

ĀSTĪKA. The son of the Maharṣi Jaratkāru and his wife, also named Jaratkāru. He stopped King Janamejaya's Sarpasatra and saved the nāgas.

1) *Birth*. There is a story about Āstika's birth in the Devī Bhāgavata. Long ago the people of the world were so much troubled by the serpents, that they sought protection from Kaśyapa Prajāpati. To find a remedy for this, Kaśyapa discussed the matter with Brahmā. To put an end to the troubles from the serpents, Brahmā suggested that a number of mantras and a deity as the basis of those mantras should be created. Accordingly Kaśyapa created many mantras and Manasā Devī as the basic deity of those mantras. She is named "Manasā-devī" because Kaśyapa created her by his mental power. Manasādevī has eleven other names also, namely Jaratkāru, Jagatgaurī, Siddhayoginī, Vaiṣṇavī, Nāga-bhaginī, Śaivī, Nāgeśvarī, Jaratkārupriyā, Āstikamātā, Viśaharā and Mahājñānyutā.

Manasādevī (Jaratkāru) when quite young, went to Kailāsa for doing tapas (penance). There she did tapas to Śiva for a thousand years. At last Śiva appeared and blessed her with divine wisdom. She returned with great learning and devotion. (Devī Bhāgavata, Navama Skandha).

At that time, a Muni (sage) named Jaratkāru, when travelling through the forest happened to see his pitṛs (souls of forefathers) hanging over a precipice at the end of a blade of grass. They were hanging precariously at the end of a reed grass, head downwards, about to fall into the abyss. Jaratkāru enquired why they were lying in that condition. They explained that they were in that plight because their descendant Jaratkāru had no children. As he is a bachelor there is no hope either, of his having any issue. Since he has no children, we will not get to heaven, they added. To save the Pitṛs from their predicament, Jaratkāru decided to marry. But he wished to marry a woman who had the same name as his. Once Vāsuki met Jaratkāru and told him that he had a sister named Jaratkāru and that he would be very happy if Jaratkāru married her. Jaratkāru accepted the offer readily and married Jaratkāru.

After their marriage, while they were living together in a place called Puṣkara tīrtha, an unexpected event happened which interrupted the happy course of their life. One evening, the husband was sleeping with his head in the wife's lap, under a tree. The sun was about to set. As the Maharṣi did not wake up before sunset, the wife became anxious. It is believed that he who does not wake up before sunrise and he who does not offer prayers at dusk will be guilty of the sin of Brahmahatyā (killing a Brahmin). Nor was it proper to wake him up from a sound sleep. But in the end, she did wake him up. The husband sprang up in great fury. He renounced the wife then and there. Weeping bitterly, she begged for his forgiveness. At last Jaratkāru relented and told her: "You will have a very noble, brilliant, renowned, virtuous, scholarly and devout son who will be a devotee of Viṣṇu and a preserver of the family". After this Manasādevī set out to Kailāsa. When she reached there Parama-Śiva and Pārvatī comforted her. Manasādevī was pregnant. The precepts and spiritual advice given by Jaratkāru, Parama-Śiva and Pārvatī were heard by the child in the womb and so even before his birth he became a Jñānī and a yogī. In due course

Manasādevī gave birth to a son who was a part of Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu). Since he was the son of Manasādevī who had deep devotion to the Guru and to the Gods, the boy was named Āstika.

The Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva, gives another reason for giving this name to the boy. When the sage Jaratkāru abandoned his wife, he had blessed her saying that the child in her womb would be a brilliant and devoted son. That is why this boy came to be called Āstika.

2) *Boyhood* Āstika was taught Veda, Vedāngas etc. by Parama-Śiva himself. After receiving the blessings of Parama-Śiva, Āstika went to Puṣkara tīrtha and did tapas to Viṣṇu for many years. Having received Viṣṇu's blessings also, he returned to Kailāsa. After living there happily with his mother for some time, one day they started to the Āśrama of Kaśyapa Prajāpati, the father of Manasādevī. Kaśyapa was very much pleased to see his noble-hearted daughter and her brilliant son. To enhance the fame and accomplishments of the boy Kaśyapa gave a sumptuous feast to ten crores of Brahmins. (Devī Bhāgavata, Navama Skandha).

Vāsuki was Manasādevī's brother. Āstika grew up there under the care of Vāsuki. It was Cyavana Muni who taught Sāmavedas to Āstika, at this time. (M.B., Ādi Parva, Chapter 48, Verse 18).

3) *Āstika at the Sarpasatra*. Once King Parīkṣit, the son of Abhimanyu was travelling through the forest for hunting animals. He picked up a dead snake with the tip of his bow and put it on the shoulder of a sage named "Śamika". Śamika's son, Śṛṅgī came to know of this. In his anger, Śṛṅgī pronounced a curse that King Parīkṣit should die within seven days by the bite of Takṣaka. When Parīkṣit heard of this, he had a palace built on a single pillar in the middle of the ocean, quite inaccessible to Takṣaka and took shelter there. The most famous physicians and wizards were engaged to ward off the approach of Takṣaka to that place. Six days passed like this. On the seventh day, determined to make a final attempt, Takṣaka disguised himself as an old Brāhmaṇa and set out to the King's place of shelter. On his way he met Dhanvantari who was proceeding to Parīkṣit to protect him. They became friends and as a result of it, Dhanvantari returned after receiving a large number of rare precious stones given to him by Takṣaka. Assuming the form of a small worm, Takṣaka secretly entered into a fruit which was to be presented to the King. As soon as the King took that fruit in his hand, Takṣaka took his own shape and size and bit the King who died immediately. Janamejaya was the son of this King Parīkṣit.

Janamejaya performed all the obsequies of his father. After that, in a spirit of revenge, with the object of annihilating the whole race of serpents, he summoned Brāhmaṇas to conduct a sarpa satra (snake sacrifice). In the sacrificial fire specially prepared at that yāga, many serpents were being burnt up. It seemed that the whole race of serpents would shortly be wiped out. But Takṣaka alone was not to be seen. The officiating priests were beginning to get angry. Impatient cries of Where is Takṣaka rent the air. The frightened Takṣaka fled for life to the palace of his friend Indra and there lay down, curling round Indra's cot. When the priests understood this they decided to use their charms and mantras which would bring Indra, his bed, cot and all, along with Takṣaka to the sacrificial fire.