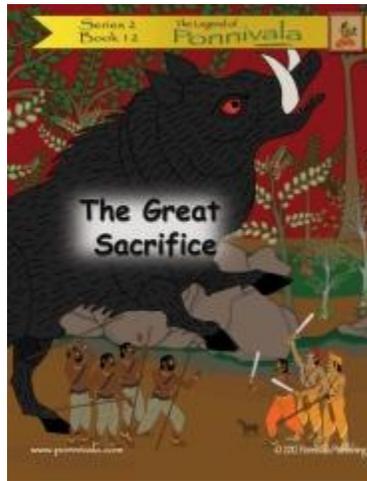


Episode 25 – A Great Sacrifice (Sub Stories a, b, c and d)

Resource Materials: Individual comic books, a graphic novel set, or 26 videos
VISIT our SHOP: Choose the retelling that works best for you



25-a A Big Apology that Yields Results

The kings now sends for the forgotten dog. When she is found and brought to the war camp the younger king offers her his apology. She volunteers to help and asks her two Lords to go and wait with their great boar spear at the top of a huge rock. The little dog then finds the great boar, challenges it, chews on its ears, bites it with poisoned fangs and generally weakens it greatly. As a consequence the huge boar runs in pain and distress toward the high rock. The little dog rides along on the boar's tail.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The little dog has a lot of power even though the enemy is very big. Do you know a story where something small and seemingly weak wins out over something or someone who is very big and strong?

COMMENTARY: This is a really much beloved sub-story, probably because it is rather raucous and has major sexual undertones. The little dog bites the testicles of the big boar and subdues him in this very graphic way. It is clearly a tale that has easy-to-read metaphorical overtones. The little, weak, ugly and forgotten female conquers the big, boisterous and overly proud male. He is huge and black, she is tiny and a motley brown. She chews up his ears, which can also be read sexually. The boar is associated with the violent and black goddess Kali from the start, But the curse of the little dog also came from Kali, so the little dog is also, in a way, empowered by this “dark tempered” divinity. The dog is now a warrior in her own right, and via her pet the temperament of the heroes’ sister is also implicated. It is changing. Her anger is ripening... and is soon to surface.

25-b The Boar is Killed and The Meat Divided Into Shares

Jumping off the boar’s tail the little dog advises the heroes to throw their spear now for the final kill. The weapon hits its target and the great boar dies, but not before it calls out to the hunter's little sister in its distress. The hunters declare war. Lord Vishnu himself descends from heaven to lead their army. But just as these fighters advance towards the heroes Lord Vishnu asks them to pause and wait for him. Then he approaches the heroes in the disguise of a washerman. They have now butchered the boar and divided the meat into seven portions in preparation for a ritual feast. But the washerman begs for a small piece of the sacrifice.

The elder hero (when his brother has stepped away from the scene), offers the leftover boar's head to the washerman instead. Lord Vishnu drags the head away.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The boar has a great ally The hunters have always been its friends. With his last breath this great beast calls out for help. The sister of the forest dwellers hears him. She will send her troops. Can you think of any parallels with other battles: in other words, just when the heroes think they have “won” the enemy calls in major reinforcements?

COMMENTARY: Significantly, the little dog steps aside at the last minute. She yields the honor of the actual boar kill (or shall we call it a sacrifice) to the two brothers. And then the elder steps back to allow the younger to wield the great spear. She is the real “killer” but the two human heroes (both male) now enjoy the formal honor of the hunter... bringing home the subject of the chase. However, the story of the great war has only just begun. The great boar calls out to the sister of the rival hunters with his last breath. He is heard. The entire force of these skilled forest dwellers is about to be concentrated on the twins. They are alone now with no large band of loyal village fighters to back them. More significant still, Lord Vishnu himself will lead the hunters' attack.

The washerman who takes the boar's head is just one more sign that the heroes' own life is nearing its end. Perhaps Vishnu himself was the boar (as he is a boar in his famous Varaha or boar incarnation). Perhaps, however, the boar was sent to earth by Lord Shiva, who (we saw in Ep. 13-d) created all the fertility that was sent down to earth when he made the queen pregnant. Perhaps Vishnu is just “playing” with Shiva's great powers (as his brother-in-law), perhaps he is taking the spoils of the boar hunt for himself. We don't really know... The epic leaves a few mysteries unanswered. But it is certain that Vishnu is symbolizing, foreshadowing the heroes' own deaths...by this act. We know this because this is the way the heroes themselves read this dramatic moment.

25-c **The Heroes Die In A Heroic And Sacrificial Way**

No sooner does the washerman leave than Vishnu is back leading his army of hunter-warriors. Very soon the two groups meet and start to fight. But the younger brother soon turns to his powerful assistant with a question. “How can these guys keep coming and coming? We have killed so many!” he comments with exasperation. Then Vishnu does something significant. He creates a vision such that the young twin can suddenly see hundreds of fighting hunters emerging, one after the other one, from the Lord's right palm. This shows the hero that Vishnu himself has “created” the entire war. It is his play, his illusion. The hero draws his sword against Vishnu but the power of the god freezes him in his tracks. The Lord then asks the twins to spend one last heroic moment fighting their enemies. Both join in briefly and together they kill a few more challengers. Then, weary of battle, the two men go to wash the blood off their swords by wading into a nearby river. At that moment Lord Vishnu (hidden in the branches of a tree) shoots the younger twin's protective chest thread off with a freshly made flower-arrow.

Both heroes now recognize that this is Lord Vishnu's private sign to them. that the time allocated by the gods for their lives on earth is almost over. Accepting this message, the two heroes and their loyal assistant all commit heroic suicides on a hillock overlooking the river bank. The two brothers fall forward, the younger one first, each on his own battle sword. The assistant follows suit, but uses a pointed tree branch instead, since does not carry a sword of his own.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Discussions about this sub-story will be sensitive but can be enlightening if students are well prepared. Try some of the following queries: How do the heroes die in myths or folk stories that you know? What is Lord Vishnu trying to tell the heroes when he shows all the fighters are coming from his own right hand? Why does Vishnu remove the younger twin's sacred thread? Do you think the twin heroes' deaths represent a happy or a tragic event?

COMMENTARY: The vision Lord Vishnu on the battlefield is important and can be compared (also contrasted) with the famous "Vision" that Krishna (a form of Vishnu) reveals to the heroic warrior Arjuna in the Bhavadgita, a "short" but very famous story that forms a small segment of India larger Mahabharata epic. In both the great Lord "shows" the hero something of his "real" self and in both the god urges the warrior to fight on. But in the Legend of Ponnivala the concept that this final war has been an illusion and was created by the god himself, is especially important. Perhaps he actually "sent" the great boar to earth to start it all? Or perhaps he is "cleaning up" what his brother-in-law Shiva started? (See the discussion of ep. 25-b). What is sure is that the Hindu world view understands that mankind lives on a downward spiral (the four yugas) and that the last one called the Kali yuga (which mankind is currently living through) will be especially destructive and painful. At the end of the Kali yuga all will end and the earth will be cleansed and renewed. Life will then begin again. (This concept can be contrasted with the view of many in the West that mankind is on a never ending upward spiral, and that each age is better than the last). Following this reasoning, the ending of the Ponnivala story can be seen as a kind of metaphor for the ending of the Kali yuga itself. They submit to this inevitable situation.

The breaking of the protective thread on the heroes' chests by Lord Vishnu is just that. The thread offers supernatural or magical protection and that is why Lord Vishnu takes aim at it. Breaking it is a sign to the heroes that they are not supposed to live any longer. Vishnu's arrow of flowers is comparable to the arrows that the Hindu god of love (Kama) shoots. Kama is comparable to the god Cupid. But the arrow here carries much more irony.... since the "love" expressed also tells the heroes that it is time for death.

The two heroes' suicides could be described as "altruistic." They are doing what they believe will be best for others and also doing what they believe Lord Vishnu wants. Their last act(s) can be seen as a kind of submission to god's will, a giving up of self for the larger cause of world renewal. The subject is too complex for these brief notes, but this ending should not be read as a tragedy. The story understands these suicides as positive and heroic acts, even as a kind of martyrdom. Their deaths could also be compared to the death of Christ, who also knew his end was near and who died willingly in a similar kind of sacrificial act (though of course the act in his case was committed by others). The assistant does not carry a sword (because of his low social status). His moral behavior is just as fine as that of the twin brothers, and his dedication to them is absolute. He simply doesn't have a sword available and so he uses the branch of a sacred tree (called vani in Tamil, the original language of the story).

Spirits Up To Heaven

Lord Vishnu soon arrives on the hillock where the heroes have died. He now takes the spirit lives of these three men back to heaven in a tiny golden box. There he presents all three to the great god Shiva. And reminds him of the bargain made long ago. When he brought the lives of the heroes back, Shiva was to return his conch shell, and also a sacred powder box. Shiva makes the exchange graciously. Back on earth, the loyal little sister sees that the signs of her brother's well being have changed (the coconut has broken open, the jasmine flowers have wilted, the sandalwood powder has dried up, the water in the pot has disappeared and the burning wick of the little lamp has gone out). She knows that her two brothers are now dead. Saddened and horrified she wonders what to do.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Shiva keeps his bargain and gives Vishnu back the things that belong to him. Can you think of some present-day situations that are similar? Do you know a story where people end up keeping their promises to one another, even after many years have passed?

COMMENTARY: Vishnu and Shiva are brothers-in-law. They are bound together by kinship, and although they tease each other, they are honourable and they value their on-going relationship. The story, on a wider level, also presents an important "balance" between these two gods. At many points in Indian history the people who worship Vishnu as a primary god have clashed with the people who believe Shiva is the more powerful and important divinity. The rivalry between these groups (or sects) is a little bit like the Catholic/Protestant rivalry in the West. This story presents a unique "folk" perspective that sees the two gods as different but basically equal. Neither god has all-encompassing powers over the other. This is one of the charming things about the Ponnivala story. It does not take sides in such debates. It is a syncretistic story that balances out differing view points. Generalizing a bit, one can say that it represents a spirit of tolerance and compromise rather than a spirit of one-upmanship and conflict. This is a characteristic of folk epics, which lack the adversarial style of many more philosophical and learned works.

The sister's likely understanding of her "plate of omens" has been discussed at length in the commentary provided for Ep. 24-a.