

[Jai Shri Ram!](#)

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PROFILE

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A short introduction to Lord Rama and the plan for His Ayodhya temple

Ramanand Sagar's TV epic, the Ramayana, brought the whole of India to a halt week after week in the mid-1980s. It was not surprising, for the story of Lord Rama has enthralled Hindus for thousands of years, ever since the 24,000-couplet saga was composed 6,000 years ago by Sage Valmiki for Rama's sons, Lava and Kusha. "The epic poem enjoys immense popularity in India," states the Students' Britannica India, "where its recitation is considered an act of great merit. Many of its translations into the vernacular languages are themselves works of great literary merit, including the Tamil version of Kampan, the Bengali version of Krittibas and the Hindi version, Ramcharitmanas, of Tulsidas." In countries of the diaspora, such as Trinidad, it is the Ramayana that is the sacred text of first choice. The Ramayana is an itihasa, or history, a part of Hinduism's secondary scriptures or smriti, which compliment the primary scriptures or sruti, the Vedas and Agamas.

It's easy to see why the story of Lord Rama is so appealing—it's exciting, entertaining and instructive all at once. It lends itself to the wonderful dramatic presentation known as katha. A skilled exponent such as Morari Bapu [see page 33] can keep audiences numbering in the tens of thousands spellbound night after night for days on end with vivid storytelling, soul-rousing devotional songs and instructive and inspiring commentary on the story. Swami Vivekananda said Lord Rama is "the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, and above all, the ideal king." There are only slightly more temples to Lord Krishna in India than to Rama.

Lord Rama, born approximately 6,300 years ago, is the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who is born among men when His divine presence is required to restore balance to the universe. Vishnu returned again as Lord Krishna in the third millennium bce, and as Lord Buddha in the first millennium bce. Rama is one of the most widely worshiped of Hindu Deities, with thousands of temples in India and more than a hundred in Nepal—most notably at Janakpur, birthplace of Sita. His icon in a temple is typically standing, with an arrow in his right hand and a bow in his left, and accompanied by his wife Sita, his half-brother Lakshmana and his devotee Hanuman, who is regarded as a God in His own

right.

The well-known story of Lord Rama can be summarize as follows. He was born to King Dasharatha of Ayodhya along with three younger half-brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna, sons of the other wives of the king. As a young man, Rama wins the hand of Sita, daughter of King Janaka, in an archery contest. As King Dasharatha has grown old, he prepares to anoint Rama as his successor when his wife Kaikeyi demands that her son Bharata be placed on the throne and Rama be exiled to the forest for fourteen years.

During the exile, Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Sri Lanka. Eventually Rama rescues her and conquers Ravana with the help of an army of monkeys and bears. During these adventures, Hanuman, the monkey God, offers himself permanently to the service of Rama. After the conquest, Rama, a worshiper of Lord Siva, installs a Sivalingam icon at Rameswaram, South India, in gratitude for his victory. But before returning north, Rama requires Sita to prove her chastity in

a trial by fire. When the fire refuses to burn her, they depart in triumph to Ayodhya, arriving on the day now celebrated as Deepavali.

Unfortunately, the trials are not over for Sita, as doubts are again raised about her chastity while in Ravana's custody. This time she is sent into exile, even though pregnant. She gives birth in the forest to sons Lava and Kusha. Unable to end the doubts, she prays to be returned to Mother Earth and disappears. Shortly thereafter Rama leaves his body. Sage Valmiki composes the Ramayana for the benefit of Rama's sons, who then recite it across India.

While it is India's favorite epic, the Ramayana has been a target of harsh criticism, especially in the treatment of Sita. "What kind of man," demand some modern Hindu women, "exiles his wife after she's already proved her chastity in a trial by fire?" It is not an easily answered question, though commentators on the text have tried. Some portions of the Dalit (or untouchable) community, don't like the parts about the monkeys and bears. They consider these a distorted and demeaning

portrayal of their own tribal ancestors. At the same time, one way that India's tribes are being urged to relate better to mainstream Hinduism is to teach them that Rama lived among them.

The Ramayana, ever immensely popular, is used to teach many aspects of Hinduism, especially the virtues of a loyal son, the dedication of the devoted brother and the devotion of Hanuman toward His Lord. Rama's reign is that of the ideal king; Rama and Sita's marriage is the ideal union. The text is also an informative discourse on ancient India, its people, customs and government. Many Hindus say, "Ram, Ram" when greeting a friend, chant, "Ram Naam Satya Hai" ("Ram's Name is Truth") at the time of death. The story of Lord Rama's life, Ramlila, is performed at hundreds of thousands of venues around India each year in September/October. The Ramayana is read to a pregnant woman in her fourth month, when the heart of the fetus is being formed, so that its heart inculcates Rama's virtues. The question on the minds of many Indians today is, "If Lord Rama were our king now, how would He rule India?"

TIMELINE

-4300 bce: Traditional date for time of Lord Rama, whose life, predating the Mahabharata , is recorded in Valmiki's Ramayana.

900 ce: Kamban composes Tamil version of Ramayana

1528: Temple marking birthplace of Lord Rama in Ayodhya is destroyed by Muslim army and the Babri Masjid is built upon its foundation.

1600: Tulsidas composes Ramcharitmanas (story of Rama) in Ayodhya.

1853: First recorded incidents of religious violence in Ayodhya.

1859: British rulers allow both Hindus and Muslims to use site.

1949: Government proclaims site as disputed and locks gates.

1984: Hindus make plans to build new temple on site.

1992: The masjid is destroyed by Hindu militants.

2001: Efforts by Hindus to build temple are increased, exacerbating tensions with Muslims.