RAMAYANA
Myth or Reality ?

By

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RAMA AS VISNU[13a]

Unlike the Mahabharata Rama is the central figure in almost all the important events. It is he who with the help of Lakshmana kills the Rakshasas while still a boy of 16, it is he who destroys no less than 14,000 Rakshasas in the Dandakaranya, in a single combat, while standing bare-footed, while his opponents were initially seated in a chariot. It is Rama who with one arrow only pierces all the seven sala trees. Ultimately it is Rama who kills Ravana and after regaining purified Sita flies back to Ayodhya in Ravana's Pushpaka Vimana. These unique feats, but particularly the *ekapatni-vrata* of Rama, in days when polygamy and alliance with young beautiful girls was common, and so also steadfast love of Sita for Rama against all threats and temptations and the brotherly affection of Lakshmana and Hanuman's unflinching services have left indelible mark on the Indian mind. Everyone of these characters has become an *adarsha*, an ideal to be cherished.

How old is this belief and what is its source?

The story of Rama and Sita is natural. It may happen at any time and in any clime, hence its universality. But the behaviour of the four or five principal characters is rare and unusual and it has gripped all readers.

From the preparation of the Critical Edition at Baroda it is evident that the Ramayana in all its essentials was known in India by at least the 5th century A.D. It was at this time that important scenes, events in the story, began to be portrayed in sculpture in early temples devoted to the worship of Visnu and possibly Siva also (though as yet we have not found any temples dedicated to Rama of such an early date).

This was the time when Kalidasa composed a major *kavya*, the *Raghuvamsa*, in which the events of Ramayana were incorporated. And slightly later Bhavabhuti wrote the famous *Uttara-Ramacharita*.

Thus by the 5th century the Ramayana was known not only over a great part of India but the story began to spread out-