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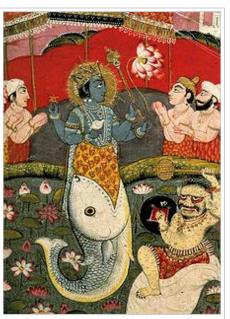
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Μάτσγια με μορφή ψαριού



Μάτσγια με μορφή ψαριού

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# Matsya

For other uses, see Matsya (disambiguation).

Matsya (Sanskrit: मत्स्य, literally "Fish") is the avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu in the form of a fish, preceding Kurma. Often listed as the first avatar in the lists of the ten primary avatars of Vishnu, Matsya is described to have rescued the first man, Manu, from a great deluge. Matsya may be depicted as a giant fish, or anthropomorphically with a human torso connected to the rear half of a fish.

The earliest accounts of the legend associate Matsya with the creator god Prajapati (identified with Brahma). However, Puranic scriptures incorporate Matsya as an avatar of Vishnu. Matsya forewarns Manu about an impending catastrophic flood and orders him to collect all the grains of the world in a boat; in some forms of the story, all living creatures are also to be preserved in the boat. When the flood destroys the world, Manu - in some versions accompanied by the seven great sages - survives by boarding the ark, which Matsya pulls to safety. In later versions of this story, the sacred texts Vedas are hidden by a demon, whom Matsya slays: Manu is rescued and the scriptures are recovered. The tale is in the tradition of the family of flood myths, common across cultures.

1

Iconography

Matsya pulls Manu's boat after having defeated the demon.

Matsya is depicted in two forms: as a zoomorphic fish or in an anthropomorphic form. In the latter form, the upper half is that of the four-armed man and the lower half is a fish (an exception is a sculpture in the Chennakesava Temple, Somanathapura, which is Mat-

sya as a fish-headed human.<sup>[1]</sup>) The upper half resembles Vishnu and wears the traditional ornaments and the kirita-makuta (tall conical crown) as worn by Vishnu. He holds in two of his hands the Sudarshana chakra (discus) and a shankha (conch), the usual weapons of Vishnu. The other two hands make the gestures of varadamudra, which grants boons to the devotee, and abhayamudra, which reassures the devotee of protection.<sup>[2]</sup> In another configuration, he might have all four attributes of Vishnu, namely the Sudarshana chakra, a shankha, a gada (mace) and a lotus.<sup>[3]</sup> The human torso generally wears a shawl and a garland. The shawl, worn over his elbows, may be wrapped such that the switch between the human torso and fish half is hidden. Matsya may be depicted alone or in a scene depicting his combat with a demon. A demon called Shankhasura emerging from a conch is sometimes depicted attacking Matsya with a sword as Matsya combats or kills him. Both of them may be depicted in the ocean, while the god Brahma and/or manuscripts or four men, symbolizing the Vedas may be depicted in the background.<sup>[4]</sup> In some scenes, Matsya is depicted as a fish pulling the boat with Manu and the seven great sages (Saptarishi) on it.

## 2 Legends

Early accounts of the Deluge equate Matsya with the Vedic deity Prajapati (who was identified with the creator god Brahma in post-Vedic era).<sup>[5][6]</sup> The Shatapatha Brahmana is the earliest extant text to mention Matsya and the flood myth in Hinduism. It identifies the fish with Prajapati-Brahma.<sup>[7]</sup> The central characters are the fish (Matsva) and Vaivasvata Manu or Satvavrata who becomes the progenitor of mankind. In this version, Vaivasvata Manu or Satyavrata accidentally catches a small fish in his hands, while bathing. The fish is Matsya, who asks Vaivasvata Manu for life and protection; in return he promises to save Vaivasvata Manu from an impending flood; and Matsya knows exactly when this is to happen. Vaivasvata Manu agrees to help; so Matsya tells him to place him in a jar of water, and keep him safe. When Matsya has outgrown the jar, Vaivasvata Manu must dig a pit, fill it with water and place him in it. When Matsya outgrows the pit, Vaivasvata Manu should transfer him to the ocean. By then, he will be big enough to survive; he will be indestructible, and will help Vaivasvata Manu survive the flood. Meanwhile, Vaivasvata Manu should build himself a boat. Vaivasvata Manu does exactly as the fish has instructed and eventually releases Matsya, now fully

Matsya, Central India, 9th - 10th century. British Museum.

grown, into the ocean. At the appointed time, the deluge comes; Vaivasvata Manu boards his boat and the waters rise to cover the earth. Vaivasvata Manu calls on Matsya for help. Matsya swims to the ship and Vaivasvata Manu ropes his vessel to the horn that has grown on Matsya's head. Then Matsya tows the ship to the safety of the highest and driest ground, at the northern mountains (interpreted as the Himalayas). Vaivasvata Manu ties the ship to a tree, disembarks, and then slowly descends the mountain along with the now subsiding water. Vaivasvata Manu finds himself the sole survivor on earth; all others have been washed away by the floods. Vaivasvata Manu then takes on the task of creating the new human race. Seeking procreation, he practices austerities and worships the gods by performing sacrifices, offering butter, milk, curds and ghee (clarified butter) to the sacrificial fire. Within a year, his prayers are answered; a beautiful woman called Shraddha appears. He marries her, and together they initiate the race of Manu, as Aryans called themselves.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

The tale of Matsya in the *Vana Parva* Book of the epic *Mahabharata* is similar to the *Shatapatha Brahmana* version but also differs in some ways. Manu is introduced as Vaivasvata Manu - Vaivasvata being a patronymic - the son of the sun god Vivasvan (Surya) and a powerful *rishi* (sage) equal to Brahma in glory. While Manu is performing religious rituals on the banks of the Chervi, he finds the fish. The legend moves in the same vein with minor modifications in that the fish grows in size, gets transferred from an earthen pot to a tank or lake and then to the mighty Ganges River (called the spouse of the Ocean)

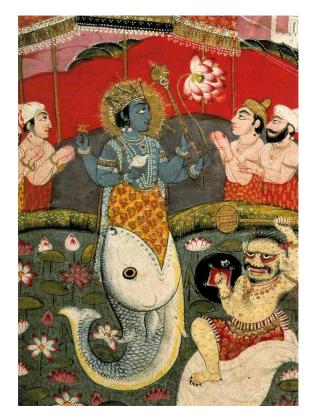
and finally to the sea. When Manu left the fish in the sea, it warned of impending danger of a catastrophic flood event, which would submerge the whole universe. The fish advised Manu to be prepared to face the catastrophe by building a massive boat to save himself and the Saptarishi (the seven great sages) and collect all seeds of the world and promised to appear when called by him as a huge horned fish to save them. As in the Shatapatha Brahmana, the horned fish appeared and the boat was tied to his horn. The fish navigated it with great force through the turbulent and salty waters of the ocean and reached the safe heights of the Himalayas. As directed by the fish, the vessel was tied to the peak of the Himalayas, which became known as the Naubandhana (the harbour). Matsya tells the sages that he is Prajapati Brahma, the lord of all beings and their saviour who rescued them from danger in the form of a fish. The fish informed that Manu would create all beings - gods, demons and men and other movable and immovable things - by the power of his austerities. The fish vanished and Manu acted on the advice of Brahma, creating all beings.<sup>[5][7][10]</sup>



Matsya pulling Manu's boat

The Matsya Purana initiates the Purana scripture tradition of identifying the fish (Matsya) with Vishnu instead of Brahma. The Purana derives its name from Matsya. It starts with the legend of Manu. King Manu renounced the world, handing his throne to his son and set off to the Malaya Mountains to perform tapas (austerities). Pleased with the austerities, Brahma granted his wish to rescue the world at the time of pralaya (dissolution of the universe). Like in the other accounts, Manu meets the tiny fish. The fish is placed in a jar, in a reservoir that is two yojanas in height, and eventually ends up in the ocean. Astonished by the fish's growth, Manu realizes that the fish is the god Vishnu. Vishnu as Matsya reveals his real identity and informs Manu that a pralaya would soon come as a yuga (epoch) and a kalpa (aeon equal to Brahma's day) would soon end. Brahma sleeps in his night and his creation dissolves, submerging the earth and all the other worlds in the cosmos in the primeval ocean. Vishnu promises to return to rescue Manu at the time of pralaya and orders him to bring all living creatures and seeds of all trees on a boat, which the gods would gift him. As pralaya came,

Matsya came and pulled the boat with the serpent Shesha as the rope, fastened to his horn. In the journey towards the top of the Malaya mountains, Manu asks Matsya questions and their ensuing dialogue constitutes the rest of the text.<sup>[3][11]</sup>

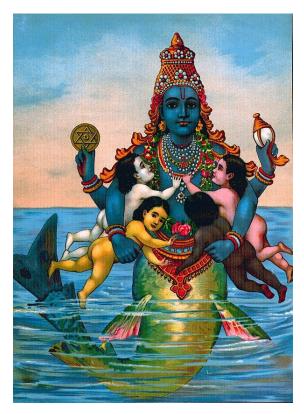


Matsya preparing to slay the demon.

The Bhagavata Purana adds another reason for Vishnu to appear as Matsya. At the end of a kalpa, a danava (demon) called Hayagriva ("horse-faced") steals the sacred Veda texts when they come out of Brahma's mouth when he yawns at the start of his night, fatigued by the creation of the universe. Meanwhile, Satyavrata (also known as Vaivasvata Manu), who was the current Manu (there are multiple Manus in Puranic texts), and the king of Dravida country (South India), was performing severe austerities. sustaining only on water. Once when he was offering water oblation in the Kritamala River, a tiny shaphari fish was caught in his folded hands. As the king was about to throw away the fish, the fish pleaded to be not thrown in the water, where larger fishes would devour it. Assuring the fish protection, the king put it in a small jar and took it with him. But the fish grew larger and requested for more space, the king moved it in a small pond, but the fish soon outgrew it. As the fish outgrew water reservoirs, Satyavrata transferred it to a lake, then to larger reservoirs and subsequently to the ocean. But the fish requested Satyavrata that it was afraid of the dangerous marine predators of the ocean. Bewildered by these words, the king asked the fish to reveal his true identity, but soon deduced that this supernatural fish was none other than Vishnu and surrendered to him. Matsya-Vishnu declared

that a great flood would come seven days from then and engulf the universe. He ordered Satyavrata to assemble the seven great sages and with their counsel, gather all kinds of seeds, herbs and various beings to load them on a boat, that would be sent by Vishnu on the fateful day. He instructed that the serpent Vasuki should be used as a rope to tie the boat to his fish-horn. Promising that he would sail the boat through the waters throughout the night of Brahma, Matsya disappeared after his revelation and reappeared as a horned fish on the day of the Deluge, when torrential rains drenched the earth. Satyavrata did as Vishnu instructed and fastened the boat to the horned fish (Matsya). As Matsya swam through the flood waters, he discoursed the king on various topics and revealed to him knowledge of the Vedas, Puranas, Samhitas as well as the Supreme Truth. After last wave of the flood ended, Matsya slew Hayagriva and rescued the Vedas and handed them over to Brahma, who woke after his night. The narrative ends with the narrator Sage Shuka praying to Matsya and declaring that whoever listens to this tale is absolved of sin and remembering Matsya daily grants success to the devotee.<sup>[12][13][14][15]</sup>

The Agni Purana version is similar to the Bhagavata Purana version, but mentions Vaivasvata Manu only collecting all seeds (not living beings) and assembling the seven great sages similar to the Mahabharata version. It also adds the basis of the Matsya Purana, being the discourse of Matsya to Manu, to the Bhagavata Purana version.<sup>[16]</sup>



Matsya with the Vedas as infants.

## 3 Symbolism and comparative mythology

#### Main article: Flood myth

The story of a great Deluge is found in many civilizations across the earth. It is often related to the Genesis narrative of the flood and Noah's Ark.<sup>[3]</sup> The fish motif and saving of the scriptures from a demon being additions in the Hindu tale.<sup>[17]</sup> Similar flood myths also exist in tales from ancient Sumer and Babylonia, Greece, the Maya of Americas and the Yoruba of Africa.<sup>[3]</sup>

Matsya is believed to symbolise the first stage of evolution, as aquatic life was the first beings on earth.<sup>[3][18]</sup> The tale of Matsya may be interpreted as a creation myth where Manu creates beings of the world and men after they destroyed in the flood, though the creation is never the focus of the legend. Some authors consider the tale not a flood myth, but symbolic in nature. Manu's boat is representative of moksha (salvation), which helps one to cross over. Himalayas is treated as a boundary between the earthly existence and land of salvation beyond. God as the fish guides one to salvation. The horn of the fish is symbolic of "sacrificial values". The presence of fish seems to be an allusion to the Indian "law of the fishes", an equivalent to the "law of the jungle", when the fish seeks protection from being eaten by a larger fish. Treated as a parable, the tale advises a good king should protect the weak from the mighty, reversing the "law of fishes" and uphold dharma, like Manu, the progenitor of mankind and in particular two royal dynasties, thus an ideal king. In the tales where the demon hides the Vedas, dharma is threatened and Vishnu as the divine Saviour, rescues dharma, aided by his earthly counterpart, Manu - the king.<sup>[11]</sup>

### 4 Worship

There are very few temples dedicated to Matsya. Prominent ones include the Shankhodara temple in Bet Dwarka and Vedanarayana Temple in Nagalapuram.<sup>[18]</sup> The Koneswaram Matsyakeswaram temple in Trincomalee is now destroyed.

Matsya is generally enlisted as the first avatar of Vishnu, especially in Dashavatara (ten major avatars of Vishnu) lists. However, that was not always the case. Some lists do not list Matsya as first, only later texts start the trend of Matsya as the first avatar.<sup>[3]</sup>

Matsya is the patron deity of the Meenas, who claim descent from the deity. The Meenas call Matsya Meenesh, the Lord of the Meenas or the fish (Meena) Lord. Meenas celebrates Meenesh Jayanti as birthday of Meenesh. In Rajasthan there are many temples of Meenesh, but the first Meenesh temple was in Pushkar, Rajasthan.<sup>[19]</sup> A

**comparative** Meenesh temple is also situated in Malarana chour village of Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan.<sup>[20]</sup>

### 5 See also

- Dashavatara
- Flood myth

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• The Matsha Purana

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