Chapter 4

Strīdharma

Strīdharma constitutes an important segment of the brāhmaṇical discourse on dharma. It includes the attributes of a woman and the appropriate code of conduct for her as prescribed by the law-givers. Therefore, its study is pertinent not only to comprehend strīdharma, but also to discern māṇavadharma in its totality, since the former is an index of the latter.

Interestingly, it appears that a woman, unlike a man, has no varṇāśramadharma to follow. Marriage is the only saṁskāra prescribed for her. In fact, she is classified on the grounds of marriage – a girl, a wife, a widow etc. The terms used for women strengthen the above belief that women are referred to as a universal category, irrespective of their varṇa. While it appears that the brāhmaṇical strictures are theoretically meant to apply to all women, the main point of reference would have been women of dvija-varṇas (specially brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya) who would have been deemed necessary for reproduction and perpetuation of the brāhmaṇical order. Although a woman has no varṇāśramadharma to abide by, this does not mean that she has no duty. Rather, she has numerous duties to discharge – as a girl, as a wife, as a mother, as a widow etc. However, the main concern of the law-givers appears to be the duty of woman to man in the husband-wife relationship.

The earliest stage of a woman’s life, i.e. girlhood, is at a discount, so much so that a mother of only daughters is to be abandoned. Altekar has an explanation for this treatment of girls:

In ancient times, in all patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl gradually became an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the

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1 Through marriage she enters gārhashṭrāsma, though Patrick Olivelle disputes this. It is highly unlikely, he says, that married state of a woman would have been regarded in brāhmaṇical tradition as constituting an āśrama. At the most, the wife could be regarded as participating in her husband’s āśrama, just as she participates in other religious actions of her husband. P. Olivelle, The Āśrama, p.186. Similarly, a wife may accompany her husband, if he decides so, to the vānaprastha. However, the primary objective appears to be wifely service and devotion to her husband and not her own spiritual upliftment.

2 Strī, yoṣit, abalā, yoṣa, nārī, śīmāntini, vadhū, pratīpadarśinī, vāmā, vanitā, and mahilā. Amarkoṣa, 2.6.2. Strī – one who bears children; yoṣit – one who is served; abalā – a weak person; yoṣa – one who serves; nārī – a female; śīmāntini – one whose limits are set; vadhū – one who is guided; pratīpadarśinī – one who is a pessimist, vāmā – one who always acts the opposite; vanitā – one who divides; mahilā – a respected lady.

3 At the most it can be said that some women technically enjoyed dvija status through their paternal kin affiliation. But they were not dvijas through their ritual rebirth from Vedic initiation. Manu categorically states that there is no ritual with Vedic verses for women (Manu. 9.18). However, it is emphasized that a dvija should marry a svarṇa virgin from good family. Manu. 3.4-5; V Dh. 8.1-2 G D h. 4.1; Yaj. 1. ApDh. 2.6.13.1-2. A mother’s vārna decides the share of her son in the father’s property.

4 BDh. 2.2.4.6.
daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the family. He perpetuated the name of the father's family... As he grew old, he offered valuable support to his people either to defend itself or attack an enemy. The daughter, on the other hand, had no fighting value. 5

Maria Mies argues that male-ness and femaleness are not biological givens, but rather the result of long historical process. 6 Ann Oakley believes the same. She examines a number of societies in which biology appears to have little or no influence on the role of women. 7

Girlhood is deemed merely as a preparatory stage for wifehood. A survey of frequency of terms used to refer to the female child reinforces this belief. The injunctions favour the term kanyā and kumārī to duhitṛ, putṛ, utmātṛ etc. (which come closer to the word daughter). 8 Kanyā stands for a young virgin and a daughter, kumārī means a girl between the age of ten and twelve, a maiden, and a daughter. 9 It is clear from these terms that the chief concern of the canonists is virginity, youth and the unmarried status in a girl. In other words, the sexual and marital status of a girl is considered more important than her kinship status. There is no detail of a girl’s childhood, she is never visualized as someone who can engage in the pursuit of knowledge like a son. One can assume that a daughter is carefully prepared to appear as a weak, futile, docile, and servile wife i.e. a perfect pativrata, for her success or failure as a wife deeply affects both the paternal and the conjugal families.

6 Maria Mies, cited in Kamla Bhasin, Understanding Gender, Kali for women, Delhi, 2000, p.12.
7 For example, Mbuti pygmies have no specific rules for the division of labour according to gender roles. Men and women hunt together, they share the responsibility of children. Among the Austrian aborigins of Tasmania, women were responsible for seal hunting, fishing etc. Turning to present-day societies, Oakley notes that women form an important part of many armed forces, particularly those of China, Russia, Cuba and Israel. Ann Oakley, cited in M. Haralambos, Sociology: Themes and Perspectives, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, pp.373-374.
8 Ernestine Friedl puts it differently. According to her dangerous tasks are allocated to man because a population can survive the loss of men more easily than that of women. The loss of women will reduce the potential size of population. The loss of men will not necessarily do so, since one man can impregnate many women. cited in M. Haralambos, Sociology, p.377.
10 Monier-Williams, Dictionary, pp.249 and 292.
4.1. Strīdhārma in the Dharmasūtras and the Smṛtis

4.1.1. Strīdhārma of the Girl-Child

The most crucial attribute of a girl is her virginity. However, the onus of its protection does not lie with her since she is deemed weak, vulnerable and incapable to protect it herself, for she is deemed to be malevolent and evil by nature. Severe punishments are prescribed for a man who deflowers a maiden before marriage.\(^\text{10}\) The importance of pre-marital virginity is also revealed by the fact that a girl’s parents are fined if a non-virgin is given as a virgin in marriage.\(^\text{11}\) Conversely, if a woman is falsely accused of not being a virgin the accuser has to pay a fine.\(^\text{12}\) The guardian has not only to guard her virtue but he has also to give her in marriage at a right age. He incurs sin if he fails to do so.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, a girl’s reproductive phase is not only identified, but it must also be utilized to produce its best. The older the age of marriage, the more the valuable period of reproduction is perceived to have been lost. The law-givers are so concerned about the birth of sons that, surprisingly, they permit a girl, who has attained maturity, to choose a suitable husband for herself if the father does not find one for her.\(^\text{14}\) Viśṇu categorically states that a girl is degraded if she starts menstruating while living at her father’s house.\(^\text{15}\) One may argue that the necessity of male power, higher rate of infant mortality, shorter period of a woman’s child-bearing capacity, and the birth of undesirable female children instead of the much-valued sons – all these could have contributed to the dictum of early marriage for a girl. So, there is an emphasis on pre-puberty marriage coupled with an unprecedented right granted to a maiden to dispose herself if her father fails to do so, in an otherwise constraining society for women.

4.1.2. Strīdhārma of the Wife

Marriage is necessary and mandatory for a woman. Manu says that marriage is a girl’s upanyana. Life in her husband’s house is life at the preceptor’s, and serving the husband

\(^{10}\) ApDh. 2.10.26.18-21.
\(^{11}\) Viśṇu. 5.45; Nārada. 2.12.33.
\(^{12}\) Manu. 8.225; Nārada. 2.12.34.
\(^{13}\) BDh. 4.1.12; see also GDh. 18.22; Nārada. 2.12.27; Manu. 9.4; Yāj. 1.64.
\(^{14}\) GDh. 18.20; VDh. 17.67-8; Manu. 9.91; Viśṇu. 24.40; Yāj. 1.64. Although they differ about the period of wait, before she can give herself to a blameless man.
\(^{15}\) Viśṇu. 24.41.
amounts to the study of the Vedas. Marriage is her complete transfer from her natal family to her conjugal family. It ensures and regulates her sexual services for one man, thus establishing the purity of her husband’s lineage. Marriage transforms a girl into a wife – *patni*, *panigrhinī*, *sahadharminī*, *bhāryā*, *jāyā*, *dāra*, *kalantram* etc. The etymology and the change in the frequency of their use indicate a change in the conceptualization of the dharma of a wife. Economically and socially significant terms like *kutumbinī*, *dampati*, *patni* etc., are used less frequently. They are replaced by *bhāryā*, *dāra*, *jāyā* etc., which stress on the essentially dependent and utilitarian status of a wife. With more or less complete withdrawal from economic activities a woman is being considered merely as a reproductive agent rather than as a productive agent. It would be interesting to look at the terms used by the law-givers for wife:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th><em>kutumbini</em></th>
<th><em>dampati</em></th>
<th><em>patni</em></th>
<th><em>jāyā</em></th>
<th><em>bhāryā</em></th>
<th><em>dāra</em></th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gautama</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>nārī</em>-1, <em>yuvaśī</em>-1, otherwise – <em>strī</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Apastamba</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>saśī</em>-1, otherwise – <em>strī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baudhāyana</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>strī</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vasiṣṭha</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>rāma</em>-1, <em>nārī</em>-1, <em>pativrata</em>-1, otherwise – <em>strī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manu</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>yogī</em>-6, <em>śādhi</em>-2, <em>pativrata</em>-2, otherwise – <em>strī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nārada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>nārī</em>-1, <em>yogī</em>-2, otherwise – <em>strī</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: The use of terms denoting wife in some Dharmasastra.

Even though some terms such as *patni* are in use, the meaning has changed from one who was an equally important participant in her husband’s religious activities to one who is merely a legally wedded wife. She has become an adjunct to her husband. She has lost her independence. In fact, she is not even fit for it. Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her son protects her in old age. Although the Dharmasastras do not talk much about a wife’s duties, they do emphasize that a wife is not independent with respect to fulfillment of the sacred law. She should not violate her duties towards her husband. She should restrain her tongue and her

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16 Manu. 2.67.
17 Patni – one who participates in the religious activities of her husband; *panigrhinī* – one whose hands have been taken in marriage ceremony; *sahadharminī* – one who is an equal partner in the dharmic activities; *bhāryā* – one whose responsibility has been accepted by her husband; *jāyā* – through whom the husband is reborn; *kalantram* – one who prevents her husband from sin; *kutumbinī* – one who holds the entire responsibility of family; *dāra* – one who gives pleasure.
19 Bṛdh. 2.2.3.44-5; V Dh. 5.1-2; Manu. 9.3; Viṣṇu. 25.13.
action. However, the Smṛtikaras devote a great deal of literature discussing a wife’s duties. To them strīdharmā is quite essential to wean women from their innately wicked nature. We are told that at the time of creation, the original Manu allocated to women the habit of lying, sitting idle and an indiscriminate love of ornaments, anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct. Uma Chakravarti argues thus:

An interesting facet of women’s innate nature, unlike that of other subordinate groups such as śūdras, was the representation of conflict between the inherent nature of women and their dharma. While the innate nature of the lower varna, that of rendering service to the twice-born, was in harmony with the dharma prescribed for them by the law-givers. Strīsvabhāva, women’s essential nature as sexual beings was in conflict with their strīdharma of fidelity to the husband: their strīsvabhāva was constantly enticing them away from their strīdharma.

Leslie argues that women’s position is more akin to that of half-breed demon priests, whose demonic svabhāva (their maternal heritage) is in direct conflict to the svadharma of brāhmaṇa priests (their paternal heritage). This maternal power had to be ordered and organized by paternal power to serve the emerging socio-economic and political set-up or what is termed as the kaliyuga. Manu provides the do’s and don’ts for a wife, which is to maintain the social order and to establish dharma. He puts it as follows:

A wife should always be cheerful, clever at household affairs; she should keep her utensils well-polished. She should not be extravagant. She should obey the man whom she is married to. She should not violate her vow to him even when he is dead. A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, and is devoid of good qualities. She cannot perform sacrifices nor can she take a vow or fast without her husband. A virtuous wife should never do anything displeasing to the husband, when he is alive or dead, if she longs for her husband’s world after death.

Manu says, “A wife who abandons her own abandons her inferior husband for a superior man and one who is unfaithful to her husband becomes an object of reproach in this world. Such a wife is reborn in the womb of a jackal and is tormented by the diseases born of her evils.” On the other hand, a faithful wife who restrains her mind,

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20 GDrh. 18.1-3.
21 Manu. 9.17.
23 J. Leslie, The Perfect Wife, p.266.
24 Manu. 5.150-156.
25 Manu. 5.163-164.
speech and body reaches her husband’s world after death, and good people call her a
virtuous woman. Such a woman wins the foremost renown in this world and here after.\textsuperscript{26}
If she performs her duty well, she takes on the very same quality that her husband has.\textsuperscript{27}
Manu cites the examples of Aśmālā and Sāraṇī who were pulled up through the
auspicious qualities of their husbands, even though they were of vile birth.\textsuperscript{28}
Interestingly, the wife with no son, who is loyal to her husband, attains heaven just like a
brahma\textsuperscript{cāri}.
In other words, just as a celibate person gains heaven because of his
penances, though he does not beget sons, similarly a loyal wife, even if she does not have
sons, obtains heaven because of her fidelity.

Elsewhere Manu says that women do not care for beauty, age etc. They are
disloyal through their passion for men and their natural heartlessness. They become
infidels, however carefully they may be guarded.\textsuperscript{30} No man can guard women entirely by
force. Manu has some remedies such as women can be kept busy amassing and spending
money, attending to their duties etc. Indeed, a woman who guards herself is well
guarded.\textsuperscript{31} So it is recognized that internalization of socially appropriate behaviour is the
most powerful instrument in perpetuating gender-roles. A woman’s financial dependence
and social isolation creates fear of success psychology, which in turn forces her more
than it does a man, to conform to norms. A husband is asked to guard his wife day and
night since by doing so he preserves the purity of his offspring, his family and himself.\textsuperscript{32}

Nārada and Brahma\textsuperscript{tī appear to depart from their predecessors when they name
their chapters – Duties of Husband and Wife. It is another matter that they end up
discussing mostly a wife’s duties.\textsuperscript{33} According to Brahma\textsuperscript{tī, a wife, who practises her
dharma, preserves her chastity and one who is liberal, goes to heaven even though she
has no son. She is considered half of her husband’s body, equally sharing the results of
good and wicked deeds, whether she ascends his funeral pyre, or chooses to survive after

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30}Manu. 5.164-166.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31}Manu. 9.22.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32}Manu. 9.22-23.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{33}Manu. 9.14-15.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{34}Manu. 9.10-12.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{35}Manu. 9.7.}

Nārada (2.12.92-4) does discuss husband’s duty such as he should banish his wife from town when she
wastes his property, or procures abortion, or makes an attempt on his life. He should quickly expel his
wife from his house if she shows malice towards him or makes an unkind remark, or if she eats before him.
He should not love a barren wife or one who is mother of only daughter or whose conduct is blamable, or
who constantly contradicts him. If he still loves such a woman he becomes liable to censure himself.
A husband can abandon a barren wife in the eighth year, one whose children have died in the tenth, one
who has only daughter in the eleventh. Manu. 9.51. See also, BDh. 2.2.4.6. But the years are ten, fifteen
and twelve, respectively.}
mother, disregarding her other cherished objects seeks the good of the child and undergoes many troubles.\textsuperscript{86} The moving tribute to a mother by her son Chirākari\textquotesingle)':

acquaints us of her duties, as follows:

Due to shelter given by her one feels protected and does not grieve. Age, poverty, misfortunes do not weigh upon him who is protected by his mother. She is cooling and faithful like a shadow. There is no defense like mother; no one is as dear as she is. The child may be able or disabled, weak or robust but she protects him with the same care and love. When the mother dies one feels old, unhappy and the world appears like a desert.\textsuperscript{87}

Her life is one of self-effacement. The brāhmaṇa ideologues seem to believe that motherhood is a natural instinct and a mother would always act for the benefit of her sons. Therefore, they do not talk much about mātrādharma. However, feminists argue that this is a myth. There is no such instinct. There is no innate drive for child-bearing. There are no exclusively female roles, and biological characteristics do not bar women from particular jobs. Betty Rollin argues that nurturing and caring are not biological characteristics of a woman, rather, these are cultural constructs.\textsuperscript{88} In other words, women have the child-bearing equipment but this does not get automatically translated into biological need and desire. Had there been innate drive for bearing children, the enormous cultural pressures that there are to reproduce wouldn’t exist. A woman is under tremendous pressure to have a son. A son is a sign of potency of a man. He attains immortality through his son. Augustine summed up the above idea by saying that he did not see in what way it could be said that woman was to be a help for man, if the work of child-bearing be excluded.\textsuperscript{89} Thus a woman’s worth lies in her bearing sons and in nurturing their emotional and intellectual growth.

4.2.4. \textit{Strīdharma} of the Widow

A son is also her protector in old age when she is no longer a wife, i.e. when her husband is no more. However, it is said that there is no protector like a husband\textsuperscript{90} and, therefore, his death is the worst calamity for her. After the death of her husband, society provides the widow protection through a son and, failing this, through a king.\textsuperscript{91} Yet, she remains unsafe. It is told that men solicit with impunity a woman who has lost her husband, just

\textsuperscript{86}Mbh. 12.7.14.
\textsuperscript{87}Mbh. 12.258.26-9.
\textsuperscript{89}Cited in Mary Daly, “I thank Thee…”, p.161.
\textsuperscript{90}Mbh. 12.144.7.
\textsuperscript{91}Mbh. 12.87.24.
like the birds who seek with avidity a meal that is thrown on the ground.\textsuperscript{92} Being financially dependent, she cannot bring up her children without her husband, nor can she protect them, since she is an \textit{abālā}. Even for Kunfī life was full of problems, though she belonged to royal family.

A widow may remarry, as remaining celibate and loyal to one's dead husband is considered difficult. Mārkanḍeya states that in the \textit{kaliyuga}, even wives of heroes will take protection of an other person in their husband's life-time.\textsuperscript{93} However, a widow's remarriage is certainly not deemed as an ideal. Nala asks Damayāntī, can any woman ever choose a second husband, forsaking her loving and devoted husband?\textsuperscript{94} Bhīṣma says that it is preferable that a virgin widow performs penance throughout life, although some opine that she may unite with her younger brother-in-law by \textit{niyoga}.\textsuperscript{95} This is certainly an indirect pronouncement against widow-remarriage, which must have been considered worse than \textit{niyoga}. A woman who is married twice and those who are born of such marriages are included among those who pollute the \textit{śrāddha} food.\textsuperscript{96}

Such pronouncements are meant to discourage widow-remarriage. The ideal of monogamy for a woman and of life-long loyalty to one man must have dissuaded a woman to remarry. The usual custom of austere living of the widows is denoted by the fact that anything divested of beauty and splendour has been compared to a widow.\textsuperscript{97} A she-pigeon finds no reason to live after her husband's death, for the state of a widow is miserable even if she is the mother of many sons.\textsuperscript{98} Life-long monogamy for a woman means a man's absolute control over her, in life as well as in death.

\textit{Strīdharma}, as discussed above, is the duties of a woman who belongs to the āśvamedha household. The law-givers do not discuss the \textit{dharma} of those who are outside the āśvamedha household, since they are deviants (\textit{parivṛājikās}, \textit{ganiśkās} etc.) and cannot be subject to any law. The ideologues concentrate on that section of women whose conduct is important in strengthening the āśvamedha values. They illustrate \textit{strīsvabhāva} and \textit{strīdharma} in such a manner that it rationalizes the system in which women stand alienated from each of these spheres – the economic, the political and the familial. These segmented worlds have rational man at its centre, pushing women to its

\textsuperscript{92}\textit{Mbh.} 1.146.12.
\textsuperscript{93}\textit{Mbh.} 3.187. \textit{passim}. (P.C. Roy's tr.)
\textsuperscript{94}\textit{Mbh.} 3.74.21.
\textsuperscript{95}\textit{Mbh.} 13.44.50-51.
\textsuperscript{96}\textit{Mbh.} 12.144.2.
\textsuperscript{97}Duryodhana does not wish to enjoy the earth, divested of her jewels, the kṣatriyas, as it is just like a widow. \textit{Mbh.} 9.30.42.
\textsuperscript{98}\textit{Mbh.} 12.144.2.
periphery. The next section would acquaint us with the extent to which women of the epic follow the regulations as laid down by the law-givers. We would also discuss what they achieve by conforming as well as what they lose if they digress.

4.3. *Vyavahāra in the Mahābhārata*

Norms, as discussed in the didactic sections, tell us how women ought to behave. It would be of interest to find out how far the lives of women in the *Mahābhārata* correspond to the idealized tenets mentioned there in. At first, it may appear that woman, being socially, psychologically and financially dependent would more or less conform to the model codes of conduct. But while advocating conformity, the regulations are themselves an admission of the power of the non-conformist women who wreck the edifice of brāhmaṇical dharma as is reflected in the growing fear of the kaliyuga.

**Women within the Brāhmaṇical Society**

4.3.1. *Strīdharma of the Girl-Child*

The birth of a daughter is not an event of elation. A son is indispensable for the continuation of the lineage, ancestor worship, and above all, for the man to attain mokṣa. The daughter is to be given for the happiness and well being of another kula, while the son promotes one’s own kula. Apart from her non-utility, the question of dowry, getting a suitable match for her and more important, to safeguard her virginity adds to the misery of a patriarch. Mātali, a wretched father of a marriageable daughter, laments that undesirable indeed is the birth of a daughter in a great reputed family. She brings disrepute into her parent’s house and also the house where she lives as a bride.99

Despite being considered a source of misery and misfortune, a daughter enhanced the honour of her father by marrying into a noble family. Some daughters saved their fathers from rṣis’ curse by agreeing to marry indignant sages whose anger would engulf the whole family if they were denied. The duties of a girl at her father’s house were mostly limited to preparing herself for grhastrājyā, such as hospitality. As a practical part of her orientation a girl performed this task at her parental home. For instance, Šakuntalā, in the absence of her father Kanva, offered seat, water etc. to Duḥṣanta.100

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99 *Mbh.* 5.95.15-16.
100 *Mbh.* 1.65.5.
Similarly Kuntī served sage Durvāśa who was famous for his short-temper. The daughter of a common man would help her father in his daily works, such as Satyavatī served her father by plying the boat.

Kuntī’s girlhood attested to a girl’s complete dependence upon her father. Her father Vasudeva gave her to his childless cousin and friend, Kuntī Bhoja. In the house of her foster-father she was engaged in the hospitality of guests. Once, sage Durvāśa was pleased by her respectful attention. Doing her duty well, she not only saved her father from a difficult situation but also earned a boon for herself. The sage imparted her a mantra of invocation by which she could compel any god to beget sons upon her. Kuntī was full of curiosity and used the mantra before her marriage. As a result, the Sun god begot Karṇa upon her. Later, the mantra proved to be a boon, but at that stage it did not make her life any easier. Iravati Karve puts it thus:

Her father gave her away to a friend and one life-long sorrow was born of this action. Her adoptive father gave her in marriage to an impotent man, and all the rest of her sorrows were a result of this union.

If Kuntī’s sorrows were rooted in her girlhood, her sister-in-law Gāndhāri’s pain also emanated from there. Gāndhāri’s father Subala was not very enthusiastic when he received the proposal of marriage from Hastināpur, since the groom was blind. However, he gave his beautiful daughter to Dhrṛtarāṣṭra because the Kurus were powerful rulers.

A daughter’s primary duty was to identify her interest with her family and learn to do the same with her conjugal family after marriage. The daughter of a brāhmaṇa at Ekacakra was well acquainted with the aforesaid norm. She argued that:

A son rescues his parents in this and the other world, therefore the learned call him putra. In the absence of a son, the ancestors desire a daughter’s son as a special means of salvation. But without waiting for my son, I myself would rescue you by protecting your lives. There is no doubt that if you escape from danger, your line would be perpetuated. The son is one’s own self, the wife is one’s friend, the daughter, however, is the source of trouble.

The daughter of the brāhmaṇa understood the worthlessness of her life. She wished to save the more precious lives of her parents and her brother by sacrificing her own. She thought that it was her duty to lay down her life for the sake of the rest of the members of her family. Sarmiṣṭha, the daughter of the Asura Chief, Vṛṣaparvan, discharged her putrādharmā by becoming a slave of Devāyani. One day Sarmiṣṭha

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101Mbh. 3.288-289. passim.
102Mbh. 1.57.56.
103Mbh. 3.292.4-5.
104Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.45.
105Mbh. 1.103.9-13.
106Mbh. 1.147.1-18.
ridiculed Devayānī and threw her into a well, but king Yayāti rescued Devayānī. Devayānī wanted her father Śukrācharya, the chief gurus of the Asura, to leave the kingdom. Śukrācharya could stay only if Vṛṣaparvan could appease his daughter. Devayānī put a condition according to which Sārmiśṭhā should become her slave for life. Sārmiśṭhā accepted the condition as she believed that one must, by all means, contribute to the happiness of one’s afflicted relatives. Thus, she stopped the departure of Sukracharya, which would have been a great calamity for the Asuras.

Lopāmudrā’s story somewhat resembles the above story. Agastya had fashioned Lopāmudrā for himself. When he was looking for a match for himself he found no one appropriate to produce progeny in order to overcome the plight of his ancestors. Then he created a woman whose body was matchless, and gave her to the king of Vidarbha in order to keep her safe for himself. When she grew up, the king gave her back to Agastya for fear of his terrible curse. In fact, when the king and the queen were hesitant, Lopāmudrā herself approached them to tell that there was no need to grieve on her account. Similarly king Śaryāti gave his daughter Sukanyā away to the decrepit sage Cyavana because of fear of his anger and curse. Sukanyā did not utter a word of protest and thus a princess became the faithful wife of an old sage.

Mādhavī was another exemplary daughter. Her father Yayāti gave her away to Gālava so that his sons and grandsons would not be destroyed by the curse of a dissatisfied mendicant. Gālava gave her to three other men for producing a son in exchange for horses for his guru. We are informed that after Gālava returned Mādhavī, Yayāti arranged for her svayamvara, but she refused to marry and eventually married the forest. However, Mādhavī’s service role did not end with renunciation. She tried to save her fallen father by giving him half of the merit acquired by her through the performance of severe austerities. From the above it is clear that a daughter was given, or gave herself, to any man if the alliance worked for the benefit of both the families. This attitude of self-sacrifice was not limited to the brahmanical society. Jaratkaru, the sister of Vāsuki, the chief of the serpents, was delighted to hear that she could be the means of saving her brother and his subjects. She married a sage named Jaratkāru,

107 Mbh. 1.75.22.
108 Mbh. 3.94-96. passim.
109 Mbh. 3.121-122. passim
110 Mbh. 5.113.10-14.
111 Mbh. 5.114. passim.
112 Mbh. 5.118.5-6.
113 Mbh. 5.119.24-25.
because it was predicted that the son born of their union could be the saviour of the race of the serpents, which was endangered by Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice.\textsuperscript{114}

Some girls were privileged to choose their life-mates in the \textit{svayamvara}, though this ‘independent’ choice of suitors was practised chiefly among royal maidens.\textsuperscript{115} However, this did not automatically mean that they had a right to exercise their choice. For example, Draupadi’s choice cannot exactly be called her self-choice, as her father had set all conditions of the contest. Sometimes the consequences were even worse. A woman might find herself trapped in the travesty of a \textit{svayamvara}, as is evident from Ambā’s constant suffering. It is well known that Kaśi’s princesses were denied the right of self-choice.\textsuperscript{116} And, if there is still any doubt left, Kṛṣṇa’s statement clarifies it. He said that for a kṣatriya, a \textit{svayamvara} was an accepted form of marriage, but the mind of a woman being uncertain, there was no guarantee whom she might choose there.\textsuperscript{117} Therefore, he advised Arjuna to capture Subhadra by force.\textsuperscript{118} It seems, men could no longer accept this pretence of a woman’s self-choice.

A girl’s important \textit{dharma} was to guard her virginity till she was given in marriage. That virginity was on a premium is evident from the concern of Satyavaṭi and Kunti who did not want their \textit{kanyābhāva} to be tainted.\textsuperscript{119} An uncorrupted virgin who had been properly trained to be a good wife, i.e. one who could adjust herself according to the demand of her circumstances and one who knew the importance of fidelity, was deemed to be an appropriate candidate for a wife.

4.3.2. \textit{Strīdhārma} of the Wife

For a girl, being married was as inevitable as growing up. No girl could remain unmarried if she wanted to go to the heavenly world. There is an interesting story in the \textit{Śalyaparva} of the daughter of Kuṇigarga who had earned great merit through her \textit{tapasyā}. When she grew old and infirm, she decided to give up her life to join heaven. Immediately, Nārada told her that an unmarried woman could not secure heaven, for she was \textit{asaṃskṛta}. She offered to bestow half of her hard-earned merit on whosoever agreed to marry her. She married Śrīgavat for a night and then went to heaven.\textsuperscript{120} So, marital

\textsuperscript{114}Mbh. 1.13-14; 33-34; 43-44. \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{115}Kunti, Śāvatī, Duryodanta, Draupadī etc. married by self-choice.
\textsuperscript{116}Mbh. 1.96. \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{117}Mbh. 1.211.21.
\textsuperscript{118}Mbh. 1.211.23. Manu permits marriage by self-choice but the maiden has to forego her ornaments if she carries them with her, it is to be regarded as a case of theft. \textit{Manu}. 9.92. Such economic deterrence would have discouraged marriage by self-choice.
\textsuperscript{119}Mbh. 1.59.15; 1. App. 1.58.11-12; 1. App. 1.59.17.
\textsuperscript{120}Mbh. 9.51.3-21.
status of a woman not only stood out as the predominant phase of her entire life, but it was also mandatory if she wished to attain heaven.

There were some exceptions to the above rule. Ambā remained celibate, though not by choice. Bhṣima’s action was responsible for her unmarried status. In her next birth, she took her revenge on him in the form of Śīkaṇḍā, and she became instrumental in Bhūṣma’s death. A celibate daughter of Śāṇḍilya attained heaven due to the performance of austerities, which were considered impossible for a woman.\(^\text{121}\) It was implied that she was an exception, and exceptions prove the rule. Another example was Sulabhā. In reply to his question, Sulabhā told King Janaka that she did not get married because she could not find a suitable match.\(^\text{122}\) But Sulabhā was just a maverick and nothing more. Her brahmacarya did not empower her with any authority, while a brahmacārī male was deemed as a repository of immense power. He acquired moral authority, and even gods feared his extraordinary strength. A brahmacārīṇī, on the other hand, was considered to be a failure, a reject, a poor and pitiable creature doomed to invisibility and celibacy. Her aloneness was the living proof of her inability to be a fruitful woman.

For a woman, being married was not enough. She must constantly prove herself to be a pativratā. Shalini Shah elucidates:

> What pativratā symbolizes so well is really the ‘service-role’ of women. Indeed, pativratā dharma is meant to provide the ideology to school women in this role. It was an ingenious ideology, which eschewed the necessity of applying physical coercion over women in an oppressive patriarchal household, which would have been more difficult to establish and maintain. Instead, this ideology was used to elicit conformity with the oppressive norms on a psychological plane.\(^\text{123}\)

The impact of psychological pressure can be observed in the case of Gāndhārī. She was married to a disabled man chosen by her father. Then, she denied herself the privilege to see, for it was not fitting that a wife should possess anything more than her husband. She was a chaste wife who never, even by words, referred to men other than her husband. Though she disagreed with Dhṛtarāṣṭra on many occasions, she never made it public. She stood by her husband till her last breath.

Just like Gāndhārī, Kuntī too was married to a disabled man.\(^\text{124}\) We do not know of the privileges she enjoyed as the queen of Hastināpura. She followed her husband when Pandu retired into the forest after being cursed by a sage that union with a woman

\(^\text{121}\)Mbh. 9.53.6-8.
\(^\text{122}\)Mbh.12.308.64-65 and 184-185.
\(^\text{123}\)S. Shah, \textit{The Making}, pp.82-83.
\(^\text{124}\)Kunti selected Pandu as her groom in her syamvara. Mbh. 1.105.2.
would prove fatal for him. Kuntī zealously guarded the activities of Pāṇḍu, since she knew the importance of a husband even though he was disabled.

Pāṇḍu was afflicted because he could not procreate sons. Therefore, he could not pay back his pitṛraṇa. He commanded Kuntī to raise sons through some person who was either equal or superior to him. He referred to various authorities and cited many examples to convince Kuntī that there was nothing illegal about such a practice, if it was practised at the command of the husband. Initially Kuntī resented this but later consented to it. However, she suggested a different method – the use of a mantra through which she could force any god to beget son upon her. After all, it did not matter whether the act was sinful or not, it was the duty of a wife to do what her husband bid her to do. Kuntī survived her husband and kept promoting his interest by remaining celibate and by rearing his children.

Kuntī’s co-wife, Mādhī, proved herself a pativrata by ascending the funeral pyre with Pāṇḍu. Although she came from a different society, she had internalized the norms of an ideal wife well. She argued that she was duty-bound to satiate her husband in heaven because Pāṇḍu died unsatiated while desiring to have union with her. Stripped of her individual existence, and reduced to a mere glorified appendage of her husband, a pativrata lost her very raison d’être if her lord died. Moreover, the onus to make the husband-wife relationship an immortal one was on a woman, and she gained immortality by sacrificing her life for it.

A pativrata’s complete identification with her husband has been restated through the legend of Nala and Damayanti. Damayanti’s was a love marriage. She chose Nala from among mortal and celestial beings in her svayamvara. She cheerfully accompanied Nala into the forest after he had gambled away everything he owned, including his clothes. He left her sleeping in the forest at night, taking away half of the only garment she possessed to cover his own nakedness; Damayanti did not utter a single word of reproach as she wandered through the forest searching for him. At the end, she got him back through her ingenuity, love, loyalty and composure. The moral of the story is, whether treated well or ill, a wife should never indulge in ire.

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125 Mbh. 1.105.5. The critical edition text informs us that Mādhī was parikṣeta i.e. she was bought by paying huge amount of money. P.C. Roy’s translation supplies us with details. Bhīṣma paid bride-price for her (which included gold, precious stone, ornaments, gems, pearls, corals, elephants, horses, etc.) on the demand of Mādhī’s brother in keeping with social practice of Madra. Mbh. 1.113. p.233. (P.C. Roy’s tr.). Such a practice was non-existent in the brāhmanical society.

126 Mbh. 1.116.25-30.

127 Mbh. 3.50-78. passim.
Exclusive devotion to one’s husband was the pre-requisite for all *pativrataś*. Chastity had gained so much importance that a wife was advised not to wait in solitude even on her grown-up sons.¹²⁸ She must completely surrender herself to the service of her lord. For example, Lopāmudrā married Agastya only to be ordered to throw away her finery and retire with him to the forest to practise austerities.¹²⁹ Once she proved that she was equal to him in asceticism, he approached her to have offspring. But Lopāmudrā agreed to have a child only if Agastya gave her all the wealth and comforts that she had been accustomed to as a princess. Agastya got the wealth from the Asura kingdom of Ilvala, and in course of time, their son Dr̥dhasyu was born. Lourie J. Patlon interprets the story as follows:

First, Lopāmudrā is the ṛṣi’s creation, made for the service of freeing his ancestors, by bearing a progeny… Although Lopāmudrā acts as a negotiator, this is not an expression of her own sexual desire. In her demands, she sets up the contrast between the king and the sage, testing Agastya to see if he can match the wealth of a kṣatriya… Thus through this cardboard cutout Lopāmudrā, Agastya not only creates progeny, but he also garners wealth like the best of kings. He does this not through the polluted means used by kings, but through his vision and guile, as a brahmana would.¹³⁰

Lopāmudrā was just an instrument through whom Agastya’s ancestors were freed and he himself attained name, fame, wealth, and mokṣa. Similarly, Sukanyā’s devotion to her decrepit husband Cyvana pleased the Aśvins so much that they transformed Cyvana into a handsome youth.¹³¹ Śaṅdili earned a place in heaven not because of any austere penances, but through her single-minded devotion to her husband.¹³²

Such was the power of a *pativrataś* that Śavitrī could actually bring her dead husband back to life. Śavitrī, in spite of the knowledge that her chosen husband was fated to die within a year, insisted on marrying him. She renounced all her luxuries of palace and joined him in his poverty. At the end of the year, Śavitrī followed Yama when he took away her husband. Yama, pleased with her devotion granted her any boon except the life of her husband. She requested Yama to enable her to be the mother of sons. Yama happily granted her that boon. But by doing so he fell in a trap. How could a virtuous wife obtain sons without her husband.¹³³ By means of her tenacity, wisdom, and wifely devotion, she brought her husband back to life and attained immortal fame for

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¹²⁸ *Mbh.* 3.223.10.
¹²⁹ *Mbh.* 3.94 -95.*passim.*
¹³¹ *Mbh.* 3.123.*passim.*
¹³³ *Mbh.* 3.277-283.*passim.*
herself. Thus, fidelity was proved to be so effective that it could triumph even over death.

All the glorification of a *pativrata* was in fact symbolic of a patriarchal society where women were perceived to be completely dependent upon men. Gerda Lerner aptly puts it thus:

Men and women live on a stage, on which they act out their assigned roles, equal in importance. The play cannot go on without both kinds of performers. Neither of them “contributes” more or less to the whole, neither is marginal or dispensable. But the stage is conceived, painted, and defined by men. Men have written the play, have directed the show, and interpreted the meaning of action. They have assigned themselves the most interesting, most heroic parts, giving women the supporting roles.\(^\text{134}\)

A woman must “do” femininity in a patriarchal society in which men are more valued than women; being a woman means being subordinate. Femininity requires women to be passive, quiet, selfless and subordinate creatures. They are conditioned to accept their own deprivation as ‘natural’. Men controlled both their productivity and reproductivity. The former ensured men’s complete control over the economy and the latter established the purity of their lineage and *varṇa*. It also prevented *varṇasaṁkara* and the resulting chaos – a characteristic of the *kaliyuga*. A man did not lose his command over his wife even after his death. She served him by bearing a son through *niyoga*, if he died sonless, so that he attained *mokṣa*. Even when *niyoga* was discouraged, a wife was expected to remain loyal to her dead husband by observing celibacy.\(^\text{135}\)

However, even for an ideal wife, it was difficult to be always docile and agreeable specially when her husband was wrong. Śakuntalā, who emerged as a chaste wife, admonished Duḥṣanta when he failed to identify her in his court. She did not keep quiet when Duḥṣanta abused her parents. In her own words:

Knowing everything, do not behave O King! like an inferior person who knows nothing. Do not degrade yourself. Don’t talk like a thief and a robber. I am your wife and therefore, I deserve to be treated respectfully. If you refuse to do so, your head would burst into a hundred pieces. The wife is a man’s half, the first of friends, and the root of *dharma, artha, kāma* and *mokṣa*.\(^\text{136}\)

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\(^{134}\) Gerda Lerner, cited in Kamla Bhasin, *What is Patriarchy*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 2000, p.15.

\(^{135}\) Ancestor worship, fulfilment of *dharma*, and the transfer of private property depend not upon any kind of son but on a biological son, better known as *aurasa* son. An *aurasa* son is begotten by a man on his savarna wife, married to him according to the dharmaic rites. *Manu* and others argue that since a woman is inherently insatiable, there is a fear of suppositious sons, whose introduction would corrupt the bloodline. In the *Mahābhārata* it is told that a man can never be sure of the paternity of the child, for only the mother would know the child’s biological father. *Mbh.* 12.258.33.

\(^{136}\) *Mbh.* 1.68.16-71 and 1.69.1-27.
Romila Thapar argues that the delineation of Śakuntalā marks a counterpoint to the notion of pativrata, which is referred to in the didactic sections. She says:

Such a depiction of Śakuntalā might underline her independence and, to that extent, a distancing from the king. Her attitude is not that of a submissive subject. She is a woman from a different society who sees herself as equal in status to the man. This is a characteristic of the society of the forest dwellers whose egalitarianism would be more evident than that of Hastināpur. She can confidently go back to her dwelling in the forest and leave Duṣṣanta to come to terms with the boy.¹³⁷

Undoubtedly, Śakuntalā of the Mahābhārata appears to be somewhat different from the self-effacing wife of Kālidāsa’s drama. She questioned her husband when he repudiates her self-respect, identity and paternity. Nevertheless, she seems to be well aware of the ideals of a pativrata when she emphasizes that a wife is the root of all the purusārthas. Her self-confidence might be a result of her motherhood, because society empowered a mother as compared to a wife. Some of Śakuntalā’s traits, if not all, can be found in Draupadī. However, there was a difference between the two, i.e. while Śakuntalā was ready to return to the forest, Draupadī never ever thought of leaving the Pāṇḍavas, perhaps, because the brāhmanical society did not allow Draupadī to go any where, even though she was in touch with her natal family. Both Śakuntalā and Draupadī derived their strength from their respective natal families. Complete alienation of women from their own family helped the patriarchal social set up to subjugate women, as they had no one to turn to for help at the time of crisis. Thus, while for men, marriage meant extended alliance, for women, marriage meant losing whatever foothold she had before her marriage. Patrilocality broke women’s solidarity, which made it easier for men to coerce them to their will.

Even though Draupadī’s parental family was constantly helping her conjugal family, her condition was not very different from other women in the epic. To begin with, the Svayāṁvara was hers; her father laid down the rules. Then five husbands were thrust upon her accidentally. Despite this, she carried her responsibilities very well. In various trying circumstances, it was her steadfast devotion to her husbands that not only strengthened them but also saw them through trials. She brought solace to them by asking Dhṛtarāṣṭra to free them and return their kingdom.¹³⁸ She accompanied them everywhere. In return for her devotion, she faced the ignominy of being dragged into the court where incredible insults were heaped upon her. Karna and others repudiated her dignity. Jayadratha and Kīcaka also humiliated her. In such an hour of peril, she

¹³⁷Romila Thapar, Śakuntalā, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1990, p.39.
¹³⁸Mbh. 2.63.28-36.
lamented on the lack of freedom from grief because she had Yudhishthira for her husband.\textsuperscript{139} Should one doubt her integrity, when she questions her husband’s inability to protect her? Her reverence for Yudhishthira did not stop her to castigating and asking him to act like a true kṣatriya, both in spirit and action. She sharply criticized his passion for the game of dice and his obsession with dharma. She held him responsible for the humiliation of his family.

However, her exhortations to him did not make her a deviant wife. One may recall here, she confided in Satyabhāmā that she never went against her husbands. For then, although kind and loving, they would react like serpents. Her fidelity and love for them was so strong that she never desired any one else, not even gods and Gandharvas. She avoided what they avoided and never incurred their displeasure by keeping company with bad women, by staying at the gate of the house, or in a concealed place or in the garden. When her husbands were away, she did not adorn herself. When they returned, she washed their feet and looked to their comfort. She took her bath and food after serving them.\textsuperscript{140} Despite being such a good wife, she fell short of the difficult expectation, i.e. to love all her husbands equally. She loved all of them dearly, but not equally. Yudhishthira pointed this out to her. He claimed that because of her subtle preference for Arjuna, she had failed in her bid to reach heaven alive.\textsuperscript{141} Iravati Karve sums up Draupadi’s agony thus:

Draupadi’s troubles are human, brought by the people of this world and, particularly by her own husbands. In almost every episode, insult is piled upon insult, constantly adding fuel to the hatred in her heart. Two words keep recurring in reference to Draupadi – nāthavati anāthavat (having husbands, but like a widow). She is the wife of five but bereft, the daughter of a rich house but like an orphan, she has brave allies but she is alone. Every time she is dishonoured, her husbands stand watching in silence. They have to; they are powerless. Only twice is she saved, once by a divine miracle, another time secretly by Bhīma.\textsuperscript{142}

Draupāḍi faced torment, insult, mental and emotional dilemma. In the words of Pratibha Ray:

On account of her outstanding chastity, Yajñaseni remains one of the five satīs. But on account of having accepted five husbands, she is abused again and again by the Kaurvas and Karna as a harlot, enjoyed by men. She is an unfailing companion of the Pāṇḍavas in their joys and sorrow. She faces a series of griefs, but her self-confidence never fades... But ultimately, she is deprived to attain heaven. Alone in a helpless condition, she is forced to give up her life.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{139}Mbh. 4.17.1.  
\textsuperscript{140}Mbh. 3.222.18-57.  
\textsuperscript{141}Mbh. 17.2.6.  
\textsuperscript{142}Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.91.  
\textsuperscript{143}Pratibha Ray, Yajñaseni, Rupa and Co., Delhi, 1995, p.400.
him leading a virtuous life and promoting the welfare of her dead husband. Brhaspati maintains that the wife is declared to be a *pativrata* if she is afflicted when her husband is afflicted, pleased when he is happy, mournful when he is away and if she dies when he dies.\(^{34}\) Viṣṇu asks a wife not to decorate herself while her husband is away. He also agrees that the only means of her obtaining heaven is obedience to her lord. A good wife, who preserves her chastity after her lord’s death, will go to heaven.\(^{35}\) Fidelity and chastity have gained so much importance that a woman gains or loses heaven almost on that basis alone.

While Manu censures remarriage of women in any circumstances, Nārada permits it on five grounds, which are - when her husband is lost, dead, has become an ascetic, is impotent or is expelled from his *varṇa*.\(^{36}\) Vasiṣṭha asks a woman to wait for her husband before remarriage. The period of wait depends upon her *varṇa* and her status as a mother as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brāhmaṇa</th>
<th>Kaśtriya</th>
<th>Vaiśya</th>
<th>Śūdra</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A woman with children</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A woman without children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
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Figure 2: The period of wait for a wife, when her husband deserts her, before she can marry again.\(^{37}\)

Thus conjugal roles are asymmetrical. *Dharma* of a wife is radically different from that of her husband. She is required to redefine and reshape herself to suit the requirements of her husband. Her movement is restricted within the four walls.\(^{38}\) Her activities are centred on making her husband’s life comfortable. Her helplessness and dependence on her husband reinforce her subordination. Even a minor digression from the prescribed norms invites severe punishment.\(^{39}\) Interestingly, Vasiṣṭha suggests that a

\(^{34}\)Brhaspati. 24.8-11.

\(^{35}\)Viṣṇu. 25.17.

\(^{36}\)Nārada. 2.12.97.

\(^{37}\)V Dh. 17.78. Manu ordains a wife to wait for eight years if the husband has gone on duty, six years for learning and fame, and three years if he has gone for pleasure. *Manu*. 9.75-76. Next Manu adds that, a husband should wait for one year for a wife who hates him and after a year he should not live with her. *Manu*. 9.77.

See also *Nārada*. 2.12.98-102. According to Nārada the period of wait depends upon *varṇa* of a woman, purpose of husband’s absence and on the status of a woman’s motherhood.

\(^{38}\)With the strict separation of the private and public domain, the former lost all economic and political significance and became less and less important. Since women remained in economically insignificant households, they lost their value and centrality. Men’s work came to be regarded as more important. As the distance between the two spheres kept increasing, patriarchy became more powerful. Women were expected to provide a heaven for men at home, and if they failed in their duty they were repudiated and could be easily replaced. For example, Manu states that a woman who drinks wine, behaves dishonestly, or is rebellious, ill, violent or extravagant may be superseded at any time. *Manu*. 9.80.

\(^{39}\)BDh. 2.2.3.48; Viṣṇu. 53.8; V Dh. 21.6-13.
wife tainted by adultery need not be abandoned. Her husband should wait until her cycle, for she is purified by it. Even after committing adultery with a sudra man, a dvija wife gets purified if no child is born of the coupling. Such passages reflect that the primary concern of the canonists is the maintenance of purity of lineage. That is why the varṇa of the guilty also regulates the punishment for committing adultery. Punishment is more severe if the woman is a dvija and the man is a śūdra. The lower the varṇa of the male offender, the more severe is the punishment for both the parties.

4.1.3. Strīdharma of the Mother

A wife, in order to be an ideal wife, must bear sons. She is of no good if she is barren or if she is mother of only daughters. The birth of a son is deemed necessary, for it is through him that a father attains immortality. A son keeps the lineage alive and enhances his father’s glory through his own accomplishments. However, we notice that while the most common identity envisaged for a woman is wifehood that includes motherhood, the notion of motherhood is less central than wifehood in the Dharmaśāstras. There could be various factors behind such an approach. The law-givers would have found motherhood to be an unregulated area. An asexual mother is no longer the dangerous sexual being whose activities must be regulated. Moreover, since a woman belongs to the private domain, she plays no major role in her son’s important activities, such as the rites of passage. However, her contributions are not totally overlooked. This can be discerned only from her eulogies, such as:

A man has three atri-gurus – his father, his mother and his spiritual teacher.
The teacher is more important than ten instructors, and a father is more important than a hundred teachers, but a mother is more important than a thousand fathers.
The trouble that a father and mother endure in giving birth to a son cannot be redeemed even in hundred years. He should constantly please them.

46 Vīdh. 21.12 and 28.2-4. See also Bīdh. 2.2.4.4. It is not to say that an adulterous wife goes scot free. Vasiṣṭha (5.3) lists horrific punishments for the guilty man and woman. Brhaspati (23.16) ordains that if a wife herself initiates an adulterous relationship; her ears, nose, lips should be cut off, then she should be publicly paraded, and finally drowned or devoured by dogs. See also Manu. 8.371-2. Yājñavalkya (3.268) categorically says that expiation involved in killing such a woman requires only donaton of leather bag, a bow, a goat, or a sheep (in order of varṇa) for purification. Nārada (2.15.12-3) declares that physical assault in such cases is no crime.
47 Vīdh. 21.16-17; Viṣṇu. 5.40-43; Vaj. 2.28; Nārada. 2.12.70-77; Brhaspati. 23.12.

The chastity of a bride, throughout primitive cultures, is not regarded as a virtue in the disposition of the young woman herself. Its merit is ascribed entirely to her parents and in particular to her mother. R. Briffault, _The Mothers_, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1969, Vol.3, p.344. Probably mother, in ancient India, was credited with the same, though there is no explicit reference to it. However, one may speculate that a mother was the most important guide and teacher of her daughter.
48 Vīdh. 13.48. See also Manu. 2.145; Vīḍī. 1.34-35.
49 Manu. 2.227-228.
To clarify the matter further:

A son must constantly serve his mother even if she is a fallen woman, since she undertakes numerous pains for him.  

An outcast father may be forsaken, but not the mother; she is never an outcast for her son.

The foregoing statements make it clear that a mother is to be always revered. Conversely, some statements, such as through devotion to his mother a son gains this world, with devotion to his father he gains heaven, clearly bring out the disparity between the social status of both the parents. Sukumari Bhattacharji maintains that:

The mother receded to the background immediately after she attained motherhood, at least, until the next delivery. She could offer worship, could observe vows for the health, longevity and well being of her children. She could give up certain delicious articles of food and drink. But apart from such negative and apparently passive gestures, her role as a mother does not draw our attention in the religious texts. So as the lady of the house, she supervised, cooked, took care of her children's nourishment, clothes and other needs. In sickness, she rather than the father nurtured them and attended to their comforts. But this is conjectural, because the scriptures are silent.

It seems that motherhood is taken as an instinctive role, i.e. it is either natural to her, or she is a failure as a woman. However, one wonders that the enormous cultural pressures that there are to reproduce and nurture would exist if these were instinctive. But once a son is born the father introduces and guides him to the public domain as the mother belongs to the unrecognized private, domestic domain. The eulogies described above appear to be in praise of the idea of motherhood rather than of the mother, who is a woman.

4.1.4. *Strīdharme* of the Widow

Unlike *mārgdharme*, the duties of widow are amply discussed by the canonists. Generally, when they speak about a widow they appear to refer to a young and childless widow. A widow is expected to serve the family of her dead husband in two ways. If she is sonless, she can bear sons through *niyoga* only when she is appointed to do so. Else, she can enhance the honour of the family by practicing chastity.

Immediately after the death of her husband, a widow (presumably childless) is advised to sleep on the ground for six months, practise religious vows and abstain from spicy food and salts. At the end of this period, she should bathe and offer funeral

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46 *ApDh*. 1.10.28.10; See also *Bdh*. 2.2.3.40-42.
47 *VDh*. 13.47. However, Apastamba is of the opinion that a son shall not communicate with his mother if she is an outcast. *ApDh*. 1.10.28.9.
48 *Manu*. 2.233. See also *Viṣṇu*. 31.10.
obliteration to her dead husband. After this she may practice niyoga if she is appointed by her dead husband’s male relatives to bear a son.\(^{50}\) Her younger brother-in-law, or in his absence a sapinda, is deputed to father a son.\(^{51}\) However, a widow who is unchaste, diseased, old, sick\(^{52}\) and who is unwilling cannot be appointed. When appointed, she can be approached only at the proper muhurta (fertile seasons). Niyoga is to continue till she conceives.\(^{53}\) To do otherwise would be evil. Gautama\(^{54}\) allows two sons through this practice, while Manu\(^{55}\) restricts the number to one. In case the widow decides to go ahead for niyoga without being appointed, her son cannot inherit the name and property of the dead husband and the son belongs to the begetter.\(^{56}\) In this manner, a woman must discharge her duty for the benefit of her dead husband and of his lineage. The emphasis is on continuation of the lineage. Although a widow is a very important party to the practice of niyoga, her desires are not taken into account. Moreover, it is taken care that the practice is used only for the sake of procreation and that neither any emotional nor any other long-lasting relationship occurs as a result of it.

Although the importance of niyoga is accepted, there is an increasing disapproval of both niyoga and remarriage of widows.\(^{57}\) Manu writes that:

> The appointment of widow is never sanctioned in the Vedic verse about marriage, nor is remarriage of widow mentioned in the rules. Therefore, twice-born men should never appoint a widow to have a child with another man, for when they do so they destroy the eternal dharma.\(^{58}\)

Bṛhaspati says that previously a widow could bear a son. But on account of the successive deterioration of the four ages of the world, mortals must not practise it in the present age, i.e. the kaliyuga.\(^{59}\) Visnu goes a step further when he states that neither niyoga nor remarriage are available to the widow. She should preserve her chastity or ascend the funeral pyre after her husband.\(^{60}\) Merely the birth of a son is no longer considered sufficient for attaining mokṣa, especially at the risk of his varṇa and lineage.

\(^{50}\)VDr. 17.55-56. See also GDh. 18.5.
\(^{51}\)BDh. 2.2.4.9; GDh. 18.4; Manu. 9.190; Yāj. 1.68-9; see also VDr. 17.57-60.
\(^{52}\)BDh. 2.2.4.10.
\(^{53}\)VDhr. 17.61. See also Manu. 9.60; Nārada. 2.12.79-80.
\(^{54}\)GDh. 18.8.
\(^{55}\)Manu. 9.191.
\(^{56}\)VDhr. 17.63. See also GDh. 18.9-12; Manu. 9.143.
\(^{57}\)The Dharmasūtras appear to be acquainted with remarriage of widow as they refer to the term punarbhū. Manu describes punarbhū as one who marries after being deserted by her husband or after his death. If she is a virgin she can go through transformative ritual of marriage with her husband. Manu. 9.175-6. See also VDr. 17.19-20. Yājñavalkya (1.67) permits widow-remarriage but according to him it is not a sacrament.\(^{58}\)Manu. 9.64-65.
\(^{59}\)Bṛhaspati. 24.12-14.
\(^{60}\)Viṣṇu. 25.14-17.
If spiritual benefit is to accrue to a man and his family through a son, it is deemed essential that the son fulfils the criterion of varṇa and lineage. However, if a widow is allowed to remarry or to practise niyoga, miscegenation and introduction of supposititious children into the lineage is a distinct threatening possibility. Therefore, both the customs—niyoga and widow remarriage—are regarded as highly reprehensible customs in the kaliyuga. Manu categorically states that no legal progeny is begotten by another man, or on another’s wife; nor is a second husband prescribed for her.\textsuperscript{61} It is evident that gradually the concept of uncorrupted varṇa setup and patriarchal control over women gains precedence over the desire of the much-valued male-child. This finds expression in the doctrine of pativrata. Even a child widow is promised heaven if she leads a pious and virtuous life.\textsuperscript{62} Chastity gains so much importance that the king is enjoined to punish and humiliate an adulteress, by getting her head shaved, placing her naked on a donkey, and parading her along the highway. She becomes pure after this punishment.\textsuperscript{63}

Apart from the above-mentioned categories there are others, such as parivrajaśikās, gaṇikās, apsarās etc. They are none of the brāhmaṇa law-givers’ concern. Either they are above all codes of conduct meant for human beings because they are heavenly or they have stooped too low to be the subject of dharma, or they are deviants to whom the law is not important. Therefore, the brāhmaṇa ideologues concentrate on those women, who would perpetuate and transmit the values of the varṇa-based society.

4.2. Strīdharma in the Didactic sections of the Mahābhārata

The epic does not enumerate strīdharma under a stereotypical framework of normative segments. The subject is mostly discussed through auxiliary legends and stories. Before we dwell on the duties of women, it would be interesting to learn the purpose of creation of women. Bhīṣma recounts:

Initially, as it had been heard, all human beings were righteous, and in course of natural progress and improvement, they attained the status of deities. This alarmed the deities. They assembled together and went to Brahman. Brahman created a new set of women and bestowed upon them the carnal pleasure and desire of enjoyment. These newly created women were sinful, they had no duties to perform, had no scriptures to follow, and they were living lies. Brahman bestowed beds, seats, ornaments, food, desire, unrighteousness, and derision upon them. Men were quite unable to restrain them within bounds. What to talk

\textsuperscript{61}Manu, 5.162.
\textsuperscript{62}Manu, 5.159-160.
\textsuperscript{63}V Dh. 21.1-2. See also Nārada, 2.12.117. Nārada says that the king must watch that there be no mixture of varṇas.
about men, if the creator himself was incapable of restraining them within bounds.\textsuperscript{64}

Thus legend had it that in days gone by; both men and women were virtuous. Their unblemished conduct and subsequent claim to divinity compelled Brahman to spread vices among them in order to secure heaven only for gods. He chose women as his instrument to stop mortals from attaining divine status.\textsuperscript{65} A woman is blazing fire, an illusion created by the daitya Māyā. She is poison, a snake; and in fact she is all the vices united together.\textsuperscript{66} Yudhiṣṭhira agrees with Bhīma that women are always busy deceiving men. He says that it appears Brhaspati and the others evolved daṇḍarūti through their observation of women.\textsuperscript{67} What else can be a better proof of the above belief than Pañcācūḍā’s opinion. Pañcācūḍā is an \textit{apsarā}. At first she declines to speak about women, for how can she speak ill of those belonging to her own sex. But Nārada persuades her to speak the truth. She consents and speaks as follows:

Verily women are the roots of all faults. God created women with all kinds of vices. They are the worst possible sinners. They are falsehood incarnate. They have no knowledge of the \textit{sūtras}, and they have no control over their senses. They are always obsessed with worldly pleasures. They are ever prepared to disregard their husbands even if they are handsome, agreeable, respected and wealthy. They never consider the age and looks of a man while bestowing favour. They remain within restraints prescribed for them, because of fear of relatives, death and imprisonment. They are never satiated with men. They cannot be kept in obedience by affection because their nature is unintelligible.\textsuperscript{68}

The description of \textit{strīsvabhava} by an \textit{apsarā} gives credentials to degraded women who are inherently fickle, greedy, unrighteous, wicked etc. Women and \textit{sūdras}, both were treated as life-long slaves. R.S. Sharma opines that women and \textit{sūdras} constituted the most condemned section of society. It seems to be a common feature of the ancient class-divided societies which were generally based on the domination of man over woman, and of priests and warriors over the small traders and the producing masses.\textsuperscript{69}

If a woman is inherently wicked, as she is traditionally supposed to be, then how can she possibly have any interest in internalizing what the theologians are at such pains

\textsuperscript{64}Mbh. 13.40.7-13.
\textsuperscript{65}In western societies also, Eve is blamed for destroying man. Mary Daly quotes Church fathers of early centuries of Christian era. Interestingly they considered to be typically feminine include fickleness, shallowness, garrulousness, weakness, slowness of understanding, and instability of mind. Mary Daly, “I Thank Thee, Lord, That Thou Has Not Created Me a Woman” in Evelyn Aston-Jones and Gary A. Olson (eds.), \textit{The Gender Reader}, Allyn and Bacon, Massachusetts, 1991, p.161.
\textsuperscript{66}Mbh. 13.40.4.
\textsuperscript{67}Mbh. 13.39.7.
\textsuperscript{68}Mbh. 13.38.11-30.
to teach them? The programme to make her a socially amicable being has been made laid
down carefully by the theologians. A Girlhood of strict seclusion and of minimal or no
education followed by an early marriage prepares her for the life of mindless
subordination. Norms and values are inculcated in such a way that a woman’s overall
inferiority appears to be ‘natural’.

4.2.1. Strīdharma of the Girl-Child

The importance given to the ideal of pativrata makes it evident that from
childhood a girl is trained to be a perfect wife. It is not clear whether the daughters of the
rich and royal families are educated in the famous sixty-four arts. The only notable
example is Uttarā, who learnt dance – one of the sixty-four arts. However, a woman
trained in these arts must have run an artistic, comfortable and happy home. One can
speculate that formal education, as it required hard work, leisure from domestic duties
and expense, would have been restricted to the privileged few. Kuni’s admonitions to
her sons, Gāndhārī’s wise counsels and Draupadi’s arguments suggest that princesses
were fairly well educated.

Virginity is the most important virtue of a girl before marriage. It is considered
so important that deflowering of maidens is linked with the king being unrighteous.
Primarily, it is the duty of a father to guard his daughter’s virtue. However, the maiden
who spoils her virginity incurs three-fourth sin of brahmicide; while the man who knows
her incurs a fourth part of the same sin. Unlike celibacy in males, which symbolizes
his self-control, virginity of a maiden implies control over her behaviour by her kinsmen.
Loss of it is, therefore, a loss of honour for them. Dexter puts forward the idea that
virginity has a significant function within a “male-centred society”. It is treated as a
stage, which renders woman a “store house” of untapped energy, which she will transmit
to man in the next stage.

4.2.2. Strīdharma of the Wife

The next stage is the stage of wifehood. The girl is indoctrinated into her gender-role.
She internalizes behaviour, attitudes, roles, responsibilities and expectations. She learns
social instincts at the cost of her individuality; the latter has no value for an ideal

70 We are informed that the salve-girls of the king are well-versed in the sixty-four elegant arts. Mbh. 2.54.
fn.13.
71 Mbh. 12.91.37-38.
72 Mbh. 13.46.13.
73 Mbh. 12.159.40.
74 Dexter, cited in S. Shah, The Making of Womanhood: Gender Relations in the Mahābhārata, Manohar,
New Delhi, 1995, pp.63-64.
pativrata. Equipped with all merits, she enters into marriage – her only saṁskāra. In fact, her duties begin with marriage and her mokṣa depends entirely upon her success as a wife. Parvati, a renowned sati, enumerates how a wife should behave, as follows:

There is no god for a woman but her husband. She attains heaven by serving him. She must be kind even to an unkind and irate husband. She should respect and serve her parents-in-law. She must not cast eyes even upon a tree bearing her husband’s name. A good wife should decorate her house, supervise the cooking, feed members of family, guests, and servants. She should look after the welfare of the family and be kind to the brāhmaṇas. She must be righteous, contented, good-natured, charming, disciplined in her habits, and faithful to her husband. She should perform religious rites like agnihoṭra and vrata for the welfare of her husband.75

Mārkandeya tells the duties and the power of a pativrata through a legend. A pativrata housewife gave precedence to her husband while the brahmana Kauśika was waiting for alms. The brahmana got angry at her indifference. The lady gave him a good harangue as to the duties and ideals of a good wife. She challenged him that she was not the she-crane, whom he had burnt alive by his gaze because she had disturbed him during his tapasyā.76 The moral of the story is that the knowledge and the power of a pativrata may exceed that of a brāhmaṇa. Bhīṣma explains that fidelity to the husband, ability to forgive absence of guile and piety, and truthfulness are the best of feminine virtues. Lākṣmī favours those women who possess these qualities. Conversely, she disappears from those who are mean, immodest, impatient, quarrelsome, gluttonous, and drowsy. Such women are also in the habit of contradicting their husbands, an act that is highly censured.77

Draupadī, a pativrata, shares the secret of her success as a wife with Satyabhāmā. She says:

Keeping aside vanity, and controlling desire and wrath, I always serve the Pāṇḍavas and their co-wives with devotion. Restraining jealousy, with deep devotion of heart, without a sense of degradation at the services I perform, I wait upon my husbands. I serve them, ever fearing to utter evil or false, or look or sit or walk with impropriety, or cast glances indicative of the feeling of the heart...

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75Mbh. 13.134.32-55.
76Mbh. 3.197.5-17 and 23-42.
77Mbh. 13.11.10-20.

Trayambaka explains that there are three kinds of wife, who merit the name of pativrata, and highly enjoy the reward accruing to that category. The first of these is the woman who dies before her husband and waits patiently for him in the heaven. She is the most auspicious wife; the ideal. But, if the man dies first, inauspiciousness and misfortune may be warded off by either of the two options open to wife. She may, like Mādī, the epic prototype of the wife who expiates her guilt for her husband’s death by dying with him, follow him onto the pyre. Or, she may like Kuntī, the epic prototype of the wife who chooses to stay alive to care for household and children, live as an ascetic for the rest of her days. Given the supposed nature of woman, however, and the difficulties of leading the ascetic life of a widow, sati is both a far easier and a far safer path than that of the celibate widow. J. Leslie, “Suttee or Sati: Victim or Victor” in J. Leslie (ed.), Role and Rituals for Hindus and Women, Printer Publishers, London, 1991, pp.188-89.
I never bathe or eat or sleep till my husbands have bathed or eaten or slept, till in fact, our attendants have done the same. I always keep the house well adorned and clean. I never indulge in angry and fretful speech, and I never intimate with women who are wicked. I always do what is agreeable. I never laugh except at a jest, and never stay for long at the gate of the house. I never take long for answering calls of nature, nor do I stay long in the gardens. Indeed, I am always engaged in waiting upon my lord and when my husbands are absent, I renounce flowers and fragrance etc., and I begin to undergo penances. I eat and drink, whatever my husbands drink and eat and renounce what they do... I never speak ill of my mother-in-law and I personally attend to all her requirements. I never reprove her in words.78

Draupadi's life is no different when she is a queen. In her own words:

As a queen, I attended the needs of guests, looked after the affairs of the palace, supervised the income and expenditure. And this load, so heavy and incapable of being borne by person of evil heart, I used to bear day and night, sacrificing my ease, and all the while affectionately devoted to them. Day and night, bearing hunger and thirst, I used to serve the Kuru princes. Indeed, day and night were equal to me. I used to wake up first and go to bed last... 79

It is evident that a woman, whether she is a wife of a common man or that of a king, is reckoned always as a member of one social category. She is not deemed as an individual being. A wife's life is arduous. A wife must act helpless and passive; she must also act helpful, enduring, nurturing and even assertive (Draupadi's husbands listened to her), but only in the interest of her husband. She gets ample reward for her virtuous behaviour, i.e. a place in heaven. Sāndili asserts that she has attained heaven not through any religious rites or penance, but through fidelity to her husband.80 If she is lucky, her husband may also acknowledge her contribution to his life. For instance, a pigeon laments that the house looks empty without the wife, even if it is full of other people. He says that the wife is the only associate of her lord. She is ever the best medicine in sickness and in woe. There is no friend like a wife and no refuge better than a wife. There is no better ally in this world than the wife. Blessed is he whose wife is faithful, does not know any other man except her husband, and who is always engaged in doing whatever is good and dear to him.81 Yudhiṣṭhira also believes that at home a wife is the best friend of a man.82

A good woman's worth may be recognized if she does her job without hankering for reward. She remains inferior to man even though she fits into the category of ideals, because, in a patriarchal social structure, man is superior. R.S. Sharma looks into the historical backdrop behind such an attitude. He argues that the possession of a wife and

78Mbh.3.222.17-39.
77Mbh. 3.222.40-56.
80Mbh. 13.124.8-20.
81Mbh. 12.142.4-10.
82Mbh. 3.297.45.
property seems to be one of the paramount objectives of people in life. There is no doubt that a woman herself was regarded as a sort of property, since both are bracketed together in several references. This is the attitude in a typical patriarchal society where women have no proprietary rights. The provision of strīdhana is of a very limited character and does not extend beyond the wife’s right to jewels and presents given to her.\(^3\) However, without the tacit cooperation of women, patriarchy would not have lasted for too long. Gerda Lerner locates the reasons behind a woman’s submission. She puts it thus:

> Women’s cooperation is secured by a variety of means; gender indoctrination; educational deprivation, the denial to knowledge of their history, the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ according to women’s sexual activities, by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resource and political power, and by awarding class privileges to conforming woman... a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance.\(^4\)

Patriarchy reduces a woman to a body and objectifies her. She is made to feel uncomfortable about her physical appearance. Then, she is confined within the house and becomes an isolated creature. She has no economic independence. All this results in creating a fear of success within her that makes her believe that she must act selfless, flexible, cooperative and altruistic to be accepted by the society. She internalizes the ideology according to which her feminine behaviour must conform to the cultural ideals of womanhood, the standard against which she would be judged as an appropriate member of her gender group. Lerner calls it paternalistic dominance, since women are provided shelter, food, and security for their conformity. Women appear to have voluntarily accepted the subordinate status in exchange for this ‘protection’ and ‘privilege’.\(^5\)

**4.2.3. Strīdharma of the Mother**

The duties of a wife include giving birth to sons. A wife is no good, if she cannot bear sons. She is deprived of her conjugal rights if she fails to procreate. In a patriarchal polygamous society, motherhood is more than the operation of a self-preserving, self-satisfying and self-creating instinct. It is a big social responsibility.

Motherhood offers an instant identity to a woman. The high status accorded to the mother is accompanied with onerous responsibilities. It is told that the expectant

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\(^3\)R.S. Sharma, *Perspectives*, p. 43.
Interestingly the norms of fidelity and monogamy were not such a significant yardstick to evaluate the greatness of a husband. In fact, it seems as if having more than one wife was an index of his greatness. On the other hand, there are few examples of polyandry, such as Draupadi’s five husbands, and Jaṭilā was married to seven *rsis.*

Even when Draupadi was married to the Pāṇḍavas the incident aroused a lot of criticism and it was mythically explained by referring to Draupadi’s former birth and the boon of a husband for five times. Five husbands were imposed upon Draupadi, but she was called a degraded woman.

The life of Draupadi proves that Jessy Bernard is right when she says that the benefit each (husband and wife) draws from marriage is radically different. Bernard argues that there is no greater guarantor of long life, health, and happiness for a man than a wife well socialized to perform the ‘duties of a wife’, willing to devote her life to taking care of him, providing, even enforcing the regularity and security of a well-ordered home. The wife’s marriage presents a different picture. Compared to her husband, she suffers considerably more stress, anxiety, and depression. Bernard continues that, paradoxically, many if not most wives state that they are satisfied in their marriage. This is simply due to the fact that women have been socialized to believe that they ought to feel this way. It is interesting to note here that Bernard’s conclusions are based on research in modern American society, but it appears as if she is talking about the women of the Sanskrit epic. Thus, not much seems to have changed for women, as is evident from the analogy of two societies, which are very different in time and space.

In juxtaposition with the ideal wives such as Damayantī and Sāvitri, there were some others who do not conform to the brahmanical pattern of life. It was not an easy task to be a good wife, since she, being a woman, lacked certain qualities and was endowed with evil characteristics. She must be selfless, flexible, cooperative, altruistic, loyal and she must deny her own identity to be labelled as an ideal wife. A wife who refused to act like a good woman, she was surely accused of being bad. However, these bad wives also had an exemplary role, for sometimes they brought out the virtues of the ideal wife by their deviant conduct.

Deviance was generally defined in terms of sexual adventure, since the major focus for threat was perceived to be in the area of sexual behaviour. A deviant wife

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144 *Mbh.* 1.188.14.
145 *Mbh.* 1.189.41-46.
suffered because of her transgressions. For example, Reṣṇukā’s son at her husband’s, Jamadagni’s, command put her to death, because she had seen a handsome man bathing, after which she had erotic thoughts about him. Her sin was visual and mental, but she did deviate from her duty by thinking about another man. However, it should be pointed out that a strict moral code of conduct did not exist since time immemorial. Pāṇḍu related a legend:

> Once when Śvetaketu was standing by, a brahmana snatched away his mother by hand. This enraged him. His father Uddālaka told him that there was no point in getting furious because all the women in the world were uncovered and self-willed, and that this had been the sanātanadharma. But the son was not ready to accept this explanation. He established the rule that a woman’s unfaithfulness to her husband would be sin equal to an abortion, an evil that would bring misery. He also ruled that seducing a chaste and constant wife would also be a sin on earth.

> Thus, it is acknowledged that earlier the situation was different when a woman could go unguarded and was her own mistress, yet there was no lawlessness for such was the law in those days. Pāṇḍu referred to the Uttarakuru region where women were still independent and self-willed. Māmatā, wife of Utathya, had no problem in uniting with her younger brother-in-law Bṛhaspati, except for the fact that she was pregnant at the moment. King Sudarśana did not object when he found his wife busy gratifying a brahmaṇa guest. Instead, he offered his life, his wife and whatever other worldly possessions he had. Although the wife may appear taking independent decision in this case, it is an example of a husband’s control over his wife, and not that of her freedom. The wife of Atri abandoned her husband in a huff because she could no longer live in subjection of that ascetic. Instead of being punished, for she was a “deviant, Mahādeva granted her a boon to have a son, without husband, simply through the grace of Rudra. However, he adds that undoubtedly the son would be born in the race of his father.

One wonders, if this would have happened to all women who took such a decision, or whether this was an exceptional case.

On the other hand, a new standard of sexual morality was set in the story of Dirghātmā who proclaimed that be the husband dead or alive, the lawful wife should not have connection with others. And she, who may have such connection, shall certainly be
regarded as a fallen woman. It is obvious that monogamy for a woman was relatively late. It emerged as an efficient instrument through which a man could control a woman’s sexuality for the purpose of serving him in many personal and sexual ways. A woman’s liaison with another man was feared to undermine the tenuous bond between husband and wife. Control over a wife’s sexuality was also necessary to ensure that a man’s private property passed on to his own son after him. It also worked as one of the many indicators of man’s strength, and a woman’s subservience in the epic.

In this context, it is interesting to note that the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata treat Śiṭā and Ahalyā differently. In the Mahābhārata, Gautama was forgiving about his wife’s adultery, but in the Rāmāyaṇa, Ahalyā’s husband disowned her. Similarly, in the Rāmopakhyāna of the Mahābhārata, it only took oral testimony of Daśāratha and various gods from heaven for Rāma to accept Śiṭā as an unblemished wife. But in the Rāmāyaṇa, Śiṭā had to go through the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. The core of both the epics belong to roughly the same period. But one symbolized a far more rigid moral conduct for women – a symbol of stronghold of patriarchy. This rigidity was not totally absent from the Mahābhārata, but the authors appear to be struggling to evolve and impose a unilinear code of conduct in a polymorphous society. The difference between the two epics can also be seen in reference to niyoga. While the Rāmāyaṇa records no account of this practice, the Mahābhārata is full of references of this custom. This is not to say that a woman enjoyed better status or is more privileged in the Mahābhārata. In both the epics, women are portrayed as creatures, who lived their lives as commanded by their male-relatives. While trying to understand the historical process behind such social institutions, Gerda Lerner makes the following point:

The dominance of men over women of their own group enable them to institute dominance and hierarchy over other people. Thus, the institutionalization of slavery begins with the enslavement of women of the conquered group.

A deviant wife was dealt with sternly. She not only lost her social entity but was also deprived of her life. She was treated as a chattel. She was a man’s property, one over whom he had absolute rights. This was like the attitude in a typical patriarchal society based on private property. Because of this attitude, the brāhmaṇical law did not allow any proprietary right to women; the provision for strīdhana was of a very limited

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153Mbh. 1. App. 56. passim.
154Mbh. 12.258.46-49.
155Rāmāyaṇa, 1.48.29-32.
156Mbh. 3.275.26-35.
158G. Lerner, cited in Kamla Bhasin, What is Patriarchy, p.34.
and did not extend beyond the wife's right to jewels, ornaments, and presents made to her.\footnote{\textnormal{R.S. Sharma, Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India, Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1983, p.43.}}

4.3.3. Strīdharma of the Mother

A wife, in order to be a successful wife in a patriarchy, has to be fertile. Her pativrata\(\text{d}h\text{a}r\text{ma}\) included the procreation of sons. A son was necessary to continue the lineage, var\(\text{n}\text{a}\), society and rescue the father from hell. A barren wife was useless.\footnote{\textnormal{R. Briault quotes Demosthenes who sums up the sexual organization of historic Greece in the same words as Korean, Siamese and the Chinese describe theirs – we have concubines for the daily needs of our bodies, and wives in order that we may beget legitimate children and have faithful housekeepers. R. Briault, The Mothers, Vol.2, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1969, p.342.}}

Even conjugal rights were denied to her if she could not bear a son. She never got fully integrated within her conjugal family; she remained a stranger and a threat to the integrity of the family, and was soon substituted by co-wives.\footnote{\textnormal{In a patriarchal and patrilocal society, wife is an alien and stranger. She is not related by blood, she has no financial right in the family. Therefore, her loyalty to the family is suspected till she has a son. She is also considered as a threat for the integrity of the family. It is feared that sexual-passion may inspire the husband to transfer his loyalty and affection from his family to her. However, once she bears son, she no longer seems to threaten the exclusion of other members because then she gets related to all through blood.}} A woman completes the mission of her life and could gladly leave for another world, once she had given birth to sons.\footnote{\textnormal{Mbh. 1.146.7.}}

The canonists emphasized it time and again, that a woman was born to procreate. However, while they devote chapter after chapter discussing strī\text{d}h\text{a}r\text{ma}, they are silent about matr\text{d}h\text{a}r\text{ma}. The \textit{Mahābhārata} employs a far more sophisticated device to explain matr\text{d}h\text{a}r\text{ma}. The attempt is to develop ideals of motherhood through some of its characters, who could be transformed into a normative model of an ideal mother, as is evident from the portrayal of Kuntī in the epic.

Kuntī, at the command of her husband, fulfilled her primary \textit{dharma} of bearing sons by using a powerful \textit{mantra} that forced the gods to beget sons upon her. The demand to bear and preserve a child’s life was quickly supplemented by the second demand, to nurture his physical and emotional growth. The task became all the more difficult, especially after Pāṇḍu’s death. However, from the \textit{Mahābhārata} it appeared that once Kuntī reached Hastināpura, she had no say in the upbringing of her sons, as the entire responsibility was taken over by Bhīṣma. As a mother, she belonged to the private domestic sphere, while her sons belonged to the public sphere, and therefore she could not guide them. The only exception was Gaṅgā, who brought up her son and supervised
his education. But Gaṅgā was a divinity and she was not subject to human norms. Therefore, she was not expected to provide a role model.

The strongest of all ties is that between a mother and her children. It is said that for the father, his children are mere offspring, while a mother feels the joy, affection and delight since conception. King Bhaṅgāśvāna argued that the affection entertained by a woman for children was greater than that of a man. Therefore, he wanted Indra to give life to the sets of children who were borne by him when he was a woman.163 Although a mother’s duties, responsibilities and contributions are not explicitly stated, these do not go unnoticed. The Japanese believe that the spirit of mothers, from the other world, look after the welfare of their children in this world.164 Among the Iroquois, the crime which is regarded as most horrible and which is without any example is that of a son’s rebellion against his mother.165 While we do not intend to use the evidences from different societies to arrive at a conclusion regarding ancient Indian society, an analogy can be drawn among different societies. Interestingly, both Aristotle166 and Manu167 think that a mother has little or no share in the process of procreation. Of the seed and the womb the seed is superior. All creatures of life assume the qualities of the seed. A mother’s womb is but a suitable receptacle to protect it during its development. It is said that a mother is little more than a nurse, while the father is the sole progenitor.

Like other people, the ancient Indians also believed that the mother was entitled to honour from her son. A mother is often compared to the earth. They both nourish and sustain their children through unspeakable sufferings. Kuntī withstood all the vagaries of a harsh social environment to nourish the five Pāṇḍavas. While Mādri and Pāṇḍu escaped to enjoy bliss in heaven, Kuntī travelled the hard stony path of life alone, sustaining, protecting and prodding her five sons. Her training equipped the five Pāṇḍavas not only to face crisis bravely, but also to uplift humanity whenever they could do so. She loved them immensely, but love and affection never came in the path of showing them their duty. She unhesitatingly sent Bhīma to combat the rakṣakṣa Vaka, because it was a duty of a kṣatriya to protect brāhmaṇas. Yudhiṣṭhira was stunned at her resolve to sacrifice her son and admonishes her.168 She wanted her sons to fight for their kingdom, not to receive it as a gift. She sent several messages to them, specially to

163Mbh. 13.12.42.
167Manu. 9.35.
168Mbh. 1.150.5-6.
Yudhiṣṭhira, through Kṛṣṇa, exhorting them to stand and fight for justice. Kunti’s speeches and messages were extremely powerful and reinvigorated the Pāṇḍavas to collect their courage and fight for their rights.

Kunti’s mātrīdharmā made her undertake the humiliating task of speaking to Karṇa. She wanted to save the life of her sons. She was not only disappointed but was also humiliated by Karṇa. Although it was impossible for her to bring up Karṇa, she wanted his last rites to be performed according to his status. Therefore, she revealed the secret to Yudhiṣṭhira at the risk of being repudiated. In response, Yudhiṣṭhira cursed the whole womankind that henceforth they would be incapable of keeping a secret. Kunti, however, tried to undo the wrong even though she had to undergo another trial. She was an ideal mother who always wished for the welfare of her sons. She provoked them into action when they lay down in despair; she pulled them up when they were sinking, she prodded them so that they would not become infamous. She did not want the kingdom for herself. In fact, she renounces the world after the war. She kept reminding the Pāṇḍavas about their duties till her last meeting with the Pāṇḍavas. Kunti told Kṛṣṇa that neither widowhood, nor the loss of fortune, nor hostility pained her, as did the separation from her sons.

Similarly Gandhari prayed for the welfare her sons. But her role in her sons’ life was negligible. Neither her husband, nor her sons paid any heed to her advice. Despite her attachment to her sons, during the entire strife of succession, she emerged as a very impartial and rational person. She adored her sons, but she was not blind to their faults. Her sense of justice was too strong to allow her to bless her sons for victory. She said that victory would be on the side of the righteous. After the first game of dice, she advised Dṛḍhaśtra not to accept blindly whatever their foolish son asked him to do, otherwise the whole family would be ruined. However, she was unable to do anything beyond rebuking Duryodhana and making dire prophecies about the future. Even though she knew which party was in the wrong, she cursed Kṛṣṇa as she held him responsible for the destruction of her sons.

Mothers were expected to be soft, gentle, devoted, silent, suffering and dependant. Such attributes given to a mother can easily be identified as an attempt to

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169 Mbh. 5.131-134. passim. She reminded her sons of an old legend, the conversation between Vidurā and her son. Her son, defeated by Sindhurāja, was joyless, weak, and ignorant of dharma. Vidurā castigated her son to show his valour even if he died in his effort. She was ashamed because she had given birth to infame in the guise of a son. The son fought and won his kingdom back.

170 Mbh. 5.88.6g.

171 Mbh. 2.66.30-35.
confine women to a narrow sphere of behaviour-pattern. Although the mothers in the
epic emerge as assertive and independent beings, there is an ambiguity in their character,
which may be a reflection of various social traditions covering a wide time-span. A
woman knew that motherhood was self-preserving, self-perpetuating and self-satisfying.
It was more than that. It helped her achieve social reverence, which was otherwise
unavailable to her. A woman was aware of the importance of motherhood. For instance,
Kunti refused to share her mantra with Madri for a second time, for the fear of Madri getting
more sons than her and thereby achieving a higher position.\textsuperscript{172} Gandhari openly
admitted her disappointment at being unable to deliver first.\textsuperscript{173} When Devayani learnt
that Sarmishta had given birth to three sons as compared to her two, she was enraged and
complained to her father.\textsuperscript{174}

In lieu of her sacrifices, a mother acquired social respect and authority. Kunti decided about their stay at Ekacakra and their subsequent departure towards the region of Drupada. She unilaterally took the decision of sending Bhima to confront the demon Vaka. Draupadi was married to the five Pandavas because their mother’s words could not be disobeyed. The importance of the mother over the wife is evident from the fact that Draupadi’s wishes were not taken into account about her own marriage. That a mother was accorded precedence over a wife is again proved when Yudhishthira staked his wife in the game of dice, but not his mother. Both the mother and the wife were dependants on him, but while the latter was regarded as a possession, the former was not:\textsuperscript{175} Motherhood empowered Sakuntala to fight for her rights. Gandhari derived her supernatural power from her self-negation, her righteousness, and her sublime motherhood. While the wife was to be admonished, the mother was to be revered. The genesis of such an attitude may be a result of the brahmanical fear of female sexuality. While fertility was considered pious and sacred, sexuality was not. If the wife conformed to the pativrata dharma, she gained access to power, unlike the mother who gained it automatically. A woman’s sexuality was no longer perceived as a threat once it was channelised into legitimate motherhood.

Sukumari Bhattacharji rejects the idea that motherhood really exalted a woman’s status. According to her, although motherhood came to be increasingly glorified, it was an emotional and ideational compensation for the reality. It was extolled in an inverse

\textsuperscript{172}Mbh. 1.115.22-24.
\textsuperscript{173}Mbh. 1.107.10-11 and 15.
\textsuperscript{174}Mbh. 1.78.28.
\textsuperscript{175}“Wives are always to be had; one cannot get a second mother”. G.T. Basden, \textit{Among the Ibos of Nigeria}, p.64 sq cited in R. Briffault, \textit{The Mothers}, Vol.1, p.150.
ratio with the demotion of the woman’s position in society. She says further that the social reality had relegated the woman to the socially significant role of procreatrix; she had lost her identity as a woman, and as a social being. She was primarily, if not solely, a mother, preferably of male children.

Contrary to the ideal mothers there were others who were not so good. Gāṅgā drowned seven of her sons in water. Of course, they were none but the Vasus under a curse to be born on earth. The only way of minimizing the effect of the curse was to die immediately after birth, so that they could return to heaven without any delay; and Gāṅgā had agreed to help them. But while the father suffered anguish at the instant death of the newborn sons, we hear of no such remorse of the mother, who bore them and then herself drowned them. Menakā, the nymph, also abandoned her new-born daughter, for she had accomplished her task of distracting Viśvāmitra from tapasya. Kadru cursed her sons of total destruction because they disobeyed her command. The actions of these mothers were unmother-like. Explanations are provided in each case to justify their unmotherly behaviour. Although Gāṅgā, Kadru and Menakā were from outside the brāhmaṇical society, and so no justification was required for their behaviour, in all the above-mentioned cases an external reason was given for their different behaviour. Gāṅgā had to release the Vasus, Menakā acted at the command of Indra and Kadru’s curse was related to a drastic increase in the number of snakes.

In brief, Kuntī and Gāndhārī have been developed as ideal mothers. Both of them were the perfect choice, since they were royal kṣatriya mothers and were expected to preserve, illustrate and disseminate the values of the brāhmaṇical society. They sacrificed their own identity so that their sons could establish theirs. In return, they were exalted to the highest position. However Sukumari Bhattacharji justly remarks that this apotheosis may not reflect their actual status, it may be compensatory, seeking to recompense society’s indifference to the mother.

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178 *Mbh.* 1.92.43-47.
179 S. Bhattacharji cites the example of Urvaśī, whose sexual love for Purūrvas was so consuming and so impatient of any kind of distraction or interruption, sent a newborn baby to be brought up at a hermitage. As a prototype of earthly prostitute Urvaśī is naturally representative of all sex and no filial affection. *Women and Society*, p.25.
4.3.4. *Strīdharmā* of the Widow

Widowhood was deemed as the most difficult phase of a woman’s life. A widow was an object of pity, she was an unlucky being having lost her lord. However, the sorrow of a widow in the epic was considered only one among the eight gravest sorrows. In other words, the *Mahābhārata* does not treat a widow’s grief as the worst among all problems. Since a widow is no longer a wife, she is expected to conduct herself differently. The epic enumerates the proper behaviour of a widow through some of its characters.

Although the authors were acquainted with the custom of widow remarriage, they did not exactly favour it. It was not remarriage, but *niyoga*, which is the dominant custom. The purpose of *niyoga* was to perpetuate the lineage of the husband, if he died sonless. The custom reasserted the norm that a wife was the property of a husband even after his death. She must fulfill her duties to enhance his honour during his life, and even after his death. Her personal feelings were never taken account of. For instance, the unwilling Ambikā and Ambalikā were informed about *niyoga*, after Satyavatī had already deputed Vīśā for the purpose. Perhaps, the norm that a woman who had sons enjoys better security and privileges than a woman without one would have been instrumental in a widow’s consent for *niyoga* even when she was reluctant. S. Jayal argues that the system must have helped in providing the widow and the wife of an impotent man, the psychological satisfaction of fulfilling her instinct of motherhood. The wife was a mere *kṣetra* (field), a property, and she belonged to the *kṣetraṅ* (husband). On the death of her husband, his younger brother took over the property.

The *Mahābhārata* is replete with cases of *niyoga*. *Ādiparvā* narrates how Satyavatī pressed Bhīṣma to procreate sons for his younger brother Vichitra Viśyā (who was dead) from his queens and how, when Bhīṣma refused, Vīśā was ultimately appointed by his mother Satyavatī, who then, procreated Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇdu. Kumarilabhatta explains that Vīśā followed Gautama and the urgent request of his mother. Besides, his *tapas* saved him from the effect of violation of *dharma*, if any.

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182 *Mbh.* 1.100.2-3.
183 *Mbh.* 3.75. *passim*.
185 *Mbh.* 1.95. *passim*.
187 *GDh.* 18.4-5.
Praḍū himself is said to have asked Kunti to procreate sons for him from a brāhmaṇa endowed with great tapas. He told Kunti some stories of niyoga to convince her that it was not an unrighteous practice. It is told that three sons were the limit and that if a fourth or fifth were procreated the woman would be a svairini (a wanton woman) and a bandhaki (harlot). Elsewhere it is mentioned that when Paraśurāma exterminated the kṣatriyas, thousands of kṣatriya women approached the brahmanas for the procreation of sons. However, it is uncertain whether niyoga was allowed to royal families only, when there was no male to succeed, or if it was a common practice.

The need of succession and procreation of a son to attain mokṣa would have permitted the continuation of the practice. However, the restrictions and stringent provisions about niyoga as ordained in the smṛtis inform us that it could not have been very prevalent, and that instances must have become rather rare with the passage of time. For instance, pativrata Vādā, queen of the righteous king Vyusitasva, bore a son through the dead body of her husband and not through niyoga. Probably, the ideal of pativrata, reaching its climax in the custom of sāti, contributed in the decline of niyoga.

It is notable that the sense of conjugal fidelity, which found its most desirable expression in the practice of sāti, developed only in case of women. Shalini Shah argues that the reason for the disappearance of the practice of niyoga is, above all, economic. An issueless widow or wife meant less division of property for the man’s agnostic heirs. Niyoga caused too many jealousies, and led to a conflict of self-interest. P.V. Kane puts it differently. According to him, niyoga was a survival from the remote past, and gradually it became rarer till the first centuries of the Christian era, when it came to be totally prohibited.

In a patriarchal and patrilocal society, a woman who is never independent loses all sources of support if she is a sonless widow. One cannot dismiss the lament on widowhood in the stīraparva as an emotional catharsis after the destructive war. It reflects the acute sense of insecurity of a woman. A wife, who is always in need of protection, suddenly loses all kinds of protection. She cannot go back to her parental

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188 Mbh. 1.111.36. He gave the example of Madayanī, the wife of Saudāṣa, who obtained a son from Vasishtha, at the command of her husband, 1.113.21-22.
189 Mbh. 1.114.65.
189 Mbh. 1.98.3-4.
191 Mbh. 1.112. passim.
193 P.V. Kane, History, Vol.2, Part 1, pp.606-607. Kane thinks that there are several causes of its origin, which are now obscure. He does not speak about the reasons behind its discontinuation.
194 Mbh. 11.16. passim.
family, she has no son to look after her and her best protector, her husband, is no more. In the words of a brāhmaṇī at Ekacakra, all men ran after a woman who was widowed. She was afraid that without her husband she could not bring up her children, nor could she get her daughter married. Therefore, she pleaded to die before her husband. Similarly, a Kapotī lamented at the death of her husband, thus:

Widows, even if mothers of many children are still miserable. Bereft of her husband, a woman becomes helpless and an object of pity. Limited are the gifts of the father, of the brother, and of the son to a woman. However, the gift that her husband alone makes to her, is unlimited. A woman has no protector like her lord, and no happiness like him. What chaste woman in this world, who, when deprived of her lord, would venture to bear the burden of life?

The female-pigeon cast herself on the blazing fire following her husband. It appears that a widow’s desire to die along with her husband was not just material but also psychological. A wife lost her ritual status, financial support and social status after her husband’s death. Whatever little respect and rights she enjoyed, she did so only as a wife. Moreover, a good wife (such as Sāvitri) was supposed to internalize the dangers so that the husbands lived longer, healthier and happier. A widow was a failure. She was, thus, psychologically conditioned to make amends for it by committing sati. For instance, Mādri told Kunti that she was duty-bound to satisfy her husband’s desire in the next world as he died in his attempt to unite with her. The wife was, thus, her husband’s possession in life and in death. Widows were told that their widowhood was due to the bad deed of their previous birth (karma). It is no wonder that they did not regard their life worth living as it was immersed in such pain. This acute sense of insecurity and failure must have driven the wives of Kṛṣṇa and the Kaurvas to follow their husbands in death. It would have been difficult to live up to the ideal of chastity in a hostile world. They ended their plight with the hope of a better life in the next world, by mounting the pyre or by drowning themselves. However, the number of satis as compared to widows who survive is quite insignificant in the Mahābhārata.

It is evident that the custom of sati, though on the rise, was not prevalent in the text. A widow could survive (like Kunī, Satyavatī, Ambikā and Ambālikā) and promote the welfare of her husband and of his lineage. She could also retire to the forest (such as was done by Satyabhāmā, Satyavatī, Ambikā and Ambālikā retired to the forest) and

195Mbhb. 1.144.4-35.
196Mbhb. 12.144. passim.
197Mbhb. 1.112.25-6.
198The Kaurva ladies took jalasamādhi, after their husband’s death, at the instigation of Vyāsa. One can speculate that the life full of misery under the conquerors would have forced them to take such a drastic step. Mbhb. 15.33.20-21.
199Mbhb. 16.8.72.
perform severe austerities after fulfilling their household duties. We do not find any reference of widow remarriage within the brahmanical society. However, there were women like Ulupī who married for the second time, since they belonged to an outside culture where strict brahmanical strictures were non-applicable.

**Women outside the Brahmanical Household**

From the above legends it is clear that virginity before marriage, fidelity after marriage, chastity and celibacy in widowhood etc. were elucidated as the *dharma* of a woman. There are some stories of women who did not follow these normative ideals. They were not subservient to their male relatives. They were not duty-bound to their husbands. They could bring up their children on their own or they might drown or leave the new-born babies. They asserted their individuality, but they were not labelled as deviants, since the norms of the brahmanical society were not applicable to them.

One such female character is Gaṅgā. She married Śāntanu on the condition that he would never interfere with her, be it agreeable or disagreeable. If he did so, she would leave him immediately. And she did leave him when Śāntanu asked her not to kill their eighth son. Gaṅgā went back to heaven, according to the agreement. However, she promised Śāntanu to return the eighth baby after he completed his education. She supervised her son’s education and over all developments and returned him to his father when he was sixteen years old.

Gaṅgā gratified her husband like any other ideal wife. However, marriage was not a sacrament and life-long commitment for her. While for Draupadī and Parvati, the relationship between a husband and a wife could be traced back to their previous births, for Ganga marriage was just a contract, i.e. a means to obtain an objective. She accomplished her aim by releasing the Vasus from Vasishtha’s curse. Having attained her objective, she left her husband. However, she did not leave her son Devavrata under Śāntanu’s care. Instead she took him along and educated him, an unparalleled instance in the epic. Gaṅgā was a goddess and, therefore, she was above all human bonds and restrictions.

Sarmiṣṭha, the daughter of the Asura King Vṛṣaparvan, did not follow the strict regulations of the brāhmaṇical society. She persuaded King Yayāti to beget sons upon her. When Yayāti was reluctant, she convinced him that being her friend’s husband, he was her husband as well. She pleaded him to absolve her from sin, to protect her virtue

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200 *Mbh. 1.92. passim.*
by fulfilling her desire. Yayāti fructified her seasons from a sense of dharma. However, Devayāni’s father was not convinced by Yayāti’s argument on dharma and he cursed Yayāti to become a decrepit.²⁰¹ Yayāti immediately lost her youth, for the onus to protect dharma lay with him as he, and not Śarmiṣṭha, belonged to the brāhmaṇical society.

Similarly Ulupī, the daughter of the Nāgā King Kauravya, persuaded Arjuna to gratify her. She assured Arjuna that he would not be breaking his vow of brahmacarya by satisfying her. Even if his virtue suffers, he would acquire greater merit by saving her life. She believed that it was Arjuna’s duty to relieve her from distress. Arjuna fulfilled his duty by pleasing Ulupī.²⁰² It is noteworthy that in the Ādīparva, Ulupī introduced herself as an unmarried girl. However, in the Bhīṣmaparva,²⁰³ she is mentioned as a widow whose husband was killed. Ulupī was technically correct when she stated that she was unmarried, since she was no longer married. But a woman, in the brāhmaṇical society, would refer to herself as a widow when her husband was dead, because the identity of a widow was very strong in her social set up.

While Ulupī was successful in getting her desires gratified, apsarā Urvasī failed to seduce Arjuna. When Arjuna rejected her advances, she cursed him that he would be deprived of his masculinity.²⁰⁴ Urvasī’s aberration was not left unchecked. Indra checked her subversive act by limiting the impact of the curse for a year. Moreover, Arjuna could decide on the year, as he did it by choosing the year of ajñatavāsa for the curse. It helped him hide his true identity. In this case, Arjuna was in command of the situation. He successfully resisted the charm of Urvasī, the foremost apsarā of Indra’s court.²⁰⁵ Urvasī could propose to Arjuna, since she did not belong to the brāhmaṇical society. Therefore she was immune to its restrictions.

Unlike Arjuna, Visvāmitra fell for Menaka. When he saw her naked, he was overtaken by desire. Menaka was an instrument of Indra who had sent her to obstruct Visvāmitra’s penances, since he suspected that Visvāmitra would depose him if he completed his tapasyā. Beautiful Menaka took Visvāmitra away from tapasyā. She was

²⁰¹ Mbh. 1.77-78. passim.
²⁰² Mbh. 1.206. passim.
²⁰³ Mbh. 6.86.7-8.
²⁰⁴ Mbh. 3.46. passim. (P.C. Roy’s tr.)
²⁰⁵ Arjuna calls Urvasī progenitor mother of the Purus, parents of the Paurva race.

The epic says briefly that the learned Purus was born of Ila. Ruling over thirteen island of the sea, the victorious one was always surrounded by superhuman powers, though himself human. Intoxicated by his own prowess, he crossed the brahmanas, tore their treasures in spite of their outcries. Then cursed by the angered sages he was at once destroyed. The same hero brought from the gandharva world, along with Urvasī, the fires for sacrifice, he begot six sons on Urvasī. Mbh. 1.70.16-22.
successful in her effort, gave birth to a daughter, and left the new-born in the forest to return to heaven. There was no question of criticising her because, being an *apsarā*, she was not expected to bring up her child.

*A tapasvī* conserved all his energies by observing *brahmacharya*. The sexual act was seen as being debilitating. He aspired to gain extraordinary power through his moral authority. When the danger of his becoming too powerful, loomed large, the King (Indra) sent an *apsarā* to seduce him and break his power. *Apsaras* appear to have no role except of seducing men. However, this does not indicate any sexual autonomy. Indra, the king of heaven, used them as sexual baits to trap ascetics, and he triumphed in their success. They were nothing more than inert tools in the hands of their king for scoring a victory and establishing his supremacy. Moreover, what was understood as their 'autonomy' made them unworthy of respect. D.D. Kosambi maintains that *apsaras* are in general mother goddesses in the *Ṛgveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. Probably the emerging patriarchal society tried to sideline the powerful, popular mother goddesses by presenting them as seductresses and witches.

Two women from the Nāgā race behaved quite differently from each other. Kadrū, the mother, cursed her sons because they did not obey her order. According to the curse, *agnī* was to consume the sons in the snake-sacrifice of Janamejaya. The snakes faced the danger of extinction, and even Brahman could not avoid the effect of the mother’s curse. Jaratkāru, the daughter of Kadrū, on the other hand, was delighted to hear that she could be the means of saving her race. She married a man who dictated the term of not maintaining her. She toiled like a slave to save the race of the Nāgās. Worse still, her husband left her without any fault on her part, when his purpose was served. Kadrū would be a strange mother according to the brahmanical standard, since she cursed her own sons when they refused to be her accomplices. Conversely, Jaratkāru appears to have internalized the ideals of the brahmanical set up. She sacrificed her individuality in order to serve her race and her husband. Hidiṃbā – a *rākṣasī* – behaved

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206 *Āvoha*, 1.65-66, *passim*.
207 It is significant to note here that Yṛpa and Ṛṣṭī (1.120.13), Droṇa (1.121.4-5) etc. were born without any sexual union. Their *brahmacāri* fathers failed to control their desire after seeing some beautiful damsel. So, they conserved their semen in pots, from where children were born.
209 D.D. Kosambi argues that the Nāgās were autochthonous element in the *Mahābhārata*. Through various instances, he brings to our notice that there was a continuous process of synthesis between the cultures of the Nāgās and the brahmanical society. “The Autochthonous Element in the *Mahābhārata*” A.J. Syed (ed.), *D.D. Kosambi on History and Society: Problems of Interpretation*, University of Bombay Publication, Bombay, 1985, pp.143-183.
a little differently. She married Bhīma who was the killer of her brother. She bore him Ghattotakata, brought him up and sent him to his father when he needed his son’s help in the battlefield. Chitrāṅgadā, the daughter of the King of Manipur, was married to Arjuna. Her father accepted Arjuna’s proposal on the condition that Arjuna would leave his son behind, for his son would succeed the king.210 Chitrāṅgadā’s father, in the absence of a son, had made his daughter a putrika.

Apart from these women, there were others who belonged to the brāhmaṇical society but they were outside the household, such as gaṇikās and parivṛṣṭikās. P.V. Kane argues that in the Mahābhārata, courtesans are an established institution.211 The Adiparva narrates how a vaiśya lady waited upon Dṛḍtarṣṭra when Gāndhārī was pregnant.212 In the Udyogparva, Yudhishṭhira sends greetings to the veṣyaśas of the Kaurvas.213 Courtesans are described as going out to welcome Kṛṣṇa when he came on a peace mission to the Kaurva court.214 When the Pandava armies are about to start for battle it is said that carts, markets and courtesans also accompanied them.215 P.V. Kane maintains that information divides concubines into two sorts, avaruddha (one who is kept in the house itself and forbidden to have intercourse with any other male) and bhujisya (concubine who is not kept in the house, but elsewhere and is in the special keeping of a person) and it is prescribed that a fine of fifty paisas is to be paid if another person has a union with them.216 The epic does not speak about any specific gaṇikā, but from the above few references it is evident that the gaṇikā was a woman who was engaged in pleasing her master; serving him, and his guests. Some of them are confined within a house, while others are available for the pleasure for all men.

Among the parivṛṣṭikās, Sulabhā is a prominent example. She traveled wildly. She did not get married because she found no bridegroom appropriate for her. She practiced the doctrine of yoga and attained the stage of supreme realization in which the finite individual soul united in the infinite universal soul. She came to the court of Dharmadhvaja Janaka, King of Mithilā, and had a discourse with him on philosophy. Janaka, who was a renowned scholar, realized the spiritual superiority of Sulabhā.217 The

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210 Mbh. 1.207. passim.
212 Mbh. 1.107.35-36. Yuyustu was born of their union.
213 Mbh. 5.30. passim. (P.C.Roy’s tr.)
214 Mbh. 5.86.15. cited in P.V.Kane, History, Vol.2, part I, pp.637-638.
215 Mbh. 5.151.58.
217 Mbh. 12.308. passim.
mendicant Sulabhā was an exception. Despite her merits, Sulabhā was not an exemplary woman. She remained an exception. Indeed, she was a failure. Her spiritual achievements were not as recognized as that of a male renouncer. She argued with Janaka. She was not passive, quiet and subordinate. She did not follow the specific rules, meant for women, that women were supposed to live by.

To sum up, almost all the female characters of the Mahābhārata are strong willed, self-contained and single mindedly devoted women. They are a never-ending source of compassion and nurturance for others. They are tireless workers; the all giving friends, the women who take care of others by putting themselves last and making lives better for those more deserving than themselves. Despite this, when Bhīṣma described the character of a woman, he quoted the dialogue between Nārada and the apsarā Pañcāciṃ, where the latter held women to be fickle-minded and licentious. Their frailty and disloyalty made them prisoners of their own sex. What appears to be an ambiguous stand is in fact a calculated portrayal. The male power subjected women to submission, first by glorifying certain feminine attributes, and second, by degrading women who lacked the avowed qualities by nature. Since by nature women lacked virtue, they had to strive hard to become ideals so that they were accepted by society. The deviants and women from outside the brāhmaṇical society highlight strīdharma through aberrations. This ambiguity was a very effective instrument in conditioning women for social life in a patriarchal society, specially in a brāhmaṇical society, which was under tremendous fear of the kaliyuga; for the conduct of women was considered important to keep the kaliyuga away and to maintain the prevalent social order. This is not to say that the brāhmaṇical discourse, although normative and dominant, was monolithic. It is evident that alternatives were frequently included within the discourse. We find that in spite of the apparent inferiority and dependence of women in the law-books, women in the narratives sometimes come across as strong and capable of independent action.