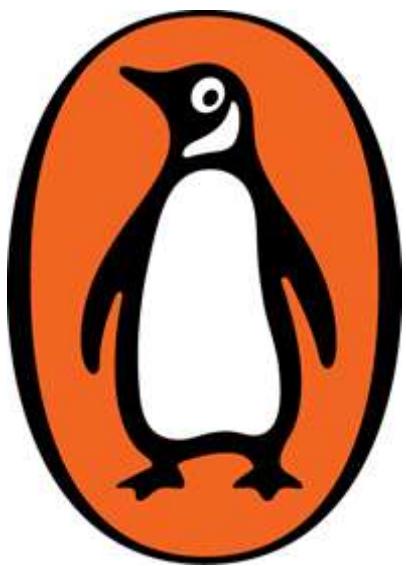


DEVLOK

with Devdutt Pattanaik

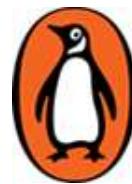
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DEVDUTT PATTANAIK

DEVLOK with Devdutt Pattanaik 3



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Devdutt Pattanaik writes, illustrates and lectures on the relevance of mythology in modern times. He has, since 1996, written over thirty books and 600 columns on how stories, symbols and rituals construct the subjective truth (myths) of ancient and modern cultures around the world. His books with Penguin Random House India include *The Book of Ram*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *The Girl Who Chose* and the ‘Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik’ series, among others. He consults with corporations on leadership and governance, and TV channels on mythological serials. His TV shows include *Business Sutra* on CNBC-TV18 and *Devlok* on Epic Channel. To know more, visit www.devdutt.com.

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1

Rites of Passage

India is all about sanskar (culture) and riti–riwaz (rituals and traditions). These are also known as rites of passage. What is the meaning of the word ‘sanskar’?

A simple meaning would be an experience of culture. It has been given a lot of importance in the Vedas. There is a concept in the Vedas called akriti (shape or form) which is of two kinds—prakriti and sanskriti. Prakriti is what is natural or default upon which man adds his own shape. This is sanskriti. From here, sanskar arises. Prakriti has another word for it called sansar, i.e., the world that is formed by karma—action and reaction. Man changes sansar by adding sanskar. ‘Ka’ is added which, in the Vedas, is associated with god, with the human intellect. Man is one animal who asks questions from ‘ka’—why (kyun), when (kab) and where (kahan). Animals do not ask these questions. The shape that arises from these questions is called sanskar. It’s a sophisticated idea that from sanskar, one experiences being human. An animal does not have any training. It has inborn or instinctive knowledge. A bird learns to feed and fly on its own. Man needs to learn to become human. Hence, sanskar or rites of passage. There are two ways of looking at sanskar. One is what I arrive with from an earlier

birth, of the past. One is that of upbringing, which I experience in this life through the rituals in society.

In TV serials today, we often hear the word ‘sanskari’, particularly in reference to women. What does it mean?

The English translation of it would be ‘cultured’. If you go to someone’s house and find it neat and tidy and you are offered water, you feel that it is a sanskari house. If you are not offered water, you feel they do not have sanskar. Whether a child has brushed or bathed before eating and so on tells of his upbringing. Children are the report card of their parents. They show whether their parents have given them sanskar or not. Another indicator of this is how you behave with other people. Even an animal looks after himself. But how you treat others (mehman-nawazi) tells of your upbringing. How you treat your daughters-in-law, strangers, guests; how you look after your house; and how you behave when you have money and when you don’t. Rama is sanskari even in the jungle. As the famous sentence goes, you can remove Rama from Ayodhya, but you cannot remove Ayodhya from Rama. This suggests that sanskar and discipline are embedded in Rama.

What is the connection between sanskar and dharma?

Dharma is a wider concept. A human being’s dharma is humanity. How do you express it? Through rules, rites and sanskar. These are the mediums of showing your humanity. Today, dharma uses religious terms. She goes to the temple, so she is sanskari. That’s not quite correct. Religious does not mean sanskari.

In our culture, how many sanskars are there?

The list is variable. In the *Purva Mimamsa*, brushing of teeth and bathing are also sanskars. Sometimes it’s sixteen, sometimes forty-eight. The rites

of passage are divided into four groups—wedding, birth, growing up and death.

Tell us about wedding sanskars.

In India, it's been called an experience. Today, a marriage has to be registered legally and is seen as a contract. This has come from Islam. There's a give and take between individuals and it is seen as an institution of god. This is not in the shastras. There it is an anubhav, an experience. You are a human being and you have to experience grahast life, which means you have to assume the duties and responsibilities of a householder. The original idea is that men and women are independent. The notion about women being dependent on men is a later addition from the *Manusmriti*. In the Vedic times, men and women were independent. Vivaah brought them together to experience living together and having a child. So some rituals are very important in a marriage ceremony. One is kanya-daan where a father gives away (daan) his daughter and the other, panigrahan, in which the boy accepts the hand of the girl. Today it's simplified as a varmala ritual. Another ritual is saptapadi. You take seven steps together where you agree to share seasons, food, wealth and prosperity, children, knowledge and love. So vivaah is the meeting of two individuals. In India, it is also the meeting of families and communities. The environment of the house changes after a wedding. Mostly, a girl enters a new home. Sometimes, boys go too. Arjuna marries Chitrangada but she never goes to his house. Rather, he goes to her house.

Was the kanya-daan concept always there?

In a swayamvara or gandharva vivaah, there was no kanya-daan. It was present in arranged marriages, and when patriarchy became prominent, a woman was considered an object that belonged to the father to give away. Many girls today don't like this concept. The important aspect of sanskar is that your experience is socially approved. You declare socially. Otherwise, a man and woman can simply live together. Sanskar is always

public. When a girl enters a household, many changes occur because she brings her values. Her cooking style and home-management style will be different. In earlier times, she would bring seeds as she travelled from one village to another, bringing new vegetation into her new home. She is said to be Lakshmi. In a manner, she is also Saraswati as she brings new knowledge and new thoughts. If you go into the details, you'll find that vivaah does not connote physical relations. Vivaah is social. There's another ritual, garbharansanskar, where there is a physical relationship. In earlier times, there used to be child marriages, so the boy and girl would live with their parents. When they became physically mature, called gaunasanskar in some parts of India, there were rituals to prepare the boy and girl for physical relations. One was to see Arundhatitara. The boy and girl would never have touched each other. The ritual is there for the boy to touch the girl in a manner that she is comfortable with. He is trained. He asks her whether she has seen the Arundhati star. She may say yes or no. She is asked to show it to the boy. She points to the sky and the boy leads her arm towards the right star. That is their first physical contact. Why Arundhati? She is Rishi Vasishtha's wife and associated with fidelity.

What are the rituals of childhood?

These start with a woman's pregnancy. One is seemantham or baby shower. The pregnant woman is called home, her puja is done and she is fed and given gifts. She becomes aware that her life is going to change. Again, an experience in a social space. Privately, she is pregnant, she is going to have a baby one day. The newborn baby is handed over to the father. Jatakrama is the ritual of the father holding the baby for the first time to give him an experience of fatherhood. Annaprashan is the ritual of the baby eating its first solid food. There's another ritual for when the baby is taken outside the house for the first time and another for ear-piercing (karnavedh). Human beings are the only creatures who wear jewellery. There's one ritual for when the child starts studying (vidyarambh) and another for cutting hair or tonsure (chudakarn or mundan).

What are the rituals of growing up?

The puberty rites for girls and boys are different. For boys, shaving for the first time used to be a ritual. Nowadays, photographs are taken and put up on Facebook! For girls, the body changes dramatically. Menstruation begins. During earlier times, she would be bathed and given jewellery and there would be a big celebration.

What are death rites?

These are very important in India. If a child dies, it's buried. For a mature person, anhesthi or cremation is done. The bones and ash are thrown in the water and shraddha ceremonies are done. These vary in families. The belief is that the atma (soul) does not leave the body immediately after death. It hovers around close by for some time. You do a few rituals so that the dead body crosses the Vaitarni and goes to Pitr-loka, the land of the dead. The rituals are performed to encourage the body to leave. If it stays back on earth it will become a bhoot or pretatma (ghost). The body is kept in the southern direction because the land of the dead, Yama-loka, is believed to be in the south. When the body is taken, mukhagani or the ritual of breaking a skull is performed because people believe that the atma is released from the skull. During shraddha, pind-daan is done in which we offer rice balls mixed with black sesame seeds. The food we eat becomes flesh. The belief is that the dead atma is looking for a body, and the crude form of body is food. A crow is called, which represents the Pitr-loka. 'I'm giving you food' means 'I'm giving you flesh. Either I will produce a child or support other people with children so that you can be reborn.' The basic concept of shraddha is to tell the pitr that we will produce children so that you can be reborn to perpetuate the cycle of life.

In Vedic times, during the anhesthi ritual, the widow was asked to lie down next to her dead husband's body but asked to get up before the actual lighting of the pyre. This was to indicate that one part of her life was over and another was to begin. She was free to remarry if she so desired. Sati

was not prevalent in Vedic times. It came later. Now it has been made illegal.

Can you tell me where the custom of wearing janevu (the sacred thread) originated from?

The Brahmin thread used to be first worn at Vedarambh before starting the studying of the Vedas which were considered sacred and secret. They were not easily accessible. Wearing the thread made you dwij (born anew or for the second time) and ready to receive that knowledge. Nowadays, it's mostly worn just before getting married.



2

Surya Dev

In ancient times, Surya was worshipped and is still very important in many parts of India. He is referred to as Surya Dev, Surya Shakti, symbol of puja and so on. How did Surya worship start in India?

Surya is mentioned in the Vedas. He is hailed in the yagnas (rituals). He is a very important part of the Vedas. In fact, in the Rig Veda, the first sloka is of purohit or pandit who sits in the east, which is considered a holy (shubh) direction because of the sun. It's natural. The first thing you see after the darkness and fears of the night is the sun. So the rising of the sun is considered auspicious.

The image of Surya is always a grand one. Can you tell us about it?

The illustration of Surya shows two hands, not four. Both hands hold lotus flowers. He sits on a chariot with seven horses to suggest the number of days of the week. This is interesting because the Vedas don't count a seven-day week. This concept emerged 1800 years ago. The Vedas are 4000 years old. So probably the concept of seven horses emerged later. The chariot has twelve wheels signifying twelve months. This grand rath is called vimana. Today vimana means a plane.

The number of Surya Dev's wives is sometimes three, four or five.

Surya is a romantic god. The folklore before the Puranas mentions one of Surya's lovers as Suryamukhi (sunflower) who adores him so much that she keeps looking at him. He does not look at her. It's a one-sided love. Another folk story talks of the Raat Rani (Queen of the Night) flower who lived in heaven and was in love with Surya who didn't care much for anybody. She felt so bad that she said she would come to earth and bloom only at night so that Surya would never touch her. As a result the Raat Rani gives off a fragrance only at night when the sun is absent. So there is one who adores the sun unconditionally and another who is heartbroken.

There's a story in the Puranas about Saranya, the daughter of Vishwakarma, the architect. Saranya, Surya's wife, is blinded by his radiance and cannot see him clearly. He too can't see anything beyond his radiance. Their children are Manu, Yama and Yamini. Saranya gets frustrated in her marriage because she can't handle Surya's brightness and leaves, but keeps her double—Chhaya—in her place. Surya does not even realize this. He has two children with her too called Shanidev (the god of Saturn) and Revant. The children from his first wife want to tell their father that Chhaya is a false wife. Yama quarrels with his stepmother who curses him saying that his feet will be infested with insects. Surya realizes that a mother will never curse her children. Yama tells him the truth. Surya then goes to his father-in-law's place but his wife runs away from there too. She takes the form of a mare. Surya then takes the form of a horse, chases her and appeases her. They then have twins—Ashwini Kumaras. Surya has quite a colourful life.

We know that Karna is Surya's son. How else does he figure in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana?

In the Vedas, Surya and Indra are the main gods. Although there are more hymns in Indra's name there's some dispute about who is more important. But both are Adityas, sons of Aditi. The clouds and sun have a

relationship. When there's more sun and it is summer, we don't like it and want the rains. But when there's a lot of rain, and it's all wet and dirty, we call back the sun. So there's a tension there which shows up in stories. From Puranic times onwards, Surya and Indra start taking a back seat and Shiva, Vishnu and Durga attain importance. But the tension stays. In the Ramayana, Sugriva is a Suryaputra while Vali is an Indraputra. In the Mahabharata, Karna is a Suryaputra while Arjuna is an Indraputra.

Who is Surya's sarathi (charioteer)?

His name is Arun, which means dawn. The Vedas don't mention this name. There it's Usha or Ushas; dawn is feminine. It's the masculine Arun in the Puranas. Arun is Garud's brother. Garud is the eagle who is with Vishnu. The eagle is associated with Surya in the Vedas. Arun and Garud's mother, Vinata, had two eggs. Impatient for the children to be born she breaks one egg and a premature child—Arun—is born. Only the upper part of his body is formed. So you do not know whether he is a man or a woman. At dawn there's light but you don't see the sun. It's unclear and that's how his sexuality is too—Usha or Arun? A related story in the Ramayana is about Arun wanting to see dancing apsaras in the Indrasabha. The guards tell him that only women are allowed inside, so he takes a female form, goes inside and watches the apsaras dance. Indra asks about this woman whom he's never seen before. He is attracted and sleeps with her. A child, Vali, is born. During the time of this romance, Surya is annoyed by Arun's absence. When Arun explains, Surya is curious to see his female form, so Arun becomes female again. Surya also falls in love and they have a child, which is Sugriva. In the images of Surya, you'll always see only the sarathi's upper body. Some images show Surya carrying a bow. This is to suggest that he shoots away darkness with his arrows. So just as Indra eradicates drought, Surya does away with darkness. The two Adityas remove dryness and darkness.

Tell us about the sun temples. We know about the beautiful one in Konark.

There was a time when there were many sun temples in India. In the eighth century, there was the Martand Sun Temple in Jammu and Kashmir. In the fifteenth century, a central eastern king, Sikander Shaheen, demolished it, so it's now in ruins. In Odisha, of course, there is the Konark Temple, which was apparently brought down even as it was being built. The idol in the garbhagriha (inner sanctorum) was never set down on the ground. It was kept floating with two magnets—one on the floor and another on the ceiling. So when the ceiling magnet was stolen, the whole structure collapsed. This is one theory for which there is no proof. There's a sun temple in Modhera, Gujarat, which is also in ruins. At one time, there used to be huge temples dedicated to Surya. Not any more.

Is there a place for him in the existing temples?

Not really. Surya is worshipped among the navagraha (the nine astrological deities of time). In Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, there are a couple of sun temples, but these aren't as popular as they once used to be. The size of the Konark Temple—also called the Black Pagoda—is huge for one god. Now we have Rama and Krishna temples but not sun temples. Perhaps after the Vedic age, the Surya parampara (community of sun worshippers) became associated with Vishnu, and he started getting worshipped. There are some images of the sun wearing boots. These are from the Kushan era which was in between the Vedic and Puranic times. Kushan was a king in the Mathura area of the Gangetic plains about 1800 years ago. He was central Asian and the boots suggest a Kazakh, Turkmenistan influence but that was about the last of it. It's not prevalent today.

Did Surya have any bhakts (devotees)?

The most famous one was Samba, Krishna's son. There's a festival called Samba Dashami during which Surya is worshipped.

Samba is falsely lured by his stepmother, Nandini. He rebuffs her advances. Krishna sees them and, despite Samba's explanation, curses him with skin disease. A rishi tells him that only one god can help him—Surya. When Samba is cured by Surya, he builds the temples in Konark, Modhera and Kashmir. Interestingly, in science too, sunlight plays an important role in healing skin diseases. There's vitamin D, of course. It seems that Ayurveda doctors knew that skin problems could be cured with sunlight.

What is Surya's role in navagraha?

In astrology, Surya is the central deity. Around him are the moon and other planets. The stars—his wives—are behind him. You worship the sun and all the others get worshipped too since he is the head of all the grahas.

Is the surya namaskar connected with mythology?

It is believed that the surya namaskar was invented by Hanuman for his guru, Surya. Yoga is always done facing the east. The east is very important for any major task. So in India, we say left is vama, but right is dakshina. That's because when you face the east, the south is to your right, the north is to your left and the west is behind.



3

Fathers

Brahma is considered the creator of Brahmada, the universe. So would it be right to call him the first father of the Puranas?

That would be correct. But the father concept is a bit complicated. Paintings show Brahma seated on a lotus, which emerges from the navel of Vishnu. So is Vishnu Brahma's father? A father also has a father, his father too has a father, and so on. Who was there right at the beginning? Who knows? Even the gods came later. This is what the famous creation hymn of the Rig Veda says.

Brahma is called Pitamaha or grandfather, not father. And all living beings may have a father like Kashyapa, Pulitsa, Saptarishi or Prajapati—whose father is Brahma. So he is definitely a father. But the words ‘creator’ and ‘father’ are different. Prakriti, nature, has no creator, because it is sanatana, eternal. It is the living beings—who experience hunger (bhookh) and desire (bhog)—who are created by Brahma. So he is the grandfather only of all living beings, not of all creation.

The concept that prakriti is eternal is common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Brahma arrives within prakriti. The story goes that there is an ocean called Kshir Sagar upon which lies Shesh Naga on whom Vishnu sleeps. From his navel arises a lotus on which Brahma sits. Brahma is the

father of Prajapati and Saptarishi who are born of his mind, so are his Manasputras, and who marry several devis from whom different living beings are born. This long story exists to show the difference between creator and father.

Who are the fathers of Vishnu and Shiva?

The answer to this will depend on the book you read. In the Shiva Purana, Shiva created himself; he is svayambhu (self-created). In the Vishnu Purana, it is said that Vishnu created the world and Shiva appeared later. In the Shiva Purana, Vishnu comes later. These are sectarian differences. In the Shakta parampara, Devi is the mother of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and there is no father. The word ‘father’ does not occur here, so Brahma is not Shiva’s father. There is no relationship. He is self-created, and at best, he is Devi’s son. But the word ‘father’ is never associated with Shiva. In the Vedas, Vishnu is said to be the son of Aditi and is known as Kashyapaputra, while in the Vishnu Purana, Vishnu too is svayambhu.

We can see images of Shiva as a father with Parvati and Ganesh.

In art, in paintings from the mountainous regions, you’ll see Shiva as a loving father, although he shies away from responsibility. All responsibility lies with his wife. This is seen in folk tales—he is a vairagi, an ascetic, who does not know how to manage household responsibilities. But there are many images in which he is seen holding Ganesh on his shoulder, or playing with him and his sons while the mother cooks. You won’t find a similar story of Vishnu. Vishnu is a worldly king and the protector of the universe. You will not see images of him as a father although Kamadeva is shown as his son, who is an irresponsible god and converts everyone into a bhogi (participant in the world). But you won’t see pictures of him sitting on Vishnu’s lap.

This is an irony. Shiva, who is an ascetic, is shown with a family life and as a loving father, while Vishnu, the preserver and protector of the

world, is not depicted as a father. Nor are Rama and Krishna. This is something worth thinking about.

So will you call god father or mother?

In English, you'll say god is my father. In India, in Hinduism, the word bhagavan is masculine, feminine and also neuter. When we talk of bhagavan it's not one entity; we talk of prakriti and atma. If we consider atma as god, it is masculine; if we consider prakriti, it is feminine. In the Bhagavad Gita, when Krishna says the world is born from me, we think it is masculine. But Krishna says he has two yonis (wombs)— purusha and prakriti, that is, atma and the material world. Here, the father becomes the mother too. So Krishna is called Vithai or mother Vitthal in Maharashtra. The gender gets mixed. Bhagavan has no gender. Once you give it a gender, one that is anant (eternal and endless) is made finite or limited within a boundary.

What is the difference between the words pita, pitr, putra, etc.?

The belief is that this is Bhu-loka, where we live. After death, we'll go to Pitr-loka or the land of the ancestors. The dead ancestors wish to be reborn in Bhu-loka, which is possible only if they've left behind sons here. So during the shraddha ceremony, sons make pind-daan and promise their ancestors that as they gave them birth, so will they bring them back, creating the cycle of life and death (ritu chakra).

The concept behind what happens to someone who does not have a child is very strong. In the Rig Veda, Yama is childless when he dies, so he gets stuck in Pitr-loka. In the Puranas, it is said that a childless person will go to a kind of hell called Putta. He'll suffer there forever, as he'll never be able to return to Bhu-loka. So the putri (daughter) and putra (son) are ‘those who will save you from Putta’. When you don't have children you do shraddha in which you accept the entire Brahmanda, the entire next generation, as your children. You adopt them mentally. Sometimes, there is real adoption too.

Having children is a very important part of manava dharma (human duty/morality). Kanya-daan also sends you to heaven. This is considered maha-daan because she'll bear children for another vansh (lineage). So putra and putri are important: putri will look after another vansh and putra our own. In a patriarchal society, lineage is important because property travels through men. Varna (caste) and gotra (lineage) also travel through men. As the child saves the parent (pita) from hell, helping him in his rebirth, there is a strong relationship between the two generations. Thus we have the concepts of Putta, putra, putri and pitr (dead ancestor).

The word preta also comes from here. If you don't have a family, nobody will do your pind-daan. You'll then be stuck in Bhu-loka and your atma will not achieve peace and will wander around like a ghost (preta). Pitr are those on the other side of the Vaitarni river and preta are those stuck on this side of the river in Bhu-loka. There is a Pitr Paksh that happens between Ganapati puja and Dussehra. Many shops are shut during this time. A puja is done at that time for all the pretatma. It's the shopkeepers' way of telling them, 'We'll help you, but please don't wander around as bhoot and obstruct our business.'

Pitr are given great importance in rituals. Living beings are alive because of food. During rituals, food is served to the gods, oneself, putra and pitr. The upper half of the right hand offers food to the gods, the palm bends backwards for oneself, towards the left for the putra and with the thumb on the right for the pitr. This is to tell them, 'We're feeding you, but don't enter the house.' Flesh is created through food and to convert preta into pitr food becomes very important. These are all correlated concepts.

Dashratha was Rama's father. Krishna had Vasudeva and Nanda as well. Explain this.

In the Puranas, the concept of father is complicated. To understand this, we should turn to a folk tale arising from the Vikram–Vetal stories. There's a girl who marries a merchant who is soon killed by a king. She develops a relationship with a Brahmin and has a son by him. That child is raised by a

king. When he grows up and goes to do pind-daan, three hands come up from the river—the merchant’s, the Brahmin’s and the king’s. He gets confused. All three claim to be his father. The merchant says, ‘I married your mother’, the Brahmin says, ‘I am your biological father’, and the king says, ‘But I raised you.’ This is a complex question because whoever you give the pind to, you’ll inherit his property, his varna and gotra, and you’ll be part of his kul (clan). So the child has to decide whether he is a Vaishya, Brahmin or Kshatriya.

This concept is also associated with Krishna. He is born to Devaki and Vasudeva who are of the Yadava Vansh. The Yadavas were not allowed to become kings because they were cursed by Yayati. But he is raised by Nanda who is a cowherd. Vasudeva takes the newly born Krishna across the Yamuna and leaves him with the cowherds Nanda and Yashoda. When Shishupala insults Krishna, he does not give him the status of a prince but calls him a cowherd as he’s raised by one. This concept comes up repeatedly.

Krishna’s stories usually involve Radha or the Pandavas, but we haven’t heard much about Krishna’s sons.

Krishna has eight main queens (ashta bharya) and 16,000 junior queens. He has many sons, but only a few sons are mentioned like Rukmini’s son Pradyumna and Jambavati’s son Samba. Pradyumna has some of Krishna’s greatness, but Samba has a different personality. He is a prankster, mischievous, and can be seen as a weak character. Just because the father is great does not mean the son will also be great.

We’ve heard stories of Rama and Dashratha but don’t know much about Rama’s relationship with his sons.

It’s interesting that Rama is not seen as a father. Sita is seen as a mother as she is a single mother raising her sons in a jungle. Rama does not play a role in raising them. In fact, in the Puranas, you will find many stories where the father simply gives his seed and leaves. The mothers raise the

children. Many sons are thus known as their mother's sons: the Pandavas are called Kaunteyaputra or sons of Kunti; Nakula and Sahadeva are Madreyaputra or sons of Madri. However, the legal and property rights and the varna come from the father.

Are there any stories where the father has played the role of the mother?

There are many stories of adoption and some in which a man adopts a girl. Janaka adopts Sita, Rompad adopts Dashratha's daughter Shanta and Kuntibhoj adopts Kunti. Ours is a patriarchal society and we talk of Putrakameshti Yagna (the ritual seeking the birth of a son) but stories of girls being adopted are also there.



Versions of the Ramayana

It is said that there's Rama in every atom of India. In every part of India, the Ramayana is not just a story but also a tradition, which includes temples, music, theatre, art and devotees. Today, let's travel the country and experience it. Does Mumbai have a Ramayana tradition?

In south Mumbai, we have the Banganga tank. The Ban is an arrow that Rama had struck on the ground to get drinking water. You can find many such ponds (kund), streams and caves associated with Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. In Maharashtra, Nasik is important. Rama is supposed to have done the shraddha ceremony for his father at the Rama kund near the Godavari. Here the river flows in the opposite direction. Near Nasik, there is a place where Sita was supposed to have been kidnapped. The word Nasik comes from Surpanakha's nasika or nose that was cut off by Lakshmana. Eknath wrote the Bhavartha Ramayana in Marathi in Maharashtra roughly during the same time Tulsidas wrote his. In Eknath's Ramayana, Rama is presented through the feeling of bhakti (devotion). In Valmiki's version, he is presented as a nayak (hero) in veer rasa (emotion of valour).

What is the tradition in Karnataka?

Many Ramayanas were written here, the earliest being Raveramayana. One of the earliest black-and-white movies called *Sati Sulochana*, a story about Meghnad's wife, was made here. In their loka katha (folk tales) there's an interesting story in which Shiva gives Ravana a fruit and asks him to give it to his wife to beget a good son. Ravana eats it himself and gets pregnant. In discomfort, he sneezes and a baby girl appears. A rishi tells him that the girl will kill him, so he sends her away on a boat. This girl is believed to have returned as Sita. This is called a Rama katha. The Ramayana is a Sanskrit poem but these are all folk tales, local stories. The main story does not change. Local variations appear that add flavour. This story, which comes from the oral tradition, shows rural simplicity as against urban sophistication.

In the Lakshadweep islands, there are many Moplah Muslims from Kerala. Their poetry has elements of the Ramayana. King Rama is called Sultan Lama and King Ravana, Sultan Lavana. Ra is pronounced as La. Moplahs have a relationship with South East Asia. Their songs—called Maplayattu—also have elements of the Ramayana.

Now let's go to Sri Lanka.

You'll think that Ashoka Vatika, Ravana's palace, was here. Nobody knows whether that idea is for tourist consumption or whether there's any authenticity to that claim. Academics won't believe any of it but the devotees do. There's a Sita temple here called Seetha Amman Temple made in the Tamil tradition that is very strong in Sri Lanka.

What is the tradition in other South East Asian countries?

Thailand and, in fact, all of South East Asia—Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos—have a strong Ramayana tradition. The Ramayana spread here around 1000 years ago through sea merchants. The identity of the king of Thailand is associated with Rama. The king of the

Chakri dynasty (1782–1809) called himself Rama I and the subsequent ones, Rama II (1809–24) and Rama III (1824–51), and their capital city was called Ayuthya. In Thailand, they say Rama is from Thailand and he came to India later. They believe the Ramayana originated there. But the Ramayana and the Buddhist traditions get mixed there. Rama is king and the emerald Buddha is their ishta-devata (primary deity). Everywhere the poetry is of Rama. *Ramakien* was written by the king himself. In South East Asia you'll see a lot of Ramayana stories but in the veer rasa, not in the bhakti rasa.

What is the tradition in Tamil Nadu?

Here, for the first time, the Ramayana was written in a local language called Eramavataram 1000 years ago. It is known as the Kambuki Ramayana. The Buddhist and Jain traditions travelled south from the north and the Bhakti tradition travelled north from the south. The Bhakti tradition is 1000 years old and is associated with the Ramayana because it was written in a folk language for the first time. Rama is an avatar of Vishnu here—he is associated with god for the first time. A story has Ravana getting scared of warring with Rama and wanting to go back to Lanka. But he can't till he holds the bow, which means till he does not bow down to god. In these stories, god's will prevails, not that of human beings. Like the boatman who does not know that Rama is god but whose simple hospitality moves Rama to alleviate his problems and give him moksha by a simple touch. Even if he doesn't want it, he'll get it because it is god's will. This comes about in the Shri Vaishnava tradition.

What about Andhra Pradesh?

In Andhra, and also in Tamil Nadu, there is a form of shadow puppetry called Ravana Chhaya through which the artists tell the stories of Rama and Ravana. They say that when the merchants sailed in their ships to South East Asia, to amuse themselves at night, they'd light a lamp behind the sail and use leather puppets to tell the story of the Ramayana. In

Andhra, and also in Karnataka and Maharashtra, you will find women's stories of the Ramayana. Women sing these while cooking and cleaning the house and in these songs you find a new rasa. You can call this stree vad, not purusha vad. There are stories about Kaushalya's morning sickness when she was pregnant with Rama, her emotions when she first held Rama, her feelings when she bathed her baby, Sita's hardships in the jungle, Urmila's pain and Surpanakha's anguish and rage. You'll also find a story of Shanta, Rama's older sister. All these belong to the oral tradition. If women don't pass these on to their daughters, these stories will be lost. I believe the first Ramayana one hears is always from one's mother. Through her songs and stories, she instils her sanskar in her children.

What is the tradition in Odisha?

Here Balaram Das wrote the Dandi Ramayana. Earlier, all Ramayana puja-paath used to be in Sanskrit. At first, people did not accept the epic in local languages. So the Odiya Ramayana could be sung on the streets but not in the temples. Gradually, it started becoming popular in the temples too.

What is the tradition in Bengal?

In Bengal, there's the Kruttibas Ramayana. Here you hear of the dhobi story for the first time and also the story about Lakshmana rekha. These are additions from loka katha. Now these have become an integral part of the Ramayana. There is a story about a rakshasa here called Taranisen, a Rama bhakt, who writes Rama's name all over his body. Rama wonders how he can possibly kill him. So he asks him to shoot an arrow in his mouth. In Bengal there's a form of Durga puja called Akalbodhon. It means worshipping god at the wrong time. Navaratri is celebrated during Vasant but Rama observed it in the Sharad month, praying to the goddess to give him strength to defeat Ravana. He promises to offer a thousand lotus flowers to the devi. The devi wants to test him so she hides one

flower. When Rama can't find the last flower he offers to cut off one of his eyes which are like lotuses (kamal-nayan). When he is about to do that with an arrow the devi stops him. Here you see the importance of the Shakti parampara (the sect worshipping Goddess Shakti). The devi starts playing an important role.

What is the tradition in Assam?

In north-east India, there is Mahakavi Kandali's Ramayana. There's a version by Raghunath Mahanta in which Sita goes to Patal-loka at the end and starts missing her children and asks Vasuki to get her children there. It's an elaborate version of the Uttara Ramayana.

What is the story in Nepal?

Janakpur, where Sita is born, is in Nepal. There's a big Sita temple there and also where Janaka's kingdom lay. That's Mithila in northern Bihar. In Gaya, which is also associated with the Buddha, people perform shraddha believing that Rama and Sita did shraddha for Dashratha there.

Let's go to Uttar Pradesh from Bihar.

Across Gangetic plains, the Ramayana has its biggest tradition, the world-famous Rama-leela. It started in Benaras. Tulsidas wrote the *Ramcharitamanas* in the sixteenth century. It was written in the language of the stage with the idea of depicting it as a play. Sita swayamvar is described here which you won't find in the Valmiki Ramayana. Swayamvar looks good in a theatrical presentation.

Tulsidas loved his wife so much that he chanted only her name day and night. There's one story in which she gets irritated and tells him that were he to chant Rama's name as much he'd have achieved moksha by now. Once, a neighbour informs Tulsi that his wife, Ratna, has gone to her parents' house for a few days because her father isn't well. Tulsi gets restless. The neighbours ask him when he is going to tell them Rama's

story and he promises to do so soon. It's a rainy night and Tulsi misses Ratna. In the downpour he goes to see her at her parents' house. He breaks into her bedroom. She is surprised to see him. He had hoped for a more positive response. She tells him that she's fed up with his constant attention, his uncontrolled lust. He is hurt and asks whether it's wrong to love one's wife. She says this is not love, just obsession. 'You've lost your love for knowledge and writing because of this,' she says. 'If you had spent that much time thinking of Rama your life would have been fulfilled,' she adds.

In Madhya Pradesh there's a Ramnami sect among the Dalits. Because they were not allowed inside the temples, they revolted through the medium of bhakti. They tattooed the name of Rama all over their bodies. This is a 100–200-year-old tradition. They read the *Ramcharitamanas*, the part where Rama speaks about equality. In fact the Uttara kanda speaks of equality between men, women, transgender people, animals and trees because they are all dear to god. These powerful ideas are seen in the political space as well.

Is there any story in Rajasthan?

Here, there's a famous story about Lanka chadhai (the invasion of Lanka). This is a loka parampara sung by the yogis of Mewad. The people who sing are self-professed Shiva bhakts but they also follow Islam and sing about Rama. There's a story about the first meeting of Rama and Lakshmana with Hanuman. They get into a fight and Hanuman eats Lakshmana. Rama and Hanuman fight so hard that Shiva intervenes and tells Hanuman that Rama is a Vishnu avatar. Hanuman asks for forgiveness and says he'll do anything for Rama. Rama asks for his brother back and Lakshmana returns. Lakshmana has experienced Hanuman's strength, so when Hanuman asks Lakshmana what he wants he asks Hanuman to serve them so that he can help them attack Lanka.

Has the Ramayana been translated into Farsi?

The Ramayana was written in Farsi for Akbar since it was the court language. It was called Razmnama, the book of war, a Persian translation of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It also had paintings since Akbar was illiterate. The stories were narrated to him along with the paintings.



5

Radha

Krishna's name always seems incomplete without Radha. We've been hearing stories of their rasa-leela for years. Who is Radha? And why is she such a favourite of Krishna?

When we talk of Radha-Krishna we are in the sphere of love. Yogis and rishis used the medium of Radha-Krishna to explain the subject of love. In India, gods always come in pairs—Shiva-Shakti, Vishnu-Lakshmi, Rama-Sita and Radha-Krishna. All forms express different ideas. A restrained, dignified form of love is found in the Rama-Sita relationship. Vishnu is constantly trying to make Lakshmi happy. He looks after her, taking different avatars to do so. This expresses a different bhava. If Lakshmi is in trouble, Vishnu goes and solves the problem because he is Gopala and she is Gomata. That's their relationship. Shiva is a vairagi who is brought into the household by Shakti. So various thoughts are expressed through the medium of these relationships. The subject of love and lust, the difference between the two and between love and desire, and the meaning of pure love—all are explored in detail in the Radha-Krishna relationship. So Radha and love are always spoken of together. Love is not an easy subject. It's an abstract concept. How does one show it?

Where did the name Radha come from?

It probably came from Aradhana. Radha is hidden in Aradhana. Radha sits in aradhana of god. Aradhana means to adore, to worship, to celebrate. One is not 100 per cent sure about this origin though.

Do we hear about Radha the first time we hear about Krishna?

Our history is ancient. The 4000-year-old Vedas do not mention Radha and Krishna. The Upanishads mention Krishna and Devaki but whether these are the same figures as in the stories we know, we can't say. Krishna is first mentioned in the Mahabharata, the 2000-year-old mahakavya. Here we hear about Krishna and his relationship with the Kuru clan. There is no description of him as a cowherd. Written as many as 1600 years ago, a poem, a mahakavya, called *Harivansh* first mentions Krishna's childhood as a cowherd. In the Mahabharata, Krishna as Gopala is mentioned only in the defeat of Shishupala. In the Bhagavata Purana of the tenth century, Krishna sings and dances with the gopis. Here rasa-leela is first mentioned and described. Here, too, Radha is not mentioned. Radha first appears in prakritkavya. There's a king called Hala who compiled an anthology of prakritkavyas called *Gathashabdashati*. It talks about the love of Radha and Krishna. Here, Krishna is a cowherd, not god. In the evening (godhuli), during a dust storm, a particle of dust enters Radha's eye and Krishna removes it. That's when the other gopis realize she is his favourite. Later, in the Sanskrit poem *Gita Govinda*, Radha suddenly appears in a big way. She becomes the central character. What is the difference between love and lust, prema and kama? There are similarities between Krishna and Kamadeva. Krishna is called Manmohan and Madanroop but he is not Kamadeva. So what is the difference between Krishna and Kamadeva? It's the same difference between Rati and Radha. In kamavasana, it's '*main bhog leta hoon*', 'I take pleasure'. In prema, it's '*main bhog deta hoon*', 'I give pleasure'. In today's society, you see male domination. The stalker boyfriend in Bollywood movies is thinking only

of his own pleasure; he does not see the woman but only himself. I am hungry and I want. The woman exists for my consumption. Krishna on the other hand gives bhog to Radha and becomes god in the process. The question here is not whether bhog is good or bad. It's about who gives it to whom. Till we understand this concept, we will not be able to understand Radha–Krishna. There's a Hindi film song—*woh kare toh rasa-leela, main karun toh character dheela*. This sort of story indicates Krishna taking bhog. A person taking bhog is trapped in kamavasana. Krishna is not associated with kamavasana. Shiva destroys Kama with his third eye because he does not understand love. There's love when you are giving bhog to another. In rasa-leela Krishna is not satisfying his hunger. He is a god and has no hunger. He looks at the other's hunger. He makes the other beautiful, inspiring. That is the relationship described here. When Radha comes into Krishna's life, she talks of prakriti, that he has a duty towards her too. In *Gita Govinda*, she asks Krishna to adorn her with jewellery. There's a demand here. She is not servile. In fact, at one point, Krishna touches her feet. He tells her to put her feet on his head saying that in giving her bhog, he has realized his own prabhutva—I have discovered my divinity in serving you.

Was Radha older than Krishna?

Radha is a poets' creation. The poets wanted to talk about love that is not bound by any rules. So the Radha–Krishna love has no niti, no riti, no rules. Hence, she is older in some stories. In some she holds him as a child and he becomes a young man. So the rules are continuously being broken. Some stories mention her as married; in another she is related to him as an aunt. It's basically clandestine, breaking society's rules. It probably comes from the tantra parampara which rejects all rules. The Rama–Sita relationship is conducted within rules. He is Maryada Purushottam. Radha–Krishna breaks all rules.

Radha and Krishna never marry but Krishna has eight wives. Why doesn't he marry Radha?

Whether he did or did not is a matter of debate. There are two traditions. One is the Swakiya parampara in which the two are married in Go-loka, which is described in Brahmavaivarta Purana. The other is the Parakiya parampara in which they are not married. They marry other people. This is to show that love is pure and not associated with marriage. The love of Rama–Sita and Shiva–Shakti is associated with marriage but not that of Radha–Krishna. Some see this as a superior prema. In the Puranas, Krishna does not marry Radha and when he goes to Dwarka from Mathura he has ashtabharya or eight queens—Satyabhama, Rukmini, Lakshmana, Bhadra, Kalindi, Jambavati, Mitravinda and Nagnajiti. He kidnaps Subhadra . . . but that relationship is very different. Here there is a husband's sense of duty (kartavya), rules and regulations. He is a husband, not a lover. It's within a sanskriti. This Krishna never plays the flute. Radha's Krishna plays the flute, not Rukmini's Krishna. When he leaves Madhuban to come to Mathura, he does not speak about that life.

Once, when Radha sits in a grove looking unhappy, Krishna asks her what the matter is. She asks him why he didn't tell her he was leaving for Mathura. He tells her he has duties. He has to challenge Kamsa.

‘You'll leave me alone over here?’ asks Radha.

‘You know it's important for me to go. Don't get angry. I only see darkness ahead of me when you get upset,’ says Krishna.

‘If I don't get upset, how will you appease me? Have you thought of what will happen to your mother, Yashoda?’

‘I know she'll also be angry, she'll cry, but I know you will look after her.’

‘You're never coming back, are you?’ she asks.

‘I'll complete my work and return but I don't know when that'll be.’

‘Why can't I come with you?’ cries Radha.

‘Because I might lose my life.’

‘No! You are Vasudeva and Devaki’s son. You’ll become the king of the Yadava clan. Mathura will be yours.’

‘If that happens, I’ll make you my queen there.’

‘You are a prince, Kanha. I am just an ordinary Vrindavan citizen. In Mathura, you’ll have all the royal ladies following you. Where would Radha be?’

‘Don’t you believe in my love?’

‘I live on your love, Kanha. During your battle with Kalia, if anything had happened to you, Yashodamaiya would not have stopped crying. Nandan baba would have stopped smiling. And I would have killed myself because I live within you.’

‘And I, within you,’ says Krishna.

‘I want to stop you but cannot keep you away from your duties. I can spend my life in your arms. How will I live without your music, Kanha?’

‘Whose music is this? It’s yours. Here, keep my flute to remember me by,’ says Krishna.

This is when Krishna leaves for Mathura. He gives her the flute at their moment of separation. He feels that Radha is his muse and only she understands the essence of his music. She is both the inspiration and the audience of his music. He leaves the world of music and rasa, his vilas bhoomi, to enter his karma bhoomi (land of duties and obligations).

They never meet again?

In loka parampara, Krishna never meets Radha again but his queens are curious and want to see her. In one story, Narada asks Krishna who loves him the most. Krishna does not answer and says he has fever and wants some medicine. Doctors give him medicine but none of it works. Krishna says the dirt from under a woman’s feet dissolved in water will cure him. This is conveyed to his queens. They say this is not right. ‘We cannot give this to our husband. We will go to hell. Find some other way.’ Narada and the vaid meet many women but they all refuse. Finally, they meet Radha in Gokul. She immediately gives it to them when she hears it is for Krishna’s

well-being. They ask her if she isn't afraid of going to hell. She says, 'I'll do anything for Krishna. It's not a question to ask. I'm not thinking about myself. I'm only thinking about him.' This shows her love. But Radha and Krishna never meet.

I've seen Radha–Krishna idols in people's houses. But are there any temples dedicated to them? Is there a Radha temple?

Good question. In the Gaudiya parampara, there are Radha–Krishna idols. Temples on the banks of the Ganga have Radha–Krishna idols. But in the big Krishna temples—Jagannath Puri, Shrinathji, Pandharpur, Udupi, Guruvayur—there are no Radha idols. In the Bhakti sampradaya, there are two groups. In one Radha and Krishna are seen together. In the other they worship Krishna with nameless gopis, but Radha is not mentioned. Sankardeva in Assam, Chakradhar swami in Maharashtra and Mahanubhav Panth do not speak about Radha.

At Puri, the *Gita Govinda* has been woven into a cloth which Krishna wears but there is no idol of Radha. They speak of swamini. That's how she is referred to. Like I said, because of the swakiya–parakiya concept and probably because the relationship is so difficult to explain, she has been kept out of temples. It would have been difficult to explain since the philosophy is quite sophisticated. It's very easy to make it cheap and vulgar since it does not fall within the boundaries of sanskriti.



6

Christianity and the Bible

Christianity is one of the biggest religions in the world. Thirty-one per cent of the world's population follows it. When did it first come to India?

It came nearly 2000 years ago. Around ten–twenty years after the crucifixion of Christ, one of his disciples, St Thomas, came to India as an apostle. He came to India twice. People called him Doubting Thomas because of his suspicious nature. Christ told him he would be resurrected within three days of his death because he is the Son of God. St Thomas doubted it but when he saw the resurrection, he became a devotee of Christ and an apostle. The apostles went in all directions to spread the message of Christ. St Thomas was sent to India. The first time he came from the north-west and the second time by sea, to Kerala. So it's believed that the oldest Christian community is in Kerala, called Syrian Christians. St Thomas also went to Chennai in Tamil Nadu, where he got into an argument with the Brahmins and got killed. In Chennai there is a San Thome Basilica where it is believed he was martyred. Some don't believe that this was St Thomas but probably just some merchant called Thomas. Some also don't believe he was martyred.

The second time Christianity came to India, the religion was already well established here. The message had become a religion and churches had been built. The rise of Islam saw the Crusades, a battle between the Christians and the Muslims. The Islamic empire had blocked all trading routes because of which Christian merchants could not travel. Maybe that's why sea routes were discovered, and Vasco da Gama reached India. He was a Roman Catholic and brought that tradition to India. Later Portuguese rulers came to the western coast (Malabar coast) of India and established the first Roman Catholic churches—Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa and St Francis Church in Kochi, Kerala. The British later brought in Anglican churches to India. This was slightly different. While the Roman Catholic Church believes the Pope to be its head, the Anglican Church saw the king of England as its head.

Is it like the Hindu schools of Shaiva and Vaishnava parampara?

Christianity is often put into one box, like Hinduism. But there are different schools. The Roman Catholic Church is associated with the Vatican. There is an Eastern Orthodox Church whose major centres are in Russia and Greece. At one time, it was present in Turkey too. There are Protestant churches that don't recognize the Pope as the head of the church. America and Germany are famous for Protestant traditions. France has a Catholic tradition. All these traditions are found in India. Kerala has Syrian Christians; Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have the Church of South India. In the north there are Roman Catholics and Anglicans.

What are the similarities between Hinduism and Christianity?

Both believe in god. They are theist religions. Both have a kind of Bhakti tradition that understands the relationship between god and devotee.

The differences between the two are many.

The religions that originated in India—Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism—all believe in karma and rebirth. Christianity does not have this concept. The Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—believe in one life. How you behave in this life will decide whether you go to heaven or hell. God will decide since he has created this earth. He has created the commandments for people to follow. If you read the stories, you find that human beings are not able to follow these rules. This is when there is a tension between God and devotee. This is the main story of Abrahamic religions.

What is the most famous story of Christianity?

The story of Genesis is important to understand the main concept of the religion. Genesis means the creation of the world. The Bible says that God created the world in seven days. A man (Adam) came first and from his rib a woman (Eve) was born. She is told not to eat the fruit of a particular tree. A devil in the form of a serpent tempts her to eat the fruit. Eve eats the fruit and gives it to Adam. After they eat it, they gain knowledge of sexual relations and become aware of their nudity, which is called the original sin. They disobey God's commandment for the first time. God is angry and sends them to earth as punishment. You will live in suffering there till you follow the rules, he tells them. Most mythical stories in the world try to understand and explain why life is the way it is. We have problems in life because we did not obey God. We are from Adam's lineage. We have inherited Adam's sin. To get free from sin, different schools have different solutions. Jews say we have to follow God's commandments which are conveyed by his messengers, and one day, a messiah will arrive and release human beings from their sin. Christianity believes that the messenger—Christ—is already here. He is not only a messiah but also the Son of God. Islam believes that the last messenger was Muhammad, and his message was the Koran.

The story of the original sin comes from the Bible. What other stories does the Bible have?

The Bible has two parts—the Old and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God appears very strict, making rules and punishing people. In the New Testament, he is kinder and more forgiving. The messenger does not talk of rules, but of love, devotion and compassion, although rules are important too. A more emotional side emerges which is connected with Jesus. The New Testament has stories of Jesus—his birth, life, crucifixion in Jerusalem and resurrection. The New Testament is like a fruit, the seed of which is the Old Testament, which is a long story about Jews, starting with the original sin. The tales of human beings not following God's rules are repeatedly told. In one, God gets angry and says that for forty days he'll pour so much rain on earth that it'll get flooded. There's one sinless man Noah (called Nu in the Arabic tradition) who is asked to make a boat that will carry a pair of all living beings. The flood destroys everything. The occupants of the boat survive and, after the waters recede, form new life and a new world. In our Puranas too, there is a story about a flood where Manu carries birds, animals and the Vedas to safety. It's the story of the Matsya avatar.

What other stories are there in the Bible?

There's a story about Ibrahim, which is not in the Bible but found in biblical traditions. He would make idols of gods and goddesses from mud and stone. But once God tells him that these are false gods because there is only one God and it is formless. He is asked to destroy the idols. He does and becomes the first messenger who says that there's only one God. This is the fundamental difference. Hinduism believes in many forms (roops) of god. God gives Ibrahim rules that people do not follow and they become slaves. This theme of rules being followed and broken appears repeatedly in the Bible.

Jesus comes much later?

These stories are said to be 3000 years old. Jesus arrived 2000 years ago.

Tell us about the Christian concept of confession.

It is believed that if you break rules in everyday life and confess in church, God will forgive you. But it is important that you accept your mistake. Confession is an important concept in the Catholic school. Protestants do not have this. There are no priests in their churches. A devotee forms a direct relationship with God.

Tell us about the Mount Mary Church in Mumbai and the Velankanni Church in the south.

The Velankanni story comes from the coastal regions which was under the Portuguese rule. Once, a cowherd, on his way to selling milk in the market, meets a woman with a baby. She asks him for milk for her baby. The boy gives her one, two, three bowls of milk. The milk does not get over. He goes to the market and tells the merchants there and wonders what it is. The Syrian Christians believe that the woman was Mother Mary. There they established a church of Mother Mary—Our Lady of Good Health. Like in some Hindu temples such as Tirupati where your hair is tonsured, at the Velankanni Church, people shave their heads as a sign of devotion. One wonders whether it's Hindu or Christian. India is a country of faith. God in all forms is accepted here. This is our secular nature.

I've read in many places that Jesus came to Kashmir. Is it true?

There is a dargah in Kashmir where Jesus is said to have died. This is found in folk tales. Historians are not yet sure about this. Christians do not believe this. There isn't much information or many stories about Jesus's youth. There are stories about his birth and childhood and later years. Some people believe he might have been travelling—like a tirth yatra—to Arab countries, Persia, probably Kashmir too since it was famous for Sufis and rishis. Kashmir was called rishi bhoomi. Around 2000 years ago there

were Buddha Vihara and Takshashila here, so it was quite likely that a person looking for god may have come eastward. There is no proof though.



7

Shabri

In the Ramayana, we meet various devotees of Rama. Famous ones like Hanuman have temples of their own and are worshipped. Today we'll meet another Rama devotee. I saw in our first season that Shabri offers Rama grapes. Wasn't it supposed to be berries?

This story of Shabri's ber (berries) was first heard in the eighteenth century. If you see the various versions of the Ramayana, you'll find that this story has undergone many changes since it was first written 2000 years ago. The Ramayana is not just a story; it's a parampara. It has undergone many changes. In the earliest version, the Valmiki Ramayana, there is no mention of Shabri at all. When Rama goes in search of Sita, Jatayu tells him that she was taken south and that is all the information he has. On his way, he meets the headless Kabandha rakshasa who tells him that there's a Pampa lake near the Rishimukh mountain where many rishis are waiting for him. He asks Rama to go to Rishi Matanga's ashram there. By the time Rama reaches the ashram, he finds that Rishi Matanga has taken samadhi, and his maid Shabri is waiting for him. When he meets her, she touches his feet, welcomes him, gives him food and then enters the fire and takes samadhi herself. Rama then proceeds to Lanka.

Does she give him berries?

That has not been given importance. She probably gives him some kanda-muli (roots and shoots). It is important to note that in the Valmiki Ramayana Shabri's story is about bhakti, dharma and seva (service). There is no mention of berries. Rama then proceeds south to Lanka.

Are there other versions of the story?

A folk tale in the Tamil Kamba Ramayana written 1000 years ago talks of seva. There's no mention of what is served, berries or otherwise.

Shabri is hesitant about meeting Rama because she is a lower-caste woman. But he urges her to meet him. She comes forward and welcomes him with flowers strewn in his path. She is very happy that he has honoured her with a visit to her hut. She offers him food. Here, there's not much talk of dharma or seva. She's just one of the people he meets on his journey to the south between Kadamba and Kishkindha. In the Telugu Ranganatha Ramayana, she offers different kinds of fruit to him. That is also not an important episode. She offers him food, which is a basic Indian custom, that of offering food and water to anyone who comes to your house because a guest is considered equivalent to god.

When did the berries come into the story?

They were probably first mentioned 500 years ago in an Odiya story—Balaram Das's Dandi Ramayana. Dandi is a metre in music. Also, the road near the Jagannath Temple is called Boradandah (from verandah). Only Sanskrit, which was god's language, was allowed inside the temples. Balaram Das's Ramayana written in folk language was sung by people outside the Jagannath Temple, and is hence called the Dandi Ramayana. After it became famous and was allowed inside the temple, it was called Jagmohan Ramayana. Here, for the first time, food is given importance. Rama meets two hunting tribals, a man and a woman—Shabra and Shabruni—on his journey south. Shabri has been used here as a common

noun, as a tribal person and tribal woman. She offers Rama and Lakshmana mangoes. Rama picks up a fruit that has teeth marks on it and Lakshmana picks one without. Rama says he finds the one with teeth marks very sweet and asks for those alone. This is the first time we see him eating something tasted by another. In Puri, there's a Krishna temple associated with the Sabar people who are hunters. It is said that tribals used to worship at this temple which was later taken up by the Brahmins. Even today, a class of Brahmins called Daityas, who originate from the hunting community, worship here. Maybe that's why when the Ramayana was written here, tribals were given importance and the Sabar story was elevated. In fact, they say if a Sabar were to offer an already tasted fruit to god in the temple, it would be accepted because they are a favourite of Jagannath. So this story was probably elevated because of the culture there 500 years ago.

There are still no berries though.

No. In Hindi literature, the story of Shabri offering berries to Rama appeared 300 years ago. She brings him half-eaten berries and when Lakshmana asks her about it, she tells them that she's tasted them and brought only the sweet ones for Rama. Rama does eat them. There's innocence and bhakti in her sentiment; she wants to be a good host. The intention is important. In fact, some say they were not berries, but yam (shakarkand). In Sanskrit, it's called shabarkand. Both berries and yam are wild things available in the forest, which the rishis and the Sabar people knew about.

Did the idea of rejecting 'jhootha' or half-eaten food come from here?

This is very difficult to explain to foreigners. When we offer bhog to gods in a temple, they are presumed to eat it, after which we have it. So we are eating god's jhootha, which is called prasad. In folk culture, a Brahmin's jhootha is eaten because it is considered pure, holy. So there is casteism associated with who will eat whose half-eaten food. It's a theory that

perhaps Balaram Das was making a political statement with his Shabri story where Rama eats a lower-caste woman's jhootha. Three hundred years ago, it was not about hygiene but about pollution of caste. This is the reality of our society. Even today in houses you find segregated vessels for people. This issue was raised 500 years ago, with the idea that it makes no difference to god. That's why this story is important in India. Rama is Patitapavan, one who lifts the fallen ones.

Does every version of the Ramayana mention Shabri as a lower-caste woman?

It's not that obvious. It is said that she is in the ashram of Rishi Matanga, who was a chandal before he became a rishi. When Matanga is mentioned the lower-caste factor comes in. Whenever Rama meets a rishi, he touches his feet. But here, Shabri touches Rama's feet. Is this because of gender or caste? It's worth thinking about. Shabri is shown to be an old woman, so Rama should be touching her feet. Balaram Das talks about tribals. In later versions, the caste system is clearly established. In fact, according to one story, the rishis don't talk to Shabri and have a separate welcome prepared for Rama. But Rama ignores this and goes directly to Shabri.

I read in one version that Shabri was not Rama's devotee and that he just met her somewhere.

Yes, she was a maid who had been instructed by Rishi Matanga to serve Rama in his absence. The bhakti element was introduced in the last 500 years. Shabri is a super bhakt. In the Valmiki story, the lake along which Rama travels has fish and birds because he was a Kshatriya and ate meat. Later, Rama is seen as a vegetarian and fruit, roots and vegetables are spoken about instead. The choice of berries is also an indication of caste consciousness. It is a simple, common food, unlike mangoes.

In the story, Rama does not have a problem eating jhootha but Lakshmana does.

Yes, there's a difference between the brothers. Rama sees Shabri's sentiment of bhakti. Lakshmana sees only the jhootha part of it. That's why Rama is a god and Lakshmana isn't.

There's a Shabri temple in south India. Is she the same as in the Ramayana?

There's a Sabarimala temple in Kerala. It is believed that Rama met Shabri in this area. Here there is the Rishimukh mountain and Pampa lake. There's a place in Madhya Pradesh too that is associated with Shabri. The Jagannath Temple in Puri too is associated with Shabri. All tribal areas are considered Shabri areas.



8

Buddhism

Buddhism is 2500 years old. Today its followers are found everywhere in the world. It is known to have originated in India. What is the meaning of the word ‘Buddha’? Does it come from buddhi (intellect)?

Yes, it is about intelligence. In English, it literally means ‘the enlightened one’. More specifically, it means the awakened one. We do not see life properly because we are ‘sleeping’. One who sees life properly is the Buddha.

What is the meaning of ‘Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami’?

To enter Buddhism, we take the sharan (shelter) of our teacher or guru (Buddham), the marga (path) he has shown (Dhamma) and the Sangha (community). Buddha was a prince who was born 2500 years ago in Nepal. He was Shuddhodhana’s son. He was interested in finding out why people were unhappy. Where is the sorrow coming from? He meditated and found wisdom, and he became Buddha. He found the origin of life’s sorrows and a path to alleviate the sorrows. This path was called Dhamma. He organized it so that this knowledge could reach everyone. He wondered if

people would understand it, whether putting it in words would be enough to convey the essence, the beauty. Brahma had come and told him that he must spread the message. So he formed the Sangha, the world's first religious institution. Buddhism was the first organized religion in 525 BCE. Christianity (1 CE) and Islam (610 CE) came later. He trained bhikkhus, teachers, who could spread the religion. Buddha travelled from Lumbini in Nepal to Bodhgaya in Bihar where he found enlightenment. He then went to Sarnath near Benaras where he gave his first lecture. Monks started joining him. This was a big revolution in India and, in fact, the world. Before this, there was the Shravan parampara in which people would leave their households and go into the jungles to meditate, become sanyasis. But it would be at an individual level. They would keep the knowledge to themselves or share it with other bhikkhus in the ashram. Buddha brought knowledge to the ordinary people. He was not selling an idea. He was sharing an idea—not just with the intellectuals but also with the masses—with the belief that each one has a Buddha within him waiting to be awakened.

Tell us about Buddha's childhood.

This story comes from *Buddhacharitam* written nearly 2000 years ago. Buddha is born into a royal family. His mother, Maya, dies soon after his birth. He is raised by his mother's sister, Mahaprajapati Gautami. Astrologers predict that the child will either become a great king or a great muni. His father, Shuddhodhana, gets very nervous. He doesn't want his only son to become a sanyasi, so he decides to keep him inside the palace charmed with the life of luxury—bhog—vilas. This way he'll never want to go out or leave his life. All is well and the prince gets married and has children. The king feels it's now safe to let him go outside, so when Siddhartha asks to see the city, he is allowed. The prince soaks in the beauty of the jungles and the flowers and discovers thorns. He sees an old man. The prince wants to know what's wrong; he's never seen so many wrinkles on anyone before. The man tells him it is his old age. He tells

Siddhartha that he too will grow old one day. Next he sees a dead body being taken for cremation. Till then he believed that only old people died. He learns that disease can kill too. Back in the palace, his father finds him looking sad. He tells his father what he saw. His father urges him to spend more time with his newborn son and not worry about the kingdom, which he'll look after. Later that night, a disturbed Siddhartha leaves his wife and child and goes into the jungle.

He basically sees the Four Sights and becomes a muni to search for the reasons behind these sorrows. He goes to many gurus, starves himself and tries various methods to achieve this knowledge. He then meditates and finally achieves wisdom and becomes Buddha. Later he forms the Sangha and spreads that knowledge. This is his life story. But 300–400 years after Buddha, people started telling stories about his previous lives. Before Buddhism and Jainism were born and the Upanishads were written, the concept of karma was limited to doing yagna. With these religions, the concept of karma as the fruit of the seed, i.e., your actions being the seeds that give fruit to your fortunes or misfortunes, took root. Probably, the idea of rebirth started then. Then the Bhagavad Gita was written. The Jataka tales described the previous lives of the Buddha. The belief was that his birth as Buddha was the accumulation of the actions of all his previous lives. It has 550 stories. He is elephant, monkey, man, etc. In these lives he always shows the karuna bhav or compassion. When you read the early Buddhist documents or Pitaka, you can see that they are very intellectual. There are rules and techniques of meditation. The Jataka tales for the first time show the emotional side; there's talk of compassion. Buddhism is changing.

Like the change from the Vedic to the Puranic in Hinduism?

Exactly. No religion is static.

What is the concept of Bodhisattva?

Buddha is one who has achieved nirvana. He gives knowledge on how to achieve nirvana. But there is not much emotion there. It's more about technique and intellect. When the emotional side of Buddhism started emerging, the concept of Bodhisattva came about. Bodhisattva is one who does not take the final step towards nirvana in order to help the rest of the world. He does not want nirvana till the sorrows of the world are not eliminated. He can be seen as the compassionate Buddha. Bodhisattva is basically one who will become Buddha in his future life.

Are stupas Buddha temples?

No. After Buddha achieved nirvana, people cremated his body, and his body parts like teeth and hair, which didn't burn, were kept safely as relics by his students. They covered it all with mud to make a mound. On it they kept an umbrella, laid flowers and this became a stupa. Around these, bhikkhus sat and meditated, discussed the knowledge they had acquired from their guru and codified and organized it. The stupa became the centre of the Sangha. It became the symbol of Buddha. The area around it where people sat was called chaitya. In those days, there was no concept of temples in India. The concept of devalaya has come from chaitya. In a way, Hinduism was influenced by these ideas. In the Vedic times, there were no idols. To give god a form was not considered correct. So Buddha was also not given a roop. His footprints, handprints and chakra used to be worshipped. They were symbols. The human form was not given.

When did the peaceful idol we know today emerge?

It emerged 2000 years ago in the Gandhara school of Buddhist art which originated in the north-west frontiers, i.e., present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Greeks had settled there and were good at making idols. They heard Buddha's story, loved the idea and made the first statue of Buddha. In philosophy, a knowledgeable one is also considered beautiful. Nobody knows what the Buddha actually looked like. Jesus too. Today in movies you see him with white skin and red eyes, but he was from an Arab

country and hence should have been dark; but the artist paints him in his idea of perfection. So the Buddha has long ears, delicate features, broad chest and narrow hips. He looks like a muni, a hermit, sitting there. He has various postures. Sometimes he's touching the ground or his hands are in a gyan mudra—basically the pose of a teacher.

The most popular images show Buddha in the meditative pose. In some, he has ten hands.

The latter is the Bodhisattva image. It was mainly a meditative pose. Gradually, he started to be shown in action. Bodhisattva is compassionate. He listens to others and sees others' sorrows. So there will be many heads, his eyes will be open, listening to people, and his many hands will comfort them. Here you see a shift in Buddhism. The older school of Buddhism—Theravada—saw Buddha as a guru who teaches techniques and ideas. The later compassionate Buddha is of the Mahayana school, where the bhakti concept is more important than dhyana (meditation).

I've seen some violent images of Buddha—holding a sword, some almost like Shiva—which is odd since Buddhism is associated with non-violence.

This is from Vajrayana Buddhism which is from Tibet, Bhutan, the Himalayan area. A Buddha guru called Padmasambhava took Buddhism into the Himalayan belt. It is said that he travelled there sitting on a tigress. Vajrayana Buddhism is different from Mahayana in that it focuses more on tantric practices. In tantra, you see violent, sexual images, so the idols will look almost like Shiva dancing the tandava, which are seen in Tibetan paintings and monasteries. It probably shows all our inner vasanas or passions which need to be conquered. Or it is a metaphor to suggest that without compassion, knowledge cannot be had. The tension in the world is shown in this violent form.

You spoke about the different traditions of Buddhism—Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Today, many people seem to be following Buddhism. Which tradition or school do they follow?

The revival of Buddhism in the twentieth century is called Navayana or new form of Buddhism. Political Buddhism became important in the last century. Ambedkar adopted Buddhism to revolt against the caste system as the Dalits were oppressed in India. In Myanmar and Thailand, Buddhism became political to mobilize people towards democracy. Another reason is that people in western societies are rejecting religion and becoming atheists. So this form of spirituality, where there is no god, is popular. There's a guru, Buddha, who will show you the path or Dhamma. Richard Gere and Dalai Lama have made it popular. It's a twentieth-century rediscovery of Buddhism.

In the Ajanta Caves, I saw a different depiction of the Buddha. He wore a crown and ornaments. Can you tell me more about it?

This is an image of Padmapani, bearer of the lotus. The story is that after a discourse, one of Buddha's disciples goes up to him and says he hasn't understood anything. So Buddha picks up a lotus flower and in that one gesture, the student understands everything. Knowledge is not always learnt through words. Images also convey knowledge. Sometimes you have to meditate, go on a journey or see images. The Padmapani image is interesting. Normally the Buddha image is masculine and sits steady. The Padmapani image is tribhangi, bent, like a dancer, has ornaments and is almost feminine. Buddhism has changed from the masculine. Woman power has entered the picture. The image of the Buddha also has become feminine. When Buddhism went to China, the Sui dynasty had the first empress and she used the religion to unite the country. Earlier, she wasn't able to unite the Confucius and Taoist traditions. People saw the Buddha in the image of their queen. In China, you find idols of female Buddha or Guanyin. Bodhisattva is seen in the female form there. It's famous in

China, Taiwan and Singapore. It's related to Padmapani. This is a Mahayana Buddhist tradition where the female principle is accepted.



9

Dwarka

Krishna was born in Mathura but he is called Dwarkadhish. Why?

Krishna's story is told in two parts. The popular part happens in Braj bhoomi, which is in the south of Delhi in the Gangetic plains near the Yamuna. Krishna was born in Mathura and then taken to Gokul where he was brought up. Then he went to Vrindavan or Madhuban and then back to Mathura where he battled Kamsa. Kamsa, Krishna's uncle (mama), was out to kill him but was killed by Krishna. The residents of Mathura were happy because Kamsa was a tyrant. He oppressed them, imprisoned Krishna's sister, killed his nephews, and so on.

Mathura was the land of the Yadavas. Kamsa's father-in-law, Jarasandha, king of Magadha, got very upset at Kamsa's death and swore revenge. Both his daughters, Asti and Prapti, had been widowed. He said he would destroy Mathura and brought his army there. Krishna and Balarama, leading an army of the Yadavas, defended the city. There is a lot of violence in this story. Jarasandha attacked Mathura eighteen times. The last time, he brought with him a new commander called Kal Yavan (Black Greek). It was believed that whenever a black Greek would attack Mathura, it would be destroyed. Krishna then decided to leave Mathura

with the Yadava clan and go to Dwarka. It is said that Krishna used his yogic power to transfer all the Yadavas to Dwarka.

What is the difference between the Krishna of Mathura and that of Dwarka?

Krishna's childhood ends in Mathura. His life is divided into the Bhagavata and the Mahabharata. The Krishna of the Mahabharata is connected with Dwarka, not Mathura. In the early stage of Krishna's life, he is a child in Vrindavan (Gokul) amidst a village environment with Radha and the gopis; he plays the flute, frolics with Radha, is surrounded by song and dance and there's playfulness and romantic innocence. All this ends when he leaves Madhuban; such details are absent in the Mahabharata.

In Mathura, as a teenager, Krishna starts showing signs of being a warrior. Here he wrestles and kills Kamsa; there's no romance or fun. As an adult, in Dwarka, he gets involved in Kuru Vansh politics which are part of the Mahabharata stories. This is an urban environment where he is married with several wives. This is the story of a mature Krishna, which is not a popular one. The stories of Krishna in Vrindavan and Mathura are more famous than the ones in Dwarka, although it is one of the Char Dhams and has a big Krishna temple.

How was Dwarka city established?

Before the Yadavas, nobody used to go there. It was an island in the sea believed to be haunted. In folk tales and some Puranic myths it is said that tall rakshasas lived there.

Krishna decides to go to Dwarka. When the Yadavas reach there, they see a giant man and woman—Revat and Revati. They are decent people but they scare people away as they do not want to be disturbed. When Krishna meets him, Revat tells him that many yugas ago this was a city kingdom, Kushasthali Samrajya, where people were very tall, and he used to be its king. Revati is his only daughter and he wants her to marry the

perfect man. In his search for one, many years ago, he had gone to Brahma. Brahma had said that there was a good boy for Revati, but Revat had spent a lot of time to come to Brahma-loka that by the time he returned, several yugas would have passed and all the eligible boys would have gone. People would have become shorter and nobody would remember him or his city. This was because one day in Brahma-loka is several yugas on earth. Revat would be so much taller than the others that they'll think he's a monster.

During this exchange with Krishna, Revati and Balarama recognize each other because of Brahma's boon. Balarama asks Revati to bend and he touches his plough to her shoulder. She shrinks in height, and they get married. He gets that island as dowry, which is Dwarka.

In other stories, Krishna calls Vishwakarma, the architect of the gods, to build a beautiful city far away from Jarasandha.

It is said that Dwarka had many palaces for Krishna's wives. Tell us about his wives.

Krishna had eight main queens (ashtabharya). Among these, the prime ones were Satyabhama and Rukmini. Jambavati (daughter of Jambavan) and Kalindi (River Yamuna) were his wives too. He also had around 16,000 minor queens.

The story goes that Indra comes to ask Krishna for help in fighting Narakasura because Krishna is Vishnu's form. For the first time, he is seen as Vishnu. Krishna mounts Garud and fights Narakasura and kills him. The 16,000 widows of Narakasura tell Krishna that nobody will accept them since they are the wives of an asura. So Krishna takes them as his wives to Dwarka and promises to build palaces for them.

Are there any other interesting stories of Krishna and his wives?

In Andhra Pradesh, Krishna's dampatya (marital) stories are very popular. These are called Bhagavata katha. In the south, the Radha and gopi stories are not as popular as those of Krishna and his wives in Dwarka. The

conflict between Satyabhama and Rukmini is particularly popular. They have very different personalities and always compete with each other.

Rukmini is the princess of Vidarbha who calls Krishna for help when she is being forcibly married to Shishupala. She then elopes with Krishna. Until then, Jarasandha thought that Krishna had been killed in the fire that destroyed Mathura. Seeing Krishna elope with Rukmini, Jarasandha realizes he is alive. As Rukmini goes away with Krishna without any dowry, she is his poor wife.

There is a wealthy Yadava, Satrajit, who marries his daughter, Satyabhama, to Krishna. With this marriage, Krishna also becomes the son-in-law of a Yadava and re-establishes his Yadava status, which sometimes is doubted because of his rustic, cowherd upbringing. So his status, prestige, authority and wealth are all because of Satyabhama.

One wife is poor and looks upon Krishna with love while the other has brought him social prestige. Who is more important? Krishna has to balance the two. It is said that Rukmini is passive and gentle while Satyabhama is demanding. After the defeat of Narakasura, Satyabhama tells Krishna to demand a fee from Indra for all that he has done. She asks for the Parijata tree from heaven to be sent to Dwarka. Indra does not want to part with that tree. Krishna gets angry and fights with Indra and forcibly brings the tree to Dwarka.

The loka katha about this is very interesting. Once the tree arrives, Satyabhama wonders who'll look after it since she does not want to do any work. She thinks up a clever plan to keep the tree in Rukmini's garden so that Rukmini will look after it while the flowers will bloom in Satyabhama's garden. Krishna realizes her trick and tells her that the tree will flower only when he is with Rukmini. So when Satyabhama sees the flowers she'll know that Krishna is with her rival and thus won't be able to really enjoy the sight and smell of the Parijata.

Are there any stories of Krishna's sons?

Krishna has several sons from several wives. But the main one is Pradyumna, Rukmini's son. As soon as he is born, Pradyumna is kidnapped by a rakshasa called Sambara who throws him into the water. A fish swallows him. A fisherman finds the baby inside the fish and hands it over to Sambara's kitchen. Pradyumna survives in that kitchen, grows up and kills the rakshasa. A woman called Mayavati looks after him. He marries her and then returns to Dwarka.

Was Krishna the king of Dwarka?

'Dwarkadhish' means 'protector of Dwarka'. Krishna is from the Yadu Vansh and Yadavas cannot be kings because of Yayati's curse. In a way it was a democratic society. There was a Sudharma council and it was ruled like a democratic senate with separate noblemen. In Mathura, there were Surasen and Ugrasen. Kamsa had broken up this council, so he died a violent death. Dwarka is also administered by many noblemen such as Satyabhama's father, Krishna, Balarama and Ugrasen.

How does Dwarka get destroyed?

Dwarka's growth and fall are tied with Krishna's rise and fall. In the Mahabharata, Gandhari curses Krishna that just as she witnessed the destruction of her vansh, he too will witness the destruction of his clan and Dwarka will be submerged. This curse is realized after thirty-six years. The Yadavas go to Prabhava tirth (pilgrimage) where there is an argument about the Mahabharata and Kurukshetra. The Yadavas fall into two groups —one that fought for the Pandavas and the other that supported the Kauravas. A war breaks out between the two groups. Krishna watches his sons and grandsons getting killed and is not able to do anything. Later, an earthquake occurs and Dwarka goes under the sea.

Archaeologists have discovered a city under the sea near Dwarka, the Atlantis of the East. Is this Krishna's city?

The Archaeological Survey of India has found a city which was in Dwarka once. They've found a port, jetty, anchor and many such objects. People believe this to be Krishna's city. It could well be but there's no proof. It's a matter of belief. Till we find some inscription or symbol we cannot be sure. But when people go to the Dwarkadish Temple, they also visit Bet Dwarka with devotion where the archaeological findings have been displayed.



10

Gramadevata

Devdutt, the name Mumbai originates from Mumbadevi, Chandigarh from Chandi and Kolkata from Kali. Why are these city names associated with the names of goddesses?

India is a country of villages, and cities arise from villages. It is said that places where human settlements were formed were originally occupied by a devi, devata, gandharva, yaksha and rakshasa. So if you are going to live there, you have to please the devi of that place—known as gramadevi. All of India's villages are associated with some gramadevi or devata. Mumbai is a conglomeration of seven villages, each of which has a gramadevi like Prabhadevi and Gamdevi. Mumbadevi is the most famous. Similarly, Chandigarh's well-known devis are Chandi devi and Mansa devi. The Kalighat Temple in Kolkata is very well known. Dhaka in Bangladesh has the Dhakeshwari Temple.

Why do some places have gramadevatas and some devis?

It's not a systematic, organized knowledge. Any group of people, any human community, requires food to satisfy their hunger and for protection from their fears. The gramadevis are usually associated with fertility, with

the land that gives food, like Annapurna, Gauri and so on. They are locally addressed as mother, by words such as aai, amma, baa or ammavaru. These are food goddesses. For protection, there are kshetra pal (protectors of the area) or guards called veer or veeroba. These are usually male gods, often with big moustaches, holding a trishul (trident), sword or bhala (spear) in their hands. They either have a horse or a dog with them, similar to hunters who protect. So gramadevi is associated with fertility and gramadevata with protection.

But it's not so clear-cut. In Odisha, there's Thakurani, a gramadevi who carries weapons in her hand. These are ferocious goddesses, also called matrikaya. In Nepal, too, and, in fact, everywhere in India, we have goddesses associated with both war and fertility. They can have a fearsome appearance with untied hair, long teeth and nails, red eyes, etc. Their descriptions are quite interesting: they come riding elephants, their hair has burning sticks in it and they carry a trishul in one hand with an elephant impaled on it—very violent, powerful images.

If you look at Hindu dharma, in the Vedas, there were gods associated with the rains (Indra), sun (Surya) and moon (Chandra). Later, in the Upanishads, gods were associated with concepts such as creation, sustenance, knowledge (vidya), wealth (dhan), etc. These belonged to the Margi parampara—not associated with a place or time but sanatana, eternal. The gramadevatas and devis are associated with a particular place—river, pond, mountain or cave. If you go to someone's house you'll see that they have a gramadevi or kuldevi (god of the family), ishta-devata (personal god) or griha-devata (god of the home). These could have various forms, appearing sometimes as a snake, sometimes as a monkey. In south India, there are big temples of gramadevatas usually outside the village. These can be seen especially in Tamil Nadu where they build tall images of these gods with big moustaches. In Rajasthan, there is Nagnechiya Maa and in Gujarat, Ashapura Mata. In fact, every part of India is associated with gramadevis and devas.

Do these gods and goddesses originate from folk tales?

They originate from the folklore of that area which is often associated with the Puranas. In early times, perhaps the people from that area alone knew about these gods, but as they became known outside the village, spread across India due to foreign visitors or because they became sites of pilgrimage, the local stories and the gods too became famous, acquiring nearly cosmic proportions. So the desi became margi; the local became sanatana.

The Vedas mention earth (prithvi) as a goddess (devi) but you'll not find Mumbadevi mentioned in the Vedas or the Puranas, not even the Sthal Puranas. If you go to a Mumbadevi temple, they'll say she is a form of devi, of Durga, and she looks like her too—she'll be astride a tiger, trishul in hand. If you ask about her story, it'll be about her killing Mahishasura or some other demon, but not anything specific. But for the people of that area their goddess is very important. If there's any problem like a drought, epidemic or crop failure, they believe it is because their gramadevi is angry with them. If you go to a temple, you'll find that the image is usually only of the head of the gramadevi because the village is supposed to be the body. There'll be a head, a pair of eyes and a hand in varad mudra (giving something) or raised in blessing. The images are usually crude. The Kali goddess image in Kolkata is basically a big rock on which the eyes, hands and tongue have been created with bronze and silver. So before the appearance of a city, town or village, the local tribes must have felt the power of this rock and declared it the devi of the area. It's a very local form. It does not have anything to do with what is now a conceptual form, that is, Kali or Durga. The local and the conceptual came to be seen as related gradually over time. Similarly, the Tirupati Devasthanam in Chennai, Vitthal Temple in Pandharpur and Jagannath Temple in Puri perhaps belonged to gramadevatas 2000 to 3000 years ago. They slowly got big temples and became famous all over India. The Khandoba Temple in Maharashtra is one such temple. Khandoba is an important local god of the Marathas; he's called Mallana in Andhra Pradesh and is also known in Karnataka. He is a very powerful, masculine, virile god.

There is a popular story about his marriage. Once Khandoba and his men arrive at a hut in the forest, tired after a failed hunt. A girl, Banai, offers them water and welcomes Khandoba to rest there for as long as he wants. Later, he begins to help her and her father around the house. After a year passes, Khandoba asks the girl's father for the payment for his services, but he is told that the food and shelter were his payment. Khandoba asks to marry Banai, which the father refuses. An angry Khandoba goes and kills all the goats in the pen and demands that he be married to Banai. He claims he would then bring all the goats back to life and make the father's region prosper. This is how Khandoba and Banai—who is also believed to have had feelings for him—are married.

This theme of marrying the god is an important one. The stories are probably meant to convey how different kuls or families settled in a village. There is a guardian gramadevata associated with any region or sthal and different families marry their daughters or kuldevis to him. Since most of this belongs to the oral tradition, you won't find stories about them too easily. The Tirupati Devasthanam that is so famous now also has an interesting story. In Vaikuntha, there's a disagreement between Lakshmi and Vishnu. Lakshmi comes to settle down in Kolhapur as Mahalakshmi. Vishnu follows her but she refuses to speak to him. Vishnu says he'll stay back on earth till she does. But he does not find a region to stay as they are all taken up by the gramadevatas, so he asks Bhupati, the lord of the earth—who is also Vishnu in the Varaha avatar. Bhupati tells him to stay wherever he sees something like Shesh Naga, the king of serpents. At Tirupati there are seven mountains that are said to look like the heads of Shesh Naga, so Vishnu decides to stay there. As he lives there alone and has nothing to eat, Shiva and Brahma come there as a cow and a calf and provide him with milk.

The local king, Kubera, gets upset that his cow is giving milk to someone else and beats it. Vishnu is angered on seeing this because he is Gopala (a cowherd) too and there's an altercation between them. Meanwhile, Vishnu and the king's daughter, Padmavati (a form of Lakshmi), fall in love. The king agrees to their marriage and lets him stay

in his domain till he pays off the bride price. They say Vishnu still hasn't paid off Kubera's loan and so continues to live in Tirupati.

So, through marriage, people of different communities formed a relationship with the gramadevatas and derived legitimacy from it. Some gramadevatas are bachelors, stay on a mountain away from women, protect the people, are yogis or from the Nath sect like Baba Balak Nath in north India and Ayyappa in south India.

Why is a devi associated with the earth?

The earth is seen as a mother. The gramadevi is a form of mother. A gramadevi's puja is quite a violent ritual. For example, the bhakts or devotees walk on fire, pierce their tongues or attach a hook to their skin and swing from it—the intention is to express their devotion through pain and suffering. The explanation for this is that human beings torture the earth by cutting down trees, ploughing, dividing and controlling the land and choosing to grow different crops on it. The devi suffers because of all this but allows it because she is a mother.

But once a year she reveals her anger, and we ask for her forgiveness and offer her blood to appease her thirst. So offering sacrifice is commonly associated with the gramadevis. The animals sacrificed are bullocks, male goats and so on, most famously during Dussehra. The crops that grow annually are seen as the mother's milk, but once a year she wants to drink blood. This is seen as the cycle of life. Kali drinks blood and Gauri gives milk. This cycle of life is depicted in the gramadevis' rituals. Through the year she is not given much importance, but after the harvest season, after all the celebrations, the sacrifice takes place and the sowing season begins.

Animal sacrifice is legally not allowed any more.

So now it is substituted with, say, a coconut or a pumpkin or mud dolls. You no longer need to sacrifice real animals; you only have to show your awareness that civilization or sanskriti is built atop nature, prakriti. It's a

form of environmental consciousness, a realization that all your prosperity is the result of domesticating the devi.

There's a puja to appease Kal Bhairava, a form of Shiva. Are all the gramadevatas forms of Shiva or Vishnu?

Yes and no. The gramadevatas are local. Since we see Hinduism in a homogenized way, some have become associated with the Puranic gods. There's Kaal (time) Bhairava, sometimes there are Kala (black) Bhairava and Gora (fair) Bhairava, associated with Shiva or Vishnu. In a way they become mainstream gods—Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Rama or Krishna—whom you find anywhere in India.

Recently, my friend got married. He went to his village with his wife to get blessings from his kuldevata. Who is a kuldevata?

The kuldevata concept is closely associated with the gramadevata. Gram, village, is associated with geography or physical space. Kul, with family. Whenever a family moves, the kuldevata is taken along. Each community has its own kuldevata, like the Saraswat Brahmins have Shanta Durga. After the wedding, the bride is introduced to or blessings are sought for the couple from the kuldevata.



11

Dravida

The Mahabharata is based in Hastinapur and Indraprastha in north India. Rama goes from Ayodhya to Lanka—from the north to the south. Are there any stories that originate in the south?

Yes. When the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were being created in north India, many mahakavyas were being written in the Tamil language. There used to be Sangams (meetings of poets) as far back as 3000 years ago in Madurai, Kanchipuram and so on. Sages and monks would also attend them. There was a rich tradition, a focus on literature, called Sangam parampara. The poems of this time are of two kinds: one is Puram, or poems of the city, and the other is Akam, which talk about emotions. Basically outer and inner traditions. This is also there in the Vedic tradition which had aranya gaan (forest songs) and gram gaan (city songs).

The outer traditions were all about veer rasa, about kings and warriors going to war on elephants and so on. The inner traditions, private conversations, have stories of romance, shringara bhav, women, love and separation. There is a lot of sensuality and energy. There are strong women who play an important role in this tradition. We see gramadevis and devatas being depicted here, and we get a glimpse of the Vedic period. Yagna is spoken of, but in the background. The Buddhist and Jain

traditions too are present here. But at the centre are stories of kings and queens, ganikas (courtesans), soldiers, merchants and their wives. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are more about kings and queens. Here, there are stories of the merchant class who had shipping businesses, which was a big tradition in south India. Merchants would sail to South East Asia, Egypt and Rome to sell cloth and masalas. They were never spoken about in the poetry of the north. The wealthy merchant class—today's Chettiyars who have a long history—was present in south Indian poetry.

There were four main mahakavyas, great epics, from the third to fourth centuries that are worthy of mention. One was *Silappatikaram*, the story of Kannagi, a merchant's daughter. Second was *Manimekalai*, the story of the daughter of a ganika. Third was *Civaka Cintamani*, the story of a warrior, and the fourth was *Kundalakesi*, the story of a businessman's daughter. Three out of these four have female central characters.

Tell us the story of *Silappatikaram*.

Silappatikaram is about a rich merchant's daughter, Kannagi, who marries another merchant's son, Kovalan, in a place called Poompuhar. The boy falls in love with a dancer called Madhavi and blows up all his money on her. In those days, men keeping mistresses was common, but this boy is so carried away that he loses his fortune. One night, Kannagi and Kovalan have an argument about him drinking and wasting money. Kannagi is so upset that she takes off her bangles, which were his anniversary gift to her, and tells him to leave the house and never come back. Kovalan comes to his senses, asks for her forgiveness and promises to turn a new leaf. She gives him her gold anklet, a wedding gift from her father, and asks him to sell it to restart his trade. One day the king's men come to arrest Kovalan on the charge that he has stolen the queen's anklet. He is sentenced to death by hanging in public. Kannagi appeals to the king about her husband's innocence. She asks to see the anklet, finds it is hers and shows the king his error. Meanwhile, Kovalan is hanged as per the king's orders.

The jeweller who had accused Kovalan is taken away for interrogation and the king asks for Kannagi's forgiveness.

This power—sati ki shakti, the power of a woman who is true to her husband—is famous in all grand epics. A sati has magical powers. She can walk through fire and her curses become true. In this story, Kannagi burns down the city of Madurai. She is worshipped as a devi. She is a Pattini and her idols are famous in south India as well as in Sri Lanka.

What is the story of *Manimekalai*?

It is connected with Kannagi's story. Kovalan leaves the dancer, Madhavi, and goes to Madurai. Madhavi is devastated as she was really in love with him. Her daughter is Manimekalai. She sees how people get destroyed in love and decides to stay out of this worldly (sansarik) life. The prince of that kingdom wants to marry this beautiful, talented dancer. But she refuses, prays to god and an ocean goddess takes her to an island where she meets Buddha and decides to become a bhikkhuni (Buddhist nun). She gets a kalash (pot) called Amrita surabhi and lives a life serving people. This is a story of Buddhist transformation.

The third story is of a warrior.

It is called *Civaka Cintamani*. There's a hedonistic king who spends all his time frolicking with his wives and courtesans. Taking advantage of this, his minister kills him and wrests his power. The pregnant queen runs away from the palace to a faraway place. She delivers a baby in a crematorium and leaves him at a merchant's house. The boy grows up to be a great, strong, handsome man who has many lovers and wives. He has many adventures after which he finds out who he is and how his father, a king, was betrayed. He goes to his father's kingdom and defeats the treacherous minister. He takes over the kingdom and lives a life of splendour, fights wars, wins women, almost like a Hindi film. But eventually he leaves everything to become a Jain monk.

It appears that the Tamil epics have stories about ordinary people unlike the Ramayana and the Mahabharata which are about kings and sages.

Yes, that is a big difference. In the north Indian epics, the tension between the life of bhog (world) and yoga (asceticism) is depicted. The former includes enjoyment, dancers, kings, lovers and heartbreaks—that is, shringara and vatsalya rasas—but it's a life of sorrow which is rejected by the Shraman parampara and can be called yoga bhavana. There's a common theme of renunciation in these stories where you adopt the path of dharma and control your desires (vairagya bhava).

Sangam literature also has a lot of passion about life when it talks of dharma (duty), artha (prosperity) and kama (desire) but when the thoughts of Buddhism and Jainism started becoming influential, when their monks travelled south, the concept of moksha or liberation from the worldly life started emerging. Sangam texts wanted to show that not everything is worldly; people should think of another world where there is no sorrow, where there is peace and stoicism.

There are no stories of gods and goddesses.

No, but there are gramadevis and devatas. There are places where Murugan is mentioned: a handsome, virile god who stands on a mountain. Such scattered mention is made of gods, but there is no talk of bhagavan or ishwar. It's not a dominant theme. There isn't a lot of discussion on self-realization as on renunciation or vairagya.

Rama and Krishna are forms of god and are the important characters in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In Tamil poetry, there are no such characters.

Rama's story in the Ramayana and Krishna's in the Mahabharata have not been directly associated with gods. Later, in the Puranas, they have been called gods. Probably, earlier, these were tales of brave warriors (veer

gatha) who gradually became avatars and then gods. This transformation is seen in the Veda parampara or what is known as Hindu parampara. But this is not the case in Buddhist and Jain paramparas. There are mentions of maha purusha, great men, although characters like Kannagi, Manimekalai, Jivaka, Bhadra and Kundalakeshi are ordinary people. These are perhaps stories of bhikkhus and bhikkhunis which became famous.

I've heard of the Tamil Vedas. Did they come with the Vedas?

The Tamil Vedas are a piece of literature called the *Tirukkural*. Kural means doha or couplets that are full of knowledge. There are almost 1300 dohas which talk of dharma, artha and kama, and they have been written in beautiful verses using simple words. After the epics of the Sangam period, there emerges the story of Kamban, of Ramavataram, which is the first time the Ramayana is written in a local language—Tamil. Hindu ideas start coming in. Alwar (Vishnu kavya) and Nayanar poetry (Shivji kavya) become famous, which sows the seeds of the Bhakti tradition in India. These ideas and the Kamba Ramayana gradually start travelling north. Buddhism and Jainism came to the south from the north while the bhakti rasa travels to the north from the south. The Bhagavad Gita has the word ‘bhakti’, but I believe that the bhava, the feeling, and the poetry associated with it, through which India is linked, originated in the south.

Many characters travelled to the south from the north, such as Rama and Agastya Muni. Are there any characters from the south who travelled north in our mythology?

There is Meenakshi, Madurai’s queen, a great warrior who conquers the entire country with her army, including the Jambudweep and northern areas. When she reaches Mount Kailasa in the north, she meets and falls in love with Shiva who promises to come to the south and marry her. Even today her image is married to Shiva who is called Soma Sundaram. There is a big festival to celebrate this wedding.



12

Ravana

Ravana may be Indian mythology's greatest villain. The story of the Ramayana is as much about Ravana as it is about Rama. Even Valmiki was undecided whether to name it after Rama or Ravana. Let's talk about him today. He is a very interesting character. He was a Brahmin and a rakshasa. How come?

Brahma had many sons. One was Kashyapa Muni who had many wives and begot devas and asuras. Another was Pulastya who begot rakshasas and yakshas. There's a rakshasa kanya (daughter) born to Pulastya called Kaikesi who marries a Brahmin called Vishrava. Their son is Ravana. He has Pulastya's blood, rakshasa blood, and Vishrava's blood. So he's both Brahmin and rakshasa. Rakshasa is an ethnic group whereas Brahmin is a caste identity. Brahmin is a social construct whereas rakshasa is about lineage and descent.

**There's some confusion about the two words rakshasa and asura.
What's the difference?**

In the Puranas, the asuras battle with the gods. They live under the earth in Patala while the gods live in heaven in the sky. So this is a vertical

alignment. The rakshasas battle with human beings. They live in forests and follow matsya nyaya (jungle law). Human beings try to follow dharma, guided by rishis. There's a horizontal altercation here. Daityas (Diti's sons) and Danavas (Danu's sons) are called asuras. These words are used interchangeably. So asuras are below the earth and rakshasas are in the jungles. In the Mahabharata, asuras have been called rakshasas. Hidimba is called asura although she seems to be a rakshasa as she lives in the jungle. People say rakshasas are south Indians and Rama is from north India. That's when these words become divisive, like Blacks and Whites. The British brought in these racial divisions that a lot of people still believe in. Nothing of the kind has been written in our Puranas.

Ravana is a Shiva bhakt. What was this connection?

The Ramayanas written after the eleventh century in Tamil (Kamba Ramayana) and Telugu (Ranganatha Ramayana) gave a lot of importance to Shiva. During those times there used to be a rivalry between the Shaiva and Vaishnava paramparas. Tulsidas wrote the *Ramcharitamanas* 400 years ago. He noticed this tension too. He says Rama and Ravana both worship Shiva who does not distinguish between the two. This idea that everyone worships Shiva spread everywhere. Rama worships Shakti on Sharad Navaratri. Ravana too worships Shakti. There are stories of Ravana trying to meet Shiva in the Himalayas. He meets Nandi first, who curses him that a monkey will defeat him one day. One story is about how Ravana cuts off his ten heads and offers them to Shiva. Shiva is pleased and gives him a boon that he'll have a sword which, whenever he uses it, will give him victory. It's said in some stories that his ten heads represent how knowledgeable he is. Another story is that he composed the Rudra stotra and made the Rudra veena by cutting off his arm and using his nerves as strings. When he sings for Shiva, he is so pleased that he asks him what boon he would like. Ravana says he wants to take him to Lanka so that nobody can defeat Lanka. He then lifts the Kailasa mountain. Shiva's family gets scared. To cut Ravana's ego down to size, Shiva presses his

foot down and the mountain crushes Ravana. He worships Shiva again, sings the Rudra stotra and asks for his forgiveness. All these stories show Ravana as a bhakt and an arrogant student; it's almost a guru–shishya relationship. It's said that Ravana acquired knowledge of astrology from Shiva. He wrote the Lal Kitaab or Ravana Samhita. A book on Ayurveda is also associated with Ravana. So the picture of Ravana is of a very educated, literate and cultured man who is also a good warrior. The negative stories depict him as a man who throws his brother, Kubera, out and takes over his kingdom. Lanka was created by Kubera. Ravana also tries to seduce a yogini, Vedavati, who curses him that she'll be reborn as a woman who will be the cause of his death.

So it's hard to depict him as a hero or villain. Most stories show him as a villain though.

Yes. On Dussehra, we even burn his effigy. This became popular around 500 years ago along the Gangetic plains. Some communities in India believe they are descendants of Ravana or that Ravana's wife, Mandodari, is from their clan. In the Puranas, no one is fully positive or negative. While he may have a negative trait, he also has good qualities. In our world too, there's no one who's 100 per cent evil. Everybody should be seen in context.

We mostly hear of Ravana's stories in association with Rama. Are there other stories?

There are several. These are not very popular but are found in the Uttara Ramayana. Ravana battles with the strong monkeys Sugriva and Vali who defeat him, tie him up with his tail and drag him to Kishkindha. There's another character called Kartavirya Arjuna who has 100 hands with which he makes a dam to stop the flow of water. In a battle, he defeats Ravana. Vali is defeated by Rama and Kartavirya Arjuna by Parashurama who is then defeated by Rama. Whoever defeats Ravana is defeated by Rama. This shows that Rama was a greater warrior than Ravana.

Ravana tries to convince Sita to become his queen. He tells her he loves her and would shower her with all his wealth and prosperity. When Sita refuses, he gets angry and says she would never be able to meet Rama without his permission. No one will be able to enter or leave Lanka without his saying so. He says, ‘I am being good by behaving nicely with you.’ Sita scoffs at him and says, ‘Kidnapping a woman is hardly civilized behaviour.’ Ravana tells her that he could easily drag her to a mandap and marry her by force, but he would rather she did so willingly. He could easily have destroyed her beauty that had so attracted him.

Did Ravana ill-treat Sita?

No. In the story, he keeps her by force in his house, in Ashoka Vatika, but never abuses her physically. There are many reasons for this. He was cursed that if he were to touch a woman against her will, his head would burst. Another story says that Sita keeps a blade of grass and tells him that if he were to cross that, he would die. So there are many boundaries. In Kamba Ramayana, Ravana falls in love with her and wants her to come to him willingly. That would be the ultimate victory for his ego. In a way, Sita’s heart is a battlefield for him, one to defeat Rama. He does not win here also. He has everything—wealth, power and good looks for which even married women abandon their husbands—and yet it’s not enough. Saam, daam, danda, bhed (negotiation, bribery, force, division)—nothing works. He even uses magic and shows Sita Rama’s head and says he’s dead, hoping that she’ll then come to him. But she turns him down again as she is a pativrata. That hurts his ego. This is to show the psychological battle of egos in tandem with the physical war against Rama. The people, though, don’t believe Sita. When she returns to Ayodhya, they raise doubts about her character, showing society’s dark side. In a way, Ravana destroys Sita’s life.

Rama is said to feel repentant after he defeats Ravana. Why?

Karma is karma after all. Even if you are a Kshatriya and have killed your wife's kidnapper, violence is violence. Moreover, Ravana is a Brahmin. In India, Brahmahatya (killing of a Brahmin) is supposed to be a paap (sin). In ancient times, knowledge was not written down. You had to learn the shastras by heart, which the Brahmins did. To kill a Brahmin was like burning down a library. It was a sin because all knowledge would be lost. This was a kind of protection for them. Rama was guilty of this sin too. He was a Kshatriya, hence lower down in the caste system than Ravana. In the story, Rama asks for forgiveness for killing a Brahmin. By killing the negative side, the positive side has been affected. There's a famous folk story in which Rama tells Lakshmana to go and acquire knowledge from Ravana because when a man dies, his knowledge dies with him too. When Lakshmana goes to him, he is turned away. Lakshmana tells Rama that Ravana is too egoistical to share his knowledge. Rama asks him where he was standing when he asked; was it at his head or feet? When Lakshmana says head, Rama scolds him and says, 'How do you expect to gain knowledge by standing anywhere except at the feet of your guru? He may be a villain, but our enmity is now over. He is now a guru from whom we want knowledge.' Rama sits at Ravana's feet and says, 'I have defeated a villain but I respect Vishrava's son, so please give me your knowledge before you die.' Ravana breaks down and says, 'I realize your greatness now. My ego did not let me see this till now.' He gives him one piece of wisdom—that in life, evil attracts us and we run away from goodness. The backstory is that Vishnu lives in Vaikuntha which has two sentries—Jaya and Vijaya—who are cursed to be born as rakshasas on earth. Ravana is one of them. By killing Ravana Rama is doing his uddhar (upliftment) so that he can return to Vaikuntha. More knowledge gives a story a different perspective. It's about more than just a hero, Rama, killing a villain, Ravana. In fact, Ravana shows viparita bhakti ('paradoxical' devotion). He is a sentry asking Rama to release him from his rakshasa life and to force him, he abducts Sita. It's not lust that drives him; it's a form of bhakti. If you see it from another point of view, the same story seems different. This is a very important wisdom from the Puranas. In the light of eternal

knowledge, Ravana has negative and positive qualities. He is a bhakt, dwarpal, Lankapati—but despite all his knowledge of the Vedas and his devotion to Shiva, he does not see that Rama is a god. Rama does not hate anybody. He watches calmly as Ravana's ego-driven actions create a big saga that is the Ramayana.

I've heard that there are many Ravana temples in south India. Is this true?

Ravana is a veer so he is worshipped. There are small temples in Madhya Pradesh (Ravangram Ravana Temple), Uttar Pradesh (the Ravana temple in Bisrakh) and Rajasthan (Jodhpur Ravana Temple). Some communities claim a relationship with Ravana and believe that Mandodari was their daughter; some believe they are his descendants. There are some Shiva temples believed to have been established by Ravana—Gokarna Temple in Karnataka and Kakinada Temple in Andhra Pradesh. These have Ravana idols. In fact, Shiva temples always have an image of Ravana because he was a bhakt. We should learn from the story of Ravana that one may be educated and capable but still foolish. We don't respect women. When a woman says she's not interested, she's not giving you consent. So no matter how much you love her, you should let her go. Let her live her life. The Ramayana is trying to say that the Ravana inside us, who does not listen to women, should be burnt.



13

Khajuraho Temples

Khajuraho is always associated with erotic sculptures. These temples are cited as examples to show how broad-minded and progressive Indian culture is. What is the meaning of Khajuraho? Has it been taken from the word ‘khajur’ (date palm)?

Yes. Three possible meanings are ascribed. It is said that there used to be gold date palms here. Some say it is related to the scorpion which was associated with Shiva especially in tantric puja and some mischievous ones say it is a metaphor for male sexual desire.

When were the Khajuraho temples built?

The temples are 1000 years old. It must have taken 300–400 years to build them during the period from the ninth to the twelfth century. In India, houses were made of mud. So upon destruction they merged with the earth. Devalaya or the house of god was made of stone and only that is now left behind.

Whose temples are these?

There are three or four groups of temples. The biggest temple is called Kandariya Mahadeva. It is a Shiva temple inside a cave. There's a Vishnu temple, Ganesha temple, Surya temple, Chausath Yogini Temple of Shakti parampara and also temples of Jain parampara.

Jains were mostly sanyasis. But Khajuraho is generally associated with erotic sculptures. Why?

Today, we separate the erotic and the ascetic aspects of life. We never did that earlier. Our shastras said that to give life meaning, we need to consider many aspects. The purusarthas (goals of human life) were dharma, artha, kama and moksha. In Jainism, moksha has been given a lot of importance, so they have many idols of meditating monks but there are also idols of dancing girls and sculptures depicting music and dance because they understood that there are all kinds of people in the world. Jainism has both the Shravan and Shramak paramparas—one who has given up life and one who lives in society. So there's always acknowledgement of the other. In Hinduism, bhog—vilas becomes the central theme where dharma, artha, kama and moksha are all given equal importance. At Khajuraho, sure, there are many erotic sculptures, but maybe one in ten. Why are temples built? For the Jains, the devalaya is for the Tirthankaras. A temple is a symbol of Brahmanda which has everything—dharma, artha, kama and moksha. A world is created from stone. The garbhagriha is for the god. The Bhagavad Gita has the terms deha (body) and dehi (atma). Similarly, a temple has a god. If you look at the art and architecture of temples carefully, you'll learn a lot. All the temples in Khajuraho face the east so that the first rays of the rising sun fall on the god inside the temple. All the temples have been built on a platform (adhishthana). There are no walls. Perhaps nobody attacked them then, so they were not afraid of anyone. All the four corners of the platform have temples; the main temple is in the centre and has a maha mandap, a mandap and a garbhagriha on which there is a shikhar (pinnacle). The shikhar and the walls have many carvings—flowers,

geometrical patterns, animals like elephants, horses and yaali (head of elephant and body of lion), male and female bodies, kings in battle or at shikar, gods and goddesses, household scenes, etc. It's like a photograph of life. Men are beautiful with soft and delicate features and women are happy and comfortable applying make-up, wearing jewellery, bathing, combing their hair and also having sex—shringara rasa. And they are not looking at you. You are looking at them as if you were peeping Toms. When the temples were built, society was probably different. Women were confident and respected. They were comfortable with their bodies and desires and all this shows in these sculptures. It is as if she is asking the man to pleasure her—I want bhog, sukh, samadhan. The pairs are not just male–female, but also male–male and female–female. Gods and goddesses look into each other's eyes and talk to each other. In one place there is a navagraha idol depicting time. In another, the concept of space is depicted by statues—Ishana (facing north-east), Kubera (north), Agni (south-east) and Indra (east). There are sculptures of kings sitting on elephants or thrones, depicting dharma. Images of merchants in a discussion and a caravan arriving in the city show artha. Kama sculptures show romancing couples—Shiva–Shakti, Brahma–Saraswati, Vishnu–Lakshmi—lost in their own world. If there is freedom to love it means it is a happy kingdom. This was the beginning of Buddhism and people had started talking about renunciation of this sorrow-filled life. Some kings and rishis felt that there should be a counterbalance to this. So they show gods enjoying sensual pleasures. People visiting the temples realized life had all the pleasures. All the sex positions—male-dominant, female-dominant, mutually pleasurable—are depicted here. Not all are at eye level. Some have been built so high that they would not be seen at all. They are meant for the gods—to show them that in our kingdom, we are prosperous, happy and well-loved.

There is a story of Shiva–Shakti associated with the Kamashastra. Shiva tells Parvati that their love is the union of purusha and prakriti and this is why the balance of the world stays. He tells her that it is their duty to sustain and foster this union and that their love is unmatched.

This shows how the Kamashastra originated from Shiva–Shakti. It's literal—pleasure between man and woman—and metaphorical—between purusha and prakriti.

Are the Khajuraho temples associated with the Kamashastra?

The Kamashastra was written 2000 years ago. The ancient texts were the Dharmashastra, Arthashastra, Kamashastra and Mokshashastra. The Vedantasutra and Upanishads fall within the Mokshashastra. As does the Jain religion. In those times, moksha was not given much importance. People thought they would think about it in old age; dharma, artha and kama were considered more important. In the Kamashastra there are several compositions. *Kokashastra* by Vatsayana is the most famous one. It is said that it all came from Shiva. After Shiva and Shakti get married, Shakti asks him how a husband can keep his wife happy. Nandi listens to their conversation and passes it on to humans through writers like Vatsayana. The Kamashastra is 2000 years old and the Khajuraho temples are around 1000 years old. Through their sculptures, they depict the concepts of all these shastras. If you read the *Kamasutra*, you'll find that only 20 per cent of it is about rati krida or erotic activity. The remaining 80 per cent is about relationships. In fact, it's quite a boring book. It reads like it may have been written by an engineering student. It's not an erotic book. It's a scientific treatise. It's not about bhog; it's about contemplation. There's one piece describing who is a rasika, how he dresses, how he should live in a city, wear perfume, how he should decorate his house and how he should talk to girls. There's one chapter on how to behave with wives—the chief wife, junior wife, etc. If you are in an extramarital affair, how do you behave with another's wife? How do you behave with the cupid who brings you together with your lover? There are chapters on massages, aphrodisiacs, magic and the sixty-four ways of making love. When you read it, you'll say, 'If we think so much, where will the love go?' So this is a very technical manual. Many artists have portrayed it in paintings, particularly kings' artists, but that is not the

Kamasutra. These paintings are 300–400 years old. The Kamashastra is 2000 years old. It's a highly technical book. But the sculptures in temples are not. There's rasa and bhava there. Young students who finished their studies in ashrams were brought to the temples to show them the ways of the world, how to treat women, how the kings and warriors lived, their durbars, shikars, battles, private quarters, etc. Another theory is that the devadasis used to stay in the temples and this was their advertising board to show that they would teach the boys how to treat their wives. Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan traveller and scholar who visited India in the fourteenth century, has written about these temples. He says that when he visited, which was 1000 years ago, women here were relaxed, did not wear purdah or ghunghat (veil) and wanted their men to keep them happy. It was not a patriarchal or male-dominated society. Women were treated well and the men were anxious about their ability to keep their wives happy, so they visited the ganikas to take training. Nowadays, we've become so scared, so puritanical, but earlier kama was just one aspect of life. And they were not just talking about duty but also about happiness. This is what the temples depict. There is god inside so it is about the Mokshashastra (liberation doctrine). There is Vishnu, Shiva, stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and also the Mokshashastra. That is the wonderful thing about Khajuraho.

Is there anything unique about its architecture?

There are two styles—one Dravidian and the other Nagara. A high level of geometry is used. For example, from a square base, the building rises into a circular form. This is called the Nagara style. If you move a square 10 degrees at a time, it slowly forms a circle. That's how the temples have been built. And every piece has a sculpture of a god or goddess or a life incident. All these small pieces of sculptures add up to a temple. The whole is beautiful; so are the parts. Your whole life is beautiful but you can bring beauty to every moment too. Make your life like the temple. But deep inside there should be god.

Are the Khajuraho temples tantric temples?

Khajuraho has the Chausath Yogini Temple associated with tantra in which the body is used to achieve moksha or siddhaprapti. Sexual activities are part of the rituals. So are madira (alcohol) and mamsa (meat). These would clash with the Vedic parampara which is about sanyasi practice where you stay away from sensual pleasure and follow the nivritti marga. The tantric tradition is about pravritti marga which uses the senses to reach god. In the temples, perhaps this was spoken about too. Sex can be seen through four prisms—dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma would be sex for reproduction. Artha would be about devadasis or courtesans who have sex for money. Kama is only about pleasure, which includes music and dance, while moksha is about tantra, which includes siddhi and samadhi. This may be related to the Chausath Yogini Temple but there is no concrete information about it.



14

Yoga

What is the meaning of the word ‘yoga’?

It’s ‘yog’ in Hindi or Sanskrit. In English it’s spelt as yoga, thus the different pronunciation. But it’s the meaning that’s important. It’s difficult to say when it originated. The 5000-year-old Indus Valley Civilization had seals which depicted people sitting in Bhadrasana or throne position. Did the people know about yoga then? It’s hard to prove or disprove.

In the Rig Veda, the word ‘yog’ is used, but the meaning is different. The word ‘yuj’ means to harness or join or bind bullocks to a cart. This meaning later becomes associated with yoga. The Vedas also use the word. So did they know about it? Perhaps.

The word is mainly associated with the Shraman parampara, which is the world of vairagis and sadhus—ascetics. Before this was the yagna parampara which contained a lot of rituals. Shraman parampara believed not in the rituals of the outer world but in the reflections of the inner world. These ideas took root 2500 years ago when the concept of moving from the physical to the psychological world emerged. That’s when the talk of yoga began. It took about 500 years of practice and discussions by sadhus and yogis to become a shastra or science where the ideas were

organized. Yoga science (yoga shastra) came together with the practice of hundreds and thousands of people over hundreds of years.

What was the first understanding of it? How was it described then?

It is about the relationship between the physical and the psychological world, about joining and harnessing these two. Consider the bullocks the physical world and the cart the psychological world. For the cart to move the alignment has to be perfect. The broad meaning of yoga is alignment. We complicate it unnecessarily.

Yoga shastra must be having classifications. Were there different schools of yoga?

There are three or four books that are highly regarded in yoga. One is the Bhagavad Gita which is 2000 years old and believed to have been told to Arjuna by Krishna. Second is the *Yoga Sutra* composed by Patanjali which is 2500 years old. Third is the *Yoga Vasishtha* which contains the knowledge given to Rama by Vasishtha. In the Nath tradition, we have *Gorakh Samhita* which has the teachings of Gorakhnath. This goes into great depth of what siddhis are, how to attain siddha and its relationship with yoga.

What has been written in the Gita about yoga?

The Gita is told when a Kshatriya has doubts as he stands in battle against his brothers. As Krishna tries to dispel his doubts, he explains about yoga. He tells him his alignment is not right. ‘Let’s go to the basics since your understanding of the problem is skewed. Examine from where your sorrow is arising.’

Three yogas have been talked about here—gyan yoga, bhakti yoga and karma yoga. Alignment by using your brain is gyan yoga, by emotion is bhakti yoga and by action is karma yoga—that is, aligning the head, heart and hands.

What did Patanjali write?

Patanjali has written the *Yoga Sutra* which contains short sentences for you to dwell on. The sutras are seeds for your mind's soil from which a plant will gradually grow and you will get the fruits of knowledge. There is a nice definition of yoga here—*yoga chitta vritti nirodha*. The mind is seen as a lake which forms ripples when something is thrown in. The aim is to make the waves peaceful. So, broadly, yoga is the silencing of the whirlpools of the mind. Or your mind is like a rope whose many knots have to be untied one by one with patience. The *Yoga Sutra* is far more technical; the body has been given a lot of importance. It seems to be for ascetics who've renounced the world. The Bhagavad Gita is for worldly people.

There is a story about how Patanjali gains knowledge of yoga. Once, Shesh Naga asks Vishnu to show him Shiva's tandava that he has often described to him. Vishnu asks him to become a human in return for the favour. Shesh Naga becomes Patanjali and goes to Chidambaram to see Shiva. He is denied entry by Nanda, Shiva's guard. So Patanjali assumes the form of a snake and enters Shiva's territory, watches him do yogasanas and writes them down.

This is a Puranic tale that imagines Patanjali as a snake, perhaps as Karkota (the snake around Shiva's neck) or Shesh Naga on whom Vishnu rests. Shiva is known as Yogeshwara or Adinath (the source of yoga). The snake is significant because it is associated with the spinal cord which is the seat of the kundalinis—the spinal cord is very important in yoga.

What exactly is raja yoga?

Among the different schools of yoga, this is considered to be the best. Just as a king pays attention to all the areas of his kingdom, raja yoga considers all the points of yoga. Normally it is associated with ashtanga yoga and *yoga sutra*. Ashtanga means eight points which, starting from the bottom of the pyramid, are yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana,

dhyana and samadhi. Basically, it is about travelling from the outer world to the inner world.

First is yama or discipline in relationships. So speak the truth, don't be greedy, control your desires and so on. Second is niyama, which is about self-discipline, self-study, maintaining hygiene and cleanliness and being satisfied or content. Third is asana—which includes standing, sitting and lying-down poses like Bhadrasana, Sukhasana (sitting peacefully), Padmasana (lotus posture), etc. This is the external manifestation or what can be seen from the outside. When you see statues in these poses, you know they're yogis. Fourth is pranayama, which is about the regularity of breath (prana). This is considered very important. Breath joins the body (which can be seen) and mind (which cannot be seen). For instance, when you are angry, your breathing pattern changes. Breath, emotion and mind have a strong correlation, and in our country, prana has been given a lot of value. 'Prani' are creatures that breathe. Pranayama has different exercises—breathing in and out, holding breath, kumbhaka, rechaka, etc. Some yoga schools focus only on pranayama.

From here onwards the psychological world begins; the connection with the outside world breaks. This is pratyahara, which is about controlling your sense organs—eyes, nose, ears, tongue and skin. These are gyan indriya, senses that bring in information from the outside world. Everything that preceded this, including the asanas, focused on karma indriya or the organs of action—hands, legs, mouth, anus and genitals.

After this we go one step inside. Dharana means gaining awareness and understanding the context and observing the world without trying to control it—just paying attention and having perspective. Then there's dhyana or focus. Perspective is on a larger canvas while focus is on one small thing. It means you retreat further into yourself.

Finally there is samadhi, which is a bit complex. It means union, absorption in the Almighty or bhagavan. This is in the spiritual zone, beyond the psychological. It has different meanings. One is, you give up the world, then your body and finally unite with the atma. Buddhists, who don't believe in atma, call it nirvanaprapti. Your ego, sense of identity or

aham gets finished. You don't exist any more; you merge with the world. This is connected with death as well as there is voluntarily renunciation of the body, like a sage taking samadhi.

Samadhi can have another interesting meaning from the two words 'sama' and 'adi'. Adi means first. Sama in music is when you come back to the first note. Your starting point is the world—the source of all the disturbance and pain. After you've progressed deep into yourself and resolved the conflicts of worldly life within yourself (chitta vritti nirodha), you come back to the beginning and restart from a point of peace.

Can you tell me the meaning of tantra yoga?

Today, tantra evokes all kinds of images! In common language, tantra means technology. In India, there were different 'technologies' to manage various aspects of life. One was to use the mind to manage the world; the second was to use the body; and the third was to use instruments. These methods were mantra, tantra and yantra, respectively.

In tantra yoga, the body or the physical aspect is important. Yogis keep the indriya (sense organs) at bay, but in tantra they are used through colour, smell, sound and touch to acquire knowledge of the world and atma. There are five 'makars' that are important to the rituals: mantra, mudra (bodily gestures), matsya (fish), mamsa (meat) and madira (alcohol). Everything that excites your indriya is accepted.

Tantra is associated with yoga as the aim is the same: to achieve knowledge, siddhi, samadhi, to know the world and to seek release from maya. The approach here is very different as it is more physical. There is no dhyana or dharana here. There are many rituals, puja–paath, where gods and goddesses are invoked and so on. It's a very external approach.



15

Eight Types of Marriage

Marriage is a big subject in India. Parents are anxious about their children's marriage and weddings are usually celebrated with a lot of pomp. Why is it such a big deal in India?

Marriages are important in all cultures. It's a sanskar, a rite of passage. In India, it perhaps became more important out of the fear that if people didn't get married, they would become bhikkhus or sanyasis (ascetics). The Buddhist or Shraman parampara is a strong influence; the gurus of both traditions talk about the transience and sorrows of material life and that people should liberate themselves from moha, maya and the like. So when their children get married parents feel relieved as though their duty is done. They feel that their children's own lives have begun. The second reason could be that parents feared their children would go astray, get 'corrupted', and would not become responsible. Marriage in India is associated with maturity and responsibility.

Why is marriage considered a responsibility?

In the Puranas, Shiva is called a destroyer. What does it mean? He destroys kama agni or vasana (desire) with his third eye. If all men became ascetics

like Shiva and refused to procreate, what will happen to society? It will collapse. To prevent this, marriage is essential. There is a recurring story in the Puranas about a rishi meditating. His ancestors appear in his dream and they're suspended upside down. They say they are in Pitr-loka (land of the dead) but will descend into Putta—into eternal oblivion—because he hasn't produced a child. 'We'll be stuck and can never be reborn. You're indebted to us (pitr rin).' This concept of indebtedness is strongly associated with marriage.

The other reason is very practical. With marriage, wealth and power are exchanged. The Pandavas do not have anything and are dependent on their cousins. But after they marry Dhrupad's daughter, Draupadi, they achieve a certain status as Dhrupad's sons-in-law and are able to challenge their cousins. So Draupadi is literally the incarnation of Lakshmi for them because she brings in wealth, power and status. The Pandavas are able to demand their share in property, etc., only after they are married.

The girl's womb is associated with the Amrita kalash and she with Goddess Lakshmi because when a girl comes into a house, the lineage can be carried forward, the family name can continue. Otherwise, it will die. A girl is a source of social mobility in India and helps to repay our ancestors' debts. Temples also have images of gods as couples. If the gods are unmarried, they are called garam devata as they have a lot of heat (tapa). Hanuman is said to have more radiance (tej) and more energy because of this. Many people thus do not keep his idols in the house.

Marriage is like the taming of a man and a woman for the good of society.

When did this institution begin?

There is a story about this in the Mahabharata. A young boy, Shwetaketu, sees his mother with a strange man and feels bad and goes and speaks to his father, Uddalaka, about it. His father says everyone is free to do what they want. Shwetaketu asks him, 'How can I be sure that you are my father?' The father replies, 'A man becomes a father by love. That I love

you as a son is sufficient proof.' But Shwetaketu is not convinced. He wants to know who his biological father is. So he makes the rules of marriage. Husband, wife, fidelity and pati- or patnivrata are all words that he coined. Before the Mahabharata, there was no institution of marriage.

There is another story about Kashyapa Muni. The Manasputras (sons of the mind), which includes Saptarishi, Dasa Prajapati and Kashyapa Muni, are created by Brahma. To have a child, Kashyapa Muni has to marry. Some women too have been borne of the mind, whom he marries and produces all the living beings on earth.

The origin of marriage is also associated with Shiva who did not want to marry. The gods fear that it will cause pralaya (complete devastation) and the world will come to an end. Devi goes to him first as Sati, daughter of Daksha, and marries him. She dies and later returns, reborn as Parvati, and marries Shiva again. This time, she insists he come to the wedding mandap as a bridegroom. So he gradually becomes a householder (grahasth) from a sanyasi. Shiva is a vairagi, an ascetic, who has no need for wealth, property or even children, so why should he get married? Parvati emphasizes that marriage is not only about these things and until you experience bhog and worldly matters, you cannot know these yourself. So the Parvati image in temples often has a mirror in one hand to suggest that their marriage gave Shiva a mirror in which he could see himself. Marriage has, thus, also been seen as a way to gain self-knowledge.

Some say that marriage is a metaphor not to be taken literally. It is to suggest that there should be an engagement among human beings, rejecting the idea of an individualistic or hermitic society. You should live and engage with society. This is an important idea in Indian philosophy.

In modern times, we have love and arranged marriages. What are the classifications in our shastras?

There are eight kinds in the shastras: Prajapatya vivaah, Brahma vivaah, Daiva vivaah, Rishi vivaah, Asura vivaah, Rakshasa vivaah, Gandharva vivaah and Pishacha vivaah.

Prajapatya vivaah was considered the best kind where the boy requested the father for the hand of his daughter in marriage (daan). If many suitors turned up, a competition, like archery, was held to select the best one.

In Brahma vivaah, the girl's father approaches the boy. Here, the concept of dowry appears. 'Marry my daughter and you'll get kingdom, wealth and power.'

In Daiva vivaah, a boy works in a house as an apprentice or does some service which impresses the father so much that he gives him his daughter in marriage.

In Rishi vivaah, a rishi goes to a king and says he wants to get married because his ancestors have asked him to produce a child. The king gives him a cow, a bullock and a girl. The cow is a source of food (milk) and fuel (dung) and the bullock is used to till the land, so all the material to set up a household is provided.

These were considered positive types of weddings because the father was in full control. In the others, the father had none.

Gandharva vivaah is love marriage, such as of Dushyant and Shakuntala. They fall in love and marry; there are no witnesses. So the problem occurs later when Dushyant refuses to recognize Shakuntala and she is helpless because their marriage has not been socially sanctioned.

In Rakshasa vivaah, the couple elopes, or the girl is kidnapped. Fathers cannot accept that their girls have eloped so they always see it as abduction. But like in Krishna's stories of elopement, the girls go of their own accord.

In Asura vivaah, the girl is bought with money. Pandu married Kunti in a swayamvara, so it probably was a Brahma vivaah where Kunti selected Pandu among other suitors. It is believed that the Kurus were not happy with Kunti. They said she was not so pretty and had probably had a child before wedlock, so they bought another wife for Pandu—Madri. In the Ramayana, Kaikeyi was said to have been bought because it was certain she would produce a worthy male child. Sometimes those girls were bought whose kundali or birth chart predicted a male child.

Pishacha vivaah was the worst kind of marriage—through rape. This was also considered a form of marriage, but of the lowest kind. Typically, the males always seek out the females, even in the animal kingdom, and there is rivalry among the males for the females. Among birds too it is the female who selects her mate. So the males suffer an anxiety about not getting a female to mate with. This is a big issue in nature. Every female is precious, whereas a male is not. Due to this, battles have been waged over women.

Pishacha vivaah is a violent act. Why is it considered a type of marriage?

Here, the word ‘vivaah’ is probably used to describe the union of a man and woman. Pishacha vivaah has been included to show that this can happen violently as well. In the shastras, the desh (place), kaal (time/era) and guna (attribute) determine the value of what is written; there is no inherent value given to anything. This is a very strong aspect of Indian tradition, that what is good today may not be good tomorrow. In these forms of marriages, you don’t always see the desire or will of the girl, only that of the boy or the father. However, the girl’s will is very important in the Puranas.

The story of Krishna and Rukmini proves this. Rukmini is the daughter of the king Bhishmaka, and she asks Krishna to rescue her from being forcibly married. Krishna knows this is happening because her brother, Rukmi, hates him. While the wedding preparations are in full swing at Rukmini’s house and Krishna is about to set off with his army, she sends him a letter. The next day Krishna arrives at the Durga temple where she goes for puja. When Krishna asks why she wanted them to meet secretly instead of at the palace, she says she wanted to prevent needless bloodshed. She prefers to elope instead.

So Rukmini asks Krishna to kidnap her?

Yes. In the Puranas, she sends him an elaborate letter saying that her will is being snatched away. It is a matter of consent, of choice. For society it is a Rakshasa vivaah, but for the two of them it is a Gandharva vivaah. It can be seen as a combination of both.

With regard to marriage, I've heard terms like sapind vivaah and sagotra vivaah. Can you explain these?

These are words to describe whom you can marry and whom you can't. Across India, there are many variations. Pind is what is offered to your ancestors. So if you have common ancestors—a grandfather or great-grandfather—marriage is not allowed in some communities. In some, first cousins cannot marry, in others even second and third cousins cannot marry. In the Puranas, you see many variations. Subhadra and Arjuna, who are first cousins, get married.

Gotra tells you about your lineage—the ancestor you come from. Sagotra means having a common ancestor, like Krishna, Bharadwaj, etc. Some communities do not allow sagotra vivaah. But it is not a standard rule and differs with tradition, community, caste and so on.

Each yuga has different kinds of marriage traditions. These were prevalent in Vedic times; today new ones have emerged.



16

Hero/Prophet

We've all heard about Alexander the Great. Is he mentioned in the Puranas?

No. Alexander reached India 2300 years ago. We've heard stories of him and Porus. When he defeated Porus and asked him how he wanted to be treated, Porus replied, 'As a king would treat a king.' This impressed Alexander. All these stories come from folklore. These are not in the Puranas. In fact, the Puranas were probably not even composed then. There is no proof of whether there was an oral tradition then. The Puranas were written 2000 years ago and Alexander came earlier, during the reign of the Mauryas.

In the Shraman parampara, Alexander is mentioned in some folk tales, particularly in the Jain tradition. When he set out from Greece on his conquest of the world (Digvijay Yatra), he conquered all of Persia (today's Iran and Iraq) and then Afghanistan and came up to Pakistan. Here he met a sage, probably a Jain muni, known as 'gymnosophist' in Greek (a naked saint whom we know as Digambara). Alexander had many conversations with him following which, according to Jain stories, he got disillusioned with the trappings of the material world. He lost his ambition to conquer India and turned back homewards. This is a theory that's not completely

accepted by historians. But perhaps one of the reasons he left India was because he learnt about Shraman parampara and dwelt on concepts like atma for the first time.

What are the stories from Greek mythology?

When we talk of the Western tradition, there are two main streams—the Greek and the Abrahamic—which formed the tradition of the Jews, Muslims and Christians. The Greek influence is very strong. Alexander too must have heard these stories and thus wanted to conquer the world. The most famous Greek stories are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. There's another called *Argonautica*. All these are stories of heroes. A hero has ambition and wants to achieve something. He goes on a journey during which he has many adventures. He battles demons, saves young damsels, meets learned ascetics and, by the end of the journey, achieves something big. He undergoes a transformation through his journey, but on his return home finds that his family has not changed, so a gap appears in his relationship with them.

There are many such stories. There's one famous story of Helen of Troy. A prince comes to Greece and meets the extraordinarily beautiful Helen and they fall in love. As Helen is married they decide to elope on a ship to Troy. All the Greek kings decide to attack Troy to bring Helen back. Such was Helen's beauty that she's known as 'the face that launched a thousand ships'. There are many dramatic stories within this epic story, one of which is of Achilles and the Trojan War. This story is told in the *Iliad*. Achilles fights on the Greek side but has an altercation with a general Agamemnon, after which he refuses to take part in the battle. The Greek army faces defeat. They plead with him to fight, but he refuses. His brother, or some say his lover, Petrolocus (homosexual relationships are common in Greek stories), believes he ought to fight. He wears Achilles's helmet and goes into the field. The Greek soldiers think it is Achilles and they are inspired to put up a great fight against the Trojans. During the battle Petrolocus gets killed. Achilles is furious and returns to the field to

seek vengeance. He defeats Hector, a Trojan hero, and ties the body to the wheel of his chariot and drags it through the city. Basically, he humiliates a dead warrior, which nobody did.

The *Iliad* is a story about a selfish hero who leaves and comes back to the battlefield because of personal anger. Achilles was Alexander's favourite character. He wanted people to consider him as great a hero as Achilles. He wanted everyone to be afraid of him like they were of Achilles. He wanted to conquer all of Asia the way Achilles defeated Troy.

The story of Odysseus is famous in Greek mythology. Tell us about it.

Odysseus is one of the great warriors in the Trojan War, and it is his cunningness that leads to Troy's defeat. He builds a huge wooden horse for the Greek soldiers to hide. The Trojans think the Greeks have retreated as they cannot see them or their ships. They are fascinated by the wooden horse and take it inside their fort, which no Greek has managed to breach for ten years. At night, Odysseus leads the men out of the horse and they unlock the main gate of the fort, leading to the downfall of Troy.

But the story of the epic *Odyssey* is of him returning home after ten years of war. It took him another ten to return home to Ithaca. For twenty years, he was away from his family. In the interim, he has numerous adventures: his ship gets wrecked; he gets into a fight with the Sea God; he battles demons like Cyclops (one-eyed demons); he escapes from the beautiful women at sea known as Sirens who can charm you with their melodious singing but are in fact demons who can swallow you up; he is lured by witches who try to make him forget his home but fail; his fellow travellers die, and so on.

Through all this time, his wife, Penelope, resolutely waits for him and refuses to remarry, despite many offers. Her son too is of marriageable age and her well-wishers worry that she'll be left alone. Penelope tells her suitors that she's weaving a cloth for her father-in-law and the day she completes it, she'll remarry. But the cloth she weaves during the day she

undoes at night after everyone is asleep so that her task is never completed.

At a dramatic moment in the story, Penelope finally agrees to remarry—on the condition that the suitor proves himself worthy of being the king of Ithaca and her husband. The challenge is to shoot a single arrow through the handles of twelve swords that have been lined up. Man after man fails. One of them succeeds. Penelope asks who it is as she does not recognize him. It is Odysseus. It is ironical that at last when he returns home, nobody recognizes him because he has grown old.

This sounds like a swayamvara from one of our stories.

There may have been some common thread between Greek and Indian cultures 2000–3000 years ago. They say that part of the Aryan tradition is in India and part in Europe. In the Aryan tradition there used to be a competition for the hand of the girl, similar to the concept of swayamvara. There are many similarities like this between the mythologies of the two lands. But these are superficial. When the British spoke about our culture, they compared the kidnapping of Sita to Helen's elopement in the *Iliad*. But it's not the same because Helen left of her own accord while Sita was kidnapped forcibly.

The most important difference is the concept of rebirth and karma. In India, we talk of karma, that this particular life is one among many births. In Greek culture, there is only one birth, one life. You live only once. So there is a lot of drive and passion—there is only one life and so we have to achieve something. The Greek heroes are ferocious. Their gods and goddesses sometimes support them and at other times oppose them. This makes the heroes very angry. They feel they're being toyed with, used like pawns.

According to their beliefs, they have three possible destinations after death. Those who have done great work in life and pleased the gods go to Elysium, a special kind of heaven. Those who've upset the gods go to Tartarus where they will have to do the same task over and over again,

thousands of times, until eternity. Usually this task is one where you can only fail, like trying to fill a broken pot with water. Those who have lived average lives, done neither too well nor upset the gods, go to Asphodel. There is no return from any of these places.

Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that if you obey God and His commandments, He will be pleased and on the day of reckoning you will go to heaven. If not, to hell. In Hinduism, the concept is very different. If you've been good, you'll go to heaven but it will be temporary. If you've been bad, you'll go to hell but that too is temporary. You'll keep getting reborn in different bodies and will be trapped in the cycle of life and death (ritu chakra). One day, when you attain knowledge and wisdom, after you've done tapa and yoga (forms of meditation and self-reflection), you'll be released (mukti) from this ritu chakra. And you will find moksha (liberation).

So Greek mythology does not have the concept of moksha?

No. It's always about achievement. The desire for revolution, for changing the world, comes from this belief system—that nothing in the world will change until the hero does something. Indians traditionally believe that the world is always changing, whether you want it to or not, so what will you achieve by revolting? That's why in India, we don't even have the concept of a hero.

But Rama is the hero of Ramayana.

In common understanding, he is seen as a hero. But this is wrong. Rama, Krishna and Shiva are all gods. They have the knowledge of all time (adi-ananta kaal) and are doing leela (simply participating in the illusion). A hero is one who undergoes an emotional transformation through his journey of victory or defeat. Our gods are stithpragnya, unaffected and stoical. They are the same in victory and defeat, in the forest and in the palace. The Greek statues show tension, style, attitude and musculature. Indian gods have no tension on their faces. They are peaceful (shanta

rasa), their bodies are soft, etc. There is no concept of mad energy (junoon). A Greek hero has passion, a destination. People believe the Gita says that gods will appear on earth and defeat the wrongdoers (adhami). What this really means is that these gods will reveal knowledge to the ignorant. The word ‘buddha’ means to awaken the sleeping one: ‘You are blind so I will reveal myself to you, give you darshan and open your eyes.’ There is no straightforward concept of good and bad or victory and defeat. In the Mahabharata, the Pandavas win but can it be called a victory when they lose their children? Rama ‘defeats’ Ravana, but basically he has done his ‘uddhar’—uplifted him. That’s the concept. We don’t look at these subtle differences; we look at stories from the outside, at their ‘bodies’. But this is the ‘atma’ of these stories.

I’ve heard that the practice of idol worship has come from Greece. Is this correct?

Good question. In Vedic times, we did not have images of gods. During yagna, gods would be invoked through mantras. After the Greeks came to India 2300 years ago, we started seeing statues in India—the images of Buddha, Vishnu and Shiva appeared in the Gandhara style, where the form and features were similar to Greek heroes. Gradually, an Indian style emerged, as in the art of Mathura, carved in red stone or black. So the practice may have been inspired from Greece but we have made it our own. Today, if you compare the forms, proportions and styles of the images, they are vastly different. By the time the Puranas were being composed, 2000 years ago, perhaps the tradition of having images and temples had come in through Greek influence. Greek theatre was famous too so the Natyashastra is supposed to have been inspired from there. We still call a curtain in the theatre ‘yavanika’, literally, ‘of Greece’. Perhaps the curtain which is used as the backdrop in the Shrinathji Temple—known as pichhwai—has also come from there.



Kingship

Our great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are about kings and royalty, not about ordinary people. Why is that so?

It's not so much about kings as about social structure—how it should be. The head or the leader of the structure, the pivot who holds it all together, is the king. According to experts, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written between 300 BCE (the era of Chanakya and Chandragupta of the Maurya dynasty) and 300 CE (the era of Samudragupta of the Gupta dynasty), a period of almost 1000 years.

What is special about this period? During the Mauryan era, there were two main forces. The first was the Buddha parampara or Shraman parampara which primarily believed that life was full of sorrow and it was better to renounce it. There was talk of viharas or monasteries. Dhamma means, ‘I am unhappy with the world and I am going to the forest or the monastery in search of truth.’ The second force was ambitious kings like Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka and Bimbisara who wanted to conquer the world. There was a tension between the two forces. In between this, people asked what the role of the king was. So royal stories became very important.

If you look closely, these are stories of kingship. What makes a good king? Is an ambitious king a good king? Buddha was a king too who gave it all up and eventually became a guru. Was he then a good king? The great epics were written in this social context. They are about politics, economics, administration and governance.

In the Puranic stories, Rama rajya is considered to be the ideal kingdom. Why so?

What is a successful kingdom? It is one wherein wealth and prosperity (Lakshmi) come to you without kalaha or conflict (Alakshmi). Saraswati also comes to this kingdom and there is a perfect balance of knowledge and wealth. There is power too which comes with Goddess Durga, a form of Shakti. So an ideal kingdom is where all the three goddesses—Saraswati (knowledge), Durga (power) and Lakshmi (wealth)—reside. This is what constitutes Rama rajya.

Rama is supposed to have been a great king because he cared only for his subjects—to the point that he destroyed his own life for their welfare. A king who keeps his word, listens to his people and is more concerned about them than himself is considered a great king. Rama's is a tragic story because his personal life was miserable—he abandoned his wife because he listened to the people. A good king always keeps his word so there's a sense of predictability, integrity and commitment about him.

Ravana is called Lankeshwara. Was he a good king of Lanka?

There are many fans of Ravana who would not like to hear any criticism about him! Now, why was Rama the king of Ayodhya? Was it because he wanted to be the king or because it was his duty or responsibility? Rama never says he wants to be king. He is Raghu's eldest son; at that time, the eldest sons were given importance. When his stepmother, Kaikeyi, wants her son to become king, Rama agrees. When he returns fourteen years later, he asks Bharata again, 'Are you sure you want me to be king?'

Rama is not greedy for the throne. It's not his ambition; it's his responsibility.

Let's compare him with Ravana. Ravana has an ambition to be king. He snatches Lanka from his brother, Kubera, who created it. This is the first point. Ravana then focuses more on himself than his kingdom and takes decisions that destroy it. Lanka burns, people (rakshasas) are killed and an unnecessary war is waged. The war happens because he kidnaps another man's wife, then refuses to send her back and is willing to go to war for it. It's a futile war which causes hardship to his people who have nothing to do with it. Where there is a big ego, there cannot be a good king. Is the king there for his subjects or the other way round?

In the Mahabharata too, when war is waged, nobody talks about Hastinapur. They talk of the kingdom as though it's their property. It's wrong to believe that it's like a zamindari system. Looking after the kingdom is their responsibility. This is what the great epics want to show. Both the Pandavas and the Kauravas are guilty of this. When Krishna recites the Gita, he asks the Pandavas, 'Why do you want to rule? You are talking of rights over the land, authority, but not about duty or responsibility.'

Thus a king is always given a Vishnu roop. The Vishnu who sits in Vaikuntha is called Daridra Narayan or the king of the poor. His wife is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. But he does not consider the wealth she brings his property. He does not say, 'Lakshmi is mine.' He says, 'I love Lakshmi. She comes to me because I am establishing dharma, order and harmony, an environment where all the people of a kingdom can perform brilliantly. Be it a potter, merchant or weaver, everyone will do their work well so that Lakshmi will come on her own. I am such a good man; I work hard so that prosperity will come to me.'

This is the dharma of a king. Rama shows all these qualities. Governance is most important. Raj dharma means that the prosperity of the kingdom is not the king's; it's for the people. 'I (Vishnu, king) attract Lakshmi so that there's pleasure and happiness in my kingdom.' Only in a prosperous kingdom can art flourish. There will be museums, theatres and

so on. A king's job is to create a happy ecosystem, called Vishnu charitra or vritti, which Ravana fails to do.

You spoke about tyrannical kings. Were there others like Ravana?

This is quite an important theme in the Puranas. It's said that once Bhudevi goes to Vishnu weeping and complains that egoistical kings are exploiting her. She asks Vishnu to destroy them. So he takes various avatars—Rama, Krishna and Parashurama—to kill these adharmi (unconscientious) kings, those who don't think about their kingdoms but only about themselves.

There is one King Ven who forces his people to worship him instead of Shiva and Vishnu, imposes arbitrary rules and bans pilgrimages. The rishis remind him of his duties as a king: 'The people of the kingdom don't have food to eat and houses to live in. There's moral corruption everywhere. Instead of penalizing the oppressors, you're interested only in your own wealth and pleasure.' The king refuses to pay heed and the rishis kill him.

They then debate who can take over the kingdom as the king did not leave a direct heir. His ancestors were the kings Daksha, Dhruv and Anga—a great lineage—so the next king should also be of the same standing. As they're left with no other choice, they decide to produce another king. They pray and a man appears with a chakra symbol on his hand. He is a Vishnu avatar. The rishis name him Prithu and pronounce him king.

So which kingdom did Prithu rule?

This story should be seen as an allegory. The rishis defeat a bad king and produce a good one from the dead king's body. This is to show that our 'default setting' is that of adharma. We are inherently egoistical and hungry for power instead of being conscious of our responsibilities.

The story goes that Prithu takes a bow and chases after Earth. Earth takes the form of a cow and runs away, fearing more exploitation. The king asks her forgiveness and says it'll never happen again. So the righteous king is called Gopala and the earth, Gomata—cowherd and cow. Bhudevi

calls herself Prithvi, after Prithu, because he is a good king. He is aware that she is a mother and should not be exploited and that a king is a caretaker of his subjects, not their master.

We've heard about Rama rajya but never 'Krishna rajya' although he too is an avatar of Vishnu. Why so?

Vishnu is associated with dharma and to establish it, he takes different forms. Sometimes he is a leader, sometimes a follower, sometimes a king and sometimes an advisor. Rama is king; Krishna is kingmaker. Krishna is also from Yadava Vansh, the Yadava clan, which is a kind of republic. There is no king amongst them; it is like a democracy. Krishna is also the younger brother, so he's Dwarkadhish, that is, the protector or guardian of Dwarka, not king.

Kings have some symbols associated with them. For instance, fan made of yak tail (chamar) is used for a king, and thus it is Rama's symbol, while fan made of peacock feathers (morcha) is used for a diwan or a person one rung below the king. This is used for Krishna, as he is like a king but not a king.

What are the other symbols for a king?

A king was believed to be god, a roop of Vishnu—Vishnuswarup—who will bring in Lakshmi. So most icons associated with Vishnu are used for a king—chamar, singhasana (lion throne) and paduka (royal footwear made of gold). Only royals were allowed to wear gold on their feet. Others are a footstool, an umbrella above his head. In Maharashtra 'Chhatrapati' is a title for Shivaji as a chhatri (umbrella) is a symbol of kingship. A king had a bow in his hand—a symbol of balance. The chakra is also very important as it suggests that the king is in the centre and his rule extends up to the borders. So a king is called 'chakravarti', the centre of the wheel.

I have read about Raja Bhoj and Vikramaditya in the Amar Chitra Katha. But these stories do not tell us about their origins.

These stories are part of folklore or legend and are not from the Puranas. Mythological stories and legends are slightly different. Puranic stories are mythological, which means they speak of sanatana satya or eternal or timeless truth. In folklore, the stories are partly historical. There may have been such a king in history, but the stories are more practical, not eternal; they're only for that time. These stories appear in the *Kathasaritasagar* (ocean of stories).

Vikramaditya is believed to have lived in Ujjain 1000 years before the start of the Islamic period. These stories were probably made up like the *Panchatantra* to teach princes how to become good kings ('raj dharma'), somewhat like case studies in management courses today. The uniqueness of these stories is that there's a puzzle in each story. Different scenarios and perspectives are presented and a king is asked what he would do. The problems presented do not have clear-cut answers about who is right and who is wrong—there is always a dilemma. Since he was a king, Vikramaditya had to take a call, a decision. This kind of situation could make you anxious because you could not know whether the effect of the decision would be positive or negative. In Vedic times, the person who took decisions was called yajman or king. He would make what is known in English as the Judgement of Solomon. This is the answer Vikramaditya would give Vetal.



18

Jainism

When did Jainism originate?

Jain and even Hindu scriptures claim that these religions have been around forever. They are called sanatana (timeless, eternal) dharma. Once in a while a gyani (learned one) picks up some of that eternal knowledge like one would a fruit from a tree and takes it to the people. If you look at sanatana dharma as a large tree, its branches would be Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. The concept common to all of them is karma.

It's difficult to say when Jainism first originated. The Indus Valley seals contain images of bull (rishabh) and elephant which are important Jain symbols. One can surmise that perhaps they had knowledge of Jainism at that time, although there's no proof because we cannot decipher the language. Historians believe that Mahavira, the Jain Tirthankara, was born around the same time Buddha was born, that is, around 300 BCE. But Mahavira is the twenty-fourth Tirthankara, so if each one came 100 years before the other, Jainism goes back that many years. So Rishabanath, the first Tirthankara, may have been there 8000–10,000 years before.

If you push further and say Mahavira was the twenty-fourth of this yuga—and the previous yuga too had other Tirthankaras and so on and so forth—then one can never know the origin of the religion. According to

historical evidence, Parshvanath and Mahavira lived about 2500–3000 years ago near Magadha, i.e., modern Bihar.

In which parts of India was Jainism prevalent?

Jainism was prevalent all over India and is so even today. But today the number of followers is not as many as it used to be. In the north, there were followers in Bihar, Bengal, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. All the ancient composers of Tamil epics like *Silappatikaram* were said to be Jains. Odisha had a Jain king, as did Karnataka. The rulers of the Hoysala dynasty followed Jainism. So Jainism was widespread in south India as well. Today it is mainly seen in Gujarat in the north and Karnataka in the south.

Is Jainism connected with Buddhism?

They are deeply related. They are both of the Shraman parampara. The Vedas described yagna as full of karmakand (rituals). Brahmins would constantly do yagna, but without thought; there was no knowledge. The shramans felt that this was not the right approach towards the Vedas. They felt there should be contemplation to discover the secret of the Vedas. There was a divide. On one side were the Brahmins who did yagna and on the other the shramans who sat in one place and meditated and were interested in the artha (hidden meaning), not the shabda (word) or kriya (act).

Buddhism's focus was to achieve freedom from suffering through withdrawal of desire. Jainism's focus was liberation of the soul (mukti) from the web of the material world through knowledge (kaivalya gyan), understanding (darshan) and philosophy. Ahimsa and Anekant-vaad (many-sidedness) were their pillars. For modern times, if there is one thought that should be emphasized, that should be learnt from Jainism, it is Anekant-vaad or diverse thought. Each person has a point of view and no one knows the supreme truth. Instead of argument, there should be conversation. People should listen to each other and understand the

different points of view in the world, just as we talk of mimamsa or inquiry for self-knowledge where each scholar has a different idea—some will say atma is immortal while others, like the Buddhists, will say there's no atma. A Jain monk will say all are right. As people are different from each other, there cannot be one absolute truth; there is only relative truth. Anekant-vaad leads to peace. There is violence in trying to enforce one's thought on others. These days you see people arguing on TV. We've lost Anekant-vaad in which we took people along with us, which is the essence of Indian philosophy.

Does Jainism believe in atma?

Atma is an important concept, but it is different from that in Hindu philosophy. Jains believe that there is jeeva (soul) and ajeeva (matter). Matter is located in space and time. When the two come together, different kinds of living beings are created. Jeeva (atma) is pure; it gets polluted by matter. Matter has hunger and does karma by which there is action and reaction. All this traps the atma in the material world. Just as a balloon is dragged down by a stone tied to its base, the atma is weighed down by karma. If you engage in ahimsa, Anekant-vaad and other meditative practices, slowly the weight of karma is released and the soul will achieve Siddha-loka, that is, liberation. In every yuga, twenty-four people achieve this and they are called the Tirthankaras.

The word 'Tirthankara' is interesting. 'Tirth' means ford, the shallow part between two rivers across which you can walk without having to swim. The two banks of the river are metaphors for the material and the spiritual worlds. A Tirthankara is one who takes you to the other side—a guru. Jains believe him to be bhagavan. Bhagavan is one who has reached the other side and shows others the way to get there. His atma is completely pure—he has gained freedom from all material things. The statues of all the Tirthankaras look alike (for example, the ones at the Gwalior Fort). They are so pure that they have no identity. They can be

identified by different symbols—Mahavira by the lion, Parshvanath by the serpent, Rishabhanath, the first Tirthankara, by the bull, and so on.

How is it different from Hinduism?

For Hindus, bhagavan is god while for Jains bhagavan is guru. In Hinduism, the soul is liberated through bhakti or devotion. In the Shraman parampara, you have to do it yourself; no one else can liberate you. Gurus can help but you have to practise ahimsa, Anekant-vaad, etc., and only your work can save you. This is the fundamental difference.

Are there many stories in Jainism as well?

Just like Hinduism has the Puranas, there are Agam Puranas in Jainism. These have been composed in Ardh Magadhi and Prakrit languages, not Sanskrit. Here the most important concept is that of mahapurusha or salakhapurusha. In every yuga there are sixty-three great heroes. These include the twenty-four Tirthankaras at the highest level. They are sant, mahatma, bhagavan, guru or one who has attained Siddha-loka. Next are the twelve Chakravartis or emperors, rulers of the world. The chakra signifies the horizon and suggests he is the king of everything you see. Then there are twenty-seven heroes—nine Vasudevas, their nine elder brothers called Baldevas and nine enemies, Prati Vasudevas.

The stories of the Tirthankaras are about their mothers dreaming that a great event is about to occur before the birth of the children. Rishabhanath, the first Tirthankara, established civilization. He taught people agriculture and trade. The story goes that once Indra deva visits him and is impressed by Rishabhanath's favourite apsara, the beautiful Nilanjana. He commends Rishabhanath for establishing an empire, making it a karma bhoomi (land of action) and changing the lives of people. While dancing, Nilanjana suddenly drops dead. Indra deva resurrects her atma. The king is confused. How is this possible? What is the reality? The body lying dead on the floor or the one dancing? Indra asks him which one he thinks is real. The king realizes that everything is maya, nothing is permanent and everything is

destructible. He decides to renounce everything—his empire, property and relationships—and sets out in search of the truth. He becomes a shraman, gradually acquires knowledge of everything (kaivalya gyan) and becomes a Tirthankara. Such are the stories of the twenty-four Tirthankaras.

The stories of the Chakravartis are about large kingdoms.

Rishabhanath's son, Bharata, was India's first Chakravarti. Some trace the origin of our country's name to this. Bharata had many brothers and he expected all of them to bow to him when he became king. One of the brothers, Bahubali, says, 'While I respect you as an older brother, I will not bow to you. I have my own kingdom and I am not your serf.' Bharat says, 'I am the emperor and everyone is below me.' Bahubali disagrees. The brothers go to war. People tell them that their father advocated ahimsa. 'Why do you want your armies to fight? Sort it out among yourselves.' But the brothers duel. Bahubali is much stronger but at one point he cannot bring himself to attack his older brother. He decides to become a shraman. He renounces everything and goes away and becomes a vairagi. In the Jain vihara, monastery, he finds that his younger brothers who too had given up everything are now senior monks. He realizes that here too he has to be below others, his younger brothers. He is disturbed. His ego is upset. Till you keep comparing, you are trapped in the material world, the world of maya. You're caught in the binaries of big and small, paap and punya (sin and righteousness), shubh and ashubh (auspicious and inauspicious) and so on. Once you have kaivalya gyan, all these disappear.

Bahubali is not a complete Tirthankara, but he's almost there. You'll see large images of Bahubali (like at Gomateshwara) where he stands straight but with creepers around his legs to show he is not fully liberated (mukti). He is one step below achieving the Tirthankara status. His ego still keeps him tied down.

Are the Vasudevas associated with Krishna?

Yes, but this is a Jain Krishna. Hindus have one Vasudeva. Jains have nine, of whom one is Krishna. His enemy is a Prati Vasudeva named Jarasandha

who is more important in Jain stories. Jarasandha's son-in-law is Kamsa, whom Krishna kills. So Jarasandha attacks Mathura. The important thing is that the Vasudevas are violent. So in Jain stories Baldevas are given more importance as they are non-violent. Krishna is associated with violence, and since there is no ahimsa-vaad here, it is believed he will become a Tirthankara only later in the future.

Another Vasudeva is Lakshmana. Jains also have the Ramayana. Rama is called Padmanabha because he is as beautiful as the lotus flower. Rama is a Baldeva because he is non-violent. Lakshmana is violent and his enemy is Ravana. In the Jain Ramayana, Lakshmana kills Ravana, not Rama. After many yugas, after he has washed off all his sins, Ravana too will become a Tirthankara.

There is this concept in sanatana that nobody is 100 per cent bad. There can be avidya (ignorance) but there will definitely be redemption in a later life when you'll get knowledge and wisdom. You can still fall back into avidya as this is a wheel, but you'll gain knowledge for sure.

I have some Jain friends who don't eat root vegetables. They don't even eat samosas. Why such extreme food habits?

Ahimsa is very important to Jains. They believe that when root vegetables like radish and potato are pulled out of the earth, many living beings are killed in the process. So they avoid it. Jain samosas use peas instead. In India, there is the philosophy of Anekant-vaad—'You can eat potato samosa, but we'll only eat pea samosa.'

Author's Note

- This is a collection of easy-going conversations about Indian mythology, based on the eponymous television show
- What is discussed here is not meant to be factually ‘accurate’—you may refer to your guru for clarity
- This is not an academic work and does not claim to be authoritative
- Contained here are simplified versions of mythological tales, taken from various versions found in different scriptures and in folklore
- The attempt is to retain the essence embedded in the tales, and to provoke readers to dig deeper into the philosophy
- I offer here a subjective truth, my truth, which is one among many truths, because:

Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth

Who sees it all?

Varuna has but a thousand eyes

Indra, a hundred

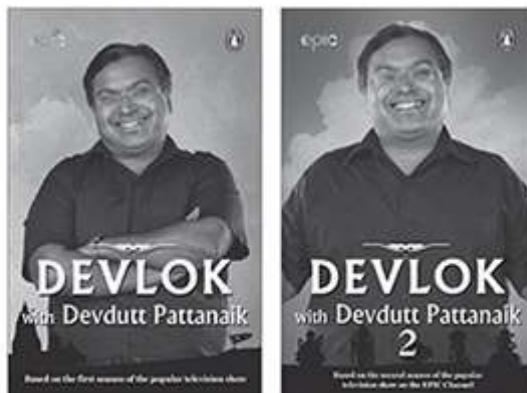
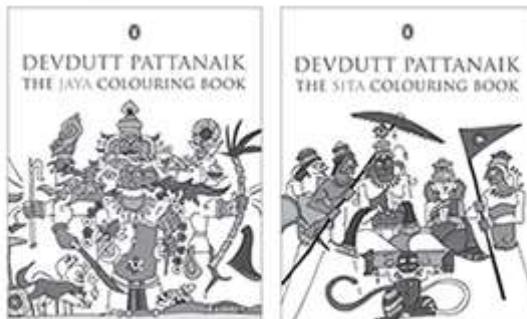
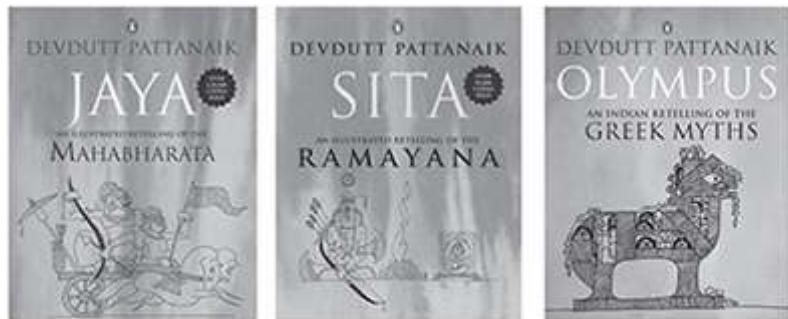
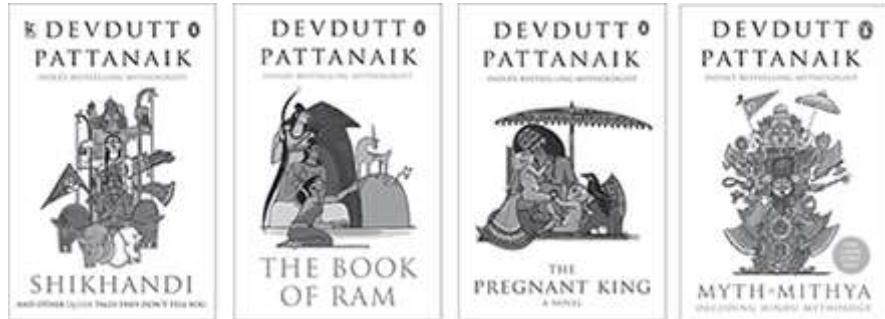
You and I, only two

Epic

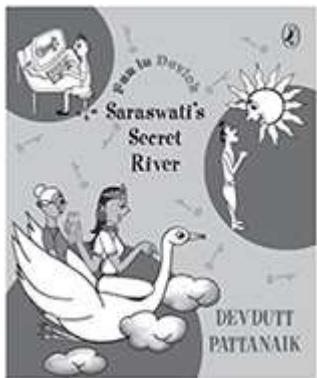
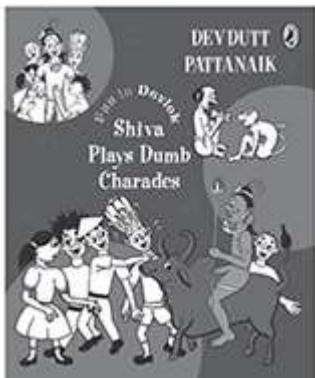
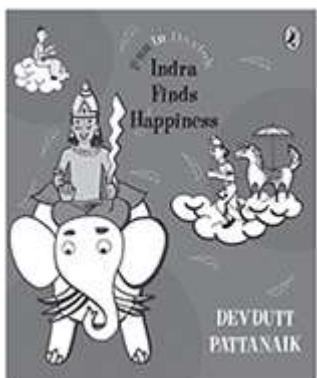
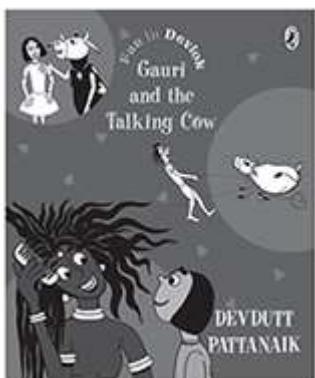
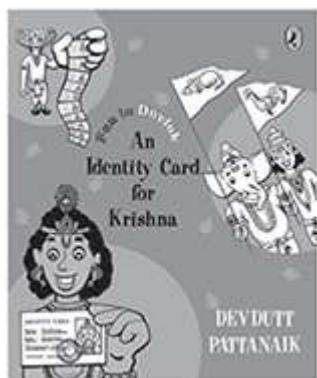
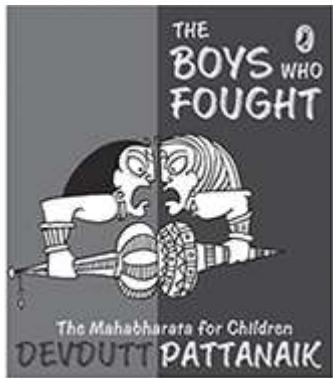
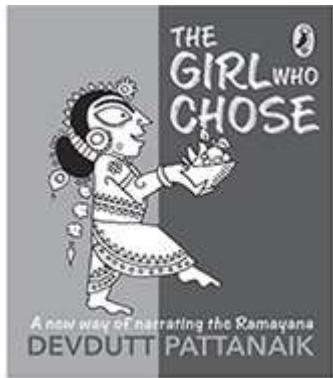
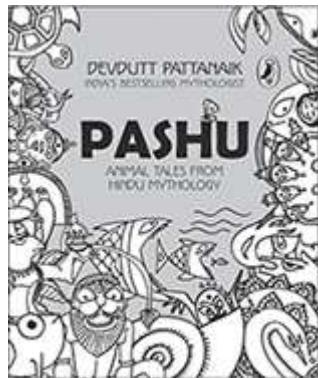
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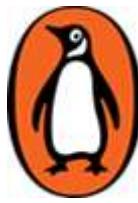
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