

Introduction to Vedic Knowledge

third volume:

**The Fifth Veda
Itihasas and Puranas**

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Mahabharata and Bhagavad gita

We have seen that Vyasa, worried by the decline in the intellectual and moral faculties of the human beings, proceeded to compile collections of Vedic hymns and rituals and to write explanations to help people understanding them. The texts resulting from the work of Vyasa and his disciples were still difficult to interpret, and therefore they were meant to be studied by the most intelligent and reflective people in society, especially *brahmanas*, and in some measure also by the *kshatriyas* and *vaisyas*, who are responsible for the material and spiritual progress of the entire society. Thus, something had to be done for the *sudras*, those who do not have special intellectual capacities, and are not attracted by austerity and meditation. Besides, Vyasa knew that with the progression of Kali yuga even the people who were usually qualified as "twice born" would become degraded and that at some point the almost totality of the people would become unable to understand the deep symbolism of the Vedic hymns and sacrifice rituals.

Therefore he composed that part of Vedic literature that could become particularly popular also among the simple-minded people, and that could carry a great

quantity of spiritual, philosophical, theological and moral teachings within a format of thrilling adventures.

These scriptures are called *Puranas* ("ancient stories") and *Itihasas* ("stories" or "epic poems") and contain an extraordinary mixture of adventure stories, historical facts, epic poetry and allegories, into which the writer has woven a series of philosophical and theological dialogues between the protagonists of the stories - some of whom are divine manifestations or *avatars*.

Due to the wealth of knowledge they contain, these texts are also called "the fifth *Veda*", for example by the *Chandogya Upanisad* (7.1.4) and *Bhagavata Purana* (1.4.20), and have been recognized as integral parts of Vedic literature. In his commentary to the *Vedanta sutra* (2.1.6) Madhvacharya writes, "*Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda, Mahabharata, Pancharatra* and the original *Ramayana*, as well as the *Puranas*, are all considered Vedic scriptures."

The texts known as *Itihasas* ("stories") - including *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* - are sometimes collectively called *Itivritta* ("chronicles"), *Akhyayika* ("tales") or *Udaharana* ("examples"), are also considered elaborations and commentaries to the core of Vedic knowledge. One of these collections that has become particularly famous is the *Panchatantra* (not to be confused with the *Pancharatra*, that is a *smriti* text on ritual procedures), a series of educational tales told by a wise *brahmana* to the young princes he was tutoring.

The most important text of this "fifth *Veda*" is *Bhagavad gita*, which is part of the epic *Mahabharata* (from chapter 25 to chapter 42 of the volume entitled *Bishma parva*): all the great *acharyas* such as Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhva have written commentaries on this fundamental text of Hinduism. As we have already mentioned, it is one of the *prasthanaya traya*, "the three starting points" from which one should begin to study Vedic knowledge - the other two being the *Upanishads* and *Vedanta sutra* or *Brahma sutra*.

In fact, we can say that more commentaries have been written on *Bhagavad gita* than on any other philosophical or literary work in history. Famous is also the glorification of *Gita* (*Gita mahatmya*) written by Adi Shankaracharya. *Gita* has shaped the life of India on the social, ethical, cultural and political levels, contributing to the development of generations of thinkers, philosophers, theologians, educationists, scientists and writers in the West, too.

To better understand *Bhagavad gita* we should study it in its context, the *Mahabharata*, that is the most voluminous epic poem in world literature. With almost 2 millions words, part in verses and part in prose, is about four times longer than *Ramayana* and 10 times larger than *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.

The only complete translation of *Mahabharata* in English is the one produced by Kisari Mohan Ganguli between 1883 and 1896, but there are numerous summaries, of which the most famous was written by

Rajagopalachari. Innumerable dance and drama works, especially in the east (including Bali, Thailand etc) are inspired by the stories of this epic, the most important being the Yakshagana (a dance-drama style from Karnataka) and Kathakali (a dance-drama style from Kerala).

In the West, the *Mahabharata* has become famous especially through the rendition by Peter Brook, a 9 hour play that was staged for the first time in 1985 at Avignon in France, and then turned into a five hour movie in 1989.

In this chapter we will try to give a clear and complete summary, that will enable the readers to understand the ideological dynamics of the story.

The original text, written by Ganesha under Vyasa's dictation, was given by Vyasa (also called Krishna Dvaipayana) to his son Sukadeva and to his disciples Vaisampayana and Romaharshana Suta. Romaharshana narrated it to the Rishis in Naimisharanya (a forest that was in the locality of Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh) headed by Saunaka Rishi, during a sacrifice ritual that was meant to last for 1000 years. Suta gave the text to his son Ugrasrava, who had originally heard it from Vaisampayana in the assembly of Maharaja Janamejaya, Arjuna's grandson.

The core of the story, called *Jaya* and consisting of 24,000 verses, is the dialogue between the regent king Dhritarastra and his advisor and charioteer Sanjaya, on what is happening on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

According to the *Mahabharata* itself (1.1.61) and the *Asvalayana Grihasutra* (3.4.4), the other verses have been added later. Some interpret verse 1.1.81 to mean that Vyasa's original *Jaya* only had 8800 verses (from the arrival of the armies at Kurukshetra to the end of the battle) while the version recited by Vaisampayana, called *Bharata*, was 24,000 verses and the final version, called *Mahabharata* and narrated by Ugrasrava Sauti, is the one with 110,000 verses. The text is divided into 18 *Parvas* or "books", to which more minor *Parvas* were added for a total of 100 (mentioned in verse 1.2.70). Often, as an appendix to the *Mahabharata* we find the famous text *Hari vamsa*, that describes Krishna's dynasty. The introductory verse to the original core of the *Mahabharata* recites:

*narayanam namaskritya naram caiva narottamam
devim sarasvatim vyasam tato jayam udirayet*

"Before enunciating this *Jaya* we offer our homage to Narayana, to Nara (the greatest of human beings), to Sarasvati Devi and Vyasa."

The most elaborate and complete text of the *Mahabharata* begins with a "prequel" on the ancestors of the Pandavas, the relatives and friends of Krishna. It is important to understand that the Pandavas are not ordinary people, but they are direct manifestations of divine principles, descended to this planet to assist Krishna's mission, that is described in detail in the *Bhagavata purana* - to which the *Mahabharata* is directly connected.

The adventures of these characters can be read at many levels, from the deepest symbolism revealing the stages of the individual's spiritual realization and the blueprint of the cosmic manifestation, to the simplest and most immediate level showing how adharmic motivations, material attachments, personality defects and selfish choices produce disastrous results both individually and socially, while faithfulness to *dharma*, detachment and a proper sense of duty enable us to properly perform our work in this world.

Besides, just like the Pandavas were comforted in their tribulations by the Rishis telling them the stories of great personalities that bravely faced difficulties and sufferings, we can also find solace and inspiration in their story.

We will now give a short summary of the text.

The ***Adi Parva*** ("the book of the beginning") starts with the assembly of king Saunaka Kulapati, where the Rishis engaged in the sacrifice are sitting together to hear edifying stories about the great personalities of the past. Specifically, the son of Romaharshana Suta speaks of a similar assembly, called by king Janamejaya (Abhimanyu's son), where the story of the Pandavas was told. There are also some other short and deeply symbolical stories, such as those of king Pausya, Rishi Puloma and Astika (respectively occupying the *Pausya Parva*, *Puloma Parva* and *Astika Parva*),

The *Adi-vamsa-vatarana Parva* ("the book of the beginning of the dynasty") narrates that according to the pledge given by his father Pratip, emperor Santanu married Goddess Ganga, the personification of the sacred river, generating an extraordinary son named Devavrata, who was later known as Bhishma. Because he was unable to deeply understand the divine motives and accept them without discussion, Santanu lost his extraordinary wife and after several years of unhappy solitary life he met a beautiful girl, Satyavati (who had already become the mother of Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*), belonging to a community of fishermen on river Yamuna.

Satyavati's father was flattered by the emperor's interest, and anxious to procure the greatest possible advantage to his own family, gave his consent to the marriage only on the condition that Satyavati's sons would become the legitimate heirs instead of the eldest son Bhishma. The young prince saw his father tortured by inner conflicts, and out of love for him he decided to renounce the imperial throne himself, and even pledged to remain a lifelong celibate so that there would be no descendants of his who could claim a right to the throne in the future. This terrible sacrifice (*bhishma* precisely means "terrible") did not just damage Bhishma's personal life, but also put the kingdom in great peril; therefore it constituted the first step towards the disastrous series of events that led to the final battle meant to eliminate the excess of the adharmic military forces on the planet and to inaugurate the age of

quarrel and hypocrisy called Kali yuga ("the black age"). Thus the origin of all such disasters can clearly be traced to the greed and arrogance of Satyavati's father, to Santanu's lust and to Bhishma's material attachment towards his father, because of which he sacrificed the future of the kingdom. These are the real causes that created the unstable situation in the succession to the throne.

Satyavati's sons, Citrangada and Vicitravirya, did not have the qualities required for a king and were unable to rule the kingdom. Citrangada died very young without leaving any sons, and Vicitravirya ascended the throne but he was so weak and impotent that the family elders sent his stepbrother Bhishma in his stead to participate to the *svayamvara* (the traditional marriage tournament among the suitors, that allowed the *kshatriya* girls to choose a suitable husband) of the princesses of Kasi (Benares) Amba, Ambika and Ambalika.

Bhishma was a powerful warrior and had no difficulties in winning the hand of all three girls, but unfortunately the eldest sister - Amba - was not happy to learn that she was going to marry Bhishma's stepbrother and not Bhishma himself. So she decided to step back from the marriage and as Bhishma allowed her to do whatever she wanted, she went to propose marriage to Shalva, another great warrior that had taken part in the *svayamvara* but had been defeated.

Shalva's hurt pride prevented him to accept the proposal and Amba was frustrated in her plans. She

decided she would then propose marriage to Bhishma, who after all had won her hand in the tournament in front of all the warriors, but Bhishma had taken the lifelong celibacy vow. Furious, Amba swore to avenge the outrage and to have Bhishma killed. One after the other, all the great warriors approached by Amba for that purpose refused to engage in such an impossible venture, because everyone considered Bhishma totally invincible. In the end, Amba decided to take care of her business herself and created a new male identity for herself, becoming the adopted son of king Drupada and getting personally trained in combat with the sole purpose of killing Bhishma on the battlefield.

The other 2 princesses, Ambika and Ambalika, were still childless when Vicitravirya died prematurely of "weakness". Then Satyawati decided to resort to an old tradition, by which the brother of a deceased king could intervene personally to give a son to his sister in law - and she called her son Vyasadeva to the court.

Ambika's son Dhritarastra was born first, but he was blind, and therefore he was excluded from the succession as his handicap prevented him to effectively take part in the protection of the subjects. Ambalika's son Pandu was not very strong either; the name *pandu* means "pale" and is used in Ayurvedic medicine to describe the characteristic complexion of those who suffer from a liver condition.

Vyasa was therefore asked to beget another son, but the princesses had been unhappy about the proposal

from the very start, and now they refused to cooperate any more. They sent their handmaiden instead, and she gave birth to Vidura, who was perfectly healthy and virtuous and later became *mahamantri* ("prime minister") of the kingdom, although he never personally occupied the throne.

Pandu was officially crowned the king, but after a short time he retired to the forest with his two wives Kunti and Madri, to perform austerities and atone for a hunting accident, in which he had inadvertently killed Kindama Rishi while the Rishi was engaged in sexual activities with his own wife, within the privacy of a thick grove. During his stay in the forest, Pandu had five sons, that became known as the "five Pandavas". The birth of these boys was truly extraordinary.

Kindama Rishi had cursed Pandu with instant death as soon as he would begin sexual intercourse, so it was impossible for him to beget an heir to the kingdom. In that circumstance, Kunti revealed that some years earlier she had received a special *mantra* from Durvasa Rishi, by which she could call a Deva and get a son from him. With Pandu's permission, Kunti evoked Yama (the Deva of death and justice), Vayu (the Deva of wind) and Indra (the Deva of lightning and rains, the king of the higher planets) giving birth respectively to Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna. Pandu's second wife (Madri) borrowed the *mantra* from Kunti and used it to call the Asvini kumaras (the two Devas who are the heavenly physicians) who became the fathers of Nakula and Sahadeva.

However, Kunti chose not to reveal that before her marriage she had already used the *mantra* out of sheer curiosity, innocently evoking Surya (the Deva of the sun) and unexpectedly getting a son from him - Karna - whom she had immediately abandoned to the waters of the river. The baby had been found by Adhiratha, a charioteer belonging to the lowest rank of the *kshatriyas*, who together with his wife Radha had raised him modestly but with lots of affection as their own son.

When Pandu and Madri died, Kunti and the five boys returned to the capital, where the regent Dhritarastra yielded to the pressure of the *brahmanas* and the elders in the State assembly, and consecrated Yudhisthira as *yuvaraja*, the official heir to the throne. Besides being the eldest among all the brothers and cousins, Yudhisthira was also in the direct line of succession from his father Pandu, who had already been crowned the king.

Dhritarastra married princess Gandhari and begot his own children: 100 sons headed by Duryodhana, Duhsasana, Vikarna and Sukarna, and a daughter named Duhsala. Gandhari had been happy at the idea of becoming the queen of Hastinapura and was shocked when she learned that her future husband was blind, but because she was a real princess she decided to sacrifice herself for the good of the kingdom. To better understand and support her husband, Gandhari voluntarily renounced her eyesight and always wore a thick bandage over her own eyes - something that unfortunately must have created some emotional

reactions both in her and in her brother Sakuni, who had accompanied her to her new home. This is shown by the fact that when she was informed about the birth of Kunti's first son, Gandhari - who was still pregnant - vented her uncontrollable anger against her own unborn child, hitting her own belly and causing a miscarriage. Vyasadeva was called to save the situation: he collected the immature fetus and divided it into 100 clones, and put each one of them in a container to develop artificially till maturity.

Instigated especially by uncle Sakuni, Duryodhana grew up hating his cousins, and therefore organized many attempts at eliminating them. Unfortunately Dhritarastra and Gandhari allowed him to continue in his evil schemes because they hoped that their own temporary position at the top of the government could become permanent when Duryodhana would ascend to the throne.

Duryodhana's rage was directed particularly against Bhima, who was physically very strong and therefore regularly won all the fights and wrestling matches. The first assassination attempt was against him: during a picnic on the river Ganges Bhima was fed a poisoned cake, and when the boy lost consciousness, he was tied up with ropes and thrown into the water, so that the poisonous snakes living in that tract of the river would finish him off. However, the snakes' bites had the opposite effect, awakening Bhima from the slumber induced by the narcotic. So Bhima returned safely to the capital, while Duryodhana was torn between the rage

for his own failure and the fear that Bhima would realize what had happened and take revenge.

In the subsequent years Duryodhana and his brothers were forced to live side by side with Pandu's sons, so they tried to distinguish themselves in some way from the cousins by taking the name of Kauravas ("descendents of Kuru", the great ancestor of Santanu) as opposed to the Pandavas ("sons of Pandu"), a definition that they considered demeaning in regard to hereditary rights.

The great Drona, a *brahmana* who was very expert in military sciences, settled at court to become the tutor of the princes, and his personal motivations created new seeds of tragedies. In fact Drona was an excellent martial arts teacher, but contrarily to what is expected from a *brahmana*, he had an arrogant and revengeful nature that he chose not to correct. During his childhood days in the Gurukula he had become friends with another student, Drupada, the heir to the throne of Panchala. Later, after his marriage with Kripa and the birth of their son Asvatthama, Drona found himself in financial difficulties and went to see his old school mate Drupada and ask for his help. However, Drupada had recently become king and was still inebriated by his new position, so he treated him offensively. Furious, Drona swore to take revenge and decided to train one extraordinary student who would humiliate Drupada - and for this, he first needed to become the military Guru of the most powerful royal family of his times, the Kuru dynasty. After securing that position, Drona rejected all

other students, an act that produced further negative reactions, as in the case of Karna.

Together with the five Pandavas, Karna is one of the main characters of the *Mahabharata*. As we have seen, he was actually their elder brother and as a direct manifestation of Surya, the Deva of the Sun, he was naturally a very powerful warrior, but as his family's position in society did not afford him to enjoy the advantages and opportunities of his true birth, he was unable to develop his real potential and he grew up torn apart by inner conflicts. Karna was keen to become a warrior and approached Drona for training, but he was rejected, so he went to see another exceptional teacher of martial arts: Parasurama the descendent of Brighu, who was still present on the planet after completing his mission of *avatara*. Knowing that Parasurama did not like *kshatriyas*, Karna introduced himself as a *brahmana* who was interested to teach the military arts, and he was accepted as a disciple. The cover up did not last long: Karna's actual qualities and behavior manifested beyond any doubt during his training, and Karna was kicked away and cursed, too. One day Parasurama was sleeping, his head resting on his student's legs, and it so happened that an insect crawled on Karna's leg and started biting into it. Karna bravely tolerated the pain because he did not want to disturb his teacher's sleep, but the bite started bleeding and Parasurama woke up. When he saw what had happened, Parasurama realized that no *brahmana* would have been able to tolerate that pain with such

determination, and knew that Karna was actually a *kshatriya*, more interested in fighting than in teaching. Offended by Karna's lie, that violated the fundamental dharmic principle of truthfulness, Parasurama cursed him to forget all the teachings he had received, and at the time when he would need them the most. This curse would take effect in the most crucial moment of Karna's life, when he finally faced Arjuna on the battlefield.

Arjuna was Drona's favorite pupil and became very expert in the science of weapons, including the Agneyastra and Varunastra, based on the control of the elements of fire and water. Pleased by his student's progress, Drona asked Arjuna to repay him for the teachings he had received, and as *guru dakshina* he ordered him to defeat king Drupada and bring him to his presence as a prisoner. Arjuna carried out the task, but showing the utmost respect and courtesy to Draupada, so much that the king wished to have Arjuna as his son in law. Brooding revenge against Drona, Drupada returned home and started a sacrifice ritual for the birth of Dhristadyumna and Draupadi - one destined to kill Drona and the other to marry Arjuna.

The *Jatugriha Parva* ("the book of the shellac house") continues by describing how Duryodhana, Sakuni and Duhsasana devised a new plan to assassinate their cousins. Sakuni hired the architect Purochana and sent him to Varanavata to build a royal residence for the summer holidays of the Pandavas, a house that was to be made with highly flammable materials.

Vidura came to know about the conspiracy and alerted the Pandavas, who dug a tunnel under the house and then took the initiative to torch the house before Duryodhana's agent had the time to do so. The tunnel surfaced at a certain distance on the Ganges bank, where a boatman at Vidura's service ferried the brothers and their mother Kunti to a safe place. So while at Hastinapura everyone believed they were dead, the Pandavas remained hidden in the forests.

The *Hidimba-vadha Parva* ("the book of Hidimba's killing") describes how, in the place known as Hidimbavana, the Pandavas were attacked by the *rakshasa* Hidimba, who was defeated and killed by Bhima. Hidimba's sister Hidimbi fell in love with Bhima and asked him for a son: thus was born brave Ghatotkacha, the half-blood *rakshasa* who will help his father and uncles in many adventures and fight on their side at Kurukshetra. Finally the Pandavas arrived at the village of Ekachakra, where they stayed in the house of a local *brahmana* and saved his life by killing another *rakshasa*, Bakasura, who used to demand human sacrifices from the people who lived in that area. This episode is the central story of the *Baka-vadha Parva* ("the book of the killing of Baka).

In the next book, the *Chaitraratha Parva* ("the book of Citraratha"), Arjuna meets and duels Citraratha, the Gandharvas' king, defeating him. Besides, the Pandavas learned about the imminent *svayamvara* of princess Draupadi, the daughter of Drupada king of Panchala. After their *brahmana* host had narrated the

miraculous circumstances of the birth of Draupadi and her brother Dhristadyumna, the Pandava journeyed to the capital of the Panchala kingdom.

In the book entitled *Svayamvara Parva* ("the wedding tournament") the Pandavas became the guests of a potter. The tournament consisted in a classic archery test - with a huge steel horn bow, very difficult even to lift - and was accompanied by much celebration and entertainment, and great distributions of food and gifts especially to the *brahmanas*. On that occasion Duryodhana officially promoted Karna to the position of *kshatriya* of royal rank, appointing him as the ruler of the kingdom of Anga (present Bengal) so that he could take part in the tournament, which was restricted to the royal princes. Disguised as a *brahmana*, Arjuna asked the king for the permission to attempt the test claiming that he was motivated by sheer curiosity, but he won the archery test by hitting the extremely difficult target: the eye of an artificial fish mounted on a wheel rotating on the ceiling, that could be aimed at only by looking at its reflection into an oil container on the floor.

The princes attending the event, including Duryodhana, Karna, Salya and Sakuni, protested because the princess was not supposed to marry a *brahmana*, but Arjuna and his brothers easily opposed and defeated all the warriors. Arriving back at the potter's house, Arjuna called his mother out, saying that he had won a great treasure, and even before asking what kind of treasure it was, Kunti told him he would have to share it with his brothers. Perplexed, Arjuna introduced his new bride to

mother and after a consultation with Drupada, Vyasa and Dhristadhyumna, it was decided that Draupadi could be the wife of all the five brothers, as long as she lived with one of them at the time: this is the contents of the *Vaivahika Parva* ("the marriage"). The rumor of the extraordinary events at Draupadi's *svayamvara* traveled fast, and soon it was clear to everybody that the Pandavas were still alive. In the potter's house the Pandavas met their other cousins Krishna and Balarama, the sons of Vasudeva, Kunti's brother, who had rushed to congratulate them.

In the *Vidura gamana Parva* ("Vidura's journey") Dhritarastra sent a message to the Pandavas inviting them to return to the capital and promising to give them half the kingdom, but when the five brothers arrived at court, they were allotted a small unhabited area within the thick Khandava forest.

The section entitled *Arjuna vanavasa Parva* ("Arjuna goes to the forest") narrates how one day Arjuna was forced by the circumstances to enter the room where Yudhisthira was intimately staying with Draupadi, and according to the rules that the Pandavas had established for themselves, he left for a pilgrimage to atone for his violation. After visiting Prabhasa kshetra (also known as Somanatha) Arjuna went to Dvaraka and fell in love with Subhadra, the sister of Krishna and Balarama. In the section *Subhadra harana Parva* ("the abduction of Subhadra") Krishna helps Arjuna and Subhadra to elope together, because Balarama was against their marriage.

In the next section, entitled *Haranaharana Parva* ("the abduction that was not a real abduction") Krishna gave a speech in the assembly of the Yadus to pacify their anger for the abduction, and stated that women cannot be given in marriage against their own will. In the *Khandava-daha Parva* ("the burning of the Khandava forest") Krishna helped Arjuna to call Agni, who happily ate all the trees and plants of the forest, including a great quantity of medicinal herbs. The king of the heavenly planets Indra sent torrential rains to save his friend Takshaka (the king of snakes who lived in the forest) and was amazed to see that Arjuna repelled the rain with an equivalent shower of arrows. To pacify Arjuna, Indra offered him the Gandiva bow, a quiver of extraordinary arrows and a very special chariot. He also promised him some divine weapons, but he would deliver them only after Arjuna had secured the Pasupata astra from Shiva.

The ***Sabha parva*** ("the parliament") describes how Khandavaprastha became the prosperous Indraprastha and many residents of the old capital were happy to move into the new city of the Pandavas, thus leaving the corrupt tyrant Duryodhana. During the forest fire, Arjuna had also saved Maya Danava (the architect of the Daityas) and Maya Danava gratefully accepted to build for the Pandavas a splendid city and a wonderful royal palace, that included a special hall for the government assemblies.

In the section called *Sabhakriya Parva* ("the building of the assembly hall") we see Maya Danava engaged in

the construction work, and gifting Arjuna with a war conch and Bhima with a special mace. The *Lokapala Sabhakhayana Parva* ("the government assembly for the protection of the people") describes the parliament of the Pandavas, that counted among its members also many Gandharvas residents of the higher planets. The great Rishi Narada, who is expert in all the branches of knowledge, went to visit the Pandavas in their new capital and after discussing with them about various topics on the management of the kingdom, reminded Yudhisthira that Pandu had planned to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice for the glory of their dynasty.

The section *Rajasuyarambha Parva* ("the beginning of the Rajasuya") shows the preparation for the great ceremony aimed at establishing the supremacy of the Pandava government. The main opponent to be defeated was Jarasandha, the evil king of Magadha, who had imprisoned a great number of *kshatriyas* to demonstrate his political supremacy. He had also subjugated many other kings such as Dantavakra, Karusha, Karava and Meghavahana, who had become his vassals. Jarasandha, father in law of the Kamsa that had persecuted Krishna and all his family for a long time, had been raised by a Rakshasi named Jara and could not be killed in a fight. He had already attacked Mathura many times, so that in the end Krishna had to move the entire population to the new city of Dvaraka to protect them from the constant aggressions.

Disguised as *brahmanas*, the five Pandavas and Krishna went to Jarasandha's capital to challenge him

to a fight, and thanks to Krishna's advice, Bhima found the way to kill Jarasandha. The kings were released from their imprisonment and happily pledged allegiance to Yudhishira: the Rajasuya yajna could then be performed right away. This is the contents of the *Jarasandha vada Parva*, "the killing of Jarasandha", followed by the *Rajasuyika Parva*, "the Rajasuya".

At the inauguration of the Rajasuya sacrifice, Sahadeva performed the *agra puja*, the offering of the "first honors" to Krishna, and on that occasion an old enemy of Krishna, his distant cousin Sisupala the king of Cedi, rose in the assembly to protest, repeatedly insulting Krishna and accusing him of having conspired to kill Jarasandha and Kamsa, kidnapped Rukmini and committed a series of other actions that he considered immoral. To keep the promise that he had made to Sisupala's mother, Krishna tolerated quietly for some time, but finally he silenced him by cutting his head off with the Sudarshana chakra, as we read in the *Sisupala vadha Parva*, "the killing of Sisupala".

The third main book of the *Mahabharata* is entitled ***Vana Parva*** ("the book of the forest") and also contains the sections called *Aranyaka* ("in the forest"), *Kirmira vadha* "the killing of Kirmira"), *Arjuna abhigamana* ("Arjuna's departure"), *Kairata* ("the Kirata"), *Indraloka gamana* ("the journey to Indraloka"), *Nalopakhyana* ("the story of Nala"), *Tirtha-yatra* ("the pilgrimage"), *Markandeya samasya* ("the meeting with Markandeya"), *Draupadi Satyabhama samvada* ("the conversation between Draupadi and Satyabhama"), *Ghosha yatra*

("the inspection journey"), *Draupadi harana* ("the abduction of Draupadi"), *Pativrata mahatmya* ("the glory of the women who love their husbands") and *Aranya* ("the forest").

Duryodhana and the other Kurus had been invited to take part in the celebrations, and although they had been given tasks and responsibilities as they were members of the dynasty celebrating the sacrifice, they still had quite some free time. While he was enviously walking around to examine the palace, the Kuru prince mistook a very polished floor for a big water basin and lifted his *dhoti* to avoid getting wet, and soon afterwards made the opposite mistake, fumbling and falling into the water where he believed there was a solid floor. Humiliated by the general laughters and by the ironic comments of Draupadi, Duryodhana quickly returned to his palace, thinking of revenge. Sakuni was a very expert gambler, and had some fixed dice that he could manipulate at will. Under the pretext of inaugurating a new hall in the palace, Duryodhana got permission from his father to organize a dice game against Yudhisthira, and with a series of insults and challenges he forced his cousin to gamble everything he had, including his own freedom and the freedom of his brothers and wife. Elated, Duryodhana sent for Draupadi to turn her into his maidservant, and when the minister Pratikami came back without Draupadi, he sent Duhsasana into Gandhari's apartments, where Draupadi had gone to plead for help: thus the queen of the Pandavas was dragged by her hair down to the assembly hall.

Only one of the Kurus, Vikarna, stood up to defend Draupadi, saying that because Yudhishtira had already lost his own freedom before losing his wife's, he had no right to decide for her. Besides, Yudhistira had not consulted his brothers, who also had a say in their own freedom and in Draupadi's. Furthermore, Sakuni had violated the rule by which each player must choose the stake freely. When Vidura and the other elders also supported Vikarna's speech and declared the game invalid, Karna stood up and said that in any case the Pandavas had lost everything they owned, including their expensive attire: Duryodhana was therefore entitled to collect their clothing. Duhsasana grabbed Draupadi's *sari* to disrobe her, but miraculously the cloth kept expanding, so that the queen still had sufficient material to cover herself.

Puzzled by the extraordinary event and scared by Bhima's oaths of revenge, Dhritarastra pacified Draupadi and annulled the game, giving the Pandavas permission to return home to Indraprastha. Duryodhana protested and called his cousins back for another game: the stake was a 12 year exile in the forest, plus an additional year to be spent incognito. Playing a second time against the fixed dice, Yudhistira was defeated and the five brothers left in exile with their wife, while Kunti remained at Hastinapura with Vidura.

Accompanied by Dhaumya and by a great number of subjects, the Pandavas reached Pramanakoti tirtha on the Ganges bank, where they asked the crowd to go back to their homes. Many, especially the *brahmanas*,

decided to spend the night there anyway, and the next morning Yudhishthira was worried thinking of how he would be able to feed all his guests. On the advice of Dhaumya (the Pandavas' court priest) the king worshiped Surya and obtained an "inexhaustible pot" (*akshaya patra*), a copper casserole that once a day supplied unlimited quantities of food, stopping only when Draupadi herself had finished eating. After breakfast the Pandavas resumed their journey and reached Kamyavana.

In the meantime in the capital Dhritarastra was musing on the threats uttered by Bhima, who had said he would tear Duhsasana apart to drink his blood and remove his arms that had violently dragged Draupadi, and he would shatter Duryodhana's legs that had been shown to Draupadi with heavy sexual allusions. The old regent sent for Vidura hoping for some comfort, but he got the exactly opposite effect, because his brother openly reprimanded him. Irritated, Dhritarastra told Vidura to go away and Vidura left the capital to go and stay with the Pandavas in the forest. Karna, too, tracked the Pandavas with the intention of assassinating them, but he was dissuaded by Vyasa, who went to talk to him while he was going into the forest.

In the third day of their stay at Kamyavana, the Pandavas killed the Rakshasa Kirmira that had attacked them. Later on Krishna came to see them, accompanied by many Yadus. Draupadi vented her feelings, bursting into tears and telling Krishna about the offenses and the violence they had suffered: Krishna comforted her

promising that Duryodhana and his allies would all be killed by the Pandavas, and that he would help them in all possible ways. "If I had been there, I would have prevented that shameful dice game," he told her, "but I was in Dvaraka fighting off Salva's attacks."

Subhadra and Abhimanyu left with Krishna to go and stay in Dvaraka, while the sons of Draupadi went with Dhristadyumna to Panchala, and then the Pandavas moved to Dvaitavana on the bank of the Sarasvati river to live in the company of the Rishis, such as Markandeya Rishi. During that period Vyasa went to see them to discuss about the preparations for the war that would inevitably come; he told them that Duryodhana had already secured the military support of Bhurisrava, Asvatthama, Karna, Jayadratha, Bhishma and Drona, and reminded Arjuna that he still had to get weapons from Indra and the Pasupata astra from Shiva. Vyasa taught Arjuna the *pratismriti vidya*, that enabled him to evoke Indra, and while the other Pandavas returned to Kamyavana, Arjuna left for the Himalayas to propitiate Shiva. When he arrived in that region, Arjuna was attacked by a wild boar and was going to shoot it with an arrow, when a hunter from a Kirata tribe (a mongolian ethnic group) stopped him, saying that he had been pursuing the animal first. Both arrows - the hunter's and Arjuna's - hit the boar simultaneously, and the two started to fight. Arjuna was amazed by the military skills of the hunter, and during a pause in the fight he offered a flower garland to the image of Shiva he used to worship, to ask for divine help.

Immediately the garland appeared on the hunter's neck and Arjuna realized the hunter was Shiva himself, who had come to test him. Shiva was pleased by Arjuna's humility and devotion, and gifted him with his Pasupata astra, also restoring Arjuna's other weapons that had been destroyed in the fight.

Since Indra's condition had been fulfilled, Arjuna went to Indra's capital Amaravati at Indraloka and remained there for five years, also learning the art of dancing from Citrasena, one of the Gandhava chiefs. One of the most beautiful and famous Apsaras, Urvasi, became attracted by Arjuna but he rejected her, treating her with the respect one shows to one's own mother; irritated and frustrated in her desire, Urvasi cursed Arjuna to lose his virility - a curse that Indra modified by reducing its effect to one year only.

As they had not heard from Arjuna for a long time, the Pandavas started to get worried, but Brihadhasva Rishi went to see them and reassured them, also telling the story of Nala and Damayanti, illustrating how patience and loyalty to *dharma* finally bring success in spite of the many difficulties that one may face in life. Narada, too, went to see them and suggested they perform a pilgrimage.

Another illustrious visitor, Lomasa Rishi, told them that he had recently seen Arjuna at Indraloka happily engaged to acquire new weapons. Accompanied by Lomasa and Dhaumya, the Pandavas left for a long journey, visiting Naimisharanya, Gaya (in present

Bihar), Gangasagara (the Ganges delta in the bay of Bengal), the Vaitarani river and Prabhasa (Somanatha) and listening to the stories of the great personalities connected to those places. When they reached the Himalayas they met Ghatotkacha, who helped them climb the Gandhamadana hill to visit the *ashrama* of Nara and Narayana Rishi.

One day Draupadi found a *saugandhika* lotus flower and asked Bhima to bring her more; Bhima followed the intense scent of the flowers, but on his way he found a big ape who was resting stretched in the middle of the path. That monkey was actually Hanuman, also son of Vayu like Bhima: pleased by the kind and respectful behavior of Bhima, Hanuman blessed him and promised he would join the Pandavas to help them in the upcoming battle. During their journey, the Pandavas met Markandeya Rishi again and heard from him the story of the Fish *avatara* and the victory of Subramanya on Mahisasura.

The inspection mentioned in the *Ghoshayatra Parva* refers to another unsuccessful plan hatched by Duryodhana. With the purpose of humiliating the Pandavas, prince Duryodhana organized a grand display of his opulence for an official journey with the pretext of inspecting the king's cows that were grazing on the pastures at Dvaitavana, not far from the place where the Pandavas lived.

In this exercise Duryodhana brought all his family and friends and engaged all the royal retinue, including

bejeweled wives and servants carrying a lot of luggage. Unfortunately, the courtesans set up camp in a spot that had already been chosen by Citrasena, chief of the Gandharvas, who easily defeated Duryodhana's small army and captured both Duryodhana and Karna. Informed about the events, Yudhishthira sent Arjuna and Bhima to rescue their cousins and Citrasena, who had recognized Arjuna (his former dance student on Indraloka) was glad to deliver the prisoners to him. Doubly humiliated, Duryodhana had to tolerate Yudhishthira's reprimand, and he was scolded by Bhishma too when he returned to the capital. In a fresh attempt at revenge, Duryodhana took advantage of the visit of the irritable Rishi Durvasa and sent him to "test" the Pandavas in the forest; Duryodhana reasoned that if Durvasa had arrived there after the miraculous pot had finished its daily work, the Pandavas would have to suffer the wrath of the Rishi who could not be fed. In that difficult situation Krishna arrived and to the greater perplexity of Draupadi, he asked for food himself. However, there was a higher purpose to that strange playful request: when Draupadi gave him the empty pot, Krishna scratched a bit of vegetables that was stuck to the bottom and immediately ate it. Precisely at that time, Durvasa and all his followers, who were bathing in the river before lunch, had a strange feeling almost as if they had just finished eating a huge meal. It had been created by Krishna's illusory power, but still they realized they would not be able to eat even a morsel of food, and decided to just leave quietly.

Another day, Draupadi was attacked by Jayadratha (king of Sindhu and husband of Duhsala, Duryodhana's sister), but the Pandavas immediately rescued her. The episode offered the opportunity for a new conversation between Yudhishthira and Markandeya Rishi to glorify women who were extraordinarily faithful to their husband - such as Sita the wife of Rama and Savitri the wife of Satyavan.

Another famous episode in this section is the meeting between Yudhishthira and Yamaraja. The Pandavas were approached by a *brahmana* who had lost his *aranis* (the wooden sticks used to light the fire), taken away by a deer. Pursuing the animal, the Pandavas arrived at a lake and decided to rest. The Yaksha who was the owner of that land demanded adequate answers to his questions before allowing them to take any water. As no one of his brothers had returned from the lake with the water, Yudhishthira himself finally went there and rescued his brothers by correctly answering the following questions:

- * how can one become knowledgeable? (by studying the *shastra*)
- * what is heavier (in the sense of "important") than earth? (mother)
- * what is higher (in the sense of "noble") than sky? (father)
- * what supports the sun? (truth)
- * what knowledge does the *kshatriya* need to perform his duty? (the knowledge of weapons)

- * what is more numerous than the blades of grass? (thoughts)
- * what is faster than the wind? (the mind)
- * what is the best type of wealth? (the knowledge of scriptures)
- * what loss is not cause of sorrow? (the loss of anger)
- * what defines a *brahmana*? (sattvic life)
- * what is the most amazing thing? (people see everybody dies, yet they never really expect they will die, too)
- * what are people looking for in life? (happiness)
- * what is the highest value? (compassion)

Pleased, the Yaksha revealed his true identity as Yama and blessed Yudhishthira forecasting his victory in the war. Indra, too, wanted to help his son Arjuna; he went to Karna and asked him in charity the armor (*kavacha*) and the ear-rings (*kundala*) that protected his life. Although he had been warned in a dream by his father Surya, Karna decided to comply with Indra's request and he asked for the Shakti weapon in exchange. Indra agreed, but warned him that it was just a loan, and he would be able to use that weapon once only.

The fourth main book, the ***Virata Parva***, also has 4 minor books about the year of incognito exile spent by the Pandavas at the court of king Virata of Matsya desa. Arjuna wrapped all their weapons in a large bunch and hid them on a *sami* tree near a crematorium, shaping

the bunch in such a way that it looked like a dead animal body. Then Yudhishthira took the identity of Kanka, a *brahmana* expert in the scriptures and passionate about dice games, Bhima became Ballava and was hired as chief cook. Arjuna put Urvasi's curse to a good use by becoming the transexual Brihannala and taught dancing to princess Uttara and her maidens in the women's apartments. Under the name of Granthika, Nakula became superintendent to the horses' stables, and Sahadeva as Tantripala took care of the cows. Draupadi took the name of Sairandhri and became the lady in waiting for queen Sudesna. About three months later, Virata organized a wrestling tournament and Bhima earned everyone's admiration by answering the challenge of a visiting wrestler, Jumuta, and defeating him in the name of the king. Trouble arrived when Kichaka, commander in chief of Virata's army and brother to the queen, became attracted by Draupadi's beauty and tried to take advantage of her with the complicity of the queen herself, who ordered her lady in waiting to go to Kichaka's room on the pretext of an errand. Draupadi appealed to Virata's assembly for protection, but without any result; from their part, the Pandavas could not risk being recognized. That night, Draupadi lured the general to a hall in the palace where Bhima, disguised in female attire, could kill him secretly. On the next day, Draupadi said that Kichaka had been killed by her Gandharva husbands. Terrified, the queen wanted to ban Draupadi from the kingdom, but Draupadi asked for three more days before leaving.

The news of those strange events reached Duryodhana's spies, and the Kuru prince organized a surprise attack against Virata aimed at forcing the Pandavas out in the open, which would send them into another long period of exile. Duryodhana's ally, Susharma of Trigarta, attacked Virata's herds from south-east and captured the king who had gone to defend the cows. Ballava immediately went to the rescue, so when Duryodhana attacked the capital from the north side, the only warrior left in the palace was young prince Uttarakumara. Brihannala volunteered to accompany him as a charioteer, and when the prince panicked on the battlefield, Brihannala revealed his identity as Arjuna, recovered his weapons from the *sami* tree and handing the reins to Uttarakumara, fought the aggressors back.

Duryodhana, however, had made a mistake in his calculations and he was distraught and frustrated to learn that the incognito year had just finished when the Pandavas had been tracked. The Kauravas were not in agreement about the strategy to be followed at that point; after a discussion where insults were exchanged, half of the army with the great generals - Karna, Drona, Kripacharya, Bhishma and Asvatthama - stayed to face Arjuna, while one fourth of the army went to guard the cows and the rest returned to the capital with Duryodhana. Arjuna did not stop to fight against the great generals, but rescued the cows and then pursued Duryodhana, challenging him to a fight. Arjuna shot the Sammohana weapon, by which all the warriors became

unconscious, and with Uttarakumara's help he collected all their shawls as a trophy.

Because the Pandavas had not yet revealed their true identities to Virata, the king attributed the success of the military expedition to the young prince, and when Kanka praised Brihannala, the king threw the dice into his face in anger. Sairindhri rushed in to collect Kanka's blood before it hit the ground, saying that in that way she had saved the kingdom from a great disgrace. When he learned that the five strange personalities at his service were actually the Pandavas, and hearing the true story of the battle from Uttarakumara, Virata felt ashamed and tried to atone for his offensive behavior by offering them his own kingdom and the hand of his daughter. Yudhisthira accepted the alliance of the Matsya kingdom for the imminent war, and Arjuna suggested that his own son Abhimanyu would be a more suitable husband for the young Uttara, whom he had come to love as a daughter.

The ***Udyoga Parva*** ("the book of attempts") is about the efforts of the Kauravas and the Pandavas to get ready for the imminent war. Krishna attended the marriage between Uttara and Abhimanyu, and spoke to the various kings in attendance, officially requesting alliance pledges, while Balarama intervened to give a last chance to Duryodhana, and the *purohit* (royal priest) of Drupada was sent as a messenger, too. Krishna returned to Dvaraka and there in the same day he received the visit of both Duryodhana and Arjuna: on that occasion Duryodhana was the first to enter the

room where Krishna was sleeping, and sat near the head of the bed, while Arjuna respectfully remained at the foot of the bed. Krishna woke up and seeing Arjuna, invited him to present his request, but Duryodhana protested, saying he had come first and therefore he had priority in presenting his request for alliance in the war. Krishna solved the problem by offering them to choose between his large army and his own personal presence; however he would just act as advisor and not as a warrior and he would abstain from fighting. Arjuna chose to have Krishna at his side as his charioteer, and Duryodhana was very happy to get the army. On the other hand, Balarama completely withdrew from the scene and left for a pilgrimage until the end of the war.

King Salya of Madra desa, brother of Madri (Pandu's second wife) went to Upaplavya camp to offer his alliance to the Pandavas, but Duryodhana rushed to the spot and organized a grand welcome for Salya and his army, pretending to be in charge of the camp. Pleased, Salya offered a boon to the camp organizer and Duryodhana immediately asked for his alliance in the war. Aghast, Salya went to Yudhisthira to consult with him, and it was decided that Salya would take Duryodhana's side in the army but he would do his best to discourage Karna during the battle.

There were many other discussions: in the assembly of the Kauravas, Bhishma was favorable to returning the kingdom to the Pandavas, while Karna proposed that they should be sent into exile for another 12 years. Dhritarastra suggested that the Pandavas should be

offered the choice between going into the forest and moving to Dvaraka with Krishna. Sanjaya and Vidura went privately to Dhritarastra reminding him of his responsibilities, and since that was not enough, they asked the great *sannyasi* Sanat sujata to talk to him and convince him to change his ways, as we read in the *Sanat sujata Parva*. In the meantime in the Pandava's camp, Krishna decided to personally go as a messenger to the Kurus' capital: the journey is described in the section entitled *Bhagavat Yana*, "the Lord's mission". After dining and spending the night in Vidura's house instead of attending the official banquet organized by Dhritarastra, Krishna went to the Kurus' assembly for a last attempt at reconciliation. Duryodhana declared that he would not give the Pandavas even the smallest piece of land and stormed out angrily. Dhritarastra commented that it was impossible for him to intervene in any way to change Duryodhana's decision, and Krishna replied that sometimes to save a dynasty one has to sacrifice a member of the family. Krishna suggested that the war could still be avoided by delivering Duryodhana, Sakuni, Karna and Duhsasana as prisoners in the hands of Yudhisthira, and Duryodhana was informed by his spies. Furious, the prince went to consult with his supporters and started to organize Krishna's arrest. Laughing, Krishna showed his universal form to Dhritarastra, Drona, Bhishma, Vidura and Sanjaya before leaving the assembly, and declared that now the Kauravas were the only ones responsible for the consequences of their own choices.

Before returning to the Pandavas, Krishna went to Karna to reveal him the secret of his birth and convince him to join his brothers, but Karna could not betray his loyalty towards those who had always supported him. Vidura and Kunti too tried to convince Karna, supported by Surya's personal witness, but to no avail: all Karna could do was to promise to only kill Arjuna, so that Kunti would still be left with five sons.

The last envoy was the king of Uluka (from whose name the *Uluka Dutagamana Parva*, or "the book of Uluka's mission"), who had become a vassal of Yudhishthira during Arjuna's *dig-vijaya*. This king of Uluka, named Vrihanta, should not be confused with Uluka the son of Sakuni. When all the attempts at reconciliation had failed, the armies assembled at Kurukshetra, a famous holy place about 160 km from the capital of the Indian nation (anciently known as Hastinapura). The ancient circle of 128 km includes a great number of temples and sacred lakes that were pilgrimage places even before Krishna's appearance, since the *avatara* Parasurama had gone there to bathe for purification after his military campaign against the *kshatriyas* that had revolted against Dharma. According to the *Matsya purana* this was the most sacred region in Dvapara yuga and one of the 16 *mahajanapadas* ("most important places") in Jambudvipa (planet Earth).

The precise place of the ancient battle is known as the place presently called Jyotisar, near Thanesar, Kurukshetra district, in the Indian State of Haryana, but the time of the battle is very controversial. Based on the

planetary references quoted in the text of the *Mahabharata* itself, and particularly on the rare event of the 3 subsequent eclipses in one single month, various scholars have proposed different dates. According to S. Balakrishna the date is 2559 BCE, while according to I. N. Iyengar is 1478 BCE, according to B. N. Achar is 3067, according to P. V. Holey is precisely 13th November 3143, while according to P. V. Vartak it is 16th October 5561 and for K. Sadananda the 22 November 3067 - always before the Current Era.

Traditionally the hindu lunar calendar celebrates the "appearance" of *Bhagavad gita* on the day of Margasirsa sukla trayodasi, that may fall at the end of October, in November or even in early December, according to the coincidences with the solar calendar; the differences of opinion on the precise year are due to the fact that the planetary positions described in the text have occurred several times in history.

Conventional historians and archeologists tend to shift the Kurukshetra battle towards 1500 BCE, if not later. Unfortunately the dating of historical events in India is subject to the confusion created by the conventional western academia, that tends to reject the idea of an antiquity greater of that afforded by the conventional calculation on the development of the ancient civilizations and the passage from a "pre-history" where all human beings were uncivilized to a "history" where mankind started to develop culturally, and more precisely in regard to Indian history from the supposed dates of the so-called "aryan invasion".

Another ideological obstacle is the disbelief of conventional historians towards the lists of kings included in the vedic scriptures. They calculate that there were 18 dynasties over 26 generations (and thus about 1050 years) between the birth of Maharaja Parikshit or his grand-grandchild Adhisimakrishna and the crowning of Mahapadma Nanda, that historians set in 382 BCE. Of course this calculation is based on only 18 years for each reign, which is a very low estimate.

Vedic Tradition does not give much importance to precise historical dates, if not to connect the circumstances of a particular event with cyclic factors, as for example the beginning of Kali yuga or the occurrence of particular positions of the planets and the stars influencing the events on earth. More relevant factors are those referring to the political and military situation of the various kingdoms and dynasties of the times, that all participated to the battle with the only exception of Rukmi (the brother of Rukmini wife of Krishna) whose alliance was rejected by both sides.

In the Pandavas' army, besides the five brothers and their five sons from Draupadi, we also find Abhimanyu (the 16 year old son of Subhadra and Arjuna), Iravan (son of the Nagini Ulupi and Arjuna) and Ghatotkacha (son of the Rakshasi Hidimbi and Bhima). There was the entire family of Draupadi - Drupada king of Panchala, Dhrstadyumna the son of Drupada specifically born for that war, Sikhandi(ni) the adopted son of Drupada, and the other sons of Draupada named Dhristaketu, Yudhamanyu, Satyajit and Uttamauja.

There was king Virata of Matsya desa with his sons Sveta, Uttara and Sankha, Kuntibhoja (Kunti's adoptive father) and his son Purujit, Dhristaketu son of Sisupala and king of Cedi, Sahadeva son of Jarasandha and king of Magadha, and Satyaki and Cekitana of the Yadavas.

On the Pandavas' side there was also the king of Kasi (Varanasi) who was a vassal of the kingdom of Koshala (Ayodhya), Sarangadhvaja the king of Pandya (with capital at Madurai, south of the present Tamil Nadu, from river Kaveri to Kanyakumari), the king of Telinga or Telangana (presently Tamil Nadu) and 5 princes of Kekaya, headed by the eldest Brihadkshatra, who had been exiled from their kingdom. There were also the generals of Parama Kamboja (present Tajikistan) who did not have a king; they belonged to the "external" territories or Bahlikas that did not follow the Vedic system (Kirata, Gandhara, Barbara, Yavana, Saka, etc).

The Pandavas' army had 7 *akshauhinis* or batallions for a total of 1,530,900 warriors, plus a non-specified number of non-organized troops coming from the barbarians' provinces. One *akshauhini* consists of 21,870 war chariots, 21,870 war elephants, 65,610 horses and 109,350 foot soldiers.

In the army of Duryodhana, that commanded 11 *akshauhinis* (2,405,708 warriors) there were also his 99 brothers with their sons. There was the old and extremely powerful warrior Bhishma, his uncle Bahlika (Santanu's brother), Somadatta son of Bahlika and Bhurisrava son of Somadatta. There were the *acharya*

Drona and his son Asvatthama, and Kripacharya the brother of Drona's wife. Sakuni (brother of Gandhari the mother of Duryodhana) was there with his son Uluka and several other relatives from the Gandhara kingdom, and there was also Sudakshina of Kamboja (brother of Duryodhana's wife).

All Duryodhana's friends were there, beginning with Jayadratha the king of Panjab, Sindhu, Sauvira (Abhira) and Sibi (this is why he was also called Saibya), Bhagadatta the king of Pragjyotisha with his terrifying war elephants, Susharma of Trigarta with his brothers and their sons, Brihadbala and Vatsaraja of Kosala, king Nila of Mahishmati, the other Kekaya princes that were the rivals of Brihadkshatra, and Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti in Madhyadesa. King Salya of Madra, brother of Madri, had been forced to join the Kauravas, while Kritavarma and his son Matrikavat had been instructed by Krishna to fight in favor of Duryodhana leading Krishna's personal army, called Narayani sena and consisting of 1 million cowherd men coming from Mathura. Among the other supporters of Duryodhanas there were the Rakshasas called Alambusha and Alayudha, the tribal king of Kalinga, and several chieftains of the barbarians' territories, such as Kamboja, Yavana, Saka, Mahishaka, Tushara, Dravida, Usinara, Pulinda and Kolisarpa.

Karna king of Anga, his son Vrishasena and the other sons of Adiratha took part in the battle only after Bhishma's fall.

The rules of the *kshatriyas'* chivalry code would be gradually broken in the course of the war, thus marking the beginning of the sad period of the Kali yuga. According to the rules of the *dharma yuddha* ("battle according to the ethical principles") the fight cannot begin before sunrise or continue after sunset. Each warrior can only engage a warrior of equal strength, both in skills and in weaponry. It is not allowed to use force against a non-fighter (human or animal) or against anyone who has no weapons, has surrendered or lost consciousness, or is looking in a different direction.

The ***Bhishma Parva*** ("the book of Bhishma") is the first section of the epic's core that we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Before the start of the great battle, Vyasa went to meet Dhritarastra and offered him the blessing of becoming able to see what was happening at Kurukshetra; when Dhritarastra refused to accept it, saying that he did not want to risk seeing the death of his own sons, Vyasa gave this gift to Sanjaya. In this way Sanjaya was able to describe to Dhritarastra all the events of the war.

The description starts with the list of the various armies coming from all regions of the earth and a study of their kingdoms in the sections entitled *Jambu-khanda Nirmana Parva* and *Bhumi Parva*, respectively regarding the region of Jambudvipa and Earth in general (called Bhumi). After describing the two armies, Sanjaya watched Arjuna, who was distraught at the idea that the imminent battle would see all those people killing each others, although they were brothers, sons,

friends, allies, teachers, relatives and parents. Besides, an enormous number of kings and warriors would die, thus depriving their kingdoms of the necessary protection in future. The battle could not be avoided and was meant to protect the kingdom from bad rulers, but the demise of so many men would throw their families and kingdoms in a situation of great difficulty and suffering, and for people it would become harder to live in an ethical way and progress at individual and collective levels. Faced with such a difficult dilemma, Arjuna wondered what was the purpose of life, the supreme principle that a human being should follow in his actions.

Krishna comforted and instructed Arjuna revealing to him the science of yoga in *Bhagavad Gita* ("the Lord's song"), consisting of 700 verses divided into 18 chapters:

1. *Arjuna visada yoga*: the yoga of Arjuna's sorrow
2. *Sankhya yoga*: the yoga of analysis and enumeration
3. *Karma yoga*: the yoga of action
4. *Jnana yoga*: the yoga of knowledge
5. *Sannyasa yoga*: the yoga of renunciation
6. *Dhyana yoga*: the yoga of meditation
7. *Vijnana yoga*: the yoga of applied knowledge
8. *Taraka brahma yoga*: the yoga of liberating spiritual consciousness
9. *Raja guhya yoga*: the yoga of the supreme secret
10. *Vibhuti yoga*: the yoga of powers

11. *Visva rupa darsana yoga*: the yoga of contemplation of the universal form
12. *Bhakti yoga*: the yoga of devotion
13. *Prakriti-purusha-viveka yoga*: the yoga of understanding nature as distinct from the personal principle
14. *Guna traya vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the 3 *gunas*
15. *Purushottama yoga*: the yoga of the Supreme Person
16. *Daivasura sampad vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the divine and demoniac characteristics
17. *Sraddha traya vibhaga yoga*: the yoga of distinguishing between the 3 forms of faith
18. *Moksha yoga*: the yoga of liberation

Here are some verses from *Bhagavad gita*:

"The embodied soul who lives in this body (passes from one form to the other) as from childhood to youth to old age, and similarly at the end of this body (he passes on). A wise person is not confused by this (passage). Just like a man abandons clothes that have become torn or worn out and acquires other and new clothes, in the same way one leaves the damaged body and accepts another new body. Through Buddhi Yoga one can become free already in this life from both bad and good (actions/reactions). Therefore you should engage

in yoga, the best way to deal with actions." (2.13, 22, 50)

"The Prajapati originally manifested the *praja* (creatures) together with the *yajna* (the sacred action) and said, 'By these (sacred actions) you will become more and more prosperous; these (sacred actions) will supply you with whatever you desire. The Devas will be pleased/fed by you through these (sacred actions), and they (the Devas) will bless/feed you (in return); in this way both sides will reciprocate in a positive way and you all will attain the highest benefit. Satisfied by *yajna* (sacred action), the Devas will give you whatever pleasures you desire. One who eats what is given by them without offering anything in return is just a thief.'" (3.10, 11, 12)

"A Yogi should constantly practice (meditation) on the Self by living alone in a secluded place, carefully keeping the mind and the consciousness under control, free from expectations and from attachments (to material acquisitions)." (6.10)

"This knowledge is supreme and deep, the purest and most sublime knowledge, and is understood through direct experience. It is eternal and in accordance with *dharma*, and its application brings happiness." (9.2)

"Humility, freedom from arrogance and hostility, tolerance, simplicity, the personal relationship with the spiritual teacher, cleanliness, steadiness, self-control, renunciation, the absence of false (bodily) identification, the perception of suffering in the cycle of deaths and

births, detachment from home and family, equanimity in favorable and unfavorable circumstances, constant dedication to spiritual life, the desire to live in a quiet and isolated place, detachment from the mass of people, the understanding of the importance of spiritual realization and the effort to understand Reality: all this is knowledge, and the rest is nothing but ignorance." (13.8-12)

The text of *Bhagavad gita* ends showing Arjuna in a balanced state of mind, determined to perform his duty, but when Arjuna had become free from his doubts, it was Yudhisthira's turn to do something that amazed the warriors assembled for the battle. Casting off his weapons and armor, he descended from his chariot and walked towards the Kurus' line to offer his homage to the elders of the family and his teachers, and ask their permission to engage in the battle. After receiving the blessings of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Salya, Yudhisthira returned to his chariot and the battle finally started.

The *vyuha* chosen by Dhristadhyumna (commander in chief of the Pandavas' army) was the one called *Vajra*, "lightning" or "diamond", as a response to the *Garuda vyuha*, "the eagle" of the Kauravas. In the *Vajra vyuha* the speed of attack is particularly important and therefore the first line utilizes short-range weapons, while the archers are in the second line. In the *Garuda vyuha* the kings march ahead, the horsemen protect the wings and the elephants constitute the external perimeter of the body. Bhishma was on his chariot in the

middle of the battle formation, as if riding an eagle. Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, who was only 16 years old, penetrated the Kurus' formation and attacked Bhishma, while Salya was engaged against Virata's sons - Uttara and Sveta - who were finally killed also with Bhishma's help.

On the second day of the battle, the Pandavas arranged their forces in the *Krauncha vyuha* ("heron") with Draupada at the head and Yudhisthira at the tail. Like on the previous day, the Kauravas were facing west and the Pandavas east. The Kauravas, too, used the same formation, with Bhurisrava and Salya on the left wing and Somadatta and Kamboja on the right wing. Arjuna realized that the priority was to stop Bhishma and launched an attack, but Bhishma was well protected and the clash went on for many hours. In the meantime Drona and Dhristadyumna were engaged in a similar duel; at some point Bhima rushed to help Dhristadyumna, whose bow had been broken. Duryodhana sent the army of the Kalinga king to attack Bhima, but almost all these soldiers were killed. Satyaki was finally able to eliminate Bhishma's charioteer, and the uncontrolled horses dragged him away from the battlefield.

On the third day Bhishma again arrayed the *Garuda vyuha* but riding at its head, while the Pandavas' army was arranged in the *Chandrakala vyuha* ("moon sickle"), with Bhima and Arjuna respectively at the right and left points. The Kauravas focused their attack against Arjuna, who fought back by creating a fortification of

arrows. Abhimanyu and Satyaki engaged Sakuni and his Gandhara army, while Bhima and his son Ghatotkacha attacked Duryodhana at the rear; when Duryodhana was hit and lost consciousness, his charioteer carried him away from the battle and his soldiers dispersed. When he awoke, Duryodhana rushed back into the fight, venting his anger against Bhishma and accusing him of not putting sufficient effort against the Pandavas. Smitten by the unjust remark, Bhishma renewed his attacks, while Arjuna was still reluctant to fight against him.

On the fourth day many of Duryodhana's brothers attacked Abhimanyu, and Arjuna and Bhima went to help him. Bhima jumped to the ground and held his mace up to face a horde of war elephants, and in the battle he killed 8 of Duryodhana's brothers, but was hit in the chest by an arrow. Ghatotkacha rushed to his rescue and defeated Bhagadatta. At the end of the day Duryodhana again complained with Bhishma, but Bhishma replied that the Pandavas could not be defeated because they were loyal to *dharma*.

On the fifth day the Kauravas took the *Makara vyuha* ("crocodile formation") and the Pandavas the *Syena vyuha* ("hawk formation"). Satyaki and his 10 sons were attacked by Bhurisrava; only Satyaki survived, rescued by Bhima. Bhishma arrived to engage Bhima, but he withdrew when Sikhandi arrived. There was also a clash between Arjuna and Asvatthama. On the sixth day the Pandavas took the *Makara vyuha* and the Kauravas the *Krauncha vyuha*, headed by Dhristadyumna and Drona

respectively. Duryodhana was seriously wounded in a clash with Bhima and in the night he had to be medicated by Bhishma. On the seventh day the *Mandala vyuha* ("orbit") of the Kauravas was opposed to the Pandavas' *Vajra vyuha*. Drishtadyumna defeated Duryodhana, Yudhishthira defeated Srutayu and Sahadeva defeated Salya, while Drona prevailed on Virata, Bhurisrava on Dhristaketu, and Bhagadatta on Ghatotkacha. Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha (present Assam), was famous for his army of elephants headed by a gigantic pachiderm named Supratika.

On the eighth day the Kauravas used the *Urmi vyuha* ("ocean waves formation") and the Pandavas the *Sringata vyuha* ("horns formation"). Bhima killed 8 more of Duryodhana's brothers, while Alambusha killed Iravan, the son of Arjuna and the Nagini Ulupi, who had killed 6 sons of Sakuni and defeated Sakuni himself. As soon as he heard about Iravan's death, Ghatotkacha started slaughtering the Kaurava army and engaged in a fight with Bhagadatta who had come to face him. Helped by Bhima and Arjuna, Ghatotkacha fought back the enemies. That night Duryodhana complained again and told Bhishma he had to make some more efforts.

On the ninth day the Kauravas arranged the *Sarvatobhadra vyuha* ("good on all sides") to protect Bhishma. Abhimanyu defeated Alambusha but was attacked by Bhishma. Arjuna fought against Drona: to his Vayuvastra ("wind weapon") Drona opposed the Sailastra ("stone weapon"). Krishna encouraged Arjuna to kill Bhishma, but without much success; at some

point Krishna became angry and personally rushed against Bhishma, armed with a chariot wheel, but he was stopped by Arjuna who reminded him his promise of not engaging in the battle. Then Krishna suggested that they should go and ask Bhishma himself how the Pandavas would be able to defeat him: Bhishma simply replied that he would not fight against a woman. Thus on the tenth day of the battle, the Pandavas put Sikhandi/Sikhandini at the head of their formation, and behind him (her) Arjuna started to shoot arrows at Bhishma. Finally the great warrior fell, his body pierced by so many arrows that it did not even touch the ground.

The fight halted and both Kauravas and Pandavas gathered around Bhishma to offer their homage to the great fallen hero. Bhishma asked Arjuna for some water and a head rest, and Arjuna complied by shooting some arrows into the ground and evoking Mother Ganges. Bhishma had the power to choose the moment of his own death and had promised Santanu that he would not die without ensuring the protection of Hastinapura, therefore he remained in that position until the end of the war, while the fight moved to another area to avoid disturbing him. That night, when everybody returned to their tents, Karna went to see Bhishma to apologize for his past enmity and offer his homage, and Bhishma reminded him that he was son of Kunti. Tormented at that thought, Karna begged Bhishma not to reveal that secret to anyone, and Bhishma promised he would only tell Duryodhana, to make him realize the extent of Karna's affection and loyalty.

The ***Drona Parva*** begins the evening of the tenth day of the war, with the consecration of Drona as commander in chief of the Kaurava army (*Dronabhisheka*) on Karna's request.

On the eleventh day the Kauravas were arranged in the *Sakata vyuha* ("cart formation") and the Pandavas in the *Krauncha vyuha* ("heron formation") with Karna and Arjuna respectively at the head of the two armies. Drona organized a plan to capture Yudhisthira as a hostage, but the attempt failed thanks to Arjuna's intervention. That night Drona and Duryodhana spoke in the assembly on how to neutralize Arjuna, and Susharma the king of Trigarta swore in front of the fire that he was determined to kill Arjuna even at the cost of his own life. Susharma was tied by a blood pact (*samsaptaka*) to his 3 brothers and 35 sons, and all of them engaged in battle against Arjuna, while Drona tried to capture Yudhisthira. Karna engaged in a fight against Virata, Bhima defeated Salya in a mace duel, Vrishasena (the son of Karna) fought against Satanika (the son of Nakula) and Abhimanyu had several duels, too.

On the 12th day the Samsaptakas (Susharma and his family) rode at the head of the *Chandrakala vyuha* ("half moon formation") to attack Arjuna, and Arjuna engaged them in battle, entrusting Satyajit (Drupada's brother) with the protection of Yudhisthira. While Arjuna launched his Vayuvastra, Drona attacked Yudhisthira, defeating the army of Drupada and killing Satyajit, Satanika, Kshema, Dridhasena and Vasudana. Yudhisthira barely escaped while Bhima, Abhimanyu

and Satyaki were busy fighting off the attack of Bhagadatta and his elephants. The three Pandava warriors lost their chariots but survived the attack; Bhima sneaked under the elephant Supratika, that started wheeling around trying to catch him. Fearing that Bhima had been killed, Yudhisthira launched Drupada's army to the rescue, but Bhagadatta killed Dasarna and Ruciparva. Yudhisthira too intervened but without success and finally Arjuna arrived and knocked off Bhagadatta's weapons; Bhagadatta evoked the Vaishnavastra against Arjuna, but Krishna stood up and absorbed the missile into his own chest. Finally Arjuna killed Bhagadatta and his elephant, then he turned to face Sakuni's brothers Vrishala and Achala, downing them both with a single arrow. Sakuni rushed on, but he was defeated by Arjuna. Finally there was a duel between Arjuna and Karna - Karna shot the Agneyastra ("fire weapon") and Arjuna replied with the Varunastra ("water weapon").

On the 13th day the Samsaptakas engaged Arjuna in the north corner of the battlefield, while Drona advanced against Yudhisthira. The other Pandavas were busy trying to break Drona's *Chakra vyuha* ("disc formation"), but that secret was only known to very few people: Krishna and his son Pradyumna, and Arjuna and his son Abhimanyu - who only knew how to get inside, but not how to get out.

In the section entitled *Abhimanyu-vadha Parva* ("the killing of Abhimanyu") Yudhisthira asked Arjuna's son to help them, promising they would all immediately follow

him. Abhimanyu broke into the middle of the enemy formation, fighting valiantly and killing the son of Asmaka and the brother of Salya, and sending Salya himself unconscious. The Pandavas tried to follow him but their path was obstructed by Jayadratha, who closed the formation again. Abhimanyu was then surrounded: Karna hit him from the back breaking his bow, Kritavarma killed his horses, Kripacharya killed the two charioteers, and Drona destroyed his sword. When Abhimanyu remained disarmed and defenseless, he was simultaneously attacked by all the great generals - Drona, Kripa, Karna, Asvatthama, Kritvarma and Brihadbala - plus a great number of other warriors. Abhimanyu fought very bravely: he killed Brihadbala (king of Koshala), Asvaketu (son of the king of Magadha) and Lakshmana the son of Duryodhana. He fought off the attack from Duhsasana, broke Karna's bow, killed Vatsatiya, Satyasrava, Rukmaratha and Vrindaraka, but in the end he had to succumb to the number of his assailants. Finally the son of Duhsasana smashed his head with the mace, finishing him off. One of Duryodhana's brothers, Yuyutsu, was so disgusted by this behavior shown by the Kauravas that he abandoned the war. Arjuna returned to the camp after defeating the Samsaptakas; when he was informed about Abhimanyu's death, he was overwhelmed by the pain and swore that he would kill Jayadratha before the sunset of the next day - failing which, he would commit suicide. Duryodhana's spies informed the Kauravas, who set Jayadratha's protection as their top priority.

On the 14th day the Kauravas created a combined formation composed by the *Sakata vyuha* ("the cart") in front, the *Padma vyuha* ("the lotus") in the back, and the *Suci mukha* ("the needle") in the middle of the *Padma vyuha* to protect Jayadratha. Arjuna easily penetrated the *Sakata vyuha* defended by Durmarshana (one of Duryodhana's brothers) and defeated Duhsasana and his elephants. Krishna advised Arjuna not to stop to fight against Drona but to find Jayadratha first. Kritavarma, Sudakshina and Srutayuddha faced Arjuna to stop him and Drona joined them, but Arjuna shot a Brahmastra and wiped them away. Srutayuddha threw his mace against Krishna but the weapon bounced back and killed him instead. Arjuna penetrated more deeply into the enemy formation, and killed Srutayu and Acyutayu.

Duryodhana procured a *mantra* armor from Drona and stood in front of Jayadratha to protect him, but Arjuna launched the Manavastra ("the mind weapon"). To defend Jayadratha then came 8 *maharathis* ("great chariots", meaning generals that could each engage 1000 warriors simultaneously), supported by many military divisions. On that day Arjuna and Satyaki alone killed 7 *akshauhinis* of the Kaurava army in order to accomplish their mission. In the meantime Drona was still trying to take Yudhisthira prisoner, and the fight became furious on both sides. Ghatotkacha killed Alambusha, Drona killed Brihatkshatra, Dristaketu (the son of Sisupala), Sahadeva (the son of Jarasandha) and Kshatradharma (the son of Dhristadyumna).

Yudhisthira was worried about Arjuna and sent first Satyaki and then Bhima to help. Satyaki faced Kritavarma, Drona, Duryodhana and his brothers including Duhsasana, but although he defeated Duhsasana, he did not kill him because he wanted to leave him for Bhima. Karna tried to stop Bhima, helped by Duryodhana's brothers, but Bhima killed 32 of them; in the end Karna defeated Bhima, but honoring the promise he made to Kunti he did not kill him.

Satyaki kept advancing and had almost reached Arjuna, but he was stopped by Bhurisrava: he fell and was about to be beheaded, when Krishna told Arjuna to intervene to stop that action, that was against the rules. Arjuna shot an arrow, cutting off Bhurisrava's hand: Bhurisrava complained about the unannounced attack, but Arjuna reminded him how Abhimanyu had been killed and Bhurisrava, recognizing his fault, stopped fighting and sat in meditation. Satyaki rushed against him and beheaded him before anyone could stop him, then he attacked Karna to distract him from protecting Jayadratha.

The sun was going to set and Jayadratha was still protected by a great number of warriors, therefore Krishna launched his Sudarshana disc to cover the sun: darkness fell and Jayadratha, thinking that night had come, finally felt safe. Then on Krishna's order, Arjuna shot the Pasupata astra he had received from Shiva: Jayadratha's head was cut off and flew away. Following Krishna's instructions, Arjuna shot a series of arrows that bounced Jayadratha's head far away and off the

ground, to the place where Vriddhakshatra, Jayadratha's father, was sitting in meditation for the evening rituals in the Kauravas' encampment. Thus the head fell on to Vriddhakshatra's lap, and when he stood up it rolled to the ground: the curse aimed at anyone who would make Jayadratha's head fall to the ground rebounded on the same person who had pronounced it, and it was Vriddhakshatra's head to burst into one thousand pieces. Krishna recalled the Sudarshana and the sun shone again before setting, and Arjuna recalled the Pasupata astra. Duryodhana panicked and Drona agreed to continue the battle in spite of the night fall. Bhima killed Bahlika and 12 more of Duryodhana's brothers, and Satyaki killed Somadatta.

Karna launched a powerful attack but Krishna prevented Arjuna from facing him, sending Ghatotkacha to fight him back: the young Rakshasa killed the horses of Karna's chariot and the Rakshasa Halayudha who protected him. Karna realized he was in serious danger and was forced to use the Shakti weapon he had received from Indra and was keeping aside with the purpose of killing Arjuna.

On his part, Ghatotkacha realized he would not be able to repel the Shakti. He accepted his imminent death, but he wanted to do as much damage as possible to the Kauravas with his own demise, so he expanded his body to such a size that when he fell, he crushed and killed over 400 thousand warriors. The death of brave Ghatotkacha gave great pain to the Pandavas and gladdened Duryodhana, who finally allowed the fight to

stop. The warriors lay down to rest on the battlefield without returning to the camp, and Duryodhana took the opportunity to go and accuse Drona of favoring the Pandavas - the same accusation he had repeatedly thrown at Bhishma. At that time Drona realized how his life and his choices had been dictated by the wrong motivations, and became disgusted with himself. Here end the two sections entitled *Jayadratha vadha* and *Ghatotkacha vadha*.

The next section, entitled *Drona vadha* ("the killing of Drona") is the most important among the books dealing with the war. Almost all the warriors on both sides are killed here. Duryodhana divided the Kaurava army in two parts, personally leading one and leaving Drona in charge of the other. On the 15th day of the battle Duryodhana and Satyaki, who used to be good friends, faced each other in a duel, both weeping on their shattered relationship. Satyaki defeated Duryodhana but left the camp and did not fight against him any more.

Drona raged on, killing Virata, Drupada and his 3 grandsons, reawakening the desire for revenge in Dhristadyumna, who had taken birth specifically to kill Drona. But how to defeat the great warrior? Krishna suggested to weaken Drona's determination by leading him to believe that his son Asvatthama was dead. The Pandavas were hesitating to tell a lie but Krishna insisted, asking Bhima to kill a war elephant that was named Asvatthama, and to announce his death loudly. The Sapta Rishis ("seven Rishi") appeared on the battlefield and asked Drona to withdraw from the battle,

because his behavior was not befitting a *brahmana*, but Drona did not listen to them. He rather approached Yudhisthira to ask him confirmation about Asvatthama's death, because he knew that Yudhisthira had never violated the principle of truthfulness. On Krishna's order, Yudhisthira repeated loudly, "Asvatthama is dead", and then murmured, *naro va kunjaro va*, "whether he was a human being or an elephant". Seeing that Drona was distraught, Dhristadyumna took the opportunity to attack him; Drona defended himself with the Vaitasmika astra, a weapon that is used at close range, but Dhristadyumna was protected by Satyaki. Then Bhima turned against Drona, reminding him of his bad choices and telling him that his son's death had destroyed all his reasons to continue living. Drona recognized the truth of that statement and taking leave from Duryodhana, Karna and Kripa, dropped his weapons and sat down to prepare for death. Finally Dhristadyumna beheaded him with his sword and Drona died. Arjuna felt deep sorrow for that death.

When he heard about the circumstances of his father's death, Asvatthama launched the Narayanastra, a mystic weapon that creates thousands of arrows with a burning tip, and fiery metal discs. Krishna told Yudhisthira that all the warriors needed to offer their homage to that weapon by lowering their own weapons; only Bhima did not comply, saying that since the Narayanastra had been contaminated by Asvatthama it did not deserve to be respected. However, he was saved by Krishna and Arjuna. Then Arjuna challenged Asvatthama to a duel -

Asvatthama launched the Agneyastra and Arjuna fought him back using the Brahmastra. At that time Vyasa appeared on the battlefield to inform Asvatthama he would never be able to kill Arjuna and Krishna, who are directly Nara and Narayana.

The next book, entitled *Karna Parva*, is not accompanied by other sections. After Drona's death, Karna became the commander in chief of whatever was left of the Kaurava army; on the 16th day the battle became a confused fight among the survivors, and there was no military strategy or arrangements any more. Karna defeated Nakula but he let him go unscathed, to the great surprise of Duryodhana, who abstained from reproaching him anyway. Tormented by his own inner conflicts, Karna went to Duryodhana in the middle of the night and asked him to give him an exceptional charioteer, so that he would be able to kill Arjuna. When Duryodhana assigned him king Salya, Salya was outraged, but as a clever politician Duryodhana was able to pacify him with prayers and glorifications, and with the idea that he wanted to give Karna a charioteer that was even more powerful than Krishna. Salya agreed to take that position, on the condition that Karna strictly avoided any stupid behavior, recriminations, boasting, or blaming.

Thus in the 17th day Karna dueled with Arjuna, while Salya - loyal to the promise to Yudhisthira - kept sabotaging and hurting his feelings, so much that finally Karna begged him to stop talking. In the presence of Karna, Bhima attacked Duhsasana and smashed his

chariot with the mace, then he grabbed him tearing his right arm from the shoulder, ripped his chest open and put his mouth to the blood that gushed forth. Collecting some of that blood, he carried it to Draupadi according to the promise he had made her when she had been humiliated in the Kuru assembly: that she would have Duhsasana's blood to wash her untied hair to purify it.

Bhima then returned to busy himself with the warriors that were still around Karna to protect him - 10 of Duryodhana's brothers and Vrishasena the son of Karna, and killed them all. When challenged by Yudhishthira and Sahadeva, Karna defeated them but let them go, to keep the promise to Kunti. Bhima, too, attacked Karna hitting him with such a powerful arrow that Karna lost his consciousness, but refrained from further revenge because Salya told him that Karna's destiny was in Arjuna's hands. So Bhima turned against 6 more of Duryodhana's brothers that had arrived on the scene, and killed them. Again Yudhishthira came forward to face Karna and again he had to retire, wounded and bleeding, and went to lie down at the camp, his entire body in pain. Worried by Yudhishthira's absence, Arjuna and Krishna went to look for him, and Yudhishthira greeted them happily, thinking they had come to announce Karna's death. When he learned that Arjuna had not killed him yet, Yudhishthira became so angry that he was going to attack Arjuna himself, but he was stopped by Krishna. Shocked at the pain and despair shown by Yudhishthira, Arjuna swore that he would immediately kill Karna. A terrifying fight ensued, with

extremely powerful mystic weapons. Arjuna launched the Agneyastra and Karna neutralized it with the Varunastra. To dissipate the vapors produced by the clash of the two weapons, Arjuna launched the Vayuvastra, then he shot his Aindrastra showering the enemy with arrows. Then Karna launched the Bhargavastra he had received from Parasurama, causing even greater destruction. Encouraged by Bhima and Krishna, Arjuna launched the nuclear weapon called Brahmastra, but it was neutralized by Karna. Karna broke Arjuna's bow 11 times, and each time Arjuna replaced it at incredible speed. When Karna aimed at Arjuna's neck to launch the Nagastra, Salya distracted him saying that he should have aimed for the chest and the shot missed, also because Krishna had the horses kneel down, sinking the chariot several inches into the ground.

Suddenly, when Karna was getting ready to launch the Brahmastra, the left wheel of his chariot got stuck in the mud: Karna lost his concentration and became confused, just as Parasurama had predicted. Depressed, Karna descended the chariot to fix the wheel and asked Arjuna for a truce, appealing to the rule by which a disarmed enemy cannot be attacked. Krishna reminded him that no relief was granted to young Abhimanyu in even worse circumstances, and enumerated the long list of adharmic actions that Karna had committed to support Duryodhana. Karna bent his head in shame and resumed the fighting, trying at the same time to get the chariot out of the mud.

Throwing the Anjalika, Arjuna was able to cut off Karna's head with an arrow, and at the death of the great warrior all fighting stopped to honor him. That night Duryodhana, tormented by the death of his most loyal friend, went to Bhishma asking for comfort, and thus he came to know the secret of Karna's birth. Overwhelmed, Duryodhana chose to die in battle as soon as possible to be reunited with his beloved Karna.

The *Salya Parva* describes the last day of the battle, when the command of the army was given to Salya. On this day Nakula killed 3 more of the sons of Karna - Citrasena, Sushena and Satyasena, while Yudhisthira killed Drumasena and Chandrasena, and finally Salya himself, using his Shakti weapon dedicated to Kartikeya. Satyaki killed Salva and Duryodhana killed Cekitana. Sahadeva fulfilled his promise to kill Sakuni and his son, and Bhima killed the last of Duryodhana's brothers. Also all 29 of Duryodhana's sons had died, and he realized that the war was finally lost.

Of the 11 *akshauhinis* he had at the beginning of the war, only 4 warriors were left: himself, Asvatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma. Filled with despair, Duryodhana fled to take shelter into a lake, and on his way he gave Sanjaya a last message for Dhritarastra and Gandhari, begging forgiveness for his bad actions and offering his respects. When his three generals came to look for him, he replied he was very tired and he needed resting. Yudhisthira was informed of the situation and went to the lake, but Duryodhana told him he had no more interest for the kingdom after his family's death, and he

was giving it to him gladly. Yudhisthira derided him. Balarama, who had just returned from his pilgrimage, arrived on the battlefield and under his supervision there was a mace duel between Duryodhana and Bhima - as he had sworn, Bhima broke Duryodhana's legs and crushed his groin as well (which was against the rules), leaving him to bleed to death. Duryodhana turned against Krishna, accusing him to have killed Drona and Karna in a manner that was against the rules, and Krishna replied accordingly. Saddened, Balarama returned to Dvaraka.

Duryodhana's fall marked the end of the war: Krishna blew his conchshell, announcing that the fighting was over. Then Krishna asked Arjuna to get out of the chariot with his weapons, and finally he descended the chariot himself: to the great amazement of everyone, Hanuman's effigy disappeared from the flag and the chariot was consumed by flames. Krishna explained that the many divine weapons that had hit the chariot had been kept at bay by his presence, but now the war was over, and the chariot could be destroyed. That night Asvatthama, Kripacharya and Kritavarma went to Duryodhana to ask for instructions. The dying prince appointed Asvatthama as chief commander of the army and Asvatthama swore to avenge him and his own father as well. The three generals sneaked into the Pandavas' camp while everybody there was asleep, and cut the throats of the five sons of Draupadi (believing them to be the five Pandavas), then they also killed Dhristadyumna, Shikhandi, Udhamanyu and Uttamauja

before they could wake up, as described in the section called *Sauptika Parva* ("the sleepers").

The next morning, of the two immense armies only 12 warriors were still alive: the five Pandavas, Krishna, Satyaki and Kritavarma, Asvatthama, Kripacharya, Vrishakethu (son of Karna) and Yuyutsu (a brother of Duryodhana who had retired from the war at an earlier stage). Bhima, Arjuna and Krishna were informed about the slaughter by Dhristadyumna's charioteer and pursued Asvatthama, who launched the weapon Brahma sira, and Arjuna responded with the same type of weapon. Vyasa and Narada personally intervened to withhold the two weapons, that would have caused a disaster of planetary level if they clashed. Then they asked the two fighters to withdraw the weapons, but Asvatthama could not do so, and was only able to direct it against the last descendant of the Pandavas, Parikshit, who was still in the womb of his mother Uttara. Krishna intervened saving the unborn child, and Asvatthama was exiled from the kingdom.

The *Stri Parva* ("the book of women") and the 2 added sections called *Jalapradanika* and *Stri-vilapa* describe how Gandhari, Kunti and the other women (*stri*) of the two clans arrived on the battlefield to mourn the fallen warriors. Vyasa and Vidura went to Dhritarastra to comfort him, and the old regent left the palace to go to the battlefield. The Pandavas approached him to offer their respects, but when Dhritarastra said he wanted to embrace his son's killer to show his forgiveness, Krishna quickly pushed Bhima aside, replacing him with

a life-size iron statue that Duryodhana had used for his fighting training. The statue was shattered in Dhritarastra's fierce grasp. Gandhari had lost all her children and blamed Krishna for the Pandava's victory, so she cursed him to lose his entire family, too. This curse came to pass many years later, when in Dvaraka the young Yadu princes provoked the *brahmanas'* anger with a foolish disrespectful prank.

While the Pandavas were performing the funeral rites for the warriors who had died in the battle, Kunti told Yudhisthira he had to offer oblations for Karna's too, and revealed the secret of his birth. Shocked and saddened, Yudhisthira became angry with his mother, who by keeping silent had committed a terrible injustice and especially had caused a huge damage to the kingdom. So strong were his anger and his pain, that Yudhisthira retired to the bank of the Ganges refusing to return to the capital, and only one month later he could be convinced by Vyasa and Narada for the good of the kingdom and its subjects. After appointing Bhima as *yuvaraja* ("junior king", the prince designed to become king in case of emergency), Arjuna as chief commander of the army and ambassador, Vidura as home minister, Nakula and Sahadeva as directors of security and provisions and Sanjaya as treasurer, Yudhisthira finally ascended the throne.

The time had come for Bhishma to leave his body, and the Pandavas went to the battlefield to offer their homage, while he was still lying on the arrow bed.

In the *Santi Parva* ("the book of peace") and *Anusasana Parva* ("the book of the last instructions") Bhishma dissolved Yudhishthira's guilty feelings, then on Krishna's request he gave the Pandavas many teachings in the various fields of knowledge and especially on Dharma, on the duties of the king (*raja dharma*), on the extraordinary and temporary measures to be taken in cases of emergency and danger (*apaddharma*), on the ultimate purpose of life and on liberation (*moksha dharma*), as well as on the *varnas* and *ashramas*, on food restrictions, charity, non-violence and truthfulness. After speeches by Brihaspati and Narada, Krishna narrated the glories of Shiva and recited the *Shiva sahasra nama* ("the 1000 names of Shiva"). In turn, Bhishma recited the *Vishnu sahasra nama* ("the 1000 names of Vishnu") offering homage to Krishna. At last Bhishma expressed his wish to finally leave his body, and after offering his worship to Krishna and contemplating his universal form, he died. The Pandavas performed his funeral rituals and then returned to the capital. These two books constitute the most voluminous part of the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna adopted his nephew Vrishaketu and took him along in the campaign preceding the Asvamedha yajna performed by Yudhishthira to bring back order and peace in the kingdom at his coronation - as we see in the *Asvamedha Parva*, that also contains the *Anugita* ("the repeated song"), that is a repetition of the teachings of *Bhagavad gita* by Krishna. Before leaving for Dvaraka, Krishna attended the ceremonies for the birth of baby Parikshit.

The *Ashramavasa Parva* ("the book of living in the *ashrama*") begins 15 years later. Vidura felt that his life was going to end and he went to see Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarastra, who had been living in the palace, honored by the Pandavas, and convinced them to leave the capital to retire to Satayupa in the region of Kurukshetra and build a small *ashrama* to perform austerities until the end of their days. The last instruction that Dhritarastra gave to his loyal assistant Sanjaya was to settle in a sacred place on the Himalayas. This book is accompanied by the sections *Putradarsana* ("the apparition of the son") and *Naradagamana* ("Narada's visit") in which Duryodhana's ghost appeared to his parents and Narada Rishi offered teachings about detachment from the material world.

In the brief *Mausala Parva* ("the book of maces") we read that Krishna and the Yadavas went to Prabhasa kshetra (Somanatha) in a pilgrimage to offer the yearly worship to Shiva, and that in the ensuing celebrations they consumed rice wine. In his drunkenness, Satyaki started a fight with Kritavarma as he remembered the killing of Draupadi's children, and Kritavarma responded by mentioning Bhurisrava. Satyaki jumped on Kritavarma and cut his head off - in the furious fight that ensued, almost all the Yadus killed one another using the large bamboo canes that had grown on the beach due to a curse.

Krishna and Balarama did not take part in the fight, but Balarama sat in meditation and left his body, while Krishna was shot in the foot by a hunter who thought he

had spotted a deer. Before dying, Krishna sent Daruka to Arjuna with a message warning him about the imminent destruction of Dvaraka, that would be covered by the ocean waters, and asked him to move the survivors to the Kuru capital.

Yudhisthira had reigned for 36 years when he heard the news of Krishna's disappearance and the destruction of the Yadu dynasty. He left the kingdom to his grandson Parikshit and crowned Vajra, Krishna's grandson, as king of Indraprastha, where all the surviving Yadus were settled. Yuyutsu was put in charge of administrative responsibilities and Subhadra remained with her grandson Parikshit. Together with his brothers and Draupadi, Yudhisthira left for his last pilgrimage to the Himalaya, described in the *Mahaprasthanika Parva* ("the book of the great journey"). One by one the Pandavas fell on the way and finally Indra descended with his chariot to take Yudhisthira to the heavenly planets in his very mortal body due to his loyalty to Dharma, as it is written in the *Svargarohanika Parva* ("the attainment of heaven").

Maharaja Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu and grandson of Arjuna, reigned for many years and witnessed the advent of the Kali yuga, as we see also in the first canto of the *Bhagavata purana*. Because of the curse of a young and arrogant *brahmana*, Parikshit was killed by the Takshaka snake, and upon ascending the throne his son Janamejaya began a great sacrifice aimed at destroying all the snakes in the world. On the occasion of that ceremony, Janamejaya was told the story of his

ancestors - an event that brings us back to the beginning of the text of the *Mahabharata*.

Ramayana

The other famous epic poem of Vedic tradition is *Ramayana*. The word *ayana* means "path, story, movement, progress, activities", and *rama* refers to Ramachandra, the *avatara* of Vishnu that defeated the *rakshasa* tyrant Ravana.

The story of Rama is extremely popular and has been celebrated for thousands of years in innumerable figurative and dramatic art works in the tradition of many asiatic countries, as for example in Angkor Vat in Cambodia and in Bali.

As we have seen, *Mahabharata* and especially *Bhagavad gita* focus around Krishna, the *avatara* of Vishnu that descended a short time before the beginning of Kali yuga, to relieve the burden of the Earth and establish the foundations for the religious principles in this age of hypocrisy and quarrel. The present compilation of the *Vedas* has been prepared precisely in consideration of such mission, and we will see the apotheosis of Krishna particularly in the *Bhagavata purana* (also called *Srimad Bhagavatam*). However, we should not forget that the Kali yuga started

"only" about 5 thousand years ago, and that before the present compilation of the *Vedas* there was already a wide corpus of knowledge and spiritual-religious tradition, of which the present Vedic literature is merely the continuation.

Before the appearance of Krishna described in the *Bhagavata purana*, the importance of Vishnu in the scriptural and devotional Tradition was focused on Narayana (the eternal principle that transcends the cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction of the cosmos) and his most famous *avatars*: Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana and especially Rama, the most recent and "human" among these divine figures.

Rama is also called *maryada purushottama*, "the perfect human being", or *dharma purusha*, "human incarnation of Dharma", a man who, by his example, could inspire the lives of people and especially of the kings, the leaders of society that by their behavior establish the model that will be followed by the general public. Even more than Krishna, Rama inspires devotion and admiration in a great variety of people, also due to his association with the extraordinary personality of Hanuman - manifestation of Shiva and Vayu - that manifests the extraordinary concept of a divine personality that takes the position of a devotee. Ramachandra himself expresses love and devotion in his worship to Shiva, and in turn Shiva takes the form of Hanuman to serve Rama with love and devotion. Devotion to Rama is even more relevant than devotion to Krishna or Vishnu, especially in regard to the Hindu

Resurgence that we have been observing in the last few decades.

There has been an international sensation about the episode of the destruction of "Ayodhya mosque", more precisely called Babri Masjid ("the mosque of Babur") on 6th December 1992, by a particularly determined group of devotees of Rama.

The mosque had been built in 1528 by the Mogul emperor Babur for the declared purpose of preventing the Hindus from rebuilding the very ancient temple that rose precisely over the birth place of Rama (*janma bhumi*) and that Babur himself had demolished, recycling some of the stones for the new islamic structure. This is a system that has been regularly applied in all the territories conquered by the Muslims (and by the Christians, too, especially in the first centuries of their history). Its rationale is the complete destruction of the ancient "pagan" holy places and even down to their memory, preventing any reconstruction and continuation of the previous tradition: this was done by forcibly occupying a sacred place that had a precise geographical importance and could not be duplicated anywhere else. This Babri masjid never had any other religious meaning for Muslims, so much that in 1992 the mosque was not attended by anyone and was practically already in ruins, as we can see from the photos taken by the participants to the rally. Unfortunately, the attempt by Hindu activists to reclaim one of the most sacred places of their faith and to rebuild the original temple to Rama has failed because

of the islamic propaganda at international level against the "violent Hindu fundamentalists" and of the ideological structure of the Indian government. The Indian Constitution gives greater power and facilities to Muslims and Christian than to Hindus, who are supposed to be the majority of the population. In fact, the first waves of Hindu devotees that went to pay their homage to the sacred land have been "punished" with the Godhra attack, in which a train with a group of Hindu pilgrims - 55 among men, women and children - was set on fire and left to burn completely in the middle of the railway station, under the eyes of the police that refused to intervene, because that by preventing or stopping the attack they would "disturb communal harmony".

Because Rama appeared long before Krishna, the epic poem (*itihasa*) that narrates his adventures, the *Ramayana*, was written not by Vyasa but by Valmiki Rishi, whose personal story is another small artwork of didactic symbolism, and an integral part of the text of the *Ramayana* as well. Valmiki was a contemporary of Rama, and as we will see later, on he became the tutor of the twins Lava and Kusha, the sons of Rama.

Of course neither Vyasa nor Valmiki should be considered ordinary persons, but precisely for this reason, the fact that they chose such peculiar circumstances for their birth should not be underestimated. Just like Vyasa (the compiler of all the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*) was born from the extra-marital union of a woman from the fishermen community, Valmiki (that was originally named Valya

Koli) was born in a family of robbers, who earned their livelihood (so to speak) by hunting and robbing the travelers. One day he happened to meet the great Narada Rishi, direct son of Brahma, and as his habit was, he ordered him to hand over whatever possessions he had. Narada's wealth consisted in spiritual knowledge, and this is precisely what he gave the robber.

The meeting with Narada is not casual, either, but on the contrary, it is instrumental to explain other very important teachings. The core of Narada's teachings to his new disciple is a brief version of the story of Rama, constituted by 100 verses and known as *Sankshepa Ramayana*. Then Valya Koli engaged in great austerities to purify himself from the consequences of his past bad actions, meditating day and night on the name of Rama and remaining so still that termites built one of their tall nests around his body, as indicated by the name *valmiki*, "the one of the termites' nest".

One day Valmiki, who is known as the *adi kavi* ("the first poet") went to the Tamasa river to take bath, and noticed two *krauncha* (heron) birds playing near a tree; while the birds were engaged in mating, a hunter's arrow hit the male bird, killing him, and the female bird started to cry. The Rishi cursed the hunter, spontaneously composing the first poetic verse (*sloka*) of Indian literature, that expressed sadness (*soka*):

*ma nishada pratishtam tvam agamah sasvataih samah
yat krauncha mithunadekam avadhiih kama-mohitam*

"O wild hunter, you will not have peace for endless years, because you killed this heron while he was engaged in love making."

Later Lord Brahma went to visit the Rishi and revealed to him that the verse could also have another meaning: "O Sri Vishnu, sitting with Lakshmi! Your fame is eternal in all ages, because you killed that rapacious bird Ravana, always immersed in lust."

Inspired, Valmiki composed a great quantity of verses on the same *anustup* metric and taught them directly to Lava and Kusha, the two sons of Rama that had grown up under his tutelage. The original text in verses, especially the *Sundara khanda*, constituted by 68 chapters, is still recited in special private or public functions.

Just like Valmiki is known as the *adi kavi*, his *Ramayana* is called *mahakavya* ("great poem"), also because it includes a great variety of sentiments or *rasas*, defined by Vedic aesthetics as *sringara* (erotic romanticism), *vatsalya* (motherly and fatherly affection), *sakhya* (friendship), *dasya* (service), *virya* (heroism in battle), *adbhuta* (amazement), *karuna* (kindness or compassion), *hasya* (humor), *bhayanaka* (fear), *raudra* (anger), *bibhatsa* (disgust) and *santa* (peacefulness). A good literary work should be able to inspire such sentiments in its readers or spectators through the dialogues and the description of the circumstances.

We can see for example the expression of the *sringara rasa* in the meeting between Rama and Sita, during

their life in the forest and in the pain of separation. The *rasas* of the other relationships (*vatsalya*, *sakhya* and *dasya*) can be observed in the interaction between the various characters, and the *virya rasa* is obvious in the many scenes of battle and courage.

Valmiki is also considered the author of the famous *Yoga vasistha*, relating the conversation between Rama and the Rishi Vasistha, who was the royal priest in the palace of king Dasaratha father of Rama.

It is important to warn the readers against a superficial interpretation of the text and the story, that at times has been distorted by hostile or ignorant commentators to present it as a justification for behaviors that are actually contrary to Dharma - such as the mistreatment of women, blind obedience to parents, passive resignation of women in the face of injustice and cruelty, acceptance of unjust social conventions, and so on. Many believe that the original text of the *Ramayana* might have been considerably modified, especially with the addition of the first and the last parts, that are obviously quite different from the rest, certainly in regard to the literary style and in some measure even in regard to the ideological structure.

The method prescribed by the Vedic tradition in such cases consists in studying each single passage in the light of the basic ideology, honestly trying to understand in which way such passage can be viewed in relationship with the rest, and choosing that interpretation that best follows the fundamental

principles. We will precisely use this method in our analysis of the story.

Due to space limitations, we will not go deeply into the symbolic and initiatic meanings of the story of Rama, that like the *Mahabharata* and many ancient poems at global level (including Homer's *Odyssey*, for example) manifested a reflection of the inner journey of the human being, who must reclaim his legitimate position after a period of exile and a battle. This symbolic level does not invalidate the factual historicity of the described events, because the divine Personality plays on the sacred script already written at the level of the supreme existence, and directs it in full awareness, although sometimes appearances may lead us to think otherwise.

Not everybody is able to understand deep teachings. There are even many persons, among those who have been born in India from families that consider themselves traditionally Hindu or even *brahmanas*, that believe that Hanuman and the Vanaras were merely monkeys, and still today they offer gifts and worship to ordinary monkeys, causing huge hygienic and safety problems and especially contributing to create a very bad public image based on their degraded and distorted view of the scriptures.

The first book of the *Ramayana*, entitled Bala kanda ("childhood") begins with the description of the birthplace of Rama, Ayodhya (literally "that cannot be defeated in war") located on the river Sarayu ("of the

lake", because it is an emissary of the Manasa Sarovara on the Himalaya) north of the river Ganges (present Uttar Pradesh) and capital of the Kosala kingdom, that was spread on most of the subcontinent. Still in the times of the *Mahabharata*, thousands of years after the events of the *Ramayana*, the kingdom of Koshala had five provinces: the original Koshala with the capital Ayodhya, the Dakshina ("south") Koshala (Madhya Pradesh, central India), the Uttara ("north") Koshala that has been ruled by Lava son of Rama with capital at Sravasti, the Purva ("east") Koshala that had been ruled by Kusha son of Rama with capital at Kusavati, and the Paschima ("west") Koshala composed by a number of smaller kingdoms.

Prince Rama was born in the royal Suryavamsa ("Sun dynasty") and among his ancestors there were famous kings such as Ikshvaku (son of Vaivasvata Manu, son of Surya) who personally built the city at the beginning of the creation of the universe), Sagara and his descendents down to Bhagiratha, Raghu (from whose name derived other famous names of Ramachandra, such as Raghava, Raghunatha, etc), Nahusha and Yayati.

The text describes Ayodhya as a great city 12 *yojana* (200 km) long and 3 *yojana* (50 km) wide, with huge fortifications and broad avenues, large gardens and parks, 7-story palaces, a great number of musicians and dancers and all comforts and arrangements, including facilities for many domestic animals of various types such as cows, elephants, horses, camels etc.

The father of Rama, by the name of Maharaja Dasaratha, had three wives: Kausalya, a woman of religious temperament, Kaikeyi, of warrior-like temperament, and Sumitra, of a peaceful and simple mind. As after many years he had not obtained a progeny yet, Dasaratha consulted Vasistha, the royal priest, and decided to perform the traditional Asvamedha yajna and the Putra kamesti yajna, specifically meant to favor the birth of a heir; the rituals required a main officiating priest, and Dasaratha invited Rishyasringa, a very powerful Rishi who had been born and raised in total isolation in the forest as the son of Vibhandaka, son of Kashyapa. Rishyasringa left his hermitage to visit king Romapada of Anga, who needed his presence to neutralize a long draught in his kingdom. Subsequently, the Rishi had married Santa, the daughter of Romapada.

The Devas evoked by Dasaratha's ritual sat to discuss the problem of the arrogance and violence displayed by Ravana, the king of the Rakshasas. Because of a special blessing, Ravana was confident that he would not be defeated by Rakshasas, Devas, Gandharvas or other celestial beings; however he did not anticipate the need to guard himself from human beings, because he considered them too weak.

Thus Vishnu decided to descend to Earth as a human being in the family of Dasaratha. At the end of the ceremony, a divine being appeared from the fire altar, holding a pot of *payasa* (sweet rice and milk pudding) and told Dasaratha to distribute it among his wives. The

king offered the pudding first to his eldest queen Kaushalya, who drank half of it with the purpose of begetting a heir that was worthy of the throne. Then the pot was given to Sumitra, the sweet and peaceful queen, who drank half of what was left, and then to Kaikeyi, the young and impulsive queen, who drank half of what was left. Finally Sumitra consumed the rest. So Kaushalya became the mother of Rama, Kaikeyi became the mother of Bharata, and Sumitra became the mother of Lakshmana and Satrugna. The four brothers are compared to the quadruple emanation (*catvur vyuha*) of Narayana: Vasudeva, Sankarshana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha.

When Rama had completed his 15th year, his father the king was visited by Visvamitra Rishi. After welcoming the great Rishi with all honors and granting him whatever he might have desired, Dasaratha was horrified to hear that the purpose of that visit was to ask the personal intervention of young prince Rama to protect a sacrifice ceremony that Visvamitra was performing and that was regularly interrupted and spoiled by two powerful Rakshasas named Maricha and Subahu. After proposing alternative solutions that were not accepted by Visvamitra as adequate, Dasaratha followed Vasistha's advice and consented to send Rama, on the condition that he was accompanied by his loyal brother Lakshmana. Visvamitra and the two princes left the capital and on the evening of their first day of traveling they camped on the bank of the Sarayu river, where the Rishi taught Rama and Lakshmana the

secret *mantras* Bala and Atibala, that give the power to conquer hunger, thirst and fatigue, as well as all diseases. After another day's journey, they spent the night at Kamashrama, a village of Rishis located in Anga desa (the present West Bengal) at the confluences between Sarayu and Ganges. In that place Shiva had engaged in long austerities and had incinerated Kamadeva (the Deva of erotic love, also called Manmatha), who had dared to hit him with his flower arrows.

Visvamitra explained that in that forest lived a terrible Yakshi named Tataka, daughter of Suketu and wife of Sunda, who had been cursed by Agastya to become a Rakshasi and could take any form. Once the forest had been a thickly populated, prosperous and happy kingdom, known as Malada and Karusha, blessed by the waters of all the sacred rivers used by the Devas for the purification ritual performed for Indra after killing Vritra. Rama hesitated to kill a woman, but Visvamitra explained to him that it was not an ordinary woman, but a blood thirsty monster, that had to be eliminated for the good of innocent creatures. Thus Rama fought against Tataka, who was extraordinarily strong and powerful, and killed her, restoring peace and joy to that region.

Visvamitra was very pleased with Rama's behavior, so he gave Rama the knowledge of the mystic weapons, including the *chakras* ("discs") of Dharma, Kala and Vishnu, the *trishula* ("trident") of Shiva, the Brahma sira ("head of Brahma"), the Haya sira ("head of Hayagriva"), the Krauncha ("heron"), the Aishika ("straw

blade") and the Brahmastra ("the arrow of Brahma"), the two Shaktis ("powers") of Vishnu and Shiva respectively, the *gadas* ("maces") called Modaki ("that beats") and Shikari ("the tower"), the *pasas* ("ropes") called Dharma, Kala and Varuna presided respectively by Yamaraja, by Bhairava and by the Deva of the oceans, the *ashanis* ("missiles") called Suksha ("drying") and Ardra ("dampener"), the *astras* ("arrows") of Pinaka (Shiva) and Narayana, and those of Agni (called Shikari, "the tower") and Vayu (called Prathama, "that blows").

Besides these divine weapons, he gave Rama also the terrible weapons called Kankala Musala ("the beater"), Kapala ("the skull") and Kankana ("golden"), the weapon of the Vidyadharas and the Pisachas, those of the Gandharvas called Mohana ("that confuses"), Prasvapana ("that makes sleepy"), Manava ("of the human beings") and Prasamana ("that calms the enemy's anger") and the sword Nanda, as well as the *astras* ("arrows") called Varshana ("that brings rain"), Soshana ("that dries up"), Santapana ("that moistens"), Vilapana ("that makes cry"), Tamasa ("that brings darkness"), Mayamaya ("that dissipates the effects of magic"), Tejaprabha ("that radiates"), Sisira ("that cools"), and many others. On Rama's request, Visvamitra also taught him how to neutralize and call back each one of those weapons.

Proceeding with their journey they reached Siddhashrama, the residence of Visvamitra, a place that once belonged to Vamana and where Kasyapa Rishi,

father of Indra and the other Adityas, had engaged in austerity with the purpose of obtaining Vishnu as a son. On this occasion, Visvamitra narrated the story of the *avatara* Vamana, who appeared to take away from Mahabali all the regions that the Danava king had conquered by defeating Indra. After reaching his home, Visvamitra started the ritual, while Rama and Lakshmana kept vigil constantly, day and night. On the seventh and last day came the two Rakshasas, ready to bring a rain of blood: Rama threw Maricha very far, beyond the ocean, and he killed Subhahu. Finally Visvamitra was able to complete his rituals successfully.

Then Visvamitra went with Rama and Lakshmana to Mithila, the capital of king Janaka, to show them the famous bow of Shiva. During the journey Visvamitra narrated many things, including the story of his own ancestor Kusha, his son Kushanabha and his son Gadhi, who was the father of Visvamitra and Kaushiki (who later became a sacred river).

After crossing the Sona river, they reached the Ganges. There, on Rama's request, Visvamitra narrated the birth of Kartikeya, risen from the fire and the sacred waters of the Ganges, and breast-fed by the stars. Then he told how the divine sacred river had descended to the earth, thanks to the merits of Sagara, the ancestor of Rama, and his descendants Amsuman, Dilipa and Baghiratha, and how, while dropping from the heavenly planets, the Ganges fell on Shiva's head and formed the lake Bindu sarovara, from which it flows forth in seven streams.

From the north bank of the Ganges it was possible to see the city of Vishala, and Visvamitra told its story to the princes - from the times when Devas and Asuras had churned the ocean of milk to obtain the nectar, and Shiva had drunk the poison produced by its impurities. Later on in the same place Diti, the mother of the Asuras, decided to take revenge against Indra who had killed all her children; she took a vow to beget a son who would be the enemy of the king of the heavenly planets. Indra was able to sneak into Diti's womb and cut the embryo into seven parts - but those were born as the seven Maruts, who became favorable to Indra as technically he had become their "brother" as had shared the same womb. After spending the night in the city as guests of king Sumati, Visvamitra, Rama and Lakshmana left again on the next morning.

At the outskirts of Mithila, Rama noticed a very beautiful *ashrama* that was completely deserted. Visvamitra told him the story of that place: it was the residence of Gautama Rishi, one of the famous seven Rishis, descendent of Angirasa. His wife Ahalya was *manasa putri* ("daughter of the mind") of Brahma and mother of Satananda, the Purohit of king Janaka of Mithila, as well as of Vamadeva and Nodha.

A long time before, Indra had been fascinated by Ahalya, the wife of Gautama, and had approached her taking the appearance of Gautama while the Rishi was absent. Ahalya recognized Indra, but because she felt flattered by the attentions of the king of the heavenly planets, she had intercourse with him. While he was

returning to the *ashrama*, Gautama saw Indra sneaking away and cursed him to lose his virility. Furthermore, Gautama decreed that Ahalya would remain invisible, living on air only, until the day when Rama would reach the *ashrama*. Visvamitra encouraged Rama and Lakshmana to enter the *ashrama*, and Ahalya was happily reunited to her husband after her purifying austerity.

At Mithila, king Janaka welcomed Visvamitra and the two princes with all honors, and on that occasion Janaka's *guru*, Satananda (son of Gautama and Ahalya) narrated the story of Visvamitra, who had been a great *kshatriya* but had earned the position and fame of a great Rishi and *brahmana* by his intense austerities. One day he had been traveling with his army, and arrived at the *ashrama* of Vasistha Rishi (king Dasaratha's *guru*). The Rishi kindly welcomed his visitors and immediately offered a sumptuous feast to all of them. Amazed, Visvamitra asked how Vasistha had been able to get so many provisions, and the Rishi revealed that his *kamadhenu* ("cow that fulfills all desires") named Sabala had the power to supply anything one desired. Visvamitra thought that such a wonderful treasure would be very useful for a king, and asked Vasistha to give him the cow. Vasistha loved Sabala like a sister and refused to give her away. Visvamitra insisted, and in the end he ordered his men to seize the cow and take her away by force.

Then the Rishi asked Sabala to create an army, that destroyed all the forces of Visvamitra and also killed his

100 sons. Humiliated, Visvamitra went away to engage in austerities, praying Shiva for help; finally he received divine weapons from him and he returned to Vasistha's *ashrama* determined to destroy it completely. All the residents fled away but Vasistha stood his *brahma-danda* ("sacred staff") into the ground, and it neutralized Visvamitra's weapons, absorbing his *brahmastra* and radiating a great light.

Defeated again, Visvamitra realized that the power of a *brahmana* is greater than the power of a *kshatriya* and decided to become a *brahmana*. After more austerities, Visvamitra was recognized by Brahma as *raja-rishi*, but he was not satisfied yet. One day he was approached by a famous king of the solar dynasty, named Trishanku, who had fallen into disgrace. Trishanku was so attached to his body that he had decided to ascend the heavenly planets without leaving his earthly body, but his *guru* Vasistha had refused to help him to fulfill that absurd desire.

Frustrated, Trishanku had approached Vasistha's sons, but without success, and when he had dared to say that he would find some other officiating priest, he had received a curse that transformed his body for the worse. Kicked out from the palace by his own guards, who were unable to recognize him, Trishanku had gone to search for Visvamitra. Moved by the story of Trishanku's sufferings, Visvamitra decided to help him and started the ritual that would raise him to the heavenly planets in that same body. All the Rishis participated to the rituals because they feared

Visvamitra's famous anger - except Vasistha's sons, who by mocking the rituals earned a special curse by which they would die and be reborn for seven times in a wild tribe of dog-eaters.

When the time came to evoke the Devas to come to the sacrifice, no Deva showed up. Angered, Visvamitra transferred all his religious merits to Trishanku to raise him up to Svarga even without the Deva's approval. Everybody was amazed to see Trishanku rising into the sky, up to Indraloka - but then Indra resented that invasion and cast him down again to earth, while poor Trishanku cried to Visvamitra for help.

The powerful Rishi stopped his fall and Trishanku remained suspended mid air like a star, then Visvamitra started to create a new solar system just for him, with a new Indra and a new group of Devas. Scared, Indra and the Devas hastened to make peace with Visvamitra and consented to let Trishanku remain where he was, with the new stars and planets that had been created already.

Then Satananda narrated the episode of Sunashepa, to whom Visvamitra had given a *mantra* to stop death. Later Visvamitra had a relationship with the Apsara Menaka, who remained with him for 10 years. After purifying himself again with long austerities on the Himalaya, Visvamitra was recognized by Brahma as *maha-rishi*. Worried about the power that Visvamitra was accumulating, Indra decided to break his austerities and sent the Apsara Rambha to seduce him; however

the Rishi could see through the trick and in anger he turned the celestial dancer into stone. Repenting for his impulsive action and realizing that he still had a lot of work to do on himself, Visvamitra resumed his austerities at Pushkara, and at last he was recognized as *brahma rishi* by Brahma and Vasistha.

After spending the night in the king's palace, Visvamitra asked Janaka to show the great bow of Shiva to the two princes. The king explained that the bow had been given by Shiva to his ancestor Devarata, the sixth of the dynasty. Then Janaka narrated the story of the appearance of Sita, his daughter, who was born from the earth: during the preliminary rituals for his sacrifice to obtain a progeny, Janaka had found the little girl in a furrow in the field that he was ploughing according to the rites. Now Sita had become a woman, and for his *svayamvara* Janaka had requested the stringing of that bow, but for one entire year all the great warriors had been unable even to lift the bow. Rama took the bow in his hand, bent it to tie the string, and pulled it with such strength that the powerful bow cracked into two pieces. Thus it was decided that Sita would become the wife of Rama. King Janaka sent ambassadors to the city of Ayodhya to inform Dasaratha about the happy news, and the royal family of Dasaratha arrived at Mithila with a great retinue. In the presence of many great Rishis and of the sacrificial fire, Rama married Sita while his brothers married the other princesses of Mithila - the daughters of Kushadhvaja, brother of king Janaka: Lakshmana married Urmila, Bharata married Mandavi

and Satrugna married Srutakirti. During the journey back to Ayodhya, Rama was confronted by Parasurama, who knew that Rama had broken the sacred bow of Shiva, and challenged him to hold the bow of Vishnu. The last chapter (77) of *Bala kanda* ends with Parasurama's defeat and the triumphant arrival of the marriage party in the city of Ayodhya.

The next book, entitled *Ayodhya kanda* (after the name of the capital city of Dasaratha's kingdom) begins with the preparations for the official installation ceremony of Rama as *yuvaraja*, meant to allow Dasaratha to quickly retire from the management of the kingdom. The king was expecting to die soon and suddenly, because there had been some inauspicious omens. Dasaratha offered Rama advice on the art of government and Kaushalya gave her blessings, and then Vasistha started the rituals with the *diksha* ("initiation to the sacrifice") to Rama and Sita, who observed fasting from the evening before the ceremony.

A palace maid named Manthara went to inform queen Kaikeyi of the imminent coronation; Kaikeyi was very happy and rewarded the maid with a gift, but Manthara refused the gift in indignation and rebuked her mistress. She observed that Rama's coronation had been organized very suddenly and at a convenient time, when Kaikeyi's son Bharata was absent from the city, having gone to visit his maternal grandfather. This, she said, could only mean that Rama was afraid of Bharata's competition, and thus Rama's coronation would cause Bharata and his mother Kaikeyi to become

mere servants in the palace. Rama's son would then ascend the throne and Bharata would be excluded from succession and even from the dynasty: all this was due to the fact that Kaikeyi had encouraged his son to remain in the company of his maternal uncle rather than staying near to his own father. In the past Kaikeyi had been the king's favorite, but now Kaushalya was officially the queen mother and she would soon get revenge. Finally Manthara succeeded in convincing Kaikeyi of her fears, and reminded her that Dasaratha was indebted with her and had promised her two boons in gratitude for having saved his life on the battlefield. If Kaikeyi asked Dasaratha to crown Bharata and exile Rama for a number of years, the people would become used to the new situation and would remain loyal to Bharata even after Rama's return.

When Dasaratha entered Kaikeyi's apartment, he found her in the *krodha griha* ("the room of anger") laying on the ground, while her ornaments were scattered around on the floor. Kaikeyi reminded him the promise of two boons, then asked him to crown Bharata and send Rama into a forest exile for 14 years. Dasaratha was shocked by that incredible and totally unexpected request, and begged her to ask for any other favor instead, but Kaikeyi did not relent. The king spent the night in agony, torn between the duty to keep his word and the injustice of exiling Rama. The next morning, when the prime minister Sumantra went to search for the king in Kaikeyi's room and found him unconscious, unable to reply to his questions, the queen ordered him

to immediately fetch Rama. When Rama arrived, Kaikeyi told him about Dasaratha's promise and Rama swore that he would execute any order to save his father from the disgrace of failing to keep his word.

Rama went to take leave from Kaushalya, who begged him not to go. Seeing Kaushalya's despair, Lakshmana could not control his anger and declared that he was ready to fight against anyone and he would put Rama on the throne even if that meant imprisoning or killing Dasaratha, because even a superior should be punished if he becomes arrogant or evil, and Dasaratha and Kaikeyi were behaving like enemies under the disguise of parents. Rama pacified his brother, reminding him that Kaikeyi was no ordinary person and had always showed him the greatest affection - therefore that situation had obviously been arranged by destiny for a higher purpose. Sita was informed about the change of plans and decided to accompany Rama into exile although she was not required to do so, and even against the order of Rama, who told her to stay back in the palace. Lakshmana, too, chose to accompany Rama, and to the great distress of all the inhabitants of Ayodhya, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana took leave from the shattered Dasaratha, got on the chariot driven by Sumantra and started to leave the city. Dasaratha ordered that the army and all the wealth of the treasury to be assigned to Rama, and when Rama refused, he said he would personally go with him. Kaikeyi, however, protested, and instead had *sannyasi* clothes brought for all the three exiled.

Dasaratha and Kaushalya followed Rama's chariot as far as they could, then when it disappeared on the horizon they resigned themselves to return to the palace; when Kaikeyi approached him, the king rejected her, repudiating her and expelling her from the family. Already invalid because of his pain, weakness and confusion, Dasaratha asked to be carried to Kausalya's apartment, where he remained lamenting the tragedy, while almost all the subjects followed Rama to the bank of the Tamasa river, although Rama had begged them to return home.

The exiled princes camped for the night, but when everybody else was fast asleep, Rama woke Sumantra and asked him to take them on the other bank of the river. On the next day Rama continued to travel and crossing the rivers Vedasruti, Gomati and Syandika, he finally reached the bank of the Ganges, where he was respectfully welcomed by the Nishadas (forest hunters) and by their headman Guha. Rama only accepted some food for the horses, although Guha had asked him to stay in that land and rule over his inhabitants, and had prepared for them a great quantity and variety of delicious foods and comfortable beds for sleeping. Rama and Sita simply lay down on the ground to sleep, while Guha remained awake to protect their sleep and had a long conversation with Lakshmana, who, too, did not want to sleep. Finally Rama convinced Sumantra to return to the capital to reassure Kaikeyi, take care of the old king and bring Bharata back home, because he was still in the city of his maternal uncle. After taking leave

from Sumantra and Guha, the princes crossed the river Ganges by boat, then entered the forest on the other bank.

Next, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana arrived at the *ashrama* of Bharadvaja Rishi at Prayaga (presently known as Allahabad), at the confluence of Ganges and Yamuna. The Rishi welcomed them affectionately and recommended that they establish a residence in Citrakuta, a beautiful place a little further south. After crossing the Yamuna on a raft, they walked along the bank and rested for the night before proceeding to Citrakuta hill. After they had visited Valmiki's *ashrama* there, Lakshmana built a beautiful log cabin with a leaf-thatched roof near the bank of the Mandakini river, Rama performed the prescribed rituals and they established their home there.

Guha and Sumantra received the confirmation that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana had happily reached Citrakuta, so Sumantra left to return to the capital and inform the king. Arrived in town, Sumantra went to Dasaratha and delivered the messages from Rama and Lakshmana, also telling the king that all the people of the city were depressed and angry for what had happened. Kaushalya and Dasaratha tormented and consoled each other, maddened in their grief, and then suddenly the king realized that his sufferings were due to an old curse. It all went back to a hunting expedition, in which young Dasaratha was practicing archery by hitting a target guided by sound only. He had arrived on the bank of river Sarayu and heard the noise of a big

animal that was drinking there. After shooting his arrow, he was shocked to find out that actually he had hit a young man, and the noise he had heard was actually the sound of water he had been collecting in a pot. Horrified, Dasaratha tried to help his victim, but the wound was lethal and the young man only had the time to ask the prince to take the water to his old and blind parents, who were waiting to drink it. Dasaratha accompanied the two old people to the river bank to perform the funeral rites, but they were crazed with despair for the loss of their only son and support, and cursed Dasaratha to die of grief for the loss of his own son, just like them. After remembering those tragic events Dasaratha completely lost consciousness and died delirious calling Rama's name.

At dawn the *brahmanas* gathered to ask Vasistha to choose a new king, because the kingdom could not be left in a state of anarchy, and Vasistha sent messengers to Girivraja in the Kekaya kingdom to call back Bharata and Satrughna. In the meantime, Bharata had been disturbed by many nightmares and bad omens, and after quickly taking leave from uncle Kekeya and cousin Yudhajit, he left to return home. The journey lasted 7 days, and when he reached Ayodhya, prince Bharata found the city unusually sad, dark and hostile. The king was not to be seen around, so Bharata went to his mother Kaikeyi and asked her what tragedy had befallen the kingdom. Kaikeyi informed him of the king's death, and told him to be ready to ascend the throne, but when he came to know the entire story, Bharata was

horrified and disgusted, and strongly rebuked his mother for the disaster that she had brought about.

Bharata went to Kaushalya, who treated him harshly until the prince succeeded in convincing her about his innocence and genuine pain. Vasistha told Bharata to stop lamenting and to take care of his father's cremation; at the end of the 13 days of funeral rites, Vasistha asked Bharata to occupy the throne to fill the void left by Dasaratha's death and Rama's absence, but Bharata refused to become king and repeated that he was determined to bring Rama back to the capital and crown him personally. That extraordinary news brought enthusiasm to all the subjects, and as everybody wanted to go with Bharata, a huge crowd assembled and a large road was built from the capital to the Ganges, equipped with water wells and tents for resting.

Guha saw the large crowd arriving and went to meet Bharata and ask him what were his intentions towards Rama. Reassured, Guha became friendly with Bharata and told him that Rama was observing all the rules of renunciation - matting his hair with tree resin, dressing in tree bark, sleeping on the ground and eating only roots and fruits. Bharata took the solemn vow to observe the same rules and to remain with Rama in the forest if Rama had refused to return to the capital and be crowned king.

After crossing the river, Bharata reached the *ashrama* of Bharadhvaja, and the Rishi, too, asked him his intentions about Rama before revealing the place where

the exiled prince was staying. With the Rishi's permission, Bharata brought his retinue to the *ashrama*, and introducing his mother Kaikeyi, he said she was the cause of the entire tragedy: however, Bharadvaja corrected him, saying that Rama's adventures would bring great blessings to the world.

Rama heard Bharata's party approaching. Lakshmana climbed on a tree to better see who was coming, and recognizing Bharata's insignia, concluded that Bharata had come with a large army to kill Rama; he prepared to fight, but Rama pacified him explaining that Bharata would never attack him. Bharata asked his retinue to stop at a distance and walked alone to the *ashrama*, where Rama welcomed him with great affection. Overwhelmed by devotion, Bharata was unable to speak so he simply prostrated at Rama's feet. Rama lifted and embraced him, then asked for news from Ayodhya. Bharata informed him about their father's death, and after performing the ritual ablutions in the Mandakini river, Rama offered water and *pindi* (the traditional food offering) to the departed soul. Bharata took Vasistha and the queens to the *ashrama*, explained the reason why he had come to the forest and begged Rama to return to the capital and ascend the throne.

Everyone tried to convince Rama to accept the kingship by using various arguments but without success; Bharata finally said that he was ready to fast until death to make that happen. Rama replied that it was not possible for him to dishonor the promise given by

Dasaratha, and that Bharata had to do his part by occupying the throne as requested by Kaikeyi. So Bharata went back to the capital, carrying Rama's sandals as a symbol of his presence on the throne, and solemnly declared that he was nothing more than his brother's servant, executing his orders to take care of the kingdom in the absence of the legitimate king until the end of the 14 years of exile - and in case Rama did not return, he would commit suicide. Bharata established his residence at Nandigrama, at a certain distance from the capital, and without entering the city again he engaged in strict austerity but cooperating with the ministers for the management of the government.

After Bharata's visit, Rama heard from the forest Rishis that some Rakshasas under the command of Khara had developed the habit of molesting the inhabitants of the *ashramas*. Considering that Citrakuta reminded him of the sadness of Bharata's visit, the news of his father's death, and the separation and pain of his family, Rama decided to seek another residence. He went to the *ashrama* of Atri Rishi, where he was received with honor and affection, and Sita met Anasurya, Atri's wife, who offered her good advice on married life and gifts of divine ornaments. The departure from Atri Rishi's *ashrama* ends chapter 119 of *Ayodhya kanda*.

In the *Aranya kanda* ("the book of the jungle") we see Rama, Sita and Lakshmana entering the Dandaka forest, welcomed by the Rishis who lived there. The first Rakshasa they met was Viradha, who attacked Sita and then Rama and Lakshmana. When he was brought

down, Viradha recognized Rama and was liberated from the curse that condemned him to remain in that form: he then returned to his position of Gandharva and suggested Rama to visit the *ashrama* of Sarabhanga Rishi. Sarabhanga was a very old man, and was waiting to see Rama before leaving his body. Other Rishis approached Rama and asked him to protect them from the repeated attacks of the Rakshasas that had settled in the forest. Rama reassured them, saying he would eliminate the threat, then visited the *ashrama* of Sutiksha Rishi, where they spent the night. Sita was not very happy about those talks of war against the Rakshasas, but Rama explained that a *kshatriya's* duty is to protect the people, and this required the elimination of the Rakshasas.

While they were traveling to the *ashrama* of Agastya Rishi, Rama spoke to Lakshmana about Agastya's story, and especially about the extraordinary way in which he had eliminated a great Rakshasa named Vatapi. Agastya presented Rama with the great bow of Vishnu, two inexhaustible quivers obtained from Indra and a divine sword; he also promised that Matali, Indra's charioteer, would bring him the chariot of the king of the heavenly planets every time he needed it. Agastya Rishi praised Sita for her great qualities and recommended Rama to spend the last exile period in Panchavati, on the river of the river Godavari - a truly beautiful place, surrounded by flowering trees. During his journey to Panchavati, Rama met the great bird Jatayu, who had been Dasaratha's friend. After

reaching his destination, Lakshmana chose the best spot and quickly built a log cabin with a thatched roof.

One day there came Surpanakha, a powerful Rakshasi sister of Ravana, the kings of the Rakshasas. Surpanakha's husband Vidyut Jihva had been killed by Ravana and she did not want to remain a widow, therefore when she saw the handsome prince Rama, she proposed to marry him. Surpanakha's episode is crucial in the story of the *Ramayana*, both as a prelude to the war against the Rakshasa colony of Janasthana in the forest, and as an introduction to the abduction of Sita, which will cause the destruction of the Rakshasas' capital in Lanka.

Superficially, it may seem that Rama and Lakshmana are cruelly making fun of a poor woman, who is confused and starved for affection, but this illusion is short lived, and the Rakshasi reveals herself in her true nature of brutal and bloodthirsty monster, when she decides to solve the problem by devouring Sita. Also Lakshmana's action to cut off the Rakshasi's nose and ears must be seen in its proper context: the Rakshasas are able to take any form they like, yet physical beauty is never their main concern. Infuriated, Surpanakha rushed to her brother Khara, the commander of the Rakshasa garrison in the forest, and Khara, Trishira and Duhsana went to punish the two human princes for that offense. Rama ordered Lakshmana to hide Sita in a cave and stay to protect her, while he would singlehandedly annihilate the entire army of 14 thousands Rakshasas. The only survivor, Akampana,

rushed to inform Ravana, and advised him to avoid confronting the prince in an open fight; it would be much better to demoralize him first by kidnapping his beloved wife. Tataka's son Maricha, who had already been defeated by Rama, confirmed that the prince was not an ordinary person, and in fact it could even be Vishnu himself, that sometimes descends as *avatara*.

In the meantime Surpanakha had arrived at Ravana's palace to demand vengeance for the offense she had suffered; she entered the discussion, supporting the plan for Sita's abduction. Ravana went to see Maricha and ordered him to take the shape of a beautiful golden deer and to go grazing around the *ashrama*, to lure Rama as far away as possible. Maricha was not enthusiastic about the plan, but because refusing to execute Ravana's order would mean certain death, he decided it was better for him to risk being killed by Rama, and accepted the task.

While picking flowers in the surrounding forest, Sita saw the deer and was fascinated by it; she called Rama and Lakshmana to show it to them. Lakshmana immediately suspected a Rakshasa's trick, but Rama observed that in such a case it would be even more important to take care of it: if he failed in capturing the animal, he would kill it. Rama told Lakshmana to stay and protect Sita and followed the deer further and further away, until he decided he had passed the limit. He shot an arrow and Maricha, mortally wounded, returned to his normal shape and by imitating Rama's voice called Sita and Lakshmana for help, according to Ravana's plan.

Rama rushed back to the *ashrama*, but the damage was done: obsessed by the idea that Rama could be in danger, Sita had begged Lakshmana to go find out. At first Lakshmana did not want to disobey Rama's orders and refused to leave her alone, but from fear, Sita had moved to anger, and expressed the doubt that actually Lakshmana was hoping for Rama to die, so that he could take advantage of her. Finally Lakshmana gave in: he drew a mystic protective line (*rekha*) around the cabin, warning Sita not to step over it, and ran off to look for Rama. As soon as Lakshmana had left the scene, Ravana took the appearance of a *sannyasi* and came forward chanting some *mantras*. Sita respectfully welcomed the fake *sadhu* and left the protective circle to bring him some food. Then Ravana revealed his true identity and asked Sita to become his lover; when Sita rejected him indignantly, the Rakshasa lifted her off the ground and carried her away on his flying chariot. Hearing Sita's cries for help, the great bird Jatayu rushed on the spot to stop Ravana, but in the ensuing battle he was fatally wounded. While flying over a mountain, Sita saw a group of Vanaras ("people of the forest") and dropped some of her ornaments, hoping they would be found and help Rama to track her.

Arrived at Lanka, Ravana took Sita to visit his palace and showed her his wealth and power, but Sita did not relent and even refused to look at his face. In the end Ravana imprisoned her in the Asoka vana, a grove of *asoka* trees inside the royal gardens, under the watchful eyes of some Rakshasis.

In the meantime, Rama was rushing back to the *ashrama* when he met Lakshmana coming after him, and their fears were confirmed when they reached the *ashram*: it was empty. Rama wept bitterly and ran here and there looking for Sita, overwhelmed by the pain for her absence, and begged the animals, the trees and the streams to give him information on his beloved wife. Lakshmana tried to comfort him, but without much success.

This part of the poem gives particular importance to Rama's loving sentiments in the *sringara rasa*. While they were wandering in the forest looking for Sita, they met dying Jatayu: the bird just had the time to tell them what had happened - his fight with Ravana and his failure to rescue Sita. His eyes filled with tears, Rama embraced the lifeless body of Jatayu and performed the funeral rites for him on the bank of the Godavari river.

Chasing after Ravana, the two princes met a Rakshasa named Kabandha, who had a strange shape: he had no head, and there was a mouth in the middle of his body. Grabbing Rama and Lakshmana, the Rakshasa started to pull them towards his big mouth to devour them, but the two princes chopped his arms off, thus liberating him from the curse that had given him that body.

After Rama and Lakshmana had cremated his body, Kabandha appeared in a divine form and advised Rama to seek the Vanara named Sugriva, who could help him to find Sita. Kabandha also told them to go to the *ashrama* of Matanga Rishi, where the Rishika Sabari, of

tribal origins, had been waiting for a long time to meet Lord Rama. In her devotional enthusiasm, Sabari offered Rama some forest fruits, after tasting some to make sure they were really good. Then Rama and Lakshmana proceeded towards lake Pampa and Rishyamuka hill, where Sugriva lived. This is the end of chapter 75 of *Aranya kanda*.

The *Kishkinda Kanda* takes its name from the capital city of the Vanara kingdom. As we have mentioned in the introduction, we need to go beyond the superficial view that identifies the Vanaras with the ordinary langur monkeys, that are still found in India. It is possible that the langur monkeys are somehow related with the ancient Vanaras, but yet again, even the contemporary human species has many genes in common with chimpanzees. The Vanaras described in the *Ramayana* have a tail but rather resemble the primates in the "Planet of Apes" movie: they build cities, have a complex social system, wear ornaments and weapons and speak expressing thoughts and sentiments that are certainly not different from the humans'. Vedic tradition describes in details many humanoid races that are reciprocally fertile, and the Vanaras are among them: we may remember that Krishna married a descendent of Jambavan, one of the Vanaras that had participated to Rama's expedition against Ravana. The other humanoid races are the Rakshasas, Yakshas, Gandharvas and Nagas, all reciprocally fertile with the human beings, and all superior to human beings in regard to the power of manipulating matter.

The book about the Vanaras begins with an elaborate description of the beauty of the lake Pampa, that intensifies Rama's feelings for the absence of Sita. This Rishyamuka hill was the place where Sugriva had taken shelter, because due a curse, his brother Vali could not come near the hill. But how had this enmity between Sugriva and Vali developed?

Vali, son on Indra and king of the Vanaras, was Sugriva's elder brother. One day Vali had gone outside the city to confront the Rakshasa Mayavi and during the fight the two entered a cave, while Sugriva remained to guard the entrance. After a long wait, Sugriva heard some screams and moaning, and saw blood flowing out of the cave: terrorized at the idea that Vali had been killed, Sugriva blocked the entrance of the cave with a boulder to imprison the Rakshasa and returned to Kishkinda with the news of the king's death. The ministers convinced Sugriva to ascend the throne for the sake of the kingdom, but Vali was not dead at all, and after some time he was able to remove the boulder blocking the passage to the cave and returned to the capital, extremely angry. Sugriva fled and Vali appropriated Sugriva's wife Ruma.

Sugriva saw the two princes approaching, and fearing they might be Vali's spies, he sent his minister Hanuman to find out their intentions. Rama was very pleased by Hanuman's courtesy and he explained who he was and what he was looking for. Immediately Hanuman lifted the princes on his shoulders and took them to Sugriva, who was happy to become their ally.

Both had a wife to rescue and an enemy to defeat, and they made a solemn oath to help each other.

Sugriva told Rama that in fact some time earlier he had seen a flying chariot from which a lady had dropped a small package containing some ornaments; Rama immediately identified them all and Lakshmana too recognized the anklets, that he had seen many times while offering his homage to his elder brother's wife. Sugriva tried to pacify Rama, then he told him his own story, warning him that Vali was a formidable and cruel enemy, who had killed the powerful *asura* Dundubhi. To reassure Sugriva, Rama demonstrated his archery skills by shooting an arrow that pierced 7 *sala* trees, entered the ground and after going through the entire earth returned into the quiver at lightning speed. Sugriva was really impressed and decided to challenge Vali; however he was defeated. According to the plan, Rama was supposed to hit Vali while he was engaged in fighting Sugriva, but Rama was unable to distinguish one from the other, because they looked so much alike. Rama suggested Sugriva to wear a garland during the next fight so that he would be able to recognize him, so Sugriva went back to challenge his brother again.

Vali was getting ready to fight, but his wise wife Tara, descendent of Brihaspati, begged him not to accept the challenge. They knew Sugriva was not crazy, yet only one day after being badly defeated he was returning for a new fight: obviously he was counting on some other hidden factor. Besides, Tara had heard rumors that Sugriva had become Rama's ally. Maybe it was better

to drop that silly enmity and make peace with Sugriva - what if he could be crowned *yuvaraja*? Vali rejected Tara's advice, and this time while Vali and Sugriva were fighting, Rama aimed at Vali and shot an arrow into his chest. Mortally wounded, Vali fell to the ground and saw Rama approaching with his bow; he rebuked him for having attacked an unaware enemy, but Rama explained the reason of his intervention: those who believe they can freely violate the *dharma* with immoral actions, have no right to invoke the protection of *dharma*, and one who chooses to behave like a ferocious animal should be treated as such. Vali recognized the validity of Rama's arguments and apologized for rebuking him. Then he made peace with Sugriva, entrusted him with his son Angada and asked him to take care of Tara. Both Tara and Sugriva were distraught because of Vali's death; Rama pacified them and suggested that Angada be crowned *yuvaraja* while Sugriva occupied the throne of Kishkinda. As the orders given by Kaikeyi required him to live in the forest, Rama did not enter the city of Kishkinda but remained on the Prasravana hill to pine on Sita's absence, waiting for the end of the rainy season, when Sugriva would be able to send explorers to track down the kidnapper.

After some time Hanuman warned Sugriva reminding him of his promise to Rama, but the new king was deeply immersed into the sense gratification enhanced by the autumn season, and he lazily appointed Nila as a general and ordered him to rally the troops within 15 days. The rainy season finished but Sugriva still did not

show up, so Rama sent Lakshmana into the city. Seeing that Lakshmana was very angry, Sugriva sent Tara to meet him hoping that he would be pacified, then he immediately sent messengers to gather all the Vanaras. Sugriva personally went to Rama to explain the preparations for the army that was going to leave for war against Ravana, and organized explorers' groups, sending them into various directions and explaining them the details of the geography of the regions they would have to go through while searching during the subsequent month. Because Ravana's chariot had been seen heading south, Sugriva entrusted the south group to prince Angada and his best minister, Hanuman, as well as Jambavan and general Nila. Rama gave his signet ring to Hanuman, to show it to Sita as a token.

It is interesting to note that Jambavan is listed here as a Vanara and at the same time as "bear"; this could indicate that, like the pre-celtic shamanic tribes of Europe who lived in its forests, the Vanaras had totemic clans and identified with the spirit of the animal that they choose as "ancestor". We could say that this tendency of tribal peoples is natural and intrinsic, and that many archaeological finds show a variety of hominids with ape-like features. We cannot really say whether the Vanaras' tail was actually a physical appendix of these "ancestors of mankind" (as most relics consist of very incomplete skeletons, and especially of skulls) or that it was a totemic ornament of great value. In any case, our understanding of who and what such Vanaras actually were is beginning to expand in various dimensions.

The group that was supposed to go west was put under the command of Sushena, Tara's father, and was asked to explore the entire territory from the Afghanistan mountains to Arabia, while Angada was going to search Lanka as well as the entire Indonesia, and even further east if necessary. The explorers sent north, led by Satabali, were supposed to go up to mount Soma. Sugriva explained to Rama that his vast geographical knowledge was due to the fact that while fleeing Vali's fury he had traveled extensively before he had found a suitable shelter. The group journeying south explored the Vindhya mountains, entering the Riksha caves, where after a long and totally dark tunnel they found a wonderful place, with plenty of houses, gardens and small lakes. An elderly lady named Svayamprabha, who was guarding that subterranean world, informed the Vanaras that the cave had been created by Maya Danava and gifted to her by the Apsara Hema, then she transported the Vanaras outside by her mystic powers.

Depressed because they had not succeeded in finding anything although their allotted period had passed, the Vanaras decided to fast to death. Sampati, a great old bird who lived in that place, was happy at the idea of getting a good meal with them, because his wings had been burned by the sun and he found it very difficult to hunt to eat regularly. While the Vanaras were lamenting their bad luck, remembering Sita's abduction as the root cause of their troubles, Sampati heard that Jatayu (who was his brother) had died fighting to protect Sita. He approached them and confirmed that in fact his son

Suparsva had seen a woman kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Lanka. Thanks to his keen sight, Sampati knew the location of Lanka and gave valuable information to the Vanaras; immediately Sampati's wings were healed, and to his great amazement the bird remembered that this miraculous fact had been predicted to him by Nisakara Rishi. With renewed enthusiasm Angada and the other Vanaras went to the beach and started discussing how to cross the ocean. Who could jump farther? Jambavan stated that Hanuman, born from Anjana and Vayu, was as powerful as his father, the Deva of the wind. Once when he was a child, Hanuman had seen the sun rising and thought it was a ripe red fruit: he jumped up to the sky to grab it and Indra, scared, tried to stop Hanuman by striking him with a lightning which left a scar on the left side of his chin (*hanuman* means "broken chin").

After mentally offering his homage to his father Vayu, to Rama and Lakshmana, Hanuman took a giant leap from mount Mahendra, helping himself with his hands and tail, too. Here ends chapter 67 of *Kishkinda kanda*.

The next book, entitled *Sundara kanda* ("book of the wonders") is the most popular and is often recited during special functions; at the end of the reading, the coronation of Rama (described later in the text) is remembered. During his flight, Hanuman encountered mount Mainaka, the last of the flying mountains (that Vayu had saved from Indra's fury) but instead of stopping for a rest he moved it aside and gracefully accepted its prayers. Then he met Surasa the mother of

the Nagas and the Rakshasi Simhika, escaping from both; finally he landed on Lamba hill (also called Trikuta) and from there he watched in amazement the beauty and splendor of Lanka's capital, well protected by fortifications, moats and many soldiers. He decided to shrink his size and as the night fell he went to the main gates of the city, where he met Lankini, the personification of the city, and defeated her. Lankini abandoned the city, foreseeing its imminent destruction, and Hanuman went on to explore each street and each building, in the meantime getting an idea of the weapons and of the army of Ravana. Arrived at the royal palace he observed the wonderful aircraft of Ravana, called Pushpaka vimana, and he entered Ravana's private apartments, and was amazed by the luxury of the place and by the beauty of the women of all races and colors who lived there, especially one who was covered with jewels. However, that woman was not Sita, but Mandodari, Ravana's queen. Walking on, he found a hall with a great variety of foods and drinks, meats and liquors of all kinds, but no sign of Sita. When he had finally given up hope, he saw a large garden within the palace that he had not checked yet, and there he found a woman of Sita's description, sitting on a platform surrounded by watchful Rakshasi guards.

Dawn came and king Ravana, awakened by the praise of the court singers, went to see the prisoner, again trying to coax her into submission, but Sita plainly told him that he should give up that false hope and beg forgiveness from Rama. Ravana warned her that she

had two months' time to make up her mind before he killed her; then he ordered the Rakshasis to harass her as much as possible or convince her in some other way, and he left.

Many months had passed since she had been kidnapped, and Sita's patience had come to the end; she had decided to commit suicide when one of the Rakshasis, named Trijata, told her companions that she had a dream where Rama was victorious and Ravana was dead. Noticing also some other good omens, Sita gathered her courage and Hanuman decided to announce himself, beginning to sing the glories of Rama with a soft and sweet voice, while he was still hiding among the branches of a *simshupa* tree. Then he showed himself in a tiny form, asking her if she really was Rama's bride. From her part, Sita too wanted to make sure it was not some Rakshasa trick. After supplying all the required information, Hanuman gave Sita the signet ring and offered to take her away immediately from Lanka, reassuring her that he was strong enough and revealing his gigantic form. Sita remarked that in this way Rama would find himself in an embarrassing position: it would be much better if Rama personally entered Lanka as a conqueror and directly avenged the offense.

To show Rama proof that he had really found her, Sita gave Hanuman the last jewel she had kept, and told him about one intimate episode that he could mention to Rama - one day while they lived in Citrakuta, a crow had attacked Sita and scratched her, and Rama had

shot a Brahmastra at him. After taking leave from Sita, Hanuman thought that before leaving he could do some damage to the city and scare Ravana a bit - something that would also keep up Sita's spirits - so he went into a rampage destroying a section of the park and easily defeated the Kinkara ("servant") soldiers that had come to face him. Then, manifesting a gigantic form and using tree trunks, pillars and iron bars from the park pavilions, he destroyed one entire garrison sent by Ravana, including Jambumali and the other sons of the minister Prahasta, other powerful warriors and even Aksha, one of Ravana's sons. Finally Ravana sent his son Indrajit, who had previously defeated Indra in a battle; Indrajit brought Hanuman down by using the Brahmastra, then while Hanuman was immobilized, the Rakshasas came and tied him up with many ordinary ropes. Although he could have freed himself quite easily, Hanuman decided to let himself be brought to Ravana, because he wanted to give him a message from Rama.

Majestically sitting in the jewelled throne hall and surrounded by his ministers Durdhara, Prahasta, Mahaparsva and Nikumbha, Ravana radiated power and splendor. Hanuman said that he had destroyed the park specifically with the purpose of being brought to his presence because he had a message for him: Rama was extremely powerful and he was going to punish the offender, therefore Ravana needed to understand that it was better for him to surrender immediately and let Sita go free. Angered by Hanuman's daring speech, Ravana wanted to have him killed, but Vibhishana, Ravana's

brother, reminded him that according to the *kshatriyas'* ethical code, a messenger can never be killed. Ravana relented and decreed that Hanuman's tail was to be set on fire instead; the Rakshasas wrapped the tail with many oil-soaked rags and set fire to it, then they took the prisoner around the city for the amusement of the residents. Sita heard about it and prayed Agni not to harm Hanuman - who was amazed to notice that he did not feel any pain or discomfort.

When he decided he had seen enough, Hanuman loosened the ropes that tied him up and killed the guards, then he used his blazing tail to set fire to the capital's buildings, only sparing Vibhishana's house. Finally he returned to Sita, who was glad to hear about his raid and blessed him.

Hanuman climbed mount Aristha and leaped again through the ocean, landing on the opposite beach. After reporting the success of his mission to the jubilant Vanaras, Hanuman was ready to go to war alone against Lanka, but agreed to return immediately to Rama to give him the news. Arriving near Kishkinda, the explorers stopped at the Madhuvana garden, property of Sugriva, and in spite of the presence of the caretaker, Dadhimukha, they pillaged the honey to celebrate the success of their mission. Informed by Dadhimukha about the exuberant behavior of the explorers, Sugriva guessed they had been celebrating, and sent immediately for Angada and his companions. Angada reported to Rama about finding Sita, then Hanuman gave a complete description of the adventure, handed

him the jewel received from Sita and mentioned the crow episode. Chapter 68 of *Kishkinda kanda* ends with Rama embracing Hanuman in gratitude and affection.

The *Yuddha kanda* ("the book of the battle") constitutes the last part of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Rama was anxious to leave for Lanka, and on an auspicious day the Vanara army began their march. Hanuman carried Rama on his shoulder while Angada carried Lakshmana, and quickly they arrived at the Mahendra mountain, from which Rama contemplated the vastness of the ocean. In the meantime in Lanka, Ravana summoned his ministers to discuss about the situation. The ministers encouraged him reminding him about the past victories and saying that Indrajit alone was capable of winning a war, if the situation required a fight. On the contrary Ravana's younger brother, Vibhishana, advised him to restore Sita to her husband, saying that many bad omens had already been observed. Displeased, Ravana dismissed the meeting but Vibhishana repeated his advice on the next morning.

Ravana would not listen, so he called the council again. When he was suggested to solve the problem by simply raping Sita, he replied that he was unable do that because of a curse. Vibhishana spoke up again and again requested that Sita be restored to her husband; displeased with his uncle, Indrajit rebuked him and Ravana kicked Vibhishana out of the kingdom, saying he did not want to see him any more. Vibhishana left his family, home and possessions, and crossed the ocean to join Rama.

Sugriva alerted Rama that Vibhishana, followed by four companions, was walking towards their camp and wanted to join them; at first all the army leaders suspected some kind of trick and did not want to allow Vibhishana to join them, but Rama replied that he would never abandon a person that sought his protection. Grateful for having been accepted by Rama, Vibhishana fell to Rama's feet, offering his eternal devotion, and Rama lifted him up with affection. Then they discussed about Ravana's military strength and Vibhishana revealed all his military secrets, including Indrajit's power to become invisible in the middle of a fight, then he added that Rama's army was much smaller than Ravana's. Rama reassured him saying that he would win the war and install him on Lanka's throne, then he immediately performed Vibhishana's coronation ceremony by using the ocean's water.

After that, Rama sat on the beach to fast, praying three times a day to obtain a passage from the ocean, but he got no reply. In the end Rama became angry and shot lightning-like arrows to the bottom of the ocean, shaking the ocean and all its inhabitants; then he called the Brahmastra and threatened to use it to dry up all the water. The ocean then personally appeared with folded hands in front of Rama and suggested him to build a bridge. The Vanara named Nala, son of Visvakarma, organized the building of the bridge, that was 100 *yojana* long and 10 *yojana* wide; all the Vanaras enthusiastically carried big boulders and tree trunks and completed the bridge within 5 days, crossing it and

reaching Lanka. The remains of the bridge still exist and constitute one of the most famous mysteries of archeology. The British called them "Adam's bridge" and the modern scientific methods date them no less than 1,750,000 years ago. Recently NASA has published very interesting photos in this regard.

Ravana had been informed about the arrival of Rama's army and his spies Suka and Sarana, captured by the Vanara with Vibhishana's help, were released and sent back into the city, where they described the power and value of Rama's army. Irritated by the discouraging conclusions of his two spies, Ravana sent a third agent, Shardula, who also returned with the same report. Then he decided to go for a trick; he sent for Vidyutjihva and asked him to create a head similar to Rama's and a bow that was identical in looks to Rama's Kodanda bow, and to take them to the Ashoka vana. Ravana went to the garden and informed Sita that Rama's army had been defeated in battle and that the Rakshasas' general Prahasta had beheaded Rama in his sleep. Vidyutjihva came with the head and the bow, that were shown to Sita, with a new request for union with Ravana. Seeing the head and the bow, Sita burst into tears. In the meantime a messenger came for Ravana and the Rakshasa king went to meet him - the illusion disappeared and the Rakshasi Sarama comforted Sita, explaining that it has been a trick and that Rama was still alive and waging war against Ravana.

The time of the siege came. Ravana posted Prahasta at the east gate, Mahaparsva and Mahodara at the south

gate and Indrajit at the west gate, ordered Virupaksha to lead the troops within the city, and then went to personally watch the north gate. Rama, too, organized his army, putting Nila at the head of the division that was going to attack the east side, Angada to the south wall, Hanuman to the west side, while Rama and Lakshmana would face Ravana on the north side of the city. Sugriva, Vibhishana and Jambavan were going to take care of the rear guard. Then they climbed mount Suvela, from which they could observe the city and spend the night safely. Sugriva saw Ravana and in a fit of rage he leaped towards him, knocked his crown off and attacked him. After a long fight, realizing that he was not going to win, Sugriva returned to the camp and Rama scolded him for that impulsive action, also considering that Sugriva had responsibilities to his own kingdom and was not supposed to get into unnecessary danger. Rama sent Angada to Ravana to tell him that there could be peace if he returned Sita, but Ravana got angry and ordered his people to kill the messenger. The Vanara prince grabbed the four Rakshasas that were coming towards him and leaping into air he threw them down to the ground, then he demolished Ravana's terrace before returning to Rama. The Vanaras started the systematic destruction of the city and the Rakshasa army descended to battle. The clash was terrifying and went on far into the night. Angada defeated Indrajit and destroyed his chariot, and Indrajit resorted to invisibility, shooting the Nagapasa ("snake ropes") that made Rama and Lakshmana unconscious.

Ravana was very pleased and embraced Indrajit, but Vibhishana comforted Sugriva and the Vanaras, telling them that the Nagapasa only had a temporary effect. In the meantime, Ravana took Sita to the battlefield on his Pushpaka vimana so that she could see how Rama and Lakshmana had fallen unconscious. Sita was terrified, but the Rakshasi Trijata comforted her, saying that they were not dead, and that soon they would regain consciousness.

Rama awoke first, and seeing Lakshmana laying motionless, he thought he was dead and started to lament - but the effect of the Nagapasa was instantly dissipated by the arrival of Garuda, the divine eagle. Seeing that Rama and Lakshmana were again standing ready to fight, Ravana sent Dhumraksha against them. Hanuman killed Dhumraksha, and in a series of other clashes Vajradamstra was killed by Angada, Akampana was killed by Hanuman after a long battle, and Prahasta was killed by Nila. Ravana decided to go personally into battle and sweeping away many Vanaras from his path, he went to challenge Lakshmana to fight, hitting him in the chest and making him fall unconscious. While he was trying to lift Lakshmana to carry him away, Ravana was attacked by Hanuman, who stroke him down. Hanuman carried Lakshmana safely to Rama, who then climbed on Hanuman's shoulders and engaged Ravana into a duel, destroying his chariot and horses, crown and bow, and wounding him severely. Then Rama showed his generosity and valor by allowing Ravana to go away to take rest and revive his strength.

Returned into his city, Ravana decided to awaken his brother Kumbhakarna, who had gone to sleep a few days earlier and was supposed to remain sleeping for many months. Finally Kumbhakarna shook sleep off and descended into battle, hitting Angada and Sugriva, who were saved by Hanuman. Ordinary arrows had no effect against Kumbhakarna, therefore Rama used divine weapons controlled by Vayu and Indra, cutting the Rakshasa into pieces while he was advancing, and finally beheading him. Ravana decided to send his sons Trisira, Devantaka, Narantaka and Atikaya, and his brothers Mahodara and Mahaparsva, all great warriors, but all these were killed in fierce battles, too.

The only son of Mandodari, Indrajit, asked permission to get into battle, and equipped with many divine weapons he killed many Vanaras and made Rama and Lakshmana unconscious with his Brahmastra. Jambavan called Hanuman and told him that to revive the two princes they needed to get the herbs called *mrita sanjivani*, *visalya karani*, *suvarna karani* and *sandhani*, growing on a particular Himalayan hill. Hanuman immediately left, but because he had the feeling he was wasting time by searching for those particular herbs, he lifted the entire hill and carried it to the battlefield. The remedy worked instantly, bringing back to life not only Rama and Lakshmana, but also all the Vanaras that had fallen on the battlefield.

The fight continued, with Kumbhakarna's sons Kumbha and Nikumbha entering the battle. Also Maharaksha son of Khara came into the battle, and Indrajit returned to

fight by using all the mystic weapons; he also created a false image of Sita and cut her throat in front of Hanuman and the other Vanaras. Informed about that horrendous action, Rama and Lakshmana fell into despair, but Vibhishana exposed the fraud and said that Ravana would never be able to kill Sita. In the meantime Indrajit had started a ritual for a demoniac sacrifice in the temple of Nikumbhila. Vibhishana came to know about it and advised Rama to send Lakshmana immediately to kill him before he was able to complete the ritual. Lakshmana and Hanuman, accompanied by Vibhishana and Jambavan, disrupted the ritual and challenged Indrajit to a duel.

Finally Lakshmana shot the Aindrastra, invoking Rama's virtue, and Indrajit was struck down. At the news of his heir's death, Ravana was shocked and decided to really kill Sita, but was stopped by minister Suparsva. The last Rakshasa went into battle and Rama defeated them all. On the eight day of the war Ravana himself returned to battle, accompanied by all the ministers that were still alive. Again Ravana hit Lakshmana with his Shakti weapon, sending him unconscious, and again the prince was revived with more medicinal herbs brought from the Himalaya. Suddenly Matali came with Indra's chariot and Rama ascended it for the last attack. After a fierce fight with the divine weapons sent by Indra, Rama used Indra's Shakti to break Ravana's trident.

Agastya Rishi intervened giving Rama the *mantra* called *Aditya hridaya* ("the heart of Surya") while Ravana was resting from battle for some time. Rama chanted the

mantra three times, regained strength, and he returned to battle. But every time he cut off one of Ravana's heads, another one was growing in its place. Finally Rama evoked the Brahmastra and hit Ravana in the chest, striking him down. While Mandodari lamented the king's death, Vibhishana praised his fallen brother's power and valor, and asked permission to perform his funeral rites.

Rama sent Hanuman to inform Sita about what had happened; Sita asked Hanuman to tell Rama she was anxious to meet him and Vibhishana accompanied her to Rama, but everyone was perplexed when Rama treated his wife coldly, simply telling her that she was free to go wherever she liked. To prove her purity, Sita asked Lakshmana to make a big fire and walked through it, protected by Agni, and the Devas appeared to remind Rama his divine nature of Vishnu, and to tell him that Sita was actually Lakshmi Devi. After this demonstration Rama, Sita and Lakshmana ascended the Pushpaka vimana to return to Ayodhya, and allowed Vibhishana and the Vanaras to accompany them. During the flight, Rama showed Sita the various places of their adventures. They first landed at the *ashrama* of Bharadvaja Rishi, and Rama asked the Rishi to bless the trees on the way so that they would fill with all kinds of fruits, even out of season. Then Rama sent Hanuman to inform Guha and Bharata about their arrival, and after sending a message to Satrugna, Bharata rushed to welcome Rama and return his sandals, thus indicating the return of the legitimate king.

To the great joy of everyone, Rama ascended the throne of Ayodhya, appointing Bharata as *yuvaraja*.

Yoga Vasistha

This is another very important, albeit less known, text of 10 chapters, written by Valmiki about the story of Rama. It contains the instructions to the young prince offered by the Raja Guru (the king's *guru*) Vasistha Rishi, that was one of the 10 *manasa putras* ("sons born from the mind") of Brahma, the creator of the universe.

Vasistha had been the preceptor of the Ayodhya Surya vamsa (solar dynasty) since the times of Ikshvaku, the son of Svayambhuva Manu.

This episode is set before Rama's exile, in anticipation of his coronation, and lasts several days. The teachings of the *Yoga Vasistha* are meant to lead to liberation and Self realization, which start when a human being asks questions about his real nature. When a man asks, "who am I?", he seeks the company of the sages to obtain the answers and thus he is blessed with the essence of all scriptures. The realized teacher guides the worthy disciple, who has attained the proper level of renunciation, and dissipates his illusions.

The activities of the material world are as illusory as the idea that the painted image of a snake could move and attack one who is watching it. Creation is nothing but a play of consciousness, and the strength of the bondage

- although they do not exist in reality - becomes stronger and creates more sufferings when the individual desires to exploit it to get sense gratification.

One who wants to achieve happiness must reject the *samsara* of material identification and the mental fantasies and attachments, and come to the level where he can see that everything that exists is only Brahman.

Just like the snake appears in our mind when we mistakenly see it as a rope, and disappears as soon as we recognize the rope for what it really is, the world ceases to appear as material to one who recognizes the absolute existence of the Self. The same thing happens to one who awakens from a dream and finds true reality.

The characteristics of a *jivanmukta*, a person who has already attained liberation in this lifetime, are inner happiness and peace, and freedom from fear. He continues to work in this world like inalterable gold that has sunk into mud; free from doubts and from the knots of desires, he does not become attached to his parentage and has no prejudice towards friends and enemies, treating them with equal justice. The material mind (*cittam*) divides awareness by creating objects of desire for itself and runs after them - a faculty that derives from the omnipresent and omnipotent Lord, but it must be destroyed by using that same tendency, just like a fire created by the action of the wind is extinguished by the wind itself.

Moving the concept of "I" and "mine" from the level of material illusion to the transcendental reality of Atman-

Brahman, the *purusha* mind dissolves the attachments and the dormant impressions (*vasana*). Such attachments do not reside in the body, because the same arms can encircle different objects with different mental attitudes.

Material consciousness (*cittam*) is terrifying (*ugra*) in the awakened state, peaceful (*santam*) in dreams, and dull (*mudham*) in deep sleep, but just like the powder of *kataka* seeds used to precipitate dirt in the water disappears in the water itself after completing its action, the material consciousness dissolves into the Self.

Only the fools speak of meditation when they are not even able to control their own minds. We should rather seek the company of the sages, abandon the dormant impressions (of the past), study the knowledge of the Self contained in the scriptures and control breathing: in this way we become masters of the mind.

The search for the knowledge of the true nature of the Self is the key to destroy the dormant impression and the control of breathing helps to direct the mind. By remaining in the company of the wise, ceasing to think about the material activities and attachments, and remembering that the body will have to die, the dormant impressions of the past become inactive.

Even an ignorant person is able to transform poison into nectar and nectar into poison by the power of his belief - in the same way we need to understand and deeply believe that we are not the material body.

Meditation on the Self consists in realizing our nature of pure consciousness, beyond all illusions, and that the body we are wearing does not really belong to us. The ocean of this consciousness can contain the rise and disappearance of all the imaginary waves of personalities, actions and reactions, without being disturbed. By rendering homage to the Self that is in all creatures, the inner consciousness experiences pure and constant happiness.

In this way we must act externally by playing our role in the world but remain inwardly stable, free from all attachments and dormant impressions, abandoning all objects of contemplation and cutting, with the sword of knowledge, the illusion of being the body.

By meditating on the Self and cultivating the knowledge of the Self, illusion dissipates automatically, even if this requires a certain effort - just like we need some effort to extract iron from ore, fire from wood, butter from the cow, and oil from sesame seeds.

Rama charita manasa

In the course of the centuries, the popularity of *Ramayana* has also been reflected in various versions in the popular languages of India (Hindi, Tamil, Oriya

etc). The most famous of such translations (which tend to be rather "independent" in their versions) is Tulsidas' version in Hindi language (more specifically, in Awadhi dialect) entitled *Ramacharitamanasa* ("remembrance of Rama's adventures") that attained immense popularity, especially among the illiterate population of the Indian villages.

Gosvami Tulsidas was born in 1497 in Uttar Pradesh and lived in Varanasi (Benares), founding the temple of Sankatamochana dedicated to Hanuman and inaugurating the tradition of the folkloristic drama events on the story of Rama, called *rama lila*. Both the text of the *Rama charita manasa* and the traditional stories around Tulsidas echo some of the beliefs and attitudes called *laukika sraddha* ("popular beliefs") developed in the course of time, also due to the influence of the Muslim and European domination, that compacted the lack of a solid Vedic knowledge, for example aggravating the division between "brahmins" and "low castes". It is possible that Tulsidas reflected such prejudice because he did not want to embark into unnecessary controversies with the ignorant people of his times, but it is also possible that the manuscripts presently available have been tampered with.

We can see an example of such prejudice in a story about Tulsidas himself: the popular legend says that Hanuman had visited the *ashrama* of Valmiki Rishi to hear the original *Ramayana*, but the Rishi had kicked him out saying that as a monkey he did not have the right of attending the recitation of the sacred text (an

idea that looks rather stupid, as Hanuman himself is one of the main heroes of the text written by Valmiki).

So according to this unlikely story, Hanuman went to the Himalaya to meditate on Rama and wrote the *Maha nataka* or *Hanuman nataka* by scratching the text on the rocks with his fingernails. When Valmiki read Hanuman's work, he realized that it would eclipse his own poem, so he ordered him to destroy the rocks by throwing them into the ocean (another rather unbelievable act as even the mere presence of the name of Rama would be sufficient to purify the rocks - as Valmiki himself had written in his poem, when the Vanaras had created the floating bridge by writing Rama's name on the rocks). All the fuss about Hanuman being "unworthy" then came down to Valmiki supposedly advising Hanuman to take birth again as a human being and a brahmin, so that he would be allowed to compose a poetic work. One may be forgiven for wondering why Narada had not given Valmiki the same instruction (take another birth) to transform him from a *chandala* into a *brahmana*, and had instead recommended him simply to remember the name and the story of Rama - including the part played by Hanuman as his dear devotee and servant.

It is said that Tulsidas was born after 12 months of pregnancy, already with 32 teeth, and as developed physically as usually are five year old children. When he was only four days old he was abandoned by his parents, who feared the effects of the negative constellations under which the child had been born. So

Tulsidas was compelled to immediately start to earn a livelihood by begging from door to door, until he was taken in by Naraharidas, a *ramanandi sannyasi*, who initiated him to *sannyasa* as his disciple. Later on, Tulsidas visited various places of pilgrimage all over India, and he claims he personally met both Hanuman and Rama several times. One day in Varanasi he met a *preta* (ghost) and after quenching his thirst with water, he obtained from him the blessing of meeting Hanuman, who was wandering around in the form of a leper to hear the story of Rama - and who after Tulsidas' insistent requests, admitted he was Hanuman and advised him to go to meditate at Citrakuta, where Rama had lived during his exile. To this ghost, Tulsidas offers his homage at the beginning of the text of the *Rama charita manasa* (*doha* 1.7). There are also many popular stories of miracles attributed to Tulsidas, like the episode when he was imprisoned by the emperor of Delhi, and an army of monkeys invaded the city, devastating everything including the royal palace.

Tulsidas composed his work in vernacular language remaining in the holy place of Ayodhya and completed it in 2 years, 7 months and 26 days. Then he went to recite it in the temple of Shiva in Varanasi, where according to the popular legend the brahmins of the temple allowed the book to be kept in the inner chamber of the temple; the next morning the manuscript was bearing an addition of three words: *satyam shivam sundaram* ("true, good and beautiful") with the signature of Shiva himself.

According to the popular tradition, several copies of the *Rama charita manasa* were written personally by Tulsidas' hand. As described in one of his last works, the *Hanuman bahuka*, in his last years Tulsidas was afflicted by serious pains all over the body, especially in his arms, and by abscesses that infected the pores of his skin. The last text he wrote, the *Vinayapatrika*, contains a very popular verse (45) often sung as *bhajan* in the evening ceremonies, like the famous *Hanuman chalisa*, the 40 verses in praise of Hanuman.

Particularly important, from the ideological perspective, are the conversation between Lomasa Rishi and Kakabhushundi regarding the identity between *nirguna brahman* and *saguna brahman*, the elaboration about the chanting of the holy name of Rama as the only effective religious practice in Kali yuga, and the presentation of Rama as the source of all divine manifestations - including Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma - and of the entire universe, that is his cosmic form and at the same time his *lila* ("divine play").

Similarly, in this conversation it is said that Sita is Maya - called Vidya Maya because she enables the creation and liberation of the individual soul, as well as Avidya Maya because she is the cause of illusion and ignorance.

Regarding Shiva, Tulsidas describes him as the manifestation of the Guru tattva, the original spiritual master. Tulsidas' philosophical position in regard to the famous controversy *dvaita* versus *advaita* is that the

world in itself is neither truth (*satya*) nor falseness (*asatya*), or the two things simultaneously (*satyasatya*), and that only by abandoning all these three illusions it is possible to attain true realization.

Puranas

Also compiled by Vyasadeva, the *Puranas* offer valuable teachings in the form of stories and dialogues, just like the *Itihasas*.

There are 18 *Mahapuranas* ("great *puranas*") for a total of 400 thousand verses, and 18 *Upapuranas* ("secondary *puranas*"). The lists in order of importance sometimes give slightly different sequences, and there are reasons to believe that the *Bhavishya purana*, often listed as *Mahapurana*, is actually a much later text inserted in the lists in place of the ancient *Devi bhagavata purana*, that is mentioned separately.

Here is a summary of the main *Puranas*.

Bhagavata purana

Also known as *Srimad Bhagavatam* and composed by 18 thousand verses, it is certainly the most famous; the core of the narration is the story of Krishna, presented as the Supreme Lord (*bhagavan*). An ample summary

study of the *Bhagavata purana*, of about 400 pages, has been presented in this series by the same author.

The text begins with an assembly of sages in Naimisharanya, discussing spiritual topics. Suta Gosvami reports the dialogue between Sukadeva and king Parikshit, who was waiting for death and asked him what is the supreme good for the human beings, according to the scriptures and the teachings of the great sages. Sukadeva narrated many stories, such as the appearance of the *avatara* Varaha, of Kapila (with his teachings on Yoga and Sankhya, and on the process of reincarnation), of Daksha's sacrifice (and Sati's death), of Dhruva (of his austerities when he was a child and his deeds as an adult), of king Vena (and his elimination by the *brahmanas*), of king Prithu, king Pracinarbarhi and his sons the Pracetas, of king Priyavrata, Rishabha (and his teachings), of Jadabharata (who preserved the memories of his previous lifetimes even through an animal birth), of Ajamila (who was saved by the Vishnudutas), of the sons of Daksha, of Indra and Vritrasura, of Citraketu (and his child who temporarily returned from death), of Indra and Diti (who was trying to have a son who could defeat Indra), of Prahlada and his father Hiranyakasipu (including the appearance of the *avatara* Narasimha), of the elephant Gajendra (who was saved by Vishnu), of the churning of the nectar of immortality (that was obtained from the milk ocean thanks to the extraordinary cooperation of Devas and Asuras), of the Vishnu *avatara* Mohini, of Bali Maharaja and the

avatara Vamana (who asked him for three paces of land, by which he covered the entire universe), of the fish *avatara* Matsya, of Cyavana Rishi (and how he recovered his lost youth), of king Ambarisha who was a great devotee of Vishnu, of Bhagiratha (who brought about the descent of the Ganges to earth), of the *avatara* Rama (whose adventures are narrated in the *Ramayana*), of the *avatara* Parasurama, of king Yayati, of king Dushmanta (who became the husband of Sakuntala and father of Bharata), and of the ancestors of Parikshit Maharaja.

After speaking of the genealogy of the Surya vamsa ("the Sun dynasty"), the text describes the Soma vamsa ("the Moon dynasty"), in which Krishna appeared. From the 10th canto onwards, the story focuses exclusively on Krishna, from his birth in Mathura to the escape to Gokula, from the adventures in Vrindavana (including the famous *rasa* dance with the cowherd girls) to the return to his parents in Mathura, the founding of Dvaraka city, his adventures with the Pandavas, and finally the disappearance of the entire Yadu dynasty.

In the 6th canto we find the Narayana kavacha ("the Narayana armour" constituted by protective *mantras*) and the Pumsavana vrata (a ritual to have a son); in the 8th canto we have the Payo vrata (a ritual fast on milk). Among the most famous prayers there are those of Brahma (3rd canto), Shiva (4th canto), the inhabitants of Jambudvipa (5th canto), Daksha (6th canto) and the personified *Vedas* (10th canto).

Skanda (or Kartika) ***purana***

It is the largest puranic text, with 81,100 verses divided into 7 books or *kandas* named after Mahesvara, Vaishnava, Brahma, Kashi, Avanti, Nagara and Prabhasa. The text starts by describing the glories of Shiva, the story of Daksha's sacrifice and Sati's death, the episode when Devas and Asuras churned the milk ocean to produce the nectar of immortality but had to face the problem of the *halahala*, the poison that aggregated the impurities of the ocean. Shiva Mahesvara ("the great Lord") drank this poison to save the world. Then the text introduces the main topic: the birth of Skanda, son of Shiva, who became the general of the Devas' army and killed the Asura Taraka. There is a description of the blessings obtained by observing the Shivaratri fasting - the 14th day of the waning moon of each month - with the example of the story of Dussah, who became Virabhadra.

After killing Taraka, Skanda received from Vishnu the instruction to worship Shiva in the forms of Pratijnesvara, Kapalesvara and Kumaresvara. Then there is the story of Kalabhiti ("he who feared Time"), the son of the *brahmana* Manti. For 4 years Kalabhiti refused to take birth because he was afraid of Time; Manti prayed Shiva, who sent 4 of his *ganas* ("companions") named Dharma ("ethical sense"), Jnana ("knowledge"), Vairagya ("renunciation") and Aisvarya ("lordship") to convince him. A fifth *gana*, named Adharma ("immorality") promised never to come near the child. At last Kalabhiti was persuaded to take birth.

After Kalabhiti was personally visited by the Lord, who gifted him with the *jyotilinga* ("radiating form") *svayambhu* "spontaneously appeared") called Mahakala that is still worshiped today.

Here he find the conversation between Kalabhiti and king Karandham regarding the rituals to honor the ancestors, the difference between Shiva and Vishnu, the worship of the Lingam, the manifestation of the Arunachala mountain as a huge Shiva lingam, the creation of the universe, and the episode of the killing of Sumbha and Nishumbha and Mahishasura by Durga.

The *Vaishnava kanda* relates the story of Varaha and his conversation with Prithivi (Earth), including the description of the four abodes of Vishnu in the four *yugas* (respectively Anjana, Narayanagiri, Simhanchala and Venkatachala), the powerful *mantra* for the worship of Varaha, the story of Padmavati, and the explanation of the reason why Sita entered the fire at the end of the *Ramayana* . The text continues with the story of Maharaja Parikshit and the curse cast by Sringi son of Shamik, who condemned the king to die within 7 days by a snake bite. Also we find the story of the story of the *brahmana* Ramakrishna who engaged in austerity on mount Venkatachala (where the temple of Tirupati Balaji was built) and the description of an important sacred place, Akasha Ganga Tirtha, that became famous for the austerities of Anjana (Hanuman's mother) who wanted to have Vayu as his son. The text gives the precise indication of the locality.

Then we find the description of Purushottama kshetra (Jagannatha Puri) where Brahma went to meditate on the recommendation of Vishnu, the episode where Markandeya Rishi survived the destruction of the universe by taking shelter in the Kalpa Vata (the desire tree) in Puri, the description of the temples of Kapala mochana and Vimala Devi, the appearance of Jagannatha and the story of king Indradyumna, Vidyapati and Visvvasu. The episodes of the appearance of the Jagannatha Deities, the worship to Narasimha and the Asvamedha yajna occupy most of this *kanda*. Narada Rishi comes to give detailed instructions for the worship to Jagannatha and especially for the annual celebration of the Ratha yatra. Then there is a long list with the description of sacred places, such as the rivers Ganga, Godavari, Narmada, Tapti, Yamuna, Kshipra, Gautami, Kaushiki, Kaveri, Tamraparni, Chandrabhaga, Sindhu, Gandaki, Sarasvati, and the cities of Ayodhya, Dvaraka, Kashi (Varanasi or Benares), Mathura, Avanti, Kurukshetra, Ramatirtha (Ramesvaram), Kanchi, Purushottama kshetra (Puri), Pushkara kshetra, Varaha kshetra and Badarikashrama. Then it speaks of the importance of the month of Kartika, of bathing in the Ganges in the month of Margasirsha, of distributing charitable donations in the month of Vaisakha and visiting the sacred place of Ayodhya.

The *Brahma kanda* speaks about Ramesvara tirtha, where Rama, the *avatara* of Vishnu, installed a Shiva lingam, and the story of Rama's war against Ravana,

the Rakshasa king of Lanka. Then it speaks of Dharmaranya kshetra, where Dharmaraja (Yama) engaged in austerities to please Shiva. After the description of Dharmakshetra we find a conversation between Vyasa and Yudhisthira, describing the degrading effects of the Kali yuga. In another conversation, Brahma explains the benefits of the *chaturmasya vrata* ("the four months vow") and the worship method called *sodasa upachara* ("with 16 worship steps") that must be performed by reciting the *Mahasukta* of the *Yajur Veda* constituted by 16 *suktas* (including the *Purusha sukta*) connected to the various parts of the body of the Deity of Vishnu.

The *Kashi kanda* begins with the episode of Narada Rishi that awakened the rivalry between the mountains Vindhya and Meru; Vindhya decided to expand and obstruct the passage of the Sun, with serious climate consequences. The Devas begged Brahma for help and Brahma suggested to consult Agastya Rishi who lived in Kashi (Varanasi). Agastya left his city to order the mountain to shrink back to its normal size, then he traveled to Sri Shaila with his wife Lopamudra to meet Lord Kartikeya (Skanda); this chapter also contains the description of the sacred places of Prayaga, Naimisharanya, Kurukshetra, Gangadvara, Avanti, Ayodhya, Mathura, Dvaraka, Badrikashrama, Purushottama kshetra and Kashi, whose glories and history are narrated from its origin. In the Ananda vana ("the forest of joy") of Kashi, that is presently known as Manikarnika ghat, Shiva and Parvati manifested Vishnu

as Purushottama; Purushottama dug a lake with his disc, the Sudarshana chakra, to remain in that place and engage in austerity.

The *Avanti kshetra kanda* begins with the glorification of Mahakala tirtha (the present Bhubaneswar in Orissa) in the conversation between Parvati and Shiva. This Mahakala tirtha is also called Ekamra vana ("the forest with one mango tree") and Vimukti kshetra ("the place that gives liberation") and is also known as a *pitha* because it is the abode of the Matrikas ("the Mother Goddesses").

One day Shiva arrived in the Mahakala forest carrying a skull (*kapala*) in his hand; the Devas performed the Pasupata vrata to honor Shiva, and as soon as Shiva dropped the skull, all the Asuras were destroyed.

Then the text speaks of Ujjain, also called Kanaka sringa ("golden horn"), Kusasthali ("the place of the sacred straw"), Avanti ("of one who protects") and Padmavati ("lotus-like"). Ujjain is also famous because in this place Shiva defeated the Tripura Asuras. This is also the place of appearance of Lakshmi, who manifested from the ocean of milk that was being churned here by Devas and Asuras.

In the region of Avantipura there are 4 sacred rivers called Kshipra, Divyanava, Nilaganga and Gandhavati, temples for 84 Shiva lingas, 8 Bhairavas, 11 Rudras, 12 Adityas, 6 Ganeshas, 24 Devis, and many temples dedicated to Vishnu such as Vasudeva, Ananta, Balarama, Janardana, Narayana, Hrishiksha, Varaha,

Dharanidhara, Vamana and Vishnu resting on Seshanaga.

Then there is the story of the descent to earth of the sacred river Narmada, thanks to the efforts of king Purutkusu; the impact of the sacred waters was sustained by Paryanka, son of the Vindhyaachala mountain. Later, during the Svayambhuva manvantara, Manu went to bathe in the water of the Narmada, in the place called Tripuri. In the second half of the same age more sacred rivers manifested: Kalindi (Yamuna), Sarasvati, Sarayu and Mahabhaga. The conversation between Markandeya Rishi and Yudhisthira, who was visiting those sacred places with his brothers, continues with the story of Jamadagni Rishi who received from Shiva a *kamadhenu* cow, who later became an object of contention with Kartavirya Arjuna, who wanted to appropriate her. Markandeya also speaks of the hellish planets - Atighora, Raudra, Ghoratama, Dukhajanani, Ghorarupa, Tarantara, Bhayanaka, Kalaratri, Ghatokata, Chanda, Mahachanda, Chandakolahala, Prachanda, Varagnika, Jaghanya, Avaraloma, Bhishni, Nayika, Karala, Vikarala, Vajravinshti, Asta, Panchakona, Sudirgha, Parivartula, Saptabhauma, Ashtabhauma and Dirghamaya.

The *Nagara kanda* contains the story of Trishanku, who was cursed by the sons of Vasistha Rishi, and for whom Visvamitra Rishi created a special star system within this universe. The *Prabhasa kanda* contains the description of the various *Puranas* and *Upapuranas*, and explains that characteristically they all deal with 5

subjects: *sarga* (the primary creation of the universe), *pratisarga* (the secondary creation), *vamsa* (the description of the dynasties), *manvantara* (the periods of the Manus) and *manucharita* (the story of the descendants of the dynasties). Then it describes the glories of the sacred place of Prabhasa ("radiant") tirtha, known along the various ages also with the names of Somanatha ("Lord of the moon"), Mrityunjaya ("conqueror of death"), Kalagnirudra ("he who shouts, who is fire and time"), Amritesha ("the Lord of the immortals"), Annamaya ("the foundation for the food existence"), Kritivasa ("where fame resides") and Bhairava natha ("the terrifying Lord"); its future name will be Prananaatha ("the Lord of life"). In that sacred place, between the rivers Vajrini and Nyanaku, there is the ancient Somanatha jyotirlinga (installed by the Deva of the Moon) and a main temple dedicated to each of the three Deities - Surya Narayana, Madhava and Bhavani - and also 10 million more temples dedicated to Vishnu and 15 million dedicated to Shiva. There are also three forms of the Mother Goddess - Mangala ("auspicious") connected to Brahma, Vishalakshi ("large eyes") connected to Vishnu and Chatvari ("the fourfold") connected to Shiva, respectively representing the powers of will, action and knowledge. No pilgrimage is considered complete without a visit to them.

From Prabhasa kshetra starts the river Sarasvati, that before joining the ocean splits into 5 branches, of which 4 are called Harini, Vajrini, Nyanku and Kapila from the names of the Rishis who bathed there. In the same area

we find the linga called Sarvesvara ("the Lord of all") or Siddhesvara ("the Lord of perfection" installed by the Siddhas) that along the ages was also known as Mahodaya ("the great ocean") and Jaigishavyesvara as he was worshiped by a great devotee named Jaigishavya. There is the description of the *lingas* called Gandharvesvara (installed by a Gandharva named Dhanvahan), Kapilesvara (installed by Kapila Rishi) and Dhanadesvara (installed by Kuvera, "the Lord of wealth").

The text speaks also about the tradition of shaving one's head during a pilgrimage and taking bath in the ocean, especially near Somanatha, where 50 million Shiva lingas are submerged. After the description of Prabhasa we find the *Dvaraka mahatmya* ("the glories of di Dvaraka"), speaking of the fabulous city built by Krishna in the ocean, and of the journey of the Rishis to Patala to ask Prahlada and Bali how it was possible to help the people of Kali yuga to realize Lord Vishnu. Prahlada explained the glories of the city of Kushasthala Puri, known as Dvaraka or Dvaravati Puri, where on the bank of the river Gomati there is the temple of Trivikrama ("the Lord of the three steps") where the powers of Krishna were preserved even after his disappearance.

Padma purana

Composed by 55 thousand verses divided into 5 parts called *Sristi kanda* ("the book of creation"), *Bhumi*

kanda ("the book of Earth"), *Svarga kanda* ("the book of the higher planets"), *Patala kanda* ("the book of the lower planets") and *Uttara kanda* ("the higher book").

The text begins with Romaharshana Suta entrusting the *Puranas* to his son Ugrasrava and asking him to go to Naimisaranya to present them to the sages assembled there. Suta tells about Pulastya Rishi who went to bless Bhishma who was engaged in austerity and explained the process of the creation of the universe, the duration of Brahma's life, the cycle of the ages, the origin of the four *varnas*, the appearance of Rudra and Manu and Manu's descendants. Then follows the appearance of Lakshmi from the milk ocean churned by Devas and Asuras, the sacrifice performed by Daksha and the death of his daughter Sati, the creation of the bodies of the various living beings, the origin of the Maruts (who were born from Diti but became Indra's friends), Svarocisa Manu in the second *manvantara*, Autama Manu in the third, Tamasa Manu in the 4th, Raivata Manu in the 5th, Chakshusa Manu in the 6th, and Vaivasvata Manu in the 7th and present *manvantara*. Then it speaks about the future Manus: Savarni in the 8th, Ruci in the 9th, Bhautya in the 10th, Merusavarni in the 11th, Ribhu in the 12th, Vitadhama in the 13th and Visvakshena in the 14th and last *manvantara* during Brahma's day. The conversation between Pulastya and Bhishma continues with the story of king Prithu (from whom the Earth took the name of Prithivi), of the wives of Surya (the Deva of the Sun), of the descendants of Ikshvaku, of the *avatara* Vamana and king Bali (also

called Bashakali), of the *avatara* Rama killing Shambuka, and the appearance of Ganesha and Kartikeya. Follow the explanation of the duties of the *brahmanas*, the meaning of the Gayatri mantra, the method of *nyasa* (installation of the sacred syllables), the legitimate means by which a *brahmana* can earn a livelihood, and the story of the *brahmana* Narottama. Then the text speaks of the importance of the *rudraksha* ("Rudra's eyes" - the seeds of the *Elaeocarpus ganitrus*, used to make sacred necklaces and rosaries), of the *amla* (the acidic fruit of the *Phyllanthus emblica*) and of *tulasi* (a variety of basil called *Ocimum sanctum*) and the worship to Surya.

The *Bhumi kanda* speaks of the different types of *papa* and *punya* (negative and positive actions), of the story of king Yayati and his marriage with Asrubindumati, and of the story of the meeting between Cyavana Rishi and the parrot Kunjala - including the teachings of Kunjala to his children in regard to religious duties and the story of his previous lifetime.

The *Svarga kanda* describes the main sacred places of India (Bharata varsha), its mountains, rivers and *janapadas* (kingdoms or "human settlements") and especially Jambumarga and the river Narmada, mount Amarkantaka, Dharma tirtha and the river Yamuna, Kashi, Kapardisvara and Gaya, and the importance of the *Puranas*. Follows the story of Rama returning from Lanka after defeating Ravana. The *Patala kanda* continues with the story of Rama, especially with the episode where Sita retired to the forest to give birth to

her two sons, the story of Kaikasi the mother of Ravana, the episode when Rama performs the Asvamedha yajna, and the story of Sita returning to Ayodhya. The *Uttara kanda* describes the sacred place of Badarikashrama, the descent of the Ganges, the meeting between Dasaratha and the planet Shani (Saturn), the qualities of the vaishnavas, the city of Indraprastha, the abode of Vishnu called Vaikuntha, and the *avatars* of Vishnu: Matsya, Kurma, Narasimha, Vamana, Rama and especially Krishna. After the description of the end of the Yadu dynasty, we find the rituals to worship Vishnu and the story of Parasurama.

Narada* or *Naradiya purana

It has 25 thousand verses; the first section contains the famous text known as *Brihan Naradiya purana*, consisting of 125 chapters.

The text starts with the four Kumaras ("the young", named Sanaka, Sanatana, Sananda and Sanat) sons of Brahma, going to visit their father. Their younger brother Narada asks Sanaka to speak about Vishnu, the cause of creation, the characteristics of devotion, knowledge and austerity. Sanaka explains how Maha Vishnu manifests Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, Lakshmi, Chandika and Sarasvati, and then the elements of the material creation. Then the secondary creation starts, in which Brahma manifests the various planets and the bodies of the living beings, and then the various generations and dynasties. In this passage we find a

description of the universe and Earth, and a famous verse declaring that Vasudeva ("the omnipresent") Vishnu ("omnipotent") is the final purpose of Dharma and austerities, the supreme knowledge and the path to realization. Vasudeva is everything that exists, from Brahma and Shiva to the Devas and Asuras, sacrifice, the universe itself and all living beings, down to the unicellular organisms (*krimi*). Sanaka also explains the science of Bhakti, devotion, starting from *sraddha* (faith), *satsanga* (the company of good people) and *samatva* (equanimity in front of the various situations). Follows the story of Markandeya Rishi, son of Mrikunda son of Bhrigu, and how by his worship he pleased Vishnu, who offered him instructions on the character and behavior of a vaishnava devotee, and especially on devotion to Shiva, that is not different from Vishnu.

The conversation between Narada and Sanaka continues with the story of the Ganges, from the times of king Bahu of the Sun dynasty and his son Sagara, and how the Ganges touched the feet of Vishnu in his incarnation as Vamana. Then the text speaks of the observance of Dvadasi ("the 12th day of the moon") especially of the waxing moon, with specific rituals for the different months of the year, described in detail. Then the discussion continues with the real meaning of Yoga, that is *jnana* (knowledge) supported by *bhakti* (devotion) and characterized by the 8 qualities - non violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, compassion, benevolence, sexual abstinence, and freedom from greed and envy. It continues with the various forms of

Yoga, the rules to be followed, the rituals and practices, the *asanas* (sitting positions for meditation), *pranayama* (breathing control) in relationship with the *mantras* and visualization, *pratyahara* (detachment from sense stimulation), *dharana* (concentration of the mind on the Supreme Soul) and *samadhi* (complete immersion in meditation). Here we find the story of king Bharata, who maintained the memory of his previous lifetimes even in the subsequent forms of deer and *brahmana*, and gave valuable spiritual teachings to the king of Suvira - including the story of Nidagha (son of Pulastya Rishi) and the non-difference between the *jivatma* ("individual soul") and *paramatma* ("supreme soul").

Sanandana Kumara explained to Narada that the 6 *Vedangas* (Siksha, Kalpa, Vyakarana, Nirukti, Chanda and Jyotisha) are aimed at supporting the *sadhana* (spiritual practice) to attain liberation, and supplies detailed explanations on this extraordinary statement.

Sukadeva, son of Vyasa, was considered a great expert on all these topics, but his father Vyasa advised him to follow the prescribed socio-religious system, that he should learn from king Janaka of Mithila. The wonderful teachings of Janaka constitute a very valuable part of this *Purana*, as confirmed by the subsequent conversation between Suka and Vyasa, where the *divya dristi* ("divine vision") of Suka, who has assimilated these teachings, is blessed by the 7 Vayus (manifestations of the wind). On that occasion Sanat kumara talked about the *tattvas* ("the categories of reality") and *moksha* ("liberation"), then Sukadeva

retired to meditate and had the vision of Vishnu, to whom he offered beautiful prayers.

In the original conversation between Narada and the Kumaras, Sanat kumara explained the details of the Shiva tantra, that enables one to understand the Supreme Lord and to worship him correctly, especially in regard to the daily spiritual practices. Sanatana kumara continued to speak about the *vratas* ("religious vows") to observe on particular days of the year for the various Deities - Lakshmi, Jagannatha, Ganesha, Matsya, Kurma, Skanda, Devi Bhavani, Krishna, Rama, Dharma, Ganga, Dasa avatara, etc. He also spoke about Ekadasi (the 11th day of the waxing and waning moon), Dvadasi (the 12th day of the moon), Trayodasi (the 13th day of the moon), Purnima (the full moon) and Amavasya (the new moon). Specifically in regard to Ekadasi we find the story of Narada visiting Yamaraja and the activities of king Rukmanda to spread the glories of Ekadasi.

The last part of the text contains the *Yugala sahasranama* ("1000 names of the couple") of Radha and Krishna, the 10 regulative principles and a summary of the other *Puranas*, deriving from the original single *Purana* in the following order: *Brahma purana*, *Padma purana*, *Vishnu purana*, *Vayu purana*, *Bhagavata purana*, *Narada purana*, *Markandeya purana*, *Agni purana*, *Bhavisya purana*, *Brahma vaivarta purana*, *Linga purana*, *Varaha purana*, *Skanda purana*, *Vamana purana*, *Kurma purana*, *Matsya purana*, *Garuda purana*, *Brahmanda purana*. Finally,

there is a list of the religious merits acquired by reading and studying the text.

Vishnu purana

It consists of 23 thousand verses, divided into 6 cantos or *amsas* ("parts"). The text begins with the description of the creation of the universe, called *brahmanda* ("the egg of Brahman"). Inside each universe there is the particular manifestation of Vishnu called Garbhodakasayi Vishnu, who later manifests Brahma for the creation of the various planets and Shiva for their destruction. It is said that Brahma's day consists of 100 cycles of the four ages (*yugas*) of the universe, called respectively Satya or Krita (4 thousand years), Treta (3 thousand), Dvapara (2 thousand) and Kali (1 thousand).

This calculation is subject to various interpretations because Vedic tradition considers different dimensions of time (in the *Bhagavata* chapter 11 of 5th canto is specifically dedicated to this topic) especially in relation to the various planets. One year on the Earth is equal to one day on the heavenly planets, therefore according to this calculation Kali yuga would last 1000 celestial years, equivalent to 365 thousand Earth years, multiplied in turn to calculate the duration of the other *yugas*.

During each of Brahma's days there are 14 reigns of Manu (*manvantaras*); at every Brahma's morning the creation is repeated and each night there is a partial

destruction; at the end of the cycle of Brahma's life (100 of his years) the entire universe is withdrawn into the Causal Ocean for 10 million years before being manifested again.

The creation of the universe develops from the various parts of Brahma's body: the Asuras were created from the legs, the Devas from the mouth, the Pitris from the sides. Similarly the Gandharvas, Nagas, human beings, animals, and all the other bodies of the living beings were created from the body of Brahma.

Next is the episode when Durvasa became angry with Indra and cursed him to be abandoned by Lakshmi: this was the original reason why the Devas lost the war against the Asuras. Following Vishnu's advice, the Devas negotiated a temporary alliance with the Asuras to cooperate in churning the milk ocean, from which Lakshmi appeared, together with the nectar of immortality. In this chapter we find the famous *Lakshmi stuti* (hymn to Lakshmi) composed by Indra. Next come the stories of Dhruva, king Vena and Prithu, Pracinabarhi and the Pracetas, and Prahlada. The story of king Priyavrata includes an extensive elaboration on the geography of the planet Earth with its seven continents and their various populations, the seven underground worlds and the hellish planets, the structure of the universe and the position of the various inhabited planets. The text continues with the story of Bharata who took birth again as Jadabharata and his conversation with the king of Subira. This canto ends with the story of Ribhu.

In the third canto we find the description of the *manvantaras*, the story of Samjna (wife of Surya), the list of the incarnations of Vyasa, the stories of Yajnavalkya Rishi, the description of how the *Puranas* were compiled starting from the *Purana samhita* given by Vyasa to Romaharshana Suta, and the 14 types of knowledge (*vidya*) constituted by the 4 *Vedas*, the 6 *Vedangas*, the *Mimamsa* (*Vedanta sutra* or *Brahma sutra*, *Karma kanda*, *Nyaya* (texts on logic), the *Puranas*, *Dharma shastra*, *Ayur Veda* (medicine), *Dhanur Veda* (military art), *Gandharva Veda* (music and dance) and *Artha shastra* (economy).

The text then speaks about Yamaraja and relates a discussion between Yama and one of his servants on how to recognize a genuine devotee of Vishnu, about the system of the *varnas* and *ashramas* with their duties and especially their ritual duties (*nitya karmani*) of family men. Follow the stories of Mayamoha (a manifestation of Vishnu who created the *arhat* tradition to confuse the Asuras) and king Satadhanu and his wife Shaivya (and the dangers of the company of false teachers who have abandoned the original knowledge of the *Vedas*). Then we find the stories of some particularly important persons among Manu's descendents - such as Ila/ Sudyumna, Marutta and Revata (the father of Revati, wife of Balarama), Ikshvaku and his son Vikukshi and his son Paranjaya, and Yuvanaska and his son Mandhata. There is the story of Saubhari Rishi who married the 50 daughters of Mandhata creating an equal number of manifestations of himself, of king

Purukutsa (and his role in the war between Gandharvas and Nagas), of king Bahu (and his son Sagara, who remained in his mother's womb for 7 years) and his descendent Amsuman (who met Kapila Rishi).

After Bhagiratha, who brought down the river Ganges to the Earth, there was Soudasa, also called Mitrasaha (and later Kalmasapada), who killed a Rakshasa that had taken the shape of a tiger. A friend of this Rakshasa took revenge by cheating Soudasa into serving human meat to Vasistha Rishi. Another famous descendent of Manu was Nimi, son of Ikshvaku; he too angered Vasistha because of a misunderstanding. Nimi's son was Janaka Vaidha, the father of Sita.

After the descendance of the solar dynasty we find the story of the lunar dynasty. Atri Rishi, son of Brahma, was father of Chandra (the moon), Lord of the stars and the herbs, who kidnapped Tara the wife of Brihaspati (the planet Jupiter) - an action that triggered the famous war called Tarakamaya. With Tara, Chandra generated Budha (the planet Mercury), who married Ila and had Pururava as a son. Follows the story of Pururava and the Apsara Urvasi.

The text then speaks of how Jahnu Rishi drank all the water of the Ganges, and of Jahnu's descendents. One of them, Gadhi, had a daughter named Satyavati, that became the wife of the powerful Rishi Richika. Disobeying Richika's orders, Satyavati and her mother caused a confusion in the characters of their sons; thus were born Visvamitra (who was supposed to be a

brahmana) and Jamadagni, whose son Parasurama should have been a *kshatriya*. One of Pururava's son, king Raji, fought alongside the Devas in one of their wars against the Asuras, at the condition of obtaining Indra's kingdom. After the victory Raji's sons claimed their inheritance installing themselves on the throne of the heavenly planets, and could be removed only with great difficulty.

The text continues with the story of Yayati, who married Devayani the daughter of Sukracharya, whose sons were Yadu and Turnvasu. One of Yadu's descendents was Kartavirya Arjuna, who was defeated by Parasurama. However, the most important among the descendants of Yadu was Krishna, whose adventures are narrated in the *Bhagavata purana*. Here we find specifically the story of the Syamantaka jewel, that belonged to Satyabhama's father Satrajit. We also find the story of Sisupala, who had previously taken birth as Hiranyakasipu and Ravana, and the story of the three sons of king Pratipa - Santanu, Devapi and Vahlika (or Bahlika) and Santanu's descendants, the Pandavas. Regarding the future, the *Vishnu purana* speaks of king Mahapadmananda, who will be killed by a *brahmana* named Kautilya (Chanakya), that will raise the *sudra* Chandragupta Maurya to the throne. Then we have the description of the conditions of life in Kali yuga and the episode of the birth of Krishna and Balarama (who appeared from two hairs of Vishnu).

Then the text narrates the childhood adventures of Krishna in Vrindavana and the killing of the various

Asuras, the punishment of the Naga Kaliya, the episode of the Govardhana hill, the arrival of the two brothers in Mathura, the war against Jarasandha and Kalayavana, the adventures of Balarama, the defeat of Narakasura, the descent of the Parijata tree, the story of Usha and her father Banasura, the story of Paundraka (who had convinced himself he had become Vishnu), the marriage of Samba with Duryodhana's daughter, the episode of the Vanara Dvidida, the destruction of the Yadu dynasty and the advent of Kali yuga. Then there is the explanation of the various types of cyclic destruction in the universe, the story of the two cousins Keshidhvaja and Khandikya, and how the ancient stories of the *Puranas* were transmitted in the past.

Brahma purana

This text of 10 thousand verses begins with the conversation between Suta and the Rishis assembled at Naimisaranya - about the creation of the universe and the story of Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa and their descendents such as Dhruva, Pracinabarhisat and the Pracetas, Daksha and his daughters (who married the Rishis sons of Brahma and generated all the living beings of the universe), Vena and Prithu, and the Sun God Surya, head of the Surya vamsa. Surya married Samjna, daughter of Visvakarma, who begot Vaivasvata Manu, Yamaraja and Yamuna. From her own image, Samjna created Chaya ("shadow") to take her place for some time while she cooled herself by running in the

northern lands in the form of a mare. Chaya generated Savarni Manu and Sani (Saturn). When Surya discovered what happened, he thinned his rays by creating the Sudarshana chakra with the excess ones, then he took the form of a horse and went to seek Samjna; he generated with her the twins Nasatya and Dasra, who became known as the Asvini kumaras ("the horse boys"). The descendants of Surya were Ikshvaku, Ila/Sudyumna and Kubalasva (also called Dhundhumara because he killed the terrible Asura Dhundhu).

We also find the story of Trisanku (who was originally called Satyavrata and was the son of Trayaruni, son of Dridasva, son of Kubalasva) and how he became a *chandala*. While Visvamitra was engaged in austerity on the beach of the ocean, his family had to face starvation because of a terrible famine, so much that Visvamitra's wife took one of her sons (Galava) to the market to sell him so that she could feed the other children. Satyavrata, who had been exiled by his father on the advice of Vasistha, decided to take action: he snatched Vasistha's cow, killed her and fed her meat to Visvamitra's children, eating some of it himself. Furious, Vasistha cursed Satyavrata for his three sinful actions (*tri*: "three", *sanku*: "crimes"): disobeying his father, killing a cow and eating her flesh. To return Trisanku's kindness to his family, Visvamitra agreed to perform the ritual that would raise him to the heavenly planets; at the end of the entire episode Trisanku ascended his father's throne and ruled on Ayodhya. The famous Harischandra was Trisanku's son.

Another descendent of the same dynasty, Bahu, neglected his kingly duties and was defeated by an alliance of the surrounding kingdoms - Haihaya, Talajangha, Shaka, Mahishaka, Darva, Chola, Kerala, Yavana, Parada, Kamboja and Pahlava. He retired to the forest with his wife Yadavi and when he died Yadavi took shelter in the *ashrama* of Ourvi Rishi, where she gave birth to Bahu's son. The Rishi personally educated and trained the child, who was named Sagara. Strong with the knowledge he had received from the Rishi, Sagara was able to defeat his father's enemies and win back the kingdom.

Later the two wives of Sagara turned to Ourva Rishi to get the blessing to have children, and the Rishi offered them to choose between having one single child or 60 thousand children. Thus were born Panchajana (also known as Asamanja) and his 60 thousand stepbrothers, who accompanied the horse in the Asvamedha yajna ritual performed by their father. However, they angered Kapila Rishi, who burned almost all of them to ashes - except Varhiketu, Suketu, Dharmaketu and Panchajana. Bhagirata, who brought the sacred Ganges river down to earth, was son of Dilipa, son of Amsuman, son of Panchajana. Bhagiratha was the forefather of Raghu, the ancestor of Dasaratha, Rama's father.

Nest the text speaks about the Moon dynasty, beginning from the birth of Soma (also called Chandra), the Deva of the Moon, who was generated by the power of austerity of Atri Rishi. He jumped up to the sky and bounced back to earth, simultaneously creating all the

medicinal herbs. Brahma took care of Soma, who later engaged in great austerities and performed the Rajasuya yajna. Soma kidnapped Tara (Brihaspati's wife), which caused a war in which Shiva took Brihaspati's side and Sukracharya allied with Soma. Then we have the stories of Soma's descendants - Nahusha and his son Yayati (who married Devayani and Sarmistha), his sons Yadu and Puru and their descendents. The text also describes the geography of the Earth and the higher and lower planets, the regions of Mercury (Budha), Venus (Sukra), Mars (Mangala), Jupiter (Brihaspati), Saturn (Shani), Ursa major or the constellation of the Great Dipper (the seven Rishis) and the polar star (Dhruvaloka), as well as the stellar systems of Maharloka, Janaloka, Tapaloka and Satyaloka.

Then it speaks of the Sun temple of Konarka in Orissa; the name comes from Konaditya, referring to the Deva of the Sun. It also explains the method to offer worship to the Sun and the 108 names of the Sun. Follows the story of Indradyumna, king of Avanti in the kingdom of Malva. The prosperous city of Avanti was famous for its temple of Shiva Mahakala and for the Vishnu temples called Govindasvami and Vikramasvami on the bank of river Shipra. Indradyumna went to Purushottama kshetra, where he built a large temple with the help of the local people and performed the Asvamedha yajna. Very quickly Visvakarma carved the sacred images from a great tree trunk that had landed on the ocean beach. The text tells, with some variations compared to other

Puranas, the episode in which Markandeya Rishi witnessed the destruction of the universe: here the banyan tree was floating on the ocean together with a young boy sitting in a boat. The boy invited the Rishi to take shelter within his mouth, and by so doing the Rishi found there all the planets and the living beings exactly as they were before the destruction. The Rishi realized the boy was Vishnu, so he offered his homage and asked for the blessing to be able to build a temple to Shiva in the place of Purushottama kshetra. Then we find the story of king Sveta, who vowed to revive the son of Kapalagautama Rishi and he succeeded thanks to Shiva's blessing. King Sveta built a great temple for Vishnu at Purushottama kshetra, calling it Sveta Madhava.

The story of Vamana and the sacrifice of king Bali narrated here coincides with the narration in the other *Puranas*, except for the continuation of the story of the Ganges descent. According to the *Brahma purana* the water that touched the feet of Vamana divided into four branches: the west branch entered the *kamandalu* (water pot) of Brahma, the east branch was collected by the Devas and Rishis, the south branch descended onto Shiva's head and was brought to Earth by Bhagiratha, where it divides further in 7 branches - while she has 4 branches on the higher planets and 4 on the lower planets.

The main north branch was brought down by Gautama Rishi through a plan devised by Parvati: Ganesha went to live in Gautama's *ashrama* for some time, then one of

Parvati's companions, Jaya, took the shape of a cow and went to graze into Gautama's rice field. The Rishi rushed in and tried to send the cow away by poking her with a blade of grass, but Jaya gave a loud moan and dropped to the ground pretending to be dead. The other Rishis declared that the *ashrama* had been contaminated by the killing of a cow and to convince them to stay, Gautama accepted Ganesha's suggestion and called for Ganga, asking her to descend on Shiva's head to purify the *ashrama*. From that time, that branch of the Ganges (presently known as Godavari) has been called Gautami Ganga.

The glories of this river are highlighted by a series of episodes giving their names to specific places along her course. One speaks about the hunter of Brahmagiri and the two doves who sacrificed themselves to offer him hospitality and were elevated to the heavenly planets; while departing, they advised the hunter to take bath in the Ganges waters for 15 days to become free from the reactions of his previous activities. The place where this episode happened is called Kapota tirtha ("the doves' ford").

Then there is the story of Maninaga, the son of Ananta Sessa, who prayed Shiva to protect him from Garuda. Seeing that he was not able to kill him, Garuda imprisoned Maninaga; Shiva came to know about it and sent his personal companion Nandi to set Maninaga free. Nandi approached Vishnu and asked him to give the required orders to Garuda, who complained about the apparent injustice he was subjected to, in spite of

his faithful service. Vishnu replied by crushing Garuda to the ground, then he entrusted him to Nandi so that he would be cured by Shiva. Garuda was completely healed under the instructions of Shiva, by bathing in the Gautami Ganga in the place known as Garuda tirtha.

During a great draught and famine, Visvamitra arrived with his disciples on the bank of the Gautami Ganga (in the place known as Visvamitra tirtha) and the only food they were able to find was a dead dog. Visvamitra gave the order to wash and offer its meat to the Devas, but Indra decided to stop that unprecedented action and took the shape of a crow to snatch away the offering before the sacrifice. Seeing that the Rishi was going to curse him, Indra quickly returned the booty, that he had transformed into nectar in the meantime. However, Visvamitra was not happy: "Why should I eat nectar, when all the people around me are starving?" Indra understood the meaning of that objection and finally sent the rains, relieving the famine: then the Rishi agreed to consume the nectar.

Another story on the Gautami Ganga is about Sveta, friend of Gautama Rishi and great devotee of Shiva. When Sveta died, Yama's servants came to take him away but they were unable to enter the house; after some time Yama sent Mrityu ("death") himself to verify what had happened, and saw that Shiva was personally present to guard Sveta's body. When Death tried to grab Sveta, Shiva and all his companions defended him strenuously in a fierce battle, in which Yama himself was killed by Kartikeya. When Yama accepted Shiva's

order that all his devotees must remain free from Yama's servants, Nandi went to get some water from the Ganges and revived all those who had died in the fight.

Visrava Rishi had two wives: one gave birth to Kuvera and the other gave birth to Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana. Kuvera was the king of Lanka, but Ravana's mother was not very happy and she ordered her sons to engage in austerity to acquire more power and take the kingdom away from Kuvera. Ravana also appropriated Kuvera's airplane and declared that anyone who would give shelter to Kuvera would be killed. On the advice of grandfather Pulastya Rishi, Kuvera went to the Gautami Ganga to pray Shiva and as a result he became the Deva of wealth.

The story of king Harischandra, too, is connected to the Gautami Ganga. On the advice of Narada and Parvata Rishi, the king worshiped Varuna on the bank of the river and obtained the blessing of a son, at the condition to offer the child in sacrifice. When little Rohita was born, Harischandra continued to postpone the sacrifice as long as possible; in the end Rohita found a substitute in Sunahshepa, the son of Ajigarta Rishi, who was going through a very difficult time, but Harischandra refused to sacrifice him. The solution was offered by a voice from the sky, that suggested to perform another ritual on the bank of Gautami Ganga, and thus everybody was satisfied. Later Sunahshepa was adopted by Visvamitra.

Vridbhagautama was son of Gautama Rishi, but he had a birth defect that made him very ugly. One day he arrived at mount Shitagiri, where an elderly lady engaged in austerities proposed him to marry her, suggesting she would pray Varuna to give him learning and good looks. Vridbhagautama accepted the proposal and they lived happily. One day some Rishis visited their home and were surprised by that strange union; on Agastya's advice the two spouses went to bathe in the Gautami Ganga (at the place known as Vridbha-sangama) and the old lady became young and beautiful again.

The powerful Dadhici Rishi lived on the bank of the Ganges with his wife Lopamudra and sister in law Gabhastini. One day the Devas went to see him after a fight against the Asuras and left their weapons in his custody. The years went by and the weapons started to lose their luster, so Dadhici tried to revive it by washing them with water, but the power of the weapons dissolved and passed into the water. To preserve that power, the Rishi drank the water. When the Devas came back to reclaim their weapons, Dadhici had no other option but to leave his body so that Visvakarma could use his bones to craft new powerful weapons for Indra and the other Devas. Lopamudra, too, chose to die and entrusted her newborn child to the care of a banyan tree (*pippala*): this was how the child came to be known as Pippalada ("given to the banyan tree").

Next there is the story of Surasena of Pratisthana, who had a snake-son by the name Nagesvara, who married

Bhogavati, the daughter of the king of Vijaya, that had also been his wife in a previous lifetime. By bathing in the Ganga, Nagesvara obtained a divine form, and in his gratefulness he built a temple for Shiva in the place known as Nagatirtha.

In another episode the Devas asked Shiva's help in one of their wars; from Shiva's sweat drops rose the Matrikas ("little mothers"), who defeated the Asuras. The place where the Devas gathered to wait for the end of the battle is called Pratisthana, while the place where the Matrikas took rest is called Matri tirtha. At that time Brahma had 5 heads, including a donkey's; this rebellious head offered the Asuras help against the Devas and Vishnu agreed to cut it off, on the condition that Shiva should catch it. The place where the head was cut is called Rudra tirtha, and there a temple to Brahma is called Brahma tirtha.

Next there is the story of the war between the doves and the owls (respectively supported by Yama and Agni, who gave their names to two more *tirthas*), the story of Veda Rishi and the hunter Bhilla (devotee of Shiva) that shows the difference between the celebration of rituals and true devotion, the friendship between the *brahmana* Gautama and the *vaisya* Manikundana (in which the *vaisya* demonstrated his loyalty to *dharma* in spite of all difficulties and was saved by Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, who administered to him the medicinal plant called *vishalyakarani*), as well as the story of Kandou Rishi (temporarily distracted from austerities by Indra who sent him the

Apsara Pramalocho) and his daughter Marisha, and the description of many other *tirthas*.

The text continues with the story of Krishna, the description of the four *varnas* and *ashramas* and their respective duties, the story of the *chandala* devotee of Vishnu who met a Brahma Rakshasa (a type of particularly powerful Rakshasa, who knows Vedic sciences) who wanted to eat him on the Ekadasi day and how both of them remembered their previous lifetimes, and finally the explanation of how to engage in Yoga - a path that requires the study of the *Puranas*, *Vedas* and *Itihasas*.

Shiva purana

Initially constituted by 100 thousand verses (divided into 12 *samhitas* called Vidyeshvara, Rudra, Vinayaka, Uma, Matri, Ekadasha-rudra, Kailasha, Shat rudra, Koti rudra, Sahasra Koti rudra, Vayaviya and Dharma) was reduced by Vyasa to 24 thousand verses; the 7 surviving *samhitas* are Vidyeshvara, Rudra, Shat rudra, Koti Rudra, Uma, Kailasha and Vayaviya.

The text starts with the explanation of the proper method to hear its recitation for the purpose of purifying the mind and attaining liberation. The assembly of Rishis where Suta narrated this *Purana* was in Prayaga kshetra (present Allahabad) and the narration starts with another Rishi assembly that was trying to determine which was the supreme form of the Deity. There

Brahma told the Rishis that Mahadeva Shiva is the origin of Vishnu, of the Rudras and all the Devas, and that the best method to realize this is to listen (*sravana*), pronounce (*kirtana*) or remember (*smarana*) the name of God in the form of *mantra* (a brief evocative formula for repeated chanting), *stotra* (elaborated prayer presented in the scriptures) or even *bhajan* (songs) in Sanskrit or in any other language.

Another method, even simpler, consists in worshiping the Shiva linga, the *nirguna* (without attributes) form of God, that symbolizes the divine pillar of fire (*analastambha*) that appeared on the occasion of a fight between Vishnu and Brahma, when Shiva intervened by getting between the two. Vishnu took the form of Varaha ("boar") to descend to the bottom of the universe (Patala) to find the lower extremity of the pillar, while Brahma took the form of Hamsa ("swan" or better, Himalayan goose) to fly as high as possible to search for the higher end. In those regions Brahma found a Ketaki flower that had been floating there since the beginning of creation and had not been able to find the end of the fire pillar. Brahma convinced the flower to declare in front of Vishnu that he had indeed found the end of the pillar, but Shiva exposed the lie and condemned Brahma to be deprived of ritual worship and the Ketaki flower not to be used in his own worship. When the two culprits begged for forgiveness, Shiva said that Brahma could preside the sacrificial ceremonies, and that the flower could be offered to Vishnu. The place of this adventure of the fire pillar is

Lingasthana (also called Arunachala) and its day is celebrated as Maha Shiva ratri, when devotees fast, consuming only fruits.

Then Shiva told Brahma and Vishnu about the *pancha kriya* (5 divine tasks) that sustain the world: *srusti* (creation or nature), *sthiti* (maintenance or position), *samhara* (destruction or dissolution), *tirobhava* (disappearance or sense of absence) and *anugraha* (mercy or liberation) and spoke about the sacred syllable Om, that represents the world and is the union of Shiva and Shakti.

We find also the description of the preparation of the Shiva linga, that can be shaped in clay, stone or metal, and must be installed together with its support base in a place that can be accessed daily. It can be *chara* ("mobile") and therefore of a small size, or *sthira* ("fixed") and of large size, always in the proportion of 12 fingers (wide) and 25 (high) measured by the devotee. One's own thumb can also be considered as a representation of the Shiva linga. The worship ritual is the *sodasa upachara* ("16 actions") and gives best results when it is performed in the middle of the night. The text lists some of the pilgrimage places dedicated to Shiva as the rivers Sarasvati, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Narmada, Kaveri, Sarayu, Tungabhadra and Kashi (Varanasi), Naimisharanya and Badarikashrama.

Also, we find the description of the intermediate or mixed *varnas*, the specific methods of spiritual realization in the various ages, the fire sacrifice (*agni*

yajna), Deity worship (*deva yajna*), the study of scriptures (*brahma yajna*), the Deities to whom the days of the week are dedicated (Monday to Durga, Tuesday to Skanda, Wednesday to Vishnu, Thursday to Yama, Friday to Brahma and Saturday to Indra), the rules for the worship of Shiva especially on *sankranti* (the day of passage between one zodiac sign to the other, especially Tula and Mesha, that is Libra and Aries), the solar and lunar eclipses, Magha krishna chaturdasi, the month of Kartika and Sunday.

Then we find the explanation of the Pranava (the original *mantra*) that manifests as "om" and "om namah shivaya" (*panchakshara* or "5 syllables *mantra*"), of the material bondage and liberation, and of the 8 *chakras*. The different types of Linga are described: *svayambhu* "spontaneously manifested", *bindu* "drop", *pratisthita* "installed", *char* "four-fold", *guru* "represented by the teacher", *vana* "of the forest", and *parthiva* ("of earth") that is the supreme. The *parthiva linga* must be 4 fingers tall and be supported by a beautiful base; the devotee must face north and the offerings are mostly the leaves of the *bilva* tree and food (that should not touch the *linga*). The *svayambhu*, *siddha* and *vana lingas* accept and purify even the food offered by a *chandala* (a person who does not observe the rules of the scriptures). Those whose ancestors were struck by some curse should worship the *parthiva linga* together with the 8 personifications of earth, water, fire, air, space, sun, moon and guests. Then the texts speaks of the importance of the sacred *bilva* tree, of the sacred

ashes (*bhasma*) and the rosary of *rudraksha* ("eyes of Rudra").

The *Rudra samhita* begins with the episode when Narada was boasting about conquering lust, and Vishnu presented him with a very interesting illusory experience. Vishnu suggested Narada to attend the *svayamvara* of king Shilanidhi's daughter, and Narada was so taken by the princess' beauty that he went to Vishnu to ask a form like his, since Vishnu is very handsome. Playing on a double meaning of the expression used by Narada, Vishnu gave him a monkey face, something that caused the hilarity of all those who were attending the *svayamvara*. Enraged, Narada cursed Vishnu by saying that he would too lose a beloved wife and that on that occasion he would seek the help of a monkey. Then we find the episode of the austerities performed by Vishnu, by which the universe was manifested, and the expansion of the *pranava omkara* in the *mantras* Gayatri Savita, Rudra Gayatri, Mahamrityunjaya, Panchakshara, Chintamani, Dakshinamurti and Mahavakya. Then we find more explanations on the method for worshipping Shiva and the origin of the Shiva lingas worshiped by the various Devas (made of diamond, gold, silver, bronze, crystal, copper and pearl), on the origin of Kailasha Vaikuntha, on the appearance of Rudra, on the birth of the Rishis and their descendants, and on the story of Gunanidhi - who angered his father because of his addiction to gambling, but was purified by unknowingly fasting on Maha Shiva ratri and took a new birth as the son of the

king of Kalinga (Orissa) and then as the Deva Kuvera, king of Alakapuri.

The episodes of the marriage between Shiva and Sati, and the sacrifice of Daksha, are followed by Parvati's birth and her austerities to obtain Shiva as a husband, the appearance of Kamadeva and the power of his 5 arrows (*harshana* "joy", *rochana* "attraction", *mohana* "confusion", *soshana* "languishing" and *marana* "death") that Kamadeva experimented on Brahma and his daughter Sandhya ("junction between day and night"). Brahma felt offended and cursed Kamadeva to be incinerated by Shiva and to remain without a body until Shiva himself had married. In turn, Sandhya engaged in long austerities by worshiping Shiva to obtain his blessings, then she left her body in the fire of Medhatithi Rishi's sacrifice to be reborn as Arundhati the daughter of Daksha, but she was divided by Surya into 3 expansions (*pratah*, *madhyanha* and *sayam sandhya*, i.e. dawn, noon and sunset). Arundhati later married Vasistha.

Daksha prayed Durga to appear as his daughter to fulfill Brahma's prophecy, and thus Sati was born (also known as Uma). Pleased by the long austerities of Sati, Shiva agreed to marry her and the divine couple settled on mount Kailasa, where nobody would disturb them. Shiva and Sati had many conversations, especially on the importance of *bhakti* (devotion) in Kali yuga and on the story of Rama. Then the disastrous sacrifice of Daksha caused Sati's death and the appearance of the avenger Virabhadra. Next we find the story of Dadhici

Rishi and king Kshuva (in which the Rishi was wounded and asked help from Sukracharya and Shiva, obtaining the Mahamrityunjaya mantra and three extraordinary blessings), then the story of the marriage between Himalaya and Maina (mother of Dhanya mother of Sita and Kalavati mother of Radha) and Parvati's birth, the birth of Bhauma (planet Mars), the austerities of Parvati, Kamadeva's incineration, the story of Tarakasura, the marriage between Shiva and Parvati (against the wishes of Parvati's parents), the story of king Anaranya (father of Padma the wife of Pippalada), the meeting between Padma and Dharmaraja (who was cursed with the gradual loss of legs in the four ages), the extraordinary birth of Kartikeya (Skanda), the fight between Kartikeya and Indra (and the manifestation of his expansions Sakha, Vishakha and Naigama), the killing of Tarakasura, the episodes of Pralamba and Banasura, the birth of Ganesha and how he received an elephant's head, Ganesha 's marriage with Siddhi and Riddhi ("perfection" and "prosperity") and the birth of Kshema ("patience") and Labha ("gain").

The *Yuddha kanda* narrates the story of how Shiva killed the three Asuras sons of Taraka (the "Tripurasura" Tarkasha, Vidyunmali and Kamalaksha) each possessing a flying fortress made respectively of gold, silver and iron, all built by Maya Danava. To confuse these Asuras, Vishnu created a strange character called Arihan, who manufactured a new ideological system based simply on action in this world, without any reference to spiritual life, and with four followers he

entered the fortresses of Tripura. Weakened by that deviant philosophy, the inhabitants of the fortresses were easier to defeat. In another episode, Shiva tests Indra by meeting him in the form of a *sadhu* and refusing to answer his questions. Indra was going to punish the hermit when he revealed his true identity, opening his third eye that was blazing with such fire that when he turned it on the ocean it created a child of enormous power, called Jalandhara. When he became adult, Jalandhara married Vrinda, the daughter of the Asura Kalanemi, and became the king of the Daityas. One day Brihaspati went to see Jalandhara and told him the story of the churning of the milk to obtain the nectar. Jalandhara became furious, thinking that the Devas had misappropriated the riches belonging to his father the ocean, and went to war against Indra. Lakshmi, who was born from the ocean like Jalandhara and therefore considered him like a brother, asked Vishnu not to kill him but to make peace with him instead; therefore Vishnu and Lakshmi went to live in the ocean with him.

In order to bring about Jalandhara's fall, Narada suggested him to seduce Parvati, Shiva's wife; Jalandhara first sent Rahu (who surrendered to Shiva) and then he directly attacked the Kailasha. Creating a diversion with several Apsaras, Jalandhara sneaked into Shiva's house and directly approached Parvati, who rejected him in indignation and went to seek Vishnu's help, suggesting him to do the same thing and try to seduce Jalandhara's wife. Thus Vishnu took the form of Jalandhara and went to Vrinda, with whom he had

intercourse: in this way Jalandhara could be killed during the battle. When Vrinda discovered she had been deceived, she cursed Vishnu and committed suicide. Vishnu was saddened by Vrinda's death, and after getting some seeds from Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati, sowed them on Vrinda's burned body and from there three plants sacred to Vishnu grew: Amla, Tulasi and Malati.

Then we have the episode of the Asura Sankhachuda, who in his previous lifetime was Sudama (the cowherd friend of Krishna), born as Daitya because of a curse by Radha. Thanks to Brahma's blessing, Sankhachuda became very powerful and married Tulasi, king Dharmadhvaja' daughter, and then he appropriated Indra's throne. In this case, too, Vishnu weakened the Asura by seducing Tulasi and Shiva was able to kill Sankhachuda. Again Vishnu was cursed by Tulasi to become a stone; this is explained as the origin of the Salagrama sila, a special sacred stone considered a form of Vishnu and is worshiped by offering *tulasi* flowers and leaves. Also Hiranyaksha's episode is presented here by introducing a character called Andhaka, who was created by Shiva and given in adoption to Hiranyaksha as a reward for his austerities. After killing Hiranyaksha, Vishnu put Andhaka on the throne of the lower planets. Later Hiranyaksha's brother Hiranyakashipu engaged in austerities with the purpose of acquiring more power to avenge his brother. Blessed by Brahma, he was granted that he would not be killed during the day or the night, on earth or in the sky, by

weapons, by Devas, human beings or animals. However, Vishnu appeared in the form of Narasimha, half man and half lion, and killed the Asura at dusk, with his own claws, by holding him on his own lap.

Then we have the episode of the long austerities performed by Sukracharya to propitiate Shiva and to obtain the Mritasanjivani vidya ("the science of how to resurrect the dead"), the story of the battle between Shiva and Andhaka (in which Chandika drank the Asura's blood to prevent him from multiplying himself, and Shiva swallowed Sukra to prevent him from resuscitating the Asuras), the killing of Gajasura (Mahishasura's son, whose skin was used by Shiva as clothing). the killing of Nirhadatya (Prahlada's maternal uncle, who had decided to avenge the death of his brother in law by destroying the *brahmanas* of Kasi), and the story of Vital and Utpal (killed by Parvati with the ball she was playing with).

Then we find the story of five of Shiva's incarnations: as Sadhojat (with his disciples Sunanda, Nandana, Visvanandana and Upanandana, all of white complexion), Namadeva (of red complexion like his disciples Viraja, Vivaha, Vishoka and Visvabhavana), Tat Purusha (dressed in yellow clothes), Ghoresha (of black complexion like his emanations Krishna, Krishnasikha, Krishnamukha and Krishnakanthadhari), Ishana (and his emanations Jati, Mundi, Sikhandi and Ardhamundi). We find the explanation of the 8 forms of Shiva - Sharva, Bhava, Rudra, Ugra, Bhima, Pasupati, Ishana and Mahadeva, representing the elements of

nature (earth, water, fire, air, space, soul, sun and moon), of Shiva Ardhanarishvara (half man and half woman) and various other incarnations of Shiva along the ages of the universe, the birth of Nandikesvara, the appearance of Bhairava, the incarnation of Shiva as Sarabha (on the occasion of Narasimha's appearance), the blessing to the *brahmana* Visvanara, the incarnation of Shiva as Grihapati and Yakshesvara and 10 more incarnations of Shiva and Shakti, the origin of the 11 Rudras, Durvasa Rishi, Hanuman, Mahesha and Vrishabha, the killing of Vritrasura, the incarnation of Yatinatha and Krishna darshana, the episode of Satyaratha's son and Upamanyu, the conversation between the Pandavas and Vyasa, the fight between Arjuna and Shiva in the form of the Kirata hunter, the description of the 12 Jyotirlingas (Somanatha in Saurashtra, Mallikarjuna at Sri Shaila, Mahakala at Ujjain, Amaresvara at Omkara, Kedar on the Himalaya, Bhimashankara on river Bhima, Visvanatha at Varanasi, Trayambakesvara on river Gautami, Vaidyanatha at Chitabhumi, Nagesha at Dvaraka, Ramesvara at Setubhanda and Dhushmesha at Shivalaya) and the Upalingas ("secondary *lingas*") generated by the Jyotirlingas, such as Somesvara, Rudresvara, Dughdesha, Kardamesvara, Bhutesvara, Bhimesvara, Guptesvara, Vyaghresvara and many others.

Then we find the description of the austerities of Atri and Anasuya, the stories of the *brahmana* Suvada, of the Shivalinga Mahabala and of Vatukanatha. We also find the story of how Vishnu obtained the Sudarshana

chakra, the description of many devotees of Shiva, the austerities of Maha Shiva ratri and the different levels of liberation, the conversation between Krishna and Upamanyu, the classification of the criminal activities and their punishment, the explanation of the importance of charity, the description of Earth and the planets, the categories of austerity, the process of development of the body at birth, control over death, the descent of the Ganges, the austerities of Vyasa, the incarnations of Mahakali, Mahalakshmi, Mahasarasvati, and Sakambari.

The *Kailasa samhita* speaks of the classifications of Yoga, the behavior of a *sannyasi*, the Pranava Omkara, and the initiation and the funeral of a *sannyasi*. It follows with the description of the origin of knowledge, the calculation of time and *yugas* (the ages of the universe), meditation, the Pasupata vrata, the duties of a *brahmana*, the installation of the Deity within one's own body, the mental worship to Shiva, the performance of *havana* (fire sacrifice), the auspicious days for special rituals, the installation of the Shivalinga, the classification of Yogas, the obstacles in the practice of Yoga and the attainment of mystic powers.

Varaha purana

It has 24 thousand verses. After being rescued by the *avatara* Varaha ("boar") Mother Earth had a conversation with him and asked him many questions, especially on creation, on the descendants of Manu and

on the 10 main *avatars* of Vishnu. The narration includes an episode where Narada is confused by Maya in the presence of Savitri, a previous lifetime of Narada when he was a *brahmana* by the name of Sarasvata, the story of king Asvasira, the story of king Vasu and Rishi Raimya, the story of the *avatara* Matsya, the story of king Durjaya and the explanation of the Sraddha ritual (honoring the ancestors). The text also speaks about Agni, the Asvini kumaras, Parvati, Ganesha, the Naga Devas and the meaning of Naga panchami, Kartikeya, Aditya (Surya), the Ashta Matrikas ("eight Mothers"), Durga, the Digapalas (protecting the 6 directions: Purva, Dakshina, Paschima, Uttara, Urdhva and Adhara), Kuvera, Vishnu, Dharma, Rudra, the Tanmatras (the subtle forms of matter), Chandrama (the Moon), the observance of Dvadasi (the 12th day of the moon) for Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Nrisimha, Vamana, Jamadagni, Kalki, Padmanabha and Buddha.

The Dharani vrata is dedicated to the Earth and is observed in the month of Kartika, while the Subha vrata is observed on the first day of the month of Margasirsa, the Dhanya vrata in the month of Aghana, the Kanti vrata in the month of Kartika; the Saubhagya vrata is observed for one entire year, the Avighna vrata for 4 months, the Shanti vrata for one year, the Kama vrata for 15 days. The Arogya vrata is observed on the 7th day of any month, the Putra prapti vrata in the month of Bhadrapada, and the Shaurya and Sarvabhauma vratas in the month of Asvina. The Til Dhenu dana consists in gifting a *brahmana* with the image of a cow made with

sesame seeds, the Rasa Dhenu dana requires the gift of sugarcane juice and sesame, the Gud Dhenu dana requires brown cane sugar, while the Sarkara Dhenu dana requires white sugar.

Also there is the description of the holy places called Kokamukha tirtha, Haridvara (also called Mayapuri), Kubjamraka tirtha (Rishikesh), Badarikashrama, Mandara tirtha, Prabhasa (Somanatha), Salagrama kshetra, Ruru kshetra, Gonishkramana tirtha, Stutasvami tirtha, Dvaraka, Sanandura tirtha, Lohargala tirtha, Mathura, Chakra tirtha, Kapila tirtha, Govardhana tirtha and Gokarna tirtha. Then the text explains the various types of sacred images made with wood, stone, clay, copper, bronze, silver and gold; it follows with the funeral rituals and the story of Nachiketa, the purification from negative activities, the description of Gokarnesvara, the realization of Vishnu, Gautama Rishi's curse, the geography of Earth and Trishakti (the threefold form of the Mother Goddess).

Garuda purana

It has 19 thousand verses in the form of a dialogue between Vishnu and Garuda; it mainly speaks of the funeral rituals lasting 12 days, the categories of criminal activities, Yoga and liberation. Traditionally it is recited only during funerals. In the introduction, we find a list of 22 *avatars* of Vishnu.

Agni purana

It has 15,400 verses in 383 chapters, with an appendix of 6 more chapters. After the traditional auspicious invocation we find the description of the 10 *avatars* of Vishnu, the creation of the universe, the process for the worship of Ganesha, Shiva, Chandi, Vishnu and Surya, the *Lakshmi stotra* and its benefits, the *Vishnu panjara stotra*, the *Marjana Apamarjana stotra*, a general summary of Vedic scriptures and the *Puranas*, and instructions on building temples. Then we find the *Tirtha mahatmya*, the description of the Bhuvana koshas ("the coverings of the universe"), the explanation of the system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, the various traditions, dreams and omens, the *Papa nashaka stotra*, the *Gayatri mantra* and the *Sandhya vidhi*. It follows with an introduction to Sanskrit literature and grammar, the practice of Yoga, *Dhanur Veda*, the duties of the king, property rights, the knowledge of Atman, and finally an introduction to the *Bhagavad gita* and to *Yama gita*.

Brahmanda purana

The title means "the egg of the Brahman", and the text is constituted by 12 thousand verses divided into 3 parts: *Purvabhaga*, *Madhyabhaga* and *Uttarabhaga*.

Brahma speaks about the creation of the present universe and future creations, the dimension of time and the cycles of ages, the description of Earth and the planets, the descendants of Rudra, the glories of Shiva

and the birth of Nilalohita; it describes the creation of the Rishis and Agni, the descendants of Priyavrata, the explanation of the name of Nilakantha, the origin of the Shiva linga, the curse of the Daruvana Rishis, the meeting of Pururava with the Pitris, the annual Sradha ceremony, the system of *yajnas*, the four *yugas*, the characteristics of the Rishis and the *mantras*, Vyasa and his disciples, the story of Yajnavalkya, the descendants of Manu and the various *manvantaras*. In the text we also find a description of the *Vedangas*, an elaborate version of the story of Rama (known as *Adhyatma Ramayana*), Nachiketa's instructions, the glories of Pinakini, Viraja kshetra and Kanchi.

Brahma vaivarta purana

Composed by 18 thousand verses, it is divided into *Brahma khanda*, *Prakriti khanda*, *Ganesha khanda* and *Krishna Janma khanda*. Like the *Bhagavata Purana*, it gives particular importance to the figure of Krishna - not as one of the *avatars* but as Parabrahman, the origin of everything. The *Brahma kanda* describes the creation of Brahma and the descendants of Manu, the story of the Pracetas and the sons and daughters of Daksha, Prithu, the *manvantaras*, Kunalasva and Brihadasva, Trisanku, Bahu and Sagara. Moving to the lunar dynasty, it speaks about Chandra and Yayati, then it describes the geography of Earth and of the planets.

The text continues speaking about Utkala (present Orissa) and the temple of Konarka dedicated to the

Sun, the method of worship to Surya, and the expansions of Surya as the 12 Adityas - Indra (the warrior aspect), Dhata (the creator and destiny), Parjanya (rain), Tvasta (trees and herbs), Pusha Aryama (in food grains), Bhaga Vivasvana (in fire), Vishnu (omnipresent), Amshumana (in wind), Varuna (in water) and Mitra (in the moon and in the ocean) - that preside over the 12 months of the solar year. It follows with the 108 names of Surya.

Then the text narrates the story of Indradyumna, the description of his capital Avanti (in the kingdom of Malva, present Kashmir), the description of Purushottama kshetra (Jagannatha Puri), the story of the construction of the temple with the help of the kings of Kalinga, Utkala and Koshala, and the installation of the Deities of Jagannatha. Follows the episode of Markandeya Rishi who witnessed the destruction of the universe, the story of the king Sveta and Sveta Madhava, the story of Bali and the descent of the Ganges, the two Brahmagiri doves, Garuda and Maninaga, Visvamisra and Indra, the *brahmana* Sveta, Deva Kuvera, Harischandra, Vriddha Gautama, Pippalada, Nagesvara, the 5th head of Brahma, the owl and the dove, Bhilla and Veda, Gautama and Manikundala, Kandu Rishi, the description of the *varnas* and *ashramas*, and the story of the *chandala* and the *brahma rakshasa*. The text also speaks about how Narayana emanated from Krishna, and how Krishna and Radha manifested all the cowherd boys and girls and the cows of Goloka Vrindavana. Then it glorifies

Radha as the origin of Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Durga and Savitri. It follows with the stories of Savitri and Satyavan, Surabhi, Svaha and Svadha, the descendants of Suratha and the story of the Ganges, many stories from the *Ramayana* and Durvasa's curse to Indra, as well as instructions for worshiping Lakshmi. The *Ganesha kanda* speaks mostly about the story of Ganesha but it also contains parts of the story of Jamadagni, Kartavirya Arjuna and Parasurama.

The *Krishna kanda* speaks about the story of Krishna in Vraja and Mathura, and how Radha was reunited with Krishna and all the inhabitants of Gokula returned to Goloka.

Kurma purana

Its name comes from the tortoise *avatara* of Vishnu and the present text consists of 17 thousand verses of the collection called *Brahma samhita*. The other 3 *samhitas* - *Bhagavati*, *Gauri* and *Vaishnavi* - have been lost.

The text tells the story of the subsequent life of Indradyumna, the description of the system of *varnas* and *ashramas*, the creation of the universe, the calculation of time, the story of Varaha, the importance of Ananta Sesha Naga (presented here as Sankarshana), the appearance of Rudra, the 1000 names of Parvati, the descendents of Uttanapada, the stories of Daksha, Narasimha, Varaha (that in this version is presented as after Narasimha's), and a

different version of the story of Gautama Rishi and the faked death of the cow. Follow the stories of Andhaka, of king Bali and the *avatara* Vamana, and the story of Bana Asura - in a different version than the *Bhagavata* and *Vishnu puranas*: here Bana is defeated by Shiva and not by Krishna, and when he surrenders he becomes one of the *gana patis* or "leaders of the companions" of Shiva. We also find descriptions of the descendants of Surya (who in this version has not 2 wives but 4 - Samjna, Rajni, Prabha and Chhaya - and a greater number of children), of Vaivasvata Manu and his son Ikshvaku. After the Sun dynasty we find the Moon dynasty, with Pururava, Yayati and his sons Yadu, Tursavu, Druhya, Anu and Puru. Follows the story of Kartavirya Arjuna and his son Jayadhvaja, that includes the interesting discussion between Jayadhvaja and his brothers on worshipping Vishnu rather than Shiva: as a general tendency the kings worship Vishnu and Indra, *brahmanas* worship Agni, Aditya (Surya), Brahma and Shiva, while the Devas worship Vishnu, the Asuras worship Shiva, the Yakshas and Gandharvas worship Chandra, the Rishis worship Brahma and Shiva, and women worship Parvati. But the best thing for human beings is to understand that Shiva is non-different from Visnu, therefore Shiva and Vishnu must be worshiped simultaneously.

The text continues elaborating on Durjaya and Urvasi, Krishna's austerities and his conversation with Upamanyu Rishi, the description of the 4 *yugas*, the importance of the Shiva linga, the 12 Jyotirlingas and

the *tirthas* or pilgrimage places of Ganga, Yamuna and Prayaga. It describes the geography of the Earth, the various *manvantaras*, the cyclic manifestations of Vyasa in the various Dvapara yugas, the *avatars* of Shiva, the *Isvara gita* and the Yoga of the secret knowledge, the rituals and *samskaras*, the rules of cleanliness, atonement and fasting. It reveals the story of the Maya Sita ("illusory Sita") that was kidnapped by Ravana, the removal of one of Brahma's heads, and the story of Kalabhairava and Nandi.

Matsya purana

It has 14 thousand verses, in the form of conversation between Vishnu and Vaivasvata Manu; it tells the story of the fish *avatara* (Matsya), the creation of the universe, the descendants of Manu and Daksha, the story of the Maruts, the list of the *manvantaras*, the story of Prithu, the dynasty of the Sun (here Surya has 3 wives), the dynasty of the Moon, the story of Sati the daughter of Daksha and her 108 names and 108 *tirthas* ("places of access"). Follow the instructions for funeral ceremonies, the story of Brahmadata, the description of many sacred places, the story of Chandra's birth and the war for Tara, the stories of Pururava, Yayati, Puru, Bharata, Kacha and Devayani, the quarrel between Sarmista and Devayani, the story of Sukracharya and Jayanti (daughter of Indra), a general description of the *Puranas* (the version for the human beings and the version for the Devas that comes to a total of 1 billion

verses), the story of Tripura Asura, the calculation of time, the characteristics of the *yugas*, the story of Vajranga son of Diti, the austerities of Taraka, the war between Devas and Asuras, the appearance of Kausiki from Parvati's body, the birth of Kartikeya, the story of Hiranyakasipu and the descendants of the Rishis Bhrigu, Angira, Atri, Visvamisra, Kasyapa, Vasistha, Parasara and Agastya. Follow the story of Savitri and Satyavan, the description of the duties of a king, the interpretation of dreams and omens, the story of Bali Maharaja and the *avatara* Vamana, the story of the *avatara* Varaha, the episode of the ocean churned by the Devas and Asuras, and the appearance of Lakshmi. The text includes a treatise on the science of architecture compiled by 18 great Rishis - Bhrigu, Atri, Vasistha, Visvakarma, Maya, Narada, Nagnajita, Vishalaksha, Puranadara, Brahma, Kartikeya, Nandishvara, Saunaka, Garga, Vasudeva, Aniruddha, Sukra and Brihaspati - and the auspicious moments to start building a house.

Linga purana

It has 11 thousand verses divided into two parts of 108 and 55 chapters respectively; it begins with the traditional invocation. Vyasa starts speaking in the assembly of the Rishis, explaining the composition of the Omkara, the subtle mechanism of creation, the appearance of the Rishis known as *brahma manasa putras* ("sons of Brahma's mind"), the nine Prajapatis,

Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa and their descendants. Here Sati is described as *manasa putri* of Brahma, entrusted to Daksha with a warning about her special position as Mother of the Universe. In this regard we also find the prayers of Brahma to Shiva. Follows a description of the Astanga Yoga, with particular instructions on the places suitable for practice, meditation and visualization, on the *mantras* to be chanted, the difficulties to be faced and the 64 *siddhis* or "perfections" to attain. Then the text elaborates on Shiva tattva and the meaning of the 5 faces of Shiva, the meaning of Omkara, the *Shiva stuti* chanted by Vishnu, the description of the rituals called Linga archana ("worship to the Linga") and Pancha Yajna ("five sacrifices"), the explanation of the *Tryambika mantra*, the origin of the Shiva linga and the meanings of *atitya* ("hospitality"), *pativratya* ("loyalty to one's husband"), *bhakti* ("devotion for God") and *bhasma* ("sacred ashes").

Follow the *Apara stuti* for Shiva chanted by the seven Rishis, the conversation between Dadhici Rishi and king Kshupa on Shiva's superior position, the birth of Nandesvara, the universal form of Shiva, the worship to Shiva by Parasara Rishi, the story of the Tripurasuras, the Pasupata Yoga, the rules for ritual worship, different *vratas* ("ritual observances") and specifically the Pasupata vrata, the monthly Shiva vratas and the Uma Mahesvara vrata. The text also contains the *Pancakshara japa mahatmya* ("the glories of the chanting the 5 syllable *mantra*"), the description of the

Dhyana Yajna ("sacrifice of meditation"), the interpretation of dreams and omens, the stories of Andhaka, Varaha, Narasimha and Jalandhara, the *Shiva sahasra namavali* ("the 1000 names of Shiva") recited by Vishnu, the death of Sati, the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, the appearance of Ganesha, the Shiva Tandava ("cosmic dance of Shiva"), the description of the various *mantras* for Vishnu and Shiva, the story of Dhunduma, the definition of *pasutva* ("animal character") and *pasu* ("animal"), the *vibhutis* ("powers") of Shiva, the 8 forms of Shiva, the *mandala* ("circle") of *puja* ("worship"), the universal form of Shiva, the installation of the Shiva linga and the various forms of Gayatri.

Vamana purana

It has 10 thousand verses. The story of the *avatara* Vamana is narrated by Pulastya Rishi to Narada, after a series of other episodes such as the sacrifice of Daksha, the story of Andhaka, the story of Sukeshi (including the description of the virtuous and criminal activities, the geography of Earth and the 10 parts of Dharma), the story of Nara Narayana Rishi and their meeting with Prahlada, the story of Mahishasura (including the episodes of Rambha and Karambha, mount Vindhya, Chanda and Munda), the new incarnation of Durga, the story of king Kuru and Kuru kshetra, and the story of Bali before his meeting with Vamana.

After Vamana's episode we find the story of the river Sarasvati, the geographical position of Kurukshetra (with its 7 forests and 9 rivers), the prayers of the Rishis to Shiva, the description of Sanihitya Sarovara and Sthanu tirtha, the origin of the 4 heads of the *linga* called Brahmesvara, the description of Prithudaka tirtha, the birth of Uma (daughter of Mena and the Himalaya) that originally was named Kali and had one brother by the name of Sunama ("beneficial name") and two sisters called Ragini (red) and Kutila (white), her marriage with Shiva, the palace built by Visvakarma for the newly weds, the killing of Sumbha and Nishumbha, the birth of Kartikeya, the killing of Taraka and Mahishasura, the story of Ritudhvaja and Pataketu, the austerities of Shiva, the killing of the Asura Mura, the story of Andhaka Asura (including the story of king Danda and the episode in which Visvakarma becomes a monkey), the origin of the Maruts in the various *manvantaras*, the episode of Vishnu killing Kalanemi, the victory of Bali Maharaja, the story of Pururava, the description of the constellations, the story of Upamanyu and Sridama, the story of Gajendra and the crocodile, the *Sarasvata stotra*, the conversation between Bali and Prahlada, the atonement austerities of Indra, and the benefits of listening to the *Puranas*.

Markandeya purana

Composed of 9 thousand verses. It is famous especially because it contains the *Devi mahatmya* ("the glories of

the Goddess"), the most popular text for the worship to the Mother Goddess. The recitation of the *Devi mahatmya*, also called *Chandi patha*, is traditionally required during the observance of Navaratri and many *shaktas* ("devotees of Shakti") perform it every day.

The text begins with the conversation between Jaimini and Markandeya Rishi, in which Markandeya speaks of Drona's bird sons, all expert in Vedic knowledge. This Drona was the son of the *brahmana* Mandapala and married Tarkshi, daughter of Kandhara (of Garuda's family); the 4 eggs of Tarkshi were collected by Shami Rishi and thus Pingaksha, Vibodha, Suputra and Sumuka learned Vedic knowledge by listening to the recitation of the Rishis in his *ashrama*. This happened because in their previous lives they had been the sons of Rishi Sukrisha, son of Rishi Vipulasva. Jaimini went to meet these extraordinary birds and asked them many questions about the incarnation of Krishna and the story of the Pandavas. The answers also speak about the various incarnations of Vishnu, such as Narayana, Sesa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. It is Pradyumna who manifests in the form of the *avatars* such as Varaha, Nrisimha and Krishna.

The story of Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, begins with the episode in which Indra killed Trishira and his father Tvasta Rishi created Vritrasura; instead of honoring the friendship with Vritra, favored by the Seven Rishis, Indra treacherously killed Vritra and thus provoked the Asuras' anger. Later on the Devas took birth on Earth, and the Pandavas are precisely

manifestations of Dharma, Vayu, Indra and the Asvini kumaras. Follows the story of Balarama's pilgrimage, the killing of Suta Gosvami and its atonement by a 12 year fast in the pilgrimage place known as Pratiloma Sarasvati. Then again the story of Draupadi's sons is traced back to the episode when king Harischandra insulted Visvamitra and Visvamitra asked him to surrender everything he possessed. At that time 5 Devas of the directions showed indignation at how Visvamitra was mistreating Harischandra's wife and he cursed them to take birth as human beings. Visvamitra continued to test Harischandra's virtue to the extreme consequences, then Harischandra was blessed by the Rishi Visvamitra, by Indra and by Dharma. Follow the story of Sumati and the description of how a human being goes through death and in the cycle of reincarnation.

Vayu purana

It has 24 thousand verses, divided into 4 parts entitled *Prakriya pada*, *Anusanga pada*, *Upodghata pada* and *Upasamhara pada*, plus an appendix entitled *Gaya mahatmya* ("the glories of Gaya", the famous place of pilgrimage in present Bihar). The text begins by declaring that the knowledge contained in the *Puranas* was originally enunciated by Brahma and constitutes a very important part of Vedic literature. After the description of creation, Romaharshana Suta speaks about the story of Varaha, the cycle of the *yugas* and

the characteristics of the various ages, the descendants of the 10 *manasa putras* of Brahma and Daksha's daughters, and the appearance of Rudra and the science of Yoga, for which detailed instructions are given. The text also speaks of the interpretation of dreams and omens, of the list of the 34 *kalpas* (days of Brahma) that passed from the beginning of creation, and of the birth of Lakshmi as daughter of Brighu Rishi and sister of Dhata and Vidhata. Then we find the sacrifice of Daksha, the description of the geography of the Earth and the regions assigned to the sons of king Priyavrata, the various planets of the universe, the episode in which Shiva swallowed the poison, the compilation of the *Vedas* and various stories about the Rishis, such as the episode of the *asvamedha yajna* by king Janaka. It narrates how the groups of Devas and Rishis incarnate in the various *manvantaras*, the story of king Vena and Prithu, and narrates about the Pracetas, the descendants of Daksha, Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha the sons of Diti, the Maruts, the Danavas and the Pitris.

The dynasty of the Sun begins with the birth of Surya from the cosmic egg - by which he was given the name of Martanda. After the birth of Yama, Yami, Vaisvavata Manu and the Asvini kumaras, the next generation sees the progeny of Vaivasvata, starting with Ila/Sudyumna, Ikshvaku, Brihadhasva, Trishanku and Sagara. In the Moon dynasty we see the birth of Chandra, Pururava and Urvasi, Yayati, Kartavirya Arjuna, and the episode when Brihaspati took the form of Sukracharya and

cheated the Daityas for 10 years. Follows a brief summary of the main *avatars* of Vishnu, in a list that is slightly different from usual: Matsya, Narasimha, Vamana, Dattatreya, Bhavya, Parasurama, Rama, Vedavyasa, Krishna and Kalki, and the line of transmission of *Vayu purana* from Vayu to Ushana, to Brihaspati, Savita and so on, down to Vyasa and Romaharshana Suta.

Bhavisya purana

The *Apastamba Dharmasutra* mentions a *Bhavisya purana*, but it is possible that the text presently available has been drastically modified in very recent times, because its contents are very doubtful and drastically different from the other *Puranas*.

The first section of the text speaks of the glories of Vishnu, Shiva and Surya, then Romaharshana Suta goes to sleep for 2000 years, and on returning he presents his prophecies for Kali yuga (which is supposed to have started in the times when Romaharshana originally received the Vedic texts from Vyasa). These belated prophecies include the advent of Buddhism with descriptions of terrible wars between Buddhists and Hindus, with millions of casualties (that never actually happened). It mentions Zarathustra, Adam and Eve (called Adama and Havyavati, pictured under a Papa vriksha or "sin tree"), Noah's ark, Moses, Jesus Christ (called "Isha Messia") and his journey to India, Muhammad and Islam, Nimbarka, Madhva,

Jayadeva Gosvami, Kutubuddin and the Delhi sultans, Tamerlan, Nadir Shah, Akbar, the British colonial rule, queen Victoria and the city of Calcutta. The "*mleccha dharma*" is described as devotion to God, worship of fire, nonviolence, austerity and sense control.

In the list of *Upapuranas* the most famous are named after *Samba*, *Nandi* (or *Nandikesvara*), *Surya*, *Adi* (or *Aditya*), *Parasara*, *Kapila*, *Narasimha*, *Kalika*, *Nilamata*, *Varuna*, *Durvasa*, *Manu*, *Sanatkumara*, *Ushana* (*Sukra*), *Maricha*, *Bhargava*, *Lakshmi*, *Shiva rahasya*, *Shiva dharma*, *Vasistha*, *Ganesha*, *Kalki* and *Hamsa*. Some sources add the *Devi bhagavata* and the *Brihan naradiya purana* to the list, while others add the *Vayu*, *Shiva* and *Skanda puranas*, that generally are considered *Mahapuranas*. There are also other *Upapuranas* called *Asamavya*, *Aunasa* (*Ausanas*), *Basava*, *Bhanda*, *Brihaddharma*, *Harivamsa*, *Kotyaka*, *Kuvera*, *Limbaja*, *Magha*, *Malla*, *Medasani-vari*, *Mudgala*, *Peria* (*Periya*), *Sarasvati*, *Sthala*, *Svayambhuva*, *Tula*, *Vaisakha* and *Vishnu-Dharma Purana*.

Devi bhagavata purana

Also known as *Devi purana*, it has 18 thousand verses in 12 chapters or cantos and is attributed to Vyasa, who called it *Mahapurana*. The introductory invocation offers a meditation on Brahmaidya, "spiritual knowledge", that is *sarva chaitanya rupa*, "the form of all awareness", so that she will awaken *buddhi*, "intelligence".

The text begins with the Rishis' questions to Saunaka and continues with the glorification of the various *Puranas*, the incarnations of Vyasa in the various Dvapara yugas, the classification of the scriptures and their essence.

The *Vedanta* (also called *jnana kanda*, "the section of knowledge") is characterized by *sattva*, the collections of *sutras* that deal with the ritual ceremonies (*karma kanda*, "the section of the prescribed activities") are characterized by *rajas* and the *Nyaya shastra* ("the texts on logic") are characterized by *tamas*, and similarly the *Puranas* too are divided into 3 categories according to the predominant *guna*, but the *Bhagavata Mahapurana* and the *Devi Bhagavata Mahapurana* are above them all. As it is characteristic of the *Puranas*, also this text speaks of the creation of the universe, the secondary creation, the dynasties, the periods of the Manus and the stories of the various kings.

The original Devi Shakti is called Vidya, "knowledge", her nature is *turiya chaitanya* ("transcendental awareness") and she is the Mother of all the worlds. Her unfathomable waters sustain Vishnu, who is the support and the origin of Brahma, the creator of the universe. Maha Lakshmi is her *sattva shakti*, Maha Sarasvati is her *rajas shakti* and Maha Kali is her *tamas shakti*.

The text continues with the story of Hayagriva, the *avatara* of Vishnu "with a horse head": the Devas were performing a sacrifice ritual, but they discovered that Vishnu had gone to sleep after fighting against the

Asuras for many years, so trying to awaken him indirectly, they cut the string of his arc, producing a strong noise. Unexpectedly the snapping bow string cut off Vishnu's head, that rolled away and became lost in the ocean. The *Vedas* then prayed Mahamaya, who revealed the purpose of that particular *lila* ("playful pastime") of Vishnu: there was an Asura called Hayagriva because he had a horse head, and who had obtained the blessing to remain unconquered by anyone except a person who looked exactly like him. Thus, Vishnu was going to take on a horse head in order to deal with the Asura.

Two more Asuras, named Madhu and Kaitabha, appeared from Vishnu's ear wax while he was sleeping, and started to afflict the universe. Brahma went to offer his prayers to Vishnu and ask for his help, but as he was unable to wake him up, he addressed Mahamaya, who was covering Vishnu's heart in the form of sleep (Nidra). With the help of Mahamaya, who confused the minds of the two Asuras, Vishnu eliminated Madhu and Kaitabha, thus liberating Brahma and the entire universe from that menace.

Then the text speaks of the birth of Budha (the planet known as Mercury), son of Chandra (the Deva of the Moon) and Tara ("star", wife of Brihaspati, who is known as the planet Jupiter) who had fallen in love with Chandra and had eloped with him. Budha married Ila, daughter of Manu, and from their union the king Pururava was born. Actually Ila had been a male at birth and until the moment of transformation - which

happened when he entered without permission into the forest where Shiva was enjoying with Parvati. Later Pururava married the Apsara Urvasi, but Indra wanted her to return to his court, so he devised a plan to force Pururava to fail to keep his word, with the result of angering his wife.

Vyasa too met an Apsara, Ghritaci, who took the form of a parrot and indirectly became the mother of Sukadeva. Suka was born from the fire of the ritual and immediately became an adult, as it is the norm with the children of the Devas; he went to Brihaspati's house for his studies and then returned to his father, who advised him to marry and thus comply with his family duties. However, Sukadeva was free from all material desires and attachments and he feared that marriage would create unnecessary problems for him; to help him understand the truth, Vyasa sent him to meet king Janaka of Mithila, a famous *jivanmukta* ("liberated soul still living in the body") who was a great example of detachment and perfection in the performance of duties. Then we have the description of Sukadeva's journey to Mithila, his arrival at the palace, and his conversation with Janaka about renunciation and family life, and the gradual evolution of the individual. In the end Janaka openly declared that the constant awareness of the Self as different from the material world is the key to attain a healthy and natural renunciation from attachments.

Convinced, Sukadeva returned to his father's house and married Pivari, the daughter of a Rishi; he had four sons - Krishna, Gauraprabha, Bhuri and Devasruta - and a

daughter, Kirti. Later Kirti married Anuha and begot the powerful king Brahmadata, who was perfectly realized in the transcendental Self and simultaneously endowed with great wealth and prosperity. Finally Sukadeva left his father's house and went to mount Kailasa, where he meditated for a long time, finally attaining the perfection of Yoga. Vyasa went to search for him, calling him with great affection and sadness, and was pacified by Shiva himself. Then Vyasa went to the birthplace of his own mother Satyavati and finally to the city of Hastinapura, where Satyavati had married Santanu and begot two heirs to the throne.

The next canto speaks about the birth of Satyavati, the birth of Vyasa, the birth of the Vasus, and the birth of the Pandavas, then about the extinction of the Yadu family and the life of Maharaja Parikshit, and the Sarpa yajna performed by his son Janamejaya.

In the 3rd canto we find the questions of Janamejaya to the Rishis, the hymns to the Devi composed by Shiva and Brahma, the powers of the Devi, the characteristics of the *gunas*, the story of Satyavrata, the fight between Yudhajit and Virasena, the story of Visvamitra, the marriage of Sudarshana, the installation of the Devi at Varanasi and Ayodhya, the explanation of Navaratri, the tradition of honoring young girls as representatives of the Goddess, and the story of Rama observing Navaratri.

In the 4th canto we find the story of Krishna and the conversation between Nara and Narayana Rishi. In the

5th we find the birth of the Apsara Urvasi, the explanation of the importance of pilgrimages, the curse of Brighu and the truce between Devas and Daityas, and the stories of various *avatars* of Vishnu. Then the story of Krishna is resumed with the marriage of Devaki, the birth of Krishna and the kidnapping of Pradyumna. The 5th canto also compares Shiva and Vishnu, speaks about the birth of Mahisha Asura, his war against Indra and the appearance of the Devi to defeat the Asura, the battle against Tamra, Vaskala, Durmukha, Ciksura, Vidalaksha, Asiloma, and finally Mahisha himself. Then the Devi tackled another danger for the Devas - the Asuras Sumbha and Nisumbha, with their generals Dhumralochana, Chanda, Munda, Raktabija, and killed them all. The narration of the deeds of the Devi is a source of great blessings for those who hear it, as demonstrated by the story of king Suratha and the *vaisya* Samadhi.

The 6th canto speaks about the story of Trishira, Vritra and Indra's escape, then narrates the story of king Nahusha, the war between Adi and Baka, the birth of Vasistha, the Haihayas and Bhargavas, the story of Ekavita, the war between Haihaya and Kalaketu, and the illusory experiences of Vyasa and Narada.

The 7th canto speaks of the two dynasties of Surya and Chandra, the story of Chyavana Rishi and Sukanya, the stories of Revata, Satyavrata, Trisanku and Harischandra. Then it speaks about the form of the Goddess "that has 100 eyes" (Satakshi Devi), the birth of Parvati, the Virata rupa, Yoga and perfection in

mantras, the knowledge of Brahman, *bhakti* and worship of the Devi. In the 8th canto we find the story of Varaha that lifts the Earth, the description of the family of Manu and Priyavrata, mountains and rivers, Ganges and the regions of Earth (*varsha*), continents (*dvipa*) and the structure of the universe.

The 9th canto describes the origin of Prakriti and Purusha, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and the Devas, the appearance of Lakshmi, Ganga and Sarasvati, the power of Kali, the punishment prescribed for offenses against Earth, the story of Tulasi and Sankhachuda, the story of Savitri and her dialogue with Yama, the 86 *kundas* ("basins") and the various forms of the Devi - Maha Lakshmi, Svaha, Svadha, Dakshina, Sasthi, Manasa and Surabhi.

The 10th canto speaks about Svayambhuva Manu and the conversation between Narada and Vindhya, after which Vindhya blocked the passage of the Sun, then we find the story of Manu and the story of king Suratha, and the appearance of Bhramari Devi. The 11th and 12th cantos describe the morning duties and specifically the cleanliness rules, the glories of the *rudraksha*, the rules for the Sirovrata, the 3 types of *bhasma* (sacred ashes), the rules of the *sandhya upasana* (the spiritual practice at the day's junctions), the *brahma yajna* (the pursuance of transcendental realization), the *mantra gayatri*, the Vaisvadevas, the Tapta kricchra vrata, *sadachara* ("good behavior"), *diksha* ("initiation") and the mystic Mani Dvipa.