

Chapter 3. Curse of No Progeny for Dasaratha

The envy of Ravana

Within a short time, Dasaratha's fame illumined all quarters, like the rays of the rising sun. He had the intrepidity and skill of ten charioteers rolled into one, so the name *Dasa-ratha* (the ten-chariot hero) was found appropriate. No one could stand up against the onrush of his mighty chariot! Every contemporary ruler, mortally afraid of his prowess, paid homage to his throne. The world extolled him as a hero without equal, a paragon of virtue, a statesman of highest stature.

Ravana, the demon (*rakshasa*) King of Lanka, heard of Dasaratha and his fame. He was so envious that he determined on a sure plan to destroy him, by means fair or foul. Ravana sought for an excuse to provoke Dasaratha into a fight; one day, he sent word through a messenger that unless tribute was paid to him, he would have to meet Ravana on the battlefield and demonstrate his superior might in war. This call was against international morality, but what morality did a demon respect?

When Dasaratha heard the messenger, he laughed outright, in derision. Even while the messenger was looking on, he shot sharp deadly arrows, which reached Lanka itself and fastened the gates of that city!

Addressing the envoys, Dasaratha said, "Well, Sirs! I have now made fast the doors of your fortress city. Your master cannot open them, however hard he may try. That is the 'tribute' I pay to your impertinent lord."

When the envoys returned and informed Ravana of this, he was shocked to find all the doors closed fast. The desperate efforts made by Ravana and his men met with failure; they could not open the gates. When Ravana was struck with shame, strangely enough, the arrows returned to Ayodhya and the doors flew open.

Ravana, however, decided that he must overpower all the rulers of the world. Realising that he could do so only by winning divine grace, he went to the depths of the forest and selected a favourable, auspicious spot for his ascetic practices.

Ravana's asceticism was so intense and satisfying that God Brahma was compelled to appear before him and offer to grant him whatever boon he desired. "Ravana! Ask for anything you want! I shall give you your heart's desire," said Brahma.

Ravana was revolving in his mind the insult he suffered at Dasaratha's hands. He argued that Dasaratha might get even mightier sons from whom he might suffer more, so he asked for the boon he wanted, "Lord! Bless me with this gift of grace: let no child be born from Dasaratha's loins."

At this, Brahma said, "So be it," and immediately vanished from the scene, lest Ravana might frame another foul request if He were present before him! Ravana strutted about, proud and devoid of fear, exulting over his prowess and success.

Meanwhile, another project entered his head! "Dasaratha is of marital age now; if I so contrive that he does not marry at all, it will make my safety doubly sure," he thought within himself! Looking about with the aid of his demon (*rakshasa*) skills, he discerned that there was a great likelihood that Dasaratha would wed the daughter of the King of Kosala. So, he decided to put an end to that princess! As the saying goes, when one's own destruc-

tion is imminent, reason turns crooked. He entered the Kosala kingdom stealthily in disguise and kidnapped the princess. Placing her in a wooden box, he cast it over the waves of the sea.

Dasaratha's three queens: Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika

Ravana could not see the truth that nothing can ever happen without the concurrence of the divine will. Brahma willed otherwise, and the box was carried by the waves on to the shore. The place where it landed was a fine recreation area. The next day, Sumanthra, Dasaratha's Prime Minister, happened to visit the place on a quiet holiday, to be spent in discussing within himself the problems of the state. His eyes fell on the box; he retrieved it and opened it. He was surprised to find in it a charming girl, with attractive shining eyes and a halo of divine splendour. Sumanthra was overcome with pity. He spoke soft and sweet to the girl, "Little one! How did you get placed inside this box?"

She replied, "Sir, I'm the princess of the Kosala kingdom; my name is Kausalya. I don't know how I came inside this box or who placed me in it. I was playing with my companions in the palace gardens, and I don't remember what happened."

Sumanthra was moved by her simple and sincere statement. He said, "Such barbarian stratagems are resorted to only by demons (*rakshasas*); they are beyond the ken of men! I'll take you to your father. Come with me. Let us go without delay." Sumanthra placed her in his chariot and went to Kosala, where he restored her to the king and recited before the court the details known to him.

The king questioned Sumanthra in various ways. He discovered that he was none other than the minister at the court of Dasaratha, Emperor of Ayodhya, and that his master was still unmarried. The discovery filled him with joy. He said, "Minister! You brought back my child, saving her from destruction. So I resolve to give her in marriage to your master himself. Please inform the king of my offer." He honoured Sumanthra with due ceremony and sent him with the court priest and appropriate presents.

Sumanthra told Dasaratha in detail all that had happened. In order to confirm his acceptance, Dasaratha sent with the court priest of Kosala his own court priest with gifts of auspicious nature. The date and time were fixed; Dasaratha proceeded to the Kosala capital accompanied by a magnificent array of elephantry, chariotry, cavalry and infantry. The paean of music that marched with him reached the sky and echoed from the horizon. The marriage of Dasaratha and Kausalya was celebrated with resounding grandeur and splendour.

The king of Kosala took Sumanthra near him and said, "You brought about this glory. Of course, nothing ever happens without God's will; nevertheless, how can I repay the debt I owe you and demonstrate my gratitude to you? Please honour my offer and accept it; be wedded this day itself in my capital city. If you agree, I'll arrange the celebration of that joyous event this very day."

Dasaratha and Sumanthra gave their consent to the proposal. Sumanthra was married to the daughter of Veeradasa, of the clan of Ganga. The news of the marriages of both king and prime minister at the same place, on the same day, spread throughout the kingdom! The land was filled with wonder and delight. The festival lasted three days; the populace were treated to music, drama, dance, and other forms of entertainment. Night and day were packed with excitement and joy.

On the fourth day, Dasaratha started back for Ayodhya with his queen and courtiers as well as minister Sumanthra and his bride and entourage; they entered the city amidst the acclamation of the people, who exulted

at the marriages of both king and minister. Dasaratha's subjects danced in the streets and shouted "hurrah, hurrah" till their throats got hoarse. They lined the streets to see their queen; they sprinkled rosewater on the roads by which they came and welcomed them waving flames of camphor.

Dasaratha resumed his royal duties and ruled with love and care. Often, he went with his consort on excursions into the forests and spent his days happily. But, as time sped through days, months, and even years, the shadow of distress darkened his face, for the pang of being childless saddened him.

The king consulted priests, pundits, and ministers, and when he knew that their desire confirmed Kausalya's earnest prayer, he married another wife, Sumitra. Sumitra lived up to her name, for she was indeed full of companionable virtues. Kausalya and Sumitra were bound to each other by ties of affection far stronger than those between a mother and child. Each yearned to give joy to the other; each had deep fortitude, detachment, and sympathy.

But in spite of the lapse of many years, there were no signs of the king having a successor to the throne. Moved by despair and at the insistence of the two queens, the king married a third wife. She was Kaika, the exquisitely charming daughter of the king of Kekaya in Kashmir.

The King of Kekaya, however, laid down certain conditions before agreeing to give his daughter away in marriage! He insisted that the son born of Kaika should have the right of accession to the throne; if the king of Ayodhya could not agree to this, he would not consent. Garga, the court priest, brought back the message to Ayodhya.

Kausalya and Sumitra recognised the ardour of the king to wed the princess of Kekaya, whose beauty was being extolled highly by all; they felt that the duty of a true wife is to obey the least wish of the husband and do her best to help the realisation of that wish; they also knew full well that the imperial line of Ayodhya could never be polluted by a son who would transgress *dharma*. Though Dasaratha might promise that the son of the third wife could succeed to the throne, the son of Kaika born in the dynasty would certainly be an embodiment of righteousness, free from such blemish. So, they pleaded with him, with palms meeting in prayer, "Lord! What greater happiness have we than yours? Accept the conditions laid by the king of Kekaya and wed his daughter and ensure the continuity of this dynasty of Raghu. There is no need to spend even a minute's thought upon this."

The words of the queens fanned his native ardour to an even brighter flame; the king sent Garga back with many presents, agreeing to the terms and informing the king that he was following fast for the wedding ceremony. The ceremony itself was celebrated with lavish magnificence.

Dasaratha returned to his capital, shining like the moon amidst the stars, as he passed through the streets in procession, accompanied by the three queens. The king treated each of them with equal consideration; they, too, evinced equal love and respect toward each other and the king. They adored him and were afraid to displease him. They did their best to carry out his wishes and not to hinder his desire, for they revered him as their God, in the tradition of the true wife. They lived with such intimate mutual love that it appeared as if all three had but one breath, though they moved about as three bodies!

Performance of a sacrifice for begetting a son

Years passed. The king and queens crossed the bounds of youth and middle age and approached the realm of old age, but there were no sign of a son. Therefore, though the women's apartments of the palace had all the

comforts and accessories needed for happy existence, the hearts of the queens were torn by unrest, anxiety, and despair.

One evening, the four (the king and his queens) sat in a room of the palace spending hours of anxiety over the future of Ayodhya and the prospects of its prosperity and safety, and each attempted to answer intelligently and pleasantly. At last, unable to resolve the problem, they rose, heavily dejected, and decided to consult the family preceptor, Vasishtha, and accept his advice.

At break of dawn, Vasishtha was invited to grant his presence; many pundits and counsellors were also called for consultation. The king placed before them the problem of finding a successor to rule the vast realm between the two seas, the imperial domain under the sway of the Raghu dynasty. Overcome by despair, Dasaratha prayed to the elders in plaintive terms for beneficial suggestions.

Vasishtha dwelled long in thought. Finally, he opened his eyes and spoke. “King! You need not grieve thus. Ayodhya will not be rendered masterless. She will not suffer widowhood. This domain will be gay, happy, and prosperous, in unbroken festivity and evergreen with festoonery. She will be the guardian of right living, reverberating with music and joy. I will not agree to raising a prince from some other dynasty to Ayodhya’s throne. The grace of God is a gift inscrutable. The vow of righteousness that you are fulfilling will surely bring you the supreme joy of having a son. Don’t delay any further! Invite sage Rishyasringa, son of Vibhandaka, and perform the sacred sacrifice prescribed for those who want to beget a son with him as the high priest. Make all the necessary ceremonial and ritual arrangements for the sacrifice forthwith. Your desire will be achieved without fail.”

The queens listened to these reassuring words, spoken so emphatically by Vasishtha. They were filled with bliss (*ananda*)! The bud of hope bloomed anew in their hearts. They retired into their apartments, praying earnestly.

The king searched among his entourage for the most appropriate emissary to send to invite Rishyasringa to the imperial capital. At last, he called his old friend Romapada, king of the Anga State, and sent him with necessary instructions and equipment. Meanwhile, arrangements for the sacrifice were made on the bank of the sacred Sarayu river. Attractive sacrificial altars were constructed, in conformity with sacred injunctions. The city was decorated with flags and festoons.

As anticipated, the great sage Rishyasringa entered the city of Ayodhya with his consort Santha, to the great delight of all.

Emperor Dasaratha welcomed the sage at the main palace gate and ceremonially washed his feet. He placed on his own head a few drops of the water sanctified by the sage’s feet and then fell at Vasishtha’s feet and prayed to him to enquire from Rishyasringa the proper procedure for the contemplated sacrifice.

Rishyasringa asked the ministers and scholars to sit in appointed order and directed the king to sit on his throne. Then he described the various processes of the ceremony, so that the court priests could note them for their guidance. He gave them in such detail that everyone even knew exactly where he was to sit in the sacrificial hall!

The sage decided that the sacrifice should begin at the stroke of seven, the very next day. The news spread all over the city in a trice. Before dawn, every street was decorated with green festoons, every road was packed with people pressing forward to the vast open space on the bank of the Sarayu, where the sacrifice was to be performed. The river bank was thick with the eager populace.

Rishyasringa, with his consort Santha, entered the specially built sacrifice hall (*yajna mantap*) with the king and queens, while *Vedic* chanting and the music of bugle, trumpet, and clarinet and the cheers of the people resounded from the sky. Rishyasringa was installed as the “Brahma” or chief organiser for the sacrifice; he assigned various tasks like worship, recitation, chanting, and propitiation, to scholars, in consideration of their qualifications. The offerings were placed in the sacred fire with the prescribed formulae by Rishyasringa himself, with scrupulous exactitude, deep devotion, and faith.

From the fire that was scripturally fed there arose before all eyes a divine person, who shone with the blinding splendour of a sudden stroke of lightning! He held a bright vessel in his hands. At this, the vast concourse, including the priests, were petrified with wonder, awe, fear and joy. They were overwhelmed by the sudden onrush of bliss and mystery. The king and queens shed tears of joy; they cast their looks upon the divine person and prayed to him, with folded palms.

Rishiyashringa continued the formulae with undisturbed equanimity, as the texts prescribe, offering oblations in the fire. Suddenly, a voice resounded from the dome of the sky, as on the day of merriment. Rishyasringa sat aghast and sought to listen to the message from above. “*Maharaja!* Accept this vessel and give the sacred sweet milk pudding (*payasam*) in it in appropriate shares to your three queens,” the voice announced. Placing the vessel in the king’s hands, the mysterious person who had emerged from the flames disappeared into them.

The joy of the people, princes, pundits, and priests who witnessed this great manifestation knew no bounds. Soon, the final rituals were completed and the *maharaja* returned in procession to the palace, with the sacred vessel gifted by the Gods in his hands.