

Position of Women in India during the Period of the *Mahābhārata*

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Abstract

The position of women in any period or any society is an important aspect. It determines the dignity and status of women we also comprehend the role and autonomy of women by their place in any social structure. Education Socialization, political participation etc are decisive factors for women empowerment. Modesty, loyalty, morality etc are ethical concept that makes human lead life culturally refined. The Mahābhārata is an epitome of Indian culture and civilization that speaks on human roles and attitude. The great Epic depicted numerous women characters in the frame of contemporary norms and values. It also prescribes defining traits and normative values of women. It had some stereotypical desires that wanted to be reflected by the deeds and actions of women. In modern terminology we define the Indian society during the period of the Mahābhārata was patriarchal. But a comprehensive study leads us to see numerous positive sign among such dark clouds that inspires the present generation. This paper is an attempt to unveil the position of women in India during the period of the Mahābhārata.

Keywords- *Autonomy, Socialisation, Normative values, Patriarchal, Position of Women*

Introduction

The position of women in a period or in a socio-cultural context tremendously depends on some factors or parameters, through which we can generally measure or calculate the position or place of women in any socio-cultural set up. Such parameters are dignity of women, female education, women empowerment and place of women in a particular period or era. It is our understanding of the defining criteria of positive role and space of women in any social set up. It is a comprehensive phenomenon of modern day. As our focus area is the Mahabharata and the position of women in India during the Mahabharata period, so it is important to study on women in that period and establish the points.

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The Mahābhārata is an encyclopaedic study of human civilization concerning with values and moralities, classification of virtues and vices and epitome of cultural integration with tradition and spirituality. It is not a book in traditional sense of the term, rather a great epic concerning to the overall history of interactive values, ethics and cultural transaction of that period. The plot and events of the epic is arranged in an artistic manner through which we can estimate the values and social system of that period. Especially the characterization, human, Divine and supernatural entities leave knowledge for us.

Although the Mahabharata is a versatile study as already mentioned. The narration of events is unique in its nature. It is not a mere spiritual book, rather a wide document of contemporary socio-cultural parlance. Here we are striving to find out the position of women in India during the Mahabharata period. The woman in present scenario of India is very different in comparison with the period of the Mahabharata. Today, society is much more evolved and changed due to the structural changing of society. Women are brought back to engage in societal and external issues. The society in the age of the Mahabharata was totally different from the social structure, today we have. So, such comparison is not attractive. Rather it is to be focused on the position of women in India during the Mahabharata period.

Indian society during the Mahabharata era was much more ancient and structurally patriarchal. Women were not like today's women in India. It was natural due to the form, structure and value system of the then society. Although women were under the supervision and guidance of men, yet they enjoy noticeable rights and freedom.

In the epic era, women were allowed and permitted to enter into the 'Vanaprastha Āshrama' or repair to the forest for a life of austerity and meditation. References are there that soon after the death of king Paṇḍu, his grand-mother Satyabati along with her two other daughters-in-law repaired to a forest for practising austerities and died there. After Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇas demise, too, Satyabhama and his other queens went to forest and practised severe penance. Women are shown as very helpful to their husbands. Ghandhari, Kuntī, Draupadī, Bidhulā et. al are worth mentioning. Despite the difference between the nature of works of men and women both are co-operative to each other.

Mahābhārata has marked references in women's education. They enjoy the freedom in education to a great extent. It is found that Kuntī is well versed in the use of Atharva Vedic mantras.⁽¹⁾ Other than this Sulabhā, Vidulā, Draupadī et. al, are learned women. Sulabhā, the Brahmavādinī, was a great scholar in various branches of knowledge and learning such as yoga, Samādhi, mokṣa etc.⁽²⁾ Mādhavi, the daughter of king Yayāti, was very skilful in music or Gāndharva vidya.⁽³⁾

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The Mahābhārata provides us the pre- marital activities of women under the vigilance of parents and the girls were very helpful to their parents. Satyabati, the daughter of Dhivar used to work as ferry-women in Yamuna River.⁽⁴⁾ Maharṣi Kanva also imposed the responsibility to Śakuntalā before going to collect fruits.⁽⁵⁾ Besides, Draupadī was a sole responsible woman to whom Pāndavas totally relied upon in domestic and some other important affairs.⁽⁶⁾ These prove that women were considered reliable and trustworthy to their parents or guardians in domestic life that was a major duty of the than women.

Generally people of the Mahābhārata era considered women's ultimate duty is to serve her husband and family. Gāndhari, was that typical woman who dedicated her life to serve and give pleasure to Kurus clan. Draupadī's teaching on the features of a Patibrata (devotional) woman clearly indicates her commitment to devotion and religious virtues. In the epic period, the women members of the royal family were well versed in socio-political background and at the same time deeply rooted in religious obligations. For example, Gāndhārī the wife of the blind king Dhritaraṣṭra and the queen mother of hundred Kauravas is one of the most celebrated and an icon of women empowerment in the epic era. She had all moral characteristics and knowledge of the principles of life. She strongly refused to wish for a success even to her own son Duryadhana and said 'yato dharmastato jayah' meaning victory pertains only to the side of the right made her a classic. In the epic, Gāndhārī is described as a very learned, intelligent, and well versed in religious practices. She is found engaged in the learned political discussion in the open court and also in public.

Undoubtedly, the noblest and best of the women characters in the Mahābhārata era was Gāndhārī. She kept her faith in the moral order undimmed and in the hours of supreme crisis in her life. She always unhesitatingly sacrificed narrow centeredness, personal selfish interests and embraced the cause of virtue and righteousness. Even after the terrible disaster of the Kurukṣetra war, in which she lost all her hundred sons and other near relatives, Gāndhārī stood firm and mentioned her unflinching faith in the triumph of the moral law and she could boldly express her feeling on that effect. There was only one occasion when she seemed to be overpowered by terrible grief. Before the dead bodies of her sons in the bloody battle-field of Kurukṣetra, she fell unconscious on the ground.

Mahābhārata shows the very natural qualities of women such as love, care, affection and sacrifice. It glorifies the innate tendencies of women that manifested in a lovely way In this regard Kuntī, the wife of king Paṇḍu and the queen mother of the Paṇḍavas, bears very good instances of the incomparable strength of character, versatility and scholarship of women of the period. When king Paṇḍu expired, Madrī the second wife of the king preferred to perform chastity on the funeral pile of her deceased husband king Paṇḍu leaving her two minor sons- Nakula and Sahadeva under the

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caretaking of the co-wife Kuntī. Kuntī with due care nourished this two orphans along with her own three sons Yudhiṣṭhara, Bhima and Arjuna who are all elder to Nakula and Sahadeva. In this way Kuntī has bestowed motherly tenderness to Nakula and Sahadeva like her own sons. She is known in epic era as the ‘Pancha putra janani’ or the mother of the Paṇḍavas. Kuntī is the embodiment of patience, love, fortitude and self-sacrifice.

From socio-logical point of view the age of the Mahābhārata was typical with some stereotypical custom. The value system and customs of that period is markedly differed from the modern era. During the period of the Mahābhārata Polygamy was a common custom, but Polyandry was exceptional. The instance of Draupadī’s marriage with five Pāṇḍava brothers happened only in order to obey the orders of Kuntī, the mother, who ordered her sons saying ‘enjoy all of you, that which you have obtained.’⁽⁷⁾ The custom of ‘Safīdaha’ was prevalent during that period. Mādri, the second wife of Paṇḍu died in the funeral pyre of her husband. But at the same time enough evidences of widows surviving after the death of their husband are also found. The names of Kuntī, Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu and Droṇa may be referred in this connection.

The widows were the more unhappy sections of the society. The great epic compares their sorrows the sorrow of a person who has lost his son.⁽⁸⁾ On the other hand we also come across positive aspects of widows with some responsibility. Widowed Kuntī was present in the auspicious occasion of marriage of Draupadī⁹ and she also had much say in the important state of affairs. In the Anuśasana parva of the Mahābhārata, it is stated that the widow can only utilize the income of the property she has inherited, she can under no circumstances dispose it.⁽¹⁰⁾ The widows who were very helpless used to live with their parents and it was positively accepted.⁽¹¹⁾

Coming to the question of the treatment of male and female child, the Mahābhārata is very liberal. Although in the Rāmāyaṇa it is mentioned that girl child is the root cause of misery of parents.⁽¹²⁾ But in the Mahābhārata such pessimistic references is not found. So the Mahābhārata does not categories the birth of female child as a burden for parents. The Mahābhārata also attributed women as the Lakṣmī of home.⁽¹³⁾ All good deeds become fruitless without their due respect; wherever women curse out of sorrows or pain all familial prosperity and goodness go in vain.⁽¹⁴⁾

The glorification of women as wives is very evident in the Mahābhārata. It is said that wife is the half body of men; she is the bosom friend, root cause of property and pleasure.⁽¹⁵⁾ So it is very important duty of everyone to behave well with their wives.⁽¹⁶⁾ The respectable position of women is clearly found out from the statement of Yudhiṣṭira regarding Draupadī whenever he says that this Draupadī is my beloved wife, dearer than my life, respectable as an ideal mother, and also adorable like an elder sister.⁽¹⁷⁾

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Draupadī, an encyclopaedic character of the Mahābhārata, who often characterises as scholar, well-versed in religious lore. She is the embodiment of courage, a blending of earthly and divine fortunes such as sense of sagacity, soundness of opinion, ability of managing the things well. She had high spirit in religion, dedicated to her husbands. By virtue of her spiritual power along with the combination of diplomatic intelligence she conquers both the temporal and spiritual abode. It is her wisdom that really makes Draupadī an esteemed character that is to be followed by any woman in any period without any hesitation. In a sense, she is the central figure of the great epic and her character has been depicted with wonderful skill by Maharṣi Kṛṣṇa Dwaipāyana.

In the Mahābhārata period women were not detached from socio-cultural events. Highborn women used to participate in social events and important occasions with sufficient security. Even the Muni Ṛṣis used to visit with their wives for tourism and propagation of religion. Women enjoyed separate sitting arrangement during any function or assembly. During the ordeal of Kuru-Pāṇḍvas, women such as Ghandhari, Kuntī et, al. Sat on a distinct and elevated stage.

Thus, the society in the Mahābhārata period was patriarchal. So, women were under the guidance and supervision of men. There was no autonomy of women in truest sense of the term. As the important members of family life they were complementary to men. They had vital role in the sustenance and development of family. Women were associated with comfort maker and attributed to the 'Lakṣmī' of home. Although the presence and dominance of men were well established and structurally determinant in all aspects of life, it was not that women did not have any say regarding such issues. There were evidences that women were involved in many more socio-cultural events. They participated in political and diplomatic issues and showed their excellence. It is found out that Indian women during the period of the Mahābhārata showed the brilliance in mortality, devotion and spirituality. They were promoted to achieve the then socio-cultural expectations. They were not deprived of education and reciting religious texts and performing rites and rituals. They were also allowed to participate in social occasions. So it is being concluded that Indian society at the age of the Mahābhārata was not like society in present day. There are a lot of differences between tradition and modernity; socio-cultural values of then and now. Keeping such views and conception in mind it is said that the position of women in India during the Mahābhārata period was not pessimistic. Excluding some issues, it can be said that the moral and spiritual beauty of the then women was satisfactory that framed the very cornerstone of Indian civilization and works as an eternal source of motivation for present and upcoming generations.

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Endnotes

1. Mbh. Vana Parva.305.20
2. Mbh.12,320
3. Mbh. U.116.3
4. Mbh.Adi.105.8, 100.48,49
5. Mbh. Ādi.71.3-5
6. Mbh.Vanaparva 232.54
7. Mbh.1.206.2
8. Ibid.2.68.81-83
9. Ibid.1.194.3
10. Ibid.Anu.47.24
11. Ibid.U.33.74
12. VR.7.9.10-11
13. Mbh.Adi.74.42
14. Ibid.Anu.46.5,6,7.U.38.11
15. Ibid.Adi.74.41
16. Ibid.Aśva.90.47
17. Ibid.Virāt.3.17

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