THE RĀMĀYAṆA

VĀLMĪKI

ABRIDGED AND TRANSLATED
BY ARSHIA SATTAR

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For my parents,
Hameed and Nazura Sattar,
with love

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Hameed and Nazura Sattar. Not only did they help me with the mechanics of books and libraries and the postal system, they fed, watered and sheltered me with unquestioning devotion for the last few months of this work. In many ways, this translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the completion of a journey they allowed me to embark on many years ago. I can only hope that the book will bring them as much joy and satisfaction as the journey has brought me.

Arshia Sattar
December, 1995

INTRODUCTION

The story of Rāma spreads all over the cultures of the Indian Subcontinent and South-east Asia. It appears in literatures, in music, dance and drama, in painting and sculpture, in classical and folk traditions, in hundreds of languages, in thousands of tellings and retellings from thousands of tellers. Each of these versions has its own special flavour, ambience and distinctive style. A.K. Ramanujan goes as far as to say that 'in India and South-east Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, "always already" . . .'[1]

Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is arguably the oldest surviving version we have of Rāma's tale, but in the multiplicity of Rāma stories received today, Vālmīki's Sanskrit poem is just one more version of Rāma's adventures.[2] Nonetheless, scholars hold that this telling is perhaps the most prestigious and influential of them all.[3]

> Like any other monumental work of literature, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has always functioned on a variety of levels. Through the millennia of its popularity, it has attracted the interest of many kinds of people from different social, economic, educational, regional and religious backgrounds. It has, for example, served as a bedtime story for countless generations of Indian children,

> while at the same time, learned *śāstrins*, steeped in the abstruse philosophical, grammatical and metaphysical subtleties of classical Indian thought, have found it a subject worthy of their intellectual energies.[4]

Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* tells the tragic story of a virtuous and dutiful prince, the man who should be king, who is exiled because of his step-mother's fit of jealousy. Rāma's real troubles begin when he enters the forest for fourteen years with his beautiful wife Sītā and his devoted younger brother Lakṣmaṇa. Sītā is abducted by the wicked *rākṣasa* king Rāvaṇa who takes her away to his isolated kingdom on the far side of the southern ocean. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa set out to rescue her and, along the way, they make an alliance with a dispossessed monkey king. The monkey king's advisor, Hanumān, becomes Rāma's invaluable ally and is instrumental in making the mission to rescue Sītā a success. At the end of a bloody war with the *rākṣasas*, Rāvaṇa is killed and Sītā is reunited with her husband. Rāma and his companions return to the city and Rāma reclaims the throne that is rightfully his.

Rāma's equanimity and grace in the face of all the terrible things that happen to him, Sītā's unflinching devotion to her husband, Lakṣmaṇa's and Hanumān's fierce loyalty to Rāma: these qualities have made the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* ideals in Indian culture, valued for their virtues and exemplary behaviour. Rāma is not just the perfect man, he is the ideal son, the ideal brother, and, most important, the ideal king. Likewise, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān loom large in the cultural imagination as the perfect examples of their social roles.

Within this idealized and heroic tale of public honour and kingship is another intensely personal and intimate story. It is one of family relationships, of love between fathers and sons, brother and brother, friends and allies, husbands and wives. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is as much a tale of personal promises and private honour, of infatuation and betrayal, of harem intrigue, petty jealousies, destructive ambitions and enormous personal loss as it is a tale of rightful and righteous kings. Even as questions of kingly duty and nobility of character for the public realm are raised, the story revolves around fidelity, obligations and the integrity that refines individual relationships.

The Two Realms of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

The universe in which this tale occurs is expanded by gods and celestial beings, boons and curses, magical weapons, flying chariots, powerful sages, wondrous animals, heroic monkeys and terrifying *rākṣasas.* A crucial aspect of the expanded universe which includes the presence of the divine is the fact that Rāma himself is an incarnation, an *avatāra,* of the great god Viṣṇu. In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa,* Rāma does not know this about himself. While the gods are on his side in all that he does and often appear to help him or his allies, he goes through the story not knowing that he was born mortal for the express purpose of killing Rāvaṇa. The gods' divine plan becomes Rāma's personal destiny and must be played out to the bitter end. After the war is over, the gods appear and tell him who he is.

Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is divided into seven books: *Bālakānda* (Childhood), *Ayodhyākāṇda* (Ayodhyā), *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (Wilderness), *Kiṣkindhakāṇḍa* (Kiṣkindha), *Sundarakāṇḍa* (Beauty), *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (War) and *Uttarakāṇḍa* (Epilogue). Of these, the first two and the last books ('Childhood,' 'Ayodhyā' and 'Epilogue') are situated firmly in the mundane world, in the kingdom of Ayodhyā, where Daśaratha and later Rāma rule wisely and well. The other books ('Wilderness', 'Kiṣkindha', 'Beauty' and 'War') are located in the forests south of Ayodhyā and in Lankā.

As with other Indian genres of literature, the magical and mundane, the natural and the supernatural encounter each other frequently in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Usually, the supernatural and wondrous events occur outside the city, in the uncharted and dangerous regions through which the hero must pass. It is here, in the narrative freedom of the forests, deserts, islands and mountains, that Rāma meets monsters and magical beings. The magical and monstrous beings of the forests and wilderness are, most often, liminal creatures. They straddle the boundaries of more than one species, more than one category of being. Some of these liminal creatures test Rāma, others become his allies, as he goes further on his quest.

In the books located outside Ayodhyā, when the story enters the realm of magic and wonder, Rāma has to contend first with powerful sages and then with marauding *rākṣasas* before he meets the friendly animals who will help him get his wife back. While there are isolated instances of the magical breaking into the mundane world in the first and last books, the incidents either occur outside the kingdom (like the princes' encounter with Tāṭakā in 'Childhood') or under highly circumscribed situations (like Sītā's disappearance into the earth during the sacrifice in 'Epilogue').

Once Rāma leaves the city, the known world has been left behind and from this point on, there are few signposts. In 'Kiṣkindha,' when Sugrīva is directing his monkey hordes to go out into the world and find Sītā, he provides a fascinating geography that begins with real kingdoms and real peoples and then opens up into a cosmology of wild and dangerous places where neither the sun nor the moon shine, where there are people with ears so long they can sleep inside them, and so on until you reach the regions where the gods and celestial beings live.

It is in the enchanted forests south of the kingdom that Rāma is truly tested for valour, patience and fortitude. Anything can happen here and it does. Rāma's initial encounters with the monstrous Virādha and Kabandha are only preludes to the larger and deadlier conflicts that await him in Janasthāna and Lankā. The forests, in a sense, represent the underbelly of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* idealized human actors and the perfect city of Ayodhyā. There seem to be different rules of conduct in the forests and wilderness and certainly a different set of narrative parameters. Birds that speak, monkeys that fly, form-changing *rākṣasas* and headless torsos that run amok are not unnatural or bizarre. Rather, they seem to fall into the normal course of events.

It has been suggested that these forest creatures, particularly the monkeys and the *rākṣasas,* are the shadows of the *Rāmāyaṇa's* ideal principal characters.[5] Because Rāma and Sītā cannot or will not act out their baser impulses, the monkeys and *rākṣasas,* who embody non-perfection, do it for them. For example, the monkey Vālī can banish his younger brother Sugrīva who usurped the kingship of Kiṣkindha, but Rāma is bound by his *dharma* and his model nature to let Bharata, his younger brother, keep the kingdom. Likewise, Śūrpanakhā, the *rākṣasī*, can express her carnal desire for Rāma whereas Sītā can only express sublimated love and devotion.

> These sets of contrastive figures provide the poets with a vehicle for portraying the ambivalence inherent in all real human beings while keeping the central characters largely free from inner struggle.[6]

It is also in the same southern lands that Rāma perpetrates the two acts that apparently mar his shining dharmic nature: the unlawful killing of the monkey Vālī and the rejection of his faithful wife Sītā.[7] By implication, it would seem that the strict moral and legal codes of Ayodhyā and the world of humans do not apply in the forests and the southern lands. Rāma operates here under a different code of ethics. In fact, in the early chapters of 'Wilderness', when Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā have just entered the unpeopled forests, Sītā tells Rāma that here they must abide by separate rules for behaviour. She says that they must leave the codes of the city behind and learn to live by the rules of the forest dwellers. Ironically, though, Rāma's unlawful acts are the result of his imposing the rules and *dharma* of human city living upon events that occur outside the city.[8]

Replications in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

While most of the animals and *rākṣasas* function as shadows of the main characters, Rāvaṇa, the wicked king of the *rākṣasas*, functions as a mirror image, an inversion, of Rāma. Even his city of Lankā is a replica of Ayodhyā: as magnificent, as prosperous and as well-defended. Rāvaṇa is brave, strong and powerful, he is handsome and majestic. He has the capacity to perform fierce austerities and was able to demand the boon of invulnerability from Brahmā. Motivated by the desire to avenge the insult to his sister Śūrpanakhā, Rāvaṇa decides to abduct Rāma's wife. Sītā refuses to submit to him and though he loves her to distraction, Rāvaṇa is honourable enough not to force himself upon her. Nonetheless, he also refuses to return her to Rāma and this stubborn refusal is, ultimately, the cause of his death.

We have seen that the magical beings of the forests can act as shadows for the *Rāmāyaṇa's* principal human characters. This shadowing creates replications, i.e., the repetition of particular themes and structures in various ways in order to create and sustain a dominant mood, in this case, that of personal loss and tragedy.[9] The replications generated by these shadows, the way their stories invert and retell the stories of Rāma, Sītā, Bharata and Lakṣmaṇa, reveal other dimensions to the *Rāmāyaṇa,* enriching the text and opening up our understanding of it.

The dominant replication in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that of brothers, their loyalty and disputed succession. It is through the loss of kingdoms and wives (who are often identified with royal power, *śrī*)[10] that the personal tragedies become publicly significant. The stories of Rāma and Bharata, Vālī and Sugrīva and Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa all resemble each other. The issue of succession, duty and the rivalry between brothers is developed and explored in the juxtaposition of these three relationships.

Rāma is the rightful king of Ayodhyā. Not only is he the most virtuous and accomplished of all Daśaratha's sons, he is also the eldest and, therefore, should succeed his father. But, because of promises Daśaratha had made in the past, Bharata, his younger son, is crowned king. Bharata, however, motivated by *dharma* and his love for Rāma, tries to return the kingdom to Rāma and then swears that he will act as a regent and hold Kosalā in custody until Rāma returns from his fourteen year exile. After Rāma has lost his kingdom, his wife is abducted, sealing, as it were, the loss of his royal power. But Sītā is stolen by Rāvaṇa and Bharata has not appropriated the kingdom for himself, leaving open the possibility that both wife and kingdom will be restored, unsullied, to Rāma.

In a direct parallel, Vālī, the older son of Ṛkṣarāja, becomes king of the monkeys. He disappears for a long time and his younger brother, Sugrīva, takes over the kingdom as well as his brother's wife, Tārā. But Vālī returns and accuses Sugrīva of having plotted to overthrow him and banishes his younger brother from Kiṣkindha. Sugrīva swears that he has been honourable and that he was forced to accept the kingship by the council of ministers. Unlike the love that persists between Bharata and Rāma, Vālī and Sugrīva become deadly enemies and the issue of who should rule the monkey kingdom is resolved only when Vālī is killed. Sugrīva inherits both the kingdom and Tārā, his elder brother's wife.

The third axis of brothers and rightful kings is explored in the story of Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa. Rāvaṇa is the king of Lankā because he is older than Vibhīṣaṇa and because of his superior prowess. But Rāvaṇa is governed by his addiction to sensual pleasures and by the arrogance he derives from his boon of invulnerability.

His abduction of Sītā and his refusal to return her to Rāma makes him unrighteous and impels Vibhīṣaṇa to leave his brother and join forces with Rāma. Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā also symbolizes his usurpation of Rāma's position as lord of the worlds and it is for this that he must be punished. At one point in the battle, when Vibhīṣaṇa thinks Rāma might be dead, he is terribly upset because his only chance of securing the *rākṣasa* kingdom seems to have vanished. Thus, Vibhīṣaṇa's motives for deserting his brother have as much to do with his desire for the kingdom as with his desire to fight on the side of the right and the good. As a reward for Vibhīṣaṇa's loyalty to *dharma,* Rāma confers the *rākṣasa* kingdom on him after Rāvaṇa is killed in battle.

Among the three sets of brothers and their three different relationships to one another and to *dharma,* it is Rāma and Bharata who clearly display the ideal relationship. The other two sets of brothers represent variations on this ideal.

> Here again the relations we encounter are not expressed by the logic of simple binary oppositions but through a technique of strategic exaggeration and distortion. I can only express it analogically by saying that human relations are mirrored and echoed in the worlds of animals and demons, but the mirrors are the kind that not only invert but also exaggerate and distort.'[11]

Women in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Just as the monkey brothers, Vālī and Sugrīva, play out an alternate option to the problem of disputed kingship, so, too, does the *rākṣasī* Śūrpanakhā, Rāvaṇa's sister, provide a distorted mirror image of the chaste and virtuous Sītā.

> Sītā and Śūrpanakhā exemplify two types of women who appear almost universally in folklore and mythology: Sītā is good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate, whereas Śūrpanakhā is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate. Although male characters also divide into good and bad, the split between women is far more pronounced and is always expressed in terms of sexuality.[12]

Śūrpanakhā comes upon Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the forest. Rāma has just fought off the *rākṣasa* Virādha who had grabbed Sītā, a foreshadowing of the more serious abduction that will take place a little later. Śūrpanakhā desires Rāma for his good looks and suggests that he give up his ugly human female for her. The brothers proceed to tease and torment Śūrpanakhā, eventually cutting off her nose and ears, Śūrpanakhā's mutilation in the forest echoes the battle the princes had with Tāṭakā in which Rāma was reluctant to kill a woman until Viśvāmitra assured him it was all right. The assault on Śūrpanakhā also moves the story into top gear—she complains to her brother Rāvaṇa at which point he decides to abduct Sītā in order to avenge the insult to his sister.

Both Katherine Erndl and Sally Sutherland[13] demonstrate that the major opposition between Sītā and Śūrpanakhā is in terms of sexuality. Sītā's is a domesticated, conjugal love while Śūrpanakhā represents untamed, aggressive and, therefore, potentially threatening desire. Sutherland suggests that the encounter between Sītā and Śūrpanakhā carries the potential of their becoming co-wives and therefore, they are set up as rivals for the same man's affections. She also interprets the mutilation of the *rākṣasī* as necessary to curb her dangerous sexuality because Rāma cannot make the same mistake as his father: he cannot be ensnared by a woman's charms. The *Rāmāyaṇa* implicitly argues that it is not wrong for Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to assault and disfigure Śūrpanakhā, just as it was not wrong for them to have killed Tāṭakā the *yakṣinī,* because they are in the forest where different rules apply and because Rāma cannot afford to commit the same mistakes as his father.

The same sexual opposition between rival wives is played out between Kausalyā and Kaikeyī, the mothers of Rāma and Bharata.[14] While Kausalyā is the respected senior wife of Daśaratha, it is clearly Kaikeyī, the junior wife, who has the king enthralled by her beauty and charm. Kausalyā does everything right, including producing the perfect son, but she has little hold on the king's affections even though she is the ideal wife and mother. Kaikeyī, on the other hand, is wilful and stubborn and gets her way all the time. She conspires to obtain the kingdom for her son and earns the contempt of everyone, including Bharata.

Similarly, good and righteous wives recur in the multiple stories of kingship. Vālī, the monkey king, has a virtuous and wise wife named Tārā who first urges him not to destroy Sugrīva and then cautions him against fighting Rāma. Vālī does not heed her words and goes out to meet his fate. When Vālī dies, Sugrīva inherits

Tārā along with the kingdom. As his senior wife, she remains the voice of righteousness and sanity in his court and Rūmā, Sugrīva's other wife, becomes the focus of his sexual attentions. The parallels with the Kausalyā-Kaikeyī situation are very clear: Kausalyā and Tārā are the wise, older wives who have the king's attention because of their virtues and Kaikeyī and Rūmā are the younger wives whose sexual charms have a hold on the king. Similarly, Rāvaṇa's chief queen, Mandodarī, tries her best to dissuade him from taking on the might of Rāma because she knows that Rāvaṇa is acting wrongly, but to no avail. While he holds Mandodarī in great respect, Rāvaṇa satisfies his sensual and sexual desires with the thousands of other women that fill his palace.

Along with dangerous, demonic women, female ascetics (like Svyamprabhā) and the virtuous wives of sages (like Ahalyā and Anusūyā) also live in the forests. Their rigorous austerities have given them magical powers and a high spiritual status. But once again (as with Sītā), because their sexuality has been sublimated, they pose no threat to anyone. In Lankā, the good *rākṣasīs* Saramā and Trijaṭā, both of whom help Sītā during her imprisonment, mirror the female ascetics of the forest. The female ascetics and the good *rākṣasīs* are safe havens in the regions where dangerous, demonic women abound.

These variations on particular themes in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are expressed through replication, shadowing and mirror images. Within the text, they explore multiple possibilities in terms of relationships, characters and story lines. The tight normative roles prescribed for Rāma, Bharata, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa are, in fact, heightened by the more realistic paths taken by the non-human and liminal characters in the text. Apart from presenting a contrast between the prescriptive behaviour of the human characters and the morally ambiguous actions of their non-human shadows, replications also serve to generate the narrative trope of foreshadowing. As in the case when Virādha snatches Sītā away, events, emotions and even behaviours are hinted at and suggested in smaller incidents and side tales well before the critical moment occurs. Foreshadowing acts as a powerful tool in the building and maintenance of a mood for the epic. It also provides a narrative rhythm as it lays out the primary concern of the text.

The Magical Beings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Traditional Indian literatures are filled with magical beings, some benign, others malevolent. While the benign beings (for example, the *siddhas* and *cāraṇas)* are very like each other, the malevolent ones are usually more ambivalent and, therefore, more interesting. Malevolent and dangerous beings occur in a hierarchy which places *asuras, daityas* and *dānavas* at the very top and *piśācas* and *yatudhānas* at the very bottom. *Rākṣasas, yakṣas, nāgas* and the like fall in between these two. The closer the beings are to the top of the hierarchy, the more they resemble the gods and, therefore, the more ambivalent they are likely to be.

Asuras, dānavas and *daityas* are 'not good' rather than being wicked or bad. They are classified as wicked mainly because they tend to oppose the gods. The *asuras,* especially, are defined only in opposition to the gods and spend much of their time and energy trying to conquer the kingdom of the gods and rulership of the worlds.[15] *Daityas* and *dānavas,* on the other hand, the sons of Diti and Danu respectively, are divine and are rivals of the gods.[16]

As we progress lower in the hierarchy, the wicked creatures become less ambiguously so. Most generally, *rākṣasas* appear in Indian stories as horrendous, vile, flesh-eating creatures. Prone to disrupting sacrifices and, therefore, to disrupting the universal order which is maintained by the careful performance of complex rituals, they are most powerful at night.

The *rākṣasas* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are unlike any others in the vast corpus of Indian literatures. Rāvaṇa and most of his followers do not fit the general description of these creatures at all. On the contrary, they are magnificent and regal. Hanumān notices that Lankā even has *rākṣasas* who are virtuous about performing Vedic rituals. Rāvaṇa and his siblings are the children of the mighty sage Pulastya who is a son of Brahmā. Rāvaṇa himself is so handsome and majestic that when Hanumān sees him for the first time, he is awed by his beauty and power and moved to remark that had Rāvaṇa not been so unrighteous, he was worthy of ruling over even the gods. Even though Rāvaṇa has ten heads, twenty arms and blazing red eyes, he clearly possesses compelling charisma. The women in his palace, each of them incomparably beautiful, have come to him of their own accord out of love. Rāvaṇa's chief queen is so beautiful that Hanumān thinks she might even be Sītā. Rāvaṇa's brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, is righteous and honourable like his grandfather Mālyavān. Rāvaṇa's sons are all excellent warriors and, except for Indrajit, fight ethically and honourably. There are also good and virtuous *rākṣasīs* like Mandodarī, Trijaṭā and Saramā.

At the same time, Rāvaṇa's sister Śūrpanakhā, whose lust for Rāma moves the story towards its climax, is ugly and crude. Likewise, Kumbhakarṇa, Rāvaṇa's gigantic brother, is terrifying and malformed. These two are more like *rākṣasas* are supposed to be—appetitive, gross and undesirable in every way. The lesser *rākṣasas,* like the ones who serve Rāvaṇa and the *rākṣasīs* who serve Sītā, fit the common description of *rākṣasas* far more closely. Almost without exception, they are greedy, ugly and deformed and eager to eat human flesh.

One of the defining features of the *Rāmāyaṇa's rākṣasas* is that they are *kāmarūpī,* i.e., they can change their forms at will. This is amply borne out by Mārīca who takes on the form of a jewelled deer to lure Rāma away from his forest settlement. During the war, Rāvaṇa's spies infiltrate Rāma's army by taking on the form of monkeys.

The counterparts of the *rākṣasas* are the monkeys of Kiṣkindha who come to Rāma's aid and fight on his side during the war. Equally magical, they, too, can change their shapes at will, as Hanumān does when he searches for Sītā in Lankā. Like Rāvaṇa and his family, each of the important monkeys has a divine father. Even the lesser monkeys were fathered by celestial beings. In this lies the secret of all their magical powers.

The magical animals of the forest, Sugrīva and his monkeys, Hanumān, Jaṭāyu and Sampāti, have often been likened to the animals that appear in folk and fairy tales. They share the same characteristics of being able to speak human language as well as being able to do uncanny things. Hanumān's character and actions fit the mode of the animal helper in fairy tales who aids the hero in his enterprise, without whom, in fact, the enterprise could not succeed.

The *rākṣasas* and the monkeys are essential to the story that has to be told. Rāma needs an opponent worthy of himself, someone who will challenge him to the fullest and yet be unrighteous enough to warrant the harshest treatment. Just as Rāma has to be human in order to kill Rāvaṇa, so Rāvaṇa has to be exceedingly powerful in order to be a threat to the worlds. Thus, his semi-divine parentage and his enormous powers are crucial aspects of his position as the rival to the hero.

The narrative reason also applies to the fact that Rāma's allies are monkeys. Rāvaṇa's boon granted him immunity from all kinds of celestial and demonic beings, but in his self-assurance, he neglected to ask for invulnerability from mortals and the lower creatures. Thus, Rāma (or Viṣṇu) appears as a mortal aided by monkeys in order to vanquish Rāvaṇa. Over and above this, we have already discussed the possibility that these creatures function as shadows, counterparts and alternates for the human characters who are restricted by their mortality as well as by their morality from behaving in certain ways.

A great deal of *Rāmāyaṇa* scholarship has turned its attention to extra-narrative explanations of who the monkeys and the *rākṣasas* really are. Several scholars have suggested that the monkeys and *rākṣasas* represent the non-Aryan tribes of India and that the defeat of the *rākṣasas* is, in fact, the story of Aryan expansion into India. This hypothesis, particularly the idea that the monkeys of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are the indigenous tribal peoples of the subcontinent, has had many supporters. Apart from the unpleasant racial overtones that such a notion elicits, the theory diminishes the power of the poetic imagination by insisting that meaning arises only from a reduction to mundane and identifiable reality.

Other scholars have suggested that the *rākṣasas* represent the 'other' of Hindu society upon which all its fears and terrors can be located.[17] This hypothesis, that the *rākṣasas* represent the innermost terrors of Hindu culture, is far more interesting because it attempts to analyse these creatures from within the mind of their creator(s). Besides that, it opens up yet another dimension, another aspect to the text, further enriching it for its audience.

Rāma's Divinity

The Indian Rāma stories that come after Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* all take Rāma's divinity as a starting point for their tale. However, in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa,* it is clear that for most of the story Rāma does not know that he is divine. It is precisely this fact that gives his trials and tribulations such poignancy—Rāma does not know why all these awful things are happening to him and why he has to suffer so much. It is at the very end of the war with the *rākṣasas,* after Rāvaṇa has been killed and Sītā has proved her chastity, that the gods appear and tell Rāma that he is Viṣṇu and not an ordinary mortal.

Scholars unanimously hold that the first and last books of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* ('Childhood' and 'Epilogue') are later additions to the central five books.[18] In Vālmīki's text as it is constituted today, the only places where Rāma's divinity is unambiguously stated are the closing chapters of the sixth book ('War') and in the first and last books. In the first book, Daśaratha performs a sacrifice for the birth of a son. At the same time, the gods, who are being harassed by Rāvaṇa, plead with Viṣṇu to be born on earth as a mortal in order to kill the *rākṣasa.* A celestial being appears at Daśaratha's sacrifice with heavenly food that will cause the queens to become pregnant. Rāma and his brothers are born as a result of this. In the last book, Viṣṇu is recalled to heaven by Brahmā and so Rāma has to give up his earthly life. When Brahmā's messenger arrives, Rāma knows what is required of him and makes arrangements to leave his kingdom and ascend to heaven.

In the middle books, then, the only direct mention of Rāma's divinity is after the war. Nonetheless, arguing from within the narrative necessities of the text, Sheldon Pollock states firmly that Rāma has to be a god-man.[19] Pollock holds that Rāma's divinity is a 'higher order narrative feature,' i.e., that it is constitutive of the text itself. His argument is as follows: since Rāvaṇa had been made invulnerable to all kinds of creatures by his boon, the only kind of being that could kill him could be a mortal. But since he is so powerful and magnificent an enemy, this mortal could not be ordinary. Therefore, a god-man is the only possibility, a man who has the powers of the gods without actually being one himself.

> The gods may never in such circumstances actually grant immortality itself . . . Yet like so many others Rāvaṇa seeks to achieve the same result by a gambit widely familiar in folklore, by attempting to frame the perfect wish. The sheer impossibility of an exhaustive catalogue, however (in this case over-determined by Rāvaṇa's scornfully discounting man altogether), immediately implies that a solution is assured; the very provisions of the boon make it inevitable that some proxy will be found. Not a god, since

> the gods have become, so to speak, contractually impotent; nor yet a man, men being constitutionally impotent . . . Instead, it must be some fusion of the two, a god-man.[20]

Despite these hypotheses and all the other extra-textual reasons for Rāma being considered divine (like the suggestion that the Indian conception of kingship demanded that the king be divine), within the story Rāma must act as a human hero even though he is Viṣṇu. How else would the tale find its dramatic tension, its pathos, its tragedy? And perhaps most important, how could Rāma be seen as the ideal man, a model for human behaviour and a paragon of virtue?

Imagine if the story had, from the outset, two equally matched protagonists, Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Imagine if Rāma had known that his banishment served a larger and far more significant purpose than the petty ambitions of his step-mother. Imagine if he had known all along that the monkeys would help him rescue Sītā and that the throne of Kosalā would be restored to him. As it is, Rāma displays an almost unnatural equanimity in the face of all that happens to him. But because he functions as a human hero, he has his moments of torment. He regrets the fact that he was exiled because of his father's infatuation with a selfish and flighty woman. He is insane with grief when Sītā is abducted and vows to show the gods the extent of his wrath if she is not returned to him unharmed. He is pathetic and miserable without her and turns his anger on Sugrīva who seems to have forgotten the terms of their alliance. It is moments like these that grasp the readers imagination for they make

Rāma real, accessible and utterly human.

At the same time, Rāma must transcend his human limitations and restrictions if he is going to vanquish the king of the *rākṣasas,* the most powerful creature on earth. On an entirely mundane level, Rāma inverts the patterns of his father's life, rising above the temptations of anger, desire and greed that Daśaratha was subject to. Daśaratha unknowingly kills an ascetic in his youth, Rāma actively protects the ascetics, first on his journey with Viśvāmitra and then later when he is exiled into the forest. Daśaratha succumbed to desire *(kāma)* by agreeing to Kaikeyī's wishes, Rāma upholds *dharma* by publicly humiliating and then punishing his innocent and chaste wife. Both Rāma and Daśaratha as kings obtain their sons at sacrifices: Daśaratha's sons are born because of the efficacy of his sacrifice and Rāma is united with his unknown sons at his horse sacrifice.

As a human hero, Rāma does all he can to avoid repeating the mistakes of his father. As an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu (and as a human king), it is his job on earth to uphold *dharma* and protect the brahmins and the ascetics. As a human, Rāma sacrifices everything, his kingdom and his wife, to uphold *dharma.* As a god, he plays along with a cosmic plan. It is the tension between his mortal limitations and the conceivably unlimited powers he enjoys as Viṣṇu that makes his dilemmas and his resolution of them compelling.

> The *Rāmāyaṇa* is the portrait of a consciousness hidden from itself; or, one might say, of an identity obscured, and only occasionally, in brilliant and poignant flashes, revealed to its owner. The problem is one of

> forgetting and recovery, of anamnesis: the divine hero who fails to remember that he is god, comes to know himself, at least for brief moments, through hearing (always from others) his own story.[21]

If we hold that the core *Rāmāyaṇa* includes the first and last books, where Rāma knows and understands his own divinity, the situation becomes even more complex and Rāma's condition even more poignant. Imagine if Rāma knew he was god and was still constrained to act as a man would and should. This is, in fact, the situation in the Rāma stories that come after Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa.* Rāma has to continue to act as a man precisely because he is a god and not in spite of his divinity.

Kingship in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Since the dominant set of replications in the *Rāmāyaṇa* explores the theme of brothers and disputed thrones, one could argue that the central issue the *Rāmāyaṇa* tackles is that of rightful and the righteous kingship. Through the multiple variations on the theme of disputed kingship, we see that Rāma is clearly both the rightful and the righteous king while Rāvaṇa is not. Rāvaṇa is the rightful king of Lankā because he is the eldest of the brothers, but he is by no means the righteous king. After Rāvaṇa is killed, Vibhīṣaṇa becomes the righteous and rightful king of Lankā.

It is the relationship between the monkey brothers, Vālī and Sugrīva, and the throne of Kiṣkindha that is the most complicated. Vālī is the elder brother and from all that we know about him, seems to be a good and righteous king. Sugrīva, on the other hand, takes over his brother's throne claiming that he is probably dead. He also takes over his brother's wife, a woman he should have treated as a mother. Sugrīva makes Rāma kill Vālī by saying that he was cruel and unrighteous. Once his older brother is dead, Sugrīva becomes the rightful king of Kiṣkindha. But once again, he takes Tārā, Vālī's wife, as his own. Ironically, taking another's wife is one of the unrighteous deeds for which Vālī is killed. Thus, Sugrīva's righteousness would appear to devolve from the fact that he makes an alliance with righteous Rāma and not from any of his own actions.

It is when he acts as the righteous king that Rāma commits the two deeds that appear incomprehensible for a man such as him—the killing of Vālī and the rejection of Sītā. Rāma forms an alliance with Sugrīva and takes his word that Vālī has wronged him and deserves to die. This expediency is compounded by the fact that Rāma kills Vālī while Vālī is fighting Sugrīva and Rāma himself is hidden behind a tree. As we learn more and more about Vālī, it would appear that he was a wise and just ruler, compassionate even towards his brother whom he could have killed on several occasions.

As Vālī is dying, he excoriates Rāma for his unrighteous act and Rāma offers a series of arguments in his own defence. These include the fact that since Vālī was a low creature, a mere monkey, Rāma could kill him in any way he pleased because the ethics of battle did not apply. At the same time, Rāma says that Vālī deserves to die because he has violated *dharma* by taking his brother's wife. The sophistry in this argument is clear: if Vālī belongs to a lower order of being and the ethics of battle do not apply to him, why, then, should he be udged by the stringent rules of human *dharma* in his ersonal life?

The matter becomes somewhat clearer when Rāma tates that he is acting on behalf of Bharata and the ighteous Ikṣvāku kings who hold dominion over the earth. There can be no violations of *dharma* under their urisdiction. The functions of a king include the meting out of punishments *(daṇḍa)*, the nurturing of *dharma* and the righteous organization of society. Rāma is attempting to fulfil those functions in this case. He is compelled to act as a righteous king, no matter how specious his arguments may be for doing so.

Rāma's unjustified rejection of the chaste and virtuous Sītā, not once, but twice, is as problematic as the episode with Vālī. Through no fault of her own, Sītā is abducted and imprisoned by Rāvaṇa. When the war to reclaim her is over, Rāma humiliates Sītā, first by calling her out in public, and then by saying that he has no use for her any more, that the war was fought to salvage the honour of his clan. Sītā walks into the fire but is rescued by the fire god who vouches for her innocence and chastity. At this point, all the gods appear and tell Rāma who he really is. Rāma takes Sītā back because the gods tell him to and also, he says, because he had always believed in her innocence but wanted to prove it to the common people. Later, after they have lived happily in Ayodhyā for many years, Rāma hears that the people still doubt Sītā. He decides that he must banish her from the kingdom because he cannot allow gossip and scandal to tarnish his reputation.

Once again, in both cases of rejection, Rāma plays the part of the righteous king who must always be above reproach. Anything or anyone connected with him must be equally so. Rāma has to sacrifice his personal feelings about Sītā in order to uphold *dharma,* as he had to do earlier when his father exiled him to the forest for fourteen years. It is here that the epic trope of the hero's personal destiny being inextricably linked with the plan of the gods is most clearly visible. But Rāma as a human hero proves equal to the task. Even though he is not always aware of his divinity, he acts in accordance with a higher law, *dharma,* which is divinely sanctioned and it is his duty, as a king (albeit in waiting), to uphold.

The Internal and External Audiences

Like the *Mahābhārata,* the *Rāmāyaṇa* is enclosed within a frame story. Besides that, it tells its own story several times within itself. There are, thus, at any given time, two audiences for the *Rāmāyaṇa,* the internal audience and the external audience.[22]

The opening frame of the *Rāmāyaṇa* involves the composer of the poem, Vālmīki, who is told Rāma's story by the celestial sage Nārada. Shortly thereafter, Vālmīki is moved to compassion when he sees the grief of a bird whose mate has just been killed by a hunter. His compassion expresses itself spontaneously in a new metre and Brahmā encourages him to sing Rāma's tale in this new metrical form. Vālmīki looks around for the students most likely to do justice to the tale and the metre and decides upon teaching it to the twins Kuśa and Lava. As Wendy Doniger O 'Flaherty points out, the names Kuśa and Lava constitute the two parts of the noun *Kuśilava,* meaning 'wandering bard'.[23] Needless to say this has an added significance in the context of what is going to happen next.

Kuśa and Lava are also Rāma's estranged sons, born ālmīki's settlement when their mother, Sītā, was shed from Ayodhyā. Vālmīki encourages the boys to the story of Rāma's life at a huge sacrifice that Rāma self is performing. The twin boys are handsome and ming, with melodious voices and fine musical talent. ir listeners are enthralled by the tale and are drawn the young men. The audience notices that they are mirror images of Rāma and even Rāma is fascinated his own story.

As the boys sing the tale in the intervals between rituals of the sacrifice, Rāma finally recognizes them his own sons. He asks them to bring their mother to n. Vālmīki brings Sītā to the sacrificial enclosure and en she is asked to prove her chastity again, she sappears forever into the earth. Rāma is heartbroken, ut Brahmā appears and encourages him to listen to the st of his own story from his sons. The young princes ontinue with their tale, reciting, apparently, even the eath of Rāma.

> The story is over. But the shocking and moving fact is that we experience these final chapters as Rāma does—not in the backward movement of the story, but rather with the past become present or future (and the future presented as past.) There is no visible seam separating the text's statement that Kuśa and Lava sang the end of the poem from the actual content of this ending—the description of Rāma's depression, the golden image of Sītā, and so on. The frame has melted away, our sense of time is confused, past conflates

> with future—as it does already at the very beginning of the epic, in Vālmīki's proleptic vision of past and future combined—and we find ourselves once again listening with Rāma to the story of his own life, but at this point to that part of it that is still to unfold. We might ask ourselves if the 'actual' narrator, Vālmīki, is continuing his narration through the mouths of his pupils, or on his own, as it were—but does it matter?[24]

According to the outer frame of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the first audience of the poem are the kings, brahmins, townspeople, monkeys and *rākṣasas* who are present at Rāma's sacrifice. The monkeys and the *rākṣasas* have participated in some parts of the story they are listening to and many of them have already heard about the events that they did not participate in. This was possible because the *Rāmāyaṇa* tells itself internally on several occasions.

When Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā first meet the sage Agastya, Lakṣmaṇa introduces himself and his companions by telling Agastya's student how Rāma came to be exiled into the forest. After Sītā has been abducted and the princes reach Kiṣkindha, Lakṣmaṇa again tells Hanumān all that has happened up to that point. Once Hanumān enters the picture, he becomes the carrier of the story within the story, from one person to the next (from Rāma to Sītā and Rāma to Rāvaṇa, then back from Sītā to Rāma and finally, from Rāma to Bharata) as well as from one location to the next (from Kiṣkindha to Lankā, from Lankā to Kiṣkindha and then from Kiṣkindha to Ayodhyā). The tale precedes Rāma's presence in Lankā as well as his return to Ayodhyā.

Hanumān as the carrier of the tale assumes significance in terms of the boon Rāma grants him at the end of their adventures together. In the very last book ('Epilogue'), once Rāma has been crowned king of Ayodhyā, he lavishes gifts on the main monkeys and *rākṣasas*. On Hanumān, his special helper, he bestows the boon of conditional immortality: Hanumān will live as long as Rāma's story is told on earth. Thus, Hanumān has a vested interest in keeping the story alive, telling it again and again, in all the places that he can and to all the people that he can.

Scholars of oral epics will argue that the reason the *Rāmāyaṇa* tells itself within itself is to maintain the integrity of the text, i.e., to ensure that future tellers and scribes are reminded of the grid of major episodes upon which they can work. For example, the opening chapters of the first book ('Childhood') have Nārada telling Vālmīki the entire story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which provides future tellers with an outline of the story. Further on, the frequent recapitulations of the story up to that point would, arguably, serve the same function.

However, if we keep in mind the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* always has more than one audience (i.e., there are multiple audiences inside the story itself) we can see how the repetitions are necessary and valid for narrative reasons as well as compositional ones. If we add Hanumān's boon to this, we see that for at least one of the storytellers within the tale, this is a matter of life and death. Besides, Shulman argues that Rāma himself has to keep hearing his own story told because the *Rāmāyaṇa* is 'the portrait of a consciousness hidden from itself' and that Rāma remembers his divine nature only through his story as told by someone else.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* as Epic

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is considered by western scholars to be one of the two Indian epics, the other being the *Mahābhārata*. The indigenous tradition, however, classifies these long poems differently. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is called *ādikāvya*, 'the first poem' and the *Mahābhārata* is held to be *itihāsa*, 'legend' or 'history'. While scholars have yet to define 'epic' satisfactorily, there is a strong consensus that, as a genre, epic is circumscribed by certain compositional and formal features. Most simply, an epic is often oral, it is narrative and it is heroic.

Early scholars of Indian epics were confounded by the non-linear narrative style of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Their stories move forward episodically, in fits and starts. Where one might expect a grand elaboration, there is none. Action is often slowed down by a digression into another story or a long description of nature. While the central story does always come to a satisfactory conclusion, it winds and meanders through a 'chaotic' abundance of other tales and side tales, diversions into philosophies and moral discourses, genealogies and cosmologies, looping back on itself, framing one story after another, until finally it comes to rest.

Since epics are often oral in origin, they have a particular way of telling their stories. Each teller has the privilege, perhaps even the duty, to tell the tale in her/his own way, dwelling on well-loved parts, elucidating morality and ethics, adding comic relief.

> . . . in a social milieu where the vast majority of the audience of traditional literatures are

> not literate, traditional texts must make heavy use of devices that maximize memorability. Among these devices are iteration, formulaic composition, simple metrical forms preferably subject to musical or quasi-musical recitation, copiousness, heavy use of epigrams and sententia, hyperbole and tales of wonder.[25]

Inside these formal constructs, epics basically tell the stories of legendary heroes, often kings, who must go through several hardships before they can 'live happily ever after'. The stories are complicated by disputed kingships, warring kingdoms, abducted or dishonoured wives, and journeys into dangerous unknown and uncharted territories. The hero of the tale must come through a series of adventures that test his valour as much as they test his virtue. He usually has a companion in his quest or on his journey who helps him come through the trials and tribulations that litter his path.

The epic hero has a special relationship with the gods. Sometimes he is fathered by a divine parent, sometimes he has the gods' particular favour and at other times he can be either a part of a god *(amśa)* or an incarnation of a god *(avatāra)*. An epic brings the human and cosmic realms together, often in the person of the hero. Epics posit a critical relationship between cosmic order and human destiny: the cosmic plan of the gods becomes the human hero's fate.[26] The gods take sides in the battle that must be fought and the battle is fought primarily to reestablish the dominion of the gods over the earth.

Apart from the gods *(daiva)* and fate *(viddhi)*, there are other significant forces that are active in the epic universe. In the Indian epics, *karma, dharma* and *kāla* (time) operate to determine what the hero can do, what he must do and what will happen to him. Curses and boons are further determining agents in these stories and elevate the stories to the level of mythic events.[27] The hero's actions are understood to be affected by any or all of these forces. Thus, the action in an epic, particularly in Indian epics, suffers from a certain degree of narrative hypercausality, where multiple causes are proffered for a single event.

Vālmīki's version of Rāma's adventures displays almost all these epic features: the hero's trials and tribulations, his intimate relationship with the gods and the operation of extra-human forces such as boons and curses. But at the same time, the *Rāmāyaṇa* also shares several themes and motifs with stories that have come to be classified as fairy and folk tales: the beautiful princess who is abducted by the wicked, monstrous enemy and imprisoned in a far-away, inaccessible place, the talking, magical animal companions, the divine maiden who can stay with her husband only for a short time before she returns to her original state, the magical objects (in this case, weapons) that help the hero rescue the princess.

While the *Rāmāyaṇa* shares structural and thematic features with genres that have been defined primarily by western scholars against western texts, we must also take into consideration the fact that there is an indigenous category for the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Indian tradition defines the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the *ādikāvya*, or *mahākāvya*, 'great poem', a category which appears to straddle the western genres of drama and narrative lyric.

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Sanskrit *kāvya* is *alamakāra*, or the adornment of verse with similes, metaphors and other figures of speech. The purpose of this is to create a distilled mood, a *rasa*. All *rasas* are based on human emotions. But while emotions are fleeting and rarely encountered in their pure state, a mood can be cultivated and developed through the sustained use of language which can, then, generate the further distillation of an essence.

The most popular mood in *kāvya* remains *viraha*, i.e., love in separation. Through various techniques, the poet tries to create this mood of longing for the beloved among his audience which, ideally, consists of *sahṛdayas*, 'like-hearted' or 'sympathetic' people. As the hero or the heroine pines for the beloved who is far away, all of nature sympathizes—trees and flowers wilt, animals and birds weep, clouds gather and the world is covered in gloom.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is completely self-conscious about its connection with *kāvya*. In the opening chapters of the text, we hear the story of how Vālmīki's compassion at the death of a mating bird was spontaneously expressed in metre. Vālmīki is then encouraged by Brahmā to recite the deeds of Rāma in this new metrical form and he teaches his poem, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, to his students Kuśa and Lava. They, in turn, recite the poem to Rāma. Rāma thus hears his own story for the first time as a poem. At the same time as the *Rāmāyaṇa* establishes itself as a poem, it is equally firm about its original oral status. The story is heard and retold many times before it reaches us, the last and outermost audience of the written text.

Even a cursory reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* shows that its style is ornate, laden with similes and metaphors, metonymy and other features of classical Sanskrit poetry. Nature functions almost as another character. Descriptions of nature abound, especially in the sections where Rāma and Sītā have been separated. Easily the most beautiful parts of the poem are the ones where Rāma is waiting for Sugrīva to fulfil his promise and begin the search for Sītā. It is the rainy season, the conventional season for love in Sanskrit poetry, and Sītā is far away. Everything around him reminds Rāma of his gentle, sweet wife.

Further, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a heroic poem, a heroic romance, in fact, and can be compared to classical Sanskrit *nāṭakas*. Under this set of parametres, the story is simple—the lovers meet, they fall in love, they are separated, and after a period of unhappiness and trial, they are reunited. As in the paradigmatic *nāṭaka,* Kālidāsa's *Abhijnānaśakuntalam,* Rāma, the hero from the city, falls in love with the woman of nature (Sītā is born from the earth and her name literally means 'furrow') and their union results in the birth of crucial male heirs.

Ramanujan believes that to classify the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an epic is to deprive it of the religious significance it holds in India and parts of South-east Asia.[28] On the other hand, since the *Rāmāyaṇa* cannot obviously be contained by any single genre, the more genre considerations we apply to it, the more we open up the text for exploration. Each particular categorization highlights another aspect of the story and of the text and each of these deepens our understanding of the multiple layers the poem holds within itself. None of the genres, whether eastern or western, are mutually exclusive and it is entirely possible, perhaps even necessary, for a text as multivalent as the *Rāmāyaṇa* to straddle many boundaries. Seeing the *Rāmāyaṇa* as *kāvya* or a *nāṭaka* or as an epic or a fairy tale, or even as all of them, provides a rich and complex backdrop to the religious significance the text has acquired over the centuries.

The Critical Edition and the Greater *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition

It is very likely that the bulk of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed by a single author (or at least by like minds at a single period in time). Nonetheless, more and more scholars have come to believe over the years that Rāma's story was in circulation for a long time before Vālmīki composed it into his particular version.[29] The existence of the *Daśaratha Jātaka* and the *Rāmopakhyāna* in the Mahābhārata have been cited as evidence that Rāma's adventures were known before Vālmīki, that Vālmīki retold the story in his own unique way. Equally though, it has been argued that the Vālmīki version is the oldest Rāma story we have and that the *Daśaratha Jātaka* and the *Rāmopakhyāna* are derived from it.[30] Whichever camp scholars fall into, there is almost no one who suggests that Vālmīki's is an original tale.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* has had a long history of transmission, from its presumably oral origins to written manuscripts and now to the printed text.[31] Even though Vālmīki probably composed his text sometime between 750 and 500 BCE, the earliest extant *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscript dates only to the eleventh century CE. *Rāmāyaṇa* manuscripts appear in different scripts from all over the Indian subcontinent. Because of the plethora of manuscripts and the multiplicity of manuscript traditions, scholars are compelled to sort through them and value them in terms of age and authenticity.

There is no longer any doubt about the fact that while Books two through six were composed by a single person at a particular time, the first and the last books of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Balā* and *Uttara Kāṇḍas*, were very likely to have been composed later than the rest of the text. From their style, content and linguistic features, they are also likely to have been composed by someone other than Vālmīki. Nonetheless, the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* as it is constituted today consists of all seven books, the first and the last serving as bookends, almost, to the central books where the main story is contained.

Since 1975, scholars of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* have had at their disposal the Baroda Critical Edition of Vālmīki's poem. This presents a standard edition that can be cited easily and efficiently. The enterprise of critically editing an ancient text that has several recensions and manuscript traditions is primarily motivated by the scholarly desire to reconstruct the original text. On the basis of linguistic, cultural and historical evidence, experts attempt to reconstruct, as closely as is possible, the original text as it was composed by the author.

The critical edition is constructed by the meticulous and painstaking comparison of manuscripts and manuscript traditions. The passages that constitute the body of the critical text are those that appear in all (or at least most) of the manuscript traditions. These are considered to be indubitably a part of the original composition. Verses that are not substantiated by several manuscripts are judged to be late in composition and/or as the work of later redactors and editors of the text and these are placed outside the main body of the critical edition.

Such an enterprise involves, for example, the labeling eparation of verses and passages that were composed date later than the bulk of the text. These, then, are rded as 'interpolations' or 'additions' to the main text. material in these passages is marked off from the of the verses and placed either in appendices or in ltiple footnotes marked by asterisks and a separate set numbers.

Opponents of the text critical method are accused of cribing a non-rationality to the original producers of the xt. Those who reject the critical edition and its findings e charged with romanticizing the oral tradition and rediting the composers with an entirely different method of text production, one that makes the criteria of critical apparatus irrelevant. On the other hand, complete reliance on and belief in the construction of such critical texts devalues the native traditions that produce them. This belief insists that the critically edited product is the legitimate text and ignores the cultural differences that inform the production and development of a text outside western modes of authorship. Nonetheless, the idea that the critical edition defines the boundaries of the 'text' itself persists, despite the fact that all those familiar with Indian texts agree that a unique notion of tradition *(paramparā)* informs and circumscribes these texts.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* as we receive it today, whether it is Vālmīki's Sanskrit telling or the Rāma story as a cultural artefact (replete with all its multiforms in the performing and fine arts and different genres of literature), is more than a putative original or source text attributed to a legendary composer. The power of the *Rāmāyaṇa* lies in the stories it tells and it lives well beyond the confines of bound volumes. Each retelling is as integrally linked to the source as it is different from it. And it is the constant retellings and reformulations of the basic story that make the text both organic and dynamic—tied to its mythic origins as well as to its real multiforms.

In speaking of the *Mahābhārata*, Hiltebeitel declares that he prefers to think of the text as a

> . . . narrative continuum, as a 'work in progress', rather than . . . a fixed or original text. By the same token, it strains matters to regard all the variants as synchronically equal in value. Some features must be older than others, and though indisputable rules for determining textual priorities will probably never be established, historical development through such processes as alteration, interpolation, and perhaps sometimes abridgement, must not be ignored.[32]

The same can be said about Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as of the greater *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition which is, in fact, predicated on Vālmīki's text. While there are considerable differences of style, composition and perhaps even modes of production between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, Hiltebeitel's observation applies equally to the former since he makes a point with regard to the way scholars should approach these 'reconstructed' texts, rather than a point about the possible way in which the texts come together.

Conclusions

The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and its critical edition eventually become layers within the greater tradition of Rāma stories that have proliferated over the centuries. Most Indian languages have their own tellings of Rāma's adventures and even cultures as far from India as Indonesia have made the tale of the exiled prince their own. But the question that remains is, what is it about this essentially simple tale that has compelled so many different kinds of people to hold it close to their hearts? The story is hardly unique, and some have argued that the idealized characters within it have little or no psychological complexities. Why then is it told and retold, by professional bards, by grandmothers, by teachers?

The answer to this question may well lie in the two unresolved issues that linger and haunt the reader/listener long after Vālmīki's story is over: Rāma's unlawful acts and his ignorance of his divine status. The killing of Vālī and his rejection of Sītā are so outrageously out of character that there is almost nothing within the premises and assumptions of Vālmīki's tale that can justify them. We can suggest that all the Rāma stories that follow Vālmīki's are attempts to resolve this issue narratively as well as structurally.

For example, Tulasidāsa's Hindi *Rāmcaritmānasā* from the fifteenth century assumes Rāma's divinity as a starting point. Rāma kills Vālī so that the monkey will be liberated from his earthly life and body. This motif of salvation has already been established by the killings of Virādha and Kabandha, both of whom are liberated from their curses by their 'deaths' at the hands of Rāma. As in Vālmīki's story, Tulasi's Ahalyā, too, is freed from her petrified condition by Rāma's presence. Tulasi follows Vālmīki to justify Rāma's rejection of Sītā—he knew that she was innocent but had to prove it to the common people. But additionally in Tulasi, Sītā the goddess, was spirited away by the gods in the moment before Rāvaṇa grasped her hand in the abduction. The Sītā that suffered the separation and torment was but an illusion of the 'real' Sītā who returned only after the trial by fire. She is, therefore, utterly pure, untouched by the vile creature that Rāma must kill.

In Krittibasa's Bengali story, Rāma is filled with remorse after he has killed Vālī and after listening to Vālī's arguments Rāma apologizes profusely, saying that since he had already formed a pact of friendship with Sugrīva, he was bound to kill his ally's enemy. Instead of justifying Rāma's unrighteous killing of the righteous monkey king, Krittibasa has Tārā, Vālī's wife, curse Rāma: because he had killed Vālī and separated Tārā from her beloved husband, he, too, would not enjoy Sītā's company for long. He would regain her now but would end his days in loneliness and misery. If Rāma's acts cannot be justified, he can at least receive retribution for them.

Krittibasa again employs the curse to make sure that Rāma suffers. When the war is over and Rāvaṇa has been killed, Mandodarī, the *rākṣasa* king's virtuous wife, curses Sītā—because she has caused the death of Mandodarī's husband, her own husband will look upon her 'with poisoned eyes'. Rāma demands that Sītā prove her innocence in public and she walks into the fire. She was not to return, except that the gods are moved by Rāma's grief over the loss of his beloved and they restore Sītā to him.

These few examples show how the later tradition struggles with Rāma's odd behaviour and how various narrative devices are employed to exonerate him from censure. If he knows that he is god, as in Tulasi's story, all his 'wrong' actions are actually right ones from the correct perspective. In Krittibasa's case, curses are used to punish Rāma and to prevent him from acting freely.

As mentioned earlier, we can think of all the other Rāma stories as predicated on Vālmīki's for two reasons: they take Rāma's divinity for granted as a starting point for their stories, and they implicitly cite Vālmīki's text as they tell their own story.

> To some extent, all later *Rāmāyaṇas* play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-*Rāmāyaṇas*. I cannot resist repeating my favourite example. In several of the later *Rāmāyaṇas* (such as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, 16th century), when Rāma is exiled, he does not want Sītā to go with him into the forest. Sītā argues with him. At first she uses the usual arguments: she is his wife, she should share his suffering, exile herself in his exile, and so on. When he still resists the idea, she is furious. She bursts out, 'Countless *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed before this. Do you know of one in which Sītā does not go with Rāma to the forest?'[33]

Ramanujan's example demonstrates that Rāma stories absorb each other and nowhere, perhaps, is this more apparent than in the issue of Rāma's divinity. Each Rāma story that succeeds Vālmīki's version addresses this particular question head on, usually in the opening chapters of the book. It is as if the later versions know how subtle Vālmīki's statement is and, therefore, they take it upon themselves to open out the issue, bring it into the foreground. It is almost possible to see the greater

Rāmāyaṇa tradition as a commentary on this primary text.

In most of the Hindu Rāma stories that follow Vālmīki's in time, Rāma's unrighteous behaviour and his divinity are inextricably linked. Rāma killed Vālī to liberate him from his earthly body. Rāma rejected Sītā because he knew all along that she would be proved innocent in the trial by fire. Rāma could do and did these things precisely because he was god, not *despite* the fact that he was god. Because Rāma is aware of and participates in a higher order, his actions cannot be judged in earthly terms and by earthly conditions. Unlike in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa,* where he has to be reminded or told who he is, Rāma in the later stories acts in full awareness and full control of his divinity.

Shulman eloquently describes the narrative nexus of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as 'the portrait of a consciousness hidden from itself . . . an identity obscured and only occasionally, in brilliant and poignant flashes, revealed to its owner.' This formulation, of the hidden divinity, the obscured identity, can be extended into a heuristic device for a further understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as well. In the *Mahābhārata,* Kṛṣṇa's divinity is hidden from those around him. He reveals himself as the *mysterium tremendum* to Arjuna in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā.* But he saves Arjuna from the memory of the epiphany which would have, in effect, made him utterly unable to act in the world. In the *Rāmāyaṇa,* Rāma must be similarly protected from the knowledge of his own divinity so that he can act effectively as a mortal in the world, most especially to kill Rāvaṇa.

The hidden divinity at the centre of the narrative is a feature of both the Sanskrit epics. The progressive revelation of the true identity of the man-god is one of the drivers of the story. In many ways, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is the climax of the *Mahābhārata* and the war that follows is but a denouement, a fulfilling of individual and collective destinies that had been set in motion in the earlier parts of the story. Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa's* narrative and spiritual climax occurs in the scene when, after Sītā's trial by fire, the gods tell Rāma who he really is. Once again, the events that follow this critical moment are but the tying up of loose ends as the story moves inevitably towards its conclusion. With the *Rāmāyaṇa* it is important to note that the revelation of Rāma's true identity occurs at the end of Book Six, the last of the central books of the text. The seventh book, the *Uttara Kāṇḍa,* has always been considered an epilogue to Vālmīki's tale which rightly and powerfully ends in Book Six.

The question that looms large over the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that of the relationship between myth and history, i.e., is the *Rāmāyaṇa* a 'true' story? When the early Orientalists were discovering Indian texts, they were struck by the absence of a formal and proper 'history', the kind they had found in ancient Greece and even in ancient China. Indians seemed to mix up their human heroes with their gods. Chronological lists of kings and dynasties were found in the Purāṇas, which were actually compendia of myths. This lead them to think that Indians could not write history, that when they did attempt to chronicle the past, their fanciful minds came up with never-ending stories peopled with gods and monsters. Thus, to see the Indian epics simply as history is to fall into an Orientalist trap.

At the same time, most scholars of epic believe that an epic grows around a core legend or tale that probably did occur. Thus, it is possible some king (perhaps not named Rāma) did exist, that his wife was abducted and that he fought a war to get her back. Through many hands and many centuries, this set of events became the *Rāmāyaṇa,* a tale that no longer has any meaningful dependence on the 'reality' that spawned it. What we have now is a remarkable tale that captures the imagination of all kinds of people, not just because it is true, but because of the way it is told, because of the adventure and magic it contains, because of the way it takes a known and familiar reality and enlarges it to dimensions that are unknown and unfamiliar.

It has been argued that to trace Rāma's journey through the Subcontinent in literal terms, identifying each and every place in which he stopped and bathed, to insist that he was born in a particular spot and died at another is a matter of faith and that it is critical to the religious sentiments of vast numbers of people. While this may well be true, literalizing a text of this magnitude does it a great injustice. The *Rāmāyaṇa* does not derive its meaning from a sacred geography or history: rather, it draws its significance from what it can tell us about ourselves, our decisions and the way we choose to live our lives.

CHILDHOOD

CHAPTER ONE

The great sage Vālmīki was a bull among men who practised austerities constantly. One day he said to the eloquent Nārada, 'Tell me, great one, who is the most virtuous man in the world of humans? Who is the most honourable, dutiful, gracious and resolute? Who is the most courteous, the most dedicated to the welfare of all beings, the most learned, the most patient and handsome? Who is the man with the greatest soul, the one who has conquered anger, who is intelligent and free of envy? Who is this man, whose anger frightens even the gods? I am sure you know of such a man and I am curious to hear about him from you.'

Nārada, who knows the past, the present and the future, was delighted with Vālmīki's question. 'There are few men with all the qualities that you have described,' he replied. 'But there is one man, O sage, who has all these virtues. Listen, and I will tell you about him.

'Born into the clan of Ikṣvāku, his name is Rāma. He is brave and illustrious, disciplined and renowned in all the three worlds. He is wise and well-versed in the science of polity. He is well-spoken and glorious. This man, a slayer of his enemies, has broad shoulders and strong upper arms, a graceful neck and a strong jaw. He is a skilled archer with a muscular body and long arms. He holds his head with pride and he walks with long strides. Splendid and prosperous, he has smooth skin and large eyes. His well-proportioned body is endowed with all the auspicious marks.

'Rāma is aware of his duties. He is truthful and dedicated to the welfare of his subjects. He is learned, virtuous and single-minded. He protects all the creatures of the world and he upholds *dharma.** He knows the four Vedas as well as the schools of thought that accompany each of them and he is equally knowledgeable about the finer points of archery. Well-versed in the sacred and philosophical texts, Rāma has a brilliant memory and a ready wit. This courteous, brave and wise man is loved by all who know him. As all rivers flow into the sea, so all good and noble people come to Rāma.

'This virtuous man is the son of Kausalyā. Viṣṇu's equal in valour, he is as deep as the ocean and as resolute as the mountains. As beautiful as the moon, he has the endurance of the earth, but he can be like the doomsday fire when he is roused to anger. As generous as Kubera, the god of wealth, Rāma is ready to sacrifice everything for the truth.

'Because of Rāma's many virtues, King Daśratha decided to declare him the heir apparent. Rāma is the oldest and most beloved son of King Daśaratha, who was devoted to the welfare of all creatures. But when Daśaratha's wife, Kaikeyī, saw the magnificent preparations for Rāma's coronation, she called up the promises Daśaratha had made to her in the distant past, promises that exiled Rāma to the forest and placed her son, Bharata, on the throne. Bound by *dharma* and his given word, Daśaratha had to banish his beloved heir. Rāma went to the forest to preserve his father's honour and to make Kaikeyī happy.

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* *Dharma*, one of the central concepts in Hinduism, is impossible to translate into English with a single word. It encompasses ideas of the right, the good, truth, law (temporal and spiritual) as well as the 'ought'. Where possible in this translation, I have used the English words 'righteous' or 'honourable'. In sentences where these adjectives could not be used with felicity, I have retained the Sanskrit *dharma*.

'Rāma's younger brother Lakṣmaṇa, the son of Sumitrā, followed him into exile because he loved him dearly and because it was the right thing to do. Rāma's virtuous wife Sītā, the most excellent of all women, also followed her husband into exile as the constellation Rohiṇī follows the moon.* When Rāma left the city, King Daśaratha and the townspeople went with him for a distance, but at the village of Sṛngavera, on the banks of the Gangā, Rāma dismissed his charioteer.

'The sage Bharadvāja told Rāma and his companions to go to Citrakūṭa and Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā went from forest to forest crossing many deep rivers on their way. In the pleasant surroundings of Citrakūṭa, the three of them built a little hut and lived there as happily as the gods and the *gandharvas*. Meanwhile, Daśaratha missed his son sorely and while Rāma was in Citrakūṭa, the old king died of grief.

'When Daśaratha died, the brahmins led by Vasiṣṭha offered the throne to the heroic Bharata. But Bharata refused the throne and went into the forest to meet Rāma. Rāma urged Bharata to return to the city to rule and finally he gave Bharata his sandals as a symbol of his regency. Bharata touched his older brother's feet and, acceding to his wishes, ruled the kingdom from

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* Rohiṇī is the ninth lunar asterism, personified as a daughter of Dakṣa and the favourite wife of the moon.

Nandigrāma while he waited for Rāma's return.

'Rāma knew that if he stayed in Citrakūṭa the townspeople would visit him all the time. So he moved further into the Daṇḍaka forest. Rāma killed the *rākṣasa* Virādha there and then went onwards to visit the sage Agastya and his brother. Rāma took Indra's bow, a sword and two inexhaustible quivers of arrows from Agastya. While Rāma lived in the forest, he was approached by the sages who dwelt there. They asked him to kill the *rākṣasas* and *asuras* who harassed them and Rāma did so.

'An ugly and terrifying *rākṣasī* named Śūrpanakhā, who could change her form at will, lived in Janasthāna. On her instructions, Khara, Triśiras, Dūṣaṇa and all the other *rākṣasas* arrived in Janasthāna and made preparations to fight Rāma. But Rāma killed them and their companions, slaying fourteen thousand *rākṣasas* in all.

'Rāvaṇa was enraged when he heard about this massacre and enlisted the *rākṣasa* Mārīca to help him take revenge. Mārīca implored Rāvaṇa time and again not to oppose Rāma, whose strength was far greater, but impelled by destiny, Rāvaṇa ignored Mārīca's advice and took him to Rāma's forest dwelling.

'Mārīca drew the two princes away with his power to create illusions and Rāvaṇa abducted Rāma's wife Sītā, killing the vulture Jaṭāyu as he carried her away. Rāma met the dying vulture and when he heard about Sītā's abduction, he was overcome with sadness and began to weep. He performed funeral rites for Jaṭāyu and then wandered through the forest in search of his wife.

'In his wanderings, he came upon the deformed and fierce *rākṣasa* Kabandha. Mighty Rāma killed the *rākṣasa* and performed funeral rites for him so that Kabandha could go to heaven.

'By the shores of lake Pampā, Rāma met the monkey Hanumān. Following Hanumān's advice, Rāma went to meet Sugrīva and told him his entire story. In turn, Sugrīva related all that he had suffered as a result of his enmity with Vālī and he also warned Rāma about Vālī's strength. Rāma promised to kill Vālī but Sugrīva was not convinced of his prowess. To prove himself, Rāma kicked Dundhubi's immense carcass with his big toe and it landed ten *yojanās* away. Then he pierced seven *sāla* trees with a single well-chosen arrow. The arrow passed through a huge mountain and lodged itself in the bowels of the earth.

'Sugrīva's confidence in Rāma grew, as did his affection for him when he saw this. He returned to his cave in Kiṣkindha, taking Rāma with him. The yellow-eyed Sugrīva roared like thunder and Vālī, the king of the monkeys, came out to meet his challenge. Rāma kept his word to Sugrīva and killed Vālī in battle. Then he bestowed the monkey kingdom on Sugrīva.

'Sugrīva called together the respected monkey chiefs and despatched them in all directions to look for Sītā. Instructed by the vulture Sampāti, Hanumān leapt one hundred *yojanās* across the salty seas and entered the city of Lankā which was protected by Rāvaṇa. Hanumān found Sītā in a grove of *aśoka* trees, where she sat with her mind fixed on Rāma. He gave her Rāma's signet ring and told her all that had happened. After he had reassured and comforted Sītā, he tore down the city gate.

'Hanumān killed five of Rāvaṇa's generals and seven of his ministers' sons. He pulverized the mighty Akṣaya and ground him into the dust. Then he allowed himself to be captured. Even though Hanumān knew he could not be harmed by the weapon Brahmā had given Rāvaṇa, he submitted to the *rākṣasas* and suffered many indignities. He burned the city of Lankā, sparing only the place where Sītā was. Then he returned to give Rāma news of his beloved.

'He honoured Rāma and related all he had seen in great detail. Rāma went to the sea shore with Sugrīva and pierced the ocean with his blazing arrows. The Lord of the Ocean himself appeared before Rāma and on his instructions, Nala built a bridge over the seas. Rāma used the bridge to reach the city of Lankā where he killed Rāvaṇa in battle. He crowned Vibhīṣaṇa king of the *rākṣasas*.

'Rāma took Sītā back but she was humiliated when he spoke to her harshly in front of all the people gathered there. Unable to bear the shame, that virtuous woman entered the fire. But as she entered the flames, flowers rained down from the sky and Agni declared her to be a chaste and honourable woman.

'The gods and the sages and all the animate and inanimate beings in the three worlds were delighted with Rāma's great deeds. The gods honoured Rāma and there was rejoicing among all the creatures. A boon from the gods brought all the slain monkeys back to life. Rāma climbed into Puṣpaka, the flying chariot, and set off for Nandigrāma. When he reached there, he cut off his matted locks. Now that he had regained his wife, Rāma, the sinless one, went back to his kingdom with his brothers.

The townspeople were glad to have him back. Rāma's presence made them virtuous, free of sickness, famine, fear and danger. No one had to witness the death of their sons, no woman was widowed and they all lived lives of devotion to their husbands. There was no fear of storms, nor of death by water, nor fear of fire nor plague nor fever. With a great expenditure of riches and gold, Rāma performed all the necessary rituals and sacrifices, including the *aśvamedha* sacrifice.* He gave away many cows and large quantities of land. The prestige of his royal clan increased a hundredfold because of his deeds and all the four castes remained dedicated to their duties in this world. After ruling for eleven thousand years, Rāma went to Brahmaloka.

'The story of Rāma is edifying and bestows merit. Anyone who reads it is freed of all sins. The man who reads the Rāmayana will be honoured along with his sons, grandsons and companions when he dies and goes to heaven. The brahmin who reads this tale will become eloquent, the kṣatriya will become a king, the vaiśya's trade will prosper and even the śūdra will flourish in his own caste.'

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* The horse sacrifice which dates back to the Vedic period. A perfect horse is allowed to wander freely through neighbouring kingdoms for one year. Anyone that stops the horse must fight the army that follows it. At the end of the year, the horse is ceremonially sacrificed. A hundred such sacrifices entitled the king who performed them to displace the king of the gods.

Gautama and a joyous Ahalyā honoured Rāma and then Gautama returned to his ascetic practices. Rāma accepted the ritual honours from Gautama and went onwards to Mithilā.

CHAPTER TEN

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa followed Viśvāmitra in a north-easterly direction until they reached Janaka's sacrificial grounds. 'The preparations for Janaka's sacrifice are truly magnificent,' they said. 'Thousands of brahmins, learned in the Vedas, have come here from different countries. And look at the camps of the holy men and the cartloads of materials for the sacrifice! Choose a place where we can stay.' Viśvāmitra picked a spot that was secluded and supplied with water.

Janaka heard that the great Viśvāmitra had arrived and came there to greet him along with his illustrious family priest Śatānanda. Sacrificial priests carried the *arghya* for Viśvāmitra and honoured him with the appropriate *mantras*. Viśvāmitra accepted the honours graciously and inquired about Janaka's welfare and the progress of the sacrifice. Then he enquired about the priests and sages according to their status, delighted to be in their company.

Janaka joined his palms in respect and said to Viśvāmitra, 'Blessed one, take your place among the best of sages!' The sage seated himself and the king, his ministers and the priests sat around him. Janaka said, 'The gods have made my preparations bear fruit. Your presence here today bestows the benefits of the sacrifice upon me. I am deeply grateful you have come to my sacrifice along with these other sages. There are twelve days left for the completion of the rituals. Then you will see the gods when they arrive to claim their shares.'

Then Janaka asked Viśvāmitra about the two young men that were with him. 'May good fortune attend you! Who are these two young men? They seem to have the valour of the gods and are as strong as lions and elephants, tigers and bulls! Armed with swords, bows and quivers, they are as handsome as the *aśvins* with their eyes shaped like lotus petals. Are they immortals who have come to earth? Why have they come here on foot and what is their purpose? Whose sons are these well-armed warriors? They light up this area as the sun and the moon light up the sky. They resemble each other in looks and deportment and their hair is as dark as the crow's wing. Tell me all about them!'

Viśvāmitra introduced the valiant sons of Daśaratha. He told Janaka about the incident at Siddhāśrama, the killing of the *rākṣasas* and their safe arrival at Viśālā, about the liberation of Ahalyā and the meeting with Gautama and about their desire to see the great bow which had brought them to Mithilā.

The next day, the king performed his ritual worship in the pure light of the dawn and sent for Viśvāmitra and the princes.

Righteous Janaka honoured them as was the custom and then addressed the great-souled sage. 'Blessed one, you are indeed welcome. I am here to follow your commands. Tell me, what can I do for you?' The eloquent sage replied, 'These two kṣatriya princes are the sons of King Daśaratha and they are renowned in the world. They want to see the mighty bow which is in your keeping.

Be kind enough to show it to them and let their wish be fulfilled. They will have accomplished their purpose when they see the bow.'

'Listen and I will tell you how the bow came to me!' said Janaka. 'There was a great king named Devarāta, sixth in the line of Nimi. This bow was given to him as a sacred trust. Long ago, at the time of Dakṣa's sacrifice, the great god Śiva grabbed this bow in anger and teased the other gods saying, 'You did not keep my share of the sacrifice even though I wanted it! Now I shall cut off your limbs with this weapon!' Terrified, the gods appeased Śiva and gratified him. He gave his mighty bow to the gods who then gave it to my ancestor, Devarāta, in trust.

'Once, when I was ploughing the sacrificial grounds in order to clean them up, the blade of my plough turned up a little girl. This child who was born from the earth has grown up as my daughter and she is known in the world as Sītā. I announced that since this child was not born from a human womb, she would be won in marriage only after a test of strength.

'When she grew up, kings from all over the world wanted to marry this daughter of mine who had been produced by the earth. They were all keen to take her as a bride, but I said that I would give her away only for the price of valour. The kings came here together to test their strength but they could not even lift this great bow, let alone draw its string! I refused to give my daughter to any of them when I saw how little strength they had.

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* Dakṣa was Śiva's father-in-law. Once he performed a huge sacrifice to which he invited all the gods except Śiva. Śiva was enraged at the insult and went to destroy Dakṣa's ritual.

'The kings felt that I had cast aspersions on their ability and they grew angry at the insult. They laid seige to the city of Mithilā and made life difficult for us. After a whole year had passed and my resources had been depleted, I began to worry. I appeased the gods with a series of penances. When they were gratified, they gave me a four-divisioned army.* I attacked those cowardly and wicked princes and, terrified, they fled in all directions with their advisors.

'Now I will show this splendid bow to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. If Rāma can string the bow, I will give this mighty son of Daśaratha my daughter Sītā in marriage!'

Viśvāmitra said, 'Send for the bow!' and Janaka instructed his attendants to fetch the divine bow which was decorated with garlands of flowers and anointed with sweet perfumes. Janaka's attendants went into the city to bring the bow and came back bearing it before them. Five hundred tall and hefty men struggled with the eight-wheeled iron cart that held the bow. They dragged the cart into the king's presence and then Janaka's ministers said, 'Here is the best of all bows that you wished to display, the one that is revered by all beings, O king!'

Joining his palms respectfully, Janaka addressed Viśvāmitra and the princes. 'This magnificent bow has been honoured by my clan for generations. Not even the bravest of all men has been able to bend it. Neither the gods nor the *asuras,* neither the *rākṣasas* nor the foremost of the *gandharvas* and *yakṣas,* not even the *kinnaras* and *uragas* have been able to draw this mighty bow! What chance does a mere mortal have of lifting it, stringing it, placing an arrow in it and then drawing it? Let the two princes see the bow!'

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* An army traditionally consisted of four divisions: elephants, chariots, infantry and cavalry.

'Child, examine the bow,' said Viśvāmitra to Rāma. Rāma walked over and opened the iron casket that contained the bow. 'May I touch this splendid bow? May I try and lift it and take a measure of it in my hands?' he asked courteously. The king and the sage gave him their permission and Rāma casually grasped the bow in the middle. Watched by thousands of people, righteous Rāma lifted the celestial bow with ease. He strung the bow and drew it to its fullest extent and fitted an arrow into it. Then, Rāma snapped the bow in half. It broke with a huge sound like a thunder-clap and the earth shook as if all the mountains had collapsed. Stunned by the sound, all the spectators, except Janaka, Viśvāmitra and the two princes, fell to the ground.

The king was relieved when the people recovered consciousness. 'Blessed one, I have now witnessed Rāma's strength!' he said to Viśvāmitra. 'I never thought that such a thing was possible! My daughter Sītā will bring honour to my family when she becomes the wife of Rāma, son of Daśaratha! And my promise that she would be won only by a man of valour will also be redeemed when I bestow my beloved daughter on Rāma! With your permission and blessings, let me send my ministers to Ayodhyā at once! Let them tell King Daśaratha how I vowed to give my daughter in marriage to a man of valour. Let them tell him what happened here and bring him to Mithilā. Let them tell him that his sons are here with you and then they will bring him here with all speed, rejoicing.'

Viśvāmitra agreed and messengers were dispatched to Ayodhyā to give Daśaratha the good news and escort him to Mithilā.

The messengers wore out their horses as they travelled without stopping for three days and nights until they entered the city of Ayodhyā. On the strength of their master's message, they were able to gain entry into the royal chambers where they saw the venerable old King Daśaratha who was like a god. Respectfully joining their palms, they spoke to the king in sweet voices. 'Janaka, the king of Mithilā, along with his teachers and elders, asks after your welfare. With deep affection and solicitude, he asks about everyone in your family. The king of the Videhas sends you this message with Viśvāmitra's permission.

'"As you already know, long ago, I made a vow that I would give my daughter away for valour. Because of this, I drove away many cowardly kings. My daughter has now been won by your brave son who came here by chance in the entourage of Viśvāmitra. Rāma snapped the divine bow in half in the midst of a huge assembly. I will give my daughter Sītā, who was to be won by valour alone, to Rāma and fulfil my promise. I seek your agreement in this matter. Great king, may good fortune attend you! Come to Mithilā as soon as possible along with your elders and your family priest. You will give me great pleasure and you will be delighted to see your sons again."

'This is the message that Janaka sends you with Viśvāmitra's permission and his family priest's support,' said the messengers.

Daśaratha was delighted with the news. He summoned Vasiṣṭha, Vāmadeva and his other ministers. 'Rāma, Kausalyā's beloved son, has been in Videha with his brother Lakṣmaṇa and the sage Viśvāmitra. King Janaka has seen Rāma's strength and courage and wishes to bestow his daughter Sītā on Rāma in marriage. If this news pleases you, let us go to Videha quickly without wasting another moment!' The ministers and sages agreed with the king's plan and Daśaratha announced that they would leave the next day. Janaka's messengers spent the night in Ayodhyā in great comfort, supplied with all that they could desire.