

Excerpt from Mahábhárata

(1000-600 BCE)

"Vana Parva". *Mahábhárata*. Calcutta.

Intended to be a treatise on life itself, this epic poem embraces religion and ethics, polity and government, philosophy and the pursuit of salvation. It is a collection of more than 4,000 and includes a number of the central texts of the Hindu holy book, The Bhagavad-Gita.

Sâvitrî; or, Love and Death.

"I mourn not for myself," quoth Yudhisthir,

"Nor for my hero-brothers; but because

Draupadî hath been taken from us now:

Never was seen or known another such

As queenly, true, and faithful to her vows,

As Draupadî."

Then said Markandya:

"Wilt thou hear, Prince, of such another soul,

Wherein the nobleness of Draupadî

Dwelt, of old days,—the Princes Sâvitrî?

There was a Raja, pious-minded, just—

King of the Madras—valiant, wise, and true;

Victorious over sense, a worshipper;

Liberal in giving, prudent, dear alike

To peasant and to townsman; one whose joy

Lived in the weal of all men—Aśwapati—

Patient, and free of any woe, he reigned,

Save that his manhood passing, left him lone,

A childless lord: for this he grieved; for this

Heavy observances he underwent,

Subduing needs of flesh, and oftentimes

Making high sacrifice to Sâvitrî;

While, for all food, at each sixth watch he took

A little measured dole; and this he did

Through sixteen years (most excellent of kings!)

Till, at the last, divinest Sâvitrî

Grew well content, and, taking shining shape,

Rose through he flames of sacrifice and showed

Unto that Prince her heavenly countenance.

"Raja!" the Goddess said—the Gift-bringer—
"Thy piety, thy purity, thy fasts,
The largess of thy hands, thy heart's wide love,
Thy strength of faith, have pleased me. Choose some boon;
Thy dearest wish, monarch of Madra, ask;
It is not meet such merit go in vain."

The Raja answered: "Goddess! For the sake
Of children I did bear my heavy vows:
If thou art well content, grant me, I pray,
Fair babes, continuers of my royal line;
This is the boon I choose, obeying law;
For—say the holy seers—the first great law
Is that a man leave seed."

The Goddess said:
"I knew thine answer, Raja, ere it came;
And He, the Maker of all, hath heard my word
That this might be. The Self-existent One
Consenteth: born there shall be unto thee
A girl more sweet than any eyes have seen;
There is not found on earth so fair a maid:
I, that rejoice in the Great Father's will,
Know this and tell thee."

"Ah! So may it be!"
The Raja cried, once and again; and she,
The goddess, smiled again, and vanished so;
While Aśwapati to his palace went.
There dwelled he, doing justice to all folk;
Till, when the hour was good, the wise king lay
With her that was his first and fairest wife,
And she conceived a girl—(a girl, my liege!
Better than many boys)—which wonder grew
In darkness, as the moon among the stars
Grows from a ring of silver to a round
In the month's waxing days,—and, when time came,
The queen a daughter bore, with lotus eyes,
Lovely of mould. Joyous, that Raja made
The birth-feast; and because the fair gift fell
From Sāvitrî the goddess, and because

It was her day of sacrifice, they gave
The name of "Sāvitṛī" unto the child.
In grace and beauty grew the maid, as if
Lakshmi's own self had taken woman's form;
And when swift years her blossomed youth made ripe,
Like to an image of dark gold she seemed,
Gleaming, with waists so fine and breasts so deep,
And limbs so rounded. When she moved, all eyes
Gazed after her, as though an Apsarā
Had lighted out of Swarga. Not one dared,
Of all the noblest lords, to ask for wife
That miracle, with eyes purple and soft
As lotus-petals, that pure perfect maid,
Whose face shed heavenly light where she did go.
Once she had fasted, laved her head, and bowed
Before the shrine of Agni,—as is meet,—
And sacrificed, and spoken what is set
Unto the Brahmans, taking at their hands
The unconsumed offerings, and so passed
Into her father's presence, bright as Śri,
If Śri were woman!—Meekly at his feet
She laid the blossoms; meekly bent her head,
Folded her palms, and stood, radiant with youth,
Beside the Raja. He, beholding her
Come to her growth, and thus divinely fair,
Yet sued of none, was grieved at heart and spake:
"Daughter! 'tis time we wed thee; but none comes
Asking thee; therefore thy thyself some youth
Choose for thy lord, a virtuous prince: whoso
Is dear to thee he shall be dear to me;
For this the rule is by the sages taught—
Hear what is spoken, noble maid!—'That sire
Who giveth not his child in marriage
Is blamable; and blamable that king
Who weddeth not; and blamable that son,
Who, when his father dieth, guardeth not
His mother.' Heeding this," the Raja said,
'Haste thee to choose; and so choose that I bear

No guilt, dear child! Before th' all-seeing gods."
Thus spake he; from the royal presence then
Elders and ministers dismissing. She,
Sweet Sāvitrī, low-lying at his feet,
With soft shame heard her father, and obeyed.
Then on a bright car mounting, companied
By ministers and sages, Sāvitrī
Journeyed through groves and pleasant woodland towns
Where pious princes dwelled; in every spot
Paying meet homage at the Brahmans feet;
And so from forest unto forest passed,
In all the Tirthas making offerings:
Thus did the Princess visit place by place.

Analysis Questions

1. Why does this poem place so much emphasis on the ruler having a child?
2. What does this poem tell you about how Indians perceived the role of deities in their everyday lives?
3. What role do women play in this poem? What behavior is expected of them?



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