

Mr Siddartha Naidu

Rowi's First Diwali

It was a dark moonless October night, deep in the forests near the icy Franz Josef Glacier. Scratching about in the undergrowth was Rowi, the Okarito Kiwi, rarest of all kiwis. In fact it was so dark that Rowi could scarcely see beyond his beak. It was the darkest night of the year, according to his wise friend - it was the night before Diwali."

He listened eagerly as his friend told him of a grand old festival lasting five days that was celebrated in a far away land, with the lighting of countless oil lamps. Of the many stories about Diwali, the one that captured his imagination most was the return of Lord Rama and his wife Sita, after 14 years of exile to the beautiful city of Ayodhya, on the banks of the Sarayu River.

Rowi looked up at the night sky, glittering with millions of tiny stars and imagined how Ayodhya must have looked on that first Diwali. He wished he could be there to see Lord Rama and listen to stories of his exploits. But alas Rowi's wings were too small and weak to fly him there. So he sought the advice of the guardian of the forest, the tallest tree in the land. He was told that if he rode on a special metal bird called Cathay Pacific, it would take him close to Ayodhya.

The next morning, when all the other kiwis were fast asleep, he packed his little knapsack with a special gift from New Zealand for Lord Rama, a chocolate and coconut-coated lamington. He was soon whizzing through the air with Cathay Pacific. After many hours of travel by air and land, Rowi arrived in Ayodhya on the night of Diwali and found a noisy and busy city choked with people and traffic everywhere. The crowds were dressed in colourful clothes, the houses were decorated with garlands of flowers and electric lights and lit with rows of oil lamps; even the birds had brightly coloured feathers. Food stalls were groaning under the weight of multicoloured stacks of sweets, and the air was filled with the deafening roar of firecrackers and fireworks. There was laughter and happiness in everyone's faces. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not find Lord Rama or his beautiful palace.

So tired and disappointed, Rowi retreated to a quiet park on the edge of the city. In the dark, he spied an old ruined temple. He was relieved to be able to rest his weary feet, and thought to resume his search later. As he rested, he gazed at the night sky and recalled the myriad stars he was able to see from home. He then realised how similarly dark and quiet this place was, despite being in the middle of a grand Diwali celebration. Rowi was also hungry, and the lamington in his pack was beginning to appear more delicious as the night wore on. But he remembered that it was to be his special gift to Lord Rama. It was soon going to be dawn, and Diwali would be over, and he had not found Lord Rama.

Then he suddenly had an idea. Rowi scrambled through the ruins to find anything that could be used for a lamp. Eventually he found enough clay to fashion a small lamp, and for a wick, he plucked one of his brown feathers. Alas, he did not have any oil and began to weep in despair. Tears flowed from his eyes and filled the clay lamp below. Then in the distance, he heard footsteps and the faint tinkle of ankle bells. Spontaneously the lamp began to light, and as the tiny flame grew, it dispelled the darkness in the temple, and the walls were bathed in a golden glow. Mysteriously the walls grew brighter and brighter and as Rowi looked up, there standing before him and smiling was Lord Rama, his wife Sita, his brother Lakshmana, and their mighty monkey warrior, Hanuman. Wordlessly, and with trembling wings, Rowi offered his lamington which Lord Rama received with gracious delight. Rowi was then directed to look towards the sky, and for a moment, he saw the majestic city of Ayodhya, decked with millions of oil

lamps for the triumphant homecoming of Lord Rama. He watched as Rama, and his entourage ascended to the city, before the vision gradually vanished and all that was left were the stars of the Milky Way.

Rowi looked away from the sky and realised he was back in his familiar surroundings in the Okatiro forest near the Franz Josef Glacier. He looked into his heart and realised a lamp had been lit within dispelling the darkness of the darkest night. Within his heart he carried the light of Ayodhya back to Aotearoa.

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