

## Chapter 7. Winning Sita

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

He read that Emperor Janaka of Mithila had resolved to perform a celebrated rite (*yajna*), expressive of the highest glory of righteousness, and that he was praying to Viswamitra to give him joy by his gracious presence with his disciples. When they heard this, all exclaimed, "May it attain fulfilment!" Viswamitra said, "Sons! Now that we can travel through the forests free from fear of demonic gangs, I have decided to start traveling tomorrow to Mithila with all the ashram residents"

When he heard this, Rama said, "Master! It is really a source of delight. Since you don't need us for anything more, we'll return to Ayodhya, if you permit us to do so. Please allow us to leave."

Viswamitra said, "I gave word to Dasaratha for a few more things; I have to keep these word too! I promised him that I myself would bring you back, so you can't return without me! A unique rite is taking place in Mithila. There isn't enough time for me to take you to Ayodhya and then reach Mithila on the day the rite begins. If you two accompany me to Mithila, you can witness the rite and then proceed to Ayodhya with me from there."

Hearing these words, which had no trace of hesitation or doubt, Rama too answered decisively, without weighing pros and cons, "Master! Since my chief vow is obedience to my father's orders, I have to submit a prayer before you."

Viswamitra asked, "Tell me, what is the prayer?"

Rama replied, "My father directed me to guard Viswamitra's rite (*yajna*) from defilement and sacrilege and to make the great sage happy. He asked us to return victorious; he didn't direct us to attend other rites. Shouldn't I receive special permission from my father before moving on to Mithila?"

Viswamitra replied, "Rama! Dasaratha didn't stop with that only! No! He said, 'Go and obey all that the sage commands you to do; do not transgress his command by even the width of a grain.' He told me, 'Master, you must yourself assume full responsibility for my children; you must yourself bring them back to me.' You listened to what he said when we left Ayodhya. So, follow my word now; come with me to Mithila, and from there we will go to Ayodhya, I and you and all my disciples."

Rama realised the truth inherent in this plan. Nodding in agreement, he said, "We will do as you desire."

Instructions went forth for everyone to get ready before daybreak for the journey to Mithila. Viswamitra rose early and led the boys to the river for ablutions. He was thrilled at the chance of telling them of the hardships he encountered from the demons whenever he attempted to celebrate sacrificial rites (*yajnas*) in the past; he related to them how all his counter measures failed to achieve their object; he expressed his gratitude for the destruction of the demons, which had ensured safety for the hermitage as well as the surrounding regions. He described how the people were happily relieved of fear and had unalloyed peace and joy.

### The story of Siva's bow

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

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

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

"The bow is so loaded with divinity that no one can raise it and string it, be he god, demon, angel, or spirit. Many princes who attempted to string it have met with disgraceful disappointment. Rama! You are worthy heroes; you can examine it. During this coming rite, the bow will most probably be on show, so this is certainly a good chance."

Viswamitra went on describing the wonderful potency of the bow. Lakshmana turned his eyes as if searching for the direction in which Mithila was. Meanwhile, Rama said with delight, "Certainly! We must see it. We'll come with you tomorrow." Viswamitra was elated.

### **Viswamitra vacates his ashram**

Darkness fell, and everyone rose and moved toward *Siddhasram*. Viswamitra called the residents of the ashram together and ordered them to be ready to leave for Mithila at dawn. Some of them asked, "Master! How can the routine of the ashram be observed without interruption if there is none left here?"

The sage replied, "If each one carries on his duties wherever he is, that itself is the proper observance of the ashram routine. There is no special routine for the ashram apart from the ashramites. Those who seek support make up the ashram; without the dependents there can be no ashram. When the dependents are with me, why worry about the ashram and the routine? The disciples are those to be cared for, those that have to observe the disciplines. Moreover, since the place has now become free from the fear of demons, the ashram cannot come to harm. The Creator of all is our refuge, and when we depend on Him He will foster all." Viswamitra spoke in this rather unfamiliar strain and continued, "Take with you the things needed for your daily rites, as well as all the tools and vessels belonging to the ashram. There is no need to leave anything here."

Some noviciates asked, "Master! When will we return? If you tell us, we can select as many articles as will suffice for that period of absence; why burden ourselves with more than what is essential?"

Viswamitra replied, "Time is no servant of the body; the body is the servant of time. Therefore, one can ever say when! Will I come here again? I doubt it!" When they heard this the hearts of all the residents suffered a shock. The clothes, vessels and tools they held in their hands slipped and fell on the ground. They could not find words to reply. They could not protest, nor could they muster courage to question the master. So, they bundled up kusha grass, sacred sticks for the sacrificial fire, ceremonial ladles, and vessels, as much as they could carry. The meaning of Viswamitra's words was a mystery, and each interpreted them in his own way.

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

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

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

### **Sage Viswamitra’s story**

The day’s journey brought them to the bank of the Sona river; they had perforce to spend the night there. They took their bath in the river and finished the evening ablutions. Then they gathered around the master eager to listen to his tales. Rama asked: “Revered Sir, this region appears rich and prosperous; what is its name and history?”

Viswamitra replied, “Rama! Brahma had a son, Kusa, through sheer will. Kusa was a great ascetic, steadfast and strict in vows, heroic in spiritual adventure, learned in the science of morals. He wedded the daughter of the noble ruler of Vidarbha. The two lived in awareness and practice of the four ends of human life: righteousness, prosperity, affection, and liberation. They had four sons —Kusamba, Kusanabha, Asurtharajasa, and Vasu— each one equal to the father in virtue and highly evolved in righteousness, integrity, and other excellences of the warrior caste.

“Kusa divided the world into four parts and assigned one part to each of them, directing them thus, ‘Sons! Rule over the part assigned to you and prosper!’ They entered upon their new duties and carried out their father’s command. Each started constructing a capital city for the kingdom: Kusamba built Kausambi, Kusanabha built Mahodaya, Asurtharajasa built Dharmaranya, and Vasu built Girivraja.

“Rama! This area is part of Vasu’s kingdom. There are five hills around us, so this city is called Girivraja (collection of hills). This auspicious Sona river is also known as Sumagadhi, so that this region is named Magadha. The Magadhi river flows from east to west here, like a jasmine garland placed among the mountain valleys. The majesty of Vasu has blessed the land on both banks of this river to be ever green and plentiful.

“The second son, Kusanabha, was well established in *dharma*; he was a pillar of righteousness. He had a

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

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

“Just then, his father, Kusa, happened to visit, and he asked why Kusanabha looked sad and full of concern. The son laid bare before him his mind and its anxieties. Kusa chided him for becoming so worried for this reason; he blessed him that he would get a son soon. And, as he blessed, so it happened. The son, named Gaadhi, grew up a very devoted virtuous prince. Gaadhi had several children, including Sathyavathi and Viswamitra. Since Viswamitra was born in the lineage of Kusa, he was known as Kausika.

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

“Rama! Through your immeasurable heroism, the rite I had resolved upon has come to its successful conclusion. It has borne fruit; my rigorous vows have been fulfilled.”

At this, the monks who had gathered around the sage exclaimed, “O, how wonderful! Really, we are fortunate that we could listen to the story of the hoary ancestors of our master! O, what a great source of joy the story is! The Kusa line is indeed consecrated. Those born in it are equal to Brahma Himself in sanctity. How lucky we are to have this singular chance to serve the one visible embodiment of all that the line represents, the sage Viswamitra; this chance must be the fruit of merit accumulated through many past lives.”

Viswamitra interrupted, saying, “I wouldn't have dwelt on all this, but Rama, your question prompted me to reply; I don't give details regarding this body and its antecedents. It is already night, so let us rest. Delay in going to sleep might slacken the speed of our journey tomorrow. Rama! See! The moon is peeping through the branches of yonder tree to catch a glimpse of you! It sends down cool rays to refresh the earth that has suffered the hot rays of the sun for so long.” That night, everyone ruminated over the tales of the master's forefathers.

### **The story of the Ganga**

They awoke from sleep pretty early and finished their morning ablutions. They performed the daily rituals, too, and got ready in time to continue the journey. They came near Viswamitra and fell at his feet. Then, they stood one behind the other on one side, awaiting orders. Rama said, “Master! The river Sona is not deep at this place. The water is clear, we can wade across. No boat is needed!”

Viswamitra replied, “Son! You are strange to this place, so you don't know the exact place to cross. I'll go

first; you follow me.” The sage walked into the river bed and moved on. Everyone had his bundle slung on his shoulder. The pace was slow, and it was noon when they reached the river Jahnavi (the Ganga, or Ganges).

The first intimation they had about the river was sweet “*kuhoo*” notes of swans, parrots, and other birds on the bank. Every heart was filled with delight at the entrancing beauty of the scene. They bathed in the pure, pellucid stream and, aware of the hallowed story of the river, offered oblations to departed ancestors and gods. They lit the sacred fire on the bank and performed ritual sacrifices enjoined by the scriptures (*sastras*). Then, they collected edible fruits from the trees and, after assuaging their hunger, drank the nectarine water of the Ganga to slake their thirst.

Rama and Lakshmana walked toward the tree under whose shade Viswamitra was reclining and sat beside him, reverentially. Rama asked him, “Master! Why does the Ganga flow as three streams in the three worlds? How does the Ganga reach the ocean, which is the Lord of every stream and river throughout the world! Please tell me and make me happy!”

Viswamitra said, “Son! The Himalayan range is the basis of all this world: it is the home for all animals and all herbs. It has two daughters, Ganga and Uma; Ganga is the elder of the two. Both are adored by the entire world. The gods asked that Ganga be given to them so that they might have prosperity. So, Himavaan (the deity of the Himalayas) gifted Ganga to the gods in order to secure their blessings and benefit the three worlds.

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

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

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

That evening, he was seated on the sands of the bed of the Ganga, after the ablutions and rites. Rama reminded him that they would be happy to know about the origin of that holy stream. Viswamitra responded, “Ramachandra! Your ancestors are responsible for Ganga coming down on earth. As a result of their good deeds, the peoples of the earth are sanctifying themselves, bathing in the sacred waters and performing morning and evening ceremonial rites and ablutions therein.

“The Ganga is the supreme stream of divine purity. The nectarine waters can confer immortality. She dwelled in the matted locks on Siva’s head, and for that reason, she is most auspicious. She grants all that is beneficial.” Hearing Viswamitra extol the river in such superlative terms, Ramachandra said, “How did my ancestors manage to lead down to earth a river with such amazing attributes of power and purity? If you can describe to us the story, we can derive great joy therefrom.”

When Viswamitra heard this request, presented with such humility, he said, “Rama! Listen! In ancient times, Ayodhya was ruled by an emperor named Sagara. He was a righteous ruler and a valiant hero. Fascinated by his



qualities of head and heart, the king of Vidarbha gave him his beloved daughter, Kesini, in marriage. She too was a strict follower of *dharma* and never wavered from the path of truth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Years passed. Aswamanja’s son, Amsumanta, grew up and won renown throughout the world as loveable, virtuous, and valiant. Once, Sagara decided on the performance of the great horse sacrifice (*aswamedha*) and fixed an auspicious moment for starting the rites.”

Rama interrupted with a question. “Master! Was the horse sacrifice performed in Ayodhya, or did he choose some holy river bank for the purpose?”

Viswamitra smiled, and replied, “Rama! I realise how earnest you are about sacrifices and how reverent your attitude toward sages is! I will describe it in detail as you desire. Listen! There is a holy range facing the

Himalayas from a distance, called the Vindhya range. The region in between is sacred for all rites and sacrifices (*vajnas* and *yagas*). The horse sacrifice was done in that region. Experts in the recitation of *Vedic* hymns gathered there, and the mountains echoed and re-echoed to the loud and correct recital of the prescribed ritual formulae. Thousands watched the unique ceremonial with great joy.

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

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

“Sagara was enraged. ‘Of what avail is this numerous progeny if you announce only your incompetence to me? Why stand before me with faces darkened with disgrace? Go, and don’t come to me until you recover the horse.’

“The sons reacted sharply to these angry words; they went back into the world determined to leave no spot unexamined. Mountains, hills, lakes, rivers, caves, towns and villages, forests and deserts —why lengthen the list? They looked closely at every yard, every foot of ground. Finally, they found a hermit, deeply immersed in meditation; the horse was near him, calmly nibbling grass!

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

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

“Sagara was greatly distressed and agitated at the inordinate delay caused by their failure to return. How could he stop the half-finished sacrifice? How could he continue and finish it? Seeing his plight, his grandson Amsumanta fell at his feet and offered to search for the horse and his uncles and bring news about them. Sagara blessed him and sent him on that errand.

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

“A reverend old man came across his path and told him, ‘Don’t allow grief to overpower you, dear son! Your

uncles were reduced to ashes by sage Kapila with the welfare of the world also in view! Do not be content to offer the ritual obligations in mundane waters. Get the holy water of the celestial Ganga. Bring the Ganga down to earth and let the sacred waters flow over the ashes. Then, the souls of the ancestors will be saved. But first take the horse with you and perform the sacrifice unto its glorious conclusion. Thereafter, you can think of ways and means to bring the heavenly Ganga to the Earth.’

“Amsumanta fell at the hermit’s feet and hurried to his grandfather, where the rite was being held up for want of the consecrated animal.”

“Sagara was awaiting its arrival with sleepless anxiety, both night and day. When the horse was brought, he and the *Vedic* scholars (*rithwiks*) who officiated as priests were filled with delight. Amsumanta felt that it would not be proper to announce, during the auspicious festival, that his uncles had an untimely death through the sage Kapila’s curse. So he allowed the valedictory rite to finish. The priests and guests were given their share of votive gifts.

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

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

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

“Bhagiratha, bright with spiritual splendour, vowed to succeed in the task given him by his father. Though he ruled the kingdom very satisfactorily, he was sad that he had no children to maintain the line. This, as well as the supreme task of getting the Ganga, forced him to hand over the reins of government to the ministers and retire into the silence of the famous Gokarna region. He stood there, practising austere penance, like bearing the heat of the sun and taking food only once a month! At last, appreciating his austerity, God appeared before him and said, ‘Son! Bhagiratha! Ask any boon and it shall be granted.’

“Bhagiratha had the vision of the One with the brilliance of a thousand suns. He fell prostrate, overwhelmed with gratitude and devotion. He prayed, ‘Lord! Cause the celestial Ganga to flow on earth, so that my great-grandfathers might be saved from perdition and be restored to heaven. And, favour me with children so that the



Ikshvaku royal line might not be rendered extinct, with me as its last representative. May the dynasty continue and flourish.’ He held fast to the Lord’s feet and submitted his supplication.

“The Lord replied, ‘Son! The first of your wishes is very hard to fulfil. Nevertheless, I shall grant you that one. The boon for the royal line? Yes, you will have a noble son and your dynasty will continue and flourish. Arise!’ Bhagiratha rose, and the Lord continued, ‘Bhagiratha! The Ganga is swollen and swift; when it falls from heaven, the earth will not be able to bear the impact. So, as ruler of the Earth, you have to ponder over the problem and discover how to avoid the dire disaster. When Ganga descends upon the earth, the effect will be calamitous. So the river must be made to fall first on Siva’s head; from there, the waters may be led on to earth with lessened impact. This is the best course, from the point of view of the inhabitants of the earth. Consider this well.’ After saying this, the Lord withdrew.

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

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

“Since Bhagiratha brought the Ganga to earth, the river got the name Bhagirathi! After the ceremonies for the forefathers were over, Bhagiratha returned to Ayodhya. Happy that he could fulfil, through divine grace, the keenest wishes of his father and grandfather, he ruled over the empire for many years, receiving the spontaneous homage of his contented subjects. At last, he too left the body.”

When Viswamitra narrated the story of Rama’s forefathers, Rama and Lakshmana were all attention; they were enraptured with the incidents. But the sage said it was already midnight and they could all go to bed. So, they prostrated before the preceptor and laid themselves on the thick sands of the river. Rama and Lakshmana could not sleep; they reclined on the sands only in obedience to their preceptor’s order, not because they needed rest! They lay picturing to themselves the wonderful story of the descent of Ganga from heaven to earth, till they found that morning had arrived! There they performed the ablutions and morning rituals in the river and prepared for the journey ahead. As soon as some teenage disciples announced that the ferryboat was ready, all moved toward it, took their seats, and crossed the holy river. They reached the northern bank and started on the further stages of their journey, admiring the heartening forest scenery through which they passed.

### **Diti, Aditi, and the city of Visala**

When they had covered some distance, they came upon a vast city full of beautiful buildings. Rama turned to Viswamitra, and asked him, “Master! Look! There’s a vast city in this exquisite forest. To what kingdom does it belong?”

The sage replied, “Rama! It appears to be near, but in fact it will take quite some time for us to reach it!

Perhaps we'll arrive there in the evening. I'll tell you the story of the city's origin and fortunes when we reach it. Meanwhile, let's proceed." Rama heard Viswamitra's words, spoken with a twinkle in the eye and a smile on the lips; he grasped the meaning of his directive and walked on without a word in reply.

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

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

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

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

"Seeing this, Diti's and Aditi's sons became mortally afraid; they felt they would be burned to ashes in that holocaust! They prayed for the Lord's succour. When Lord Vishnu appeared before them, Diti's sons pleaded pathetically, 'Lord! Save us! Put an end to this dreaded disaster.' The Lord changed into Siva and said, 'Dear Ones! I am the eldest of the gods, so I am entitled to receive the first fruit of this churning process.' And He drank off without delay the demonic poison that was causing the panic.

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

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

They tried in many ways to persuade the sons of Diti and Aditi to wed them; they prayed and petitioned; but

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

“At last, the nectar (*amritha*) arose from that ocean of milk. Who should drink the nectar? A huge conflict broke out between the sons of Diti and Aditi. In the terrible fight that ensued, Aditi's sons began destroying Diti's sons. The battle threatened to become a battle of extinction. The earth shook under the thrust and counterthrust of weaponry in that battle. Fear and anxiety spread their dark clouds over the world.

“Suddenly, Vishnu appeared before the contending parties as an entrancingly charming damsel, who captivated the hearts of all and led their minds away from the combat into which they had plunged! She charmed everyone and, during her appearance, the precious holy nectar (*amritha*) disappeared! Diti's sons had all died. Their mother's grief was beyond consolation. Kasyapa failed to bring her to the state of normalcy. His attempts to teach her the evanescence of things failed to convince her. She wailed aloud and lamented most excruciatingly, as if the end of the world had come.

“At last, Diti brought herself round; she approached Kasyapa and, submerging her agony deep into her mind, said, ‘Lord! Is this just? We both had children by you. Now I have been made childless. Is this fair, must I grieve eternally thus? Not even one of my sons is alive. Rather than have many short-lived sons, one long living one is more desirable isn't it?’

When she wept aloud in this manner, Kasyapa consoled her and told her to enter on the discipline of austerities to propitiate the Gods, so that she might have a son who would live long. He advised her to give up her grief, which could never fulfil her desire. Encouraged by him and seeking his blessings, she left immediately and started austerities with the professed aim of securing from the Gods the boon of a son who would be able to defeat the lord of gods, Indra Himself!

“Kasyapa told her, ‘Asceticism is no easy discipline. One has to be pure until the very end; one has to observe the vows and fasts without the least infringement; only then will the gods be pleased and grant the boon.’

“Diti reached the holy region known as Kusaplava and entered upon rigorous asceticism. Knowing her resolve, Indra wanted to test her. He came to her in the guise of her attendant. Diti's prayer was answered; she became pregnant with child through divine grace. Days passed, months rolled by, Indra was beside her, as attendant!

One day, in the hot hours of noon, overcome by sleep, she lay on the bed with her hair loose and her head where the feet were usually placed. This was against the strict rules of ceremonial purity, which she had to observe with tenacity, so Indra got his chance. He noted that her posture was heterodox and contrary to scriptural injunctions. So he punished her by fragmenting the foetus in her womb. The fragments started weeping inside the womb for their limbs and segments, which had broken away; the attendant, Indra, spoke softly to them, ‘Don't weep’! Diti had terrible bouts of bleeding. She lamented her fate and wept most pitifully.

“Indra stood before her with folded palms and pleaded, ‘Mother; pardon me. You acted contrary to the rules of ceremonial purity and broke the vow. Your hair was unbound and loose, and your head was on the bed where the feet are normally placed. When you slept thus, your ascetic practice was defiled; when the enemy who is waiting for a chance to foil your fortune gets such an opportunity, will he keep quiet? I am Indra, come in this form. You prayed for a son who would kill me, didn't you? The foetus in the womb was to destroy me, so I took that

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

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

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

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

### **A short stay in Visala**

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

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

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

After partaking of the reception feast arranged by the King of Visala, Viswamitra described to the gathering of royal kinsmen, priests, and pundits, his own *Siddhasram* and the rite (*yajna*) that he had celebrated, as well as the heroic way in which Rama and Lakshmana stood guard to defend the sacrificial precincts from marauding demons. The listeners were struck with wonder and boundless spiritual bliss (*ananda*) at the skill and courage of the princes. They looked on them with admiration, and they felt that they were *Nara-Narayana* come again. They prostrated before them, overcome by feelings of reverence.

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

### **Rama rescues Ahalya**

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

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

"Ahalya, the sage's wife, was a woman of great virtue and a perfect paragon of beauty. No one was equal to her in personal beauty and charm, so Gautama kept her ever under watch, guarding her with vigilant care. One day, while Gautama was absent, Indra, the chief of the gods, came into the hermitage in the guise of Gautama himself! The virtuous spouse took him to be her lord, and she served him reverentially. But the real Gautama entered and discovered her apparent faithlessness. He recognised Indra, in spite of his disguise, and became terribly enraged. 'Evil-minded fellow!' he shouted, but Indra had suddenly disappeared.

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

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

Gautama melted a little at her importunities as the truth became clear to him. But, since words once spoken could not be withdrawn, he said, 'Ahalya! You know that I vowed never to go against the spoken word. Therefore, you have to lie in bush and briar, sad and starving, until Rama, Dasaratha's son, comes this way. Seeing you, He will shower grace on you, allowing you to touch His feet, and He will speak with you in great compassion. The vision (*darshan*), touch (*sparshan*), and speech (*sambhasan*) of the Lord will cleanse you, and you will shine forth in your real form and charm. I will then rejoin you.'

So saying, Gautama left this place and hastened to the Himalayan region. From that moment, Ahalya lost her name and form; she lives on air and is deeply lost in austerity, eager to rejoin her lord. And this once lovely park suffered neglect."

Ramachandra expressed great surprise, "What! You are telling me that she is waiting for me! Poor thing! If you can let me know where she is, deep in austerity ... tell me where." As Rama moved on, Viswamitra and Lakshmana followed him at a distance. He passed through tangled bushes and entered a hut, behind a briar bush.

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



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

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

### **The city of Mithila**

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

Wherever they turned, they saw ascetics and *brahmins* engaged in the recitation of the *Vedas*. They saw many houses where sacrificial fires were fed with ritual offerings. Under every sheltering tree were groups of people around the bullock carts that had brought them from the country side. There were men and women, old and young, with children belonging to all castes and professions, people from all stages of life assembled at every corner. It was like moving in a stream of joy. The city was packed with eager people moving crisscross on all the roads. The sage and his followers reached the embankment of a tank, which was comparatively less crowded, for they had to decide where to stay and were not yet quite sure where. The time for evening ablutions had drawn near, so they kept their belongings on the bank, took their bath, and finished the prescribed rites.

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

Viswamitra finished his ablutions and rites and sat on the embankment with his disciples and the brothers, who looked like twin stars fallen from heaven upon the Earth. He was describing to them the glories of Mithila. Meanwhile, a courier from the court approached them very politely and enquired, "Master! Please tell me who you are. Where have you come from? We are the king's messengers and are only obeying orders and carrying out our duty. If you tell us your name, we can inform the king of your arrival."

When the messenger hurried straight to the palace and told the Emperor Janaka that the sage Viswamitra had arrived, he made arrangements appropriate for the reception of the great sage and sent the chief *brahmins*, priests, and pundits of the court under their leader, Sathananda, to Viswamitra.

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

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

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

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

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

It was a pretty little new temple-like structure, situated in the centre of a lovely garden; it was tastefully decorated with greens and festoons. The place was heavy with silence; it was as if peace fell in heavy showers there from the wings of grace from heaven itself. It was quite adjacent to the royal palace.

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

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

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

That night, they slept well. When daylight spread slowly over the city, the music of pipe and drum rose from their doorstep. *Brahmins* recited *Vedic* hymns. Rama and Lakshmana rose, finished their bath and other rituals,

and approached Viswamitra. The sage gave them cups of milk to drink and said, “Sons! Janaka will be here any time now. Take breakfast and be ready.” Soon, they as well as the sage’s younger pupils repaired to the apartments and partook of fruits and milk. They washed their hands and quietly gathered around their preceptor, sitting reverentially near him.

Meanwhile, it became known that Emperor Janaka was arriving with the royal preceptor, in order to pay homage; the blowing of conches and the play of the traditional nine instruments heralded the approach of the ruler of the realm. Janaka entered with auspicious sandal paste and rice grains in his hands, while Sathananda and the entourage entered the sacred residence. With the delight of gratitude he washed the sage’s feet.

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

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

At this, Viswamitra smiled, and said, “Last night, since there was no time, I could not tell you in detail. I will now tell about these princes, Rama and Lakshmana, since you desired to hear their story. If you have no leisure now, I can tell you some other time.”

Janaka exclaimed, “Master! what more important work have I than experiencing the ecstasy of conversing with you? This chance can be the fruit only of age-long austerity. I’m filled with spiritual bliss at the expectation of hearing about them; I consider it great good fortune.”

Viswamitra narrated the events that had taken place beginning with his appearance at Dasaratha’s court up to the sacrificial rite (*yajna*) and the heroic way in which the young boys had stood guard and foiled the demons’ attempts to desecrate the rituals. He described the bravery and skill of the boys in their battle against the demons and praised their achievements. During the narration, tears of joy and gratitude welled from the sage’s eyes, which he frequently wipe away with the end of his garment.

Hearing these words and filling his eyes with the majesty and charming loveliness of the boys, Janaka experienced supreme delight, the delight he often derived in *samadhi*! He felt that the boys were actual embodiments of divine splendour. Though he often tried to look somewhere else, his eyes thirsted only for the sight of those charming lotus-like faces, which showered *Brahmic* illumination. Janaka suppressed with great difficulty the outward expression of his inner ecstasy and sat looking intently at them, in humility and reverence. He did not feel for a moment that he was an emperor and that these boys were the princes of another imperial monarch. He had an incredible impression that they had come down from Heaven to Earth, and the feeling was strengthened and increased by the description of their superhuman might and skill. He realised that they were rare beings, akin to God himself, for, even before becoming teenagers, they successfully guarded a rite that the renowned Viswamitra could not carry through unimpaired. What a marvel, he wondered!

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

emotion that he was unable to move, like a pillar.

Viswamitra observed him and said, “Son! Do not be so overwhelmed with the little events that have happened so far! In the coming days, many events vastly more amazing will happen; they will cause amazement and ecstasy by their superhuman glory. Your parents too will arrive at Mithila tomorrow or the day after. You can hear the marvelous story of Rama and Lakshmana direct from them. Calm yourself.”

Emperor Janaka replied, “Master! How fortunate are the parents who have such divinely endowed sons. Oh how fortunate I am that they stepped into my house!” He turned to Rama and Lakshmana, “Darlings! Pardon me if the residence I arranged for you is not quite to your liking or in keeping with your status. If you desire, I am ever ready to arrange more appropriate accommodation. If you like, I will facilitate ‘sightseeing’ in the city, for you are strangers to Mithila. Ask for anything you require, without reservation; I will feel happy only when you so ask.”

To those words, spoken with exemplary goodness and humility, Rama replied in a manner that revealed the respect he wanted to offer Janaka. “*Maharaja!* We are but boys. We don’t feel anything wanting in the arrangements made. We are quite happy. There is no need to arrange something more for us. If, however, you have such great affection toward us, you can fulfil one wish that we have ...” and without mentioning what it was, he turned toward the preceptor, Viswamitra.

### **Breaking the Siva-bow**

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

“But I spoke to them of many divine weapons you have, objects that they are naturally eager to see and handle. I described the Siva bow, which you have here and which deserves to be seen by them. I told them the story of that bow. Then they agreed to accompany me hither, longing to see it. They have no yearning to go round the city or visit interesting places; bows, arrows, weapons that can guard the right and punish the wicked—these claim first consideration for their attention.”

Janaka felt he had no need to hear more. “In that case, I will make arrangements to have the bow brought to the rite (*vajna*) hall soon,” and instructed that the preceptor, Sathananda, be consulted about an auspicious hour for it to be brought there.

Meanwhile, Rama asked Janaka, “*Maharaja!* If you can tell us how that divine bow came into your possession, we can derive great joy.”

Janaka gave the details with evident joy. “Darlings: Six generations after Nimi, the great ancestor of my dynasty, king Devaratha, ruled over this kingdom. The gods placed this bow of Lord Siva in trust in his palace. It has been with us since then. It’s a weapon of the gods, so I assert it is no ordinary bow! It weighs some thousands of tons! No one has held it in the erect position so far, for who can lift that weight? Many times in the past, I tried to discover who could bend the bow and use it or hold it for public gaze. I invited people to try. But I have yet to see one who could do it. Every king and prince who attempted the feat failed and returned humiliated. They couldn’t

bend the bow or even move it ever so slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

Day dawned. The nine traditional musical instruments raised a paean of harmony that rose to the vaults of heaven. Conches were blown in peals. The auspiciousness of the day was declared through song and ritual. Emperor Janaka entered the enclosure, accompanied by a group of priests and with attendants carrying materials for ceremonial worship of the divine bow. Long before that moment, the enclosure was filled with kings, princes, ministers, courtiers, sages, and *Vedic* scholars. When Janaka came in, the entire gathering stood up to honour the ruler of the realm. *Vedic* pundits declaimed aloud hymns invoking the gods to shower grace; their voices rose up to heaven in exclamatory unison. Others recited passages from the *Vedas*. All were so filled with expectancy that



they looked on in wonder, without even a wink.

Janaka walked in reverence around the vehicle with the bow and offered floral homage to it, while chants were recited to propitiate it. He bowed before the divine bow and spoke to the distinguished assembly. “Prostrations to the sages! I welcome all who have come to this assembly! For many years, my forefathers as well as many other monarchs have been, as you all know, worshiping this divine bow. Besides, it is already well known that no one, be he god or demon, *Yaksha*, *rakshasa*, *Garuda* or *Gandharva*, *Kinnara* or *Mahoraga*, has so far been able to lift the bow, hold it, and string it! All who attempted have turned back, humiliated. In spite of this, this day, I have again resolved to bring the bow into the sacred enclosure. Whoever among you lifts this bow or lifting, strings it, or stringing it, fixes an arrow on to it—or even who can hold the weight of the bow in his hands— can come forward and take this chance; the bow is before you.” Janaka bowed before the gathering with his palms folded and sat on the lion throne.

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

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

### **Dasaratha is invited**

Janaka rose from his seat, fell prostrate before Viswamitra, and said, “Master! No one on earth can claim greater strength than Rama; such strength is not of the earth. I will fulfil my word; I will give Sita in marriage to him who lifted, bent, and broke this bow.”

Viswamitra replied, “Janaka! It would be good to send this news to Emperor Dasaratha and celebrate this auspicious event after he comes. This is my desire; Rama is such a deeply dutiful son that he would not agree to the marriage until Dasaratha gave his approval!”

So, Janaka called the *brahmins* of the court to his presence, along with some ministers. He set them on the journey to Ayodhya as soon as day dawned. They sped on in their chariots, drawn by swift horses, for three days and nights and reached Ayodhya on the morning of the fourth day. They halted the chariots right before the main entrance of the imperial palace, so that there could be no delay in taking the news they had brought to the emperor. When the guards asked their names and purpose, the ministers asked them to announce their arrival to the emperor. They informed Dasaratha, and the ministers were immediately called into the palace and the presence.

In spite of old age, Dasaratha was a divinely splendourous figure when the *brahmins* and ministers of Mithila saw him on his throne. When they stood before that bright venerable face, they fell at his feet without any hesitation or reservation. They stood up and said, “*Maharaja!* We are messengers from Emperor Janaka of Mithila. He commissioned us to enquire and learn from you about your welfare and the welfare of your realm. We have been sent with the approval of sage Viswamitra and with the consent of the royal preceptor, the great Sathananda, by

*Maharaja* Janaka to communicate to you an important message.”

Dasaratha’s face was brightened by smiles; his assurance was unshaken. He was struck by the humility and good manners of the envoys from Mithila. He said, “O greatest among *brahmins*! O ministers of the Mithila court! There is no deficiency in the administration of the kingdom of Ayodhya, no obstruction anywhere for rituals like the oblation to Agni (*Agnihotra*); no diminution in the happiness of any of my subjects, no obstacle from any quarter in the path of their moral and spiritual advance. My subjects are prosperous; they are progressing steadily toward the highest goal. I am glad to tell you this. I wish to know about Janaka’s health and welfare, the emperor of Mithila, about the uninterrupted performance in his kingdom of the religious rites prescribed in the *Vedas*. You can communicate your message to me, without any reservation. I am eager to hear it.”

When Dasaratha granted permission so softly and sweetly, the ministers signed to the *brahmins* to speak. The chief priest rose from his seat and delivered the message. “Great sovereign ruler! Our *Maharaja* Janaka has vowed that his daughter, the goddess Sita, would be given in marriage only to heroic might. No doubt you are aware of this, and you might also know that many princes have tried to prove their prowess and were humiliated. By divine will, your two sons Rama and Lakshmana accompanied the sage Viswamitra, eager to see the great rite (*yajna*) that our *Maharaja* is celebrating, and your eldest son Rama won the goddess Sita by means of his incomparable valour!

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

“We have been sent to request and receive your assent, to offer you cordial welcome, to invite you, with the preceptor, priests, ministers, courtiers, kith and kin, and attendants and followers, to the city of Mithila. Our *Maharaja* desires to celebrate his daughter’s marriage after receiving your presence (*darshan*). We were sent by him to inform you of this.”

The priests and ministers stood with folded hands, reverentially awaiting Dasaratha’s reply. But Dasaratha thought it over with earnest care and sent for the sages Vasishta, Vamadeva, and others for consultations before speaking a word in reply. He also invited the foremost among the *brahmins* of the court. When they all arrived, he asked the party from Mithila to repeat their message. When they had listened to the news, Dasaratha wanted their comments. But first, he fell prostrate before sage Vasishta and prayed for his approval. Vasishta, Vamadeva, and others responded with joyous acclamations, “Hurrah! Hurrah!” They asked, “Why spend further thought on this? Make preparations to go to Mithila!”

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

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

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

### Dasaratha in Mithila

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

When all had occupied their seats, Janaka welcomed Dasaratha. “Your coming to Mithila with these great sages, these foremost *brahmins*, and your kinsmen and escort augurs great good fortune for us. It marks the fruition of the good we have done in past lives. I am sure great joy has filled your mind at the valour and victory of your son. I am about to enter into relationship with the great Raghu dynasty, resplendent with the boundless heroism of its scions. My dynasty is about to be sanctified more than ever before by this kinship. I believe this is the result of the blessings showered on me by my forefathers. *Maharaja!* This morning, the sacrificial rite (*yajna*) we have been celebrating is coming to a close. I have thought of celebrating the marriage of Sita and Rama after its conclusion. I plead for your assent.”

Dasaratha thrilled with bliss (*ananda*). His face was lit by bright smiles. He said, “*Maharaja!* You are the donor; elders declare that a gift is to be received at the sweet will and pleasure of the donor! So I am ever prepared to take the gift whenever it pleases you!” When Dasaratha spoke with such wit and wisdom, with such heart-melting warmth of affection, Janaka was overwhelmed with spiritual bliss surging within him.

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

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

Meanwhile, Janaka was immersed in preparations for the wedding. He was mostly in the palace itself; he invited the chief priest, Sathananda, to the court and prayed to him reverentially to start collecting men and materials for the various rites preliminary to the actual wedding rite. The sage replied, “*Maharaja!* The rite concluded just today. During the next two or three days, there are a few hours that are auspicious for the ceremonials. I can give details, if you want to know.”

Janaka saluted Sathananda and, standing with folded hands, said, “Master! I received Emperor Dasaratha’s assent last night. This is indeed a sign of extreme good fortune. My younger brother Kushadwaja is not presently here; he has been very busy supplying provisions for the sacrificial rite (*yajna*) as and when the high priests asked for them. I am reluctant to celebrate this most auspicious ceremony without his presence at my side. I don’t want to deprive him of his share of joy. I have set afoot plans to get him here quickly. I feel it would be best if we fix the day and hour after his arrival.”

Sathananda responded, “Good! That would make us all happy beyond calculation!” And he left the palace.

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

Janaka hastened to meet him, for he was counting the minutes that were hurrying by. He clasped his brother in fond embrace and was filled with inexpressible delight. Kushadwaja fell at his elder brother’s feet and prostrated before Sathananda; then, all three sat on raised seats and deliberated on the course of action. After deciding on what had to be done, they sent for the highly respected elder statesman, Sudhama, and told him, “Minister of state! Please go to Dasaratha and pray to him to come here, to this palace, with his ministers, priests, courtiers, kinsmen, and others he would like to bring with him. Bring him with due honours.”

Sudhama took with him a group of courtiers, scholars, and royal priests; he got tastefully decorated chariots ready to bring the imperial party and reached the palace where Dasaratha was staying. He submitted sweetly and softly to him the message he had brought and, with profound obeisance, invited him to Janaka’s palace. Dasaratha was ready; he moved out with his entourage and reached Janaka’s court hall very soon. They greeted each other as befitted the occasion and their respective status and occupied the seats laid for them.

### **Narrating the dynasties**

Then Dasaratha rose and said, “Janaka! For the Ikshvaku dynasty, the sage Vasishta is god on Earth! He is our supreme preceptor. He can speak with full authority on the traditions of our dynasty.”

Dasaratha sat down, and Vasishta stood before the assembly and spoke. “Royal sage! Listen, all those who have assembled! Brahman! The unmanifested Supreme, the Eternal, the Pure, created Marichi through the exercise of will; Marichi’s son was Kasyapa, whose son was Surya; Surya’s son was Manu, Manu had a son named Vaivaswata Manu; he ruled over the people and earned the appellation *Prajapathi*. A son Ikshvaku was born to him, who was the first overlord of Ayodhya, so the dynasty itself came to be called the Ikshvaku Line.

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

“Both his queens were pregnant when he died. They sought asylum in Chyavana’s hermitage, who was filled with compassion at their plight. He consoled them, saying, ‘Mothers! Don’t entertain any fear. This is your home. You will have safe delivery and strong splendour-filled fortunate babies.’ His blessing came true. Within a few days, the elder queen delivered a son named Sagara, who was installed as the emperor of Ayodhya.

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

“Nahusha’s son was Yayathi, and Yayathi’s son was Nabhaga. Nabhaga had Aja as his son. Dasaratha is the eldest son of Aja, and his four sons, each a precious jewel, are Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna. Rama, the eldest of the four, raised, bent, strung, and broke the bow of Siva.

“O Royal sage! This royal dynasty is sacred and pure. Every one born in this line has earned spiritual illumination and has shone in spiritual splendour. They are rooted in righteousness and are in the front rank of heroes. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna are precious lamps that shed lustre on the annals of the clan.

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

After listening to the narrative of the Ikshvaku Dynasty from the lips of the great sage Vasishta, Janaka rose from his throne and said, “O great sage! When the scion of a noble clan intends to gift his daughter in marriage, he has to announce the historic glory of his clan, doesn’t he? I have resolved to follow your example and recite the story myself, for it gives me great joy to recapitulate the names of my forefathers and recall their majesty. My birth with this body happened through the blessings of forefathers of this dynasty. It will be justified and its purpose fulfilled only if I describe them myself to this vast gathering.”

Janaka stood prayerfully before all. Vasishta agreed with the request and gave the permission sought. Janaka then began the narration. “Great sage! Revered preceptors! *Maharaja* Dasaratha! In the very distant past, an emperor named Nimi adhered firmly to the path of righteousness and was therefore famous for might and foresight. His son Mithi built this city, Mithila, to serve as the capital for this kingdom. He was the first sovereign of this region. His reign was very popular, and his subjects were happy and prosperous.

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

“Hriswarupa is my father; I am indeed very happy to acknowledge that my father was an ideal personage. The truth is that I now rule happily over this city of Mithila as a result of the merit acquired and handed down as heritage by my forefathers.



“My brother Kushadwaja is much more to me than a brother. I revere him as a divine personality. He is more of a friend to me than a brother. I brought him up with such love and affection that I have developed great attachment to him. Years ago, when the King of Sankasya demanded that I yield the Siva’s bow to him or else meet him in battle, I refused, and he laid siege to Mithila City. This was the signal for a bitter war between us, during which Sudhanva was killed and I made my brother the ruler of Sankasya. That city shines bright on the banks of the Ikshumathi river. Seen from afar, it reminds one of the famous celestial chariot of the gods! Let me tell you of another auspicious idea that the gods have inspired in me.

#### **Four weddings are proposed**

“I have brought him here today, so that he might share in the joy of the wedding celebrations. Brahmarshi! You commanded that Rama wed Sita and Lakshmana wed Urmila, my other daughter. I accept the command with immeasurable joy. Sita is a celestial damsel, and she will wed Rama as the hero’s gift. And I bow my head in all humility and gladness and give Urmila to Lakshmana.

“I have another representation to make for your consideration. *Maharaja* Dasaratha! You have four sons, all born of the same heavenly gift of grace. Why allow two to remain single? It will contribute to our happiness fully if they too are wedded. Today is the asterism of *Magha*. This is a good day to commence the rites and have the preliminary ceremonials. The day after, under the asterism *Uttaraphalgun*a, I seek your assent to gift in marriage my brother’s two daughters: Mandavi to Bharatha and Srutha-keerthi to Satrughna.”

At this, everyone in the huge gathering acclaimed the proposal, exclaiming, “Most welcome!” Their applause rent the sky.

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

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

Janaka and Kushadwaja fell prostrate before the sages, overcome with delight at their wish being fulfilled. “This is no ordinary event. How fortunate we are to have been blessed with this consummation! How lucky that the sages agreed to this proposal and eased the path. Sages never encourage inauspicious happenings. We will reverentially obey all your commands,” they said.

Vasishta then said, “Why should we postpone these two weddings to the day after or some later day! Tomorrow is auspicious for all. It will be very good if all four weddings are celebrated on the same day.”

Janaka replied, “I am blessed, indeed! Worthy preceptor. Emperor Dasaratha has long been your disciple,

executing whatever you commanded. From this day, we brothers are also your disciples. All our burdens are on your shoulders; direct us how to proceed and how to act; we will follow unquestioningly.” They stood, awaiting his reply, with hands folded in utter humility and reverence.

Dasaratha rose and said, “Ruler of Mithila! The virtues I find in you two I cannot describe in words! You have made excellent arrangements for the stay and reception of such a magnificent array of *maharajas* and great sages, as well as of the vast mass of people who have thronged this city. I will go back to my residence now and carry on the rites of prosperity and completion of studenthood (*nandi* and *samavarthana*) in full concordance with *Vedic* prescription.”

The brothers honoured him duly as he emerged from the hall and took leave of him at the main entrance, as befitted his status. They then went to their own palaces to fulfil their assignments.

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

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

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

### **The four weddings**

Early in the morning, Janaka proceeded to the special dais on which the rituals of the wedding were to be gone through, accompanied by a highly spiritual splendour-showering group of sages. He completed the preliminary rites and was awaiting the arrival of the bridegrooms and their parents and kinsmen. Rama, Lakshmana, Bharatha, and Satrugna had their ceremonial baths; they wore yellow silken dresses and had silk cloth wound around their heads. They were bedecked with many ornaments studded with diamonds and sapphires and gave the impression that they were alluring, heart-captivating gods come down from heaven.

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

The populace gazed upon their beauty and prowess without even blinking an eye; they confided to each other

that the dignity of their bearing marked them out as divine and not human at all. “What charm! What a surge of beauty! They are denizens of heaven come down on earth,” they whispered among themselves as the bridegrooms passed between the thick rows of onlookers. Women swore they had never cast eyes on such charming princes. Every window and terrace was packed to overflowing. At last, the princes reached the dais and sat down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Janaka spoke these words, “Rama! Here is Sita, my daughter. She will tread your *dharmic* path from now on. Accept her. She brings prosperity, peace, and joy. Hold her hand with yours. She is highly virtuous and true. From this moment, she will follow you like your shadow, forever.” With these words, he poured water on Rama’s hands to set the seal on the gift.

Then he came near Lakshmana. “Lakshmana! I give you this bride, Urmila; accept her.” With the prescribed *mantras*, he completed the ceremony of gifting her to the bridegroom. Similarly, he approached Bharatha and pronouncing the *Vedic mantras* traditionally used for the wedding and gifted Mandavi to him as his bride. In the same manner Srutha-keerthi was gifted by him to Satrughna with the pouring of holy water and *Vedic* recitation. After this, scholars well versed in *Vedic* lore completed the customary rites and rituals for drawing upon the wedded couples the grace of the gods.

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

While they were doing so, showers of flowers fell upon them; joyous music rose from a galaxy of instruments. The distinguished gathering acclaimed the moment and scattered rice grains on their heads, wishing them all the best in life. The jubilation with which they cheered “hurrah! hurrah!” shook the sky and filled all ears with delight. The gods played divine music in heaven, elysian drums were beaten in ecstatic exaltation, and minstrels of heaven sang hallelujahs.

On the dais, court musicians sang the traditional wedding songs describing the splendour of the marriage ceremony, extolling it as on a par with the marriage of Lord Siva and Gauri. They sang it in a rich variety of *ragas* and melodies, filling the atmosphere with vibrations of delight. The four brothers and their brides stood on the dais facing the vast gathering and bowed in acknowledgement of their cheers and greetings: “May you be happy forever,” “May everything auspicious be added unto you.”

The brothers, resplendent in their youth, heroism, and beauty, went with their brides into enclosures behind the curtains from where their mothers were watching the ceremony, in order to prostrate before them and be blessed by them. Then, they returned to the palace allotted for the stay of the royal party. From that day, for three days, the populace witnessed a magnificent variety of ceremony and festival, packed with joy and jubilee. The people of Ayodhya who had come to Mithila as well as the inhabitants of Mithila itself could not distinguish night from day! It was festivity without intermission.

### **Taking leave**

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

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

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

Unable to bear the pangs of separation from Sita and Urmila, many nurses and maids broke down with grief. The mothers held the hands of the sons-in-law and prayed to them to treat their daughters gently and with affection. “They know no hardship or sorrow; they have grown up soft and tender,” they pleaded in pathetic appeal. They wept as if they were losing their very eyes. At last, they ascended the chariots and moved off. The city was filled with gloom—as much gloom as the ecstasy with which it was filled for the three previous days!

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

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

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

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

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

“In Mithila, everyone, young and old, had that feeling and that reverence toward them. It is really a wondrous coincidence that such bridegrooms have been wedded to such brides, worthy in every way, in physical, mental, intellectual and spiritual characteristics, in status, wealth, power, family honour, dynastic sanctity, and religious faith. This cannot happen to all. Therefore, the daughters will have happiness, without the least diminution. Their



lives will be filled with greater and greater joy as the years roll by.”

The ministers recalled the grandeur of the marriage celebrations and calmed the agitated mind of Janaka. They engaged themselves in consoling him and restoring his equanimity and mental peace.