UNIT 4: HISTORICITY OF NARAKA AND HIS SUCCESSORS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- know Naraka in different Texts like the Mahabharata and the Puranas,
- discuss different stories on Naraka and his successors.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

Dear learners, hope all of you have heard about king Naraka of Kamarupa. But historicity of Naraka is still questionable. Most of the Indian texts and scholars prefer to call him as a mythological king of Kamarupa rather than a historical king. Now in this unit we are going to discuss the historicity of Naraka through different Texts.

4.3 NARAKA IN DIFFERENT TEXTS

4.3.1 Naraka in the Mahabharata :

The Mahabharata allows an insight into the earlier myths of Naraka and his successors. He is recognized as being one of the ancient kings of Assam with the name Bhauma (son of the Earth or



Asura- A demon.

Kuru- A royal dynasty

Rajasuya- A sacrifice performed by a monarch as a mark of his subduing all other kings.

Bhumi) and ***Asura***. He is referred to have stolen Aditi's ear-rings and was slained by Krishna Vasudeva (a form of Lord Vishnu) who recovers the ear rings. In a later stanza, it is narrated that Lord Vishnu killed Naraka at the insistence of Indra, whose status was threatened by Naraka. Likewise, it is also narrated that the Earth, mother of Naraka, secured the *Brahmastra* (a powerful weapon) for her son from Lord Vishnu. It was later passed on to his son, Bhagadatta.

The Mahabharata contains numerous references to Naraka's son, Bhagadatta. Bhagadatta was the ruler of Pragjyotisha and a friend of Indra, king of gods as well as of Pandu, the ***Kuru*** Prince. He is said to have presented an iron vessel and swords with ivory hilts to Yuddhisthira on the grand occasion of the ***Rajasuya*** sacrifice. He also provided soldiers to the Kuru king Duryodhana which included the Chinas and the Kiratas. He fought for Duryodhana in the war of Kurukshetra. He is said to have been killed by Arjuna and so was his son, Vajradatta while guarding the horse of Yuddhisthira for the *Ashwamedha* sacrifice (horse sacrifice).

We must however not attach undue importance to the Naraka legends especially the association of Bhagadatta and Vajradatta with the heroes of the Kurukshetra war, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, as the historicity of the legends of the Kauravas and Pandavas and the war of Kurukshetra has yet to be satisfactorily determined. Moreover, the dates of the war are a matter of confusion as the traditions regarding the war are conflicting.

One very interesting aspect of the legend as mentioned in the Mahabharata is the fact that Naraka is not regarded as the son of Earth or Bhumi, as depicted in the Puranas. But his son Bhagadatta resided in the hilly region of the Himalayas and other hill ranges of Assam can be accepted because his followers, the Kiratas, were Himalayan mountaineers of Mongolian stock, while the Chinas were Tibetan Mongoloids. It is stated in the Digvijaya section of the *Sabha Parvana* of the *Mahabharata* that Bhagadatta

was known as dwelling in the eastern sea with his followers and people who lived along the sea coast. It is said that Arjuna during his march to the north, came across the Pragjyotisha king, whom he defeated. Similarly, Bhima is mentioned as having defeated the *Mlechchha* king and his people of the sea coast, while he was on his expedition to the east. He is said to have reached Lauhitya (Brahmaputra). Historian K.L. Barua suggests that the sea mentioned above should be located in and around the Sylhet and Mymensingh district (now in Bangladesh). He also suggests the connection of the said area, in ancient times, with the Bay of Bengal. Early epigraphic records of the kings of Assam refer to the Lauhitya or Brahmaputra as the Lauhitya Sagara or Sindhu (Sea). There is a tradition in ancient times which mentions of the eastern sea extending to Devikota (West Bengal). This gives an explanation of the mentioning of the Lauhitya along with the reference to the people living alongside the sea coast.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Fill in the blanks:

Q.1: Pandu was a ……Prince.

Q.2: Naraka is said to have been slained by……..

4.3.2 Naraka in the Puranas

The Puranas give a different version of the story revolving round Naraka. According to the *avatara* (incarnation) theory, the Hindu god Vishnu descends to earth in ten different forms or incarnations to save mankind. Rama and Krishna are the two most famous incarnations of Vishnu. The avatara theory traces the legend of Naraka to the theory of his being born of the *Varaha* (boar) form of Vishnu and *Bhumidevi* or Earth. The *Satapath Brahmana* describes the rescuing of the Earth from the ocean by Prajapati in the form of a boar. The *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, of a later date, mentions

the boar to be of a black colour and having a hundred arms. In the later mythology, the god Vishnu is regarded as Prajapati. The *Harivamsa* gives a hint of the birth of Naraka as a result of the union of Earth and her saviour, Vishnu.



LET US KNOW

Harivamsa is assumed to date back to the beginning of the 5th century C.E. It is a supplement of the *Mahabharata*, and sometimes called a Purana.

The Varaha Avtara of Book I of the Harivamsa speaks of the Earth being rescued. Book II records the speech as given by Earth to Krishna Vasudeva. This speech can be assumed to be spoken to a husband. She says: “It is you, O Govinda who gave him and it is you who have killed him. The Vishnu Purana too puts similar speech in the mouth of the earth: “He whom thou gavest me has now been killed by thee”.

The Harivamsa version of the legend of Naraka narrates the story as follows. Indra, the king of gods, visits Dvaraka and pleads with Krishna to punish Naraka who was misbehaving with the gods, women, and sages. He tells Krishna about Naraka’s stealing Aditi’s ear rings, the rape of Tvashtri’s daughter, the seizure of 16100 girls, gandharvas, apsaras etc. Hearing this Krishna readily agreed and left for Pragjyotisha on the back of his Garuda along with his wife Satyabhama. Krishna had to wage a war with Naraka’s warriors like Muru and his son, Nisunda, Hayagriva and Panchanda. In the end, Naraka was slain by Krishna. The mother of Naraka returned Aditi’s earrings. Krishna found many treasures of Naraka, among which were Varuna’s umbrella, Maniparvata (a solid heap of precious gems and stones), jewels, a large number of elephants, horses, birds and other animals. These were all sent to Dvaraka.

The Vishnu Purana leaves out many details as given in Harivamsa due to textual corruption. Kaseru is not mentioned in the Vishnu Purana. The girls captured by Naraka, are called maidens

of gods, saints, demons and kings".

The Bhagavat Purana, composed at a later date than the Vishnu Purana, highlights the speech of Earth (Bhudevi) to Krishna. The Maniparvata as spoken in the earlier texts is now called Amaradristhana, meaning some peak of mount Sumeru, the abode of the gods.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the questions:

Q. 3: What does the Avatara theory say about naraka?

.....

Q. 4: What has the Satapatha Brahmana have to say about the legend of Naraka?

.....

Q.5: Name the vehicle of Krishna.

.....

Q.6: Satyabhama was the wife of .....(fill in the blanks)

- **Naraka in the Kalika Purana**

The Naraka story finds more elaboration in the Upapurana entitled *Kalika Purana*. It was composed most probably in the Brahmaputra valley itself. The work dates back to a period earlier than 1000 C.E. as it was quoted by Nanyadeva (c. 1097-1133 C.E.), Apararka (c. 1115-1140 C.E.) and Ballalasena (c. 1159-1179 C.E.). This is refuted by R.C.Hazra who has shown that the Kalika Purana cited by Nanyadeva, Aparaka and Ballalasena was an earlier work composed somewhere during the seventh century C.E. However the extant Kalika Purana is a later work composed in between the tenth or the first half of the eleventh century C.E.

According to the *Kalika Purana*, the result of the union of the boar (*Varaha* incarnation of Vishnu) and Bhudevi, was a powerful son whose birth was delayed for the good of the world. Vishnu advised the earth to carry the son in her womb until the end of *satya*

yuga. Meanwhile Janaka, the ruler of Videha, was issueless and had started a sacrifice for the purpose of having a child. The result was the birth of two sons and a girl. The girl (Sita) had to be dug out as the child lay inside the earth. Under the advice of Narada, Janaka dug the earth and the earth handed over the child to Janaka and requested him that he should bring up her son, who was to be born from the very ground where Sita was born. As said, so it happened, and after the destruction of Ravana by Rama (the avatara or incarnation of Lord Vishnu), the earth went to the very sacrificial ground where Sita was born and gave birth to Naraka. Vishnu blessed the child and said that he would be a ruler of a concealed kingdom and as long as he would possess human nature he would prosper, but once he was devoid of their nature he would bring about his own ruin. The Earth informed Janaka, who adopted the child and Gautama named him as Naraka as the child was found in a skull. For sixteen years, Naraka grew up under the protection of Janaka and nursed by earth (under the name of Katyayani). Shortly after the completion of his sixteenth year, Vishnu took him to Pragjyotisha city. It was situated in the middle of Kamarupa inhabited by the Kiratas who worshipped Kamakhya as the principal deity and also Shiva. Following the advice of Vishnu, Naraka killed the Kirata king Ghataka and drove the Kiratas to the east beyond the Dakkeravasnini (Dikhou river). The coronation of Naraka was performed by Vishnu. The kingdom of Naraka extended from the Karatoya to the eastern territory bounded by the shrine of goddess Dikkeravasini Naraka's kingdom was the place of residence of Mahamaya Yogini (Kamakhya) besides Lauhitya 'son of Brahma' or Brahmaputra and other principal gods and goddesses. The land came to be known as Kamarupa wherein were settled Brahmins who had an expertise in the Vedas, the members of the four varnas and others by Vishnu. Meanwhile, Naraka married the princess of Vidarbha, Maya and soon he was presented with a lance (sakti) and was advised by Vishnu that the weapon was not to be used against men, unless for self defence, that he should worship only

goddess Kamakhya and never bring harm upon the Brahmanas, gods and sages lest he should invite his death.

For many years, Naraka ruled wisely and there was prosperity in his kingdom. But soon he came under the influence of the Asura (demon) king Bana of Sonitpur (identified as Tezpur in the district of Sonitpur). Bana was a worshipper of Shiva and soon Naraka started showing disrespect and dishonour towards Vishnu, Kamakhya and the Brahmanas. It is said that once sage Vasishtha came to worship Kamakhya but was not permitted to do so by Naraka. The angry sage cursed Naraka that he would be killed by Vishnu in the human form and that as long as Naraka was alive, Kamakhya would disappear from the earth. Naraka now kept closer terms with Bana and tried to please Brahma by standing for one hundred human years on the bank of Lauhitya. Brahman was pleased and granted him boons but with a caution that he was not to molest Tilottama and other heavenly damsels, born on earth before the coming of Naraka to his capital. Acting on the advice of Bana, Naraka soon attacked the gods, sages and others. He was assisted in his activities by his four sons: Bhagadatta, Mahsirsha, Madavat and Sumalin and also by Hayagriva, Maru and other demons. Naraka stole Aditi's earrings and perpetrated much havoc on earth and in heaven. At this, Vishnu took the avatar of Krishna and went to Pragjyotisha where he killed Naraka. Naraka's son Bhagadatta was made the king and also received his father's lance. Krishna returned to Dvaraka with the earrings, the Maniparvata and Varuna's umbrella.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 7: Match the following:

i) Janaka	a) a sage
ii) Katyayani	b) sons of Naraka
iii) Bana	c) ruler of Videha
iv) Vasistha	d) ruler of Sonitpur
v) Bhagadatta, Madavat	e) mother of Naraka

4.4 DIFFERENT STORIES ON NARAKA AND HIS SUCCESSORS

In the late medieval period, the Naraka legend is further embellished by additions and alterations. Based on Kasiram Das's Bengali *Mahabharata*, which was composed about the beginning of the seventeenth century, Bhagadatta is regarded in Assam and Bengal as the father of the wife of Duryodhana (Bhanumati). Some other traditions place Bhagadatta as having married the sister of Duryodhana. Even though such relationship between Bhagadatta and Duryodhana is unknown in the Puranas, yet the people believe that a tank in Guwahati was excavated on the solemn occasion of the marriage between Duryodhana and Bhanumati.

Kalhana's *Rajtarangini* mentions a similar tale where it mentions that king Meghavahana of Kashmir attended the Svayamvara of Amritaprabha, daughter of the king of Pragjyotisha. He then weds her and receives the umbrella of Varuna. When Meghavahana returns the parasol to Varuna, he is told that the umbrella was carried away by the father of his father-in-law. This seems to point that Naraka's grand daughter was Amritaprabha.

Harshacharita mentions the name of Pushpadatta among the lists of the ancestors of Bhaskaravarman and placed him after Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. This is not corroborated however by any other source. Some writers refer to Puspadatta as the son of Bhagadatta, who was killed by Nakula in the Kurukshetra war. As against the early literary and epigraphic traditions, the medieaval inscriptions of Assam tend to elaborate the myths of Vajradatta. It is said that when Bhagadatta took over as the lord of Pragjyotisha, his younger brother, Vajradatta went to the forest and started penance to his Isvara (Siva). He was successful and he was blessed by his god to be the lord of Uparipattana and also the future lord of Pragjyotisha. Verse 5 of the Doobi copper plate refers to many horse sacrifices being performed by Vajradatta. The myths of Naraka and his successor are also highlighted in the works like *Yogini Tantra, Haragaurisamvada, Ain-i-Akbari (*completed *in 1595* C.E.*)* and *Mandala Panji.*



4.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learn about,

- the mention of Naraka and his successors in the Mahabharata.
- a different version of the strory related to Naraka and his successor.
- the Naraka story in a more elaboratie way in the Upapurana entitled *Kalika Purana*, probably it was composed in the Brahmaputra valley itself.
- besides the stories of the epics and the Puranas related to the hist oricity of Naraka and his successors, there were other sources too where we can find the presence of Naraka. These were, Kasiram Das's Bengali Mahabharata, Kalahana's Rajtarangini etc. he myths of Naraka and his successor are also highlighted in the works like *Yogini Tantra, Haragaurisamvada, Ain-i-Akbari (*completed *in 1595* C.E.*)* and *Mandala Panji.*



4.6 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003): *The Comprehensive History of Assam* (Volume-I) Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati.

2) Choudhury, P.C.: *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th century* C.E.



4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Krishna.

Ans to Q No 2: Kuru.

Ans to Q No 3: According to the avatar theory, Naraka was born out of the union of Vishnu (in his boar form) and earth.

Ans to Q No 4: The Satapatha Brahmana tells about the rescuing of the earth from the ocean by Prajapati in the form of a boar (*Varaha*).

Ans to Q No 5: Garuda.

Ans to Q No 6: Krishna.

Ans to Q No 7: i) -c, ii) -e, iii) -d, iv)-a, v) -b



4.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 50 Words)

Q 1: Who was Bhagadutta?

Q 2: What does *Harivamsa* speak about the birth of Naraka?

Q 3: The Kalika Purana was composed at .....Valley.

Q 4: Who was Naraka?

B) Short Questions (Answer each and every question within 150 words)

Q 1: What did the *Mahabharata* say about Naraka?

Q 2: What does the *Rajtarangini* say about Naraka?

Q 3: Write a short note on historicity of Naraka in Kalika Purana?

C) Long Questions (Answer each and every question in between 300-500 words)

Q 1: Discuss the historicity of Naraka in your own words.

Q 2: Describe the Naraka story as described in the *Kalika Purana*.

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