

## Chapter 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, Vasishta completed the worship ceremony. The food (*payasam*) presented by the divine person was placed in three golden cups. Then, Vasishta 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 Vasishta and Dasaratha. Then, Vasishta 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, *Aaslesha* star, the eleventh astrological *yoga* of prosperity (*vriddhi-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 Vasishtha 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.

Vasishtha 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, Vasishtha 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, Vasishtha 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 Satrughna (the slayer of enemies).

Later, he gazed on the child that was the source of Kaika's joy. This child, Vasishtha 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 prod-



ucts 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 His 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 Satrugna, 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 col-

lyrium 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 Satrugna 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.