



The Ramayana Story

Introduction

1. The *Ramayana* is one of the two great Indian epics. The *Ramayana* tells about life in India around 1000 BCE and offers models in dharma. The hero, Rama, lived his whole life by the rules of dharma; in fact, that was why Indians consider him heroic.
2. When Rama was a young boy, he was the perfect son. Later he was an ideal husband to his faithful wife, Sita, and a responsible ruler of Ayodhya. "Be as Rama," young Indians have been taught for 2,000 years; "Be as Sita."
3. Prince Rama was the eldest of four sons and was to become king when his father retired from ruling. His stepmother, however, wanted to see her son Bharata, Rama's younger brother, become king.
4. Remembering that the king had once promised to grant her any two wishes she desired, she demanded that Rama be banished and Bharata be crowned. The king had to keep his word to his wife and ordered Rama's banishment.
5. Rama accepted the decree unquestioningly. "I gladly obey father's command," he said to his stepmother. "Why, I would go even if you ordered it."
6. When Sita, Rama's wife, heard Rama was to be banished, she begged to accompany him to his forest retreat. "As shadow to substance, so wife to husband," she reminded Rama. "Is not the wife's dharma to be at her husband's side? Let me walk ahead of you so that I may smooth the path for your feet," she pleaded.
7. Rama agreed, and Rama, Sita and his brother Lakshmana all went to the forest.
8. When Bharata learned what his mother had done, he sought Rama in the forest. "The eldest must rule," he reminded Rama. "Please come back and claim your rightful place as king."
9. Rama refused to go against his father's command, so Bharata took his brother's sandals and said, "I shall place these sandals on the throne as symbols of your authority. I shall rule only as regent in your place, and each day I shall put my offerings at the feet of my Lord. When the fourteen years of banishment are over, I shall joyously return the kingdom to you."
10. Rama was very impressed with Bharata's selflessness. As Bharata left, Rama said to him, "I should have known that you would renounce gladly what most men work lifetimes to learn to give up."

11. Later in the story, Ravana, the evil King of Lanka, (what is probably present-day Sri Lanka) abducted Sita. Rama mustered the aid of a monkey army, built a causeway across to Lanka, released Sita and brought her safely back to Ayodhya. In order to set a good example, however, Rama demanded that Sita prove her purity before he could take her back as his wife.

12. Rama, Sita and Bharata are all examples of persons following their dharma.

Synopsis of the Ramayana Story

13. Dasharatha, King of Ayodhya, has three wives and four sons. Rama is the eldest. His mother is Kaushalya. Bharata is the son of his second and favorite wife, Queen Kaikeyi. The other two are twins, Lakshman and Shatrughna. Rama and Bharata are blue, perhaps indicating they were dark skinned or originally south Indian deities.

14. A sage takes the boys out to train them in archery.

15. In a neighboring city the ruler's daughter is named Sita. When it is time for Sita to choose her bridegroom, at a ceremony called a swayamvara, the princes are asked to string a giant bow. No one else can even lift the bow, but as Rama bends it, he not only strings it but breaks it in two. Sita indicates she has chosen Rama as her husband by putting a garland around his neck. The disappointed suitors watch.

16. King Dasharatha, Rama's father, decides it is time to give his throne to his eldest son Rama and retire to the forest to seek moksha. Everyone seems pleased. This plan fulfills the rules of dharma because an eldest son should rule and, if a son can take over one's responsibilities, one's last years may be spent in a search for moksha.

17. In addition, everyone loves Rama. However, Rama's step-mother, the king's second wife, is not pleased. She wants her son, Bharata, to rule. Because of an oath Dasharatha had made to her years before, she gets the king to agree to banish Rama for fourteen years and to crown Bharata, even though the king, on bended knee, begs her not to demand such things. Broken-hearted, the devastated king cannot face Rama with the news and Kaikeyi must tell him.

18. Rama, always obedient, is as content to go into banishment in the forest as to be crowned king. Sita convinces Rama that she belongs at his side and his brother Lakshman also begs to accompany them. Rama, Sita and Lakshman set out for the forest.

19. Bharata, whose mother's evil plot has won him the throne, is very upset when he finds out what has happened. Not for a moment does he consider breaking the rules of dharma and becoming king in Rama's place.

20. He goes to Rama's forest retreat and begs Rama to return and rule, but Rama refuses. "We must obey father," Rama says.

21. Bharata then takes Rama's sandals saying, "I will put these on the throne, and every day I shall place the fruits of my work at the feet on my Lord." Embracing Rama, he takes the sandals and returns to Ayodhya.

22. Years pass and Rama, Sita, and Lakshman are very happy in the forest. Rama and Lakshman destroy the rakshasas (evil creatures) who disturb the sages in their meditations. One day a rakshasa princess tries to seduce Rama, and Lakshmana wounds her and drives her away. She returns to her brother Ravana, the ten-headed ruler of Lanka (Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon), and tells her brother (who has a weakness for beautiful women) about lovely Sita.

23. Ravana devises a plan to abduct Sita. He sends a magical golden deer which Sita desires. Rama and Lakshman go off to hunt the deer, first drawing a protective circle around Sita and warning her she will be safe as long as she does not step outside the circle.
24. As they go off, Ravana (who can change his shape) appears as a holy man begging alms. The moment Sita steps outside the circle to give him food, Ravana grabs her and carries her off to his kingdom in Lanka.
25. Rama is broken-hearted when he returns to the empty hut and cannot find Sita. A band of monkeys offer to help him find Sita.
26. Ravana has carried Sita to his palace in Lanka, but he cannot force her to be his wife so he puts her in a grove and alternately sweet-talks her and threatens her in an attempt to get her to agree to marry him. Sita will not even look at him but thinks only of her beloved Rama.
27. Hanuman, the general of the monkey band, can fly since his father is the wind, and Hanuman flies to Lanka and, finding Sita in the grove, comforts her and tells her Rama will soon come and save her.
28. Ravana's men capture Hanuman, and Ravana orders them to wrap Hanuman's tail in cloth and to set it on fire. With his tail burning, Hanuman hops from house-top to house-top, setting Lanka afire. He then flies back to Rama to tell him where Sita is.
29. Rama, Lakshman and the monkey army build a causeway from the tip of India to Lanka and cross over to Lanka. A mighty battle ensues. Rama kills several of Ravana's brothers and then Rama confronts ten-headed Ravana. (Ravana is known for his wisdom as well as for his weakness for women which may explain why he is pictured as very brainy.) Rama finally kills Ravana.
30. Rama frees Sita. After Sita proves her purity, they return to Ayodhya and Rama becomes king.
31. His rule, Ram-rajya, is an ideal time when everyone does his or her dharma and "fathers never have to light the funeral pyres for their sons." Mahatma Gandhi dreamed that one day modern India would become a Ram-rajya.

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