

Chapter 3 Primary Source Activity



The story of Prince Rama is one of the great epics of ancient India, involving gods, heroes, and evil spirits in exciting adventures (textbook pages 56–57). Stories from the *Ramayana* still are popular today in folk theaters, dances, and puppet shows throughout South Asia. A central theme of the story is the perfect love and marriage of Prince Rama and Princess Sita. This excerpt, in a modern retelling by Indian author R. K. Narayan, describes their first meeting, in the city of Mithila. ♦ *As you read, notice the mood and setting of the story. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Sita and Rama's First Meeting

The very minute Rama steps into Mithila, he notices golden turrets and domes, and towers, and colourful flags fluttering in the wind as if to welcome a royal bridegroom-to-be. The streets glitter with odds and ends of jewellery cast off by the people (a necklace that had snapped during a dance or a game; or had been flung off when found to be a nuisance during an embrace), with no one inclined to pick them up in a society of such affluence. There was no charity in Kosala country since there was no one to receive it. Torn-off flower garlands lay in heaps on the roadside with honeybees swarming over them. The *musth* [sweat] running down the haunches of mountainous elephants flowed in dark streams along the thoroughfare, blending with the white froth from the mouths of galloping horses, and churned with mud and dust by the ever-turning chariot wheels.

On lofty terraces women were singing and dancing to the accompaniment of veena [stringed instruments] and soft drums. Couples on swings suspended from tall areca [palm] poles enjoyed the delight of swaying back and forth, their necklaces or garlands flying in the air. Rama and Lakshmana [his brother]



went on past shops displaying gems, gold, ivory, peacock feathers, beads, and wigs made of the hair of rare Himalayan deer. They observed arenas where strange elephant fights were in progress, cheered by crowds of young men; groups of women practising ballads and love songs under wayside canopies; horses galloping without a break round and round bridle tracks, watched elegant men and women; swimming pools with multi-coloured fish agitated by people sporting in the water.

They crossed the moat surrounding Janaka's palace, with its golden spire soaring above the other buildings of the city. Now Rama observed on a balcony princess Sita playing with her companions. He stood arrested by her beauty, and she noticed him at the same moment. Their eyes met. They had been together not so long ago in Vaikunta, their original home in heaven, as Vishnu and his spouse Lakshmi, but in their present incarnation, suffering all the limitations of mortals, they looked at each other as strangers.

Source: *Ramayana: A modern prose version*, by R.K. Narayan, (Viking Press, 1972).

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Questions to Think About

1. What is your first impression of the city of Mithila?
2. What are Rama's and Sita's first reactions on seeing each other?
3. **Recognizing Ideologies** The last paragraph refers to Sita's and Rama's earlier lives together in heaven. From this statement, what can you infer about Indian beliefs at the time of the *Ramayana*?
4. **Activity** If you were a traveler in Mithila, you would find many things to entertain you. In the form of a short letter or postcard, write to a friend describing the city and its attractions.