

King Yudhishtira:

‘Oh mighty sage, has there ever been any other woman as chaste and exalted, in the history of men, who being dedicated to her husband suffered so much as Draupadi?’

Rishi Markandeya:

‘Yes, there was one. Listen O King, how the exalted merit of chaste ladies was completely obtained by a princess named Savitri.’

– *Mahabharata, Vana Parva,*
Story of Savitri and Satyavan,
Ch. 1.1-3

Prologue

The writ of fate...

Aswapati, king of the prosperous land of Madra, suffers from infertility and therefore, is childless.

Dyumatsena, king of Salwa is blind; as a result of this, he has lost his kingdom and now lives in exile.

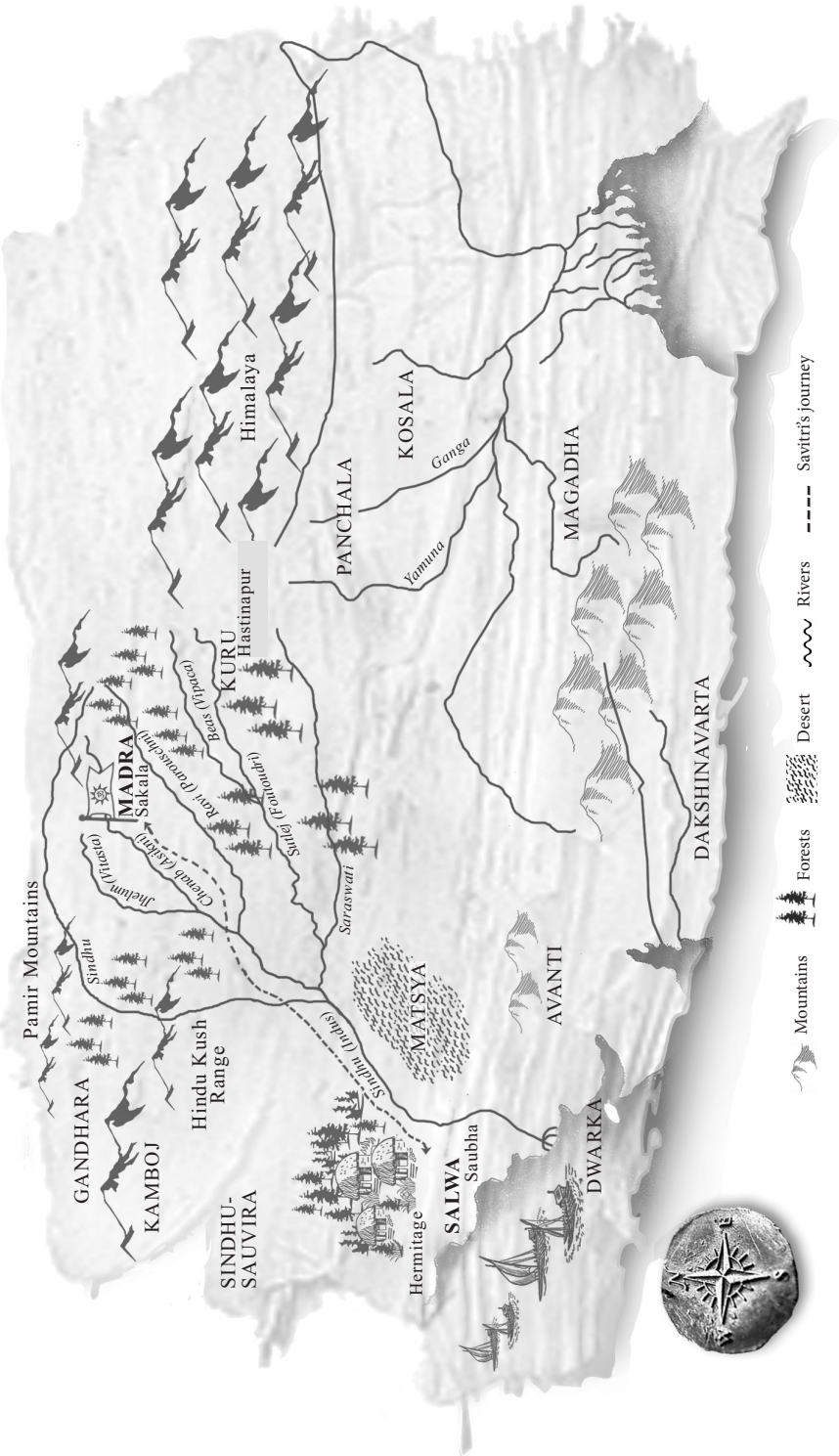
Aswapati has a kingdom, but no son.

Dyumatsena has a son, but no kingdom.

Savitri is the daughter born to Aswapati, through a boon granted by Goddess Savitri.

Satyavan is the son of Dyumatsena and, as his name signifies, a speaker of truth.

Ancient India – Map of North-western Kingdoms of Madra and Salwa (7000 BCE-3500 BCE)





A Childless King

The rains had come to the kingdom of Uttara Madra, which lay beyond the Pamir mountain range, beyond the Hindu Kush, in a valley between the Chenab and Ravi rivers that flowed through the mountainous landscape. In tiny rivulets they ran nourishing the soil and causing the seeds to swell and sprout in row after row of furrowed land tilled by the farmers. While the earth was being regenerated year after year with showers sent by Lord Varuna from his skies, the gods had not seen fit to favour the pious and noble Aswapati, king of Madra, as kindly.

The palace at Sakala remained bereft of the patter of tiny feet and the laughter of children. His wife, Queen Malavi, the beautiful princess of the Malava clan, had so far not been able to bear a child and provide an heir to the kingdom. Aswapati and Malavi had tried everything, from herbal potions to charmed talismans to magic spells, but nothing had helped. Since even his other wives had been unable to conceive all these years, the King's personal *vaid*s and *hakims* were privately led to conclude that the fault lay with the king – he was sterile.

Distressed and distraught, the King withdrew into himself.

One morning as he sat brooding in the lush, green maze of the royal gardens, a deep, rich voice broke his reverie, 'Oh! I've been looking all over for you and here you are... hiding from me, Rajan?'

Looking up, Aswapati's face brightened as he saw the white-robed figure of his *Kul-guru*.

'*Pranam Gurudev*,' he said rising with folded hands and then

bending down to touch his feet. ‘When did you return from your sojourn in the Himalayas? The ashram has been deprived of your radiant countenance and blessed presence for so long!’

‘*Ayushman bhava*, Rajan,’ the Guru replied raising his hand to bless the King. ‘I trust everything has been going well for you and your people in Madra, during my absence. The kingdom appears to have prospered well. And how is Queen Malavi?’

‘Aa-ah here she comes!’ he observed. ‘You are looking radiant, my child!’

‘Pranam Gurudev,’ Malavi said and bowed low to touch his feet. Then offering him a glass of milk and a platter of fruits, she added, ‘We are so glad to have you back among us.’

‘Due to your blessings, which have always been with us, the kingdom is prospering and the people are happy, Gurudev,’ said Aswapati.

‘Then why do I detect a veil of sadness on your countenance, Rajan?’ asked the Kul-guru.

‘Wherever I look around me, I see life procreating itself Gurudev. Why then am I accursed to remain childless? This weighs heavily on my mind and I am gravely concerned about the future of my kingdom. There is no heir to carry forward the family line and see to the welfare of the kingdom after I have departed,’ said Aswapati resignedly.

‘In the course of my *tapasya* and meditations,’ said the Kul-guru, ‘I have received a message from the gods. You are to perform a *mahayagna* and then go deep into the forests of Madra and perform an eighteen-year long *tapasya* to the Goddess Savitri.’

‘Eighteen years, Gurudev?’ exclaimed Aswapati. ‘I am already thirty years of age and considered rather old to bear a child. By the time my *tapasya* is over, I will be fifty years old!’

‘The gods work in mysterious ways, Rajan,’ answered the Kul-guru. ‘Let your faith be steadfast and never let it waver. Everything happens according to the Divine plan.’ Saying this, he blessed the King and said, ‘Start preparations for the *mahayagna*

to be held ten days from now. I will personally perform it with the help of 108 unmarried youths who are still in the stage of *brahmacharya*.’

‘Gurudev, you have observed me since I was a young lad and know I have led a righteous and pious life. I have offered prayers and sacrificial offerings to please the gods. I have been a good ruler of my people and always kept their welfare above mine. Yet, the gods deign to smile on the humblest among them. Why, just the other day, the wife of Kallu who looks after the stables, has been blessed with another male child – her fourth son. And here I am, without a son to even perform my last rites,’ lamented Aswapati.

The Kul-guru stroked his flowing beard and said consolingly, ‘Rajan, good karma brings its own rewards. And with my powers of divination, I know you have accumulated a storehouse of good karma over your past lives.’

‘Then why have not the gods and goddesses thought it fit to bless me with even just one son? I have carried forward my father’s name, but who will carry forward mine?’ the King said dolefully.

Taking both the King’s hands in his, the Kul-guru said, ‘There are times the gods test the faith of even those they love, by putting them through agonising ordeals. Just as gold is purified in the goldsmith’s fiery furnace of the impure alloys that get embedded in it when it is being mined, so also is this mind-body form through trials and tribulations sent by the gods. These are meant for the evolution of humankind to higher levels of consciousness in each succeeding birth. So do not despair. Give the gods what they ask of you – the eighteen years of tapasya. It will surely yield fruit.’

‘*Jo aagya Gurudev,*’ Aswapati said with folded hands.

‘Ayushmana bhava,’ the Kul-guru reiterated his blessing of a long and fruitful life for the King.



Praying in the Forest

On the auspicious day declared by the Kul-guru, and with his blessings, King Aswapati cast off his regal robes and donned the saffron *chola* of a monk. Then instructing his chief minister to look after the welfare of the kingdom, he took his leave of Queen Malavi and walked out of the palace towards the dense, dark forest in the foothills of the Pamir mountains.

Away from the hustle and bustle of the kingdom, Aswapati felt a strange relief upon having abdicated the responsibility of his royal duties. He felt free as the eagle flying overhead. A peace and calm began descending upon him as he walked deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest. Even though the sun was now at high noon, the forest was pleasantly cool. The rays of the sun filtering through the trees created a magical play of light and shadows. Aswapati paused to rest and take in his bearings. He would soon have to find shelter for the night because darkness fell much earlier in the forest than it did back in the palace. He took a few *sattu* ladoos from the pouch slung over his shoulder and washed them down with water gulped from his *kamandal*.

Slipping his feet into the flat wooden *khadawa*, he got up and walked towards a hollow opening in a hillock that could be discerned even at this distance. 'That has to be a cave of some sorts,' he mused. 'Perhaps, I can take shelter there for the night.' On reaching the cave, he noticed that someone had spread a mat of dried leaves inside the cave. 'Perhaps a hunter lying in wait for his prey,' he thought. He went out to gather some twigs for building a fire on which he could boil some rice for his supper.

Unused to lying on a reed-thin mat on the stone floor of the cave, he slept fitfully through the night. He woke up at an hour when night began to slowly cast off its cloak of darkness and Surya, in its phase of *Savitri*, began spreading its soft effulgence preceding the dawn of a new day. Picking up his kamandal, he went to bathe in the crystal waters of a stream that he had crossed over last evening. Cupping his palms he scooped some water and then raising them as an offering to Savitr in the heavens, let the water pour back into the stream, while reciting:

*“Savitrā prasavena juseta brahma pūrvyam
Tatra yonim krnavase nahi te pūrtam aksipat”*¹

Chanting this mantra, Aswapati took a dip in the stream and then scrubbed his body with the bark of the neem tree. Having thus cleansed himself, he turned his face towards Surya, now rising in the violet sky and offered water to it, intoning:

*“Yuje vām brahma pūrvyam namobhir vi śloka etu pathyeva sūreh
Srvvanti viśve amitasya putrā ā ye dhāmāni diviyāni tasthuh”*²

Today, he was to begin his tapasya as advised by the Kul-guru. The planets and the stars were placed in just the right positions and indicated an auspicious start for the tapasya that would last for eighteen long years in the forest. So, after having bathed he took some clay from the bed of the stream and fashioned an image in the likeness of the female divinity and set it on a platform of stones that he made around the trunk of a banyan tree. Dedicating this rough image in the name of the Goddess Savitri, he placed some flowers before it and offered an invocation to the Goddess:

¹ Serve the eternal Brahman with the blessings of the Sun, the cause of the universe. Be absorbed, through Samadhi, in the eternal Brahman. Thus your work will not bind you.

² O senses and O deities who favour them, through salutations I unite myself with the eternal Brahman, who is your source. Let this prayer sung by me, who follow the right path of the Sun, go forth in all directions. May the sons of the Immortal, who occupy celestial positions, hear it.

– *Svetasvatara Upanishad, Ch. 2 – Invocation To Savitr (Sun)*

“*Om
bhur bhuvah svaha
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yoh nah prachodayat*”³

Having repeated this mantra 108 times, he sat before the image of the goddess and meditated, soon becoming completely unaware of his surroundings. Over the coming days, Aswapati meditated longer and deeper, completely relinquishing his past concerns and future worries. The past and future, time and space, ceased to exist for him; he became rooted and immersed in the moment. Maybe it was something about the cave, he thought. He had sensed a certain vibration and a palpable occult air about it while he had lain there the first night, so much so that his whole body had tingled with a strange sensation he had never experienced before.

As the days went by his mind gradually stopped turning to his queen, his kingdom and his people; withdrawing deeper into his self. Immune to worldly affairs, his mind stilled. The silence of the forest and the animals inhabiting it became his sole companions. The birds and the beasts soon became reconciled to his presence in their midst. Some, who would earlier watch him warily from a distance, now started approaching closer when he sat cross-legged before the image of the Goddess, offering oblations and reciting mantras and chants in her honour. He had a vague sense that they were also starting to participate in his tapasya as mute spectators.

As weeks drew into months, the tapasya of Aswapati intensified. He experienced his mind becoming blank as a *bhoja patra* on which the gods were inscribing their fresh writ, and felt himself being drawn into their loving embrace.

³ Om, Earth Atmosphere Heaven
We meditate on the sacred light
Of the luminous source
May that guide our intentions

[This mantra of Goddess Savitri is also popularly known as the Gayatri mantra.]



The Blind King

Signs of ill omen had been observed in the skies over the kingdom of Salwa, which lay south-west of Madra, along the Arabian Sea. Political intrigue had been brewing ever since King Dyumatsena's eyesight had begun to fade. When the news reached the ears of an arch rival in a neighbouring kingdom that the King had gone completely blind, he hatched a wily plot to overthrow Dyumatsena and capture the capital city of Saubha.

The chief of a wandering band of *banjaras* on their way to Salwa, was handsomely bribed with a pouch full of gold *mohurs*, to pitch his camp at some distance from the outer walls of the palace and have his most beautiful dancers and musicians entertain the guards on duty. This entertainment was to be provided nightly over a few days to give the dancers and musicians time enough to mingle with the guards, entertain them with wine, women and song to lower their defences. On the dark night of *amavasya*, when the fateful attack was to take place, Chandrakala, along with a bevy of dancers, would serve liquor spiked with a sleep-inducing drug while the musicians would pass around chillums stuffed with *ganja* and *dhatura* among the guards.

Soon, that ill-fated night arrived and with it came a hand-picked unit of stealthy warriors led by the enemy king. Hooded and clad in black, they moved towards the walls of Dyumatsena's palace where all the guards lay sprawled in a drunken stupor. Throwing ropes with iron hooks at one end over the rampart, they clambered up and opened the gates from within to allow the enemy king and the captain of the armed force into the

palace. Using the elements of stealth, silence and surprise, they overpowered everyone and captured King Dyumatsena in what turned out to be a bloodless coup. Along with Saivya, his queen who was still suckling her infant son Satyavan, Dyumatsena was sent into exile in the wilderness on the outer reaches of Salwa.

Here, the blind king and his queen were provided refuge by Rishi Dalbhaya in his hermitage.

Rishi Dalbhaya was a living legend. Tales of his encounter with Parshuram, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, had been narrated for generations. One such tale stated that when Parshuram was engaged in a battle with King Chandrasen of Ayodhya, his queen Kamala, who was pregnant, escaped from the palace while the battle still raged, and sought refuge in the hermitage of Rishi Dalbhaya. On learning that the Queen had escaped his wrath, Parshuram followed her to the Rishi's hermitage and demanded that he hand over the fugitive Queen to him. Without much ado, Dalbhaya sent for Queen Kamala and presented her to Parshuram.

Amazed at the readiness with which the Rishi had conceded to his demand, Parshuram, in a display of largesse told the Rishi to ask for anything in return. The wise Rishi immediately asked for the life of the Queen's unborn child. Outwitted but bound by his promise, Parshuram agreed to grant Rishi Dalbhaya's wish but with the condition that the boy be brought up not as a Kshatriya warrior, but as a learned scribe and that he should be named *Kayastha*, as he had been saved by his mother's *kaya* – her body.

The wise and compassionate Rishi Dalbhaya, who now lived in the forests of Salwa, was renowned for his knowledge of Ayurveda, of the healing properties of herbs, plants and various barks and leaves of trees. In his hermitage was a grotto dedicated to the worship of Lord Dhanwantri – physician to the gods and goddesses. Dalbhaya had taken it upon himself to tutor the young prince Satyavan from an early age, in the Vedas and the various forms of Yoga, and to impart his wisdom accumulated over years of tapasya and study of the holy scriptures. Occasionally, renowned sages along with their acolytes passing through the

forest would stop for a meal or a night's rest at this hermitage before proceeding to their destination in some neighbouring kingdom or pilgrim town.

The name given to a child at birth often shapes and defines his personality. Thus it was only natural for young Satyavan (*satya* = truth, *van* = sayer) to grow up loving the truth. Being the only child, his parents doted upon him and his mother rarely let him wander off too deep into the wilderness when she sent him to collect wood or fetch water. Whenever he had moments to spare, Satyavan could be seen painting scenes from the forest. Although there were no horses to be seen in the wilderness of Salwa, he was often seen moulding horses out of clay or painting them on the walls of his hut, or on large strips of sun-bleached bark. He appeared to be fascinated with them. His mother was puzzled by this fixation on horses and asked Rishi Dalbhaya what it could signify.

‘Our young painter, *Chitrasen*, probably has a sub-conscious memory of the horses in the palace of Salwa. The blood of a Kshatriya king runs through his veins and you cannot separate a Kshatriya warrior from his horse,’ reasoned the Rishi.

The forest was his world. Satyavan had not known any other. He would listen rather disinterestedly to news of the outside world, which a passing traveller would share with Dyumatsena and his queen. Yet, when his parents were receiving a renowned rishi or sage at the hermitage, he would sit in rapt attention and listen to their discourses on matters pertaining to the physical, mental, as well as spiritual progress of human beings. He would often hear them say, ‘Seek out Truth, and you will find God.’

Living in the lap of nature, Satyavan, saw truth in everything he observed around him. The rivers ran true to their course, the birds and animals lived according to their true nature, the shrubs and trees likewise bore their fruit. He instinctively felt and also saw that his mother and father always spoke the truth with each other and with him, never resorting to falsehood. Truth, one could say, had made its home in his heart; truth was second nature to him.



Raja Yoga of King Aswapati

Three years had passed since Aswapati had donned an ascetic's chola. One day, Queen Malavi sought out the Kul-guru and voiced her concern, 'I wonder how our King is faring in the forest?' she mused. 'Gurudev, perhaps he would welcome a visit from you. Having been his source of strength all along, he may need some advice or further guidance from you.'

Nodding sagely, the Kul-guru said, 'Perhaps you are right. Even I have been wondering how he is progressing in his tapasya.'

'Then it is best if you go to him, Gurudev and, if it is possible, spend a few days with him,' Malavi requested.

'I shall leave on the morrow, Queen Malavi,' assured the Kul-guru.

On reaching the forest next morning, the Kul-guru made his way towards the cave in which Aswapati dwelt. Finding it vacant, instead of going out in search, he thought it wise to just await Aswapati's return. Gathering some twigs and building a fire, he began preparing a broth of wild grain and herbs. He recalled how on his last visit, Aswapati had confessed that he was quite confused about how simply reciting Om, the Savitri mantra and offering oblations to the fire day in, day out for eighteen long years would help him gain the boon he sought.

'Rajan, the gods have a specific purpose for this eighteen-year tapasya which they have asked you to perform,' he had replied. 'Consider the first stage to be that of a novice who prepares the groundwork with recitation of mantras and chants.'

'And what will come after that?' Aswapati had asked.

‘When the time is right, I shall come again and advise you about that. For now, just keep reciting the mantras and chants and sit in meditation,’ he had advised.

Now the time had come to prepare the King for the next stage of his spiritual journey.

Seeing him coming from afar, the Kul-guru got up to welcome the King. ‘Goodness!’ he exclaimed, ‘Rajan, how well you are looking! The life of a hermit certainly seems to sit well with you!’

Aswapati smiled, ‘Simple living and to an extent, high thinking, Gurudev!’

Said the Kul-guru, ‘Hmm... I’m here to prepare you for the next levels of your tapasya. But before that, come sit and have the nourishing broth I have prepared for you.’

While they were enjoying the frugal meal, he began explaining, ‘Rajan, although it’s true that you have lived a pious and noble life all these years, you were still functioning through the unconscious or subconscious level. The mantras you have been reciting and yagnas you have been performing have enabled you to rise above the mundane level and evolve along the intended spiritual path.

‘The Vedic science of consciousness states that there are fourteen planes of consciousness – seven higher planes and seven lower planes – at the sub-human, human and supra-human levels. The Earth, that is physical consciousness, is at the bottom of the higher planes. The planes below it are at our deep subconscious level. To reach the three highest planes – *sat*, *chit* and *ananda* – a human being has to transcend all the planes that are below these.’

‘So, performing this lengthy tapasya will help me not only gain access to, but also achieve mastery over these levels of consciousness, and this will finally lead to union with the Divine?’ asked Aswapati.

‘By doing so, you will connect with the inner ‘Self’ or the inner ‘Divine’. Of course, a lot will depend upon your mental and physical resolve. You will be tested at each plane, Rajan, before you proceed to the next. I hope you follow?’ asked the Kul-guru.

‘Yes, Gurudev,’ Aswapati replied with a smile playing on his lips and requested him to go on.

The Kul-guru began, ‘A man is said to be encased in five sheaths of consciousness, known as the *pancha kosas*. The outermost is *Annamaya Purusha* – the physical body of man. Within it, sustaining it and sustained by it is *Pranamaya Purusha* – the vital energy-body of man. Within it is *Manomaya Purusha* – the mind-body associated with man’s ego-identity. Within it is *Vijnanamaya Purusha* – this is man’s knowledge-body and is associated with wisdom. Within it is *Anandamaya Purusha* – the blissful self. Within these five sheaths is said to live the Eternal Being. By training himself to look inwards and transcending the outer sheaths of consciousness – one can realise the Eternal Being.

‘Your tapasya – that is your spiritual journey, Rajan, if pursued with single-minded dedication, will help you reach the pinnacle of your spiritual evolution. Let me forewarn you that it is not going to be easy but, then, nothing truly worth accomplishing comes easily. Traversing through the lower of the fourteen lokas of consciousness could plunge you to the depths of despair and dismay; you will have to struggle and strive hard at every step to attain the next level of consciousness.’

‘Gurudev, with your blessings, I shall rise every time I falter along the way,’ said Aswapati, undeterred.

‘Rajan, more than my blessings, a deeper, fuller understanding of what all this entails will help you most,’ said the Kul-guru gently, ‘so bear with me and pay heed’.

‘There are three *gunas* or qualities of consciousness – *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*. The first is darkness and inertia. The second is inspiration, action and creation. *Sattva* is knowledge, nobility and sustenance. The fourth, which lies beyond these is, *Trigunaateeta* or the Absolute.

‘The states of consciousness in which man perceives the world are the *jaग्रत* – that is the waking state, *स्वप्ना* – the dream state, *सुशुप्ति* – the dreamless sleep state and *तुरीया*, which is the fourth state. In the waking state, the being is called *Vaisvanara*

and is outwardly cognitive and perceives gross objects. In the dream state, the being is called *Tajjasa*, is inwardly cognitive and perceives subtle objects. In the dreamless sleep state, the being called *Prajna* is blissful, opening up to soul-consciousness. In the fourth *turiya* state, the being is neither inwardly nor outwardly cognitive nor non-cognitive, but it pervades all states of consciousness and none of them. All the other states and all phenomena dissolve in it. It is *Brahman* – the Absolute.’

As he was listening to the sermon with his eyes closed, Aswapati felt a warm ray of light emanating from the brow of his Kul-guru and piercing his own *Ajna chakra*, between his brow. He opened his eyes and looked at his Guru. With folded hands, he bowed low to touch his feet.

‘I feel blessed to receive this wisdom from you, Gurudev,’ said a humbled Aswapati. ‘Whatever the demands this tapasya makes on me, I shall leave no stone unturned in my endeavour to please the goddess Savitri and to receive her blessing and the boon I seek.’

‘Rajan, my best wishes are with you. May you be successful in your tapasya and reap the fruits of it,’ said the Kul-guru. ‘I must take your leave now and return to the palace. Queen Malavi will be most anxious to learn about your welfare and impending return.’

As was his daily practice, Aswapati, having offered ten thousand oblations into the sacrificial fire, followed this ritual with recitations of the Savitri mantra. Thus his yoga tapasya progressed and he kept receiving the rewards of deeper spiritual insights and the power of *siddhis*. This was evident in the visible change that had gradually come over his outward appearance – his face and body resembled that of an enlightened ascetic. His eyes now shone with an inner light. He felt connected to everything around him... he was the leaf stirring in the breeze on the branch of the tree, he was the bird gathering twigs to build a nest, he was the water flowing in the stream, he was the cloud drifting lazily in the sky. He had now begun to identify and experience a unity, a oneness with all things. The transformation that was occurring

within him was making every cell in his body open itself to the splendour of this miraculous happening.

The arduous Raja Yoga of Aswapati, that is the Yoga of the King, had first to become Vishwa Yoga of the Universal Being. But even that Yoga had to fulfill itself in the Adya Yoga of the Divine Shakti. Aswapati recognised this and set himself to accomplishing this task because he knew that only then would his tapasya be complete. It is then he would become the Lord of Life; become in truth, the Aswapati. Ashwa, the Horse, a symbol of Life-Energy, the Consciousness-Force in all its power and glory.

It would be this that would lead to the mortal birth of the Goddess Savitri.



Young Satyavan

One morning Satyavan went along with a group of other young boys from the hermitage to gather herbs and barks for Rishi Dalbhaya. Leading them was Jabala – a rotund, jolly monk who had a large cloth bag that hung over his bulging stomach with its ends tied around his neck. ‘Boys,’ huffed Jabala, ‘I can’t walk around with this big bag around my neck. Why don’t you go about plucking the herbs while I sit under the shade of this banyan tree?’

‘Haha, Jabala! Don’t you know that nothing grows under the shade of the banyan?’ said Gopala. ‘You will remain short and stunted!’

‘I am happy as I am, Gopala,’ retorted Jabala. ‘I don’t want to be a tall and gangly lout like you!’

‘Stop quarrelling, you two!’ Satyavan admonished as he came up to them holding some herbs he had gathered. Putting them into the bag around Jabala’s neck, he brushed the mud off his palms. ‘Let me tell you something about the forest in which our hermitage stands.’

‘What don’t we – who have been here longer than you – know about it that you have discovered?’ questioned Gopala.

‘Oh, shut up Gopala! Let us hear what Satya has to tell us. Anyway, we can do with a break. My fingers are sore from all this plucking and peeling!’ said Dhruva.

‘Well, it just struck me while we were herb-hunting,’ said Satyavan. ‘Do you all know that the brave Hanuman once walked this very forest?’

‘Oh-ho-ho! That’s crazy,’ laughed Jabala. ‘Have you been listening to the monkeys jabbering in the trees, Satya?’

‘It’s true, believe me!’ said Satya.

‘Hmmm...’ said one of the group. ‘Pray tell us how that could be?’

‘It’s most interesting, really!’ said Satyavan. ‘In the *Kishkindha Kanda* of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, it is said that Sugriva, who with the help of Hanuman and Lord Rama, became king of the *Vanaras*, had sent his troops to search for Sita, Lord Rama’s wife who had been abducted by Ravana, King of Lanka, in various lands of the Uttarapatha including the kingdoms of Madra and Salwa.’

‘That means our lands are really ancient,’ replied Jabala.

‘Indeed!’ said Satyavan. ‘They even find mention in the *Vishnu Purana* and the *Matsya Purana*.’

‘One must be thankful they did not find Sita Mata anywhere near our lands, else we would have suffered the same fate as Lanka,’ Gopala grinned.

‘Okay, let’s get going now. I still have to collect some dried twigs and branches. Mother needs some firewood for the noon meal. Neither you nor I would want to go hungry, would we?’ said Satya.

Rubbing a hand over the generous curve of his stomach, Jabala remarked, ‘No, we wouldn’t Satya... least of all, me!’

Seeing the boys returning from afar, Satyavan’s mother turned to her husband and remarked, ‘How well our boy has grown! I wish you could see him now.’

Physical labour had most certainly helped Satyavan develop a lean, sculpted physique. His skin had a healthy, golden sheen to it. The simple, hand-spun clothes made by his mother could not mask the fact that here was a prince among men. He held himself well, with a back straight as an arrow and walked with a measured, princely gait. It was most unfortunate that the boy would probably not inherit his father Dyumatsena’s throne, she mused. ‘Strange are the ways of our gods and goddesses.’

Saivya thought aloud and shook her head sadly while walking back into her *kutir*.

‘There’s a time for everything,’ she had told him while stroking his hair last night. ‘There’s a time for sorrow, a time for reflection, a time for adjustment, and a time for action. We have made our peace with your father’s blindness. You have now become his second sight and he sees the world through your eyes. Speaking for myself, I have no regrets. I was happy living in the palace, and I am happy living here in this lovely forest. But I know that somewhere deep in his heart, your father feels the loss of his kingship and his kingdom even though he appears to be reconciled to his fate. In fact, I think that being in the company of rishis and sages of the forest has helped him make his peace with the gods for having taken his sight from him. You, of course, were just a babe in arms when we were sent into exile, so you cannot know the depths of his distress at your birthright being snatched away by his enemy.’

‘Mother,’ he had answered putting his hand over hers. ‘I am so happy here. I know of no other world than this sanctuary of peace and calm. And I am not sure I want to either. Let us learn to accept and be content with whatever the gods have provided us.’

Saivya had smiled and continuing to stroke his hair as he had laid his head in her lap, said, ‘The gods have provided us with an obedient, dutiful and loving son. What more could we want!’

She had bent her face down to kiss his forehead and observed that he was already fast asleep.



Aswapati - the Tapasvi

His eyelids fluttered as the veil of night slowly withdrew and the first, faint light at the break of dawn filtered into the cave dwelling. Mild fragrance from the vines of Morning Glory, creeping on the outer wall of his cave, wafted on the light breeze as the violet flowers began to gently unfold their petals. The silent forest gradually came alive with the tweeting and chirping of winged creatures as their chorus of birdsong filled the air.

Aswapati arose and stretching his limbs, stepped out of his cave to go bathe in the icy cold waters of the stream. Winter had just turned to spring; the snows on the mountaintops of the Pamirs had begun to melt and flow down the mountains into the crystal clear streams of the valleys. With the bark of a neem tree, he scrubbed off the ash which he had smeared his body with at night to keep him warm. Washed and bathed, he offered water to the rising sun while reciting a mantra. Then he offered flowers to the Goddess Savitri at her shrine and recited the Savitri mantra. As time had passed, he had found himself naturally getting attuned to the mantra so much so that it was internalised and he kept reciting it sub-consciously during his waking hours. Together with his tapasya, Aswapati had set out to practice and master the various forms of yoga that would help fortify and discipline his mind, body and sense organs to withstand the rigours of advanced yogic practices.

In this deep spiritual retreat, Aswapati gradually lost track of days, then months, and then even years as they came and went. On the rare occasions that his Kul-guru graced him with a visit,

he would learn about the welfare of Malavi and the kingdom he had left behind. Two days ago, a herald had been despatched to the forest to inform Aswapati that the Kul-guru would be visiting him today. So to receive him, Aswapati had finished his morning rituals and then gone about gathering fruits and honey to serve the revered sage. Seeing him coming from afar, the King went out to greet him.

‘Pranam Gurudev,’ Aswapati said with folded palms and then bent down to touch his feet.

‘Ayushman bhava... Rajan,’ the Guru gave his blessing. ‘Queen Malavi sends her regards.’

‘How is Malavi taking this long separation from me, Gurudev? How does she occupy her solitary hours?’

‘Well, Rajan, her tapasya, in a way, is no less ardent than yours. She prays for your well-being and for the success of your severe tapasya. She hopes that the Goddess will be pleased with your devotion and grant the boon that you seek.’

‘Come, Gurudev, rest awhile in the cave and let us enjoy nature’s fruits. I have picked some fresh wild berries, apples and bananas for you.’

‘The forest somehow feels different this time, Rajan,’ observed the sage.

‘Different in what way, Gurudev? To me, it appears the same as the day I first entered it,’ asked Aswapati looking around.

‘You have become one with the forest, Rajan, that is why you don’t notice it,’ smiled the Kul-guru. ‘But I feel there is a palpable heartbeat to it. The bark on the trees has a sheen to it, the texture of the leaves looks more silken, the fruits you have picked for me are juicier and glow with the promise of good nourishment – why, even the birds tweet and chirp more sweetly!’ he remarked.

Aswapati laughed, ‘Gurudev, you see all this because you are in the lap of nature and not in the confines of a man-made, walled city.’

‘That’s not it, Rajan,’ replied the sage sombrely. ‘I feel this definitely has something to do with the austere tapasya you have been performing here. What was once a wilderness today appears

to be a veritable garden of the gods. The mantras you have been chanting, the yajnas you have been performing in preparation for your eighteen-year sojourn here are making the forest come alive in a most remarkable way!’

‘Gurudev, you are a great yogi so your senses are highly refined. It is because of that perhaps that you can see and perceive things that I, still an aspirant, cannot,’ Aswapati said in all humility.

‘Don’t underestimate the powers of your tapasaya, Rajan,’ said the sage. ‘You are now on the threshold of a joyous discovery – that of your true inner self.’

‘With your guidance and blessings, Gurudev, I hope to make good progress.’

‘My blessings have always been with you, noble King,’ said the sage, giving a gentle smile. ‘But remember, a man always reaps the rewards of his own, personal efforts. And I can see that you are sparing no efforts to achieve your goal. Combine that with the power of prayer and you will keep progressing on the path.’

‘Yes, Gurudev. But the path appears never-ending,’ sighed Aswapati. ‘I still have a long way to go.’

‘Persevere, pray and persuade the gods. They will surely shower their blessings on you.’ Saying this, the sage picked up his kamandal and satchel made of cloth. ‘I should be on my way if I am to reach the outskirts of the kingdom before sundown.’

Aswapati stood up. He picked up some fruits from those placed before the image of Goddess Savitri and put them in the Kul-guru’s satchel. ‘Will you please give these to Malavi as *prasad* from the Goddess, Gurudev?’

‘I would be most happy to do so, Rajan. You shall see this *prasad* bear fruit some day.’



Divine Visitation

Aswapati awoke feeling a strange lightness of being. The years had passed as if in a dream. And what a glorious dream it had been, he thought as he walked down to the stream. As he stepped into the cold waters, a shiver ran up his spine. His whole body tingled with a strange sensation as he raised his hands to offer water to the rising sun. Its rays seemed to charge the pool of cupped water with golden particles of Divine energy that renewed and invigorated his entire body.

Walking towards the temple-shrine, he picked up a handful of flowers to offer the deity. Pouring water from his kamandal into a dried, curved strip of bark, he washed the feet of the Goddess and decorated her altar with the flowers he had brought. Their fragrance mingled with the scent of freshly-rolled sticks of *dhoop*. He then sat down in the lotus posture and closing his eyes began chanting the *Gayatri* mantra.

As the chanting neared its end, a faint rustling was heard among the leaves that lay spread carpet-like on the forest floor. He sensed a heavenly fragrance spreading throughout the forest. Were his ears ringing or was it the sound of tiny tinkling anklet-bells that seemed to draw nearer? He felt waves of compassion gently coursing through his form and spirit. A strange sense of his space being shared with a Divine presence overpowered him.

Suddenly, Aswapati opened his eyes and saw the forest ablaze with radiant light. Besides the trunk of the tree which housed the shrine, stood the Goddess, a golden aura of light emanating from her form! Almost involuntarily, his arm went up to shield his eyes from her dazzling brilliance.

‘O noble and pious King, by the severe austerity, unwavering fidelity and sheer intensity of your tapasya, you have won my admiration for what a mortal being can achieve, when with single-mindedness of purpose he sets out to seek the Divine,’ spoke the Goddess. ‘This is the moment for which you have waited eighteen years... open your eyes... gaze upon me... and receive my blessing.’

Aswapati unshielded his eyes and gazed upon Goddess Savitri – the Divine Shakti, the daughter of Surya and the consort of Brahma. Overwhelmed and overawed, he found himself at a loss for words, unable to voice his heart’s desire.

‘Speak not the words... I have heard what is in your heart,’ the Goddess said with a gracious smile. ‘She will descend possessed of celestial beauty, grace and spiritual power; a heavenly being to be born from a human womb. She will embody the wisdom of the ages, bear an infinite capacity for love, an unshakeable will and an unwavering determination to challenge and overcome the writ of Fate itself.’

‘Thus I have been blessed,’ murmured Aswapati with folded hands.

‘Go in peace, noble King,’ said the Goddess, ‘Queen Malavi and the kingdom await your return. With the wisdom gained from your Yoga-tapasya, fulfill your kingly obligations and the gods will fulfill theirs.’ Then in a flash of blinding light, the Goddess disappeared.

Aswapati bent to pick up the clay image of the Goddess he had worshipped all these years. He touched his forehead to it and returned to the cave he had shared with denizens of the forest who often sought shelter there. He took one last, long look at what had been home to him for eighteen long years and stepped out. As he walked through the forest, the birds and animals that he had befriended accompanied him till the forest gave way to the plains of Madra. Aswapati turned to face them and with folded hands bowed before them.

‘My beloved companions, I thank all of you for making my sojourn in your forest so wonderful and enriching. With a heavy

heart, I now have to take my leave of you. Your forest is now a sacred sanctuary blessed by the Goddess herself,' said the King. 'My subjects have come to receive me, and the forest awaits your return. I bid you a fond farewell.'

The birds and animals watched the King walk away. Then when he was out of sight, they ambled back to their forest dwelling.

After the welcoming committee of council ministers had greeted the King, Aswapati ascended his chariot and rode towards the palace where Queen Malavi, along with her attendants, was waiting to receive him with fragrant garlands. The people lined along the route, showered petals as the King rode by waving his hand in greeting. The city wore a festive look for their King who was returning to them after such a long time.

Donning the royal robes, Aswapati felt the weight of kingship fall over him once again. After being briefed on the state of affairs in the kingdom and learning that it had continued to prosper under the able governance of his ministers, he declared week-long celebrations and games for the entertainment of his people.

A yagna was conducted at the palace by the Kul-guru to thank the gods for the successful completion of the King's tapasya. Aswapati and Malavi together offered 1008 ladles of ghee to the sacrificial fire as the Gayatri mantra was chanted by them along with 108 brahmachari priests. On completion of the yagna rituals, hymns were chanted in praise of Goddess Savitri.

That night Aswapati visited Malavi in her chambers which had been prepared like a bridal bower, decorated with flowers and lit by myriad bronze and copper lamps whose soft, golden flames flickered and danced. Incense burners cast a bluish haze and veiled musicians behind wooden latticework strummed the strings of their harps to the delicate tinkling of cymbals. Malavi poured a fine *sura* wine from a flagon into a copper chalice and offered it to her husband.

'Dear husband,' she murmured, 'alone and awake I have passed many lonely nights with just the memories of your

presence beside me. Tonight we will be one and give form to the blessings of the Goddess.’

As she gently put out the diyas, Aswapati disrobed. When the last flame was gone, moonlight and shadows engulfed the room and the King held his Queen in a tender embrace.