

## ***Harischandra***



The story of Harischandra is of perennial interest. The story will last for as long a time as the value of truth lasts. It illumines our life. It was this story which helped Yudhishtira to get over his adversities. Again, it was this story which showed the path of truth to Gandhiji. This story occurs in the Vedas and also in the Puranas, in poetry and in drama. It took its origin in the Vedas, flowed through the Puranas, ran into cascades of poetry, and has continued to enrich the life of people all around the world.

Harischandra was the mighty monarch of Sri Rama's lineage (Ikshwaku dynasty) he did not have any children for a long time. In desperation Harischandra's wife said to herself: 'It is enough if I can give birth to a child, however short-lived its existence might be. At least that will save me from the odium of being 'a barren woman'. King Harischandra felt the same agony. He too longed for a child. The husband and wife observed many a ritual and went on extensive pilgrimages. At last they were able to propitiate God Varuna and secure his benediction. Varuna blessed them with a son whom he wanted to be offered as a sacrifice to him. The husband and wife

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were helpless and they had to agree to the condition laid down by the God.

A son was born to Harischandra. Thus they were relieved of their chief worry. But they were confronted by another anxiety. The God Varuna, who had graced them with a son, appeared before them. "Give me back the child," demanded. "O! the child is young. Please wait till he develops his teeth," pleaded Harischandra. The child's teeth appeared. The God came back. The father said: "Please wait till the boy's initial tonsure ceremony. The God granted another term reprieve. Even as the father was thus putting off his promise, the boy developed sufficient awareness. He came to know that his father had consecrated his life to the God. He suddenly absconded from the country. God Varuna was angry. Consequent Harischandra contacted a deadly form of dropsy. But the God himself took pity and said relenting: "I do not want the sacrifice. Let Harischandra be cured of the disease."

Harischandra realized his folly. It was clear to him that he had been punished for not having fulfilled his promise to the God, out of his own infatuation for his son. He could have, instead of praying for a reprieve, begged the God to relent and to release him from the obligation. He wondered what his fate would have been if instead of repeatedly asking for a reprieve he had gone back on his word. What would have been the reputation of his family? How terrible would have been the future life of his wife and son! Therefore, he made up his mind thereafter never to go back on his word under any circumstance. 'A man should be as good as his word. He should

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preserve its sanctity. One ought to realize the value of truth. Hereafter I shall rigorously practice truth in my daily conduct'. Accordingly he lived a life of truthfulness and became famous as 'Satyavrata' - an observer of truth.

One day the celestial court of Devendra had assembled. In the midst of several activities there, some earthly matters also came up for discussion. Devendra wondered if there were any truthful human beings on earth. The sage Vasishta stood up and said: "Yes, there are truthful men on earth." "Who could it be?" mused Devendra. Vasishta mentioned the name of Harischandra, the son of Satyavrata. Vasishta's words infuriated the sage Vishwamitra: "He who could not keep up his word to the God Varuna- how can anybody call him a truthful man? Don't you know that he was a victim of dropsy owing to the curse of God Varuna? "

All that happened in his past life and it does not interest me, said sage Vasishta. I aver that he has now become a truthful man. He does not so much as utter a single lie."

"Suppose some one catches him uttering a lie...? asked sage Vishwamitra.

The sage Vasishta, who had complete trust in Harischandra, spoke with confidence: "if he were to tell a lie and if he were to be found dishonest at any time, I shall take this oath: I shall let my plait of hair fly unkempt, and bare-bodied I shall walk away southwardly, drinking toddy from a cast-away human skull."

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The sage Narada, who was close by, said to Vishwamitra: "Now, supposing Harischandra adhered to truth unswervingly, what would be your oath?"

Sage Vishwamitra said, "I shall give away to Harischandra half the quantum of the divine fruits, and grace I have earned in my life and I will make him world renowned," said Vishwamitra swearing an oath in the court of Indra.

The selfishness and egotism of these two sages caused untold hardship to Harischandra. His ordeal began.

Harischandra who had a loving wife, an affectionate son, a clever minister and devoted to subjects was unaware of the oaths and counter-oaths taken by the sages Vasishta and Vishwamitra in Indra's celestial court. On returning to earth Vishwamitra carefully considered for some time Harischandra's polity, his ways and means. He seriously pondered how best he could tempt him into the path of falsehood. Why not mulct all his wealth, ruin him and force him into a situation in which he would be compelled to tell lies?

One day the king was busy in the midst of fun and frolic. Some followers of the sage Vishwamitra, approached him and described to him the details of a religious sacrifice called Bahu Suvarna Yaga. They persuaded him that he was the most qualified person to observe the sacrifice. The king agreed. He promised to conduct the sacrifice with the co-operation of the sages. A special feature of the observance was that a king should be limitless in his bounty in giving away gifts after the sacrifice. A king should never deny and gift to anybody however cruelly exacting the demands might be.

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Harischandra was aware of this stipulation. He completed the yaga with great eclat. The poor and the needy were fully satisfied. But Vishwamitra resented the success of Harischandra. He continued his schemes and intrigues.

He came to the king. The king welcomed and honored him with his customary courtesy and hospitality. He asked the sage what he could do for him. The sage said without any qualms of conscience, I have come to collect my gifts on the occasion of the sacrifice." Harischandra readily agreed. The sage spelt out his demands. A man should stand up on the back of an elephant and toss a coin reaching a certain height, the king, should pile up money and jewels so as to measure up to the said limit and gift it away to him. The king granted the demand unhesitatingly and begged the sage to accept it. Vishwamitra was bewildered. He had failed in attempt to demoralize the king and bamboozle him into promise. He left all the gifts with the king and went away saying that I would send for them whenever he needed them. He went back to the hermitage, crestfallen. Harischandra had, emerged triumphant in the initial test.

Vishwamitra was awfully worried. He wondered how he would fulfill the oath he had taken in Devendra court. What a shame it would be he failed! What was worse, this Harischandra's fame was spreading and wide. What was he to do next? He thought of another plan. Some men have money-power. Some have soul- power. Some others draw sustenance from their position and prestige. Vishwamitra decided to wean away the king to his hermitage and try the power and spell of his status on him. I shall see how he can afford to stick to

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truth,' he said to himself. He used his magical powers and created a number of wild animals. He let them loose in the kingdom and they plagued the people.

Vishwamitra's tyranny manifested itself in another terrible form. Thanks to the wild beasts, the people's sufferings were endless. Pests and insects attacked the seeds sown by the farmers in their lands. Deer ate away the sprouting crops. Peacock and other birds ruined corn stalks. There was severe shortage of food for the people. They were terror-stricken. They supplicated to the king for instant redress 'O mighty monarch! So far we were not plagued by such tyranny, we feared no enemy-, we suffered no indebtedness; we hardly ever knew what was thirst and starvation. But the present condition is terrific. The seeds have dried up. The crops have failed and the streams have petered out. The menace bird and beast is unbearable" - they cried in agony. The king assured them of immediate relief and set out to hunt the wild animals. He pursues the quarry all day long and slew them. When he was pressing, forward in the jungles, he suddenly came upon a sanctuary in which the wild animals were living together in peaceful abandon. The king went on and on and approached the precincts of a hermitage. Much to his surprise, he learnt that it was the hermitage of his family teacher, the sage Vasishta. The calmness of the place gave immense relief to the king, exhausted by the hunting exercise. He met his teacher and took his blessings. He told him of his errand and proceeded into the forest.

In the afternoon he entered the surroundings of another hermitage which presented a contrast. His fatigue and agitation

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increased. Then he came to know that it was the abode of the sage Vishwamitra. But he was unable to account for the change in the atmosphere. He decided to meet the sage after resting for a while. He placed his head in the lap of his wife and went to sleep.

Vishwamitra came to know that Harischandra had arrived at his hermitage. His scheme had succeeded. He was bent upon using his power to force the king to tell a lie. His wrath against Vasishta flared up. 'Also he remembered' his earlier unsuccessful attempt at tempting the king. The memory of the challenge he had thrown in the court of Indra and the shame that would result if he failed aroused his vengeful feelings. In this state of mind the, sage created two beautiful girls. The sage was often motivated by intense anger, implacable enmity and motiveless malignity. These passions accounted for what was morbid in his personality. And hence these two girls created by him were of filth and dirt. They set out to tempt Harischandra as prompted by their master, the sage.

Harischandra, who was sleeping in the lap of his wife, dreamt a horrible dream. He thought it was the fore warning of some thing inauspicious. He explained his dream to his wife. She spoke assuringly; "Pray, do not be worried. However, never stray away from truth." The prince and the minister also consoled him. Just then the two girls of Vishwamitra came. They entertained the king with their song and dance.

Harischandra was delighted. He gifted away to them his pearl necklace. But what they wanted was not just a gift. They were there to tease him, to annoy him, as instigated by sage. They tried to trap

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him with their clever talk. At last they wanted him to marry them. The king, who had been amused so far, flared up. How could those lowborn women ever have the cheek to ask a monarch of the Dynasty of the Sun God to marry them? Probably the times were bad, or it must be due to the pernicious influence of the locality. They deserve only physical admonition. So saying, the king beat them with a sledge hammer and drove them out. They came back to Vishwamitra and appealed for mercy.

That was just what the sage wanted. Burning with indignation, he came to the king. His arrival was so unexpected that it was hard for the king to recognize him. Was it a plait of hair or fire that he was wearing? Was it the holy ash that he was wearing on his forehead or it thunder? Was he putting on was the doer-skin or the wildlife? It was not clear to the king if the burning 'third eye' of Ishwara had taken the form of a sage! Vishwamitra presented a contrast in every respect to the peaceful, gentle, graceful, scholarly Vasishta. For a minute the king stood perplexed. But he had the strength of truth to support him and he welcomed the wrathful sage courteously, apologized to him for any remiss of duty. He told him that he was at his service and would do his bidding. But the sage had failed in his sagacity. His anger mounted unabated. "Look, Harischandra! What have you done? You have slain my animals, ruined my hermitage and you have mercilessly manhandled my girls!"

The king was amazed. "O, my lord! I am blameless. Was it wrong to have come to greet you?" he asked. Vishwamitra spoke with cunning deliberately on: "The girls entertained you with song and

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dance and you roughed them up. I shall pardon you if you marry them." The king refused. Vishwamitra grew more resentful. At last the king emphatically said, " I would rather part with my kingdom than marry those women."

"Very well, then surrender to me your entire kingdom, " the sage asked.

Harischandra made over his whole kingdom without batting an eyelid. But the sage was still obstinate: "You had better go back to your capital and summon all your people. I want you to hand over to me the kingdom in their presence,' he argued.

The king agreed and seated the sage in his chariot and led him in a procession. He himself followed on foot following the chariot all the way to the palace. And in the presence of his principal ministers he handed over to him the charge of all the four wings of the armed forces, the state treasury, the capital, and the royal seal everything.

In spite of all this, was the sage content and happy? No! "Take off all the jewels you are wearing and your clothes too. Give me an inventory of the jewels of your wife and children. You had better wear these garments." So saying, he gave them cheap, hempen clothes.

Harischandra told his wife and son to put on those clothes; he too wore them and asked the sage if they could go. The sage, still resentful, gave his half-consent. Harischandra was unable to understand his behavior. He left the palace and stepped into the street where he was surrounded by huge crowds of citizens. They were utterly confused on seeing the predicament of the ruler. The

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king consoled them, told them that thereafter Vishwamitra was their king, and he left the capital city.

Vishwamitra again sent for the King and asked him "Where's my fees? Out with it," he demanded. The king was flabbergasted; He had given him money and jewels, piled up to the height of a coin tossed by a man standing on an elephant's back. He had given away everything, every pie, and he was unable to understand the fuss the sage was making. "When I have handed over to you all that I had, where is the question of my paying the duty on it?" he asked. Vishwamitra did not agree with the argument, he said that the kingdom and all the property belongs to him, the gift the King had made, but was requested by Vishwamitra to safeguard until when demanded was his too. And now he wants his gift back.

At last the king got sanctioned a time limit of 48 days and left the city. The citizens wept bitterly and moaned: 'The grace our life has left us.'

Then Vishwamitra called Nakshatraka who was one of his disciples, and ordered him: 'Whether they can give or not, you had better torture and torment them without mercy. You must menace them in the midst of jungles, starve them, and see that they lose their way. Threaten them that the time limit for payment of debts is over. Never relent, never be kind and considerate. Never let him rest for a while anywhere. When he is dog-tired, pretend as if you are fagged out and you need his nursing and care. Somehow or other, see that he slips into telling a lie. You will be just an instrument of torment, whereas I will be the power behind it. I will assume the shape of wild

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storms, scorching sun, scalding fire and monstrously wild animals. I will haunt and plague him in the form of hunger, thirst, sleeplessness and sickness. I shall somehow win my gamble." Thus he instigated Nakshatraka and unleashed him behind the king.

Nakshatraka's conduct became proverbial and thus he immortalized himself with his notoriety.

Now Vishwamitra was the rule and Harischandra had to fulfil his promise to repay the debts within the stipulated time. But he could not earn it as a citizen of Vishwamitra's kingdom. He had to go elsewhere and collect the money either by way of hard labor or loan or some other means. He thought Kashi or Varanasi, the seat of the Lord Vishweshwara, was the proper place for him. He went to Varanasi.

It was inevitable that he should pass through impenetrable jungle on the way to Varanasi. Treading the jungle path is itself arduous. What was worse, Harischandra was accompanied by his queen and son who had not been accustomed to any hardship. Besides, the difficulties caused by Vishwamitra were terrifying. On top of it all was the menace of Nakshatraka. For example, once on the way, a wild fire broke threatening to engulf all of them. The power of Chandramati's chastity helped to put out the artificial wild fire. On another occasion the Sun's blazing heat burnt like fire when even the shades of trees were heated up. Earth, air and water burnt horribly making them restless and mad. Not all these terrifying hardships could even once dislodge Harischandra from his unwavering truthfulness and moral rectitude. After all these afflictions, the king and family arrived in Varanasi.

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A new town and they were utter strangers. How was the king to find money for clearing his debts? The stipulated time was drawing nearer. And there was Nakshatraka for dogging and vexing them. The helpless and desperate Harischandra bathed in the Ganges, went to the Lord Vishweshwara's temple and offered prayer. Even then he was restless. His wife suggested: Why don't you sell my son and me and pay off the debts? Harischandra was shocked. How could one sell one's wife and son?

Then the wife admonished 'are your wife and son more important to you than your honor? Do not hesitate. We resent your decision. Please go ahead.'

There was no way out. The mighty monarch of Sri Rama's lineage prepared himself to sell his wife and son. He wandered from street to street crying like a hawker that he would offer for sale his wife and son. At last, to their misfortune, a Brahmin customer came. He found fault with 'the woman' and said she was 'old'. 'The boy is a weakling,' he sniffed at him. He haggled and at last bought them both for cash. When the king paid the money to Nakshatraka he debited it towards his 'daily allowance'; and the loan amount remained unpaid.

Even as the last date for the repayment was drawing closer, Harischandra began to grow panicky and was ready to sell him. He placed a straw on his head and went out in the street crying. "I am a king of Ikshwaku dynasty. I am offering myself for sale." Thus he wandered from morning to evening in the streets of Varanasi.

At last a buyer turned up. He was Veerabahu, an outcast in charge of the burning-ground. He bloated with wine and his body was

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reeling with intoxication. He offered to buy Harischandra who was for a minute disturbed by a doubt as to whether it was right for a highborn Ikshwaku King like him to sell himself to a lowborn person. But the thought of the heavy burden of the debts he owed to Vishwamitra tormented him and he had already committed himself to the bargain. The die was cast.

Now, Harischandra knew how to negotiate. He cautiously stipulated his price "I want as much gold as would, if piled up, reach the height of a coin tossed up by a man standing on an elephant's back. That is my price."

"If I give you as much gold as would cover an elephant, what would be the quantum of work you do?" Veerabahu asked.

Harischandra, said: "Well, after all I am your servant. I shall do every thing you order me to do." Then Veerabahu threw before him a huge heap of money and employed the king of Ayodhya as his servant. He told him that his work was to be the watchman of the cremation ground.

The heap of gold dazzled the eyes and Harischandra handed over the entire sum to Nakshatraka. Nakshatraka felt ashamed. He reflected on the meanness of his 'Guru' and the nobility of the king. 'I am fortunate in having been in such close proximity to the king,' he mused. He went to his master to hand over the money.

Vishwamitra was greatly agitated. Here was a man who remained undefeated in any ordeal. He made up his mind to try again - he thought of more horrifying trials for the king.

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You will remember that Chandramati and Rohitashwa were living as servants at the Brahmin's house. He was an evil 'avatar' of Vishwamitra; he harassed them endlessly. They had slaved from morning to evening. They were cribbed and starved. The master often pricked them with foul words. Their life was full of blood and tears. They struggled hopefully and looked forward to better days.

One day when Rohitashwa (son of King Harischandra) was gathering faggots (for the ritual fire) in the woods, he was stung by a serpent. It was already night when the news reached home.

Chandramati's heart the midst of all indignity and adversity her son was the only solace to her. Now, even he was gone and her hands were empty.

But she could not afford to waste time in weeping and whimpering. The son's body was lying in the woods and she had to cremate the body she was all-alone.

Even to go out to cremate the body she had to obtain her master's permission. He was too hard-hearted and gave her permission only after the day's stipulated charges were over. Her grief was inconsolable and at the end of the day she went into the forest to search for the dead body. She found it and wept her heart out. Frantically she lifted the body and went to the cremation ground. She placed it there. She had no money to buy firewood. She gathered together the half-burnt faggots and placed her son's body on the funeral pyre. She was about to light the pyre.

What an agonizing moment to a mother!

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Just then, Harischandra, who was like a dragon keeping vigil in the cremation ground, hurtled there, snatched the lighter-faggot from Chandramati's hand and hurled it. He held the child's corpse by the toe and threw it away from the funeral pyre. Chandramati was perplexed. She wept bitterly, please permit me to cremate him."

Before you cremate the body, remove the clothes and give them to me. Also pay up the prescribed fees for the cremation license, said Harischandra

"I am a poor serf. I have no money to pay."

"Then remove your 'mangalasutra' (precious symbol worn by married women), pawn it with some moneylender and bring me the money," he said.

Her grief welled up without end. She knew that her 'mangalasutra' would be visible only to her husband the others would see it only when the husband's life was in peril. When the watchman of the cremation grounds referred to her 'mangalasutra', she was anxious for the safety of her husband's life too. She trembled with fear; she bemoaned her luckless condition. Her son, a prince, was dying a wretched death and she - Harischandra's queen - was unable to pay the funeral charges.

Vishwamitra, who was suffering defeat after defeat, made a last bid to trap the king. That night some robbers kidnapped the prince of Varanasi and killed him for the sake of his jewels. When the child was crying in deathly throes, Chandramati came there and mistook the dying boy for her son. The robbers decamped, leaving the stolen

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jewels and the dying boy. Chandramati was mistakenly caught by the king's men and was charged with the murder of the prince.

When she was summoned for interrogation before the king, she was benumbed and speechless. Although the king pitied her, he had been greatly shocked by his son's death. He ordered that she be executed by Veerabahu, the public hangman. But the latter assigned the task to his serf, the watchman of the burning ghat.

"This is my Wish and you may strike the Blow"

Harischandra was waiting for the woman and hoping that she would return with the cremation fees for burning her son's body. Now he had to agree to put her to death as ordered by his master. He led her to the gallows stone and told her to offer her last prayers to her God. He did not attempt to find out who the woman was. He did not need it. In her present state, he could never have recognized her.

Chandramati squatted on the ground, closed her eyes and prayed to God. She remembered her 'Guru' Vasishta and offered to him her salutation. Then she looked up at the sky and said: "Let Harischandra, grow immortal through his truthfulness. Let his name last till the sun and moon last. Let the dead son come back to life. Let the lord of the land, Vishwamitra, become immortal. This is my last wish. Now you may strike the blow."

Harischandra heard the words uttered by the woman bending her head on the hangman's block. It was clear to him that the woman was his wife and it was the same woman who had gone out to fetch the cremation fees. The son's dead body was still lying nearby. 'Well,

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one more trick of fate,' he thought. 'Yesterday the son died and he is not yet cremated. Now I am killing the wife. This is our master's bidding, and what fate wills. I cannot refuse to do my duty.' Thus he quietened his beating heart and lifted up the hangman's sword. He was aiming it at the wife's neck on the block.

The Sun was just rising on the mountain top and gazing at the glory of his dynasty - the 'Suryavamsha-' The angels and Gods had assembled in the sky to witness the glorious occasion when an earthly king, by his heavenly conduct, was about to achieve Godhood. The sage Vasishta was eagerly hoping and longing that at least, at that point, Vishwamitra would relent towards the king. The whole of creation was anxious to witness the apocalypse of truth. Then a voice was heard 'You marry my girls and I will suspend all hostilities. I will bring back to life your dear son. I will save your wife from death and I will give back to you all the glory of your kingship.'

Harischandra lifted up his head and saw. It was the voice of Vishwamitra. Then he realized that he was wrong in thinking that all his sufferings were the result of his past deeds the fruit of karma. 'All this is not the vengeance of fate - it is all due to the machinations of my 'guru.' But I didn't know why he is nursing such vengeance towards me. I shall, however, never yield to his futile fury,' he decided. He told the sage, "Oh, my revered master, never repeat those tempting offers. I yield not to temptation. I am tempted by nothing but the observance of truth. I have lived the life of a pariah. I have witnessed my son's death. Now a woman, a wife, has to be put to death. Very well. Let me not go back on my word. May you bless

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me with your benediction." He lifted his sword and in a wild sweep hit at his wife's neck.

But a miracle happened. Even before the blade of the sword touched the queen's neck, the sword itself took a different form. God Ishwara and his consort Parvati with the gesture of protective assurance appeared. Harischandra was found falling in prostration at the God's feet. Harischandra extraordinary adherence to truth had enabled every one to get to see God Parameshwara.

The Gods were pleased. The sage Vishwamitra ran to the place and stood in obeisance to the God. The God ordered that the dead Rohitashwa be revived. Vishwamitra put the seal of official recognition on the triumph of Harischandra. He narrated the origin and the consequence of the feud between Vasishtha and himself. He said that the sufferings of Harischandra, and his family were all an illusory drama. The Brahmin who bought the queen and prince was God Agni. Veerabahu, the outcast hangman, was none else than the God of death, Yama. He gifted away to the king, in the presence of all sages, angels and Lord Ishwara, half of the divine purity and virtue he had garnered.

The sage Vasishtha was all admiration for his disciple's noble conduct. Indra and other angels showered flowers on the king and his lost kingdom was returned to him. The sufferings and agonies inflicted on Harischandra by the sage were a blessing in disguise, since they proclaimed the king's truthfulness to the whole world. 'The sage is not angry with you. He does not resent your triumph. He is

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reverential like Vasishtha,' assured the God Ishwara, and blessed him with eternal happiness.

The story of Harischandra who lived for truth, who renounced everything for the cause of truth, is sacred, very sacred indeed. Isn't it?

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