

Savitri and Death

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Keywords

Hinduism; Beliefs: *dharma*, death, marriage and wifedom

Notes for teachers

This story is found in the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata* (on which see separate information sheet), where it is told to the heroes to illustrate the virtue of great women. Savitri is clearly the heroine here, though her virtuous nature takes the form of being a model wife, devoted to her husband. Being devoted to one's husband is believed to bring a woman a certain ascetic power, as do other domestic rites such as fasting. It is suggested that Savitri's ability to follow Death results from these rites. In addition, her knowledge of *dharma* shows an impressive mastery of important teachings, and her persistence is impressive.

In Hinduism, *dharma* is one's duty or responsibility, perhaps more loosely understood as morality. Sometimes *dharma* is said to vary from person to person – such that a king's *dharma* is different to that of a commoner, and woman's *dharma* different to that of a man. However, there are also explanations of *dharma* as being a universal code, so, for example, it is *dharma* to avoid harming others, and to speak the truth. In this story, Savitri's little *dharma*-teachings are of both types – she speaks of the *dharma* of a wife but also of general moral principles that should be adhered to be all. To have a woman teach a man about *dharma*, and a human teach a god, is rather unusual though by no means unique to this story.

Death – or Yama as he is called in Sanskrit – is the god who has the job of bringing a person's life to an end. As with many other Hindu stories of the gods, we see that they are quite human, and certainly not all-powerful or transcendent. Not only does Death look like a man, he speaks like a man, and he allows himself to be caught out by the persistence of a woman.

This story thus brings together ideas about the correct behaviour of a wife, the extent to which devoted love can overcome obstacles, and the nature of death, all intermingled with potted teachings on *dharma*.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Why does Savitri insist on marrying Satyavat even though she knows he will die soon?

Why does Savitri fast for three nights before the day her husband is due to die?

How does Savitri manage to restore her husband to life?

Why does Death keep granting Savitri boons?

What are Savitri's admirable qualities?

Application to other contexts

Can love and devotion overcome all obstacles?

Is it helpful to tell stories about people being able to overcome death?

What are the benefits of being really determined? Can you think of something you have worked really hard to achieve? When does being determined turn into being stubborn? Is being stubborn always a bad thing?

Reflecting on wider Hindu issues

What does this story tell us about how a virtuous Hindu woman should behave?

Savitri (a human) manages to defeat Death (a god). What does this tell us about the nature of the gods in Hindu traditions?

Can you find out more about the Hindu god of Death (called Yama) from other sources?

What is *dharma*? How is it taught in this story? Is *dharma* the same for everyone?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is summarised from *Mahabharata* book 3. For further information about the *Mahabharata* see separate sheet on

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For a full translation see John D. Smith (trans.) *The Mahābhārata* (Penguin Classics 2009), p.214-233 or for a readable retelling see Carole Satyamurti, *Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling* (Norton, 2015), p. 289-292.

Savitri and Death

Princess Savitri looked like a goddess, and was perfect in all aspects of her character. But because she was so splendid, nobody dared propose marriage to her. Her father the king was sad about this, and advised Savitri to go off on a journey to seek a suitable husband. Upon her return she announced that she would like to marry Satyavat, the son of a blind king currently living in exile in a hermitage. The seer Narada, who was visiting at the time of this conversation between father and daughter, advised against it: "Satyavat is a brilliant man, firm of character, generous and brave, and handsome with it, but he has one fault: a year from now he is destined to die. You had better choose another." But Savitri had made up her mind, and was determined to marry no one else. And so it was arranged, and Savitri went to live with her husband in the hermitage, where she was a model wife and daughter-in-law.

Now Savitri never forgot the words of the seer Narada, and she counted the days carefully until the year was passed. On the fourth day before the day that Satyavat was due to die she began a three-night fast, standing up all night and refusing food. On the morning of the final day she performed all her rituals and paid honour to her parents-in-law and all the ascetics in the hermitage, all of whom offered her blessings. She still refused to eat anything, saying she would break her fast that night, once she had accomplished her aim.

Then Satyavat set off into the forest carrying an axe, planning to fetch wood and gather fruits. Savitri set out after him, tense and fearful, seeing him as if he was dead already. She could take no pleasure from the beauty of the forest. After some time gathering food and splitting logs, Satyavat began to feel tired and his head ached. He sat down and laid his head in Savitri's lap, and she knew it was time. A handsome figure, dressed in black and carrying a noose, approached them.

"Deity, who are you?" asked Savitri. "I am Death, come to take your husband," the man replied. He pulled out a figure of Satyavat the size of a thumb from his body, and bound it with his noose. Carrying this life-force of Satyavat, Death set off. But Savitri followed behind, her hands clasped together in entreaty.

"Go back, Savitri! There is no point in pursuing me. Go and perform your husband's funeral rites," advised Death. But Savitri refused to turn back, saying "Where my husband goes, there must I follow. Such is *dharma*, and *dharma* is paramount. So the

virtuous say.” Death replied: “I am pleased with your response. Choose a boon – anything except the life of your husband.”

Savitri asked for her father-in-law’s sight to be restored, and for him to be mighty and glorious. Death granted this, and continued on his way, but still Savitri followed.

“Go back, Savitri. Do not weary yourself,” said Death. She replied, “How could I be weary when I am with my husband? They say that a single meeting with a virtuous person is great, but greater still is friendship with virtuous men.” Once again Death was pleased with her response and offered her another boon: “Anything except the life of your husband.”

Savitri asked for her father-in-law’s kingdom to be restored to him. Death granted this and continued on his way. But still Savitri followed. Death tried to persuade her to turn back, but she continued speaking about *dharma*: “The eternal *dharma* is to do no harm, in action, thought or word, and live with kindness and compassion. Most aspire to live like this, but only the truly virtuous can be compassionate towards their enemies.”

Death was pleased by this teaching on *dharma*, and offered Savitri a third boon: “Anything except the life of Satyavat!” She asked for one hundred sons for her father, who had no sons to continue his lineage. “So it shall be,” said Death, “but now you must turn back, for you have already come too far down this road.” “The distance is not far when I am with my husband,” replied Satyavat, and she continued to speak to Death about *dharma*, while all the time her husband dangled from Death’s noose. Once again Death offered her a boon: “Anything except your husband’s life.” She chose a hundred sons for herself. But still she pursued Death, speaking about *dharma* and virtue.

“The more you speak to me about *dharma*,” said Death, “the more impressed I am. Now choose an incomparable boon.” At last, Savitri had the opportunity she had been waiting for. “I choose my husband’s life!” she responded. Death smiled and granted her wish, and sent her back to her husband’s body.

Satyavat awoke in his wife’s lap as if from a long sleep, and indeed it was nightfall by this time. Together they began their journey back to the hermitage, where they found that all of Savitri’s boons had been fulfilled. And so it was that Savitri, through her virtue, rescued her husband and ensured the welfare of her family.