

Chapter 11. Happy Ayodhya

The trip home

When the aerial cart rose, there was great commotion on the ground; monkey hordes raised thunderous shouts of “victory (*jai*) to Rama, victory to Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana.” Inside the aerial cart was a high throne, charmingly designed and carved, and Sita and Rama took their seats on it. They then appeared to all as a cloud with a lightning flash resting on the Sumeru Peak.

Rama drew Sita’s attention to the battlefield below and said, “Here is where Lakshmana overpowered and killed Meghanada.” He showed her other spots associated with similar exploits and victories. He showed her the bridge that the monkeys had constructed across the sea and described to her the monkey’s heroism, devotion, and faith.

Very soon, the aerial chariot reached the Dandaka Forest. Rama had the vehicle land before the hermitages of Agastya and other sages. With Sita, Lakshmana, and other members of his entourage, Rama visited the holy sages and paid reverential homage to them. After taking leave of them, they ascended the aerial chariot and flew to the Chitrakuta Hill. There too, he offered prostrations to the sages. Soaring into the sky again, he showed Sita the city of Kishkindha from the chariot itself. Even while the aerial chariot was speeding fast, Rama indicated to her the sacred rivers, the Yamuna and the Ganga. Sita offered worship to the holy streams in her mind. Soon, they could see the thrice-holy Prayag, where the Yamuna flows into the Ganga. From that position, they could get a far glimpse of the splendourous city of Ayodhya itself.

The chieftain of the Nishada tribe, Guha, was yearning most ardently for the return of Rama, his brother, and his consort. He saw the aerial chariot in the sky and immediately fell flat on the ground in grateful obeisance. And, lo and behold, the chariot landed just then at the very place. Guha ran forward and fell at Rama’s feet. Tears streamed from his eyes; he couldn’t contain his delight. He rose and embraced Rama in the ecstasy of his heart. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana conferred their blessings on the tribal chieftain. They bathed in the sacred river and asked Guha to bring the ferryboat for them to cross the Ganga. The aerial chariot, which belonged to Kubera before Ravana appropriated it, was sent back to its original owner.

One more day remained to be spent, outside cities, in exile, so Rama commissioned Hanuman to change himself into a *brahmin* and go to Ayodhya. He was to tell Bharatha the news about Rama and others and bring back news of Bharatha. Hanuman left immediately. Rama, with Sita, Lakshmana, and all who had come with him, moved into the hermitage of Bharadwaja and accepted the hospitality and gratitude of that sage.

Hanuman visits Bharatha

Hanuman found the residents of Ayodhya lean and famished, despondent and depressed, for they hadn’t relished food or drink during Rama’s absence. All over the town, one could hear their grievous groans and wailing. No one could move toward another to console or nurse, for everyone was too weak to take a few steps, and no one had the desire or capacity to nurse or console.

But rays of hope had already been cast by the news he was bringing. Bharatha had some welcome premoni-

tions of the happy event; his right eye twitched, and his right arm, too. He anticipated the receipt of the good news of Rama's entry into Ayodhya. He grieved that one more day was still to pass before the period of exile would end. He was worried that Rama had not sent anyone to tell him where he was. He told himself how fortunate Lakshmana was, since he was in Rama's presence and serving His lotus feet all the time. "The Lord cast me into this, for I am a hypocrite. My Lord is all softness and sweetness. He is the kind kinsman of the downtrodden and the fallen. He is compassion itself. He will certainly arrive tomorrow," he consoled himself.

Just then, Hanuman came within his sight, as a *brahmin*. Hanuman was thrilled at Bharatha's condition. His body had been very much reduced, he was worn down by anxiety. His hair had become matted. His eyes had become perennial streams of tears. But he was repeating Rama's name without intermission. Hanuman was full of joy at the sight of such a dedicated soul. The hairs of his body stood on end because of the ecstasy.

Hanuman's thoughts ran in several directions, but he remembered his mission and poured the nectarine news he had brought into Bharatha's thirsty ears. "Bharatha! The person from whom you have been separated and for whom you have been pining without sleep or food all these days and nights, whose virtues and powers you have been extolling and reciting every moment of your life all these years, who has guaranteed safety to the gods and security to the sages, who fosters truth and righteousness in all the worlds—he, Rama, has achieved victory over all enemies, and the gods are singing his glory."

Just as a man suffering from acute thirst is rendered happy at the sight of water, Bharatha was filled with joy when he listened to Hanuman. He wondered whether he was actually listening to someone speaking to him. But he assured himself that it was true. "How can this be an illusion? Who is this person who has brought the good news? Where did you come from?" he asked the visitor, embracing him out of sheer gratitude. Hanuman replied, "O Bharatha. I'm Hanuman, the son of Vayu, the God of wind. You seem to have forgotten. I'm the monkey who fell on the ground before you, while I was carrying the Sanjivi Hill. I'm a servant of Rama's lotus feet."

Bharatha rose most respectfully, overwhelmed with joy. He bowed his head in reverence. "O leader of monkeys! You have demolished my sorrow. Your very sight has ushered calm in my mind. Ah! How fortunate I am! I could see Rama's messenger today!"

He continued to repeat the same sentiments for a long time. "Is my Rama hale and happy? My mother Sita, how is she? Hanuman, how am I to express my gratitude to you? What shall I do for you in return? I can't find anything of equal preciousness to offer you in gratitude. So, I will be ever indebted to you; I don't know how to repay the debt, or with what. Where is Rama now? Where is he staying? Tell me the exploits he fought unto victory," he said, with unbearable eagerness.

Hanuman was struck by the devotion and dedication that Bharatha evinced, and he fell at his feet to demonstrate his admiration. "Bharatha! Rama is very near to Ayodhya. You can see him soon. His achievements are indescribably wonderful. You know this. And He constantly remembers you. The Lord of the worlds, Rama, has said out of his own mouth that in the whole world there is no brother equal to you in purity of heart and sharpness of intellect, and equipped so fully with all the virtues. How can those words be negated?"

Bharatha was overcome with delight. "Did Rama speak of me thus? O! How fortunate I am!" He embraced Hanuman fondly and cried. Hanuman declared that he couldn't delay any longer; he took leave of Bharatha and returned to Rama. He told Rama what he had seen and heard.

Bharatha and Ayodhya prepare for the return

Bharatha started preparations; he seldom put both his feet down at the same time on the ground! He was ever on the move, most busy. He arrived at Ayodhya from Nandigrama, offered prostrations to preceptor Vashishtha, and told him that Rama would enter Ayodhya soon. He rushed into the queens' apartments and announced that Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were arriving. The three mothers rose quickly, filled with joy. Bharatha ordered the entire city to be informed of the good news through all media. The news reached all ears with lightning speed. Children, the aged, men, and women ran helter-skelter shouting the news at the top of their voices.

Bharatha collected the sages, the scholars, the preceptors, the leading citizens, and the four sections of the armed forces, and with the three queens and ministers, led by Sumanthra, he walked forward with Satrugna by his side to meet Rama.

Home at last

While nearing Ayodhya, Rama was describing the beauty of the city to the monkeys and others around him. "O Sugriva, Angada, Vibhishana! Ayodhya is a holy city. It is beautiful." In the midst of Rama's enthusiastic description of the city's charms, Bharatha appeared at the head of the armed forces, with his brother and the queens. As the ocean heaves up in joy at the sight of the autumn moon, the vast populace heaved a breath of joy at the sight of *Ramachandra*, Rama the moon. Their excitement reached the sky. The mothers embraced Rama with ecstatic delight and forgot themselves, caught in the flood of happiness. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana fell at the mothers' feet; the joy of both parties knew no bounds. Rama drew Bharatha near him and, pained at his weakened frame, consoled and counseled him lovingly. He praised his brother aloud for his steadfast devotion and affection toward the people. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana prostrated before Vasishta, Jabali, Vamadeva, and other sages as soon as they were sighted. Even the most ascetic among the sages could not restrain his tears at the happy reunion with Rama.

The *Vedic* scholars raised their voices to the sky and showered their blessing in traditional formulae: "Live victoriously for hundreds of years," "Live prosperously for hundreds of years." Bharatha and Satrugna fell flat on the ground before Rama in reverential homage. Though Rama pleaded with them again and again to rise up, they found themselves unable to rise and let go of the lotus feet. Lakshmana and Rama had to exert jointly to lift them. The brothers embraced each other in fervent affection and shed tears of joy and relief at sight of each other's faces. The delight with which their minds were filled gave their innate beauty a rare splendour. They shone like embodiments of physical charm. The sadness of separation gave place to the joy of togetherness. They were now deep in the ocean of bliss.

Sugriva, Nala, Nila, Angada, Hanuman, and others assumed beautiful bodies for the festive occasion. The citizens were overjoyed at the sight of Rama's entourage. They extolled in various ways the austerities that Bharatha went through and welcomed the result thereof. They appreciated his sterling virtues. Rama admired the faith and devotion of the people of the city. He gathered around him the monkeys and Vibhishana, introducing them to his brothers and his preceptors. When he took them near the queens and told them, "These are my mothers," all of them fell at women's feet, saying, "O How fortunate we are. We see the mothers who gave birth to God Himself. You are indeed most worthy of worship. Bless us most graciously."

Kausalya addressed them, "O monkeys! You are all as dear to me as my son Rama himself. May Rama never forget you; may he ever protect you." Then, deliberating among themselves, they ascended the chariots brought for them and entered the city.

In front of every home were golden pots filled with auspiciously coloured water. Flags were tied across the streets and on houses. When Rama came before them, the faces of the people, which were previously faded and shrunken with sorrow, like lotuses in moonlight, blossomed into freshness and beauty, like the same lotuses at sunrise. Their countenances shone with attractive effulgence. The sky resounded with their cheers and shouts of victory. The chariot that bore Rama entered the city streets, which were bursting with excitement and delight. The auspicious flames of the lamps held by devoted hands and waved as he passed shone like stars and gave the impression that the firmament had fallen on the earth. The roads were soaked with fragrant rosewater.

As the chariot passed, showers of flowers were rained on it by the citizens from windows and terraces. The ecstasy of the citizens broke all bounds. With his three brothers and three mothers and Sita by His side, Rama gave immense joy to the thousands packed on the sides of the roads. People congratulated one another on their good fortune in being alive and present on such a happy occasion. When they reached the palace, the women of the inner apartments and the aides and servants of the house-hold came forward and received them with customary rituals, like washing the feet.