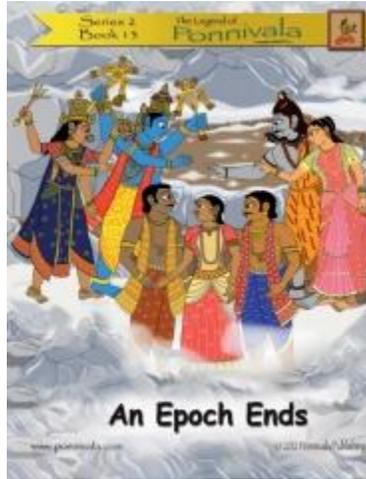


Episode 26 – An Epoch Ends (Sub Stories a, b, c and d)

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



26-a The Sister Reacts With Anger Upon Discovering That Her Brothers Are Dead

The sister knows that her brothers have died in the mountains. Her first act is to go to the “jail” where her sisters-in-law live and ask them to perform their husbands’ funeral ceremonies. The women, angry at their life spent locked in a humble home, refuse. The sister is angry, feeling that these women have refused to give her brothers the ceremonial respect they are due. She leaves and returns to her own palace. There, will still more anger, she asks her servants to take home anything they want. As soon as the great home is emptied she asks Lord Vishnu to send her a fireball. With that she burns the family palace to the ground. When little but ashes are left she stops the fire by asking for rain. Next she turns to her sisters-in-laws’ palace and burns that too. She cools the ashes of this second fire with more rain. Then she collects her sisters-in-laws’ bones and takes them to the river. There she performs a minimum funeral for these women by feeding a flock of crows cooked rice. Turning towards the hills where her brothers’ bodies lie, the devoted sister now begins a long pilgrimage to search for the spot where they died.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The sister’s angry is so great that it turns into the power to burn with fire. Do you know any other stories where a main character has control of fire and can actually burn things? Can we think of anger as a kind of emotional fire inside the self? Can anger hurt someone else in a way that makes them feel like they have been burnt? Can you tell a story about anger that made a person feel like they were burning inside?

COMMENTARY: The power of women to burn things “with fire” when they have been wronged is a key thread that runs through the ancient literature of South India. Stories like this have been recorded from very early times. One of the most famous of these tales is called Silappadikaram (The Story of the Anklet). In the Legend of Ponnivala itself there are examples

of this in two different generations. Here the sister burns the palace that (technically) belongs to her brothers. In the previous generation her mother (Tamarai) burns the palace where her two brothers live. Lord Vishnu uses the power of fire to persuade these same men that (that by traditional rights) they must allow their daughters to be married to their sister's sons. These men's initial refusal to allow this can also be read as an "affront" to their sister's rights (ep. 5-c). This "burning" is expressive of the power of a woman's deep anger, especially when it is backed by her otherwise spotless character and by the horror of some injustice that she has suffered. Turning to animal metaphors, we can observe a similar kind of power in the sister's tiny female dog. This time the anger exits her pets as a curse that causes illness (rather than as fire) but the underlying dynamics are similar. The fearful Indian goddess Kali, whose skin is black and who dances on the ashes of the cremation ground, shares the same background theme. Another feature of this story theme is that women who have this kind of anger let their hair loose. Loose hair is thought to be dangerous. Various evil spirits are said to be attracted to a woman's loose hair and to "inhabit" or "stick" inside its tangles. The sister leaves her hair down as she sets off on her long, sad pilgrimage to find her brothers' bodies.

Thinking more broadly, the several fires that we see followed by heavy rain in this episode are also symbolic of the end of the Kali yuga (see the discussion of this concept provided for ep. 25-c). As for the sisters-in-laws funeral rites, the images provided by this story are standard for the area. Dead bodies are generally cremated by anyone affluent enough to afford the wood needed to do so. And then the bones are put in a river, and the crows are fed rice. This last gesture is similar to the feeding of the demons that happens in episode 23-d. What is "missing" is the funeral ceremony itself, with a large feast and the gathering of friends and relatives. The sisters-in-law are "denied" this honor. That omission seems appropriate as they were never really a part of the family nor did they participate in palace life.

26-b **The Sister Becomes a Wanderer**

Eventually, after wandering for days through the forest, the sister finds a clearing where a lovely ascetic maiden is performing penance. Vishnu has been watching and descends to help the sister at this moment. He asks the meditating maiden to climb down from her pillar momentarily, so that the heroic little sister can use it to obtain a gift from Lord Shiva. When that woman agrees and the sister climbs this huge post she asks for a special wand. Vishnu gets this from Shiva's counsel chambers and the sister (later) uses it to revive her brothers. After obtaining the all-important wand, the ascetic maiden sends the sister to a nearby village to fetch a stack of tiered pots. But the sister has no money and the local potter refuses to be generous. Facing injustice once more, the sister calls on a great rain cloud. There is a sudden downpour and the potter's unfired work disintegrates before his eyes. He apologizes and begs for forgiveness, exactly what the sister needs to return the many pots to their former state. Now the potter readily gives her what she needs. When the sister returns to the forest maiden with her tiered vessels the maiden fills them with the exact ritual substances she will need when she finds her brothers' bodies. The forest maiden also lends her "gooselike" vehicle to the sister for a flight to her brothers' place of death.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: Here the heroine has the power to call up rain (in contrast to fire). Do you know any other stories where a main character has the power to cause a (destructive) torrential rain? What about some of the classic stories about floods? Can you tell a story with that kind of theme?

COMMENTARY: The imagery in this episode shares has much in common with what has been discussed elsewhere. Again there is a chaste and determined woman sitting on a pillar who is

deep in meditation (as in ep. 13 a&b) It is worth noting that most forest sages who meditate in Hindu mythology (yogins) are male. Usually they are “distracted” by lovely women that happen by. This scene presents a kind of unusual reversal. Now there is a female meditating who is interrupted by Vishnu with a non-sexual intent... but still he briefly interrupts her concentration). But we do not learn anything more about who this “mystery” woman is. Also, we find another major downpour here... again caused by a woman’s magical anger (similar to that just seen in ep. 26-a). Finally, there is the story of the 7 pots. The potter is a “ritual specialist” whose willingness to contribute to important ceremonies is important (see ep. 11-b for a further discussion of caste roles in ritual). Perhaps the sister having to coerce him into service is symbolic of her need to obtain “endorsement” for her mission from a wide range of social groups. The ritual substances the maiden magically puts in these pots are not particular symbolic individually. However, as a cluster one can say that they are all intended to soothe, nourish, moisten and “cool” the broken bodies of her two dead brothers.

26-c **The Sister Finds Her Brothers Bodies And Briefly Revives Them From Death**

The meditating maiden offers the distraught girl her own lovely vehicle, a golden bird. The young sister is then flown by this bird to the site of her brothers' suicides. There she finds her little palace dog guarding the boar meat left over from the great kill. With this dog’s help she locates her brothers' bodies. Then awakens them with the help of her golden wand and talks to them briefly. The two men reaffirm that their lives are now over and that they can not go back to their lands in Ponnivala. It is time for others there to take up the responsibilities of kingship.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The wand the sister carries allows her to “awaken” her brothers from death, if only briefly. So you know of any other stories where a dead hero is brought back to life by a friend or a relative?

COMMENTARY: The golden goose that the forest maiden lends the sister is of real interest. All gods and goddess have a “vehicle” in Hinduism and many of these vehicles are birdlike. This shows that the lady doing meditation is “like a goddess,” as otherwise she would not have such a vehicle. Surprisingly, perhaps, the vehicle is gooselike, as is the bird used by the goddess of learning and of the arts, Saraswati. Certainly this particular bird lends status to its owners and implies that they are knowledgeable and educated. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that the little sister is able to “fly” to the place her brothers have died, because she is lent the use of this bird. This is the only time in the story that any “human” flies. This suggests that the young girl is already undergoing a transformation to divine status. Also, her trip on the goose will take her to the “dying place,” which can be understood as a kind of liminal location that is already ½ way between heaven and earth. The use of the bird symbolises the beginning of the transformation from human to god... a change that is soon to take place for all three heroic siblings.

The wand used by the sister to bring her brothers’ lives back to them, if only briefly, has no particular significance. It is just a “magical tool.” However, this scene and the kind of “resurrection” that occurs in this sub-story is very important from a ritual point of view. There is a huge temple festival each year near the spot where the heroes are said to have died, and devotees actually go through rituals that symbolize this “return from death” event. Male worshippers enter a kind of trance state, with the help of special drum beats and then fall on the ground as if dead. Later a skilled poet-singer will chant special sacred verses over them to bring these prone, stiff, corpse-like men back to life. These events are of much interest to local worshippers and are highly anticipated each year. Only the most devout undertake to submit to such a deathlike trauma. Other temples in the area celebrate the heroes’ deaths in a similar way.

More important for classroom discussion, perhaps is the content of the conversation between the sister and her brothers during the brief moments that they regain their lives and the ability to speak. In this special interlude the brothers (especially the more aggressive and younger one) declare that it is their duty to pass the role of local ruler to others, to “pass the baton” so to speak. This is an important characteristic of a wise king... that he recognizes when he must (graciously) let others take over control. The “rub” in this case is that the two brothers have most definitely not laid any plans for successor ship.... In deed quite the opposite is the case. They have groomed no one for the post. They have left their wives untouched and produced no offspring. They have not even “adopted” a child. And most grievous of all, perhaps, they have not seen to their sister’s marriage as they once promised their parents they would. She is now alone in the world and without support. These steps (or more plainly the lack of them) must be considered to be a deliberate part of the story. They say, to a knowledgeable Hindu audience, that this is intended to be the end. There are no successors, there are no remaining relatives (except one sister) and there are basically no enemies or adversaries either. Note that the clansmen, the artisans, the hunters, the Chola king.....all these people have all died in the lead up to this final outcome. The world is at an end. The Kali yuga has come to a close. The world will now reabsorb itself and the gods will see to it that life begins again.

26-d **The Heroes’ Three Spirits Are Returned To Lord Shiva And Blessings Are Showered Upon All**

Lord Vishnu then takes their spirits back to heaven and the bodies are carried on magical biers to the town nearby. There they are paraded through the streets to receive their final respects. Then the bodies magically turn to stone and become shrines. The sister sets a lovely array of offerings before the two stone heroes. The Lord Shiva himself sends a chariot down from heaven and the sister is taken up to join him in his counsel chambers. The epic ends with a lovely blessing addressed to all who listen to the story. There are images of ploughing the land, of planting, of a lovely river that flows through the kingdom, of a spreading banyan tree, of well rooted grasses and finally, of birds singing in the bamboo.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS & EXERCISES: The sister performs her brothers’ funeral ceremonies. Essentially she takes over the role of a male... the son, who should do this work at his father’s funeral. Can you think of other stories or situations where a girl must essentially “become a man” in order to do things that are required by custom because there are no other better qualified people around?

COMMENTARY: In this final sub-story of the Legend of Ponnivala the heroes are “transformed into gods.” They are given shrines on earth and also a position next to the great gods, back in heaven. The situation is not very different to what happens in the “Christian story” when Jesus ascends to heaven and the church becomes established here on earth. Here there is no one left to perform the brothers’ funerals and to establish temples for them. So the sister does this work (behaving essentially as a male priest would under more normal circumstances). Again this can be seen as honouring and respecting the powers of a woman, a chaste and dedicated female who steps in to do what is necessary in a time of great adversity. In some ways (like in talking to the revived brothers) she is like Mary Magdalena in the Christian tradition. After she has finished the necessary ceremonies Lord Shiva himself recognizes her good works and has her raised to his Counsel Chambers in an honorific palanquin. Significantly, it is not only the

two heroes and the sister who are honored. The loyal assistant (who was of very low origin) is also given a place of honor, as are the heroes' two magical horses and the heroine's pet dog.

There is a "blessing" at the end which is something traditional that story tellers in India do. The blessing essentially confirms that hear this story retold is a kind of good deed that will bring prosperity to one's family and well-being to all. Listening to this story, in religious terms, conveys benefits similar to that are thought to accrue from "reading the bible" regularly for some Christians. There are also the benefits, of course, of learning much about the traditional culture and beliefs shared by the people of this area of South India. The bards who told (actually sung) this epic acted rather like village history teachers. In a time before universal education in India this story served as a kind of oral "reconstruction" of what was remembered about this area's past. From hearing this story people learned much about their own history, and about the life and customs of their own ancestors. Making allowance for some of the more imaginative and fanciful events, the basic story line is not far out of line with what is actually know about this area in the medieval period. See part two of this manual for more information about this issue.