

# Vice And Virtue



*Too often, it is assumed that the dominant image of women in Indian literature has been that of Sita or Sati Savitri—an all suffering, self sacrificing, eternally patient and chaste wife and mother. However, not only are there divergent images of women within the written literary tradition, but we need to remember that the majority of people who lived in rural areas are likely to have drawn more mental and imaginative sustenance from regional folk tales and songs and local variations of epic and Puranic stories. This incredibly rich tradition, being largely oral, was probably more flexible and lent itself more to individual improvisation. Women are likely to have participated more actively in its creation. Every region and every village has its own stock of ever growing, ever changing legends, tales and songs. While such literature is certainly not free of antiwomen sentiment, much of it is woven around positive, realistic and visionary thoughts about women's reality. We hope readers will try to send us such literature from their regions, whether from written sources or from recollections of oral narrative.*

*Here we present a Garhwali folk story "Pap Aur Punya" which reveals how much flexibility the idea of the sati or pure woman was capable of encompassing, and also shows, in a positive way, a friendship between two women. The story is taken from "Akash Dani De Pani," edited by Govind Chatak, and published by Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 1982. It has been translated from Hindi by Manushi*

FAR away, on the peak of a mountain, there once was a village in which there dwelt two women. Other women must have dwelt there too, but this story is about only two women. Well, women there have been in every age, but this story is about the golden age. It is said that in that age, all the women were *sati sadhvis*. On their *sat* were the mountains founded, the rain fell in its due season, diseases and epidemics were unknown, sin never showed its face.

Yet even in the golden age, everyone could not have been of the same temperament. Have the five fingers ever been of equal length? Do not different flowers yield different perfumes? All jackals do not have

horns nor do all toads have jewels in their heads. So too were those two women. Totally unlike each other. If one was the west, the other was the east.

One of them was known to be a *sati sadhvi*, devoted to her husband, and given to prayer and worship. She thought it a sin to look on the face of any man besides her husband, so the question of taking one into her heart did not arise. She it was who purified the purest in her village.

The other never spent a moment on prayer or worship. She loved her husband but thought it no sin to look on the face of any other man. She mixed freely with everyone and talked openly to everyone. Her heart was a treasure

house of love. She was full of compassion, and playful was her nature. She would fondly kiss a child who came her way and help out an old person. She would weep a while with those who were in mourning, and would laugh heartily with those who were making merry. She felt not the slightest hesitation in meeting with or talking to anyone. Everybody praised her. But, because of her open heart, people did doubt her morals.

Everyone called the first woman a *sati*. No one ever voiced any suspicion of her character.

It so happened that these two women were very close friends. They moved around together, visited each other, and, whenever possible, went

together to work in the fields.

One day, late in the month of June, these two forded the river and went to work in the fields. As they were returning in the evening, all of a sudden, clouds gathered. Rain fell, and the river flooded. They stood on the bank, wondering what to do. There was no bridge, and to ford the river now was to risk one's life. They were in a fix.

Darkness was gathering. The *sati sadhvi* called on god and her friend began to laugh. "Yes, sister", said she. "Try out your knowledge and your meditation now ! What better occasion to make use of all that prayer and worship !"

The *pativrata sati sadhvi* felt hurt by this comment. She could not bear to be taunted about her worship and her years of devotion to her husband. Irritated, she said : "What makes you laugh ? If you want a demonstration, I will cross the river. But think it over, for you will be left alone."

So saying, she stooped and filled

her hands with the river water. Then she cast a yearning glance upwards, and, closing her eyes, she said "Oh god of my household, if I have never desired any man besides my husband then let this river subside and let me cross over."

As the *sati* spoke, the river subsided like boiling milk when it is taken off the fire. She plunged into the river. The water lowered its level to her ankles. She crossed over. When she reached the other bank, she looked back and saw her friend still standing there while the river had once more reached flood level. Smiling proudly, she called to her : "Why don't you come too ?"

The other heard and felt embarrassed. What should she do? Should she too plunge into the river? This was not merely a matter of

drowning or crossing over. It was a matter of vice and virtue. She fell into thought. The religious one had crossed over on the strength of her virtue. Had she too any claim to virtue ? 'I have only loved', she thought, "I have looked with love on every human being. It is said that love is the embodiment of god. Therefore, I too have not sinned."

Finally, she too plucked up courage. Filling her hands with the river water, she called to mind her beloved deity and said : "If I have loved humanity then oh god, carry me also across."

She too plunged into the river. The waters subsided as before and she too crossed over. Thanking god in her heart, she went and stood beside her *sati sadhvi* friend. Then both of them joyfully wended their way home. □

