HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RAMAYANA
Kampan

(12-13th c. CE?)

Reading

The Forest Book of the Ramayana of Kampan, translated by George Hart and Hank Heifetz, 1988
The Ramayana, retold (and condensed) by R K Narayan, 1972

Cultural significance

The popularity and prominence of the Ramayana in India would be hard to overstate. The story has been told, sung, danced, sculpted and filmed in more than a hundred different versions. One of the finest scholars of Indian literature (the late A.K. Ramanujan) suggested that there are about 300 major texts, including 26 in Sanskrit alone. As a story it has everything: romance, a kidnapped woman and a demon king. Good defeats evil, and husband and wife are reunited. When we throw in curses and disguises, scheming women and flawed men, flying monkeys and a hydra-headed enemy, we begin to realise why the story is known in every single village of India and travelled outside its borders to nearly every country in Asia. Within India, the story has a special element of devotionalism. Because Rama is, in fact, Vishnu, many recitations and performances of the story are forms of worship. When the television series aired for almost two years in the 1980s, people lit lamps and daubed the screen with sacred vermilion powder. Perhaps the clearest indication of the cultural significance of the story is its prominence in politics. When the current ruling party in India (the BJP) campaigned for elections in 1990, its leader toured the country in a chariot that made to resemble Rama's vehicle in the epic story. And, finally, the depth of feeling in Hindu India about the story of Rama is evident in the destruction of a mosque in 1992, which devotees believed had been built over a Rama temple. The location of that mosque and temple is Ayodhya, where Rama was born and later ruled in the story.

Overview

The Ramayana comes in many shapes and sizes. There are, without exaggeration, hundreds of different versions, although the main elements of the plot do not often vary much. The text chosen for summary below is the Ramayana composed in Tamil by Kampan, probably in the late 12th or early 13th century CE. It is chosen because it is the first full-blown epic text of the story in which Rama, the human hero, is explicitly worshipped as Rama the god (avatar of Vishnu). Although Kampan's story also exaggerates the grandeur of Ravana and elaborates the tale of two monkeys (Vali and Sugriva), it otherwise follows the plot as laid out in earlier Sanskrit texts.

Story

The story begins in Ayodhya, where Dasaratha is king. He has three wives: Kausalya, who has one son, Rama; Kaikeyi, who also has one son, Bharatha; and Sumitra, who has twin boys, Lakshmana and Sathrugana. The drama starts when Dasaratha sees white hairs on his head and makes arrangements for Rama, his eldest son, to succeed him. Trouble is then brewed up by a mischievous maidservant (Kuni) who needles her mistress (Kaikeyi) into admitting that she would like her own son (Bharatha) and not Rama to sit on the throne. With her maternal pride stimulated, Kaikeyi claims from Dasaratha the two promises that he gave her a long time ago. When Dasaratha agrees to honour his promises, she asks that Bharata be crowned king and that Rama be banished to the forest (to prevent him from attempting to take back the crown). Bharata is enthroned, but he symbolically places Rama's sandals on the throne to show that he regards his older brother as king. When Rama leaves, accompanied by his wife Sita and younger brother Lakshmana, Dasaratha dies of grief.

As they travel in the forest, Rama is spied by a female demon named Surpanakha, who falls in love with him. Disguised as a beautiful woman, she approaches Rama but is rejected. Angry, she turns to her brother, Ravana, the demon king of Ceylon, and asks that he avenge her humiliation. Listening to his sister's description of Sita, Ravana, the ferocious demon with ten heads, falls madly in love with Sita and devises a plan to capture her. He orders one of his demon lieutenants to take shape as a deer, which attracts Sita, who then asks Rama to catch it for her. Rama is suspicious but cannot refuse her request. Drawing a magic circle of protection around Sita, Rama and Lakshmana chase after the false deer, enabling Ravana to appear in disguise as a hermit, who lures her outside the circle and takes her away in his chariot to Ceylon.

This is the turning point in the plot because now Rama is searching for Sita and her captor. After an unsuccessful search, Rama comes across a pair of brother monkeys (Vali and Sugriva) who are fighting among themselves. Without considering who is in the right, Rama hastily kills one of the monkeys. Then Rama makes friends with another monkey, Hanuman, who is part of a large army of monkeys who pledge themselves to help him find Sita. They finally have some luck when an eagle tells them that Ravana is holding Sita on Ceylon. The monkeys build a bridge from south India to the island.

Now the battle between Rama and Ravana begins and lasts for several days. One by one, Ravana's military leaders die, including his son and his brothers. Ravana, however, appears invincible; indeed, he has been given a boon by Siva that he will not die except at the hands of a god. Thinking that Rama is a mere human, Ravana does not fear him. Ravana puts up a ferocious fight, and Rama despairs of being able to finish off the powerful demon. As soon as he cuts off one of his ten heads, another one sprouts up in its place. Finally, though, Ravana is killed and Sita is freed.

The reunion of Rama and Sita is then marred by Rama's suspicions that she may have been tainted by her captivity, that maybe she has, even in thought, been unfaithful to him. Rama demands that she undergo the 'fire test' by entering a raging fire. If she is innocent, she will not be burned. Sita walks through the flames and emerges unharmed. His suspicions banished, Rama takes Sita back to Ayodhya, where he is crowned king.

Themes

Love When we strip away all the mythic elements, the palace intrigues, long battles and supernatural interventions, the Ramayana is fundamentally a love story. It is a romance. This is what drives the action forward and what accounts for its enduring popularity in India and across the world. And it presents many kinds of love. First and foremost, there is the conjugal love between Rama and Sita, the happy couple whose marriage is celebrated in the beginning, whose marital bliss is destroyed by the machinations of Kuni and Kaikeyi, and whose reunion is the happy ending of the story. In contrast to this normative courtly love, there is the passion felt by the demons. Surpanakha falls madly in love with Rama, and Ravana is infatuated with Sita (simply by listening to his sister's description of her). Indeed, the poet's depiction of Ravana's love-crazed state of mind is one of the most moving scenes in the whole epic. This demonic love, however dangerous, is nonetheless genuine. The poet does not suggest that Ravana's love for Sita is cheap or tawdry; instead, it is an all-consuming desire that sometimes makes Rama's love for his wife seem tepid. There is also fraternal love, the loyalty that Bharata feels toward his older brother Rama, and that Kumbhakarna shows toward his older brother Ravana. We can also mention filial love, which motivates Rama to accept his father's command that he relinquish the crown in favour of Bharata. Although his father does not want this, he has promised a boon to his wife, who asks that he fulfil his promise by banishing Rama and crowning Bharata. Rama does not want to leave the kingdom, but he realises that if he doesn't he will make his father a liar. Out of love for his name, then, he does leave. And, finally, there is devotional love (*bhakti*), manifest most vividly in the monkey Hanuman. At one point, when asked why he supports Rama, Hanuman simply rips open his chest (like Superman revealing the 'S' on his chest) to reveal the letters 'ra' and 'ma' written on the two sides of his heart. Of all these varieties of love, the most significant is Ravana's brooding and tempestuous love for Sita. It is what propels the story forward and leads him to his destruction. An alternative title for the Ramayana might be 'The Demon Who Loved Too Much.'

Brothers The other great theme of the story is the importance of fraternal cohesion. On both sides of the epic contest, among the good guys as well as the demons, unity among brothers is stressed.

Beginning with the royal family of Rama and his brothers, their unity is what is imperilled by the palace intrigue that results in Rama's banishment. Behind the intrigue is female spite (a disgruntled servant) and jealousy (one co-wife wanting her son on the throne instead of another's), but the damage to the kingdom is expressed in terms of the cracks that they create in the wall of fraternal loyalty. When Bharata is told that he, and not Rama, will be consecrated king, he refuses to betray his brother, who (as the first born) is the legitimate heir to the crown. He would rather, he says, disobey his mother (whose wish it is) and his father (whose word it is) than betray his brother. In the end, he finds an ingenious solution, or 'epic fudge': he will become king only in name. By placing Rama's sandals on the throne and bowing down to them, he will acknowledge that his brother, exiled to the forest, is the actual ruler of the kingdom. In addition, brother Laksmana goes with Rama into the forest as his protector and plays a vital role in the defeat of Ravana. Fraternal cohesion is also important, possibly even more critical, on the other side of the divide, among the demons in Ceylon. The necessity of brotherly cohesion is illustrated by the contrasting characters of Vibhisana and Kumbhakarna. The first is portrayed as a wise demon, who realises that Ravana's theft of Sita was wrong and advises him to give her up; when Ravana calls him a traitor, he leaves him and joins his enemy, Rama. In sharp contrast, Kumbhakarna, who also has second thoughts about Ravana's actions, sticks with him to the deadly end. It is the genius of the story, and the various poets who have told it, that we are more sympathetic to the brother who supports the evil demon that the one who supports the hero Rama.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rama (Principled)

Character Rama is the hero of this epic story, and in the version summarised here he is also a god, an avatar of Vishnu. This dual aspect of his character, as both man and god, is key to understanding him. On the one hand, he is divine and has only come to earth in order to defeat evil (in the shape of the demon king Ravana); that is, he is the embodiment of *dharma* or correct conduct, which for a king is to protect his people. And that is why Rama triumphs in the end. At the same time, he is a man, who is also a king, whose duty it is to defeat the enemy. But as a human being he is imperfect and makes mistakes, especially in his judgement. As a man, he loves Sita, whom he spends most of the epic attempting to rescue from Ravana. Running through both identities is his commitment to act according to the rules and expectations of *dharma*. He is a character of high principle, who will always put (or strive to put) morality above personal gain. And in this respect, he is an admirable character.

Activities Rama is a prince, who is taught the martial arts of a warrior, especially archery and chariot racing. As a king in waiting, he is instructed in the skills of a statesman and the philosophies of sages. He is also initiated into the sacred rites of Hinduism by ascetics, who take him into the forest for secret training. While he is in exile in the forest, he hunts wild animals and picks wild berries. He makes camp fires and sleeps out in the open.

Illustrative moments

Principled The key element in Rama's character is his correct behaviour, his adherence to traditional roles and obligations. This is what Hindus call *dharma*, the upholding of norms and expectations. Rama's obedience to moral principles is hardly surprising since, after all, he is a god. As a man, however, his greatest (and most agonising) illustration of his principled behaviour is his decision to uphold his father's reputation by agreeing to go into exile in the forest. It is not an easy decision. The situation is that Rama and everyone else is expecting that he will be consecrated as king, following the decision by his father, Dasaratha, to step down from that role. That plan, however, is foiled by Kaikeyi (one of Dasaratha's wives) because she is afraid that her son, Bharata, will be badly treated by his brother. Egged on by a servant (Kuni), she asks that her husband, Dasaratha, make good on his promise long ago to grant her two wishes. One wish is that Bharata should be crowned king; the other is that Rama should be exiled. Dasaratha is in a bind. If he agrees, he will lose his beloved son Rama; if he refuses, he will dishonour his word. Overcome with despair, he becomes ill and takes to his bed. At that moment, Rama comes to him and says that he will voluntarily go into exile. The trouble is that Rama knows that if does that, his father will die of grief. So, Rama has a terrible dilemma: if he remains his father will live but his word will have been dishonoured; if he leaves, his father will die but his name will not be tainted with dishonesty (refusing to honour his earlier promise to Kaikeyi). Rama leaves, his father dies, but with his honour intact, and the story goes on.

Heroic The niceties of correct conduct (*dharma*), as explained above, are important, but far more memorable to most people is Rama's heroism. Love aside, this is a story of war, of the long siege of Ceylon, where Ravana has taken Sita captive. By far the longest chapter of the Ramayana is known as the 'Book of War', which describes in detail the many battles that take place between members of Rama's army (including his brothers and his monkey allies) and soldiers fighting for Ravana. And the most spectacular of all is the final battle between Rama and Ravana. It rages on for days, as the two combatants hurl more and more fantastic weapons at each other while their chariots 'circled the globe.' Rama shoots arrow after arrow into Ravana's huge body, but the wounds do not halt the demon's charge. Then Ravana calls upon his secret weapon, illusion (*maya*), which makes Rama see all those he has killed revived and charging toward him. Rama then invokes his hidden power, called 'perception', which enables him to see through this deception. Eventually, Ravana weakens and Rama's brothers urge him to close in for the kill, but Rama hesitates, saying, 'It is not fair in warfare to attack a man who is in a faint. Let him recover first.' Finally, Rama kills him by using a weapon given to him by the gods, which attacks not the hydra-heads of the demon but his heart, where he is more vulnerable. When Ravana lies dead on the ground, Rama turns him over and notices a wound in his back. He is disconsolate at having shot him in the back, but another demon explains that the wound is 'an old one, created by a raging elephant which pierced him.' Satisfied with his victory, Rama then allows the demons to take away the corpse for cremation. It is a great victory and a hard-fought battle, celebrated on earth by Rama's army and in the heavens by the gods.

Flawed However heroic and principled Rama is, Kampan's portrait of the epic hero is complicated by the flaws in his character. There are several disturbing examples of Rama's poor and hasty judgement in the story, but (for me) the most glaring is his decision-making in what is known as the 'Vali' scene. Rama is searching for Sita (kidnapped by Ravana) when he comes upon two monkeys (Vali and Sugriva) who are fighting each other over who should be king of the monkeys. Each has a claim, but Rama is told only Sugriva's side of the dispute. Rama then sends an arrow through Vali's heart, after which the dying Vali (miraculously) lectures Rama on the immorality of his action. Rama replies with pious words about *dharma*, but Vali is unrelenting in his condemnation of Rama's mistake. 'You can speak fine words, Rama,' he says, 'but nothing will hide the fact that you have killed me without looking into the merits of the case. You were born a prince, and yet you commit this barbarous act, hiding behind a tree and shooting me.' Rama has no convincing reply to these charges of irresponsible, even cowardly, action. In the end, Rama realises his mistake and offers to revive Vali, but the monkey refuses this saying that he will still be tainted as one who had lost the battle. Vali then chooses to die, with his warrior reputation unstained. When we read this, more than once, we wonder who is the greater hero, the god Rama or the monkey Vali? The whole scene is a reminder that Rama is a man, too, and subject to misjudgement and hasty decision-making.

(temple sculpture of scene where Rama kills the monkey, Vali. Darasuram, c. 1100 CE)

Ravana (Passionate)

Character Ravana is the king of the demons who rule the island of Lanka. He also claims a high-status ancestry with the Sun and is a great devotee of Siva. He is an accomplished singer and musician, and he is able to recite many hundreds of verses from the ancient Vedas. All this is to say that Ravana is not just a villain, though he is that, too. He represents the untrammelled energy that threatens the cosmic order and domestic order. When he loves, his love is dangerously wild; when he hates, it is as if a fire burns in the heavens. Everything about him, in other words, is magnified—his physical form, his feelings and his abilities. He has ten heads and twenty arms, but those are just the visible manifestations of his mystical powers, which include a boon from Siva to be invincible to gods and demons. From some perspectives, he is a more heroic figure than Rama, more noble because he is fated to die and yet battles courageously until the end. He is also a great lover. He abducts Sita, wife of Rama, but he does not touch her while in captivity. He admires and sweet talks her, but he does not harm her. And in defeat, he is also magnificent. When Rama's divine arrow finally fells him and Ravana lies on the earth, the poet describes how the dross that had accumulated began to burn away—all the layers of conceit, anger, lust, egotism and cruelty—and his true self shone through, a pious man capable of great achievements.

Activities Ravana is a man of many talents. He likes to play the *vina* (a sitar-like instrument) and to chant the Vedas. He has a magical chariot, which he loves to take 'for a spin' around the Three Worlds. When he sits in council, deliberating with his ministers, he is majestic, issuing commands and arguing with passion. Most of all, however, he likes to boast about his past conquests, when he subdued Indra, king of the gods, and shook the peaks of a mountain where Siva rested.

Illustrative moments

Passionate Ravana's most dominant characteristic is his passion, his energetic and demonic desire. Everything about him is exaggerated in scale, colossal in scope and terrifying in its consequences. His love for Sita is no exception. It is not like the courtly love that binds Rama and Sita. It is much more dangerous and untrammelled. It is closer to the erotic, passionate love known in India as *kama*. Ravana's own sister Surpanakha describes it this way: 'It's lust, desire, that's what it is. And it comes from that basic disposition called energy. It's *kama* that burns us all.' It may be lust, but it is nonetheless genuine for that. In fact, at times, it appears that Ravana's love for Sita is deeper than Rama's for her. A good illustration of his loves comes, somewhat comically, in a scene when Surpanakha, his sister, describes Sita to him. Surpanakha is trying to rouse Ravana to attack Rama for rejecting her overtures to him and only incidentally mentions Sita. 'That wretched wife of his,' she says and Ravana raises his eyebrows, curious, and asks her to tell him about her. Surpanakha gives a vivid description of her moon-like face, her arched eyebrows, honey lips and graceful form. Hearing these details, Ravana goes into a stupor, numbed by love for Sita. He walks around in a daze, ignoring his ministers, not even seeing people in front of him. His crazed infatuation causes him to issue conflicting and erratic commands, that the seasons should go in reverse and that the moonlight should shine (although it is noon) in order to cool down the heat of his passion. This description of Ravana's love-mad mind is one of the finest passages in all Indian literature.

Colossal Ravana is a demon king, with an enormous body, with multiple limbs and phenomenal strength. His character is a portrait of exaggeration and unimaginable dimensions. The magnitude of this figure is conveyed in one of the early descriptions of him, when the demon king of Ceylon makes his appearance on the battle field to challenge Rama. 'There he stood,' says the poet, 'Ravana, with ten heads, twenty arms and the strength of a thousand elephants. Ravana, who did fierce penance and received boons from the gods, Ravana who lifted up Mt. Kailasa (where Siva was in meditation, making the mountain heavy). It is might Ravana, who scattered all the gods on the battlefield, defeating even the invincible Indra, king of the gods and god of kings.' Next, as Ravana is still advancing on the battle field, the poet describes his talents as a musician and singer. When Siva challenged him to a singing contest, Ravana cut off one of his twenty hands and made it into a *vina* (like a sitar), turned his sinews into strings and then sang hundreds of verses from the Vedas. All this astonished Siva, who thought Ravana was merely an upstart demon who had won a few battles over insignificant rulers. Now Siva is told that Ravana has circled the Three Worlds in his magnificent chariot, defeated the eight elephants upon whose backs the cosmos rests and then, with a wave of his twenty hands, defeated the fifty-six rajas of the earth. From this extended, breathless description Ravana, we learn that he is not only physically impressive, but that he also possesses knowledge of the ancient texts, has the talent to sing them and is capable of supernatural feats. He is a formidable enemy indeed, even for Rama.

Humbled The other impressive dimension of Ravana's character is the monumental scale of his defeat. If his powers are extraordinary, then his humiliation will be equally grand. On the first day of the battle with Rama, Ravana suffers a defeat. He is not killed, not yet, but his weapons are countered and his armies in retreat. Now, the poet tells us, the mighty body that shook Mt Kailasa drooped in despair; the tongue that out sang Siva went silent; the shoulders that had lifted elephants sagged. In his defeat, Ravana feels a humiliation, whose intensity matches that of his passionate love. He has lost not just one crown, as a normal king would do in defeat; he has lost ten, one for each head. He drags his huge body back to his palace, 'without his weapons, without his chariot, without hope.' He is described as 'like the moon swallowed by night, like a frog swallowed by a snake, like crops withering in the fierce heat, like a deserted, penniless debtor.' It is a poignant image, and the pathos increases when we watch Ravana enter his grand palace. Inside, he keeps his eyes low, so low that he only sees the earth. His courtiers, wives and children are lined up to welcome their king, but he dare not look anyone in the eye. So great is the shame of defeat, that he slinks back into his private chamber and weeps. Everything about the demon king is abnormal even his humbling in defeat, and yet it is described in very human terms. It is at moments like this, when we read of Ravana's defeat, that we know we are in the presence of an epic story.

Dasaratha (Venerable)

Character Dasaratha is a venerable figure, an aging king and commander who has guided his country for decades, winning wars and extending territory. He gained the name 'Dasaratha' ('ten chariots') as a result of his outstanding leadership on the battlefield. He has also done his duty in producing four sons, from his three wives, in order to continue the lineage of the kings of Ayodhya. He is a generous ruler, too, who gives large gifts to visitors, particularly to Brahmins, and expensive jewellery to his wives. Beyond these qualities of kingship and military prowess, he is a very human figure. He has great affection for his sons and shows kindness to his wives. In all of this, Dasaratha is without blemish. However, a curse hangs over this estimable man. In the past, he accidentally killed a young man, whose parents then cursed him to suffer the same fate and lose his son. And he is sometimes foolish, as when he promised his youngest wife that she could have two things, any two things, she wanted. That promise comes back to haunt him, just as the story begins.

Activities As a king, a member of the Kshatriya caste, Dasaratha is obliged to patronise Brahmins, sages and ascetics. This is something that he does with great gusto, inviting holy men to his kingdom to oversee a series of long and complex ceremonies, such the Ashvameda. In this event, the Brahmins bless a horse, which is then set out to roam by the king. Whatever territory the horse covers in a year is then claimed by the king. Inside the palace, Dasaratha oversees the observance of a daily routine of Hindu rituals, bathing and prayer. Whenever he has a difficult decision to make, he retreats into a private chamber, where he might sit for hours in contemplation.

Illustrative moments

Foolish Dasaratha is a scion of an old dynasty that had ruled the kingdom for thousands of years. He has carried out his administration with wisdom and compassion, in strict adherence to *dharma* (right conduct). But, once or twice, he has also been foolish. The example that is most significant to the plot is his granting two wishes to his youngest wife, Kaikeyi, a long time before the action of the epic begins. She was beautiful and he was aging, and in order to win her he promised that she could ask for two things anytime she wanted. Unfortunately for Dasaratha, that time comes just as he is puffed up with pride watching the preparations for the coronation of Rama, his first-born and favourite son. The night before the grand event, Kaikeyi reminds Dasaratha of the two boons. 'Yes, I remember them,' he says, a little reluctantly. 'And do you honour those promises now?' she asks. 'Yes, of course,' he replies, 'I swear by the name of Rama that I will not renege.' Then Kaikeyi delivers her bombshell: Rama should be banished to the forest and Bharata (her son) should be installed as king instead of him. Dasaratha is shocked into disbelief. Rama not become king? Sent into exile, a young boy who might perish in the forest? Terrible though it is, he has no one but himself to blame. Years ago, when an old man should have been wise enough to avoid the temptations of flesh, he had been flattered to win the hand of a young woman. And in order to do that, he had granted her the two wishes that have now come back to destroy his happiness in his final years. They say that there is no one as foolish as a foolish old man, and Dasaratha proves the accuracy of that statement.

Loving Dasaratha is nothing if not a loving husband and father. He raises his four sons with great affection and patience, watching them develop into young men (they are only teenagers, but in

ancient times that was mature enough to be crowned king). He is affectionate toward his wives, but his deepest love is reserved for his sons, and among his sons for Rama, his first born. His concern for Rama is illustrated on several occasions, but perhaps the most poignant is when a sage comes to his court and asks that Rama accompany him into the forest in order to accomplish a great deed. When the king asks him to explain, the sage says that it will be a ritual sacrifice in honour of the god of fire, attended by hundreds of ascetics and kings. 'But why Rama?' the king asks, a little defensively. 'I want Rama,' the sage says, 'because he has great power and will safeguard the ritual from demons and false gods.' Dasaratha is impressed and is loath not to honour the holy man's request, but he is afraid to let Rama go with the sage. 'He is too young,' Dasaratha says. 'Not yet fourteen. Only a child. How can he contend with demons?' When the sage insists that Rama is the person he needs, Dasaratha grows increasingly anxious. 'I'll send my army…all twenty divisions…they can do the job. But, please, sir, do not ask me to send my tender child into the forest on this mission.' They argue like this for some time, Dasaratha pointing out that the forest is far away, cold and full of wild animals. Although he does, in the end, consent, the way he tries to save Rama from going on this mysterious expedition is very much like a mother protecting her son from danger. And this demonstration of his fatherly love, so early in the epic, sets up the reader for the even more emotional moment, not long after, when he has to watch Rama leave the kingdom and enter the forest in exile.

Cursed Dasaratha's loss of his son to exile is, in part, explained by his foolish granting of the two wishes to Kaikeyi and to the manipulations of a scheming servant, but it is also partially explained by a curse. The story of Dasaratha's curse is told as a flashback, in an aside by the poet as narrator. The story is that when Dasaratha was much younger, he often went on hunting expeditions. One day, he was out hunting and saw a deer at the edge of a lake. Priding himself on his excellent archery skills, Dasaratha crouched behind a bush, took aim and shot his arrow. It found its mark, but when Dasaratha went closer, he discovered that he had killed a young boy not a deer. The boy, Sravanan, had been carrying his blind parents in a wicker basket, suspended by a pole over his shoulders. The boy had stopped, put the basket down and gone to the lake to collect water for them. Then Dasaratha hears the parents, sitting in the basket, ask where their child is. They are blind and saw nothing, so Dasaratha has to break the news to them: 'I killed your son.' After that, they curse Dasaratha to lose his son just as they lost theirs. The Ramayana story is strewn with similar curses—nearly every major character is fated to do something as the result of an imprecation—but Dasaratha's curse is special for its perfect symmetry and impeccable logic.