

## Hindu Epics: Violation or Observance of Pativrata Ideology

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### Abstract

Epic, a literary device is known by all as long narrative poem talking of actions and livings of noble/divine / godly characters. The Hindu epics famously known for their women and the Pativrata ideology seem to be violated to an extent. On doing an analysis of the women characters of the epics it was observed that the depiction was not that presenting Pativrata concept. Examples of Kunti, Satyawati, Amba are remarkable. The paper will throw light on the portrayal of female characters portraying fairness which will be concluded with certain examples from the texts

Let us get a clue of the attitude to women who, to an extent, violate the sexual codes of married life through disloyalty; as they are epics, tradition and culture should be strictly followed. How their violations are viewed by the general readers and public of the present times. Given the dominant Pativrata ideology of the text, one would expect that its position on adultery would be clear-cut, since adultery represents a volitional transgression of sexual mores. The reality, however, is more complex. Variations are produced by several factors. Women contribute to the general collapse of civilization through neglect of social and familial duty. Hence they are critical agents in creating the distress signaled by the age and are the source of disquiet and difficulty. Women are also, however, thought to suffer distress of a variety that excuses errant behavior. Thus, there is a general recognition in the text of epics that women are often sexually victimized by powerful men. Consequently, some latitude is extended to women who suffer in such ways. Having said all this, it must be noted that the Mahabharata exhibits an overall generosity toward its major women characters; its attitude is generally charitable.

**KEYWORDS:** 1 Hindu 2 Epics 3 Pativrata 4 Ideology 5 Transgression 6 Civilization 7 Distress 8 Mahabharata 9 Sex 10 Victim.

#### Full Text of the paper:

It has been observed that in the last two decades the interest in Hindu epics is seen more rampant than the discussion of the in the past centuries. Perhaps the credit can be given to celluloid presentation of epics through novel media. BR. Chopra's Mahabharata and Ramanand Sagar's Ramayana are the first example clarifying the above statement. After this many others of the same stream penned their thoughts using latest techniques to display / telecast the idea of Hinduism. Thereafter many other theatre lovers and artist portrayed the epics according to their focus of presenting it to the people worldwide. For the most part these modern renditions of the ancient Hindu (classics) texts have been labors of love and piety, in which the personalities of Rama and Krishna are explored with immense affection; every action of their lives cherished and embellished with worshipful intensity, It cannot be denied however, that the television epics have also had immense impact on Hindu society and politics. Indeed it would not be wrong to say that the dramatization of the epics have played a critical role in the revival and political self

assertion that has characterized Hinduism in recent years. One of the noticeable exercises by these digital presentations of the epics is to observe the way that gender is constructed. The producers of these epics, working in the postcolonial era had to face many challenges to prove the young generation the relevance of the epic lore in modern world. They were called to somehow demonstrate, conscious of feminist critiques, that the traditional gendered structure of Hindu society, as represented in the Hindu epics, continue to be of same value which it had in the past; that it has the ability to provide the anchoring truths for an age in which women wear skirts, shorts and trousers and work alongside men in offices. A gender scheme applied for ancient audience needs to be updated, subjected to the inspection of a feminist transformed consciousness, but at the end of the end still affirmed.

The word Pativrata is familiar from Vedic scriptures as an adjective indicating a woman sexually faithful to her husband. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that Pativrata was not the dominant ideology of Vedic tradition. Although marital loyalty was clearly expected of a woman, it was not the most surrounding concern. Vedic literature, particularly in its early phases, was more alarmed with demarcating the uniformity of husband and wife in the safeguarding of the home and the act of ritual as has been copiously mentioned. In Vedic literature primary conception of woman is Sahadharmini, rather than Pativrata hence a woman was understood as the necessary and obligatory ritual partner of her husband. He was as imperfect without her as she without him. The Hindu literature is remarkably known for this since generations. But the recent scholars of Hindu literature and tradition take it as a point to be debated. A woman had a clearly defined ritual role in the **Vedic sacrifice**. Her participation in the ritual was a crucial necessity. She was in this way as implicated in ensuring the solemnity and success of the sacrifice as the man. Elements of these Vedic origins are preserved in Mahabharata, indeed, the texts details several royal sacrifices in which Draupadi functions as the sahadharmini, the ritual partner, of her eldest husband. During the Rajasuya that marks the beginnings of the Pandavas political ascendancy; she performs official duties for him and is everywhere conspicuous as Yudhishtira's chief queen. She describes some of her activities to Satyabhama in Aranyakparava. In the Asvamedha yagna Draupadi is again performing her ritual role to the fullest extent. (XIV.91.72)

Apart from this Vedic paradigms, the process of change is evident everywhere. The change in the theoretical place of womanhood mirrors these broader intellectual and social existences. Women thus go from being the partners and supporters of their husbands in religious life—which indeed in the Vedic world is all of life—to being their uncritical servants and devotees. Pativrata dharma is thus an embryonic ideology that becomes grafted over the older paradigm of the Sahadharmini woman, and exercises a powerful ideological appeal. It is seen rapidly emerging as the dominant ethic, considering prior ethics into its own rubric. While more ancient practices continue to be recorded in the text, the increasing supremacy of the Pativrata dogma is evident in the didactic aims of the text. The depreciation of women's roles in the conjugal relationship coincides with the attenuation of women's roles in the ritual orb. Whereas in Vedic times, women were indispensable participants in the sacrifice, even if in passive rather than active modes increasingly, we find in the Mahabharata statements saying, "There are no sacrifices for women, no Sraddhas, no observances" (XIII.46.12). These statements parallel statements to be found in the Dharmasastras. While they are not accurate

descriptions of women in Vedic times, where women clearly did perform various rites, they do reflect the evolving mood that women's religious lives should be located around their husbands. In classical Hinduism, it became common to refer to marriage as the upanayana for girls, and to think of the husband as the guru. These formulations reflect the ethos of the pativrata creed, that husbands possess both intellectual and religious priority over their wives. In living in humble service of their husbands, women hope not only to propitiate them as they would a deity, but also to learn from them, be intellectually formed by them. This is a very different ethic from that of sahadharma, where husband and wife are conceived as complementary partners with different roles, together responsible for the maintenance of order in the universe through their ritual activities. The purposes of Pativrata dharma are achieved by a host of congruent cultural practices. Some of them are discussed below:

**Patriliney:** The major social institution that both necessitates and reinforces Pativrata dharma is the tradition of patrilineal marriage, the dominant practice in Hindu epics. Shalini Shah in her work, *Gender Relations in the Mahabharata* has demonstrated that Pativrata dharma is dependent on Patriliney, and is indebted for its success to the profound insecurity experienced by a woman entering an entirely environment.

**Polygyny:** closely linked to the practice of Patriliney, Polygyny is the prerogative of the man to take multiple wives; it serves as a disciplining tool for women and has the effect of disempowering them. Draupadi is pained to bear Subhadra; case of Kunti and Madri, the relationship of Kaushalya and Kakeyi in Ramayana are the instances of the same. Pativrata nevertheless is expected to handle the situation with stoicism and grace. Draupadi when faced with the fact of Subhadra, must concede with dignity; the younger Subhadra, meanwhile, must conduct herself carefully, so as not to rouse the hatred and jealousy of the elder.

**Sati:** Sati is the rational end to the Pativrata practices of a woman. This verdict is characteristically activated by two concerns. One is that by following her husband promptly on his death, a wife can better serve him in the next world. This course of reasoning is followed by Madri at the death of Pandu. The second sense is that it would be traitorous and disloyal for a wife to continue to enjoy the joys of this world after her husband is gone. Since all of life is structured around service of the husband, what purpose could there be to living once he is gone? The she-pigeon who becomes a sati in the Santiparva says as much in her parting words: "I have no purpose here, O Lord, living without you" (XII.144.8).

**Widow Chastity:** The identical logic shelters the prohibition against widow remarriage, that it would be detrimental to the memory of the husband. Widow marriage appears to have been acceptable in at least some strains of the text. To cite one example, in the Nala-Damayanti episode, Damayanti advertises her readiness for a second marriage, assuming the death of her first husband. This bill boarding draws out no bewilderment or curiosity from the general public. Her suitors respond positively to the invitation, and prepare to assemble for the Svayamvara.

**Virginity:** The fixation with long-term sexual partnership with but one single man, logically leads into the overstated concern with female virginity to be found in the text. In principle, the Mahabharata approves sexual involvement for a high-caste woman with only one man in her life. As noted above, it is expected that a woman will never “step over” her first husband. In exceptional cases, however, it can accept that she is sexually active with several different men, but the ideal of female virginity is never negotiated.

**Seclusion:** The seclusion of women is not practiced in the Mahabharata. We see it in specific instances, such as when a woman is menstruating. In the most notorious case, we know that Draupadi was dragged into the assembly hall by Duhshasana while she was in her monthly seclusion in the women’s quarters, and this fueled the sense of outrage felt by her supporters in the Sabhaparva. Apart from that, there seems to be little evidence for the seclusion of women as a practice. All the principal female characters of the text are seen in public domes at one time or another. Gandhari is present for numerous events in the assembly hall. Kunti and Satyawati are both visible in the public sphere, without any inhibitions. Draupadi, outside of that one instance, may be witnessed on the battlefield, in active discussion with her husbands and the sages of the forest, as well as in conversation with strangers in the forest (as in the case of Jayadratha III.251). Uttara is spied speaking freely to her brother in the assembly hall of Virata (IV.35). In the Udyogaparva, we are told that women came out onto the streets, to witness Krishna’s arrival in Hastinapura (V.82.14). Similarly, at the close of the Sabhaparva, we are informed that women appeared on the streets, grief-stricken at the departure of the Pandavas (II.72.20)

Pativrata at its effortless mode, the word literally means a woman who is sworn to her husband/ lord or master. In the Mahabharata, for a woman to be committed to her husband entail many things outside of a marriage vow. It implies being committed, unyielding, and stalwartly devoted to achieving the interests of her husband. It means placing her husband’s interests and desires paramount in her life; assessing his requirements in eating, sleeping, bathing, resting; indeed in every activity before her own. It also means holding her husband’s priorities not only above her but also above everybody else’s in the whole universe, including her children’s, her guests’, her family and God’s. To speak clearly Pativrata means putting husband’s wishes and desires dominant and forgoing your own come what may or whosoever. It means holding his desires and wishes so dear as to sacrifice all of your own personal desires and wishes to the accomplishment of his.

Draupadi from Vedvyasa’s Mahabharata gives a good example of Pativrata dharma in the Aranyakaparva .Describing herself to Krishna ‘s wife , Satyabhama she says,

Be he a god, a man, a gandharva. Or a well adorned wealthy and handsome youth, My mind never goes to another man. Until my husband has eaten, bathed or lain down, I never do so myself, even when there are servants, when my husband returns from the field , from the forest, or from the village, I get up and greet him with a seat and water ... never in any way do I wish my husband ill. When he is away on family business, I do not adorn myself with flowers and observe vows. What my husband does not drink, what my

husband not does not chew , what my husband does not eat , I give it all up. (III.222.22-31).

Draupadi goes on to illustrate how she never out sleeps, out eats or out talks her men (III.222.36). She is never tetchy and always truthful and satisfied. She is austere observant about her demeanor, even when it is not required; as she advises Satyabhama: “ Though Pradyumna and Samba are your sons, you should never sit with them alone (III.223.10)

The most essential precept of Pativrata dharma is that a woman should hold her husband to be no less than God. “ He is God, He is path; there are no others. What wrong can he do? 15(III.222.35), says Draupadi to Satyabhama. A woman stands in relation to her husband as a devotee to God . All she has to do is to glorify her God by fulfilling his necessities and neglecting all else. If she does so that is considered as a sign of a virtuous lady. This is demonstrated in Aranyakaparva(III.197). The woman becomes so much engrossed in serving her husband that she forgets that the beggar waiting at the door for alms gets neglected. This laxity gets defense in the story by the postulation that the woman was responding to a higher ethic. In fulfillment of the same if she neglects others, that is pardonable. Such a kind of woman is recognized as the quintessence of feminine virtue. Pativrata dharma looks forward to the far-reaching archetype of bhakti developed in later Hinduism. It insists on total surrender of a woman’s will to her husband-God. Uma says, “That woman... who looks upon her husband as God, who waits upon him, who serves him as if he were God who surrenders her own will completely to that of her lord ...is regarded as truly righteous”( XIII. 134.630). Our society defines a devotee as one who is able to subsidize his or her desires utterly to the commands of god. In the same way best kind of woman is one who yields herself to the authorities of her husband. Furthermore, the husband god never expects woman to ask any question for his doings. ‘Whether husband is poor or diseased, fallen into difficulties, harassed by enemies, or afflicted by Brahman’s curse, a wife should also do his bidding. Even if the task is unrighteous and leads to the destruction of her life, a wife should always do it without hesitation, taking recourse in the laws of distress (XIII.134. 53-54).

By asset of being her God, a husband is permitted to the generous deference and worship of his wife. His personal merits for such treatment should never be a point of reflection. Whatever may be his financial, social or physical status; he must be honored on all costs. In Santiparva, the all-pervading bramha rishi Narad is imprecated to be a monkey and appear before his wife Sukumari, Sukumari however, finding herself married to a monkey, remains unperturbed by his physical appearance. She serves him with full devotion, she is so much rapt with her patibhakti that when Narad muni is transformed to his original form, she rushes away in terror of being associated with a wrong man. Archetypical bhakti is persevered in the form of Seva. The existing texts, describing how a wife should devote herself to her husband say that Seva is the first and foremost thing by which the husband is honored, just as in the case of worshipping God. Seva is personal service of God, performed with totality of mind and body. A woman should leave all other activities to attend personally to the wants of her husband. Even during his times of rest, she needs to remain heedful of his needs. Anusanaparva quotes, “When my husband

slept in peace, I never woke him, even in sickness or for work. My mind was content by his lying asleep (XIII. 124.18); this is called patibhakti, “worship of the husband.” All her duties are solely concerned to her husband. In Anusasanaparva Uma says that the woman who always takes pleasure in rising early in the morning, who devotedly performs all her household chores, keeps her house clean, rubbing it by cow dung, actively do the domestic work...who never forgets to offer flowers to god, she definitely succeeds in getting a high place in the eyes of almighty. It is not only limited up to this, the husband’s family and friends should also be treated with great importance. A woman is not allowed to make her own friends because they can distract her from concentrating on her husband and husband’s friends and relatives, moreover they (friends of a woman) can be adverse or have corrupting influences. His family being a natural extension of the husband; Pativrata women’s relationships with all members are of significance, and defined by the same qualities present in her relationship with her husband: duty, unquestioning devotion and service. “I always wait on the Lady Kunti, mother of heroes, speaker of truth, myself personally bathing her, dressing her, feeding her, sending the servants away, says Draupadi.(III.22.38) “I never outshine her in clothes or jewellery, out do her eating...(III.22.39).The final family therefore deserves the same care and service as does the husband , Sandili says on support: “Always vigilant, I waited upon and served my mother in law and father in law... Rising at early dawn, I did and got done whatever was required for the whole family.”(XIII.124.14-15). Draupadi tells Satyabhama: There is no God like him, Satya, in all the worlds with all their gods. If you fulfill all your husband’s desires, you are blessed. If you annoy him you are dead...”(III.223.2-3)

Having said all this, it must be noted that the Mahabharata exhibits an overall generosity towards its woman characters; its attitude is generally charitable. As Sutton notes, whatever the distaste the modern mind may feel for the discrimination against women embodied in the text, one cannot deny that it is work of civilized men of largely compassionate intent”(2000.430)

Perhaps, as expected for a creative literary work, in several narratives, love earns the indulgence of the writers, breaking the circumscribed hold of dogma and ideology. For example the story of Amba., the eldest of three sisters’ abducting during their swayamwara by Bhishma, Amba had already chosen her mate, king Salva. She had decided to make her decision public in swayamwara. Before this could happen, however she and her sisters were abducted. On knowing the fact she is given the permission to leave. When she returns to king Salva he rejects her, quoting the fear of retaliation from Bhishma. Amba again goes back to Bhishma and proposes to marry her, who rejects her for the sake of his vow of celibacy. Amba now twice rejected vows to avenge Bhishma for her insult. Through extreme asceticism she is reborn and transformed into the man shikhandi, who eventually becomes the cause of Bhishma’s death. This story of Amba is handled with such care that Amba is nowhere blamed to love Salva before marriage and for pledging herself to him. The sages accept her grievance and support her to take revenge from Bhishma. The story of Swaha and Agni is another example quoting the lack of Pativrata ideology. Swaha, one of the sixty daughters of mythic king Daksa, deceives Agni who is already married. Throughout the narrative Swaha is counted as blameless and innocent. The remarkable thing about this account is

that Pativrata ideology is brutally murdered in such cases. The same kind of compassion is shown to Devayani, a willful and spoiled daughter of Sukra, falls in love with two men Kaca and Yayati in direct infringement of the ideal of Pativrata Dharma. Similarly Renuka, who is brutally punished by her husband for lusting after another man, is not vilified by the writers of the text. The text reveals her husband to be callous and autocrat. The analogous stories of Kunti and Satyawati are other instances in the same rhyme. Savitri consorts with the powerful risi Parasara after she finds herself alone with him on a boat. Kunti is helpless before the illustrious Surya. Both women even bear children before marriage. Can this be termed as Pativrata ideal? When Satyawati confesses her deed with Bhishma, he is respectful of her discretion and does not question her moral fitness. Similarly when Kunti confesses her story to her father in law, Vyasa forgives Kunti, “No fault can be ascribed to you. You were restored to virginity” (XV.38.20). He excuses her completely. No moral judgment is passed on these women. Even in the situation where their misdeeds were proved, that they traversed the confines of Pativrata ideology and were materially benefitted from the act done—Kunti charismatically fragrant body and Kunti-an exceptional son. They still are not condemned for their actions. The episode featuring Atri’s wife may be read the same way. Anusuya’s unorthodox behavior is excused because her husband is recognized as overbearing. Anusuya is a character who is known from other sources too. In the Ramayana she is a unsullied wife who gives counsel to Sita on the proper observance of Pativrata dharma. Beyond these outstanding cases, the text has considerable compassion for women whose husband’s take second wives, women who are in any ways victimized by men. Women who are raped are never held responsible for their quandary, but are taken care of with great commiseration. The same case is observed in the story of Mamata, the highly venerated wife of Utathya, she is raped by her brother in law Brahaspati; the story of Raibhya’s daughter in law, who is raped by Yavakri. She is treated with gentleness and is not made to suffer for the action. Similar is the story of Bhadra who is raped by Varuna. No fire ordeals are demanded here, and the text clearly indicates that the woman was sexually violated. Bhadra is never taken responsible for the events that were beyond her power.

All of the above mentioned characters represent violation of Pativrata ideology, and they are excused from these violations for one reason or the other. To conclude I would say from every angle of society- public, media, ritual, social convention, even law, she is beamed images of Pativrata woman, she is that gigantic model of virtuous womanhood in whose image she must shape herself. Even in this age of urbanization, globalization, and increasing sexual equivalence in the public globe, all promise change, the Pativrata woman is a profoundly internalized idyllic for Hindu women, armored through the current boulevards of the present era. Though shrouded in western array, the Pativrata woman reign as the reserved ornamentation of this genre of presenters, readers, writers and through her enticing fashion sense, she magnifies, and bolsters the Pativrata ideals for new generations

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