

The Rescue of Sita

Rama and Sita lived happily in a cottage in the forest for many years. One day, when Rama was out hunting. Sita took pity on a poor old holy man and invited him into their home. Too late, Sita realised her mistake, for the old man was the demon king Ravana in disguise. He bundled Sita into his chariot and flew her back to his kingdom on the island of Lanka.

Rama searched the forest for his wife for days, but with no success. At last, in desperation, he went to the monkey king for help. The monkey general, Hanuman, was entrusted with searching Lanka to find Sita. But he could not find her anywhere.

"Show me the way, Vishnu." Hanuman prayed, closing his eyes. When he opened them, he saw a light glowing among some trees. Hanuman leapt towards it.

"Sita!" he exclaimed. "Rama has sent me to find you."

Sita's hair was tangled and her clothes hung about her in tatters. She was sick with grief and despair.

"Why has it taken Rama so long to find me?" asked Sita, sadly. She handed Hanuman a jewel. "This will prove you met me. Tell Rama if he does not come soon. I will be dead."

Hanuman's fur glowed like a flame. He was furious with Sita's captor, Ravana. He said goodbye to Sita. And as a warning to Ravana, destroyed as much of Lanka as he could.

"How dare this monkey attack us!" Ravana thundered, releasing 80,000 warrior demons against Hanuman. But the great monkey was the son of the wind-god Vayu and as powerful as a hurricane. He leapt nimbly out of the way of the demons and their weapons.

Furious, Ravana summoned his son Indrajit. "Kill the monkey," he commanded. "Use the arrow Brahma gave you. It always hits its target." Indrajit let loose his arrow and Hanuman fell to the ground, unconscious. Ravana's demons took him to their king. Ravana's ministers wrapped Hanuman's tail in cotton wool and oil and set it alight.

"That will show Rama what we think of him," they sneered. As Hanuman's tail burst into flames, he leapt high into the air. But he had the protection of Agni, god of fire, and felt no pain. Hanuman flew on to Ravana's fort. Lashing wildly with his tail, he smashed its towers and set its walls on fire. Then, he flew directly back to Rama and told him everything. Rama's army of monkeys and bears immediately made their way down to the sea.

"Build a bridge across to Lanka," advised Sagar, the ocean god. Very soon, Rama's troops arrived in Ravana's city. But this time, the demons were ready. They knew their city better than Rama and his army and they used magic to help them. Indrajit made himself invisible and shot Rama with his special arrow. Rama collapsed, unconscious. Jambavan, king of the bears, and Hanuman were skilled healers, but they could not revive Rama.

Still, they did not give up hope. As evening fell, they heard the swish of wings and felt a strong gust of air. Out of the clouds came Garuda, the eagle who belonged to Vishnu.

"I come from my master," Garuda said, "Vishnu fights beside those who fight on the side of right." Garuda enclosed Rama in his mighty wings and when he released him, Rama stood up strong and healthy.

"Take my greetings to Sita," Rama commanded Hanuman. "Tell her she is safe."

Rama's troops cheered. With Vishnu's help, they knew they would win the war.

Glossary

Agni – the god of fire.

Avatar – a god in human or animal form. Avatars would descend from heaven to Earth to help fight against evil.

Bhishma – the hero of the Mahabharata.

Brahma – the supreme god of creation. Along with Vishnu and Shiva, one of the famous triad of the gods of creation, survival and rebirth.

Chalice – a drinking cup or goblet.

Constellation – a group of stars that can be seen from the Earth.

Cosmos – the world or universe.

Dyaus-Pitar – the sky-god. Believed by the ancient Indians to be the father of creation.

Elixir (of Life) – a magical drink which was believed to prolong the life of those who drank it.

Epic – a long narrative poem, which traditionally describes the deeds of a legendary hero. Epics are often based on stories which have been passed down from one generation to another.

Ganesh – the god of wisdom and remover of obstacles. He is famous for having an elephant's head and was the son of Shiva and Parvati.

Ganga – the goddess of the sacred river Ganga (Ganges), which is believed to wash away the sins of those who bathe in its waters.

Hanuman – a brave general of the monkey army. He was the son of the wind-god, Vayu.

Indra – the supreme god of the ancient Indians. He was seen as the protector of harvests as he had the power to bring rain.

Krishna – the god of fields and hillsides. One of the avatars of the god Vishnu.

Lakshmi – the goddess of good fortune, created when the gods churned the Ocean of Milk. Wife of Vishnu.

Mahabharata – an epic poem which recounts the

great war between two rival families over the throne of the kingdom of Kurujangal. It is over 100,000 verses long and was composed around 900 BCE.

Prithvi – the Earth goddess. Believed by ancient Indians to be the mother of creation.

Rama – a great king and hero of the first Indian epic, the Ramayana.

Ramayana – an epic poem which tells the story of the life of a great king, Rama of Ayodhya. The characters and events it describes are well-known in India to this day. It was written around 1000 BCE.

Rigveda – a collection of over a thousand hymns which tell of the early Vedic or nature gods, including Indra and Agni. They were written between 900 and 1500 BCE.

Sage – a wise man

Saptarishi – the seven powerful sages (wise men) of Indian mythology.

Sati-Parvati-Kali – the mother goddess. She appeared first as Sati and re-appeared hundreds of years later as Parvati. Kali is her most fierce form. She was married to Shiva and has many other forms such as Durga, the war-goddess.

Shiva – the god of destruction and rebirth.

Sita – the wife of Rama. The Ramayana describes her kidnap and rescue.

Surabhi – a magical cow, created when the gods and demons churned the Ocean of Milk. She had the ability to grant all wishes.

Surya – the sun-god.

Valmiki – the author of the Ramayana.

Vishnu – the preserver and protector of creation. It is believed that he will appear on Earth in ten different forms (called avatars) to help fight against evil; the seventh and eighth forms were Rama and Krishna, the tenth is yet to come.

Yama – the god of death.