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Ramayana A Sacred Way of Life

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Ramayana A Sacred Way of Life

Sweeter than sugar, tastier than curd, sweeter indeed than honey is the Name of Rama. Constant repetition of this sweet Name gives one the taste of divine nectar itself. Therefore, one should contemplate on the Name of Rama incessantly.

(Telugu Poem)

The Ramayana represents a sacred path, a sacred door to Divinity, a sacred way of life. The Ramayana is not merely the biography of an individual. All characters in the Ramayana are equally important. Dasaratha distributed the sacred pudding he received from the Yajna Purusha equally among his three wives. Kausalya received her share of pudding joyfully and took it to her Puja (worship) room. Kaikeyi also did the same. Each of them was happy thinking that her son would be the heir apparent to the Ayodhya throne. However, Sumitra had no such desire. She carried her bowl of pudding to the terrace and placed it on the parapet wall while drying her hair in the sun. All the while, she was contemplating on God. As she watched helplessly, an eagle swooped down and carried away the bowl of sacred pudding. She was shocked and disturbed thinking of the reprimand she would have to face from her husband for being careless. She at once rushed downstairs and informed Kausalya and Kaikeyi about what had happened. Unlike the co-wives of the present time, the three queens had utmost love and affection for each other. Kausalya and Kaikeyi hugged Sumitra and consoled her, saying, "Sister, why are you disturbed so much? We three are one and we will share our pudding with you. Kausalya and Kaikeyi at once went into their respective shrine rooms and brought their pudding cups. Each of them gave half of her share of pudding to Sumitra. Sumitra felt greatly relieved and expressed her gratitude to her sisters. The three queens offered their pudding to God and partook of it. Very soon, they conceived. It was Kausalya who developed labour pains first and gave birth to a male child. Then Kaikeyi was blessed with a son. Soon Sumitra developed labour pains and gave birth to two sons. In fact, Sumitra never had any desire to have children. But she was blessed with two sons. She accepted it as the Will of God and was very happy about it. The three queens were waiting for King Dasaratha to come and bless the children. Dasaratha went to each of them and showered his blessings on the children. It was then that Sumitra revealed to King Dasaratha about the incident of the eagle carrying away her bowl of pudding, and her sisters Kausalya and Kaikeyi giving half of their share of pudding to her. That was the reason she was blessed with two sons.

King Dasaratha requested Sage Vasistha, the family preceptor, to christen the newborn children. Sage Viswamitra was also invited for the function. Many sages, Vedic scholars and eminent personalities who attended the naming ceremony were spellbound by the ethereal beauty of the children. Sage Vasistha, Sage Viswamitra and other sages blessed the children by chanting Vedic Mantras. Everyone was wondering how Sumitra had two sons while Kausalya and Kaikeyi were blessed with only one son each. How can anybody comprehend the ways of God? Everything happened according to God's Will. Sage Vasistha named Kausalya's son as Sri Rama as He had the power of attraction in Him. *Ramayathi Ithi Ramah* (that which attracts is the principle of Rama). The name 'Rama' was given to Him according to His birth star. His form was highly brilliant and resplendent. As per the tradition, Vasishtha wrote the name Rama on rice. Then Vasistha named Sumitra's first son as Lakshmana as he looked one of valour and his face shone with all auspicious attributes. He named her second son as Satrughna, saying he would destroy all Satrus (enemies). Vasistha then went to the place where Kaikeyi was seated with her son on her lap. She was bubbling with joy as she remembered the promise made by Dasaratha that her son would be made the

crown prince of Ayodhya. She was thinking that her son would rule over the kingdom of Bharat. Keeping this in mind, Vasistha named her son as Bharata. In this manner, the naming ceremony came to a happy conclusion.

The sons of Kausalya and Kaikeyi were having timely food and sleep and were happily playing in their cradles. On the other hand, Sumitra's sons were crying all the time, day and night, without even taking food. Sumitra became restless seeing the plight of her sons. When she mentioned this to King Dasaratha, he consoled her saying, "Everything happens according to God's Will. Pray to Him. He will take care of the rest." There was little he could do about it. Three days passed, the situation remained the same. Sumitra could no longer bear the suffering of the children. She went to sage Vasishtha and told him about her predicament. Sage Vasishtha closed his eyes. His Yogic vision enabled him to know the truth. He said to Sumitra,"As you partook of the sacred pudding given by Kausalya, you gave birth to Lakshmana who is an Amsa (part) of Rama. Similarly, Satrughna is born out of the share of pudding given to you by Kaikeyi. So, he is a part of Bharata. Put Lakshmana by the side of Rama and Satrughna by the side of Bharata. Then they will rest peacefully." Sumitra did as instructed by Vasishtha. The children became peaceful and stopped crying. Watching this, everyone heaved a sigh of relief. As the children grew up, it became very clear to Sumitra that Lakshmana was an Amsa (part) of Rama and Satrughna, an Amsa of Bharata. One day, she told Kausalya and Kaikeyi, "Dear sisters, your sons may ascend the throne of Ayodhya in future. I have no such ambitions. I am happy to see my sons being in the company of their elder brothers and serve them." Accordingly Lakshmana and Satrughna were always in the company of Rama and Bharata respectively. They served them and spent their time blissfully. King Dasaratha and the three queens were very happy to see such unity and harmony among their children.

It is but natural that both happiness and difficulties follow each other. As King Dasaratha was spending his time blissfully, one day Sage Viswamitra came with a request which caused great anxiety to the king. Viswamitra said, "Oh king! I want you to do me a favour." Without a second thought, Dasaratha promised to do the needful. Then the sage said, "I have decided to perform a Yajna. I request you to send your son, Rama to protect the Yajna from the demons." Dasaratha was in a dilemma. He thought, "Rama is very young and tender. He knows no hardship. How can I send Him to the forest with the sage? How can He fight the cruel demons?" When he expressed his feelings to the sage, Viswamitra became furious and said, "Oh King! It is a great folly to go back on your word, for no one in the noble lineage of Ikshvaku has, until now, ever broken his word. You are tainting their glory by breaking the promise given to me."

Dasaratha became frightened on hearing the words of Viswamitra. He consulted Sage Vasistha in this regard and ultimately decided to send Rama with the sage. He left everything to God's Will. He called Rama to his presence. Rama came there with all valour and courage. It was natural for Lakshmana to follow Rama wherever He went. Hence, Lakshmana also came to Dasaratha in fact, with Rama. Nobody had called Lakshmana. He came of his own accord and sat next to Rama. The king did not want to dissuade Lakshmana from following Rama. The Ritwiks chanted Mantras and blessed Rama and Lakshmana before the two brothers set out with Sage Viswamitra.

When they reached the banks of the Sarayu river, Sage Viswamitra said, "My dear ones! This is a very sacred place. Hence, you may perform Sandhya Vandana here." Rama and Lakshmana offered their prayers as instructed by the sage. They closed their eyes and sat in meditation for sometime. Then Viswamitra

thought that it would be very difficult for the royal princes, who are used to palatial comforts and luxuries, to keep awake day and night to guard the Yajna. They cannot even think of food as they have to be on high alert all the time to fight the demons. It was then that the sage taught them the sacred Mantras of Bala and Atibala which would help them overcome sleep and hunger.

Viswamitra, accompanied by Rama and Lakshmana reached Siddhasrama and started the performance of the Yajna. Rama and Lakshmana guarded the Yajna night and day chanting the Mantras taught by the sage. They never felt the pangs of hunger nor did they feel sleepy. They were on high alert all the time in all enthusiasm and exuberance. All of a sudden the demons appeared in their frightening forms and tried to disrupt the Yajna. They were making deafening sounds. But, the princes were least perturbed. They fought the demons with courage and valour and ultimately vanquished them. Viswamitra was very happy that he could complete the performance of the Yajna without any interruption. He showered his love and blessings on Rama and Lakshmana.

In the meantime, a letter arrived from Janaka, the king of Mithila, inviting the sage to take part in a Yajna. Viswamitra told the princes, “My dear ones! We have received an invitation from the noble King Janaka. I am proceeding to Mithila and I wish that you two should accompany me.” At first, Rama was not inclined to go to Mithila and said to Lakshmana, “Dear younger brother, our father instructed us to follow Sage Viswamitra and protect his Yajna. We don't have his permission to go to Mithila and take part in the Yajna performed by King Janaka.” When the same was conveyed to Viswamitra, he convinced them saying, “My dear ones, your father commanded you to follow me and it is your duty to follow me wherever I go.” The princes had no option but to obey the command of Viswamitra.

The arrival of Rama and Lakshmana in Mithila created a sensation. People admired them and began talking about them. As they were moving in the streets, they attracted everybody's attention. “Who are these handsome princes? They look strong and valorous. Have they come to marry the daughters of King Janaka?”, people started talking to themselves in this manner. They reached the royal palace allotted to them and rested. The Yajna was to commence on the next day. A meeting was also being arranged for which the gallant heroes of Bharat were invited. It was to see if anyone could break the bow of Siva. The victor could win the hand of Janaka's daughter, Sita. One after the other, the princes tried to lift the bow of Siva, but had to return to their seats humiliated. At the instance of Viswamitra, Rama gently walked towards the bow, and raised it with His left hand. There was a thunderous applause. When He bent the bow to tie the string, it broke with a thunderous sound. Sita was brought there ready with a garland. Then Viswamitra asked Rama whether He was ready to marry Sita. He was ready to undertake any task entrusted to Him by Viswamitra, but was certainly not prepared for the marriage. Rama offered His salutations to Viswamitra and politely said, “Swami! You have brought us with you to safeguard your Yajna and not for performing our marriage. I would not think of marriage unless I get the consent of My father.” The sage was in a fix. There was absolute silence in the assembly. Everyone was surprised at Rama's reply. Rama was firm in His stand. Thereupon King Janaka sent his messengers along with a few disciples of Viswamitra with an invitation to King Dasaratha. Viswamitra's disciples narrated to Dasaratha all that had happened. The king, the queens and the people of Ayodhya were filled with joy and jubilation at the prospect of the marriage between Rama and Sita. Dasaratha accompanied by his queens, Bharata and Satrughna and a host of others, arrived at Mithila.

The womenfolk proceeded to the venue of the wedding in all enthusiasm, singing joyously, exhorting

each other to witness the celestial wedding of Sita and Rama.

Welcome to all for Rama's wedding;
together we shall witness the joyous scene.
Many have gathered already,
decked up in all their finery.
With necklaces the ladies are adorned
of jewels pure and gleaming.
Rama shall tie the knot today
to beauteous Sita, oh what a fine match they make.
Father Dasaratha has made ready bounteous feasts.
All learned sages are assembled with Vasishtha presiding.
Oh, what a multitude has assembled
to rejoice, hearts with joy overflowing.
Wedding of the holy pair
Rama and Sita, such a sight is indeed rare.
The sight shall confer great merit.
Rama looks the cool full moon,
and Sita is a matching double.
The compassionate Rama who loves all
will confer his grace on us all.
Come quickly to witness the holy wedding of Rama and Sita.

(Telugu Song)

The men folk were also ecstatic and joined the festivity by singing thus:

Come let us go and see the marriage of Rama and Sita,
The sight shall confer great merit.
The lives of those who see this marriage will be sanctified.
Oh come one and all to see the sacred marriage,
Rama, who is riding on an elephant, is shining effulgently.
Mother Sita is by His side,
The brothers are at their service.
Sita and Rama will smilingly enquire about our well-being;
What else can we aspire for!
Come let us go anon to see the holy wedding of Rama and Sita.

(Telugu Song)

Sita was Janaka's foster daughter. He had another daughter by name Urmila. His brother Kushadwaja also had two daughters by name Mandavi and Srutakeerthi. With the consent of King Dasaratha, it was decided that the four brides would be given in marriage to the four brothers. Dasaratha was happy that all his four sons who were born on the same day were getting married on the same day and same time. The marriage function was celebrated in all grandeur.

Sweet notes of auspicious music reverberated in the air. The Vedic priests chanted the sacred Mantras full-throated and blessed the couples. King Dasaratha shed tears of joy. Everyone was filled with divine bliss watching the marriage proceedings. It is customary during the occasion that the bride and the bridegroom exchange garlands. Sita had to garland Rama first, before the other brides could garland their respective bridegrooms. Sita, being short in stature, could not garland Rama who was Ajanubahu (tall personality).Unless Rama bent His head before Sita, she could not garland Him. But He did not want to bend His head lest people should blame Him for not maintaining the honour of His lineage. Unable to garland Rama, Sita was holding the garland in her hand for a long time. There is another secret in this act of Rama. Lakshmana was the incarnation of Adisesha who carried the mother earth on his hood. Rama looked at Lakshmana as if to say, “Look, why don't you raise that part of the earth where Sita is standing to enable her to garland Me.” Then Lakshmana indicated to Rama that it was not possible to raise any particular area. If he tried to raise that part of the earth where Sita was standing, simultaneously Rama would be raised and so also others. Lakshmana, being endowed with intelligence, thought of a plan to solve the problem. All of a sudden, he fell at the feet of Rama and did not get up for a long time. Then Rama had to bend to lift Lakshmana up. Sita seized the opportunity and lost no time in garlanding Rama. Then the other three brides garlanded their respective grooms. The four brothers and their brides shone like brilliant gemstones. The onlookers shed tears of joy

watching the grand spectacle.

As they were returning to Ayodhya, they heard a loud and frightening sound. Rama instructed Lakshmana to be ready for the battle. Parasurama appeared on the scene and challenged Rama saying, "Oh Rama! I have heard that you have broken the bow of Siva. It is of no consequence and is not at all difficult to lift. If you really have strength, you should break this weapon of mine. So saying, Parasurama hurled his weapon at the feet of Rama. Rama calmly picked it up and broke the weapon. Parasurama at once fell at the feet of Rama. The people of Ayodhya welcomed the newly-wed couples. At the main entrance, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi gave the brides and grooms Mangalarati and took them inside. The entire city of Ayodhya bore a festive look and everyone rejoiced.

Today, everyone is celebrating the marriage of Sita and Rama. But after the marriage Rama had to face many ordeals; He overcame them all with fortitude. He decimated the demonic forces. Lakshmana was His main weapon. With his help, Rama emerged victorious in the battle with demons. Many a time He lavished praises on His brothers saying, "My brothers are greater than Me. I owe My victory to them. I could win over the enemies because of the strength of unity among us." The lives of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna demonstrated the ideal of brotherhood to the entire world. Such ideal brotherhood is not noticed today. Many wonderful events took place in the life of Lord Rama.

The stories of Lord Vishnu are amazing,

They purify the lives of the people in all the three worlds,

They are like the sickles that cut the creepers of worldly bondage,

They are like good friends who help you in times of need,

They are like shelters for the sages and seers doing penance in the forest.

(Telugu Poem)

It is not enough to merely celebrate the Rama Navami as the birthday of Sri Rama. You should understand the purpose of His birth and practise the ideals He demonstrated. Rama Kalyana does not mean the marriage of Rama and Sita at physical level. Rama Kalyana is Atma Kalyana; it signifies the merging of Atma (individual soul) with Paramatma (universal soul). The Ramayana is not the story of an individual. Rama symbolises the cosmic and universal spirit.