

3. The Mission Commences

*When truth, righteousness, and love are
practised, Earth greatly rejoices.
These noble principles secure universal
peace and happiness.
Listen to this noble truth, Oh! brave son of
Bharath.*

Sage Valmiki propagated the *Ramayana* in three different ways: As the story of Rama, as the story of Sita, and as the story of the slaying of Ravana.

Ramasya ayanam iti Ramayanam. The *Ramayana* unfolds the story of Rama. It is also the story of Divinity. Further, the *Ramayana* is the epic that unfolds the story of Sita; and the story of Sita is also the story of the individual self. The third aspect of the *Ramayana* is the annihilation of Ravana. The destruction of Ravana signifies the destruction of ignorance. Ignorance is extinguished when we realise perfectly the relationship between the individual self and the Absolute Self.

There are three syllables *ra*, *aa*, and *ma* in the word Rama. *Ra* signifies the principle of fire; *aa* signifies the principle of the Sun; *ma* signifies the principle of the Moon. The primal sound *Aa*, which is the Sun principle, dispels the darkness of ignorance. *Ma*, which signifies the Moon principle, cools the inner heart. *Ra*, which signifies the fire principle, destroys illusion. Hence, the name of Rama contains the *Vedic* message:

Asathoma Sad Gamaya

(Lead us from falsehood to truth).

Tamasoma Jyothir Gamaya

(Lead us from darkness to light).

Mrithyorma Amrutham Gamaya

(Lead us from death to immortality).

Vasishta's Joy

When the four children were born, Emperor Dasaratha performed all the rituals connected with the birth of the children. On the second day, Dasaratha asked Sage Vasishta, to bestow his blessings on the four children. At first, Sage Vasishta remained speechless and could not utter the words of blessing. Recovering, Vasishta said, "How can I utter them when I am spellbound? The mission for which I came to the royal house is fulfilled today." He added: "I came here as a priest so that I may have the good fortune of associating myself with the Lord, who has chosen to be born in your lineage. I did not come to you tempted by your wealth and stature. The One who has taken birth in your lineage is verily God Himself. But swayed by illusion, you harbour the notion that He is a human child." Vasishta returned home shedding profuse tears of Bliss, for he realised that his life had attained fulfilment that day.

The Tutelage

Prior to this, a significant thing happened as soon as Rama was born. The servant maid of Kausalya rushed to Dasaratha to inform him of the good news of the birth of the child. Overjoyed by the good news, Dasaratha wished to present the servant maid with a

necklace of precious stones. The servant maid rejected the offer and instead pleaded: “Master, grant me the boon of fondling, caressing and cradling your child.” Such noble thoughts arise in people due to the meritorious lives led by them in the past.

Emperor Dasaratha brought up his children with great love and affection and performed the thread ceremony when they were five years old. The Emperor prayed to Sage Vasishta to initiate the children into the discipline of learning. The children mastered the four *Vedas* before their tenth year. Indeed, before the age of ten, they became masters of all types of knowledge—moral, secular, and spiritual. These four children strove to secure the welfare and well being of all people.

The foremost knowledge obtained was that of the Spirit, for spiritual learning is supreme learning. All secular disciplines are like streams, whereas spiritual knowledge is like a mighty ocean. These four children also cultivated noble virtues and supreme qualities. The children cultivated qualities that were not tainted by selfishness. They mastered military arts like archery, swordsmanship, and equestrian skills. The four brothers were past masters in horse riding and elephant riding. They rode so fast that people could hardly see them. It was Kaikeyi who initiated Rama into archery, since she was an expert archer herself. She taught Him military skills with great love and rare affection.

When the children attained the age of fourteen, Dasaratha decided to get them married. It was the tradition in those days to perform the marriage early so that the boys did not go astray. For this purpose, the Emperor consulted elders and men of eminence, like Sage Vasishta.

At this stage, Sage Vishwamitra arrived on the scene. Dasaratha received him with great reverence and courtesy. Sage Vishwamitra first blessed the Emperor and made enquiries about the welfare of the Emperor and his subjects. When Dasaratha asked him the reason for his visit, Vishwamitra said that he would explain the cause only if the King promised to grant him his wish. When Dasaratha promised that he would honour the words of the Sage, Vishwamitra said that the King should send his son Rama for the protection of his *yajna* (sacrifice). Hearing the words of the Sage, Dasaratha pleaded, “Oh Sage! My son Rama is only fourteen years old. He is tender and has not known any hardship. So, it is not possible for me to send my son along with you for the protection of the *yagna*.”

Vishwamitra became furious and said, “It is extreme folly to go back on your word, for no one in the noble lineage of Ikshvaku has, until now, ever broken his word. The scions of the Ikshvaku lineage have always been truthful, pure, and sacred. You are tainting their glory by breaking the promise given to me. No merit accrues to those who break their promise, even if they perform many a noble deed and *yaga*. Death is

preferable to the sin of uttering falsehood. It is better that one dies rather than break one's promise."

Dasaratha became frightened on hearing the words of Sage Vishwamitra. At that instant, Vasishta arrived. Assessing what had happened, the Sage said to Dasaratha, "Oh King, it is not proper on the part of the scions of the Ikshvaku lineage to go back on their word. You need not fear about the safety of Rama. He is the auspicious One and the incarnation of Narayana. You should send Rama along with Vishwamitra for the protection of the *yajna*." Dasaratha agreed to send Rama along with Vishwamitra. Lakshmana wanted to follow Rama since he was the very reflection of Rama. He was Rama's shadow. Similarly, Satrughna would follow Bharatha, since he was the very reflection of Bharatha. The following episode illustrates how Lakshmana and Satrughna were attached to Rama and Bharatha.

Sumithra's two children, Lakshmana and Satrughna, arrived in the world crying as soon as they were born. They would not stop crying at all, while Rama and Bharatha were playing about with blissful smiles, in their cradles. The children of Sumatra puzzled everybody by their incessant crying. Sumatra tried, by resorting to various stratagems like toys and colourful objects to make them stop crying but it was of no avail. Emperor Dasaratha consulted several physicians to cure the strange malady of Sumithra's children; but nothing worked. Mother Sumatra then called Sage Vasishta as the last resort to her problem. The eminent Sage meditated for some time and said, "Oh

Mother, you need not administer any medicine to alleviate your children's suffering. All you have to do is to keep Lakshmana by the side of Rama, and Satrughna in the cradle of Bharatha. Rama and Lakshmana are of one *amsha*, and so are Bharatha and Satrughna."

Sumatra did accordingly and found that Lakshmana and Satrughna stopped crying immediately. The two children who had refused to drink milk until then, started taking food and playing in the cradle. Surprised at this sudden change of their behaviour, Sumatra prayed to the Sage to explain the cause of this behaviour. The Sage explained thus, "Oh noble mother, a branch is a part of the tree. Humans are part of Divinity and cannot live without Him. Since Lakshmana was born of the same aspect as Rama, he did not rest until he was united with Rama. The same holds good for Satrughna. He would not bear the separation from Bharatha. The Individual cannot live apart from the Absolute Self, which is its source. A fish cannot exist away from water, even if it is placed in a golden bowl studded with precious stones. The fish can be at rest only in water and not in a golden bowl, for water is its life source. Similarly, the individual self is restless until it reaches the Absolute Self, which is its source."

Though many people have power and wealth at their command they enjoy no peace of mind, for they live apart from their source, which is God. The world may give temporary joy; but to enjoy eternal peace and bliss, we must go back to the source. This episode of Lakshmana and Satrughna crying until they were

united with Rama and Bharatha respectively, illustrates the supreme truth that the individual being too can find happiness only in the union with the Eternal. It is the first great lesson that the *Ramayana* teaches us.

Vishwamitra comforted Dasaratha saying that, because Rama was the incarnation of Narayana, nothing would happen to Him. He further assured him that he should not grieve over the departure, since Rama was Divinity Himself. He thus tried to dispel the spell of illusion that surrounded Dasaratha. Though he tried to free Dasaratha from the spell of illusion, later he himself came under the spell while going with Rama through the forest.

It was evening when the Sage and the two brothers reached the banks of the river Sarayu. He then said, “Oh Rama and Lakshmana, you are young and have never set eyes on the terrible forms of demons until now. I will teach you the *mantras*, *Bala* and *Athibala* to protect yourselves from the Demons.” After teaching the *mantras* to the children, he regretted his audacity to teach *mantras* to the very embodiments of Divinity!

The mission starts

On the second day, Vishwamitra, accompanied by Rama and Lakshmana, proceeded to Siddhashrama, which had earlier been sanctified by Lord Vamana, who was none other than Narayana born in the lineage of Kashyapa. After reaching the *ashrama*, Vishwamitra said to Rama, “Oh Rama! This Siddhashrama is harassed by the demoness Thataki,

who possesses the strength of a hundred elephants. You will have to kill her.” To this Rama replied, “Guruji, I don’t wish to kill a female, since the scriptures forbid it.” Vishwamitra replied, “Females should be killed if they commit atrocities. It is not sinful to kill a female who is a curse to the world.” Rama then quoted the scriptures as saying, “It is not righteous on the part of anyone to kill the one who is frightened, one who is asleep, one who is intoxicated, one who has sought protection, and one who is a female.” Vishwamitra answered this by saying, “Though the scriptures forbid the slaying of a woman, it is not sinful to kill a woman who has perpetrated crimes on mankind.” Still unconvinced, Rama asked, “Was there anyone in the past who has killed women?” Vishwamitra then replied, “Indra himself killed Mandhara, the daughter of Virochana for she had inflicted great suffering on mankind. Indra justified his act by asserting that Mandhara deserved to die. Vishnu killed the wife of sage Bharadwaja, since she indulged in violence.” Hearing these accounts, Rama decided to slay Thataki. Rama realised that the noble and righteous women should not be touched but evil demons who committed atrocities must be killed. While they were deliberating thus, they heard deafening sounds emanating from Thataki. She rained stones on them. By discharging his arrows, Lakshmana stopped the volley of stones. She then began to rain blood and fire. Rama encountered her bravely and repulsed her attack. Thereupon, Thataki assumed an ugly form and made deafening and frightening sounds. Rama employed the technique of *shabdhabhedhi* by which the discharged arrows reach the very source of sound and attack it. The demoness

was thrown on the ground immediately. After some time Maricha and Subahu, the sons of Thataki launched an attack. Like Thataki, they also rained fire, blood and stones on Siddhashrama. Rama then used *Manasa Astra*, which hurled Maricha to a distance of a hundred miles. Rama then released the *Agneyastra* on Subahu, who collapsed on the ground then and there. Rama followed this up by launching the *Vayu astra* on the followers of Subahu, who melted into thin air instantaneously. Eventually Siddhashrama regained its original serenity and peace, and the inmates of the hermitage—sages, students, women, and children—were filled with unspeakable joy. The sages gathered in front of Rama and extolled Him, “Oh Rama! You are verily the incarnation of Lord Narayana. You are the Omniscient, the Omnipotent, and the all-pervasive One. In Your youth itself, You have achieved what no one could achieve before.”

Vishwamitra then started the performance of the *yajna*, which lasted over five days. In accordance with the promise they had given to Vishwamitra, Rama and Lakshmana guarded the *Yajna* continuously, moving around the sacrificial altar, forsaking food and sleep. Upon the conclusion of the *yajna*, Vishwamitra asked Rama and Lakshmana to relax, for they had had no rest during the previous five days.

At this stage news arrived from Janaka, the King of Mithila, that a meeting was being arranged to which the bravest heroes of Bharath were being invited. It was to see if anyone could break the bow of Shiva. The victor could win the hand of Janaka’s

daughter, Sita. Vishwamitra told Rama and Lakshmana that they should go to Mithila to break the bow of Shiva. At first Rama was not keen to go to Mithila since He had not obtained the permission of His father. Vishwamitra convinced them thus, "Rama, your father Dasaratha ordered You to obey my command and asked You to conduct Yourself in consonance with my wishes. Since I ask You to go to Mithila, along with me, You have to obey my word." Rama had no option but to obey the command of Vishwamitra.

It was during the journey to Mithila that Sage Vishwamitra gave to Rama powerful arrows like *Gandaka*, *Dharmaja*, *Dharmaka*, *Vishnukula*, *Bhramaku*, etc., for he was a master of archery. The hermits and others who lived in the ashram chose to accompany Vishwamitra as far as Mithila, for they knew that Vishwamitra would never return to Siddhashrama. The animals that lived around shed profuse tears when Vishwamitra chose to go to Mithila. Vishwamitra had great compassion for animals and treated them with unbounded love and affection. The birds and beasts also followed Rama and Lakshmana, since they were fascinated by these two princes of Ayodhya.

During the journey, Vishwamitra narrated to them the past history of the Ashramas that they came across on the way. At last, they reached the hermitage of Gautama where Gautama's wife, Ahalya, lay in one place like a stone, having been earlier cursed by her husband. Rama, the incarnation of Lord Narayana, knew everything, but pretended as though He did not know anything. As He moved toward Ahalya, the vi-

brations that emanated from His feet brought a new surge of life into her petrified form. She immediately clung to the feet of Rama, and prayed to Him to forgive her and shower grace on her. At that very instant, Sage Gautama arrived on the scene and accepted the purified Ahalya. Gautama knew that Lord Rama would come and sanctify his ashram. After redeeming Ahalya, Rama and Lakshmana, accompanied by Vishwamitra, Gautama, and a host of other sages, proceeded towards Mithila.

The arrival of Rama and Lakshmana, who moved like lion cubs in the streets of Mithila, created a sensation. People admired them and began talking about these two handsome princes. Emperor Janaka received them with due courtesy and extended to them warm hospitality. Janaka had made all arrangements for them in a spacious mansion. Rama pretended as though He was tired and lay down. Keeping one leg on the other, He started massaging His own feet. Sage Narada arrived there to see Lord Narayana in human form. Observing the Lord massaging His feet, Narada said, "Lord are You tired because You have walked a long distance?" To this Rama replied, "Narada, do I ever get tired? Never. This body of Mine has come for your sake and not for Mine. With this human body of Mine, I have to bring succour to the ailments of man."

The power of maya

God descends to the earth in human form for the sustenance of *dharma*. Of all the living beings that exist in the world, it is man alone who has strayed from the path of *dharma*. When Divinity dons the garb of a

human body, people are thickly blanketed by illusion. They become blind to the Divinity of God. Illusion covers the eyes of men like a thick curtain and prevents them from seeing the Reality. Even Yashoda and Vishwamitra were no exception to this, though they came into intimate contact with Divinity.

Once Balarama complained to mother Yashoda that his brother Krishna was eating mud. Challenged by Yashoda to tell the truth, little Krishna made a startling statement, "Oh mother dear! Am I an infant, or a foolish one, or a mad one, to eat mud?" These very words speak eloquently about the Divinity of Krishna, but poor Yashoda failed to fathom the depth of the revelation contained in Krishna's words. On the other hand, she demanded that Krishna should open His mouth, so that she could check for herself whether Krishna had eaten mud. Little Krishna opened His mouth wide. To her utter shock and amazement, Yashoda saw heavenly spheres rolling in the mouth of Krishna. She exclaimed:

*Is this a dream or magic spell cast by a
magician?*

Is all this true or false?

Am I awake?

Am I Yashoda?

At that instant, she realised that Krishna was verily God Himself. However, this realisation did not last long. As soon as Krishna closed His mouth and stood in front of her with an innocent look, she hugged Him to herself, and treated him as an ordinary child. It

was the same with great Sages like Narada and Vishwamitra as well.

Though Sage Vishwamitra had firmly declared to Dasaratha that his son Rama was the very Embodiment of Divinity, he chose to teach the *mantras Bala* and *Athibala* as though Rama was an ordinary prince. Even an eminent Sage like Vishwamitra could not escape the magic spell cast by *maya* (illusion).

Shiva's Bow is broken

Thousands of strong men wheeled the great bow of Shiva into the open court. Many a Prince from far-off parts of Bharath had assembled there, to win the hand of Sita. They were more interested in winning the hand of Sita than in facing the trial of strength. But Rama and Lakshmana came there in simple obedience to the command of Vishwamitra and without any expectation. One after another, the Princes tried to lift the bow of Shiva; but they returned to their seats humiliated. Even Ravana came there to lift the bow and break it, but he fell under the bow, much to his humiliation. The one who is swayed by ego is sure to suffer in life. When people laughed loudly at his plight, Ravana felt deeply wounded, as though he had lost all his ten heads.

At that instant, Rama walked quietly towards the bow, much to the chagrin and amazement of the princes gathered. Commotion arose in the court when Rama, a tender boy of fourteen, was walking towards the bow of Shiva, for it was an audacious act on the part of a young boy to dare to lift the matchless bow of Shiva. But the instant Rama reached the bow

and raised it with His left hand, there was thunderous applause. When Rama bent the bow to tie the string, the bow snapped with a deafening sound. The people clapped loud and long, rejoicing that a worthy one had at last arrived to win the hand of Sita. Vishwamitra asked Rama whether he was ready to marry Sita. Rama politely observed that He would not think of marriage without obtaining consent of His parents. Rama went so far as to say that He would not even look at Sita without obtaining the permission of His parents. Thereupon, Emperor Janaka sent speedy messengers on chariots to bring Dasaratha and his entourage to Mithila. The men and women were filled with joy and jubilation at the prospect of the marriage between Rama and Sita. They sang many a song expressing their desire to see the marriage.

In the meantime, Dasaratha accompanied by his Queens, Ministers and a host of others, arrived at Mithila. Emperor Janaka received them with great courtesy and extended full hospitality. All preparations were ready for the grand event, and Rama, adorned with most beautiful ornaments, was brought to the marriage pandal.

It is an Indian custom that the bride and the bridegroom should pour on each others' head a handful of sacred grain. Since Rama and Sita were of royal lineage, arrangements were made for Rama and Sita to pour precious pearls on each others' head. The white pearls shone with orange splendour when they were in the hands of Sita, for Sita had painted her hands in red. When these pearls were placed on the white tur-

ban of Rama, they shone white. When these pearls fell on the blue complexioned body of Rama, they shone like sapphires.

The marriage of Rama and Sita was verily the marriage of *Prakruthi* and *Paramatma*. Since Sita was born of the Earth, she was endowed with the magnetic power of the Earth. That is why she could easily lift the bow which was also a part of *Prakruthi*. With the aid of magnetic power, the bow slowly raised itself, as Sita once tried to lift it. The same principle operated when Rama tried to lift the bow of Shiva. Since Rama was a magnet Himself, it was not that difficult for Him to raise the bow. It was all a part of Divine drama enacted for the benefit of mankind. The marriage of Rama and Sita was performed on a most magnificent scale, and people vied with each other to sing the glory and grandeur of the Divine wedding.

