



## Story of Garuda

The great sage Kashyapa, the wish-born son of Lord Brahma, was married to the two daughters Kadru and Vinata of Daksha. (Kashyapa was married to many more women, some of them the daughters of Daksha.) Both these sisters were of great beauty and jealous of each other. Kashyapa was exceedingly pleased with both of them and offered to grant each of them a boon.

Kadru said, "Let a thousand sons of incomparable strength and valor be born to me!" Kashyapa said, "So be it!", and to Kadru were born the race of serpents, a full thousand of them, endowed with great strength.

When it was her turn to chose her boon, Vinata said, "Let two sons be born to me, who shall eclipse the sons of my sister in strength, valor and fame."

Kashyapa said, "So be it!"

In due course of time, Vinata laid two eggs. She gave them to her maid-servants for safe-keeping. They put these two eggs in warm containers and guarded them day and night. Five-hundred years passed, but the eggs had not hatched. Vinata grew impatient, for her sister already had a thousand snakes as her offspring. She broke open one of her eggs. The embryo in it had the upper part fully developed, but its lower half was still to be formed. The child grew angry at his mother and said, "How could you be so impatient? You have nearly killed me by your rash act. I curse you to slavery! Do not disturb my brother in the other egg. If you wait for another five hundred years, he shall be the means of delivering you from your servitude."

Some time after this, the two sisters Kadru and Vinata were involved in an argument. Kadru asked her sister, "Sister, what is the color of the divine horse Uchaishravas that belongs to Indra?"

Her sister replied, "It is of a flawless white color, right from its nose to its magnificent tail."

Kadru said, "You are wrong. While it is true that his face and his body are of a flawless white color, I think that his tail alone is a shiny black color. Tell you what, let us have a bet on this topic. If you are right, I shall become your slave. If I am right, you must become my slave instead."

Vinata accepted the bet. She was confident that she would win. Kadru knew that the horse was white through and through, so she hatched a plan. She called her sons and said, "I have bet with your aunt that the horse Uchaishravas possesses a black tail. You must make my words come true. Go forth and entwine yourself around his tail and give it a black appearance."

The snakes did not want to be a part of this deception. Kadru became exceedingly angry. She said, "How dare you disobey the command of your mother? There is no use in having offspring that disobeys my commands. I curse that all you will be destroyed by fire before too much time has elapsed!" (Note: This is the curse that was responsible for the so many snakes being destroyed in King Janamejaya's snake-sacrifice.)

When Lord Brahma heard this curse, he further strengthened it by saying, "So be it!". When Kashyapa heard how his sons were cursed, and that his father Brahma had also sanctioned it, he went to Brahma and pleaded with him to mitigate the curse.

Brahma said, "Your sons are wicked. Their poison is threatening to destroy all creation. If left unchecked, nothing else can live on the earth. However, not all of them shall be destroyed. Those who are virtuous, who did not swerve from the path of truth shall be saved." Thus comforting his son, he taught Kashyapa an infallible Mantra to neutralize the poison of the snake. (This is how Kashyapa worsted his son Takshaka in a challenge, by reviving a banyan tree that had been reduced to ashes by the serpent's venom).

Meanwhile, the Nagas decided after a consultation among themselves that it was better to do their mother's bidding. The blackest among them went and entwined themselves around the tail of Uchaishravas. When the two sisters arrived, the tail of the horse was as dark as night. According to the terms of the wager, Vinata became the slave of her sister. She had to serve Kadru and the serpents as their servant.

When the appointed time came, Garuda emerged, radiant like the sun and Agni, from his egg-shell. His lusture was like that of the fire that would consume all creation when this world would end. The Devas in heaven suddenly beheld this bright shining light and nearly became blind.

Indra then asked Agni, "Tell me, O Fire, who is this second Fire who rivals you in brightness? It appears as if the end of the world is near!"

Agni then replied, "My King, This is Garuda, the son of Kashyapa and Vinata. He is destined to be the King of the birds. His father had granted a boon to his mother that he will surpass all the immortals in his lusture and glory, and that is what you all are being blinded by."

Upon hearing this explanation, all the Devas started to extol the virtues of Garuda. They said, "O Son of Kashyapa, thy lusture out shines us all. Thou art a great Rishi, knowledgeable in the Vedas and other branches of knowledge. Thou art greater than Agni. Thou art like the fire that shall burn all creation at the end of the world. Thou art our great protector, the ocean of holiness. None is purer than thee. Thou art the dispeller of darkness. We are unable to bear thy divine radiance, for it is threatening to burn us. O terrible one, O mighty Garuda, please reduce your brightness, so that we can see you normally."

Upon hearing this prayer from the celestials, in obedience to their requests, Garuda reduced his brightness a thousand fold, enabling them to see him clearly. Like his mother, he also became the servant of Kadru and her sons.

One day, Kadru commanded Garuda to take her and her sons to a region in the middle of the oceans, which would be a suitable habitat for the Nagas. So Garuda carried his half-brothers and their mother on his back, and started to ascend in the sky. As he got closer to the sun, the snakes started to wilt in its great heat. Kadru prayed to Indra, the friend of her sons, to save them. Thereupon Indra commanded the clouds and caused refreshing rain to fall on them. It revived the snakes. They and their mother reached the safety of the island called Ramaniyaka.

The island was beautiful, covered with dense forests, filled with trees of every kind. However, the snakes were not satisfied. They said, "O Garuda, take us to some better place. You must have seen something more suitable while you were flying. Take us there."

Garuda had grown tired of doing his half-brothers' bidding. He turned to his mother Vinata and said, "O Mother. Why is that we have to do everything these snakes say? Whence have we become their servants?"

Then Vinata recounted to him the story of the bet she had made with Kadru. Garuda then turned to his brothers and said, "I no longer wish to be a servant. Tell me, what should I do that I may be rid of this slavery? How may I save myself and my mother from this plight?"

The snakes replied, "Know that Amrit has been fixed as the portion of the Devas alone. They guard it zealously. If you bring us this divine Amrit, we shall release you and your mother from bondage."

So the great bird resolved to save himself and his mother by obtaining Amrit. He asked his mother, "Tell me mother, how can I obtain Amrit? I can fly all the way there, but I will need a great amount of food to accomplish this feat. Tell me where I might find such food?"

Vinata said, "In a remote place in the midst of the ocean, a great tribe of Nishadas (a local tribe) reside. They have turned their mind towards evil. You may eat them for food. Just take care that you do not inadvertently consume a Brahmana."

Garuda said, "I shall eat the Nishadas mother. However, how shall I be able to identify a Brahmana?"

His mother replied, "You can tell a Brahmana apart by his Brahma-Tejas (divine-lusture). If you eat a Brahmana inadvertently, you can identify him by the way he burns your throat. If such a thing happens, immediately release him, for the great anger of a Brahmana can even destroy the Gods!"

After assuring his mother that he will take care, Garuda took to the skies. He consumed innumerable Nishadas who were fishermen. Once, he felt a great fire burning in his throat, and realized that he had swallowed a Brahmana. He immediately released him and then continued his destruction of the Nishadas.

Despite eating all the Nishadas he did not feel satiated. He met his father Kashyapa on the way and asked him to indicate suitable food.

Kashyapa blessed his son and said, "If you continue along your way, you will see an elephant who is dragging a tortoise who is his elder brother. In their previous birth, they were two Rishis named Supritika and Vibhavasū. They quarrelled over property and cursed each other to be born as an elephant and tortoise respectively. They are still quarrelling in this life. If you eat them, your hunger shall be appeased. May you be successful in your quest!"

Garuda encountered the animals mentioned by his father on the banks of a lake. He devoured them whole and satisfied his great hunger. He came upon a tree, whose branches broke away when he sat upon them. Sages called the Valakhilyas were performing a penance on that branch. When Garuda saw that they were falling down, he carried the whole branch in his claws. It was then that he got the name of Garuda, which means bearer of heavy weight.

Meanwhile, the Devas saw a wondrous sight. All their weapons rose from their holsters and started turning on each other. Indra's favorite thunderbolt started quivering in fright. Meteors and comets started to shoot in the sky.

Alarmed by these ill omens, Indra asked his preceptor Brihaspati, "Sire, What do these ill omens mean? Even when the Asuras were assaulting the heavens such a thing never came to pass. What can be the cause of this confusion?"

His preceptor replied, "Know that the great bird Garuda, resolved upon obtaining Amrit, to free himself and his mother from bondage, is flying to attack you all. He is of great energy and of immeasurable strength. If you hope to save Amrit, you have prepare for battle."

Indra then ordered the rest of the Devas to take up battle positions. He himself strode in front of his army, resolved to thwart the goal of Garuda.

(There is a reason why Garuda posed such a threat to the king of heaven. Long ago, when Kashyapa was engaged in a sacrifice desiring offspring, the Gods, the Gandharvas and all the Rishis

assisted him. Indra was commissioned to find the fuel for the sacrifice. The sages known as the Valakhilyas, were also asked to bring some fuel. Indra brought a huge mountain full of trees as the fuel. On the way he saw that the Valakhilyas (who were only as large as a thumb), carrying a stalk of a Palasa leaf as the fuel. Drunk with his power, he made fun of them. They then cursed him saying, "To Kashyapa will be born one who is greater than you. He will be the Indra of all creation." Indra sought the intervention of Lord Brahma, who changed the curse slightly. He said, "The son of Kashyapa will be the Indra of the birds. He shall be your friend and thus, you shall be protected from his wrath." It was time for that curse to operate.)

Garuda appeared in the skies, facing the Devas. The great battle began. The Devas were sorely harassed by the flying bird, he of immeasurable strength. He mangled them with his claws and beak. Vayu attempted to blow him from the skies by raising a dust storm. Garuda parried this thrust with a counter wind generated from his mighty wings. All the celestials were routed. The Sadhyas and Gandharvas fled to the east. The Rudras and Vasus fled to the south. The Adityas fled to the west, and the Ashwini twins fled to the north, unable to bear the onslaught of Vinata's son.

At last, after killing a large number of the warriors ranged against him, the King of birds approached the place where Amrit was. It was surrounded on all sides with great flames that reached up to the sky. Garuda made his mouth very large and flew to the ocean. He swallowed the contents of many rivers and put out the flames guarding Amrit with it. He then assumed a tiny form and approached the vessel containing the nectar. He saw that a wheel with razor sharp edges was spinning very fast, intending to destroy all who came near. With his great speed, Garuda passed through between the spokes of that wheel. He saw that two great snakes were guarding the vessel beyond. He generated a great dust storm and blinded them. He then mangled them to death. He broke open the mechanism that was guarding the nectar, and rose to the skies, carrying the vessel in his claws.

When Indra saw that Amrit was being stolen, he discharged his potent weapon Vajra towards Garuda. In respect to the Rishi (Dadichi) from whose bones that weapon had been crafted, Garuda shed exactly one feather. Otherwise he was unharmed and continued on his way. Despite having possession of the divine nectar that would have made him immortal, he did not partake of it, intending to fulfill his promise to his brothers.

He met Lord Vishnu on the way. Vishnu granted him a boon, in appreciation of his selflessness. Garuda chose the boon that he should always be higher than Vishnu, and that he would be immortal,

even without the aid of Amrit. Vishnu granted him this boon and set him on his flagstaff, thus giving him a great position. He then said to the bird, "Know that your half brothers are evil. If they drink Amrit and become immortal, much harm shall come to the world. You have only undertaken to bring the nectar to them. Use some stratagem and prevent them from drinking it."

Accordingly, when Garuda reached the isle where the snakes were, he set the pot of Amrit before them. He then said to them, "I have brought Amrit to you. As per our agreement, you should release me and my mother from bondage."

The snakes said, "So Be it!", and started to advance towards the vessel containing the nectar.

Garuda said, "It has been said that, before beginning a great task, one should purify yourself. All of you are unclean, finish your ablutions before you partake of this nectar."

Agreeing to this advice the snakes went to the river to purify themselves. Indra, who was waiting for just such an opportunity, stole the vessel and restored it to its place among the Devas. Thus the evil snakes were thwarted at their bid to attain immortality.

Since the Amrit had been placed on Kusa grass, that grass became sacred to the Gods from that day. Since Garuda had helped him, Indra desired his friendship and got it. They divided the rule of the world amongst themselves. Garuda got the lordship of birds and other flying creatures, while Indra got the rest. And obedient to the command of Vishnu, Garuda became his faithful mount. In return, he got the boon that snakes should become his food.