

SANDALS ENTHRONED

On the sixth day of their stay, Bharatha called together, after the morning rites, bath and devotional ceremonies such as the worship of the Dawn, 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: “Oh Mark of Auspiciousness on the brow of the Royal Ikshvaku line! You have fulfilled my desires in every way. On my account you have determined to suffer miseries of all kinds. You are undergoing all types of troubles for my sake. Lord! I am awaiting your commands. For fourteen years, I shall 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, the people residing in the vast Empire, the Brahmins, the Pundits—all are spiritually earnest. They 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 care not 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 shrivelled 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. Do not hesitate to reprimand me for this fault.”

Hearing this, the gathering hailed his statements and expressed their appreciation. As the *Hamsa*, Celestial Swan, is able to separate the milk from the water which is mixed with it and drink just the milk, so, they said, Bharatha had separated the Truth from untruth and given expression to the Truth alone.

Rama, compassionate towards the distressed, listened to those words poured from the pure heart of his brother. Rama replied thus in conformity with the place, the time and the circumstance: “Brother! For you who resides 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 Vashishta and the 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 whoever reveres the commands of the preceptor, the father and the mother and walks on the right path, is the noble example for all.

“Be ever aware of this truth. Throw away the shroud of grief. Take up the burden of Empire; rule over it for fourteen 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 too were overcome by the imminence of the moment of parting. Suddenly, Rama in his infinite Graciousness loosened his sandals and gave them to Bharatha. And 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. They are the protecting doors of the fort which 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.”

Bharatha extolled the “sandals” thuswise and danced around them in sheer joy and thankfulness. All present fell at the feet of Rama and acknowledged the sublimity of Rama’s Grace.

Bharatha prostrated before Rama and prayed that he might grant him permission to leave. Rama appreciated the spirit of contentment with which he welcomed the “sandals.” He drew Bharatha near and embraced him fast and firm with great affection and delight. Satrughna also fell at Rama’s feet. Rama embraced him with great affection and he communicated to him also 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.”

Then, 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 too called them near and told them that the “sandals” of Rama are the springs of all varieties of auspiciousness and so, they, who have won that gift, were indeed more fortunate than any. He advised them to act worthy of the gift and earn the Grace of Rama forever. “This is your duty now,” he reminded them.

Later the brothers proceeded to where Sita was and fell at her feet. On seeing her, they could not contain their grief. They burst into sobs. She consoled them softly and sweetly in various ways. “Is there aught 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 the return of Rama. Carry on the administration with patience and devotion. Don’t deviate 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 the brothers, Bharatha and Satrughna, went straight to Emperor Janaka and fell at his feet in exemplary reverence and said, “Lord! You have such compassion on us that you came to Ayodhya when you heard about the death of our father and of the exile of Rama 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 over 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 and 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 himself and he 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 proceeding to Mithila straight from here.” The ministers, feudatory rulers, Brahmins, sages, ascetics, and others who had come with the brothers, went one after another towards Rama, Lakshmana and Sita, and falling at their feet, they took leave of them and turned their faces homeward, their hearts heavy with a sense of gloom. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana went to where the mothers were 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 be spending happily and peacefully the period of fourteen years as a quick span of fourteen seconds, and returning joyfully to Ayodhya. These words restored the spirits of the queens.

They fell at the feet of Kaikeyi and told her that she had not an iota of responsibility for the exile of Rama into the forest 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: the death of his father and exile of his brother. He flew into a passion, for his blood boiled at the person he imagined was responsible for these events. He did not even care for the fact that you were his mother!” Rama, Sita and Lakshmana prayed that she should not blame Bharatha for that incident. They begged her to pardon Bharatha for the indiscretion.

While Rama was speaking thus, Kaikeyi 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 to spend his years in this terrifying jungle? Oh, what a devilish deed did I perpetrate? But did I do it on my own? Or, was it Rama that willed the turn of events through my instrumentality? Whatever the truth, I cannot escape. I have committed the gravest sin.”

Kaikeyi was overcome with sorrow over the irrevocable past. She held both hands of Sita 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 long. Everyone who had come from Ayodhya took leave of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana as and when they could get the chance. Afterwards, they ascended their chariots in due order.

Sita, Rama and Lakshmana approached each chariot before it left and consoled and comforted each occupant and persuaded them to leave. Sita, Rama and Lakshmana fell at the feet of the Preceptor 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 their duty demanded. Then they asked permission to stay back.

Vashishta was of course a Brahmajnani and a Maharshi, 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. Vashishta and his consort could not leave the presence of Rama, for they were so attached to the virtues he embodied. The picture of those three standing by the side of the jungle track with folded palms, bidding adieu to each passing chariot and the people inside, melted the most adamant heart. Vashishta and his consort, Arundhati, were very much moved at the sight of their large-hearted sympathy.

Then, Rama saw the chieftain of the Nishadas standing before him, amidst his followers. He went forward to him and extending his arms, he embraced him, more warmly than when he clasped to his bosom his own brother. He consoled Guha, with affectionate appeals to calm himself and persuaded him to accept the separation wisely. Guha could not do anything to change the turn of events; so he fell at the feet of Rama, and rose with a heavy heart, and walked off, with his eyes fixed on Rama for as long as he could catch sight of 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, at the head of his party, for Mithila. Rama and Lakshmana prostrated before their father-in-law and mother-in-law. Sita fell at the feet of her parents. The parents embraced her and stroked her head in fond tenderness. They said, “Daughter! Your courageous determination and your devotion towards 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 would not 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 now and then confront you. 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 both Ayodhya and Mithila went beyond the range of their eyes. Then, they returned to their thatched cottage, and there, while Rama was describing 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 the death of Dasaratha and tears rolled down their cheeks as they recalled the Emperor’s affection towards them. Seeing their plight, Rama’s face was lit up with a smile. He expatiated on the mystery of life

and the key to its unravelling. Thus, they spent that eventful day, in the silence of that sylvan retreat.

Meanwhile, the stream of people emerging from the edge of the forest towards the populated areas near Ayodhya—the ascetics, the sages, the Brahmins, the brothers Bharatha and Satrughna, the queens Kausalya, Kaikeyi and Sumitra, the 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 and his love, compassion and affection. They did not halt anywhere for food or even for 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 come away from 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. Vashishta, the Royal Preceptor noticed this, and he 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 in order to snatch a few hours of rest. Bharatha had resolved to travel straight to Ayodhya and not delay on the way. He was anxious to present before the citizens pining in Ayodhya the holy sandals of Rama, and bring them some little comfort and courage. So the party forded the Gomathi and the 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 could not join the vast assembly that marched to the place where Rama had fixed his camp, were watching for the signs of their happy return, after accomplishing their mission, namely, 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 learnt that Rama did not return to the Capital from the

forest, but had sent instead, the Sandals he wore, as his representative.

Meanwhile, Bharatha called together the Royal Preceptor and the Ministers of the Court and assigned to them the various duties of administration. He entrusted them with the authority to perform their duties. He then called Satrugna near and allotted to him the task of fostering and consoling the queen mothers. He arranged a gathering of Brahmins and Pundits, and 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 that they should place their demands before him without hesitation.

He also called for a gathering of the citizens of Ayodhya and the leaders of the people from all parts of the Empire and he described before them all that had happened in the Capital and at the place where Rama was living in exile. He gave them a summary of the conversations he had with Rama, and appealed to them to adore and revere the Sandals of Rama for the period of fourteen years that Rama would be away, as the authentic Presence of Rama himself. "They will guard us all, they are our refuge and resource," he said. "In the full confidence that the sandals are ruling over us, let us," he said, "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, when the Sacred Sandals could be installed on the throne, for, he had the joy of all classes of the population in view, the Royal Preceptor, the Pundits, the ascetics, the priests, the 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 the mothers, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi and then proceeded to the throne with the Sandals borne on his head. Praying for the blessings of Vashishta and permission from him 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 towards the village of Nandigrama, where he had a thatched hut made ready for his residence. He wore his hair braided into 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 specially dug into the earth. His food and dress were the same as those of the ascetics of the forest. His acts, thoughts and words too were 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 the face of anyone until Rama returned from exile. His mind was fixed on Rama and on the day of his return from the forest into which He had gone. 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.