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Portrayal of Female Characters in “Bharath: An Epic of Dungri Bhils”

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&
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The Bhil tribe is one of the major tribal communities in India, with a population ranking after the Santhal and Gond tribes. They are found in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. “Bharath: An Epic of Dungri Bhils” is an oral epic documented by Bhagwandas Patel and translated to English by Nila Shah. It depicts the difference in interpretation of an epic and the unique identity of this tribe. The female characters in the epic are represented as strong and influential. It also contributes to the discourse on gender and identity. “Bharath: An Epic of Dungri Bhils” is also read as a women’s epic. There is a respect for matriarchal society. The paper aims to study the role of selected women characters and their importance in the social and cultural fabric of the Dungri Bhils.

In Bharath, the Bhils have a close relationship with the king, and saints and belong to dynasties. There are descriptions of maidservants, soldiers, and wars. There is no ingrained social control in Bhil society. Women are strong and independent. They can move alone in forests and do water activities in lakes without the protection of men even during nighttime. Queens can get ready on their desire wander in the garden and invite the king on their wish. The Bharath of the Bhils is an epic that sings the praises of women. In the beginning, they used to go on pilgrimage to Ganga to give dignity to women in the family and society. It happens when a frog’s soul enters a childless man’s body. When the Baniya’s son grew up, he accepted lord Indra’s service in Indrapuri. He dressed the woman, Valmiki’s wife in gold and made her his sister who came to market. In this incident, matrilineal society is reflected. It also shows that the difference between high and low has to be forgotten. It shows Human should be respected and honoured. The son of Baniya is incarnated as a jackal in his next birth on being cursed by the sun god. From the thirteenth Abyss, a jackal was hiding in the clump of grass on the bank of river Ganga. The beauty of Ganga’s body is like the flame of Holi bathed in light. Ganga rises and hits one eye of the jackal with a stone. But he continues to follow Ganga to Guru Sarasankhar’s place and so Ganga turns him into ashes and throws it in the Ganga River. It shows the woman’s rebellion to protect herself against the jealous man. From the ashes grows the Sal tree and from



the Sal tree again the king Shantanu takes birth. Even in his second birth, he did not leave Ganga. He goes to Guru Sarasankhar's and asks for Ganga's hand. Ganga agrees to marry to keep the promise of her Guru. But she also kept a condition that King Shantanu would kill their children by throwing them in the river. It shows that the guru has a unique place in their society and she followed his commands. After marriage, Ganga is treated as a companion, not a servant, and eventually, her personality develops into an empress who rules over the king. She used to wander in forests with maidens without taking anyone's permission. She also plays Chopin with the king. She orders Shantanu to kill their children once they are born and they eat delicious food and if this condition is not fulfilled Ganga leaves the king forever. Here her character is not an object but a personality who rules over "purusha" (Man). No one influences her but she also respects her guru.

Kunti

The Saptrishi creates Gandhari from the skeleton and emanates Kunti from flesh and blood. Kunti goes to the lake to draw water while bathing in the lake. The sun god shoots arrows enchanted by the form of Kunti and Karna is born. Kunti puts Karna in a dungeon for the fear of tarnishing the Guru. The Virgin Kunti keeps the Guru immaculate as she lives in the ashram. Kunti abandons her son not because of the fear of dynasty or society but to keep the dignity of her Guru. Kunti sought promises from Karna, not because of her interest but to help the Pandavas. Kunti in the Bharath at the behest of the childless and sick Pandu king invokes the gods through mantras and gives birth to the five Pandavas through the Niyoga method. Kunti went to bath in the lake along with the maids and the arrows of the enraptured gods flew hence from Yamadev, Yudhistir, arjuna from Agni Dev (fire god), Bhima from Pavan Dev, Sahadev from lord shiv and Nakul from Indra was born. Kunti received the joy of motherhood because of her desire. Kunti and Draupadi's power prevails in the Pandavas family's kingdom. Bhim gets scared of seeing Kunti and Draupadi under the pollen tree at midnight in the assembly of gods and goddesses. Women here are not intimidated by masculinity or their egoistic personalities. Conversely, men were influenced by the personality of women. In the fight between Kabira (dushasan) and Bhima, Bhima is on the verge of defeat because of starvation during this moment Kunti produces sweets with her breast milk, and after eating Ladu Bhima has the power to fight and defeat Kabira. There is a reflection of motherhood in her character. Like Draupadi, Kunti is also an important and strong character of Bharath. He advises and makes suggestions on political, religious, and social occasions. The Pandavas cannot overrule her command. Kunti orders Arjun to accept the coconut and marry Subhadra though she is pregnant and he cannot refuse her order. She orders him to take care of the palace and



domesticated animals. Kunti's character shows foresight. during the division of the continent with the Kauravas, Kunti orders Pandavas to welcome Narada and God with joy and she prepared thirty-two food items. Kunti was the one who took fire spear and bow from Karna through deception to achieve victory in war. Kunti advises Nakul and Sahadev about the difficulties they will face on their path and asks them to go to Subhadra who can see the future. The kingdom of Hastinapur is run by Mother Kunti and Draupadi.

Subhadra

Women in Bhil society enjoy freedom in terms of physical relations. Among Bhils, unmarried youths can have sexual relations. It is an accepted social custom. As a result, even if the bride becomes pregnant, she is accepted by paying less bride price. Even lord Krishna's sister Subhadra is pregnant before marriage so he decides to leave her at Pandavas place but Kunti says no matter how she is a girl is like gold and we should accept it with respect. In Bharath women are more free than men in terms of sexual relations. Arjun's wife Subhadra, became pregnant before marriage. She appears in the Rajya Sabha and exposes the lasciviousness of Arjun. She tells her brother-in-law that Arjun is a womanizer. She tries to seduce Arjun to stop him from going to the abyss.

Draupadi

There is respect and dignity for Draupadi, Kunti, Subhadra, and Indrani. In the epic, Draupadi and Kunti are the ones who hold political, social, and religious authority. Draupadi is not treated as the husband's property. Not a single man from the Pandavas or the Kauravas is capable of deploying, insulting, or dominating Draupadi. There is no incident of undressing Draupadi in this epic. Instead, the Pandavas are humiliated by Draupadi in the royal court for their inability to dissolve their ego on the path of meditation. Draupadi and Kunti are the ones who perform yajna for the dead Pandu king. Draupadi used to roam freely in the Kadli forest she likes the proposal of the Pandavas and accepts it on her wish and she accompanies them to Hastinapur. no marriage ceremonies or rituals of society are performed. And without passing through the shackles of society she begins to stay in the seven-story palace of Hastinapur. In the morning at the sight of Yudhistir performing the arti of Draupadi and falling at her feet, Bhima became very angry and at midnight when he saw Draupadi and Kunti under the pollen tree he was frightened and screamed to save himself from the witches. Draupadi says to Bhima to follow her orders if he wants to save his life. In this epic woman are the decision-makers, it reflects a matriarchal society. They are the ones who have the power to dissolve the ego of men. On the failure of the seventh yajna of the Pandavas, the Pandu king received the incarnation of a dog. Sahdev, Nakul, and Bhim's wife scream at the dog in their courtyard. Whereas Draupadi



prepares thirty – two food items, places them on a plate, and feeds the dog. Bhima asks her angrily, “Why are you feeding the dog is it close to you?” Draupadi answers it is my father-in-law, Pandu. He has suffered a lot. Both went to the royal court to argue with one another. Lord Krishna asks Draupadi to calm down. Draupadi speaks clearly to him that, “Brother, if he wants to insult, he will get insulted, if you want good, you need to be one, but he doesn’t want good and so he will get only abuse.” This is Draupadi’s true introduction where she owns her personality which is self-created according to her feelings. She does not consider or nurture the wrong orders instead she brings warriors like him on the right path. Pandavas involve Draupadi and Kunti while making political, religious, and social decisions. She is the one who decides Abhimanyu’s marriage. She asks them to marry Abhimanyu the princess of Virat Nagar. In Bharath, any type of religious or social events are decided and organized by women. In the epic, we see women in the form of a daughter, a wife, and a mother. Even the ordinary characters like the maids are not influenced by the king or queen. They move freely with the queens and are treated equally.

Heerapath

The sight of the dead Arjuna bewitches the daughter of snake Vasuki, Heerapath in the abyss. she performs Gandharva's marriage with the dead Arjun before her friends. After completion of the marriage, she brings him to life and they both get attracted to one another and Heerapath becomes pregnant. Heerapath was aware of the selfish nature of man and so she placed gold in Arjun’s hand telling him to use it to perform the yajna behind his father. She only asks him not to forget her. But Heerapath’s skepticism turns out to be true. Later he comes to the abyss after several years when he needed something. And Heerapath without a word or any kind of oblation gives him a saree preserving the dignity of the Pandavas. Snake is personified in the epic. They perform actions, enjoy, grief, pain, and sexuality very similar to humans.

There is no clear mention of the devil’s society in this narrative. Hidimba is represented as a human. Like Draupadi, she has no family, gotra, or lineage. She moves freely in the forest and solitude; she builds a hammock to attract men. Attracted by the sound of gulls, Bhima whirled around and brought Hidimba with the wind to the chariot of the sun. She was attracted by the strength of Bhima. She is hurt by the arrows of Bhim’s eyes becomes pregnant and gives birth to Ghatotkach.

Indrani

In the episode of lord Indra, Indrani, and Saints, a woman’s exposure to men who treat women as objects of luxury on the occasion is reflected. It is also anger towards the husband who is unable to protect her wife from other men. There is a fierce rebellion against a cowardly



husband. The sage who came to Indra's abode were welcomed by Indrani. A monk winks at Indrani, another sage steps up on her feet, and the third pinches her by touching her waist. Indrani gets angry and replies, "What are you doing here? Stay away from me. What are you doing on this woman's body? If you continue this, I will burst your head with tambur (cymbals)." She also rebels against her husband. She trembles with rage, gnashes her teeth, and tells him, "You are such a fool. From where did you bring these saints? I will build home with another brave man but will not stay with you. You eat drink and be merry." She comes to the royal court of the Kauravas and proposes to accept her. But because of the fear of Indra, the Kauravas do not accept her proposal. At that time Indrani taunts them saying, "I came to your court with hope and ambition. But you turned to be impotent." Then she goes to Hastinapur, the court of the Pandavas but they also denied her proposal because of the fear of lord Indra. She gets very angry and, on her way, back she pushes the child-like Abhimanyu with determination. He remains adamant. She tells Abhimanyu the sad story. But he decides to give her social honor. He defeats the warrior Pavan dev by Indra and gives Indrani respect in the royal court.

There are episodes where men are treated as objects and assets. In all stories till now we see destruction, usurping power, and dignity, be it forest, in the desert, the subject is the same. In the case of women, exile means the abolition of life. But this narrative is very different. Here, Kunti or Draupadi do not have to suffer in the forest. No one kills or tries to capture the Pandavas and Kunti. There is no such occasion of lakshagriha burning. Kunti is never shown suffering being a widow on any occasion or place in life. Draupadi is not staked by Yudhistir in the royal court. She is not treated as their property. There is no such scene of undressing Draupadi in the royal assembly. No woman sheds tears on being insulted or ill-treated by a man. Here woman is not at the center of the battle but it is lord Krishna who unequally distributed the land between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Hastinapur and Dhavlagarh are separate states of their own. Women here are not presented as helpless or are not humiliated at any occasion or place in life. The entire political, religious, and social authority is in the hands of efficient women like Draupadi and Kunti.

Conclusion

After studying various instances from the story, it is depicted that women of the Bhil tribe are not submissive or weak instead they are strong, intellectual, and independent. Their opinion is taken on social, religious, and political occasions. Women here are independent and empower themselves socially and politically. They not only act as advisors but also as decision-makers.



So, “Bharath” is the epic that illuminates and glorifies the life of a woman. It also reflects the unique identity and cultural aspect of this community.

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