The Story of Ram in Ramlila

There are many versions of the story of Ram, but the story that is told in many Ramlilas, plus or minus some scenes, is fairly consistent and begins long before Ram’s birth in the kingdom of Ayodhya. Two backstories entailing twists of fate and curses uttered in rage are often presented to set up the main plot. In the first one, a young Dashrath slays the virtuous and dutiful son Shravankumar in a hunting accident, prompting the latter’s blind father to proclaim that the king too will one day be separated from his son and die bereft. In the second backstory, the overly confident sage Narad discovers that Lord Vishnu has “made a monkey out of him” to bring him down a few spiritual notches, leading him to declare that Vishnu too will one day lose his beloved and have to rely on the aid of monkeys to recover her.

Fast forward to the dramatic present: Ravan, the arrogant ten-headed, half-brahmin, half-rākṣas (a variety of demon) ruler of the island kingdom of [Shri] Lanka is tormenting the earth with his atrocities and reign of terror. Distraught by Ravan’s rampage, the gods appeal to Vishnu to take human form on earth to rid it of the scourge of Ravan. Vishnu assumes the form of Prince Ram to defeat Ravan, with the aid of a celestial vēnar (monkey) army, gods incarnate. Vishnu’s divine partner Lakshmi assumes the form of heroine Princess Sita. Unfortunately for Ravan, he is invincible against all combatants except humans, as per the conditions of a boon he previously received from Lord Brahma after performing great penances.

Down on earth, noble King Dashrath rules the kingdom of Ayodhya. Desirous of a male heir, Dashrath calls on his sage-adviser, Vasishth, who arranges a ritual in which the king feeds his three wives, Kaushalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi, a milky pudding. The result of this ritual intervention is not one son, but four: Ram (by Kaushalya), Bharat (by Kaikeyi), and twins Lakshman and Shatrughna (by Sumitra). Lakshman is an incarnation of Sheshnag, Vishnu’s protective serpent. A few years later, Sita is born miraculously in the kingdom of Mithila. Her father King Janak and his wife discover the child by accident while plowing a field in a royal ritual, and indeed her name means “furrow.”
When Dashrath’s sons are teenagers, another sage pays a visit to Ayodhya. It is Vishwamitra, who earlier pulled himself up by his royal bootstraps through the power of his own formidable austerities, to become a great sage. He entreats Dashrath to place Ram and Lakshman in his care, to receive his tutelage and rid the forested areas of meddlesome demons. Initially hesitant, the king agrees, and the trio sets out. During their travels, the princes successfully clear out the demons, and Ram proves his mettle by slaying the demoness Tadka. Ram also shows his grace by liberating Alahya, whose ascetic husband had turned her to stone for her supposed infidelity. Next, Vishwamitra brings the boys to Janakpur, where Ram has his first glimpse of Sita in a chance encounter. King Janak is holding a svayamvar (“bride-groom choice” or marriage contest) for his daughter Sita. The condition that is whoever lifts and strings the mighty bow of Shiva shall marry Janak’s daughter Sita. After many princes fail, Ram steps forward and effortlessly completes the task, breaking the bow in the process. Vishnu’s sixth incarnation Parashuram appears and angrily questions why someone has broken Shiva’s bow, but is pacified by Ram. Then in a joyous wedding, Ram marries Sita, and his three brothers marry Sita’s kinswomen.

Some time later, Dashrath decides to retire and make Ram king. However, before Ram can assume the throne, Kaikeyi, provoked by her hunch-backed maidservant Manthra, conspires to make her son Bharat king. Cashing in an old promise from the king to grant her two wishes after she once saved his life on the battlefield, Kaikeyi now demands that Dashrath crown Bharat king and banish Ram to the forest for fourteen years. Distraught, Dashrath agrees to her demands and subsequently dies of a broken heart. Meanwhile, Ram, who placidly accepts his fate, has set out for the forest, with his wife Sita and brother Lakshman. In the forest, the brothers, now dressed in ascetic attire, and Sita meet people of various forest-dwelling communities, sages, and demons. Some are humble characters who attain salvation through their passing, loving experiences with Ram. This is the case with the boatman Kevat, who tenderly washes Ram’s feet and ferries Ram’s party across the Ganga (Ganges) River.

Devastated by the turn of events, Bharat visits Ram in the forest and begs him to return to Ayodhya. When Ram dutifully declines, Bharat returns to Ayodhya bearing Ram’s wooden sandals on his head in a symbolic gesture, and rules in his stead. Ram, Sita, and Lakshman then live a tranquil life in the forest until one day when they are visited by the demoness Shurpnakha, Ravan’s sister. Attracted to the brothers, she takes on the form of a beautiful woman and attempts to entice Ram and then Lakshman, in turn, to marry her. Rebuffed, she becomes furious and is about to attack Sita, when on Ram’s order, Lakshman cuts
off her nose. In retaliation, Shurpanakha’s brothers Khar and Dushan engage the brothers in battle, and both perish.

Thus shamed, Shurpanakha flees to Lanka to enlist the support of Ravan. Initially reluctant, the lustful demon-king agrees to avenge her humiliation. First he coerces his uncle Marich to shapeshift into a golden deer as bait to draw Ram away from Sita in their forest hermitage. Fascinated with the deer, Sita indeed sends Ram to chase after it. Then Marich throws Ram’s voice feigning being hurt, prompting Sita to dispatch Lakshman to check on Ram. Before departing, Lakshman draws a line in the ground before Sita, the so-called *Lakṣman-rekha* (Lakshman’s line), which creates a protective force field around her. With Sita left alone, Ravan appears disguised as a sādhū (ascetic) and draws Sita out of the field by appealing to her duty to serve honored guests. As soon as Sita steps outside the line, an undisguised Ravan swoops in and abducts Sita, setting up the impetus for the war. Jatayu, a kindly vulture, tries in vain to save Sita, but he is mortally wounded, his wings cut off. Ravan hopes to make Sita his wife but she steadfastly refuses.

Returning and finding Sita gone, Ram is inconsolable. Searching for her, Ram and Lakshman meet up with dying Jatayu, and later, the elderly tribal ascetic Shabri, who offers them humble forest fruit, which Ram warmly accepts. On their counsel, Ram and Lakshman head south. In the monkey kingdom of Kishkindha, they form an alliance with Hanuman and Sugriv, who is embroiled in a conflict with his hot-headed brother, Vali, over control of Kishkindha. Ram helps Sugriv defeat Vali and regain the crown, by slaying him from a concealed position in combat. After a delay, Sugriv, his monkey troops, Vali’s son Angad, and the bear Jambavan return the favor by assisting Ram. They form four search parties and fan out in the cardinal directions in search of Sita.

From the group traveling south, Hanuman breaks off and flies to Lanka, along the way defeating two creatures who try to obstruct him over the ocean (Sursa) and at the gates of the city (Lankini). He then locates Sita, held captive in a grove of ashok trees. Hanuman gives her Ram’s signet ring but does not rescue her, for Sita would like that honor to go to her husband. To gain more intelligence, Hanuman then creates a ruckus, uprooting trees, tangling with Ravan’s forces, and slaying his son Akshaykumar. Willingly captured and brought before Ravan, Hanuman is defiant and tells Ravan to release Sita. When Ravan has his tail set alight to humiliate him, Hanuman breaks free and sets Lanka ablaze.

Back in Kishkindha, Hanuman gives Ram a full report and an ornament from Sita. Ram, Lakshman, and their allies then travel to Rameshwaram at the southern tip of India. Appalled by his brother
Ravan, pious Vibhishan defects and joins Ram’s camp, providing them with much wise advice. After Ram presses Sagar, lord of the ocean, to help them, Ram’s troops, under the direction of Nal and Nil, build a bridge to Lanka and cross over. Angad, Ram’s emissary, now makes one last ditch effort to avert war by asking Ravan to release Sita and challenging anyone to lift his foot to make Ram retreat. But Ravan declines the offer and fails to lift Angad’s foot.

The war begins. Ram’s forces battle Ravan’s, in fierce hand-to-hand combat, with soldiers bearing a variety of weapons—bows and arrows, clubs, lances, swords, daggers, and so on. The fighting coalesces around four major warriors in Ravan’s camp: Kumbhkarn (Ravan’s brother), Meghnad (Ravan’s son), Ahiravan (Ravan’s brother), and Ravan himself. Ravan’s favorite son Meghnad, also known as Indrajit (“Conqueror of Indra”), has the ability to make himself invisible and possesses the powerful śakti missile, which he launches on Lakshman, causing him to fall unconscious. A grief-stricken Ram dispatches Hanuman to bring the life-saving sañjīvanī herb from Mt. Dronagiri. Unsure of which herb to pick, Hanuman brings the entire mountain, and in this way saves Lakshman’s life.

Ravan sends his minions to awaken the giant Kumbhkarn (“Pot ears”), legendary for sleeping six months at a time. They use a variety of stratagems to awaken him. Once conscious, he is belligerent and fights fiercely against Ram, Lakshman, Hanuman and the rest, before being felled by Ram’s arrows. Meghnad suddenly withdraws to perform a special ritual to gain celestial powers that will make him invincible in battle. However, Ram and others disrupt the ritual, thwarting him. The fighting continues and Lakshman slays his archrival Meghnad. Sulochana, Meghnad’s wife, who earlier emotionally bid her husband farewell, now mourns and in a macabre turn, must ask Ram for her husband’s head so she can complete his last rites, and commit ritual suicide on his funeral pyre. Ravan now dispatches another brother, Ahiravan, who hatches a dastardly plot to sacrifice the two brothers to the Goddess. At night, he shapeshifts into Vibhishan, deludes Hanuman, and carries off Ram and Lakshman to his netherworld, pātāl-lok. Later tipped off by Vibhishan, Hanuman travels to the netherworld, takes the place of Devi Maiya on her seat, and slays Ahiravan.

With all of his chief kinsmen now dead, Ravan himself fights Ram. After a protracted battle, Ram pierces Ravan’s heart with an arrow and he falls dead. Hanuman and others triumphantly bring Sita out of captivity, and Ram anoints Vibhishan king of Lanka. With the war and his exile over, Ram and his party return to Ayodhya. Ram and Bharat are joyfully reunited, and everyone celebrates as Ram is reinstalled on the throne.