Mortal Gods

Many cultures and religions imagine a time very long ago when gods and demons lived among the people. In such an age, a god in the Himalayas had five young and strong sons. The youngest was called Pipihya, and his name meant ‘one who has four older brothers’.

The five brothers loved each other and went everywhere together. They chased blue sheep over the Himalayas into the meadows of Tibet. They bathed in the glacial waters of the Ganga and in the hot-water springs of Kermi, in Humla. Each of them had a flying chariot, so they traveled widely. On the islands in the Langar Tsho they watched birds build nests in the spring. In the Limi Valley they watched snow leopards. Disguised as shepherds they traveled down to the Byans Valley to dance in the mustard fields.

One day, when they were making crowns of marigolds and poppies in the Valley of Flowers in Garhwal, they heard an enchanting song.

‘Brothers,’ Pipihya said to his elders, ‘we may be gods, but I will die if I don’t see who sings this song!’

‘Pipihya,’ his brothers warned, ‘some kinds of desires are only for humans who live and die. For us, youth is eternal, and so will longing be if we are made unhappy.’

But Pipihya insisted upon finding the singers. His eldest brother said, ‘Alright, Pipihya. But we must all promise never
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to eat anything the humans offer us. If even a grain of rice goes into our mouths, we will be trapped on earth forever.’

After a short search on their flying chariots they found the singers in the Byans Valley, where the Rung people still live. The five daughters of Lord Runglin were the most beautiful in the world. Pipihya and his brothers introduced themselves and immediately befriended them.

Lord Runglin had built a pleasure palace for his daughters. From there, the sisters could see the Saipal Mountain to the north-east, and the Mahakali flowed in the valley beneath it. There, the gods and the young women played chess on beds covered in red velvet and danced barefoot on soft grass and spent the entire night laughing and talking. The gods played flutes and drums while the young women danced. When the sisters asked, the gods happily danced for the young women. Pipihya and his brothers always made excuses to avoid eating any food that was offered to them. And they left the pleasure palace before sunrise.

After a few days of blissful friendship, the sisters noticed that all the food they laid out for their guests was left untouched. ‘From their stature and beauty it is clear that the brothers are gods. Maybe they think our food is impure,’ the sisters said. They decided to peel with their own hands every grain of rice, and to make rice pudding themselves. They wondered – ‘What kind of a friend would refuse to eat something made with so much affection?’

The sisters spent the entire day peeling rice grains. They sang to chase away the boredom of the work. But they were also happy because they knew the pudding would make the gods smile. After boiling the pure rice in pure milk with the finest spices from Kerala and Kashmir, the sisters prepared five big bowls of kheer, milk-and-rice pudding.
The gods arrived in the evening. The sisters asked them to sit on rugs made of the finest wools, fanned them with yak-tails, and put bowls of pudding before them.

With a wink and a nod, the oldest of the brothers signaled to the others to pretend to eat the pudding but never let a single grain of rice into their mouths. This was a strict rule that separated the pure gods from the impure humans. To break this rule was to defy Creation itself. His brothers understood the signal, so they laughed and praised the pudding. ‘Oh, the cardamom smells beautiful!’ one said. ‘Surely the fragrance of saffron is more enticing!’ another added.

The gods pretended to take the pudding to their lips, but cleverly threw it over their shoulders. But as he was loudly laughing and praising the pudding, a grain of rice went into Pipihya’s mouth.

As the night passed, the gods and the sisters whispered secrets to each other and danced with arms around each other’s waists. They tested who could resist the tickle of a peacock feather the longest. They played games of the mind and of the body, until the goddess of dawn painted the eastern skies red. The gods promised to return in the evening, gently peeled away from the embrace of the sisters, and mounted their chariots.

Five chariots of gold and silver flew up from the pleasure palace as the five sisters waved silk-tasseled shawls in goodbye. But Pipihya’s chariot soon began descending slowly, as if an invisible burden pulled him back to earth. His brothers saw that and worried. When the chariot finally settled at Sirkha, they spoke to him from beyond the clouds.

‘Pipihya! You have eaten human food, and now you must endure your punishment. Settle here, and live like a king. We will send you everything you need.’
Pipihya agreed with his brothers and built himself a great fort on the Sirkha hillside with the chariot in the middle of the courtyard where he had fallen. The eighteen-story fort was the most magnificent building in the whole world. His brothers sent him the wealth needed to hire masons and carpenters, weavers and potters, and every kind of worker needed for a large fort. Pipihya also hired and trained an army. He began eating mortal food. After all, he was stuck on earth. Why shouldn't he enjoy his time here?

But he had so much wealth that it spilt out of the windows and roofs of the fort. Pipihya used his army to distribute his wealth among the poor farmers and shepherds of the Byans Valley, and to his cooks and cleaners and cowherds and tailors. He built roads, bridges and rest-houses to make trade with Tibet easier and faster. He trained young men and women to recognize, process and store the herbs in the mountains so that they could heal the sick and also earn a living.

Time passed at a different pace for Pipihya than it did for the humans around him. He visited the five sisters as they grew older and finally died. The chariot in his courtyard rusted and broke. Generations of servants joined his service with energy and enthusiasm, then grew thick around the waist, then stooped and squinted, and finally died. This journey from birth to death stopped amusing Pipihya and he, too, began desiring liberation.

‘If only my brothers would come from heaven and take me away! I am tired of all this wealth and prosperity because it keeps me here,’ he moaned one day as a maid peeled grapes for him. This maid had grown old peeling grapes for Pipihya and was tired of hearing him complain. After all, she didn’t get to complain about how peeling grapes strained her eyes or gave her arthritis in her fingers.
‘If you are so tired of being rich and beautiful, why don’t you offer your ancestors a shield made of ashes instead of flour and a dog instead of a goat for the yearly feast?’ the old woman said.

Some rules of society and religion are very clearly established and most people know them. Some rules are not clearly known by everybody, but they still bring punishment if broken. Some rules are broken unknowingly. But sometimes even gods knowingly break society’s rules to invite change. Pipihya called the people he trusted and said, ‘I am going to destroy my fortune.’

‘No! That would be bad for us,’ said his ministers and commanders, fearing the loss of wealth and power. But Pipihya made a shield of ashes instead of flour and chose a dog instead of a goat to offer to his ancestors. This was terribly insulting. That misfortune soon befell Pipihya should surprise nobody. His wealth decreased. Thieves stole what was left of his chariot of gold, silver and rust. Finally, a day came when his fort lay in ruins, and he had to eat scraps thrown to him by strangers.

Pipihya only had a wooden bowl to eat out of. All splendor and beauty disappeared. When a tooth fell off while he was chewing rice, he laughed like a mad man and rolled in the dirt.

‘Brothers! Have you forsaken me?’ he said to the heavens.

His brothers appeared on their magnificent chariots of gold and silver and picked him up from the dirt and pulled him into the skies. Pipihya had finally been forgiven for eating one grain of rice. Nobody has heard from him since that day.

When the fort was great and prosperous, five hundred Rung families of traders and farmers had settled to the west of the fort. To the east lived three hundred families
of blacksmiths who served the fort and its armies. But after Pipihya offered a shield of ashes along with a dog to the ancestors, the people knew that the land would never see wealth again. They left, never to return.

Tourists who visit Sirkha today can see the ruins on the hill. These ruins are a reminder of what happened when a god broke a simple rule.