



## Sabitri Brata : Important Ritual of Married Women with Husbands Alive

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Odisha is remarkable for tradition of Oshas, Bratas and Melas. The ceremony and sanctity of these traditional religious festivities are more or less lively and some of them are gradually perishing too. The source of these Oshas, Bratas and Melas goes back to the ancient times. Some of them are directly derived from Bhagabat where as most of them are derived from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Shiva Purana, etc. Mostly the former two are observed by women of Odisha. But the Melas are observed by all the family members. Each Odia family must wait eagerly to such an occasion in a year. These constitute the essence of Odia tradition. There are almost sixteen major Oshas such as Budhei, Chaitra Mangala, Alana, Shani, Janhi, Bata, Dutiya (Puajuntia), Danda Panhara, Sathi, Kanji Anla, Sukutuni, Nisha Mangalabara, Margasira Gurubara (Dhanamanika/Khudurukuni), Benatia, Purnima and Bada Osha have been observing. There are nearly thirty Bratas, observed in Odisha in a year. They are Santoshi Mata Brata, Sudasha, Kedar, Sambadashami, Radhastami, Somanath, Kukkuti, Pandu Osha, Sabitri, Naga Chaturthi, Sankata Chaturthi, Rabinarayan, Balitritiya (Tija), Samba Dasami, Shibaratri, Rai Damodara, Shri Krishna Janmastami, Ananta, Pusa Rabibara, Binayaka, Skanda Sasthi, Magha, Guru Panchami, Guru Purnima, Baisakha, Sita Nabami,



Ramba trutiya, Bipattarini, Gouri and Kartika Bratas.

Out of nearly thirty Bratas, Savitri Brata is a fasting day observed by all Hindu Odia married women on the *Amavasya*, the last day of the dark fortnight, in the month of Jyestha. This day is most favourable for the married Hindu women whose husbands are alive. They observe it as a vow with great dedication and pray for their husband to have a long life. Married women in Odisha fast during the day and listen to the story of Savitri and Satyaban. The word Savitri Amavasya reflects the origin and significance of the Vat-Savitri puja. The fast is dedicated to Savitri and Satyaban; her husband who was destined to die within one year but was brought back to life by her penance. The God of death, Yama, is implored by Savitri when he is

about to leave his body. Due to her sheer determination and devotion to her husband, she won him back to life. Soon Satyaban regained his lost kingdom.

### **Legend behind the festival:**

The Brata was named after Savitri. She was the beautiful daughter of King Aswapati of Madra Desa. She selected Satyaban as her life partner, a prince in exile who was living in the forest with his blind father Dyumatsen. She left the palace and lived with her husband and the in-laws in the forest. As a devoted wife and daughter-in-law, she went to great lengths to take care of them. One day while cutting wood in the forest, Satyaban's head reeled and he fell down from a tree. Savitri accompanied him on that day. Then Yamraj, the death God, appeared to take away his soul. Deeply hurt, Savitri pleaded to Yamraj not to be separated from her husband. If he would take away the soul of her husband; she would also follow. Yamraj, moved by the devotion of Savitri, returned the life of her husband.

### **Observation of Savitri Brata:**

Women wake up early in the morning on the Savitri Brata day and after taking bath, wear new clothes and ornaments including bangles. All married women use red vermilion on the forehead, which is elongated to touch the line parting the hair. Savitri is symbolically represented by the grinding stone, locally known as *Sila Pua*. The grinding stone is thoroughly cleaned and worshipped. Bhoga or offering to Savitri consists of rice, wet pulses and locally available fruits like mango, jackfruit, banana, palm, date palm, etc. The fasting begins at sunrise and ends after sunset with the evening prayers. The fast is broken by consuming the offering made to Savitri. Women also make it a point to read or listen to the Savitri Brata Katha mentioned in the Mahabharata.

### **Savitri Brata Katha/Story:**

One day king Yudhisthira, the elder son of Pandu, asked Sri Krishna: Oh! Krishna, Oh Madhava! Kindly tell me about the *brata* which if performed by women brings immense happiness and good fortune to them and also saves them from widowhood. Kindly enlighten me!

Upon hearing this from Yudhisthira, Sri Krishna replied: Your majesty! I will now narrate before you; please listen carefully. Women observe various kinds of *bratas*. Out of these Savitri Brata is the foremost. One who performs this *brata* is blessed with children and wealth and well being of their respective husbands. Her life is filled with evergreen happiness.

Then Yudhisthira asked : O Gopinath ! Please narrate how one become benefitted by performing this *brata*. Sri Krishna continued in his sweet voice: O Dharmasuta! Now listen. There was a king named Aswapati. He earned great fame in the whole world as a very gracious and judicious king. He was very wealthy and his coffers always remained filled with treasures. But the one thing that kept him always dejected was that he had no children.

Once an unknown saint visited the king's palace. The king washed his feet and welcomed him by paying obeisance. The sage was very pleased. By virtue of his insight he could sense traces of grief in the king's mind. He asked, "O King! Why are you sad?" The king replied, "Munishree! I have got everything in life, but no child. So I have no peace of mind." The sage said, "Rajan! I will tell you a *mantra*. If you recite this with utmost devotion you will be blessed with a daughter. This daughter will bring wellbeing and good luck to you. Having said this, the saint went away.

King Aswapati recited the mantra with devotion every moment each day. Subsequently

a daughter was born in an auspicious moment. Since she was born by chanting of the holy mantra, she was named Savitri.

Savitri grew with utmost love and blessings of her parents. When she was young, she used to visit the hermitages in the forest accompanied by her maids for paying respect to the revered sages there and serve them. Once as she was roaming in the forest with her maids she saw a handsome youngman Satyaban and was impressed. She asked a hermit about the Youngman and able to know everything.

Sensing symptoms of fascination and interest on Savitri's face, the great Muni replied, "Dear Princess ! He is a prince. There is a kingdom named Avanti which was earlier ruled by king Dyumatsen. He is the son of that king. Due to his ill fate the king is now forced to stay in the forest with his family. This only son of him is Satyaban.

On learning from the Muni that the young man was a prince Savitri developed a desire to marry him. Nurturing such a wish within her she returned to her palace that day. She told her mother about it. The queen after knowing this apprised the king about it. The king asked : the son of which king is the prince ? Without knowing this how can we give the hand of our daughter to him ?"

As the matter was being discussed by the king and the queen, Narada, the great sage, appeared there. The king was very happy and received him with great reverence. He washed his feet and paid obeisance to him. As the ritual of reception of the sage was going on, Savitri came there. Seeing her Narada asked : whose daughter is this ?"

The king replied: O great sage ! This is my daughter. I have a problem. She is now

adamant on an issue. During her visit to the forests she once happened to see a stranger and instantly accepted him as her husband. It has caused a lot of worry to me. Could you kindly suggest a way out ?

Upon hearing this Narada called Savitri to him and asked : Dear Savitri, tell me whom have you chosen to be your husband ? Savitri narrated all the incidence.

Upon hearing this, sage Narada told the king: OAswapati ! I have this to say - when once king Dyumatsen lost his eyes due to his misfortune and became blind, enemies captured his kingdom. After that he now stays in the forest. King Dyumatsen is endowed with all good qualities. But I can see that your daughter, the princess, will spend her life in utter grief after her marriage. If this marriage takes place, she is going to become a widow. Prince Satyaban's life is very short. He is destined to die after one year. In view of this the princess should change her opinion.

After hearing this princess Savitri felt sad. Now that she had once accepted someone as her husband at the core of her heart, there was no question of marrying someone else, come what may. So she told her father straight away: My dear father ! I am a righteous woman. A woman who is righteous never changes her mind after accepting someone as her husband. Any deviation from such a decision makes her sinful. So father, I have to face whatever is there in my fate. Allow me to face my destiny.

Upon hearing this from Savitri, sage Narad said happily: I feel blessed to hear such words of commitment and firmness. Savitri, let your wish be fulfilled. You are going to be a lucky woman. Having said this Narada went away.

Thereafter king Aswapati made arrangements for a grand marriage of his beloved

daughter. The wedding took place at an auspicious moment.

After his marriage Satyaban returned with Savitri to the forest where his father was staying. King Dyumatsen was very happy to receive his son and daughter-in-law and blessed them.

Time passed and Savitri, being a virtuous woman, served her husband, father-in-law and mother-in-law with extreme dedication. She also worshipped the gods devoutly. As time passed, the ominous prediction made by Narada kept on lurking in her mind. But it was not known to Satyaban's father - king Dyumatsen and the queen. Savitri had kept it hidden from them.

Savitri's father-in-law and mother-in-law were very pleased with her good nature and dedicated service. But in Savitri's mind reigned the apprehension of the Amavasya day of the Jyestha month – the day on which the life of Satyaban was destined to end. Gradually the number of days left for Satyaban to remain alive was coming to a close. At last the day arrived. It was a fateful day. She performed Laxmi Narayan Puja by observing fasting and recited the *Laxmi Narayan Stotra*. In the *puja* she made offerings of a variety of fruits. She appeased Brahmins by feeding them and then served food to her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Thereafter finding that Savitri herself had not taken any food herself, they asked her the reason.

Savitri replied: Father ! I am today performing *brata*, so shall eat food only at the end of the day. In the afternoon, Satyaban said : There are no fruits and firewood at home. So I will go into the forest to collect them.

Upon hearing this from her husband Savitri told her mother-in-law: Today I wish to accompany him into the forest. After returning from there both of us will have our food. Kindly

permit me. Sensing that Savitri was firm on going into the forest with her husband, the queen gave her consent. She called Satyaban and told him: Since my daughter-in-law desires to go into the forest with you I am permitting the same. You should take care of her while she is there and return home before it is dark.

Then Satyaban went into the forest accompanied by his beloved wife. In the forest, Satyaban collected some fruits and left them with Savitri saying: My dear, let these fruits be with you, as I go again to collect some firewood. Thereafter we will return home. Satyaban went to a tree to cut some branches for firewood. Suddenly he felt darkness all around. He told Savitri: I feel dizzy. It seems life's departing from my body. The prophecy of Narada reverberated in Savitri's mind. 'Has the moment of his end arrived now ?' She thought to herself.

She spread the *anchal* of her saree on her lap and told him: Put your head in my lap and sleep down. We'll return home after you become alright.

Satyaban lay down putting his head in Savitri's lap. After some time it was evening. Savitri said: It's already evening; let's return home.

But Satyaban did not respond to her words. He did not rise. The ominous apprehension of her husband's death caused turmoil in Savitri's mind. She realized that the prophecy had come true.

The messengers of Yama soon arrived there. But due to the righteous glow around Maha Sati Savitri they could not go near her, in whose lap Satyaban was lying. So they went back and told Yamaraj about this: Your majesty! Satyaban has died. We went to him to bring his soul. But due to the heavenly glow of Savitri we couldn't go near him.

Upon hearing this from his messengers, Yamaraj got astonished. There being no other way, he himself set out to where Satyaban was lying.

There he found Satyaban in Savitri's lap. Having been deeply touched by the sorrow of Savitri, he said: Lady, why are you crying? Please stop it. No one can prevent what is ordained by destiny. We have to carry out what is fated to happen. One who is born on this earth with flesh and blood has to die someday. Satyaban's death is a part of that process. All husbands and wives in the world have to die like this. They vainly cry for each other. See, once your very dear husband is embraced by death, will he worry about you? As long as life was there in his body he was yours. Now he isn't. Because he was destined to be yours for a pre-determined period. Now give up all hope on him. No husband is ever brought back to life by such unnecessary howl. Please stop crying and let me carry out my task.

After Yamaraj said this, the great lady, extremely devoted to her husband asked: Who are you? Why do you try to console me by saying these spiritual words? From where have you come? Please tell me to dispel my doubts.

Upon hearing this from Savitri, Yamaraj was amazed and replied: Dear lady, I'm Yamaraj. I have come here to take away the life of Satyaban, who has died.

After this as Savitri left her husband aside and moved away from his body to go near Yamaraj to talk to him further, Yamaraj used the opportunity to take the life out of Satyaban's body and moved ahead.

But Savitri was not the one who would give up so easily. She silently followed Yamaraj as he was going away with her husband's life.

Looking back, Yamaraj found Savitri following him. In order to provide her solace again

he said: My dear princess ! You continue to cry even after knowing the way of the world, and are following me. It will be of no use. Before you get tired and fail in your attempts, it's better for you to return from here. Savitri, I tell you to stop following me and go back to your in-laws.

On hearing these words from Yamaraj, Savitri said: O Yamaraj ! When my husband is going to your place, what's wrong in my accompanying him and what can prevent me from doing that? I will go with him. What is a wife without her husband ? Without the existence of husband there is no peace in a wife's life. Doesn't God know this ? There is no place for me without my husband. I request you not to be cruel and allow me to go with you to your place. There I will be in right company. Please do not prevent me from going there.

Hearing such pleadings from Savitri, Yamaraj said smilingly: Oh ! the best among virtuous women, I am pleased with you. You may now ask me for fulfillment of any of your wishes and I shall grant the same, but not the life of Satyaban.

Savitri said: My father-in-law is blind and has been deprived of his kingdom. I beseech you to return his vision and also his kingdom.

Yamaraj thought to himself: This is not a wish that's impossible to be fulfilled. If I grant this to Savitri then she would stop following me and go back to her in-laws. Hence he said, "So be it" And moved ahead.

Even then Savitri continued to follow Yamaraj. Turning back, Yamaraj found Savitri behind him again. He told her: Savitri, You are still following me. It will serve you no purpose.

Savitri replied, "O Yamaraj, You have snatched my husband away from me. I feel enlightened to hear your preachings. But my

concern is how to liberate my husband and this prompts me to follow you. You are an incarnation of Lord Narayana Himself. So I wish to earn your holy blessings by worshipping and serving you. That is why I follow you. If you kindly permit me I would get the privilege of serving at your holy feet.

Upon hearing this Yamaraj was in great dilemma. This Savitri would not give up following him, he thought. His immediate task was to convince her to go back. So he said: Savitri, I am pleased with your extreme devotion. You may ask me for anything again, but except the life of your husband. I will grant it now and then you should leave this place.

Savitri said: O Yamaraj ! You are an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. I feel privileged that you are pleased with me and are asking me to name my wish. But what do I want ? You have granted happiness to my father-in-law and mother-in-law. But you are taking away my husband's life. What can I ask for ? Still, since you have told me and with high esteem to your words, I plead to grant me one more wish. Kindly bless me with one hundred sons.

Yamaraj had become overwhelmed by the extraordinary devotion of Savitri. So he instantly uttered, "So be it" and moved ahead.

But Savitri was not that kind of woman who would give up so easily. She still continued following Yamaraj. Noticing it Yamaraj told her: Savitri, you are again after me. I have already granted you yet another wish. Following me again is of no use. Go back and let me perform my duty.

Savitri replied: Yamaraj ! I am grateful that you have granted me all my wishes, except the life of my husband. I should not be bothering you again. I just want that you should carry out your wishes and then go to where ever you are going.

Yamaraj said: Tell me Savitri, what now? What else is left for me to do?

Savitri said: O merciful Yamaraj! You are the greatest among gods. Your words will never fail. But you have not told me how the wish which is granted by you will come true. You are taking my husband away with you. How can a wife become a mother without her husband? The grant of my wish by you makes no sense, and rather you are pushing me into sin. I am a righteous woman. To a righteous woman her husband is the God. You are taking away my husband. I cannot become a mother. Your words will be untrue. I cannot become a mother of a hundred sons, as granted by you. But I cannot let you go like this. I have no other way but to follow you to where ever you are going.

Yamaraj was stunned to hear these words from Savitri. He was overwhelmed and said: You are the greatest one Savitri. Glory be on you. Your righteousness is outstanding. With your polite perseverance you have defeated me. You are a pious lady. People will sing your glory forever. You have won.

Yamaraj continued: "Dear Savitri, on his Amavasya day in the month of Jyestha, any woman who performs *brata* will earn righteousness and liberation. She will be freed from the prospect of widowhood and be endowed with children and prosperity.

With these words Yamaraj returned Satyaban's life into his body. Savitri went back to where her husband lay and found him getting up as if waking up from a sleep. Thus ends the Savitri Brata Katha. ( Translation from Odia to English)

### Customs & Rituals:

All Hindu women observe this festival by worshipping and propitiating Savitri as a Devi. Early in the morning, women take purifying baths,

wear new clothes and bangles, and apply vermilion to their foreheads. Nine types of fruits and flowers are offered to the Goddess. Wet pulses, rice, mango, jackfruit, palm fruits, datepalm, kendu, bananas and several other fruits are offered as Bhoga and observe the festival with Savitri Barta Katha. After fasting for the whole day, the fasting women simply take the Bhoga in the evening. In the afternoon, when formalities of worship are over, they bow to their respective husbands and elderly people.

As the name indicates this Brata or vow is dedicated to Goddess Sabitri, who has fought with Lord Yama (God of Death) and taken away her husband's departed soul. According to mythology, Sabitri is regarded as one of the Satis (Sacred woman) out of the Pancha Satis (five sacred Women). Though Sabitri has fully devoted her life for her husband, this Brata teaches all the wives to respect their husbands. On this day, each and every married woman goes to the Temples and wears new sarees and bangles to offer her worship. Some women perform their puja at home. After washing the 'Silapua' (made up stone) they decorate that with haldi (Turmeric), Sindoor (Vermillion), new saree and gold ornaments. Then they offer various types of fruits as *prasad*. All day long, the women only take fruits and observe fasting and keep praying to the Goddess for the longevity for their husband.

Essentially a fasting day for married women, the ritual practised for Savitri is meant for the well-being and long life of the husband. The grinding stone used in the house is wrapped in a fresh cloth after washing with scented holy water and offered only ripe mangoes, coconut, palm, banana, pineapple in prayer along with a branch of the banyan tree. The fasting is assigned to Savitri and Satyabana her husband who was destined to die within one year but was brought

back to life by her severe penance. The God of death, Yama is implored by Savitri when he is about to leave his body and due to her sheer determination and devotion to her husband, she wins him back to life and soon Satyabana regains his lost kingdom.

### **Love that conquers even death:**

Savitri Amavasya or Savitri Brata which is most auspicious for the married Hindu women with husbands alive. Women observe as a vow with great devotion and pray for the long life of their husbands. It is a story of conjugal loves which conquers death. One can beat all odds in life through true devotional love.

Satyaban was known for his honesty and truthfulness. Savitri was determined to marry him in spite of knowing from Narada that Satyaban is destined to die one year from the day of their marriage. As per her wishes the marriage took place. So strong was the single-minded love and determination of Savitri that she chose a noble youngman for her husband, knowing that he had only a year to live.

Three days before the foreseen death of Satyaban, Savitri takes a vow of fasting. The morning of Satyaban's predicted death; she also accompanied him to the forest. While Satyaban was collecting wood, he suddenly became weak and laid his head in Savitri's lap.

Yama himself, the god of Death, comes to claim the soul of Satyaban. Savitri follows Yama as he carries the soul away. Savitri ran after him, and pleaded with Yama either take her along with him to the land of the dead or give back the life of Satyaban. Yama replied, "Your time has not yet come, child. Go back to your home." But Savitri insisted on accompanying her husband. She also tries all her logic to convince him and repeatedly requested him for her husband's life.

The God of Death turned down every time. She was still following him with a hope.

Finally, he agreed to give her three boons but not the life of Satyaban. Savitri with a ray of hope requested for his blessing for her in laws and was granted.

The third boon was that she wishes to be the mother of hundred sons, the Yamraj agreed. Savitri informed him that it is impossible. As a Sati, she can't take another husband. Yamaraj moved by the devotion of Savitri, returned the life of her husband. Satyaban came to life again and both of them lived happily thereafter.

### Conclusion:

The morale of the festival is to teach the women to be virtuous, devotional and painstaking like Savitri to make worldly life happy and peaceful. Savitri Bratas are observed mostly by Brahmin families. Even people of other castes also observe it with a greater sanctity although they depend upon a Brahmin to perform the puja at times. However, the advent of modernity has already hampered such traditions. People in various parts of Odisha observe the Brata as a traditional part of seasonal worshippings and some also observe it farcically. This seems to become gradually less pompous and lack of life. The get-together on such occasions imply a lot to the people of Odisha. Along with *hulahuli* and *haribol* sound, these pujas are performed in religious congregations.

### Notes:

1. Sila - a flat and sized stone meant for preparing spice paste.
2. Hulahuli - the enchanting of auspicious sound made by women while worshipping.

3. Haribol - making a sound together by men in the name of God.
4. Yamaraj- the death God according to Hindu scripture
5. Narada- the saint who is able to move freely in between earth and heaven.
6. Brahmin- the community maintaining pious life.

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