India is a land that abounds with legends of multitudes of Gods, Goddesses; apsaras, yakshas and kinnaras; fallen angels; asuras and demons; and the various mythological stories associated with them. According to Hinduism, there are about thirty crore plus Gods and Goddesses; plus countless demigods and divine beings. The interesting thing is that, while most of these Gods and Goddesses have shrines and temples dedicated to their worship, one can also find places of worship dedicated to some of the most negative characters in Hindu mythology, including both asuras and human beings.

Most of these characters featuring in Hindu mythology never did much good throughout their lifetimes. However, they attained the high status of moksha (liberation) due to the fact that they were slain by the Gods themselves. Many times, Devis and Devatas took avataras purely with the mission to kill them and thus, destroy that evil affecting the entire universe.

From a higher spiritual perspective though, these negative characters and extreme wrongdoers too manifested on earth only to fulfill their karmic goals by taking birth on earth. It is part of their own mission to meet their end at the hands of a God or Goddess, thus ultimately attaining the Lotus Feet of the Lord.

In this post, we bring you a feature on some of the most prominent Hindu temples in India, dedicated to the worship of Asuras and other negative characters. But first, let us know who and what Asuras really are.

**Asuras**

Indian and Persian texts most commonly describe Asuras as powerful superhuman beings, with good and/or bad qualities, and who always compete for power with the Devas. The good Asuras are called Adityas and are led by Varuna, the Rain God. The malevolent ones are called the Danavas and are led by Vritra. Other categories of Asuras include Daityas, Anavayas and Rakshasas.

Interestingly, the earliest Vedic texts referred to Devas such as Agni (the God of Fire) and Indra
(the King of the Devas) as Asuras, as they were the Lords of their respective domains. Many Asuras, then, helped to keep Rakshasas at bay. Later Vedic texts made a clear distinction between the Devas and the Asuras, defining the latter as "enemies of the Gods". Some post-Vedic scriptures describe Asuras as the elder siblings of the Devas.

Several post-Vedic texts talk of some Asuras who were renowned for their piety and devotion for Hindu Devatas, wisdom and knowledge of the Arts, Hinduism and its scriptures. Yet others were known for their valour and militancy, ethics and unwavering adherence to the Dharma. Asuras such as Maya Danava actually wrote the Vastu Shastra and even designed Hindu temples.

Generally speaking, Asuras are supernatural beings, either good or bad, who usually rule the Patala Loka (the Netherworld). Just as love and hate; and good and evil are two sides of a coin, the Asuras are as essential to maintaining the balance of the universe.

**Temples Dedicated to Asuras**

**Kamsa**

Kamsa or Kansa was the tyrant ruler of the kingdom of Vrishni, the capital of which was Mathura. Kamsa was the cousin of Devaki, the mother of Lord Krishna. The Puranas describe him as a Rakshasa (demon). Since he lived in his royal quarters of Bhoja, he was also referred to as Bhojapati.

Kamsa was born to Ugrasena, a powerful Yadava king and his wife, Queen Padmavati. On the advice of his evil friends Banasura and Narakasura, he decided to overthrow his father and then ascend the throne as the ruler of Mathura. He married Asti and Prapti, the daughters of Jarasandha, King of Magadha.

After an akashavani (celestial voice) prophesied that Devaki's eighth child would kill him, he imprisoned her and her husband, Vasudeva. The minute he heard that Devaki had given birth, he would go to their cell and kill the newborn child. This kept happening each time. However, their eighth child, Krishna, who was actually an avatara of Lord Sri Maha Vishnu himself, manifested with the intention of killing Kamsa. His father, Vasudeva, secretly transported the child to Gokul, where he was raised in the care of Nanda, the chief of the cowherd clan.

**Birth and Youth**

Kamsa was actually not the biological son of Ugrasena. Once, a passing Gandharva caught sight of Padmavati and, lusting after her, transformed himself into an Ugrasena lookalike. Thinking that it was her husband, she had a sexual encounter with him.
However, when she discovered that this was only an impostor, Padmavati was filled with shame and rage. In order to appease her, the Gandharva promised her that the soon-to-be-born child would have great powers and would be half human and half Gandharva. But Padmavati, still in a rage; cursed that the child would be born a Rakshasa and would be slain by his own people. Frightened by her anger, the Gandharva fled the scene. Incidentally, in his previous birth, Kamsa was born as a demon called Kalanemi and was killed by Lord Vishnu.

During childhood, Kamsa was trained in warfare by the Yadavas there. He soon turned into a mighty warrior. When Jarasandha tried to invade Mathura, the boy single-handedly fought and routed his entire army. This impressed the former, who made Kamsa his son-in-law. With Jarasandha’s force behind him, Kamsa became even more powerful and vanquished even the Devas such Indra, Varuna and Kubera in battle.

Kamsa then overthrew Ugrasena, without informing his subjects about it. When the latter failed to show up for events, the residents of the kingdom started suspecting that something was wrong. Kamsa then announced that he had taken over as ruler of Mathura.

**Yogamaya Warns Kamsa**

Alarmed by the akashavani that the eighth child of Devaki would kill him, he wanted to kill her. However, her husband Vasudeva managed to convince Kamsa that he would reach all his children to him, as soon as they were born. Accepting the condition, Kamsa decided to spare her life. He then put both Devaki and Vasudeva in prison. While in prison, Devaki delivered six children. The minute Kamsa came to know of a child’s birth, he would visit their cell and cruelly kill the child in cold blood.

Just before the birth of the seventh child, Lord Vishnu summoned Goddess Yogamaya, an eight-armed deity, holding different kinds of weapons in her hands. Vishnu asked her to transfer the embryo of Shesha Naga from Devaki to Vasudeva’s other wife, Rohini. Rohini lived in Gokulam. The child born thus came to be named Balarama, Krishna’s elder brother; as also an avatara of Vishnu.

Vishnu also asked Yogamaya to take birth in the womb of Yashoda. After Krishna was born to Devaki, Yogamaya, the Controller of Darkness, put Kamsa’s guards to sleep. Baby Krishna then willed the prison gates to open, thus letting Vasudeva slip out into the heavily rainy, stormy night, holding his newborn in a basket. He carefully crossed the river and reached baby Krishna to Nanda and Yashoda’s house in Gokul. On the orders of Vishnu, he also brought Yashoda’s newborn daughter back to their prison cell.

The next morning, presuming that this was Devaki’s eighth child, Kamsa tried to kill her by throwing her to the ground. Yogamaya, however, slipped from his grasp and, taking her cosmic
form of Devi Durga, warned Kamsa that Devaki's eighth child was safe in Gokul and would indeed come back to kill him.

Death

Wanting to kill Krishna, Kamsa sent a host of demons to kill him. However, Krishna was already aware of his evil uncle's every move. He effortlessly killed each one of the demons Kamsa sent to kill him. After he came of age, Krishna visited Kamsa in Mathura and slew him. He then reinstated Ugrasena as the ruler of Mathura.

Kamsa Temple

Though Kamsa only brought sadness and grief to his father, sister, her husband and the subjects of his own kingdom, the fact remains that he met his end at the hands of an avatara of Sri Maha Vishnu Himself. Due to this, he attained moksha instantly and entered the gates of Heaven.

Accordingly, there is a temple of Kamsa in a place of Hardoi, which is located at some distance from Lucknow, in the State of Uttar Pradesh. Here, one can find a massive idol of the demon king. He is highly venerated as a blessed soul who attained liberation at the Lotus Feet of the Lord and is worshipped by his followers.

Putana

In Hindu mythology, Putana was a Rakshasi (demoness), who was killed by Lord Krishna in his form as a child. As she breastfed Krishna, she is also sometimes considered as his foster mother. She attained immediate mukti at the Lord's hands, as she had performed the supreme act of vatsalya bhakti (maternal devotion), by offering him her milk (though her actual intent
was to kill him with the poisoned milk). Thus, she is also associated with the Matrikas and motherhood.

In some versions of the legend and books, she is portrayed as an evil hag, who eventually surrendered herself to Krishna. Putana is also sometimes interpreted as an infantile disease or bird, embodying danger to an infant or desire respectively. Other texts even go as far as to portray her as a bad mother.

**Etymology**

The word "Putana" is a combination of "Put" (virtue) and "na" (devoid of). So it implies the "one that is devoid of virtue". According to yet another explanation, the word "Putana" is derived from "Puta" (purifying), meaning, the "she who purifies". "Put" is also a form of hell in Hindu mythology and is associated with parents and children. It is largely believed that, by conducting the last rites of his parents, a son liberates them from the tortures of "Put". Incidentally, Putana is also a weapon of or the form of the Goddess of small pox, Sitala.

**Legend**

The legend of Putana is quite popular and is narrated in the Bhagavata Purana, Harivamsa, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Vishnu Purana and Garga Samhita.

Putana, also referred to as Poothani (the killer of infants) was sent by baby Krishna's evil uncle, Kamsa, to kill him. Putana took the form of a young, beautiful woman and arrived at the Brajbhoomi (Gokul), where the baby was in the foster care of Nanda and Yashoda. So beautiful was she that the gopas (cowherds) mistook her for an avatara of Goddess Lakshmi herself.

Impressed by her persona, Yashoda invited her to her abode and let her take baby Krishna into her lap and breastfeed him. Putana had smeared her breast with mandana, a poison to kill Krishna. However, Krishna squeezed her breasts and, along with the milk, took the prana (life force) out of her.
The demoness took her original form and, screaming in pain, begged for release. She tried to free the baby from her, but was utterly unsuccessful. She ran out of the town with Krishna still clutching onto her. After a long struggle, she finally fell lifeless to the ground.

The people of Gokul cut up her body, burying her bones and feet, burning her skin and flesh. As Putana had attained moksha at the hands of the Lord, a fragrance arose from the flames as her body burned. She was then cleansed of all her sins and attained the same heaven that Yashoda attained.

Some versions of the story relate that her milk itself was filled with poison. Yet other versions say that she stole the child at night, when everyone else was asleep.

**Previous Birth**

According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana and the Garga Samhita, Putana was a woman called Ratnamala in her previous birth. In that birth, she was the daughter of the demon king, Mahabali. When she met Yamana, a previous incarnation of Sri Maha Vishnu, she instantly felt a desire to have him as her son and suckle him.

However, when Yamana tricked Mahabali and took everything he had; also pushing him down to Patala (the Netherworld); Ratnamala changed her mind and decided to kill him. Knowing her desires from her previous birth, Krishna let her suckle him and also let her try and take his life, though in vain.
Symbolism

- The legend of Putana has several connotations in Hinduism.
- It assures those devotees liberation, who treat God as their own son
- It also interprets Putana as an infantile disease which can easily be cured by forcefully suckling the affected child
- The Vishnu Purana states that Putana worked in the night, thus symbolizing the lack of illumination of knowledge and wisdom. Thus, Putana stands for death and darkness.
- She is portrayed as being quivering and shaky, thus showing her own instability

Textual Description

- The Bhagavata Purana describes Putana as yatudhani, meaning, "evil spirit". The Rigveda stipulates that they are to be killed, their bodies broken and their flesh eaten. This was indeed the way she was also treated after her death.
- In the Mahabharata, when she is mentioned along with the Matrikas (Mother Goddesses) and the warrior-God Skanda, she is portrayed as a Protector Rakshasi, as well as a Matrika and a Yogini.
- In Harivamsa, she is described as a Grahini, with a prayer to protect children as the end.
- In the Agni Purana too, she receives mention as a Grahini and a Yogini.

Groups of Putana

- The medical text, Balatantra includes Putana as a collective name of the 16 sisters of demon king Ravana. They were permitted to eat the flesh of infants.
• The Buddhist texts, Saddharmapundarika Sutra and Manasollasa list several demons, including a group of Putanas.
• The Brahmanda Purana and Harita Samhita mention Putanas as a subset of Matrikas and Grahinis, whose names include Kali and Dakini.

In Ayurveda

The Ayurvedic text Susrutha Samhita describes Putana as being black in colour, with a gaping mouth, projecting fangs and disheveled hair. She is further portrayed as being smelly, wearing filthy garments and residing among ruins and in dilapidated buildings.

Ayurvedic Medicine prescribes offering crow dung, fish, a rice dish, ground sesame and alcohol to Putana, while reciting hymns, asking her to protect children. Kumaratantra, a branch of Ayurveda, mentions that this vidhi aims to heal diseases which arise from infants' consumption of poisoned milk of the Grahinis; Putana being one of them. According to this system, all infantile diseases falling on the third day, the third month, or the third year of a child's life are attributed to Putana. This holds true, irrespective of the nature of disease and its symptoms.

Portrayal as a Bird

Putana is portrayed as a bird in images and sculpture in Mathura, Deogarh and Mandor. Harivamsa describes her as the “Nurse of Kamsa”, who comes to a child as shakuni (a female bird) and is one of the many birdlike female entities in Harivamsa. This birdlike form symbolizes the desire for materialistic objectives.

In some texts, she is also described as a Vaki, a female crane. This embodies crookedness and hypocrisy.

Putana Temple

In the present, one can find a temple dedicated to the worship of Putana in Gokul, Uttar Pradesh. Though she had tried to kill Krishna with her poison, the fact remains that she unknowingly fulfilled the highest duty of motherhood. Her idol in the temple shows her lying on the bed, with Krishna seen sitting on her chest, drinking milk.

Duryodhana

Duryodhana, literally meaning "very hard fight", was a major character in the great Hindu epic Mahabharata. The eldest of the Kauravas, the hundred sons of the blind King, Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari, he was the crown prince of the Kuru Dynasty. He lived in the capital of the kingdom, Hastinapura, along with his cousins, the Pandavas.

A negative and jealous character, Duryodhana was one of the main reasons for the Great War of Kurukshetra. Karna was his closest friend, confidant and advisor.
Birth and Childhood

Gandhari’s pregnancy continued for an unusually long period of time. This caused her to beat her womb in frustration, which in turn created a mass of grey-coloured flesh tissue from her womb. She requested Sage Vyasa to help her. He blessed her to have hundred sons. He also divided the ball of flesh into one hundred and one equal pieces, put them in pots of ghee and sealed them. After the end of the second year, he opened the first pot and Duryodhana emerged from it.

Although loved by his family, Duryodhana and his brothers did not receive as much respect as the Pandava princes, who were honest, upright and always adherent to the Dharma. Duryodhana was mentored by his evil maternal uncle, Shakuni, who seemed to fight the Pandavas, but secretly wanted the downfall of the entire Kuru race.

Duryodhana developed a deep hatred for the Pandavas. Since Dhritarashtra was blind, he had to renounce the throne, letting his younger brother Pandu take over. Duryodhana believed that this was injustice, as he was the actual heir to the throne, being the eldest of the Kauravas.

Training in Warfare

Duryodhana was extremely skilled with the mace and went on to specialize in that field under Balarama, becoming his favourite pupil. However, he could never equal Arjuna in archery and always felt inadequate because of that.

Friendship with Karna

Further, he resented the fact that the Pandavas never lost the chance to bully him and his friend, Karna, who was the foster son of a charioteer. In actuality, Karna was the firstborn of
Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas.

Karna was always denied privileges, as he was not a kshatriya (warrior) by birth. Duryodhana would come to his defense each time. He then made Karna the king of Anga, so that he would receive the same respect as the Pandavas. When Karna was killed in the War, the Kaurava prince mourned him intensely and was utterly inconsolable.

**Scheming to Kill the Pandavas**

Duryodhana constantly schemed with Shakuni to try and kill the Pandavas. He tried to poison Bhima's food and even plotted to burn the Pandavas by inviting to live in a wax house at Varanavata. The Pandavas, though, were warned by Vidura and managed to escape just in time.

**Usurping the Kingdom**

In order to avoid further tensions, Yudhishthira took over half the kingdom and was made king of Khandavaprastha. Duryodhana became the crown prince of Hastinapura. Finally, he took over the rule of his part of the kingdom.

He however became upset when the Pandavas transformed the arid Khandavaprastha into the breathtakingly beautiful Indraprastha, along with the help of their friend, Krishna. Humiliated further by Draupadi's and the Pandavas' taunts when he had a fall in Indraprastha, he vowed to destroy them entirely.

**The Infamous Game of Dice**

Duryodhana, along with Shakuni, then plotted to defeat the Pandavas at a game of dice. He knew that this game was Yudhishtira's only weakness. Cheating in the game, he tempted the eldest Pandu prince to place his money, kingdom, brothers and even his wife, Draupadi, in wager. The latter gradually lost everything, finally staking Draupadi, the Pandavas' wife.

Duryodhana then asked his younger brother, Dushasana to bring Draupadi before the court and disrobe her in the presence of the entire Sabha. They laughed at her, calling her a veshya (prostitute). Duryodhana asked her to come sit on her lap, due to which Bhima swore that he would break his thigh.
Fearing the consequences of all this adharma, Gandhari asked her husband to reverse all of the Pandavas' losses and leave them alone. However, Shakuni insisted that they should play one more game and if the Pandavas lost in that one too, they must spend thirteen years in exile in the forest. He also said that the last year must be spent in incognito. Sure enough, the Pandavas lost again and went on exile.

**The Kurukshetra War**

At the end of the Pandavas' exile, Duryodhana refused to return Yudhishthira's kingdom. All the elders, also Krishna, tried to convince him to do the right thing. He, however, would not listen to their counsel. Finally, war was inevitable.

Duryodhana got to keep the entire army of elders on his side, while the Pandavas depended entirely on Krishna. The former also won the army of Shalya, the Pandavas' maternal uncle. Krishna decided to be Arjuna's charioteer.

The Great War of Kurukshetra took a heavy toll on both sides, with stalwarts falling everywhere. While kshatriya dharma stipulated several rules to be followed, many of them were flouted and adharma reigned supreme on the battlefield, with warriors being killed in an unethical fashion.

**Death**

Duryodhana's hopes were finally dashed to the ground when Karna was felled unjustly by Arjuna. On day 18, which was the final day of war, he lost everyone and everything, including his horse. He left the battlefield and decided hide in a lake.

When the Pandavas and Krishna found him there, Duryodhana told him that he was willing to
gift Hastinapura to them. Yudhishthira mocked him, saying that Hastinapura was not his to gift it to anyone. He offered that Duryodhana could pick any one of the Pandavas to fight and win, instead.

Angered and humiliated, the Kaurava prince chose to fight with Bhima. After a brutal one-on-one fight, Bhima began to tire. Though he was the one with more strength, the former had the advantage of far better technique and training.

When Krishna noticed that Duryodhana was starting to gain the edge over Bhima, he repeatedly clapped his own thigh with his hand, thus trying to remind Bhima of the oath he had taken to split the Kaurava prince's thigh. Understanding what Krishna meant, Bhima attacked him viciously with his mace, on the thigh, thus mortally wounding Duryodhana. Bhima was well aware that it was unfair to deliver that blow below the waist, during a mace fight. However, this was the only way to destroy him.

Even during his last few minutes, Duryodhana taunted the Pandavas and Krishna for felling him deceitfully and laughed at them, saying that this was the only way they could ever have defeated him. He then commanded Kripacharya, Kritavarma and Ashwatthama to take revenge on the Pandavas for their dastardly act and appointed Ashwatthama as the supreme commander of the Kaurava side.

In the cover of night, Ashwatthama entered the Pandavas' tent and, thinking that he was killing them, ended up killing the Upapandavas, their sons. He ran back to Duryodhana to give him the good news of their death, but found him dead too. According to some other versions, Duryodhana received the news and was happy to hear that the Pandavas had lost everyone they ever cared about. Then he peacefully let go and breathed his last. That symbolized the end of the Kurukshetra War.

**Duryodhana Temple**

Many Hindus believe that, though Duryodhana was a largely negative character, he was not without his positives. Hence, there are some temples dedicated to the worship of Duryodhana and some other Kauravas.

Poruvazhy Peruviruthy Malanada, popularly known as Peruviruthy Malanada or Malanada, is the only Duryodhana temple in Kerala, South India. Unlike the usual, there is no deity here and no "Sreekovil" or sanctum sanctorum. Instead, there is an “Althara” or “Mandapam” (raised platform). The devotees here submit themselves to a higher power, by means of meditation and “sankalpam” to the "sankalpa moorthy”, which is Duryodhana himself.
Legend

According to legend, Duryodhana was trying to find the Pandavas while they were living incognito, after their exile. He reached a house on the northwest of Malanada and asked them for drinking water. That was the place that Oorali (the priest and ruler) of the area was staying.

An elderly woman handed him some toddy. Seeing her apparel and general look, he realized that she was from the Kurava clan. Appreciating their hospitality, he walked up to a hill, sat in one particular spot and prayed to Lord Shiva for their peace and prosperity. He then gave away hundreds of acres of agricultural land as freehold to the “Devasthanam”. Even now, tax is levied there in the name of “Duryodhanam”.

Malakkuda Festival

The Malakkuda Festival is the annual festival of Malanada. Celebrated during the second half of March, the arrival of the season is proclaimed by “Kodiyettu” (hoisting the ceremonial flag by Oorali). Then the Oorali undertakes a visit to the Gurukkalssery Bhagavathy Temple and invites the Devi to Malanada. He then wears his priestly attire to attend and bless a colourful event called the “Kettukazhcha”.

This event attracts thousands of spectators and is a sight for the Gods. It is then followed by various cultural programmes, which go on through the night. A Kathakali show, based on the story “Nizhalkuthu”, is a customary part of this event. Malanada Thookkam and Swarna Kodi (exhibition of the Golden Flag) are other essential elements of the festival.

Pallippana

Legend has it that Lord Vishnu found out that he was afflicted with “Asura Dosha”. The people of the Velan community had the power to perform rituals to get rid of the dosha. Vishnu searched high and low, but could not find anyone from the Velan community. Finally, Shiva appeared as Velan, with Parvathi as Velathy and Ganapathy and Kartikeya as Bhoothaganangal. They performed a Mahakarma, known as Pallippana, thus ridding Vishnu of his dosha.

This ritual is performed once in 12 years in Malanada. It is believed that the ritual rids the place of evil and unwanted energies and makes the people rich and prosperous.

Mahiravana

In the Krittivasi Ramayana, Mahiravana was the son of Sage Vishravas. He was a brother of the demon King of Lanka, Ravana. He was the rakshasa who secretly carried away Rama and his brother Lakshmana to Patala-loka (the Netherworld) and then decided to sacrifice their lives in order to appease his chosen deity, Goddess Mahamaya.
Legend

During the fight between Rama and Ravana, the latter’s son, Indrajit, was killed in battle. Heartbroken, Ravana called to his brother Mahiravana, who was also the ruler of Patal Lok or the nether world, for help.

Sensing trouble, Sage Agastya warned Rama that they could be in for some kind of trouble, especially during the night. Hanuman was put on guard and was instructed not to let anyone into Rama and Lakshmana’s room.

Mahiravana made several attempts to enter their room, but failed each time. Finally, Mahiravana took the form of Vibhishana and requested Hanuman to let him in. The latter, tricked by the impostor, let him in. Mahiravana acted quickly and took the brothers away.

When Hanuman realized what happened, he was panicky and approached Vibhishana for help and advice. The latter asked him to leave immediately and rescue the brothers; and warned him of Mahiravana’s plans to sacrifice their lives.

Hanuman reached the door to Patala, where he had to fight a creature, which was half Vanara (monkey) and half reptile. The creature turned out to be his own son, Makaradhwaja. Hanuman was taken aback by the information. He had always led the life of a Brahmachari (celibate) and so, there was no possibility of him begetting a child.

Makaradhwaja then narrated the incident of his birth. After Hanuman had set fire to Lanka with his tail, he sat by the ocean to cool off from the heat. At that time, a huge drop of his sweat was swallowed by a crocodile. The reptile was caught by the people of Patala-loka. When they cut her open, they found Makaradhwaja in there.
Hanuman was overwhelmed at meeting his son and was impressed with his valour and strength. After defeating his son, Hanuman entered Mahiravana’s chambers and easily defeated his army. The only way to kill Mahiravana would be to blow out five different candles, located in five different directions. This would have to be done at the same time. Assuming the form of Panchamukhi Hanuman (his five-faced form), he blew out all the five candles at the same time, thus killing Mahiravana.

The battle however did not end there. On learning of her husband’s demise, Mahiravana’s pregnant widow rushed out to kill Hanuman and in the melee Hanuman ended up kicking her on her belly resulting in her child coming out. The child - Mahiravana’s son - was called Ahiravana, and he too joined the battle. Since it was still covered in blood and mucous, Hanuman threw some mud on the child, grasped him and threw him onto the ground, killing it instantly. He then brought back Rama and Lakshmana to the safety of their own camp.

**Ahiravana Temple**

Chintaharan Hanuman Temple in Jhansi is a unique temple, where the demons Ahiravana and Mahiravana are worshipped along with the main idol of Hanuman. Devotees gather here to light lamps in this 300 year-old temple, both to Hanuman and the demons. The Chintaharan Hanuman Temple has a tradition of lighting lamps made of wet flour. It is believed that lighting these lamps on five consecutive Tuesdays eliminates difficulties from devotees’ lives.

In this temple, one can see a five-foot tall statue of Hanuman, crushing the Tantric Goddess, along with Ahiravana and Mahiravana begging forgiveness of her. He carried Rama and
Lakshmana on his shoulders. An idol of Makaradhwaja can be seen on the right hand side as well.

Dashanana

Dashanana (literally meaning “the one with the ten faces”), more popularly known as Ravana, was the demon king of Lanka and also the main antihero in the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana. He was a great follower of Lord Shiva, a capable ruler, a master of the 64 arts; especially the Veena; and also a great scholar; adept in many subjects dealing with religion and philosophy. A mighty Chakravarti (Emperor), his ten heads represent his knowledge of the four Vedas and the six Shastras. One of the greatest ever rulers, his main negative trait was that he resented the Devas and wished to overthrow them, in order to gain the power to rule over the whole world.

The word “Ravana” means “roaring”. Some experts believe that the word may have originally been a derivative of Iraivan, the Tamil term for Lord or King. He is usually portrayed as having ten heads. Sometimes, he is also shown with nine heads, as he is believed to have sacrificed one head to his Ishtadevata (favourite deity), Shiva. He is also considered to be the author of Ravana Samhita, a book on Hindu astrology, and Arka Prakasham, a book on Siddha Medicine. A master of varying subjects including spirituality, religion, arts, political science and much more, he was also said to possess the nectar of immortality, which was stored inside his navel.

Birth

Ravana was born to Sage Vishravas and his wife, the daitya princess Kaikeshi. The people of Bisrakh village in Uttar Pradesh claim that Ravana was born there. But according to more reliable sources, he was born in Lanka. His father’s father was Sage Pulastya, one of the Ten
Prajapatis (the mind-born sons of Brahma).

Ravana was blessed with a boon that made him invincible to any creation of Brahma. He could also shift shape at will. He usurped Lanka from his half-brother Kubera and started to rule the country. Appointing Shukracharya as his priest, he learnt the Arthashastra from him.

**Family**

Ravana had six brothers and two sisters, namely, Kubera (the God of Wealth), Vibhishana (a staunch follower of Lord Rama), Kumbhakarna, Kharana, Dushana, Mahiravana, Kumbhini and Shoorpanakha. Ravana was married to Mandodari, the daughter of the celestial architect Maya. He also had two other wives. He had a total of seven sons from these wives, namely, Meghanaad (also known as Indrajit), Atikaya, Akshayakumara, Narantaka, Devantaka, Trishira and Prahastha.

**Ravana Pleases Shiva**

Ravana was vain about his strength, prowess and good looks. He once attempted to lift Mount Kailas in order to impress Shiva. At that time, Shiva and Parvati were seated on the peak, enjoying each other's company. Enraged at Ravana's impudence, Shiva pressed his toe down on the ground. This pressure resulted in the mountain coming down on Ravana, threatening to crush him under it.

Realizing his folly, Ravana decided to appease his Lord. He immediately tore open his chest with his own fingernails and, tying the nerve ends to his toes; he made a Veena out of his own body and played on it, singing in praise of Shiva. There is record of an ancient instrument, Ravanahatha, that the demon king played on.

The sheer melody emanating from this music thrilled Shiva so much, that for a moment, he lifted his toe off the ground. Ravana instantly crawled out from under the mountain and then apologized for his inexcusable behaviour.

**Sita Swayamvara**

Ravana always had an eye for Sita, the foster daughter of King Janaka, the King of Videha and his wife, Sunaina. In her infancy, she was discovered placed in a little casket, buried in the ground. Hence, she is considered to be Bhuma Devi's (Mother Earth) daughter.

Ravana desired to make Sita his own, but could never succeed to do so. During her Swayamvara ceremony, Janaka stipulated the condition that the person who could lift Shiva's bow placed in the mandapa and then string it, would be able to win his daughter's hand in marriage.
The ceremony was attended by kings and princes from all over India. Everybody was enchanted by this young, lissome beauty and wanted to marry her. All the participants tried to lift the bow, but could not move it even an inch. Finally, Ravana entered the mandapa and, gloating about his strength, declared that he would be able to lift it with his little finger.

After a few unsuccessful attempts, Ravana put in all his strength. However, the bow refused to budge from his position. After failing miserably, he exited the mandapa. The young Rama, who was in exile at the time, easily lifted the bow in one effortless swoop and strung it with a resonant twang.

Angered and humiliated, Ravana vowed to make Sita his own. Meanwhile, Rama was residing in the Dandaka Forest along with Sita and his brother, Lakshmana. He first sent Shoorpanakha to entice Rama and Lakshmana. She tried her level best, but was mocked at by the brothers and insulted by them. In a rage, she tried to attack them. But Lakshmana intervened and cut off her nose, forcing her to rush back to her brother for help.
Ravana then asked his uncle, Mareecha, to take the form of a golden deer and entice Sita. When she saw the beauteous creature, she requested her husband to bring it to her. Rama immediately followed it as it ran deep into the forest. After some time, Sita and Lakshmana heard a cry from Rama. Disturbed, Sita asked Lakshmana to go in search of Rama. Reluctant to leave her alone, he drew a Lakshmana Rekha (line of protection) on the ground with his arrow, asking her not to cross it.

Grabbing the opportunity he had been waiting for, Ravana, disguised as a mendicant, came to the hermitage, begging for alms. He managed to lure Sita out of the line and, lifting the entire ground that she was standing on, carried her away on his Pushpakavimana.

On the way, Jatayu, the Divine Vulture, accosted him and tried to stop him from kidnapping Sita. Though the former put up a valiant fight, the demon king managed to cut both his wings, finally killing him. But before he breathed his last, he told a distraught Rama about the incident. Bestowing moksha upon the great bird, Rama vowed to kill Ravana and rescue his wife.
Death

With the help of Sugreeva, Hanuman and his Vanarasena (Army of Monkeys), Rama managed to build a Setu (bridge) to Lanka. With the help of his army, he attacked Lanka and, after a long battle, defeated and killed Ravana.

He then visited Ashokavana where Sita was held captive, freed her and brought her back to Ayodhya, where they celebrated his Pattabhishekha (coronation ceremony) with great pomp and show.

Previous Birth

According to the Bhagavata Purana, Ravana and his brother Kumbhakarna were incarnations of Jaya and Vijaya, the doorkeepers of Vaikuntha, Vishnu’s abode. The two once refused entry to the Sanathkumara monks, mocking them, because they appeared as young children. For their insolence, the monks cursed them to be born on earth.

Vishnu gave them two choices - they could be born seven times as normal mortals and devotees of his; or be born three times as powerful, but as his enemies. Jaya and Vijaya chose the latter option. Accordingly, they were born as Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha in their first birth in the Satya Yuga. They were killed by Vishnu’s avatara as Narasimha. In their second birth in the Treta Yuga, they were reborn as Ravana and Kumbhakarna, defeated by Rama. In the Dwapara Yuga, they were Dantavakra and Shishupala and were slain by Krishna.
Ravana Temples

There are some Shiva temples, where Ravana is worshipped.

- The Kanyakubja Brahmins of Vidisha District of Madhya Pradesh worship him as a symbol of prosperity and a savior. They perform daily pooja to him, offering naivedya and distributing the prasad.
- The Ravana temple at Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, is opened once a year on Dusshera Day. Devotees pray to him and offer pooja for his welfare.
- The Sachora Brahmins claim to be Ravana's descendants and sometimes even have the surname “Ravan”.
- Some Saraswat Brahmins from Mathura claim to be his descendants as well.
- The Maudgil Brahmins in Jodhpur believe that Ravana was their ancestor and have a temple dedicated to his worship.
- The Ravangram Ravana Temple in Madhya Pradesh houses a 10-foot idol of the demon king in reclining position.
- The Gondi people of central India claim to be his descendants and have temples dedicated to his worship. They consider Ravana to be the tenth Dharmaguru of their tribe. Every year during Dusshera, they take a procession in his memory.
- The Baijnath Temple was a Shiva temple in Himachal Pradesh, also known as Ravankhola.
- Kakinada is a Shiva temple in Andhra Pradesh, which is believed to have been built by Ravana himself. Both the Shivalinga and Ravana are worshipped here.
- In Sri Lanka, the Seetha Amman Temple and the Munneswaram Temple also contain shrines for Ravana.
- The Koneswaram Temple of Sri Lanka is one of the most famous Ravana temples in the world.

Karna

The tale of Karna, one of the central characters in the Mahabharata, is very different from the above, due to the fact that Karna was never really a negative character. Karna was a man of exceptional abilities; one who was brave, mighty and extremely loyal to those who supported him in his time of need. He was a tragic hero, who could have contributed much, but unfortunately, ended up a victim of circumstances. Several instances in his life occurred entirely out of his own control and he merely ended up being a puppet in the hands of time and karma. He, however, suffered as he supported Duryodhana and hence, abetted his crimes in a sense.

Birth

Karna was actually the eldest of the Pandava princes, as he was Kunti’s firstborn. Kunti had received a boon that she simply had to call upon a God and he would immediately emerge and gift her with a child. At the time, she was still unmarried. Curious to know if the boon would work, she called upon Surya, the Sun God. To her dismay, he immediately appeared before her
and gave her Karna.

Fearful about what society would say about her, being an unwed mother, she placed the child in a basket and let it float on the river. The infant was finally discovered by charioteer Adhiratha. He was immediately drawn to the child, who was born with a kavacha (armour) and kundala (earrings). He and his wife Radha raised him as their own.

**Youth**

Karna schooled in Hastinapura, where he trained in the martial arts under Drona, Kripa and Parashurama. He and Arjuna were always ace rivals. Though he worked hard and made a name for himself, he was always put down, as he was not a kshatriya by birth.

**Friendship with Duryodhana**

Karna always craved the respect and love he truly deserved, but never received. Duryodhana was the first ever person to recognize and respect him for the person and warrior that he was. He considered Karna equal to Arjuna in all respects. The boys soon became close friends. In order to help his friend enjoy the same status as the Pandavas did, Duryodhana made him King of Anga and conducted an elaborate coronation ceremony for him.

The Pandavas' constant criticism of him made Karna hate them. He vowed that he would always be by Duryodhana's side and would fight them till his last breath. Even though he was well aware that his friend was being highly unfair and adharmic towards the Pandavas, he continued to support him and be loyal towards him.

Even during the game of dice, Karna did not stop at being a mere spectator. He, in fact, went to the extent of mocking Draupadi, calling her a whore. He also asked Dusshasana to strip her in front of the entire sabha of dignitaries. In actuality, Karna loved Draupadi and had wanted to marry her. Krishna, however, had interfered in the matter and told her not to get together with Karna, as he was of lower varna (caste). Though he regretted his actions, Karna continued to fight against the Pandavas.

**Karna Discovers His Biological Mother**

Parva 5 of the Mahabharata describes how Karna discovers that Kunti is his biological mother, when she comes to meet him for the first time. While he extolled Karna's virtues, Krishna, who approached him with a view to preventing the impending war, revealed that he should actually have been the eldest Pandava prince. Krishna also offered that, if he so wished, he could join the Pandavas and could rightfully claim his place as their king.

Karna declined the offer, saying that though Kunti gave birth to him, it was Radha that raised him and gave him the love and the family feeling that was so essential to all human beings. He
also stated that he would never ever leave Duryodhana, who had always stood by his side, no matter what.

**Death**

Karna had yet another flaw in his character - he was over generous and was willing to give freely in charity, particularly to Brahmins. Karna was invincible as far as the kavacha and kundala stayed on his person. Knowing this, Indra, the father of Arjuna, decided to trick him, thus making him vulnerable to attack.

Indra disguised himself as a Brahmin and asked for Karna's armour and earrings as dana (charity). Though the latter knew the consequences, he immediately pulled out his knife and unflinchingly cut up his own body in order to detach these from himself.

Karna had the Vajrayudha (Indra's weapon) with him and hoped to use it to kill Arjuna during the war. The war took a heavy toll on both sides, felling many greats. On the second last day of the war, Karna decided that it was time to kill Arjuna. Duryodhana appointed him as his Senapati (commander-in-chief) and requested Shalya to be the latter’s charioteer for the day.

As Karna approached Arjuna's chariot, his wheel unfortunately got stuck in the ground. This forced him to step out of his chariot and fix the problem. Just as he was trying to pry it off the rut, Krishna instructed Arjuna to strike the fatal blow on Karna. Though it was adharmic to attack the enemy when they were unarmed and unprepared, Arjuna did as he was told. He knew there was no other way to defeat and kill the mighty warrior. Thus, Karna breathed his last, dying a valiant death on the battlefield.
**Karnaprayag**

One can find several temples and shrines dedicated to Karna. The most major temple can be found in Karnaprayag, at the confluence of the Pinder and Alakananda Rivers. It is believed that he meditated her to please his father, the Sun God.

According to another legend, Krishna buried Karna here after his tragic death. Goddess Dharma-Devi (the Goddess of Righteousness) herself had protected him constantly. She, however, had to concede to fate and let Arjuna kill Karna in the cowardly way that he did. Before breathing his last, Krishna bestowed Karna with a darshan of his Vishwaroopa and also promised him that he would bury him in a virgin land, which would go on to become one of the most sacred spots for Hindus all over the world.

Other Karna temples include the following:

- Sangameshwara Temple in Maharashtra
- Karneshwar Temple at Karnawat, Madhya Pradesh
- Karna and Suyodhana Temple at Sarnaul, Uttarakhand
- Karna Temple at Dewara, Uttarakhand
- Karna Temple at Hastinapura, Uttar Pradesh
- At Karnawat in Uttar Pradesh
- At Tulaswadi, Gujarat
- Lord Mahunag Temple, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh
- Manas Kamana Karna Temple, Bhagalpur, Bihar
- Karnadighi, West Bengal
- At Malanda, Kerala

**How to Reach Karnaprayag**

There are buses plying regularly from Rishikesh to Karnaprayag. This place also has its own railway station. Jolly Grant in Dehradun is the nearest airport.

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