

Chapter 18. Sandals Enthroned

On the sixth day of their stay, after the morning rites, bath, and devotional ceremonies like the worship of the dawn, Bharatha called his brother Satrugna and his own aides and followers. He watched for a favourable moment to accost Rama, and when he found one, he rose suddenly from his seat and mustered sufficient courage to lay himself prostrate at his feet. Standing in front of him with his palms folded, Bharatha prayed thus, “O mark of auspiciousness on the brow of the royal Ikshvaku line! You have fulfilled my desires in every way. On my account, you determined to suffer miseries of all kinds. You are undergoing all types of troubles for my sake.

“Lord! I await your commands. For fourteen years, I will be awaiting your return and serving you in the kingdom. Show me the path by which I can feast my eyes on your lotus feet when the period of exile ends. Teach me the courage I need to survive these fourteen years of separation.

“Rama! Your subjects, their families, people residing in the vast empire, *brahmins*, pundits—all are spiritually earnest and are bound to you by feelings of reverential devotion. They are bearing the pangs of misery buoyed up by the love you bear unto them. I don’t care even for the attainment of self-realisation if, to attain it, I am separated from you. You are aware of the inner feelings of your servants; you know their deepest desires. You can guide me and lead me to the goal, here and hereafter. This conviction is the sustenance and strength on which I exist. On account of this conviction, I treat all this agony as just shriveled blades of grass. Till now I elaborated before you my sorrows as if they were burdening my head. That was a failing on my part; don’t hesitate to reprimand me for this fault.”

The gathering hailed his statements and expressed their appreciation. As Hamsa, the celestial swan, separates the milk from the water with which it is mixed and drinks just the milk, so, they said, Bharatha had separated truth from untruth and given expression to the truth alone.

Rama, compassionate toward the distressed, listened to those words poured from the pure heart of his brother. He replied thus, in conformity with the place, time, and circumstance, “Brother! For you who reside at home, and for us who reside in the forest, there is the One who fosters all, to foster and fend. You have, in a worldly practical sense, the preceptor Vasishta and Emperor Janaka as guardians and guides. No trouble can bother either you or me, even in our dreams; no, it can never happen.

“The highest duty for us is to carry out strictly the commands of our father; that alone can confer on us all the good we long for; that alone can enable us to earn lasting renown. That path is the one approved by the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* declare that he is the noble example for all who reveres the commands of the preceptor, the father, and the mother and walks on the right path. Be ever aware of this truth; throw away the shroud of grief; take up the burden of empire; rule over it for 14 years with justice and rectitude as your ideals.

“The king is the face of the state, for the face eats and drinks and thus strengthens and activates all the limbs of the body. The king feeds and sustains every section of his people. The mind encloses within itself all likes and dislikes; so too, the king is the repository of all moves and movements in the political field.”

Rama expounded many a useful doctrine of political ethics to Bharatha, but Bharatha was too agitated to earn mental peace as a result of Rama’s advice. The mothers, teachers, and ministers stood benumbed, for they were also overcome by the imminence of the moment of parting. Suddenly, Rama, in his infinite graciousness, loosened

his sandals and gave them to Bharatha. Bharatha reverentially accepted them in his palms and placed them on his head. Tears streamed from his eyes, like the twin rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna.

Bharatha could not express his joy in words. “These are not the ‘sandals’ worn by the ocean of mercy! These are the guardians of the lives and prosperity of all mankind. These are the chests enclosing the precious treasure of Rama’s brotherly love. These are the protecting doors of the fort that enshrines the royal fame of the Raghu clan. These are two hands that are ever engaged in good deeds. These are the veritable eyes of the universe. These are the symbols of Sita and Rama who are coming with us as these two.”

Thus, Bharatha extolled the “sandals” and danced around them in sheer joy and thankfulness. All present fell at Rama’s feet and acknowledged the sublimity of Rama’s grace.

Taking leave

Bharatha prostrated before Rama and prayed for permission to leave. Rama appreciated the spirit of contentment with which he welcomed the “sandals”; he embraced Bharatha fast and firm with great affection and delight. Satrughna also fell at Rama’s feet; Rama embraced him with great affection and also gave him many a directive for ruling the kingdom and carrying out the duties devolving on him. Consider Bharatha as Rama himself, he told him. “Be his support and counsel and help him to establish peace and prosperity in the empire.”

Bharatha and Satrughna embraced Lakshmana in fraternal love, saying, “Brother! Your luck is indeed great. Yours is the best of luck. In all worlds there is none so fortunate as you.” They praised Lakshmana to their hearts’ content and took permission to depart. Lakshmana told them that Rama’s “sandals” were the springs of all varieties of auspiciousness, so they, who had won that gift, were indeed more fortunate than any. He advised them to act worthy of the gift and earn Rama’s grace forever. “This is your duty now,” he reminded them.

Later the brothers went to Sita and fell at her feet. They could not contain their grief and burst into sobs. She consoled them softly and sweetly in various ways. “Is there anything else than the armour of Rama that can protect anyone in the world? You are indeed blessed. The fourteen years will roll by as swift as fourteen seconds, and the empire will smile in plenty and peace with Rama’s return. Carry on the administration with patience and devotion; don’t deviate even a little from the guidelines he has marked out. By this rigorous obedience, you will be able to secure the fruits of your desires.”

Then, Bharatha and Satrughna went straight to Emperor Janaka and fell at his feet in exemplary reverence, saying, “Lord! You have such compassion on us that you came to Ayodhya when you heard about our father’s death and Rama’s exile into the forest. You observed our plight with your own eyes and comforted us during those critical days. You gave us appropriate advice to resuscitate ourselves. In order to fulfil your inner desire, you subjected yourself to all this strain and trouble, coming here into this jungle. You have shared with us our grief and contributed your valuable part in the pleading we made to Rama to persuade him to return. When those pleadings failed, you consoled us, taught us to bear the disappointment and distress, and enriched us with your blessings. We offer our reverential gratitude. What more can we say or do? Your blessings are the most effective reinforcements we require.”

Janaka listened to these words uttered so sincerely and so thankfully by the two brothers. He appreciated their reactions and feelings, their character and conduct; he drew them near and lovingly caressed them and stroked their heads. He said, “Sons! May you walk along the path laid down by Rama and may you thereby win

his grace. I am going to Mithila straight from here.”

The ministers, feudatory rulers, *brahmins*, sages, ascetics, and others who had come with the brothers, went one after another toward Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. Falling at their feet, they took their leave and turned their faces homeward, their hearts heavy with a sense of gloom. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana went to the mothers and prostrated before them. They consoled them, saying, “Do not worry in the least. Be engaged in the correct performance of your duties and responsibilities. Have before you ever the wishes and ideals that father has laid before us.” As for themselves, they said they would spend the fourteen years as happily and peacefully as a quick span of fourteen seconds and then return joyfully to Ayodhya. These words restored the queens’ spirits.

They fell at Kaika’s feet and told her that she had not an iota of responsibility for Rama’s exile and that she was ever worthy of their reverence and worship. She had never intended any harm, they said. They assured her that they would ever pray for her; they pleaded with her that she should not have the least worry over them in the forest. They gave her a great deal of courage to bear her burden of repentance. “Bharatha had spoken rashly and impertinently, in a fit of senseless fury, when he was suddenly confronted with the two calamities: his father’s death and his brother’s exile. He flew into a passion, for his blood boiled at the person he imagined was responsible for these events. He didn’t even care that you were his mother!” Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana prayed that she not blame Bharatha for that incident; they begged her to pardon Bharatha for the indiscretion.

While Rama was speaking, Kaika was downcast with shame at the memory of her iniquity. She could not look Rama in the face. She felt within herself, “Alas, that I should be the cause of inflicting so much misery and suffering on this son endowed with a heart of compassion and a mind full of virtues, a son who is unalloyed gold, nothing less. Am I not the reason for him spending years in this terrifying jungle? Oh, what a devilish deed I perpetrated. But did I do it on my own? Or did Rama will the turn of events through my instrumentality? Whatever the truth, I can’t escape; I have committed the gravest sin.”

Kaika was overcome with sorrow over the irrevocable past; she held Sita’s hands in her grasp and petitioned for pardon. Soon, she added, “No. No. It is not just that you pardon a sinner who brought about such unbearable travail on such a pure and tender woman.” She continued to lament her fortune for a long time.

Everyone who had come from Ayodhya took leave of Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana as and when they could get the chance. Afterward, they ascended their chariots in due order.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana approached each chariot and consoled and comforted each occupant and persuaded them to leave. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana fell at the preceptor’s feet and apologised to him, saying that they had caused him and his consort a lot of trouble; they expressed sorrow that they could not serve them as well as they wished to and as duty demanded. Then they asked permission to stay back.

Vasishta was, of course, a knower of Brahman (*Brahma-jnani*) and a great sage, so he could know the inner feelings of Sita and others. He appreciated the devotion and humility of the brothers and Sita and their strict adherence to the path of *dharma*. He and his consort could not leave Rama’s presence, for they were so attached to the virtues he embodied. The picture of those three standing by the jungle track with folded palms, bidding adieu to each passing chariot and the people inside, melted the most adamant heart. Vasishta and his consort, Arundathi, were very much moved at the sight of their large-hearted sympathy.

Rama saw the chieftain of the Nishadas standing before him, amidst his followers. He went forward to him and, extending his arms, embraced him more warmly than he had his own brother. He consoled Guha with af-

fectionate appeals to calm himself and persuaded him to accept the separation wisely. Guha couldn't do anything to change the turn of events; so he fell at Rama's feet, rose with a heavy heart, and walked off, his eyes fixed on Rama for as long as he could see that picture of charm.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana stood under a spreading tree until the last of them left. Meanwhile, Emperor Janaka also prepared to leave for Mithila, at the head of his party. Rama and Lakshmana prostrated before their father-in-law and mother-in-law; Sita fell at her parents' feet. The parents embraced her and stroked her head in fond tenderness. "Daughter! Your courageous determination and your devotion toward your husband will bring us great renown. Through you, our family and clan have been rendered holy. We must have accomplished some great vow and fulfilled some great austerity or else you wouldn't have been born in our line." They extolled her in profuse terms and expressed their joy and exultation.

They assured her, "Sita! You can suffer no want; Rama is the breath of your existence. We know that since you live in his shade, no harm can touch you. However, as a result of you two being different entities, problems and perplexities might confront you now and then. Those are but the play of destiny, just passing clouds." Janaka presented before them many *Vedantic* truths to bring them comfort and contentment. Then, he too left the hermitage and took the track that led him out of the forest.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana stood in the shade of that tree until the people from Ayodhya and Mithila went beyond the range of their eyes. Then, they returned to their thatched cottage. There, while Rama described with appreciative ardour the devotion and faith of Bharatha and Satrugna, their exemplary love and loyalty, and the affectionate attachment of the subjects of the empire, Sita and Lakshmana listened attentively and echoed the same sentiments. Their hearts felt sore at their departure; they would fain have liked their presence longer. Often during the talk, they remembered Dasaratha's death, and tears rolled down their cheeks as they recalled the emperor's affection towards them. Seeing their plight, Rama's face lit up with a smile; he expatiated on the mystery of life and the key to its unraveling. Thus, they spent that eventful day in the silence of that sylvan retreat.

Reaching Ayodhya

Meanwhile, the stream of people emerging from the edge of the forest toward the populated areas near Ayodhya —Bharatha, Satrugna, the queens Kausalya, Kaika, and Sumitra, the ascetics, sages, *brahmins*, ministers, and the vast mass of citizens— could not contain the burden of sorrow, which became heavier the farther they went and the nearer they approached the city. They spent the time describing to each other the events of the five days they had spent in Rama's presence and admiring the ideals that Rama had embodied and exemplified, his love, compassion, and affection. They didn't stop for food or even sleep, since they felt neither hunger nor the prompting of sleep. Sorrow at the separation had overwhelmed and put to flight all minor insufficiencies.

The second day, they encountered the mighty Ganga River. The chieftain of the Nishadas arranged boats to row them across and also prepared plentiful repast for the tired populace and for the distinguished persons from the court. But no one partook of the hospitality he provided, for their grief at having left Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana lay too heavy on their hearts. Unable to displease Guha and unwilling to wound him, they just sat before the plates, fingered the items and, getting up soon, threw the contents away. Why? Even the horses had no wish to feed. They just refused. Vasishtha, the royal preceptor noticed this and said, "See! Rama is the Inner Resident, the *Atma* that is in all; He is the Intelligence, the Awareness that marks out each being."

They had no inclination to turn aside to snatch a few hours of rest. Bharatha had resolved to travel straight to Ayodhya without delay. He was anxious to present Rama's holy sandals before the citizens pining in Ayodhya and to bring them some little comfort and courage. So the party forded the Gomathi and Sarayu rivers and reached the outskirts of Ayodhya on the fourth day of their journey.

The aged, the children, and the women of Ayodhya who couldn't join the vast assembly that marched to Rama's camp were watching for signs of their happy return after accomplishing their mission of persuading Rama to take up the reins of rulership. Their eyes had well nigh gone blind with exhaustion and extreme anxiety. When they heard the distant whirr of chariot wheels, they ran out into the streets and peered into the passing vehicles, asking "Where is our Lord?" But, since dusk soon thickened into darkness, they went back into their homes and spent the night in joyous hope that they could see their beloved prince with the first rays of the rising sun. Vast disappointment not unmixed with a little satisfaction awaited them next morning, for they learned that Rama had not returned to the capital but instead had sent his sandals as his representative.

Bharatha renounces the luxurious life

Bharatha called together the royal preceptor and the ministers of the court and assigned them various administrative duties. He entrusted them with the authority to perform their duties. He called Satrugna and gave him the task of fostering and consoling the queen mothers. He arranged a gathering of *brahmins* and pundits; standing before them with folded palms, he told them that he would fulfil their wishes, whether great or small, for he knew they would only promote the best interests of himself and the people. He wanted them to place their demands before him without hesitation.

He called for a gathering of the citizens of Ayodhya and the leaders of the people from all parts of the empire. He described to them all that had happened in the capital and forest. He gave them a summary of his conversations with Rama and appealed to them to adore and revere Rama's sandals as the authentic presence of Rama himself for the fourteen-year period of exile. "They will guard us all, they are our refuge and resource. In full confidence that the sandals are ruling over us, let us live with Rama installed in our hearts. After his return, Rama will rule over us directly, granting us the joy of his physical presence and direction. Our duty from this moment is to wait for that happy day, with prayer in our hearts."

Then, Bharatha decided on an auspicious hour to install the sacred sandals on the throne, for he had the joy of all classes of the population in view, the royal preceptor, the pundits, ascetics, priests, ministers, and others of the court, the leaders of the people, and the common ranks of citizens. He saw to it that arrangements were made on a grand scale to celebrate the event.

That day, he prostrated before Kausalya, Sumitra, and Kaika and then went to the throne with the sandals on his head. Praying for the blessings of Vasishta and all those assembled, he placed them on the throne, offering them reverential loyalty. He placed all his responsibilities safely in their custody.

Later, that steadfast adherent of *dharma*, that incomparable hero, Bharatha, walked toward the village of Nandigrama, where he had a thatched hut made ready for his residence. He wore his hair braided in a knot, as Rama and Lakshmana had done; his apparel was made of the bark of trees, as theirs was; he lived in a cave dug into the earth. His food and dress were the same as those of the ascetics of the forest; his thoughts, words, and deeds were also austere and spiritually oriented.

Bharatha renounced the luxurious life of Ayodhya, which Indra, the ruler of heaven, praised as unattainable by Him; he gave up the rich life of the royal palace, which even Kubera, the god of riches, envied. He was happy in that tiny village unseen by others, inside the “grass-thatched” hut. He vowed that he would not look at anyone’s face until Rama returned from exile. His mind was fixed on Rama and on the day of his return from the forest. His body became weaker with every passing day. But the spiritual splendour on his face brightened more and more with the passage of time. His devotion to Rama grew to vaster and vaster proportions. He was transformed into a pure soul that has achieved fulfilment. In the firmament of his heart, the stars shone in glorious galaxies; below them, his feelings and emotions shone like the Ocean of Milk, calm, deep, and pure.