

# Extracts from the Srimad Bhagavatam

## Book Nine

### XVIII — XIX - *Yayati*

Sri Suka sketches from generation to generation the Lunar Dynasty which was started by Soma, the moon-god, the mind-born son of Atri, when he begot a natural son from Tara, the wife of Brihaspati, whom he had seduced. King Arjuna (previously mentioned) was one in that line, and Nahusha another. Nahusha, who was hurled down from heaven for his rudeness to Indra's consort (p. 120) and transformed into a python, was succeeded by his second son, the virtuous Yayati, who, though a Kshatriya, married Devayani, the daughter of Sukracharya, whom he met as if by accident, but actually at the behest of destiny.

Once Sarmistha, the virgin daughter of the Danava king Vrishaparva, went out with her maids and Devayani for a stroll in the garden. Reaching a pool of clear water, they all undressed and plunged into it and started sporting with one another. At that moment Lord Shankara happened to pass that way with Parvati. All the girls ran for their clothes to cover themselves, and in her haste the Princess by mistake wore Devayani's clothes, at which the latter felt offended and rebuked the Princess, who not only answered in a sharp language, but also pushed Devayani into a well and went her way with her companions. Soon afterwards Yayati passed by that road and, feeling thirsty, he looked in that well to see if it contained water, when to his great surprise he saw the naked girl. He threw to her his upper-cloth to cover herself, then gave her his hand and pulled her out. Seeing his youthful beauty, the girl fell in love with him and frankly told him that since he had touched her hand it was clear that he accepted her as his wife, which, she was convinced, was the will of Providence, as, although a Brahmin by birth, on account of a curse, she was not destined to marry a Brahmin. Yayati thought over her proposal for a minute, accepted it on the spot, and departed. But Devayani's grievance against the Princess did not abate: she went weeping to her father and reported the whole story to him, which so incensed him that he forthwith left the service of Vrishaparva. When the latter got to know of the priest's departure, he rushed after him, fell at his feet, and promised to make ample amends for his daughter's misdemeanour. He was seized with a great fear that Sukracharya might join his enemies the gods, and do him a great harm by his supernatural powers. As a condition for his return, the Brahmin demanded the satisfaction of his daughter's terms, which were that the Princess should henceforth consider herself and her thousand maids as Devayani's servants to follow her everywhere. The king accepted the terms and brought back the Brahmin and his daughter, whom the Princess and her maids started loyally serving.

Yayati married Devayani and brought to his house Sarmistha and her thousand maids, on the private understanding with Sukracharya that he would not go to bed with the Princess. But when at the right time his wife was blessed with a son, and Sarmistha, who had retained her virginity, demanded of him to give her also children, he complied with her wishes. In course of time he got three sons by her and two by the Brahmin wife. The matter came to a pitch when Devayani could no longer contain her jealousy and went to complain to her father, followed by Yayati, who passionately loved her and was trying to conciliate her. Sukracharya, flaming with rage, rebuked and cursed his son-in-law. "Fool and perjured!" he cried, "your lewdness will be punished by your instantly assuming a great old age to disfigure you (and make you unfit for young women)." Greatly abashed, Yayati pleaded that he was still in love with Devayani and entertained a strong desire for her, which made the Brahmin relent and soften the curse by making his senility transferable in exchange for the youth of anyone who was willing to accept it.

(Now looking extremely senile) King Yayati called his sons, first the two from Devayani, then the three from Sarmistha and coaxed one by one to accept his throne in exchange for his youth. But all of them wriggled out of "their duty to a king and a father" on one pretext or other, except the youngest, Puru — Sarmistha's

son — who agreed with alacrity. For one thousand years did Yayati enjoy sex pleasure vicariously through Puru's youth, at the same time prayed to Lord Vasudeva in his heart to rid him of these gnawing and never-ending desires, which he knew to be merely the product of imagination. The Lord seemed to have heard his prayer, when He gave him the courage one day to call Devayani and explain to her his spiritual downfall by an impressive parable, and ended with:

*“Pulled by the strings of your love, I lost myself in your delusive charm, wretch that I am! All the gold, possessions, delicious food and all the women in the world cannot satiate the man whose mind is captivated by lust. Sensuous desires are not killed, but sharpened and increased by gratification, like the flame which is fed by oil. For one thousand years have I enjoyed again and again the very same thing, and again and again have I longed for it: my thirst for lust has never been slaked. I will now definitely give it up and take to roam with the deer, fixing my mind on the absolute Reality and no longer on the mirage. Knowing that everything that is seen and heard is unreal and leads to degradation and transmigration, I will abstain from all desires and get Redemption.”*

Summoning Puru to his presence, Yayati returned his youth to him and received back his senility, keeping him on his throne and appointing the other four sons to the governorship of the four quarters of the earth under Puru's suzerainty and left for the forest, where he practised\* tapas till he attained absorption in the Supreme Brahman. Devayani followed his example and was liberated like him.

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\*It will be of benefit to record here the account given in the Mahabharata of the strenuous sadhana of Yayati and of the valuable message he left with Puru before he left home for the forest. The 86th and 87th chapters of the Sambha Parva of the Adi Parva say that Yayati, son of Nahusha, performed most severe penance for more than one thousand years by living only on corn which he gleaned from the fields. Then he fasted, remained sleepless and surrounded himself by a blazing fire for one year, which entitled him to ascend to heaven, where he lived thereafter. When meeting with Indra in heaven, he related to him his whole life-story and the message he had left with Puru, which was:

“If wronged, dear Son, you should not wrong in return. He who does not yield to anger earns all the merits of him who displays it. Never should you hurt others by cruel words nor defeat your foe by despicable means. He who utters scorching words to torture others carries rakshasas in his mouth: prosperity and luck fly away from him. You should always keep the virtuous as a model for all your behaviour and should compare your acts retrospectively with theirs. You should ignore the hard words of the wicked. He who is wounded by the shafts of a cruel speech nurses his wounds by weeping day and night, which strikes at the very core of his being. The wise never fling such arrows as these. There is nothing in the three worlds which can please the gods more than kindness, friendship, charity, sympathy and sweet speech. You should show regard to those who deserve it and should always give but never beg.”

It is evident that Yayati had strong reasons to lay emphasis on “sweet speech”. He had before him two cases of very regrettable hasty words. One was the unfortunate remark of his father Nahusha to Indra's wife, which caused him to be turned into a python. The other was poor Sarmistha's in her early youth to Devayani, for which she had to serve the latter for two thousand years. But the advice is extremely salutary to people of even the 20th century.