INTRODUCTION
1. Prelude to the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*

Although one can no longer claim with Jacobi's confidence that in its "original" form the *Rāmāyaṇa* began with the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*,
1 nonetheless, the main narrative of the poem commences in this book. The name of Ayodhya, the capital city of the ancient state of Kosala in east-central India, is an apposite choice for the title of the section. For in contrast to the other four central books of the epic, where the action takes place in the unpeopled wilderness (Book Three), the land of the monkeys (Book Four), and the island fortress of the rākṣasas (Books Five and Six), here the center of interest is the city, where social life reaches its greatest degree of complexity and intensity.

It was probably not much earlier than the seventh century B.C. that the major urban centers of Aryan India came into existence,
2 and yet during the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in pre-Mauryan times the city had already become the literary focal point of civilized life. Not surprisingly, given the conditions of their existence, the epic poets were primarily concerned with life as played out in the city. Their interest embraced both social life—especially the family with its inherent tensions, the responsibilities it imposes on the individual, and the often conflicting allegiances it exacts—and political life, the "state," and the powers of the state, which appeared in their most tangible manifestation in the city. For all the attention they pay it, the village might not have existed for the epic storytellers. Moreover, as we shall see in the *Aranyakāṇḍa* (Book Three), they regarded the "desolate forest" as a zone of mystery, where supernatural forces came into play, yet where a certain Edenic quality had been preserved, as well.

The contrast—at times tension—between the city and the forest, which was increasingly to command the attention of the urban poet,
3 becomes palpable, perhaps for the first time in Indian his-

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1 Jacobi 1893, pp. 50ff., 64. See the General Introduction in Volume 1.
2 A recent overview of the question can be found in Ruben 1978. Archaeology and philology are in accord; cf. Rau 1976, who notes (p. 51) that such words as *nagara* occur with the meaning "town" only in the very latest stratum of Vedic literature.
3 The theme becomes commonplace later on, as in the fifth-century poet Kālidāsa. See Ingalls 1976, especially pp. 22ff.
tory, here in the Ayodhya-kanda. It is with an unmistakable sense of liberation that Râma will find himself banished from Ayodhya and its troubles, and declare:

To set one's eyes on [Mount] Citrakûta and the Mandâkini [River], my lovely, is far better than living in the town.\(^4\)

This attitude, partly a function of the innovative world view that we shall discover in the hero, seems also to be symptomatic of a new urban malaise.\(^5\)

But this opposition remains secondary in the present book. For the most part, Vâlmîki directs our attention to the city and its central concerns—those social and political features that are thrown into particularly high relief in an urban setting. As a consequence, the Ayodhya-kanda is a remarkably human book; the story it tells is realistic and credible, and its subject-matter familiar and immediately understandable to an audience, village or urban, that would never march with an army of monkeys against a demon fortress.

Although these characteristics distinguish the Ayodhya-kanda from the rest of the Râmâyana, the book by no means stands isolated from the main concerns of the poem as a whole. Quite the contrary. Because the scene later shifts beyond the human social order, the issues raised here may become attenuated, but they still remain the fundamental ones for Vâlmîki.

These problems can be formulated through a large comparative generalization. If Homer, for example, addresses a transcendent problem, showing us what makes life finally impossible—in the words of one writer, "the universality of human doom"\(^6\)—Vâlmîki poses the more difficult question: What is it that makes life possible? This is more difficult because it is a social, not a cosmic question. The answer, as we might anticipate, is complex, raising additional questions that demand resolution: it is behavior in accordance with dharma, "righteousness," that alone makes life possible. But what

\(^4\) 2.89.12; cf. 2.50.22 and 2.88.1ff., especially verses 3 and 19.

\(^5\) The Râmâyana, and the Ayodhya-kanda in particular, may well have contributed from the beginning—as it certainly did later—to the legend of the life of the Buddha, whose spiritual quest is at least partly conditioned by social problems of the sort noticed here (see Fairbrother 1975, pp. 378-79). The city-forest antithesis does not, of course, exhaust the meaning of Râma's exile, or fully explain it. Other themes are also present: a folkloric quest motif, for example, and perhaps that of a ritual enthronement (for the latter cf. Heesterman 1978).

\(^6\) Griffin 1980, p. 69 (cf. p. 76).
exactly does “righteousness” mean? What are the kinds and limits of the obligations it imposes? Who is placed under these obligations, and to whom and how are they to be discharged?

Vālmīki, who represents the culmination of an epic tradition, was certainly not the first to explore this problem. On the basis of all the epic poetry we know, it seems safe to say that “the subtest of things, dharma,” had figured centrally in the genre from the start. That the interest in this issue was historically vital is demonstrated by the fact that an emperor of the third century B.C., toward the end of the creative epic period, had the question carved into rock: “Dharma is good. But what does dharma consist of?” Vālmīki, however, subjected the matter to an especially sustained and profound analysis, and offered a set of answers that has deeply affected and durably fixed itself in the Indian imagination.

7 Aśokan Pillar Edict II. For the subtlety of dharma, cf. M Bh 2.34.3 and elsewhere in that epic. See also Cg on Ayodhyākānda 18.36: “The main concern of this śāstra (that is, the Rāmdya) is to validate dharma.”