

Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

Women of Wisdom in the Mahabharata: Intellectual Agency and Ethical Leadership

Amit Mahato¹

Abstract:

The representation of women in the Mahabharata as thinkers, advisers, and ethical leaders whose intellectual agency shapes the epic's moral and political discourse. Focusing on figures such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Savitri, and Sulabha, it explores how women question authority, interpret dharma, offer counsel, and influence decisions. Their speeches and actions reveal that wisdom in the epic is not confined to kings, warriors, or male sages, but also emerges through female experience, suffering, courage, and moral reflection. The study argues that these women exercise agency within restrictive social structures by challenging injustice, exposing contradictions, and articulating alternative visions of duty and leadership. Their contributions deepen the Mahabharata's exploration of power, responsibility, justice, and ethical choice. The continued relevance of these characters lies in their capacity to inspire contemporary discussions on gender, leadership, moral reasoning, and the recognition of women as authoritative participants in intellectual and public life.

Keywords: Mahabharata; Women; Intellectual Agency; Ethical Leadership; Dharma



AIJITR- Volume-3, Issue-IV, July-August 2026



1. Introduction

The Mahabharata is not only a narrative of dynastic conflict; it is also a sustained reflection on duty, justice, kinship, and political responsibility. Although kings and warriors dominate its public world, women repeatedly shape its moral direction through counsel, questioning, endurance, and resistance. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Savitri, and Sulabha demonstrate that wisdom and leadership are not exclusively male qualities (Black, 2013; Müller, 2024). The Mahabharata centres on the struggle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, yet its deeper concern is the difficulty of recognising dharma when family loyalty, political interest, and moral duty conflict. Its debates and interconnected narratives provide an important framework for examining sovereignty, social conduct, gender, and ethical choice (Black, 2013; Müller, 2024). Women were valued as mothers, wives, queens, and guardians of family honour, but their autonomy was limited by patriarchal rules governing marriage, sexuality, inheritance, and obedience. The epic reflects this contradiction: women may possess wisdom and moral insight, while their choices and bodies remain subject to male authority (Chakravarti, 1993; Sutherland, 1989). Intellectual agency is the ability to think independently, interpret experience, question accepted rules, and influence others through reasoned speech. Women exercise it when they challenge decisions, advise rulers, reinterpret dharma, and compel powerful men to examine their conduct (Bandura, 2001; Patton, 2007). Ethical leadership combines fairness, moral courage, responsibility, and guidance towards just action. The epic's women often lead without formal office by speaking truth during crises, defending dignity, and judging power through its consequences for others (Brown et al., 2005; Malinar, 2007).

1.2 Objectives

1. To women's intellectual agency through knowledge, counsel, dialogue, and questioning.
2. To the relationship between women's wisdom, moral authority, and participation in decisions.
3. To evaluate Draupadi as a model of justice-centred resistance and ethical leadership within patriarchy.

2. Women, Knowledge, and Power in the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata portrays knowledge as a living form of power. Women may not consistently control armies, courts, or royal succession, yet their understanding of dharma, kinship, suffering, and political responsibility allows them to influence important events. Their authority emerges through speech, memory, ethical judgement, and the courage to oppose injustice (Malinar, 2007).

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Bidhan Chandra College, Rishra, Hooghly, West Bengal, India

DOI Link (Crossref) Prefix: <https://doi.org/10.63431/AIJITR/3.IV.2026.68-75>

AIJITR, Volume 3, Issue –IV, July - August, 2026, PP.68-75

Received on 11th July, 2026 & Accepted on 21st July, 2026,

Published: 1st August, 2026.

The statement "Copyright © by Author" (The author retains the copyright to the published article.)



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

2007; Patton, 2007).

2.1 Women as Possessors of Knowledge

Women in the epic possess religious understanding, practical intelligence, political awareness, emotional insight, and knowledge acquired through personal suffering. Kunti manages dangerous family circumstances, Gandhari warns against destructive ambition, and Draupadi interprets legal and political duties. Their wisdom is therefore active and relevant to real situations rather than merely ornamental (Black, 2013; Patton, 2007).

2.2 Participation in Political and Family Decisions

Although formal decision-making institutions are dominated by men, women participate through counsel, persuasion, warning, and moral pressure. Kunti influences the unity and responsibilities of her sons, while Gandhari judges the behaviour of rulers and warns against war. Draupadi repeatedly reminds the Pandavas that political authority must protect dignity, justice, and social order (Malinar, 2007; Müller, 2024).

2.3 Relationship Between Wisdom and Moral Authority

The epic frequently separates official power from moral authority. A king may occupy a throne but fail ethically, while a woman excluded from formal office may speak with greater clarity and justice. Women gain moral authority when their arguments expose hypocrisy, defend injured people, and demand accountability from those holding power (Brown et al., 2005; Malinar, 2007).

2.4 Limitations Imposed by Patriarchal Structures

Women's intelligence does not free them from the restrictions surrounding their lives. Marriage arrangements, patrilineal succession, ideals of wifely obedience, and control over female sexuality limit their choices. Draupadi's treatment as someone who can be wagered shows how patriarchal institutions disregard a woman's personhood even while praising her virtue and family loyalty (Chakravarti, 1993; Sutherland, 1989).

2.5 Women's Resistance to Social Restrictions

Resistance in the Mahabharata takes several forms, including questioning, refusal, warning, strategic silence, endurance, and public condemnation. Draupadi confronts the royal assembly, Gandhari rebukes political blindness, and Kunti negotiates family survival within dynastic restrictions. Their actions may not completely overthrow patriarchy, but they expose the injustice hidden within accepted customs (Black, 2013; Motswapong, 2017; Patton, 2007).

3. Draupadi: Voice of Justice and Political Intelligence

Draupadi is one of the Mahabharata's strongest examples of intellectual agency because she transforms personal suffering into a public examination of law, kingship, and responsibility. She is neither simply a passive victim nor merely an angry queen. Her leadership arises from her ability to question authority, remember injustice, and insist that political power must remain answerable to dharma (Agarwal, 2017; Black, 2013).

3.1 Draupadi's Questioning in the Royal Assembly

When Yudhishtira loses her in the dice game, Draupadi asks whether a man who has already lost his own freedom retains the legal authority to stake his wife. Her question exposes a contradiction that the assembled kings and elders cannot resolve. By demanding an answer in a hostile court, she transforms the assembly from a place of male authority into a forum where that authority is publicly judged (Agarwal, 2017; Singh, 2025).

3.2 Understanding of Law, Dignity, and Justice

Draupadi does not appeal only to emotion; she carefully examines ownership, consent, royal responsibility, and the meaning of dharma. Her reasoning connects law with human dignity and suggests that a rule cannot be considered just merely because powerful men approve it. Justice, in her understanding, must protect individuals when institutions and elders fail to act (Agarwal, 2017; Malinar, 2007).

3.3 Resistance to Humiliation and Oppression

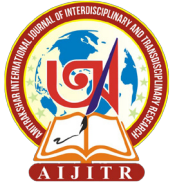
During her humiliation, Draupadi refuses to accept the shame imposed upon her. She speaks, questions, identifies wrongdoing, and forces the court to recognise its failure. Her resistance transfers moral disgrace from the violated woman to the men who violate, encourage, or silently witness injustice, making her an enduring symbol of resistance against gendered oppression (Motswapong, 2017; Singh, 2025; Sutherland, 1989).

3.4 Political Influence During Exile and War

During exile, Draupadi repeatedly reminds the Pandavas that patience without justice may become moral weakness. Her discussions with Yudhishtira address punishment, kingship, honour, forgiveness, and the responsibilities of rulers. Although she does not formally command an army, her memory of injustice sustains the political demand for accountability and influences the ethical meaning attached to the Kurukshetra War (Black, 2013; Malinar, 2007).

3.5 Draupadi as a Symbol of Courageous Leadership

Draupadi's courage lies in her willingness to speak when silence would protect the powerful. She represents leadership founded on intellectual clarity, self-respect, perseverance, and commitment to justice. Her character remains relevant because



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)
Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

she demonstrates that ethical leadership can begin with a difficult question, particularly when established authorities have normalised injustice or abandoned their responsibilities (Brown et al., 2005; Motswapong, 2017; Singh, 2025).

4. Kunti: Strategic Wisdom and Maternal Leadership

Kunti occupies a distinctive position in the Mahabharata as a mother whose leadership develops through personal suffering, political insecurity, and difficult moral choices. Her influence does not depend on formal royal authority. Instead, she leads through resilience, strategic counsel, emotional discipline, and her ability to preserve the unity of the Pandavas during repeated crises (Dhand, 2002; Vemsani, 2021b).

4.1 Kunti's Early Life and Personal Struggles

Born as Pritha and given in adoption to King Kuntibhoja, Kunti experienced separation and responsibility from an early age. Her service to the sage Durvasa brought her a mantra through which she could invoke divine beings. Her youthful experiment with this power resulted in the birth of Karna, whom she abandoned because she feared social condemnation as an unmarried mother. Her later marriage to Pandu, his curse, and his death left her responsible for raising the five Pandavas under dangerous political circumstances. These experiences made her emotionally strong, cautious, and capable of enduring loss without surrendering her responsibilities (Chakravarti, 1993; Vemsani, 2021b).

4.2 Protection and Guidance of the Pandavas

After the deaths of Pandu and Madri, Kunti accepted responsibility for all five Pandavas, treating Nakula and Sahadeva with the same affection as her biological sons. She guided them through insecurity at Hastinapura, exile, poverty, political hostility, and repeated threats to their lives. Her greatest achievement was preserving their unity despite their different personalities and ambitions. She encouraged cooperation rather than rivalry and reminded them that their survival depended on mutual loyalty. Thus, her motherhood became a form of practical leadership founded on protection, discipline, adaptability, and collective identity (Dhand, 2004; Vemsani, 2021b).

4.3 Political Foresight and Decision-Making

Kunti understood that the Pandavas could not survive merely through physical strength; they required unity, alliances, legitimacy, and public recognition. Her acceptance of Draupadi's marriage to all five brothers, although ethically debated, prevented competition among them and connected them to the powerful kingdom of Panchala. Before the war, she also encouraged her sons to defend their honour and political rights rather than accept permanent humiliation. Her decisions reveal a practical understanding of royal politics in which family solidarity was essential for dynastic security. Nevertheless, her foresight frequently required painful compromises between personal morality and political necessity (Dhand, 2002; Patton, 2007).

4.4 Kunti's Relationship with Karna

Kunti's relationship with Karna is the deepest source of sorrow in her life. Fear of social disgrace compelled her to abandon him, but the secret continued to shape her emotional and political decisions. Before the Kurukshetra War, she revealed to Karna that he was her eldest son and requested him to join the Pandavas. Karna refused to betray Duryodhana, who had supported him when others rejected him, but promised Kunti that she would still have five sons because he would not kill four Pandavas. Their meeting exposes the tragedy of delayed truth: Kunti loved Karna, yet she approached him when his identity could also serve the Pandava cause (Dhand, 2004; Vemsani, 2021b).

4.5 Ethical Conflicts in Motherhood and Leadership

Kunti's motherhood is neither idealized nor free from error. She protects the Pandavas but fails to protect Karna; she values truth but conceals his identity; and she seeks justice while making decisions that burden others. Her life illustrates how leadership under patriarchal and political pressure often involves choosing between competing duties rather than between simple right and wrong. Importantly, she does not escape the emotional consequences of her choices. Her eventual confession and withdrawal to the forest indicate remorse, accountability, and renunciation. Kunti therefore represents a deeply human leader whose wisdom emerges not from perfection but from suffering, responsibility, and moral self-awareness (Chakravarti, 1993; Dhand, 2002).

5. Gandhari: Moral Authority and Political Criticism

Gandhari's authority in the Mahabharata is primarily ethical rather than administrative. Although she possesses limited formal power in the Kuru court, she repeatedly evaluates rulers, warriors, and even Krishna according to the demands of dharma. Her leadership develops through disciplined self-denial, moral criticism, prophetic warning, grief, and the courage to hold powerful figures accountable for the destruction caused by war (Alam, 1994; Sumathi & Eljo, 2025).

5.1 Gandhari's Voluntary Blindness

Gandhari's decision to blindfold herself after marrying the blind Dhritarashtra has several possible meanings. It may represent marital solidarity and her determination not to enjoy a physical advantage denied to her husband. It can also be interpreted as a silent protest against a marriage arranged without sufficient regard for her choice. At the same time, her blindness carries an ethical contradiction: by refusing to see physically, she limits her ability to intervene directly in the political and moral



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

decline of her family. Her blindfold therefore symbolizes devotion, resistance, self-discipline, and constrained agency rather than simple submission to patriarchal expectations (Alam, 1994; Dhand, 2004).

5.2 Role as Queen, Wife, and Mother

As queen, Gandhari performs the expected duties of loyalty, dignity, and dynastic motherhood, yet her identity cannot be reduced to these prescribed roles. She supports Dhritarashtra but does not always approve of his decisions. Similarly, she loves Duryodhana without accepting his greed, anger, or injustice. Her maternal attachment sometimes weakens her ability to restrain him, but she never fully abandons ethical judgement. Gandhari's tragedy lies in recognising the faults of her family while lacking sufficient political authority to correct them. She consequently becomes a moral witness within the palace—close enough to understand its failures, yet unable to prevent their consequences (Alam, 1994; Dhand, 2002; Sumathi & Eljo, 2025).

5.3 Warnings Against Injustice and War

Gandhari repeatedly warns that hostility toward the Pandavas will ultimately destroy the Kuru dynasty. She recognises Duryodhana's envy and uncontrolled ambition as threats not only to his cousins but also to the kingdom he desires to rule. Before the war, she urges him to restrain his anger, respect experienced elders, and accept a peaceful settlement. She refuses to promise him victory merely because he is her son; instead, she maintains that victory belongs to the side of dharma. Her warnings demonstrate political intelligence because she understands that injustice weakens legitimacy, divides families, and transforms royal ambition into collective catastrophe (Alam, 1994; Dhand, 2002; Sumathi & Eljo, 2025).

5.4 Criticism of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana

Gandhari openly identifies Dhritarashtra's excessive attachment to Duryodhana as a major cause of the political crisis. She understands that the king's inability to discipline his son permits ambition and resentment to determine state policy. Her criticism of Duryodhana is equally direct: she condemns his refusal to share power, his rejection of wise counsel, and his willingness to sacrifice the Kuru family for personal sovereignty. Speaking against both husband and son requires moral courage because her criticism challenges patriarchal and dynastic loyalties from within the royal household. Gandhari's voice shows that genuine loyalty does not mean approving wrongdoing; it may require confronting those one loves when their actions endanger society (Alam, 1994; Dhand, 2004).

5.5 Gandhari's Grief, Curse, and Moral Judgement

After the war, Gandhari's grief expands beyond the death of her own sons to include the suffering of widows, mothers, and families on both sides. Her confrontation with Krishna transforms private mourning into political and theological criticism. She argues that, although Krishna possessed the influence to prevent the conflict, he allowed the destruction to unfold. Her curse upon the Yadava clan is therefore both an expression of maternal anguish and a judgement against power that remains inactive before foreseeable violence. Yet she does not remain consumed by revenge; she eventually shows compassion toward the Pandavas and shares the grief of Kunti and Draupadi. Gandhari consequently becomes the epic's conscience after the war, forcing victors, survivors, rulers, and divine figures to face the human consequences of their decisions (Dhand, 2004; Sumathi & Eljo, 2025).

6. Satyawati: Ambition, Statecraft, and Dynastic Leadership

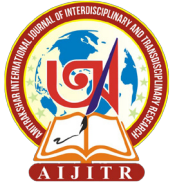
Satyavati is one of the earliest architects of the Kuru dynasty represented in the Mahabharata. Rising from a socially marginal background, she acquires royal authority through negotiation, foresight, and determination. Her leadership is pragmatic rather than idealistic: she concentrates on succession, dynastic survival, and political continuity, even when the methods required to achieve these objectives create serious ethical consequences (Dhand, 2004; Vemsani, 2021a).

6.1 Satyawati's Rise from a Marginal Background

Known initially as Matsyagandha, Satyawati grows up in a fishing community and assists her father by ferrying travellers across a river. Her encounter with the sage Parashara reveals her presence of mind and negotiating ability. Rather than passively accepting his demands, she seeks protection for her reputation and future, obtaining secrecy, restored virginity, fragrance, and an honourable destiny for their son Vyasa. This episode establishes her as a woman who understands both her vulnerability and her bargaining power. Her rise from a fisher's daughter to the queen of Hastinapura challenges the assumption that political intelligence belongs only to women born into royal privilege (Vemsani, 2021a).

6.2 Marriage, Power, and Royal Succession

When King Shantanu seeks to marry Satyawati, her father requires that her future sons inherit the throne. The condition threatens the position of Shantanu's existing heir, Devavrata, who responds by taking the terrible vow of celibacy and renouncing the crown. Satyawati's marriage consequently secures royal status and succession rights for her children. Her actions demonstrate political foresight and a refusal to enter the palace without protection for her lineage. However, Bhishma's renunciation also removes the kingdom's most qualified prince from succession, revealing how a decision that secures immediate advantage may create long-term institutional weakness (Dhand, 2002; Vemsani, 2021a).



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)
Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

6.3 Preservation of the Kuru Dynasty

After the deaths of Chitrangada and Vichitravirya without surviving heirs, Satyawati faces a severe succession crisis. She first asks Bhishma to continue the lineage, but he refuses to violate his vow. She then summons Vyasa and arranges niyoga with the widowed queens Ambika and Ambalika. This decision results in the births of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, while the union with a maid produces Vidura. Satyawati's intervention prevents the immediate extinction of the Kuru dynasty and demonstrates her willingness to use socially accepted but emotionally difficult practices for political continuity. She acts as the dynasty's principal crisis manager when its male authorities cannot provide an heir (Chakravarti, 1993; Vemsani, 2021a).

6.4 Political Decisions and Their Consequences

Satyavati's strategies preserve the Kuru lineage, but they also contribute to its instability. Bhishma's vow complicates succession, while the urgent use of niyoga produces heirs whose eligibility becomes politically contested. Dhritarashtra's blindness prevents his uncontested accession, whereas Pandu's rule and later withdrawal create further uncertainty. Satyawati's decisions therefore reveal the limits of crisis-based leadership: immediate survival does not always guarantee long-term stability. She successfully prevents dynastic extinction, yet the structure she preserves remains vulnerable to rivalry, resentment, and disputed authority. Her story illustrates why political decisions must be judged through both their immediate necessity and their unintended consequences (Dhand, 2002; Vemsani, 2021a).

6.5 Satyawati as an Example of Pragmatic Leadership

Satyavati represents leadership grounded in negotiation, ambition, strategic timing, and institutional survival. She does not wait for powerful men to secure her future; she establishes conditions, mobilises available customs, and makes decisions during moments of dynastic crisis. Nevertheless, her leadership is ethically complicated because individuals, particularly Bhishma, Ambika, and Ambalika, bear the emotional cost of her plans. Satyawati is therefore neither merely an ambitious queen nor an unquestionable heroine. She is a pragmatic stateswoman whose achievements and failures demonstrate that political leadership often operates within tension between collective continuity, personal freedom, institutional power, and moral responsibility (Dhand, 2004; Vemsani, 2021a).

7. Savitri, Sulabha, and Other Women of Wisdom

The Mahabharata presents women not merely as wives, mothers, or victims of conflict, but also as thinkers, advisers, philosophers, and moral decision-makers. Savitri, Sulabha, Vidula, Hidimba, and Amba demonstrate different forms of wisdom through dialogue, courage, independent choice, and resistance to injustice.

7.1 Savitri's Knowledge, Courage, and Devotion

Savitri knowingly chooses Satyavan even after learning that he is destined to die within a year. Her decision is neither emotional weakness nor passive obedience; it reflects self-knowledge, moral conviction, and the courage to accept responsibility for her choice. Her devotion becomes powerful because it is supported by discipline, intelligence, and purposeful action rather than silent suffering (Brodbeck, 2013; Garlough, 2013).

7.2 Savitri's Dialogue with Yama

When Yama takes Satyavan's life, Savitri follows him and engages him in a carefully reasoned conversation about friendship, righteousness, compassion, and duty. She does not challenge divine authority through violence; instead, she gradually persuades Yama to grant boons that ultimately make Satyavan's restoration necessary. The episode portrays speech, ethical reasoning, patience, and strategic intelligence as forms of feminine power (Brodbeck, 2013; Garlough, 2013).

7.3 Sulabha's Philosophical Debate with King Janaka

Sulabha enters King Janaka's court as an independent woman ascetic and tests his claim of having attained spiritual liberation. When Janaka questions her identity, gender, and social position, she responds through a sophisticated discussion of consciousness, embodiment, language, and freedom. By arguing that the true self cannot be restricted by gender, birth, or marital status, Sulabha exposes the contradictions between Janaka's philosophical claims and his gendered assumptions (Fitzgerald, 2002; Vanita, 2003).

7.4 Vidula's Teachings on Courage and Kingship

Vidula refuses to accept the defeatism of her son Sanjaya after he loses his kingdom and withdraws from political responsibility. Through forceful instruction, she reminds him that kingship requires courage, perseverance, honour, and responsibility toward one's people. Although her language reflects the warrior values of the epic world, her role is significant because she acts as a political educator who defines the ethical obligations of a ruler (Armour, 1922; Sinha & Bhattacharya, 2025b).

7.5 Hidimba, Amba, and Other Women as Agents of Change

Hidimba rejects her brother's command, warns the Pandavas of danger, expresses her desire openly, and chooses a life beyond the expectations of her community. Amba transforms personal humiliation into sustained resistance after Bhishma, Salva, and the social order deny her dignity and justice. Her rebirth as Shikhandi makes her grievance historically consequential, showing that silenced suffering can return as a powerful demand for accountability and social change (Sinha & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2025a).



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

8. Intellectual Agency Through Dialogue and Resistance

Women's intellectual agency in the Mahabharata is most visible when they speak, question, interpret dharma, and resist decisions imposed upon them. Their words often expose the moral failures hidden beneath established authority.

8.1 Questioning Male Authority

Sulabha questions Janaka's spiritual authority, while Savitri refuses to treat prophecy or divine power as reasons for surrender. Amba similarly challenges the decisions of Bhishma and Salva when those decisions destroy her freedom and social position. These narratives reveal that authority becomes ethically legitimate only when it can answer reasoned criticism (Chakravarti, 1993; Vanita, 2003).

8.2 Use of Argument, Reason, and Philosophical Knowledge

Savitri and Sulabha demonstrate that women's power is not confined to emotion, sacrifice, or family loyalty. Savitri constructs a moral argument through carefully chosen boons, whereas Sulabha employs philosophical reasoning to challenge assumptions about gender and liberation. Their victories arise from intellectual preparation, clarity of expression, and control over language (Brodbeck, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2002).

8.3 Public Speech as an Instrument of Power

Sulabha debates a celebrated king in his own court, and Vidula speaks with the authority of a political teacher. Their speech is public, corrective, and capable of changing conduct rather than merely expressing private pain. The epic therefore presents women's voices as instruments of education, persuasion, accountability, and collective memory (Luthra, 2014; Vanita, 2003).

8.4 Resistance to Injustice and Humiliation

Amba's resistance emerges from abduction, rejection, and the denial of meaningful justice, while Hidimba resists the violent command of her brother. Neither woman remains within the identity assigned to her by male authority or social prejudice. Their actions reveal resistance as an attempt to recover dignity, choice, and moral personhood (Luthra, 2014; Sinha & Bhat-tacharya, 2021, 2025a).

8.5 Women's Role in Redefining Dharma

These women show that dharma cannot be reduced to obedience, custom, or gender-specific duty. They reinterpret it through justice, loyalty, self-respect, compassion, truth, and responsibility for consequences. Their interventions keep dharma open to debate and prevent powerful men from claiming exclusive authority over its meaning (Luthra, 2014; Müller, 2024).

9. Ethical Leadership and Contemporary Relevance

The women of the Mahabharata offer models of leadership grounded in moral courage, thoughtful communication, responsibility, and resistance to injustice. Their relevance lies not in copying every ancient social value but in critically applying their ethical strengths to contemporary institutions.

9.1 Leadership Based on Justice and Responsibility

Savitri's actions seek not only her husband's life but also the restoration of her father-in-law's sight, dignity, and kingdom. Vidula similarly defines leadership as responsibility toward the community rather than enjoyment of status. Their conduct reflects the modern principle that ethical leaders must demonstrate fairness, integrity, accountability, and concern for those affected by their decisions (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brodbeck, 2013).

9.2 Courage in Confronting Unethical Authority

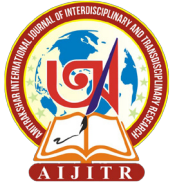
Sulabha's debate and Amba's resistance demonstrate the courage required to confront authority when it becomes arrogant, discriminatory, or morally unaccountable. Ethical courage does not always involve physical confrontation; it can appear through disagreement, questioning, refusal, and the exposure of hypocrisy. Contemporary women leaders similarly require institutional environments in which challenging injustice is recognised as responsible leadership rather than disobedience (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Karelaia & Guillén, 2014).

9.3 Emotional Intelligence and Moral Decision-Making

Savitri remains composed while facing grief, death, and divine authority, allowing her to communicate persuasively rather than react impulsively. Her emotional strength includes self-awareness, patience, empathy, adaptability, and the ability to maintain a moral purpose under pressure. Such qualities remain central to effective leadership because emotionally intelligent leaders can understand people, manage conflict, and select responses appropriate to difficult circumstances (Goleman, 2000; Garlough, 2013).

9.4 Relevance to Women's Leadership Today

These narratives challenge the belief that leadership is naturally masculine or that women must abandon feminine identities to become effective leaders. Savitri combines devotion with strategic intelligence, Sulabha combines independence with philosophical authority, and Vidula combines maternal identity with political instruction. Contemporary research similarly indicates that women can integrate gender and leadership identities while employing participatory, transformational, and ethically responsive leadership approaches (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Karelaia & Guillén, 2014).



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

9.5 Lessons for Governance, Education, and Social Equality

Governance can learn from Sulabha's insistence that authority remain open to questioning and from Savitri's ability to combine firmness with respectful dialogue. Education should present epic women as thinkers and ethical actors, rather than reducing them to symbols of obedience, sacrifice, or idealised womanhood. Such readings can encourage critical thinking, inclusive leadership, gender equality, and a culture in which public decisions are evaluated through justice and human dignity (Luthra, 2014; Müller, 2024).

10. Conclusion

The study finds that women in the Mahabharata possess substantial intellectual and moral authority. Their interventions influence family decisions, political choices, and ethical debates, demonstrating that female agency operates through speech, judgement, endurance, resistance, strategic counsel, and principled action within complex social and political structures. Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Savitri, and Sulabha emerge as reflective thinkers rather than passive figures. They advise rulers, question accepted norms, confront injustice, and guide others during crises, thereby expanding the epic's understanding of leadership, courage, and public responsibility. These women strengthen the Mahabharata's ethical discourse by exposing conflicts between law, justice, loyalty, and compassion. Their arguments reveal the uncertainty of moral action and compel powerful men to reconsider responsibility, honour, justice, and the consequences of silence. Female agency in the epic is closely linked with wisdom and dharma. Women act meaningfully by interpreting duty through lived experience, challenging rigid conventions, and demonstrating that ethical judgement requires courage, self-awareness, contextual understanding, moral accountability, and practical wisdom. The women of the Mahabharata remain significant because their voices address enduring questions of gender, power, justice, and responsible leadership. Their intellectual courage continues to inspire contemporary debates on equality, ethical governance, inclusive leadership, and women's participation in public life.

References

- Agarwal, K. (2017). Draupadi jeopardizing jurisprudence: A critical analysis of dharma as law in the light of Draupadi's question(s) in the Sabha. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 9(1), 133–139. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v9n1.14>
- Alam, J. (1994). Gandhari, the rebel. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29(25), 1517–1519.
- Armour, W. S. (1922). Customs of warfare in ancient India. *Transactions of the Grotius Society*, 8, 71–88.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1>
- Black, B. (2013). Draupadi in the Mahābhārata. *Religion Compass*, 7(5), 169–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12042>
- Brodbeck, S. (2013). The story of Sāvitṛī in the Mahābhārata: A lineal interpretation. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 23(4), 527–549.
- Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002>
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6), 595–616.
- Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14), 579–585.
- Dhand, A. (2002). The dharma of ethics, the ethics of dharma: Quizzing the ideals of Hinduism. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 30(3), 347–372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9795.00113>
- Dhand, A. (2004). The subversive nature of virtue in the Mahabharata: A tale about women, smelly ascetics, and God. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 72(1), 33–58. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfh003>
- Eagly, A. H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, M. C. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781–797.
- Fitzgerald, J. L. (2002). Nun befuddles king, shows karmayoga does not work: Sulabha's refutation of King Janaka at MBh 12.308. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 30(6), 641–677.
- Garlough, C. (2013). Savitri's stories and girl power: Rhetorical approaches to feminism(s) in Indian American ethnic schools. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 9(2), 143–168.
- Goleman, D. (2000). Leadership that gets results. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(2), 78–90.
- Hiltebeitel, A. (2007). Among friends: Marriage, women, and some little birds. In S. Brodbeck & B. Black (Eds.), *Gender and narrative in the Mahabharata* (pp. 110–143). Routledge.
- Karelaia, N., & Guillén, L. (2014). Me, a woman and a leader: Positive social identity and identity conflict. *Organizational*



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)
Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

- Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 125(2), 204–219.
- Luthra, R. (2014). Clearing sacred ground: Women-centered interpretations of the Indian epics. *Feminist Formations*, 26(2), 135–161.
- Malinar, A. (2007). Arguments of a queen: Draupadi's views on kingship. In S. Brodbeck & B. Black (Eds.), *Gender and narrative in the Mahabharata* (pp. 79–96). Routledge.
- Motswapong, P. E. (2017). Understanding Draupadi as a paragon of gender and resistance. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 3(2), 477–492. <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n2.a22>
- Müller, M. J. (2024). The production and deconstruction of the “ideal Indian woman” on the basis of the Mahabharata in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In M. Banerjee & J. Strube (Eds.), *The Mahabharata in global political and social thought* (pp. 137–160). Cambridge University Press.
- Patton, L. L. (2007). How do you conduct yourself? Gender and the construction of a dialogical self in the Mahabharata. In S. Brodbeck & B. Black (Eds.), *Gender and narrative in the Mahabharata* (pp. 97–109). Routledge.
- Singh, A. (2025). Draupadi's disrobing on Indian television: Unravelling a conceptual landscape of “dharma,” justice and gender. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 42(8), 2145–2168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2025.2465017>
- Sinha, S., & Bhattacharya, K. S. (2021). By me shall he be nursed! Queer identity and representation in the Mahabharata. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 13(3), 1–8.
- Sinha, S., & Bhattacharya, K. S. (2025a). Hidimba, the demon bride of Bhima. In *An alternative reading of the other in the Mahabharata: Celebrating the marginal* (pp. 56–65). Routledge India.
- Sinha, S., & Bhattacharya, K. S. (2025b). Vidula, the firebrand queen mother. In *An alternative reading of the other in the Mahabharata: Celebrating the marginal* (pp. 95–102). Routledge India.
- Sumathi, H., & Eljo, J. G. (2025). Women and dharma in the Mahabharata: Amba, Gandhari, and Hidimbi's resistance to patriarchy. *International Journal of Sciences and Innovation Engineering*, 2(6), 412–423.
- Sutherland, S. J. M. (1989). Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive behavior and female role-models in the Sanskrit epics. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 109(1), 63–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/604337>
- Vanita, R. (2003). The self is not gendered: Sulabha's debate with King Janaka. *NWSA Journal*, 15(2), 76–93.
- Vemsani, L. (2021a). Kunti: The many journeys of the quintessential mother. In *Feminine journeys of the Mahabharata: Hindu women in history, text, and practice* (pp. 43–72). Springer.
- Vemsani, L. (2021b). Satyawati: Ferrier of the family. In *Feminine journeys of the Mahabharata: Hindu women in history, text, and practice* (pp. 23–42). Springer.