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Beyond The Banyan: Reclaiming Agency in Pattanaik's "Sati Savitri"

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I. SYNOPSIS

In his work *Sati Savitri*, Devdutt Pattanaik deconstructs the popular image of the "dutiful wife" (Sati) and the "savior of the husband" (Savitri). While traditional interpretations use these stories to enforce wifely obedience and domestic piety, Pattanaik offers a "new dimension" by arguing that these myths originally depicted women of immense intellect and agency. He suggests that the modern, stifling version of these stories is a result of a patriarchal "anxious mind" that sought to control women's power over the centuries.

II. INTRODUCTION/CONTEXT

Sine generations, the names Sati and Savitri have been synonymous with the Pativrata (devoted wife) archetype. Women are taught to emulate Savitri's devotion to Satyavan to ensure their husband's longevity. However, Pattanaik's recent critique challenges this "Victorian" reading of Indian mythology. He posits that the original Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain lore portrays these women not as subservient, but as independent decision-makers who navigated a world of shifting "Dharmas."

Criticism: The "New Dimension" of Sati and Savitri

Pattanaik's critique introduces several revolutionary pivots in how we view these characters:

Intellect vs. Devotion: Pattanaik argues that Savitri did not save Satyavan through "magic" or mere "tears," but through shrewdness and negotiation. She outwits Yama, the god of death, using logic and the rules of Dharma. In this light, Savitri is the first "lawyer-intellectual" of Hindu myth, not just a grieving widow Agency over Obedience: He highlights that Savitri chose her husband despite her father's and the sages' warnings. This "Swayamvara" spirit (the right to choose) is often erased in modern retellings that focus only on her life after marriage.

The Evolution of Patriarchy: Pattanaik uses these stories to track how women's status diminished across the Yugas. He criticizes how the "free-spirited feminine intellect" of antiquity was gradually caged by Puranic and later Brahmanical constraints, turning a story of empowerment into one of endurance.

The Feminine "Aham": A unique dimension in his critique is the separation of biology from the soul (Atma). He argues that the desire to dominate is a trait of the ego (Aham), and by portraying women as masters of their destiny, the myths show they are as spiritually capable as any man.

However, this popular imagery is often a sanitized, domestic version of much older, more complex narratives. As Devdutt Pattanaik argues in *Sati Savitri*, the transformation of these figures from formidable negotiators into meek devotees was not accidental; it was a systematic recalibration of myth to suit the anxieties of a patriarchal society.

While the common retelling of the Savitri myth focuses on her following Yama (the God of Death) into the underworld with nothing but tears and tenacity, the ancient texts suggest something far more radical. They present a woman who exercised Swayamvara—the sovereign right to choose her own destiny—despite the heavy warnings of sages and kings alike.

By peeling back the "Victorian" layers of morality that were grafted onto these stories during the colonial era, Pattanaik's critique serves as a cultural excavation. He posits that we have traded the sovereign feminine intellect for a version of womanhood that is "safe" and subservient. This article explores how reclaiming the original "dimension" of Sati and Savitri isn't just about revising history—it's about restoring the agency that was always inherent in the feminine Atma.

III. CONCLUSION

Pattanaik concludes that feminism is not a "Western import" but an ancient Indian reality that was "closeted" by centuries of patriarchal interpretation. By looking at Savitri as a woman who "negotiated with death" rather than one who "suffered for her husband," he invites a modern audience to reclaim mythology as a tool for empowerment. The "new dimension" is clear: we don't need to reject our myths; we need to peel back the layers of fear that have distorted them.



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Footnotes

Dharma, emphasizes, fluidity, Pativratha, devoted, weaponized, female agency, yugas.

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