

Story of Nala & Damayanti

Nala was the ruler of Nishada. He was a very capable king and his country prospered under his rule. However, despite being one of the most handsome men of his time, he was still unmarried. One day a brahmin came to his court. On learning of his bachelor status he suggested the name of Damayanti, the daughter of the King of Vidarbha. He painted such an impressive picture of the princess that Nala fell in love with her without seeing her.

At that it was uncustomary for a man to present his suit. He had to wait for the woman, or her father, to make the first move. Nala pined for Damayanti and began to neglect his state duties. He spent long hours in the garden of his palace dreaming about her.

A group of swans lived in the lakes in the garden. They daily observed the despondent king wasting his time. One day the leader of the swans approached the king and asked him what the matter was. The king informed the swan that he was in love with Damayanti but was unable to press his suit. He did not even know if Damayanti was in love with someone else. Custom prevented him from going to Vidarbha himself and this was too delicate a mission to entrust to someone else.

"If you think fit I can deliver your message," said the swan. Nala lighted up. At last there was an end to his immediate problems. And there could be no more romantic way to woo a maiden. That night the swan left for Vidarbha. Every morning and evening Nala would go to his garden to see if the swan had returned and would be disappointed.

After a week he found the swan waiting for him. The news was good. Damayanti too had heard of him and had fallen in love with him. Now that she knew he reciprocated her love she would arrange for her swayamvara. A swayamvara was a ceremony in which the maiden chose her husband from a gathering of suitors present. She asked Nala to immediately come to Vidarbha as soon as her swayamvara was announced.

Getting a swayamvara arranged was not as easy as Damayanti thought. It would be highly improper of her to approach her

parents directly. She began to drop hints by eating less and losing weight, by pretending to forget things, by looking lost and gloomy and other such things. At last her mother noticed that Damayanti was not her former self and told the king about it.

The king immediately ordered the royal physicians to find out what sickness was troubling her daughter. It was only after the physicians drew a blank that the king realised that his daughter was now a grown-up maiden and it was time for her to get married.

The swayamvara was announced. Nala left immediately. Since he was an excellent equestrian he made good progress. The news of the swayamvara had reached the heavens as well. Four of the demi-Gods, Indra, Agni, Varun, and Yama, had also descended to the earth for the swayamvara. They accosted Nala as he was nearing Vidarbha.

Indra told Nala that he would have to do them a favour. Nala protested that he needed to know what was being asked of him before he could commit. Indra got angry. "Humans consider it an honour when we ask them to do something. But you are creating a fuss. Don't you know our power? We can make you disappear and not reach the swayamvara at all," he thundered. Nala meekly acquiesced.

Indra then told him to approach Damayanti and plead with her to choose from the four demi-Gods. Nala was aghast. "How can I act against my own interest," he pleaded. The threat of dire consequences was repeated. Nala tried a different route. "We are allowed in the palace only on the day of the swayamvara and that too only where the swayamvara is to be held," he said, "How will I access Damayanti?" Indra reminded Nala that he was the king of the demi-Gods and would arrange the meeting.

A day before the swayamvara Indra transported Nala to Damayanti's chamber using his divine powers. The two recognised each other instantaneously. After a long embrace Nala stated the purpose of his visit. Damayanti told him not to worry. He had kept the promise made to the demi-Gods and nothing could dissuade Damayanti from garlanding Nala in the swayamvara ceremony. Nala faithfully repeated the conversation to Indra. "You have kept your word only in letter

and not in spirit," Indra stated, "Now I will do what has to be done."

A galaxy of princes was gathered at the swayamvara. Nala sat in one corner so as to avoid the demi-Gods, but they sought him out and sat next to him. At the appointed time Damayanti entered the hall. To her amazement she saw five people exactly like Nala sitting in a corner. She realised that the demi-Gods were trying to trick her but was confident that her love would prevail. After watching the five for a few minutes she realised that four stared at her with unblinking eyes while the fifth was blinking regularly. She garlanded the fifth person. The four demi-Gods assumed their true form and blessed the bride and groom and went back to heaven.

On the way they met Dwapar and Kali, two other demi-Gods. These presided over two of the four Yugas that make up one cycle of time between Creation and Destruction. Indra told them that the swayamvara was over and in any event it was a mere formality because Damayanti has already made up her mind. Dwapar and Kali felt that they had been cheated and swore that they would make life hell for Nala and Damayanti.

No sooner than Nala and Damayanti had settled down in their newly married life, Kali and Dwapar started their mischief. Kali entered the mind of Nala's brother, Pushkar, and exhorted him to challenge Nala to a game of dice. Though Nala was a weak player he accepted the challenge assuming it will be a friendly game. But Pushkar was being driven by Kali and the dice was being driven by Dwapar.

What began with the stake of a ring ended up with Nala losing everything he owned, including his kingdom. Then Pushkar asked Nala to stake his wife. "If you win I will return everything you have lost so far," he added as an incentive. Nala thought for a while but in the end declined the offer. Pushkar made them leave the country on foot. Nala wore only a loincloth and Damayanti only a sari.

They roamed around in this manner for a few days eating roots and fruits. One night Nala saw a bird and decided to trap it. He took off his loincloth to snare it but the bird flew off with the cloth. They now had to hide during the day and move at night. Damayanti wrapped one end of the garment around Nala

whenever they were near people. Totally exhausted they reached within striking distance of the capital of King Bhim, Damayanti's father. Nala pleaded with Damayanti that she return to her father's palace, but his wife did not comply.

That night while Damayanti slept Nala decided to leave her. He thought that she would return to her home after he deserted her. He tore off an end from her sari, just sufficient to cover the bare minimum, and quietly slinked away. Some distance away he saw that a snake was trapped in a burning bush. He doused the fire and freed the snake. As soon as he was freed the snake bit him and turned into a celestial being. "Do not worry," he told Nala. "The poison will disfigure and discolour you but you need to remain incognito for some time. Whenever you feel that you have to return to your original self just wrap this garment around you. Travel in the south direction for five days. You will reach the kingdom of Rituparna. Win his confidence and take the opportunities as they come." He handed Nala the magic cloth and went his way.

The poison had taken its effect. Nala's skin had darkened and his body had shrunk and in all his appearance was more than hideous. He reached Rituparna's kingdom and with some difficulty got an audience with the king and work in his stables. His prowess with horses soon reached the king's ears. He began to choose and groom the horses for the king's personal use. He also began to drive the king's chariot on a regular basis. When he had gained sufficient familiarity with the king he requested that he would like to prepare a meal for the king. The meal was a big hit and Nala became the head of the stables and the kitchen and the king's confidante.

Meanwhile Damayanti had reached the palace of the king of Chedi. When she found herself alone on that fateful night, she moved away from her father's kingdom searching for Nala. The next night she was protected by a band of celestial beings, who put her with a caravan of merchants. However a herd of mad elephants destroyed a large portion of the caravan, and Damayanti because of her single garment and dishevelled state was immediately branded as a witch responsible for the tragedy.

Many in the caravan wanted to stone her to death but the leader took pity on her. "We will be passing the city of Chedi

tomorrow and I will drop you in the marketplace there. After that you are on your own," he warned. It was a case of out of the frying pan into the fire. The shopkeepers pushed her away fearing that she would bring bad luck. The pimps passed lewd comments and offered to take her to the brothel. One even threw a bad of coins at her. Some children thought she was being stoned and began to pelt her.

The king's soldiers heard the commotion and intervened. They took her to the king, who immediately ordered that she be put in his mother's care. For the first time since her exile Damayanti took a bath. After being given a meal Damayanti was presented before the Queen Mother. She thanked her for the hospitality but refused to disclose her identity. All she said was that she was searching for her husband. She looked for an opportunity to escape from the palace and continue with her search. But the palace was well guarded and her every attempt was thwarted Nala too had reached a dead end. He did not know how to proceed to look for Damayanti or to get back his kingdom. Both husband and wife were separately waiting for Fate to make the next move. Fate came to the rescue in the form of Damayanti's father. After learning of the fate of his daughter and son-in-law he sent out emissaries in all directions in order to locate the couple. One messenger ultimately reached Chedi, where he learnt that a mad woman found in the market place was living in the palace of the Queen mother. He asked to see this woman and recognised her. Thus Damayanti was sent to her father's kingdom.

Damayanti then sent emissaries to search for Nala. Since her father's emissaries had found no trace of him she realised that he could be in disguise for some reason. She gave her men a question to ask anyone they thought could be Nala and to bring back the answer. The question was, "How much of a man is a person who not only deserts his wife in the middle of the night but also steals half her clothes?"

A few weeks later one of the emissaries reported, "King Rituparna has a new aide who is skilled in horsemanship and cooking, both areas in which King Nala is proficient. I sought out this man. Unfortunately he turned out be dwarfish and ugly and not like the King. However as per your instructions I asked him the question and he replied that if a person did that in order to make his obstinate wife return to her father then he

was a man."

Everything apart from the description fit. Damayanti had to meet this man. She announced another Swayamvara since Nala was missing for a long time and could now be presumed dead. She kept the notice so short that only the fastest riders would be able to make it. Rituparna heard of the Swayamvara and decided to participate.

Nala assembled the team of his best horses and set off with Rituparna to Vidarbh. On the way Rituparna's scarf flew off and he wanted to retrieve it. Nala made a quick calculation of the horses' speed and estimated the distance they had covered since then. He told the king that if they returned for the scarf they would miss the Swayamvara. Later they passed a row of fig trees.

Rituparna said that he could look at the fallen leaves and predict the number of leaves on the tree. Since they were nearing Vidarbh and were ahead of time Nala decided to test the king. To his surprise Rituparna was successful. On the final leg of the journey Rituparna told Nala that he was a fantastic gambler. Nala had not seen him play because no one was willing to play with him.

Damayanti was waiting on her balcony listening to the hoof beats as the carriages passed her palace. She immediately recognised the pattern of the hoof beats of the chariot being driven by Nala. She sent a maid to inquire who had arrived in the chariot and was informed that it was King Rituparna and his chariot driver. She was also informed that the king had refused the hospitality of Vidarbh and was asking his chariot driver to prepare his meal.

Damayanti then asked the maid to smuggle some item of food. The taste was identical to her husband's cooking. Throwing all decorum to the winds she ran down to meet the chariot driver and was stunned to meet a dark, short and deformed man instead of a fair, tall and handsome Nala. She asked, "Why does a man want to send his dutiful wife back to her father's home?" The man replied, "Because he has lost his kingdom and cannot support his wife in the manner she was accustomed to before their marriage." He then put on the magic garments and was returned to his original form.

Rituparna congratulated Damayanti and told her that she had found her husband but he would lose not only his best horseman and best cook but also his best friend. Nala had a proposal for Rituparna. "I will stay with you for a while and teach you all that I know of horsemanship if you teach me all that you know of gambling." He added that he was not interested in playing regularly but just one time in order to win his kingdom back. Nala and Damayanti moved to Rituparna's kingdom. Soon Rituparna was an adept horseman and Nala an adept gambler.

Nala sent a challenge to his brother. He was willing to stake Damayanti if Pushkar staked the entire kingdom. Pushkar still felt that the victory was incomplete without his brother's wife and readily accepted the challenge. This time Kali and Dwapar were not there to aid him and Nala had become an expert player. Pushkar lost everything back to Nala. Nala had half a mind to send Pushkar out in a loincloth, but he was a large-hearted man. He gave Pushkar a part of the kingdom and suggested that he mend his ways.

Nala and Damayanti then lived happily thereafter and they did not forget the swan who had so sportingly taken their messages of love.