

## The Return of Rāma

-Vishwambhara R Hebbalalu

It was now the fourteenth and final year of Prince Rāma's exile. We had heard rumors about the kidnap of Sītadevi by the demon Rāvaṇa and of the lionlike vānaras who had gone there with Rāma and his dutiful brother Lakśmaṇa. We had also heard about the great battle of Rāma and Rāvaṇa, which was witnessed by all the Devas and Asuras with bated breath. And this verse, sung by two beautiful young bards later in the court rightly states the unparalleled fighting in that one battle that went on for seven days and seven nights.

गगनं गगनाकारं सागरः सागरोपमः।  
रामरावणयोर्युद्धं रामरावणयोरिव।।

(Only the sky can be compared with the sky and only an ocean can be compared with another. Similarly, the battle of Rāma and Rāvaṇa can never be compared with any other battle except theirs.)

The noble Bharata and Shatrughna were waiting patiently for the return of their brothers and sister-in-law. Kausalyādevī, Sumitrā and Kaikeyī were anxiously awaiting the return of their sons and their daughter-in-law Sītā. The whole of Ayodhyā, that had been so full of sadness for these fourteen long years, finally was showing some signs of life, as people got happier and happier that the great Rāma would be coming back to ascend his throne and rule us for happiness and justice.

I was a cavalryman in the army of Kosala, specifically training for the military conquests that we hoped that our king would perform, after his coronation and stabilisation of the kingdom. But then, Kaikeyī's servant Mantharā spoiled her mind so badly that she asked Rāma to be exiled for fourteen years and allow her own son to rule in place. Everybody protested

against this, even Bharata, whose sole wish was for his brother to reign without problems. But Kaikeyī's word was law, which sadly meant that Rāma had to go to the forest. This meant that the now strengthened army would be of no use till 14 years later. All the while, we spent our time cursing our misfortune and wondering how Rāma was in the forest.

But I grew stronger and stronger, rising in prominence in the army, till Prince Bharata made me head the garrison at Nandigrāma, which was the place we were supposed to be waiting at for the return of Rāma.

In my frequent trips to the city from there, I found many things that I did not like happening in the city. On one such occasion, I had been to the jewel-merchant to get my son a golden chain for his return from the Gurukula after his learning. And some people gossiped about the "so-called" virtues of Rāma. This hurt me so much that I did not stay there for a *nimesha* more.

Some days later I approached prince Bharata, who requested me to be at Nandigrāma while Rāma arrived. I promised him that I would be there to welcome him, along with Bharata himself. So I went to the city to convey to the palace that Rāma would be arriving in a few days.

Then, I mounted my horse and headed out of the city, and found a small hamlet with a few rogues sitting under a tamarind tree. And I heard some vague phrases about the kidnap of Sītādevī, and how they thought she must have been taken and that she might have even gone willingly and happily with Rāvaṇa. My blood boiled on hearing this and urged my horse backward to the same tree. They saw me and the jewelled bridle of my horse and immediately one of them took out a knife and said, "Hey rich man! Care to share some riches with us? Anyways that prince will not be coming with that stupid wife of his, probably he'll be dead as the lord of demons will be holding his head by this time. With that Sītā next to him of course.....". This was too much for me and as I looked straight into that vagabond's eyes, and saw that they weren't the normal human eyes, but the red eyes of an Asura. So were the eyes of the four other men. I breathed a small sigh and battled! I jumped off my horse, unsheathed my sword, and gave a clean cut to the head and hands for the four men, who

painfully resumed their evil forms and perished. The fifth one shook the knife and the knife turned into a sword! But I was too quick for him, as I cut off his hands and his ear. As he lay dying, I waited for him to resume his rākshasa form, as I had a last message to deliver, and as he became an 8-foot pile of meat, I took my sword and bent over him and said angrily “Never insult the great Rāma and Sītā, you hear me? Never! And besides, your demon-king is dead, killed by the same Rāma who you scolded!”, and listened with fierce content to his bloodcurdling shriek as I cut off his head. Remembering my promise to prince Bharata to be at Nandigrāma by the next day, I cleaned my sword and freshened myself and went on to my destination.

The next morning, I told all the soldiers to wear their clean uniforms, requested the cooks to ready the refreshments for the prince and stand in a neat orderly line. And then we started waiting, from the morning till the afternoon, when suddenly, a vānara appeared out of nowhere from the sky and landed in the courtyard. I ordered everybody to stand down and ran to the hut of prince Bharata, who by now was so saddened that he had slept over the throne on which he had kept the pādukas of Rāma. I ran into the hut and said “My lord, there is a tall vānara in the courtyard who just leapt out of the...”. Even as I said so, the vānara himself bounded into the room and said in scholarly Samskrita to the now awake prince “Noble prince, there is no need for sadness, your brother will be here with you soon, within a *muhūrthakāla* (48 minutes). He enquires about your health and your well-being and hopes that you are happy.”.

Bharata was so happy that he embraced the vānara. He then took the pādukas of Rāma upon his head and slowly walked out in anticipation of the arrival of his brother. The atmosphere that had been so dreary and boring was now tense with excitement and happiness. As the prince walked out, he turned to the vānara and frowningly said, “Do not mistake me, but you are a vānara, who is the kind to play a practical pleasantry. Is what you have told me true? My brother WILL come, won’t he?”, to which the vānara courteously replied “Noble prince, I am Hanūmān, an ardent devotee of Rāma and to pose a joke to one of his family is regarded as the worst crime

by me. Do not worry, as what I have said is true. Now look, as your brother himself arrives in the Puṣpakavimāna!” and gestured to the east. A great cloud of dust had formed in the east and then we saw the huge vimāna hurtling towards us and then neatly stopped at the entrance to the courtyard. From the vimāna opened dazzling golden steps that touched the floor.

The soldiers had ordered themselves into lines just by extreme surprise and I sheathed my sword and looked at the door to the vimāna. We could hear the excited chatter of the vānaras aboard the vimāna. The vimāna could have been more than 400 gajas in length and 200 in breadth, with every crevice decorated in jewels and gold. And then the door opened revealing prince Rāma, his brother Lakṣmaṇa, and his wife Sītādevī. The golden hue of the vimāna was not comparable to the great radiance of Rāma, which was accentuated by the matted hair and the attire of bark and deerskin

As they walked down the steps, prince Bharata shed tears of joy, so did everybody else at seeing the happy reunion of the brothers.

Prince Bharata fell at the feet of his brother and embraced him fondly. Then, prince Bharata put the pādukas of prince Rāma at his feet and made him wear them again. Then prince Rāma walked around the courtyard. I unsheathed my sword as my symbol of allegiance and respect to the prince and he responded with a warm smile that made all of the soldiers there so happy that they could have assumed that they were in brahmānanda.

The next morning all of us cleaned our weapons and prepared for our journey back to Ayodhyā. I held the rear guard, with all the other soldiers. When we finally arrived at the gates of the citadel, got off his horse, bowed to the ground and to the city and then with his right foot in, entered the city with his wife and brothers.

The main street was decked with mango leaf toraṇas, with the sound of conch shells and the empowering chant of the Vedas. Every household had

gathered upon the street, gaiety and affection in everybody's faces as they saw their king return, with the effect the rising sun has on a lake of lotuses.

Outside the palace, Kausalyādevī was waiting and as she saw her son, tears of happiness appeared in her eyes, as with Sumitrā and Kaikeyī. Vasiṣṭhamuni stood next, his eyes full of pride and admiration for the scion of the race of Raghu.

Then I unsheathed my sword, raised it and ordered the archers to shoot nine flower arrows at the entrance to create a rain of flowers. Immediately after, the Devas themselves created flower rain. And then the princes entered the palace, with great tumultuous cheer from all the inhabitants of Ayodhyā.

And the whole of Ayodhyā was happy, finally.