



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
Srvanti 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)*