

Hindi / English / Gujarati

स्कन्द पुराण

महर्षि वेद व्यास



Introduction

The *Puranas* are sacred compositions of ancient India. Like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, they are integral parts of Hinduism. The *Skanda Purana* itself describes the *Puranas* as the *atman* or soul of the *Vedas*. The *Narada Purana* calls them the *sara* or essence of the *Vedas*. The *Vayu Purana* says that, to appreciate the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, one has to understand the *Puranas*. The *Puranas* are so called because they are of *purakala* (ancient times) and because they complement (*purana*) the knowledge of the *Vedas*.

Vedavyasa was a great sage who composed the *Mahabharata*. He was so named because he partitioned (*vyasa*) the *Vedas* and disseminated them amongst men. Vedavyasa was not content after composing the one lakh *shlokas* (couplets) that are there in the *Mahabharata*. He went on to compose four lakh more of *shlokas* and these constitute the *mahapuranas* or the major *Puranas*.

No specific date can be ascribed to the composition of the *mahapuranas*. Despite the belief that Vedavyasa composed all of them, it is agreed that the texts evolved over a long period of time. Some sections may have been composed as early as 500 B.C., though the range of time scholars generally agree upon is between 300 A.D. and 1000 A.D.

According to the *Puranas* themselves, such texts have five characteristics (*pancha lakshana*). This means that they describe five different subjects. These are *sarga* (the original creation of the universe), *pratisarga* (the periodical process of destruction and re-creation), *manvantaras* (the various eras), the histories of the *surya vamsha* (solar dynasty) and *chandra vamsha* (lunar dynasty), and *vamshanucharita* (royal genealogies).

But it is only the *Vishnu Purana* which actually exhibits the prescribed characteristics in the right order.

There is some disagreement about which text is really a *mahapurana* and which is not. Several *Puranas* give lists of the eighteen *mahapuranas*. Seventeen of them are clearly identified. But there is disagreement about whether the fourth one in the list should be the *Shiva Purana* or the *Vayu Purana*. The lists in the *Puranas* differ on this point. So one can think of

there being nineteen *mahapuranas* instead of eighteen, and include both the *Shiva Purana* and the *Vayu Purana* in the list.

There is however no doubt whatsoever that the *Skanda Purana* is a *mahapurana*. It is thirteenth in every list.

The *Puranas* vary enormously in length. The shortest is the *Markandeya Purana* with only nine thousand *shlokas*. An average *Purana* has between fifteen thousand to twenty thousand couplets. The *Skanda Purana* is the longest text of all. It has more than eighty-one thousand *shlokas*. That is, it is nine times the length of the shortest *Purana* and four to five times the size of an average one.

According to the *Puranas*, there are three qualities in the universe, *sattva* (goodness or purity), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (ignorance, evil or gloom). Correspondingly, there are three kinds of *Puranas*, *sattvika*, *rajasika* and *tamasika*, depending on which quality (*guna*) dominates the *Purana*. The *Skanda Purana* is supposed to be a *tamasika Purana* epitomising the quality of *tamas*. But do not think ill of it because of this. The word *tamas* is to be understood in a deep philosophical sense. It in no way suggests that the *Skanda Purana* is evil or gloomy.

Sattvika Puranas generally glorify Vishnu more than the other gods and are alternatively known as *Vaishnava Puranas*. *Rajasika Puranas* glorify Brahma more and are alternatively known as *Brahma Puranas*. *Tamasika Puranas* tend to glorify Shiva more and are also called *Shaiva Puranas*. Being a *tamasika Purana*, it is with the charisma of Shiva that the *Skanda Purana* mostly deals. Other *Puranas* that focus primarily on Shiva are the *Matsya*, the *Kurma*, the *Linga*, the *Shiva* (or the *Vayu*) and the *Agni*.

In addition to the *mahapuranas* or major *Puranas*, there are several minor *Puranas* known as *upapuranas*. These are not believed to have been composed by Vedavyasa himself and are dated much later. Many more than just eighteen *upapuranas* are available. One such is the *Skanda upapurana* and this should not be confused with the *Skanda Purana* which is a *mahapurana*.

The *Skanda Purana* is among the major *Puranas* that Vedavyasa composed. In fact, it is supposed to be his second work, the first being the *Mahabharata*. That is, it was the first of the *Puranas* to be composed. It is perhaps because of this immediate succession to the *Mahabharata* that the *Skanda Purana* overlaps with several parts of the *Mahabharata* and has

various stories in common. Examples are: Skanda's birth and valour (described twice in the *Skanda Purana*), Indra's fight with Vritra and Vali, Nahusha's fall from heaven, and so on. There are some interesting variations in detail however.

A *kalpa* is a unit of time equal to one day of Brahma's. This is believed to be the extent of time required for the universe to be created as well as destroyed. Each such *kalpa* consists of fourteen *manvantaras* or eras, ruled over by a Manu. At the end of any *kalpa*, the universe is destroyed and is created afresh in a new *kalpa*. There have therefore been several *kalpas* and the *Skanda Purana* is said to describe the events that took place in the *kalpa* named *tatpurusha*.

Scholars agree that the huge *Skanda Purana* does not exist as a complete work. In various parts of the country, we get various fragments or parts which collectively go by the name of the *Skanda Purana* today. These *khandas* (sections) number seven and are as follows.

- (1) *Maheshvara Khanda* the part relating to Shiva;
- (2) *Vishnu Khanda* - the part relating to Vishnu;
- (3) *Brahma Khanda* - the part relating to Brahma;
- (4) *Kashi Khanda* - the part relating to the holy city of Kashi or Varanasi;
- (5) *Avanti Khanda* - the part relating to the kingdom of Avanti;
- (6) *Nagara Khanda* - the part relating to cities (*nagara*); and
- (7) *Prabhasa Khanda* - the part relating to the holy *tirtha* (place of pilgrimage) of Prabhasa.

There are two alternative lines along which this *Purana* may have come down to us. It is of course associated with the name of Skanda, the son of Shiva and Parvati and the general of the gods. But some trace its origin to Parvati, goddess and consort of Shiva. She is originally supposed to have related the contents of the text to Skanda. Skanda passed it on to Nandi, Shiva's personal attendant. Nandi passed on the knowledge to the sage Atri.

According to the other line of origin, the *Skanda Purana* is supposed to have been culled by Skanda himself, though it is not stated from where or from whom. Then Skanda is supposed to have narrated it to Bhrigu, a very important sage. From Bhrigu, the sage Angira heard it; from Angira, the sage Chyavana heard it; from Chyavana, it then passed on to the sage

Richika. In subsequent periods it was the sages who disseminated the contents of the *Purana* among mankind in general. The exact way it was done, is of course lost in antiquity.

Vedavyasa merely brought together the circulating accounts in a single place.

This is enough of an introduction. Let us now get straight into the *Skanda Purana*. We will start with the *Maheshvara Khanda*. You will appreciate that since the *Skanda Purana* is so huge, one has to be selective in deciding what to retell.

Daksha's Yajna

The *Purana* begins by extolling Shiva.

In the holy forest of *naimisha*, Shounaka and the other sages were performing a *yajna* (sacrificial ceremony). Lomasha (meaning "the hairy one") was a great sage and a disciple of Vedavyasa's. He arrived there to attend the *yajna*.

"You have learnt a lot from the great Vedavyasa", the assembled sages told Lomasha. "Please tell us about the charisma of Shiva".

Lomasha obliged.

Daksha Prajapati (the lord of all the creatures) had given his daughter Dakshayani to Shiva in marriage. But Daksha felt slighted at the lack of social respect that his son-in-law displayed towards him. He began to slander Shiva and deliberately arranged a *yajna* to which he did not invite either Shiva or Dakshayani.

Dakshayani went to attend the *yajna* uninvited. But Daksha made insulting remarks about Shiva in her presence. The loyal wife could not stand such public censure and abuse of her husband. She yielded up her life then and there, entering a fire in self-immolation.

Shiva's attendants, with terrifying appearances and terrible weapons, descended upon the sacrificial grounds. Shiva himself tore off a strand of his matted hair and flung it down on Mount Kailasa. From this strand of hair, there emerged a being named Virabhadra. He had three eyes and a thousand arms and rode on a chariot drawn by lions and tigers. From Shiva's hot sighs were born various fevers and infections and also the goddess Kali, surrounded by numerous ghosts and spirits. This entire host descended upon Daksha's *yajna*. Sages like Bhrigu and Pusha were

humiliated. (Bhrigu and Pusha are sometimes also identified with the sun-god.) The gods who supported Daksha, Indra and Vishnu among them, were vanquished and Daksha himself was beheaded. Virabhadra and his army wrought total havoc.

But Brahma, who was Daksha's father, appealed to Shiva. Thus pacified, Shiva came and inspected the scene of Virabhadra's rampage. In his infinite mercy, Shiva wanted to bring Daksha back to life. But the problem was that Virabhadra had flung away Daksha's severed head into the fire and it had been burnt. The head of a goat was therefore stuck on to Daksha's headless body and Shiva brought Daksha back to life. Daksha shamefacedly bowed to Shiva. Shiva also restored the sacrificial grounds to what they had been like before the carnage started.

From then onwards, Daksha became one of Shiva's devotees.

Indrasena

Lomasha next narrated the story of Indrasena.

There was a rapacious and evil king named Indrasena. His sole objective in life was to amass wealth. Two words were constantly on his lips. These were "*ahara*" meaning "gather, bring or cull" and "*prahara*" meaning "to beat up or punish." That is, Indrasena was always trying to gather riches by beating other people up.

But to his own astonishment, after his death, Indrasena was sent by Yama to heaven, not hell. Hara is one Shiva's names. Unintentionally, without knowing or meaning it, the king had taken Shiva's name while using the words "*a-Hara*" and "*pra-Hara*." This had earned Indrasena the *punya* (store of merit) of constantly keeping Shiva in mind and of being devoted to him.

Whosoever worships Shiva, cleans his temples, offers him lamps, incense and mirrors, or constructs temples to him, accumulates a lot of *punya*. Those who only visit Shiva's temple once, twice or thrice a day, are blessed by Shiva.

Nandi

Lomasha now narrated how Nandi came to be Shiva's attendant.

Nandi was a member of the *vaishya* class, a class whose primary occupations are trade and animal husbandry. He was fairly rich as a result of those pursuits and lived in the kingdom of Avanti. In the city where Nandi

lived, there was a temple to Shiva by the side of a lake. Every morning, Nandi would go to the temple and worship the *linga* (Shiva's image) with jewels and other precious offerings.

A hunter of birds and animals was also in the habit of worshipping the *linga*.

On one particular day, the hunter bathed in the lake and came to worship the *linga*. He discovered the flowers and jewels that Nandi had left behind as offerings. He kicked away these rich offerings and made his own offerings of water, *bilva* leaves and the flesh of a deer that he had killed.

Nandi was most upset when he discovered what had happened. He shifted the *linga* from the temple and took it home, placing it on a golden pedestal.

Next day, the hunter came and discovered the temple to be empty. The *linga* had disappeared. There was only a gaping hole where the *linga* had been.

The hunter was extremely angry. "Where have you gone, forsaking me?" he shouted. "Shiva, reveal yourself to me."

When there was no sign of Shiva, the hunter plucked out his own entrails and flung them down into the hole as an offering to Shiva. He bathed and brought some offerings of *bilva* leaves as well. Pleased at such devotion, Shiva appeared before the hunter and granted him the boon that he would become a chief attendant and gatekeeper in Shiva's abode of Shivaloka.

Nandi had known about the hunter and he had come to see how the hunter would react to the absence of the *linga*. He marvelled to see what transpired between the hunter and Shiva. He told the hunter. "You know me, I used to worship Shiva's *linga* just as you did. I see now that you are Shiva's true devotee. But please tell him about me as well."

The hunter told Shiva that Nandi had been in the habit of regularly worshipping Shiva's *linga*. He also told Shiva that Nandi was rich and belonged to the *vaishya* class.

"I don't know of any Nandi from the *vaishya* class," retorted Shiva. "The best of my devotees, the ones who are dearest to me, have no titles or riches at all."

But the hunter kept asking Shiva to grant Nandi a boon. Shiva therefore accepted Nandi as an attendant and guard along with the hunter.

(There is a completely different story of how Nandi came to be Shiva's attendant after performing difficult *tapasya* (meditation). This can be found in the *Kurma Purana*.)

Other Stories of Devotion to Shiva

Whosoever serves Shiva devotedly goes to Shivaloka. Two of the ways to serve Shiva are to sweep the floor of Shiva's temple with one's hands and to go to the temple on foot. Lomasha illustrated this with an anecdote.

An insect once went to a temple to eat an offering of food that had been made to Shiva. The whir of the insect's wings removed some of the dust from the temple. When the insect died, it went to heaven and spent a long time there. It was thereafter born as the princess of the kingdom of Kashi.

Every day at dawn, the princess walked to a temple of Shiva's. She swept the floor of the temple with her own hands.

The sage Uddalaka once commented in surprise, "You have hundreds of servants. Why not order them to perform this menial task? Why don't you stop sweeping the floor yourself?"

"I don't because I want to do it myself," replied the princess. "I know of no other way of serving Shiva".

Lomasha also narrated the story of a drunkard and a thief who once gambled with his cronies and lost. To pay them, he decided to rob one of Shiva's temples. He went to the temple at night and stood up on top of the *linga* so as to remove a valuable bell that hung from above. But the bell began to ring as a result of the thief trying to steal it. Virabhadra and Shiva's other attendants came rushing to the temple. They took the thief to Kailasa and Shiva made him one of his attendants.

The *devas* (gods) and associated species like the *gandharvas* (singers of the heaven) and *kinnaras* (a semi-divine species) all worship Shiva. So do the various categories of demons, the *daityas*, the *danavas* and the *rakshasas*. Prominent demons like Mali, Sumali, Dhumraksha, Praghosa, Kumbhakarna and Ravana were devotees.

It was due to a boon received from Shiva that the demon-king Ravana obtained ten heads. (This is really the story of the *Ramayana*). Ravana decided to worship Shiva some more. One by one, he cut off his heads and

offered them to Shiva. When Ravana became completely headless, Shiva appeared before him and granted him the boon that he would become invincible. Shiva restored Ravana's ten heads and blessed him that all his wishes would be fulfilled.

But it was due to Shiva again that Ravana's army of *rakshasas* was routed by an army of *vanaras* (monkeys) led by Rama. Shiva had decreed that the god Kubera would be the god of wealth and prosperity. Ravana happened to be Kubera's half-brother and he once went to pay Kubera a visit. Kubera also lived on Kailasa so that Ravana encountered Nandi. Nandi explained that Kubera was busy and that Ravana should wait for a while. But Ravana was in a hurry and in no mood to wait. A scuffle took place between Ravana and Nandi. Nandi cursed Ravana that he would eventually be killed by a man who lead an army of creatures whose heads were like Nandi's head. By Shiva's grace, Nandi's head had become the head of a monkey. This is why it was an army of monkeys led by Rama which brought about Ravana's downfall.

Nilakantha

Lomasha next recounted the story of how Shiva drank poison and became Nilakantha (blue of throat).

The gods and the demons decided to churn the ocean (*samudra manthana*). (The story of the churning of the ocean is recounted in great detail in the *Ramayana* and in the *Mahabharata*.) The objective was to obtain a life-giving drink named *amrita* that was expected to emerge as a result of the churning. Mount Mandara was used as the churning rod and the great snake Vasuki was used as the rope for the churning. But since Mount Mandara had no base, the churning could not proceed. Vishnu then adopted the form of a *kurma* (turtle). Mount Mandara was placed on the turtle's back and the churning began.

But the gods were greedy and overcome by avarice. Because of their haste, the ocean was churned excessively. As a result of this, poison emerged from the ocean and enveloped the entire universe. Brahma's abode and Vishnu's abode were burnt. Vishnu himself became blue-black in complexion because of the poison. Other beings were also blackened and burnt.

The God Ganesha appealed to Shiva. "Please save the world and grant it protection", he said.

Shiva then absorbed the terrible poison into himself. The gods, the demons and the other living beings emerged from their blackened states as if from a dream. Because he had drunk the terrible poison, Shiva's throat (*kantha*) became blue (*nila*) and from that day on he was known as Nilakantha.

There also happened to be a demon named Rahu on the scene. This demon had many heads and he had been frightening the gods with these heads. As soon as Rahu saw Shiva, he bowed down before him. But as a punishment for what he had done to the gods, Shiva cut off all of Rahu's heads and strung them together into a garland. He wound the garland round the top of his head. That is how Shiva saved the gods from the threat posed by Rahu.

(All *samudra manthana* stories agree that Shiva drank the poison. But the Rahu incident is not there in any other *Purana* and is an attempt to glorify Shiva. Rahu is mentioned in connection with the churning of the ocean as follows. When the *amrita* was obtained, Vishnu adopted the form of a beautiful woman. She tempted the demons so that they parted with the *amrita*. It was Vishnu's plan that only the gods would obtain a share of the *amrita*. But Rahu adopted the guise of a god and drank some of it. However, before Rahu could swallow the *amrita*, Vishnu sliced off his head with a bladed discus. Consequently, only Rahu's head became immortal.)

Shiva's Linga

Nandi once explained to the sage Agastya the significance of the *linga*.

As you have already been told, there are three basic qualities (*guna*) of *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (darkness).

The goddess who has these three qualities and is foremost (*pra*) in the task of creation (*kriti*) is known as *prakriti*. The primal power of creation (*shakti*) and the three basic qualities are subsumed in *prakriti*. At the time of destruction, *prakriti* and the three *gunas* are merged into the divine soul or *paramatman*. When this process of dissolution and merger takes place, the embodiment of the *paramatman* is the *linga*. It is that into which all creation merges. Because the three *gunas* are assimilated into it, the *linga* is without qualities (*nirguna*).

Since the *linga* is supreme, it should always be worshipped as the embodiment of Shiva. Shiva, in the form of the *linga* is to be regarded as the supreme one.

But Shiva is also conceived of as a devoted husband and affectionate father, that is in a tangible form, warm and human. Let us now turn to the stories that depict Shiva in that form, rather than as an impersonal *linga*.

Parvati

You have been told that Dakshayani, Shiva's wife and Daksha's daughter, had yielded up her life at the sacrificial ceremony organised by her father. Lomasha stated that, as a result of this, Shiva was full of misery and immersed himself in deep meditation. With Shiva out of the way, terrible demons began to plague the world.

One of these demons was Taraka, the son of Namuchi. He pleased Brahma through his meditations and asked that he might be made invincible.

"Invincible you cannot be," replied Brahma. "But I will grant you a wonderful boon. You will be vanquished only if you fight with a child."

Taraka was quite happy with this boon. He set out to do battle with the gods and gave them a good thrashing. The gods were driven out of heaven and were in a state of helplessness. While the gods were mourning their fates, a divine voice was heard from the sky. "Do not be despondent," said the voice. "Shiva's son will kill Taraka. You should do something so as to get Shiva married."

The gods appealed to the mountain Himalaya. Himalaya and his wife, Mena (or Menaka) prayed that they might have a daughter and a daughter was indeed born to them. The birth was greeted with great jubilation by the gods. This daughter was variously known as Gouri, Uma and Parvati. She was actually nothing, but Dakshayani reborn as Parvati.

When Parvati was eight years of age, Himalaya took her to the place where Shiva was meditating. Parvati began to visit Shiva every day, but Shiva took no interest in her. The gods sought help from Madana, the god of love. Madana always carries a bow made out of flowers. He also has a quiver full of arrows that are made out of flowers. Anyone whom Madana shoots with his arrows is inflamed with love.

Madana went to Shiva's hermitage and created an atmosphere of fragrance and birdsong there. He shot arrows at Shiva and disturbed his meditations. Shiva opened his eyes and saw Parvati before him, garland in hand. But with the third eye in his forehead, Shiva also saw Madana taking aim at him. Shiva's anger was aroused and flames issued out of his third eye

and reduced Madana to ashes. A great wail rose from the gods who had been looking on.

Shiva left the hermitage in a huff, but Parvati lingered on at the spot. She would not budge. Her parents failed to dissuade her. Parvati stayed on at the hermitage and subjected herself to the rigours of difficult *tapasya*. Although she was only a small girl, she began to subsist on wet leaves, then dry ones. Finally, she gave up eating even leaves. Since she did not eat even a single leaf (*parna*), she came to be known as *Aparna*, the one who does not even eat leaves. Parvati eventually gave up drinking water as well. Her only interest was in her *tapasya*, so that she might obtain Shiva as a husband.

In the end, Shiva was pleased at Parvati's meditation. But he wanted to tease her a bit and test her as well. So he appeared in disguise before Parvati and said. "This girl is really stupid. Why does she want to get Shiva as a husband? Shiva is such an awful person, roaming about in cremation grounds, garlanded with skulls and snakes, grey with ashes, and surrounded by horrible ghosts and spirits."

Like Dakshayani, Parvati too could not stand this criticism of Shiva. "Go away, get lost," she said. "There is no need here for the sort of nonsense that you are spouting."

Hearing this, Shiva revealed his true form to Parvati. Although she was overcome with shyness, she asked Shiva for a boon.

"Have you forgotten that you had been my husband when I had been born as Dakshayani?" asked Parvati. "Please make me your wife in this birth as well. The gods are waiting for a child to be born to us - the child who will defeat the demon Taraka. It is your duty to marry me."

Shiva agreed. With great pomp and ceremony, Himalaya gave his daughter away in marriage to Shiva.

Skanda's Birth and Adventures

Skanda's birth and adventures are described twice in the *Skanda Purana*. (The *Mahabharata* also contains an account of them. In fact, the *Mahabharata* account is probably the more basic account as it was composed earlier.) In relating Skanda's birth and adventures, we will primarily rely on the first account in the *Skanda Purana*.

After marrying Parvati, Shiva took her to Mount Gandhamadana and the region was soon abloom with the fragrant flowers of spring. Nandi stood guard at the entrance to the temple where Shiva had closeted himself with Parvati. For thousands of years, the world was plunged into chaos as Shiva was not around. The worried gods decided to spy on Shiva.

Sent by Vishnu and Brahma, the fire-god Agni went to Shiva's temple on Mount Gandhamadana. He contracted his body and thus escaped Nandi's eyes at the gate. He crept all the way into the interior parts of the temple. (In the second account of the *Skanda Purana*, it is stated that Agni flew in as a pigeon.)

In the inner precincts of the temple, Agni encountered Parvati and begged her for alms. Shiva's relaxations were disturbed in the process and he flew into a violent temper. Parvati gave some of Shiva's energy as alms to Agni. But she cursed him as well. "Since you have disturbed us, I curse you," she said. "You will become an indiscriminate eater of everything. Moreover, the alms that I have given you will cause no end of trouble."

(In the second account of the *Skanda Purana*, Shiva spotted Agni spying and forced him into accepting his energy. There is a mention of Parvati's anger, but not of her curse.)

Offerings made into the fire constitute food for the gods. The alms that Parvati had given Agni entered into the bodies of all the gods in this fashion. This became a big bother to them.

From here, the two accounts differ substantially. In the first account, the uneasy gods went to Vishnu for advice. On Vishnu's advice, the gods started to pray to Shiva himself for deliverance. Shiva asked them to vomit out the energy. With the exception of Agni all the other gods did this and were relieved. As for Agni, Shiva asked him to pour the flaming energy into the bodies of those who were suffering from the cold of the winter.

Early next morning, Agni went to the shores of a lake and waited. The wives of the seven great sages (*saptarshi*) came there to bathe. Trembling with cold after their early morning dip in wintry weather, they sought to warm themselves before the fire. Arundhati, the wife of the sage Vashishtha, tried to argue that this would not be proper. But the other wives were in no mood to listen and they basked in the welcome warmth of the fire in the process, they also took in Shiva's energy. Agni simply passed it on through the pores on the skins of the women. Soon, Agni was rid of his

burden. And the six wives were carrying it instead. (Remember that Arundhati had not been tempted.)

On discovering what had happened, the six sages who were their husbands cursed the wives that they would be born as stars (*nakshatras*) in the sky. The six wives became the *krittikas*. (These are identified as the Pleiades.)

But before this happened the *krittikas* unburdened Shiva's energy on Mount Himalaya. There, the scattered energy came together and formed one whole. This floated down the river Ganga and mingled with the reeds (*shara*) that grew along the banks of the river.

A six-headed boy was then born from the energy. The sage Garga named the child Kartikeya as he was borne for some time by the *krittikas*. He was also called Gangeya, which means the son of Ganga. Because he had six (*shada*) faces (*anana*), he was given the name of Shadanana. Other names given to the child were Shakha, Vishakha, Skanda, Kumara, Guha and Atibala.

Parvati's inner senses made her aware of this great event. The sage Narada also came and gave her the good news. With his entire retinue, Shiva went to the banks of the Ganga to meet the boy. Drums beat and sages chanted hymns as Parvati took the boy to her breast. Shiva too took him in his arms and the child played with the snake around Shiva's neck.

"What can my Kumara now do for you?" Shiva asked the assembled gods.

The gods requested that Kumara be made their general. They placed Kumara in the forefront of their army and prepared to fight with Tarakasura. While all this was going on, Sena, the beautiful daughter of Mrityu (death) came up. The gods informed Shiva that earlier, on Brahma's advice, Sena had meditated for many years so that she might obtain Kumara as her husband. This alliance was agreed upon and Kumara was married to Sena. Thus, Kumara came to acquire the name of Senapati, which means Sena's husband. (The word Senapati also means the general of an army.)

At this juncture, a quarrel started among Parvati, Garga and the *krittikas*. "This child is mine," each of them claimed. Narada silenced the *krittikas*, explaining that Kumara had been born of Shiva and Parvati with the specific objective of destroying a demon. Kumara however reassured

the *krittikas* that they would have a permanent place in the sky as *nakshatras*.

The second account in the *Skanda Parana* differs in some respects from the account that has been given above.

As per this account, Shiva's energy split open the stomachs of the gods and came out. It then formed a lake of mercury (*parada*). Agni too had deposited his share of the energy, but not in the lake. He deposited his energy in the river Ganga. Ganga was burnt with this energy and could not bear it. She cast it up with her waves and the energy formed the Shveta mountains.

Meanwhile, the seven great sages requested Agni to come and preside over a ceremony that they were conducting.

(From now on, the second account differs quite significantly from the first account, although it is rather similar to the account of the *Mahabharata*.)

The beautiful wives of the seven sages were present on the occasion of the *yajna* and Agni was smitten by their charms. Conscience-stricken at his desire, but unable to control himself, he went away to the forest. (The *Mahabharata* states that he went away to the forest in disappointment because he failed to win over the wives of the sages.)

Agni's wife Svaha now determined to assume the forms of the wives of the sages and unite with Agni. (In the *Mahabharata*, Svaha is not actually Agni's wife. She was Daksha's daughter and always had a desire for Agni.)

Svaha first disguised herself as Shiva, the lovely wife of the sage Angira. She offered herself to Agni, so that no blame should attach to Shiva herself. Svaha assumed the form of a Suparni or Garudi (a mythical hawk-like bird) and cast down Agni's energy into a golden pit. This pit was located amongst a clump of reeds (*shara*) on Mount Shveta. Svaha went through a similar act six times. But the seventh time, in the case of Arundhati, the wife of the sage Vashishtha. Svaha could not go through with the deception. The reason was that Arundhati was so devoted to her husband that she had very special powers of her own. It was impossible for Svaha to assume her form.

Moreover, the other six wives had unknowingly bathed in the Ganga in the very same spot where Agni had cast out Shiva's energy. Some of the energy had entered their bodies and had embarrassed them considerably.

That was the reason why Svaha could enter their bodies and steal away the energy from them without invoking curses from them. (This is not very clear. The logic presumably is that Svaha had to enter their bodies before she could assume their forms.)

Meanwhile, Agni was full of remorse at having united with the wives of the revered seven sages. He even thought of killing himself as penance. But a divine voice was heard from the sky. This voice told Agni that, as punishment, he would develop indigestion. That would be enough atonement for his sin. The sin was not as severe as he had taken it to be. Those whom he had taken to be the wives of the seven great sages were not their wives at all. It was Svaha who had adopted those forms. Agni was advised to go to Mount Shveta to see his son.

On Mount Shveta, Agni discovered that a boy had been born out of the scattered energy (*skanna*). Since he was born from the *skanna*, he was named Skanda. The child had one stomach and one neck, but six heads, twelve eyes, twelve ears and twelve arms. At Agni's bidding, the sage Vishvamisra performed the rituals that have to be observed on the occasion of a birth. Agni addressed Skanda as his son and made him the present of a spear.

The sages however doubted their wives and threw them out of their houses. (The *Mahabharata* states that this was because of evil gossip. Even though the Garuda bird claimed to be Skanda's mother, tongues had been wagging that it was the six wives of the sages who had given birth to the child.)

Almost immediately after his birth, Skanda began to rain down arrows and spears on the peak of Mount Shveta. He created havoc. His roars struck terror into the hearts of the demons. (The *Mahabharata* has the detail that Skanda took up the bow and arrow with which Shiva had killed the demon Tripurasura. It was lying there on Mount Shveta.)

The gods did not know who this boy was. They thought that he might be an enemy. "Kill him", the gods urged Indra. (The account in the *Mahabharata* states that Indra was scared of directly confronting Skanda. The gods sent the *lokamatas* to kill Skanda. These *lokamatas* or *matrikas* were demi-goddesses with special powers who were born from the anger of gods such as Brahma, Shiva and Yama. But when they saw the adorable

child that Skanda was, the *matrikas* could not kill him. Instead, they joined with Agni in protecting him and nourishing him.)

Goaded by the gods, Indra confronted Skanda with his army. But flames issued from Skanda's mouth and Indra's soldiers ran hither and thither, their bodies on fire. After all, Skanda was the son of Agni, the god of fire.

"Use your *vajra*," the gods told Indra.

Indra hurled this wonderful weapon at Skanda. But all that happened was that Skanda's right side split open and out came a fiery young man wearing earrings. This was Shakha. (In the *Mahabharata* account, this was Vishakha.) Indra hurled the *vajra* again. The left side now split open and a powerful young man named Vishakha came out. (In the *Mahabharata* account, this was Shakha.) Indra hurled the *vajra* once again. This time, it was the chest that burst and a youth named Naigameya came out. These young men were known as the *kumaras*. Apart from the *kumaras*, seven *kumaris* (young women) also burst out of Skanda when he was struck by the *vajra*. (These creatures are terrible in nature and the *Mahabharata* describes them as *skandagraha*. They are supposed to rob and kill newborn babies, and variously harm children till they attain sixteen years of age. The *Skanda Purana* further mentions a child born along with them. This child was named Lohitaksha, meaning, the red-eyed one.)

Indra had to bow down before Skanda, Lakshmi or Shri, the goddess of wealth, prosperity and victory, took her side by Skanda's side. The gods and the sages paid their respects to the wonderful child. Skanda looked resplendent in golden crown, golden armour, a garland made out of gold and red clothes.

The gods and the sages said, "O golden one. You are just six days old and yet you have the world at your feet. Please accept the position of Indra. Be the administrative head of the world."

Indra also offered his post to Skanda.

But Skanda refused, saying that he would be quite happy to serve Indra. "I do not covet your crown. O king of the gods," he told Indra.

"In that case, please accept the position of the general of our army," replied Indra. "Let me anoint you *deva senapati* (general of the gods)."

This position Skanda accepted and, with great pomp, he was appointed the general of the gods. The news of the celebration reached Shiva and Parvati and they came to bless their son. (In the first account of the *Skanda Purana*, the news had been carried to them by the sage Narada.)

"These are your parents. Skanda," said Brahma, introducing Shiva and Parvati to their son. The parents hugged their child close.

But at this juncture, the six deserted wives of the sages turned up. They addressed Skanda as their son.

"He is my son, not yours." said Parvati.

A quarrel ensued. Parvati, Svaha, Agni, Shiva, Ganga and the wives of the sages, all claimed Skanda as a son.

Skanda smilingly reassured all of them. "I am a son to each of you." he said. "Please accept a boon from me."

The wives of the sages desired to have a permanent place in the sky as they had been deserted by their husbands without a fair hearing. Skanda placed them in the sky as the *krittikas*. (As you have already been told, this is identified with the Pleiades.)

Svaha said, "I am clearly not Agni's beloved one, even though I have always loved him. Please grant me the boon that he will come to love me and that I will always be able to stay with him."

"I will ensure that." replied Skanda. "From now on, wherever *brahmanas* make offerings to the sacrificial fire, they will say the words "*agnaye svaha*". That means, 'to Agni, Svaha.' This will ensure that you will be in Agni's constant companionship." (Even now, these are the words that priests use in making offerings to a sacrificial fire. The practice thus owes its origin to Skanda.)

Agni desired the boon that he might have a share in all sacrificial offerings and Skanda granted him that boon. As for Ganga, Skanda granted her the boon that he would be known as her son.

Amidst a great deal of celebration, Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods, anointed Skanda on the banks of the river Mahanadi. Various gods brought him presents. Garuda gave him a peacock to ride on and Aruna gave him a cock. (The *Mahabharata* states that Indra gave Skanda and Vishakha two red balls that had earlier adorned his elephant, Airavata.)

The gods next asked Skanda to slay the demon Taraka for them.

Taraka

The gods and the demons came face to face on the field of battle.

Skanda mounted a wonderful space-vehicle or chariot (*vimana*). (The *Skanda Purana* has two separate accounts of the battle. In the first account, Skanda rode on a chariot. But in the second account, he rode a peacock.) The moon-god Chandra held a sunshade over Skanda's head. Indra rode into battle on an elephant. Gods like Yama, Varuna and Kubera joined in with their armies.

The demon Taraka was astride an extraordinary *vimana*. He too had a sunshade held above his head. Elephants, horses and chariots were to be found in abundance in the armies of both sides. And both sides had diverse weapons like spears, swords, maces and bows and arrows.

A tremendous battle raged. King Muchukanda, the son of King Mandhata, had come to aid the gods and he fought with Taraka, Shiva's attendant. Virabhadra, also fought valiantly with Taraka. Other gods too tried to fight with Taraka. But soon it became clear to Vishnu that none other than Skanda could stand up to Taraka. Vishnu accordingly requested Skanda to go and fight with Taraka.

"Shameless - that is what you are," Taraka screamed at the gods. "Sending a mere boy to fight with me. But what can one expect when you have a coward such as Indra for your king."

Indra hurled his *vajra* at Taraka. But Taraka felled Indra to the ground and then struck him with Indra's own *vajra*. When Virabhadra tried to protect Indra, Taraka pierced Virabhadra's chest with a spear.

Skanda next entered the fray and Skanda and Taraka hurled powerful spears at each other. They lacerated each other. Once, Skanda was struck in the chest and fainted. But soon he was up again. *Gandharvas* (singers of heaven), *guhyakas* (attendants of Kubera), *apsaras* (dancers of heaven), sages, and *charanas* (bards and minstrels) had assembled to watch the fight. They began to ask one another, "Who do you think is going to win?"

The various mountains and hills also assembled there, worried about Skanda's safety.

"Don't worry. Don't have the least doubt." said Skanda. "I'll kill this sinful demon in front of all and sundry."

And he cut off Taraka's head with a spear. (It is difficult to see how a head could be cut off with a spear. The second account states that Skanda's spear pierced Taraka's chest and the demon fell down with a terrible cry. Having pierced Taraka's heart, the spear entered the earth. From the hole that this caused in the earth, a gush of water issued out. Eventually, the spear returned to Skanda.)

There was great jubilation. Gods and sages rained down flowers upon the wonder-child. The happy Parvati took Skanda in her lap and hugged him close.

(The *Mahabharata*, instead of describing Skanda's battle with Taraka, describes his battle with the demon Mahisha. According to the *Puranas*, the demon Mahisha was killed by Parvati.)

Pralamba and Vana

The *Skanda Parana* also contains descriptions of how Skanda killed the demons Pralamba and Vana.

Pralamba was a sinful demon who ran away when the battle between Skanda and Taraka took place. Pralamba took refuge in the underworld (*patala*). He began to kill the snakes (*nagas*) who were the original residents of the underworld.

Other *nagas*, with their leader Shesha, were at the time visiting Skanda. A *naga* named Kumuda went there with the news of Pralamba's oppression. Skanda immediately hurled a spear at *patala*. This spear travelled right through the ground and killed Pralamba and ten crores of his soldiers in *patala*. Having achieved this task, the spear returned to Skanda with a gush of water from the Patalaganga river. (This is a river that flows in the underworld.) The hole that the spear made in the ground was filled with this water and was named Siddhakupa by Skanda.

(The more famous Pralamba in the *Puranas* is a demon who was killed by Krishna. This story is told in the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*.)

There was a demon named Vana. He was the son of Vala. This demon was frightened of Skanda and ran away. He went and took refuge in Mount Krouncha. This was a mountain that was full of thickets and wild animals. Skanda hurled a spear at the mountain and it bore a hole clean through Mount Krouncha. In the process, the spear killed Vana and the countless demons and animals lived there. Having accomplished its purpose, the

spear returned to Skanda. The hole that the spear made in Mount Krouncha is used by ducks and swans to travel to Manasa Sarovara lake.

(The more famous Vana in the *Puranas* is a demon who was defeated by Krishna. This story is again told in the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana*. The Vana whom Krishna defeated was the son of Vali, not Vala. The *Skanda Purana* seems to have borrowed and adapted that story.)

Shveta

Lomasha now told the sages about King Shveta who was a true devotee of Shiva's.

The word *kala* means time as well as the god of death. The god of death, Kala, erodes the lifespans of all living beings and finally brings them to their predestined ends. When King Shveta had spent a long time on earth, Kala (or Yama) sent the *yamadutas* (Yama's messengers) to take him to Yama's abode.

The messengers came and found that Shveta was meditating inside one of Shiva's temples. They stood there and waited, not daring to enter the temple and not daring to perform their task of taking Shveta away. When his messengers did not return, Yama himself came to see what was going on. For some time, Yama stood there transfixed, not knowing what to do. But his job had to be done. So he mustered up enough courage to enter the temple, sword in hand.

Shiva now manifested himself. From the third eye in the middle of his forehead, he sternly gazed at Yama. Such was the power of the gaze that Yama went up in flames.

Shveta had been meditating all this while and had been completely oblivious of what was going on. But the commotion made him open his eyes and he was horrified at what had happened.

"O Shiva, what have you done?" exclaimed Shveta. "Why have you reduced Yama to ashes? What wrong has he done? He was only doing his job."

Shiva explained that Yama had been reduced to ashes as he had tried to take one of Shiva's devotees to Yama's abode. But Shveta persisted in pleading for Yama. "Kala is the mainstay of creation," he said. "if you do

not want the destination of all forms of life, please bring him back to life at once. Nothing can exist without Kala. Without Kala, life is meaningless.”

Shiva smiled and Kala was brought back to life once more. Kala and his messengers sung Shveta’s praises. *Yamadutas* were thereafter instructed to leave Shiva’s devotees alone. They were not to be taken to Yama’s abode.

The Game of Dice

The sage Narada once went to Mount Gandhamadana. He found Shiva and Parvati there, happy in each other’s company.

“The best way to spend time is to have a game of dice (*dyuta*).” Narada told Parvati.

Incited by Narada, Parvati challenged Shiva to a game of dice. Narada looked on. Narada and Shiva employed a little bit of trickery and Shiva won the game. Shiva and Narada then began to tease Parvati at her defeat. This made Parvati angry and she challenged Shiva to another game. This time, it was Parvati who won.

Parvati smiled and said, “I have defeated you Shiva.”

“Never use such words again, my dear.” replied Shiva. “In the three worlds, there is no one who can defeat me. I am invincible.”

“That may be true,” retorted Parvati. “Shiva may not be conquered by any creature from the three worlds. But this simple fact is also true - I have won this game of dice and have therefore succeeded in defeating you.

Tempers rose and soon the couple were in the midst of a fight. Narada made matters worse by saying. “Why are you lying, Parvati? You have not been able to defeat Shiva; he lost willingly. It is beyond the reach of anyone to defeat Shiva, unless he deliberately wants to lose.”

“Be quiet, sage, and do not blow up Shiva’s importance out of all proportion.” responded Parvati. “He owes his position to me. It is I who established him in the universe.”

Shiva’s attendant Bhiringi tried to restrain Parvati. “Do you not remember what had happened earlier?” he asked. “Did you not meditate so as to obtain Shiva as your husband? And do you not remember that, in your earlier life as Dakshayani, you had given up your life rather than hear Shiva being criticised? Slander against Shiva was unbearable to you then. Have you forgotten all that? And if you have not, how dare you Insult Shiva?”

‘Go away,’ said Parvati. ‘What do you know of the true significance of Shiva and Parvati as a whole? You are trying to distinguish between us. You are differentiating between two who are really one and the same. I curse you that your body will lose all its flesh.’

In a fit of anger. Parvati then snatched away from Shiva his snakes, his moon, and all that he had on. These were to be her winnings for having won the game of dice. Shiva turned upon her the fiery glance of his third eye.

But Parvati laughed and said. ‘I am not Yama, or Madana. Nor am I the yajna that Daksha performed. That third eye of yours can do me no harm.

Mortified. Shiva thought that a lonely forest was the only place for him. He left for the place known as Siddhatavi, in the middle of a forest. Clad only in the snakes Shesha and Vasuki. Shiva began to meditate.

Kartikeya. Ganesha. Virabhadra. Nandi, Bhiringi and all the other inhabitants of Kailasa were left behind, along with Parvati. Parvati soon began to find her surroundings unbearable in Shiva’s absence. Parvati’s companion Vijaya asked her to go over to Shiva and apologise.

But Parvati calmly replied, ‘Please do not ask me to do any such thing. It is I who have conquered Shiva. It is I who had accepted him, given him his form and endowed him with beauty. I have no further duties now. The entire world, with all of its gods, is my creation. I created it for the purpose of having a game. Now just watch what I do.

Adopting a beautiful form that disguised her real appearance, Parvati went to Siddhatavi. Shiva was captivated by this beautiful woman and forgot all about his meditation. Parvati teased and tantalised Shiva, vanishing for some time and then appearing again. But she was careful not to reveal her true identity.

‘Please marry me,’ requested Shiva. ‘Please do not say no.

‘I have no objection to marrying you, replied Parvati. ‘But you will have to approach my father for my hand. Why don’t you meet him and see what he says?’

Parvati directed Shiva to Mount Himalaya who, if you remember, was Parvati’s father. Himalaya clasped his hands and said, ‘How can I refuse you, the lord of the three worlds? But don’t you remember? You are already my son-in-law.

At this point Narada also appeared and told Shiva, “It is women who cause men trouble and embarrassment. It is a woman who has made you deviate from your path of meditation,”

Shiva was considerably embarrassed by all this. He went off to Mount Gandharnadana and began to meditate again. Narada now told Parvati, Himalaya and the other inhabitants of Kailasa that it was high time that Shiva was forgiven. With Parvati in their forefront, all the inhabitants of Kailasa went to Shiva and chanted hymns to him. Shiva returned and the gods and the sages welcomed him with flowers and the beating of drums. Shiva was reunited with Parvati.

Indra and Nahusha

Remember how Shiva had delivered the gods from Rahu?

Once Rahu was out of the way, the gods took fresh courage and fought fiercely with the demons. Through Shiva's grace, Indra humbled Vali and other demon stalwarts. The demons were terrified and fled. The sages crowned Indra the king of the three worlds. His wife, Indrani or Shachi, became the queen of the three worlds. Indra made his capital in Amaravati.

You should not take this to mean that Indra and the gods succeeded in killing the demons. Well, they did kill the demons. But Shukracharya, the preceptor of the demons, knew the art of *mritasanjivani*. This was the art of rejuvenating the dead and bringing them back to life. (In fact, Shukracharya had learnt this art by praying to Shiva and pleasing him. That story is related in the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsha* and several *Puranas*.) Through the knowledge of *mritasanjivani* Shukracharya brought the dead demons back to life. But the demons were banished to the underworld, while the gods revelled in heaven.

Indra used to hold sacrifices in his palace. Vishvakarma was the architect of the gods and Vishvakarma had a son named Vishvarupa. Vishvarupa used to preside over the sacrificial ceremonies that Indra held. But unknown to Indra, he used to make offerings to the demons as well, and not merely to the gods. In fact, the offerings that he made to the demons were made with respect. The offerings he made to humans were made with neither respect, nor displeasure. But the offerings he made to the gods were made with displeasure.

(There were two distinct Vishvarupas and the account in the *Skanda Purana* makes them out to be the same. The first Vishvarupa was

Vishvakarma's son and Vishvakarma created him to counteract Indra's power. This Vishvarupa was not related to the demons. Indra eventually killed him with his *vajra*. The second Vishvarupa was the sage Kashyapa's son and since the demons were descended from Kashyapa, Vishvarupa was related to the demons. It was this Vishvarupa who was the priest of the gods and secretly made offerings to the demons. This second Vishvarupa was also killed by Indra with the *vajra*. The first Vishvarupa had three (*tri*) heads (*shira*) and was known as Trishira.)

To return to the account of the *Skanda Purana*, when Indra got to know that Vishvarupa was secretly making offerings to the demons, he was furious. He hurled his *vajra* at Vishvarupa or Trishira and severed all three of his heads. Three different kinds of birds were born out of Trishira's severed heads.

Trishira had been a *brahmana* (the first of the four classes) and the killing of a *brahmana* was a terrible sin. This sin became personified and began to pursue Indra in an attempt to eat him up. Indra fled.

(Vishvakarma was also known as Tvashta and the *Mahabharata* relates the story of the first Vishvarupa, who was the son of Vishvakarma or Tvashta. Vishvarupa meditated so that he might assume the position of Indra. Indra sent *apsaras* to disturb Vishvarupa's meditations. When this proved to be of no avail, Indra slew Vishvarupa with the *vajra*. Tvashta was so furious at his son being killed, that he created a demon named Vritra to exact vengeance.)

To return to the *Skanda Purana*, the personified sin chased Indra all over the place. It dogged Indra's steps like a terrible shadow. In terror, Indra sought refuge under the water and spent a hundred and two years there in hiding. With Indra absent, the three worlds were plunged into a state of chaos and anarchy. It is known that a kingdom without a king, a kingdom with a sinful king, and a kingdom where a killer of *brahmanas* lives, are cursed by famine, epidemics and disease. The three worlds now reeled from these effects, all because of Indra.

Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods, traced Indra to where he was hiding under the waters of a lake. The personified sin lay in wait on the shores of the lake.

"There is no penance for the sin that you have committed," said Brihaspati. "There is no sin so severe as that of killing a *brahmana*

knowingly and deliberately. You will simply have to suffer the effects. That is the only possible atonement.”

“I know,” replied Indra. “I am like the dead, overcome by remorse and shadowed by the sin. Please go back to Amaravati and elect someone else as Indra. Make someone else your king.”

In Amaravati, the gods were also discussing the problem and looking for a possible solution.

“Don't waste any time.” suggested the sage Narada. “The three worlds are fast degenerating. Bring King Nahusha and instate him as Indra. He is a powerful monarch of the lunar dynasty. He has performed many *ashvamedha yajnas* (horse sacrifices). He would be the right Indra for you.”

(Nahusha was the son of King Ayu. Apart from the *Mahabharata*, Nahusha's story is also recounted in the *Padma Purana*.)

The gods endorsed this suggestion, although Shachi was naturally not happy. She left the palace with tears in her eyes.

Nahusha was brought to Amaravati and anointed as Indra amidst a great deal of fanfare. Sages like Agastya, gods, *gandharvas*, *apsaras*, *yakshas* (demi-gods who were companions of Kubera) and *vidyadharas* (a semi-divine species), that is, all the inhabitants of heaven, began to serve Nahusha.

This pomp and glory turned Nahusha's head and he said. “All the gods are bowing to me in adulation. All of them are treating me as Indra. But where is Shachi? Why has she not come to me? She is the Indrani, her place is by my side. Fetch her at once.”

Brihaspati went to Shachi and said, “You are the Indrani. Nahusha is now the Indra. Please take your seat by his side.”

“Nahusha has still not completed the required number of *yajnas*,” replied Shachi. “He has performed only ninety-nine horse sacrifices. He has, therefore, still not obtained a right to me. Besides, I am the wife of another. Nahusha may be the Indra and I may be the Indrani, but that does not still make him my husband. However, there is a way in which he can attain me. He has to come to me riding on something that should not be used as a carriage. Then and only then, will I become his wife.”

(The number of sacrifices requires some explanation. Indra performed one hundred (*shata*) horse sacrifices (*kratu*) and came to be known as

Shatakratu. The Idea is that a person had to perform one hundred *ashvamedha yajnas* to be regarded as Indra's equal. Nahusha performed only ninety-nine.)

Brihaspati brought Shachi's message back to Nahusha.

"That is easily done." thought Nahusha. "But what can such a carriage be? I will have to think of something that is never used as a carriage."

Nahusha thought about this and arrived at a solution. He would go to Shachi carried on a palanquin. And this palanquin would be carried by two brahmanas. The brahmanas as a class were given to intellectual and spiritual pursuits and were never assigned menial tasks. In that sense, they should never be given the task of carrying a palanquin. Shachi's condition would therefore be met if Nahusha did give them that task.

Nahusha set out for Shachi's house on a palanquin carried by two brahmanas. One of them was no less than the great sage Agastya. In his impatience to get to Shachi quickly, Nahusha kept egging on the *brahmanas* to move faster, "*Sarpa, sarpa*" he said, "move, move".

Agastya could not bear this goading. He cursed Nahusha and transformed him into a snake or *sarpa*. (The word *sarpa*, when used as noun, means a snake. When used as a verb, it means "move". The *Mahabharata* states that, in his hurry, Nahusha lost his balance and his feet touched Agastya's head. That was the reason for the curse.)

Nahusha fell from heaven and became a python (*ajagara*) snake. He started to live in a forest. (The *Mahabharata* says that Nahusha ruled as Indra for one hundred thousand years. The sequel to the story is not given in the *Skanda Purana*, but can be found in the *Mahabharata*. When the Pandavas were banished to the forest, Bhima encountered Nahusha in the form of a snake. The snake coiled itself around Bhima and would not let him go. Yudhishtira began to look for Bhima and came upon the snake. Nahusha told Yudhishtira that he would let Bhima go if Yudhishtira could answer his questions correctly. This Yudhishtira could do and Bhima was set free. Moreover, this incident freed Nahusha from his curse and he ascended to heaven.)

To return to the *Skanda Purana*, there was no Indra now and the gods did not know what to do. The sage Narada advised the gods to instate Yayati. Nahusha's son, as Indra. But when Yayati was taken to heaven, he began to sing his own praises. He spoke at great length on the various good

deeds that he had done on earth and expounded on the great deal of *punya* that he had accumulated. This self-adulation and self-glorification was a sin and Yayati was not entitled to stay in heaven. He fell down from heaven.

The dismayed gods did not know what to do. They could not function in the absence of an Indra.

“Do not worry so much.” said Shachi. “Why not bring Indra himself back?”

The gods trooped to the lake where Indra was hiding. “We have come to take you back as Indra,” requested the gods.

“But what about me?” asked the personified sin that had been waiting for Indra. “I have been waiting, Indra is mine. If I give him up, where will I go? I am not going to let go of that which I am entitled to.”

“We will find some other place for you to reside in.” reassured the gods.

The sin of killing a *brahmana* was divided into four parts. The first part was vested with the earth, the second with the trees, the third with the water and the fourth with women. These were the apportioned locations where the spirit of the sin would henceforth live in. The sin accordingly left Indra and started to pervade these four locations that had been allotted to it.

Freed from the sin, Indra once again ascended the throne that he had been forced to vacate.

Vritra

Vishvakarma was not very happy to see that Indra was back in Amaravati with Shachi by his side. He was again filled with sorrow for his dead son Vishvarupa. Vishvakarma performed difficult meditation so that he might have a son who would exact vengeance on Indra. All this *tapasya* pleased Brahma and Brahma granted Vishvakarma the boon that he would have a terrible son named Vritra.

Vritra was indeed a monstrosity. He grew every day by the length of a hundred bows, and was soon gigantic. The demons who had fled to the underworld united under Vritra and accepted him as their leader. Led by Vritra, the demons once again started to plague the gods. Brahma advised the gods that the only way Vritra could be killed was for them to fashion a weapon out of the bones of the sage Dadhicha (or Dadhichi)

(The reason why the sage's bones were required is not made explicit. The *Devi Bhagavata Purana* states that Vritra had obtained a boon from Brahma that he could not be killed by a weapon made out of iron or wood or by a weapon that was wet or dry'

But the sage Dadhicha's bones could not be obtained until the sage himself was dead. And Indra was scared of committing the sin of killing a *brahmana* a second time. But Brahma prevailed upon Indra to go with Brihaspati and the other gods to visit the sage.

Indra prayed to Dadhicha. "We are terrified and only you can deliver us from this terror," he said. "Please make a gift of your bones to us. We will make weapons out of your bones so that we may be able to kill the demons."

Dadhicha was a righteous sage who was devoted to Shiva. (You will remember the account of Daksha's *yajna*. It was Dadhicha who alone, amongst all the sages, opposed the idea of a *yajna* being held in Shiva's absence.) When the gods requested him for his bones, the sage agreed with alacrity. He informed his wife Suvarcha of his decision and shed off his physical body.

Indra asked Surabhi, the heavenly cow to lick Dadhicha's dead body. Surabhi soon licked the body clean of all flesh and blood. Only the glistening bones were left. The gods quickly fashioned weapons out of these bones. From the spine of the skeleton, a wonderful weapon named *vajra* was made and handed over to Indra. From the skull, a terrible weapon named *brahmashiras* (literally meaning the head of a *brahmana*) was made. A *pasha* (noose) was made from the nerves.

(The *Agni Purana* gives a more complete list of various weapons that were made from Dadhicha's bones. There is some inconsistency, which it is impossible to reconcile. The *vajra* was constructed so that Vritra might be killed. That is prior to the Vritra incident, Indra could not have possessed the *vajra*. Vishvarupa's killing took place prior to Vritra's birth. How could Indra then have killed Vishvarupa with the *vajra*?)

Dadhicha's wife Suvarcha was however not at all pleased with the sage's decision. She cursed the gods that they would not have any children. Suvarcha was expecting at the time and she split open her womb and died. The baby was born well before the appointed time. He was left at the foot of a *pipala* tree and eventually came to be known as the sage Pippalada.

(The *Skanda Purana* itself mentions another sage named Pippalada. The sage Yajnavalkya had a sister named Kamsari and Kamsari gave birth to a son before she was married. Scared of social disapproval, Kamsari left the baby under a *pippala* tree. The child grew up and was named Pippalada.)

But all of Indra's newly-obtained weapons proved to be futile against the demon Namuchi. He could only be killed by sea-foam.

(The *Skanda Purana* now identifies Vritra with the demon Namuchi, an identification that is made by some other Puranas as well. There were two Namuchis. One was the son of Danu and the sage Kashyapa, and is referred to in the *Vamana Purana*. He was killed by Indra. But there was a second Namuchi as well, referred to in the *Mahabharata*. This Namuchi was the son of the demon Viprachitti. Namuchi once fought with Indra and robbed the king of the gods of all his valour. Namuchi returned Indra's valour to him on the condition that Indra would not kill Namuchi with any object that was wet or dry. Nor was Indra permitted to kill Namuchi during the night or the day. Indra eventually killed Namuchi with his *vajra* covered with sea-foam. Thus, the weapon was neither wet nor dry. Moreover, Namuchi was killed during twilight, which was neither day nor night. There is a parallel to the Namuchi story in the context of Vritra, but we will talk about that in a short while.)

To return to the *Skanda Purana*, Indra's weapons had no success against Vritra, at least, not at first. Brihaspati advised Indra to pray to Shiva. It was only through Shiva's grace that Vritra could be killed. After all, Vritra had pleased Shiva with his meditations and had obtained a lot of power from him.

But before praying to Shiva, Indra attacked Vritra and the other demons. The other demons fled before India's onslaught, but Vritra stood his ground. Indra hurled a mace at Vritra. But Vritra simply caught up the mace and hurled it back at Indra. The mace struck Indra with such a resounding whack that the king of the gods fell down unconscious.

"Carry your king back to Amaravati." said Vritra and roared with laughter.

Brahma revived Indra and again asked him to pray to Shiva. This time, Indra listened to the advice and started to pray to Shiva. Shiva told Indra to bide his time and wait. Vritra could not be easily killed. One would have to

look for a chink in Vritra's armour. Shiva also told Indra that, in an earlier existence. Vritra had been named Chitraratha.

Chitraratha had prayed to Shiva and had obtained a *vimana* from him. In this *vimana*, Chitraratha had travelled far and wide. And one of these trips had taken him to Kailasa. In Kailasa, Chitraratha had had the effrontery to laugh at Shiva himself. Parvati had then cursed Chitraratha that he would be born as a demon and that he would be disappointed in his ambitions.

Shiva therefore advised Indra to watch and wait for Vritra's weaker moments. That was the opportune time for Vritra to be attacked. This might not seem to be a brave or heroic act, but it was the only way to dispose of Vritra. In a straight fight, Vritra was invincible.

(The *Devi Bhagavata Purana* adds the Information that, on Vishnu's advice, Indra sought a fraudulent truce with Vritra. One of the conditions of the truce was that Indra would not kill Vritra with any weapon made out of iron, wood or stone. Nor would Indra kill Vritra with any object that was wet or dry. Vritra would also not be killed during night or day. If Indra failed to abide by these conditions, the sin of killing a *brahmana* would vest with Indra. Some other *Puranas* add the information that Indra sent the *apsara* Rambha to tempt Vritra. Rambha agreed to marry Vritra provided that the demon listened to whatever she said. Vritra consented to this and Rambha persuaded Vritra to drink some wine. When the demon was drunk and intoxicated from the effects of the wine, Indra seized his chance and slew Vritra.)

To return to the *Skanda Purana*, Indra waited patiently for one thousand years for one of Vritra's weak moments. The day eventually came. It happened to be the thirteenth day of the month (*trayodashi*) and was a Saturday. This was the day prescribed for observing a religious rite (*vrata*) known as *pradosha vrata*. The word *pradosha* means evening and the rite had to be observed in the evening.

Vritra was at that time on the banks of the river Narmada and Indra happened to come there. Vritra requested Indra to observe the *pradosha vrata*. This involved going around a *linga* and the observance of the rite immediately increased Indra's powers. But while Indra was going through with the ceremony, Vritra fell asleep. Falling asleep at an inauspicious hour was a terrible sin and Vritra lost all the *punya* that he had earlier accumulated. He became weakened, lacklustre and vulnerable. He felt all

his powers ebb away. Because of Parvati's curse, Vritra also felt disheartened and depressed.

Indra now approached Vritra and a battle between the two began. (This does not make sense. The fact that Vritra asked Indra to observe a religious rite means that the two must have been friends, or must have been pretending to be friends. Why should they start to fight now? The incident must therefore be taken in conjunction with what is mentioned in the other *Puranas*, but is glossed over in the *Skanda Purana*. That is, some form of truce must have been agreed upon between Indra and Vritra. Finding that Vritra had weakened, Indra went back on the truce and attacked him.)

Indra immediately wanted to use his *vajra* on Vritra, but Brihaspati advised against the use of such a powerful weapon at first, Indra therefore attacked Vritra with a mace and a trident. But these attempts were futile. Vritra simply swallowed up these weapons. The demon then opened his mouth wide and prepared to swallow up Indra, elephant and all. (Indra was astride his elephant Airavata.)

When Indra was indeed swallowed up, the gods began to lament. A divine voice was then heard from the sky. This voice told the gods that Indra had made certain mistakes in the observance of the *pradosha vrata*. That was the reason why he had failed, instead of succeeding.

"Please do something." the voice told the gods. "All of you must together do something so that Indra may be freed. Pray to Shiva and get the procedure right. That is the only way for Indra to be released."

The gods started to pray to Shiva, taking great care to see that the procedures and rituals were correctly observed. As soon as the prayers were completed, Indra burst out of Vritra's armpit, elephant, *vajra*, crown, earrings and all.

Vritra's body lay there. After six months had passed, Indra chopped off Vritra's head with his *vajra*. That was the end of Vritra. Since Vritra had been Vishvakarma's son, he had been a *brahmana*. But the sin of killing a *brahmana* did not pursue Indra this time. It stayed with Vritra's dead body. (Although not explicitly stated, you will have noticed that Vritra was killed in the evening. This was not night, nor day. The other *Puranas* state that Indra covered up the *vajra* with sea-foam before killing Vritra. This ensured that the weapon was not wet or dry. But *Puranas* like the *Devi Bhagavata Purana* do state that the sin of killing a *brahmana* started to pursue Indra

after he had killed Vritra. The *Skanda Purana* probably skips this as a similar phenomenon has already been described in connection with the killing of Vishvarupa.)

Vali

The demon Virochana had a son named Vali.

Vali was determined to defeat Indra and subjugate the gods. Shukracharya, the preceptor of the demons, advised Vali to perform a *yajna*. From the sacrificial fires of the *yajna*, a wonderful chariot came out. It was drawn by four white horses and was stacked with all sorts of wonderful weapons. Vali ascended this chariot and invaded Amaravati at the head of a vast army of demons.

Brihaspati told the gods that they had no hope of facing up to Vali. It was better for them to flee. The gods disguised themselves as birds and followed Brihaspati's advice. Indra took the form of a peacock, Yama that of a crow, Agni that of a pigeon, and so on. The demons took over the abandoned city. Vali ascended Indra's throne and began to rule the three worlds.

Vali was a most generous donor. He granted all that was asked of him. This was because he was really Kitava reborn. Kitava's story is as follows.

Kitava was a sinful and evil person. But he had a change of heart just before he died. He died while he was carrying some flowers and incense. He stumbled by the wayside and died. But as he fell and died, he did not lose his senses immediately. With the flowers and the incense that had fallen down on the ground. Kitava made an offering to Shiva.

As a result of this good deed, Kitava was given the reward of being able to rule in heaven as Indra after his death. But this rule was only for a limited period of three hours. After all, most of his life had been spent in evil pursuits. When Kitava became Indra, the sage Narada tried to persuade him to take Shachi as his wife. But Kitava refused to fall into the trap. Instead, for the limited duration of time that he had at his disposal, he started to donate generously to all and sundry. To the sage Agastya he gave Indra's elephant Airavata, to the sage Vishvamitra he gave Indra's horse Uchchaihshrava, to the sage Vashishtha he gave the divine cow Surabhi, and so on.

When Indra returned at the end of three hours and claimed his throne back, he kicked up a fuss to see that all his prized possessions had

disappeared. He requested the sages to return all that had been given away by Kitava. Since the sages were not particularly covetous of these possessions, they did return them to Indra.

But the *punya* Kitava had accumulated from donating all these objects away saved him from going to hell for the sins (*paap*) he had committed on earth. He was reborn as Vali, the son of the demon-king Virochana and grandson of Prahlada.

As had been his nature as Kitava, Vali was most generous when he ruled as Indra at Amaravati. Vali, performed ninety-nine *ashvamedha yajnas* and was about to perform the hundredth. On the occasion of the *yajna*, a *brahmana* who was a dwarf (*vamana*) came to Vali's court. Vali paid his respects to the *brahmana* and asked him what donation the dwarf would like to have from Vali.

"Just a piece of land to build a hut on." replied the dwarf.

"How much of land do you need for the purpose?" asked Vali.

"*Tripada*." answered the dwarf. "Give me as much of land as can be encompassed in three (*tri*) of my footsteps (*pada*). I want no more, but what I want, you must give me."

Vali smiled and said. "I am prepared to give you the whole earth with all its forests and mountains. So think it over and ask for more. I am the great Vali, as powerful as I am munificent. You are asking too little of me."

But the dwarf stuck to his request, he desired as much of land as could be encompassed in three of his footsteps and no more.

"Let it be as you wish," said Vali. "Take the area that you want."

Shukracharya, the preceptor of the demons, warned Vali, "Don't you understand that this dwarf is really Vishnu in his *vamana* incarnation? Grant him nothing. Refuse him."

"I know that this *brahmana* is none other than Vishnu," replied Vali. "But he has come here only for the purpose of my deliverance. His coming here is a favour to me. I will not refuse him."

"You are transgressing your preceptor." retorted Shukracharya. "You are disregarding my advice. I curse you that all your prosperity will desert you."

After Shukracharya had left in a huff, Vali proceeded to make good his promise to the dwarf. But the dwarf began to expand in size until he became

gigantic. With one footstep he covered the entire earth. With the second footstep he covered all of heaven and reached all the way up to *satyaloka*. (The upper regions of the universe number seven and the highest is *satyaloka*.) When the dwarf's foot entered *satyaloka*, Brahma washed it with holy water. This flow of water gave rise to the heavenly Ganga. (According to the stories of the *Puranas*, the Ganga used to be in heaven before it was brought down to the earth by King Bhagiratha. The heavenly Ganga is also identified with the Milky Way.)

The dwarf then sat down on Vali's throne and summoned Garuda. Garuda is the king of the birds and also Vishnu's carrier. Summoned by the dwarf, Garuda instantly appeared.

"Why are you not giving my Lord Vishnu his third measure of land?" demanded Garuda. "You promised him as much of land as could be encompassed in three of his footsteps. Yet, only two footsteps have been covered. Who asked you to forget your limitations and promise to donate more than it was in your power to donate? Your preceptor tried to restrain you, but you paid no heed to him. Now where is that third chunk of land? If you don't hand it over, I shall extract it forcibly from you."

Having said this, Garuda tied Vali up with a noose.

Vali's wife was named Vindhyavali and she could no longer restrain herself. She could not bear to see the plight her husband was in. She rushed to the assembly with her son Vana in her arms.

"Why has Garuda tied up my husband?" asked Vindhyavali. "If my husband has promised to grant as much of land as can be encompassed in three of Vishnu's steps, then so be it. We will abide by the promise and not go back on it. There is no need to tie up my husband. Please let him go, he will keep his word. If there is no more land to be had, I will offer a solution. Let Vishnu place his first step on my head. Let him place the second step on my son Vana's head. And let him place the third step on my husband's head. This is how Vishnu can obtain as much of land as can be encompassed in three of his footsteps."

Vishnu was pleased at Vindhyavali's suggestion and her faith in her husband. He freed Vali. There is a region of the underworld named Sutala. Vishnu decreed that Vali should go and live in Sutala. That was the region that would thenceforth be earmarked for the demons to reside in.

"I do not wish to go and live in Sutala," said Vali. "I wish to be near Vishnu."

But Vishnu assured Vali that his blessings would always be with the demon-king.

The story ends with a praise of Shiva. It was those flowers and incense offered to Shiva that had transformed the evil Kitava into the generous Vali. Shiva is thus the most revered of all gods. The *Skanda Purana* emphasises that there is no god superior to Shiva.

(Vali's story occurs in many *Puranas*, such as the *Vishnu Purana* or the *Bhagavata Purana*. However, there is usually no reference to Shiva. Vali's account glorifies Vishnu's incarnations, especially the dwarf (*vamana*) incarnation. Vali drove the gods out of heaven. The oppressed gods prayed to Vishnu so that they might be delivered from Vali. Vishnu promised them that he would be born as a son to Aditi and the sage Kashyapa. As a dwarf, he would then hoodwink Vali into giving up all his dominions.)

Arjuna and the Tirthas

Large parts of the *Skanda Purana* are descriptions of *tirthas* (sacred places of pilgrimage). There are also catalogues of the stories associated with these *tirthas*. In one of these sections, the sage Narada described the geography of the entire world to the Pandava Arjuna.

At the beginning of creation, there was only an all-pervading darkness. Gradually, the three *gunas* evolved, the universal egg (*brahmanda*) was formed and the seven regions of the underworld came to be created. (The word *patala* is the name of one of these regions of the underworld and is also a generic name for the underworld as a whole.) The seven regions (*dvipas*) that make up the earth were created and the seven heavens (*svarlokas*) were demarcated. (This last statement is slightly loose. According to the *Puranas*, there are seven regions (*lokas*) that form the upper parts of the universe. These are *bhuloka* (the earth), *bhuvarloka*, *svarloka* or *svarga* (heaven), *janaloka*, *maharloka*, *tapoloka* and *satyaloka*. Unlike the word *patala*, which is often used as a generic name for the whole of the underworld, it would be incorrect to say that there were seven *svarlokas*. There was only one *svarloka*.)

There is no need to describe here the fourteen regions of the universe, seven upper regions and seven regions of the underworld, in great detail.

Better descriptions can be found in the other *Puranas*. The strength of the *Skanda Purana* lies in the stories that are not available elsewhere.

You must have heard of Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers. He was a superb archer and an excellent fighter. Arjuna once visited the five great *tirthas* that lie on the shores of the southern sea (*dakshina sagara*). The names of these five great *tirthas* are Kumaresha, Stambhesha, Varkareshvara, Mahakala and Siddhesha. These *tirthas* were however avoided by all those who practised meditation.

Arjuna happened to meet some sages. He asked them. "Why are these *tirthas* avoided by the sages and by those who meditate? What is wrong with them?"

The sages told him that in the waters of these *tirthas* there lived five crocodiles. That is, in each *tirtha* there was a crocodile. These crocodiles devoured whoever descended into the water for a holy dip.

"You have bathed in the waters of many *tirthas*," the sages told Arjuna. "What is the harm if you do not bathe in the waters of these five? Avoid them. There is no point in endangering oneself."

But Arjuna would not be discouraged. He first went to Stambhesha *tirtha* and began to bathe there. Immediately, a huge crocodile grabbed him and tried to drag him into the depths of the water. But Arjuna was a valiant warrior. He hauled himself up onto the bank with the crocodile still hanging on to his leg. As soon as he reached the bank, the crocodile transformed itself into a beautiful *apsara*.

"Together with four other *apsaras*, I tried to disturb the meditations of a handsome *brahmana* who had been praying in the forest," said the *apsara*. "Because of our folly, the *brahmana* cursed us that we would be crocodiles for a period of one hundred years. We would be released only if a valiant and righteous man pulled us out of the water. You have now freed me. Please free my friends as well."

Arjuna went to the other four *tirthas* and rescued the four other *apsaras*.

Mahisagarasangama

Mahi is the name of a river and the word *sagara* means the sea. *Sangama* means confluence. Thus, Mahisagarasangama connotes the

confluence of the river Mahi with the sea. This is a famous *tirtha* and Narada described the wonders of this *tirtha* to Arjuna.

Narada had once gone to the *ashrama* (hermitage) of the sage Bhrigu. This hermitage stood on the banks of the river Reva. Narada asked Bhrigu about some holy land that might be donated to *brahmanas*. And in response to Narada's question, Bhrigu mentioned the confluence of the river Mahi with the sea.

"When I went to Mahisagarasangama to bathe," said Bhrigu. "I found an old and emaciated sage lamenting there, with his arms raised up towards the sky. He said that he was a sage named Devasharma who used to live at the confluence of the river Ganga with the sea (Gangasagarasangama). He had a hermitage there and used to regularly make offerings to his dead ancestors. But Devasharma discovered that the ancestors of the sage Subhadra looked more opulent and resplendent, brighter and happier. He learnt that this was because Subhadra made offerings to his ancestors at Mahisagarasangama rather than at Gangasagarasangama."

Devasharma at once made up his mind that he would go to Mahisagarasangama and make his home there. But his wife Ruchi refused to accompany him.

"You old man, you crow," said Ruchi, "you wish to take me to a place where there are no roots and fruits to eat and where the water is caustic. Go there and please your ancestors if you so desire. But don't expect me to go with you."

Devasharma left his hermitage in Gangasagarasangama under the care of his disciple Vipula. And he himself made his way to Mahisagarasangama. But he felt torn between two loyalties—that to his wife who would not leave Gangasagarasangama, and that to his ancestors who were best served at Mahisagarasangama. That was the reason why Bhrigu found Devasharma lamenting there.

While Devasharma was explaining his woes to Bhrigu, the sage Subhadra happened to turn up. And Subhadra found a way out of the impasse. It was agreed that Subhadra would make offerings to Devasharma's ancestors in Mahisagarasangama. And Devasharma would reciprocate by making offerings to Subhadra's ancestors in Gangasagarasangama. One-fourth of whatever *punya* Devasharma had acquired through his meditations was transferred to Subhadra in

acknowledgement. Subhadra agreed to this proposition and everyone was happy. (No *punya* was transferred to Devasharma as a result of the service he would be performing for Subhadra. This was presumably because Mahisagarasangama was a superior *tirtha*.)

Devasharma returned to Ruchi. Thus ended the sage Bhrigu's recital.

Skanda himself has said that bathing at Mahisagarasangama yields *punya* equal to the *punya* that can be acquired by bathing in all the sacred *tirthas* of the world.

Narada also told Arjuna about three *lingas* that Skanda erected in Mahisagarasangama. After killing Taraka, Skanda felt remorseful. Although Taraka had been a particularly belligerent demon, he had also been a true devotee of Shiva's. (This is curious. Nothing that the *Skanda Purana* has so far said indicates that Taraka was Shiva's devotee. It was true that he was destined to die at the hands of Shiva's son. But that was because of a boon granted by Brahma.)

Vishnu advised Skanda to erect a *linga* as atonement for his sin. Skanda enthusiastically said that he would erect three *lingas*, not one. The first one would be erected at the place where he had taken the resolution to kill Taraka; the second one would be erected at the spot where his spear had pierced Taraka's skull; and the third one would be erected at the spot where Taraka had actually died.

Vishvakarma constructed three *lingas* for Skanda. They were absolutely pure and perfect in dimension. The first one was named Pratijneshvara; the word *pratijna* means resolution. The second one was named Kapaleshvara; the word *kapala* means skull. The third one was named Kumareshvara; the word Kumara, as you already know, is one of Skanda's names. A fourth *linga* was also established on a pillar to commemorate Skanda's victory. This was named Stambheshvara, the word *slambha* means pillar.

(Although not explicitly stated, the Stambhesvara *linga* was presumably set up at the *tirtha* named Stambhesha and the Kumareshvara *linga* was presumably set up at the *tirtha* named Kumaresha.)

Like other Puranas, the *Skanda Purana* also contains descriptions of the different kinds of *patala* (the underworld) and *narakas* (hells). Like the others, it also has sections on the measurement of time. It describes the four different eras, *satya yuga*, *treta yuga*, *dvapara yuga* and *kali yuga*. These

we will not repeat as they are covered in many other *Puranas*, and in any case, are not given great prominence in the *Skanda Purana*.

Mahisagarasangama Again

Narada told Arjuna more about the virtues of the holy place known as Mahisagarasangama. This is illustrated by the following story.

Kali yuga is the last of the four eras and evil is the order of the day in *kali yuga*. The *Mahabharata* describes the battle of Kurukshetra and *kali yuga* is supposed to have started as soon as that great war was over. (Sometimes it is stated to have started from the moment of Krishna's death. This was about thirty-six years after the Kurukshetra War was over.)

In *kali yuga*, there was a king named Shatashringa who ruled in the kingdom of Simhala. Shatashringa was the son of King Bharata and he had a daughter who had the head of a she-goat. The rest of her body was perfect. But everyone was aghast at the sort of head that Shatashringa's daughter had. When the princess grew up, she happened to see her face reflected in a mirror. But unlike her friends and relatives, she was not depressed at the sight. She remembered the story of her previous birth. It was that which explained the possession of a goat's head instead of a human head.

From Mahisagarasangama to Stambhesha, there stretched a wood full of bushes and creepers. A she-goat got caught in this network of leaves and thorns. Unable to escape, she died of hunger and thirst. Eventually, the body fell into the waters of Mahisagarasangama. But the head remained stuck in the creepers and the bushes. The she-goat was reborn as the daughter of King Shatashringa as her body had fallen into such holy place and therefore accumulated a lot of *punya*. But because the head had not fallen into the sacred waters, the princess was stuck with the head of the she-goat she earlier had been.

Explaining all this to her parents, the princess said that she wished to go to Mahisagarasangama. Her father arranged for a ship whereby she could travel to Stambhesha. There, the princess gave away all that she possessed in the form of generous donations. She searched in the woods and found the goat's head from her previous birth. It was now just skin and bones. After cremating the head, she flung the ashes into the holy waters of Mahisagarasangama. Her face at once became human and she was transformed into a beautiful woman.

From far and wide, people came to marry the princess. But the princess refused to marry. Instead, she devoted herself to prayers and meditation. She also set up a *linga* named Varkareshvara at the spot where the goat's head had been burnt.

Arunachala

Nandi is Shiva's companion and Nandi once told the sage Markandeya about the glories of the *tirtha* known as Arunachala. Arunachala is also known as Shonachala and is a mountain. The mountain symbolises Shiva. Shiva is therefore also known as Shonadrisha or Arunashrisha. (The word *adri* means mountain and the word *isha* means lord.)

King Vajrangada ruled in the kingdom of Pandya. He once went on a hunt to the forests that were around Arunachala. Riding into the woods after a rare musk-deer, he fell down in sheer exhaustion. As if in a daze, the king saw the horse he was riding and the deer he was chasing rise up into the sky in the form of two *vidyadharas*. The king was shaken out of his stupor and wanted to know what was happening. The two *vidyadharas* told Vajrangada the following story.

In their earlier lives, the two *vidyadharas* had been foolish and had disturbed the sage Durvasa's meditations. One of them had thumped on the ground with his legs. The sage had cursed him that he would be born as a horse. The other *vidyadhara* had grasped some of the flowers that grew around the sage's hermitage. Since these flowers had been fragrant. Durvasa had cursed the second *vidyadhara* that he would be born as a musk-deer and would emit a fragrance.

The two *vidyadharas* had pleaded with the sage for mercy. Durvasa had told them that they would be freed from their curses when they circumambulated Arunachala hill. (This the horse and the deer had done in course of the chase.)

Durvasa also told them how Arunachala hill came to have such wonderful powers.

Once, Shiva had received a ripe and round fruit as a tribute. Both of his sons, Ganesha and Skanda, were children and clamoured for the fruit.

Shiva hid the fruit in his hands and said "Whoever can circle the whole world first and come back, will get the fruit."

Skanda set off on the task of circumambulation. But Ganesha was cleverer. The peak Shona or Arunachala symbolises Shiva and therefore the entire world. Ganesha accordingly circled Arunachala and was soon back before his father. "I have circled the whole world," he declared.

Shiva gave the fruit to Ganesha and said. "This hill is my immobile form. Whoever circumambulates me in the form of this hill will earn great *punya*."

When King Vajrangada learnt all this, he resolved not to return to his kingdom. He decided to stay on at the foot of Arunachala hill. He handed his kingdom over to his son and devoted himself to the worship of Shiva. In that dry and desert-like region, he planted fruit trees and dug tanks and ponds.

After Vajrangada spent three years in such holy pursuits, Shiva appeared before him.

"Enough is enough", said Shiva. "You are none other than Indra, the wielder of the weapon *vajra*. You had been disrespectful towards me. And I had therefore made you take birth as Vajrangada. Your penance is over now and you can go back to heaven."

(The word Vajrangada also means the wielder of the *vajra*.)

Venkatachala

One of Vishnu's incarnations was as a boar (*varaha*) and in his form of a boar, Vishnu told the earth (*prithivi*) about the *tirtha* named Venkatachala.

(The boar incarnation also recited the *Varaha Purana* to the earth.)

There are numerous holy places in and around Venkatachala hill. There is a lake there named Kumaradharika. Skanda always lives there with his wife Devasena. Bathing there on auspicious occasions leads to instant liberation from the cycle of birth and death. A lot of *punya* is accumulated and the bather enjoys a long life.

The sage Bharadvaja told Arjuna that it was in Venkatachala that Vishnu appeared in person before King Shankha of the Haihaya line of kings. He also told Arjuna the story of Anjana.

Anjana was the daughter of a *rakshasa* (demon) and the wife of the great ape Keshari. She observed a large number of religious rites, but could not obtain a son. She then started the most severe meditation that was possible. The sage Matanga, a devotee of Vishnu's, advised Anjana to climb

to the peak of Venkatachala and continue her meditations there. Anjana did this for a full thousand years. At the end of this period, the wind-god Vayu appeared before Anjana.

"I will be your son." promised Vayu.

Do you know who that son was to be? None other than the brave Hanuman, Rama's faithful follower.

Purushottamakshetra

The sage Jaimini told many other sages about the great *tirtha* known as Purushottamakshetra (Puri). Vishnu always resides there in the form of a wooden image.

This *tirtha* is on the shores of the ocean and is in the kingdom of Utkala (Orissa).

In *satya yuga*, a king named Indradyumna used to rule in the city of Avanti. He belonged to the solar line of kings.

Indradyumna performed several *yajnas* and was a devotee of Vishnu's. The word Jagannatha means "the lord of the world" and is one of Vishnu's names. Indradyumna wished to see Jagannatha, not in his mind's eye, but in a tangible form right in front of him. A much travelled man advised Indradyumna to go to the kingdom of Odra (Orissa), across the Nilgiri hills, and visit Purushottamakshetra.

Indradyumna's long and arduous journey took him to various places. But he eventually reached Purushottamakshetra and performed many *yajnas* there. When he was about to complete the thousandth such sacrifice, he had a dream early in the morning. Vishnu seemed to appear before him in a dream.

When the day dawned, the king's attendants came to him and reported that an extraordinary tree had been sighted on the sandy shores of the nearby ocean. It was fragrant and red and bore the marks of the *shanka* (conch-shell) and the *chakra* (a bladed discus). (The *shankha* and the *chakra* are marks that are associated with Vishnu.) The tree was floating on the water in a semi-submerged condition.

The sage Narada had come to attend Indradyumna's *yajna*.

"O King, end the *yajna* now," said Narada. "Fortune has indeed smiled upon you. It is Vishnu's body-hair which has assumed the form of this tree. Establish it on a pedestal with all the appropriate rituals."

The king did so and asked Narada. "Who will fashion Vishnu's image out of the wood of this tree?"

At this point, a divine voice was heard from the sky.

"Vishnu himself will descend on the pedestal for the purpose." said the voice. "You will see an old carpenter arrive with his tools. Allow him to ascend the pedestal and then construct a shed around it so that it is covered from all sides. The shed is to be closed to everyone for a period of fifteen days. And throughout this period, drums must be beaten outside the shed. This must not be stopped as long as the work Inside is going on. Do not enter the shed. And do not try to hear or see what is going on inside. If anyone does so, he will become blind and deaf, lose his children, go to hell, and bring grave misfortunes upon the king and the country."

When the voice ceased, an aged carpenter arrived. Indradyumna allowed him to ascend the pedestal and then constructed a shed all around it. While the work was in progress, no one dared enter or peep in.

At the end of fifteen days, a wonderful fragrance wafted through the air. The shed disappeared and three wooden images appeared on the pedestal. One of the images was that of Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu or Jagannatha. A second image was that of Balarama, Krishna's brother. And the third image was that of Subhadra, Krishna's sister.

The divine voice was heard again.

This time the voice said, "It is an awful sin to behold these images in their wooden forms. Get hold of good tailors and cover up the images in layers of cloth. Then paint up the wrappings. Every year, the old wrappings have to be taken off and new ones, instated. If anyone removes these wrappings or looks upon the images without the wrappings, he will lose his children, go to hell, and bring calamity to the kingdom. There is a devotee of Vishnu's named Vishvasu. He will be the first one to wrap up the images. After you have done all this, install the images on top of the mountain Nila."

King Indradyumna followed all these instructions to the letter. That is how the wooden image of Vishnu or Jagannatha came to be established in the land of Odra.

Vadarikashrama

Shiva himself told Skanda about the importance of Vadarikashrama or Vadarikatirtha. A tree named *vadari* grows there and *amrita* (a life-giving drink) is secreted from the tree. That is how the *tirtha* obtains its name. Vishnu sometimes leaves other *tirthas* depending on what *yuga* it is. But he never leaves Vadarikashrama.

In the very early stages of creation, Shiva sliced off one of Brahma's five heads with a sword. (The reason for this is given in other *Puranas* like the *Vamana Purana*.) This amounted to Shiva committing the sin of killing a *brahmana*. As a punishment for this, the severed head (*kapala*) immediately attached itself to Shiva's hand and refused to come off. No matter where Shiva went, the skull would not be dislodged.

Vishnu advised Shiva to visit Vadarikashrama and as soon as Shiva went there, the skull loosened itself from Shiva's hand. Shiva was forgiven the sin of killing a *brahmana*. Ever since that day, Shiva resides in Vadarikashrama. This is Shiva's favourite *tirtha*, dearer even than Varanasi or Kailasa.

(Other *Puranas* however state that the *kapala* was dislodged in Varanasi.)

Since the *kapala* was dislodged (*mochana*) in Vadarikashrama, the place is also known as Kapalamochana *tirtha*.

Shiva went on to relate a further story about Vadarikashrama.

One day, the fire-god Agni went to Vadarikashrama and asked the sages who were assembled there. "How can I be saved from hell? The sins that are committed on earth keep preying on my mind and I become a party to these sins. What is going to happen to me?"

The sage Narayana told Agni, "Sins will not be able to touch you. As soon as anybody visits this *tirtha*, all his sins are forgiven."

I hope you have not forgotten that Parvati cursed Agni that he would be all-consuming. In the process, Agni is contaminated by everything that he consumes. He accumulates a lot of sins. But these do him no harm because he visited Vadarikashrama. The exact spot where Agni was reassured is known as Agnitirtha.

Ayodhya

Skanda once described the virtues of Ayodhya to the sage Agastya.

Ayodhya is situated on the banks of the river Sarayu and has the elongated shape of a fish. There is a statue of Vishnu in the city and this has great power and influence.

Vishnusharma, a learned *brahmana*, once meditated there and was favoured with a visit from Vishnu. At the spot where he meditated, he later erected an image of Vishnu. This came to be known as Chakratirtha. (As you know, the *chakra* is Vishnu's weapon.) Brahma went to Chakratirtha, dug a pit to its east, and performed a *yajna* there. This pit, full now of water, water-lilies and water-fowl, is known as Brahmakunda (Brahma's tank).

Another potent *tirtha* in Ayodhya is Sahasradhara (thousand streams).

After he finally became the king of Ayodhya, Rama declared, "Whenever I am engaged in secret consultation, I must not be disturbed. I will promptly throw out whoever disturbs my private consultations."

Once, Rama was discussing a private affair in his secret chamber. His faithful brother, Lakshmana, stood guard at the door.

The irritable sage Durvasa turned up and said, "I am terribly hungry. Go and inform Rama at once about my arrival. If you do not do so, I am going to curse you."

Fearing Durvasa's curse, Lakshmana stepped into the consultation chamber. The consultation that Rama had been having in secret was with Kala or Yama, the god of death. As soon as Lakshmana entered, Rama broke up the consultation and bid farewell to Kala. He also welcomed the sage Durvasa, paid him his respects, and fed the sage his fill.

But true to his declaration, Rama subsequently made Lakshmana leave the palace. Rather than prove his declaration false, he parted sorrowfully from his dear brother. Lakshmana went to the banks of the Sarayu, bathed in its waters, and started to meditate.

While Lakshmana was meditating, the snake Chakshuhshrava suddenly emerged from the ground. Its one thousand bejewelled hoods gouged holes in the earth.

Indra and the other gods arrived before Lakshmana and said. "Attain your permanent place with Vishnu now. Look in front of you. Your embodiment has come, spreading its thousand hoods."

The gods took Lakshmana with them to heaven. The snake Shesha was left behind in that hallowed spot. (This means that Chakshuhshrava was the

same as the great snake Shesha.) The place where Lakshmana meditated and the place where a thousand holes appeared in the ground (from the thousand hoods of the great snake), is known as Sahasradhara *tirtha*. That is the place of a thousand streams. It becomes especially potent on the fifth lunar day (*panchami*) in the month of Shravana. That is the time when sages gather there for worshipping the *nagas* (snakes).

Rameshvara

In the forest named Naimisharanya, several sages had assembled to hear what the learned sage Suta had to say. Suta told the other sages about the famous *tirtha* of Rameshvara or Setubandha. That was the place where the great Rama subdued the ocean and had a bridge built across the ocean with the help of the monkey-chief Nala. (This is the story of the *Ramayana*, with which you are probably familiar).

Near Ramashvara is Chakratirtha. This was the place where Vishnu's *chakra* sliced off the head of a *rakshasa* who used to scare the sage Galava. (In view of what was said earlier about Chakratirtha, there must have been more than one place with such a name.)

To the south of Chakratirtha is Vetalaravada *tirtha*.

The sage Galava had a daughter named Kantimati. She used to pluck flowers and collect firewood for her father. Once she had gone to the forest to do so, when two young *vidhyadharas* named Sudarshana and Sukarna caught sight of her.

Sudarshana was attracted by Kantimati. He came up to her and said. "You are very beautiful and I have fallen in love with you. I too am handsome. Please accept me for your husband."

"If you wish to marry me, please speak to my father first," replied Kantimati. "I am not an independent person. My father is my guardian".

But Sudarshana caught hold of the girl's hair and prepared to drag her away. He would not let her go home. Kantimati cried out for help. The sages, including Galava, came running from the nearby hermitage on hearing these screams.

Galava cursed Sudrashana, "You have acted like a *vetala* and not like a *vidhyadhara*. You will therefore be born first as a human being and then as a *vetala*. As you brother Sukarna stood by and supported your action, he too will be born as a man. But since his sin was less severe, he will not be born

as a *vetala* afterwards. Sukarna will be released from the curse when he meets Vijnapti-Koutuka, the king of the *vidyadharas*. But as for you Sudarshana, you will have to roam the world forever as a *vetala*."

(The *vetalas* were a species which fed on blood and meat; like the *rakshasas*. They were in the habit of abducting women).

The two *vidyadhara* brothers were born as the sons of a *brahmana* named Govindasvami. Govindasvami lived on the banks of the Yamuna.

When the two brothers had grown up, drought and famine forced their father to move elsewhere, and the entire family went to Prayaga (Allahabad). There they met a sage who told Govindsvami that he would soon be parted from his elder son Vijaya.

That night, the wandering family took shelter in a ruined temple. Vijaya became tired and feverish. He trembled as if with the cold.

"Father, please get me a fire", he pleaded.

Govindsvami searched everywhere, but failed to find a fire. He returned and told his son. "It is midnight now. All the doors to the houses are latched from the inside. The inmates are asleep. No one will give me fire now.

The sick Vijaya kept on whining. "The cold wind is making me feel doubly sick," he said. "Please make me a fire. Get a spark from somewhere. Father, you lied to me. It is a lie that you could not get a fire from anywhere. Can you not see that in the distance, flames are leaping into the night sky? Please bring me a spark from that fire. Don't lie, please. Don't tell me that no fire is available."

"I am not lying, my son," replied Govindsvami. "The fire that you see is the fire from a nearby cremation ground. It is the terrifying flame of a funeral pyre. One does not warm oneself in that sort of a fire. A man who does so has years of life taken away from him."

"I don't care," pleaded Vijaya. "Father, please bring me a fire. Let it be a sacrificial fire or let it be fire from a funeral pyre. I couldn't care less. If you do not bring me a fire, I will surely die".

Affection made Govindsvami lose all control over his senses. He headed towards the cremation ground and Vijaya followed him. They eventually reached the cremation ground, strewn all around with skulls and bones.

"Father, what is that incandescent and spherical object within the fire?" asked Vijaya. "It is glowing like a red lotus."

"Son, that is a skull", replied Govindasvami. "It is full of blood meat, fat and brains. It is glowing in the embers."

Vijaya struck the skull with a wooden stick. The skull burst and blood and brains spurted out and splattered Vijaya's face. Vijaya rubbed those flecks off with his fingers and licked them. He tasted some of the fatty substance that had been splattered on him.

As soon as he did this, he grew into an enormous size and developed sharp teeth. He had become a *vetala*. His terrible laughter filled the cremation ground. He snatched up his father and attempted to kill him. But a divine voice was heard from the sky. This voice warned Vijaya against killing his own father. Vijaya let Govindasvami go. But as he had become a *vetala*, he rose up into the sky and met the other *vetalas* who were there.

"You have become a *vetala* by bursting (*sfotana*) a skull (*kapala*)," said the other *vetalas*. "You will henceforth be known as Kapalasfotana."

Kapalasfotana became the general of the *vetalas* and later, their king.

Govindasvami, his wife and his remaining son began to lament for Vijaya. Hearing their lamentations, a merchant took them to his home. There they stayed for a number of days. Vijaya's brother was known as Ashoka and Ashoka soon became well known in that region for his learning and for his physical prowess. Pratapamukuta, the king of Kashi, became his patron and Ashoka soon had a permanent place in the king's court.

One evening, Pratapamukuta and Ashoka were riding by a cremation ground, when they heard a plaintive cry.

"I have been punished by being impaled on this spike." said the voice. "For four days I have been languishing on this spike. My lips are parched. This thirst is unbearable. Please grant me a few drops of water, O king."

Pratapamukuta asked Ashoka to go and offer the condemned man a pot of water. As he was about to give the man a drink, a lovely lady suddenly materialised in that terrible cremation ground.

"This is my husband." said the lady. "I want to pour water into his dry throat. But I am down below on the ground and he is up there on the spike. What a torture this is."

"Mother", responded Ashoka, "you will be able to give your husband his last drink. Climb up onto my shoulders. You can then pour the water into your husband's parched throat."

Ashoka bent down and the lady climbed up on his shoulders. While he was waiting in that bent position, Ashoka suddenly felt a few drops of fresh blood drop onto his shoulders. He raised his head and saw that the woman was in the process of eating the man on the spike. Quickly, Ashoka grabbed hold of one of the lady's anklets. But she nimbly slipped her foot out of the anklet and escaped.

Ashoka returned and related this shocking incident to Pratapamukuta. He gave the king the anklet. So impressed was Pratapamukuta at Ashoka's bravery that he married his daughter Madanalekha to Ashoka.

The anklet was of a unique and celestial design. The king wished for its counterpart so that there would be a pair. But how could the other anklet be obtained? Ashoka had a plan.

He started selling huge chunks of meat at the cremation ground. Chanting *mantras* (incantations), he called up all the *rakshasas*, *vetalas*, *pishachas* and *kankalas*. (You already know what *rakshasas* and *vetalas* are. *Pishachas* and *kankalas* are similar ghosts, spirits and demons.)

"Hunks of meat! Chunks of flesh! Buy up, come on." called Ashoka.

The ghosts and demons gathered at the call. Among them was Vidyutkeshi. (This literally means one with hair like streaks of lightning.) This was the woman Ashoka was in search of.

"Give me the other anklet." said Ashoka. "Otherwise. I will not sell you any meat."

"I will," replied the demon. "Take my daughter Vidyutprabha as well. And take this golden lotus."

(Vidyutprabha means one with complexion as bright as that of lightning.)

Ashoka went back with these acquisitions and the king was very pleased that the anklets now made a pair. As for Vidyutprabha, Ashoka married her. Ashoka kept asking his wife to tell him where his mother-in-law had got the golden lotus from. Finally, Vidyutprabha led her husband to a lake. She said that this lake was in the territory of a *vetala* named Kapalasfotana.

Many golden lotuses bloomed on the lake. Ashoka attempted to collect some more golden lotuses. He killed the *vetalas* who came to stop him. He was about to kill the king of *uetalas*, Kapalasfotana, as well.

But Vijnapti-Koutuka, the king of the *vidyadharas*, appeared in the sky in a shining *vimana*. “Don't you dare kill this *vetala*.” he said. “He was your brother, Vijaya in an earlier birth”.

At the sight of the king of the *vidyadharas*, Ashoka changed into the *vidyadhara* Sukarna. Vijnapti-Koutuka asked Sukarna to accompany him to heaven. But Sukarna refused.

“I feel no enthusiasm about going to heaven.” said Sukarna. “Not without my brother Sudarshana. Please tell me how he can be freed from this cursed existence as Kapalasfotana.”

“This curse is difficult to counter,” replied Vijnapti-Koutuka. “But your brother can try bathing in the *tirtha* that is to the south of Chakratirtha and to the north of Mount Gandhamadana.”

The *vetala* and the *vidyadhara* hastened to the shores of the southern ocean. Drops of water from the holy *tirtha* fell on the *vetala's* body as spray. He became human. That is, he changed into the *brahmana* Vijaya. Vijaya then dived into the waters of the *tirtha*. When he emerged after his bath, he had changed further. That is, he had been transformed into the *vidyadhara* Sudarshana. The two brothers ascended to heaven in *vimanas*.

That *tirtha* came to be known as Vetalaravada, that which granted a boon to a *vetala*.

Dharmaranya

The sage Vedavyasa told the Yudhishtira. (the eldest of the Pandava brothers In the *Mahabharata*, about various holy places in Dharmaranya.

Dharmaranya is a most pleasant and wooded area, full of flowers and birdsong. In the dark shades of this forest, Yama meditated in the beginning of *treta yuga*. He sat so still that termites drank up all his blood and his bones shone white in the shade.

Indra was worried. “Yama must be meditating so as to attain my position,” he thought. “I am certain that he wishes to become Indra.”

There was a dancer named Vardhani in Indra's court and Indra sent her to try and disturb Yama's meditation. Dressed to kill, and playing a flute.

Vardhani began to dance in front of the meditating Yama. Yama was distracted.

He broke off his meditation and asked. "Where do you come from and why have you come? What is your purpose? Tell me the truth. Do not lie to me."

Vardhani was candid. She told Yama that she had been sent by Indra to try and disturb Yama's meditation. She explained that Indra had felt threatened by all this *tapasya*. In appreciation of her frankness, Yama offered Vardhani a boon. Vardhani desired that she might have a permanent place in Indra's abode, and was granted her wish. In appreciation of her music, Yama gave her another boon. That entire region became a *tirtha* named after her and was known as Vardhamana. There is a holy lake there and making offerings to one's ancestors there is highly recommended.

After Vardhani returned to heaven, Yama resumed his meditations and the termites built a termite-hill on his body. Birds built their nests on it. The *devas*, the *yakshas* and the *gandharvas* were all afraid that Yama would try to claim Indra's place after his meditations were successful. They appealed to Shiva to try and restrain Yama.

Shiva appeared before Yama and offered to grant him boons.

"Let this forest become hallowed ground and let it be named after me." requested Yama.

Shiva established his *linga* in the forest. Dharma is another name for Yama and Shiva re-named the entire forest Dharmaranya. Shiva's *linga* is named Vishveshvara and a tank constructed by Yama in the forest is known as Dharmavapi.

Shiva himself had told Skanda about Vishnu's association with Dharmaranya. Vedavyasa told Yudhishtira that story as well.

The gods were performing a *yajna* to invite Vishnu to it, they searched high and low. They finally found him in a meditative posture in the form of a killer of demons with a bow in his hand. To rouse Vishnu from his intense meditation, an insect was made to gnaw through the string of his bow. The idea was that, when the string snapped, the bow would twang and startle Vishnu out of his concentration. Unfortunately, that was not quite what happened. When the string was eaten through by the insect, the bow gave Vishnu's head a resounding whack and completely knocked it off. Vishnu was left headless. And the severed head rose towards heaven.

Why did such an important god like Vishnu get beheaded? That too, has an anecdote behind it. Long ago, in a gathering of the gods in Brahma's abode, Brahma had behaved rather arrogantly.

"Who would you say is the supreme one in the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva?" asked Brahma.

"I am supreme," said Vishnu. "The entire universe is under the influence of my extraordinary powers."

"No, no, that cannot be," retorted Brahma. "You are ignorant in this matter."

"No," responded Vishnu, "It is you who are ignorant. It is you who do not recognise the truth of the matter. You are being deluded by your arrogance and your jealousy."

"What! You dare to insult me in my own court." exclaimed Brahma. "The head with which you utter such an insult will soon fall off your torso."

That is how Vishnu came to be beheaded. But once Vishnu was so beheaded, Brahma requested Vishvakarma to fashion a head for Vishnu. If Vishvakarma would do this, Brahman promised him a share in the sacrificial offerings. To this, Vishvakarma had earlier had no right.

"Fashioning a new head is difficult", said Vishvakarma. "Bring me the severed head. I will stick it on to the headless body"

But search as they might, the gods could not find the lost head. Vishvakarma then had a very clever idea. It was then mid-day and Surya, the sun-god was driving across the sky in his horse-drawn chariot. The gods brought one of these horses to Vishvakarma and the architect of the gods sliced off its head and stuck it into Vishnu's headless body. The gods now began to address Vishnu as Hayanana or Hayagriva, meaning the horse-headed one.

Vishnu went to Dharmaranya and started to meditate. Meanwhile, Vishnu had also cursed Brahma. As a result of this curse, Brahma's face became disfigured. Brahma also started to meditate in Dharmaranya. Thanks to the powers of that *tirtha*, Vishnu's face became as it was before the head was severed. And Brahma's face also lost the disfigurement.

Dharmaranya is indeed a most potent *tirtha*.

Gokarna

Another famous *tirtha* is Gokarna. The sage Goutama spoke of it to Mitrasaha, a king belonging to the line of Ikshvaku.

There are numerous holy spots and stone images of Shiva in Gokarna. It is located on the shores of the western ocean. Of the various *lingas* that are to be found there, the *linga* named Mahabala (very powerful) is the most potent. It is white in *satya yuga*, red in *treta yuga*, yellow in *dvapara yuga* and green in *kali yuga*.

King Mitrasaha once went on a hunt to a dense forest. There he killed a demon. The demon had a brother and this brother vowed that he would have his revenge.

"This is however a powerful king," thought the demon. "I will have to resort to trickery and deceit."

The demon adopted the form of a man and came and met the king. Mitrasaha appointed him the royal cook and the demon took complete charge of the royal kitchen.

The sage Vashishtha once came as a guest to the palace. The demon in cook's disguise cooked and served human meat to the sage.

The sage blamed the king for this. "You served me the food of demons", said Vashishtha. "I curse you that you yourself will become a demon."

Subsequently, the sage got to know that the king was innocent and that the mischief had not been of his doing. Since a curse cannot be completely undone. Vashishtha reduced the duration of the curse to twelve years.

But the king was angered at being cursed by the sage. He had not committed a crime. He therefore decided to curse the sage back. For this purpose, he took some sanctified water in his palms. This was the prescribed ritual prior to an act of cursing. But the queen Madayanti restrained her husband. She convinced Mitrasaha that cursing a sage like Vashishtha would be a most improper act. But what was to be done with the sanctified water? That had to be sprinkled somewhere. The king poured the palmful of water on his own feet. The sanctified water immediately blackened (*kalmasha*) Mitrasaha's feet (*pada*) and the king came to be known as Kalmashapada.

Kalmashapada became a *rakshasa* and roamed the woods. In the course of his wanderings, he came upon a young mendicant couple. As he now had

cannibalistic tendencies, he chewed up the husband's head, inviting a curse from the widow.

"The moment you unite with a woman, you will die." said the woman.

The sin of killing a *brahmana* (the mendicant) adopted the personified form of a she-demon and began to follow Kalmashapada around.

When the twelve years were over, Kalmashapada became Mitrasaha again and returned to his palace. But Madayanti had learnt of the curse and refused to unite with her husband. The king lost all interest in managing the affairs of the state. He left aside his worldly goods and retired to the forest in a disheartened state. The she-demon continued to follow him wherever he went. The king visited many *tirthas*, but could not shake her off. After several years had passed in such wanderings, Mitrasaha happened to visit the city of Mithila. In that city he encountered the sage Goutama.

Goutama took pity on Mitrasaha and said, "Go to the *tirtha* of Gokarna. Bathe there and observe a religious rite dedicated to Shiva. If you fast and worship Shiva with the leaves of the *bilva* tree, all your sins will be cleansed."

Mitrasaha accepted Goutama's advice and Gokarna did for him what the other *tirthas* had been unable to do. It freed him from the she-demon that had been pursuing him.

(The story of Kalmashapada appears also in the *Vishnu Purana* and in the *Mahabharata*.)

To impress the potency of Gokarna on Mitrasaha, the sage Goutama had related the following story to him.

On his way to Mithila, Goutama saw a shady pool and sat down to rest beside it. An old outcast woman lay nearby. Her emaciated body was covered with sores and worms were crawling all over her body. Her clothes were torn and a stink arose out of her. The kind-hearted sage decided to stay by her side as she lay there, waiting for death to relieve her of her miseries.

When the woman died, Goutama was most surprised to see that Shiva's attendants came in a shining *vimana* to take the woman to Shiva's abode.

"How is this possible?" asked Goutama. "This destitute creature has been unclean all her life. She has killed animals for food, she has filled her body with wine and she has never worshipped Shiva. Why is she then being taken to Shiva's abode with such honours?"

Shiva's attendants told Goutama that the outcast woman used to be a young *brahmana* girl in an earlier life. Her name was Sumitra. Widowed early, she fell into evil ways. She started to live with *shudras* (the last of the four classes).

One night, Sumitra was drunk and had a sudden hankering for eating meat. She went to the cattle-shed to look for a sheep that she might kill. But the cattle-shed was dark and she happened to kill a calf with her knife. When she brought the carcass to the house, she realised what she had done. "Shiva, O Shiva," she exclaimed, she ate up parts of the calf, threw the remaining parts away, and began to wait loudly. "A tiger has entered our cattle-shed and eaten up our calf, she cried.

Because of her association with outcasts and because she had killed a calf, Sumitra was next born into the family of an outcast. Blind and diseased from birth, fed on unclean and infected food, and unable to obtain a husband for herself, she led a pitiable life. In her old age, she joined a group of people who were going to visit a temple to Shiva in Gokarna. Kings, *brahmanas*, merchants and *shudras* all formed part of the procession. Hoping to get a lot of alms from these pilgrims, the old outcast woman travelled with them to Gokarna.

But all she obtained as alms was a sprig of *bilva* leaves. In bitter disappointment, she threw the leaves away. As luck would have it, the day happened to be an auspicious one and the leaves fell on a *linga*. Since the woman had obtained no food as alms, she had been fasting. Unknowingly, these acts fetched her lot of *punya*.

Next morning, the woman started back for her own village. But the journey was tiring and the hot mid-day sun forced her to lie down beside a shady pool. She lay there, fatigued and famished.

"It was then that Shiva asked us to fetch her to him" concluded Shiva's attendants.

However sinful her life may have been, the old woman had performed some acts which had brought her great *punya*. As Sumitra, when she realised that she had killed a calf, she had taken Shiva's name. And as the old outcast woman, she had inadvertently observed a religious rite sacred to Shiva. These acts were enough to allow her entry into Shiva's abode.

This example convinced Goutama of the powers of Gokarna and that is the reason why he asked Mitrasaha to visit the *tirtha*.

Kashi

The *Skanda Purana* is full of descriptions of temples and holy places such as the ones that have been given above. Scholars think that the *Skanda Purana* is not one continuous piece, but is a collection of pieces that were found in different parts of the country. These evolved so as to glorify and publicise local temples and holy spots.

The *Kashi khanda* of the text extols the virtues of Kashi or Varanasi. It gives a detailed description of the Shiva temples in and around Kashi. This *khanda* has fifteen thousand *shlokas* and is the most celebrated of all the *khandas*. (The *Linga Purana*, the *Matsya Purana* and the *Shiva Purana* are a few of the other *Puranas* which refer to the charisma of Kashi.)

The area between the rivers Varuna and Asi is known as Varanasi or Kashi. Shiva himself told Skanda that Kashi is a very holy place and is the most hallowed place in the three worlds. It yields great *punya*. Dying in Kashi leads to instant liberation. This is liberation from the cycle of birth and death. One who dies in Kashi does not have to go through the rigmarole of life on earth. That is the reason why even gods wish to die in Kashi, not to speak of lesser creatures.

Among the most holy places in Kashi are Manikarnika, Jnanavapi, Vishnupadodaka and Panchanadahrada. People who bathe in the sacred waters of these spots do not have to be reborn. One who sees the Vishveshvara image in Kashi is also freed from the cycle of birth and death.

Sages often visited Kashi. It was on one such visit that the sage Suta narrated parts of the *Shiva Purana* to sages who had come down to Kashi from the Himalayas.

Shiva himself told Parvati that his favourite place of residence was Varanasi or Kashi. He stays there constantly.

Parvati asked Shiva. "But why do you never leave Kashi?"

(In response to this question, Shiva narrated the story of how he had severed Brahma's head and how it had got stuck to his hand. This story we will not repeat, as it has already been mentioned. What is interesting is that now it is stated that the skull was dislodged in Kashi.)

Kashi leads one to the supreme attainment, whatever meditation, worship or sacrifice is performed in Kashi, yields *punya* that is not eroded away. All the sins of one's previous births are destroyed as soon as one

enters the boundaries of Kashi. Whosoever dies in Kashi goes straight to Shiva's abode. This holds true for all the four classes and even for outcasts and species other than human beings. Animals and insects which die in Kashi also go straight to Shiva's abode.

One day, in Kailasa, Sanaka and the other sages requested Skanda to tell them about Kashi. Skanda told them that every spot in Kashi is holy and is marked by a temple or some other religious monument. In its cremation ground, there is a celestial temple that is invisible to all except those who have attained communion with the divine soul (*paramatman*). That is, there is a temple to Shiva in the sky and this can only be seen by those who are truly learned.

One who lives in Kashi for a month earns the *punya* that can be earned from observing a difficult *vrata* (religious rite). One who lives in Kashi for all his life earns *punya* that is equivalent to the *punya* earned by observing all the *vratas* and performing all the *yajnas*. A killer of *brahmanas* is pardoned his sin if he visits Kashi. A resident of Kashi is pardoned the sin of killing *brahmanas* in all his earlier lives. The sacred Ganga flows through the city of Kashi. And Shiva's attendants guard the city with spears, maces and *vajras*.

One who donates rice in Kashi is not born again. One who donates milk-yielding cows to *brahmanas* in Kashi liberates his entire family. One who donates incense in Kashi obtains *punya* equivalent to the *punya* obtained by donating land elsewhere. Sweeping the ground in the city or playing musical instruments there also bring a lot of *punya*. A person cremated in Kashi merges directly with Shiva.

But not everyone has the right to reside in Kashi. Those who resent the gods, *brahmanas* and other men, those who do not have devotion towards the gods, those who are ungrateful, those who are disrespectful towards their teachers, those who pollute holy places, those who regularly employ evil means for their livelihood, and those who are horribly ugly, have no right to live in Kashi.

Even Vedavyasa himself does not have the right to live in Kashi all the time. He is entitled to enter it on the eighth and the fourteenth lunar days.

Once, Vedavyasa started to reside in Kashi. But in all of six months he could not get a single inhabitant of Kashi to give him alms. In great anger, the sage was about to curse the city and its inhabitants. But Shiva and

Parvati averted the crisis. They adopted the form of a human couple living in Kashi and invited Vedavyasa to their home. They gave him heavenly food as alms. The sage was so delighted with Kashi that he decided to live there for good. But while he was making a tour of the city, he ran into Shiva and Parvati.

“You have no control over your temper,” said Shiva. “You cannot therefore live in the city on a permanent basis.”

“If that is the rule, please let me at least enter the city on the eighth lunar day (*ashtami*) and the fourteenth lunar day (*chaturdashi*),” requested Vedavyasa.

Shiva and Parvati granted this boon and vanished.

Relating this story to the sages, Suta said that there are guards who are engaged in protecting the city. They throw out those whose characters are undesirable.

The city of Kashi was built by Vishvakarma at Shiva’s command. The story is as follows.

After her marriage, Parvati stayed on with her parents, Himalaya and Menaka. Shiva also lived with his father-in-law and was quite content with the luxuries that he could enjoy there. But one day, Menaka taunted her daughter about this.

“You performed such a lot of *tapasya* to get yourself a good husband.” said Menaka. “What wonderful results has it yielded you? You meditated in the deep woods and did not even eat a leaf. You have got yourself an old dotard for a husband. He has neither wealth nor family background. What are the qualities in him that you so admire? I must confess that I fail to see them. What rich jewellery and clothes has he given you? As far as I can see, he is going to be a burden on our hands forever. We will have to maintain you all your life. My other daughters are bedecked with ornaments given by their husbands. They live with their husbands, not in their father’s house. In any case, don’t tell your husband what I said. It is not anger or greed that made me speak. I said it all in sport.”

Hurt at these derogatory remarks, Parvati went to Shiva. She hid from him the fact that her mother had criticised him. But she nevertheless spoke to him a little harshly, although affectionately.

“I don't think that you should live with your in-laws any longer.” said Parvati. “You art the lord of the three worlds. It is not my intention to criticise you. But don't you feel that we should not stay here permanently? Isn't there any place on earth that is fit for you?”

Shiva at once mounted his bull and, along with Parvati, went to Varanasi. He set up a city there. The city was full of impressive mansions, flowery groves, hallowed spots and all kinds of people. It had golden walls and many bejewelled coloumns. Vishvakarma painted the city white and had it washed in the pure waters of the Ganga.

Shiva and Parvati made the city their residence. Parvati was resplendent in the ornaments that her husband had given her and forgot all about her parents. Only after ages did Shiva return to Kailasa. But before leaving, Shiva set up one crore of *lingas* in Kashi. The city was thereafter looked after by many kings.

In *dvapara yuga*, one such king led to the city's being gutted by fire. This king pleased Shiva through his meditations and asked for the boon, “Let me be able to defeat Krishna in battle.”

Shiva granted the boon and further assured the king that he would fight on his side. Thus emboldened, the king challenged Krishna on the battlefield. But Krishna's *sudarsharta chakra* sped after the stupid king and beheaded him. It also killed all of the king's soldiers. The *chakra* now turned to the city and burnt everything up, Walls, buildings, squares, quarters and sheds - kings, officials, servants, horses and elephants - all perished in the fire.

Shiva now confronted the *chakra*, but had to acknowledge defeat.

The city was also badly damaged at the hands of the sons of King Haihaya and descendants of Manu. They came once when Haryashva was the king of Kashi, killed him and went away. They came a second time when Haryashva's son Sudeva had succeeded to the throne, killed Sudeva as well, and departed. When Sudeva's son Divodasa became king, he fortified the town. But the sons of Haihaya attacked again a third time. The town was ransacked, the treasury looted, and the royal family wiped out with the exception of the king himself. Divodasa had to leave Kashi and take refuge in the hermitage of the sage Bharadvaja.

With the sage's help, he eventually avenged himself on his enemies.

More important than the details of this story and the preceding one are their implications. The *Skanda Purana* describes not only how the city of Kashi came into being, but also records that it was sometimes besieged and damaged. Kashi is no figment of one's imagination. Accounts of its rise and fall may thus very well contain glimpses of historical truth.

Prabhasa

The last *khanda* of the *Skanda Purana* is named after the *tirtha* of Prabhasa. The name literally means luminous and this *tirtha* was by the shores of the ocean. The high esteem in which the *tirtha* was held is clear from the following story.

In *treta yuga* two learned *brahmanas* lived in the kingdom of Chola. Their names were Ujjayanta and Praleya. Brahma himself had extolled Prabhasa and it was said that pilgrims who had not visited Prabhasa had not really visited any *tirtha*. The two *brahmanas* therefore resolved to visit Prabhasa.

As they crossed the Narmada river and proceeded past the desert, they became famished by hunger and thirst. They were almost fainting with fatigue. Their feet had swollen so that they could no longer walk. They began to roll along the road, Ujjayanta in front and Praleya behind him. They rolled on painfully rather than stop.

Touched, Shiva made two *lingas* materialise out of the road, one a little ahead of the other. One of these was meant for Ujjayanta and the other for Praleya. The *lingas* were as potent and as powerful as the famous *linga* at Somanatha.

A divine voice was heard from the sky. "You two are tired," the voice said. "Stay here, there is no need for you to proceed further. These two *lingas* have been provided for you. You need not go to Prabhasa now."

But Ujjayanta and Praleya refused. "Since we decided to go to Prabhasa, we will keep on trying to get there," they said. "We will go on till we fall down and die."

Impressed by their strength of purpose, Shiva hardened their bodies with a glance from his eyes. Now the two *brahmanas* were able to reach Prabhasa; safe and sound.

Epilogue

Suta himself has said of the *Skanda Purana*, “It is impossible to count the couplets of this *Purana*, just as it is impossible to count the raindrops in monsoon, the stars in the sky, and the grains of sand along riverbanks.”

He who hears all the seven *khandas* of the *Skanda Purana* being read out, earns such a lot of *punya* that it is impossible to quantify it. He who reads it even for a few days achieves success in whatever he tries to do. He who hears or reads even a fraction of a couplet, goes to Vishnu’s abode.

On reading the *Skanda Purana*, or hearing it being read, a *brahmana* attains the knowledge of the Vedas; a *kshatriya* (the second of the four classes) defeats his enemies; a *vaishya* (the third of the four classes) obtains wealth and foodgrains; and a *shudra* attains happiness. This *Purana* grants a long life, reunion with separated friends, and marriage with the husband of one’s desire.

You may not be convinced by these reasons. But no doubt you are convinced of the fact that the *Skanda Purana* is a gigantic *Purana*. We have been able to give you only a very small sample of what it has to offer. How about reading the whole text of the *Purana*?