

The Ur-Ramayana

(The Root Ramayana)

○ Nabaneeta Dev Sen

That which you create is the truth, What occurs is not always true.

Sugriv said: “You will certainly be successful. Your swiftness surmounts all obstacles on earth, in water and the skies. You have knowledge of the right; your strength, intelligence and bravery cannot be matched by any amongst us. Oh supreme one of the monkey clan, I have no doubt that you will return with news about our Sita Devi—you may even be able to rescue her!”

Hanuman said with a modest smile: “Maharaj, you flatter me. Anyway, I shall immediately set out on the mission to rescue Sita, to set Sri Ram Chandra’s mind at rest. But I require an introduction, after all. How else shall I prove my locus standi to Sita Devi? Perhaps the master of Ayodhya could provide me with an identity card. Or would the Kishkindha ID be sufficient?” A morose Sri Ram Chandra had till then been sitting listening to the conversation of the monkeys without a word. Time was flying. Only after a great deal of scolding and cursing had Lakshman managed to extract an unwilling Sugriv from the Queen’s quarters. The Sita-rescuing mission hadn’t even begun.

Now Ram Chandra took

off his invaluable gem-studded signet ring with his name and the Solar Dynasty insignia etched on it, and silently handed it to Pavanputra Hanuman. “Sita knows this well,” he said slowly. “We played the ringgame ritual with this ring the night after our wedding.” Hanuman touched the ring to his forehead and salaamed with a flourish: “Requesting permission to depart, Sir.” “May the God be with you,” said Ram Chandra and Sugriv together. “May you return successful, oh brave Mahavir.”

In one great leap from Sugriv’s royal court, Hanuman landed in the middle of the forest. Angad was there, busy measuring the long jumps of the monkey commanders. Sampaati had said that Sita was a hundredjoans away in the middle of the southern ocean on the coast of Lankadweep. King Ravan had stolen her and carried her away to his land. So Angad was testing the long-jump skills of Neel, Maid. Suhrod and Jambabaan to see who could twice cross those hundred joans in a single leap. It appeared that some spanned ten or twenty, some could cover eighty or ninety, but no one could manage to leap over a hundred joans. Then, hesitantly, they requested the great Hanuman. He was Pavanputra, the son of the Wind God. Thousands of joans were nothing for him. Hanuman agreed at once. And showed Angad the ring. “See that the ring doesn’t end up in the stomach of a fish!” warned the wise old Jambabaan. Hanuman smiled: “Do I look like a daydreaming, pregnant ashram damsel longing for her husband to distraction that I shall allow the ring to be swallowed up by fish, Jambabaan?”



Illustration by BADRI NARAYAN. Courtesy: The Ramayana

And bowing to the elderly monkeys, saluting the Sun and the Moon, the Wind, Fire, Water, Earth, the Ocean and Sri Ram Chandra, Hanuman began to get ready for his mission. Getting ready entailed acquiring the proper size for leaping across the ocean. He took a long and deep breath and puffed himself up by yogic power: He grew and grew, till he was as large as a rocket.

Then, with a cry of "lai Ram Chandra!" he leapt into space. But Mount Mahendra is no Cape Kennedy, prepared to withstand the effects of rocket launches. Here trees were yanked off by their roots and sucked into the skies on Hanuman's trail, the mountain cracked open throwing up warm water springs, shattered bits of rock jetted into the air. "Heave ho!" cried Hanuman up in the sky. The gods, demons, spirits and sundry other heavenly beings burst into spontaneous applause, cheered heartily and showered flowers from heaven. Angad and the monkey community scampered about collecting the flowers, with great glee. For these were akashkusum, heavenly flowers coloured by the shades of wishes.

Hanuman was sheltered by the fair wind (in other words, he was lovingly cradled by his father Pavan, the Wind God) and he floated swiftly and peacefully down straight to the coast of Lankadweep.

Passports and visas existed even in those days, though they had different names. Srimati Lanka Devi was the protector and patron goddess of Lanka. It was impossible to enter the land without overpowering her. Hence, she was truly Lanka's immigration officer.

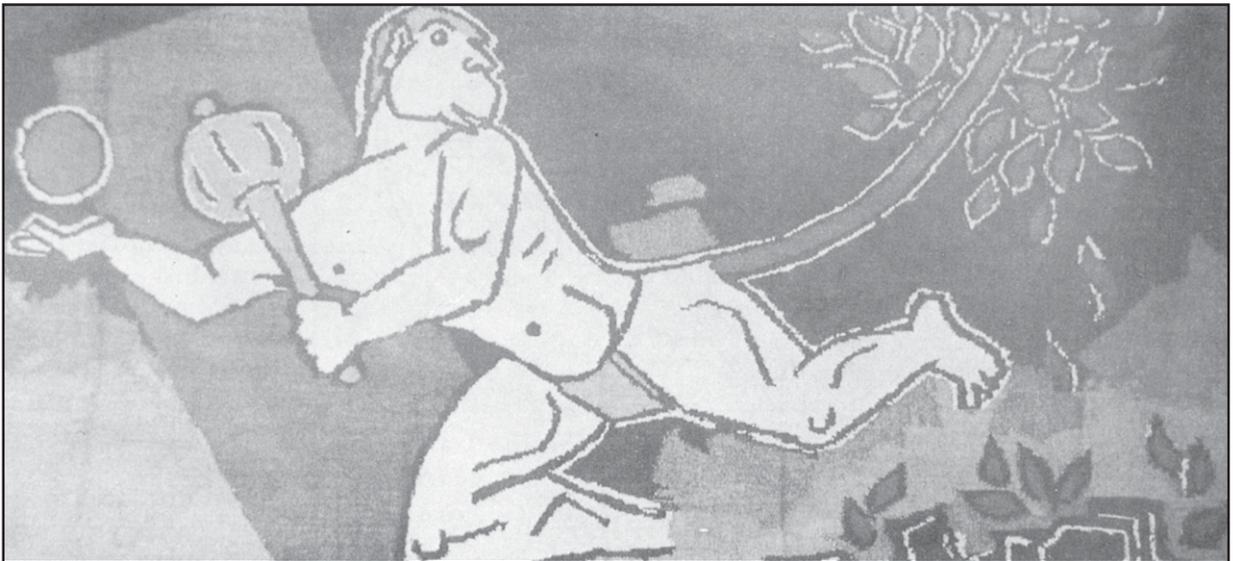
Grounding her in a trice with a 14-carat Hanumanly slap, the brave warrior entered Lanka with a whistle on his lips. Rubbing her cheek ruefully, Lanka Devi realised that the last days of Lanka were now at hand. She couldn't do much though, she didn't even have a walkie-talkie to warn others. Like Casablanca, she remained fixed to her station.

Hanuman entered Golden Lanka, and was so astounded that he froze in mid-breath. Even the whistle died on his lips which were now parted in utter amazement. The riches of Kishkindha were not to be scoffed at, but only Indra's court up in the heaven and the Pandava's palace in Hastinapur built by Moy could compare with the

Golden Lanka. And Hanuman had seen neither of those. Even before he set eyes on the royal palace, the roads, parks and multi-storied houses filled him with awe. Buildings made of gold! Heavens! Such architectural excellence! Hanuman completely forgot his reason for being there.

He wandered around happily like a tourist. At one point he found himself in front of the royal palace and leapt over the boundary wall to enter. And so began the search for Sita.

The gods in heaven lose their heads when they see Ravan's palace, and this was just Hanuman from the wilderness. What gardens, what fountains, what groves, nautch-halls, what an enormous dining hall, dreamy sleeping quarters. And what exquisitely beautiful young companions surrounded the huge-moustached, ten-headed great King Ravan as he lay in deep sleep, his twenty enormous drink-reddened half-closed eyes the colour of the rising sun. Even in his dreams, his pupils didn't dart right and left. His twenty hands entwined the necks of twenty sleeping beauties like garlands. Hanuman watched, wonder-struck. It suddenly struck him that

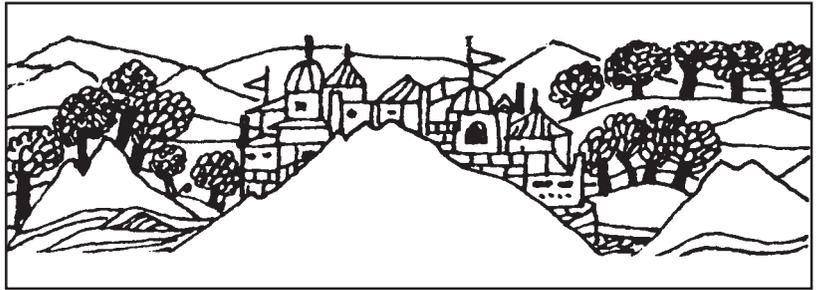


Painting : MF Hussain

maybe it was not proper for bachelor monkeys of impeccable character to cast eyes on sleeping female bodies. Even so, he stared with amazement at the mechanical golden doll-like lovelies who fanned the countless queens and King Ravan all night long with diamond-studded fans, though the gentle breeze bearing the fragrance of flowers and sandalwood wafted in from the garden through the open windows all around.

Wait! Who's that asleep on that golden bed just to the left of King Ravan? It's Sita Devi herself! Behold her sparkling golden skin, her wavy hair dark as the monsoon clouds of sravan, bedecked with jewel nets, the perfection of her limbs, her soft, full fingers each sparkling with jewelled rings, her body adorned with just the right ornaments, her clothes a little dishevelled because clearly she had fallen asleep in the throes of revelry... The room is littered with golden goblets, her ripe red lips slightly parted barely revealing a couple of pearly teeth.

Staring with great adoration, Hanuman reflected that Sita Devi was pretty well off here. Would she want to return to beds of straw, fruit meals and forest swamps? Had this been Queen Ruma Devi or Tara Devi, they'd have stayed here, no doubt. Who knows what Ayodhya's like? However nice a person Ram may be, and he was after all a part of Narayan. All said and done he was, to be honest, a king without a kingdom, dressed in rags, with matted hair, a family man of the sanaysi (an ascetic) type. He doesn't have an ounce of the glamour of King Ravan. For one, he has only one head. Only one pair of hands. And look at King Ravan



- what a personality! Ah! Even in the arms of sleep, he radiates vigorous masculinity. Arrogance flames from his sleeping brow, from the slight curve of his proud lips, his thrusting chin, his carefully tended moustache and sidelocks. And there's Ram, in a flood of tears, endlessly wailing "Ah Sita, oh Sita!"

It was only because Hanuman was a stout devotee of Ram and an honest person that he didn't transfer his loyalties to King Ravan on the spot. But he did wonder if Sita would return. Tohen he remembered that Ravan was not a man of good character. A man who makes off with another man's wife is a thief and a mischief-maker. Sita Devi is famous as Sita Lakshmi the symbol of chastity and conjugal purity. She had sacrificed the luminous plenty of her father-in-law's court willingly to accompany her husband to the forests. Was Hanuman making a mistake somewhere? He looked closely. The woman he believed to be Sita Devi looked as if she had borne a number of children. The shadow of age and wanton living had begun to mark her chin, the valley beside her nostrils, the edges of her eyesthough neither youth nor beauty had yet. begun to ebb away.

But Sita Devi had already spent a number of years leading an ascetic life wandering in the forest, sleeping on beds of grass,

eating fruits and roots to stay alive. It was unlikely for her to have much flesh on her frame, in fact very likely she was skinny. Besides, she hadn't yet borne children. Also, if Sita Devi was so fond of jewellery, why would she have chucked all her ornaments. as she came through the forest, marking out the path of her abduction? No, humans seem to have a different set of values. Sita may well be different from Tara Devi and Ruma Devi. It doesn't quite seem right that Dasarath's daughter-in-law, Janak's daughter Sita will decide to get drunk, deck up in ornaments and indulge in pleasures of the flesh at King Ravan's bedside. Chastity is hemmed in by too many constraints in human society, women wouldn't dare go to another man even if they wished to. So after much deliberation, Hanuman concluded that this woman could not be Sita. Her face was not shadowed by sorrow, loss, anxiety or worry - it reflected only satiation. She may well be the chief queen, Mandodari.

Hanuman left the palace, deciding to make a round of the groves and gardens to check out the fruits and have a quick snack. He was hungry after all that jumping around. Travelling a hundred jojans was no joke. So he strolled into the orchard, plucking fruits and gobbling them up. He plucked and gobbled,

plucked and gobbled. He chucked peels, skins and seeds all over the place, broke branches and tore leaves. The great monkey was busy littering and spoiling King Ravan's well-tended garden.

Suddenly he spied a unique grove of ashok trees in the distance, dazzling with flaming red flowers. One leap and he was in the grove. Not to eat, but to play monkey tricks. He began to rip off bunches of leaves and flowers, destroying the groves. Whether Sita was found or not, at least let Ravan's forest wealth be destroyed. And all of a sudden, beneath an ashok tree, he saw, hair loose and awry, dressed in rags, a veritable goddess. But this goddess had her feet firmly fixed on the ground, and her eyes were raining tears. Hanuman couldn't tear his eyes away. What a halo of beauty glowed around her! Thin with starvation, hair uncoiled, uncombed and unkempt, eyes puffy and red with crying, no jewellery adorning her except a single anklet around one ankle, whose matching pair Hanuman had seen in Ram's possession.

Hanuman began to chatter with glee. In undiluted joy, he jumped up and down, up on a branch and with a -thud on the ground, up again, down again. Such monkeying around startled Sita out of her weeping, and she lifted her astonished gaze at him. The moment she did so, Hanuman took a flying leap and landed right in front of her. He prostrated himself and

said: "Oh mother! I am your husband Ram Chandra's servant Hanuman. I've come to escort you back to your husband. Please climb on to my shoulder, I shall cross hundredjovans much faster than Ravan's flying chariot Pushpak, and deliver you to the lotus feet of Sri Ram Chandra in the bl'ink of an eye."

Hanuman's excited declaration left Sita gaping in open-mouthed disbelief. What was the monkey trying to say? Was he a mad monkey? Tetanus, hydrophobia... God alone knows what else may result if he bites. Oh dear. As it is, she had to deal with a mad demon. Now there seemed to be a mad monkey as well. Or was this more of that idiot demon's monkey business? Like the last time, when he came disguised as a sage. Sita promptly wiped her eyes, knitted her brows and said angrily: "Shoo, shoo! Go away! Scat! Scram! Bad demon, why

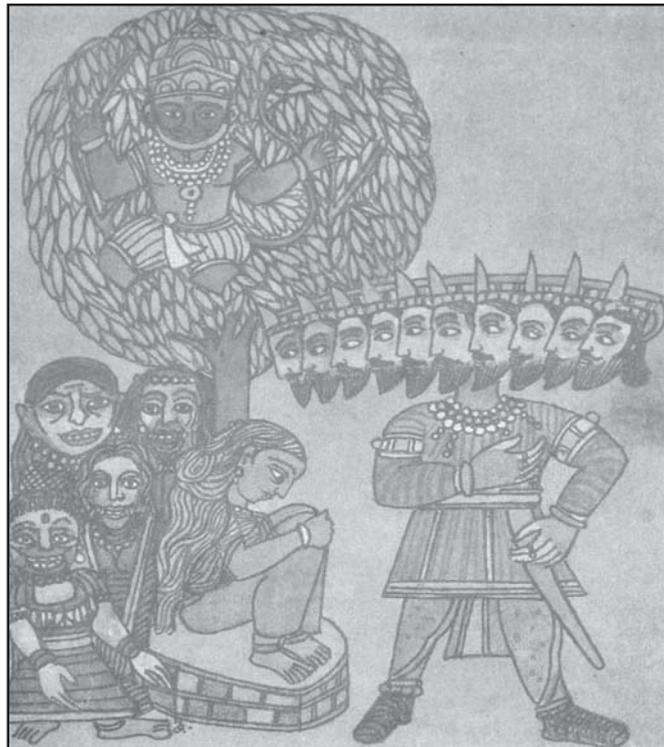
have you come to bug me again? And look! This time you're disguised as a monkey! You think I'll be fooled by your wiles? Alas, my lord husband Sri Ram Chandra! Alas, brother-in-law Lakshman! Where are you all?"

Hanuman smiled. "Oh goddess, dOh't be deluded!" he said sweetly. "I am really Pavanpu.ra Hanuman, born from the womb of the monkey princess Anjana.

Here, look at this ring, do you recognise it?" Taking the ring in her hand, Sita burst into tears. These are called anandashru, the tears of joy. Just to be sociable, Hanuman too cried with her. After having shed a few rivers of anandashru, Sita asked about the well-being of Ram and Lakshman. When the formalities were over, Hanuman said: "Mother, let's not delay any longer. If the demonesses wake up we'll have to waste some time in needless conflict.

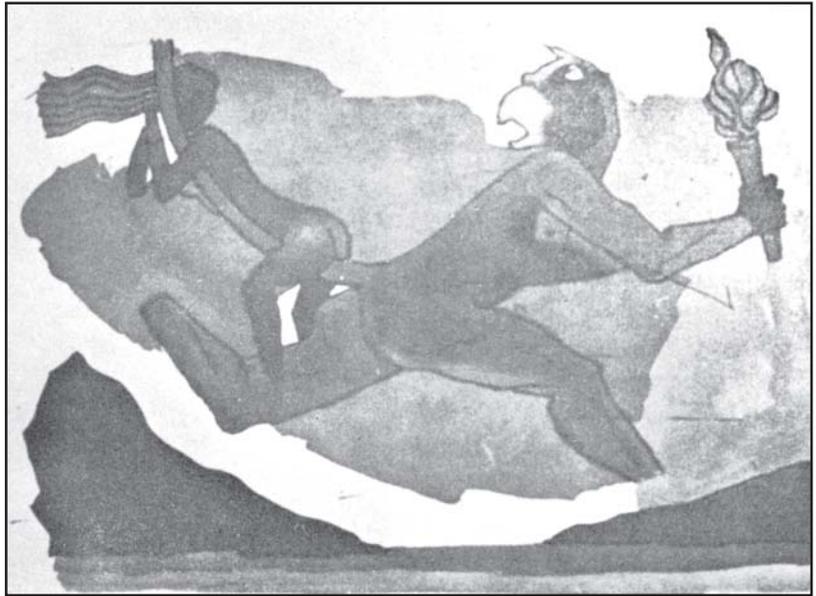
Don't be afraid, just get a firm grip on my shoulder and sit on my back. Sri Ram Chandra has become rather restless. He doesn't bathe, eat, sleep or rest. He's always worrying about you. He just yells at Lakshman and beats his breast in remorse. If we don't act fast, he may well end up as a basket case."

Hearing that Sita quickly hitched up her sari, tied it around her waist, and in a flash she was up on Hanuman's back. "Then let's go Hanuman, my son," she said. Like a shot Hanuman puffed up as



big as a rocket and with a mighty “heave ho!” took off. His supernatural leap created a tremendous friction in the air and sky and Golden Lanka burst into flames. The ash ok trees were uprooted and flung into the skies, the foundations of the seven storied houses cracked, the buildings jettied into oblivion. Lanka city was drowned in a chorus of mighty wails. No one had a clue as to what was going on. Some said it was an earthquake, others declared that a meteorite had landed, still others believed that a sleeping volcano had suddenly come to life, or there had been an explosion in an ammunition factory. There is no internal dissension in Lanka, everyone is happy there. There is no poverty, want, sorrow or suffering in Ravan’s reign. Whenever he feels the urge for brutality or terrorising, the great protector of his subjects King Ravan gives vent to them in other people’s kingdoms. So it couldn’t be a political disturbance. What was it then?

Meanwhile, Hanuman wove a translucent web of illusion around himself so that Sita’Devi would be invisible. Then he crossed the ocean in a trice and landed in Mount Mahendra. Hundredjojans are like a speck of snuff to his supersonic speed. Those of the mighty monkey army who had come to see him off hadn’t left the mountain yet. When they saw that he was already back, they were beside themselves with joy, squawking loudly with absolute glee. When they saw Sita Devi within the sparkling web of maya, their joy increased a hundred fold. Their yells of delight caused the birds of Mount Mahendra to fly off in a hurry, the small animals to scatter in fear and the large animals to rush into their caves for shelter.



The monkey brigade burst into celebrations by singing, dancing and kissing one another’s tails. The gods, demons, spirits et al appeared once more and showered petals from heaven. Then prince Angad scolded the monkeys and hollered: “Make a sandalwood palanquin first!” The monkeys carried Sita in the palanquin and started out in a great procession to Sri Ram Chandra. Behold, a reunion of such moving tenderness! Valmiki hasn’t recorded it, so the people of this world have been deprived of the knowledge of this enchanting scene for ever.

The monkey troops were in the throes of superlative celebration centred on Ram, Lakshman and Sita. They had already destroyed entire forests of honey and had become quite intoxicated with the elixir they had found within, and Sri Ram had already forgiven the mischief. Putting his own invaluable jewelled chain around Hanuman’s neck, Ram proclaimed: “Oh the greatest of all monkeys! From this day you are immortal!” Picking up Sita and placing her on his left knee, Ram

began to carefully arrange the strands of hair that had tumbled onto her forehead and whisper sweet nothings into her rose-petal ears which made Sita blush right down to her throat. Lakshman of course wasn’t watching all this, for his eyes don’t travel above Sita’s feet—so he was carefully placing the other anklet around her ankle, when shattering this blissful interlude to a thousand pieces, a valmik—an ant:lill--stirred.

And from within this valmik emerged the anthill encrusted sage Valmiki, mad with fury, cursing and condemning Ram Chandra, his eyes livid, his words bitter. Valmiki said: “Shame on you progeny of Dasharath, Lord of Lakshmi Sri Narayan in the form of lotus-eyed Sri Ram! Does this become you? Just because you have come to earth in human form, does it mean that the ways of humans should enter so deeply into your divine nature that you must forget the purpose of your coming to earth? Even the purpose behind causing Ravan to abduct Sita? First, you lose all

sense of balance grieving for Sita, then you get a monkey to rescue Sita, and now you are here, cooing like a pair of turtle-doves! May I ask, how the war between Ram and Ravan is supposed to take place now? Do tell! Preparations of this great war have been brewing since the Krita and Treta eras, on Earth, the heavens and the underworld, the ten heads of Brahma- Vishnu- Maheshwar (i.e. four plus one plus five) have had to be put together, so much planning has gone into this! Now all that has been spoilt by a know-all, smart alec monkey! The universe is on the verge of sinking with Ravan's sins. Now how will dharma be restored and how on earth will I write the Ramayana?"

Having successfully reduced Ram to a jelly quivering with embarrassment, Valmiki turned to Sita. "And you too, mother Sita Devi!" he began., "Congratulations! An auspicious royal daughter and daughter-in-law, didn't you feel the tiniest bit of shame or hesitation while clinging to the neck of a burnt-face monkey? Didn't you even tremble at the thought of touching another male? Or has your sojourn with the demons made all your finer feelings...,"

Unlike Ram, Sita Devi wasn't the type to take things lying down. She flared up like phosphorous: "Mind your language, sage sir! What's an 'other man' among animals? Is a monkey human? I've ridden horses in my father's house for exercise, I've gone for fresh air riding elephants in my father-inlaw's house, there was no sin in that! But when I ride on a monkey's back to come back to my husband from the house of the enemy, it suddenly becomes a sin! Why? Just because I haven't been smothered by an



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anthill, you think I have no clue about what's right and proper? Do not underestimate a woman who is not born from the womb, oh sage. Think twice before you weave your arguments. Remember, I too am born as part of Lakshmi. The monkey Hanuman, whose shoulder I sat on is like my son-he calls me mother. Alas, blind superstitions! So what if anthills have given you the status of sage, you were no more than a robber, remember? Your mind's just as impure as it used to be. Angara shata dhautena malinatva... etc etc. No matter how much you wash the coal, its blackness cannot be wiped away!"

At the receiving end of such scolding from Sita, Valmiki was dumbfounded. Rage addled his brain. He didn't know what to say. He began to stutter and stammer. Ram Chandra smelt doom. If the epic poet begins to stammer, how will the epic ever be written? "Okay, okay, let's not go into all that," he said hurriedly. "Now tell me Sita, what should be done? Really, it's true that in the operation to rescue you I was scheduled to destroy Ravan and his clan and re-establish

the one true dhanna on earth, sky and the netherworld. Creation is just about drowning in Ravan's evil, the cosmic order is about to be destroyed. But now? How does one go about saving the universe? Everything has been upset!"

Sita's bow-shaped brows arched to a sharp scythe. "What's upset, Aryadev?" she said. "Why. are you going by an anthill sage's ramblings? I'll set everything right. Okay, so there have been a couple of slips, but that doesn't mean they can't be rectified. There's hardly a mile between Mount Mahendra and the ashok grove. I had just about got on when it was time to get off. We'll reach in the twinkling of an eye. Come Hanuman, my son. Let me get on your back once more. I'm sure those lazy demonesses are still asleep. But don't delay the rescue, my lord. Come save me swiftly, brother-in-law Lakshman. Come my son Hanuman, let's go back to Lanka. Huh!" And decimating Valmiki with a single Jook Sita turned away.

"As you say, mother," said Hanuman. "Victory to Sri Ram Chandra!" And he amassed all his strength, assumed rocket proportions once more, and flew off. This time, because of Sri Ram Chandra's divine presence, nature suffered no disturbances. The monkeys waved white hankies and wished Hanuman a bon voyage.

Valmiki watched, teeth on edge.

And said to himself: "So you're a spirited female, eh? All right. I too am Mahakavi Valmiki. I'll see how you get away! Whispering sweet nothings cradled in your husband's lap, eh? We'll see, we'll see. Just you wait. He who yields the pen, orders the future!" And what happened to Sita after that is, of course, history. □