

Ordeal by fire: the story of Prahlad

A Hindu story

Key ideas: standing up for your beliefs, defying tyranny

Long ago in India lived a king called Hiranya Kashyap. When he was born, a wise man studied the stars and said that the baby would never be killed by man, animals or weapons, during the day or during the night, on earth or in water, inside a house or outside it.

As he grew, Hiranya Kashyap pondered the meaning of this saying. 'It has to mean that I am immortal' he thought. 'Indeed it must mean I am God.' The idea quite turned his head. He ordered that all his subjects worship him and he tortured and killed those who refused. His sister, Holika, was as arrogant as her brother. The same wise man had foretold that she could not be burnt by fire. The two believed they owned the Universe.

One day, the wife of Hiranya Kashyap gave birth to a son. They called him Prahlad, and the boy grew up believing his father was God. One day, Prahlad was wandering around the courtyard when he noticed the potter lying on the ground.

'What are you doing?' asked Prahlad. 'I am praying to God to save my chicks.' said the potter. 'The hen laid her nest in the kiln and I forgot when I lit the kiln.' 'You must pray to my father.' said Prahlad. 'Your father cannot save my chicks from that roaring fire.' said the potter. 'Only God can do that.' 'But my father is God. He will punish you if you say he is not.' said Prahlad. 'Your God cannot save the chicks'. 'Wait and see.' said the potter.

When the fire had gone out and the kiln was cool, the potter opened the door of the oven. A mother hen strutted out followed by seven golden, fluffy chicks.

A year later the King called for his son Prahlad. 'Who is the greatest being in the Universe?' asked the King, impatient for a prompt answer. 'God,' answered Prahlad. 'Good,' said the King. 'You realise that I am the greatest.' 'No, No.' said Prahlad. 'God is the greatest. You are only the King.' The King grew angry and his anger fed his cruelty. 'Take this child and fling him from the highest cliff in the kingdom. See if his God will save him.'

The courtiers hated the order but they feared the King. They carried Prahlad to the highest cliff and hurled him from the edge. But instead of death, Prahlad landed in a fresh, springy softness. His God was watching over him.

The King was beside himself with rage. If Prahlad lived, the people would doubt the power of the King. Slowly, a plot formed in his mind. He would build a huge fire of logs. Holika would sit on top of the pyre, holding Prahlad tightly in her arms. The fire would not harm her but she would make sure that Prahlad did not squirm out and escape the flames. That way Prahlad would surely die.

So arrangements were made. Holika held the child tightly as the torch lit the wood. The flames licked upward. Soon the heat and smoke were overpowering. The King was satisfied. But in the heart of the flames Holika felt compassion for her nephew. 'God save this child,' she pleaded. 'Save him. Grant him safety from the fire in place of me. Let him live.'

Hours later, the King came to watch the dying fire. No courtier dared to warn him what he would find. There on the mound of ash sat Prahlad. 'God saved me.' said Prahlad, simply. 'I'm sick of your God,' said the King. 'Where is this God, then? See if he'll save you from me.' The King drew his sword. 'God is everywhere.' said Prahlad. 'He is in the fire, in water, in the wind and the grass, even in that stone column behind you.'

With that the column broke in two. Out came God but his shape was strange. The upper part of his body was that of a lion, the lower, that of a man. He was neither man nor animal. He lifted the King, carried him to the lintel of the palace door and placed him on his lap. The King was neither in the palace nor outside it. Then he killed him with a single swipe of his great claws. There were no weapons. And it was dusk, neither night nor day.