The Story of Savitri from India’s *Mahabharata*

**ABOUT THE READING** The story of the legendary princess Savitri is one of the best-loved episodes from the *Mahabharata*, an ancient religious epic, or story poem, of India. It demonstrates the qualities that the people of ancient India most admired.

**VOCABULARY**

*hermitage* an isolated, secluded place

*As you read* think about what traits make Savitri so admirable that people still love this story.

When the time came for Princess Savitri to marry, she chose Satyavan, a prince who cared for his old and blind father, who had lost his kingdom. When she told her father of her choice, the king’s seer warned her that Satyavan was destined to die in one year. But Savitri did not change her mind.

Satyavan was overjoyed to be offered such a bride. But his father, the blind king, asked Savitri, “Can you bear the hard life of the hermitage? Will you wear our simple robe and our coat of matted bark? Will you eat only fruit and plants of the wild?”

Savitri said, “I care nothing about comfort or hardship. In palace or in hermitage, I am content.”

That very day, Savitri and Satyavan . . . became husband and wife.

For a year, they lived happily. But Savitri could never forget that Satyavan’s death drew closer. Finally, only three days remained. Savitri entered the hall of worship and faced the sacred fire. There she prayed for three days and nights, not eating or sleeping.

“My love,” said Satyavan, “prayer and fasting are good. But why be this hard on yourself?”
Savitri gave no answer.

The sun was just rising when Savitri at last left the hall. She saw Satyavan heading for the forest, an ax on his shoulder.
Savitri rushed to his side. “I will come with you.” . . .

Hand in hand, Savitri and Satyavan walked . . .
Satyavan chopped firewood from a fallen tree.
Suddenly, he dropped his ax.
“My head aches,” he said . . . “What is wrong with me?”

Satyavan’s eyes closed. His breathing slowed.
Savitri looked up. Coming through the woods to meet them was a princely man . . .
Trembling, Savitri asked, “Who are you?”
A deep, gentle voice replied, “Princess, you see me only by the power of your prayer and fasting. I am Yama, god of death. Now is the time I must take the spirit of Satyavan.” . . .

Satyavan’s breathing stopped . . .
“Happiness awaits your husband in my kingdom . . .”

Savitri desperately tries to stop Yama from taking her husband

“Lord Yama,” said Savitri, “[M]y duty as a wife is to stay beside [my husband].”
“Princess, that duty is at an end,” said Yama. “Still, I admire your loyalty. I will grant you a favor—anything but the life of your husband.”
Savitri said, “Please restore my father-in-law’s kingdom and his sight.”
“His sight and his kingdom shall be restored.”
Yama again headed south. Savitri followed . . .
“Savitri! You have come far enough!”
“Lord Yama, . . . you carry away the happiness that is mine!”
“Princess, even love must bend to fate,” said Yama. “Still, I admire your devotion. I will grant you another favor—anything but the life of your husband.”

“Savitri said, “Grant many more children to my father.”

“Your father shall have many more children.” Yama once more turned south. Again, Savitri followed . . .

“Savitri! I forbid you to come farther!”

“Lord Yama, . . . no matter what may come, I will remain by Satyavan!”

“Princess, . . . you will not!” said Yama. “Still, I can only admire your courage and your firmness. I will grant you one last favor—anything but the life of your husband.”

“Then grant many children to me,” said Savitri. “And let them be children of Satyavan!”

Yama’s eyes grew wide as he stared at Savitri. “You did not ask for your husband’s life, yet I cannot grant your wish without releasing him. Princess, your wit is as strong as your will . . . Return, Savitri. You have won your husband’s life.”

The sun was just setting when Savitri . . . laid Satyavan’s head in her lap.

His chest rose and fell. His eyes opened . . .

“My love,” said Savitri, “let us return home.”

Yama was true to all he had promised. Savitri’s father became father to many more. Satyavan’s father regained both sight and kingdom.

In time, Satyavan became king, and Savitri his queen. They lived long and happily, blessed with many children.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What are some of Savitri’s good qualities?

Savitri’s asks one more favor—and gains the life of her husband without asking for it.
2. Why do you think Savitri asked Yama for favors for her father-in-law and her father?

3. Why do you think this tale was popular in ancient India? Explain your answer.
Biography Candragupta Maurya

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. Maurya was said to have ruled India much like Alexander the Great.
2. Indica described what life was like in India during this time. It may have included details about civilian lives, legal and state doctrines, and even Mauryan’s practices.

ACTIVITY
Answers will vary.

Biography Kautilya

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. The Arthashastra was a guidebook that discussed politics, and how to lead. It also dealt with philosophy.
2. Kautilya’s thoughts and opinions were probably applicable to life in the time in which he lived, however today things are very different. I do not think politicians would be able to follow the Arthashastra, as modern government is very different from what I have learned about history.

ACTIVITY
Answers will vary.

Biography Mahinda

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. Mahinda spread Buddhism through India.
2. Mahinda was a monk who became enlightened, then traveled to Sri Lanka to convert the King to Buddhism. He then spread the teachings of Buddha. He died, and a memorial was erected where he was cremated.

ACTIVITY
Answers will vary.

Literature

CALL-OUT BOX
Similes (p. 12): misery will follow, as the wheel of a cart follows the foot of an ox; happiness will follow, like a shadow that never leaves.

ANALYZING LITERATURE
1. the consequences of good and evil
2. Both passages talk about the consequences of good and evil. The Buddhist passage uses comparisons and refers to happiness when one is good and sorrow when one is evil. The Hindu passage lists the traits of good and evil men. It refers to goodness leading to freedom and evil leading to suffering and bondage.

Primary Source The Story of Savitri from India’s Mahabharata

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. Possible answers: intelligence, loyalty, devotion, lack of concern for riches, determination, concern for family members, more concerned for others than for herself
2. Answers will vary. Possible answers: She cares more about making other people happy than about her own happiness. She wants to trick Yama into continuing to grant her favors. She wants Yama to admire her and feel sympathy for her.
3. Accept any reasonable response.
Primary Source
Mohandas Gandhi’s Autobiography

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. Truth, which is the basis of all morality
2. If someone harms you or offends you, do not respond in anger, but try to respond with kindness.
3. Answers will vary. Examples: It was harder because turning the other cheek, or swallowing your anger, can be difficult. It was easier because he believed that returning good for evil was morally right, and being good made him happy.

History and Geography

MAP ACTIVITY
1. Colors will vary.
2. Arabian Sea
3. Ravi River; Chenab River

INTERPRETING MAPS
1. More than 300 miles
2. Pakistan and western India
3. Because they wanted to protect their city from floods as well as invading neighbors.
4. Perhaps being located on the river caused the cities to end, because the river flooded and destroyed the cities. Or perhaps invaders came from the sea and up the river and destroyed the cities in their path.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
Students’ drawings and descriptions will vary but should include answers to the questions.

Social Studies Skills

PRACTICE THE SKILL
Russian is descended from East Slavic, one of the Slavic languages. Hindi descended from Sanskrit; the path was Proto-Indo European to Indo-Iranian to Indic to Sanskrit to Hindi.

APPLY THE SKILL:
1. The only relation that they have is that they are all part of the Indo-European language group.
2. Sogdian
3. I would predict that Latvia and Lithuania are near each other because their languages are close to each other on the diagram, and countries that are far apart probably would have unrelated languages.

Chapter Review

REVIEWING VOCABULARY, TERMS, AND PEOPLE
1. monsoon
2. nonviolence
3. reincarnation
4. nirvana
5. alloy
6. inoculation: practice of injecting a person with a small dose of a virus to help him or her build up defenses to a disease
7. subcontinent: large landmass that is smaller than a continent, usually separated from the rest of the continent by physical features
8. fasting: going without food, various motivations (protest, expression of religious devotion)

COMPREHENSION AND CRITICAL THINKING
1. The ideas of the sacred Vedic texts began to blend with ideas from other cultures. This blending created Hinduism.
2. The Guptas thought it would strengthen their rule and would make the empire more stable.

REVIEWING THEMES
1. geography
2. religion
3. politics
4. technology and innovation

REVIEW ACTIVITY: WORD SEARCH
Students’ word searches will vary in terms of placement of words; however, all should include the required number of words.