

Quick guide to the Ramayana

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Background

The **Ramayana** is an ancient Sanskrit epic which follows Prince Rama's quest to rescue his beloved wife Sita from the clutches of Ravana with the help of an army of monkeys. It is traditionally attributed to the authorship of the sage Valmiki and dated to around 500 BCE to 100 BCE.

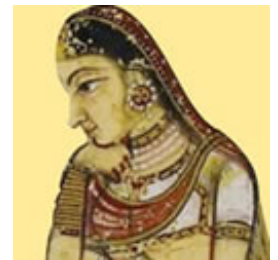
Comprising 24,000 verses in seven cantos, the epic contains the teachings of the very ancient Hindu sages. One of the most important literary works of ancient India, it has greatly influenced art and culture in the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia, with versions of the story also appearing in the Buddhist canon from a very early date. The story of Rama has constantly been retold in poetic and dramatic versions by some of India's greatest writers and also in narrative sculptures on temple walls. It is one of the staples of later dramatic traditions, re-enacted in dance-dramas, village theatre, shadow-puppet theatre and the annual *Ram-lila* (Rama-play).

Origins

The original five books of an oral epic of local northern significance dealing with a hero and his exile, the abduction of his wife by a rival king and her rescue became conflated into seven books in which the hero Rama became an avatar of the god Vishnu, the scene shifted to encompass the whole of India, and the struggle to recover his wife became a metaphor for the final triumph of the righteous.

A brief summary of the *Ramayana*

Rama, prince of Ayodhya, won the hand of **the beautiful princess Sita (seen here)**, but was exiled with her and his brother Laksmana for 14 years through the plotting of his stepmother. In the forest Sita was abducted by Ravana, and Rama gathered an army of monkeys and bears to search for her. The allies attacked Lanka, killed Ravana, and rescued Sita. In order to prove her chastity, Sita entered fire, but was vindicated by the gods and restored to her husband. After the couple's triumphant return to Ayodhya, Rama's righteous rule (*Ram-raj*) inaugurated a golden age for all mankind.

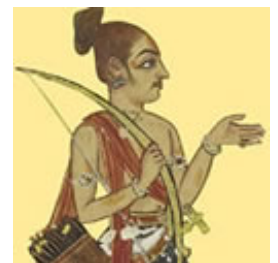


Characters of the *Ramayana*

Rama is the hero of the **Ramayana** epic, an incarnation of the God Vishnu. The eldest and favourite son of Dasaratha, King of Ayodhya, he is a virtuous prince and is much loved by the people. He is exiled from Ayodhya due to the plotting of his stepmother, Kaikeyi.

Sita is Rama's wife and daughter of King Janaka of Mithila. Sita is the epitome of womanly purity and virtue.

Laksmana (seen here) is Rama's younger brother. Completely loyal to Rama, he chooses to go with Rama and Sita when they are exiled from Ayodhya.



Ravana is the king of Lanka and has 10 heads and 20 arms. He received a boon from the God Brahma that he cannot be killed by gods, demons or by spirits, after performing a severe penance for 10,000 years. After receiving his reward from Brahma, Ravana began to lay waste to the earth and disturbed the deeds of the good Hindu sages. Vishnu incarnates as the human Rama to defeat him, assisted by an army of monkeys and bears, thus circumventing the boon given by Brahma.

Dasaratha is the King of Ayodhya, Rama's father.

Kausalya is Rama's mother, Dasaratha's chief wife.

Kaikeyi is Dasaratha's wife and Rama's stepmother. She demands that Rama be banished to the forest and that her son Bharata be awarded the kingdom instead.

Bharata is the second son of Dasaratha. When he learns that his mother Kaikeyi had forced Rama into exile, causing Dasaratha to die broken hearted, he storms out of the palace and goes in search of Rama. When Rama refuses to return from his exile to assume the throne, Bharata obtains Rama's sandals and places them on the throne as a gesture that Rama is the true king.

Sumitra is Dasharatha's wife and mother of the twins Lakshmana and Satrugna.

Hanuman is the wise and resourceful monkey who helps Rama in his quest to defeat Ravana and rescue Sita.

Sugriva is the ruler of the monkey kingdom. His throne was taken by his brother Bali, but Rama helps him to defeat the usurper in return for his assistance in finding Sita.

The importance of the *Ramayana* in Indian culture

The epic's poetic stature and marvellous story means that the story of Rama has been constantly retold by some of India's greatest writers both in Sanskrit and regional languages. It is one of the staples of various dramatic traditions, in court drama, dance-dramas, and in shadow-puppet theatres. In northern India, the annual *Ram-lila* or 'Rama-play' is performed at the autumn festival of Dassehra to celebrate with Rama and Sita the eventual triumph of light over darkness.

A hugely popular television series, 'Ramayan', was aired in India 1987-1988, drawing over 100 million viewers to become 'the world's most viewed mythological serial'. Dubbed 'Ramayan' fever by *India Today* magazine, it was reported that India came to a virtual standstill as so many people who could gain access to a television stopped whatever they were doing to watch the small screen adventures of Rama. From January 2008, a new big-budget primetime series of the *Ramayana* has been appearing on television screens across India.

The *Ramayana* manuscripts of Jagat Singh of Mewar

Rama was of a royal race descended from the Sun, and Rajput clans of the Solar dynasty, among them the rulers of Mewar or Udaipur, claimed Rama as their ancestor, making the *Ramayana* something of a family history.

The *Ramayana* manuscripts commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar (1628-52) are among the most important documents of 17th-century Indian painting. Unlike most other *Ramayana* manuscripts, they have not been dispersed as individual paintings into various collections but remain largely intact. The huge scale of the project (with originally over 400 paintings) allowed the artists to focus on telling an epic story on the grandest scale.

The seven books of the *Ramayana* are illustrated in three different styles of Mewar painting, including two books by Sahib Din, the greatest Mewar artist of the 17th century. Four of the seven books and part of a fifth are in the British Library. The two remaining books are still in India.

The British Library's four volumes were given by Rana Bhim Singh of Mewar to Col. James Tod, the historian of the Rajputs, who brought them back to London in 1823. Bhim Singh also gave Tod a separate manuscript of the first book of the *Ramayana* dated 1712. They were all acquired by the British Museum in 1844, and from there came to the British Library.

How to read a Rajput painting



The **Ramayana** manuscripts commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar (1628-1652) were illustrated on the grandest scale so that no episode or detail of importance was omitted. This necessitated the revival of the ancient narrative method of simultaneous narration used in both sculpture and painting. In European or Islamic illustration, each picture usually concentrates on depicting a single episode of the story - but in the Indian method, each picture might capture several episodes in the story so that the characters appear more than once in the same picture.

In the example shown above, reading anti-clockwise, we can follow Rama, Bharata and Satrughna from the top of the hill, down to the river (in the lower right corner) and back up again to where they sit outside the hut.