

## Bali

The story of the demon Bali appears many times throughout Hindu literature, showing that this figure has significance in the development of Hindu culture. For example, Bali's tale appears in the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Vayu Purana*. While Bali appears in Hindu literature many times, the most important story of Bali comes from the tale of his interactions with Visnu's avatar Vamana. Another important myth surrounding Bali is his role as a teacher of Indra. Both of these myths are significant to Hindu literature, and both myths will be discussed here.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Bali is reborn as a demon after his previous life as Kitava. Kitava is branded as an evil man in this literature; however, by the grace of Siva he is granted the throne of Indra for a time. During his reign on Indra's throne, Kitava proceeds to give away all of the possessions of Indra, including Indra's elephant, horse, and wishing cow (O'Flaherty 127). When Indra was returned to the throne, Indra was clearly displeased by what had happened and pleaded to Yama, the god of death, to curse Kitava to hell. However, through his karma, Kitava was reborn as the son of Virocana, the demon Bali (O'Flaherty 128).

According to Hindu literature, a war began between the *devas* (gods) and the *asuras* (demons) for control over the heavens and the earth. Bali had been proclaimed king by the other *asuras* and was charged with removing Indra from power over the three worlds, and restoring the prestige of the demons. Bali was chosen as the king because he had virtuous qualities, and was considered to be grateful and wise. Many of the important figures of Hindu demonology were granted powerful armies to fight for Bali against the gods (Bhattacharyya 151). At the end of the war, the *asuras* were victorious in driving the *devas* from heaven. The throne that had belonged to Indra was now given to Bali, the son of Virocana (Hospital 25).

The *devas*, angered by the loss of their kingdom, appealed to the god Visnu for help in regaining their lost lands. It was understood by the gods that Bali was a very generous ruler, and would give his subjects any possession they asked for. With this knowledge, Visnu is reborn

as the dwarf Vamana and seeks an audience with the king Bali, while he is performing a sacrifice to celebrate his victory over Indra and the other gods (Bhattacharyya 152). It is during this meeting that the main flaw of Bali is exposed. Vamana asks Bali for all of the land that he can walk in three steps. Bali is pleased with this request, seeing only a dwarf in front of him. However, as it is stated in the Vaya Purana, Vamana “...with three strides stepped over the sky, the mid-region and the earth – this entire universe.” (Hospital 28). For Bali, his generosity would be his demise as he is forced to give the kingdom to Vamana, the avatar of Visnu, who returns Indra to the throne of the universe. In O’Flaherty’s book, she quotes a Sanskrit aphorism as saying “Because of his excess of generosity, Bali was captured... Excess should always be avoided” (O’Flaherty 131).

According to O’Flaherty, the actions of Bali in this myth go against what is considered to be Bali’s *svadharma*. That is to say that the duty of a demon is to interfere with sacrifice, and to kill gods (O’Flaherty 127). While it is true that the armies of Bali were responsible for the death of gods, in the myth, Bali is seen as performing a sacrifice ritual when he is approached by Vamana. Performing this ritual causes a disruption in the cosmic order of things, which Vamana is praised for restoring. O’Flaherty states in her book that “...the dharma of the whole world – owls and stars and lotuses are disturbed by the sudden imbalance in the social order, for cosmic order is maintained by the proper performance of all *svadharmas*.” (O’Flaherty 130). This could be understood as one of the main reasons that despite all of Bali’s virtues, he is considered to be a force of evil that disrupts the cosmic order.

In the second important myth about Bali, Indra is seeking Bali out for instruction. According to the myth, Indra finds Bali reborn as an ass. During their conversation Bali attempts to explain to Indra the significance of time and of prosperity (Hospital 74). This entire myth is centered on helping to explain the ideas of *dharma* in its relation to *samsara*. In his teachings to Indra, Bali attempts to show Indra that until an individual achieves *atman*, all things are transitory. Materialistic possessions, such as jewels, as well as possessions such as armies, are all subject to time (Hospital 61). The discussion continues with Bali describing his understanding of life and death as such: “Death is the end of creatures as the ocean is for rivers” (Hospital 61).

The story of Bali's discussion with Indra contains a number of examples of behaviour that would have an impact on one's rebirth. Bali lectures Indra on how it is wrong to mock someone who has been reborn into a lower status than they were previously. In the case of Bali and Indra, Bali says "You mock me who am in adversity. When you are as I am, then you will not talk like this" (Hospital 61). However, it is not Bali's plan to lecture Indra on how to have a positive rebirth, rather, Bali aims to advise Indra on how to achieve *atman*. Understanding that time will eventually remove prosperity from one individual, and grant it to another, and that a person should not grieve at the loss of prosperity, nor celebrate the gain of it is ultimately what Bali is attempting to teach to Indra.

The story of Bali in these two myths can be seen as being related. In the first myth, Bali is responsible for actions that result in his rebirth in a lower status than he had previously. This rebirth allows Bali to understand that all things are subject to the power of time, and that without a realization of the transitory qualities of time, a person cannot achieve *atman*. Developing the relationship between these two myths also proves to be important, as it becomes obvious that the second myth would not have the influence it has without understanding the first myth. Having a former demon king who was reborn as an ass, to teach the god Indra about the fickleness of possessions is a much powerful lesson than one taught by someone else.

### **References and Further Reading**

Bhattacharyya, Narendra Nath (2000) *Indian Demonology: The Inverted Pantheon*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors

Hospital, Clifford (1984) *The Righteous Demon: A Study of Bali*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

O'Flaherty, Wendy (1988) *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Singh, Balbir (1984) *Hindu Ethics: An Exposition of the Concept of Good*. New Delhi: Gulab Vazirani

Stietencron, Heinrich von (2005) *Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art, and Politics*. Delhi: Permanent Black

### **Related topics for Further Investigation**

Vamana

Visnu

*Karma*

*Moksa*

*Dharma*

*Svadharm*

Kerala

*Bhagavad Gita*

*Vaya Purana*

Indra

*Devas*

*Asuras*

*Atman*

*Samsara*

Kitava

### **Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://www.boloji.com/hinduism/042.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu>

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/622527/Vamana>

[http://www.experiencefestival.com/bali\\_demon](http://www.experiencefestival.com/bali_demon)

[http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu\\_gods\\_and\\_goddesses/vamana.htm](http://www.sanatansociety.org/hindu_gods_and_goddesses/vamana.htm)

Written by Kris Duncan (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.