

SHUKRATAL

Introduction

From Delhi, this important holy place is about two third of the way between Delhi and Haridwar. This small town sits on the banks of a branch of the holy Ganges River. This is special place where Shukdeva Goswami spoke the SrimadBhagavatam to Maharaja Parikshit 5000 years ago.

Location

It is about an hour east of the city of Muzaffarnagar. Its around 150 km from Delhi on the way to Haridwar.

Important Places

Shukratirtha- First the Bhagavata Peeth Shukdev Ashrama. This is built around the 5100 year old AkshayVrikshatree which sits on top of the hill where 80,000 sages of all ranks gathered hear Shukdev Goswami speak the Bhagavatamto Maharaja Pariksit 5000 years ago. It was under the branchesof this tree where Shukdev Goswami and King Pariksit sat. The uniqueness of this tree as it's name suggests is that it does not shed leaves. The tree is quite large, towering up to 150 feet, with branches spreading in all directions, even coming out of the sides of the hill just below the tree. One branch has a nub coming out of it is in the shape similar to Lord Ganesh. The ashramaincludes a number of shrines and deities within its complex, including one close to the tree that has the images of Shukdev Goswamisitting and speaking to King Pariksit.



To the east of the town is **Ganga**, which is a quiet and peaceful river here, compared to the swift and powerful river at Haridwar and Rishikesh. Many pilgrims take a holy bath here. However, this is a branch of the Ganga that flows next to the village, while the main branch of the Ganga is 3 to 4 kilometers away. It is in this area where King Pariksit gave up his body.

History

To comprehend the importance of this place, one must understand the history. The SrimadBhagavatam is considered the most important literary work of Srila Vyasadeva, who was the author and compiler of most of the important Vedic texts, such as the Vedas, Upanisads, and Mahabharata. The Bhagavatam is said to be Vyasadeva's own commentary on all of his own writings. At one point, MahamuniVed Vyasa was dissatisfied with all of his writings. At that time the great sage Narada Muni arrived and encouraged him to explain the Vedic truths by elaborating on the pastimes, character, qualities, and names of the Supreme Being, Sri Krishna, for the benefit of humanity. Thus, Vyasadeva accepted this instruction and composed the 18,000 verses of the Bhagavatam, which included all of the wonderful pastimes of the Supreme Lord.

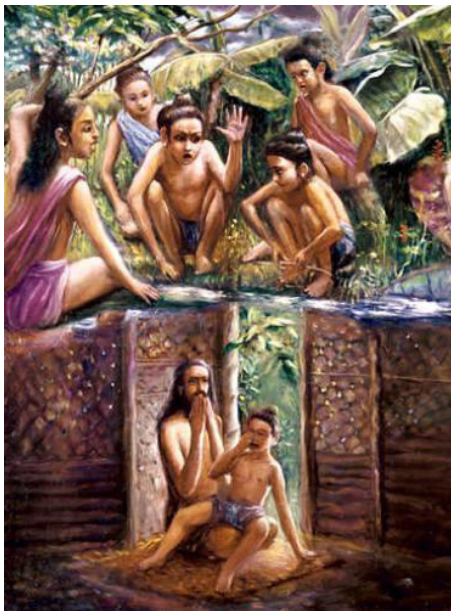


These ultimate spiritual truths revealed in Bhagavatam were first revealed by the Supreme Lord to Brahma. Brahma passed them along to the great sage Narada Muni, who then gave it to Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa (Vyasadeva). And Vyasa wrote the Srimad-Bhagavatam and also passed it along to Shukdev Goswami, who also spoke it to Maharaja Pariksit.

How the narration between Shukdev Goswami and King Pariksit happened is a story in itself, which shows the importance of not only the Bhagavatam but of the holy place of Shukratal. King Pariksit is the son of Abhimanyu and the grandson of the warrior Arjuna who was Lord Krishna's friend and the person who heard the Bhagavad gita from Lord Krishna. One day while King Pariksit was hunting, which many kshatriya kings did in that era, he became thirsty and tired. He was about 60 years old at the time and while looking for water came across the hermitage of the sage Shamik. However, the sage was in deep meditation and was completely unaware of the King's presence. When the sage did not respond to the King, the King did not know the reason for the sage's silence and felt insulted. The King, feeling his importance was being neglected, responded by taking a dead snake with the end of his bow and garlanding the sage with it. This was certainly an insulting and improper act by the King toward the sage.



At that time, the corruption and confusion of the age of Kali-yuga was beginning, and the effect was felt by the actions of all involved. What happened next indicated all the more that the influence of Kali-yoga was spreading. Shringi, the young son of the sage Shamik, was playing with his friends, the children of other sages. But when he heard about the incident with his father, he became angry at King Parikshit. Shringi then took some holy water from the Kaushaki in his hands and cursed the King, saying that within seven days the poisonous snake Takshaka would bite the man who had insulted his father, thus killing him.



When Shringi returned to his father's hermitage and saw the dead snake on his father's shoulders, he began to weep loudly. On hearing the sobbing of his son, Shamik finally came out of his trance. He opened his eyes and saw the dead snake around his shoulders, but like an

elevated sage, he did not consider it important and merely threw it away. He then asked his son why he was crying. However, on hearing the entire story, the Shamik felt remorse at what his son had done. He knew that the King had done a shameful act, but in a moment of weakness. Then he chastised his son, telling him that he had committed a great sin, giving such a grave punishment for a small mistake, and that he was very immature to consider the King an ordinary person.

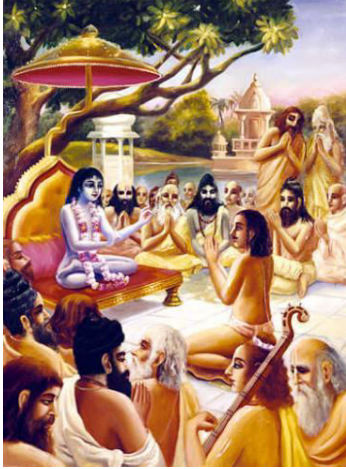
Around that time the King returned to his palace. Settling down, he realized his mistake and felt saddened by treating the innocent sage like a wicked person. He wondered how he could be absolved of this sin. As he thought in this manner, a disciple of the sage Shamik came to Maharaja Pariksit to warn him of the curse that was put on him by the sage's son. The King, accepting his fate as a blessing, handed over his kingdom to his son Janamejaya and went to the banks of the Ganga to fast for the seven days before he was to be bitten by the snake. The news of this traveled rapidly and brought many sages along with their disciples to place where he was fasting. On the pretext of making a pilgrimage to a holy place, these saintly men actually purify the places they visit.

The King was glad to see all the holy men assemble near him and worshiped them by bowing his head as they arrived. Then the King asked them, " O great sages, what is the most important duty of one who is about to die? Please consider this."



All the sages who had gathered around King Pariksit deliberated on this question and also decided to remain there until he left this world.

The great sage Shukadeva, the 16 year old son of Vyasadeva, was wandering nearby, free from all cares and completely content within himself. Wearing the garb of an avadhuta, one who is completely carefree from all rules and social standards, and as though others had neglected him, he was being followed by children. At that time he appeared on the scene in the presence of the sages and King Pariksit.



Even though Vyasadeva and Narada Muni, Shukadeva's guru and grand guru, were also present in the assembly of great sages called brahmarshis, rajarshis, and sadhus, they all rose from their seats to pay their respects to him. King Parikshit also addressed Shukadeva: "You are the supreme among saints, therefore I would like to ask what a man should do who is about to die? What should he hear, chant, remember and worship?"

Shukadeva at first responded, "The question you have asked is glorious because it is beneficial to everyone. The answer to this question is the prime subject for life and is approved by all transcendentalists: At the last stage of life, one should be bold enough to not be afraid of death. But one must cut off all attachment to the material body and everything pertaining to it and all such desires."

In this way, to answer the request of Maharaja Parikshit, the nectar of the Bhagavata flowed from the lips of Shukadeva Goswami in a way that seemed to them that they had never heard it before. This question and answer format, the discussion of all the most important of spiritual topics, became the Srimad Bhagavatam as we know it today.

After the whole Bhagavatam had been discussed, Shukadeva concluded that for a person who is suffering in the fire of countless miseries and who desires to cross the insurmountable ocean of material existence, there is no vehicle more suitable than cultivating a transcendental taste for the narrations of the pastimes of the Supreme Personality of Godhead.



This was the second time the whole Bhagavatam had been recited. The first time was when Srila Vyasadeva had recited it at his ashrama at Badrinatha. [Vyasadeva recited it once to his son

Shukadeva, and also recited it to Ganesh who had written it down.] The second time it was recited was at Shukratal. The third time was when Suta Goswami recited it to the many sages at Naimisaranya.

After the week long recitation of the Bhagavatam, King Pariksit thanked Shukdev Goswami for his merciful instructions, and said: "Now I have achieved the purpose of life. You have personally related to me the narration of the Supreme Lord and have revealed to me what is most auspicious - the knowledge of the supreme personal feature of God. I am now full of transcendental knowledge and self-realization, and my ignorance has been eradicated. I no longer have any fear of Takshaka or any other living being, because I have absorbed myself in the purely spiritual Absolute Truth. Kindly allow me to absorb my mind, purified of all lusty desires, within Him and to thus give up my life."

Then Shukdev Goswami, along with the other sages, departed after blessing the King. Pariksit then laid the darbhagrass on the bank of the Ganga so that the tip of its stalks faced east and he turned himself toward the north. The King settled his mind within his spiritual Self, and he became as stationary as a tree. As the time came when the curse was to take effect, the snake bird Takshaka, who could shift into any shape he wanted, approached Shukratal in the guise of a brahmana to bite the King.

As Takshaka went, he met the brahmana Kashyapa Muni who was traveling in a hurry. Takshaka asked where he was going. Kashyapa Muni, who knew the science of counteracting poisons, said he was going to meet King Pariksit because he could neutralize the effect of the snake bite. To test the sage, Takshaka exposed his fangs and bit a green tree which turned to ashes in seconds. Then Kashyapa chanted some mantras and the tree was restored and as green as before. So Takshaka asked whether the sage was going in order to receive rewards for his knowledge, and the sage replied to the affirmative. Takshaka said that he could reward Kashyapa more than the King, if he would only go back home. So the brahmana Kashyapa took much wealth from Takshaka and returned home.

The place where this incident occurred is known as **Bheraheri**, which is five miles away from Shukratal. The place where Takshaka asked Kashyapa to return home is called Modna which later became known as **Morna**, the village on the road four miles from Shukratal as we come from Muzaffarnagar.

Legend continues to explain that when Takshaka got to the area of King Pariksit, he was not allowed to enter. So he changed himself into a caterpillar and entered one of the fruit baskets being taken to the King's area. On reaching the King, Takshaka came out of the fruit, and assumed the form of a brahmana and easily approached the King, and while the King was in devotional meditation, bit him. As everyone looked on in horror, the King's body was immediately turned to ashes by the fire of the snake's poison. Thus, Maharaja Pariksit left his body and, immersed in the absolute truth of the Supreme Being, as he entered the spiritual world. This is why the whole area of Shukratalis full with the sweetness of bhakti or devotion for Lord Sri Krishna. This is also the importance of hearing the powerful and fully transcendental literature of the SrimadBhagavatam. It can deliver one from the pangs of material existence and into the absorption of the spiritual pastimes of the Lord.



It is said that only after many lifetimes of performing pious acts does one achieve the opportunity of being able to hear the SrimadBhagavatam. Also, wherever the Bhagavatam is read, Lord Krishna will manifest. It is also said that all of the holy rivers, kundas and lakes, all sacrifices, and the seven holy cities of Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Kashi (Varanasi), Kanchipuram, Avanti (Ujjain), and Dwaraka, and all the holy mountains are present where SrimadBhagavatam is discussed. This is only a small portion of descriptions on the power found within the vibrations of the Srimad-Bhagavatam. Thus, the holy place of Shukratalis importance to the sacred text of the Srimad-Bhagavatam.



One word of caution: A local tradition, in line with the way Maharaja Pariksit died after being bitten by the snake, is that anyone who receives a snake bite in Shukratal is sure to meet with death.