Women Ascetics in Mahabharata

Mahabharata explores asceticism in its various aspects. An ascetic has traditionally been seen as one who has renounced all desire for material happiness both here and hereafter. He does not hanker after progeny, or wealth in this world or even heavenly bliss after death. Asceticism is the practice of total renunciation of the material world to realize the self within or atman which is accepted to be the source of all bliss. Hindus have laid a lot of emphasis on asceticism, and have even prescribed it as the fourth asrama, sanyas or the stage of an ascetic in human life in its last phase. It is the desired goal after passing through the stages of brahmacharya, grihastha and vanaprastha that is a period of celibacy and acquiring of knowledge; the life of a householder; and the retiring to the forests respectively. However, one can also practice asceticism at any point in one’s life through the practice of spiritual discipline involving self mortification and purification by austerity; through the recitation of mantras in a prescribed fashion; and through following ritual practices. Whatever may be the ideal of asceticism, the reality as seen in Mahabharata is quite different. As is the method in Mahabharata, every issue raised is examined throughout the text by various characters in various situations and through this all, the different aspects of prevalent ideas are put forward.

Instead of renunciation, many ascetics practice severe austerities and undergo self mortification to attain boons which would give them wealth, sons or power. There are others who follow ritual practices but their state of mind is not one of renunciation and neither do they succeed in conquering their senses or their desires. On the other hand, there are others who live as householders and still others who do not seem to have renounced anything at all, but they are actually ascetic in their thoughts and actions. Then the question arises whether women can be ascetics as the greatest merit advocated to them is in the grihastha ashrama, to be completely devoted wives and mothers within the framework of a householder. Patrick Olivelle has argued that women occupy an ambivalent and often contradictory position within the Brahmanical theology of dharma. While they have been given an indispensable role in the central acts of the
Brahmanical religion, that is sacrifice and procreation, they are not treated as independent agents. The dharmashastric tradition places them under the guardianship of the father in childhood, husband in youth, and sons in old age as they were not considered fit to act on their own.

However, there is ample evidence to suggest that in the early period, women participated in major brahmanical institutions like the Vedic initiation. In the period of Grhyasutras around the second half of the first millennium B.C.E., women were initiated into Vedic study. It was during the classical and medieval periods, that their theological status fell and they were excluded both from initiation and Vedic study. The gradually increasing oppressive patriarchy drove women like Amba and Madhavi to asceticism. Even Sulabha became a wandering ascetic mendicant because she could find no one suitable for her virtues and accomplishments to marry. Shandili seems to be the only ascetic woman who has not been pushed into this path by the overpowering patriarchal order but her reaction to Garuda shows her anger towards it. The whole question is also interrelated with the power and nature of women’s sexuality, its control by men in marriage and the implications of the alternative that is of allowing women autonomy over themselves.

**Nature of Asceticism**

Dhritarashtra tries to stabilize his over wrought mind by discussing the nature of asceticism with the Rishi Sanata-sujata. The failure of Krishna’s mission to avert war raises a tempest of doubts, fears and misgivings as he apprehends the impending disaster. Wanting to regain his mental stability and equanimity, Dhritarashtra first questions Vidura and then Sanata-sujata on renunciation.³ According to Sanata-sujata, the essence of asceticism lies in the restraining of the senses. A person who has not been able to do that cannot be rescued from his sinful acts by any of the Vedas. Sanata-sujata explains that the universe sprang from the Supreme Soul by the union of conditions respecting name, form and attributes. Hence the Supreme Soul and the universe were different, not identical. Asceticism and sacrifices, he elaborated, had been prescribed to attain that Supreme Soul. A man of knowledge obtained the Supreme Soul through knowledge.
But those who desired to pursue the four of human aspirations of *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha* enjoyed the fruits of their actions both in this world and hereafter and when these were exhausted they returned to the world which was actually the realm of action. The fruits of ascetic austerities on the other hand could only be enjoyed in the other world by those who had not obtained mastery over their senses; but those who had, could enjoy them immediately in their lives on this earth itself leading to what Sri Aurobindo would call the life divine in this world. Therefore asceticism unstained by desire and other faults was capable of procuring emancipation but that which was stained by vanity and lacked true devotion, did not succeed.

Sanata-sujata then went on to explain what were the different kinds of faults that human beings were subject to. These included lust, anger, envy and others and unequivocally asserted that self-restraint, renunciation and knowledge of the Self, were the key to emancipation. Sanata-sujata expounded on both faults and virtues and concluded that one who was liberated from the five senses, the mind, and from the past and the future, attained happiness. In effect the soul had to be devoted to truth; all the worlds are established on truth,... self control, renunciation and self knowledge are said to have truth for their foremost attribute. Avoiding (these) faults, one should practice asceticism here. The Ordainer hath ordained that truth alone should be the vow of the righteous. Asceticism that is dissociated from these faults and endued with these virtues, becomes the source of great prosperity.4

Sanata-sujata then goes on to say:
There is but one Brahman which is Truth’s self. It is from ignorance of that One, that god-heads have been conceived to be diverse. But who is there, O king, that hath attained to Truth’s self or Brahman? Man regardeth himself wise without knowing that One Object of knowledge and from desire of happiness is engaged in study and the practices of charity and sacrifices. They have deviated from Truth (Brahman) and entertain purposes corresponding (with their state) and hence relying in the truth of Vedic texts thereof performs sacrifices. Some perform (or attain the object of) sacrifices by the mind (meditation), some by words (recitation of particular prayers, or japa); and some by acts (actual consummation of the Yatishtoma and other costly rites). The person, however, who seeketh the Brahman through Truth, obtaineth his desired objects at home.5
Thus the debate is whether ascetic practices and rituals are important or whether emancipation is obtained through knowledge and intuitive insights while exercising control over the senses and the vacillations of the mind.

The two ideas are inherent in the Vedas themselves, each of which has four parts known as Mantras, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. As Radhakrishnan points out the Mantras or hymns especially of the Rig Veda which constitute the beginning of Indian philosophy, paved the way for the monistic tendencies of the Upanishads by progressing through polytheism and monotheism to suggestions of monism.\(^6\) The Brahmanas are chiefly religious documents teaching precepts and sacrificial duties. Aranyakas and the Upanishads form the concluding parts of the Brahmanas which instruct the householder in the rituals that he must perform. But when he becomes old and retires to the forests, he needs to substitute something in place of these rituals. The Aranyakas, falling between the Brahmanas and the Upanishads, fulfill this need by encouraging contemplation and meditation. While the hymns are the creations of poets, the Brahmanas are the works of priests, and the Upanishads are the meditations of philosophers. The Upanishads simultaneously continue the Vedic religion and are also a philosophical protest against the prescriptions of the Brahmanas. The tendency of spiritual monism in the Upanishads is to be found in much of Indian philosophy. They also recognized that intuition rather than reason was the true guide to the Ultimate Truth.

**Asceticism and Moksha**

But what is the goal of the ascetic way of life? Presumably it is to attain moksha or liberation. What does liberation mean? If it is freedom from what and to what? Why should a person worry about liberation when he is perfectly happy in this world and wishes to enjoy it rather than to renounce it? Also if it is a cessation from the cycle of birth and death, why should any one be concerned about it since we do not remember our past lives anyway.\(^7\)

There are two general propositions from which the idea of Moksha has to be ascertained. One is that pleasure and suffering or Sukha and Dukha are the results of
one’s own acts. The second is that from the moment of conception one experiences the fruits of one’s actions that are carried over from previous lives as well. These two propositions are the essence of the Karma theory. They are connected to another proposition that not all acts come to fruition immediately or even in one lifetime. Hence the necessity to posit rebirth, or a whole cycle of births and deaths. The entire edifice of Karma is not built on the idea of God but on the structure of human desire and what necessarily follows from it. The idea is, therefore, completely secular as is the connected proposition that the Karma of man never leaves him. The Shanti Parva explains the whole theory. The fruits of one’s actions are like a trust protected by the unseen. At the appointed time, acts done earlier bear fruit. Honour insult, gain loss, rise fall, all these are the result of one’s actions in the past and are exhausted once experienced. If one can reach a point where the consequences of all actions are over and no new ones emerge, one is liberated.

Therefore, moksha is the ultimate point in the logic of Karma. Together they constitute a rational system of thought in which all its essential propositions are derived from the main premise that every act, good or bad, if done with a motive binds the doer. The rationality of karma and moksha is based on the empirical experience of trishna or thirst and asakti or obsessive entanglement that lead to a virtually endless chain of acts. Only those acts that are done with a desired objective bind the doer. Acts done disinterestedly do not count as ‘acts’ in the logic of karma. Hence the importance of nishkama karma or action without the desire for its fruits. Therefore, it is the mind and not the outward act that is the decisive factor. For the full logic of actions to be played out requires a series of lives. Therefore moksha or liberation which is the desired purpose of asceticism is to be released from the repetitive series of life and death. For this one has to overcome the thirst for desire and dissolve all entanglements. Hence the ascetic way of life.8

But the question is why should a person desire moksha or liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth when he has no consciousness of it. It is explained in the Ashwamedhika Parva by a brahmana to an ascetic named Kashyapa.9 Human experience
he says, is usually repetitive. Only names and faces change. *Moksha* is simply a poignant human cry for the release from the toil and fatigue of repetitive experience. Nowhere is there too much happiness nor does a person remain in any one state for too long. Even after obtaining the highest state, one falls and suffering comes again and again. Sinful deeds are done because of the insatiable thirst for pleasure and this leads to unwholesome states. The *brahmana* said that he had died several times and had been born several times. He had had various kinds of foods and known all kinds of mothers and fathers in various births. He had known both pleasures and sufferings of strange kinds. Many times he had known the loss of loved ones and kept company with those not dear to him. He had known the pain of losing wealth obtained with great trouble. Misfortune and pain had been inflicted upon by him strangers and from those near to him. He had known awful pains of the body and sufferings of the mind. He had received severe punishments and known dreadful bondage. He had several times fallen into darkness and known the pain of repeated dying. Again and again he had suffered old age, disease and afflictions of many kinds. He had known the pain of conflicts inherent in the world. It was from this repetitive weariness arising from the feeling that one had seen and experienced it all arose the ultimate aspiration for neither grace nor bliss but simply for a release from the toil and fatigue of experience. Hence, a large part of *Mahabharata* discusses *moksha* as liberation from the ceaseless toil of birth and rebirth. But the more basic question that it raises is of *moksha* as human freedom here and now, in this life. The main concern is not what will happen after death for that is mere speculation but what one makes of one’s self in this life which is concrete and visible.\textsuperscript{10}

What are the characteristics of a free person? Three features are enumerated in the *Ashwamedhika Parva*. He has risen above the play of opposites. Physically he may experience heat or cold but these do not assail his consciousness. He fears no one and creates conditions for others also to be free from fear. He perceives the oneness of all human beings and so works ceaselessly for the good of others so that they are enhanced, enriched, sustained and held together.\textsuperscript{11} But freedom is also necessarily not just in relation to the other but also in relation to one’s self and bondage is created by one’s ignorance and wrong understanding of who one is. So freedom also lies within oneself.
From this it follows that self understanding is the clearest path to human freedom. It is not something esoteric. It is achieved gradually by reflecting upon one’s relations with human realities.

The experiential world is a chain of *samsara* or a series of act-consequence-act. It is logical to snap this chain in this life itself by emptying the consciousness of all conceivable opposites. Such a state is *moksha*. It is neither negative nor positive, neither good nor bad. First one has to take a step that takes one beyond the polarities and having done that the very feeling that one has renounced has itself to be renounced so that there is not even an awareness that something has been given up.

What are the paths to *moksha*? One is thought to be external renunciation but the *Shanti Parva* emphasizes that mere withdrawal from the world and renunciation from personal and social bonds is not really *moksha*. When King Janaka decides to renounce everything and retire to the forest, his wife tells him that no one becomes a monk by renunciation, maintaining silence and by begging. He alone is a genuine monk who has risen above his narrow and petty self interests and is not attached to pleasures. If passions are not removed from one’s heart then to wear ochre robes and shave one’s head is to use renunciation for selfish ends as a means of livelihood or escape. King Janaka realizes that discriminating awareness is the only means to *moksha*, freedom from pain and suffering. All external signs are irrelevant. Inwardly free, it is a matter of indifference whether a person wears an ochre robe or the regalia of a king. Except in the *vairagya* tradition which includes monastic disciplines, Indian thought has never denied the natural bonds of love and affection on the way to spiritual freedom.

Also, *moksha* is not achieved by practicing some ritual nor is it only for some special section of people. Ordinary human beings can achieve inner freedom. There is no need to wear external uniforms. As is pointed out in the *Shanti Parva*, a *sanyasi* and a householder are alike in exercising self control, in being subject to the logic of attraction and aversion, egoism, arrogance and grasping.
Asceticism, Sexuality and Women

Mahabharata acknowledges the power of women’s sexuality. It is felt that this has to be dealt with if state power itself has to be preserved. That is why Yudhishthira, the newly appointed king after the war, requests Bhishma, lying on his bed of arrows, to tell him about the disposition of women who were supposed to be the root of all evil and were regarded as exceedingly frail. Marriage, motherhood and family are considered sacrosanct. On them depends the well-being of society and hence of the state. If the norms pertaining to them are threatened and challenged the order of life quickly transforms into chaos.

Women’s sexuality is seen to be a potentially extremely destructive force in front of which the mightiest of men are rendered helpless. Yet, it can be put to great use once it is subordinated and regulated. Hence, women are divided into two classes: the utterly destructive because of their unbridled sexuality and the chaste wives and mothers. The virtuous women are the highly blessed mothers of the universe who uphold the earth with all its waters and forests. They need to be protected and cherished. Those who are not virtuous are those with unbridled sexuality through which they destroy the entire race and cannot be restrained or protected.

Hence marriage is regarded as central to women’s existence and except for prepuberty and widowhood, Brahmanical theology does not recognize the celibate status of women. A woman derives her identity as wife-mother, that is, through husbands and sons. Hence the highest dharma of a woman is said to be serving her husband in life and becoming a sati after his death so as to remain united to him in life hereafter. This being so, the central duty of a father towards his daughter is to get her married at the earliest opportunity.

It is argued by Olivelle that three of the four ashramas demand celibacy. Since marriage was considered to be central to a woman’s existence, she could not be part of brahmacharya, vanaprastha or sanyas. Even in marriage, women could only participate in the religious acts of their husbands and not as independent agents. Since the four
ashramas were supposed to be a gradual but sure way to advance spiritually and to attain the final goal of human beings, by denying women this ladder of ascent, the Brahminical theology was asserting the spiritual superiority of men. Since the very nature of the institution of marriage is one in which necessarily the husband and wife participate, when a women enters matrimony, at best it could be said that she is participating in the second ashram, that is the grihasthya. However, even in this she has no autonomy but does so only through the religious actions of her husband. For example, when Pandu, cursed to die at the time of sexual intercourse, decides to renounce the world, his two wives Kunti and Madri implore him not to as he could perform great austerities in the company of his two lawful wives within the framework of marriage itself. However the role of the wife is participatory and not independent and autonomous.

This is as far as the theoretical construct goes. However, as Patrick Olivelle points out, in real life women participated in the social institutions of the system. As has been stated earlier, there is evidence of female Vedic initiation and study during that period. There is also the overwhelming evidence of independent female ascetics even within the Brahmanical tradition. Buddhism and Jainism established parallel monastic orders for women and early Sanskrit grammatical literature refers to female ascetics as do the Dharmashastras themselves and the legal treatises of the time. In the Mahabharata too, there are female renouncers and female hermits are accepted within the Brahmanical tradition.

The Anger of Ascetics

Most of the male ascetics in Mahabharata can hardly be considered as Jivan Mukta or liberated beings. They are full of anger and curse for the smallest transgression, imagined or real. Anger, unrestrained lust and greed, were considered the three doors to self ruin. A brahmana was supposed to have self restraint and control over his passions but as Chaturvedi Badrinath points out, there seems to have been something in their calling itself that produced anger. Each varna was expected to follow a certain discipline. Such impossibly high standards of conduct were expected of a brahmana that it was bound to create a grinding feel of resentment and anger. For one who sought
learning, there were no pleasures. If one wanted pleasure, he should give up learning. But, as Badrinath says, to seek pleasure in all its ways is a natural human attribute. If a person is made to live a joyless life, it is fertile ground for anger. This was aggravated because around him the brahmana saw the power and glory of the kshatriya and the affluence of the merchant and the trader. He was not only excluded from both but also dependent on for his own sustenance of himself and that of his family. The desire for money and power is human attribute and a brahmana, an ascetic even more so, was denied both. The only thing left for him to get from the three varnas was respect. So coupled with resentment at his joyless, poverty stricken, powerless existence, he had a feeling of humiliation because of dependence. Hence, even the smallest sign of disrespect made his anger blaze up. In addition, he was expected to do yajna, be polite and courteous, have forbearance and self control, rise above delight, anger and arrogance and other impossible things like take no pleasure arising from smell and taste. Also, he was not supposed to wish for any honours, acclaim or fame. It is no wonder that he felt angry and bitter.

The women ascetics on the other hand show no anger except for Amba. The others Shandili, Sulabha and Madhavi when compared to their male counterparts truly reveal themselves to be evolved persons of great stability. Perhaps this is because they have already been ripened and matured through suffering.

**Amba the Vengeful Ascetic**

Amba sought ascetism after being carried away by Bhishma for marriage with Vichitravirya and then being abandoned by both Bhishma and Shalva whom she had accepted in her heart as her husband. Insulted, she did not want to return to her father and so went to the asylum of Sheikhavatya, an ascetic of merit and a preceptor of the scriptures and the Aranyakas. She pleaded with him to instruct her in the practice of penances as she wanted to renounce the world and practice the severest of ascetic austerities in order to destroy Bhishma whom she regarded as the root cause of all her misfortunes. The sage Sheikhavatya consulted with the other brahmanas of the asylum and after deliberations they all promised to help her. However at first they tried to
persuade her to return to her father as life in the woods was exceedingly hard and she was a delicate princess. A woman needed a father or a husband they said to protect her, but she refused to pay any heed to their persuasion. Just as they were discussing the best course of action, there arrived Hotravahan, a royal sage and a great of ascetic. He turned out to be Amba’s maternal grandfather who, after hearing in detail all the misfortune that had befallen her, advised her to go to Rama, the son of Jamadagni. He was certain, that Rama would take revenge on her behalf from Bhishma. They were wondering how to find Rama when Akritavrana, Rama’s close companion came there. After being told every thing Akritavrana said that he wanted to be very clear about what Amba really wanted; to marry Shalva or to avenge herself on Bhishma. Amba said she was implacable in her desire to see Bhishma slain in battle.

A day later Rama himself arrived. On hearing what had happened, he agreed to call for Bhishma who was also his disciple and challenge him to battle if he did not obey his command to marry Amba. However, Amba insisted that there was no point in this as he had already rejected her and so the only course of action open was to slay him. A battle then ensued between Bhishma and his preceptor Rama in which Bhishma’s mother Ganga herself became his charioteer. It remained inconclusive for several days but at last Rama had to concede to Amba that he had been unsuccessful. Since he had been vanquished by Bhishma he told Amba that she had no option left but to seek Bhishma’s mercy and ask him for refuge.

Amba refused saying that she would not go a second time to Bhishma but to a place where through ascetic practices she may herself obtain the capacity to slay Bhishma in battle. She entered the forests where she practiced austerities beyond human endurance. Without food, emaciated, dry, with matted locks and begrimed with filth for six months she lived on air alone and stood as still as a street post. She similarly passed another year standing in Yamuna, and yet another year after that on her front toes having eaten only one leaf fallen from a tree. Thus she practiced different kinds of the severest of penances for twelve years.
Although disowned by her relatives for her course of action, Amba did not desist. She went to Vatsabhumi the retreat of the high-souled ascetics resorted to by the Siddhas and Charanas, and also she roamed from asylum to asylum till one day Ganga, Bhishma’s mother asked her what it was that she really wanted. Amba answered quite honestly that it was the destruction of Bhishma, Ganga’s son whom she wanted to slay in battle. At this she was cursed by Ganga to become a river, crooked in her course and dry for eight months being filled with water only during the rains. Her bathing places said Ganga, would be difficult to approach and she would be filled with alligators and other fierce creatures inspiring fear. This came true on Amba’s return to Vatsabhumi but because of her ascetic merit, only half of her became the river while the other half remained a maiden.

The maiden continued to practice severe austerities resolved to obtain manhood and the capacity to avenge herself in battle with Bhishma. Finally, moved by her penance, Shiva himself arrived and granted her the boon that she would be born in the race of Drupada and after the passage of a certain period from her birth, she would obtain manhood. Further, she would have the satisfaction of remembering the incidents of her life in the next when she would become proficient in the use of weapons and be a fierce warrior who would be the destruction of Bhishma.

**Shandili the Independent Ascetic**

While Amba became an ascetic after being spurned and insulted as a princess, Shandili was a female ascetic who was completely independent of everyone, and full stationed within herself. She lived on Mount Rishabha where came Galava rishi mounted on Garuda. Galava, having completed his studies asked his preceptor Rishi Vishwamitra what he could give him. After much persuasion, the teacher said that he wanted eight hundred steeds, as white as the rays of the moon with each having one black ear. This demand filled Galava with great anxiety as he did not know how he could find the means to procure such steeds. At this time came his friend Garuda, the son of Vinata and the mount of Vishnu. He had already spoken to Vishnu about Galava and taken his
permission to help his friend. So he happily carried Galava to various quarters of the universe in search of the required horses.

In the course of their travels, Galava and Garuda alighted on Mount Rishabha where they met the *brahmana* lady Shandili engaged in ascetic penances. Both of them worshipped her and she in turn greeted them warmly. Enquiring their welfare, she offered them hospitality. After eating the food given to them by her both Galava and Garuda retired to rest but when they got up, they found that Garuda’s wings had fallen off. He looked like a mere ball of flesh with only his head and legs. Galava looked at Garuda sorrowfully and wondered what sin he had committed which had brought him to this state.

Garuda denied having done anything wrong. The only thing that he could think of was that he had entertained the thought of carrying Shandili to where Mahadeva and Vishnu resided as he felt that she too should live there. However, he decided that he would ask her forgiveness and appeal to her mercy and compassion if he had unknowingly in some way offended her. He did not know whether his thought had been right or wrong but he realized that it was certainly against her wishes. Shandili agreed to restore his feathers but explained to him that she had felt slighted by him and that any being who entertained any contemptuous thoughts about her would have to suffer. She asserted that she had attained high ascetic merit because of the purity of her conduct and not through anybody’s help. She felt that Garuda had disregarded the significance of this in his thinking. She restored his feathers to him and allowed him to leave but warned him that he should not be contemptuous of any woman even if she had done something blamable.

The question arises what was Garuda’s fault? It could be argued that he thought so highly of Shandili that he felt she should live with the gods themselves. Perhaps what Shandili is trying to say is that a woman as rooted in goodness as she was did not need to live with the gods. She did not have to derive any inner energy or strength from them as
goodness had an absolute value to which the gods could add nothing. This is what Garuda had disregarded and for which she had punished him.

**Madhavi the Wronged Ascetic**

Then there is the beautiful princess Madhavi the story of whose life is horrifying in her being bartered for material goods at the instance of her own father Yayati.\(^{21}\) Having failed to find the steeds, Galava and Garuda went to King Yayati who received them with all the warmth and honours at his command. They explained to Yayati the kind of steeds that were needed to give to Vishwamitra and requested him to procure them for Galava with his vast wealth. Yayati explained that he had lost a lot of his wealth and so he did not have resources that they thought he had but at the same time he did not want to turn them back empty handed. So he said he would help them by giving them his beautiful daughter Madhavi who was desired both by gods and men. He would be happy if they could use her beauty to get what they wanted as kings would be willing to give away their kingdoms for her. In return, all he wanted was a son from his daughter as a daughter’s son was a means to attain heaven.

Galava and Gaurda accepted the gift of Madhavi and started thinking of which king they should approach who would be able to give them a fit dower for her. The first king they went to was Haryyaswa of the Ikshvaku race who ruled at Ayodhya. Wanting offspring, he lived in quiet and peace performing great austerities. When Haryyaswa heard the offer, he was blinded by desire but became sorrowful as he had only two hundred horses of the kind required and not eight. He therefore, suggested, that he would beget only one son on her and consequently give them one-fourth of the required dower.

This perplexed Galava and Garuda till Madhavi herself spoke up. She said that she had a boon that after each delivery she would regain her virginity. Hence, she could be given away to four kings to get the eight hundred horses and she would have four sons. They readily agreed and in due time, after a son was born to Haryyaswa, Galava came back to claim Madhavi who, having become a virgin again, followed him. They then went to Divodasa, the King of Kashi who also sported with her and had a son from
her in return for two hundred steeds. After that, once again Madhavi left everything to keep her promise and followed Galava to King Usinara in the City of Bhojas. Galava offered to king Usinara that Madhavi would bear him two sons in return for the required four hundred horses. However, king Usinara too, had only two hundred horses of the kind required and so like his predecessors he also got only one son from her in return for two hundred horses.

After the son was born, Galava came to king Usinara at the appointed time and took Madhavi away with him. He went to see Garuda with Madhavi and the six hundred houses that he had acquired. When he told Garuda that one fourth of his task still remained, Garuda informed him that there were no more steeds of that kind left in the universe and so he should offer Madhavi to Vishwamitra himself in lieu of the remaining two hundred horses.

Taking Garuda’s advice, Galava together with Madhavi and the six hundred steeds that he had obtained went to Vishwamitra. When Vishwamitra heard the whole story he said he wished that Galava had brought Madhavi first to him as he could then himself have begotten four sons on her. Anyway, asking Galava to leave the steeds in his asylum, he got one son from Madhavi. After that, having given over Madhavi to his disciple, Vishwamitra went into the woods.

Galava and Garuda arrived to fetch Madhavi, happy that they had managed to give Vishwamitra the fee demanded by him. Galava complimented Madhavi for bearing the four sons by which she had saved him, her father, and the kings to whom she had gone. He then took her back to her father Yayati who together with her two brothers, arranged a swayamvara for her at a hermitage on the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna. A vast concourse of Nagas, Yaksha, human beings, Gandharvas, animals, birds, dwellers of mountains, trees and forests and the inhabitants of the province assembled. However, Madhavi passed by all of them and went into the forests, which have always been considered sacred and devoted herself to ascetic austerities. This shows the agonies that her mind must have gone through at being, in effect, sold off by her father in the full
knowledge of what awaited her and then having been sexually exploited by sages and kings for their own purposes.

It is ironical that when thousands of years later her father fell from heaven, his virtue having expired because of his egotism and arrogance, it was the virtue of Madhavi the ascetic which saved him. As he fell he wished sorrowfully that he would land among the righteous. Thus he fell among the kings Pratarddana, Vasumanas, Shivi and Ashtaka, sons of Madhavi who had assembled in the Naimisha forest to perform the sacrifice called Vajapeya. They realized that he was their maternal grandfather and offered him their virtues and the fruits of their sacrifices. About this time Madhavi arrived in the course of her wanderings. She also gave him a part of the virtue earned by her. Just then, Galava also came and gave him an eighth part of the virtue earned by him. And so with the help of everyone, Yayati ascended to heaven again.

Thus Madhavi truly reached the lofty heights of asceticism to become a jivan mukta leaving the petty world of patriarchal male ascetics, kings, and brothers far behind her. Perhaps in a completely different context she, like Amba, understood that she had to find her own realization and like Shandili had to get so rooted in goodness that she no longer needed anyone; man, beast or god. In giving Yayati her virtue she showed that she had risen above the play of victory-defeat, gain-loss, honour and insult.

Sulabha the Wandering Mendicant

The issue whether it is possible to rise above worldly entanglements and the polarities of success and failure while performing the worldly duties of a householder or a king is explored in the interaction between king Janaka of Mithila and the ascetic mendicant Sulabha. Yudhishthira, attracted to the spiritual mode of life in the forests and a disillusioned and reluctant king, asked Bhishma if anyone had attained emancipation without abandoning the domestic mode of life. This, in effect, is his own dilemma. Bhishma answered by telling him of the discourse that took place between Janaka, the king of Mithila and Sulabha.
King Janaka was devoted to ascetic practices and well conversant with the Vedas, the scriptures on emancipation and with the scriptures concerning the duties of a king. Sulabha was a mendicant and an ascetic who practiced the duties of yoga and wandered over the earth. She had heard about the king who claimed to be a jivan mukta while performing his kingly duties and wanted to meet him personally to see if this was true and even really possible. Through the powers of her yoga, she assumed the most faultless features and a form of unrivalled beauty and presented herself before the king as a mendicant.

On seeing her, the monarch was filled with wonder. He welcomed her and once she was refreshed by the rites of hospitality, she asked the king to state his position with regard to the religion of emancipation. The king in turn enquired who she was, from where had she come and who did she belong to. She entered the consciousness of the king through her consciousness and held it from escaping her in order to ascertain the truth. The king understood her intentions and the two now appeared to each other as equals in their subtle forms while apparently retaining their gross forms: the monarch without the royal umbrella and sceptre and Sulabha without the triple stick. The idea was that the bearing of the sceptre and of the triple stick were only modes of life. Both the king and the sanyasin were free to acquire knowledge and so both could gain emancipation notwithstanding their different emblems indicative of their different societal positions. The emblems themselves could not mean efficacy or disqualification as all persons got attached to particular things whether it was the sceptre or the triple stick. The issue was of bondage or attachment and not the validity of the object of attachment. The littleness or greatness of things could not be a bar to emancipation. Similarly kingship or mendicancy neither could be a disqualification or obstruction in gaining knowledge and through it achieving the desired liberation.

Janaka, considered himself to be free from the bonds of kingship, and introduced himself as the disciple of the sage Panchashikha who belonged to the mendicant order of Parashara’s race. Janaka said that he was a worthy disciple who had become fully conversant with the Sankhya and Yoga systems and the ordinances with respect to
sacrifices and other rites which constituted the path of emancipation having been taught by Panchashikha while he stayed with him during the four months of monsoon and discoursed to him about the several paths to emancipation in an appropriate manner suited to his intelligence. Panchshikha did not command him to give up kingship, rather he taught him how to live free from all attachments, fixing his soul on the Supreme Brahma and unmoved by companionship. Janaka said he had understood that renunciation of all kinds of attachments was the highest means prescribed for emancipation. It was from knowledge that one gained renunciation and renunciation led to freedom. From knowledge arose the endeavour for yoga and through it one attained an understanding of the self or soul. Through the knowledge of the self, one transcended both joy and grief and that enabled one to transcend death and attain high success. Janaka claimed to have acquired the knowledge of the self and thus transcended all pairs of opposites, becoming free in this life itself. Therefore to him, he proclaimed, it was all the same if some one coated his right arm with sandal paste or hacked his left with a knife. For him a lump of clay, a piece of iron and a piece of gold were all alike. He claimed not to be attached to either the material power of kingship or to the worldly affections and love, having become a jivan mukta, that is liberated from the human condition while being a part of it. Although he was a king where it was natural to be grasping and be bound to wealth, he said he was free from all bonds.

The ego of the king was evident in both what he said and what he omitted to say. While it was true that he had been taught Sankhya and Yoga by Panchashikha but he did not acknowledge that the most important lesson of his life had been given to him by his wife Kausalya when she had persuaded him not to leave his kingdom and become a mendicant. She had made him realize that there was no logic to his taking outward sanyas as his station in life was that of a king and not a brahmana. True liberation, she had said was possible even in the state of a householder. In any case, she asked him what kind of freedom would Janaka achieve by giving up his kingship and becoming dependent on others even for his daily sustenance. As long as there was need and dependence, there could be no freedom. She had pointed out that those who renounced the world were actually sustained by householders. Further, if passions were not
removed from the heart, the ochre robes were only a means to selfish ends. The ochre robe, the shaven head and the trident were the outward signs of renunciation and did not necessarily lead to liberation or moksha. No one was a monk only because he had renounced his profession and family and taken to begging. A true monk was one who had risen above his petty self interests and was not attached to worldly pleasures.

Kausalya could be accused of self interest as a wife in dissuading her husband from worldly renunciation. But the same lesson was taught by the simple housewife to the arrogant brahmana Kaushika who became angry with her. Reproving him she firmly said that she was not like the bird he had reduced to ashes with his wrath. She told him that he had not really understood the essence of virtue and advised him to learn from the meat seller who lived in Mithila, driving home the point that liberation was of the mind and not of outward positions, emblems and stations of life. Similar teaching was given by Markandeya to Yudhishthira in the Vana Parva and Savitri voiced the same idea in her conversation with Yama when he was taking away her husband Satyavan. Therefore Mahabharata repeatedly emphasizes that asceticism is not a matter of outward symbols but of the equanimity of the mind which makes one transcend the bonds of polarities and attachments.

After his detailed self congratulatory introduction of himself to Sulabha, Janaka became accusatory and even insulting to her. Far from being emancipated, he seemed to lose all control over himself. It was as if someone had touched a raw nerve in him of inner doubts, insecurities and fears and all the venom came tumbling out. He began by saying that Sulabha was young and beautiful and so he doubted very much that she had managed to subjugate her senses. He then took umbrage to her having forcibly held him and accused her of transgressing her sanyas as he saw it as an indication of her desire for him and so violative of his person. If one was endowed with yoga, he said, but was still driven by one’s desire for the other, there was no point in renunciation or in carrying the triple stick. She was guilty, according to him, of several transgressions by entering his inner being. She was a brahman and he a kshatriya and therefore their union amounted to an illegitimate mingling of varnas. Further she was a sanyasin and he a grihastha or
householder and so by establishing contact with him she had caused the illegitimate mixing of *ashramas* or stages of life. Moreover, their *gotras* were not known and if both belonged to the same *gotra* she had also caused transgression of the *gotras*. In any case, her husband could be alive and if he was, this was another transgression. In every which way he castigated her of doing wrong and so of being a wicked women. He accused her of not only wanting to subjugate him to her desires but also the whole assembly and that he said was the reason why she was continuously glancing at those who had gathered there.

Janaka seemed to have lost all his stability and become profoundly disturbed. Since he was her being lodged within him a sexual he felt that for Sulabha to satisfy her sexual desire, through yoga was utterly reprehensible. When a man and a woman desired each other, their union was like nectar but when the woman did not get the man she desired, it hurt her like poison. He warned her not to touch him and to follow the discipline of *sanyas*. He was convinced that she was trying to test whether he was genuinely liberated and could resist the temptation she had put in his path. He then wondered whether she had actually come on her own or had been sent by another king to spy on him and if the latter it was completely wrong for her to put on the guise of a renunciate. A person who went to a king or to a person of a higher caste or to a good woman under false pretences he said, was bound to be destroyed. Therefore, he urged her to honestly disclose her caste, education, calling, the kind of person she was and the purpose of her coming to him.

Sulabha did not lose her equanimity at hearing the completely inappropriate words of Janaka and spoke calmly to him. She began by indirectly pointing out his excess in language when she began by saying that her words would be productive, meaningful, fair and just. By implication his were not. She said she would be coherent and logical without being hurtful or ambiguous. Further, she would not speak out of anger, fear or greed. While she would not say anything out of pride, there would also not be any false humility and she would respond to his propositions firmly refuting them where necessary.
Sulabha then proceeded to outline what were the elements of meaningful communication. One was the coming together of the speaker, the listener and the speech. If the speaker disregarded the listener and only talked on what interested him, he would not reach the listener. But on the other hand, if the speaker disregarded what interested him and spoke keeping only the interest of the listener in mind, that is, if he merely played to the gallery, his speech would necessarily sound insincere. Therefore, for proper communication, a true speaker had to speak in the interest of both himself and the other. Having delivered this indirect criticism of Janaka’s harangue, she requested him for his undivided attention.

To his question of who she was, she first gave a long analysis of the thirty elements that composed the human body to make the point that the physical form changed at different stages of life from childhood to youth and then old age. Also, the characteristics that distinguished one individual from another also kept changing but so subtly that it was almost imperceptible. Moreover, the world moved swiftly from one state to another and hence it was difficult to say where one came from and to whom one belonged. If, as a jivan mukta Janaka had acquired a sense of unity in all, seeing his own self in the other, then why did he keep asking who she was and who she belonged to. These questions were irrelevant to one who had liberated himself from conflicting dualities. Also, his accusations of her having illegitimately mingled the ashramas, the varnas and the gotras were irrelevant for a liberated person as they could only arise in the functional, conventional and social world.

If Janaka were truly liberated she wondered how she could have committed an offence by entering his subtle being as sanyasis of any gender could take residence in a place of solitude which the inner being was. Therefore there was no pollution in what she had done. She had not physically touched him in any way but if in spite of that he had felt her touch, the teachings of sage Panchashikha had been rather futile in Janaka’s case. Moreover, in sensing the touch of a woman other than his wife, he had slipped from the discipline of a householder. In the light of what Janaka had said Sulabha affirmed
that she could only conclude that he had not obtained moksha; he had only been talking about it. In any case she asked how as a sanyasini who had no attachment to her own body, could she be seeking his?

To the accusation of varna sankara because of the union of a brahmana and a kshatriya, she pointed out that she as a sanyasini did not belong to any varna at all. However she informed him that by birth she was a kshatriya like him and of a royal family being the daughter of king Pradhana. But, she pointed out there was a fallacy in Janaka’s accusation because in the state of ultimate liberation, no distinctions remained. All beings were perceived only as manifestations of the same Self, the Atman. Hence there could be nothing separate and so there could be no mixing, legitimate or illegitimate.

The argument on both counts of varna and ashram could be refuted in another way too. Take a vessel with milk she said, in which a fly falls. All three – the vessel, the milk and the fly – are interconnected but not mixed as they cannot lose their separateness. Whichever argument is accepted, there can be no mixing. Moreover, she questioned, how could a person who professed such neutrality of feeling that it was the same to him whether his right aim was coated with sandal paste or whether his left arm was hacked by a sword, be so concerned with legitimate and illegitimate mixing.

Sulabha told Janaka that she had not married because she had not found a man worthy of her. Consequently she had become a renouncer, living and traveling alone. She neither assumed false guises not did she deviate from her dharma. Hence she could not be the cause of illegitimate mixing of varnas and ashramas. She said that she was resolute in what she did and spoke only after careful thought. She had come to visit Janaka only because she had heard that he had attained moksha while remaining a king and a householder. She had been disappointed. In any case, it was impossible for him to become liberated while remaining a king because given the duties of a kingship, he could not be liberated from the human condition or be free from illusions and pretensions. As a king he had necessarily to be concerned with who was his enemy, who his friend or who
remained neutral in times of war, or while negotiating a treaty or imposing a penalty. Further, a king lived within a kingdom which had its boundaries. There were further limitations. Within that kingdom he lived in a city in his palace and slept on a bed that he shared with his wife. So how could he be free? He acted on the advice of his ministers and often had to do things that he did not want or like to do but which had to be done because they were essential for the wellbeing and security of his kingdom. So how could he be free she asked? A king’s life was full of fears and suspicions and these created bondage not freedom. It was not that Sulabha unaware of the necessity of order in human society which flowed from the structure of kingship and state. Her only concern was to test the pretensions of King Janaka, to being totally liberated. Wrong perceptions of one’s self, she asserted did not do any good. She punctured Janaka’s perceived and projected notions about himself and assured him that she would disturb him no further, happily leaving the following day. At the end of it, Janaka had little left to say.

**Conclusion**

The women ascetics of Mahabharata leave one in no doubt that external symbols do not matter. Asceticism is of the mind. True liberation, which is the end of ascetic practices, lies in rising above the polarities of the world and transcending all attachments. It is the men who seem to remain entangled in the pursuit of power, wealth and desire in spite of being ascetics. In fact they use the ascetic merit acquired through rigorous practices to obtain them with even greater ferocity and vigour. The women, on the other hand, have a turning away from the world. Suffering the injustices of patriarchy, they turn to asceticism to liberate themselves from worldly desires and attachments to obtain an inner serenity and peace.

(Kavita A. Sharma)


4 Ibid., p.99

5 Ibid., p.100


8 Sjanti Parva, Sections CLXXVII – CLXXXI, CCXL – CCXLI

9 Ashwamedhika Parva, Sections XVI – XIX


11 Ashwamedhika Parva, Section XIX

12 Shanti Parva, Section XVIII

13 Shanti Parva, Section CCCXX

14 Patrick Olivelle, pp. 183-190

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


18 Ibid.

19 Udyog Parva, Sections CLXXIV – CXCV

20 Udyog Parva, Section CXIII


22 Shanti Parva, Sections CCCXX – CCXI. See also, Chaturvedi Badrinath, The Women of Mahabharata pp.130-147.