

## The Story of Gaṅgā

On the Full Moon Night of the Month of Kārttik, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, along with the Gopis, Gods and Goddesses, Yakṣas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, and Apsaras, all engaged in the Rāsa Līlā, the divine dance and drama of immortal nectar. When Sarasvatī sang her beautiful song, Brahmā became so delighted that he offered some jewels and gems to her, and likewise Mahādeva and Kṛṣṇa and all the Gods and Goddesses made presentations to her in thanks for the beautiful song that she sang.

Then Brahmā requested, "Śiva, would you please sing us a song?"

When Śiva began to sing, everyone became enraptured by the sweet quality of his music. The song was so enchanting that Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa merged together in rāsa, they became so filled with nectar, that their union took a liquid form and became known as Gaṅgā. Gaṅgā was born from the union of the Rāsa of Śri Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

Gaṅgā grew up into a beautiful young lady, and she was very lovely. One day, when she saw Kṛṣṇa sitting by himself, Gaṅgā became very amorous, and sat down beside him. Being filled with desire, she looked at him coyly, with so much love and desire in her eyes. Just at that time Rādhā came there with all her attendants. She walked right up to her place beside Kṛṣṇa, looked with angry red eyes at Gaṅgā, who immediately got up, and then she took her seat.

She said, "Kṛṣṇa, we are women. We are naturally simple, and even-tempered by nature. Why are you exciting this young girl to passion and lust? I have seen you do it many times before, and I'm not going to stand for it any more! I saw you in union with Virājā, She who is Free from Passion or Attachment. When She who is Free from Passion or Attachment was making love to you, Consciousness was in union without attachment.

"But when you heard me coming to see you in union with your beloved, out of shame you ran away, and Virājā quit her body and became a river, which even to this day flows near Jagganāth, Puri.

"When I went back home, you went again to Virājā, and called her, 'Oh Virājā, Oh Free from Passion or Attachment!' And hearing your voice she came out of the river to assume her divine form again.

And you united with her and gave her your seed, and from that seed was born Sāgar, the Ocean.

"Another day I saw you in Union with Śobhā, Radiance. And when you saw me coming, again you fled. Śobhā, Radiance, also out of shame, quit her body and went to live with the Moon. That is why the Moon has Radiance. And then you divided her radiance and gave some of it to gems and jewels, some to gold, some to precious stones, some to the faces of beautiful women, some to the bodies of kings.

"I saw you again in union with Prabhā, Lustre. Also out of shame, Prabhā left her body when you ran away. Then you divided her nature and gave some of her qualities to fire, some to the Gods, some to the Sun, some to lions and some to men.

"One time I saw you making love to Śānti, Peace. Oh Kṛṣṇa, Divine Consciousness, you were so absorbed in Union with Peace, enjoying yourself to the utmost. But when you heard the sound of my footsteps coming, I saw you run away. Śānti, too, quit her body out of shame, which you divided and distributed some to the forest, some to Infinite Consciousness, some to the Divine Mother, some to the sādhus, the pure sattvic beings, and some to Dharma.

"Another time I saw you in union with Kṣāmā, Patience or Forgiveness. You didn't even notice me coming, and when I came, I saw the two of you in union together. Your body turned black with shame. Kṣāmā also quit her body, and you divided her among the dharmic and religious persons, and among the Gods, ṛṣis and sādhus.

"Now I fully understand what you are intending to do with this young girl, Gaṅgā! I do not agree to this type of behavior! To think that you would act like this in our own home, no less! You are constantly flirting with every female who comes by. You have no respect, no shame! You do everything in your power to incur my wrath. And now in my anger, I am going to swallow up this Gaṅgā in one sip!"

When Gaṅgā understood how Rādhā might manifest her anger, She took refuge at the feet of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. She withdrew all the waters of the three worlds into His feet, and hid there. Immediately all the waters of the entire earth, the heavens and the atmosphere became dry. Everyone became thirsty. There was no water anywhere. All the waters were with Gaṅgā hiding in the feet of Kṛṣṇa.

Then all the people of the earth were extremely thirsty. They cried out to the Gods in their agony, "Please save us! The Earth

Herself is parched from lack of water. All the plants, animals, all living beings on the earth, all that is, needs water. Please help us!"

The Gods came to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and sang a great hymn of praise. Hearing the supplications of the Gods, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa asked of them, "What is your difficulty?"

Quickly the Gods responded, "Where is Gaṅgā? Without Gaṅgā we shall all perish from thirst. Even at this very time, all life on the earth is crying out for water. Please, if you know why Gaṅgā is hiding, reveal her hiding place and the cause of her withdrawal. We will quickly remove her every adversity, so that She will once again nourish the hearts of creation."

Kṛṣṇa replied, "Gaṅgā is hiding in my feet for fear from Rādhā's anger. Tell Rādhā not to be angry with her, and I am sure that she will come out to solve your difficulties."

Brahmā said, "Rādhā, you are Gaṅgā's mother. You cannot harm your own daughter. Please let her come to nourish creation. We will give her to Nārāyaṇa as his wife, and she will also marry Śiva. She can also marry Sāgar, the Ocean, and in every way we will keep her away from your Kṛṣṇa. But please, you must consent to let her come out of hiding. Without Gaṅgā we shall all perish!"

Rādhā agreed, but Gaṅgā was still afraid to see the anger in her face. Then Brahmā put his kamandalu, the mendicant's water pot, just beside Kṛṣṇa's feet, and Gaṅgā came out from her hiding place and directly filled up his water pot.

Brahmā took that water pot to Nārāyaṇa and said, "Nārāyaṇa, Gaṅgā is a most beautiful Devī. I saved her from the wrath of Rādhā's jealousy. She has come here of her own accord to seek refuge with you, so please marry her according to the rules of the Gandharva form of marriage."

Nārāyaṇa was very pleased to accept Gaṅgā as his wife. Then they spent much time together in happy enjoyment.

So Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Gaṅgā were the three wives of Nārāyaṇa, representing the three guṇas or qualities of Nature in union with Consciousness. Lakṣmī is pure and peaceful Sattva; Sarasvatī, firey and aggressive Rajas; and Gaṅgā, foolish and docile Tamas. All were equally loved and all were equally close to Hari, and all existed together in the same house in harmony.

But one day Gaṅgā looked amorously at her husband, Nārāyaṇa, with a smile on her lips. When Nārāyaṇa saw this, he was startled,

and he smiled back at her. Lakṣmī saw this incident, but didn't take any offense. Sarasvatī, however, being fiery by nature, became extremely angry. She began to shake all over, and in many ways her anger became known.

Lakṣmī, who is of pure and peaceful quality, began to console Sarasvatī in many ways, but the rajas of Sarasvatī could not be appeased. Her face became red, and she trembled with feelings of passion. She began to scold Nārāyaṇa. She gave him such a tongue-lashing for his behavior.

When Nārāyaṇa had received the brunt of Sarasvatī's rebuke, he paused for a moment, and, realizing that this was not the appropriate time to give an answer, he went outside to let the matter cool down.

When Nārāyaṇa left the room, Sarasvatī became fearless, and becoming abusive she called Gaṅgā names and proclaimed, "I will destroy your pride today!"

With much anger she rose and grabbed Gaṅgā by the hair and started to pull at her, trying to strike her. Lakṣmī intervened to try to stop the fighting, and Sarasvatī became violent and cursed Lakṣmī: "Seeing the inappropriate behavior of this shrew, you are standing by like a tree saying nothing in my defence, or with your wishy-washy way, like a river with no course of your own, you are not speaking out to right this injustice; I curse you! You go down to earth and become a tree and a river!"

The Sattva Lakṣmī didn't say anything in reply. She held Sarasvatī's hands and remained silent. But the foolish Gaṅgā became charged with anger. Her lips began to quiver seeing the fiery nature of the red-eyed Sarasvatī, and Gaṅgā cursed her in return. "You, too, become a river and go to the earth, to the abodes of men, and wash away their heaps of sins."

Receiving the curse of Gaṅgā, Sarasvatī also replied with another curse to Gaṅgā: "You, too, go to the earth and become a river, washing away all the sins of humanity!"

When Nārāyaṇa returned into the room, he found that his three wives had all been cursed by each other, and he said to them: "Obviously the world is needing you now, and you should all go and incarnate on earth. When by taking one wife a man does not become happy, imagine how painful it must be to have many wives. When the house is full of quarrels, where will a man go to seek his peace? The forest is better for him than his own house. The pains of disease

or venom are bearable, but the words of a quarrelsome wife are hard to bear. Those who are under the control of the moods of their wives, will never find any peace until they leave the body. I am in no need of many wives. Gaṅgā, you go become the wife of Śiva. Sarasvatī, you go and marry with Brahmā. Let the Sattva Lakṣmī stay here with me. He who has a chaste and obedient wife will attain peace and prosperity, will fulfill his Dharma and attain to Liberation. One man with one wife will be the natural way of peace and harmony. Many wives will be a burden to all."

Then Nārāyaṇa called Brahmā, and said, "Brahmā, you brought Gaṅgā here to be my wife. This is your responsibility. Now I am sending her to Śiva. Please take her back and give her to Śiva."

Gaṅgā got back into Brahmā's kamandelu, and Brahmā took her with him.

### **Kapila Muni curses Sāgar's sons**

Virāja's son, Sāgar, grew into one of the strongest Kings of Ayodhyā. He had dominion over the entire earth. One time, when he was performing the Aśvamedha Horse Sacrifice, Indra came and stole the horse. Sāgar's sons immediately chased after him.

Indra fled with the stolen horse, and left it tied to the gate of Kapila Muni's aśrama. When Sāgar's sons reached the aśrama, they found the stolen horse tied to the gate. Entering inside the aśrama, they began to abuse Kapila Muni: "Why did you steal our father's horse? You have disrupted the sacrifice, which is certainly not the conduct befitting a Brahmin. Now we shall punish you and take back our father's horse."

Kapila Muni became very angry and said, "I didn't steal your father's horse! Why are you barging into my aśrama and disturbing my meditation? I don't know anything about your horse!"

The boys said, "That is a highly unlikely story, Muniji! Here is the horse right here. Now we are going to punish you. Not only are you a thief, but you're also a liar! Here you are caught with the stolen horse, and still you deny any knowledge! Certainly you will be punished severely for this misbehavior!"

Kapila Muni said, "You doubt the word of a Brahmin! I said 'I didn't steal your horse!' I told you, 'I know nothing about your horse,' and still you are insulting me and insisting on punishing me? You are

not believing the word of a Brahmin? I curse you!"

He picked up some water in his hand and he pronounced the curse, and throwing the water at the boys, all the sixty thousand sons of Sāgar were immediately turned into ashes.

When Sāgar heard the news of the death of his sons, he began to cry. Leaving his sacrifice, he retired into the forest to do tapasya. After some time Brahmā came to give him darśana, and asked Sāgar why he was practicing tapasya.

Sāgar inquired, "How can I be reunited with my sons?"

Brahmā said, "You will take birth as the ocean, and when Gaṅgā comes to the earth, she will marry you. When she rushes forward to mix her waters with yours, she will pass the spot where the ashes of your sons now lie. Being touched by her purifying waters, the souls of your sons will attain salvation, and the remains of their ashes will be brought to you in the sea."

Sāgar was extremely pleased with this news, and he began to perform even greater tapasya in order to ask Gaṅgā to come to the earth. He was not successful in his lifetime, and leaving his human form, Sāgar took birth as the ocean.

His successor, Anśuman, continued the tapasya to bring Gaṅgā to the earth, but he, too, was unable to complete that objective. Anśuman was followed by Dīlip. Dīlip, too, performed tapasya for the same purpose, but he, too, was unsuccessful. Dīlip's son was Bhagiratha, who also performed tapasya to bring Gaṅgā down to the earth.

He stood on his one foot, reciting Gaṅgā's mantras throughout thousands of years. Oblivious to the rain, wind, sleet or snow, Bhagiratha continued his discipline without fail. Daily he used to recite the excellent hymn of praise to Gaṅgā, which was composed by Nārāyaṇa himself, with intense devotion:

शिवसङ्गीतसम्मृग्धश्रीकृष्णाङ्गसमुद्भवाम् ।

राधाङ्गद्रवसंयुक्तां तां गङ्गां प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥ १

**śivasāṅgītasammugdha śrīkṛṣṇāṅga samudbhavām ।**

**rādhāṅga dravasamyuktāṃ tāṃ gaṅgāṃ praṇamāmyaham ॥**

Enchanted by the singing of Śiva, Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā were bathing in the perspiration of their union. To that Gaṅgā born of that sweat, I bow down in obeisance.

यज्जन्म सृष्टेरादौ च गोलोके रासमण्डले ।

सन्निधाने शङ्करस्य तां गङ्गां प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥ २

**yajjanma sṛṣṭerādau ca goloke rāsamaṇḍale ।**

**sannidhāne śaṅkarasya tāṃ gaṅgāṃ praṇamāmyaham ॥**

Whose birth took place at Rādhā's festival of sentiments (Rāsa) in the regions of Light, who always resides with Śaṅkara, to that Gaṅgā I bow down in obeisance.

Brahmā was so pleased with Bhagiratha's devotion that he came and awarded the desired boon. Gaṅgā will come down to the earth and wash away the sins of man. But She will come down to the earth with such force that she will wash away the earth itself. Brahmā said, "Call upon Lord Śiva to marry with Gaṅgā. From that union he will be able to take some of the force away from her so that her falling to the earth will not destroy the creation."

Then Bhagiratha began a great tapasya for Lord Śiva, and after thousands of years Śiva was pleased and gave the vision to grant the boon. "Śiva, please take Gaṅgā as your wife. Unite with her and take away her force so that she does not destroy creation."

Śiva agreed to marry her and to take her waters onto his own head in order to let them come down to earth at a lesser speed. Then Gaṅgā could fall to earth without washing away all of creation.

Then Brahmā said to Gaṅgā, "Everything is arranged. You will marry Śiva, as Nārāyaṇa has spoken. Also you will have to go down to earth and wash away the sins of men, according to the curse of Sarasvatī. Then you will unite with Sāgar, the ocean, and together you will purify and nourish the earth."

"But," objected Gaṅgā. "If I go down to earth to wash away the sins of men, then my waters will become polluted. Certainly I will become foul and an object of hatred and scorn for all. If I purify the sins of men, who will purify me?"

Then Brahmā thought for a moment and replied, "As many sādhus and pure souls who come to your banks and sing the names of the Divine Mother, or of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma or Śiva, or any other names of the divine, their divine chanting will purify your waters and make them the object of the greatest respect. In fact no pūjā will be complete without the offering of your waters. No matter where worship is being performed, your presence will be invoked."

Then Gaṅgā was very happy, and she agreed to Brahmā's arrangements.

### **Bāli and the Vāmaṇ Āvatār**

Once upon a time there was an aśura named Bāli. He was an extremely Dharmic and truthful man, even though he was an aśura and a representative of the forces of duality. He observed the code of ethics and stood by his word with the steadfastness of truth and honor.

At this time he was making the sacrifice by which he would become Lord of the Earth. He was doing a great tapasya which was frightening to all of the Gods, and all of the Gods assembled together and said, "If Bāli becomes the Lord of the earth, then he will make everyone on earth neglect us Gods and worship the forces of division. We must do something to stop this tapasya. You know Śiva. You know Brahmā; even Viṣṇu is liable to give him the boon of his choice if he does not waver in his sādhana. We must find a way to disrupt this yajña, and to make sure his worship is without fruit."

The Gods went to Vaikuṅṭha, the home of Lord Viṣṇu. After singing a great hymn of praise to Lord Viṣṇu, the Gods said, "Oh Lord, Bāli is doing a yajña by which he can become the Lord of the earth. We must find a way to stop him. If he is successful, he will teach mankind not to worship the Gods, and he won't stop until everyone is so tangled up in the webs of karma, that they will all say, 'Who has time for worship or meditation?' Please help us Lord."

Viṣṇu thought for a moment and then replied, "I've got an idea. Certainly I can put a stop to the threat of Bāli's taking over the earth. Gods, I shall help you in your purpose."

Bāli was sitting by the sacrificial fire, offering the mantras by which he could attain his desired objective. Viṣṇu assumed the Vāmaṇ Āvatār, the form of a dwarf. He was dressed as a Brahmiṇ, wearing a mālā of sacred beads around his neck. He was shining with the light of tapasya, radiant with light. And he walked into the sacrificial area beside the blazing fire.

Everyone was completely amazed. The light of the little dwarf was even greater than that which emanated from the sacred fire. When Bāli saw the radiance of the guest who had come to bless his sacrifice, in majestic tones he welcomed the dwarf and thanked him

for giving the blessing of his presence. "Ask me for a boon," he submitted in kingly fashion.

The dwarf, Vāmaṇ, replied, "I am so pleased with the devotion you are showing in this sacrifice. I have every intention of blessing you with the highest attainment. You see, I am a poor Brahmiṇ, and I need a piece of land of my own where I can maintain my body. Though this body is small, whenever I want to sit to perform some great tapasya, someone might come along and cause me to vacate the space which I have been occupying. Oh King, if you would like to grant me one boon, then please give me a little space to keep my body."

The King Bāli replied, "I am the King of the nation, ruler of the largest lands and estates. When I complete this sacrifice, I am going to be the Lord of the Earth. I will have at my command villages, towns, cities, countries. Yes, even nations obey my every order. You choose any amount of land that you want, and I shall grant it to you for sure!"

Then the Vāmaṇ Āvatār thought for a moment and said, "Oh King, you can see that I am not a very large man. Really I am quite small. I am a Brahmiṇ, and my karma makes me meditative, and I only want to practice tapasya. I don't have the temperament to be the chief of a village, or to run the administration of a town, or even to govern cities or states, not to think of nations or empires. I just want enough land so I can sit in my asāna in meditation without being disturbed! Oh King, please give me that much land as my foot covers three times. I ask you for three steps of land."

The King said, "Holy Brahmiṇ, I am the Ruler of nations, about to become the Lord of the entire earth, ask for villages for your sustenance, ask for great tracks of land for your aśrama, ask for cities for your devotees, you can have whole areas of mountains, lakes, fields, blooming with the abundance of nature! What will you do with three steps of land?"

"Please excuse me, King. I just need a place to put my body. I am not concerned with storing up treasures for the future. I am a Brahmiṇ. My only job is to worship God, not to run countries or cities of men. Now, if you want to grant me my wish, allow me to pace off three steps of land, and that will be my place."

The King went to his minister to seek his advice. He said, "Minister, a Brahmiṇ has come, radiant with a shining aura. I asked

him to choose a boon from me, and he asked for three steps of land to call his own, so he could do tapasya without fear of being disturbed. I told him to take a whole village or even many villages, or any amount he liked. He replied that he is a Brahmiṇ and he wants to do tapasya. He does not want to be burdened with administration of other people's lives, he is not a tax-collector, nor a banker, nor a politician. All he wants is a space of his own where no one has the right to disturb him in his meditation. What do you think?"

The Minister replied, "Don't trust him. There is something funny about all of this. No one has controlled his greed to such an extent. Don't do it!"

The King said, "I already gave my word that I would give him any amount of land that he would like, and I am bound by that promise. If I don't fulfill my promise, and if I turn out to be a liar, I will lose all the merits that I hope to attain by this sādhana. So I am really obligated to give him the three steps of land."

The Minister said, "If you commit some sin, it is possible to make atonement. So if you commit the sin of not fulfilling the promise of your vow, then you can make atonement for it. But don't give him three steps of land! Something is not right!"

The King said, "I am very much afraid to incur the wrath of a Brahmiṇ by denying the promise that I have already given. He might curse me in his anger, and put me into a worse position than I am in right now. I think I had better give it to him."

The Minister took his leave with great reluctance.

The King returned to the Brahmiṇ and said, "Okay, radiant Brahmiṇ. I concede your wish. Choose the three steps of land as you desire."

Suddenly the dwarf form of Lord Viṣṇu began to grow in immensity until his foot covered the entire earth. And he said, "This is my first step. All the earth belongs to me."

He kicked his foot up into the air, and that foot permeated the furthest reaches of the heavens. And he said, "This is my second step. All the heavens belong to me."

And he turned to the King Bāli and said, "Oh King, with my first step all the earth belonged to me. With my second step all the heavens belonged to me. Where else is remaining for me to put my third step? What is left for me to claim as my own?"

Bāli, the King, bowed to the feet of Lord Viṣṇu and pointing to the top of his own head said, "Right here, my Lord. Please put your foot on my head."

Then Viṣṇu put his foot on Bāli's head, and that, too, became the property of the Lord.

Well, when Viṣṇu's foot went up through the heavens and went through to the other side of infinity, Brahmā was sitting up there in his residence in the Satya Loka. He was contemplating and singing the Vedas, when suddenly the foot came right up through the edge of infinity, and entered into the Satya Loka, whereupon Brahmā exclaimed, "Oh my Goodness! It's Viṣṇu's foot! What a wonderful blessing!" And he took his kamandelu filled with the waters of Gaṅgā, and began to pour those pure waters over Viṣṇu's foot in an offering of hospitality which is the duty of any householder. As he washed Viṣṇu's foot, the waters came dripping down, and Gaṅgā took flight through the cosmos.

She came off from Viṣṇu's feet and she started to gain velocity in her trip down to the earth. She passed by the seven ṛṣis who were meditating in the heavens, the constellation of the Big Dipper: Vasiṣṭha, Viśvāmitra, Gautam, Bharadvāja, Atri, Jamadagni and Kaśyapa. She washed past all of them, and none of the ṛṣis could slow down her force. She kept on coming with such speed that they all feared they would be washed away by her, so they sent her over to Drūva, the North Star or Pole Star.

Drūva exclaimed in terror, "Help! I can't stop the force of that rushing water!"

By now Gaṅgā was falling at tremendous velocity, and she was so strong everyone ran from her path in terror. "She will wash away anything in her way. No one can stop Gaṅgā!"

They all began to pray, "Śiva, please take Gaṅgā as your wife. Unite with her, and take away the force of her power. Then send her down to the earth in a nice way, so she doesn't create any harm."

Then Śiva assented, "Okay, I'll come and save the universe."

Fearlessly he took his seat right in the middle of Gaṅgā's path, and let her fall right onto his head. Hitting his head, the force was broken, and she spilled over and came down to the earth in order to fulfill the blessing given to Bhagiratha. That is why one of her names is Bhagirathi.

Gliding over the earth, she washed all of the sins of men away. In her course down from the mountains, she nourished and purified the earth. As she crossed the plains and wandered across the great land of Bhārat, the Land where the Light of Wisdom always Shines, she came across the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of Sāgar, the Ocean, who were burned to death by the curse of Kapila Muni. As soon as her purifying waters touched those ashes, all the souls of those sons were liberated, and rose up into heaven. Gaṅgā picked up the ashes of those sons and carried them to the Ocean.

When the Ocean saw that Gaṅgā was coming and carrying the ashes of all his departed sons, his heart leapt with joy! He was so happy. He remembered the boon he had received of being able to marry with Gaṅgā, and he accepted his beloved wife and allowed her to mix her waters with his in loving embrace.