Remember that.

"My dearly beloved darling, Rama, in obedience to father's order, wore apparels of fibre, tied his matted hair into a topknot, and is now moving about in the jungle. Sita, who cannot live away from him even for a moment, is with him, clothed in a bark-garment. Lakshmana tried to stop Rama from going into the forest, but his efforts were of no avail. Declaring that Ayodhya without Rama was a jungle for him, he followed Rama. All this happened before my very eyes. O! What a sinful soul should I be that I still live!

"I couldn't go with them, nor would my life depart when they left; how shall I describe my miserable plight?

My heart is really carved out of adamant stone. O tender-hearted Rama! You suffer so much now, since you were born of me. Or else, why should you? Alas! Rama! How much suffering you have to endure, living on fruits and roots and wandering about in the terror-striking recesses of the jungles!" She groaned aloud once and fell in a faint on the floor.

Bharatha saw and listened to all this, but the puzzle still remained unsolved. He was struggling in fear and anxiety, unable to delve into the mystery. Meanwhile, a message was brought by Minister Sumanthra that the royal preceptor, Sage Vasishta, had asked for Bharatha to go to him. Sumanthra also burst into tears when his eyes fell on the brothers, and he clasped Bharatha to his breast. The brothers also could not control their grief. Bharatha hoped that Sumanthra, at least, would throw light on the mystery hanging over the tragic events in the capital, and he tried various means to draw Sumanthra into giving him an account of the happenings. But Sumanthra did not like to speak about them; he thought Bharatha and Shatrughna had already been told what had happened by those who met them before his arrival.

Dasaratha's body is cremated

They went to the preceptor. Bharatha and Shatrughna fell at Vasishta's feet and wept aloud. He raised them up, with affection and sympathy, and taught them many a moral and philosophical lesson in the process of consoling them. "Already, there has been much delay; it is not advisable to delay any further," he said, and directed Bharatha to prepare himself for performing the funeral rites of his father.

Bharatha was lost in thought for a long while; then, he pleaded with the preceptor Vasishta, "Master! This duty has to be carried out by the eldest son, and Rama is the eldest of us four. Now you propose that I carry it out.

Is this just? Is this right? You have preserved the body all these days; keep it so for two or three days more. We will go to Rama, Satrughna and I, and bring him back with us. Please give us permission to do so." Vasishta replied, "Son! You are a simpleton! Rama wouldn't like to return earlier than the fixed period. He honours his word, when once given. However much you might plead, Rama will not enter Ayodhya until the fourteen years are over. Therefore, give up this idea; perform the obsequies of your father; later, you can do what you want." Vasishta spoke in this strain again and again to convince Bharatha of the futility of his idea.

Bharatha could not avoid obeying the preceptor. He agreed; the father's body was bathed, and the rites laid down in the Vedas preliminary to cremation were duly gone through. Meanwhile urged by an irrepressible yearning, Bharatha went straight into the apartments of Kausalya and Sumitra. Falling at their feet, he prayed, "Mothers!

You must desist from immolating yourselves in the funeral pyre of father. If you try to do so, I won't perform the last rites for him." He secured from them the promise that they would not. Both of them were much impressed by his love and affection. They could not but comply with this request. They said, "Son! We shall act in accordance with your desire." Then the body was placed on the pyre of sandalwood piled on the bank of the Sarayu River. Bharatha performed the last rites with scrupulous correctitude, evincing a faith in the Vedas that was a thousand times more than what Vasishta expected and foresaw. He gave in charity, in his father's name, the sixteen prescribed articles in plenty. He gave cows, lands, gold, houses, food, horses, clothes, elephants, coins, and other valuables. The recipients extolled his generosity and filial piety.

Bharatha learns the full truth

But the feudatory kings, the scholars and priests, and the common people could not reconcile themselves to Rama's absence. That sorrow gnawed their hearts. That agony of separation caused pangs of pain every moment.

They knew they were helpless; there was no way out. Rama would never give up the plighted word. He would not return, whatever the inducement, until the fourteen-year period was over. They had to accept that fact. So they steeled their hearts to bear with the agony and decided to keep alive, awaiting his return, hoping to rejoice when the term of exile ended.

Meanwhile, Vasishta, the royal preceptor, gathered the feudatory rulers, vassal kings, ministers, sages, monks, wise people of the empire, and leaders among the people and held a conference. First he administered words of advice according to the Dharma-sastras, the canons of moral law, on the

duties and obligations of rulers. He narrated the entire series of events from the plot woven by Kaika to the day when Rama left for the forest. Then, Vasishtha dilated upon the high qualities of the deceased Emperor - his adherence to truth, his elevated standards of conduct, his high spiritual attainments, his regal splendour, and his loyalty to Vedic injunctions, all of which made him a generous patron of countless rites, sacrifices, and other ceremonial rites.

Vasishtha went on with the narration of the Emperor's attempt to celebrate Rama's coronation and the obstacles that came in his way, which resulted in Rama's exile and the Emperor's death through grief at the separation from his dearly beloved son.

Bharatha and Satrughna, who had been unaware of these tragic developments, were overwhelmed with anger, sorrow, and a sense of shame. They bent their heads; their hearts were filled with contrition. Streams of tears flowed down their cheeks. The people assembled before them could scarcely lift their eyes toward them. Even Vasishtha wiped his eyes, which were fast filling with tears. The hall was saturated with gloom; a silence fell over the assembly; everyone sat like stone images.

Bharatha and Satrughna couldn't listen anymore to Vasishtha's narration, for they were too full of anger at Kaika for her nefarious conduct. Bharatha cursed himself that he was born of such a mother; he was so ashamed at this consequence of his own evil deeds in past lives that he could not lift his head or look anyone in the face.

They were anxious to leave the hall and get away.

Vasishtha knew their feelings and went to them with comforting counsel. "Son, there's no use lamenting over the past. What has happened has happened. Now we must think and resolve upon what has to be done. Your father, I must say, was fortunate in all respects. Why grieve over him? Listen to me; bow your head to his command. He granted you authority to rule over this empire. It's right that you accept his grant and honour his order.

"Your father agreed to be separated from Rama, since he could not bring himself to breaking his own plighted word. He gave up his life, since he had immense love and affection toward Rama. Without a doubt, he died in order to redeem his promise. He knew that honouring a promise once made is more valuable than life itself. That is why he was ready to face death itself rather than go back on his word. And consider, Rama also went into exile in the forest with his wife in order to honour his word!

"It is the glory of the Ikshvaku royal line that everyone belonging to it would sacrifice anything for the sake of keeping the word once given. You share that splendour. You must now act according to your father's word and accept the responsibility of administering the kingdom. May you attain all auspiciousness in the task. May success and prosperity attend all your undertakings. I ventured to advise you thus only because of the affection and compassion I have toward you, or else I would not have laid on your shoulder this heavy responsibility. I know you can maintain the fair name of your father; you have the administrative ability, the skill, and the courage needed for taking up this burden. Don't hesitate or doubt. Accept the charge." Vasishta patted Bharatha on his back and blessed him. Bharatha took his loving advice, and when the preceptor finished, he rose quickly from his seat and fell prostrate at his feet. He struggled to speak, for he was in inconsolable grief; his lips quivered; his throat was unclear. Words could hardly shape themselves on his tongue.

He said, "Master! Are these words really an indication of your love and compassion? No, in fact, you have no love or compassion toward me. For if you had, you would never have agreed to place all this burden on me.

You are sentencing me to this punishment without the least compassion. This empire, which drove the holiest and purest person into the jungles, which plunged the entire population into years of incessant tears, which has lost its most righteous ruler, which has brought eternal infamy to its ruling dynasty, the Ikshvaku line, which brought about the pathetic state of widowhood on mothers Kausalya, Sumitra, and the rest, which has degraded itself in so many ways - you entrust this empire to me!

"Alas, this is the consequence of the sins I have committed, the consequence of this unfortunate fellow being born from the womb of that embodiment of cruelty and hatred, Kaika. Instead of inflicting this punishment on me, please earn some spiritual merit by sending me to Rama. I can make my life worthwhile and save myself by engaging in the task of sweeping the paths ahead of them, to make them soft for his feet. I can't remain in this place a moment longer." Bharatha fell at Vasishta's feet and prayed for permission to leave for the forest. At this, the Ministers of the state rose with folded hands and said, "Lord! It isn't proper to continue this state of affairs for long; we have no ruler now. You cannot escape the responsibility that the preceptor is imposing on you. After Rama returns, you can act in the way you prefer, but now, please accept our prayers. Protect the realm and promote the prosperity of the people. Take up the reins." Bharatha talks to Kausalya Bharatha didn't reply. Instead, he wanted leave to go to mother Kausalya and see her for awhile. Vasishta readily agreed. Bharatha and Satrughna moved out of the assembly and made their way straight to Kausalya's palace. They fell at her feet and Bharatha told her, "Mother! Pray pardon this unlucky Bharatha, who has been the cause of all this calamity, having been born from the womb of that wicked woman, Kaika. This cursed fellow is the source of miseries of the realm. Give me permission to leave for the forest. I cannot walk or move about with head erect even a moment in Ayodhya, after my master and lord, Rama, has left it on account of me. This empire rightfully belongs to the eldest son; this insignificant fellow has no right over it. I don't need this burden, I won't bear it. Bless me, so that I can leave immediately." Bharatha stood waiting, filled with grief.

Kausalya mustered courage and began comforting him. "Bharatha! Consider the circumstances and give up your grief. This is no time for wavering. Rama is out there in the midst of the forest region. Your father is in heaven. Your mothers, kith and kin, your friends and well-wishers, and the subjects are sunk in deep sorrow. All are looking forward to you as their sole refuge and resort. Realise that all this has happened because the times were not propitious, so men's deeds became crooked and shocking; take courage and decide. Obey your father's directions. Bow your head to the command of the guru, Vasishta. Honour the petitions of the people. Act as the ministers are

praying you should." Kausalya held his hands fondly in hers while she tried to persuade him to accept the authority of the monarch of the realm. Her words touched him with a strange softness, as if they were cool sandal paste over a burning heart. They were sweet to the ear and very appealing to hear. For Kausalya had no word of condemnation for his mother, who had caused this string of disasters; she entertained not even the least doubt regarding his loyalty.

Bharatha felt immensely happy and relieved when he listened to her words. He was delighted beyond measure when he noted how broad her heart was and how sincere her affection toward him. He hadn't calculated even in his wildest dream that Kausalya would treat him like this, when her own son was an exile for fourteen years in the forest, that she would pour out such plentiful affection on him, the son of another wife of her husband! What a difference, he wondered, between his own mother, Kaika, and Kausalya. He could not gauge it by any unit of measurement. In Kausalya, he found the completion and fulfilment of the love that should fill the heart.

He folded his palms and importuned, "Mother! Your words, filled with tenderness and love, are like a shower of cool rosewater on my lacerated heart. Perhaps you mistook me for Rama! But, alas, I am not that pure-hearted Rama. As Bharatha, born of Kaika, I have a crooked nature, inherited from her. I am mean, with no sense of shame. I am Rama's enemy. You have taken me to be Rama and spoken so kindly, so affectionately. Your heart is so set upon Rama that you address everyone as you address Rama himself. I speak the truth, mother! Listen to me and pay heed to my prayer.

"Mother! Only those who are established in righteousness deserve to rule. When persons of devious intelligence and shady skills like me rule the realm, the earth will degenerate into an image of the nether regions.

Selfish pushers, narrow-minded adventurers, greedy vultures, pomp-loving personalities, self-centred individuals, persons suffering from chronic envy - these don't deserve the right to rule. They harm the interests of the people whom they rule over; they undermine the foundations of righteousness. The

kingdom will be ruined by them.

Only those who tread the path of virtue and righteous conduct deserve to rule over others.

"I can discover only one such: Rama. I don't know of any other. Therefore, I will leave this very instant and, clasping his feet, pray to him. I will bring him back to Ayodhya. Grant me permission; bless me without further delay." Bharatha prostrated before Kausalya and waited for the answer.

Bharatha's words soothed Kausalya's heart to a large extent."Son! In you I find surging forth the self-same feelings my Rama has. Looking upon you, I can bear a little the agony of separation from him. So, if you also go to the forest, what is to happen to us? If you declare that your going is inevitable, then take me too. For whom have I to spend my days with in this Ayodhya? Having lost the husband, and having become distant from the son, the wife has not yet dissolved herself in the agony of the loss. Go, secure the permission of the guru, Vasishta; we will enter the forest and spend at least some time with Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana. I can then end this life of mine." When she spoke thus, Bharatha derived some consolation and peace of mind. He fell at the feet of Kausalya and Sumitra and rose to go to Kaika's palace.

Kaika repents

Bharatha walked first, and Satrughna followed. They were heavy with grief and resentment that Kaika, putting her trust in Manthara, had brought about such havoc. They tried hard to suppress the anger that rose within them. At last, they entered the palace. They saw Manthara herself at the entrance, elaborately bejewelled, waiting to receive them. Satrughna couldn't tolerate that sight; he dragged her down by the hair and rained blows on her. She bawled out, "Ayyo, Ayyo." When the sound reached Kaika's ears, she ran to the spot and started berating Satrughna for his action.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Bharatha let himself go with uncontrolled indignation. He shouted at her, "Fie upon you, blackest sinner!

You placed faith in this wicked woman's words and committed despicable sin. Why didn't your heart break in two when this woman's disastrous counsel entered it? How could your tongue pronounce those baneful boons? Why didn't it turn into ashes when it uttered those abominable desires? With what face can you dare reside in this palace? Aren't you ashamed to move within its precincts? Alas! How did the emperor place his faith in the words of a person so evil as you?

"Blinded by lust, he agreed to barter away the son in order to win the wife. The conspiracy you hatched was mean and fraught with misery. You polluted the pure heart of the emperor; you set the kingdom on fire; you destroyed the dynasty and its glory and brought eternal disgrace on the royal line of Raghu; your crooked, poisonous heart has achieved all this ruin. To declare you as my mother is a dire sin. How could you decide that when you harm another, your son would attain good fortune? Aren't the children of others as dear to them as yours are to you? Women who plan ill for other's children accomplish only evil for their own children. How did you miss this great truth? It must be due to sins you committed in previous lives.

"No. All this is due to me. Why else should the pure, the steadfast, the undefiled Rama, my loved brother, and the crown of chastity and goodness, mother Sita, wander about in the fearsome forest? O, what a cruelty!

How dreadful! Fie on you. That I have to speak to such a foul-hearted sinner is itself the result of sins I must have committed in my past lives. O, I wonder what dreadful sin I committed to deserve this punishment, this disgrace of being born of your womb. Sinners get only sinners as sharers and companions; how can they be associated with good people, people engaged in meritorious activity?

"This solar dynasty is as holy, as pure as the celestial swan, with no trace of blemish. But really speaking, you are like your mother; she had her husband killed in order to fulfil her ambition. You too have killed your husband in order to realise your selfish wish. Can the younger son ever rule over the empire, overstepping the eldest son, contrary to the established practice of the royal

line?

"You did not get this fatal idea now; it was there, latent, as a seed, since the very beginning, or else it would not have manifested as a giant tree all of a sudden. Endowed with such a wicked nature, you could have smothered me dead as soon as I was born and saved me and this empire from all this misery. Of what avail is it now to bewail what is past? Alas! Your intelligence directed you to hew down the trunk and water the branches, your reasoning faculty instructed you to promote the lives of fish by bailing the water out of the tank. I can't decide to laugh or weep at your banal stupidity.

"Instead of fouling these minutes conversing with you, I would rather proceed to Rama's presence and pray to him to come back to Ayodhya, so that I can return with him. If he declines, I am determined to stay with him, as Lakshmana has done, and be happy serving him. I won't look on your face again." Bharatha turned his back on her and started with his brother. Kaika ruminated on her erroneous action; she lamented the turn her plot had taken; she felt that wicked plans by anyone would grant only temporary happiness and were certain to pave the way to ultimate downfall. She found no means of escape, she could not find words to express her remorse and sorrow. She stood petrified and dumb.

Kaika was disgusted with Manthara. She realised the truth. She felt delighted at the righteous stand taken by Rama. And she hung her head in shame at the recognition of her own sin.

17. The Brothers Meet

Bharatha and Satrughna went straight to the place where the ministers, the royal preceptor, and the leading citizens of the capital had assembled. All of them were awaiting their arrival, anxious to know what they had resolved upon and silently expectant to listen attentively to what they were about to tell them.

Bharatha fell at the preceptor's feet. "Divine Master! I tell you my honest intention; please believe my sincerity, for I'm not hiding anything. I'm opening my heart without any reservations. The effect is harder than the cause; the metal that is extracted from the soil is harder than the soil, you know. Born in the womb of the hardhearted Kaika, I'm indeed even more hard-hearted. Or else, how can you explain that I'm still alive, despite the fact that Rama is far away from me?

Kaika sent Sita and Lakshmana into the forest and her husband into heaven, plunging the subjects of this vast empire into sorrow and anxiety and bringing eternal infamy on her son. And you demand that I rule over the empire and cover myself with lasting disgrace. I'm not in the least happy over this; I don't deserve this at all. Won't people laugh at me in scorn if I sit on the lion throne as lord ruler, when Rama is moving about in the jungle?

"My reign would bring only harm to the people, for my accession itself would be immoral and unrighteous.

And who would deign to honour a usurper and obey his commands? I cannot punish the unrighteous and the immoral!

With what face can I correct wrong doers when I myself have done mountains of wrong in ascending the throne that is not rightfully mine? People would certainly point an accusing finger at me, when opportunity arises, though they may keep quiet for some time for fear of the reprisals that I might inflict using my authority.

"My mother's evil design has become transformed into an agonising headache for me. I can't wait even a single moment here without seeing Sita and Rama. I am only communicating to you my terrible anguish; only the sight of Rama can cool my heart and cure my agony. No words of consolation or explanation can bring me solace in my grievous plight.

"I have obtained permission from Kausalya and Sumitra and have decided to proceed at dawn tomorrow to Rama. My sins, however plentiful they might be, will be reduced to ashes the moment Rama's eyes fall on me.

Even if Rama doesn't speak to me, I will always be happy at the sight of the Lord, hiding behind some tree and following him at a distance, delighted at the chance. Elders who have gathered here! Pray for me, bless me that I may progress as a result of the sight of Rama. Ministers! Give me permission to go to him. I'm the slave of Lord Rama. He is the Lord for all of us." No one in the assembly among the ministers, feudatories, and leaders of the people, could raise a voice in reply. They realised the depth of Bharatha's remorse. They understood that Bharatha had an unsullied heart and that he was refusing to be bound by the coils of the conspiracy his mother had wound round him.

The chief of the elders rose from his seat. "Lord! We'll come with you. We too find separation from Rama an insufferable agony. We don't care what happens to our lives after we get one chance to see the Lord." He asked for this permission on behalf of everyone gathered there.

Others responded to the suggestion whole-heartedly and came forward with prayers that they too be taken to Rama. Within minutes, the news spread into every nook and corner of the vast city, and men, women, children, young and old, got ready to start! Who can dissuade whom? That day, no one among the huge population of Ayodhya was so cruel as to prevent others from proceeding to Rama, to see the Lord. Kausalya and Sumitra also set out on the journey with their maids.

Meanwhile, Kaika, overcome with repentance for her errors and sins, communicated with Kausalya and prayed that she too be allowed to

accompany the queens. She pleaded for permission to pray for pardon and join the others in attempting to persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya. Kausalya, who had a pure unblemished heart, did not entertain the least doubt or deviation from right-consciousness; she sent word for Kaika to join her.

Bharatha was informed that the entire city was on the move. He told the ministers that at least a few had to stay behind in order to guard the city, so some were left behind. During the night, vehicles were made ready before every house, so that the inmates could join the trek at an early hour. Practically everything on wheels was commandeered for the purpose. Food and drink for the entire mass of people were arranged. Like chakravaka birds, the men and women of Ayodhya awaited the heralding of the dawn, so that they might journey toward their dearly beloved Lord. It was a night of ecstatic anticipation for the citizens; they spent it in contemplating the sight of the Lord, which awaited them.

The army, with the entire force of chariotry, elephantry, cavalry, and infantry, got ready to march. Vedic scholars were directed by the minister to keep on reciting auspicious hymns and to take with them the ceremonial requisites for the ritual worship of fire. Right on time, according to the calculations of the astrologers, the leading chariot for Bharatha and Satrughna and the palanquin for Queen Kausalya were brought before the palace.

Bharatha ordered everyone to occupy their chariot or vehicle. Allowing his empty chariot to move on, Bharatha and Satrughna walked by its side, barefooted.

People thought that they might walk in that manner only for some little time, for some short distance. But they found that Bharatha was in no mood to get into the chariot, however long the distance to be covered. Kausalya couldn't tolerate this. "Son! I can't suffer the sight of your walking. Sit in the chariot at least for some time." Bharatha replied, "Mother, this is only to make amends for the sins I am burdened with. Do I suffer while walking on the road at least a fraction of what Rama and Sita are suffering in the forest, walking barefoot?"

When they are walking barefoot, it is highly wrong for me, their servant, to ride in a chariot. Pardon me for disobeying your command; let me walk as I am doing now." Meanwhile, the royal preceptor, Vasishtha, and his consort Arundathi, who were seated in the preceding chariot, stopped their vehicle. Witnessing Bharatha's determination, they prayed to him at least to sit in their chariot and act as their charioteer. But Bharatha was adamant. He said, "I'm Rama's servant, and I'm bound only to his chariot. Until I get the precious chance to act as his charioteer, I won't ride in any chariot or hold the reins of any other steed. This is my vow." Vasishtha desisted from any further persuasion; he was genuinely delighted at Bharatha's love and reverence toward Rama.

Guha, chief of the Nishadas

They reached the bank of the River Thamasa at nightfall on the first day. The next day, they reached the bank of the Gomathi. The Thamasa is a tributary of the Gogra River, while the Gomathi is a tributary of the Ganga.

As soon as it was dark, the vehicles were stopped, shelters were provided for women, children, and aged; and the minister ordered the soldiers to distribute food to the people, systematically and with due respect. Really, throughout the journey, everyone carried out the work with care and enthusiasm. They took good care that no one suffered any hardship.

Resuming their journey with the dawn of the third day, they reached Sringerapuram as darkness fell. The king of the Nishadas saw the huge concourse and the army on the march. He was perturbed and wondered why Bharatha was proceeding to the forest and why he was taking with him the army with all its components. What was the significance of it all? He tried to solve the mystery. He pondered the pros and cons of this unusual procedure.

He argued within himself, "When the tree is poisonous, its fruit too is bound to be poisonous." He tried his best to foil Bharatha's plans; he directed his men to keep every boat sunk in the depths of the Ganga and to deprive the prince of all means of crossing the river. He ordered that they should prevent the

concourse from crossing over to the other bank, even at the cost of their lives.

The king of the Nishadas stood ready to attack with his bow and arrow, willing to sacrifice his life in the cause of his beloved Rama, in spite of the fact that Bharatha's forces were far superior in strength to his own.

Guha alerted his community and all its members to be prepared for the imminent battle. Then, he got ready to meet Bharatha, to discover whether he had come as a foe or friend or whether he was neutral, only a passing visitor who need not be worried about. Knowing that Bharatha was a prince of imperial lineage, he secured as offering to be presented to him large quantities of flowers, fish, flesh, and fruits.

He planned to discover the innate intent of Bharatha by noting his reactions to the various articles that were offered to him. Roots and tubers and fruits are pure (sathwic) food; if he preferred them, he must be reckoned a friend. The flesh of slain animals is passionate (rajasic) food; preference for that type of food would mark out the "middle of the road" neutral, who is neither ally nor adversary. Fish, if accepted eagerly, would indicate a foe, for they are slothful (thamasic).

Guha, the chieftain of the Nishadas, took these offerings to Bharatha. Good omens greeted him at the very first step. His eyes fell on the sage Vasishta. He ran forward and fell at his feet, announcing himself by name. The preceptor recognised him as Rama's companion. He blessed the chieftain and, calling Bharatha to his side, spoke to him of Guha as Rama's "friend".

When these words fell on his ears, Bharatha embraced Guha warmly and showered questions on him about his health and welfare. Bharatha asked Guha to relate to him how he met Rama. When Guha mentioned how Rama spent one whole night with him on the banks of the self-same river, Bharatha showed great earnestness to listen to his description of that night; his eyes and ears were panting with thirst for the nectar of that narrative.

Guha was all praise and adoration for Rama. He showed Bharatha the thatched hut he had prepared so that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana could rest; he told him of the conversation he had with Lakshmana during the night.

On hearing all this, Bharatha and Satrughna could not stop the stream of tears flowing down their cheeks; they could not suppress the surging waves of sorrow. Watching them, Guha was convinced that they had genuine brotherly feelings toward Rama and that there was no trace of hostility in them. He was struck by their devotion and the sincerity of their dedication.

Bharatha looked closely at the huts constructed for the use of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana; he wanted them tended with due care so that they would suffer no damage. Following the orders of the peceptor, Bharatha performed the ceremonial bath in the holy river Ganga, along with his mothers.

Bharatha asked Guha to take them to the place where Rama spent the night. Pointing to a heap of darbha grass that had been scattered by the wind, Guha said, "Sita and Rama rested here, on this bed of dry grass that night." Bharatha and Satrughna prostrated before the holy spot. Bharatha lamented, "Alas! Accustomed to sleep on a thick soft silken bed, how could my Lord sleep on such hard stuff? Alas! How did that holy mother Sita bear all this hardship?" Overcome with grief, Bharatha could not move from the place for a long while.

Rising, Bharatha asked to be shown the places that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana had rendered holy by treading on them. Guha took them to an ashoka tree, under whose shade they sat for some time eating a frugal meal of fruits. There also the brothers fell on the ground reverentially, knowing it to be holy ground.

While moving round the places sanctified by Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, the two brothers suffered indescribable agony. Their humility, reverence, and devotion touched the heart of the Nishada chieftain.

Bharatha couldn't contain his anguish when he contemplated the discomforts

endured by Sita - Goddess Maha-Lakshmi herself - the dearly beloved daughter of Emperor Janaka, the daughter-in-law of Emperor Dasaratha, and the consort of Rama the Mighty. Bharatha disclosed to Guha that the inhabitants of Ayodhya city could not survive in that city any longer, for the holy couple, Rama and Sita, had left it; they felt that Ayodhya had been transformed into a jungle, for it had no Rama in it; he said that he too could not bear their grief, and he too realised that Ayodhya was wherever Rama was. He explained that he had come with his following and the inhabitants to be in the sacred presence of Rama.

Guha grasped the situation clearly, now, and gave up all the suspicions he had entertained when he saw Bharatha advancing with his army, with its four components of infantry, cavalry, elephantry, and chariotry, toward the jungle where Rama was. He opened his heart to Bharatha and begged his pardon for doubting his intentions.

Bharatha said that his fears were natural and that he had committed no wrong. The truth was that he, Bharatha, was indeed a wicked barbarian! "I am the reason for Rama's exile," he said. "For that one crime, I deserve to be killed; he who kills me commits no sin," he groaned. When Bharatha was condemning himself so harshly, Guha poured out his prayers for pardon.

News spread in Sringerapur, the Nishada capital, that Bharatha had come to the Ganga, and the subjects hurried in groups to honour Rama's brothers. They fed their eyes on the brothers' beauty and majesty and praised them to their hearts' content; they prostrated reverentially before them. They also roundly reprimanded Queen Kaika. They blamed the god of destiny, Brahma, for being so cruel. They shed profuse tears and extolled Rama through manifold forms of praise. They (every man, woman, child) prayed to Bharatha and Satrugna to bring Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana back.

Bharatha was struck dumb at this demonstration of extreme agony at separation from Rama! Tears rolled down his face. "Praying is my task; what happens to the prayer is dependent on Rama's grace. I am but a slave; who am I to exert pressure on Rama? Join me in prayer; pray from the depths of

your hearts for Rama to return to Ayodhya. His heart will certainly melt at our agony. This is our duty. Let your prayers help my prayers to succeed.

Rama has come to save the world, and he won't refuse the prayers of the people."

Bharatha consoled and comforted the Nishadas and others in ways best suited to their needs and capacities.

Meanwhile, darkness fell, and Bharatha asked Guha to direct his people to go home. They ate the fruits brought by Guha and spent the whole night talking about Rama and His glory.

When the eastern sky brightened to usher in the new day, Bharatha instructed the minister to awaken the populace; he bathed in the sacred Ganga with his brother, and the mothers also finished their bath. Everyone got ready to continue the journey. Guha, the chieftain of the Nishadas, collected enough craft to row over the large mass of people, chariots, horses, and other sections of the armed forces that had accompanied Bharatha. The task of ferrying them across the Ganga was quickly and successfully accomplished.

The hermitage of Bharadwaja

After making sure that all had been transported across, Guha moved forward into the jungle, showing Bharatha the way. The brahmins and the preceptor Vasishtha walked as one group; the people of Ayodhya followed in one vast mass; units of the army followed behind. Journeying thus, in the afternoon Bharatha reached the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, the sacred Prayag. He had never walked so much, and his soles were sore and hurt with a burning sensation. Yet, he plodded on, for he felt his pain as recompense for the pain inflicted on Rama. He ignored the pain, for he was conscious only of the pain Rama was undergoing at that very moment.

Prayag is known as Triveni, for the river Saraswathi also enters the twin rivers

there. Its sacredness is tripled thereby. They bathed at the famous confluence with due rites. The anchorites, hermits, celibates, sages, and monks of Prayag were delighted at the chance to fill their eyes with the sight of Bharatha. They said among themselves, "O! He casts around him the same halo as Rama; in fact, the appearance is just the same." Everyone who looked at him could scarce indulge in a wink, lest the delight would be interrupted thereby!

The inmates of the Bharadwaja ashram in Prayag learned of the coming of the brothers with armed forces, accompanied by their mothers and ministers. Sage Bharadwaja sent his disciples to Bharatha and invited the party to visit the ashram. Interpreting the invitation as a command, Bharatha and his entourage entered the ashram. The brothers prostrated before that monarch of the monastic orders. Bharadwaja raised them by the shoulders and drew them near with great affection. He gave them refreshingly cool drinks.

Bharadwaja noticed Bharatha sitting with his head bent in shame and fear, lest his share in Rama's exile be revealed through questions that might be asked. Bharadwaja discovered the reason for his silence and nervousness.

He said, "Bharatha! You need have no apprehension; I am aware of all that happened. No one can control or direct the path of destiny. Why pine over the boons demanded by mother? No trace of wrong can be attributed to her for this. The will of God induced her to ask such boons. Kaika, I know, loves Rama as her very breath, so the reason for the turn of her mind is to be sought not in any human field of thought and reason but only in the divine plan. As the world judges events, Kaika did wrong; as the Vedas lay down, the Goddess Saraswathi, who presides over the tongue, did wrong; know that what happened is in conformity with the will of the Almighty.

"Bharatha! The world will enthuse over your spotless renown and sing your praise. Vedas will be valued more on account of such as you exemplifying their teachings and demonstrating their efficacy.

"Do not hesitate!

"The son to whom the father entrusts the kingdom is thereby deemed deserving of the right to govern it. That relentless adherent of truth, that high-souled ruler Emperor Dasaratha gave the empire to you and ordered you to act according to the dharma of monarchs.

"The exile of Rama into the forest has resulted in a series of calamities. The entire world is sunk in sorrow on account of it. Now your mother is repenting pitiably over the wrong. You are innocent and blameless. No blemish can attach itself to you now if you rule over the empire. In fact, Rama will be happy to know that you have taken up the reins of imperium.

"I must also say that your mission here is laudable indeed. Your purpose is highly commendable. For devotion to Rama's lotus feet is the spring and source of all prosperity and progress. Bharatha! I can boldly declare that there is none so virtuous, so fortunate as you. You have proved yourself worthy of being Rama's dearly beloved younger brother. Rama sanctified this, our ashram, while on his way to the forest. That night, until midnight, Rama talked to me mostly of you and your virtues. They went with me to Prayag for the holy bath; they remembered you even while engaged in bathing! He felt very sad that he could not see you and Satrughna the day he left Ayodhya. I can't measure the love that Rama has toward you.

"Besides, Rama is ever intent on assuaging the grief of those who take refuge in him. The entire world is his family; all are his kith and kin. I believe you are the 'affection' of Rama, in human form, no less. To me, what you feel as a blemish on your name is a lesson, an example, an inspiration. Bharatha! Don't be weighed down by sadness. You are in possession of the wish-fulfilling gem! Why then should you lament that you are poor? It isn't proper for you to do so.

"The sight of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana is truly the treasure all spiritual aspirants seek. I secured that fortune; I feasted my eyes on them. I spoke with them. I was in their presence and I touched them, also. I had the privilege and pleasure of being their host. Perhaps there was some balance of fortune still awaiting me, for I now have the pleasure of seeing you too.

Ecstasy has filled my heart. I am truly blessed. Rama exiled himself into the forest for our sake, ascetics living therein, so that our yearnings might be fulfilled and our holiness heightened.

We are indeed blessed."

In this manner, Bharadwaja, the great sage, praised Bharatha for his manifold virtues and excellences. While speaking in this strain, tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of the revered ascetic.

Bharatha and Satrughna had their minds set on Rama and his limitless love (prema); they felt fortunate indeed to be his brothers, but the joy was extinguished at the thought that they themselves had been exiled from the presence of that embodiment of love. They were plunged in gloom, unbearable agony, and inexpressible grief.

In a voice choked by anguish, Bharatha said, rising up from the prostration he offered to the sage, "Master! You are aware of the past, present, and future. You spoke the very truth. You are master of the highest truth. Rama is unbeatable in skill and power. I have resolved to utter only the truth in your presence. Rama knows the workings of people's minds and what is agitating them. At present, I have no grief over the wrong committed by my mother.

I have no fear that the people will blame me for the tragedy that has befallen them. I have no despair even when it is announced that I am ineligible for heaven.

"My father earned high renown; though dead, his fame has spread over the entire world. The very instance that his beloved son, Rama, left his presence with Lakshmana, he gave up the bubble breath. He couldn't survive the bolt of that tragedy. Therefore, there is no need to be anxious anymore about him. But Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana are moving about bare-footed. Donning the robes of ascetics, they sit on mats of kusha grass and reside in leaf-thatched huts; they are fried by the sun, soaked by rain; they shiver in the cold and bear its pangs; they are undergoing untold hardships in the forest,

aren't they?

"Now, tell me, aren't I the sole cause of all these hardships? This sad fact is eating me throughout the day and night. Food refuses to enter my stomach; sleep refuses to close my eyelids. The crookedness of my mother's mind has become a dagger sticking in my heart. The stratagem she devised to install me on the throne has turned into a trap to ruin me. The agony that is gnawing me from within cannot be appeased, whatever is done. Nothing can cure it. It will end only on the day when Rama returns to Ayodhya. No other remedy can destroy this agony." The monks who had gathered were delighted to hear these words from the prince. Bharadwaja told him, "Son! Don't grieve any more. The moment your eyes fall on Rama's lotus feet, the burden of grief that torments you is certain to disintegrate and disappear." The ascetics also consoled and comforted him in various ways.

Meanwhile, Bharadwaja beckoned to a pupil and directed him to bring roots, tubers, and fruits for Bharatha and Satrughna. He also ordered his pupil to arrange for the supply of food to the aides, minister, courtiers, and citizens of Ayodhya, all of whom had borne uncomplainingly many a hardship on the way in their eagerness to have the sight (darshan) of Rama and who were afflicted in mind by the agony of separation from their beloved Lord.

Complying with that order most reverentially, the pupil quickly offered plentiful repast to all the guests. For the princes, Bharatha and Satrughna, their families, the ministers and courtiers, the pundits and brahmins, hospitality was arranged on an elaborate festive scale. Everything was produced plentifully and perfectly, through the ascetic's mysterious will-power itself. Bharatha was filled with wonder.

But it must be said that not only the two brothers but the entire gathering from Ayodhya looked upon the pomp and profusion as mere trash! They were not charmed in the least. The scents, the bouquets of fragrant flowers, the juicy fruits and the attractive tasty dishes struck them with awe. The two resplendent seats specially set up for Bharatha and Satrughna defied all description.

When all was ready, the sage invited everyone inside a specially erected hall, where they were to partake of the banquet. They entered that marvel of beauty. The royal preceptor and his consort were led to high seats reserved for them. The queens entered the place that was covered and cordoned off for their sake. Bending under the weight of sorrow, they too complied with the sage's command.

Then the bright-faced disciples of the sage brought in Bharatha and Satrughna, with all due honour, in accordance with the practice of that renowned hermitage. The young ascetics stood on both sides of the passage, waving yak-tail whisks and reciting scriptural hymns. The brothers approached the magnificent seats set for them, but, as soon as they came near, they bowed their heads and fell on the floor in respectful obeisance. They took the whisks from the hands of the pupils, and started waving them reverentially, standing one on each side of the lion thrones! They were adoring the thrones instead of sitting in them! All present were surprised at this gesture, this homage offered to the empty thrones.

When the sage invited them to occupy the thrones, Bharatha and Satrughna fell at his feet and implored, "Master! These thrones belong to Sita and Rama, not to us. We have no right to them. In this holy hermitage, only those two, goddess Lakshmi and Narayana, have the title to sit on lion thrones. We are their servants. Permit us to serve them thus." The ascetics and the entire assembly were thrilled with joyous appreciation. They extolled among themselves the immense depth of devotion of the brothers for Rama. Tears of joy flowed from their eyes. The monks were astounded at their faith and its steadfastness.

The brothers offered the elaborate fare to the thrones, picturing them as being occupied by the charming figures of Sita and Rama. A little while after, they broke off small particles from the offered dishes and, placing them adoringly on their eyelids, ate them as sacramental food.

The elders, ministers, aides, and residents of Ayodhya craved pardon from the sage Bharadwaja for not eating, since, as they said, they could not relish

any food, overwhelmed as they were by the agony of separation from Rama. They refused to eat, for they felt that only the sight of Rama could give them the sense of contentment.

That was the nectarine feast for which they yearned. They were plunged in gloom as deep as the standard of the sage's hospitality was high. They said they were too engrossed in their anxiety for the sight of Rama to entertain the idea of food. The sage finally had to accede to their wish to be left alone; he could not prevail upon them to sit down at the feast.

On to Chitrakuta Hill

Everyone got ready to start for the forest, even as early as the first intimations of dawn. They prostrated before the sage and secured his blessings and his permission before leaving the hermitage. The servants walked in advance, showing them the way, and the palanquins and chariots followed immediately after. Bharatha walked behind, with his hand on the shoulder of the chieftain of the Nishadas, Guha. He appeared as the very personification of fraternal love and devotion. He had no footwear to guard against thorns and pebbles; he allowed no one to bring him footwear. He had no umbrella to guard against the scorching sun; he allowed no one to hold one above him. But the earth took pity on him and made his path soft and sweet. The wind comforted him, blowing cool and gentle all through the journey. The sun drew a cloud between him and itself.

They reached the bank of the river Yamuna at evening. Throughout the night, boats were seen gathering by the bank in countless numbers. Hence, at daybreak, the entire mass of people could ferry over at the same time!

Then they finished their bath, prostrated before the holy river in reverential gratitude, and proceeded forward.

Thenceforward, Bharatha and Satrugna moved on in the robes of recluses, into which they had changed.

With them walked the ministers, the companions of the princes, and their aides, carrying pictures of Sita and Rama in their hearts.

While on the march, inhabitants of the villages on the way stood in awe at the strange crowds that passed along. Women walking toward the river for water placed their pots on the ground and stood stunned, looking at the brothers without even blinking their eyes for a moment. They wondered who they were and concluded that they were the same two brothers, Rama and Lakshmana, passing through again, this time without Sita but accompanied by armed forces, chariots, elephants, horses, and foot soldiers. They wondered where Sita was. They searched for her amidst the moving mass, with eager curiosity, and they shared their disappointment with their friends in sad whispers.

"The other day, when we saw Rama and Lakshmana, the brothers, shone with the splendour of physical charm, youth, virtue and intelligence. But now some sadness clouds their faces, so these might not be those who passed this way that day," argued a woman in the group. Their conversation was overheard by one of the spies of the royal entourage, who reported it to Bharatha.

Meanwhile, the women came to know that they were Rama's brothers going to where Rama was to see the Lord. At this, one rough-natured woman burst into rage. She exclaimed, "Ruling over the empire that his father gave him, look at this person, going to have sight of his brother, Rama, accompanied by the armed forces! Has he no sense of shame?" Another woman interrupted her. "Sister, don't talk so. Our Emperor Dasaratha's children could never have hearts so hard. He must be going to Rama with the various units of the armed forces to pray to Rama and persuade him to return to Ayodhya, to take him back with imperial honours." A third woman agreed with this interpretation. "Yes, yes. Who knows which snake rests in which hole on the earth? No one can pronounce on the nature of another. Who can judge the feelings and motives that prompt others to action. They may be of very high order, for all we know. But Rama is the firm adherent of truth. He won't return to Ayodhya until the full fourteen years are spent in exile, whoever might plead with him and pray to him.

This is my belief." She expressed her noble sentiments in this manner.

The spies reported the conversation of these village women to Bharatha and Satrughna. They were delighted to know that those unsophisticated women from the rural regions had grasped Rama's greatness to such an amazing extent. Thus, they walked along listening to the people's admiration for the virtues of Rama and for their own humility and fraternal devotion. Every moment, their minds were fixed only on Rama.

They encountered many brahmins, ascetics, monks, and other holy men as they walked on. And all were engaged in the pleasant task of extolling Rama and his virtues. On seeing them, Bharatha prostrated before them and asked where they were coming from. When the holy men struggled to master the surging waves of ecstasy and at last succeeded in discovering their voices in order to reply, Bharatha watched them in eager expectancy. When they said they were returning after seeing Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana, the brothers fell flat on the ground before them and rose with tears of joy streaming down their cheeks.

They said, "O! How fortunate you are! Tell us, how far away are they? Where are they?" They asked about the health and welfare of those holy men; learning from them that they had to continue the journey for some distance more, they decided to spend the night where they were.

As soon as dawn broke, they discovered that they were quite near to the Chitrakuta Peak. Urged on by the yearning to meet Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita, the Mother, they continued on with redoubled haste. By about noon, they could hear the murmur of the Mandakini river and could see the Chitrakuta Peak clearly.

The moment they saw the peak, the two brothers and the citizens of Ayodhya prostrated on the ground in reverence. Rising, they walked forward with renewed vigour. Those who were exhausted and had despaired of further exertion suddenly found that they had developed elephantine resources of energy. They walked fast, without paying attention to their physical condition.

Those who bore the palanquins and had trudged along on bleeding soles suddenly found reinforcements of strength by cheering "Hail, Hail" and reciting Rama's name.

The brothers meet

That day, Rama had risen from sleep even before dawn. He told Sita that his father was coming into his consciousness more often than on other days. Sita replied, "Lord! You know that I don't get any dreams. But this night I had a very wonderful dream! I can even say it wasn't really a dream. I dreamed that Bharatha and Satrugna had become frail and weak as a result of separation from you; finding it impossible to be in Ayodhya for a single moment without you, they were coming to us, with not only the people of Ayodhya but also the Queens Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika." Tears gathered in her eyes while she described the experience.

Rama called Lakshmana and told him, "Brother, you heard, didn't you, about Sita's dream? This does not indicate good tidings, for Sita saw all the others and I saw in my dream only father, father alone, with no association or relation with the rest of them. This strikes me as a bad omen. Come! It is best we take a bath." And the three of them went to the river for the bath.

Just then, birds flew across the sky in flocks and the northern region was darkened by a thick cloud of dust.

Many animals and birds were scared into wild haste. Taking note of this unusual occurrence, Lakshmana climbed a tree to find out the reason.

He saw an army on the move, with infantry, cavalry, chariotry, and elephantry advancing to where they were.

He inferred that a king was at their head. He informed Rama. Rama told him that it was Sita's dream coming true!

He advised that the best course would be to return quickly to the "thatch" -

the parnasala.

Meanwhile, the Bhils, Kirathas, and other tribesmen of the jungle ran to Rama and gasped out the news that a regular military force was advancing toward the spot and that the chariot of the royal leader of the army had a flag with the sign of the banyan tree upon it. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana were confirmed in their inference that it was no other than Bharatha. They had no more doubt on that point.

Lakshmana started quaking with anger. When coming to have the sight (darshan) of Rama, why bring troops in full strength, he argued. That vile woman, his mother, must have advised him, and he seems to have accepted her wicked stratagem, to attack the lonely and unarmed Rama in his jungle retreat and ensure that he does not return and reign, he surmised. Lakshmana was well-nigh consumed by the flames of anger that rose in him. His eyes were reduced to red-hot coals. His words became sharp as sword thrusts.

Rama realised the change that had come over him. "Lakshmana! Forbear! Don't be agitated. Be calm.

Bharatha is strong in virtue. His love is immeasurable. He adds lustre to the royal line of Ikshvaku, like the lotus to the lake. It is not proper to cast aspersions on one so pure, so immaculate and holy." Thus describing the exact nature of Bharatha's motives and mind, Rama succeeded in quietening Lakshmana's upsurge of anger.

Very soon, Bharatha himself sent word through some forest dwellers that he was seeking the sight of Rama, along with his brother Satrughna and their attendants and followers. Rama felt glad when this happy news was brought to him. Like lakes in late autumn, his lotus eyes were filled with water.

All this happened while Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita were returning in haste to the "thatch" after their hurried bath. Bharatha saw them when they reached the cottage of grass. Torn by agony, he shouted distressingly and in extreme

agony, "Rama." He fell flat on Rama's feet and sobbed aloud. When Lakshmana saw Bharatha's anguish at the separation from them, he realised that his estimate of intentions was very wrong! He suffered terrible contrition within himself; his head was bent by the weight of sorrow; he shed profuse tears along with Bharatha and Satrughna.

Rama raised his brothers from the ground and sought to calm their feelings and quieten their grief. While he was so engaged, the queens Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika and the ministers, the royal preceptor Vasishta, the pundits and citizens, and the members of the armed forces came near and were overcome by both grief and joy when they saw Rama. Their sorrow when they saw Rama in hermits' robes by the side of the lowly hut could not be wiped out by the joy of setting their eyes on their dearly beloved prince. They wailed and wept, shedding tears of grief and gratitude. The cry, "Rama! Rama!" rose from their torn hearts and sped over the vast expanse of earth and sky.

Rama spoke to them softly and sweetly and persuaded them to control their emotions. Then, he walked toward the mothers, but he could not bear to look on that picture of misfortune and misery. He became aware of the calamity that had befallen, but he soon consoled and comforted himself. He drew Lakshmana near him and told him the fact. Feeling that it would be better for Lakshmana to be informed more fully, he asked Sumanthra, the loyal minister of the line, to relate to him the details regarding the administration of Ayodhya.

Sumanthra fell down, unable to bear his grief. Struggling to rise, he said amidst sobs, "Lakshmana! Where can we have Dasaratha hereafter? He was reduced to ashes by the flames of sorrow at being separated from Rama, Sita, and you. Ayodhya has become a jungle. Wherever you look, you see only sorrow; whatever you hear, you hear only wailing. Not merely people, even birds and animals cast off their lives when you left. Those who survive are keeping alive in the hope of your return." Hearing this, Lakshmana shed streams of tears. He stood like a stump, unable to reply.

Lakshmana approached Rama and told him in a faltering voice, "I could not imagine, even in my dreams, that such a terrible calamity would happen. We could not see our father in his last moments." Rama consoled him, saying that there was no profit in grieving over what has already come to pass. "Physical bodies are as transient as bubbles in water; they are bound to burst and disappear, if not today at least the day after." He gave expression to many a moral maxim, until both brothers went to the river to finish the bath ritually laid down when one hears of the death of those who are near of kin.

Meanwhile, Sita went toward her mothers-in-law and touched their feet in great reverence. She also prostrated before the feet of the royal preceptor's wife. She met the women who had come from Ayodhya and, with due consideration, put them at ease by her sweet welcome. When their eyes fell upon Sita, the queens wept aloud.

The women from Ayodhya saw the plight of their charming young princess and were so overcome with sorrow that they too could not desist from wailing.

Coming to know that Emperor Dasaratha had left the body, Sita prostrated before the queens again and again, saying: "Alas! What misfortune is ours! The emperor gave up his life because he couldn't bear separation from us!" Sita felt that the news of Dasaratha's departure was as a thunderbolt on her heart. She and the queens wept long at the turn that events had taken. That day, no one took either food or drink; they had no mind for either. The entire day and night were spent in sorrow.

When the sun rose, Vasishta told Rama to perform the obsequies for the departed father. They were carried out in strict conformity with scriptural injunctions. Since Rama Himself uttered the mantra sanctifying the waters, "May the holy waters of Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswathi, Narmada, Sindhu, and Cauvery come into this vessel and sanctify the water therein," the ritual was rendered sacred and eminently fruitful.

Discussions about returning to Ayodha

Thereafter, the preceptor, the ministers of the court, the queens, and the citizens of Ayodhya spent two full days with Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. At the end of two days, Rama approached the preceptor, "Master! The citizens and residents of Ayodhya are suffering very much here, drinking nothing but water and eating nothing but roots and tubers. Looking at Bharatha, Satrughna, and also the mothers, I feel every moment is as long as an age. It is best to return to the city. You are spending your time here; the emperor has ascended to heaven. It is not proper that I emphasise the urgency more. Please act, as seems most beneficial." And Rama fell at Vasishta's feet.

Vasishta replied, "Rama! Lord of the Raghu dynasty! Why do you speak thus? You have not realised how happy and contented these people are, since they are fortunate enough to be looking at your charm." When the people heard that Rama had asked them to return, they felt tossed into fear and despair, as a boat caught in a hurricane in midsea. But when they heard Vasishta pleading on their behalf, they sailed smoothly, as a boat does when a friendly breeze blows into its sails. Their minds rejected the thought of returning to Ayodhya and giving up the fortunate chance of the bath, three times a day, in the Mandakini River, living on the sweet simple meal of fruits, roots, and tubers gathered by their own efforts from the forest and, more than all, filling their eyes with the pictures of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana and filling their ears with Rama's edifying and exquisite words.

Sita was engaged in serving the mothers-in-law, anticipating their needs and over-eager to serve. She consoled and comforted them; she told them how she was spending her days happily in the forest, lacking nothing, and she made them wonder at her fortitude and skill. They were happy at the thought that she was able to derive so much joy under such adverse conditions. They bore their own sorrow with greater ease when they saw how Sita was braving hers.

Bharatha didn't sleep a wink at night or have a pang of hunger during the day. While the people were happy, looking at Rama, looking at Rama filled Bharatha and Satrughna with misery. They couldn't bear it any longer; they

fell at Vasishta's feet and asked him to persuade Rama to return to Ayodhya with Sita. They pleaded with him most earnestly, expressing their agony in manifold ways. The preceptor knew only too well the strength of Rama's faith in his ideals, the tenacity with which he stuck to his sense of truth, and his determination to carry out his father's wishes. But he was so moved by the sorrow of Bharatha that nothing was left undone to persuade Rama to return.

He called Rama to where he was. "Rama! Listen to the prayers of Bharatha. Conduct yourself in accordance with the wishes of good people, the interests of the people, the principles of politics, and the directives of the Vedas." Rama recognised the preceptor's affection toward Bharatha, which found expression in these words; he knew that Bharatha would never deviate from the path of righteousness, that he would carry out his directions with full heart and in word, deed, and thought, and that he would always follow his steps and strive for his welfare and prosperity. He felt happy at this. So, he responded softly and sweetly to the sage's proposal with a few auspicious sentences. "Master! You are my witness, my father's feet are my witness. Let me assert this: No one is so dear to me as my brother Lakshmana. No one has a brother in the world as dear as Bharatha is to me. Those who are attached to the feet of their preceptor are indeed really fortunate; you have such affection and compassion for him; that is his great treasure. He is younger than me, so I hate to praise him in his presence. My opinion now is that Bharatha should speak his mind." Rama prostrated before Vasishta and took his seat.

Vasishta turned toward Bharatha, for he couldn't reply directly to Rama. He knew that Bharatha was to be "ruler". "Give up all hesitations and doubts. Rama, your elder brother, has immeasurable compassion. Open your heart to him; tell him all that you have in mind." Hearing the sage's words, Bharatha felt that Vasishta had probed Rama's mind and that both of them were inclined to favour him and grant his desire. So he was glad at the turn of events. He stood motionless before them.

Tears flowed from his eyes, red and bright like lotus petals. "The revered sage has told Rama all that has to be said. What remains for me to add specially to

the appeal he has made on my behalf? I know full well my Rama's nature. He has no anger against even wrongdoers. He has unbounded affection for me; I cannot deny it. A sense of shame has made me silent while I stand before him.

"But my affection makes me delighted to look upon him; my eyes don't feel content, however long they fix their gaze on him. God couldn't tolerate my affection toward Rama. He couldn't bear to see so much love between brothers. So, He designed this distress, devising my mother herself as the instrument to bring it about.

"I know that it does me no credit or brings me no respect for me to say this. How can I establish my superiority by placing the blame on my own mother? When one proclaims himself innocent, can that statement make him truly so? I hesitate to declare, because of my doubts, that my mother is feeble-minded or that I am good and intelligent. I am diffident to state so. Can pearls grow in the shells of snails that infest tanks?

Why should I blame others for my sorrows? My misfortune is as vast as the ocean. I know that all this tragedy has happened as a consequence of sins. I have been seeking a way to escape my grief, along any of the four quarters. I see now that there is one and only one way out.

My preceptor is the great sage Vasishta; Sita and Rama are my sovereign rulers. Hence, I am certain all will be well with me. Lord! I don't wish for anything else. Rama! Grant but this one wish of your servant. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna are all four the physical progeny of Emperor Dasaratha. So, all four are equally bound to obey the commands of their father. The father has equal affection for all the sons. And there is no limitation or regulation that the commands of the father must be obeyed by this one son or that other son. Thus far, you have borne the responsibility of obeying his commands. Now, it is our turn to bear the burden of exile.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana must return to Ayodhya, and we two will be in the forest as exiles until the sentence lapses. Confer on us this boon and bless

us." Thus saying, Bharatha fell at Rama's feet.

Vasishta shed tears of joy, but Rama was not taken in by this argument. He said, "Bharatha! I feel that your line of thought is not as valid as you seem to think. It is not correct so to act. Ask me for anything except this." Bharatha replied, "In that case, brother, allow me and my brother to be with you here and serve you, as Lakshmana has been doing. This will then be a wholly satisfying holy life for us." Rama didn't accept even this prayer. "Bharatha! For me as well as for you, the commands of the father are unbreakable; we have to bow our heads in reverence before them and carry them out without the least murmur.

My most appropriate action is to follow the orders issued to me; yours is to follow those issued to you. Let's not spend precious days in such purposeless talk and cause distress to the people who have come such long distances hoping against hope. Return to Ayodhya, which has been allotted to you, with them and rule them righteously. I will carry out the task allotted to me and act righteously, guarding and fostering the forest realm assigned to me." Neither Bharatha nor anyone else could meet this decisive statement of Rama with any counterproposal or argument. They had to accept it as the right path to take.

Bharatha was overcome with grief. He lamented, "On whom else can God heap such unbearable agony than on me, who happens to be the son of a mother who felt that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were her enemies? Yes, Brother! I heard that you walked into the forest on bare feet with nothing to protect you from thorns and pebbles.

The news wounded my mind like sharp spears; but yet I lived on! I am the cause of all this calamity; but as a sinner, I am alive; or else I would have cast off my body long ago. My breath persisted in this body even when Guha suspected me of treachery against my brother and got ready to confront me in battle at the head of his forces! Alas!

My heart is harder than diamond; that is why it has not broken, in spite of

those blows.

"I look calmly at the very tragedy that was caused by me; yet my life is so unfortunate that I am able to stand the thrust of so much sorrow. My mother has such dreadful poison in her that scorpions and serpents discard their proud possessions in sheer shame. Being the son of such a mother, how can God allow me to escape the consequences of my destiny?" Bharatha indulged in such self-torture that the citizens, queens, sages, and others who watched his grief, penitence, humility, reverence and fraternal affection were all stricken like lotus blooms fallen on ice. They reminded Bharatha of many incidents from the Puranas to help him recover from his depression.

Rama addressed Bharatha. "Brother! Why do you give yourself up to despair? Your sorrow is in vain. Destiny cannot be countermanded. At all times, everywhere, you will be honoured by good and virtuous people; those who ascribe crookedness to you will be miserable here and hereafter. And, condemning one's mother? This crime is committed only by those unfortunate enough not to be trained in the society of the virtuous or at the feet of preceptors. Bharatha! Your name will be long remembered, and those who bring it to their memory will be able by its unseen influence to discard their vices. You will be earning renown in this world and bliss in the next. The world will be sustained by your ideals and your rule.

"Bharatha! Both hatred and love cannot be suppressed and hidden in the heart. They must find expression despite all attempts to keep them imprisoned in the heart. I know your nature very well. In order to uphold truth, the emperor let me go and, unable to bear the separation from me whom he loved so much, he lost his very life. It is not right for a son like me or you to dishonour the word of such a loving father. Therefore, don't hesitate further.

Tell me what you have to say, ask about things that you want to know, and decide to shoulder the responsibilities imposed on you. That is the best course for you." Rama spoke these words with great emphasis.

Bharatha had no chance to speak any more about his fond desires. But he

resolved to press one demand of his, the final one. "Rama! I don't like to rule over the kingdom that you gave up, that brought on this disgrace of being the cause for your exile. I have no love toward it either. I can never go against your will, your command. I won't do so, at any time. If you but cast your loving eye on me with no trace of anger, I consider myself blessed.

Lakshmana has served you now so long; send him back with Satrughna to Ayodhya and allow me to take his place at your feet.

"This will bring Lakshmana and Ayodhya fair renown. Lakshmana is an expert in administration; he can rule over the empire wisely and well in all fields of administration and bring solace to the soul of the departed father.

Grant me this prayer; keep me with you; don't refuse my request; don't kick me from your presence." Imploring piteously in this way, Bharatha clasped Rama's feet.

"Or else," continued Bharatha, "kindly return to Ayodhya with Sita and stay there. We three brothers will stay on in the forest. We will carry on our lives here in any manner that you prescribe. If you pile this royal burden on me, I can't bear the weight and live.

"Keep me at your feet and pile on me a weight a thousand times heavier than the empire; I will bear it gladly and with enthusiastic delight. I have no knowledge of the science of government or the texts on morality; you are aware that one who is sunk in grief can have no wisdom in him. Even shame will be ashamed when one's servant answers back and points to one's want of knowledge. Do not put me in that position.

"Rama! I'm opening my heart to your gaze and revealing my inmost feelings. I want only to promote the welfare of the world. Kindly decide on the best course for each of us; don't doubt our intentions. Shower your grace and confer your commands on us. We will bow our heads in loyal reverence and carry them out without hesitation." Bharatha gave the vast gathering great joy, and their hearts melted with compassion and gratitude. They extolled in

manifold ways the affection and faith that Bharatha had placed in his brother. They were affected by the expression of his deep devotion. They all prayed with one voice, "Rama! Lord! Accept Bharatha's prayer. With the passing away of Emperor Dasaratha, the long-established glory and happiness of the people have also passed away! The world has been pitiably orphaned. Ayodhya wails like a despairing waif. She is lamenting her lot like a chaste woman who has been deserted by her lord." Kaika pleads for forgiveness. Meanwhile, Kaika, the forlorn queen - what shall we say about her! She stood there, her heart gnawed by grief. She was anxious to discover how she could explain her wrongs; she tried her best to seek out Rama while he was alone, so she could beg his pardon, but she couldn't move. She was ashamed even to show her face to Rama.

She wondered how she could ever subject Rama, whom she loved so dearly, to all the privations and travails she now witnessed. Rama was her very breath.

Kaika felt sure that by herself she would never be capable of inflicting harm on him; she guessed that the influence of some evil power had possessed her to bring about this sad series of events. But, she said to herself, the world would never pardon her, however strongly she asserted that it was none of her doing. Torn by these doubts and misgivings, Kaika was powerless to move toward Rama to speak to him, nor could she walk away, for she was anxious to have the burden lifted from her heart. She stood there, weak and frail, fearful and faltering.

Rama noted her agitation. Using an opportune moment, he moved toward her in order to fall at her feet and pay her his homage.

Kaika was waiting for just this chance. She clasped Rama's feet, saying, "Child! You are much younger than me; you are my son. But yet, you are the Master of the whole world because of your virtue and your wisdom. I don't commit a wrong when I hold your feet in my hands. Come. Rule over Ayodhya. Pardon my sin. Only that can redeem me from the disgrace that I have brought on myself. If that cannot be, keep Bharatha in thy presence at

thy feet; bestow on me that boon. That will give me peace of mind as long as I live; I have no wish to live after the consummation of this wish of mine.

"I am shocked that I craved for the fulfilment of those two desires, which not even the most vicious ogress would have entertained. Did I ask for them while I was the daughter of the ruler of the Kekaya kingdom? Or did I speak those words when I was possessed by some evil genius? Or was I under the poisonous influence of some evil star? I don't know; I can't tell." She wept aloud in anguish, holding Rama's feet fast in her clasp.

Rama shed tears at her plight. He assuaged her with soft and sweet words. "Mother! You have done no wrong, not even the least bit. The human crowd is a pack of crows; they caw loud and hoarse, without any rule or reason. People don't try to know the truth; in their ignorance, they blabber as the whim dictates. You didn't ask for those boons of your own free will, with full knowledge of the implications. All this happened because I willed it to happen. You have rendered much help for the fulfilment of the purpose for which I have incarnated and the task I have set before myself. You committed no disservice.

"Mother! I repent very much for having made you plead with me so long instead of expressing at the very outset my gratitude for the help you did for my plan of action. Don't grieve over what has happened, for that will cast a shadow on my task; it will make my days inauspicious. Bless me, mother! Shower your affection on me.

Mother! Bless me." Rama prayed and fell at her feet.

With this, Kaika recovered her mental peace a little. The other queens, Kausalya and Sumitra, heard the conversation, and when they realised that Kaika was only the innocent instrument of the divine will, they too consoled and comforted her. Nevertheless, Kaika stuck to her wish that Rama accept the throne and be installed as emperor of Ayodhya with Sita as the empress and that Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna serve them and be their loyal companions in court. She said that she would spend her life until death put an

end to it, witnessing this glory and sharing in this ecstasy. She repeated these words often and pressed for the grant of her wish.

Rama orders Bharatha to return to Ayodha

Four days and nights were thus spent in the forest, praying, pleading, consoling, explaining, assuaging, weeping, and imparting solace. One wish ruled all their hearts: to persuade Rama to return to the capital. At last, Rama directed Vasishtha, the royal preceptor, and Bharatha to return to Ayodhya along with the queens and the citizens.

News of this order spread despair among them. They said that, for them, the place where Rama was was as delightful as a million heavens put together, so they refused to move. They said that only those whom the gods discarded would turn their backs on the forest where Rama was. They said, "O what great fortune awaits us here!

A bath in the holy Mandakini River, delicious fruits for appeasing hunger, the sight of Sita and Rama, so charming to the eye, so exhilarating to the heart! Where else is heaven? What else is happiness?" They talked in this strain among themselves and resolved to persuade Rama by every means to return with them, if they had to go at all. Each of them expressed their innermost wishes in words soaked in sweet love.

Finally, one wise old brahmin said, "Well. If we possessed the good fortune and merit to deserve the auspicious and happy company of Rama in this forest, he would certainly agree to keep us here. If that's not our destiny, our evil fate itself will harden the heart of Rama, and he will drive us back to Ayodhya. If Rama doesn't bestow grace, who else can? What does it matter where we spend our days if we can't spend them in Rama's presence?

Away from Rama, we are only living corpses." When he finished, all of them responded with the exclamation, "True! True! These words are absolutely true." Sunayana talks to the queens and Sita When Emperor Dasaratha had passed away, the family preceptor Vasishtha had sent a message to Janaka,

and he and his queen, Sunayana, had come immediately to Ayodhya to console the bereaved. There, they learned about all developments. When Bharatha arrived and decided to proceed to Chitrakuta along with the mothers, the royal preceptor, and the leaders of the people, Janaka and his queen also accompanied them. They waited long for a favourable chance to meet Sita and Rama.

Meanwhile, Sita's mother directed a maid to find out whether Kausalya and other queens were available for an audience, and she hurried toward their residences. It was the eleventh day of the bright half of the Jyeshtha month. The queens met that day, in the forest - the four of them. Queen Kausalya paid honours to Queen Sunayana and, treating her with great respect, offered her a seat. It was the first time the queens met Janaka's consort.

On seeing the queens of Ayodhya, Queen Sunayana felt that even the hardest diamond would melt before their loving conversation, tender manners, and compassionate comradeship. She found that their bodies had become emaciated and that their heads were bowed by sorrow. Their eyes were fixed on the ground below their feet, and they were shedding streams of tears. The three queens were extolling the virtues and excellences of Sita and Rama, but they could not stop the outflow of grief.

Queen Sunayana could find no words. At last, she said, "Mother! Of what avail is sorrow at this stage? Providence directed things along this crooked way. A diamond-edged cutter was used to sunder the cream on the milk!

We have heard of the life-giving, heavenly nectar (amritha), but we haven't seen it. Yet, we are privileged to see now the equally potent poison. We have the visual experience only of crows, storks, vultures, and owls; but the visual experience of the celestial swan Hamsa, which has lake Manasa-Sarovar (lake of the mind) as its habitat, is beyond us queens! The sport of destiny is full of contradictions and absurdities; they are as unpredictable as the wayward sport of children." While trying thus to console them, Sunayana herself could not restrain her tears.

Kausalya said, "Sunayana! This didn't happen through the fault of one particular person. Happiness and misery, profit and loss, are all consequences of karma, of the deeds, words, and thoughts of the people themselves.

Hasn't it been declared, "Good or bad, whatever karma has been done, its consequences have willy-nilly to be suffered or enjoyed (avasyam anubhokthavyam, krtham karma subha-asubham)"? God knows the hardship-filled process of karma; He confers the appropriate consequence according to the deed. Each one carries on the head this divine command.

"Oh, queen! We are entangled in delusion, and we yield in vain to grief. Why should the merit earned and stored by us in previous lives desert us when we grieve? Can this rule of cause and effect that holds sway over the world from before its beginning be set aside for our sake? It is a mad hope." Kausalya ended her attempt at consoling, with many a sigh.

Queen Sunayana spoke. "Mothers! You are indeed highly fortunate, for Emperor Dasaratha has a renown for holy merit that few rulers have. You are the consorts of such a noble person. You are the mothers of the very embodiment of dharma, the very personification of love, Rama, whose heart embraces all beings in compassion.

You have earned everlasting fame all over the world.

"What you said now is the ultimate truth. Happiness and misery are the two pots balanced on back and front by the rod to which they are tied and placed on the shoulder. Everyone has to carry both in equal measure. Without misery, one can't identify happiness, right? (Na sukham labhyathe sukham). From happiness, no happiness can ensue." Kausalya said, amidst her sobs and in a grief-stricken voice, "If Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana live in the forest, many calamities will happen. I know that Bharatha can't survive separation from Rama. My agony is heightened when I see Bharatha more than when I see Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana. Fear overpowers me when I think of Bharatha." Sumitra and Kaika agreed. They too were saddened at Bharatha's condition.

Sumitra spoke."Mother! Through your blessings and good wishes, our sons and daughter-in-law are as pure as the Ganga itself. Bharatha had never so far asserted that he was Rama's brother and claimed something from him. But now he is demanding that he should fulfil his wishes, in a pure (sathwic), highly righteous manner.

Even the goddess of speech, Saraswathi, will hesitate to accept the assignment of describing the virtues that mark Bharatha as a great person - humility, large-heartedness, fraternal attachment, steadfastness of faith, courage, and the inflexibility of that courage. Can the ocean be measured by means of a snail shell? At all times, under all conditions, Bharatha is the effulgent lamp of the royal line, but people did not realise this until now. A gem has to be examined before its value can be determined; gold has to be tested on the touchstone before its genuineness and fineness can be known. Let us not talk despairingly about him now, for our reason is affected by sorrow and deluded by filial attachment." Sumitra wiped her tears, as she concluded her wise words of consolation.

Hearing her words, the Queen of Mithila, Sunayana, thought to herself, "These queens are really very great, one greater than the other, in nobility. They don't praise their own children, as mothers are prone to do; they extol the virtues of the sons of co-wives. This is quite against the nature of women, as usually found in the world. Look how they describe and appreciate sons born to the other wives of their husband! They don't distinguish between their sons and the sons of the other queens - what ideal housewives for the whole world. Ah! What large-heartedness!

What purity and perfection in the feeling of love!"

Mustering a little courage, Kausalya addressed Sunayana. "Queen of Mithila! You are the consort of the ocean of wisdom, Emperor Janaka. Who could dare give you counsel! We prattle away in our ignorance. Yet, I pray you might tell Emperor Janaka at the earliest, when he is in a mood to listen, these words of mine, namely, 'Persuade Rama and make him agree to have Bharatha with him for some time. Since Lakshmana has already spent some time in his

presence, let Lakshmana be sent to Ayodhya to oversee the activities and administration there, and let Satrughna be directed to assist Lakshmana in his duties at Ayodhya.' "If only Rama would agree, the rest of the problems would set themselves right quickly. It is only Bharatha's condition that gives me anxiety. His attachment and love for Rama are deep-rooted and delicate. The emperor has passed away, and Rama won't return from the forest. If Bharatha finds separation from Rama unbearable, it might lead to his death. Then, the empire would be reduced to a living corpse! My heart is torn by fear and anxiety when I picture the future and the calamities that are in store." Kausalya held Queen Sunayana's hands and appealed to her to fulfil this mission, achieve this end, and confer spiritual bliss (ananda) on them all.

Sunayana was touched by the affection that filled the queen's heart and her adherence to the path of righteousness.

"Mother!" she said, "Humility and virtue are innate in you. They are a natural expression of your goodness and nobility, as smoke in fire and beds of grass on mountain peaks. Of course, Emperor Janaka is ever ready to serve you by thought, word, deed. He is ever eager to help. But, can a lamp illumine the sun? Rama came to the forest to accomplish the task of the Gods. After finishing it, he will surely return to Ayodhya and reign over the empire. The might of his arms will ensure the attainment by subman, man, and superman of all their dearest wishes. These tidings were long ago revealed by the Sage Yajnavalkya. His words can never be falsified." With these words, Sunayana fell at Queen Kausalya's feet. Taking leave of her and preparing to leave the place, she went to Sita's cottage. When she entered and saw Sita, she was overwhelmed with grief. She could not control her tears; she ran toward Sita and caught her arms. Sita consoled her mother by various means; she counseled courage and faith; she prostrated at her mother's feet. She stood before her mother in her anchorite robes, appearing like Parvathi, Siva's consort, during the days when she did penance. The mother could not contain within herself the question: "Child! Are you really my Sita, or are you Parvathi?" She looked at her long and leisurely, from head to foot, and was filled with wonder and joy.

At last, she said, "Oh Sita! Through you, two families have been consecrated, the family of your parents and the family of your parents-in-law. Your fame will reach the farthest horizons. The flood of your renown will flow as a river in full flow between its two banks, the two royal lines of Mithila and Ayodhya. The Ganga has but three sacred spots on it - Haridwar, Prayag, and the place where it joins the ocean. May the stream of your pure fame enter and sanctify each one into a holy temple." Hearing these words of truth that flowed from the affection of her mother, Sita blushed and bent her head, as if overcome with a sense of shame. "Mother! What words are these? What is the relevance? What comparison can be found between me and the holy Ganga?" And she went through the gesture of prostration directed toward the Ganga, with a prayer for pardon.

Sunayana embraced her daughter and stroked her head in tender affection. "Sita! Your virtues are examples for all mistresses of families to follow and emulate." Sita intercepted her. "Mother! If I spend much time with you, the service of Rama might be delayed. Please let me to go to him." The mother realised that her desire also lay in that direction, and she felt that she should not be an obstacle.

She fondled and caressed Sita profusely and said, at last, "Child! Go and serve Rama as you wish." Sita fell at her feet and left to go serve Rama.

Sunayana pondered long over Sita's reverential devotion toward her husband and her other virtues. She didn't take her eyes off Sita until she disappeared from view. She stood at the same spot, watching her and admiring her. She was awakened from the reverie by her maid, who came and said, "Mother! Sita has gone in; we should return to our residence." Suddenly, Sunayana turned back, wiping the stream of tears from her eyes. Her unwilling steps took her to the cottage allotted to her.

Bharatha's Well

The sun set just at this time, so Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrughna went to the river for evening sacraments, like bath and ritual worship of the

gods at dusk. The pundits, members of the brahmin caste, ministers, and others accompanied them. After finishing, they ate fruits and tubers and lay down to sleep under trees allotted to each group. When dawn broke, after the morning sacraments were done, they all gathered around the cottage of thatch where Rama was. Rama came out with a bewitching smile and passed through the thick crowd, lovingly asking each about health and welfare.

Bharatha fell at Rama's feet when He came near. "Lord! A desire has arisen in my heart; I am unable to express it before you on account of fear and shame." Rama stroked the head of his dear brother, saying as he did so, "Why do you hesitate to tell me? Come. Tell me what it is." Bharatha said, "Brother! I have a great desire to see the hermitages, the sanctifying bathing ghats on the banks of the river, the glens of these thick forests, the wild animals that roam therein, the lakes and streams, the waterfalls around this Chitrakuta peak. They have all been rendered holy by the imprint of your lotus feet. The residents of Ayodhya are overpowered by the urge to see those meritorious spots." Rama replied, "Bharatha! Your desire is highly commendable. You can gladly explore this region, with permission of the sage Athri." Hearing this, Bharatha was very happy. He fell at the feet of the sage as well as of Rama and then proceeded with Satrughna and the people from Ayodhya to the interior of the forest, visiting on the way many hermitages and other holy spots.

On the way, he saw a well by the side of the mountain. It had in it holy waters from all the sacred rivers and lakes. Bharatha sprinkled its waters reverentially on his head and prostrated before that sacred seat of sacredness.

He cleaned the water by removing with his own hand some dry leaves and dirt that had fallen on the water. It is this well that is honoured even today as Bharatha-kupa, or Bharatha's Well, all over the world.

18. Sandals Enthroned

On the sixth day of their stay, after the morning rites, bath, and devotional ceremonies like the worship of the dawn, Bharatha called his brother Satrugna and his own aides and followers. He watched for a favourable moment to accost Rama, and when he found one, he rose suddenly from his seat and mustered sufficient courage to lay himself prostrate at his feet. Standing in front of him with his palms folded, Bharatha prayed thus, "O mark of auspiciousness on the brow of the royal Ikshvaku line! You have fulfilled my desires in every way. On my account, you determined to suffer miseries of all kinds. You are undergoing all types of troubles for my sake.

"Lord! I await your commands. For fourteen years, I will be awaiting your return and serving you in the kingdom. Show me the path by which I can feast my eyes on your lotus feet when the period of exile ends. Teach me the courage I need to survive these fourteen years of separation.

"Rama! Your subjects, their families, people residing in the vast empire, brahmins, pundits - all are spiritually earnest and are bound to you by feelings of reverential devotion. They are bearing the pangs of misery buoyed up by the love you bear unto them. I don't care even for the attainment of self-realisation if, to attain it, I am separated from you. You are aware of the inner feelings of your servants; you know their deepest desires. You can guide me and lead me to the goal, here and hereafter. This conviction is the sustenance and strength on which I exist. On account of this conviction, I treat all this agony as just shriveled blades of grass. Till now I elaborated before you my sorrows as if they were burdening my head. That was a failing on my part; don't hesitate to reprimand me for this fault." The gathering hailed his statements and expressed their appreciation. As Hamsa, the celestial swan, separates the milk from the water with which it is mixed and drinks just the milk, so, they said, Bharatha had separated truth from untruth and given expression to the truth alone.

Rama, compassionate toward the distressed, listened to those words poured

from the pure heart of his brother.

He replied thus, in conformity with the place, time, and circumstance, "Brother! For you who reside at home, and for us who reside in the forest, there is the One who fosters all, to foster and fend. You have, in a worldly practical sense, the preceptor Vasishta and Emperor Janaka as guardians and guides. No trouble can bother either you or me, even in our dreams; no, it can never happen.

"The highest duty for us is to carry out strictly the commands of our father; that alone can confer on us all the good we long for; that alone can enable us to earn lasting renown. That path is the one approved by the Vedas.

The Vedas declare that he is the noble example for all who reveres the commands of the preceptor, the father, and the mother and walks on the right path. Be ever aware of this truth; throw away the shroud of grief; take up the burden of empire; rule over it for 14 years with justice and rectitude as your ideals.

"The king is the face of the state, for the face eats and drinks and thus strengthens and activates all the limbs of the body. The king feeds and sustains every section of his people. The mind encloses within itself all likes and dislikes; so too, the king is the repository of all moves and movements in the political field." Rama expounded many a useful doctrine of political ethics to Bharatha, but Bharatha was too agitated to earn mental peace as a result of Rama's advice. The mothers, teachers, and ministers stood benumbed, for they were also overcome by the imminence of the moment of parting. Suddenly, Rama, in his infinite graciousness, loosened his sandals and gave them to Bharatha. Bharatha reverentially accepted them in his palms and placed them on his head. Tears streamed from his eyes, like the twin rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna.

Bharatha could not express his joy in words. "These are not the 'sandals' worn by the ocean of mercy! These are the guardians of the lives and prosperity of all mankind. These are the chests enclosing the precious treasure of Rama's

brotherly love. These are the protecting doors of the fort that enshrines the royal fame of the Raghu clan.

These are two hands that are ever engaged in good deeds. These are the veritable eyes of the universe. These are the symbols of Sita and Rama who are coming with us as these two." Thus, Bharatha extolled the "sandals" and danced around them in sheer joy and thankfulness. All present fell at Rama's feet and acknowledged the sublimity of Rama's grace.

Taking leave

Bharatha prostrated before Rama and prayed for permission to leave. Rama appreciated the spirit of contentment with which he welcomed the "sandals"; he embraced Bharatha fast and firm with great affection and delight.

Satrughna also fell at Rama's feet; Rama embraced him with great affection and also gave him many a directive for ruling the kingdom and carrying out the duties devolving on him. Consider Bharatha as Rama himself, he told him. "Be his support and counsel and help him to establish peace and prosperity in the empire." Bharatha and Satrughna embraced Lakshmana in fraternal love, saying, "Brother! Your luck is indeed great.

Yours is the best of luck. In all worlds there is none so fortunate as you." They praised Lakshmana to their hearts' content and took permission to depart. Lakshmana told them that Rama's "sandals" were the springs of all varieties of auspiciousness, so they, who had won that gift, were indeed more fortunate than any. He advised them to act worthy of the gift and earn Rama's grace forever. "This is your duty now," he reminded them.

Later the brothers went to Sita and fell at her feet. They could not contain their grief and burst into sobs.

She consoled them softly and sweetly in various ways. "Is there anything else than the armour of Rama that can protect anyone in the world? You are indeed blessed. The fourteen years will roll by as swift as fourteen seconds,

and the empire will smile in plenty and peace with Rama's return. Carry on the administration with patience and devotion; don't deviate even a little from the guidelines he has marked out. By this rigorous obedience, you will be able to secure the fruits of your desires." Then, Bharatha and Satrugna went straight to Emperor Janaka and fell at his feet in exemplary reverence, saying, "Lord! You have such compassion on us that you came to Ayodhya when you heard about our father's death and Rama's exile into the forest. You observed our plight with your own eyes and comforted us during those critical days. You gave us appropriate advice to resuscitate ourselves. In order to fulfil your inner desire, you subjected yourself to all this strain and trouble, coming here into this jungle. You have shared with us our grief and contributed your valuable part in the pleading we made to Rama to persuade him to return. When those pleadings failed, you consoled us, taught us to bear the disappointment and distress, and enriched us with your blessings. We offer our reverential gratitude. What more can we say or do? Your blessings are the most effective reinforcements we require." Janaka listened to these words uttered so sincerely and so thankfully by the two brothers. He appreciated their reactions and feelings, their character and conduct; he drew them near and lovingly caressed them and stroked their heads. He said, "Sons! May you walk along the path laid down by Rama and may you thereby win his grace. I am going to Mithila straight from here." The ministers, feudatory rulers, brahmins, sages, ascetics, and others who had come with the brothers, went one after another toward Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. Falling at their feet, they took their leave and turned their faces homeward, their hearts heavy with a sense of gloom. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana went to the mothers and prostrated before them. They consoled them, saying, "Do not worry in the least. Be engaged in the correct performance of your duties and responsibilities. Have before you ever the wishes and ideals that father has laid before us." As for themselves, they said they would spend the fourteen years as happily and peacefully as a quick span of fourteen seconds and then return joyfully to Ayodhya. These words restored the queens' spirits.

They fell at Kaika's feet and told her that she had not an iota of responsibility for Rama's exile and that she was ever worthy of their reverence and worship. She had never intended any harm, they said. They assured her that they

would ever pray for her; they pleaded with her that she should not have the least worry over them in the forest. They gave her a great deal of courage to bear her burden of repentance. "Bharatha had spoken rashly and impertinently, in a fit of senseless fury, when he was suddenly confronted with the two calamities: his father's death and his brother's exile. He flew into a passion, for his blood boiled at the person he imagined was responsible for these events. He didn't even care that you were his mother!" Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana prayed that she not blame Bharatha for that incident; they begged her to pardon Bharatha for the indiscretion.

While Rama was speaking, Kaika was downcast with shame at the memory of her iniquity. She could not look Rama in the face. She felt within herself, "Alas, that I should be the cause of inflicting so much misery and suffering on this son endowed with a heart of compassion and a mind full of virtues, a son who is unalloyed gold, nothing less. Am I not the reason for him spending years in this terrifying jungle? Oh, what a devilish deed I perpetrated.

But did I do it on my own? Or did Rama will the turn of events through my instrumentality? Whatever the truth, I can't escape; I have committed the gravest sin." Kaika was overcome with sorrow over the irrevocable past; she held Sita's hands in her grasp and petitioned for pardon. Soon, she added, "No. No. It is not just that you pardon a sinner who brought about such unbearable travail on such a pure and tender woman." She continued to lament her fortune for a long time.

Everyone who had come from Ayodhya took leave of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana as and when they could get the chance. Afterward, they ascended their chariots in due order.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana approached each chariot and consoled and comforted each occupant and persuaded them to leave. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana fell at the preceptor's feet and apologised to him, saying that they had caused him and his consort a lot of trouble; they expressed sorrow that they could not serve them as well as they wished to and as duty demanded. Then they asked permission to stay back.

Vasishta was, of course, a knower of Brahman (Brahma-jnani) and a great sage, so he could know the inner feelings of Sita and others. He appreciated the devotion and humility of the brothers and Sita and their strict adherence to the path of dharma. He and his consort could not leave Rama's presence, for they were so attached to the virtues he embodied. The picture of those three standing by the jungle track with folded palms, bidding adieu to each passing chariot and the people inside, melted the most adamant heart. Vasishta and his consort, Arundathi, were very much moved at the sight of their large-hearted sympathy.

Rama saw the chieftain of the Nishadas standing before him, amidst his followers. He went forward to him and, extending his arms, embraced him more warmly than he had his own brother. He consoled Guha with affectionate appeals to calm himself and persuaded him to accept the separation wisely. Guha couldn't do anything to change the turn of events; so he fell at Rama's feet, rose with a heavy heart, and walked off, his eyes fixed on Rama for as long as he could see that picture of charm.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana stood under a spreading tree until the last of them left. Meanwhile, Emperor Janaka also prepared to leave for Mithila, at the head of his party. Rama and Lakshmana prostrated before their father-in-law and mother-in-law; Sita fell at her parents' feet. The parents embraced her and stroked her head in fond tenderness. "Daughter! Your courageous determination and your devotion toward your husband will bring us great renown. Through you, our family and clan have been rendered holy. We must have accomplished some great vow and fulfilled some great austerity or else you wouldn't have been born in our line." They extolled her in profuse terms and expressed their joy and exultation.

They assured her, "Sita! You can suffer no want; Rama is the breath of your existence. We know that since you live in his shade, no harm can touch you. However, as a result of you two being different entities, problems and perplexities might confront you now and then. Those are but the play of destiny, just passing clouds." Janaka presented before them many Vedantic truths to bring them comfort and contentment. Then, he too left the

hermitage and took the track that led him out of the forest.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana stood in the shade of that tree until the people from Ayodhya and Mithila went beyond the range of their eyes. Then, they returned to their thatched cottage. There, while Rama described with appreciative ardour the devotion and faith of Bharatha and Satrughna, their exemplary love and loyalty, and the affectionate attachment of the subjects of the empire, Sita and Lakshmana listened attentively and echoed the same sentiments. Their hearts felt sore at their departure; they would fain have liked their presence longer. Often during the talk, they remembered Dasaratha's death, and tears rolled down their cheeks as they recalled the emperor's affection towards them. Seeing their plight, Rama's face lit up with a smile; he expatiated on the mystery of life and the key to its unraveling. Thus, they spent that eventful day in the silence of that sylvan retreat.

Reaching Ayodhya

Meanwhile, the stream of people emerging from the edge of the forest toward the populated areas near Ayodhya - Bharatha, Satrughna, the queens Kausalya, Kaika, and Sumitra, the ascetics, sages, brahmins, ministers, and the vast mass of citizens - could not contain the burden of sorrow, which became heavier the farther they went and the nearer they approached the city. They spent the time describing to each other the events of the five days they had spent in Rama's presence and admiring the ideals that Rama had embodied and exemplified, his love, compassion, and affection. They didn't stop for food or even sleep, since they felt neither hunger nor the prompting of sleep. Sorrow at the separation had overwhelmed and put to flight all minor insufficiencies.

The second day, they encountered the mighty Ganga River. The chieftain of the Nishadas arranged boats to row them across and also prepared plentiful repast for the tired populace and for the distinguished persons from the court. But no one partook of the hospitality he provided, for their grief at having left Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana lay too heavy on their hearts. Unable to displease Guha and unwilling to wound him, they just sat before the plates, fingered the

items and, getting up soon, threw the contents away. Why? Even the horses had no wish to feed. They just refused. Vasishta, the royal preceptor noticed this and said, "See! Rama is the Inner Resident, the Atma that is in all; He is the Intelligence, the Awareness that marks out each being." They had no inclination to turn aside to snatch a few hours of rest. Bharatha had resolved to travel straight to Ayodhya without delay. He was anxious to present Rama's holy sandals before the citizens pining in Ayodhya and to bring them some little comfort and courage. So the party forded the Gomathi and Sarayu rivers and reached the outskirts of Ayodhya on the fourth day of their journey.

The aged, the children, and the women of Ayodhya who couldn't join the vast assembly that marched to Rama's camp were watching for signs of their happy return after accomplishing their mission of persuading Rama to take up the reins of rulership. Their eyes had well nigh gone blind with exhaustion and extreme anxiety. When they heard the distant whirr of chariot wheels, they ran out into the streets and peered into the passing vehicles, asking "Where is our Lord?" But, since dusk soon thickened into darkness, they went back into their homes and spent the night in joyous hope that they could see their beloved prince with the first rays of the rising sun. Vast disappointment not unmixed with a little satisfaction awaited them next morning, for they learned that Rama had not returned to the capital but instead had sent his sandals as his representative.

Bharatha renounces the luxurious life

Bharatha called together the royal preceptor and the ministers of the court and assigned them various administrative duties. He entrusted them with the authority to perform their duties. He called Satrughna and gave him the task of fostering and consoling the queen mothers. He arranged a gathering of brahmins and pundits; standing before them with folded palms, he told them that he would fulfil their wishes, whether great or small, for he knew they would only promote the best interests of himself and the people. He wanted them to place their demands before him without hesitation.

He called for a gathering of the citizens of Ayodhya and the leaders of the

people from all parts of the empire.

He described to them all that had happened in the capital and forest. He gave them a summary of his conversations with Rama and appealed to them to adore and revere Rama's sandals as the authentic presence of Rama himself for the fourteen-year period of exile. "They will guard us all, they are our refuge and resource. In full confidence that the sandals are ruling over us, let us live with Rama installed in our hearts. After his return, Rama will rule over us directly, granting us the joy of his physical presence and direction. Our duty from this moment is to wait for that happy day, with prayer in our hearts." Then, Bharatha decided on an auspicious hour to install the sacred sandals on the throne, for he had the joy of all classes of the population in view, the royal preceptor, the pundits, ascetics, priests, ministers, and others of the court, the leaders of the people, and the common ranks of citizens. He saw to it that arrangements were made on a grand scale to celebrate the event.

That day, he prostrated before Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika and then went to the throne with the sandals on his head. Praying for the blessings of Vasishta and all those assembled, he placed them on the throne, offering them reverential loyalty. He placed all his responsibilities safely in their custody.

Later, that steadfast adherent of dharma, that incomparable hero, Bharatha, walked toward the village of Nandigrama, where he had a thatched hut made ready for his residence. He wore his hair braided in a knot, as Rama and Lakshmana had done; his apparel was made of the bark of trees, as theirs was; he lived in a cave dug into the earth. His food and dress were the same as those of the ascetics of the forest; his thoughts, words, and deeds were also austere and spiritually oriented.

Bharatha renounced the luxurious life of Ayodhya, which Indra, the ruler of heaven, praised as unattainable by Him; he gave up the rich life of the royal palace, which even Kubera, the god of riches, envied. He was happy in that tiny village unseen by others, inside the "grass-thatched" hut. He vowed that he would not look at anyone's face until Rama returned from exile. His mind

was fixed on Rama and on the day of his return from the forest. His body became weaker with every passing day. But the spiritual splendour on his face brightened more and more with the passage of time. His devotion to Rama grew to vaster and vaster proportions. He was transformed into a pure soul that has achieved fulfilment. In the firmament of his heart, the stars shone in glorious galaxies; below them, his feelings and emotions shone like the Ocean of Milk, calm, deep, and pure.