

# SHRI SITA RAM FOUNDATION BLOG POSTS

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**Blog Heading: The Verdant Ramayana**

You've heard about the Ramayana as an epic about a **great king**.

You've heard about the Ramayana as the story of **Righteousness**.

You've also heard about the Ramayana as the **saga of God**.

You've noticed the story, the characters and the plot of the Ramayana. But have you paid attention to the setting?

**Religious. Political. Spiritual.**

The Ramayana has been given several hues.

But have you heard about the Ramayana as a work of Botany? Or a text of Geography? Or as a source of History? Perhaps not. Let me delve into the first

**“The Ramayana is a botanist's delight, with detailed descriptions of forest types and plants that grew therein.”**

I am not a religious person. But I enjoy reading the Ramayana and essays about the Ramayana. It has been for time **immemorial**, a **reflection of Indian society and its values**.

**In Bengal, whether the Devi cult is strong, you will find a Women's Ramayana.**

At the height of the bhakti movement sprang out the **Odiya Ramayana** in which the popular scene of **Rama eating the tasted berries from Shabri's hand takes place, urging people to break social taboos**.

In the **Jain Ramayana**, **Rama must practice ahimsa or nonviolence, and it is Lakshman who slays Ravana**.

The **Ramayana offers a vast canvas for those interested in studying** History, Geography, Sociology, Botany, Zoology and just about everything else!

The text and its variants fascinate me. For it speaks to me in ways unimaginable, about the history of India and her people.

One of the contexts that I find interesting about the Ramayana the trees and forests mentioned there.

**Botany lessons from Ramayana (Forests and trees in the epic)**

The 14-year vanvaasa or forest exile takes Rama through these forests of the Indian subcontinent. You can still find these jungles and trees today!

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Chitrakoot, present day Madhya Pradesh.

### 1. Chitrakoot

**Rama spends the early part of his exile here.** It is to the **south of Mandakini River**. This region is rich with fruit-laden trees like mango and bael.

Chitrakoot means the **'Hill of many wonders'**. Chitrakoot region falls in the northern **Vindhya range spread over the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh**.

Chitrakoot's spiritual legacy stretches back to legendary ages. It was in these deep forests that **Ram, Goddess Sita and his brother Lakshman spent eleven years and six months of their fourteen years of banishment**.

It is said that all the gods and goddesses came to Chitrakoot when **Lord Rama performed the Shradh ceremony of his father to partake of the shuddhi (i.e. a feast given to all the relatives and friends on the thirteenth day of the death in the family)**. The first known mention of the place is in the Valmiki Ramayan, which is believed to be the first ever Mahakavya composed by the first ever poet.

As Valmiki is said to be contemporaneous with (or even earlier than) Ram and is **believed to have composed the Ramayan before the birth of Lord Ram**, the antiquity of its fame can well be gauged.



Dandakaranya, present day Chhattisgarh.

### 2. Dandakaranya

This area is said to be **modern-day Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh**. This is a deciduous forest and was said to contain lions and tigers.

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**Dandakaranya is a historical region in India**, mentioned in the Ramayana. Dandakaranya, means the Dandak Forest, the abode of the demon Dandak. The name of this forest is mentioned in the ancient Indian text Ramayana. It was the location of the Danda Kingdom, a stronghold of the Rakshasa tribes. **It was a state of the Lanka Kingdom under the reign of Ravana. Ravana's governor Khara ruled this province.**

**The Dandakaranya zone was the location of the turning point in the Ramayana.** The plot for the divine objectives to uproot the rakshasa from the land was formulated here. **According to the Ramayana, it was home to many deadly creatures and demons.** Exiled persons resided here and sages had to cross it in order to reach the Vindhya Mountains.

**Rama, his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana spent initial years of fourteen years as exiles traveling around the region.** This region has an average height of metres and lies mostly in the **Indian State of Chhattisgarh.**



Panchavati, present day Nashik — Maharashtra.

### 3. Panchavati

This is where **the dramatic turn of Sita's abduction takes place. Lord Rama spent a few years of his 14-year-long vanvasa (exile) at Panchvati**, a place known in the Ramayana for 'Sita's haran' and many events leading up to it. **Located on the banks of the Godavari, India's second-longest river, Panchavati** is associated with rich mythology and history.

#### Famous places in Panchavati

**Kala Ram Mandir** : It is said that you'll feel **ananda (happiness)** twice over even if you just walk by the KalaRam Temple. **The temple is built right where Rama is believed to have set up his hut with Sita and Lakshman.** The story behind the name of the temple is that the sages of Panchvati pleaded with Rama to get rid of the **Rakshasas or demons** who occupied the region. Rama then took on his 'Kala Roop', or invoked his dark side, to slay and defeat them.

**Sita Gufa (The Cave of Sita)** : It is said that Sita was a Shiva devotee and used to pray to him inside a cave, now known as the Sita Gufa. The cave also has a make-up room or shringara greha, where she is said to have spent some of her time. **Sita Gufa is also believed to be the place from where the great Ravana kidnapped Sita.**

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Kishkindha, present day Karnataka.

### 4. Kishkindha

This is where **Rama meets Hanuman**. This forest is by the **Pampa Lake, in today's Karnataka**. It is described as containing many mango, banyan, peepal, sandalwood and apple trees.

**Kishkindha is the kingdom of the Vanara King Sugriva**, the younger brother of Vali, in the Sanskrit epic Ramayana. According to the historical account of India, this was the kingdom where Sugriva ruled with the assistance of his friend, Hanuman. **This kingdom is identified to be the regions around the Tungabhadra river (then known as Pampa Saras) near Hampi in present-day Bellary district, Karnataka**. The mountain near the river known as **Rishimukha, where Sugriva lived with Hanuman** during his exile, bears the same name.

During the **Treta Yuga, the whole region was within the dense Dandaka Forest**, which extended from the **Vindhya range to the South Indian peninsula**. Thus, this kingdom was considered to be that of the Vanaras.



Lanka, present day Sri Lanka.

### 5. Lanka

This area has lush evergreen forests. **Hanuman flies over these forests as he searches for Sita**. Rama and his army traverse these forests when they go to Lanka. **Sita waits under the Ashoka tree in the Ashoka Vatika**.

**The Lanka referred to in the still-extant Hindu Texts and the Ramayana (referred to as Ravana's Lanka), is considered to be a large island-country, situated in the Indian Ocean**. The island was situated on a plateau between three mountain peaks known as the Trikuta Mountains. **The ancient city of Lankapura is thought to have been burnt down by Hanuman**. After its king, Ravana, was killed by Rama with the help of Ravana's brother Vibhishana, the latter was crowned king of Lankapura.

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According to Ramayana, **Lanka was originally ruled by a yaksha named Sumali**. Kubera seized control of Lanka and established the Yaksha Kingdom and his capital was guarded by rakshasas. His half-brother **Ravana, son of the sage Vishravaya and Sumali's daughter Kaikesi, fought with Kubera and took Lanka from him.**

**Ravana ruled Lanka as king of the Rakshasa Kingdom.** The battle in Lanka is depicted in a famous relief in the **12th-century Khmer temple of Angkor Wat**. After Ravana's death, he was succeeded by his brother, Vibhishana.



Dronagiri, present day Uttarakhand

### 6. Dronagiri

These are **Himalayan Forests**. **Hanuman flies there in search of the Sanjivani herb** when Lakshman is mortally wounded in battle.

Beyond the Ramayana, in present-day **Drongiri village in the Uttarakhand Himalayas**, there is a mountain worshipped by locals that is believed to be the one that **Hanuman disfigured during his search for the life-saving herb.**

The village, situated at an altitude of 11,800 feet, is hard to access. In this ecologically-sensitive zone, **Hanuman is the bad guy. The villagers of Dronagiri haven't forgiven him for destroying the right flank of the mountain (Parbat Dev) that they worship.**

It is said that during the **Treta Yug — the second of the world's four epochs according to Hinduism** — when Hanuman flew in to find the Sanjivani plant to revive his lord's younger brother, **the villagers of Dronagiri did not allow him passage.**



This painting of the Mewar Ramayana by Sahib Din depicts Rama, Lakshmana and Sita in the forest that is bursting with several varieties of trees, birds and wildlife.



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**Chitrakoot is a lovely forest** filled with fruit bearing trees where **Rama spends the first part of his exile**. This forest is said to be filled with jackfruit and mango trees and deciduous in nature.

Following this, **Rama enters the Dandakaranya** — which is also a deciduous forest that is filled with many tall trees such as Sal, Badri and Bilwa trees. It is said that the name of the forest arises from the kind of grass which is found there called danda-trina grass. **It is also said to be the forest in which the demon Dandaka resided.**



In the Kishkinda kanda of the Ramayana, Sugriva and Vali battle it out as Rama watches hidden behind a tree.

The **Panchavati** forest comes next. This is where **Sita is abducted by Ravana**. It is in the region of modern-day Maharashtra and central India. The name Panchavati comes from pancha meaning five and vata meaning Banyan. **This is a dry deciduous forest that is still seen in large parts of central Maharashtra today.** It is described as containing Palmyra, date palm, mango and other trees.

Finally **Rama moves to Kishkinda in search of Sita, the kingdom to the south.** This is also described as a thickly forested area. **Here is where he meets Hanuman, Sugriva and Vali.** This is in **present-day Karnataka** — areas known as the **Rishyamukha and Matanga Hills-** names that have continued to this day.

When Hanuman flies to Lanka in search of Sita, **one discovers the forests of Lanka are described as evergreen.** Much like the equatorial forests one would find there. **The tree under which Sita sits is today called the Sita Ashoka (A+soka meaning no sorrow) — i.e. the tree that took Sita's sorrow away).** Ashoka vatika was a large garden in Lanka, full of Ashoka trees.

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Sita's sorrow vanishes as she hears the good news from Hanuman. The tree under which she sits is named Sita Ashoka — the tree that took away Sita's sorrow.

Later in the story comes **Dronagiri — the Himalayan Forest where Hanuman goes in search of the Sanjeevani herb when Lakshman is injured in battle.** This is described to be in the north, near Kailash and is an Alpine forest.

**The forest in the Ramayana is described as having 4 qualities.**

**Calm (shanta)**

**Sweet (madhura)**

**Angry (Raudra)**

**Fearful (Vibhatsa)**

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The setting varies from tropical deciduous forest to dry and moist forest, evergreen tropical forests to alpine forests. **The stretch of Valmiki's canvas is indeed extremely vast!**

**The Epic describes the settings of its scenes in vivid detail.** The rivers and the lakes, the flora and fauna, the birds and the insects, the topography and the land features.

**Experts who have studied the text say that all in all, the Epic contains references to 182 plants and trees!**

**“It is amazing how much Valmiki knew and how little has changed in the forests that are found in each of these places, except for its density and wildlife.**

**The Ramayana abounds with treasures.**

**For the lover of literature.**

**For the connoisseur of art.**

**For the history buff.**

**For the spiritually inclined.**

**For the sociologist and the naturalist.**

A pity indeed it is, that we have turned it into a battleground for asserting identity and claiming political hegemony.

**Throw aside these encumbrances!**

Let us discover the beauty of the Evergreen Epic.

And through it, together, we can discover an incredible slice of India!

**Take Shri Sita Ram Foundation's heartfelt thank you to all concerned for the decision to let you all know about "Ramayana" at this juncture. But let us be responsible, safe and yes, compassionate.**

**Jai Shree Ram!!**