

Chapter 12. Sita Insists on Going with Rama

Sita was watching the entrance door, for she was anxious to learn what had happened at Kaika's palace and why Rama had not come yet, though the auspicious hour for the coronation was fast approaching. She had finished her own rites of vigil and fast, and she held in readiness a plate of sandal paste, flowers, grain, and other prescribed articles so that she would not be the cause of delay. Her heart beat fast in expectancy of Rama's arrival. Her maids and attendants were overcome with the ecstasy of the coming hour of triumph. Lovely maidens were ready with sparkling lamps for the ceremony of waving them before Rama as he entered the decorated hall shining in unprecedented charm. Suddenly Rama stepped in, unheralded, with bowed head and bare feet.

Everyone was shocked. Sita moved forward toward her Lord; she could scarcely believe her eyes. Her body shivered like a leaf in the wind. She bit her lips and swallowed her surprise. "Lord! What is the meaning of this? Why are you thus? You said this day is dedicated to Brihaspathi, preceptor of the gods. You said it is a very auspicious day. The star is Pushya, and you're to become the crown prince of this empire.

"Why aren't they holding over your divinely beautiful self the white umbrella of imperium with the brilliance of sunlit pearls, with its hundred ribs of gemset gold? Where are the resplendent whisks with their feather-pure sheen that appear like moons? Why aren't they accompanying you today? Why are the minstrels of the court silent as you proceed to the court hall? O, Lord! Why haven't the masters of *Vedic* lore, the *brahmins*, anointed you with consecrated honey and curds? And the ministers, vassal kings, and leaders of the various communities in the state aren't walking behind you, as usage requires! The majestic royal elephant, a mountain peak on the move, Satrunjaya, trampling the ground, making people mistake it for a dark blue cloud flowing over the road — shouldn't he come first, announcing your arrival?"

While Sita was raining questions like these, Rama could not decide how to answer them. The matter could not be explained quickly in a few words. Rama entered an inner hall and drew Sita nearer. "Sita! Revered father has willed and resolved at this very auspicious hour to send me to the forest, and it has become urgent to honour his command."

Sita heard the words but could not believe them. "Lord! What crime did you commit to deserve this punishment, this exile into the forest? Dasaratha is the embodiment of justice. He would never issue such an order without legitimate reasons! What is the real purpose, the inner significance, of this order?"

Rama smiled at her question. "Sita! Long ago, father promised to grant mother Kaika two boons, but the promise had not been fulfilled so far. This day, she asked for them both. They were, first: Bharatha must be crowned as heir-apparent (*yuvaraja*); second: I should move into the forest and live there with matted hair and vestments of bark for fourteen years.

"Father is supremely righteous. He never acts against the plighted word. Therefore, he bowed his head to *dharma* and acceded. I felt I should see you before leaving! You were born in a greatly revered family. You know and value all the moral codes and goals. Janaka *Maharaja*, master of the inner mysteries of the highest morality, is your father. You too walk steadily on the path of *dharma*. I have to leave for the forest this very day.

"Dasaratha has given this empire, inherited by him through many generations, to Bharatha; from now on, he is the lord over this realm. Immediately after being crowned, he will come for your blessing. Don't extol me

before my brother or exhibit any trace of sorrow or displeasure at my being sent to the forest. Don't slight him or look down upon him. Kings appreciate only those who adore them and serve them. So don't praise me or decry him. He is my brother and your brother-in-law; but, that is only with reference to physical kinship; with reference to kinship, Bharatha is your monarch and mine. Give him due honour. Don't cause any displeasure or distress to him by word or deed.

“Fair one! Follow not only Bharatha's directives but also those of the father, Dasaratha. Serve also mother Kausalya, who is suffering unspeakable agony because I am leaving her. Take all appropriate measures to keep grief away from her. Also, please obey and please the other two mothers, Kaika and Sumitra.

“Sita! Bharatha and Satrughna are to me as dear and close as my very breath. Treat them as your own brothers; foster them lovingly as your sons. O charming damsel! Don't leave this place and go to Mithila because I am not here. Remain in Ayodhya and comfort mother and father, serving them in suitable ways to remove the sorrow from their hearts. With love and care, confer comfort, courage, and contentment on them.”

When Rama was instructing Sita on her duties, she could not contain her laughter! She also felt a sense of shame at the turn of his arguments. She couldn't remain silent for long. “Rama,” she interrupted, “Rama! you are Dasaratha's. I have not heard at any time words unworthy of that lineage fall from your lips. Mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter-in-law —everyone has to experience a quantum of happiness and misery, in proportion to the good and bad done by each. But the wife has a special source of fortune, good or bad; she has a share in the good and bad for which her husband is responsible. She is endowed with a part of his joy or grief. So, if Emperor Dasaratha ordered you to go into the forest, he also gave me that order.

“A woman may be fed and fostered by her mother and father; she may be revered by her son; she may be served by her maids. But they can never be her shield and support. The trinkets and toys with which you try to convince me serve only to arouse amusement in me. During the years preceding my wedding, father taught me all the duties that should guide and bind me. I am neither an ignoramus nor a seeker of power. And, more than these, let me tell you, I do not cling fanatically to any opinion because it is mine.

“There is no need for you to point out my special duty, for I know them all. Isn't it only when I decide to remain here that you have to tell me how to serve the parents-in-law, sisters-in-law, and ruler of the land? But when I'm with you, what chance is there, what need is there, for me to take on the service of others? I'm coming with you in full joy! For a long time, I have had an unfulfilled desire to spend some years in forests. My good fortune now gives me the chance to satisfy that desire, in the company of my Lord! I won't listen if you tell me not to express my point of view in this great matter. Don't be angry with me for disobeying you. It is not just and proper for you to throw me aside here, as one throws out water from the cup after quaffing a mouthful. Believe me! I won't stay in Ayodhya even for a moment; take me with you.”

Sita fell at his feet and held them tight. “I haven't the slightest sorrow that you were not crowned. I hold you dear, crowned or uncrowned. Wherever you are, that is my empire. There is my treasure. That is my glory,” she pleaded and prayed.

Rama told her that forest life was fraught with fears and dangers. The forest was infested with wild animals and wilder men, demonic predators, and bandits. One encountered river floods and thick thorny undergrowth. She was not used to going places on foot, so she would undergo great exhaustion. He described various other forms of fear and anxiety that would confront her.

But Sita was unmoved. She replied, “Lord! However wild the animals, however thick and terror-striking the forest, what harm can they cause, what injury can they inflict on me when you are by my side? I can walk through forest tracks; it will be no trouble for me. I will be happier if you ask me to walk first, preparing the path smooth for you to tread. I will pick and cast away stones, pebbles and thorns to lessen pain, making your journey easy. Let me be with you, so I may render this service and be happy.

“Here, in the palace of Ayodhya, and in the women’s quarters, I wouldn’t get the chance to serve you. I would feel worried and miserable that all services for you were undertaken by attendants and aides. There will be no attendant, no aide in the forest! So I can be happy, doing all the services myself. That is my great good fortune! Make my life worthwhile, Lord. Give me that glorious chance!” Sita asked in a variety of ways, pleading for mercy and justice.

Rama was moved to compassion. “Sita! Living in the forest, you cannot be happy, you have to suffer greatly in the coming days.” Rama expatiated on the horrors of jungles and the sufferings that one has inevitably to meet there.

But Sita stood firm. “Rama, I won’t be an obstacle in the observance of your vows. From your words, I infer that you are hiding something from me, some objection that you don’t like to raise before me. I will observe along with you the vows of personal austerity incumbent on a person on the *brahmachari* path. I too will live on tubers and fruits. I too will discard the use of scents, and we will inhale only the fragrance of forest flowers.

“You are a scion of the Ikshvaku line, which has saved millions from danger and disaster! Can’t you guard me against them? Are you so weak of hand? I won’t give you trouble; through me, you won’t have the slightest worry. Lord! I cannot but follow you. I will lay myself down and sleep at your feet; that will give me the fullest bliss. Rama! I know and recognise none except you. I cannot exist alive for a moment apart from you. If you hold fast to your resolution and leave me in Ayodhya, Sita will have drawn her last breath before you reach the forest. Take this as Truth.” Sita’s eyes shed streams of tears as she spoke these words.

Rama tried to pacify her. “O Sita, you are a very staunch adherent of *dharma*. It is best for you to stick to your righteous qualities, maintaining them at this place. You can’t act as your will dictates; you have no freedom to behave as you want. Your *dharma* is to act in accordance with my words. Therefore, give up this idea.

“I am saying this for your own good. Guarding you will be a burden for me. Streams rolling down from mountain peaks, wild beasts that dwell in the caves, lions and tigers roaming without let or hindrance amidst the hills and valleys—these have to be overcome. Rivers in spate will have to be forded. We may have to leap down from huge boulders and rocks. Considering these difficulties, I have to tell you in such emphatic terms to stay.

“You have to wear matted hair and clothes of the bark of trees. When men go to some river or lake for the evening rites of worship, who will watch over you against any calamity that might happen? Whatever may be the crisis, we cannot give up those rites. You know how strict that rule is, so every day you may have to be alone for some time. We can’t say what will happen when.”

Rama tried to picture before Sita fearful scenes of forest life, but Sita was not affected in the least. “Rama! Why tell me these things, as if I am a simpleton of some backward village or an ignorant, stupid woman, unaware of the teachings of the scriptures (*sastras*)? I am well aware of your skill and prowess. Nothing is impossible for you on earth, nay in all the fourteen worlds! And, when you are with me, what fear can disturb me? Well, if a wild beast attacks me and I fall a prey to it, I will be happy to die in your presence, rather than anywhere far! I shall

die happily then.

“I shall never agree to a life spent without you. You said I have no freedom to do as I wish. Did you say that with full consciousness of its meaning? Or was it just a remark to test me? I am half of you; it is my right to name myself as your half. You too have the same right. That is the truth. You are not fully free, nor am I. I have as much right over you as you have over me. But I don’t plead for my rights or claims. I am yearning to be near you, to be ever in your presence. My words arise from that craving.”

Listening to Sita revealing her hard determination, Rama continued. “Sita! You are entangling yourself in the complexities of rights and claims! When I proceed to the forest, the aged parents will wail and weep for me. At that time, you can console and comfort them, with gentle assurances. That is your duty. You must conduct yourself according to the needs of each occasion. Be with them; serve them; that is the way to please me and give me spiritual bliss (*ananda*).” Rama spoke as if his decision was final, and in a tone of command.

Sita responded only with a smile. “When the son born of these very parents plunges them in deep grief and goes away, clinging with a bear’s grasp to his adamant resolution, and when the very son whom they love so much gives everything up and goes into the forest, what responsibility does the daughter-in-law have, who has entered this household from her own, a stranger in the family, what responsibility does she have to console and comfort those deserted by the son? Ponder this!

“I am told you insisted on your mother remaining here, serving her husband, though she wept out her eyes in bitter tears and prayed to be allowed to follow you to the forest! You told her that her duty of serving her husband is predominant. You declared that it would bring untold disgrace on the Ikshvaku dynasty if she abandoned the lord she was wedded to out of affection for the son she had borne and brought forth into the world! You dilated on such moral rules of inestimable value before her. But, as soon as you come near me, you reverse the advice and tell me that my predominant duty is service to the parents-in-law and not to the husband! Think it over! Which is the correct advice?

“For the wife, the husband is God —this was laid down not only for Kausalya; it is the guide and goal for women, all over the world, without exception. Evidently, you have forgotten this truth, for it doesn’t suit your present wish. You are unable to explain how the moral rule you quoted before Kausalya doesn’t apply to me

“However long you argue, whatever you assert; I will not leave off treading along your footprints. You may kill me for transgressing your order, but I assert I can never be without you. Ramachandra! No sooner did you speak of the exile in the forest you are entering upon than I had such an upsurge of joy, remembering an incident that took place in my childhood! You cannot understand the extent of that joy!

“My mother, with me seated on her lap, was immersed in anxiety about the husband destiny had in store for me, whether he would be morally upright and endowed with excellent attributes. She was stroking my hair, lost in thought. The maid appeared just then and announced that a woman ascetic wanted an audience with her. She lifted me, gently placed me on the floor, and went forward to meet her. Mother fell at her feet and directed me to do likewise. I did as she directed. The woman eyed me closely from head to foot and said, ‘Mother! Your child will spend years with her husband in the forest.’

“My mother replied, with a laugh. ‘Not married yet, and you talk of her spending life in the forest!’

“However, the woman did not keep quiet. ‘After marriage! She will have to live in the forest with her hus-

band, for some time!’ Then she went her way! Ever since, I have looked forward excitedly to living in the forest with my Lord! Make me happy, take me with you.” Sita fell at his feet, sobbing.

Rama was moved to pity. He raised her gently. “Sita! To whom else am I to confide the secret spring of my decision? Listen! You are young; in the forest there are many hermitages full of ascetics, hermits, and sages. I will have to go to them in order to be of service to them and to offer my reverence to them. Kings and princes may also be present (since they come to hunt) and honour them and be blessed by them. Their eye may fall on you, and consequential complications and conflicts may arise. And, since I will be wearing the apparel of an ascetic, it may not be proper to fight with them. At least for this reason you will have to remain in Ayodhya.”

Sita had her own reasons to protest at this. “Rama! It isn’t just for you to deceive me, spinning such fairy tales, as if you are of common stock! When you are by my side, can even the ruler of the gods cast his eye on me? If he does, won’t he be reduced to ashes that very moment? No, for this reason, you can’t leave me here; you can’t escape your duty and responsibility on this score!

“Let me also tell you something: If you are not with me, what will be my fate? I will have to be alone in Ayodhya; the kind of incidents you just dilated upon can happen here! Or else, I may suffer inner agony not being able to bear the conjugal happiness of others! So, don’t leave me alone. Take me with you, and let your renown and mine spread for all time over the entire world.

“Let me add: You are dear to all as Ramachandra, Rama the moon! I am Sita, which means cool, the cool moonlight! How can the moon be in the forest and its cool light be in Ayodhya? Where the moon is, there must be its light! So this separation can never be. The two shall ever be together, never apart! If the two happen to part, it is but evidence of the approach of some unnatural catastrophe, a world-shaking tragedy. Or, it may happen for the sake of an epoch-making endeavour to destroy the wicked and save the good from extinction! Since no such crisis is evident now, our separation is impossible. It cannot happen.” Sita, the supreme mother, spoke these words in a resolute voice, as if she would brook no objection.

“Sita! You will have to sleep on hard rocky ground, wear apparel made of fibre or bark, live on tubers and roots. Even this food might be difficult to get every day. Their availability depends on the seasons of the year. When they are not procurable, you might have to be hungry for days. The forest is infested with demonic tribes who are masters of a million stratagems and who eat human flesh with delight. O! It is impossible to describe fully the travails of life in the forest! You can’t bear these terrors and tribulations. If you accompany me into exile, people will condemn me and pour abuse on me. How can the celestial swan that lives on the ambrosial waters of the Manasa-Sarovar (Lake of the Mind) survive drinking the brackish waters of the sea? How can the cuckoo sporting in the garden that is full of tender-leafed mango trees be happy and carefree in a patch of low grass? Reflect on these matters. It is most desirable that you stay at home.”

Sita listened to Rama’s words, spoken so softly and sweetly, but all the while she stood with her eyes on the ground and tears streaming down her cheeks. She stood like a pillar, unmoved and immovable. Her tears fell continuously on the floor. Rama could not bear the sight of her distress. Sita could find no word to answer the objections Rama raised. Finally, she managed to control her emotions, and swallow her grief.

“O Lord of my life! You are the treasure-house of everything good and auspicious. When I am separated from you, even heaven is horrible hell. Parents, brothers, sisters, parents-in-law, sons, preceptors, kinsmen—all these might be resplendent repositories of goodness, but for a woman, her husband is the only source of strength,

joy, and fortune. He alone can grant her happiness and delight. Except for the husband, she has none to guide and guard her; he is her refuge, her only resort. Lord! When the husband is away from her, the wife will find the body, the home, city, kingdom, the wealth heaped around her —everything as sources of grief and sorrow. They cannot confer joy on her stricken mind. Sweetness will turn bitter when her Lord is away. Delight will be curdled into disease. All the joys I crave are centred in you. Nothing can equal the ecstasy I derive when I fix my eyes on your face, which shines so bright and comforting like the full moon in autumn.

“When I’m with you there, the birds and beasts will be my kith and kin. The forest will be the city I love. The apparel made of tree bark will be silken clothes. The hermitage with the thatch of leaves will be as delightful a home as a heavenly mansion. The fairies and angels of the forest, the sylvan deities will be parents-in-law. I will revere them with equal awe. When I am with you, sheaves of grass and heaps of floral petals will give much softness for the bed —the God of love could aspire for more. And the tubers, roots, and fruits you speak of will be as sweet and sustaining as divine nectar itself! The mountain peaks will gladden me as much as the towers of Ayodhya. I will come down one slope and climb another as gladly as coming down one flight of stairs and getting up another here. It will be so easy and delightful.

“Every day, I will derive the thrill of delight at the sight of your lotus feet. Besides, this will be a golden chance for me to serve you at all times in every way. How can I survive the agony of losing this precious chance? O, treasure-chest of mercy! Don’t leave me here; take me with you!

“Really there is no need for me to pour these importunities into your ear; for, you reside in all beings and are aware of all that they feel and think. It isn’t proper to inflict such pain on me, when you know how my heart yearns for the chance to be with you.

“Lord! I am downcast, miserable. If you leave me and go, it will bring your name down. You have all the noble attributes; why then deny mercy to me? Can I keep alive for fourteen years, separated from you? I find it impossible to keep alive even for ten winks of separation! Accept my prayer, show me a little kindness. When I am with you, how can anyone dare harm or attack me? Why? No one dare cast a glance at me. Can the jackal or the hare open its eye and dare look at the lion? I am not a tender fragile person. To speak the truth, you are tenderness personified!

“The Earth is my mother, so I have every right and every strength to traverse it. Really, happiness is your share in life; my lot is to suffer. When such is the case, why do you invent facts and cause disappointment to me. It is not correct. I declare that I can carry out with ease tasks that are beyond you! You know full well that I lifted up and placed aside Siva’s bow, which no king, however proud of his prowess, could lift. I am surprised that you doubt my capabilities! My valour and skill are not inferior to yours. So, give me permission and make arrangements to depart with me in great joy.” Sita bowed low and fell at Rama’s feet.

Rama felt it would be improper to continue resisting her wishes. He resolved to yield. “Sita! Give up your grief. Don’t give way to sadness. As you desire, I will take you with me. Engage yourselves quickly in preparing for the journey to the forest!”

Hearing his sweet words, Sita was elated, filled with boundless joy. She said, “Preparation? What has one to prepare to live in the forest? I am always ready, with whatever I need, for I need only you. I have no other want. I follow you this moment. In you, I have all I need. You know I have no desire for anything other than you.” With these words, she held Rama’s hand in hers and stepped forward.

“Sita! Consider this: You will not be in Ayodhya for fourteen years. Therefore, go and release the parrots and birds you have reared as pets with love and care. And the cows you fostered with affection. Give them away to *brahmins*, so they might be treated lovingly. Distribute the various articles of dress, the vehicles, and other articles used by you to the people, or else they will be ruined by time. It is better far that they be used rather than get disintegrated.”

Sita immediately ran toward the cages, and addressing each pet bird in loving accents, told them; “Go! Like us, roam freely in the beautiful forest.” With her own hands, she opened the cages and set them free! Then she went to the cowshed. She fed the cows with various tasty foods and talked to the *brahmins* who were to receive them as gifts. Her charming face beamed with joy. Spectators watching her give the things away felt their hearts melt with sorrow at her impending departure. They shed tears in streams, for they were moved by the large-hearted generosity and, more than all, by her exultation at the prospect of accompanying her husband into exile in the forest. Her ecstasy was beyond the pen of any poet.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana joined them. After taking leave of his mother, the three moved on.