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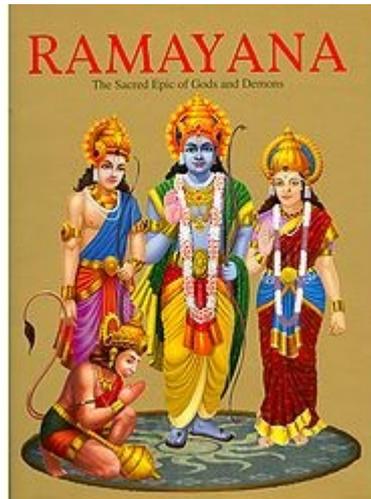
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Vibhishana - Loyalty Versus Righteousness

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The mythology of every land is a mirror to its culture, tradition, ethos and the psyche of its people. The tales and legends contained in great epics are not only educative and entertaining, but also serve as a lesson to educate past, present and future generations on cultivating and maintaining values, morals and, in general, becoming a better person.

The great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are veritable beacons in this aspect. Relevant in all times and to all ages, these works delve deeply into human behaviour through their characters; thus showing followers the right path towards Dharma or righteousness.



Ramayana - The Sacred Epic of Gods and Demons (Book)

Such is the tale of Vibhishana, the brother of King Ravana. His life is one of the best examples of selflessness, devotion, service and adherence to the Dharma. Let us take a detailed look at the life and times of Vibhishana.

Vibhishana

Vibhishana, also called Bibhishan, was the younger brother of Ravana, the Demon King of Lanka, in the great epic Ramayana. Though an asura himself, Vibhishana displayed none of his clan's characteristic behaviour. He was, in fact, a noble character and great devotee of Lord Rama, the seventh avatara of Sri Maha Vishnu and also the central character of the Ramayana. Vibhishana was all for peace and tried to advise Ravana against abducting Rama's wife, Sita.

He wanted his brother to return Sita to her husband. When the former refused to heed his words, Vibhishana deserted him and joined Rama's army; eventually helping the latter defeat Ravana.

Some records of Sinhalese history consider Vibhishana as one of the Sathara Waram Deviyo or the four guardian deities. This belief took predominance during the Kotte period. The Ravana Katha of Wickramasinghe Adigar narrates that, after Ravana was defeated and killed by Rama, Vibhishana ascended the throne as King. He then moved his Yaksha capital from Alakamandawa to Kelaniya. Post the 16th century, he was revered as a God of the four warrants by the Goddess Pattini. He still continues to be worshipped by a small number of devotees, mainly in the Kelaniya area.

Early Life

Vibhishana was the youngest son of Sage Vishrava and Kaikei. The brother of Ravana and Kumbhakarna, he is also one of the Seven Chiranjivis, or the Seven Immortal Beings in Hinduism, who will live on till the end of the present Kali Yuga. Though an asura himself, he defected from Ravana and went on to join Lord Rama to fight against him.

Vibhishana's character is quite similar to that of Yuyutsu in the Mahabharata. Yuyutsu was the son of Dhritarashtra. Born to Dhitarashtra's wife, Gandhari's maid, Sughada, he was the half-brother of the Kauravas. Yet, he chose to fight against them during the Great War of Kurukshetra.

Right from childhood, Vibhishana had a pure mind and sattvic nature. Even though he was a demon by birth, he considered himself to be a Brahmin. He was the grandson of the great sage, Pulatsya, so he was particular to keep up the name and reputation of his illustrious lineage. Hence, he discharged all his karmas as a Brahmin would.

As a little boy, he would spend all his time meditating on the name of the Lord. Pleased with his devotion, Lord Brahma appeared before him and offered him any boon he wanted. Vibhishana said that the only thing he ever wanted was to have his mind unwaveringly fixed on the Lord's Lotus Feet. He only wanted to be a servant of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu. Brahma readily granted him his boon and disappeared from there.

In the Ramayana

Vibhishana played a vital role in the Ramayana. He moved away from his own family, giving up all his wealth and royal status. He then supported and aided Rama throughout his tussle with Ravana. To understand his character to the fullest extent, we go right back, to the time of the Sita Swayamvara.

The Sita Swayamvara

Ravana had wanted Sita, ever since he first laid eyes on her. He was totally smitten by her beauty and charm and wanted to marry her at all costs. When the time came, Sita's father, King Janaka, arranged her swayamvara ceremony. For this, he invited all the Kings and princes from the nearby areas to come and participate in the ceremony.

King Janaka stipulated a condition for the prospective groom during the ceremony. He declared that only the person who would be able to lift and string the massive Shiva Dhanush (Lord Shiva's bow), would be able to win the hand of his daughter in marriage. Many a mighty ruler came forward to pick up the bow, but none could manage to even move it an inch.

Ravana too was one of the participants. Being vain and overconfident, he was absolutely sure that he would be able to lift the bow with ease. He was an ardent of Lord Shiva, but his ego

blinded him into disrespecting his own ishta devata (favourite deity).

Casually strolling up to the platform where the bow was placed, Ravana gloated that he would be able to lift it with his little finger. He then proceeded to lift it taking minimum effort. When he saw that it would not move, he went on to put in more and more effort, finally using all his might. After several tries, Ravana did manage to lift it a bit off the ground. However, it proved to be too heavy for him and dropped back to the platform with a loud thud. Frustrated and humiliated, he returned to his seat, secretly vowing that he would make Sita his own, no matter what came in his way.

Rama, the Prince of Ayodhya, was also present in the gathering, along with his younger brother Lakshmana and Sage Vishwamitra. When his turn came, Rama humbly prostrated before the Sage, greeted everyone and then, praying to Lord Shiva, offered his obeisance to the Shiva Dhanush.

Bending down, he lifted the bow in one effortless swoop and strung it, giving the string a sharp twang, the echo of which rang miles away. Everyone present there cheered and applauded this young prince who had accomplished the impossible.

Janaka, who had been dismayed till then, was elated to find a groom most worthy of his daughter. Sita too was delighted that Rama was going to wed her. She had fallen in love with him the moment she saw him and had been praying for this moment. She never liked Ravana and had gotten scared when he had tried to lift the bow.

The marriage ceremony took place in a grand manner and Rama and Sita became man and wife with the blessings of everyone present there. All except Ravana, who stormed out of the venue in a rage.



Rama Weds Sita - Madhubani Folk Art (Madhubani Painting)

Ravana Abducts Sita

Soon after the wedding, Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother, forced her husband Dasharatha to make her own son, Bharata, the King of Ayodhya. She connived with her evil maid Manthara to hatch a plan to force Rama to leave Ayodhya and spend some years in exile in the forest region of Dandaka. In the past, Dasharatha had told Kaikeyi to ask for two boons. At that time, she had said that she would take up on the offer whenever the time came. Now, she took advantage of that and asked her husband for the two boons. Firstly, she said that her son, Bharata, must ascend the throne. Secondly, Rama should go on an exile to the Dandaka forest for a period of 14 years.

Dasharatha was heartbroken that his oldest and favourite son had to leave thus. He, however, had no choice and had to let Rama leave. Rama, on the other hand, was calm and ever-willing to obey his parents' orders. Sita and Lakshmana too willingly renounced the comfort of the palace and joined Rama on his journey to Dandaka.

In the meantime, Ravana was still fuming at the humiliation he had faced at the hands of Rama. He was still thinking of wreaking revenge. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had moved to the forest at Panchavati and this offered Ravana the chance he had been waiting for, since so long. He decided it was now time to abduct Sita and take her to his palace.

He asked his Uncle, Maricha, to disguise himself as a golden deer and entice Sita. The deer reached Rama's hut and strolled around in the vicinity. Sita was immediately attracted to it and tried to catch it. After failing several times, she finally requested Rama to go bring the deer to her. Rama asked Lakshmana to keep a watch and left to fetch the deer.

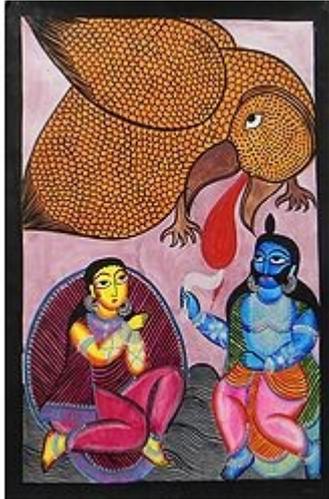
Maricha sped away deep into the woods. He then shouted out Lakshmana's name, imitating the voice of Rama. Thinking that his brother was in some kind of trouble, Lakshmana drew a line on the ground with the tip of his arrow, requesting Sita not to cross it. He told her that this Lakshmana Rekha would protect her, as long as she stayed within it.

Ravana then disguised himself as a mendicant and came begging for alms. Sita came out with some rice and requested him to come get it from her. Knowing that he had to lure Sita out of the Lakshmana Rekha, he refused and asked her to come give it to him instead. Just as Sita stepped out of the protective line, Ravana lifted the entire piece of earth that she was standing on. Placing it on his Pushpakavimana (flying chariot), he sped away with her towards Lanka. Some versions of the Ramayana narrate that the lady Ravana abducted was actually Maya Sita, her illusory double. The actual Sita, these versions claim, took refuge with Agni, the God of Fire.



Abduction of Sita By Ravana (Odisha Patta Painting)

On the way to Lanka, the vulture-king, Jatayu, heard Sita's screams for help and realized that Ravana was kidnapping her. Jatayu tried valiantly to protect Sita. He fought Ravana and gave him a hard time. However, the demon-king eventually chopped off both of Jatayu's wings and seriously wounded him. The latter fell to the ground and could only helplessly look on as Ravana took Sita away on his chariot. Rama and Lakshmana returned to find Sita missing and Jatayu so seriously injured. Rama gently placed his head on his lap. The vulture narrated the entire incident and then breathed his last on Rama's lap, thereby instantly attaining moksha (salvation).



Ravana, Sita and Jatayu (Kalighat Painting)

Ravana kept Sita prisoner at his Ashokvan and ordered all his female attendants to take good care of her. He held her captive for a year, during which time he approached her several times, expressing his deep desire to make her his own. Sita refused him each time and maintained her chastity.

In the meantime, Rama met Hanuman and sent him to find Sita. The mighty Hanuman crossed the ocean in one single leap and reached Lanka. He then found Sita at Ashokvan and told her he had come from Rama. He offered to take her back to Rama, but she was insistent that her Lord should come to Lanka, fight and kill Ravana and then take her back with him. Sita then blessed Hanuman and gave him her chudamani, a hair ornament, asking him to give it to her husband. Accordingly, Hanuman returned to Rama and narrated all his experiences in Lanka.

Vibhishana Joins Rama

Vibhishana's was always against Ravana's attitude. He took serious exception to his brother's heinous and cowardly act of kidnapping Sita. When he could not take it anymore, he approached his mother, Kaikesi, for advice. Being the wise woman she was, she asked him to go away from Lanka and join Rama. At that time, Rama was busy assembling an army in order to fight Ravana and bring back Sita.

As per his mother's advice, Vibhishana decided to flee Lanka and join hands with Rama. Before leaving, he called his daughter, Trijata, who was guarding Sita in Ashokvan. He asked her to take good care of her. He also told his wife Sarama about his plans and asked her to take good care of herself.

He then secretly left Lanka, with his mace in his hand, also accompanied by two of his favourite demons. It is commonly believe that, while going to meet a warrior to surrender oneself, one should not carry any weapon. However, Vibhishana had a purpose in carrying along his mace.

He was overwhelmed when he finally reached the shores of Rameshwaram where Rama, Lakshmana and the Vanara Sena (Army of Monkeys) were seated. At last, he could have a darshan of his Lord, who he was destined to serve for the rest of his life.



Hanuman and the Vanar Sena Build a Bridge of Rocks Across the Sea to Lanka - Scene from Ramayana (Odisha Patta Painting)

Seeing Vibhishana approach them with mace in hand, Hanuman and Sugreeva thought that he was coming to attack them. But Rama instantly realized why he had the weapon in his hand. The Lord knew that Vibhishana was actually his mace, just as Lakshmana was his Adishesha and his Sankha (Conch) and Chakra (Discus) were his own brothers, Bharata and Shatrughna respectively. It is said that, whenever Vishnu takes an avatara on earth in order to fight and destroy evil, his mace, conch and discus also accompany him in some human form. They then help the Lord to fight all the evil and reestablish Dharma on earth.

Vibhishana approached Rama and humbly fell at his feet. Rama fondly welcomed him into their fold and embraced him.

Vibhishana is an Invaluable Asset to Rama

Vibhishana proved to be a great asset to Rama and his army, as he divulged all the secrets and tactics of the Lankan army. His main aim was to defeat his brother and see to it that Rama would emerge victorious in the battle. Vibhishana also revealed the secret path to the temple of Mata Nikumbala, the family deity of the Pulatsya Dynasty. There, Ravana's son, Indrajit, was performing a yagna to defeat Rama. Lakshmana immediately went inside and destroyed that yagna, thereby denying him the blessings of their kuladevata.

Indrajit then decided to perform certain rituals and sacrifices to burn Rama to ashes. The magic tricks he employed for the same created much confusion amongst Rama's army. Vibhishana, being an asura himself, immediately recognized what was happening and why. He employed counter tricks to nullify the power of Indrajit's black magic.

Vibhishana also warned Rama and Lakshmana about the blackberry tree, under which Indrajit performed all his magic rituals. The place was littered with bodies of humans, who had been sacrificed during the rituals. He informed them that Indrajit's powers would be magnified when he sat under the tree and advised them to somehow pull him away from that tree.

Once the setubandhana (construction of the bridge) to Lanka was completed, Rama crossed over to that country and challenged Ravana to battle. However, in spite of fighting long and hard, he could not kill the demon king.



Ravana (Papier Mache Mask)

Seeing the potential damage that his brother was capable of causing to Rama's army, Vibhishana stepped forward and revealed the secret of Ravana's death to Rama. Ravana stored the Nectar of Immortality in his navel and, in order to slay him, it was necessary to hit him in the navel and dry out the nectar. Rama immediately pulled out an arrow, took aim and shot it at Ravana. The arrow found its mark and pierced Ravana on his navel, instantly killing him.

Rama Crowns Vibhishana the King of Lanka

Rama then freed an elated Sita from her captivity and prepared to take her back to Ayodhya. Before leaving, he showed Vibhishana his real form as Sri Maha Vishnu, blessed him and also crowned him as the King of Lanka. He then asked him to rule wisely, keeping the Dharma in mind, at all times.

Vibhishana: An Epitome of Devotion

Vibhishana was an epitome of devotion and selfless service. After ascending the throne of Lanka, he worked toward transforming his subjects and leading them on the path of Dharma or righteousness. His wife, Sarama, was also a pious lady and helped him in all his efforts.

With the Lord's grace, he came to be known as one among the Chiranjivis or Immortal Beings of Hinduism. As per Rama's direction, he continued to remain on Earth, spreading the message of devotion and selfless service to God. He also became an ardent devotee of Lord Ranganatha, the family deity of the Suryavamsha; the Sun Dynasty, to which Rama belonged.

Symbolically, Vibhishana personifies devotion. His story also indicates that, in spite of being a demon, the Lord does not distinguish between his devotees and showers his grace equally on all beings.

Association with Srirangam

Vibhishana has a deep association with Srirangam and the famous Ranganathaswamy Temple there. This temple is sacrosanct to all Hindus and is considered as the Bhooloka Vaikuntha (Vishnu's abode on earth). During the coronation of Rama, Vibhishana was presented the sacred Sri Ranga Vimana. Elated to receive this, he prepared to carry it back all the way to his kingdom in Lanka.

Midway, he stopped to rest at the banks of the Kaveri River. After taking a break, he performed

his routine pooja and then tried to lift the Vimana. However, the Vimana simply refused to budge from its place. Realizing that this was the act of the divine, Vibhishana prayed to Vishnu.



Lord Vishnu (Print on Laminated Board)

Lord Sri Maha Vishnu appeared before him and said that he desired to stay on in this place as Lord Ranganatha. This venue went on to become Srirangam. Vishnu also expressed a desire to watch the Brahmotsavam at Tirucherai. Hence, this festival is also considered to be very sacred.

Vibhishana's Previous Birth

According to Tulsidas' Ramayana, there is an interesting legend about Ravana's and Vibhishana's previous birth. This story narrates that there was once a king called Pratapabhanu. He had a brother called Arimardan and minister called Dharmaruchi. With their help and guidance, the king conquered many neighbouring kingdoms and ably ruled his state for a long time. The kingdom flourished under his rule and all his subjects were very happy.

One day, King Pratapabhanu went on a hunt to the forest. There, he saw a bear and tried to shoot it down with his arrow. However, the bear escaped and, though he went deep into the forest to track it down, he could not find it anywhere. Preparing to return home, he lost his way in the forest. Tired and thirsty, he wandered around, till he spied an ashrama (hermitage).

One of the kings who had earlier fought and been defeated by Pratapabhanu was taking refuge in the same ashrama. He was living in disguise as a sadhu (ascetic). Recognizing the king, he decided that he would take revenge for his humiliating defeat. He approached Pratapabhanu and told him that he could make him immortal, if he would invite all the Brahmins present there and also propitiate all of them.

He offered to cook the meal that the king would have to serve to all Brahmins. Pratapabhanu agreed. What he did not realize was that, the sadhu secretly mixed the flesh of a Brahmin while cooking. Just as everyone was ready to partake of the feast, an akashavani (celestial voice) warned them not to eat the food, as the flesh of a Brahmin was mixed with it.

Enraged, the Brahmins cursed Pratapabhanu that he and his family would be born as demons in their next birth, and that they would eventually be destroyed. Another akashavani filled the sky, saying that the king was innocent and was not party to this crime. However, it was already too late and the curse took effect. Meanwhile, the other king, who was actually responsible for

this heinous act, disappeared from the scene.

In his next birth, Pratapanbhanu was born as Ravana and his entire family belonged to the asura clan. His brother, Arimardan, was born as his brother, Kumbhakarna. His minister, Dharmaruchi, who always advised him to follow the path of dharma, reincarnated as Ravana's brother, Vibhishana.

Vibhishana Proposes Marriage to Mandodari

Before returning to Ayodhya with Sita and Lakshmana, Rama advised Vibhishana that he should marry Mandodari, the widow of Ravana and the reigning Queen of Lanka. He also visited the bereaved Mandodari, consoled her and reminded her of her duties to the kingdom.

Mandodari is one of the five Sreshta Naaris (exemplary women) of Hindu mythology. The other four include Ahilya, Draupadi, Kunti and Tara. She was a noble woman and was completely and unflinchingly loyal to her husband. She was against Ravana abducting Sita and begged him to return her to Rama. She knew that Ravana was being adharmic and was well aware of the consequences. However, she knew she had to stay by his side, no matter what.

Given her character, Mandodari was unwilling to marry Vibhishana, who was already married and had a daughter as well. After Rama and his entourage left Lanka, she returned to her own palace and disconnected herself from the outside world. Sometime later, she returned from her palace and decided to wed Vibhishana. This incident seems to be mentioned in passing in Tulsidas' Ramacharitamansas as well.

There are some reasons as to why Mandodari may have agreed to marry Vibhishana. According to one theory, Ravana's race may have had matrilineal families and hence, it became necessary for Vibhishana to marry the reigning Queen of the land, so as to bring order in the kingdom.

One other theory suggests that it may be a non-Aryan custom to marry the ruling Queen. In this case, the marriage would have been purely an "act of statesmanship" and nothing else. So, Mandodari would have married her own younger brother-in-law, as this would help her lead her kingdom towards stability and prosperity. This way, she would also hold power over the kingdom and have a say in governance.

Yet another reason for marrying Vibhishana was that Mandodari had nowhere to go after Ravana's death. It is believed that she attempted suicide, but it was averted, just in time, by Rama. The latter then advised her to reconsider her options and achieve some stability and purpose in her life, by marrying Vibhishana.

Whatever her reasons for agreeing to wed Vibhishana, Mandodari accepted his proposal and continued to guide the kingdom of Lanka towards the path of good and dharma.

Is Vibhishana Justified in His Behaviour?

Though the character of Vibhishana inspires one to lead a dharmic life, it also continues to receive much criticism from the Indian society. He was the one who betrayed his own brother and joined with a foreign enemy. He then went on to become the ruler of Lanka, also marrying his brother's wife.

In fact, there is even an idiom in Hindi, which goes as follows: "Ghar ka bhedi, Lanka dhaaye". This talks about him derogatorily, saying that a betrayer in one's own house can bring down even a kingdom as mighty as Lanka and can burn it to the ground.

However, it is important to understand that legends and epics are here to make people understand the importance of character, values and dharma. A casual reader tends to view

these epics adopting a black-and-white attitude. However, this is never the case in real life. Good and evil exists within all of us and each one of us has shades of grey that define our personality and make us the sort of person we are.

As mentioned earlier, Vibhishana was the personification of Sri Maha Vishnu's Gada or Mace. He knew deep down that it was divinely destined for him to return to his Lord, in this birth. He also believed that Rama was indeed an avatara of Vishnu, and that he was meant to serve him. To that extent, Vibhishana never once strayed from his own, personal dharmic duties.

Epics such as the Ramayana bring us characters in order to make us understand the practical implications of dharma. In this story, neither Vibhishana nor Kumbhakarna ever strayed from their personal concept of dharma. They were merely pushed into circumstances that created a moral dilemma for them. Kumbhakarna too knew that Ravana was going against dharma, but chose to be loyal to his kin, in spite of Ravana failing to heed his advice. On the other hand, Vibhishana chose to oppose his kin when his advice failed. Hence, this was a matter of choosing and adhering to personal principles; not a matter of right and wrong.

All his life, Vibhishana was devout, pure of heart and dharmic. He never intentionally hurt anyone or caused harm in any way. As a ruler too, he carried out his duties in a wise, just manner, thus bringing peace and prosperity to his land and his subjects.

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