

the Legend of  
the **DESCENT**  
of the Ganges



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THE LEGEND  
OF THE DESCENT OF  
THE GANGES



FROM THE RAMAYANA  
OF VALMIKI

## TALES AND LEGENDS OF INDIA

### *Volume 1*

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*This series was started with the aim of providing the modern reader with a glimpse of the fascinating, but infinitely complex world of Indian sensibility. Today's mind is at times taken aback by the superimposition of different worlds in the old Indian stories. This characteristic is not the fruit of a laboured aestheticism, but is the sign of a mentality that always tries to describe terrestrial life not in outer terms, but in terms of what it hides. It is a mentality that sees the field of human action as always surrounded and influenced by other forces that one could qualify as cosmic in nature. For the Greek spirit the light of the sun is its natural atmosphere, but for the ancient Indian spirit the sun is a golden veil that hides wonders that it desires ardently to possess. Ours is not a scholarly venture but an attempt to suggest through certain stories, told in as living and simple a language as possible, a key to understanding the culture and genius of India.*

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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*The sense of the infinite, said Sri Aurobindo, is “native” to the Indian mind. Some ancient legends of India illustrate this point in a beautiful way. We invite the reader to abandon for a while his sense of symmetry and measure, and enter a strange and immense world, where all dimensions of space and time are on a huge scale—a world in which “the invisible always surrounds the visible”. He will read the story of a man who has the tremendous audacity to “grapple with the infinite” and sets out to conquer powers that are normally out of the human reach. The reader will marvel at the spirit of ancient Indian culture which, without “fear or littleness”, knew how to set for itself such ambitious goals. To highlight the different aspects of the genius of India is one of the aims of this series, and a “boundless courage” as exemplified in the story of King Bhagiratha, is certainly a characteristic feature of this genius.*

*To Sharmaji,  
With whom, on a night of Ramlila,  
I crossed the Ganges...*

## FOREWORD

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To reconcile heaven and earth and inundate with light the most sombre recesses of our earth, cleanse our wounded humanity in the soothing and regenerating waters of redemption, is perhaps one of the oldest dreams of humanity.

This “rugged” reality that Rimbaud speaks of, this hard matter, this earth that resists, groans and cries out, to dig deep down therein a path for the bright, limpid, purifying waters to pour into, is a story that finds a deep echo of response in all of us. This old human dream of purity and startling whiteness—central to so many mythological tales—does it still not make our



heart beat, perhaps today more than ever, in this age when man has managed to turn the waters of his rivers into foetid poison? To call down onto our poisoned and polluted earth, and us humans and the little pile of ashes which is finally all that our lives amount to, a divine torrent that could cleanse all our stains—to echo Rimbaud again—and deliver us from the obsessive shadows of the past and bring in a new life, is this not what we sometimes dream of when we scrape and tear ourselves on life’s “thorny reality”? Maybe this is why the ancient Indian legend of the Descent of the Ganges creates such a strange resonance in us.

One doesn’t explain a myth, one can’t dissect a story that is symbolical by using the tools of the intellect, except to impoverish it and make it lose precisely that which gives the symbols it contains their strength and sacred resonance. This does

not mean that they contain no meaning, on the contrary they are as laden with meaning as the clouds that herald the monsoon. But one cannot flatten out a storm cloud. Great and powerful truths hide behind these symbols, but they are truths that are round, plentiful, truths of the soul that only the poet sees and can communicate. The poet's words have the power to lift a corner of the veil and show us a fleeting glimpse of the great forces at work behind our lives—forces that we can only guess at but which we would like to befriend, yet do not know how to approach. In this sense, the effect that a legend like this has on us is similar to that of a powerful dream, from which we wake up with the impression of having touched a very deep secret of life.

The story of the Ganges is also the story of Bhagiratha, a hero of extraordinary will-power and courage. We are reminded of what

Sri Aurobindo said about the ancient spirit of India: one of its constant tendencies was the impulse to follow each motive “to its extreme point and to sound its utmost possibility.” The Indian spirit, he adds, knew that “without a ‘fine excess’ one cannot break down the limits which the dull temper of the normal mind opposes to knowledge and thought and experience; and it had in seeking this point a boundless courage and yet a sure tread.” Bhagiratha, the Seer-King, is a symbol of the bold and noble endeavour of that culture, and in its own vivid way the legend shows us what formidable powers the ancient Indians sought to harness.

Christine Devin



*In other times Ganga, the daughter of the King of Snows, known for her independent and capricious nature, lived in the celestial regions. This divine river had its source in Vishnu's big toe and from there flowed forth to water the different Paradises, bestowing on them richness and fertility...*

## THE DESCENT OF THE GANGES

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There was once in another time a king named Sagar who reigned in Ayodhya. In that age kings did not merely follow their whims and pleasure; their duty was to serve a greater sovereign than themselves, an invisible monarch recognised by all: the Great and Abiding Law. Sagar was a scrupulous guardian and faithful servitor of this Eternal Law.

The king of Ayodhya had two wives, Keshini and Sumati, but neither of them had been able to give him a child, which is why, in his anxiety to perpetuate his lineage, he decided to leave the capital with his two wives and depart to the

mountains to live a life of asceticism and prayer for a hundred years. At the end of the hundred years the sage Brighu appeared to him and announced:

“O most pure king, your wishes will be granted, you will engender many sons and you will obtain an unequalled glory. One of your wives will give you a son who will perpetuate your dynasty, while the other will be the mother of sixty thousand young men.”

The two queens were thrilled to hear this prediction from the mouth of the seer Brighu, and approaching him with folded hands implored him to reveal more:

“Tell us, O Brahman, which of us will give birth to a single son, and which will be the mother of sixty thousand young men.”

Brighu in his wisdom replied:

“May the choice of both of you be respected.

Either a single son who will assure your lineage or sixty thousand sons whose courage will be renowned. Which do you choose?”

The two queens expressed their respective desires in the presence of the king. Keshini desired a single son and Sumati preferred sixty thousand sons of renown. After having bowed respectfully before the sage, the king and his two wives returned to the capital.

Keshini duly gave birth to a son who was called Asmanja. Sumati gave birth to a gourd-shaped foetus. When this gourd had matured, it burst producing sixty thousand seeds. These were put into jars filled with milk. After a few years Sumati found herself surrounded by sixty thousand sons, young boys filled with grace and vigour. A little later Asmanja in turn had a son, Anshuman, who was beloved of the people.

After some time Sagar conceived an ambitious

project.

The Great Law demanded that all powerful sovereigns attempt to unify the many surrounding principalities and small kingdoms. He was not allowed to destroy the liberties of these people, nor dethrone their kings. But a sovereign authority had to be established in order to unify the country's military forces and consolidate the Great Law throughout the land. Bearing this goal in mind it was customary to celebrate a great religious ceremony entitled "The Horse Sacrifice". During the ceremony the king would choose a white stallion that became the symbol of his power. The horse was left to freely roam the kingdoms and provinces, followed by a cortege of the king's officers. Where it was allowed to pass, the king's authority was recognised. But to stop the horse was a sign of defiance towards the king.



Sagar, respectful of the Law and conscious of his duty, wanted to unite all the territories from the Himalayas to the Vindhya mountain range under his sceptre. The ceremony then began. The Horse of the Sacrifice was set free to roam the wide ways and Anshuman, the king's grandson, put in charge of following it from afar.

But then, the god Indra, assuming the appearance of an ogre, took possession of the horse and made it disappear. The priests had to interrupt the ceremonies and worried by the bad omen implored the king to find the horse as soon as possible and punish the thief.

The king then called his sixty thousand sons and bade them to go out and search for the horse: "Travel throughout the world, and if you find nothing dig down into the earth until you reach its interior. Lay hands on the Horse of the Sacrifice and the miserable one who stole it.

I will stay here with Anshuman and the priests awaiting your return to complete the sacrifice.”

The sons of Sagar full of ardour and strength rejoiced at being given this task. They travelled throughout the world but couldn't find the slightest trace of the horse. So, following the instructions of their father, the sixty thousand young men whose arms had the power of lightning began to dig into the earth.

All the young men traced out a sizeable plot of land and threw themselves into the task armed with picks as hard as diamonds. The earth groaned and gasped under the blows that tore it apart and a formidable rumbling was heard. These were the Serpents of the depths, the demons and other inhabitants of the underworld, who cried out in rage as they were attacked and torn apart by the weapons of the sons of Sagar. Relentlessly they continued pushing down into the earth

until they had reached the Rasatala, or sixth underground world.

Extremely alarmed, the gods, accompanied by the celestial musicians, the Serpents and demons of the depths, decided to go together and plead to Brahma, the father of creation:

“O Lord,” they implored, faces undone with worry, “the Earth has been pierced by the sons of Sagar. Great Souls and many marine creatures have been exterminated. These princes in their arrogance are accusing all beings they meet of having stolen the horse and interrupted the sacrifice.”

Brahma listened patiently to their complaint and understanding their great state of agitation reassured them:

“I was the creator of many worlds and I assisted in the destruction of all of them. The excavation of the earth has invariably occurred

in every age. Be not afraid, the earth belongs to Vishnu, the supreme protector, and it is he who supports it with his power. The sons of Sagar will soon be consumed by the fire of their anger.”

Greatly relieved by the predictions of the ancient one of creation, the company of gods returned to their domains. Meanwhile the sons of Sagar, discouraged at having found nothing, returned to see their father to whom they communicated their difficulties. Despite all their efforts, they had not found the slightest trace of either the horse or the thief. They would have to review the situation and make new plans. But Sagar, the noblest of kings, did not want to hear any of this, and ordered them to dig more and split the earth asunder, and not to appear before him again until they had found the thief. The sixty thousand princes bowed respectfully before their father and set out again. Each



... the gods, accompanied by the celestial musicians,  
the Serpents and demons of the depths...



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