

NILKANTH CHARITRA

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Travels Around India as a Teenage Yogi

A Textbook of the Satsang Examinations Series: 5

NILKANTH CHARITRA

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Travels Around
India as a Teenage Yogi

Gujarati Text: Kishore M. Dave

Translation: BAPS Sadhus



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Ahmedabad

NILKANTH CHARITRA

Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Travels Around India as a Teenage Yogi

A textbook for the examination prescribed under the curriculum set by Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS).

Inspirer: HH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

Blessing: HH Mahant Swami Maharaj

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Blessings

The youth movement established and nourished by Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj has been expanding at a very rapid pace. To satisfy the aspirations and thirst for knowledge of the youth joining the movement, and also to enable them to understand and imbibe the principles of Akshar-Purushottam expounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the publication division of Shri Akshar-Purushottam (Swaminarayan) Yuvak Mandal, organized under the auspices of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar-Purushottam Sanstha, has drawn up a plan to bring out a series of books.

These books are intended to systematically impart scholarly knowledge in a simple language to the children and youth of the Satsang. It is hoped that this Sanstha – established by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj to implement and propagate the ideals revealed by Bhagwan Swaminarayan – will, through this activity, teach the ideals and noble traditions of the Sampradaya and through it, the Sanatan Hindu Dharma.

The aim of this Sanstha is to spread the divine message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan to all corners of the world. It is planned to bring out these books in different languages. We hope that all religious-minded truth seekers of the Sampradaya and those outside it, will welcome this activity and extend their full support to it by all possible means, including monetary help.

To encourage children and youths, examinations are held based on the curriculum as presented in these books. Certificates are also awarded to successful candidates.

I bless Shri Ishwarcharan Swami, Prof. Rameshbhai Dave, Kishorebhai Dave, and all others who have assisted in the preparation of these books.

Vasant Panchami
Vikram Samvat 2028
(21 January 1972 CE), Atladara

Shastri Narayanswarupdasji
(Pramukh Swami Maharaj)
Jay Swaminarayan

Publisher's Note

We read in *Ghanshyam Charitra* about Bhagwan Swaminarayan's divine, inspiring and miraculous childhood. After the passing away of his parents, Ghanshyam Maharaj renounced the world and sojourned in the forests. During this period, he was known as Nilkanth Varni. He travelled to many pilgrim places in India for seven years and also observed intense austerities. He astutely assessed the spiritual, cultural and social atmosphere throughout the country. Finally, he met Ramanand Swami who initiated him into the sadhu-order, renamed him Sahajanand Swami, and later appointed him as his spiritual heir.

Details of this extraordinary period of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's life are documented in the established shastras of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. They form the basis for the stories narrated in this book.

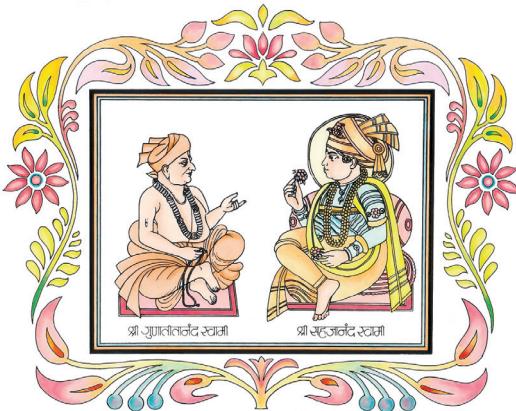
Nilkanth Charitra: Bhagwan Swaminarayan's Travels Around India as a Teenage Yogi is a translation of the Gujarati book 'Nilkanth Charitra'.

The book has been designed to serve as part of the curriculum for the Satsang Pravesh Examinations. We thank the BAPS swamis who have diligently produced this latest edition.

It is our earnest prayer that all *satsangis* study this book carefully, pass the examinations with flying colours, and above all, derive immense spiritual benefits, and please Bhagwan Swaminarayan and gurus Pramukh Swami Maharaj and Mahant Swami Maharaj.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith

Prayer



Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine māte;
Ame sau Shrijitanā yuvak, ladishu Shrijine māte...
Nathi dartā nathi kartā, amārā jānani parvā;
Amāre dar nathi koino, ame janmyā chhie marvā...Ame 1
Ame ā yagna ārambhyo, balidāno ame daishu;
Amārā Akshar-Purushottam, Gunātit gnānane gāishu...Ame 2
Ame sau Shrijitanā putro, Akshare vās amāro chhe;
Svadharmi bhasma choli to, amāre kshobh shāno chhe...Ame 3
Juo sau Motinā Swāmi, na rākhi kāi te khāmi;
Pragat Purushottam pāmi, malyā Gunātit Swāmi...Ame 4

Meaning: We are all children of Swami; we will die for Swami. We are all youths of Shriji [Maharaj]; we will fight for Shriji [Maharaj].

We are not afraid; we do not worry about our own lives. We do not fear anyone; for we are born to die.

We have begun this sacred endeavour (*yagna*), and we will offer any sacrifice. We will sing the glory of Akshar-Purushottam and the knowledge of Gunatit. We are all the children of Shriji [Maharaj]; Akshar is our abode. We are dedicated to our dharma; we have no sorrows whatsoever.

Everyone see Motibhai's Swami [Shastriji Maharaj]; he has left no shortcomings. We have attained the manifest (*pragat*) Purushottam and Gunatit[anand] Swami.

1. Across the River Saryu

It was the morning of 29 June 1792 (Ashadh *sud* 10, Samvat 1849). The River Saryu on the outskirts of Ayodhya was in spate. The 11-year-old Ghanshyam (Nilkanth Varni) was considering jumping into the rampaging river which had burst its banks. Suddenly, a giant demon appeared and hurled Nilkanth into the river. The demon jumped with joy, behaving like one intoxicated after a victory. In his mad frenzy, the demon collided against a tree which fell on him with a thundering noise and crushed him to death.

Nilkanth, on the other hand, survived the deluge. He passed through a massive wave and landed on the opposite bank. It was a miracle as few could have come out alive. The young *brahmachari* who had a *tulsi mala* in his hand was not at all ruffled by the incident. He was exultant as he had renounced the world that very day and snapped all worldly ties. After reaching the bank, he started walking. The atmosphere was serene. Peacocks and other creatures were making the most of the rain, the flood notwithstanding.

Nilkanth looked splendid with a glow on his round, tender face. His eyes had a clear vision of his goal to liberate souls. His black, curly *jata*, and the *kamandal* in his hand proclaimed to the world that a new, extraordinary ascetic *hjad* just been born.

The young *brahmachari* walked for some time before reaching a banyan tree. He sat in a *padmasan* posture and started to meditate.

2. The Attributes of a Tyagi

After leaving home, Nilkanth spent the first night under a banyan tree. The following morning on Ashadh *sud* 11, as was his practice, he got up early, performed his ablutions and again sat under the tree. Soon the residents of Amarapur

village started flocking to the location. Greatly impressed by the calm on the *brahmachari*'s face, they started debating as to whether Swami Kartikeyiji or Dhruvji had come in person. They ran to their homes to get whatever offerings they could lay their hands on. Soon there was a pile of fruits, sweets and other kinds of eatables. The young ascetic had a Shaligram with him. First he made an offering to it and then sparingly ate some of the eatables. He then distributed everything to the assembled villagers. They were greatly surprised by his virtue of non-possession. They advised him, "Brahmachariji, why don't you keep something for this evening." Nilkanth smiled at them and said, "If I were to think about food for this evening or tomorrow, then what was the point in renouncing my home! A *tyagi* should be detached like the sky. Having renounced with faith in God, God will provide as necessary." The village folks were attracted to Nilkanth's divine, sweet words.

Nilkanth reassured them, "Now you may go. I fear no one. My powers prevail in all things." The simple villagers did not understand these divine words of Nilkanth.

Nilkanth then departed from that place. He crossed rivers and dense forests as he progressed in his sojourn. Wherever he stopped, the villagers were attracted by his divine form. They brought fruits and other eatables for him. As usual, he would first offer them to Thakorji and then take a little for himself.

He walked northwards towards the Himalayas. He did not remember his brothers, sister-in-law or friends. He walked briskly, looking frequently over his shoulder to check that nobody was pursuing him to take him home.

Nilkanth was God himself. He had no need to perform austerities. However, he was going to undertake austerities for the liberation of countless people.

3. Gives Darshan to Veniram and Revives Raghunandan

Meanwhile, in Ayodhya, Ghanshyam's renunciation had plunged the town into grief and sadness. Thinking that Ghanshyam may have gone to Chhapaiya, Rampratapbhai went there and searched for him for seven days, but to no avail. Even the friends of Ghanshyam searched for him until they too got tired. Suddenly, Veniram remembered that Ghanshyam often jumped into the deep well of the village. He said to himself, "Let me go and look in the well. If Ghanshyam is not to be found there, I will kill myself by drowning in the well."

With these thoughts, Veniram plunged into the well but could not find Ghanshyam. When Veniram did not come out even after an hour, his father, Motiram, got worried and he too jumped into the well to save his son. The well was very deep and dark. Motiram began to drown in the well. As time passed, neither father or son came out of the well. Veniram's mother and maternal uncle also went there. They began to cry and beat their chests in despair.

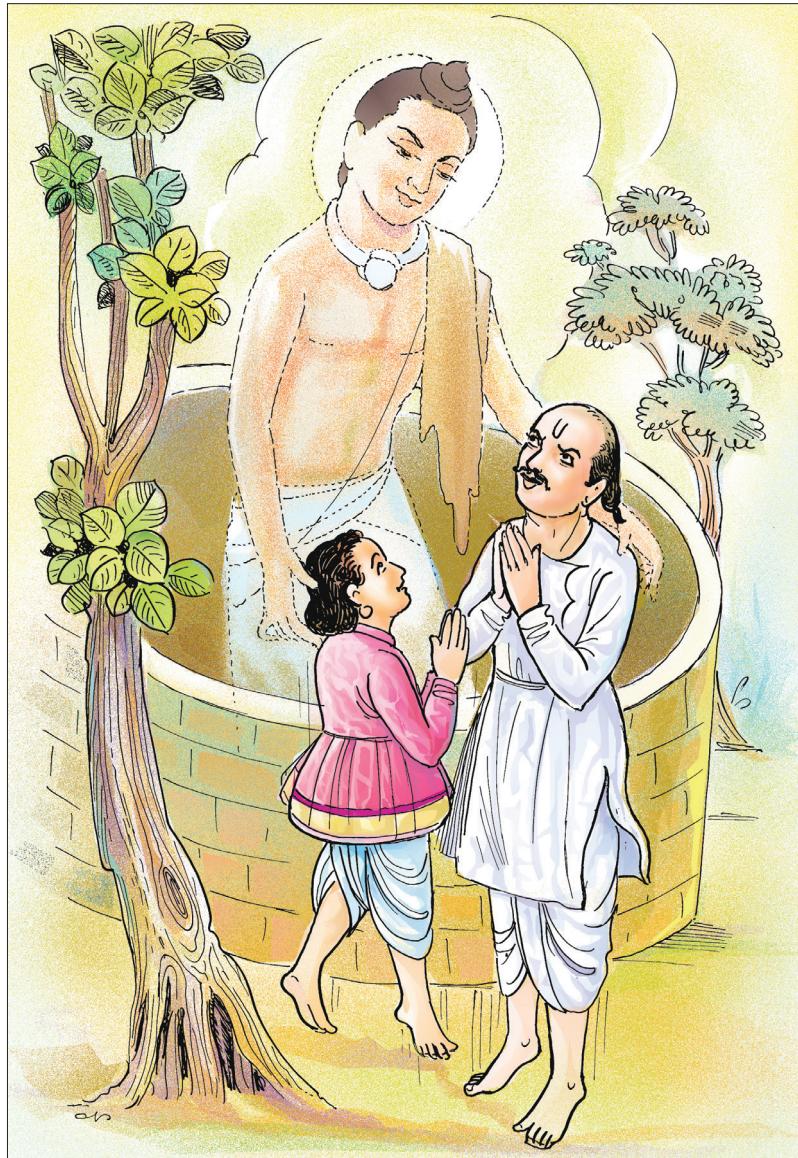
Ghanshyam took pity on them and thus appeared in the well in his divine form. At once, the well was flooded with divine light. Gently, he lifted Veniram and his father out of the well before disappearing into the sky. Veniram was overjoyed at this good fortune of having had the darshan of Ghanshyam.

Ghanshyam had another close friend, Raghunandan, who was the son of a Bania. He, too, searched for Ghanshyam for seven days. When he could not find him, he became very dejected and thought, "What joy is left for me in life without Ghanshyam?"

Thinking thus, Raghunandan went to Lake Narayan, and sitting under a mango tree began to meditate on Ghanshyam.

So deep was his grief that he could no longer bear it and he died during his meditation.

As Raghunandan did not return home that evening, his



Ghanshyam saves Veniram and Motiram

parents became worried. With the assistance of Rampratapbhai they began to search for their son. Rampratapbhai, who was already deeply anguished at Ghanshyam's departure, became all the more unhappy at the disappearance of Raghunandan.

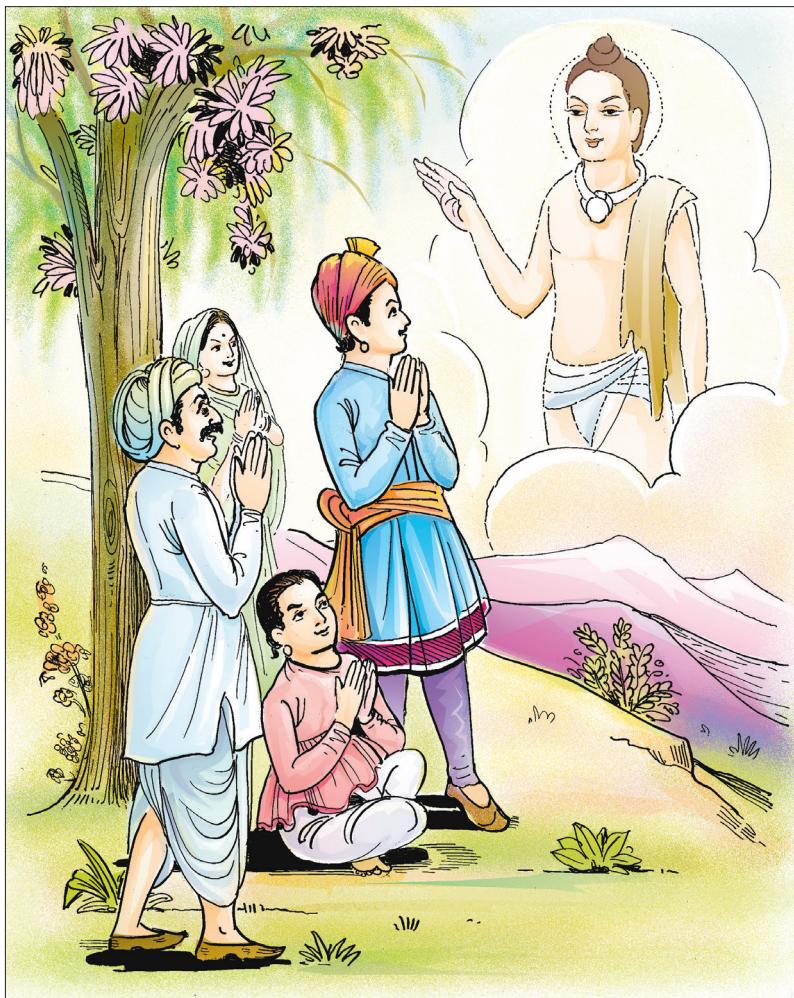
They all set out for Lake Narayan in search of Raghunandan. Seeing the grief of these three individuals, Hanumanji appeared in the sky and informed Rampratapbhai in a heavenly voice, "Your younger brother has gone to the forest to perform austerities. Thereafter, he will establish his own fellowship on this earth for the moral and spiritual regeneration of mankind. Then, he will send for you and give his darshan. Therefore please do not lament over his absence any longer." On hearing this, Rampratapbhai was greatly relieved.

Continuing their search for Raghunandan, they came to a mango tree, where they found Raghunandan's dead body. His parents began to sob bitterly. Seeing their anguish, Ghanshyam came down from the sky in a divine form and brought Raghunandan back to life. He made him sit up and said, "I have not left you. I will give you my darshan whenever you remember me. Please don't abandon your life like this." Thus, Ghanshyam gave darshan to Raghunandan, his parents and Rampratapbhai in his divine form before disappearing.

Proceeding further, Nilkanth reached Lodheshwar, where there is the mandir of Lodheshwar Mahadev and a lake of the same name. Nilkanth bathed in the lake and had the darshan of Mahadev. After one night at the mandir, he continued his journey. Passing through Jetpur and Pathepur, he came to Naimisharanya (Kherilapur).

There is a lake in Naimisharanya called Chakratirth, which is surrounded by many mandirs. After visiting all the sacred places in Naimisharanya, where thousands of years ago Sutji had recited the Shrimad Bhagvat before Shaunak and other sages, Nilkanth proceeded further towards the north.

After passing through Sahejapur and Bareli, Nilkanth entered a dense forest. The way ahead seemed very difficult. The forest was so thick that it remained completely dark even during the day. Amidst dense bushes, numerous wild animals such as lions, tigers, leopards, wolves, jackals, hyenas and elephants roamed. It was infested with snakes, crabs, wild owls and scorpions. One had to walk over heaps of dry leaves. The area was so isolated



"I will give you my darshan whenever you remember me."

and frightening that one would tremble to death on hearing the thundering roars of the wild beasts. However, Nilkanth walked on through this dark and terrifying forest, undaunted and unperturbed.

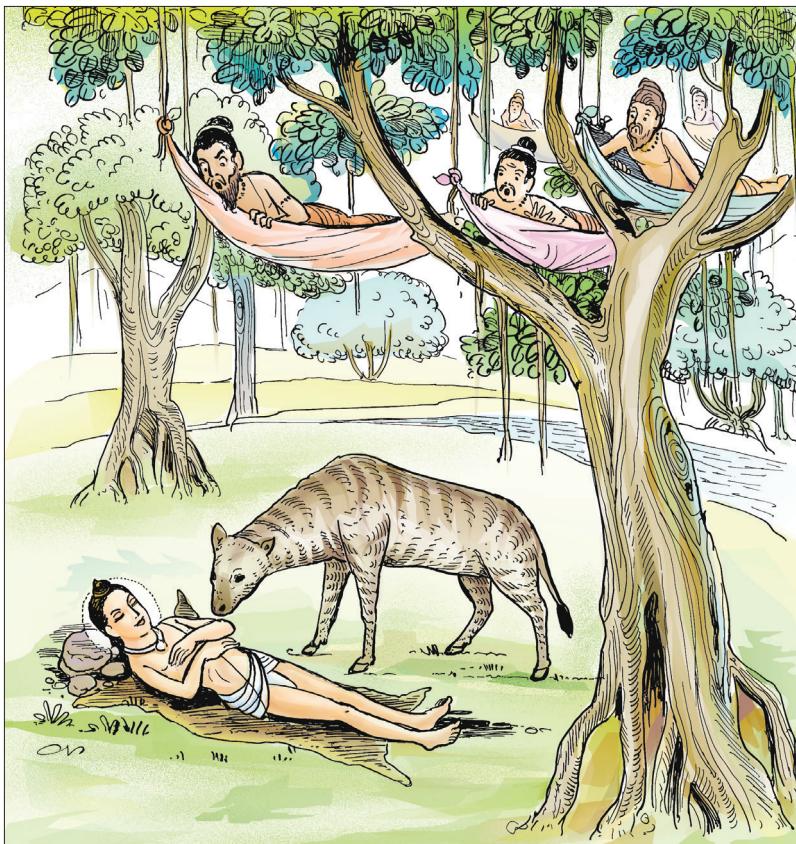
4. Liberating Ascetics

The road ahead remained very difficult with many dense forests. The thick vegetation kept the forests despite the sunlight above.

Continuing his journey on foot through the thick jungle, Nilkanth came to a banyan tree. He saw some ascetics sitting under the tree. He went to them and asked, “O ascetics, why have you come here ? Where will you go from here?” The ascetics replied, “O Varniraj, we are going to the Himalayas to perform austerities. We wish to propitiate God through our austerities. We plan to undertake severe austerities after reaching the Himalayas in the north in order to attain liberation.”

The ascetics then asked Nilkanth, “Why have you come alone to this harsh jungle? We are many, still we are afraid of wild animals at night. How is it that you are moving about so fearlessly? Who are you? Are you not afraid of the tigers, wolves or lions? As you are clad only in a loincloth, don’t you feel cold at night?”

Nilkanth replied, “I am *atma*, distinct from the physical body, and unattached to family and relatives. I am free from carnal desire, anger, avarice and other vices. I am beyond *Akshar*, which is *sat-chit-anand*. I am beyond the three states (waking, dream and deep sleep), the three bodies (gross, subtle and causal) and the three qualities (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*). I am the divine embodiment of the supreme God. I am also going to the Himalayas for the liberation of countless *jivas*. But tell me, how will you attain liberation without meeting God in



The ascetics look in fright to see what the hyena approaches Nilkanth

human manifestation? Even if your bodies were to become mere skeletons through austerities, how would you attain liberation without knowing the manifest God?"

On hearing this, the ascetics were wonder struck. They asked, "O Varniraj! Where can we possibly find God manifest and when? How can we attain liberation?" Nilkanth replied, "If you are sincere and earnest in your quest, you will find God manifest right here. Recognize him, and you will immediately attain liberation."

The ascetics were overjoyed on hearing Nilkanth. They soon realized that Nilkanth himself was God manifest. They followed

Nilkanth, listened to his soul-elevating discourses and served him devoutly.

Nilkanth was pleased with their *seva* and their faith. He gave darshan to the ascetics in the *chaturbhuj* form of Narayan Bhagwan. The ascetics were greatly exhilarated at this darshan.

The ascetics continued their journey towards the Himalayas. One night Nilkanth, along with the ascetics, rested under a banyan tree. There was a roar of tigers and lions from all sides. The chirping of crickets, the hissing of snakes and the hooting of owls could be heard from time to time. Overcome by fear, the ascetics tied their hammocks to tree branches and went to sleep in them. Nilkanth, on the other hand, stretched himself on the plain ground, a few steps away from the tree.

A ferocious hyena came there at midnight. It let out a loud howl, sniffed the ground, and went around Nilkanth before finally sitting under the banyan tree. The ascetics were watching this from their hammocks. The hyena began to stare at the hammocks hanging high up. On seeing this, the ascetics were frightened all the more. Bewildered, they lay motionless in their hammocks, and began to pray to Nilkanth.

At daybreak, the hyena stood up, looked up at the banyan tree once again and then lashing its tail fiercely on the ground twice, it went on its way. At that time the ascetics were focussed on Nilkanth. He granted them liberation. Thus uplifting the ascetics, Nilkanth continued his onward journey.

5. On the Way to Badrinath

After a nine-day trek through the forest, Nilkanth passed through Bahadurpur and reached the banks of the River Ganga. He crossed the sacred river by boat. Finally, he reached Haridwar, where he bathed in the waters of the Ganga and had darshan at the Mahadev mandir situated on its banks. At the time, there

was a spiritual fair in Haridwar. *Bawas* and the *vairagis* from all corners of the land had gathered there. The fair was overflowing with *jogis* and *jatis*, sadhus and sannyasis of all sorts. Nilkanth went round the fair giving darshan to all and liberating them.

Proceeding from Haridwar, Nilkanth reached Tapovan. Seeing the beautiful grove, Nilkanth experienced great joy. He stayed there for ten days. Many ascetics, engrossed in austerities for ages, felt elated at the darshan of Nilkanth. Nilkanth visited the hermitage where Dhruvji had performed intense austerities. Here, Nilkanth also resolved to perform intense austerities further ahead.

From there he reached Lakshmanjhula (Lakshmanpura). There is a mandir of Lakshmanji on the banks of the River Ganga. Nilkanth bathed in the cold waters of the Ganga and paid homage to the image of Lakshman in the mandir. Nilkanth stayed there for ten days.

6. Spurns Mahantship

Thereafter, Nilkanth crossed the bridge, proceeded further and reached the city of Shripur. At this place Uddhavji, on being separated from Shri Krishna Bhagwan, had performed austerities thousands of years ago. Nilkanth visited this location. Knowing the sanctity of the place, Naradji had built the city of Shripur. It is also known as Shrikshetra. As the River Alaknanda flows here in the form of a bow, the place is also known as Dhanushtirth.

When Nilkanth Varni reached Shripur, it was late evening. He saw a hermitage outside the village and sat on a small platform nearby. On seeing the illustrious *brahmachari* the mahant of the hermitage was impressed. He said, “Brahmachari, please come inside the ashram. If you stay outside there is danger in the form of wild animals. It is not proper for you to remain outside.”

The young *brahmachari* did not take any notice of the mahant’s

entreaties. He sat in meditation. The mahant urged again, "Brahmachari! You must be very hungry. Please come inside. Have food and take rest." When there was no response even to this, the mahant thought the young celibate was observing a vow of silence. He shook him and said, "Maharaj! Listen to me. If you do not want to come inside the ashram, please go to the village and stay there for the night. Death is imminent here."

Nilkanth replied, "I do not stay where there are many people. I prefer to live outside a village, in a place like this and under the sky. I am not afraid of death."

The mahant still tried to reason, "Why are you so stubborn? And why do you invite death when there is no need to?"

The mahant's efforts, however, were to no avail. Nilkanth remained outside the ashram in deep meditation on a deer skin.

Soon, it was past midnight. Suddenly there was an earth-shaking roar of a lion. The mahant and the villagefolk woke up because of the deafening roar. The mahant was worried about Nilkanth's safety. The lion broke out in a terrifying roar once again, started thrashing its tail vigorously and sprang with outstretched claws in the direction of Nilkanth. Some birds fell off their perches as a result of the roar. Varni sent the lion into a trance through his divine gaze. The ferocious, roaring beast then lay at Nilkanth's feet without making a sound. The mahant who was watching the proceedings was greatly surprised.

Nilkanth patted the lion and it started licking his feet. The surprised mahant exclaimed, "He is indeed an incarnation of God!" The lion was behaving like a meek cow before Varni. This as was a natural experience for Nilkanth. All he wished to do was to liberate anyone who came to him. At the break of dawn, the young ascetic got up and started towards the river bank for his ablutions. The lion followed him like a kitten. When the *brahmachari* reached the water's edge, he ordered the lion to go back. Quietly, bowing his head, the lion slipped into the bushes.

The mahant and his disciples were watching all this from a distance. The mahant came to where Varni was. He spoke to him with folded hands, "Brahmachari, you are a very valorous person. I wish that you stay permanently in our ashram. I will make you the mahant. We have an annual income of Rs. 100,000."

Varni interrupted him, "If I were interested in ashrams or income, why would I have left home? I have to visit many pilgrim places and liberate countless souls. I want to explain to the world about true satsang."

In this way, Nilkanth spurned the offer of mahantship and vanished into the nearby bushes. Nilkanth then bathed in the Alaknanda before proceeding towards the mountains.

First, he climbed Mount Chittabhang and then Mount Manbhang before descending on the other side. There, he gave darshan to ascetics engaged in austerities. He visited Uddhavji's hermitage and then reached Guptakashi. In Satyug many ascetics had undergone austerities here to please Bholanath Shankar. After having darshan of the Shivling of Kashivishvanath Mahadev, Nilkanth reached Uttarakhand, a region where many old mandirs are situated, the foremost being that of Vishwanathji. After darshan, Nilkanth proceeded to Gangotri. Passing through Guptaprayag, he crossed the swinging bridge and went to the Triyuginarayan Mandir. After visiting the mandir, he arrived at Gauri Kund and bathed in the hot water springs. After darshan at the mandir dedicated to Parvati, he proceeded and reached Kedarnath.

7. Visits Badrinath and Manasarovar

There are twelve self-born *jyotirlings* in India, one of which is located at the mandir of Kedarnath.

After visiting Kedarnath and worshipping the *jyotirling*, Nilkanth continued his journey towards the Greater Himalayas

or Himagiri. He walked on through the mountains for nine long days before finally reaching Badrinath. There, in the mandir with its brightly decorated pinnacle, he had the darshan of Bhagwan Badrinath and Nar-Narayan. The priest of the mandir was deeply drawn towards this child celibate. He saw in Nilkanth, Bhagwan Badrinarayan himself, and out of deep respect for him he offered his *seva* to him. Every day he would garland Nilkanth and serve him food. Nilkanth stayed there for the Diwali festival to celebrate the Annakut.

During the four months of winter, it is very cold in Badrinath. Sometimes there are hailstorms and rain. Everything is covered with snow. Therefore, the *murti* of Bhagwan Badrinath is brought down and installed in the Jyotishvar mandir of Joshimath for worship.

The pujari respectfully brought Nilkanth to Joshimath on an elephant. Nilkanth stayed here at the mandir for a few days.

From Joshimath, a very precipitous road passes via the valley of Niti, leading to Manasarovar and from there towards Mount Kailas. Nilkanth Varni continued his journey through this difficult and extremely cold Himalayan region. The cold winds penetrated his body like sharp arrows. Hailstones also rained. Unmindful of his body, Nilkanth walked on and reached Badrivan (Adi-Badri).

The ashram of Narayan Rishi is located in Badrivan. The place is isolated. It was here that Nar and Narayan had performed austerities for more than 50 years, beseeching the supreme God to manifest on earth. Today, God in the form of Nilkanth had come to bless them with the fruits of their austerities. Everyone was happy on having the darshan of Nilkanth. Both Nar and Narayan offered prayers, "No one knows your glory. It is because of your powers that we are great. And those who believe us as greater than you know not your true greatness." Perceiving their love and affection of Nar and Narayan, and the many other

rishis, Nilkanth stayed in the ashram for three months during winter. Nilkanth Varni performed austerities here and gave the divine bliss of his form to thousands of rishis.

After completing his stay in Badrivan, he blessed Nar and Narayan, "You have served me well. Therefore, I will install your *murti* on this earth." Nilkanth then resumed his pilgrimage. Walking barefoot in the snow, he reached Manasarovar. He bathed in the clear waters of the lake and bestowed his blessings on the white swans gliding gracefully on the lake. This place is the source of the River Saryu. Nilkanth bathed in the mouth of the River Saryu, paid obeisance to Mount Kailas from a distance and turned back. Continuing his journey on foot, Nilkanth returned to Badrinath on the day of Akhatrij.

8. Discourse to Maharaja of Punjab

Around this time, the valiant ruler of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, was on a visit to Badrinath. Here, he met Nilkanth Varni. He was greatly impressed by the magnetic personality of the youthful *brahmachari*. He caught hold of the young celibate's feet and declared, "I am not going to leave you. So, please do not leave me. I will do whatever you want me to do." Nilkanth told him that he could not stay with him and said, "I will meet you later wherever you are. But for now you must go." The Maharaja was sorely disappointed by Nilkanth's instructions. However, he derived comfort from the fact that the young *brahmachari* had agreed to meet him again.

Nilkanth once again scaled the peaks and reached the mandir of Gangaji at Gangotri. Varni paid his respects and started going up the Himalayas in Uttarakhand and came to Haridwar at the foot. At Harki Pedi in Haridwar, Ranjit Singh once again met him. The Sikh ruler sat at Nilkanth's feet and expressed his inclination to surrender his empire to him. The young ascetic,

however, was not interested at all. After blessing the ruler, he said, "Remember me and govern your kingdom. When you realize my knowledge, your kingdom will not be a bondage." Nilkanth placed his hand on the ruler's head and gave him a glimpse of his divine personality. Ranjit Singh experienced supreme bliss. Nilkanth then briefly returned to Ayodhya incognito.

9. Compassionate Nilkanth

Only ten months had passed since Nilkanth had renounced his home. After blessing the town of Ayodhya, Nilkanth trekked along the banks of the River Saryu. Passing through forests and groves, in the upper north eastern Himalayas, Nilkanth arrived in Bansi. A river flowed by at a short distance from the city, which had a beautiful garden. Nilkanth went to the river every morning to bathe. Beautiful birds of many kinds chirped in the garden.

One day, after bathing in the river, Nilkanth came to the garden for meditation. At that time, two servants of the king entered the garden. Heedless of the presence of Nilkanth, they aimed their rifles at a spot and fired. The bullets hit a couple of birds which fell down from a tree, screaming and struggling for life. The helpless eyes of both birds stared at Nilkanth and they soon died. Nilkanth blessed them and liberated their souls. He was deeply pained at the cruel behaviour of the king's servants. He became sad and dejected. On that day, he observed a fast. He did not go to the city again, but spent the whole day in the garden. His heart was greatly moved with compassion. He could not bear any sort of violence.

At midnight, he suddenly woke up. A thought casually passed through his mind, "Let this city be burned!" Nilkanth decided to leave the city. However, immediately after this, he withdrew

his thought saying to himself, “No, a sadhu should always be forgiving. He should not even harbour a thought which may cause harm to anyone.”

However, as a result of his first casual utterance, the city of Bansi went up in flames. The god of fire had already set it aflame from the heavens. The fire started from the king’s palace and rapidly spread to the whole city. There was great commotion. The king, the queen and all the citizens began to flee the city.

When Nilkanth saw this, he felt compassion for the citizens. Instantly, he plunged in the waters of the river. With that, the fire was extinguished. Only the two servants who had killed the birds were burnt to death. The city was saved from being reduced to ashes.

Since the incident had occurred as a result of his casual utterance, Nilkanth stood in the water of the river. Taking a little water in the palms of his hands, he took an oath and uttered a curse on his own speech, “If ever again such an impure thought passes through my mind, even by mistake, let it not be fruitful. Let my words, on such an occasion, fail to come true.”

After bathing and meditating, Nilkanth continued his journey.

10. Nilkanth in Vanshipur

Early one morning, Nilkanth sat under a banyan tree to perform his morning puja. At that time, the king of Vanshipur, who was out hunting, came there and saw the young *brahmachari*. The resplendent face of the young *tapasvi* impressed the ruler as something out of the ordinary. The king was an ardent seeker of liberation. In Varni he recognized at once his spiritual guide. He was overjoyed and thought to himself, “Today Narayan has come in person to liberate me.” At once, he sought refuge at the young *brahmachari*’s feet. When Nilkanth opened his eyes,

he saw the king before him. He entreated Nilkanth to come to his palace to liberate him and his family. When he saw the sincerity in the ruler's request, the young celibate agreed to go with him. The king helped him sit on his royal horse, got hold of the reins and galloped to his city. On reaching the city, his citizens thronged to both sides of the road to see their king leading a young *brahmachari* to his palace. He received reverential salutations along the entire route. Finally, Nilkanth entered the *darbar* where the queen briskly and enthusiastically ran to receive the new guest. Everyone felt that the young *brahmachari* was not an ordinary guest, but God himself.

The royal couple were wanting in one matter. They did not have a male heir. They had two daughters, Ila and Sushila. They too were impressed by Nilkanth's illustrious personality. From that day onwards until he left the palace, Nilkanth was served devoutly by the king, queen, and their two daughters. The princesses would arrange puja materials for the *brahmachari*. Every day, Sushila and Ila brought fruits, flowers and water. Nilkanth would offer the items to Thakorji. He ate very little himself and would distribute the rest as *prasad*.

Varni would sometimes talk of his own life and sometimes about the past or future. Everyone would listen to him with rapt attention. The queen had some personal interest in keeping Varni in her kingdom.

One day, she came to Nilkanth and said, "Brahmachariji! We would like to offer this kingdom to you. Along with that, we would give you our daughters in marriage. Therefore, give up the bother of going to the forests to do austerities." Varni laughed at the worldly inclinations displayed by the queen and said, "Mother! I have still to wander in the forests and liberate souls like you. I have come here as a result of your austerities. You are very fortunate." The queen was greatly distressed and agitated on hearing this reply. "Brahmachari! Think carefully.

You are a mere boy now. When you become a young man, you will become restless without a woman? Kamdev (the god of love) has conquered many great minds. Do you think he will leave you alone?"

Varni took pity on the queen and said, "My joy lies in going to the forest and meditating on Paramatma." The queen felt as if the ground was slipping from under her feet. "Is Varni going to leave us?" was the thought that worried her the most. She made one last attempt to frighten Nilkanth by vividly describing the dangers of the forest. To this Varni had a ready answer, "Mother, I am not afraid of the forest, its ferocious creatures or the extremes of heat and cold. One should be afraid of worldly pleasures. I have come to this world to liberate people from the allurement of *maya* and take them to my Akshardham. I have not come to become attached to your kingdom or your daughters. However, as all of you have served me with devotion, I will grant you all Akshardham."

The veil of illusion was lifted from the queen's mind. She went into a divine trance. Nilkanth left the room. When she awoke from the trance, she was weeping. Her daughters advised her, "Mother we have in our midst a divine person who is pure and above mundane desires. Let us serve him according to his wishes. Do not be stubborn in your ways. Be insistent in keeping him within your heart and give up your mundane motives." These words were like nectar to the queen. Sushila and Ila rushed to Nilkanth's room. There they found him sitting in a *swastik-asan* in deep meditation. They had his darshan, came on tiptoe and made his bed. They also filled his gourd with fresh water, and brought some fruits and flowers before quietly leaving the room.

Nilkanth sat in meditation for a long time. He lost count of time. It was late night. The palace gate was closed. Varni opened his eyes and thought that he should leave the place immediately.

The royal family, out of their faith in him, would definitely be liberated. With this resolve, he left the palace in a flash.

When Sushila and Ila went to Nilkanth's room the next morning, they found it empty. They felt that he must have left the palace. The weeping princesses rushed to their mother to convey the news. The queen could not bear the terrible news and collapsed on the floor. The king was informed and soon the tragic news spread to different parts of the capital and kingdom. People thronged to the palace to verify the news. There were scenes of mourning at the palace. The king ordered horse riders to fan out in different directions to search for Nilkanth. "Don't return without bringing the young *brabmachari*," was the royal edict.

The mounted riders travelled far and wide, but found no trace of Nilkanth. The king himself went in search of Nilkanth, but could not find any trace of him. He returned sorely distressed. Nilkanth assured the king through his uttering from the sky that he would later be able to meet him in Saurashtra.

11. Enters a Dense Forest

Nilkanth now embarked on the route to reach Kala Parvat in Nepal. Only a few ever dared to travel on that difficult route. He trekked for a month and came to an impenetrable forest in the valley of Kala Parvat. So thick was the forest that even sunlight could not penetrate the vegetation. As the young ascetic walked on the thick carpet of dried leaves, snakes slithered out. Rhinos, wild buffaloes and other wild animals roamed the forest. The forest was full of scorpions, snakes and spiders. Even then Nilkanth walked barefoot.

Nilkanth wished to reach Pulhashram. He had been journeying for three days and nights without rest. No food was available for four days. Nilkanth had been drained of all

strength. He was so tired that he fainted and lost consciousness. On gaining consciousness, he saw a river and dragged himself there to bathe. He bathed the Shaligram, and offered it water, fruits and flowers. Then, he ate some *prasad* and performed *sandhya vandan*. That day marked an important milestone in the *brahmachari*'s life. It was exactly one year and two months since he had left home. The day was 29 August 1793 (Shravan vad 8, Samvat 1850).

12. Destruction of Ghosts and Deliverance of Yogis

Nilkanth spread his *mrugcharma* under the shade of a large banyan tree and sat in meditation. Hanumanji, son of the wind-god, had climbed upon a tree and come near Nilkanth. When it was past midnight, terrible noises disturbed the atmosphere. Huge flames were seen at a distance. In a short time, fearful shapes began to approach nearer and nearer.

Hanumanji sat up and became alert. When he looked around, he saw a number of ghosts coming towards the tree from all sides in a menacing manner. Some of them were short, while others were tall and tough. Some were as high as palm trees, and awfully fat. Some had long teeth while some had horns on their heads. They all had large bloodshot eyes and long nails. Screaming and shouting, the ghosts came near the tree. Kalbhairav, the king of the ghosts was walking ahead of them all with a sharp spear in his hand.

He came up and shouted an order to his followers, "Come on, jump on that boy and monkey, and devour them at once!"

Hanumanji got enraged on hearing this. With a roar, he rushed towards the ghosts. He whirled his tail around and began to lash out at them. The jungle reverberated with screams and commotion. Some of the ghosts ran helter skelter for their

lives while others ran, stumbling against one another, and hid themselves at a safe distance. Even the birds and animals of the forest were awakened by the screams and howls of the ghosts.

At this, the king of the ghosts became terribly angry. He rushed towards Hanumanji. Hanumanji, with a single jump, pounced on him. Winding his tail around him, he held him tight and hit him hard on the head with his fist. The blow was so severe that Kalbhairav's head sank into his trunk. A fountain of blood sprang forth. All the other ghosts ran away, terrified. The fight was over and all was quiet again.

At daybreak Nilkanth got up, bathed and performed his puja.

He then proceeded to climb the mountain. The higher he climbed, the denser the vegetation became. When he reached the top, he was in the midst of the densest part of the jungle. The growth was so thick that it was dark even at noon.

In the middle of the forest, several yogis were performing austerities. When they saw Nilkanth, they were greatly pleased. They thought to themselves, "God himself has come today to give us darshan. Our austerities of many years have at last borne fruit."

The yogis all received Nilkanth reverentially. They cleaned a cottage for him to stay and led him to the lake to bathe. After bathing and worship, Nilkanth asked them, "Wild vegetation seems to be growing here; can I get some fruits to eat?" The yogis replied, "We have got an *akshay patra*. It gives us whatever we wish to eat at noon every day."

The yogis thus served Nilkanth with devotion for four days. They wished for different varieties of eatables from the *akshay patra* and offered them to Nilkanth. On the fifth day when Nilkanth prepared to leave, all the yogis prostrated before him and prayed, "Please bless us with your bhakti and deliver us."

Pleased with them, Nilkanth replied, "Continue your

meditation for some time more. I have set out with the sole object of bestowing deliverance on all. When I reach Mount Navalakha and liberate the 900,000 yogis, you too will be liberated.” All the yogis were extremely pleased to hear this and bade a warm farewell to Nilkanth.

13. Meeting with Himalaya

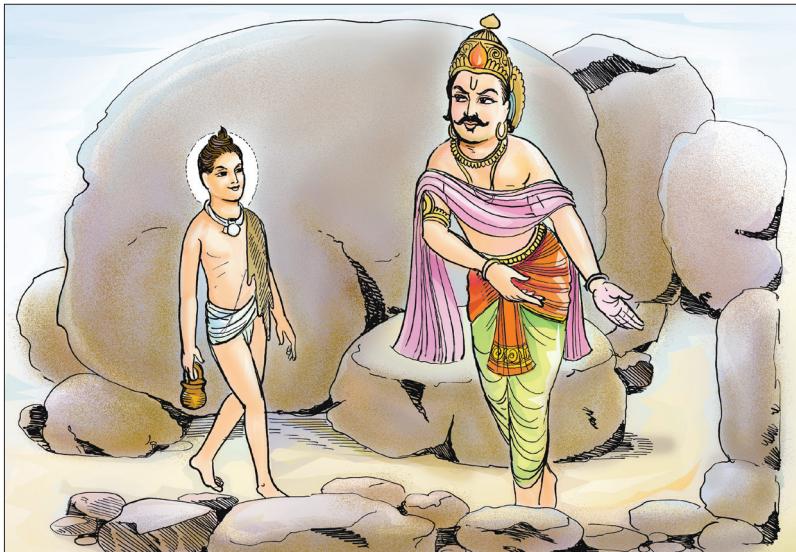
In Nepal, Nilkanth passed through dense Himalayan forests. He trekked through a valley between the Dhavalgiri and Shyamgiri mountains. When he saw a torrent of water flowing through the valley, he realized there was no way to proceed further. Nilkanth, however, was determined to go to Pulhashram.

At that time Himalaya, the god of the mountains, came to Nilkanth in person, prostrated at his feet and asked, “O merciful God! Where have you come from? What is your wish? I have come for your darshan and to serve you.” Nilkanth replied, “I want to go to Pulhashram to perform austerities, but I have lost my way. Therefore, please show me the way.”

Himalaya replied, “Maharaj! The only way to proceed forward is through this torrent of water flowing between these two mountains. But the waters are infested with poisonous snakes, crocodiles and fish. I beseech you not to take this route.”

Nilkanth, however, paid no heed to the words of Himalaya and plunged himself in the dangerous, turbulent waters. He walked all night against the water current and emerged from the cave early the following morning. Nilkanth then proceeded on the shores of the River Kali Gandki.

After trekking and overcoming many obstacles, Nilkanth eventually climbed to a height of 12,500 ft and reached the sacred pilgrim place of Muktinath.



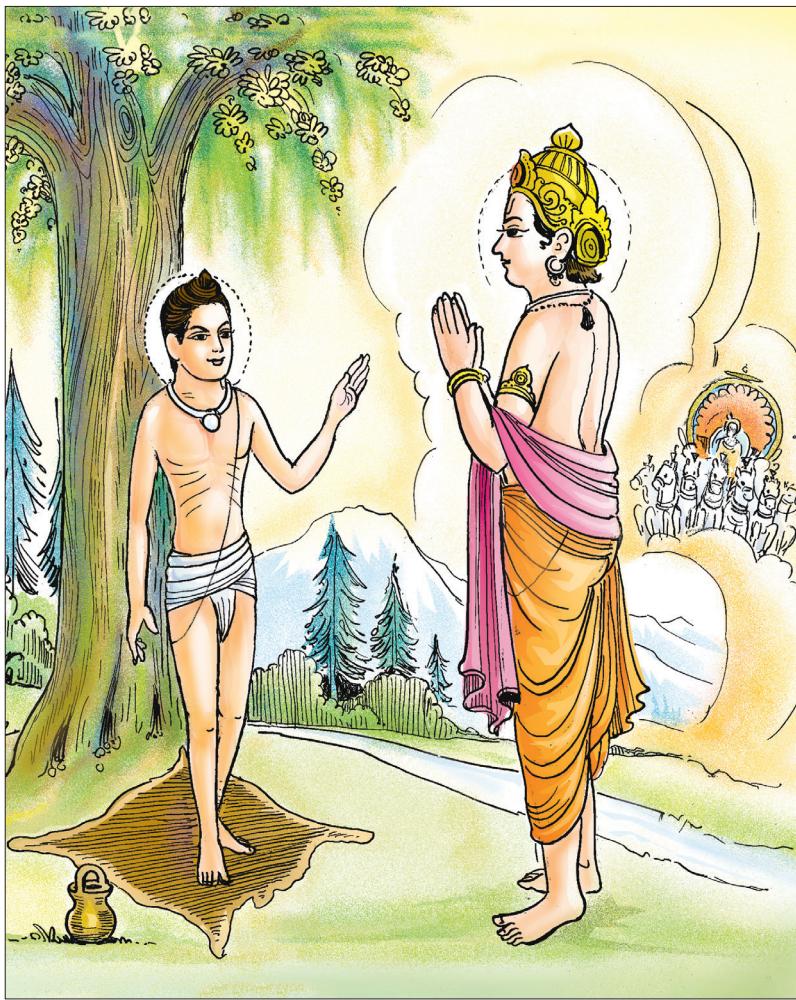
Himalaya shows Nilkanth the way to Pulhashram

14. Intense Austerities in Pulhashram

Nilkanth did the darshan of the *murti* of Muktinath. He selected a place at Pulhashram or Muktinath to perform austerities. Pulhashram was a secluded and an extremely beautiful place, where, Brahmā's son, Pulaha, and King Bharat had performed austerities.

Nilkanth Varni, only 12 years old, began his austerities at the same spot where Bharat had performed his. The spot had since become famous as Bharat Kund. It was the rainy season. The young celibate began his austerities despite lashing rains and cold winds. He held both his hands high and stood on one leg. Over his head was a large knot of matted hair. His body was thin and fair in complexion. He fixed his gaze on the tip of his nose. He was heedless of hunger and thirst, and exposed his body to the elements. The austerities continued unhindered and soon were reflected in the emaciated body of Nilkanth.

Many yogis and *munis* stayed in Pulhashram. They were



Suryanarayan appears before Nilkanth

astounded to see the severity of Nilkanth's austerities. They would come to see him in the morning and evening, but he was engrossed in austerities.

The rigorous austerities exposed every bone in Nilkanth's frail body. His veins were also visible. The once tender body became emaciated.

In this way, Nilkanth spent $2\frac{1}{2}$ months performing intense

austerities. On the morning of 14 November 1793 (Kartik sud 11, Samvat 1850), Suryanarayan, the sun-god, appeared in human form before Nilkanth. Nilkanth bowed to him.

After darshan at Muktinath, Nilkanth departed. Varni was happy at having successfully completed his austerities. His sole purpose for undertaking austerities was to inspire aspirants on to the path of liberation.

With his emaciated body and resplendent form, Varni then crossed high lands and dense jungles on his way to Pokhra.

15. Mohandas Meets Nilkanth

While Nilkanth was walking at a brisk pace through dense forests, a sadhu called Mohandas saw him. He was greatly impressed by Varni's personality. He experienced bliss while in the presence of this young celibate. He was convinced that Nilkanth had extraordinary spiritual powers. He bowed at the feet of Nilkanth and asked, "Brahmachari! I have already lost my way while trekking through the Himalayan foothills. However, at this young age, why are you roaming through this difficult terrain?"

"I am travelling to show the way to the likes of you who are lost," replied Varni.

The sadhu was convinced that Varni would show him the true path and decided to stay with him. The young *brahmachari* permitted him to stay. Nilkanth realized that the sadhu was eager to discover his true self. However, his mind was attracted to worldly things. Someone had presented Nilkanth with an attractive *kamandal*. Mohandas took a fancy for that. Although he did not want it, his mind remained fixed on it even while doing darshan of Nilkanth.

While walking, the two of them came to a river. It had stones of all sizes covered with moss. Mohandas warned Varni, "Be

careful while stepping over the stones. If you slip, the *kamandal* will break.” Nilkanth was really surprised at the concern of the sadhu for a mere *kamandal*. On reaching the opposite bank, Nilkanth dashed the *kamandal* against a boulder and broke it. “What have you done? You have broken a beautiful *kamandal*,” Mohandas cried out.

Nilkanth replied, “Instead of concentrating on God, you have become attached to this mundane object. How then will you be liberated from this world?” A reformed Mohandas touched Varni’s feet.

A few days later, they came across a tall tree from which violet mango-like fruits had fallen on the ground. Nilkanth started eating one. Mohandas, too, took one to eat. “Don’t eat the fruits, they are poisonous,” Varni warned him. “If you eat them you will die.” Mohandas threw away the fruit.

Soon four *bawas* arrived. On seeing Nilkanth eating the fruit, the *bawas* plucked some. Varni told Mohandas, “Tell them not to eat the fruits.” Mohandas told them that they were poisonous and that they would die if they ate them.

“Why then is the *brahmachari* eating them?” the *bawas* questioned sternly.

“Because he is a great person,” Mohandas replied.

“We too are great,” boasted the *bawas*. And so out of sheer arrogance, the *bawas* ate the fruits and died.

Some years later, when Mohandas undertook a pilgrimage to Dwarka, he met Bhagwan Swaminarayan in Saurashtra. He took the saffron *diksha* from Bhagwan Swaminarayan and was named Vrajanand Swami.

16. At the Palace of King Mahadatt

Nilkanth Varni took the route to Pokhra. After walking for some time, he saw Tibet from a distance. It seemed as if he was

in search of some sacred spot. After some time, Nilkanth came to a beautiful town called Butolnagar. He decided to stay on the bank of the river in a beautiful garden after seeking the permission of the owner.

Bawas were camping in the garden. King Mahadatt and his sister, Mayarani, came to the garden in the morning, as per their daily routine. They acknowledged the *bawas* and touched their feet in reverence. The royal brother and sister then came to where Nilkanth was staying. His spiritual glow and emaciated body due to severe austerities convinced them that they were in the presence of an extraordinary soul. Tears appeared in their eyes when they saw the body of the young celibate. They prostrated at Varni's feet and insisted that he stay at their bungalow in the garden. Nilkanth agreed and he was given a special room all for himself. The royal personages visited him every day and the young *brahmachari* would discourse to them on spiritual matters. All this made the *bawas* extremely jealous.

Mahadatt's daughter used to come to the garden to play with her companions. The *bawas* would lustfully look at the princess and her companions. Nilkanth on the other hand would lower his eyes when the princess came to play. The difference in behaviour of the *bawas* and the young *brahmachari* was conveyed to the king by the princess and her companions. The king's reverence for Nilkanth increased even more.

The royal brother and sister implored Varni to come and stay with them in their palace. But Nilkanth refused. He, however, due to their love for him, agreed to eat with them. This daily *seva* cleansed the hearts of the king and his sister. Nilkanth revealed his divine form to Mahadatt and Mayarani. As a result, both the king and his sister were doubly pleased and elated.

Realizing that his mission had been accomplished, Nilkanth made preparations to leave. He took the *mrugcharma*, tied

the Shaligram around his neck and took the *kamandal* in his hand, ready to depart. The king and his family were extremely distressed at this. The king and queen urged, “O Maharaj! You stayed with us for all these days and blessed us with the knowledge of your divinity. Now, all of a sudden, where are you going? Even my daughter and others have taken vows inspired by your presence. How can we possibly live without you?”

Nilkanth told him, “O king! I have to go. Many people who want to attain liberation are waiting for me.”

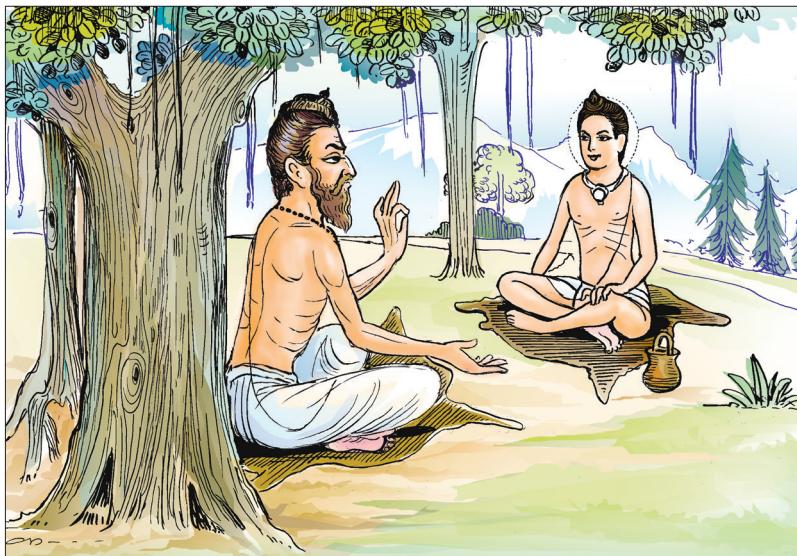
King Mahadatt and his sister, however, insisted that Nilkanth stay. Nilkanth put back his belongings and postponed his departure. Still, in the dead of night, he quietly slipped out of the palace. When the king’s sister came to know of this the following morning, she sent horsemen in search of Nilkanth in different directions. By then, Nilkanth had already covered several kilometres. On catching up with Nilkanth, the horsemen lovingly pleaded with him and brought him back to the palace.

Eventually, through Nilkanth’s discourses the royal brother and his sister were liberated from worldly desires. Nilkanth achieved what he wanted to accomplish before finally departing. After staying with Mahadatt for five months, the *brahmachari* set out to continue his mission.

17. Meeting Gopal Yogi

Nilkanth walked through the Himalayan forests for almost one year. The biting cold, heat, rain, hunger, thirst or fierce animals did not deter him. One evening, he came to a banyan tree. It was a very old tree with branches all around.

Nilkanth saw an old rishi, sitting on his deer-skin spread on a stone slab under the banyan tree, engrossed in meditation. One of his hands rested on a small staff and the other on his knee. He was sitting in the *swastik* posture. Automatically his



Gopal Yogi teaches yoga to Nilkanth Varni

eyes opened and his attention was drawn towards Nilkanth. A wave of devotion filled his heart. He ran towards Nilkanth and embraced him.

The rishi was overjoyed when he saw the young celibate. He shed tears of joy and said, "Bhagwan! You kept me waiting for a long time." He was convinced that Purushottam Narayan himself has come to give him darshan. The rishi said, "My name is Gopal Yogi. My mind has never been drawn to anyone and my eyes have never opened while in meditation. Today, however, as soon as you came near this tree, my eyes opened. My mind and eyes were enticed by you. Therefore, O Bal Yogi ! Tell me who you are, I have attained perfection in ashtanga yoga. I will teach you yoga, but first please tell me about yourself."

Nilkanth replied, "I am Parabrahma, beyond the *atma*, and Akshar or Brahma. From the worldly viewpoint, however, I am the son of a Brahmin. I have been travelling through forests for three years since I left my home. I have performed severe austerities for over two months and have propitiated

Suryanarayan. I aspire to accomplish ashtanga yoga. People call me by the name of Nilkanth Varni. Please accept me as your disciple and teach me yoga."

Gopal Yogi was very pleased with this reply. He accepted Nilkanth's request and taught him yoga every morning and evening. Gradually Nilkanth mastered the science of ashtanga yoga – *yam, niyam, asan, pratyahar, pranayam, dharana, dhyān* and *samadhi*. He also attained the eight *siddhis*. He also learnt various yogic exercises such as *kunjar, dhoti, neti* and *basti*. In addition, he mastered the various *vidyas* such as *brahmavidya, akshividya* and *daharvidya*. He spent one year with Gopal Yogi to master the theory and practice of yoga, a feat which other yogis would not be able to accomplish in a whole lifetime.

Nilkanth also served Gopal Yogi with devotion. Gopal Yogi taught yoga to Nilkanth, who in turn imparted to Gopal Yogi the knowledge of his own self. He imparted *brahmagnan*. He gave Gopal Yogi the darshan of Narayan in his own self and liberated his soul. After performing the crematory rites of Gopal Yogi, Nilkanth resumed his journey.

18. Blesses the King of Nepal

After crossing mountains and forests, Nilkanth reached Kathmandu in Nepal in 1796 CE. Prithvi Narayan Sahah's grandson, Rana Bahadur, was the king. His grandfather had expanded the Gorkha kingdom and made Kathmandu the capital. Nilkanth came to Kathmandu to have darshan of the Pashupatinath Mandir.

The king, Rana Bahadur, was suffering from a chronic disease. He had tried many treatments to find a cure, but had not succeeded. He even sought the assistance of *bawas*, *sadhus*, *Brahmins*, scholars, priests and others. Unfortunately, he was not to keep compassion. Whoever tried to cure the king and

failed would be imprisoned by him and subject to all sorts of tortures. Therefore, sadhus avoided coming to Kathmandu.

When Nilkanth arrived in Kathmandu a band of *bawas* accompanied him. At first, they were reluctant to step foot in Kathmandu because of the king's condition and his wicked nature. When the *bawas* told Varni not to go, he told them, "A sadhu should never be afraid." On Varni's assurance, the *bawas* entered Kathmandu. As soon as the king came to know of their arrival, he sent his man to call the mahant. The mahant took the young *brabmachari* with him to the king. The monarch received them with due honours in his palace.

The king requested Varni to find a cure for his disease. The young celibate replied, "Your disease is willed by your karmas and nothing can cure it. No one can change what God has determined. Therefore, believe whatever misery and pain that comes to you as your fate. Bear it with patience and offer prayers to God. Your wilful ways will not end your misery. Instead you will invite further bondage through such karmas." On hearing the soothing message of the young sadhu, the king's inner eye opened. He asked for forgiveness and requested Varni to cure him.

The compassionate Nilkanth asked for water and gave a little to the king to drink. The king faithfully drank the consecrated water. Soon, by the wish of Nilkanth, his stomach pains subsided. The king was tremendously impressed by Nilkanth. He told Varni to ask for something in return. Nilkanth said, "If you want to do a little *seva*, then I have only one demand to make. Please release all the imprisoned sadhus." The king was greatly pleased by Varni's selflessness and immediately released all the imprisoned sadhus. Nilkanth was pleased and blessed the king.

Nilkanth then headed north towards Tibet, where he visited Buddhist monasteries and cast a glance towards China. He then returned to Nepal and visited Adivarah *tirth* before reaching Sirpur.

19. Liberates a Telangi Brahmin

Nilkanth resided at a garden in Sirpur. Some unruly *bawas* had made themselves comfortable at the place and had been camping there for a long time. At that time, Sirpur was ruled by a virtuous king called Siddhavallabh. The king was greatly impressed by the darshan of Nilkanth. The king asked Varni to stay in his palace, but Nilkanth refused. The king arranged for a *brahmachari* called Gopaldas to serve Nilkanth.

Gopaldas served the young celibate with devotion. He would prepare and offer different food dishes each day. The king would meet Nilkanth daily and sit on a mat to listen to his discourses.

The *bawas* who were camping in the garden were devotees of the goddess Bhairav and ghosts. They frightened people by resorting to hocus-pocus, muttering mantras and tying charmed threads, casting charmed grains of *adad*, and harrassing them with their occult powers or by hypnosis. The *bawas* burned with jealousy because of the king's reverence for Nilkanth.

One day, because of their jealousy for Nilkanth, a *bawa* cast a spell on Gopaldas and made him unconscious. He then told the king, "Now you tell your Varni, whom you worship, to revive him if he has the powers." Nilkanth merely passed his hand over the unconscious Gopaldas, who immediately got up.

Gopaldas sat at Nilkanth's feet. The *bawas* were greatly surprised and became speechless with wonder. Some approached Varni to become his followers. This displeased some of the other *bawas*, and thus they cast spells on them. In turn, some other *bawas* cast spells on them. Consequently some of them fainted. Nilkanth revived all of them through his powers and told them to lead virtuous lives.

At that time, a Telangi Brahmin had come to in Sirpur. He was very greedy. Out of avarice, he had acquired an elephant and a Kal Purush as a gift from the king. The Brahmin had been very

handsome and of fair complexion. However, when he accepted the gift out of greed, his whole body turned black and ugly. All the Brahmins began to censure and ridicule him. The Telangi Brahmin, therefore, became very unhappy and cried in despair.

With tears in his eyes, he came to Nilkanth and prostrated at his feet. He confessed his greed. Nilkanth felt pity for him. He placed his hand on the Brahmin's head and blessed him. The Brahmin became fair-complexioned. He bowed to Nilkanth and became his disciple. Nilkanth guided him to give up greed. At this, King Siddhavallabh developed more affection and respect for Nilkanth. The *bramachari* inspired the glory of his divine form in the king's heart. As he departed, the king was pained. Nilkanth told him, "If you cherish my form in your heart, I will always be with you."

After celebrating the Annakut and Kartik Purnima festivals, Nilkanth left Sirpur and headed towards Assam.

20. Defeat of Pibek

From Sirpur, Nilkanth arrived at the pilgrim place of Kamakshi. There was a large Kamakshi mandir in the town. As he walked through, it appeared as if the young celibate, with his diminutive form, had cast a spell on people all around. Several aspirants were greatly attracted to his personality. This incited jealousy in the minds of the *bawas* who felt that their hold on people would weaken because of the young sadhu. They incited a wicked Brahmin called Pibek, a tantric practitioner, to challenge and defeat Nilkanth.

Earlier in his life, Pibek had been very virtuous. However, once he got into bad company, he became vicious and corrupt. He began to eat meat and fish, and drank bhang and liquor. He used to meditate for the appeasement of ghosts. He went to cremation grounds at night to learn black magic. He used

abusive language and frightened people. He harassed them by practising hocus-pocus and offering them charms to wear. With his forehead besmeared with large vermillion marks, with a large tuft of hair, his eyes large and bloodshot and physique as strong as that of a wrestler, he used to threaten and intimidate one and all. He extorted money from everyone. He forced sadhus, *jogis* and *jatis* to forsake their religious faiths by breaking their *kanthis* and forcibly made them his disciples. He also made them worship ghosts.

Nilkanth had lodged in a garden outside the town of Kamakshi. Some *siddha* yogis were also camping in the same garden. Pibek came to the garden to defeat Nilkanth. He was accompanied by several half-naked men and women who were without shame. They came to the garden dancing weirdly. He saw many *siddha* yogis sitting there. Enlarging his bloodshot eyeballs, Pibek rushed towards the yogis.

On seeing Pibek, the yogis began to tremble as they were very afraid of him. The yogis got up and were about to leave. Nilkanth told them in a quiet tone, “Why are you afraid of this man who worships evil? Without Paramatma’s powers nobody in this universe can kill anyone. Don’t be afraid. Don’t even look at him.”

Pibek was enraged by Nilkanth’s calm composure. People had warned Varni of Pibek’s powers and advised him not to infuriate the man. Nilkanth, however, was calm and resolute. Pibek then uttered some mantra and threw *adad* grains on a banyan tree. The tree withered away instantly. The *bawas’* fright increased further. They put their hands on their *kanthis* and tried to break them.

Nilkanth urged, “Do not rub off your *tilak* marks. Do not break your Vaishnavi *kanthis*. It would be sinful if you break the Vaishnavi *kanthis* of tulsi beads. Do not be afraid of Pibek at all. Let him practise his devilry first on me. If something happens

to me, then you surrender to him.” Nilkanth then challenged the wicked Brahmin.

Pibek was thoroughly roused on hearing this. He roared, “Your time has come.”

Nilkanth replied calmly, “Do what you can. I am sitting here.” Nilkanth was sitting cross-legged in front of Pibek. Behind him, all the yogis sat down.

In order to frighten Nilkanth, Pibek muttered some mantras and threw a handful of *adad* grains on the ground with great force. Clouds of smoke emerged from that spot. Ghosts appeared from the smoke, but could not go near Nilkanth and stood at a short distance from him. Pibek muttered numerous mantras, but the ghosts did not move towards Nilkanth. On the contrary, they began to beat Pibek with their tridents and crashed him to the ground. Pibek started bleeding from his mouth. This incensed him all the more and he invoked the presence of Hanumanji. When Hanumanji appeared, he struck a blow with his fist on Pibek’s head. He beat Pibek so severely that he vomited blood and fell unconscious to the ground with a thud like a crashing tree.

On seeing this, some of Pibek’s disciples and relatives prayed to Nilkanth to revive him and bring him back to life. Nilkanth felt pity for them. He looked at Pibek, who soon regained consciousness. His whole body was aching and he could not speak. Not a single bone was intact as his body had been beaten to pulp. With great difficulty, he dragged himself to where Nilkanth was sitting and caught hold of his feet in abject surrender. He begged for forgiveness. Everyone was surprised at this change of Pibek’s heart.

Nilkanth said, “Pibek, he who is a true *siddha* never frightens others. He who has sought refuge in Paramatma is not afraid of anything. Your magical powers have been reduced to ashes by the powers of Paramatma.”

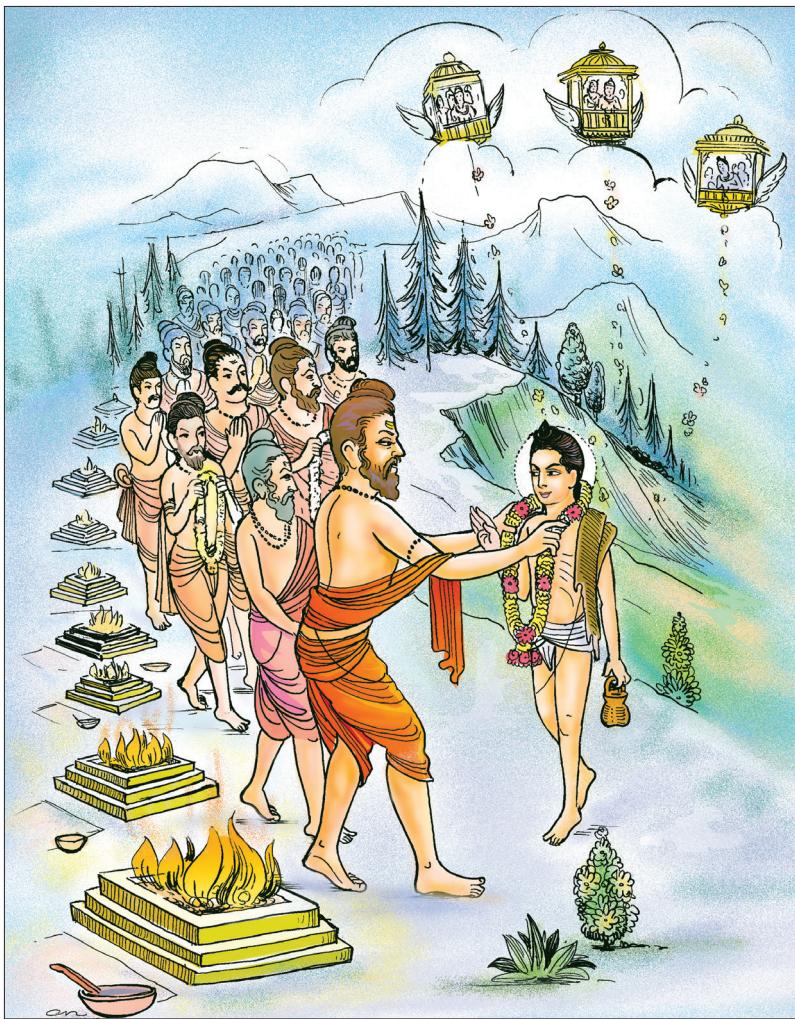
Nilkanth then put his hand on Pibek's head. Pibek experienced divine bliss. Nilkanth initiated him into the Vaishnav fold and asked him to adopt moral and peaceful ways. Pibek's disciples were also administered the Vaishnav *mantra* and made to wear the tulsi *kanthi* and put on the *tilak*. Nilkanth blessed them all in this way. Having uplifted them from their evil ways, he continued his journey eastwards.

21. Uplift of 900,000 Yogis

Proceeding from Kamakshi, Nilkanth approached Mount Navlakha¹. Nine hundred thousand yogis were residing on this mountain. They were all *siddha* yogis and had been performing austerities for thousands of years. They had resplendent forms while praying to God which could not be seen by ordinary mortals. Every morning, they bathed, performed *yagnas* and performed *sandhya*. Each one of them had a separate water-cistern to bathe in and a *yagna kund* for performing rituals. Thus there were 900,000 small water cisterns and 900,000 *yagna* altars. Day and night the *siddhas* remained engrossed in prayers to God. They were emaciated. They had thick, matted hair on their heads and wore long beards, white as cotton-wool.

One morning, when all the *siddhas* were seated in meditation, a divine voice was heard from the sky. In a sweet tone, it said, "Purushottam Narayan, for whose darshan you have been performing austerities for years, will himself come and give you his darshan. He is manifest now on this earth. He will himself give his darshan to you and liberate you all."

1. According to the Sampradaya's shastras, it seems as if refers a huge mountain range. As 900,000 yogis were residing on it, it has become popular as Mount Navlakha in the Sampradaya. Geographically, however, no such name is found on the map. There is a possibility of it being in eastern India in the state of Meghalaya, near Shillong. Since Nilkanth descended from the Navlakha mountain to arrive straight in Balwakund, there is good reason for inferring that the mountain ranges could be somewhere between Bangladesh, and the states of Mizoram and Tripura.



Nilkanth Varni on Mount Navalakha

On hearing the heavenly voice, the *siddhas* were exhilarated. They all felt happy. Peace pervaded their hearts. Engulfed in joy, the *siddhas* started preparations for the reception of Nilkanth. Some began to collect fruits, while others began to weave garlands of flowers for him.

Continuing his *vicharan*, Nilkanth arrived at the foot of Mount Navalakha. He started climbing the mountain. Again

the *siddhas* heard the heavenly voice, “Tomorrow at dawn you will all have the darshan of Purushottam Narayan in the form of Nilkanth Varni. Through his darshan alone, you will all attain liberation and reach Akshardham.”

It was dawn. Nilkanth Varni reached the top of the mountain. The yogis experienced bliss on having his darshan. They all honoured him, giving him a warm welcome by placing garlands around his neck. The deities showered flowers from the sky. The whole atmosphere was sanctified by the chanting of Vedic verses.

Nilkanth assumed 900,000 forms. He offered oblations at every *yagna* altar. He drank water from every cistern and thus consecrated the water. The 900,000 yogis kept Nilkanth with them for three days and pleased him with their *seva*. They sang praises of Nilkanth from the core of their hearts.

They all offered prayers, “O Nilkanth! As you have given us your darshan, kindly be merciful and reside permanently in our hearts. It is our humble request, O Lord of Akshar, that your *murti* never disappears from our hearts.” On hearing this prayer Nilkanth said, “So be it.” The yogis then bade him farewell with heavy hearts.

Nilkanth walked on. On the way, he came to Balwakund. Flames eternally come out from the waters of this spa and from the stones nearby. Sanctifying the birthplace of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Navdweep and visiting Shantipur, the seat of the Gaudiya sect, Nilkanth reached Gangasagar, the confluence of River Ganga and the sea. He bathed there and spent three days at the Makar Sankranti festival. He then crossed the sea by boat to reach Kapil Ashram.

22. Religious Preaching

Kapil Ashram, where Kapil Muni had performed austerities for several years, was a beautiful, secluded spot. Its rural setting

was ideal for performing austerities. Even today, many genuine aspirants have the darshan of Kapil Muni, who propounded the Sankhya philosophy. On Nilkanth's arrival, Kapil Muni came in person to welcome him. The *brahmachari* liked the ashram and he decided to meditate there.

After bathing, the young celibate sat in *dhyan*. This lasted for six days. So absorbed was he that it made the devas anxious. They were terribly upset. They felt that with Nilkanth immersed in *dhyan*, the aim of his earthly mission to root out unrighteousness and evil on this earth would be forgotten. It seemed as if Mother Earth was praying before him to relieve her of her burden of sin.

After six days, Nilkanth opened his eyes. He gave a firm commitment to re-establish dharma on this earth. He then bid farewell to the place.

Nilkanth then travelled towards the south. One evening, he reached a village. A few persons were sitting in the village square. Nilkanth asked them, "Is there any place in your village for *jogis* and *jatis* to stay?"

One of the villagers replied, "There is a Ramji mandir for mendicants opposite the house of the village Bania. All sadhus and ascetics are allowed to stay there. You may also go and stay there."

Nilkanth reached the Ramji mandir. The *bawas* gave him a place to stay. After bathing, Nilkanth sat in the courtyard of the mandir.

In the evening, *arti* was performed in the mandir. Thereafter, the evening discourse began. Men and women came from the village and gathered to listen. Nilkanth did not like that the men and women sat together in the mandir. When the recital was over, people began to disperse after touching the feet of the *bawas*. Some women came to touch the feet of Nilkanth also, but he got up and returned to his room. Some women then

began to massage the feet of the *bawas* and to render other *seva* to them. Nilkanth did not like this either. He admonished the *bawas*, “You give spiritual discourses, but why don’t you follow dharma? A sadhu cannot directly deliver religious discourses to women. A sadhu who has renounced the world should renounce women and wealth.”

On hearing these words, the *bawas* became very angry and asked, “Who are you, little kid, to advise us? Get out of here; otherwise we will beat you and drive you out.”

Nilkanth immediately disappeared. The *bawas* wondered as to how the boy could have disappeared through closed doors. Nilkanth reappeared, seated on the verandah, at the Bania’s house opposite the mandir.

At that time Hanumanji suddenly appeared and beat the *bawas* before instructing Nilkanth to enter the mandir.

The *bawas* open the mandir doors, went to the verandah of the Bania’s house, and apologized to Nilkanth. The *bawas* said, “We are sorry we could not recognize you. Now we know that you are the manifest form of God.”

Nilkanth forgave them all. The *bawas* then respectfully brought Nilkanth back to the mandir. Nilkanth stayed for two more days and gave a code of moral conduct to all the *bawas* before setting out on his onward journey.

23. Nilkanth at the House of Jairamdas

As he was walking constantly, Nilkanth naturally felt fatigued. One evening, the sun was about to set. A village was visible at a short distance and the young celibate walked towards it.

There were two *bawas* in the village. One of them was the head of the local mandir and the other a householder-*bawa*.

Nilkanth stayed at the mandir for the night. The head of the mandir experienced peace in the presence of Nilkanth and thus requested him to stay for two to three more days.

The householder-*bawa* had a son and two daughters. Both the sisters used to go to the mandir to learn Tulsi Ramayan from this *bawa*. The *bawa* would read and explain the Ramayan to them daily every morning and evening. Whenever the girls did not follow anything, they would ask the *bawa* its meaning. He would explain to them according to his knowledge. If the question was difficult, he would give a confusing answer. Nilkanth heard all this silently.

One day when the *bawa* was explaining the Ramayan, the girls asked a question which baffled the *bawa*. He did not know the answer. Nilkanth intervened and asked the *bawa* if he could help to give the explanation. The *bawa* agreed. Nilkanth answered several questions one by one. The girls went home pleased with the answers.

On reaching home, they related the whole incident to their parents and remarked, "Nilkanth is a child celibate. He is very brilliant. He is God himself. Let us invite him to our house for dinner." The father was pleased to hear this. He went to the mandir. With great persuasion, he brought Nilkanth to dine at his Krishna mandir. The wife of the Brahmin was a very devout woman. She prepared and served delicious food, as well as milk, cream, butter, curds and sugar to Nilkanth.

When Nilkanth finished eating, the Brahmin requested him to stay at his house, saying, "This is my son Jairamdas. I want him to serve you." He repeated this request several times. Responding to the deep feelings of the Brahmin and his wife, Nilkanth stayed at their house for a few days. Pleased with their devotion, Nilkanth showed them his divine form.

24. Liberation of a Bear

Jairamdas became extremely fond of Nilkanth and was always ready to serve him with great devotion day and night. Every morning and evening, Nilkanth would teach him the shastras and yoga. Every day Jairam would bring lotus fruits for the young *brāhmaṇḍa*. One day, Nilkanth asked, "Jairam, where do you get these lotus fruits from?" Jairam replied, "There is a lake. My friend Krishna Tamboli and I get the lotus fruits from that lake."

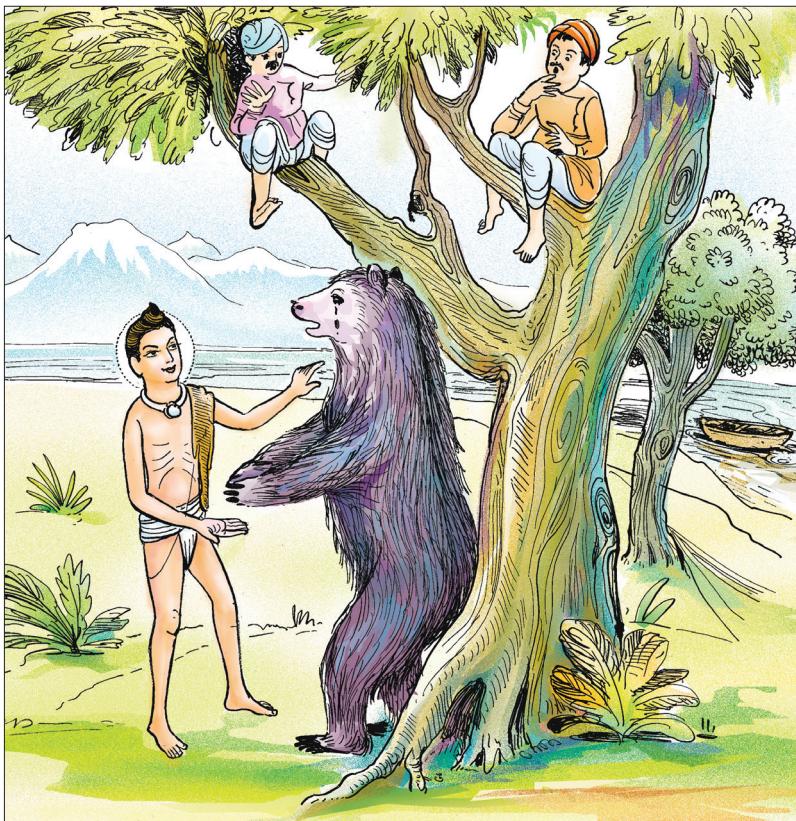
Nilkanth asked, "Is that so? Will you show me the lake? I want to eat fresh lotus-fruits. Come, let us sail in the lake and enjoy it there." Jairam was very happy and agreed to the proposal.

The sun was setting. Nilkanth and Jairamdas reached the shore of the lake. Krishna Tamboli kept a raft ready. The three of them got onto the raft and Jairamdas began rowing. A cool breeze was blowing. Tamboli plucked lotus plants from the water and offered the fruits to Nilkanth, while talking.

Tamboli said, "Varniraj! Do you see those trees on the opposite shore? The forest there is full of ferocious animals. At night, the roar of lions and tigers can be heard even from my house. No one ever ventures out there." Tamboli went on talking while Nilkanth listened to him quietly. After some time, Nilkanth said, "Give me the oar. Let me steer the raft." With these words, he took the oar from Jairam and began to row the raft.

Soon the wind changed direction. Nilkanth increased the speed of the raft which began to sail swiftly towards the opposite shore. Krishna Tamboli and Jairamdas held their breath because they were heading for the dangerous forest. In a short while, they reached the opposite shore. Nilkanth got out and onto the shore. Jairam shouted, "Nilkanth! Don't go there."

Tamboli said, "Varniraj, it is not safe to go into the forest.



Nilkanth blesses and liberates Jambuvan

There is great danger from wild animals. Besides, it being evening time, the beasts will soon come to the lake to drink water." But Nilkanth would not listen. Although they did not wish to, Jairam and Krishna Tamboli got off the raft. Nilkanth began walking towards the forest.

As Tamboli shouted not to advance further, Nilkanth went deeper into the forest. The roar of wild animals made the boys' hearts throb with fear. Suddenly, they heard loud screams coming from a distance. Tamboli and Jairamdas began to tremble. The dry leaves on the ground rustled. The birds flew from the tree branches. Two monkeys noisily climbed up to reach the higher branches of the trees. There was some

commotion in the opposite thicket. Suddenly, a ferocious, black bear came charging towards Nilkanth.

“Nilkanth,” cried Tamboli and Jairam, as they climbed up a tree. Their hearts throbbed vigorously, beads of perspiration formed on their foreheads and their throats went dry. Both sat on the tree like statues. They thought that the bear would tear Nilkanth to pieces. At that time, Nilkanth cast a glance at the bear and it calmed down. It stood on its hind legs, came near Nilkanth, bent down and bowed to him. Tears began to roll down its cheeks. Nilkanth helped the bear stand up, blessed it and said, “You may go.” The bear bowed again to Nilkanth and disappeared into the thicket.

Nilkanth shouted for Tamboli. Tamboli and Jairamdas came down from the tree, still trembling. Nilkanth said, “Let us go home.”

All three returned to the shore, got on the raft and began to row speedily. Then, Tamboli asked Nilkanth, “Varniraj! How is it that the bear became quiet when it came to you? Why was it weeping? Who was it? Why did it bow to you before it returned?”

Nilkanth explained, “Its name is Jambuvan. It had served Shri Krishna Bhagwan. However, because of doubts it had been wandering hither and thither. Now it will be liberated. It will shed its body and be born as a devotee, and will then come into my contact to attain Akshardham.” Jairamdas and Krishna Tamboli were greatly surprised. They soon arrived at the opposite shore of the lake.

Tamboli escorted Nilkanth upto the house of Jairam. Both Jairam and Tamboli related the story of the bear to members of their respective families and ended by revealing, “Nilkanth is Bhagwan himself.”

This story soon spread throughout the village and also to nearby villages. Large crowds of people flocked to the home of Jairam every morning and evening for the darshan of Nilkanth who became renowned all around.

25. Nilkanth Leaves Jairam's House

It was early morning. The day had not yet dawned. Nilkanth awoke and sat up. He thought that his mission with Jairamdas, his family and the bear was over. So, he decided to leave. He looked around. Everybody was fast asleep. Gently, he took his *kamandal* and went to the door. The door opened automatically. Nilkanth left the house of Jairamdas and walked away.

When the day dawned. Jairam's mother got up and immediately noticed that Nilkanth was not there. She first thought that Nilkanth might have perhaps gone to bathe. She sent someone in search of him at the lake, but Nilkanth was not there either. Jairam and his father went around every street of the village to search for him. They searched in the village square, the bazaar, the forest, the garden, but they could not find him anywhere. Jairam's parents became sad and they refused to eat anything. The whole village wore a forlorn look. Everyone wondered, "Have we done anything wrong? Why has he left us like this?"

Jairam's mother felt extremely uneasy and told him to get ready to search for Nilkanth. She gave him some food and money for the journey and said, "Go and search for Nilkanth. Bring him back from wherever he is. I cannot live without him. Beg for his pardon if we have made any mistakes, but bring him back. Nilkanth is our God."

Soon, Jairamdas left in search of Nilkanth.

26. Jairam's Reunion with Nilkanth

When Nilkanth was briskly walking in the direction of Jagannathpuri, he heard someone calling, "O Nilkanth Varni." He turned back to see who was calling him.

It was Jairamdas who had come running, panting and

shouting. After 20 days of searching he had at last found Nilkanth. Seeing Jairam, Nilkanth stopped. Jairamdas fell at the feet of Nilkanth. He beseeched, "O Brahmachariji! Please forgive us of our flaws. O kind one, please excuse our mistakes. Come back to our house. I will not allow you to proceed any further. My parents are in mourning. They have stopped eating. They are crying all day long. The whole village is sad. My sisters and Krishna Tamboli have become almost mad. Please hurry up and return to my house. I will not leave you alone." Nilkanth quietened Jairam and gave him guidance. It was only then that Jairam calmed down. He said, "Jairam, please come with me on a pilgrimage to Jagannathpuri."

Because Jairamdas had a lot of affection for his family, he was hesitant at first. Still, he agreed to accompany Nilkanth to Jagannathpuri. Whilst travelling through a dense forest Jairamdas experienced the divinity of Nilkanth. They crossed the sea and reached Bhubaneshwar, where they had darshan of Mahadev. After three days, they reached Janakpur, near Jagannathpuri.

27. Nilkanth in Jagannathpuri

Nilkanth arrived on the banks of Lake Indradumyna. The famous mandir of Jagannathpuri is only a couple of kilometres from Lake Indradumyna.

Jagannathpuri is a very holy pilgrim place. A large mandir has been built there on the sacred ashes of Shri Krishna Bhagwan. Thousands of pilgrims throng to this place for daily darshan. Nilkanth used to come for the darshan of the deity, Jagannathji, every day and sit in meditation before the Garud pillar in the mandir. He would listen to the discourse on the Shrimad Bhagvat with devotion.

The priest was happy to have Nilkanth's darshan. He would

give him the food offered to Shri Jagannathji. Each day, the young *brahmachari* would bathe in the sea and sit in meditation under a banyan tree outside the mandir. He would go to Chandan Sarovar to perform yoga. People were greatly attracted by his lofty spiritual state. It soon became known that a great young *brahmachari* had arrived in Puri. The king came to know of this and he felt blessed by Nilkanth's darshan. He visited Varni daily to listen to his discourses and learn the essence of spirituality. On seeing the extraordinary powers of Nilkanth, the king accepted him as his guru.

There was, however, much trouble from evil people. A large band of *bawas* lived by Lake Indradumyna. They deceived the masses, indulged in illicit sex and remained intoxicated in addictions. They wielded weapons and quarrelled with each other, and burned with envy on seeing the devotion of the king, pilgrims and the local people towards Nilkanth.

Soon the festival of Rath Yatra was to be celebrated in Jagannathpuri. This festival is celebrated yearly by pulling the chariot with the *murtis* of the deities in it. Even the king pulls the chariot on this day. The king thus placed Nilkanth on a beautifully decorated chariot, which he and his citizens pulled through the streets of Jagannathpuri. On seeing this, the *bawas* were filled with hate and anger.

One day, Nilkanth was meditating on the banks of Lake Indradumyna. A *bawa* came and shook him, "Hey boy! Go and pluck some spinach leaves."

Nilkanth, however, did not wish to do so.

The *bawa* ordered him again, "Go and pluck some spinach leaves."

Nilkanth replied, "Since there is a *jiva* in it, I will not pluck it." The *bawa* became terribly angry at Nilkanth's answer. He unsheathed his sword and rushed to strike Varni. But Nilkanth remained unruffled.



The *bawas* started fighting amongst themselves

Jairamdas was in Nilkanth's *seva*. On seeing this, he started screaming with fright. The sudden commotion attracted the attention of other *bawas*. They came running to the spot and stood in defence of Nilkanth. Soon there were two opposing factions. At the sound of trumpets and drums, a battle began. By then Jairamdas had rushed to the city of Jagannathpuri and announced, "Help, help! Nilkanth's life is in danger."

When the king came to hear of this, he immediately led his armed soldiers to attack the *bawas*, and a fierce battle ensued. Thousands of *bawas* were killed and those that survived ran away.

The king came to Nilkanth. The young *brahmachari* was still absorbed in meditation. When Nilkanth awoke, the king requested him to come to stay in his palace. Varni, however, refused. Nilkanth blessed the king and departed from Janakpur and Jagannathpuri. Nilkanth had stayed there for ten months and perceived the devotion and deception of the priest of Jagannath mandir. Due to Nilkanth's stay, righteousness prevailed and evil was destroyed.

28. Destruction of Asuras in Manaspur

Nilkanth came to Manaspur. He stayed on its outskirts in the king's garden. The gardener used to weave garlands of flowers every morning and evening, and place them around the *brāhmaṇḍari*'s neck. He also offered him fresh fruits and food.

On hearing the greatness of Nilkanth from the gardener, the king, Satradharma, went to the garden for his darshan. The darshan gave peace of mind to the king. Thereafter, accompanied by his queen, he used to go every day to hear the sermons of Nilkanth. One day Nilkanth described to them the importance of worshipping Vishnu and Shaligram. The king, therefore, wished to own a Shaligram.

A group of ignorant sadhus was camping in the garden. The king approached the mahant for a Shaligram. The mahant was infuriated and reacted, "Is it something to be asked for? Do you know that you have to perform its proper puja daily?"

The king had already noticed how the senseless *bawas* performed puja. He, however, kept quiet. He came and told everything to Nilkanth. The next day Jairamdas was directed by Nilkanth to approach the mahant for a Shaligram. The latter was terribly annoyed and picked up his trident to threaten Jairamdas. Jairamdas reported the matter to Nilkanth.

That night, all the Shaligrams belonging to the *bawas* fell into the River Gandki as willed by Nilkanth. The following day, the mahant launched a vigorous search, but to no avail. The mahant thought that either the king had stolen the Shaligrams or Nilkanth's attendant, Jairamdas, had taken them away. Thus the *bawas* were angry with Nilkanth.

Since Jairamdas had gone out, the mahant and the *bawas* thought it was a golden opportunity to kill Nilkanth. They started pelting stones at him. However, not a single stone

hit him. Meanwhile Jairamdas returned. He was frightened by the scene and immediately rushed to the king.

On hearing of the incident, the king and his soldiers rushed to the garden. Fighting broke out between the king's troops and the *bawas*. The *bawas* were all killed in the conflict. Nilkanth revealed his true divine form to the king and bade him farewell. On the way, Nilkanth preached to Jairam. He asked Jairam to become a sadhu. Jairam, however, would not listen. "Return to my house. My parents are waiting for you," was all that he could say.

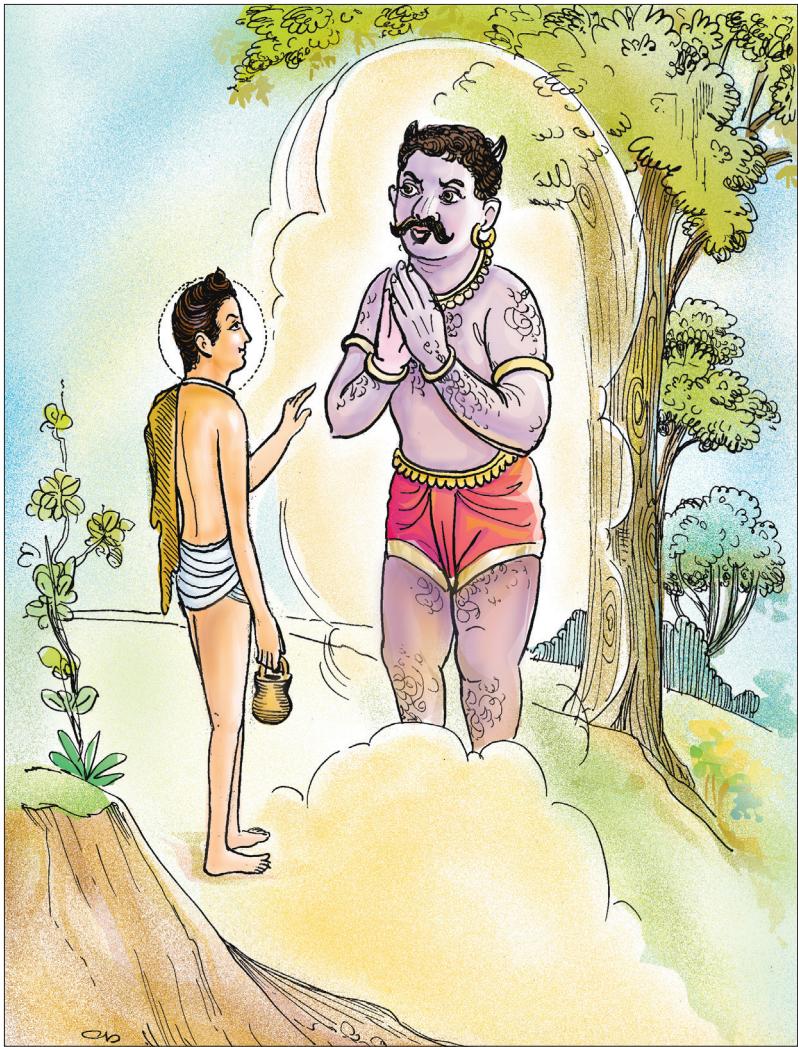
In the end, Nilkanth told Jairam to return home. He told Jairam, "If you are in sorrow, remember me. If you want to become a sadhu in the future come searching for me in Kathiawad and I will meet you there."

Jairam bowed at Nilkanth's feet, and with a sad heart, set out for home. Nilkanth took the route south to Rameshwar and proceeded towards Venkatadri.

29. Liberation of Rata Bashiya

Nilkanth walked on. On the way he came across a thick forest. The forest was pitch dark even during the day, as the light of the sun could not penetrate through the trees. Nilkanth walked through the forest. In the midst of a narrow meandering path in the forest, there lay a demon, like a python. His snore could be heard from a distance. It was so loud that it frightened the people.

As Nilkanth was walking along the path, he came near the demon and kicked his head. The demon at once woke up, stood on his legs and roared, "Who are you?" On seeing Nilkanth, however, he immediately bowed to him and with folded hands prayed, "O God, please liberate me. I have been reduced to this wretched state by the curse of a Brahmin."



"Today your gracious foot has touched my head. This will uplift me."

He then began to relate his story, "I was a pious and religious king of the Telang region. Two Brahmins named Jaidev and Mukunddev resided in my kingdom. Both were learned, powerful and had high achievements to their credit. The one-year-old daughter of Jaidev was engaged to the three-year-old son of Mukunddev. The daughter grew up and so did the son.

Unexpectedly, Mukunddev's son was afflicted with smallpox and he became blind. Hence, Jaidev broke off the engagement of his daughter to the son of Mukunddev. He returned all the customary gifts of clothes and ornaments. However, Mukunddev got very angry and came to me for justice. I studied the relevant shastras and pronounced my judgement, 'In the event that either the bride or the bridegroom become disabled, the engagement can be broken off.'

"Hearing this judgement of mine, Mukunddev was enraged. He said to me, 'Family tradition and customs are more important than the shastras. You must, therefore, call upon the bride's father to get her married to my son.' I firmly replied to him that I could not pronounce a judgement contrary to the commands of the shastras.

"So Mukunddev cursed me indignantly, 'You will become a demon within nine months.' On hearing this, Jaidev, taking my side, gave me a boon, 'Don't worry about the curse; God himself will meet you. You will have the privilege of his *seva* and a place in his divine abode.' Within nine months, I died. Since then, I have been living here as a demon. I eat whatever birds or animals I can get hold of. Once, I could not get anything to eat for seven days. At that time, a young Brahmin was passing through the forest. I caught hold of him and was about to devour him when he spoke, 'I am the only source of livelihood to my old parents and two sisters. I am soon going to arrange the engagement of my sisters, so please let me go. If you do not let me go, you will have to lie here inert like a python.'

"I did not listen to him and devoured him. Since then, I have been lying in this forest like an inert, lazy python. Today, your gracious foot has touched my head. This will uplift me." With these words, the demon fell at the feet of Nilkanth.

Nilkanth blessed him, "You will attain liberation. You will be reborn in Kathiawad and will be associated with me and

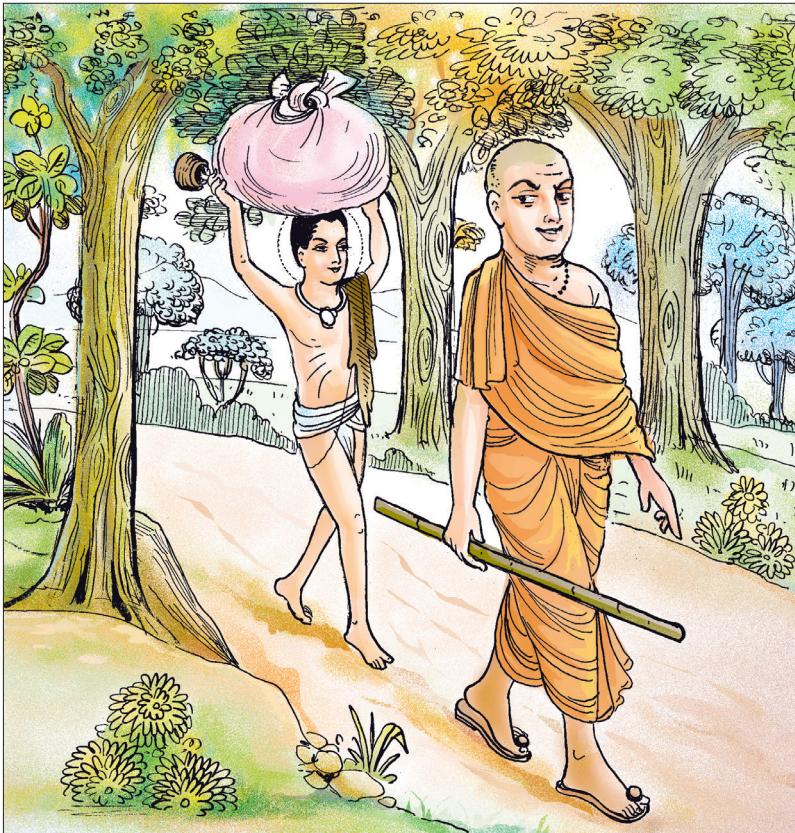
render *seva* to me. You will get your ultimate deliverance and attain my Akshardham.”

After blessing the demon in this way, Nilkanth proceeded. With this, the demon shed his mortal body. In accordance with the blessings of Nilkanth, he was subsequently reborn in the Kathi community and family of Bashiya in the village of Jetpur in Sorath. He was named Rata. People called him Rata Bashiya. He served Bhagwan Swaminarayan, and was deeply devoted to him. He inspired faith amongst the people by relating the story of his previous birth. Shriji Maharaj also had much affection for him.

30. Ungrateful Sevakram

From Venkatadri, Nilkanth took the path to Kanchipuram. He met a sadhu called Sevakram on the way. He had studied the Shrimad Bhagvat and was a pundit in Sanskrit. Nilkanth was exhilarated to hear the verses of *Gopika Geet* from Sevakram. Nilkanth was greatly interested in the Bhagvat. Although Sevakram gave discourses on the Bhagvat, by nature he was ungrateful. He had a thousand gold coins with him, but had no attendant to serve him. Once, he was struck with acute dysentery. He had frequent motions, and blood passed in his stools. It was very painful. He could not even walk and was, therefore, depressed. He cried because of his pain and helplessness. Nilkanth comforted him and reassured, “Don’t worry, I will serve you.”

There was a banyan tree in a banana garden. Nilkanth prepared a bed of banana leaves under the tree for Sevakram to rest and sleep. He washed his soiled clothes as well as prepared and served him meals every day. Sevakram would give money to Nilkanth to buy food provisions such as sugar, ghee and rice only to suffice for himself. Every day Nilkanth cooked



Nilkanth carries Sevakram's luggage

food for Sevakram, but for himself, he would have to go to the neighbouring village to beg alms and eat whatever he received. Sometimes, he did not get any alms and had to go without food. Sometimes, he would have to fast for two days running, but Sevakram would not give him any money. He did not even have the courtesy to ask him to eat with him.

For two months, Nilkanth served Sevakram. When he got better, they both proceeded towards Rameshwar. On the way Sevakram would have Nilkanth carry his luggage weighing 20 kg. For himself, Nilkanth never kept even a handkerchief's weight of luggage; still he carried Sevakram's bundle. Sevakram

became so healthy that he could soon drank and digested more than a pound of ghee every day. Still, he did not care for Nilkanth. He merely extracted work from him like a slave.

Realizing the ungratefulness and lack of devotion in Sevakram, Nilkanth left him. One who does not appreciate a favour or a good turn is an ungrateful wretch. One who merely exploits one's servant without taking care of their food and clothing needs is an ungrateful person. An ungrateful person is considered to be a great sinner. Sevakram was such an ungrateful person.

On the way, Nilkanth visited Kanchipuram and Chingalpet before coming to the River Kaveri. He bathed in the Kaveri and arrived in Kumbakon. Every 12 years a Kumbh Mela is held in Kumbakon. Nilkanth enjoyed the darshan of Kumbheshwar Mahadev and took a dip in Mahamagham Sarovar. He gave darshan to all who had gathered for the Kumbh Mela.

From there, Nilkanth went to Srirangkshetra. After bathing in the Kaveri-Ganga, he came to the huge Srirang mandir. It was here that Ramanand Swami had given Vaishnav *diksha* in a dream by the great *acharya*, Ramanujacharya. The mandir also has a four-armed *murti* of Srirang seated on Adishesha. Nilkanth had observed that in the pilgrim places the priests and gurus had strayed from the path of devotion and adopted a life of material indulgence. Out of this subtle observance, Nilkanth's resolve to establish a path free from such weaknesses grew stronger.

Nilkanth then travelled to Mannargudi. People believe this town to be the Ayodhya and Dwarka of the south. Nilkanth went to the ancient mandir of Bhagwan Shri Rajgopal for darshan and then took the road to Devipattan.

In South India, Devipattan marks the beginning of the *setubandh* bridge. Nilkanth arrived in Devipattan, where Shri Ram Bhagwan had worshipped the nine *grahas*. There is also a mandir dedicated to Venkateshwar, where Nilkanth ent for darshan.

31. Bhagwandas Has Darshan of Sacred Footmarks

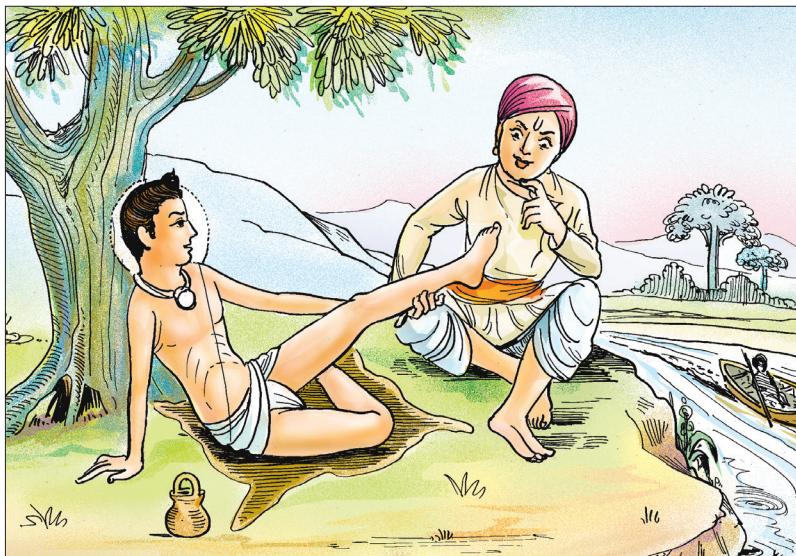
Just prior to arriving in Devipattan, Nilkanth came to a village. It was noon. He stopped to rest under a tree on the bank of a river.

The village was not far from this place. One Bhagwandas Bhavsar lived there. His aged mother was very pious and a staunch devotee of Shri Krishna Bhagwan. Every day she would ask her son Bhagwandas to go in search of God. She believed that they would find God if they searched for him, and, when found, should invite him to their house.

Today, since early morning, she had insistently said to Bhagwandas, "If you simply work at home and on the farm, you will never find God. Leave all this and set out in search of God." Bhagwandas, however, did not listen to her. He went off to his farm.

At noon, Bhagwandas returned home for his meal. His mother had kept a box containing foodstuffs and a bundle of clothes ready for him. Bhagwandas washed his hands and feet before sitting down for lunch. His mother, while serving him food, repeated, "You will not go to the farm today. Look, here is your bundle of clothes and the box of foodstuffs. And here are 100 gold coins. Finish your lunch quickly, and then start at once. Search for God at every holy place and on the banks of every river. Look out for him in jungles and gardens, in caves and ravines. Go to the Himalayas and search for him. Do not come back without bringing him with you. If you return without him, your devout father will lose face. I will not allow you into this house if you return without him."

One hearing this, Bhagwandas softened. He agreed, "Yes mother, I will go today in search of God. However, please tell



Bhagwandas observes the holy marks on Nilkanth's soles

me how I can identify him? If I come across him in person, how should I recognize him?"

The aged mother answered confidently, "Oh, that is very simple. God has, in all, 16 footmarks, seven on his left foot and nine on his right foot. His body does not cast a shadow. If one holds a lamp in front of him when it is dark, and the light passes through his body as if it were transparent. Rest assured that would be God himself. Do not leave him. Request him, persuade him, pray to him, appease him, but bring him home."

On listening to this dialogue, the wife of Bhagwandas said to her husband, "You are going away in search of God, but you alone are my God. If you cannot find God until the end of your life, all that I can do is to wait for you."

On hearing this, the aged mother laughed. She pacified her daughter-in-law, "Why are you worried? If we have faith, God will be found within a fortnight. Pray to God that your husband and the supreme God may meet us very soon."

Bhagwandas, too, was now enthused. He assured his wife,

“Yes, yes, I will certainly find God. See what paramount faith our mother has! If her devotion is true, if your chastity is true, and if my faith is true, the Divine will surely be found within a fortnight. Do not, therefore, worry for me. I will be back soon.” Respectfully touching the feet of his mother, Bhagwandas stepped out of the house.

Bhagwandas blindly walked on. When he had walked about 12 miles, he came to a river. The sun was about to set. Bhagwandas thought, “Let me cross the river and stay the night in the village on the other side. Tomorrow morning I will resume my search.”

Bhagwandas reached the bank of the river, paid the fare to the boatman and got into a boat. The wind filled the sails. The boat sailed off speedily towards the other bank. Within a short time, Bhagwandas reached the opposite bank. He got out of the boat, walked a few steps and then stopped. He thought to himself, “Where shall I spend the night here?”

At that very moment, someone shouted, “Bhagwandas, come here.” Bhagwandas was surprised to hear his own name. He looked around and saw a young child sitting under a banyan tree. Nilkanth again called Bhagwandas by name. Still wondering, Bhagwandas went near him. He bowed to Nilkanth and sat down beside him. He thought, “This celibate surely looks divine. How did he come to know my name? How did he recognize me?”

While he was wondering in this way, Nilkanth said to him, “Brother Bhagwandas, I have called you to take out the thorn which has pierced my foot. Please do me a favour by kindly removing it to relieve the pain.”

“Of course, I will,” replied Bhagwandas. He sat opposite Nilkanth. Nilkanth stretched out his right leg and placed it on the lap of Bhagwandas. As Bhagwandas lifted the foot to take out the thorn, he noticed the nine marks on the sole of

Nilkanth's right foot. He saw the *urdhvarekha, ashtakon, swastik, jambu, java, vajra, ankush, ketu* and *padma*. However, no thorn was visible on the sole. Bhagwandas was very pleased to see the nine marks on the sole. He said to Nilkanth, "O Brahmachariji, the thorn is perhaps in the other sole, not in this."

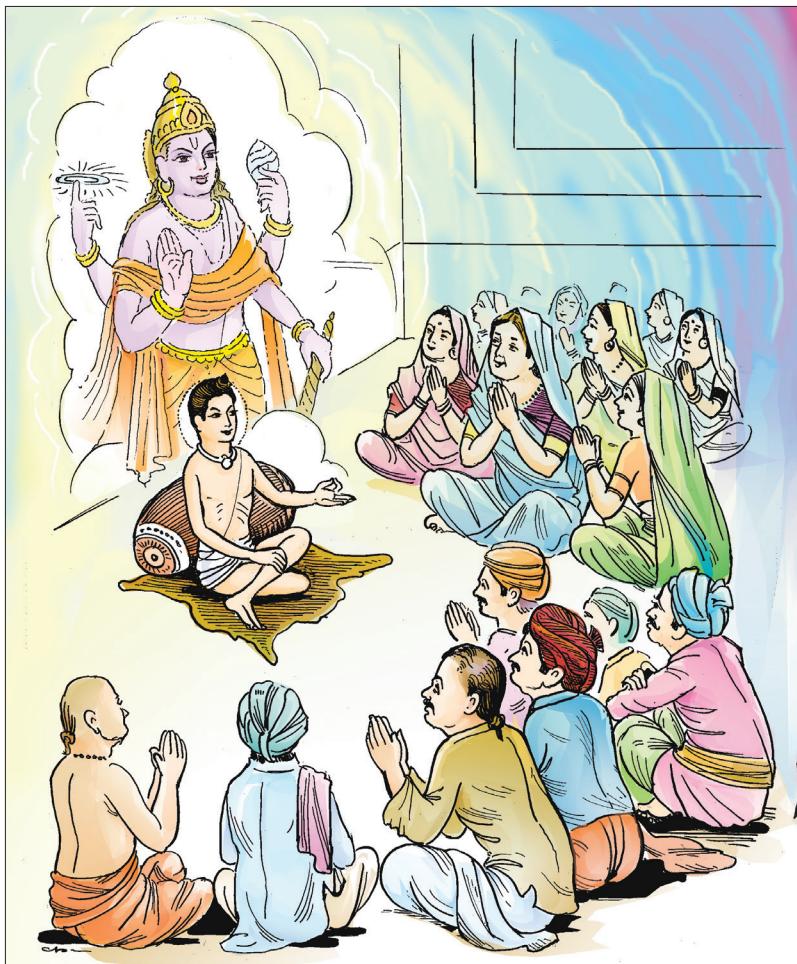
Nilkanth then stretched out his left leg and placed it on his lap. Bhagwandas observed the remaining seven marks on the left sole – *trikon, kalash, gopad, dhanushya, meen, ardhabachandra* and *vyom*.

Bhagwandas suddenly recalled what his mother had told him. He looked at the sun in the west and then in the east. He saw his own shadow, but not that of Nilkanth. He felt extremely happy. Without waiting for a moment, he requested and prayed to Nilkanth to accompany him, made him sit in the boat and took him home. They reached home late at night. Bhagwandas knocked on the door. His elderly mother came to open the door. The wife of Bhagwandas also came to the door with a lamp in her hand to see who it was.

The door opened. Both mother and daughter-in-law were amazed at what they saw. The light of the lamp was passing straight through the body of Nilkanth. The mother was exhilarated. Her joy knew no bounds. The wife of Bhagwandas prepared fresh *rotla* and fed Nilkanth with warm *rotla*, milk, butter and sugarcandy. They attended on him through the night.

Early next morning, the mother of Bhagwandas went from home to home in the village inviting everyone to come and have darshan of God at her house.

People, out of curiosity and doubt, flocked to the house. Nilkanth imparted a few words of wisdom and appeared to all in the form of Chaturbhuj Narayan holding a conch shell, mace, wheel and lotus in his four hands. Everyone bowed at the feet of Nilkanth.



Nilkanth gives darshan as Chaturbhuj Narayan

Nilkanth stayed for two days at the old woman's house and blessed the family, "All three of you will pass away shortly and will be reborn in north Gujarat in the village of Vadnagar at the house of Jumakhram Bhavsar. There, after a few years, I will meet you and accept your *seva* to fulfil your wishes." Nilkanth then left early the following morning.

Nilkanth crossed a gulf called Harbola by boat. After much difficulty, he reached Setubandh Rameshwar. This is among the

four most important pilgrim places of the country as it contains a *swayambhu jyotirling*. The mandir is very big and ancient. The young *brahmachari* would daily bathe in the sea and go for the darshan of the *murti* of Rameshwar. Wherever Nilkanth went, he attracted people because of his gracious look and piety. After staying there for two months, he left for Dhanushyakoti.

Here, after the Ramayan war was over, at Vibhishan's request, Shri Ram had broken the bridge to Lanka with his bow. Therefore, it was known as Dhanushyakoti.

From there, Nilkanth went to Darbhashayan for darshan of the *murti* of Dwibhuj Narayan. From there, he proceeded to Sundarraj (also called Vrishabhadri), which is 12 miles from Madurai and houses the *murti* of Sundarraj (Narayan). The mandir also has the *murtis* of Sridevi and Bhudevi. After darshan of the Meenakshi Mandir, he proceeded to Bhootpuri (now called Sriperumbudur).

32. Nilkanth Accepts Food

There are many hills and forests on the way to Bhootpuri. Nilkanth continued to walk for four days continuously without food to eat or water to drink on the way. On the fifth day, he fainted out of exhaustion.

On regaining consciousness he saw a well nearby. He approached the well and saw that the water was deep but clean. He drew the water by attaching a long vine to his gourd and releasing it into the well. Nilkanth bathed and performed his daily rituals. Then, he placed his Shaligram in a vessel and began to bathe it with the water from the gourd. As he poured water on the Shaligram, a miracle happened! The Shaligram drank all the water. Nilkanth then poured another gourdful of water on it, but the Shaligram drank that too. He poured water on it for the third, and fourth time, and the Shaligram drank it all.

Nilkanth thought, “Since the Shaligram is so thirsty, it must also be hungry. But where can I get food from?”

Even though he was God, Nilkanth was worshipping the Shaligram with profound devotion to inspire devotion in all devotees. As he was thinking about how to get food for the Shaligram, a couple, dressed like renunciants suddenly appeared. They gave Nilkanth some salt and *sathvo*. Nilkanth offered these items to the Shaligram before eating.

Nilkanth then reached Bhootpuri. After staying there for a few days he arrived in Totadri.

33. Nilkanth in Totadri

Totadri is the main seat of Shrimad Ramanujacharya. Here, his consecrated wooden seat is preserved. In the mandir is the *murti* of Bhagwan Vishnu reclining under the hood of Shesh. When Nilkanth reached here, a leading sannyasi named Jeer Swami was the successor of the *gadi* of Ramanujacharya. Nilkanth Varni stayed with him for some time. He keenly listened to the texts of the Ramanuja Sampradaya. He grasped the essence of its philosophy and had a liking for its *upasana*. The philosophy and the *sampradaya* of Ramanujacharya appeared to him to be simpler and better in comparison with those of other schools of philosophy. Nilkanth therefore stayed there for a few months.

During this time, Nilkanth observed that the sannyasis here followed the code of not touching money and shunned addictions. However, some had not renounced women. They associated freely with women. Nilkanth did not approve of this and asked the head swami, “Realizing that you have renounced, I venture to ask you a question. What should we understand from the injunction given in the shastras that a sadhu should renounce women and wealth? Women, wealth and taste are

considered to be the biggest sources of bondage for a sadhu. Therefore, please explain the course which a sadhu should adopt.”

For the head swami, the concept of renouncing women was unimaginable. Annoyed, he shouted, “Drive this boy out. He ventures to discuss the conduct of a sadhu! Though a mere child, he attempts to embrace the universe. Take him away from here. I will not eat or drink until then. I don’t want such disciples.”

Nilkanth responded, “Oh preceptor, it does not befit a guru or a disciple to fret and fume like this. Just as a small fire can reduce a palace to ashes, so can a little anger thwart liberation.”

The head swami got all the more angry on hearing these words. He had Nilkanth removed from the monastery. Nilkanth passed the night at a place opposite the monastery.

Nilkanth then went to Kanyakumari, also known as Kumarikashetra. At this place, one finds the confluence of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Nilkanth bathed here before travelling northwards. He went for the darshan of Lambe Narayan and Chote Narayan before continuing his journey.

34. Northwards from Kanyakumari

Crossing the River Krutamala on the way, Nilkanth arrived at the mandir in Padmanabh (Trivendram), where he had the darshan of the huge *murti* of Bhagwan Padmanabh reclining on Shesh, and Brahmā seated on a lotus coming out of his navel.

Walking northwards, Nilkanth arrived in the holy place of Janardan. It is situated near the sea, and yet it abounds in freshwater springs. After darshan at the large mandir dedicated to Bhagwan Janardan, Nilkanth reached Adikeshav, where he had darshan of the *murti* of the deity Adikeshav in a mandir on the bank of the River Tamravarni.

After walking further northwards for a few days, Nilkanth

reached Srirangapattam, where he had the darshan of Srirang. He then went to Yadavgiri (Melukote). A mandir of Sampatkumar is located here which Ramanujacharya had renovated. After having of the *murti* of Narayan in that mandir, Nilkanth proceeded further to the north.

On the way, he bathed in the River Kalyaniganga before arriving in Sundur, where he went for darshan of the mandir of Swami Kartikeya on the hill known as Parvatgiri. Coming down from the hill, Nilkanth entered the region of Kishkindha, where he bathed in the River Tungabhadra before visiting the holy place of Svatikshila situated on Mount Malyavan. A mandir is built inside a cave at this place with the *murtis* of Ram, Lakshman and Janki. Nilkanth devoutly enjoyed their darshan.

Coming down, he reached Mount Rushyamuk. This place is known as Chakratirth of the south because the River Tungabhadra here curves like a bow. The river is very deep. After bathing in the river, Nilkanth offered his respects at the Shri Ram mandir located on the mountain.

Nilkanth walked through the city of Kishkindha, passed through the Shabri forest and crossed the River Tungabhadra before arriving at Lake Pampa. There are many mandirs dedicated to the deities of Srirangji and Lakshmi-Narayan on the hills near Lake Pampa. Nilkanth had the darshan of those deities.

Trekking through Maharashtra, Nilkanth soon arrived in Pandharpur. He stayed there for two months on the banks of the River Chandrabhaga and had darshan of Vithoba. From Pandharpur, he reached Pune in mid 1798 (Ashadhi Samvat 1855). At that time Bapu Gokhale, the minister of the king, was in charge of the administration of the city. He was very devout and aspired for liberation. He devoutly served Nilkanth and became his disciple. Nilkanth spent the month of Ashadh in Pune.

At the beginning of the month of Shravan, Nilkanth took the path to the Vindhya mountains. After walking for a few days, he reached the confluence of two rivers, Tapi and Mauna. After bathing, he reached Buranpur on the other side of the river. Proceeding from there, he reached Malegaon, where he stayed for five days in a mandir dedicated to Bhagwan Shiv. He bathed in the Mosam Ganga. Proceeding further, he passed through the forest of Dandakaranya before arriving in Nasik. After bathing in the River Godavari, he went for darshan of Tryambakeshwar Mahadev. Nilkanth then proceeded towards Gujarat.

35. Nilkanth in Gujarat

After walking for five days, Nilkanth reached Suryapur (Surat). He stayed at the Godiya Mandir of the Nirvana school. For three days, he went without food. On the fourth day, a gardener's wife gave him some provisions, which he cooked and ate. He then went to Ashwinikumar Ghat. The River Tapi was very deep here. People dissuaded Nilkanth, but he plunged into the river and swam across to the opposite bank.

From there, Nilkanth walked on the banks of the River Narmada. After some time, he reached Bharuch where he stayed there for the night at the Ashvamedh Ghat. After passing through the village of Pimpali, he reached Tavare. He went for darshan at the Kapileshwar mandir. After bathing in the Narmada, he came to the Bawapyara Ghat in Shuklatirth.

From Shuklatirth, Nilkanth went to Ambali and Ansuya. There is a mandir of the goddess Ansuya here. Rajbai, a devout aspirant residing in the village of Ambali, gave Nilkanth milk to drink and requested him to stay there and drink milk at her place every day. Seeing her devotion, Nilkanth stayed for seven days in Ansuya. He would bathe in the Narmada, and go to the village of Ambali to drink milk at Rajbai's house.

Thereafter, he proceeded to Shukeshwar and Vyas-tirth, thus sanctifying the various places where austerities had been performed by the ancient rishis on the banks of the River Narmada.

Walking along the banks of the Narmada, Nilkanth passed through Chanod and reached Karnali. He did darshan of the ancient mandirs of this place before reaching Dabhoi. There, he stayed the night in the mandir of Vaghnath Mahadev.

From there, he passed through Vasai and arrived in Vatapattam (Vadodara). He stayed the night at the Mandvi Gate in the centre of Vadodara. When he arrived, the sun had already set. Despite this, Nilkanth's divine personality in the faint light attracted a number of people. They came and gathered before him. Out of curiosity, they asked about him. A merchant called Amichand came out of his shop. He had a lantern in his hand. He made his way through the crowd and came to Nilkanth. When he saw the face of Nilkanth with the aid of the lantern, he was convinced that he was in the presence of a great person. With folded hands, he asked Nilkanth whether he would eat some food. Varni told him to bring whatever was ready. He rushed home and asked his wife, who replied that *khichdi* was ready. Amichand said, "A prominent yogi has come and I wish to feed him."

Amichand's wife had already had the darshan of Nilkanth. She had experienced great bliss and had prepared the food with great devotion. Amichand brought a plateful of *khichdi* and ghee for Nilkanth. He took two morsels and returned the rest as *prasad*. Amichand took it home. When his wife later ate the sanctified *khichdi*, her worldly desires disappeared and she experienced inner peace.

She told her husband about her experience and urged him to invite Nilkanth the following day. Early next morning, when Amichand went to invite Varni to come to his home to

eat, he was preparing to resume his journey. Nilkanth told the merchant, "I wish to take your *seva* in the future." Amichand asked with folded hands, "But what guarantee is there about my existence in the future?" Nilkanth replied, "To keep you alive until then is in my hands!" Nilkanth smiled and added, "You have the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan buried in your house. I will send my sadhus when I need them from you."²

Amichand was surprised to hear this. His father had buried the *murtis*, and only he knew of it. He bowed at the feet of Nilkanth. The young *brahmachari* blessed him and departed.

On the way, Nilkanth bathed in the River Mahi and then reached the village of Navli. He ate food offered by Laldas and blessed him, "You will get a virtuous son [Kashiyabhai]." He then went to Bamangam, where he ate *rotla* and *math* dal at the house of a Brahmin, Khoda Pandya. Nilkanth blessed him, and proceeded to Dakor via Anand.

After the darshan of Shri Ranchhodrai in Dakor, Nilkanth arrived at Vartal. Here Joban Pagi, taking Nilkanth to be a great sage, offered him some food provisions. Nilkanth cooked this offering and ate. Joban Pagi pressed him to stay in Vartal. Nilkanth, however, promised him that he would return on some other occasion, and thus proceeded to Bochasan. There he put up on a bank of the village pond under a banyan tree.

36. Nilkanth in Bochasan

Nilkanth found the village to be very beautiful. On that day the village was full of Patidars, who had come from neighbouring villages. Nilkanth inferred that some festival was being celebrated in the village. At that time, the women-folk

2. As foretold by Nilkanth, many years later when the mandir in Vartal was ready, Bhagwan Swaminarayan sent sadhus to fetch the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan from Amichand Sheth. They were installed in the central shrine of the mandir in Vartal.

came to the lake to bathe. Varni immediately got up and went to the Ramji mandir. The priest, Narsinhdas, received him warmly.

On that day, the village chief, Kandas Patel, had arranged a feast for Brahmins. The villagers had the darshan of Nilkanth and were greatly impressed by his divinity. A village Patidar, Veribhai, had told Kandas in advance about the arrival of Varni. Kandas thus sent his son Kashidas to invite Nilkanth to his house.

Nilkanth was in meditation when Kashidas was drawn by Varni's illustrious form. He felt the brightness of several suns emanating from Nilkanth's body. Nilkanth opened his eyes after a short time. Kashidas approached him. Bowing at his feet, he requested, "O Brahmachariji! Please do come to our house for food." Due to Kashidas's devotion, Nilkanth agreed.

He came to Kandas's house and sat outside the main porch. The elderly mother of Kandas, Nanibai, was overjoyed on having the darshan of the young *brahmachari*. Nilkanth then asked her, "Mother, bring the laddus." Naniba went into the kitchen to bring some laddus. But the Brahmins, however, refused, saying, "The food has not been offered to God." Nanibai returned empty-handed, so Nilkanth suggested, "Mother, bring some milk and rice." But there was not a drop of milk in the house. "Where can we get milk at this hour," thought Kandas. Nanibai, the wife of Kandas, had great faith in Nilkanth's words. She took a vessel and went to the buffalo. To her surprise, she saw milk dripping from its udders. She filled the vessel and offered Nilkanth some milk, rice and sugar. Varni was satisfied with the meal, rinsed his mouth and got up to leave.

Nanibai requested, "Maharaj, now please stay at our house." Nilkanth replied, "Mother, I will come again. Actually, I will come several times and stay at your house. I have to go now as I have several things to do. Your son and your family are very fortunate. They will all become devotees. You will all worship me." With these blessings, Nilkanth returned to the Ramji mandir.

After the evening *arti*, Nilkanth prophesied to the priest, “These *murtis* [of Shri Ram, Lakshman³ and Sita] will be housed in a magnificent mandir that will be built here.”

The village folks were greatly attracted to Nilkanth’s divine personality. They told him to make Bochasan his home.

The priest retorted, “What will this boy do here? There is no need for him here.” Nilkanth smiled and said, “I am not one inclined to stay in such a small place. For me, a huge abode will be built here.”

Early the following morning, Nilkanth left Bochasan and travelled ahead.

37. Leather-Touched Water Is Impure

After leaving Bochasan, Nilkanth liberated many people in villages and pilgrim places and reached Budhej. From there he proceeded and came to the bank of a pond on the outskirts of the village of Gorad. He sat under a banyan tree. A Koli named Bijal was operating a *kosh* pulled by two bullocks. The necks of the bullocks had been lacerated through labour, and Nilkanth felt pity for them. The water was poured into an open tank. He entered the farm and asked the farmer, “Brother, will you give me some water to drink? I am very thirsty.”

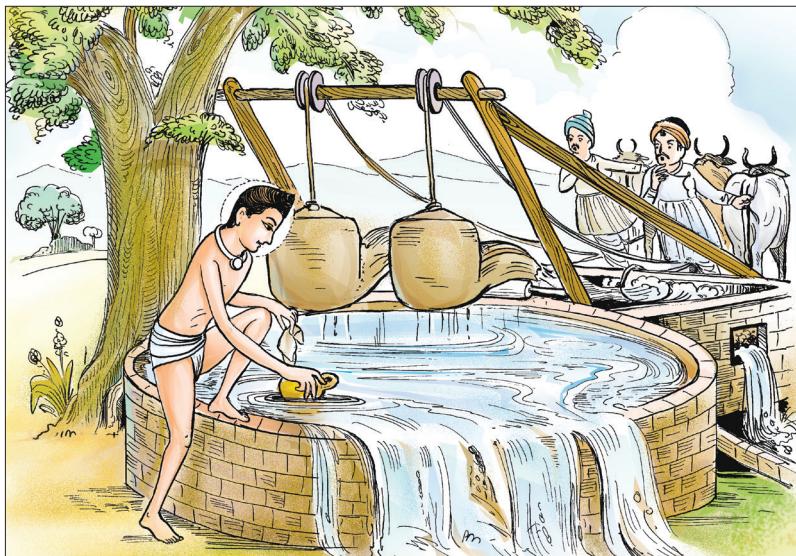
Bijal replied, “My *kosh* is operating. Drink as much water as you like.”

Nilkanth, however, stood still and did not drink the water.

He politely told the farmer, “Brother, this is *charmavari*. This water is drawn by leather buckets. I cannot drink it.”

The farmer thought Nilkanth belonged to some class of fastidious sadhus. He replied, “Bawaji, the water is very deep.

3. These sacred *murtis* were subsequently installed in the central shrine of the Akshar Purushottam mandir in Bochasan, built by Shastriji Maharaj in 1907 CE, and renamed as Ichcharam and Raghuvirji Maharaj.



Nilkanth raises the water to the top of the well

If you want to drink it, then you can do so. The drought has diminished the water in rivers, ponds and wells.” He added, “Maharaj, I do not have a rope and pot, otherwise I would draw water for you.”

On hearing this Nilkanth smiled and uttered, “I do not need any rope.” With these words, he went near the well and held the gourd in his hands. Immediately the water in the well began to rise and touched the brim. Filling the gourd with water, Nilkanth drank to his heart’s content.

Bijal was amazed to see this phenomenon. He fell at the feet of Nilkanth and requested him to keep the water at that level. He thought that if Nilkanth stayed in our village, then our future would be brighter and better.

Nilkanth, however, was in a hurry to leave. Bijal rushed to his village and declared, “A mahatma has come to my farm. The water in the well came up for him to drink. Let us all stop him from going away.”

Surprised to hear this, the villagers rushed to the farm. By

then, Nilkanth had already left and was far away. They were greatly disappointed. When they saw a shepherd come from the same direction, they asked him about Nilkanth. He replied, "Yes, I saw an ascetic travelling two hand-lengths above the ground at great speed. You will not be able to catch him." They were all convinced that Nilkanth was God himself.

38. Who Gave You the Right to Kill?

Nilkanth arrived in Dhanka, a pilgrim place on the shores of the Gulf of Khambhat. Varni cast a benign glance at the pilgrims. He then went to Lake Ramsar in the north and drew water from a nearby well, offered it to Thakorji and drank it. He then set off for the River Shikotar. On the way, he met a man. His untidy clothes and bag made Nilkanth ask him, "Brother, who are you? And what do you have in your bag?"

The man replied, "I am of the Koli community. My name is Lakho. My bag contains fish that I have caught."

Nilkanth was greatly pained on hearing this. He said, "Brother, among Kolis there have been many devotees." Pointing his finger at the bag, Nilkanth added, "Why have you killed so many fish? When will you be liberated from such sins?" Every word of Varni sent a chill down Lakho's spine. Nilkanth asked further, "Brother! Won't God ask you why you have killed so many of his creatures? What right have you to kill living beings?"

Lakho's conscience was pricked. Tears rolled down his cheeks. With folded hands, he pleaded, "In this dreadful drought, I could not get any grains. So, I had to take to this occupation. It is no doubt, a sin, to kill living creatures but I had to do it out of necessity."

Varni replied, "Lakho, don't Banias and Brahmins get grains? They are not dying of hunger? Similarly, if you decide to eat

only grains, God will certainly provide for your needs. Famine will not affect your house.”

Nilkanth then touched Lakho’s bag. All the dead fish were immediately revived and released into the river. Lakho’s heart became unburdened and light. He became convinced that Nilkanth was God. He fell at his feet and requested, “O Brahmachariji! Please stay in Vadgam tonight. It is evening and the road ahead is deserted. Besides, where the rivers Mahi and Sabarmati meet, the water is deep and impossible to cross. Also, there is the threat of tigers and leopards lurking in the bushes on the opposite bank.” Varni listened quietly and revealed, “Lakho! I feel like going to places where the route is more difficult and dangerous, the river waters are deeper and the fear of tigers and leopards are greater. Wherever I set foot, fear vanishes.” With these words, he took Lakho to the shores of Shikotar.

The sun had already set. An eerie silence pervaded all around. The sounds produced by the confluence of the two rivers made the place appear more dangerous than it actually was. Lakho pleaded once again, “Maharaj, it is very difficult to cross this point. Even expert swimmers would find it challenging because of the terrible waves. Let the tide ebb by tomorrow before you try to cross it. Tomorrow, I will take you to Dholera.”

These appeals, however, fell on deaf ears. Nilkanth said, “After I reach, I will wave my deer skin to confirm that I have crossed over safely.” Lakho’s reverence and affection for Nilkanth, who had brought about a change in his heart and revived the dead fish, increased.

After blessing Lakho, Nilkanth set foot on the water and started walking briskly. Lakho was astonished to see Nilkanth walking on the water. In the darkness, he saw a trail of light reach the opposite shore. When Nilkanth waved his deer skin, Lakho realized that the divine *brahmachari* had now gone. He

felt sad at heart and rushed to the village to proclaim the glory of Varni. It became apparent to all that a great soul endowed with divine qualities had graced their village with his presence.

Nilkanth arrived in Vagad to spend the night. A potter, Rana Bavaloj, offered him a mattress, but the young celibate preferred to sleep on a heap of soil as was his daily discipline.

39. Revealing His Divinity

Nilkanth continued his redemptive travels by crossing villages, towns and pilgrim places, and came to the western side of Gujarat, which is bound by the Arabian sea. Wherever Varni set foot, he captivated people with his divine personality. Whether people asked him in astonishment or not, as to who he was, Nilkanth would reveal his divinity and sometimes foretell their future.

Trekking along the coast, Nilkanth reached the village of Kukad in the district of Bhavnagar. At that time, the ruler Bhagwansinhji and his administrator, Khoja Jiva Thakkar, were sitting by the gate of his home. Varni stood there for some time. After looking at him, the ruler took him to be a *brahmachari* who was seeking alms. He asked in jest, “Maharaj! Where do you live? What’s your name? What is your caste?”

Nilkanth replied with pride, “My country is an intangible place, caste is Brahma, and my names are endless. I cannot even count my names.”

Saying this, he left the place. The *darbar*’s employee was a clever man. He understood that this celibate was no ordinary yogi. Otherwise, he would not have replied with such profound words. He told the ruler, “Sir, whether you believe it or not, the *brahmachari* is some great yogi. It was wrong not to have honoured him.”

The ruler was a seeker of liberation. He said, “Jiva, what you say appears to be true. We have made a big mistake. Maybe

it's not too late. He can't have gone very far. Let's go and call him back."

With these words, they went in search of Varni. Nilkanth had spread his deerskin and was meditating under a mango tree by the riverbank. He was sitting in *padmasan*. His eyes were calm and absorbed in meditation. His water gourd was lying nearby. When the ruler, Bhagwansinh, prodded him, Nilkanth immediately opened his eyes. He saw both the ruler and his administrator sitting before him with folded hands.

Bhagwansinh said, "Yogi! Allowing you to have gone hungry when you had come to my doorstep was not good on my part. And being dull-witted, we could not grasp your divine utterings. Please now come to my home and accept my hospitality."

Varni responded, "Darbar! Bring your alms here. I will cook and eat here." The ruler at once called for provisions. After offerings were made to Thakorji, Nilkanth ate a little of what he had cooked and gave the rest as *prasad* to Bhagwansinh and Jiva. Both of them felt happy and experienced inner peace. Nilkanth left after promising to return again.

Nilkanth reached Dihor, where he met several old men chit-chatting in the village square. He gave them a discourse. A Bhavsar lady and her son Mulji came there and devoutly offered alms to Varni. They took back the remainder as *prasad*.

Nilkanth then reached Lakadiya. Premji Thakkar was a devout man. He possessed a mat made of grass reeds that he desired to offer to a yogi or great sadhu. Nilkanth came to his shop and said, "You will not find such a yogi in countless universes." Nilkanth sanctified the mat before taking the road to Nana Gopnath.

Varni offered worship to Bholanath and arrived in Piparla. Here, a Brahmin lady devotedly gave Nilkanth a freshly made puffed-up *rotlo* with ghee. The *brahmachari* appreciated her

devotion by accepting it and peeled the top layer. To her surprise the lady saw an entire universe in the *rotlo*, and realized the glory of Nilkanth's divine form.

On arriving in Gopnath, Nilkanth, with his eyes cast down, was walking at great speed. A woman approached from the opposite direction. She stood still after watching the lightning speed at which Varni was going. Convinced of his extraordinary spiritual powers, she uttered spontaneously, "O Maharaj! Please stop."

Varni stopped in his tracks and looked behind. The lady came running to him. She was astonished when she came near.

"What do you have in the small pot?" Nilkanth enquired.

"Maharaj, it is filled with milk. Please have it", she said.

Varni filtered the milk into his gourd and drank it. He then asked, "Sister who are you?"

She replied, "I stay in Pithalpar. We are Khojas by community and my name is Janbai. It is my practice to offer milk to Mahadevji every day. However, if I meet anyone on the way, I offer it as a rule to that person."

Nilkanth responded, "Janbai! Today, Mahadev himself has accepted the milk you have offered." Nilkanth then blessed her with his divine darshan, and she experienced a feeling of peace within.

On arriving in Mahuva, Nilkanth bathed in the River Malan and then came across Pitambar Sheth. The latter offered fruits to Nilkanth. The *brahmachari* blessed him and he became a devotee. Nilkanth stayed under a tamarind tree by the shrine of Hanumanji in Mahuva. He was given alms by the *bawas* on the first day, by the merchants on the second and by Bawa Fulvani's place on the third. Each day, Nilkanth would bathe in the river before sitting to meditate on the riverbank.

Varni then arrived in Guptaprayag via Tulsishyam. Here, he sat under a rayan tree. Each day, after bathing, he would deliver

discourses to pilgrims. Bhana Pathak of Vadnagar would offer him food with reverence.

One day, he asked Nilkanth, “Yatiraj, what is your real name?”

“My name is Sahajanand. People will know me by this name in future.”

Bhana Pathak was pleased on hearing Nilkanth’s words. Brahmachari Nrusinhanand of the Sheshshayi Mandir also offered alms to Nilkanth. His request for the water reservoirs to remain full all year round was granted by Nilkanth. Varni stayed at this beautiful pilgrim place for one-and-a-half months.

Nilkanth then reached the village of Dolaha and stayed in a shepherd’s settlement. When the shepherd offered alms, Nilkanth refused them. Instead, he asked for cow’s milk to drink. At night the shepherd’s guru arrived. The settlement was filled with the sound of bhajans. It was late night when everyone retired to bed. Varni was sleeping near the guru. Every time the guru changed sides, he uttered, “O Ram!” and Nilkanth naturally responded with “Yes.” When this happened several times, the guru got up and asked, “Are you Ram?”

Nilkanth replied, “Yes. Only he who is Ram will reply to the name.”

At that time, they had the darshan of Bhagwan Shri Ram in Nilkanth. The guru was convinced of Varni’s divinity. Early the following morning, Nilkanth left for Lodhva.

40. Nilkanth at the House of Lakhu Charan

Lodhva was home to a *charan* devotee named Lakhubai. This woman used to go into samadhi and clearly see things that are normally out of sight. Sitting in Lodhva, she could see and hear things hundreds of miles away. Lakhu could walk through

walls without any problem. She used to sit in meditation for hours on end and go into samadhi. Lakhu was a disciple of Atmanand Swami. Two *brahmacharis*, Vithalanand and Balanand resided with her. As Lakhu had a herd of buffaloes, there was no shortage of milk and curds at her house.

Nilkanth arrived at the house of Lakhubai in Lodhva. She would give alms to every sadhu who came to the village. She would test the genuineness of the greatest of sadhus and sannyasis. When she saw Nilkanth, Lakhu felt he was as great as Sanak and other devout sages. She, therefore, insisted that he stay at her house for three months. Every day, she served him fresh milk, butter and sugar.

One day, Nilkanth asked Lakhubai, “Can you tell me, who initiated you into this path of devotion?”

On hearing this question, Lakhubai started narrating her story, “Atmanand Swami was my guru. His seat was at Tramba village near Girnar. Atmanand Swami was *vachan-siddha* and a true *sadguru*. He was a *jivan-mukta*. He was a believer and supporter of the Advait philosophy; hence, he preached that God was *nirakar*. So we hold God to be formless. Atmanand Swami performed many miracles in our village. He also initiated Vithalanand and Balanand. They have been residing at my house according to his command. We identify him with God.”

Lakhubai stopped for a while before digressing to another topic.

41. The Story of Ramanand Swami

Lakhubai continued, “In Ayodhya there lived a Saravariya Brahmin named Ajayprasad. His wife’s name was Sarmani. On the auspicious day of 26 August 1739 (Janmashtami; Shravan vad 8, Samvat 1795) she gave birth to a son, named Ram Sharma. From his very childhood, Ram Sharma was devoted

to God. He was very intelligent. He studied at home until he was 12 years old. He then left home for further studies. After that, he never returned home. He travelled from one holy place to another and continued his search for a true guru. During his travels, he came to Talaja in Kathiawad.

“One Kashiram Shastri lived in Talaja. He was very learned. He owned many religious books in Sanskrit. Ram Sharma stayed at his house and studied many of those books. After completing his studies, he set out on a pilgrimage to Dwarka. There, a sannyasi told him, ‘One Atmanand Swami lives in Tramba village at the foot of Mount Girnar. He is a sadhu with great attainments and performs miracles.’ So, Ram Sharma went to Tramba village to find him.

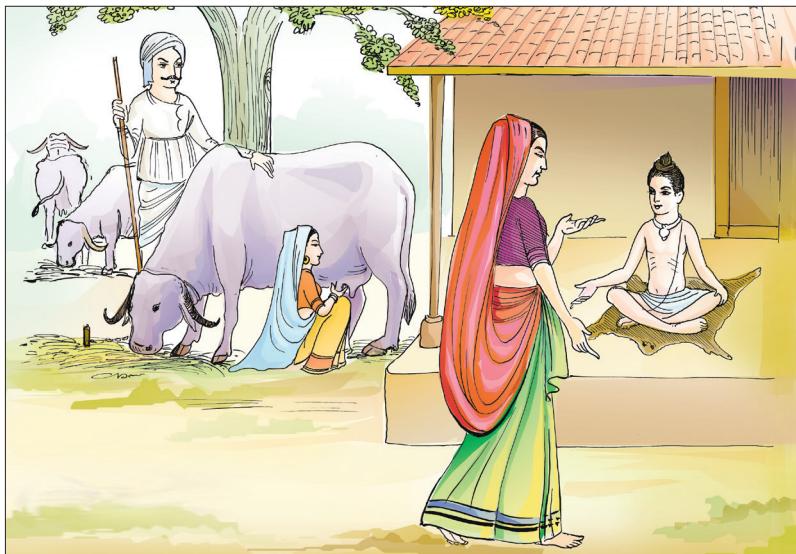
“Ram Sharma met Atmanand Swami and became his disciple. Atmanand Swami initiated him to his fold and named him Ramanand Swami. The guru and the disciple used to debate everyday. Guru Atmanand Swami would say, ‘God is *nirgun* and *nirakar*. There can be no *murti* worship of God.’ And the disciple, Ramanand Swami, would argue, ‘God is *sakar*. We must worship the *murti* of God and render *seva* to him.’ Such discussions were usual.

“Ramanand Swami was a great devotee and he loved to offer devotion to Shri Krishna Bhagwan. He ardently desired to have the darshan of Shri Krishna in person. So, one day, he left Atmanand Swami. During his *vicharan* Ramanand Swami went to south India. He reached Srirang Kshetra, the seat of Shri Ramanujacharya. Here he commenced the worship of Shri Krishna and devotion to Ramanujacharya. Shri Krishna, pleased with his devotion, gave him darshan in his dream. Ramanujacharya also gave him the Vaishnavi *diksha* in a dream. The marks of initiation were imprinted on his hands and chest. He was ordained to spread the Vaishnav dharma and to propagate the worship of God with a form.



Shri Krishna Bhagwan gives darshan to Ramanand Swami

Thereafter, Ramanand Swami began to travel all over India, preaching the worship of Shri Krishna. Having travelled all over the country, he returned to Kathiawad and met his guru, Atmanand Swami. This time also, he had a dialogue with his guru, who was finally convinced. In this way, Atmanand Swami renounced the Advait philosophy and accepted *murti*-worship.



"You are God manifest, please bless me..."

and devotion to a personal God. He also acknowledged that God is *sakar*. He asked all his disciples to submit to Ramanand Swami and directed them, 'Hereafter, all of you should follow the instructions of this Ramanand Swami.'

"After some time, Atmanand Swami passed away. Ramanand Swami became very sad. He established his ashram in the village of Loj and began to preach the gospel of Shri Krishna from village to village. Wherever he went, he declared, 'I am merely the drum-beater announcing the arrival of God. The hero of the play, God himself, is yet to come.'

At this point in her narration, Lakhubai's throat was choked with emotion. Then, she added, "O Brahmachari, we do not have faith in anyone other than our guru, Atmanand Swami. Other disciples have all submitted to Ramanand Swami, but we three have stuck to this place. I, Vithalanand and Balanand still believe that God is *nirgun* and *nirakar*. We don't listen to the preachings of Ramanand Swami."

On hearing this, Nilkanth Brahmachari gave a lengthy

discourse to Lakhubai, Vithalanand and Balanand. He convinced them of his unique philosophy. He impressed upon them that God is always *sakar*, and that the worship of and devotion to God are of great significance. All three were thus enlightened with true knowledge. In this way, three months elapsed. Nilkanth thought, “Lakhubai has served me devoutly and she has now understood the truth. Therefore let me give her something.”

Nilkanth told Lakhubai to ask for a boon. She replied, “Brahmachari Maharaj, you are God manifest. Please bless me so that my son Viro, my 60 buffaloes and my fields become immortal.” Thrice, Nilkanth asked her to ask for some other boon; thrice the old woman demanded the same boon.

Nilkanth thought, “This old lady does not know what boon to ask for. Let me therefore give her the best thing in the world.” With these thoughts, he told her, “Lakhubai, I bestow on you a gift of my Akshardham.” Blessing her, Nilkanth then departed and made his way to Prabhaspatan.

42. Darshan to Narsinh Mehta

After travelling through Prabhaspatan and Bhalka, Nilkanth proceeded towards Junagadh. There he circumambulated Mount Girnar and climbed it. He bathed in the Damodar Kund. Here, devotees, sadhus and mahatmas had the darshan of various forms of Bhagwan in Nilkanth. At the Damodar Mandir, the priest had darshan in the form of Damodar. Nilkanth then went to bathe in the Gaumukhi Ganga, where many *baus* lived. Nilkanth gave them darshan in the form of Bhagwan Vamanji. The *baus* bathed Nilkanth, anointed *chandan* on his body, placed a garland of flowers around his neck and offered him food. At the top of Mount Girnar in the mandir of Dattatreya, Nilkanth gave darshan in the form of Dattatreya to an ascetic.

After descending the mountain, Nilkanth arrived in

Junagadh. He went to the mandir of Hatkeshwar Mahadev and sat there. A Nagar Brahmin, who was passing by, saw Nilkanth and thought, "This ascetic appears to be very learned; let me ask him a few questions." With this thought, he asked Nilkanth ten questions all at one time. Nilkanth answered his questions in just two sentences. This greatly amazed the Brahmin. He fell at the feet of Nilkanth. He escorted Nilkanth to his house and offered him a dish of *shira-puri*. Nilkanth stayed at his house for the night. The Brahmin had darshan of Bhagwan Shivji in the form of Nilkanth.

Nilkanth then left Junagadh the following morning. He went for the darshan of Bhutnath Mahadev on the way and drank water from the Khengar Vav before travelling to Vanthali. There, he took a bath in Suryakund and proceeded to Piplana. In Piplana, there lived a pious Brahmin named Narsinh Mehta. Nilkanth went to his house and sat on the verandah. At that time, Narsinh Mehta was reciting the Gita and worshipping the Shaligram. His son, Kalyanji, was sitting in the courtyard. Nilkanth asked for alms from Kalyanji, who replied, "The food is not yet ready. If you kindly wait for a while, I can make and serve you a good meal." Nilkanth told him, "I cannot wait until the food is cooked. I am on a pilgrimage. You may bring whatever is ready." And he added, "If the food is not ready, then I will need to leave." Nilkanth started walking away. As he left he shot a glance at the Shaligram being worshipped by Narsinh Mehta. At this, a miracle happened. A bright light emanated from the Shaligram.

Narsinh Mehta rushed out of the house. Not seeing Nilkanth, he asked Kalyanji, "Where is that ascetic with whom you were talking?" Kalyanji replied, "He was asking for food right now. I requested him to wait so that I could get something for him. However, he did not wait and went away." On hearing this, Narsinh Mehta sent Kalyanji running to the outskirts of the



Nilkanth gives darshan to Narsinh Mehta

village in search of Nilkanth. He met Nilkanth on the outskirts, prostrated at his feet, offered prayers to him and brought him back to his home.

Nilkanth said, “Please don’t delay. Bring whatever that can be prepared at once.”

Narsinh Mehta milked the buffalo and offered Nilkanth fresh milk and *juvar*. After the meal, Nilkanth gave Narsinh Mehta darshan in the form of Chaturbhuj Narayan. Narsinh Mehta offered his *pranams* and recalled the words of his guru, Ramanand Swami, “I am an incarnation of Uddhavji. Purushottam Prabhu will come later and accept your *seva*.” At that time he also heard

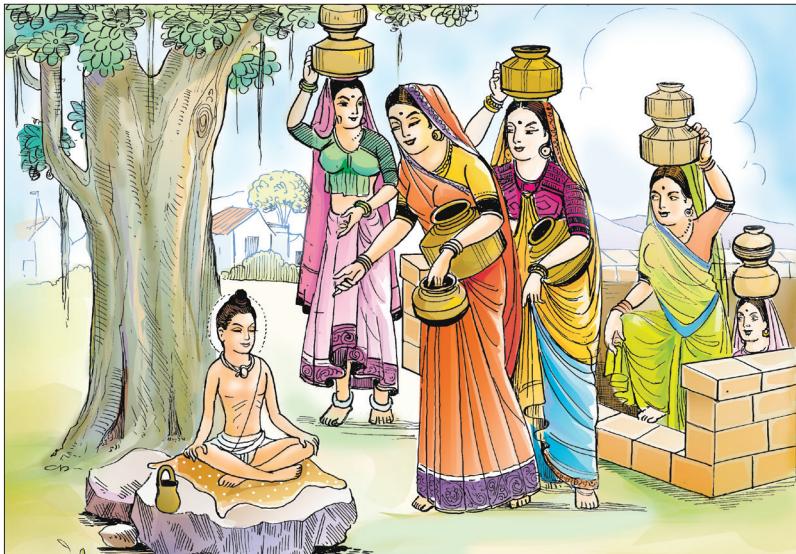
a voice from the sky saying, “God himself will come to your house and give darshan in the form of Chaturbhuj Narayan.”

Narsinh Mehta fell at the feet of Nilkanth and narrated the whole story to him. Nilkanth asked him, “How did you hear the voice from the sky?”

Narsinh Mehta began to narrate his own story, “From childhood, I had yearned to meet God. Every day I worshipped God. I performed charitable and religious acts, but could not find God. I left home and wandered around Girnar. I met a number of *jogis*, *jatis* and *bawas*, but I could not get mental peace. The fire of worldly desires within could not be extinguished. Out of despair, I climbed a tree with the intention of committing suicide. Thrice, however, I heard a voice from the sky saying, “Do not worry. Do not put an end to your life. God himself will grace your house with his presence and give you darshan in the form of Chaturbhuj Narayan.” Therefore, I returned home. I have since carried on worship and offering prayers in the hope of getting your darshan. Today, I have had your darshan, and am therefore emancipated.”

Nilkanth then stood up and said, “Now I must go.” On hearing this, Narsinh Mehta escorted Nilkanth to the banyan tree on the outskirts of the village. There, he saw a miracle. Ten incarnations emerged, one from each of the ten directions, and all merged in Nilkanth. All around, bright light appeared. Nilkanth then suddenly disappeared. Narsinh Mehta returned home, profoundly pleased.

Proceeding from there, Nilkanth passed through the village of Akha and reached the house of Jetha Mer in Madhada. Pleased with Jetha Mer’s observance of celibacy, he favoured him with his divine darshan and then went to Mangrol, where he put up at the Dosavav stepwell in the west of Mangrol. Gordhanbhai, a Bania, gave Nilkanth *sukhadi* to eat. From Mangrol, Nilkanth proceeded to the nearby village of Loj.



The village women were curious about the young *brahmachari*

43. Nilkanth in Loj

Nilkanth arrived in Loj on the early morning of 21 August 1799 CE (Shravan *vad* 6, Samvat 1856). He was at once attracted to the place. The whole area was bathed in greenery because of plentiful rain. It was daybreak. Nilkanth first bathed in the stepwell situated in the north of the village. He then sat still in meditation on a large stone under a banyan tree.

As the dim light of the dawning sun grew in the eastern horizon, women carrying pitchers on their heads came to the stepwell to draw water. Their eyes were arrested by Nilkanth's divine form. They all stood rooted to the spot. Despite his emaciated body his face was illustrious. Who could this *brahmachari* possibly be? They repeatedly looked at Nilkanth and were moved by his renunciation. Gradually, all the women came and stood near the child-celibate. They were all waiting for him to open his eyes. Nilkanth, however, was engrossed in meditation. They were all debating among

themselves as to what made him renounce the world at such a young age.

Meanwhile, a sadhu belonging to the local ashram came there to draw water. He too was greatly attracted to the young *brahmachari*. He also waited for him to open his eyes. After some time, he went to draw water from the nearby stepwell.

After filling the pitcher, the sadhu once again came and stood before Nilkanth. He experienced the bliss of the young *brahmachari*'s darshan. In a short time, Nilkanth opened his eyes.

The sadhu who was greatly impressed by his lustrous eyes asked, "Brahmachari, where have you come from? What is your name? What are the names of your parents? What made you renounce the world? Who is your guru?"

Nilkanth smiled and replied, "Sadhuram, one who has renounced does not have caste, country or relatives. Whoever frees one from worldly ties are one's true parents and guru. I have come in search of such a guru." The sadhu enquired again with folded hands. Nilkanth asked, "Sadhuram, what is your name? Whose disciple are you? To what *sampradaya* do you belong?"

The sadhu replied, "My name is Sukhanand. Our guru is Swami Ramanand. He is an *acharya* of the Ramanuja Sampradaya. His ashram is here. Some 50 sadhus live in this ashram."

Nilkanth made eager inquiries about Ramanand Swami. Sukhanand clarified, "Ramanand Swami is currently engaged in *vicharan* in Kutch. Come and stay in our ashram. Ramanand Swami's principal disciple Muktanand Swami is there. The sadhus will be pleased to have your darshan. Muktanand Swami will also be immensely pleased to see you."

Varni was touched by Sukhanand Swami's humility and politeness. He explained, "Sadhuram, I do not go where there are lots of people." Sukhanand Swami replied, "If you are unable to come to the ashram, Muktanand Swami himself will come to fetch you."

At these words, Nilkanth agreed to go to the ashram. As soon as he entered the ashram, he met Muktanand Swami. Nilkanth bowed to him. Sukhanand Swami introduced Nilkanth. Muktanand Swami was greatly impressed by the darshan of Nilkanth. When Sukhanand Swami went to fetch a seat for him, Nilkanth said, “The whole earth is my seat. Why honour my body with a seat?”

All the sadhus in the ashram soon began to gather. They, too, were greatly attracted to the divinity of Nilkanth. Varni bowed to them reverentially. He said, “My mind is greatly soothed by your ashram and I experience bliss on seeing such sadhus.” He continued, “Wherever I have travelled, I have always asked five philosophical questions. So far, I have yet to come across anyone who has been able to answer satisfactorily.”

Muktanand Swami replied with folded hands, “I will certainly answer your questions the way I have been taught by my guru Ramanand Swami.”

Varni asked, “Swami what is *jiva*? What is *ishwar*? And what is *maya*? Explain to me the characteristics of Brahma and Parabrahma.” Muktanand Swami pondered over the questions before replying, “Varniraj! You have asked very subtle questions at this young age. The nature of the questions proclaim your greatness.”

With these words, Muktanand Swami answered the questions with full humility. Nilkanth said, “I have put these questions to many people, but all of them had difficulty in answering them. You have the knowledge to answer them. This reveals the grace of your guru Ramanand Swami.”

Nilkanth was eager to go to wherever Ramanand Swami was to have his darshan. Muktanand assured him that the guru would return within a month or two. Nilkanth, therefore, decided to wait and stay in the ashram.

In his wanderings, spanning seven years, one month and

24 days, Nilkanth had not settled down at any place. He now decided to stay in Loj. It was a golden day, not only for the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, but also for the history of India. The conclusion of his seven-year sojourn was a landmark event. His resolve to stay in Gujarat was priceless, because it was the point that would forever change the history of Gujarat for the better.

44. Significance of Nilkanth's Travels

From 29 June 1792 (Ashadh *sud* 10, Samvat 1849) to 21 August 1799 (Shravan *vad* 6, Samvat 1856), Nilkanth had travelled continuously for seven years, one month and 24 days before finally settling down in the village of Loj. This great pilgrimage by Nilkanth was highly significant.

During the journey, Nilkanth endured all sorts of hardships. He had endured cold, heat, rain and hailstorms. Many a time, he had gone without food and water. He had observed fasts. He had undertaken such intense austerities that his body became emaciated. He had lived in the midst of poisonous reptiles, insects and wild beasts. He had passed through forests and thickets, over mountains and through deep valleys, across lakes and gushing rivers, through winding roads and thorny tracks. Barebodied and barefoot, Nilkanth had walked all the way without any conveyance. What was the purpose of such an ordeal?

Nilkanth had endured all this to liberate countless *jivas*. By their mere association with himself, he had liberated numerous animals, insects, birds and beasts. He gave darshan to many aspirants, to thousands of devotees yearning for his darshan for countless births, fulfilling their quest and blessing them with deliverance.

Through the sheer power of his divine glance and firm resolve,

he had destroyed evil people, thus opening the way to worship, free from danger, for sincere devotees of God. He liberated thousands of sages and sadhus, who had been performing austerities for many years in forests and on mountains. He gave refuge to thousands of souls.

Nilkanth had sanctified the whole land of Bharat through his spiritual journey. He sanctified lakes, wells, rivers and oceans. He added divinity to pilgrim places. He sanctified mandirs through his divine presence. He preached to sages and sadhus living in hermitages and monasteries, and touched them with his pure and flawless conduct. He directed those who wished to become sadhus and desired liberation on the road to Kathiawad with the intention of initiating them as *parambansas* in the future.

Wherever he went, Nilkanth preached the principles of ahimsa and *brahmacharya*. For sadhus, he established the importance of renouncing women and wealth. He explained the duties of householders, sages and kings. He made a deep study of pilgrim places, mandirs, and the lives of sages and sadhus, as well as the philosophy and traditions of many *sampradayas*. He made a mental note of all their essential attributes, as practised in different parts of the country.

Wherever he went, Nilkanth probed whether there were any sadhus and *sampradayas* favouring renunciation of worldly desires and wealth. He noted their beliefs regarding God as *sakar*, whether they had firm conviction in the *upasana* of God together with his ideal Bhakta, and whether there was real knowledge of the distinction between the five entities – *jiva*, *ishwar*, *maya*, Brahma and Parabrahma. Nilkanth Varni had asked questions regarding these five distinct entities in every pilgrim place and ashram. Nowhere did he receive a wholly satisfactory reply.

It was because of these reasons that Nilkanth Varni finally chose to settle at the ashram of Ramanand Swami in Loj. Here,

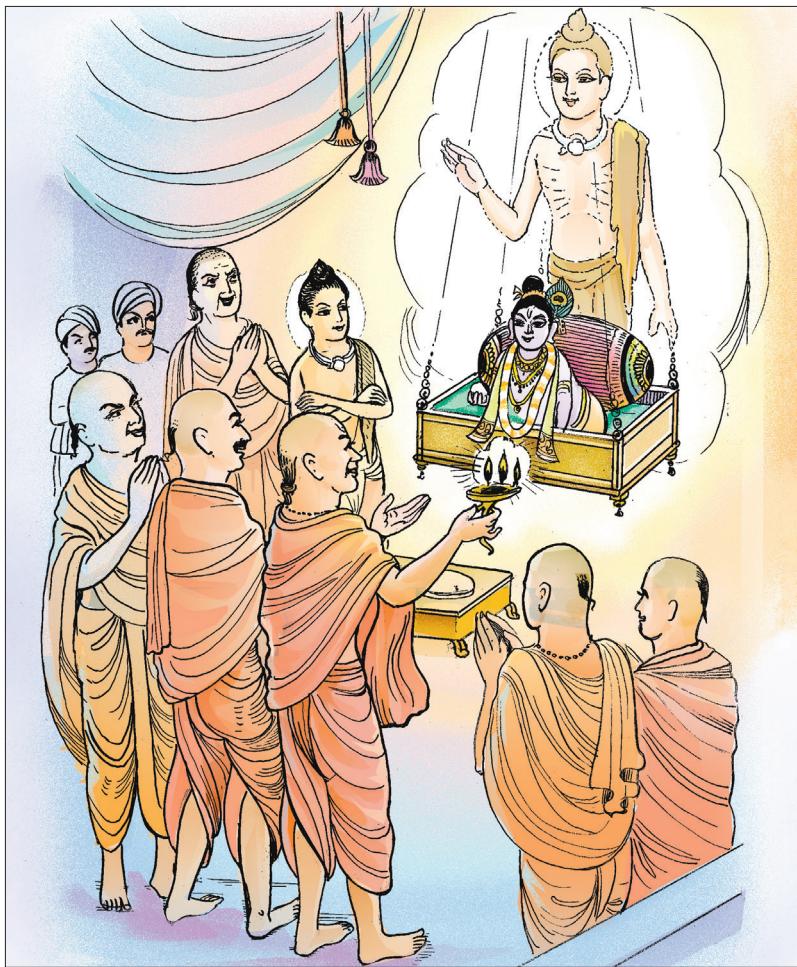
there were sadhus who had renounced both women and wealth. There was the worship of *sakar* God, together with reverence for his ideal devotee. They accepted the philosophy recognizing the five entities of *jiva*, *ishwar*, *maya*, Brahma and Parabrahma as distinct from one another. It was a pure bhakti *sampradaya*. Nilkanth, therefore, decided to settle down in Kathiawad. He was all-knowing and had great foresight. Ramanand Swami had already prepared the ground for him in the region where he wanted to work. He knew that in this land of Kathiawad, previously sanctified by the footsteps of Bhagwan Shri Krishna, many devotees were awaiting him.

The most important reason for Nilkanth's decision to settle in Kathiawad, however, was that it was the birthplace of his divine abode, Aksharbrahma Gunatitanand Swami, who had taken birth as Mulji Sharma in Bhadra. Nilkanth himself was Parabrahma Purushottam. He would naturally go where his ideal devotee, the eternal abode of Aksharbrahma resided. In this way, Nilkanth agreed to settle down in the sacred land of Kathiawad in Gujarat.

45. Darshan in Two Forms

Nilkanth Varni had now been in the ashram of Ramanand Swami for two days. For the Janmashtami festival, the whole ashram had been decorated with flags and bunting. Festoons of *asopalav* leaves lent beauty to the ashram. Trunks of plantain trees were planted at the ashram entrance. Drums were being played from early morning. Janmashtami is a day of fasting. Therefore, all the sadhus and devotees had observed an absolute fast, without taking even water.

When evening arrived, devotees began to flock to the ashram. Everyone came with a gift, small or big. Devotional songs and *dhun* resounded in the ashram. Muktanand Swami delivered a



Nilkanth gives darshan in place of the *murti* of the child Krishna

religious discourse. When the clock struck 12 midnight, the *murti* of Balkrishna was placed in a beautifully decorated cradle. Muktanand Swami performed the *arti* to celebrate the birth. To the surprise of all, Nilkanth Varni gave darshan in the cradle in place of the *murti* of the child Krishna. At the same time, he was also seen in another form seated in the assembly next to Muktanand Swami. Everyone was convinced that Nilkanth himself was the manifestation of Shri Krishna. Everyone in

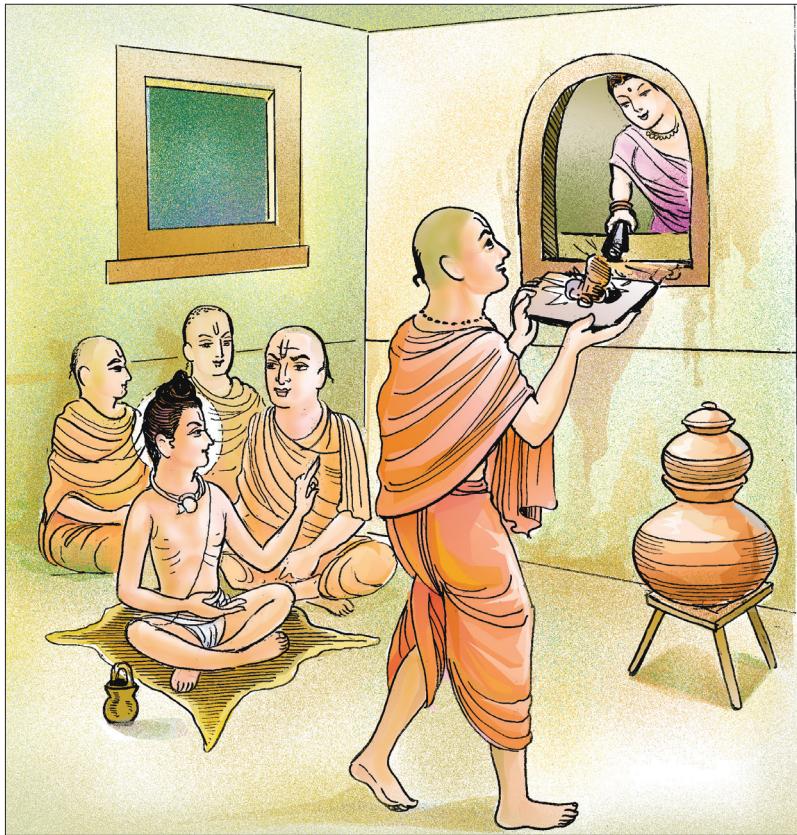
the assembly had this darshan for about half-an-hour. All of them took *prasad* of *panchajiri* and bowed to Nilkanth before returning home.

46. Separate Assemblies for Men and Women

There was a large compound belonging to Jivraj Sheth adjacent to the ashram of Ramanand Swami. Every evening, Muktanand Swami would deliver discourses there. Nilkanth also went to listen to the discourses. Men and women from all over the village gathered daily to listen to these discourses.

Nilkanth observed that the men and women sat together to listen to the discourses. This conduct violated the vow of *brahmacharya*. Nilkanth did not approve of it and thus got up from the assembly. Muktanand Swami realized that because Nilkanth was young and staunch in his asceticism, he may not have liked the mixed assembly of men and women. He thus decided that he would explain it later to Nilkanth and continued his discourse. With the departure of Nilkanth, however, the minds of everyone went with him. They felt a void and lost their concentration. Muktanand Swami was amazed by this. Never before had such a vacuum been created. Why did it happen today?

The following day, when the assembly commenced, Nilkanth got up again and told the sadhus, "O sadhus and devotees! Come to the mandir now and I will discourse to you. To listen to discourses with women in this way is not dharma." Nilkanth then walked off towards the mandir. The sadhus and male devotees followed him. Only women were left in the assembly. Muktanand Swami immediately realized his mistake and said to the women sitting there, "Goodbye to you all. From today onwards, there will be separate assemblies for men and women."



A sadhu accepts red hot embers from the adjoining house

Even though Muktanand Swami was senior to Nilkanth and the principal disciple of Ramanand Swami, the influence of Nilkanth's divine personality on him was tremendous. He respectfully accepted the assembly change introduced by Nilkanth. It was Nilkanth Varni's first chapter in introducing a spiritual discipline for men and women.

47. Plugging the Hole in the Wall

Another significant event soon followed. Adjoining the ashram of Ramanand Swami was a barber's house, with a small window

in the common wall between the two dwellings. Whenever required, the sadhus of the ashram and the barber's wife used to exchange fire for their respective ovens through that window. Nilkanth's eyes fell on that window. He called Muktanand Swami and said, "Swami, this window in the wall will one day definitely cause a breach in the moral conduct of sadhus. The sadhus should not have any such contact with women." Then, without even waiting for Muktanand Swami's consent, Nilkanth got the window plugged with bricks and mortar. The sadhus simply looked on. Muktanand Swami also felt that Varni had taken the appropriate action.

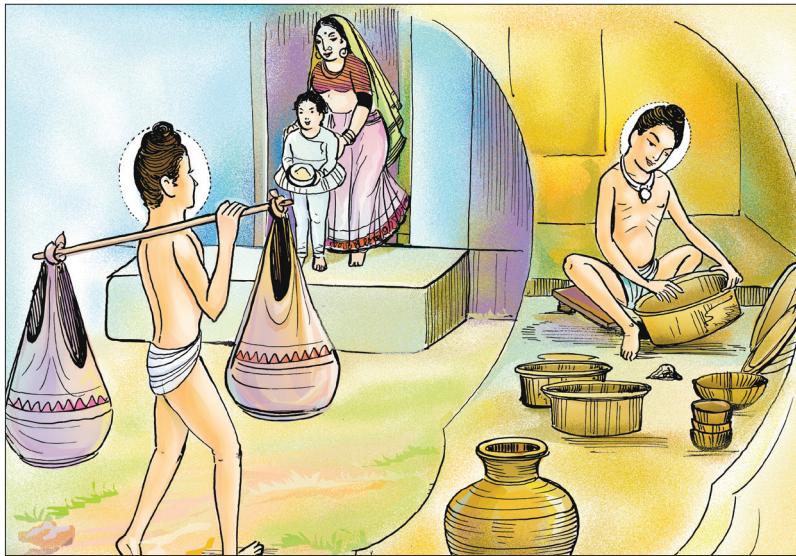
In this manner, Nilkanth brought about purity in dharma and in the conduct of sadhus of the Sampradaya. Everyone in the ashram was inspired with more reverence for Nilkanth.

48. “Cling to the Pillar”

Varni was now eager to meet Ramanand Swami. One day Anandjibhai Sanghedia came to Loj for the darshan of Muktanand Swami. He was going to Bhuj with Mayaram Bhatt. After darshan of Nilkanth, they got updates on the ashram activities and then went to meet Ramanand Swami. On reaching Bhuj, Ramanand Swami eagerly enquired as to what was happening in Loj. He then told Mayaram Bhatt, "Go to Loj and tell Nilkanth that if he wants to be a part of Satsang, he should cling to the pillar."

After a few days Mayaram Bhatt and Anandjibhai returned to Loj with Ramanand Swami's message. As soon as he heard this message, Nilkanth stood up and embraced a pillar. Muktanand Swami and all the other sadhus were greatly surprised at Nilkanth's briskness in instantly obeying the order of the guru.

On seeing Nilkanth clinging to the pillar, Mayaram Bhatt clarified, "Brahmachariji, what the guru meant was that you



Nilkanth begs for alms in Loj and performs menial seva in the ashram

should obey the commands of Muktanand Swami who is like a pillar in Satsang.”

Nilkanth bowed to Muktanand Swami and the latter embraced the young *brahmachari*.

Ever since Nilkanth had come to the ashram, the sadhus had become more alert in their moral duties. The following day, Varni was given two upper cloths and a long cloth. Muktanand Swami requested him to wear the cloths and said, “From today you will be called Sarjudas, because you come from the place through which the River Sarju flows.”

Nilkanth was amused on hearing this and said, “Swami! I am a guide who leads people along the path to Brahmapur. I have forgotten the land of Saryu and several other regions.”

Thereafter, Sarjudas engaged himself in *seva* at the ashram. He started teaching all the sadhus yogic exercises. He would eat only once a day in the afternoon. It was a frugal meal consisting of *rotlo*, chilli and a ball of *mindhiaval*. He used to get up early, draw water for bathing and serve the sadhus in various ways.



The village women see the universe in lumps of cow dung

He would pick up the *kavad* and go on begging rounds in the neighbouring villages as well as pick up cow dung for fuel. He used to spend the whole day in serving the ashram and performing bhakti.

One day, a *vairagi* came. The sadhus started giving him some food they had received as alms. However, he would not take it. Soon, when Sarjudas sat down for his meal, the *vairagi* saw a half *rotlo* and a ball of hot chillies being served. The *bawa* took it to be a sweet and asked for it. When he ate the *rotlo* and the ball that seemed like a laddu, he felt a burning sensation on his tongue, mouth and eyes. His eyes started watering. Nilkanth took pity on him and gave him some ghee to drink in order to relieve him of his discomfort.

49. Miracles Galore

Even the village-folk started referring Nilkanth as Sarjudas. Young Sarjudas became the darling of all. Following Ramanand

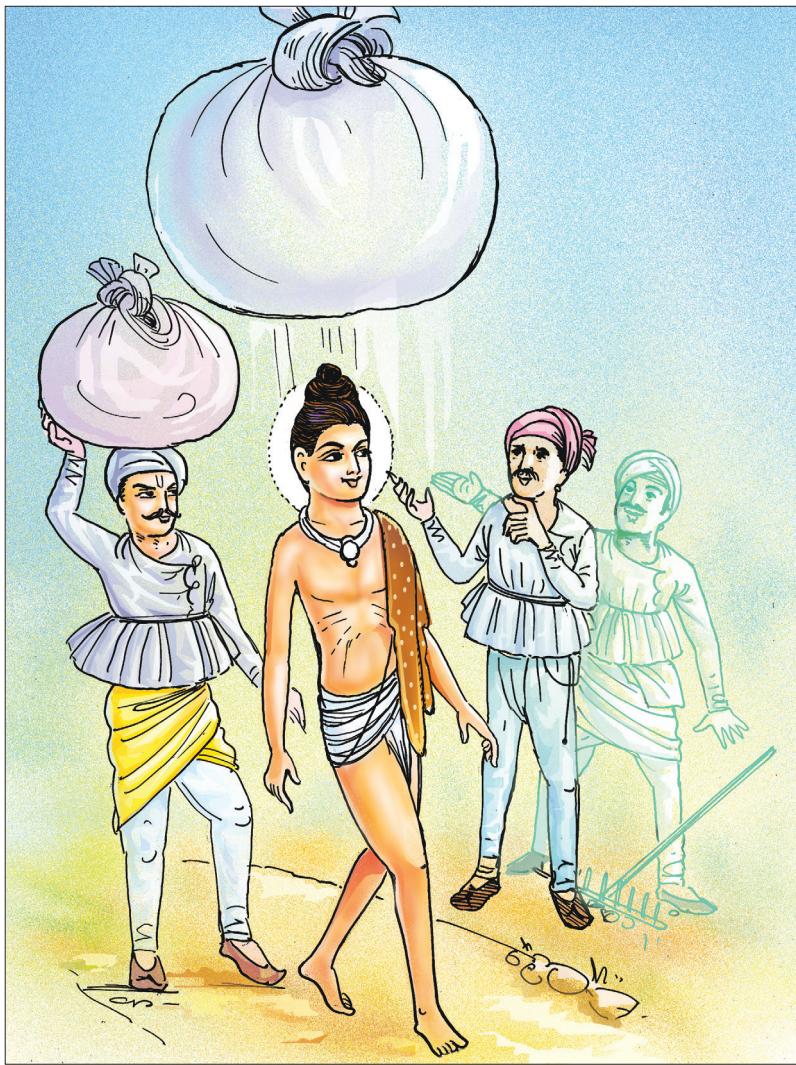
Swami's *agni*, Nilkanth stayed at the ashram under Muktanand Swami's guidance. Nilkanth made himself useful to the ashram and its residents in different ways. He would collect dung for making fuel cakes, sweep the floor, wash dishes, draw water for sadhus to bathe and help in many other ways. He would then go to beg for alms chanting "Ram-Krishna Dhuni Dhuni, Ram-Krishna Dhuni Dhuni" with a *kavad* slung across his shoulder.

In the late afternoon, when Nilkanth went to collect cow dung for fuel, the village girls and women would also come onto the streets to collect dung in their baskets. Everyone would rush to get the dung. Whenever any girl or woman attempted to pick a lump of dung, Varni would use his divine powers to make her see rivers, mountains, trees, chasms, jungles, clouds, lightening, and other scenes from the universe in it. The women would step back in fear and leave the dung alone. Nilkanth would then pick it up. He would then prepare dung cakes by mixing the dung with hay and grass. From this he would give one-third to the villagers.

The village of Sheel was 6 km from Loj. Two devotees had an abundant crop of cucumbers on their farms. They decided to give the cucumbers to Muktanand Swami for the purpose of making pickles for guru Ramanand Swami. They came to Muktanand Swami and requested, "We have an abundance of cucumbers in our farm. Please send 12 to 15 devotees to handpick the best. It is our wish to have the cucumbers dried and pickled for Ramanand Swami."

Muktanand Swami told Sukhanand Swami, "Go now to the village centre, and send 12 to 15 devotees to bring the cucumbers from Sheel."

Nilkanth, who was listening to the conversation, suggested, "Muktanand Swami, there is no need to call the devotees. I will go to the village today with Deva Bhakta and bring the whole lot of cucumbers."



People are amazed to see the bundles of cucumbers above Nilkanth's head

Muktanand Swami tried to dissuade him, "Nilkanth, you are too weak. Besides, the two of you will not be able to carry a load of 15 to 20 maunds of cucumbers for a distance of 6 km. Therefore, take a few devotees to help you."

Nilkanth, however, was persistent, "This *seva* I'll render myself. It will be of no labour or difficulty at all." With these words, Varni

went to Sheel with Deva Bhakta to bring the cucumbers. After they reached the village, Varni and Deva Bhakta picked 18 maunds of *cucumber*. A devotee told them to wait. “I shall get a cart,” he said. “There is no need for a cart. Bring a large piece of cloth,” Nilkanth suggested. The cloth was brought and 16 maunds of cucumbers were placed in the large cloth and tied to make a large bundle. The remaining two maunds were tied in a smaller bundle.

“Put the heavy bundle on my head,” Nilkanth said. With great difficulty, 12 devotees lifted the bundle to place on Varni’s head. To everyone’s surprise, the large bundle remained a foot above Nilkanth’s head. The second bundle was put on Deva Bhakta’s head. They both left for Loj. Nilkanth was walking briskly, whereas Deva Bhakta became tired and started perspiring after a mile. “I’ll not be able to carry this load,” he said.

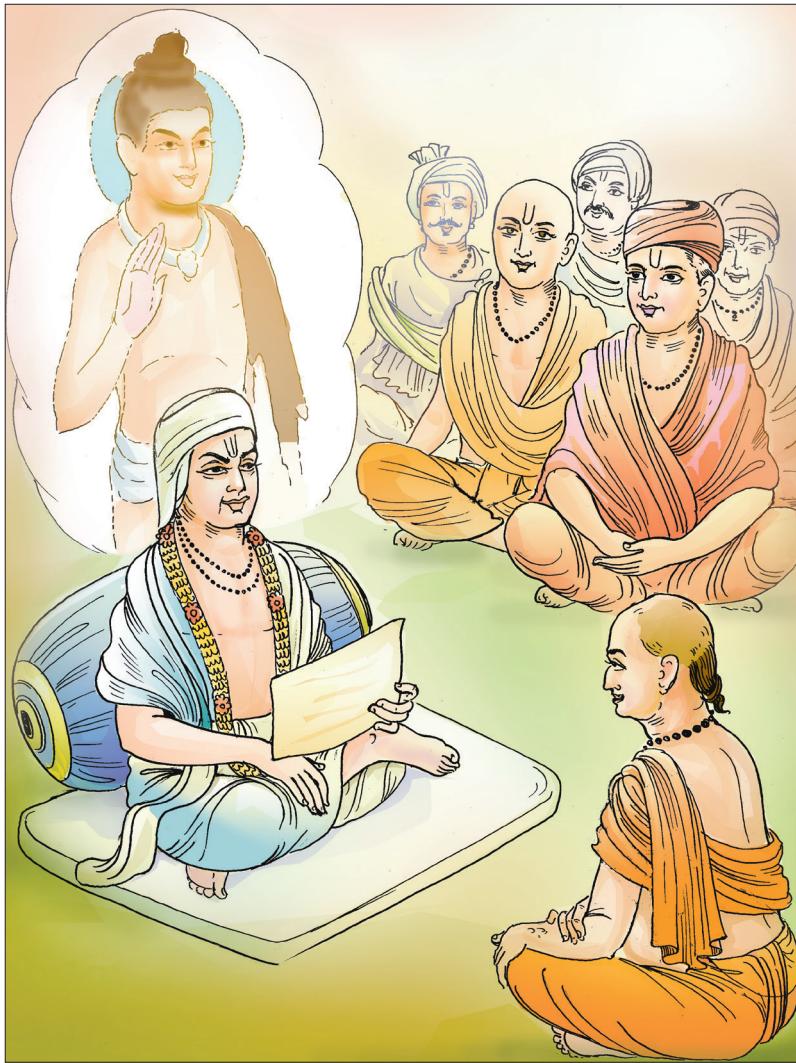
Nilkanth reassured him, “Why are you worried? Get on the big slab of stone ahead and gently put your bundle on my head.”

Deva Bhakta did as he was told. As they passed by, people were astonished to see both the large and small bundles above Nilkanth’s head.

Soon, they reached Loj. Nilkanth set down the load inside the ashram and announced, “The cucumbers have arrived. Tell the sadhus to take them inside in basketfuls.” When Muktanand Swami came with 15 sadhus, he was surprised to see the size of the larger bundle. Deva Bhakta described what had happened to Muktanand Swami. The latter realized that the young *brahmachari* was a *siddha* yogi and touched his feet. The sadhus then carried the cucumbers to the store room.

50. Letter to Ramanand Swami

It had been seven months since Nilkanth had arrived in the ashram of Ramanand Swami. It was now the month of Falgun and still Ramanand Swami had not returned. Nilkanth was



Ramanand Swami receives Nilkanth's letter

anxious to have the darshan of Ramanand Swami. He told Muktanand Swami, "If you kindly permit me, I would like to go to Kutch for darshan of the guru." Muktanand Swami replied, "The guru will certainly return here in a few days. Please stay here until then. In the meantime, let us write a letter to him."

On 15 March 1800 CE (Falgun vad 5, Samvat 1856), Nilkanth

Varni and Muktanand Swami both wrote a letter to Ramanand Swami. They were conveyed to Kutch by Mayaram Bhatt. He reached Bhuj after seven days, offered prostrations and gave the letters to Ramanand Swami. The guru was immensely pleased to receive the letters, and out of respect touched them to his head. He pressed Nilkanth's letter to his heart and then opened Muktanand Swami's letter. His face welled with joy as he read it. Then he opened Sarjudas' letter.⁴ The words reflected Nilkanth's divine personality, knowledge, detachment and devotion.

Ramanand Swami was overwhelmed with happiness and declared, "The one who I had been waiting for has finally arrived. God has manifested in human form to gift everyone with *moksha*."

Tears of joy welled in the eyes of Ramanand Swami. He added, "Glory, glory to Varniraj! We have been relieved of all our burdens." He addressed the assembly, "Devotees, today is a great auspicious day for us all. Through whom the *bbagvat* dharma will be established and thousands will become *brahmarup* and attain *Brahmadham*; that Varni – God – has arrived in Loj."

To celebrate this eventful occasion, Ramanand Swami asked for sugar crystals and gave handfuls to Mayaram Bhatt.

"Bhattji, I give you these sugar crystals because you have brought the good news. I have given you only this much. Varni will give you a lot more and make you happier." Ramanand Swami then distributed sugar crystals to all the devotees.

The following day, Ramanand Swami wrote letters to Varniraj and Muktanand Swami, and instructed Mayaram Bhatt to return with the two letters. He said to him, "Mayaram, take these two letters and give them to Muktanand Swami. On your way, inform all the devotees about Varni's arrival in the villages you pass through. Tell them all that I have instructed everyone to go to Loj for his darshan."

4. The historic letter of Nilkanth is today preserved in the 'Prasadi Mandapam' at Akshardham, Gandhinagar.

After a few days, Mayaram reached Loj. He delivered the letters to Muktanand Swami. In his letter to Muktanand Swami, Ramanand Swami wrote, “Take care of Varni. He is not of this world, which you will realize in future. Arrange for all the sadhus to learn ashtanga yoga from him. I will come at the end of Vaishakh month.” To Nilkanth Varni, Ramanand Swami wrote, “Take care of your body. You still have to accomplish many tasks. Stay there at present. Do not be in a hurry to come here.

“Teach ashtanga yoga to all the sadhus. As you are eager for my darshan, I too am equally eager for your’s. But currently, I have to travel for the spread of Satsang and please the devotees.”

51. The Glory of Nilkanth

In the village of Shekhpur lived Lalji Suthar, a disciple of Ramanand Swami. He went for darshan of Ramanand Swami in Kutch.

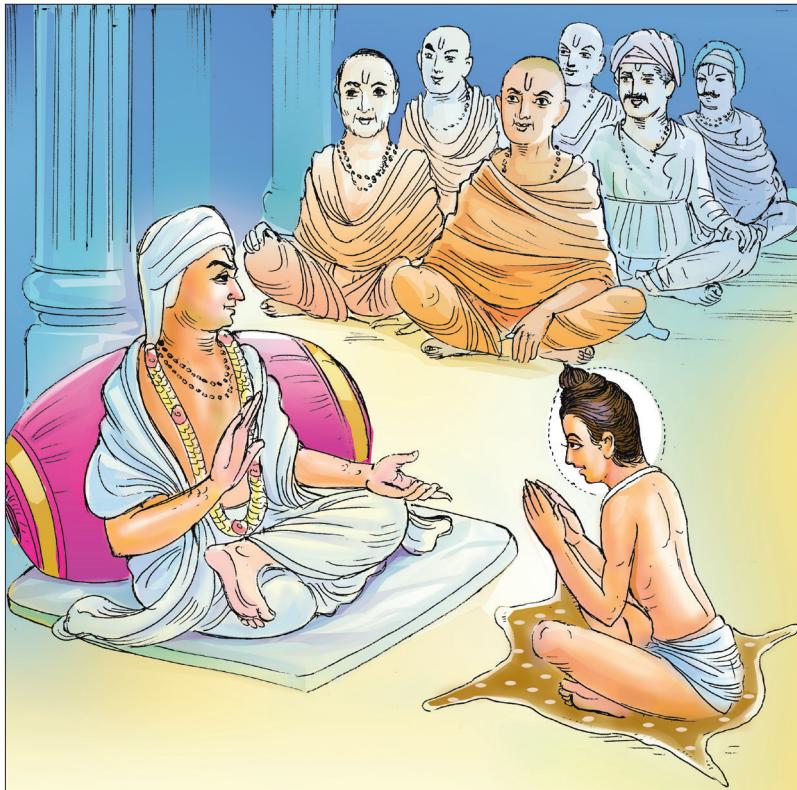
“Why did you come here all of a sudden?” Ramanand Swami asked.

Lalji Suthar replied, “A few days ago when Mayaram Bhatt was going to Loj with your letters, he halted in Shekhpur for the night. He informed me that Varni has arrived in Loj, and that he is greater than you. I thought I should see you and acquaint you with the fact that Mayaram is propagating the greatness of Nilkanth in your name.”

On hearing this, Ramanand Swami told Lalji, “Why did you come here at all? I had sent word to all concerned through Mayaram to go for Varni’s darshan in Loj. Why, then, didn’t you go to Loj?”

Lalji was still not satisfied. He queried, “Swamiji, how great is Nilkanth?”

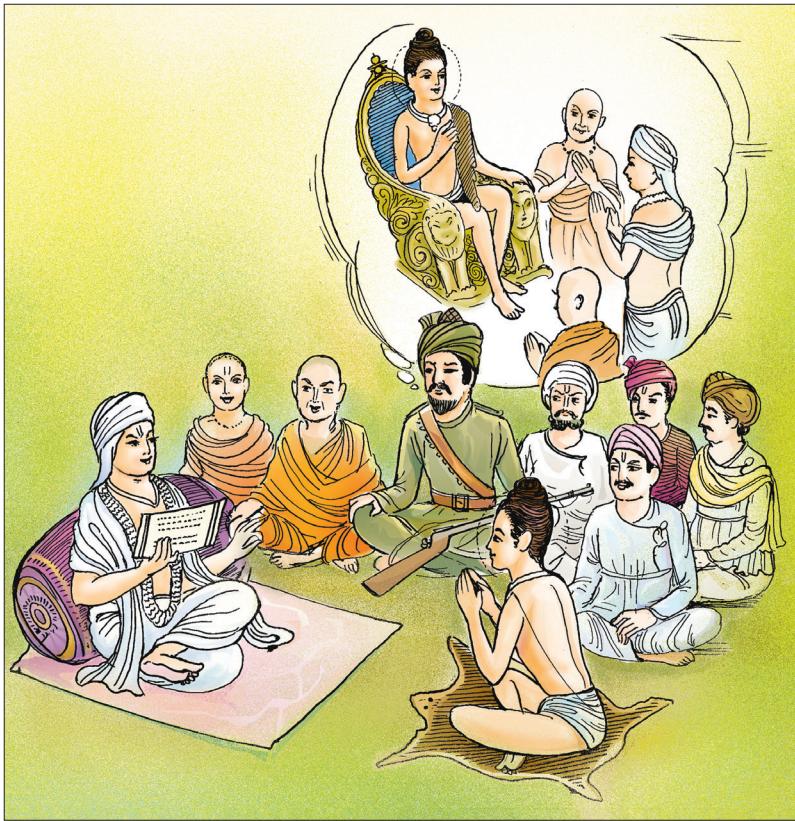
Ramanand Swami calmly replied, “He is the incarnation of



Nilkanth meets Ramanand Swami

all incarnations. However much we may extol his greatness, it will still be inadequate. Even the greatest of yogis and *munis* meditate on him. Why did you come to Kutch without having Varni's darshan? Now, go to Lojpur, have the darshan of Nilkanth and pay your respects to him."

Lalji Suthar was surprised to hear this. Overwhelmed with joy, he bowed to his guru before leaving enthusiastically for Lojpur for Nilkanth's darshan. In Loj, he felt blessed at Varni's darshan. After Ramanand Swami passed away, Lalji Suthar was later initiated into the sadhu-fold and named Nishkulanand Swami.



Jamadar Saheb realizes the glory of Nilkanth during samadhi

52. Meeting Ramanand Swami

Nine months had passed since Nilkanth's arrival in Loj. Still, he had not been able to meet Ramanand Swami. Nilkanth asked Muktanand Swami to fulfil his wish to meet the guru by any means. In response, Muktanand Swami convinced Varni to be patient, because it would still take a little more time. One day, Varni told Muktanand Swami, "Swami, when you sit for puja tomorrow, I will sit by your side." Muktanand Swami did not understand the purpose behind Varni's wish.

The following day, when Muktanand Swami sat down for puja, Nilkanth came and sat next to him. Muktanand Swami

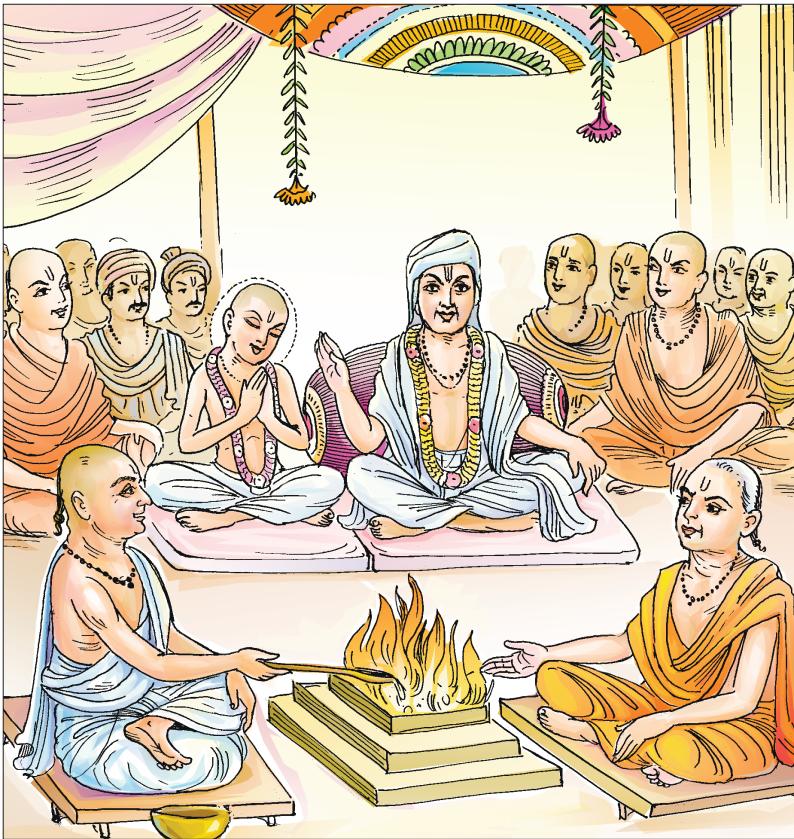
started meditating. He was seeing Ramanand Swami in his meditation. Sarjudas linked his mind through his yogic powers with Muktanand Swami's mind and had darshan of Ramanand Swami. The guru had a fair complexion, stout body, lotus-shaped eyes, sharp nose, broad forehead and a deep navel. On seeing the serene form of the guru, Nilkanth was overjoyed. When Muktanand Swami completed his meditation, Nilkanth happily expressed his feelings, "I have had the darshan of Ramanand Swami." To everyone's surprise, Nilkanth then described the specific physical features of Ramanand Swami.

On the evening of Jeth *vad* 10, Kurji Dave came to Loj with a message that Ramanand Swami was soon to arrive in Piplana and had invited Nilkanth Varni and all the sadhus to come for darshan. Delighted by the good news, Muktanand Swami, as a token of appreciation, presented his *pagh* to Kurji Dave. The other sadhus too presented him with whatever they had as gifts. The news brought tremendous joy to Nilkanth's face. As he had nothing to give to Kurji Dave, he said, "Dave, I will give you my Akshardham as a gift." Kurji Dave did not understand these words of Nilkanth. The *bramachari* repeated his words. "Dave, what no one can give, that supreme Akshardham I give to you."

That evening, Nilkanth Varni, Muktanand Swami and other sadhus departed for Piplana. All through the night, they walked in the light rains. Naturally, everyone was walking briskly because they were in a hurry to have darshan of Ramanand Swami. Nilkanth, however, was physically emaciated and tired easily.

"If you walk like this, when will we reach Piplana? It is still very far, so use your yogic powers," Muktanand Swami suggested to Nilkanth.

Nilkanth immediately exercised his yogic powers and walked with the speed of an arrow shot from a bow. The entire group was left behind. No one could keep up with him. Nilkanth soon



Ramanand Swami gives *diksha* to Nilkanth

reached the banks of the River Ozat. Piplana was on the other bank. The river was overflowing. The current was so strong that even mighty elephants would be swept away. Nilkanth, however, remained undeterred. He was eager for the darshan of Ramanand Swami. Using his yogic powers, he walked briskly over the waters of the River Ozat and reached the opposite bank. The entire group watched in amazement. After bathing, Varni performed puja and waited for Muktanand Swami and others to join him. After an hour, when the floods subsided Muktanand Swami and the others crossed the river in a boat and entered Piplana together. Ramanand Swami was staying at Narsinh Mehta's home.

The day of this historic meeting was 19 June 1800 (Jeth vad 12, Samvat 1856). News was conveyed to Ramanand Swami that Nilkanth Varni and the sadhus had arrived in Piplana. On hearing this, Ramanand Swami immediately got up from his seat. Soon the group of sadhus arrived. Nilkanth was at the front. On seeing Ramanand Swami, Nilkanth started offering prostrations. The guru ran towards the young *brahmachari*, raised him and embraced him.

Ramanand Swami then revealed, “Muktanand Swami, did you know that the alms centres we have started in the villages were for this Varniraj? I have been waiting so long for him to come.” Then, Ramanand Swami explained the glory of Nilkanth to all the sadhus.

One sadhu asked, “Swami, you had often mentioned that the main player of the show was yet to come. Is it this Varni?”

“Yes, it is him. It is your great fortune to have met him today. When you realize his true form, your joy will know no bounds!” replied Ramanand Swami.

53. The Police Chief Experiences Samadhi

One day, Ramanand Swami, sitting on a mattress spread over a raised dais and resting against a pillow, was delivering a discourse explaining the glory of Nilkanth. Nilkanth Varni was sitting on a mat nearby. During this time, a *jamadar* (police chief) arrived. He was a Muslim, and was very devout and respectful. He touched the feet of Ramanand Swami and sat down to listen to the discourse.

During the discourse, he experienced samadhi because of Nilkanth’s grace. He had the darshan of Akshardham. He saw Nilkanth Varni seated on a beautiful divine throne in Akshardham. All around him infinite *muktas* were standing and

praying to Nilkanth. He also saw Ramanand Swami praying to Nilkanth.

After a while, the *jamadar* woke up from samadhi, stood up and exclaimed, “What is this? Why is there this reverse tradition among the Hindus? I find it quite improper. How is it that amongst you Hindus, the messenger sits on a higher seat and God sits on a lower seat?”

Ramanand Swami explained, “Jamadar Saheb, you may not be able to appreciate our ancient tradition. Sage Vashishtha used to sit on a high seat, while Bhagwan Ramchandra sat down beside him.”

Nilkanth Varni was amused by this dialogue. The *jamadar* could not understand much. He simply bowed to Nilkanth and, scratching his head in bewilderment, departed.

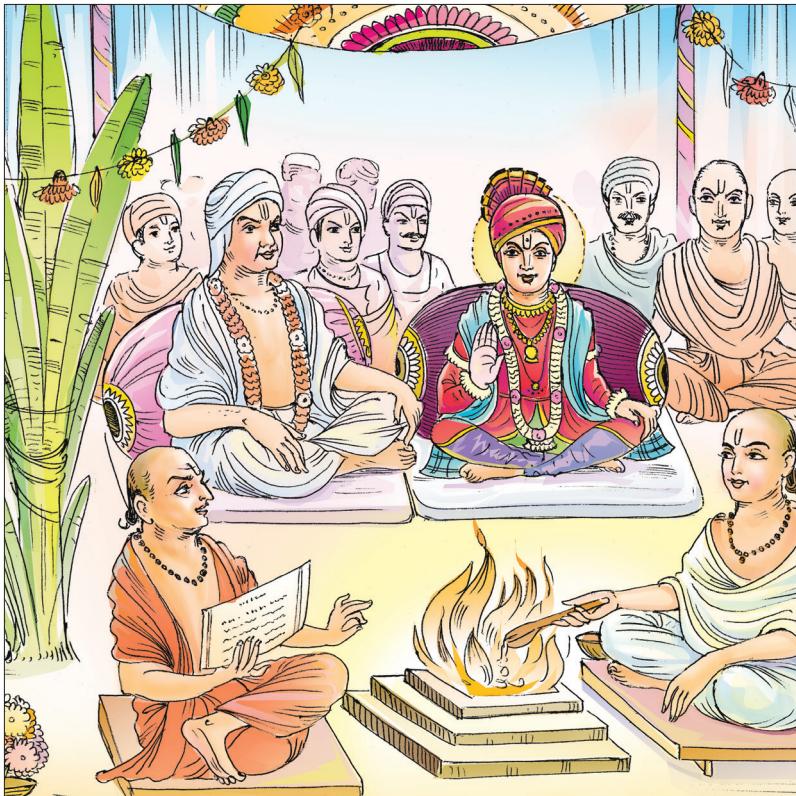
54. Receives Diksha

Nilkanth spent the four months of Chaturmas with Ramanand Swami. He also offered *seva* in during the Diwali and Annakut festivals. Then came the auspicious day of Prabodhini Ekadashi on 28 October 1800 (Kartik *sud* 11, Samvat 1857). Everyone in the ashram had observed an absolute fast.

After bathing and morning worship, Nilkanth bowed to Ramanand Swami and said, “Swamiji, you are my father and mother. You alone are my guru. Please favour me today with the *maha-diksha* and bless me.”

Ramanand Swami called for musicians who could play the *dhol*, *transa* and *sharnai*. He organized a grand festival. He had called learned Brahmins to perform a *yagna* in accordance with the mandates of the shastras.

Nilkanth's head was completely shaven. Clad in beautiful clothes, Nilkanth came to Ramanand Swami to the *yagnashala*. Ramanand Swami placed a *tulsi mala* around Nilkanth's neck.



In Jetpur, Ramanand Swami appoints Nilkanth as his spiritual successor

He applied *chandlo* and *tilak* on the young celibate's forehead. He smeared sandalwood paste on both his arms and chest and uttered the guru mantra in Nilkanth's ear and gave him two names – 'Sahajanand Swami' and 'Narayan Muni'. Ramanand Swami also gave him this precept: "O Sahajanand, observe dharma and inspire others to observe the same. Liberate all the *jivas* living on this earth and propagate the significance of offering bhakti with God's greatness." In this manner, Nilkanth became Sahajanand Swami. Ramanand Swami was overjoyed that day. It appeared as if he were absorbed in the darshan of Sahajanand Swami. Everyone else was also impressed and drawn to the divine form of the newly initiated Sahajanand Swami.

55. Appointed as Head of Fellowship

Thereafter, Sahajanand Swami visited several villages with Ramanand Swami in Sorath. Wherever they travelled, Ramanand Swami spoke about the glory of Sahajanand Swami to the devotees. The devotees experienced great peace at the darshan of Sahajanand Swami.

Sahajanand Swami used to eat only one *rotlo* and some chillies every day. Because his body was extremely weak, Ramanand Swami took proper care of him. Daily, he had his body massaged with wax oil and asked him not to undertake any fasts. He made Sahajanand Swami sit by his side for meals and served him with nourishing food and sweet items. He made him eat butter and sugar to gain weight.

In this way, a year passed. Once, Ramanand Swami called Muktanand, Sukhanand and other sadhus as well as devotees such as Ramdasbhai, Mancha Bhakta, Bhimbhai, Parvatbhai, Mayaram Bhatt and others. He asked, “I want to relinquish the *gadi* of this Satsang. Whom do you think I should install?”

All of them declared unanimously, “Swamiji, this child-celebrate Sahajanand Swami alone deserves to be installed on the *gadi*.”

Ramanand Swami said, “You have given expression to the wish I cherish most. Let us therefore begin preparations for the installation celebrations.”

Ramanand Swami then called the leading devotees to hold consultations for the installation ceremony. He ascertained from the Brahmins the appropriate *muhurt*. They indicated a *muhurt* on Prabodhini Ekadashi. Ramanand Swami had invitations written and sent to all his disciples. He instructed them all to come to participate in this celebration with their families, and not to miss the occasion.

Ramanand Swami, thereafter, asked Mayaram Bhatt to make

arrangements for the Brahmins and the *yagna* rituals. Parvatbhai was entrusted with the work of purchases. Bhimbhai was called upon to arrange for beds and quilts. Govardhanbhai was placed in charge of arranging for ghee, oil, cereals and other provisions. Hirjibhai was asked to maintain the accounts and to attend to the devotees. In this way, Ramanand Swami distributed the work.

A spacious pavilion, which could accommodate thousands of devotees was set up in Jetpur. The *yagnashala*, kitchen, stables and other areas were all beautifully set up. The entrance and arches were erected by planting trunks of banana trees. Flags, bunting and festoons of asopalav leaves decorated the whole *mandap* and the town of Jetpur.

Prabodhini Ekadashi fell on 16 November 1801 (Kartik *sud* 11, Samvat 1858). The lanes and by-lanes of Jetpur town became overwhelmed with devotees. Drums had been rhythmically played from early morning. Sahajanand Swami, Muktanand Swami and Sukhanand Swami accompanied Ramanand Swami to the River Bhadar for their early morning bath. After completing his daily worship, Sahajanand Swami prostrated before Ramanand Swami and performed his *pujan*.

Thereafter, all of them started for the *mandap* accompanied by the beating of drums and pipe-playing. The guards saluted the occasion by firing rifles in the air. Groups of sadhus were singing kirtans. Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami were both seated in a coach driven by two horses. The whole procession soon arrived at the *mandap*.

The *mandap* resounded with the recitation of Vedic mantras by Brahmins. The *sharnai* and the drums were being played. The main *yagna* altar was in the middle of the *mandap*. A beautiful seat was set up and the whole atmosphere was rendered fragrant with incense, lighted lamps and sandalwood paste. The *murtis* of Radha and Krishna were placed in the *yagnashala*. Both Ramanand Swami and Sahajanand Swami went before the *murtis*

and bowed to them. They sat down before the altar and offered oblations. With Yagnanarayan as a witness, Ramanand Swami held Sahajanand Swami's hand and seated him on his *gadi*.

Guru Ramanand Swami then smeared sandalwood paste and applied a *chandlo* of kumkum on the forehead of Sahajanand Swami before placing a garland around his neck. The whole *mandap* resounded with, "Shri Sahajanand Swami Maharaj *ni jay!*" The deities showered flowers from the heavens. Women sang auspicious songs. The devotees hailed the victory slogan. All the sadhus performed the puja of Sahajanand Swami. Then Sahajanand Swami prostrated before guru Ramanand Swami, bowed to all the sadhus and then sat down to receive guidance and blessings from the guru. According to popular tradition, guru Ramanand Swami instructed, "Today, I have appointed you as the head of this Fellowship. Therefore, please abide by and foster the dharma as prescribed in the Vedas. Perform *yagnas*, Vishnuyag and deeds for the welfare of people. Propagate *jnan*, *vairagya* and other spiritual values. Give *diksha* to those aspirants who are of good conduct, are detached from life and want to renounce the world. Spread the doctrine of bhakti imbued with dharma. Inspire the writing of shastras to consolidate the establishment of the Sampradaya. Accept whatever clothes, ornaments, fruits, flowers and the like that are offered to you. Remove those from the Fellowship who are unworthy and averse to it."

After concluding his instructions, Ramanand Swami gave him Sahajanand Swami rich clothes such as *surval* and *pagh* to wear and adorned him with ornaments. Ramanand Swami then performed the *arti* of Sahajanand Swami. The devotees were absorbed in a sea of divine joy. Everyone was attracted to the beautiful, divine form of Sahajanand Swami.

Thereafter, Ramanand Swami instructed all the sadhus and devotees to obey the commands of Sahajanand Swami and to

engage in bhajan of God. He added, “I may have come here first, but this Sahajanand is the master of all. He is Purushottam Narayan himself, transcending even Akshar who is beyond everything else. Therefore, all of you should act according to his dictates and worship him devoutly.”

Ramanand Swami then told Sahajanand Swami to ask for a boon. Sahajanand Swami asked for two boons, “If a devotee is to suffer the pain of one scorpion sting, then may the pain of the sting of millions of scorpions befall on each and every pore of my body; but no pain should afflict the devotee. And if a devotee is destined to have a begging bowl, then let that begging bowl come to me; but the devotee should not suffer from want of food and clothing. Please grant me these two boons.” Sahajanand Swami’s unparalleled prayer to ask for these boons from his guru, Ramanand Swami, revealed his compassion and deep love for the devotees. On seeing the magnanimous sentiment of Sahajanand Swami, the eyes of Ramanand Swami and the devotees became wet with tears of joy. Ramanand Swami granted him both boons, “So shall it be.”

On this historic occasion Mulji Sharma, the incarnation of Aksharbrahma, and Lalji Suthar were both present. Mulji Sharma had offered respects to Sahajanand Swami by performing *pujan* and donating a cow. At that time, Sahajanand Swami revealed, “This Mulji is my divine abode of Akshardham.” On this occasion devotees offered various gifts to Sahajanand Swami. Thereafter, a procession was carried out in his honour.

56. Passing Away of Ramanand Swami

About a month had elapsed. Ramanand Swami thought, “The manifest form of Purushottam has been installed on the *gadi* and my work is now over. I no longer wish to remain in this

body.” With this thought, he went to the village of Faneni and fell ill. He addressed the devotees, “This Varni is God himself. Firmly believe this and obey the wishes of Sahajanand Swami. I have played the role of a drum-beater to gather you all and connect you with him. He will establish and propagate *bhagvat* dharma. He will open the path of highest liberation for all.”

Soon after, on 17 December 1801 (Magshar *sud* 13, Samvat 1858), while meditating on his seat, Ramanand Swami passed away to Akshardham. Divine light emanated all around. As news of Ramanand Swami’s demise spread, thousands of devotees were overwhelmed with grief. At that time, Sahajanand Swami consoled everyone, “Great souls never leave this world. By obeying Swami’s commands, you will not feel that he has departed. You will come to realize the manifest form of God.”

On that day, a new chapter unfolded in the life of Sahajanand Swami and the Sampradaya.

Glossary

adad a type of pulse

advait philosophy of absolute non-dualism

ahimsa non-violence

Akshar divine abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; Gunatitanand Swami

Akshardham the abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; Gunatitanand Swami

akshay patra inexhaustible bowl which gives food by wishing
akshividya knowledge of spiritual perception; inner vision by which one realizes subtle truths beyond the physical senses

ankush one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a thin-edged weapon to drive and steer an elephant

annakut a variety of food dishes offered to God

ardhachandra one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like the half curve of the moon

arti a ritual of moving a lighted lamp in one's right hand in a circular movement in front of a deity while ringing a small bell with one's left hand and singing God's glory

ashtakon one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like an octagon

ashtanga yoga eight steps to master in yoga

asopalav a kind of Indian tree

atma pure *jiva*

bal yogi child sage

Bania Hindu trader

basti yogic practice

bawa ascetic

bhagvat dharma dharma related to God; dharma which is not different from or lesser than bhakti; also called *ekantik* dharma

bhakta devotee

bhakti sampradaya religious sect advocating devotional worship of God

brahmachari celibate

brahmacharya celibacy

Brahmadham divine abode of Bhagwan Swaminarayan; Akshardham

brahmagnan knowledge of Brahma and Parabrahma

brahmarup one who has realized Brahma. A transcendental state free of mundane desires and unbroken communion with Parabrahma

brahmavidya knowledge of Brahma and Parabrahma

chandlo circular mark made on the forehead

chandan paste of sandalwood

Charan belonging to the clan of traditional poets

charmavari leather-touched water

chaturbhuj four-armed form of God

Chaturmas four months of the monsoon season during which one traditionally undertakes additional spiritual observances

daharvidya knowledge of the 'dahar akash', the subtle space within the heart where God is realised to reside

darbar court of residence belonging to a king or rural ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas

deep lighted lamp

dhanushya one of the 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a bow

dharana concentration; refers to a day of fasting

dhol large drum

dhoti a yogic practice

dhyan meditation; contemplation

dhun repeated recital of name of God accompanied by clapping

diksha initiation into ascetism; initiation into a faith

Falgun month of Hindu Calendar; corresponds to February–March

gadi seat of religious head of a Sampradaya

gopad one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a cow's hoof

graha stars; planets

guru preceptor; teacher

guru mantra mantra given by one's preceptor

jamadar chief of police

jambu one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a blackberry

jata long tuft of hair

jati ascetic

jav barley

jiva individual soul; one of the five eternal realities

jivan-mukta one emancipated from the bondage of life in this very body

jnan spiritual knowledge, wisdom

jogi an ascetic

juvar millet

jyotirling one of the twelve sacred shrines where Bhagwan Shiv is believed to have manifested as a pillar of divine light (jyoti-ling) in various parts of India

kalash water pot

Kal Purush an entity that is invoked in a gold *murti* which liberates anyone of disease and other afflictions

kamandal gourd

kanthi a double-threaded necklace usually made of tulsi

beads worn by *satsangis* as a sign of affiliation to Bhagwan Swaminarayan

Kartik month of Hindu calendar; corresponds to October–November

kavad bamboo lath borne on the shoulder with slings at both ends for carrying pitchers, etc.

ketu one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a flag

khichdi cooked preparation of rice and *dal* grains

kosh a mechanism to draw water from a well

kunjar a form of yogic practice

Magshar month of Hindu calendar; November–December

maha-diksha special initiation ceremony as a sadhu

mahant head of mandir

mala rosary

mandap pavilion

maund a unit of weight varying from 11 kg to 72 kg

meen one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a fish

mindhiaval medicinal leaves

mrugcharma deer skin

muhurt an auspicious time

mukta liberated soul; one free from *maya*

muni sage; austere person

murti sacred image of deity in stone, painting, or other form

math dal split brown gram, a kind of pulse

muth monastery

neti preliminary purificatory exercises in *bathā* yoga

nirakar formless; impersonal

nirgun beyond qualities

niyam code of conduct

padma one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a lotus

padmasan a yogic posture
pagh turban-like attire placed on one's head
panchajiri item made of sugar and *dhana*
paramhansa the best of the four types of sannyasis
pranayam regulation and restraint of breath; the fourth stage of ashtanga yoga
prasad sanctified food
pratyahar withdrawal of senses from their objects; the fifth stage of Patanjali's ashtanga yoga
pujan worship with rituals

rajas quality that generates worldly passion and restlessness; one of the three *gunas* of *maya*
rath yatra chariot procession
rayan a sweet fruit-bearing tree
rotlo baked flat bread made of millet flour

sadguru eminent preceptor
saheb a title of respect used for one's superiors
sakar personal; with form
sakshat in person; perceptible
sampradaya fellowship; organization
Samvat Indian year
sandhya a religious ablution and prayer performed in the morning, at noon and in the evening
sandhya vandan worship offered to Gayatri in the evening
sarovar lake
sathvo preparation made of flour
sat-chit-anand 'existence-consciousness-bliss'
sati chaste lady
satsangi member of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya
sattva quality of light, purity and goodness; one of the three *gunas* of *maya*

Satyug golden era; era of truth
setubandh bridge
seva service to God
Shaligram black round smooth piece of stone worshipped as the symbol of Bhagwan Vishnu
sharnai Indian clarion
shastras scriptures
shira-puri a sweet and savoury dish
Shravan a month of the Hindu calendar; corresponds to July–August
siddhi accomplishments or achievements; extraordinary powers acquired as a result of gruelling austerities or naturally through spiritual maturity in yogic endeavours
siddha realized soul; a perfect yogi
sukhdi a type of sweet delicacy
surval similar to a pair of trousers
swarup form or *murti*
swastik auspicious sign; one of the 16 holy signs on God's feet
swastik-asan a yogic posture
swayambhu self-made

tamas ignorance; darkness; principle of inertia of consciousness and force; one of the three *gunas* of *maya*
tapasvi one engaged in austerities
tapovan a grove where austerities have been performed
thuli a wheat preparation
tilak a U-shaped mark applied to the forehead with sandalwood paste
transa cymbals
trikon one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a triangle
tyagi ascetic; one who leads a life of renunciation

upasana mode of worship in which one offers devotion to God with the understanding of his glory

urdhvarekha one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a line pointing upwards

vachan-siddha an individual who has power to make spoken words come true

vairagya detachment; dispassion

vaishnavi pertaining to Vaishnavs

vajra one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a thunderbolt

vairagis clan of ascetics

vyom one of 16 holy signs on God's feet; it is shaped like a circle or open disc

yagna a Vedic ritual in which offerings are made to the gods

yagnakund offering pit in which the *yagna* fire burns and into which offerings of grains, pulses and other items are made

yagnashala place where *yagna* is performed

yam one of the eight steps of yoga

yatiraj king of celibates