

Women of the Mahabharata as Custodians of Indian Knowledge Systems: Ethics, Governance, and Social Wisdom

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Abstract. *The women of the Mahabharata as custodians of Indian Knowledge Systems, with particular attention to ethics, governance, social responsibility, and the interpretation of dharma. Through figures such as Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Savitri, and Vidura's female interlocutors, the epic presents women not as passive recipients of tradition but as active moral thinkers, political advisers, and preservers of social wisdom. Their speeches, choices, protests, and sacrifices illuminate questions of justice, duty, power, family, war, and social order. The study argues that these women contribute significantly to the ethical and political imagination of the Mahabharata by challenging authority, redefining duty, and exposing the consequences of unjust governance. Their experiences also reveal tensions between patriarchal norms and women's agency. Re-reading these characters through a gender-sensitive framework demonstrates their continuing relevance to contemporary debates on leadership, justice, social harmony, and the transmission of Indian intellectual traditions across generations in changing social contexts.*

Keywords: *Mahabharata; Women; Dharma; Ethical Governance; Indian Knowledge Systems*

Introduction

The Mahabharata is more than a narrative of dynastic conflict; it is a civilizational archive in which questions of duty, kinship, justice, governance, suffering, and moral responsibility are tested through human relationships. Its women are not merely supporting characters. Through speech, memory, counsel, endurance, and protest, they preserve and reinterpret knowledge that guides families, rulers, and communities. Their experiences reveal that knowledge is not confined to scriptures or formal institutions; it also develops through lived experience, ethical choices, and the courage to speak during moments of crisis[1][2]. Developed through a long interaction between oral performance and textual transmission, the Mahabharata brings together heroic narrative, philosophy, law, political thought, spirituality, and social reflection. Its layered structure allows different characters to debate dharma rather than reducing it to a single, fixed rule. The epic therefore presents knowledge as a continuing process of interpretation and moral enquiry[3][4]. Indian Knowledge Systems refer to interconnected traditions of learning developed in India through observation, reasoning, dialogue, practice, memory, and ethical reflection. They include philosophy, governance, medicine, ecology, arts, spirituality, education, and social conduct. These systems do not treat knowledge merely as information; they connect knowledge with self-discipline, social responsibility, harmony, and responsible living[5]. Women such as Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, Savitri, and Sulabha embody different forms of knowledge. They preserve family histories, interpret duty, question rulers, advise men during crises, and expose the human cost of political decisions. Their wisdom emerges from both intellectual understanding and lived experience[6][7]. Women in the Mahabharata function as custodians of ethical, political, and social wisdom. It particularly studies their role in preserving

values, challenging injustice, influencing governance, and transforming personal suffering into public moral argument[8][9]. The study focuses on selected female voices, with particular attention to Draupadi. It argues that reading these women as thinkers and knowledge bearers offers a more inclusive understanding of Indian intellectual heritage and demonstrates the continuing relevance of epic wisdom to dignity, governance, justice, and public ethics[10].

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative textual and interpretive research methodology to examine the role of women in the Mahabharata as custodians of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), with particular emphasis on ethics, governance, and social wisdom. The analysis is based on close reading of selected episodes involving Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawati, Savitri, Amba, Hidimba, Subhadra, Ulupi, and Chitrangada. These characters were selected because their speeches, decisions, acts of resistance, and political interventions illuminate important concepts such as dharma, justice, leadership, family governance, institutional accountability, and cultural continuity. The study adopts a gender-sensitive hermeneutic approach and applies thematic analysis to interpret recurring patterns of moral reasoning, political counsel, social responsibility, and knowledge transmission within the epic. Primary textual analysis of the Mahabharata is supported by relevant secondary scholarship on Indian philosophy, gender studies, political thought, and Indian Knowledge Systems. This methodology enables a critical understanding of women's intellectual agency and their contribution to the ethical and political imagination of the Mahabharata.

1. Women and Knowledge Traditions in Ancient India

Women's contributions to ancient Indian knowledge traditions frequently operated through spaces and practices that conventional histories have undervalued. Knowledge was carried not only through royal courts, educational institutions, or ritual centres but also through storytelling, household discipline, caregiving, counsel, song, memory, and intergenerational conversation. The Mahabharata preserves traces of this broader intellectual world by portraying women as interpreters of experience, duty, relationships, and moral consequences[11].

1.1. Women's Role in Oral Tradition

Before and alongside written transmission, epic knowledge lived through recitation, performance, retelling, and collective memory. Women contributed to its continuity by narrating genealogies, vows, rituals, family conflicts, and examples of righteous conduct. Their retellings connected inherited traditions with the emotional realities of each generation, making knowledge memorable, adaptable, and socially meaningful.

1.2. Transmission of Ethical and Cultural Values

Women communicated values through everyday choices rather than through abstract instruction alone. Kunti's appeals for family unity, Gandhari's warnings against uncontrolled ambition, and Savitri's determined yet reasoned actions demonstrate how courage, restraint, loyalty, perseverance, and accountability were taught through conduct. These examples present ethics as a lived practice shaped by relationships, responsibilities, and the consequences of human actions.

1.3. Domestic Spaces as Centres of Learning

The household functioned as an important centre where children learned language, memory, ritual conduct, hospitality, responsibility, emotional discipline, and social boundaries. However, domestic knowledge was not politically insignificant. Decisions taken within families affected succession, marriage alliances, conflict, inheritance, and kingship. Women's household authority therefore connected private education with the stability and moral character of the larger kingdom.

1.4. Women's Participation in Intellectual Discussions

The epic also records women participating in explicitly philosophical and political discussions. Sulabha's debate with King Janaka displays her command over logic, language, selfhood, liberation, and the proper methods of argument. Similarly, Draupadi's speeches demonstrate a sophisticated

understanding of dharma, justice, political authority, and human dignity. Their arguments challenge the assumption that intellectual authority in ancient India belonged exclusively to men[12].

1.5. Relationship Between Knowledge, Duty, and Social Order

In the Mahabharata, knowledge creates an ethical obligation. A person who understands dharma but remains silent before injustice becomes involved in the resulting disorder. Women repeatedly expose this gap between knowing what is right and having the courage to act, particularly when rulers and elders place convenience or reputation above moral responsibility during public crises. Their interventions remind rulers that social order cannot be preserved through power alone; it requires justice, compassion, self-control, accountability, and the willingness to question harmful customs.

2. Draupadi: Voice of Justice and Ethical Resistance

Draupadi stands among the Mahabharata's most compelling ethical voices because she refuses to treat humiliation as a private misfortune. She transforms her personal injury into a public examination of law, kingship, institutional responsibility, and human dignity. Her strength lies not merely in her anger but in her ability to formulate questions that expose the contradictions of a royal court claiming to uphold dharma while permitting injustice before its respected elders.

2.1. Draupadi's Questioning in the Royal Court

After Yudhishtira loses her in the dice game, Draupadi asks whether a man who has already lost himself retains the legal or moral authority to wager his wife. Her question unsettles the assembly because it demands a reasoned judgment rather than unquestioning obedience to royal or male authority. By raising this issue, she forces the elders to confront the moral and legal limits of ownership, marriage, and political power[13].

2.2. Debate on Dignity, Ownership, and Dharma

Draupadi rejects the assumption that marriage reduces a woman to transferable property. By questioning the sequence and validity of the wagers, she connects personal dignity with procedural justice. In her reasoning, dharma cannot be separated from consent, fairness, responsibility, and the protection of vulnerable individuals. Her argument consequently challenges a legal order that protects male privilege while denying women recognition as morally independent persons.

2.3. Resistance Against Patriarchal Injustice

Her resistance becomes especially powerful because the royal assembly contains respected elders who recognise the injustice but fail to prevent it. Draupadi exposes silence as a form of participation in wrongdoing. She neither accepts the shame imposed upon her nor allows violence to define her identity. Instead, she directs moral scrutiny towards the perpetrators, the silent witnesses, and the institutions that protect them.

2.4. Political Intelligence and Moral Courage

Draupadi understands that the assault in the dice hall is not simply a domestic offence; it is evidence of a political system collapsing from within. A court that cannot protect human dignity cannot legitimately claim to defend the kingdom. Her speeches connect the treatment of women with the ethical quality of kingship, demonstrating that political stability depends upon justice, accountability, restraint, and respect for human dignity.

2.5. Draupadi as a Symbol of Constitutional Justice

Although the modern Constitution belongs to a different historical context, Draupadi's insistence on reasoned judgment, equal dignity, and accountable authority provides a powerful comparative ethical lens. She represents the individual who questions arbitrary power and demands that institutions honour the principles they claim to uphold. Her voice remains relevant wherever laws exist formally but justice fails in practice. Thus, Draupadi may be understood as an enduring symbol of ethical resistance, institutional accountability, and justice grounded in human dignity.

3. Kunti: Maternal Leadership and Practical Wisdom

Kunti's importance in the Mahabharata lies not in formal sovereignty but in the practical intelligence

with which she protects a vulnerable family. Widowed and politically exposed, she turns motherhood into leadership. Her knowledge is experiential: she recognizes danger, preserves collective purpose, and acts when every available choice carries moral cost[14][15].

3.1 Kunti's Role in Protecting the Pandavas

After the deaths of Pandu and Madri, Kunti accepts Nakula and Sahadeva alongside her own sons, refusing to divide the children according to biological motherhood. During the conspiracy of the lac house and the subsequent years of wandering, she gives the Pandavas emotional stability and discipline. Her protection therefore means more than survival; it preserves their identity, dignity, and shared future[16].

3.2 Decision-Making During Political Crises

Kunti repeatedly makes decisions without possessing complete information. During exile, she adjusts to unfamiliar communities, accepts anonymity, and supports actions necessary for survival. Her choices reveal practical wisdom rather than perfect morality: she weighs immediate danger against long-term responsibility. Political judgment appears here as the ability to act decisively while remaining conscious of uncertainty and consequences[17].

3.3 Maternal Responsibility and Sacrifice

Kunti gives up royal comfort, personal reputation, and emotional peace for her sons. Her motherhood, however, is not merely passive suffering. It requires discipline, endurance, and the difficult work of preparing her children for public responsibility. Her eventual withdrawal to the forest suggests that maternal duty is not possession; after securing her sons' political position, she relinquishes privilege and accepts austerity.

3.4 Management of Family Unity

Kunti understands that rivalry among the brothers could destroy them before their enemies do. Draupadi's marriage to all five Pandavas is connected with Kunti's instruction and is frequently interpreted as a means of preventing fraternal division. Whether accidental or strategic, the episode demonstrates that family unity can become a political resource during dynastic conflict[18].

3.5 Ethical Complexity of Secrecy and Truth

Kunti's concealment of Karna's birth is her deepest ethical burden. Secrecy initially protects her social standing and later the Pandavas' legitimacy, but delayed truth leaves Karna without recognition and contributes to the tragedy of kin fighting kin. Her story teaches that protective silence may resolve an immediate crisis while producing lasting harm. Practical wisdom therefore requires timely truth, accountability, and compassion for those excluded through secrecy.

4. Gandhari: Moral Authority and Political Counsel

Gandhari's authority in the Mahabharata does not arise from military command or direct control of the throne. It develops through moral speech, disciplined restraint, and her willingness to confront the failures of the Kuru household. Her life also reveals a painful truth: wise counsel loses its power when rulers hear it too late or refuse to act upon it[19].

4.1 Gandhari's Commitment to Marital Duty

Gandhari's decision to blindfold herself after marrying the blind Dhritarashtra has been interpreted as devotion, solidarity, protest, and self-denial. The act gives her the stature of a devoted wife, or pativrata, yet it also raises an uncomfortable question: did sharing her husband's physical darkness limit her ability to correct the political blindness of the court? Her marital commitment is therefore admirable but ethically complicated.

4.2 Advice to Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana

At crucial moments, Gandhari urges Dhritarashtra to restrain Duryodhana and asks her son to abandon pride, listen to experienced elders, and make peace with the Pandavas. She understands that parental affection cannot excuse destructive conduct. Her counsel distinguishes responsible motherhood from unconditional approval and reminds rulers that genuine loyalty must include honest

correction.

4.3 Criticism of Greed and Misuse of Power

Gandhari identifies envy, anger, and greed as forces capable of destroying both family and state. Duryodhana treats royal authority as a personal possession, whereas Gandhari views kingship as a responsibility governed by justice and self-control. Her criticism expresses a central principle of Indian political wisdom: a ruler who cannot govern personal desire cannot govern a kingdom responsibly.

4.4 Grief, Responsibility, and Moral Accountability

After the war, Gandhari's grief becomes a public indictment of violence. She mourns her sons but does not completely deny their wrongdoing. Her anger towards Krishna, the Pandavas, and the wider political order expresses the suffering of women who bear the consequences of decisions made by powerful men. At the same time, her earlier silence and maternal partiality invite reflection on shared responsibility and delayed intervention.

4.5 Gandhari's Vision of Responsible Governance

Gandhari's political vision rests on restraint, consultation, justice, and accountability. She demonstrates that governance fails when a ruler protects an erring heir, ignores ethical advisers, and treats compromise as weakness. Her tragedy offers a durable lesson: moral authority must speak early, institutions must respond to warnings, and family loyalty must never be placed above the welfare of the state.

5. Satyawati: Statecraft, Succession, and Dynastic Governance

Satyavati is one of the Mahabharata's clearest examples of political intelligence exercised outside conventional male authority. Her life moves from the social margins to the centre of the Kuru court, where she becomes a strategist of succession and institutional survival. Her choices reveal both the necessity and the danger of preserving a dynasty at any cost[20].

5.1 Satyawati's Rise to Political Authority

Satyavati's marriage to Shantanu is shaped by negotiation rather than passive acceptance. The condition that her future sons should inherit the throne secures her lineage within the royal household and transforms her social position. Her rise demonstrates that women could influence sovereignty through marriage agreements, lineage claims, and strategic foresight, even when formal kingship remained a male institution.

5.2 Protection of the Kuru Dynasty

After the deaths of Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, Satyawati confronts a crisis that threatens the continuity of the kingdom. Rather than allowing the royal line to collapse, she consults Bhishma and summons Vyasa. Her response reflects an institutional understanding of leadership: the survival of the political community is treated as more important than personal grief or social embarrassment.

5.3 Decisions Concerning Royal Succession

Satyavati turns to *niyoga* to produce heirs through the widowed queens Ambika and Ambalika. This decision eventually leads to the births of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura, thereby reshaping the future of the Kuru state. Politically, it is a bold solution to a succession emergency; ethically, it raises questions about consent, bodily autonomy, caste, and the unequal burden placed on women for dynastic continuity.

5.4 Women's Participation in Political Strategy

Satyavati's authority operates through kinship, reproductive decisions, negotiation, and control over succession. These were not merely domestic matters; they determined who could rule, whose lineage would be recognized, and how political legitimacy would be produced. Her role challenges the assumption that women were absent from statecraft simply because they did not occupy the throne directly.

5.5 Ethical Dilemmas in Preserving Institutions

Satyavati's actions preserve the dynasty, but they also generate serious human costs. Bhishma's lifelong vow, the pressure placed on the widowed queens, and the later succession disputes show that institutional survival without fairness can reproduce instability. Her legacy therefore offers a balanced lesson: strong governance requires foresight and continuity, but institutions remain legitimate only when preservation is combined with consent, dignity, and moral restraint.

6. Savitri, Amba, and Other Women as Knowledge Figures

The women of the Mahabharata are not merely supporting figures in a heroic narrative. They possess spiritual insight, political awareness, cultural memory, practical intelligence, and a strong understanding of dharma. Savitri, Amba, Hidimba, Subhadra, Ulupi, and Chitrangada represent different social and regional worlds, demonstrating that Indian Knowledge Systems developed through dialogue among diverse communities rather than through one uniform tradition[21][22].

6.1 Savitri's Spiritual Wisdom and Determination

Savitri's encounter with Yama presents spiritual wisdom as an active combination of devotion, courage, reasoning, and self-discipline. Although she knows that Satyavan is destined to die, she makes an informed choice and accepts responsibility for it. She does not defeat death through physical force; instead, she speaks to Yama with patience and moral intelligence, gradually securing the restoration of her husband, family, lineage, and kingdom. Her story therefore transforms marital devotion into ethical agency and skilful negotiation[23][24][25].

6.2 Amba's Struggle for Identity and Justice

Amba's life exposes the injustice created when women are denied consent and control over their futures. Abducted by Bhishma and subsequently rejected by Salva, she becomes trapped between masculine honour, dynastic duty, and rigid social rules. Her demand for justice challenges a system that allows men to make decisions while women bear their consequences. Her transformation into Shikhandi symbolically extends this struggle beyond one lifetime, turning personal humiliation into a sustained challenge to gendered power and inherited injustice[26][27].

6.3 Hidimba's Cultural and Social Inclusiveness

Hidimba represents the knowledge and dignity of forest-dwelling and non-courtly communities. Rather than remaining confined by the identity imposed upon her as a rakshasi, she independently chooses Bhima and establishes a relationship across cultural boundaries. Her story widens the epic's social world by bringing forest society into contact with royal society. Through Hidimba and her son Ghatotkacha, the Mahabharata acknowledges that courage, loyalty, family responsibility, and social wisdom are not the exclusive possessions of elite kingdoms.

6.4 Subhadra's Role in Political Alliances

Subhadra's marriage to Arjuna connects the Pandavas with Krishna's influential Yadava community. It may therefore be read not only as a personal union but also as an important political and cultural alliance. Subhadra later protects the continuity of the dynasty through Abhimanyu and Parikshit and accepts responsibility for the younger generation after the devastation of war. Her conduct combines diplomacy, emotional maturity, maternal leadership, and concern for political stability.

6.5 Ulupi and Chitrangada as Representatives of Regional Traditions

Ulupi, the Naga princess, and Chitrangada, the princess and heir of Manipura, connect the central epic narrative with distinct regional traditions. Ulupi possesses specialised knowledge, political confidence, and the ability to reconcile conflict, while Chitrangada represents a succession system in which a daughter can preserve her father's lineage and kingdom. Their stories recognise the cultural plurality of India and show women functioning as warriors, healers, heirs, mediators, and transmitters of regional knowledge.

Results and Discussion

1. Women's Contribution to Governance and Social Wisdom

Governance in the Mahabharata extends beyond kingship and warfare. It includes the preservation of families, negotiation of alliances, protection of dignity, resolution of conflict, and restoration of social order. Women contribute to these processes through counsel, moral argument, mediation, sacrifice, and long-term responsibility.

1.1. Ethical Leadership in Times of Crisis

Savitri's dialogue with Yama and Amba's refusal to accept injustice illustrate two forms of ethical leadership. Savitri works through persuasion and restraint, whereas Amba uses protest and determined resistance. Both demonstrate that ethical action requires moral clarity, courage, accountability, and a willingness to confront unjust authority[28].

1.2. Family Governance and Conflict Management

Women such as Subhadra, Ulupi, and Chitrangada help maintain family networks fractured by exile, war, death, and political rivalry. Subhadra accepts responsibility for younger heirs, while Ulupi resolves the conflict involving Arjuna and Babhravahana. Their actions show that family governance involves emotional intelligence, reconciliation, continuity, and the responsible management of relationships.

1.3. Diplomacy and Alliance-Building

The marriages involving Hidimba, Subhadra, Ulupi, and Chitrangada connect the Pandavas with forest, Yadava, Naga, and Manipura communities. Although formed under different circumstances, these relationships create networks of cooperation and shared responsibility. The women consequently become cultural intermediaries who bring regional communities into a wider political and social framework.

1.4. Protection of Social Justice and Human Dignity

Amba's protest raises enduring questions concerning consent, honour, accountability, and access to justice. Her suffering reveals how institutions become unjust when they protect reputation and tradition but ignore the person harmed by their decisions. Her resistance affirms that dharma must protect human dignity rather than simply preserve established authority.

1.5. Balance Between Individual Duty and Collective Welfare

Savitri's requests to Yama move beyond her personal desire to recover Satyavan. They also seek the restoration of her father-in-law's sight and kingdom, the continuation of her father's lineage, and the future of her own family. Her wisdom demonstrates that individual duty becomes socially meaningful when it supports justice, family security, political stability, and collective welfare.

2. Contemporary Relevance

These narratives remain relevant because they address questions that continue to shape contemporary life: Who has the authority to make decisions? How should institutions respond to injustice? Can tradition evolve without losing its ethical foundations? Modern readings must neither romanticise every practice in the epic nor dismiss its women as passive figures. Instead, their experiences can encourage critical reflection on leadership, gender, cultural diversity, and public responsibility.

2.1. Women's Leadership in Modern Governance

The women of the Mahabharata demonstrate leadership through negotiation, resilience, alliance-building, crisis management, and protection of future generations. Contemporary evidence from India similarly shows that women's political participation can influence public priorities and challenge assumptions about leadership. Exposure to women leaders can also reduce gender bias and expand the aspirations of girls. Savitri's reasoned negotiation and Subhadra's acceptance of dynastic responsibility therefore resonate with modern ideas of participatory and welfare-oriented governance[29][30].

2.2. Gender Justice and Legal Consciousness

Amba's experience provides a powerful framework for discussing consent, personal autonomy, institutional responsibility, and equal access to justice. Her repeated rejection by those exercising social and political authority demonstrates how formal rules may fail when they disregard lived experience. In contemporary education, her story can help students examine the difference between legality and justice and recognise how gender hierarchy may operate through apparently respectable institutions.

2.3. Ethical Decision-Making in Public Life

Savitri's thoughtful speech, Hidimba's independent choice, and Ulupi's restorative intervention demonstrate that ethical decisions require empathy, foresight, courage, and awareness of consequences. Modern ethical leadership similarly depends on leaders acting as moral persons, communicating responsible standards, and remaining accountable to those affected by their decisions. Epic wisdom can therefore enrich public ethics when it is studied through questioning and discussion rather than treated as unquestionable instruction.

2.4. Women as Preservers of Cultural Knowledge

Hidimba, Ulupi, and Chitrangada preserve the memory of forest, Naga, and Manipura traditions within the larger epic. Their inclusion reminds readers that Indian civilisation has always contained multiple regional, ecological, and social knowledge traditions. Contemporary cultural preservation should similarly recognise women as storytellers, healers, educators, artisans, community leaders, and transmitters of local knowledge. Preserving their voices prevents Indian Knowledge Systems from being reduced to a single elite or centralised tradition.

2.5. Application of Epic Wisdom in Education and Society

The stories of these women can be used in ethics, law, political science, gender studies, literature, and value education. Students may debate Savitri's negotiation, examine Amba's demand for justice, map Subhadra's political relationships, and compare the regional identities represented by Hidimba, Ulupi, and Chitrangada. Such approaches transform the epic from a collection of idealised personalities into a living classroom for ethical reasoning, cultural dialogue, and gender-sensitive citizenship.

Conclusion

The Mahabharata presents women as vital bearers of ethical memory, political insight, and social responsibility. Their experiences connect personal suffering with larger questions of justice, authority, duty, and collective welfare across generations and changing contexts. The study finds that Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and other women shape the epic's moral discourse through counsel, resistance, sacrifice, and critical questioning. Their voices reveal the social consequences of failed leadership and distorted dharma. These women actively interpret dharma rather than merely obeying prescribed roles. They question kings, elders, husbands, and social conventions, demonstrating that moral authority may arise from experience, reason, courage, and conscience. Their interventions contribute to ideas of accountable governance, justice, restraint, and responsibility. Draupadi's demand for legal clarity and Gandhari's criticism of destructive ambition show how ethical counsel can challenge political power. Within Indian Knowledge Systems, these characters preserve practical wisdom concerning family, statecraft, conflict, social harmony, and moral decision-making. Their narratives transmit values while also exposing contradictions within inherited traditions for future generations. A gender-sensitive reinterpretation is necessary to recover women's intellectual agency and avoid reducing them to symbols of devotion or suffering. Such readings make the Mahabharata more inclusive and relevant to contemporary discussions of equality, leadership, and justice.

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