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Women Influence in Indian Epics

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Abstract

Indian epics have had various retellings and versions told over the decades. Today, the average reader knows of Rama's obedience, love and righteousness, as well as Arjuna's skill and valour. We know all about Ravana's tyranny and no one forgets Duryodhana's unjustness, not to mention the likes of Indrajit and Kumbhakarna or Dushasana and Shakuni.

But in the midst of all the splendour and grandeur of these epics, we forget the most essential characters without whom neither the Ramayana nor the Mahabharata might have existed. Without Sita, we never would have gotten to see Rama's sacrifice, love or valour. Sans Draupadi, the Kurukshetra War may have never happened, nor would Duryodhana's anger or Karna's hatred been further provoked.

In the many intricate folds of both these ancient itihisas, we never get to see the feminist icons and role models young people of today look for, or the power of royal women in their full glory, from Satyawati to Kaikeyi.

Keywords: Women, India, influence, epics, love, righteousness, ancient, icons, royal

Introduction

Role models are extremely important for today's generation, and the population is constantly struggling to find a worthy personality to follow. However, sometimes we forget that role models don't have to live during our time, they just have to be paradigms of the ideals that we look for, and thus, overlook the multiple chapters of history behind us that have been long-forgotten but carry exactly what we need. From Sita and Tara, both queens but one more recognised than the other, to Draupadi and Satyawati, two queens who rose above the condemnation they faced and manipulated their own stories, both these epics are filled with the kind of fiery yet calm, bold yet compassionate heroines that readers are looking for.

Women Influence in Indian Epics

Both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are held in a separate class of epics as itihisas, meaning they were written by poets who lived during the time of both stories, stood as record-keepers of time and differentiated between fact and fiction. This leads us to understand that both epics are mostly true and there is very little exaggeration to be found in between the lines, which means that every small character and story is absolutely real. The lives these women have lived, the struggles they overcame and the wisdom and spirit they possessed is unmatched.

Many female characters have been overlooked or are constantly under-appreciated for their determination and the sacrifices they made. This paper aims to bring these women to the spotlight and give them their chance to shine, with both their flaws and their glowing attributes laid bare. The stories of four women from the Ramayana and five from the Mahabharata, a mix of well-known but undervalued and unknown and unnoticed characters: Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari and Tara (Ramayana) and Satyawati, Uloopi, Kunti, Hidimbi and Draupadi (Mahabharata).

Their stories have been twisted and manipulated over the years, portraying them in unfair depictions, Sita as the meek, obedient wife and Kaikeyi as the misfortune-bringing matriarch. However, this paper's goal is to tell their stories in their authentic and raw, unfiltered forms, as much as possible. In this paper, we will see Sita as a dedicated and determined princess, Kaikeyi as a warrior queen, Satyawati as a master of politics, Kunti as a multi-faceted mother and more.

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Sita

When today's readers compare the two most prominent female protagonists in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Sita and Draupadi, the latter generally gets more of her due credit as she is seen as the bold, fearless woman who demanded justice while Sita is perceived as quiet, demure and ever-ready to bear the brunt of Rama's law-abiding nature and self-justified decisions.

Both women were the ultimate feminist icons, relevant to both theirs and our time, they had many disparities between them, not just in time but in manner. And yet, Sita and Draupadi both made their mark in history, despite their differences: this is an indicator that both their characteristics led to similar impact in their own stories.

Sita was the Princess of Mithila and daughter of King Janaka, a great Rajarishi. As Valmiki implied in the Valmiki Ramayana, the relationship between Janaka and Sita, an under-appreciated father-daughter duo, was never accidental or by chance. Sita was also a sage in her own right, having been extremely well-educated and also by building her confidence on the power of observation.

Critics and readers mistake this skill of Sita's for silence, which to them translates into weakness and fragility rather than the true underlying qualities.

What we fail to realise is that Sita's quietude was never a flaw; it symbolised her strength, love, patience and affectionate not resigned acceptance of the flaws of the people around her that stemmed from her utmost confidence that they need her whereas she did not need them.

Over time, Sita has been used to depict the 'ideal' wife - rarely outspoken, quiet, obedient and accepting and enduring even in the most insufferable of situations, which is why today's readers do not look up to her as the feminist role model they want.

However, none of these qualities truly add up to Sita as a character. She was rarely outspoken not because she knew her place but because she knew what she wanted and only interfered in a situation when she felt needed. This shows tremendous foresight as well as intelligence. In the extremely influential moments, one in which she skillfully debates her way into accompanying Rama to the forest despite everyone else's discouragement, and another, in which she commands Lakshmana to follow Rama into the forest when she hears his cries for help.

Sita proves that she was never an obedient wife, only a dutiful one who would exert her wit and power only when she deemed necessary, again showing her impeccable sense of judgement.

When Sita was made to go through the Agni Pareeksha as a test of her fidelity, we have already seen that she can stand up for herself when she wants to which means she understands and is tolerant to her husband's reasons for putting her through the test, knowing that it isn't for his approval but for her vindication in the eyes of the people.

Many argue that the Agni Pareeksha was completely unnecessary and so was Sita's exile when she was pregnant, saying that it shows Rama's selfishness to maintain his reputation as a good king rather than a good husband and Sita's meek acceptance of the same. We may never know the true reason why these events happened but it can definitely be said that it was not Sita's ability to silently suffer but her capacity to analyze a situation and then decide whether to accept and endure it or not.

It is through Sita that Rama establishes his relationship with

the people of Ayodhya, the Vanaras of Kishkinda and his most trusted ally, Hanuman. Without Sita, there is no Ramayana. Without her, Rama's dependability, love, sacrifice and loyalty could never have come through. Thus, sans Sita, neither the Ramayana nor Rama is complete.

Rama also exhibits his dependence on Sita and his undying love for her multiple ways. The most evident instance is his crossing of the oceans to reach Lanka, to reach Sita. In the Uttara Kanda, when the Ashwamedha yagna he conducted required his wife to be at his side, Sita was on exile. He refused to remarry despite the multiple attempts at persuasion by the people around him, thus becoming the only Hindu deity to ever practice monogamy and be the only ekam-pati-vrata, an extremely rare phenomenon in his times.

Instead, Rama created a solid gold replica of her, thus establishing both that he had exiled the queen, never the wife and also that Sita was pure and ideal in his eyes, regardless of what his people thought.

Sita was one of the few to realise that her husband was Vishnu, the dependable god, making her Lakshmi, the independent goddess. She showed patience and courage like never seen before through the many undeserved trials of her life. Even Ravana, one of the most powerful kings with multiple divine boons, was terrified of her and the raw power she possessed due to her chastity, as he was afraid to touch her because of her previous form, Vedavati's curse that he would die if he touched a resistant woman.

In relation to today's #MeToo movement, we see Sita demonstrating the importance of consent and consensual relationships. She brings out the ideals of feminism while being mistaken for a frail, meek young girl rather than the fierce, independent woman she was. She showed the strength and maturity required to bear the consequences of a patriarchal society's decisions at an extremely young age, showing the sagacity in her child-like nature and wisdom in her free-spirited words.

Kaikeyi

The Ramayana, as an epic, owes most of its progressions to women, and Kaikeyi is one among them.

Eternally looked upon as the scheming villain who ruined the family's harmony and joy, Kaikeyi has been portrayed as the epitome of spite, jealousy and heartlessness in various retellings. She has been used as an example to show that wrongly placed trust and promises never end well, as well as, a scapegoat to promote the stereotype of catfights, envy and misfortune that a woman can bring to a home.

Yet, even as so many historians and writers dig deep into her story, we fail to see her authentic persona - the raw, real charm of Kaikeyi, from her days as the bold and daring Princess of Kekeya to her unchanged manner as the Queen of Ayodhya.

Kaikeyi was the daughter of King Ashvapati, the king of Kekeya which includes parts of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Due to an earlier spat between her parents in which Ashvapati was disillusioned by his wife's lack of concern for his life, her mother had been banished from the kingdom when Kaikeyi was extremely young. As a result of this, Kaikeyi never had a genuine maternal influence in her life, save Manthara who was her nurse and became her only motherly figure all through her life.

With seven brothers, Kaikeyi grew up in a world where men

and only men's emotions, decisions and egos were taken into consideration. In spite of being constantly overshadowed by her overachieving brothers and her powerful father, she grew up to be a well-learned, courageous and compassionate young woman, widely known for her intrepid and unapologetic attitude.

Kaikeyi's journey to becoming the Queen of Ayodhya began in the forests of Kashmir where Dasharatha, the King of Ayodhya, was hunting. He fell for her almost immediately and the two were married on the one condition (laid down by Ashvapati), that should Kaikeyi have a son, he would be the next king of Ayodhya. This shows the irony of the whole Ramayana and the disparity between a father and his son's principles.

The whole Ramayana is based on the keeping of promises and not breaking one's word and yet, one of the very first promises ever made in the epic is broken without a second thought later on, and one could argue that this eventually leads to Dasharatha's downfall and death, among other reasons.

Kaikeyi, although Dasharatha's second consort (after Kausalya, princess of Kosala), was always treated with superiority and evidently favouritism by Dasharatha who himself admits that he does not treat his three queens equally because of Kaikeyi.

This shows that Kaikeyi is being showered with newfound attention and love after coming from a crowded family of eight children, but there is not one account of sudden conceitedness or superior airs in the Valmiki Ramayana, suggesting that she has always maintained her character to be kind but blunt, gentle but fierce and has never been one to back down from a fight, whether it demanded her brain or her military skill.

The first episode in which we get to see Kaikeyi as a warrior is in the battle between Indra and Samhasura. Indra, the king of the heavens, enlists in Dasharatha's help, a formidable military man of his time, to defeat the powerful opponent. Adamant to accompany him, Kaikeyi joins her husband on the battlefield, making this one of the first instances where we see a woman on the battlefield.

In the middle of the battle, Dasharatha is fatally wounded and the chariot wheel is broken as well. Kaikeyi demonstrates her physical strength and mental willpower, as well as her love for her husband, by using her little finger to push the chariot wheel, thus driving her husband to safety. This also shows her prowess in chariot-riding.

The earlier accounts of her life are brushed aside, so we have never seen Kaikeyi as a scholarly woman, a fierce warrior, a doting wife and the boldest queen of the three. She is only portrayed as a cold-blooded villain who ruined her family's happiness so much so that girl children are not even named Kaikeyi for fear that they will mirror her undesirable attributes as well.

When the four princes were born, she is quoted again and again accepting that Rama is her favourite child, preferring him even over her own son, Bharata but never treating the other princes any less. In the hot-headed and fiercely loyal (to Rama) Lakshmana's eyes, her one saving grace is her undying affection and love for Rama which is why he comes to loathe her and hurl abuse at her the moment she exiles Rama.

Kaikeyi's story is a creation of circumstance and a fruit of negative emotions. Throughout her life, she has seen Ashvapati's infuriation towards her mother, Kausalya's

jealousy of her, Manthara's disgruntlement and Bharata's hatred of her.

And yet, in all this, she never once let her spirit die or let herself be suppressed. As a child, in a fit of mischief and glee, she blackened a Rishi's face when he was deep in the middle of meditation. Extremely upset, the Rishi cursed her for her simple folly, saying that just as she blackened his face, she would also have a 'black' reputation.

There is much debate surrounding Kaikeyi's story as to whether she was actually an easily swayed and willful woman who could be poisoned by another's schemes or if she was actually a pawn in the bigger scheme of things and agreed to take the brunt of the villain in the story.

All evidence of Kaikeyi's upbringing points in the other direction, away from the idea that she would be influenced by Manthara's toxic thoughts so easily, being a well-educated, clever woman of substance.

Some suggest that Rama needed a way to go to the forest, as the purpose of his avatar was to rid the world of evil and kill the demons in his way and so, he approached Kaikeyi as he viewed her in awe as the bravest queen. Others say that Ashvapati once overheard two birds (via his boon), talking about how there was a curse on the kingdom of Ayodhya that whoever sat on the throne for the next fourteen years would die.

Thus, they say that it was for this reason that Kaikeyi had banished Rama for exactly fourteen years, knowing that Bharata, out of loyalty for his brother, would never accept the throne.

We may never know Kaikeyi's true story, whether she was the influencer or the one being influenced, but we can remember her as the feminist icon of her times, a charismatic and bold princess who became a queen, shunned by all but still rose above all.

Mandodari

There are many female characters in the Ramayana, who have been conveniently overlooked and not given their due credit, not only in the kingdom of Ayodhya where the likes of Kaikeyi and Urmila exist but also in the kingdom of Lanka where live Mandodari, Trijata, Shurpanakha and more.

In her few mentions in the Ramayana, Mandodari has been projected as a dutiful and pious wife, which she very much was, but has never actually been portrayed as the powerful and strong yet compassionate and accepting queen she was.

Mandodari was the daughter of the apsara, Hema who left her in the care of her father, Mayasura, a renowned and mighty king of the asuras, daityas and rakshasas. Once again, much like Kaikeyi's story, Mandodari also grew up in a world of men, though not as emphatic as Kaikeyi. She had two brothers, Mayavi and Dundubhi and was often recognised as the voice of reason between the two feuding brothers.

There is an episode from Mandodari's life, when she was around the age of ten, in which her brothers are mauling one another in an epic fistfight. Legend has it that she calmly walked up to them, yanked them apart by the hair and educated them, saying that there were already so much evil in the world and brothers are meant to be each other's pillars against these forces of destruction. Her words were so impactful and profound that it is said that Mayavi and Dundubhi never fought ever again and were even recognised for their camaraderie.

Being the only daughter in a family of four (extremely small in those times), Mandodari was brought up with a lot of affection and care from Mayasura's side, as well as the love and protection of her two doting brothers.

She was so prodigious a woman that she is one of the Panchakanyas of Hinduism (Five Women), along with Kunti, Tara, Draupadi and Ahalya. Mandodari married Ravana in a ceremony of great splendour, after he was smitten by her and Mayasura, impressed by Ravana's numerous feats and vast kingdom, consented to the union. Sources say that she came to know of Ravana's infidelity and enormous ego only after her wedding.

Mandodari and Ravana had three sons, Meghnad, Atikaya and Akshaykumara, all of whom became formidable warriors, especially Meghnad, who later became Indrajit. She is said to have been a devout and pious wife who was always a pillar of strength for Ravana, but never supported his principles and always cautioned him against wrong.

Mandodari has also been said to have saved Sita's dignity and life on multiple occasions, the first time being when she barred Ravana from bringing Sita into their palace, resulting in her staying in the Ashok Vatika, and another time when Ravana lost his patience with Sita's consistent rejections and almost beheaded her.

She was an epitome of wisdom and silent strength, unlike the bold and tradition-defying heroines we are used to seeing. Mandodari recognised her husband's faults and had also quietly accepted that they would be his ultimate downfall, yet she never tried to save herself, always her husband.

In this, we see that Mandodari was never blind and ignorant to Ravana's character defects like Dhritarashtra was to Duryodhana, she only accepted him as he was but never stopped trying to change him and prevent his destruction. She is said to have been one of the very few characters in the Ramayana, who realised that Rama and Sita were indeed avatars of Vishnu and Lakshmi.

Mandodari was wise beyond her years and a paragon of unconditional but not blinding love and the ultimate sacrifices that she made to ensure her family's happiness.

Tara

The Panchakanyas are five women whose intelligence, might and chastity set them above all others, such that the recital of their names (Kunti, Draupadi, Tara, Mandodari and Ahalya) are believed to dispel all sins.

Yet, these are all women who have survived unsolicited sexual abuse or women who have been stigmatised for various reasons.

Their stories are told by Valmiki and Veda Vyasa, two poets living on the edge of society as honest record-keepers time, human history and wars. They knew what it felt like to be held as an illegitimate or an anomaly of and by society, and thus, they liberated these women of the stigma that surrounded them by upholding them as the Panchakanyas and telling the world their true stories.

Tara's birth is shrouded in debate, some saying she was the daughter of the monkey physician, Sushena, and others saying that she was an apsara brought forth by the churning of the ocean of milk. She married Vali, the king of Kishkinda and had a son named Angad. The real upheavals in Tara's life began as a fight between the brothers.

Vali had been challenged by the demon, Mayaavi, to a fight at the city gates. However, upon seeing Vali and Sugriva

charging towards him, Mayaavi fled into a cave. Vali had asked Sugriva to wait outside the cave for him as he went into the cave, in pursuit of the demon. After much waiting, Sugriva heard demonic screams and, upon seeing blood oozing from the mouth of the cave, heartbrokenly assumed that his beloved brother had died in combat and closed the cave with a huge boulder.

Sugriva went back to Kishkinda and assumed the throne, accepting Tara as his second wife, as was the custom of his times. However, many days later, Vali returned, having been victorious, and being the hot-headed king he was, upon seeing the boulder and Sugriva acting as king with Tara at his side, added two and two, and assumed that his brother had betrayed him. Vali banished Sugriva, making the brothers bitter enemies.

In this story, one might see Vali's rage and mistrust, Sugriva's wrong accusation or the start of the feud between the brothers. However, this episode has Tara woven into its intricacies.

Tara has been said to have served as Vali's moral compass and wall of support. She too, loved him unconditionally while still being aware of his flaws. In the scarce mentions of Tara in the epic, we see her counselling as well as consoling Vali and trying to make him see reason and look past his blinding fury.

She explains that both she and Sugriva had only consented to be married as Vali's death had been confirmed and also tries to persuade Vali to not kill Sugriva. There are some versions of the epic that say Vali wasn't able to kill Sugriva because he had fled to Rishyamukh, the one place on earth that Vali cannot tread on. Others say that it was Tara's constant advice and the promise she extracted from Vali that he would not kill his brother. Thus, she saved Sugriva's life through her righteous counsel as well.

After the epic battle between Sugriva and Vali took place in which Rama killed Vali, Tara is seen grieving but with composure as she is also one of the few to realize not only her husband's fatal flaws but also that Rama was Vishnu incarnate, thus accepting that Vali was killed by divine forces.

Tara is an embodiment not only of profound guidance and wisdom but also of forbearance and grace even after her loved one's defeat. Sarga 24 of the Kishkinda Kandha depicts how Tara, in her grief, pleads with Rama to kill her with the same arrow which also shows the adoration she had for her husband, despite his defects, thus making her the personification of acceptance as well.

There are some versions that say Tara cursed Rama with the sheer might of her purity, but this is widely refuted, as it is said that Tara receives enlightenment from Rama.

After Vali's death, Tara is treated with utmost respect and care by Sugriva once he marries her, as he knows that she is the reason Vali never killed him. As a young mother and a dowager queen, Tara diplomatically left the resolution of Angad's ascension to the throne to his step-father, knowing fully well that Sugriva was too guilt-ridden to deny her son the throne once he stepped down.

In a world and a story where men were the deciding forces as well as the cause of tumult in her otherwise peaceful life, she still played a largely important role which ensured that Rama had assistance to cross the ocean and reach Lanka.

Tara was the one who cautioned Sugriva to start the search for Sita immediately instead of lounging about before Lakshmana attacked Kishkinda. She, along with Mandodari

and many others, shows that widow remarriage was not a taboo of those times which makes us wonder that if a Panchakanya, a chaste woman, was still considered so after widow remarriage, why it became a stigma later on. Thus, the lives of the Panchakanyas are but balance sheets of the inhumanity women have faced and how they rise above them, defying all odds.

It is evident that all these women were ahead of their time in some way or another, be it their presence of mind or their ability to endure and sacrifice. There are multiple common themes throughout all their stories, including determination, patience, compassion and acceptance.

These characters blatantly flouted the idea of women being quiet and silently suffering individuals, and whether they broke conventions or conformed to them, they left a lasting impact in both their own and others' stories.

The epics also show that laws against discrimination, self-defense and other major topics of debate and discussion in world organizations, like CEDAW, today, were implemented and followed even in their times.

Sita skillfully demonstrates the art of self-dependence coupled with independence as she chooses to be beside Rama, not behind him, when she accompanies him to the forest. This is yet another example of women of those times constantly and repeatedly demonstrating their ability to care of themselves and not depend on a male crutch or any other sort of protector.

Conclusion

Women are fit for so much more than just sacrifice and quiet endurance. They were intellectuals who were never denied education even back then. They were warriors who were not discriminated against on the battlefield and they carried profound wisdom and wit even in those times.

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