FOREWORD

If a beautiful garden is to be raised, one needs to take proper care of tender flower plants. In the same way in order to create a good society, great care needs to be taken of young children who are going to be future citizens of India. All their intellectual attainments will be futile if they fail to learn of their culture and its greatness. They need to be told of great men and women of this country so that they are inspired by their ideals. The essentials of our culture should be given to them in the form of simple and charming stories. They will cherish these ideals and be guided by them. They will promote good, and they will love the society they live in. They make their families proud and bring great prestige to their country when they grow up into good citizens.

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams have brought out these booklets in Telugu for children under Srinivasa Bala Bharathi Series. Although meant for children, they are useful to the elderly too. They have found place in the book shelves of every family. The stories of legendary men and women are narrated in a simple way. We hope that more and more children will read them and profit by them.

I congratulate Dr. R. Sri Hari, Editor-in-Chief, TTD for his efforts in bringing out the English translations of SRINIVASA BALA BHARATI SERIES so well. We have received co-operation of many learned men and women in our efforts to popularize this series. I am thankful to them.

In the Service of the Lord

Executive Officer
Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams
Tirupati
VALMIKI

Who is Valmiki?

Maharshi (great sage) Valmiki is the great poet, who composed the first ever kavya (a grand poem) of the divine Sanskrit language. There are differences of opinion about how he came to be known as Valmiki. ‘Valmika’ means an anthill. Valmikat uthitah Valmikih - one who arose from an anthill is Valmiki. A sage performed austere penance (tapas), for a long time, sitting in padmasana and meditating on God, caring little for food, water or shelter; then gradually anthill developed around him. At the end of penance, the sage came out of anthill (Valmika) and became known as Valmiki. Some are of the opinion that Valmiki is the son of a sage called valmika, but the first version appears to be more possible. A popular verse says, “God, who is to be known through the vedas, was born as Sri Rama, son of Dasharatha and the veda was delivered as Srimad Ramayana by Praachetasa”; it shows that Valmiki was also known as Praachetasa.

Some scholars say that “Riksha, Bhaargava and Praachetasa” mentioned in the Vedas actually refer to one sage, that is Valmiki. Bhaargava means one who is born in the family or clan of Maharshi Bhrigu. Praachetasa is the son of Prachetas and both Bhaargava and Praachetasa are different names of Rishi Riksha only. Vishnupurana says “Rikshah
Therefore, it can be said that Riksha, that is Praachetasa himself is Valmiki.

It is held by some that Valmiki, who composed Ramayana, belongs to kaliyuga and modern historians assume that he dates back to 800 B.C.

**Birth of Valmiki**

Another story in Padmapurana is very popular and it says that Valmiki used to make a living by hunting animals in a forest and some sages gave him instruction to recite the name of ‘Rama’. Then he meditated on ‘Rama nama’ for quite a long time. Meanwhile, an anthill grew around him. As he came out of that anthill at the end of meditation, he became Valmiki. The story is like this.

Long ago, the Saptarshis (group of seven divine sages, namely Vasishtha, Atri, Gautama, Kasyapa, Bharadwaja, Jamadagni and Viswamitra) visited the ocean of milk, the divine abode of Sri Mahavishnu. There, they saw Sri Mahavishnu leisurely resting on Adisesha, the great serpent, who made himself as a couch for Vishnu, in ksheera sagara (ocean of milk). They offered obeisance to Him and praised His greatness and powers profusely. Sri Mahavishnu appeared before them and said, ‘O sages! I am pleased with your prayers. Just as ksheera sagara is my home, I reside in your hearts also at all moments. Be assured and go on.’

The sages were elated and they praised Sri Mahavishnu again and proceeded to visit many islands, rivers, hills, holy places and reached Kashi, the earthly abode of Lord Siva. At Kashi, they offered prayers to Sri Viswanatha. To visit more holy places, they proceeded further and reached river Tamasa. They crossed that river and entered into a terrifying and thick forest. As they were traveling through that jungle, they reached the outskirts of a village, where hunters live. The raw, bloody skins and bones found at that place disgusted them. As they were walking there, closing their nostrils, because of the foul smell, they encountered a hunter.

That hunter was ferocious with bloody red eyes and was flinging arrows furiously from his bow. He then saw the rishis and halted them with a commanding voice. “O Sages! If you move even a step ahead, I will kill you. Take out all money and valuables you have on
you and give them to me at once. Else I will kill you without mercy,” he boomed.

Sages were startled and remained silent. Then the hunter pulled at their hair roughly, beat them mercilessly, poured water on their heads from their water-pots (kamandalam), thumped on their backs and tortured them. He searched their clothes and bags thoroughly but could not find anything and was disappointed.

The Saptarshis were personification of peace. In a soft tone, they said, “O hunter! How can you be so cruel to beat sages like us? You have treated us like animals. It appears that some misfortune is likely to befall you. Will you lead the rest of your life committing sins like this? Don’t you have any feeling of kindness? Are you made of a rock by Brahma, the creator? Wouldn’t you stop committing such sins at least from now? Alas! Not realizing that this life does not last forever and may end at any moment like a bubble, you are committing sins endlessly. We cannot imagine what misery is in store for you, as a result of these evil deeds. We pity you a lot”.

The hunter noted that in spite of his cruel behavior towards them, they were kind to him and appeared to be truly worried about his fate. He calmed down a bit and said, “O Rishis! Let me explain my cruel behavior. I am wandering in this forest and robbing the passersby only to give food and a decent life for my family members. Isn’t it a man’s religious duty to feed and support his family? Why should I be condemned and how will I attract sin when I am only performing my duty?” he asked thus.

The sages understood that he is ignorant of what is right and what is wrong and decided to bless him with knowledge. To make him think properly, they said, “Consider this. You say that you do all this for the sake of your family members. Do you think your wife and children will share the misfortunes brought about by your sins? Or you alone will suffer on account of your sins?” The hunter was silent for a while. He started realizing a few things about himself.

He mellowed a bit, greeted them with namaskara and said, “O great sages! The village I live in is nearby. I will go home and get this doubt clarified from my family members. Stay here till I come back. If you go away you know what I will do.” Though he was repenting within, he could not stop threatening. It is difficult to realize one’s own mistakes and it is even more difficult to mend oneself. Yet, it is possible and the hunter proved it later.

The hunter walked towards his village, without hunting any animal on his way and reached home. He sat on a deer skin and brooded over his violent past, remembered how he caused pain and harm to others on so many occasions and worried a lot.

After a while, he calmed down, saw his wife pounding rice and called her. She came nearer, and
then he asked her, “O dear! I have a doubt. Do I have to bear the fruits of my sins, all by myself or will you have a share in them? What do you think? Do not hesitate to tell”. His wife smiled and said, “O my dear! Whatever you bring home, I cook and serve and do my duty. By what means you earn, is not my concern. I do not know whether you beg, borrow, steal or gamble to earn. Being so, how and why should I share the fruits of your sins?”

He was disappointed and yet he called his children and put the same question to them. They too told him that he was solely responsible for his sins. The hunter felt depressed. He thought, “Alas! Because of my love for my family members, I had committed many sins. Now I realize the truth. They say that they have nothing to do with my sins, but they are ready to enjoy whatever I earn. All the toil and hardships I face are of no use. I am disgusted with this family life and I can no longer live with them”. Brooding thus, he returned to the sages, having lost interest in all relations and pleasures of life.

He prostrated before the sages and said, “O divine souls! I was truly blessed the moment I saw you. You have come to me only to help me in crossing this ocean of worldly life which no longer holds any interest for me. Kindly initiate me into recitation of some divine mantra.”

The sages were pleasantly surprised to see him as a changed man and thought, “He might have been a pious man in his previous life. Otherwise, he would not have such a wise intention. The mantra which consists of only two syllables, which is fit to be recited with devotion by all classes of people, which is able to deliver all good results that can be given by all mantras, which is pleasing to the ears and recitation of which does not require observance of any rigorous religious customs, and which is one of the most powerful of all mantras - that is, the name of Sri Rama - has to be given to him as upadesa (instruction). For a layman like him it should be given in a reverse form, that is ‘mara, mara, mara,’ instead of ‘Rama, Rama, Rama.’” With this idea, they told him to have a bath in the holy river and come back. The hunter followed their instructions. Casting their benevolent eyes on him, they said, “O Kirata! You are blessed. Recite ‘mara, mara,’ and meditate upon this one mantra. We bless you to have undivided attention and concentration required for your penance (tapas). They blessed the Kirata and proceeded on their pilgrimage.

God blesses a man who truly repents his past sins and makes an ardent wish to reform himself into a pious man and sends suitable guidance to that individual in an appropriate form. That was what happened in this hunter’s story.

The hunter stopped taking non-vegetarian food, satisfied his hunger with whatever roots and tubers (kanda, moola) were available in the forest; he used to
have bath in the holy river Tamasa daily and recite the
divine mantra given to him by the sages, with pure
devotion. After a few days, his family members and
relatives searched for him and found him in the middle
of the thick forest, meditating upon the divine ‘Rama
nama’.

“It appears that this man is possessed by some
evil spirit. He is not responding to any of us. He used
to wear peacock’s feather on his head and now his
long hair is twisted into plaits. No longer he wears that
‘kasturi tilakam’ on his forehead. Holy ash (vibhuti)
now adorns his forehead. He always used to roam
around the forest and hunt animals. Now he sits
unmoving, like a stone. Somebody appears to have
misguided this poor man and he no longer appears to
belong to our tribe. He does not even seem to
remember his own family members”, they thought.

They tried to distract him from his deep meditation.
They called him aloud and said, “O poor creature!
See what you have done to yourself! You are starving
yourself and have become very lean. What purpose
will it serve for a hunter like you, if you sit throughout
the day murmuring to yourself? Who will take care of
your family? Don’t you know that your children are
eagerly waiting for you, hoping that you will bring home
delicious meats, honey, fruits and other eatables? It is
not proper for you to desert your friends and relatives
in this manner and be lonely. Get up from this slumber
and let us go to our village. Who did advise you
wrongly to deviate from your own dharma (code of
conduct) and tradition?”

The Kirata heard them and smiled. He said to his
family members, “Didn’t you say that you have nothing
do with my sins? Why did you come to me now? I
cannot be deceived any longer. Rama is my father and
Sita is my mother. The devotees of Rama are my
relatives. Who are you and who am I? You are free to
go wherever you like to. I do not have anything to do
with you. The wife, sons, daughters, friends, relatives -
all are like logs floating from different directions in a
river, coming together for a while and then moving
apart to go on one’s own course. All relations are short
lived and temporary. God alone is the true, everlasting
relation for all of us. I realized this truth. Kindly do not
bother and allow me to meditate in peace. Please go
back to your home”. His family members and relatives
lost hope and returned to their village.

Later the Kirata collected a few rudrakshas (holy
beads), made a rosary (japamaala) and using that he
started reciting ‘Ramanama’ all the time. As he was
reciting it as ‘mara, mara’ every day, gradually and
unconsciously he started pronouncing it in its original
form as ‘Rama, Rama’. The incessant recital of
‘Ramanama’ opened his mind and consciousness for
spiritual knowledge.
He started having visions. At first his inner mind’s eye saw a black cloud, then a young prince holding bow and arrows, then a great mass of resplendent light that outshines the brightness of countless number of Suns and Moons put together. The bright vision blessed him with a supernatural, elating experience. He was experiencing great happiness, having visions of the lotus of his inner self. Like a child and like a drunk, he was happy in his own inner world, not caring for the happenings around in the physical world and was practicing higher forms of austere meditation.

Due to severity of his ‘tapas’ (penance), flames emanated from his head and the world around him was filled with dark clouds of smoke. Sages, Gandharwas, Gods and men were afraid and wondered whether the world is coming to an end. Indra, the king of Gods, met sage Narada and asked, “O great sage! Some mysterious, terrifying hot smoke spread all over this world. Did Lord Shiva open his third eye and burn everything around into ashes? Or, is someone performing austere penance with an eye on my throne? Kindly tell me.”

Narada smiled and said, “A hunter is meditating upon Sri Rama with fierce devotion. You are not going to lose anything because of him. Go home and relax.” Narada tried to make Indra feel at ease.

Meditation gives immense powers. So, Indra was not convinced and was suspicious that the hunter wanted to usurp his throne. He then remembered the tussle between Rambha and Urvashi, the divine beauties of heaven, as to who is better of them in the arts of music and dance. He summoned them and said, “Even Lord Vishnu cannot decide who is better of you two. Yet, I advise both of you to visit the sage, who is meditating on the banks of river Tamasa. Try to distract him from his meditation. Whoever is successful in doing so, is not only more talented in music and dance but also is more beautiful.” He complimented them with golden jewelry and ornaments studded with precious stones. Rambha and Urvashi were pleased and they promised that they would distract the sage somehow.

Accompanied by gentle breeze, the bright moon, spring season and mesmerizing manmatha (Cupid), they crossed river Ganga and reached the banks of river Tamasa. They tented near the place where the Kirata was meditating and stayed there for the night. They got up early in the morning and went closer to the sage, acting as if they were plucking flowers and tried to attract his attention towards them.

It was not vasanta rithu (spring season) but Indra’s magical powers ensured that the youthfulness and freshness of spring season reigned there. Rambha and Urvashi, accompanied by their maids, sang mellifluous rhymes. As their anklets were making pleasant sounds, they approached the sage, offered him fruits and
flowers and with folded hands and said, “O Moon-like Sage! We are fortunate to see you here. Kindly cast your benevolent eyes on us and bless us”. They requested him again and again to open his eyes but of no avail. The sage was unmoved by their gestures and continued to be in deep meditation. The divine beauties were surprised at the devotion of the sage and his radiance.

But they did not lose heart and started dancing before him. The sage could not be disturbed. All their efforts were in vain. Rambha understood that she could not distract him, felt shy and stood still. Urvashi was hopeful yet and she started playing veena before the sage. The music was divine, melodious and powerful that even deer stopped grazing and were listening attentively. It looked as if the music could melt even the mountains. Even the withered trees sprouted fresh leaves, but the sage did not move. He was devotion personified.

Urvashi too felt shy and said, “This sage proved that neither of us is truly great. We should learn from this mistake and should not try to disturb the meditation of any sage hereafter. We should forego our ego and jealousy and be together like dear sisters.” Later, they returned to heaven. The sage was unaware of the appearance and exit of the divine beauties and was immersed in meditation. Gradually anthills developed around him. Plants grew on those anthills. The sage was performing austere meditation within that anthill and was as glorious as the divine soul residing in a body.

Two years passed. The seven sages, who initiated the Kirata into recitation of ‘Ramanama’, visited the Himalayas and returned to the banks of Tamasa river. As they arrived, they noticed that the forest wore a festive look with a lot of green trees, creepers and ponds. The trees were with flowers of all seasons emanating fragrance all around. The deer were playing with tigers. The peacocks were wearing serpents as necklaces and were dancing with joy. The baby elephants were playing with lion cubs. The rats and mongoose were roaming together. This is ‘nirvairam’ which means absence of animosity between enemies - even natural enemies. Scriptures say that, if the people inhabiting any place practice ‘ahimsa’ (non violence) absolutely, for a long time, that place attains such quality. The sages observed this and wondered, “A great sage might be meditating here now. This is the place where we were tortured by a hunter two years ago. Where did he go?”

Then they heard “akashavani”, the oracle from the skies, saying, “O great Sages! That man is meditating upon Sri Rama in that ant-hill.” The Saptarshis were pleasantly surprised.

Then the Kirata dismantled the anthill that grew around him and came out glowing, like the Sun rising
from the eastern hills. He bowed before the sages and said, “O divine sages! Your kindness made me pure,” and expressed his gratitude. The sages realized that over a period of time, the hunter recited the mantra given by them in its original form as ‘Rama Rama’ and praised the power and glory of recitation of ‘Ramanama’. Whoever recites ‘Ramanama’ with devotion, will be blessed with all merits and good things of life. “O Kirata! You will be blessed like devotees Prahlada and Narada! Be devoted to God and get liberated.” They blessed him thus and returned to their heavenly abodes. As he emerged from an anthill (Valmikam), the Kirata came to be known as ‘Valmiki’. He followed the instructions of ‘Saptarshis’ and continued his penance for Sri Rama.

It appears from the above story that Valmiki knew about ‘Sri Rama’ and was devoted to Him, even before he composed the great epic ‘Ramayana’. But the first sarga (chapter) of ‘Ramayana’ mentions that Valmiki learnt about ‘Sri Rama’ only from Maharshi Narada.

In Ramayana, it is narrated like this. Valmiki was performing penance in a hermitage on the banks of river Tamasa. Once, Sage Narada visited him. Valmiki served him with devotion and offered all that is due for the divine sage, and asked, “O Maharshi! Kindly tell me, who, in today’s world, is blessed with all good qualities, is valorous, a knower of dharma (code of conduct prescribed in scriptures based on the Vedas), one who is with gratitude, one who always speaks truth, one with impeccable character, one who is kind towards all living beings, is able, beautiful, graceful and idealistic, one who is without any negative qualities like jealousy, anger, greed, pride etc., and one who glows with divine grace? I am eager to know about such a great individual.”

Sage Narada was pleased with the obedience and hospitality of Valmiki and benevolently replied thus:

“O Maharshi! A person with all the distinguished qualities you have mentioned, is not easy to be found in this world. However one individual fits your description. He is the son of King Dasaratha and queen Kausalya of Ikshwaku lineage. He is the epitome of all good qualities you have mentioned. He is a great warrior with good physique, is steadfast, intelligent, an orator, vanquisher of enemies, is devoted to the welfare of all people, illustrious, efficient and is loved by all. He is as sober as a sea, as courageous as Himavanta, as powerful as Sri Mahavishnu, appears as pleasant as the Moon, as fierce as the Fire God (Agni) when he is angry and as patient as the Mother Earth. He is the embodiment of Satya (truth) and Dharma.”

He then narrated the story of Lord Rama briefly and went on his way.

The next day Valmiki, accompanied by his disciple Bharadwaja, went to river Tamasa to take a bath.
Water in the river is as calm as a pious man’s mind. Valmiki was looking at the forest and the scenic beauty of the nature around him with admiration. He saw a pair of Krauncha birds singing musically and roaming freely around. As Valmiki was happily watching those birds, a hunter came and shot the male bird with his arrow. The male bird fell on the ground and bled to death. The female bird wept sadly, watching her partner losing his life. Valmiki felt very sad watching this and he expressed his sorrow for the female bird in the form of a sloka (a Samskrit verse in a meter - Chandas).

Ma nishaada pratishthaam tvamagamah shashvatissamah Yatkrauncha mithunadekam avadhih kamamohitam.

“O Hunter (Nishada)! As you have killed the male bird who was sensually in love with the female bird, may you not have fame for a long time (or may lose fame)!”

Though it appears that the above sloka was meant for the hunter who killed the bird, it had seeds of story of Ramayana in it. With ‘slesha’ (a literal way of rearranging words in a sentence or a verse to give a different meaning) in action, the above verse also means-

“O Vishnu, the abode for Lakshmi (Lakshmi dwells in the heart of Vishnu)! As you have killed the sensuous Ravana, the husband of Mandodari, you will attain fame for a long time to come!”

Ravana was blessed with many supernatural powers by Lord Brahma and Ravana misused his powers to torment gods and sages. On the request of gods and sages, Lord Vishnu incarnated himself as Sri Rama and killed Ravana. Rama was held in high regard as he granted protection and peace for gods and sages. The above verse reflects this meaning too.

‘Nishaada’ may also mean adharma or unrighteous conduct that disturbs the world. Therefore, the above verse may also mean:

“O Adharma! As you have separated the wife and husband, who were leading an ideal life of a responsible householder, you will not last long! (adharma will get vanquished soon by dharma).

Musicologists are of the opinion, that the words in the sloka ‘ma nishada…’ appear to be set to a pattern of one udatta swara (high note) followed by one anudatta swara (low note) in the raaga that is set with swaras (sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, da, ni) resembling the sounds made by a krauncha bird.

That was the first sloka uttered spontaneously by Valmiki and it was set to a meter and is replete with meanings. Valmiki himself was surprised at his poetical response to the killing of a bird. He asked Bharadwaja, ‘What I uttered appears to be a sloka, set to a meter and consisting of specific number of syllables in each stanza. Doesn’t it appear to be like a sloka and is also
musical?” His disciple agreed. Pondering over the strange incident, he had bath and returned to ashram with his disciple.

After a while, Brahma, the creator appeared before Valmiki. Valmiki honored him with arghya, padya etc., and served him with devotion. He narrated the whole episode to Brahma, repeated the sloka he uttered then and expressed his surprise as to how he could recite such a sloka. Brahma smiled and told Valmiki that it was his will that made Valmiki utter a sloka. He said, ‘didn’t sage Narada narrate the story of Sri Rama briefly to you? Compose a kavya (a grand poetical composition) based on that story. Do not hesitate. You will know everything and with my blessings all aspects of the story of Rama will become evident to you. The kavya composed by you will have no falsehood in it. As long as the rivers and mountains will be there on the earth, the story of Ramayana will be told and retold and be popular. As long as Ramayana will be popular, you will stay in Brahmaloka (the abode of Brahma, the creator).’ Thus Brahma guided Valmiki to compose the Ramayana and disappeared.

Valmiki was surprised and elated too. His disciples recited his first ever sloka again and again and were happy. Valmiki took up the divine task of composing Ramayana. His purified self and Brahma’s grace enabled him to complete the task without any obstacle and thus was born the first ever kavya in Sanskrit language, Srimad Ramayana.

Ramayana is one of the two great national epics of our country and is available in approximately 24,000 slokas. It is divided into six kandas, namely, Bala kanda, Ayodhya kanda, Aranya kanda, Kishkindha kanda, Sundara kanda and Yuddha kanda and these are further subdivided into thousands of chapters (sargas).

Ramayana is immensely popular even today and there are reasons for its popularity. No other kavya equals Ramayana in the exposition of rasa and bhava (emotions and feelings), that is, in exciting various emotions in the reader like shanta, karuna, shringara, hasya, roudra, bheeabhat, bhayanaka, veera, abhusha etc.(pathos, romance, heroism, humor, passion, fearsomeness etc.)

In the narration of the story, characterization, creation of emotional and soulful scenes, in explanation of morals and dharma, Maharishi Valmiki excelled and made Ramayana a model kavya for future poets. In the history of world literature, one cannot find more than one or two parallels for Ramayana.

The language used in Ramayana is as easy to understand as it is graceful in word and meaning. It is as graceful as it is latent with the powers of mantras. Learned scholars revealed that recitation of different
sargas of Ramayana will relieve us of miseries, ill luck and planetary afflictions (graha dosha brought about by our misdeeds in the past) and guide us on the path of morally correct behaviour.

*Valmiki* rarely used compound words that are difficult to understand. He always employed simple, apt, melodious, harmonious and easy to understand words to express even complex issues. One need not be a great scholar to understand his *kavya*. Any person with literary interest can understand and enjoy reading *Ramayana*. Even those who do not understand *Samskrit* also recite *Ramayana* as they find the experience to be uplifting, morally and spiritually! *Ramayana* bestows peace and happiness in this life and beyond this life.

*Valmiki* was an ardent admirer of nature and beauty. His graphic description of all elements of nature like rivers, mountains, rains, seasons, forests, gardens, great palaces, hermitages, individual appearances- point to his child like wonder at nature. He had an eye for detail in everything. His narration of events, including war, is so picturesque that the reader gets a vivid idea of the happenings. His depiction of human emotions is excellent and incomparable. He adorned his *kavya* with many beautiful *alankaras* (literary means of decorative description) that critics and laymen alike, enjoy his work. Simplicity evolves from higher wisdom. The analogies (*upamanas*) he used in descriptions are very simple, easy to identify with and are highly creative. He influenced the poets of subsequent generations like *Kalidasa*, *Bharavi* and many others, with his fluent style. Above all, his love and compassion for fellow human beings and his concern for the material and spiritual upliftment of society on ideological lines is reflected throughout the *kavya*. His ideas are gentle, graceful and pious promoting welfare of all.

Scholars say that a *kavya* bestows aesthetic pleasure, wealth, fame and worldly wisdom, purges evils and misfortunes, teaches morally acceptable behavior and guides men towards enlightenment. *Kavya* advises and encourages us to lead a pious life, it is said, in the manner like a loving wife advises her husband.

There are many *kavyas* and all *kavyas* do not fulfill all of the above objectives. *Valmiki’s Ramayana* is the foremost *kavya* that accomplished the goal of a good *kavya* and continues to influence Indians, generation after generation.

*Ramayana* will always be held in high esteem for its presentation of an idealistic way of life. *Ramayana* establishes the idea of an ideal householder (*grihastha*)’s life. The epic teaches an individual about how to be an ideal son, an affectionate brother, a trustworthy friend, a loving wife, a doting and guiding
mother, an ideal king, a responsible citizen, and a responsible guru (teacher) and an obedient sishya (student). It promotes friendliness and affection among all members of a family, of a society and of a nation. It guides an individual as to how to respond to pain or pleasure in different situations of life. It presents a picture of comparison between Rama and Ravana and advises an individual to lead life like Rama.

The strength of Ramayana lies in the characterization. Sri Rama and Sita are the protagonists of this epic. They are considered role models for all, in leading their lives.

Sri Rama, the avataara (incarnation) of Sri Maha Vishnu, declared more than once in Ramayana that he considered himself an ordinary human being. He faced more difficulties and trials in his life than any ordinary human. He was highly principled and he sacrificed the power and glory of the kingdom to keep the promise made by his father Dasaratha to Kaikeyi. He maintained the honour of word given by his father even after his father’s demise. Obedience to his father (pitr vaakya paripalana) and leading life with one wife (eka patni vrata) were two of the many principles he staunchly stood for. He was praised as personification of dharma-Ramo vigrahavan dharma by Maricha, the follower of Ravana and the enemy of Sri Rama. Valmiki himself was a great devotee of Sri Rama and we find praise of Sri Rama in Ramayana, as frequently as one breathes air. Sita or Janaki is affectionately referred to as ‘Sita mata’, and is regarded as an epitome of an ideal ‘Bharata Nari’ (Indian woman) and of all goodness that can be found in a woman. Supporting her husband in all situations of life, bearing with all the difficulties, was her ideal. It was her ardent love for husband that made her renounce all the pleasures of a kingdom and accompany her husband to the thick forest. She spent nearly nine months as a captive at Asokavana in Lanka, always remembering her husband. Ramayana is therefore described as ‘Sitayaah charitam mahath’ - the great story of Sita. Both Sita and Rama conferred enduring honour upon the epic.

Valmiki sketched all the characters of Ramayana with equal devotion and detail. Dasaratha’s intense love for his son, Rama’s devotion to his father and dharma, Lakshmana’s devotion to elder brother and Bharata’s sacrifice, Anjaneya’s devotion to his master and his supreme acts of valour, the strength of Vali, the power and glory of Ravana, Mandodari’s devotion to her husband, Taara’s political acumen, Sita’s ideal womanhood and love for her husband, the demonic activities of Rakshasas, Vibhishana’s sattva guna (pious nature), Sugriva’s steadfastness as a friend, Manthara’s maleficent nature, Kaikeyi’s unstable, gullible nature, Shurpanakha’s passion, Vishwamitra’s unstinted efforts to attain enlightenment were all
depicted so graphically that the characters of Ramayana are household names even today. The diligent way in which even the ‘not-so-important’ characters were treated, surprises the avid reader.

‘Na gayatryaah param mantram’ - Gayatri mantra is regarded as the most powerful mantra. Gayatri means ‘mantra that protects the singer or reciter of that mantra.’ There are twenty four syllables in Gayatri mantra. Mantras are ‘seen’ or obtained by revelation by Rishis or divine sages. Sage Vishwamitra is the ‘seer’ (Drashta) of Gayatri mantra. It is said that Valmiki took letters of this mantra and at the rate of one thousand slokas for each letter of Gayatri mantra, he composed Ramayana in 24,000 slokas. It is our tradition that only those who are initiated into Gayatri mantra, through upanayanam (initiation ceremony) are entitled to recite Gayatri and others are not; whereas all can freely recite Ramayana, comprising of the twenty four syllables of Gayatri mantra. All of us can get the benefits of reciting Gayatri mantra from recitation of Ramayana.

Srimad Ramayana is not only famous as a great epic but is also revered as a religious holy book. Srivaishnavas (devotees who believe in the supremacy of Sri Maha Vishnu over other gods) praise it as ‘dirgha saranagati’ (prolonged refuge).’ Tormented by Ravana, the gods visited vaikuntha, and prayed to Lord Vishnu and requested him to kill Ravana and protect them. Sri Maha Vishnu promised to kill Ravana and asked them to wait for some more time. This is the first saranagati or ‘coming for shelter’ in Ramayana. Later on, as the story unfolds, Vishwamitra, Lakshmana, Bharata, Ahalya, Sugriva, Sabari, Guha, Sri Anjaneya all of them seek ‘saranu’ (refuge or shelter) of Sri Rama. Sri Rama blessed all of them. Lastly, Vibhishana sought shelter from Sri Rama. Even though the individual who sought shelter was from enemy’s camp, Sri Rama gave shelter unhesitatingly. This is the mark of Sri Rama being an incarnation of God Himself.

Of all the characters of Ramayana, including those of the protagonists, the character of Hanuman holds special importance. Hanuman is introduced in Kishkindhakanda, without any fanfare, as one of the four ministers of the king-in-exile, Sugriva. However, from then onwards, the character is given such subtle yet significant treatment that it assumes divine proportion in Sundarakanda and Yuddhakanda. He was instrumental in the formation of a friendly pact between Rama and Sugriva. He helped Sugriva to regain his kingdom and brought back happiness to Sri Rama by finding Sita in Lanka.

He flew across the ocean of length of one hundred yojanas and reached Lanka. He roamed all around Lanka in a miniscule form due to his anima siddhi
(the magical power of becoming very tiny— as tiny as a grain of sand) and at last found Sita in Asoka vanam (garden); assessed the strengths and weaknesses of Ravana, the king of demons, displayed his own prowers by setting Lanka on fire; announced the most awaited news of Sita to Rama and Lakshmana and rekindled their hopes; brought sanjivani twice to protect the life of Lakshmana in the war field; declared the return of Rama from exile to Bharata and prevented him from entering into fire to end his life. Hanuman played such a key role in Ramayana that he is praised as ‘Ramayana mahamala ratna’ (the most precious stone in the garland called Ramayana). He was born of Lord Siva’s divinity and is therefore worshipped by shaivaites. As he is the devotee of Lord Rama, the incarnation of Maha Vishnu he is worshipped by vaishnavaites too. Thus, Hanuman is the favorite god of followers of different paths within Hinduism.

Hanuman is the epitome of wisdom, supreme strength, perfect control over senses, excellent executive ability, spotless, non-controversial character, fearlessness, heroic valour, good health, industriousness (never lazy), reputation, truth and clarity in speech and supernatural abilities. He is selfless and has no wants. He is a yogi, a pure devotee always meditating on Rama and is always pleased to be at any place wherever and whenever Rama is praised.

The story of such a magnificent personality is a part of Ramayana, making it even more religious.

To say that Ramayana is an important milestone in the history of Sanskrit literature is to repeat what is obvious. In fact, the theme of Ramayana and Lord Rama are a part of our national psyche. Ramayana has been retold many times in all Indian languages in the form of a Kavya, drama, harikatha (musical narration of mythological fables), champu (a form of kavya in prose and verse) and songs and is popular in every nook and corner of our country. It had also been translated into many foreign languages, owing to its distinction and popularity.

All of us who are proud of Indian culture and traditions should always recite Ramayana, imbibe the good values of life presented therein and put them to practice in our lives. Ramayana is a celebration of life in its full glory. Ramayana is about leading a happy and contented life in a morally acceptable way, in spite of trials and tribulations. It is about establishing the importance of ‘family’ as the basic unit of a society. It glorifies affection and love among all members of a family. It idealizes defending the virtuous and punishing the evil-doers. It also teaches us to forgive and forget a wrong-doer, in the face of repentance. It advocates disciplined adherence to dharma and maintenance of law and order in social and public life. It mirrors the
moral responsibilities of a ruler and the ruled. It counsels us about the need to overcome selfishness and other vices of life. It is about self respect and love for one’s family and country.

*Ramayana* is a revelation of what a great soul *Valmiki* was, and of his poetical abilities, wisdom, study of human psychology from all angles, his narrative felicity and clear presentation of dharma through various characters. All Indians are, indeed, indebted to such a great poet and visionary.

With folded hands, let us bow to **Maharshi Valmiki**:

*Kujantam Rama Ramethi madhuram madhuraaksharam

Aruhya kavithashakham vande Valmiki kokilam.*

I bow to the cuckoo called *Valmiki*, who is Singing ‘*Rama, Rama*’ melodiously in beautiful syllables, sitting on the branches of poetry.

*Valmiker munisimhasya kavithavanacharinah

Shrunvan Rama kathaanadam ko na yathi paraam gathim.*

A lion by name *Valmiki* is narrating the story of *Rama* through his roar. How can anyone, who heard that roar, not attain liberation (*moksha*)? It means that whoever reads *Valmiki’s Ramayana* will certainly be blessed to get *moksha* (liberation).

*Om tat sat*