

Chapter 1. Rama—Prince and Principle

The name *Rama* is the essence of the *Vedas*; the story of Rama is an ocean of milk, pure and potent. It can be asserted that no poem of equal grandeur and beauty has emerged from other languages or from other countries until this very day, and it has provided inspiration to the poetic imagination of every language and country. It is the greatest treasure inherited by their good fortune by every Indian.

Rama is the guardian deity of the Hindus; the name is borne by the bodies in which they dwell and the buildings in which those bodies dwell. It can safely be said that there is no Indian who has not imbibed the nectar of *Ramakatha*, the story of Rama.

The *Ramayana*, the epic that deals with the story of the Rama incarnation, is a sacred text. It is reverently recited by people with all varieties of equipment, the scholar as well as the ignoramus, the millionaire as well as the pauper. The name glorified by the *Ramayana* cleanses all evil and transforms the sinner; it reveals the form represented by the name, the form that is as charming as the name itself.

The azure ocean and the almighty Lord have much in common. Just as the sea is the source of all the waters on earth, all beings are born from “Rama”. A sea without water is unreal; a being without “Rama” is without existence, now or ever.

The ocean is the abode of the Almighty, as myth and legend proclaim; they describe Him as reclining on the ocean of milk. This is the reason behind the title of each canto (*kanda*) given by Valmiki (son of Prachetas), the great poet who composed the epic.

Kanda means water, an expanse of water. *Kanda* also means “sugar cane”. However crooked a cane may be, whichever section you chew, the sweetness is unaffected and uniform. The stream of Rama’s story meanders through many a curve and twist, but the sweetness of compassion (*karuna*), tenderness, and pity persists without diminution throughout the narrative. The stream turns and flows through sadness, wonder, ridicule, awe, terror, love, despair, and dialectics, but the main undercurrent is the love of *dharma* and the compassion it fosters.

The nectar in the story of Rama is as the Sarayu river, which moves silently by the city of Ayodhya, where Rama was born and ruled. The Sarayu has its source in the Himalayan Lake of the Mind (*Manasa-Sarovar*), just as this story is born in the lake of the mind! The Rama stream bears the sweetness of compassion; the stream of Lakshmana (Rama’s brother and devoted companion) has the sweetness of devotion. Just as the Sarayu river joins the Ganges (Ganga) and the waters commingle, so too the streams of tender compassion and devotion (the stories of Rama and Lakshmana) commingle in the *Ramayana*. Between them, compassion and love (*karuna* and *prema*) make up the composite picture of the glory of Rama. That picture fulfils the heart’s dearest yearning of every Indian, and to attain it is the aim of every spiritual striving.

The effort of the individual is but half the pursuit; the other half is the grace of God. People fulfil themselves by self-effort as well as divine blessings; the fulfilment takes them across the dark ocean of dualities to the immanent and transcendent One.

The *Ramayana* has to be read not as a record of a human career but as the narrative of the advent and activities of an incarnation of God (*Avatar*). One must endeavour with determination to realise through one’s own

experience the ideals revealed in that narrative. God is all-knowing, all-pervasive, and all-powerful. The words He utters while embodied in the human form, the acts He deigns to indulge in during His earthly sojourn —these are inscrutable and extraordinarily significant. The precious springs of His message ease the path of deliverance for mankind. Don't look upon Rama as a scion of the Solar dynasty, the sovereign of the kingdom of Ayodhya, or the son of Emperor Dasaratha. These correlates are but accessory and accidental. This error has become habitual in modern readers; they pay attention only to the personal relationship and affiliations between the characters of the story they read; they don't delve into the values they represent and demonstrate.

To elaborate this error: Dasaratha, Rama's father, had three wives; the first was such and such, the second was of this nature, the third had these traits! Her maids were of this ugly type The wars fought by Dasaratha were characterised by these peculiarities ... those specialities ... In this manner, fancy leads people astray into the region of the trivial and colourful, making them neglect the valuable kernel. People do not realise that the study of history must enrich life and make it meaningful and worthwhile, rather than cater to the appetite for paltry facts and petty ideas. Their validity and value lie deep within the facts and fertilise them like subterranean water. Wear the glasses of reverent adoration (*bhakti*) and steady dedication (*sraddha*); then, the eye will endow you with the pure wisdom that liberates you and grants you eternal bliss.

Just as people squeeze juice out of the fibrous cane and drink only the sweetness, just as the bee sucks the honey in the flower, regardless of its symmetry and colour, just as the moth flies toward the brightness of the flame, ignoring the heat and the inevitable catastrophe, so the spiritual seeker (*sadhaka*) should yearn to imbibe the expression of the emotion of tenderness, pity, and compassion with which the *Ramayana* is saturated, paying no heed to other subjects.

When a fruit is eaten, we throw away the skin, seeds, and fibre. It is in the very nature of nature that fruits have these components! Nevertheless, no one eats them on the plea that one paid for them! No one can swallow the seeds and digest them. No one will chew the outer rind. So too, in this Rama fruit called *Ramayana*, the tales of demons, ogres and the like (*rakshasas*) form the rind; the wicked deeds of these evil people are the hard indigestible seeds; sensory and worldly descriptions and events are the not-too-tasty fibrous stuff; they are all sheaths for the juicy nourishment.

Those who seek the expression of compassion in the Rama fruit should concentrate more on the central narrative than on supplementary details that embellish or encumber it. Listen to the *Ramayana* in that mood; that is the best form of spiritual listening (*sravana*).

The role of sages in royal courts

On one occasion, Emperor Parikshith fell at the feet of sage Suka and asked for instruction on a point that was causing him dire doubt. "Master! One riddle has been worrying me for a long time. I know that you can solve it for me and that no one else can. I have listened to the narratives of the lives of my forefathers, from the earliest, the great Manu, down to those of my grandfathers and father. I have studied these stories with care. I observe that in the history of every one of these, there is mention of sages (*rishis*) attached to the monarch, some learned scholar-saints who are members of the court, attending court sessions and sharing the business of government! These scholars have renounced all attachments and desires and have realised that the world is a shadow and a snare, that the One is the only Reality. What is the real meaning of this amazing association of scholars with kings and rulers playing subordinate roles and being counseled? I know that the revered elders won't engage in any ac-

tivity without sufficient and proper reasons. Their behaviour is ever pure and unsullied. But this makes my doubt unsolvable. Please enlighten me.”

Suka laughed. He replied, “You asked a fine question, no doubt. Listen! The great sages and holy scholars are always eager to share with their fellow people the truth they have grasped, the sanctifying experience they have won, the elevating deeds they have been privileged to perform, and the divine grace they have been chosen to receive. They seek nearness to those who are in charge of administration and those who are adepts in ruling over peoples, with the intention to use them as instruments for establishing and ensuring peace and prosperity on earth. They implant high ideals in their minds, and holy ways of fulfilling them. They prompt the performance of righteous actions, in accordance with just laws.

“The monarchs invite and welcome the sages, seek out the scholars, and plead with them to be in their courts, so that they can learn from them the art of government and act according to their counsel. The monarch was the master and guardian of the people; so, the sages spent their days with him for the estimable purpose of realising, through him, the yearning of their hearts: May all the worlds be happy (*lokaassamasthaah sukhino bhavanthu*). The sages were eager to see happiness and peace spread over the world. Therefore, they tried to equip the kings with all the virtues, fill them with all the moral codes of discipline, arm them with all branches of learning, so that they may rule efficiently, wisely, and with beneficial consequences to themselves and their subjects.

“There were other reasons, too. Listen! The sages knew that the Granter of joy to humanity, the Mentor of human morals, the Leader of the solar line, the Dweller in the Heaven of eternal bliss will take birth in a royal line. The sages with foresight to anticipate events gained entry into the courts of rulers so that they might experience the bliss of contact with the incarnation when It happens. They feared they might not get such access later, that they may miss the bliss they could well garner. So they profited by their vision of the future and established themselves in the royal capital, in the thick of the community, longing for the advent.

“To this venerable group belonged Vasishtha, Viswamitra, Garga, Agastya, and the other sages (*rishis*). Monarchs of renunciation, they had no wants, sought nothing from anyone, and were ever content. They appeared in the audience halls of the emperors not for polemics and the pomp of panditry, or to collect the costly gifts offered to such disputants and guests, or to decorate themselves with the burdensome title those patrons confer on people they preferred. They craved rather the bliss of the vision of the Lord (*darshan*) and for a chance to uphold *dharma* in human affairs; they had no other objective.

“The kings were also immersed in divine thoughts in those days! They approached the hermits and sages in their retreats in order to discover from them the means of making their subjects happy and content; often, they invited them to their palaces and consulted them about ways and means of good government. In those days, there were sages with no attachment to self and scholars with no craving for power; such were the people who tendered advice to the kings. As a consequence, there was no lack of food, clothing, housing, or good health for the people of the realm. All days were festival days; all doors were decorated with green festoons. The ruler felt that his most sacred duty was to foster his people’s welfare. The subjects also felt that the ruler was the heart of the body politic. They had full faith that he was as precious as their own hearts, and they valued him as such. They revered him and paid him homage of gratitude.”

Suka explained the role of the sages in the royal courts in this clear downright manner before the large gathering that was sitting around him.

Rama's story is the story of the universe

Have you noticed that whatever is done by the great, whichever company they choose, they will ever be on the path of righteousness, on the path of the Divine. Their acts will promote the welfare of the entire world! So, when the *Ramayana* or other narratives of the Divine are recited or read, attention must be fixed on the majesty and mystery of God, on the truth and straightforwardness that are inherent in them, and on the practice of those qualities in daily life. No importance should be attached to extraneous matters; the means and manner of the execution of one's duty is the paramount lesson to be learned.

God, when appearing with form for the sake of upholding *dharma*, behaves in a human way. He must! For, He has to hold forth the ideal life before people and confer the experience of joy and peace on people. His movements and playful activities (*leelas*) might appear ordinary and commonplace to some eyes. But each will be an expression of beauty, truth, goodness, joy, and exaltation. Each will captivate the world with its charm and purify the heart that contemplates it. Each will overcome and overwhelm all the agitations of the mind, tear the veil of illusion (*maya*), and fill the consciousness with sweetness. There can be nothing ordinary and commonplace in the careers of *Avatars*. Whatever is seen and taken as of that nature is really super-human, super-natural, deserving high reverence!

The story of Rama is not the story of an individual; it is the story of the universe! Rama is the personification of the basic Universal in all beings. He is in all, for all time, in all space. The story deals not with a period that is past but with the present and future without end, with beginningless eternal time!

No ant can bite without Rama's will! No leaf can drop from its branch without Rama's prompting! Sky, wind, fire, water, earth—the five elements that compose the universe—behave as they do for fear of Him and work in tune with His orders! Rama is the Principle that attracts the disparate elements in nature and endears through that attraction. The attraction that one exerts over another is what makes the universe exist and function.

That is the Rama principle, without which the cosmos would become chaos. Hence, the axiom: Without Rama, there would be no panorama (universe).