**Savitri - A Tale of Ancient India**

Adapted for readers theater by Aaron Shepard from his picture book published by Whitman, Morton Grove, Illinois, 1992 \*

For more reader’s theater, visit Aaron Shepard’s RT Page at www.aaronshep.com

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Preview: The princess Savitri must use all her wit and will to save her husband from the god of death.

Genre: Myths, folktales, legends

Culture Asian Indian (ancient), Hindu

Theme: Heroines, determination

Readers: 11

Readers Ages: 9–15

Length: 10 minutes

Roles: Narrators 1–3, Savitri, Satyavan, Kings 1 & 2, Teacher, Narada Muni, Lord Yamaraja, Goddess

Notes: This story was first written down about 5000 years ago as part of the Mahabharata, India’s great national epic. Savitri is pronounced “SAH-vit-ree.” Satyavan is pronounced “SOT-ya-von.” Narada is pronounced “NAR-a-da.” Yama is pronounced “YAH-ma,” rhyming with “lama.” Mahabharata is pronounced “MAH-hah-BAR-a-ta.”

Narrator 1: In India, in the time of legend, there lived a king with many wives but not one child.

Narrator 2: Morning and evening for eighteen years, he faced the fire on the sacred altar and prayed for the gift of children.

Narrator 3: Finally, a shining goddess rose from the flames.

Goddess: I am Savitri, child of the Sun. By your prayers, you have won a daughter.

Narrator 1: Within a year, a daughter came to the king and his favorite wife. He named her Savitri, after the goddess.

Narrator 2: Beauty and intelligence were the princess Savitri’s, and eyes that shone like the sun. So splendid was she, people thought she herself was a goddess.

Narrator 3: Yet when the time came for her to marry, no man asked for her. Her father told her:

King 1: Weak men turn away from radiance like yours. Go out and find a man worthy of you. Then, I will arrange the marriage.

Narrator 1: In the company of servants and councilors, Savitri traveled from place to place.

Narrator 2: After many days, she came upon a hermitage by a river crossing. Here lived many who had left the towns and cities for a life of prayer and study.

Narrator 3: Savitri entered the hall of worship and bowed to the eldest teacher. As they spoke, a young man with shining eyes came into the hall. He guided another man, old and blind.

Savitri: (softly, to the teacher) Who is that young man?

Teacher: (smiling) That is Prince Satyavan. He guides his father, a king whose realm was

conquered. It is well that Satyavan’s name means “Son of Truth,” for no man is richer in virtue.

Narrator 1: When Savitri returned home, she found her father with the holy seer called Narada Muni.

King 1: Daughter, have you found a man you wish to marry?

Savitri: Yes, father. His name is Satyavan.

Narada Muni: (gasps) Not Satyavan! Princess, no man could be more worthy, but you must not marry him! I know the future; Satyavan will die, one year from today!

King 1: Do you hear, daughter? Choose a different husband!

Narrator 2: Savitri trembled but said:

Savitri: I have chosen Satyavan, and I will not choose another. However long or short his life, I wish to share it.

Narrator 3: Soon the king went with Savitri to arrange the marriage.

Narrator 1: Satyavan was overjoyed to be offered such a bride. But his father, the blind king, asked Savitri:

King 2: Can you bear the hard life of the hermitage? Will you wear our simple robe, and our coat of matted bark? Will you eat only fruit and plants of the wild?

Savitri: I care nothing about comfort or hardship. In palace or in hermitage, I am content.

Narrator 2: That very day, Savitri and Satyavan walked hand in hand around the sacred fire in the hall of worship.

Narrator 3: In front of all the priests and hermits, they became husband and wife.

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Narrator 1: For a year, they lived happily. But Savitri could never forget that Satyavan’s death drew closer.

Narrator 2: Finally, only three days remained. Savitri entered the hall of worship and faced the sacred fire. There, she prayed for three days and nights, not eating or sleeping.

Satyavan: My love, prayer and fasting are good. But why be this hard on yourself?

Narrator 3: Savitri gave no answer.

Narrator 1: The sun was just rising when Savitri at last left the hall. She saw Satyavan heading for the forest, an ax on his shoulder.

Narrator 2: Savitri rushed to his side.

Savitri: I will come with you.

Satyavan: Stay here, my love. You should eat and rest.

Savitri: My heart is set on going.

Narrator 3: Hand in hand, Savitri and Satyavan walked over wooded hills. They smelled the blossoms on flowering trees, and paused beside clear streams. The cries of peacocks echoed through the woods.

Narrator 1: While Savitri rested, Satyavan chopped firewood from a fallen tree. Suddenly, he dropped his ax.

Satyavan: My head aches.

Narrator 2: Savitri rushed to him. She set him down in the shade of a tree.

Satyavan: My body is burning! What is wrong with me?

Narrator 3: Satyavan’s eyes closed. His breathing slowed.

Narrator 1: Savitri looked up:

Narrator 2: Coming through the woods to meet them was a princely man. He shone, though his skin was darker than the darkest night. His eyes and his robe were the red of blood.

Narrator 3: Trembling, Savitri asked:

Savitri: Who are you?

Lord Yamaraja: (gently) Princess, you see me only by the power of your prayer and fasting. I am Yama, god of death. Now is the time I must take the spirit of Satyavan.

Narrator 1: Yama took a small noose and passed it through Satyavan’s breast, as if through air. He drew out a tiny likeness of Satyavan, no bigger than a thumb. Satyavan’s breathing stopped.

Lord Yamaraja: Happiness awaits your husband in my kingdom. Satyavan is a man of great virtue.

Narrator 2: Yama placed the likeness inside his robe. Then, he turned and headed south, back to his domain.

Narrator 3: Savitri rose and started after him.

Narrator 1: Yama strode smoothly and swiftly through the woods, while Savitri struggled to keep up. Finally, Yama turned to face her.

Lord Yamaraja: Savitri! You cannot follow your husband to the land of the dead!

Savitri: Lord Yama, I know your duty is to take my husband. But my duty as his wife is to stay beside him!

Lord Yamaraja: Princess, that duty is at an end! Still, I admire your loyalty. I will grant you a favor - anything but the life of your husband.

Savitri: Please restore my father-in-law’s kingdom and his sight.

Lord Yamaraja: His sight and his kingdom shall be restored.

Narrator 2: Yama again headed south.

Narrator 3: Savitri followed.

Narrator 1: Along a riverbank, thorns and tall sharp grass let Yama pass untouched but they tore at Savitri’s clothes and skin.

Lord Yamaraja: Savitri! You have come far enough!

Savitri: Lord Yama, I know my husband will find happiness in your kingdom. But, you carry away the happiness that is mine!

Lord Yamaraja: Princess, even love must bend to fate! Still, I admire your devotion. I will grant you another favor—anything but the life of your husband.

Savitri: Grant many more children to my father.

Lord Yamaraja: Your father shall have many more children.

Narrator 2: Yama once more turned south.

Narrator 3: Again, Savitri followed.

Narrator 1: Up a steep hill Yama glided, while Savitri clambered after. At the top, Yama

halted.

Lord Yamaraja: Savitri! I forbid you to come farther!

Savitri: Lord Yama, you are respected and revered by all. Yet no matter what may come, I will remain by Satyavan!

Lord Yamaraja: Princess, I tell you for the last time, you will not! Still, I can only admire your courage and your firmness. I will grant you one last favor—anything but the life of your husband!

Savitri: Then grant many children to me. And let them be children of Satyavan!

Narrator 2: Yama’s eyes grew wide as he stared at Savitri.

Lord Yamaraja: You did not ask for your husband’s life, yet I cannot grant your wish without releasing him. Princess! Your wit is as strong as your will.

Narrator 3: Yama took out the spirit of Satyavan and removed the noose.

Lord Yamaraja: Return, Savitri. You have won your husband’s life. (leaves)

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Narrator 1: The sun was just setting when Savitri made her way back to Satyavan.

Narrator 2: His chest rose and fell.

Narrator 3: His eyes opened.

Satyavan: Is the day already gone? I have slept long. But what is wrong, my love? You smile and cry at the same time!

Savitri: My love, let us return home.

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Narrator 1: Yama was true to all he had promised.

Narrator 2: Savitri’s father became father to many more.

Narrator 3: Satyavan’s father regained both sight and kingdom.

Narrator 1: In time, Satyavan became king, and Savitri his queen.

Narrator 2: They lived long and happily, blessed with many children.

Narrator 3: So they had no fear or tears when Yama came again to carry them to his kingdom.

If you like this script, don’t miss the picture book:

Savitri - A Tale of Ancient India

Retold by Aaron Shepard ~ Illustrated by Vera Rosenberry

\* Author’s Postscript - Savitri, my 1st picture book, was published before I understood the importance of describing the background and sources of a story. Here is the note I would like to have had in the book.—Aaron

The story of the princess Savitri is one of the best-known and best-loved tales of India. Traditionally, Hindu women celebrate an annual festival in Savitri’s honor to secure a long and happy married life.

The story is found in the Mahabharata, one of the two great ancient epics of India’s Hindus. It appears in Book 3, “The Book of the Forest,” where it is related as an instructive tale to Yudhisthira, one of the epic’s heroes, by the wise hermit Markandeya. It is one of many such independent tales woven into the

epic.

The Mahabharata achieved final written form around the time of Christ; but having originated in the oral tradition, it was by then already centuries old. As a focus for

research, I settled on a rough date of 800 B.C..

With the date set, the location was easier to pinpoint. The Mahabharata places the story in “the kingdom of the Madras.” This was the region between the present-day rivers Chenab and Ravi, tributaries of the Indus. It is today situated mostly in northeast Pakistan, and partly in the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir. In the Brahmanic period, the capital of this kingdom was Sakala—near the modern Pakistani city of Sialkot, in the foothills of the Himalayas. I set my retelling there in Sakala and in the foothills just north of it.

The second problem for the re-teller is more philosophic, and for that reason more important. In its final written form, the story of Savitri emphasized the devotion and submission of the ideal wife to her husband and his family. This reflected the attitude of Hindu authorities by this later period. (It is in fact an attitude typical of the male religious leaders who arrive after the initial outpouring of a religion to establish institutions and codify teachings. By contrast, a religion’s earliest years often show surprising equality between the sexes—as in the case of Christianity while Jesus still lived.)

Still, beneath the theological tampering, a storyteller’s eye discerns clearly the tale of a strong, remarkably independent woman—a trickster tale, in fact, in which a woman dares to oppose even a god. And women were indeed treated much more equally in the period when this story likely originated.

Which of these, then, should be respected and brought to the fore—the enshrined morality piece, or the feisty underlying folktale? Being a storyteller and an aspiring friend of women, I chose the folktale. May Yama forgive me.

In other ways too, the culture of the Brahmanic period was very different from the classical Hindu culture more familiar to us. The following will help in understanding various aspects of the story.

Race. Savitri’s people were Aryans, part of the conquering tribes that had come over the Himalayas starting in 1500 B.C. They were not a blond-haired Germanic master race but Caucasians of various ethnic origins, probably originating in central Asia. Since they had not yet fully integrated with the natives of India, they were lighter-skinned than today.

Worship. The Aryans worshipped the Sun and Fire, as well as Brahma and other gods. The “sacred fire” was set on a brick altar, probably constructed to standard dimensions. Rituals were performed at this altar at sunrise and sunset.

Religious practice was based largely on sacrifice. This, however, was in the broader sense of “consecration.” In a typical sacrifice, for instance, food would be set on the altar and “offered” to a god. After a suitable period, the food would be removed and eaten.

In the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom walked together around the altar. Here is a detailed description from the Grhya Sutras:

Having placed to the west of the fire a millstone, to the northeast a water pot, he should

sacrifice, while she takes hold of him. Standing with his face turned to the west, he should seize her hand with the formula, “I seize thy hand for the sake of happiness.” . . .

Leading her three times around the fire and the water pot, so that their right sides are

turned towards the fire, he says, “This am I, that are thou. Come! Let us here marry. Let us beget offspring. Loving, bright, with genial mind, may we live a hundred autumns.” Each time after he has led her so round, he makes her tread on the stone with the words, “Tread on this stone; like a stone be firm. Overcome enemies; tread foes underfoot.”

Having first poured melted butter over her hands, her brother pours fried grain twice over the wife’s joined hands. He pours again melted butter over what has been left of the

sacrificed food, and over what has been cut off. She should sacrifice the fried grain without opening her joined hands. Without that leading round the fire, she sacrifices grain with the neb of the basket towards herself.

He then loosens her two locks of hair, if they are made [i.e. if two tufts of wool are bound round her hair on the two sides]. He then causes her to step forward in a northeastern direction seven steps with the words, “For sap with one step, for juice with two steps, for thriving with five steps, for the seasons with six steps. Be friend, with seven steps. So be thou devoted to me. Let us acquire many sons who may reach old age!”

Joining together their two heads, the bridegroom sprinkles them with water from the water pot.

Savitri (the goddess)

As told in the story, the princess Savitri was named after the goddess Savitri, who announced the coming birth. This goddess was the daughter of Savitar, the Sun, who was worshiped at that time. She was also the personification of the “Savitri prayer” (also called Gayatri)—the prayer to the Sun that the princess’s father repeated for years to attain children.

The Savitri prayer is found in the Rig Veda, and is considered the most sacred passage in all the Vedas. One translation of the prayer is, “We desire that covetable gift of the god Savitar, who must impel our thoughts.” It was to be recited at dawn while standing and facing east, and at sunset while sitting and facing west.

Yama. Though the image of Yama and his realm became more sinister and terrifying over the centuries, in much of the Vedic period he was seen as relatively beneficent. His earliest role was merely to reign over the virtuous in the land of the dead, supplying them with food and shelter—much like Odin in Valhalla. Later, the job of harvesting souls was added.

Yama’s realm was often said to be in the south. For the Aryans, who had invaded from the north, this was a convenient direction for the unknown and mythical, as the territory to the south was still unexplored.

Cities. The cities were really forts—square or rectangular, surrounded by walls and then a moat. If located on the plain, they were built of wood; if on higher ground, of mud and brick. Stone was not yet in use. The palace was generally an enclosed courtyard or courtyards with a number of buildings.

Hermitages. The hermitage, or ashram (“OSH-rom”), served as a center for those who wished to devote themselves to a more intense religious regimen. Besides providing homes for monks, the ashrams were retreat centers for city-dwellers, and men often took up residence there after retiring from public life. Some hermitages were also boarding schools for the young.

The ashram would consist of scattered huts and cottages, plus a common hall for worship and sacrifice. Ashram residents devoted themselves to contemplation, scripture study, and ritual. Celibacy was not required, and men often brought their families along to live there. They didn’t grow or cook food, but instead ate fruit, herbs, and roots gathered from the wild.

Natural setting. The region where the story is set has been described as “a delightful country, a paradise of rivers and mountains and woods.”

In Indian literature, hermitages are described as being in “the forest,” “the jungle,” or “the wilderness.” But these are Indian terms for anything other than a settlement or farmland. Even a desert could be called a “jungle.” Typically, an ashram was located on a major highway where it crossed a river. Most

were easily accessible.

In my retelling, I’ve used the term “forest” only when it really means “forest.” This is not at all a tropical jungle. The weather in the western Himalayas is relatively temperate and dry, the forest cover is relatively thin, and the trees are mostly conifers.

The “tall sharp grass” by the river is kusa—apparently a kind of saw grass.

Dress. In the cities, women wore brilliant, fine clothes, with many gold ornaments and gems. Hermitage residents wore simple saffron-colored robes. For warmth, they could wear outer coverings of matted bark. These were made by pounding bark into separate fibers, then felting them—as done also by some native American tribes.

Travel. For their journey, Savitri and her party probably traveled on horseback and in horse-drawn carriages. Savitri may well have held the reins herself in a kind of four-wheeled chariot. Elephants were not used for transport at that time.

Women. Women and men in this period were not treated as entirely equal, but much closer than under classical Hinduism. Women were educated and not secluded. They could perform rituals, though this would not be encouraged. Women often chose their own husbands. Though Savitri was no doubt a teenager, women at that time weren’t married off right at puberty. She was likely around 16.

I first heard this tale from a storyteller and dear friend, the late Will Perry. For my own retelling, however, I worked solely with the Mahabharata, as translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen, Vol. 2, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1975. Sources for background information included:

The History and Culture of the Indian People, edited by R. C. Majumdar, Vol. 1, The Vedic Age, Allen & Unwin, London, 1951; and Vol. 2, The Age of Imperial Unity, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1951.

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Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic, by J. L. Brockington, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984.