



RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEGOTIATING POWER AND PIETY: SAVITRI'S PATIVRATA DHARMA AS FEMALE AGENCY

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14th January, 2026
Received in revised form
24th February, 2026
Accepted 25th March, 2026
Published online 30th April, 2026

Keywords:

Savitri; Mahabharata; Pativrata Dharma;
Female Agency; Negotiated Agency;
Discursive Agency; Gender and
Religion; Brahmanical Patriarchy.

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Citation: Myungnam Kang. 2026. "Negotiating Power and Piety: Savitri's Pativrata Dharma as Female Agency". *International Journal of Current Research*, 18, (04), 36917-36921.

ABSTRACT

This article reexamines the figure of Savitri in the Mahabharata as a site of negotiated agency, challenging interpretations that reduce her narrative to a passive embodiment of pativrata dharma. Drawing on the critically edited text established by Sukthankar et al. (1933–1966) and the translation by van Buitenen (1973–1978), it argues that Savitri's authority in her encounter with Yama is produced not through devotion alone but through a structured sequence of discursive interventions that mobilize the internal logic of dharma to generate binding consequences. This mode of action, termed discursive agency, operates by inhabiting and extending the interpretive possibilities of the normative framework rather than by opposing it—compelling Yama to restore Satyavan's life through a chain of reasoning he cannot deny without undermining the coherence of dharma itself. The article situates this textual analysis within a broader comparative framework, drawing on ethnographic studies of women's ritual practice in Hindu contexts. Research on fasting observances, moral authority in devotional practice, and women's interpretive participation in religious life demonstrates that the structural dynamic visible in the Savitri episode—agency produced through the intensification of normative performance rather than its transgression—recurs across different domains and historical contexts. This parallel is understood as structural rather than historical, intended to illuminate the analytical content of the concept of negotiated agency proposed here. The article engages directly with the objection that identifying agency within constraint risks functioning as a theoretical alibi for structural subordination. It acknowledges that pativrata dharma operates as a historically embedded system of power rather than a neutral interpretive framework, and that Savitri's success ultimately reaffirms the normative order it inhabits. What the concept of negotiated agency is designed to capture, however, is precisely this entanglement of constraint and action—a dynamic irreducible to either domination or resistance. By foregrounding this dynamic, the article contributes to a more analytically precise account of how gendered subjects engage with normative systems, positioning piety not as the antithesis of power but as one of its conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Savitri has long been regarded as the exemplary embodiment of pativrata dharma, the ideal of wifely devotion that defines female virtue within Brahmanical tradition. In both classical commentary and modern discourse, her narrative has been repeatedly invoked to reinforce normative expectations of female fidelity, self-sacrifice, and moral subordination to the husband. Such readings, however, tend to flatten the complexity of the Savitri episode in the Mahabharata, reducing its protagonist to a static emblem of patriarchal ideology. Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy demonstrates that the idealization of the pativrata figure operates not only through prescriptive texts but through symbolic and narrative structures that encode women's roles within relational and moral hierarchies (Chakravarti 2006). Sangari and Vaid similarly show that figures such as Savitri were selectively reappropriated in colonial and nationalist discourse to construct a normative image of the "Hindu woman," one in which devotion was foregrounded while narrative complexity

was systematically suppressed (Sangari and Vaid 1989). These interpretive patterns persist across both scholarly and popular registers, producing readings in which Savitri's agency, if acknowledged at all, is subordinated to her symbolic function as an icon of marital virtue. This article challenges such reductive interpretations by returning to the Savitri narrative in the Mahabharata as a primary site of analysis. Drawing on the critically edited text established by Sukthankar et al. (1933–1966) and the translation by van Buitenen (1973–1978), it examines how Savitri's role in the epic is constituted not by devotion alone, but by the discursive strategies through which she acts, reasons, and engages with the moral order she inhabits. Her encounter with Yama, in particular, reveals a mode of agency that operates through argumentation and the strategic mobilization of dharma, rather than through direct opposition to authority. This suggests that dharma in the epic is not a static normative code but an interpretive framework within which ethical meaning is actively produced. The article proposes to understand this textual dynamic through the

concept of "negotiated agency," by which it means the capacity to act within normative structures by inhabiting, interpreting, and redirecting their internal logic. Within this broader framework, Savitri's specific mode of action in the Yama episode is characterized here as "discursive agency": the exercise of influence through reasoned speech, moral argumentation, and the sequential construction of binding claims. Discursive agency is thus understood as the textual and performative dimension through which negotiated agency is enacted in the Savitri narrative. Together, these concepts are intended to move beyond binary models of domination and resistance, offering a more nuanced account of how gendered subjects engage with normative systems from within. This reading aligns with broader interpretations of the Mahabharata as a text in which ethical principles are articulated through dialogue and situational judgment rather than fixed prescription (Hiltebeitel 2011). As Jamison has shown, female figures in the epic frequently exert influence through relational positioning, moral reasoning, and speech rather than through institutional authority (Jamison 2010). Savitri exemplifies and extends this pattern, demonstrating that discursive engagement with dharma can reshape narrative outcomes in ways that exceed the subordinating function typically attributed to the pativrata ideal. Building on this textual analysis, the article situates Savitri's narrative within a wider pattern of women's religious practice. Ethnographic research on ritual fasting and devotional observance suggests that forms of practice associated with marital obligation also function as sites of meaning, personal efficacy, and constrained agency rather than as purely coercive structures (Pearson 1996; Harlan 1992; Pintchman 2005). These studies reveal structural parallels with the Savitri episode: in both contexts, women engage with normative frameworks not by rejecting them but by inhabiting and performing them in ways that generate a degree of moral authority. The article acknowledges the methodological distance between textual analysis and ethnographic evidence, and does not treat these cases as historically continuous. Rather, it draws on them to illuminate a recurrent pattern in which constraint and agency are co-constitutive rather than mutually exclusive.

The argument advanced here is twofold. First, the Savitri narrative demonstrates that pativrata dharma is not simply a mechanism of subordination, but a discursive and performative framework within which agency can be articulated. Second, this form of agency remains structurally constrained: Savitri's success ultimately reaffirms the normative order it inhabits, and her authority is conditional upon her conformity to the pativrata ideal. The article takes seriously the critique that such constrained agency may amount to a sophisticated reproduction of patriarchal norms, and engages with this tension rather than resolving it prematurely. By holding these two dimensions together, it seeks to position Savitri not as a passive symbol of devotion, but as a figure through whom the negotiation of power and piety becomes critically visible.

DISCURSIVE AGENCY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF DHARMA: SAVITRI IN THE MAHABHARATA

The Savitri episode in the Mahabharata, preserved in the Vana Parvan (Book of the Forest), constitutes one of the epic's most sustained engagements with the moral possibilities available to

a woman within the framework of dharma. The narrative presents Savitri not as a figure defined solely by her devotion, but as one whose authority is produced through speech, reasoning, and the strategic construction of moral claims. A close reading of this episode, drawing on the critically edited text established by Sukthankar et al. (1933–1966) and the translation by van Buitenen (1973–1978), reveals that her encounter with Yama is structured as a sequence of discursive interventions, each of which builds upon the last to produce a logically binding outcome. It is through this sequence, rather than through devotion alone, that Savitri exercises what the present study terms discursive agency.

The Initial Frame: Positioning within Dharma: The encounter begins at the moment of Satyavan's death. When Yama arrives to carry away his soul, Savitri follows. Yama commands her to turn back, invoking the boundary between the living and the dead as a fixed cosmic limit. Savitri's response does not challenge this boundary directly. Instead, she grounds her continued presence in the principle that a wife's highest duty is to accompany her husband. By framing her persistence as an act of pativrata dharma rather than an act of defiance, she situates herself within the moral order that Yama himself represents. This opening move is strategically precise: it refuses confrontation while asserting a claim that Yama, as upholder of dharma, cannot dismiss without undermining his own authority (van Buitenen 1973–1978, vol. 2). This initial positioning is not merely rhetorical. It establishes the terms within which the subsequent dialogue will proceed. By invoking dharma as the ground of her presence, Savitri constrains Yama's available responses. He cannot simply deny her claim without conceding that dharma permits exceptions, nor can he affirm it without acknowledging her right to persist. The dialogue is thus set within an interpretive space that Savitri has partly constructed through her opening speech.

The Sequence of Boons: Escalation and Logical Entrapment Yama, moved by the quality of her reasoning, offers her a boon on the condition that she does not ask for Satyavan's life. This conditional concession is the pivot on which the episode turns. Savitri accepts the condition and proceeds to request the restoration of her father-in-law's sight and kingdom. The request is consistent with dharmic expectation: concern for one's husband's lineage and family welfare falls within the recognized duties of a wife. Yama grants it without hesitation. Her second request, blessings for her own father, similarly operates within the bounds of conventional piety. Again, Yama concedes. Each successful request establishes a precedent: Yama has demonstrated a willingness to grant boons, and each boon accepted has been framed within the logic of dharmic obligation. Savitri has not yet approached the limit he has set, but she has accumulated a pattern of concession that shapes the moral context of what follows. Her final request is for sons born from her union with Satyavan. The request is worded with deliberate precision. It does not name Satyavan's resurrection directly; it requests progeny from the specific man who is her husband. The logical implication, however, is unavoidable: sons cannot be born from a dead man. To grant this boon, Yama must restore Satyavan's life. He has already accepted the condition that his boons are binding, and he has already granted three. To refuse the fourth on the grounds that it implies what it does not state would be to act inconsistently within his own framework. Yama recognizes this and concedes (van Buitenen 1973–1978, vol. 2). As Hiltebeitel argues, dharma in the Mahabharata is not a fixed legal code but an

interpretive and dialogic process in which ethical meaning is produced through reasoning, precedent, and situational judgment (Hiltebeitel 2011). Savitri's sequence of boons exemplifies this process with unusual clarity. Each step in the sequence is individually unexceptional; it is their cumulative arrangement that generates an outcome that no single step could have produced. The agency here is not located in any single speech act but in the architecture of the sequence as a whole.

Discursive Agency as Performative Practice: What the boon sequence reveals is that Savitri's power is neither external to the system of dharma nor reducible to passive compliance with it. It operates through the internal flexibility of the system itself. Her arguments do not oppose the moral order; they extend it, demonstrating that the principles Yama is already committed to upholding entail consequences he had not anticipated. This is the defining feature of discursive agency as understood in this article: the capacity to produce binding effects by inhabiting and extending the interpretive logic of a normative framework, rather than by resisting or circumventing it. This reading is consistent with Jamison's observation that female figures in the Mahabharata characteristically exert influence through moral reasoning and relational positioning rather than through institutional or physical authority (Jamison 2010). Savitri fits this pattern but extends it in a significant respect: her speech is not merely expressive of a position but performative in the technical sense, producing real narrative consequences through its structure and sequencing. The distinction matters because it locates her agency not in her interiority—her devotion, her virtue, her emotional state—but in the discursive act itself. It is also significant that Yama's final concession is framed not as a disruption of cosmic order but as its fulfillment. He does not restore Satyavan because he has been overpowered or deceived, but because the internal logic of dharma, as Savitri has articulated it, requires this outcome. The narrative thus does not position her outside the system; it reveals that the system contains within itself the possibility of the outcome she achieves. Her adherence to pativrata dharma is not a constraint that she overcomes but the very condition that makes her authority legible within the moral universe of the epic.

The Limits of Discursive Agency: At the same time, the nature of this agency imposes its own constraints. Savitri's success is inseparable from her conformity to the pativrata ideal. Her arguments carry force precisely because she does not step outside the normative framework: she invokes its principles, she fulfills its expectations, and she constructs her claims in terms that Yama must recognize as valid within his own system. An argument that departed from these terms would lose its purchase entirely. The discursive space within which she operates is real but bounded; it is constituted by the very norms she mobilizes. This tension—between the enabling and limiting dimensions of pativrata dharma—is not resolved by the narrative. Satyavan is restored, the lineage is secured, and the normative order is reaffirmed. Savitri's agency has produced a transformative outcome, but that outcome is one that the system itself can accommodate and, in accommodating, absorbs. What the episode demonstrates, then, is not that pativrata dharma is a site of liberation, but that it is a site of negotiation: a framework within which constraint and action are not simply opposed but deeply entangled. It is this entanglement, and its implications for understanding how gendered subjects engage with normative systems, that the

following section pursues through the comparative lens of ritual practice.

PATIVRATA AS NEGOTIATED AGENCY: RITUAL, PERFORMANCE, AND CONSTRAINT

Toward a Definition of Negotiated Agency: The preceding analysis of the Savitri episode establishes that pativrata dharma functions not only as a prescriptive ideal but as a discursive and performative framework within which a specific form of agency becomes possible. Savitri does not act by rejecting the norms she inhabits; she acts by inhabiting them with a precision that reveals their internal flexibility and generates consequences their original formulation did not anticipate. This dynamic—action produced through the strategic interpretation and enactment of normative structures, rather than through opposition to them—is what the present study terms negotiated agency. The concept requires some analytical clarification before proceeding. Negotiated agency, as used here, does not presuppose a sovereign subject who stands outside normative systems and chooses to engage with them instrumentally. Rather, it designates a mode of action available to subjects who are already constituted within those systems, and whose capacity to act is inseparable from the norms that simultaneously constrain them. The "negotiation" in question is therefore not a transaction between equals but an interpretive practice conducted from within conditions of structural asymmetry. This distinction is crucial: it prevents the concept from collapsing into an uncritical celebration of agency, while preserving its analytical purchase against readings that reduce normative participation to mere submission.

Ritual Practice as a Site of Negotiated Agency: This model of agency finds empirical grounding in ethnographic studies of women's religious practices within Hindu contexts, where structurally analogous patterns emerge in relation to ritual observance. The parallel is not historical but analytical: the present study does not claim continuity between the Mahabharata's narrative world and contemporary practice, but draws on ethnographic evidence to illuminate a recurrent structural dynamic in which constraint and action are co-constitutive. Pearson's study of ritual fasting among Hindu women in North India provides the most direct point of comparison (Pearson 1996). Fasting practices associated with marital devotion—such as the Vat Savitri vrat, which is explicitly linked to the Savitri narrative—are conventionally understood as expressions of female subordination within patriarchal religious systems. Pearson's ethnographic evidence complicates this reading. Women who observe these fasts consistently describe them not as externally imposed obligations but as intentional, meaningful practices through which they experience moral efficacy, emotional stability, and a sense of participation in the well-being of their households. The fast is disciplined and structured by prescribed norms, but its performance is experienced as an act of will rather than compulsion. Crucially, this sense of agency does not depend on the rejection of the normative framework; it is produced through its enactment. The parallel with Savitri is precise: just as her authority in the Yama episode emerges through the intensification of pativrata dharma rather than its transgression, the efficacy women attribute to fasting is realized through conformity to prescribed form. Harlan's analysis of religious

practice among Rajput women extends this observation into the domain of moral authority (Harlan 1992). In the narratives and ritual practices she documents, women who fulfill the obligations of marital devotion with exceptional rigor are understood to acquire a form of religious power—*shakti*—that derives directly from their adherence to the *pativrata* ideal. This power is not incidental to their normative role but produced by it. Harlan's findings suggest that the relationship between constraint and agency in these contexts is not one of simple opposition but of structural interdependence: the more completely a woman inhabits the normative framework, the greater the moral authority she is understood to possess within it. This dynamic maps directly onto the Savitri narrative, in which Yama's concession is not despite her conformity to *pativrata* dharma but because of it. Her authority is legible precisely because it is expressed through the system's own terms. Pintchman's study of women's devotional practices in Benares adds a further dimension by demonstrating that ritual participation creates shared spaces of religious agency that cannot be explained solely by reference to patriarchal imposition (Pintchman 2005). The women she observes are active interpreters of religious meaning, adapting received traditions to their own circumstances and constructing forms of collective authority within the spaces ritual affords. What emerges from Pintchman's account is a picture of women who are neither passive recipients of normative prescription nor unconstrained agents, but participants who exercise interpretive initiative within the conditions that define their participation. This corresponds to the model of negotiated agency proposed here: action that is real and consequential, but whose conditions of possibility are inseparable from the structures it navigates.

The Structural Logic of Negotiated Agency: These ethnographic cases illuminate three structural features of negotiated agency that are equally visible in the Savitri episode. First, agency in these contexts is produced through performance rather than interiority. What generates moral authority—whether in Savitri's speech before Yama or in a woman's observance of a *vrata*—is not the internal state of the subject but the disciplined enactment of prescribed form. Second, the normative framework functions simultaneously as a constraint and as a resource: it defines the terms within which action is possible, and it is precisely those terms that give the action its force. Third, the outcomes produced within this framework, while real, remain bounded by the system that enables them. Savitri restores her husband; she does not dismantle the institution of *pativrata* dharma. Women who observe ritual fasts acquire a degree of moral authority; they do not thereby exit the structures of marital obligation. These three features together define the analytical content of negotiated agency as it is understood in this article. It is a mode of action that is neither illusory nor unlimited: it produces genuine effects, but those effects are achieved within conditions that simultaneously define its scope.

The Limits of the Framework and the Question of Structural Reproduction: The preceding analysis must be brought into direct confrontation with a serious objection. If negotiated agency ultimately reaffirms the normative order—if Savitri's success restores the patriarchal household and ritual fasting reinforces the ideology of marital devotion—then the concept risks functioning as a theoretical alibi for structural subordination. On this critique, to identify agency within constraint is not to challenge the system but to render it more

palatable, obscuring the coercive dimensions of *pativrata* dharma beneath a vocabulary of negotiation and performance. This objection carries genuine force and cannot be dismissed. The structures within which negotiated agency operates are not neutral frameworks of interpretation; they are systems that have historically regulated women's bodies, mobility, and social existence in ways that have produced real harm. To acknowledge that women exercise agency within these structures is not to suggest that the structures are therefore acceptable or that the constraints they impose are inconsequential. What the concept of negotiated agency is intended to resist, however, is not the recognition of structural power but the analytical foreclosure that results from treating normative systems as wholly determining. If constraint entirely eliminates the possibility of action, then the differences between women's engagements with normative structures—differences of strategy, timing, outcome, and meaning—become analytically invisible. The evidence examined here suggests that these differences are real, and that accounting for them requires a framework capable of holding constraint and action together without dissolving either into the other. Negotiated agency is proposed as such a framework: not as a redemptive narrative, but as an analytical category that preserves the complexity of the terrain it describes.

The Savitri narrative, read in this light, does not offer a model of liberation. It offers something more precise: a demonstration of how power can be exercised within a system that simultaneously enables and limits it, and how the very conditions of constraint can become the conditions of action. It is this dynamic, irreducible to either domination or resistance, that the concept of negotiated agency is designed to capture.

CONCLUSION

This study has reexamined the Savitri narrative in the Mahabharata not as a straightforward illustration of *pativrata* dharma, but as a site in which the relationship between normative constraint and female agency is actively produced and contested. The argument has proceeded in three stages, each of which has contributed a distinct layer to the concept of negotiated agency developed here. The first stage, conducted through close textual analysis of the Yama episode, established that Savitri's authority is generated not by devotion alone but by the discursive structure of her engagement with the moral order. Her speech before Yama is not expressive but performative: it constructs a sequence of claims whose cumulative logic compels an outcome—the restoration of Satyavan's life—that the system of dharma cannot deny without undermining its own coherence. Drawing on the critically edited text of Sukthankar et al. (1933–1966) and the translation of van Buitenen (1973–1978), the analysis demonstrated that this discursive agency operates through the internal flexibility of dharma itself rather than through opposition to it. Hildebeitel's reading of the Mahabharata as a text in which ethical meaning is produced through dialogue and situational reasoning, rather than fixed prescription, provides the broader interpretive framework within which Savitri's speech acts acquire their full significance (Hildebeitel 2011). The second stage situated this textual dynamic within a comparative framework drawn from ethnographic studies of women's ritual practice. The parallel between Savitri's narrative performance of *pativrata* dharma and women's embodied enactment of devotional practices—particularly the

fasting observances documented by Pearson (1996) and the moral authority produced through ritual adherence analyzed by Harlan (1992)—illuminates a structural pattern that recurs across different domains and historical contexts. In both cases, agency is produced through the intensification of normative performance rather than its transgression; constraint and action are not opposed but structurally interdependent. Pintchman's analysis of devotional practice as a space of interpretive participation further demonstrates that this pattern is neither exceptional nor confined to extraordinary figures such as Savitri, but constitutes a more general feature of women's engagement with Hindu religious frameworks (Pintchman 2005). The methodological premise of this comparison has been stated clearly: the parallel is structural rather than historical, intended to illuminate the analytical content of negotiated agency rather than to posit continuity between epic narrative and contemporary practice. The third stage brought the concept of negotiated agency into direct confrontation with the objection that it may function as a theoretical alibi for structural subordination. This objection was taken seriously rather than deflected. The structures within which negotiated agency operates—pativrata dharma as a normative system governing women's bodies, roles, and relational identities—are not neutral interpretive frameworks but historically embedded systems of power. To identify agency within constraint is not to endorse the constraint, and the present study does not do so. What the concept resists, rather, is the analytical foreclosure that results from treating normative systems as wholly determining, and that renders invisible the real differences in how women engage with, interpret, and redirect the conditions of their participation. Negotiated agency is proposed not as a redemptive category but as a descriptive and analytical one: a framework for holding constraint and action together without collapsing either into the other.

Collectively, these three stages produce an account of Savitri that differs substantially from both the ideological reading and the straightforwardly resistant one. She is neither the passive emblem of marital virtue that nationalist and colonial discourse constructed from her image, as Sangari and Vaid have documented (Sangari and Vaid 1989), nor a proto-feminist heroine whose narrative enacts a covert critique of Brahmanical patriarchy. She is, rather, a figure whose story demonstrates with unusual precision how power can be exercised within a system that simultaneously enables and limits it—how the conditions of constraint can become, under specific discursive conditions, the conditions of action. The implications of this reading extend beyond the Savitri episode itself. If dharma in the Mahabharata is understood as an interpretive framework rather than a fixed code, then the forms of agency available within it are not exceptional but structural: they are features of the system, available in principle to any subject capable of inhabiting its logic with sufficient precision. Chakravarti's analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy as a system that operates through symbolic and relational structures, rather than through brute prescription alone, provides the broader historical context within which this conclusion acquires its significance (Chakravarti 2006). The Savitri narrative, read in this light, is not simply a story about one woman's exceptional virtue; it is a textual record of the interpretive possibilities and structural limits that the normative order makes available to women who are fully constituted within it. Several questions remain open.

The present study has focused on a single episode within a vast and internally heterogeneous text, and the extent to which its conclusions generalize to other female figures in the Mahabharata—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, each of whom engages with dharma under conditions of acute constraint—remains to be examined. The relationship between the epic's representation of female agency and the social conditions of its composition and transmission also warrants further investigation, as does the question of how the pativrata ideal was differently mobilized across regional, sectarian, and historical contexts. These are questions that the present study cannot answer but which its framework is intended to open.

What can be said, as a conclusion, is this: piety and power in the Savitri narrative are not opposed categories, nor is one simply a disguised form of the other. They are entangled in ways that resist clean resolution, and it is precisely this entanglement that makes Savitri a figure of continuing analytical interest. To read her story is to encounter, in unusually concentrated form, the question of what it means to act within a world one did not make and cannot simply refuse—a question that extends well beyond the boundaries of the text in which she appears.

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