

# ASURA

TALE OF THE VANQUISHED  
*The Story of Ravana and His People*

ANAND NEELAKANTAN





## 1 THE END

RAVANA

Tomorrow is my funeral. I do not know if they will bury me like a mangy dog or whether I will get a funeral fit for an emperor – an erstwhile emperor. But it does not really matter. I can hear the scuffling sounds made by the jackals. They are busy eating my friends and family. Something scurried over my feet. *What was that?* I haven't the strength to raise my head. Bandicoots. Big, dark, hairy, big rats. They conquer the battlefields after foolish men have finished their business of killing each other. It is a feast day for them today, just as it has been for the past eleven days. The stench is overpowering. The stink of putrefying flesh, pus, blood, urine, death. Our's, their's. But it does not matter. Nothing matters now. I will pass out soon. The pain is excruciating. His fatal arrow struck my lower abdomen.

I am not afraid of death. I have been thinking of it for some time now. Thousands have been slain over the last few days. Somewhere in the depths of the sea, my brother Kumbha lies dead, half-eaten by sharks. I lit my son Meghanada's funeral pyre yesterday. *Or was it the day before?* I've lost all sense of time. I have lost the sense of many things.

A lonely star is simmering in the depths of the universe. Like the eye of God. Very like the third eye of Shiva, an all-consuming, all-destroying third eye. My beloved Lanka is being destroyed. I can still see the dying embers in what was once a fine city. My capital, Trikota, was the greatest

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city in the world. That was before the monkey-man came and set it on fire. Trikota burned for days. Shops, homes, palaces, men, women, and babies, everything burned. But we restored it. Almost every able man joined in rebuilding Trikota. Then the monkey-men came with their masters and destroyed everything. Hanuman did that to us. The monkey-man brought us death, destruction and defeat.

I don't want to dwell on that. I should have killed him when my son captured him. Instead, I listened to my younger brother, who plotted against me. But treason and betrayal is nothing new to the Asuras. I was naïve. I foolishly believed that I would always be loved by my brothers and my people. I never imagined that I would be betrayed. I feel like laughing. But it's not easy to laugh when one's guts lie spread around like a wreath.

Sounds of joy float down to me from my city. The enemy is celebrating his victory. The monkey-men will be busy plundering Trikota. My temples will be looted, the granaries torched, schools and hospitals burnt. That's how victory parties are. We have done that and worse to many Deva villages, when the goddess of victory was my consort. Some ugly monkeys must have entered my harem. I hope my queen has the sense to jump from a cliff before anything happens. I can't control anything now. I can feel the hot breath of death on my face. The jackals have come. *Which part of my body will they eat first?* Perhaps my guts, as they are still bleeding. *What if part of my breastplate chokes a jackal?* I chuckle at the thought. A jackal sinks his teeth into my cheek and rips off a chunk of flesh. That's it. *I've lost this bet, too.* They have started from my face. Rats are nibbling my toes.

I, Ravana, have come a long way. Now I do not have anything left to fight for, except this battle with the jackals. Tomorrow, there will be a procession through the streets. They'll raise my head on a pole and parade it through the very same roads that saw me racing by in my royal chariot. My people will throng to watch this spectacle with horror and perverted pleasure. I know my people well. It will be a big show.



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One thing I cannot understand is why Rama came and stood above me after I had fallen. He stood there like he was bestowing his blessings on me. Playing God? But I could play that game too and I folded my hands in mock obeisance. To my amusement, Rama took it seriously. These Devas have no sense of humour. Then he blabbered something about a place in heaven. Thanks to Rama, all my previous sins have been washed away and I have been assured a seat in the heavenly kingdom. I always wondered how I'd get to heaven. I wanted to stand up, hug him right there, and thank him. But I didn't. I was dying and could not stand up. And who knows? Rama might have taken it seriously and started mumbling some gibberish in Sanskrit. I would have died of laughter. And that is no way for an emperor to die. Then I might have lost the seat in heaven. I doubt if heaven has a place for people who die of laughter.

Then just as suddenly, as it had started, the rats and jackals scurried away. A shadow, darker than the dark night, fell upon me. A dark head with curly hair blocked the lonely star from my view. *Is it Kala, the god of death, who has come to take me away?* I struggled to open my eyes wider. But dried blood held my eyelids together. *Is it one of Rama's lowly servants who has come to sever my head and take it back as a trophy?* I want to look him in the face. I want to look into his eyes, unwavering and unflinching in my last moments. Something about that head and curly hair reminds me of my past. *Do I know him?* He leans down and looks at my face. *Ah! It is Bhadra.* My friend, perhaps the only friend left. I do not know if I can call him my friend. He was my servant, a foot soldier to start with. Then he got lost somewhere along the way. He strolled in and out of my life, was sometimes missing for years together. Bhadra had access to my private camp when I was the head of a troop that resembled a wayside gang of robbers rather than a revolutionary army. Then, he had access to my private chambers when I was the king of a small island. Finally, he had access to my bedroom when I was ruling India. More than that, Bhadra had access to the dark corners of my mind, a part that I hid from my brothers, my wife, my lover, my people, and even from myself.

*What is Bhadra doing here?* But why am I surprised? This is just the place for people like him who move around in the shadow. I can hear him

sobbing. *Bhadra getting emotional?* He was never angry, sad or happy. He acted as if he was very emotional now. But I knew he had no emotions. And Bhadra was aware that I knew.

“Bhadra, carry me away from here. Take me away to...” My strength failed me. Actually, I don’t know whether the words actually left me or died a silent death somewhere in my throat. Bhadra shook his head. I was cold, extremely cold. My life was ebbing out of me. Then Bhadra hugged my head to his bosom. I could smell this sweat. Pain shot through me from every angle and spread its poisonous tentacles into my veins. I moaned. Bhadra laid me back on the wet earth, wet from my blood, the blood of my people, the blood of my dreams, and the blood of my life. It was over. A sense of sadness and emptiness descended on me.

“I will complete your work, your Highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race. My methods may be different, even ignoble, compared to your’s. I too, was once a warrior, but I have grown old. Arms frighten me now. I’m terrified of war. I can’t even hurt a child. Nevertheless, my methods are deadly. I will get revenge for you, me and our blighted race. Rama won’t go free for what he has done to us. Believe me and go in peace.”

I did not hear most of the things Bhadra said. Strangely, however, I was soothed and slipped away from this foul-smelling Asura and drifted back to my childhood. A thousand images rushed to me. My early struggles, the pangs of love and abandonment, separation, battles and wars, music and art, they flashed through my mind in no particular order, making no sense. Meaningless, like life itself.

I sensed Bhadra bowing down to touch my feet, then walking away. “Bhadra.....,” I wanted him to come back and take me to some doctor who would put my intestines back, fit my dangling left eye back into its socket and somehow blow life into my body. I wanted to withdraw to the Sahyas forests in the mainland and start a guerilla war, as Mahabali had done years ago. I wanted to start again. I wanted to make the same mistakes, love the same people, fight the same enemies, befriend the same friends, marry the same wives and sire the same sons. I wanted to live the same life again.

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I didn't want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth.

I knew such things were not going to happen. I was sixty, not sixteen. If I lived, I would be a one-eyed, dirty, old beggar in some wayside temple, with stinking, tattered clothes. A long way from what I once was. I wanted to die now. I wanted this to end. I wanted to go away. Let the burning cities take care of themselves. Let the Asuras fight their own wars and be damned along with the Devas. I only wanted to return to my childhood and start over again, every single damn thing, again and again and again...



## 2 THE SEED

RAVANA

The monsoon wind swirled around the small hut hanging precariously on a mountain cliff. Another push by the roaring wind and the hut would plunge into the black torrents waiting hungrily below. Then we would be just specks of death washed ashore. It would have been better had it ended like that. *But this was just the beginning of the end. Could I be obliterated from the leaves of history just like that? Hadn't I a mission to fail?* I didn't know then, but I had been born to fulfil someone else's destiny. To allow someone else to become God.

Huddled together with three siblings and a morose mother, I looked down at the brightly lit palace of my half-brother. It was quite near, yet a world apart. I had been there once, hidden behind the shawl of my poor, black mother, my younger brothers tugging at my fingers. My sister was lying limp like a dirty old rag, tired and hungry, on my mother's shoulder. We were poor, dirt poor. The only thing we had in abundance was poverty. And hunger. Also shame.

As a last desperate effort, mother dragged us to beg before her stepson, Kubera, the lord of all wealth, the richest man on earth. In the glitter of the palace and the sickening fragrance of abundance, we stood there with a begging bowl. We got our alms, a few pieces of gold and also many derisive glances from my stepbrother's wives. Our needs were few and his time was too precious to waste on us. A flick of his hand, some small change, and he thought no more of us. Until the day I reminded him of

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our existence quite rudely and loudly. But that happened much later. By then we had ceased being beggars.

I gained my biggest asset from that arrogantly opulent palace of avarice and greed – my burning ambition. The fire of hunger would never quench the flames of ambition the palace ignited in me. I knew then that the world he owned and much beyond, would be mine and mine alone. Today, might well be the last day I will be with my mother. Tomorrow, if our small hut survives this torrential rain, we will start our journey. I believe there is a world out there to conquer. A better world awaiting us.

My brothers and I never had an education to speak of. No Brahmin was ready to take us for free, even if we worked for them. We were wild, black and naughty. We had learned that we were half-castes. Our father, from the little I knew, was some lecherous Maharishi who used my poor mother to scratch his itching groins and gifted us to her. He knew his Vedas and he knew how to justify his lust. He was a Brahmin. My mother was of an unknown Asura caste. He kept the relationship an open secret. He knew enough of the Sanskrit Vedas, which the Brahmins claimed contained all the learning of the world.

Father wasn't a bad man, really. He was like any other of his caste – gloriously self-centered. He considered that we were suitably rewarded with his mere presence in our home. And conveniently forgot that humans need food to live too. Oh sure, he named us after demons, as we never showed any interest in his teachings. Many a time, we mocked him and ever so often, I boldly questioned his faith when he and his friends chanted the Vedas (after eating his full while we went hungry). In our mud veranda, Kumbakarna, Soorpanakha and I mimicked them. Only my youngest sibling, Vibhishana, watched with awe, his eyes fixed on the Brahmins, listening to their jabbering with rapt attention.

This was after my father gave away all his money to my stepbrother, Kubera. We were left with nothing. Growing up was difficult, a continuous numbing ache, the kind which throbs and slowly spreads its black fingers over one's soul. Yet, we never strayed from the path of righteousness. Our sense of justice differed from what the learned and privileged considered

right. We decided our righteousness and we defined our rights in our own way. We learned that the truth could be bent to suit one's needs. Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart; and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong. One should not cheat, even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight it at all costs. We never knew any of the great teachings of the ancient Asura or Deva saints. We followed no tradition. We were almost bastards.

The next day, we would be leaving this island. I had heard that there are great nations to the north. I would travel across the length and breadth of India. I wanted to climb the snowclad mountains of the Himalayas, swim against the dangerous currents of the Ganga raging in her full monsoon fury. I dreamed of passing through the thick forests of the Vindhya and Sahyas and seeing the monkey men and the kingdom of the Yakshas and Kinnaras. I dreamed of being in the music-filled world of the Gandharvas. Oh, what a world to conquer! What a life to enjoy! One day I was sure this Ravana would rule the world. From the mighty Himalayas to Lanka, nay, from Lanka to the Himalayas, I would rule the world, with justice, peace and prosperity for all.

Looming in the shadows of my myriad dreams, there lingered a small doubt. Were these wonderful dreams just hunger-induced hallucinations? I might die today, caressed by the black waves and dragged by the roaring currents. My life might just flicker for a while and end in dark silence. Then who would ever now the passions and ambitions I held close to my heart? Who would know what glories I had planned for my people? My life would be just like the foam on the frothing black waters down below, soaring, ever-expanding, there now but then gone into the unknown.

My mother's tears burned a hole in my soul. She wanted us to go out and conquer the world, yet she wanted us nearby, too. Perhaps, she saw the fire raging in my eyes and decided not to stop us. When I looked back, I saw my mother, a hunched-back figure in tattered clothes, hugging my ugly sister. She was the most beautiful baby for us, but when I saw her with the sense of fairness my mother had instilled in us, I had to reluctantly agree with my father's belief that my sister was the ugliest creature he had ever

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seen. I hated him for that statement. I hated him even more for the fact that it was true.

The gatekeeper of my half brother's palace was sitting on the beach with his friends. They roared with laughter at the sight of us three teenagers struggling with the catamaran and raised a toast to our death. They even insulted my mother with indecent songs. I wanted to wring their necks! But I had promised my mother that I would not use violence until I got wise to the ways of the world and the sense to use my power with fairness and justice. I fixed my teary eyes on the distant shoreline – there lay my hope of success in this cruel world, my world and my guru.

My brothers and I travelled through the thick, evergreen Sahya forest. We saw glorious palaces and ports. Ivory and sandalwood, peacocks and monkeys. We saw ships with kaleidoscopic-coloured sails sailing to distant lands, laden with gold and diamonds, pepper and spices. We saw temples where the gods resided and demanded a portion of the earnings which men strived hard to earn. And we also saw the representatives of those gods who plundered in God's name. The cities were bright with lights as brilliant as the sun and the women, beautiful like those in paradise. I saw with mixed emotions of pride, jealousy and anger, the ships on which my half-brother's flags fluttered.

Whichever city we went to, Kubera's enterprises had an office. He ran a tightly controlled business empire from his palace in the island. Equestrians carried important letters to his business partners and trade guilds. He owned more than 130 ships, which sailed to Greece, Egypt and China. I was sure any junior manager of his numerous units would have welcomed us to their gold-brocaded offices, had we identified ourselves as Kubera's siblings. But that was the last thing I wanted to do.

I could have easily led a comfortable life as a clerk in any one of my half brother's offices. It would have ensured that my family got at least one meal a day. But how could I forget the bored look in my step-brother's eyes when he dismissed us from his palace with a few gold coins? I would rather die of hunger, but I would never demean myself for a lowly job in his business empire. It might have been false pride. Many worldly-wise

people have said so, to get along in the world you had to be practical and satisfied with what your measly life offers. But I was a dreamer. And I did not want to just get along in this world. I wanted to own it. Why were our people so meek and humble? That was something I always wondered about. Why were only a few able to control the power and wealth while the rest obliged them, and even laid down their lives to help this small selfish gang oppress them and their children? Was it fear? I don't know. But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs, superstitions – all conspired together to crush the humble majority. Why couldn't there be a more just way of living?

The moment I started asking *why*, I was branded a hothead. The Brahmin friends of my father once tried to banish me from the village saying I was possessed by evil spirits and that I was a Rakshasa, a demon. Perhaps I was too young and brash and my view of the world was yet to get tempered with experience. Except for my youngest brother Vibhishana, who was always quiet, I could see the same restlessness in the rest of us. I believed Vibhishana was a bit of a nitwit. But he was the darling of our village while we were growing up. He followed whatever was laid down in the books and never asked any questions. There were many times when I felt that Vibhishana was most suited for this society and that he was going to make it big in life. And I liked him. He was so small and vulnerable and I always felt he needed to be protected from this cruel world.

I desperately needed some confidence. I wasn't intelligent in the conventional sense either. I could not recite the Vedas backwards, the way Vibhishana enjoyed doing. In any case, I thought the Vedas were a load of humbug and it didn't matter which way you recited them. Some jobless Brahmin like my father, created them thousands of years ago. Instead of making themselves useful, the Brahmins prayed to the gods they themselves invented for rain, sun, horse, cow, money, and many other things. It must have been very cold, from whichever cursed places they came. Otherwise, why would they croak like frogs, appealing to the gods after putting hundreds of assorted twigs into the fire?

Perhaps I was prejudiced. I shouldn't think that the work they were doing, as Yajnas, was useless. In fact, it served as a perfect tool to mint money and

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gain material favours. They were no fools, these Brahmins. They knew how to project even the mundane tasks of burning twigs as earth-shaking, scientific discoveries and claimed to tame the forces that controlled the world. And it was funny that the majority of people like the carpenters, masons or farmers, who were doing something meaningful, had become supplicant to these jokers croaking under the warm sun, sweat pouring from their faces in front of a raging fire and chanting god knows what.

They had a yagna or puja for everything under the sun. If you had leprosy or a common cold, there was a god to whom you had to offer a special puja to appease him. You wanted your pestering wife to elope with your bothersome neighbour, there was a puja for that too. You wanted your cow to have a calf or your wife to have son, the Brahmin would help you. He would just conduct a puja and a divine calf or son would be born. You curried favour with the Brahmins and your son would become the biggest pundit in the world by the age of sixteen. If not, he would perhaps become rowdy like me, who did not respect Brahmins or rituals. He would become a Rakshasa. I think there are many more Rakshasas among us now. Perhaps, it was because the *why* virus spread. Couldn't the Brahmins conduct a puja so that our heads were cleared of sinful thoughts? This is something I have to ponder over when I have time.

Wherever I travel I find imposters claiming to have direct access to god and fleecing people. It is strange how kings of antiquity suddenly became gods. How they metamorphosed into specialty gods is even more amusing. I am no atheist. I strongly believe in God and am always willing to pray for my material and spiritual progress. But for me, God is a very personal thing and prayer needs to be spoken silently in my heart.

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*"For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor's tale, the Ramayana. Now hear the Ravanayana, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished."*

*"I am a non-entity - invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me. I have suffered both Ravana and Rama - the hero and the villain or the villain and the hero. When the stories of great men are told, my voice maybe too feeble to be heard. Yet, spare me a moment and hear my story, for I am Bhadra, the Asura, and my life is the tale of the loser."*

The ancient Asura empire lay shattered into many warring petty kingdoms reeling under the heel of the Devas. In desperation, the Asuras look up to a young saviour - Ravana. Believing that a better world awaits them under Ravana, common men like Bhadra decide to follow the young leader. With a will of iron and a fiery ambition to succeed, Ravana leads his people from victory to victory and carves out a vast empire from the Devas. But even when Ravana succeeds spectacularly, the poor Asuras find that nothing much has changed for them. It is then that Ravana, by one action, changes the history of the world.

Cover Design by MISHA RDT

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978-93-81576-05-2



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