



# Oceans in Hindu Mythology

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## Introduction

Since antiquity the oceans have played a significant role in Hindu religion and its greatness has been profusely illustrated in Holy Scriptures. The ocean has several Hindi and Sanskrit names and synonyms such as Samudra, Sagar, Sindhu, Jaladhi, Neernidhi, Bannidhi, Barees, Udadhi, Payodhi, Nadees, Toynidhi, Kampati, Makaralaya, Varunalaya, Mahodadhi etc. The ten synonyms of the ocean have been given in Ramcharit-manas. Out of 10 different incarnations (Dasavatar) of Shrihari Vishnu, three avatars such as Matsya Avatar, Kurma Avatar and Varaha Avatar are directly associated with the oceans. In Rama Avatar, the bridge was constructed as per the desire of oceans and helped Lord Rama in various ways. As when the Ravana, the king of Lanka heard the news about the construction of bridge on the ocean by Lord Rama's army led by engineers Nal & Neel, he astonished and said- "What! Has he really bridged the waves, the billows, the sea, the ocean, the floods, the deep, the main, the brine deep, the home of springs, the Lord of rivers?"

दो०— बांध्यो बननिधि नीरनिधि जलधि सिंधु बारीस ।  
सत्य तोयनिधि कंपति उदधि पयोधि नदीस ।।

लंका काण्ड—5

Each of the ten names for the ocean was uttered by Ravana with one of his ten mouths.

## The Origin of Oceans

Lord Ram's ancestor Sagara (सगर) whose sixty thousand sons dug out the bed of the ocean that is why ocean is called Sagar (सगर), the son of Sagara (सगर). Therefore, When Lord Rama asked Vibhishana, how we should cross the vast ocean? Vibhishana suggested "for being an older in your family, ocean, My Lord, will think out and suggest a plan. The whole host of bears and monkeys will thus be able to cross the sea without an effort".

दो०—

प्रभु तुम्हार कुल गुरु जलधि कहिहि उपाय विचारि ।  
बिनु प्रयास सागर तरिहि सकल भालू कपि धारि ।।

रामचरितमानस, सुन्दर काण्ड

The same thing is mentioned in Valmiki Ramayana as Vibhishana suggested this immeasurable ocean was dugout by King Sagara and Lord Rama is the descendant of Sagara. Therefore, the ocean must help him.

खानितः सगरेणाय मप्रमेयो महोदधिः ।  
कर्तुमर्हति रामश्च ज्ञातेः कार्यं महोदधिः ।।

वाल्मीकि रामायण, सर्ग 19, 31

## The origin of Seven Oceans and Continents

It is mentioned in Shrimad Bhagvata's Canto-5, first



chapter, the seven oceans and continents were created by the movement of chariot of the king Priyabrata, the son of Swayambhuva Manu.

After Swayambhuva Manu's son was trained in the renounced order (Priyavrata) thus became the master of the universe where he endowed with powerful arms of command together with them pulled the bowstring loudly to defeat all who opposed the dharma. Without interruption for 110 million years there was the rule of the great soul who with the daily increasing amiability, femininity, shyness, laughs, glances and exchanges of love [in his repeated births] with his wife Barhishmati enjoyed a life of pleasure, but confounded and defeated by it he lost his power of discernment. Not appreciating that the sun god, as long as he circumambulated mount Meru, lit up one side of the earth and left the other half in the dark, he who in his worship of the Fortunate One was of a supernatural power then said: 'I'll make the night as brilliant as the day', and to enforce that he followed the orbit of the sun in a chariot, exactly seven times and with the same speed, like he was a second sun. Thus proceeding with the wheels of his chariot that created trenches with their rims, the seven oceans came about which divided the earth (Bhu-mandala) into the seven dvipas (the continents or islands). Known as Jambu (related to *Syzygium cumini*), Plaksha (related to *Ficus virens*), Salmali (related to *Bombax ceiba*), Kusa (related to *Desmosthya bipinnata*), Kraunca, Saka and Pushkara each of them is twice the size of the preceding ocean in the beyond of which it all around is situated. Those seven oceans consisting of salt water, sugarcane juice, liquor, clarified butter, milk, fluid yogurt and sweet water are of the same size as the islands they as the trenches (of his wheels) one after the other consecutively fully enclose. For each of the dvipas separately the husband of Barhishmati beginning with Jambudvipa, installed one of his faithful sons named Agnidhra, Idhmajihva, Yajrabahu, Hiranyareta, Ghritaprishthha, Medhatithi and Vitihotra as their king.

It is mentioned in Ramcharitmanas that the great king Pratapbhanu and Lord Rama ruled over on all seven continents.

चौ०— सप्तदीप भुजबल बस कीन्हे ।  
लै लै दण्ड छांड़ि नृप दीन्हे ।।  
सकल अविनि मण्डल तेहि काला ।  
एक प्रताप भानु महिपाला ।। बालकाण्ड— 154

By the might of his arm he subdued all the seven continents and let their princes go on payment of tribute. Now Pratapbhanu became the undisputed monarch of the whole the world.

चौ०— भूमि सप्त सागर मेखला ।  
एक भूप रघुपति कोसला ।।  
भुवन अनेक रोम प्रति जासू ।  
यह प्रभुता कछु बहुत न तासू ।।

उत्तरकाण्ड— 22

Undisputed sovereign of the entire globe girdled by the seven seas was Raghunatha, the Lord of Koshala. This lordship (of entire globe) was nothing great for him, each of whose several hairs contained many a sphere of creation.

## Salinity of Oceans

There are two mythological legends associated with the salinity of oceans in Holy Scriptures.

1. It is mentioned in Ramacharitmanas Lanka Kanda, that the son of wind- Hanuman said, "My Lord's might take the fierce fire beneath the sea, had before now dried up the waters of the ocean. But then it was filled up again by the floods of tears shed by your enemies weeping wives, and that is what makes saline".

चौ०— यह लघु जलधि तरत कत बारा ।  
अस सुनि पुनि कह पवन कुमार ।।  
प्रभु प्रताप बडवानल भारी ।  
सोखेउ प्रथम पयोनिधि बारी ।।  
तव रिपुनारि रुदन जल धारा ।  
भरेउ बहोरि भयउ तेहि खारा ।।

लंकाकाण्ड —दोहा 1

2. It is also mentioned in Epics and Puranas that once a bird gave the birth of 3 babies on the sea shore. A large ocean wave came and washed away the baby birds. To teach the lesson to the ocean, the bird started to removing off water of ocean with her beak so as to dry it gradually. The great sage Agastya asked the purpose. The bird told the story how the cruel ocean had washed away her babies. The compassionate sage Agastya said "I will punish



the merciless ocean for his mistake" and went away. One day when sage Agastya was performing his worship and muttering of prayers on sea shore, a large ocean wave washed away all his worship material. The Agastya was very angry and remembered what the bird had complained. He absorbed whole Ocean in three Anjali (the hollow formed by joining both hands). The ocean dried up. Then the deities requested to sage Agastya to refill the oceans. The Agastya refilled the ocean by *yogbal* that is why it became saline.

It is also mentioned in Ramcharitmanas that "What comparison was there between the sage Agastya, who was born of a jar, and the boundless oceans? Yet the Sage drained it dry and renown throughout the world".

चौ०— कंह कुभंज कंह सिंधु अपारा ।  
सोखेउ सुजसु सकल संसारा ॥

## The Wealth of Oceans

It is written in Ramcharitmanas as well as in Valmiki Ramayana in Sundar Kanda that "When the Lord Rama fitted the dread arrow to his bow; a blazing fire broke out in ocean breast. The crocodiles, serpents and fish felt distressed. When ocean found the creatures burning, he swallowed his pride and assuming the form of a Brahman, came with a golden dish filled with various gems".

चौ०— मकर उरग झश गन अकुलाने ।  
जरत जंतु जलनिधि जब जाने ॥  
कनक थार भरि मनि गन नाना ।  
बिप्र रूप आयउ तजि माना ॥

रामचरितमानस, सुन्दरकाण्ड

भोगिना पष्य भोगानि मया भिन्नानि लक्ष्मण ।  
महाभोगानि मत्स्याना करिणा च करानिह ॥

वाल्मीकि रामायण, सर्ग 19

During the Rama Rajya in Treta Yuga "the oceans kept within their bounds and cast forth jewels (Corals, Pearls, and Gems etc.) on the shore to men for gather".

चौ०— सागर निज मरजादा रहहीं ।  
डारहिं रत्न तटहिं नर लहहीं ॥

## The Biodiversity of Oceans

The ocean has a wide variety of fauna and flora. All the creatures of the deep showed themselves in multitudes to behold the Lord Rama, the very fountainhead of mercy. Many kinds of crocodiles, alligators, tortoises, serpents and fishes with enormous bodies are eight hundred miles in length. There were others too, who could devour even these and these in turn were afraid of others.

चौ०— मकर नक्र नाना झश ब्याला ।  
सत जोजन तन परम बिसाला ॥  
अइसेउ एक तिन्हहि जे खहीं ।  
एकन्ह के डर तेपि डेराहीं ॥

## Oceans and Hindu Mythology

It is mentioned in various Hindu scriptures like Veds, Puranas, Shrimad Bhagvata and Epics etc that the Shrihari Vishnu has appeared on this planet earth in 10 different incarnations (Dasavtar) for the help of Bipra (the Brahmans), Dhenu (the Cows), Sur (Deities), Saint (Devotees) and to establishment of Hindu Dharma. The first three incarnations such as Matsya Avatar, Kurma Avatar and Varaha Avatar related to the oceans. In the fourth Ram Avatar- Lord Rama crossed the oceans.

### 1. Matsya Avatar

Matsya Avatar is the first among the Dasavatar or 10 incarnation of Srihari Vishnu. The story of Matsya avatar is one that symbolically narrates the beginning of civilization. At the end of the one cycle of creation, Matsya appears to save all that is good. He is present when one cycle of creation is destroyed and the next cycle begins. Matsya appears as the one-horned fish that navigates all that is good through the great deluge or pralaya that appears at the end of one cycle to clean all the *adharma* accumulated from the beginning of a cycle of creation.

Just before the end of the previous cycle of creation, Matsya, a tiny fish, swam into the hands of a pious man and asked him to save it from a big fish. The pious man took the fish home and placed it in a small pot. The fish kept on increasing its size. It was then transferred from the small pot to a big vessel; from it to a



well, from well to a pond, from pond to a lake, from lake to river; and finally it was transferred to the ocean but it still kept growing. The pious man in some Puranas is referred as Manu, in some other Puranas he is named as Satyavrata.

The pious man realizes the fish is Narayana and prostrates before it. Matsya then forewarns him about the great deluge or Mahapralaya which is to take place in seven days. Matsya requests him to carry the Vedas and gather the seeds of all plants and a pair each of all living beings. He is asked to put them in a ship and wait for the deluge (Mahapralaya). Along with the pious man, the Sapta Rishis (Seven Saints) are also rescued by Matsya. Matsya tells the pious man that he will again appear during the deluge and he will need to tie the boat to its horn using Snake Vasuki as the rope. In some versions, Matsya sprouts the horn and uses Ananta Sesha as the rope and navigates the boat to safety without the help of the pious man. The boat is safely navigated to the top of Mount Meru.

When the deluge was taking place, the Vedas were stolen by a demon named Damanaka and he had taken refuge in a conch-shell under the ocean. Matsya then goes in search of the Vedas. After a terrible fight with Damanaka, the Vedas are restored and returned to the pious man. After the great deluge the new civilization is set in order by the pious man.

The core concept of Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) is that there is no beginning or end. There is only transformation. When man abandons Dharma and ventures into the territory of Adharma, Nature starts its destructive transformation. We humans term this as apocalypse or total annihilation. Lord Vishnu incarnated as Matsya to save all that was good in the world before its destruction. He also sets the new civilization in order.

## 2. Kurma Avatar:

Kurma, or Turtle, is the second incarnation of Hindu God Vishnu. Hindu devotees also refer to this avatar as Adi-Kurma and the Tortoise incarnation. This Avatar was taken by Vishnu to help the Devas acquire the Amruta, or elixir of life, during the Samudra Manthan or churning of the ocean. The information about the Kurma Avatar is mainly found in the Bhagavad Purana (Canto 8 Chapter 7), Agni Purana and Ramayana (Balakanda Chapter).

**The Churning of Ocean (Samudra Manthan):** Once Indra - the King of Gods, while riding on an elephant came across Durvasa Muni who offered him a special garland. Indra accepted the garland but put it on the trunk of the elephant. The elephant was irritated by the smell and it threw the garland on the floor. Seeing Indra's disregard, the revered sage became furious. He cursed Indra saying that he and the other gods would lose all their powers. In due course, Indra and the other gods began losing all battles against the demons, and the demons led by Bali took control of the universe. Seeing no other means, the helpless Indra rushed to Vishnu for help.

Vishnu had a plan. He said that to get back their powers the gods would have to churn the oceans and bring out the magical nectar-amrita. Only after consuming it could they regain their powers. Devas formed an alliance with demons to jointly churn the ocean for the nectar of immortality and to share it among them. This great churning is known as samudra manthan. But as the gods were powerless now, they sought the help of the demons to accomplish this huge task.

The gods and demons got together for the Herculean task. The huge mountain, Mandara, was used as the pole to stir the waters. But as the pole entered the water it kept sliding into depths of the ocean. To stop this, Vishnu quickly transformed himself into a tortoise and placed the mountain on his back. This image of Vishnu as the tortoise was his second avatar called 'Kurma Avatar. Once the pole was balanced, it was tied to the gigantic snake, Vasuki, and the gods and demons started pulling it from either side. As the churning began and the massive waves whirled, an extremely poisonous drink called Halahal came out. The gods became scared because this blue drink could destroy creation. They all got together and prayed to the powerful Shiva to help them. Shiva appeared before all and gulped the entire poison. But, he did not swallow it. He kept the poison in his throat. Since then, Shiva's throat became blue, and he became known as Neelkantha or the blue-throated one. The churning continued and poured forth a number of gifts and treasures.

During the churning of ocean 14 precious things (14 Ratan) were produced. They were as follows:



1. **Halaahal**-A Poison which is consumed by Lord Shiva
2. **Parijat**- a tree in the Paradise of Lord Indra
3. **Airavat**- a multi-tusked elephant for again Lord Indra
4. **Kamadhenu**- the wish-fulfilling cow
5. **Uchchaisravas**-the divine white horse for Lord Indra
6. **Sankha** -the conch of Lord Vishnu used for victory
7. **Chandra**- the moon for Lord Shiva
8. **Laxmi**- the goddess of wealth
9. **Rambha**- the apsara (celestial beauty) for heaven
10. **Kaustubh Mani**- A rare diamond said to be the most valuable jewel in the world. Lord Vishnu took it and placed it in his neck.
11. **Kalpavriksha** - the wish-fulfilling tree
12. **Dhanwantari**- carrying the pot of amrita and a book of medicine called Ayurveda. A Physician for all Gods.
13. **Varunee** - Goddess of wine
14. **Amrit**- the nectar of immortality.

A great war between the gods and demons followed. Finally, Vishnu disguised as the enchanting Mohini tricked the demons and recovered the nectar. While fleeing the clutches of the demons, Vishnu gave the amrita to his winged charioteer, Garuda. But the demons caught up and a tussle followed. During this tussle few drops of the drink fell at Ujjain, Nasik, Allahabad, and Haridwar. The drops are said to have purified the land and it is here that every year devotees come to wash away their sins in the famous assembly called Kumbh Mela. This Great War was started on Ekadashi of Krishna Paksha of Kaartik month and ended on Amavasya.

Two demons, Rahu and Ketu, disguised themselves as gods and drank the amrita. The sun and moon gods

recognized it to be a trick and complained to Vishnu, who in turn, severed their heads with his Sudarshan Chakra. As the divine nectar did not get time to reach below the throat, the heads remained immortal, but the body below died. This helps Rahu and Ketu take revenge on the Sun and Moon by devouring them every year during solar and lunar eclipse. Once Garuda got back and the Gods drank the nectar, they became immortal.

### 3. Varaha Avatar

Varaha Avatar, the third incarnation among the 10 Dasaavatar of Lord Vishnu, is in the form of a Boar. According to Hindu Puranas, there was a demon called Hiranyaksha, an incarnation of Jaya, who was a gatekeeper of Vaikuntha (the abode of Lord Vishnu). He was born as an Asura due to a curse of the twin Rishis known as the Sanat - Kumaras. He gifted the boon of immortality by Brahma. No god, demon, beast or man could ever kill him. Hiranyaksha's powers grew by the day. One day, Hiranyaksha snatched the earth and took it with him under the ocean. The gods were alarmed and rushed to Vishnu for help. Vishnu remembered that Brahma had forgotten to grant Hiranyaksha immortality against Varaha, the two-tusked wild boar. Vishnu changed himself into a Varaha and dived into the ocean. Seeing Hiranyaksha there he challenged him to a fight. Soon, Vishnu beheaded Hiranyaksha and brought back the earth from the depths of the ocean. Varaha Purana, one of the major eighteen Mahapuranas, describes about the Varaha incarnation of God Vishnu and also about the rescue of the Prithvi.

### 4. Rama Avatar

In this Avatar Lord Rama constructed a 100 Yojana (>1200 km) long and 10 Yojana (>120 km) wide bridge on the oceans with the help of engineer Nala and Neela and monkeys army. The bridge was constructed in five days. First day 14 Yojana bridge was constructed. Second day 20 Yojana, Third day 21 Yojana, fourth day 22 Yojana and fifth day 23 Yojana bridge was constructed.

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