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Dedicated to
All Those who Love
and cherish Truth

Other books
By the author:

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   'Krishna Pakshamu'
   A review.
2. Swatantryanantara
   Sahityam lo
   'Telugu Katha'
3. Ravindra 'Gitanjali'
4. Thorns and Roses.

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Prologue in Heaven

(Indra, the lord of heaven, the divine Rishis and other celestial beings are seated in their golden seats)

Vasishta enters the glittering court
and addresses Indra in glowing terms.

"Oh, Indra, God of the firmament
Wielder of thunder and lightning;
Thou art heaven's lustre and
Leader of the celestial host;
I pay my obeisance to you, mighty one!"

Indra moved by these endearing words
Steps down from his golden throne
And embracing Vasishta offers him
A vacant seat by his side and
In a tremulous tone of affection
Asks him to narrate his sojourn on earth
And the great rajasuya sacrifice
Performed under his supervision
In the august halls of Harishchandra.

As Vasishta begins his narration
Of the great Yagya to lord Indra,
A commotion at the entrance
Disturbs them as some sages
Rise up to welcome Viswamitra
Into the portals of the hall.
No sooner he entered, Indra steps
Down from his golden throne and
In all humility receives the sage
With an affected smile on his lips
And a trembling heart within,
For, no one, not even lord Vishnu
Can breathe in peace in his presence,
For, he always searched for lapses
In others to denigrate them,
Regardless of the consequences.

He was offered a seat on the
Other side of Indra's throne
To be on par with Vasishta
Lest he may feel offended if
Any other seat is offered.

Thus seated, Viswamitra looks
With contempt at Vasishta
And remarks in a derisive tone
"O sage, those golden bracelets
Studded with diamonds, look
Awkward on your lean wrists,
Which bear not their heavy weight,
And may I know the generous soul
Who gifted such priceless gifts?"

Vasishta in a solemn tone replied,
"Who else on earth can bestow such
Gifts other than Harischandra!"
Viswamitra affecting surprise
At this revelation, questions
"Is that king really so generous
And for what else is he famous for?"

The sneering way in which
The snobbish sage spoke
Is only a preamble to the
Pugnacity glowing like embers
In his haughty heart,
Ready to fan into flames
At the very sight of his arch rival.

Undaunted by this knowledge
Of his rancour towards him
Vasishta eulogized before the
August assembly that either
In the past or in the future
None was born or ever will be born
To equal Harishchandra in
Charity, valour, piety, Dharma
Kindness and truthfullness.

In speaking thus of Harishchandra
The conviction of his heart
Permeated his sublime face
Which rankled the jealous
Bosom of sage Viswamitra, who
In a fit of rage blurted out:
"Enough, enough of thine
False and servile flattery.
Who doesn't know that thou art
The family priest of Harschandra,
And all these glowing attributes
Reflect only thy loyalty to him."

Having admonished Vasishta thus,
He looked around at the August
Assembly and proclaimed in a
Voice of deep conviction:
"Listen, O sages and celestial hosts,
I vow before this divine assembly
That I shall prove Harishchandra
False to his word of truth,
By making this truthful man
Recant and take refuge in the
Pavilion of untruth and falsehood,
As all mortals do in adversity.

If I fail in my attempt to
Swerve him from his path of
Truth, I shall sacrifice all
My powers earned through
Arduous austerities and penances.
If I succeed, Vasishta should
renounce his powers like-wise.

This angry challenge of Viswamitra
Stunned the sages in the August hall,
But Vasishta accepted the challenge
with a smiling and serene face;
For he foresaw the doom of the
Arrogant sage in his encounter
With the power of Truth.
During this bellicose debate
Between arrogance abetted by hatred,
And humility aided by affection,
All the assembled sages and Indra
Remained as mute spectators
Unable to counsel restraint
On viswamitra, fearing his
Intemperate and haughty nature.
CANTO I

Oblivious of this wager in heaven,
Harishchandra ruled over his kingdom,
with Dharma as sword and truth as shield.
Sickness skirted his borders and
Famine feared to enter his domain.
Prosperity did not breed evil
And immorality was out of bounds.

Virtue ruled the minds and
Contentment smiled on faces.
Peace, harmony and bliss had
their rendezvous in people's hearts,
And his kingdom was an Eden on earth.

Into such a realm of peace
Entered Viswamitra, straight
After his wager with Vasishta.
He was received with courtesy
And after the usual greetings,
The sage related to Harischandra
The purpose of his sudden visit.
"O, mighty king! thy name is revered
Even in the assembly of gods
As the true repository of truth
And as a liberal donor for all
Sacred and religious functions.
I intend to perform a great yagya
Inviting all the kings as well as
Gods and other celestial beings.
So have I come to request you
to patronize this yagya and
Grant me the necessary funds".

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The king was very much pleased
At this solicitation by the sage
And in all humility spoke thus:
"thy desire shall be fulfilled,
I am prepared to bear all the
Expenditure for the yagya.
Name the amount and thou shall have it".

Then the sage smiled and said.
"O, king! Let the money be with you:
I shall come and take it after
Completing the preliminary work
Connected with the great yagya".
So saying the sage departed.
Happy with the thought that
The king has fallen into his trap.

A few days after this incident.
Farmers around Ayodhya came
To the court with the complaint
That a strange beast looking
Like a boar with sharp tusks
And moving like lightning
Is destroying crops, trees,
Gardens, orchards and fields.

The king felt that their reports
Might be an exaggeration, but
When he went round and saw the
Devastation, he was appalled!
He also witnessed the terror
Caused by the boar in the villages.
Women were afraid to go to the
River for fetching fresh water.
Children were shut up in the houses;
And men moved around with weapons,
Casting cautious glances in all
Directions for this wild beast.

The king wanted to rid this menace
And so summoned his hunters.
Accompanied by these hunters
Armed with all kinds of weapons,
The king encircled the forest
And moved inside cautiously.
To attack and kill the mighty boar.
But the boar was more cunning.
It appeared at one place and
in the next moment it was miles
Away moving swiftly and
Eluded its hunters cleverly.

The hunt went on till the afternoon
Without any success and the hunters
Tired and completely exhausted.
Settled down in different
Parts of the forest to take rest.
The boar made itself visible
Only to the king and led him
Deep into the forest where,
Too tired and exhausted, he
Quenched his thirst from the
Cool waters of a running brook
And relaxed in the shade of a tree.

As he was about to doze, he heard
The soft tinkling of moving anklets
And through the green haze of
The towering trees, he saw the Figure of a graceful apsara Approaching with musical steps. He sat, spellbound at her beauty, And even before he could enquire About her, she bowed to him and With a cheerful smile on her lips Moved her feet rhythmically In consonance with the jingling Of the bells of her bracelets, whenever the arms and wrists Moved to indicate various mudras.

She regaled king Harischandra With quick succession of different Mudras articulated by fingers As well as facial expressions. The poise and grace of her limbs Moving in unison with the Resonance of her invisible bells Showed her dexterity in the art. Her dance was so captivating That it moved Harishchandra Into raptures of a reverie Of unmitigated astonishment.

When the king recovered from This state of temporary bliss, He removed the precious Jewel dangling on his breast And offered the same to her, But she rejected this golden offer Whereupon the king told her To ask whatever she desired and
It would be hers immediately.

The apsara who was waiting
For such a chance, requested
The king to satisfy her lust,
For she has fallen in love with him
And can no longer live without him.

On hearing this sinful desire
The king rebuked her for
Expressing such an immoral wish,
And told her to get out of his sight.

Very soon after this episode,
The sage came to the king at Ayodhya
Accompanied by the apsara
whom he claimed as his daughter
Born out of his powerful penance,
And demanded that he should
Keep his word of granting her
Whatever she desired, failing which
He would join the list of those
Who go back on their word of honour.

The king pleaded with the sage
That as he is sworn to monogamy,
He cannot break that scared vow.
To emphasize his strong resolve
In this matter, he asserted that
He is ready even to sacrifice
His kingdom with all its treasures
Rather than satisfy her carnal lust.
The sage was only waiting for such a declaration by the king And so he immediately said, "If that be thy firm resolve, then Give me thy kingdom with its army. Cavalry, chariots and elephants, Thy cattle, thy wealth including all Thy treasures and whatever else Thou possessest excepting thy wife, Son and thy body. O, Sinless one! Let all these things be granted me".

Harischandra listened calmly To this supplication of the sage And thought. "All these material Things are gifted to me by God to enmesh me in the net of senses. Wealth makes man greedy. It darkens one's inner vision. It makes one a slave to passions And promotes one to run after mirages To quench one's thirst in vain. Ultimately, in search of peace One prays for a drop of God's love which one inherits not because of one's worldly iniquities! God has spoken through this sage Advising me to renounce these Worldly pleasures and seek The joy of communion with him". Gladdened by this divine insight He bowed to the sage in reverence And replied respectfully, "So be it".
Viswamitra eager to put the king
into the turmoil and tribulations
of poverty asked him, "Oh, honest king
if thy kingdom, with its army and
all thy property are given to me
who then is the lord of this realm?".

The king smiled at the sage and said,
from the moment, I gifted my
kingdom to you, holy sage, thou art
the real lord of this realm".

"If as acknowledged by you,
i am the real lord of this kingdom,
then thou must hasten to depart
from this realm where I hold sway,
together with thy wife and son.
but before you do so, all the costly
clothes and jewels worn by you and
your wife and son must be removed
and handed over to me and you should
depart wearing clothes of bark".

The king, his wife, Chandramati
and his son Rohitasya divested
themselves of every possession
and wearing only clothes of bark
set out on their way to holy Kashi.
as they started moving down the
wide palace street, Viswamitra
blocked their path exclaiming
"Where wilt thou go without
giving me the expenses for the
contemplated Rajasuya yagyā?"
"O sage, I had given you all my Treasures, jewels and my kingdom.
I am bereft of everything except
My body and the bodies of my wife And son. So how can I pay the expenses?

"O, king! Thou sayest that nothing Is left with thee—Yet it is your Bounden duty to give me the fee For the performance of the yagya.

You are aware that a promise Made especially to Brahmins, If left unfulfilled may result Ultimately in one's destruction. As long as Brahmins delight in Rajasuya sacrifice, so long, the promised fee for the yagya Must be paid. As a man of Dharma, You are aware of the Commandment That promises must be honoured, the afflicted must be protected, And enemies must be fought till They are totally annihilated".

The king sensing the warning In the words of the Rishi, said, "O venerable sage, At present I am without money; but I promise To pay the fee after some time. Kindly grant this supplication Considering my virtuous conduct".

The sage softened down and asked
"O king, tell me as to how much time
Thou require to arrange for the fee.
Remember that if thou faileth again,
The fire of my curse shall consume thee".

"O Brahmarshi, Grant me thirty days
And I shall give thee, the yagya fee".
The sage smiled condescendingly
And blessed the king as follows:
"Go now noble king on thy journey
And may thy journey be peacful!"

Permitted to go, the king departed:
The queen, though unused to walk,
Followed him holding her young son.
Seeing that noble king departing
From the city with his wife and son,
The citizens cried out in anguish:
"Alas, O king! Is it proper for you
To leave us in sorrow like this?
Thou art not only a virtuous king
But also the guardian of our lives.
If thou art devoted to Dharma,
You should take us also with you.
Wait a minute; Let our eyes drink
Like bees the sweetness of your
Lotus like face. Who knows when
We shall be able to see you again!
Thou art the ruler who was preceded
And followed by minor kings whenever
Thou went forth in the past-But now
Alas! what a spectacle it is to see
Today, thy queen and son following thee
Decked in clothes of fibrous barks!
There were times when thy servants
Followed thee riding on elephants.
And today, how pathetic it is
To see you, O king, leaving on foot!
How graceless will thy handsome face
Become subjected to the heat and dust
Of thy long weary way to holy Kashi!
Seeing thee in this pathetic state
What need have we of wife and
Children or wealth and grain or
The comforts of luxurious life!
Abandoning everything we wish
To follow thee like thy shadow.

Is it proper for thee to leave us
And seek thy deliverence all alone?
Don't you know that wherever
Thou livest, we shall live there?
Wherever thou findest happiness
there indeed, we too shall be happy;
Where thou livest that is our city
And where thou art that is our heaven.
So please stay here and don't leave us.
"Having heard the citizen's plea,
The king, overwhelmed with grief,
Stopped in the middle of the road,
To console them in their distress.

Irritated by this act of the king
And unable to control his anger
Viswamitra approached the king
Shouting in an infuriated tone,
"Fie on thee, vile in thy conduct
False and crooked in thy speech,
Thou wisthest now to take back
All that thou hast given me.
How audacious art thou to contemplate
Retraction of a solemn promise?"

At this angry outburst of the sage,
Harischandra trembled with fear
And filled with trepidation, replied;
"O sage. I shall rather die than
retract and live dishonoured!"
So saying, Harischandra moved on
Pulling the queen with him and
Telling the people to return to
The city and go to their homes.

In the king's unwavering reply,
Viswamitra sensed the collapse
Of his artful attempt to coerce
The intransigent king to retract.
Piqued and enraged at his failure
His soul clamoured for reprisal
Which he quickly accomplished
By belabouring the wearied queen,
Who was slow and lagging behind,
With the stout wooden staff which
Sages use for resting their arm
While in tranquil meditation.

Seeing the harsh blows wounding
Her tender and delicate limbs,
The noble king exclaimed in pain:
"O sage! Show mercy on this innocent
Soul who suffereth for my fault",
And shielding her with his hands
Moved ahead with tears in his eyes.  
Nature mourned silently, this  
Savage impiety of the fiery sage.  
But the five universal deities  
Who witnessed this monstrous act  
From their heavenly abode  
Spoke out in an admonishing tone,  
"This sage is vile and wicked  
And is destined to end up in hell,  
For he not only robbed this king  
Harischandra, of his kingdom  
But also shamelessly laid his hand  
On the hapless queen, forgetting  
The noble tradition of Aryavarta  
Which ordains to respect women".  
The sage hearing this rebuke  
Looked up with blazing eyes  
And cursed them with human birth.  
The five deities shocked at this  
Curse pointed out to Viswamitra  
That they had soken only the truth  
And it is not proper for a sage  
To beat a helpless woman and waste  
His powers in cursing one and all".  

Regaining his composure and  
Ashamed at his hasty conduct,  
Viswamitra relented and amended  
His curse to the following effect.  
"In your birth as human beings,  
Ye shall not suffer the travails  
Of family encumberances, nor the  
Pangs of jealousy, hatred or anger,  
And shall soon become Gods again".
Thus cursed, the five deities  
Entered the womb of Draupadi  
to be born as sons of Pandavas  
And died in infancy in sleep  
Struck by Ashwathama's sword  
Of vengeance and retribution.

CANTO II

Harischandra was appalled by  
This mighty power of the sage  
Before which even gods cower  
And he is merely a man who can  
Never face this ominous sage.

His goal as a man of Dharma was  
To obey the will of God and attain  
Final communion with the Divine.  
The temperamental Viswamitra's  
Enter into his tranquil life  
Worried the king with the fear  
That the erratic sage might  
Harm this noble goal of his,  
By cursing him permanently to the  
Eternal cycle of births and deaths.  
It is this fear that prompted him  
To move ahead shielding his wife  
And swallowing all humiliations.  
Bereft of everything in life,  
He thought of the only place  
That shelters and sustains  
All the destitutes and the deprived,  
And that was the holy city of Kashi,
Where one could stay in the charity Homes that abound along the banks Of the sacred river Ganges and Live on the alms and food offered At the temple gates of Lord Shiva.

After many hardships, burdened With a tired wife and a weak son. He walked his way into the holy city And settled down to lead his life In incognito as a miserable mendicant.

Promptly on the thirtieth day The sage appeared before the king. Sending shivers of terror Across his trembling heart Yet he bowed to him reverently And said "O sage, I offer myself. My wife and my son as chattels. Please deal with us as you deem fit".

The sage gave a sardonic smile And said, "The stipulated time Of one month, thou desired to pay The fee for the Rajasuya sacrifice Will end this day. Pay the fee and I shall not bother you any more".

Hearing this plea of the sage, Harischandra politely replied: "O Maharshi, This is the last day; There is time for the day to end. Have patience till the day ends".
The rishi rose and said ominously, "O king, Be it so; I will come again And if thou failest to pay the fee today I shall pronounce a curse on thee". Warning thus the sage departed.

The king fell into a deep thought: Only a few hours remain now To fulfill my promise to the sage. From where can I get the money? I have no noble friends who can Rescue me from this predicament! Being a Kshatriya, it is sinful To solicit gifts from others. How can I overcome this dilemma, And save myself from the contempt And denigration of the world? Shall I end my life and buy peace! But to what hells will I go if I die, Without fulfilling my promise. For having cheated a brahmin I may become a worm or a villain In my next birth. Instead, it would Be better to become a bonded slave. So why not sell myself to someone And break the shackles of the sage. While he was introspecting thus, The queen saw the deepening clouds Of gloom on his face and spoke thus, In a voice chocked with sorrow: "O king, Leave thy worry and follow The path of truth. One who forsakes Truth is like a burning cemetery. Hated and shunned by everyone.
In human life there is no greater
dharma than the pursuit of truth,
All benevolent and kind deeds
Are fruitless in him who is false.
It is laid down in dharma shastras
That truthfulness is an ideal tool
With which the wise seek salvation.
While fools clutching the rope of
Falsehood slowly slide into hell.
O my lord, aren’t you aware of
The fate of king kriti who
Ascended heaven after performing
Ashwamedha and rajasuya yagyas
But fell from it by one falsehood!
I was barren without any hope
But by the divine grace of Varuna,
I had been blessed with a son.
The righteous marry for progeny
And thy desire is fulfilled.
Having performed my sacred duty
I shall deem it my fortune if
This body of mine serves you
To redeem your promise to the sage.
Therefore sell me to pay thy debt
And protect thy dharma of truth
Which is greater than thy kingdom,
Thy treasures, thy wife and thy son,
For it is this dharma alone that
Lights thy path of salvation”.

On hearing these words of his wife
The king’s face darkened with gloom
As though Sorrow had thrown her mantle
Of distress on his glittering face
Like a dark cloud clouding the
Bright rays of the brilliant sun.
His eyes valiantly struggled
To arrest the torrent of tears
Bursting the banks of his eyelids.
Words faltered to venture forth
From his throat, while his heart
Crushed by the weight of her
Dismal words, lay bleeding silently.
Unable to control the surge of sorrow,
He spoke to his wife in a choked voice:
"How could you think of selling
Youself and leaving me alone.
Oh! What a fall hath befallen me.
My queen who should be sharing
The splendours of the palace
Is squatting on this dusty path
With tired limbs and a torn heart
Which is eager to go into bondage
To save me from the peril of falsehood.
To sell such a noble wife or face
The fires of hell for falsehood,
That is my present predicament!"

In this state of acute anguish
He lost control of his senses and
Fainting, slumped to the ground.
Seeing her husband slumping
To the ground, Chandramati sat
Beside him and resting his head
On her lap, cried out piteously:
"O king of kings! In thy palace
Thou wert accustomed to lie on soft
Mattresses stuffed with the
Silky hair of spotted deers, But now
Thou art lying on this bare ground,
With none to aid you in distress.
Thou my lord, who hast honoured
Venerable brahmins and sages
With lavish boons and favours
Art now left to fend for thyself.
Oh God! This noble man had implicit
Faith in thy righteousness and
Lived a virtuous and sinless life.
Why then art thou making him suffer
In this cauldron of misfortune?"
Wailing thus over her husband's
Misfortunes, she gasped for breath
And the ground reeled under her.
While the sky whirled over her head
And slowly, she sank into a stupor.
The child, troubled by hunger and
Seeing the parents motionless
Pushed them hither and thither
Pleading piteously for food:
"O mother, please give me some food;
O father, give me something to drink,
I am thirsty: My tongue is parched."

While the boy was wailing thus,
'with anger crouching on his face
And eyes spitting fire' the sage
Stepped into this tragic scene
With a stony heart and an iron mind.
He sprinkled water on their faces
And when thy regained their senses,
Spoke to the king in a solemn tone:
"For one who is a debtor, distress
Mounts day by day without respite,
Pay my fee and thy sorrow vanishes
In the joyous raptures of truth, for
Truth is the light of the Sun.
It is the anchor of the earth.
It is the vital Dharma of life.
Heaven's benediction lies in truth.
Truth outweighs the benefits of a
Thousand Ashwamedha sacrifices.
But of what use are these ethical
Enunciations before a shameless and
Irresponsible person like you.
Who is unable to keep thy word
And honour thy commitment.
If thou failest to pay my fee
when the sun sinks in the west,
Then thou shalt suffer my curse."
Having spoken thus, the sage
Left, leaving the king in terror.

CANTO III

The queen unable to bear the
Humiliation of the king spoke thus:
"My lord, Act on my proposal lest
The sage's curse blights thy life
Sell me and settle your debt."

Having been urged by the queen
Again and Again, the king replied-
"I shall set aside my sentiments
Of pity, affection, kindness and
With a cruel and brutal heart
Perform an act which not even
A heinous man will agree to do".

Speaking thus and with a heart
Crushed by the canker of despair,
He reached the business centre
And standing on a raised ground,
With tears clouding his eyes.
And a voice choked with guilt,
Addressed the people around him:

"Hey Citizens! Listen ye all to me:
Your looks probe my identity.
I am a cruel man. an inhuman wretch,
A vile and wicked man. a Rakshasa;
Who, to safeguard his own life sank
To the lowest depths of degradation
Of selling his loyal and devoted wife".
Even after contemplating
Such a dreadful and sinful act,
My heart didn't break in twain
And like a shameless scoundrel
I continue to breathe and live.
If any one of you need a slave or
A servant, please speak up quickly".

In response to this offer of
Harischandra, an aged Brahmin
Came froward speaking thus-
"Wealth, I have in plenty but
My wife is young, tender and
Unaccustomed to strenuous work.
Your wife seems to be polite,
Obedient and hardworking-
I am therefore offering you
Sufficient money in exchange. 
Please deliver this woman to me."

So saying, the brahmin tied 
the money in a corner of the 
king's loose upper garment and 
Started dragging the queen. 
Seeing this calamity, her son 
Rohitasya, who was standing 
By her side started crying 
Pleading with her not to go. 
Humiliated and in great distress, 
The queen begged the brahmin; 
"Noble sir, release me once, 
So that I that can have a last look at my son: 
"Come, my child to me, thy mother 
Sold into slavery by cruel fate." 
The boy with tears flowing down 
His checks ran upto his mother 
And the angry brahmin kicked 
The boy and asked him to go away, 
But the boy clung to his mother.

The queen hugging the child 
To her bosom pleaded with the 
Aged brahmin in a choked voice: 
"O master, be kind and do me a 
Favour by purchasing my child, 
For if I am separated from him, 
I may not perform my duties well, 
With my thoughts centred on him. 
Therefore unite me with my child 
As a cow is twined with her calf."
Her logic appealed to the master
And so tying some more money
In the corner of the king's garment
The brahmin told Harischandra,
"Take thou this money also and
Give thy boy to me: The prices
For a man and a woman and a child
Have been fixed by experts in
Dharma shastras and I have paid
Those sums for thy wife and son."

Before departing, the queen
Rendered obeisance to the king
And with conviction spoke thus:
"My lord, steel thy spirit to cross
These hurdles of sorrow which
Fate had strewn across our path.
Your truthfulnes alone shall
Save us from these calamities.
These are not misfortunes but
Trials to test our faith in Dharma.
Don't waver on thy path of Dharma."

Giving this counsel, the queen
Followed the brahmin with her son.
Watching them silently walking
As slaves behind the brahmin,
The king felt a stab in his heart
And clutching his chest in pain
Reeled forward muttering thus:
"Alas! This noble queen, who lived
In her palace beyond the reach of
The scorching gaze of the sun or
The icy glances of the moon

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And the inquisitive stares of
The common folk of the kingdom,
Is now exposed to the malevolent
And mocking stares of evil eyes.
Ah! What a wretch I am, to have
Brought this misery of bondage
On my beloved and beautiful wife!
My crime does not end here. I have
Even spelled a misfortune on my son
Who is as tender as a budding leaf.
Is there any one in this world
More base and monstrous than me?
Shame on me that I still breathe
Plunging my wife and son into
The dismal depths of bondage!"

No sooner the brahmin disappeared
With Chandramati and Rohitasya,
Viswamitra appeared before the king
And demanded the payment of his fee.
Harischandra handed over all
The money paid by the brahmin.
The sage counted the money and
Finding it quite insufficient
Fulminated against the king
In a most threatening manner.
"O deceitful king, dost thou
Deemest this a fitting fee?
Thou seems to be unaware of my
Infinite powers arising from
Endless penance. and austerities!"
To pacify the wrath of the sage,
The king said in all humility:
"O venerable sage, Don't be angry;
I am aware of thy potent powers,
And so I procured that money
By selling my dear wife and son.
More shall I give thee if only
Thou granteth me some more time".

"A quarter of the day still remains
And thou shalt pay me the balance
Before the sun sinketh in the west".
Setting such a hard proposition
Before the king, the sage departed.

Standing conspicuously in the market
With tears flowing down his cheeks
And a heart aching with despair
At the loss of his wife and son:
The king resolved to offer himself
for sale and addressed the bidders;
"Who so ever desires to purchase me
As a slave, let him speak quickly
While the sun is still shining".
Then Yama, the god of Hell, appeared
Before the king disguised as an
Ugly looking chandala with fierce
Flaming eyes, protruding teeth,
And a bulging pendulous belly.
He advanced towards the king
Carrying a hideous skull and a
Sturdy staff, with a pack of dogs-
Dreadful and barking behind him.
Silencing the dogs with a loud bark,
He swaggered towards the king and Blurted out, "I wish to buy thee- Tell me quickly at what price Will I be able to acquire thee".

Gazing at him such as he was, Cruel eyed and hideous to look at- The king asked"Who art thou?.

"I am a chandala, reputed in Kashi As Pravira, the executioner of Those condemned to death and Lord of the burning ground whither Cometh all mortals to turn into ashes". On hearing this. Harischandra Overwhelmed with disgust said; "I shall prefer to be consumed By the fire of the curse rather than Slide into thraldom of a chandala".

At this juncture. Viswamitra Arrived with eyes spitting fire And spoke to the king harshly: "This chandala is ready to give thee, Wealth in infinitae to pay my fee; Why then art thou rejecting it?" With downcast eyes, the king said: "O venerable sage, Having been Born in the sacred Solar race, How could I be a thrall to a chandala?"

Annoyed at this reply, the sage said: "The day is nearing its end. If thou will not give me the fee
By selling thyself to this chandala
Then suffer my terrible curse".

Thereupon, shivering in fright.
The king fell on the Rishi's feet
Exclaiming". O sage, be gracious.
Deplorable is bondage to a chandala.
Bestow me a favour and accept me
As thy slave, obedient to thy will".

The sage seized this opportunity
With delight and pronounced thus:
"If thou art my slave, then I am
Selling thee to this chandala
For a hundred million and so
Thou hast fallen into his slavery.
This very moment till thy death".

No sooner Viswamitra said this.
The chandala gladly paid the pelf
And to make escape impossible
Bounded the bewildered king and
Led him, beating whenever he slowed.
Towards the hamlet of the out castes.

CANTO IV

Harischandra had to work from
Early morning till late in the night
In the abode of the chandala.
Each morning, noon and night,
He was obsessed by the thought
Of his dear wife and son, who he
Was sure might be hoping that
He would come and repay more money
Than what the brahmin had paid
For them and will release them soon
From the debasing bondage.

" Oh ! To what a miserable state
Have I brought them. They are not
Aware that I too have been reduced
To the state of a slave and can
Never earn the money to free them.
Oh, God! What sin have I done that
Thou art punishing me like this.
First thou hast deprived me
Of my kingdom; then my friends and
Lastly my dear wife and son.
Now thou hast reduced me to lead
The wretched life of a chandala".

Crusing his fate in this manner
And yearning for his wife and son
Harischandra lived a life of
Abject misery and degradation,
Bearing the insults of Pravira.
After subjecting the king to
A life of implicit obedience
And total servility, the chandala
Spitefully sent him to manage
The burning ghat outside the city
With the following instructions:

" Stay in the ghat day and night
And watch the arrival of the corpses.
On each corpse, collect the
Prescribed tax from which
"A sixth part goes to the king,
three parts belong to me and
The rest shall be thy wages".

Commanded thus, Harischandra
Directed his steps towards the
Horror filled burial ground
With a stout club in one hand and
A glimmering lantern in the other.
As he approached the cemetery
In the darkness of a moonless night.
He heard the howlings of jackals
Moving amidst the burning corpses
Searching for smoky half-burnt
Remnants of roasted cadavers.
These howlings were mingled
With the screeching sounds of
Vultures engaged in a sly battle
With the pack of barking dogs for
A share of the shrivelled flesh.
The red flames of the raging fires
Swallowed the flesh and sucked
The oozing marrow and fat with
Sputtering sounds and displayed
The bare bones and burnt skulls with
Grinning teeth which seem to say:
"This body, born from the fire of lust,
When death stills its lusting breath,
Burns on the fires of faggots
From dust to dust and ashes to ashes,
Eternal is this endless cycle
Of continuous births and deaths".

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Thus as the fires flared in fiery rage
Over the limbs of the young and the old.
The wailings of women rent the air
Muffling the mild sobs of men. all
Grieving over the death of a son or
A daughter. an uncle, a father or
A mother. a husband or a wife.

Stifling these cries of the bereaved,
fiendish and terrifying howls
Of Ghouls. goblins and vampires
Echoed through the burial ground
Striking terror in the shivering
Hearts of all living things.

Harischandra stepped into this
Weird world of frightening sounds
And grief stricken mourners
Only to mourn his own tragic fall
From the glory of a kingly grace
Into the abyss of a chandala's slave!
Tears dripped down his cheeks.
As his mind fought to escape from
The reminiscences of past glory.

"Whither had my servants gone?
To whose patronage my priests fled?
Where did my ministers disappear?
Ah ! What a fall is mine from the
Pedestal of splendour to the
Gutters of grovelling disgrace.
My kingdom lost, and my consort
Sold into slavery with my son,
And I, left all alone by fate
To suffer the agonies of thraldom.
All this misery is brought upon me
Because sage Viswamitra desires
That I should renege and ruin
My pious life of Dharma and truth.
Oh. Almighty! Into what more perils
Dost thou wish to shove me through
This fastidious, intemperate sage!"

Grieving thus, he reached the
Heart of the burial ground
And began performing his duties
As instructed by the Chandala.
After collecting the taxes on
The corpses, he used to set aside
The specified amounts due to
The king, and the Chandala and
Retain the balance as his wages.

Running about in all directions
As keeper of the burial ground,
He underwent a physical change
Befitting his new profession.
Reeking with the smell of sweat.
And covering his dirty limbs with
Patched up rags, and carrying
A club in one hand and a toddy pot
In the other, with his long hair
Swaying on his face and shoulders,
And decked with garlands taken off
From the corpses, and eating the
Food offered to the dead souls,
His face, arms and bulging belly
Covered with ashes from the
Funeral fires; his fingers with
Long crooked and dirty nails.
Smeared with fat, oil and marrow.
He looked like walking Death.

Transformed thus as if he had
Taken a new birth of a chandala.
The king spent twelve months
Withput proper sleep either
During day or during night and
Felt as if he had spent an aeon
In that inferno of raging fires.
Working thus, without proper sleep,
Tired and exhausted, the king
Fell into a deep slumber and
Dreamt a dreadful dream!

In that dream he saw himself
Being conceived in the womb
Of an untouchable woman and
When he attained the age of seven
Was employed in the burning ghat
To collect the requisite taxes.
One day the corpse of a brahmin
Was brought to the burning ghat
By his relatives and as they
Were poor they pleaded for the
Waiver of the cremation charges.
But he insisted on its payment
And refused to allow them to
Proceed with the funeral rites.
Angered by this obduracy,
The brahmins cursed him
"Thou shalt go forthwith to Hell"
No sooner the curse was uttered
Yama's fierce looking servants
Seized him and tortured him
Day after day in diabolical ways.
He was boiled in a tub of oil:
Spears tore his flesh asunder.
He was roasted on leaping flames.
Icy winds pierced him like needles.
He was thrown into furnaces to melt.
Each day was like hundred years
And each day Yama's servants
Inflicted pain by brutal tortures.

He suffered thus for twelve years
And was sent back to the earth
To suffer the cycle of births
And deaths in the lower order
Of creation like a dog, an ass,
An elephant, a monkey, an ox, a cat,
A goat, a heron, a bull, a sheep,
A bird, a worm, a fish, a tortoise,
A wild boar, a porcupine, a cock,
A snake, a parrot and a myna.

Finally after thousand years of
Such lowly births, he saw that
He was born again in his solar race,
But his weakness for gambling
With dice cost him, his kingdom,
His wife and his son. After losing
Everything precious in life and
Left alone with a heavy heart, 
He rambled through the forest 
In a state of dazed stupefaction. 
While wandering thus in the forest, 
He was accosted by a ravenous lion 
Which mauled him severely and 
Was about to feast on him. 
When a fabulous monster 
Snatched him from its jaws 
Only to torture him constantly. 
While thus suffering torments 
Under its strict surveillance, 
He had a glimpse of his wife 
Along with his son, who implored:

"Rescue us my venerable lord; 
What hast thou to do with dice? 
Thy son has fallen into slavery 
And so hast thy beloved wife. 
Oh, redeem us from this bondage".

Hearing these wailings of his wife, 
He dashed forward like an arrow 
In the hope of meeting them. 
But there was no trace of them 
And they seem to have disappeared 
As suddenly as they had come! 
While in such a state of suspense 
He was ushered into the presence of 
Yama, by the messengers of hell.

The lord of hell, Yama, told the king: 
"The anger of sage Viswamitra 
Is difficult to be pacified till
His desired goal is achieved.  
Therefore go thou to thy world  
And suffer the tantrums of his ego  
Whose aim is to prove thee false.  
To achieve his cherished goal  
He may even inflict death on thy son!  
Face these calamities bravely  
And deliverance shall be thine".

No sooner this interview ended  
Harischandra was hurled down into  
The human world by Yama's minions.  
And Harischandra awoke with a  
Startled cry and finding himself  
On his pallet, exclaimed in horror  
"What a dreadful dream I dreamt!"  
May the gods protect my son from  
The wrath of the petulant sage  
Who is bent on destroying me  
And my family only because  
I am not swerving from truth.  
While introspecting thus,  
He could not but appreciate  
The advice of Yama in his dream.  
And with closed eyes, he prayed.  
"I bow to thee in gratitude O, Yama  
For revealing my past births  
And warning me about my future.  
Whatever may happen, I shall not  
Abandon the golden path of truth  
Which is the path of salvation".  
So saying Harischandra paid  
His obeisance to all the gods  
And busied himself with his chores.
CANTO V

While Harischandra was leading
The life of a wretched chandala
Amidst corpses in the burning ghat,
The fate of his wife Chandramati
Was even worse in the thraldom
Of the Brahmin who bought her.
His household was large with
Numerous dependents and the Brahmin made her work from
Early morning to late in the night
To get back his money's worth.

Chandramati's tasks were varied
And strenuous. She had to get up
At four in the morning and draw
Water from the well and fill all
The pots and the storage tank.
As the sun's rays filtered through
The misty sky, she had to sweep
The court-yard and the threshold
And decorate them with rangoli.
Then she had to clean and scrub
The floors of all the rooms and halls:
She had to attend to the cattle and
By the time the household woke up
She had to light the fire and
Prepare hot water for their bath.
As soon as their bath and prayers
Were over, she had to promptly
Serve their breakfast and later on
She had to cook the mid-day meals.
During the afternoon, while the
Elders enjoyed their siesta
She had to wash their clothes
And do other chores of the house.
Like sieving of rice and dahl,
Cleaning and cutting of vegetables;
And grinding the spices required
For preparing the night meals.
After their meals, while the
Members indulged in chit-chat
She had to clean the utensils
And spread the mats and beds.
It was only after the household
Went to sleep, she was able to eat
Whatever was left in the kitchen
Along with her son who was given
A number of out-door duties and
Hence thy could find time only
to meet late in the night and
Have a word with each other.
While lying down on their mats
By the stinking cattle-shed.
She was rebuked for minor delays
In the performance of her duties,
By the brahmin and his wife.
She had no respite from these chores
Even when she was sick and any
Complaint of fever was mocked at
As malingering by the inmates and
Kaushika, the brahmin with his
Vicious tongue used to abuse her
Husband, Harischandra for not
Redeeming her by clearing his debt.
To avoid such painful insults,
She suffered silently and did

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Her gruelling duties day after day
Only with the hope that her lord
Would come one day and release her
From this accursed bondage.
The innocent queen Chandramati,
Ignorant of the wager in heaven
Could not perceive that she and
Her lord are but pawns in the game
Of chess, controlled by Viswamitra.

One afternoon Rohitasya was sent
To the forest to gather twigs
To light the sacrificial fire
And while he was collecting them,
He was bitten by a deadly snake.
He fell down with foam oozing
From his mouth, and his body turned
Blue and life ceased to throb.

His friends who are cowherds
Grazing their cattle in the forest
Hurried to Kaushika's house and
Informed Chandramati about the
Death of her son in the forest.

With her heart rent asunder
And tears flowing down her cheeks
And unable to control her sobs,
She pleaded with her master to
Permit her to go and see her son.
But the cruel brahmin told her
To first complete all her chores
And then proceed to see her son.
He also warned her to return back
In the morning as the cock crows.  
So it was only late in the night  
That she could reach the forest  
And pressing the lifeless body  
To her bosom, she wept till the tears  
In the well of her heart dried up.  
"Oh, son! I was only living gladdened  
By the light of your shining eyes.  
What should I tell your father  
When he returns to redeem us!  
Oh God! Why are you so cruel to me?  
I had done no harm to anyone.  
All my life I led a pious life.  
Why then hast thou pushed me  
Into this cauldron of misery?"  
Weeping thus she lifted the body  
And reached the burning ghat  
To perform the funereal rites.

After placing the dead body  
Underneath a Banyan tree  
Amidst the flaring fires of  
Crackling and burning corpses;  
She thought of her loving husband  
And wailed endearingly thus:  
"Alas! O king, Dost thou not see  
That this, thy child, Whom thou  
Didst formerly see playing,  
Lying dead bitten by a snake?"

The king hearing these loud cries  
Hastened thither thinking,  
"Here I shall collect some tax"  
And looked at the emaciated,
Pallid and sobbing woman,
whose hair was covered with dust and
Whose face was an epitome of sorrow.
As the resemblance between
This sorrowing feeble woman
And his gay graceful queen
Was blurred by ravaging time,
The king failed to recognise her.
The queen too looked at the man
Staring at her with fierce eyes,
Matted hair, a pot in one hand
And a stout club in the other.
He looked as if Yama of hell
Had come down to torment her.

Failing to recognise each other
They relapsed into their own worlds-
She into the world of despair and
He into the world of his burning ghat.
After some time, he asked her to pay
The tax to cremate the dead body.
Bereft of money, she told him
About her inability to pay the tax
And pleaded for permission
To cremate the body without tax.
But the king heeded her not and
Pointing to the mangalsutra
Around her neck asked her to
Mortgage the same to pay the tax.

Chandramati on hearing this
Was stunned beyond belief, for
At the time of her holy birth,
She was blessed with the boon
Of her mangalsutra being visible
To none else except her husband.
So, she was overwhelmed with joy
For it dawnded on her that the
Uncouth and unkempt man standing
Before her was none other than
Her dear husband, Harischandra.

At that moment, each atom of her body
Throbbed with delight and ecstasy.
She forgot the sorrow of her slavery:
She forgot the death of her son;
She forgot the gloomy world around her:
She forgot everything and exclaimed
"Oh, my dear husband. Is it a dream
That I am perceiving my noble lord
As the keeper of the raging fires
That burn the corpses in the ghat!
The hand of Time had wrought changes
Which the pulse of heart feels not.
I am so disfigured in destitution
That the dignity of a royal queen
Had faded from thy Chandramati".

No sooner these words left her lips
Recognition wrought its miracle
And the king's face beamed with
The joy of inward beauty of reunion.
But this joy melted in the shadow
Of the life-less body lying at his feet.
He lifted it and hugging it cried out:
Oh my son, Rohitasya, thy young
Face with its beautiful eyes, brows,
Nose and curls shall haunt me
Till my death and how cruel is
Death which has made you his target!
Who shall now come to me babbling
"Father, dear father" and whom
Shall I here after embrace with
Endearments like "My child, my child".
Who shall now spoil my garments
Jumping on me with dirty feet?
Oh my son, thou wast the delight
And splendour of my heart and mind!
How cruel of me to have sold thee
Like a chattel at the altar of Truth.
Cruel fate in the guise of the sage
Had deprived me of my kingdom
And now the same fate in the
Form of a snake stung thee also!"

Having spoken thus, the king
Turned to his wife and told her
"Go thou to thy master and sell
That mangalsutra and hurry back-
We both shall then perform
The last rites of our dear son".

Thus counselled by her husband
Chandramati left the cemetery
And was groping her way towards
Her master's house to sell
The mangalsutra, but fate again
Intervened in the form of a robber
Who collided with her, while fleeing
After robbing a jewel from
The king's palace and whom the
Guards of the palace were chasing.
Having worked the whole day in
The master's house without rest
And deprived of sleep during the
Night, Chandramati felt a shooting
Pain in her chest due to the collision
And reeling forward fainted on the road.

The thief without a second thought
Placed the jewel in her hand and
Disappeared into a by-street.
The guards stumbled on her and
Finding the jewel in her hand.
Arraigned her before the king.
Who ordered her to be executed.
Thus she was brought before
Pravira, the chief executioner.
Who in turn called Harischandra
And ordered him as follows:
"Take this woman to the execution
Ground and cut off her head".
Harischandra stared in disbelief
At this unexpected turn of events.
He knew that the conduct of
His wife is irreproachable
And blamed it on the cruel fate
Whose web of disasters has now
Finally destroyed his family.
With shadows of sorrow darkening
His face, he bemoaned the utter
Futility of life sans son and wife.
He therefore resolved to die
On the funeral pyre of his son
Along with her wife and told her
Of his resolution as follows:
"My dear wife. I choose not to live
After your death, for my soul
Shall suffer utter loneliness.
Our son lies lifeless here and
Thy life too hangs on my sword.
Surrender of life is the salvation
for one sunk in the sea of sorrow.
So, saying, the king laid his son
On the funeral pile and joined
His wife in paying his last obeisance
To the gods. After this, the king
Took a torch and lit the pyre
And accompanied by his wife
Stepped into the raging flames!

EPILOGUE

No sooner thy entered the fire
The gods led by Indra sprinkled
Flowers on them and the fires
Dwindled in the drench of rain
Showered by the lord of heaven.
The gods along with Viswamitra
Descended from heaven praising
Harischandra for his adherence
To truth, against all odds and
His willingness to sacrifice
Everything at the altar of truth.
They honoured him as the apostle
Of Truth, and Indra praised him thus:
"Thy trials have ended and
Thou hast snatched victory
From the hands of Viswamitra".
Then Viswamitra stepped forth
With all his ego subdued and
Spoke to Harischandra as follows:
"Oh king, In this battle of truth
And falsehood, Thou hast triumphed,
In every trial I had set forth.
Thy tormentors-the boar, the apsara,
The brahmin, the chandala, the snake.
And the robber have all been
Set up by me only to make you
Break your promise atleast once.
You have borne much trouble
Because of my eagerness to prove
You false and to achieve this end
I pushed you into painful perils.
But you stood like a rock against
The lashing torments of life's tornado.
In appreciation of thy staunch
Adherence to truth, I shall now
Restore thy son back to life".
So saying, Viswamitra took
Some water into the palm of his hand
And chanting some mantras
Sprinkled it on the dead body.
The son rose up from the faggots
And ran towards his parents as if
He had just woken up from sleep.

The king and the queen took him
Into their arms and all the three
Prostrated themselves at the
Feet of Viswamitra in gratitude.
Viswamitra lifted them and Hugging
the king to his bosom said:
"Having lost my wager with sage Vasishta that I shall prove you False, I am surrendering all my Powers obtained through penance, And shall begin acquisition of these Powers all over again from nothing".

Indra, Yama, Vasishta and all Other gods and sages present Applauded him for fulfilling His promise made in heaven. Then Indra pointing to the Chariot descending from heaven Spoke to Harischandra thus:

"O king. Thy father Trishanka Bereft of any great virtue Was vaulted to heaven by sage Viswamitra, but he was pushed down By the gods and falling down, He appealed to Viswamitra To restore him back to heaven. Then Viswamitra with his powers Created a new heaven for him Now famous as Trishanka swarga. But the gods pleased with thy Virtues have sent the celestial Chariot to take thee and thy wife Bodily into the abode of gods". Having spoken thus, Indra and others Led Harischandra to Ayodhya Where he enthroned Rohitasya As the king of his mighty kingdom, And seated in the celestial
Chariot with wife Chadramati,
He ascended to heaven amidst the
Rhythmic sounds of beating drums;
The shrill clang of clashing cymbals,
And the applause of his people.

There had been no king like him
In the entire history of India.
Who adhering to Truth and Dharma
Attained his goal of salvation,
Setting a classic example which
Has endeared him to all Indians.
Generation after generation.