

An Essay on Rama: The Self-Sacrificing Altruist

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Abstract

Many excellent volumes are now available on the well-known Indian epic, Valmiki's Ramayana and its hero, Rama. Excellent as these volumes indeed are, by the very nature of the subject, they tend to be a bit too long to read and get a handle on the basic storyline. Hence, the key objective of this essay is to synthesize the basic themes enunciated in these volumes in, say, less than ten thousand words. According to Hinduism, the supreme god by the name of Vishnu appears in ten incarnations and Rama was the seventh incarnation but purely in a 'human form'. Because he was the human incarnation of Vishnu, Rama did not exhibit miracles. Instead, he behaved as if he was one among the many humans around him. That makes it easier for even people in the modern era to relate to him and his multi-faceted personality as a self-sacrificing altruist.

An Essay on Rama: The Self-Sacrificing Altruist

1. Introduction

“If you ask a Christian to give you a book on Christianity, he gives you the Bible. If you ask the same question to a Muslim he gives you the Quran. But if you ask a Hindu to give a book on Hinduism, he is bound to say: “welcome to my library” (Swami Chinmayanda quoted in Hiremat (Hiremat, 2018, June 9). The two most well-known Indian epics -- Ramayana and Mahabharata - together constitute a significant part of that library, not to mention the other scriptures like Vedas, Puranas, and the Bhagavad-Gita itself.

The British economist, Joan Robinson, once said: “whatever you can rightly say about India, the opposite is also true” (quoted in Zubrzycki 2022, August). The same can perhaps be said about this great Indian epic. Moreover, being a mythology, Ramayana should indeed be interpreted as ‘creative speculations that cannot be either confirmed or denied’ (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rama-Hindu-deity>). Hence, one could be agnostic about both these epics. That said, it is also possible to argue that just because one has not seen one’s grandparents or great-great-parents, it does not mean that they did not exist.

Rama is the hero of Ramayana and the seventh (out of the ten) incarnation of Vishnu - the ‘Supreme God’ in Indian epics and puranas –but born as a human being with all the human traits that go with it. It is, therefore, referred as ‘Naravataara’ - meaning an incarnation of Vishnu in a human form. The role of Vishnu in all his ten incarnations was to establish human harmony and social peace. Rama was the hero of Ramayana and Ramayana basically means the Journey of Rama (Shukla 2023, 16 January).

It is an epic with six parts (Cantos in English and Khandas in Sanskrit and some other Indian languages) with about 24,000 verses (Shastri, 1952 , p.15). It is thus more than twice the length of, say, the Bible. Rama was a noble as well as a humble human being – perhaps the kindest among the ten incarnations of Vishnu. He is known to be the embodiment of humility, patience and sacrifice, (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rama-Hindu-deity>).

There are many excellent volumes on Valmiki’s Ramayana and its hero, Rama, in different languages, including English. But these are rather a bit too long to read for many people in the 21st century. This is the driving force behind this paper: to provide a brief articulation of the storyline surrounding the hero of the epic ‘Rama’ in an essay with, say, less than ten thousand words.

Following this introductory section, some basic background for understanding the great epic and its equally great hero Rama is provided in section 2. The paper then more or less follows the sequences of the incidents that are supposed to have occurred in the epic: Rama’s Renouncing

the kingdom of Ayodhya (section 3); Sita's abduction and Rama's lament (section 4); Valli/Bali's fall (section 5); building the Bridge across the ocean (section 6); the imminent war (section 7); Sita's fire-test and Ramarajya (Section 8); and summing up (section 9).

2. Some Preliminaries

According to Indian cosmology, the world witnesses four main 'Yugas' – epochs or eras – each era spanning over thousands of years (<https://popularvedicscience.com/history/yugas/4-yugas/>). The four eras are: Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali (the modern era). It is believed that the moral values – what is referred to as 'dharma' in many Indian languages -- declined across these four eras. The degree of dharma or moral values supposed to have declined from 100% during the Satya era, while that figure declined to 75% in Treta, 50% in Dvapara, and 25% in Kali era (modern era). Indeed, in Hindu cosmology, dharma is symbolized by a unique 'Dharma Bull'. That special bull supposedly stood on: all its four legs during the Satya era, three legs in Treta, two legs in Dvapara, and just one leg during the Kaliyuga (the modern era). Ramayana belonged to the Treta era. Thus in Ramayana, there still is a reasonable distinction between 'good' and 'bad' characters and their behavior patterns.

It is interesting to note that the sixth incarnation of Vishnu, by the name of Parashurama, belonged to the Brahmin or the priestly class. Parashurama was dead against the Kshatriya race. Why? The Kshatriyas had become so powerful and ruthless that they used to attack the rest of the society and rob whatever little belongings others had. With their weapons and power, the Kshatriya race had become too ruthless to let others live in peace. They used to destroy even the little hermitages and used to steal whatever little belongings the hermits had.

It is believed that Parashurama fought against the Kshatriya race 21 times and indeed tamed them into more humble human beings. It is believed that he thus restored the 'Cosmic equilibrium'. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parashurama>). In this context, it is interesting to note that Dasharatha, Rama's father, himself had confided in his mother, Kaushalya "O blessed lady; a doer surely reaps the fruit of his deeds based on the nature of good or evil he has perpetrated" (Arora 2023, p 494). Apparently, he had killed a hermit boy in his youth by mistake.

Ramayana is believed to have been written around 500 BCE to 100 BCE by a sage by the name of Valmiki. However, Griffith, who so very well translated the Sanskrit version of Valmiki's Ramayana into English, dates the epic to as early as the 12th century BCE (Griffith, Ramayana).. "Ramayana was composed in epic style. Although there is a natural hyperbole associated with the genre and some interwoven storytelling, these aspects of the composition should not be used to quibble about the essential historicity of events described" (Arora, p. 486). There are additions and subtractions on the basic story scripted by Valmiki. In general, this paper restricts its scope to the 'texts' written by Valmiki – indeed its translations into English and Kannada. At times, the

paper also draws upon an artform called ‘Yakshagana’ – both in its stage performance format and the ‘debating’ format. Both these formats are quite popular in the southern part of today’s Indian State of Karnataka and the northern tip of the neighboring State of Kerala.

Rama belonged to the royal race (Kshatria). Rama is known to be a humble, calm, and a cool human being – ‘mitahari, mitabhashi, mitanidri’ -- ate, spoke, and slept – all in moderation. In addition, he was also soft-spoken - ‘mridubhashi’. He was a perfectionist to the tilt, and placed principles ahead of profits. He literally symbolized the saying ‘Do good; do it well’ – a one-liner from Devex. In other words, Rama was generous to a fault. He personified frugality. It is believed that he was someone who would be happy even under extremely difficult personal circumstances, indeed at trying times. He inculcated the ‘one-wife’ principle in his life. Indeed, Rama, was a symbol of ‘self-sacrifice’. (<https://hindupad.com/differences-between-rama-krishna/>).

Note that Rama was the seventh incarnation of Vishnu in the form an ideal man or a perfectionist par excellent. As per Indian numerology, someone associated with number ‘7’ are believed to be insightful, intuitive, truthful, introspective, intellectual, and wise. Moreover, Rama did not use his supernatural powers all his life; indeed he was not aware that he was a god even when he fought his well-known battle with Ravana – the king of Lanka.

Rama displayed all the qualities of a great human being – once very bullish then suddenly bearish; once speaks very confidently but only to perish in despair; once very joyful and then very grief-stricken; once very hopeful and then becomes hopeless. He, so often kept telling himself and sharing with his younger brother Lakshmana about fate being the universal and changeless law (Griffith). “Destiny is hard to overcome.” (Arora, p. 493). Lakshmana held an almost contrarian view. He believed that only timid and weak people take shelter in fate (Arora 2023). However, Rama used to soften or even quieten his somewhat restless younger brother. To Lakshmana, Rama was not just a brother, but also a friend, philosopher, and guide.

3. Rama Renouncing the Kingdom

King Dasharatha ruled the city of Ayodhya, a city located in the now Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Ayodhya means “the city none can challenge in warfare” (Shastri 1952, Book 2, p. 22). The name ‘Dasharatha’ means a hugely valiant person who had expanded his kingdom in ten directions. Why ten, not eight, as is commonly understood. According to the Hindu beliefs then, they added two more directions to the commonly known eight: by counting both up (Urdhwa, or above) and down (Adhah, even below Pathaal) (Nair, 2017). In more subtle words, king Dasharatha had ruled his kingdom just as well as Indra, the king of heaven, ruled the heaven (Shastri, Book 2, p. 22).

Be that as it may, despite his unparalleled achievements, Dasharatha had a huge cause for worry. Dasharatha did not have a progeny from any of his three wives - Kaushalya, Sumitra, and Kaikei. At the advice of one of the greatest Sages of the times - Sage Vashista – Dasharatha performed a Hindu ritual called ‘Putrakameshti yaga’ – a ritual performed to please the Gods and obtain their blessings to have progenies. As a result, Dasharatha was blessed with four children – Rama from Kaushalya, Lakshmana from Sumitra, Bharata and Shatrugna from Kaikei. Time flies. The children grow up to adults and adults grew up to elders.

It is time for the ageing king Dasharatha to appoint his successor to the kingdom. As was the common practice then, the eldest son of the ageing Dasharatha – Rama -- was to become the king of Ayodhya – succeeding his father. Dasharatha had made all arrangements to crown Rama to succeed him. Ayodhya was brimming with a festive mood on the eve of Rama’s coronation ceremony.

Now comes the most unexpected twist. Fallen into the bad hands of her helper-woman, or royal nurse (by the name of Manthara), Kaikei contests king Dasharatha’s decision to crown Rama and puts two stiff conditions: (i) her son, Bharata should be crowned as the king, instead of Rama; and (ii) Rama should be exiled from the kingdom for 14 years. Why 14 years? In those days someone who has been exiled for 14 years or more automatically lost his right of inheriting the kingdom. King Dasharatha tries to reason it out to his young wife. He pleads with her that as per the tradition, the eldest son (Rama) should be crowned and nobody else would take his place.

That said, Dasharatha could not deny what Kaikei asked for, because he had given two promises to Kaikei at an earlier occasion when she had saved him in one of the battles by helping him to steady his chariot. Kaikei had agreed and had told her husband that she would wait until the necessity for calling on those promises arises.

Meanwhile, Rama heard what was happening in the royal family. His father was literally faltering to convey the cruel decision to his beloved son. With great difficulty, his voice becoming frailer, he could just about complete the sentence. “The king, his eyes filled with tears, his throat choked with emotion, could only utter these words: “Rama and nothing more” (Shastri 1952, Book 2, p.197). But Rama understood what his father wanted to convey.

Indeed, Rama accepted the decree unquestioningly. "I gladly obey father's command," he said to Kaikei: "Why, I would go even if you ordered it" (Johnson, undated). Thus, without a word of protest, Rama sets out on his 14-year journey in exile in a huge gesture of kindness and goodwill. He indeed requests Kaikei not to make a mountain out of a molehill. He also consoled her and requested her that she should not at all worry over such a small matter. To Rama, spending 14 years in the forest looked like such a small matter.

However, Rama's decision now starts snowballing on the family and indeed the entire kingdom.. Lakshmana, Rama's most faithful younger brother, now decides to join Rama in some kind of a royal retort to the unfair treatment meted out to Rama. Rama tried his best to convince Lakshmana that he should indeed stay back to take care of the family and also help Bharata in ruling the kingdom. However, Lakshmana was invincible. Although Lakshmana does not agree with Rama's philosophy of 'fate or destiny', he cannot live without his elder brother either. It thus came to a point that Rama had no choice but to let his younger brother join him in the exile.

To make matters worse for Rama, his young wife, Sita, also decides to accompany Rama. Despite Rama's best efforts at persuading Sita that it would be extremely hard for her to live in a jungle, Sita insists that she accompanies her husband. "As shadow to substance, so wife to husband," she reminded Rama "Is not the wife's dharma to be at her husband's side? Let me walk ahead of you so that I may smooth the path for your feet" (Johnson, undated). Rama was thus forced to bring Sita with him to the forest. "Then Rama, Sita, Lakshmana bent at the king's feet, and sadly went" (Griffith, p.142)

It must have been hard for Rama at that stage to leave his elderly father and go for exile. Yet, being a kindhearted and self-effacing altruist, Rama sacrificed the royal life, the throne of his kingdom, decided to go for exile. As Rama calms down Lakshmana at that point: "These I ascribe to fate alone... Fate, which none may comprehend, to which all life must bow and bend... Our life and death, our joy and pain, anger and fear, and loss and gain, each thing that is, in every state, all is the work of none but fate. Even saints, inspired with rigid zeal, when once the stroke of fate they feel, in sternest vows no more engage, and fall enslaved by love and rage" (Griffith, p.121).

Rama's role as a son has been nothing short of exceptional. Many people, if not most, would not have relinquished the throne and instead accepted a 14-years of exile. That said, sometimes decisions taken by self-sacrificing altruists come with unintended consequences, not just confined to the person who takes those decisions, but also on the people near and dear to him. For example, this hugely kind and highly principled act of Rama may have hastened the death of his beloved father. On his deathbed, he longed for his beloved son to be by his side.

Indeed, as soon as Rama left Ayodhya, his father was in tears: "No will, no power to live have I when my brave son no more is nigh" (Griffith, p.146). Indeed, Dasharatha turned quite a bit harsh on Kaikei: "In order to please thee, I will put to death one who does not deserve the penalty, or will pardon who merits death" (Shastri, Book 2, p.174). He goes on to say "Alas, I brought thee to my house for the destruction of my home" (Shastri, Book 2, p. 177). He could not stop anymore: "I shall not long survive the exile of Rama and the grief of Sita. Enjoy thou the kingdom with thy son, but as a widow" (Shastri, Book 2, p.181).

Moreover, unable to bear the pain of sending Rama for exile, the entire kingdom was transformed into a 'catastrophic sea of sorrows'. For each and every citizen of Ayodhya, life without Rama looked as if 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short', to use a terminology from the 16th century British philosopher-cum-clergyman – Thomas Hobbes.

Did Rama make the right call on the trade-off between the throne and the forest. Was it not important for him to have been by the side of his aging and ailing father? Or, for that matter, listen to the common desires of the entire citizens of his kingdom? One could endlessly debate and discuss these issues. But Rama had to strike a trade-off between these alternatives. Being a symbol of sacrifice, he chose to abide by his 'father-cum-king's' decision. Or else, as Rama himself repeatedly admitted that we all are guided by our fate/destiny.

4. Sita's Abduction and Rama's Lament

Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita are now in the forest. When they walked through the forest, amidst hermits' huts, demon's dwellings, and the crowds of cruel animals, it is believed that Rama was in the front, Sita just behind him, and Lakshmana behind Sita – so as to provide the maximum protective cover for Sita. And the three of them made a small hut in the forest. Everything went well for the three-some for about 11 years in exile. They lived happily. But that happiness suddenly came to an end on a fateful day.

The younger sister of Ravana, by the name of Shurpanakha, was around the little hut of Rama. As soon as she sees Rama and Lakshmana, she falls in love over their good looks. Hence, by deceit, she clones herself into a beautiful woman (referred to as 'Mayashurpankha') and tries to woo them over. However, when both the brothers patiently explained to her that they were already married and hence they would not be romantic with her, she suddenly revealed her scary looks and tried to kidnap Sita. At that point, Lakshmana chases and disfigures her – indeed cleft her nose and ears. Surviving from Lakshmana's chase, she somehow returned to Lanka and provoked her brother, Ravana to revenge the wrong done to her.

Ravana, had a mixed lineage – his father was a sage by the name of Vishrava but his mother by the name of Kaikasi was from a demon's family. That is why Ravana was also referred as 'Brahma-Demon' (Brahma Rakshasa in Sanskrit). Ravana had the boon to invoke Lord Shiva whenever he wanted. He also had other boon from Brahma that neither the gods nor the semi-gods (or even other demons) could kill him; only a human might cause his death. When Brahma gave him that boon, Ravana could not control his laughter and dismisses the plausibility of his death by a human is literally zero, indeed impossible; a human being could never have the courage to even meet him, let alone cause his death. Unlike popular beliefs, Ravana did not have

ten heads – it was just a poetic and symbolic way of expressing his huge physical and mental strength strengths – a way of magnifying his capabilities.

Shurpanakha, now narrated to her brother the entire incident. To boot, she also explained in detail how beautiful Rama's wife really was. The hugely skilled Ravana now knows about the bearings of Rama and his beautiful wife. For Ravana, the news that his sister brought was too hard to digest. He now decides to take a sweet revenge against Rama.

He plots a plan of kidnapping Sita. As per that plan, he forces his maternal uncle, by the name of Maricha, to disguise himself as a beautiful golden Deer, despite his uncle dissuading him in no uncertain words: "There is no greater sin than coveting another man's wife." (Arora, p. 496). The disguised golden Deer now hangs around Rama's hut. Sita sees the Deer and now requests Rama that he should get her that Deer. Despite Rama repeatedly explaining to her that the Deer was not real but the work of some demons using their culpability to clone anything and anybody, Sita kept insisting that Rama must get her the beautiful Deer.

Upon Sita's insistence, Rama, and then Lakshmana in quick succession, went after the Deer. With none to guard Sita, Ravana, goes in the disguise of a holy monk and requests Sita for some food, whatever she then had in her little hut. The innocent Sita could not resist herself from helping a holy monk. That little innocent act of kindness from Sita proved to be fatal. Ravana suddenly kidnaps Sita and takes her to Lanka across the sea by using his royal aircraft, supposed to be a self-driving magic aircraft -- named Pushpaka Vimana. Rama and Lakshmana returns their hut, but only to see Sita lost.

Did Rama fail to use his judgment in yielding to the rather childish demands of his young wife? Is this act of Rama worse than that of leaving his elderly father and refusing to obey the pleas of millions of citizens of his kingdom? These are hard questions to answer. Apparently, "Rama slew fourteen thousand rakshasas who dwelt in the forest" (Shastri, Introduction, p. 6). Witnessing that, Sita had cautioned Rama against his "violence when he agreed to help the rishis (or sages) by exterminating the Rakshasas" (Arora, p. 485). Mishaps happen even when one tries put one's best forward to avoid them.

Let us look at it from Ram's perspective. Rama, being a perfectionist, must have tried his best to be an ideal husband by fulfilling the little desires of his young wife - especially such a faithful wife who had even followed him in to live in the jungle for 14 long years, sacrificing all the comforts of a palace-life. Moreover, with Lakshmana remaining at their little hut, Rama knew quite well that Sita was in safe hands. Yet, Ravana, by using his culpability to clone, has caused a huge damage to Rama and Lakshmana. Sita has been abducted and Rama is heartbroken. Lakshmana now consoles Rama: "Misfortunes come and burn like flame, then fly as quickly as they came" (Griffith, p 308). Despite Lakshmana's counsel, Rama still remains grief-stricken.

5. The Bilateral Pact with Sugriva and Vali's Fall

Unable to bear the loss of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana started a long march in search of Sita. They went around the forest to look for any signs Sita, or her abductor, may have left on the way. It was really a clever thinking on the part of Sita to have dropped her necklace, bracelet, and the ring down to the earth while she was in Ravana's flight.

After a long walk up and down the hill, crossing the rivers and the plains, they found the little bearings of Sita. With huge excitement, Rama now tells his brother: "O Lakshmana, here, he cried behold my Sita's earrings dropped with gold. Here lie her garlands torn and rent, here lies each glittering ornament. O look, the ground on every side with blood-like drops of gold is dyed" (Griffith, p. 306).

The blood drops that they notice is from a bleeding bird by the name of Jatayu. The noble bird had valiantly fought with Sita's abductor but in vein. In its dying moments, it tried convey to Rama, most probably by using its sign language, that it heard some young woman in distress, crying out loudly and repeatedly 'Oh Rama, save me, save me'. It also indicated that the abductor was using something like a flying car and was headed towards the south. The bird then breathed its last.

With that clue, the two brothers started their search for Sita walking up and down the hills and crossing rivers, and what not! As luck would have it, Rama now comes across a little kingdom named 'Kishkinda' (now located in India's Karnataka State). That little kingdom was then ruled by a king by the name of Vali. Some covert the 'V' into 'B' and refer to him as Bali. I prefer to use the Sanskrit word 'Vali' rather than 'B', so that one does not confuse Bali for a city in Indonesia by that name. It is said that whenever someone fights with Vali, Vali was gifted with the power of usurping about half of his enemy's strength. That gift indeed befits his name 'Vali', meaning strength.

Rama happens to meet up with the younger brother of Vali by the name of 'Sugriva'. Sugriva was in almost similar situation as Rama then was. As a result of some huge misunderstanding between him and his elder brother, Sugriva too was now 'wifeless'. His wife had now been forcibly taken over by his elder brother. Sugriva wanted to make a bilateral pact with Rama that they would help each other in rescuing their wives, despite Sugriva's lingering doubt if either Rama or Lakshmana are really capable of winning against the mighty Vali. That said, both had to take whatever chances that came their way, if they were to get their respective wives.

Rama now encourages Sugriva to provoke his elder brother for a fresh round of fight. Vali never said 'no' whenever someone challenged him for a fight. A furious battle ensues between the two brothers. At a stage when Sugriva was on the verge of losing the battle, Rama shoots at Vali

by hiding behind a tree. Holding on to the arrow, Vali now mocks Rama: “ Striking me from behind, what merit dost thou hope to earn by this” (Shastri, Book 4, p. 207). He then continues: “Now I perceive that thou art a perverse creature, feigning piety whilst in truth thou art like a well concealed in the grass, without faith and resorting to evil deed. Outwardly virtuous, wearing the cloak of integrity, thou art in reality a scoundrel, like a fire bidden by the ashes, nor do I recognize thee behind the concealing mask of virtue” (Shastri, Book 4, p.208).

Now comes the most sad words from Vali’s wife – Tara: “Since that Lion among the Monkeys is dying, of what use to me is my son or the entire kingdom?” (Shastri, Book 4, p. 216). “ I would rather cling to the body of this hero than a hundred sons like Angada... Tara who was submerged in an ocean of grief, gazing on the face of her dead lord, fell to the earth embracing Bali like a creeper to an uprooted tree” (Shastri, Book 4, p. 222).

Rama heard all these allegations hurled at him, yet did not lose his cool. He patiently explains to Vali that a strong man like him should not have misused his powers to capture his younger brother’s wife. Moreover, Rama assures Vali that he can call the arrow back, if Vali still wanted to live. Indeed, Rama had just about pricked Vali by an arrow called ‘Sankalpa Shara’ which does exactly what Rama wants, including how deep the arrow hurts the opponent, neither an inch more nor an inch less. Only Rama seemed to have the capability to use such an exceptional arrow. At that stage, Vali suddenly becomes a bit philosophical and politely tells Rama that he would rather die than lead a life on earth that, more often than not, tends to be full of miseries.

One could endlessly debate and discuss if Rama did the right thing by shooting at Vali by hiding behind a tree. One could argue that it was done in honor of Vali’s huge strength. Hence Rama had no option but to shoot at Vali by hiding behind a tree. Perhaps, the loss of his loving wife may have been becoming unbearable for him. Recount how much he missed his loving wife: “My spirit sinks in hopeless pain when my fond glances yearn in vain for that dear face with whose bright eye the worshipped lotus scarce can vie” (Griffith, p. 324). Looking at it from an entirely different perspective, it is possible to argue that indeed Rama exempted Vali from rebirth and suffering over and over again. That is the reason why that entire incident is referred to as ‘Vali Moksha’ (meaning Vali’s salvation).

The somewhat good news is that Sugriva now gets his wife back. However, Rama’s objective of rescuing his wife seemed to be far away still. It is said that once he got his wife back, Sugriva spent all his time in merrymaking to the point of forgetting his bilateral pact with Rama (Shastri, Book 4, pp. 251- 263). Lakshmana now got so angry at Sugriva’s behavior that he stormed into Kishkinda and cautioned him about the dire consequences he would have to face if he fails to abide by the bilateral pact with Rama.

When Lakshmana stormed into Kishkinda early in the morning, “Sugriva, heavy with sleep and fatigue, did not wake up but lay in a drunken stupor, sexual indulgence having dulled his reason” (Shastri, Book 4, p. 253). To put it all in common parlance, Sugriva must have had a huge hangover! Apparently, the bilateral pact that he had with Rama had a clause that within four months of Sugriva getting his wife back, he would help Rama in searching for Sita. Sugriva now tells the angry Lakshmana that if he has betrayed his friendship may he be pardoned. He then asked Lakshmana: “... is there anyone without fault?” (Shastri, Book 4, p. 264).

However, once awakened by the rage of Lakshmana, Sugriva now gives a ten-day deadline for his army of Vanaras to find the bearings of Sita, failing which they might be given harsh punishments. The little Angada, now in all kinds of woes, tells himself and others that they should focus on the work, rather than face the threat of death. A frantic search for Sita by Sugriva and his army of Vanaras begins now.

On top of those efforts, Hanuman now goes on a mission impossible! He takes a huge leap forward by flying over the sea all the way up to Lanka to find out if and where Sita is. Not only that Hanuman had the skill to fly over the sky but he also had the capability of both magnifying his body to touch the mountains as well as shrink it into the size of a little cat. Indeed, when he arrived at Lanka he shrank his body into a little cat, so that nobody but only Sita would recognize him.

When he flew over to Lanka, he had an aerial view of the city. One should hear it from his own words: “a lovely city planned and decked by heaven's creative architect, fairest of earthly cities meet to be the Gods' celestial seat.... Thus in his heart began debate: our mightiest host would strive in vein to make this city on the main, a city that may well defy the chosen warriors of the sky, a city never to be won even by the arm of Raghu's son” (Griffith, p. 398). If something seemed so difficult for such a strong Hanuman, the task ahead for Rama's side must have been extremely hard.

That said, he brings back one of the best news yet for Rama: Sita is very much alive and well in a secluded place next to Ravana's palace. Now comes the next big challenge of crossing the sea and reaching Lanka that has already been destroyed beyond imagination by Hanuman. Hanuman set on fire the entire Lanka, and caused humongous damage to the city. “With the exception of Maithili Sita, he burnt down the city of Lanka” (Debroy, p. 39). The ocean now stands between Rama and Sita.

6. Building the Bridge Across the Ocean

Once again, Rama is in despair: “But of the sea I sadly think, and the sweet hopes that cheered me sink. How can we cross the leagues of foam that keep us from the giant's home?” (Griffith, p.

428). Not just that. Rama now shares his despair with Lakshmana: "Sorrow invariably decreases with the passing of time but in the absence of my beloved, mine increases daily" (Shastri, Book 5. p. 15).

He somehow stops his broodings and now focuses on the work ahead. Being such a humble being, he patiently prayed to Varuna – who in Hinduism is in charge of water – and requested him to help him in building the bridge across the sea. But his prayers fell on deaf ears. Even Rama, who hardly gets angry, lost his patience now: "Varuna has haughtily refused my request for an audience?. Obviously, he has mistaken my humility for weakness and does not appreciate gentleness" (Arora, p. 309). The consequence was unbelievable but true.

He shot a powerful arrow named after Brahma – Brahmastra. "Swift from the bow, as Rama drew his cord, the fiery arrow flew. Earth groaned to feel the wound, and sent a rush of water through the rent; ...Then every brook and lake beside throughout the region Rama dried" (Griffith, p. 445).

The tamed Varuna now apologizes to Rama. He also politely suggests to Rama that Nala, son of Vishwakarma (the architect of the gods), is best suited to lay the foundations of the bridge, as he had the necessary 'celestial art of architecture', or the skills of 'civil engineering', to use a modern terminology.

Thus, Nala was appointed to be in charge of building the bridge across the ocean, of course, with all the entire Vanara army helping him. Hanuman had the strength to uproot an entire hill and throw it on to the sea. With the strength of the mighty Vanaras, huge hills were overthrown into the roaring sea. "Rocks huge as autumn clouds bound fast... Wild was the tumult, loud the din As ponderous rocks went thundering in" (Griffith, p. 445). The wonderful bridge, built to last for long, was completed in less than a week.

7. A War Becomes Imminent

Rama, Lakshmana, and the entire army of the Vanaras now trod across the sea and reached Lanka. Now the military formation was ably guided by Rama himself. Rama leads from the front. However, given that he was a symbol of patience, he still does not rule out the possibility of peace.

Let us now shift our focus from Rama to Ravana for a while. Ravana's maternal great-grandfather by the name of Malyavana gave him a piece of wise advice – kindly make peace with Rama, lest Rama will destroy the entire race of demons. Ravana literally scorns him off by telling him that he was too old to think, let alone advise him. To make matters worse, here is a piece of advice to Ravana from the young Angada, when he was sent as an ambassador of Rama:

“Once more I counsel thee: repent, avoid the mortal punishment... and pardon for thy sin implore.” (Griffith, p. 459). Ravana tells him that he is too young to think and how dare he comes forth to advise the king of Lanka.

Ravana is fed up of advices from anyone and everyone, including Angada, a young boy that too from his opponent’s side. He dismissed all those pieces of advice as utter nonsense, pure and simple. Moreover, he brushed aside his younger brother, Vibhishana’s decision to change sides and seek asylum from Rama. Indeed, Ravana’s arrogance has now debilitated his capacity to think and take wise decisions. As an Indian proverb goes: ‘Vinasha Kale, Viparitha Buddhi’. The best English translation I could make of this proverb is something like: ‘as one’s doomsday approaches, one’s intellect works against his own interests’. Indeed, Ravana has made up his mind: ‘never shall I return Sita to Rama in my lifetime’.

Ravana now orders Vidyujjihva – a skilled magician on his side -- to clone Rama’s head, by using his magical powers. He now dangles the ‘artificial head of Rama’ around Sita to convince her that her beloved Rama is dead and gone. Indeed, he makes a sarcastic comment too that like a in a flowing river, the water that has flown down will never flow up (Arora, p. 498). Sita starts worrying afresh. Indeed, she was in tears now. However, there was a kind woman on Ravana’s side by the name of Sarama. She quietly tells Sita that she should neither believe what she saw nor what she heard. With her soothing words, Sarama reassures Sita that Rama is very much alive to rescue her from Ravana.

The first casualty in the war was Shardula, a spy from Ravana’s side. The Vanaras from Rama’s side captured him and surrendered him to Rama. Rama, being such a gentle-hearted person, pardoned him and let him return to Lanka and pass on the message that Rama and Lakshmana along with a huge Vanara army are battle-ready. Shardula returns to Lanka and narrates the entire incident. He now cautions Ravana that he should make peace with Rama rather than invite death not to only himself and his family members but also the countless innocent soldiers of Lanka. Ravana was furious over the little spy and tells him that his job is only to report what he saw, not to advise his king.

A war between the two sides became imminent. As the late economist, Herbert Stein, put it somewhat differently: “If something cannot go forever, it will stop” (quoted in White, 2021, April 1). Even the most peace-loving Rama was drawn in to a war, echoing a common saying: ‘if you want peace, be ready for a war’. But war has its own cyclicity or changing fortunes. One day, Ravana’s side become jubilant, another day, Rama’s.

Ravana now requests his son by the name of ‘Athikaaya’, born to him from one of his wives by the name of Dhanyamalini, to go to the battlefield. The very name ‘Athikaaya’ in Sanskrit and in a few other Indian languages means ‘strong bodied’ or mighty. He was also a peace-loving person. He advices his father to surrender Sita and save the inevitable destruction of Lanka and

its citizens. Ravana now tells his son to stop storytelling and instead clearly let him know if he would fight for his father or not. That leaves no option for such a strong person like Athikaaya. At any cost, he was unwilling to become another Vibhishana.

Obedient to his father, he now goes to the battlefield. By his huge strength, he makes the Vanaras on Rama's side run helter-skelter for their life. Rama is a worried man now. But, Lakshmana using the all-powerful 'Brahmastra', makes Athikaya to embrace death but at the same time attain 'salvation'. The arrow was as divine as it was powerful.

Fortunes of the war suddenly shifted towards Rama's side now. But not for long. Ravana's son from Mandodhari, by the name of Meghanatha (who roars like a thunder) as well as Indrajitu (as he had defeated even Indra) enters the battle field. He causes humongous destruction to Rama's side. Unlike, Athikaaya, Indrajitu does not preach his father the virtues of surrendering Sita to Rama. Like the father, the son, Indrajitu. He opines that the time to discuss and debate about the war has dead and gone and that it is ridiculous at this stage of the war to do a counterfactual simulation of events.

Using his culpability to clone, Indrajitu now clones Sita, and brings that 'Mayasita' on to the battlefield and beheads her in front of Rama and Lakshmana. Rama is in despair. Vibhishana at that stage comforts Rama that those were what the demons do with their culpability to clone, but not real. He then uses a weapon called 'Nagapasha' – a weapon with serpentine shaft - and ties both Rama and Lakshmana down. At that stage, at the request of Hanuman, Garuda (the king of birds, and a blood-relative of Jatayu) came on to the battlefield and saved the life of Rama and Lakshmana (Shastri, Book 6, p.123).

Be that as it may, nothing dims Indrajitu's hopes. In a flash of a second, he delves deep into the underworld, called 'Pathala' – and starts a Havana/Yaga by the name of 'Maranadhvara'. The word 'marana' means death. He had a boon from Brahma that if he completed that Havana, he would be undefeatable by anyone. However, the foul smell that was emanating from the animal sacrifices he was making for that Havana, started to be felt on the earth too. That gives a hint on where he now was. With that clue on hand, Lakshmana dwells deep into the underworld, interrupts the Havana, and in a huge battle that ensued, demolishes Indrajitu. The death of his beloved son, Indrajitu, was an unbearable loss for Ravana. Indeed, Ravana had a huge trust in his beloved and valiant son.

Now it is the turn for his huge younger brother by the name of Kumbhakarna, the indomitable and mighty warrior – who sleeps for six months of year and then keeps awake for the rest half. Why? When he was young, he made a huge sacrifice to please Brahma, the creator, and he was about to ask for a blessing from Brahma to be immortal. However, when he was about to ask for that boon, Brahma's wife, by the name of Sharada, cleverly made him stumble – in that process

instead of asking for immortality (nirjaravasthe), he asks for uninterrupted sleep (nidravasthe). Hugely disappointed, he requests Brahma to amend his blessing a bit and give him some concession. Brahma thus felt pity for him and amended his blessing a bit: instead of sleeping twelve months of a year, he now sleeps for six months and keeps awake in the other half.

As bad luck would have it for Ravana, at that stage of the battle, he was in his sleeping position. Thus, Ravana had to use huge drummers to wake him up. They did that. Yet, he now feels hungry that they had to feed his unending appetite -- all in the middle of a war. They fed him too. Somehow, he now enters the battlefield and makes a huge dent on Rama's side. Rama now had no option but to demolish Kumbhakarna by using an arrow that not only was very sharp but also had had wings - 'Indrastra'.

The final stage of the battle has now arrived: the combat between Rama and Ravana. Even at this stage, Rama's patience does not dim. He still has some cautionary words for his arch enemy: "Once more I warn thee, Rakshasa King. This hour the Maithili lady bring, and, yielding while there yet is time, seek, suppliant, pardon for the crime, or I will leave beneath the sun no living Raksasas, not one" (Griffith, p. 459?). "...the duty of a king to save the lives of his people and avoid bloodshed until milder methods have been tried in vain (Griffith, p. 460)

That said, Ravana is not easily convincible of defeat as yet. A huge battle between him and Rama ensued. That final combat between Rama's arrows and Ravana's weapons was unbelievable but true. Rama hurls a rain of arrows on Ravana. Ravana also does almost the same. However, the battle finale is slowly and steadily awakening Ravana and reminds him of the words Brahma had chosen while he asked for the boon of immortality.

One must hear it from his own words: "All the supreme austerities I have performed have become useless. I am like the great Indra, but I have been vanquished by a human. Brahma had indeed cautioned him: 'Know that you will face fear from humans. I asked that I could not be killed by gods, danavas, gandharvas, yakshas, rakshasas and serpents, but I did not ask the same about humans" (Debroy, p. 1180). Ravana had indeed laughed at Brahma and retorted to him sarcastically: 'of all the gods and demons in the world, should I ever fear a man on earth?; he thought that a human cannot do much harm to him, let alone demolish him. However, he is not facing an ordinary man now.

Even the patient Rama now thinks that enough is enough, He now shoots an arrow of exemplary strength. "In its wings was the wind, in its point the fire and the sun, in its haft space, and, in it resembled the Mountains Meru and Mandara. With its marvelous point, haft and gilding, it was composed of the essence of all the elements and was as resplendent as the sun. Resembling the Fire of Time enveloped in smoke, it was like unto an enormous snake and was capable of riving men, elephants, bones, gateways, ban and even roc" (Shastri, Book 6, p. 314).

That arrow brought an end to the mighty Ravana. Witnessing the death of her beloved husband, Ravana's wife Mandodhari is in deep despair. She could not stop her tears. She then goes on to say: "One only God thy match I deem: It was Vishnu's self, the Lord Supreme, whose days through ceaseless time extend" (Griffith, p. 495).

8. Sita's Fire Test and Ayodhya's Ramarajya

After rescuing Sita, Rama now does something not too kind an act on Sita. "A suspicion has arisen, however, with regard to thy conduct, and thy presence is as painful to me as a lamp to one whose eye is diseased ! Henceforth go where it best please thee, I give thee leave, O Daughter of Janaka. O Lovely One, the ten regions are at thy disposal; I can have nothing more to do with thee" (Shastri, Book 6, p. 335). In other words, "I have no attachment for you. You can go wherever you desire. O fortunate one! I have spoken to you in this way after making up my mind" (Debroy, p. 1353). These indeed are really harsh words from Rama to Sita, especially at that juncture, when she must have been eager to hear much more sympathetic and sweet words from her husband.

Sita was totally exasperated. Her reply was as apt as anybody in her situation would: "Why did you give me false hope by sending Hanuman with the message that you would rescue me? If I had known your true feelings about me at that time, I would have given up my life then. All the trouble you took to come here, making the arduous journey across the sea and endangering yourself by waging a war that took the lives of so many, was entirely unnecessary" (Arora, p. 383). Indeed, for Sita, it was like choosing between life and death. Witnessing all this, even Lakshmana got the surprise of his life time, but Rama's stern look quietened him too.

Sita is not a weak woman either. Calm and composed as she was, she requested Lakshmana to prepare the pyre. Wood, appropriate for such a Hindu ritual, was brought in piles and the pyre was prepared and lit. Sita, slowly walked around her husband and then entered the fury of the flaming fire. Sita came out victoriously from the flaming fire. Sita and Rama were thus reunited. Meanwhile, I venture to say that my casual empiricism suggests that I have heard many Indian men named as 'Sitarama', but yet to find a woman named 'Ramasita'!

Be that as it may, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana now returned to Ayodhya. Fortunately, for Rama, the throne was kept safe by Bharata. In the absence of Rama from Ayodhya, Bharata ran the kingdom as a representative of Rama. Hence, no inheritance issues held up Rama's coronation. "Hanuman tells Bharata all that befell Rama and Sita during their exile" (Shastri, Book 6 p. 358).

Valmiki tells us that Rama ruled Ayodhya for many more years with human harmony and social peace. Rama's rule of Ayodhya has indeed been referred to as – Ramarajya. In Ramarajya,

“There was no fear from predatory beasts. There was no fear on account of disease. There were no bandits in the world. No one suffered from lack of riches. The aged did not have to perform funeral rites for the young. Everyone was cheerful “ (Debroy, p. 1388). Not only did Rama establish ‘Ramajaya’ but also did he sustain it for a long, long time. Under Rama’s rule, Ayodhya became a ‘model kingdom’ for others to emulate.

9. Summing Up

For Rama, it was testing time, all the time. The tradeoffs he faced in life were indeed hard enough, say, between: fulfilling his father’s wish and being with him in his old age; going alone to the 14 year exile and taking his beloved wife and the valiant brother along; protecting Sita while in exile and taking chances with the plausibility of her abduction; protecting Sugriva and reprimanding Vali; rescuing Sita and making her go through a fire test.

Striking the right balance between those alternatives became a tough task even for Rama - a god in man’s incarnation. Being a self-sacrificing altruist, Rama chose what was then considered as the right things to do during the Treta era. In those days, ‘honor’ was far more important than one’s ‘own self’. Note that the overall level of honesty during the Treta era was 75%. Against that backdrop, many incidents and behavior patterns in those days may surprise us in today’s world but not for those in the Treta era. Rama’s patience and kindness knew no limits, as was his trust in ‘fate or destiny’

That said, in today’s world, it is possible to think of fate as setting a lower and an upper bound to one’s performance in life, or say a ‘fate-limit’. If one does not put in any effort, a human being is likely to be nearer the lower end of his/her ‘fate limit’. In comparison, if a human being puts in one’s maximum effort, one could possibly be nearer the upper end of one’s ‘fate limit’. This so called ‘fate limit’ may not be uniform across individuals, countries, race, genealogy, and may be a host of other things that we now club into ‘initial conditions’.

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