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Chiranjivis - the Immortals of Hindu Mythology - Part 1
Ashwathama, King Bali, Veda Vyasa

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Last month, we brought you the first part of the Seven Chiranjivis or Immortals of Hindu Mythology. The term Chiranjivi describes those who remain alive on Earth, until the end of the current epoch, the Kaliyuga. These great personalities are also referred as "Amaras", or those who do not have death.

In our previous issue, we related the stories of Ashwatthama, King Mahabali and Veda Vyasa. In this chapter, we bring you the legends of the other Chiranjivis, namely, Hanuman, Vibhishana , Kripacharya and Lord Parashurama.

Hanuman

Hanuman or Anjaneya is an ardent devotee of Lord Rama, an avatara of Sri Maha Vishnu. One of the pivotal characters of the epic Ramayana, he is worshipped not only in India, but also in Sri Lanka and several countries in Southeast Asia. As a Chiranjivi, he enjoys a prominent place in several other works, including the Mahabharata, the Puranas and even some Buddhist, Jain and Sikh texts. Many of these texts extol him as an incarnation of Shiva.



Lord Hanuman

Origins of Hanuman

The origins of Hanuman in Hinduism are unclear. According to some theories, a similar ancient non-Aryan deity was later Sanskritized by the Vedic Aryans. Yet others aver that he first emerged in the earliest literary works as a folk Yaksha - a protector deity of yore. In later literature, he is viewed as the patron God of the martial arts, acrobatics, as well as meditation and devotion.

In today's time, Hanuman is a popular deity, viewed as the best example of strength, devotion, heroism and everlasting love and loyalty towards his personal God, Rama. He is seen as an embodiment of faith, self-control, shakti (strength) and bhakti (devotion).

Nomenclature

The origin or meaning of the word "Hanuman" is unclear. One Puranic version suggests that the name could have come from the root "Hanu", which means, "the one having a prominent jaw (mant)". According to another version, the name is derived from the Sanskrit words, "Han" (killed or destroyed) and "Maana" (pride). In this case, the name implies, "one whose pride was killed or destroyed". A third version, found in Jain texts, indicates that the name was derived from the island "Hanuruha", where Hanuman spent his childhood.

Linguistic variations of Hanuman include Anuman, Hanumat, Hanumantha, Hanumanthudu and so on. Hanuman's other names include Anjaneya, Anjaniputra, Anjanisuta and Anjaneyar (all of them meaning "son of Anjana"), Kesari Nandan (son of Kesari), Maruti, Vayu Putra or Pawan Putra (son of Vayu, the Wind God), Bajrang Bali (the one with strong limbs, powerful like a Vajra or thunderbolt) and Sankata Mochan (the one who destroys sorrows). Outside the Indian subcontinent, his name and descriptions vary slightly. In Indonesia, he is referred to as Anoman and Sang Kera Pemuja Dewa Rama, Hanuman (the mighty devotee of Rama, Hanuman) and as Handuman in Malaysia.

Early Mentions

- The earliest mention of Hanuman is in the Rigveda, dated between 1500 to 1200 BCE. This appears as a dialogue between Lord Indra, his wife Indrani, an energetic monkey called Vrisakapi and his wife Kapi.
- Hanuman receives prominent mention in the Puranas. In a medieval legend dated as early as the 8th century CE, Hanuman is referred to as an avatara of Lord Shiva himself. Besides, ancient texts such as the Mahabhagvata Purana, the Skanda Purana and the Brhaddharma Purana also talk about his strength and power. Interestingly, some legends found in South India talk of Hanuman as the union of Vishnu and Shiva and is even associated with the origin of Lord Ayyappa.
- In the Valmiki Ramayana; composed around the 3rd century BCE; Hanuman is one of the most central figures. The most trusted friend and the main messenger of Lord Rama, he is extolled as the best example of devotion, love, loyalty and strength.

However, it was only in the late medieval era that he emerged into such a pivotal character. This popularity was largely due to the emergence and growth of the Bhakti movement (around the 16th century) and also vernacular texts such as the Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas.

- From around the 17th century, stories and legends began to portray Hanuman as a divine being and an avatara of Shiva himself. He then came to be considered as the champion of the downtrodden, a martial artist par excellence and a highly spiritually evolved yogi as well.

Iconography

Hanuman is depicted as a strong and muscular half-man half-monkey. He is either found being by himself or more commonly, with Rama and Sita. In the latter case, he is shown kneeling on the ground, to the right of Rama, humbly bowing down to him. If alone, he carries weapons such as the Gada (Mace) and/or the Vajra (thunderbolt).



Hanuman with Rama and Sita

The relatively uncommon Panchamukhi Hanuman is a five-headed icon, found in esoteric tantric traditions.

In some parts of North India, he is venerated in the form of a round stone. This helps Yogic focus on his abstract, spiritual form.



Panchmukhi Hanuman

Birth and Childhood

According to Hindu mythology, Hanuman was born to Kesari and Anjana. He is also believed to be the son of Vayu, the Wind God. This is because Vayu had an important role in Hanuman's birth.

One version, as narrated in Eknath's Bhavartha Ramayana, relates that when Anjana was worshipping Shiva, King Dasharatha of Ayodhya was also performing the ritual of the Putrakama Yagna (in order to beget a son). During the course of the Yagna, he received some payasam (pudding) as prasad. He was asked to give the same to his wives. They shared the payasam and soon, became pregnant. Thus, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna were born by divine ordinance.

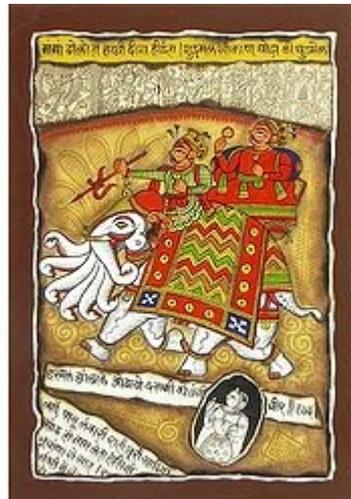
At that time, a kite happened to fly past them. It snatched a little bit from the payasam and accidentally dropped it while flying over the forest where Anjana lived. She was deeply immersed in prayer. Vayu, knowing that she was the one ordained to give birth to a great soul like Hanuman, delivered the falling bit of payasam to the outstretched hands of Anjana. Opening her eyes, she was surprised to see the pudding. Considering it as a blessing from the Lord, she consumed it. Soon, she gave birth to Hanuman.

Hanuman Reaches for the Sun

The Valmiki Ramayana relates several beautiful stories and anecdotes about Hanuman, especially during his childhood. One day, little Hanuman was hungry and was in search of something nice to eat. He saw the rising sun and was immediately attracted to it. Mistaking it for a fruit, he leapt up to consume it.

According to one version, Indra, the King of the Gods, saw what was happening and became worried about the consequences of the little boy eating up the Sun! So he intervened and

struck him with his Vajra (thunderbolt). It hit Hanuman in his jaw and rendered him unconscious. The boy fell to the earth and lay unconscious there. On seeing this, Vayu became upset and completely withdrew unto himself. The lack of air created tremendous suffering throughout the whole world. Knowing how much more chaos this could cause, Prajapati, the God of Life, resuscitated Hanuman and begged Vayu to restore peace to the Earth.



Indra on Airavat

Yet another uncommon version narrates that, after Hanuman leapt towards the Sun, he was burnt to ashes by its heat and intensity. The ashes fell onto the earth and the oceans. The Gods then collected all his ashes and bones, from land and sea. They then reassembled him and made him whole. They only missed a fragment of his jawbone. On his great grandfather's request, Surya (the Sun God) brought the boy back to life. However, Hanuman was left with a permanently disfigured jaw.

Attributes

Hanuman has several extraordinary attributes, such as follows:

Chiranjivi: He is a Chiranjivi or Immortal. Many versions of Ramayana state that, just before Rama and Lakshmana left this mortal world, they blessed Hanuman that he would be immortal.

Kama-Rupin: He is a Kama-rupin - one capable of shifting his shape at will. He has the power to become smaller than an atom and larger than the largest living being. He used this quality to enter Lanka, when he went there in search of Devi Sita. Later, he took a gigantic form, emitting brilliant radiance, in order to show Sita his true power.

Very Strong: Hanuman is extraordinarily strong. He traversed across the mighty ocean with just one leap. He also effortlessly carried an entire mountain to Rama. During the war between Rama and Ravana, Lakshmana was grievously wounded. He could only be healed by a herb called Sanjeevani, which could be found only in one particular Himalayan mountain. Hanuman

reached the mountain in one leap, but could not find the Sanjeevani. Not wanting to waste time, he lifted the entire mountain and carried it back to Sri Lanka, thus saving Lakshmana's life. This is a popular iconography of Hanuman, where he is shown flying high in the sky, carrying a mountain in the palm of his hand. On account of his strength, he is called Vira, Mahavira and Mahabala.



Hanuman lifting a mountain

Clever: Hanuman is also described as someone who is clever and who cannot be easily subdued by his enemies. He faced many difficult situations in his life, but always fought back and emerged the winner. In one instance, after he found Sita in Ashok Van (Ravana's grove), he proceeded back to Rama to relay the good news to him. However, he was caught and arrested at Lanka and was imprisoned and brought before King Ravana. The latter ordered his public execution. Ravana's guards then tied his tail with oiled cloth and set it on fire. The clever and agile Hanuman escaped from their grasp and jumped from one palace rooftop to the other, thus burning down everything in sight. He then went to the seashore and dipped his tail in the sea, to put off the fire in his tail. This and many other stories provide ample proof of his strength and wit. In fact, many scholars aver that Rama could not have won the battle with Ravana, without Hanuman's able support at all times.



Hanuman in Ashok Van

Devoted: Hanuman is considered as the most exemplary devotee of Rama. The Sundara Kanda, the fifth book in the Ramayana, speaks in detail about Hanuman and his love and devotion for Rama. Hanuman met his Lord in the last year of the latter's 14-year exile. By this time, Ravana had kidnapped Sita and Rama was in search of her, along with his brother Lakshmana. Hindu texts such as the Bhagavata Purana, the Ananda Ramayana, the Bhakta Mala and the Ramcharitmanas portray him as a mighty, brave, highly spiritual being, entirely devoted to Rama. He is once said to have torn open his own chest to reveal the presence of Rama and Sita in his heart. This is yet another popular depiction of Hanuman, with his Ishta Devata residing in his heart.

Remover of Obstacles: In devotional literature, Hanuman is revered as the remover of obstacles. Besides, he was a highly learned scholar, had full knowledge of the Vedas and Vedantic philosophy, was a poet, singer and musician, a polymath and a grammarian par excellence.

In the Mahabharata

Hanuman enjoys pride of place in the Mahabharata as well. In Vana Parva, Book 3 of the epic, he is described as the half-brother of the Pandava Prince, Bheema. The latter accidentally meets him on his way to Kailasa. Hanuman lay in the middle of the narrow path, his tail blocking the road. Arrogant about his strength, Bheema attempted to move Hanuman's tail. However, despite putting in all his might, he could not move it even an inch. He then realized that this was no ordinary monkey. On knowing the monkey's real identity, Bheema was completely humbled.

This legend is part of the artwork and reliefs in many temples, including those at the Vijayanagara ruins.

Hanuman's image was also present on the flag of Arjuna's chariot. It was symbolic of Hanuman himself sitting atop the chariot, protecting the warrior. Lord Krishna himself was Arjuna's charioteer during the Great War of Kurukshetra. However, he knew that having Hanuman protect him would further ensure his victory against the Kauravas. Hanuman belonged to the Maharathi Class of warriors. However, his extraordinary strength made him fit to be venerated as an Atimharathi.



Arjuna's Chariot with Hanuman on Top

During the Treta Yuga, Hanuman had offered himself as a sort of shield to protect Rama and his entire Vanara Sena (Army of Monkeys). Twice, he had resisted the impact of the all-powerful Brahmastra. He had also remained unaffected even when attacked by Shiva's Pashupatastra.

Considering the above, Krishna knew that having Hanuman's grace would protect Arjuna from all deadly weapons and ensure his triumph over the enemy.

Is Hanuman Married?

Traditionally, it is believed that Hanuman is a Brahmachari or celibate. He had only Rama and Sita in his heart. His whole heart was filled with his Ishta Devata and so, he decided that he did not want anyone else to come and occupy that sacred space.

However, some Southeast Asian versions suggest that he was married to Ravana's daughter, Suvannamaccha (literally meaning, "golden fish"). She was a mermaid-like creature. Her main aim was to spoil Hanuman's efforts to build a bridge to Lanka. However, she failed in all her attempts to do so and, instead, fell in love with him.

Yet other versions state that Hanuman was married to Suvarchala, the daughter of Surya. Suvarchala was an ayoniya (the one born without the participation of the yoni, that is, one who was not born of sexual contact). Hanuman wanted to learn the Nava Vyakaranas and for that, he compulsorily had to get married. However, he had already taken the vow of being an Ajanma Brahmachari (life-long bachelor). Hence, Surya created Suvarchala with his spiritual energy and granted Hanuman a boon that he would always remain a celibate even after marriage.

Some scholars aver that Suvarchala was only a divine energy and not an actual human person. She was born from the grace of the Sun God and was then associated with Hanuman. Besides, some ritual forms of worship stipulate that deities must be accompanied by their respective

Shaktis (female counterparts), specific vahanas (vehicles) or ayudhas (weapons). They could also have necessitated Hanuman to have his own divine feminine companion.

Makaradhwaja - Hanuman's Son

Makaradhwaja is Hanuman's son - he makes a brief appearance in the Valmiki Ramayana. After setting the whole of Lanka on fire, Hanuman decided to take a dip in the cool waters of the sea. As he was sitting by the sea, a drop of his perspiration fell into the mouth of Makara, a mighty fish-cum-reptile-like creature. She instantly became pregnant.

The fish was caught by the fisherfolk of Ahiravana, who ruled Patala, the Netherworld. Cutting open her stomach, they discovered the unborn fish in there and named the young one after its mother. Seeing his great strength and agility, Ahiravana gave him the responsibility of guarding the gates of his kingdom.

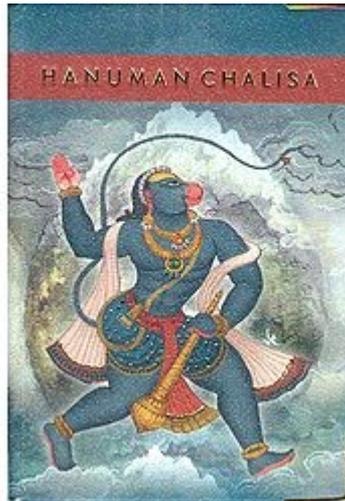
When Hanuman went to Patala to rescue Rama and Lakshmana from there, he was stopped at the gate by Makaradhwaja. He proudly introduced himself as Hanuman's son and said that he would have to fight and defeat him before entering the kingdom. Initially, Hanuman refused to believe that he had a son. However, when he went into dhyana (meditation), he recollected the past events and the situations leading to his son's birth.

When Makaradhwaja realized that this was his own father, he took his blessings, but insisted that he would not be able to enter Patala without fighting him. Hanuman defeated Makaradhwaja with ease, securely bound him and then went on to kill Ahiravana and rescue Rama and Lakshmana.

Later, on Rama's advice, Hanuman installed Makaradhwaja as the King of Patala, before returning to Lanka.

Hanuman Chalisa

In the 16th century, poet Tulsidas penned the Hanuman Chalisa, a set of forty chaupais or quatrains dedicated to Hanuman. He is believed to have had visions, where he met Hanuman face-to-face. Even now, this hymn is considered to be sacrosanct and is chanted by Hindus all over the world.



Hanuman Chalisa

In Other Cultures

- Hanuman is venerated in various other South East Asian and Buddhist cultures, including Tibetan and Khotanese (west China, central Asia and northern Iran) cultures. In Japan, icons of Saruta Biko, the divine monkey, guard temples such as Saru-gami at Hie Shrine. In Sri Lanka too, one can find several legends related to Hanuman. In the Sinhalese versions, the characters have Buddhist themes, also mentioning him meeting with the Buddha.
- In Cambodia, Hanuman is adored as a heroic figure in Khmer history. He features in the Reamker, a Cambodian epic poem, based on the Ramayana. Elaborate carvings from the scenes of the Ramayana can be found, even today, on the walls of Angkor Wat.
- In Bali, Indonesia, Hanuman is a central character in many dance and drama works, such as Wayang Wong. These arts can be traced as early as the 10th century.
- The Jain version of the Ramayana mentions Hanuman not as a divine monkey, but as a Vidyadhara; a demigod or supernatural being. Here, he is not celibate, but instead, is a sexually active entity. He marries princess Anangakusuma, the daughter of Kharadushana and Ravana's sister, Chandranakha. Ravana is also believed to have presented one of his nieces as a second wife. Eventually, Hanuman renounces worldly life and becomes a Jain ascetic.
- Hanuman is also venerated among the Sikh community, as a siddha beyond compare.

Temples Dedicated to the Worship of Hanuman

There are several temples and shrines dedicated to the worship of Hanuman. To Hindus, Tuesdays and Saturdays are the most popular days for Hanuman worship. The following are some of the oldest and biggest temples:

The temple at Khajuraho is the oldest known Hanuman temple. Others include the Jakhu temple in Shimla; the Veera Abhaya Anjaneya Swami (which stands 135 feet tall) at Paritala in

Andhra Pradesh; the Hanuman Dhara temple in Chitrakoot, which features the Panchamukhi Hanuman; the Sholinghur Sri Yoga Narasimha Swami Temple and Sri Yoga Anjaneyar Temple in Vellore District; a monumental statue of Hanuman in Nerul, Navi Mumbai; another imposing statue at the Ragigudda Anjaneya Temple and many, many more.

Hanuman, being a popular God, one can find an immense number of temples all over India and abroad. Practically every locality in Indian villages, towns and cities has at least one little roadside Hanuman temple, which is frequently visited by people in and around that area.

Festivals

Hanuman features prominently in annual Ramlila celebrations in India and abroad. The Ramlila is a dramatic musical presentation of the Ramayana and is popular in North India and parts of Southeast Asia.

Some Hindus celebrate Hanuman Jayanti (his birthday), which falls in the traditional month of Chaitra in the lunisolar Hindu calendar (sometime in March/April). In parts of South India, however, Hanuman Jayanti is observed in the Tamil month of Margazhi, which falls in December/January.

On this day, devotees gather at temples before sunrise and undertake day-long spiritual and ritual celebrations.

Vibhishana

Vibhishana, who features prominently in the Ramayana, was one of the rulers of Lanka. The younger brother of the Demon King Ravana, Vibhishana was a noble soul (in spite of being a demon himself). He always remained on the side of the Dharma and often advised his brothers to stay away from adharmic activities.

Vibhishana was very upset when Ravana abducted Sita and kept her captive at Ashokvan. He requested him, several times, to return her to her husband Rama. However, his pleas fell on deaf ears - Ravana refused to heed his words. Eventually, Vibhishana gave up and joined Rama's army. After Ravana was killed, Rama crowned Vibhishana as the king of Lanka.

In the Ramayana

Vibhishana was the youngest son of Kaikesi and Sage Vishrava, who was the son of Sage Pulatsya. Incidentally, Sage Pulatsya was one of Heaven's Guardians. Ravana and Kumbhakarna (the King of Sleep) were his other brothers.

Soorpanakha was his sister and Kubera (the God of Wealth) was his half-brother.

From early childhood, Vibhishana had a pure and pious heart. He considered himself to be a

Brahmin and spent much time meditating on the name of the Lord. Finally, Lord Brahma appeared before him and told him to ask for any boon he wished. To this, he replied that the only thing he ever wanted was that he should remain devoted to his Lord, at all times, throughout his life. He also prayed that he should always have the good fortune of getting the darshan of Lord Vishnu. Pleased, Brahma granted him his wish and disappeared.

Now, Ravana was always hungry for wealth and power - he also wanted the throne for himself. Due to irreconcilable differences of opinion with him; especially due to the fact that Ravana had abducted Sita; Vibhishana decided to flee Lanka. Their mother, Kaikesi, advised him to go meet Lord Rama and serve him. At that time, Rama was in the process of assembling his Vanara Sena (Army of Monkeys) to fight and defeat Ravana and bring back Sita.

Vibhishana Meets Rama

One day, when Rama and Sita were worshipping the Shivalinga at Rameswaram, Vibhishana looked on at this devout couple. He instantly knew they were no ordinary human beings and sensed their divinity right away.

After they had finished their prayers, Vibhishana walked up to them, introduced himself and related his desire of serving Rama. He then divulged the secrets of Ravana's army and tirelessly worked to ensure Rama's victory in his ensuing battle with Ravana.

Vibhishana proved to be an invaluable asset to Rama. In fact, he emerged as one of the key factors of Rama's triumph. He divulged many a secret of Lanka, including a hidden path to the temple of Mata Nikumbala, the Kuladevata (family deity) of the Pulatsya Clan. He then also disclosed the only way Rama would be able to kill Ravana - by shooting an arrow on his Nabhi (navel); wherein was stored the Devamrita (Nectar of Immortality).

Symbolically, Vibhishana embodies total and complete devotion to Lord Rama. This story also clearly indicates that, in order to live a Brahmin's life, you do not need to be born as a Brahmin. That status comes from good behavior and not from birth or family background. The legend further illustrates the fact that God does not distinguish between his devotees based on birth, caste or other conditions. His Grace flows on those who keep up their faith and uphold the Dharma under all circumstances.

Once Vibhishana was crowned as the King of Lanka, he ruled wisely and never ever swerved from dharma and discharging his duties to the best of his abilities. His wife, Queen Sarama, was equally pious and devoted and helped him in his efforts. They had one daughter, named Trijata.

Just before leaving for Ayodhya, Rama appeared in his original form of Shri Maha Vishnu and advised Vibhishana to stay on Earth and serve his subjects; adhering to the highest morals and

values. Vishnu also told him to henceforth pray to the family deity of Rama's Suryavansha (Sun Dynasty), Lord Ranganatha (also a form of Vishnu).

In the Mahabharata

Vibhishana also features in the Mahabharata. In this epic, he is associated with the legend of the Ranganathaswamy temple at Srirangam. This temple is considered to be the Bhooloka Vaikuntha or the abode of Sri Maha Vishnu on Earth. As the legend goes, during the Pattabhishekha (coronation ceremony) of Rama, Vibhishana was presented with the sacrosanct Sri Ranga Vimana. After the function was over, he proceeded back towards Lanka, carrying it with him. Midway through his journey, he wanted some rest and placed the image on the banks of the Kaveri River.

After performing his routine round of poojas, he tried to lift the Vimana, but could not move it an inch. Dismayed at the thought that he had sinned in some way, he prayed to Vishnu. The latter appeared before him and said that he desired to stay on as Ranganatha in that place. This location went on to become the sacred Srirangam. Vishnu also said that he desired to watch the Brahmotsavam ceremony at Tirucherai. Thus, the festivals of this temple are held in a grand manner, to please Sri Maha Vishnu.

In Other Cultures

During the Kotte period (around the 15th century), Sinhalese considered Vibhishana as one of the four Heavenly Kings (satara varam deviyo). He is still worshipped as a deity and enjoys a few followers, particularly in the Kelaniya area.

According to the Six Adventures of the Razmnama (Book of War), which is a Persian translation of the Mahabharata, Vibhishana stole the horse which was sent out by Arjuna during his Ashwamedha Yagna. When Arjuna came to know about this, he accosted the former and recovered the horse from him.

Kripacharya

Kripa, also known as Kripacharya, is yet another important character in the Mahabharata. He was the son of Shardwana and Janapadi. He and his twin sister, Kripi, were adopted by King Shantanu. Kripi later went on to marry Drona. A mighty Maharathi, Kripa fought on the side of the Kauravas during the Great War of Kurukshetra. Considered to be among the foremost of Rishis (sages), Kripa is also one of the Saptarishis in the 8th Manvantara.

Birth

Maharishi Gautama had a grandson called Shardwana. He was named thus, as he was born with arrows. This made it clear to everyone that he was born to become an archer. As he grew up, the boy showed great skill in archery. He then started undertaking penance in order to become an unbeatable one. This made the Gods, especially Indra (the God of the Gods) uncomfortable

and insecure. Indra sent a beautiful Apsara, Janapadi, to distract him from his penance.

Seeing Janapadi, Shardwana was immediately smitten and completely lost control of himself. Highly disturbed, he dropped his weapons and retreated into the forest to undergo more severe penance. His semen fell on some weeds growing by the wayside. This divided the weeds into two. A boy and a girl were born from each of these two sections.

Shantanu, who then ruled over Hastinapura, happened to pass through that path. Seeing these radiant infants, he instantly knew they were no ordinary children and that they came from a great Brahmin. He named the boy and girl Kripa and Kripi respectively and took them to his palace.

Kripa and Kripi Train in Archery

When Shardwana came to know that two children were born of him, he went to the palace and told the king about their true identity. He then performed several rituals for their health and happiness and also taught them the Vedas, Shastras and archery as well.

With time, the children grew up to become masters in the art of warfare. Kripa, especially, was an expert in employing all forms of weapons and combat skills. On reaching the right age, Kripa was assigned to train young princes about warfare. He was also appointed as the chief priest of the court at Hastinapura. In the meantime, his sister Kripi married Drona, the teacher of the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

During the Kurukshetra War, Kripa was one of the three surviving members in the Kaurava side. He was later appointed as the teacher of Parikshit, Arjuna's grandson.

Why Kripa Never Became the Commander-in-Chief

During the War of Kurukshetra, Kripacharya, as he was later addressed, was never made the Commander-in-Chief of the Kaurava army, even after the demise of Bheeshma and Dronacharya. There are a few probable reasons for this, as follows:

- Though all the great warriors including Bheeshma, Dronacharya and Kripacharya were fighting on the side of the Kauravas, Duryodhana was well aware of the affection all of them had for the Pandavas. He sensed that he could not place complete trust in them at all times. Duryodhana never really trusted anyone, except Karna. He knew that all the other Maharathis believed that the Pandavas would eventually triumph, since they were on the path of the Dharma.
- Duryodhana knew that Karna had no actual interest in the war. He merely wanted to defeat the Pandavas at all costs; he especially wanted to see the fall of Arjuna. Once Arjuna was defeated, the rest of the Pandavas would succumb easily. Duryodhana wanted to see to it that he scored an early victory over the Pandavas. That is why he wanted Karna as the Commander-in-Chief, after Bhisma and Drona fell during the war.

- Duryodhana asked Karna to occupy the coveted position right after Bheeshma's fall. However, the latter insisted that Drona lead the army instead. Hence, he was the obvious choice to take over after Drona's death.
- As a warrior, Karna was far superior to Kripacharya. Kripa was the official Guru and trainer of the Kauravas, besides also being a direct relative of Dronacharya. However, because Karna was much stronger and more capable and also had made a solemn vow to kill the Pandavas, he was the right choice to take over as General of the Kaurava army.

As a Chiranjivi

Kripacharya is one of the most remarkable characters in the Mahabharata. He is considered to be a special entity, for a variety of reasons:

- He was not born from the human womb - his birth was ordained by the divine. He came to earth with a mission and stayed on to fulfill the same. His undying loyalty and adherence to the Dharma is what made him such a luminous figure in the epic.
- Kripa taught the art of warfare to both the Pandavas and the Kauravas. He was impartial at all times. He fought on the Kauravas' side, in spite of knowing that they were adharmic. This is because he owed allegiance to the Kauravas, who had offered him shelter, nurtured him and encouraged him to become the powerful figure he now was.
- Kripa was a powerful Maharathi. He had the ability to effortlessly destroy mighty armies. The Mahabharata states that, in valor, he is comparable only to Karthikeya, the Son of Lord Shiva himself.

Due to his strict adherence to Dharma and righteousness, Lord Krishna conferred the blessing of being a Chiranjivi on him. Very few personalities were fortunate enough to achieve this rare honor. Even the Pandavas could not attain immortality, in spite of being extremely close to Krishna.

Parashurama

Lord Parashurama is the sixth avatara of Sri Maha Vishnu. He is alternatively referred to as Rama Jamadagnya and Rama Bhargava.

Parashurama does not feature in early Vedic literature. His initial mention is found in the Ramayana. He is also mentioned in the Mahabharata, but with several other names.

Iconography

Parashurama is commonly depicted as a powerfully built man with matted locks, with two hands; one carrying an axe. In the Agni Purana, however, he is shown with four hands, carrying an axe, bow, arrow and sword. In the Bhagavata Purana, his icon has four hands, carrying an

axe, bow, arrows and a shield, like a warrior.

In Hindu temples, he is usually shown having two hands, one holding an axe in his right hand. He is depicted either seated or standing. It is only in the Basohli temple where he is represented in a war scene, inside a temple.



Parashurama

Legends

Some legends state that Parashurama was the fifth son of sage Jamadagni and his wife Renuka. The pious couple led a simple life and lived in a small hut. They had a celestial cow called Surabhi, who gave them all they desired.

A king named Arjuna Kartavirya learnt about the cow and wanted to have it for himself. He asked Jamadagni to give it to him. The sage, however, refused to part with it. Enraged at being insulted thus, the king hatched an evil plot. When Parashurama was away one day, he came and took the animal by force. When the former came to know about this, he got very upset, took up his axe and challenged the king to battle. In the ensuing fight, the king was slain at the hands of Parashurama. After that, he continued to kill everyone that ever dared to challenge him.

According to some versions, after his martial exploits, Parashurama returned to his father's residence with the Surabhi cow. He told him about all the battles that he had had to fight so far. Hearing about all this, sage Jamadagni became angry. He reprimanded his son for killing a king, in spite of being a Brahmin himself. He asked his son to wash off his sins by going on a long pilgrimage. On his return from the pilgrimage, Parashurama was told that his father was killed by warriors seeking revenge. He again picked up his axe and killed several hundreds of warriors in retaliation. Eventually, feeling disillusioned by it all, he renounced everything, decided to live in a remote place and took up Yoga.

Parashurama is infamous for his extreme anger, violent deeds and then repentance for having committed those deeds in rage.

In the Ramayana

Rama lifted, strung and broke the Shiva Dhanush during Sita's swayamvara, thereby winning her hand in marriage. When Parashurama came to know of this, he became angry. He had learnt archery from Lord Shiva himself and could not imagine how a mere Kshatriya prince could have managed to accomplish such a feat.

As Rama was heading back to Ayodhya with his father Dasharatha, new wife Sita and the rest of the entourage, Parashurama confronted them and blocked their way ahead. A battle ensued between him and Rama. The former fought with his Parashu or axe, while Rama replied to each strike with his bow, the Kodanda. As they continued to battle against each other, their eyes met. They instantly realized that they but different incarnations of the same Supreme Power, Maha Vishnu.

Instantly, the Vishnu aspect of Parashurama merged itself with Rama. He realized that his avatara had reached the end of its time in this mortal world and that he had fulfilled his divine mission on earth. He asked Rama to shoot a final arrow towards the horizon, saying that he would settle down in the place where the arrow landed. He followed the arrow and then went back to his hermitage in the Mahendra Mountain, where he spends his time in deep meditation.

In the Mahabharata

Parashurama enjoys a pivotal position in the Mahabharata. Here, he is shown as a sage, accomplished Brahmin warrior and a teacher of the martial arts. However, the Mahabharata does not extol him as an avatara of Vishnu. That occurs only in the Puranas.

In chapter 3.33, he is the grandson of Satyavati and the son of princess Renuka. In chapter 6 of the Devi Bhagavata Purana, he is born with an intense aura emanating from him. This effulgence is so strong that it blinds all warriors. They are instantly blinded and then start repenting for their deeds. They promise to lead a dharmic life if their vision is restored. Young Parashurama then gifts them the boon of sight.

Parashurama is usually depicted as the angry Brahmin wielding an ace, killing a huge number of Kshatriya warriors, because they were abusing their powers. In some versions, he even killed his own mother, because his father ordered him to do so. According to this legend, Jamadagni told his son that his mother was having lustful thoughts after seeing a young couple frolicking in the water. Not one to defy his father's orders, Parashurama did as he was told.

Pleased, Jamadagni told him to ask for a boon. Young Parashurama asked that his mother's life

be restored. His father readily agreed and brought her back to life. However, the youngster was so affected by the needless violence that he left to a remote place in order to repent for his terrible sins.

In the Mahabharata, Parashurama serves as a mentor to Bheeshma, Drona and Karna, teaching them the art of weaponry and also helping the main warriors in both the Pandava and Kaurava camps, during the Great War of Kurukshetra.

Hindus in Kerala believe that he is the founder of the land and that he brought it out of the sea and settled the Hindu community there.

Parashurama is the only avatara of Vishnu who never dies. He lives in a deep meditative state in the Mahendra Mountain. He is also the only avatara who co-exists with the Rama and Krishna avataras.

Parashurama Kshetra

The Indian state of Kerala and some of the areas nearby, including the Malabar Coast and even parts of Konkan, are sometimes considered as Parashurama Kshetra (area of Parashurama).

The ancient Saptakonkana is also referred to as Parashurama Kshetra. The Seven Mukthi Kshetras, which are also known as Parashurama Srishti, include Udupi, Kumbashi, Kukka Subramanya, Koteshwara, Shankaranarayana, Kolluru and Gokarna.

Lesser-Known Facts about Parashurama

- He received his famous axe (Parashu) from Shiva himself, after undertaking severe penance to please him. Shiva also taught him the martial arts. The Lord asked him to liberate Mother Earth from felons, demons and adharmic people.



Axe of Parashurama

- Once, Shiva, wanting to test his devotee's skills, challenged Parashurama to engage him in warfare. Both fought tirelessly for twenty-one days. While ducking to avoid being hit by Shiva's Trishula (Trident), Parashurama accidentally struck the axe on the Lord's forehead, thus creating a wound there. Shiva was pleased to see his disciple's power and might.
- He is most known for his merciless massacre of Kshatriyas, twenty-one times.
- He actually fought back the advancing seas in order to save the lands of Kerala and Konkan.
- After reclaiming the land of Konkan, Parashurama requested different deities to settle in the newly created land. He also asked Shiva to give him darshan every day, as long as he lived on this Earth. Further, he also brought 60 "Vipras" to settle in the Konkan region.
- Parashurama is the Kula Guru (family Guru) of the Bharadwaja Gotra. His father, Jamadagni, was a direct descendant of Lord Brahma.
- Parashurama clipped the thousand arms of Kartavirya Arjuna (also called Sahasrarjuna) with his axe and then killed him. He singlehandedly resisted the latter's army by showering arrows on them. In appreciation of this feat, Lord Indra presented his most beloved bow called Vijaya to Parashurama.
- According to the Puranas, the mighty Brahmin warrior was once on his way to the Himalayas to visit Shiva. Halfway through, his path was blocked by Ganesha, the Son of Shiva and Parvati. Enraged, Parashurama threw his axe at the Elephant-Headed Lord. Aware of the man's true identity and knowing that the axe was gifted by his father, Ganesha quietly allowed it to sever his left tusk.
- He once became irritated with Surya, the Sun God, as it had become too hot. In anger, he shot numerous arrows into the sky, thus scaring Surya. When he ran out of arrows, he asked his wife Dharani to go bring more. Surya then focused his rays on her, making her faint and fall to the ground. Surya then appeared before the warrior sage and presented him with sandals and an umbrella.
- According to the Nath tradition, Parashurama was deeply disturbed after carrying out all the killings. He visited Mount Gandhamadana to seek Dattatreya for spiritual solace and guidance. The conversation between them gave rise to the Tripura-rahasya, a treatise on Advaita Vedanta.
- He and Sage Agastya, one of the Saptarishis, are believed to be the founders of Kalaripayattu, the oldest martial art form in the world. He also developed Vadakkan Kalari (or Northern Kalari), which places more emphasis on using weapons.
- He traveled across central and north eastern India, before settling in the Mahendra Mountains. Before he became a sanyasi, he distributed the territories he had conquered among a clan of Brahmins, who were called Bhumihaar. They ruled for many centuries, forming dynasties such as the Cheras, Pandyas, Mushika, Dravida, Karnata and Konkana.
- The Kalki Purana states that he will reemerge at the end of the present Kaliyuga, as the martial and spiritual guru of Sri Kalki, the tenth and final avatara of Sri Maha

Vishnu. It is believed that he will teach Kalki to perform a terrible penance to please Shiva, so that he can receive the celestial weaponry required to bring about an end to this present epoch.

- Parashurama, who is considered to be the foremost rishi in the Kaliyuga, will also go on to become one of the Saptarishis in the 8th Manvantara.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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