

The Concept of Strīdharmā in the Mahābhārata

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Mahābhārata, the greatest repository of Indian culture indignated into the later Dharmic tradition moulding into a peculiar Dharmic cult by reflecting the aspirations and achievements of Indian people in ancient period that appreciably said: 'Yanna Bharate tanna Bharate' - Whatever that is in India, it is there in Mahābhārata and whatever that is not in the Mahābhārata is not in India too. It is no doubt an encyclopaedia of ethics, knowledge, politics, religion, philosophy and dharma.

The Mahābhārata can be claimed as the most renowned epic of India, the only book of its kind in the whole world that contains every aspect of life, depicted in the form of stories and advices. It teaches moral lessons that illustrate distinguishing characteristic of the ancient India. The stories, songs, nursery tales, anecdotes, parables, discourses and sayings contained in this epic are marvelous and rightly instructive. It contains the brilliant records of mighty heroes, warriors of great prowess, deep thinkers, profound philosophers, sages and ascetics and devoted wives of chastity¹. The beauty and charm of the language is extremely striking and attractive. The message of Mahābhārata is the sensible message of truth and righteousness. The great epic arouses a moral awakening in the readers and exhorts them to tread the path of Satya and Dharma. It urges one strongly to perform good deeds, practice dharma, cultivate dispassion by realizing the illusory nature of this universe and its vain glories, sensual pleasures, eternal bliss and immortality.

The Mahābhārata, the great ethical epic of India, unfolds certain positive, creative and imperishable ideals of Indian womanhood. The characters woven in the Mahābhārata reflect the vision of the society about woman that leaves norms for anyone to negate their state of affairs in the society. There are housewives, ladies in search of their identity, ardent devotees, devoted wives and noble characters². These ideals we can find embodied in a most perfect manner in the lives of Gāndhāri, Kunti, Draupadi, Damayanti and Sāvitrī. The most important of these ideals, however, is an abiding faith in dharma or the moral order of the universe. Dharma in the entire Mahābhārata, really is a force or principle that binds together the entire universe. It implies also the union of traditional thought and faith, of common custom, loyalty and understanding, that makes human society an organic unity. Draupadi expounds a most serene and touching profile of Indian woman. Gāndhāri, Kunti as well as Sāvitrī and Damayanti are the most inspiring characters. They visualize an undeterred spirit of struggle and perseverance as well as the nobility of character. In fact the Mahābhārata attains the grandeur and sublimity through such woman characters. They were ideal wives and ideal mothers. That is the reason why they have left an immortal name behind them.

Gāndhāri

Gāndhāri is the noblest and best of the woman characters in the Mahābhārata. She, more than any other person, in the epic, keeps her faith in the moral order undimmed, and in terms of gloom and despair in her life, she ever unhesitatingly sacrifices narrow, personal selfish interest and embraces the cause of virtue and righteousness. She keeps aloof the standard of dharma and asks others to follow in the same manner. At a moment of deep crisis delving into the fortunes of Kuru family, Gandhari could utter these ever-memorable words to her son

Duryodhana: 'where there is righteousness, there is victory'. After the terrible disaster of the Kurukṣetra war, in which she lost all her hundred sons and other near relations, Gāndhāri stays firm and maintained her unflinching faith in the triumph of the moral law, and she could boldly express her feelings to that effect.

Gāndhāri is an example of the most sensible devotion to her husband which is expressed in her reaction that she was to marry Dhṛtarāstra- the blind king of Kauravas- she blind- folds her eyes and did not open them to the last. As a result of this ascetic life, she had acquired such powers that she could see without opening her eyes. There is a touching scene just after the war. With the extra-sense graced by Vyāsa, Gāndhāri could see each of her kith and kin who chose Vīramṛtyu in the great battle. She laments about each of them to Lord Śrīkṛṣṇa. She blames Śrīkṛṣṇa for not preventing Kurus and Pāndavas from the great war. She even curses Śrīkṛṣṇa for this.

Gāndhāri gave birth to one hundred sons, but these sons did not fulfill the expectations of the virtuous mother. She never approves the conduct of her sons towards their Pāndava cousins, and often appeals her husband to check their evil propensities. In the game of dice, Yudhiṣṭhira gambles away all his possession including his wife. But Gāndhāri was very sorry for this. As a mother, Gāndhāri never allowed her love and affection for children to seize away her judgement and wisdom. Her voice throughout the Mahābhārata is the voice of warning to her sons, who were treading the path of error and injustice. After the outbreak of the Kurukṣetra war, which lasted for eighteen days, Duryodhana used to visit his mother every day before going to the battlefield; in order to seek her blessings. The pathetic prayer of Duryodhana was that his mother should wish victory for his cause, but in spite of his repeated entreaties, Gāndhāri always uttered the highly significant words before

Duryodhana that righteousness always and invariably triumphed: yato dharmastato jayah. After the conclusion of the war in which all her sons were slain, she asked Srikrna to depart and save the Pandavas. This shows the sense of duty and her affection for the Pandavas. There was only one occasion when she got overpowered by terrible grief before the dead bodies of her sons in the bloody battlefield of Kuruksetra, she fell unconscious on the ground. On the day of her passing away from the earth, Gandhari's eyes were still bandaged, and she made the supreme sacrifice with unflinching loyalty to her ideals. She exemplifies the best ideal of Indian womanhood through the ages from the days of the Mahabharata and remains immortal in the minds of millions of Indians to derive their inspirations from the great epic.

Kunti

Kunti, throughout the Mahabharata, is the embodiment of patience, fortitude and self-sacrifice. Right in childhood, she was given as Datta to King Kuntibhoja by her father, King Śūra. She was married to King Pāṇdu of Hastinapura. She gave birth to three children- Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna. After the death of Pāṇdu, Mādri sacrificed her life and Kunti had to look after her children- Nakula and Sahadeva. She always used to treat them on par with her sons. Kunti has more affection towards Mādri's children. This shows the broad-minded vision of Kunti. She showed wonderful patience and forbearance while she passed her days under the care of King Dhrtarāṣṭra at Hastinapura. Kunti was terribly aggrieved but remained firm as a rock and uttered words of encouragement and advice to Droupadi as she was accompanying the Pāṇdavas to the forest.

वत्से शोको न ते कार्यः प्राप्येदं व्यसनं महत् ।
स्त्रीधर्मणां अभिज्ञासि शीलाचारवती तथा ॥^३

She could never forgive the Kauravas on account of the insults that they had heaped particularly on Droupadi, who was dearer to her than even her own sons. She was greatly pained that nobody except Vidura had protested against the inhuman conduct of Duśśāsana towards Draupadi on the day of the game of dice. Referring to this episode, Kunti declared that the only person worthy of respect and worship in that great assembly of Hastinapura was Vidura. she undoubtedly laid down a very important maxim necessary for the moral evolution of mankind when she said that man attained moral elevation of his character and conduct, and not by his fortune or learning. Kunti had some messages to deliver to her sons through Srikrṣṇa. Her message to Yudhiṣṭhira was that his dharma was becoming fruitless by his failure to perform his duties. Kunti asked her sons not to accept poverty and humiliation on any account. Her one advice to them was to fight for the vindication of the honour of their family and for the redemption of their lost glory and fortune. The only occasion in which Kunti seemed to be very much frustrated is when she went out to meet her deserted son Karṇa on the eve of the Kurukṣetra war. In that war the battle was between her two sons- Karṇa and Arjuna. She interviewed Karṇa for the purpose of bringing about an honorable settlement between the Kauravas and the Pāṇdavas. her firm conviction was that Duryodhana being deserted by Karṇa would come down to reach an agreement with her sons. Thus the impending catastrophe could be averted and the two branches of the same family would be able to live together in peace and with mutual understanding.

Kunti had always urged her sons to fight and recover their lost fortune. This had been accomplished and her son Yudhiṣṭhira was made the Lord of the whole Bhārata. She made the supreme decision of her life that it was her duty to accompany Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhāri in their journey to the forest. She had only one message for her sons that they

should cultivate righteousness and generosity. In the Himalayas, Kunti passed her remaining years of life in placid contentment. Her devotion to Dhrtarāṣṭra and Gāndhāri during this period was also wonderful. Her end was as noble as her life. When a conflagration engulfed the forest in which she was living with Gāndhāri and Dhrtarāṣṭra, she remained steadfast and embraced death peacefully.

Draupadi

Draupadi is a well-known figure in the Mahābhārata and is a familiar name in every Hindu household. She is cited even now, after five thousand years, as the embodiment of duty, charity, truth, devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa, chastity and righteousness. In short, she is shown as the symbol of all virtues. She lives in the mind of every virtuous woman in India as a model to follow and in that glorious galaxy of the most famous women of Mahābhārata.

Draupadi throughout Mahābhārata , is the embodiment of courage, fortitude, sense and sensibility, and even pride and prejudice. the very circumstances of her birth made it abundantly clear that she had come to this world for fulfilling a great destiny. She arose from a sacrificial fire lit by her father Drupada- the king of Pāñcāla- and at once a voice from above announced that Draupadi would in course of time, perform duties pleasing to Gods, and that Kuru family would meet with disaster on her account.

Mercy and solicitude for the poor and the distressed were not the only traits in the character of Draupadi. When Yudhiṣṭhira lost her in a game of dice at Hastinapura, and Duśśāsana, the brother of Duryodhana taking recourse to unfair means, helped all sorts of personal insult upon her in the open assembly, she turned round to the members present and asked for protection and justice. Finding everybody silent, she rebuked

the open assembly by saying that sense of justice had disappeared from Bharata and that the members of the warrior caste had forgotten their duties. Otherwise how could the members of the assembly, in an open session at Hastinapura, remain silent spectators of the injustice that was being perpetrated before their eyes?

धिगस्तु नष्टं खलु भारतानां धर्मस्तथा क्षत्रविदां च वृत्तम् ।
यत्र ह्यधीतां कुरु धर्मवेलां प्रेक्षन्ति सर्वे कुरवः सभायाम् ॥ ४

As a faithful wife, she accompanied the Pāṇḍavas in their journey to the forest. During the twelve years that they had to live there, Draupadi lived as the ideal mistress of the household. During the remaining years that she had to stay in the forest in the company of the Pandavas, she was an ideal wife bearing patiently with all the difficulties present there. When SriKṛṣṇa and his wife Satyabhāma came to meet the Pandavas in the forest towards the end of the period of their stay there, Satyabhāma asked Draupadi in all humility how she could manage her household affairswith such credit, and how she could win the confidence, love and respect of such great heroes as the five Pāṇḍava brothers. At that time, she told SriKṛṣṇa that she could not forget for a moment that a woman of her status could be so openly humiliated in the presence of the Pandavas. Draupadi's discourse on the duties and responsibilities of a wife on this occasion is one of the important chapters of Mahābhārata . Even though Draupadi remains a unique type woman, not merely a fond and devoted wife, but a true helpmate and partner. She is perhaps the best illustration of Kālidāsa's famous verse in the Raghuvamśa:

गृहिणीसचिवः सखीमिथः प्रियशिष्या ललित कलाविधौ ।
करुणाविमुखेन मृत्युना हरता त्वां वद कि न मे हतम् ॥ ५

Draupadi was the very embodiment of Śrī or good fortune in the house of Pāṇḍavas. She was occasionally subjected to moods of

indignation, no doubt, but the loftiness of her soul, her unfailing courage in facing disasters, her spirit of self-sacrifice, and above all, her moral earnestness and spiritual integrity have shed luster on the ideals of women in the Mahābhārata.

India is honoured by such women and it is still the land where the ancient holy traditions of great sages have survived on account of women like Draupadi. Draupadi did not perform any penance or any sacrifice in the accepted sense of the terms, but her life was combined with them. Hence in her dire needs, Lord Kṛṣṇa himself arrived to help her once in the Kurusabha and again in the forests when Durvāsa came to visit Pāṇḍavas. On numerous occasions, He constantly saw her, encouraged and advised her. A woman whom Lord Kṛṣṇa honors is worthy of universal honor.

We get memorable female characters who have made indelible stamp in the Indian minds through the substories of Mahābhārata. Sāvitrī and Damayanti represent this kind. Sāvitrī who could win over even God of Death by her determination. Perseverance and intelligence are worshipped even today by married women. Damayanti whose beauty attracted even Gods and who ignoring them all chose Nala and did not leave him even when he discarded in the forest, is a praiseworthy example in this regard. Enduring severe hardships she chose to wait and win her husband back by devotion and determination. These two characters are considered as models of Pativrata tradition.

Thus the valuable qualities exhibited by women in the Mahābhārata are beyond the limitations of time, place and social conditions. They are worthy of inspiring even the modern woman for fulfilling their aspirations. The names of these ancient women are everlasting and are enlisted by ancient as well as modern scholars. Draupadi reveals the most

serene and touching profile of Indian woman. Gāndhāri, Kunti, Sāvitrī and Damayanti are also the most inspiring characters. They visualize an undeterred spirit of struggle and perseverance as well as the nobility of character. The greatness of culture of India cannot be completely gauged without being acquainted with Mahābhārata. And the greatness of Mahābhārata cannot be realized without knowing the lives of these women with their commendable virtues valuable even for the modern society. In fact, Mahābhārata attains the grandeur and sublimity through such women characters.

References

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