

RĀMĀVATĀRA

Lord *Rāma* was born in the solar dynasty and was known as *Raghukula Tilaka*, the foremost among the descendants of *Raghu*.

Daśaratha, *Raghu*'s grandson, ruled the kingdom of *Kosala* from the capital of *Ayodhyā*. He had three queens, *Kausalyā*, *Sumitrā* and *Kaikeyī*. But his heart was sorrowful as he had no progeny. He arranged to perform the *putrakāmeṣṭi*, a ritual for begetting children. All the *devatās* assembled at the *yajña-sālā* to receive their oblations in the *yajña*. Seeing that the time was opportune, they prayed to Lord *Viṣṇu* for relief from the harassments of *Rāvaṇa*, the powerful *rākṣasa* king of *Laṅkā*. The Lord blessed them and assured them that he would be born as *Daśaratha*'s son and would kill *Rāvaṇa*.

As the ritual was about to end, a divine being appeared from the fire altar with a pot of *pāyasam*, sweetened rice with milk, and asked *Daśaratha* to distribute the *pāyasam* among his three queens. By the grace of the Lord, his queens gave birth to four princes who were named *Rāma*, *Lakṣmaṇa*, *Bharata* and *Śatrughna*. *Rāma* and *Bharata* were born to queens *Kausalyā* and *Kaikeyī* respectively, while *Lakṣmaṇa* and *Śatrughna* were born to queen *Sumitrā*. *Rāma*'s stature, gentleness coupled with courage and wisdom made him a young hero, loved by all in the kingdom. Even King *Daśaratha* was more fond of *Rāma* than his other sons, as *Rāma* was devoted to him and cared for him deeply.

One day, Sage *Viśvāmitra* came to *Daśaratha*'s palace and asked the king to send *Rāma* with him to the forest. He needed *Rāma*'s help in killing the demons that were interfering with the fire ritual being performed by the sage.



Rāmāvatāra contd...

At first, *Daśaratha* was reluctant to send *Rāma* as he loved him very much and feared for his life. Sage *Vasiṣṭha*, confident of *Rāma*'s skills and prowess, reassured him and the king sent *Rāma* with the sage alongwith *Lakṣmaṇa*. During their journey, the princes learnt archery and other disciplines of knowledge from the sage. Upon reaching *Siddhāśrama*, the sage's hermitage, *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa* protected the sacrifice by killing the demons and carried the ritual through its completion.

Pleased with the accomplishments of the young princes, *Viśvāmitra* took them to the assembly of King *Janaka* of *Mithilā*. He wanted the princes to see the bow of Lord *Śiva* which many great heroes had failed to even lift. King *Janaka* had offered his beautiful daughter, Princess *Sītā*, in marriage to anyone who would break the bow. *Rāma* effortlessly lifted the bow, strung it, and drawing the bow, broke it instantly. *Rāma*, thus, won *Sītā* in marriage. His brothers also married the princesses from *Janaka*'s family. The princes along with their brides and *Daśaratha* returned to *Ayodhyā* and lived happily for a number of years.

As *Daśaratha* was becoming old, one day he decided to coronate *Rāma* as the *yuvarājā*, crown prince, with the consent of the elders. Everyone was happy to hear about it and began preparing for the coronation, which was to take place the following day. In the meanwhile, *Mantharā*, a servant-maid of *Kaikeyī*, planted the seeds of jealousy in *Kaikeyī*'s mind against *Kausalyā*, the senior queen. She suggested to *Kaikeyī* to encash her two boons which *Daśaratha* had once given her, by asking for *Rāma* to be sent to the forest for fourteen years and for coronating *Bharata* to the throne of *Ayodhyā*. *Kaikeyī*, influenced by *Mantharā*, did as she was told.

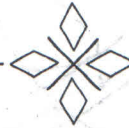
Rāmāvatāra contd...

Daśaratha was shocked at *Kaikeyī*'s claim of the two boons, but bound as he was by his promise, he could not refuse *Kaikeyī*. *Rāma* honoured his father's words and left for the forest. As a true *pativratā*, a devoted wife, *Sītā* also accompanied *Rāma*. *Rāma* could not dissuade the persistent *Lakṣmaṇa* who also decided to accompany them. Soon after, another tragedy struck the royal family when *Daśaratha* passed away in grief of separation from his beloved son.

Bharata who was in his maternal uncle's place all this time, was sent for by Sage *Vasiṣṭha*. Upon arriving in *Ayodhyā*, *Bharata* came to know of his mother's cruel deeds and his father's death which had been due to the grief of separation from *Rāma*. He condemned her for her actions and disowned her as his mother. Performing his father's last rites, he decided to bring *Rāma* back to *Ayodhyā* and set out for *Citrakūṭa* where *Rāma* was staying.

Bharata met *Rāma* and pleaded with him to return, but *Rāma* stood firm on his commitment to keep his father's promise to *Kaikeyī*. Instead, he asked the reluctant *Bharata* to return to *Ayodhyā* and rule the kingdom. *Bharata* finally agreed to rule as a proxy for the fourteen year period of exile and installed *Rāma*'s sandals on the throne as a symbol of his rule.

In the forest, *Rāma* visited many hermitages and earned the grace of the sages. He killed a number of *rākṣasas* who harassed the sages in their life of asceticism, and thus gave them his protection.



Rāmāvatāra contd...

While they were staying in *Pañcavaṭī* on the banks of River *Godāvarī*, one day, a *rākṣasi* *Śūrpaṅakhā*, arrived at the *āśrama*. She fell in love with *Rāma* and asked him to marry her. *Rāma* in humorous jest told her to go to *Lakṣmaṇa*. *Lakṣmaṇa*, too, joined his brother in the humour and directed her back to *Rāma* telling her that she would be a mere servant if she married him, since he was only *Rāma*'s servant and that *Rāma* would like her better than *Sītā* who lacked beauty. Thus being sent back and forth, *Śūrpaṅakhā* lost her patience and seeing *Sītā* as the stumbling block in her marrying *Rāma*, she furiously advanced towards her. *Lakṣmaṇa* promptly took his sword and chopped off her nose and ears.

Angered by the humiliation, *Śūrpaṅakhā* went to her brother *Rāvaṇa* and pleaded with him to take revenge on the two brothers. She evoked in him a passion for *Sītā* by describing her beauty to him and asked him to capture *Sītā* and make her his wife. *Rāvaṇa* sought *Mārīca*'s help, compelling him to take the form of a beautiful golden deer and attract *Sītā*'s attention in *Pañcavaṭī*. Transforming himself into a captivating golden deer, *Mārīca* wandered around the *āśrama* playfully. Enchanted by the charming beauty of the animal, *Sītā* called out to *Rāma* and *Lakṣmaṇa* and asked them to capture the deer and bring it to her. Unable to resist her entreaties, *Rāma* went behind the deer, asking *Lakṣmaṇa* to look after *Sītā*. After a long chase, *Rāma* sent an arrow at his target. As the arrow pierced the animal, simulating the voice of *Rāma*, it cried out for help and fell dead.

Sītā heard the cries and fearing for *Rāma*'s life, she appealed to *Lakṣmaṇa* to go and help *Rāma*. *Lakṣmaṇa* sensed danger for *Sītā* and refused to leave her alone. *Sītā*'s fears turned into anger against *Lakṣmaṇa*. She assailed him of bad character and ascribed ulterior motives of his desire to marry her. *Lakṣmaṇa* reluctantly left her. Seeing *Sītā* alone, *Rāvaṇa* approached her in the guise of a monk and kidnapped her. Overpowering *Jaṭāyu*, an eagle bird, who resisted him on his flight, *Rāvaṇa* reached *Laṅkā* and kept *Sītā* in the *Aśokavana*, the royal grove, closely guarded by a number of *rākṣasīs*.

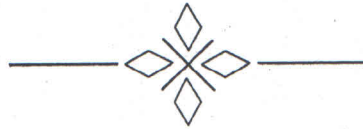
Rāmāvatāra contd...

After killing *Mārīca*, *Rāma* hurried towards the *āśrama* where on the way he met *Lakṣmaṇa* running towards him. As they reached the *āśrama*, they saw the *āśrama* empty, confirming their fears. *Rāma* wept bitterly and ran all over searching for *Sītā*. *Lakṣmaṇa* tried to console him and calm him down.

After a long search in the forest, they came across the *vānara* chief *Sugrīva*, who was living in exile in the *Rṣyamūka* hill. *Sugrīva*'s elder brother, *Vāli* had usurped his wife *Rumā* besides exiling him. *Rāma* and *Sugrīva* struck a bond of friendship. *Rāma* promised *Sugrīva* that he would help him to get rid of *Vāli* and gain back his wife and the kingdom of *Kiṣkindhā*. *Sugrīva*, in turn, promised all assistance to *Rāma* in his efforts to find *Sītā*.

Confident of *Rāma*'s prowess and valour, *Sugrīva* challenged *Vāli* to a fight. In the encounter that took place between the two brothers, *Rāma* sent an arrow at *Vāli* and killed him. Arranging to perform the obsequies of *Vāli*, *Rāma* coronated *Sugrīva* as the king of *Kiṣkindhā*. *Aṅgada*, son of *Vāli*, was appointed the crown prince.

Sugrīva, on his part, sent his *vānaras* in all the four directions to search for *Sītā*. *Hanumān*, the most powerful and wise minister of *Sugrīva*, went towards the south. Guided by *Sampāti*, brother of *Jaṭāyu*, *Hanumān* crossed the ocean and reached *Laṅkā*. After a long search, *Hanumān* discovered *Sītā* in the *Aśokavana*. Giving her the signet ring of *Rāma*, *Hanumān* assured her that *Rāma* would soon return with the *vānara* army and destroying *Rāvaṇa* in a battle, would relieve her of her sufferings.



Rāmāvatāra contd...

After taking leave of *Sītā*, *Hanumān* was ready for his return journey when he thought of doing something that would give him a first hand information about *Rāvaṇa*'s army strength as well as instill confidence in *Sītā* regarding the strength of the *vānara* army of *Rāma*. He instigated a fight with the *rākṣasas* by destroying the beautiful royal grove, *Aśokavana*. Killing many *rākṣasas* in the fight that ensued, he encountered *Rāvaṇa*'s son, *Indrajit* and was bound by *Indrajit*'s *Brahmāstra*. When the *rākṣasas* tied him with other materials, the divine *astra* lost its power and *Hanumān* became free. However, welcoming the opportunity to have an audience with *Rāvaṇa*, *Hanumān* allowed himself to be dragged to *Rāvaṇa*'s court.

Hanumān boldly asked *Rāvaṇa* to return *Sītā* and ask for *Rāma*'s forgiveness or face the dire consequences in the battlefield. Angered by *Hanumān*'s bold statements, *Rāvaṇa* punished him by setting his tail on fire. Hearing about the punishment, *Sītā* prayed to Lord *Agni* with whose grace, *Hanumān* remained unaffected by the heat and flames. *Hanumān* burnt the entire city of *Laṅkā* with the fire on his tail. Having accomplished his selfappointed task, *Hanumān* then put out the fire by dipping his tail in the sea and returning to *Rāma*, reported the happy news of *Sītā*'s discovery.

Rāma was now anxious to cross the ocean with a huge army and reach *Laṅkā*. *Sugrīva* encouraged him with words of support and they marched towards the ocean. Soon they reached the foot of Mount *Mahendra* and *Rāma* ascended the peak and surveyed the vast expanse of the sea.



Rāmāvatāra contd...

At *Laṅkā*, *Rāvaṇa*, shaken by the havoc caused by a mere monkey, called his council of ministers to discuss the future course of action. While every one in the court spoke in support of *Rāvaṇa*, *Vibhīṣaṇa*, the virtuous brother of *Rāvaṇa*, argued for *Sītā*'s return. Annoyed with *Vibhīṣaṇa*, *Rāvaṇa* hurled harsh words at him. Seeing that he no longer had a role in *Laṅkā*, *Vibhīṣaṇa* crossed the sea and sought refuge in *Rāma*. In keeping with his principle of accepting anyone who came to him, *Rāma* embraced *Vibhīṣaṇa* lovingly.

Soon a bridge was built across the ocean with the help of the *vānaras* and the entire army crossed over to *Laṅkā*. *Rāma* sent *Aṅgada* on a peace mission to *Rāvaṇa*. But *Rāvaṇa*, refused to return *Sītā* and the war was declared.

In the fight, many great warriors of *Rāvaṇa*'s army such as *Jambumālī*, *Prahasta*, *Atikāya*, *Trisiras*, *Kumbha* and *Nikumbha* were killed by the *vānara* chiefs. *Kumbhakarna*, *Rāvaṇa*'s brother was killed by *Rāma*, while *Lakṣmaṇa* with the help of *Vibhīṣaṇa*, killed *Indrajit*. Finally, a great battle ensued between *Rāma* and *Rāvaṇa*. Both sent powerful *astras* at each other and one was countered by the other with more powerful weapons. Many celestial beings witnessed the battle from the sky. At the end, *Rāma* invoked Lord *Brahmā* and sent his *Brahmāstra* piercing *Rāvaṇa*'s chest and *Rāvaṇa* fell dead. There was rejoice in all the three worlds. *Rāma* crowned *Vibhīṣaṇa* as the king of *Laṅkā*. Establishing *Sītā*'s purity through a fire test, *Rāma* reunited with *Sītā*, and returned to *Ayodhyā*.

Bharata was rejoiced to see *Rāma* back at *Ayodhyā* on the completion of the fourteenth year. He asked *Rāma* to wear his sandals again and *Rāma* was coronated the king of *Ayodhyā* with *Bharata* as crown prince.

Rāma ruled *Ayodhyā* for many years. There was justice everywhere and people had no fear of *adharma*. It was an ideal kingdom ruled by an ideal king, Lord *Rāma*. Having achieved the purpose of his incarnation, Lord *Rāma* returned to his abode at the end of his rule.

