

THE RĀMĀYAṆA OF VĀLMĪKI

An Appraisal

TO THE READER

If you are a scholar looking for a scholastic treat here, you are sure to be disappointed; because this is not a learned treatise written by a scholar for the benefit of other scholars.

If you are a researcher interested in unearthing new facts or discovering new theories, you will find nothing here that can excite you or whet your appetite for a deeper understanding of Rāmālogy.

If you are a 'lively as a lark' sort of person, seeking entertainment here, thinking that it contains the exploits of monkeys, bears and hideous demons, you are in for a shock, since this booklet contains more serious things that can make you do some self-introspection.

However, if you are a simple devotee of Rāma, believing in the Hindu scriptures as a source of strength and inspiration for life, and the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki as such a scripture, we can assure you that you will not be disappointed.

If this brochure can induce you and inspire you to read Vālmīki's original work, we deem that our task is done!

Swami Harshananda

Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation – sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭh-th in ant-hill
आ , ā-a in master,	ड ḍ-d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍh-dh in godhood
ई ī-ee in feel,	ण ṇ-n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū-oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri, द d-th in then	
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ-ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś-sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ-sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,, ह h-in hot	
ट ṭ-t in ten,	
• ढ ḍ-m in sum,	:ḥ-h in half

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Introduction

If there is one holy book that has profoundly influenced the life, the thought and the culture of millions of Hindus over the millennia, it is, undoubtedly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki. No aspect of Hindu religion and culture, whether it is literature, drama, music, art or sculpture, has remained unaffected by it. There also seems to be, apparently, no place in the Indian sub-continent that has not had the privilege of being visited by Rāma and Sītā or Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān. This rock contains the foot print of Rāma; that mountain split into two, unable to bear the weight of Hanumān; the water of this rivulet is coloured since Sītā had washed her clothes-This is how, even now, the simple folk of rural India weave an affectionate bond between themselves and the immaculate heroes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Hence, a reverent study of this wonderful work can certainly contribute to the levelling up of our culture in the social field and add an inch or two to our inner evolution and elevation.

Historicity of the Rāma Story

There is a fundamental difference between the occidental and the Hindu concept of history. For the former, an incident that had *really* occurred, its date or time or period as also the location, is all important. An implement of stone, a piece of pottery or an ancient coin discovered during archaeological excavations are more valuable as 'evidence' for the existence or the occurrence of that incident than whether it has left its imprint on the future generations or not. On the other hand, the existence of persons or the occurrence of incidents in the past are completely ignored by the Hindu psyche if they have not had any impact-good or bad-on the life and manners or the culture of the future generations.

Another basic difference should also be noted. If the West looks at time as a linear thing with a beginning and an end, the Hindu mind views it as cyclic and hence without beginning or end. The division of time into Yugas and Manvantaras, of immense durations, should be looked at from this angle.

Due to this inherent (self-imposed?) limitation, the occidental scholars do not accept the historical existence of Rāma and just pass off the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a poetical work with mythical contents.

From this, one should not jump to the conclusion that the Hindus have never paid any attention to history in their literary works and accounts. Both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*,-which are specifically termed as 'itihāsas' ('thus, verily, did it occur')-as also a number of purāṇas have given enough astronomical data connected with all the important incidents narrated by them that it is possible to work upon them and extract the exact dates in terms of the Gregorian Calendar.

According to one such attempt, the following are the dates specified for some of the incidents in the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

Birth of Rāma - 4439 B. C. His Banishment - 4414 B. C. His Coronation - 4400 B. C. (N. Mahalingam (Ed.), *Ancient World-A New look*, Madras, Pub. International Society for the Investigation of Ancient Civilizations, 1981.)

Suffice it to say that the Hindu religio-cultural tradition has accorded the Rāma story a far greater reality, which does not preclude the historical aspect.

Vālmīki and His Work

Maharṣi Vālmīki, the celebrated author of this great poem, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is also one of the personages appearing in the Rāma story. He is one of the earliest sages whose hermitage Rāma visits in his sojourn through the forest after leaving Ayodhyā.

When Rāma banishes Sītā, it is Vālmīki that shelters her and rears up her twin sons. Though the author, and a contemporary of the heroes in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he gives pretty little information about himself. This is as it should be, since he was a sage who had dedicated his life to contemplation on God and service to humanity.

He has revealed that he is a son of the sage Pracetas (sometimes identified with Varuṇa). Lava and Kuśa, his disciples who sang the epic poem in the court of Rāma himself, introduced themselves as the pupils of Bhagavān Vālmīki, a Bhārgava (of the lineage of the sage Bhṛgu).

Piecing together the stories given in other works like the Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, the Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa and the Bhāgavata this much can be said about him: He was a brāhmaṇa by birth belonging to the lineage of Bhṛgu. Fate consigned him to a family of robbers which brought him up. Accidental contact with the Saptarṣis (the Seven Sages) or with the sage Nārada changed his life. By the repetition of Rāmanāma (the name of Rāma) he attained the supreme state of a maharṣi or 'great sage'. Since a valmīka or an anthill had grown over his body during his long period of austerities and since he emerged out of it when called, he came to be known as 'Vālmīki'.

The story of the origin of the Rāmāyaṇa is given in the epic itself, in the beginning. Once, Nārada arrived at the hermitage of Vālmīki who received him with due honour and courtesies. Then he put a question to Nārada enquiring whether there was anyone living at that time, embodying in himself sixteen great and noble qualities that go to make a perfect man. In reply Nārada gave him the story of Rāma in brief.

Then, immersed in the thought current of this story, Vālmīki left for the river Tamasā for his ablutions. There he witnessed the killing by a hunter of a male bird that was in love with its mate. The piteous wailing of the distressed female moved the heart of the sage so much that he spontaneously uttered a curse on the hunter. However, this curse came out of his mouth in the form of a 'śloka,' a perfectly metrical composition, which surprised the sage himself. When he returned to his hermitage, Brahmā (the fourfaced God, the Creator), appeared to him and commanded him to compose an epic poem on the story of Rāma as he had heard it from the great sage Nārada, in this newly discovered metre. He also gave him the boon of the visions of all the incidents and the revelation of all the secrets connected with the story.

Accordingly Vālmīki composed this epic, christened it as Rāmāyaṇa ('The Way or the Conduct or The Lifestory of Rāma') and taught it to Lava and Kuśa, the twin children of Rāma and Sītā, through whom it gained wide currency and acclamation.

Date of the Composition

If the Hindu traditional view is accepted, then the date of Vālmīki and his composition will be around 4400 B. C .

According to one view, the dates pertaining to Rāma's life are: Birth 4342 B. C. ; Marriage with Sītā 4327 B. C. ; Exile 4315 B. C. ; Return to Ayodhyā and Coronation 4301 B. C. [D. S. Trivedi, Indian Chronology, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963.]

However, the modern Western scholars and their Indian counterparts are wont to assign a much later period to this scripture, 400-200 B. C. Theories are also not wanting that try to trace the Rāmāyaṇa to the Daśaratha Jātaka of the Buddhists or identify Rāma with a Pharaoh of Egypt! They deserve to be ignored.

The Text

The text as available to us now consists of 24,000 verses-24,253 to be exact-and is divided into seven kāṇḍas or Books. Each kāṇḍa is subdivided into sargas or chapters (total number of sargas = 647) and these comprise ślokas or verses. Though the work is almost entirely in the śloka or the anuṣṭubh metre, bigger metres like indravajrā or upendravajrā have also been employed.

Three pāthas or recensions of the Rāmāyaṇa have been discovered so far: the Dākṣiṇātya (southern), the Gauḍīya (Beṅgālī) and the Vāyavya (north-western).

There are some well-known commentaries in Sanskrit. They are:

Tilaka or Rāmābhirāmī by Nāgoji Bhaṭṭa
Śīromaṇi by Śivasahāya
Bhūṣaṇa by Govindarāja
Tattvadīpa by Māheśvara
Tīrtha Rāmānujīyavyākhyā by Kandāla Rāmānuja
Vivekatilaka by Varadarāja
Dharmākūtavyākhyā by Tryambakarāja
Rāmāyaṇa-kūṭa-vyākhyā by Rāmānanda Tīrtha

Most of these have been printed.

Over the years, the Rāmāyaṇa scholars have struggled to discover which part of the text is the original and which is prakṣipta or the interpolated part. However, there has been no unanimity among them. Though the possibility of interpolations has to be conceded, it is not correct to say-as some opine-that the entire *Uttarakāṇḍa* is an interpolation. It is a genuine part of the original text. It may not be out of place to mention here that a ceremonial recitation of the text, especially during the Rāmanavamī (in April) and the Navarātri (during September-October) celebrations, is believed to confer great religious merit.

The Story in Brief

BĀLAKĀṆḌA

Daśaratha, the king of Kosala, was ruling from Ayodhyā, the impregnable and matchless capital. An invincible warrior, a just and kind ruler, he had everything in life except worthy sons to succeed him to the throne in course of time. As per the advice of the sage Vasiṣṭha, the royal priest, he performed the Aśvamedha sacrifice followed by the Putrakāmeṣṭi rite, under the guidance of the well-known sage Ṛṣyaśṛṅga. From the sacrificial fire there arose a divine being who delivered a vessel of pāyasa or

pudding to Daśaratha, instructing him to give it to his three queens-Kausalyā, Sumitrā and Kaikeyī-so that they could bear him virtuous sons.

In course of time Kausalyā, the chief queen, gave birth to Rāma, Sumitrā to the twins Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna, and, Kaikeyī to Bharata.

Under the loving care of the parents and the watchful eyes of the preceptors, the children grew into boyhood. Lakṣmaṇa was very fond of Rāma and liked to be with him always. Śatrughna was more attached to Bharata.

One day Viśvāmitra, the warrior turned sage, arrived at the court of Daśaratha and asked for sending Rāma with him to protect his sacrifice against the deprivations of the demons Mārīca and Subāhu. Hesitant at first, the king yielded and sent Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with him. The two brothers successfully completed their assignment. And, in the company of that great sage, through his various journeys up to Mithilā, the capital city of the King Janaka, they gained a vast knowledge of various subjects including the science of archery, of weapons and of war.

At Mithilā, the capital of Videha, Viśvāmitra took Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to the king Janaka and requested him to show the Śivadhanus, the massive bow of Lord Śiva, to the boys.

Janaka had a daughter Sītā, the paragon of feminine grace and virtues. He had declared that any prince or warrior who could string the Śivadhanus, would get her hand. Since a host of princes and warriors including the mighty ones had miserably failed to pass the test, Janaka was a worried person. He now got it brought to the assembly hall and showed it to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. At the instance of Viśvāmitra, Rāma effortlessly lifted it up and tried to string it. In the process, unable to bear the pressure of his might, the bow broke into two with a thunderous noise. Janaka and his family were extremely pleased.

Daśaratha and his queens were summoned to Mithilā and the marriage, not only of Rāma but also of the other three princes with suitable brides, was celebrated with due éclat. All of them returned to Ayodhyā. On the way, Rāma vanquished Paraśurāma, the ruthless exterminator of the Kṣatriya race. He retired for penance.

AYODHYĀKĀṆḌA

After a few years, Daśaratha, who was getting old, decided to anoint Rāma as the Yuvarāja (heir apparent) and retire. As the news got wind, the whole of Ayodhyā went agog over it. Kaikeyī, the second of the queens who had captivated the heart of Daśaratha by her beauty, was incited by Mantharā, her crooked maid, to intercede with the king on behalf of her son Bharata and demand the kingdom for him. Simultaneously, Rāma was to be banished to the forest for fourteen years. An unfulfilled boon given by Daśaratha to Kaikeyī, came in handy at this juncture and the physical absence of the noble prince Bharata-who was away at his uncle's place- made things easy. Caught in a trap as it were, Daśaratha had to helplessly acquiesce in.

Rāma readily agreed to fulfil his father's word. Along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, who importuned him to accompany him, he left for the forest. Daśaratha, unable to bear the separation from Rāma, his dearest son, passed away in great agony.

Meanwhile Bharata and Śatrughna were called back urgently by Vasiṣṭha, the royal preceptor. After returning to Ayodhyā and learning of the tragic events, Bharata, nobility incarnate, railed against his mother Kaikeyī, refused to accept the kingdom and started for the forest, vowing to bring back Rāma.

When, at last, Bharata succeeded in meeting Rāma at Citrakūṭa in the forest and begged him to return, Rāma refused. Since it was equally incumbent on Bharata to rule the kingdom for fourteen years, to fulfil the word given by Daśaratha to Kaikeyī, Rāma persuaded him to return to Ayodhyā. Bharata did so, taking the pādukās or the sandals of Rāma, which he coronated as the 'King.' He lived at Nandigrāma, a little village, away from Ayodhyā, like a forest recluse, managing the affairs of the State as Rāma's regent.

ARANYAKĀṆḌA

Now Rāma, along with Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, started moving in the forest going deeper, and farther towards the south, visiting the hermitages of many a great sage. Finally, after spending more than ten years, they settled down at Pañcavaṭī in the Daṇḍaka forest.

One day Śūrpaṅkhā, an ugly demoness with uglier intentions, came there. Captivated by Rāma's matchless beauty she beseeched him to marry her. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were having some fun at her expense, she tried to attack Sītā. At this, Lakṣmaṇa cut off her nose and ears as a punishment, as per Rāma's directions. She went to Khara, the demon-chief, an overlord of this area of the forest and complained to him against Rāma. However, when Khara came and attacked Rāma with his huge army of 14,000 demons, Rāma, singlehanded, decimated them. The enraged and hapless, but vengeful, Śūrpaṅkhā, approached Rāvaṇa her brother and the king of Laṅkā, to avenge her humiliation. However, knowing Rāvaṇa's weakness for women, she was wily enough to describe the bewitching beauty of Sītā, the spouse of Rāma. Roused more by lust than by anger, Rāvaṇa approached Mārīca, his erstwhile lieutenant and a past-master in cheating, to assist him in abducting Sītā from the Pañcavaṭī. Failing to dissuade Rāvaṇa from his nefarious designs, Mārīca assumed the form of a golden deer, enticed Sītā to hanker for it and beg Rāma to catch it for her. Rāma pursued it endlessly. Failing to capture it alive, he killed it. Mārīca, while dying uttered a loud cry, 'Oh Sītā! Oh Lakṣmaṇa!' imitating the voice of Rāma. On hearing this, Sītā, out of consternation, forced Lakṣmaṇa much against his will, to go to the rescue of Rāma. Finding her all alone, Rāvaṇa abducted her and carried her away to Laṅkā. Jaṭāyu, the giant vulture, a friend of Rāma, fought with Rāvaṇa in vain to rescue Sītā and became a martyr. Keeping her presence of mind, Sītā while being abducted, dropped some of her ornaments among some monkeys perched on a mountain top. Rāvaṇa, after reaching Laṅkā kept her captive in his pleasure-garden, the Aśokavana.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa returned to their hermitage, found Sītā missing and started a vigorous search. In this process they encountered the demon Kabandha and killed him (thereby redeeming him from a curse). Then they met Śabarī, a woman-hermit of the forest tribe, accepted her hospitality and started towards the Ṛṣyamūka hill as per her advice with a view to meeting Sugrīva, the vānara or monkey chieftain.

KIṢKINDHĀKĀṆḌA

Sugrīva, of the royal family of the kingdom of Kiṣkindhā, was living on the Ṛṣyamūka hill, being banished by his elder brother Vāli, who had also taken away his wife. Rāma forged friendship with him,

killed Vāli and restored the Kiṣkindhā kingdom to Sugrīva who was duly crowned. Sugrīva promised to search for Sītā and help Rāma to recover her.

Later, Sugrīva despatched his monkeys in all directions to find out the whereabouts of Sītā. Since he and his able minister Hanumān, had seen a lady in distress in an aircraft, along with a monstrous figure, flying towards the south, he sent the more able of his troops to the south under the leadership of Aṅgada (Vāli's son) and Hanumān. This group arrived at the shore of the southern sea and started deliberating as to how to cross it.

SUNDARAKĀṆḌA

After some discussions among themselves, it was finally decided that Hanumān should be deputed to go to Laṅkā on behalf of them all. Accordingly he enlarged his body to massive proportions, using his special yogic powers, and crossed the ocean in one leap, overcoming all the obstacles on the way. After a thorough search, he found Sītā in the Aśoka grove, successfully talked to her, delivered to her the signet ring of Rāma, took her cūḍāmaṇi (crown jewel) to be given to Rāma as also her message and returned to the other shore after doing immense havoc to the city of Laṅkā and its ruler.

When Rāma got all the news, he ordered Sugrīva to mobilise his troops and march to the seashore.

YUDDHAKĀṆḌA

When the army was camping on the seashore, Vibhīṣaṇa, younger brother of Rāvaṇa, alighted there from Laṅkā and sought refuge at the feet of Rāma along with his four comrades. He had tried hard, but in vain, to prevail upon Rāvaṇa to return Sītā to Rāma and gain his friendship, thereby saving himself, his city and his subjects from utter disaster. Rāvaṇa had not only spurned his sage advice but had positively humiliated him. Hence Vibhīṣaṇa, being a righteous person, had abandoned Rāvaṇa and joined Rāma.

After successfully building a bridge across the sea, the entire army of Rāma crossed over it, reaching the outskirts of Laṅkā. Rāma's final efforts at peace by trying to induce some sanity in the heart of Rāvaṇa and get back Sītā without war and bloodshed, failed due to Rāvaṇa's obstinacy. A terrific war ensued resulting in immense loss of life on both sides. There were periods of great tension and anxiety for Rāma and his army, as for instance when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa were downed by the serpent missiles of Indrajit or when Lakṣmaṇa was struck unconscious by the śakti-missile of Rāvaṇa. However, all such crises were overcome and all the dead in Rāma's army were restored to life by the breeze of the Sañjīvanī mountain brought by Hanumān. All the great warriors of Rāvaṇa's army including Kumbhakarna (the giant brother of Rāvaṇa) and Indrajit (Rāvaṇa's son) were slain. Finally Rāvaṇa too was killed by Rāma thereby bringing the war to a close.

Then Rāma put Vibhīṣaṇa on the throne of Laṅkā and accepted Sītā, after she underwent the fire-ordeal. By this time, fourteen years of banishment had been completed.

All of them now returned to Ayodhyā and met Bharata and the queen-mothers.

Rāma was then crowned as the king and Sītā as the queen at a joyous and pompous ceremony.

The reign of Rāma (Rāmarājya) was ideal in every sense of the term and all were extremely happy. It lasted for a long time.

UTTARAKĀṆḌA

Being overjoyed at the destruction of Rāvaṇa and the establishment of Rāmarājya, a number of sages, under the leadership of Agastya arrived at Rāma's palace. After Rāma duly honoured them, Agastya narrated the stories of Rāvaṇa and others in detail, just to make him understand how powerful and formi-dable they were. Then they returned to their hermitages.

One day Rāma learnt from his spies about the rumours current in Ayodhyā and elsewhere accusing him of impropriety in bringing back Sītā to his house even though she resided in Rāvaṇa's house for quite some time. Shocked at this, Rāma decided to banish Sītā to the forest and accordingly instructed Lakṣmaṇa to implement it. Sītā, who was then pregnant, was given shelter by the sage Vālmīki whose hermitage was near the place where she had been abandoned. In course of time she gave birth to twins.

They were named Lava and Kuśa, and were brought up by the sage in a manner that befits princes.

Some sages under the leadership of Bhārgava and Cyavana came to Rāma and complained to him against the demon Lavaṇā-sura. Rāma instructed Śatrughna to go to Madhupurī, the capital city of Lavaṇa and destroy him. Śatrughna accomplished the task easily and was crowned as the king there. He ruled for twelve years.

Once the young son of a brāhmaṇa died and the brāhmaṇa blamed it on Rāma since it was an untimely death. Such deaths could take place only when there was adharma or unrighteousness in the kingdom. It was found out that a śūdra, Śambūka by name, was practising severe austerities, which was against the norms of that age. Hence Rāma was obliged to kill him.

Years passed. Rāma decided to perform the Aśvamedha sacrifice in the Naimiśa forest. All arrangements were made. Vālmīki decided to attend the sacrifice along with his disciples including Lava and Kuśa. They were instructed to sing the *Rāmāyaṇa* in all places of the sacrifice. They did so. Even Rāma heard it and was charmed by it. Later, when he learnt that they were his own children he sent word to Vālmīki that Sītā should come to his court and reassert her purity. Though Vālmīki brought her and she did reassert her fidelity to Rāma she also prayed to Mother Earth from whom she had emerged at the time of her supernatural birth, to take her away! The ground split into two and from it emerged Bhūdevī (Mother Earth) with a throne. Seating Sītā on that throne, by her side, she disappeared for ever.

The period of Rāma's life on earth was fast coming to an end. So, the Kālapuruṣa (personified time) arrived at Ayodhyā to remind Rāma that his play on earth was over and that it was time that he return to his abode.

Due to the intrigue of the inexorable fate, Rāma was obliged to banish Lakṣmaṇa who was taken away by Devendra to heaven.

After coronating his sons Lava and Kuśa, Rāma retired to the Sarayū river and then to his divine abode, after giving salvation to all the people of Ayodhyā and others who had accompanied him to the banks of the Sarayū river.

The Characters of the Rāmāyaṇa

Before delving into the study of the various characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, especially of Rāma, one should carefully note the main purpose of the work itself. Vālmīki was a *tapasvī*, a holy man, who had practised severe austerities to realise the Truth within and to serve the society through the power of that realisation.

It was not his intention to compose this epic poem nor was he a poet, competent enough to accomplish it. The simple question he put to Nārada, the great sage, was to know out of curiosity, whether a perfect man existed then, who had in him all the great qualities that bespeak of a perfect being. He himself listed sixteen such qualities. If one did exist, he could as well become a model for the whole humanity to emulate. While admitting that it was difficult for a human being to possess even a fraction of these great qualities, Nārada gladly confessed to the existence of such a remarkable man, Rāma by name, the king of Ayodhyā, of the race of Ikṣvāku, who possessed these qualities in abundance and gave his story in brief. He even indicated the divinity of that personage.

Brahmā, the Creator, chose Vālmīki as the instrument through whom the story of Rāma the perfect being, was to be widely disseminated, infilled him with the necessary power and commanded him to compose this great work. Hence, the *Rāmāyaṇa* that issued forth was a divinely ordained work, aimed at providing an ideal man to the world so that all the human beings could shape their own lives in his mould.

Dharma is the keynote of this lyric poem. It is the basic principle that supports the whole universe. It expresses itself as conscience within and duties and obligations without. Rāma is its most complete representation so much so that he has become synonymous for dharma for ages at a stretch. Other characters like Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata or Hanumān reflect different aspects of that dharma in their life and doings, whereas Rāvaṇa and his ilk exhibit the tragic consequences of its not being followed. Let us now deal briefly with these characters of the Rāmāyaṇa.

RĀMA

Rāma was extremely handsome. Rāma was extraordinarily strong. Rāma was *par excellence*, in the use of weapons and missiles, especially in archery which was his forte. Hence the use of the word 'rāmabāṇa' for any unfailing remedy in any field. He was a past-master in the science of war or the art of peace.

He was deeply learned in the scriptural lore. His knowledge of literature or music or logic was astounding. None could beat him in the finesse of conversation or consultation or negotiation.

Yet, he was humble, affectionate and easily approachable. He rejoiced like a father in the happiness of his subjects and felt grieved at their sorrows and sufferings.

Above all, he was deeply devoted to satya, truth. He spoke nothing but truth and, once word was given, he would keep it at all costs.

He loved and served his parents. He was fond of his brothers, his wife and even his friends. But, when it came to the protection of satya and dharma, he would exercise his adamant will and show that no sacrifice was too great to preserve these principles. To protect the truth of the word given by Daśaratha to Kaikeyī he gave up the kingdom in a trice and that too when he was about to be crowned! To protect the honour of his race and that of the crown and set an example in dharma to his subjects, he

subjected Sītā, his dearest wife, first to the fire-ordeal and then, later, abandoned her eventhough he knew in his heart of hearts that she was pure and innocent!

Daśaratha, who was a prisoner of his own making, urged Rāma to disobey him and even imprison him! Bharata offered back the kingdom to him and earnestly importuned him to return. Even Vasiṣṭha, the royal preceptor concurred with Bharata!

Notwithstanding all these pressures put on him by these beloved ones, Rāma not only refused to budge but also successfully convinced them of the correctness of his decision!

When he returned to Ayodhyā after duly completing the period of banishment, he did not hesitate to take back the kingdom and rule over it. However, he was even prepared to abdicate his right to the kingdom in favour of Bharata, if Bharata had by that time become attached to it. This only shows his extreme nobility and supreme indifference towards mundane comforts.

While living in the forest, he adopted the way of life of the ṛṣis and munis (sages). And yet, as a kṣattriya warrior and an envoy of the ruler of the land, he did not forget his duty towards the helpless forest dwellers, especially when they beseeched him to protect them against the depredations of the rākṣasas (demons). When Sītā protested that he was misusing his might against the rākṣasas who had done no harm to him, he unequivocally declared that it was his duty to chastise or even destroy the evil-doers who harmed the law-abiding citizens. He was prepared to abandon even Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, if need be, in the process, but not his dharma! And this he did, when the need arose.

In friendship also Rāma was absolutely loyal and steady. Sugrīva sought his friendship. Rāma reciprocated. He killed Vāli and got Sugrīva crowned as the king of Kiṣkindhā, thereby fulfilling his part of the covenant. But, Sugrīva on his part faltered. On being pulled up by Rāma, he corrected himself and then plunged himself wholeheartedly in the service of Rāma.

Now, a few words about the Vāli episode that has raised a lot of hue and cry in the academic circles, accusing Rāma of adharma or unrighteous conduct. It should be remembered that the basic source of the whole story is the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki. In this work Vālmīki himself has *solved* the problem by showing that the very Vāli who raised the objections first, accepted Rāma's answer *in toto* and asked for forgiveness! Since Vālmīki did not create either Vāli or Rāma but has only narrated whatever had happened between them, there is no need for anyone else, much less the persons of our generation, removed as we are from them by a few millennia, to take up the cudgels on Vāli's behalf and run down Rāma! Suffice it to say that Vāli knew better.

Rāma was a great leader who knew the pulse of his followers very well. When Vibhīṣaṇa arrived in his camp and sought refuge, Rāma placed the problem before all of them and gave them full freedom to express their views fearlessly. Finally when he did take the decision, it was in perfect accord with his svadharmā, of not refusing shelter to anyone who sought it, even if it be Rāvaṇa himself ! We should note that this decision of his was *against* the overwhelming-almost unanimous -decision of the war council he had called! Apart from his svadharmā, he had so much confidence in his own immense might that he was least afraid of even the mightiest of the enemies. Since he was sure of his victory over Rāvaṇa and the conquest of Laṅkā, he then and there got Vibhīṣaṇa crowned as the king of Laṅkā, so that Laṅkā and its innocent citizens would not suffer after the war.

In the war with Rāvaṇa and his army, Rāma always followed the path of rectitude eventhough the enemies often adopted unfair or even foul means and crooked strategies. Though he had to suffer in the process, he never wavered from it ! During the very first combat with Rāvaṇa, Rāma had worsted

him so much that he could have easily killed him. However, his sense of dharma was so strong that he permitted the enemy to escape from the battlefield with his life and limb intact, but also challenged him to come again after recouping for another round. When Rāvaṇa was finally killed and when Vibhīṣaṇa refused to perform his last rites, Rāma admonished him and declared that he himself would undertake it if he did not! (Compare this with the present day war-ethics!)

Sītā was liberated. Rāma was happy. However, having known the psychology of the common masses who could crucify even a saint, he refused to accept her. The huge crowd comprising the vānaras and the rākṣasas was watching with bated breath. Sītā rose to the occasion. Her whole life was for Rāma's sake. If he disowned her, she had no other alternative than death. To immolate herself in fire was *her* decision. Rāma did not object. He knew that her blazing purity would protect her from the fire. The fire that did not burn Hanumān's tail because of her command, how could it consume *her* at all? As expected, she was restored to Rāma unscathed.

This was Rāma's master-stroke that publicly proved the greatness of not only himself and his spouse, but also vindicated dharma itself, that it protects those who protect it!

Once Rāma assumed the reigns of the kingdom, he ruled it like a father and a mother rolled into one. Punishing the wicked, protecting the good and affording all opportunities to the subjects to lead a virtuous life was the hall-mark of his administration. Since he meticulously followed dharma in his own life, even nature-which is also ruled by ṛta, the cosmic aspect of dharma-was kind to his country.

However, even in the Rāmarājya-the country ruled by Rāma-there were people whose tongues wagged a little more than Rāma's goodness and greatness could withstand. The central figure of this calumny was again the poor Sītā! To protect the honour of the Ikṣvāku race and to keep his subjects within the limits of dharma, the dharma of family life, Rāma banished Sītā to the forest where Vālmīki gave her shelter. Sītā knew her lord's compulsions and fully cooperated, never being bitter against him for this unkind act.

The beheading of Śambūka, the sūdra ascetic, by Rāma has drawn the ire of many a critic of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. A look at *all* the facts of the story and a dispassionate analysis of the same will reveal that Rāma acted in the best interest of the society and in accordance with the dharma of the times. The sūdras were *not* prohibited from performing tapas or austerities provided it was for self-purification or self-realization. And, even for this they were expected to follow the injunctions of the śāstras (the scriptures honoured by the society) and śiṣṭācāra (conduct set up by the tradition of the good in the society). Śambūka was performing severe austerities with the intention of ascending to heaven in the human body! This was clearly against the scriptural injunctions and the norms for entry into heaven which required the acquisition of a divine and subtle body to fit in with the heavenly creation. It is obvious that Śambūka was very much attached to his physical body and-perhaps, against the wiser counsels of the wise ones of the society-was trying to force his entry as it were, into heaven. That means, the rules of the game had to be relaxed to cater to his whims, thereby disturbing the cosmic balance. It is akin to someone insisting on admission into the intensive care unit or the operation theatre of a hospital with his polluted clothes on, refusing to change over to the sterilized dress! If such a behaviour, that too if it is accompanied by an agitational approach, is condoned, the consequences would be catastrophic. The untimely death of the brāhmaṇa boy was only the first stirring of this since the subtle cosmic structure was getting loosened. Hence Rāma was right in doing what he did. If we remember Rāma's affectionate treatment meted out to Guha and Śabarī, who were also from the sūdra class, we can appreciate his conduct better.

And, the revival of the dead boy back to life, confirms the rightness of Rāma's conduct.

Rāma was the personification of infinite compassion, love and consideration, and gratefulness. That is why when he ascended to his heavenly abode, he granted liberation to all the citizens of Ayodhyā who had accompanied him till the end.

Whether Rāma was God become man or man become God, Vālmīki's Rāma is intensely human. He loves, rejoices, weeps or gets angry or exhibit many other human moods like anyone of us. However, in and through all these, he has shown to what limits we can expand and evolve. That is why he has been called-and rightly so-'Maryādā Puruṣottama,' the best of men who has expanded the human possibilities to infinite limits (maryādā = limit, border). The tribute paid by Mārīca, a demon and an erstwhile foe of Rāma, viz., that he was *vigrahavān dharmah* (Personified Dharma), speaks volumes for Rāma's greatness.

LAKṢMAṆA

If there is anyone in the *Rāmāyaṇa* who lived for Rāma and for nothing else or none else, it is Lakṣmaṇa. He was a paragon of loving service to Rāma. He was deeply attached to Rāma right from the childhood days. Rāma too was equally attached to him.

Was Lakṣmaṇa irascible? Was he an agnostic who cared a fig for dharma? Was he a disobedient and heartless son who despised his own father? Was he suspicious by nature? What were his achievements in life? Almost nothing?

This description, this list of 'vices,' may appear to fit in well with Lakṣmaṇa as long as one does not understand the intensity or the depth of his love for Rāma. The one and only puruṣārtha or purpose of his life was to keep Rāma happy. Keeping that end in view, he was ever prepared for any service, any sacrifice, in his life.

No one asked him to accompany Rāma to the forest. But he was ready even before Rāma was! He walked in front clearing the path. He built the huts for the comfortable living of Rāma and Sītā. He gathered the articles of food for them, cooked for them, served them and stood guard when they slept or rested. The hut he built at Pañcavaṭī pleased Rāma so immensely that he saw in Lakṣmaṇa his own father's love.

When Bharata came to the Citrakūṭa with his huge army and retinue Lakṣmaṇa flew into a rage suspecting harm from him for Rāma. When he learnt of his noble intentions he was ashamed and melted in love.

Rāma had hesitated to kill the demoness Tāṭakā since she was a woman and since killing a woman was considered to be a grave sin. But Lakṣmaṇa did not waver in the least to punish Śūrpaṅkhā since Rāma had commanded him to do so. His duty was just to implement Rāma's orders!

Lakṣmaṇa was very intelligent and thoughtful. He could easily see through the māyā or the deceptions of the rākṣasas behind the golden deer. He warned both Sītā and Rāma about it.

Unfortunately he did not succeed in preventing what actually happened.

When Sītā castigated him and threatened to commit suicide if he did not go to the rescue of Rāma (after the deer had been killed), he left with a heavy heart thinking that disobeying Rāma's

command was better than allowing the self-immolation of Sītā. Yet, he could not escape the censure by Rāma!

When Rāma was inconsolable due to the loss of Sītā, it was Lakṣmaṇa who stood by him like a rock, often giving the healing touch by his mature advice and timely consolation.

In the war with the rākṣasas, Lakṣmaṇa fought bitterly not caring for his own life. His conquest of Indrajit was considered by the sages of the day, even more difficult of accomplishment than that of Rāvaṇa by Rāma.

His feelings, when he had to prepare the pyre for Sītā-during the fire ordeal-and be a mute witness to it, can better be imagined than described.

When Rāma returned to Ayodhyā and was coronated as the king, he offered Lakṣmaṇa the position of Yuvarāja (heir apparent) which he flatly refused to accept since it would interfere with his service to Rāma!

At the time of banishment of Sītā it was again the poor Lakṣmaṇa that had to carry it out. It was worse than hell for him.

Just as Rāma was closeted with the Kālapuruṣa and Lakṣmaṇa was guarding the place with strict instructions not to allow anybody inside, Durvāsas, the sage known for his volcanic temper, appeared on the scene and insisted upon being admitted into the presence of Rāma. Lakṣmaṇa had only two alternatives before him:

To admit him and face death as punishment at the hands of Rāma or prevent him, thereby subjecting all to destruction by the wrath of the sage's curse. Lakṣmaṇa made the supreme sacrifice by choosing the former alternative since he did not want the entire Ayodhyā to be annihilated.

As soon as Rāma expelled him as a substitute for punishment with death, Lakṣmaṇa went straight to the Sarayū river and gave up the body since there was no use living any more without his Rāma!

BHARATA

Though Bharata was only next to Rāma in age, he conducted himself as the least of the brothers. If Rāma accepted the loss of the kingdom and expulsion to the forest stoically, Bharata gave up the kingdom that was placed in his lap as his, since he could never accept the injustice done to Rāma. After severely reproaching his mother Kaikeyī for all the havoc that had been wrought by her, he tried his best to bring back Rāma and coronate him as the king. When he did not succeed, he consented to rule as Rāma's regent by installing his sandals on the throne and himself living in a village like a hermit, denying all the pleasures of life that had been denied to Rāma.

Bharata had ruled the kingdom so efficiently that its properties and resources had been multiplied ten times. When Rāma returned, Bharata offered the kingdom back to him immediately and felt greatly relieved. Rāma made him the Yuvarāja.

An ideal brother and an ideal devotee of Rāma, Bharata continues to live in the hearts of Indians for ever.

DAŚARATHA

The picture of Daśaratha that we get while reading the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that of an old man, a weak king, a lustful prisoner of Kaikeyī's beauty and a father doting on his son Rāma.

However, in his younger days, he had proved to be a great warrior, capable of driving his ratha or chariot in daśa or ten directions -hence the name Daśaratha-and an able as well as popular ruler.

His greatest defect was his impulsive nature, of giving promises without discretion or discrimination. It was this that made him promise Aśvapati Kekaya, father of Kaikeyī, that her son would be crowned as the king. Again it was the same trait that made him promise Viśvāmitra to give whatever he wanted and then try to back out when he wanted Rāma to be sent with him. It was again the same story that repeated with Kaikeyī, leading to untold misery and even his own death under tragic circumstances.

SUGRĪVA

On returning to Ayodhyā after the exile, Rāma introduced Sugrīva to Bharata as their fifth brother. He fully deserved that remark and status by his surrender to Rāma and dedication to his cause. However, it took quite some time for him to rise to that level.

Though Sugrīva was himself a strong man and a great warrior, the repeated defeats and hammerings he had received at the hands of the powerful but vicious Vāli had made him extremely suspicious, nervous and cowardly. That is why he suspected Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa at first sight as Vāli's spies. He gained full faith in Rāma's prowess only after testing him in more than one way.

He was intelligent, shrewd and worldly-wise. He was also addicted to the lower pleasures of life like sex and drinking.

However, by the deft handling of Rāma he came round quickly and proved to be a great asset.

After being crowned as the king of Kiṣkindhā, Sugrīva made arrangements to gather all the vānara warriors from different places at Kiṣkindhā to help Rāma in his search for Sītā. He then retired into his harem and forgot all about his responsibility as the king and his duty towards Rāma. When Rāma sent Lakṣmaṇa as his envoy to caution him and even warn him, Sugrīva pacified the irate Lakṣmaṇa through Tārā. Then he plunged into his task earnestly.

Once the whereabouts of Sītā were known, Sugrīva mobilised his forces and marched towards Laṅkā under the leadership of Rāma.

The help he rendered to Rāma both personally and through his army of monkeys was invaluable. He even fought a duel with Rāvaṇa on seeing him for the first time and returned after inflicting humiliation upon him. This being an impulsive and rash act, he was pulled up by Rāma.

Rāvaṇa tried to entice Sugrīva away from Rāma but got a severe rebuff. His loyalty to Rāma was, by now, absolutely firm.

He fought bravely and killed many a rākṣasa warrior. His eagerness to witness Rāma's coronation made Rāma bring him and all the vānara heroes to Ayodhyā. He was honoured suitably.

When Rāma decided to leave for his heavenly abode, Sugrīva also accompanied him.

HANUMĀN

Hanumān can be considered as the brightest jewel, a veritable diamond, in the necklace of *Rāmāyaṇa* characters. His physical strength and prowess were proverbial. His mastery over the scriptures was unmatched. His speech was not only faultless but also elegant. His intelligence and shrewdness were, by any standards, extraordinary. His common sense was uncanny. Even his facial appearance, though belonging to the race of the *vānaras*, was bright and pleasant. Above all, his devotion to Rāma was supreme, towering far above all other qualities. Anyone, as Rāma himself admits, who has such an one as his servant or envoy or minister, should deem himself as the luckiest of beings and there is no task that he cannot accomplish.

Hanumān was the son of Añjanādevī, born as a result of the grace of Vāyudeva (the god of wind, also known as Marut). Hence the appellations Āñjaneya and Māruti. The blow delivered by Indra, by his Vajrāyudha, on his jaw (= hanu) when he was a baby, to check his menacing prowess, left it swollen and hence he came to be known as 'Hanumān,' 'one with a prominent jaw'. He was educated by no less a person than Sūrya, the Sun-god and acquired immunity from various weapons, as per the boons of the gods in heaven. Once as a child, he incurred the wrath of some sages by his mischievous pranks that were too much to bear. They cursed him that he would not remember his strength until someone reminded him about it. This silenced him, preventing him from harassing the hapless sages.

When Sugrīva was driven out by Vāli from Kiṣkindhā, Hanumān chose to leave the country along with him, eventhough Vāli begged him to stay on, since he knew that dharma was on his side. He voluntarily underwent all the hardships for his sake.

When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa arrived at the foot of the hill Rṣyamūka, Sugrīva deputed him to find out who they were. His manner of approach-reverent and courteous-as well as his refined speech impressed Rāma so much that he gave vent to his admiration. Convinced of their nobility and greatness Hanumān carried them to Sugrīva and eulogised them before him. The attraction of Hanumān for Rāma and Rāma's special affection for him that sprouted on that first meeting grew to phenomenal proportions and have now become a legend.

When Vāli was killed by Rāma, and Tārā, his queen, was inconsolable with grief, it was Hanumān who succeeded in restoring her mental balance and peace by timely advice with an effective philosophical discourse.

Again, when Sugrīva had steeped himself in sensuous pleasures neglecting his duties of the State, it was Hanumān who roused him out of that stupor and advised him to apologise to Rāma through Lakṣmaṇa.

When Sugrīva sent four batches of his troops in the four cardinal directions in search of Sītā, he sent Hanumān as a leader of the southern batch, since the possibility of finding Sītā in the south were the brightest.

Rāma too gave his signet ring to Hanumān with the necessary instructions of what to communicate to Sītā when found. This clearly shows the faith that they reposed in him.

After reaching the southern shore of the land mass, the *vānaras* became despondent. Aṅgada, their leader, even spoke of staying back permanently! Hanumān effectively intervened and through his

wise counsels successfully prevented, what might have resulted in a division of the country of Kiṣkindhā. This shows his farsightedness and loyalty to the cause he had committed himself.

Hanumān crossed the vast ocean with a mighty leap, overcoming all the obstacles on the way. He entered the city of Laṅkā after vanquishing the demoness Laṅkā the protectress of the fort-city. He searched for Sītā in every nook and corner, especially in Rāvaṇa's palace and the harem but was disappointed. That the seeing of the women of the harem in various uncouth postures did not upset his steady mind in any way is a tribute to his brahmacarya or celibate life. Realizing that such a pativrata (a chaste lady deeply devoted only to her husband) like Sītā could never consent to be in the palace of an abductor, he started searching for her elsewhere. Finally he found her in the Aśoka grove, the pleasure garden of Rāvaṇa behind his palace.

Hanumān had to use all his wisdom and tact to establish contact with her and to develop a personal rapport. Once that was done, the rest was easy. He gave her Rāma's signet ring and message, and, reassured her of Rāma rescuing her very soon. He took the cūḍāmaṇi (crestjewel) from her to be delivered to Rāma as also her message.

Hanumān, though his task was fulfilled, did not want to leave, without leaving a mark, a warning shot as it were, to the enemy.

So he contrived to meet Rāvaṇa and also have a surveillant view of his city by destroying his favourite pleasure garden and killing all the rākṣasa warriors that came to capture him. Later, wilfully submitting himself to Indrajit's Brahmāstra, he succeeded in meeting Rāvaṇa in the courtroom of his palace, admonished him severely and advised him to return Sītā honourably to Rāma or be prepared to face decimation at his hands. Due to Rāvaṇa's wrath, when Hanumān's tail was set on fire by his aides, the vānara hero destroyed the city by that very fire. He then triumphantly returned to Rāma and Sugrīva who immediately started on an invasion of Laṅkā.

During the war, Hanumān's heroic exploits were many. Even the mighty Rāvaṇa could not stand the intensity of his blows!

After the death of Rāvaṇa at the hands of Rāma and the formal coronation of Vibhīṣaṇa as the king of Laṅkā, Sītā had to be given the good tidings. This privilege was naturally conferred on Hanumān who did it so successfully and gracefully that Sītā was all praise for him. Out of his intensity of devotion to Sītā and his sensitivity to her intolerable suffering under the rākṣasīs (demonesses) Hanumān offered to punish them severely. The offer, however, was rejected outright by Sītā, the compassionate mother of all.

Along with Vibhīṣaṇa and Sugrīva, Hanumān also went to Ayodhyā to attend the coronation ceremony of Rāma. When the Puṣpaka-vimāna, the divine aircraft, alighted in the hermitage of the sage Bharadvāja, it was again Hanumān's prerogative to act as the messenger of Rāma to Bharata, then living at Nandigrāma. In this he endeared himself to Bharata almost instantaneously.

After the coronation, Rāma gave a priceless necklace to Sītā giving her the freedom to grant it to anyone she deemed fit.

Again, it was none other than Hanumān who received the gift.

Since Hanumān decided to stay back in this world as long as Rāma's legendary story was recited and listened to, Rāma blessed him before he left for his heavenly abode.

Though coming from the Kiṣkindhā culture, considered to be a little lower than that of Ayodhyā, Hanumān stands as the brightest example of human excellence.

VIBHĪṢAṆA

Vibhīṣaṇa is one of the dazzling gems not only among the rākṣasas but also among the other votaries of Rāma. Bhīṣma and Droṇa of the *Mahābhārata*, though they knew that Duryodhana was morally wrong in usurping the kingdom of the Pāṇḍavas, ultimately sided with him. True, they advised him and even admonished him. But, to them, obligation to a person became more important than commitment to dharma! Vidura was a little better. He not only severely admonished Duryodhana and his tribe but also stayed away from participating in the iniquitous war. But Vibhīṣaṇa of the *Rāmāyaṇa* made history by deserting the camp of the wicked and fighting against it from the camp of the good and the noble. No doubt he had an ambition for becoming the king of Laṅkā as Rāma himself has admitted. But, coming from the royal race, he could not abdicate his claim to the throne and responsibility to the kingdom since it involved saving Laṅkā ultimately, from ignominy.

Being sāttvika by nature, goodness and devotion to dharma were natural to him. Even when he practised severe austerities along with Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarṇa, and Brahmā appeared before him to bless him, he asked only for his mind being firmly established in dharma! Brahmā, pleased with him, granted him the additional boon of being immortal even here.

Śurpaṅakhā too and later on Rāvaṇa himself, concede his righteousness and goodness.

In Rāvaṇa's caucus of sychophants he was the first to boldly declare Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā as utterly wrong and sinful and to exhort him in various ways to send her back to Rāma with all honour due to her and to Rāma. In this battle for righteousness he had many an encounter with Rāvaṇa's aides and even with Indrajit, his own young nephew. Yet, he successfully stuck to his guns and silenced them all.

But for the utter humiliation and positive insult heaped upon him by Rāvaṇa in his insolence, Vibhīṣaṇa might have continued to live in Laṅkā, persevering in his efforts to bring back sanity into his behaviour. But that was not to be.

When he finally decided to cross over to Rāma's side, he never hesitated, since he knew in his heart of hearts, that Rāma would neither punish him nor desert him. His innate faith in Rāma's greatness and nobility was his forte.

The first thing that Rāma did was to symbolically crown him as the monarch of Laṅkā. This automatically enhanced Vibhīṣaṇa's faith in him.

Since Vibhīṣaṇa's surrender and Rāma's acceptance were both complete and perfect, Vibhīṣaṇa spared no effort in helping Rāma to overcome all the obstacles created by the rākṣasas, especially the ones centred in māyā or delusory powers. His help to Rāma, particularly during the beheading of the Māyā-Sītā (illusory Sītā) was timely and invaluable.

After Rāvaṇa's death, Vibhīṣaṇa at first, refused to perform the last rites for him. Being admonished by Rāma and realizing his duty, he completed it as per the dictates of the scriptures. The lifelong bonds of brotherly affection then made him break down with sorrow and lamentation. However, he quickly overcame the same and regained his usual composure.

He too attended Rāma's coronation at Ayodhyā, enjoying his loving hospitality.

When Rāma finally departed from this world, he commanded Vibhīṣaṇa to return to his kingdom and rule over his subjects by dharma. Vibhīṣaṇa was not allowed to open his mouth and protest, because Laṅkā needed his benign rule!

RĀVAṆA

Even the strongest of chains breaks at its weakest link with little effort. Even the mightiest of men gets liquidated by his own mortal sins. Rāvaṇa the 'lokarāvaṇa,' who 'shook the worlds' once, is the supreme example of this eternal principle. He had great physical strength, was handsome and stately in appearance, possessed vast knowledge of the Vedas and was an expert in the use of weapons and in waging wars.

However, his uncontrollable lust, as also his arrogance, brought about his utter ruination.

Endowed with natural strength and prowess, and boosted further by the boons he had secured from Brahmā, the creator, he was a terror to the whole world. There was no warrior whom he had not vanquished or killed, no sage whom he had not humiliated, no woman whom he had not molested during his nefarious invasions and victory marches. He was shrewd enough to forge friendly ties with those who were a match to him so that his evil deeds could go on unhindered. Kārtavīrya and Vāli belonged to this category.

But neither mercury nor sin can be digested that easily! The tears of the chaste women and the anguished cries of the holy hermits along with their curses weighed heavily upon him, finally bringing him down.

Sītā proved to be his nemesis. From the day she was brought to Laṅkā, its fate was sealed. Odious omens started to appear in abundance foreboding evil to the whole society and its king. Not only Vibhīṣaṇa, even the trusted lieutenants of Rāvaṇa, had noticed them with dismay and had warned him of the impending disaster if the remedial measure of returning Sītā was not implemented immediately.

But the die had been cast. Being a prisoner of inordinate lust and an aggressive ego, Rāvaṇa could never get out of his self-created and self-nurtured predicament.

He never hesitated to sacrifice the lives of his trusted generals, his near and dear relatives, even his own brother and sons, for bolstering his position. The very fact that he got Kumbhakarna woken up before the allotted period of six months, even though he knew well that that would mean his sure death, is proof enough for this.

In his fight against Rāma and his army, Rāvaṇa employed every means, fair or foul, to defeat or destroy the enemies. When nothing worked and his own forces were steadily getting decimated, Rāvaṇa realized that he was now paying through his nose, for all his sins and misdeeds. But it was too late. In desperation he even tried to behead the poor Sītā, since she was 'responsible' for all his ills! Timely intervention by the saner elements around him saved her life.

Rāvaṇa had been worsted in his battle against Rāma earlier, who had mercifully let him off the hook. But, when the final battle ensued, there was no escaping. He fought bravely and bitterly, but was

brought down by the infallible missile (Brahmāstra) bearing the name of the very person who had endowed him with many boons and powers!

Rāvaṇa stands today as the supreme example of the tragedy that can strike anyone who misuses and abuses his talents and powers, against the good and the noble, against the innocent and the holy.

KUMBHAKARṆA

Endowed with a mountainous body and an appetite of astronomical magnitude, Kumbha- karṇa possessed a simple heart and an intellect tempered with a sense of justice. When his very existence in the waking state-he used to eat up the living beings by scores at a time to satisfy his ravenous appetite-became a disaster for the world, the gods successfully worked out a stratagem with the assistance of Sarasvatī (the goddess of speech) and the concurrence of Brahmā, the Creator, to put him to sleep most of the time. He would wake up once, that too just for a day, after a sleeping bout of six months. This saved the lives of millions of beings and salvaged the honour of the Creator himself.

Kumbhakarṇa was present in the second advisory council called by Rāvaṇa. He boldly admonished him and even gave a discourse on the duties of a king! However, his own nature soon overtook this streak of wisdom in him and he promised Rāvaṇa to 'set right' everything by his own prowess. He then went to sleep.

Within nine days after this, tragedy after tragedy struck Rāvaṇa and he lost a good number of his sons and generals. So, he was obliged to wake up Kumbhakarṇa from his phenomenal sleep, even though he knew of its disastrous consequences, since rousing Kumbhakarṇa half way through his sleep would mean his certain death.

This time also Kumbhakarṇa was amazingly frank and gave the same advice. Rāvaṇa frowned upon him. Seeing that he was in no mood to listen to words of sanity and wisdom, Kumbhakarṇa confessed to having given that advice as a matter of duty but agreed to do his bidding. Rāvaṇa, of course, commanded him to fight.

Kumbhakarṇa landed on the battlefield like an avalanche and started destroying the vānaras by catching them and eating them up. He almost succeeded in capturing Sugrīva but the latter managed to escape after successfully amputating his earlobes and nose bridge.

As he was rushing towards Rāma, Vibhīṣaṇa accosted him.

Kumbhakarṇa's heart melted out of love and compassion for him and advised him to make himself scarce lest he might be killed.

Kumbhakarṇa appreciated and approved Vibhīṣaṇa's decision to join Rāma and blessed that the rākṣasa race be saved by him.

Kumbhakarṇa was finally mowed down by the powerful arrows of Rāma.

Verily, he strikes us more like a tragic hero. By siding with the unrighteous conduct of his elder brother, though out of brotherly love, he sacrificed himself. It was, however, in vain.

VĀLI

Vāli was the son of Ṛkṣarajas, born by the grace of Indra. Sugrīva was his younger brother. He was the king of Kiṣkindhā.

He was extremely strong and had even routed Rāvaṇa once when he had dared to battle with him.

Vāli had been blessed by Indra with a golden necklace that would add not only grace but also strength to him.

Though Vāli and Sugrīva lived together in peace and harmony with mutual love and affection, fate brought about a deep chasm between them which persisted primarily due to Vāli's intransigent and vengeful nature.

Once, Vāli, accompanied by Sugrīva, went in hot pursuit after a demon Māyāvi by name who had challenged him. When the enemy entered a cave, Vāli kept Sugrīva at the entrance as guard and went inside. He did not return even after a long time. When blood flowed out of the cave, and Sugrīva heard the noises of the rākṣasas, he apprehended that Vāli might have died. To prevent them from escaping, Sugrīva blocked the mouth of the cave with a boulder and returned to Kiṣkindhā with great sorrow.

The ministers crowned him as the king. Sometime later, Vāli returned after killing Māyāvi and was furious to see Sugrīva on the throne. Though Sugrīva surrendered and explained what had happened- that it was a genuine case of misunderstanding -the suspicious and vindictive Vāli ruthlessly drove him out. He also usurped Rumā, Sugrīva's wife, in spite of the pleadings and the sensible advice of Tārā, his own queen. He thus incurred a great sin equivalent to incest, for which he had to pay with his life at the hands of Rāma.

While accusing Rāma for having killed him in this manner he had said that he himself could have recovered Sītā for him. Rāma who knew better, had chosen Sugrīva as his ally rather than Vāli, because the former was a dharmātma, a righteous person and the latter was not. Being lewd by nature and a committed friend of Rāvaṇa, the consequences for Rāma would not have been very pleasant.

Either due to Rāma's greatness or due to a streak of goodness in Vāli's own personality, Vāli realized his mistake, accepted Rāma's explanation, asked for his forgiveness and died a peaceful death.

SĪTĀ

Sītā, the immaculate, the ideal of Indian womanhood for ages, was the adopted daughter of Sīradhvaja-Janaka, 'Janaka' being the surname of the family. She was found by him in the ground while ploughing it, as a part of sacrificial rites. Hence she was also called Bhūmijā or the daughter of Mother Earth. Keeping her divine origin in mind, Janaka had pledged to give her in marriage only to him who would string the Śivadhanus (the great bow of Lord Śiva) that was in the possession of his family. Many a warrior-prince had tried his hand at it but none had succeeded. Rāma did. And, the marriage was performed with due éclat. Sītā lived happily with Rāma for quite a few years in Ayodhyā.

When Rama gave up the kingdom, chose to retire to the forest, Sītā automatically followed him. That was how she had been trained by her parents in her svadharma.

Sītā was an ideal match for Rāma whether in physical beauty or education and culture or wisdom or steady faithfulness. Though she was obedient and ever ready to serve him, she freely expressed her opinion-what she thought was right-when the occasion demanded. When Rāma gave word to the sages of Daṇḍaka forest that he would destroy the demons of the forest, she protested gently saying that the demons had done him no harm and reminded him that he had come to the forest like a hermit!

However, when Rāma replied to her objections she accepted the same gracefully. The appearance of the golden deer at Pañcavaṭī was a turning point in her and in Rāma's life. The extraordinary beauty of the golden deer was so enchanting that she fell a prey to it in spite of the timely warning given by the shrewd Lakṣmaṇa. Though Rāma too was carried away by its beauty, he was more eager to satisfy the desire of Sītā who had sacrificed everything for his sake and had never asked for a thing. The consequences were of course disastrous. When Sītā heard the distressed voice of 'Mārīca-Rāma,' she was so unnerved-as women under such situations do-that she goaded Lakṣmaṇa to go to Rāma's rescue. But, Lakṣmaṇa the wise one, did not want to stir out, leaving her unprotected. Then she openly accused him of the vilest of intentions, and even threatened to commit suicide if he did not go! Poor Lakṣmaṇa chose the lesser evil and departed.

All the same he did not escape from severe admonition by Rāma.

When Rāvaṇa appeared on the scene in the guise of a monk, she, in her innocence, treated him with all the respect due to a monk.

When he made his intentions known and then abducted her, she was shocked. She then realized her fatal mistake and repented for having accused and taunted Lakṣmaṇa. But it was too late!

While being carried away and when she noticed some persons sitting on a hill, she had the presence of mind to drop some of her ornaments amidst them. This, later on, helped Rāma and Sugrīva to locate the abductor's place.

While in Rāvaṇa's captivity she lived a very austere life. She ruthlessly spurned all his advances and treated him like straw.

She was bold enough to advise him on dharma and forcefully suggest that she be returned to Rāma with due honour. She even threatened to burn him up by the very power of her chastity but held herself since she did not have Rāma's permission, nor did she want his prowess to go waste.

Her mind, all the while, was dwelling on Rāma and Rāma alone.

Once Hanumān appeared on the scene and she got the news of Rāma, her spirits got buoyed up.

Her refusal to go with Hanumān back to Rāma, bespeaks volumes of her sense of honour and propriety.

Her prayer to Agni, the fire-god, to protect Hanumān when his tail had been set on fire, and her refusal to permit Hanumān to punish the wicked rākṣasīs reveals her motherly love and compassion.

After Rāma killed Rāvaṇa and crowned Vibhīṣaṇa as the king of Laṅkā, Sītā was brought to Rāma at his bidding. But when Rāma spoke very harshly and disparagingly, she gave a spirited reply and chose to die by entering into fire rather than suffer ignominy. No sooner did she enter the fire, than she was brought out unscathed, endowed with even greater beauty and grace, by Agni himself. After this fire-ordeal, when Rāma accepted her, her joy knew no bounds.

Following the coronation of Rāma she enjoyed peace and bliss, However, when Rāma banished her to the forest eventhough she was pregnant-being shaken by the insinuations of the people of Ayodhyā, she took it in its stride, appreciating Rāma's standpoint and reaction.

The sage Vālmīki who sheltered her and nurtured her children, was eager to reunite her with Rāma. However, Rāma's insistence on her proving her purity once again in public, brought the curtain down on her life once for all. She gracefully chose to leave the world rather than face the humiliation of proving her innocence and purity, time and again. But, even in her final moments, her only concern was Rāma, her lord.

KAUSALYĀ

Vālmīki does not give any information about Kausalyā's antecedents. Though she was the chief queen of Daśaratha, he had ignored her, due to his infatuation with Kaikeyī and the fear of incurring her wrath. Having been deprived of his love, she lived more like a recluse or a nun, sustaining herself on the meagre funds granted to her. She used to spend a substantial part of this on the maintenance of Vedic students in a part of her palace. She was often harassed by the servants and others of Kaikeyī's household.

On hearing that Rāma would be coronated as Yuvarāja, she started ceremonial worship and giving gifts in a big way. When Rāma broke the tragic news, she was naturally affected like any mother. Her great disappointment made her speak very harsh words to Daśaratha wounding him deeply. However, his remorse and pitiable remarks begging for pardon, made her retract and apologize. She even remonstrated with Rāma saying that as his mother, her command-`Do not go to the forest!'-should get precedence over his father's! When Rāma gave convincing reasons she accepted the same and cooperated.

On the arrival of Bharata who was eager to make amends for all the havoc perpetrated by his mother, she spoke harshly at first, wounding his tender heart further. But, when she discovered his magnanimity, she immediately responded and treated him with the same affection that she showered on Rāma.

How she greeted Rāma, when he returned to Ayodhyā, can better be guessed than described.

She was a simple woman with a golden heart who suffered much in life but maintained her nobility and dignity throughout.

SUMITRĀ

Sumitrā, the second wife of Daśaratha, was superior even to Kausalyā in her equanimity, nobility and recognition of the divinity of Rāma. She did not weep and wail when Lakṣmaṇa decided to accompany Rāma to the forest. On the other hand she profusely blessed him, advising him to treat Rāma and Sītā as his parents, Daśaratha and Sumitrā. If Kausalyā, even Sītā, found occasions to vent their bitterness against Kaikeyī, it was Sumitrā alone who never did it. She bore all the hardships and ignominies, created by Kaikeyī's jealousies, with stoic heroism. That is why Daśaratha called her as `tapasvinī,' a hermitess. She solidly stood by Kausalyā, giving solace and comfort by her timely advice. By her words and deeds, she stands out as a remarkable woman.

KAIKEYĪ

Kaikeyī presents herself to us as an enigmatic personality. However, piecing together all the information we can gather about her, we can solve the riddle to a great extent.

She was the daughter of a woman-the queen of Aśvapati, of Kekaya kingdom-who had been banished by her husband for her illhumoured nature. She had inherited her mother's temperament, who had not cared even for the life of her husband! If physical beauty had equipped Kaikeyī with the power to ensnare Daśaratha, her impetuous nature had made it worse. All the persons in the palace, as also Vasiṣṭha the royal preceptor, Sumantra the chief minister and Siddhārtha (another minister) knew it and had taken her to task severely on various occasions. Even Bharata did not have many kind words to spare for her!

Bharata and Śatrughna seem to have lived with Aśvapati most of the time. This loss of the company of her dear son, had perhaps, been compensated by her by immersing herself in the pleasures of the palace and harassing her co-wives.

One thing however was certain:-She loved Rāma as she loved Bharata and was all praise for his noble qualities. Whether she too had a better side in her personality or whether Rāma's sterling qualities could penetrate even her irascibility is left to one's discretion to judge.

But for the Mantharā factor, her reaction on hearing the news of Rāma's prospective coronation might have been pleasant. It was Mantharā who stoked the fires of her innate jealousy towards Kausalyā, the chief queen, which ultimately developed into a conflagration resulting in all the havoc.

Daśaratha loved her intensely. But his love and attachment for Rāma were even more intense. Had he not been trapped by his own words and the boons he had granted earlier, he might have dismissed her demands and even disowned her unceremoniously. All his entreaties and piteous lamentations had no effect on her.

Any woman, and a favoured wife at that, would not have been that bad. Extremely harsh accusations or harsher invectives, even by Sumantra and Vasiṣṭha, fell on deaf ears.

All that she did, was for her dear son Bharata. But she had not obviously, expected his adverse reactions. When Bharata too joined the chorus of criticism against her and decided to bring back Rāma, she must have repented for her hasty actions, since she too formed the party that went to the forest with him.

She was also one of the persons in the forefront, to greet and welcome Rāma, on his triumphant return.

She is a good example of persons spoiled by indiscriminate pampering by the loved ones.

ŚABARĪ

Śabarī is the only character in the *Rāmāyaṇa* which is 'small' but 'beautiful!' She stands as the supreme example of a person attaining beatitude by devotion and surrender to the guru or spiritual preceptor.

Her real name is not known. The word 'Śabarī' just indicates that she was a woman belonging to the śabara caste. Śabarās were a forest tribe, classed among the śūdras and living by selling honey and fruits gathered in the forest.

She had a guru, Mataṅga by name. He was a very great person, a knower of dharma, who had practised severe austerities. He was perhaps the same sage who had cursed Vāli for his evil deeds. Śabarī was living in his hermitage as per his command given at the time of his departure from this world. Having directed her to wait until Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa came there and then leave the world after worshipping them, he himself had cast off the body in his Vedic fire. She too did the same thing after honouring Rāma to her heart's content.

There is a popular (mistaken) notion that Śabarī gave Rāma fruits after tasting them, thereby implying that she gave ucchiṣṭa (food or eatable soiled by one's saliva) to him. There is absolutely no basis for this belief either in the *Rāmāyaṇa* or in the allied works. As per the descriptions given by Vālmīki, she knew the manners and etiquette (yathāvidhi) of honouring guests. Rāma's questions posed to her touch upon her austerities only.

Once the purpose of her long wait was over by meeting Rāma and worshipping his feet and honouring him by giving the fruits she had gathered, she expressed her blessedness and bliss.

It should specially be noted that the caste factor never came in the way of her honouring Rāma or Rāma responding to her service or her attaining liberation.

TĀRĀ

Tārā, the queen of Vāli and the mother of Aṅgada, is the only woman character of Kiṣkindhā about whom Vālmīki has given some details. She was the daughter of Suṣeṇa, a vānara hero.

Tārā was very beautiful and was also very intelligent, a combination not always very common. She was also good in the art of talking wisely and logically, with proper regard to time, place, person and situation.

When Sugrīva challenged Vāli a second time, Tārā appealed to Vāli, not only not to fight with him-since he had secured the friendship and protection of the extraordinarily powerful Rāma-but to bring him back and make him the Yuvarāja and live in peace with him. However, her sensible counsel was not relished by Vāli as he was being driven by his inordinate hatred towards Sugrīva and his own super-ego.

When Vāli was mortally wounded, she was inconsolably griefstricken. Words of advice by Hanumān and of consolation by Rāma brought her back to normal state.

When Sugrīva took over Kiṣkindhā as the new king, Tārā also became his wife as per the custom prevalent among the vānaras. When an infuriated Lakṣmaṇa sent by Rāma, entered Sugrīva's palace, it was again Tārā who spoke very sweetly and pacified him.

When Rāma was crowned as the king, Tārā also attended the coronation ceremony along with Sugrīva and other vānara heroes as also their womenfolk.

MANDODARĪ

Mandodarī (also spelt as Maṇḍodarī), the chief queen of Rāvaṇa, was the daughter of Maya, the śilpi or architect of the rākṣasas and the most brilliant exponent of the science of architecture now known as *Mayamata*. She bore Rāvaṇa a heroic son-Meghanāda or Indrajit. She was so beautiful and resembled Sītā in so many ways that Hanumān mistook her at first, when he saw her in Rāvaṇa's harem, for Sītā herself. She knew the evil nature of Rāvaṇa, and in all probability, had tried her best to bring him to better ways of life. Her lamentation at the death of Rāvaṇa, over his dead body described in a long passage, brings out her character brilliantly. She could easily intuit that Rāma was none other than Viṣṇu and Sītā was Lakṣmī, his divine spouse. She regrets that Rāvaṇa by his evil deeds such as destruction of the sacrifices of the ṛṣis, upsetting the wheel of dharma, employing dubious methods in warfare and molesting numberless women of all classes brought about his own ruin since the consequences of sins can never be escaped.

By her dignity and sagacity she stands out as a rare exception among the women of the rākṣasa race even as Vibhīṣaṇa, does among the men of the same race.

Civilization and Culture as Depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa

Civilization and culture need not, or, do not, always go together. Advancement of civilization does not necessarily contribute to a refinement of culture. Civilization makes our life here and now, more easy, more comfortable. But, culture inspires us to use the good things of life that civilization keeps in our hands, in the best interest of all and in a way that brings long-term benefits. Civilization can, like the weeds that grow along with the crops, contribute to profanity too. Culture, on the other hand, with its stress on the moral and ethical values, and a holistic approach to life, can not only tone down its evil effects, but also elevate it to more sublime levels.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki mirrors both these aspects of life. It presents us with three typical and distinct civilizations and cultures: those of Ayodhyā, Laṅkā and Kiṣkindhā.

The description of Ayodhyā, first under Daśaratha and later under Rāma gives us an idea of its advanced civilization and culture. The city was full of palatial buildings elegantly decorated. The roads were well laid-out, broad and kept clean by periodical watering. There were strong and well-designed forts filled with all the articles essential for the guards and their assistants. Armed forces were ever kept in combat-readiness.

They contained many heroes who were experts in the use of weapons, especially archery. However, they were magnanimous in battles and followed the rules of dharmayuddha, like not attacking an unarmed enemy or one fleeing from the battlefield.

People led a happy, peaceful and contented life. Study and propagation of the Vedas as also the performance of sacrifices went on unhindered. The king administered the country very efficiently, ably assisted by the ministers, advisors and sages who acted as royal priests. Satya and dharma (truth and righteousness) were the basic principles upon which the whole edifice of the State rested. The duties of the four varṇas and the four āśramas were scrupulously kept up and were also enforced if and when necessary. Daśaratha being bound by the word he had given to Kaikeyī, Rāma's immediate compliance by renouncing the throne and going to the forest, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa following him of their own accord, Bharata's exemplary behaviour in trying to bring back Rāma, Vasiṣṭha's ever watchful eye in protecting the interests of the kingdom and its subjects-all these bespeak of a highly cultured society.

Lañkā under Rāvaṇa was a very rich and prosperous city of dazzling splendour. But almost all its riches were the result of robbery or booty plundered in wars. The city abounded in palaces and huge buildings, as also gardens. The citizens were physically giants with fierce appearance and ruthless behaviour. Drinking as also cannibalism was quite common. There were also yāgaśālās (sacrificial sheds), but the brāhmaṇas were devoted to magical rites and sorcerous rituals. The temples were mostly dedicated to certain fierce deities like Bhadrakālī. Rāvaṇa and Indrajit were wont to worship this deity at a secret place called Nikumbhilā, before a war, to acquire supernormal powers and weapons. Hence they were experts in māyāyuddha, wars using the magical powers of illusion to deceive the enemies. Enjoyment of sensual pleasures was the main concern of the people.

The city of Kiṣkindhā has been described as a guhā or a cave. It was probably situated within a mountain range, the passage to which lay through a cave. The city itself was quite spacious, well-designed and beautiful, provided with all the necessities for a comfortable life, revealing an advanced civilization.

Vālmīki has described the denizens of Kiṣkindhā as 'vānaras' or monkeys with all the characteristic features of the monkeys or apes throughout the work. If we analyze the various facts provided in the epic, we have to come to the inevitable conclusion that the word is to be taken, not literally, but symbolically. The word 'vā-nara' may mean 'or, perhaps, he is a human being'. The facial features of these vānaras might have approached those of apes by the rather prominent lower jaws. Since they spoke a human language and since the women had no tails and have been described like other women of the human species, we can conclude that the vānaras were also human beings but accustomed to live in the hilly regions, forests and banks of rivers. May be, they painted themselves like apes and wore a dress leaving a part of it at their backs or loins like tail. May be, the ape was their national symbol.

They were physically very strong and used their own teeth and nails or implements of stone or branches of trees while fighting. They were, obviously, not used to warfare with artificial weapons, though they were experts in wrestling.

The wearing of the yajñopavīta (sacred thread) and performance of the sandhyā ritual was current among them. However, rules of marriage and the regulation of man-woman relationship do not seem to have been governed by the higher ethical codes as in the Ayodhyā culture. Drinking seems to have been quite common, even among women. The level of their civilization was perhaps midway between those of Ayodhyā and Lañkā.

Lañkā was rich and prosperous. Rāvaṇa was a mighty king. He had learning and power. He could even practise severe austerities if and when needed. But his inordinate concupiscent and intense selfishness ruined him, destroyed his kingdom and almost decimated his subjects.

Vibhīṣaṇa the lone crusader for dharma, managed to save of Lañkā what little he could, by joining Rāma. But for him there would have been no Lañkā.

Kiṣkindhā of Vāli would have met with the same fate but for Rāma's intervention brought about by the surrender of Sugrīva to him. Sugrīva's sense of dharma, however feeble it might have been in the beginning, and his devotion and dedication to Rāma, saved it from disaster.

Ayodhyā under the noble Ikṣvāku princes, buttressed further by Rāma's personality and example, rose to glorious heights, making it a place of pilgrimage for ages.

This, then, is the philosophy of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Wealth and power cannot save either an individual or a nation. It is devotion to satya and dharma, character, that saves, that protects!

Rāmarājya-the Ideal State

Rāma's rule was so ideal that the word 'Rāmarājya' has now become synonymous with an ideal kingdom or an ideal State. We can get a fairly accurate description of an ideal State by putting together the three accounts given in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: a narration of Daśaratha's rule, the questions posed by Rāma to Bharata at Citrakūṭa to find out how he is ruling and the graphic description of Rāmarājya itself.

Since the 'Rāmarājya' hinges on the 'Rāma' (the king) that rules, he should be an ideal person deeply devoted to the practice of satya and dharma in his personal and social life. He should be ever vigilant in the welfare of the State. He must have a small group of ministers and advisors of proven character and competence. He should employ persons in jobs suitable to their temperament and capacity. There should also be a well-organised espionage system, preferably of three tiers. The ruler should disburse salaries on time and honour the heroes learned in the martial arts. He should confer rewards or mete out punishment to persons in proportion to their acts of commendation or blame. People having faith in God and the value-system based on the holy books should be protected and supported at all costs. Atheists and agnostics who cared not for this, should be put down with an iron hand.

He should rule in such a way that the income is always in excess of expenditure. All those engaged in the production and proper distribution of wealth-the agriculturists, the traders, the dairy farmers and other persons in similar vocations-must be meticulously taken care of.

More than everything else, it was the supremely sacred duty of the king to maintain the socio-ethical balance by protecting the varṇa-āśrama-dharma of the subjects, punishing the transgressors severely when necessary.

Since Rāma was an ideal man and an ideal king, his rule also was ideal. When he was ruling, people lived happily to a ripe old-age, without the fear of diseases or dacoits, wild animals or poisonous reptiles. All were devoted to dharma and led a contented and peaceful life sans greed and sans violence since they could always see Rāma the ideal person before them, to emulate. Even nature was gracious unto them by giving them timely rains conducive to the good growth of crops and vegetation.

Literary grace

If Hindu religious tradition treats the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki as a smṛti (a secondary scripture, next only to the Vedas), the literary tradition accords it the title 'ādikāvya' (primeval classic) and calls Vālmīki himself as the 'ādikavi', the patriarch of poets. The work richly deserves this epithet and has been a model to be emulated by the later poets of the classical age.

Vālmīki's genius lies in his masterly use of the similes and metaphors. Whether it is the human sentiments of love and attachment, hatred and detestation, valour and fearlessness or the beauties of nature as the descriptions of the seasons or even the comical featuring of grotesque figures, his similes are always most apt and can conjure up the objects very well.

Rāmāyaṇa Literature

The influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki has been so powerful and deep that quite a few other *Rāmāyaṇas* have come into existence in course of time, thereby enriching our *Rāmā-yaṇa* literature. Of these, mention must be made of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (4200 verses) considered to be a part of the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*. Modern scholars however feel that it is an independent work of an unknown author and assign it to the 14th century. Cast in the form of a dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī, this work is highly devotional and is dedicated to the spreading of the cult of Rāma. It abounds in beautiful hymns and quite a few philosophical discourses including the wellknown *Rāmāgītā*.

The Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa (12,000 verses), also called Manohara-Ānanda-Rāmāyaṇa is another popular work. It is also in the form of a dialogue, first between Pārvatī and Śiva and later between Rāmadāsa and his disciple Viṣṇudāsa. This work contains a number of stories popular even now, such as those of Gokaṛṇa, the famous pilgrimage centre in Karnāṭaka and of the rākṣasa brothers Ahirāvaṇa and Mahirāvaṇa of the nether world who tried to help Rāvaṇa. This work also is assigned to the 14th century or even a later date.

Then there are some other Rāmāyaṇas, also in Sanskrit, like the Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa (1355 verses) the Yogavāsiṣṭha Rāmāyaṇa (32,000 verses), the Tattvasaṅgraha Rāmāyaṇa and the Saṅgraha Rāmāyaṇa which have been printed but have not become popular except in limited circles.

Quite a few purāṇas also contain the story of Rāmāyaṇa, though briefly. Some minor upaniṣads like the Rāmapūrvatāpanīya, Rāmottaratāpanīya and the Rāmarahasya deal with Rāma as Paramapuruṣa, the Supreme Person himself. As regards the Sanskrit literary works based on the Rāmāyaṇa themes, they are legion.

Other Indian languages also have been enriched by the Rāmāyaṇas based on Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa or its adaptations. The Rāmācarita-mānasa of Tulasīdās (in Hindi), the Rāmāyaṇa of Kamba (in Tamil), the Rāmāyaṇa of Kṛttivāsa (in Bengali), the Rāmācaritam and the Kannassa Rāmāyaṇam of Ceramān and Kannassa (in Malayalam), the Rāmāvatara of Guru Govind Singh (in Punjabi), the Raṅga-nātha Rāmāyaṇa (in Telugu), the Rāmācaritra of Girdhar (in Gujarāṭi), the Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa of Sarala Dās (in Oriya), the Rāmā-yaṇa of Mādhava Kandali (in Assamese), the Torave Rāmāyaṇa of Narahari (in Kannada) are some of the more wellknown Rāmāyaṇas in the vernaculars.

Rāmāyaṇas outside India

The story of Rāma, either in its original form as depicted by Vālmīki or in a metamorphosed form, has travelled widely outside India, to Tibet and Eastern Turkestan, to South East Asian countries, Japan and even Mongolia. The following list of works-by no means exhaustive -gives an idea of this movement:

Rāmāyaṇa Kakawin (Javanese)
Hikayat Seri Rāma (Malaysian)
Rāmakien (Thai)
Pha Lak Pha Lam and Khvay Thuaraphi (Laos)
Hobutsushu (Japanese)
Rāmāśvamedha (Nepali)
Jānakiharaṇa (Sinhalese)

Conclusion

If the worth of a literary composition has to be judged by the effect it has had on a whole generation, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Ādikavi Vālmīki stands out as supreme since it has influenced and is continuing to do so even now, generation after generation. Its tremendous impact on our religion, social values, literature, music, drama, dancing, painting and sculpture-in fact, on *all* aspects of our life-is very palpable.

It has given us an ideal man who stood for satya and dharma come what may. It has given us an ideal woman, the paragon of feminine grace and virtues. It has shown us an ideal family system where everyone thought of the welfare of everyone else first. It has given us the models of ideal brothers, ideal friends and ideal servants who spared no effort to bring comfort to the loved ones. It has put before us an ideal State. In other words, it has placed before us enough ideas and ideals to inspire us, to rise from the human level to divine heights. If this spirit is imbibed, a study of this scripture will be immensely profitable.