

Ramayana Rhapsody: An Epic of Light, Learning and Belonging in Regional Australia

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When *Ramayana Rhapsody* opened at the Savannah Function Centre at Taronga Western Plains Zoo in Dubbo on Monday, 22 December, it marked more than the launch of an exhibition. It initiated a broader conversation about story, identity, faith, migration and the shared human values that connect people across cultures and generations.

Presented by ORISCON (Orana Residents of Indian Subcontinental Nations), with guidance from the Hindu Council of Australia and funding from Dubbo Regional Council and the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, *Ramayana Rhapsody* brought one of the world's most enduring epics into the heart of regional New South Wales. The project was realised through the generous efforts of community volunteers who supported transport, logistics, installation and artistic contributions.

Reimagining an ancient epic



At the centre of the exhibition is the *Ramcharitmanas*, the 16th-century retelling of the *Ramayana* by poet-saint Tulsidas. For centuries, this text has shaped moral and cultural life across the Indian subcontinent, exploring duty, courage, love, sacrifice and the triumph of good over evil.

Rather than presenting the epic in full, *Ramayana Rhapsody* offers a curated interpretation. Selected verses, visual storytelling, explanatory panels and guided reflections invite audiences to engage with the *Ramayana* as a living source of wisdom.

The exhibition highlights universal themes such as:

- the struggle between right and wrong

- the power of keeping one's word
- loyalty within families and communities
- the search for justice in times of hardship
- the belief that light ultimately overcomes darkness

For families of Indian heritage, the exhibition affirms a familiar story in a formal civic setting. For others, it offers an accessible introduction to one of the world's great literary traditions.



A launch shaped by reflection and hope

The opening event was designed as a moment of collective reflection. Guests observed a minute's silence in memory of lives lost to recent acts of violence in Australia and around the world, acknowledging shared grief and the role of culture in healing and solidarity.

This was followed by a diya-lighting ceremony symbolising light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance and hope over despair. Together, these moments set the tone for the exhibition—honest about present challenges, yet grounded in unity and peace.

Story as a bridge between cultures

A central aim of *Ramayana Rhapsody* is to show how epic stories can build bridges rather than boundaries. Exhibition materials were designed for diverse audiences, encouraging visitors to recognise parallels between the *Ramayana* and other cultural and literary traditions.

Children's activities supported intergenerational learning, reinforcing the idea that cultural knowledge is passed on through shared



curiosity and experience.

In this way, the project:

- demystifies the *Ramayana* for first-time audiences
- creates shared spaces for Hindu and non-Hindu visitors
- affirms that children's cultural stories belong in public, curated settings

The epic is presented not as something to be explained by one group to another, but as a shared point of reflection on values and community life.



A regional initiative with national relevance

The regional setting of *Ramayana Rhapsody* is central to its significance. As centres like Dubbo become increasingly diverse, access to high-quality cultural experiences outside metropolitan areas becomes essential.

By hosting the exhibition at Taronga Western Plains Zoo, ORISCON has:

- demonstrated that regional cities can support sophisticated cultural work
- embedded multicultural storytelling within mainstream civic spaces
- ensured access for local schools, families and community groups

The project highlights the leadership role regional Australia can play in intercultural understanding.

Children, families and foundational learning

Epics shape how children understand fairness, courage and empathy. *Ramayana Rhapsody* was designed to engage school groups, families and young people—many of whom are seeing their heritage represented in a professional exhibition for the first time.

Interpretive material balances clarity and depth, inviting discussion across generations. For young migrants, the exhibition affirms that their cultures are part of regional Australia's present and future.

Partnership and community leadership

Behind the exhibition lies strong collaboration between ORISCON, Dubbo Regional Council, the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs and Taronga Western Plains Zoo. These partnerships recognise ORISCON's role in supporting settlement, belonging and leadership among communities from the Indian subcontinent.

The project reflects a community-led model of cultural diplomacy, grounded in volunteerism, trust and shared purpose.

A living resource

Ramayana Rhapsody is designed as an ongoing resource rather than a one-off event. It can host guided tours, talks and creative responses, and offers a model that could travel to other regional centres.

Carrying the light forward

At its core, *Ramayana Rhapsody* sits at the intersection of heritage and hope. It honours an ancient text while addressing contemporary questions about diversity, compassion and belonging.

By opening with silence for those lost and light for the path ahead, the project acknowledges both the pain and promise of our times. In doing so, it reminds us that when we make space for each other's stories, we do more than preserve culture—we help build a more generous and united future.