

# Ramayana Depicted in Indian Temples



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By

Apurba K. Chattopadhyay

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Dedicated to

My parents,  
Late Haradhan Chattopadhyay and  
Late Sabasona Chattopadhyay



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

India is a land of temples - humble shrines and majestic sanctuaries scattered across its vast landscape. These temples are not merely sites of worship; they are living spaces where culture, philosophy, art, and community converge. For centuries, they have served as vital centres of spiritual life and public expression. Their walls, adorned with intricate plaques and carvings, are enduring canvases where stories of gods, kings, and epics unfold in silent eloquence.

Among the many narratives captured in temple art, the Ramayana holds a place of special reverence. More than a literary epic, it is a shared cultural inheritance - retold in countless languages and forms, echoed in music, dance, painting, and theatre, and carved lovingly into temple stone and terracotta. Its moral and emotional depths have inspired generations, and the temples of India have preserved these inspirations in visual form.

My journey into this rich visual heritage began over fifteen years ago. Initially exploring the terracotta temples in the villages near my hometown in West Bengal, I gradually expanded my travels across regions - documenting, photographing, and interpreting plaques that depict scenes from the Ramayana. What emerged is not merely a catalogue of images, but a narrative woven from the artistic imagination of diverse communities and centuries.

This journey has been informed by my earlier career as a scientist. I studied zoology at the University of Burdwan, earning a Ph.D. in entomology. I later conducted postdoctoral research in biomedical sciences at institutions in Kolkata and Bethesda, USA, and spent decades teaching and researching bacterial plasmids and molecular epidemiology. My scientific background has trained me to observe minutely and analytically - skills that proved invaluable when interpreting temple plaques. In facing weathered or damaged artwork, I could often distinguish between natural erosion, environmental degradation, personal neglect, and acts of deliberate destruction such as vandalism or iconoclasm. This perspective has allowed me to view these cultural artefacts with clarity and without bias.

Among the many contributions to this book, what may distinguish it most is the methodology I followed. Each plaque is first placed within the larger

narrative of the Ramayana as told by Valmiki - the earliest version of the epic. I then examine variations found in the Bengali retelling by Krittibas Ojha. Finally, I analyse the plaque itself - its composition, style, and artistic features - and offer a conclusion on whether it reflects Valmiki's version, the Krittibasi Ramayana, or a synthesis. This three-tiered approach - textual, comparative, and visual - is, to my knowledge, rarely employed in studies of temple art and helps reveal the narrative choices made by the artisans.

Among all regional traditions, the terracotta temples of Bengal occupy a special place in my heart and in this book. Built between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, these temples stand apart for their intricate surface work, rhythmic panel arrangements, and distinctive storytelling style. The artisans of Bengal, often anonymous yet profoundly skilled, developed a narrative art rich in local detail, folk energy, and emotional immediacy. Their work gives the Ramayana a uniquely regional flavour - one that reflects not only devotion but also a deep engagement with the rhythms of village life.

From the Gupta-period plaques at Bharhut and Deogarh to the Chalukyan masterpieces of Aihole and Pattadakal, from the monumental Kailasanatha Temple at Ellora to the refined elegance of Hoysala Temples in Karnataka, and from the grand stone temples of Hampi to the vibrant brick temples of Bengal - the visual storytelling of the Ramayana flourishes in many forms. Each site offers a distinctive perspective shaped by regional style, historical context, and the devotion of local artisans.

This book is a tribute to that legacy. Through my own words and images, I have attempted to listen to what the plaques have to say - to interpret, not merely describe, and to bring their stories to readers who may not have the chance to visit these sites themselves. These depictions are not only about Rama, Sita, Hanuman, and Ravana - they also reveal the artistry, craftsmanship, and spiritual yearning of those who carved them. They are expressions of continuity - threads linking us to a past that still speaks.

The process of documenting these plaques was not always easy. Many temples lie in remote areas, accessible only with effort and patience. Weathering and erosion have obscured many carvings, making interpretation a careful and often uncertain task. Still, each challenge only deepened my resolve to preserve and share this invaluable tradition.

This book, therefore, is not an academic treatise alone. It is also a personal journey - of discovery, reverence, and learning. I owe deep gratitude to

many individuals who have encouraged and supported this work in various ways. Their insights, companionship, and kindness have helped me navigate this long path.

Any shortcomings in interpretation or analysis are entirely my own, and I welcome observations and suggestions from scholars, artists, and readers who share a passion for temple art and the Ramayana.

I hope this book inspires a greater appreciation for the visual storytelling traditions of India, and for the silent stories still alive on the temple walls across this ancient land.

—Apurba K Chattopadhyay

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Ramayana* is one of the two great epics of India. Indian epics have been inextricably linked with Indian civilization and culture since time immemorial. The influence of these epics is so profound that their retelling and reinterpretation through art, literature, architecture, painting, songs, dance, proverbs, personal names, and more continue in an unbroken rhythm.

Rama is the central character of the *Ramayana*. According to the *Puranas*, Rama is one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. 'Rama' is a significant figure in Indian culture and is deeply embedded in Indian public life. A few examples illustrate this influence. Naming places or individuals after Rama remains common, with names such as Rama Avatar and Rama Naresh still in use. Many places in India bear the name 'Rama,' such as Ramrajatala, Srirampur, Sitarampur, Ramgarh, and Ramnagar. In Hindi-speaking regions, people often greet each other with 'Rama Rama,' and the phrase 'Rama naam satya hai' is chanted while carrying a deceased person for cremation.

### **Valmiki's Ramayana as the Source of Later Ramakatha or Ramkahini**

It can be stated without hesitation that the *Ramayana* composed by Valmiki, the first poet of the Sanskrit language, is the source of all later versions of *Ramakatha* or *Ramkahini*. Valmiki's *Ramayana* has inspired numerous later retellings in Sanskrit and various Indian vernaculars. Examples include the *Yogavasishtha Ramayana*, *Bhushundi Ramayana*, *Adbhut Ramayana*, and *Ananda Ramayana*. Many timeless Sanskrit literary works have also drawn from the *Ramayana*, such as Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa*, Abhinanda's *Ramacharit*, Kshemendra's *Ramayana Manjari*, and Banabhatta's *Raghunath Charit*. Dramas like *Pratima* by Bhasa and *Uttara Ramcharit* by Bhavabhuti have also been composed based on the *Ramayana*.

The tradition of *Ramkahini* has existed since ancient times, leading to its remarkable diversity. The *Ramkahini* has not only spread across India but has also reached other parts of the world. Writers of *Ramkahini* have not always adhered strictly to Valmiki's version; many have incorporated additional anecdotes and events. Various commentaries on the *Ramayana*

have given rise to multiple interpretations, demonstrating its vastness and timeless appeal. Scholars across different eras and regions have analyzed and reimagined the *Ramayana*, resulting in numerous adaptations.

# THE RAMAYANA IN REGIONAL LANGUAGES

## **Ramayana in Ancient Tamil: The Kamba Ramayana**

Tamil is one of the ancient languages of India, spoken for over two thousand years before the birth of Christ. Even then, literary works were composed in Tamil, a tradition that continues today. The *Ramayana* has been available in Tamil since the eighth century CE. In the twelfth century, Kamban, the court poet of Kulottunga Chola III, composed the *Kamba Ramayana* or *Ramakathai* based on Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The *Kamba Ramayana* is a brilliant addition to Tamil literature. However, *Ramakatha* references appear in Tamil literature long before Kamban's composition.

The earliest phase of Tamil literature is known as the Sangam Age (300 BCE to 600 CE). A poet of this period even named himself Valmiki, indicating a deep familiarity with the *Ramayana*. The complete Valmiki *Ramayana* had been translated into Tamil before the eighth century CE. In the Kambahareswar Temple (founded by Kulottunga III in the 13th century CE), *Ramakatha* is inscribed on the temple's *mandapam* (hall). The *mandapam* of the Sriranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, situated on the banks of the Kaveri River, features wall paintings depicting the *Ramayana*. This temple, the largest Hindu temple in the world, continues to be a place of worship. The saint-poet Tyagaraja composed 600 devotional songs (bhajans) based on the *Ramayana* and propagated *Ramakatha* through his music, profoundly influencing Tamil cultural life.

## **The Telugu Ramayana**

Rama worship is deeply rooted among Telugu speakers (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana). Every village in this region has a Rama temple, and devotional songs about *Ramlila* are commonly heard. Rama is a beloved deity, and the name Rama is spoken with deep reverence in Andhra Pradesh. During weddings, songs about Rama and Sita's marriage are sung, and after the birth of a child, blessings are given with the phrase, "May Lord Rama protect this child."

Numerous *Ramakatha* books exist in Telugu, including complete *Ramayanas* and shorter poetic works. Alongside Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Adbhut Ramayana*, and *Yogavasishttha Ramayana* have all been translated into Telugu. Some of the most well-known Telugu *Ramayanas* include:

- **Ranganatha Ramayana** (c. 1240 CE): Popular for its simple and rhythmic language, making it easy to sing.
- **Bhaskara Ramayana**: A contemporary of *Ranganatha Ramayana*, composed by Bhaskara and his three disciples.
- **Molla Ramayana**: Composed by a 14th-century female poet named Molla, it was widely appreciated across different strata of society.
- **Varadaraju Ramayana**: Written in the 17th century by Katta Varadaraju, this is the longest *Ramayana* in Telugu and includes additional stories.

### Very Popular Ramcharitmanas

Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas is the most popular among the Ramkathas written in regional languages. The 16th-century Ramcharitmanas reached almost every home in the Hindi-speaking region. Its influence has remained strong from that time to the present day.

### Jagmohan Ramayana – The National Purana of Odisha

Since ancient times, *Ramakatha* has spread in Utkala or Kalinga. Long before the Ramayana was written here in Sanskrit or Oriya, *Ramakatha* flourished throughout the province through temple sculptures, paintings, woodwork, legends, and even personal names. In the 16th century, Oriya literature flourished under the influence of five disciples of Lord Chaitanya, one of whom was Balaram Das.

Balaram Das's Ramayana, known as *Jagmohan Ramayana*, is highly popular. In this work, he vividly describes the culture of Odisha. He also identifies the locations of Rama's forest exile with various places in Odisha, substituting and adapting place names accordingly. As a result, his Ramayana has been recognized as the 'National Purana' of Odisha.

## Ramayana in the Marathi Language

Ekknath Swami (1348–1399) was the first to compose the Ramayana in Marathi. His *Bhavartha Ramayana* was based on *Ramakatha*. His grandson, Mukteshwar, also presented the story of the Ramayana in Marathi. In the 18th century, Sridhar composed *Ramvijay* based on the Ramayana.

## Ramakatha in Kannada Literature

Kannada, or Karnataka, has an ancient literary tradition. By the 3rd century CE, Kannada had absorbed many Sanskrit words and developed as a language. Pampa, a poet in the court of Chalukya King Arikesari II, is one of the earliest known Kannada poets.

The Jain poet Bimalasuri composed the Jain Ramayana *Paumachariya* in Prakrit in the 4th century, inspired by *Ramakatha*. Nagachandra is credited with writing the first Ramayana in Kannada. In the 12th century, he composed *Ramachandracharitapurana*, based on Bimalasuri's *Paumachariya*, to propagate Jainism. This work, also known as *Pampa Ramayana*, is the oldest Ramayana in Kannada. For this, Nagachandra earned the title *Abhinava Pampa*.

Later, poet Narahari (14<sup>th</sup>-15th century) composed *Ramakatha* in *Sathapadi chhanda*. In the 16<sup>th</sup>-17th centuries, poets Venkamatya and Bhaktaneshwar also wrote versions of the Ramayana in Kannada. In the late 19th century, Muddana composed *Ramaswamedha Kavya* in Kannada, which is considered a literary treasure. This poem is regarded as a pioneering work in modern Kannada literature. *Ramakatha* has deeply influenced the Kannada region through music, poetry, and drama, and the people of this region have embraced it with great reverence.

## Ramayana in Bengali

Poets from various Indian languages have composed *Ramkathas* based on Valmiki's original work, and this tradition continues. Bengali poets also contributed to this literary movement. Among them, Krittivas Ojha of Phulia, in the Nadia district, holds a prominent place.

In the 15th century CE, Krittivas Ojha wrote the Bengali Ramayana, popularly known as the *Krittivasi Ramayana*. This remains the most widely read Bengali version of the epic. In terms of popularity, no other Bengali Ramayana has surpassed it. Many versions of *Krittivasi Ramayana* exist

today, making it difficult to determine the original or most authentic one. Sukhmoy Mukhopadhyay, a former professor of Visva-Bharati, compiled and edited *Krittivasi Ramayana* using the oldest complete *Punthi* collected by Nathaniel Halhed and other reliable ancient texts.

### **Jain and Buddhist Ramayanas and Translations of the Ramayana**

The *Ramakatha* had a profound influence on Jain and Buddhist traditions, leading to the creation of Jain and Buddhist versions of the Ramayana. However, the Ramayana is particularly prominent in Jain literature. The Jain tradition modified the epic by adding and omitting various stories, thus shaping a distinct *Jain Ramayana*.

Through translations, the story of the Ramayana has reached many countries, including Russia, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Poland, Italy, France, and England. Remarkably, it has even spread as far as Brazil. *Ramakatha* also found its way into West Asian countries through translations. The Ramayana has been translated into Arabic, Persian, and Urdu - languages widely spoken in the region.

### **The Retelling of the Ramayana in Indian Temples**

India is full of temples. There is no place in this country where temples are absent. Many temples, one, one and a half, or even two thousand years old, still exist in India today. These ancient temples, primarily made of stone, are adorned with beautiful plaques. Various types of plaques have been used for decoration, among which the stories of the Ramayana occupy a significant place.

The story of Ramkahini spread to various countries of Southeast Asia long ago. Evidence of this can be found in the Hindu temple of Prambanan in ancient Java (Indonesia). This temple, dedicated to the Trimurti - Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar - is over a thousand years old and features numerous plaques depicting scenes from the Ramayana.

Many ancient temples in India also have Ramayana plaques. A few notable examples include the railings of the Bharhut Stupa (100-125 BCE) and the Dashavatar Temple at Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh (6th century CE), built during the Gupta period. Other significant examples include the Durga Temple at Aihole in Karnataka (late 7th to early 8th century CE), as well as the

Mallikarjuna, Virupaksha, and Papanatha temple in Pattadakal, Karnataka - recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Additional examples include the Kailasa Temple at Ellora, founded by Rashtrakuta king Krishna I in the 8th century; the Nageshwaram Temple in Kumbakonam (9th century CE); the Amritheshwar Temple at Amritapura, Karnataka; the Chennakeshava Temple at Belur; the Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebid; and the Chennakeshava Temple at Somnathpur. Two other remarkable temples worth mentioning are the Hazara Rama Temple (also known as the Ramachandra Temple) and the Vijaya Vittala Temple in Vijayanagara (modern Hampi).

## **The Ramayana in the Terracotta Temples of West Bengal**

Temples in West Bengal are primarily made of brick, with very few stone temples in the region. Apart from a handful of ancient temples, most terracotta temples were built between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of these brick temples are decorated with terracotta plaques, which were used for ornamentation. Among them, depictions of the Ramayana, the life of Krishna, and Mahishasuramardini-Durga are particularly prominent. The more ornate temples contain numerous plaques illustrating different episodes from the Ramayana. However, it should be noted that no single temple displays all the plaques representing the entire Ramayana story.

The abundance of high-quality materials for brick and terracotta plaque production in this region, coupled with the presence of exceptionally skilled artisans, led to the construction of countless brick temples and the creation of exquisite terracotta plaques. Crafted in a unique Bengali style, these plaques are masterpieces of artistry and an invaluable cultural treasure. Unfortunately, many of these temples and plaques are deteriorating due to neglect, environmental pollution, and deliberate destruction. It is difficult to predict whether these plaques will survive in the coming decades. Therefore, their preservation is essential. These plaques not only hold artistic value but also serve as a vital medium for social awareness, children's education, and public learning. They must not be allowed to perish, and their intentional destruction should be regarded as a crime.

A review of all surviving brick temples in West Bengal with Ramayana plaques reveals the following insights:

1. The events from the seven Kandas of the Ramayana are not uniformly represented.

2. Adikanda (known as Balkanda in Valmiki's Ramayana) and Lankakanda (known as Yuddhakanda in Valmiki's Ramayana) feature the highest number of plaques, together accounting for about half of the total. Sundarkanda follows in prominence.
3. The two most frequently depicted scenes in temple ornamentation are the battle between Rama and Dashanan (Ravana) and Rama's coronation.
4. No single temple displays all the key events of the Ramayana. To see the complete story, one must visit multiple temples.
5. The Ramayana plaques found in the brick temples of Bengal are primarily based on the Krittivasi Ramayana.

# TEMPLE PLAQUES OF THE SEVEN KANDAS OF THE RAMAYANA

## **Balkanda**

One of the main events of Balkanda is that one day, young Dasharatha, driven by a desire to test his hunting skills and fulfill his princely duties, wished to go for Mrigaya (hunting). This event not only highlights Dasharatha's expertise in Shabdavedhi (sound-guided archery) but also sets the stage for a pivotal moment in the Ramayana, ultimately leading to Andhamuni's curse and foreshadowing Dasharatha's tragic fate. He appeared on the banks of the river Sarayu. At dusk, he heard a sound and thought that some wild animals had come to the river to drink. Dasharatha, skilled in Shabdavedhi (shooting by sound), threw an arrow guided by sound. However, his arrow pierced a young ascetic who had come to the Sarayu River to fetch water. When Dasharatha arrived at the riverbank, he saw that the ascetic had been fatally injured by his arrow. The ascetic revealed that he was the son of an Andhamuni (blind sage). After the ascetic's death, Dasharatha informed Andhamuni, who then cursed Dasharatha.

Once there was no rain in Angadesh for a long time, and priests advised King Lompada to bring Rishyasringa Muni (sage). As soon as Rishyasringa was brought to Angadesh with the help of courtesans, the rains started. Lompada bowed to Rishyasringa, brought him to the royal palace (Raj Anthapura), and married his daughter Shanta to him. Later, when Dasharatha decided to perform the Ashwamedha Yajna, he visited Angadesh. Lompada, a good friend of Dasharatha, agreed to send Rishyasringa to Ayodhya to perform the yajna. Rishyasringa agreed, and Dasharatha returned to Ayodhya with him.

Desiring sons to continue his lineage and secure the future of the Ikshvaku dynasty, Dasharatha requested Rishyasringa to perform a yajna. This yajna, the Putrakameshti, was not only a deeply spiritual endeavor but also a pivotal moment in the Ramayana narrative, as it directly led to the divine birth of Rama and his brothers, who were destined to shape the epic's course. Lord Brahma sent a Purusha (divine being) from the sacrificial fire, who

gave Dasharatha a golden plate filled with childbearing payasam. Dasharatha distributed the payasam to his queens, who later gave birth to Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Shatrughna.

As time passed, the princes were educated and trained in weaponry by their guru. Rama excelled in archery, horse riding, and chariot driving. One day, Maharishi Vishwamitra came to Dasharatha and requested Rama and Lakshmana's help to kill demons. Rama killed Tarka Rakshasi and other demons and liberated Gautama's wife, Ahalya, with the touch of his feet. Vishwamitra then took Rama to Mithila. In Mithila, Rama broke the divine bow while stringing it, leading to Mithilaraja Janaka's decision to marry his daughter Sita to Rama. Lakshmana married Urmila, and Janaka's brother Kushdhvaja's daughters married Bharata and Shatrughna. On their return to Ayodhya, Parashurama confronted Rama, but Rama's actions humbled him.

Several terracotta plaques depicting key events of Balkanda can be seen in temples. These plaques are masterpieces of ancient craftsmanship, featuring intricate carvings that vividly bring to life the narrative of the Ramayana. The artistic details, such as the expressive faces of the characters, the flowing garments, and the dynamic postures, reflect the skill of the artisans. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these plaques hold immense cultural significance, serving as a medium to communicate the epic's moral and spiritual lessons to the masses. The use of terracotta, a material readily available and durable, also highlights the ingenuity of temple architects in incorporating local resources into sacred art. These include: Dasharatha's accidental killing of Andhamuni's son, Andhamuni's curse, the seduction of Rishyasringa by courtesans, Rishyasringa's arrival in Angadesh, the Ashwamedha Yajna, the birth of Dasharatha's sons, their childhood activities, Rama's killing of demons, and his marriage to Sita. Notable temples with these plaques include the Ramachandra Temple at Hampi, the Jorbangla Krishna Raya Temple at Bishnupur, and the Ekaratna Ramachandra Temple at Guptipara.

## **Ayodhyakanda**

Dasharatha wanted to anoint Rama as the king when his sons came of age. Bharata's mother, Kaikeyi, asked Dasharatha for two boons—one, the coronation of Bharata, and two, Rama's exile for fourteen years. Rama went into exile. Sita and Lakshmana accompanied him. Dasharatha died mourning his son. At this time, Bharata had gone to his uncle's house. He returned to Ayodhya and came to know of his father's death. After performing the last rites of his father, he went to Chitrakoot to bring Rama

back to Ayodhya. Rama did not agree to return. He said he would come back only after completing the fourteen years of exile. Bharata said he would perform all royal duties by offering everything to Rama's *paduka* (shoes). Bharata returned to Ayodhya with Rama's shoes. When Bharata returned, Rama did not stay in Chitrakoot for long. He left Chitrakoot to meet Atri Muni. After spending the night at Atri Muni's ashram, he prepared to go to another forest at dawn the next day.

Two key events in the *Ayodhyakanda* are Rama's journey to the forest and Bharata's journey to Chitrakoot to bring Rama back to Ayodhya. Plaques depicting Rama's forest journey are found in several temples. The plaque of Bharata's arrival at Chitrakoot is found only in the *Atchala Raghunath Temple* (Founder: Chakraborty, 1768) of Parul village in Hooghly district. Plaques depicting some events during Rama's journey to the forest are found in the Durga Temple at Aihole in Karnataka (Founder: Chalukya Raj, 7th–8th century). A beautiful terracotta plaque of Rama's exile is found in one of the *Charchala Shiva Temples* (Founder: Sarkhel, 1769) at Uchkaran village in Birbhum.

The plaques found in the *Ayodhyakanda* are:

1. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana embarking on their journey to the forest
2. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana at Dasharatha's palace
3. Rama requesting Dasharatha's permission to proceed
4. Dasharatha saddened by Rama's decision to go to the forest
5. Rama setting out for the forest
6. Nishadraj (Nishad King) Guha meeting Rama
7. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana crossing the Ganges by boat

## Aranyakanda

After meeting Atri Muni, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana entered the Dandakaranya forest. They saw many ashrams there. After spending the night with the ascetics, Rama took leave of them and entered the deeper forest. There lived a terrible demon named Viradh. He took Sita in his lap and shouted at Rama and Lakshmana, asking why they had come to the forest. When Rama and Lakshmana attacked Viradh simultaneously, he left Sita and charged at them. Rama and Lakshmana killed Viradh and went to the ashram of Sharbhanga Muni. After the Muni passed away, Rama proceeded to the hermitage of Sage Sutikshna. Staying there for the night, Rama then set out to visit the hermitages of the sages of Dandakaranya.

After meeting the sages of Dandakaranya and spending ten years there, Rama returned once again to the hermitage of Sutikshna Muni. After meeting Sutikshna, Rama met Agastya Muni's brother and later Agastya Muni himself. Agastya then instructed Lakshmana to build an ashram at Panchavati.

With the help of mud, bamboo, *kusha* (reeds), leaves, etc., Lakshmana constructed a large *parna-kutir* (hut made of leaves) at Panchavati near the Godavari River. After this, Rama and Lakshmana performed worship with fruits and flowers and entered the *parna-kutir* to reside. The autumn season had arrived. One morning, the demoness Shurpanakha saw Rama and wished to marry him. As Rama did not agree to the proposal, the demoness tried to attack Sita. Rama became angry and instructed Lakshmana to cut off Shurpanakha's nose and ears.

When the demoness informed her brother Khara, he attacked Rama with a large army of demons. Rama killed Khara, Dushana, Trishira, and the entire demon army. Shurpanakha then informed her other brother, Ravana, the king of Lanka. Ravana instructed Maricha to assist him. Maricha disguised himself as a beautiful golden deer and began roaming in front of Sita. When Rama set out to catch the deer, it led him far away. Tired and unable to capture it, Rama eventually shot an arrow and killed Maricha. Just before dying, Maricha imitated Rama's voice and called out for help.

Hearing this, Sita urged Lakshmana to go to Rama's aid. Lakshmana left the cottage, and Ravana, disguised as a monk, came and abducted Sita.

Jatayu tried to stop Ravana (Dashanana) from taking Sita away in his chariot. In the ensuing battle, Jatayu was mortally wounded. Ravana took Sita to Lanka and placed her in Ashoka Kanan. On his way back, Lakshmana met Rama. Returning to the cottage, they found Sita missing. While searching for her, they encountered the dying Jatayu, who informed Rama that Ravana had abducted Sita. Rama then set out with Lakshmana in search of Sita.

There were incidents in the *Aranyakanda* that resulted in the Lanka War. First to mention is the desire of the demoness Shurpanakha to marry Rama. When Rama disapproves of the marriage, Shurpanakha becomes extremely angry and attempts to eat Sita. On Rama's order, Lakshmana cuts off the Rakshasi's nose and ears. What happened next - when Shurpanakha told this incident to her brother Ravana - was that Ravana abducted Sita. If Ravana had not kidnapped Sita, the Lanka War would never have happened, and

Ravana would not have been killed along with his whole family. However, it should be remembered that if Shurpanakha had not attempted to eat Sita, there would have been no need to cut off her nose and ears. So, if this incident is said to be the root cause of the Lanka War, then it will not be wrong.

Among the main events of the *Aranyakanda*, the plaques found are:

1. the slaying of the demon Viradha by Rama and Lakshmana,
2. Shurpanakha in Rama's ashram,
3. the cutting off of Shurpanakha's nose and ears by Lakshmana,
4. Maricha coming in disguise into Rama's premises,
5. Rama's departure to capture the golden deer,
6. Rama's killing of Maricha,
7. Lakshmana drawing the *gandi* around Sita,
8. Ravana's arrival in the guise of a monk,
9. the abduction of Sita by Ravana,
10. Jatayu's obstruction of Ravana,
11. Rama's meeting with the dying Jatayu, and
12. Suparshwa (son of Jatayu's brother, Sampati) about to engulf the Pushpak chariot with Ravana and Sita.

A few of these plaques are found in the Ramachandra Temple of Hampi, and the rest in different brick temples of West Bengal.

Compelled by Sita's misbehavior, Lakshmana draws a *gandi* around her and leaves the hut. The only plaque that depicts this event (according to the *Krittivasi Ramayana*) can be seen in the Ekaratna Ramachandra Temple (founded by Raja Harishchandra Raya, late 17th century) at Guptipara. Some of the temples where plaques depicting the stories of the *Aranyakanda* are found include:

- Ramachandra Temple in Hampi (Founder – King Devaraya I, early 15th century CE),
- Charbangla Shiva Temple in Uchkaran village (Founder – Sarkhel, 1769),
- Ekaratna Ramachandra Temple in Guptipara (Founder – King Harishchandra Raya, late 17th century),
- Atchala Shiva Temple in Haripala,
- Ekaratna Damodar Temple in Kendur village (17th century CE),
- Charbangla Shiva Temples in Baranagar (Founder – Rani Bhavani, 1755), and

- Atchala Raghunath Temple in Parul village (Founder – Chakraborty, 1768).

### **Kishkindhyakanda**

In search of Sita, Rama and Lakshmana came to the shore of Pampa. Rama was charmed by Pampa's beauty. Sugriva was frightened to see Rama and Lakshmana from Rishyamukh Mountain when they were passing by the banks of the Pampa. Fearing Bali, Sugriva had fled from Kishkindhya and taken shelter in Rishyamukh Mountain. Sugriva, in his safe refuge, told his ministers, “They must be spies of Bali. They have come to this remote forest in disguise.” Hanuman reassured Sugriva and was then instructed by him to find out the identity of Rama and Lakshmana and to ask them why they had come to Pampa. Hanuman, in the guise of a monk, approached them. He was pleased to converse with Rama and Lakshmana. Then Hanuman assumed his real form and told them that Sugriva wished to meet and befriend Rama. When Hanuman brought Rama and Lakshmana to Sugriva, the two leaders took each other’s hands and formed an eternal alliance.

After this, Sugriva told Rama that Bali had expelled him from the kingdom and kidnapped his wife. Rama assured Sugriva that he knew how to help a friend. He promised to kill Bali and restore the kingdom to Sugriva. When Rama killed Bali, Sugriva became the king of Kishkindhya. After the monsoon season was over, in autumn, Sugriva, following Hanuman’s advice, gathered monkey troops and sent heroic monkeys in all directions in search of Sita.

The proud Dashanan once came to Kishkindhya to test the power of Bali. At that time, Bali was engaged in evening worship at the southern ocean. When Dashanan attacked Bali from behind, Bali, realizing this, tied Dashanan with his long tail. Bali then completed the *Chatusamudra Vandana* (prayer) while Dashanan remained tied and squirming in the seawater. After some time, Bali released him. This incident is described in the *Uttarakanda* of Valmiki Ramayana. A plaque depicting this event is found only in two brick temples – the Jorbangla Krishnaraya Temple and the Pancharatna Shyamray Temple at Bishnupur.

There are two main incidents in *Kishkindhyakanda*: firstly, the alliance of Rama and Sugriva, and secondly, the killing of Bali by Rama. Plaques depicting these events are present in only a few temples, such as the Krishnaraya Temple in Bishnupur and the Raghunath Temple in Parul

village of Hooghly. The plaques illustrating stories from *Kishkindhyakanda* include:

1. Hanuman's meeting with Rama and Lakshmana
2. Sugriva's alliance with Rama
3. Piercing of the *Saptatal* trees with a single arrow by Rama
4. Rama, hidden behind a tree, killing Bali with his bow and arrow - as often depicted in temple plaques.
5. The *abhisheka* (coronation) of Sugriva, and
6. Ruma's reunion with Sugriva after Bali's death

Temples where plaques from *Kishkindhyakanda* can be seen include:

- Ramachandra Temple in Hampi (Founder - Raja Devaraya I, early 15th century CE)
- Atchala Raghunath Temple in Parul village (Chakraborty, 1768)
- Jorbangla Krishnaraya Temple in Bishnupur (Founder - Mallaraj Raghunath Singh, 1655)
- Kailasanath Temple at Ellora (Founder - Rashtrakuta Raja Krishna I, 8th century CE)
- Atchala Sitaram Temple at Rautara in Howrah district (Founder - Ghosh, 1700)

## Sundarkanda

Hanuman, Angad, and others moved forward in search of Sita and met Jatayu's brother, Sampati, in Vindhya giri. They came to know from Sampati that Lanka's King Ravana had abducted Sita. At Jambavan's request, Hanuman agreed to cross the ocean to reach Lanka in search of Sita. Arriving at Mahendra Mountain, Hanuman jumped after saluting the gods like Surya, Indra, Pawan, etc. Nagamata Surasa blocked Hanuman's path. After appeasing her, Hanuman resumed his journey, but the demoness Singhika stopped him. After killing Singhika, Hanuman reached Lanka. He was worried not to find Sita in Ravana's palace. Finally, arriving at Ashoka Kanan, he saw Sita under a young *Shishu* tree, surrounded by demonesses. Hanuman met Sita and said that Rama had sent him, and Rama had given him a ring to hand over to her. Seeing Rama's ring, Sita believed that Hanuman was indeed Rama's messenger. Hanuman told her that Rama would soon come to Lanka and rescue her by killing the demons, including Ravana. Sita gave Hanuman a gem to take back, and Hanuman decided to meet Ravana.

When Hanuman began breaking the trees of Ashoka Kanan, Ravana's soldiers came to stop him. Hanuman killed them. Later, he deliberately surrendered to the demons. When they brought him to Ravana's royal court, Hanuman told Ravana that he had committed a great wrong by abducting Sita and that she should be returned to Rama without delay. Enraged, Ravana ordered Hanuman's tail to be set on fire. Hanuman escaped from Ravana's palace and set fire to the entire city of Lanka. After crossing the sea, he returned to Mahendra Mountain. On meeting Rama, he conveyed the news of Sita and handed over the gem given by Sita.

Hanuman's crossing of the ocean in search of Sita and his meeting with Sita at Ravana's Ashoka Kanan are the two main events of the *Sundarkanda*. However, several plaques also depict other episodes from Hanuman's crossing of the ocean and his stay in Lanka. These include:

1. Hanuman's leap to cross the ocean,
2. Hanuman's encounter with Nagamata Surasa while crossing the ocean,
3. Hanuman's encounter with the demoness Singhika,
4. Dashanan's journey to Ashoka Kanan to meet Sita,
5. An angry Dashanan's attempt to kill Sita,
6. Hanuman's meeting with Sita at Ashoka Kanan,
7. Hanuman's battle with the demons,
8. Dashanan's meeting with Hanuman, and
9. Hanuman burning the city of Lanka.

The plaques that have attracted particular attention in connection with Hanuman's crossing of the ocean are found in the Ramachandra Temple at Guptipara (founded by Raja Harishchandra Raya, late 17th century CE) and the Jorbangla Gangeswara Shiva Temple at Baranagar, Murshidabad (founded by Rani Bhavani, 1753). A panel depicting Hanuman's encounter with Nagamata Surasa during the ocean crossing is present in the Ramachandra Temple at Guptipara. In the Gangeswara Shiva Temple at Baranagar, two small plaques appear side by side - one depicting the encounter with Nagamata Surasa, the other with the Rakshasi Singhika. The plaque showing Hanuman's meeting with Singhika in the Gangeswara Shiva Temple is partially broken.

Two more rare plaques deserve mention. One is on a large panel in the Pancharatna Lakshmijanardan Temple (founded by the Sarkar family, 19th century CE) at Surul village. It shows Hanuman breaking the trees of Ashoka Kanan to test the strength of the enemy, followed by his battle with

the demon army. After his tail was set on fire, he burned Lanka. The only known plaque depicting the burning of the city of Lanka is in the Vijaya Vittala Temple at Hampi (founded by King Devaraya II, 15th century CE).

## Yuddhakanda

After crossing the ocean to meet Sita in Ashokavan, Hanuman gave Rama the news of Sita, and Rama was overjoyed. Hanuman does things very easily that others cannot even think of. Then Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman, Neel, and a huge army of monkeys set out for Sita's rescue. Rama arrived at the seashore and deployed the army. Ravana's younger brother Vibhishana requested Ravana to send Sita back to Rama. Ravana became angry at this and insulted Vibhishana in very harsh language. Vibhishana then came to Rama.

On his advice, Rama started worshipping the ocean, sitting on *kushasana* on the bank of the sea. Samudra (the Ocean God) came and told Rama that Vishwakarma's son Nala could prepare a bridge across the sea. Saying this, he disappeared. The monkey army brought huge rocks and trees, with the help of which Nala prepared a bridge across the ocean. Over the bridge, Rama and the monkey army reached Lanka.

To get news about Ram Sena, Ravana sent two demon spies. As Shuka and Saran entered the monkey army disguised as monkeys, Vibhishana recognized them. The monkeys caught them, beat them, and brought them to Rama. However, Rama released them. Shuka and Saran went back and told Ravana that Rama, Lakshmana, and Sugriva were the protectors of the forces and that no one could defeat them.

Rama visited the monkey army and arranged the troops with Sugriva. In good time, he ordered a war march. He marched towards Lanka with a bow and arrow in hand. The battle between Rama's army (*Rama-sena*) and the demon army (*Rakhasa-sena*) began.

Rama, Sugriva, Angad, and other heroes killed many of the Rakshasa forces. Then the magical Indrajit, keeping himself invisible, pierced Rama and Lakshmana with arrows. Snakes embraced and bound their bodies. Indrajit told his father Ravana that Rama and Lakshmana had been killed. On hearing the news, Garuda came, freed Rama and Lakshmana from the poisonous serpents, and returned. Rama and Lakshmana recovered. When the war resumed, demonic heroes like Dhumraksha, Vajradamshtra, Akampana, Prahastha, and others were killed.

Hearing that Prahastha had died, Ravana himself came to fight. Other demon warriors joined him. Lakshmana took Rama's permission and entered the battle. Ravana hurled the dreaded Shakti weapon at Lakshmana. Lakshmana tried to repel it with arrows but failed. The weapon pierced his chest and he fell. As Ravana tried to lift the injured Lakshmana, Hanuman came and punched Ravana on the chest. Ravana fell unconscious. Hanuman picked up the wounded Lakshmana and brought him to Rama.

When Ravana recovered and returned to battle, Rama himself stepped forward to combat him. Noticing Ravana fighting from a chariot while Rama stood on the ground, Hanuman lifted Rama onto his shoulders. Ravana was rendered unconscious by Rama's arrow. After recovery, Ravana ordered the demons to wake up his brother, Kumbhakarna. When Kumbhakarna came to battle and destroyed a large part of the monkey army, Rama killed him. Ravana fainted at the news of Kumbhakarna's death.

Then Narantaka, Devantaka, Mahodara, Trisira, and Mahaparshva came to battle with Ravana's permission. They were killed while fighting the monkey warriors. When Atikaya joined the battle, Lakshmana hurled the Brahmastra and killed him. When Atikaya was killed, Indrajit, keeping himself invisible, launched a fierce shower of arrows to neutralize the monkey army, as well as Rama and Lakshmana. The wounded Jambavan, with great difficulty, instructed Hanuman to fetch the medicinal herbs—*Mritsanjivani*, *Vishalyakarani*, *Savarnyakarani*, and *Sandhani*—from the Himalayas. Hanuman brought back the *Mahaushadhi* (unique herbal medicine). As the warriors inhaled the scent of these herbs, their injuries were healed.

Sugriva then told Hanuman, “Many sons of Ravana have died. Now we must attack Lanka.”

After sunset, when the monkeys stormed into Lanka, many demon warriors were slain. In response, Ravana sent his son Indrajit to the battlefield. Indrajit, remaining unseen, rained down arrows that killed many in the monkey army. He then retreated to Nikumbhila to perform a *yajna* to gain invincibility. Vibhishana, along with Lakshmana, Hanuman, and a large force of monkey warriors, proceeded to Nikumbhila to stop him. On arrival, Lakshmana vanquished a vast number of demons. Indrajit rushed to defend them, leaving the *yajna* incomplete. Lakshmana, mounted on Hanuman's back, fought a fierce duel and ultimately killed Indrajit. Bloodied from battle, Lakshmana returned and bowed to Rama. Rama embraced him and