



Door painting of Lakshmi in Oriya style

Lakshmi Purana

by

Balaram Das

translated by J.P. Das

This is an abridged and free translation of the Oriya Lakshmi Purana Suanga (also called Manabasa—installation of the mana or grain measure). Written by Balaram Das (fifteenth - sixteenth century), the poem is recited even today during observance of the Lakshmi Puja or Manabasa vrat. This vrat is celebrated on all Thursdays of the month of Margashira (December-January).

Houses are cleaned a day before the puja and in the villages they are plastered with cowdung. Floors and walls are decorated with designs made out of rice paste and doorways with strings of green mango leaves and bunches of ripe (yellow) paddy stalks. The puja is performed early in the morning, preferably before sunrise and a reading of the Lakshmi Purana is part of the ritual. Though the puja is performed by women, the Purana is usually recited aloud by a man or a young boy of the house. This story became the theme of a very popular Oriya film made in the '50s. It has a long tradition of being enacted as an intensely entertaining and popular folk play.

The Lakshmi Purana has been translated into English for Manushi by well known Oriya writer, Jagannath Prasad Das. Among several contradictions inherent in this text, is that no outsider, not even a married daughter, is to partake in the ceremony or accept the prasada, even though Lakshmi herself demands of Jagannath that Brahmins and chandals should accept food from one another's hands. However, Lakshmi's manner of revolt provides us with fascinating insights into the manner in which women sabotage the ideology of servitude, even while paying lip service to it. Lakshmi enjoins women to consider worship of husbands as the highest vrat, even while she herself launches a fierce revolt against her own husband's tyranny towards her and his refusal to consider certain castes as equal to others. She returns to the house only after she is able to make her husband accept her own more humane and egalitarian value system as well as her own autonomy. —Ed

Salutations to thee, mother
Kamala, daughter of the ocean.
Salutations to thee, Lakshmi, Vishnu's

consort Salutations to Kamala, the
benevolent, who looks after all beings,
inert and living. He who listens to your

life story with attention or remembers
you with devotion is delivered of his
poverty.

Here I narrate your story.

One day, sages Narada and Parashara, in the course of their travel, entered a village. It was Thursday in the month of Margashira and the village folk were celebrating the holy occasion, worshipping Lakshmi.

Narada asked Parashara, 'What is this ritual? What is this *vrat* that Brahmin and Chandala alike are celebrating? Who are they worshipping and what are the rituals?'

Parashara said, "This is the worship of Lakshmi on the Dhanamanika Thursday. Margashira is the supreme among the months of the year and Thursday in this month is Lakshmi's favourite day. Of the Thursdays, the first Thursday is specially important. If that day happens to be the tenth day of the bright fortnight, *Sudasha vrat* is performed on that day."

Narada said, "Do tell me who has gained by observing the *vrat* and who has suffered ignoring Lakshmi."

Parashara then narrated this story: One day Lakshmi told Jagannath (Vishnu) with folded hands, "Lord, it is my *vrat* day today and if you permit, I would go round the city." Jagannath having agreed, Lakshmi bedecked herself in fine clothes and ornaments and jewellery, took the form of an old Brahmin woman and went to the house of a trader. There she asked the lady of the house, "How is it that you have not decorated the house for Mahalakshmi *vrat*?" The woman said, "Do tell me how and for whom the *vrat* is to be performed." Lakshmi told her : "Wash the floor with cowdung and decorate it with rice flour. On a low table, spread some

newly harvested paddy grains of white colour. Fill a *mana* (grain-measure) with such grains and place it on the table. Wash three betel nuts in turmeric water and place them on the *mana*. Decorate the place with vegetables, flowers and coloured cloth. Then invoke Mahalakshmi with lamp and incense and make three offerings of meals. Prepare special



Cover page of Manabasa Lakshmi Purana, a popular book even today and a must for every Oriya home

pancakes and sweets and eat that *prasad* after prayer. Many things are taboo for women during this period: giving Mahalakshmi's *prasad* to outsiders even to a married daughter, beating the children, not cleaning the cooking vessels till all the black is gone, spreading the bed crooked, disobeying the in-laws, sleeping naked, applying oil, and so on. If it happens to be the last day of the dark

fortnight on Thursday, a woman should not wash the mouth after meals, face south or west while eating, tie and dress hair in the evening, eat in a dark room, apply oil on the body after bath, be angry with or disobey the husband. Lakshmi does not leave the house of the woman who treats her husband as god, is of clean habits and shares her husband's happiness and sorrow. Lakshmi shuns the house of the woman who is adulterous, lazy, dirty, quarrelsome and disrespectful to the husband. The married woman has no future without her husband. If she does vain *vrats* leaving aside service to her husband, she is destined to be reborn as a child widow."

So saying, Lakshmi asked the trader's wife to prepare for the *vrat* and went on to visit other houses. In the course of her visits, she entered the street where low caste *chandalas* lived and entered the house of a *chandala* woman Shriya on the outskirts of the town. Shriya, a devotee of Vishnu, had woken up early in the morning and had made preparations for worship with flowers and offerings. She was now praying to Lakshmi to accept her devotions.

Lakshmi could not resist the lotus flowers and stepped on them. Thus appearing before the *chandala* woman she asked her to seek a boon from her. The *chandala* woman said, "Give me a hundred thousand cows, wealth befitting Kuvira, a son in my lap, ornaments for my arms, and immortality." Lakshmi said, "All these will be gifted to you, except immortality."

At this time, Jagannath and his elder brother Balaram were hunting in

the forest. Balaram called Jagannath and said, “Look at your wife’s conduct. She is now in a *chandala*’s house. She goes to the huts of low-caste *hadis* and *panas* and comes back to the temple without even taking a bath. This she does everyday. She is supposed to care for the poor and so the *chandala* woman worships her. Well, if you are so fond of your wife, go and build her a palace in the *chandala* street. Listen to me and drive her out. It ill behoves you to have such a wife.”

Jagannath said, “If we throw her out, we cannot get a wife like Lakshmi again. What we can do is to get her back into caste by paying a fine of five lakh rupees to the inhabitants of heaven. If she repeats this, we will throw her out of the temple. We may excuse her this once.” Balaram said, “If your Lakshmi stays, I do not stay. A wife is like a pair of sandals. If you have your brother, you can have ten million wives. If you still feel for your wife, go and build a palace in the *chandala* street; don’t come back to my great temple.” Jagannath could take no more of this and they came to the main gate of the temple.

In the meantime, Lakshmi gave Shriya all she desired, a mansion of sandalwood, plenty of gold, and five sons. After this she returned to the temple to find the brothers sitting on the doorway. When she wanted to enter, Jagannath said, “We

have nothing to do with you who have been to the *chandala* street. If it were only me, I would have excused you your transgression, but brother has seen this and has reprimanded me enough. You are the worst of sinners. You move about like a mad woman. You cannot live in my house.” Lakshmi said, “Throw me out after giving me a divorce.” Jagannath said, “In our caste, there is no system of divorce.” Lakshmi said, “You got me out of the churning of the ocean and you had promised my father Varuna that you would excuse ten transgressions of mine. I have only committed one and that you do not tolerate.” Jagannath said angrily, “Your father is just so much salt and

he is roaring all the time. We had to build a wall around the temple to escape the noise.”

Lakshmi said, “You want to throw me out since I stayed a while in the house of an untouchable. You talk of caste and since you are gods, everything is excused. What about your own caste? You lived in a cowherd’s house. You ate in Nima’s house; you ate leftover fruits from Jara. Both you brothers are therefore low caste, no less. If the wife commits a mistake, the husband must bear it. For one transgression, the master does not remove his servant.”

Jagannath said, I cannot disobey my brother. I will give you a daily ration for the time being and maybe bring you back later after persuading brother.”

Lakshmi said, “I do not want a daily ration. I will leave like a helpless orphan. I will go to my father’s house. Take away your ornaments and do not accuse me later.” So saying Lakshmi took off all her ornaments and gave them to her husband. He said, “When a man sends away his wife, he gives her clothes and food for six months. Take these ornaments, sell them and buy yourself clothes and food.” Lakshmi said, “When you get another wife, give her these ornaments. I leave like a lowly orphan. But I put a curse on you. As true as the movement of sun and moon, you will have nothing to eat. For twelve years, you will be



A pata painting of Vishnu (Jagannath) done by a Puri Chitrakar. Chitrakars are Shudras by caste and their caste profession is icon-painting



An old *pata* painting of Balaram and Jagannath with their sister Subhadra between them

destitute and will get no food, water or clothes. When I, a *chandala* woman serve you food, then only you will get to eat.”

Lakshmi then left the temple and calling Vishwakarma asked him to build her a small hut. Vishwakarma built a palace with walls of gold and columns of coral and this pleased Lakshmi. She then summoned the eight Vetalas and asked them to ransack the kitchen and pantry in the temple and bring everything to her. When the Vetalas said they were afraid of Jagannath catching them in the act, Lakshmi asked Nidradevi to make the two brothers sleep till the

next day. The Vetalas now brought everything to Lakshmi who found that they had not brought back the golden bejewelled beds on which the brothers slept. The Vetalas went back and brought these after throwing the two brothers on ordinary string beds, as also the costly garments of the brothers. Lakshmi then called Saraswati and asked her to go to every house and ask the householders not to give food and water to Jagannath.

When the brothers woke up, they found the place deserted and everything gone. Jagannath said, “This is what happens when Lakshmi

leaves.” Balaram said, “Don’t say such things about a mere wife. If a wife is lost, does it mean that the husband has to go hungry?” They then went to the kitchen and the pantry, but there was nothing inside. They went to the Indradyumna tank, but there was not a drop of water in it.

Having spent the day without food and water, they decided to go out begging. Wearing torn clothes, sacred thread on the shoulder and broken umbrella in hand, the brothers now looking like Brahmin beggars, went round asking for water to drink. Wherever they went, they were taken to be thieves and driven out. At one

place when a Brahmin woman wanted to serve them rice, the utensil containing rice simply vanished. At another place, they were served some parched rice, but Lakshmi who knows everything, asked the wind-god to blow it away. The brothers then thought of entering the pond and eating lotus roots, but as soon as they entered the pond the water became mud.

The brothers then went to the sea shore the abode of Lakshmi's father. There at the portals of the palace they recited the *vedas* and when the maid servants came out, they asked for food. The maids reported this to Lakshmi, who asked them to go to the Brahmins and tell them that they could not possibly eat food prepared by a *chandala* woman. When told this, Balarama said, "Give us utensils and provisions; we will do our own



Lotus symbol with stylised footsteps drawn by village women with rice paste, to attract Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, into the house

cooking." Lakshmi sent them utensils and rice and vegetables but also

urged Agni not to provide any heat to the firewood when the brothers cooked.

Thus frustrated, the brothers agreed to eat in Lakshmi's house even if it meant losing caste. Lakshmi then cooked a great meal for them and the maids served it to the brothers who ate to their hearts' content after prolonged starvation.

When the brothers were resting outside the palace after the hearty meals, Lakshmi sent the maids to ask them if they were married. Jagannath said, 'I sent away a wife like Lakshmi; hence our misfortune.' The maids said, "How can a man become poor if he forsakes his wife?" Jagannath said, "There are wives who bring wealth; there are also wives who bring death in the family."

Balaram now asked Jagannath to go and hold Lakshmi's hand and tell her that it was all his, Balaram's, fault. Lakshmi could live wherever she wanted and he would never again try to forbid her. Jagannath went inside and as soon as Lakshmi saw him, she was all smiles. She then washed his feet and from the water thus sanctified she sipped a little and a little she sprinkled on her head. She worshipped his lotus feet with flowers. then she said to him, "You drove me out as a *chandala* woman, but ate in the very same woman's house. Both of you have thus lost caste. Shame on your greatness; shame on your vows. Shame on your brother and your promise. Now what do you want?"

Jagannath said, "We have suffered a lot because of you. The world now knows us as beggars.

Some "Modernist" Interpretations of Lakshmi Purana

"There are many morals to be drawn from this (festival)...Bad days come if one is not clean, pure and just - this is the message of the learned Lakshmi Devi. Life goes waste if one does not keep humanism in his heart like the god in his temple. **It is the woman's religion to protect the sanctity and purity of her house. As mother, sister and wife she is a source of respect, affection and love for men.**" (emphasis added)

Shailbala Mohanty

"Lakshmi Purana propogates the high ideals of Jagannath culture to the world torn apart with casteism and colour bar. In this vrat, there is no caste distinction....From another point of view, (it preaches that) devotion to duty and hardwork brings to one's life glory, honour and walth."

Premlata Dash

From *Odishara Parba Parbani* ed. Prof. Pathani Patnaik and others, Cuttack, 1983

Everyone knows that it is you who fed us. Whoever listens to this Purana on Thursday will be absolved of sins. The woman who recites this on Lakshmi *puja* day will go to heaven.”

Lakshmi said, “You must promise this to me. *Chandalas* and Brahmins will have no food taboos henceforth; they should eat from each other’s hand. Only then will I go back to the temple.” Jagannath agreed and took Lakshmi by her hand and with Balaram returned to the great temple. Balaram said, “A home is beautiful only when the lady of the house is there. Now I know how great Lakshmi is.”

Narada listened to the story. It is only through the grace of Lakshmi that the wretched *chandala* woman was blessed with wealth. Success comes to those who reads this Purana. All sins vanish as with sunrise. Those who recite or listen to this Purana earn the benefits of a trillion cow-gifts. This Purana is the way to salvation.

Thus ends the Lakshmi Purana written by Balaram Das. □

Ritual Remains, Message Forgotten

The equality of Brahmins and untouchables, at least to worship and earn religious merit, forms the core of the text. The text enjoins that there shall be no taboo in the matter of food and Brahmins and untouchables may share the same *prasad*. This injunction comes from Lakshmi who has been able to lay it down after a revolt against her husband and his brother.

In the recital of the text, however, this central point is lost on the devotees, as it is lost on commentators, both men and women, who have written about the text and have sought to find a moral to the story. Lakshmi can leave her abode and put a curse on her husband and return home on her own terms; it is fine for the goddess, but not for mere mortals. The women observing the *vrata* strictly follow the rituals prescribed in the text, which for them is more a manual of worshipping the goddess of wealth than a testament of a cause.

What happens today in the Jagannath temple in Puri, the abode of Lakshmi and her consort and the locale of the Purana, is revealing. The god of the Puri temple is of tribal origin and a group of temple functionaries, called *daitas* (who are thought to be descendants of the original tribal worshippers) are allowed to perform rituals inside the temple. However, untouchables are not welcome in the temple in spite of the anti-untouchability legislation. The Muktimandap Pandit Sabha, the Brahmin assembly of the temple, which is the highest council in matters of caste and religion, still holds that untouchables should not gain entry into the temple. It is, however, another matter that Brahmins do not mind sitting down with non-Brahmins to eat *mahaprasad* from the Puri temple, which they would not do in case of other food.

J.P. Das

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