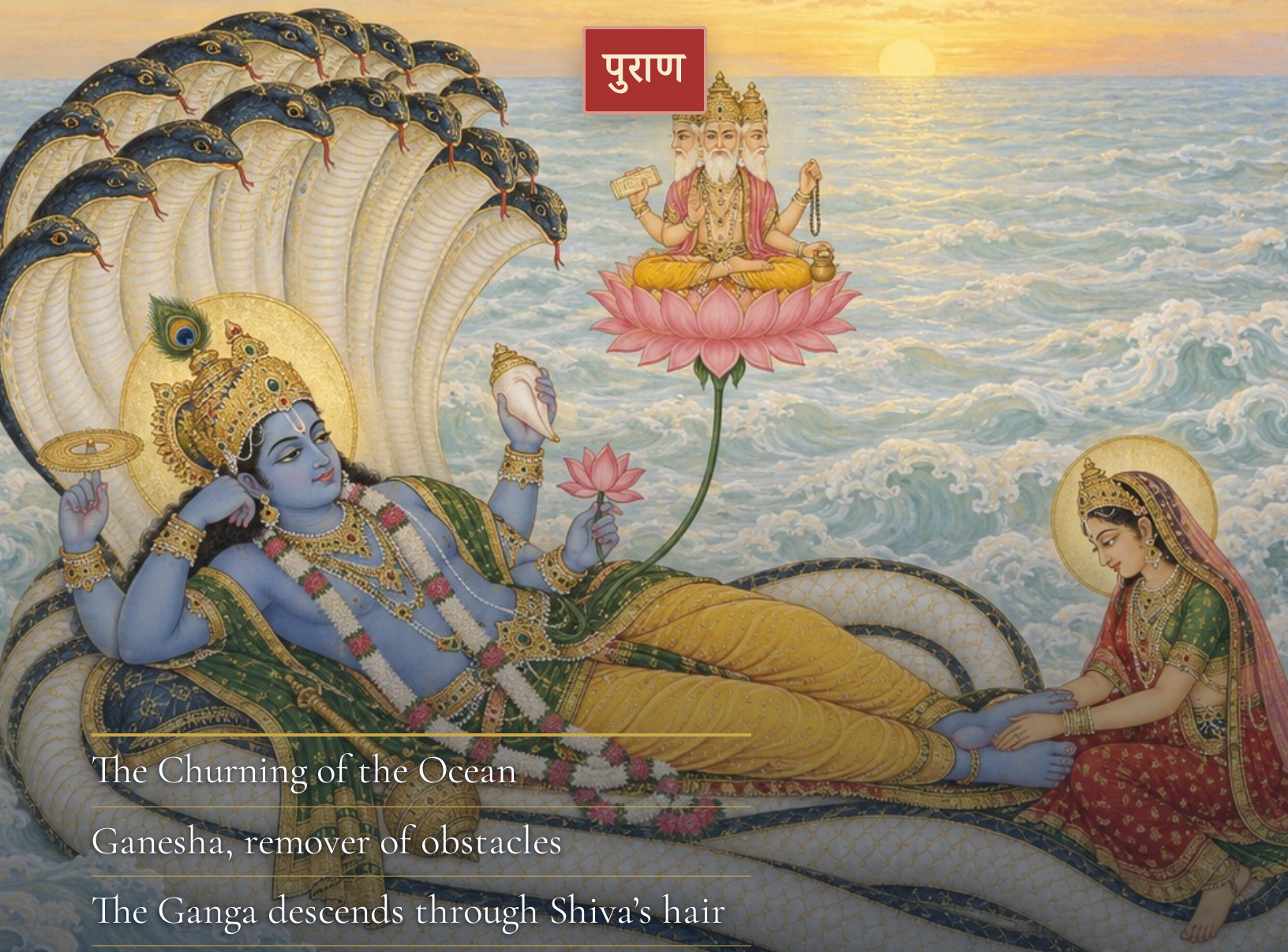
India

Purāṇa · Itihāsa

पुराण



The Churning of the Ocean

Ganesha, remover of obstacles

The Ganga descends through Shiva's hair

Garuda, Hanuman and the serpent Shesha

20 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE LAND

THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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Garuda, king of birds, with wings spread and a serpent in his talons

INTRODUCTION

Hindu Mythology Field Guide

Names, attributes, and narratives from the creation stories, the great deities, the divine creatures and the epic tales of the Hindu tradition — organised so each entry can be used as a search target in deliberate pareidolia practice.

In this tradition rivers are goddesses, mountains are the homes of gods, and the whole land of India is mapped by pilgrimage routes to sacred places. Story and geography are already bound together.

Rivers are goddesses, mountains are the homes of gods.

CONTEXT

How the Hindu Tradition Holds Its Myths

Hindu mythology is vast and plural. The same deity may appear in many forms, and stories differ between regions, languages and schools of devotion. Many stories remain sacred scripture for hundreds of millions of people today, recited, performed and celebrated in festivals.

Story and geography are already bound together.

SOURCES

The Vedas (from c. 1500 BCE) hold the oldest hymns. The two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (which contains the Bhagavad Gita), took shape over many centuries. The Puranas (c. 4th–16th century CE), such as the Bhagavata and Vishnu Puranas, gather the stories of creation, the avatars and the gods. Regional and Tamil traditions add many local tellings.



Shiva Nataraja dances within a ring of fire

AN INDIAN PRECEDENT

In the Ramayana, the line of shoals between India and Sri Lanka is told as the bridge built by Rama's army of monkeys and bears to reach Lanka — a landscape feature named for a story and still called Rama Setu. The river Ganga is the goddess Ganga, descending from heaven through Shiva's hair.



The Churning of the Ocean — Mount Mandara on the tortoise Kurma, the serpent Vasuki as the rope; Lakshmi and the amrita rise

THE FEATURE

The Churning of the Ocean

Samudra Manthana

Gods and asuras churn the cosmic ocean for the nectar of immortality.

Using Mount Mandara as the churning rod and the serpent Vasuki as the rope, they pull back and forth. Vishnu, as the tortoise Kurma, supports the mountain. Treasures rise from the ocean, among them the goddess Lakshmi and the amrita.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A mountain on a turtle's back; a serpent wound around it, pulled from both ends.

Ganesha

Elephant-headed remover of obstacles.

Parvati's son, beheaded by Shiva at the door and restored with the head of an elephant. He rides a mouse and is honoured at the start of every undertaking.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

An elephant head with a curled trunk.



Ganesha, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles, with his mouse

THE TWO BEST FIRST TARGETS

1. The naga or great serpent — Vasuki in the Churning of the Ocean, or Shesha, on whom Vishnu rests; long coastlines and river courses suit it. 2. Ganesha — an unmistakable elephant-headed figure. Strong alternates: Garuda with wings spread, Hanuman leaping, and the tortoise Kurma.



I · CREATION & COSMOS

I The Making and Ordering of the World

Cosmic eggs, a churned ocean and a river brought down from heaven.

Above: Hiranyagarbha, the golden egg floating on the waters

Hiranyagarbha

The Golden Embryo

The cosmic golden egg.

A Rigvedic image of creation: the universe begins as a golden womb or egg floating on the waters, from which the creator emerges.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

An egg shape floating on water.

Brahma on the Lotus

The creator, four-faced.

A lotus grows from Vishnu's navel as he sleeps on the serpent Shesha; Brahma sits upon it and begins creation.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A lotus on a long stem rising from a reclining figure.



Shiva catches the Ganga in his matted hair; King Bhagiratha below

The Descent of the Ganga

Gangavatarana

The heavenly river comes to earth.

King Bhagiratha asks for the Ganga to descend and purify his ancestors' ashes. To keep her force from shattering the earth, Shiva catches her in his matted hair and releases her in streams.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A seated figure with streams flowing from the head; a branching river.

Manu and the Fish

Matsya

The flood story.

A tiny fish asks Manu for protection and grows enormous. It warns of a flood, and Manu ties his boat to the fish's horn and is towed to safety on a mountain.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A great horned fish towing a boat.



II · GODS & GODDESSES

II The Great Deities

Preserver, destroyer, the goddess and the remover of obstacles.

Above: Krishna lifts Mount Govardhan to shelter the villagers from Indra's storms

Vishnu and the Avatars

Dashavatara

The preserver, who descends in many forms.

The ten avatars include the fish Matsya, the tortoise Kurma, the boar Varaha (who lifts the earth from the cosmic ocean on his tusks), the man-lion Narasimha, Rama and Krishna.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A boar raising a globe on its tusks; a man-lion.*

Shiva Nataraja

Lord of the Dance

Destroyer and renewer.

Dances within a ring of fire, ending and renewing the cosmos; one foot crushes the dwarf of ignorance.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A dancing figure inside a ring; raised leg.*



Durga on her lion defeats the buffalo demon Mahishasura

Durga

Warrior goddess riding a lion or tiger.

Formed from the combined power of the gods, she defeats the buffalo demon Mahishasura, celebrated at Durga Puja and Navaratri.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A many-armed figure on a great cat; a buffalo.*

Krishna

Avatar of Vishnu; divine cowherd and teacher of the Gita.

As a boy he lifts Mount Govardhan on one finger to shelter the villagers from Indra's storms, and subdues the serpent Kaliya by dancing on its heads.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A figure holding up a hill; a dancer on a many-headed serpent.*

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Dashavatara

दशावतार

The Ten Avatars of Vishnu



Vishnu on the lotus, ringed by the ten avatars, beginning with the fish at the top and reading clockwise.

THE PULL-OUT · DASHAVATARA

Vishnu and the Avatars

The preserver, who descends in many forms.

The ten avatars include the fish Matsya, the tortoise Kurma, the boar Varaha (who lifts the earth from the cosmic ocean on his tusks), the man-lion Narasimha, Rama and Krishna.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A boar raising a globe on its tusks; a man-lion.

THE TEN, IN ORDER



I
MATSYA
मत्स्य



II
KURMA
कूर्म



III
VARAHA
वराह



IV
NARASIMHA
नरसिंह



V
VAMANA
वामन



VI
PARASHURAMA
परशुराम



VII
RAMA
राम



VIII
KRISHNA
कृष्ण



IX
BUDDHA
बुद्ध



X
KALKI
कल्कि

Names are given in common English transliteration; regional and sectarian versions differ.

— FROM A NOTE ON RESPECT



THE FIRST AVATAR

Matsya मत्स्य

A great horned golden fish tows Manu's boat through the storm towards the mountain.

I

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Manu and the Fish Matsya

The flood story.

A tiny fish asks Manu for protection and grows enormous. It warns of a flood, and Manu ties his boat to the fish's horn and is towed to safety on a mountain.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A great horned fish towing a boat.*

II

THE SECOND AVATAR

Kurma कूर्म

Mount Mandara on the tortoise's back, the serpent Vasuki wound about it and pulled from both sides.

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

The Churning of the Ocean Samudra Manthana

Gods and asuras churn the cosmic ocean for the nectar of immortality.

Using Mount Mandara as the churning rod and the serpent Vasuki as the rope, they pull back and forth. Vishnu, as the tortoise Kurma, supports the mountain. Treasures rise from the ocean, among them the goddess Lakshmi and the amrita.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A mountain on a turtle's back; a serpent wound around it, pulled from both ends.*





III

THE THIRD AVATAR

Varaha वराह

The boar rises from the cosmic ocean, lifting the earth upon his tusk.

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE — VISHNU AND THE AVATARS

"...the boar Varaha (who lifts the earth from the cosmic ocean on his tusks)..."

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A boar raising a globe on its tusks*

IV

THE FOURTH AVATAR

Narasimha नरसिंह

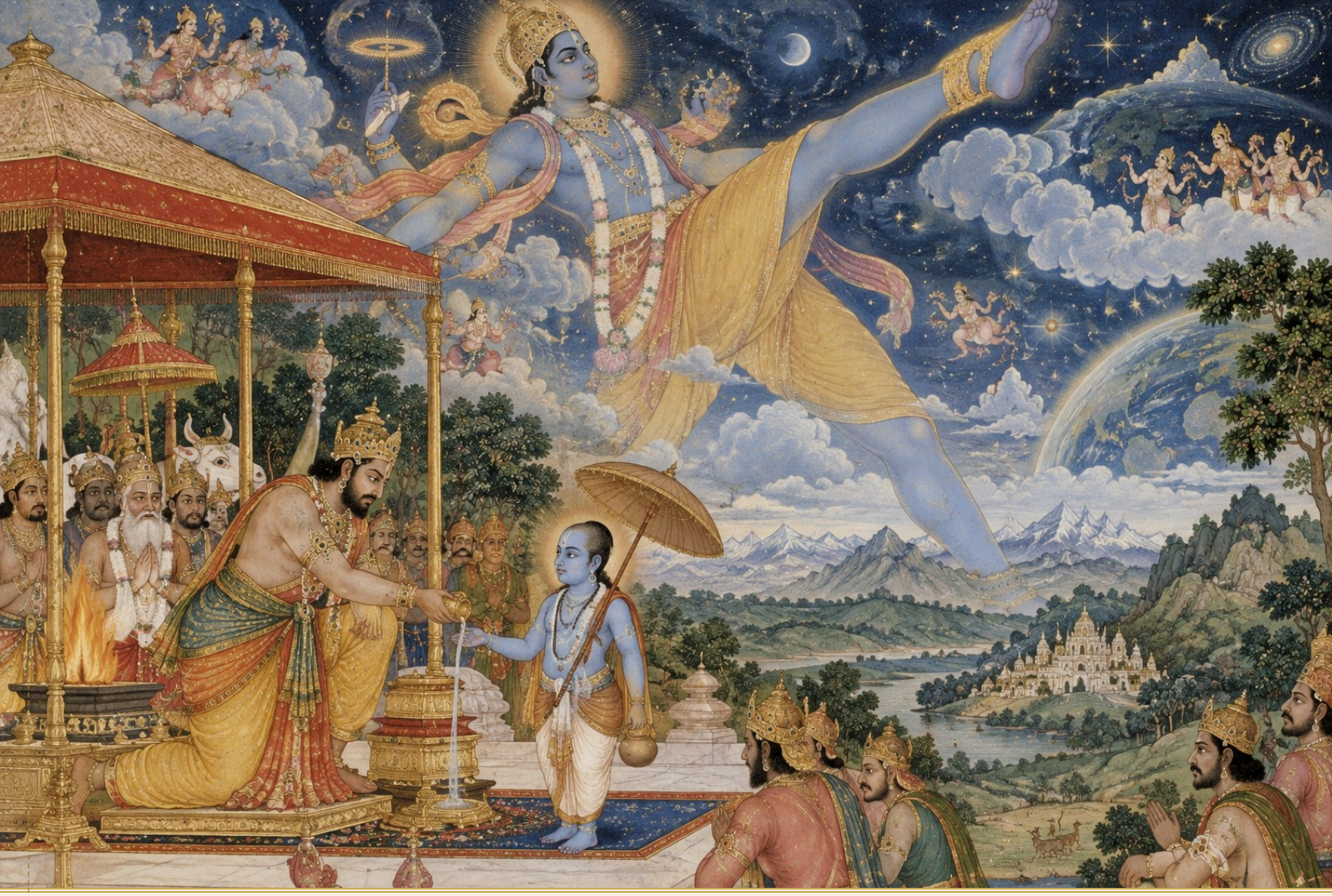
The man-lion at a palace pillar, a child standing before him in prayer.

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE — VISHNU AND THE AVATARS

"...the man-lion Narasimha..."

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *a man-lion*





THE FIFTH AVATAR

V

Vamana वामन

A small boy with a parasol stands before a king at a sacrifice; above, the same figure, grown vast, strides across the sky.

VI

THE SIXTH AVATAR

Parashurama परशुराम

An ascetic warrior with an axe stands beside a mountain river.





VII

THE SEVENTH AVATAR

Rama राम

Rama with bow and quiver beside Sita and a companion archer; Hanuman kneels before them.

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Rama's Bridge Rama Setu

From the Ramayana.

To rescue Sita from Ravana, Rama's army builds a bridge of floating stones across the sea to Lanka.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A chain of islands or shoals across a strait.*

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Ravana

Ten-headed king of Lanka.

A learned king and devotee of Shiva who abducts Sita in his flying chariot, the Pushpaka.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A figure with a row of heads.*

THE EIGHTH AVATAR

Krishna कृष्ण

Krishna plays the flute among the cows beneath a flowering tree; in the river beyond, a small figure dances on a many-headed serpent.

VIII

FROM THE FIELD GUIDE

Krishna

Avatar of Vishnu; divine cowherd and teacher of the Gita.

As a boy he lifts Mount Govardhan on one finger to shelter the villagers from Indra's storms, and subdues the serpent Kaliya by dancing on its heads.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A figure holding up a hill; a dancer on a many-headed serpent.*





THE NINTH AVATAR

IX

Buddha बुद्ध

The Buddha sits cross-legged beneath the Bodhi tree, his left hand raised with thumb and forefinger touching; deer rest by the river at dawn.

X

THE TENTH AVATAR

Kalki कल्कि

A rider on a white winged horse, sword raised, sweeps over a dark field towards the dawn.





III · CREATURES & MOUNTS

III Divine Beings and Vahanas

Bird, serpent, elephant and monkey — strong, recognisable silhouettes.

Above: Airavata, the white elephant of Indra, rises from the Churning of the Ocean

Garuda

King of birds; Vishnu's mount.

He steals the amrita from the gods to free his mother from slavery, and becomes the eternal enemy of serpents.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A great bird with wings spread; a serpent in its talons.*

Shesha (Ananta)

The thousand-headed cosmic serpent.

Vishnu reclines on his coils in the ocean of milk; Shesha holds the worlds on his hoods.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A coiled serpent with hooded heads fanned.*

Airavata

White elephant of Indra.

Rises from the Churning of the Ocean; often shown with several tusks or heads.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *An elephant with raised trunk.*



Hanuman carries a whole mountain to bring the healing herb

Hanuman

Monkey devotee of Rama; strength and loyalty.

Leaps the sea to Lanka to find Sita, and carries a whole mountain back to bring the healing herb for the wounded Lakshmana.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A leaping monkey; a figure carrying a mountain.*

Makara

Sea creature; mount of Ganga and Varuna.

Part crocodile, part fish or elephant; guards thresholds and gateways in temple art.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A crocodile-like beast with a curled snout.*



IV · EPIC AND ODD TALES

IV Stranger Narratives

Bridges, abductions and tests of devotion.

Above: Rama's army builds a bridge of floating stones across the sea to Lanka

Rama's Bridge

Rama Setu

From the Ramayana.

To rescue Sita from Ravana, Rama's army builds a bridge of floating stones across the sea to Lanka.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A chain of islands or shoals across a strait.*

Ravana

Ten-headed king of Lanka.

A learned king and devotee of Shiva who abducts Sita in his flying chariot, the Pushpaka.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A figure with a row of heads.*

Savitri and Satyavan

From the Mahabharata.

Savitri follows Yama, god of death, as he carries off her husband's soul, and wins him back through wisdom and persistence.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A woman following a figure leading another away.*

Bhishma's Bed of Arrows

From the Mahabharata.

The great warrior, struck by countless arrows, lies upon them and chooses the time of his own death.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A reclining figure upon a field of lines.*



Nachiketa waits at death's door

Nachiketa and Yama

Katha Upanishad

A boy questions death.

Sent to Yama by his angry father, Nachiketa waits three days at death's door and is granted three wishes, using the last to ask what lies beyond death.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A small figure at a great door.*

A NOTE ON RESPECT

Many of these stories are sacred scripture and living devotion. Names are given in common English transliteration; regional and sectarian versions differ. Tell them with reverence and confirm the version with a practitioner or scholar before public use.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.



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