

Ramayana Revisited

A tale of love & adventure

By Abha Dayal Kaul

It took Prince Rama of Ayodhya 14 years to return home to a hero's welcome after his exile in the wilderness; it has taken only 12 years for a Ramayana exhibition to 'revisit' us right here in Singapore. We welcome *Ramayana Revisited* with open arms and full hearts, brought to us by our own Asian Civilisations Museum, thus granting us a wonderful opportunity to embrace its remarkable collection of Ramayana-related artefacts, and to immerse ourselves in this wondrous tale which has enthralled millions over the centuries.

Most readers have an inkling that the Ramayana is an ancient Indian epic recounting the riveting saga of righteous Rama and compassionate Sita. One of the oldest stories on earth, from time immemorial it has been narrated in the form of verse, song, dance and theatre by bards, saints, sages, scholars, performers and grandmothers. It was committed to writing in Sanskrit by the poet Valmiki roughly 2,500 years ago, and later in the innumerable languages of India and the world. *Ramayana Revisited* explores this story based on Valmiki's classic, on Tulsidas' popular 16th century devotional text from North India, and also on a plurality of rich literary and other art traditions of South and Southeast Asia. Via stone sculptures, paper and cloth paintings, shadow puppets, photographs of ancient temples and monuments and interactive displays, the show emphasises the vast spread and unique absorption of the Ramayana ethos into local cultures in Asia.



Death of Kumbhakarna, *Wayang Kulit, Bali*



The Kidnapping of Sita, *Kamasan, Bali*

For those who lost the plot or never heard or understood the whole story, but also for those who know and love it well, here's a chance to focus on the tale itself. The exhibition is geared towards story telling – the grand, sweeping account of noble ideals and heroic personalities, of characters larger than life, both benevolent and evil, and also lesser-known ones with touching stories of their own. Come, get familiar with all seven 'books' of the epic, laid out in linear, sequential fashion, with key characters and episodes that populate and illuminate them. Come, contemplate the introduction's opening premise that Rama, born as a mortal, was none other than a reincarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu who assumed human form on earth in order to vanquish the all-powerful 'demon-king' Ravana.

As *Ramayana Revisited* unfolds Rama's story, it also offers a glimpse of the Hindu god Shiva in the introductory section. In the poet Tulsidas' majestic oeuvre the *Ramacharitamasa*, the great Shiva had treasured Rama's story in his mind and then relayed it to his consort Parvati at a favourable time. Thus the author, blessed by Shiva, was moved to compose the poem and retell the story, as Shiva had done before him.

At the outset, visitors will be captivated by two gorgeous images of Hanuman, Rama's most loyal servant and devoted monkey friend, who is never far away from Rama or a telling of the tale.

The narrative begins with the miraculous birth of Rama and his three brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughana, to the good King Dasharatha and his three queens. It includes significant events from the lives of these young, valiant princes who defend forest sages against mischievous demons and slay the notorious demoness,



Hanuman in Ashokavatika,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

together they embarked on their victorious journey back home, as the stipulated 14-year exile period was now almost up. The delighted inhabitants of Ayodhya welcomed them back with much fanfare – truth and justice had prevailed and Rama, the ideal man, was finally crowned King.

Who can resist the charm and drama of this incomparable story of love and adventure, extolling bravery, duty, sacrifice and service, especially when it is ‘sung’ to us in Rama’s court by Rama and Sita’s

Tadaka. A high point is the wedding of Rama and Sita, a ceremony in which the lovely bride chose her husband based on a show of prowess – only Prince Rama succeeded in lifting Shiva’s divine bow in Sita’s father’s court, and while stringing it, even snapped it in two. Thus Sita and Rama, eternal lovers destined to tread the path of ‘dharma’ (the law or supreme duty) together, were united in sacred marriage and spent several blissful years together in Ayodhya.

Just as Rama was to be crowned heir apparent, however, a terrible and unfortunate series of events occurred, resulting in his banishment from the kingdom. Having pledged to live in the forest as an ascetic, he was accompanied by devoted Sita and faithful Lakshmana. Numerous incidents took place, some of which you will see highlighted by intriguing artefacts. Then came the pivotal kidnapping of Sita by the wicked, lustful 10-headed King Ravana, leading to the search for Sita by Rama, aided by Hanuman and legions of courageous monkeys. Hanuman played a central role in ‘flying’ over an ocean, tracking Sita down, acting as Rama’s trusted messenger and appealing to Ravana to return Rama’s rightful wife, failing which Rama would have no alternative but to fight Ravana to vindicate his honour and reclaim his beloved Sita.

The monkey armies built a stone bridge across the ocean to the island of Lanka, Ravana’s kingdom, and upon seeing Hanuman in the palace gardens, Sita was assured that her splendid Prince Rama would arrive and rescue her. She had single-mindedly thought only of him during her captivity, rejecting all orders from Ravana and his wives and concubines to succumb to Ravana and supposedly end her misery. As Sita held out, awaiting Rama’s appearance, Ravana’s camp debated her return to Rama while Prince Rama himself readied his forces to storm Lanka in anticipation of battle. The arrogant Ravana passed up many opportunities to avert war and return Sita, thus bringing Rama’s wrath upon himself. He lost a dear son, a mighty brother and finally his own life in the ultimate battle of Lanka.

Sita went through a fire ordeal and emerged unscathed, proving her chastity after spending a year imprisoned by Ravana. She and Rama were joyously reunited, and

twin boys, Lava and Kusha, at the story’s end? Do look forward to ‘meeting’ them as you commence touring the exhibition and hear the entire tale narrated in their youthful words.

Ramayana Revisited is a collaborative exercise between South Asian and Southeast Asian curators for the enjoyment of the general visitor who would be fascinated to discover how a largely orally transmitted story found its way deep into the cultures of Southeast Asia. The tale has given rise to palmleaf manuscripts in Thailand, shadow puppets in Malaysia and Indonesia, and temple sculptures in Cambodia. When you visit, you will have an idea of why the Ramayana still appeals to multitudes – transcending age, gender, religion, geography, time and other boundaries – as a truly universal epic!

Ramayana Revisited is on view through August 22 at the Peranakan Museum.

Abha Dayal Kaul grew up in a culture which revels in the *Ramayana* and values its continuous relevance in our daily lives. She is thrilled to have participated in the FOM’s research group for *Ramayana Revisited*.

Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum



Rama, Sita and Lakshmana Perform Death Rites,
Kangra Painting, India