

Chapter 1. The Dandaka Forest

While Bharatha was spending his days at Nandigrama in constant contemplation of Rama, far away in the forest, on Chitrakuta Peak, Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana were praising his devotion and sense of dedication. They were happy in the peaceful, quiet forest home.

The fool Jayanta

One day, a fool named Jayanta sought to measure Rama's valour, an adventure as foolish and suicidal as the attempt of an ant to discover the depth of the ocean! Prompted by sheer mischief, he transformed himself into a crow and, approaching Sita, who was seated by Rama's side, lost in the contemplation of the scenery spread out before them, pecked at the sole of her tender foot with his sharp beak, causing blood to trickle from the wound.

Seeing the blood, Rama plucked a blade of dry grass from the ground and threw it at the crow.

Rama would never hurt anyone who had not done any injury. But when it is necessary, and when it has to be done, even Rahu will swallow the Moon, right? So too, Rama. He would never hurt the innocent. But that blade of grass became a huge flame of fire and flew toward Jayanta. And when he fled, it pursued him relentlessly wherever he went. Helpless and frightened, the crow returned to its original form, and Jayanta fell at Rama's feet praying for succour. Indra learned that the culprit was his own son, and he too repented for his son's audacity and irreverence.

Jayanta prostrated before Rama, pleading for mercy. He said, "I am a fool. I didn't realise the baseness of my deed. Save me from your anger, from this fire."

Rama pitied the poor fellow, who had so humbled himself. He made one of Jayanta's eyes ineffective and sent him away alive, as a single-eyed individual. The blade of grass that had become a missile of fire was neutralised by him and resumed its nature. Jayanta was grateful to be let off with just a token punishment for the heinous crime he had committed, and he lived for a long time on Chitrakuta Peak, where Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had taken residence. One day, the tenth day of the bright half of the month of *Margasira* (November-December), Rama ordered Jayanta to go southward from his habitat.

A visit to the sage Athri's hermitage

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana also left Chitrakuta, for the hermitage of the great sage Athri. Through his pupils, the sage learned in advance of Rama's intention to visit his retreat. So when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were approaching the hermitage (*ashram*), the sage moved far out on the forest track to welcome them. Athri was so overpowered with joy at the sign of grace that he shed profuse tears in his ecstasy and declared that the visit had indeed made his life realise its highest aim. That day, he said, his austerities had at last borne fruit.

That evening, the sage Athri gathered his pupils and placed a high seat for Rama at the head of the assembly. Meanwhile, his consort, Anasuya, attended to Sita's needs and brought her also to that place. Then, Athri described to all present the sacredness of the occasion, the powers of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, and the divine forces that had incarnated as these three. Anasuya also praised the virtues of Sita and gave her holy counsel on the duties of woman and the ideals they should ever hold dear.

Sita spoke to the fact that every individual, every being, and every creature had the feminine principle inher-

ent in its composition. She said that though there are masculine and feminine roles acting on the world stage, all are basically feminine when their strength, emotions, and attitudes are considered. She said that her Lord, Rama, was the incarnation of the One and only masculine principle in the universe. In him, she said, there was no trace of duality, of mine and thine, of grief or joy. He was the embodiment of fearlessness; He was strength personified. The Eternal Masculine (*Purusha*) had wedded Nature (*prakriti*), the Eternal Feminine. Though nature appears manifold and variegated, it is really One undifferentiated unity. In this way, Sita revealed the truth of the Rama principle to Anasuya, the consort of sage Athri.

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana spent a happy time at the sage's *ashram*. They gave good counsel to the residents and pupils on various problems of right conduct.

Taking leave of Athri, they resumed their journey through the jungle. The *ashramites* shed tears of sorrow when they parted company. Despite their determined attempts to accompany Rama during the subsequent stages of his forest life, they had to stop and resume the life for which they had dedicated themselves. Helplessly, they had to witness the departure of the divine master of their hearts.

A stay at a beautiful hermitage

The jungle echoed with the roar of ferocious beasts wandering about in search of prey. Manifold varieties of plumaged birds sang melodiously on the trees. Each had a peculiar beauty and melody; their coos and cries were balm for the ear. It appeared as if they had entered a new world of thrills.

While passing through this region of awesome grandeur, suddenly their eyes fell upon a lovely hermitage, which had at its centre a picturesque temple. Lakshmana moved forward and cleared the track, pushing back the bushes that stood across. He broke off the thorny creepers that hung overhead and threatened to harm wayfarers so that Rama and Sita could walk safely along the track. As they came to the precincts of the hermitage, a charming garden presented itself before them. Well fostered and affectionately looked after, the fruit trees and flowering trees rose beautifully from the ground, with charming crowns of beauty. The branches of the trees drooped under the weight of ripe juicy fruits.

Sita was filled with delight; she forgot all exhaustion; she was lost in the heavenly peace and joy that she had come into. She walked behind Rama, imbibing the thrill of the nature that surrounded her.

When some residents noticed their approach, they ran in haste to their preceptor; he hurried forward to the main gate to welcome Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana. His eyes streamed tears of joy. Appropriate hospitality was offered to the guests; they were taken in and given cool refreshing drinks; tasty fruits and tubers were placed before them. The guests accepted their attention and regard with great pleasure and partook of the simple repast.

In the evening, they took baths and performed due rites. Rama spoke to the residents on ideal modes of conduct and behaviour. He let them ask questions on doubts that might be puzzling them and knotty points of interpretations of the scriptures. They welcomed the opportunity most enthusiastically. Rama offered convincing and clear explanations, in simple and satisfying words. Without a doubt, the dwellers of the *ashram* experienced heaven on earth. They spoke among themselves with great delight that Rama's presence was as elevating an experience as contact with God Himself in Heaven.

When dawn broke, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana bathed and went through the matinal rites. In spite of the plaintive prayers of the *ashramites*, they started on their journey, expostulating that people should not stand in the

way of their vows and resolutions. They had resolved, they said, not to stay in one hermitage or place for more than one single night.

An encounter with Viradha, the ogre

They resumed their journey. Passing through the forest, a monstrous form, the frightful ogre Viradha, suddenly appeared and rushed menacingly toward them. Sita was naturally frightened at the apparition; but she mustered courage, knowing that, with the lion Rama to protect her, she had no need to be frightened at the “lame fox” that had presented itself! “Let it roar its worst,” she consoled herself. She stood behind Rama and watched developments.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana shot a sharp arrow at the monster. Soon, he showered many missiles on it. Wounded by the arrows, Viradha transformed himself into a blazing fury of anger and, appearing like the very embodiment of death and destruction, pounced upon Lakshmana.

Rama saw that his brother was getting exhausted by the struggle; he fixed a crescent headed arrow to his redoubtable bow and shot at the ogre. The arrow shattered to pieces the formidable three-pronged spear that the ogre was flourishing; it then sliced off the head of the monster. At that very moment, a bright heavenly form emerged from the fallen corpse!

Viradha had been born as an ogre on earth in consequence of a curse that he had invited upon himself from his divine master, Kubera. He was one of a group of heavenly angels (*gandharvas*) who were serving Kubera. Later, Kubera had taken pity on him and declared that his demonic career would come to an end the moment he met his death from Rama’s arrow. He could then return as an angel to Kubera’s presence, it was said. So, the angel fell at the feet of his Saviour and extolled him with high praise, before leaving for his permanent abode.

Rama interred the huge body of the demon that lay on the ground and went through the rites prescribed for such disposal. Just then, a shower of rain fell on the spot, as if the gods above were showering tears of joy at the compassion that Rama was evincing.

Sarabhanga immolates himself

Next, Rama entered the famous hermitage of the sage Sarabhanga. Even while he was nearing the *ashram*, the ascetics and monks were talking among themselves of the havoc caused by the inroads of Ravana, the demon king. When Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana appeared before them in the midst of their conversation, they sensed the meaning of their visit and knew that their fears would soon come to an end. When the sage Sarabhanga saw the divinely charming figure of Rama, he could scarcely believe his eyes; he doubted whether it was a dream, an illusion, or some strange experience caused by meditation mania. Soon, he realised the genuineness of his good fortune. He was overwhelmed with the ecstasy of winning his long-desired goal; he knew that his asceticism had at last been blessed by the fruition of his yearning.

He offered them profuse hospitality while extolling Rama to his heart’s content. “Rama! You are the heavenly swan moving majestically on the waters that fill the minds of the sages. Ah! This day, I have realised the goal of life,” he said. “Rama! I am unaware of any spiritual discipline worth the name. I could win you through just one path, the path of love. My eyes have seen you now; they need look on nothing else. And, you have given word that day that you would fulfil the wishes of the sages. Well. Now you have to stand by that word. My wish

is this: Stand before me in this most charming form until my breath leaves this body. I wish to cast this body off while my gaze is fixed on you.”

Within minutes, a pyre was set up. Sarabhanga ascended it, and it was lit, with him sitting unconcerned on top, his eyes shining in joy at the ecstasy of looking at Rama. The eyelids did not quiver: the gaze did not slacken. With the forms of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana imprinted on his heart, Sarabhanga reduced his body to a handful of ashes. The blue placid waters of his heart reflected the blue form of Rama, whom he had adored until the very last. His soul merged in the Universal that was before him.

At first, the *ashramites* grieved over the departure of their preceptor and master, but they soon realised that he had the unique fortune of a rare blessing. God himself had come in human form and blessed him with mergence in his majesty and glory. Feeling that they had shared in that gift of grace; they adored Rama and extolled him in various ways, shouting “Hail! Victory! Victory!” They applied the ashes of their master on their brows in reverent gratitude.

Sutheekshna adores Rama

The news of Sarabhanga’s immolation soon brought to that hermitage residents from other *ashrams* as well. They fell at Rama’s feet and praised him and his mission of compassion. “Lord! How fortunate Sarabhanga was,” they cried, “Many a sage has fallen prey to the voracious ferocity of the tribe of demons (*rakshasas*) in this area. But Sarabhanga was blessed by the Lord Himself. He offered his body and life to the Lord Himself. Lord! Save us from these rapacious enemies. Let us progress in our spiritual exercises and disciplines, without these demonic raids. And, at the end of it all, O Lord, bless us with the fruit we strive for: Your presence before our vision,” they pleaded.

Meanwhile, a sage Sutheekshna, the pupil of the renowned Agastya, came forward and prostrated before Rama. He was an incomparable devotee, and his mind was saturated with love for Rama. He had steady faith that God could be won by love alone. He could not picture before his mind’s eye any form of God other than Rama. He gazed upon Rama without blinking, lest even that fraction of time should go to waste. His heart melted in adoration at the sight of Rama.

He said, “Lord! Did you come so far into this region just to bless me? Can’t you merge me into the Lord you are? Having come upon the earth with this visible form, do you still wish me to adore, as hitherto, the formless Absolute? No. I love this form and this name. I don’t know any rite or ritual. I know only that you, the embodiment of love, can be attained through love. Yearning is the only earning I have accumulated. That is the only asceticism I have subjected myself to. Tell me, isn’t that enough? O, Saviour from the travail of birth and death! No form of worship is so effective as service of the Lord through love, right? Singing your glory, meditating on it, and deriving unspeakable bliss in the process —can anything else yield greater joy?”

Sutheekshna danced about, unaware of where he was or what he was doing. Tears flowed in streams down his cheeks. For those who couldn’t gauge the inner joy he was experiencing, he appeared insane. Rama knew the urge within the sage, drew him near, and embraced him most lovingly. He spoke softly and sweetly, to bring him round to a consciousness of his surroundings. While Rama was holding his hands, the great sage entered the supreme state of *samadhi*. He became a doll, unmoved and immovable.

Rama brought him back to consciousness; as soon as he came to, he fell at Rama’s feet. He raised his hands

above his head and, joining palms in adoration, expressed his joy and took delight therein. He said, “Lord! You are the conflagration that destroys the forest of delusion in which humanity has lost itself. You are the solar orb that makes it possible for the lotuses of the hearts of good people to bloom in beauty and fragrance. You are the lion king of beasts, come to destroy the brood of demonic elephants. You are the eagle come to hunt down and destroy the bird that flits into birth and flits out of life, in a recurring cycle of joy and grief.

“Lord! Your eyes are as charming as lotuses; my two eyes cannot drink in all the beauty of your effulgent form. You are the moon that sheds cool light to enrapture the twin *chakora* birds, namely, the eyes of Sita. You swim happily as the celestial swan in the placid lakes that shine in the hearts of sages. You are the *garuda* bird that preys upon and destroys the serpents that breed in the minds of doubters and unbelievers. All cruelty, confusion, and calamity will be burned away when a tiny glance from your eye falls on them.”

He extolled Rama thus and in various other forms, deriving great joy at getting the chance. He also utilised the chance to gaze upon the Lord, to have His image imprinted on his heart. He was not conscious of the passage of time or the needs of the body. He did not blink once while looking on and drinking deep the glory of Rama.

Rama watched him for a while. Then, he raised him up with his hands upon his shoulders. “Sutheekshna! You are endowed with all desirable virtues. Ask me anything you wish, for I shall bless you as you desire.”

The sage replied, “O, friend and kinsman of the distressed! My wish is this: Reside ever in the depths of my heart, with Sita and Lakshmana.”

Rama said, “So be it.”

On to Agastya’s ashram

With Sutheekshna as companion, Rama began walking to Agastya’s *ashram*, with Sita and Lakshmana following. A short distance later, they heard the murmur of a river flowing by. When they walked toward the sound and neared the river, they could see a mountain peak beside the flowing water. In the middle there were beautiful flower gardens, and, like a lotus shining in the centre of a tank, Agastya’s lovely hermitage could be seen on a carpet of fragrant flowers.

Word cannot adequately describe the exquisite nature of that scene. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana stood petrified for a few moments at the captivating splendour. The atmosphere was so astoundingly spiritual. There, animals that are enemies by their very nature, aquatic animals and land animals, beasts and birds of every type, sported and lived together, free from fear or enmity. Many monks and ascetics were sitting on the river bank, lost in meditation.

When they neared the *ashram*, Sutheekshna ran forward to convey the tidings to his master. He fell at his feet and declared, “O great teacher! O embodiment of mercy! The prince of Ayodhya, the very sustainer of this universe, has just come to our *ashram* with Sita and Lakshmana. The very person whom you were seeking to know and visualise through your spiritual practices for years, without regard to whether it is day or night, has come to you, near you. Ah! What a great good day this is! What great good fortune!” Sutheekshna forgot himself and was filled with immeasurable ecstasy.

Agastya rose suddenly from his seat and walked fast into the open. He saw the three coming toward him; tears flowed freely from his eyes. He ran forward, shouting, “Lord! Lord!” He clasped Rama to his bosom. He had

no mind to release Rama from his embrace and stood with his arms around Rama, clinging to him, as a creeper clings to the trunk of a tree.

Agastya couldn't contain the joy that welled up within him when he led Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana into his hermitage. He invited them to rest on elevated seats. He had fruits and sweet tubers brought, and he offered them for their repast. Then, he asked about the journey they had gone through and listened with eyes closed in deep delight, tears of joy streaming down the cheeks, as Rama answered his queries. A happy smile hovered on his face.

At last, he spoke, "Lord! I'm convinced that no one is more blessed than I. The Lord, Narayana, has Himself come to me; He is staying in my hermitage! Is this true? Is it a dream? No. It is clearly a fact of experience. He gave expression to his joy in grateful and devotional words.

Agastya asks not to be deluded into egotism

Rama said, "O monarch among monks! I have nothing to hide from you. You know too well why I have come into the forest. Tell me how I can destroy the brood of demonic persons (*rakshasas*) who obstruct the austerities of sages and monks, and how I can protect and preserve the dedicated servants of God from danger. I will act accordingly; I await your advice. In the cold (*hemantha*) season, lotuses shrivel up and die. The season has approached for the shriveling of the demons."

Agastya smiled and replied, "Lord! You are omniscient. I don't know why you ask me to tell you how. I am unable to decide whether you are blessing me or testing me. Nevertheless, through the effect of your grace, the sight (*darshan*), touch (*sparshan*), and conversation (*sambhasan*) with which you have just blessed me, I am able to grasp the significance of your question. That too is your grace. Illusion (*maya*), which is your creation and your puppet, your slave, lying at your feet, is watching ever to carry out your commands at the slightest raising of your brow. Through the skill endowed by you, illusion is creating all beings on earth and in heaven.

"Your illusion is unconquerable. It harasses beings endlessly, that is to say, those who fall a prey to its machinations. That is a fact that is known to all. Your illusion is like the banyan tree, spreading far and wide. The orbs in the cosmos are as the fruits of that tree, and the beings and things that exist in this cosmos are like the worms and larvae that creep inside the fruit. The fruit might appear lovely outside, but when it is opened, hundreds of worms can be seen wriggling inside.

"Those attached to this exterior world and its transitory treasures are afraid of you, since in your aspect as time, you cause inexorable ruin of their plans. The cosmos itself is an appearance on your reality. Rama! You are adored by all the worlds.

"You ask me for directions, just as a commoners would. You praise me as people do. This makes me laugh. I'm not concerned with anything now. I would like you stay in this hermitage, with Sita and Lakshmana; that is the only boon I ask. I prefer always to worship your attributeful form, not your attributeless principle. That is what I believe in and teach. That is my ideal, my favourite goal, my aspiration.

"Therefore, grant me this boon. It is your sport, to elevate your servants and to slide into the background, as if you are innocent of anything and ignorant of everything! But don't elevate me. Don't ask me for directions. My duty is to assent and accept your wishes and to follow your footsteps. Father! Don't inveigle me into your illusion (*maya*) and delude me into egotism, making me the target of your sport."

Rama replied, “O venerable sage! You know this region well, so what harm is there if you tell me which place to select for my stay? This is what everybody would expect of you, isn’t it?”

The story of the curse on Dandaka Forest

Agastya replied, “Master! Since you have commanded me, I shall obey and give answer. Very near to this place flows the sacred river Godavari. For ages, that great river has been flowing full and free. Adjacent to it, we have the Dandakaranya region. When you sanctify it by residing in it, you will confer all content and happiness upon the monks and sages that live therein, for that forest region and its guardian ruler are under a curse and afflicted thereby.”

Rama interrupted the sage. “Master! Sita is anxious to learn the story of that curse. Tell us about it in detail.”

Agastya saw through that request, so he addressed Rama. “O, Director of the eternal play. Once upon a time, famine raised its head in the Panchavati area. All the monks and ascetics who lived there took refuge in the hermitage of sage Gautama. He gave them all they needed through the powers he had acquired as a result of his austerities! When the famine was over, the monks decided to return to their old dwellings.

“But some pseudo-monks among them conspired against him and planned to bring him to disrepute. They brought a cow that was in the throes of death and made it enter the hermitage garden, on a particular green and attractive patch. Gautama saw it was about to bite a beautiful flower from its stem, and he attempted to drive it away. But at his very first push, the cow breathed its last! The conspirator monks immediately laid the dreaded sin of cow killing (*go-hathya*) on him! They condemned him as an outcast and a heathen.

“Gautama wanted to discover whether the cow died as a result of his push or because its allotted span had ended. He sat in deep meditation exploring an answer to this vital question. Soon it was revealed to him that it was but a trick played by inimical monks. He was disgusted at their despicable nature. He said, ‘May this forest, which is polluted by such low-minded persons, be out of bounds for the good and the saintly. May it become the haunt of demons (the demonic Yakshas).’

“Another incident added to the effects of this curse. Danda, the ruler of this region, violated the chastity of the daughter of his own preceptor, Bhrigu. Bhrigu listened to the pathetic story related by his daughter and, in the extremity of his anger, overwhelmed the region with a downpour of dust. Therefore, this area was sodden deep with mud, and in the course of time it became a thick jungle from end to end. The region is named Dandakaranya, after that infamous ruler.

“Rama! Crest-jewel of the Raghu dynasty! I am sure that when you take residence in that forest, the demons (*rakshasas*) will be decimated and the curse will be lifted. Monks and spiritual aspirants (*sadhakas*) will once again dwell there and progress in their austerities. Humanity everywhere will benefit by this cleansing and this consummation. The sage who cursed will also be rendered happy by you, for he is sad at the consequence of his anger.”

When Agastya finished his account of the story of Dandakaranya, Rama said, “Well. So be it. I will reside there.”

On to Dandaka Forest

Rama took leave of the sage and went with Sita and Lakshmana to Dandaka Forest. Before they left his hermitage, Agastya brought forth some weapons that he had acquired from divine sources by asceticism. He gave them to Rama, saying that he had no wish to use them, for they had now a wielder who deserved them and who could utilise them for a holy purpose. “Rama!” he said, “You are my shield, my strength, my prowess. These weapons can’t save me, but You can. Your grace is my most powerful weapon. You are my refuge, my fortress, the impenetrable armour for my breast.”

Even as Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana entered the thick jungle-ridden area of Dandaka, trees that had gone dry were thrilled into greenery and were covered with tender, whispering clusters of leaf. Weak, enervated creepers and vines suddenly felt alive, alert, and active and gave birth to bunches of fragrant flowers. The forest hastened to clothe itself in lovely green, speckled all over with multicoloured floral dots.

They sought a spot where they could reside and soon arrived at the place known as Panchavati, which Agastya had indicated.

There, they saw the old eagle chief, Jatayu. He was a great friend of Dasaratha, accompanying him on his spatial expeditions to help the denizens of Heaven. Rama told the eagle the sad news of Dasaratha’s death and alleviated his sense of loss and bereavement. Rama told him about himself and spoke to him about Sita, Lakshmana, and his other brothers. They were set on rigging up a thatched hut on the banks of the Godavari. Jatayu became a close friend, and through him, they could acquire a clearer picture of the region. That night, they spent the hours under a tree in sound and refreshing sleep.