

The Ramayana: A Summary

Prince Rama was the eldest of four sons and was to become king when his father retired from ruling. His stepmother, however, wanted to see her son Bharata, Rama's younger brother, become king. Remembering that the king had once promised to grant her any two wishes she desired, she demanded that Rama be banished and Bharata be crowned. The king had to keep his word to his wife and demanded that Rama be banished and Bharata be crowned. Rama accepted the decree unquestioningly. "I gladly obey father's command," he said to his stepmother. "Why, I would even go if you ordered it."

When Sita, Rama's wife, heard Rama was to be banished, she begged to accompany him to his forest retreat. "As shadow to substance, so wife to husband," she reminded Rama. "Is not the wife's dharma to be at her husband's side? Let me walk ahead of you so that I may smooth the path for your feet," she pleaded. Rama agreed, and Rama, Sita, and his brother, Lakshmana all went to the forest.

When Bharata learned what his mother had done, he sought Rama in the forest. "The eldest must rule," he reminded his brother. "Please come back and claim your rightful place as king." Rama refused to go against his father's command, so Bharata took his brother's sandals and said, "I shall place these sandals on the throne as symbols of your rightful authority. I shall rule only as regent in your place, and each day I shall put my offerings at the feet of my lord. When the fourteen years of banishment are over, I shall joyously return the kingdom to you." Rama was very impressed with Bharata's selflessness. As Bharata left, Rama said to him, "I should have known that you would renounce gladly what most men work lifetimes to learn to give up."

Years pass and Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana are very happy in the forest. Rama and Lakshmana destroy the rakshasas (evil creatures) who disturb the sages in the forest during their meditations. One day a rakshasa princess tries to seduce Rama, and Lakshmana wounds her and drives her away. She returns to her brother Ravana, the ten-headed ruler of Lanka, and tells her brother, who has a weakness for beautiful women, about lovely Sita.

Ravana devises a plan to abduct Sita. He sends a magical golden deer which Sita desires. Rama goes off to capture the deer for Sita, leaving Lakshmana behind to protect her. Hours go by, and then they hear Rama screaming. Sita begs Lakshmana to rescue Rama; he leaves to investigate the trouble. Meanwhile, Ravana has changed his shape into a sage needing food and drink. He grabs Sita and carries her off to his kingdom in Lanka.

Rama is broken-hearted when he returns to the empty hut and cannot find Sita. A band of monkeys offer to help him find Sita. Ravana has carried Sita off to his palace but he cannot force her to be his wife, so he puts her in a grove and alternately sweet-talks her and threatens her in an attempt to her to agree to marry him. Sita will not even look at him but thinks only of her beloved Rama. Hanuman, the general of the monkey band, can fly since his father was the wind, and Hanuman flies to Lanka and, finding Sita in the grove, comforts her and tells her Rama will soon come and save her.

Ravana's men capture Hanuman, and Ravana orders them to wrap Hanuman's tail in cloth and set it on fire. With his tail burning, Hanuman hops from house-top to house-top, setting Lanka afire. He then flies back to Rama to tell him where Sita is.

Rama, Lakshmana, and the monkey army build a causeway from the tip of India to Lanka and cross over to Lanka. A mighty battle ensues. Rama kills several of Ravana's brothers and then Rama

confronts ten-headed Ravana. (Ravana is known for his wisdom as well as for his weakness for women which may explain why is pictured as very brainy.) Rama finally kills Ravana.

Rama frees Sita. After she proves her purity, they return to Ayodhya, their kingdom's capital, and Rama becomes king. His rule, Ram-rajya, is an ideal time when everyone does his or her dharma and "fathers never have to light the funeral pyres for their sons."

THE END

Dharma is an important part of Hindu culture. It can be expressed as one's role in society. If everyone in the universe does his dharma, the universe functions smoothly. When people or things violate their dharma, things fall apart.

Discussion Assignment:

Discuss the role of dharma in the Ramayana using several characters.

BE SURE to cite specific examples from the story for support.

1. What caste did these characters come from?
2. Who lived up to their role in society (who fulfilled their dharma)? How? What were the results?
3. Who did not live up to their role in society (dharma)? How? What were the results?