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WOMEN

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Seeking a lifetime of blessings for husband and family

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Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a region of land that now straddles the border between northeast India and Nepal, there lived a great King named Ashwapati. This King had only one daughter, Savitri, and she was beautiful. Savitri fell in love with a handsome lad named Satyaban. As the couple approached the king to obtain his blessing for marriage, Sage Narada mystically appeared before them and confirmed that Satyaban and Savitri were indeed a most compatible match, but that Satyaban was destined to die in one year. King Ashwapati tried to convince his daughter not to wed, but she would not listen. Savitri and Satyaban got married immediately and lived in bliss for eleven months and 27 days.

Three days before the speculated date of Satyaban's death, Savritri started fasting and praying for her husband's life. On the day Satyaban was to die, she and her husband went into the forest. Suddenly, as Satyaban fell unconscious in Savitri's lap under a banyan tree, Lord Yama, the God of Death, appeared, carrying a mace and riding a water buffalo. Raising His right hand slowly in a lifting gesture, He pulled the spirit of Satyaban up and out of his body and turned South to ride slowly into the after life, gently carrying the spirit of Satyaban with Him.

After some time, Yama became aware of a rustling noise. When He turned to see what it was, His fiery eyes mellowed. Savitri was running along behind him, crying and gasping for breath. "Why have you followed me?" He shouted. "I know you love your husband, but I must take him. Please turn back." Savitri was relentless. Again and again she begged Lord Yama to return the spirit of Satyaban to his

physical body. Finally she pleaded, "If you will not bring my husband back to this world, then take me with him to the next. I can't bear to exist without him." That did it. Lord Yama was so moved by Savitri's perfect love, that He not only brought Satyaban back to life, he also bestowed eternal happiness upon them both.

This is the popular story that a priestess tells a young bride during the Vata Savitri Vrata, a ceremony performed for newly wedded ladies during the first year of their marriage to seek protection and longevity for their husbands and prosperity for their future families. Vata is a Sanskrit name for the banyan tree. Vrata means vow. For 24 hours before this ceremony, new brides observe a fast and attend a series of rituals as they strive to emulate Savitri in her dedication to her husband. At an astrologically auspicious time, the culminating puja (worship service) is performed under a banyan tree, symbolizing the moment Savitri and Satyaban first met Lord Yama.

The banyan tree is a symbol of tranquillity and peace. Called the Bo Tree by Buddhists, it is the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment and became liberated. During the Vata Savitri Vrata, the bride prays that her husband will live as long as the banyan itself. She also prays that her husband will provide ample security for their family, just as the banyan tree gives shade to all who seek rest under its far-reaching branches.

Preparations for the Vata Savitri Vrata begin in the house of the parents of the bride. Craftsmen are commissioned to make certain utensils required for the puja (ceremony). Token money gifts called dom are given to both the bride and the groom. Milk and rice are purchased for making rice pudding on the day of the festival. Mangos, bananas, apples, oranges and litchi are purchased and set aside to be served as prasadam, or blessed food. Elaborate candies and pastries are prepared. Invitations are extended to friends and well wishers. And all arrangements are finalized with the priestess who has been commissioned to perform the ceremonies.

On the day of the Vata Savitri Vrata, the young wife takes her morning bath, dons new clothes and jewelery and worships in her home shrine. She then joins female family members and friends at the auspicious banyan tree chosen for the Vata Savitri Vrata. Only women attend this special event, and only a priestess performs the rites. As the priestess performs the puja, including ceremoniously telling the

story of Savitri, the young wife binds the tree with a red sacred thread five times around and pours water on its roots. When the ceremony is concluded, delectable edibles and gifts are distributed and enjoyed by all. At this time, elders give blessings and advice to the bride for a happy and secure conjugal life.

The origin of the Vata Savitri Vrata cannot be confirmed. Historical records show that in Nepal as well as in Bihar, India, it has been observed for at least five hundred years. It was originally most popular in a Northern region of ancient India known as Mithila. In 1816, Mithila was divided between India and Nepal when British East India Company established the Sugauli Treaty with the Gurkha King of Nepal.

Marriage has deep significance in Hinduism. Through marriage, a man and a woman each fulfil their inherent soulful tendencies to become physically, emotionally and spiritually complete in each other. The wife is the homemaker, standing beside her husband as the mother and educator of their children and the home's silent leader. It is with a prayer that these sacred duties be performed well that the good wife seeks the blessings of the Vata Savitri Vrata.