

More than 2,000 years old, the *Ramayana* is an epic poem in the Hindu religious tradition. Originally written in Sanskrit, it is made up of 24,000 verses. It is sometimes compared to Homer's the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad*, which are Greek epic poems. The first written account of the *Ramayana* dates back to around the first century CE. Oral traditions, however, may extend back as far as the 400s or 300s BCE. The story has spread throughout all of South and Southeast Asia. There are popular retellings in many countries, including Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Laos, and Burma. Modern-day versions of the epic exist on stage, on screen, and even in graphic novels.



This wood carving shows Rama with Sita, his wife.

Ramayana means “Rama’s journey.” The poem follows the heroic adventures of Rama and his wife, Sita. Below is a summary of part of the *Ramayana*.

Rama is an incarnation, or form, of the Hindu god Vishnu. Sita is an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi. Prince Rama, the oldest of four sons, is chosen by Sita to be her husband. Rama and Sita are joined together through a traditional Indian custom called *swayamvara*. A *swayamvara* is a contest in which a girl’s father makes suitors, or men seeking brides, compete for his daughter’s hand in marriage. Sita’s father presents the suitors with an extremely heavy bow which he received from the god Shiva. No one has ever been able to string this bow. Rama succeeds, and therefore he and Sita are married. They declare their love and devotion to one another immediately.

Rama’s father wishes for Rama to become king. Just as Rama is about to ascend to the throne, however, the king is persuaded by one of his wives to choose her son, Bharata, instead. The king reluctantly agrees and exiles Rama to the forest for 14 years.

Bharata devoutly refuses to take Rama’s place, but Rama refuses to disobey his father. Sita refuses to remain behind and begs Rama to allow her to share his exile. She says,

*For O, my heart on this is set,
To follow thee, dear anchoret. . . .
She in this world shall be his wife,
His also in the afterlife.*

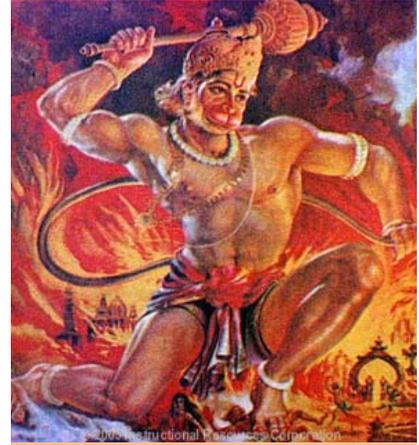
Rama agrees, and Rama, Sita, and Rama's loyal brother, Lakshman, dress like hermits and set out for the forest.

While in exile, Sita is kidnapped by the evil 10-headed demon king, Ravana. She is taken away to his kingdom. She refuses his romantic advances and waits for Rama to rescue her. Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshman search for her. Rama is full of anguish and worry for his wife, and could not find her anywhere he looked. His worry soon turns to terror, and then grief. He begins to cry, and falls to the ground, overcome with his sadness for his missing wife.

The brothers finally find Sita with help from Hanuman, the monkey king. They attack Ravana's kingdom, and Rama kills the evil king, Ravana. Sita is finally rescued, but Rama is cold to her. He questions whether she has been faithful. She pleads with Rama, and his brother, to believe that she has been faithful. She says,

*For how shall I, the chosen bride
Of dark hued Rama, lotus-eyed
The queen who once called Rama mine,
To love of other men decline ?
Believe me, Lakshman, Kama's wife
Before thine eyes will quit this life,
And not a moment will she stay
If her dear lord have passed away.'*

Her pleas to Lakshman convince him that she is telling the truth, and Lakshman helps convince Rama of her devotion. Still, Rama makes Sita endure a test of his own. He makes her stand in a fire, knowing that if she is innocent, the Lord of Fire will appear and proclaim Sita's innocence. She passes the test of fire, and the three return to the kingdom, where Rama assumes the throne. Rama, however, still has lingering doubts about Sita's loyalty. Rama hears rumors that the people in his kingdom do not believe that she has been faithful to her husband. He feels that he cannot rule if people distrust the queen. So, he decides to send Sita back to the forest. In exile, Sita gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusa. Rama eventually finds out about his sons and asks his family to return to the kingdom. Sita meets Rama once again and ultimately proves her devotion by asking the earth goddess to take her home. The earth opens up and takes Sita. Rama declares that he will not see her again on earth but that they



Artistic depiction of the
Ramayana.

will be reunited in the afterlife. Rama goes on to rule for a thousand years until he too returns to heaven.

The end of the poem proclaims this message:

This is the great first poem bleared and glorious, which gives long life to men and victory to kings the poem which Viilmiki made. He who listens to this wondrous tale of Rama un-wearied in action shall be absolved from all his sins. By listening to the deeds of Rama he who wishes for sons shall obtain his heart's desire, and to him who longs for riches shall riches be given.

Meaning Today

For many generations, Rama and Sita have served as the ideal man and woman in Indian culture. Rama is fearless, devout, principled, and powerful. Sita is beautiful, pure, and devoted. Young boys and girls have been encouraged to be like Rama or be like Sita in their interactions with others. Of course, in modern times, many may find these role models disturbing. Even though Sita risks her life to prove her devotion to her husband, it still wasn't enough to clear her name. She ultimately sacrifices herself to prove herself to her husband. Some modern feminist critiques have even speculated the poem promotes unfair treatment of women.

Nonetheless, the stories reveal the social mores, or values, of the time in which they were written. Dharma, or duty, is a major theme throughout the epic. Carrying out one's duty was of utmost importance in ancient India. Rama's duty was to be a fearless and devoted leader. Sita's was to be a faithful wife. Ultimately, they both did whatever they had to do, although harsh, to fulfill their destinies. Today, Rama is considered a god in many cultures. The *Ramayana*, along with another epic poem, the *Mahabarata*, are much revered Hindu texts.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** In what language was the *Ramayana* originally composed?
 - A.** Hindi
 - B.** Arabic
 - C.** Sanskrit
 - D.** Latin

- 2.** Why does Rama's father exile him for 14 years?
 - A.** He is jealous of his son's power.
 - B.** One of his wives wants her son Bharata to be king.
 - C.** He does not think Sita would be a fit queen.
 - D.** An evil demon makes him do it.

- 3.** Why does Rama exile Sita back to the forest?
 - A.** Rama wants to fulfill a promise to the monkey king.
 - B.** She did not prove herself faithful in the trial by fire.
 - C.** People in the kingdom do not trust that Sita was faithful.
 - D.** His brother Bharata asks him to.

- 4.** In the *Ramayana*, men and women have clearly defined gender roles. What do you think about Sita's role in the epic? What does it say about traditional male/female roles in ancient cultures? Do you think that the *Ramayana's* moral message is still relevant today?