

that time I will take back the replica and give you back your real wife". Śrī Rāma was very much pleased to hear this. Agni then, by his yogic powers created a Phantom Sītā and gave her to him. Rāma kept this as a secret even from Lakṣmaṇa. In the great Rāma-Rāvaṇa battle Rāvaṇa was killed and Śrī Rāma took back Sītā to his kingdom. Then respecting public opinion and wishing to establish in public the purity of his queen King Śrī Rāma put her into the fire. At that moment Agni took back the replica and gave back the real Sītā to Śrī Rāma. Sītā thus came out from the fire unscathed. Later, on the advice of Rāma and Agni, the Phantom Sītā went to the sacred place Puṣkara and started doing tapas (penance) there. After doing tapas for a long period of three lakhs of divine years this Phantom Sītā became known as Svargalakṣmī. It was this Svargalakṣmī that later on in the Dvāpara yuga came out from the yajña kuṇḍa of King Pāṇcāla as Pāṇcālī and became the consort of the Pāṇḍavas. Vedavatī, daughter of Kuśadhvaṇi in Kṛtāyuga, Sītā, daughter of Janaka in the Treta yuga, and Pāṇcālī, daughter of Drupada in Dvāpara yuga are one and the same person. On account of this she is known as trihāyanī also. (Chapter 9 of Devī Bhāgavata).

6) *The story of how Agni got indigestion.* In olden times there was a bold and mighty King called Śvetaki. He conducted several different types of yajña. Afflicted by the unending dense smoke in the yajña hall all the ascetics left the place and went their way. Undaunted by this, Śvetaki started another twelve-year sacrifice in which not a single sage took part. The sages rebuked him and said if he wanted to conduct a sacrifice again he could invite śūdras to help him. (Śūdras belong to the lowest caste among Hindus and are not allowed to participate in sacrifices generally.) Enraged by this insult Śvetaki went to Kailāsa and did fierce penance. Lord Śiva appeared before him and gave him Durvāsas as a priest for his yajña. For twelve years sage Durvāsas performed the yajña pouring into the mouth of Agni through the sacrificial pit unlimited materials of food. Agni was overfed and he got indigestion. He lost all appetite for food, became weak and the brilliance of his face faded. (Chapter 235, Ādi Parva, M.B.).

7) *The story of how Agni burnt the big forest, Khāṇḍava.* When the indigestion continued without abate for some time Agni approached Brahmā and asked for a cure. Brahmā declared that his indigestion would be cured if Agni could burn the huge forest, Khāṇḍava, the abode of the enemies of the Devas. Agni immediately started consuming the forest. But the inhabitants of the forest soon quenched the fire. Disappointed Agni went to Brahmā again and the latter advised him to wait for some time till the advent of Nara-Nārāyaṇas to that forest. They would then help Agni to burn the forest. Agni waited for the time to come. At that time the Pāṇḍavas were living in Indraprastha with Śrī Kṛṣṇa. When the heat became unbearable there Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa came to the banks of river Yamunā. Hearing about the arrival of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna who were none but the incarnations of Nārāyaṇa and Nara, Agni disguised as a brahmin approached them and requested them to help him to burn the Khāṇḍava forest. Agni added that any attempt of his to burn the forest was

always foiled by Indra who would send a heavy downpour of rain to quench the fire because Takṣaka, an intimate friend of Indra, was living there.

To gain his end Agni gave Arjuna an arrow-case which would never be empty, a chariot bearing a monkey flag, four white horses adorned with gold chains and also the famous Gāṇḍīva bow. To Śrī Kṛṣṇa he gave the cakrāyudha or the divine wheel-weapon. (All these military equipments were once given to Agni by Varuṇa.) When all these were given to them Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna got ready to help Agni to burn the forest. Agni started burning the forest, Indra at once sent a heavy downpour of rain and Arjuna created a canopy of arrows above the forest preventing the rains from falling on the forest. Agni carried on his work undisturbed, the forest was burnt and Agni was cured of his indigestion. (Ślokas 233 to 239, Ādi Parva, M.B.).

8) *Agni falls in love.* As an inaugural procedure to the great Rājasūya which Dharmaputra performed at Indraprastha his four brothers Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva conducted a victory march to the four different sides of the kingdom. Sahadeva who turned south conquered many kings including Dantavakra and Bhīṣmaka and reached a country called Māhiṣmatīpura. There he had to encounter a powerful king called Nīla. Before long there broke a fire in his camp. Disheartened, Sahadeva prayed to the God, Agni, for help. It was then that Sahadeva came to know about the ties between Agni and Nīla.

King Nīla had a beautiful daughter named Sudarśanā. Once when she was talking to her father after having entered the Agni-hotra Agni fell in love with her. From that day onwards Agni became dreamy about the beautiful lips of Sudarśanā. It reached a stage when Agni would burn only if it was blown by the lips of Sudarśanā. This ended in Agni marrying Sudarśanā. After the marriage Agni lived in the palace of his father-in-law, King Nīla, as a useful ally. It was at this time that Sahadeva came to conquer Nīla. But Agni knew that for the proper conduct of the Rājasūya of Dharmaputra his father-in-law had to surrender to Sahadeva and so advised his father-in-law to do so. What appeared to be a difficult problem was thus easily solved. (Chapter 31, Sabhā Parva, M.B.).

9) *How Emperor Śibi was tested by Agni.* Once Agni and Indra thought of testing how strong and deep was the sense of charity in Emperor Śibi. Indra took the shape of a hawk and Agni that of a dove and the dove flew and dropped down into the lap of the Emperor who was at that time doing a yāga. The hungry hawk came chasing its prey and finding the dove in the lap of the Emperor said : "O King, is it proper on your part to withhold my food from me, and keep it in your lap?" Hearing this Śibi replied: "This dove has sought refuge in me. It is my duty to give it protection. If it is only food you want I shall give you food." Śibi then offered many things including his kingdom to the hawk in return for the dove. But the hawk refused them all and finally agreed to accept an equal weight of flesh from the body of the Emperor. Śibi without any hesitation cut a portion of his thigh and weighed it against the dove in a scale. The dove weighed more and the Emperor started putting more and more flesh from his body to make the weight equal. But the dove