



Gandhari: The model of female propriety or a victim of society

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Abstract

The females of ancient India, from Lopamudra and Maitreyi in Rig-Veda to Sita in *Ramayana*, and Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari in *Mahabharata* made an everlasting impression on the Indian subconscious. Among all these, Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra and the mother of the Kauravas, is one of the unsung heroes of the Mahabharata. She was a very brave woman rooted in her own convictions. She tried hard but in vain to change the course of the events that eventually catapulted her family into the abyss calamity. Despite of this, she was a virtuous woman; a completely devoted and faithful wife who voluntarily endured sufferings; and her internal purity brought in her a sort of divine and accumulated power. The present paper aims at analysing whether Gandhari serves as a female stereotype of 'a pativrata' and a victim of society or acts as a model of female propriety.

Keywords: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Sanskrit literature, Rig-Veda, Indian subconscious, stereotype, female propriety, pativrata

Introduction

Epics play an important role in shaping attitude and value of the people. The two major epics where the culture, tradition and life of Hinduism reflect are Ramayana and Mahabharata. These epics contain the legends of heroes and their valour; they acquaint us with the iniquitous and their iniquity, they sing the charm and dedication of the queens and about their pitiful journeys as well. In fact, Indian mythology is full of fiery, strong and multi-dimensional woman characters. Women who stood for their husbands through loyalties and duties, women who stood against their husbands, women who shaped history by making or marring the relationships, women who ruled with their head and not with their hearts, thus making variance in the way history is professed. This ever-lasting imprint of the females of ancient India, from Lopamudra and Maitreyi in Rig-Veda to Sita in Ramayana, and Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari in Mahabharata, is deeply rooted in the Indian subconscious.

At the very outset, Mahabharata can be thought as a fratricidal war fought between the Pandavas and Kauravas. But among them there are stories of some powerful women who asserts themselves in a patriarchal society. They are intelligent, accomplished, learned, well versed in statecraft, beautiful and when required they become very subversive, manipulated and even ruthless. It is men who seem to be indecisive and flounder at crucial moments and their courage has to be showed up by these women. In the Mahabharata men think that they can control women, they can bring them into moral codes, terrorize them into submission, threaten them with dire consequences, evolve penalties for transgression of codes. But woman know how to subvert this male hegemony, how to invert *de jure* power, make spaces for themselves and convert it into *de facto* power in their own hands.

The Mahabharata is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since (Brodbeck and Black 11). The desire for revenge is a central

trait linking the sexes who are otherwise assigned clear differences in appearance, behaviour as well as character. Fighting being one of the main gender-distinguishing activities, the masculine ideal is commonly represented by the virile husband and fearless warrior. This is complemented by the portrayal of the epic's principal model of femininity, the ideal of the loyal, devoted wife (16-17). A striking example for this is Gandhari.

Among all the female characters of the Mahabharata, Gandhari, possessing the outerity of a traditional Hindu wife is bright with her own gravity. Gandhari, the beautiful princess of Gandhar kingdom, often referred to as the model of female propriety, also considered an incarnation of goddess Mati (Goddess of intelligence), was the daughter of King Subala who was the contemporary of Bhishma's half-brothers, Chitraganda and Vichitravirya.

In her maiden state, Gandhari worshipped Lord Shiva to get a good husband and children for her. Because of her prayers, Lord Shiva gave her a boon of hundred sons. By hearing this boon, the covetous Bhishma coerced Subala, the ruler of Gandhar into giving Gandhari away in marriage to a prince of a distant land. As a rude shock to her, she got a blind husband Dhritarashtra, a puppet swayed by the winds of anger and lust. He had never experienced the delight of colours and radiance of light in his entire life. Though beautiful and accomplished, she did not raise any questions against her parents and surrendered herself to her blind husband but not unconditionally. She volunteered to blindfold herself throughout her life which is generally considered as an act of intense love for her husband and supreme self-sacrifice.

Referring to Gandhari's self-enforced blindness, Krishna Chaitanya remarks, "this is a detail that shares the hyperbole characteristic of epics and one can have doubts about its propriety since a blind husband can hope to see only through the eyes of his life companion" (159). But according to Vyasa, Gandhari did not want to have any advantage her husband lacked, as referred to, in the *Adi Parva* chapter CX 14-10 when Bhishma approached Subala,

king of Gandhara for his daughter's hand in marriage to his blind son, Subala is said to have hesitated at first. But on hearing of the prince's blindness, Gandhari is said to have acted immediately:

O king, ever devoted to her husband, Gandhari bandaged her own eyes with cloth, into many folds out of her desire that she would not be wanting in respect and love for her husband. She ever devoted, to her husband pleased her superiors by her good conduct and vow-observing as she was, she never referred to other men even in words. (Dutt 160)

Gandhari of Vyasa's epic is the archetype of a 'pativrata' who stands for an impossible degree of devotion to her husband. The society of the epic period venerated such a woman who underwent a great deal of misery for the sake of loyalty to her husband. She expressed her empathy with her husband by not exceeding him in any manner and by sharing his dark life. However, much has been written and said about Gandhari's willingness to be as sightless as her husband was. One opinion is that Gandhari's voluntary blindfolding was an act of protest and rebellion against the injustice done to her. It was her way of saying: if they thought that a blind husband was fine for a woman, then a blind-folded wife is good enough for him.

In this way, this queen withdraws herself from everything, hides herself from everybody and in this way, she subsides some other facts which are cruel but heart rendering. It is as if she had covered the eyes of all the sighted people of the world. Her blindness is symbolic; it is as if she were mocking all other sighted people of the world". (Das et al 123)

This reveals her indomitable will, ability to stand alone and to take swift and agonizing decisions unmindful of the consequences. Although Gandhari's act of choosing to be sightless raises questions about the prudence and essence of married life:

Should one attempt to be a replica of his or her spouse? Or, should the partners in a marriage mutually compliment; support each other's abilities; also try to make up for the other's shortcomings; Dover each other's strengths and weaknesses (just as Sukanya of yore helped her blind husband Chavyana)? Which is of greater value in a marriage: sameness or compatibility? (Rao 8)

By blindfolding herself, she became a female counterpart of a blind king. But she would have been more forthright if she had chosen to be her blind husband's eyes instead of a blind companion.

Her self-inflicted blindness became a state or feeling of great physical or mental distress or discomfort for her. As Gandhari steeped into the royal household at Hastinapur, life became more challenging with a blind, insecure and depressed prince who would never be a king. Dhritarashtra had his own complexes and frustrations. His relationship with Gandhari was not a good one. He took many maid servants to his bed and had never paid heed to the emotions and words of his wife.

However, things took a better turn with the untimely demise of Pandu the king and Dhritarashtra was placed on the throne. But he was only a nominal figure head and the real

power lied with the overbearing patriarch Bhishma. The only way of getting de jure power was by producing an heir to the throne. But that hope was not materializing as per the plans and she had a prolonged pregnancy of about two years. In the meantime, Kunti and Madri had delivered sons through *Niyoga* who turned out to be the legal heir of the throne of Hastinapur as the sons of Pandu. On realizing that, Gandhari was devastated and in fury and frustration, she made her maid hit hard at her womb with an iron rod and delivered an immature ball of iron hard flesh, which was later divided into one hundred pieces by sage Vyasa and incubated in a jar filled with ghee for another two years to produce Gandhari's hundred sons and a daughter. In the *Adi Parva CXV 9-20* the account of the birth of the Kauravas is given:

She bore the burden in her womb for two years without being delivered; she was therefore much afflicted with grief [...] she struck her womb with violence without the knowledge of Dhritarashtra (Vyasa) let one hundred jars filled with ghee be brought in the proper way; let placed at a concealed place and let cool water be sprinkled on this wall of flesh.

O king that ball of flesh in time became gradually one hundred and one separate parts. (Dutt 165)

On several occasions, women must take several crucial decisions as these women have to work largely through her husbands and sons. That's why the pressure to produce the first son leads to rivalry. These women can never forge a solidarity and friendship among themselves. That is why Gandhari and Kunti are rivals; Kunti and Madri are rivals at the time of *Niyoga*. But, as a mother, Gandhari had to pay a terrible price for her self-inflicted sightlessness. As her sons grew up to fine young lads, Gandhari could neither discipline nor guide her children along the right path unlike Kunti, who devoted herself entirely to protecting and guiding her children through their good and bad days. As a mother, she terribly failed to restrict her sons for bend upon committing unrighteous act one after another.

But as an individual, Gandhari is known for her indomitable strong will, passionate nature, and the ability to take decisions and to speak out her mind clearly; and above all for her innate sense of justice and righteousness. She was not insensitive to the intrigues, surreptitious schemes and plots hatched by 'wicked quartet' (Duryodhana, Dushyasana, Karna, and Shakuni) against the Pandavas. She even counselled Dhritarashtra for his excessive fondness for his sons and for losing his control over them. She told him not to have a false hope of winning against the Pandavas because veteran warriors like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others might fight for Duryodhana out of a sense of loyalty to him but in their hearts they all knew that Dharma was on the Pandavas' side. In the *Sabha Parva*, she even advised her husband to stop the game of dice. According to her, this reprehensible act would rekindle a dead fire and destroy his whole dynasty. Dhritarashtra blinded by his fondness for his sons did not have enough sense to heed to her words of wisdom and caution.

Her righteousness is evident from the blessing she gave to Duryodhana before and during the Great War. She very well knew that Dharma was on the Pandavas' side, she utters only the word that where there is virtue there is a victory.

She even rebuked her son by saying that immoral motive of getting wealth brought death in the long run. But all her moral sayings fell flat on them. Despite of disapproving the immoral deeds of her sons she was a loving mother who opened her blindfold just once in her life to bestow a naked Duryodhana with an iron-body that could not be destroyed by any weapon. But fate befell on Duryodhana for his immoral deeds and he breathed his last by getting stuck down fatally by Bhima. Therefore, the Great War ended with relentless slaughter of millions of men, horses, elephants, and so on. It highlighted the cruel irony of life where the self-serving men pursue their hatred at the expense of women whom they love and vowed to protect. With the news of Duryodhana's death, Gandhari, and the whole royal court of Hastinapur were devastated by the catastrophe that betide them all. The wailing sound of women described in *Stree Parva* is an overwhelming and horrific depiction of the devastation caused by war. In fact, in the *Stree Parva* Gandhari gives the account of the horrific war through her 'divine eye'. Through the divine power this heroic mother noticed her fallen son Duryodhana and brooded upon her son's spoilt life. The old and frail mother, Gandhari was surrounded by the corpses of her hundred sons: some with broken necks, some with smashed skulls, some with open chests, and one with a broken thigh. Tears fell out of her eyes leaving her devastated. She grieved on the evil influence of her brother Shakuni on her sons and even repented for the fate of her blind husband. She then mourned for the death of her other sons. She bemoaned for the wife of Duryodhana (Bhanumati) and his son Lakshmana. She then moved on to lament her distraught daughters-in-law and the horrors that befell them all. Further, her sorrow extends to Uttara the widowed young and beautiful girl carrying the child of Abhimanyu to whom a terrible wrong was done by his own family members who were supposed to love and protect him. In sorrow, she delineates:

Several groups of hysterical women in their throes of grief ran about as if they were in the girls' yard; holding on to each others' arms. They wept uncontrollably for their lost beloveds, sons, brothers and fathers. It was as if they were enacting the destruction of the world at the end of the Age. Babbling and crying, running hither and thither, they were out of their mind with grief and lost all sense of propriety. Young women who used to be modest even before their friends now appeared shamelessly before their mothers-in-law in simple shifts, their hair dishevelled, with their arms up in the air wailing, shrieking incoherently. Women who earlier comforted each other in the most trifling sorrows now ignored other women staggering about in grief... They were like beings set on fire at the end of the Age. These bewildered women were in shock; helpless, having lost the wits – vast was the wretchedness of the women of Kurus. The clamour of all those afflicted women bewailing the destruction of their family became thunderous and shook the worlds. (Mbh. Stree Parva 11.9.8. 8-21)

Gandhari was devastated at the sights of women wailing over death and devastations of war. Widow ladies beheld their loved ones and fell down unconscious and stupefied on

the ground. Gandhari was left struck with grief for the lifeless bodies of her sons. She along with her daughters-in-law wept aloud over the lifeless bodies of their dear ones. Overpowered by this heart rendering destruction of Kuru clan, Gandhari utters the following words to Krishna:

O Janardhana, look at the woeful throngs of Dhritrashtra's daughters-in-law, like herds of fillies with beautiful manes. The best of the women tormented in grief and pain mourn their dear ones wretchedly. What could be more painful to me than this, Keshava that all these women present themselves in such extreme distressful forms? This is all the results of the evils I did in my past births; I see now my slain sons, grandsons and my brother. (Mbh. Stree Parva; 11.16.55)

Gandhari's sorrow was so deep and intolerable that she lost her queen's composure and noble character. Her agony was so deep that she confronted and cursed Krishna:

You purposely destroyed the Kurus; made a pretence of carrying out peace-talks. You let the two warring kinsmen devastated each other. Now, take the result of that. If I have been a devoted wife, may my curse come true? Krishna, mark my words; you will slay your own kinsmen. Just as Pandavas and Kurus were killing each other, your kinsmen too will kill each other. As your cousins, their sons, grandsons slay each other; you will wander about in the woods in desolation and die a lonely and ignominious death at the hands of a stranger. And your wives, having lost their sons, brothers and dear ones shall run around the woods in desperation and grief, just as the Bharatha women are now doing. (Dutt II.2)

Gandhari is regarded as a virtuous woman whose fidelity as a *Sadhavi*, her *Tapas* and internal purity bring in her a sort of accumulated power. Breathing in anger, rays of her sight piercing through the cloth covering her tearful eyes burnt and blackened the toes of Yudhishtira. But after that, her anger had gone away and she looked upon Pandavas as her own sons.

And finally, the ultimate tragedy- she not only lost all her uterine sons and son-in-law but from a queen she became an 'ashrit' or dependent. Bhima never lost an opportunity to torment the old queen and king in the twilight of their years in reminding how he was responsible in for killing all their sons:

Every day, henceforth, for thirty six years, Bhima will remind me and my husband how he killed our hundred sons. When we sit down to eat, just as when we are about to put the food in our mouth, he will crack his knuckles so that we hear the sound that came when he broke their bones or ripped open their chest. Draupadi will try to stop him, but he will justify his actions, "They must never forget their children's villainy. They were quiet when you screamed for help in the gambling hall. Their silence led to the death of your sons and my Ghatotkacha. Why forgive them? Let me have the pleasure of reminding them how I killed each and every one of their hundred sons. How they begged me to stop and how I drank their blood. (Rao 15.1)

Those gestures of Bhima became an intolerable cruelty for both the husband and the wife. Therefore, after some time, Gandhari and her husband went to 'Banaprastha' by the side of river Ganga along with Kunti, Vidura, and Sanjay. They began to live an austere life in the forest where one day, they all died in a forest fire.

Thus Gandhari with all her mental strength was an exception. She was such a strong woman who never mercied the crime of her own sons and strongly rebuked them for humiliating Draupadi as she considered it as a humiliation of all women of the world. She was the mixture of goodness and justice in spite of the injustice meted out to her. She is symbolic of the role of women and the sacrifices made in married life. She also goes on to show that virtuous women could even curse the gods. But various social, political, psychological, familial factors and role of destiny lead her to an ultimate tragedy of her life. Therefore, she stands as a model of female propriety who is more a victim of a society that endorses male supremacy.

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