The women in Mahabharata are not weak. Rather they command respect and are sought after for advice on the art of statecraft and matters related to war. Often they actually catalyse, control and guide the events that unfold. The following extracts from Dr. Kavita Sharma’s sessions on the Mahabharata, as part of the intensive on Aspects of Indian Culture (held at The Gnostic Centre in December 2003) provide insights into the role of women in the Mahabharata, as well as offers gems of wisdom on the art of statecraft.

The Central Role of Women

Draupadi exhorts Krishna for war. Gandhari tries to dissuade Duryodhana from war. When Krishna goes on his peace mission, it fails. Duryodhana storms out of the court. He doesn’t want to talk to Krishna any more. In fact, at one point, he even threatens to imprison him. And what does Krishna say? It’s a lesson in diplomacy. He says, ‘You should never imprison the ambassador of another king. He’s only the messenger. So, don’t kill the messenger.’ But what does Dhritarashtra do? He just realizes that he will be defeated so he wants to dissuade Duryodhana from war. Not because Dhritarashtra is feeling very righteous – again our motivations come into it. (You may be doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.) And then he calls on Gandhari and Gandhari comes to the court.

So, the women of Mahabharata are all very powerful women, and they are all very political women. They don’t just sit behind and watch their men doing something. When Pandu dies, between the two wives, why do you think Madri commits sati and Kunti doesn’t? Madri, of course, is feeling very guilty and wants to die on the pyre, and Kunti says, ‘No, I will die.’ Madri says, ‘If I live and you die, I would never be able to get kingship for these children, but you can.’ So it’s a political act. And what does Kunti proceed to do? She realizes that by staying in the forest and raising them there – they were supposed to go to the guru in the forest… She takes them to Hastinapura, so that they are raised with the Kauravas, so that their claim to kingship is never lost sight of.

Who is a Good Leader?

So, Gandhari calls back Duryodhana to the court and says this – and here we also learn who is a good king, which means who is a good governor, in-charge. She says, ‘O thou of great wisdom, nobody, O best of the Bharatas, succeedeth by his own desire alone, in acquiring or keeping or enjoying a kingdom.’ So just by desire you can’t do it. ‘One that hath not his senses under control’ – so this is what makes a good leader – ‘cannot enjoy sovereignty for any length of time. He that hath his soul under control and is endowed with great intelligence, can rule a kingdom. Lust and wrath wean away a man from his possessions and enjoyments. Conquering these foes first, a king bringeth the earth under his subjugation.’ So what’s it? You have to first conquer your own anger, lust, bring your own senses under control, only then can you enjoy the kingdom.

Sovereignty over men is a great thing. Those that are of wicked souls may easily desire to win a kingdom, but they are not competent to retain a kingdom when won. He that desireth to obtain extensive empire, must bind his senses to both profit and virtue, for if the senses are
restrained, intelligence increaseth, like fire that increaseth when fed with fuel. If not controlled, these can even slay their possessor, like unbroken and furious horses capable of killing an unskillful driver. One that seeketh to conquer his counsellors without conquering his own self, and to conquer foes without conquering his counsellors, is soon vanquished himself and is ruined. He who conquereth his own self first, taking it for a foe, will not seek in vain to conquer his counsellors and enemies afterwards.' So first get a hold on yourself, don’t just walk out like this in anger.

The Secret of Good and Prosperous Governance

‘Prosperity worshippeth greatly that person who hath conquered his senses…’ – nowhere does she say that you have to renounce all this. You must conquer your senses, get a hold on yourself so that you can enjoy all this – ‘…and his counsellors who inflicteth punishment on his transgressors,…’ – so danda neeti is something which is talked of throughout Mahabharata. There is no governance without penalties. There have to be sanctions. ‘…who acteth after deliberation and who is possessed of wisdom. Lust and wrath that dwell in the body are deprived of their strength by wisdom like a couple of fishes ensnared in a net with holes.’ She goes on to tell him who is a good ruler, who is a good king, how do you retain a kingdom, how do you conquer, how do you banish your enemies.

‘That king who is desirous of winning wealth and virtue and vanquishing his enemies, should always be engaged in controlling his passions.’ In a very cynical fashion you can say, ‘Be cold, calculate what you are doing.’ ‘Influenced by lust or from wrath he that behaveth deceitfully towards his own kinsmen or others can never win any allies.’ And then she goes on to say, ‘O son, there is no good in battle, no virtue, no profit. How can it bring happiness then? Even victory is not always certain.’ The people you are pitted against, it is not certain that you will win. And then she goes on to give details that who are the warriors who are pitted against you. That means she has worked it all out. So, ‘Therefore,’ she says, ‘it’s never seen in this world that men acquire wealth by avarice. Give up thy avarice then, O son, and desist O bull of Bharata’s race.’ So, she gives him a lecture in real politick, she gives him a little lecture on how he is to retain his kingdom, how is he to enjoy wealth, how is he to vanquish enemies – not by doing what he is doing.

Action – the Supreme Law

Where does Krishna go after he has failed in his peace mission? He goes to Kunti, he goes to report back to Kunti what happened. He came and first went and talked to Kunti what he should do, what was her advice, and then goes and reports back of his failed mission. And then what does he do? Again indulges in some real politick. He says, let’s go tell Karna what is his real identity. And that’s what he does. He tells Karna what’s his real identity. Before that he asks Kunti a very simple straightforward question, ‘What should I say unto the Pandavas as thy instructions to them?’

So, the women are not that weak.
‘Tell me that, O thou endowed with great wisdom, I desire to hear thy words.’ And what does Kunti say? Kunti also reads out a lecture on who should be a king, why is it Yudhishtira’s duty to fight. She also does not say ‘renounce everything, don’t fight, what will you get out of it’. No. She says by not fighting his virtue is decreasing. So, we are still on this – whether to fight or not to fight.

She says, ‘Thy virtue, O son, is decreasing greatly. Do not act vainly, O king, like a reader of the Vedas incapable of catching their real meaning and therefore truly unlearned.’ So she says, your knowledge that you are so proud of, is like someone who has just parroted the Vedas, not really learnt them. If you learnt them, you would fight. It’s exactly the opposite of what we would think. ‘Cast thy eyes on the duties of thine own order as ordained by the self-create.’

**What Creates a Good Nation?**

And then Kunti goes on to say a very interesting thing. Who is a good king? How does a nation or how does a state become good or bad? She says, it depends on the king. So she says, ‘Then again, a sixth part of the virtue practised by subjects well protected by the king is obtained, O Bharata, by the king.’ She says, if you are a good king, then all the good that everybody does in your state, you get a part of. ‘The virtue again that the king himself practiseth conferreth godhead on him, while if he perpetrateth sin, he goes to hell. The penal code properly applied by the ruler maketh the four orders adhere to their respective duties...’ So, don’t abdicate your duties as a king. ‘...and leadeth to an acquisition by the ruler himself of virtue, profit and salvation.’ So, it’s only by doing your duty, will you be counted as virtuous, you will get profit and through that you will get salvation. In fact, there is a lot of talk on what is renunciation, what is true renunciation, and true renunciation is not to give up.

‘So, when the king properly abideth by the penal code, without making any portion of it a dead letter, then the best of periods called the Krita Yuga setteth in. Let not this doubt be thine that whether the era is the cause of the king or the king the cause of the era...’ So what makes a good time in a nation and what makes a bad time. She says it is the king who makes a good time and it’s the king who brings about its downfall – which you can see in any organization, you can see in any home.

‘...for know this to be certain that the king is the cause of the age. It’s the king that createth the Krita, the Treta or the Dwapara age. Indeed it’s the king that is the cause of the fourth yuga, that is the Kali Yuga. That king who causeth the Krita age to set in enjoyeth heaven exceedingly.’ And so on and so forth, then she says, ‘The king’s sins affect the world and the world’s sins affect him.’ So you can’t abandon – and this debate will go on right up to the end. Because, when the war is won, who refuses to become the king? Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira went into the war very clear that this war has to be fought, unlike Arjuna. And at the end when the war is won, it is Yudhishtira who says I want to renounce everything and go away, we fought a wrong war. That is the moral dilemma. What should one do? The same action at different points seems right or wrong.

**The Duties of a Ruler**

So she goes on to talk about the duties of a king. ‘The mother and the father as also the gods
always desire for their children liberality and gift and study and sacrifice and sway over subjects. Whether all this be righteous or unrighteous, you have to practice it...’ Forget righteous or unrighteous – this is what you should do for your children. ‘...in consequence of your very birth. Behold O Krishna, so far from doing all this, though born in a high race, they are yet destitute of the very means of support and are afflicted with misery. Hungry men approaching a brave and bountiful monarch are gratified and live by his side. What virtue can be superior to this? A virtuous person upon acquiring a kingdom should in this world make all persons his own, attaching some by gifts, some by force, and some by sweet words.’ Rule as you must, win over people, whether by gifts, whether by force or whether by sweet words. Koota neeti. But do not give up your kingship.

And then she says, a Brahmin should become a mendicant, a Kshatriya has to be a warrior, and so forth, and then she goes on to recount the story of Vidula. But then she says that poverty is like death. So do not be under any illusions that you will become a mendicant. And she says Vidula similarly exhorted her son Sanjay that he must go and fight when he refused to fight. She goes on to say, ‘Do not disgrace thy soul, O son, by anticipation of failure.’ Go fight, whether you fight or you win – do not disgrace yourself like this.

How can one Ensure a Successful Outcome?

‘Objects unattained have been attained while those attained have been lost.’ This is the way of the world, so why are you worried about failure? ‘The accomplishment of objects should never be sought with wrath and folly.’ Go at it coolly. ‘In all acts, O son, the attainment of success is always uncertain.’ So never keep thinking on what’s going to happen at the end. ‘Knowing that success is uncertain [in the absence of exertion] there is but one result, the absence of success.’ So that result becomes certain if you do not act. If you act you may succeed you may not succeed. ‘There are however two results in the case of exertion – the acquisition of success or its non-acquisition. He, O prince, who hath settled beforehand that all acts are uncertain, in respect of their results, maketh both success and prosperity unattainable by himself.’

So she goes on like this. She goes on also to give some lessons in real politick. This is very interesting. ‘In it behoveth thee to win by every exertion the object thou hast in view.’ Do whatever you can to win this object. ‘Bring together to thy own side those that are angry, those that are covetous, those that have been weakened by thy force, those that are jealous of thy force, those that have been humiliated by your enemies, those that always challenge them from excess of pride, and all others.’ So all the people who are unhappy with your enemy, just go and bring them to your side – they will all come to your side. That is how you must garner your battle, your allies. So just go and fight.

If you read this whole debate one would become very good at getting people to their side. And then she says, ‘In whatever calamity a king may fall, he should not still betray it’ – i.e. he should not betray his kingdom. ‘Beholding the king afflicted with fright, the whole kingdom, the army, the counsellors, all yield to fear, and all the subjects become disunited.’ Therefore it is your duty to fight. This is for Yudhishthira because she knows Yudhishthira is so scared of fighting.

For Arjuna, for Nakula – for everyone she has a different message. One very interesting thing she says to Arjuna. ‘In case of doubt listen to Draupadi, not to Yudhishthira.’ Why? Because
Yudhishthira will say forget it, we have been aggrieved, we will forgive. I will come to that also in a little while. What is forgiveness? When should you forgive and when should you not forgive?

And she sends a message to Draupadi also. ‘Never forget what harm was done to you.’ Keep on encouraging these five people to fight.

Choosing between Good and Right

Before I close the section, I want to talk to you about Karna. The moral dilemma of Karna. When Krishna goes to Karna and says you are actually the son of Kunti – he’s trying to actually win him over to the side of the Pandavas, because if Karna comes, then the Kauravas have lost anyway. But Karna says, ‘Morally I am the son of Pandu. Kunti however abandoned me without thinking of my welfare. The suta ahira as soon as he beheld me took me to his home, and from her affection for me Radha’s breasts were filled with milk the very day. And she, O Madhava, cleansed my urine and evacuations.’ And then he says, ‘My heart also, O Krishna, and all the bonds of affection and love, are fixed on them.’ Fixed on my foster parents. And then he goes on to say how Duryodhana has always helped him, and so he says, ‘For the sake of death, or the ties of blood, or fear or temptation, I cannot venture, O Janardana, to behave falsely towards the intelligent son of Dhritarashtra.’ So I know that actually I am going to lose but I still cannot betray him. ‘If I do not now engage in a single combat with Arjuna, this will, O Hrishikesha, be inglorious both for myself and Partha. Without doubt, O slayer of Madhu, thou hast told me all this for doing me good. The Pandavas also, obedient as they art to thee, will do without doubt all that thou hast said. Thou must however conceal this our discourse for the present, O delighter of all the Yadavas. If king Yudhishthira of virtuous soul and well controlled senses, cometh to know me as the first-born son of Kunti, he will never accept the kingdom. If again, O slayer of Madhu, this mighty and swelling empire becometh mine, I shall, O repressor of foes, certainly make it over to Duryodhana. Let Yudhishthira of virtuous soul become king...’ So even Karna knows that he is going to die, but it is the decision between good and right. It is good for him to go to the Pandavas, but it is right for him to stay with Duryodhana.

Reflect on the following:

1. What makes a good leader and what constitutes good governance? How much does an organization depend for its character on a good leader?
2. You are in a position of authority. Someone has been nasty to you or has betrayed your trust. An occasion comes when you can harm him or do him good. You can justify it either way through rules and regulations. What would you do and why? Has there ever been such an occasion in your life?

(To be continued)

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