

waters, rose to the surface to greet them. Well aware of their mission and pleased by their devotion, He taught them the *Rudhra Geetha*, a hymn in praise of Vishnu. Then, before disappearing beneath the water to resume His penance, He assured the Prachetas that their father's wish would be granted. With this assurance they began worshipping Vishnu, standing in the sacred tank for 10,000 years until He appeared and announced that they would have a noble son whose children would fill all three worlds.

Satisfied with Vishnu's blessings, the Prachetas married a woman called Marisha.

Marisha was, in a way, the daughter of a *maharishi*, a great sage called Kandu, a man of such enormous self-discipline that the gods felt threatened by his power. Indra was so anxious to prevent Kandu from upsetting the balance of the universe that he dispatched a beautiful *apsara*, a divine nymph called Pramalocha, to distract and seduce him. His plan was successful: Kandu as overwhelmed by her beauty and embraced her with such passion that though they were entwined for centuries it was as if only a day had passed.²¹ However, Kandu regretted his loss of control and angrily drove Pramalocha away. And so it was that as the *apsara* wandered through the forest and soft breezes cooled her body, Kandu's semen emerged from her pores as perspiration. Taking leaves from trees she wiped herself and, as she scattered them behind her, a gentle wind tenderly blew them to form a human shape that the moon infused with life-giving energy to create the beautiful Marisha.

In her previous life, Marisha had been the devout but childless widow of a king known for his great devotion to Vishnu. To reward her husband, Vishnu appeared to her and said He would fulfil any boon she asked for. Her request was clear: in her next life she would marry 'honourable husbands and have a son equal to a patriarch'. Her wish was granted when, as Marisha, she married the Prachetas and became the mother of Daksha who fathered many sons and daughters, one of whom was Sathi, Siva's first wife.

²¹ More precisely, 907 years, 6 months and 3 days.

Up to this point, the main purpose of the myth has been to establish the antiquity of Guruvayur as a sacred site, and that Siva performed austerities there whilst meditating on Vishnu.

The link to the next stage of the story is tenuous for it begins by telling us that the idol of Guruvayurappan was originally worshipped by MahaVishnu in Vaikuntam, His celestial abode.

At the beginning of the Padma *kalpa*,²² Vishnu gave this idol to Brahma, the Lord of Creation, so that He could carry out His allotted task of creating the Universe, whilst at the start of Varaha, the next *kalpa*, Brahma, with Vishnu's agreement, presented the idol to Sutapa and Prisni, a devout couple seeking the boon of a son. Brahma assured them that by worshipping the idol, their wish would be fulfilled and that Vishnu would appear before them three times. Everything happened as foretold, and, with each appearance, the couple asked Vishnu for a son. And each time He said: 'Be it so,' whilst assuring them that they would always be able to worship the divine image.

Prisni soon gave birth to a son, Prisnigarbha, who became a famous sage and teacher. In Sutapa and Prisni's second life there is a link to the first part of the story since Sutapa, who is reborn as Kasyapa, marries thirteen of Daksha's many daughters. The son of Aditi, one of the daughters, was Vishnu's fifth *avatar*, the dwarf Vamana, born to humble Bali, an *asura*, a demon-king whose power was threatening the gods.

In their third and final birth, Sutapa and Prisni, incarnated as Vasudeva and Devaki, received the idol of Guruvayurappan from a *rishi*, a sage called Dhaumaya, and became the parents of Lord Krishna, Vishnu's most perfect *avatar*. Krishna was eventually given the idol by His

²² A day of Brahma's life. If the intricate details of His extreme age are to be taken into account, a day of Brahma's life is equal to 1,000 *yugas* or 4,320 million years, and His night the same. Brahma lives for 311,040 billion human years and is now deemed to be in His 51st year.

There are numerous *kalpas*, the first known as Brahma and the last as Padma. When His allotted time span is over, a new cycle of creation takes place with a new Brahma.