

## **A Sociological Study of Women's 'expected virtues' and sufferings with reference to Mahabharata**

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Mahabharata. The word remains very synonymous to our childhood and deeply etched in our memories. As we grow older we are able to speculate that this grandiloquent saga has so much more to offer than the intense emotional sentiments and was actually a reservoir of wisdom and profound philosophy. Vrinda Nabar (2005) in her article 'Whose "Mahabharat"? A point of view' wrote that the epic contained labyrinthine plots and has been a hunting ground for sociology, literature, anthropology, cultural history and feminist studies.

### **Central Concern**

The principal concern of Mahabharata is the relationship of the self with the self and with the other. It sows the seed for 'politics', 'gendered' society witnessed by posterity. The universality of the themes explored in the literature speaks volumes of the critical, reflective enquiry, it makes into human condition. Mahabharata contains the 'Bhagwad Gita' that is the religious bedrock of the Hindus. It espouses values and ethics and shows Man the 'Dharma' to live life. The longest poem, ten times the size of Iliad and Odyssey, dwells upon the intricate human relations in the form of political alliances and gendered cleavages existent then and now. The paper addresses three main issues:

1. How 'women' bear misery and pain because of her gender.
2. How was pativrata dharma the highest virtue for women.
3. How did women's change of "self" go through layers of unfurling in the epic.

### **I. Women as 'sufferers'**

The epic is filled with fascinating tales of sages and seers who had renounced all worldly pleasures and were deeply respected for it. But if we are talking of gender disparity one has to mention the story of Vrddhakanya, an ascetic woman who was forced to believe that being a brahmacarini was not substantial enough to occupy a place in heaven or achieve enlightenment. She would have to marry and though she found the idea quite implausible she was compelled to find a husband and give in to the rigid moralities of society. She wedded a

young *rishi* Praksrngavat who had agreed to be her husband for only a day on the grounds that she would give him half of her penance. Therefore, a content ascetic was coerced into following conventions only because of the fact that she was a woman and marriage was her dharma. But here Praksrngavat falls in love with her and is devastated when the next day she gives her penance as per the deal and dies proving that though she had to bend and oblige her enlightenment state shone through and it was the man who was actually weak and loses his ascetic fervor. Thus it could be said that men make the laws and impose them on women to hide their feebleness and nature of dependency.

The Mahabharata documents the steady journey of repression and subjugation of women. It all begins with the feelings of jealousy a son had towards his mother. The tale of Mamata and Dirghatamas unfolds when Dirghatamas is still a foetus in Mamata's womb and attempts to stop his uncle from advancing amorous behaviour towards his mother. Brhaspati, his uncle, out of rage curses him to be born blind. This was the cause of his lifelong insecurity towards women. Dirghatamas's wife deserts him for being useless which ultimately leads him to curse all women to marry, be faithful to one man (as women used to be free and liberated) and prevented widows from getting married.

The concept of restraining for women from having multiple relationships with men was probably to establish the knowledge of paternity and trace lineage of the sons. Therefore illegitimate children were a bane to women who would lose face and status in society. The early seeds, hence, were sowed. The example of Kunti could be stated here who gave birth to Karna had to abandon him because she was an unwed mother and live with the guilt of deserting her first born for the rest of her life. Another tale of signifying the emergence of patriarchy is of Goddess Aditi who as a mother refused food to Buddha till all her children were fed. Buddha, tired and hungry, was enraged and cursed her pain in her womb during the birth of her son. Henceforth, all mothers bear the pain and suffer during childbirth.

The aforementioned examples prove the fact that chastity and loyalty have forever been "expected virtues" of women. The 'fairer sex' was responsible for maintaining 'order' in the society. Manusmriti, suggested that men born of higher 'caste' and 'status' could marry women from lower social categories as the latter would undergo positional change, resulting in cleansing and ritual purity that had been associated with women of lower castes since ages. This kind of ideological underpinnings had a far-reaching impact on the social order in India. Dowry, bride -burning and lower absorption rate in the paid labour market are a fall-out of such ideological undercover. Emancipation or empowerment of women, when defined, seems an obscure impediment in bringing about concrete reforms for them in most countries. It might be ascertained that women have experienced liberation in one way or the other but the 'differential liberation' experienced by the second sex across caste, class, race and ethnicity in India hinges us to the fact that "women were empowered before the birth of civilization, now empowerment comes with a caveat..."

*In that country*

*where doors are adorned*

*with flowers and mango-leaves,*

*the houses decorated  
 with lighted lamps,  
 in that country  
 the woman is still a slave.  
 Where Sita had to pass  
 the ordeal by fire  
 to prove she was a pativrata,  
 Ahilya to sacrifice herself  
 to Indra's sexual desire,  
 and Draupadi was divided up  
 among five men,  
 the woman of that country  
 still remains a slave...*

- The Slave by Hira Bansode (1939)

## II. Women, and Pativrata as Dharma

Indian culture since time immemorial has placed great prominence on *pativrata dharma*, the highest form of virtue for a woman. As Shalini Shah in her article "On Gender, Wives and Pativratas" reiterates that the transition of wife from patni to pativrata is evident in the portrayal of Draupadi, one of the central characters in the Mahabharata. She terms this process of transition as 'pativratization'. She writes that 'a fearless and wise Draupadi with a mind of her own is ingeniously introduced by her husband Yudhishthira as both pandita and pativrata. Thus, to worship husband as God was what defined pativrata dharma and it was commonly believed that there was no protector the equal of one's husband, nor any joy greater than him and the ideal way of life for a woman was to sacrifice everything and take refuge in her husband considered equivalent to heaven. The husband was discerned to be the sole repository of his wife's happiness and it was unfathomable that she would seek it elsewhere. This unquestioned passive faith was, as Shah (2012) puts it, "an ingenious ideology which eschewed the necessity of applying physical coercion over women in an oppressive patriarchal household, which would have been more difficult to establish and maintain. Instead, this ideology was used to elicit conformity with oppressive norms on a psychological plane". The pativrata stri was also expected to render services to her husband's family as well.

When we are on the subject on the patriarchy its most pure form was observed when Draupadi had to take all the Pandavas as her husbands. Fraternal polyandry, as was the case, delineated a shift towards patriarchy with Bhishma rationalizing her set of affairs and the other wise men like Guru Dronacharya choosing to stay silent. Draupadi was betrayed by her husbands, used as a pawn in the battle for the throne, lost and publicly mortified and shamed. Yet she was

expected to continue with her stri-dharma and had to coexist with her husbands' other wives without churning any feelings of malice or resent.

The label 'second sex' was attributed to women by Simon de Beauvoir. The name itself goes on to speak 'volumes' that life for the 'fairer sex' has always been under marginalization and subservience. "Expected qualities" of women have always been defined in definite terms. Adjectives such as polite, docile, obedient, caring, affectionate, motherly, are associated with 'women'. The longest epic of the world too, reiterates this philosophy in terms of the characterization it has etched. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women's autonomy is paraphrased in terms of relational autonomy. They are considered as bridges between relations, 'builders' of bonds and 'sustainers' of tradition. The 'womb' not only holds life, but carries the seeds of custom that will take birth on the remnants of the 'bygones'.

### **III. Metamorphosis and Social Perpetuation**

The process of Metamorphosis or transformation has a critical meaning in Mahabharata signifying polarized gendered roles rooted in patriarchy. At first glance, we see all characters following prescribed gendered rules yet as the story unfolds there are instances where women become men and men become women or animals or rocks due to circumstantial conditions. If we take the example of Amba, a woman abducted by Bhishma for his brother Vicitravirya, and later on turned away by her lover King Salva, as he doubted her chastity, she turned into a hermit and lived many years alone in a forest to arrange a boon that would reborn her as a man who would kill Bhishma. She then organized a large fire and burnt herself in it. Half of her metamorphosed into a river and the other half was reborn in the palace of King Drupad. Born a girl, she was brought up as Sikhandin, a boy skilled in warfare, and a secret known exclusively to her parents.

To flow with the regular societal conventions Sikhandin was wedded to a princess and it was she who discovered the lie and made her father declare war against Drupad. Sikhandin escaped into a forest and had an encounter with Yaksha Sthutanakarna who hearing her sad plight agreed to exchange his maleness with her. Sikhandin returns home a male and eventually in the war of Kurukshetra kills Bhishma with Arjuna.

It is very important to clarify the importance of metamorphosis here. Amba, disallowed by circumstances to follow the conventional ideals of womanhood and despite her righteousness and honesty, rejected and misused by the males, exposed their careless attitudes towards women. This realization made her patient, a virtue not generally seen in men. She out of perseverance excelled first in ascetism which made her capable of writing her own fate and second by rebirth became a warrior beating her enemy in the battle.

Amba's transformation from female to male is indicative of the true nature of society where each sex contains its inherent restrictions and she grapples with the idea that antagonism and ferocity are synonymous to the male form. Regardless of the fact that Sikhandin was a fearless warrior she was forced to live the lie of being a man.

The epic offers a number of examples of women being punished especially by the ascetics who often inflicted curses to control uncustomary or defiant behaviour. Apsaras, or the damsels of the Gods, were frequently cursed simply because of being beautiful and usually transformed into less enchanting guises. Adrika was cursed and altered to a fish and in this form gave birth to Satyavati who later on became the queen of Shantanu, the Kuru king of Hastinapur, mother of Vyas who authored Mahabharata, and the great grandmother of the Pandava and Kaurava princes. Varga, Saurabheyi, Samici, Vudvuda and Lata were all Apsaras cursed to change into crocodiles for a century. Rambha, another Apsara, was cursed to be a rock for ten thousand years by Vishwamitra, a Brahmarishi, when she had disturbed his penance as ordered by Indra.

These curses or punishments were actual reflections of male dominance and aggressive patriarchal mindset. The stories of metamorphosis underline how agonizing it is for people to be captivated in bodies which curtailed their fulfillment of desires.

### Conclusion

The stage of summary becomes the most arduous task. Women have been the structure and agent of various discourses. However, the work is never complete. The epic symbolizes women's power but does not keep the fact latent that they are the sufferers as well. The fact they can nurture life itself becomes a curse when such nurturing has to be justified within the defined precincts of virtues. On a similar note, their voices remain unheard or subdued when they exercise their will to topple traditional jurisdiction of authority. Women are often, the vassals of the dominant sex and find greater approval if they respect the space.

On a positive and brighter note, it may be said that they are an assertive voice in the space of planning and execution of decisions within the family and beyond. All the women discussed here had a will, power and influence of their own, each reacting to patriarchal situations in their own way. They demand respect for their unyielding strength, individuality and determination to seek justice and vengeance for all the wrong doings. The Mahabharata carry immense weight and reverence in our society. The women in the epic are known for their expressions of fortitude, courage and multilayered qualities.

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