

WHAT A SPLENDID HARVEST!



KEY THEME: OPTIMISM AND SUPPORT HELP LEAD TO SUCCESS

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: THE RIVALS TRY ANOTHER TRICK BUT A GOD COUNTERS THIS MEAN BEHAVIOR

Kunnutaiya has returned to his ancestral lands with his new wife after spending many years in exile after his parents died when he was only a young child. Now he has managed to reclaim one family field and has planted a crop. The couple watch their ploughed plot anxiously and finally they see some tender plants peeking up through the soil. After the fourth week the field is full of young tender stalks. But the rival clansmen also see this. They don't want Kunnutaiya to prosper and then demand the rest of the lands. These jealous relatives have enjoyed harvesting crops from these fields during the many years he was absent. So one dark night these men drive their cows over the growing plants. Kunnutaiya inspects the field again the next day, and is shocked to see the badly trampled stalks. But fortunately Lord Vishnu was watching and he uses a little magic to ensure that no permanent damage is done. The stalks spring back and the maize pods swell. When the couple return to the field Tamarai looks carefully at one plant and finds ... not ordinary corn... but a beautiful array of coloured jewels!.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Kunnutaiya has worked hard to obtain such a fine harvest. But he was not laboured alone. Both his wife and Lord Vishnu were there as supporting partners. **a)** Why were Kunnutaiya's male cousins so mean? Did they have any right to try to destroy their neighbor's crop? **b)** The jewels Tamarai finds on the tall maize stalks are quite a surprise! Is this just magic or can we

STORY EPISODE 7.1

talk about it as a metaphor for what hard work can produce? **c)** Can you add any other interpretations ... other ways we might give meaning to this story's magical events?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: In the previous story segment Kunnutaiya's clansmen secretly roasted the seeds that Kunnutaiya later planted, to try to destroy the harvest that way. In this segment they trample the growing plant stalks with their cows. Can you compare the clansmen's two mean tricks? How are they different? (Some possible answers are: human versus animal destruction, work done inside or done outside, A trick organized by one family or organized by a group, a trick performed at home versus one done after trespassing on another family's land, an (almost) invisible versus a clearly visible result). By drawing out these contrasts you can help students become more aware of how literature uses contrasts and oppositions to maximize a story's memorability and impact.

COMMENTARY: One can also note here that the hero, Kunnutaiya, is naïve. He does not ask himself why his tender plants got so badly damaged... in just one night. Kunnutaiya has recently returned to his homeland and is about to reclaim his family's control of a large expanse of fine fields. But he is a kind hearted man and he doesn't spend time thinking about the potential jealousy his male cousins may feel towards him. Is it always good to be kind hearted and not to suspect others of possibly harbouring some type of evil intent?

SUMMARY- PART TWO: THE INSIGHTFUL WIFE FINDS MAGICAL WEALTH

Tamarai is more confident than her husband Kunnutaiya and she also explores most situations more thoroughly. Dismissing his anxiety about how much maize they will be able to reap, Tamarai wades deep into the crop and examines at a swollen cob herself. She then pierces it with her fingernail. Inside she finds a pearl! So she uses her fingernail again. Now she finds another jewel. Tamarai becomes excited and calls her husband over to see what she has found.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: How does the heroine's behavior differ from that of her husband? Why does she do some "research" and then find jewels inside their maize plants... while her husband does not conduct a fingernail "test" and therefore sees nothing?

COMMENTARY: This story segment helps illustrate a difference in the personalities of these two key characters. One is timid and accepting of "superficial" realities. The other is insightful, questioning and unafraid. One holds back and the other takes the initiative to "wade in" and look carefully. It is important to note that, in this culture and in this story, these differences are "gender related." The women in the Legend of Ponnivala question their situation more thoroughly. They also have special powers of insight that the men in the story do not. Women can "see" alternative realities that the men can not. These special powers are related to the depth of their devotion to Lord Vishnu and to their willingness to place their faith in God's beneficence. In the next segment of this huge legend (just below) we also see that the wife is far more generous than her husband, when it comes to giving her wealth to the poor.

EVERYTHING GIVEN AWAY!



KEY THEME: THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARITY

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **BOUNTIFUL WEALTH ACQUIRED.... UNEXPECTEDLY**

The hero Kunnutaiya, and his wife Tamarai, have just discovered that they have the opportunity to harvest a magical crop. Their ordinary looking maize plants have heavy cobs that secretly contain a wealth of gem stones. Being careful not to reveal their discovery to others, the couple call in laborers to help cut down the tall stalks. But they ask that these simply be piled in heaps. They will open the cobs themselves. When the labourers leave the husband calls on Lord Vishnu and this god magically helps the two of them break each cob and tassel open. Soon they have filled their harvest baskets with beautiful jewels. Next they store these baskets inside their home and begin to measure out their new found wealth.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: This couple's new wealth comes to them very suddenly. It is as if they have "won the lottery." Find some stories about sudden wealth. Develop a story about what would you do if something like this happened to you.

STORY EPISODE 7.2

COMMENTARY: Winning sudden wealth is very common in folktales, but very rare in real life. You could compare this story segment, for example, with Aesop's Fable "The goose that laid the golden egg." What happens in that story? Will something similar happen here? The next piece of the story gives this magical event much added depth and also answers this question.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: **A DOUBTING HUSBAND AND A SAINTLY WIFE**

Vishnu is watching Kunnutaiya and Tamarai closely. How will they deal with their newly acquired wealth? This playful god now wants to test the couple's generosity. So he turns himself magically into a hundred human beggars. These men come and knock on the door of Kunnutaiya and Tamarai's humble little hut. They are asking for alms. Kunnutaiya is upset when he sees these mendicants. He asks Tamarai to send them away. But Tamarai ignores him and starts generously giving the newly harvested family jewels away! Waking from a short nap he took while Tamarai was giving away their wealth, Kunnutaiya decides to go to visit the family overlord, a great Chola king. Instead of giving to beggars, he will give the king a small gift. But when Kunnutaiya returns from his trip to see the king, the door of their little house is stuck shut. Tamarai has been locked out! After managing to open the door with brute strength, the couple make a discovery. To their surprise and delight they find that their original stash of jewels has been replenished! Tamarai quickly recognizes Lord Vishnu's hand in this beneficence. The couple decide to spend their new-found wealth building a fine palace.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Charity is an old, old theme, common to many cultures and religions around the world. **a)** Many religions ask their followers to give a certain percentage of their wealth to charitable causes each year. Are there any traditions like this among your relatives or friends? **b)** Here the story is about giving, and giving and giving. In the end Tamarai and her husband are rewarded for this attitude, by the gods. What can we learn from this idea? **c)** Can giving make one happy, or happier? **d)** Who do you think tends to "give" more generously, the wealthy or the poor? Why do you think that there is a difference (or maybe you don't believe there is one)?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Read (or tell) Aesop's Fable about the Goose That Laid The Golden Egg. How does this story from India differ from that story... which is from Europe?

COMMENTARY: Kunnutaiya and Tamarai worked hard to obtain their wealth, and they suffered along the way (this kind of background information is missing in Aesop's Tale). Furthermore, an important contrast between the husband's and the wife's reactions can be seen in our story. This is also missing in Aesop's account. Consistent with what we already know of our heroine's personality, we now learn that she is quite ready to give all away. This woman is saintly and concerned for the welfare of others, while her husband is far less generous. Finally, when the family's new wealth is generously distributed to others, a god steps in to "reward" this giving by replenishing the treasure. This also does not occur in the Golden Goose story.

We see that Lord Vishnu has been "playing" with (teasing) the couple. And significantly, the god's focus is mainly on the heroine. One can almost say that he is "flirting with her." However, Tamarai passes his tests easily and thereby proves her sincerity as his devotee. This is a common theme in the Hindu mythology surrounding Lord Vishnu. He loves to "flirt" with young women, but also expects them to worship him. Finally, one can note that Kunnutaiya's gift to the neighbouring Chola king is his way of paying symbolic "tribute." Kunnutaiya is sharing a small token of his new abundance with his

STORY EPISODE 7.2

overlord. The gift is a token of his respect, and is also symbolic of his political submission to the great monarch's wide powers.

A KING IS CROWNED



KEY THEME: BUILDING ALLIANCES

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: A WONDEROUS PALACE IS BUILT

Kunnutaiya and his wife Tamarai have recently returned to the family's homeland in Ponnivala. On his return, Kunnutaiya was not welcomed. His lands had long back been taken over by his male cousins and his old family palace had been destroyed and the remains poughed under the earth. But due to backing from Lord Vishnu, and a lot of hard work, Kunnutaiya is suddenly wealthy once again. So he and his wife have decided to build a palace. First they want to locate where the old palace stood so they call on Lord Vishnu to point out that special spot. The couple find this place and perform a small ritual there. Then they call the stone masons to begin the work of construction. It is to be a fine building with many rooms. Lord Vishnu has been watching all this from his couch on the milk sea. Happily, he decides to descend to earth and help. As a result, invisibly, for every stone the masons lay, Vishnu lays another thousand. In this way their fine palace is quickly constructed.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: How would you design a palace and what rooms would you have in it? (Do some internet research) How do you think palaces built in India differ from palaces found elsewhere in the world? What is the reason for these differences? Why was the old palace utterly destroyed? Can you think of modern examples of something similar,

STORY EPISODE 8.1

where the destruction was done on purpose to get rid of an important symbol of political power?

COMMENTARY: Palaces in India are famous for their heavily fortified walls. Inside one normally finds a “mini” city, complete with wells, temples, palace animals and many weapons of war. There are many courtyards and open spaces. There are also many ceremonial reception halls for visitors. Old palaces are very hard to find nowadays, especially in the far South. This is because the enemies of a ruler generally destroyed the entire physical space after it was conquered. This humiliated the previous ruler and made a comeback by his family that much more difficult. This is exactly what happened to Kunnutaiya’s original family palace in this Ponnivala story.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: A GRAND CORRONATION OCCURS

As soon as the palace is built Kunnutaiya’s wife, Tamarai, calls on Lord Vishnu and announces that she wants to conduct an “inauguration” ceremony. Lord Vishnu suggests to her that all three monarchs of the South (the well-known Chola, Chera and Pandiya kings) be invited. He also announces that he wants to confer a title on the family. A grand event ensues. Many honors are accorded the new “king” of Ponnivala. Now, somewhat late to join in the celebrations, Kunnutaiya’s rival clansmen arrive. They pay their respects to the three monarchs. The Chola king then tells them that they must give back all the lands that once belonged to the farmer-king’s father. The clansmen are reluctant, but are forced to agree to the king’s command. The clansmen commit to carrying out his orders and then quickly leave.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Rulers and politicians survive by building alliances. They seek out loyal followers who will represent them. Kunnutaiya’s political duty will be to spread the good name of the ruler and attest to his powerful presence.... wherever he goes. **a)** What did Kunnutaiya do to deserve this gift of a crown from the reigning Chola monarch? We know that he built a palace and that he is now is a wealthy man. Was that reason enough or is there something more happening here? **b)** What kind of bond and what type of loyalty has developed between Kunnutaiya and this Chola ruler? **c)** What might Kunnutaiya be expected to help his leader accomplish? **d)** Are there any things Kunnutaiya might do that might anger the king and break-up his publically announced alliance with him? Would Kunnutaiya ever have reason to rebel? (See what his sons do in episode 19)

SUGGESTED EXERCISE: Have you ever seen a royal coronation on TV? What kinds of symbols of respect and authority are used? Are European traditions for crowning or honouring persons who are allied with a king any different from the ceremonies one sees in the Ponnivala Story? What are some of the titles European rulers use when they want to honor their supporters and allies?

COMMENTARY: The king and queen of Ponnivala are actually only “minor royalty” and do not have the same stature as their guests.... the three great kings of the land. The Chola, Chera and Pandiya overlords present at this ceremony represent three great South Indian kingdoms. All of these are important in South Indian history and you can find a lot of information about them on the internet.. However, these men were rarely a friendly three-some. This story is a bit “fanciful” in showing them come together in such a cheerful way. However, think about the current “summits” between great political leaders in our modern world. We often see them talking together and shaking hands, even though we know that there are deep rivalries concealed underneath these friendly gestures. In this

STORY EPISODE 8.1

story the three kings (with the Chola king in the lead) are conferring honors on an ally whose overall power is less than any of theirs. This makes for an event that it is easy for all three to participate in.

THE CHILDLESS QUEEN



KEY THEME: THE DESIRE FOR CHILDREN IS A POWERFUL MOTIVATOR

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **A TRAGIC CURSE: THE QUEEN IS BARREN**

The Chola king has just granted the wealthy farmer Kunnutaiya a symbolic crown and declared that he is a trusted ally. Now this monarch turns to the newly elevated landowner and issues a set of instructions. He tells him how to be a wise ruler. Then the king leaves for his own territory, hoping that the prosperous Ponnivala region will be ruled henceforth with justice and with wisdom. But the couple lack one vital thing: they are childless. How will their family's power and influence be continued after their death? Kunnutaiya and Tamarai decide to purchase a pair of fine cows, two handsome horses, and even a male and female pig. But none of these animals bear and offspring either. Finally the queen grows weary of her barrenness and yearns to visit her natal household. There she hopes that she can at least enjoy a visit with her brother's children. But Kunnutaiya is vehemently opposed to this plan. He remembers the way that family "cast them out" at the moment of their marriage (see episode 5). But the queen is determined to make this trip and starts her preparations anyway.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Wanting to bear and raise children is one of the oldest themes known to human history. There are many reasons for this driving desire, including social, economic, political and physiological explanations. **a)** What reasons for having children can you name and describe? **b)** Does it matter whether a person adopts a child or creates one "naturally" with a partner? Why is there a difference, if you think there is one? **c)** In some traditional cultures, like this one, women who could

STORY EPISODE 8.2

not bear children were sometimes thought to be “witches.” Why do you think people might sometimes think this way? **d)** What does the queen herself think is the “cause” of her barrenness?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Why is the queen’s barrenness such a big issue? Why are the barren animals important? And is the queen justified in visiting her brothers’ home even though her husband has told her not to go?

COMMENTARY: There are many different threads one can follow up on in this story excerpt. Barrenness is the stumbling block to perpetuating the family’s rule of the area. It seems that Kunnutaiya and Tamarai buy several different pairs of animals in order to “test” the extent of the curse they suspect may lie on their family (see episode 1-d). If none of the animals bear offspring then the whole kingdom can be understood to be covered by this terrible fate. This unhappy result intensifies the problem and makes it very serious indeed. And finally the issue of the queen’s “right” to visit her brother is important. This is one “right” that South Indian women retain for life. No husband has the authority to keep his wife from visiting her natal family. The “twist” here is that such visits are usually built around a wife’s pregnancy. She is expected to return to her natal home to deliver each new child. In this case Tamarai is “barren” so the normal reason for returning to her family home is absent. But women are also expected to return to their parental home in times of extreme unhappiness, when beaten by a husband or after a terrible argument. But we know that Tamarai’s brothers threw her out at the moment of her marriage, telling her never to return (see episode 5-c). This makes the situation very interesting for a South Indian audience. There is a kind of “balance” set up here between Kunnutaiya’s warning to his wife and her “right” to return home for a visit. Balanced and opposing reasons for a deciding whether or not to commit to a certain action make for a good story.

TWO ANGRY BROTHERS



KEY THEME: THE NEED TO TOLERATE PEOPLE'S DIFFERENCES

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **A BARREN “WITCH” IS SPOTTED**

Queen Tamarai wants to pay a visit to her natal home. She plans to carry gifts with her to give to her nieces and nephews. So she orders a jeweller to come and prepare some lovely necklaces. Tamarai also orders him to make some lovely boxes that can be used to carry these and her other pleasing gifts. Then, early the next morning, she awakens her husband to and announces that she is leaving for her brother's place. Again her husband Kunnutaiya tells her not to go. But Tamarai is determined and she bravely sets out for her old home with a group of servants. After much hardship en route the weary travelers arrive. But just then a family shepherd spots a group of strangers approaching. He asks them who they are and learns that Tamarai is the banishes sister of his two masters. So when the group asks the way he outlines a less than direct route. Meanwhile, he runs directly to the palace using a short cut. There he addresses Tamarai's two sisters-in-law. These two women are horrified and fear that this unwanted sister will place a magical curse on their own children.. out of jealousy for having none of her own. They rush inside to warn their husbands. Fearing her evil spells the children are hidden under a huge basket and the door to the palace is locked.

STORY EPISODE 9.1

SOME TALKING POINTS: Basically, queen Tamarai is being judged unfairly by her brothers and their wives. She is being discriminated against and stereotyped. Her barren condition is not her fault. She has done nothing wrong. But her brothers and their wives believe that she is somehow personally responsible for her childless condition. They also believe that this condition is “contagious” and that it can spread to others. She has been singled out because she is different and has not born children... as all women in the family are traditionally expected to do. One can easily call this a special kind of “bullying.” In this culture a woman retains her right to visit her brothers and the right to expect their sympathy and support.... throughout her life. **a)** Has the heroine been “wronged” and denied her rights? **b)** What would you have done if you were Tamarai’s brother or one of her sisters-in-law? **c)** What do you think queen Tamarai will do next? **d)** Can you think of anyone who might help Tamarai and why?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: What stories to you know about people rejecting strangers and being afraid of them? How does this story resemble (or differ) from ideas about foreigners being dangerous that some people have?

COMMENTARY: The queen’s status is beautifully ‘ambiguous’ in this encounter. She has been made into a “foreigner” by an act of expulsion that occurred at the moment of her marriage. But she can still claim her right as a “blood sister” of the two men who now live in her old palace home. These two point of view are neatly balanced at this point in the story... making for a lot of suspense!

THE SISTER'S REVENGE



KEY THEME: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: THE SISTER IS REFUSED ENTRY TO HER NATAL HOME

Queen Tamarai has just returned to her natal home for a visit with her two brothers and their many children. But palace guard has been instructed to refuse her entry because the two families are afraid she is dangerous and that she might curse their children in some way. So the grand palace door is locked and the guard severely beats this poor woman when she asks to enter. The crying queen then calls on Lord Vishnu. She asks him to send her a magic fireball. Vishnu goes to Lord Shiva to get permission for this and Shiva himself, distressed to hear the story Vishnu tells him, sends a powerful fireball directly to earth using his magic. The angry woman receives a fireball in her right hand. She then throws the fire at the guard and she curses her two brothers and their families... all of whom are hiding inside. The curse balances out what she herself has suffered (exile from her natal kingdom at the time of her marriage). Now she wishes a similar fate on her brothers, announcing that they are to leave their fine palace and live in exile without any children. In addition she sends a curse over the many palace children that causes them to die instantly under the basket where they are hiding.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Anger and ostracism directed towards someone who is simply different but who has done nothing wrong is bound to create bad feelings. In this story we see the Queen react with fury. The story also shows that when Queen Tamarai is mistreated that she responds with anger and that she summons up extra courage (call this magical power) that allows her to retaliate a) Where

STORY EPISODE 9.2

does the Queen's fiery power come from? **b)** Is she justified in cursing her brothers and their many children?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Brother/sister arguments are common around the world. Do you know of a story where a brother locked his sister out? How did she respond? What other stories can you find about brother/sister conflict?

COMMENTARY: This story can be discussed as a metaphor for many kinds of issues that can cause anger between a brother and sister. In India the social reputation of the sister is a matter of honor for the brother. In this story it is the sister's barrenness that has her brothers frightened and angry. But other reasons for worry about a sister's reputation are more common, especially the worry that she has been defiled or polluted in some way. Brothers are supposed to protect their sisters from harm, so this story presents a shocking "inversion" of the correct behaviour of a brother. It is "natural" for a sister to respond to this moral misbehavior of her brothers with anger that seems as "hot" as real fire. In this sub-story the sister has a moral right to expect hospitality from her brothers. Her bareness is not her fault; their violent treatment of her is reprehensible. Nonetheless, one can understand why (given their beliefs about barren women) these two male siblings are afraid of her.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: THE SISTER CURSES HER BROTHERS AND (TEMPORARILY) KILLS THEIR CHILDREN

Queen Tamarai has just killed all fourteen of her brothers' children with her powerful curse. Then she leaves for the village gathering place and invites all the other local children to gather around. She opens the boxes of gifts she has brought and invites each child to take something home. Finally she erects two stones near the local temple. She orders the stone masons to inscribe there, the curse that is to lie on her two brothers' families.. She also goes to the nearby temple of the fierce goddess Kali. Kali takes pity on poor Tamarai and listens to her complaints. The goddess is moved and tries to think of a way that she can help.

FURTHER DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: There is a widespread festival day each year in India during which brothers and sisters ceremonially honor each other. It is called Holi. This is an interesting event which students can be assigned to research on the internet. In one area (the state of Bihar) these rituals actually include a requirement that the sister ritually swear at her brother in a sort of "momentary reversal of social norms." The brother and sister must "make up" afterwards. What do you think is the idea behind this peculiar custom? Might something similar be about to happen here too... in the next episode? Who do you think will step in to help Queen Tamarai and how might that help resolve this terrible conflict?

COMMENTARY: Ironically the brothers in this story believe that their sister may harm their children out of jealousy, because she has no children of her own. This is exactly what the sister does end up doing, but that was not the intention she had on arrival. In planning her trip she had jewellery made for each child and she had planned to honor them. The sister's violent act is caused by her emotional anger after her brothers first make the moral mistake of mistreating her. There can be a deeply hidden jealousy and discord between opposite-gendered siblings. This is one of several sociologically important but somewhat "hidden" themes that runs through many episodes of this Legend of Ponnivala story.

STONE BRIDES



KEY THEME: INSURING A FAMILY'S FUTURE

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **TWO BROTHERS BEG FORGIVENESS**

Queen Tamarai's heart has just been broken. Her brothers have just refused her entry into her old palace home and had the door guard there beat her for protesting. As a result Tamarai requested, and received, a large fire ball from Lord Shiva. With this she has burnt that guard and cursed both her brothers to exile and generations of barrenness. She has also cursed all their fourteen children to die instantly under the large straw basket where they have been hidden by their parents. Now this bruised and dejected heroine stands before the goddess Kali asking her for sympathy and help. A priest of this temple happens by. He asks Tamarai who beat her and why. Upon learning her story he makes up an excuse: he has forgotten something he needs for the temple worship he is supposed to do. Then the priest runs quickly to her brothers' palace home. There he talks gently with these men. He shows them that their children have been cursed to lie in a deathlike trance. He begs them to go to the temple and ask their sister's forgiveness. Only then will this curse on their children be lifted. The two brothers reluctantly go and fall at their sister's feet. She does not want to even look at them.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Does the goddess give the right advice to the queen? Do you think she will forgive her brothers?

STORY EPISODE 10.1

COMMENTARY: The story is pretty clear in its moral judgement here. The goddess Kali confirms that the heroine's brothers have erred in not welcoming their sister back into their home. At the same time she is encouraged to forgive these two men. Her brothers lower themselves before her and beg for an apology (which she does eventually grant them). The ambiguity remains, however, and the "feud" continues. The heroine announces that now she never wants to see them again.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: **MANY CHILDREN MIRACULOUSLY REVIVED**

The goddess recommends that Tamarai forgive her brothers, but also that she should go and actually enter her old home. The queen follows this advice and forgives her brothers. But she also demands that they run off, out of sight. They do this and then she proceeds to visit her natal home with the temple priest as her escort. Inside she finds the dead bodies of her brothers' fourteen children. The priest tells her she has special powers and begs her to revive them all. The heroine bargains and asks permission to take two of the female children for her own purposes. The priest allows this and all the children are brought back to life using a golden wand Lord Shiva himself now sends her. The heroine takes two girls of her choosing from the palace, dragging them against their will to a spot near the village (Ganesh) temple. There she magically turns them into two upright stones. Calling on Lord Vishnu, she asks that these girls be guarded by beetles and wasps until such time as she can bring her own (as yet unborn) twin sons back to that very spot to marry them. Finally, satisfied with her accomplishments, queen Tamarai gathers her servants and starts back towards her own Ponnivala palace.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Tamarai has just struck a hard bargain. In exchange for her mistreatment she asks for two of her brothers daughters. Normally a woman's brothers would give their girls away in marriage...happily, when suitable grooms step forward. But because there has just been a serious confrontation between the two sides of the family, the Queen wants to insure that these two girls her (dreamed of) sons will have the "right" to marry later on.... are not given to others first. This is something like taking out an "insurance policy" on marriages hoped for in the distant future. **a)** The Queen's brothers first have to ask their sister's forgiveness. Why do you think asking for forgiveness important? **b)** What do you think of a bargain where the Queen agrees to give back life to all her brothers' children but then immediately turns two of these girls into lifeless statutes? **c)** What do you think could be the symbolic significance of turning young women into stone? **d)** Golden wands are present in many folktales, from Europe as well as from India. Why do you think a golden wand is so popular across many cultures?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Was the sister right to tell her brothers to run away so that she would never have to see them again? Why do you think she wants to "take" two of the female children with her? Can you find another story or situation where women are somehow "reserved" for their husbands-to-be, many years in advance?

COMMENTARY: In this story queen Tamarai has special powers. She is able to bring her brothers' children back to life (even though she cannot give birth to any children herself, at least just now). A modern reading of the story might say that the queen never really killed her brothers' children, but rather that they just became "frozen" by fear. This reading is strengthened by a fuller understanding of what Tamarai wants to do with the two nieces she asks to take with her. As a woman with special powers, the queen's intuition tells her that her curse will one day be lifted and that she will then bear twin sons. According to a very powerful local custom, she has the right to demand that her brothers provide (their own daughters) as brides for a sisters' sons. This kind of cousin-to-cousin marriage is an old, old tradition in the area this story come from. Tamarai wants to "freeze" two girls in time and

STORY EPISODE 10.1

keep them ready for her own sons' marriages. Turning women to stone is a familiar theme in Indian mythology. It appears in other contexts as well.

LAST MINUTE RESCUE



KEY THEME: SUICIDE PREVENTION

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

**SUMMARY: THE QUEEN IS BANISHED FROM THE PALACE
BY AN ANGRY KING**

Queen Tamara returns home from a very long and tiring journey. She has been to visit her brothers, a trip her husband did not approve of. In addition they beat her and there are still visible bruises on her body. Now that she is back home she tries to rest in secret and avoid a confrontation with her husband Kunnutaiya. But he finds her asleep in a hallway, with her sari completely covering her body. Kunnutaiya suspects trouble. Asking to see Tamarai's arms and legs, he soon knows the real truth about her terrible beating. Angry that she has disobeyed his earlier advice Kunnutaiya banishes his wife from the palace. She is very dejected as a result and begins to think of suicide. So she calls in a group of stone masons and asks them to build her a 60 foot tower near the family temple. She plans to jump from that to her death.

STORY EPISODE 10.1

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: What would you do if you were a queen and were thrown out of your own palace? Might you have suicidal thoughts and why? Can you find a story or do you know someone close to you who was “thrown out” of their house? What happened? Was that person very sad and upset? Did they think about committing suicide?

COMMENTARY: A husband who throws his wife out of the house is a very common story theme. It happens in many tales and legends and, of course, it also happens in real life. The queen's suicidal thoughts are also not surprising. Anyone might think this way after they are forced out of their home and believe they have nowhere to turn.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: THE QUEEN CONTEMPLATES SUICIDE BUT IS SAVED FROM DEATH AT THE LAST MOMENT

When the tower queen Tamarai has ordered built is complete she sets out to climb it. When she reaches the top she calls out to Lord Vishnu. She asks him to assure her that when she jumps her body will be broken into many pieces, so that death will be quick and final. But Lord Vishnu knows better and he now is determined to save queen Tamarai from death. After all, he has been her helper in times of trouble... all her life. Lord Vishnu now uses all of his cunning and finally he entices her to climb down the tower and listen to what he proposes. Vishnu now brings Kunnutaiya into the picture. He asks the couple to perform a long list of good works. Now he sets many challenges before them, each of which is something aimed at doing good for others.. In addressing the husband and wife Vishnu implies that when their many fine deeds are complete, he will see to it that they are granted a child! This, of course, is what the barren couple have been praying for, for years!

SOME TALKING POINTS: Thinking about, even planning suicide... is not a recent phenomenon. The human issue of suicide has been with mankind since the beginning. Suicide was even practiced (and sanctioned) in hunting and gathering societies in times of extreme stress. In this story we see an example of suicidal thinking from medieval India. **a)** How does the Queen of Ponnivala telegraph to others her plan to commit suicide? **b)** Who notices and comes to her rescue? **c)** What arguments does Lord Vishnu use to talk the Queen out of suicide? His tactics are worthy of careful attention and match modern suicide counselling in many ways. **d)** How does Lord Vishnu cleverly redirect Tamarai's thoughts? What is his key strategy? Does he simply agree to meet her demands?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Heroines are also associated with high towers in some European folk stories. Can you find (and then tell) a story from somewhere else that combines a fine woman and a tower?

COMMENTARY: Climbing a tower (or a pillar) is something the queen will do again in this legend. In the next generation her daughter and another saintly woman also sit on top of a pillar while praying. It is as if the person climbing the tower is getting closer to god, making his or her conversation with a divine being easier and more focused. And in a sense this strategy works for our heroine too. Lord Vishnu does respond to her pleas when she calls from the top of a tower. And again we see the “teasing personality” Lord Vishnu often exhibits. Through teasing Lord Vishnu tests Tamarai repeatedly, testing her to determine whether she is deserving of his help (see episode 7-d for another

STORY EPISODE 10.1

example). Lord Vishnu's rescue efforts in this traditional legend could be discussed and compared to modern day women's shelters, or to the efforts of others who work with refugees, the poor and more.

THE GREAT FESTIVAL



KEY THEME: COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **The Heroic Couple Undertake Good Works**

Kingu Kunnutaiya and his wife Tamarai have just made a commitment to Lord Vishnu that they will undertake a series of good works. They will do things that will help their local community prosper and help make the people there happy. But they want something in exchange. Tamarai has not been able to bear children. Lord Vishnu promises that after the many tasks he has set this devout couple are complete... he will find a way for Tamarai to bear the children they both fervently desire. Their first challenge is to build a number of animal shelters. Then they are to perform a ritual that will marry two trees. They are also to erect a high pillar and place a lamp to it, they are to dig public wells, provide resting spots for the poor and to feed a thousand beggars. Lastly and most important of all, they are to have a temple cart constructed for the local goddess and they must pull this around the temple at a great local festival.

SOME TALKING POINTS: Festivals events are often a means by which a community symbolizes its solidarity and interdependence. In this story we see that everyone comes together to pull the great, and beautifully decorated cart. But there are a few bad apples in the crowd who want to spoil the fun and use the occasion to kill their rivals, the King and Queen. Overall, this situation is not very different from some street parties we see today, for example after a big sporting match, where fans are celebrating but then a few hooligans want to convert the situation into a riot. **a)** What similarities and differences do you see in these two scenarios? **b)** Are these artisans gangsters? Why do they behave like this? **c)** What kinds of parades have you seen where a deity is featured and perhaps carried or pulled along by the crowd? **d)** What do you think will happen when the cart actually begins its journey?.

STORY EPISODE 11.1

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Many people today do similar kinds of charitable work today. They plant trees, for example. Sometimes they dig wells or build public shelters, pay for park benches and the like. Many people contribute time and effort to organizing parades, and so forth. Tell your own story of a public festival where everyone pitched in.

COMMENTARY: The things the king and queen do in this story need some explanation. Marrying two trees may seem odd. It is important to know that the species Vishnu selected are very specific. These two species happily grow up side by side and become “entwined.” In India this wrapping around one another is seen as symbolic and thought to be like a marriage. When two tree like this are found a wedding ceremony is performed for them!. These “dual” tree systems usually become small shrines and are worshipped as pleasing examples of positive bonding relationships. One could also comment that marrying two trees is a suitable prelude to a big public festival where communal harmony is a key to success. Finally, one needs to know about the local tradition in South India of building temple carts for larger shrines. The god, the goddess, or a divine couple in such a temple are normally worshipped once a year by placing small mobile statues of the particular deity (or deities) high on the cart, in a position of honor. Then that cart is pulled around the temple as part of a festive celebration that is said to give “joy” to the divinity in question. The Catholic Church has similar customs. In many places, a small portable shrine dedicated to a particular saint will be carried in procession through the streets near a popular Catholic shrine on special festival days.

It is also important to know that because festivals are such big communal events, they are also places where individual groups can assert their “power” by declining to perform specialized services or otherwise causing disruption... until their roles are recognized and re-valued. It is a predictable time for something like a union “strike” to occur. Therefore, this is the appropriate occasion of a group of artisans to advance their communal cause.

SUMMARY – PART TWO: The Rival Clansmen Cleverly Plot To Kill

Kunnutaiya and Tamarai’s rivals, their paternal clansmen hear of the coming festival and the king and queen’s plan to hand pull a new temple cart around the temple. So the artisans forge a plan of their own. They will stop the cart half way using a wooden brake. Then they will declare that a dream was sent to them by the goddess. In that dream, the artisans will announce, divine female voice told them that the king and queen must place their own heads under its heavy wheels in order to satisfy her wishes. The artisan count on the couple’s strong belief in the goddess to get them to believe this tall story.. A huge bribe is promised to the man who will tell the big lie to the crowd. The king and queen are shocked by this unexpected announcement. They feel forced to submit to this terrible fate, but they cry out in anger to the goddess as they do so.

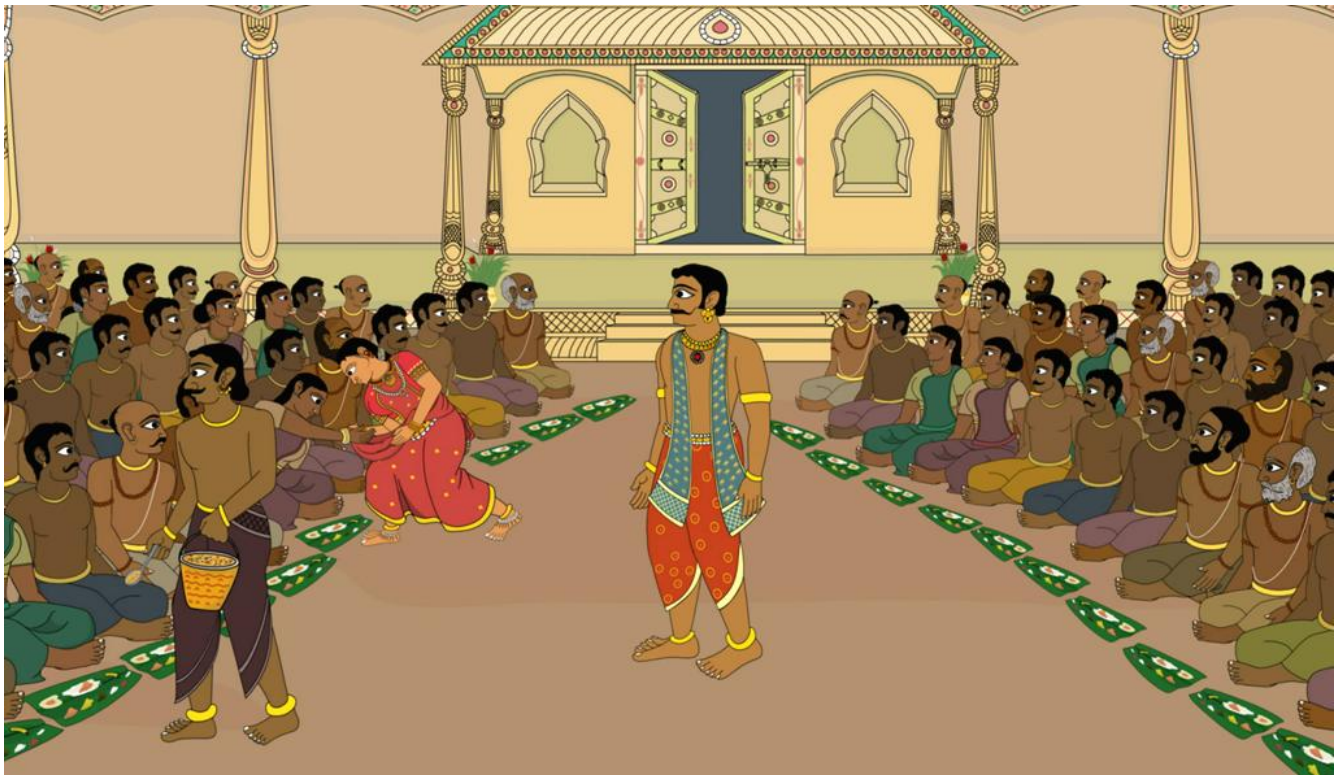
SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: This is the story of a group of villains who scheme in order to attain their own selfish ends. Can you predict what will happen? Many legends and many movies have this kind of plot line. Can you tell a story where someone tells a lie intended to hurt others gets tripped up, and instead ends up being the one to suffer? Do you think the next story will have a similar outcome?

COMMENTARY: Pre-existing social disputes often surface during Hindu festivals. This is because during a ritual event every social group, and every key participant, will have a pre-assigned and well-known role to play. If such a group or person is disgruntled they can refuse to do what is expected of them during the ceremonies and thereby hold up proceedings. Many people are kept waiting in such a situation, and so pressure builds to forge a workable compromise. Festivals can actually be good occasions to “study” social tensions. The clansmen’s alliance with the artisans and their joint plot to kill

STORY EPISODE 11.1

the king and queen fits within this wider festival dispute tradition, though this particular example is a little extreme. The story also highlights the fact that both the clansmen and the artisans feel they deserve more. The clansmen believe they are the rightful heirs to the king's palace lands (episode 2-b) and the artisans feel they were unfairly cheated by these same farmers... from the very moment of their arrival in Ponnivala (see episode 1-b).

FEEDING THOUSANDS



KEY THEME: PREPARING FOR A PILGRIMAGE

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **The King and Queen Escape Danger Through Their Gesture of Submission**

The king and queen of Ponnivala have been told, at a festival, that the goddess being worshipped has asked that their own heads be placed under the wheels of her huge temple cart. Dismayed but gullible, the couple believe this is a genuine message from the goddess that they must obey. So with considerable reluctance, king Kunnutaiya and queen Tamarai bend down and place their heads in front of the cart's heavy wheels. But when the chariot begins to roll once more Lord Vishnu magically intervenes. Now the great wagon begins to fly in the air, causing the devout couple no injury! Instead, the 16 clansmen who were pulling the cart are killed, plus six out of seven of the scheming artisans who were responsible for this grand scheme to kill the king and queen (the 7th escapes).

SOME TALKING POINTS: Kunnutaiya and Tamarai “escape” danger through their submission to what they believe is an act their goddess asked them for (placing their heads under the festival cart wheels). **a)** Was this a good idea? What key point is the story trying to make? **b)** Were the couple just “naive” and obedient or do their actions say something symbolic about leadership and the importance of devotion to god? **c)** Is this story just about medieval beliefs or does it have something to say to us today? **d)** What is the point of feeding 1,000 beggars and lighting a perpetual lamp... soon after the couple discover that they have escaped harm?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: This is the story of a group of villains who fail to obtain their goal and end up getting “harmed” themselves. Many legends and many movies have this kind of plot line. Can you tell a story where someone tells a lie intended to hurt others gets tripped up, and instead ends up being the one to suffer?

COMMENTARY: Pre-existing social disputes often surface during Hindu festivals. This is because during a ritual event every social group, and every key participant, will have a pre-assigned and well-known role to play. If such a group or person is disgruntled they can refuse to do what is expected of them during the ceremonies and thereby hold up proceedings. Many people are kept waiting in such a situation, and so pressure builds to forge a workable compromise. Festivals can actually be good occasions to “study” social tensions. The clansmen’s alliance with the artisans and their joint plot to kill the king and queen fits within this wider festival dispute tradition, though this example is a little extreme. The story reminds us of the fact that both the clansmen and the artisans are unhappy with the hero’s family. The clansmen believe they are the rightful heirs to the king’s palace lands (episode 2-b) and the artisans feel they were unfairly cheated by these same farmers... at the very start of this very long legend (see episode 1-b)

SUMMARY – PART TWO: A Vow To Feed The Multitudes

Kunnutaiya and Tamarai take a moment to realize that they are still alive! But as the festival finishes they remember that there are at least three more important things Lord Vishnu has asked for. They have been asked to feed a thousand beggars, to light an oil lamp on top of a high tower and then to walk to the gates of heaven and pray at the feet of Lord Shiva himself. The oil lamp is soon lit and a feast for the beggars is prepared. Then the king and queen leave on their long pilgrimage. But soon after stepping outside the palace all the people of the area come to say good bye. Finally the couple set off in earnest. They lock the compound gate and black beetles and wasps are called to stand guard.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Stories from many religions feature saints or other good people who miraculously feed a multitude. Do you know such a story? Do you know someone who has gone on a pilgrimage? What was their reason for going? Did they come back satisfied and with a feeling that the trip (and all its difficulties) was worthwhile?

COMMENTARY: At one level this story is a “test” of the queen’s generosity and saintliness. It is also an illustration of how the rich were expected to act. Still today many churches, mosques and other religious institutions have a guideline that their followers should give 1/10 of their yearly income either directly to the poor or to the institution that will in turn support good works. Many charities operate on this principle, as do food banks, the goodwill and others. Furthermore, many people undertake pilgrimages, to this day. Usually these devout travelers hope to obtain a divine blessing. Some have taken this trip as a vow to say thanks for a gift already received ... others are hoping for a future reward. Pilgrimage in medieval times, and even today, can be a huge educational opportunity. Often this was a way poor and uneducated people could see something of the wider world. Pilgrims would meet people who spoke other languages and strangers whose customs were different from their own. Making a pilgrimage was also one of the few ways that women could “escape” the daily grind of housework and child care. Pilgrimage can represent a real “freedom” from routine and provide the logic for undertaking new and challenging adventures. Here Kunnutaiya and Tamarai prepare by putting themselves in the right frame of mind. Feeding religious mendicants is a way of acknowledging what their own condition, as poor and homeless pilgrims... will be shortly. And local residents tell them what they would like to have the couple bring back.... just as our friends and family may request that we bring something home for them when we travel to a distant place.. And one can consider the couple’s lighting of a perpetual lamp on a high tower... as a kind of

STORY EPISODE 11.2

foreshadow that points to the Queen's own twenty one years of prayer atop a high pillar (which will occur in Episode 13, pt. 1).

HIKING TO HEAVEN



KEY THEME: COURAGE IS NEEDED TO FOLLOW LIFE'S LONG ROAD

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **A Great Insult & Its Consequences**

King Kunnutaiya and Queen Tamarai set off on a very long pilgrimage. They hope to reach the very gates of Lord Shiva's Council chambers, and to pray there for the gift of children. Up to now Queen Tamarai has been barren, due to a curse that lies on her husband's entire family. But this couple travel only a short distance when a large black sow-boar blocks their path. This is the same she-boar that the Queen earlier purchased and raised with great hopes of its bearing offspring. Meeting up with this creature now makes her impatient. She is eager to get on with her journey feels that the boar is being rude. So she kicks it with her left foot. The boar takes this as an insult. In return this animal utters a ominous curse, a prediction that when the Queen eventually realizes her wish and bears two sons, she too will become pregnant. Her boar-child will grow to become huge and very black. The angry sow further threatens that her son will gore one of the Queen's own princes-to-be with its right tusk and the other with its left. Having spoken this curse, the mother-boar turns and runs away. Next a little palace dog, appears. She is the Queen's personal pet. The tiny she-dog wants a boon, and knows what has just transpired. So the little bitch asks for a pup that will have poison in its teeth. Then she makes the Queen a promise: Once

born, her tiny daughter will be the heroine that will kill that great black boar.

SOME TALKING POINTS: As the King and Queen set out on their pilgrimage they receive a bad omen from a huge wild pig! But they also receive some hopeful news from their devoted palace dog Omens and the foretelling of future events used by story tellers to heighten interest and knit long legends out of many shorter stories? **a)** What do you think will happen? **b)** Who should the traveling couple believe? **c)** Do you think the pig's threat will come true? **d)** Does anybody pay attention to omens today? **d)** Can you think of a prediction of something to come that has influenced you? **e)** What do you think of the fact that the Queen perseveres, even when she has to carry her weak, sick husband on her back?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: This sub-story features a threat and then a counter threat. Arguments and even major feuds often start like this. Can you find a story about how a small insult gradually escalated into a major confrontation in just this kind of way?

COMMENTARY: This seemingly small "pig-kicking" incident lays the ground work for the entire second half of the story. Most of what is threatened comes true, and all the actors who address the queen as she leaves on her pilgrimage become important characters at a later point. This little sub-story, then, can be used to illustrate how a great story is knitted together. Everything is connected and the significance of the tiniest details will become significant in hindsight. Good novelists and story writers all make sure that their story cloth is "well woven" and that every detail has a purpose and a place within the larger whole. It is also interesting to note that the queen has been collecting a long list of others' requests and promising to work for their fulfillment. This is much like a politician running a political campaign. At this point the role of "leader of the region" has subtly shifted from her husband's hands to hers!

SUMMARY PART TWO - The King Falters but His Queen and her magical backer come to the Rescue

The couple now set out in earnest for the abode of the gods. But the King now begins to tire and the Queen has to urge him on. She coaxes him and eventually has to carry him on her back up the long, steep path. Lord Vishnu is watching and teases her at several points, making the journey even more difficult. Finally Kunnutaiya faints and she finds a little water that might revive him. But Lord Vishnu plays with her once more, making that water recede just as she reaches out to touch it. So then she thinks of picking a flowering plant. But it speaks up and frightened the startled Tamarai. Eventually she calls on Lord Vishnu himself and he appear and uses his magical powers to restore the King. Kunnutaiya quickly regains consciousness.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Have you ever sought for something that seems to repeatedly recede before your eyes? You grasp for it over and over, but it always lies just beyond your reach? Sometimes dreams are like this. Can you tell a story to illustrate the frustration you felt when this happened to you?

COMMENTARY: The Queen is teased by Lord Vishnu. Once more we see him testing her dedication and her fortitude. Kunnutaiya is about to expire. She has even had to carry him on her back. Now she can't even get water for him. But her sincere efforts to help her husband mean that she passes Vishnu's "test" and is finally rewarded. Tamarai has been both selfless and persistent. And so the

STORY EPISODE 12.1

god returns her greatest asset, her husband. "Tests," directed at either a hero or a heroine are standard building blocks used in folk tales. Sometimes they are referred to as a "lack" which the key character experiences.... such that eventually that "lack" is remedied or fulfilled. The above story fits this classic pattern.

A WALK THROUGH HELL



KEY THEME: CRIMES, WEAKNESSES AND HUMAN SUFFERING

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **The Pilgrims' Path Contains Many Challenges**

Two dedicated pilgrims, King Kunnutaiya and Queen Tamarai, face a huge mountain cliff. They have already walked a long way and they are both weary. How will they managed to climb such high mountains? Fortunately Lord Vishnu appears at the critical moment. He helps the couple by lifting the King and Queen over the worst spots. Next they cross rivers of stone, of thorns, of butter oil and finally of fire. When these feats are complete the couple face yet another threat. This time they are confronted with a forest full of cobras. One cobra asks the queen for a child, someone who can later assist her in a time of need. The queen agrees to carry this special request with her as well.

SOME TALKING POINTS: The King and Queen suffer a lot on their journey. But it is Kunnutaiya who crumbles repeatedly. Eventually he will be left in a sort of stupor...to wait for his wife who continues on the long journey alone **a)** Why do you think the king is singled out and described as weaker than his wife? **b)** Can you think of any other differences in the behaviour of the King and the Queen? **c)** The Queen is the one who talks to the cobra they meet. Why do you think she is not scared by this encounter? **d)** What do you think about the images of hell the story provides? How do these compare with what you have heard (or seen) in descriptions of hell you know about? **e)** Are the crimes and their punishments fair? **f)** Would you change anything if you were telling the story? If so, why? **g)** What do you think this scene "from hell" is really about? Why is it included in the story?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The Queen and her husband have to face many challenges. They struggle a lot. Can you think of another story where someone struggles against overwhelming obstacles and finally succeeds?

COMMENTARY: The obstacles the couple face have a mythic “feel.” Try discussing what climbing a mountain cliff could represent in human terms. Similarly, try talking about flying over stones, stumbling through thorns or walking across a fire could be used as metaphors for difficult human experiences. Another direction that might interest students is to take this as a “description” of the strange geography and typography the couple encounter on their way to the god’s domain. Their journey takes them through a no-man’s land, a land of the imagination. It can be compared with medieval European ideas of what lies between earth and heaven. One could collect and compare a variety of artist’s impressions of such “liminal” landscapes (using internet sources).

SUMMARY PART TWO - The King Drops Into a Deep Sleep But The Queen Reaches Her Destination

Finally the king and Queen reach a flight of steps leading to heaven. Vishnu tells the Queen that only she will do the penance. Her husband is tired and will wait there for them. He falls into a deep sleep. Then Lord Vishnu puts Kunnutaiya’s life into a little protective box. As Lord Vishnu and Queen Tamarai continue the journey they start to climb a long flight of steps. At the top is the entrance to a cave... inside that is hell. Walking through the cave Tamarai sees various people being tortured. Soon Vishnu instructs her not to be frightened and not to listen to anything she might hear. Finally they exit the cave and reach a very sacred spot near Lord Shiva’s Council Chambers. Here is where the Queen perform a deep meditation.... for 21 years!

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Can you think of an example or a story about a group effort where one member is “sidelined” by illness or injury and the other had to carry full responsibility for the mission?

COMMENTARY: It now becomes clear that the king lacks the stamina and special powers his Queen is endowed with. One can also “suspect” that Vishnu is behind this. He has planned for the Queen to finish the journey alone. Only she will make it to the special spot where she will perform her twenty one years of penance. He finds a way to get the king moved gently out of the picture before her years of near-death “testing” begin. At the same time this turns Tamarai into a real heroine. She is the one to endure the worst of the hardships (and she will be the one to return with the prize).

TWENTY ONE YEARS OF PRAYER



KEY THEME: FOCUSING ON ONE KEY GOAL

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: **The Queen Sits Deep In Prayer For 21 Years**

The King and Queen of Ponnivala have begun a long journey to the Gates of Lord Shiva's own Council Chambers. Lord Vishnu first builds a special platform for her to sit on. One top of a tower that stands tall at this place, the god places seven sharp needles. Each is topped by lovely oleander flower. Queen Tamarai will sit on top of these for twenty one years. She performs such a powerful penance that she sits motionless. Soon a family of heavenly parrots build a nest in her nose. Eventually Lord Vishnu comes to check on her, and as he waves his arms the two birds leave the queen's nose. He asks them to fly off to earth and take up residence in a banyan tree that belongs to a hill-dwelling hunter king. The hunter's sister greets them warmly and the parrots settle happily in her forest (They will reappear in Episode 21).

SOME TALKING POINTS: The 21 years of penance are an arduous period for the Queen. In theory she neither eats nor sleeps. And she is also exposed to all types of weather, and to other threats as well

- a)** Why does the Queen punish herself for such a long period?
- b)** Note that before she starts praying, Tamarai changes her sari to one used by ascetics. And she covers her body with ash. These are core Indian symbols of extreme sacrifice. Monks and nuns in the Middle Ages (and even some ... today) do something similar. What do you think these devout people are trying to symbolize with their distinctive dress style and looks?
- c)** The Queen's hair is also very significant. What kinds of people today do you know about who have rather similar hairstyles.
- d)** Why do you think the Queen

STORY EPISODE 13.1

asked to sit on a pillar? What do you think might be the significance of the needles and the oleander flowers Vishnu made for her to rest on?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Sometimes people slip into a deep trance-like state. Sometimes their thoughts or their “spirit” is understood to travel to a higher realm during this interlude. Have you ever “seen” something like this or read a story about such a person?

COMMENTARY: Trance-like states can be compared to extensive prayer or meditation. There are many examples one can find in native North American traditions where young men are sent into the wilderness and required to experience a special communion with an animal or with the spirit world. It is interesting to think about the heroine doing the same kind of thing in this story. Again, note that the character chosen for this is a woman. Some medieval female saints in Europe took on similar trials. If one focuses on the pillar in this story one can also compare the queen to Simeon Stylites, an actual historical (documented) Christian saint from Aleppo (now in modern Turkey) who sat on a pillar for over thirty years.

SUMMARY PART TWO - The Queen Is Tested Seven Times

The supreme god, Lord Shiva, now pushes the Queen to the brink of death. He then revives poor Tamarai only to put her through the same cycle again and again. In the last “trial” Lord Shiva actually asks that her head be cut off and placed on a separate pillar. Fortunately Lord Vishnu now comes to her aid and uses his magic to put the two parts of her body back together. Finally Tamarai completes a full cycle of seven “rebirths.” But Vishnu wants more than this for this poor Queen he has tried so hard to help. And so Vishnu goes to seek the assistance of his sister, the goddess Parvati... who just happens to be Lord Shiva’s wife!

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Do you know anyone who says they have been “reborn?” What did they mean by this? Can you compare that experience with what is happening to the heroine in this sub-story? During her period of extreme prayer Tamarai symbolically “loses her life” seven times. Why is this? What do you think is happening when she dies and is then brought back to life? Why do you think the number of deaths is specifically seven, and not six or eight?

COMMENTARY: Concepts of “rebirth” are common in many cultures. In Hinduism the idea of rebirth has so much importance that it can be said to be a foundation stone of the Hindu worldview in general. Taking this perspective, human lives are seen to “cycle” through many births on earth. If they are dedicated and good at heart, however, such persons will finally build up enough merit through prayer and good deeds to find “release” from their perpetual rounds of struggle. Christians have a related idea and many say that they have experienced “rebirth” when they undergo a baptism or other ritual to mark their entry into the fold as a true or devout Christian. The heroine Tamarai is being “fast tracked” on the rebirth circuit. Her seven deathlike experiences are intended to purify her soul and ready her for the miraculous event that lies just ahead.

SUCCESS AT LAST!**KEY THEME: PATIENCE AND THE TOOLS OF PURSUASION**

(Black = Event summary, Green = Discussion Topics, Red = Background Commentary for teacher reference)

SUMMARY: Lord Vishnu Intervenes

Lord Vishnu has watched Queen Tamarai throughout twenty years of a severe penance. Tamarai has been praying right at the gates of Shiva's Council chamber. This poor but determined woman has just passed through seven ritual deaths, the last of which included losing her head. Lord Vishnu has now "put the queen back together" but he is worried. Tamarai's hard work has so far not produced the desired results. Lord Shiva is still deep in meditation and is not listening to the Queen's prayers. So Vishnu decides to go and see his sister, Parvati, who is also the wife of Lord Shiva. Vishnu asks Parvati to help by approaching her husband and pointing out how poorly he has treated Tamarai. Parvati promises him that she will intercede with Lord Shiva. She does this and Shiva now agrees to talk directly with his brother-in-law about this matter. Vishnu is angry about Tamarai's condition. Shiva is angry about the "heat" generated by the fire Vishnu has generated on behalf of Tamarai. It has made his body "burn." Shiva does not quickly cede to Vishnu's request easily. But eventually he sends a message back with Vishnu that Tamarai will be granted an audience with him in his chamber.

SOME TALKING POINTS: The Queen's long years of patient struggle now come to an end. The heart of the great Lord Shiva... finally softens. **a)** What do you think made Shiva change his mind? **b)** What was the role of Lord Vishnu in her success? Could the Queen have won an audience without his backing? **c)** What about the goddess, Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva? Was it necessary to ask for her help as well? What are the key points is the storyteller trying to make?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: What stories do you know where a leader, a saint or other helper intervened to assist someone in approaching a higher authority? Was the intervener honorable? Did he or she have the authority and the connections needed to get the job done, as Lord Vishnu certainly does in this case? Do you know of an opposite story, where an intervener misrepresents himself or is only interested in personal gain? What was the outcome in that case?

COMMENTARY: Sometime a pilgrim or penitent feels unworthy of meeting a god face-to-face. So they will ask for help from an intermediary. There are differing kinds of “connections” that an intermediary can have with a higher authority and differing motives. These can be points for discussion. Sometimes an intermediary has to “strike a bargain” in order to get what is wanted for the “client” or supplicant. In this case is Lord Vishnu as selfless as he seems?.

SUMMARY PART TWO - The Queen’s Prayers Are Answered!

Finally Shiva allows his brother-in-law to bring the Queen before him. He then has his accountant check his records. Finally he decides to grant the penitent three children. She is to have two sons, each of which reincarnate the spirit of an important hero made famous by India’s famous classical epic: the Mahabharata. A third child will be a girl, and she will reincarnate one of the seven “virgin sisters” said to live near Shiva’s Council Chambers. But Siva sets two conditions: 1) All three children will have lives lasting only 16 years. 2) Vishnu must give up his sacred conch shell and leave it “in hock” with Shiva while these three “spirits” return to earth. Lord Vishnu will only get this important possession back when he physically brings the lives of these three divine children back to Lord Shiva’s chambers. This will happen when their sixteen years of life are over. Shival also gives Queen Tamarai a pot of magic water that she can share with others in her kingdom to make them pregnant as well. After these matters are finalized the couple start their long journey back to earth. Lord Vishnu revives the heroine’s “dormant” husband when she reaches the spot where he rests. The couple continue on to their palace together. They are greeted by happy residents who share the joy of their return.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The queen has been away on a long quest. But she finally succeeds and gets the outcome she wanted. What other long quests do you know about, either real ones in the history books, or from stories and myth? Did any of them succeed? In the end Lord Shiva gives the Queen three children (in embryo form) and also a pot of “fertility” water. Why is this second gift necessary? Does this ending tell us anything about the Queen’s larger role as a leader in her kingdom? How are patience and persuasion woven together in the final outcome of this story?

COMMENTARY: This is the “climax” point of the entire first half of the Ponnivala story. The Queen is finally granted the wish she has struggled to obtain for so long. The bargain Vishnu strikes with this brother-in-law Shiva is also notable. The conch is an instrument of war and its sound has very special powers. Lord Vishnu’s own strength is “reduced” until he can get it back. Furthermore, the heroine’s pregnancy is caused by a god, and her children represent the “rebirth” of three divine spirits. There is even a kind of “annunciation.” The parallels with the Virgin Mary in

STORY EPISODE 13.2

Christian tradition and the miraculous birth of Christ can certainly be discussed if it seems appropriate to do so..