



Swasthani

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adapted by Pallau Ranjan

Swasthani adaptation by Pallav Ranjan

Kathmandu. Spiny Babbler, 1999. 126 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Hutt
EBHR 17. Pages 159-161.

Pallav Ranjan divides his English adaptation of the Swasthani Vrat Katha, the 'Story of the Fast of the Goddess Swasthani', into twenty-two short 'readings'. Two thirds of these deal with characters and myths from the Hindu Puranas. Readings 1 and 2 deal with cosmology and the creation of the world. The main theme of readings 3 to 7 is the story of Shiva's marriage to Satidevi, daughter of Daksha Prajapati, Daksha's insulting of Shiva, Satidevi's self immolation, and Shiva's mourning and scattering of the pieces of Satidevi's body, during which the demon Taraka takes over the world. Readings 8 to 15 begin with the birth of Parvati, who manages to secure Shiva as her husband by reading the Swasthani stories, and go on to recount the myths of Shiva as Kirateswar in the forest near Pashupati, the births and exploits of Ganesh and Kumar, the defeats first of Taraka and then of the demons who had created Three Cities, and the bizarre series of seduction, murder, and suicide involving Vishnu and Shiva, and Jalandhar and his wife, Brinda.

Finally, readings 16 to 22 contain the story of Goma, the girl who is cursed by Shiva to marry a man ten times her age. This is in some way the most interesting section of the text. At the age of seven, Goma marries a 70-year-old man, Shivasharma, and they live with her parents. Some years later Shivasharma decides he must go home, and Goma goes with him. As soon as they have departed, her parents die in an accident, and on their journey thieves steal everything from Shivasharma and Goma, then Goma becomes pregnant. When they reach Shivasharma's village he goes begging for food but dies in a fall. Goma bears a son, Nawaraj, and they are supported by some local rich people. In time, Nawaraj marries Chandrawati, and then he searches and finds his father's bones but does not return to his mother. After a while Chandrawati goes back to her parents, leaving Goma alone. Goma goes mad, but Parvati sends Rishis to teach her the Swasthani rites, and when they leave she finds gold under their seats.

Goma's readings of the Swasthani stories bring her son back to her, and Shiva, now suddenly benevolent, sends Nawaraj to become king of Labhanya and take a new wife. Goma is summoned there too. Nawaraj holds a feast and magnanimously invites Chandrawati

too, but on her way to Labhanya Chandrawati becomes angry with her bearers for stopping to listen to the Swasthani stories en route, and when they resume their journey she falls into a flooding river. Chandrawati is so evil that the river does not flow again until some villagers dump her body on the bank, where she becomes an unrecognizable object. Not even the soil will allow her to eat it. Two priests on their way to the feast promise to bring food back for her but the grain store suddenly empties when they go to get some, and the rice turns to ash when she tries to eat it. The Apsaras come and tell her to read the Swasthani and make offerings of sand; finally, she is restored to her family.

The Swasthani Vrat Katha is a crucial text for anyone who wishes to understand the ideals and constraints that have traditionally governed the lives of women (particularly, but not exclusively, Brahman and Chetri women) in Nepal. My understanding of it prior to reading Pallav Ranjan's rendering relied heavily on the summary and analysis that appear in Lynn Bennett's book *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and symbolic roles of high-caste women in Nepal* (Columbia University Press, 1983, especially pp. 274-306). Bennett referred to an edition compiled by Babu Madhav Prasad Sharma and published in Banaras in 1955, which extends to around 300 pages. Pallav Ranjan's retelling of these stories is in almost flawless English and is highly readable. For instance, when Shivasharma hears Goma's mother, Sati, voicing her horror at the idea of her daughter marrying such an elderly man, the words Ranjan has him say are genuinely poignant:

"There are old people in this world, mother, and then there are children. There are people who are pleasant to look upon and people who are ugly. Some people do not have descendants and some have too many. Some have wives that are older than they are and some have husbands who are older. Some of us are rich and some poor. The world is like the potter's wheel. It is always spinning. Everyone becomes old and dies. There are none who will not age. Why do you feel that you are better than I am? Why will you not respect my life? If this is how you feel, I will die now, before your eyes."

Parts of Ranjan's adaptation appear highly condensed in comparison

with the edition cited by Bennett. For instance, Bennett quotes from her own translation of the episode towards the end of the Goma story, in which an Apsara instructs Chandrawati how to perform the Swasthani vow, and these instructions continue for 26 lines (Bennett 1983: 277), but Ranjan simply gives us "So she asked the Apsaras what she should do. According to their advice, Chandrawati learned to worship the Swasthani with a clean mind" (p. 118). Thus, it would seem that Ranjan has prepared his adaptation for a readership that would find this level of detail irrelevant and tiresome.

It would have been instructive if Pallav Ranjan had provided some insight in his brief preface into the way in which he prepared this adaptation. Certain passages are very close indeed to the original, which suggests that a text was at least consulted, while others are omitted (suggesting an intention to abridge, perhaps) or simply different (suggesting that a different text was consulted or that Ranjan relied on an oral source or his own memory). It is also a shame that Ranjan's introduction does not really bring out the important role the text has played and continues to play in the lives of so many women in Nepal.

Which brings us to the question of readership? For whom is this 'adaptation' intended? Nepali readers with a mastery of English will admire the elegance of its prose, and will also appreciate this effort to bring this text to the attention of a wider readership. To introduce the text to a foreign readership which is unable to approach it in its original language: would be a worthy aim, but if this is indeed the intention the success of the initiative it is rather circumscribed by the absence of any real explanation or analysis of the text's precise significance and meaning, despite the fluency and accessibility of the English rendering itself. To fully understand what is going on here, a foreign reader would need also to be directed to a work like Bennett's.

This is not to detract from Pallav Ranjan's achievement, which is notable and worthy of praise. The text is also greatly enhanced by the inclusion of illustrations whose abstract nature suggests that they emanate from the same mythic dimension in which these stories take place.

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Readings One

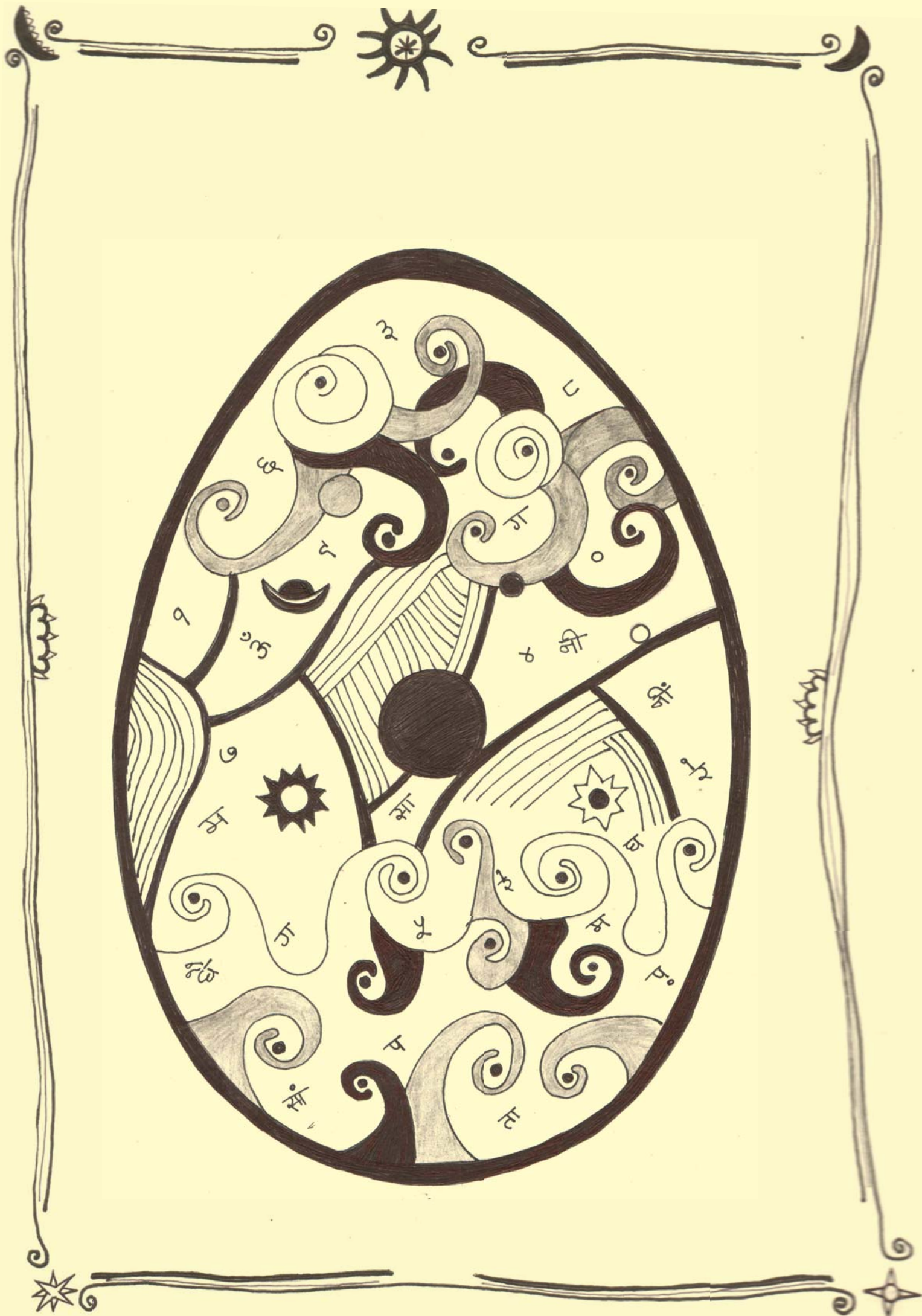
The Way God Works

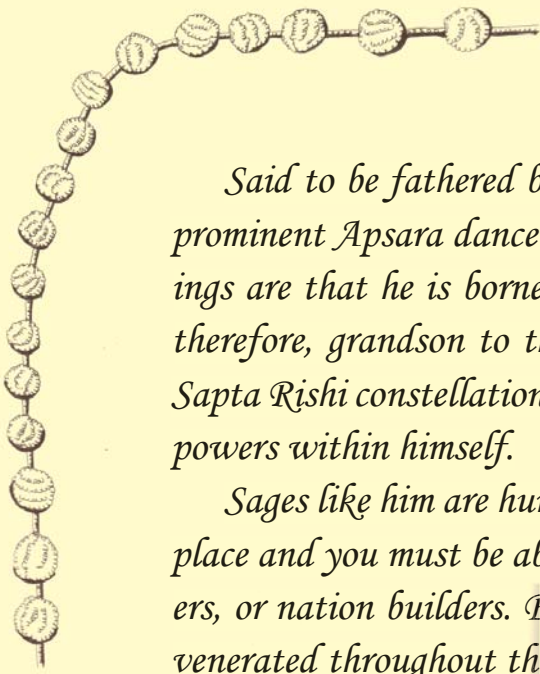
Deep in the jungles lives a sage. The animals here are gorgeous, deadly, and soft; cliffs are steep and at their feet rivers and brooks run clear, sparkling, and bone-chilling; the trees are thick and tall and thorns and vines intertwine; mosses and orchids hang from branches; the clearings have rich soft grasses and flowers; and the earth itself is sweet smelling.

The name of this sage is Agastha. He is a forager. He gathers leaves, fruit, and roots. They nourish his body and mind. He also gathers herbs, barks, and seeds that heal him and the others around him when they suffer illness, fever, wounds and broken bones. Some work on his body, some free his mind so he can explore thoughts that he would not be able to explore otherwise. The seasons bring forth much that is good from the ground.

Agastha and other sages like him meditate and offer penance in the loneliness of such places. For hours, days, and years, they explore their thoughts, feelings, observations, and experiences. They offer sadhana meditation and prayers to the lords who give them ideas, techniques, and strengths that make them more able than others.

Agastha is favored of Lord Shiva who has gifted him the knowledge of Siddha medicine. Generous of nature, he has passed on this hard-learned practice to the sect of Siddhar healers who honor him as their guru.





Said to be fathered by Mitra-Varuna sun deities and born to Urvasi, a prominent Apsara dancer of Amarawati where live the Devas, the whisperings are that he is borne of seed planted by a Lord Brahma son and he is, therefore, grandson to the creator himself. He is one of seven stars in the Sapta Rishi constellation and an astha siddhi who holds all of the eight great powers within himself.

Sages like him are hunters, fighters, warriors for the world is a dangerous place and you must be able to keep safe whether it be from animals, murderers, or nation builders. Being a teacher, for he is wise among the wise, and venerated throughout the worlds that know of him, Agastha has ninety-six scriptures to his credit and he is called the father of Tamil writings and worshiped in Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, and Malay languages among others. The Vedas offer him many mentions.

He and other ascetics like him take on young people who would learn the letters, foraging skills, weapon use, war plans, and gather knowledge that prepare them for a life as rulers, soldiers, gurus, accountants. These young people live with him in the jungles during their formative years serving and learning.

Consorts, wife (or wives), as well as children of these sages help upkeep. Their water comes from brooks, springs, and wells. Wild rice, yam, squash, deer-fowl-and hunt that they trap or kill serve as food, sometimes disciples are rich or royal and guardians send grains, dried or fermented food for the collective.

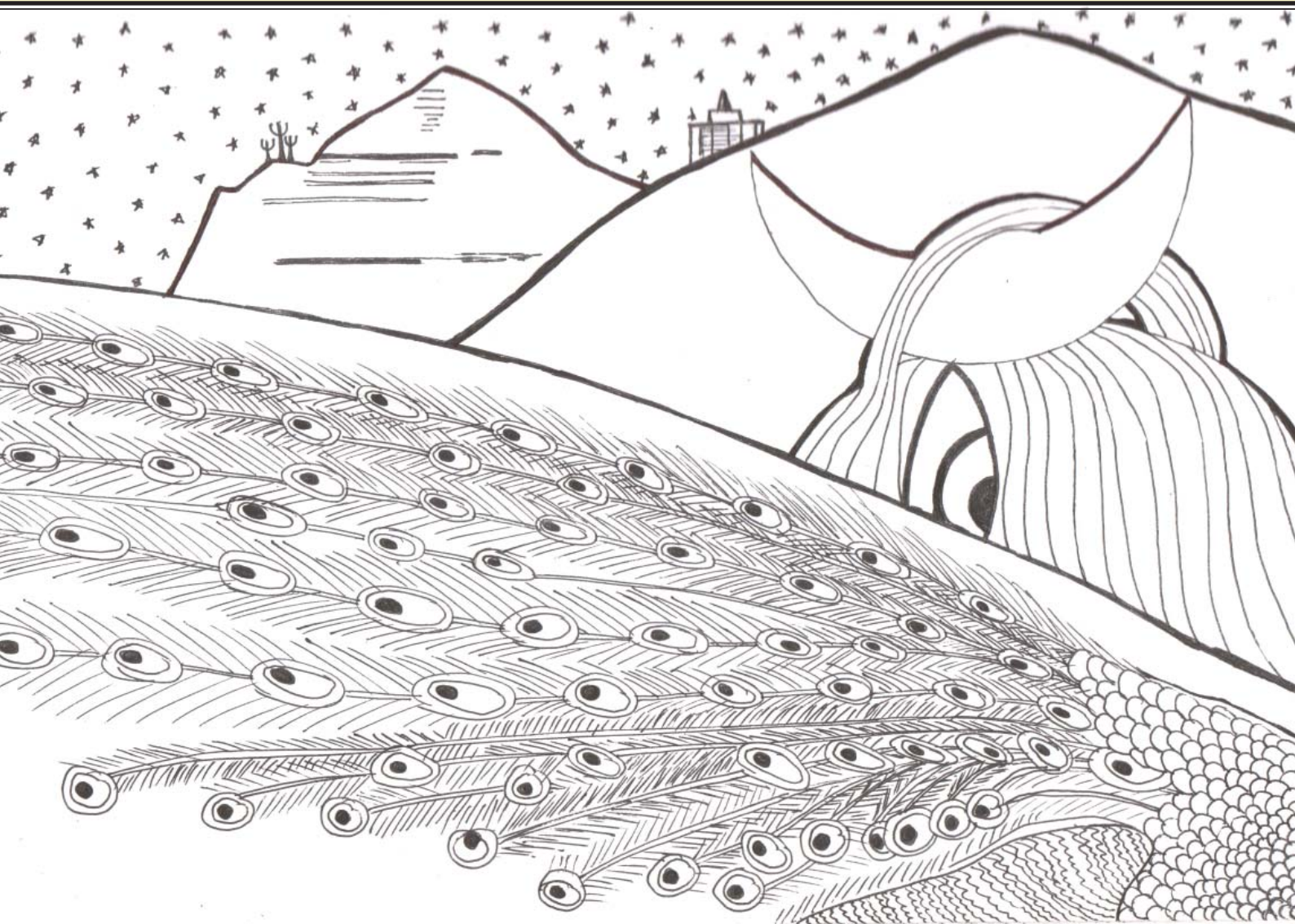
In the kuti huts that he and his disciples have built using long grasses to cover the roofs; light, true forest bamboo and wood for walls and support; earth paste to smoothen floors and walls; and mined colors that are blue, white, green, red, yellow, and orange, they cook, sleep, live, learn, keep their fowl and cows and other animals.

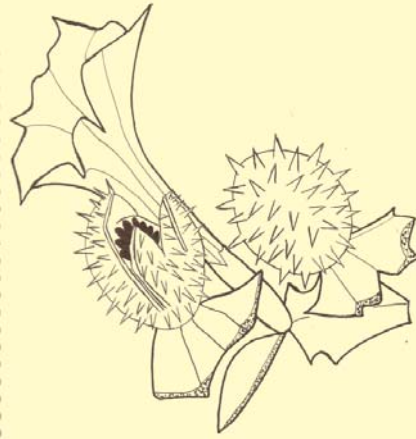
In the meanwhile, at Mount Kailas, the days are different for Kumar, the son of Lord Shiva. The white snow and sparkling icicles are amazing to look upon and to live with. The ghosts, dakinis, spirits, yogis cackle and laugh and sing about his father's home day and night. Sages

come through life-taking mountain passes to seek learning and blessings from his family as has Agastha done many a time. Some arrive bare foot, some without clothes on: their Lord travels thus and they wish to please him by risking limb and life to emulate his way of doing things.

Kumar, at times, finds the rarified air, the intense worship, and the continuous cold hard to put up with. This is why many many years from now this son of Lord Shiva wished for days that were different. He wanted leave from the sparkling Kailas Mountain and the freezing winds that danced upon the roof of the world. Kumar's thought of sage Agastha's residence. He wanted to warm himself in the sun of sub-tropical jungles, he wanted the feel of flowering grass beneath his bare feet and the taste of sweet summer fruit on his tongue.

He called upon his steed, the peacock, and they left Kailas and its splendors for a spell, the shrill call of the bird lost to the vast brown-white desert that was this world.





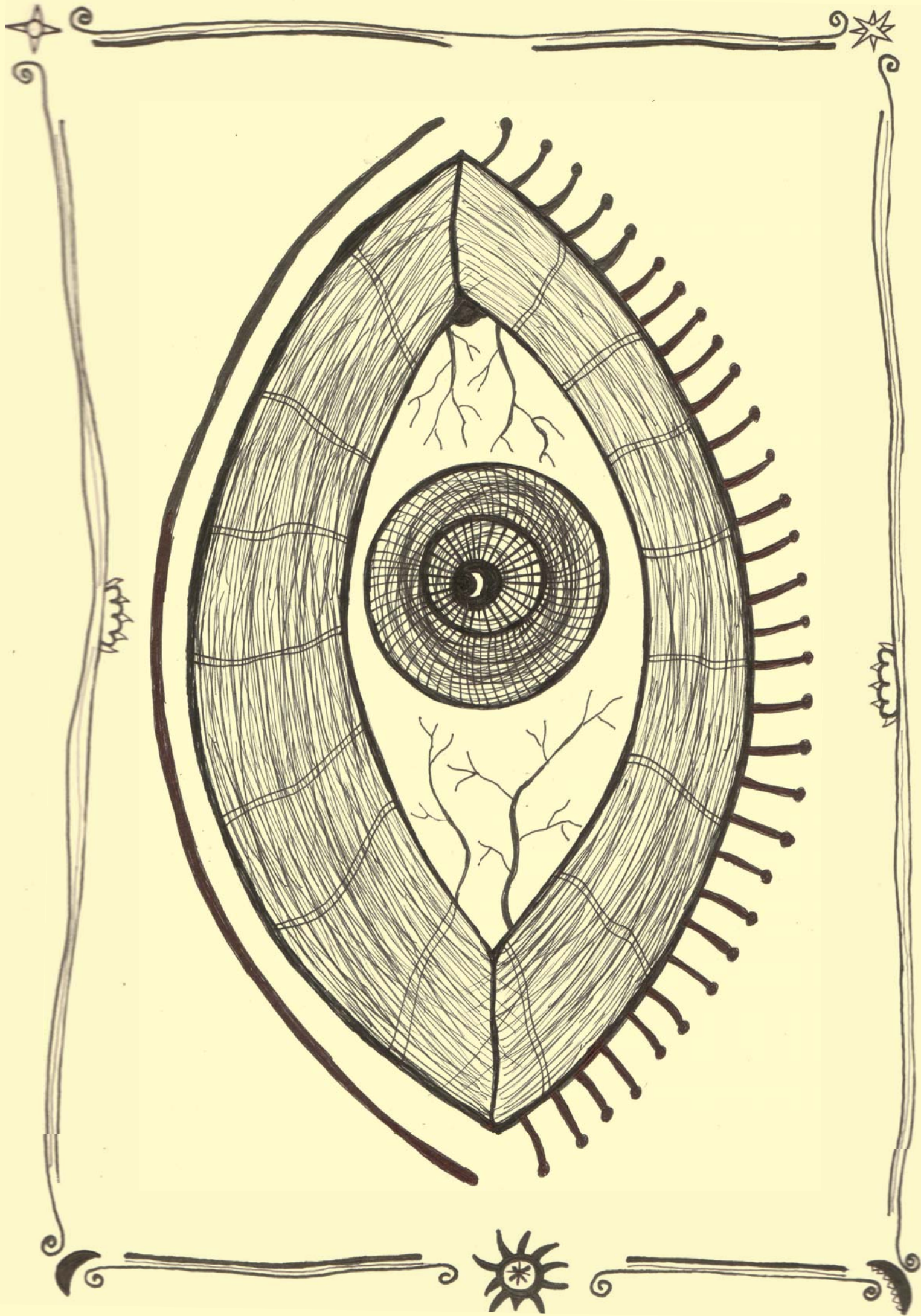
Agastha Muni was filled with joy when he saw the young and handsome Kumar. He had heard the call of his steed and hurried back to prepare for the Kartikeya's coming calling to a halt the hunt that he and his disciples were involved in. He was very pleased that the young Lord had chosen to grace him with his presence. Welcoming him with pleasant words, sweet smelling flowers and clean water with which to wash and refresh himself, he placed an offering of fruit and roots before him.

"O leader of the Deva army, the one with six faces, Skanda, Murugan, Subramanyam, the one wins all wars, the one worshipped by the follower of many religions, Senthil, Swaminatha, Mahasena, Velan, thank you for gracing my humble abode with your presence."

Kumar was pleased to hear such praise. He found the bird and insect noise pleasant. The breeze was gentle and the play of leaves and flowers soothing. The sun upon the grass roof, the smell of incense of a morning's prayers, the slow yet important movements of life in the kuti made him benevolent. Stretching out on grass woven mats and animal skin, he relaxed and sought to enjoy his visit.

Sage Agastha was glad to see Kumar like this and as he related the happenings in his world, he wanted to add to his knowledge of the universe. Kumar, being a son of Lord Shiva, had information that no one else has. So seeing him inclined to share some of what he knew Agastha asked Kumar to tell him of the creation of the universe.

"How did this universe, this earth that we live on, the plants and animals around us, the air that moves, the grass that we sit on, the wondrous Sumeru Mountain, and everything else come about? I am curious. You are one of few beings who know of this. If you would be kind and relate such beginnings I would be blessed."





From the half-dreams that the sun and the food and the warmth of Agastha's welcome, Kumar replied:

O Agastha Muni, in the beginning, you must know that God has, in his possession, an infinite number of cosmic eggs. Each of them can become a source of everything that you see about yourself and everything that you do not. Each cosmic egg has the potential to give life to a universe. The fundamentals of all that live and all that are not alive are within them. All material necessary to make mountains, stars, moons, and planets are within each cosmic egg.

And within each egg are not only that which can be touched and made tangible, but also potential words, feelings, shapes, and smells intangible. Such is the essence of the cosmic eggs that they can shape universes that are each unique and infinite, encompassing and amazing.

Each cosmic egg has its own Brahma and Vishnu. Lord Brahma shapes and designs the cosmos for God and Lord Vishnu preserves what has been created. It is up to Lord Shiva to decide that the time for change and destruction have arrived. While we know the roots of Brahma and Vishnu, no one knows the beginning or the end of Lord Shiva. He is present in each cosmic egg before it comes to life and he is the one who sees it to the end. Such is his glory.

The life of each cosmos is finite. Lord Brahma, in his own way, is like a human being. He has to eat and sleep. Perhaps not as frequently as us but without nutrition, without rest, he cannot go on. In one day of his life, his creation undergoes four ages: Satya, Treta, Dwapar, and Kali. They are as mornings, afternoons, evenings, and nights for him and for his creation.

Of these ages, Satya, or the age of truth is the best as all that happens during this time is good. Almost everything that he creates during this age is flawless. Perhaps this is because he is fresh during this time of his day.

Then comes Treta age. During this period, some illness, some evil, some cracks and decay begin to appear, though it is little. Lords and their creations that wish the good of the universe need to work to assure that truth and goodness are maintained. Lord Vishnu himself took on the shape of a Baman dwarf, Parshuram the warrior priest, and Ram the prince of Ayodhya to keep evil at bay in this universe during the Treta age.

It is as if Lord Brahma's afternoon has started and after the hard and

fruitful work of a morning, his work is no longer as pristine and pure perhaps as some tiredness has begun to creep into what he does. With the coming of the evening Dwapar yug begins. Half or more of the creation now may not turn out right, may turn to evil and may suffer shorter or less productive existence.

The Lords, those that care for the universe and its goodness need to be alert and a constant battle is ongoing. After working hard for the creation, even Lord Bishnu returns to his residence in Baikuntha for rest and recuperation, especially after his involvement in the Mahabharat wars. This leads to the age of endings.

When Kali yug begins it is almost as if light has begun to fail on Lord Brahma's creation. This is a time of strife and difficulty for the cosmos. Demons and weapons that are powerful and wondrous take form. Evil proliferates and even those that are good are no longer able to keep the ending at bay. Now Lord Brahma himself needs rest and such is the state of the cosmos that when he goes to sleep much of what he has created is brought to an end as Lord Shiva destroys what has gone wrong and prepares for Lord Brahma to wake up to another beautiful morning.

As one hundred years of days and nights like these pass by, Brahma ages and his life comes to an end as does the life of Lords Bishnu. With their passing ends all that is one cosmos. And now that the universe is no more, if God wills, another cosmic egg comes into life.

I have related how creation works in brief. Since there have been so many cosmic eggs that have been given life and have come to an end, I cannot relate the stories of them all. What I now relate to you is the story of one cosmic egg. I will tell you the story of this universe. Listen carefully.

When God wished to give life to our cosmos, three great Lords appeared within one of the cosmic eggs: Shiva, Brahma, and Bishnu. From Shiva a female force appeared and this force was nature. Mortal beings were to live within her boundaries and obey her rules. Trying to oppose her brought strife and difficulties, knowing her and working with her brought peace, knowledge, and mokṣya.

Since there is no end to creation and destruction, happiness and sadness are but a dream. If you can bring the mind and your emotions under control, you can find a path and become a siddhi.



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Artwork on this page, Shiva linga as appears in the new version.