

**THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN MAHĀBHĀRATA  
AS REFLECTED IN GĀNDHĀRĪ,  
KUNTĪ AND DRAUPADĪ**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN SANSKRIT**

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## DECLARATION

I, Rajalakshmy M, Research Scholar of Department of Sanskrit, University of Calicut, hereby declare that this thesis entitled "***The Image of Women in Mahābhārata as Reflected in Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī***", submitted to the University of Calicut, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is my original work. I further declare that this thesis has not been submitted to any other University or Academic body for the award of any Degree, Diploma or Fellowship or other similar title of recognition.

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## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that this thesis entitled "*The Image of Women in Mahābhārata as Reflected in Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī,*" is a bonafide record of the research work carried out by Mrs. Rajalakshmy M under my supervision at the Department of Sanskrit, University of Calicut. It has not, either in part or as a whole, previously formed the basis of the award of any degree, diploma or fellowship.

C. U. Campus  
March, 2016.

**Dr.V.K. Vijayan**

## PREFACE

This thesis entitled "*The Image of Women in Mahābhārata as Reflected in Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī*", is Submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sanskrit. The *Mahābhārata* is one of our two epics. Over the years it has been exerting deep influence on the life and psyche of large sections of people of the Indian sub continent. Numerous life situations have been portrayed in the epic with picturesque details. The characters in the epic no more appear to us as remote shadows. They live and pervade like real beings in a thousand situations of our daily life. The female characters in the epic are all the more lively and picturesque and an attempt is made here to see them in newer light.

Various interpretations and evaluations are possible on the major female characters of the *Mahābhārata*. But what is intended in the present thesis is a re-reading of the character and personality of Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī essentially against their epic backdrop. By doing so an attempt is sought to be made here to incorporate a different dimension to the image of these three major female characters in the *Mahābhārata*. Their joys, wrath and tears of deep despair and disillusionment, their rights and wrongs, their justifications and excuses, silence and eloquence, moments of loss and gain, ascents and descents in their roles as wife, mother and queen – are all aspects that need to be viewed from a newer point of view and that is what is intended in the present thesis.

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**Rajalakshmy M**

## ABBREVIATION

<i>MB</i>	:	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
<i>Ādi. P.</i>	:	<i>Ādi Parva</i>
<i>Sabhā. P.</i>	:	<i>Sabhā Parva</i>
<i>Vana. P.</i>	:	<i>Vana Parva</i>
<i>Virāta. P.</i>	:	<i>Virāta Parva</i>
<i>Udyoga. P.</i>	:	<i>Udyoga Parva</i>
<i>Bhīṣma. P.</i>	:	<i>Bhīṣma Parva</i>
<i>Śalya. P.</i>	:	<i>Śalya Parva</i>
<i>Sauptika. P.</i>	:	<i>Sauptika Parva</i>
<i>Strī. P.</i>	:	<i>Strī Parva</i>
<i>Śānti. P.</i>	:	<i>Śānti Parva</i>
<i>Anuśā. P.</i>	:	<i>Anuśāsana Parva</i>
<i>Āśrama. P.</i>	:	<i>Āśramavāsika Parva</i>
<i>Aśva. P.</i>	:	<i>Aśvamedhika Parva</i>
<i>Mahā. P.</i>	:	<i>Mahāprasthāna Parva</i>
<i>Svargā. P.</i>	:	<i>Svargārohaṇa Parva</i>

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Bāṇabhaṭṭa, the well known author of *Harṣacarita* and *Kādambarī*, evaluates the merits of the *Mahābhārata* (*MB*) in *Harṣacarita* making an observation that no useful purpose will be served by a poem if it does not attract the attention of the three worlds by means of its anecdotes, episodes and fame in addition to its popularity:

किं कवेस्तस्य काव्येन सर्ववृत्तान्तगामिनी ।

कथेव भारती यस्य न व्याप्नोति जगत्रयम् ॥<sup>1</sup>

The *MB* is one of our two epics, the other one being the *Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa*. An epic, according to ancient Indian tradition, is a long heroic narrative of old happenings beset with heroic undertones with a view to lay bare the panorama of human life. It must contain didactic elements with a peep into the operation of Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa, the puruṣārtha-s or human goals:

धर्मार्थकाममोक्षणामुपदेशसमन्वितं ।

पूर्ववृत्तकथायुक्तमितिहासं प्रचक्षते ॥<sup>2</sup>

Heroes with great physical as well as mental powers, a great war as the chief plot, great descriptions of human situations, the presence of numerous episodes, myths, legends and folk stories, description of ancient customs, rites and beliefs, depiction of lofty thoughts and action, representations of noble human values are the other inevitable features of an epic. The chief story is invariably set around an impending great war which enables the epic author to effectively bring out the subtleties of human character in numerous testing circumstances. It is in war-like situations that human character bursts out in its true colours, with all its unflinching powers and never-ending frailties. So an analysis of one's personality against the onslaught of impending or current war situations yields richer and truer results.

The present study attempts to undertake a re-reading of the personality of the major three women characters in the epic *MB*. A re-reading naturally involves a reassessment utilizing modern tools, modern

thought against the background of emerging disciplines like cultural studies, women studies, and new domains of knowledge in socio political fields without extracting the characters from their epic halo and context.

### **1.1. The Major Female Trio**

Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī - all these strong women, born and brought up as princesses, walked through the corridors of royal power during various periods of the reign of their spouses. They were all queens. Kuntī was the queen of Hastinapura when Pāṇḍu was the monarch. After his period Dhṛtarāṣṭra came to power and Gāndhārī became the royal queen. Draupadī had been the queen of Indraprastha for a short span of time during the pre-war period and during the post war period she was the queen of Hastinapura. Thus all these three well known women characters in the epic held positions of power and authority and their spouses were all powerful and valiant heroes. But, as is evident from the epic, they had practically no role in decision-making bodies. That means, despite their lofty royal positions they were outside

the purview of the royal power structure. A. L. Basham points out how ‘early law books assessed a woman’s wergild as equivalent to that of a Sūdra. Whatever her class.’<sup>3</sup> Their destinies, bound together in Hastinapura by some reason or other, however, bear, striking points of both similarity and dissimilarity. Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī are also the great losers of the war. They all lost their most dear ones. Their sorrow symbolizes all those untold sorrows of women who have ever been the ultimate losers of war since war brought into their life nothing commendable and desirable but chaos, catastrophe and frustration. Though much has been written on the female characters of *MB*, an attempt is made in the present thesis to re-evaluate the role and personality of these three major female characters in the epic which may perhaps yield rich results especially when it is done in the light of modern women studies and socio-political developments.

## **1.2. The Crux of the Women Studies**

Thinkers in Women Studies, a discipline that came to the notice of the world in the second half of the twentieth century, generally believe

that women have been grossly misrepresented in literature.<sup>4</sup> It was not because that there have been no women writers in the field. As is well known, there are several such writers. What matters is the particular gaze towards women that gets reflected in writing. And that gaze has predominantly been a masculine one. This happened because women always had their powers outside the basic power structure which influences the cultural super structure. The phenomenon of war which grew into a virtual institution in ancient Indian society, was determined, fought, won or lost by men only. But the atrocities of war always fell on the poor shoulders of womenfolk.

Women problems and issues like their identities as mother, wife, sister, sweetheart etc. were being looked at from a male perspective. Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) well known by her work *The Second Sex* observes that 'female subservience originated not because of any natural inferiority of women but because of well established dominance of men'.<sup>5</sup> This idea seems to be the crux of the modern Women Studies

and by and large, it has been the view of eminent feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), Elaine Showalter (b. 1941).etc.

### **1.3. Play of Destiny**

A significant aspect that casts its shadow on the character of the female trio in the *MB* is the operation of the phenomenon called curse. It sometimes acts as a motif in the sense that it acts as a focal point in so many episodes in the epic where Kuntī, Gāndhārī and Draupadī have got a major role. Curse implies its allied aspects like, *vara*( boon), *śapatha*(oath) *āśis* (blessings), *aśarīri* ( divine voice) etc.<sup>6</sup> Durvāsa was bestowing Kuntī with the boon of a magic mantra by which she can invoke a celestial being and bear child in him. Kuntī didn't ask for any boon from the sage who virtually thrust it up on her in appreciation of her devoted service at the palace of king Kuntibhoja. It was given to her when she was still an adolescent, when she was not mature enough to handle such a situation by her own. The sage knew well that she could not keep it in her heart for a long time since she was just like any other



adolescent in innocence curiosity and child-like obsession to see wonders.

The boon by sage Durvāsa virtually transformed itself into a curse in her life. The mystery behind the magical mantra of Durvāsa was too hard for the child in Kuntī to keep it for a long time. Curiosity and amazement overwhelmed her. She made up her mind to test the mantra and in that moment ended the world of her childhood and adolescence. It played havoc in her life. After her encounter with the Sun god and subsequent delivery of the child, the innocent adolescent in her was no more.

Yet another curse, the one that pronounced on Pāṇḍu by sage Kindama also had devastating effect on the life of Kuntī. She had selected Pāṇḍu as her husband by means of the svayamvara type (self-choice) of marriage. But soon she came to know that she could not lead a normal conjugal life with Pāṇḍu because of this curse. To add insult to injury, Pāṇḍu married another princess too by name Mādri. The birth of the three sons in various gods by the compulsion of her husband and the

birth of the twins and the subsequent sudden and sad demise of Pāṇḍu and Mādri's performance of Sati in Pāṇḍu's funeral pyre are episodes that transformed Kuntī too much. She became a mature woman and a sorrowful mother. All the above mentioned experiences cast their own mark on the personality of Kuntī. She almost grew into a sober woman who forgot to get involved into moments of joy, laughing and merrymaking.

The encounter between Karṇa and Arjuna at the arms tournament, between her own sons, between the elder and the younger brother, the insult showered up on Karṇa on the occasion and the latter's unreasonable and unmanageable enmity towards Arjuna – all these made a lasting impression on the mother in Kuntī. The continuous scheming and machinations by Śakuni and Duryodhana towards the Pāṇḍava-s including the tragic episode at Vāraṇāvata virtually extracted the last trace of a smile on the face of Kuntī. She grew into a woman with a grim and forlorn look. Her smiles disappeared. On crucial moments where assertion was necessary, Kuntī failed to rise to the

occasion like a powerful kṣatriya lady who had been once the queen of Hastinapura, though for a short time.

Kuntī's pre-war meeting with Karṇa, her eldest son also ended on a sorrowful note. She had, before meeting him, longed to dream a coming together of the brothers on the basis of the fact that blood will finally recognize blood. Expectations ended. The truth was grim. All her sons would not survive. Either Arjuna or Karṇa would be swallowed in by the war. This naked fact stared at her. The mother in her shuddered. Karṇa's switching of loyalty towards the Pāṇḍava-s would have perhaps averted even the war itself. Kuntī had secretly nurtured such a dream also before her meeting with Karṇa.

In the *Sabhā.P.* episode wherein Draupadī is treated with inhuman cruelty by rude creatures in the guise of human beings, Kuntī's presence is shadowy. The epic author cleverly makes no mention either of the presence of Kuntī or her response to the entire episode. Still, one can imagine the impact that this episode would have brought in on the

psyche of Kuntī. The epic author's silence speaks volumes. Kuntī lost even the last rays of hope for life. War now became a certainty and she knew that nobody could now avert it given the nature of the happenings in the *Sabhā. P.*

In the post war period, the epic has an occasion wherein Yudhiṣṭhira curses womenfolk that they would never be able to keep secrets in their bosom.<sup>7</sup> Though the imprecation comes out of Yudhiṣṭhira's moral indignation towards his mother for keeping them in darkness about the true identity of Karṇa, because of which they had to kill their own brother, it has no justification at all. Though the curse is pronounced against womanhood, it was indirectly aimed at Kuntī who obviously did not deserve it, for she had her own reasons not to divulge the secret. The punishment to Kuntī is now complete. The epic has many such striking paradoxes in its bosom. It is curious to note that the curse against womenfolk is uttered by a person like Yudhiṣṭhira, who in a sense has been the cause of several atrocities perpetrated by the Kauravas. Yudhiṣṭhira consulted none while accepting the invitation for dice at

Hastinapura while any child would have understood the evil motive behind the almost sudden and inopportune invitation for the play of dice at Hastinapura. The malafide intention of Duryodhana was as clear as day light and the invitation came soon after the return of the Kaurava-s from Indraprastha. The way he did things during the episodes in the *Sabhā.P.* and on other crucial occasions speaks volumes on the near total incapacity on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira to rise to the occasion and act with prowess and intelligence. His words and deeds during the play of dice when he was staking his own brothers and duly wedded wife in a most arbitrary manner are sorrowful scenes in the epic where the weakness and lack of character, intelligence and integrity on the part of Yudhiṣṭhira come to the fore. It is such a person who chose to pronounce an imprecation against womenfolk indirectly rebuking his own beloved mother to whose sufferings also Yudhiṣṭhira had contributed much.

#### 1.4. Indifference Goes Before a Fall

Now , in the case of Gāndhārī, one is given to understand, at the outset, that she made up her mind to remain blind in a gesture of registering solidarity with her blind lord Dhṛtarāṣṭra. This gesture of the queen of Hastinapura is ironic in a way since it can be taken or it can be interpreted as the expression of a woman's silent protest since her consent for marrying a blind groom was never sought either by Subala, her father, or by Śakuni, her brother. It was a decision taken on her behalf by her male elders. She was denied the chance of having a 'svayamvara' type of marriage as was the custom in those days as in the case of Kuntī who married Pāṇḍu by self-choice. Her decision for remaining herself blindfolded is all the more suggestive in the sense that she failed to perceive so many crucial occurrences which she was expected to behold unflinchingly.

Gāndhārī was bestowed up on the boon of one hundred sons by none else than lord Śiva and later by Vyāsa who also positively

responded to her wish to have a powerful son in law. She naturally thought that she would be the happiest and most fortunate woman in the universe to have one hundred powerful sons and a single loving daughter. But the story tells us that all her sons, including her eldest son Duryodhana and his infamous younger brother Duḥśāsana brought disrepute to the entire Kuru race. With powerful warriors like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Kṛpa, Kṛtavarman as well as the incorrigible Aśvatthāman, Duryodhana thought himself to be invincible and instead of choosing the life of true kṣatriya valiance and commitment to principles of Dharma, he chose the life of one who wanted to secretly take over what justly belongs to others. It was not some kind of impermanent deviation from character, but the way he chose to behave on his imaginary enemies. Unfortunately his parents failed to check it at appropriate times. The culminating moment was the heart rending scene in the *Sabhā. P.* wherein Duḥśāsana dragged Draupadī by her hair from the harem to the assembly hall giving scant respect to her lamentations. Gāndhārī was nowhere seen in the scene. She was apparently absent.

But she made her presence once things assumed ominous undertones, when the grievously wronged Draupadī was about to pronounce a curse on the Kuru race. Gāndhārī came running from nowhere and asked Dhṛtarāṣṭra to make amends for the atrocities. This episode seriously eroded the presence of the merit called nobility in the character of Gāndhārī.

Gāndhārī, mother of Duryodhana, had more grip on him than his father, but the former never rose to those expected heights to become an overwhelming positive corrective force. After all, Duryodhana was the heir apparent and in the subtleties of royal power structure, mothers always remained on the shadowy side. So, ultimately the birth of a hundred sons turned out to be a curse or misfortune rather than a boon or blessing.

In the post war scenario, Gāndhārī once asks, Bhīma who ferociously slaughtered all her hundred sons, why he never chose to leave behind at least a single one among her one hundred sons to be a prop to the ageing parents during their last days to shun the feeling of



remaining total orphans despite the birth of a hundred sons, Bhīma had no satisfactory answer. He did not tell her that it was after all a war and in a war, once it commenced, the only natural measure was to kill or get killed and that everything was considered fair in war and love. The question from Gāndhārī's side is quite normal, but still, Gāndhārī was well aware of the oath taken by Bhīma and the situation under which he had taken such an oath that he would be finishing off all the one hundred Kaurava-s in the battlefield.

Gāndhārī's pronouncement of a curse on Kṛṣṇa also does not carry conviction despite her unbearable mother's agony. All the episodes leading to the Great War were transpiring with measured paces with an element of destiny in it. Still the element of '*manuṣyakāra*' or human effort, against the element of '*daivakāra*' or operation of destiny, was not put to use in a manner that was expected. Serious attempts to avert the tragedy should have begun from none else than Dhṛtarāṣṭra and then from Gāndhārī. But they never cared for the wise words of persons like Vidura. They kept jargoning that destiny could not be stopped. Human

efforts especially of those at the helm of affairs like Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī could have gone a long way in averting the War. They could have worked wonders to avert the devastation. Even the eleventh hour attempt by Kṛṣṇa in favour of peace was responded with callous scheming and wanton thoughtless action by Duryodhana, like in the attempt once initiated by Sanjaya. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī, instead of using their parental as well as royal authority, remained mute spectators allowing destiny to have her irresistible operation and to bring in whatever she wanted. The paradox of destiny is complete in the epic with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī staying at Hastinapura under the protection of the very persons who devastated their life by exterminating all their hundred sons.

### **1.5. Paradoxes and Uncertainties**

Draupadī was a woman torn between many a paradox in her life despite her faultless behaviour. It is curious to note that in the whole of the *MB*, there is no other character than Draupadī whose personality is torn asunder by accidental happenings and paradoxes. She was born into

an atmosphere of the spirit of war, of revenge and retaliation. Though born as an adult, Draupadī, just like any another princess, wanted peace and happiness; but she was soon turned into a tool of war instead being loved as a pet daughter. Drupada's enmity towards Droṇa was an age old one and the former nourished and watered the enmity by whatever reason he can discover. Drupada was more like a war lord than a model king who ruled the country according to the wishes of his subjects. Draupadī's birth was not an expected one. But now that she was born, Drupada made up his mind to make her also as a tool of war. That was why he arranged her svayamvara with the difficult test with a view to have Arjuna<sup>8</sup> as the spouse of Draupadī. Moreover there was a divine voice at the time of her birth to the effect that she would be the cause for the destruction of the Kuru-s.<sup>9</sup>

At the time of svayamvara, Draupadī had in her mind the image of a single hero and that was Arjuna. She won him, but her dream and joy was short lived. She had to be the wife of all the five brothers and that was perhaps the greatest shock in the life of a kṣatriya girl like Draupadī.

Such a polyandrous deed haunted Draupadī throughout her life despite its justification were given by Vyāsa and other elders. She became the single wife of the most powerful heroes on the earth; yet she suffered frequent insults from others becoming like a plaything in the hands of villainous men. The most powerful heroes were her protectors; yet the most shameful disgrace and humiliation she had to bear. The oath she took at the assembly hall of Hastinapura against Duḥśāsana was the one that any woman would take in similar circumstances; yet it provoked another oath from Bhīma to drink the blood of Duḥśāsana in the battlefield and it finally turned out to be a perpetual ignominy to Bhīma despite the untold misdeeds of Duḥśāsana towards Draupadī. She tried to treat and offer service to her five lords with a sense of equality without showing more favours to anyone; Yet Yudhiṣṭhira, out of his dark jealousy, alleged that she showed special privilege to Arjuna. Of all her five husbands, it was Yudhiṣṭhira who mistreated her with utmost indifference at the episodes in the *Sabhā.P.*, in the *Virāṭa.P.* and also in the *Svargā.P.* Yet that one always came to be considered the

embodiment of Dharma, the one who can never be prone to err. She was the devoted wife of Arjuna who was the one she chose as her life partner on the occasion of her svayamvara; yet she had to happily welcome Subhadra as her co-wife and it was Abhimanyu who came to bestow the dexterity in bowmanship from Arjuna, not Prativindhya.

Basham observes that ‘Draupadi was powerful enough even to chastise her husbands’.<sup>10</sup> Yet she was never consulted before the invitation to play of dice at Hastinapura was accepted. It was she who redeemed her husbands from slavery by means of the two boons offered to her by Dhṛtarāṣṭra; Yet again, without consulting her, Yudhiṣṭhira, in a feat of unpardonable and thoughtless infatuation for dice, staked everything to Duryodhana and accepted once again, twelve years stay in forest as refugees and one year life incognito. Perhaps the second play of dice and the subsequent loss of everything to the Pāṇḍava-s is one of the weak spots in the entire story of the epic. From a reader’s point of view it is a situation that does not carry conviction and may appear to be an affront to the discernible reader’s sensibility. Just like any other woman,

Draupadī was a proud mother with her smart, valiant five sons; but she became the most hapless and unhappy and broken hearted mother since all her five sons were killed not in the battle field, but in the night massacre in the *Sauptika.P*. She ceased to be a mother by the death of all her sons and a poignant void stared at her at the end of the War. On many a crucial occasion, Draupadī expected consolation from her powerful husbands; but often she received vital assistance from Kṛṣṇa.

The cup of the woes of women again is filled by the minor female characters in the epic like Mādhavī, Hiḍimbā, Paulomā etc. The epic author describes how a virtual river was formed by name ‘vadhūsarā’ by the incessant shedding of tears by Paulomā, who had to suffer a lot from the male world around her despite the fact that she was carrying and under the protection of a powerful sage. Such symbolic reference about the untold sorrows of womenfolk is significant and it adds to the graver dimensions of the epic.

Various interpretations and evaluations are possible on the major female characters of the *MB*. But what is intended in the present thesis is a re-reading of the character and personality of Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī essentially against their epic backdrop. By doing so an attempt is sought to be made here to incorporate a different dimension to the image of these three major female characters in the *MB*. Their joys, wrath and tears of deep despair and disillusionment, their rights and wrongs, their justifications and excuses, silence and eloquence, moments of loss and gain, ascents and descents in their roles as wife, mother and queen – are all aspects that need to be viewed from a newer point of view and that is what is intended in the ensuing chapters.

## End Notes

- 1 Kane P.V., (Ed.) The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Mothilal Banarasidas Publishers, Private Limited. 2005, Verse 9
- 2 Tarkavacaspati, Taranatha., *Vācaspatyam*, part II, Chowkamba Sanskrit Series Varanasi, 1990, p.124.
- 3 Basham A. L. *The Wonder That Was India*, Sidwick & Jackson, London, 2004 (3<sup>rd</sup>ed.). p. 179.
- 4 Norman Jeffares, A., (Ed.) *A History of Literary Criticism*, Macmillan Press Ltd., Delhi, 1991, p. 373.
- 5 *ibid*, p.374
- 6 For detailed information on the operation of curse on the characters in the *MB*, vide, Ramankutty, PV., *Curse as a Motif in the Mahābhārata* Nag Publishers, Jawahar Nagar Delhi, 1999
- 7 *Mahābhārata*-Sanskrit Text with English Translation of M.N Dutt, Ed. Dr. Ishvar Chandara Sharma & Dr.O.N Bimali, Parimal Publications, Delhi, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2013, *Śānti*. P. 6. 10, 11
- 8 *Ādi*. P.185.9, 10
- 9 *ibid*, 167.49
- 10 *Op. Cit.* P. 179



## CHAPTER 2

# **GĀNDHĀRĪ: FROM DARKNESS TO THE WORLD OF LIGHT**

Gāndhārī is a powerful character in the epic *MB*. She symbolizes the unending sorrows of woman folk. Much has been written on the character Gāndhārī, yet much remains to be written on her because she is a character who eludes any dexterous assessment. Sometimes she appears to be in-vulnerable, to be the formidable one in the next moment. With a piece of cloth covered over her eyes, Gāndhārī though not born blind by birth, walked through the corridors of the palace of Hastinapura, defying the light of the world. She apparently did it as a mark of the expression of fidelity to her blind lord King Dhṛtarāṣṭra. But virtually she accepted blindness throughout her life a mark of silent protest against the ways of doing things at the palace in an obvious declaration of patrilineal authority.

## 2.1. Repudiation of the Light of the World

The daughter of Subala, the king of Gāndhāra, Gāndhārī grew up just like any other princess in the midst of luxury of royal splendid, pomp and show. It is a mystery of destiny that came to be linked with that of Hastinapura. The epic tells us how Gāndhārī had propitiated God Śiva and received a boon from him to the effect that she will be the mother of as many as hundred sons.

आराध्य वरदं देवं भगनेत्रहरं हरं ।

गान्धारी किल पुत्राणां शतं लेभे वरं शुभा ॥<sup>1</sup>

*(Gāndhārī, the daughter of Subala, having worshipped Hara had obtained from the diety the boon that she should have a centuary of sons.)*

No reference on the life of Gāndhārī as a child and adolescent is seen given in *MB*. The first passage that introduces Gāndhārī in the *Anukramaṇīparva* of *MB* runs thus:

विस्तरं कुरुवंशस्य गान्धार्या धर्मशीलताम् ।

क्षत्तुः प्रज्ञां धृतिं कुन्त्याः सम्यग्द्वैपायनो ब्रवीत् ।<sup>2</sup>

*(Vyāsa has fully represented the greatness of the house of Kuru, the virtuous principles of Gāndhārī, the wisdom of Vidura and the constancy of Kuntī.)*

This passage refers to Gāndhārī as a person of virtues. The epic denotes her as *Dharmajñā*, *Dharmacāriṇī*, *Dharmadarśini* at numerous occasions. Gāndhārī enters into the *MB* story as the wife of Kuru Prince Dhṛtarāṣṭra who was blind by birth. When she knew her husband's blindness took a piece of cloth and folded her eyes forever. The description of Gāndhārī's entrance to Hastinapura as the wife of blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra is given in the epic in *Sambhavarva* section of *Ādi*.<sup>3</sup> Bhīṣma tells Vidura how he has heard about Gāndhārī, the daughter of Subala who was fit to be the maiden of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king of Hastinapura. He mentions about the beauty and the noble birth of Gāndhārī. An additional merit of Gāndhārī was, as mentioned earlier, her boon from Śiva to have a century of sons. This also is a reason why

Bhīṣma chooses Gāndhārī as fit for alliance in the family of Kuru-s. Then Bhīṣma sent messengers to Gāndhāra seeking the hand of Gāndhārī for Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Subala knew that the groom was blind. There is no mention in the epic to show that Subala had sought the acceptance of his daughter Gāndhārī to be wedded to a king sans eyesight. Subala gave consideration only to the fame, nobility and the illustrious pedigree of the bridegroom. It is also clear that in a patriarchal system of society, a parent seldom gives any concern to his daughter in marriage despite the fact that the system of svayamvara marriage was prevalent in those days. In the case of Gāndhārī no such svayamvara was arranged. Gāndhārī was beautiful, educated, inherited with strong customs and beliefs and also had the boon from Lord Śiva for 100 sons. Certainly Gāndhārī, the Princess of Gāndhāra had all the rights to undergo for svayamvara. But this was denied to her and her marriage with Dhṛtarāṣṭra held in a patriarchal way. So there is logic to believe, that the first reason for the series of tragedies, that befall in future is Gāndhārī's marriage to a blind king. The frustration in her heart

naturally takes several unpredictable dimensions. The following lines are suggestive of this psychic frustration of Gāndhārī.

गान्धारी त्वथ शुश्राव धृतराष्ट्रमचक्षुषम् ।  
आत्मानं दित्सितं चास्मै पित्रा मात्रा च भारत ॥  
ततः सा पट्टमादाय कृत्वा बहुगुणं तदा ।  
बबन्ध नेत्रे स्वे राजन् पतिव्रतपरायणा ॥<sup>4</sup>

*(The chaste Gāndhārī hearing that Dhṛtarāṣṭra was blind and that her parents had consented to marry her to him, from love and respect for her future husband, blindfolded her own eyes.)*

In the above lines the silent protest of Gāndhārī is seen sublimated as the dedication of Gāndhārī to her husband with the result that the protest itself is ignored.

After the marriage Gāndhārī's position in the royal kingdom and harem were inferior and insecure while comparing with that of Kuntī, her sister-in-law who entered the Kuru kingdom as the wife of Pāṇḍu. Subala gave her daughter to a blind man attracted by the wealth and fame of Kurū-s. Dhṛtarāṣṭra had the right to be the king of Hastinapura.

But Bhīṣma made Pāṇḍu as king instead of him due to his blindness. Dhṛtarāṣṭra was seen as distressed and disappointed by the loss of kingship. Helplessness of a blind man led him to possess many complexes and frustrations. As the story goes, later Pāṇḍu was cursed by a sage and retreated from Hastinapura and went to forest along with his wives. Then Dhṛtarāṣṭra regained his lost kingship and Gāndhārī became queen. But another severe sorrow followed her. Gāndhārī appears as impatient, frustrated and jealous at the first instance while she learns that Kuntī gave birth to a male child. As per the custom the eldest son will be the successor of king. So she would have felt insecure and worried as Kuntī's son has become the legal heir for the throne. Another matter for her anxiety was that inspite of having a blessing from Lord Śiva and Sage Vyāsa to have a hundred sons and having been conceived for long, her delivery did not take place. Gāndhārī was so ambitious to have many children and desired to be a glorious mother by their strength and power. Besides this as an issueless woman her social and ritual status was much inferior to Kuntī's who had attained motherhood before

her. In addition to this the intention of Bhīṣma to propose Gāndhārī for Kuru race might be to strengthen their kingdom through her hundred sons. Her issueless state would have been a matter of discussion in palace and she would have been mentally afflicted in several ways by these causes. Though her distress subsides with the birth of children, her sorrows and miseries increased step by step along with the growth of her children. The wicked and crooked Duryodhana guided by the advice of Śakuni persecuted the Pāṇḍava-s in various ways for the acquirement of undisputed sovereignty. By arrogance and greed Duryodhana lead the whole race of Kuru-s into total destruction as per the prediction of his birth time.

## **2.2. Gāndhārī, the Mother**

It is interesting to analyze Gāndhārī's relationship with her hundred and one children. But the epic does not give much information on this aspect. It has concentrated wholly on the Bhārata war, the events that proceed and succeed. So it is but natural that Gāndhārī does not

have many a conversation with her children. Perhaps the epic author thought that such matters as the expression of motherly affection are inconsequential against the background of the happenings in the war. Perhaps a direct expression of intense human feelings takes place only in the *Strī.P.* where the Bhārata women repair to the battlefield to bid adieu with their departed ones. The *Strī.P.* is an exception to the general state of human relations depicted in the war.

Unlike Kuntī, the effort put in by Gāndhārī as a mother to raise the children were not cited in the epic. She just gave birth to hundred and one children. Gāndhārī hardly involved in raising their sons and showing them the path of wisdom. In Gāndhārī's post war dialogue with Bhīma the latter narrates the vicious acts done by Duryodhana towards Pāṇḍava-s. Gāndhārī accepts the fact. But she tells Bhīma that his act of killing all her sons is a heartless one. Gāndhārī has unbounded affection towards her children especially with regard to her eldest son Duryodhana. Her anxiety in showering limitless love to her children is almost pardonable since her children were born to her as a result of the



blessings of Lord Śiva. That means Gāndhārī knew what it was like to live as a woman without children. She was the queen of Hastinapura and so her inability to bear children will be treated as a sinful defect according to the customs and beliefs prevailing in those days. Moreover a son, Yudhiṣṭhira had already been born to Kuntī, therefore it has after much agony and insult that Gāndhārī could become a mother which explains her inexplicably deep affection towards Duryodhana and his brothers.

Gāndhārī was helpless in distracting her son from his evil designs. Still her heart was filled with affection for Duryodhana as a mother. Vaiśampāyana speaks of her as *rājaputṛī yaśaswinī* (princess of great renown). She knows that her eldest son is afflicted with passion for kingdom. At the same time she knows that a country cannot be governed by unjust person with the little regard for virtue or worldly good.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra in a conversation with Gāndhārī<sup>5</sup> describes Duryodhana as wicked minded one who precipitates himself in misery. Dhṛtarāṣṭra says that Duryodhana is an evil souled one and the person with an envious disposition and vanity. Duryodhana is one who seldom listens to the advice of elders. Taking the cue from her husband Gāndhārī also says to Duryodhana:

ऐश्वर्यकाम दुष्टात्मन् वृद्धानां शासनातिग ।  
ऐश्वर्यजीविते हित्वा पितरं मां च बालिश ॥  
वर्धयन् दुर्हृदां प्रीतिं मां च शोकेन वर्धयन् ।  
निहतो भीमसेनेन स्मर्ताऽसि वचनं पितुः ॥<sup>6</sup>

*(Thou covetous wretch that disregardst the commands of the aged, abandoning thy father and myself and giving up prosperity and life, enhancing the joy of the foes, and afflicting me with deep distress, thou wilt, O fool remember thy father's words, when struck by Bhīmasena, thou wilt bite the dust.)*

The gist of the above slokas is that Gāndhārī knows that her eldest son is one who is after supremacy. The other words in the sloka namely

*duṣtātman, vṛdhānāṃ śāsanātiga* also point to the fact that how Gāndhārī estimates her own son. She articulates that he will certainly remember the words of his parents when he will be slain by Bhīmasena.

Gāndhārī's incompetence to make out the consequences of all the plotting and machinations against Pāṇḍava-s has its undertones in her remaining blind just like her husband. She could not see what was needed to be seen by her. Even the great intellectuals in Hastinapura namely Vidura, Bhīṣma, Droṇa practically remained passive except perhaps some weak advice from Vidura towards the hapless young Pāṇḍava princes. As the queen of Hastinapura, Gāndhārī would have perhaps understood that the young sons of Pāṇḍu were virtually being hunted out of the royal palace by a chain of concerted cruel actions. The so called sense of Dharma, which is always referred to in the epic every now and then, did not have any bearing on the ruthless actions of both Śakuni and Duryodhana. All the episodes from the inauspicious omens at the time of the birth of Duryodhana to the plotting of Vāraṇāvata to massacre the Pāṇḍava-s along with Kuntī were ignored by Gāndhārī for

reasons ranging from her mother's affection to her inexplicable inadvertence.

### **2.3. Gāndhārī's Encounter with Dhṛtarāṣṭra**

Gāndhārī had advised her husband to denounce Duryodhana for the sake of maintaining peace in the Empire. After the first play of dice when the Pāṇḍava-s had lost everything and Draupadī had been subjected to inexplicable disgraces Dhṛtarāṣṭra had returned to Pāṇḍava-s all that was lost to them. But under the insinuation of Śakuni and overcome by affection towards his own son Dhṛtarāṣṭra conceded all the Pāṇḍava-s back to take part in a second play of dice.

In this context Gāndhārī approached Dhṛtarāṣṭra and asked to intervene and stop the game. She warns that else it might lead to calamity of war.

अथाब्रवीन्महाराज धृतराष्ट्रं जनेश्वरम्।

पुत्रहार्दाद् धर्मयुक्ता गान्धारी शोककर्षिता ॥<sup>7</sup>

*(O Monarch, it was then that the virtuous Gāndhārī, afflicted with grief on account of her affection for her sons, addressed king Dhṛtarāṣṭra and said.)*

Gāndhārī had warned her husband and strongly criticized him against showing affection towards Duryodhana in an inopportune manner. The words of criticism by Gāndhārī towards Dhṛtarāṣṭra are summerised in as many as twelve verses in the *Sabhā.P.*<sup>8</sup>. The cardinal points of the conversation between Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra in this context are given below:

- Gāndhārī reminds Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the ominous portends that had appeared at the time of birth of Duryodhana and advice of Vidura to kill the child Duryodhana at once in order to save Kuru dynasty. Vidura had tried his best to prevail upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra to see sense in abandoning Duryodhana for the welfare of the entire Kuru Empire.

- Gāndhārī tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra about Vidura's wise advice not provoke the virtuous, peace loving Pāṇḍava-s
- The gist of Gāndhārī's words was that the wickedness of their sons should not prevail upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra because of his irresistible weakness towards his sons.
- Gāndhārī pleaded with Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he should not waver from his strength of virtue and loose his balance of mind at a crucial time when the future of empire and its people was terribly at stake.

Despite the good words of Gāndhārī , Dhṛtarāṣṭra wavered and took consolation stating that whatever is bound to happen, shall happen and that he is leaving everything to the operation of destiny. But later Dhṛtarāṣṭra had to repent for it. Dhṛtarāṣṭra while talking to Sanjaya recalls how Gāndhārī had attempted to block the war because of her unlimited affection towards her children.

गान्धार्या चैव दुर्मेधाः सततं हितकाम्यया ।

नाबुध्यत पुरा मोहात् तस्य प्राप्तमिदं फलम् ॥<sup>9</sup>

*(By his mother Gāndhārī<sup>7</sup> ever anxious to compass his good, that perverse Duryodhana did not comprehend our words before through his folly. Now he reaps the fruits of his own actions.)*

Though Dhṛtarāṣṭra had boundless affection towards his son he assessed his son as wicked hearted and wretch.<sup>10</sup> He thinks that Duryodhana is one who brings dire and frightful calamity to the country. It is surprising to see how even Dhṛtarāṣṭra knew the true nature of Duryodhana. It is obvious from the epithets he uses to describe his son's nature.

In the *Udyoga. P.*<sup>11</sup> Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks Vidura to call up on Gāndhārī. Here Dhṛtarāṣṭra considers Gāndhārī as a person of great foresight –*dīrghadarśinī*. So he ask Vidura to fetch Gāndhārī to his presence to render proper advice to Duryodhana. Dhṛtarāṣṭra thinks that Gāndhārī may perhaps succeed in pointing out the right path to Duryodhana who is avaricious and arrogant because of his wicked allies.

The moment Gāndhārī arrives, Dhṛtarāṣṭra complains that her wicked souled son never obeys his commands due to greed for wealth. He is therefore, bound to loose his prosperity as well as his life. Duryodhana is an unmannerly man and he shows scant respect towards others. Dhṛtarāṣṭra says that he is always accompanied by his vicious companions without paying any attention to the advice of well wishers; he always goes out of the council hall whenever an attempt is made to advice him. The epithets used in this context inorder to describe the character of Duryodhana are furnished below:

- *Durmati*, (one of evil intellect)
- *Durātmā*, (wicked souled )
- *Duṣṭacētaḥ* ( of vicious heart )
- *Lobhābhibhūta* ( overpowered by avarice )
- *Aiśvarya lobha* ( avaricious to prosperity )
- *Amaryādaḥ* (unmannerly man )



- *Vyatikramya suhṛdvacaḥ* ( without paying attention to the advice of well wishers) <sup>12</sup>

#### 2.4. Gāndhārī's Encounter with Duryodhana

Accepting the request of Dhṛtarāṣṭra Gāndhārī makes a fervent attempt to dissuade Duryodhana from the calamity of imminent war with the Pāṇḍava-s.<sup>13</sup> Here words used by Gāndhārī in order to indicate the nature of Duryodhana are *pāpamati* or wicked souled, *nṛsamsa* or inhuman. The address is made to Duryodhana in the assembly of Kuru-s in the presence of great men like, Bhīṣma Droṇa etc. and several sages and kings. Gāndhārī says that her good words be certainly bring happiness to her son. Bhīṣma , Droṇa, Kṛpa, and Kṣatta have spoken to Duryodhana as well wishers in order to see that the war is averted. But Duryodhana did not listen to their words. He was constantly advised to make peace with Pāṇḍava-s. At first Gāndhārī insists her son to control his senses. According to her, self control is the essential quality of a ruler. A kingdom cannot be maintained only by means of one's bent of

desires alone. A country cannot be earned or protected by the operation of one's own desires. One has to control his senses if one wants to enjoy a kingdom for a long time. What matters is intelligence without which a country cannot be governed. Desire and wrath snatch away what is good in a person. These two enemies are therefore to be defeated, in order to protect a kingdom. Sovereignty over men is a great thing. Those of wicked souls may easily desire to win a kingdom, but they are not competent to retain it. For governing an extensive Empire, one must bind his senses to virtue and profit. If the senses are restrained intelligence increases like fire when it has fuel added on to it. If not controlled, these can even slay their possessor, like unbroken and furious horses, capable of killing an unskillful driver. Self control is to be an essential quality of a ruler. The king who wants to conquer his ministers and enemies should firstly conquer his senses or else he will be vanquished and ruined. One who has his senses under control, who has gained mastery over his enemies, who holds the rod on offenders and one who does a thing after mature consideration, can win prosperity and great adoration.

Here Gāndhārī describes in detail about the evilness of desire and wrath. Both these dwell in the body are deprived of their strength by wisdom, like two small fishes caught into a net with close holes. The gods shut up the doors of heaven against those people who are overwhelmed by these two. That king who knows well to gain complete control over desire, wrath, avarice, pride and vanity subjugates the entire world. A king should be constantly practiced to control his passions for gaining wealth, virtue and for vanquishing his foes. No allies would seek allegiance to a king who behaves falsely being subjected to desire and wrath towards him or to others.

## **2.5. Attempt to Avert the War**

Gāndhārī tried to convince Duryodhana the futility of war and advises him to follow the instructions of elders and to avoid the massacre of Kuru-s and destructions of earth. She says that the War will bring, no virtue, worldly benefit or happiness. Even victory is not stable in battle. Therefore one is not set to one's mind in war. Those who do not listen to

wise words of elders and scholars only gladden his enemies. Here Gāndhārī praised the power and the qualities of Pāṇḍava-s and asked Duryodhana to make alliance with them. According to her words the Pāṇḍava-s are wise and chastiers of their enemies. They are endued with prosperity and have intelligence and controlled their senses. By a struggle with them Duryodhana would not get happiness. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are invincible and Bhīṣma and Droṇa have already mentioned it. Seeking refuge in Kṛṣṇa is desirable to Duryodhana. Pāṇḍava-s have suffered many troubles because of Duryodhana. As per Gāndhārī's opinion half of the kingdom is sufficient to Duryodhana. So she insists him to give Pāṇḍava-s their due share and to avoid great calamity. She also informed a truth that Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa and others have equal affection towards Pāṇḍava-s and Kaurava-s. Whichever side wins the kingdom, it would be the same to them.

Gāndhārī reminds Duryodhana that the countries are obtained in certain fixed order in tune with the tradition and custom. But the avaricious of Duryodhana has made him such a person that he wants to

win the country by unjust means. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the emperor and Vidura is his well known minister endowed with great intelligence and foresight. Gāndhārī asked Duryodhana how he can desire to obtain the country unrighteously. Dhṛtarāṣṭra governs the country taking advice from not only Vidura but also from Bhīṣma. So she reminds her son that there is no possibility of any kind of lapse in the administration of the country. It is only the greed and impatience to wield royal power on the part of Duryodhana that propel him to transgress the well- balanced advisory words of his well wishers. It is noteworthy in the context to see that Gāndhārī thinks that the entire kingdom normally goes to the sons of Pāṇdu and to his sons and grandsons and not to Duryodhana. A sensible ruler of the Kurū-s. should pay attention to the words of Devavrata that hardly waver from dharma.

Gāndhārī tells her son that Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura and Bhīṣma speak the same with regard to persisting confrontation with the Pāṇḍava-s. In this occasion Gāndhārī concludes her words to Duryodhana with the following advice.

न्यायागतं राज्यमिदं कुरुणां  
युधिष्ठिरः शास्तु वै धर्मपुत्रः।  
प्रचोदितो धृतराष्ट्रेण राज्ञा  
पुरस्कृतः शान्तनवेन चैव।।<sup>14</sup>

*(Keeping virtue in front, let Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, guided by king Dhṛtarāṣṭra and urged by Śantanu's son, rule for many long years this kingdom of the Kuru-s lawfully obtainable by him.)*

Unfortunately Gāndhārī's words were not taken into consideration by Duryodhana. He never heeds her wise words. Thus both Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Duryodhana neglected her in crucial situations and the Kurukṣētra war taken place and she lost all her sons in it. She became an orphaned mother. The picture of the bewailing Gāndhārī after the war who lost all her hundred sons and a son in law is so pathetic and deplorable.

## **2.6. Gāndhārī and Aftermath of the War**

The consequences of the Great War are picturesquely described in *Strī.P.*. The agony and sorrow caused by the terrible scenes in the

battlefield to the Bhārata women who visited the battle field lead by Gāndhārī were so heart-rending that words may fail to portray the exact experience that the battle field conveys on an onlooker.

The epic says that Gāndhārī could see with her spiritual eye the slaughter of the Kurū-s. Seeing such scenes of total devastation and destruction Gāndhārī lost her composure and started wailing piteously. The post war scenes of the battle field were terrible to look at. Bones and hairs were strewn covered with streams of blood. Thousands of dead bodies lay scattered. Headless trunks and trunkless heads filled the battle field. The battle field was a sporting ground for demons want of human flesh. The ground was filled with ospreys and vultures and the host of other birds of prey and animals. Widowed ladies beheld their dear ones slaughtered in the battle field. Their bodies were being devoured by beasts, ospreys and owls. Seeing such onslaught the widowed ladies lead by Gāndhārī wailed aloud. There were sights which they had never seen before. Those Bhārata ladies felt their limbs to be deprived of strength. They fell down on the ground. Some became stupefied and lost

their consciousness. The women were thus plunged into inexplicable distress. Even those who displayed great potential at the warfront and became heroes like Droṇa, Karṇa, Abhimanyu, Drupada and host of other illustrious warriors lay dead in the battle field. Another eloquent sight was that of Bhīṣma who lay on the bed of arrows waiting for death, Gāndhārī says that nobody can imagine the fall of heroes like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Jayadratha and Abhimanyu. All these heroes were now mere dead bodies lying scattered in the battle field. Those heroes were still beside them, their keen arrows well-tempered swords and bright maces as if they are still alive. The illustrious heroes were being dragged by carnivorous creatures.

In the battle field she bewails continuously seeing the corpses of Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana, etc. She suddenly dropped down on the earth like an uprooted plaintain. Her grief was so deep that she was overcome by swoon. The body of Duryodhana was lying on the bare ground, bathed in blood. On regaining consciousness she embraced her son and wept over his lifeless body for a longtime. She said that she had clearly



warned her son thus: ‘*Yato dharmastato jayah.*’ Gāndhārī has remembered that her son was the best of warriors, wrathful and expert in weapons and irresistible in battle.

Gāndhārī is also struck by the deep sorrow when she saw Duḥśāsana killed by Bhīma. She remembered how his blood was drunk by Bhīma in the battle field. She also recalled the cruel words of Duḥśāsana spoken towards Draupadī at the time when she had been won by dice in order to please Duryodhana, Duḥśāsana had then said: “You are now the wife of a slave, with Sahadeva and Nakula and Arjuna, O lady, enter our household now”. Gāndhārī again remembered how at that time she had advised her son to discard the wrathful Śakuni who was quite wicked and greatly fond of quarrel. Śakuni had to be abandoned forth with in order to make peace with the Pāṇḍava-s. Her words again fell flat on Duḥśāsana who kept omitting poison in words towards Pāṇḍava-s at the occasion of play of dice at Hastinapura.

In the same way Gāndhārī also encounter the lifeless bodies of her other sons Vikarṇa, Durmukha, and Duḥsaha. Gāndhārī recalls how Vikarṇa was always praised by the wise. He was lying dead in the midst of slaying elephants. The picture of the mother in Gāndhārī wandering through the bloody battle field searching for the dead bodies of her dear ones is a piteous one.

The daughters-in law of Dhṛtarāṣṭra who accompanied Gāndhārī wept aloud seeing the lifeless bodies of their lords. Overwhelmed with great affliction Gāndhārī uttered the following words to Kṛṣṇa :

इतो दुःखतरं किं नु केशव प्रतिभाति मे ।  
यदीमाः कुर्वते सर्वा रवमुच्चावचं स्त्रियः ॥  
नूनमाचरितं पापं मया पूर्वेषु जन्मसु ।  
या पश्यामि हतान् पुत्रान् पौत्रान् भ्रातृश्च माधव ॥<sup>15</sup>

*(What, O Keśava, can be a sadder spectacle for me to behold than that presented by those ladies of fair forms who have assumed such an aspect? Without doubt, I must have perpetrated great sins in my former*

*lives, since I am beholding. O Keśava, my sons and grandsons and brothers all slain by foes.)*

Gāndhārī loses her queen's composure earned by means of her noble character and steadfast vows. Her sorrow was so deep and unbearable that it was imperative on her part to find fault with somebody. She cannot survive without doing such acts, when one is overwhelmed by deep agony which threatens one's own mundane existence in this world. One's psyche invariably finds somebody to shower the wrath and despair. That is why Gāndhārī confronts Kṛṣṇa and curses him.

## **2.7. Gāndhārī and Kṛṣṇa**

The first significant meeting of Gāndhārī with Kṛṣṇa takes place in *Śalya. P.* when the war was almost coming to a close. Gāndhārī's hundred children were slain in the war. Duryodhana was lying in the battlefield; his thighs broken in the club- fight took place a short time

ago. Kṛṣṇa knows the depth of the sorrow of Gāndhārī. So he addresses her with these words;

त्वत्समा नास्ति लोकेऽस्मिन्नद्य सीमन्तिनी शुभे।<sup>16</sup>

( *O auspicious dame, there is now no lady like thee in the world.* )

Kṛṣṇa tells Gāndhārī that she is a person of great vows and that there is no lady like her in the world. Kṛṣṇa then reminds her own words spoken on earlier occasions to her sons to which they had paid no attention at all. Gāndhārī had told Duryodhana thus: ‘*Yato dharmastato jayah*, -victory follows righteousness. She knew quite well that Duryodhana never heeded to her wise words. Kṛṣṇa pacifies Gāndhārī’s sorrow and grief with many words of consolation. He tells her that because of her penances, her anger will consume the whole earth. Therefore Kṛṣṇa entreats Gāndhārī that her heart should not be bent towards the destruction of the Pāṇḍava-s. The soothing words of Kṛṣṇa ultimately win in pacifying the anger and sense of revenge in the heart of Gāndhārī. She replies Kṛṣṇa, both Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī who have become childless because of the war are to take refuge under the

Pāṇḍava-s. Gāndhārī could not control her sorrow and wept aloud in front of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa had a tough time in solacing the grief-stricken princess with the words. This meeting of Kṛṣṇa with Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra came to an abrupt end since Kṛṣṇa had to leave in view of the evil designs of Aśvatthāman which he was trying to put in practice.

The meeting of Gāndhārī with Kṛṣṇa and the words spoken between them show that Gāndhārī was a sensible lady who is capable of discerning the reality of situations. She is then one of the most hapless women in the world. She knows quite well that the Pāṇḍava-s won the war because of their concern for dharma and the Kaurava-s lost it because of their lack of concern for it. She is well aware of the pressure of circumstances which is why she tells that the Pāṇḍava-s and Kṛṣṇa are the only refuge to whom Dhṛtarāṣṭra and she take resort to. She is naturally wrathful because of the killing of her sons. But at the same time it was after all a war and war like fire will consume everything with the scant concern for human relationship.

## 2.8. Gāndhārī's Curse to Kṛṣṇa

Gāndhārī's curse to Kṛṣṇa is one of the most significant episode in the epic. Gāndhārī and the other widowed ladies behold their slain brothers, sons and husbands lying on earth. Their bodies were being devoured by beast of spray and wolves. The epic writer has taken care to describe this post-war seen in a most vivid and picturesque manner. Such sights have already filled the heart of Gāndhārī with inexplicable sorrow and insufferable frustration and wrath. It was in such poignant and agonizing situation that she confronts Kṛṣṇa who was coming to meet with Pāṇḍava-s. In the flash of a moments, overwhelmed with grief, Gāndhārī loses her fortitude and get agitated seeing Kṛṣṇa. In that moment of frustration, the mother in her thinks that Kṛṣṇa could have averted the Great War with all his superhuman powers with the result that her hundred sons could still be living then. She earnestly thought that Kṛṣṇa could have prevented the slaughter. Gāndhārī feels that he did it deliberately being indifferent to the universal destruction that the war brought in. Gāndhārī feels that it was not an act that can be

pardoned by anybody. One who does such an act must know the consequences also. Gāndhārī is overcome by deep despair and for a moment she thinks that all the calamities transpired were solely because of Kṛṣṇa. It is quite natural that human psyche when it confronts unbearable sorrow discovers somebody on whom all faults and sins can be vested upon. Gāndhārī also does the same thing under frustration and she utters thus:

त्वमप्युपस्थिते वर्षे षट्त्रिंशो मधुसूदन ।  
 हतज्ञातिर्हतामात्यो हतपुत्रो वनेचरः ॥  
 अनाथवदविज्ञातो लोकेष्वनभिलक्षितः ।  
 कुत्सितेनाभ्युपायेन निधनं समवाप्स्यसि ॥  
 तवाप्येवं हतसुता निहतज्ञातिबान्धवाः ।  
 स्त्रियः परिपतिष्यन्ति यथैता भरतस्त्रियः ॥<sup>17</sup>

*(O Weilder of the discus and the mace! Since thou wert indifferent to the Kuru-s and the Pāṇḍava-s whilst they slew each other, therefore, O Govinda, thou shalt be the slayer of thy own kinsmen! On the thirty sixth year from this, O slayer of Madhu, thou shalt, after causing the slaughter of thy kinsmen and friends and sons, perish by disgusting*

*means within the wilderness. The ladies of thy race, deprived of sons, kinsmen and friends, shall weep and cry even as these ladies of the Bhārata race. )*

Kṛṣṇa remained undaunted by the stunning curse imprecated by Gāndhārī on him, for he is one who can foresee the future of the universe. He is well aware of the impending plights of the Yādava-s and his own departure from the world. It is not un to him to have any sense of guilt in his mind for not avoiding the war since outwardly, he has made all attempt to stop the war which includes his last journey to Hastinapura as an ambassador of peace, when he tries his best to see that sense prevails on Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his eldest son. On that occasion Kṛṣṇa shares such a view with none other than Vidura who had misgivings on the victory of Kṛṣṇa's visit to Hastinapura as an envoy of peace.<sup>18</sup>

Gāndhārī genuinely feels that the devastating war could have been avoided if Kṛṣṇa had sincerely desired for it. So all her ire was directed him. At the same time she does not put herself on trail for practically doing nothing to avoid the war lead by her misguided eldest son. She just



behaved like an ordinary woman who does not respond on crucial situations and finds fault with somebody, some dear one, for her own punishable silence on decisive occasions. This point of view amply gets reflected in the replies of Bhīma and Kṛṣṇa to Gāndhārī's words. Mother's affection for her son is a common phenomenon. It should not to be a hindrance to take a justifiable decision when a great calamity begins to engulf the entire humanity. The epic suggests that Gāndhārī committed this irrecoverable mistake, for not properly bringing up her hundred sons. They have been brought up in an air of wrath, revenge, greed and hatred towards Pāṇḍava-s.

## **2.9. Gāndhārī's Meeting with Pāṇḍava-s**

Gāndhārī along with other Bhārata women who have lost their dear ones visit the battlefield to see their beloved ones. The plight of lamenting women at the devastated war ground was heart breaking. It is portrayed in *Strī. P.* Such a scene is rare in other ancient literatures. On the verge of Gāndhārī's visit to battlefield, Kṛṣṇa and Pāṇḍava-s visited Gāndhārī in order to console her. It was Vyāsa himself who had advised

Pāṇḍava-s to call on Gāndhārī lest she might curse them out of grief due to the destruction of her hundred sons. Vyāsa had also advised Gāndhārī his daughter-in-law not to imprecate curse on Pāṇḍava-s. On the other hand she was expected to make use of the situation and win their favour of by magnanimity and forgiveness. Vyāsa reminds Gāndhārī of her words to Duryodhana on all the eighteen days of the war, she had uttered: ‘*Yato dharmastato jayah.*’

Gāndhārī sees logic in the words of Vyāsa and replies to him that she knows that her lord Dhṛtarāṣṭra and she must treat the Pāṇḍava-s with an air of forgiveness rather than wrath. But there are acts done by Bhīma which she cannot forgive. One was Vṛkodara’s strike below the navel in his fight with Duryodhana. Another is Bhīma’s act of swigging the blood of Duḥśāsana in battlefield.

किं तु कर्माकरोद् भीमो वासुदेवस्य पश्यतः ।

दुर्योधनं समाहूय गदायुद्धे महामनाः ॥

शिक्षयाभ्यधिकं ज्ञात्वा चरन्तं बहुधा रणे ।

अधो नाभ्याः प्रहतवांस्तन्मे कोपमवर्धयत् ॥<sup>19</sup>

*(But there has been one act done by Bhīma in the very presence of Vāsudeva that moves my resentment. The high souled Vṛkodara, having challenged Duryodhana to dreadful encounter with mace, and having come to know that my son, while careeing diverse kinds of motion in the battle, was superior to him in skill, struck the latter below the navel. It is this that moves my wrath.)*

हताश्वेनकुले यत्तु वृषसेनेन भारत ।  
अपिबः शोणितं संख्ये दुःशासनशरीरजम्  
सद्भिर्विगर्हितं घोरमनार्यजनसेवितम् ।  
क्रूरं कर्माकृथास्तस्मात्तदयुक्तं वृकोदर ।<sup>20</sup>

*(When Vṛṣasena, however, had deprived Nakula of his steeds, O Bhārata, thou quaffedst in battle the blood from Duḥśāsana's body! Such an act is cruel and is censured by the good. It suits only a person that is most disrespectable.)*

As has been mentioned above Gāndhārī despite her magnanimity and the advice of Vyāsa, could not pardon Bhīma's acts of drinking the blood of Duḥśāsana at the battlefield and striking Duryodhana below the

navel in the Gadāyuddha. The first is a demonic act which should not be indulged in by a kṣatriya warrior. The second one is a violation of all the course of war and precedents laid down by the wise in ancient times.

Gāndhārī's post war dialogue with Bhīma is a prolonged one. She gives free expression to her wrath and discontent. Her query to Bhīma as to why not a single son was left by Bhīma in order to protect her in her old age is a poignant one.<sup>21</sup> Bhīma offers no satisfactory answer to this question. This very question assumes great dimensions in the sense; i.e. a question that indicates the futility and ferocity of war in which the prime goal is to kill or get killed irrespective of the consequences. The episode of Bhīma's striking Duryodhana below the navel also underscores this fact that when war begins all codes of conduct of war are violated. This factor also reflects the popular saying that everything is fair in war and love. The episode of Bhīma's sucking the blood of Duḥśāsana in battlefield also shows how man transforms into a demon in battlefield which explains ferocity of the ruthless slaughter i.e., war.

In the post war scenario Yudhiṣṭhira meets Gāndhārī with trampling hands and remorseful mind. He tells Gāndhārī that he deserves her curses since he was root of the universal destruction called war. Gāndhārī does not speak a single word and as she turns her eyes within the folds on the cloth that cover them, to the tip of Yudhiṣṭhira's toe, his nails become disfigured by the sheer strength of the fire of her wrath and sorrow. This episode shows how genuine and irremediable sorrow of the innocent is capable of causing great harm to those indulge in acts against humanity.

### **2.10. The Silence of Gāndhārī in *Sabhā Parva***

The silence of Gāndhārī on several crucial occasions is part of the ironies and paradoxes of the epic. Gāndhārī's silence in the *Sabhā. P.* before and after the attack on Draupadī is so eloquent that it will speak several volumes. The heinous episode in which Draupadī is virtually dragged by Duḥśāsana from the harem to the open assembly of Hastinapura took everybody by shock and surprise. Many would never

have thought that the Kaurava-s would stoop to such low levels of conduct in front of the great and the wise men of Hastinapura like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Vidura, Kṛpa and the host of others. While Draupadī is dragged by force Gāndhārī is conspicuous by her absence in the harem. Kuntī would perhaps have thought that Gāndhārī would finally appear to give a helping hand to Draupadī. One is at a loss to give any explanation to this great silence on the part of the epic author who perhaps wants us to believe that the operation of destiny is irresistible. Insults were being showered on even after she was dragged to the open assembly where Duryodhana and Karṇa were bent upon adding insult into injury. Draupadī was in the meantime kept asking many a pertinent question to a dumb assembly which included her own once-powerful husbands. Gāndhārī's silence on this context becomes all the more pregnant with suggestivity since the whole episode had been meticulously schemed, engineered and executed by none other than her own brother. The author of the epic does not present Gāndhārī in such a crucial context after which the occurrence of war became a certainty. But

except Vidura and Vikarṇa nobody chose to speak on such a most crucial occasion.

The epic author also does not mention the presence of Kuntī in the harem of Hastinapura in that particular occasion. Had the presence of Kuntī and Gāndhārī in the harem been mentioned it would have led to the description of their sorrows and lamentations. That would certainly have shifted the focus from Draupadī to Gāndhārī and Kuntī. The epic author perhaps did not want to produce a creative defect by shifting the focus from Draupadī to others.

In the open assembly the atrocities continued. Draupadī had been dragged to the assembly hall while she was attired in one piece of cloth and at a time when her season had come. Duḥśāsana was telling her that she had been won by the Kaurava-s and urged her to accept the Kuru-s as her lords. He then seized Draupadī on her long blue and wavy hair. The tragedy enhances when Draupadī tells Duḥśāsana not to take her into the assembly hall since she was in her season and attired only in one

cloth. The reply given by Duḥśāsana to Draupadī is quite characteristic of his callousness.

रजस्वला वा भव याज्ञसेनि  
एकाम्बरा वाप्यथवा विवस्त्रा ।  
द्यूते जिता चासि कृतासि दासी  
दासीषु वासश्च यथोपजोषम् ॥<sup>22</sup>

*(“O Yājñaseni, whether thy season hath come or not, whether thou art attired in one piece of cloth or entirely naked, when thou hast been won at dice and made our slave, thou art to live amongst our serving women as thou pleasest.”)*

While Draupadī was being dragged her hair had become disheveled and attire half loosened. Draupadī again pleads to Duḥśāsana that she cannot stand before the elders in the assembly in such a state. Her words fall flat because they were the words of a woman. The entire assembly of males including her husbands does not come to the help of a hapless lady. It is symbolic that the elders on their part, simply looked on silently when a woman was being insulted before



their very eyes. The distress of a woman does not move them. Duḥśāsana was then dragging her more forcefully repeatedly calling her ‘slave, slave’ and he was virtually laughing aloud to add the ferocity of the situation. Karṇa then adds his own share. He also laughed aloud. Śakuni was applauding Duḥśāsana for his brave act. The tragedy is at its pinnacle when Karṇa has replied to Vikarṇa’s good words in a manner shown below:

एको भर्ता स्त्रिया देवैर्विहितः कुरुनन्दन ।  
इयं त्वनेकवशागा बन्धकीति विनिश्चिता ॥  
अस्याः सभामानयनं च चित्रमिति मे मतिः ।  
एकाम्बरधरत्वं वाप्यथवापि विवस्त्रता ॥<sup>23</sup>

*(O son of the Kuru race, the gods have ordained only one husband for one woman. This Draupadī, however, hath many husbands. Therefore, certain it is that she is an unchaste woman. To bring her, therefore, into this assembly attired though she is in one piece of cloth- even to uncover is not at all an act that may cause surprise.)*

It is surprising to note that the presence of Gāndhārī was nowhere felt indirectly or directly when the atrocity determining the destiny of Hastinapura was taking place. As a woman she did not play her part. The mother in her never ventures to rebuke and block her sons from committing the crime. The wife in her miserably failed to awaken the decency and responsibility in her lord Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king of Hastinapura. She had to play a part at the time of crucial happenings affecting the future of the empire and the queen in her virtually kept mum.

The epic says that after the heinous crime committed on Draupadī there were fearful omens foreboding great misfortunes to the country. The epic tells that seeing the fearful omens Gāndhārī and Vidura told everything in great affliction to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king.<sup>24</sup> Everybody was beginning to panic after these omens. But nobody panicked when Draupadī, the wedded wife of Hastinapura was being insulted and disgracefully mistreated.

The silence of Gāndhārī assumes significant dimensions in the epic on other occasions. Not only in the case of Draupadī but, with regard to several crises that Kuntī confronts in the epic also, Gāndhārī keeps her studied silence. She has never been able to rise to greater heights as the queen of Hastinapura. The mother in her miserably failed to block her sons from bending upon committing unrighteous acts one after another.

Gāndhārī keeps her chilling silence on all occasions when the Kaurava-s were trying to uproot the Pāṇḍava-s barely when they had started their life as young princes. The epic does not tell us whether Gāndhārī knew all the machinations of Duryodhana and Śakuni in order to annihilate the Pāṇḍava-s. The episodes at Vāraṇāvata were quite a telling one when the Pāṇḍava-s had suddenly come face to face with the premature death. Consequent on the Pāṇḍava-s' defeat in the play of dice, when they were retiring to the forest, again, there was not a single word from Gāndhārī either to scold her sons or to render a word of solace to the Pāṇḍava-s except that she had asked not to infuriate

Pāṇḍava-s further inviting them to have a second play of dice at the insinuation of Kaurava-s lead by Duryodhana. In this context also Gāndhārī's interference smacks insincerity. Since she was speaking to Dhṛtarāṣṭra not out of a genuine concern for Pāṇḍavā-s but because of her anxiety of the welfare of her own sons- *putrahārdād*.

After the war Aśvatthāman, Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman inform Gāndhārī of their most heinous massacre committed during the previous night. They had slaughtered the Pāñcāla-s, including Dhṛṣṭadyumna and all the sons of Draupadī buried in deep sleep. Gāndhārī heard everything without a word in response.

### **2.11. Eulogy of Gāndhārī in the Epic**

As has been described in the beginning of the present chapter the epic introduces Gāndhārī in glowing terms at the paragon of all virtues. Often she is described as a person who is aware of all the dimensions of meaning of dharma. She is also seen referred to as the *Arthavit*<sup>25</sup> which indicates her interest and proficiency in matters pertaining to statecraft.

Yet another place, mention is made on Gāndhārī's beauty, hospitality, pleasing mental attitude and faithfulness to her husband. She gratified all the Kuru-s by her respectful behaviour. She was chaste to the core and never referred even by words to men other than her husband or her superiors.

गान्धार्यपि वरारोहा शीलाचारविचेष्टितैः ।  
तुष्टिं कुरुणां सर्वेषां जनयामास भारत ॥  
वृत्तेनाराध्य तान् सर्वान् गुरुन् पतिपरायणा ।  
वाचापि पुरुषानन्यान् सुव्रता नान्वकीर्तयत् ॥<sup>26</sup>

*(O thou of Bharata's race, the beautiful Gāndhārī gratified all the Kuru-s by her behaviour and respectful attentions. And Gāndhārī, ever devoted to her husband, gratified her superiors by her good conduct; and as she was chaste, she never referred even by words to men other than her husband or such superiors.)*

An ardent worshipper of God Śiva Gāndhārī pleased her Lord with severe penances and austerities. In *Strī. P.* Gāndhārī is pictured as the embodiment of numerous merits in the following verses:

पतिव्रता महाभागा समानव्रतचारिणी  
उग्रेण तपसा युक्ता सततं सत्यवादिनी ।।  
वरदानेन कृष्णस्य महर्षेः पुण्यकर्मणः ।  
दिव्यज्ञानबलोपेता विविधं पर्यदेवयत् ।।<sup>27</sup>

*(Devoted to her lord, that highly blessed lady had always practised high vows. Undergoing the severest penances, she was always truthful in her speech. In consequence of the gift of the boon by the great Ṛṣi Vyāsa of sanctified deeds, she became possessed of spiritual knowledge and power. )*

Vyāsa was once pleased by her hospitality and gave her the same boon which was given to her by Lord Śiva. He had a special concern for Gāndhārī and pacified her whenever she is overcome by tragic occurrences. He considered Gāndhārī as a person conversant with every duty and possessed of great intelligence. He praised on several occasions using words like *Prāṇihitā*, *Manasvinī*, *Satyavādinī*, *Karuṇavedinī*, *Kārajñā*, *Āgamāpāyatavajñā* and so on. Kṛṣṇa also appreciates her intelligence and the sense of justice. On a particular occasion he tells that

there is no lady equal to her in the world.<sup>28</sup> She is capable of burning the whole earth by her power of penance. The epic, through several characters repeats that Gāndhārī is endowed with great power of penance. Yudhiṣṭhira mentions of her high power of penance.<sup>29</sup> It was because of the irresistible power of penance that Kṛṣṇa sent by Yudhiṣṭhira to pacify her. Dhṛtarāṣṭra was well aware for her foresightedness and often addresses her with terms like *Mahāprāñjā*(very wise), *Dīrghadarśinī* (foresighted) etc.<sup>30</sup>

Though the epic attributes numerous merits to the character of Gāndhārī several negative traits can also be seen in her behaviour. Her principles of righteousness have been different when it comes to practical level. She had penchant for fame and wanted to retain her reputation as intellect and a true teller. She made her deliberations intelligently whenever she had to speak. But her actions were in contrast with her speech. She advises Duryodhana to maintain self control and tells him that the desire and wrath snatch away a man from earthly good. But she could not control her desire, envy and anger while she learned

Kuntī had given birth to a son before her. Gāndhārī was well aware of her brother's treacherous and wicked activities. But there cannot see a single attempt from her side to send out Śakuni from Hastinapura. Gāndhārī blames lord Kṛṣṇa for the destruction of Kuru-s and also points out the mistakes of Pāṇḍava-s, committed by them during the war, one by one. She is leaving all her silences and asked thus:

कथं नु धर्म धर्मज्ञैः समुद्दिष्टं महात्मभिः ।

त्यजेयुराहवे शूराः प्राणहेतोः कथंचन ॥<sup>31</sup>

( *Why should heroes, for the sake of their lives, cast off obligations of duty that have been determined by high-souled persons conversant with every duty. )*

Whereas Gāndhārī kept stillness or not responded adequately while her sons and brother were conspiring and doing wrong against Pāṇḍava-s.

Despite the above facts, Gāndhārī's curse towards Kṛṣṇa after the war is justifiable, because, after all, she is the mother who lost all her hundred sons in the war having none to support her in her old age. Her



curse originated from her limitless sorrow which has no remedy whatsoever.

Gāndhārī realized her faults at last and admits her it in front of lamenting Draupadī. After the great war when the Bhārata women were all grieving in the battlefield over their deceased dear ones Gāndhārī finds time to console Draupadī who was coming battle field with Kuntī. Gāndhārī tells them that the dreadful slaughter of the war was caused by the operation of destiny the universal destruction of war was brought about by the irresistible cause of time. It happened not only because of fault of human being but because it was a matter that was inevitable. She continues to add that Vidura had already foreseen the war when Kṛṣṇa's final attempt for peace had failed. On this occasion Gāndhārī finally lays bare the fact that the calamity happened through her own fault also.

ममैव ह्यपराधेन कुलमग्र्यं विनाशितम् ॥<sup>32</sup>

*(Through my own fault, this foremost of races has been destroyed.)*

It was very significant revelation since only a high-souled person can look back into her own shady corners of mind. Such self revelation

that too in front of persons grieving throws light like herself on the character of a person.

Thus the epic episodes give a surprising picture of Gāndhārī. In many contexts she is represented as the woman who is forced to live under complete control of patriarchal system. At the same time she is seen as silent and vehement protestant of such system. In other time she has been seen as an ardent worshipper of her husband and as selfish mother. While in other times she is seen as impartial, truthful, and a most righteous woman. Renowned Indian Theater Director Aravind Gour observes her character as a woman with silent protest against arbitrary male power and authority.<sup>33</sup>

A detailed analysis of Gāndhārī's life situations clearly states that it was not only her own faults that lead her an utter tragedy and predicament, but various social, Political, familial, psychological factors and the role of destiny can be seen there. She faced many conflicts, confusions and dilemmas in various phases of her life and could not overcome those hurdles successfully. Her excessive pain owing to the lose of her sons, helpless state in consoling her widowed young

daughter and daughter-in-laws are really pathetic and heart breaking. She describes it as the most unbearable incident of her life owing to a sin accrued in previous birth.<sup>34</sup> Gāndhārī renowned by her sacrifice, love, and devotions towards her husband. But in real life she had to pay a terrible price for self inflicted blindness.

## End Notes

1. *Ādi.P.110.10* (The English translation of the verses is adopted from Kisori Mohan Ganguli's Translation to the *MB* vide, *The Mahābhārata*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1970)
2. *ibid, 1.99*
3. *ibid, ch.110*
4. *ibid,110.13,14*
5. *Udyoga. P. 69. 8*
6. *Sabhā. P. 75.1*
7. *Udyoga. P. 69.9,10*
8. *Sabhā. P. 75. 1-12*
9. *Bhīṣma. P. 90. 7*
10. *Udyoga. P. 129.7,8*
11. *ibid, 129. 2*
12. *ibid, 129.3-7*
13. *ibid, 129. 19 -44*
14. *ibid, 148.36*
15. *Strī. P. 16.59,60*
16. *Śalya. P.63. 6 0*
17. *Strī. P. 25.44-46*
18. *Udyoga.P. 93. 13-16*
19. *Strī. P. 14.19, 20*
20. *ibid, 15.13,14*
21. *ibid, 15. 21*
22. *Sabhā. P. 67.34*

23. *ibid*, 68. 35, 36
24. *ibid*, 71.24
25. *Ādi. P.* 57.94
26. *ibid*, 110. 16, 1 7
27. *Strī. P.* 16. 2, 3
28. *Śalya. P.* 63. 60
29. *ibid*, 62.10
30. *Udyoga. P.* 127. 2
31. *Strī. P.* 14. 21
32. *ibid*, 15. 44
33. Ipshita Mitra., '*Mahābhārata Through the Eyes of Gāndhār*' -article downloaded from internet-<http://times of india-india times.com>
34. *Strī. P.* 16. 60

CHAPTER 3  
**KUNTĪ: SUFFERING, TOLERANCE AND  
FORTITUDE**

Kuntī in *MB*, like Gāndhārī, is one whom destiny has tossed to and fro like a plaything. Born to Śūrasena, she did not have the fortune, of enjoying the love of her parents, for her father gave over her to Kuntibhoja, his cousin brother who was childless. One perhaps cannot help wondering here that Śūrasena would have given over the child had it been a prince. Again as an adolescent, Kuntibhoja left her to look after the amenities of elders and sages who choose to visit the palace. It is also surprising to note that the king deputed an adolescent, a mentally immature adolescent girl for the service of the ones whom she has not seen earlier. Her immaturity and girlish curiosity is quite obvious when she chooses to test one of the mantra-s given to her by Durvāsa for her commendable service. The sage had given her a charm with which she could beckon any god in whom a child will be born to her. This is also curious and odd for such charms could not have been given over to an

adolescent embedded with all curiosity about the ways of world. So her first test with the mantra of Durvāsa virtually ends to tragedy. It paved the way for her encounter with the sun god and the birth of Karṇa even while she was an unmarried girl. This incident virtually transformed in her personality, for she had been suffering from a sense of guilt for being an unwedded mother.

### **3.1. Kuntī, the Unmarried Mother**

The birth of Karṇa to Kuntī before her formal marriage changed everything in her life. It was the most significant turning point of her life. The shadow of this very first major episode loomed large in her later life inflicting agonizing results. Her life became beset with so many unforeseen happenings. Before the birth of Karṇa, Kuntī was just like any other pleasant princess who would have led a normal life just like any other princess of her age. The epic mentioned that from her very childhood she was very attentive to serve elders, brothers, friends and relatives and even servants. On account of her good dealings everyone in the palace including the servants were pleased with her. But her

experiment with the charm presented to by Durvāsa was unsolicited in the life of Kuntī.

The moment the child was born Kuntī became another person. Her childish wonders were over. Her childhood suddenly came to an untimely close. She ceased to be the girl who could smile at things that unroll before her eyes every now and then. The smiles are gone. She had to face several problems which only a mature adult person can confront and solve. So Kuntī, at a time when her adolescence had barely ended became one confronted with the mysterious agonies of life. She had by then become an unmarried mother with a concern haunting her that she has committed a sinful act.

Delivering a baby prior to marriage is a taboo for a woman in the society. In fact Kuntī's act was not intentional. Kuntī would have called the Sun god making use of the charm simply out of an adolescent thrill and curiosity to know what might unroll if and when such a charm is invoked as was told by sage Durvāsa. She had to pay heavily for her



childish curiosity in her later life. The story of Kuntī's childhood until the birth of Karṇa is mentioned in several episodes of *MB*.<sup>1</sup> The epic nowhere accuses her or find fault in her for chanting the mantra and invoking the god sun to beget a child and considered her action as girlish ignorance. But whether it was of curiosity or ignorance a son was born to her before marriage. The society disapproves such an act which explains Kuntī's subsequent act of discarding her first child.

The *Āśrama.P.* in the epic gives somewhat an analytical version of Kuntī's encounter with sun. Here it is described how Kuntī after she had been offered the mantra by the sage became filled with wonder. It dwelt in her memory always as pleasant surprise, but she was naturally overcome by thrill and wonder. Once as the girl Kuntī sat beholding the rising sun, in a flash, she invoked the sun God. This was done without any consciousness of the fault she committed.

In *Vana.P.* there is a reference to Kuntī's reluctance to accept the boon from the sage Durvāsa. There the sage virtually imposes the mantra

to Kuntī. She had told the sage that his blessings itself have the effect of the boon and no separate boon need to be vested upon her. In *Vana. P.* the sage had told her that the deity invoked by the mantra will come before her assuming the obedient attitude of a slave. But the nature of the sage Durvāsa was commanding and Kuntī had no option before her to refuse his boon.

The description in the *Āśrama. P.* is felt to be more realistic. When the Sun God appeared before her as a result of her invocation, Kuntī trembled at first sight. Bowing before him she asked him to leave her alone. But the god was stubborn and said that he could not leave her because he could not simply bare the idea of coming to her fruitlessly. He threatened to curse her and the sage, who gave her that mantra. It was after such a threat from the god that she had to submit to the desire of Sun God. Here the epic tells us that because of the godly grace she remained as a virgin.

Thus from the description of various episodes one is left to make out that Kuntī's suffering started from the very beginning of her childhood as a princess. Really Kuntī who named as Pṛthā was matchless on earth in beauty. It is almost queer since no father normally sends his daughter to another king. But Śūrasena, father of Pṛthā gave her to his friend Kuntibhoja. Kuntibhoja appointed the girl to attend upon brāhmaṇa-s and guests. The expression seen in the epic in this context is:

सा नियुक्ता पितुर्गृहे देवतातिथिपूजने ।<sup>2</sup>

*(She was appointed as her father's house to look after the hospitality to the brāhmaṇa-s and guests.)*

Kuntī received the boon from sage Durvāsa without seeking for it. When the Sun god appears she appeals him to spare her. Her request to Sūrya is mentioned in the epic in the following verses:

कश्चिन्मेब्राह्मणः प्रादाद्वरं विद्यां च शत्रुहन्  
तद्विजिज्ञासयाऽऽह्वानं कृतवत्यस्मि ते विभो ।।  
एतस्मिन्नपराधे त्वां शिरसाहं प्रसादये ।  
योषितो हि सदा रक्ष्याः स्वापराद्धापि नित्यशः ।।<sup>3</sup>

*(‘O Slayer of foes, a certain brāhmaṇa gave me this formula of invocation as a boon, and, O Lord, I have summoned thee only to test its efficacy. For this offence I bow to thee. A woman, whatever to her offence, always deserveth pardon.’)*

Kuntī was grown up to understand that begetting a son from sun god before marriage is a sinful act. But the god denied to return without having a child in Kuntī, the girl who was too immature to be a mother. Neither Durvāsa who blessed her with the boon nor the sun who fathered the baby comes for the help of Kuntī at her critical situations of pregnancy or later. She alone had to face the entire trauma of an unmarried mother. The epic nowhere mentions of any care that Kuntī had enjoyed from a mother either at the palace of Śūrasena or of Kuntibhoja. Kuntī concealed the entire matter just to protect the dignity

of the family who fostered her and then discard her first born baby with the help of her maid. The new born baby named as Karṇa was extremely beautiful and was born with divine coat of mail and a pair of ear rings. It was so painful to Kuntī to abandon her first baby but she was compelled to bury her personal virtuousness and emotions for the sake of the dignity of Kuntibhoja who raised her. Kuntī's motherly affection towards Karṇa cannot be under estimated. She flew the child in the river with full protection with an intention that he should survive as she has imagined. Later Kuntī got married to Pāṇḍu and her life turned into another track. The curse which pronounced on Pāṇḍu by a sage and his sudden death led her into another world of sufferings. After the death of Pāṇḍu, Kuntī had to shoulder the responsibility of raising all five sons of Pāṇḍu including two born to Mādri, her co-wife.

### **3.2. Svayamvara or Marriage by Self- choice**

The epic writer does not tell much about the marriage of Kuntī. As a damsel Kuntī was a lovely one. She had large eyes and was endued

with beauty and every accomplishment. She was in the habit of observing rigid vows and she remained devoted to virtue. It is a big surprise to note that though she possessed beauty and almost all feminine merits, loveliness and excellences no king sought for her hand.

तां तु तेजस्विनीं कन्यां रूपयौवनशालिनीम्  
व्यवृण्वन्पार्थिवाः केचिदतीव स्त्रीगुणैर्युताम् ।।  
ततः सा कुन्तिभोजेन राज्ञाऽहूय नराधिपान्  
पित्रा स्वयंवरे दत्ता दुहिता राजसत्तम ।।<sup>4</sup>

*(But though the maiden was effulgent and possessed beauty and all womanly qualifications and youth, yet no king sought for her hand. O best of kings, thereupon, the king Kuntibhoja invited all the monarchs and offered her in a svayamvara.)*

It was in these circumstances Kuntibhoja invited all the monarchs to offer her in a Svayamvara in accordance with the custom prevailing at that time. The svayamvara was duly conducted and Kuntī accepted Pāṇḍu who looked most prominent among the king in the palace of Kuntibhoja. This episode is seen described in the epic in just thirteen

verses.<sup>5</sup> The epic in this context does not make mention of any defect on the past of Kuntī. An impression is created here to the effect that everything took place all of a sudden. The expected significance that needs to be attached with the introduction of one of the heroines of the epic is seen missing in this part of the epic. After the marriage of Kuntī with Pāṇḍu, Bhīṣma thought that it would be better if Pāṇḍu has a second wife.

ततः शान्तनवो भीष्मो राज्ञः पाण्डोर्यशस्विनः ।

विवाहस्यापरस्यार्थे चकार मतिमान् मतिम् ॥<sup>6</sup>

*(Sometime after, Bhīṣma, the intelligent son of Śanthanu, set his heart upon getting Pāṇḍu married to a second wife.)*

The word ‘*mathiman*’ in this sloka appears to be very significant. It suggests that Bhīṣma was intelligent enough to see through the fact that, after all, Kuntī was a woman with a defect. Despite her merits Kuntī was one who became a mother before her marriage. Bhīṣma then went to the king of Madra and sought his sister Mādri as the wife of Pāṇḍu. Mādri was married to Pāṇḍu after giving much wealth to the

king of Madra in accordance with the custom prevailing in that country.

After receiving kanyāśulka from Bhīṣma the king of Madra gave away his sister to Bhīṣma as the wife of Pāṇḍu. So the spirit of the epic also appears to be seized of the inherent defect of Kuntī.

### **3.3. Predicament of Pāṇḍu**

The predicament of Pāṇḍu is closely linked with life of Kuntī. Pāṇḍu, without spending much time with his newly wedded wives, leaves Hastinapura with a purpose to expand his kingdom. He expands the Kuru Kingdom by winning the wars and brings a lot of wealth. But neither Kuntī nor Mādrī could enjoy the wealth that was brought to Kuru by Pāṇḍu. He distributed all the wealth among Bhīṣma, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura. Pāṇḍu then moved to the forest with his wives, leaving the luxurious life of Palace. His purpose of leaving to forest is mysterious. The epic mentions that Pāṇḍu retires to forest on mastering over his senses. He has mastered his senses but engages in hunting is seen as very contrast. Whatever the reason may be, Kuntī and Mādrī had accompanied Pāṇḍu. The life at forest cannot be cordial like a



Palace but Kuntī never hesitates to follow Pāṇḍu to forest. During the forest life, Pāṇḍu had been cursed by the sage Kindama as Pāṇḍu had shot him with an arrow when the latter was engaged in conjugal pleasure with his wife in disguise of deer.<sup>7</sup>

The act committed by Pāṇḍu was a heinous one since he had pierced both the male and female deers were engaged in physical contact, an act that is a sacred to all the creations of universe. Pāṇḍu had pierced both of them with five of his sharp arrows. It was then the curse from sage Kindama was pronounced.

प्रियया सह संवासं प्राप्य कामविमोहितः ।

त्वमप्यस्यामवस्थायां प्रेतलोकं गमिष्यसि ।।<sup>8</sup>

*(When approaching the wife lustfully, thou wilt unite with her even as I had done with mine, in that very state shalt thou have to go to the world of the spirits.)*

So the fate of Pāṇḍu, the king of Hastinapura, was sealed. He cannot thereafter lead a normal conjugal life with his two wives. Any

union with Pāṇḍu as husband and wife would lead to his death. This has not only affected adversely his own life but also the destiny of Kuntī and Mādri. The situation was all the more tragic since all of them were childless at the time of the pronouncement of curse.

### **3.4. Observance of the Custom of Niyoga**

The curse which affected Pāṇḍu was a significant turning point in Kuntī's life and was a twist to the main story of *MB*. The curse brought out significant changes in the character and personality of Pāṇḍu also. It is well known that Kuntī obtained three children namely Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna from the great Gods Yama, Vāyu and Indra respectively. She gave birth to these children by observing Niyoga under the command of Pāṇḍu. It was Pāṇḍu who himself pressurized Kuntī to invoke the Gods by means of her divine mantra. Before that Pāṇḍu had asked Kuntī to be subjected to the custom of Niyoga- on the death of husband or if the husband is impotent any person chosen by husband or close relatives can have children in a woman.

However, acquiring children through Niyoga is disgracing for a woman and will be black mark on her morality. But Kuntī had to accede to the request of Pāṇḍu and acquired three sons. Even after having three sons through niyoga Pāṇḍu kept on insisting her to have more children.<sup>9</sup> Kuntī refuses to his further requests but she had to share the mantra with Mādri. Mādri acquires twin sons through the boon which is acquired by Kuntī by her exemplary hospitality. So Kuntī had to bear all four of her children by means of the mantra given to her by Durvāsa. So the curse of Kindama on her husband drastically changed the character of Kuntī. Moreover the great duty of bringing up the first three Pāṇḍava-s and the twins of Mādri fell on her shoulders. So the mother in Kuntī underwent so many tragic experiences since her sons and the twins had no benefactor to protect them. She brought them up by showering all her unlimited motherly love on them. Hence the defeat of her children was her own defeat; their failures were her own failure. The insults and injustice meted out her children caused unbearable agony in her since there was virtually nobody to help her. She had to keep her mind and

eyes open since her children staying as princes at the palace of Hastinapura had to be saved from the continuous plotting and intrigue by the Kaurava-s. So Kuntī transformed herself into a mother in the truest sense of the word.

### **3.5. The Intrigues of Hastinapura**

Kuntī's struggles multiplied with the demise of Pāṇḍu and Mādri. The responsibility to look after five children of Pāṇḍu i.e. three of her own and two of Mādri, fell on the shoulder of Kuntī. She arrived at Hastinapura with five children expecting that they will grow in the Palace safely with all privileges of Princess. They had all the rights to live at the palace and for the Kingdom especially on account of the fact that the kingdom was enlarged by the strength of Pāṇḍu. But the situations at Hastinapura were different and contrary to her expectations. There formed a conflict between Pāṇḍava-s and Kaurava-s from their childhood onwards. Duryodhana, the eldest son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra was so worried about the rising popularity, valour, kindness and wisdom of

Pāṇḍavā-s. Kuntī's life became insecure by the conspiracies of Duryodhana and she did not receive any moral support or consolation from Dhṛtarāṣṭra who had the responsibility to protect her and Pāṇḍava-s in the absence of Pāṇḍu. Gāndhārī was also silent at many crucial occasions which were so shocking and unbearable to Kuntī. Several Painful and tragic occurrences were faced by Kuntī and Pāṇḍava-s due to the heartless activities of Duryodhana. Few of the major incidents as portrayed in *MB* are outlined below:-

- Duryodhana attempted to kill Bhīma by food poisoning, snake bite and dropping in water after fastening with rope due to jealous of Bhīma's power and valour.
- Duryodhana along with Śakuni prepared a plot to kill Kuntī and her sons by burning. They send them to a house made of lac at Vāraṇāvata that was highly inflammable. Kuntī and sons escaped narrowly by luck from there. Subsequent to their escape from

Vāraṇāvata they had to live in the forest, at the houses of brahmins and potters under many hardships.

- After some negotiations Kuntī and sons get an unimproved region i.e, Khāṇḍavaprastha as their share from the Kuru Kingdom. But Pāṇḍava-s converted the area as a sovereign kingdom through their valour and power. But the kingdom and prosperity has been grabbed from Pāṇḍava-s by Duryodhana through the gambling.
- Apart from snatching away the hard earned kingdom from her sons, Kuntī also had to see her daughter-in-law insulted cruelly at the court of Kuru Kingdom in front of great scholars and veterans. The Kuru-s with Bhīṣma at their head stood there without any interference while Draupadī, was attacked in the assembly hall. Yudhiṣṭhira was robbed of his kingdom and made a stipulation regarding his exile in the forest.

- Pāṇḍava-s were sentenced to twelve years exile and one year incognito. Kuntī was separated from her sons during these long years and was living at the house of Vidura.
- Finally, when Pāṇḍava-s returned to Hastinapura after their period of exile, the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra denied the share of their ancestral wealth that was entitled to them

Dhṛtarāṣṭra stood as irresponsible and neglected Pāṇḍava-s in all the atrocities of Duryodhana towards Pāṇḍava-s. In *Udyoga.P.* Yudhiṣṭhira mentions the miseries of Kuntī which she experienced at Hastinapura during the childhood days of Pāṇḍava-s.<sup>10</sup> Kuntī reared Pāṇḍava-s from their infancy and saved them from the wickedness of Duryodhana like a boat saving the ship from the great terrific death in the sea. Troubles have often been encountered for the sake of, Pāṇḍava-s. Kuntī stood sturn and overcame all kinds of diverse situations by her will power. But she collapsed when Pāṇḍava-s were defeated in the game of dice. Her sorrows were unbearable while Pāṇḍava-s went to the

forest. Kuntī laments that Pāṇḍu and Mādrī were fortunate because they need not see the miseries of their sons. Kuntī's conditions was excessively pathetic during the departure of her sons to forest. Her state of mind is well portrayed by the poet in the following lines:

धन्यां चातीन्द्रियज्ञानामिमां प्राप्तां परां गतिम् ।  
मन्ये तु माद्रीं धर्मज्ञां कल्याणीं सर्वथैव तु ॥  
रत्या मत्या च गत्या च ययाहमभिसन्धिता ।  
जीवितप्रियतां मध्यं धिङ्मां संक्लेशभागिनीम् ॥<sup>11</sup>

*(Fortunate also was the virtuous Mādrī, as I regard her today, who had, it seems, a fore-knowledge of what would happen and who on that account, obtained the high path of emancipation and every blessing therewith, Ah, Mādrī looked upon me as her stay, and her mind and her affection were ever fixed on me. Oh, fie on my desire of life, owing to which I suffer all this woe.)*

Here the epic brings out the unbearable sorrow of Kuntī who loved her sons and daughter-in-law more than anybody. Iravathy Carve observes:



“Mādrī burnt herself on the king’s funeral pyre. Mādrī’s lot in choosing death was indeed hard but the life which Kuntī was left to drudge alone was equally hard if not harder”.<sup>12</sup>

Kuntī had not been in the habit of complaining or wailing even during her childhood. But she wept aloud in front of Kṛṣṇa when she heard about the hardships that her sons had faced during their exile period. On this occasion she lost control over emotions. Kuntī loved and cared all the five Pāṇḍava-s and her daughter in law more than anyone. After the demise of Pāṇḍu, the children were everything to her. Thus the intensity of her sorrow of separation from her children for long thirteen years can be presumed.

### **3.6. Kuntī and Karṇa at the Eve of Arms Tournament**

Kuntī came across with Karṇa, her eldest son, at the eve of arms tournament conducted at Hastinapura. By then Karṇa became great soldier with tremendous archery skills acquired from great sage Paraśurāma. During the tournament of arms the assembly of men and

women were divided into two parties, when the Pāṇḍava-s and Kaurava-s took positions in it. Kuntī and Gāndhārī with their royal retinue had made their entrance with great joy. Kuntī had been proud of her sons expected expertise in arms in the use of various arms. She was so sure of the performance especially by the great Arjuna. Suddenly the atmosphere changed and everything was surrounded by an air of enmity and division. Karṇa arrived at the venue of arms tournament challenging Arjuna. Karṇa's entrance added insult to injury. Unexpected entry of Karṇa by challenging Arjuna and his divine appearance was wondering to all. Kuntī recognized her first born son at first sight because her eldest son had almost had a divine birth with pair of shining ear rings and a coat of mail that was something which could not be hidden from the eyes of others. The encounter between Karṇa and Arjuna was most poignant experience to Kuntī. She knew that Karṇa was her first born baby, but she could not naturally express it. At particular stage in the tournament of weapons when Karṇa was bent upon having a single handed fight with Arjuna and was challenging the latter, Kṛpa well versed in all the

precepts of virtue and rules, asked Karṇa to declare publically the lineage of his father and mother and the royal line in which he was born.

He says:

अयं पृथायास्तनयः कनीयान् पाण्डुनन्दनः ।  
कौरवो भवता सार्धं द्वन्द्वयुद्धं करिष्यति ॥  
त्वमप्येवं महाबाहो मातरं पितरं कुलम् ।  
कथयस्व नरेन्द्राणां येषां त्वं कुलभूषणम् ॥<sup>13</sup>

*(This Pāṇḍava, who is the youngest son of kuntī, belongeth to the Kaurava race. He will engage in combat with thee. But, O mighty armed one, thou too must tell us the lineage and the name of thy father and mother and the royal line of which thou art the ornament.)*

Kṛpa added that the Pāṇḍava-s being the princes shall not fight a duel with men of inferior lineage. In this context Duryodhana declares that the sources of heroes and rivers are unknown and nobody goes on enquiring about it.

क्षत्रियाणां बलं ज्येष्ठं योद्धव्यं क्षत्रबन्धुना ।  
शूराणां च नदीनां च दुर्विदाः प्रभवाः किल ॥<sup>14</sup>

*(Might is the cardinal virtue of a kṣatriya, and even a kṣatriya of inferior birth deserveth to be fought with. The lineage of heroes, like the sources of a lordly river, is ever unknown.)*

He adds that a deer never gives birth to a tiger and Karṇa, born with a natural armor and ear rings and as bright as sun and possessing all auspicious marks, cannot have an inferior origin of birth. When this entire dispute was going on Kuntī sat helplessly among royal women witnessing the episode whose centers of attention were her own dear sons Karṇa and Arjuna.

Kuntī became the hapless mother who was destined to witness the expression of enmity between her own two sons, who ever won in the duel between Arjuna and Karṇa. Anyway Kuntī was destined to lose. Every moment of the arms tournament was high drama which filled Kuntī's heart with deep sorrow and helplessness. Her heart throbbed but she had concealed it. The tempo of incidents in the arms tournament

reached at such a climax that Kuntī fell down overcome by a state of unconsciousness.

Kuntī had to keep the birth of Karṇa as a secret till almost the last phase of her life. It is only after the war that Kuntī tells Pāṇḍava-s that Karṇa had been their eldest brother. The burden and sorrow of the great secret had its negative impact in the life of Kuntī. She always had the feeling that she did something not befitting a queen or the illustrious mother of Dharmaputra, Bhīma and Arjuna. There were occasions when she was tested to choose between the Pāṇḍava-s and her own eldest son. It is indeed a play of destiny that Arjuna became Karṇa's arch enemy and vice versa.

During the episode of the *Sabhā.P.* where Draupadī is mistreated, it was Karṇa who uttered most foul words against Draupadī. This incident of Karṇa's misbehaviour is never seen referred to by Kuntī. She would have certainly known about how Karṇa mistreated Draupadī But the author of the epic never gives a hint to show Kuntī's response on it.

### 3.7. Kuntī's Pre-War Meeting with Karṇa

Kuntī's encounter with Karṇa just before the war is another situation which throws light on the character of Kuntī. Her mission was to win over Karṇa to the side of Pāṇḍava-s, which would ultimately mean the cancellation of the Great War, for Kuntī thought that the Kauravā-s could not wage the war successfully without Karṇa. Kuntī's sudden decision to meet Karṇa before the war was inspired by the words of Vidura who spoke to her after Kṛṣṇa's mission for peace had failed. Kuntī perhaps knew that she did not have any more authority over Karṇa in order to seek his help. The fact that she had done injustice to her eldest son always haunted Kuntī but after the failure of Kṛṣṇa's mission the only way to avert the war was her meeting with Karṇa. Her timidity and reluctance were too insignificant a reason when compared with the greater mission of averting the war which meant the slaughter of thousands of people. Infact Kuntī extend Karṇa the leadership of Pāṇḍava-s and subsequent royal authority. It can be won over easily once Karṇa switched over to his alliance to Pāṇḍava-s. But inwardly

Kuntī̄ also moved by Karṇa's dignity in keeping his promise to Duryodhana and his unwavering commitment to dharma even at testing times.

After the war during the period of Kuntī̄'s retirement to the forest Vyāsa once approached her and asked her to seek a favour from him. Kuntī̄ had no hesitation to request Vyāsa to permit her to have a meeting with Karṇa.<sup>15</sup> It shows that how her sorrow for Karṇa had still been burning in her heart. In this context also Kuntī̄ narrates the episode of the birth of Karṇa. Kuntī̄ tells in this context that it was her failure to acknowledge her eldest son even after he had been a grown up person.

स मया मूढया पुत्रो ज्ञायमानोऽप्युपेक्षितः ।

तन्मां दहति विप्रर्षे यथा सुविदितं तव ॥<sup>16</sup>

*(Foolish that I am, although he knew me for his mother when he grew up, yet I made no effort to acknowledge him. This burns me. O Regenerate Ṛṣi as is well known to thee.)*

On another occasion also Kuntī confessed her great mistake. She says to Yudhiṣṭhira:

आयसं हृदयं नूनं मन्दाया मम पुत्रक ।  
यत् सूर्यजमपश्यन्त्याः शतधा न विदीर्यते ॥  
एवं गते तु किं शक्यं मया कर्तुमरिंदम ।  
मम दोषोऽयमत्यर्थं ख्यापितो यन्न सूर्यजः ॥<sup>17</sup>

*(Surely, my son, this heart of mine is made of steel, since it does not break into a hundred pieces at not seeing that child born of the Sun god. When such has been the case, O chastiser of foes, what can I now do? I am very much to blame for not having proclaimed the truth about the birth of Sūrya's child.)*

Kuntī had several occasions to reveal the truth about Karṇa, but her royal lineage and fear for the loss of dignity made her refrain from such an attempt. All her wrong doings were torturing her with the agony of a wound that never heals. One of the big questions remains unanswered in the epic as to why Kuntī chose not reveal the birth of Karṇa to her sons who were so virtuous and meritorious that they can



absorb the situation of Karṇa accepting to be their elder brother. This very question was raised by Pāṇḍava-s to Kuntī after the war.

### **3.8. Kuntī and the Mahābhārata War**

There were several factors which moulded the situations leading to the Great War, one of which was Kuntī's sense of wrath and revenge because of the concerted attempts on the part of Kaurava-s to deprive their sons of their due patrimony. She was under the impression that her sons had to wage a righteous war to win over what they actually deserve. In a sense, a war was being imposed on the Pāṇḍava-s and Kuntī knew quite well that there was no escape from it. It was a question of revival of her sons and herself. As long as the Pāṇḍava-s were the natural heirs to the kingdom, the Kaurava-s were not going to treat them as friends, so when the friendship and magnanimity was refuted and the language of the war was the only solution, Kuntī advised her sons to stand up the situation and win what they had to win. It is in *Udyog.P.* that Kṛṣṇa's last mission of peace is described. Kṛṣṇa chose to go over to the

Kaurava-s in an attempt to bring out peace and avert the Great War. On this occasion, Kuntī as a result of her long sufferings tells Kṛṣṇa, how she feels that the war is a certainty. She says that though the attempt to peace is welcome a kṣatriya cannot choose begging instead of fighting.<sup>18</sup>

It was certain that the Kaurava-s take the mission of Kṛṣṇa as an attempt to beg for peace. On this context the following points that throw light on the character of Kuntī.

- Kuntī tells Kṛṣṇa that the dependence to others is worse than death.<sup>19</sup>
- The insult caused to Draupadī is unpardonable. Such an act cannot be exposed by any stretch of magnanimity.<sup>20</sup>
- As far as kṣatriya-s are concerned what is done is to be won over by courage and not by an inopportune display of a sense of peace.<sup>21</sup>

Her long lonely stay at Vidura's home for thirteen years in constant anxiety and fear thinking of her sons is ample reason to have a

sense of revenge towards the enemy. The attitude of the Kaurava-s in turning the princes to beggars in the forest suffering untold hardships is also reason for the war. When Kṛṣṇa returns after his mission of peace to meet Kuntī at the residence of Vidura she sends a message to Yudhiṣṭhira quoting the story of Viduḷa. The story indicates the necessity to rise to the occasion to wage the war when it becomes inevitable. In the story of Viduḷa she tells her son that a momentary blaze is better than remaining as smoke for long time and one is to do his duty irrespective of the result.<sup>22</sup> The person, destitute of wrath and given to exercise forgiveness, is neither a woman nor a man.<sup>23</sup> Heroes are respected to exhibit their prowess instead of sulking over peace.<sup>24</sup> To live in poverty in being princess is nothing short of death.

The above mentioned situations portray Kuntī as an intelligent mother and woman who is capable of analyzing situations and taking right decisions. The dominant factor in Kuntī's personality is her strength of character and not weakness in taking decisions.

### **3.9. Kuntī's Mindset during and after the War**

Kuntī does not make her appearance during the course of the occurrence of the war. Even known crucial occasions like the murder of Abhimanyu, Kuntī's response is definitely wanting. The author of the epic also does not allow us a peep on the response of Kuntī even when Karṇa falls. Perhaps the author does so in order to maintain the tempo of the war. All lamentations were postponed to the post war situations. This is also true with respect to other major female characters in the epic. The author does not provide any hint of the response of Kuntī with respect to numerous ferocious happenings in the war. One is left to guess that Kuntī resign to her to suffer all the agonies and anxieties of the war alone surmising over her destiny.

The victorious Pāṇḍava-s after the war came to see their mother after a long gap of time. They had not even met her even when they returned from their life in exile. Now the Pāṇḍava-s vanguard the enemy with the force and Yudhiṣṭhira was duly crowned as the emperor of

Hastinapura. Kuntī became the mother of the emperor. But there was no display of high sounding words and expressions of joy on the part of Kuntī. The following events in the post war situations that throw light on the character of Kuntī need to be highlighted.

Kuntī makes the most heart rending and crucial confession of her life to her sons after the war. She tells them that Karṇa who was their arch enemy had been none other than their eldest brother. In a moment charged with pain and anger, Yudhiṣṭhira tells Kuntī that all the pathetic situations underwent could have been averted if she had concealed this fact of the birth of Karṇa.

अहो भवत्याः मन्त्रस्य गूहनेन वयं हताः।<sup>25</sup>

(Alas, in consequences of the concealment of this affair by thee, we have been undone.)

Another crucial occasion is also there when Bhīma asks his mother why she prompted them to wage the war if she had made up her mind to retire to the forest after the war.

### 3.10. Kuntī and Mādrī

Kuntī and Mādrī, both co-wives of Pāṇḍu had a somewhat cordial relation with each other. After Kindama's curse, Pāṇḍu made up his mind to retire from royal life and chose to travel to the forest for leading a peaceful life. It was but natural that Kuntī and Mādrī followed him to the forest where with the consent of Pāṇḍu three sons were born to Kuntī in Gods. That was the result of continuous compulsion from Pāṇḍu who was fearful that there would be nobody to continue to the race after his demise. This episode is described in *Ādi.P.*<sup>26</sup> It was in this context that Mādrī becomes jealous of Kuntī because of the birth of three sons. Mādrī asked Pāṇḍu that she also may be allowed to make use of mantra. This was readily granted by Kuntī and two sons Nakula and Sahadeva were born to Mādrī in Aświns with the permission of Pāṇḍu. It was when Mādrī requested for a second application of the Mantra that was disallowed to do so by Kuntī fearing that her number of children will be higher than that of Kuntī. Here are the words of Kuntī in the epic.

तमुवाचाथ पृथा राजन् रहस्युक्ता तदा सती ।  
उक्ता सकृद् द्वन्द्वमेषा लेभे तेनास्मि वञ्चिता ॥  
बिभेम्यस्याः परिभवात् कुस्त्रीणां गतिरीदृशी ।  
नाज्ञासिषामहं मूढा द्वन्द्वाह्वाने फलद्वयम् ॥  
तस्मान्नाहं नियोक्तव्या त्वयैवेषोऽस्तु वरो मम<sup>27</sup>

*(O king, addressed by her lord in private, Prthā replied to him, “having given her the formula of invocation only once, she hath, O king, managed to obtain two sons. Have I not been thus deceived by her, I fear, O king, that she will soon surpass me in the number of her children. This, indeed, is the way of all wicked women, fool that I was, I did not know that by invoking the twin gods, I could obtain at one birth twin children. I beseech thee, O king, do not command me any further. Let this be the boon granted by thee to me. )*

This episode betrays the fact that both Kuntī and Mādrī were ordinary women possessed of all the merits and demerits common to them. But the greatest compliment for Kuntī from Mādrī comes on the

occasion when the latter decided to enter the funeral fire of her deceased

Lord. Here are the words of epic author.

न चाप्यहं वर्तयन्ती निर्विशेषं सुतेषु ते ।  
वृत्तिमार्ये चरिष्यामि स्पृशेदेनस्तथा च माम् ॥  
तस्मान्मे सुतयोः कुन्ति वर्तितव्यं स्वपुत्रवत्  
मां च कामयमानोऽयं राजा प्रेतवशं गतः ॥<sup>28</sup>

*(O revered one, if I survive thee, it is certain I shall not be able to rear thy children as if they were mine. Will not sin touch me on that account, but, thou, O Kuntī shalt be able to bring up my sons as if they were thine.)*

The above words of Mādri lay bare the fact that Kuntī was a noble person who can rise to any greater heights when situation demands.

### **3.11. Kuntī and Hiḍimbā**

The story of Bhīma's affair with Hiḍimbā which is described in the *Adi. P.* was a test to the mother-in-law in Kuntī. Hiḍimbā's declaration of love towards Bhīma was taken in its true spirit by Kuntī.



Hiḍimbā said that she chose Bhīma as her husband leaving her friends, relatives and religion and she was prepared to die willingly if her love towards Bhīma was spurned.<sup>29</sup>

Kuntī recognized Hiḍimbā as woman where her love was chaste and true. She did not disbelieve the words of Hiḍimbā to the effect that she would bring Bhīma back to her when night sets in. Then Kuntī was virtually happy that Bhīma had a son in Hiḍimbā. Never did she bear any kind of ill-will towards Hiḍimbā because of the fact that she, as a woman, could understand that Hiḍimbā's words were sincere and they carried conviction. Demons or God what mattered was whether one's words are in consonance with one's deeds.

### **3.12. Kuntī and Draupadī**

Kuntī was not present at the palace of Drupada when the competition for archers was being held in connection with the marriage of Draupadī. Many had come to take part in the competition and king after king was failing to string the bow and shoot the target. The

Pāṇḍava-s were there in disguise of brāhmaṇa-s. Arjuna advanced towards the bow and stood like a mountain before it. Walking around the bow he finally took it up and stringed it within a twinkling of an eye. Arjuna took up five arrows and shot the mark and brought it down on the ground and in the next moment Draupadī accepted Arjuna as her lord with a garland of flowers and Arjuna took her to the camp where they were residing. The Pāṇḍava-s shouted from outside the hut that they had won a bhikṣā or ‘alms’ on that day. The most significant occurrence regarding the response of Kuntī is described in this context. Kuntī was inside the room and she did not see her sons but heard their voice. From inside the potter’s house which it was Pāṇḍava-s temporary home Kuntī told them:

कुटीगता सा त्वनवेक्ष्य पुत्रान्  
प्रोवाच भुङ्क्तेतिसमेत्य सर्वे।<sup>30</sup>

*(Kuntī who was there within the room did not see her sons, replied, saying ‘Enjoy ye all what ye have obtained’)*

In the next moment she sees Draupadī and exclaims! ‘Alas What I have said’. It may sound silly that the Pāṇḍava-s decided to be the five husbands to a single woman simply because of an inadvertent comment by Kuntī. She was a mother who was living amidst many an enemy and it is probable that she would have desired to have complete unity and love among her five sons. So unknowingly and unconsciously Kuntī, the practical mother would have thought that their friendship will be everlasting if they shared a common wife. But Kuntī in this context behaved like a normal, possessive, practical mother who thought only of the welfare of her sons against the back drop of impending dangers to her sons. But as a woman Kuntī never thought of the destiny of a hapless woman who had to share herself among the five husbands. The epic does not mention any positive or negative response from Draupadī in this context. Draupadī simply stands there as an embodiment of patience and modesty. The epic writer also does not give any hint to show that she had some kind of silent protest while sharing herself among five males or when she heard the words from Kuntī. Draupadī thought that Arjuna

alone would be her lord but the situation faced by Draupadī was one from which many women will shirk herself away. What are significant here are the ingenuity and the practical sense of Kuntī. It is veiled in her inherent innocence. This is all the more an evident fact that on the previous occasions she does not betray an attitude sharing the alms equally among her sons. On such occasions half of what was gained was given to Bhīma and the rest was shared equally among the other four.

निवेदयन्ति स्म तदा कुन्त्या भैक्षं सदा निशि ।  
तया विभक्तान् भागांस्ते भुञ्जते स्म पृथक् पृथक् ॥  
अर्धं ते भुञ्जते वीराः सह मात्रा परंतपाः ।  
अर्धं सर्वस्य भैक्षस्य भीमो भुङ्क्ते महाबलः ॥<sup>31</sup>

*(At nightfall they placed before Kuntī all they gathered in their mendicant tours, and Kuntī used to divide the whole amongst them, each taking what was allotted to him. And those heroic chastiers of foes, with their mother, together took one moiety of the whole, while the mighty Bhīma alone took the other moiety.)*

Moreover, common sense tell us that the Kuntī's innocence in this context is farfetched since she knew quite well that her sons had gone to participate in the competition in connection with the marriage of Draupadī.<sup>32</sup>

The silence of Kuntī in *Sabhā.P.* when Draupadī was cruelly assaulted is all the more significant. The epic author does not tell us what Kuntī did when Draupadī was being dragged from harem to the assembly-hall at Hastinapura by Duḥśāsana. All circumstantial evidence lead to the fact that Kuntī was very much present in the harem when Duḥśāsana, under the command of Duryodhana, stormed into the harem to take Draupadī by force. The epic tells us that Draupadī ran to the aged kuru women for help in the harem lamenting loudly when Duḥśāsana came into the inner quarters. Again it is significant that Draupadī did not approach either Kuntī or Gāndhārī, for help in such a helpless situation. The silence left behind the epic author in this context is pregnant with many a possible interpretation.

The following points with regard to the silence of Kuntī at the time of assault on Draupadī are noteworthy:

- On several occasions Kuntī declares that the most poignant event of her life is the assault on Draupadī.<sup>33</sup>
- In the *Udyog.P.* Kuntī chastises her sons for standing helpless, despite their heroism, at the time of one of the most crucial occurrences in their life namely the assault on their own wife.<sup>34</sup>
- In *Āsrama.P.* Kuntī unexpectedly make a queer statement to her sons to the effect that she fell unconscious at the crucial moment when the attack on Draupadī was being mounted.<sup>35</sup>
- Kuntī also frequently makes mention of the unpardonable silence on the part of the elders of Hastinapura except Vidura on the occasion when Draupadī (clad in only a single garment), was being forcefully dragged into the court-hall by Duḥśāsana.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.13. Kuntī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Kuntī considered Dhṛtarāṣṭra, her husband's elder brother as equal to her Father-in-law and she served and respected him with utmost care and devotion when he was in distress after the war. But she had not received any kind of moral support or help from him at any of her crucial situation. Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not do his duty as a king or a brother-in-law to her and did not take care of her and Pāṇḍava-s. He was the king of Kuru-s and had the responsibility to protect Kuntī and Pāṇḍava-s in absence of Pāṇḍu. But he skips from his duties due to the boundless love for his son and also by his own greed for sovereignty. His irresponsible nature towards Kuntī and her sons drowned them into deep sorrow. Through the words of Sanjaya in *Udyoga. P.* the epic summarises the hostilities of Dhṛtarāṣṭra to Kuntī and Pāṇḍava-s.<sup>37</sup>

- Dhṛtarāṣṭra did not see things in an impartial manner.
- Dhṛtarāṣṭra was the king so he was expected to be just to all.

- The kingdom of Indraprastha won by the arms of Pāṇḍava-s was taken over by Dhṛtarāṣṭra through foul means.
- Like a thoughtless child Dhṛtarāṣṭra repeatedly laughs on the defeat of the Pāṇḍava-s at dice and then they were sent as exiles.

Kuntī was a lost woman disregarded to the maximum on many an occasions throughout her life. Despite the fact that Dhṛtarāṣṭra inflicted deep pain on her on several occasions. But Kuntī does not speak a word against him. While analyzing the epic episodes one cannot see an incident where Kuntī blamed or raged with Dhṛtarāṣṭra. She only blamed her father for her sufferings. She had many expectations when she arrived at Hastinapura after Pāṇḍu's death. But the situations were adverse. After winning the war the Pāṇḍava-s became the authorities of kuru kingdom. Then Dhṛtarāṣṭra was under the protection of Pāṇḍava-s. But then Kuntī expressed no ill-will towards him and served the blind old couples with utmost care.



### 3.14. Kuntī and Vidura

Kuntī had a peculiar relationship with Vidura. She had great respect towards him as she thought that Vidura was one who never wavered from dharma on crucial occasions.

वृत्तेन हि भवत्यार्यो न धनेन न विद्यया ॥<sup>38</sup>

*(Neither by learning, nor by wealth doth one become worthy of homage. It is by disposition alone that one becomes respectable.)*

क्षत्तुः शीलमलंकारो लोकान् विष्टभ्य तिष्ठति ॥<sup>39</sup>

*(Endued with great intelligence and profound wisdom, the character of the illustrious Vidura, like unto an ornament adorns the whole world.)*

The above verses emphasize on the strength of character rather than wealth and knowledge of a person. Such persons normally does not fail on crucial occasions. And in the case of Vidura, despite odd circumstances, he stood on his stand and shouted at Kaurava-s on the occasion of the assault on Draupadī. Kuntī stayed at the house of Vidura

during the thirteen years when Pāṇḍava-s were in exile. There is no reference in the epic that Kuntī had received any kind of help or consolation from the part of Dhṛtarāṣṭra or other elders of the Kuru-s except Vidura on those tragic situations.

### **3.15. Kuntī and Gāndhārī**

Kuntī and Gāndhārī were both queens. But before the great war, except for a short period when Pāṇḍu was the king Kuntī never wielded royal authority. But Gāndhārī had been enjoying the authority of the queen of Hastinapura. Gāndhārī had one hundred and one children: Kuntī had only four besides among whom one, Karṇa, had been treated as her illegitimate son. Kuntī had the fortune of treating Nakula and Sahadeva also her own sons.

Gāndhārī was almost indifferent when Kuntī, after the sudden demise of Pāṇḍu return to Hastinapura with her five children. Kuntī was almost coming like refugee and an encouraging word from Gāndhārī, the queen of Hastinapura could have been the great consolation to Kuntī.

Injustice was being continuously meted out to Pāṇḍava-s ever since their arrival to Hastinapura after the demise of their father. Kuntī was a mute spectator of the numerous occasions. Then even the life of her sons was being rendered at stake. She silently suffered everything. During the time when the Pāṇḍava-s were engaged in their forest life, Kuntī had been staying with Vidura. Perhaps Vidura would have thought that Kuntī would rather be insecure in the palace of Hastinapura given the deep rooted enmity between Kaurava-s and Pāṇḍava-s. The epic does not tell us the attitude of Gāndhārī to the proposition of Vidura that it was better that Kuntī would stay at his home. If Gāndhārī had been generous enough to ask Kuntī to stay with her at Hastinapura their relation would have become deep rooted despite the enmity between their sons. The author of the epic leaves many a space in the epic, charged with the eloquence of silence giving scope for several interpretations. So for the long period of thirteen years Gāndhārī and Kuntī had been living apart, the former like a queen and the latter like an ordinary woman.

Before the occurrence of the War Gāndhārī advises Duryodhana to desist from war. She was making an earnest attempt to prevail upon her

husband and son to enable them to withdraw from the impending calamity called the War. On the other hand Kuntī attempts to mentally equip her sons for the war.

According to tradition and belief human life is an inevitable undercurrence of peace and quietude, after the initial torrence of violent events and incidents. Such a fact is evident on the last phase of the life of Kuntī and Gāndhārī. Both had retired to the forest along with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura. Kuntī chooses to spend the last days of her life attending and nursing Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Even before that under the regin of Yudhiṣṭhira after the war, Kuntī had been rendering her service to Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra along with her daughters-in-law. Kuntī does not exhibit an attitude of disregard and scorn towards the aged couple recollecting their past deeds. Kuntī's character here assumes heights of nobility and virtue which is in contrast against the attitude of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī towards Kuntī at Hastinapura. The epic author perhaps gives the hint that between the two Gāndhārī and Kuntī the latter emerges at a high place of nobler merits and sublime character.

Kuntī could not experience safety and pleasure in any of the stages of her life. While she was a baby her father gives away her to Kuntibhoja. In her adolescence she was entrusted to serve a short tempered sage. In her youth, she spent most of her time in forest. She wandered through forests and hills even without a residence. When power and wealth near to her she simply left all that and accepted the ascetic life. The nobility and high souled nature of Kuntī is evident when she transforms her post war life as an occasion not to enjoy the joys of royal life but to dedicate herself in service of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī.

## End Notes

1. *Ādi.P Chs.67, 111; Vana.P. Chs. 303-309; Udyoga. P.Ch.144 and Āśrama.P. Ch. 30.*
2. *Ādi. P. 111. 4*
3. *ibid, 111. 11, 12*
4. *ibid, 112. 2, 3*
5. *ibid, Ch. 112*
6. *ibid, 113. 1*
7. *ibid, 118.27*
8. *ibid, 118. 31*
9. *ibid, 123.76*
10. *Udyoga.P.83.37-40*
11. *Sabhā.P. 79. 19, 20*
12. Carvey Iravathy., *Yuganta*, Disha Books, Hyderabad, 1993, p. 43.
13. *Ādi. P. 136.31, 32*
14. *ibid, 137. 11*
15. *Āśrama. P. 30.18*
16. *ibid, 30. 17*
17. *ibid, 16. 12,13*
18. *Udyoga.P.132.31*
19. *ibid, 90.74*
20. *ibid, 137.16*
21. *ibid, 132.7*
22. *ibid, 133.15*
23. *ibid, 133.33*
24. *ibid, 133.44,45*

25. *Strī.P. 27. 21*
26. *Ādi. P. Chs.120-124*
27. *ibid,124. 26, 27, 28*
28. *ibid, 125. 27, 28*
29. *ibid, 155.7*
30. *ibid, 191. 2*
31. *ibid, 157.5,6*
32. *ibid, 184.1,2*
33. *Udyoga.P.90.57, 85, 86, 87; 137.17-19; Āsrama. P.17.9-13*
34. *Udyoga.P.90.87; 137.19*
35. *Āsrama. P.17.13*
36. *Udyoga.P 90.50-52; Āsrama. P.17.12*
37. *Udyoga. P.54.5-10*
38. *ibid, 90.53*
39. *ibid, 90.54*

## CHAPTER 4

### **DRAUPADĪ: THE HEROINE PAR EXCELLENCE OF THE EPIC**

The most important woman character in the epic is, perhaps, none other than Draupadī who can be considered the heroine of the main story. She was a woman sans a childhood. She did not have that amazing world of children- the world of little wonders, unlimited smiles, causeless joys and endless mischief. She did not have her childhood friends or the genuine affection of a mother that fills up many a vacant spot in one's character. So when she was launched into life by Drupada, her father, there was this missing in her life, the one that remained as a lasting drawback in her personality.

#### **4.1. An Uncommon Birth**

Draupadī was born out of the sacrificial fire as a grown up woman after the birth of Dhṛṣṭadyumna. It is paradoxical to note that her birth was something which was not sought after by Drupada. He had performed the sacrifice solely for obtaining a son who is proficient to kill



Droṇa in battle.<sup>1</sup> The sacrifice was duly performed paying huge gifts to the priest. It was for the birth of a son and not for a daughter. Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna was born from the sacrifice. He was born as true warrior effulgent as fire, terrible to look at, a crown on his head, body being encased in excellent armor, sword, bow and arrows in hand and roaring like a furious warrior.<sup>2</sup> It was after the birth of Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna that Draupadī arose from the sacrificial altar. She was called Kṛṣṇā since her complexion was black. She appeared extremely lovely with smiling large eyes like lotus leaves. She looked like a celestial maiden and sweet fragrance of blue lotus emitted from her body. The epic sketches her beauty in the following lines:

कुमारी चापि पाञ्चाली वेदिमध्यात् समुत्थिता ।  
सुभगा दर्शनीयाङ्गी स्वसितायतलोचना ।।<sup>3</sup>

*(There rose from the sacrificial altar a daughter, called Pañcālī, who was blessed with good fortune; she was beautiful and her eyes were smiling and large.)*

Despite her matchless beauty and divine appearance it was clear that her birth was not prayed by Drupada that means hers was a birth that was unwanted and unwelcomed by her father. Technically she was the daughter of Drupada and Pṛṣatā. So she was recognized in the name of Draupadī and Pārṣatī. However, there is no ample evidence in the epic to show that she received any parental affection. She had virtually not enjoyed true care of parents like an ordinary girl. So there is possibility to think that the absence of parental love have created a void in her character. As she took birth as a grown up maiden she did not had a childhood with all its innocence, the pretty dreams and the fondling of parents to remember. It is in this aspect the story of the birth of Draupadī assumes significance. For her father she had only been an instrument to win over Arjuna, the most illustrious warrior of the time. Perhaps Draupadī was aware of the fact that the birth of female child was not as welcomed as that of a male one.

To say, the birth of both Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Draupadī were through the yajña and derived from the sacrificial fire. The birth of

Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna was as a result of great desire of Drupada with a purpose to defeat his rival Droṇa. But birth of Draupadī was an unsought one and she had no definite targets. However there were celestial revelations that her birth will cause destruction to Kaurava-s.<sup>4</sup>

If the concept that the god never creates someone without any purpose is taken into consideration a target for Draupadī is indeed. It may be for providing support to Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna to kill Droṇa. Killing of Droṇa was not an easy task. He had extra ordinary knowledge in weapons and as the preceptor of Kuru-s had the support of Kuru Kingdom. So defeating Droṇa was not an easy task or can be done by a person alone. A character was thus mandatory for a split among the disciples of Kuru dynasty and one fraction to support Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna in the fight. From the epic events one can notice that Draupadī has become a cause for transforming the small disputes between Pāṇḍava-s and Kaurava-s to a great war. Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna could achieve the target assigned to him with the support of Pāṇḍava-s. Unless there were no Kurukṣetra war that mainly staged due to the rage of Draupadī or

Pāṇḍava-s were not there to support Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna, the defeat of Droṇa would not have been possible. So one cannot overlook the role played by Draupadī in achieving the desire of her father though it is not illustrated well in the epic.

#### **4.2. Svayamvara or Self- Choice**

The svayamvara of Draupadī is described in the *Svayamvaraparva* of *Ādi.P.* A ceremony for the marriage of Draupadī was arranged by Drupada, the Pāñcāla king with great pomp and show spending a large sum of money on it. The Pāṇḍava-s were given to understand that the svayamvara of Pāñcālī is taking place amidst extraordinary festivities. The epic describes Pañcālī as a lovely maiden of faultless features endowed with fresh youth and intelligence. The fragrance of lotus that emits from the body of Pañcālī was also an attraction. Several illustrious warriors from various quarters of the world were arrived to take part in the competition and to win Draupadī. The Pāṇḍava-s were also present in disguise of brahmin youths.

In the case of Draupadī's svayamvara there was a condition set by Drupada. He arranged an archery competition wherein a replica of a rotating bird was placed on a typical device in the air and a heavy bow and arrow underneath. The warrior who can shoot down the bird using the bow and arrow kept there can win the heart of Draupadī. The bow was very heavy and difficult to lift. Similarly the target was too difficult to achieve. Warriors after warriors including Duryodhana came forward to string the bow and shoot the mark in the air and everybody failed invariably.

The dramatic turns to the events appears when Karṇa enters the fray.<sup>5</sup> He was about to string the bow and shoot the mark. At this moment Draupadī intervenes and declares that she will not chose a son of sūta as her husband. Her expression is seen in the following verse:

दृष्ट्वा तु तं द्रौपदी वाक्यमुच्चै-

र्जगाद नाहं वरयामि सूतम् ।।<sup>6</sup>

*(Seeing Karṇa Draupadī loudly said, "I will not select a sūta for my lord.")*

It was one of the dramatic moments of the epic, filled with great irony, for the incident triggered Karṇa's heart deep rooted enmity towards Draupadī. Draupadī dismisses Karṇa from taking part in the competition stating that he is ineligible as he is the son of a sūta. As per the conditions set the caste or creed was not a condition for participation in the archery competition. The verses of Drupada prior to the commencement of svayamvara were thus:

इदं सज्यं धनुः कृत्वा सज्जैरेभिश्च सायकैः ।

अतीत्य लक्ष्यं यो वेद्वा स लब्धा मत्सुतामिति ॥<sup>7</sup>

*(He who will string this bow and he who will be able to shoot the mark above the machinery with these ornamented arrows, will obtain my daughter.)*

Accordingly Karṇa was very much eligible to participate in the competition. He was also a King of Aṅga then. In a sense Draupadī's declaration to the effect that she would not marry a son of sūta is unnatural given the condition of Drupada that any archer who shoot the

mark will be able to seek Draupadī in marriage. Draupadī also did not take into consideration that Karṇa was a king of Aṅga-s and he was one of the foremost bowmen of the time. So her denial for Karṇa was not so lawful and it was a great insult and injustice done on him. As a result great grudges were developed in Karṇa against Draupadī. In the subsequent part of the epic, one can see that Karṇa leave no chance that he got to insult her and revenge. Karṇa's vicious comments on Draupadī at the court of Hastinapura, when she staked there, are evident to it.

There can also be seen another aspect in the denial of Karṇa by Draupadī in the svayamvara. Drupada had a long cherish that to give his daughter to Arjuna, the great archer of that time. After the Vāraṇāvata incident there was an uncertainty that whether they were alive or not. As per the given fact in the epic Drupada had arranged such an archery contest in svayamvara in order to discover whether Arjuna is alive and to obtain him as the bridegroom of Draupadī. Thinking of Arjuna Drupada made a very stiff bow incapable of being bent by any man except Arjuna.<sup>8</sup>

The strong belief of Drupada was that only Arjuna can succeed the too difficult archery competition. In case Pāṇḍava-s are alive he believed that Arjuna will definitely reach there and win Draupadī. Accordingly he can have relations with the strong Pāṇḍava-s and strengthen his military power. So in this aspect Draupadī's denial for Karṇa is quite natural. It is also possible that Draupadī must have learned about Arjuna's archery skill and nurtured an inclination for Arjuna and getting him as her Lord. It was this fact that prompted her to make the extraordinary declaration. Thus, Draupadī's denial for Karṇa can be construed as that she wished to marry only Arjuna.

This incident on the occasion of svayamvara became a turning point not only in the progress of the epic story but in the character of Draupadī also. When war became a certainty, her repudiation of Karṇa at the time of her svayamvara, would perhaps have stirred up deep anxieties in her thinking of the deep rooted hatred that Karṇa had been nurturing towards herself and her husbands. The repudiation of Draupadī also would have left a deep mark in Karṇa's heart which became a factor



in moulding his character. His life was always beset with dark destiny and continuous paradoxes.

Karṇa overwhelmed by unexpected snub went back to his seat. Thereafter Arjuna who was in disguise of brahmin youth appeared there. He lifted the heavy bow easily and shot at the target without any strain and has been chosen as the husband by Draupadī. But the svayamvara did not culminate smoothly. There were lot of arguments between the Pāṇḍava-s who were in disguise of brāhmaṇa-s and the kṣatriya Kings who have arrived there to win beautiful Draupadī. Many had questioned the eligibility of brāhmaṇa-s participating in the competition. The arguments turned to be a fight. Before getting the situation worst Lord Kṛṣṇa intervened and settled the issues. The war like situation must have definitely caused some disturbances to Draupadī but the same is not illustrated in the epic.

### **4.3. Polyandrous Situation of Draupadī**

Though Draupadī had been given the privilege of svayamvara marriage or self-choice, she could not enjoy its fruit. She had won over

by Arjuna, the warrior whom she had cherished, but she had to be the wife of five persons. That was a major turning point in Draupadī's personality. The marriage itself turned out to be a controversial one. Kuntī's decision to make her accept all the five Pāṇḍava-s was shocking to her. Arjuna was the winner in the competition. Accordingly Draupadī chose Arjuna as her husband and as per the condition of svayamvara, only Arjuna had the right to marry her as he was the winner. She was very fond of him and it would be the same for Arjuna too. Ironically she had to accept all the five Pāṇḍava-s as her husbands. Nobody asked for her opinion, willingness, for her marriage with the five brothers. It is certain that both Draupadī and Arjuna must have undergone through severe mental trauma on this decision though the epic is silent about it. Nobody had any concern for the feelings of a woman. Draupadī was the victim of the unilateral decisions of elders. Her emotions and distresses had been buried in her own mind.

C.V Vaidya points out: “the explanation given in the *Mahābhārata* of the marriage of the five brothers with a single woman is fantastic.

Nobody would believe that a casual command given by mistake would be obeyed so literally, nor is it likely that Kuntī would have said what she is made to say.”<sup>9</sup>

From the instances as illustrated in the epic, it can be assumed that all the five Pāṇḍava-s including the so-called righteous person Yudhiṣṭhira had a penchant for beautiful Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira, Kuntī and the epic author Vyāsa prepared a beautiful plot for the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī. The reasons to call it as a plot is that:

- Pāṇḍava-s and Kuntī were aware of the svayamvara of Draupadī while they were staying at Ekacakra through a brāhmaṇa. Later Pāṇḍava-s departed for svayamvara with the knowledge of Kunti. But on their return from svayamvara she asks Pāṇḍava-s to equally share whatever they have brought and then pretends that it was told unknowingly, without seeing the object.

- Secondly, it was very much possible to take back the words if it had told unknowingly rather than encouraging to do an act which is not in practice and heartbreaking for a loving pairs.
- Thirdly, the general practice when they bring bhikṣā Kuntī herself use to distribute it among them in a ratio that half to Bhīma and remaining to others equally.

At first Drupada and Dhṛṣṭadyumna had expressed their hesitation in the plural marriage of Draupadī with all Pāṇḍava-s. The sage Vyāsa then intervened and justified the situation with tales of her former birth. Hearing the words of Vyāsa, Drupada recognized the proposal of Yudhiṣṭhira and her marriage was taken place with five Pāṇḍava brothers. Thus there both Arjuna and Draupadī became a subject of male and elder's supremacy. It is ironic that the so called Dharmaputra also could not see the heart of his own brother Arjuna and the Princess Draupadī and he took initiative for their polyandrous marriage by giving justifications and illustrations.

A close analysis of svayamvara part of Draupadī in the epic generate some arguments. It raises the question that whether the svayamvara of Draupadī has been held in a fair manner or not? First of all she had rejected the candidature of Karṇa illegally. Secondly it did not culminate happily. Thirdly Draupadī had to marry all the brothers of Arjuna. Some truths and facts of every episodes in the epic are thus either concealed or incomplete and left to the reader to deliberate as per own imagination. Kum Kum Roy rightly observes:

‘The marriage of the Pāṇḍava-s was also construed as an occasion for defeating, depriving and humiliating their rival kinsfolk, their Kaurava cousins and their supporters. Implicit in this is an understanding of kinsmen as potential or actual competitors for brides- a theme undeveloped in the normative tradition.’<sup>10</sup>

Though the marriage of Draupadī with five brothers were held with the consent of elders like sage Vyāsa and after proper rituals, she had been insulted and ridiculed on several occasions. This she suffered

for only being a woman. Whereas polygamy was common practice and a man is not considered sin though who have alliance with more than one woman. There is evident to show that in ancient India the system of polygamy was common especially among the kings. They married many women and maintained a separate harem in the palace solely for their bodily pleasure. But the system of polyandry was not common and it is considered an ill practice. In the *History of Dharmaśāstras* P V Kane observes that no reference of polyandry is seen elsewhere other than the one mentioned in the *MB*.<sup>11</sup> But there is an argument that the system of Polyandry was not uncommon in the Vedic period.<sup>12</sup>

Draupadī neither expressly discloses her displeasure or discontent nor does she express her joy on her polyandrous marriage. The epic is silent on this part perhaps because of the fact that the epic author perceived things from the male point of view. He was reluctant to blame the Pāṇḍava-s except Arjuna for expressing their willingness to be the husbands of a single woman. This is also evident from the statement that Draupadī was the second birth of Nāḷāyaṇī. The male prejudice of the

epic author in adopting a purely arbitrary male gaze is very much present in the story of Nālāyaṇī.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.4. Sufferings for Being a Woman

Draupadī became the wife of five illustrious warriors. It will sometimes give the impression that she was the luckiest among the women being protected and attended by the great men but the reality was contrary to apparent facts. The fact of the matter was that she was the woman least protected even at crucial hours despite being the well-known prowess of her lords. It was in front of those great men she was subjected to most unfortunate experiences. Draupadī herself once makes a presentation about her to Kṛṣṇa.

कुले महति जातास्मि दिव्येन विधिना किल ।  
पाण्डवानां प्रिया भार्या स्नुषा पाण्डोर्महात्मनः ॥  
कचग्रहमनुप्राप्ता सास्मि कृष्णा वरा सती ।  
पञ्चानां पाण्डुपुत्राणां प्रेक्षतां मधुसूदन ॥<sup>14</sup>

*(I was born in a great race and I came to the world in an extraordinary way. I am the beloved wife of the Pāṇḍava-s and the daughter-in-law of*

*the illustrious Pāṇḍu. O kṛṣṇa, O slayer of Madhu being the foremost of women and devoted to my husbands, even I was seized by the hair in the very sight of Pāṇḍava-s, each of whom was like an Indra.).*

An analysis of the circumstances reveals that Draupadī was subjected to many miseries because of being a woman. During the play of dice at Hastinapura, out of a moment's infatuation Yudhiṣṭhira makes up his mind to pledge Draupadī to Śakuni. Yudhiṣṭhira recounts the merits of Draupadī including her bodily traits and treat her as a commodity for sale. At the assembly hall she had to suffer all the insults since she was a woman. Jayadratha attempted to abduct her since she was a woman. Kīcaka attempts to molest her since she was a lovely lady. Her life in the incognito was all the more difficult simply because of her being a woman.

#### **4.5. Murder of Chastity at Hastinapura**

One of the most moving episodes in the whole of the *MB* is the experience which Draupadī had to undergo at the assembly hall in the



palace of Hastinapura. It was during her prime period of fame she received most devastating insults and became a subject of rage and revenge. After the initial hardships and sufferings of Vāraṇāvata incident Pāṇḍava-s regained power and fame by their marriage with Draupadī. They became the rulers of Indraprastha and conquered the world. Yudhiṣṭhira became the emperor and Draupadī the empress. During this prime position Yudhiṣṭhira along with others visits Hastinapura on their invitation and get into the trap of Kaurava-s by playing dice. Yudhiṣṭhira the so called propagator of righteousness failed to provide justice to his own wife.

The decision of Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra to engage in suhṛddyūta- a friendly play of dice with Kaurava-s is bit surprising because Yudhiṣṭhira was none other than Dharmaputra, the son of Dharma and he knew quite well that the play of dice is against the codes of Dharma and its outcome will be misfortunes and tragedies. Dyūta was one among the seven vices of kings and Yudhiṣṭhira was well aware of it. In his dialogue with Vidura he goes on detesting dyūta every

now and then. With regard to the play of dice which was staged by Śakuni, the following points are noteworthy:

- Vidura who visits Yudhiṣṭhira with the invitation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra was aware that it is an act of deceit from the part of Kaurava-s to snatch the wealth and royal fortunes of the Pāṇḍava-s. Being a well-wisher of Pāṇḍava-s and knowing the cruel designs of the Kaurava-s in the light of previous conspiracies, Vidura did not advise Dhṛmaputra to refrain from suhṛddyūta.
- Vidura gives sufficient hints to Dharmaputra about the presence of professional experts at Hastinapura in foul play. Still Yudhiṣṭhira did not withdraw himself from the dice game voluntarily.
- The other Pāṇḍava-s could not perceive any threat in dice game and did not made any effort to stop Yudhiṣṭhira.
- The most important factor is that Draupadī also maintained silence on the matter. Not even once she spoke her opinion about the play of dice before it starting.

- Kuntī and Gāndhārī also kept mum on the situation.
- After Pāṇḍava-s arrival in Hastinapura neither Bhīṣma nor Droṇa and other elders chose to have a word of advice towards Pāṇḍava-s against participating in the deceitful play of dice.
- The game of dice was to be held between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana. But Duryodhana appointed Śakuni to play on his behalf. Śakuni was a tremendous player and also known for his wickedness. Yudhiṣṭhira had the chance to withdraw himself as Duryodhana was not playing himself. But he did not refrain from it.

So the stage was set for the murder of chastity at Hastinapura. The game with Śakuni began and Yudhiṣṭhira started losing the game one by one. He staked every material wealth that he held as an emperor including the Kingdom. It was another chance for him to withdraw from the game as he lost everything. But Śakuni insisted him to stake his brothers and himself. Yudhiṣṭhira did so without perceiving its

consequences. Dharmaputra continuously got defeated and he along with brothers becomes the servant or logically fell as captives of Duryodhana. Even under this shattering condition nobody in the great assembly hall intervened and stopped the game.

Dharmaputra failed utterly in the game and lost everything including himself and he was about to withdraw from the game. Then the tricky Duryodhana and Śakuni reminded him that he has not lost everything and has Draupadī as his property. They prompted him to stake Draupadī and regain the wealth that he has lost earlier. Yudhiṣṭhira fell in their trap and staked Draupadī too. Whatever the reason may be, he staked Draupadī and lost the game as usual. Thus the life of royal queen turned into a pawn because of the male shownistic mindset of her husband. Draupadī got stunned after hearing that she was staked in the game and became a slave for Duryodhana.

Duryodhana sends message to Draupadī to come out from the harem and present her at the court. But the furious Draupadī refuses to

present herself in the court and questioned Yudhiṣṭhira's right to stake her as he himself lost. Duryodhana got infuriated with Draupadī's behaviour and commanded his younger brother Duḥśāsana to bring her into the court. Meanwhile Yudhiṣṭhira also send a message to Draupadī, discreetly to come to court. Still Draupadī refused to come to the court and stated that she is in her menstrual period and cannot present in the simple attire that she was wearing. Duḥśāsana refused to listen to all those excuses and grabs her hair and dragged her into the court. The situation is marked conspicuous by the absence of Gāndhārī and Kuntī. No elder women came to denown Duḥśāsana. He roared in anger as Draupadī was running from one place to another in the harem. Finally Duḥśāsana seized Draupadī by her long hair and dragged her into the court. The epic author tells us that she was piteously entreating Duḥśāsana to free her since she was in her season.

Draupadī repeatedly questions the legality or the right of Yudhiṣṭhira to place her at stake; in an emotional appeal to the elders present at the court. Except Vikarṇa and Vidura none of the so called

heroes utter a word in favour of Draupadī who was undergoing through a most humiliating situation.<sup>15</sup> The other Pāṇḍava-s were under the captive of Duryodhana and could not do anything. However Bhīma got aroused and blames Yudhiṣṭhira for creating such situation. In order to provoke Bhīma further, Duryodhana bares and pats his thigh looking into Draupadī's eyes. In rage Bhīma vows in front of the entire assembly that he would break that thigh of Duryodhana.

What was pitiful is that none of the elders like Bhīṣma, Drona, Dhṛtarāṣṭra etc. have intervened at this crucial situation also. Only Vikarṇa, a brother of Duryodhana, showed the courage to answer the question of Draupadī. He gives his opinion that Draupadī is not won rightfully as Yudhiṣṭhira lost himself first before staking her. Besides Draupadī is the common wife of all Pāṇḍava-s and so Yudhiṣṭhira alone has no right to take decision on her.

Here Karṇa interferes and counter the arguments of Vikarṇa. He offended Vikarṇa indignantly by saying that when Yudhiṣṭhira lost all

his possessions he lost Draupadī also. Karṇa publicly called Draupadī as bandhakī, means prostitute, for being the wife of five men. He spoke in support of Duryodhana's act and ditching Draupadī. Here Karṇa strongly argued that Draupadī had been won by Śakuni in the game and approved as a stake by the Pāṇḍava-s. Besides, the gods have ordained only one husband to a woman. But as Draupadī has many husbands and according to śāstra-s of the age, she can be considered a characterless woman. So bringing her in a court of men is not a surprising act whether she is attired or naked.

The support from Karṇa and the unquestioning attitude of the assembly have taken Duryodhana to the top of aggressiveness. He ordered Duḥśāsana to disrobe Draupadī. Except Vidura the other elders and preceptors kept their studied silence despite seeing the terrible actions on the part of Kaurava-s. The great Pāṇḍava-s also could not do anything and became mere spectators. The subsequent incidents in the epic to which Draupadī was subjected are too well known to be repeated.

On analysis of the situation the following points appeared to be significant:

- The intelligentsia of the country as usual was succumbed to the will of the royal authority and nobody including Bhīṣma and Droṇa had the courage to question it. It seems that all the males in the assembly hall were, in a way, enjoying the scene of a helpless woman being robbed of her modesty.
- No elder woman of the harem comes forward with a helping hand. There are moments even the powerful are at a loss to understand subtle ways of code of ethics. This was evident in the case of Pāṇḍava-s, who despite their prowess remained as mute spectators in front of the sordid drama that was held in front of them wherein the heroine was their own consort.
- The description of the situation where the attack on Draupadī is described leaves out an eloquent message.



Not only at the court hall of Hastinapura but also on various occasions including from the side of Pāṇḍava-s, Draupadī had been subjected to numerous sorrows and insults. She had to spend a long period in forest and had to stay incognito as a maid of another queen despite being a princess and the sister of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, daughter of the powerful king Drupada, and the wife of Pāṇḍava-s. From an in-depth reading of the epic, one can observe that she had suffered major insults and distresses on the following occasions:-

- When Draupadī's marriage was determined with all five Pāṇḍava brothers denying her right to marry Arjuna whom she selected in Svayamvara.
- Arjuna's Departure from Indraprastha and Marriage with Subhadṛā.
- During their exile and stay at the forest where Jayadratha tries to abduct her.

- While she was staying at the court of Virāta as a servant to the queen Sudeṣṇā.
- When the Pāṇḍava-s were preparing for a compromise with Kaurava-s disregarding their endless sufferings and hostility of Duryodhana.
- When all five children of her were brutally murdered by Aśvatthāman.
- When Yudhiṣṭhira blames her saying that she had loved Arjuna more than other husbands and that is the cause for her fall while stepping towards heaven.

#### **4.6. Jayadratha's Abduction of Draupadī**

The episode in which Jayadratha abducts Draupadī is described in the *Draupadīharaṇaparva* that comes under *Vana.P.*. Jayadratha the husband of Duḥśalā and the son of Vṛddhakṣatra was on his way to attend a marriage when he chanced to meet Draupadī in the forest. It was the time when Pāṇḍava-s were away from Draupadī. From the

description of the epic it is not clear whether Jayadratha actually recognized Draupadī as the wife of Pāṇḍava-s when he looked from afar. That is why he asked his friend Koṭikāśya who the lovely woman was? But as he came near he understood that she was Draupadī the wife of Pāṇḍava-s. It is a big surprise to note that Jayadratha could not recognize Draupadī even from a reasonable distance. He knew that the woman was a lovely one. Jayadratha had been in the palace of Drupada at the time of Draupadī's svayamvara.

Jayadratha came near and saw that the woman was none other than the wife of Pāṇḍava-s. No sooner does he see her, he is overcome by desire for her despite being the husband of Duḥśaḷā. He got fascinated with the extreme beauty of Draupadī and tries to induce her to fulfill his lust. She cautions him to leave his lust and advised him to go back. But Jayadratha did not listen to her and caught her hand with malicious intentions. However disregarding the protest of sage Dhaumya, Jayadratha abducted Draupadī. He was finally caught and punished and insulted by the Pāṇḍava-s. Here Yudhiṣṭhira showed an

un-deserving sympathy for Jayadratha and prevented Bhīma and Arjuna from slaying him. The following points in this episode deserve special mention:

- Jayadratha attempted to abduct Draupadī even after knowing that she was the consort of Pāṇḍava-s that means Jayadratha had scant concern in inflicting insult even to a close relative.
- The episode seems to tell us that the loveliness of a woman gets transformed as a crime of hers. The entire episode was curse on her beauty and was a matter of distress for her.

#### **4.7. Incognito at Virāta's Court**

Draupadī took the role of a servant to the queen of Virāta while they were to live incognito. Born in a luxurious family, lived as the empress of Indraprastha as wife of five strong husbands and having numerous servants she had to work herself as maid for just survival. Kīcaka, the brother of royal queen Sudeṣṇā, wished to have relations with the beautiful Draupadī. Sudeṣṇā also prompts her to go to Kīcaka

but Draupadī conveys her unwillingness to do so. Kīcaka always tried to induce and molest her. What become more painful for Draupadī is the respond of Yudhiṣṭhira who stay there in the name of Kaṅka, advisor to Virāta King. When Draupadī was attacked by Kīcaka she rushed to the assembly hall crying to complaint to the king Virāta. Yudhiṣṭhira in disguise as a wellwisher of the king, was also present there, playing dice.

The response of Yudhiṣṭhira was thus:

अकालज्ञासि सैरन्ध्रि शैलूषीव विरोदिषि ।  
विघ्नं करोषि मत्स्यानां दीव्यतां राजसंसदि ।।<sup>16</sup>

(“O Sairandhrī, thou art ignorant of the timeliness of things, and it is for this that thou weepst as an actress; besides interrupting the play of dice in Matsya's court”.)

The words of Yudhiṣṭhira were extremely hurting for Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira, the epitome of dharma, hardly gave any respect and regard to Draupadī. At the palace of Virāta he could have speak for Sairandhrī as he was very close to Virāta King; but he didn't do so. It was because

of Bhīma and Arjuna she could escape from Kīcaka. But the insult and betrayal she had from the palace of Virāta is unforgettable. Even a woman and queen Sudeṣṇā tried to trap Draupadī for fulfilling her brother's lust.

#### **4.8. Yudhiṣṭhira's Nature as 'to be or not to be'**

Yudhiṣṭhira the eldest of the Pāṇḍava-s has always enjoyed his position as the eldest in order to thrust his principles and ideas on others. Considered to be the paragon of virtue and embodiment of Dharma Yudhiṣṭhira made his presence felt in numerous episodes in the main story of the epic to the disadvantage of others. Seldom did he take care to see how his words and the habit of imposing views on others would affect the victims. The most glaring example is the one described in the *Sabha. P.* wherein Draupadī is disgraced before the very eyes of her powerful husbands. He was narrating the beauty of Draupadī while she was staked at the dice game. In this context even the spontaneous expression of wrath on the part of Bhīma is blocked by Yudhiṣṭhira by

his inopportune and impractical declarations, which made sufferings of Draupadī all the more amazing and insufferable. Before making up his mind to accept the invitation of the Kaurava-s for a play of dice at Hastinapura Yudhiṣṭhira does not consult either his brothers or Draupadī. A particular feature that conspicuously present in Yudhiṣṭhira's personality is his inability to take powerful decisions on crucial occasions. He has always been governed by the notion of 'to be or not to be.' He fails miserably on crucial occasions and his failures brought unending sorrows to his dear ones. On the occasion of the suggestion of Kuntī to the effect that Draupadī may accept all the five Pāṇḍava-s as her lords, it was Yudhiṣṭhira who came first to defend Kuntī's decision knowing fully well that it will adversely affect the dreams of Draupadī. Not only that; Yudhiṣṭhira went to Drupada in order to justify Kuntī's decision quoting all kinds of unconvincing and unjust arguments. In spite of regaining wealth and prowess as suitable to a kṣatriya Yudhiṣṭhira took always passive attitudes towards enemies. Draupadī could not bear such an attitude from the side of Yudhiṣṭhira.

Such move was distressful for Draupadī. Observing Yudhiṣṭhira's attitude towards Draupadī Chaturvedi Badrinath rightly remarks:

‘As regards Yudhiṣṭhira's relation with his wife Draupadī, it is abundantly clear, especially as the story proceeded, that from the very beginning to the very end he was supremely insensitive to her feelings and thoughts, and behaved not as a truly caring husband or man but more like a learned professor- Professor Yudhiṣṭhira - ready at every turn, to give her a long lecture on this or that.’<sup>17</sup>

#### **4.9. Wrath and Revenge of Draupadī**

Draupadī was not free from a sense of revenge which is evident from so many subsequent events and incidents in her life. Time helps one to forget several things including deep rooted enmity. But Draupadī keeps the fire of wrath and revenge burning throughout her life. As Kevin Mc-Grath observes ‘Draupadī has a certain highly charged anger about her, which is unconditional and not to be mitigated. Her lust for revenge is distinctive among the women of the poem.’<sup>18</sup>



The continuous attack and tragic experiences caused Draupadī to be very aggressive and revengeful. She never wants to ally with the enemies. She was a lady of kṣatriya spirit and was very proud of her race and prowess. Vanamala Bhavalkar observes the nature of Draupadī:

“Draupadī, unlike the mythological goddesses or the ideal heroines of our ancient literature, was quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness and grief.”<sup>19</sup>

Draupadī’s spirit can be seen in *Sabhā.P*. There she tries to protest as far as possible and at last when Dhṛtarāṣṭra offered boons to her, she received only two and rejected the third one saying thus:

लोभो धर्मस्य नाशाय भगवन् नाहमुत्सहे ।  
अनर्हा वरमादातुं तृतीयं राजसत्तम ।<sup>20</sup>

*(O best of kings, O illustrious one, covetousness always destroys virtue.*

*I do not deserve a third boon. Therefore I dare not ask any. )*

After the incident of dice game her aim of life became the destruction of her foes. She could not forget the insults heaped upon her by the enemies

and could not tolerate with the peaceful attitudes of her husbands and their attempt to make alliance with Duryodhana. She says:

त्रयोदश हि वर्षाणि प्रतीक्षन्त्या गतानि मे ।  
विधाय हृदये मन्युं प्रदीप्तमिव पावकम् ।।<sup>21</sup>

*(Thirteen long years have I passed in expectation of better times, hiding in my heart my wrath like a smouldering fire.)*

In *Vana. P.* she invokes Yudhiṣṭhira to fight reminding him all the injustices done by the Kaurava-s and argues that the Kaurava-s do not deserve any mercy or forgiveness. She strongly states that forgiveness is not apt before Duryodhana's aggressive behaviour.

In *Udyoga.P.* when Kṛṣṇa makes up his mind to go as an ambassador of peace to Hastinapura, Draupadī gives vent to her anger. She tells Kṛṣṇa not to show mercy on Kaurava-s because their object is to win either by peaceful means or by surrender. Kaurava-s are the ones who deserve suitable punishment. She therefore ask Kṛṣṇa to give heavy punishment towards Kaurava-s who have ever been perpetual offenders.

It is up to a kṣatriya to kill another kṣatriya if the latter one is avaricious. Draupadī reminds Kṛṣṇa that reluctance to met out punishment to offenders is as sinfull as punishing the innocent.

न हि साम्ना न दानेन शक्योऽर्थस्तेषु कश्चन ।  
तस्मात् तेषु न कर्तव्या कृपा ते मधुसूदन ॥<sup>22</sup>

*(O slayer of Madhu, that thou shouldst show them mercy. those enemies, O Kṛṣṇa, with whom peace cannot be established by either conciliation or presents, should be treated with severity by one desirous of saving his life.)*

She wanted to kill Jayadratha as the punishment for abducting her.

She states here that:

भार्याभिहर्ता वैरी यो यश्च राज्यहरो रिपुः ।  
याचमानोऽपि संग्रामे न मोक्तव्यः कथंचन ॥<sup>23</sup>

*(That foe who forcibly carries away one's wife or wrests his kingdom, should never be forgiven on the battlefield, eventhough he should supplicate for mercy.)*

#### 4.10. Draupadī and the Mahābhārata War

The seeds of the Kurukṣetra war were formed at the very beginning of the childhood days of Kaurava-s and Pāṇḍava-s. Draupadī also became one of the reasons of the war by the circumstances. She was not ready to suffer in silence. Burned with anger she continuously ignited fire in her husbands' minds and persuaded them to fight. She never wavered from her decision to put up a fight against the Kaurava-s and she did everything to give moral courage and strength to her lords to wage a successful war against their enemies. Before the Great War when Duryodhana rejected the request of Pāṇḍava-s to give even five villages, Draupadī reminds her husbands all the injustice done by the Kaurava-s. There she declared that if Pāṇḍava-s do settle for peace her aged father and her sons would fight for her.

यदि भीमार्जुनौ कृष्ण कृपणौ सन्धिकामुकौ ।  
पिता मे योत्स्यते वृद्धः सह पुत्रैर्महारथैः ॥  
पञ्च चैव महावीर्याः पुत्रा मे मधुसूदन ।  
अभिमन्युं पुरस्कृत्य योत्स्यन्ते कुरुभिः सह ॥<sup>24</sup>

*(If Bhīma and Arjuna, O Kṛṣṇa, have become so low as to long for peace, my aged father then with his warlike sons will avenge for me in battle. My five sons also that are endued with great energy, with Abhimanyu, O slayer of Madhu, at their head, will fight with the Kaurava-s.)*

Draupadī's action in prompting the Great War was justifiable since she was a woman who had to undergo maximum atrocities from the Kaurava-s. It was but natural that Draupadī was roared for waging the war knowing quite well its drastic consequences. The point was that Duryodhana was a ruler who has habitually committing crimes against Pāṇḍava-s and he was never overcome by any kind of remorse despite his incessant evil acts. So her sense of revenge was justifiable.

During the course of war Draupadī's presence was not so seen in the epic. Even during the major episodes in the war Draupadī's response is wanting. But she was behind the curtain providing support to her husbands.

#### 4.11. Draupadī, the Wife

The key element that differentiates Draupadī, the central heroine of *MB* from other women characters of Indian epics and literature is that she was the wife of five men. The epic tries to make Draupadī as a devoted wife of her five lords. But the mental trauma of Draupadī while sharing herself with five Pāṇḍava-s was nowhere mentioned in the epic. Draupadī followed her husbands in every walks of their life, sharing their sorrows and miseries. In a conversation with Satyabhāmā, Draupadī gives a detailed account on her routine and manners towards her husbands. But it seems to be very contradictory at many other occasions of her nature depicted in the epic. She often criticized and even rebuked them and also expressed compassion and distress on their tragic plights. Draupadī blamed Bhīma and Arjuna for not using their might and power for protecting her from enemies and also ridiculed them for watching silently the atrocities against her. Remembering and comparing the prosperous state of life of Indraprastha with their pitiful and ridiculous conditions in Virāta's court while they were living

incognito Draupadī rebukes Yudhiṣṭhira. She vehemently criticized Yudhiṣṭhira and blamed that he is the only reason for their unbearable sufferings. She said to Bhīma:

भ्रातरं च विगर्हस्व ज्येष्ठं दुर्द्युतदेविनम्  
यस्यास्मि कर्मणा प्राप्ता दुःखमेतदनन्तकम् ।।  
को हि राज्यं परित्यज्य सर्वस्वं चात्मना सह ।  
प्रव्रज्यायैव दीव्येत विना दुर्द्युतदेविनम् ।।<sup>25</sup>

*(Censure thou that elder brother of thine who is addicted to the despicable game of dice, through whose act alone I have been afflicted with such woe. Who else, save him that desperate gambler, would play, giving up kingdom and everything including even myself, in order to lead a life in the woods?)*

There is no reference in the epic to show Draupadī had greater love to Arjuna than others. But in *Svargā.P.* Yudhiṣṭhira makes a comment that she had greater love towards Arjuna than others. No such mention is seen in the epic. But it is true that the reader of the epic can read between the lines when Draupadī described the sorrows of each of

her husband when they live incognito at the palace of king Virāta.<sup>26</sup>

There she describes at length the merits of Arjuna and his misfortunes during the time of their life incognito.

Though the marriage ceremony was over, Draupadī could not live with Arjuna, for long years since he had set out for a one year journey. As per an agreement she had to live with each brother for one year in rotation in chronological order beginning with Yudhiṣṭhira followed by Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. During such period if someone breaks the privacy or enters to the couple's room, he has to stay in exile for one year. In an unavoidable situation Arjuna had to break the rule and as a result he departed for brief sojourn as ascetic life. She would have special affections for Arjuna as he is the winner of the contest and whom Draupadī had internally chosen as her husband. Before they could live together and share their love he had departed to the forest. His separation and thought about the possible hardships that Arjuna have to face alone in forest definitely caused for agony and anxiety of Draupadī.



Arjuna won Draupadī by his valour but he was compelled to share her with his brothers because of the pressure of circumstances. It is natural that Arjuna was greatly aggrieved with this and wanted to escape from such depressed atmosphere. While he was leaving from Indraprastha Yudhiṣṭhira tells him that he did not commit any sin and there is no need to go in exile. But Arjuna did not listen to his elder brother and departed to the forest. During this exile period he had relations with Ulūpī, Citrāṅgadā and later he weds Subhadrā. It is intolerable for any woman if her beloved husband gets into relations with any other woman. Draupadī openly expressed her intolerance before Arjuna when he approached her after his wedding with Subhadrā. She says to Arjuna:

तत्रैव गच्छ कौन्तेय यत्र सा सात्वतात्मजा  
सुबद्धस्यापि भारस्य पूर्वबन्धः श्लथायते ।<sup>27</sup>

*(O son of Kuntī, go there where the daughter of the sātvata race is. A second tie always relaxeth the first one upon a faggot. )*

#### 4.12. Dialogue between Draupadī and Satyabhāmā

The dialogue between Draupadī and Satyabhāmā that described in the *Vana. P.* appears to be rather artificial.<sup>28</sup> Satyabhāmā as a curious woman asks Draupadī how she effectively goes on managing her five husbands which, in a normal case, is unthinkable as far as a common woman is concerned. The reply of Draupadī is in tune with the traditional concepts regarding the relationship between husband and wife. Draupadī here speaks just like any other ordinary woman under the irresistible influence of traditional customs and values. The cardinal points of her speech are as follows:

Draupadī controls her husbands without vanity and egoism, jealousy and malice. She never bathes or eats till her husbands have not eaten nor did take her food before the servants are fed. She never indulged in anger and never followed the ways of wicked women. She always engaged in serving her husbands and a separation from her husband is never agreeable to her. She gave up flowers and fragrant

paste of every kind and went for a life in the forest with Pandavas. She never sleeps or eats or adorns against the will of her husband. She knew the names and features of every one of her husbands' thousands of maid servants.

The dialogue does not reflect any particular or significant trait in the personality of Draupadī. Satyabhāmā also appears here as an ordinary woman who is curious to peep into the intimate affairs of another woman. The personality of Draupadī that gets reflected in the numerous other situations in the epic does not further assume any meaningful dimension in this particular dialogue between Satyabhāmā, the consort of God Kṛṣṇa and Draupadī, the friend of God Kṛṣṇa.

#### **4.13. Draupadī, the Mother**

Sufficient situations have not been described in the epic to portray the character of Draupadī as a mother. It gives only indirect hints on the personality of Draupadī as a mother. Draupadī is not seen expressing her sentiments very often. The tough and tragic experiences of Draupadī

made her mind so rigid and there had no position to tender feelings. As she was the wife of five Pāṇḍava-s, she was the mother of five sons, Prativindya, Sutasoma, Śrutakarma, Śatānīka and Śrutasena. But the motherly feelings or motherly affection of Draupadī towards her children is not so mentioned in the epic. In *Vana.P.* Draupadī had made a comment that she should have been protected by her husbands for even the sake of their children. Quoting the codes of Dharma she says to Kṛṣṇa that five great powerful sons had been born to her from her five husbands, for their sake it was necessary to protect her.<sup>29</sup> There is also another comment from the side of Draupadī for her children. During the occasion of the play of dice at Hastinapura, accepting Dhṛtarāṣṭra's offer to receive boons Draupadī asks to release Dharmaputra first from slavery saying thus:

मनस्विनमजानन्तो मैवं ब्रूयुः कुमारकाः ।  
 एष वै दासपुत्रो हि प्रतिविन्ध्यं ममात्मजम् ॥<sup>30</sup>

*(Let not unthinking children call my child Prativindhya endued with great energy of mind as the son of a slave. Having been a prince, so*

*superior to all men, and nurtured by kings it is not proper that he should be called the child of a slave.)*

#### **4.14. Murder of Draupadeya-s**

It was at the time of night massacre committed by Aśvatthāman, Kṛtavarman and Kṛpa that Draupadī had the occasion to lament over her five beloved sons. All her sons were cruelly slaughtered in sleep by Aśvatthāman. They were too young to fight a war but participated and helped in war. But all the five have become martyrs of the war. On the side of Kaurava-s, Gāndhārī also lost her hundred children. But the difference apart in number were that; Kaurava-s were elders and caused death due to their evilness, but the sons of Draupadī were very young and innocent. Further, they were not killed while engaged in war. The war was over with the victory of Pāṇḍava-s and the children were sleeping under a shelter. It was during this time Aśvatthāman intruded to their place and brutally killed the sons of Draupadī. It was most disastrous for Draupadī; more than physical and mental assaults she had

suffered at the court of Hastinapura. She would have felt the sense of void and vacuum that might stare at her during the last part of her life. After a long period of gap when she meets Kuntī after the war she wept aloud saying thus the futility of life :

किं नु राज्येन वै कार्यं विहीनायाः सुतैर्मम ।<sup>31</sup>

*(Deprived as I am of my children, what need have I of kingdom?)*

#### **4.15. Draupadī's Fall in Midway to Heaven**

At the end of the epic story the Pāṇḍava-s, after giving up all the worldly pleasures, started for their last journey to heaven along with Draupadī. They were walking through the valleys of Himalaya to reach heaven alive. Draupadī was at the rear and was tired. She falls on the way. The haughty Bhīma then asks Yudhiṣṭhira that what the sin done by Draupadī was. Yudhiṣṭhira's reply was thus:

पक्षपातो महानस्याः विशेषेण धनञ्जये ।

तस्यैतत् फलमद्यैषा भुङ्क्ते पुरुषसत्तम ।।<sup>32</sup>

*(O best of men, though we were all equal unto her she had great partiality for Dhananjaya. She obtains the fruit of that conduct today, O best of men. )*

These words of Yudhiṣṭhira were so cruel and her soul won't be able to bear this. Even if she had loved Arjuna what was the sin in it. Arjuna was the man who won over her in svayamvara and whom she had cherished to be her husband. It was Yudhiṣṭhira and others who snatched her love for Arjuna. She had followed the customs and traditions of a wife in a virtuous manner. Satisfying five husbands equally is not an easy task but she did it with her intelligence and virtues. But no one except Bhīma turns back or bid farewell to her in her last moment.

The justification and actions illustrated in the epic through Yudhiṣṭhira are sometimes contradictory. The reasons for Draupadī's fall as given by Yudhiṣṭhira are not at all justifiable. If Draupadī's love for Arjuna is a sin then what would be the gravity of the sin of

Yudhiṣṭhira. The murder of six people, a mother and her five children, at Vāraṇāsvata were happened under the knowledge of Yudhiṣṭhira. He lied to his preceptor Drona in order to distress and win over him mischievously at war ground. He played a vital role in persuading the lady lover of Arjuna as the wife of him first and then to the other Pāṇḍava-s. Bhīma and Arjuna had conjugal relations with women other than Draupadī. If their extra-marital relations are sinless then Draupadī's passion for her own husband Arjuna is also sinless. The situation explains that Draupadī also has become subjected to gender discrimination. Here the following observation of Iravathy Carvey seems to be relevant:

"Draupadī's troubles were human, brought on by people of this world and particularly by her own husbands. Her experiences are described realistically unembellished by flowery language or poetic conventions."<sup>33</sup>



The epic author seems to imply that despite the favourable material circumstances of Draupadī, there is an element of the operation of destiny that keeps hanging over her head. For Draupadī, her entire life was like a live battlefield where a war is waged every now and then. There were situations wherein she had to act just like a plaything. As a wife she had to serve as many as five spouses. As a mother she was one who lost all her five sons and that too not in war, but in a night massacre committed by a most heartless person, Aśvatthāman, the veritable son of illustrious Droṇa. Draupadī was a woman and being a woman the society will bring before her untold sufferings and that was exactly what happened in her life.

## End Notes

1. *Ādi.P. 167.30*
2. *ibid,167.40*
3. *ibid.,167. 44*
4. *ibid., 167.49*
5. The Suktankar's edition of the *Mahābhārata* do not have the portion of Karṇa taking part in Draupadī's marriage.
6. *Ādi.P. 187. 23*
7. *ibid., 185. 11*
8. *ibid., 185. 8-10*
9. Vaidya C, V.,*The Mahābhārata- A Criticism* , Cosmo Publications New Delhi 1983. p.123.
10. Roy ,Kum Kum .,*The Power of Gender and The Gender of Power*,Oxford University Press,2010,p. 233.
11. Kane.P V., *History of Dharmaśāstra*. vol-II. part I. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1974. p. 554.
12. vide. *Polyandry in the Vedic Period* - An Article by Sarva Daman Singh published in the work *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Ed. Kum Kum Roy , Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2001.
13. *The story of Nāḷāyaṇī does not seen in Sukthankar's Edition*. But it is there in Krishnamacharya's Edition and Malayalam Translation of Vidvan K. Prakasam.
14. *Vana. P.12. 120, 121*
15. When the commotion was over Bhīṣma tells that Yudhiṣṭhira was the sole authority to do what is proper on Draupadī in the harem.
16. *Virāta. P.17. 13*
17. Badrinath Chaturvedi., *The Women of the Mahābhārata*, Orient Longman Private limited, Newdelhi, 2008, p. 194.
18. Mc-Grath, Kevin., *STRI-Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata*, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, New Delhi, 2011, p.118.

19. Bhavalkar Vanamala., *Eminent Women in the Mahābhārata*, Sarada Publishing House, Delhi, 1999, p. 141.
20. *Sabhā.P.71.34*
21. . *Udyoga.P .82.40*
22. *ibid., 82.12*
23. *Vana.P.271. 46*
24. *Udyoga. P. 82. 37,38*
25. *Virāta.P..18.10,11*
26. *ibid., Chs.18-20*
27. *Ādi.P.221. 17*
28. *Vana. P. Chs.233-235*
29. *ibid., 12. 68-74*
30. *Sabhā. P. 71.29*
31. *Strī. P. 15. 38.*
32. *Mahā. P. 2. 6*
33. Carvey Iravathy., *Yuganta*, Disha Books, Hyderabad, 1993, p. 80

## CHAPTER 5

### **GĀNDHĀRĪ, KUNTĪ AND DRAUPADĪ: A CONTRASTIVE ASSESSMENT**

Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī appear to be the most powerful and significant women characters in the epic *MB*. All the three were in lofty positions in the higher echelons of royal power structure. In spite of the authoritative positions they held, the epic does not furnish any situations wherein they could wield any kind of influence either in the policy making bodies or in any other domain which is of marked significance. All these three women were, in a sense, the victims of patriarchal system of society. Gāndhārī was not consulted during the occasion of her marriage and she was to live with a blind man even when she was so wise and intelligent. Incidents in Kuntī's life before marriage were a kind of exploitation of a girl child. After marriage Pāṇḍu compelled her to obtain children from other persons. When a necessity arrived Pāṇḍu rejected all the laws and rules imposed on woman's chastity. Though Draupadī appears as a spirited lady she was also bound

up in the patriarchal set up of the society. There are rare occasions where these three characters express their views in the eve of crucial happenings in the epic. But the major episodes in the epic take place without any positive influence on their part to arrest or change such occurrences.

All of them are the victims of the Great War and lost their dear ones in battle. Their experiences were so hard and unbearable and they failed to join hand for resisting the war or eliminate increasing enmity of Pāṇḍava-s and Kaurava-s. One is at a loss to assess whether Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī were in favour of the Great War or against it. Gāndhārī the royal queen at the time of the war seldom makes any significant intervention either for or against the war. One is aware Gāndhārī's advice to Duryodhana in the assembly hall at behest of Dhṛtarāṣṭra at a time when the attempt of Kṛṣṇa as an ambassador of peace from the side of Pāṇḍava-s had failed.<sup>1</sup> Gāndhārī gets involved herself here under the instruction of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and not by her own. But here her attempt failed. She was also too late to respond and her

words were neglected by her husband and son. Kuntī and Draupadī invoked Yudhiṣṭhira to fight and win the war. Their endless sufferings persuaded them to invoke the war and it became unavoidable for their survival. In some of the crucial situations they raised their voices and sometimes maintained utter silence. Their silence and eloquence also contributed to the reasons for the war, directly and indirectly.

### **5.1. Shadowy Presence of Gāndhārī**

The epic author does not furnish any kind of response from Gāndhārī the queen of Hastinapura as well as the mother of Duryodhana, towards the numerous attempts on the young life of the Pāṇḍava princes, all schemed and executed by Duryodhana and Śakuni. It is true that Gāndhārī makes her own feeble attempts to avert the war in the form of her own unconvincing dialogues with her eldest son. But she does not assert her authority either as the royal queen or as a royal mother. The only possible reason for these might be Gāndhārī's own notion that her words were after all, of a woman and in a situation, where

all decisions were taken by powerful males, she, as a female had got nothing to do except being a mute spectator of the sordid drama that was being unwieldy in the palace of Hastinapura. It is no wonder that, Gāndhārī, after all, could not break the barriers of the age old notions pertaining to a royal queen, a wife, a mother and an ordinary kṣatriya woman.

There have been numerous episodes of deceit and cruelty on the part of Gāndhārī's sons committed against the Pāṇḍava-s. In no such situation she does get intervene. She does not make her appearance felt in any major happenings at Hastinapura before the war. The following are the major episodes before the war in the epic which warrant Gāndhārī's interventions.

- The attempt of Duryodhana and Duḥśāsana to drown Bhīma and get rid of his presence once and for all. One cannot assume that Gāndhārī was not in the know of such things.

- The Vāraṇāvata episode in which Duryodhana in connivance with Śakuni, the Gāndhāra king, makes a frantic attempt to destroy Pāṇḍava-s and their mother. The atrocity was committed with tacit approval of Dhṛtarāṣṭra with Vidura remaining as the mute spectator.
- The continuous state of conspiracy that was being hatched out at the palace of Hastinapura by Kaurava-s against the Pāṇḍava-s. This includes the one particular major conspiracy, by Duryodhana, Karṇa and Śakuni after the Pāṇḍava-s' marriage with Draupadī making them formidable enemies.
- The virtual banishment of Pāṇḍava-s to Khāṇḍavaprastha knowing quite well that it was a place unfit for inhabitation.
- The play of dice at Hastinapura.
- The presentation of Duryodhana's unending grievances to Dhṛtarāṣṭra after his visit to Indraprastha.
- The episode of the Draupadī's tragic experience at *Sabhā.P.*



- At the time of Pāṇḍava-s banishment to forest for 13 years.
- Duryodhana's journey to forest in the *Ghoṣayātrāparva* to witness the tragic plight of Kaurava-s.

As a mother and queen Gāndhārī should have seen and grasped all the happenings at Hastinapura. For example Gāndhārī was surprisingly at a loss to decipher the true purport of all the conspiratorial happenings in the palace initiated by her own eldest son and her own elder brother, who instead of getting involved in the royal affairs of Gāndhāra, chose to have his incessant presence in Hastinapura. The peril and purport of such an action by Śakuni was never understood either by Dhṛtarāṣṭra or Gāndhārī even after the occurrence of many unpleasant incidents in Hastinapura wherein always the victims were the sons of Pāṇḍu.

## **5.2. Silence of Kuntī on Crucial occasions**

On crucial occasions Kuntī was also at a loss to take sensible and bold decisions. She almost wavered or kept silence on crucial junctures

in her life. The twin aspects namely loss of childhood common to any ordinary girl and the birth of a child while she was an unmarried girl, largely influenced the future happenings of the epic in which Kuntī was expected to inact a significant role.

She was too weak to confess the birth of Karṇa to Paṇḍu, in the early days of her conjugal life. The events of the arms tournament had really cast a lasting impression on her personality which aggravated her frailty and sense of guilt. During the arms tournament at Hastinapura, Kuntī the royal mother was cutting a piteously sorry figure witnessing the terrible encounter between her two sons.

The concealment of the story of Karṇa from Pāṇḍava-s up to his death was another severe fault on the part of Kuntī. Her royal heredity was a factor in impeding a possible revelation of her past to the Pāṇḍava-s. It was certain that Pāṇḍava-s would have taken Kuntī's words in their true spirit. This kind of weakness and reluctance that

might impire her royal pedigree and position always was a major trait in Kuntī's character.

Kuntī's decision in making Draupadī the wife of her five sons also lacked courage and conviction because the epic tells us that her decision was the result of an instant impulse that Kuntī failed to make a well thought out decision. Although she had great concern on perpetuate unity among her five sons, one can assume that it was sheer commonsense which made Kuntī to take such a decision. For, she thought that the unity of her sons will remain in that if they share a common wife. Such cleverness fails to match with the nobility and maturity expected from a royal mother since having different wives does not bear the possibility of disunity among Pāṇḍava-s.

The epic does not tell us where Kuntī was staying at the time of Yudhiṣṭhira's acceptance of invitation for gambling. Nevertheless there is no mention in the epic that Kuntī ever made any attempt however feeble, in order to distract her son Yudhiṣṭhira from the impending

tragedy. This happens despite the untold bitter experiences meted out to her by the Kaurava-s ever since she made her appearance in Hastinapura with her five sons.

The absence of Kuntī during the episodes in the *Sabhā.P.* also speaks volumes. Her presence is wanting and her interventions were all the more significant on such occasions when Draupadī was being mercilessly treated by a male assembly.

### **5.3. Draupadī's Reluctance to Assert**

The epic also does not tell us that Draupadī had any significant protest against being made as the consort of five husbands. It is surprising to see that Draupadī had maintained a studied silence when an inadvertent word from Kuntī sealing her fate. The whole scene is seen set as a kind of silent drama. Draupadī who did not fail to vocally express unwillingness to accept Karṇa as her lord, maintained unusual silence at a crucial phase of her life. Another apparent impropriety in this context is that it is Yudhiṣṭhira, and not Arjuna who takes the decision to

make Draupadī as their common wife relying on the weak justification of a casual remark from his mother. It is possible that Draupadī would perhaps have given her silent consent because of her belief in the irresistible operation of destiny. There are occasions in life when one sometimes will have to remain as mute spectator to the drama of life in which the major actor shall be none other than destiny itself. Equally surprising is the occasion when later Nārada comes and proposes a system for the life of Pāṇḍava-s in which Draupadī had to spent cycle of one year with each of her five husbands and Draupadī as usual does not expressed either consent or dissent. When her father Drupada disapproves to make his daughter as the wife of five husbands that Draupadī maintains her silence. On all these crucial occasions the silence of Draupadī may provoke any number of explanations. During the *Sabhā.P.* episode Karṇa unleashes a hating ridicule against Draupadī pointing out her willingness to be the common wife of five husbands, which according to Karṇa, lowered her status to that of a courtesan. So in this case also the decision is almost wholly taken and implemented by

males to which Draupadī succumbs silently. Gāndhārī and Kuntī also willingly succumb to the situations created by a male dominated scenario. Major decisions pertaining to their life is proposed, discussed and implemented by powerful males who wield authority in several capacities like king, husband, eldest son as well as benefactor. In the case of common wifhood pertaining to Draupadī, it was Vyāsa who finally makes his appearance and sets things right.

The decision of Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the invitation of Duryodhana for a play of dice at Hastinapura is another significant episode in the epic. Duryodhana accept the invitation without consulting the matter with brothers, wife and mother. After having known Yudhiṣṭhira's decision to go to Hastinapura neither Kuntī nor Draupadī or his brothers make any intervention in order to dissuade him from ill advised decision. Draupadī was very much reigning supreme as the royal queen in Indraprastha at that time, but she does not have a word with Yudhiṣṭhira positively or negatively.

#### 5.4. Wrath and Moral Indignation of Gāndhārī

Despite the silence on crucial occasions there are several instances where Kuntī, Gāndhārī and Draupadī rise to the gravity of the situation and express their views without fear or favour. In such cases they speak like true kṣatriya heroic women.

With regard to Gāndhārī the following occasions may be cited where she quite vocal and candid in her words.

- Before the beginning of the second gambling in *Sabhā. P.*<sup>2</sup>
- Plain and bold talk with Duryodhana in *Udyoga.P.* before the war begins.<sup>3</sup>
- Gāndhārī's powerful expression of rage and sorrow towards the Pāṇḍava-s and Kṛṣṇa in *Strī. P.*<sup>4</sup>
- Gāndhārī's occasional comments or soliloquies in the battlefield after the war wherein she is seen in the company of sorrowing Bhārata women.<sup>5</sup>

With reference to one above, it can be stated that Gāndhārī had an open talk with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who was instrumental in meeting out the most heinous experience towards Draupadī. Gāndhārī knew that she was slowly be overcome by the presence of a feeling of fear and inevitable revenge from the Pāṇḍava-s. For a moment it is the queen in Gāndhārī speaks out and not the mother in her nor the ordinary wife of a king. She does not hesitate to make some painful plain talk with her lord. She reminds her husband that the warning given by Vidura, at the time of the birth of Duryodhana, seeing the ominous portends. Vidura had infact advised Dhṛtarāṣṭra to do away with Duryodhana with him for the sake of the whole country. According to Rājanīti sacrificing an individual for the welfare of the entire country was not a sin.<sup>6</sup> It is this fact that Gāndhārī chooses to remind Dhṛtarāṣṭra in order to save the country from total doom. She goes on entreating Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he should not be the cause of destruction of the whole country that might be caused by the misdeeds of a son.



With reference to second point above: Gāndhārī attempt to make a long dialogue with Duryodhana to see that she can prevail upon him to control his rage and hatred and reckless misdeeds towards Pāṇḍava-s. Duryodhana's wanton attempt to bind and imprison Kṛṣṇa who had come to Hastinapura as an ambassador of peace, had destroyed all of a reconciliation between Kaurava-s and Pāṇḍava-s. That was the last significant attempt from the part of the lord Kṛṣṇa to avoid the war and Gāndhārī was pained and frustrated to see that her son's efforts to misbehave with a person none other than Vāsudeva. It was nothing but insult to injury and in angering Kṛṣṇa, Duryodhana generated another powerful enemy. It was nothing short of ignorance and idiocy. Gāndhārī knew it quite well and it was her moral indignation that gave sharpness to her words to Duryodhana. She moans about the deep ignorance on the part of Duryodhana which makes her incapable of seeing things as they are the subtle ways of operation of his own deeds.

Duryodhana fail to understand the subtle negative ways of the operation of his own misdeeds. Gāndhārī knew that he had been

virtually blinded by his own haughtiness. It was long time that clear stream of reason is to be restored to her son. Now Duryodhana, virtual warlord puffed up merely by the strength of his own allies. Gāndhārī finally tells him frankly that no king can ever govern a country in an arbitrary manner without any consideration to the wise words of well-wishers and relatives. So Gāndhārī has been convinced that the Pāṇḍava-s were on the path of Dharma unlike his son. It was this moral conviction that makes her words reasonable and powerful though there are occasions where reason makes its exit from her.

With reference to Gāndhārī's encounter with Pāṇḍava-s and Kṛṣṇa in *Strī.P.* the following points seem to be noteworthy:

- Gāndhārī asks Bhīma why he never left a single son of theirs, whose offence is comparatively more or less lighter for example Vikarṇa was the only one among the Kaurava-s who talked in favour of Draupadī during the *Sabhā.P.* episode. Gāndhārī would perhaps have meant that Vikarṇa could have been spared by

Bhīma. She told Bhīma at least one among the hundred sons had been spared; he could be a prop for them in their old age. It was a question that arose out of wrath and sorrow of a mother. That question left reverberating in the heart of Pāṇḍava-s, because they did not have an answer for that.

- In Gāndhārī's question to Bhīma as to why he chose to drink the blood of Duḥśāsana in the battlefield. Gāndhārī's point was that to kill and to get killed was quite natural in the war. But drinking the blood of an enemy even at the phase of ferocious provocation was a diabolic act. Here also Gāndhārī's expression of rage seems to be justifiable when it is looked from the point of view of a mother and also when it is seen as an affront to the prevailing principles of war ethics.
- One of the most powerful expression of Gāndhārī's rage appears in her encounter with Kṛṣṇa after the war, out of sorrow and despair rising out of the total destruction including her sons in the

war. Gāndhārī had come to the conclusion that Kṛṣṇa could have averted the Great War if he so willed. So her impression that attempts made by Kṛṣṇa to avoid the war lacked sincerity. She thought that Kṛṣṇa did not undertake a thoroughly meaningful attempt to stop the war. In her heart of heart Gāndhārī thought that even Kṛṣṇa's last attempt in coming to the Hastinapura assembly as an ambassador of peace lacked conviction. It was in this attempt that circumstances were a bit more aggravated because of the attempt on the part of Duryodhana to bind and insult Kṛṣṇa despite his stature. Duryodhana had thrown to winds all the basic principles of statecraft as well as royal courtesy expected to be shown to a messenger of peace at the crucial time of a war like situation. All these faults of her sons did not deter her powerful words of rage towards Kṛṣṇa. That was why she pronounced a powerful imprecation<sup>7</sup> on Kṛṣṇa to the effect that the entire Yādava race would be destroyed because of Kṛṣṇa's unpardonable failure to check the bloodshed in the Great War.

- However in reply to Gāndhārī's curse, Kṛṣṇa responded that he already knew what would happen. Then he reminded Gāndhārī that it was because of her fault that the huge destruction took place. Kṛṣṇa also explained how her son Duryodhana was exceedingly wicked, envious and arrogant. Kṛṣṇa told Gāndhārī that her silence amounted to praise for the wicked acts of her son Duryodhana. She failed to understand how her son was highly ruthless and disobedient to the commands of the God and how he was the embodiment of hostilities. Gāndhārī's righteous indignation in this context is quite justifiable in view of her colossal loss in the war.

With reference to the item no. four above namely, Gāndhārī's occasional comments or soliloquies in the battlefield after the war wherein she is seen in the company of sorrowing Bhārata women, sometimes it can be assumed that it is the soliloquies of the person that may throw light on the inner soul of a character. Gāndhārī's soliloquies in the *Strī.P.* enable one to have meaningful peeps into her character.

Gāndhārī's bewailing in the war ravaged battlefield in the *Strī.P.* is to keep reminding that it is women who are at the receiving end and that nothing is more pitiable in the war than the tragic plight of the women who invariably lose their husbands, brothers and sons. Life becomes stagnant for them and there is nothing but darkness and vacancy that stare them in a ferociously fought post war situations.

Gāndhārī had lost all her sons as well as her close relatives. Most of them faced death in the most unnatural and ferocious manner. Gāndhārī's expression of rage in the post war period is influenced by her sense of total destruction and despair.

### **5.5. Kuntī's Words of Pain and Rage**

The epic does not give more situations where Kuntī was so raged or behave unmannerly. But she burst out for unbearable agony and pain in certain situations. She was not so greedy to be queen or queen mother or to enjoy the royal pleasures. But she wants to live with dignity as a

kṣatriya woman. The following are the instances where Kuntī's rage and wrath are seen expressed.

- Kuntī's encounter with Sūrya described in *Vana.P.* <sup>8</sup>
- Kuntī's talk with Pāṇḍu regarding his demand to have a fourth child invoking some other God other than the ones already invoked. <sup>9</sup>
- Kuntī's dialogue with Kṛṣṇa wherein she sends message to her sons through him. <sup>10</sup>

With reference to Kuntī's encounter with Sūrya: During the occasion of Kuntī's encounter there is an instance where she expresses mild displeasure.

पिता माता गुरवश्चैव येऽन्ये  
देहस्यास्य प्रभवन्ति प्रदाने ।  
नाहं धर्मं लोपयिष्यामि लोके  
स्त्रीणां वृत्तं पूज्यते देहरक्षा ।।<sup>11</sup>

*(It is only one's father, mother, and other superiors, that are capable of giving away their daughter's body. I shall never sacrifice my virtue. In this world keeping their bodies pure is considered to be the highest duty on the part of women.)*

एतस्मिन्नपराधे त्वां शिरसाहं प्रसादये ।

योषितो हि सदा रक्ष्याः स्वापराद्धापि नित्यशः ॥ <sup>12</sup>

*(For my this fault, I bow down my head to you to ask for your grace. A woman, however guilty, deserves protection.)*

It was out of curiosity Kuntī̄ invoked Sūrya by means of mantra given to her by Durvāsa. But when the Sun God incarnated before her in his full physical form she was confused and frightened. She requested Sun god to spare her from having a physical contact with him because unwedded mothers are never welcomed in society. Kuntī̄ tried to salute him requesting for his grace. Kuntī̄'s words suggest displeasure towards the Sun god's demand for physical contact with her. The Sun god was telling her that his appearance before her in response to the invocation of the mantra was infallible and that it had to be fruitful. So Kuntī̄'s



encounter with Sun god has given the impression that his physical desire was virtually imposed upon Kuntī.

It was Pāṇḍu who compelled Kuntī to be subjected to Niyoga, the practice of bearing progenies in persons other than one's husband. Out of pressure of circumstances Kuntī agreed to invoke three Gods. But Pāṇḍu was desirous of getting more sons. So he asked Kuntī to have a fourth son. She replies that learned men have not sanctioned fourth conception even in an emergency. The woman who has physical contact with four different men is called Svairiṇī, with five she becomes a harlot.

नातश्चतुर्थं प्रसवमापत्स्वपि वदन्त्युत ।

अतः परं स्वैरिणी स्याद् बन्धकी पञ्चमे भवेत् ॥<sup>13</sup>

*(The wise do not sanction a fourth conception even in a season of distress. an emergency. The woman having intercourse with four different men is called a Svairini; with five she becometh a harlot.)*

Here Kuntī's reply betrays her strong displeasure and disapproval to do things in accordance with the wishes of other men even if it is her own husband.

Kuntī's encounter with Kṛṣṇa in *Udyoga.P.* also appears to be an occasion where she gives free expression of her indignation. The following points in Kuntī's dialogue with Kṛṣṇa are noteworthy.

- Kuntī says that the person who is solely responsible for her all untold woes is none other than his father Śūrasena who abandoned her even in her childhood.
- Kuntī spares no words to harshly criticize Pāṇḍava-s for not protecting Draupadī during the terrible episode in *Sabhā.P.* All her sons ceased to be her dear ones the moment when Draupadī was dragged to the assembly hall by Duḥśāsana because her sons were but mute spectators instead of becoming true kṣatriya-s.

In Kuntī's second encounter with Kṛṣṇa before going back to the Pāṇḍava-s Kuntī tells him the story of Viduḷa.<sup>14</sup> The story suggests

the lack of prowess on the part of Pāṇḍava-s in suffering insult at the hands of their enemies. Other points suggested by the story can be enumerated as follows:

- A kṣatriya is not expected to lead the life of a beggar that is what Pāṇḍava-s have been doing for long time.
- A kṣatriya is born out of the arms of the Virāṭpuruṣa and therefore he is to live by expressing the prowess of their arms.
- A kṣatriya is expected to perform hard deeds for the protection of the subjects.
- An intelligent hero does not grieve in success or failure. He goes on doing right things in tune with the emerging circumstances.
- One who is destitute of wrath and given to the exercise of forgiveness is neither a woman nor a man.
- One who lives on the strength of his arms gets renowned in this world.

- Objects earned by the exercise of prowess always please the heart of a kṣatriya.

## 5.6. Feminine Sense of Moral Courage in Draupadī

When Compared to that of Gāndhārī and Kuntī, the agony and rage expressed by Draupadī on several situations in the epic is more genuine and striking. No other character in the epic had to undergo most crucial situations like her. It was because of this that Draupadī later came to be considered a symbol of woman who faced unjustified and unwarranted male misdeeds. In an Article- *Imaging Vengeance ;Ambā and Draupadī in the Mahābhārata*, Dr. Janaki Sreedharan remarks:

‘Both as a product of rivalry between the Kurus and the Panchalas Draupadi’s saga is a poignant depiction of a Kshatriya woman’s vicissitudes in a patriarchal kinship structure.’<sup>15</sup>

Draupadī’s experience in the *Sabhā.P.* has been explained in detail in the thesis chapterIV. But certain situations in the *Sabhā.P.* which are not described in the fourth chapter are dealt with in the present

context. In *Sabhā.P.* at the time of gambling Prātikāmin under the command of Duryodhana comes to deliver the message to Draupadī that she has already been staked by Yudhiṣṭhira in the ensuing play of dice. On this occasion Draupadī asked Prātikāmin that is there any kṣatriya in the world who staked his own wife in a play of dice. Draupadī said that Yudhiṣṭhira was certainly intoxicated with dice, because he could not find any other object for staking except his wife without her permission.

कथं त्वेवं वदसि प्रातिकामिन्  
को हि दीव्येद् भार्यया राजपुत्रः ।  
मूढो राजा द्यूतमदेन मत्तो  
ह्यभून्नान्यत् कैतवमस्य किञ्चित् ।।<sup>16</sup>

*(Why, O Prātikāmin dost thou say so? What prince is there any prince who playeth staking his wife? The king was certainly intoxicated with dice or else could he not find any other object to stake?)*

She asked Prātikāmin to go back the court hall and ask Yudhiṣṭhira whom he lost first himself or her. It is significant here that Draupadī used the word ‘kitava’ (gambler) in order to denote

Yudhiṣṭhira. It is the word that betrays her contempt and wrath towards Yudhiṣṭhira.

Later when Duḥśāsana dragged her into assembly hall Draupadī reminds him that he was dragging her before the Kuru heroes even when she was in her season. Draupadī tells Duḥśāsana that she is surprised to see that no elder is rebuking him. Therefore they are certainly of the same mind like that of Duḥśāsana. All the Kuru-s in the assembly hall were silently looking on when Duḥśāsana was dragging her. Draupadī says that the great tradition and morality of Bharatas are completely destroyed by the act of Duryodhana towards Draupadī in which no expression will be sufficient to denounce it. Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Vidura and elders like them, who were passively and silently looking on the atrocity that have been committed by Duḥśāsana. Because of their silent acceptance of the great crime that have lost their greatness and in the history of human behaviour they were inaugurating the culture of silence with respect to the injustice that was being meted out towards a woman before their very eyes. All this occasion the glance that she had cast on

her husbands spoke volumes of her agony and insult. The epic author tells that the Pāṇḍava-s were not so much pained at the robbing of the kingdom, or their wealth and costly gems as they were by the glance of Draupadī on the moment of Duḥśāsana's atrocity to her. The author of the epic tells that except Duryodhana, Karṇa, Śakuni and Duḥśāsana all those who were assembled were overcome by the great sorrow seeing the plight of Draupadī.

In *Vana. P.* Draupadī is seen engaged in long conversation with Yudhiṣṭhira. (chs. 35 to 40) It was in this dialogue that she asks Yudhiṣṭhira how he could be drawn towards the vice of gambling even when he was well known for being simple, gentle, modest as well as truthful. (34.190) She continues to urge Yudhiṣṭhira to resist the enemies and regain his lost kingdom and honour. She pointed out that it was to think that a person can attain prosperity in this world by the virtues, gentleness, forgiveness, straight forwardness or fear of censure. She reminds her lord that the victory is the result of action and not passivity. A kṣatriya who fails to manifest his prowess on crucial situations does

not deserve to possess that title. She reminds him that man is different from other creatures since he is capable to get involved in intelligent action. Those who believe in the efficacy of their actions are laudable. People who always harp up on destiny or chance belong to that class of men who are incapable of intelligent and powerful action. A person is not expected to be always mild and gentle. There are occasions when he is expected to strike back at those who are bending upon inflicting pain and insult towards others.

### **5.7. Draupadī's Words of Dissatisfaction**

During the time when Pāṇḍava-s were staying at incognito in the court of Virāta, Kīcaka's impolite words to Draupadī were so frequent that she once brought it to the notice of Yudhiṣṭhira while he was engaged in a play of dice with king Virāta. Draupadī had come weeping to the entrance of the court as she had been deeply hurt by Kīcaka. It was with burning eyes that she spoke to the king of Matsya's because she had been virtually kicked by Kīcaka. Instead of finding out a means



to rescue his wife Yudhiṣṭhira, spoke high sounding words on the conduct of women towards their husbands. He advises Draupadī not to stay there and go to the apartment of Sudeṣṇā. He tells that the wives of heroes endure pain for the sake of their husbands and thus win their favour. He also reminds her that her Gandharva husbands think that the time has not yet arrived, in order to get involved in the matter. Yudhiṣṭhira here rebukes her in front of king Virāta saying that she is weeping like an actress and causing annoyance in the court hall where the king and himself are engaged in the play of dice. If anything needs to be done, it will be done by the five Gandharvas. It is this indifference of Yudhiṣṭhira that make Draupadī sad and indignant. She could not help expressing her feeling towards Bhīma who was in disguise of a cook.

Draupadī tells Bhīma that her sorrows will continue so long as Yudhiṣṭhira is her husband.

अशोच्यत्वं कुतस्तस्या यस्या भर्ता युधिष्ठिरः।।<sup>17</sup>

*(What grief hath she not who hath Yudhiṣṭhira for her husband?)*

Yudhiṣṭhira stood like a statue when Prātikāmin dragged her like a slave to the court in the midst of courtiers. There will be no other princess enduring hard miseries for long time. Draupadī tells Bhīma that Kīcaka is persistently asking her to be his wife. She thinks that chief cause of her misery is none else than Yudhiṣṭhira and asks Bhīma to censure him who is still addicted to the play of dice. He has not given up such a vice despite the fact that it was the addiction to dice that turned the heaven of her life to hell. It is surprising that Yudhiṣṭhira still engages himself in the game of dice and forgets everything without having any meaningful sense of guilt. Yudhiṣṭhira who considered himself as paragon of virtue was the one who kept himself engaged in the play of dice with Kaurava-s, knowing fully well that Śakuni was playing expert in foul play. Draupadī says that he keeps himself silent, meditative perhaps over his own misdeeds. So everything that caused the

great fall of Pāṇḍava-s from royal glory to slavish degeneration is necessitated by the boundless idiocy of Yudhiṣṭhira in the name of virtue and it was because of it that Draupadī asks Bhīma to censure his elder brother. Bhīma expresses his wrath towards Yudhiṣṭhira in *Sabhā.P* thus:

भवन्ति गेहे बन्धक्यः कितवानां युधिष्ठिर ।

न ताभिरुत दीव्यन्ति दया चैवास्ति तास्वपि ॥

अस्याः कृते मन्युरयं त्वयि राजन् निपात्यते ।

बाहू ते सम्प्रधक्ष्यामि सहदेवाग्निमानय ॥<sup>18</sup>

*(O Yudhiṣṭhira, the gamblers have many loose women in their house they do not play staking even those women. Even they have kindness towards them. O King, it is for her sake that my anger falls on you. I shall burn your hands. Sahadeva, bring some fire.)*

After the war there is an occasion in *Sānti. P.* where Draupadī engages herself in dialogue with Yudhiṣṭhira expressing her indignation towards him. Yudhiṣṭhira was too upset to take over the role of reigning

monarch. She reminded Yudhiṣṭhira that the duty of kṣatriya is to punish the enemies. So it was not upto Yudhiṣṭhira to feel guilty thinking of the persons who died in the war. It is not befitting for a kṣatriya to express disinclination when a situation demands responsibility and courage from him. This kind of elasticity of mind has ever been a trait of weakness in the character of Yudhiṣṭhira.

It is because of such wavering nature that his wife and brothers had to suffer a lot. It is characteristic of Yudhiṣṭhira to stain on crucial occasions. Another sharp remark Draupadī expresses about Yudhiṣṭhira is couched in the following verse:

न क्लीबो वसुधां भुङ्क्ते न क्लीबो धनमश्नुते ।

न क्लीबस्य गृहे पुत्रा मत्स्याः पङ्क इवासते ॥<sup>19</sup>

*(A eunuch can never enjoy earth, a eunuch can never enjoy wealth, a eunuch can never have children, as there can be no fish in a mud.)*

The above mentioned rebuke is uttered by Draupadī because of her pain and despair towards the vasculating nature of her lord and the

contempt in her statement never fails to fall on Yudhiṣṭhira and it is a maximum of a wife's criticism of her husband.

Yet another occasion where Draupadī gives her expression of rage and sorrow comes while the Pāṇḍava-s' post war encounter with Aśvatthāman who had committed the most heinous night massacre with the help of Kṛpa and Kṛtavarman. Aśvatthāman had killed all the five sons of Draupadī. So she demands Bhīma to take away Aśvatthāman's crest jewel by force. As in the case of Draupadī's encounter with Jayadratha, Draupadī is here overwhelmed by a powerful wave of wrath because a mother can never bear the news of the slaughter of all her sons.

Women are often compared to mother earth in patience, perseverance and tolerance. They are supposed to suffer silently without a word since the world around them wants them to do so. But Draupadī is so capable of expressing her feeling of wrath and moral indignation on several occasions though her words make little impact

on the hearers simply because they are words spoken by a woman. Later the well known Sanskrit poet Bhāravi in his poem *Kirātarjunīya* very beautifully illustrates the feminine expressions of Draupadī. Here the words spoken by Draupadī remind one of the concerned verses in the *MB both in Vana. P. and Virata. P.* While starting her words towards Yudhiṣṭhira she says:

भवादृशेषु प्रमदाजनोदितम् भवत्यधिक्षेप इवानुशासनम् ।

तथापि वक्तुं व्यवसाययन्ति मां निरस्तनारीसमया दुराधयः ॥<sup>20</sup>

*(Advice given by a woman to persons like you is like an insult; still agonizing mental afflictions setting aside the bounds of conduct proper for women, prompt me to speak.)*

The questions rose by Draupadī in the court hall are very significant on which discussion continued through ages. But the elders and preceptors keep quiet without answering her questions. It symbolizes that women are under the control of men and if they dare to question the atrocities against them, it was invariably ignored. In the

introduction of the text *Moral Dilemmas of Mahābhārata*, Bimal Krishna Matilal points out that: 'if Draupadī's questions were properly answered it would have required a paradigm shift in India's social thought.'<sup>21</sup>

Draupadī sounded not only for her right but for entire womanhood. Unfortunately not only from the side of men but from the side of women also no one was there to support Draupadī. Jasbir Jain opines :

"Draupadi's arguments in Vyāsa's Mahābhārata are a clear indication both of the analytical and intellectual skills of Draupadī in particular and women in general. In direct contrast to the image of an obedient, docile body or a silent sufferer, she brings her own perception to the attention of the assembly."<sup>22</sup>

## End Notes

1. FN Gāndhārī's words of advice have been summarized in chapter II , vide supra page 39 - 44.
2. *Sabhā. P. 75.2-10*
3. *Udyoga.P. 129.19-54*
4. *Strī. P. 14,15,25*
5. *ibid., Chs.16-26*
6. *Ādi. P. 115.37-39*
7. curse- see vide supra.chapter II. page 53
8. *Vana.P. 306.22-24*
9. *Adī.P.123.76,77*
10. *Udyoga. P.90.132-137*
11. *Vana.P.306.22,23*
12. *Ādi.P.111.12*
13. *ibid., 123.77*
14. *Udyoga.P.Chs.132-137*
15. Sharma, T R S., *Reflections and Variations on Mahābhārata*, Sahitya Accademy, New Delhi, 2009, p.101.
16. *Sabhā. P. 67. 5*
17. *Virāta.P. 18.1*
18. *Sabhā.P.68.146*
19. *Śānti. P. 14.13*
20. Kale M R., (Ed.), *Kirātārjunīyam* of Bharavi, Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi, 1977. Canto 1 verse 28.
21. Matilal Krishna Bimal., *Moral Dilemmas of Mahābhārata*, Indian Institute of Advanced study & Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi,1961,p.3
22. Jain, Jasbir., *Indegeneous Roots of Feminism*, Sage publication Pvt Ltd. NewDelhi.2011 p.38



## CHAPTER 6

### MINOR WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

In an article on *MB*, Aurobindo quotes Bunkim Chandra Chatterji's view that there were different recognisable styles in the poem which can be divided into three layers namely 'the original epic by a very great poet, a redaction of the original epic by a poet not quite so great and a number of additions by very inferior hands.'<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to assert whether the upākyaṇa-s belong to the third division. Some of the stories like those of Śakuntalā, Naḷa and Damayantī are as well known as the original story of the epic. The story of Mādhavī constitutes one such episode which has several suggestive undertones in it regarding the predicament of women.

The minor women characters in the *MB* both in the main story as well as in the numerous upākyaṇa-s are of relevance in the present thesis in view of the fact that their stories are complimentary to the image of women as reflected in the epic. An attempt, therefore, is made here to

analyse the content of such stories and the characters therein in order to show how they are significant to the content of the present thesis.

### **6.1. Predicament of Mādhavī**

The story of Mādhavī is a quite well known one in the epic. It occurs in the *Gālavacarita* episode of the *Udyoga.P.*<sup>2</sup> Gālava was the disciple of sage Viśvāmitra. As he finished his education under Viśvāmitra, Gālava, with due respect to his preceptor asked him as to what he must offer as gurudakṣiṇa or the preceptor's fees. The sage, out of affection towards Gālava, told him that he was not very particular to receive any fees from him. But Gālava insisted that he would be given an opportunity to offer due gurudakṣiṇa. In a moment of displeasure, as it were, Viśvāmitra asked him to bring eight hundred white horses to him with one ear of black hue. (Such stories wherein one sees the disciple's persistence and the subsequent annoyance on the part of the preceptor prompting him to ask a somewhat difficult offer as gurudakṣiṇa keeps recurring in several purāṇic episodes. One well known example is that of

Kautsa which is described in the fifth sarga of *Raghuvamśa*). Gālava was in a dilemma now. He did not know where he could have eight hundred white horses with one ear black in colour. However he made up his mind to share his difficulty with somebody and so Gālava told everything to Garuḍa who directed him to Yayāti, the well known monarch of lunar dynasty. Yayāti was also in a state of hardship, for his wealth had waned. So he had neither the horses nor the wealth to help Gālava. But he unhesitatingly gave his beautiful daughter, Mādhavī, to Gālava by the help of whom perhaps he can fulfil his promise to Viśvāmitra. Gālava was now felt a bit relieved, for he thought that he could somehow earn the horses with the help of Yayāti's daughter. Gālava took Mādhavī to Haryaśva, the king of Ikṣvāku race. He presented Mādhavī as a gift to Haryaśva and asked for the eight hundred white horses with one ear in black hue. But to Gālava's misfortune, Haryaśva had only two hundred such horses. Gālava was again in difficulty, for he thought how he could earn the six hundred remaining horses if he had to present Mādhavī to Haryaśva. Mādhavī came to his

help. She told Gālava that she would stay with Haryaśva for one year until a son is born to them after which Gālava could take her to other kings for collecting the remaining six hundred horses. Mādhavī consoled Gālava saying that after each sojourn, she will remain a virgin. Gālava was happy and after a son was born to Mādhavī and Haryaśva, Gālava took her to king Divodāsa of Kāśi with whom she stays for a period of one year. Gālava received two hundred more horses from Divodāsa. After a son was born to them, Gālava took Mādhavī to king Uśīnara and received another two hundred horses from him. After a son was born to them, Gālava came to know that there were no more such horses in the universe and he presented those six hundred horses to Viśvāmitra and requested him to be pleased to receive the six hundred horses instead of the eight hundred ones. To his surprise, Viśvāmitra, the so called great sage also wanted to stay with Mādhavī for a period of one year. Mādhavī also bore a son for Viśvāmitra. So during the course of four years, Mādhavī had to be the consort of four different persons and she became a mother four times. After begetting the fourth son to

Viśvāmitra, Mādhavī returned to Yayāti who arranged for her marriage. She refused and said she would like to be wedded to the forest and in the next moment she disappeared to the woods.

The story of Mādhavī in the epic assumes significance in the light of the pitiable predicament of women referred to at several places in the epic. King Yayāti, her father, does not ask for her permission before being given over to Gālava to be staked to various persons. And the father in Yayāti does not see anything wrong in it given the general social situation shaped and formulated by the principles of Dharmaśāstra which seemed to be governed by a system of patriarchal authority. Such a system has a smile of victory on its face when Mādhavī herself mouths a solution for Gālava's difficulty by giving permission to be staked to various persons and beget sons for them. The pivotal aspect of the story is encircled in Mādhavī's remaining a virgin after her each sojourn with different consorts. There is yet another more moving aspect to the story. Mādhavī bears a son for each of the four persons with whom she stayed for a period of one year as their wife. That means that she had no time to

fondle her child and as soon as she delivered, she was deprived of her position as a mother because it was time for her to be taken to another person. She had no right over her child and she was just a pawn or plaything in the hands of a society in which everything seemed to be determined and executed by a male dominated system of governance which was deaf and dumb to decipher even the so called sublime norms and principles attached to motherhood. The four sons belonged not to her, but to their fathers. She had no role except to be a veritable means for giving birth to four sons during the span of four years. The only hint in the story about Mādhavī's agonising and silent protest is the expression of her reluctance to take part in the marriage arranged for her by her father after having lived with four persons in four years. The children were not living with her and despite being the mother of four sons, Mādhavī was destined to be an orphan and hence her silent disappearance into the forest. So the epic author leaves behind enough hints to let one have an awareness of Mādhavī's silent but eloquent protest towards a society which mistreated her like an object not being

considered a human being even once in a story in which the major players were all males namely her own father, the learned disciple Gālava and his great preceptor Viśvāmitra as well as three other ones who were supposed to be the responsible protectors of their subjects.

## **6.2. Tears of Paulomā**

The story of Paulomā, the wife of sage Bhṛgu, is also a significant one in terms of the untold sufferings Paulomā had to bear simply because she happened to be a woman. Paulomā's story is described in the *Paulomaparva* section of *Ādi.P.*<sup>3</sup> Her status as the wife of a great and powerful sage did not make any difference in her life.

The story is described thus: Paulomā, the pregnant wife of sage Bhṛgu was once approached by a demon called Puloma. The licentious demon was tempted by the beauty of Paulomā. In the absence of the sage, the demon misbehaved with Paulomā since he was under the impression that Paulomā actually was betrothed to him once by her father and therefore the demon believed that Paulomā belonged to him

and not to the sage. The demon carried her by force and in that melee, Cyavana came out of Paulomā's pregnancy. By the fire of wrath in Cyavana, the demon was burnt alive in his spiritual lustre. Paulomā was crying aloud thinking that even her status as the wife of a sage did not save her and that she was attacked even when she was in her pregnancy. One is also reminded here of the story of Mamatā, wife of sage Utatthya, in Dīrghatamopākhyāna of *Ādi.P.*<sup>4</sup> as well as the story of a brahmin lady, in Aurvopākhyāna of *Ādi.P.*<sup>5</sup> the mother of the well known sage Aurvan. In both these cases sheer violence on pregnant women is committed by ruthless males. Irrespective of the positions held and the social hierarchy they belonged to, women were in the habit of being mistreated and molested by masculine force and authority.

### **6.3. Vadhūsarā**

Paulomā lamented for a long time. Tears of grief and agony flowed from her eyes. Those tears of suffering and pain took the shape of a river and it flowed beside the hermitage of sage Bhṛgu and the river of



tears came to be known as Vadhūsarā reminding one of the unending tears of womanhood shed profusely through ages. The river Vadhūsarā thus symbolises the untold sorrows of women caused mainly by the actions of a male dominated social milieu.

#### **6.4. Other Instances**

Several instances as the ones described above are seen in the *MB*. Jaratkārū, the sister of Vāsuki, the king of serpents, had to marry a sage. The sage had set a condition to the effect that Jaratkārū should not utter anything unpleasant or disagreeable whatever is done by the sage. Once the sage slept at the time of performing the evening rites and it was after much hesitation that Jaratkārū woke him up from the sleep. The sage left her without a word.<sup>6</sup> In yet another example, King Bali, suffering from childlessness, sends his wife Sudēṣṇā to a blind old sage called Dīrghatamas, to beget children from him. She, however, sent another śūdra maid to Dīrghatamas and eleven sons were born. Bali came to

know of it and again compels his wife to go to Dīrghatamas to have children from him.<sup>7</sup>

The story of Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā is too well known to be narrated in detail. Bhīṣma had won them by force to be the brides of Vicitravīrya who did not live long and what transpired after his death is a story which is the life breath of the development of the main story of the epic. In another instance, Uttarā had to marry Abhimanyu though she had fallen in love with Arjuna. The predicament of Duḥśalā in the epic is all the more poignant. She had to live with a licentious man as her husband. Her husband had also a most terrible death at the battle field of Kurukṣetra at the hands of Arjuna. After the war another tragedy happened in her life. Knowing the news that Arjuna had started for a world conquest her son died out of fear for Arjuna. Holding her grandson in her hands, Duḥśalā comes to Arjuna begging to spare the life of the child. It is one of the most moving scenes in the epic.<sup>8</sup> Despite being the only daughter of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī and the only sister of a hundred valiant heroes, Duḥśalā's suffering knew no bounds. Stories

which describe the experiences of women like Sukanyā, Rēṇukā, are also beset with incidents of unending sorrows which occur, in most cases, not because of their fault, but because of the social circumstances antagonistic to women.

The experiences undergone by women characters like the ones mentioned above cannot be considered as accidental happenings. The tone and tenor of some of the principles of the Dharmaśāstra literature which get reflected in the epic at several places is generally quite unfriendly to women though there are occasional descriptions with full of hollow praise for women for their chasteness and loyalty to husbands. In several instances one sees that great men including sages are instantly overcome by sheer lust once they come across any beautiful women including the married and pregnant ones. In the next moment they insist that their desire be satisfied either succumbing to them physically or getting themselves engaged in a Gāndharva type of marriage. In several episodes one sees young girls are compelled to serve aged and short-tempered men. Abduction, sexual harassment, public rebuke, use of male

power and authority are all appearing in the epic as common happenings. At one moment one sees the glorification of women and motherhood. In the next moment, one comes across an episode in which a person suffers simply because she happens to be a woman. Seldom does one find women having a say on matters pertaining to their life. The role of women in life as passive partners of men is seen glorified every now and then. Their desires, wishes and views were invariably modified to suit those of their male partners. Pages after pages are seen written in the epic describing the unending duties and obligations of women towards their partners and not vice versa. The *Anuśā.P.* and Śānti parva-s have several passages in them which detail the essentials of a model code of conduct for women. Begetting and bringing up children were considered their most sacred obligations to society.<sup>9</sup> One of the passages in the epic<sup>10</sup> tells that women are the source of all evils. At one place Bhīṣma makes a harlot speak on women and he blurts out the view of a society whose cultural values are always influenced by an attitude of male domination. Here is a summary of such arguments: Even if high born

and gifted with beauty and endowed with protectors, woman is prone to transgress the restrains assigned to her. There is nothing else that is more sinful than a woman. She is the root of all evils. Even though endowed with meritorious husbands, woman disregards them when she gets an opportunity. She is after male companionship always. A woman will do anything to win favours. She falters towards persons of other sex. There are no men in the world that a woman may consider as unfit for friendship. A woman is always fickle minded and she is after new male companionship. Like fire is never satiated with fuel, like ocean can never be filled, what remains in woman's heart can never be deciphered.

## End notes

1. Aurobindo., *The Mahābhārata Essays and Translations*, Aurobindo Ashram Press, Puducherry, 2007, p.11.
2. *Udyoga.P. Chs. 112-120*
3. *Ādi.P. Chs. 5-7*
4. *ibid., ch. 104*
5. *ibid., Ch.178*
6. *Āstīkaparva section of Ādi.P. Chs.45-48*
7. *Dīrghatamopākyaṇa in Ādi.P ch. 104*
8. *Aśva.P. Ch.78*
9. *Anuśā.P. 46.11*
10. *ibid Chs.38-39*

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

In the foregoing pages an attempt is made to delve deep into the world of major as well as minor women characters in the epic against the backdrop of the Great War and also against the background of the panorama of human situations set in an atmosphere of the dark and bright sides of the subtle phenomenon called human psyche. In the introductory chapter the major three women characters in the epic namely Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī are introduced underscoring the significance of their role in the development and denouement of the main story of the epic. The traits of the personality of these three characters are sought to be analysed in the light of the emergence of new thought in the field of women studies and allied domains of knowledge.

By the time the epic is coming to a close the character Gāndhārī seems to assume more and more mature features. Her journey in the epic is one that can be broadly described as a slow but steady progress from

uncertainties to sober reflections. Such a scenario is discussed in chapter two titled: *Gāndhārī: From Darkness to the World of Light*. The significant occurrences in the life of Gāndhārī described in the epic are analysed to scrutinise the character of Gāndhārī. In presenting the various aspects with regard to the role of Gāndhārī in the epic a critical approach is generally resorted to.

The marriage of Gāndhārī with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the acceptance of blindness darkened her life. Neither her father Subala, nor her brother Śakuni, had asked Gāndhārī whether she was willing to have a blind king as her life partner. She silently submits to her destiny. Gāndhārī was the mother of hundred sons including the veritable Duryodhana the great protagonist of war. She was the sister of, Śakuni who leaving his country behind, chose to spend his time to teach the philosophy of hatred and wrath in Duryodhana and those all around him. Gāndhārī could not prevent her brother from his evil intentions. Decisions and machinations to commit several unrighteous and gruesome acts leading to the Great War were being taken behind her back despite her authority as the queen



of Hastinapura. At times she makes her appearance to attempt to instill sense in her lord and eldest son. But her words naturally fall flat. They are, after all, the words of a woman. Not even once Gāndhārī's words for peace and virtue were taken seriously. At the same time not even once could she assert her moral guts in front of her husband and sons. Her unbounded motherly love to Duryodhana also failed piteously to avert the war. Hers was a mute presence when Draupadī was being literally dragged from her own harem to the assembly of great males sitting with their commanding silence. The heinous act of dragging Draupadī by her hair, making the quarters resound by her hapless screams, was committed by none other than her second son, Duḥśāsana. Gāndhārī's remaining a mute spectator to all the sordid drama that was being enacted on the dark corridors of power at Hastinapura caused a serious missing on the personality and character of Gāndhārī who is otherwise known for her courage and fortitude.

In the third chapter, captioned as *Kuntī: Suffering, Tolerance and Fortitude*, an attempt is made to analyse the character of Kuntī against

the backdrop of numerous happenings in which Kuntī plays a key role in the main story of the epic. In the case of Kuntī also there is similarity of circumstances with those of Gāndhārī. Śūrasena, father of Kuntī, gave her to Kuntibhoja. The epic does not have a word about the mother of Kuntī; that means Kuntī did not have a childhood that was enriched by the love and care of parents. So Kuntī is a person (character) in whose personality there was a void even from her childhood. It is true that she was brought up as a princess despite being the maid in service of the esteemed guests in the palace of Kuntibhoja. It was this life situation that paved the way for her encounter with sage Durvāsa that lead to her meeting with Sūrya and the birth of Karṇa even while she was an unmarried girl. This incident virtually transformed her personality, for she had been suffering from a sense of guilt for being an unwedded mother. Even the birth of Karṇa was virtually thrust upon her by Surya, for the adolescent Kuntī was pleading innocence and sheer curiosity in uttering and invoking Sūrya by means of Durvāsa's mantra. This had caused another void in Kuntī's character.

Ever since Kuntī arrived in the palace of Hastinapura after the sudden demise of her husband along with the young Pāṇḍava-s ,Kuntī had to encounter several conspiratorial threats from Duryodhana since her eldest son Yudhiṣṭhira happened to be a formidable claimant to the throne of Hastinapura. Such a situation turned out to be one that was least expected by Kuntī. In her heart of heart, perhaps Kuntī had thought that Pāṇḍu's sons and herself shall be well received in Hastinapura. But what transpired was a sudden flood of incidents in which her sons were treated as real villains simply because of the fact that they were the true heirs to the throne. All significant situations pertaining to the life of Kuntī including her dialogues with important personalities in the epic are churned to bring out the several shades of Kuntī's personality. The significant conflict of emotions that raged in her psychic horizon especially with regard to Karṇa, her eldest son, made Kuntī a character who never felt free from tension from the toss and pull of the torrent of circumstances in which , sometimes, she was becoming just like a plaything to the conspiracy of destiny. The birth of Karṇa at a time

when she remained unwedded was an episode which had great impact on the personality of Kuntī. Ever since the occurrence of this incident in her life, Kuntī hardly had an occasion to relax even during the pre-war period. Not even the many small and big victories in the war were able to soothe her agonising heart since she knew that ultimately all her sons would not survive it. Not only did she lose her eldest son, but all her grandsons too were consumed in the flames of war. That was why she was determined to retire to the forest along with Gāndhārī and Dhṛtarāṣṭra despite her sons' concerted entreaties not to do so. All such striking episodes in the life of Kuntī throw light on the infinite situations of life which a human being is ordained to go through in the amazing phenomenon called human existence. Almost by the close of the epic, one can deduce that Kuntī's sufferings, over a period of time, made her tolerant woman and her tolerance later grew into her psychic fortitude. Towards all the insufferable atrocities in the war, Kuntī had stood like a fort. The heart-rending happenings in the war would perhaps have

frightened anybody, but not Kuntī, the mother of Arjuna and Karṇa and the mother in law of Draupadī.

The fourth chapter titled *Draupadī: the Heroine par Excellence of the Epic*, lays bare the image of the character and personality of Draupadī who can certainly be considered the heroine of the epic. Many are the ascents and descents she came across. She is the one who weathered many a crisis throughout her life. Draupadī survived even the most terrible experience she had to undergo in the Sabhā. P. Discarded by everybody including her heroic husbands, Draupadī could survive the heinous attacks of Duḥśāsana with the tacit approval of every male assembled there, because of her confidence in herself which is a merit that is seldom seen in women on crucial occasions. Kṛṣṇa's help on that occasion in the form of the supply of unending robes to her making the villainous Duḥśāsana incapable of disrobing her, can be considered a poetic representation of her moral courage and self confidence which came to her help when all other material elements had failed to come to her assistance. The chapter attempts to analyse all the significant

episodes and situations in the epic in which Draupadī gets involved directly or indirectly. The chapter tries to portray not only her victories but her failures in the epic. The epochs in her rather uncommon life are subjected to analysis in order to pinpoint certain missing as well as pluspoints in her personality. The great and conspicuous paradoxes in her life are specially taken for consideration.

Chapter five is captioned Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī: A Contrastive Study. As the title of the chapter suggests, the chapter is an attempt to make a comparative as well as contrastive study of Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī, the three major women characters in the epic who influence the course of events in the main story of the epic to a great extent. The subtleties in the character of the major trio are subjected to a critical approach giving emphasis on elements of contrastive significance which are in abundance in the epic. The way these three major characters responded to certain most significant episodes in the epic is underscored. The chapter attempts to bring out the multifaceted nature of the image of women in the epic.

Chapter six is a treatment of certain significant, but minor women characters in the epic that appear both in the main story as well as in the numerous upākhyāna-s in the epic. In all the instances the suffering of women is highlighted. The chapter attempts to point out how decisions for the sake of women are taken and carried out by male masters and how women either remain mute spectators and sufferers or become spokespersons of the patriarchal values of society. A deep perusal of the epic reveals that the epic has a number of minor female characters who appear as telling examples of the unending miseries into which they are thrown solely because they happen to be women and solely because each episode is portrayed from a male gaze.

## **Findings**

1. The *MB* is an epic on which much has already been written. But what is attempted in the thesis is to highlight the image of women with reference to the three major women characters in the epic in the light of modern developments in women studies and allied domains of knowledge.
2. An analysis of the character and personality of the three major characters is done adopting a critical approach into the positive as well as the negative aspects of the character. A dispassionate evaluation, without either glorification or otherwise, is generally adopted.
3. A comparative and contrastive approach has been attempted in the fifth chapter which is expected to throw new light on further study of the great epic.



4. The chapter on the minor characters of the epic underscoring the silent and unending sufferings of women folk enhances the scope of the analysis of the image of women in the epic.
5. The episodes in the epic and their analysis pertaining to the three major women characters and minor female characters in the epic constitute a dimension of cultural studies to the domain of Mahābhārata research.

#### **Suggestions for Researchers to Come**

1. The *MB* is considered not only an epic of great value, but a treatise on Dharmaśāstra also. After going through the present thesis a researcher can enquire whether the characterisation of Gāndhārī, Kuntī and Draupadī is presented in a manner that is in consonance to the traditional dictums of Dharmaśāstra literature.
2. A modern researcher can churn out the numerous discussions on Dharmaśāstra seen in Śānti and Anuśāsana Parva-s and also at other parts of the epic including the dialogue between

Satyabhāmā and Draupadī which reflect the views on several matters pertaining to women adopting a critical approach . The researcher can inquire into the intensity of traditional views on women in the epic scattered in its pages and see how far it has been influenced by a patriarchal as well as male chauvinistic viewpoint. The present study may provoke such an inquiry which a discerning student of literature and sociology shall not lose sight of.

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