

Maharshi Valmiki



The story of Rama and Seethadevi is the 'Ramayana'.

It is remarkable that Sri Rama himself listened to the story of the 'Ramayana' and was pleased. Lava and Kusha sang the story before Rama very sweetly; Rama did not know that they were own sons!

The poet, who composed 'Ramayana' and taught the song and story to Lava and Kusha, was a great sage by name Valmiki. How this man became a sage and a singer-poet is itself a very interesting story.

Valmiki's 'Ramayana' is in the Sanskrit language. It is a very beautiful long poem narrating the story of a very great hero is called an epic.

Valmiki's 'Ramayana' is the very first such poem in Sanskrit. Therefore, it is also called the 'Adikavya' or -the First Poem; Valmiki is also known as the 'Adikavi', which means the First Poet.

Valmiki was not the name that his parents chose for the poet. His real name was Ratnakara. The word 'Valmika' in Sanskrit means an ant-hill. Since he came out of an ant-hill, he got the name of

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Valmiki. But how strange! How did he come out of an ant-hill? Now, that is a wonderful and delightful story.

Valmiki also lived in the age of Sri Rama - called the 'Treta Yuga' (the Age of Treta). In those days, there was a thick forest all along the banks of the river Ganga. Many sages built their hermitage in that forest for their 'tapas' (penance); that means they meditated on God. Among them was a sage by the name of Prachetasa. He had, a son called Ratnakara. When he was s a very young boy, one day he went into the forest. While playing he lost his way and began to cry. Just then a hunter came there looking for a prey. He saw the chubby boy and fondled and pacified him. The hunter had no children. He took the boy to his hut in the midst of the jungle.

Ratnakara's father searched for his son all around the hermitage, but could not find him. Finally he and his wife thought that the boy had become the prey of some wild beast. Both wept very much.

The hunter and his wife brought up the lad with great love. Ratnakara forgot his parents. He took the hunter for his father and the hunter's wife for his mother. He was taught how to hunt by the father. Ratnakara was a clever boy and learnt it quickly. He became a hunter with a sure aim.

To the birds and beasts of the forest, he became verily Yama, the God of Death. When he came of age, his foster father searched for a bride and celebrated his marriage with a beautiful girl from a hunter's family. In a few years she gave birth to some children. Thus Ratnakara's family grew in size. It became very difficult for him to

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provide food and clothing to his large family. So he took to robbery. He began to attack people going from one village to another, frighten them and to away all that they had. If they opposed him, he killed them.

One day Ratnakara was sitting by the side of a road waiting for a victim. It happened that the great sage Narada was passing that way. Narada had his favorite musical instrument, a Veena, in his hands. As he played on the Veena, he was singing a song in praise of God. When he was thus lost in joy, suddenly Ratnakara rushed at him. He lifted the stout staff in his hands and shouted, "Look here! Hand over all you have or else I'll break your head."

But Narada was not an ordinary man. He was a divine sage, and one who wandered all over the Earth, the Heaven and the Underworld. He was not frightened by the loud shouts of Ratnakara. He smilingly said, "My dear man, all that I have only this old Veena and the rags I wear; if you want them, you can certainly take them. Why should you break my head for these?"

Ratnakara was astonished at these words. He looked up at Narada's face. There was neither fear nor anger; there was only peace. And how bright was that face! He was surprised to see a face tender and innocent like that of a child. He had never seen such a lovely face. As he gazed, his cruel mind melted into tenderness.

Narada sat beneath a tree and as played on the Veena, sang a song in praise of God. It was sweet like the song of cuckoo. Ratnakara was deeply moved. Noticing the change, the sage Narada

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paused in his song and said, "Brother, stealing is a sin. Killing animals is also sinful. Why do you do such evil?"

"Sire, what can I do Ratnakara replied, I have a large family. There are my old parents and my wife and children; they partake of my happiness and my troubles. I have to provide them with food and clothing. Hunting and stealing are all I know. What else can I do?"

The sage smiled and said, "My friend, will any member of your family partake of your sin also? Go and ask them, and bring back their reply."

Ratnakara thought that Narada was trying a trick to make his escape. Narada understood it and again said, "Well, child, if you do not trust me, you can tie me to this tree and then go."

Ratnakara thought that was all right. He tied Narada to a tree and went home.

On reaching home, he first went to his father and said, "Father, I rob people to get food and clothing for you all. It seems that is a sin. Do you not share in that sin?"

His father was angry and said, "You sinner, you should not do such bad things. Am I to share your sins? No, never. You have to suffer for what you do."

Ratnakara went to his mother and said, "Surely, mother, you will share my sin, won't you?" But she also scolded him and sent him away. He then went to his wife and said, "Do you know how I earn to provide you and your children with food and clothing? It is by robbery."

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But I steal for your sake. Therefore you are also partners in my sin. Isn't that so?"

The wife was displeased and said, 'What are you saying? What have we to do with your sin? You are my husband, and my children are your children. It is your duty to look after us and give us food and clothing.'

Ratnakara's eyes were opened. He realized that he alone was responsible for all his sins no one else would share his sin. As soon as it was clear to him, he ran to Narada. He untied the sage and amidst weeping, narrated to him all that had happened in his home. Falling at Narada's feet he asked the sage, "Oh, sire now what of me? How can I atone for all the sins I have committed? You are my only savior."

Narada lifted him up and wiped his tears. He consoled him saying, "Do not be afraid. I shall teach you a way to wash off your sins." So he taught Ratnakara the sacred name of Rama - 'Rama Nam'. He made him sit beneath a tree and asked him to go on repeating the sacred name of Rama. He said, I shall come here again, Till then you should not get up and go away." Then the sage departed.

Ratnakara continued his 'tapas' chanting the name of Rama. His eyes were closed. His whole mind was concentrate on the chanting of the name of the Lord He forgot his existence. He had neither food nor sleep for days and days. And in this way quite a few years passed. An ant-hill grew all around and above him. He could not even be seen by anybody.

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At last one day the sage Narada again came that way. Of course, he knew that Ratnakara was inside the ant-hill. Very carefully he cleared that ant-hill still Ratnakara was wholly lost in his 'tapas' and did not wake up to the world around him. Narada chanted the name of Rama in his ears. Then he opened his eyes and saw the sage standing before him. He saluted him from where he was sitting. Narada helped him to get up. He also gently touched him all over. Ratnakara felt new life flowing through him. He touched the sage's feet; Narada lifted him up and embraced him. He said to him, "Ratnakara, you are blessed. God is pleased with your 'tapas'. You are now a sage of the highest order, a Brahmarshi. As you are now reborn from a Valmika (the ant-hill), will here after be famous as Valmiki."

Tears of joy welled up in Valmiki's eyes at these words. He prostrated before Narada again and said, "Sire, all this is your kindness. The company of good men uplifts man. I am myself a proof of this." Narada blessed him and went his way.

The sage, Valmiki, now formed his ashrama or hermitage near the river Ganga. His fame spread every – where Many other sages went with their families and settled down in his ashrama. There sons became the disciples of Valmiki.

One day Sri Rama with his wife Seetha and brother Lakshmana came to Valmiki's ashrama. Valmiki's joy knew no limit. With the help of his disciples he waited on them with great enthusiasm. His disciples brought them water to wash their hands and feet, and

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spread mattresses for them to sit upon. They offered the guests fresh milk and tasty fruits.

After resting a while, Sri Rama narrated his story. He had come to the forest so that his father's promise might be fulfilled. Valmiki was very pleased to hear it. He said, "Ramachandra, there is none so truthful as you are. You have given up your kingdom so that your father's promise may be kept. Giving up a king's throne, you have come to the forest. You are not an ordinary man but the Almighty Himself. The power of your name is such that I have changed from a sinful hunter to a sage, a Brahmarshi. Your grace is great."

Sri Rama smiled. Then he said to Valmiki, "O great sage, we have come here to live near your hermitage. Please show us a suitable spot." There was a hill very near Valmiki's hermitage. It was called Chitrakuta. It was a beautiful place with many kinds of plants full of flowers and trees bearing fruits. Valmiki guided Rama to that hill. Sri Rama lived for a while on the hill with his wife and brother.

Like the story of Valmiki's becoming a sage, the story of his composing the Ramayana' is also very interesting. One day the sage Narada came to Valmiki's ashrama. Valmiki was very happy. He showed him great courtesy, offered milk and fruits. Valmiki and his disciples sat with folded hands before Narada. Then Valmiki said to the divine sage, "Sire, you visit all the three worlds, and therefore know what happens anywhere. You can certainly answer my questions. Please tell me, who is the most virtuous person among all the human beings on the earth? One who always speaks the truth, and is always calm? Who is he, who desires the well being of

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everyone, and is loved by all? Who the man, whose words and actions are praised by the Gods? Who is famous as the greatest hero and the noblest of men in the world?"

In answer to Valmiki's question, Narada mentioned the name of Sri Rama. Narada narrated how Sri Rama was born as the eldest son of King Dasharatha, married Seethadevi, and went to the forest for fourteen years to honour his father's promise. He told them in detail how in the forest Ravana stole Seetha, how Sri Rama killed that very evil person, returned to Ayodhya with Seetha and Lakshmana, and was finally crowned as King. Hearing all this, Valmiki was very happy. He praised Narada and bowed to him. The divine sage blessed him and left.

Some time after Narada left, Valmiki went to the river Ganga to bathe. A disciple by name Bharadwaja was with him carrying his clothes. On the way they came across the Tamasa Stream. The water in it was very clear. Valmiki said to his disciple, "Look, how clear is this water, like the mind of a good man! I will bathe here today."

Valmiki was looking for a suitable place to step into the stream, when he heard the sweet chirping of birds. Looking up he saw two birds flying together. Valmiki felt very pleased on seeing the happy bird couple. Just then one of the birds fell down hit by an arrow. It was the male bird. Seeing the wounded one, its mate was screaming in agony. Valmiki's heart melted at this pitiful sight. He looked around to find out who had shot the bird. He saw a hunter with a bow and arrows, nearby. The hunter had shot the bird for food. Valmiki was

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very angry. His lips opened and words came out: "You, who have killed one of a happy couple, may you not yourself live long!" Of course, he spoke in Sanskrit. The form he used is called a 'sloka' in Sanskrit. It means a couplet. A sloka was born out of his sorrow.

The sad plight of the birds had moved Valmiki to curse the hunter, but yet he felt very unhappy, because he had cursed him. He expressed his sorrow to Bharadwaja who was with him. He was equally surprised that a sloka should have come from his lips. He was thinking of this all through his bath. As he walked back to his ashrama and also later, he thought only of the sloka.

While Valmiki's mind dwelt so intensely on the sloka that had sprung from his lips, Brahma, the Lord of Creation, appeared before him. He said to Valmiki, "O great sage, the sloka which came from your lips was inspired by me. Now you will write the 'Ramayana' in the form of slokas. Narada has narrated to you the story of the 'Ramayana'. You will see with your own eyes all that happened. Whatever you say will be true. Your words shall be truth. As long as there are rivers and mountains in the world, people will read the 'Ramayana'." So Lord Brahma blessed him and disappeared.

Valmiki wrote the 'Ramayana'. He taught the slokas first to the sons of Sri Rama, Lava and Kusha. They were born twins in Valmiki's ashrama and grew up there. Now, why did they, a king's sons, grow up in a hermitage? That is also an interesting story.

After Sri Rama killed Ravana in a great war to regain Seetha, he returned to the city of Ayodhya with Seetha and Lakshmana. He was then crowned King of the Kosala country. Seethadevi was now

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the Queen. They were happy. All his subjects were also very happy and joyful. After some years Seethadevi became pregnant. Sri Rama was very pleased that his line would continue. He said to her, "Seetha, you are now with child and you may have some desire or the other. Tell me whatever it is, and I shall fulfill it."

Seetha smiled and said, "My lord, what other wish can I have? I only desire your happiness and your love. Still there is a small thing I would like to mention. When we were in the forest years ago, we used to go to the hermitages of the Rishis. But I could not give anything to the wives of the sages at that time. Can I go there now, and offer them gifts to my heart's content? I would like to spend some time with them." Sri Rama gladly agreed to fulfill her desire.

After a few days, one morning Sri Rama was sitting in his chamber attending to his kingly duties. Then a spy came to him. His work was to disguise himself at night and to listen to what different persons said. In the morning he met the king and reported everything. The previous night he had heard some persons criticizing Sri Rama. It was his duty to tell the king whatever he had heard. He said to Rama, "Sire, the people of Ayodhya are full of praise for you. But there are some who do not speak well of one action of yours. 'Queen Seethadevi was a prisoner in Ravana's palace. Ravana was the King of Rakshasas, and a wicked fellow. Therefore what of Seetha. Who was his prisoner? Sri Rama was wrong in bringing her back.' I have heard some persons speak like this. "

Sri Rama was greatly pained to hear this. He knew that Seethadevi always thought only of him, and was very pure. But a king

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should always so conduct himself as to please and satisfy his subjects. That is the quality of a good king. Therefore Sri Rama decided to give up Seetha. He sent for his brother Lakshmana and told him all that he had heard from the spy. He asked Lakshmana to take away Seethadevi at once and leave her near Valmiki's hermitage. Lakshmana was shocked at the order he received from his elder brother. He tried to change the mind of Sri Rama but could not succeed. Lakshmana had no choice; he had to take away his sister-in-law.

He brought a chariot to the gate of Seethadevi's palace. Seethadevi thought that Sri Rama was fulfilling her desire to visit the ashramas of sages. She was all enthusiasm. She got up a big package of haldi, kumkum, bangles and gold ornaments to be given to the wives of the Rishis. She told everyone in the palace that she was going on a visit to hermitages, and took leave. Sri Rama was not in the palace. So she requested Kausalya, her mother-in-law, to inform Sri Rama. She then entered the chariot. Lakshmana himself drove the chariot.

They sped along and soon reached the banks of the river Ganga. Nearby was the hermitage of Valmiki Rishi. But Lakshmana did not go to the ashrama. He got down in the forest near the ashrama. He helped Seethadevi to alight from the chariot. Then tearfully he said to Seetha, "Mother, Sri Rama has asked me to leave you in the forest. Some people in Ayodhya have spoken ill of you with doubts in their minds. They blame Sri Rama for having brought you back from Ravana's prison. A king has to win the respect of his

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subjects. Therefore Rama arms given you up. This has given him great pain, but he is bearing it because he thinks of his duty. I have obeyed his instructions. I am a very great sinner, to be leaving you in the forest. Kindly forgive me." He touched her feet. Then he left the weeping Seethadevi in the forest and returned to Ayodhya.

Lakshmana's words were like a thunderbolt to Seethadevi. She stood for a long time staring at Lakshmana who was going away. Deep sighs escaped from her lips. Unable to stand, she collapsed on the ground. She recalled the entire story of her life. Should this be the fate of a woman who always thought of her husband as her God? She wept and wept. But yet she did not blame her husband. She thought it was her bad fate. She was soon to become a mother and was wearied by the journey; she had eaten no food and her mind was full of agony, so she crumpled up. She was overtaken by sleep and lay down under a tree.

Seethadevi awoke from her sleep by the evening. She did not know what to do and began to cry loudly. Just then Valmiki's disciples had come to the forest to gather flowers and leaves for the master's worship. They heard the loud wails of Seethadevi and followed in the wake of the sound.

They approached her and said to her, "Mother, who are you? Why are you crying alone in the forest? We are disciples of the sage Valmiki. Have no doubts. Guruji's hermitage is quite near. Please come with us, Mother."

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The very mention of Valmiki Rishi brought Seethadevi some comfort. She took courage and went with the disciples to the ashrama.

As soon as she saw Valmiki, Seethadevi prostrated before the sage with great devotion. Weeping, she narrated her whole story to the sage. Valmiki was deeply moved. He consoled her in various ways. He then assured her that he would keep her in his hermitage. He asked the women of the ashrama to look after her. He told them that she was a very virtuous lady and they should look after her with all possible care and affection.

After a few days, Seethadevi gave birth to two sons. They were born on a good day under very auspicious stars. The two babies were beautiful like dolls made of moonlight. Valmiki rejoiced when he saw them. On the tenth day after their birth, he named them Lava and Kusha. Every one in the ashrama was very fond of these babies. Someone or the other among the inmates of the ashrama was always carrying the babies and fondling them. Their affection for her children filled Seethadevi with joy. Seeing those pretty children, she was able to forget her sorrows. And this brought Valmiki great relief.

Lava and Kusha grew up day by day like the waxing moon. Valmiki himself taught those boys the first letters. He taught them to read and to write. The boys also learnt to recite several songs of prayer. They had very sweet voices. When they sang, all around listened spellbound. Valmiki would often make the children sing before Seethadevi; their song delighted her like divine nectar (Amrita).

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Lava and Kusha were now eight years old. Valmiki performed their 'sacred thread ceremony' - the Upanayana. Then he began to teach them the sacred Vedas. He had by now completed the 'Ramayana', which also he taught them. The two boys learnt it by heart. They sang the 'Ramayana'

So movingly that Valmiki was filled with joy. He made them sing his long poem before Seethadevi. Her heart melted at the story of the 'Ramayana', at the singing and the sweetness of the voices. Their recitation gave the story of 'Ramayana' a new beauty and appeal. Seetha's eyes were filled with tears of joy. Valmiki felt proud of the boys and their singing. He would ask Lava and Kusha to sing the 'Ramayana' before everyone who came to his ashrama.

The boys grew up day by day and advanced in their education in Valmiki's ashrama. Sri Rama's reign continued. He thought of performing the great sacrifice of Ashwamedha. In those days an Ashwamedha Yaga was no small matter. It was the greatest aim and ambition of many a king. Only the most heroic of kings in the world would be able to perform that sacrifice successfully. A king desirous of undertaking it would worship a horse of a fine breed. As the horse was free to roam, if any other king tied up the horse he had to be conquered in a war. Thus the king who wanted to perform Ashwamedha had to conquer all kings on the earth and become an emperor. After the horse roamed over all countries and returned home, the owner could perform the Ashwamedha sacrifice. Sri Rama undertook such a venture. All other kings on earth offered their tributes and gifts, and accepted him as Emperor. Then he performed

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the great Sacrifice. All the sages in the land were invited to the sacrifice. So was Valmiki Rishi, who went there with his disciples.

Sri Rama's Ashwamedha Yaga went on for several days in grandeur. Poor people were given food and good clothing to their heart's content. Brahmins and rishis were pleased with the generous gifts and money. On the final day when all the rishis were gathered together in the evening, Valmiki asked Lava and Kusha to recite his 'Ramayana'. Another disciple of his played on the flute pleasingly. It was a night of the full moon. The two boys sang the 'Ramayana' to the accompaniment of the flute. The recitation went on all night. The rishis and the Brahmins who had assembled there were overjoyed. The sages and Brahmins, being so pleased, gave gifts to the boys. Valmiki was over whelmed with joy at this appreciation of his poem and of the recitation by his disciples.

During the night when Lava and Kusha were singing, Sri Rama was lying down on the open terrace of his palace. He heard the song of the boys. It was like nectar to him. He sent for the boys the next morning. When they came there, he requested them to sing the 'Ramayana' again. As they sang and as he listened to the story of his own life, he was very pleased. He shed tears whenever there was mention of Seethadevi. Alas, how much had she suffered! She had married him; what happiness had the marriage brought her? Her whole life was full of trouble and sorrow. Sri Rama wiped his tears; hardly able to speak, he asked the boys, "Who are you?"

"We are Seethadevi's sons and disciples of Valmiki," they said.

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Sri Rama was stunned at the mention of Seethadevi. 'Did Seetha, whom I sent away to the forest, give birth to these children? Are they then my own sons he thought. He sent for sage Valmiki at once. When the Rishi arrived, Sri Rama heard from him the story of those two boys in detail. He was very eager to get back Seethadevi and begged Valmiki to fetch her. He gave the assurance that she would again be his Queen.

Valmiki sent his disciples to fetch Seethadevi from the ashrama. When Seethadevi arrived, Sri Rama said to her, "Seetha, swear before all the sages assembled here, that you loved me alone and are in truth a virtuous woman. Let the minds of all those who doubt you be cleared. Then I shall take you back." Sage Valmiki protested. He said to Sri Rama, "Lord Rama, Seetha is the most virtuous of women. Please do not test her again and again. Why should she again swear before this gathering? Her mind is already greatly hurt. Do not pain her again. You are verily Lord Mahavishnu, the great Protector of the Universe, and she is your divine consort, Mahalakshmi. Let there be no further test."

But Sri Rama did not agree. He said the test was needed in order to remove the suspicion of people.

Seethadevi felt ashamed. She stood with her head bowed. Tears flowed like a stream from her eyes. All the Gods came down from heaven to witness the test of this most virtuous woman. Before all those Gods and the rishis, Seetha prayed to the Earth Goddess, "O Mother Earth, if it is true that I have never thought of anybody but Sri Rama, receive me in your arms. O Mother Earth, if it is true that I

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have always worshipped only Sri Rama, then please receive me. If my words are true at all, O Mother Earth, receive me in your arms."

As Seethadevi uttered these words, the Earth burst open, and a throne rose. Bhoodevi, the Goddess of the Earth, was seated on the throne, which was held up by four serpents. Bhoodevi drew Seethadevi into her arms and embraced her. In a moment, both disappeared into the earth with the throne. The earth, which had opened, closed again.

Seeing Seetha vanish underground, Sri Rama was in great misery. He wept loudly. Seetha was the daughter of Bhoodevi. She had again entered the mother's womb. Sri Rama prayed to Bhoodevi, his mother-in-law, to give his wife back to him; he blamed himself, craved for Seetha, and raved angrily. But it was all in vein.

Then Brahmadeva, the Lord of the Creation, appeared to him and soothed him. "Sri Rama," he said, "You -are no human being, but Lord Narayana. You were born a human being to kill the demon-king Ravana. That mission is over; you must now get back to your own world of Vaikunta. Your wife Seethadevi awaits you there as Lakshmi."

Sri Rama realized that these words were true. His sorrow subsided. The assembled Gods and sages were filled with wonder. After some days Sri Rama left the earth and returned to Vaikunta.

The story of Valmiki is meaningful. Valmiki is a great example of how people are uplifted by the company of good men. By coming into contact with Narada, he became a great sage, a Brahmarshi; and

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he also gave the 'Ramayana' which the world can never forget. It is one of the great epics of the world. People of other countries read it in their own languages. The study of the 'Ramayana can reform our lives. We can never forget Valmiki who gave this great epic to us. Let us offer our salutations to that great sage and bard.

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