



# Icons of Women hood: Insights into the Legendary characters Kunti and Gandhari from the Mahabharata

**Dr.Sandhya B.Nair**

**Assistant Professor**

**Email:sandhyaskt123@gmail.com**

## Introduction

The Mahabharata is not merely an epic, it is an eternal tale of hero men and women who rightly represent the ups and towns of the entire humanity of all ages. The requirements of an ornate epic and a Dharmasastra are harmoniously blended in the Mahabharata. It is the greatest epic of India and the biggest of the world's epics. The beginnings of epic poetry in India are to be found in the early Vedic literature. The Rigveda contains hymns of a narrative character, and short legends in prose and verse, called Gatha-s, Itihas-s etc. Itihasa is an ancient historical or legendary tradition, turned to creative use as a significant myth or tale, expressive of some spiritual or religious, ethical or ideal meaning and thus formative of the mind of the people. Purana and Itihasa are forms which literally indicate an old story. Itihasa (iti-ha-asa) is interpreted as 'so indeed it was' These terms are found associated with each other in early literature in general.

The Mahabharata represents the past present and future aspirations of crores of people in India. It is a literary monument, a cultural scripture, that influenced India to mould her destiny. The Mahabharata is undoubtedly an important encyclopedia of our rich cultural heritage. "Maha" means great and Bharata means the descendants of Barata. Thus, the title indicates the story of the great descendants of Bharata. The Bulk of the epic, composed by

Krishna dvaipayana Vyasa, the son of Parasara and Satyavati, in not less than one lakh verses describes the struggle between the unrighteous kauravas and the righteous Pandavas.

The Mahabharata expresses the important of Dharma in all activities. It means that the Veda, truth and dharma are one. Therefor the Mahabharata says, Victory is there where Dharma is-‘YATODHARMASTATO JAYA’ it is the book of Dharma and is called Dharmagrantha. Here, the hero Yudhishtira, also called Dharmaputra, is the upholder of dharma, a word that includes law, religion and the norms of right conduct. In the Mahabharata, the battle is Dharmayuddha and hence the battle field is called Dharmakshetra. The very soul of the Mahabharata is Srikrishna, who tried to restore Dharma on earth.

The Mahabharata explains many kinds of Dharma or duties, viz. Rajadharma (Duty of rulership) Prajadharma (duty of Citizen), Dhanadharma (ethics of charity) Apaddharma (conduct at times of distress), Stridharma (duty of a woman), Moksha dharma (conduct for liberation from the cycle of birth and death) etc. These guide one to deal with various situations in life.

### **Icons of Women hood Gandhari and Kunti**

The *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, has depicted the lives of many ideal women like Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Satyavati, Madri and so on. Their lives reveal the ideology of Dharma or the moral order of the Universe. These ideal women gave their lives to keep Dharma, the ever active, ever present moral law which regulated the entire universe. The *Mahabharata* is not only a heroic poem but it also contains moral teaching and philosophical reflections.

The *Mahabharata* envisages that Dharma is the basic principle that binds the whole universe together. It is not only the union of traditional thought and faith but also the common custom, fidelity and understanding. Organic unity in the human society is the net result of Dharma. Dharma is not only the duty of men alone. The women characters in the *Mahabharata* show the essence of Dharma in the form of patience, steadfastness and sincerity through their character and conduct. They have kept those principles at the moment of the supreme crises too. For instance, Gandhari utters these remarkable words to Duryodhana at a crucial moment. "Where there is Righteousness, there is Victory."

The stories of women in the epics and puranas are replete with heroic deeds and womanly chastity and love, dedication and service to God and man. In the *Mahabharata*, all the important female characters projected extreme faithfulness to their husbands. In this paper only the most important heroines of the epic Gandhari and Kunti are touched upon. The myths and legends of India are legion, and heroines mostly form a pattern - virtuous, chaste, gentle with indomitable courage and capacity for suffering if God willed it.

## **Gandhari**

One of the noblest women characters in the *Mahabharata* is Gandhari. The author of the *Mahabharata* records her devotion to duty and righteousness in the very beginning of his introduction to the great epic. She kept her faith in the moral order even at the time of the supreme crises that she had faced in her life. She fought for virtue and righteousness and stood on the principles of Dharma firmly. She even denied the fortunes of her own sons and all other personal interests for the sake of Dharma.

## **Gandhari, the true replica of Dharma**

Subala, the King of Gandhara, was her father. Bhisma, the head of the family and Guardian of Kuru princes, heard from the brahmins that Subala had a daughter who was reputed for her beauty and piety. Messengers were sent from Hastinapura to Gandhara, seeking Gandhari as the bride of Dhritarastra. At first, Subala did not agree to the proposal, since the bridegroom was blind, but he decided to give Gandhari to Dhritarastra, considering the nobility, greatness and reputation of the Kuru family. When Gandhari knew that her husband was blind, she voluntarily wrapped her eyes, denying herself the pleasure of sight. Then, she spent the rest of her life with eyes tightly bandaged. This incident shows her immense love and devotion to her husband. The dutiful Gandhari won the praise of everyone through her good conduct.

Gandhari was famed the world over for the devotion to Sankara even from her childhood. Once Rishi Vyasa came to the palace of Dhritarastra. Both Dhritarastra and Gandhari served him very well and the Rishi was much pleased. He blessed them that they would have one hundred sons. Gandhari gave birth to one hundred sons. But she was not satisfied with the

deeds of her beloved sons. She appealed to her husband many times about the evil doings of their sons towards Pandavas. In the game of dice Yudhishtira lost his kingdom, fortunes, brothers and his wife. He was too much insulted by Duryodhana and his group at the court of Hastinapura, in front of all the celebrities including king Dhritarastra. The one and the only soul that wept with grief on that incident in Hastinapura was none other than Gandhari. She showed her disapproval of the conduct of her wicked sons before her husband and even requested him to banish the evil-doer Duryodhana.

Gandhari never justified the deeds of her sons; she always warned them about their misdeeds. Her basic intention was to find an amicable settlement between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Lord Krsna came to Hastinapura as an arbitrator with peace proposals before the great Kuruksetra war. But Duryodhana contemptuously rejected all the proposals. Knowing this rejection, Gandhari appeared in the royal court and warned Duryodhana that the wages of sin was death. She was against war and told Duryodhana that war did not solve any problem.

After the outbreak of the Kuruksetra war, Duryodhana used to visit Gandhari before going to the battle to seek her blessing for the victory. But Gandhari never blessed him; she simply reminded him the great principle that ultimate victory was with righteousness. In the Kuruksetra war, she lost her hundred sons and beloved relatives. Before the dead bodies of her sons in the Kuruksetra, she fell unconscious on the ground and got overpowered by grief. Krishna came to Gandhari! for pacifying her and at the very moment he asked her permission to go immediately to save Pandavas from Aswathama. Without any hesitation she approved it for the sake of the lives of Pandavas. This reveals the sense of duty, affection and righteousness of Gandhari.

Gandhari shows a lot of sagacity in handling different situations. Take, for instance, the way Gandhari reacts to the conflict between Duryodhana and Pandavas. After the first game of dice, she advises Dhritarastra not to accept blindly what their foolish sons ask; him to do, for it could ruin the whole family. Despite her attachment to her sons, in the whole strife of succession, she emerges as a very impartial and rational mother. Her sense of justice does not allow her to offer her son Duryodhana the blessing of victory.

After the Kuruksetra war, Gandhari and Dhritarastra lived at Hastinapura for sixteen years under the protection of the Pandavas. To a great extent they forgot their grief at the loss

of their sons on account of the wonderful care and sympathy bestowed upon them by Yudhistira. After that they decided to go for a final pilgrimage to the Himalayas. The half-brother Vidhura, Minister Sanjaya and Kunti accompanied them. In this meeting Gandhari appeared by the side of her husband with her eyes bandaged, and made a request to the assembled multitude through her husband, asking their forgiveness of the sins of her sons.

In the Himalayas they lived for a few years and were burnt alive in the fire of the forest. They refused to escape from the fire and sat down calmly on the ground. This shows their will power, courage and fortitude. Till death Gandhari bandaged her eyes and kept all the ideals and moral principles. Her deeds equate herself with righteousness and she remains in the minds of millions as a symbol of Virtue.

## Kunti

Kunti is one of the strong-willed women of the great epic. Throughout the Mahabharata, Kunti appears the embodiment of patience, fortitude and self-sacrifice. The will power and pain staking as well as pragmatic efforts of Kunti were the sole support of the Pandavas to reach their ultimate destination. She reared her children by abandoning all her personal enjoyment and accompanied them as she could. She taught her children the eternal philosophy of dharma through her own life.

When we go through the ancient epics and classics, we realize that, there is no other mother who had as immense love and affection towards her children as Kunti of the *Mahabharata*. Her entire life was dedicated to the fulfilment of, dharma. She was not only the beloved and obedient wife of Pandu, but also a good mother and she had due consideration for her children. Kunti of the *Mahabharata* is a true replica of a passionate mother but at the very same time, she held her dharma firmly. Her sorrow started in her childhood itself and it was a long lasting one too.

## Kunti, the infallible feminine figure.

Kunti was born to Surasena, the Grandfather of Lord Srikrishna. Her real name was Pritha. She belonged to the Yadava dynasty. King Kuntibhoja, the nephew of Surasena had no offspring. As per the word given to him by Surasena, Pritha his first born daughter was given to Kuntibhoja. Pritha had lost her name too. From that day onwards, Pritha came to be known as Kunti. Though she was born as Pritha, she was brought up as Kunti. There began the sacrifice. The mystery of the *Mahabharata* tells that Kunti personifies our planet the 'Earth', and so Prakriti of the pure Sakhya. She had her own role in manifesting the idea of Prakriti. Her life from her birth to her end (Samadhi) reveals it.

She was the royal hostess, and it was her duty to receive and to treat all the sages who came to the court of Kuntibhoja. Once the sage Durvasa visited Kuntibhoja, and Kunti was deputed for his service. She did the duty at her best. The pleased sage Durvasa, blessed her that she could have a son from any God invoked by her with a particular mantra. But she could use it, any five times. According to the sage, it was for her later life. But out of curiosity to test the power of the mantra, she the young girl invoked Surya and had a child Karna. She discarded the child in a basket in the river. An old charioteer called Adhiratha picked up the child from the river and brought him up as though it was his own child.

Kunti was married to Pandu with all the gaiety. The forecasts of Durvasa had so far been true. Pandu had a blind elder brother Dhritarashtra. According to the laws of that time, a blind man could not rule unless he was the only heir to the dead king. Thus Pandu, the younger son, came to the throne. Then Bhishma thought of having one more wife for Pandu. He approached the King of Madra, to offer his daughter Madri to Pandu. The King was pleased with such an offer and gladly married off his daughter Madri to Pandu.

Pandu though born in a virtuous family became overwhelmed with misery and was cursed by the sage Kindama as a result of his unfortunate deeds. Deprived of the power of begetting children, Pandu felt dejected, but the sage predicted that they had foreseen Pandu's progeny with their prophetic eye. Then Kunti told Pandu about the boon that she had received from Durvasa, and with his permission she bore three sons from three Devas; Dharmaputra from Dharma, Bhima from Vayu and Arjuna from Indra. Then Pandu requested Kunti to give



the mantrato Madri, who invoked Aswins, who without loss of time came and bestowed twins, Nakula and Sahadeva; After the unexpected death of Pandu and Madri, Kuntl returned to Hastinapura with her five children.

After the death of her husband, she suffered a lot with her children. The misdeeds of Dhritarastra and Duryodhana worried her very much and so she was forced to go to forest again with her children. Kunti's personality dominated the period of Pandava's exile in Varanavarta, but she used her intelligence and influence discreetly with a minimum of aggressiveness, so low-keyed in her manner that the unwarned reader may not even realise how effortlessly and superbly she took it on herself to guide the fortunes of her and Madri's sons. Kunti, the foremost pragmatic mother, tactfully bound the Pandavas through a common wife Panchali. Thus, she stood as an ideal symbol for motherhood. She taught her children the eternal philosophy of Dharma . through her life and encouraged them to stick on to the Ksatriya dharma as advised by Vidula.

After the war of Kuruksetra, Dhritarastra and Gandhari decided to go on a pilgrimage to the sageland Himalayas. Vidura and Sanjaya volunteered to accompany them. Then Kunti went to Gandhari, held her hand in her, and led the way. The Pandavas prevented their mother from going, but she did not yield.

This was the most surprising attitude of Kuntl on this occasion. She had always urged her sons to fight and recover their lost fortune. That had been accomplished, and her son Yudhisthira was the over-lord of the whole Bharata. It was to be expected that Kunti would be glad to continue indefinitely her life of care and comfort after long years of suffering. But wealth and fortune had no more attraction for her. She made the Supreme decision of her life that it was her duty to accompany Dhritarastra and Gandhari in their journey to the forest. Her sons Yudhisthira and Bhima, tried to dissuade her from this resolution. But she remained firm. She pointed out that she had already enjoyed enough wealth and fortune; her clear duty now was to adopt a life of asceticism. She had only one message for her sons, that they should cultivate righteousness and be also generous.

## Conclusion

The Mahabharata is universally accepted as an encyclopedia of ancient Indian culture and civilization. The great epic, composed in different ages, presents conflicting views on women. The women characters in the Mahabharata express the power of Dharma in the form of their patience, steadfastness and sincerity. The epic depicts the life and destiny of many ideal women like Gandhari and Kunti. Their lives reveal the ideology of dharma or the moral order of the universe. These women gave their lives to keep dharma, the ever active, ever present moral law which regulated the entire universe.

The history of the position of women is very important in every age. The culture of Hindu society where women are kept in high esteem status. The Mahabharata contains ample reference to prove the exact status of women, such as daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law etc. All the women characters in the Mahabharata act according to the will of their husbands. They had a duty towards the society and country, and they performed. The Mahabharata sketches many ideal women like Gandhari, Kunti, and others. They have upheld dharma at every phase of their life. The very message of the Mahabharata is that one can attain moksha by performing one's dharma. The creation of all the female characters in the Mahabharata has the establishment of dharma as their aim. Infact the study on these characters opens a new way in understanding the Mahabharata.

## Works Cited

1. Krishnamachariar, History of classical Sanskrit literature, Motilal Banarsidass Indological publishers and Book sellers, Delhi-1937.
2. Srinivasa Iyengar K.R. The Epic Beautiful, Sahitya Academy, Ravindra Bhavan, New Delhi-1983.
3. Janaki Abhisheki, Tales and Teachings of Mahabharata Vidya Bhavan, Kulapathi Munshi Marg, Mumbai-1998.
4. Thadani. N.V, The mystery of the Mahabharata, Bharat publishing house, Karachi-1934.
5. Swami Madhavanada, Great women of India, Calcutta Advaita Ashrama-1997.