

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN FEMALE WARRIORS OF MAHABHARATA

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Abstract:

Women are incredible in our Indian mythology. Throughout the history of Indian civilization; Women have battled to assert themselves as self-reliant individuals, and to vindicate their identities in a patriarchal society. Again and again, these warriors have manifested their prominence in various myths; which are narrated and passed down by various generations in the form of folk traditions. The two great epics The Ramayana (500 BCE) and The Mahabharata (400 BCE) are radiant with many heroic female characters' distinguishing themselves through various skills. The Mahabharata is the story of courageous men and eminent women whose lives are truly motivational. Women in the Mahabharata performed their various roles and responsibilities with their endurance, optimism, nobility, intellect, and faithfulness. Their assertiveness and self-confidence made them rebellious and tough enough to deal with the Patriarchy and Gender-discrimination. Draupadi, Gandhari, and Kunti are the leading ladies of Mahabharata, but there have been some lesser known female warriors who were skilled in warfares, but not attained recognition in the epic. These women performed an important role in shaping the narrative of the epic and their contributions cannot be overlooked. This paper is an attempt to discover some of these forgotten female warriors in the Mahabharata.

Keywords: *Forgotten, Mahabharata, Mother, Power, Shakti, Warrior.*

Introduction:

Hindu Mythology is enormous and we have various warriors with significant powers to conquer over their enemies. In our mythology, the Goddesses are seen as devoted and nurturing figures that remain calm and the figures of humanity. Women *have always been viewed* as the incarnation of 'Shakti.' *Durga, Gauri, and Maha-Kali* are the manifestation (Avatar) of Shakti; these Goddesses are the embodiment of energy, fertility, and power. Shakti is the Creator, the Destroyer of devilish forces and the Restorer of balance. Devi or Shakti takes many appearances, incarnations, and names. She can be a harmonious and sacrificial mother like Goddess *Parvati* is also worshipped as '*Annapurna*' who is considered as the goddess of nourishment and fertility that represents food. A dangerous warrior and epitome of strength like Goddess *Durga* who transformed herself into nine fierce forms to kill demons like '*Mahisasura*', '*Shumbh*' and '*Nishumbh*' because they were fascinated by her beauty and attempted to abduct her forcibly. As the fiery goddess of annihilation *Maha-Kali*; she is the slayer of devil '*Raktabeej*' by drinking every single drop of his blood because with each drop of his blood fell on the ground, produced multiple forms of '*Raktabeej*'.

“The hungry earth, which devours its own children and fattens on their corpses ... It is in India that the experience of the Terrible Mother has been given its most grandiose form as Kali. But all this and it should not be forgotten an image not only of the Feminine but particularly and specifically of the Maternal. For in a profound way life and birth are always bound up with death and destruction”.....

- Erich Neumann (The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype)

If we look into our legendary epics we have found many invincible women, who fought courageously in the battle-field alongside men. In *The Ramayana* For instance, the brave and beautiful

queen '*Kaikeyi*' was the second wife of King *Dasharata*; she was well-trained in self-defense, warfare, drove chariots, and fought wars from a very young age. When '*Indra*' the king of gods asked *Dasharata* to fight with the devil '*Samhasura*', who was the rival of both *Indra* and *Dasharata*. *Kaikeyi* requested *Dasharata* to take her with him on the battlefield. She served him as the charioteer. In the field, *Dasharata's* chariot wheel broke and then it was the fearless '*Kaikeyi*' who took him to a safe place, repaired the chariot wheel, healed *Dasharata's* injuries, then returned to the battlefield again and they won. After that, the king *Dasharata* had promised her two boons.

The Mahabharata was previously known as '*Jaya*', was composed around 400 BCE by Krishna-Dvaipayana Vyasa. The saint Vyasa approached Ganesha, to write *The Mahabharata*. Lord Ganesha graciously agreed on a condition "that during working hours the dictation would have to be continuous and his pen must not be kept idle even for a moment" (*Chaturvedi*, 2). *The Mahabharata* means Great India. The epic is considered as a whole literary text, not just the metrical creation. It consists of 18 Parva's and its central theme is the great Kurukshetra battle lasted for 18 days. The war was fought between two cousins Kaurava's and the Pandava's, which resulted in the absolute destruction of the Kaurava's and finally, Pandava's achieved their kingdom forever because they were standing for the truth.

More than 100 women are discussed in the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti are associated with the main theme of the epic, but there are many 'other' women who were lost in the history of *Mahabharata*. These women have shown their eminence in warfares and martial arts. Chitrāngadā, Satyabhama, Shikhandi, and Ulupi were such skilled warriors. These female figures were, surely the embodiment of heroism, but got a remark in very few episodes of Mahabharata. The present paper aims to discover the myths of these female warriors in the epic, which will justify their contributions in the Mahabharata.

Chitrāngadā: The Warrior Princess of Manipur-

The story of Chitrāngadā finds mention in the "Arjuna-Vanavasa Parva" of the Mahabharata. Arjun had met the Chitrāngadā during his exile from his kingdom Indraprastha because as per the condition Draupadi should stay one year with each Pandava brother. If anyone did not follow this condition they had to go into exile for twelve years. When Draupadi was with Yudhishtira, Arjuna entered their room to take his bow *gandiva* to save the cows of a Brahmin. So, as per the condition, Arjuna had to go into exile for twelve years, to visit holy places in this period. In his wanderings, he reaches Manipur, ruled by the King Chitravahan. During hunting, he came across Chitravahan's daughter Chitrāngadā, the warrior princess of Manipur. As Chitrāngadā was the only child of the king Chitravahan, she was brought up as a boy, who loved adventures, hunting, and martial arts. She was exceptional in archery, sword art, horse riding, warfare, and administration. Chitrāngadā was the army chief and the protector of Manipur. She dressed up like a man who fiercely protected her land. Even a skilled archer like Arjun also got impressed by the skills of Chitrāngadā; she gave him a tough competition in archery. Chitrāngadā was not a Man, but she was more than a son for king Chitravahan. After seeing Arjun, she reacquires her hidden womanly qualities and feminine delicateness. She invokes the God of love (Kamdev) and the Goddess of beauty (Rati) to make her elegant and gorgeous to win the love of Arjuna. Pleased with her prayers, Kamdev granted her a beautiful appearance.

When Arjun saw the completely transformed Chitrāngadā, he was fascinated with her charm. *Her angelic beauty* and skills made him *fall in love with her*. Therefore, Arjun requested the king to seek Chitrāngadā's hand in marriage. The king Chitravahan was initially reluctant of getting her *daughter married* to Arjuna because according to the boon of Shiva, every king of Manipur is destined to have only one child, who is appointed as the king's inheritor. Chitrāngadā was his inheritor so; king agrees on a condition that; the child born to Arjun and Chitrāngadā would be the king of Manipur. Arjuna accepts this condition and getting married to Chitrāngadā, he stayed with her for three years. When she gave birth to a son '*Babruvahana*', Arjun went away on his wanderings. Chitrāngadā was left behind to govern and protect

Manipur. She deeply missed Arjun in every single moment. Chitrāngadā became the teacher of her son Babruvahana; she prepares him in all techniques of war such as archery, sword art and martial arts like his father Arjun. According to the Ashvamegh Parva of *Mahabharata*, when Arjun returned to Manipur with his army, following the sacrificial horse of yajna; Babruvahana captures their horse. Babruvahana does not even know that he is the son of Arjun. However, Babruvahana challenges Pandava's army to fight with him, if they want their horse. In this combat, Babruvahana triumphs over 'Bhīma', kills 'Vrishketu' (Karna's only living son) and his father Arjun with an arrow given by Ganga (who wanted to take revenge from Arjuna for the slaying of Bhishma). When Chitrāngadā got to know about this, she was deeply shattered. She rebukes Babruvahana for killing his own father. Chitrāngadā, lamenting with uncontrollable grief fainted and fell on the ground (*Bhawalkar, 352*). And then Krishna sent Babruvahana to the naglok (the land of the snakes), to bring sanjeevani Mani from Arjuna's another wife Ulupi. Arjun was brought back to life with the help of Krishna. Though, Chitrāngadā spent her whole life without Arjun but wanted to die if her husband was not revived (*Bhawalkar, 362*). This kind of devotion has been seen in the women of that era.

Ulupi: The Naga Warrior Princess

Ulupi was a Naga princess and the daughter of the serpent king, Kauravya, who belongs to the dynasty of Vasuki. Kauravya was the ruler of the underwater kingdom of snakes in the river Ganga. Arjun started his exile of twelve years from the banks of Ganga. Ulupi saw Arjun and fell in love with him. Ulupi was a well-trained warrior (*Chandramouli, 2012*), who was skilled in martial arts. She dragged him forcibly into the Naga Lok (the land of the snakes). Ulupi expressed her love and requested Arjun to accept her as his wife otherwise; she will end her own life. Arjuna got impressed with her skills and accepted her by Gandharva marriage because he wants to end the rivalry between the Pandava's and Nagas. He spent that night with her and left the palace on the morning of the next day. They had a son whose name was Iravan. Ulupi gave a boon to Arjun that "he would be unbeatable in the water and all creatures live underwater would always obey him". Some sources also say that that Ulupi had taught war-techniques to 'Babruvahana' (son of Chitrāngadā and Arjun) along with Chitrāngadā. She behaved like an elder sister with Chitrāngadā and loved her son Babruvahana too. When Arjun got slain by Babruvahana, she revived him by giving sanjeevani Mani to Krishna. Ulupi was the second wife of Arjun; the first one was Draupadi, later he had married to Chitrāngadā and Subhadra. Though Arjun had spent only one day with Ulupi; yet she had ended her life by drowned herself in the Ganga, When Pandava's decided to go with Draupadi on their last journey to Himalayas (*Bhawalkar, 360*).

Satyabhama: The Warrior Wife of Krishna

Satyabhama was the only child of Satrajit, the royal treasurer of Dvaraka. She was an incarnation of BhooDevi, the earth goddess. Satyabhama was the third wife of Lord Krishna. She was an ace archer, who expert in war tactics. Unlike the other women of those days; who were satisfied with their household. Satyabhama was the companion of Krishna in all fields, including battles. Her father had given her adequate training of warfares. There is an iconic story associated with Narakasura and Satyabhama. Narakasura was the son of BhooDevi; He became tyrant after getting so many powers from 'Brahma'. He had attacked Indra's kingdom to rule the heaven. He had abducted 16,000 women and captivated them in his palace to satisfy his lust. Narakasura became obsessed with his powers and in greed; he stole the earrings of heavenly goddess 'Aditi'.

When Satyabhama heard of his tyrannies and ill-treatment towards women, she became furious. She approached Krishna to declare a battle against Narakasura. Krishna took her as his charioteer, on the battlefield. In the war Narakasura attacked Krishna with his most dangerous weapon Thunderbolt; being struck with his weapon Krishna got fainted. After seeing Krishna collapsed, Satyabhama got enraged. She doubled her powers, aggressively took the bow and shot an arrow at Narakasura's chest and He died finally. After that Satyabhama released the sixteen thousand women and all the prisoners who were captivated by Narakasura. To protect the Honor of sixteen thousand women, Krishna married to all of

them. Satyabhama was the warrior as well as the loving and caring wife of Krishna. In the Vana-Parva of *Mahabharata*, there is the most popular conversation between Satyabhama and Draupadi; where Satyabhama wants to know from Draupadi, the secrets of winning a husband's heart. Draupadi explains to her how to be a good wife by serving your husband, satisfies their needs, how to become an *indispensable* and loved in the eyes of your husband. Thus, Satyabhama always tried to make Krishna happy, they had ten sons. After Krishna's death, Satyabhama went to the forest to perform penance.

Shikhandini: The Warrior Princess

'Shikhandini' had been born in her previous birth as 'Amba'. She was the princess of Kashi. In her Swayamvar, she was forcibly abducted by Bhishma with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika. Bhishma abducted the princesses for the marriage of his brother Vichitravirya, The king of Hastinapur. However, Amba told Bhishma that she wants to marry Salva, not Vichitravirya. So, Bhishma respectfully sent her to Salva, but Salva refused to marry her because she had been abducted by Bhishma. She returned to Hastinapur, but Vichitravirya refused to marry her. Amba then requested Bhishma to marry her, but Bhishma rejected her due to his vow of celibacy. Bhishma had ruined her life; so she went to Parashurama to kill Bhishma in a war. After twenty-three days of fierce battle with Bhishma; Parashurama could not defeat Bhishma. Therefore, Amba decided to avenge Bhishma herself and kill him by taking birth as a man (*Bhawalkar*, 441). She started very tough penance; Shiva blessed her and granted her a boon that in her next birth she would kill Bhishma but with the condition that she would be born as a girl and later would become a man (*Bhawalkar*, 441).

In her next birth, Amba was born as Shikhandini; she was the daughter of Drupad, the King of Panchal. According to the boon of Shiva, Drupad's wife would give birth to a daughter, who would later be transformed into a man. So, Drupad announced that the queen gave birth to a son and they raised 'Shikhandini' like a prince. They had dressed her up in manly attires. She learns archery, martial arts, war-techniques, and fine arts when she is a mere girl. Dronacharya is her guru; it is not mentioned in the *Mahabharata* whether she has learnt this staying in Drona's house or in her own house (*Ghosh*, 45). She was married to the daughter of the powerful king of Dasarna, who became very angry to know the gender of Shikhandini. He felt betrayed by Drupad, so he terrorized him to attack his kingdom. Being responsible for the sufferings of her parents, Shikhandini left home and went into a forest. There she had seated alone, cried and fasting for days. Yaksha felt pity for her and asked her about her sufferings. He offered her mutual exchange of their sexes for a short period, to satisfy the king of Dasarna. Thus, Shikhandini attained manhood, became 'Shikhandi', after that he happily returned to his own country, Panchal. When Kubera got to know about Yaksha's act of changing gender, he became very angry on Yaksha. Kubera cursed Yaksha that "he would not to regain manhood till Shikhandi's death". It's because of Shiva's boon, Shikhandini permanently got masculinity to avenge Bhishma.

In the Kurukshetra war, Shikhandi fought on the side of the Pandava's. Bhishma knows all the activities of Amba, her penance and her rebirth as Shikhandi. Bhishma took an oath that he would drop his weapons against women. Arjuna took an advantage of Bhishma's oath; he took 'Shikhandi' on his chariot to kill Bhishma. On the chariot, he hides behind Shikhandi and attacked Bhishma with several arrows. Thus, Shikhandi became the cause of the death of Bhishma, this way 'Shikhandi' took the revenge of his humiliation in previous birth as 'Amba'. Shikhandi was killed by Ashwathama on the 18th day of the war. Amba/ Shikhandini had enough courage to challenges patriarchy; she had fought with *Bhishma*, Parashurama and *even Shiva for her self-respect*. From Amba/Shikhandi's life journey we can learn that everything can be achieved by self-confidence, firmness, dedication, and self-sacrifice.

Conclusion

These phenomenal women of the *Mahabharata* were fearless warriors, who performed as fighters and defended themselves in the patriarchal society. They were not just warriors; they were daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers also. These ladies were those who administrated their kingdom wisely; who

fought alongside men in the battle-field, who nurtured their children alone and accept the challenges of hard-pressed life, who trained their children in warfare's, who fought for their dignity and self-respect. These heroic women were the embodiment of strength, courage, and dedication. Undoubtedly, we cannot ignore the contributions of these female warriors in the epic, without them *Mahabharata* would have been incomplete.

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