

## **WOMEN, SELFHOOD AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: A STUDY OF EPIC OF MAHABHARATA**

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**Abstract:** The epic of Mahabharata is an important and as old as 4-8 BCE that narrates about the Kuru dynasty, Kurukshetra War and also the philosophical and devotional aspects of life cycle. The epic has central contribution of women in all aspect of life. Here the question is how do we locate women in the social institutional framework and what is their selfhood in the whole epic. This paper tries to study this issues with theoretico-analytical framework of socio-anthropological, indological and feminist perspective to analyse location of women in the social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, caste system/varna system, education, polity and economy along with existence of customs, traditions, organisations etc. to be strictly followed by women and at the same time analyse how women's selfhood is evolved within the structure of power and authority throughout the epic of Mahabharata.

**Keywords:** Women, Selfhood, Power, Social Institutions, Mahabharata, India.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The epic Mahabharata is an important epic in the world and as old as 4-8 BCE. Mahabharata is not the product of one or a few authors, but the results of the combined efforts of poets of many generations. The epic narrates the Kuru dynasty, the Kurukshetra War and also philosophical and devotional aspects of life cycle. The epic is about the struggle of succession for the Kuru dynasty of Hastinapura. The fight of succession is between the two branches of the Kuru family. One branch is of Kauravas, headed by Duryodhana and the second branch is of Pandavas headed by Yudhishthira. The fight also raises intricate questions of family-kinship, caste-acquired status, women hood-lineage, friendship- enmity, interface of right and duties etc. The epic culminated with war and end of the Kshatriya dynasty. It is also said that from this period onward there is a start of the period of Hindu age of Kali Yuga, where the value system is deteriorated.

The spread of the Mahabharata and other epics is through the Hindu religious and cultural practices to south-east Asia began around the middle of the millennium BC through extensive mercantile or trading contact with Burma, Cambodia, and other countries, partly by political conquests, and also through emigration of Indian colonists to this part of the world, and latter to rest of the world (Sen, 2005). A striking feature of Mahabharata is the unity of Indian culture which is presented with sympathy and pride, and a gradually growing conception of a unified Indian culture.

The epic contributes to the 'formation of code, the self-sacrifice of prince Bhishma, the truthfulness and forgiveness of prince Yudhishthira, the love of justice

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and the desire to protect the weak by the strong Pandava brothers, and the generosity of king Karna on the side of the Kurus have provided ideals to countless Indians for many generations. The epics also portray some remarkable women, like queen Draupadi and queen Gandhari, who provided examples of not merely chastity and devotion to their husbands but also of wisdom and justice. There are women like Queens Satyawati and Kunti who were known for their bravery. There are other women characters like Madri, Amba, Ambalika Ganga etc. who are important to be considered as strong characters in the epic, otherwise the Indian women are depicted as powerless and oppressed ones.

The present paper focuses firstly on socio-cultural and political status of women in the social institutions, secondly highlights the central role of women and thirdly present strong selfhood of women on the basis of Epic of Mahabharata.

### **STATUS OF WOMEN IN MAHABHARATA**

The approach to this study is with socio-anthropological, indological and feminist perspective to analyse the social institutions of family, marriage, kinship, caste system/varna system, education, polity and economy along with customs, traditions, organisations etc. and to analyse evolution of selfhood of women in the structure of power and authority. This study is based on the primary ideas of Kapadia (1958), Uberoi (1993) and Gilligan (1982) to understand social institutions, power and authority. There is a need of such type of analysis for understanding the newer forms of feminist work (Lynch, 1990).

To start with, it is seen that the identity of every woman in Mahabharata she is of a mother, wife, daughter or sister of someone or other although they have individual identities like Queen, warrior, saint, poetess, or etc. When we look at an education institution it is clear that women in the epic were kept away from the formal education unlike princess or kings. Rather they were informally taught feminine education in arts like dancing and singing instead of warship or politics (Altekar, 1978). This is so because in varna or system, the social status is important for women's social or public life, level of empowerment and also for her family composition. The social structure of society did not allow social interaction of girls with different varnas backward. This was more applicable in the spheres of education and skill attainment for the girls. The Brahmin girls used to get education privately and not with the girls of other varnas due to varna or caste rigidity. There are girls who were considered to be the intellectuals of that time like that of Krupi and Devayani. In case of Kshatriya girls or women, there were warriors like Satyabhama who could make her place in statecraft or warfare.

When we see women in marriage institution it is found that, long time before Mahabharata, there was freedom for both men and women for sexual relationships with anybody of their choice but in latter stages this practice was stopped and

marriages were solemnized. In the later times women's freedom to marriage by choice (swayamvar) or divorce or remaining unmarried was lost. The practice of right to choose her husband as the privilege of Kshatriya women (Wadly, 1998) was taken over by fathers by various logics and politics. But it was the duty of the father to marry off their daughter at right time. The epic shows the predominance of men like in any patriarchal society.

It is seen that marriages mainly took place by kidnapping, paying bride price, mutual consent etc which were commonly practiced though there were criticism for it. Polygamous marriages seems to be quite common and to mention that there is also one case of polyandrous marriages in the epic (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Vana Parva, 206-14 and Mahabharata, Adi parva). Speaking about the social structure of the then time, the epics shows a hardening of the caste system. But there are also markable number of characters or heroes or heroines from the lower social order or caste of the society (ibid). As a practice Brahmin and Kshatriya women were not allowed to remarry after the death of their husbands rather they were encouraged to upbringing up of her children and continue to live with their in-laws with respect. The other two varnas allowed her to divorce or remarry.

The epic mentions practice of having compulsorily son for succession through or religious duty. The literature of epic also throws light on the process and practice of procuring son by adopting, buying and niyog (son from elder brother). But at the same time the birth of daughters was also welcomed. In the family institution, woman as a wife enjoyed respect in term of religious spheres. The participation of women/wife in the rituals can only complete the religious activities. The epic also mentions management of domestic finance and valuable as a long listed duties of a wife.

In the last cycle of the life that is retirement or vanaprastha, women generally accompanied their husbands to retire to the forests, like that of Satyavati, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Draupadi or can stay back with their children, like Subhadra (Ayyer, 2006).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SELFHOOD**

Traditionally Indian women have, in special cases, experienced the four stages of life-studentship, family life, community service, and religious retirement- a cycle intended to allow the full development of the selfhood or personality (Pandey, 2002) by virtue of being in the social institutions of family, marriage, kinship, caste system/varna system, religion, education, polity, economy and etc. There have been women, who were great teachers, administrators, queens, warriors, spiritual leaders, but they were rare. In general, women do not moved beyond the second stage, family life. Writing on Hindu women, Alien (cited in Varma, 1995) 'reduces the fourfold goal of moksha, dharma, Artha and Karma to a dialogue between moksha and dharma,

between the renouncer and the man-in-the world. Similarly, he argues that the Hindu woman is be viewed on the parameter of purity, goddess, productive, obedient or honored one as a feminine character of girl, wife, widow or mother etc.

Verma (1995) described the conception of femininity found in the dominant Indian tradition where an analysis of the notion of personhood shows that the traditional perspective on women deprives her not only to many valuable roles and experiences, but also to her personhood too. There is a need from the feminist philosophers to reflect on modernity and self of the women. Although Benhabib (1999) shows “commitment in viewing people as socially situated, interpersonally bonded, and embodied, she is also committed to the feasibility of rational philosophical justification of universal moral norms” (Meyers, 2010). Benhabib’s perspective of selfhood will supplement our objectives of study since selfhood is indispensable to feminist emancipatory objectives.

In this study few women characters of the epic are chosen to match the objectives of the study. Amongst the main lead characters are Satyawati, Gandhari, Kunti, and Draupadi but contextual references are made to the supporting characters like Ganga, Ambika, Ambalika, Madri etc. to reflect on the social institutions, socio-cultural and political issues and selfhood of women of the era.

## **POWERFUL SELFHOOD OF WOMEN**

The women in the epic of Mahabharata are knowledgeable in politics, statecraft, warship, diplomacy etc for achieving their ultimate objectives. They are respected for their power to lead, catalyse and manage the proceedings of the kingdom.

### **1. Queen Satyawati**

Satyavati was an adopted daughter of Dusharaj, a chief of fishermen on the banks of Yamuna river. According to the tale it is also said that she was a daughter of the king Vasu of Chedi dynasty. But due to the spill of curse she was turned into a fish called Adrika. The fish origin or fish like smell and the fishing community affiliation earned her name called as Matsyagandha.

Satyavati’s father, Dusharaj used to ferry the sages or rishis across the banks of the river Yamuna. In this work Satyawati also assisted her father. While ferrying on the banks, she meet sage Parashar who converted her fishy smell into musky fragrance by his divine power. Because of the smell she was also named as Gandhavati. Soon she became victim to the lustful sage Parashar. But with her intelligence she demanded three wishes to be fulfilled by the sage before mating. First wish was of keeping her virginity intact, second to keep her young and her fragrance eternal and last, to make her son, a great sage like him. Soon she had a son Vyasa out of the wedlock who was fathered by sage Parashar. This son became the famous sage, Vyas.

Latter Satyavati, met king Santanu of Hastinapur on the banks of the river. The king fell in love with the fragranced girl and asked her to marry him. Satyavati had beauty with brain and this time she demanded through her father that her son only will succeed the throne instead of present prince Bhishma, son of Ganaga. King agreed to the demand of the fragranced and beautiful girl.

Satyavati married to king and had two sons named Chitragada and Vichitravirya. The tale says that Chitragada was killed and latter Vichitravirya was crowned as king. Prince Bhishma administered the kingdom on behalf of the king on the command of Satyavati until Vichitravirya grew up. Young Vichitravirya married Ambika and Ambalika, princesses of Kashi-Kosala. This Princesses were won by princes Bhishma in a marriage choice ceremony but he did not marry due to the promise of bachelorhood given to his father. The young king Vichitravirya died of tuberculosis without giving successor to the throne. Queen Satyavati showed her cleverness by asking prince Bhishma to do levirate marry with the widows of Vichitravirya and become king. Bhishma rejected her request reminding of his promised. He suggested that a Brahmin will be suitably good for niyoga to get heir for the throne.

This time again queen Satyavati secured her lineage with the help of his own son, sage Vyas by taking prince Bhishma into confidence by her victim tale with sage Parashar. Satyavati persuade sage Vyasa to have niyoga with his brother's widows in the name of the dynasty and protection of the kingdom. Sayavati secured two grandsons, Dhritarashtra (blind person) and Pandu (pale person) through niyoga from son Vyasa. Princes Dhritarashtra and Pandu became fathers of the Kauravas and Pandavas respectively. Pandu become king but died of weak health in the young age. Latter prince Dhritarashtra was crowned as king. After completing her task of making king from her lineage, Satyavati went to the forest for penance and died there.

## **2. Queen Gandhari**

King Dhritarashtra married to princess Gandhari. The beautiful queen Gandhari dedicated her entire life blindfolding her eyes because king was blind. She was a foresighted queen who could see the social implications of such types of marriages at the political and administrative level. This dedication was to protect her personally and socially from all the social stigmas and troubles.

Latter she become mother of hundred sons, Kauravas. In the due course of time, there was fight with Pandavas, son of king Pandu for succession of throne of Kuru dynasty. Gandhari sympathises with the Pandavas because they were right. Gandhari criticises her husband for being weak with their sons. She played an important role as negotiated in the war. This is evident from her noteworthy talk of negative impact of war to princess Dhritarashtra (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata,

Udyoga Parva:129). Gandhari also tries to discourage Duryodhana for fighting war against the Pandavas when Krishna went for his peace mission to Pandavas. But with the effort of Krishna also the war was not stopped. But Gandhari was accused for supporting war and was treated as a villain (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Sabha Parva: 75).

Queen Gandhari believed in religion, righteousness and duty of the king for inheriting the throne. Gandhari blessings to Duryodhana before proceeding for war are important where she says, 'wherever is dharma there is victory' (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Stri Parva:16-25). Her reactions to war are also intelligent and the reasons for holding Dhritarashtra and Krishna responsible for war are reasonable. She has the knowledge of the rules of righteous in warfare so she curses Bhima for hitting Duryodhana on his thigh which is against the rules. She was a person of knowledge of not only peace and war but also of inheritance. So she advised Duryodhana to share half of the kingdom with the Pandavas. This shows her principles of life are based on the idea of religion and Justice.

### 3. Queen Kunti

Queen Kunti was wife of King Pandu who died untimely. Kunti's life has amazing turn since her birth. Kunti was given in gift by her father to King Kuntibhoj. As a young girl she was sent to serve sage Durvasa, an eccentric sage. Prince Kunti was blessed for her devotion by the sage. She wanted to experiment with the blessing given by the sage so she called god Surya or Sun. While experimenting with the blessing, she felt prey to the lust of god Sun's (Bhattacharya, 2004). But she was very wise girl to negotiate even in the victimhood. She made sure before mating with sun that her virginity is integral even after childbirth and the child born should be similar to Sun's glory. Soon she had a son, Karna, from Surya which she abundant as illegitimate child. As per the blessing, she was actually described virgin and as a virtuous girl at the time of marriage fixing ceremony which was contested by Panini and later by Patanjali (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Adi Parva :111). Kunti was married to king Pandu. This marriage was solemnised by paying bride/prince price for which she faced social criticism (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 112). Later King Pandu also brought second wife, Madri, sister of Salya, the king of Madra (ibid) but could not get sons for throne.

So Pandu cajoled Kunti to get children from others by saying it is a sanctioned custom of the time. Kunti gave sons to the king with the help of the blessing given by the sage Durvasa. Later King Pandu died and Madri held herself responsible for Pandu's death. She decided to become sati, which is a reflection of practice of social norms. According to sages Madri believed that Kunti will do justice to all their sons in sharing kingdom. After the death of king Pandu and her only friend queen Madri, queen Kunti and her sons suffered poverty and insecurity. But Kunti guided and protected her sons from the deceitful plots of the Kauravas in the exile,

imposed by kauravas. There was no support from anyone except her nephew, Krishna and her half brother-in-law, Vidura.

She brought up her sons with the sense of responsibility and sharing in the exile. Here Kunti is held responsible for asking to share even princes Draupadi, as wife of the five Pandava brothers (Ganguli, 1990-92, *Adi Parva*: 190, 195). She was wise to house her sons in the potter family instead of Brahmin family in the period of exile to gain field experience from all strata of the society as education. She had the capacity to take decision on her own. She used her political vision for making alliances even in the exile.

After completing the exile when Pandavas were not given due share in the kingdom than she insisted Yudhisthira to fight as a Kshatriya for getting justice. But she stayed in Hastinapur to remind the king Dritharashtra of the injustice. She says fighting battle is not good or profitable or nor it brings happiness. She adds that even victory in the battle is uncertain. But she says one has to fight for justice. She was angry and did not compromise with the peace mission of Krishna for stopping the war. She said, that I am not much hurt by the loss of kingdom or by the defeat at dice or with the exile of my sons but I am much hurt by the humiliation of Draupadi in the sabha. She says to Krishna who comes with peace mission that if you would have read the Vedas than you would have known the actual meaning of it. It says that you need to fight for justice (Kawathekar, 1956).

She had good knowledge of statecraft she says, a good king needs to first conquer himself through control on senses, anger and lust so that it definitely conquer his counsellors and enemies. She also says that good king should do his duty and benefit the pupil with good time and salvation for himself. She also talked about the diplomacy or koota neeti of the king. She says king should make all persons his own by sweet words, giving gifts or by force. She also reminded of good governance with rules of penalties (Danda Neeti) and sanctions for action after consulting with learnt people.

Kunti guided her sons along the path of religion (Dharma). But for upholding dharma, she pleaded son Karna to pardon her for abducting him and requested him to make join his brothers for fight for justice, which he disapproved. This shows her strategy to acknowledge Karna as her son at a right time to show his worth to enforce dharma. She rightly foresighted that war is the only means for justice to regain honor and the lost kingdom for her family. She was person of intelligence and moral strength who knew the time for vanaprastha when all the time of pleasure and happy was in the life.

#### **4. Queen Draupadi**

Princess Draupadi was daughter of king Panchala, Drupada. She was considered to be bold, beautiful, courageous and fearless girls. Her outspoken and unwillingness

to surrender in front of strength is evident time to time in the epic. She always longed for inherited social status instead of acquired social status of a person. This is experienced in the event of marriage by choice ceremony, when she insulted Karna, a Archer belonging to lower caste for his unworthiness to participate in the ceremony. But on the other hand she very boldly expressed her desire to marry Arjuna for his skill of archery. The ceremony lead her to polyandrous marriage relegating her status to wife of the five Pandava brothers. Her status meted to lowly treatment is evident in the game of dice (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Sabha Parva 66-68). She did not oppose the marriage but succeed in performing her responsibility as a wife to five brothers by giving sons to each husband as a dutiful wife.

She was a leading member in the extended family to manage the household affair of income, expenditure and the staff. She was the person who discussed all the important issues with the husbands before arriving at the decision. Because of her quality of welfarism and effectiveness in management she was often asked for advice on the important issues (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata. iii.233, 238, 241).

Apart from her domestic role she had knowledge in politics, statecraft and laws. This is evident, when she was lost in the game of dice to Kauravas by Pandavas. Her sense of pride and esteem remains unconquered even in the circumstances of insult because of her presence of mind and knowledge of laws. She questioned Yudhistira for summoning her to court when they were indulging in the gambling game and longing for women, which is illegal. She also reminds him that he is not supposed to decide on behalf of her other four husbands. The questions raised by her had the basis of dharmashastra (religious text), Rajya (state) and Raja (King) for maintaining her dignity and respect (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 185-187). Hence based on the illegality of their conduct she boldly says "how can Kauravas own her ? I am a free woman by all means."

She also did not want to take undue favour of three booms given by the King Dhristarashtra when he intervened in the dice game to rescue her from insult. In her first boom Draupadi asked freedom of her husbands and in second boom, restoration of lost wealth of Pandavas. But she refused to state the third boom, saying that, three booms can be granted only by the Brahmins and not by the Kshatriyas. This simply shows her knowledge of dharma and courage to fight odds. In the next thirteen years of exile, Draupadi was restless to take revenge of her insult in the dice game. She always reminded her husbands of the dishonestful eviction of them from the kingdom. When she came to know about the peace mission of Krishna she was angry. She encouraged Pandavas to wage a war for the honor and justice. Pandavas won for justice. But there was death of all the Kauravas and sons of Draupadi. Lastly, she was made a queen of Hastinapur.

Draupadi looked after Gandari with affection being an elderly women of the family inspite of insult and pain given by her sons. She was very accommodative



for others but no one amongst her five husbands cared and loved for her. She was alone and unprotected in her entire life (Bhattacharya, Pradip 2004). The tale says that, she is the cause of all misfortunes or wars in the Kuru family. It was also prophesied that by her birth there will be annihilation of the Kshatriyas or Yadav dynasty (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 166).

### **ROLE OF WOMEN IN MAHABHARATA**

The women like Satyawati, Gandhari, Kunti and Draupati gave lesson on politics, statecraft, diplomacy and war in the times of need. They were part of the court functioning and were not just sitting behind and watching their men doing something. Women were powerful, influential, decision-makers, or director of events and decided the fate of men and their generations to follow.

It is clear from the character of queen Satyawati that she used her beauty to succeed to become a queen. Satyawati who belonged to fishing caste, that is, serving caste or backward caste marries on her terms and conditions to a king or Kshatriya. Here we see that the marriages were practiced across the varna. In this case it is seen that the personal quality of the girl was important than her community identity. Further she played politics with King Santanu by her spell bound beauty to dethrone crowned prince Bhishma. She used deceitful ideas and elimination game for gaining power. She took help of her illegitimate son for procuring heir for dynasty in the name of dharma. It is seen that how she played politics to ensure her lineage succeeds the throne. She is criticized for the blind ambition to goals. Satyawati was praised for her beauty and cleverness. Satyawati is seen as “the embodiment of the driving force of womanhood, with motherly ambition blinding her vision at every turn” (Ayyer, 2006).

Gandhari is praised for her morality of becoming blind along with the king as a mark of loyalty. She always wanted dharma to prevail. She urged her sons to make peace with Pandavas by sharing half kingdom with them. But when she lost all her sons she used her spiritual power to curse Krishna for carrying on the war. Her curse resulted in ensuring the destruction of the Kshatriya or Yadava dynasty.

Kunti also had spiritual power to procure heir for the Pandavas lineage. She is an ideal and dotting mother respected by sons but did not go against established social norms (Bhattacharya, 2004). According to sages, even Madri respected her for the ideas of justice and equality for treating the sons. She was also not in haste to acknowledge Karna as her son to prevent the unreligious forces from attacking her. She advice to follow religion (dharma) to fight for justice. She was foresighted to start kingdom under the guidance of Krishna. Kunti spoke of the secret of good and prosperous governance by stating, “He who conquers his own self first, taking it for a foe, will not seek in vain to conquer his counselors and enemies afterwards ” (Kawathekar, 1956) . She also says there is no governance without penalties. Kunti

says battle is not good, it does not bring happiness nor victory is certain. But it is necessary to fight for justice.

Draupadi was bold and beautiful women of the epic. She had courage to give back on various occasion like that in the dice game to king Dhristarashta. She give back to king saying that only the Brahmins can ask for three boons and not a Kshatriya. Her questions in the courts are important showing her knowledge of dharmashastra to maintain her respect and dignity (Ganguli, 1990-1992, Mahabharata, Adi Parva, 185-87). It was because of her knowledge and presence of mind she could secure freedom from the Kauravas. She did not allow her husbands to forget even in exile that how she was insulted in the court and how they were dishonestly dispossessed from the kingdom.

The position of women during the age of the epics is seen to be strong in socio-cultural and political spheres and not otherwise. Women were aware about their rights and duties in the life cycle. The epic shows the difficult combination of dignity, compromise and reconciliation for the family, marriage, caste, social traditions/norms, education, polity, community, state, etc. Women in the epic were referred to their state of existence. Women were caught in situation accidentally which were considered immoral and not for physical wants. So they were virgins girls at the psychologically level. They were independent women who enjoyed identity of their own. They know how to overcome their ego to reach a higher self. M. Esther Harding (1935) says psychologically virgin is what she is because what she does is true. Naomi Wolf says these women were the celebration of women as “sexually powerful magical beings” and were women of substance and leaders of men.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has modestly tried to view the socio-cultural and political status of women, and their strong selfhood in the central role of the Epic Mahabharata showing their relationship with power and authority creating benchmark for themselves in the history. This paper studied the issues with theoretico-analytical framework of socio-anthropological, indological and feminist perspective to analyse location of women in the social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, caste system/ varna system, education, polity and economy along with existence of customs, traditions, organisations etc. which were strictly followed by women. This helped to analyse evolution of women’s selfhood within the structure of power and authority throughout the epic of Mahabharata.

It is found that all these women characters of the epic were willfully powerful and wielded influence in their own manner. The women in the epic had knowledge of politics and were controlling political power. We can see the character of Satyawati as political and blind folded for ambition. Gandhari been praised for her sacrifice and idea of justice. Kunti was considered to be the women of knowledge in

statecraft. Draupadi seen selflessly and effectively managing all her responsibilities and fighting for respect.

The epic of Mahabharata had multi-version due to which there is problem of clear social picture. Since the epic under study has constantly interpreted and being contested by others with their divergent versions of events, voices and relationships. But still right perspective to rethink on many crucial issues and contextualise it contemporarily especially for women is needed.

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