

Episode 40 – Major marine eco-systems of India and challenges

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Synopsis

A mother is narrating a bedtime story to her daughter. In the story, two princes rule over a kingdom – Dayanand is a just ruler, Rajiv is a lazy one. Rajiv turns Dayanand into a fish so that he can rule. As a fish, Dayanand swims across the whole coast of India till he meets a magical queen of another kingdom who restores him to his normal state. He returns and vanquishes his brother. Through the way the princes rule their kingdom and the adventures of Dayanand as a fish, facets of the various marine ecosystems of India are brought out.

Characters

Renuka, a young girl

Renuka's mother

Rajiv, the lazy prince

Saroja, the lazy prince's wife

Minister

Dayanand, the good prince

The FishermSSSSSSan

The Queen

Script

RENUKA: (whining) Amma, I can't sleep.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: (tired) What is wrong, Renuka? Go to sleep.

RENUKA: Amma, can you tell me a story? Please? That will surely help.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Do you promise to sleep after that?

RENUKA: Yes!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: (laughing) Okay, fine. I'll tell you a story about *The Prince Who Was A Fish*.

RENUKA: But how can a prince be a fish?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Listen to the story!

RENUKA: (quickly) Okay, sorry, sorry. Tell me the story.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Once upon a time there was a kingdom on the coast of India.

RENUKA: (interrupting) Which coast, amma?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: (confused) Eh? What do you mean?

RENUKA: Amma, India has two coasts – one with the Bay of Bengal and one with the Arabian Sea. Which one was it?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: I'm not sure, darling.

RENUKA: Tell me, no! India's coastline is very, very long! It's almost 7500 kilometres long. If you just say "the coast", it could be any one of nine states in India. Which one is it?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Okay, which state has the longest coastline?

RENUKA: Um. Gujarat!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Okay, that one. Don't interrupt anymore. The king and queen of that kingdom had two sons. These two sons were in charge of looking after the kingdom because the king was getting old. For this kingdom, the sea was very important. Even today, almost one-third of all the people in India depend on the sea and the coastal areas. Imagine how it must've been back then!

RENUKA: But how come so many people depend on the coasts?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Oh. (Pause) Many reasons. Sometimes the best land for farming is along the coasts. In the olden days, cities were built along the coast because ports are very important places for trading and travel. Nowadays most people don't travel by ship any more. But ports are still important for trading goods between countries.

RENUKA: And the cities?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Those cities have become very big today and many industries and businesses are there. So lots of people travel there for jobs and the cities become even bigger.

RENUKA: What work did the sons have to do?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Well, the kingdom was divided between the two princes. They had to make sure their lands grew and prospered and that their people were happy and many other things. The first prince was lazy and did not bother too much – he didn't want to pay close attention to what was going on his kingdom.

RAJIV: (yawning) What's next on the list of things to do?

MINISTER: We have to discuss some big changes to the fishing industry, your highness. Right now, there's so many people, so many fishermen and women that it's becoming chaotic. Everyone catches a little and there's no growth.

RAJIV: So what can we do about it?

MINISTER: My solution is simple! Make someone like me in charge of the whole industry. Then I can direct and control the fishing in the most efficient way and maximize profit. All the fisherfolk can work for me and this way, they will also be looked after. The whole country will benefit.

RAJIV: Fine, fine, Minister. Do whatever you want. Is that all? There is a cricket match planned for my entertainment and I don't want to be late.

RENUKA: That Minister sounds very suspicious.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Yes, he did.

RENUKA: Is he going to do something bad?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Maybe. But that's not what the story is about. The other son was very different – his part of the kingdom was run in way that was more just and fair.

MINISTER: Your highness, your current system of getting rid of waste is becoming very difficult to handle. A lot of merchants and businessmen are asking why they can't just dump their waste into the river and let it go into the sea. I think we should listen to them.

DAYANAND: Minister, tell them that I'll try to make it easier for them but there will be strictly no dumping of waste into the sea. As a nation, we depend on the sea too much to treat it like a dumping ground.

RENUKA: This prince sounds much smarter than the other one!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Yes, he does, doesn't he?

RENUKA: I'm cheering for him.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Well, the king of that country agreed with you. The king saw how these two princes were behaving and he wanted to make the second son his heir – so that he would become the king after he died. This made the lazy prince angry. He started complaining.

RAJIV: The kingdom should be mine! Or if I can't have the whole thing, then it should be divided in half. My father is a fool.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: The lazy prince had a wife who was a witch. She heard all these complaints and decided to use her magical powers to help her husband get the whole kingdom.

SAROJA: My dear husband, I can fix your problem. I will cast a spell on your brother and turn him into a fish. Then we can get rid of him.

RAJIV: (surprised) Can you do that?

SAROJA: Of course!

RAJIV: Amazing. Tell me your plan!

SAROJA: (in a cunning voice) Invite him over for lunch. After you have eaten, bring him to the balcony of the palace that overlooks the sea. I will stand above and cast the spell. Once he is a fish, you throw him into the water and that's it, we will be rid of him!

RAJIV: (happily) I will do as you say and soon you will be queen and I will be king.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: So the next day, the lazy prince invited his brother for lunch.

(The sound of plates and glasses clinking as they cleared away.)

DAYANAND: Thank you for that delicious meal, brother. I'm glad you invited me over for lunch. There's something I wanted to talk to you about.

RAJIV: What's that?

DAYANAND: It is about the way you are thinking. I feel like you are looking only a short distance into the future in how you rule. If you start looking far ahead in the future-

RAJIV: (interrupting him) Oh, talking about looking far out. There is an excellent one from my balcony. Why don't you let me show you?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: They went to the balcony that looked outward onto the sea. It was sunset and the view was stunning.

DAYANAND: Isn't it beautiful, brother? Don't you think we should protect it?

RAJIV: Your lectures are unbearable. You're always nagging me. (shouting to his wife) Cast the spell, my wife, and let's be rid of this fool!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: His wife was waiting above and soon as she saw the brother, she said the magic words and turned him into a fish. Straight away, the lazy prince picked up his brother and threw him into the sea.

RENUKA: Oh no! Were there rocks there?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: No, no, there were no rocks.

RENUKA: So he lived?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Yes!

(Renuka cheers loudly.)

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Don't be too happy because the good prince wasn't safe. He landed in the water but he knew that his brother's lands were a bad place to be a fish. So he swam and swam, through underwater places no man had never seen before, till he came to another kingdom with large mangrove forests.

RENUKA: Which kingdom?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Ayyo. So many questions!

RENUKA: Tell!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Okay. (pause) Which place has the largest mangrove forests?

RENUKA: Sunderbans! It's the largest mangrove forest in the world. It's on the east coast of India and some parts are in Bangladesh.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: That's where he went.

RENUKA: Oh, amma, that's not possible. You can't swim from Gujarat to the Sunderbans. They are on opposite sides of the country.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Who is telling the story? You or me?

RENUKA: You, you. Sorry, sorry. Go on, amma.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: So he swam to this far away kingdom. But just when he was about to relax, thinking he was safe, he was caught by a fisherman.

FISHERMAN: (complaining) Look at this tiny fish. They are getting smaller every day.

DAYANAND: Then why did you catch me, fisherman!

FISHERMAN: (taken aback) Oh, you're a talking fish?

DAYANAND: Yes, please let me go. You said it yourself, I'm too small. Why don't you catch large fish instead?

FISHERMAN: This place used to be full of large, delicious fish and my community used to be the only ones here. But then others heard about this spot and soon many people from outside started fishing here.

DAYANAND: There was not enough fish?

FISHERMAN: That was not the problem. They had huge boats with large nets which they would cast out and pull in, not caring whether the fish they caught were big or small, adult or babies. And because they kept coming back, there's no time for the fish to grow big in the first place. They are caught when they are young itself. They don't have time to breed and now there are fewer and fewer fish.

DAYANAND: So now you too have to catch small fish like me?

FISHERMAN: No, I could not compete with those rich men. I sold my boat and my net and now work for wages on their boats. I have no choice but to do whatever they tell me to do.

DAYANAND: What are you going to do with me? Set me free, I beg you.

FISHERMAN: I can't do that, little fish. My family are struggling at home. You might be small, but you're handsome and I have the feeling that the queen will like to have you in her tank. She might even reward me.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: So the fisherman took his prized catch to the queen. She was very pleased with the pretty little fish and became

very fond of him. She put him in a bowl and fed him boiled rice. She began to call him 'fish prince' – not knowing that it was true! One day, when she was in her room, she saw that he was looking very uncomfortable.

THE QUEEN:

What is wrong, my fish prince? Are you okay?

DAYANAND:

This bowl is too small for me, my queen.

THE QUEEN:

What! You can talk!

DAYANAND:

Yes, I can talk.

THE QUEEN:

Why didn't you say anything till now?

DAYANAND:

I was scared that you would do something to me.

THE QUEEN:

will never do anything to hurt you, my fish prince. But how can you talk? Where did you come from?

RENUKA'S MOTHER:

The queen moved the fish prince into a large tank and the prince began to tell his story.

DAYANAND:

I come from a land far away. I swam along the whole coast of India to reach here.

THE QUEEN:

You must've seen so many wonders on your way here!

DAYANAND:

Yes, I swam through the Arabian Sea, along the Konkan and Malabar coasts till I passed the Lakshadweep Islands. After that, I travelled around the southernmost tip of the Indian continent Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu and crossed the Gulf of Mannar. Then I followed the coasts along the Bay of Bengal all the way till I reached your kingdom. I saw plants and animals underwater that might not exist anywhere else in the world. There were fields of corals with fish and sea snakes swimming around. I saw turtles and dugongs flounder through sea grass meadows and abundant sea weeds. It was a kingdom that was as diverse and beautiful as any that exists on the land.

THE QUEEN:

It sounds like paradise.

DAYANAND:

That is only because I haven't told you the other side. As I was swimming, I saw many disturbing sights as well. I saw people dumping waste and garbage into the ocean. I saw them emptying huge drums of black, poisonous liquids and dirty chemicals into the clean water. All around me animals and plants of the sea were dying.

THE QUEEN:

This doesn't happen in my kingdom!

DAYANAND: That is partly true, my queen. Your kingdom is better than many other places – but it too has certain flaws.

THE QUEEN: You speak very honourably. From your words I can tell that you are a royal person – a true fish prince.

DAYANAND: Yes, you are correct. My story is a sad one. I used to be a human prince. My father wanted to make me the king of the entire kingdom. This made my brother angry. So he tricked me and using a magical spell, turned me into a fish.

THE QUEEN: (suddenly laughing) I know that spell. I am a witch as well.

DAYANAND: Really? Please, my queen. Turn me back into a human and I will do anything you ask.

THE QUEEN: If you take me to see the wondrous sights you describe, I will gladly turn you back into your true form.

DAYANAND: Of course!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: The queen turned herself into a fish and she along with the delighted fish prince explored the coasts of India together.

DAYANAND: First, let me show you the mudflats, your majesty!

THE QUEEN: Oh, what are those?

DAYANAND: Mudflats are a very common type of coast in India. They are formed over many years by the tides. The waves wash over the land over and over, leaving mud behind. This muddy area keeps getting covered by water so it's soft and squelchy.

THE QUEEN: Look at that crab!

DAYANAND: Yes, there are lots of crabs here. They are here for the same reason as us. There are lots of delicious things to eat!

(Sound of a bird.)

THE QUEEN: What's that?

DAYANAND: (as a warning) Unfortunately, because fish and crabs like these places so much, the birds like it too! We better run! I don't plan on becoming someone's dinner.

I've never seen these kinds of birds before!

DAYANAND: They're probably migratory birds - going from one place to another because of the change in seasons. Mudflats are important for such birds, they stop there to eat on their long journeys.

THE QUEEN: (getting scared) They have such long legs and beaks! I feel like they could spear us any minute. Let's go somewhere safer!

DAYANAND: Head for the safety of the sea grasses! Come!

THE QUEEN: This definitely looks safer. Look at that! (as if she is seeing something far away)

DAYANAND: Yes, those are sea turtles. They look so slow and confused on land but how beautifully they swim in the water. Don't they look graceful?

THE QUEEN: Are there more interesting sights?

DAYANAND: Well, you still haven't seen the rocky shores but they're far away. Swimming through them you'll see sponges and sea anemones. It's like swimming on another planet.

THE QUEEN: Are there any nearby?

DAYANAND: I'm sure there are. But let me first take you to the beach!

THE QUEEN: What do you mean?

DAYANAND: I'm sure you've never seen them from the point of view of a fish.

THE QUEEN: I used to go to one particular beach as a child. But it's been such a long time. I would like to see it again.

DAYANAND: Let's go there then.

THE QUEEN: I'll show you the way come.

(Pause. Then, softly we hear the sounds of waves hitting the shore.)

THE QUEEN: (shocked) Oh, no! What happened here? Where is my beach? It's almost gone!

DAYANAND: I'm sorry, your majesty.

THE QUEEN: There used to be a beautiful beach here, long and sandy. It used to stretch for miles. People would come and play here. There were fishermen, launching their boats and reeling in their nets. It has become so small and barren. What happened?

DAYANAND: (sadly) Over the years, it must have eroded away – bit by bit, the sea takes away parts of the shore. This is happening in many places. Do you see that large hole there?

THE QUEEN: Yes, I was wondering how it got there.

DAYANAND: Those were dug by sandminers. They bring large machines and scoop away the sand. They make these huge holes all over and this makes the erosion much worse.

THE QUEEN: (angrily) I'll put a stop to this. It's horrible!

DAYANAND: If this angers you, then I have more to show.

THE QUEEN: There are things worse than this?

DAYANAND: Swim with me further and I'll show you a place where humans are poisoning themselves. Not directly but in a roundabout way.

THE QUEEN: (disgusted sound) Ugh. What is that smell?

DAYANAND: That is a tannery or something like that. See how the waste chemicals are being dumped straight into the sea via that big pipe.

THE QUEEN: Oh no, the local fish must be getting poisoned.

DAYANAND: It's not just the fish. Once the dirty waste is in the water, it affects the plants, which are eaten by the small fish. The small fish are eaten by the larger fish which store even more of the poison in their body. Then, fishermen catch and eat the large fish.

THE QUEEN: They don't realize it is happening?

DAYANAND: The fishermen sometimes realize but they can't stop the factories!

THE QUEEN: (sadly) This is breaking my heart. Let us go back.
(Pause.)

THE QUEEN: Thank you for taking me on that journey, fish prince. I thought my kingdom was perfect but seeing life through the eyes of a fish has taught me many things. You have shown me much beauty but also tragedy and I will work to make sure that the beauty grows and the tragedy decreases. In return, I will keep my bargain and break the spell.

DAYANAND: Ah! I am back to my true form! Thank you, my queen. With your blessing, I will now return to my kingdom and seek revenge on my brother for his betrayal.

THE QUEEN: If you're going to seek revenge on your brother, I have an idea.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: The queen whispered into the prince's ear and a big smile developed on his face. He thanked the queen for all her help and set out for his home.

RENUKA: What was happening there?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Things were not going well at all! Back in his kingdom, his father was heartbroken at the loss of one of his sons. He had been mourning while the lazy prince took over the running of the kingdom.

RENUKA: Oh no!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Yes! As usual, instead of his rule, it was the rule of greed. The mangrove forests in his kingdom were disappearing. The lagoons were being developed into farms for growing fish and prawns. All the garbage and wastes from the coastal cities were being dumped into the oceans. The coral fields were being destroyed and whales and sharks were being hunted and killed in huge numbers for food and for their blubber which is used as fuel in some places.

RENUKA: The good prince Dayanand is going to be so angry!

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Oh, you are right. When the good prince saw all this, he was shocked. He went straight to his father's palace and met the king who was overjoyed to see him. He told him the whole story and they went to confront the lazy prince and his wife. When they reached their palace, the lazy prince was shocked to see his brother.

RAJIV: What? This is not possible!

DAYANAND: You thought you got rid of me. But I survived and now I've come back, brother. You have destroyed so much of this kingdom while I was gone. But all that stops today!

RAJIV: (defensively) But I haven't done anything!

DAYANAND: Exactly! You stood back and let others do whatever they wanted, without doing anything. It's time for you to understand your mistake.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: The good prince began to say the magic words that the queen had whispered in his ears and turned the lazy prince and his wife into fish! This was the queen's idea. She had understood so much by experiencing life as a fish. So she hoped that the lazy prince and his wife would also realize their mistakes and learn to protect and care for the sea.

RENUKA: Oh no! Is the story over?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Yes, how did you like the ending?

RENUKA: The mean prince got what he deserved.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Then why are you looking so sad?

RENUKA: I'm thinking about whether what the fish prince described is still happening today. All the pollution and the animals dying.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Sadly, it is.

RENUKA: Is anybody doing anything to protect our coasts, amma?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Many groups are trying to do something. From the government's side, they have stated that the conservation of oceans as one of their objectives. They are supposed to reduce pollution in the oceans, stop overfishing and many more things.

RENUKA: What is their plan?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: I don't know, Renuka. But it's a big challenge.

RENUKA: Why don't they just stop people from fishing?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Oh no, that would be terrible! There are more than a million coastal fishermen who depend on this activity for their livelihood. They can't do that!

RENUKA: But what about the fish?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: That's a part of the problem. India's fish production has increased eight times in the last fifty years! The market

for fish just becomes bigger and bigger and there is so much pressure to catch more and more. But the population of fish isn't enough to meet this demand.

RENUKA: What happens if we keep fishing like this, amma?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: If fish populations get too low, then that will be devastating. So many livelihoods will be destroyed.

RENUKA: So we have to protect the sea, not just because of the sea but also because that is what is best for us?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Exactly!

RENUKA: I wish more people knew this, amma.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: More and more people understand this nowadays. That is what 'sustainable' means after all. It means that we work in such a way that we can work tomorrow also. We should live in a way that allows our children and grandchildren to live the same way. When we harm the environment, we not only hurt ourselves today, we're also hurting ourselves tomorrow.

RENUKA: Oh, so when you try to do something to protect the fish and the sea, you're doing it for me?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Of course! Everything I do is for you only.

RENUKA: Great. Can you tell me another story then?

RENUKA'S MOTHER: No, you have to go to sleep! You promised.

RENUKA: Oh, no. (Pause) *Fine*. Good night, amma.

RENUKA'S MOTHER: Good night, Renuka. Hopefully we wake up in a better world.