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**Age: 8 (group I)**

### **The virtues and non-virtues of Soorpanakha**

According to C. Rajagopalachari, Sage Agasthya had recommended Panchavati as an enchanting spot for an aashram to Lord Rama. This was also the spot where he found his good friend Jataayu. He asked Lakshmana if he could build an aashram for them. Lakshmana did as he was told and made a comfortable aashram for Rama and Sita. They spent many a happy day there. One winter morning, Rama and Lakshmana bathed in the river Godavari and after they came out they went back to the aashram. After their morning duties were over, they sat spending the hours with tales of old days and tales of long ago. While they were remembering the past together, suddenly there came a rakshasi and she happened to see them. She was Soorpanakha, the sister of Ravana who was roaming the forest full of thoughts of ill taught youth. She was very ugly but had the powers to change her form at will. When she saw the handsome Rama, she could not help but want Rama for her husband and said "Who are you dressed like an ascetic in the company of a woman and carrying weapons? Why are you in this forest which belongs to demons? Tell me the truth". Rama said "I am the eldest son of King Dasaratha. My name is Rama. This is my brother Lakshmana. This is my wife Sita. Obeying my father I have come to this forest to live for fourteen years and now please tell me who you are?" She answered "Have you heard of Ravana, the heroic son of Visravas and the king of the rakshasas? I am his sister. My name is Soorpanakha. My brothers Vibheeshana and Kumbakarna are also great warriors. The kings of this region Kara and Dushana are also my brothers but I can go about as I wish for I am not controlled by my brothers. Every single person in the forest is afraid of me. The moment I set my eyes on you I fell in love with you. So, to me, you are my husband. Let us wed the way the Gandharvas do". Rama replied with a mocking smile "I am already married. You can wed Lakshmana if you want to". Taking Rama seriously, Soorpanakha approached Lakshmana and said "Marry me. Everyone in the forest will be afraid of you and we can roam the forest together." Lakshmana said "I am only a slave of Rama. It would not be proper for a princess like you to marry me." Soorpanakha was tired of being rejected constantly and said to Rama "Are you spurning me because of your ugly wife? If so, I will devour her. Then will you marry me?" As she rushed towards Sita, Rama said to Lakshmana "Stop her". Lakshmana heeded Rama and cut off Soorpanakha's ears and nose. Soorpanakha fled the scene and never met Rama again. This is Valmiki's point of view. There is also the Tamil poet Kamban's point of view. According to Kamban, Rama was sitting on the banks of Godavari and saw a swan that was walking. Then he looked at Sita who was also walking. He looked at the similarity and then smiled. Then Sita saw an elephant coming back from the river and reminded her of Rama's way of walking. Then fate had Soorpanakha to arrive on the scene. Lord Vishnu has left the ocean of milk to rid mother earth of rakshasas but just how was Soorpanakha to know this. Beholding how handsome Rama was, Soorpanakha wondered "is this Indra, Shiva, or Vishnu? But Indra has many eyes and Shiva has third eye. Maybe, it could be Vishnu? But Vishnu has four arms. So, he cannot be Indra, Shiva, or Vishnu. Anyway, why should this man do thapas?" She stood there not able to look away. She thought "if I appear to him like this", she looked at her ugly body, he will be disgusted. So, Soorpanakha changed into a beautiful woman. She bowed down in front of him. Rama asked "who are you? Where do you live? And who are your people?" Soorpanakha answered "I am the daughter of the grandson of Brahma. Kubera is one of my brothers. Another is Ravana. I am a young woman and my name is Kamavalli." Rama says "what are you here for?" Soorpanakha said "I love you and I cannot look away from you and you should wed me." Rama laughed. Just then Sita was moving towards them. Not knowing who Sita was, Soorpanakha said, "This girl is a rakshasi in human form. She has come to kill you. Beware of her. She is a rakshasi that eats raw meat. Throw her out." Rama laughed again. "You are very wise" he said. "You have found out the truth about her". "Go away from here" said Soorpanakha to Sita. Sita was afraid. Rama said "Dear lady, please stop. My brother will hear you. There is no telling what he will do to you". Saying this Rama went inside the aashram with Sita. Not able to fulfill her desire, Soorpanakha decided to return the next morning and carry Sita off. When she came the next morning, Rama was out and Sita was alone. Soorpanakha decided that it was the right time to carry Sita off. She did not notice that Lakshmana was in the woods nearby.

Lakshmana came in the nick of time and cut off Soorpanakha's ears and nose. When this happened Soorpanakha assumed her real form and went into the forest crying loudly.

The Soorpanakha episode led to Soorpanakha telling Ravana which led to Ravana abducting Sita which made Rama go to Lanka and kill all the rakshasas and finally Ravana himself. Rama made Vibheeshana the king of Lanka and restored peace. Good prevailed over evil.

References: Vaibhavi read Amar Chitra Katha and Sri C. Rajagopalachari's Ramayana and based her essay on those readings.