

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MAHABHARATA

The role of women in the Mahabharata makes an interesting study providing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their character. In this epic, four women play crucial parts in the course of events.

The first is Satyawati who was the daughter of the chieftain of fishermen. As a young maiden, while ferrying sage Parasara across a river, he fell in love with her. She bore him a son, Vyasa. He was brought up as an ascetic sage, but before he returned to forest life, he promised his mother he would come and help her whenever she faced difficulty.

Later, the emperor Santanu fell in love with her. Her father consented to the marriage only on condition that her children would inherit the throne. Santanu's older son, the crown prince Bhishma, not only voluntarily relinquished his right but also took the vow that he would remain celibate so that he could not have any children who might lay claim to the throne in the future.

After Santanu passed away, Satyawati's two sons died young. The older one was unmarried, and the younger had two wives, Ambika and Ambalika, who were childless. This created a crisis for there was no legal heir to the Kuru throne. Bhishma did not relent from his vow because he considered it sacred.

At this juncture, Satyawati sent for her son Vyasa, who promptly responded per his earlier promise. Satyawati said the problem could be solved by his fathering a child through each of the two young widows. The son borne by Ambalika was Pandu who became the future emperor. The son through Ambika was Dhritarashtra who was born blind. As time passed, Satyawati sensed the animosity between the sons of Pandu and the sons of Dhritarashtra, and she foresaw a struggle for power with tragic consequences. She voluntarily retired to the forest.

After the Kurukshetra war was over, the Pandavas ruled for a short time and then handed over the kingdom to the only survivor, Parikshit, who was the grandson of Arjuna and the son of Abhimanyu. Parikshit ruled wisely and well until he was bitten by a poisonous snake and had eight days to live. During this time, it was to Parikshit that Suka, Vyasa's ascetic son, narrated the Srimad Bhagavatam, the great book on bhakti, the path of devotion.

Hence, it can be seen that Satyawati kept the Kuru lineage intact and unbroken, and also that she was responsible, though indirectly, for the Srimad Bhagavatam, a great scripture available for posterity.

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Gandhari

Gandhari was the wife of King Dhritarashtra and mother of the Kauravas. She was the daughter of King Subala, ruler of a vast area west of the river Sindhu (now called the Indus) extending to Kabul, Afghanistan. The main city was Gandhar (modern Kandahar).

Grandsire Bhishma sent a proposal seeking her hand in marriage for Dhritarashtra. Subala knew that Dhritarashtra was blind, but thinking that an alliance with the powerful Kuru clan would be in the larger interest, agreed to the proposal. Gandhari accepted her father's decision as a dutiful daughter. She wanted to experience blindness and share it with her husband. Showing great strength of mind and in a spirit of personal sacrifice, she voluntarily forewent her sense of sight after marriage by tying a scarf over both her eyes.

Gandhari was a votary of Lord Siva. Pleased with her devotion, he granted her a boon that she would be the mother of a hundred sons. Gandhari had been jealous of her sister-in-law, Kunti, who had given birth to two sons. The boon caused her to conceive, but strangely, the pregnancy lasted two years. Out of frustration, she struck her abdomen with an iron rod and surprisingly delivered a congealed mass. Sage Vyasa called for one hundred and one clay jars, carefully divided the flesh into the jars, filled them with ghee, and had them closed. In time, the jars broke, and Gandhari became the mother of one hundred sons and one daughter.

The boys grew up and had their training in the martial arts under Dronacharya. Gandhari, however, noticed that her husband did not restrain the arrogant behavior of his oldest son, Duryodhana, and brought it to his attention on appropriate occasions.

On the eve of the great war, when Duryodhana came to seek her blessings, she said, "Let victory accrue to the righteous." After the war, she was sorely aggrieved that all her sons had been killed, and she wanted to pronounce a curse on the Pandavas. Sage Vyasa, sensing her intention, reminded her of her words. He said that victory had indeed accrued to the righteous as the Pandavas had fought for a righteous cause. Gandhari, however, could not forgive Lord Krishna whom she held responsible for all the tragic events. She cursed him saying that the whole of his clan of Yadavas would die fighting one another. Her words came to be true.

After the war, she retired to the forest with her husband and sister-in-law, Kunti, where they perished in a forest fire.

Kunti

Kunti was the wife of Emperor Pandu and mother of the Pandavas. She was the daughter of King Surasena, father of Vasudeva, Krishna's father. Her father gave her in adoption to his brother-in-law, King Kuntibhoja, and hence she was called Kunti. Her name at birth was Pritha, and therefore, one of the names of her son, Arjuna, is Partha.

A large part of Kunti's character has already been considered earlier when studying Karna in the Mahabharata: how she invoked the Sun God, abandoned the newborn out of a sense of shame because she was not married, how she met Karna again on the eve of the battle and revealed to him for the first time his divine birth.

Kunti accompanied her sons during their first period of exile, having escaped from the arson of the house of combustible material (lac), a dastardly attempt by the evil-minded Duryodhana.

When roaming through the forest, Bhima killed a rakshasa, Hidimba. Hidimba's sister, Hidimbi, fell in love with Bhima and wanted to marry him. Kunti gave her consent, and a child, Ghatotkacha, was born. As this boy grew up, Kunti repeatedly told him, "You are the first-born grandchild in the family. It is your duty to come to our help whenever the occasion demands." Ghatotkacha was gigantic in stature, strong, and powerful. He kept his word and fought valiantly in the Kurukshetra war. He paid the ultimate price by sacrificing his life while causing tremendous havoc in the Kaurava army.

During the period of exile, the Pandavas were sheltered by a hospitable Brahmin family in a small town, Ekachakra. Bakasura, an evil giant, was tormenting the people of the town by making demands for cartloads of food and human flesh to be supplied to him every day. Kunti came to know of this when she overheard a conversation between her host and his wife. She showed her gratitude to them and her compassion for the defenseless townspeople by persuading her son Bhima to challenge and fight the rakshasa. Bhima succeeded in killing him.

One of the great qualities of Kunti was her impartiality. The youngest two Pandavas, Nakula and Sahadeva, were her stepchildren, having been born to Pandu's other wife, Madri. They were entrusted to her care when Madri died along with Pandu. She treated her two stepsons as she did her own children.

This led to a rather strange incident. When Arjuna won the hand of Draupadi by his skill in archery at her swayamvara (marriage by choice), the Pandavas brought her to their house in Ekachakra. Approaching the house, they shouted with joy, "Mother, see what we have brought for you today!" Kunti was busy, and thinking it was food, replied, "Share it equally among you." A mother's word is in the nature of an order to be strictly obeyed. This is how Draupadi became the wife of all the Pandavas.

DRAUPADI

Draupadi was the daughter of King Drupada, ruler of Panchala. She was born along with her brother, Drishtadyumna, from the great sacrifice their father performed for progeny to kill Acharya Drona who had insulted him. She was also known as Panchali, or sometimes Krishna because she had a dark complexion.

Draupadi is the most notable among the women in the Mahabharata, and has a stellar role in the second half of the epic. She was considered the most beautiful among women in her time. How Arjuna won her at the svayamvara and how she became the wife of all the Pandavas have been described in an earlier column.

Draupadi's beauty, however, did cause problems, as she became the cynosure of many evil-minded people. One such was Kichaka, the brother-in-law of King Virata. Kichaka was physically strong and politically powerful, being commander of the army. The Pandavas had to spend the thirteenth year of their exile incognito, without being discovered. They had assumed different roles in the household of King Virata under false identities. Draupadi became chief attendant to the queen, and Bhima a cook in the royal kitchen. Kichaka began to make improper advances towards her. She complained to Bhima, and together, they hatched a plan. Kichaka was persuaded to meet her secretly at night in the dance hall where Bhima was lying in wait dressed as a woman. They fought each other, and Kichaka was killed. To keep Bhima from being recognized as the killer, it was given out that Draupadi was protected by gandharvas, semi-celestial beings who were responsible for the killing.

Draupadi's implicit trust and deep devotion to Sri Krishna are revealed on many occasions, two of which are described here. During a shameful episode where she was disrobed in public in the assembly of Kurus, when no one could come to her rescue, she mentally petitioned Lord Krishna to save her from disgrace. Sri Krishna responded promptly by sending her an inexhaustible supply of saris.

On another occasion, Duryodhana, who was hosting Sage Durvasa and his many disciples, requested the sage to visit the Pandavas during their forest exile. Duryodhana's intent was evil and malicious. He thought that Yudhishthira would not be able to satisfy them, and Durvasa, who was known for his quick, fiery temper, would pronounce a curse on the Pandavas. Early during the exile, Surya, the Sun God, pleased with Yudhishthira's worship and devotion, had gifted a magical vessel to the Pandavas. It could provide an inexhaustible supply of food, but would not provide any more for the day after Draupadi, who was the last to eat, had eaten her meal and put it away. Yudhishthira, as a dutiful host, invited Durvasa and his disciples for a meal. Draupadi was caught in a dire predicament as she had already eaten and put away the vessel. She thought intensely of Lord Krishna who appeared and asked Draupadi to fetch the vessel. A grain of rice and a piece of spinach were found sticking to the bottom. Krishna ate the tiny remnants with great relish and declared he was full and could eat no more. Meanwhile, Durvasa and his disciples had gone to the river for their customary bath. All of them suddenly experienced extreme fullness. Thinking that Yudhishthira would be insulted if they did not eat, they left in haste.

Draupadi's full acceptance and kind behavior to the two wives Arjuna had acquired during a period of voluntary separation from his family, show her magnanimity. One was Ulupi, a princess of the Nagas, and the other was Subadhra, sister of Krishna. In another episode, when she meets Krishna's wife, Satyawati, Draupadi shows her intelligence by giving wise advice on how to keep husbands happy. After the war was over, Drona's son, Aswatthaman, commits a heinous act by killing all of Draupadi's sons when they were asleep by setting their tents on fire. Arjuna was able to capture him and was intent on killing him. Draupadi shows her capacity for forgiveness by reminding Arjuna that he was his teacher's son, and pleads that his life be spared.

