



Women in the *Mahabharata*: Negotiating Power and Identity

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Abstract: This research paper analyzes the patriarchy, female voice, and diversity of women's experiences in the *Mahabharata* through the status and depiction of women. The *Mahabharata* was composed between c. 400 BCE and 400 CE and is an encyclopaedic and evolving text that bears the mark of multiple social formations. The paper begins with an analysis of patriarchy through ideological, social, and institutional controls, especially through concepts such as *pativrata dharma* and *stridharma*, that shaped women's roles and identities. It then explores various forms of female agency and resistance, demonstrating how women such as *Draupadi*, *Amba*, *Gandhari*, *Kunti*, *Sulabha*, and *Savitri* question, negotiate, and challenge patriarchal authority through speech, action, and intellectual engagement. Moreover, the research emphasizes the diversity of women and provides a distinction between central and marginal figures. Central women have visibility and influence within the social and political structure, marginal women such as *Hidimba*, *Ulupi*, *Chitrangada*, and culturally othered groups like the women of *Madrakas* and *Bahlikas* show alternative forms of identity and agency, though often without recognition. The paper argues that the *Mahabharata* offers a different perspective on women, one in which patriarchy and agency coexist. The paper concludes that gender roles in the epic were not fixed but were constantly determined by social context, cultural differences, and narrative space, and thus the text is an important source for understanding the dynamics of gender in early Indian society.

Keywords: Gender, *Mahabharata*, Marginal, *Pativrata*, Patriarchy

Received : 07 May 2026

Revised : 29 May 2026

Accepted : 09 June 2026

Published : 30 June 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Tanisha Raj, Jyotsana Sonal & Subhash Chandra (2026). Women in *Mahabharata*: Negotiating Power and Identity. *Journal of Studies in South Asia*, 2: 1, pp. 119-128.

Introduction

The *Mahabharata*, a very important text of ancient Indian tradition, was written over a long period, from c. 400 BCE to 400 CE. It falls into the categories of *smriti* (remembered tradition) and *itihasa* (traditional history), meaning it is not only a literary work but also a source reflecting

social and cultural values. The epic is mainly situated in the Indo-Gangetic divide and the upper Ganga Valley, and is divided into eighteen *parvas* (books).

At its core, the *Mahabharata* is the story of the struggle between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* that led to the *Kurukshetra* war. But the text goes beyond this central storyline. It contains a huge amount of supplementary material, including moral lessons, philosophical discussions, and social narratives that often extend or even run parallel to the main story. The epic is so layered and complex that it can be read and interpreted in many ways.

Depending on the perspective adopted, different kinds of historical readings of the *Mahabharata* are possible (Singh 2009: 21). Following this approach, the present study looks at the epic from a feminine perspective, emphasising the place, role, and voice of women in the text. This helps to examine the parts of the epic that are frequently ignored in the traditional political or religious interpretations.

To better understand the position of women in the epic, it is important to look briefly at earlier traditions. The Indus Valley Civilisation has evidence of the worship of female goddesses, indicating the importance of femininity in the religious sphere. Women seem to enjoy a comparatively respectable position in the Vedic period, particularly in the *Rig Veda Samhita*. There are hymns in the *Rig Veda* composed by women, references to women sages, and references to women taking part in *sabha* and in religious rituals along with their husbands. But this picture is not quite complete. The number of hymns attributed to women is limited, and there are no clear references to women acting as priests or performing sacrifices by themselves. This indicates that, while women were present, their roles were limited.

In the later Vedic period, these restrictions became more structured, in so far as the texts show an ideal household with the *grihapati*, and the wife in a supportive role. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (5.2.1.10) describes the wife as the one who completes her husband, but also limits her role by mentioning that a good woman is one who pleases her husband, bears sons, and never speaks back to her husband. The *Atharva Veda* (3.23) also shows its preference for male children, in its charms to produce a male child.

This domination continues in later Brahmanical texts, like *Manusmriti* and *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, where the roles of women are further restricted. *Manu Smriti* (II. 213) writes that the nature of women is to seduce men, which makes a negative perception of women. *Yajnavalkya Smriti* (III. 77) later subordinates women as it limits them to act according to their husbands, and defines their duties in the framework of family and patriarchy.

From a historical perspective, the *Mahabharata* reflects a society that is neither uniform nor static, marked by transitions and contradictions. While the didactic portions of the epic show features of a complex and developed society, other parts preserve elements of an earlier, tribal and stateless social structure. These differences create many inconsistencies within the text. One important example is the practice of polyandry, which can be seen in the marriage of *Draupadi* to the five *Pandavas*. This suggests that the *Pandavas* may have belonged to a polyandrous hill society rather than a fully developed patriarchal state system (Sharma 1983: 136). Such a practice does not fit easily in the later Brahmanical social order and points towards older kinship patterns. In the *Adi Parva*, while conversing with *Drupada* and *Dhrishtadyumna*, *Yudhishtira* cites another example of polyandry he had heard in the *Purana*: a lady named *Jatila*, belonging to the *Gautama* race, who

married seven *rishis* (Ganguli 1883-96: 1.CLXLVIII). Similarly, the birth of the *Pandavas* through the practice of *niyoga* reflects traces of matrilineal traditions, in which lineage and inheritance may not have been strictly controlled by male authority. However, *niyoga* had some rules; for example, *Manu Smriti* (IX. 59) mentions that it can be performed with the brother-in-law or a sapinda of the husband.

These examples indicate that the *Mahabharata* consists of heterogeneity of social forms, on one hand, elements of a patriarchal, varna-based, and state-oriented society, and on the other, traces of earlier tribal and kin-based systems. This combination makes the epic an important source to understand the transition of Indian society from earlier forms of social organisation into more structured hierarchies.

The study of women in the *Mahabharata* becomes important in this social context. The epic reflects patriarchal norms that regulate the roles of women and also preserves traces of other social practices where women may have occupied different positions and exercised agency in various forms. This article aims to explore the representation of women by examining these forms in the text.

This paper considers the *Mahabharata* as a complex and evolving text in which both continuity and change is reflected. It seeks to highlight the interaction between older social traditions and emerging patriarchal structures that shaped the roles, identity, and voices of women through a gendered lens.

Research Objectives

The main aim of this paper is to explore the representation of the relationship between patriarchy and female agency in the *Mahabharata* in social, political, and domestic spheres. It aims to analyse the ways in which patriarchal structures shape the roles and identity of women, while also examining the ways in which women negotiate, resist, and express their agency within these constraints. The study also explores the range of women's voices in the epic, from elite to non-elite characters, to understand how their experiences reflect different forms of power, identity, and marginalisation. This paper highlights the complexity and plurality of women's positions in the *Mahabharata* and contributes to a better understanding of gender relations in early Indian society.

Patriarchy and Gender Norms in the *Mahabharata*

The subordination of women has been a widespread feature across different historical societies, but its nature depended on the specific social and cultural context. In the world represented in the *Mahabharata*, patriarchy operated as a deep rooted system which shaped women's roles, identities, and behaviour. This system was not maintained by a single factor; rather, a combination of social structures, religious ideas, and cultural practices supported it which regulated women's lives.

Patriarchal control is closely linked to the organisation of society at the structural level. The Hindu social organisation functioned as a "closed structure" which was designed to preserve land, women, and ritual purity (Yalman 1963: 25-8). In this structure, women were central to maintain the family honour and caste boundaries. To ensure that property and lineage remained within the specific social group their reproductive power had been controlled. Thus, control over women was not only about gender but also to maintain the broader social order, as their resistance can challenge the existing system of property and social status.

This structural need for control is further evident in Brahmanical texts, where upper-caste women were treated as objects of moral concern due to the fear of mixing of castes, as upper-caste women are regarded as the gateways into the caste system (Chakravarti 2018: 64-5). Their behaviour was closely regulated because they were seen as carriers of purity and status. However, such control is not achieved only through direct force. Instead, it operates through multiple mechanisms. In the context of Mesopotamia, patriarchal systems secure women's cooperation through ideology, economic dependence, class privileges, educational deprivations and, when necessary, force (Lerner 1986: 217). Along with religion, a similar pattern can be observed here, too, where women's subordination was both imposed and internalised.

Among these mechanisms, ideology plays the most significant role. The concepts of *stridharma*, the duties of a woman, and *pativrata dharma*, which is devotion to the husband, form the core of the epic's gender norms. These ideas define the ideal woman as obedient, self-controlled, and completely devoted to her husband and family. It had been discussed in other Brahmanical texts as well and presented as paths to spiritual merit and virtue. These concepts linked women's everyday roles and duties not just to social expectations but also to the spiritual order. Over time, these ideals became so deeply rooted that women began to regulate their own behaviour according to them.

The concept of *pativrata dharma* is particularly important in understanding how patriarchy functions. It represents one of the most effective ideological tools of control as it encouraged voluntary acceptance of subordination. A *pativrata* wife was expected to treat her husband as a god, obey him without question, and prioritise his needs above her own. The *Santi Parva* of the *Mahabharata* clearly states that the husband is the highest deity of the wife. Therefore, a woman should dedicate herself entirely to him (Ganguli 1883-96: 12.CXLV).

This ideology goes beyond the relationship between husband and wife. A woman was also expected to serve her husband's entire family, including his parents and other relatives. In the *Mahabharata* conversations, like those between *Draupadi* and *Satyabhama* or *Sandili* and *Sumana*, explain these duties in detail. *Sandili* advises that an ideal wife should never speak against her husband and serve her in-laws with full devotion (Ganguli 1883-96: 13.CXXIII). Similarly, *Draupadi* also describes of serving Kunti and respecting the family hierarchy to maintain harmony in the household. (Ganguli 1883-96: 3.CCXXXI). These narratives reinforce the idea that the virtue of a woman lies in her ability to maintain family unity through obedience and service.

Negating a woman's personality makes *Pativrata Dharma* more powerful. A woman was not expected to have independent desires or preferences. Her lifestyle, what she eats, wears, or does, was shaped by her husband's choices. Even her religious duties were not separate but were tied to her role as a wife. In this way, her identity becomes completely dependent on her husband.

Closely connected to this ideology is the idealisation of motherhood, as *Manu* wrote, 'Women are destined to bear children and are worthy of worship' [IX. 26]. However, this respect was conditional. Women were valued primarily for their reproductive roles, especially for giving birth to sons who could continue the family line. This reinforces the epic's preference for sons over daughters. Thus, even the glorification of motherhood served to confine women within the domestic sphere.

The epic also reflects negative perception of the nature of women at the same time. The *Anusasan Parva* of the epic describes women as inherently unstable or sinful (Ganguli 1883-96:

13.XXXVIII), which later justified their control. A contradiction was created by such references: women were idealised as devoted wives and mothers, but were also viewed with suspicion and mistrust. This dual image strengthens patriarchy by both glorifying and controlling women.

Control over women operated at multiple levels to maintain this system. First, there was ideological control, in which norms such as *pativrata dharma* encouraged women to discipline themselves. Second, there was kinship control, in which male relatives, such as fathers, husbands, and sons, had the authority over women's actions. Third, there was political control, where the king or state had the power to punish women who violated social norms (Chakravarti 2018: 70). Manusmriti (8. 371) advises that if a wife, feeling proud of her family or herself, disobeys her husband, the king should devour her by dogs in public. These levels worked together to create a complete system for regulation.

The most effective of these was ideological control, as it leads to assimilation of patriarchy. When women began to believe that their subordination was natural and even desirable, the system became self-sustaining. As seen in Brahmanical traditions, ultimate social control was achieved when subordinated groups accepted their condition as a mark of distinction. This is evident in the transformation of the concept of a wife from *sahadharmini*, an equal partner, to *pativrata*, a devoted follower (Shah 2012: 80). This shift reflects a gradual loss of autonomy and independent judgment for women.

The *Mahabharata* played an important role in reinforcing this ideology through narrative and dialogue. Many teachings about the duties of women were presented through female characters themselves. This can be seen as a strategic part of patriarchy, where women become the carriers of norms that limit them. The text made these ideas more acceptable and influential by presenting them through respected female figures.

Patriarchy in the *Mahabharata* was not a simple system of male dominance but a complex structure that was supported by social organisation, religious ideology, and cultural practices. The concept of *pativrata dharma* was based at its core, which shaped the roles of women and encouraged them to internalise their subordination. Women were both valued and restricted, respected and regulated. This makes the *Mahabharata* an important text to understand the ways through which gender norms were constructed, maintained, and justified in early Indian society.

Female Agency and Resistance in the Epic

The *Mahabharata* presents a strong patriarchal society, but also offers important examples of women who used to resist, question, and negotiate the system. Women in the epic were not always passive followers of the norms. They often maintained their individuality and expressed their voices within, and sometimes against the patriarchal limits. This shows that patriarchy in the epic was not absolute but was constantly challenged and reworked.

It is important to begin with the expectation of a *pativrata* woman to understand the agency. A *pativrata* was expected to show complete loyalty to her husband, obey him, and endure suffering without complaint. However, the *Mahabharata* itself complicates this ideal and presents women who did not fully follow it. Their actions show that there is space for questioning and resistance even within this framework.

Draupadi is one of the strongest examples of this. Although she had often been described as a devoted wife, she did not remain silent in the face of injustice. In the *Sabha Parva*, when she is dragged into the royal court after being gambled away, she questions whether *Yudhishtira* had the right to stake her after losing himself (Ganguli 1883-96: 2.LXVI). At that moment, she directly challenged both legal and moral authority in a public setting.

Draupadi's resistance does not end there. She openly criticised her husbands and reminded them of their responsibility to restore her honour. *Draupadi*'s character is powerful because she is aware of her victimisation and responds to it with strong and outspoken criticism. In doing so, she overturns the idea of a *pativrata* woman who silently accepts suffering (Sutherland 1989: 63-79).

Draupadi's agency is more complex than simple resistance at the same time. An analysis of the *Draupadi-Satyabhama* dialogue suggests that *pativrata dharma* should not be understood as blind obedience. It worked as a two-way relationship. *Draupadi*'s loyalty and service created a form of reciprocal obligation from her husbands (Patton 2007: 104). Patton also points out that *Draupadi*'s careful management of household relations shows that she is aware of the power dynamics within the family. This suggests that even within traditional roles, women could exercise control and influence.

The questioning of patriarchal norms becomes more direct in *Amba*'s story. Her experience exposes the limitations of practices like *svayamvara*, which appeared to offer women choice but were actually controlled by men. When *Bhishma* abducts her and refuses to marry her, *Amba* strongly condemns this injustice. She curses *Bhishma* and expresses anger at a system that denies her autonomy (Ganguli 1883-96: 5.CLXXVII). Her response went beyond personal suffering and became a critique of patriarchy itself. *Amba*'s rage represents a clear rejection of the structures that restrict women's freedom.

Speaking of *Gandhari*, while she is often portrayed as an ideal wife for blindfolding herself in devotion to her husband, she did not remain silent on political matters. She repeatedly advised *Dhritarashtra* and *Duryodhana* to follow the path of justice and warned them about the consequences of their actions. Her resistance lies in her moral authority and persuasion. Even though she worked within the system, she questioned the injustice and refused to support wrongdoing.

Similarly, *Kunti* demonstrates agency through her decisions and guidance. She played a key role in shaping events, whether through her instruction regarding *Draupadi*'s marriage or her later revelation of *Karna*'s identity. Her actions show that women could influence both family and political outcomes, even without holding formal power.

The epic also presents intellectual forms of resistance, especially through the character of *Sulabha*. As an unmarried woman, she engaged in a philosophical debate with King *Janaka* on the nature of the self and renunciation. When *Janaka* dismissed her on the basis that women are not suited for such a path, *Sulabha* challenged him directly. She questioned his claim of detachment and exposed the contradictions in his thinking. Her success in the debate shows that women were capable of intellectual and philosophical authority, challenging male dominance in knowledge systems (Ruth 2003: 76-93).

Another important character is *Savitri*, whose story presents a different but equally powerful form of agency. When her husband *Satyavan* died, *Savitri* followed *Yama*, the god of death, and engaged him in dialogue. Through her intelligence, persistence, and skill in argument, she brought

her husband back to life. This episode shows that *Savitri* is not simply a submissive wife but an active and determined figure. *Savitri* can be seen as a “spunky and defiant woman” who even defeats the god of death through verbal argument. This challenges the stereotype of the passive and submissive Hindu wife (Jamison 1990: 260).

When these characters and their narratives are examined together, it becomes clear that female agency in the *Mahabharata* is not uniform. It appears in different forms: questioning, rejecting, guiding, participating in intellectual debate, and influencing in political situations. Each of these forms challenges patriarchy in different ways.

At the same time, these acts of resistance did not completely break the system. Women still operated within limits, and their power was often restricted. However, their actions create spaces where patriarchal authority is questioned and weakened. This reveals that women were not passive victims but active participants in shaping their own lives. The *Mahabharata* presents a complex relationship between patriarchy and female agency. Women both followed and challenged social norms, creating multiple forms of resistance within a restrictive system that differs from central to marginal characters.

Diverse Female Voices of the Epic

A close reading of the text shows that women in the epic cannot be treated as a single group. Their experiences differed depending on their position: whether they were in a central, royal, visible role or a marginal, invisible, peripheral, or culturally othered character. This difference helps us to understand how patriarchy operates in different ways, giving some women visibility but restricting them, while allowing others limited freedom but placing them at the margins.

At the centre of the narrative are women like *Draupadi* and *Kunti*, who are part of royal families and directly connected to political power. These women had a voice and influence, but their agency was still limited. *Draupadi*’s questioning in the *Sabha Parva* is an example of this. When she asks whether she could be staked after *Yudhishtira* had already lost himself, her question becomes one of “self, justice, and representation”. However, it remained unanswered, showing that even powerful women were not fully heard.

Kunti’s life also reflects this paradox. She plays a central role in shaping the *Pandavas*’ destiny, yet social norms control her personal choices. Her abandonment of *Karna* was driven by fear of dishonour, and her role is described as “motherhood sanctioned by patriarchy”. This shows that central women were influential but not independent.

Moving beyond these characters, there are women from culturally distinct or peripheral communities, such as womenfolk of the *Madrakas* and *Bahlikas*. These women were presented as socially “outsiders” within the Brahmanical framework. Their customs were described as different from normative ideals, and these women were considered “impure” (Sinha & Bhattacharya 2025: 32-8). This difference leads to their marginalisation, as they did not suit the dominant model of controlled, domesticated femininity. It shows that patriarchy is not uniform but also depends on cultural location. Women who fall outside the accepted norms were seen as deviant and were placed at the margins.

The epic also presents the character *Chitrangada*, the princess of Manipur, who further complicates this framework. She does not fit the model of a passive or dependent woman. She

was raised as a warrior and had a more active and independent role in her own life. Her marriage to *Arjuna* was shaped by conditions that reflect her unique social context, where lineage and inheritance follow different rules (Ganguli 1883-96: 1.CCXVII). This shows that alternative social systems allow women greater agency, but such models remained outside the dominant patriarchal structure and are treated as exceptions.

The *Mahabharata* creates space for what it calls the “gendered marginal,” where such women can express themselves, even if in limited ways. This space becomes visible in characters like *Hidimba* and *Ulupi*. *Hidimba*, a forest-dwelling woman, openly expresses her desire for *Bhima* and chooses him as her partner (Ganguli 1883-96: 1.CLIV-CLV). The strict marriage rules of royal society do not bind her. Similarly, *Ulupi*, a *naga* warrior princess, approaches *Arjuna* and asserts her choice (Ganguli 1883-96: 1.CCXVI). These women show forms of agency that were more direct and less restricted. However, their marginal position also limits them. *Hidimba* disappeared from the narrative after fulfilling her role as *Ghatotkacha*'s mother, and *Ulupi* remained outside the central storyline. This shows that marginal women may have had greater freedom, but lacked long-term recognition and narrative significance.

The epic creates a limitrophic space, giving the marginalised, such as the gendered subaltern, a chance to narrate their stories (Sinha & Bhattacharya 2025: 3). This means that the epic allowed moments of resistance but did not fully challenge the overall structure of patriarchy.

Patriarchal norms are evident in the characters of Apsaras like *Menaka* and *Rambha*. These women were controlled by male authority, especially Indra, and were sent to seduce sages. For example, *Menaka* was sent to disturb *Vishwamitra*'s penance, even against her will (Ganguli 1883-96: 1.LXXI). This shows that even divine women were not free but were used as instruments within a patriarchal system. At the same time, these women were not without influence. *Menaka*'s union with *Vishwamitra* leads to the birth of *Shakuntala*, showing that marginal women characters can shape important events, even if indirectly.

Reading these characters reveals how patriarchy works by creating fixed roles for women, like the ideal wife, the mother, or the seductress. However, the epic also challenges these fixed roles. *Draupadi* is both a devoted wife and a critic of injustice; *Chitrangada* is both a princess and a warrior; *Hidimba* is both marginal and independent. These overlapping identities demonstrate that women cannot be confined to a single category.

The epic's dialogic, open nature allows multiple voices and contradictions to coexist. This openness creates space for both central and marginal women to express their experiences, even if unevenly. Bringing all these characters together, a clarity appears that central women have visibility and influence, but are more strictly controlled; on the other hand, marginal women may have greater personal freedom but are not fully recognised or included in the main narrative.

Conclusion

This study examines the position of women in the *Mahabharata* by critically analysing the relationships among patriarchy, female agency, and the diversity of women's experiences. The epic presents a complex social structure in which women are both controlled and influential at the same time. The epic's strong-woman characters suggest that women were less subordinate to men than in later times. But the practice of *niyoga* reflects much stricter control over women (Singh

2009: 19). Rather than showing women as only passive or only powerful, it reveals a different picture in which women negotiate their roles within a patriarchal system.

The first part of the paper examined the ways in which patriarchy operated through social norms, religious ideas, and family structures. Concepts like *pativrata dharma* and *stridharma* shaped the roles of women and encouraged them to accept obedience, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. These ideas not only controlled women from outside but also influenced how they see themselves. As a result, patriarchy becomes strong because both social pressure and internal belief support it.

The study highlighted that, at the same time in the *Mahabharata*, women are not silent or passive. Through characters like *Draupadi*, *Amba*, *Gandhari*, *Kunti*, *Sulabha*, and *Savitri*, the epic presents various forms of female agency. Women questioned injustice, expressed anger, gave advice, made decisions, and even engaged in philosophical debate. These actions show that women actively responded to the limits placed upon them. However, their agency is incomplete, as it remains shaped and constrained by the larger patriarchal system.

The study also emphasised the importance of diversity among women. By comparing central and marginal women, it becomes clear that not all women experienced power and control in the same way. Royal women like *Draupadi* and *Kunti* had visibility and influence but were tightly bound by social expectations. On the other hand, marginal women such as *Hidimba*, *Ulupi*, *Chitrangada*, and the women of the *Madakas* and *Bahlikas* exhibit alternative forms of identity and agency, yet remain outside the central narrative and lack recognition. This reveals that gender is not the only factor shaping women's lives; religion, social position and cultural identity also play a key role.

In the whole, the epic offers a dynamic and open-ended understanding of the lives of women. It reflects a patriarchal society, but also creates space for questioning, resistance, and alternative voices. The contradictions present in the epic suggest that gender roles were not fixed but were continuously debated and negotiated.

The *Mahabharata* should not be seen or understood only as a text that supports patriarchy, but also as one that reveals its limits and tensions. By bringing together themes of control, agency, and diversity, this study interprets varied narratives of women in the epic as an important source for understanding the complexity of gender relations in early Indian society and for rethinking women's voices in historical and literary traditions.

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