

Srimad Valmiki Ramayana contains some of the famous hospitalities hosted by Rishis in honour of visiting kings and his retinue. Of course, on the face of it, hosting a feast need not merit any discussions at all. But what stands out, in these cases, is the scale and grand manner of conduct of feast spontaneously with *greater purpose* despite simple austere living and limited means of subsistence of the host.

The first one was the grand feast hosted by Bhardwaj Rishi in honour of Bharatha, his ministers, the army and the general public from all walks of life who accompanied him.

A recount of the events preceding the so-called feast would help one to appreciate the timing and significance of the event. Kaikeyi, in blatant misuse of the promises given to her by the king long ago, exercised her option to halt the intended coronation of Sri Rama and wanted his exile etc. As a result, the entire city plunged into the morass of unending grief culminating in the death of Dasharatha. Messengers were dispatched to bring Bharatha from his maternal grandparent's place. He was unaware of what all had happened in his absence in Ayodhya. Though he had premonition of some sort of bad turn of events to take place in Ayodhya vaguely in a dream, never could he imagine the harshest treatments meted out to Sri Rama due to misplaced affection of Kaikeyi towards Bharatha. Kaikeyi's action had rattled his conscience. Right from the day he arrived at Ayodhya, the grief-stricken Bharatha neither could eat nor could sleep. His bemoaning in a way portrayed or mirrored the unfathomable sadness of Kausalya and all other residents of Ayodhya. Mother Kausalya became emaciated due to starvation.¹ All of them had literally starved and eked out a miserable life only waiting for return of their beloved master.

Bharatha was such a noble soul² that he resisted all kinds of temptation of pomp and show which goes with the rulership even though such an opportunity had fallen to his lot effortlessly.³ He esteemed his elder brother as his teacher, master and only refuge for him as his eternal servant.⁴

He considered him as a main cause for Sri Rama's sufferings. Bharatha, after the completion of last rites of the king, outrightly refused to take up the rulership. Due to the miserable events at Ayodhya, he became feeble, emotionally drained and miserable to look at. However, he announced his firm resolve to go to forest and to surrender at the lotus feet of his master and would bring him to the city as the king.

With massive crowd eager to have a glimpse of Sri Rama, he set out with huge army to go to Chitrakoot to meet, plead and request his elder brother to return to the kingdom. On the way, they came across a hermitage of one Rishi by name Bhardwaj who can only guide them to the exact location of stay of Sri Rama. A soft and law-abiding Bharatha stationed his battalions at a distance. He, with Vasistha and some important ministers, entered the holy

¹ कौसल्या भृश दुःखिता ॥ उपवास कृशा दीना भर्तृ व्यसन कर्षिताः ॥ (Ayodhya Kanda Sarga 87)

² भरतः वाक्यम् धर्म अभिजनवान् शुचिः । (Ayodhya Kanda Sarga)

³ धन्यः त्वम् न त्वया तुल्यंपश्यामि जगती तले । अयत्नात् आगतम् राज्यम् यः त्वम् त्यक्तुम् इह इच्चसि ॥ (Ayodhya Kanda Sarga 85)

⁴ यो मे भ्राता पिता बन्धुर् यस्य दासो अस्मि धीमतः ॥ (Ayodhya Kanda Sarga)

hermitage to pay respect to him. Only to test the unwavering resolve of Bharatha as well as to show to the world the selflessness of Bharatha, the Sage expressed his apprehension that there were no hidden agenda of harming Sri Rama by his intended visit to Chitrakoot. The young brother of Sri Rama was crest fallen and openly decried his pitiable position being judged wrongly by one and all and now none other than the Sage who truly knew the events of happenings. The Sage affectionately consoled the sobbing Bharatha and volunteered to provide a feast. He declined the offer politely. However, the Rishi insisted that he really wanted to host a feast to the thousands of people accompanying him. Having secured his kind permission, the Rishi's invoked celestial to make arrangement and conduct the feast.

Breath taking arrangements including rivers were made available instantaneously to the guests for taking bath, stay etc. Celestial musicians and dancers arrived at to regale the weary souls. They were greeted and lovingly attended to by them. These women personally took care of each and every guest, gave them oil bath, massage, dressed them up with new garments which was never seen on the earth, smeared them with perfumes etc. Different varieties of wines were served in plenty. Six kinds of preparation of food and variety of items were served. Everyone consumed it to their hearts' content. Not only the people, even the horses, the elephants were taken care of in equal measure. Thus, without any exception, all of them acknowledged that they were entertained beyond words and thoughts. So much so, these people who were starving for last few days and anxiously awaiting to see Sri Rama, now only wanted to remain in the hermitage forever. Neither were they interested to return to Ayodhya nor to proceed to Dandaka Forest to see Sri Rama. By staying at ashram, they only wanted to extend their blessings to Bharatha and Sri Rama.⁵

It is beyond our imagination that such a huge scale of feast could ever be conducted without any prior preparation. The mental satisfaction uniformly felt by one and all is also hard to create in the present world even if one manages to prepare a feast in grand manner. It is only the sheer power of penance of the host which contributed the success. Further the Sage, being warm and loveable human being, wanted to shower happiness on the fellow devotees of Sri Rama as they were famished at that time.

Besides, Bhardwaj Rishi knew that the service to these simple people having unshakeable love and affection towards Sri Rama was the need of the hour since they had endured severest test of faith of love by the exile of their Lord. Therefore, this feast ranks foremost since the ways of the Lord Sri Rama are unfathomable. Affectionate Sri Rama could never endure the harshest ordeal of starvation of his devotees.

Similarly, Bharadwaj Rishi hosted a grand feast in honour of Sri Rama on his return from exile accompanied by Sugriva, Angada, Vibhishana and other multitudes of Vanaras. Sri Rama happily spared a day and stayed to avail the courtesy extended by the Sage. At that time, Bhardwaj readily agreed to the request of Sri Rama bestowing a boon to Vanaras that wherever they stationed there would be plenty of fruits and other natural resources for their welfare and

⁵ न एव अयोध्याम् गमिष्यामो न गमिष्याम दण्डकान् | कुशलम् भरतस्य अस्तु रामस्य अस्तु तथा सुखम् || (Ayodhya Kanda Sarga 91)

survival. Further, he was profusely happy and proud of Sri Rama who had carried out the wishes of his father and through that had brought joy to many.⁶

The second heartwarming feast was, an austere one, given by Shabari to Sri Rama and Lakshmana on their visit to see her at Matanga Muni's ashram. The feast was the simplest one as it consisted of specially selected ripened fresh fruits grown in areas surrounding Pampa Lake.⁷ And it was strictly in accordance with what is prescribed in Vedas. What made the feast memorable are mainly on two counts. One, Shabari waited alone in the ashram for the arrival of Sri Rama, right from the time he entered into Chitrakoot roughly about 12 years ago. Her only purpose of living was only to see and serve Him during his visit as ordained by her Guru. She maintained the ashram in clean condition. She kept ready herself every day till the final day of occurrence with all customary necessary things to welcome the revered guests and carefully selected fresh ripened fruits etc to offer to them. She did the hospitality with affection, pure heart and sincerity. Neither She saw them earlier nor was she aware of the exact time of their arrival at her ashram. Such a long holy wait coupled with genuine affection to meet the guests. Secondly, Sri Rama not only relished her hospitality but also obliged her wish to be a witness of her ascendancy to her cherished world. Thus, Sri Rama, in a way, reciprocated in a manner which more than compensate the ordeal of Shabari as well as the greatness of the feast.

These two hospitalities are still being remembered daily among other 5 equally memorable ones while a devotee is offering delicious dishes etc, to the Lord. Some of the other famous hospitalities spoken high by the Acharyas are Vidhura's hospitality, Kunti to Lord Krishna, Yasodha Devi motherly service to young Krishna, Gopa's sumptuous feast to mountain Govardhan, the spontaneous hospitalities extended by the wives of the priest performing yagna etc. Let us fervently pray to Sri Rama that we may, with His kind grace, develop in us unpatrolled attitude of utmost sincerity, motherly love and affection and with heart felt personal touch every time while offering foods to the Lord.

⁶ सांप्रतम् तु समृद्धार्थं समिन्नगणबान्धवम् ॥ समीक्ष्य विजितारिं च ममाभूत्प्रीतिरुत्तमा । (Yuddha Kanda Sarga 124)

⁷ मया तु विविधम् वन्यम् संचितम् पुरुषर्षभ ॥ तव अर्थं पुरुषव्याघ्र पम्पायाः तीर संभवम् । (Kishkinda kanda Sarga)