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Female characters from the Mahabharata.

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I would also like to thank everyone for supporting and guiding us through these times and being with us along these physically distanced times.

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Female characters from the Mahabharata

Ganga:-



According to the scriptures, Shantanu was a powerful king of the Ikshvaku dynasty named *Mahabhisha* in his previous life. Through his merits, he reached the *Devaloka* after death and attended the court of Indra where Lord Brahma was present. It is said a gust of wind displaced Ganga's clothes revealing her body. Everybody present there bashfully bent their heads except Mahabhisha who kept gazing lustfully at her. Upon seeing this act, Brahma lost his temper and cursed him to be born as mortals. Ganga, who also enjoyed this act, was cursed to be born as human and come back only after breaking Mahabhisha's heart. Mahabhisha then

requested Brahma to be born as the son of Kuru king Pratipa and his wish was granted by Brahma.

A child was born to Pratipa and his wife Sunanda in their old age. He was named Shantanu because when he was born his father had controlled his passions by ascetic penances. Pratipa then installed Shantanu as king of Hastinapura and retired into the woods to perform penances. Bahlika who was elder than Shantanu also gave permission to him for becoming the **king of Hastinapura**.

One day king Shantanu was hunting at the bank of river Ganga. He saw Ganga the Divine River and the **Goddess Ganga**. Shantanu at once was enamored with her and approached her and proposed her for marriage. She agreed but kept a condition that King would never question her actions. Shantanu gave his words to Ganga that he wouldn't. Ganga also warned King that if in future he was to question her, then she would leave him after giving the answer.

Soon time passed and Ganga gave birth to her first son. Hasthinapur was filled with joy. The next morning, Shantanu saw Ganga going towards the river, with their son. King was confused so he followed her but was shocked to see that Ganga had drowned their son. Bound by his promise that he would never question her, Shantanu remained quiet. The same thing happened when Ganga gave birth to her second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and Seventh Son. King was struck with grief. The ministers stated questioning the silence of the King. The whole kingdom was talking about Ganga and her doings.

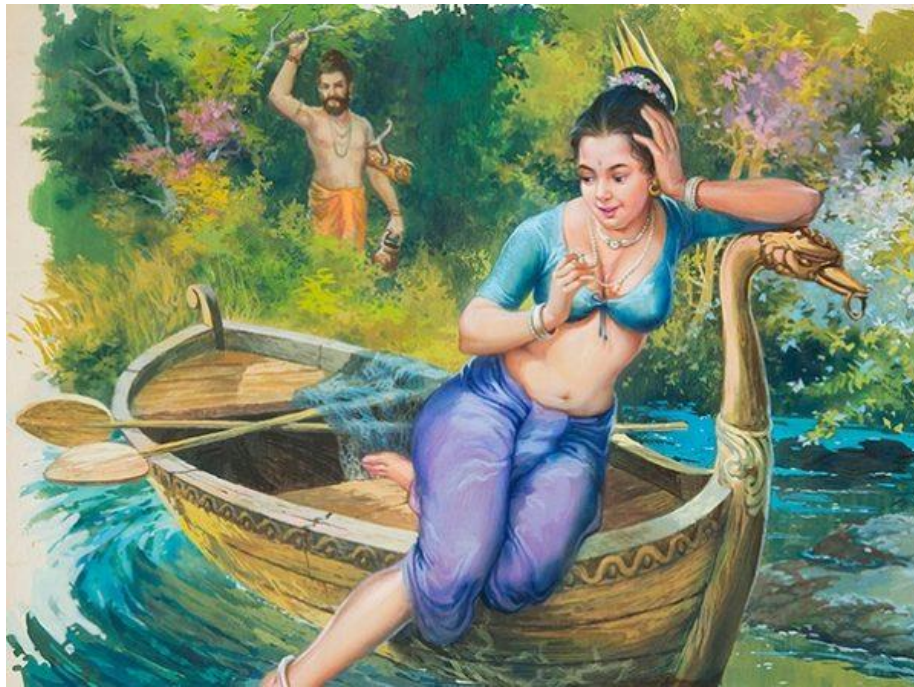
When the 8th child was born and Ganga walked to the river with the same intention. Shantanu could hold himself no longer. He cried out "Stop! You heartless woman. Why do you do this wretched act? Why do you what no mother would? You are as insane as you are beautiful".

As Shantanu restrained Ganga from doing this horrible act, Ganga replied, "Dear King, you have broken the promise you made to me and the time has come for me to leave you. However, before leaving, I shall answer your question and reveal my origin and the reasons for my actions." "I am goddess Ganga and am in this human form as a result of Sage Vasishta's curse on the 8 Vasus. And by obstructing the flow of destiny, you have managed to save your eighth child but happiness is not something that he will know for long. He is a great soul but not destined to be an heir nor to see his progeny inheriting the throne."

She went on to say,” I’ll take him away and impart him education from the best teachers in the world. He will be a master at politics, philosophy, religion and martial arts. He will follow the code of conduct of a Kshatriya like no other man has ever followed, no other man ever will. After he graduates, I will send him back to his father well prepared”.

This child known as Devaratha would go on to become **Bhisma Pitamaha**. One of the central characters of Mahabharata.

Satyavati:-



After Ganga left Devaratha over to King Shantanu, Devavrata (*Bhisma*) flourished in Hastinapur. He was now a handsome prince, but King Shantanu was all alone—a feeling of loneliness and sadness had crept into him. At such times, Shantanu used to take long walks in the forest beside the Yamuna. In one such walk, a particular fragrance attracted him and he wanted to find the source of such a beautiful aroma. This led him to the riverbed, where he met Satyawati, the daughter of the head fisherman, and immediately was smitten by the love bug. Satyawati was indeed a very charming and beautiful woman. Satyawati’s father agreed to the marriage on condition that the son bore of her daughter would be heir to Shantanu’s throne.

King Shantanu was unable to give his word on accession as his eldest son Devavrata was the heir to the throne. However, when Devavrata came to know of this and for the sake of his father, gave his word to the head fisherman that he would renounce all his claims to the throne, in favor of Satyavati's children. To reassure the skeptical ferryman, further, Devavrata also vowed lifelong celibacy to ensure that future generations borne of Satyavati would also not be challenged by his offspring. Thus, that day, he got the name: Bhishma. But there was more to her story.

The Mahabharata, Harivamsa and Devi Bhagavata Purana assert that **Satyavati was the daughter of a cursed Apsara named Adrika**. Adrika was transformed by a curse into a fish and lived in the Yamuna River. When the Chedi king, Vasu (better-known as Uparicara-Vasu), was on a hunting expedition he emitted his semen while thinking of his wife. He sent his semen to his queen through an eagle but, due to a fight with another eagle, the semen dropped into the river and was swallowed by the cursed Adrika-fish. Consequently, the fish became pregnant.

The chief fisherman caught the fish, and cut it open. He found two babies in the womb of the fish: one male and one female. The fisherman presented the children to the king, who kept the male child. The boy grew up to become the founder of the Matsya Kingdom. The king gave the female child to the fisherman, naming her Matsya-Gandhi or Matsya-Gandha (smell like fish).

Once Satyavati was ferrying the Rishi Parashara across the river Yamuna, the sage wanted Kali to satisfy his lust and held her right hand. She tried to dissuade Parashara, but eventually gave in. She was given two boons, one that she would change from Matsyagandhi into Yojanagandha ("she whose fragrance can be smelled from across a Yojana"). She now smelled of musk, and so was called Kasturi-Gandhi ("musk-fragrant") and the gift of re-virginity. He also mentioned she would bear a son who would be a great sage who would re-write history.

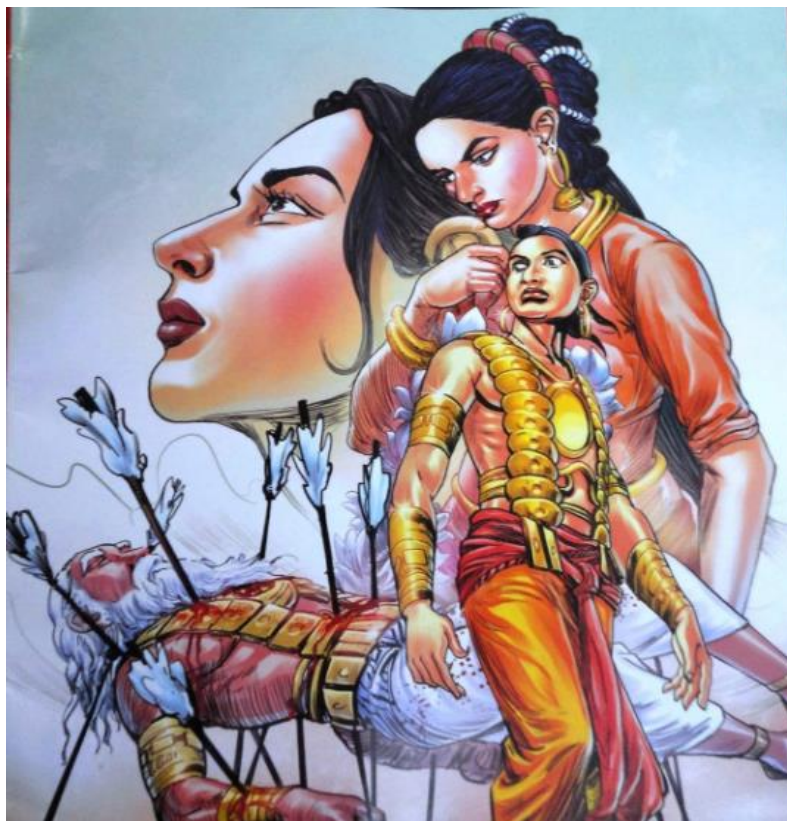
Ecstatic with her blessings, Satyavati gave birth the same day to her baby on an island in the Yamuna. The son immediately grew up as a youth and promised his mother that he would come to her aid every time she called on him; he then left to do penance in the forest. The son was called Krishna ("the dark one") due to his color, or **Dvaipayana** ("one born on an island") and would later become known as **Vyasa**, fulfilling Parashara's prophecy.

After her marriage to Shantanu, she had two sons. The younger one was married to sisters Ambalika and Ambika. But their premature death left the kingdom without an heir so Satyavati

wanted Bhisma to marry them, to which he declined. Revealing to Bhishma the tale of her encounter with Parashara, Satyawati well knew that this was the time to call her son Vyasa to aid her. Satyawati suggested Vyasa have Niyoga with his brother's widows. Vyasa finally agreed to that "disgusting task", but suggested that the offspring of perversity cannot be a source of joy.

Consequently, due to Dhritarashtra's blindness and Vidura's birth from a maid, Pandu was crowned king of Hastinapur. However, he was cursed (by a sage), renounced the kingdom and went to the forest with his wives Kunti and Madri. Vyasa warned Satyawati that happiness would end in the dynasty and devastating events would occur in the future (leading to the destruction of her kin), which she would not be able to bear in her old age. At Vyasa's suggestion, Satyawati left for the forest to do penance with her daughters-in-law Ambika and Ambalika. In the forest, she died and attained heaven.

Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika:-



They were the three daughters of the King of Kashi who were famed for knowledge, virtue, and beauty. Since Hastinapur was more or less being ruled by Bhishma he decided not to invite his half brother, And he himself had taken the vow of not marrying. Vichitraviryan, the actual ruler was nothing more than the paper head. Kashiraja had no intention of his daughters getting married to someone weak.

Just as his eldest daughter Amba came forward with the garland in her hand towards King Shalva of Saubha Kingdom, there was a loud commotion outside the palace. A furious Bhishma thundering inside the palace. He challenged the kings and princes gathered and fought with everyone. While Ambika and Ambalika were delighted to be fought over, Amba was distraught as she loved king Shalva.

The usually observant Bhishma failed to note the eldest princess. Upon being presented to Satyawati, finally, princess Amba came forward and said she was about to garland King Shalva. Bheesma was upset and ordered his servants to deck the princess and send her over to King Shalva. Ambika and Ambalika were married to Vichitravirya. After sometime Dhritrashtra was born to Ambika and Pandu was born to Ambalika. The sons of Dhritrashtra and Pandu were known as Kauravas and Pandavas respectively.

But Amba was rejected by King Shalva, she came back and asked Vichitravirya to accept her, he denied saying she was a gift to someone else, she then asked Bheesma to marry her but he denied stating his vow. Furious at her humiliation, she tried to persuade other kings to wage a war with Bhishma and compel him to wed her. None agreed for they were afraid of incurring the wrath of the great warrior. Amba got Parashurama, Bhishma's guru, to champion her cause. However, not even Parashurama could defeat Bhishma.

Amba did severe penance to Lord Shiva for a boon to cause Bhishma's death. Eventually, her prayers were answered. But, being a woman with no military training, she asked Shiva how she would accomplish her task, and he responded that her future incarnation would be the one to actually bring about Bhishma's demise. Amba was reborn as Shikhandini, the daughter of King Drupada.

In the battle of Kurukshetra, Bhishma recognized Shikhandi as Amba reborn, and not wanting to fight a "woman", avoided battling Shikhandi. On the tenth day, Shikhandi rides in Arjuna's

chariot, and together, they face Bhishma, forcing him to lower his weapons. Knowing that this would happen, [Arjuna](#) hid behind Shikhandi and attacked Bhishma with a devastating volley of arrows. Thus, **Shikhandi** was instrumental in Bhishma's death.

Kunthi/pritha:-



Kunti, daughter of King Sura and adopted by king Kuntibhoja, was Krishna's paternal aunt. A young girl; devoted to the service of gods, sages, and guests, Kunti so pleased the sage Durvasa that he taught her a mantra that enabled her to invoke any god of her choice and have a son born out of him. Though still unwed, a curious Kunti could not resist the temptation to try out her newly learned mantra, and invoked Surya – the Sun God, and lo and behold, Surya appeared and blessed her with a son, Karna. Afraid of being a single mother she floated the child away in the river.

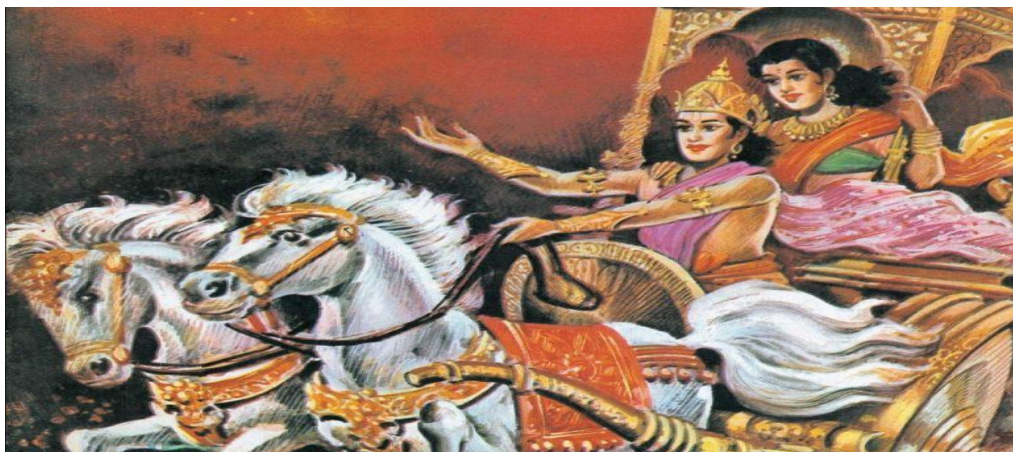
She went on to choose Pandu as her husband. Sometime later, Pandu married the extremely attractive princess Madri. One day Pandu shot an arrow at the couple sage Kindana and his wife while hunting, taking them to be a deer due to their copulating forms and the dying sage cursed

Pandu that he would die as soon as he tried to make love with either of his wives – Kunti or Madri. Dejected and heirless he left the palace along with his wives and made Dhritarashtra the king.

At this point, Kunti was reminded of the mantra taught to her by Sage Durvasa and she used it reluctantly to invoke Dharma, Vayu and Indra gods who gave her three sons Yudhishthira, Bhishma and Arjuna respectively. Kunti then taught the mantra to Madri who invoked the celestial physician brothers Ashwini Kumaras who blessed her with two sons Nakul and Sahadeva. After Pandu's death and Madri's Sati, she was tasked with raising the kids.

The Game of thrones nearly cost them their lives when Duryodhana and Shakuni managed planned to burn them in a Lakshagraha while they were at a festival at Varanasi. They lost their palace Indraprastha, the kingdom even her daughter in law Draupadi in a game of dice. In all this upheaval she remained a positive influence on her sons and was a woman with high moral and social values who constantly guided her sons on their actions and keeps the family bound as one, never to have them fight among each other. Despite supporting her children, Kunti stayed in the Kaurava camp along with her sister-in-law Gandhari during the 18 days of the Mahabharata War. After the Kurukshetra war, Kunti moved to a forest near the Himalayas with her brothers-in-law Vidura and Dhritarashtra and sister-in-law Gandhari, where all four of them later perished in a forest fire, attaining heaven.

Draupadi:-



Damayanti's story is told in Mahabharata to Yudhishthir the eldest brother when the Pandavas were completing their exile period. Yudhishthir met Rishi Vrihadashwa in the forest. He told the Rishi about his miserable fate. To relieve Yudhishthir from his pain he told him the story of Nala and Damayanti. The story is about a very beautiful woman Damayanti, the princess of Vidarbha, who chose the very handsome Nala as her husband. They had a very happy life and two children. After twelve years of marriage, they confronted their ill fate when Nala's cousin Pushkara invited him to play a game of dice. Nala lost all his possession in the game. He was asked to leave his palace and was not allowed to carry anything but his garment on his body.

Damayanti decided to accompany him. Nala asked her to leave him but she was determined to follow her husband but he eventually agreed. They somehow tried to sleep. Nala was unhappy to see his wife suffer because of him. So he left in the dark of night, hoping that Damayanti would go back to her father in his absence. She instead roamed through the forest in search of her husband and eventually reached the kingdom of Chedi. Initially pelted for her appearance, she was taken in by the queen and hired as the lady in waiting. She never stopped thinking about her husband. One day a priest named Parnada from her father's kingdom arrived at Chedi and immediately recognized the princess and had her sent to her father.

She wanted to find her husband. So his father appointed a priest called Parnada for the same. But he didn't know how to recognize Nala. So Damayanti asked her to sing a song during his travel:

"Oh, you who lost crown and kingdom in gambling, who abandoned your wife after taking one half of her clothing, where are you? Your beloved still yearns for you."

According to her, only Nala would respond to it. So the priest did the same. And when he reached Ayodhya, ruled by Rituparna, the royal cook, an ugly dwarf responded to the song:

"Despair not beloved of that unlucky soul. He still cares for you. The fool who gambled away his kingdom, whose clothes were stolen by a bird, who wandered off in the middle of the night leaving you all alone in the forest."

Parnada rushed back to Damayanti and told her everything. She said that it was her husband who responded. But Parnada pointed out that he was an ugly dwarf, named Bahuka. But Damayanti knew it could be none other but her husband.

So she came up with a plan. She announced her swayamvara. She asked Sudev to visit Ayodhya and tell the king that there is no sign of Nala, and therefore Damayanti would get remarried. And that the swayamvara would take place the very next day of the announcement. The idea behind the plan was that Nala was the fastest charioteer in the world and hence the king would take his help. And the plan worked. But the dwarf would help him with a condition. He asked the king the trick to win a dice game. The king who was an expert in the dice game promised Bahuka to teach him.

Then Bahuka left for swayamvara with the king. As soon as they reached Vidarbha and their chariot crossed the palace gate two children came running. Bahuka jumped off the chariot and hugged them. Rituparna, the king, was shocked. He asked Bahuka about the children but he didn't reply. Damayanti watched from far and she was sure he was her husband. When he walked through the palace the gates rose to give him the way, as if the whole palace recognized him. Damayanti rushed to him and hugged him in front of everyone including the king. She told everyone that he was Nala.

Everyone was in shock because the Nala they knew was a handsome man. Nala told how he came upon a dreaded snake Karkotaka. Its venomous breathe transformed him into an ugly dwarf. But the snake gave Nala a magic robe that would transform him back to his original self, once he learns his lesson and also advised him to visit Ayodhya and learn to play dice game from the King. Nala wrapped the magic robe around himself and transformed. Now there was no doubt. The king was impressed by Nala and Damayanti's love. He kept his promise. After few days Nala challenged his cousin for a dice game. He told his cousin that this time he would put his beautiful wife at stake. His cousin accepted the challenge. This time Nala won everything back. Damayanti would not look at another male although her husband's fate or whereabouts are unknown — the reason for her being eulogized as the ultimate chaste woman.

Draupadi:-



Draupadi is the only instance we come across in epic mythology of a sati becoming a kanya. It is stated that in an earlier birth as Nalayani (also named Indrasena), she was married to Maudgalya, an irascible sage afflicted with leprosy. She was so utterly devoted to her abusive husband that when a finger of his, dropped into their meal, she took it out and calmly ate the rice without revulsion. Pleased by this, Maudgalya offered her a boon, and she asked him to make love to her in five lovely forms. As she was insatiable, Maudgalya got fed up and became an ascetic. When she remonstrated and insisted that he continue their love-life, he cursed her to be reborn and have five husbands to satisfy her lust. Thereupon she practiced severe penance and pleased Lord Shiva with her prayers. He granted a boon to her. Nalayani said that she wanted a husband and to ensure that her request was heard, she repeated it five times in all. Shiva then said that in her next life she would have five husbands. She obtained the boon of regaining virginity after being with each husband.

Thus, by asserting her womanhood and refusing to accept a life of blind subservience to her husband, Nalayani, the sati, was transformed into Yajnaseni, the kanya. Some sources have a slightly different narration. Draupadi made her request only once but she added a long list of qualities that she wanted in her husband. Lord Shiva said that it would be impossible to find one man with all these qualities. Hence she would have five husbands in her next life. All of them together would possess the qualities she had enumerated. According to Brahmavaivarta Purana, she is the reincarnation of the maya Sita (shadow Sita - wife of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and hero of Ramayana) who, in turn, was Vedavati, reborn after molestation at Ravana's hands, and would become the "Lakshmi of the Indras" [\[*\]](#) (one of the forms of Goddess Lakshmi, eternal consort of Lord Vishnu) in heaven.

Draupadi and Lord Krishna shared a very special relationship. As is known to admirers of the great epic poem Mahabharata, Draupadi always considered Lord Krishna as her Sakha or beloved friend and Krishna addressed her as Sakhi, this as symbolic of the platonic love existing between the fiery Draupadi and the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Krishna. Draupadi is the instrument of Lord Krishna. Using her, he realized his mega-plan of annihilating the evil Kauravas. The choice of Draupadi as the instrument, which caused his actions, explains the special place she had in his scheme of things, Draupadi was put through severe tests in her life. The only true friend, who validated her persona and came to her rescue each time she found herself in dire circumstances, was Krishna, whose divine presence she experienced constantly in her life.

Draupadi was punished for the mistakes that she actually didn't commit. After the war, many called her Kulnasini (destroyer of dynasty). But she was not. Duryodhan humiliated her in an assembly. First of all, she was the wife of his own cousins. Secondly, she was an empress of whole Bharat. With such a powerful position, she was left helpless by the Warriors who were well-versed in laws and Dharma. What would be the position of a commoner in that kingdom? To simplify, men tortured women, (Kauravas and other men in dyut sabha), they took oaths of killing the other (Pandavas before leaving the sabha), they gave up promises and prepared for war (Kauravas) they even declined to give up war at any cost (defeat of Bheeshma, Drona and Karna didn't move Duryodhan to stop war) then forcing his mistakes on women (Draupadi).

Krishna calls Draupadi his sakhi, or friend. Another story says the reason he helps Draupadi is that she prayed with utmost devotion. When Krishna had cut his finger on the Sudarshan Chakra, she bound it with her Sari, this act being the origin of Rakhi. The another story of origin of Rakhi is Sachi tying thread to Indra. Sachi's avatar is Draupadi.

Also, Krishna is the one who opposes her marriage to Karna and promotes her marriage to Arjuna. Draupadi is the exemplification of bhakti to God. She showed utmost faith to Lord Krishna.

Gandhari:-



Gandharī is a character in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. In the epic, she was the daughter of Subala, the king of Gandhara, a region spanning northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, from which her name is derived. Gandhari's marriage was arranged to Dhritarashtra, the eldest prince of the Kuru kingdom. Gandhari voluntarily blindfolded herself throughout her married life. Her husband Dhritarashtra was born blind, and on meeting him and realizing this, she decided to deny herself the pleasure of sight that her husband could never relish.

Gandhari bore a hundred sons, (collectively known as the Kauravas), and one daughter Dushala who married Jayadratha. The Kaurava, principally Duryodhana and Dushasana, were the villains of the Mahābhārata, and were all killed in their war against their cousins, the Pandava, at Kurukshetra.

Although Gandhari's sons were portrayed as villains, the Mahābhārata attributes high moral standards to Gandhari. She repeatedly exhorted her sons to follow dharma and make peace with the Pandavas. Gandhari was especially close to Kunti who respected her like an elder sister.

Gandhari made a single exception to her blindfolded state, when she removed her blindfold to see Duryodhana rendering his entire body except his loins invulnerable to any foe. This was however to prove fruitless as Bhima smashed Duryodhana's thighs in their decisive encounter on the eighteenth day of the Kurukshetra battle, a move both literally and figuratively below the belt.

Gandhari was also devout; in particular an ardent worshipper of Lord Shiva. Gandhari's sacrifice of her eyesight and her austere life was to grant her great spiritual power. Gandhari's anguish in the loss of her hundred sons resulted in her cursing Krishna in effect ensuring the destruction of the Yadavas. It is also said that through a small gap in the napkin in which her eyes were blindfolded, her gaze fell on Yudhishthira's toe. The toe was charred black due to her wrath and power. Gandhari ended her life with her husband and her sister-in-law Kunti in the Himalayas, where they died in a forest fire.

Learning outcome

I have personally learnt a lot from this project. The women in the Mahabharata have been treated as slaves, property, chattel and commodities used for the pleasure of men. The key characteristics of women are seen as submission, suppression, obedience and silence. They are tools of male ambition. Women like Gandhari, Kunti, and Draupadi stand out, sometimes opposing the injustice of the male world. There has not been much evolution from the age of the Mahabharata to present-day society. The plight of the women in the 21st century is not different from that of the women in ancient times.

I have chosen the characters which I personally admire and by taking this topic I have grown pretty fond of these characters after discovering what these characters have accomplished and the way they have accomplished it. I have learnt majorly about how the major characters try to follow dharma despite being faced with many hurdles. And if by any chance if they stray away from how other major characters guide them back to path of dharma. And one of major learning's from Mahabharata was not falling into traps such as gambling and trying to pursue revenge and playing dirty. Lord Krishna was like a light for pandavas which led them to victory even though they had to lose many precious things to them. My personal favorite character was Draupadi, as she stood strong even after facing many hurdles.

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