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#KnowYourHistory - 001

#AsalBharat - How Sanatan Dharma brings out heroes even Avengers may not match up with -

Today is the day when in 1923, a braveheart took birth in the home of Dr. Amarnath Sharma, an officer in the Armed Medical Corps of the then British Indian Army. He was not extremely studious, but was brilliant at sports and other physical activities.

He followed into the footsteps of his illustrious family, and joined the British Indian Army as a 2nd Lieutenant, right into the middle of World War II. Later on, he would gain name by fighting against all odds at Badgam in November 1947, getting martyred when he was only 24.

This was Major Somnath Sharma, the first recipient of India's highest gallantry award, the Param Vir Chakra. But did you know that the medal was designed by his own brother's mother in law? -

Yes, call it a twist of irony, or sheer coincidence, but the Param Vir Chakra was actually designed by the mother in law of Major Somnath Sharma's brother, whose name was Savitri Bai Khanolkar. Even more interesting is the fact she was not a Bharatiya by birth either -

Born on 20 July 1913 as Eve Yvonne Maday de Maros, Savitribai Khanolkar was a Swiss artist, who spent her early childhood in Geneva. Though living in Europe, Eve was extremely interested in the beauty of nature, and was equally interested towards Sanatana Dharma.

Her interest towards Hinduism took a whole new turn, when she met Vikram Ramji Khanolkar, a young cadet on a break from his training at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst -

Though there was a stark difference of 8 years in their age, the two slowly fell in love with each other. Eve was so much attracted towards Vikram and his beliefs, that she rebelled against her hesitating father, and arrived at India a couple of years later.

Vikram and Eve married each other in 1932, and Savitri willingly converted to Hinduism, adopting the name Savitribai for herself, based on the determined woman who compelled even Yamraj to revert his decision and restore the life of her husband Satyavan.

Savitri Bai Khanolkar Savitri Bai identified so closely with Hindu traditions and ideals, that her integration into Indian society was smooth and effortless -

She was a vegetarian, learnt to speak fluent Marathi, Sanskrit and Hindi and learnt Indian music, dance and painting. She always claimed that she had been "born in Europe by mistake" as she was Indian soul, and woe unto him who dared to call her a "foreigner"!

She was so fascinated with Indian culture that she read extensively from Hindu scriptures and had a deep knowledge of India's ancient history and legends.

It was this knowledge that led Major General Hira Lal Atal, the creator of the Param Vir Chakra, to ask for Savitri Bai's help in designing a medal that would truly symbolize the highest bravery -

Savitribai thought of the sage Dadhichi – a vedic rishi who made the ultimate sacrifice to the Gods. He gave up his body so that the Gods could fashion a deadly weapon – a Vajra, or thunderbolt, from his spine. This was why the Param Vir Chakra has the Vajra emblazoned on it.

This was how the Param Vir Chakra became India's highest gallantry award since independence. Little did she realize that the first recipient would be her own daughter's brother in law, that too posthumously -

The Param Vir Chakra is not awarded in the style of other gallantry awards in the world. It is only given to the rarest of the rare in terms of gallantry, i.e. in order to win it, you have to defy every known notion of realism and practicality in terms of bravery -

This is why out of the 21 brave souls who won the Param Vir Chakra, only 7 had the blessings of proudly getting the medal pinned on their chest. Their stories are such that even fans of Avengers or action heroes like Arnold, Rambo etc. be like

"WHAT THE HELL DID WE JUST MISS?"

This is only the beginning, for we deserve to know more. It is the beauty of Sanatana Dharma, that even people who have no close association with the religion are compelled to be attracted towards its charming world, as Savitribai Khanolkar was.