

Analyzing Gender Dynamics in Indian Itihāsa Texts Beyond Popular Narratives

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Abstract. Itihāsa and Purāṇa often serve as a source of inspiration for many Indians about how to conduct themselves in various aspects of life. While these descriptions help maintain a value system and a sense of balance in the society, sometimes these are selectively used to set a certain narrative. One such popular narrative is stereotyping men and women being suitable only for their gender-specific roles or duties. It is often portrayed that women embody modesty, sacrifice, and submission in love, while men are seen as protectors, providers, and lineage holders. In this work, through several examples, we show that in Indian Itihāsa, the roles of men and women are depicted with remarkable flexibility, often challenging the rigid stereotypes that later traditions have sometimes placed upon them. Stories like Sāvitrī and Satyavān do highlight a woman's sacrifice, but they are not singular in their portrayal of devotion or bravery. Many narratives present dynamic and reciprocal relationships, where both genders exhibit strength, wisdom, and resilience, depending on the situation. For example, while Sāvitrī's devotion is well-remembered, the story of Ruru and Pramādvārā from the Mahābhārata, symbolizing a man's capacity for selflessness in love and willingness, is rarely discussed in popular discourse. Similarly, Sātyavatī's determination to preserve the Kuru lineage underscores her role as a decisive figure for her family's future, a position often reserved for male characters in patriarchal interpretations. This mutual responsibility and shared devotion emphasize that gender roles were more fluid and context-dependent in ancient Bharata than they are usually considered to be. Further, women like Sītā and Draupadī, while revered for their modesty and dedication, also displayed incredible strength, patience, and courage, qualities not limited by gender. By revisiting some of these incidents from the Itihāsa texts and viewing them without any biased perspective, it becomes evident that ancient scriptures advocate partnership, mutual support, and respect, presenting a holistic and integral view of gender rather than a unilateral one. This perspective aligns with the values of equality and shared responsibility, reflecting a balanced and enriched approach to relationships.

Keywords. Gender Dynamics, Indian Itihāsa

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1 Introduction

Itihāsa texts, such as the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, serve as foundational epics in Indian culture and history. The term Itihāsa means "thus it was" in Sanskrit, suggesting that these texts are viewed as both historical narratives and moral teachings. These texts were composed over a long period of time, and document the societal norms, values, and ethical dilemmas of their time, preserving the worldview and lived experiences of ancient Indian civilization. The Itihāsa texts preserve not just stories but ancient wisdom and philosophical concepts that have been passed down through generations. They explore concepts like justice, morality, and duty and how they relate to everyday human life. For example, the Bhagavad Gītā (part of the Mahābhārata) presents an ethical dialogue that transcends time, discussing issues like the duty of warriors, the role of the self, and the quest for spiritual liberation.

Although these texts often provide ethical guidance on duty (dharma), justice, and personal conduct, shaping the way individuals, particularly kings, warriors, and women, were expected to behave, some misinterpretations or partial understanding without contexts have led to conflicts with modern view of the world-order. In the context of Strītvā (gender roles and women's agency), which is the primary focus of the current work, women are often portrayed in a variety of ways, from devoted wives to strong, strategic figures who actively shape the course of events in these texts. Characters like Sītā, Draupadī, Sāvitrī and several others became symbols of virtue, sacrifice, and devotion, representing ideals of femininity, while also reflecting more complex gender dynamics. However, modern interpretations tend to reduce their roles to passive, submissive figures. The purpose of this research is to challenge these interpretations and highlight the dynamic, multifaceted roles of women beyond popular stereotypes. By revisiting these figures through a nuanced lens, this paper aims to illustrate how women in these texts exhibited strategic thinking, decisive action, and significant agency, far beyond the passive, idealized figures often portrayed in popular

narratives.

We explore the gender dynamics in the ancient Itihāsa texts, specifically the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, by looking into the roles of women and their interactions with male counterparts and the society as a whole in shaping the narratives. This research combines close reading of primary texts with modern feminist perspectives. We revisit key episodes in these texts around popular as well as relatively unknown characters such as Sītā, Draupadī, Śākuntalā, Sātyavatī, Kuntī, and Pramādvarā. Through a close analysis of specific śloka and adhyāyas from these texts, we analyze the gender dynamics in these ancient narratives.

2 Issues with some interpretations of Itihāsa

Several popular interpretations of Itihāsa texts have often reinforced rigid and limited gender roles, typically placing women on a pedestal as paragons of virtue, emphasizing qualities like modesty, sacrifice, and submission while minimizing or overlooking their strength, wisdom, and agency. A prime example of this is the Sāvitrī and Satyavān story, where Sāvitrī is celebrated for her devotion and selflessness, particularly her unwavering commitment to rescuing her husband from death. While this narrative is undoubtedly powerful, it often becomes the sole focus of the portrayal of women's roles in the texts, reinforcing the stereotype that women's worth is tied solely to their sacrifices for others, especially their husbands.

Similarly, the Rāmāyaṇa is often interpreted as a portrayal of a dysfunctional relationship between Rāma and Sītā, particularly in the context of Sītā's abduction and the probable trials she endures. Many interpretations tend to focus on her victimhood, portraying her as meek and passive, which oversimplifies her character and fails to acknowledge the deeper complexities of her strength, patience, and resilience throughout the epic. By reducing her to a symbol of suffering and fidelity, these interpretations strip her of the full range of virtues she represents, including courage and decisiveness. Originally, the

couple was meant to exemplify an ideal partnership, where both Rāma and Sītā embody virtues like righteousness (dharma), duty, and mutual respect, showcasing their partnership as a symbol of balance. This view is often overshadowed by a patriarchal lens that limits the scope of their relationship.

Draupadī, is frequently reduced to a symbol of suffering and humiliation, particularly in the context of the Mahābhārata’s infamous dice game and her subsequent disrobing. While Draupadī’s strength, intelligence, and leadership are central to her character, they are often overshadowed by her victimization and the dynamics of her marriages. These portrayals strip her of her agency, reducing her to a passive figure defined solely by her relationship with the Pāṇḍavas. The above examples show the stereotypical portrayals of women that dominate popular interpretations today. In the subsequent sections, we revisit these ancient narratives with a critical lens in order to see the true depth of the characters and their relationships.

3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative and analytical approach to explore the roles of women in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, focusing on Strītvā (gender roles and women’s agency). We focus on key female characters, and explore how they navigate and reshape traditional gender roles through strategic decision-making, focusing on their roles as wives, mothers, and companions. The study also delves into the *Indian conception of feminism*, which extends beyond

equality in financial or physical terms, focusing instead on a more integral framework embedded within Indian tradition as per the Itihāsa texts.

The study draws from primary texts and selected secondary sources to uncover nuanced portrayals of female characters, showcasing their strategic thinking and decisive actions. Valimiki Rāmāyaṇa [1] and Mahābhārata [2], as published by Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, are selected as primary texts. These texts serve as the cornerstone of the analysis, providing the classical narratives of the epics as documented in traditional Sanskrit literature. The Geeta Press editions were chosen due to their widespread accessibility, established credibility, and adherence to traditional interpretations.

Among the secondary texts, we employ Pt. Shriram Sharma Acharya’s Rāmāyaṇa aura nārī śakti [3] and Ami Ganatra’s Ramayana Unravelling [4] and Mahabharata Unravelling [5]. These secondary works are used for alternative readings and a modern interpretation of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, bringing forward perspectives that highlight often-overlooked details, particularly with respect to gender dynamics.

3.1 Content Selection

The vast literature contains several female characters which may fit into the current study. Here, for brevity, only key characters are analyzed through a gender-conscious lens, challenging contemporary portrayals and uncovering their agency. Table 1 lists the characters considered alongside key themes that fit into the current discussion.

Itihāsa Text	Character	Key Themes	Parva/Kāṇḍa
Rāmāyaṇa	Sītā	Sahadharmacharini ideal, resilience, and devotion	Ayodhya Kāṇḍa, Sundarkāṇḍa
Mahābhārata	Śākuntalā	Dharmic perspective, clarity, and inner strength	Sambhava Parva
Mahābhārata	Satyavatī	Strong decision-making, leadership	Sambhava Parva
Mahābhārata	Draupadī	Agency over family and social conduct	Dyūta Parva
Mahābhārata	Kuntī	Strategic foresight, resilience, and diplomacy	Bākṡvādha Parva

Table 1: Itihāsa text and character considered in this study

4 Discussions and Perspectives

4.1 The Concept of sahadharmācāriṇī and understanding of feminism

The concept of sahadharmācāriṇī is central to understanding the shared duties and mutual responsibility in marriage, as represented in the relationships between women and their husbands. This powerful notion celebrates women as equal partners in dharma, morality, and decision-making, rather than as mere supporters or followers. Both Sītā and Draupadī exemplify this idea beautifully. Sītā's decision to accompany Rāma into exile despite requests from her father-in-law as well as Rāma himself advising her to stay in the palace is clearly in contradiction to the submissive figure often portrayed in popular narrative. The dialogues from the text symbolize a deep sense of partnership, underscoring the value of shared responsibilities between husband and wife. While Rāma's effort to persuade her to stay away from the dangers of the forest is in accordance to his pati dharma, Sītā's decision to follow him irrespective of the circumstances is her duty as per her sahadharmācāriṇī dharma (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, 2.27-2.60).

यदि त्वं प्रस्थितो दुर्गं वनमद्यैव राघव।
अग्रतस्ते गमिष्यामि मृदन्ती कुशकण्टकान्॥2.27.6॥
ईर्ष्यारोषौ बहिष्कृत्य भुक्तशेषमिवोदकम्।
नय मां वीर विस्रब्धः पापं मयि न विद्यते॥2.27.7॥

The entire dialogue between the two is centered around their duties. This duty-centric approach of both partners instead of insistence on their rights is a fundamental defining aspect of Indian idea of Strītvā that helps avoiding escalation of conflicts and amicable and acceptable solutions. Similarly, Draupadī, the queen of the Pāṇḍavas, was not a passive figure in her marriages but a decisive and strategic partner. During the Mahābhārata's infamous dice game, Draupadī's response to the insult she suffered at the hands of the Kauravas demonstrates not only her courage but also her knowledge and agency over matters like dharma, Nīti and duties (Dyūta Parva, Adhyāya 67, Śloka 50-54).

तिष्ठन्ति चेमे कुरवाः सभाया,

मीषाः सुतानां च तथा स्नुषाणाम्।
समीक्ष्य सर्वे मम चापि वाक्यं,
विब्रूत मे प्रश्नमिमं यथावत्।
न सा सभा यत्र न सन्ति वृद्धाः,
वृद्धा न ते ये न वदन्ति धर्मम्।

By her wisdom and irrefutable arguments, Draupadī was able to free her husbands from the slavery of the Kaurava princes. Such instances in Mahābhārata underscore the idea that Draupadī, like Sītā, was not just a wife but an active partner in her husband's responsibilities, particularly in the moral and strategic decisions that affected the fate of the entire family.

Another key example is Śākuntalā's story, where her actions illustrate the depth of her agency and strength of character and will in accompanying her husband in the path of dharma. In the Sambhava Parva, Adhyāya 73, Śloka 34, when asked to seek a blessing, Śākuntalā asks Rishi Kanva to bless her husband with an eternal following of dharma, demonstrating her strategic thinking and profound vision for the future of the kingdom and her husband.
ततो धर्मिष्ठतां वद्रे राज्याच्चास्थलनं तथा
शकुंतला पौरवाणां दुष्यन्तहितकाम्यया॥ 73.34

Later, in Adhyāya 74, Ślokas 16-100, Śākuntalā passionately criticises King Dushyanta for not recognising her and reminds him that Bhāryā (wife) is Ardhānginī (equal half) of the husband, the best friend and the root of Dharma, Artha and Kama purushārtha and takes fatherly or motherly role as and when needed. Further, she reminds him that wife is also the protector of wealth, progeny, dharma, Rishis and forefathers and the husbands journey in this life and beyond. Reminding the king about his son Bharat's rightful place as heir to the throne, she finally decides to leave the scene since the King has stayed from the path of the Satya and Dharma and declares that his son will rule the earth despite the non-acceptance by the king. In doing so, she also provides a solid defence of women's purity and menstruation, further challenging the currently popular societal norm. These instances highlight Śākuntalā as a woman of great strength and vision, an assertive sahadharmācāriṇī—a wife and companion who ensures that her husband does

not stray away from the path of Dharma.

The popular story of Sāvitrī and Satyavān from Vana Parva, Adhyāya 293-299 of Mahābhārata is commonly used as an example of the extreme dedication and sacrifice of a wife in getting the life for her husband from the Death god Yama. However, the popular narrative cites her name often as a symbol of submissive lady of the house with very little agency and decision making. The fact that she chose to marry a commoner, who was predicted to have a short life-span, and got her royal family convinced to respect her decision does not get highlighted. In addition to her courage and wisdom, her strategic thinking is also evident from the fact that since she also got the kingdom of his father in law back. Given the duty-centric approach founded on the principles of Dharma in Indian tradition, it is imperative that examples of sacrifice and dedication ought to be present for both genders. A thorough reading of the Itihāsa texts indeed shows such examples and we mention one such story to highlight this. The lesser known story of Ruru and Pramādvarā (Pauloma Parva, Adhyāya 8-9, Śloka 1-27) from the Mahābhārata highlights a man's devotion and willingness to sacrifice for his love. Here, the male character Ruru happily donated half of his life to revive his dead fiancée Pramādvarā and then got married to her.

आयुषोअर्धं प्रयच्छामि कन्यायै खेचरोत्तम।

शृंगापरूपाभरणा समुत्तिष्ठतु मे प्रिया॥ 9.12

This example of commitment, affection, love and dedication to one's yet-to-be-life-partner, is rarely emphasized in mainstream narratives. Such omissions, unfortunately, perpetuate the stereotyped gendered notion that only women are expected to embody such selflessness and sacrifice.

Therefore, the concept of Strītvā, as derived from Itihāsa, offers a culturally grounded alternative to contemporary feminist discourse. Table 2 contrasts this perspective with Radical Feminism, a prominent ideology in modern feminist thought. While both advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment, their foundational principles and approaches differ significantly. Strītvā emphasizes mutual respect, collaboration, and shared responsibility between genders, presenting a model where men and women complement each other in both familial and societal roles. Rooted in dharma, it envisions gender equality not through opposition but through harmonious coexistence, ensuring the well-being and prosperity of both family and society. In contrast, Radical Feminism seeks to dismantle traditional gender roles and societal structures, viewing them as inherently oppressive. It prioritizes structural change, often challenging foundational social institutions to create a new paradigm centered on women's autonomy and liberation.

Feature	Strītvā	Radical Feminism
Core Perspective	Rooted in family and community values	Emphasizes individual autonomy
Primary Focus	Responsibilities and ethical duties (Dharma)	Individual rights and personal freedoms
Philosophical Foundation	Traditional wisdom and cultural heritage	Western philosophical and political theories
Path to Empowerment	Harmonious balance of roles within the family	Overhauling societal structures
Understanding of Gender	Complementary and interdependent roles	Inherent conflict between genders
Overall Approach	Cooperative and nurturing	Confrontational and revolutionary

Table 2: Contrast of Strītvā with 'Radical Feminism'

4.2 Strategic and Decisive Roles of Women

Taking some examples from the Itihāsa texts, this section highlights the role of women as crucial strategists and decision-makers, more than just mere supporters of their husbands and families. Consider the example of Kuntī, a central figure from Mahābhārata that exemplifies strength of character and strategic thinking. In the Sambhava Parva (Bākhvādha Parva), Adhyāya 161, Śloka 20-21, Kuntī demonstrates her selflessness by prioritizing her duties to the samāja (society) over her personal interests and the fear of losing her child.

नेदं लोभान्न चाज्ञानान्न च मोहाद् विनिश्चितम्।
बुद्धिपूर्वं तु धर्मस्य व्यवसायः कृतो मया॥
अर्थो द्वावपि निष्पन्नौ युधिष्ठिर भविष्यतः।
प्रतीकारश्च वासस्य धर्मश्च चरितो महान्॥ 161.20

Despite two life threatening episodes of Lākshagrih (House of Lacquer) and battle with the Hidimba rākshas, she decides to send his son Bhīma to fight Bakāsura rākshas who was tormenting the Ekchakrā nagarī. While king of that kingdom had, for all practical purposes, left his people at the mercy of the cruel rākshas, Kuntī transformed this difficult situation as an opportunity to teach the her sons about the Kshatriya dharma of protecting the people from all different walks of life in addition to the family that hosted them. Her political acumen in this episode is clearly displayed from the fact that while saving the lives of his hosts and getting rid of the tormentor of the city, she ensures that the identity of her sons is not revealed despite the heroic action of his son. Her decisive role is evident from the fact that she sends Bhīma to fight Bakāsura despite the initial hesitation of Yudhishtira. This and several other similar incidents highlight the confidence Kuntī has in her sons, reflecting a mother's role not just as a nurturer, but also as a powerful figure in shaping her children's futures. Through such decisions, Kuntī plays an essential role in the shaping of Pāṇḍavas and their ultimate success in life.

Similarly, when Hanumān offers Sītā the option to leave from Lanka along with him (Sun-

darkānda Sarga 37), she politely refuses to go along with him by citing various reasons and finally concludes saying that it will be proper if Rama comes there, kills Rāvana along with all the demons and takes her away. This indicates not only her unwavering faith in Rāma's affection for her and his valour but also her commitment to her Sahadharmācāriṇī role to ensure that the Rāma fulfils the promise made to the sages of Dandakāranya (of freeing them from the tortures of the Rāvan and his rākshas clan). This is further evident from her questions to Hanumān about Rāma where she categorically asks whether Rāma is following his various duties appropriately or not? Sītā's concern for the larger good of the society and despite being in an extremely difficult and unfavourable situation clearly demonstrates the decisive and strategic aspects of her personality that are often ignored.

Through these examples, it is clear that the roles of women like Sītā, and Kuntī were not confined to passive, supporting roles. Rather, they were integral decision-makers, whose wisdom, strategic thinking, and leadership helped guide their families and societies. These women were not simply victims or subordinates to male figures, but were active agents in the shaping of history, demonstrating that gender roles in ancient texts were far more fluid and flexible than contemporary interpretations often suggest.

4.3 Women as Active Participants in Leadership

In addition, the women in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata played an integral role in the leadership of their families and had an essential role in guiding the kings and warriors. The characters of Sātyavatī, Draupadī, and Kuntī showcase a vision of women as strategic thinkers and decision-makers. Far beyond the roles of passive wives or daughters-in-law, these women were active participants in shaping the direction of their families and kingdoms. Let us look at the character of Sātyavatī, the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty, displayed remarkable strategic acumen. Despite facing immense personal sorrow and several fateful events, she continued to demonstrate strength and leadership. In

the Sambhava Parva, Adhyāya 103, Śloka 1-11, Sātyavatī takes decisive action when the Kuru dynasty is in dire need of an heir. She demands that Bhīṣma takes over the responsibility of the kingdom and after his refusal, she devises alternative solutions to ensure the continuation of the lineage. Furthermore, in Sambhava Parva, Adhyāya 104, Śloka 34, Sātyavatī asserts that both a mother and father have equal rights over their children, emphasizing her right to ensure the bloodline continues, as she strategically navigates the familial and political complexities.

मातापित्रोः प्रजायन्ते पुत्राः साधारणाः कवे।
तेषां पिता यथा स्वामी तथा माता न संशयः॥104.31

Women like Sātyavatī were pivotal in shaping the political and familial landscapes, using their wisdom and intellect to navigate complex situations. Similarly, Draupadī's influence on the Pāṇḍavas and her wisdom in navigating their exile and the subsequent battle for justice highlight her pivotal role in the leadership dynamics of the Mahābhārata. Further, Kuntī's leadership in the Mahābhārata, illustrates the essential role women played in governance, strategy, and moral leadership, both in navigating personal challenges and guiding her sons toward their destinies. These examples highlight the progressive nature of the Itihāsa in recognizing the political intelligence and leadership of women, making them key architects of both familial and state affairs.

5 Conclusions

This study has explored the portrayals of women characters in Indian Itihāsa (Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata) by examining key female characters such as Sītā, Draupadī, Kuntī, Śākuntalā, and Sātyavatī. We uncover a more nuanced and empowering representation of women than is often seen in popular interpretations. Central to the Itihāsa is the concept of Ardhānginī and Sahadharmācāriṇī, which represent the idea of mutual partnership between husband and wife in both spiritual and social realms by following a duty-centric approach. Women like Sītā and Draupadī exemplify this partnership, engaging

not only in emotional support but also in strategic and moral leadership.

Selected events surrounding Kuntī, Śākuntalā, and Sātyavatī in this paper reveal that women in the Itihāsa were not only pivotal in shaping the course of events but were also active agents of change, embodying wisdom, resilience, and leadership. For example, Sātyavatī's decisive actions to secure the Kuru lineage—through strategic marriages and alliances—demonstrate her authority in shaping the future of the kingdom. Rather than being confined to rigid, stereotypical roles, the women in these texts exhibit remarkable strength, intellect, and agency. They are shown as active decision-makers, strategists, and key figures who shape the course of events, often driving the narrative forward. Far from being passive or secondary figures, they were integral to the moral, social, and political fabric of their worlds. Their roles are not limited to passive support; instead, they engage in complex, reciprocal relationships where both men and women share responsibility and contribute equally to the success and stability of their families and societies. By revisiting these ancient narratives, it becomes clear that the gender dynamics depicted in these texts offer a holistic and enriched perspective, one that values partnership, mutual respect, and shared duties, reflecting a much more egalitarian view than is often attributed to the past. These texts challenge modern misconceptions, urging us to rethink the roles of women and men as equally significant and fluid, transcending the typical gendered limitations that have often been imposed upon them.

Compliance with ethical standards Note required.

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