

Translations



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Dāndi Ramayana
Trishanku Episode (from Ādi Kānda)

Balarama Dasa

Translated by. *Ashok Mohapatra



(*Jagamohana Ramayana* or *Dandi Ramayana* was written by Balarama Dasa in the Fifteenth Century. It is a regional version of the Ramayana as retold by Siva to Parvati in the medieval Odia language. This outer frame of storytelling has many inner frames. The story of Trishanku is told by the Sage Shatānanda to Rama. Out of his devotion to Lord Jagannatha, Balarama ascribed the authorship to his Lord Jagamohana (another name of Jagannatha). It is written in a metre called Dāndi Vritta consisting of rhyming lines of fourteen syllables each. Hence this nomenclature. The picture is from the Internet.)

And then Vishnuparusha, Basu's son,
Became the king of Ayodha.
And his son was Satyabrata,
A fine youth, good-looking and noble.
The loving father coronated him as Prince
And bequeathed to him all his wealth.
One day, while touring the city,
The Prince spotted a Brahmin girl.
Beautiful, accomplished, nubile;
She hadn't yet found a suitable groom.
Satyabrata was smitten with Madana's arrow,
Seeing the maiden at her porch.
She gazed at the handsome Prince,
Equally love-struck, trembling with desire.
Their hearts met,
And he brought her to the palace.
And disported himself with her,
But aggrieved, the Brahmin soon arrived.
The old King listened to his complaint.
And chided Satyabrata thus:
'You are a disgrace, a sinner,
Though I declared you as next in line.
How could you lift the Brahmin's daughter
Brought her home as bride?
You are a Chāndāla,
You have no place here. '
The Prince left the palace
And built himself a hut outside the city.
He nourished a grudge against Vashista –
The great sage was the minister.
'My father perhaps had the right to be angry,

But why did the minister not defend me?
Now I am exiled, embittered', so he thought.
The King also forgot he had to look after
The wife and eight sons Vishvamitra had left under his care.
Vashista did not remind the King of this;
Towards Vishvamitra he bore hard feelings.
The woman was in distress, as were the kids.
Famine struck the Kingdom,
And the woman's miseries grew.
'What do I do now, to whom will I turn?
Abandoned by husband, I am clueless.
Lost in his royal luxury
The King also forgot me.
In these hard times
Who will look after me?
She looked for succor vacantly
To all the ten directions.
I would rather not have food
Than see my children starve.
Fate has brought me down to privation,
Though I was a queen and saw better days.
O Dharma Deva, the righteous and perfect one,
How can I keep body and soul together?
She bewailed her misfortune all night,
But at daybreak made up her mind.
'I will sell one of my sons in the market' –
She was desperate but firm.
'Children of a hapless mother,
Whom her man left improvident.
How on earth will I bring you up
When Vashista begrudges our happiness?

And the King to whom your father entrusted us
Has forgotten us – so cruel is fate.
We lived on rice starch and gruel
As long as I managed to beg.
But yesterday, I returned empty-handed.
How will eight lives survive the calamity?
I will sell Galavya for some money,
Or else no food will come our way.
This is the only way we can live
When we have no shelter of our own.
'No issues, mother,' Galavya reassured,
'If selling me off does any good to you all.
This is willed by Fate, so be it then.'
He strode off to the market.
And his tearful mother and seven brothers
Followed, distraught with grief.
At the marketplace of Ayodhya they sat,
Hawking him around, as if he were goods.
Evening fell, but none came to buy the child;
They returned, crushed with grief,
And met Satyabrata on the city's outskirts.
'Why are you woebegone?' he asked;
'I am Vishvamitra's wife', she answered.
These are my kids,
And my husband was the King's friend.
To the King's care he left us,
But we are unremembered, uncared for.
Vashista, the Minister, never told the King
What misfortune befell us.
The famine made things worse,
My children have remained unfed.

I came to the market to sell the youngest child,
But none bought him.
My children's faces are glum,
And their bellies empty;
Blame shall go to Vashista
If any of them dies,' she began to wail.
'Do not cry, please be calm,
I would love to be of service to Vishvamitra,'
Satyabrata pacified her and gave her money
In lieu of Galavya.
He was himself worth a hundred cows,
As also caring and resourceful.
He took the woman and kids
Under his care and nourished them.
He offered them every day a new dish,
With his help Galavya was sold,
And the proceeds were spent before long.
Food cost dear,
Hunger claimed lives.
To feed eight mouths was difficult,
But Satyabrata scraped along.
He fed them the meat of deer and boars
Until animals were hard to find.
One day, he found Surabhi, Vashista's cow
Grazing, and he shot her dead with arrow.
He brought her meat home
And said it was a boar's.
Vishvamitra's wife was delighted
To cook her sons a dish of meat.
She herself ate with relish some of it –
Listen, Ramachandra.

The red sun dipped behind the mountain,
But Vashita's cow never returned to the pen.
The sage could know everything with Yogic power
And was mad at Satyabrata.
'You did what a Chāndāla is wont to do,
Having killed my Kamadhenu.
You cannot escape the sin of cow-slaughter
Now you have been branded with.
You broke the word you gave your father –
A sin that outweighs all else.
You made off with a Brahmin's daughter,
And thus, committing two sins.
Yet one more now, of cow-slaughter,
How could you not consider these sins, villain,
But continued to live a life given to wickedness?
From this day you will be called Trishanku
A name you will carry like a badge of shame.'
In this manner Vashista cursed him,
Leaving Satyabrata to mull:
'Why keep this depraved body alive for long
When I have become a Chāndāla?'
Wandering as an exile he met
Vishvamitra on the seashore.
By virtue of arduous ascetic practice.
He had evolved into the sage named Kaushika
He asked Satyabrata with a smile,
'My soul is pained to see you in this state.'
'A curse has reduced me to wretchedness,
But your blessings count as I am helpless.
You left your wife and sons at Ayodhya
And famine afflicted them.

Given to luxury and royal pleasures,
The King forgot about them.
For his part, Vashista was mean
Not to have told the King of their plight.
She suffered too much, your wife,
With her sons going hungry.
I kept them under my care
When I saw them in distress.
I hunted animals to feed them,
But one day I found no quarry.
I killed Vashista's cow while it was grazing
I skinned it and offered them as food.
I had no other option;
It was to be a secret in these inopportune times.
But the sage came to know of this,
And cursed me to be a Chāndāla .'
'What did your father say
When he heard about it?' Vishvamitra asked.
'I had sinned against my father
Having abducted in lust a Brahmin girl.
Angered at this, my father sent me into exile,
But Vashsita did not intervene then.
I lived outside the city as pariah
And killed animals for livelihood.
I saw your wife then in the marketplace
Trying to sell one of her sons, to no avail.
She was in tears, and I asked her the reason.
'Why are you crying, O lady?
Has someone killed your relatives?'
I am Vishamitra's wife,
Punished by fate with hunger.

In dire straits, I even failed to sell one of my kids
Grief-stricken, distraught.’
She was such a pitiful sight,
And her story so heart-rending.
I looked after her and the kids,
Much to Vashista’s chagrin.
He condemned me to be a Chandala and named me
‘Trishanku’, appropriate to my lowly status
Disgraced, I have been knocking about,
Though I meet you now, fortuitously.
Please mitigate my suffering
If you can, O revered one.’
Hearing this the great sage Vishvamitra
Reassured Satyavrata in imperious manner.
‘I will accomplish a feat
For the posterity to remember,
O Suryavanshi, mark my word,
I assure you of a place in heaven;
There you shall go on the strength of my Yajna.’
Then the Yajna paraphernalia followed,
And Vishvamitra invited Yogis and hermits
Who came to attend the ceremony in fear of him .
But Vashista turned them back, persuading them
Not to consecrate a Chandala’s ceremony.
So, they all returned, and this,
Vashamitra heard from his disciples.
Gadhi’s son was enraged at this affront.
He initiated the Chandala into Brahminic studies.
And Trishanku mastered the four Vedas,
The mantras and the mudrās of esoteric Anga Nyāsa.
Armed with this learning,

He performed the rites of fire.
Vishamitra was himself surprised
To see him so accomplished thus.
On the bank of the Sindhu
A fire was lit amidst
Grains of barley, sesame seeds, and grass of doob.
Unto the fire offerings were made
While the gods in heaven watched the rites, bemused –
'O scion of the Raghu clan, give an ear,' Satyananda said –
Improper it was for a Chāndāla to perform the rites.
So, no god descended to consecrate the Yajna,
And stoked Vishvamitra's anger instead.
'I shall perform the rites even in their absence,'
He said and ladled ghee into the fire.
Distressed and overwrought, to the Digapāla they ran.
Brahma alone could dissuade Vishhvamitra, they reasoned;
With him they conferred in the empyrean region.
Irate and obdurate, the sage carried on the rites
And ordered Trishanku to rise to heaven;
But gods loomed in the heaven and thundered:
'You enter here, and you shall be burnt to ashes.'
Forewarned thus, the Prince came down and cried,
'Save me, O Vishvamitra, from this plight.'
Gadhi's son was livid with rage, and carried on
The rites in disregard of Indra and other gods.
'What madness is this, Vishvamitra?' Brahma asked.
'What inequity is this? How can a low-born
Enter heaven and sit among the celestial beings?
How can this ever happen? Just calm down and think.
Noble as you are, please stop doing this reckless act.'
Gadhi's son responded to Brahma's words and said,

‘O Father of the World, hear me out.
To Trishanku I am indebted,
For the favor he did to me.
He supported my wife and sons
When they fell on hard times.
And I shall place him in heaven,
Feed him Amrit and break all precedents.’
‘But this is wrong,’ the Father said.
‘Satyabrata is now a Chāndāla
Under Vashistha’s curse.’
‘I am much obliged to Trishanku,
O Carrier of the Universe,’ Vishvamitra replied.
‘He was kind to me,
I promised him Heaven;
I will keep my word
For posterity to remember.’
Vishvamitra was adamant,
Brahma was dumbstruck.
Between Heaven and Earth
Trishanku remained hung.
‘We will find him a suitable place,’
Brahma assured Vishvamitra
And the latter then relented.
In the southern sky Trishanku was placed,
With jubilant uproar the firmament rang:
‘*Sadhu, sadhu*, blessed you are, Vishvamitra
Noble are your thoughts.
You raised a person up to heaven
Who sinned on three counts:
Killed a cow, lifted a Brahmin maid
And disobeyed his father.

Vashista cursed him as Chāndāla
And gods cast him aside as a sinner.
And yet you seated him in heaven,
Giving him a big push.
What a great feat it was,
A great Karma, indeed.’
Having said this the divine beings
Departed to their heavenly abode,
And the kings felicitated him too.
‘This is the glory of the sage,
Which you ought to hear, O Rama.’
Brahma hailed Vishamitra with these words.
The mortals who hear or read this Charita
Will be pardoned their rankest sins
Like killing a Brahmin or lifting a girl.
Intentional or unintentional,
All wrongdoings will be forgiven.
They who slaughter cattle will still
Have their souls unafflicted, hearing this.
If one rescinds one’s word to his father
Would be taintless even so.’

About the Translator



Ashok K Mohapatra, Professor of English, teaches at St Xavier's University, Kolkata. He has taught at Sambalpur University, and has been Fulbright alumnus at Columbia and Yale universities, and UGC visiting fellow Jadavpur, Delhi and Bardhaman Universities. He has authored and edited four books and has over fifty national and international publications. He has been translating Odia poetry and prose for some years.