
13. SKANDA PURANA

I. MAHESHWAR KHAND

DAKSHA'S ANIMOSITY TOWARDS LORD SHIVA

Skanda Purana begins with the eulogy of Lord Shiva--

Yasyagya Jagat Srishta Viranchih Palko Harih;

Sanharta Kalrudrakhyo Namastasmai Pinakine.

(Meaning)--- Salutations to Lord Shankar who has entrusted the job of creation to Lord Brahma-- Who has instructed Lord Vishnu to nurture the world and who himself acts as the supreme annihilator. During ancient times, once, Sage Shaunak had performed a grand 'yagya' at his hermitage in Naimisharanya forest. Many sages had thronged Naimisharanya to attend it. One of them was Sage Lomesh. After the yagya was over, all the assembled Sages requested Sage Lomesh to narrate the divine tales of Lord Shiva.

Sage Lomesh said--Daksha-Prajapati had got his daughter, Sati married to Lord Shiva. Once, he had performed a grand yagya in which he had invited everybody except his own son-in-law. When Sati learnt about the yagya, she sought Lord Shiva's permission to attend that yagya. Lord Shiva tried to convince her that it was not proper to attend a ceremony in which one had not been invited. But Sati did not pay any heed and was bent upon attending that yagya. Ultimately, Lord Shiva had no option but to give his consent. But he did not forget to send his 'Rudraganas' with her for her protection.

SATI JUMPS INTO THE SACRIFICIAL FIRE

When Sati reached her father's place, she saw a grand yagya being performed. A large number of people had been invited--the deities, the sages and the hermits.

Sati became sad because Daksha had invited everybody except her husband. She knew quite well that it was a deliberate decision on part of her father, not to invite Lord Shiva. But, she got infuriated when she found that Daksha had not even kept Shiva's share in the yagya while the 'shares' of other deities had been kept.

When Daksha saw Sati, he was enraged---How dare you come here? Your husband is an embodiment of inauspiciousness. He is the Lord of the spirits, ghosts and all types of mean powers. This was the reason why I did not invite him.'

The insult heaped on her husband in front of everybody devastated Sati. She felt so humiliated that she decided to give up her life. Before any one could understand, she jumped into the sacrificial fire and was charred to death. All the deities present there were stunned by this sudden development. All the 'Rudraganas' mourned Sati's death with deep sorrow. Meanwhile, Lord Shiva got the sad news from Narada. He got mad with anger and uprooted some hair from his scalp. He then dashed the hair against a mountain. There was a thundering sound and Veerbhadra manifested within a split second. Lord Shiva ordered him to punish Daksha for his evil deed, which caused the death of Sati. Veerbhadra proceeded with a huge army of spirits, ghosts and marudganas to punish Daksha. When he reached the oblation site, Daksha and all the other deities became scarred. But, Sage Bhrgu came at the deities' rescue and told them not to worry. He then chanted few mantras, which helped the deities to win the first round of the battle.

The defeat of his army enraged Veerbhadra to such an extent that he created havoc in the ranks of deities' army. He showered volleys of arrow on them, which forced the deities to make a hasty retreat from there. Veerbhadra dashed Sage Bhrgu against the ground and uprooted his beard. He then severed the head of Daksha and threw it in flames of sacrificial fire. Lord Brahma took the refuge of Lord Shiva and requested him to stop Veerbhadra from causing further death and destruction. Lord Shiva told Brahma--'Nobody else but Daksha himself was responsible for his death. But, Lord Brahma requested Lord Shiva to make Daksha alive once again. Lord Shiva then went to Daksha's place and fixed a goat's head on the trunk of Daksha's body. This way Daksha became alive once again albeit with a goats body. He was very ashamed of his behaviour and requested Lord Shiva to forgive him. Lord Shiva blessed him and said--

"Salvation can not be attained merely by performing the rituals. If you are desirous of salvation then engage yourself in virtuous deeds with."

VIRTUES OF WORSHIPPING LORD SHIVA

Sage Lomesh told the assembled sages--- One who brooms the courtyard of Shiva temple attains to Shiva loka. Those who make offerings of incense to Lord Shiva not only liberate himself from the bondage of this world but also both his 'Kulas'. One who gets constructed a Shiva temple or renovates it, attains incomparable virtue. One who chants the holy mantra 'Om Namah Shivay' daily and begins his day by visiting Shiva temple in the morning becomes absolved of all his sins.

CHURNING OF THE OCEAN

Sage Lomesh narrated the tale, which described how Indra lost heaven after he showed disrespect to Brihaspati--

Once, Indra was enjoying the songs sung by Gandharvas when sage Vashishtha arrived. But, Indra was so engrossed in music, that he forgot to welcome his distinguished guest. Sage Vashishtha was enraged by his behaviour and went away fuming with anger. When the demon King Bali--the lord of Patal loka, learnt about this incident he attacked Indraloka with a large army. A fierce battle took place in which all the deities were defeated. Bali and his army brought all the wealth to Patal-loka. But the demons were not destined to be the owner of this plundered wealth for too long as the whole wealth got submerged into the ocean. Bali was surprised and asked Shukracharya about the reason. Sage Shukracharya revealed to Bali that he could not enjoy the splendours of deities' wealth because he had not performed 100 Ashwamedha yagyas.

The deities, after being defeated went to seek Lord Vishnu's help. Lord Brahma was also present with them. After giving a deep thought to the whole issue, Lord Vishnu advised them to patch up with the demons so that all the wealth could be retrieved from the ocean bed. The deities went to Patal-loka and convinced the demons to participate in the churning of the ocean. When the process of churning of the ocean began, Mandarachal mountain was used as a churner and the serpent -Vasuki as the rope. Both the parties immersed the Mandarachal mountain into the ocean but it sank down, as there was no base upon which it could be placed. So, Lord Vishnu took the form of a tortoise and held the mountain on his back.

Churning of the ocean resulted into the emergence of many things like Chandrama, Surabhi (cow), Kalpa tree, Kaustubh, Uchchaihshrava (Horse), Eravat (elephant), goddess Lakshmi, poison, ambrosia, intoxication etc. When poison emerged from the sea bed, neither the deities nor the demons made any claim for it. The poison was so venomous that the whole world started getting inflamed by it. Lord Shiva then drank the Halahal poison and thus the world was saved. Lord Vishnu accepted goddess Lakshmi as his consort.

THE EMERGENCE OF AMBROSIA

When Dhanvantri appeared with a pot of ambrosia in his hands, a demon named Vrishparva snatched it from him. All the demons then fled to Patal loka with the pot of ambrosia. Lord Vishnu disguised himself as an enchanting beauty and went to Patal loka. There, he found all the demons quarrelling among themselves. Each of them wanted to have his own share of ambrosia. The demons were stunned by Mohini's beauty the moment they saw Lord Vishnu in the form of a beautiful lady. Mohini took control of the ambrosia pot and summoned the deities to Patal loka.

All the deities and demons were made to sit in separate rows. Mohini then started distributing ambrosia to the deities. A demon named Rahu, who had disguised himself as a deity was also sitting among the deities. Hardly had Rahu gulped down some ambrosia then Mohini severed his head on the information given by chandrama (Moon). The severed head of Rahu tried to take revenge by swallowing chandrama, who took the refuge of Lord Shiva. Shiva kept chandrama

within the lock of his hair. Meanwhile, Rahu too came chasing chandrama and Lord Shiva wore his head as a garland in his neck.

LORD BRAHMA'S BOON TO TARAKASUR

After the death of Sati, Lord Shiva became aloof and engaged himself in an austere penance. His lack of interest in performing his duties resulted into the predominance of sin in the world. A demon named Tarakasur had received a boon of invincibility from Lord Brahma. Only a child and nobody else could kill him. Tarakasur, being drunk with power started to torment the deities.

All the deities eulogized Lord Brahma and they heard a heavenly voice saying---

'Nobody can kill Tarakasur except Shiva's son. So you must put all your efforts to help Shiva get married.'

The deities were aware that after the death of Sati, Shiva had lost all interest in life and was living like a recluse. Nevertheless, they wanted to give a try. So they went to Himalaya, who had no progeny at that time and requested him to beget a girl. Himalaya agreed, as he was aware of the misdeeds of Tarakasur. In course of time, Himalaya's wife, Mena gave birth to a girl child who was in fact the reincarnation of Sati. The girl child was named Girija. Girija was brought up with great love and care. When she attained the age of eight, Himalaya once took her to the cave where Lord Shiva was doing penance. Initially, Shiva was little hesitant to meet Himalaya because Girija was accompanying her father and he had vowed never to put his glance on any woman after the death of Sati. But, Later on he relented and allowed both of them to meet him whenever they liked. Now, Girija made it her habit to visit Lord Shiva regularly. She used to look after all the needs of Shiva while he was engrossed in his penance.

Even after the passage of a long time the deities' wishes did not look like getting fulfilled, as Shiva remained as nonchalant as ever. So, the deities requested Kamadeva's help in sowing the seeds of love and passion in Shiva's heart. Kamadeva went to the place where Lord Shiva was doing his penance. He tried to sow seeds of compassion in Shiva's heart only to receive his wrath. Lord Shiva was infuriated by the efforts of Kamadeva. He opened his third eye as the result of which Kamadeva was charred to death. Rati started wailing inconsolably at the death of her husband but Girija assured her that she would try to bring Kamadeva back to life. Girija commenced her penance to please Lord Shiva. There was a great turmoil in the world on account of her penance. Lord Vishnu led the deities to Shiva and requested him to marry Girija so that the world could be protected from the torments of Tarakasur. Finally, Shiva gave his consent and went to the place where Girija was doing penance.

SHIVA TEST'S PARVATI'S DEVOTION

After reaching there, Lord Shiva found Parvati engrossed in her penance. Parvati was surrounded by her few trusted companions. Lord Shiva decided to test Parvati's devotion towards him. So he disguised himself as a hermit and asked her companions about the reason why Parvati was doing such a severe Penance. Jaya, one of Parvati's companions informed him that her friend was doing

penance in order to get Lord Shiva as her husband. Jaya also informed Lord Shiva that her friend Girija was the daughter of Himalaya.

Lord Shiva, who was in the guise of a hermit said---'Why is this tender girl so eager to marry Shiva who is an embodiment of inauspiciousness--who carries a skull in his hand and who lives in a crematorium. How can your friend think of marrying one who has been expelled by Daksha from the yagya ceremony? Does your friend know that Shiva wears a snake around his neck and is surrounded by numerous spirits and ghosts?'

Parvati, who had been listening to all those nonsensical utterances, told Jaya---'This fellow seems to abhor Shiva. We should not talk to this evil person. Tell him to leave at once.' Lord Shiva was extremely pleased by Parvati's unwavering devotion towards him. He appeared in his original form and said--'You can ask for anything you wish.'

But Parvati replied--- 'O Supreme Lord! I am the same Sati for the sake of whom you had destroyed Daksha's yagya. Don't you recognize me? There is a great purpose behind my reincarnation. A son born to us would kill Tarakasur. So go to my father and request for my hand in marriage.'But Lord Shiva refused to make a request to Himalaya considering it as an undignified act. He then returned to the place where he had been meditating.After a while, Himalaya and Mena arrived there and asked Parvati how her penance had been progressing. Parvati narrated the whole incident how Lord Shiva had finally given his consent to marry her.Himalaya and Mena were extremely pleased by this good news.

THE ARRIVAL OF 'SAPTARISHIS'

Later on Lord Shiva sent the Saptarishis with the proposal of marriage to Himalaya. Himalaya received his distinguished guests with respect and enquired about the purpose of their visit. The Saptarishis replied--'We have come to request you to give your daughter's hand in marriage to Shiva.' After consulting his wife, Mena and other mountains, Himalaya agreed to accept Shiva as his son-in-law. The Saptarishis then returned and conveyed the good news to Shiva.The preparation for marriage ceremony started being made. Finally the marriage procession proceeded towards the bride's home. The marriage procession consisted of all the deities, apsaras, gandharvas even spirits and ghosts.

Sage Garg supervised the rituals of marriage ceremony. Vishwakarma constructed the canopy, where marriage ceremony was supposed to take place. After the marriage was over, Himalaya performed the ritual of Kanyadan and this way Shiva returned with his consort.

BIRTH OF KARTIKEYA

Lord Shiva and Parvati lived happily at Gandhamadan Mountain enjoying every bit of their conjugal life. Once it so happened that a small quantity of Shiva's sperm fell on the ground while he was enjoying intimate moments with Parvati. As a result, tremendous amount of heat was generated and the whole world started burning. Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu instructed Agni to employ some means so that the destruction caused by Shiva's over flowing sperms could come to

an end. Agni went to Gandhamadan mountain in the guise of a hermit. He requested Parvati by saying---'O Mother! Please give me something as alms. I have nothing but my hands as a begging bowl'

Parvati kept Shiva's sperms on his palm, which was eaten up by Agni. Parvati was enraged to see this and cursed Agni--"You have shown disrespect to me. From today onwards you would become omnivorous. The sperms which you have devoured would cause unbearable inflammation in your body."

As the result of Parvati's curse, Agni really started experiencing unbearable inflammation in his body. He requested Lord Shiva to reveal the means by which his pain would come to an end. Lord Shiva instructed Agni to implant those sperms in any woman's womb to get rid of the unbearable inflammation. Thus, Agni, who was suffering from extreme heat that generated in his body, sat at a lonely place waiting eagerly for a woman to arrive there. He did not have to wait for too long, as six Kritikas, shivering with cold arrived there to warm themselves. The sperms of Shiva entered into their bodies through the pores. These six Kritikas became pregnant.

When their respective husbands learnt about their pregnancy they cursed them. As a result they got transformed into 'Nakshatras' and established themselves in the sky. But, they aborted their respective foetus at Himalaya mountain before getting transformed into six constellations. The holy Ganges carried that foetus to a secluded place, which was covered with dense bushes of reeds. In course of time, Lord Kartikeya manifested from those reed bushes. He had six heads. The deities were delighted at the birth of Kartikeya. Lord Shiva along with Parvati went to the place where Kartikeya had incarnated. Parvati took young Kartikeya in her embrace.

KARTIKEYA KILLS TARAKASUR

Lord Shiva assured the deities, who were also present there that Tarakasur's days were numbered. The deities's army then proceeded towards the battlefield. On their way, the deities heard a heavenly voice--'You can defeat the demons only if you fight under the leadership of Kartikeya.'

Now all the deities requested Kartikeya to become their leader. Meanwhile, Devasena--the daughter of Mrityu arrived there and requested Kartikeya to become her husband. Kartikeya accepted Devasena as his wife. This is the reason why he is also known as Deva senapati. Kartikeya was leading the deities' army, mounted on an elephant. The army had all the deities in its rank- Indra, Varuna, Vayu, Kuber, Dharma Raj, etc. Both the rival armies met at an island situated between Ganga and Yamuna. Tarakasur had come with a large army, which boasted of many brave and mighty warriors.

The battle commenced and the first phase was dominated by the demons. The deities could not stand up to the might of demons. Even Indra was severely wounded when Tarakasur attacked him with his deadly weapon- 'Shakti'. On seeing the level of destruction caused in the deities' army, King Muchkunda, who was on the side of the deities' attacked Tarakasur. In the ensuing battle Muchkunda got injured and fell down on the ground. He got up furiously and tried to kill Tarakasur with his Brahmashtra. Sage Narada told him that Brahmashtra would be of no use as

Tarakasur had been blessed with invincibility against mortals. Narada said--'Only Kartikeya is capable of killing Tarakasur. So, you all need to have patience till Kartikeya accomplishes his mission.'

Meanwhile Veerabhadra was fighting a dual fought against Tarakasur. He had already caused indescribable losses to the demons. While the fight was going on, Tarakasur realized that it was not easy to defeat him. So, he decided to use his illusionary powers, which helped him in acquiring ten thousand hands. The deities ran away from the battle field, when they saw ferocious Tarakasur approaching them. Lord Vishnu instructed Kartikeya to kill Tarakasur before it was too late. Kartikeya chased Tarakasur with his deadly weapon- Shakti in his hand. A fierce fight took place between both of them. Kartikeya attacked Tarakasur with his Shakti. Tarakasur retaliated by hitting him with his own Shakti. The assault was so severe that Kartikeya lost his consciousness for few moments.

When Kartikeya regained his consciousness, he got up quickly to fight against Tarakasur. Once again a fierce battle commenced. Kartikeya remembered his parents in reverence and released his Shakti in the direction of Tarakasur. Tarakasur died instantly. The deities were delighted at the death of their tormentor.

VIRTUES OF OBSERVING FAST ON 'SHIVARATRI'

Sage Lomesh eulogizes the virtues of Shivaratri in the following words--'The fourteenth day of the dark half of a month is dedicated to the worship of Lord Shiva and is famously known as 'Shivaratri'. It destroys all the sins committed by a man. Sage Lomesh then narrated a tale, which emphasized the greatness of Shivaratri--

Once upon a time a brahmin widow developed an illicit relationship with a 'Chandal' (a low caste man). Later on she gave birth to a son who was named Dussah. Her son had all the bad qualities one can think of-- a gambler, a drunker, a thief, a murderer, etc.

One day, Dussah went to a Shiva temple with the intention of committing robbery. It was the festive night of Shivaratri and people had thronged the temple in a large number. So, he did not get an opportunity to steal temple property. He remained awakened for the whole night waiting for an opportune moment but his wishes remained unfulfilled. He spent his time listening to the divine tales of Lord Shiva that was being narrated by the temple priest. Though he was a sinner yet he took his next birth in a royal family on account of his two virtuous deeds--he had remained awakened for the whole night of Shivaratri and he had listened to the tales of Shiva. In his next birth, he was born to a king named Chitrangad and he himself was named Vichitraveerya. Vichitraveerya was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He ultimately united with Lord Shiva and manifested as Veerabhadra at the time when Lord Shiva had shaken his head violently after hearing the sad news of Sati's demise. There are numerous instances of people attaining salvation by observing a fast on Shivaratri. The names of some great devotees to do so are King Bharata, Mandhata, Dhundhumar, Harishchandra etc.

KARTIKEYA'S SORROW

While the deities hailed the glory of Kartikeya for having killed Tarakasur, Kartikeya himself was saddened by his act. He told the deities--'I regret for having killed Tarakasur because he was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. Is there any way to atone for my sin?'

Lord Vishnu consoled him---'Killing a wicked person, who nourishes himself on the blood of innocent people, is not a sinful deed. But, still, if you feel guilty then there is no better way to atone for your sin than worshipping Lord Shiva. Install Shivalingas and worship them with deep devotion.' Kartikeya instructed Vishnukarma to make three divine Shivalingas. Later on Kartikeya installed these Shivalingas at three different places and worshipped them with appropriate rituals. In course of time these three holy places came to be known as Pratigyeswar, Kapaleswar and Kumareswar. Kartikeya, while worshipping at Kapaleswar sprinkled holy water on the Shivalinga and prayed so that Tarakasur's soul rested in peace. He also offered sesame seeds to Lord Kapaleswar and prayed --'May my offerings made in the form of sesame seeds reach Tarak--the descendant of Sage Kashyap.'

This way, Kartikeya was absolved of his sins.

KILLING OF PRALAMB

A demon named Pralamb had escaped unharmed in the battle fought between the deities and demons. As the deities were busy installing Shivalingas at different places, Pralamb started to torment their families in their absence. The deities got this information from Kumud who appeared at the time when the deities were digging up a reservoir near 'Siddheshwar' temple. All the deities requested Kartikeya to do something. Kartikeya released his fiery weapon, Shakti in the direction of Pralamb. Shakti pierced the heart of earth and went right up to Patal loka where Pralamb lived with the surviving demons. All the demons were killed within few moments.

A long tunnel had been created as the impact of Shakti's penetration of the earth. This tunnel was later on filled up with the water of Patal Ganga and became famous as 'Siddha-koopa.'

KALBHITI'S AUSTERE PENANCE

There is an amazing tale related with the birth of Kalbhiti. During ancient times there lived a sonless brahmin named Manti in Kashi. He did an austere penance to get a son. At last, lord Shiva became pleased by his devotion and appeared. Lord Shiva said--'You will be blessed with an enlightened son who would liberate your whole clan.'

In course of time Manti's wife became pregnant but amazingly did not deliver a baby even after a long time. Four years passed like this but Manti's wife did not deliver the child. Manti was perplexed by this unusual event so he asked the baby, who was still in his mother's womb as to why he was hesitant to come out. The child replied that he feared 'Kal' and this was the reason why he was not taking birth. The child said--'If you can assure me of protection from 'Kal' then I shall certainly take birth.' How could have Manti given such an assurance. So he took refuge in Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva ordered four of his ganas to go and convince the baby. The names of these five ganas were Dharma, Gyan, Vairagya Aishwarya and Adharma. They assured the baby

by saying--'Get rid of your fear. We assure you that each four of us (Dharma, Gyan, Vairagya and Aishwarya) will never abandon you.'

The fifth gana named Adharma on the contrary promised not to cast his evil Shadow on the baby. These assurances were enough for the baby to come out from the womb. But, even after taking birth the child was trembling and wailing in fear. The ganas said--Manti! Your child is still fearful of the Kal. He is trembling and crying inspite of the best of our efforts to drive away his fears. So he will become famous as Kalbhiti (one who is fearful of Kal).

Kalbhiti grew up to be a virtuous person. He used to engage himself in various kinds of austerities. He was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. One day, as Kalbhiti was meditating under a 'bael' tree (wood apple), he went into his trance. The joy experienced during trance period was something, which he had never experienced before. He decided to regularly meditate under that tree. He did penance for one hundred years standing on his toe. Lord Shiva became pleased by his devotion and appeared in the guise of a human being. Lord Shiva said--'O Great soul Please discontinue with your penance. I have brought some water for you! Please quench your thirst!'

But Kalbhiti refused to take water from an unknown person. He requested Lord Shiva to reveal his identity. Kalbhiti also inquired Lord Shiva about his religion and conduct. Lord Shiva told him that he was beyond any religion or conduct. When Kalbhiti refused to have water, Lord Shiva dug up a large pit and emptied the pot into it. After that he disappeared. Kalbheeti stood fixed at that place, being stunned by the disappearance of Lord Shiva. Suddenly, an effulgent Shivalinga appeared under that bael (wood apple) tree. Kalbheeti worshipped that Shivalinga which was radiating light in all directions. Now, Lord Shiva appeared and blessed Kalbheeti to become free from the fear of Kal (Death). From that day onwards the Shivalinga situated there became famous as Mahakal. Before disappearing once again, Lord Shiva instructed Kalbheeti to preach Sage Karandham who was expected to visit him shortly. Kalbheeti himself became renowned as Mahakal because he had been successful in conquering death.

KARANDHAM'S QUERIES

As predicted by Lord Shiva, king Karandham arrived at the place where Mahakal (Kalbheeti) was staying. First of all he worshipped Lord Mahakal and subsequently went to meet Sage Mahakal (previously Kalbheeti). King Karandham had numerous doubts regarding the rituals of Shraddh so he asked Mahakal--'How does the rituals related to 'tarpan' satisfy the dead ancestors?'

Mahakal replied--The souls of dead ancestors are capable of accepting whatever is offered to them. Time and distance does not matter to them. They accept only the essence of whatever is offered to them and not the gross materials as such. Karandham posed his second query--'I think a soul, after it has abandoned the mortal body is bound by its own karma. Then, how, can the dead ancestors be expected of giving us blessings and changing our fortunes.'

Mahakal replied---Not all Pitras (dead ancestors) are bound by their karma. Pitras belonging to different classes like deities, 'asuras' and 'yaksha' are unembodied and formless (amurta). Similarly, the dead ancestors of all the four castes are called 'murta Pitras' (with form). These

seven types of Pitras are considered to be eternal and powerful. They also transcend the law of Karma. A total number of 31 ganas are subordinate to them. The rituals of Shraddh are performed for the pacification of these seven eternal Pitras. These seven Pitras are the ones who shower blessings on the performers of Shraddh rituals.' Karandham's next question was--'Some people are of the view that one can attain salvation only by taking refuge in Lord Vishnu. While some think that only Lord Brahma is capable of giving salvation. There are many people who consider Lord Shiva as the supreme liberator. What do you have to say on this?'

Mahakal replied--'God is one. The three deities you have named even they eulogize each other. It is nothing but foolishness to grade them as superior, average or inferior. The thing, which matters most in the path of salvation, is individual's unflinching faith and devotion. Any deity in whom he has total devotion is capable of giving salvation. Karandham then requested Mahakal to describe the appropriate rituals related with the worship of Lord Shiva.

Mahakal replied---A devotee who puts on 'tripund' mark on his forehead, chest and both the shoulders while worshipping Lord Shiva is blessed to see the divine appearance of Lord Shiva. He should enter the temple premise with a pure heart. After entering the temple he should purify the Shivalinga by removing all the unnecessary articles which may be lying there. He should then fill up four 'Garuas' (drinking pot with a curved spout) with water. Articles like milk, curd clarified butter, honey and sugarcane juice are kept to the left side of Shivalinga. The devotee should then come out of the temple and worship the 'dwarpalas'. After that, deities like Kuldevta, Nandi, Mahakal Dhata and Vidhata are worshipped.

Once again he should enter the temple and sit in front of the Shivalinga and meditate on Lord Shiva. While performing 'ardhya' he should make offerings of articles like water, akshat, kusha grass, sandalwood, flowers, mustard seeds, milk, curd and honey. Having offered ardhya, a devotee should perform the ritual of ablution with water, milk, curd, honey, clarified butter, and sugarcane juice in the given order.

While performing this ritual the devotee should also offer dhupa (incense) and chant

'Om Hoom Vishvamurtaye Namah'.

Some other deities whom a devotee must worship along with the worship of Lord Shiva are Ishan, Tatpurush, Sadryojat etc. A devotee must also not forget to worship Shiva's trident. While doing this he should chant--

Trishul Dhanuh Khadga Kapal Kutharebhyo Namah.

A devotee should conclude his worship by begging for Lord Shiva's forgiveness for any mistake that he might have committed while performing the rituals.

ARUNACHAL SHIVALINGA

Once, Sutji had gone to Naimisharanya. All the sages residing there asked him about the manifestation of Arunachal Shivalinga. Sutji recounted a tale when Sage Sanak had posed the

same query to Lord Brahma -- 'Lord Brahma had told Sanak- Son, once Lord Vishnu and I witnessed an effulgent pillar. It had manifested from nowhere and was limitless in size. Its radiance put the whole world ablaze. Both of us worshipped that marvelous pillar by chanting vedic mantras.' Actually, that effulgent pillar was a Shivalinga. Lord Shiva manifested from it after being pleased by our devotion. We requested him to minimize his size and establish himself in the form of Arunachal Shivalinga.'

'Lord Shiva agreed to minimize his size as well as his effulgence by establishing himself in the form of 'Arunachaleshwar'. The holy place of Arunachaleshwar remains untouched while the whole world gets submerged in water at the time of deluge.

LORD SHIVA--THE SOVEREIGN CREATOR

The sages then asked Sutji how Lord Shiva had created the universe.

Sutji replied---Lord Shiva commenced creation by his own will. Vishnu manifested from the left side of his body while Brahma from the right side. He then attributed the qualities of 'Rajas' and 'Satva' to Brahma and Vishnu respectively. From then onwards Lord Brahma took the responsibility of further creation and Lord Vishnu became the preserver of the world. Later on Lord Brahma created his ten Manasputras (Marichi etc.) by his will and Daksha Prajapati from his right thumb. He also created the brahmins from his mouth, Kshatriyas from both his arms, Vaishyas from both his thighs and Shudras from both his feet respectively. Both, the deities and demons came from the lineage of Sage Kashyap, who himself was Marichi's son. Not only that Kashyap also fathered different species like Marut, Nag, Yaksha, Gandharva and Apsaras.

Similarly, Lord Brahma had also created Manu who is believed to be the person from whom human race originated. All the sages as well as the Kshatriyas are the descendants of Sage Atri. Yakshas originated from Pulastya whereas Rakshashas were the descendants of Pulah. Agni as well as Sages like Chyavan was the descendant of Bhrigu. Many famous sages came from the lineage of Vashishtha. These are the names of few prominent sages, whose descendants have populated the earth. Thus, Lord Shiva is the Sovereign creator because he created Brahma--the creator.

EXECUTION OF SHUMBH NISHUMBH AND MAHISHASUR

The demons named Shumbh and Nishumbh had received boons from Brahma according to which no deity, demon or Man could kill him. Shumbh and Nishumbh became excessively arrogant and started tormenting the deities. All the deities including Lord Vishnu went to Lord Shiva and requested for his help. Lord Shiva assured them that both the demons would be killed at the opportune time. The deities were satisfied and returned back to their respective abodes. Parvati was of dark complexion. She thought that Shiva would be more affectionate towards her if she somehow discarded her dark skin. She eventually discarded her dark skin at a place and it instantly got transformed into 'Kali Kaushiki'. She then did an austere penance at Vindhyachal mountain. At that time, Shumbh and Nishumbh lived there. When both the demons saw goddess

Kali Kaushiki her divine beauty infatuated them. But Goddess Kali Kaushiki ultimately killed both of them.

Having accomplished her mission, Kali Kaushiki did a tremendous penance at 'Gauri-peak' and regained her fair complexion. In course of time she became the mother of Ganesh and Kartikeya. Once, goddess Parvati went to Arunachal mountain where Sage Gautam was doing penance. She was so enchanted by the scenery over there that she decided to do penance. She instructed goddess Durga to stand guard till she accomplished her penance. She also ordered the two goddesses Subhaga and Dhundhukumari to keep a watch in all directions.

Mahishasur--the demon sent a female messenger to convince Parvati into marrying him. The female messenger disguised herself as a female hermit and tried to impress all the three goddess who were keeping surveillance by praising the glory of Mahishasur--

'O beautiful ladies! Why is your mistress living in such a secluded place? She is worthy of living in a royal palace. There is nobody among the deities who is fit enough to marry her. But, Mahishasur--the lord of all the three worlds is certainly fit to become her husband.' But all the three goddesses drove the female messenger away. Ultimately, Mahishasur came accompanied by a large army to forcibly abduct goddess Parvati. The commotion caused by the demons disturbed Parvati's meditation. She instructed Durga to kill all the demons. Goddess Durga transformed her appearance. Now she looked ferocious in her new appearance. She was well equipped with all sort of lethal weapons and was mounted on a lion. She thundered loudly and challenged Mahishasur. Countless 'yoginis' manifested from her body. These yoginis attacked Mahishasur's army and killed many demons. The whole battlefield was splashed with blood.

Goddess Chamunda (Durga) severed the heads of 'Chand' and 'Mund' with her chakra. Mahishasur was enraged and he attacked goddess Durga. Some other demons like Prachanda, Chamar, Mahamauli, Mahahanu, Ugravaktra, Vikataksha and Dahan also came forward to help him but each one of them was killed by goddess Durga. Now, Mahishasur's anger crossed all limits and he menacingly ran towards goddess Durga. A severe battle was fought between both of them. When Mahishasur realized that the goddess was dominating the battle, he started changing his guises frequently. He tried to dodge goddess Durga by transforming his appearance into that of a boar. But, goddess Durga kept on chasing him. Then, Mahishasur became a lion. This way he kept on changing his appearances frequently to avoid getting killed by goddess Durga. Once he transformed himself into a buffalo but goddess Durga attacked him.

This way, Mahishasur was forced to change his appearance frequently on account of relentless attack by goddess Durga. Ultimately Durga killed him. Goddess Durga picked up his severed head and danced in joy. The deities were relieved at the death of Mahishasur.

PARVATI RECEIVES ARUNCHALESHWAR'S GRACE

Goddess Durga then went to the place where goddess Parvati was still doing penance. She held Mahishasur's head in one hand and a sword in the other. Goddess Parvati said---'O Vindhyavasini! You have accomplished an impossible act. If it were not for you I would not

have been able to accomplish my own penance. Now, you should get rid of this skull and create a holy spring bathing in which would destroy your sin acquired by killing Mahishasur.'

Goddess Durga hit ferociously at a huge rock breaking it into pieces. A large pit was created which was soon filled up with underground water. She then took her bath in it by chanting Namah Shonadrinathay.

In the meantime, an amazing incident took place. While goddess Durga was taking her bath with Mahishasur's skull in her hand, a Shivalinga, which was struck in Mahishasur's throat fell down. This Shivalinga later on became famous as 'Papanashan Shivalinga'. She then released the skull and came out from the pond. Arunachaleshwar (Lord Shiva) became pleased by Parvati's devotion and appeared before her. Lord Arunachaleshwar then made Parvati to sit by his left side. The next moment Parvati's identity mingled with that of Lord Arunachaleshwar. The place where this incident took place, there is situated a grand temple of goddess Apitastani and Lord Arunachaleshwar.

II. VAISHNAV KHAND

LORD VARAHA SATISFIES PRITHVI'S CURIOSITY

Sutji then narrated the tale of Lord Varaha to the sages, which he had heard from Sage Vyasa--- Once, while Narada was wandering about, he reached Meru mountain where he saw the abode of Lord Brahma. He also saw a giant sized entity, just next to Brahma's abode. The person possessed four arms and his face resembled a boar. The person held a conch and a chakra in his two hands--The remaining two hands were in the postures of giving blessings. Narada was very surprised to see that divine person being surrounded by Sages like Vashishtha, Atri, Markandeya and Bhrigu. After paying his eulogy to him, he stood in a corner. In the meantime, Prithvi (earth) arrived there with her two companions--Ila and Pingla. She was curious to know about the identities of various mountains, which Lord Varaha had established on her. Lord Varaha told Prithvi about the prominent mountains---Mountains like Sumeru, Himavan, Mandarachal, Vindhychal, Pariyatrak, Mahendra, Malay, Sinhachal and Gandhamadan are situated to the north of Himalaya.

The mountain ranges situated to the south of Himalaya are Arunachal, Hasti, Gridhachal and Ghatikachal. Sages believe that in Satyayuga Lord Vishnu had his abode at Anjan Mountain, while in Treta yuga, Dwapar yuga and Kali yuga he has his abode at Narayangiri, Sinhachal and Shrivenketachal respectively. Lord Varaha and Prithvi flew away towards Venkatachalgiri mounted on Garuda.

LORD VARAHA MANTRA

On their way, Prithvi requested Lord Varaha to reveal the sacred mantra, chanting of which makes him pleased.

Lord Varaha said--'The secret mantra that pleases me to no limits is ---Om Naham Shrivarahay Dharanyu Uddharnay Swaha. This mantra is capable of liberating a man and also brings all sort of worldly accomplishments to him. In the first Krita yuga, a Manu named Dharma had realized me by continuously chanting this mantra. Even Indra regained the control of heaven by chanting

it. Anant--the lord of all serpents, chanted Varaha mantra and as a result became capable of holding the earth on it's hood.'

MANIFESTATION OF PADMAVATI

Lord Varaha then narrated the tale of Padmavati's manifestation to Prithvi. He also revealed to her that Padmavati was the reincarnation of Vedavati and had manifested so that she could become his (Vishnu) consort. Lord Varaha said---Once upon a time there lived an emperor named Akash. One day he ordered his men to get the land situated at the bank of Arani ploughed so that a grand yagya could be organized there. As the land was being cultivated, the plough suddenly struck against something. People ploughing the field dug up that place and were surprised to find an infant girl, crying loudly. The news of girls' manifestation spread like a wild fire. The emperor became extremely happy since he had no progeny. He brought up that child as his own daughter. This way the baby girl was brought up like a princess. She was named Padmavati. Padmavati proved very lucky for the emperor, as the emperor, who was still sonless till then was blessed with a son. This male child was named Vasudan.

One day, Narada visited the palace and met both the children. He was impressed by Vasudan's intelligence but Padmavati appeared to be shy and absorbed in her own thoughts. Narada lovingly called her and instructed her to spread her left palm. Narada was amazed to find signs, which predicted Padmavati's marriage to Lord Vishnu. Everybody living in the palace became happy after getting this news. Narada then went away.

PADMAVATI BECOMES LORD HARI'S CONSORT

Continuing with the tale, Lord Varaha said-- One day, while Padmavati and her companions were playing in the garden, they saw an equestrian approaching them. He held a bow and arrows in both his hands. The stranger asked all the girls whether they had seen a wolf. Apparently the stranger was on his hunting spree. Padmavati angrily reminded the stranger that hunting was strictly prohibited in that area and hence he should go back home. The stranger was stunned by Padmavati's beauty and said--'I am Ananta from Venketachal mountain. People also call me Veerpati. Can I have this beautiful lady as my wife.'

Padmavati's companions angrily rebuffed Anant who then galloped back on his horse. These unfortunate girls were unable to recognize Lord Vishnu who had come disguised as Anant. After reaching his palace, Anant found it very difficult to concentrate on his work. His mind was occupied by the thoughts of Padmavati. One day, while he was sitting in a thoughtful mood, Vakulmalika (a maid servant) arrived there and requested him to come down for lunch. But, Sri Hari (Anant) was lost in the thoughts of Padmavati. On being asked by Vakulmalika, Sri Hari narrated the following tale to her ---

In Treta yuga, when I had incarnated as Ram, Ravan had deceitfully abducted my consort--Sita. But fortunately she was not Sita but Agni's consort Swaha. Before this incident could occur, Agni had already taken Sita to Patalloka and kept his own wife 'Swaha' in her place. Indra's act had special purpose behind it--to avenge Swaha's death, who was Vedavati in her previous birth

and who had committed suicide after being touched by the same demon. Actually, Agni's consort 'Swaha' was 'Vedavati' in her previous birth. So, in reality Ravan had abducted Vedavati instead of Sita. Later on, I thanked Agni and promised him that I would make Vedavati my consort in Kali yuga. The same Vedavati has taken birth as Padmavati. You must go and convince Padmavati to become my consort. Vakulmalika went to Narayanpur and informed the king about Sri Hari's desire. Emperor Akash was extremely delighted at the prospect of having Sri Hari as his son-in-law. An auspicious day was chosen for the marriage and thus, Lord Sri Hari got Padmavati as his consort.

KING PARIKSHIT

Once, Sutji narrated the tale of king Parikshit to all the assembled sages---Parikshit ruled over Hastinapur. One day he went into a forest on a hunting spree. He saw a deer and managed to injure it with his arrow. But the injured deer disappeared from his sight. Parikshit chased the injured deer in the direction it had disappeared. He reached a place where Sage Shamik was engrossed in his meditation. Parikshit enquired Sage Shamik if he had seen that injured deer. But Sage Shamik being in deep meditation did not respond to Parikshit query. This made Parikshit extremely angry and he wrapped a dead snake around Shamik's neck as a punishment for not having answered his question. But, it made no difference to Sage Shamik and he continued with his meditation. Parikshit went back fuming in anger.

Shringi was the son of Sage Shamik. When he saw a dead snake coiling around his father's neck, he cursed--'Whoever has tried to insult my father will not live to see the seventh day because a takshak nag would bite him to death.'

When Sage Shamik learnt about his son's curse, he reproached his son and sent a disciple named Daurmukh to inform Parikshit so that he (Parikshit) could take some preventive measures. Daurmukh went and narrated the whole incident to king Parikshit. Parikshit became very scared and he started living on a canopy that had been constructed in the middle of river Ganges on his instructions. Now he felt secured and safe. Meanwhile a poor brahmin named Kashyap came to know about the curse that poor Parikshit had received. He knew how to cure a person bitten by snake. So he thought that it was an excellent opportunity for him to receive monetary awards from the king. So, he proceeded towards the place where Parikshit was staying.

On his way, Kashyap met a brahmin who in reality was Takshak in disguise. Takshak was on his way to kill Parikshit. He asked Kashyap about the reason he was going to meet Parikshit. Kashyap revealed to Takshak that he could neutralize the influence of poison in any person bitten by a snake. Takshak wanted to examine the authenticity of Kashyap's statement, so he inserted his poisonous fangs into the trunk of a huge tree. A man was sitting on the branches of that tree. The tree as well as the man was charred to death within no time.

Kashyap, really brought the tree and that man back to life. Takshak was stunned by this unbelievable act. He asked Kashyap how much he expected as reward from the king. Kashyap revealed the amount, which he expected from Parikshit in lieu of giving him a fresh lease of life. Takshak gave lot of wealth to him as a bribe and Kashyap went back home satisfied. Takshak then summoned all his companions and instructed them to go to the place where Parikshit lived,

disguising themselves as hermits. All the serpents went to meet Parikshit impersonating as hermits and offered fruits to him. According to his plan, Takshak had hidden himself within a plum fruit. He bit Parikshit as soon as he got a chance. Parikshit died instantly. Janmejaya was crowned as the next king. Meanwhile, people started criticizing the treacherous conduct of Kashyap, which had resulted in the death of king Parikshit. He decided to make a pilgrimage to Venketachaleshwar so that he became liberated from his sin.

KRISHNA TEERTH

Sutji narrated a tale to all the assembled sages--During ancient times, a brahmin named Ramkrishna did an austere penance at Venketachal mountain. He remained immobile during the entire course of his penance resulting into the development of mole hills all over his body. Indra was scarred by Ramkrishna's penance and caused a heavy downpour for a week. All the mole hills were washed away from Ramkrishna's body. Lord Srinivas became pleased and appeared before him. He blessed Ramkrishna by saying--'This holy place, where you have performed a great penance will be named after you as Krishna teerth. Anybody who makes a pilgrimage to this place will be liberated from all the sins.'

Eulogizing Lord Venketashwar, Sutji says---'A man, who has the good fortune of seeing the divine appearance of Lord Srinivas even for a moment, attains salvation.'

SOME OTHER PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE ON VENKETACHAL MOUNTAIN

All the sages then requested Sutji to tell about some other places of pilgrimage situated on Venketachal mountain.

Sutji replied---There are about one hundred and eight holy places situated on Venketachal mountain. Among all these holy places, six are considered to be capable of bestowing salvation--Swami pushkarini, Akash ganga, Papvinashan, Panduteerth, Kumar dharika teerth and Tumbu teerth.

ANJANA'S PENANCE AT AKASHGANGA TEERTH

Describing how Vayudeva had once assured Anjana that he would take birth as her son, Sutji told the sages---Anjana, being issue less even after a long married life, decided to do penance in order to beget a son. Sage Matang advised her to go to Akashganga teerth where her wishes would get fulfilled. Sage Matang also described the geographical location-- 'At a distance of ten yojans towards south is situated Dhanachal mountain, which is believed to be the abode of Lord Nrisimha. Brahma teerth lies in its vicinity. At a distance of ten yojans south of Brahma teerth, flows river 'Suvarnamukhari'. Venketachal mountain is situated to the north of this river and the holiest place called Swamipushkarni is situated among its numerous peaks. You should visit that place and take a holy dip in its water. After that you should seek the blessings of Lord

Varahaswami and Lord Venketeshwar. You should then go towards north of Swami teerth and you would reach Akashganga.'

Acting as per Matang's instructions, Anjana went to Akashganga teerth and did her penance. Finally Lord Vayudeva appeared before her and promised to incarnate as Hanuman.

VISHNU ADVISES BRAHMA TO GO TO PURUSHOTTAM KSHETRA

The Sages asked---'O revered sage! We would like to know more about Purushottam Kshetra, where there is a majestic wooden idol of Lord Vishnu.'

Sage Jaimini replied--The sacrosanct place of Purushottam Kshetra is graced by the presence of Lord Jagannath. During ancient times, Lord Varaha had rescued Prithvi from the clutches of Hiranyaksha--the mighty demon who had abducted her to Rasatala. After Prithvi had been established in its original position, Lord Brahma commenced his creations. Lord Brahma wondered about the means by which human beings could get liberated from three major types of sorrow---Adhyatmic (spiritual), Adhidaivik (deities wrath), Adhibhantik (related with this world). He sought the help of Lord Vishnu who eulogized the greatness of Purushottam Kshetra and advised him to go there. Lord Vishnu said-- 'Purushottam Kshetra is situated at the sea-shore, to the south of river Mahanadi. This sacrosanct place of mine does not get affected by deluge. I dwell at this holiest place as 'Lord Purushottam'. There is a holy pond called Rohin in the vicinity. Anybody who takes a holy dip in that pond gets absolved of all his sins. O Brahma! You must pay a visit to Purushottam kshetra where spending a day bestows virtues greater than all the austerities combined together.'

This way, Lord Brahma went to Purushottam kshetra as per the instructions of Lord Vishnu.

MARKANDEYA EULOGIZES VISHNU

Lord Brahma soon after reaching Purushottam kshetra sat down and started meditating. He was so engrossed in his meditation that he remained in that state for a very long time. This resulted into total chaos as Yamaraj found that his power of causing death had no effect on people living in Purushottam kshetra. Worried as he was, Yamaraj rushed towards Neelachal mountain and sought Lord Vishnu's intervention in the matter.

Lord Vishnu smiled and signaled goddess Lakshmi to say something. Goddess Lakshmi said--'O Suryanandan! Anybody residing at this holy place is freed from the vicious cycles of birth and death after becoming absolved of all his sins. This is the reason why you are experiencing this unusual problem. The whole world except this holy place will come into your jurisdiction.'

Yamaraj was amazed by this revelation so he asked Lakshmi--'I would like to know why such a privilege is being given to this place?'

Lakshmi replied--'O Ravinandan! At the time of deluge when the whole world was submerged in the water sage Markandeya was struggling to find a secure place for his survival. Although he was blessed with an unusually long life of seven kalpas but still he needed a place to live in. He started swimming and finally managed to reach Purushottam kshetra, which had remained unscathed by the turbulence of the deluge. There he saw a divine tree called 'Akshay Vat'. Markandeya continued to swim along the coast wondering how that place had managed to remain unaffected by deluge when the whole world had been submerged. Suddenly he heard a voice, which appeared to be coming from the direction of the Akshay Vat--'O Markandeya! Don't worry! Take my refuge and you shall be protected.'

Markandeya was very surprised and looked all around. He kept on swimming and saw Lord Vishnu, who was engrossed in his yoga nidra in Ksheer Sagar. I (Lakshmi) was also present there. Markandeya eulogized Vishnu in the following way--'Salutations to the supreme lord- the source of all creations! O Jagannath! Protect me from getting drowned.'

Lord Vishnu opened his eyes and found Markandeya gasping for breath. On realizing the gravity of the situation he said--'Raise your head and look at the top of this Kalpa Vat. You would find an infant sleeping on a leaf of the Kalpa Vat. The infant is none other than Kal himself. You should enter inside his (Kal's) body through his opened mouth and live peacefully as there is no other place for you to live in.'

Markandeya entered into Kal's body as per the instructions given by Lord Vishnu and was amazed by the expanse of his belly, which appeared like a bottomless pit. He also saw all the fourteen Bhuvans existing within Kal's belly including all the creatures-deities, sages, siddhas, gandharvas, etc. Markandeya wandered all over the place and after getting tired came out through Kal's opened mouth. He found Lord Vishnu was still present there accompanied by his consort-Lakshmi. Markandeya made salutations to both of them and narrated his experiences he had inside Kal's belly. Lord Vishnu blessed him and made a revelation--' The place you had visited few moments ago is beyond the limits of creation or deluge. The name of this holiest place is Purushottam kshetra and it is my permanent abode for I do not leave it even for a moment.'Markandeya was very impressed and requested Lord Vishnu to allow him to live there. Lord Vishnu replied--' O Brahmarishi! I shall remain at Purushottam-kshetra till the end of this kalpa. I shall also create a sacrosanct place, which would enable you to become immortal.'

Sage Markandeya then dug up a reservoir with the help of Vishnu's chakra. He did an austere penance to please lord Maheshwar as the result of which he was indeed blessed with immortality. In course of time, this reservoir became famous as 'Markandeya kund'.

HOLY PLACES IN THE VICINITY OF PURUSHOTTAM - KSHETRA

Dwelling in length upon the majesty of Purushottam kshetra, goddess Lakshmi said--Purushottam kshetra resembles a conch in shape and is graced by the presence of lord Shiva. Towards its north is situated a temple of lord Neelkanth. A famous Shivalinga named Kapal

mochan is also situated in the vicinity. One who makes a pilgrimage to Kapalmochan becomes liberated from gravest of sins. A temple of goddess Vimla devi is also situated nearby.

Purushottam kshetra is considered to be supreme among all the places of pilgrimage and for this very reason it is aptly named 'Teerth Raj'. A divine pond called Rohin kund is also situated nearby. Anybody who takes a holy dip there is freed from the vicious cycles of birth and death. It is believed that the increased level of water at the time of deluge ultimately recedes and disappears into this pond.

Goddess Lakshmi said--' O Dhanraj! This holy place is beyond your jurisdiction because people living there never experience death. It is well protected by eight goddesses from all the eight directions. The names of these eight goddesses are Mangla, Lamba, Kalratri, Marichika, Vimla, Sarvamangla, Ardhashini and Chandrupa. How can Lord Rudra be absent when Rudrani has manifested herself in eight forms, so, he has manifested himself in eight different forms as well- Kapalmochan, Kshetrapal, Yameshwar, Markandeyeshwar, Ishan, Bilveshwar, Neelkanth, and Vateshwar. While describing the majesty of Purushottam kshetra, goddess Lakshmi revealed to Lord Brahma--' In the coming Satya yuga there would be a king named Indradyumna and would be famous for his unflinching devotion in Lord Vishnu. Being pleased by the king's devotion, Lord Vishnu would ultimately manifest himself from a wooden structure to bless him. Vishwakarma would then carve out four idols (Jagannath, Balbhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra) from the wooden block all of which would be installed by none other than you (Brahma).'

Once, while Sage Jaimini was describing the greatness of Purushottam kshetra to the assembled sages, all of them curiously asked him--'Where is Purushottam kshetra situated?'

Jaimini replied --'Utkal is situated at the eastern coast of Bharatavarsha. At the time of deluge, when everything gets submerged in water Utkal remains unaffected and it is the very place from where the knowledge of the Vedas spread in all directions. The residents of Utkal are not only learned but also very prosperous. There is not a single person in this land who is not a devotee of lord Vishnu. All the people belonging to the four prominent castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) diligently follow their respective dharma. This holy place never experiences natural calamities of any kind.'

Sage Jaimini then went on to narrate the tale of king Indradyumna to all the assembled sages --'In Satya yuga there lived a noble and virtuous king named Indradyumna, who ruled over the province of Malva. He was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. One day, while worshipping in a temple, he asked the priest- I have a wish, which still remains unfulfilled. I have a deep desire of seeing lord Jagannath with my mortal eyes. Is there any means with the help of which I can get my wish fulfilled?'

The royal priest had no answer to the king's query so he kept quiet. Suddenly, he saw a group of pilgrims coming towards the temple. He thought that perhaps one of them might be having an answer to the king's query. When the pilgrims arrived at the temple, the royal priest posed the same question to them. One of the pilgrims answered--' There is a place called Odhra, where is situated a grand temple of Lord Jagannath. This sacrosanct place is also famously known as

Purushottam kshetra and is situated at the foothills of the Neelachal mountain. There is a holy pond called Rohin situated nearby. At the eastern bank of this pond is situated a majestic temple of Lord Vasudev. The idol of Lord Vasudev is made of 'Indraneel' diamond. To the west of this temple lies 'Shabardeep' hermitage, from where starts a path leading to Jagannath temple.'

Having said this, the pilgrim disappeared from everybody's sight. Not only Indradyumna but all the pilgrims were equally amazed by his sudden disappearance. Indradyumna was convinced that lord Jagannath had himself come there in the guise of a pilgrim. Now, his desire of visiting Purushottam kshetra became even more intense. Indradyumna instructed his priest to find out the exact location of Purushottam kshetra by sending somebody over there. Later on, the priest went home and sought the help of Vidyapati-his younger brother in this regard. Vidyapati readily agreed to help his brother and one fine day he proceeded on his journey with a select group of his trusted friends.

After a long and arduous journey all of them reached 'Ekamravan' forest, situated at the foothills of Neelachal mountain. The thought of being so near their destination made everybody extremely excited. But, despite their best of efforts they could not find Shabardeep ashram. Being tired, all of them decided to take rest for a while and then recommence their efforts to find out the location of Shabardeep hermitage. Finding a huge tree, all of them took rest under the shade of that tree. Suddenly, they heard a heavenly voice, which appeared to be coming from the western direction. They followed the voice and reached Shabardeep ashram in a short time. There they saw a large gathering of devotees. One of the devotees, whose name was Vishvasu, curiously asked Vidyapati--'It is not easy to reach this place. From where are you coming and where do you intend to go? You must be tired--wait, till I return with some refreshment for all of you.'

Vidyapati was not in a mood to waste his time, as he was aware that Indradyumna was eagerly waiting for him to return. He told Vishvasu-- I have a difficult mission to accomplish so, I am not in a position to waste my time. I am the younger brother of the royal priest of king Indradyumna. The king has vowed not to have a single morsel of food till he makes a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra. He has sent me with a specific purpose of finding the exact location of Purushottam kshetra and the easiest route leading to it. So, help me reach the temple of Lord Jagannath as soon as possible.'

VIDYAPATI EULOGIZES LORD NEELMADHAV

Vishvasu told Vidyapati--' I have heard this prophesy of Indradyumna's possible arrival at Purushottam kshetra in the near future. Not only that, I have also heard that Indradyumna would become so impressed with Purushottam kshetra that he would settle down there for good after renouncing everything.'

Vishvasu then requested Vidyapati to follow him and started negotiating the steep heights of Neelachal mountain. Vidyapati followed him through the curvy and arduous paths of the mountain. Having walked for sometime, Vishvasu pointed towards a pond and said--'This pond is famously known as Rohin kund. The kalpa vat that you see towards the east of this pond is considered to be so sacrosanct that a sinner becomes liberated of all his sins once he comes under its shade. Lord Jagannath's temple is situated between Rohin kund and the kalpa vat. Go

ahead and have a darshan of Lord Jagannath for whom you have undertaken such an arduous travel.'

Vidyapati's joys knew no bounds as he had been waiting for this moment for a long time. First he purified himself by taking a holy dip in Rohin kund and then went inside the temple to worship Lord Jagannath. He worshipped Lord Jagannath by chanting the sacred pranav mantra. After the worship was over, Vishvvasu requested Vidyapati to visit his place which was nearby. Vidyapati agreed and accompanied Vishvvasu to his place. Vidyapati was given a royal treat by his host, which made him wonder as to how could Vishvvasu arrange all the luxurious things at such a remote place. He could not control himself and asked Vishvvasu-- Even a king would have found it difficult to treat his guest as lavishly like you! I am amazed how you could make arrangements for all these things at a remote and secluded place like this! How do you manage this?

Vishvvasu replied-- It is not as difficult as you believe. Since Purushottam kshetra is a sacrosanct place and it is frequently visited by the deities who make divine offerings to Lord Jagannath. I collect the residuals of whatever is offered to Jagannath from the temple and bring it home. So, I really don't have to make any special efforts to accumulate divine food stuffs. On account of eating these divine food stuffs, not only we have been blessed by eternal youth but also we are never troubled by old age. Vidyapati was very impressed and requested Vishvvasu to become his friend. He also reminded Vishvvasu that he wanted to return as soon as possible so that the king could go on a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra. But, Vishvvasu made a shocking disclosure to Vidyapati and said-- King Indradyumna will never be able to have a divine glimpse of Lord Jagannath as the lord is soon going to disappear. But, don't disclose this fact to the king otherwise he would get disheartened and abandon his plan of making a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra. Finally, when the king in his utter frustration would try to end his life after not being able to have a divine glimpse of Neelmadhav, the most gracious lord will appear in his dream and instruct him to get constructed four wooden idols of Jagannath, Balbhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra.

Having accomplished his mission, Vidyapati proceeded on his return journey and once again he visited Purushottam kshetra, which fell on the way. He picked up a garland, which had been offered to Neelmadhav by some deity. Finally, when he reached Malwa he found king Indradyumna eagerly waiting for him. After presenting the garland to the king, he narrated his experiences he had at Purushottam kshetra--' O king! Lord Jagannath's idol is made of Neelmani diamond and is very ancient. Even the deities have deep regards and undiluted reverence for Lord Jagannath and are frequent visitors to Purushottam Kshetra. The garland, which I have given you, was in fact had been offered to Lord Jagannath by the deities- these flowers do not wither and have fragrance lasting for eternity. Purushottam kshetra remains untouched by old age, sorrow or disease and gives salvation to anybody, who goes on a pilgrimage over there.'

INDRADYUMNA LEAVES FOR PURUSHOTTAM KSHETRA

Indradyumna had been waiting for this moment for a long time- the moment when he would get a chance to go on a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra. Revealing his great plan to Vidyapati, he said--' Now, the time has finally come for me to go on a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra. I also intend to develop that holy place as a prominent place of pilgrimage. I would shift my subject to that holy place and perform one hundred Ashwamedha yagyas once I reach there. I also intend to devote rest of my life in the worship of Lord Jagannath.'

While the conversation was going on, the ever wandering Sage Narada, arrived there and informed Indradyumna how pleased were the deities after learning of his holy intention of developing Purushottam kshetra into a major place of pilgrimage. Narada also dwelt on length on the virtues of Jagannath's worship. Indradyumna, thinking that Narada might prove to be of great help during the course of pilgrimage because of his vast travelling experience, requested him to accompany him to Purushottam kshetra. Narada readily agreed to accompany the king and said--' O king! I shall reveal to you the importance of all the holy places that we come across in the course of our pilgrimage.'

Finally, king Indradyumna left for Purushottam kshetra followed by a large procession, that consisted of his subject, all the ministers and army officers. The entourage touched the bank of river Mahanadi by evening. Deciding to take rest and spend the night there, king Indradyumna first took his bath and then worshipped Lord Jagannath. After the king had taken his bath, all the rest of the people also took their bath and then everybody sat down to have their dinner. After the meal was over, while Indradyumna was busy discussing with his ministers on the future course of action, somebody came with the news that the king of Utkal had arrived. Indradyumna ordered the messenger to bring the esteemed guest with all the honour and respect. The king of Utkal arrived and broke a disturbing news-- 'Indradyumna, I am afraid your intention of having a divine glimpse of Lord Jagannath is not going to fructify as lord Neelmadhav has presently concealed himself beneath a huge heap of sand caused by a ferocious sandstorm. The fallout of this inauspicious incident has been extremely adverse on my kingdom-- as my people are experiencing acute famine.

Indradyumna was shocked, especially the thought of not getting a chance to have a divine glimpse of lord Neelmadhav made him dejected- he saw all his efforts going in vain. But, Narada consoled him by saying --'Don't worry! Lord Neelmadhav is extremely merciful and he will certainly give you an opportunity to have his divine glimpse.'

INDRADYUMNA REACHES 'EKAMRACHHETRA'

Continuing with the tale of Indradyumna, sage Jaimini told all the sages--'Next morning, Indradyumna and his entourage crossed Mahanadi on boats and reached Ekamrachhetra where they worshipped lord Purushottam. After that they worshipped on their onwards journey and reached Kotishwar Mahalaya where they worshipped lord Tribhuneswar with appropriate rituals. Lord Tribhuneswar appeared after becoming pleased and blessed Indradyumna that his wish of seeing lord Jagannath was soon going to be fulfilled. Lord Tribhuneswar then instructed Narada--' O great soul! After reaching Purushottam kshetra, help Indradyumna perform one hundred yagyas as per the instructions given by Lord Brahma. I along with goddess Durga, dwell at the entrance of conch shaped Purushottam kshetra. Although, presently lord Jagannath has

concealed himself beneath a heap of sand yet very soon he is going to manifest himself. Indradyumna should get constructed a magnificent temple of Lord Jagannath at the same place, where once existed his idol and presently which is hidden beneath the heap of sand. Later on, Vishwakarma would then carve out four idols from a single piece of wood, which would subsequently be installed by Lord Brahma himself. Finally, Indradyumna's wish of seeing Lord Jagannath would get fulfilled.

Narada assured Lord Tribhuneswar that all his instructions would be followed in letter and spirit. The procession then left for the place indicated by Lord Tribhuneswar.

INDRADYUMNA EULOGIZES LORD NEELMADHAV

After reaching the temple of Neelkanth-Mahadev, all of them worshipped Mahadev and Durga. They then visited the temple of Lord Nrisimha, situated under a sandalwood tree at the foothills of Neelachal mountain. King Indradyumna was anxiously waiting for the moment he would have a divine glimpse of lord Jagannath. He requested Narada to take him to the place where Jagannath had hidden himself beneath the heap of sand. Narada took him near a Banyan tree and said--' Look at this huge Banyan tree that is two yojans in height and whose trunk is spread in the area of one yojan. To the north of this Banyan tree and to the north of Nrisimha temple lies the place where Lord Neelmadhav used to have his dwelling sometime ago but who has presently concealed himself. Now, the time is not very far when you would see Lord Jagannath with your mortal eyes.'

Indradyumna bowed in reverence to the place where Lord Jagannath was supposed to reappear himself in the near future. He eulogized the lord as if he were already present there and this was true as Jagannath's idol was indeed present there albeit hidden beneath heaps of sand. He prayed--'O lord! You are the one in whom every living creature ultimately takes refuge. My only wish is to be able to see your idol, which is presently hidden beneath heaps of sand.' Hardly had Indradyumna finished his prayer when he heard a heavenly voice--'O king! Do not worry! The day is not far when you would see me with your mortal eyes. You just need to follow Narada's instructions and your wish will be fulfilled.

NARADA INSTALLS THE IDOL OF NRISIMHA

Narada told Indradyumna--'Now, we should install an idol of Lord Nrisimha near Neelkanth's temple for this is the very place where you will be performing one thousand Ashwamedh Yagyas in the days to come. So, your first priority should be to get constructed a magnificent temple of Lord Nrisimha. I plan to stay here for five more days as Vishwakarma will be needing my help in carving out the idol of Lord Nrisimha.'

Leaving Narada alone near the Neelkanth temple, Indradyumna went near the sandalwood tree, which was at a little distance from the temple, and was surprised to find Sughat- Vishwakarma's son waiting for him. He requested Sughat to construct a grand temple with its main entrance facing west. Sughat constructed the temple within four days. On the fifth day, Narada arrived there with an idol of Lord Nrisimha, which had been carved out by Vishwakarma. An auspicious

day was chosen for installing the idol. After the idol had been installed, every body including king Indradyumna, Narada as well as the people accompanying the procession worshipped Lord Narsimha.

INDRADYUMNA PERFORMS ASHWAMEDHA YAGYAS

Sages, who had been listening to the tale narrated by Jaimini with rapt attention till then asked-- 'What did Indradyumna next do after the idol of Lord Nrisimha had been installed?'

Sage Jaimini replied--'After the idol of Lord Nrisimha had been installed, Indradyumna began making preparations for Ashwamedha yagya. He sent invitations to all the deities, learned brahmins and sages. When everybody arrived, he made a special request to Indra to remain present at the oblation site till the completion of one thousand Ashwamedha yagyas. Indra assured Indradyumna of his full cooperation and advised him to go ahead with his plan of accomplishing one thousand Ashwamedha yagyas. Finally, Indradyumna performed the first yagya under the supervision of learned priests. This way, he was able to successfully accomplish nine hundred and ninety nine yagyas without any problem. Finally, when the last Ashwamedha yagya was being performed, Indradyumna had a divine glimpse of Lord Vishnu while he was engrossed in his meditation. Indradyumna narrated his experience to Narada to which he got a reply that it was a good omen, which proved that the king was going to see Lord Jagannath with his mortal eyes.'

JAGANNATH IDOL IS CARVED OUT

After the rituals of final yagya ended, Narada advised Indradyumna to perform the rituals of 'Purnahuti' to mark the end of Yagya ceremony. Narada then went on to say--' A tree is considered to be the partial incarnation (Ansha avatar) of Lord Vishnu for each of his hair that falls on the earth gets transformed into a tree.' Narada, then pointing towards a tree told Indradyumna-- 'The almighty Lord has manifested himself in the form of this tree. Now, you should make preparations to get this tree installed on the great altar inside the temple.'

The tree to which Narada had pointed was unique in the sense that it had only four branches on it. Indradyumna, following the instructions ordered his men to uproot the said tree and then install it on the 'Mahavedi' inside the temple. But, at the same time he was wondering as to who would carve out the four idols of Jagannath, Balbhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra. Suddenly, a heavenly voice was heard--' Lord Vishnu would manifest himself on the sacred altar on his own. An old carpenter, who is standing among you, should be sent inside the temple premise. The main door of the temple should then be shut and nobody should try to enter the temple till the idols are ready. One more thing to be kept in mind is that all of you should keep on beating drums so that nobody hears the sound emanating from the carving of the idols. Anybody, who hears this sound, is doomed to become deaf. Similarly, anybody who tries to see the act of idols being made shall loose his power of sight.'

Indradyumna made elaborate arrangements as per the instructions given by the heavenly voice. The old carpenter was sent inside and the main door of the temple shut. On the fifteenth day,

Lord Jagannath manifested himself along with Balbhadrā, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra. Once again heavenly voice was heard which said--'O king! Get all the four idols coloured on the basis of the complexion of the respective deities. The colour of Jagannath's idol should be dark blue similar to that of dark clouds. Similarly, the idol of Balbhadrā should be coloured in white just like his fair complexion. The colour of goddess Subhadra's idol should be reddish just like the rising Sun. Sudarshan chakra should be painted deep red. Either the descendants of Vishvasu or your royal priest are entitled to participate in the consecration ceremony of the idols in future events.'

Indradyumna, once again following the instructions, got the idols coloured in the way specified by the heavenly voice. After that, all the four idols were adorned with beautiful apparels and ornaments. Now, they really looked divine in their new looks. Looking at the divine idols of Jagannath, Indradyumna went into trance. Seeing his condition, Narada advised not to waste time and seek any boon from Lord Jagannath because the sole purpose for which Jagannath had manifested himself was to bless him and to fulfill his wish. Indradyumna immediately realized what Narada meant to say. He eulogized Lord Jagannath in the following way--'O Jagannath! Help me out from the sorrows of this world. I don't aspire for anything else.'

Subsequently, Narada and the whole entourage, which had come along with king Indradyumna worshipped Lord Jagannath, Balbhadrā, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra. Lord Jagannath was worshipped amidst the chanting of Dwadashakshar mantra while Jagannath was worshipped with Purusha sukta. Similarly, Subhadra and Sudarshan chakra were worshipped amidst the chanting of Devisutra and vedic verses respectively. Finally, donations were made to the brahmins and everybody was sent off with respect.

CONSECRATION OF THE IDOLS

King Indradyumna was anxious to get performed the rituals of consecration as soon as possible, so he asked Narada--'I am not aware of the proper rituals that are employed in the consecration of an idol. I need your help in this regard.' Narada then made a list of articles required for the consecration of idols and instructed Indradyumna to make arrangements for all those items. He also instructed the king to get constructed a grand palace for Lord Brahma, who was supposed to arrive shortly to perform the consecration ceremony. Narada said--'Get constructed three chariots for all the three deities. The chariot meant for Lord Jagannath should have a mast on its top with the figure of Garuda on it. Similarly, Balbhadrā's chariot should have a mast with a plough drawn on it whereas Subhadra's chariot should have a mast with a beautiful lotus drawn on it. The number of horses pulling the chariots of Jagannath, Balbhadrā and Subhadra should be Sixteen, fourteen and twelve respectively.'

It did not take much time to construct the three chariots as per the instructions given by Narada. Very soon lord Brahma arrived there, accompanied by all the deities, to perform the consecration of the four idols. On seeing Lord Brahma, Indradyumna's joys knew no bounds and he paid his obeisance to the creator. Lord Brahma said--' See how fortunate you are. All the deities and sages have come here to help you in your cause.'

Lord Brahma then performed the rituals of consecration on the auspicious day of ashtami of the bright half of the Hindu month Vaishakh. The day was Thursday and the Nakshatra was Pushya.

RATH YATRA

Dwelling on length about the auspicious days on which Rath Yatra should be taken out, sage Jaimini told the assembled sages--'The combination of 'Teej' falling in the month of Vaishakh (bright half) and Rohini nakshatra, is considered to be extremely auspicious. A king should get constructed three chariots on the above mentioned day. The entire path along which the chariots as well as the procession is supposed to pass should be decorated with beautiful flowers and banners. On the second day of the bright half of the Hindu month-Ashadh, all the three deities are worshipped and subsequently installed on their respective chariots, which are then pulled by the devotees. The procession then passes through the major routes of the city so that people can pay their obeisance. After reaching Gundicha Nagar, the procession should stay there for seven days on the bank of Bindu teerth. On the eighth day, all the chariots should begin their return journey. This famous Rath yatra lasts for nine days.

SOME PROMINENT PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE

Once, Sage Shaunak asked Sutji about the means, which enabled human beings to attain salvation in Kali yuga.

Sutji recounted a tale -- 'Once, Kartikeya had posed the same question to Lord Shiva. Emphasizing on the importance of pilgrimages, Lord Shiva had told him that in Kali yuga anybody could attain salvation by going on pilgrimage to holy places. Giving names of some prominent holy places and rivers, Lord Shiva had told Kartikeya that some of them were capable of fulfilling any wish of a man, while some gave salvation. The names of some prominent rivers Lord Shiva had given were Ganga, Godavari, Narmada, Tapti, Yamuna, Kshipra, Gautami, Kaushiki, Kaveri, Tamraparni, Chandrabhaga, Sindhu, Gandaki, Saraswati, etc. According to Shiva all these rivers were not only capable of fulfilling any wish of a man but also giving salvation. Naming some prominent holy places, Lord Shiva had told Kartikeya that Ayodhya, Dwarka, Kashi, Mathura, Avanti, Kurukshetra, Ramteerth, Kanchi, Purushottam kshetra, Pushkar kshetra, Varaha kshetra and Badrikashram were capable of liberating a man from the sorrows of this world.'

Lord Shiva had told Kartikeya-- 'Anybody who goes on a pilgrimage to Ayodhya becomes absolved of all his sins. Lord Hari dwells at Dwarka and does not abandon it even for a moment. A devotee, who takes a holy dip in river Gomti and then pays obeisance to Lord Krishna, attains salvation even if he is ignorant. In the same manner, one who takes a bath in the holy Panchganga at Varanasi, becomes free from the cycles of birth and death. Anybody, who goes on a pilgrimage to Kashi and pays obeisance to Lord Vishwanath, is freed from all the bondage of this world. Great importance has been attached to the performance of 'tarpan' at Vishramteerth and anybody who performs the rituals of tarpan with sesame seeds and water, his ancestors are freed from the tortures of the hell. Taking a holy dip in Kotiteerth at Avantipuri, in the Hindu month of Vaishakh and worshipping Lord Mahakaleshwar too absolves a man of all his sins.

Donating gold either at Kurukshetra or Ramteerth, on a solar eclipse day, helps a man in attaining salvation. Going on a pilgrimage to Purushottam kshetra and worshipping Lord Jagannath after taking a holy dip in Markandeya sarovar, bestows incomparable virtues. Badrinath, the dwelling place of Lord Vishnu, is considered to be the supreme place of pilgrimage and even its remembrance is capable of giving salvation. Virtues attained by the performance of various deeds (tapa, yoga, samadhi), appear to be insignificant as compared to virtues attained by going on a pilgrimage to Badrikashram.

THE MAJESTY OF BADRIKSHETRA

Kartikeya asked Lord Shiva--'How did this sacrosanct place originate? Who is the presiding deity of this place?'

Lord Shiva replied--'Badrikashram is an eternal city and Lord Narayan is its presiding deity. A mere sight of Badrikashram is enough to free a man from all the bondage of life. There are numerous other holy places situated in the vicinity, Kedarnath being one of them.'

To emphasize the significance of Badrikashram, Lord Shiva narrated the following tale to Kartikeya--'In Satya yuga, Lord Vishnu existed in his physical form at Badrikashram for the benediction of human beings. But, in Treta yuga, only sages had the privilege of perceiving him with the help of yoga. At the advent of Dwapar things changed drastically and Lord Vishnu just disappeared from Badrikashram. Deities became worried and asked Lord Brahma about the reason that made Lord Vishnu disappear. Even lord Brahma had no answer to this question. Thinking that Lord Vishnu must have gone to Ksheer sagar-his eternal abode, all the deities led by Brahma went there. They eulogized Vishnu, who emerged from the Ksheer Sagar. But, none of the deities except lord Brahma could see him. Lord Vishnu told Brahma that the main reason why he disappeared from Badrikashram was the flawed intelligence and arrogance of the deities. Brahma informed the deities whatever Vishnu had told him. All the deities were ashamed of themselves and returned to heaven with long faces. Feeling pity on the deities, I (Shiva) disguised myself as a sanyasi and carried Lord Vishnu's idol from Naradateerth to Badrikashram and installed it over there to uplift the sagging morale of the deities. This is how Lord Vishnu once again graced Badrikashram with his presence. Even a grain of 'prasad' had at Badrikashram is enough to liberate a man from all his sins.'

THE IMPORTANCE OF HINDU MONTH 'KARTIK'

Once, on being asked by some sages about the significance of the Hindu month- Kartik, Sutji narrated the following tale-- 'Once, Narada had asked Lord Brahma the same question. At that time Lord Brahma had revealed to Narada that 'Kartik' was supreme among all the months just as Lord Vishnu is supreme among all the deities and Badrikashram is the crown of all the places of pilgrimage. According to Brahma all these three would have greater significance in Kali yuga as compared to any other yuga. Kartik is very dear to Lord Vishnu and any virtuous deed done during this month never goes without being rewarded. One important characteristic of this month is that all the deities live in the proximity of human beings for the entire period of the month and accept everything that is offered to them. Penance done in this month or donations made during

this month is believed to give Imperishable virtues. There is a special significance of donating food grains during this month. Similarly, worshipping Shaligram during this month also has great significance. Observing austerities during this month or worshipping Lord Vishnu with appropriate rituals liberates one's ancestors from the tortures of the hell. Worshipping Lord Vishnu with petals of lotus helps him to become absolved of all the sins committed in his previous many births. Worshipping Lord Vishnu with tulsi leaves helps one in getting cured of incurable diseases.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'HOLY DIPS' IN MARGASHIRSH

Continuing with the description of the significance of various months, Sutji said-- 'Once, while Lord Vishnu was engrossed in his 'yoganidra' at Shwetdweepa, Lord Brahma arrived there and requested him to describe the importance of Margashirsh. Lord Vishnu had told him that a devotee aspiring for unification with him, must observe austerities during this month. Describing the proper method of observing austerities Lord Vishnu had said that one should get up early in the morning and after performing the ritualistic 'achaman', he should remember me by chanting my one thousand names. Next, he should take his bath according to the rituals mentioned in the scriptures, as follows-- He should remove some soil from near the roots of tulsi plant and pluck few tulsi leaves. Holding both the things in his hand, he should chant either Gayatri mantra or the mantra, 'Om Namoh Narayanay', so that they become sanctified. While taking his bath, it is a must to eulogize Ganga in the following way- 'O Ganga! Though have manifested from Vishnu's feet and hence called Vaishnavi. Myself being a devotee of Lord Vishnu, you should protect me from all the possible sins I am likely to commit in my whole life.' A devotee should say this prayer for seven times and take the same number of holy dips in the river. He should then put on tidy clothes and perform 'tarpan' in the names of all the deities sages as well as ancestors.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHARITY MADE IN 'VAISHAKH'

Continuing with his tales, Sutji said--' Once, king Ambarish asked Narada about the reason why Lord Vishnu had special liking for the Hindu month-Vaishakh. Narada's answer was that Vaishakh had been given special privilege by Lord Brahma himself and is believed to fulfill all the wishes of a man. No other month is as dear to Lord Vishnu as Vaishakh. The sin raises its ugly head only till a devotee has bathed before sunrise in the month of Vaishakh but once he has taken his bath all his sins just disappear. This is also the period when all the deities are believed to dwell in all the rivers, ponds, lakes, apart from the holy rivers. Great significance has been attached to doing charitable deeds in this month, especially providing water to thirsty. Similarly, donating certain articles like umbrella, fans, shoes, all have their own importance. One who gets constructed an inn for the comfort of the travelers and provides water to them attains imperishable virtues. No charitable deed can ever match the virtue of donating food grains and one who accomplishes this great act can be aptly called a 'Pita' (Father).

AYODHYAPURI

Once, on being asked by sage Bhardwaj and few others about the grandeur of Ayodhya, Sutji replied--'Ayodhya, a sacrosanct city is based on the bank of river Saryu. It is the very city where the famous king Ikshavaku ruled once upon a time. The term Ayodhya means unconquerable and consists of three root letters: a- symbolizing Brahma, y-symbolizing Vishnu and dh-symbolizing Rudra. It is a place where Lord Vishnu has his abode for eternity and does not leave it even for a moment. According to the scriptures Ayodhya is based on Sudarshan chakra. It is well expanded in the radius of one yojan. Its eastern boundary stretches up to one yojan from a place called 'Sahastradhan'. Similarly, the western front stretches up to one yojan from a place called 'Sama', the southern up to one yojan from the bank of Saryu and its northern boundary up to one yojan starting from the bank of river Tamsa. In ancient times, a brahmin named Vishnu Sharma had performed an austere penance at Ayodhya. Lord Vishnu had appeared after becoming pleased by him and had created a holy place by digging up the earth with his Sudarshan chakra. Anybody, who takes a holy dip in Chakrateerth becomes absolved of all his sins.

III. BRAHMA KHAND

RAMESHWAR KSHETRA

Once, Shaunak and few other sages asked Sutji as to how could a man become free from the bondage of the world. They also inquired whether there was an existence of any such holy place capable of liberating a man from heinous of sin.

Sutji replied--'Ramteerth is supreme among all the places of pilgrimage. A mere sight of this holy place is enough to free a man from the bondage of this mortal world. Going on a pilgrimage to Rameshwar gives virtues similar to what is attained by performing all the yagyas. One, who takes a holy dip at Setu Rameshwar, attains to Vishnu loka. Merely by sleeping at the sea shore of Rameshwar a man gets absolved of heinous of sins like brahmhatya, etc. A man is blessed if his remains are consigned to the holy waters at Rameshwar after his death. Scriptures say that five types of sins are as grave as the sin of brahmahatya--

1. One, who criticizes sages
2. A selfish person who cooks food only for himself,
3. One who destroys well laid path making it difficult for people to tread upon,
4. One who accepts food from a 'chandal' and
5. One who sells food grains to a chandal. But, all these just disappears once the sinner reaches Rameshwar.

SETU BANDH

All the sages were curious to know about the holy places in the vicinity of Rameshwar. Sutji replied--Sri Ram replied went into exile accompanied by Sita, his consort and his younger

brother, Lakshman. Ravan, the demon king who ruled over Lanka deceitfully abducted Sita. Subsequently, Sri Ram befriended Sugreev and killed Bali, who harboured enmity against him. Sugriva sent monkeys in all directions to find out where Sita had been kept by Ravan. Later on Sri Ram reached Mahendra Parvat accompanied by Lakshman, Hanuman, Sugriva, Jambavan, Nal and many more brave warriors. They stayed for a brief period at Chakrateerth, where Vibhishan came to see Sri Ram. Eventually Vibhishan was nominated the king of all the demons by Sri Ram to the great displeasure of his brother Ravan.

Sri Ram and his army faced an uphill task of reaching Lanka for they had to cross the ocean, which lay as a great barrier between them and their destination. Samudra (ocean) revealed to Sri Ram that Nala had divine powers and whatever he would throw in the Ocean would not sink down but keep on floating. Nala tried to check the authenticity of Samudra's statement by throwing a huge rock into the ocean, as he himself was not aware of his powers. To the sheer amazement of everybody present there the rock started floating on the surface of the ocean instead of sinking down. All the rest of the monkeys tried to emulate Nala's feat by throwing huge rocks into the ocean and to their own surprise found that the rocks did not sink. This was how a bridge was built across the ocean which made it possible for Sri Ram and his army to cross the ocean. Then length of Setu Rameshwar Bandh is hundred yojan and it is ten yojan broad. There are many holy places situated on the bridge prominent among which are Chakra-teerth, Pap-vinashan teerth, Sita-sarovar, Mangal-teerth, Amrit-watika, Brahma-kund, Hanumat-kund, Agastya-teerth, Ram-teerth, Lakshman-teerth, Jaya-teerth, Lakshmi-teerth, Agni-teerth, Shiv-teerth, Shankh-teerth, Yamuna-teerth, Ganga-teerth, Koti-teerth, Manas-teerth and Dhanushkoti teerth.

RAMESHWAR LINGA

Describing how Sri Ram had installed Rameshwar Linga, Sutji said--' After killing Ravan, Sri Ram enthroned Vibhishan as the king of Lanka. While returning to Ayodhya he made a brief stop at Gandhamadan mountain. Since the thought of having killed a brahmin (Ravan) kept on tormenting him, he decided to atone for his sins. So, he installed the idol of Rameshwar linga at Rameshwar setu. Rameshwar Linga is so sacrosanct that all the holy places, sages and ancestors are believed to exist within the temple premise of Maheshwar Linga. Being installed by Sri Ram himself, this particular linga has special significance attached to it. One who goes on a pilgrimage to this holy place is certain to attain salvation even if he were a 'Mlechha' (born in a low caste).

DHARMARANYA KSHETRA

Once, Sage Vyasa went to meet Yudhisthira, who requested him to describe the significance of Dharmaranya kshetra.

Sage Vyasa replied-- 'O king! Once, Dharmaraj-Yudhisthira did an austere penance to please Lord Shiva. As usual, Indra became scarred because he thought that Dharmaraj was doing penance with the intention of acquiring Indraloka. He and other deities went to seek the help of Lord Brahma, who did not have any clue. So, all of them went to Kailash mountain to seek Lord

Shiva's help. Since Shiva was aware of Dharma's motive, he explained to the deities that there was nothing to worry about. But, Indra was not satisfied and the thought of losing his kingdom continued to torment him.

Indra then instructed a beautiful Apsara named Vardhini to go to the place where Dharma was doing penance and disturb him by corrupting his thoughts. Vardhini went to the place where Dharma was engrossed in his penance and was successful in disturbing him. When Dharma opened his eyes he found a beautiful Apsara in front of him. Vardhini asked Dharma--'O Lord! What is the objective with which you are doing such an austere penance? Being an embodiment of virtuosity yourself, you prevail in the whole world. So, in a sense you already the lord of the world - what else do you need?'

Dharma told Vardhini that he was doing penance with the objective of having a divine glimpse of Lord Shiva. Vardhini informed him that Indra was scared of losing his kingdom and hence had sent her to disturb his penance. Dharma was pleased by her truthfulness and wanted to reward her for that. Vardhini expressed her desire of having her abode in Indraloka for eternity and also of having a place of pilgrimage named on her. Dharma blessed her after which she returned to Indraloka.

Dharma once again engrossed himself in penance. Ultimately, Lord Shiva became pleased and appeared before him. 'Ask for any boon and it shall be bestowed to you', said Lord Shiva. Dharmaraj replied -'O lord! I want this place to be named after me. I also request you to grace this place by your presence.' Lord Shiva blessed him and fulfilled both his wishes. This was how Dharmakshetra got its name. Subsequently, Lord Shiva appeared in the form of Dharmeshwar linga in accordance with the second wish of Dharmaraj. After his penance was over, Dharma also had created a holy reservoir over there which is believed to absolve a man of all his sins.

LOSS OF MORAL VALUES IN KALIYUGA

On being asked by Yudhisthira about the life-style of people in Kali yuga, sage Vyasa replied--'There will be a widespread prevalence of sinful deeds and lack of moral values in Kali yuga. People would become untruthful and would become critical of revered sages. Moral values would decline to such an extent their minds would be preoccupied by nothing else but the thought of sex. In Kali yuga women will feel most insecure and even her near and dear ones would become untrustworthy - men belonging to their own gotras would try to exploit her. Brahmins would be criticized because of their inappropriate conduct. They would become arrogant, would start trading their knowledge and would not follow the teachings of the Vedas.

Similarly, Kshatriyas would become cowards and a mere reference of battle would be enough to scare them. Majority of people would indulge in immoral deeds like gambling and consume variety of intoxication. They would always look out for an opportunity to grab other's wealth by deceitful means. Married women would not fulfill their obligation towards their husbands. Cows would give lesser milk and trees would bear fewer fruits. Young girls would become pregnant at the raw age of eleven years. Brahmins, by their conduct would undermine the importance of holy places and would indulge in excessive eating and drinking. In Kali yuga, people would not give

any importance to caste system. Kings would lose their kingdoms and Mlechhas would become the rulers. Treachery, enmity and disrespect towards elders would become the norms of the day.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHATURMASYA VRAT

Once, on being asked by Narada about the importance of Chaturmasya, Lord Brahma said-- 'Chaturmasya is the period of four months during which Lord Vishnu is believed to take rest in Ksheer-Sagar. So quite naturally, all the oceans, rivers and ponds are believed to attain divinity due to the presence of Lord Vishnu in Ksheer-Sagar during this period. This is the reason why great importance has been attached to taking holy bath during this period. A devotee, who observes austerities related with Lord Vishnu during these four months, becomes absolved of all his sins. All the deities are believed to dwell within Lord Vishnu during this period. Going on pilgrimage to holy places and taking holy dips in rivers bestow indescribable virtues.

A devotee must not forget to perform the rituals of 'Tarpan' after taking his daily bath. He should also observe abstinence and avoid indulging in sensual pleasures during this period of four months. There is special significance of making donations during this period, especially donating food-grains.

IMPORTANCE OF ABSTINENCE DURING CHATURMAS

Continuing with the importance of austerities observed during Chaturmas, Lord Brahma said-- 'Human-beings are bundle of desires and long for worldly things. So, there is a great importance of abstinence and forsaking things, which one is very fond of. One who relinquishes his most favourite thing during this period gets the same thing in abundance in the next world. A householder, who renounces his family life for the sake of his devotion during this period, becomes free from the tortures of recurring births and deaths. Similarly, relinquishing the use of chilly in one's food during this period helps him to acquire great fortune. Renouncing silk cloths during this period gives imperishable joy. One should avoid wearing black cloths during this period. Combing and shaving are prohibited during this period.

A devotee should worship Lord Vishnu on the auspicious day of Kark Sankranti. Normally black plums are offered to Lord Vishnu while worshipping. Celibacy is believed to be the best austerity and anybody who observes it during the period of chaturmas, never experiences sorrow in his life.

RITUALS PERTAINING TO SHODASH UPACHAR

Once, on being asked by Narada about the proper methods of performing Shodash upachar rituals, Lord Brahma said --'In normal circumstances, when Lord Vishnu is worshipped by employing the rituals of Shodashopachar it is considered as 'Tapa'. But, when the same rituals of shodashopachar are employed to worship Lord Vishnu during chaturmas, it is considered as

'Mahatapa'. In the same manner, all the austerities that are observed during Chaturmas attain greater importance.

Lord Brahma then went on to elucidate the proper method of performing the rituals of 'Shodashopachar'--' "A particular 'mahasukta' of Yajurveda consisting of sixteen ' richas are chanted while worshipping Lord Vishnu. Similarly richas like 'sahastra-sheersha purushah' and fifteen others are considered to be most appropriate for the worship of almighty Vishnu. First of all, a devotee should perform the ritual of 'nyas' by mentally associating all the sixteen richas with different organs of the body as per the instructions given in the smritis. The same rituals of 'nyas' are then performed on the idol of lord Vishnu or Shaligram. After that an invocation is made to Lord Vishnu by chanting the first richa of Purush sukta--'Sahasra sheersha Purushah' with a slight modification i.e. by adding 'om' in the beginning of the mantra. Similarly, Lord Vishnu and other 'Parshads' should be installed at the place of worship by chanting the second richa- 'Purush evedam'. With the chanting of third richa, Lord Vishnu's lotus feet are washed after which 'ardhya' is offered with the holy water collected from all the seven seas and other holy rivers. Subsequently, the ritual of 'achaman' is performed amidst the chanting of fifth richa. The ritual of ablution is then performed in which the idol of Lord Vishnu is bathed amidst the chanting of the sixth richa. The idol is adorned with beautiful apparels amidst the chanting of seventh richa.

Similarly, a sacred thread is offered to Lord Vishnu amidst the chanting of eighth richa while sandalwood paste is smeared on the idol amidst the chanting of ninth richa. Subsequently, amidst the chanting of tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteen richas, flowers, incense, lighted lamp and naivedya are offered to the deity respectively. Naivedya should consist of cereals. While performing 'arti' the fourteenth richa should be chanted. A devotee should then circumambulate around the idol amidst the chanting of fifteenth richa. Imagining himself as an inseparable part of lord Vishnu, he should meditate amidst the chanting of the sixteenth richa."

IV. KASHI KHAND

VIDHYACHAL OBSTRUCTS THE PATH OF SURYA

Once, Sage Vyasa narrated the following tale to all the assembled sages-- 'Once, while wandering about, sage Narada arrived at Vindhyachal mountain. He was received with great honour and respect by Vindhyachal mountain. But, when the time arrived for Narada to take his leave, he took a deep sigh, which made Vindhyachal extremely perplexed and he asked Narada if anything was wrong. Narada replied--' Your rival-Meru mountain is superior to you in every respect and this is the fact I am lamenting about. My deep sigh is just the indication of my worried state of mind.'

Vindhyachal mountain was filled with inferiority complex and started waiting for an opportunity when he could prove his superiority to Meru mountain. He thought--' Perhaps Narada was right for even Lord Surya has great respect for Meru's might and this is the reason why he circumambulates my adversary. If I am able to beat Meru in height then may be Lord Surya would start circumambulating me and this way I shall prove my superiority to Meru.'

Now, Vindhyachal started increasing his height and in a short time its peaks became invisible. The fallout of this amazing incident proved to be quite catastrophic for the world because even Lord Surya was left stranded at a particular point in the horizon. As a result, one part of the earth became too hot for any life to exist. Similarly, the other half of the earth became unbearably cold. The time became still and everything went haywire in the world.

All the deities became extremely worried and went to Lord Brahma to seek his help. Lord Brahma advised them to go to Kashi and seek help from sage Agastya. Deities were pleased at their good fortune of getting a chance to visit Kashi. Deities, after reaching Kashi paid a visit to 'Manikarnika teerth' and took their bath. Subsequently, they went to Vishwanath temple and worshipped Lord Vishwanath. At last, they reached the hermitage of Agastya where he was busy worshipping a self made Shivalinga. The entire hermitage was crowded with young pupils of Agastya. After the pleasantries having been exchanged, sage Agastya asked the deities about the purpose of their visit.

AGASTYA ORDERS VINDHYA TO DIMINISH ITS SIZE

When Agastya learnt of the problem created by Vindhyachal, he agreed to help the deities despite fully aware of the fact that once he left Kashi it would not be possible for him to see his dearest Kashi once again at least in his present birth. Before leaving for Vindhyachal, he sought permission from Lord Bhairav. He then reached the place where Vindhyachal had obstructed the path of Surya. Lopamudra, his wife accompanied him.

When Vindhyachal found Agastya staring angrily at him he became scarred and immediately minimized his size. Sage Agastya was pleased that his objective had been achieved without making any effort but he knew quite well that once he left the place Vindhyachal would regain his mammoth size. So he decided to do something so that Vindhyachal could not obstruct the path of Surya. He worked out a plan according to which he instructed Vindhyachal to wait for him until he returned after accomplishing his pilgrimage. Vindhyachal agreed assuming that Agastya would return in a short time.

Vindhyachal thanked his good fortune of escaping Agastya's wrath, which could otherwise have threatened his very existence. Sage Agastya then went away never to return and Vindhyachal kept on waiting for his arrival. This way, the path being cleared, Surya was once again able to move freely on its orbit without any problem and as a result normalcy returned to the world.

On the other hand, Agastya who was not at all happy leaving his dearest Kashi was desperate to get there back as soon as possible. But, he knew that his wish was going to remain unfulfilled. While wandering about, he reached Kolapur where he worshipped goddess Mahalakshmi. When goddess Mahalakshmi appeared, he asked her whether he would ever be able to reach Kashi in his present life. Goddess Mahalakshmi replied--'Your wishes will be fulfilled in the coming nineteenth dwapar, when you would incarnate as Vyasa and would contribute a great deal in the propagation of the Vedas and Puranas. There is a sacrosanct place of Kartikeya not very far from here. Go there and pay your obeisance to Lord Kartikeya and he would unravel the mysterious aspects of Kashi to you.'

Sage Agastya and his wife Lopamudra then went to the mountain called Sri Shail, where Kartikeya lived at that time.

KASHI -THE SACROSANCT PLACE OF PILGRIMAGE

After travelling for sometime, both of them arrived near Sri Shail mountain. Pointing his finger towards the mountain, Agastya told his wife--'One, who has a good fortune of seeing the peaks of this mountain, never takes a second birth.'

Lopamudra replied in amazement--' If the sight of this mountain was capable of giving salvation then why do you long for Kashi?'

Sage Agastya then went on to clarify that there were many other holy places capable of giving salvation. Prayag is one such place. It is capable of bestowing all the four 'Purusharth' to man- Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Apart from Prayag, there are many more holy places like Naimisharanya, Kurukshetra, Gangadwar, Avanti, Ayodhya, Mathura, Dwarka, Badrikashram, Purushottam kshetra which are capable of giving salvation to a man. But none of these places can match Kashi because Kashi is incomparable.

LORD KARTIKEYA DESCRIBES THE MAJESTY OF KASHI

Sage Agastya and his wife Lopamudra circumambulated Sri Shail Mountain and climbed up Lohit mountain where they found Lord Kartikeya. Both of them eulogized Kartikeya by singing Vedic hymns in his praise. Lord Kartikeya was extremely pleased by their devotion and said- 'O revered sage! You can understand Kashi's importance by the fact that, though I am capable of reaching any place according to my wish but still, here I am doing this austere penance for the attainment of Kashi. I must confess that I have not been successful in my efforts till date. If any body thinks that he can attain to kashi just by performing austerities than he is totally wrong. Kashi can never be attained to until and unless one has the blessing of Lord Mahadeva. And one who is fortunate enough to have reached Kashi must under no circumstances leave it till he is alive. O Agastya! You are blessed because you had the good fortune of residing at Kashi. Please allow me to touch your body, which has acquired holiness due to its proximity to Kashi.' Having said this, Kartikeya touched different parts of Agastya's body as if he were touching the sacred soil of Kashi.'

THE ORIGIN OF KASHI

Sage Agastya asked Lord Kartikeya how the sacrosanct place, Kashi came into being. He also asked how Kashi became famous as a place capable of giving salvation to a man.

Lord Kartikeya revealed to Agastya that once Parvati had asked Lord Shiva the same question. Lord Shiva had told her-- ' At the time of deluge when every thing had submerged in the ocean and darkness prevailed everywhere, only Brahman, the embodiment of truth existed at that time

and nothing else. Brahman, the absolute truth is indescribable and inexpressible. No name can be attributed to Him. He is the absolute truth, the ultimate knowledge, the infinite, the omnipresent and the eternal bliss. Though basically formless He attained a form on account of His own wish. That form is none other than me. Later on I created Prakriti from my body. All three of us (Shiva, Parvati and Kashi) manifested simultaneously by the grace of 'Adi Purusha' (The Almighty God).'

Continuing with the tale of Kashi's greatness, Kartikeya told Agastya- ' There is no holy place as dear to Lord Shiva as Kashi, which is not abandoned by him as well as his consort-Parvati even at the time of deluge. Lord Shiva named this holy place- Ananda van, because it gave immense joy to him. Subsequently, Lord Shiva and goddess Jagdamba put a glance on the left portion of their respective bodies as the result of which a divine entity manifested himself who was none other than Lord Vishnu and who was named Purushottam by Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva after blessing Purushottam went away. Later on, Lord Vishnu created a divine reservoir with his sudarshan chakra and filled it up with his sweat. He then engaged himself in an austere penance. Lord Shiva once again appeared along with Parvati and blessed Vishnu by saying- ' This holy place will become famously known as Manikarnika because this is the very place where I had once lost my diamond ear-ring.'

Lord Vishnu made a request to Shiva -- 'May this place fulfill the wishes of those who seek salvation. Since it is blessed with your eternal presence hence its another name would be Kashi.'

Lord Shiva assured Vishnu by saying- 'This sacrosanct place is very dear to me and no event takes place here against my wish. Even if a person living here happens to be a sinner he has nothing to fear because I protect him. One who lives far from Kashi but remembers it with reverence becomes absolved of all his sins.'

There is a magnificent Shiva-linga at Kashi famously known as Kashi Vishwanath. Here is situated one of the twelve Jyotirlingas. Just as the Sun is visible in the whole world despite its presence at a particular point in the horizon, in the same manner Kashi has its influence throughout the length and breadth of the world.

V. AVANTI KSHETRA KHAND

SANATKUMAR GLORIFIES MAHAKAL TERTH

Once, goddess Parvati requested Shiva to describe the significance of Mahakal teerth. Lord Shiva replied- "Once, Sanatkumar- one of the manasputras of Lord Brahma had gone to his father's abode, situated at a place near Meru mountain. Sage Vyasa arrived there and asked him the same question. Sanatkumar had revealed to him that all kinds of sins loosed their evil influence at Mahakal teerth. He had also told him that it was called 'Peetha' because Matrikas had their abode over there. Anybody, who is fortunate of leaving his mortal body at this holy-place, is freed from the vicious cycles of birth and death." This place is very dear to Lord Shiva and is also called by various other names like Ekamrak-van, Mahakal-van and Vimukti-kshetra.

KAPAL MOCHAN

Once, Lord Shiva arrived at Mahakal forest with a skull in his hand. All the trees and vegetation were delighted to find him in their midst. They requested lord Shiva to remain their forever. Lord Shiva told them that it was not possible for him to stay there forever but on being requested once again agreed to stay there for at least a year. After one year, when the time for departure came he released the skull from his hand as a memorial.

When Lord Brahma came to know of this incident, he instructed all the deities to reach Mahakal forest without wasting any time so that a grand yagya could be performed at the place where Shiva had left the skull. All the deities went to the said place and worshipped Lord Shiva by employing the rituals of Pashupat vrata, which Lord Brahma had taught them. Lord Shiva became pleased by their devotion and said-- ' Perhaps you all are not aware that there was a specific objective behind my act of releasing the skull from my hand. This act of mine was done to protect your lives but it seems you are unaware of its significance. In a way, all of you have already received my blessings in advance for your deep devotion. What else do you wish for?'

Deities were amazed by Shiva's statements and were wondering what Shiva was trying to convey. So, they requested Shiva to unravel the mystery so that they could understand what he meant to say. Lord Shiva told them- 'The followers of Maya were planning to kill you while you were busy doing penance but no one of you was aware of their evil motive. I came to know about this in my deep state of meditation and dropped the skull from my hand. As soon as the skull touched the ground a thunderous sound was made as the result of which all the demons were killed instantaneously.'

All the deities thanked Lord Shiva for protecting their lives. In course of time this particular place became famous as Kapal mochan temple and is presently situated in Ujjain.

VARIOUS NAMES OF UJJAINIPURI

Once, Sage Vyasa requested Sanatkumar to reveal why Ujjainipuri was known by various names like Kanakshringa, Kushasthali Avanti and Padmavati.

Sanatkumar replied-- 'Once, Lord Brahma and Lord Shiva arrived at Ujjainipuri in search of Lord Vishnu, who had disappeared from his abode. To their pleasant surprise they found Lord Vishnu staying there. Both of them requested Vishnu to allow them to stay at Ujjainipuri and said- ' O Lord! When did you create such a magnificent place with golden mountain peaks? Allow us to live in this beautiful city for we can not live in your separation.'

Lord Vishnu requested Brahma to make his abode in the northern part of the city while Shiva was told to make southern part as his abode. Lord Vishnu then told them- ' Since you have referred to this place as a city of golden mountain peaks therefore from now onwards it would become famous as 'Kanchan Shringa' (golden peaks)'.

Sanatkumar then went on to explain why Ujjainipuri was also called Kusha sthali-' Having created the world, Lord Brahma requested Lord Vishnu to nurture it. Lord Vishnu agreed on the condition that Lord Brahma provided him a pious place on the earth from where he could perform his duty. Brahma then picked up a handful of kusha grass and threw down on the earth.

This way Lord Vishnu performed his duty as the nurturer of the world sitting on the seat of Kusha grass. This is the reason why this place came to be known as Kusha sthali.'

Sanatkumar then described how Ujjainipuri also came to be known as Avanti puri-' Once, after being defeated by the demons, deities fled to Meru mountain. Later on they went to Lord Brahma and sought his help. Lord Brahma took all the deities to Lord Vishnu. Hardly had they reached the abode of Vishnu and offered their obeisance, then they heard a heavenly voice- 'There is a sacrosanct place called Kushasthali in the forest of Mahakal van. This holy place is graced by the presence of Lord Mahadeva. Go there and engage yourself in austerities and you will certainly become the master of the heaven once again.'

Subsequently, all the deities went to a place called Paishachmochan situated in Kushasthali and engaged themselves in various austerities. As prophesized by Vishnu, the deities indeed defeated the demons and became the ruler of heaven. The term 'Avan' means 'the protector' and since it had protected the deities hence it became famous as Avanti.

Sanatkumar also described how Kushasthali also came to be known as Ujjaini-- 'Once, a demon named Tripur did an austere penance to please Lord Brahma. When Brahma appeared he expressed his wish of becoming immortal. Lord Brahma fulfilled his wish as the result of which Tripur became arrogant and started tormenting the deities. The deities sought the help of Lord Shiva, who assured them that he would kill the demon. Subsequently, Lord Shiva did kill Tripur with his most lethal weapon 'pashupat ashtra' after a fierce battle. The place where this incident took place became famous as Ujjaini because of the fierce battle fought between Shiva and Tripur.

Continuing with the tale which described the reason why Ujjainipuri also came to be known as Padmavati, Sanatkumar told Vyasa--'During the time of ocean churning ambrosia had also emerged from the ocean bed along with many other valuable things. The demons wanted to drink ambrosia so that they could become immortal but the deities were against this idea. Very soon, the arguments turned into a major dispute and both the sides started quarrelling. Narada requested Lord Vishnu to do something in this regard. Lord Vishnu disguised himself as a beautiful lady and was successful in infatuating the demons. Finally, he started giving ambrosia to the deities who after drinking it became immortal. A demon named Rahu was sitting in the rows of the deities after changing his guise. Lord Vishnu was unable to recognize Rahu and gave some ambrosia to him mistaking him to be a deity. But, hardly had Rahu gulped down Ambrosia and before it could reach down his throat, Vishnu severed his head. Rahu's head became immortal as the result of ambrosia's influence. This incident had taken place at Mahakal forest. Later on all the deities distributed the whole wealth, which had emerged from the ocean among themselves. This is the reason why Ujjainipuri came to be known as Padmavati because Padma is another name of Goddess Lakshmi.

THE GRANDEUR OF AVANTIPURI

Sanatkumar says-'Once, Parvati requested Lord Shiva to explain why Avantipuri was considered so holy by the devotees. Lord Shiva told her that it was so because there were numerous holy places situated over there. Lord Shiva had told her-- 'There are four holy rivers flowing through

the different regions of Avantipuri- Kshipra, Divya-nav, Neelganga and Gandhavati. There are temples belonging to eighty four Shivalingas, eight Bhairavas, eleven Rudras, Twelve Adityas, six Ganeshas and twenty four goddesses. Not only this there are also temples of Lord Vishnu and Brahma. Avantipuri is spread in the radius of one yojan. There are temples belonging to ten different incarnations of Lord Vishnu- Vasudev, Anant, Balam, Janardan, Narayan, Hrishikesh, Varaha, Dharnidhar, Vaman and Lord Vishnu himself taking rest on Sheshnag. Apart from these there are many other holy places situated at Avantipuri, which enhances its sanctity and holiness.

THE DESCENT OF NARMADA

Explaining the reason why Narmada had to descend down to earth, Sutji narrated a tale to the assembled sages-- 'Once, Sage Markandeya was taking rest at the bank of river Narmada where Yudhisthira accompanied by Draupadi arrived there. Yudhisthira curiously asked Markandeya about the reason he had chosen the bank of Narmada as his resting place when there were so many other holy places of greater significance. Sage Markandeya recounted a tale, which said how some sages had requested king Pururva to bring down river Narmada to the earth so that the whole world becomes liberated from its sins. Describing the holiness of Narmada, sages had told Pururava- ' The holy Narmada is capable of liberating the whole world from its sin. So, you should find means so that Narmada descends down to earth.' Later on, Pururva did an austere penance to please Shiva. When Lord Shiva appeared before him, Pururva expressed his wish. Shiva instructed Narmada to descend down to earth but she told him that she needed a base for that to happen. Lord Shiva then instructed Paryank- the son of Vindhya mountain to hold Narmada while she descended down to earth. Prayank agreed to do that and this was how Narmada came down on earth. Initially, the whole world was flooded with the waters of Narmada but at the request of the deities she minimized her size. Narmada blessed Pururva and instructed him to perform the rituals of tarpan in the name of his ancestors so that they became liberated from their sins. Pururva complied and thus by performing tarpan liberated all his ancestors.'

Having finished his tale, Markandeya told Yudhisthira that one who takes a holy dip in Narmada attains virtues similar to that of performing Ashwamedh yagya.

NARMADA MARRIES PURUKUTSU

Markandeya said--'O Yudhisthira! King Purutkutsu was Samudra in his previous birth and had been cursed by Brahma. The descent of Narmada on earth made the deities extremely delighted and they requested Narmada to give them the privilege of experiencing her divine touch. But, Narmada refused to give them that privilege on the pretext that she was still unmarried and it would not be proper for her to do so. All the deities then requested her to become the consort of Purukutsu to which she agreed. This way, Narmada married Purutkusu. After getting married, Purutkutsu requested her to liberate his ancestors so that they could attain to heaven. Narmada readily obliged and this way Purutkutsu contributed in his ancestors' departure to heaven.'

MANU RECEIVES A BOON FROM NARMADA

Markandeya said--'Manu ruled over Ayodhya during Swayambhuva manvantar. One day, while he was going to sleep, he heard a peculiar sound, as if numerous small bells were ringing. He was perplexed and could not ascertain the cause of that sound so he asked sage Vashishtha about this. Sage Vashishtha made a revelation by which Manu was startled. Sage Vashishtha told him-- 'There is a holy place called Tripuri situated at the bank of river Narmada. The sound that you heard last night emanated from the small bells attached to number of aircraft kept on the roofs of the residences of such people who are virtuous. O king! Only Narmada is capable of giving salvation to lowly of sinners.'

Manu was highly impressed and decided to go to Tripuri along with his whole clan. All of them took holy dips in the Narmada and became liberated from all their sins. Manu performed a grand yagya at the bank of Narmada to which all the sages and hermits were invited. Narmada became pleased by his devotion and expressed her willingness to fulfill any wish that Manu desired.

Manu requested her help in bringing down Ganga and other holy rivers to earth. Narmada blessed him and said-- 'In the first half of Treta yuga, one of your descendants named Bhagirath would accomplish this great feat of bringing down holy Ganga to earth. In the second half of the same era other holy rivers like Kalindi, Saraswati, Sarayu, and Mahabhaga would also manifest themselves.'

JAMDAGNI RECEIVES KAMDHENU

Markandeya told Yudhisthira-- 'Sage Jamdagni was a great devotee of Shiva and he lived in Narmadapur. He spent his day chanting mantras in the praise of Lord Shiva. Once, he performed an austere penance, which lasted for a month. Ultimately, Shiva manifested himself from the Siddheshwar Linga and appeared before him. Lord Shiva asked Jamdagni to ask for any thing he wished for. Jamdagni expressed his desire to have Kamdhenu so that he could perform his rituals and other religious obligations without any problem. Lord Shiva blessed Jamdagni and disappeared. The next moment, Jamdagni found Kamdhenu standing in front of his hermitage.

Now, Jamdagni got everything that he wished for. This way, he was a happy and contented life until one fateful day when he was killed by a greedy king named Kartaveerya, who subsequently took Kamdhenu along with him. While the greedy king was still on his way, Kamdhenu cursed him that very soon not only he but the whole caste of Kshatriya would be liquidated by Parshuram, Jamdagni's son, as punishment for having committed such a ghastly sin of killing an innocent sage. After cursing Kartaveerya, Kamdhenu went to her original abode, the heaven. Later on, when Parshuram learnt of his father's slaying, he liquidated Kartaveerya and the whole caste of Kshatriya as had been prophesized by Kamdhenu.

DESCRIPTION OF HELL

Yudhisthira requested Markandeya to describe what a sinner had to go through in Yamaloka and also that what kind of a person should be considered as the most ghastly sinner.

Markandeya replied: 'Donating food to needy people is an extremely virtuous deed and there is no virtuous deed greater than this. A person who donates cereals can be aptly called 'Annadata'- one who provides food. One who has never donated cereals in his lifetime is definite to go to hell and has to tread an arduous path leading to it that is ridden with prickly thorns, pointed nails and other sharp objects. The entire path leading to hell is extremely dark and covered with large pits. The path is also covered with unbearably hot sand spilled all over the place. The sinner is forcibly taken by the Yamdoots despite their reluctance. The sinners repent for the sins they have committed but it is of no use to them, as they will have to reap the fruits of their evil deeds. They have to undergo all sorts of painful experience- they are forced to pass through fire and pits full of filth.

Those sinners who have atoned for their sins are not treated so harshly by the Yamdoots. After they appear before Yamraj, Chitrugupta reminds them of all the sins they had committed. Thereafter, Yamraj orders his attendants to purify the sinners by putting them into the ocean of the Hell. There are Twenty-eight types of hells- Atighora, Raudra, Ghortama, Dukhjanani, Ghorrupa, Tarantara, Bhayanaka, Kalratri, Ghatokata, Chanda, Mahachanda, Chndakolahala, Prachanda, Varagnika, Jaghanya, Avaraloma, Bhishni, Nayika, Karala, Vikarala, Vajravinshti, Asta, Panchkona, Sudirgha, Parivartula, Saptabhauma, Ashtabhauma and Deerghamaya. Each of the latter hell is more horrific than the former. Sinners have to undergo unbearable pain and sufferings in the hell. They are tied up by very hot iron chains and hanged down from trees. Yamdoots attach hot and heavy iron balls to their feet and thrash them with hot iron rods. They are then put into wells of filth. The tongue of a liar is rooted out with brute force and a person, who shows disrespect to his elders and teachers, his mouth is filled with hot sands and boiling oil. Similarly immoral women, who do not fulfill their obligation towards their husbands, are thrown into a horrific hell named Lohakumbh. O Yudhisthira! A man's life is too short and uncertain. One is not sure when his final call would come. So, one should try to lead a virtuous life to the best of his ability.'

VI. NAGAR KHAND

TRISHANKU CURSED BY VASHISHTHA'S SONS

Sutji once narrated the following tale to the assembled sages- In ancient times there lived a mighty king named Trishanku. He belonged to Suryavanshi dynasty. One day, he asked Sage Vashishtha whether there was any such Yagya by performing which, he would be entitled to go to heaven with his physical form. Sage Vashishtha laughed at his naive query and told him that there was no such Yagya by performing which a man could go to the heaven with his mortal body. But, Trishanku was not satisfied by Vashishtha's answer and so he went to ask the same question to Vashishtha's sons who were one hundred in number. But even they corroborated their father's statement. Trishanku got infuriated and threatened them that he would appoint somebody else as his royal priest to get the same yagya performed as they all lacked the required knowledge and competence. Vashishtha's sons also got angry and cursed him to become a 'chandal' (a low caste person). The next moment Trishanku indeed became a 'chandal' and was so much ashamed of himself that he decided to go to the forest after relinquishing his throne. He called his son -Harishchandra and narrated the whole tale of his misery. Before going to the forest he appointed Harishchandra as his successor.

One day, while wandering in the forest, Trishanku met Sage Vishwamitra and narrated his miserable tale to him. Since Vishwamitra was a competitor of Vashishtha, he took it as a golden opportunity to prove his superiority to his adversary. So, he assured Trishanku that he had the requisite power to send anybody to heaven and said- ' I shall help you perform a grand yagya, which would allow you to attain to the heaven with your mortal body. But before that you will have to go on a pilgrimage so that you become pure once again.' Both Vishwamitra and Trishanku set out on a pilgrimage and reached 'Arbudachal' where they met sage Markandeya. After the pleasantries were over, Markandeya asked Vishwamitra about Trishanku, who was standing quietly. Vishwamitra revealed everything to Markandeya and said - I had taken a vow not to take rest until Trishanku got absolved of the evil influence of the curse given by Vashishtha's sons'. I have not achieved success in my objective till date, so I have decided to renounce the world.

Seeing Vishwamitra in such desperation, Markandeya consoled him and instructed him to go to Hatkeshwar where taking a holy dip in Patal Ganga would purify Trishanku and solve all his problems. Both Vishwamitra and Trishanku reached 'Hatkeshwar' and bathed in the holy Patal Ganga. To his pleasant surprise, Trishanku found that he had indeed become purified and all the lowly qualities had vanished within no time. Vishwamitra was delighted as the first condition for Trishanku's departure to Heaven had been met. He decided to go to Brahma loka to request Lord Brahma to be present at the Yagya which was to be performed for the success of Trishanku's departure to heaven. But before leaving, he instructed Trishanku to make all the necessary preparations before his return.

After reaching Brahma loka, Vishwamitra narrated the whole story to Lord Brahma and requested him to grace the Yagya by his presence. Lord Brahma told him that it was just impossible for any mortal to attain to heaven in his physical form but he added that if Trishanku performed the rituals diligently then he would certainly attain to heaven after his death. Vishwamitra did not like Brahma's words and challenged him that no power on earth could stop him from sending Trishanku to Heaven.

VISHWAMITRA COMMENCES NEW CREATION

Vishwamitra then instructed Trishanku to make preparation for the Yagya. After everything was ready, Vishwamitra initiated Trishanku into the rituals of Yagya. Trishanku made offerings in the sacrificial fire at the instruction of Vishwamitra. The deities readily accepted all the offerings that were made to them. This way, the yagya continued for twelve long years but still there was no sign of Vishwamitra's desire of sending Trishanku to heaven getting fulfilled. Trishanku became dejected and told him about his decision to renounce everything and spend rest of his life doing penance as chances of attaining to heaven appeared impossible. He was also sure that Vashishtha's sons would make fun of him if he went back to his kingdom without achieving his objective. But, Vishwamitra consoled him and said--'No power on earth can stop you from going to heaven with your physical form. You just need to have some patience and your desire will be certainly fulfilled.'

Vishwamitra decided to please Lord Shiva as he was convinced that Shiva was the only deity who could help him achieve his goal. He eulogized Shiva by singing hymns of praise in his

name. At last, Shiva appeared before him and expressed his desire of fulfilling any wish of Vishwamitra. Vishwamitra requested Shiva to bestow on him the power of creation just like Brahma had. Lord Shiva blessed him and disappeared. Now, Vishwamitra was eager to test his powers so he began creating different things. He created Sun, Moon, Stars, Oceans, Rivers, so on and so forth. In a short time the whole world was filled by his creations resulting into chaos all over. As the result of his creations, every natural thing became double in number- one that had already been created by Brahma and the second created by Vishwamitra. Now there existed two suns, two moons, so on and so forth. Vishwamitra's amazing deeds had catastrophic fallout on the natural course of events.

Deities were scarred and rushed to seek the help of Lord Brahma. They told Brahma that if Vishwamitra was not stopped the whole world was doomed to destruction. Lord Brahma appeared before Vishwamitra and ordered to stop doing creations. Vishwamitra told him that he was ready to do that if Brahma helped Trishanku attain to heaven with his mortal body. Seeing no other option, Brahma accepted Vishwamitra's condition. This way, Vishwamitra was able to send Trishanku physically to heaven with the help of Lord Brahma.

VII. PRABHAS KHAND

DESCRIPTION OF PURANAS AND UP-PURANAS

Once, while describing the origin of Puranas, Sutji told the sages who had assembled at Naimisharanya--'Lord Shiva had first revealed the contents of Skanda Purana to Parvati at Kailash Mountain. Lord Brahma and few other deities were also present there at the time when Shiva was narrating the tale. Subsequently, Parvati narrated this tale to Skanda, Skanda to Nandi and Nandi to sages like Sanak, etc. and finally Sanak narrated it to Vyasa. Now I am going to tell you the same tale which Vyasa had narrated to me.'

Sutji began by saying-' During ancient times, Lord Brahma once did a very austere penance resulting into the manifestation of all the four Vedas. Later on, all the eighteen Puranas too appeared from his mouth. These eighteen Puranas were- Brahma Purana, Vishnu Purana, Shiva Purana, Bhagawat Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Narada Purana, Markandeya Purana, Agni Purana, Brahma vaivarta Purana, Linga Purana, Padma Purana, Varaha Purana, Skanda Purana, Vaman Purana, Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana, Garuda Purana and Vayu Purana. Apart from these eighteen main Puranas, there are also similar number of secondary Puranas known as Up-Puranas. These Up-Puranas are - Sanatkumar, Narsimha, Skand, Shiva Dharma, Durvasa, Narada, Kapil, Manu, Ushana, Brahmand, Varun, Kalika, Maheshwar, Samb, Saura, Parashar, Marich and Bhargava.'

Sutji then went on to describe the other features of each Purana-' Brahma Purana contains ten thousand shlokas in it whereas Padma Purana contains fifty-five thousand shlokas. Similarly, there are twenty-three thousand shlokas in Vishnu Purana. Vayu Purana contains the tales related with Lord Shiva and it contains twenty-four thousand shlokas in it. Similarly the remaining Puranas like Bhagawat, Narada, Markandeya, Agni, Bhavishya, Brhmavaivarta, Linga, Varaha,

Skanda, Vaman, Kurma, Matsya, Garuda and Brahmanda Purana contain 18,000, 25,000, 9,000, 16,000, 14,500, 18,000, 11,000, 24,000, 81,100, 10,000, 17,000, 14,000, 18,000, and 12,200 shlokas respectively.'

Sutji told the sages that all the Up-Puranas owe their origin to the main Puranas which are eighteen in number. He also revealed to them that they could be categorized into three main types- Satvik, Rajas and Tamas. Satvik Puranas contain the tales of Lord Vishnu while Rajas Puranas contain the tales of Brahma and Tamas Puranas contain the tales of Agni and Rudra. One of the chief characteristics of Puranas is that each of them is divided into five sections- 'Sarg' (Description of how creation began), 'Pratisarga', 'Vansh' (Description of prominent dynasties), 'Manvantar', and 'Vanshanucharit' (Tales related with the descendants of the famous sages).

PRABHAS TERTH

On being asked by the sages about the prominent places of pilgrimage, Sutji named many holy places but according to him Prabhas Teerth was the crown of all the places of pilgrimage and was incomparable. Recounting a tale when Parvati had once asked Lord Shiva the same question, Sutji said-- 'At that time Shiva had told Parvati that Prabhas Kshetra was supreme among all the holy places and capable of liberating a man from all his sins. He had also told her that due to prevalence of sins in Kaliyuga people would not attain virtues despite going on pilgrimages. Shiva had also told her that this was the reason why he had created numerous holy places and kept them secret so the holiness of these places remained intact. I have manifested myself in the form of a divine Shivalinga at Prabhas kshetra. The whole universe has originated from it and merges into it ultimately at the time of deluge. The Shivalinga is called Somanath and very few people are aware of it's existence. This Shivalinga continue to exist since it's manifestation in a particular kalpa named Bhairav long ago. Unfortunately, people of Kali yuga under the influence of all pervading ignorance would fail to recognize the importance of holy places. Such people would try to demean the value of holy places and make fun of those people who go on pilgrimages. Being blinded by their superficial intelligence they would try to find faults with rituals and religion. Such would be the condition of the mortals in Kali yuga that they would criticize everything that is religious and spiritual in nature. How can one expect from these unfortunate people of Kali yuga to understand the significance of Prabhas kshetra and which is revered even by me?'

Parvati, who had been listening to the tale with rapt attention, became even more curious to know about Prabhas kshetra. So she requested Lord Shiva to shed more light on the other important aspects of this sacrosanct place. Lord Shiva, continuing with his description of Prabhas kshetra, said- ' This sacrosanct place has temples of three deities on its three sides. To its east is situated a grand temple of Surya Narayan while there is a magnificent temple of Madhav to it's west. In the same way there is a beautiful temple of goddess Bhavani to the north of Prabhas kshetra and towards it's south lies the ocean. This holy place is spread in the area of five yojans and is divided in three major areas- Maheshwar, Vaishnav and Brahma. There are about one crore temples related with different deities in Vaishnav and Brahma kshetras while Maheshwar kshetra contains one and half crore temples. As the name implies, each area has been named after one God forming the Trinity. Anybody who has the good fortune of living in the central part of

Prabhas kshetra becomes absolved of all his sins even if he has committed most abhorrent sins. The significance of this holy place can be understood by the fact that a man born there does not take a second birth and attains salvation. One whom scholars of the Vedas call 'Kalagni Rudra' is famously known as Bhairav in Prabhas kshetra.

SOMNATH LINGA

Emphasizing on the significance of Someshwar Linga and its deep association with the Vedas, Lord Shiva told Parvati- 'The divine Someshwar Linga exists since time immemorial and will remain for eternity. This revelation descended on me while I was engrossed in a deep state of meditation. Someshwar Linga has deep association with the Vedas and it enhances their sanctity by establishing itself in each of them at different periods of time during the day. During morning time Someshwar Linga establishes itself in the Rigveda, during noon in the Yajurveda, during afternoon in the Samaveda and during evening time it establishes itself in Atharva veda.

DIFFERENT NAMES OF SOMNATH

Parvati curiously asked Lord Shiva about the reason why Somnath was known by so many different names. Lord Shiva said- 'Since the time this divine linga first manifested itself very few blessed souls had the knowledge of its existence. Brahma has a life span of one kalpa at the end of which even he ceases to exist giving way to his successor, a new Brahma. In the same manner this divine linga acquires a new name at the end of each kalpa. The present kalpa is seventh in order as six kalpas have already passed. The name of the present Brahma is Shatanand and this divine linga is presently famous by the name of Somnath. Similarly it was famous as Mrityunjay during the time of Brahma named Virinchi. During second kalpa this linga was famous as Kalagnirudra and the name of Brahma was Padmabhu. The third kalpa had Swayambhu as Brahma and the linga was famous as Amritesh. The name of the fourth Brahma was Parmeshthi in fourth kalpa and the linga was famous as Annamay. In the same way the names of the fifth and sixth Brahma were Surajyeshtha and Hemagarbha respectively and the names of the linga during their periods were Kritiwas and Bhairav Nath respectively.'

Lord Shiva also revealed to Parvati that the next kalpa- eighth in order would have Chaturmukh as Brahma and the divine linga would be known as Pran Nath. Goddess Parvati then asked Shiva about the exact location of the linga in Prabhas Kshetra. Lord Shiva told her that the sacrosanct place of Prabhas Kshetra was situated between the plains of two rivers Vajrini and Nyankumati. He also told her that the eternal linga was not very far from the sea coast. Dwelling at length about the good fortunes of those living in Prabhas kshetra, Lord Shiva told her- ' Anybody who does not abandon this holy place despite his hardships and troubles is certain to attain to my abode. One who has the good fortune of dying at Prabhas kshetra attains salvation. There will be prevalence of sins in Kali yuga. As a result of this people would experience all sorts of hurdles and problems in their lives. To minimize their sorrows and to lessen their miseries, I have personally instructed Ganesh not to abandon this place even for a moment. Of all the lingas present on the earth, Somnath is specially dear to me.'

SIDDHESHWAR LINGA AND SIDDHA LINGA

Describing the reason why this sacrosanct place was named Prabhas, Lord Shiva told Parvati-- 'I dwell in the entire area stretching between the ocean in the south and river Kaureshwari. Being situated at the western coast, this entire area is radiated by Surya's light for a relatively longer period of time and hence it has been named 'Prabhas' meaning luster. This is the reason why there is situated a grand temple of Lord Surya in Prabhas Kshetra. Not far from this Surya temple is situated a magnificent temple of Lord Siddheshwar, which was famously known as Jaigishavyeshwar in ancient times.'

Lord Shiva then went on to describe why Siddheshwar was called Jaigishavyeshwar during ancient times-' There lived a sage named Jaigishavya in previous kalpa. He used to daily worship a Shivalinga named Mahoday, which had manifested on its own. Keeping in view Shiva's fondness for ashes, he used to smear it on his body hoping to please his deity. Not only this he even slept on ashes. He thus led an extremely austere life. At last he was able to please Lord Mahoday by his devotion. When Lord Mahoday appeared before him and expressed his willingness to fulfill anything he wished but Jaigishavya wanted nothing but total devotion in his deity (Mahoday). Lord Mahoday blessed him with immortality and said- ' There would be nobody as powerful as you. Your feats achieved in spiritual things will be unmatched and you would become famous as 'Yogacharya' or teacher of Yoga. One who regularly worships this particular linga which you have been worshipping with such deep devotion till now is certain to get absolved of all his sins.' Having blessed Jaigishavya thus, Lord Mahoday disappeared from his sight. After this incident, Mahoday Linga also came to be known as Jaigishavyeshwar. In course of time, when the Kaliyuga of that Kalpa arrived, some sages named 'Balkhilyas' had gone to the same place and worshipped Lord Mahoday. Similarly, many more sages went there and attained 'siddhi' or accomplishment. This is how this linga came to be known as 'Siddheshwar' (the lord of all accomplishments). There are many holy places in the vicinity like Siddha Linga, which was installed by lord Surya. Anybody who worships this linga on the auspicious day of trayodashi of the bright half of the Hindu month Chaitra attains virtues similar to the accomplishment of 'Pundareek Yagya'.

CHANDRA DEVA EULOGIZES SHIVA

Parvati asked Lord Shiva about the reason Chandra Deva had to install a Shivalinga at Prabhas Kshetra. Lord Shiva replied that Daksha had got married twenty seven of his daughters to Chandra Deva. Chandra Deva was very attached to Rohini, who was one of them and neglected others. When Daksha came to know about this he cursed Chandra Deva as the result of which he lost his luster and started waning day by day. The worried Chandra Deva did an austere penance for thousand of years to please Lord Shiva. At last Lord Shiva became pleased and appeared before him. Subsequently, Chandra Deva got a divine Shivalinga installed by Brahma and worshipped it for thousand of years. Lord Shiva appeared once again and expressed his willingness to fulfill any wish Chandra Deva expressed. Chandra Deva requested Lord Shiva to dwell in the very Shivalinga he had been worshipping till then. Lord Shiva revealed to him that there was no question of dwelling in the Shivalinga as he had never abandoned it in the first place. Chandra Deva had regained his luster on account of his arduous penance. Lord Shiva blessed him and said- 'Since you have regained your luster (Prabha) by dint of your austere penance, this holy place will become famous as 'Prabhas Kshetra'. This linga would be named upon you and become famous as Somnath Linga.'

Having blessed Chandra Deva thus, Lord Shiva disappeared. Later on Chandra Deva instructed Vishwakarma to build a magnificent temple at the sight. He also built a city nearby so that all the priests who were supposed to supervise the rituals of worship could live there.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GETTING ONE'S HEAD TONSURED

Dwelling on length about the significance of getting one's head tonsured at holy places, Lord Shiva told Parvati- 'A man should get his head tonsured whenever he gets an opportunity to visit a holy place because hair are believed to contain all the sins he has committed. There is a holy place called Padma teerth, not far from Somnath temple. A devotee should first get his hair removed at Somnath teerth and then immerse them at Padma teerth. This way he becomes absolved of all his sins. Women should have a symbolical cut of their hair. It is necessary to perform the rituals of tarpan in the names of ancestors after the head tonsuring ceremony. According to the scriptures, an ocean is considered holy and nobody should its holy water in an impure state. While bathing a devotee should chant the following mantra--

'Om namo Vishnu guptaya Vishnu rupaya namah;

Sannidhye bhava devesh sagare lavanambhasi.'

There are about five crore Shivalingas submerged in the ocean near Somnath. There are also other holy places situated nearby like Agnikunda, Padma sarovar etc.

THE EMERGENCE OF SARASWATI IN PRABHAS KSHETRA

On being asked by Parvati about the emergence of river Saraswati at Prabhas Kshetra, Lord Shiva narrated the following tale to her-'The holy Sarswati flowing in Prabhas kshetra constitutes of five different streams - Harini, Vajrini, Nyanku, Kapila and Saraswati. Lord Vishnu once instructed Saraswati to carry 'Badwanal' (Submarine fire) and dump it in the ocean near Prabhas kshetra. After taking permission from Lord Brahma, her father Saraswati flew towards her destination. Ganga became sad at her departure so she asked her as to how could she have a glimpse of her now that she was going to such a distant place. Saraswati consoled Ganga by saying that she would be able to see her whenever she looked eastwards. The swift currents of Saraswati penetrated the earth and reached Patal Loka carrying Badwanal along with her. She continued to move beneath the ground towards her destination. As she reached Prabhas Kshetra, four learned sages, who were well versed in Vedas arrived there and invoked Saraswati to give them the privilege of separate bath by dividing herself in four different streams.

The names of these sages were Hiranya, Vajra, Nyanku and Kapil. While Saraswati was about to comply with their request, suddenly Samudra arrived there and he too expressed the same wish. Thus Saraswati divided herself into five different streams- Harini, Vajrini, Nyanku, Kapila and Saraswati. Eventually, when Saraswati reached near the ocean, Badwanal whom she was

carrying was surprised to see the high tides rising in the ocean. He thought that the Samudra was frightened of his fury so he asked Saraswati-- 'Why is the ocean scarred of me?' Saraswati inflated his ego by saying that who would not be scarred of him. Badwanal was pleased and wanted to grant her a boon. Saraswati remembered Lord Vishnu, who instantly gave his divine appearance in her heart. She narrated the whole story and sought his advise. Lord Vishnu advised her to ask Badwanal to make his appearance small like the eye of a needle. Saraswati, following the advise of Lord Vishnu asked Badwanal to become small like a needle and keep sucking the ocean. Subsequently, Saraswati summoned Samudra and told him to accept Badwanal to which he agreed. This way Samudra devoured Badwanal, who continues to suck the water of the ocean even today as per the instructions given by Saraswati. It is believed that tides are nothing but the manifestation of Badwanal's exhalations. This was how Saraswati emerged in Prabhas kshetra.

PRABHAS -THE ABODE OF TRINITY GODDESSES

Lord Shiva revealed to goddesses Parvati that Prabhas kshetra boasted of possessing many more Shivalingas apart from the famous Somnath Shivalinga. He also gave names of some of the prominent Shivalingas situated over there and said-- 'To the North-East of Somnath temple is situated a grand temple of Lord Sarveshvar Deva, who is also famously known as Siddheshwar. The reason behind this is that Shivalinga over there had been installed by the 'siddhas' (accomplished ones) in ancient times. People who are desirous of acquiring siddhis through this holy place and engage themselves in austere penance. To the east of Siddheshwar temple is situated one more temple called Kapileshwar. It has been named after Sage Kapil, who had installed the Shivalinga over there. A Shivalinga named Gandharveshwar is also situated nearby. This particular Shivalinga had been installed by a gandharva named Dhanvahan. To the east of Gandharveshwar temple is situated Vimalleshwar temple. It is believed that anybody suffering from tuberculosis gets cured after he worships in that temple. Dhandeshwar Linga was installed by Kubera, who was bestowed with the lordship of wealth on account of his austere penance.'

Lord Shiva told Parvati that there were also temples of three goddesses in Prabhas Kshetra apart from Shiva temples. These three goddesses were Mangla, Vishalakshi and Chatwar representing the three types of power--will power, power of action and power of knowledge. Lord Shiva said-- 'The pilgrimage to Prabhas kshetra is believed to be incomplete until and unless these three goddesses have been worshipped. Goddess Mangla represents the power of Lord Brahma (Brahma shakti) while goddess Vishalakshi that of Lord Vishnu. Goddess Chatwar represents my power. Goddess Mangla holds the privilege of getting worshipped first. During ancient times Chandrama did an austere penance for thousand of years and all the deities including Lord Brahma had gone there to witness his amazing feat. At that time goddess Mangla had blessed them and this was how she got her name.'

Lord Shiva then went on to describe how goddess Vishalakshi got her name-' A fierce battle had taken place between the deities and demons during Chakshus manvantara. Lord Vishnu fought along with the deities and helped them in defeating the demons. Demons fled towards the south but were chased by the deities. Realizing that it was not easy to annihilate the demons, Lord Vishnu remembered goddess Mahamaya and sought her help. Mahamaya appeared instantly and looked at Lord Vishnu with her large eyes. This is how she got her name. In the present kalpa she is also known as Lalitoma. To the south of Vishalakshi temple is situated the temple of

goddess Chatwarpriya. Goddess Chatwarpriya is the saviour of people living in that area. Anybody who worships her on the auspicious day of Mahanavami with appropriate rituals is blessed.

DWARKA MAHATMYA: SAGES' QUERIES TO PRAHLAD

Once, few sages asked Sutji about the means by which Lord Vishnu could be realized in Kali yuga- the era dominated by sin and decaying moral values.

Sutji started by describing how Lord Vishnu on seeing the prevalence of sin in Dwapar yuga had to take incarnation as Krishna to liberate the world from the sinners. He also described in detail all the incidents culminating into the killings of many cruel demons -Kaliya serpent, Chanur, Shishupal and ogress like Putna. He gave in depth description of the events leading to the war of Mahabharata and how the infighting among the mighty Yadavas led to their destruction. He told them how a Fowler mistook Krishna's feet to be a deer and killed him.

Sutji also told the assembled sages how the magnificent city of Dwarka had been submerged in the ocean ultimately. He revealed to them that the passing away of Krishna marked the advent of Kali yuga and the situation became even worse. On finding how difficult it was to realize Lord Vishnu in the Kali yuga- the era dominated by sin, some prominent sages decided to seek Lord Brahma's help in this regard. After reaching Brahma loka, they eulogized Brahma and received his blessings. Lord Brahma told them to go to Patal loka and meet Prahlad, the supreme devotee of Lord Vishnu who according to Lord Brahma was in a better position to help them.

All the sages went to Patal loka as per the instructions given by Lord Brahma. There they not only found Prahlad but also the most charitable king-Bali. After the pleasantries were exchanged, they came to the real issue and said-- 'We are very much distressed by the prevailing situation where it appears that the evil forces have overshadowed the virtuous ones. The ways shown by the Vedas are no longer in practice and the Brahmins are being tormented by the Shudras, who have become the rulers. We have come with a request and a desire to know whether there was any possibility of realizing Lord Vishnu in this dark era of 'Kali'. If yes then where can we find Lord Vishnu?'

THE SANCTITY OF DWARKAPURI

Prahlad, being an ardent devotee of Vishnu himself, understood quite well, the desperation with which a devotee seeks his Lord. So he told them-- 'By the grace of Almighty Vishnu, I am revealing to you the name of that sacred place which has remained a secret till now. Kushasthal Puri is a divine city situated on the western coast. Nearby is the place where river Gomti meets the ocean and at this convergent point is situated the sacrosanct city called Dwarawati Puri, where you can find Lord Vishnu in all his glory of sixteen kalas. Blessed be the Dwarka Puri, which The almighty Vishnu has chosen as his abode and where he dwells in his glorious Chaturbhuj form. This is the very place, which even liberates the most fallen sinner from all his sins. There is a famous temple of Lord Trivikram at the bank of river Gomti and not far from this

temple is a divine pond. Anybody desirous of salvation must bathe in this pond for the fulfillment of his wish. It is believed that before leaving for heaven, Lord Krishna had transferred all his divine powers into the Trivikram idol. So, there is no place as holy as Dwarka and if you are desirous of having a divine glimpse of Lord Krishna then you must visit Dwarka.'

All the sages thanked Prahlad for sharing his secrets with them because nobody else except Prahlad was aware of the fact that Lord Vishnu had given Dwarka the privilege of being his abode. These revelations made them more curious about Dwarka, so they requested Prahlad to disclose how the holy Gomti descended down to Dwarka.

Prahlad began by describing the virtues of going on a pilgrimage to Dwarka-- 'The mere resolution of going on a pilgrimage to Dwarka is enough to liberate one's ancestors from the tortures of the hells. Each step that a devotee takes towards Dwarka gives virtues similar to what is attained by performing Ashwamedh Yagya. One who encourages others to go on a pilgrimage to Dwarka certainly goes to Vishnu Dham.'

Prahlad then switched over to the second part of the sages' question and said- 'There is an interesting tale describing how Sage Vashishtha had brought down Gomti from the heaven to earth. At the time of deluge when the whole world had submerged in water, a lotus flower manifested from Lord Vishnu's navel on which was seated Brahma. Lord Vishnu instructed him to perform his duty as a creator to which Brahma agreed. First of all Brahma created his ten manasputras (Sanak, Sanandan, etc.) and sought their help in increasing the population of the world by becoming householders. But, all of them were extremely virtuous and did not show any inclination towards getting married. Ultimately all of them went to the western coast and engaged themselves in austere penance. Their penance continued for a number of years after which 'Sudarshan chakra' appeared before them. As all of them looked up in bewilderment, they heard a heavenly voice -- 'O sons of Brahma! Very soon the almighty Vishnu is going to manifest himself. The 'Chakra' you are seeing is his. You all must perform the rituals of 'ardhya' in the name of Lord Vishnu to show your reverence towards him.' All the Manasputras eulogized Sudarshan-Chakra with deep devotion. All of them wished that there were a holy river, with whose water they could perform the rituals of ardhya. But to their utter dismay there was no such holy river nearby. They then remembered Lord Brahma, who immediately understood what they desired. Lord Brahma instructed Ganga by saying- 'Ganga! Go to the earth, where you would be known as Gomti. Sage Vashishtha will lead you to your destination. Just follow him like a daughter follows her father.'

Finally, when sage Vashishtha followed by Gomti reached their destination, all the Manasputras were delighted. They eulogized Ganga and expressed their gratitude to Vashishtha for bringing Ganga on earth. All of them thanked Vashishtha by saying- 'Since you have brought Gomti on earth, you would be considered as her father.' They offered 'ardhya' to Gomti and subsequently eulogized Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu appeared after being pleased and blessed them- 'Your unflinching devotion in me has pleased me no bound. Since you did this penance with the objective of Moksha (salvation), this place would become famous as Moksha Dayak (giver of salvation). This sacrosanct place would also be called Chakra teerth because of Sudarshan Chakra, who informed you all of my manifestation at Dwarka Puri. I assure you that I won't abandon this sacrosanct place even for a moment.'

This way, all the Manasputras were finally successful in their objective of offering ardhya to Lord Vishnu with the holy water of Gomti. At last, Gomti having fulfilled her mission for which she had descended down to Earth merged with the ocean. Lord Vishnu disappeared from there and Manasputras continued to live there.

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