

Chapter 15. Among Hermitages

The hermitage of Bharadwaja

Thus, Rama entered the hermitage of Bharadwaja, taking Sita with him and accompanied by Lakshmana and Guha. The sage appeared at the doorway and walked forward to welcome him, as if he had been waiting for a long time to be blessed by the sight of the Lord (*darshan*). Rama prostrated before him, and when Bharadwaja lovingly embraced him and invited him to enter the hermitage, he was very happy to comply. The sage made them sit on seats he had spread on the floor, for each according to his status.

He asked after the welfare of every one of them and declared that his heart's desire was now fulfilled. He asked his pupils to bring fruits and roots, and, placing them before his guests, he pleaded with them to eat. They spent the night in the hermitage, accepting the sage's hospitality and service.

When day dawned, Rama proceeded to the confluence of the three rivers at Prayag, asking the sage to accompany him. Bharadwaja said, "Listen, O Lord! I chose this holy spot for my hermitage and austerities because I knew that here I could get the sight of the Lord, which I had longed for for many years. To get this thrill, I undertook vows and performed *Vedic* rites (*yajnas*) and sacrifices (*yagas*). I immersed myself in chanting divine names and in meditation on the divine form, so that I might be rewarded with the chance to converse with you. I was awarded the sight of all three of you. I have no more wants. I am no more concerned with bath or with food. I don't want to be reckoned as a fool who continued consuming drugs even after being cured of illness. I am free now from the fell disease of birth-and-death. I have seen God."

Seeing him filled with ecstasy, with tears flowing, Guha was overwhelmed with surprise. He said to himself, "O! What great good fortune is mine!" He was overcome by supreme joy.

Meanwhile Rama suppressed His divinity and acted as if he was just a man with common human attributes. While sage Bharadwaja was dilating delightedly on the Rama principle, Rama listened, as if it all related to another person called Rama and not to himself! He replied, "O! Foremost among sages! All those who are recipients of your hospitality are, for that very reason, adorable. All such are full of virtue and wisdom." The pupils, ascetics, sages, and monks of the hermitage who heard the words of Bharadwaja and Rama were struck with wonder and filled with joy.

After the holy bath at Prayag, Rama left the hermitage with Sita, Lakshmana, and Guha and entered the deeper recesses of the forest. Bharadwaja followed them as far as the river bank. There, he clasped Rama in loving embrace, wishing them a happy journey. Rama prayed for the blessings of the sage and said, "Master! Tell us which direction is best."

The sage replied, with a laugh: "Lord! There is no path unknown to you in all the worlds, is there? You are playing the role of a mere man, in this habiliment. Well, since I have been asked, it is my duty to reply to the best of my knowledge." Thus saying, he beckoned to four of his pupils and sent them with Rama to show him the track that led to the next hermitage complex.

The boys were delighted at the chance to journey with Rama for some little distance. They felt that it was a gift earned in previous lives. They walked in front, showing them the track. Behind them, Rama went with Sita,

Lakshmana, and Guha. The boys went as far as the bank of the Yamuna river, where they took leave of Rama and turned back, without the least will to do so. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana were very pleased with the pupils for the help they rendered; they blessed them with all their hearts and allowed them to leave. Then, they got ready to have the holy bath in the sacred Yamuna.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the villages on the bank noticed these visitors of extraordinary charm and splendour and gathered around them, wondering who they were, whence they came, and what their names were. They were too shy and too afraid to ask and talked in whispers among themselves.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana finished their bath without paying heed to them. Coming on to the bank, Rama called Guha near and said, “Dear one! It is a long time since you joined us; it is not proper for you to spend so much time with us. You must carry out your duties to your subjects. Go home now, to your post of duty.” He gave him permission to leave.

Guha found himself helpless to answer. “Can anyone give up the wish-fulfilling gem that I had come by? How unfortunate I am to be forced to do so!” he wailed. He couldn’t disregard Rama’s command, so he prostrated before Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana and showered the dust of their feet on his head. He left their presence, most unwillingly.

The city of Amaravathi

A short time after Guha left them, the three resumed their journey. Soon, they saw before them a city, which shone brighter than even the city of the *nagas*. As they neared the light, they wondered which city it was. The nearer they came, the more delighted they were at the grandeur and charm of the city and its suburbs. Reaching quite near, they took it to be Amaravathi, the city of the gods, and they were still more delighted. They felt that the citizens must be gods, not people. They sat under a tree in its cool shade and admired its splendour and magnificence.

The people came around them and asked among themselves whether they had come down from “heaven” and were they immortals themselves. They ran into the town and spread the good news that some divine personalities were coming into the city, bringing great good luck with them. Everyone who heard ran toward the visitors and vied with each other in attending to their comforts. Some placed milk before them; some spread fruits; all looked at them without even a blink! No one could leave them and go back. They stood unwilling to depart.

One of them, bolder than the rest, came forward, and spoke; “Sirs! Your charm and imposing personality make us infer that you are princes of royal blood. But you are journeying by foot along these rough jungle paths, with this damsel. You are climbing mountains and crossing rivers. You are hard travelers braving all the dangers of the trek, so we have to conclude that you are like us, mere citizens. We don’t understand how you manage to travel across this forest, where lions abound and herds of wild elephants roam. And you have with you this tender embodiment of loveliness and beauty. Have you no kith and kin, no friends and comrades, no well-wishers? If there were any such, certainly, they would not have allowed you to venture on this journey.” He enquired into the nature and cause of the journey and put a number of other questions to Rama.

Meanwhile, a woman advanced and addressed Rama. “O Prince! I place a prayer before you. Woman that I am, I am afraid to express it. Pardon my effrontery. We are common folk, unacquainted with verbal finesse. Your physical charm reflects the lustre of emerald and gold, which seem to be the source of your brightness. One of you

has the complexion of the rain cloud, while the other is resplendent white. Both are as enchanting as a billion gods of love moulded into human bodies. Also, we don't know how this sweet damsel is related to you. She has the exquisite charm of the goddess of love, Rathi Devi. Watching her modesty and innate humility, as well as her charm, we women are ashamed of ourselves. Kindly tell us who you are and why you have come like this."

Listening to their prayers and watching their eagerness and joy, Rama and Lakshmana were very much amused. Sita turned toward the women and spoke. "Sisters! This simple, sincere person with the golden complexion is Lakshmana. He is my Lord's brother, a younger brother. Then about the dark-blue person; he with the lotus-petal-eyes that enrapture the worlds, with the long, strong bow-arms, (here, she turned toward Rama), this is my Lord, the very breath of my life." Saying this, she bent her head and looked at the ground.

A young maiden interjected, "Ma! You haven't told us your name!"

Sita said, "My name is Sita. I am known as Janaki, the daughter of Janaka."

The women looked at each other in wonder and appreciation and, with one voice, blessed Sita profusely, saying, "May you both be as happy a couple as God Siva and Goddess Parvathi, and may you live together as long as the Sun and Moon, as long as the Earth rests upon the hood of the snake Adishesha, in harmony and unbroken joy."

Rama spoke to the men and informed them that they had come to see the grandeur and beauty of the forests and that their journey so far had been quite comfortable and useful, that they were not in the least exhausted or inconvenienced. He asked their permission to leave, and they turned to the forests again. Having nothing left to do, the men and women hied homeward.

Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana wended their way, talking among themselves about the citizens, their questions, the affection they manifested, and the joy that glinted in their eyes. Suddenly, Rama noticed signs of exhaustion on Sita's face and proposed that they rest awhile under a shady tree. A cool broad stream flowed near by. Lakshmana ventured into the jungle and soon gathered some fruits and tubers, which all three ate with relish. They spent the night there, quite happily.

The hermitage of Valmiki

At dawn, they awoke and, finishing the morning ablutions, started off on the next lap of their journey. Soon, they entered the fearsome recesses of the forest. The towering peaks, dark dreadful tangle of trees, and deafening roar of flooded streams produced a queer feeling of awe and mystery.

Right in the midst of that frightful area, they came upon a patch of garden, nursed and fostered by humans, and upon it, a hermitage that was charming to behold. It was the ashram of the sage Valmiki. On one side of the hermitage rose the cliffs of a tall mountain; on the other side, far below, at the bottom of a deep trough, flowed a murmuring stream. The hermitage was a picture of beauty; it shone like a gem on that green carpet. Sita felt considerably relieved and assuaged when her eyes fell on that picture.

Learning from his pupils that they had entered the garden, Valmiki appeared at the door of the hermitage. Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana hurried forward and fell at his feet. The sage also moved forward and, as if he had known them long, welcomed them with fond embrace. He invited all three to enter the hermitage. Valmiki provided comfortable seats for Rama, whom he loved as his very breath, and for Lakshmana and Sita. He called for fruits and edible tubers and placed them before the three. As desired by Valmiki, they partook of them and

expressed their pleasure. Valmiki sat before them, watching Rama and quenching the thirst of his eyes. He was filled with inexpressible delight.

With utmost humility, Rama addressed the great sage. “Most venerable sage! You are conversant with the past, the present, and the future of all, so the reason I have entered this forest must be as clear to you as the berry in one’s palm. Nevertheless, I feel it right that I should discharge my duty of informing you why I am here, with my wife and brother.” Then Rama described how Queen Kaika sent him into exile in the forest and how brother Bharatha was crowned as ruler of the realm, according to the promise made by the father.

The sage listened to the story and communicated his joy with a face lit with smiles. “Rama! As you fulfilled their desires then, you have satisfied my desire now. My austerities, vows, and yearning have at last yielded fruit today. I must confer on Kaika my heartfelt gratitude and a share of the bliss I am now enjoying.”

Valmiki sat long in silence, with his eyes closed, trying to control the emotions of gratitude and joy surging inside him. Tears gathered in his eyes, tears of spiritual bliss (*ananda*), and they rolled down his cheeks in big drops that chased each other.

Rama broke the silence. “We will reside where you direct us to live. Indicate to us a place where we won’t cause any trouble to anyone and won’t come in the way of hermits and hermitages; give us proper advice. We will put up a ‘thatch’ of leave and spend some time therein.”

These words from a pure sincere heart moved the sage. “O Rama! I am indeed blessed. You are as the flag that proclaims the glory of the Raghu dynasty. Why are you talking like that? You are the force that fosters the path laid down in the *Vedas*, the power that safeguards it from harm. Sita is the deluding half of your personality, your illusion (*maya*). She creates, maintains, and destroys (as you ‘will’) worlds beyond worlds. And, Lakshmana is the very basis of the movable and immovable, the ‘thousand-hooded serpent’, the primal *Sesha-Naga*, which upholds the universe.

“You have assumed forms in order to carry out the wishes of the Gods —to re-establish righteousness in the world. You will pretty soon, I am sure, destroy all demonic hearts. You will protect the good and the compassionate. Rama! You are the eternal witness of the play named ‘The World’. The universe is the ‘seen’; you are the witness. Even the gods fail to gauge your reality and glory, so how can ordinary mortals understand your mystery? Only those who have received your grace, namely, wisdom, can claim to have known something of your truth and majesty.

“You took this human form in order to promote the peace and security of good people and gods; as a consequence, you converse and behave like one of us. Only fools are misled into believing that you are a man among men! We are all puppets who play about as you direct, as you pull the strings. Who are we to direct you to act thuswise or to stay at a certain place?

“Rama! Are you planning to delude us, ascetics, by your words? O, how wonderful is your play! How realistic is your acting! Don’t I know that you are the director of this cosmic drama? I can’t understand why you ask me to select a spot where you can stay for some time in this forest. Which spot can I choose and recommend? Is there any spot in the whole universe where you are not already? Answer this question, and thereafter I will point out the place where you can stay.” Valmiki said this while looking at Rama’s charming face; in the extremity of his delight, words melted away on his tongue.

Rama laughed within himself, listening to the revered sage. Meanwhile, the sage spoke again, softly and sweetly, with a smile beaming on his resplendent face.

“Rama! I know in reality that you reside in the hearts of your devotees. Now, I will tell you the best place for this form of yours to stay. Listen. You can reside there with Sita and Lakshmana. Select those whose ears, like the ocean, receive gladly the streams of stories recounting your exploits and who are ever happy listening to the narrative of your divine acts and words; whose tongues are busy repeating your name and tasting its nectarine sweetness; whose throats recite and revel in the recitation of your praise and of your words; which are soft and refreshingly sweet; whose eyes yearn to see your cloud-blue form as the chathaka bird yearns for the first cloud-burst; whose ever-present longing is to discover you anywhere, in any quarter, and delight in the discovery when you find any such. O! Rama, dwell there with Sita and Lakshmana.

“Rama! If you want me to elaborate further, listen. Stay in the heart of the person who discards evil in others and loves them for the good they have, who trudges along the journey of life in the path of morality and integrity, who observes approved limits of conduct and behaviour, and who has faith in thought, word, and deed that the universe is your creation and that the entire objective world is your body.

Residing on Chitrakuta Hill

“Nevertheless, since you have assumed this human body and come here to carry out the commands of your mother and father, and questioned me in that role, I venture to answer as if that role were real. You can reside on Chitrakuta Hill. It has all the facilities for a comfortable stay. It is a holy place, a charming beauty spot. The atmosphere is saturated with love and peace. Lions and elephants roam together there, with no trace of rivalry. The river Mandakini, extolled in the *Vedas*, flows round the hill. Sages like Athri live there in hermitages, which you can visit and render more sacred. Confer your blessing on that sublime spot and on that dear divine river.”

Rama agreed and, receiving his permission to leave, resumed his journey with Sita and Lakshmana. Within a short time, they saw the Mandakini and were happy to bathe in its sacred waters and perform the prescribed ceremonial rites. They rested under a shady tree and ate some fruits before walking over the grass for some distance, admiring the verdure and the scenery.

Then, Rama spoke. “Lakshmana! I am at a loss to decide on the exact spot to erect a cottage of leaf-thatch and bamboo for our stay here. I don’t find it easy to say which place is good and which isn’t, so you select a spot.”

No sooner did these words fall on his ears than Lakshmana crumpled on the ground right at Rama’s feet. He was in evident anguish. “What wrong have I committed that you should speak to me thus! Is this a sentence for any sin? Or are you testing me and my nature? Are you joking and making fun of me?” In great sorrow, he stood with his head bent with fear and anxiety.

Rama was surprised. He went to him and clasped him to his bosom. “Brother! What happened to make you so sad? I can’t guess why you are so heart-broken. Tell me,” he pleaded, “tell me why; don’t prolong my astonishment and sorrow.”

Lakshmana replied. “Brother, I surrendered everything to you. I have no likes and dislikes. What is pleasing to you is, on that account, pleasing to me. You know this. Yet, you ask me to select a place that I like and erect a cottage for you thereon! My heart received a shock when you directed me to exercise my will. Order me where to raise it and I will do so. Be merciful, don’t speak to me in this strain; bless me in accepting the surrender I offer at

thy feet—the surrender of all of me, the will, the intelligence, the mind, the senses, the body, all with no exception and no reservation. I am your servant, following you in the hope of having the chance to serve you. Use me. Command me, and have the command obeyed and the action accomplished.”

Rama consoled him and pacified his feelings. “Lakshmana, why are you worried so much on this little matter? Don’t take it so much to heart. I gave you that direction in just a casual way. I am not unaware of the loyalty that fills your heart. Well. Come along with me. Right, I shall select the spot myself.”

With Sita by his side, he took the forest track, along with Lakshmana, and soon they sighted the northern bank of the Mandakini river. This length of bank was curved like a bow; it appeared as if the bow was held by the Chitrakuta peak standing behind it like a hero. One felt that the arrows it was ready to let loose were sense control, mind control, charity, renunciation, and so on and that the target they were intended to destroy was the gang of sin. Rama described the spot thusly and added, “This hero will not withdraw from the fight!” He directed the cottage to be built on that captivating spot.

Lakshmana asked Rama and Sita to rest awhile under a tree and set about collecting poles, leaves, creepers, and fibre from tree-barks from which to spin ropes. In order to raise a hut spacious enough for three, he dug pits, planted poles, and laboured quickly. When Sita and Rama rose from the shade after some rest, they found the cottage rising before their eyes, a thing of beauty, certain to be a lovely home by all counts. Rama felt he should help Lakshmana in his work, so, seeing his brother on the roof, giving the finishing touches, he handed him from the ground bits of string to tie the bundles of dry grass to the crosspoles in order to thicken the thatch. Sita also wanted to help; she plucked long leaves from the tree branches Lakshmana had brought and gave sheaves of them to Rama to be passed on to Lakshmana.

The house was ready for occupation even before sunset. Rama looked often and long at the neat little cottage, and he praised the devotion and skill of his brother to Sita, in high terms. Sita also appreciated the house and said that she had yearned for a long time to live in just such a habitation. She told Rama that her long-cherished desire was fulfilled that day.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana came down from the roof; he went round the cottage to examine whether anything was wanting. Then, he asked permission from Rama to proceed to the Mandakini for a bath. A short while after, Sita and Rama went to the river and had their bath; they returned to the cottage and partook of the fruits that Lakshmana had gathered in the morning, and they slept soundly on the floor of their new home.

Before another day passed, the news that Sita, Rama, and Lakshmana had taken residence on Chitrakuta Hill spread among the hermits of the forest, and groups of them, bringing their pupils and comrades, approached the sacred cottage; after seeing the Lord (taking *darshan*), they left for their hermitages. Rama asked them about their health and progress and also asked about the difficulties they encountered. Rama assured them that whenever they required his service, he was ready, with his brother, to go to their rescue.

But they mentioned no difficulties and referred to no troubles. They said, “Rama! The fact that we have been able to see you is enough to make our lives trouble-free. We have no difficulties, nor can any difficulty come into our lives. Your grace is enough protection for us.” They sat petrified with wonder at the charming personality of Rama. Rama welcomed the ascetics and treated them with affectionate regard. Seeing him and being in his presence cooled the pining hearts of the ascetics and gave them immense consolation and confidence. A deep calm descended on their consciousness.

Rama is predominantly love. He made every one of the forest-dwellers happy. He discoursed with them and slaked the thirst for love that was tormenting them. Those who came to him, whether ascetics or hunters, received from him instruction appropriate to their aspirations. Rama elevated their occupations into a higher level by his sympathy and counsel. Those who went to him and returned from his presence talked among themselves of his virtues and compassion; they reached their homes extolling him and congratulating themselves.

The forest where they had resolved to reside shone with a new glory and thrilled with a new joy, right from the day they entered the cottage. It was charming to the eye and saturated with a coolness that delighted the mind. The ascetic communities that lived in the forest had fear and anxiety removed from their lives; in their place, spiritual bliss (*ananda*) grew and flourished. Even the hard-hearted hunter clans started observing the rules of morality and soon became ornaments of the human race. The Vindhya mountain range was sad that the Chitrakuta Mountain had won this fortune. Why? Not only the Vindhya range; all mountain ranges continued to be sad, for they could not attract Rama to select them for his residence.

Lakshmana had the unique chance of feasting his eyes upon the lotus feet of Sita and Rama and imbibing the affection they bestowed on Him, so he forgot everything else and immersed himself in supreme spiritual ecstasy. His mother, Sumitra Devi, wife Urmila, and his other kinsmen did not appear before his vision, even in dreams. So austere was his refusal to remember them.

Sita also never recalled, even for a fraction of a second, her relatives or parents or the cities of Mithila and Ayodhya. She fixed her eyes and attention on the lotus feet of Sri Ramachandra. That was the veritable festival for her eyes; she watched the stream of sages and their consorts who came to Rama for instruction and guidance. Time flowed by without her noticing the passage of night and day. The chakora bird delights to the point of self-forgetfulness when the moon shines in the sky; so too, Sita reaped delight, fixing her eyes intently on the face of Rama. For Sita, the lovely little grass-thatched bamboo cottage was so attractive that she forgot the palace of Mithila, where she grew up, and the palace of Ayodhya where she spent years as the princely daughter-in-law. That cottage was to her more pleasing and palatial than all the mansions she knew.

Off and on, Rama related stories of ancient heroes famed in *Puranic* lore and described the varied achievements of people who had mastered the mysteries of austerity. Sita and Lakshmana heard them eagerly and enthusiastically.

In the midst of these narrations, Rama would remember his parents and remind them of their grief at being separated from them, and Sita's eyes would fill with tears at the thought of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Drops rolled down her cheeks when she pictured the plight of Queen Kausalya. Suddenly, she pulled herself up, with the thought that she was with Rama, the lion among men, that it wasn't proper to give in to sadness or anxiety in the forest while in his presence, and that whatever happened must be welcomed as the cosmic play (*leela*) of her Lord.

Thus, Sita spent her days in undiluted happiness in the cottage, with Rama and Lakshmana. And they guarded her like the lids of the eye against the slightest disturbance or noise that might affect her equanimity and raise fears in her mind. No worry affected them; no grief or pain or shade of sadness marred their happiness at Chitrakuta.