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## Savitri

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It was quite impossible that an old widowed woman at the age of seventy would take on every odd thing in life for survival. Nobody could felt for Savitri, except herself. She looked down on the dumps as she became nostalgic, and brooded over her past. The house was in disorder, a nausea she strongly detested in her prime days. The specks of dust on the worn out mirror spoke of the perforated picture of the house, and Savitri as well. She was feeling all in. The barking of a street dog at one corner, a fox's howling in a nearby plain and the ringing sound of the midnight – all had no immediate effect on her wrinkled eyes. She was at the death's door, she was scared stiff at the many chances her life had handed down to her.....

The twinkle of the falling star in the far off sky reminded her to reflect upon her troubled times. Savitri's imagination stretched up to all the years of misery and submission in an otherwise dull winter evening. Her optimism to survive in the ever spreading village was shrinking, "when you are on the verge of death and the time has taken the best out of you, your wrinkled face is a sure sign of decline", she would retort complainingly.

Savitri glanced at the candle flame flickering in the breeze. The dreaded winter was very hard to grasp. She was never afraid the numerous winters she had encountered earlier. Neither was she scared at the withering leaves.

She had fixed a photograph of Lord Krishna at the front wall of her bed room. Perhaps the photograph provided perfect bliss of becoming one with God, but only by accident. It was an ordinary calendar, due to be expired in a month's time. She had taken a retreat in the abstract idol of Lord Krishna. She had fallen in love with Him. But fallen in her love of the world.

An agonizing experience, she had encountered. Her youngest daughter-in-law Madhu had challenged her integrity. She selected Madhu, a girl from neighbouring village for her youngest son Surya with the hope that the latter would abide by the words of her workable mind. Savitri had taken the bull by the horns in retaliating strongly to her other two daughters -in- law. But contrary to her expectation, Madhu was up in the arms over every odd thing from the beginning. And the poor old widow could hardly show the grit she had displayed in case of the other two daughters –in –law.

She was shaken in the shoes when Madhu, became hell bent to disclose her mother-in-law's clandestine deal with a local priest of the temple, Satya. Savitri had kept her cards close to her chest over the years. But her daughter-in- law never got to the bottom of the story.

The drama was unfolded in a mysterious way. That was a 'Holi' day, the festival of colours when everybody would indulge in merry making and bridge the difference of all animosity. When the outside world is busy celebrating the festival of friendship, the hell broke loose when the temple priest threw some colour powder on Savitri's forehead. It was considered a heinous crime for a middle-aged widow to be wrapped up in colour. The whole village was

talking behind Savitri's back. "What an illicit relationship exists between Satya and Savitri! Ram, Ram, What evil things have crept into the village! A middle-aged widow playing holi with the temple priest!", the villagers' gossip had spread like a wild fire.

Savitri would wish to give a talking to her daughter-in-law. She was in a muddle. She had kept her records straight against the villagers often, but "how to convince her own kith and kin over a delicate and emotional issue", her mind defied all logic. Never before was she so upset in her life. Even her much vented two elder daughters-in-law had buried the hatchet for the sake of family prestige. But she had been swept under carpet by Madhu and the climax had finally come off. That mean Madhu had shown her what an uneducated woman could do....

It was really, it was absolutely terrible—ah the worst!—it was simply—in fact from the first day Savitri knew that she was the scapegoat in her husband's house. Other members of the family would always pick holes in everything she said. She had no naturally inherited father-in-law and mother-in-law, and no sister-in-law or brother-in-law either to unloose torture unlimited in the in-law's house. But the mouth-spoken relatives of the neighbourhood had filled in the roles of the in-laws for Savitri to suffer at the hands of her husband. She endured everything that came in her way in the thought that only large hearted people were picked by the God to be burdened with the suffering of the world as the light hearted people won't tolerate that much grief. This was in brief, the life for savitri.

Srikant married her to look after his one year old orphan son and they quite liked each other when they first met. Although she was made to believe that he was a gentle man with his Job of a government School Head master, she didn't fancy him at all. He accepted her to take care of his infant son and she in her turn agreed to marry him to shed the burdens off the shoulders of her parents. She couldn't enjoy spending time with him. He fascinated her with his stories of integrity in his professional career, and something innocuous about his past had attracted her earlier.

She was keen on embarking upon an adventurous life style which had been eluding her till now. In fact all newly wedded women nurture the thought of an independent life in her in-law's house for she had nothing but suppression in her parental home, citing one reason or other. She knew that many marriageable women had suffered similar fates around her. But the fate of Savitri had no happiness in store for her anywhere in the world. Soon she realized that she had no option but to cater to the needs of her husband. She was fed up with his rudeness She would have broken down but for the love of the tender boy needing her motherly care to survive in the world. The responsibility of looking after a one year old appealed her and she was in a sense captivated by the child's innocence.

Now ten years later, she detested the dire ways of life. She didn't understand why she had fallen for him the moment they set eyes on each other. He was very caring person; fond of his son and his students. But he always treated her with contempt and he didn't like the causes she believed in and the people she cared for. Perhaps she didn't understand then that a gentle man would turn out to be a bad husband. She wished both of them would always understand each other as much and be devoted to their life as every woman would expect her husband to be.

The gift of the gab that Savitri was, she tamely gave in to her husband's wishes with in no time. She was treated with disdain by her husband for the simple reason that he was unable to

forget the emotional bondage with his first wife. To stir things up, evil treatments were handed down to her by her make-shift mothers –in-law. It was very difficult to cope with one's own mother-in-law those days because of her tale of innumerable torture unleashed upon her daughter-in-law and not to have one genuine mother-in-law means you are answerable to many a women even from the neighbouring village-hood who would be watching you all the time for directing bitter criticism at the drop of a hat. To make things worse, Savitri had to go to a common pond for her morning rituals where women from three different villages would gather to perform their rituals daily for attached latrine –bath room system was a dream then. Savitri would go the pond at the crack of the dawn to save herself from the truant of the elderly village women. But to her surprise and dismay, the poor pond would be crowded even before her arrival to add to her already depleted state of mind. Any element of doubt would always crop in her inquisitive mind about what would be the topic of gossip on a particular day. They would begin and end off with topics related to her. The bitter fate of being a mother of only daughters would provide enough material for her detractors to make her a butt of criticism. Things were under her control until now. Worse came when Srikant gave her ultimatum to be a mother of a son next time.

She was scared out of her wits. She had never cared about the bitter pill of the villagers she had to swallow since she came to the village for the first time. Her seemingly educated and well-to-do husband did care about her in internal matters. What added to her agony was that the last straw on which she was pinning her hopes was now out of her grip. You can adopt a tit for tat invective for the outsiders but it would be very difficult to manage the inside fire involving her husband Srikant who had been her only saving grace when negative thoughts regarding routine life would begin to perturb her. Even that source of strength is now lost. Savitri knew pretty well that if doubt and suspicion come in the way of a relationship, hell would be the better option. Over awed, she took recourse to the most uncalled-for-means. Of course, that was not her fault either. She had gone to the temple to pray God for a son. She devoted every good of her life at the feet of God and all precious gifts of the world if she is blessed with a son.

Satya came to her as a God-send and she in her turn had fallen prey to his manly desires. On her part she had forgotten everything to become a mother of a son. Her too large heart had become softened by being the centre of criticism for not giving birth to a son for a long period. She had taken every criticism in her stride and waited for her turn to atone for the sin of not being a mother of a son. And finally the moment came and she had forgotten every reason to be with Satya for a single night. It was not her fault for sure. The temple premises had witnessed many a men and women getting their wishes fulfilled and her rebellious mind would ponder over the thought as to when her turn would come to teach her detractors a lesson.

The dense fog outside had heightened her feeling of mystery. She smiled wisely, sadly, as she turned into the temple premises to offer her prayer to God. The loud clanging of the temple bell had made her look fresh. How much she had felt now than to have waited for the ultimatum to come? Now she wished Srikant would wear with her; he would never get over it! His life was wrecked, was ruined; that was for sure. But she was successful in her mission. After all we are human beings to get something we have to sacrifice something. This is the law of nature and no human being can have a controlling hand over what was going to happen. She gave birth to a male child in due course of time.

Time changes everything. Changes did come in Savitri's life. In twenty years time she gave birth to three sons. Fate smiled on her for a brief period. But troubles came soon after pouring in. Her husband's death came as a bolt from the blue to her. She was quite wayward earlier. But now the sad demise had let her down. The fate of a widow in our society was still considered horrible. She bore the sign of evil omen with her everywhere she went. Earlier the village women would come to her to ask about the procedure of a new festival for in her locality people would observe thirteen festivals in twelve months. For every auspicious occasion- be it a simple birthday ceremony or a marriage, festival or a condolence of death and austere observation of the ritual for twelve days- Savitri would be called upon on every drop of a hat in the village. But heaven fell upon her now. No one was there to help her when she needed it badly. Her tear had dried down on its own. She could not gather courage to recover from the heart breaking mishap. But finally good sense prevailed and she made up her mind to take the responsibility of looking after her young sons; their upbringing would be her ultimate aim in life after the untimely departure of Srikant. Though he died at the age of sixty two, it would still be considered a young age as his sons were not well established in the society. She swallowed every bitter pill in life to be in charge of her orphaned sons for in those days it was like hell to look after the family after the husband's death. But one thing that came as a blessing in disguise for Savitri was that her husband's long absences from the village due to his busy schedule in his far away work places ( Srikant had served in every nook and corner of Odisha as a Government servant) and Savitri's firm determination resulted in the success of her sons establishments, each with a government job. It was indeed a great thing for a widow in those days. While other children from the village who were in the active charge of their parents were unemployed, her sons were counted among the gentle men of the village. She did not bent a bit even while she had lost her husband. Her sons got married and trouble began soon after. She preferred not to go to her son's house than staying back in the ancestral house of her fore fathers. She was not afraid of staying alone in the house even when her eyes betrayed her at night. She did cook during the day time and before the daybreak she would eat her dinner so that she would be able to rise early the next morning to finish the household chores on time. The only trouble that worried her all the time was her handicapped son's marriage. Again the two daughters-in-law were not up to her liking. That was playing in her mind when a thought of marrying her youngest son came to her. Finally a tried and tested bride was selected from the neighbouring village with every detail of both the families known to each other. She managed her youngest daughter-in-law for one year giving her every training that was needed to manage the house hold like receiving a guest, dealings with elders, relatives and above all cooking. She did not want to leave any clue this time for her earlier two daughters-in-law had gone out her control for her lenient approach.

Age had taken its toll on Savitri in due course of time. When matters came to a head, she fell back on her son's mercy. No one but the youngest one came to her rescue at this felt age. But Madhu came in the way and raised the issue of her illicit relationship with Satya as she was well versed with her mother-in-law's not-so-good past while she stayed in the village immediately after her marriage. She could not look her mother-in-law in the eye. She was really perturbed at the sad turn of events. It was out of the grasp her little mind that Madhu whom she brought to her house with an eye on her old days would desert her in the most uncalled-for-manner. She was discarded by her own kith and kin for whom she had wasted the prime of her life. She had often thought of going to Puri to spend the rest of her life in the twenty two feet on the way to get a glimpse of the Lord of the universe, Jagannatha but on the second thought, she would give up these ideas for she had thought seriously about the reputation of her well-to-do sons. She had



firm faith on Jagannath for, on many occasions in the past the Lord had saved him from grave dangers. Soon came the delayed but the face saving release of the family pension which became the only resort of her survival. She blamed her professionally famous husband for letting her down in the prime of her youth.

At the moment she stumbled upon her future course of action. She was astonished for a moment at the mysterious ways of the God. He was so great that a small creature like Savitri would not be a problem for Him in this vast world. But after all she had to survive against all odds. She had done it earlier and time demanded once again from her a firm self belief that would stand her in good steads in difficult times. She could go to Puri for a recluse but for her well-to-do family's honour. She reflected upon her in auspicious moments in silence. She was a good-for-nothing daughter for her parents. She was also an evil sign for being daughter of three daughters but when she got an opportunity to turn the tables on the disturbing elements, Srikant's death came as a blow. A rumour aired in her village blamed her for Srikant's death, but in actuality he died of heart attack. When she could gather courage to survive the outside criticism, her own sons and daughters-in-law stood against her. Many questions crop up in her simple mind. "Why don't people understand that she had also a human heart? How can she forget Satya? Why should Madhu add to her agony? She lived in the heartless world to come to terms with the complexities of life. She lived her life only to know the treachery of her own people. She wouldn't contemplate upon suicide. She had have enough sacrifices.

The big banyan tree in the temple premises stood unfazed to take on the assaults from various quarters—men, birds, insects, and even the devastating storms. In winter, its leaves have all withered. But the log is still upright even after years of torture. It didn't budge even an inch. Savitri could draw the all important courage from the old banyan tree.