

Kunti, Satyavati's grand-daughter-in-law, is a remarkable study in womanhood.¹ Kunti chooses the handsome Pandu in a bridegroom-choice ceremony, *svayamvara*, only to find Bhishma snatching away her happiness by marrying him off again immediately to the captivating Madri. She insists on accompanying her husband into exile and faces a horripilating situation: her beloved husband insists that she get son after son for him by others. It is in this husband-wife encounter² that Kunti's individuality shines forth. At first she firmly refuses saying, "Not even in thought will I be embraced by another (I.121.5)."

Her statement is somewhat devious, as already she has embraced Surya and regained virgin status by virtue of his boon after delivering Karna. It is, however, evidence of her resolve to maintain an unsullied reputation. Unlike her grandmother-in-law Satyavati, who had no problems with summoning her illegitimate son Vyasa to keep the Hastinapura dynasty running, Kunti does not acknowledge the existence of her pre-marital son. Nothing must interfere with the chances of Pandu's restoration to the throne. She does not tell Pandu about Karna, even when, while trying to persuade her, he enumerates various categories of sons who are scripturally permissible, including *kanin* (one born to the wife before marriage). Children born with the sanction of her husband would be a completely different proposition from one born to her in adolescence as an unmarried princess.

Hence, Kunti urges Pandu to emulate Vyushitashva, who died prematurely because of sexual over-indulgence like Pandu's father, but whose wife Bhadra obtained seven sons by embracing his corpse. Pandu refuses to invite death-in-intercourse with Kunti—though ironically that is precisely what he does with Madri—

“One-in Herself” Why Kunti Remains a Kanya

○ Pradip Bhattacharya

*In the first two parts of this quest we have explored two of the five kanyas, Ahalya and Mandodari of the Ramayana, seeking to understand what makes them such remarkable women, as well as describe what special features characterise all these kanyas. We are now entering the dense forest of the Mahabharata to discuss Kunti. To help the readers through its thickly interwoven maze of relationships, I have provided the broad linkages of these characters in a separate box (see opposite page).**

and tries to persuade her urging that (a) she will only be doing what is sanctioned by the northern Kuru (I.122.7); (b) the new custom of being faithful to one's husband is very recent; (c) precedents exist of Sharad-andayani, Madayanti, Ambika and Ambalika.³; Finally, he quotes

Shvetaketu's scriptural directive for implicitly obeying the husband's commands:

“The woman who, commanded by her husband to procreate children, refuses, is guilty of the sin of infanticide.” (I.122.19)



This Kangra painting ca 1800 painting shows Draupadi, the Pandavas, and their mother, Kunti, eating a meal; then their figures are repeated as they lie down to sleep. Draupadi's brother eavesdrops on their nighttime conversation to ascertain the identity of the ascetics. He then hastens back to report to his father to stop worrying about Draupadi because the ascetics are indeed princes in disguise.

This makes no impact on Kunti. She cannot be browbeaten and her character is far stronger than her husband's. She gives in only when Pandu abjectly begs her:

“Sweet lady,
I fold my palms
joining the tips
of my lotus-leaf fingers
and I implore you
listen to me!” (I.122.29)

Look at the sheer grace and power of her reply:

“Best of Bharatas! Great *adharmā* it is for a husband to ask repeatedly a favour: shouldn't a wife anticipate his wishes?” (I.122.32)

Only now, Kunti reveals the ace up her sleeve: where her husband had wanted her to approach some eminent Brahmin, she has the power to summon any god to her bed. Like her grandmother-in-law Satyawati revealing her final weapon Vyasa to Bhishma only in the last extremity, Kunti shares the secret of her *mantra* only after Pandu has been virtually brought to his knees. However, the choice of the impregnators remains wholly Pandu's; Kunti has no say in it. Let us not forget that she had chosen Pandu as her husband from among all the assembled kings. Perhaps it is this love, never trumpeted for public

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consumption, that drives her all through her life. Yet, just as Kunti was denied the choice of her sons' fathers, she too denies her daughter-in-law Draupadi of any say in choosing her husband and ensures that all her five sons, not just Arjuna who won her, wed her.

How pregnantly succinct is Vyasa's account of Kunti's encounter with Dharma!

Relationship of Characters of Mahabharata to Each Other

□ The sage **Parashara** forces himself on the fisher-maid Kali (dark)-Matsyagandha (fish-odorous)-**Satyavati** who is ferrying him across the Yamuna à Krishna (dark) Dvaipayana (born-on-an-island) **Vyasa (the arranger)**.

□ **Shantanu**, king of Hastinapura, marries (m.) **Ganga** à Devavrata-**Bhishma (of the terrible vow)**, who abjures the throne and vows celibacy to obtain the agreement of Satyawati to marry his father.

□ **Shantanu m. Satyawati** à Chitrangada (killed in a duel) & **Vichitravirya** who becomes king in adolescence, with Bhishma as regent.

□ **Vichitravirya m. Ambika and Ambalika**, princesses of Kashi (Benares) whom Bhishma abducts for this purpose. The youth dies without progeny. Bhishma refuses to break his vow and practice levirate on the widows as requested by the Queen-mother Satyawati. She summons her illegitimate son Vyasa who is a famous sage by now. Reluctantly he agrees à blind **Dhritarashtra** and pale (jaundiced?) **Pandu**. The latter rules, as the former is disqualified because of his blindness.

□ **Dhritarashtra m. Gandhari** (Bhishma had terrorised her father into giving her in marriage, whereupon she blinds herself by tying a cloth over her

eyes permanently) à 100 sons called the **Kauravas (Duryodhana, Duhshasana etc.)**, one daughter Duhshala, and another son Yuyutsu from a Vaishya maidservant when Gandhari was pregnant. Gandhari's brother **Shakuni** becomes their advisor.

□ **Shura** of the Yadavas of Mathura à **Pritha**, whom he gifts away in childhood to his childless friend Kuntibhoja who renames her Kunti. The sage Durvasa gives her an incantation (*mantra*) whereby she can summon anyone, even a god, for begetting a son. To experiment, she invokes **Surya** à **Karna**, whom she sets afloat in a basket in the river, as she is unmarried (see Part II).

□ **Karna** is rescued by a childless charioteer **Adhirath** and his wife **Radha**. **Duryodhana** makes **Karna** ruler of Anga and his fast friend.

□ A son of **Shura** is **Vasudeva**, whose sons **Balarama** and **Krishna** are **Pritha's** nephews.

□ In a *svayamvara* **Kunti m. Pandu**. Immediately, Bhishma pays heavy bride-price and brings **Madri** as Pandu's second wife. Pandu is childless, being cursed to die if he ever engages in coitus. In grief, he exiles himself with his wives in the Himalayas. Dhritarashtra rules. At his insistence, Kunti uses the *mantra* to summon **Dharma** à **Yudhishtira**; **Vayu** à **Bhima**; **Indra** à **Arjuna**. At

Pandu's plea, Kunti teaches the *mantra* to **Madri** who invokes the twin **Ashvinikumaras** à **Nakula** and **Sahadeva**. These are the five **Pandavas**.

□ Pandu forces himself on Madri and dies in coitus. Entrusting her sons to Kunti, Madri dies too. Kunti returns to Hastinapura with the five Pandavas.

□ Jealous of their cousins' claim to the throne, the Kauravas conspire with **Shakuni** and **Karna** to kill them. The Pandavas flee into a forest where a *rakshasi* **Hidimba m. Bhima** à **Ghatotkacha**.

□ The Pandavas reach the kingdom of Panchala where **Arjuna** wins the hand of its king Yajnasena-Prishat-**Drupada's** miraculously born daughter Yajnaseni (emerging from the sacrificial altar)-**Krishnaa (dark)-Parshati** (daughter of Prishat)-**Panchali (of Panchala)-Draupadi (daughter of Drupada)**. She becomes the common wife of the five brothers.

□ Dhritarashtra asks the Pandavas to make their home in the forest of Khandavaprastha. Balarama and Krishna assist the Pandavas in building their capital Indraprastha by clearing the forest of Khandava.

□ **Arjuna m. Subhadra**, sister of Balarama and Krishna à **Abhimanyu** who m. **Uttara** daughter of king Virata à **Parikshit** who becomes king of Hastinapura at the end of the epic.

* an “a” signifies “parent of”; an “m.” signifies “married”; a “—” indicates alternative names for the same character; the main name of the character is given in bold.

‘He smiled.

“Kunti, what can I give you?”

She smiled,

“A son.” (I.123.4)

There is no coy coquetry here, no bashfulness. A need is voiced to someone who is known and it is fulfilled. In the epic, Dharma is Vidura’s other name. He is Kunti’s *devara*, younger brother-in-law, who is scripturally designated as the proper person to approach when levirate (*niyoga*) is required. We notice the difference when Kunti summons Vayu (I.123.15). Here she is described as smiling shyly, for he is a stranger. Does this not remind us of another woman whose smile was also so mature and meaningful: the adolescent Kali-Matsyagandha, Kunti’s grandmother-in-law, smiling at the obsessed Parashara?⁴ Not content with a virtuous son (Yudhishtira born of Dharma) and a strong one (Bhima born of Vayu), Pandu now wants a paragon. And so, it is the king of the gods, Indra, who fathers Arjuna on Kunti. Thereafter, however, Kunti has the last word where Pandu’s desires are concerned. “Hungry for sons”, much like his grandmother Satyawati, Pandu urges Kunti to give him yet more sons. Perhaps he might have been anxious, having heard of Gandhari’s miraculously obtaining hundred sons. Kunti bluntly refuses, quoting scripture at him, just as he had quoted Shvetaketu to her:

Kunti shows remarkable control here. She refuses to be turned into a mindless womb seeded according to her husband’s whim to satisfy his inveterate craving for male heirs.



Surya appears at Kunti’s call

“The wise do not sanction a fourth conception, even in crisis. The woman who has intercourse with four men has loose morals; the woman who has intercourse with five is a prostitute.” (I.123.83)

Kunti shows remarkable control here. She refuses to be turned into a mindless womb seeded according to her husband’s whim to satisfy his inveterate craving for male heirs. However, while her mastery of scripture is admirable, the words subtly give her away. Arjuna is actually her *fourth* conception. She has had sexual intercourse with four different males (Surya, Dharma, Vayu, Indra). Out of her own mouth Kunti appears to condemn herself unawares as falling in the “loose morals” category. If she had truly summoned gods, Pandu would have seized upon this flaw in her argument (“The woman who has intercourse/with four men has loose morals”) and commanded her to have more sons of godly origin. The fact that he accepts her argument shows that the fathers of Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna were *not* gods.⁵ Moreover, Kunti’s last words (“the woman who has intercourse/with five is a prostitute”) bristle with tragic irony, for that is precisely the category into which she

thrusts her daughter-in-law. In the dice-game it is Karna, her first-born, who, because of this very pronouncement, declares her daughter-in-law Draupadi to be a whore.

It is significant that all this occurs in the Himalayas where even today in the Garhwal region polyandry is practised. Pandu, as we have seen above, had sought to persuade Kunti pointing out that she would only be adopting the custom of “the northern Kurus”. Later, when proposing that Draupadi marry all the Pandavas, Yudhishtira assures the shocked Drupada that it is the custom of their ancestors for brothers to have a common wife.

Kunti’s determination to protect her interests, Satyawati-like, is brought to the fore when she flatly refuses Pandu’s request to help Madri have more children. It is a revealing commentary on how Pandu discriminates between his wives, for he does not prescribe to Madri whom she should approach and leaves the choice to her. Then, despite the bravado he displays before Madri (“I know that if I ask Kunti/she will not refuse me”), Pandu slinks away before Kunti’s fury

“She deceived me”, said Kunti.

“With one mantra I gave her, she managed to get two sons.

I am afraid she will get more sons than I.

Scheming woman!

What a fool I was!

Had I known, I too would have summoned the Ashvins, and obtained twins.

Don’t come to me again, my lord, saying, ‘Give her the mantra.’” – I.124.26-28

The jealousy is clear, because Madri has consistently outmanoeuvred her. As Kunti herself admits to Madri, finding her in the arms of the dead Pandu,

“Princess of Vahlika!

You are fortunate indeed—
I never had the chance to see
his face radiant in intercourse.”—
I.125.23

Despite the mutual rivalry between the two women, Madri’s tribute to Kunti brings out the beauty of character that makes Kunti a true leader. “Could I bring up your children/as if they were mine?” (125.42) Madri asks, lacking that firmness of will that rises above the ego’s petty bounds (Kunti always takes special care of the Madreyas, particularly the youngest, Sahadeva). Madri continues,

“You are blessed. There is none like you...
...you are my light,
my guide, most respect-worthy,
Greater in status,
purer in virtue.”—
I.125.66-68

How true a thumbnail portrait of Kunti! Even as an adolescent girl her adoptive father Kuntibhoja found her exceptionally intelligent, pure in character and conduct, disciplined, sensitive. Since infancy, everyone—Brahmins, elders, friends, kith and kin,—was drawn to her by the unfailing and sincere respect she displayed and her devoted service. None in the city and the inner apartments was annoyed with her and even her treatment of servants was praiseworthy (IV.303.21).

As a widow, she brings up five children in a hostile court, bereft of relatives and allies. Neither Kuntibhoja nor the Vrishnis come forward to provide shelter or support. A widowed daughter is an unwelcome proposition. In the *Bhagavata Purana* (X.49.8-13) she upbraids Akura, when he visits her in Hastinapura, that her parents, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews no longer think of her; that Krishna and Balarama do not consider her children as their aunt’s offspring, although like a deer surrounded by terrible wolves she

lives among enemies, immersed in a sea of sorrows, with her utterly helpless fatherless children.

Again, when the Yadavas visit Kurukshetra during a full solar eclipse (X.19-20), Kunti complains that she is truly most wretched in the world because, despite her kin being powerful, none made a single enquiry about her welfare when she was in danger. It is interesting to note the connection between her and her daughter-in-law Draupadi who, later, upbraids Krishna in almost similar terms.

Hemmed in by adverse forces, Kunti swiftly turns to her grandmother-in-law Satyawati’s favourite grandson by a servant-maid: Vidura. He proves to be her fast friend and more. He saves them from being burnt alive and it is in his home that Kunti takes shelter when her sons are exiled. He even accompanies her at the very end into the forest. No wonder Iravati Karve⁶ surmised that Dharma, the first “god” summoned by Kunti, was none other than Vidura, known as Dharma’s incarnation in the epic. As we recall, it is the younger brother (stepbrother in this case), *devara*, who is the first appropriate person to turn to for levirate, *niyoga*. Hence that welcoming smile with which she greets “Dharma” in I.123.4.

Once Bhishma has provided a roof over her head, it is Kunti who guards her sons. The insecurity is of such dimensions that she dare not inform anyone but Vidura, not even Bhishma, of Duryodhana’s attempt to poison Bhima and the strangling of his charioteer. It is she who alerts Yudhishtira to mull-out the secret message in Vidura’s parting words couched in *mlechchha* dialect warning him against an attempt to burn them alive in Varanavata. Yudhishtira makes out the inflammable nature of the dwelling built for them and plays for time while Vidura’s sapper digs a tunnel underneath the floor for escape. Once it is ready, what an implacable will we find revealed in what follows! It is Kunti

who gets a Nishada woman and her five sons drunk in the festivities the Pandavas arrange in the House-of-Lac so that when it is gutted, people find the bones of six persons and no evidence is left of the Pandavas’ escape. As P.Lal, transcreator of the epic puts it, “Instigating Macbeth-Bhima (to set fire to the house)”, “was Kunti, bringer-forth of men-children only.”⁷ No half-measures for Kunti where the security of her sons is at stake. If Duryodhana can plot fiendishly to burn them alive, she can sacrifice six lives to foil him, as earlier she had cast away her newborn son to save her reputation. With this ruthless holocaust of six Nishadas we realise that the Nishada dynasty Satyawati sought to establish continues only through Dhritarashtra and his sons, lasting for just two generations. It is replaced by the dynasty Kunti founds through her son Arjuna.⁸

Fleeing into a terrible forest, the Pandavas’ spirits droop. With unerring instinct Kunti rallies her sons:

“*Hai!* I am Kunti, mother
of five sons, and I thirst
for water sitting in their midst!”
(I.153.13)

The response is immediate. Then, after Bhima has killed the ogre Hidimba he is about to despatch his sister Hidimba who has fallen in love with him. While Yudhishtira only prevents Bhima from killing the infatuated woman, Kunti, with remarkable foresight, seizes upon this fortuitous occurrence to cement an alliance for the friendless five:

“I can see no way
of taking fit revenge
for the terrible injustices
that Duryodhana has done us.
A grave problem faces us.
You know Hidimba loves you...
Have a son by her.
I wish it. He will work
for our welfare. My son,
I do not want a ‘no’
from you. I want your promise
now, in front of both of us.” –
I.157.47-49

Ghatotkacha, the fruit of this union, is of inestimable value to them in exile and above all as Arjuna's saviour from Karna's infallible weapon at the cost of his own life. Again, it is Kunti who instructs her first grandchild in order to ensure his loyalty:

"You are one of the Kurus.

To me you are like Bhima himself. You are the eldest son of the Pandavas,

Therefore, you should help them."—I.157.74

Thus, the Kaunteya dynasty is slowly but surely structured into an entity with multiracial affinities. Earlier, because of Kunti, Bhima was befriended by the Naga chief Aryaka, her father's maternal grandfather. Now, an alliance with the forest-dwelling Rakshasas is established. Later, Arjuna will forge marital alliances with the Naga princess Ulupi and others.

Kunti teaches her sons a lesson in attending to the welfare of the common man even at the risk of their lives. In Ekachakra, they take shelter with an impoverished Brahmin and discover him in anguish, as it is his turn to become that day's meal for the ogre Baka. Overruling Yudhishtira's frantic remonstrances, she deposes Bhima to meet the ogre instead. In the exchange between mother and son, Kunti, as earlier with Pandu, emerges totally triumphant. Yudhishtira exclaims,

"Mother, what right had you to expose him like this?

have you lost your reason?

have our sufferings unbalanced you?"—I.164.11

Never again will he upbraid his mother in such strong terms, save once after the war when she reveals that Karna was his elder brother. Yudhishtira's outburst only shows his failure to appreciate the

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profound wisdom and practical sense underlying Kunti's decision, apparently rash and fraught with life-risk to their sole protector. After pointing out that they ought to repay the kindness of their host, for "He indeed is a man whose gratitude/exceeds the favour he receives", she reminds Yudhishtira of Bhima's extraordinary strength and then teaches him a lesson in kingship:

"It is a king's duty to protect even the Shudra if the Shudra seeks protection"—I.164.15, 28

It is precisely in failing to extend this protection to the Pandavas that Bhishma's greatest failure lay as a Kshatriya. Kunti now pulls up her son masterfully and then explains the reasons for the decision:

"I am not foolish: don't think me ignorant; I'm not being selfish.

I know exactly what I am doing.

This is an act of dharma.

Yudhishtira, two benefits will follow from this act—
one, we'll repay a Brahmin,
two, we'll gain moral merit...
a Kshatriya who helps
a Brahmin gets the highest
heaven in his after-life."

—I.164.20-22

Thus the people of Ekachakra are freed from a terrible menace by unknown benefactors. Kunti's maturity and foresight, the ability to observe life closely and use the learning from experiences to arrive at swift decisions benefiting her children, set her apart from and

above all characters in the epic, except perhaps Krishna.

Kunti's decision to proceed to Panchala is another step aiming at winning its princess Draupadi to forge a princely alliance with the traditional enemy of Hastinapura and challenge the Kauravas. In Panchala she chooses to stay in the hut of a potter, even lower down in the caste and economic hierarchy than in Ekachakra. Thus, she brings up her sons from virtually the lowest economic rung of society to become rulers, in the process turning necessity to glorious gain. The enforced exile brings her sons into intimate contact with the common people, so that they develop the feeling for the felt needs of the vast majority that equips them to become true *rajās*, those who discharge the duty of pleasing their subjects.

Kunti's foresight perceives that any split among the united five will frustrate the goal of mastering Hastinapura. Moreover, in Ekachakra (I.168.15) Vyasa had already briefed them that Draupadi was fated to have five husbands and urged that they proceed to Panchala to win her as their common wife. Hence she plays that grim charade of pretending not to know what Bhima and Arjuna mean when they ask her to see what they have brought home from the visit to the *svayamvara*. In I.190.29 we find Yudhishtira and the two Madreyas slipping out of the *svayamvara* hall after Draupadi has been won by Arjuna. Therefore, though the text does not explicitly say so, these three are already with their mother when Draupadi arrives with Arjuna and Bhima. Kunti knows that the only way to forge an unbreakable bond among the five is not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. Up to then, their lives had been governed by her and revolved

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only around her. If that unified focus is to persist, only a single woman can replace her, not five. It is as though she were bringing into practice the *Atharva Vedic* injunction⁹:

“May your drink be the same,
may your food be common.
I bind you together with one
common bond.
United, gather round
the sacrificial fire
like the spokes of a chariot-wheel
round the nave.” [III.30.6]

Significantly, Draupadi is virtually born from the sacrificial fire-altar, *yajna vedi*, and is therefore named Yajnaseni. Hence, Kunti deliberately asks that whatever has been brought be shared as usual. After “discovering” her “mistake”, her only worry is that something must be done so that her directive does not become untrue (I.193.4-5). Yudhishtira’s speech to Drupada amply clarifies that the decision is Kunti’s though the brothers have eagerly acquiesced, each having Draupadi in his heart (I.193.12). It is also a magnificent tribute to the total respect and implicit obedience paid by

the brothers to Kunti that is unparalleled in the epic. For example, despite all the paeans to Gandhari’s virtues, her complete failure as a mother to command any respect from Duryodhana only serves to highlight the qualities that make Kunti pre-eminent among all women in the *Mahabharata*:

“My mother’s will is my will
because I think she is right...
Isn’t it said that obedience
to gurus is a supreme virtue?
What greater guru than one’s
mother?...

To me this is the highest
dharma.”—I.197.29; 198.17

It is instructive to see how desperate Kunti is that her stratagem is not foiled. As Yudhishtira finishes, she immediately appeals to Vyasa:

“What *dharma*-firm Yudhishtira
says is right.
I fear my words
will become as pointless as lies.
And if that happens, will I
not be tainted with untruth?”
—I.198.18

Perhaps, subconsciously, she is also protecting herself. By manoeuvring Draupadi into having

five husbands, she effectively ensures that her daughter-in-law will never be able to point an accusing finger at her for having had sexual relations with four persons (Surya, Dharma, Vayu and Indra) other than her spouse.¹⁰ As usual, Kunti ensures that she has her way, this time with the help of Vyasa, her real father-in-law. Kunti’s ambition for her children is finally voiced openly when she formally blesses Draupadi after the marriage ceremony:

“May you be queen of
the kingdom of the Kurus
with your *dharma*-loving husband
in the capital of Kurujangala.”—
I.209.9

Her nephew Krishna comes forward with Yadava wealth to build up the Pandavas. The soundness of Kunti’s strategy is proved when the Kauravas plan to destroy the unity of the Pandavas by despatching lovely hetaerae to seduce them. Karna points out that being wedded to a common wife of extraordinary beauty, this ploy is doomed.

Hereafter, Kunti retreats into the background, giving up pride of place to Draupadi. Proof of her astonishing detachment is seen in the Pandavas not consulting her when invited to the dice-game, which is so very unusual in the context of her over-arching influence over them till the marriage. This first instance of her removing herself from the decision-making role leads to disaster.

After this, she emerges from the



Draupadi marries Pandavas, Painting by Nandalal Bose

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shadows thrice to intervene decisively. When her sons are exiled, she decides to stay back in Hastinapura as a silent but constant and visible reproach to Dhritarashtra about her sons' violated rights. Later, in *Udyoga Parva*, she tells Krishna, who has come on a peace-embassy, to urge Yudhishtira to fight for their rights as Kshatriyas must. She reprimands him for abandoning his duty as king and mistakenly believing that espousing peace is the proper *dharma*. To inspire him she repeats a tactic used in the Varanavata exile in the forest:

“Can anything be more humiliating than that your mother, friendless and alone, should have to eat other’s food? Strong-armed one, recover the ancestral paternal kingdom use gentleness, dissension, gifts, force or negotiation. Follow the *dharma* of *rajās*, redeem your family honour. Do not, with your brothers, watch your merits waste away.”
—V.132.32-34

To inspire him further, she assumes the person of Vidula, narrating the tale of how she berated her son Sanjaya who was reluctant to face battle after defeat:

“Flare up, even if briefly, like *tinduka*-wood Do not smoulder away in billowing fireless smoke.”¹¹

To these twin spurs to prick them on, Kunti now adds the climactic motivation: the insult to her daughter-in-law, mincing no words in upbraiding the five to arouse their hibernating manhood:

“The princess of Panchala followed all *dharmas*, yet in your presence they mocked her— how can you ever forgive this insult? The kingdom lost did not hurt me, the defeat at dice did not hurt me; the exile of my sons did not hurt me so much as the humiliation of Draupadi weeping in the *sabha* as they mocked her. Nothing more painful than that insult.”—V.137.16-18

After this, in order to secure the safety of her sons, she takes the conscious decision to undergo the trauma of acknowledging her shame to her first-born. Not knowing that Krishna has already failed after approaching Karna with the same secret, baiting his offer with the prospect of Draupadi becoming his wife,

“The Vrishni lady, the Kaurava wife waited; she wilted in the sun’s heat like a faded lotus garland. She sheltered in the shade of Karna’s dress.”—V.144.29

Though Karna rejects her as she had discarded him after birth, in that apparent failure lies Kunti’s victory. For, she obtains his promise not to kill any Pandava but Arjuna. Moreover, she effectively weakens him from within. While he knows that he is battling his mother’s sons, they are only aware that he is the detestable charioteer’s son who must be slain for his crimes against Draupadi and Abhimanyu.

As for the criticism that Kunti remained silent about his birth so long, this ignores the fact of Karna’s

unquestioning submission to Duryodhana. “As Karna tells Krishna, if the kingdom were to be given to him by Yudhishtira, he would offer it to Duryodhana.” Kunti’s remarkable perspicacity sensed that Karna would not provide her sons the leadership needed to win back their heritage. Instead, he would lead them into serving Duryodhana. That is why she heroically steeled herself and silently bore the anguish in her heart, choosing the greater good of motivating her sons to win their kingdom over the evil of not acknowledging her first-born.¹²

Kunti has that rare capacity to surprise us that distinguishes the *kanyas*. When all that she had worked for has been achieved, she astonishes everyone by retiring to the forest with, of all persons, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, to spend her last days serving those who were responsible for her sufferings. Kunti’s reply to her bewildered sons’ anguished questions is that she had inspired them to fight so that they did not suffer oppression; and that having glutted herself with joy during her husband’s rule, she has no wish to

Kunti has that rare capacity to surprise us that distinguishes the *kanyas*. When all that she had worked for has been achieved, she astonishes everyone by retiring to the forest with, of all persons, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, to spend her last days serving those who were responsible for her sufferings

enjoy a kingdom won by her sons. How effortlessly she transcends the symbiotic bonds of maternity! Seated calmly, she accepts death as a forest fire engulfs her.¹³ It is profoundly significant that the epic declares her the incarnation of *siddhi*, consummation. She is indeed the consummation of womanhood and the archetype of the modern phenomenon that is of



Unique Panchakanya temple in eastern Nepal

such concern all over the world today: the Single Mother.

Why Kunti Remains Kanya

It is in the account of Kunti's life that we find a clue about why she is celebrated as a *kanya*. It is Surya who tells the adolescent Kunti while responding to her summons, that the word *kanya* comes from "*kan*" meaning "to be satisfied, or pleased, to shine, be liked, or wished for, to strive after, desire, wish" denoting one who is radiant, desired by all, satisfied and pleased with herself. Because the *kanya* is empowered to choose her partner, says Surya, she is independent (IV.303.10; 304.13). While giving her the boon, Durvasa had explained that anyone she summoned, whether he wished it or not, would be bound to satisfy her desires (IV.305.98).

Kunti is the pre-eminent example in our mythology of the *kanya*, a personality that has successfully integrated the *animus* with its rationality and heroic predilections to master external adversity.¹⁴ Simultaneously, keeping her libido under control, she has not more than one son from each of the four relationships and does not choose to use Pandu's hankering after more sons to enter into more sexual relations.¹⁵ Making her own way in a

hostile world, she establishes her sons and ultimately sublimates the ego, transcending the self to give up her life reconciled, made whole, calm of mind, all passion spent.

Originally, "virgin" or *kanya* connoted precisely the opposite of what it has come to mean. Ishtar and Aphrodite, the goddesses of love in ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, were called virgins. The later patriarchal cultures denounced them as immoral and wanton. The boon of virginity is not just a physical condition but refers to an inner state of the psyche that remains untrammelled by any slavish dependence on another, on a particular man. She is "one-in-herself", an integrated personality who, in the words of Dr M. Esther

The boon of virginity is not just a physical condition but refers to an inner state of the psyche that remains untrammelled by any slavish dependence on another, on a particular man. She is "one-in-herself", "belongs to herself while she is...

Harding, "belongs to herself while she is virgin-unwed and may not be compelled either to maintain chastity or to yield to an unwanted embrace...This liberty of action involves the right to refuse intimacies as well as to accept them...It may be used of a woman who has had much sexual experience; it may be even applied to a prostitute. Its real significance is to be found in its use as contrasted with

'married.'"¹⁶

How precisely this delineates the unique quality of the *kanyas*! *Kanya* has neither the pejorative connotations of "spinster" nor the

***Kanya* has neither the pejorative connotations of "spinster" nor the naiveté that is associated with "maiden"**

naiveté that is associated with "maiden". The concept becomes clearer if we study Madri, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari and Subhadra who present the exact opposite: the "married" woman who is dependent on what others think and therefore does what she may not actually approve of. "She is not one-in-herself, but acts as a female counterpart or syzygy to some male."¹⁷ Ambika and Ambalika silently accept their mother-in-law's command to receive the repulsive Vyasa. Madri commits sati. "Gandhari blinds herself so that she does not exceed her husband. Subhadra is just a shadow like her daughter-in-law Uttara." On the other hand, continues Dr. Harding, "The woman who is psychologically virgin is not dependant in this way."

She is what she is because that is what she is. The woman who is virgin, one-in-herself, does what she does—not because of any desire to please, not to be liked, or to be approved, even by herself; not because of any desire to gain power over another to catch his interest or love, but because what she does is true...she is not influenced by the considerations that make the non-virgin woman, whether married or not, trim her sails and adapt herself to expediency dependent on what other people think. Her actions may, indeed, be unconventional.”¹⁸ Does not this describe Ahalya, Tara, Satyawati and Kunti? In the next part of this series, we will examine if it applies to Draupadi as well. □

Endnotes

1 Pradip Bhattacharya: *Themes & Structure in the Mahabharata*, Dasgupta & Co., Calcutta, 1989; Asim Chattopadhyay: *Karuna tomaye Kunti*, Modern Column, Calcutta, 1991. Also, see Dr Nrisingha Prasad Bhaduri's excellent study, *Karna Kunti Kaunteya* (Ananda, Calcutta, 1998).

2 *Mahabharata* I.120-124. The translations are from P.Lal's verse-by-verse transcreation of the epic, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1968 ff.

3 It is curious that Pandu omits the far more apt instance of his own ancestress Madhavi, who was given away by her father the emperor Yayati to four kings and one sage to produce sons, and of Marisha wife of the ten Prachetas sages.

4 See Part II, issue 142. Dr. Nrisimha Prasad Bhaduri *op.cit.* points out an interesting parallel in the Nala-Damayanti story where Damayanti is claimed by four gods—Indra, Agni, Varuna and Yama, guardians of the four quarters. Nala is the fifth, the human, who becomes her husband after urging her to accept them first. Kunti shares two of these gods—Indra and Yama/Dharma—as her sexual partners, while her daughter-in-law, Draupadi, has them as her husbands (Vayu and the Ashvinikumaras replace Agni and Varuna).

5 As Dr. N.P. Bhaduri points out (*op.cit.*), in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* (4.115.72) this is precisely what Bana says berating Krishna's grandson Aniruddha's clan (the Yadavas) referring to Kunti having been a lover four times over *Kunti caturnam kamini bhuvī*.

6 Iravati Karve: *Yuganta*—the end of an Era (Deshmukh Prakashan, Bombay, 1969).

7 P. Lal: Introduction to Fascicule 19 of *Mahabharata* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1970).

8 A brilliant insight offered by Dr. Chitra Chaturvedi in her speech on Kunti in the seminar on “Pancha Kanya of Indian Epics” held on 27 December 2003 by the Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Kolkata.

9 A.C. Bose: *The Call of the Vedas* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1988, p. 262).

10 In the Bengali tele-serial *Draupadi* (1999), this is precisely what Draupadi does, brilliantly portrayed by Roopa Ganguli. Also, see Dr Nrisimha Prasad Bhaduri's excellent study, *Karna Kunti Kaunteya* (Ananda, Calcutta, 1998).

11 *Ibid.* V.133.14. See Sri Aurobindo's superb transcreation of Vidula's exhortation to her son Sanjaya.

12 Pradip Bhattacharya: “Epic Women: East and West—Some Observations”,

Journal of the Asiatic Society, XXXVII.3, 1995, p. 81.

13 Shaoli Mitra, in *Katha Amrita Saman*, M.C. Sarkar, Calcutta, 1991, p. 121, has Kunti persuade Gandhari and Dhritarashtra to walk towards the flames, welcoming release from this life filled with rejection and loss.

14 Charles Breux explains the role of the animus thus: “A woman's conscious self is attuned to instincts, emotions, and intuitions...A woman, therefore, needs to learn how to focus her awareness. The animus helps her to clarify her purpose and meaning in life.” *Journey into Consciousness* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998) p. 68 following Irene Claremont de Castillejo, *Knowing Woman* (Harper & Row, New York, 1973, p.77).

15 I am indebted for this insight to Smt. Suprobat Bhattacharya.

16 M. Esther Harding: *Woman's Mysteries*, Rider, 1971, p.103.

17 *ibid.* p. 125.

18 *ibid.* p. 126. □

Women Bhakt Poets



“No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.”

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