

## Garuda

Garuda is a Hindu deity and is not to be confused with the *Garuda Purana*, which will be briefly described later. Garuda is described as having the body of a human with a face of an eagle. His hair is tied in a top knot, and with beautiful strong wings, he is known for having an abundance of strength. In different epics, Garuda is described as having either two or four arms, wearing snakes as anklets and bracelets, similar to what Visnu is depicted as wearing (Dallapiccola 2002). The Indian myth of Garuda and how he became to be Visnu's *vahana* is found in the *Mahabharata*, an 180,000 line poem written in Sanskrit by a sage called Vyasa, and is filled with courage, betrayal and maternal love (Mcleish 1996).

The myth of Garuda starts with Kasyapa, a tortoise-man, who had two wives named Vinata and Kadru (Wessing 208). He impregnated both his wives at the same time and mentioned that he would grant them both a boon since he was very pleased with the services they provided him. Kadru asked Kasyapa for a thousand *nagas* (half human beings and half serpents, usually of the feminine gender (Wessing 208) while Vinata asked Kasyapa for two sons, which would be more powerful and heroic than Kadru's thousand *nagas*. After granting Kadru's and Vinata's boons, Kasyapa disappeared in the forest. (Mani 581)

Both Kadru and Vinata took great care of their eggs. On the 500<sup>th</sup> year, Kadru's thousand eggs hatched and all kind of *nagas* came forth, but Vinata's eggs showed no

sign that they would be hatching anytime soon. It truly pained Vinata as she watched Kadru playing with her children, so that out of curiosity, Vinata secretly cracked open one of her eggs. Out came Garuda's oldest brother, Aruna, a half grown child. He was upset not only having his egg cracked prematurely but for having his rest disrupted as well. For having done so, Vinata was punished and was to be Kadru's slave. She would be freed 500 years from then, when her second egg would hatch naturally (Mani 581). Aruna would later become the *vahana* of Surya.

Garuda was born 500 years after the birth of Aruna, in the shape of a human, having a head of an eagle with a beak, and with wings and talons instead of toes and fingers. Due to his golden skin colour, Garuda was initially and accidentally worshiped as Agni, the god of fire.

While his mother was still enslaved to Kadru for having lost a bet, and Garuda was not able to bear the sight of his mother enslaved and performing Kadru's demands. Garuda took it upon himself to free his mother from Kadru's enslavement, and asked Kadru what the price of his mother's freedom would be. She replied, "Amrta from Devaloka," an elixir that would revive the strength of the gods and render them immortal. Garuda informed his mother of his journey to find the elixir to purchase her freedom and she wished him well. She asked that his wings be blessed by Vayu, his lower body by the sun and the moon and the rest of his body by the Vasus and he then embarked on his journey (Mani 581). As a final word of warning to Garuda, his mother warned him to not eat anything, for it would burn his throat.

After having embarked on his journey, Garuda found his father Kasyapa in the forest, where he told him of his journey and asked Kasyapa if he could have something to eat. Kasyapa replied by telling him the story of a fight between two brothers, Vibhvasu and Supratika, who were enemies at the time and had been transformed into an elephant and a tortoise, respectively. Kasyapa told Garuda that he could eat them without his throat burning. Since Vinata settled for two eggs that would lead her children to be powerful, Garuda had an enormous amount of power. Because of this power, he was not able to sit down to eat the elephant and the tortoise because anything he would approach or sit on would collapse within a blink of the eyes, due to the vibration his powerful wings created. (Mani 581)

Garuda faced many opponents and events throughout his journey before he had reached the heavens, where the Devas were protecting the pot of Amrta. The same moon and sun that had blessed Garuda's lower body attacked him when he got closer to the pot of Amrta. Garuda not only defeated the moon and the sun but also defeated anybody that was against him, for his strength was unmatched. The strength of his wings, when flapping, created a dust storm which blinded his opponents (McLeish 1996). As he got closer to the tower of flames where the Amrta was kept, he noted two wheels with serpents protecting the elixir. Even though he was blinded by looking into the eyes of the serpents, he defeated the serpents with his beak, grabbed the elixir and flew away.

Mahavisnu, proud of Garuda's achievements, granted him two boons. Garuda asked to become Visnu's *vahana* and to be immortal without having to drink the elixir so that he could return safely and deliver the elixir to his mother Kadru. Indra attacked Garuda as he was flying away with the elixir, by striking him with lightning. Indra told Garuda that the only way they would become friends and be at peace would be if Garuda would return the elixir back to the heavens. In another version, Indra took the elixir before Garuda was able to take it and a few drops of the elixir spilled onto the ground. The drops of the elixir fell near the snakes that were protecting the pot. The snakes both split their tongues and tried to lick off as much elixir as they could which; is the reason why snakes are immortal and shed their skin to be re-born once again (Mcleish 1996).

Garuda replied that the elixir was not for him and that the only reason that he stole the elixir was to release his mother from her sister's slavery. When he returned to his mother, she was released from Kadru's enslavement. From that moment on, Garuda wanted to take revenge on Kadru. He decided that he would slowly eat all of Kadru's *nagas*. After a certain time that Garuda was hunting and eating the *nagas*, they came to him with a deal that a *naga* would come to him day after day for him to feed on and Garuda accepted.

Throughout his life, Garuda faced many opponents and went through many adventures, such as helping Galava, a disciple of Visvamitra, fighting Airavata, searching for the Saugandhika flower and saving Uparicarvasu (Mani 584). To this day, Garuda is a sign of speed and force due to the abundant strength he has. The image of Garuda is widely

used throughout Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Thailand and Mongolia. It is a symbol depicted from flags to royal crests and hotels, and even on the national airline of Indonesia. Although the image portrays a different form of Garuda, they all carry the same meanings: speed and strength.

In the early 1970's, a statue dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century was discovered in Kathmandu, Nepal, depicting Garuda kneeling and praying (Exhibit 1). Garuda is normally depicted as devouring snakes or carrying Visnu on his back, with two of his arms folded in *anjālimudra* (where the hands and palms are clasped together near the chest) and his other two arms holding Visnu's feet (Dallapiccola 2002).

According to myth, after Garuda became Visnu's *vahana*, and Visnu subsequently wrote the *Garuda Purana*, a set of instructions for Garuda to follow. The *Garuda Purana* contains all kind information regarding funeral rites, the reconstitution of a new body, judgement of deeds and the many stages between death and rebirth (Dallapiccola 2002). Although the *Garuda Purana* is extremely long and consists of many stories, it is still widely read by Hindus to this day.

### **References & Further Recommended Reading**

DALLAPICCOLA, Anna L. (2002) *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*. New York: N.Y. Thames & Hudson

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### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

- Airavata
- Agni
- Amrta from Devaloka
- Anjalimudra
- Aruna
- Devas
- Flower of Saugandhika
- Galava
- Garuda Purana
- Indra
- Kadru
- Kasyapa
- Mahabharata
- Nagas
- Purana
- Supratika
- Surya
- Uparicaravasu
- Vasus
- Vayu
- Vibhavasus
- Vinata
- Visvamisra
- Vyasa

### **Noteworthy Websites Related to Garuda**

- [http://www.khandro.net/mysterious\\_garuda.htm](http://www.khandro.net/mysterious_garuda.htm)
- <http://members.tripod.com/~tudtu/garuda.htm>
- <http://goarchi.com/archo/mag/garuda.html>
- <http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/garuda.html>

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