

FROM THE RAMAYANA



Valmiki
c. 400 B.C.?

Wise Man of the Forest

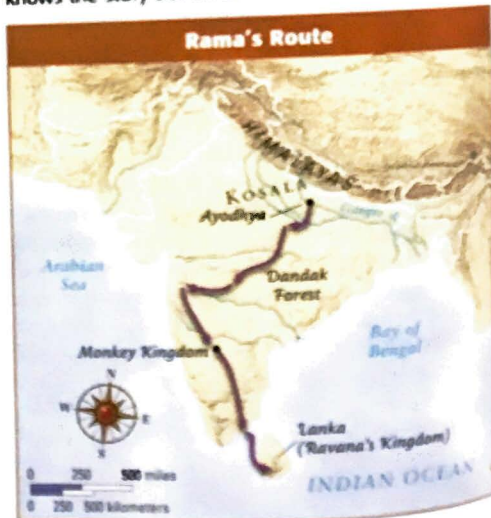
The *Ramayana* (rā-mā'yā-nə), or "journey of Rama," is India's second great epic and may be even more popular than the *Mahabharata*. Most of what is known about its author, Valmiki (vāl-mē'kē), comes from the epic itself, for Valmiki is a character in the story.

According to the prologue, Valmiki was a wise man who lived deep in the forest. One day Narada, messenger of the gods, visited him and told him the story of Rama, the ideal man. Although very moved, Valmiki didn't feel capable of writing an epic worthy of so great a hero.

Inspired by Nature Later, as he was walking by the river, Valmiki spotted a pair of herons nesting in a tree. Suddenly, a hunter shot the male heron with an arrow. Valmiki was so affected by the female's grief for her mate that he cursed the hunter for causing such misery. He uttered this curse in a rhymed verse form that had never been heard before. He called it a *śloka* (shlō'kə), after *soka*, the Sanskrit word for grief. Valmiki realized that the *śloka* was the perfect medium to convey the story of Rama and his sorrowful separation from his wife, Sita.

Above: Detail of illustration, Valmiki teaches the *Ramayana* in Dandak Forest. Copyright © The British Museum, London.

India's First Poet The classical poets who came after Valmiki hailed him as the first true poet of India and praised his artistry. Later poets such as Kamban and Tulsidas used Valmiki's *Ramayana* as the basis of their own versions in the popular languages of India. The epic lives on in folk songs and dramatic performances, even in non-Hindu countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. As R. K. Narayan says in the introduction to his English translation, "Everyone knows the story but loves to listen to it again."



Build Background

The Story of Rama

Hero in Exile Rama is the son of King Dasaratha, the ruler of Kosala. Exceptionally strong and brave, he wins the hand of the princess Sita by bending and stringing a bow that no other man could lift. King Dasaratha intends that Rama shall be his heir. However, the king's second wife—whom he had earlier promised to grant any two wishes—demands that her own son, Bharata, be given the throne and that Rama be exiled to the forest for 14 years. The king cannot break his promise, so Rama must leave. Sita and Lakshmana, Rama's loyal brother, go with him.

In the forest, Rama and Lakshmana kill demons who have been harassing holy men. Lakshmana cuts off the ears and nose of a female demon whose brother, Ravana, rules the island of Lanka. Ravana is immensely powerful, with 10 heads and 20 arms. He kidnaps Sita in revenge.

Monkeys Versus Demons Searching all of India for Sita, Rama makes an alliance with Sugreeva, the king of the monkeys. Hanuman, the monkey general, proves to be a particularly loyal and valuable ally. He leaps to the island of Lanka and finds the captive Sita. He watches as Ravana begs her to become his wife, whereupon Sita protests that she will have no other man but Rama. When they are alone, Hanuman offers to carry Sita back to Rama, but she refuses to be touched by any male but her husband. Hanuman returns to Rama, and they prepare to wage war on Ravana. The monkeys build a bridge across the sea to Lanka, and the battle begins.

Guide for Living In India, the *Ramayana* is not just an entertaining story, but a guide for living. Rama is viewed as the ideal man and ruler. He is worshiped as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. The devoted Sita is seen as the ideal wife; millions of Indian women are urged to be like her.

For a humanities activity, click on:



Connect to Your Life

Recall a grand battle between good and evil, perhaps presented in a movie, TV show, comic book or novel. Who was the hero and who was the villain? What was at stake? What powers or weapons were used? Who won? Make some notes for later comparison.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS:

CONFLICT IN AN EPIC

A **conflict** is a struggle between opposing forces that moves a plot forward. In an epic, conflict is often on a grand scale—supreme good versus monstrous evil, life versus death for thousands. In epic battles, the hero and his opponent often use supernatural powers and are aided by the gods. Look for such elements in the battle between Rama and Ravana.

ACTIVE READING:

CLASSIFYING CHARACTERS

There are many characters in this battle, and their names are probably unfamiliar. It may help you to **classify**, or sort, these characters as allies of either Rama or Ravana. Vibishana, for example, is Ravana's brother, but he is on Rama's side.



READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read, put the characters in two groups according to their loyalty, either to Rama or to Ravana. Beside each name, write down something that will help you remember the character—such as a description of a physical or personality trait—and note the character's role in the battle.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

benediction	impervious	intermittently	primordial
dejectedly	incarnation	parrying	pristine
formidable	ineffectually		

from the Ramayana

Retold by R. K. Narayan

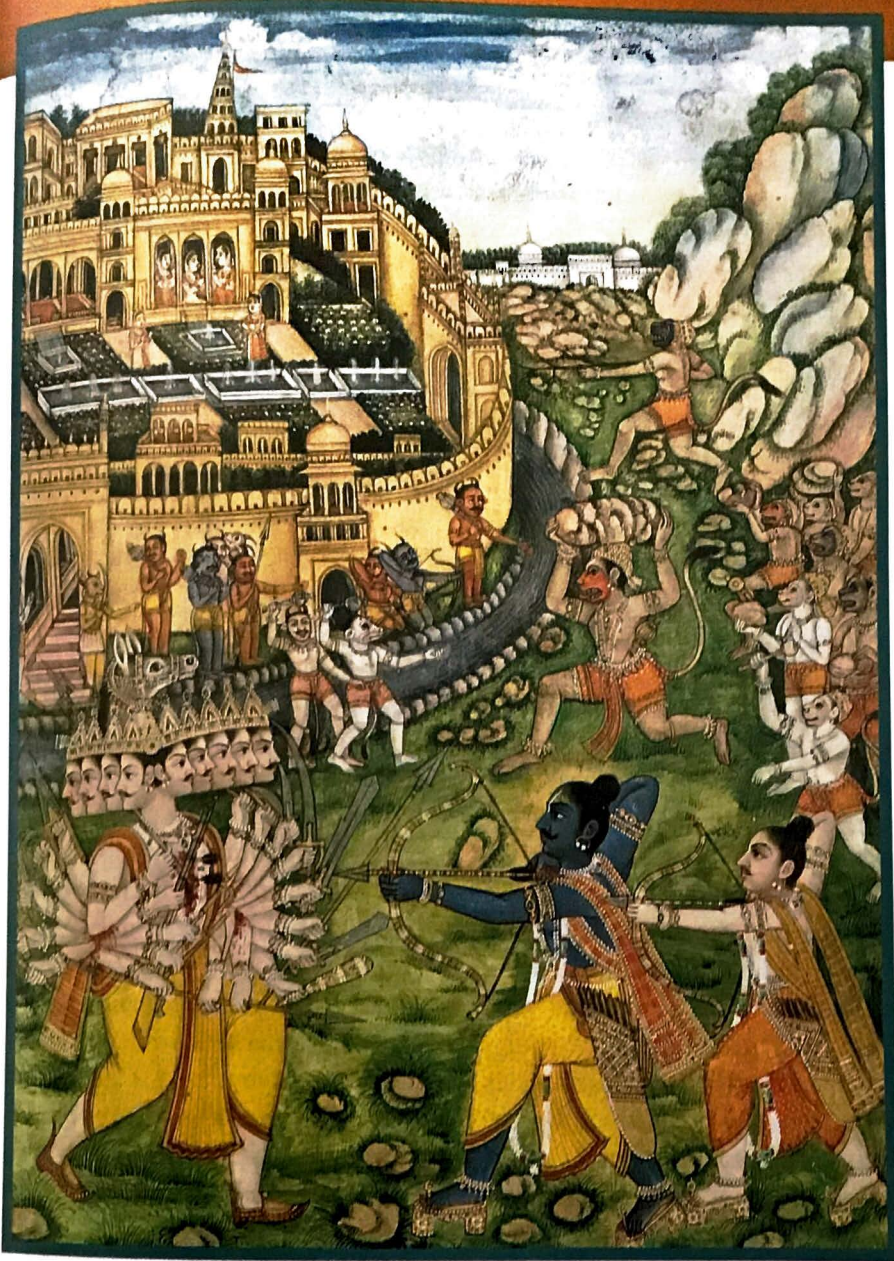
RAMA AND RAVANA IN BATTLE

Every moment, news came to Ravana of fresh disasters in his camp. One by one, most of his commanders were lost. No one who went forth with battle cries was heard of again. Cries and shouts and the wailings of the widows of warriors came over the chants and songs of triumph that his courtiers arranged to keep up at a loud pitch in his assembly hall. Ravana became restless and abruptly left the hall and went up on a tower, from which he could obtain a full view of the city. He surveyed the scene below but could not stand it. One who had spent a lifetime in destruction, now found the gory spectacle intolerable. Groans and wailings reached his ears with deadly clarity; and he noticed how the monkey hordes revelled in their bloody handiwork. This was too much for him. He felt a terrific rage rising within him, mixed with some admiration for Rama's valour. He told himself, "The time has come for me to act by myself again."

He hurried down the steps of the tower, returned to his chamber, and prepared himself for the battle. He had a ritual bath and performed special prayers to gain the benediction of Shiva;¹ donned his battle dress, matchless armour, armlets, and crowns. He had on a protective armour for every inch of his body. He girt his sword-belt and attached to his body his accoutrements² for protection and decoration.

1. **Shiva** (shē'və): an important Hindu god.

2. **accoutrements** (ə-kōō'tər-mənts): military equipment other than uniforms and weapons.



Rama fights Ravana. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

HUMANITIES CONNECTION Rama has dark blue skin because he is a form of the god Vishnu. Vishnu's blue skin represents endlessness or infinity.

When he emerged from his chamber, his heroic appearance was breathtaking. He summoned his chariot, which could be drawn by horses or move on its own if the horses were hurt or killed. People stood aside when he came out of the palace and entered his chariot. "This is my resolve," he said to himself: "Either that woman Sita,³ or my wife Mandodari,⁴ will soon have cause to cry and roll in the dust in grief. Surely, before this day is done, one of them will be a widow."

The gods in heaven noticed Ravana's determined move and felt that Rama would need all the support they could muster. They requested Indra⁵ to send down his special chariot for Rama's use. When the chariot appeared at his camp, Rama was deeply impressed with the magnitude and brilliance of the vehicle. "How has this come to be here?" he asked.

"Sir," the charioteer answered, "my name is Matali.⁶ I have the honor of being the charioteer of Indra. Brahma, the four-faced god and the creator of the Universe, and Shiva, whose power has emboldened Ravana now to challenge you, have commanded me to bring it here for your use. It can fly swifter than air over all obstacles, over any mountain, sea, or sky, and will help you to emerge victorious in this battle."

Rama reflected aloud, "It may be that the rakshasas⁷ have created this illusion for me. It may be a trap. I don't know how to view it." Whereupon Matali spoke convincingly to dispel the doubt in Rama's mind. Rama, still hesitant, though partially convinced, looked at Hanuman⁸ and Lakshmana⁹ and asked, "What do you think of it?" Both answered, "We feel no doubt that this chariot is Indra's; it is not an illusory creation."

Rama fastened his sword, slung two quivers full of rare arrows over his shoulders, and climbed into the chariot.

The beat of war drums, the challenging cries of soldiers, the trumpets, and the rolling chariots speeding along to confront each other, created a

deafening mixture of noise. While Ravana had instructed his charioteer to speed ahead, Rama very gently ordered his chariot-driver, "Ravana is in a rage; let him perform all the antics he desires and exhaust himself. Until then be calm, we don't have to hurry forward. Move slowly and calmly, and you must strictly follow my instructions; I will tell you when to drive faster."

Ravana's assistant and one of his staunchest supporters, Mahodara¹⁰—the giant among giants in his physical appearance—begged Ravana, "Let me not be a mere spectator when you confront Rama. Let me have the honour of grappling with him. Permit me to attack Rama."

"Rama is my sole concern," Ravana replied. "If you wish to engage yourself in a fight, you may fight his brother Lakshmana."

Noticing Mahodara's purpose, Rama steered his chariot across his path in order to prevent Mahodara from reaching Lakshmana. Whereupon Mahodara ordered his chariot-driver, "Now dash straight ahead, directly into Rama's chariot."

The charioteer, more practical-minded, advised him, "I would not go near Rama. Let us keep away." But Mahodara, obstinate and intoxicated with war fever, made straight for Rama. He wanted to have the honour of a direct encounter with Rama himself in spite of Ravana's advice; and for this honour he paid a heavy price, as it was a moment's work for Rama to destroy him, and leave him lifeless and shapeless on the field. Noticing this, Ravana's anger mounted further. He commanded his driver, "You will not slacken now. Go." Many ominous signs were seen

3. Sita (sē'tā): Rama's wife.

4. Mandodari (mən-dō'dā-rē).

5. Indra (īn'drā): a warrior god, the lord of rain and thunder.

6. Matali (mā'tā-lē).

7. rakshasas (rāk'shā-səz): demons.

8. Hanuman (hūn'ōō-mən): a monkey ally of Rama's.

9. Lakshmana (lūk'shmā-nā): Rama's brother.

10. Mahodara (mā-hō'dā-rā).

now—his bow-strings suddenly snapped; the mountains shook; thunders rumbled in the skies; tears flowed from the horses' eyes; elephants with decorated foreheads moved along dejectedly. Ravana, noticing them, hesitated only for a second, saying, "I don't care. This mere mortal Rama is of no account, and these omens do not concern me at all." Meanwhile, Rama paused for a moment to consider his next step; and suddenly turned towards the armies supporting Ravana, which stretched away to the horizon, and destroyed them. He felt that this might be one way of saving Ravana. With his armies gone, it was possible that Ravana might have a change of heart. But it had only the effect of spurring Ravana on; he plunged forward and kept coming nearer Rama and his own doom.

When he emerged from his chamber, his heroic appearance was breathtaking. He summoned his chariot, which could be drawn by horses or move on its own if the horses were hurt or killed.

Rama's army cleared and made way for Ravana's chariot, unable to stand the force of his approach. Ravana blew his conch¹¹ and its shrill challenge reverberated through space. Following it another conch, called "Panchajanya,"¹² which belonged to Mahavishnu¹³ (Rama's original form before his present incarnation), sounded of its own accord in answer to the challenge, agitating the universe with its vibrations. And then Matali picked up another conch, which was Indra's, and blew it. This was the signal indicating the commencement of the actual battle. Presently Ravana sent a shower of arrows on Rama; and Rama's followers, unable to bear the sight of his body being studded with arrows, averted their heads. Then the chariot horses of Ravana and Rama glared at

each other in hostility, and the flags topping the chariots—Ravana's ensign of the Veena¹⁴ and Rama's with the whole universe on it—clashed, and one heard the stringing and twanging of bow-strings on both sides, overpowering in volume all other sound. Then followed a shower of arrows from Rama's own bow. Ravana stood gazing at the chariot sent by Indra and swore, "These gods, instead of supporting me, have gone to the support of this petty human being. I will teach them a lesson. He is not fit to be killed with my arrows but I shall seize him and his chariot together and fling them into high heaven and dash them to destruction." Despite his oath, he still strung his bow and sent a shower of arrows at Rama, raining in thousands, but they were all invariably shattered and neutralized by the arrows from Rama's

bow, which met arrow for arrow. Ultimately Ravana, instead of using one bow, used ten with his twenty arms, multiplying his attack tenfold; but Rama stood unhurt.

Ravana suddenly realized that he should change his tactics and ordered his charioteer to fly the chariot up in the skies. From there he attacked and destroyed a great many of the

11. **conch** (kǒngk): a large spiral seashell, sometimes used as a trumpet.

12. **Panchajanya** (pān'chə-jūn'yə).

13. **Mahavishnu** (mə'hā'vīsh'nōō): Hinduism's supreme god, who divides himself into the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

14. **ensign of the Veena** (vē'nə): a flag depicting a stringed musical instrument.

WORDS TO KNOW

dejectedly (dĕ-jĕk'tīd-lē) *adv.* sadly; in a depressed way

incarnation (īn'kār-nā'shen) *n.* a bodily form taken on by a spirit

monkey army supporting Rama. Rama ordered Matali, "Go up in the air. Our young soldiers are being attacked from the sky. Follow Ravana, and don't slacken."

There followed an aerial pursuit at dizzying speed across the dome of the sky and rim of the earth. Ravana's arrows came down like rain; he was bent upon destroying everything in the world. But Rama's arrows diverted, broke, or neutralized Ravana's. Terror-stricken, the gods watched this pursuit. Presently Ravana's arrows struck Rama's horses and pierced the heart of Matali himself. The charioteer fell. Rama paused for a while in grief, undecided as to his next step. Then he recovered and resumed his offensive. At that moment the divine eagle Garuda was seen perched on Rama's flagpost, and the gods who were watching felt that this could be an auspicious sign.

After circling the globe several times, the duelling chariots returned, and the fight continued over Lanka.

It was impossible to be very clear about the location of the battleground as the fight occurred here, there, and everywhere. Rama's arrows pierced Ravana's armour and made him wince. Ravana was so insensible to pain and impervious to attack that for him to wince was a good sign, and the gods hoped that this was a turn for the better. But at this moment, Ravana suddenly changed his tactics. Instead of merely shooting his arrows, which were powerful in themselves, he also invoked several supernatural forces to create strange effects: He was an adept in the use

of various asthras¹⁵ which could be made dynamic with special incantations. At this point, the fight became one of attack with supernatural powers, and parrying of such an attack with other supernatural powers.

Ravana realized that the mere aiming of shafts with ten or twenty of his arms would be of no avail because the mortal whom he had so contemptuously thought of destroying with a slight effort was proving formidable, and his arrows were beginning to pierce and cause pain. Among the asthras sent by Ravana was one called "Danda," a special gift from Shiva, capable of

pursuing and pulverizing its target. When it came flaming along, the gods were struck with fear. But Rama's arrow neutralized it.

Now Ravana said to himself, "These are all petty weapons. I should really get down to proper business." And he invoked the one called "Maya"—a weapon which created illusions and confused the enemy.

With proper incantations and worship, he sent off this weapon and it created an illusion of reviving all the armies and its leaders—Kumbakarna¹⁶ and Indrajit¹⁷ and the others—and bringing them back to the battlefield. Presently Rama found all those who, he thought, were no more, coming on with battle

There followed an aerial pursuit at dizzying speed across the dome of sky and rim of the earth.

WORDS TO KNOW

impervious (ĩm-pũr'vẽ-es) *adj.* unable to be affected

parrying (pãr'ẽ-ĩng) *n.* a warding off or turning aside **parry** *v.*

formidable (fõr'mĩ-dẽ-bẽl) *adj.* hard to overcome

15. **asthras** (ũs'thræ): arrows or other weapons powered by supernatural forces.

16. **Kumbakarna** (kũm'bã-kũr'nã): Ravana's brother.

17. **Indrajit** (ĩn'drã-jẽt): Ravana's son.



Rama cuts off Ravana's heads. Copyright © The British Library, London.

HUMANITIES CONNECTION This painting is one of about 400 from a 17th-century *Ramayana* manuscript created for Jagat Singh I, ruler of Udaipur. It presents a sequence of events in Rama and Ravana's battle, so the same figures appear more than once.

cries and surrounding him. Every man in the enemy's army was again up in arms. They seemed to fall on Rama with victorious cries. This was very confusing and Rama asked Matali, whom he had by now revived, "What is happening now? How are all these coming back? They were dead." Matali explained, "In your original identity you are the creator of illusions in this universe. Please know that Ravana has created phantoms to confuse you. If you make up your mind, you can dispel them immediately." Matali's explanation was a great help. Rama at once invoked a weapon called "Gnana"¹⁸—which means "wisdom" or "perception." This was a very rare weapon, and he sent it forth. And all the terrifying armies who seemed to have come on in such a great mass suddenly evaporated into thin air.

Ravana then shot an asthra called "Thama," whose nature was to create total darkness in all the worlds. The arrows came with heads expos-

ing frightening eyes and fangs, and fiery tongues. End to end the earth was enveloped in total darkness and the whole of creation was paralyzed. This asthra also created a deluge of rain on one side, a rain of stones on the other, a hail-storm showering down intermittently, and a tornado sweeping the earth. Ravana was sure that this would arrest Rama's enterprise. But Rama was able to meet it with what was named "Shivasthra."¹⁹ He understood the nature of the phenomenon and the cause of it and chose the appropriate asthra for counteracting it.

Ravana now shot off what he considered his deadliest weapon—a trident²⁰ endowed with extraordinary destructive power, once gifted to Ravana by the gods. When it started on its journey there was real panic all round. It came

18. Gnana (gnā'na).

19. Shivasthra (shī-vūs'thra).

20. trident (trīd'nt): a spear with three prongs.

WORDS TO KNOW

intermittently (in'tər-mīt'nt-lē) *adv.* with stops and starts; on and off

on flaming toward Rama, its speed or course unaffected by the arrows he flung at it.

When Rama noticed his arrows falling down ineffectively while the trident sailed towards him, for a moment he lost heart. When it came quite near, he uttered a certain mantra²¹ from the depth of his being and while he was breathing out that incantation, an esoteric syllable in perfect timing, the trident collapsed. Ravana, who had been so certain of vanquishing Rama with his trident, was astonished to see it fall down within an inch of him, and for a minute wondered if his adversary might not after all be a divine being although he looked like a mortal. Ravana thought to himself, "This is, perhaps, the highest God. Who could he be? Not Shiva, for Shiva is my supporter; he could not be Brahma, who is four faced; could not be Vishnu, because of my immunity from the weapons of the whole trinity. Perhaps this man is the primordial being, the cause behind the whole universe. But whoever he may be, I will not stop my fight until I defeat and crush him or at least take him prisoner."

With this resolve, Ravana next sent a weapon which issued forth monstrous serpents vomiting fire and venom, with enormous fangs and red eyes. They came darting in from all directions.

Rama now selected an asthra called "Garuda" (which meant "eagle"). Very soon thousands of eagles were aloft, and they picked off the serpents with their claws and beaks and destroyed them. Seeing this also fail, Ravana's anger was roused to a mad pitch and he blindly emptied a quiver full of arrows in Rama's direction. Rama's arrows met them half way and turned them round so that they went back and their sharp points embedded themselves in Ravana's own chest.

Ravana was weakening in spirit. He realized that he was at the end of his resources. All his learning and equipment in weaponry were of no avail and he had practically come to the end of his special gifts of destruction. While he was going down thus, Rama's own spirit was soaring up. The combatants were now near enough to grapple with each other and Rama realized that this was the best moment to cut off Ravana's heads. He sent a crescent-shaped arrow which sliced off one of Ravana's heads and flung it far into the sea; and this process continued; but every time a head was cut off, Ravana had the benediction of having another one grown in its place. Rama's crescent-shaped weapon was continuously busy as Ravana's heads kept cropping up. Rama lopped off his arms but they grew again and every lopped-off arm hit Matali and the chariot and tried to cause destruction by itself, and the tongue in a new head wagged, uttered challenges, and cursed Rama. On the cast-off heads of Ravana, devils and minor demons, who had all along been in terror of Ravana and had obeyed and pleased him, executed a dance of death and feasted on the flesh.

Ravana was now desperate. Rama's arrows embedded themselves in a hundred places on his body and weakened him. Presently he collapsed in a faint on the floor of his chariot. Noticing his state, his charioteer pulled back and drew the chariot aside. Matali whispered to Rama, "This is the time to finish off that demon. He is in a faint. Go on. Go on."

But Rama put away his bow and said, "It is not fair warfare to attack a man who is in a faint. I will wait. Let him recover," and waited.

When Ravana revived, he was angry with his charioteer for withdrawing, and took out his sword, crying, "You have disgraced me. Those who look on will think I have retreated." But his

21. mantra (măn'tră): a word, sound, or phrase used as a prayer or spell.

charioteer explained how Rama suspended the fight and forbore to attack when he was in a faint. Somehow, Ravana appreciated his explanation and patted his back and resumed his attacks. Having exhausted his special weapons, in desperation Ravana began to throw on Rama all sorts of things such as staves, cast-iron balls, heavy rocks, and oddments he could lay hands on. None of them touched Rama, but glanced off and fell ineffectually. Rama went on shooting his arrows. There seemed to be no end of this struggle in sight.

Now Rama had to pause to consider what final measure he should take to bring this campaign to an end. After much thought, he decided to use “Brahmasthra,”²² a weapon specially designed by the Creator Brahma on a former occasion, when he had to provide one for Shiva to destroy Tripura,²³ the old monster who assumed the forms of flying mountains and settled down on habitations and cities, seeking to destroy the world. The Brahmasthra was a special gift to be used only when all other means had failed. Now Rama, with prayers and worship, invoked its fullest power and sent it in Ravana’s direction, aiming at his heart rather than his head; Ravana being vulnerable at heart. While he had prayed for indestructibility of his several heads and arms, he had forgotten to strengthen his heart, where the Brahmasthra entered and ended his career.

Rama watched him fall headlong from his chariot face down onto the earth, and that was the end of the great campaign. Now one noticed Ravana’s face aglow with a new quality. Rama’s arrows had burnt off the layers of dross,²⁴ the

anger, conceit, cruelty, lust, and egotism which had encrusted his real self, and now his personality came through in its pristine form—of one who was devout and capable of tremendous attainments. His constant meditation on Rama, although as an adversary, now seemed to bear fruit, as his face shone with serenity and peace. Rama noticed it from his chariot above and commanded Matali, “Set me down on the ground.” When the chariot descended and came to rest on its wheels, Rama got down and commanded Matali, “I am grateful for your services to me. You may now take the chariot back to Indra.”

Surrounded by his brother Lakshmana and Hanuman and all his other war chiefs, Rama approached Ravana’s body, and stood gazing on it. He noted his crowns and jewelry scattered piecemeal on the ground. The decorations and the extraordinary work-

manship of the armour on his chest were blood-covered. Rama sighed as if to say, “What might he not have achieved but for the evil stirring within him!”

At this moment, as they readjusted Ravana’s blood-stained body, Rama noticed to his great shock a scar on Ravana’s back and said with a smile, “Perhaps this is not an episode of glory for me as I seem to have killed an enemy who was turning his back and retreating. Perhaps I was wrong in shooting the Brahmasthra into

While he had prayed for indestructibility of his several heads and arms, he had forgotten to strengthen his heart.

22. Brahmasthra (brā-mūs’thra).

23. Tripura (trī-pōō’ra).

24. dross (drōs): waste matter; impurities.

WORDS TO KNOW

ineffectually (īn’ī-fēk’chōō-ə-lē) *adv.* in a useless manner

pristine (prī’s’tēn’) *adj.* pure; uncorrupted



Rama and Sita enthroned. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

him.” He looked so concerned at this supposed lapse on his part that Vibishana,²⁵ Ravana’s brother, came forward to explain. “What you have achieved is unique. I say so although it meant the death of my brother.”

“But I have attacked a man who had turned his back,” Rama said. “See that scar.”

Vibishana explained, “It is an old scar. In ancient days, when he paraded his strength around the globe, once he tried to attack the divine elephants that guard the four directions.

When he tried to catch them, he was gored in the back by one of the tuskers and that is the scar you see now; it is not a fresh one though fresh blood is flowing on it.”

Rama accepted the explanation. “Honour him and cherish his memory so that his spirit may go to heaven, where he has his place. And now I will leave you to attend to his funeral arrangements, befitting his grandeur.” ♦

25. Vibishana (vī-bē’ shē-nē).

from **ARROW OF THE BLUE-SKINNED GOD:**
RETRACING THE RAMAYANA THROUGH INDIA

JONAH BLANK

In 1990, the anthropologist and journalist Jonah Blank traveled through India, following the path Rama took in the Ramayana. In his book Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God, Blank relates this famous epic to life in India today and tells what the epic means to him.

When I was a boy, like most boys, I longed to become a knight in shining armor. My heroes were Sir Lancelot, King Richard the Lionheart, and . . . Saint George. I believed that there really had been a time when brave men devoted their lives to the cause of right. I would read Thomas Malory¹ entire afternoons and evenings, and desperately wish to slip back to those times. It always made me sad to put the book down and look out the window at the mundane² world, the world in which “Sir” was what a waiter called my father if he wanted a tip.

I did not bother to think that the Saracens³ slain by valiant Crusaders were fighting a holy



Rama and the archer in a carriage attack Ravana.
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war of their own, knights just as righteous or unrighteous as the thundering chivalry of Europe. Nor did I think much about the women and children slaughtered by the Lionheart for the crime of being Muslim. My heroes had not yet been demythologized.⁴ . . . But even then the knight with whom I most identified was Saint

1. **Thomas Malory:** author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, a collection of tales about King Arthur and such knights as Sir Lancelot.
2. **mundane** (mūn-dān'): ordinary; everyday.
3. **Saracens** (sār'-ə-sənz): Muslims from the time of the Crusades, against whom Richard the Lionheart and others did battle.
4. **been demythologized** (dē'mī-thōl'ə-jīzd'): had the mythical or mysterious elements removed.

George. Because he, more than any other, personified the triumph of good over evil. . . .

What Saint George represented, without my realizing it, was an entire world view in which good *always* beats evil, without even working up a sweat. When he kills the dragon, it is not a titanic clash between equally powerful enemies. For the knight, slaughtering a monster is no more difficult than swatting a mosquito. There is little drama, no chance that the dragon might actually win. Virtue *must* prevail—that is the natural order of the universe. It is an immensely comforting notion of life.

It is also the notion of life that underlies the Ramayana. I don't want to spoil the suspense (and I won't reveal the kicker), but in the end Rama wins. It was fated from the beginning. All the characters know it. Even the Demon King's counselors tell their master that he will lose, and only suicidal arrogance lets him ignore their warning. All Indians know how the epic turns out, yet they cluster around their televisions, radios, and school stages just the same.

Everyone, I think, longs for a world where good always trounces evil. When we go to the movies we know the hero will win out and the villain will be crushed, but we still grip the armrests in anticipation. What are action-thriller films if not morality plays? Does the sadistic⁵ drug lord *ever* walk away unpunished? It is the same in most popular forms of fiction: right must defeat wrong, or else we'd feel cheated.

In real life, it is quite often evil that triumphs. In real life, rapists and murderers go free on judicial technicalities, slumlords and stock manipulators flourish as respected members of society. In real life, good, honest, hard-working people

lose their livelihoods at the flick of a corporate raider's pen. Perhaps that is why we so desperately seek escape. We ache for a world where good always wins, because that is not the real world we inhabit. We long for Saint George. We long for Rama.

If you look at the icons of these two holy warriors, you notice that both faces wear the same untroubled expression. Both mouths are tinged with the same faint shadow of a placid smile. It is a smile of inner serenity, of divine self-confidence, of quiet contentment, a smile that comes from utter certainty that good is destined to prevail. ♦

5. *sadistic* (sə-dī'stīk): loving or delighting in cruelty.



Saint George and the Dragon (17th century). Ivory. Cavalry Museum Pinerolo/The Art Archive/Dagli Orti.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

What is your reaction to the battle between Rama and Ravana?


Comprehension Check

- What kinds of weapons do Rama and Ravana use against each other?
- How does Rama finally win the battle?
- How does Rama treat Ravana after killing him?

Think Critically

2. Ravana, with his 10 heads and 20 arms, would seem to have an advantage over Rama. Why do you think Rama is able to defeat him?

3. ACTIVE READING: CLASSIFYING CHARACTERS

Review the chart of characters you classified in your  **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. How much do Rama's and Ravana's allies affect the course of the battle?

4. How would you describe Rama's heroic code—that is, the set of rules that he, as a hero, must follow?

THINK ABOUT

- the chance he gives Ravana to recover
- his strategy and behavior in battle
- what he tells Ravana's brother after Ravana has been killed

5. Do you think that Ravana is heroic? Support your answer.

Extend Interpretations

6. **Critic's Corner** Barbara Powell writes of the *Ramayana*, "While it is alive with exciting action, intrigue, and profound emotions, it is sublimely spiritual as well." What spiritual or religious dimensions do you see in this excerpt?

7. **Comparing Texts** How would you compare Rama with Arjuna from the *Mahabharata*?

8. **Comparing Texts** In *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God* (page 141), Jonah Blank compares Rama to Saint George. Name other heroes whom you would compare to Rama. Do you agree with Blank about why people need such heroes?

9. **Connect to Life** What similarities can you see between Rama and Ravana's struggle and the battle between good and evil that you recalled for the Connect to Your Life activity?

LITERARY ANALYSIS: CONFLICT IN AN EPIC

The **conflict**, or struggle, in an **epic** is large-scale. It involves great heroes, vast armies, and the fate of nations. Supernatural elements are common: the combatants have powers beyond those of ordinary humans, and the gods themselves may intervene on either side. The battle between Rama and Ravana is a perfect example of an epic conflict.

Cooperative Learning Activity

With a group of classmates, discuss elements of the battle that make it an epic conflict, such as the flying chariot sent by Indra and the ominous signs that herald Ravana's attack. Keep a list during your discussion. Then choose a real-life conflict, such as a city-council election or a football game. Describe it as an epic conflict, adding elements similar to those on your list. Share your description with the rest of the class.

Writing Options

1. Comparison Essay Compare the battle between Rama and Ravana with a struggle between good and evil in modern culture. You might see echoes of the *Ramayana* in *Star Wars*, or superhero comic books, for example.

2. Battle Lines Try to put the *Ramayana* back into its original form—poetry. Take a scene from this selection and rewrite it in rhymed or unrhymed verse suitable for reciting with music. Perform the poem.

3. Definition Essay What did it take to be a hero in ancient India? Write a definition based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Use Rama, Arjuna, or any other characters from the epics as examples to support your ideas.

Activities & Explorations

1. Battle Scene In India, people frequently perform the *Ramayana* in folk plays. Write dialogue, then stage the battle between Rama and Ravana. Use masks or makeup to express the characters' larger-than-life qualities. Invent creative ways to suggest supernatural events that would be difficult to show on-stage. ~ **PERFORMING**

2. Comic Book The *Ramayana* was once published as a comic book of more than 100 pages. Draw a few comic-book panels of your own to depict the battle scene. How do you envision the terrifying Ravana? ~ **ART**

Inquiry & Research

The Epic Performed Research a performance tradition based on the *Ramayana*. You might investigate *Ramlilas*, or annual drama festivals; *wayang kulit*, or Indonesian shadow-puppet plays; or *kathakali* or *bharatnatyam*, forms of Indian classical dance. Present your findings in an oral report that includes photographs or a videotape.

Communication Handbook
See page R45: Finding Sources.



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Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE: WORDS IN CONTEXT For each underlined word, write the Word to Know that could substitute for it in the context.

The two armies fought on aimlessly and (1) unproductively. Neither had realized how (2) overpowering the other's forces were; both had considered themselves (3) invulnerable to attack. But in truth they were evenly matched: the (4) avoidance of an attack by one brought on an equally clever move by the other. And so the battle went on (5) periodically for days.

The countries of the two armies were long-standing enemies, almost since the (6) earliest days of the world. Worshipers of different gods, both had gone into battle with a special (7) blessing from their priests to bring on victory. At a certain point one army thought they saw the (8) personification of their chief god floating high and (9) uncorrupted over the battlefield. But the image disappeared, and they went (10) sadly back into battle.

WORDS TO KNOW

benediction
dejectedly
formidable

impervious
incarnation
ineffectually

intermittently
parrying

primordial
pristine

Building Vocabulary

For an in-depth lesson on using context clues, see page 674.

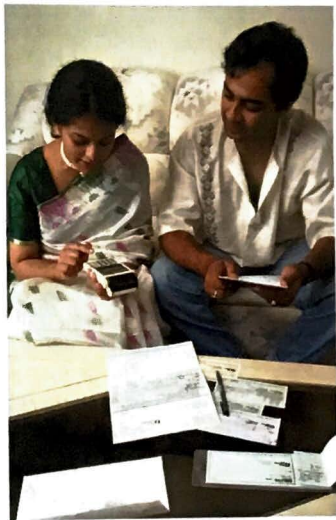
Modern Views of Rama and Sita

In Indian culture, Rama and his wife, Sita, embody such virtues as strength, leadership, devotion, and purity. However, some Indians question whether Rama and Sita are good role models in today's world. Their actions in the seventh book of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttara Kanda*, are particularly troubling to many people.

Unhappy Ending After Rama slays Ravana, he rejects Sita, saying he doubts she has remained pure during her captivity. She demands a trial by fire, and the god Agni, knowing she is innocent, saves her from the flames. Rama then states he had put Sita through the ordeal to prove her innocence before all his subjects. Months later, however, the people remain suspicious of Sita. For the good of the kingdom, Rama orders his brother Lakshmana to abandon Sita in the forest. There the pregnant Sita takes refuge with the poet Valmiki and gives birth to twin sons. These sons learn to recite the *Ramayana*, and eventually they perform it before Rama's court. When Rama realizes who they are, he invites Sita to return to him. He asks her to prove her purity once more, but she refuses and asks Mother Earth to swallow her up. Her wish is granted, and she disappears.

Are Rama and Sita Heroic? Given these events, modern Indians disagree about how to view Rama and Sita. Contemporary rural women sing folk songs calling Rama heartless and expressing sympathy for Sita. A 1998 exhibit, "Sita in the City," showed that South Asian immigrants in New York held wildly varying views of Sita. One mother saw Sita's chastity as something for teenage girls to emulate, but an activist against domestic violence called Sita "a lousy role model for women." Some people admiringly compared Sita to a modern single mother raising children alone. Some saw her fire test as a sign of virtue and strength, while others saw it as proof of women's oppression.

Group Discussion Who are some of the men and women—real or fictitious—held up as ideals in your own culture? Would you want to imitate them? Have they ever been challenged as proper role models? Explain.



Rama and Sita are seen as role models for modern Indian couples.