
Demystifying *Samyak Agraga* from the women characters of the Mahabharata: a holistic leadership perspective

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Abstract: This paper presents the holistic leadership from the Mahabharata demonstrated by the women characters. The authors employed hermeneutics, which is a qualitative approach in analysing the characters from the Mahabharata. Twelve women characters have been selected and analysed from a holistic leadership perspective. The 12 women characters played a significant and vital role in many situations and influenced the process and the outcome of the events in the Mahabharata. The holistic leadership roles played by these women characters have a great significance to leadership theory and practice in today's world. The findings reveal that these women characters leadership approach is an inside-out rather than outside-in as they demonstrated emotional, mental, strength in dealing with any crisis, and they effectively changed the conventional image of a woman. This paper is expected to provide a framework for more research of underrated women characters from the Mahabharata within leadership and management.

Keywords: holistic leadership; women in leadership; Mahabharata; Indian management culture; Indian women.

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1 Introduction

It is well established by scholars that the Mahabharata is the longest epic in the world and has been called the national epic of India with the Ramayana. In very much the same sense, the Illiad is the national epic of classical Greece. The Mahabharata reflects Indian ethos in totality. The name also suggests that it is the story of a dynasty of Bharata, the first emperor of India. For Indians, it is an epic that deals with the great fratricidal battle between Kauravas and the Pandavas, the two cousins.

The epic Mahabharata is also extolled as the fifth Veda (Veda means knowledge). Mahabharata is also considered an encyclopaedia of life, and its central theme is dharma meaning occupational duty, righteousness and virtues. It deals with dharma and artha, which is the acquisition of wealth, kama, enjoyment, and moksha, which is liberation. The Mahabharata was composed by Veda Vyasa (son of Parasara Muni) and was written by Sri Ganesa more than 5,000 years ago, and it has about 100,000 verses in 18 Parvas (books), 107 sub-Parvas (sections), 2,111 chapters, and more than 1.8 million words. The 18 Parvas or books are *Adi Parva*, *Sabha Parva*, *Vana Parva*, *Virata Parva*, *Udyoga Parva*, *Bhishma Parva*, *Drona Parva*, *Karna Parva*, *Shalya Parva*, *Sauptika Parva*, *Stree Parva*, *Shanti Parva*, *Anushasana Parva*, *Asvamedha Parva*, *Ashramavasika Parva*, *Mausala Parva*, *Mahaprasthanika Parva* and *Swargarohanika Parva* (Ganguli, 1896).

The Mahabharata has been known for inculcating wisdom, knowledge and learning. It is brimming with a fantastic treasure trove. On one level, it is a great story of heroism, bold women, power, greed, envy and bad decisions. On another level, it is a treasure trove for philosophical insights, behavioural patterns, choices, and decisions. It is a vast, genuinely unforgettable cast of living eccentrics – men, virtuous and immoral, warriors, saints, kings and women's of magnificence and intellect. Painful losses, radiant nobility, great courage and virtue, insatiable greed, satanic hatred and sinister intrigues are part of the dynastic struggle between two real beings, and in the case of the Mahabharata – two branches of a family that culminates in an 18-day war in the plain of Kurukshetra. The tragic battle of Kurukshetra symbolises human's constant struggle to distinguish between right and wrong, to prefer right action to wrongdoing. Mahabharata is not just the story of a fraternal war or a source of wisdom for philosophers (Brodbeck, 2007).

The Mahabharata philosophy clarifies that people are different and are motivated by different factors, so there can be no uniform approach. There is a deep acceptance that people are influenced by emotions and often do not respond appropriately or correctly (regardless of their actual performance). There is a built-in recognition of fuzzy logic that is not necessarily black and white. It reveals the secrets of leadership and the path to success. The western management theory on leadership is measurement oriented having a materialistic approach with a strong base in rationalism focusing on professionalism and a thirst for profit. The leadership philosophy that arose from the Mahabharata seems more experiential than prescriptive and also spiritual. Mathew et al. (2019) suggest that although spirituality has no effect on employee performance but it supports the connections between job satisfaction, employee commitment, and performance. It focuses on subjective criteria acceptance, keeping a holistic approach in the back of the mind. It has fuzzy logic with an ultimate preference for the human element and dynamism.

2 Methodology

Mohapatra and Gupta (2021) calls for developing indigenous organisational theories, identifying traits from culturally traditional patterns that can be transferred to the business environment, introducing cultural perspectives to conventional business perspectives, and addressing the West's need to look at applications of Indian philosophy in business. The authors have rigorously reviewed the literary work published on the Mahabharata, and it is observed that more often, the epic male characters have been given the due credit of leadership in this larger than life tale. Nevertheless, the contribution of female characters or the women, in particular, is overlooked, or even if it is covered. Only a few characters are highlighted, ignoring the contribution of niche women whose role was probably short in this epic, but they have left the colossal impact or, rather say, have acted as a game-changer.

Women in Mahabharata stand against the decisions taken by men and play a vital role in many situations. They carried out their roles as mother, wife, and daughter following societal expectations. They were bold and powerful enough to confront life's obstacles because of their ambition, intelligence, and personal strength. Despite the adversity imposed by fate, they held firm in their opposition to their wrongs and successfully attained their goals. Women in the Mahabharata have a high level of emotional vitality and complete control over their passions. The authors here have attempted to bring the selected women characters of this great epic into the limelight, considering their leadership dimension.

For this purpose, hermeneutics, a qualitative research methodology for interpreting ancient or classical literature, has been employed. Hermeneutics is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of topics, but it is not well defined. It is also concerned with language use and the process of language use (Muniapan and Rajantheran, 2011). Hermeneutics is applied widely in philosophy, religion and theology, law, sociology and international relations. The Mahabharata, written in the Sanskrit language, is one of the oldest languages in the world. However, today the Mahabharata has also been translated into English and other languages of the world. The Mahabharata's content analysis and interpretation are made to explore its relevance for developing a spiritual leadership model. It was analysed by using the hermeneutic analysis. The analysis was done based

on four stages (4Is), namely identification, investigation, interpretation and integration (Muniapan, 2010). The identification stage involves searching for the relevant direct and indirect verses related to the women characters and leadership from the text; this was followed by a detailed investigation of the verses in terms of content within modern context. The next stage involved interpretation of the verses by providing the meaning and the relevance to the context of spiritual and women leadership. The final stage was the integration, which involved adopting and modifying the lessons from the Mahabharata and provides commentary from the leadership perspective.

In the management and leadership literature written within the ancient wisdom such as the Sanatana Dharma or the Vedic context, authors such as Chakraborty (1993, 1995, 1999), Chakraborty and Chakraborty (2008), Sharma (1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003), Krishnan (2001, 2003), Kejriwal and Krishnan (2004), Satpathy (2006, 2007), Muniapan (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2015), Muniapan and Dass (2008, 2009), Muniapan and Shaikh (2007), Muniapan and Satpathy (2010, 2013), Muniapan and Rajantheran (2011), Muniapan and Low (2011), Low and Muniapan (2011), Muniapan and Jalarajan (2014), Satpathy and Muniapan (2008), Satpathy et al. (2013), Malik and Pereira (2016), Nayak (2017), Parashar (2008), Taker (2011), Parikh (2020), Singh (2022) and others have made their contribution based on Vedic literature. These scholars have made studies based on the Vedic literature written in Sanskrit, such as the Upanisads, Ramayana, the Mahabharata (mainly the Bhagavad Gita), Arthashastra of Kautilya and the Thirukurral (Tamil). The Bhagavad Gita from the Mahabharata is considered the essence of the Vedas, and it is the most popular area of research from the Mahabharata, but other parts of the Mahabharata are rarely explored within leadership and management. Therefore, the authors explore the holistic leadership approaches of women characters in the Mahabharata in this paper.

3 Samyak Agraga – a holistic approach to leadership

The eminent management and leadership scholars have given their remarkable contribution to the leadership, its traits, styles and behaviours approach. Leadership is also one of the most researched topics within the areas of management. However, the spiritual dimension of leadership, leadership from ancient wisdom and women role in leadership during the ancient time are lacking in the past literature, which is the need of an hour to consider in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world.

Today, we are in a pandemic world with the entire world is affected by COVID-19 and in the world of increased VUCA. VUCA is an abbreviation that was first used in 1987 to describe or reflect on the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of general conditions and situations, based on Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus' leadership ideas (Johansen, 2007). Volatility recognises frequent and rapid change, uncertainty is the unpredictability of events, complexity highlights the multiple factors and issues to be considered, and ambiguity draws attention to the fact that there is a lack of clarity, understanding and precision due to multiple meanings and messages within a situation a leader has to deal (Scherer, 2021). The authors have made an effort to fill in this gap by adding the spiritual dimension to holistic leadership.

Holistic leadership is a style of leadership that considers not only what leaders must do and how they must do it but also who and where they must lead. A more comprehensive paradigm of leadership ability, holistic leadership, extends beyond actions

to define who the leader is as a person. Holistic leaders understand how to incorporate their beliefs and character into their leadership, and they recognise that they must bring their entire self to their leadership role – body, mind and spirit (Raju, 2018).

The etymology of the word Samyak Agraga combines ideologies derived from Jainism, Prakrit, Hinduism and Sanskrit. ‘Samayak’ means ‘right’, and ‘Agraga’ means a leader, a guide or the one who is marching foremost as a torchbearer – combining these two words means righteous guide or torchbearer who marches foremost all the time in the organisation (Agraga, 2015).

The Mahabharata gives a holistic approach to leadership. The role of a leader unfolded by this great epic is not limited up to being in charge of the organisation, but he is the one who inspires influences and energies with his proper, dutiful and virtuous conduct.

The women characters selected by the authors in this paper leave a massive impact in this epic in discharging their duties morally, free from bias and ethically. Women have increasingly moved toward greater gender equality in the workplace, yet, women are still underrepresented in leadership roles. As leaders, women can make bold and sensible judgements, which help to make the team climate less authoritative and more cooperative, giving the team a family-like feel. It improves teamwork across the organisation and aids in the implementation of a new corporate culture.

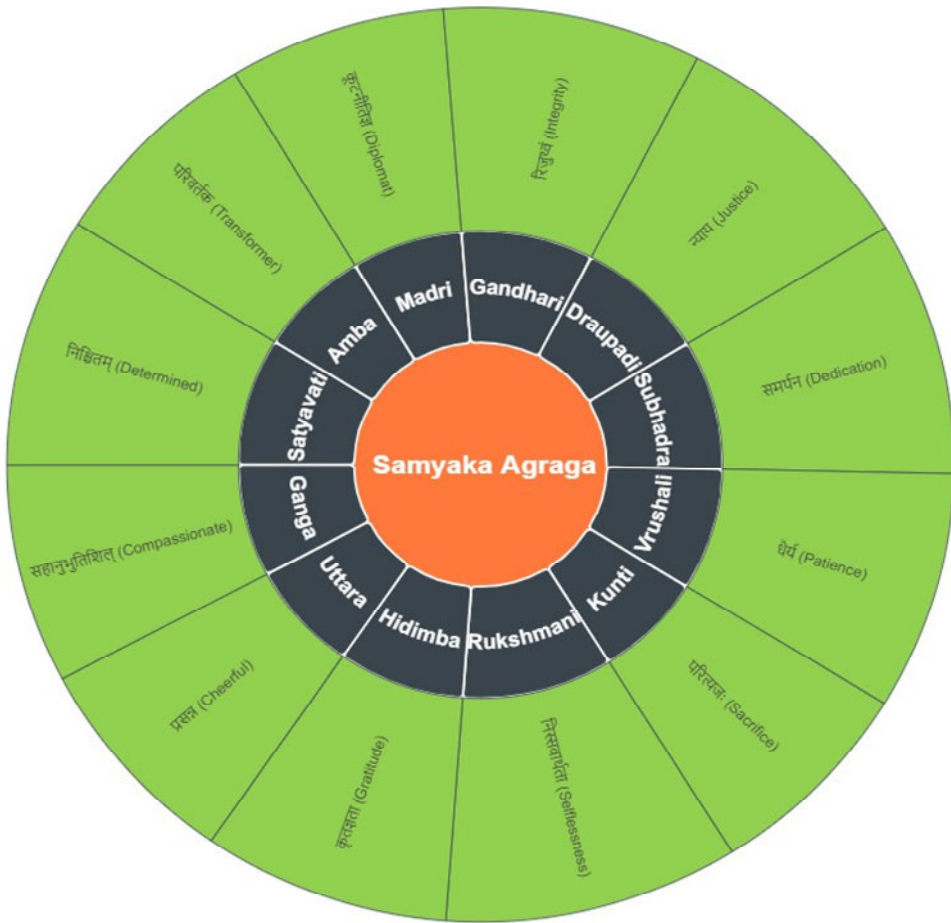
When women become leaders, they bring talents, new views, and structural and cultural distinctions to the companies they work for, resulting in more successful solutions. Women can study more minor details to see what is going on underneath the surface with diverse views and a sense of awareness. Strong women usually are brave in pursuing what they want and need, are comfortable and confident being alone and doing things on their own, constantly seek to learn and grow, prioritise themselves and their lives, recognise their self-worth and let go. The women characters of the Mahabharata have been depicted with their intricacies and have projected themselves as strong and influential women characters. They skilfully handled various crises and cleverly flipped the situations upside down to demonstrate their substance and heroism.

As described below, the notion of ‘Samayaka Agraga’ elucidates the concept of leadership bestowed with all good qualities or the virtues derived from the remarkable women characters of the epic Mahabharata.

The authors in this paper aimed to derive the strategic implications of the wholesome, self-sustaining and resilient attitudes that leaders need to embrace in dealing with people. Leaders’ core values and the virtues of adopting are integrity, justice, dedication, patience, sacrifice, selflessness, gratitude, cheerfulness, compassion, determination, transformational and diplomacy. These attributes are whirling in motion and can be used in various proportions to create a unified impact while displaying leadership behaviour by leaders. These ‘soft’ attributes are significant for a leader irrespective of choosing any leadership style or approach. The leadership behaviour that the western theorists explain has universal acceptability but have a partial perspective as it claims about strategic aspects on managing people. However, in this research study, the authors propose a long-term, internally focused view of leadership behaviour to create ‘holistic leadership’ as described in the Sanskrit phrase ‘Sarva Guna Sampann’ that ascribe total supremacy and epitomise a leader who is entirely accomplished with all qualities, goodness, virtues, and traits as described in the wheel. In this research, the authors’ conception is the

‘rootedness’ the leaders need to have while displaying leadership behaviours, especially in the Indian context.

Figure 1 The Samyaka Agraga model of leadership (see online version for colours)



The authors purport that if leaders adopt this gyration, they can create a more robust, resilient and sustainable leadership ecosystem rather than operating in silos. This approach can help future leaders not only managing harmonious industrial relations but also helps in analysing the root causes of employee unrest, burnout and stress. The leadership approach of ‘Samyaka Agraga’ gives a deep insight by deliberations based on spiritual aspects by focusing on the sense of connection to become thought leaders and not merely leaders. It is an embedded approach of leadership that is holistic, unlike the leadership theories of the west. It will help the leaders build a competent and sustainable organisation that can easily withstand time pressures and tackle challenges.

4 Sarva-Guna-Sampanna leadership lessons from the selected women characters of the Mahabharata: an integrative approach

4.1 Ganga

4.1.1 Brief character sketch

Ganga married Shantanu with conditions that Shantanu must never ask any questions about her actions. Ganga is the mother of Bhishma (Ganguli, 1883). When she first met Shantanu, Shantanu asked her to become his wife. She agreed on the condition that he would not ask her a single question. She later gave birth to eight children who were born again as mortals by a curse. Ganga drowned her seven sons when the Vasus told them to do so. However, Shantanu stopped her from drowning her eighth son, Bhishma, and asked her questions. Ganga's condition was broken, and she left Shantanu. However, she promised to return his son.

4.1.2 Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications

From a leadership perspective, the behavioural tendency observed in Ganga's character was that she was an active listener and accountable, which is the dearth requirement in a leader these days. Zhou et al. (2016) identify that leaders' should possess innovative ideation, futuristic, and action-orientation in their approach to avoid any blunders that will be costly to organisations.

John Akers' blunder in IBM in 1993 is an example of the corporate disaster that how a rush to the market and a failed reorganisation led to the most extensive annual loss in a single day in the US history (WowEssays, 2020). Visionary pioneers permit yet energise those they work with to foster their abilities and evaluate new things. They are hopeful about the future, and like this, advance innovativeness and novel thoughts. They are translating the company's vision for their team and developing a new front-line team vision that can be cascaded up through the company.

4.2 Satyawati

4.2.1 Brief character sketch

Satyavati was born uniquely, and a fisherman raised her, and she grew up to be a respected and influential queen (Ganguli, 1883). Self-confidence and influence were the critical traits observed in her portrayal of the characters in the timeless epic Mahabharata. Bhattacharya (2004) praises Satyawati's handling of her encounter with the sage Parashara. He states that, although young, she approaches the tenacious sages with great maturity and spiritual existence. With maturity and openness that amazes us even in the 21st century, she indicates that coitus should be mutually agreeable. She does not fool herself by the idea that the wise man will marry her and asks for virginity to secure her future status in society.

Bhattacharya (2004) continues to comment on the series of her requests: the body scent to make the sexual act pleasant for both of them, the veil of mist to keep the act secret, virgin for her future and fame for her child, who will ensure his fame and according to practical aspects sorted out, eternally feminine blessings of lifelong youth and fragrance. Modern women might wish they were only half as confident,

clear-headed, and confident about their desires and goals as Satyavati. He also praises their togetherness when they secure their children's future with Santanu by expropriating crown prince Devavrata, later known as Bhishma. She brings her illegitimate son Vyasa on stage to continue her lineage for the widows (Ambika and Ambalika) of her deceased son (Vicitraviraya).

4.2.2 Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications

Satyavati's decisions are exemplary throughout her life and show the commanding and autocratic style of leadership that allows almost no contribution from individuals (Caillier, 2020). It requires leaders to settle on practically the entirety of the choices, allowing them to direct work techniques and cycles (Ufua et al., 2020).

This leadership style leaves the group feeling like they are not trustworthy with decisions or tasks (Briker et al., 2021). It tends to establish an exceptionally organised and extremely rigid environment in the organisation. It discourages inventiveness and out-of-the-box thinking and establishes rules, and tends to spell out to be followed clearly.

4.3 Amba

4.3.1 Brief character sketch

Amba is the eldest daughter of Kashya, the king of Kashi and the sister of Ambika and Ambalika. Amba was abducted by Kuru Prince Bhishma and held him responsible for her misfortune. An impossible situation to kill Bhishma from a woman who does not know how to hold a bow. However, this woman is determined to kill Bhishma. The way how Amba took a vow for her rebirth to take revenge on Bhishma. Her vow was as strong as a stone, and she became the cause of Bhishma's death on the 10th day of the Kurukshetra battle. She was reborn as a Shikhandi (born as Shikhandini and later transformed to Shikhandi), and as Bhishma does not fight or fire his weapon at a woman, and Arjuna took advantage of this weakness.

4.3.2 Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications

The iconic leadership trait observed in her character is that she is visionary and self-motivated. She is the kind of leader who is transactional and performance-focused thought of the journey in the Mahabharata. Such leaders use rewards and punishments to achieve organisational targets (Gemedda and Lee, 2020). These kinds of leaders are structured in their approach emphasis purely on results and efficiency at the workplace. These leaders are value-based leaders who screen subordinated cautiously to authorise rules, reward achievement and dislike disappointment (Kark et al., 2018). They seldom change and get impetus for development and change in the organisation. All things being equal, they are centred on keeping up with this and upholding current principles and assumptions.

4.4 *Madri*

4.4.1 *Brief character sketch*

Madri is the princess of the Madra Kingdom and the second wife of King Pandu. She is the mother of the youngest Pandavas – the twin brothers Nakula and Sahadeva. The word Madri means ‘she who is the princess of Madra Kingdom’. King Pandu was looking to expand the borders of the Hastinapura Empire. He decided to attack the kingdom of Madra. Madri was the princess of Madra, and she secretly loved Pandu. However, Madra King was not friends with Hastinapura, and so the chances were very slim. It was the perfect moment she had been waiting. She went to the king of Madra and told him that defeating the Hastinapura army was not an easy task. Even if one defeats him, one will lose thousands of men, wealth and property.

The only way to avoid this war permanently is to offer her to King Pandu and establish a friendly relationship with Hastinapura so that they can never attack the Kingdom of Madra in the future. Madri acts diplomatically by not revealing her desire to marry Pandu. Instead, she focuses on helping her kingdom and saving the lives of thousands of people. Otherwise, they would have died in the war.

4.4.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The role of Madri in the Mahabharata depicts the leadership with a fair attitude and diplomacy. Such leaders always remain persuasive who communicates the intensity. They are the kind of leaders who sell their ideas with intense communication ability. They treat their employees as assets to the organisation and reach consensus through negotiations with a high emotional quotient. The convincing leaders know the art of persuasion, and rather than providing orders, these administrators work by disclosing why a particular course of action should be chosen (Humborstad et al., 2014). Subordinates will, in general, feel more associated with the dynamic interaction under this style (Li and Liu, 2020). Enticing the executives is an incredibly accommodating approach that tends to clarify each task

4.5 *Gandhari*

4.5.1 *Brief character sketch*

Gandhari is a princess of Gandhara and the wife of Dhritrashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura, and the mother of a hundred sons, the Kauravas, and a daughter. Gandhari was pious, especially an ardent admirer of Lord Shiva. Gandhari’s sacrifice of her eyesight and strict life gave her great spiritual strength. Gandhari made one exception to her blindfolded condition when she removed her blindfold to see how Duryodhana made his entire body, except his loins, invulnerable to any enemy. Although Gandhari’s sons have been portrayed as villains, the Mahabharata attributes high moral standards to Gandhari. She repeatedly admonished her sons to follow the dharma and make peace with the Pandavas. Gandhari was particularly close to Kunti, whom she respected like an older sister.

4.5.2 Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications

While referring to Gandhari, it can be depicted that she walked on the path of dharma throughout her life. Even after being surrounded by Shakuni – a dicey brother, Dhritrashtra – an ambiguous husband and Duryodhana – an avarice son. In the organisational context, it often happens with the leader that he may have such negative people or followers accompanying him. However, the leader should adopt the behavioural trait of integrity and honesty like Gandhari (Masud and Hossain, 2021). Gandhari's character exemplifies the bureaucracy and duty focused behaviour in the Mahabharata, which is the need of an hour for today's leaders. The leader is fixated with official rules, hierarchy-based work ethics, systematic work approach, task-oriented, hardworking and stability (Weiss, 2014). The style of authority is a style of a leader who depends on fixed principles. This style does not empower advancement and change by leaders who might act naturally shaky and dubious in their job. Individuals who utilise this authority style are frequently acquainted with the standard arrangements and rules (Rahman et al., 2017).

4.6 Draupadi

4.6.1 Brief character sketch

Draupadi has a wide range of contradictory connotations as a character. Draupadi is regarded as the personification of limitless bravery, boldness, intelligence, and a warrior's revengeful mindset. She transforms into a full-fledged character from a non-existent creature of emptiness.

4.6.2 Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications

The lesson leader can learn from this episode is to accept the circumstances instead to escape from them. It was a time when a man could have multiple marriages, but women could not. Draupadi emerged as a change agent when she agreed to divide herself between five husbands (Boamah et al., 2018). In the dice game, when her husband lost her to Kauravas, and she was humiliated, she takes a vow to keep her hair open until she does not washes it with the blood of Duhsasana. This Draupadi act shows how strong she was as a communicator with the clarity of her goal (Choi et al., 2016). She had pride in her beauty and intelligence. Henceforth when Arjuna marries Subhadra and brings the second wife, she feels disappointed, but she never let this thing come in her relationship with Subhadra and always treated her like her younger sister. This behaviour of Draupadi entails that she was emotionally intelligent and self-aware, which any leader should be in the organisation. In their exile, she remained empathetic and a source of motivation for Pandavas to remind them of their life's goal. It illustrates that every leader should act as a passion for his followers. Moreover, she is the symbol of women empowerment in the timeless epic Mahabharata.

These are path-breaking leaders who empower subordinates to quest for freedom (Gong et al., 2009). They are always involved in forming new goals, envision success and are inspirational. They keep on giving direction to subordinates. The quest for success energises them for more critical trust in their subordinates (Vasilagos et al., 2017).

4.7 *Subhadra*

4.7.1 *Brief character sketch*

Subhadra is the half-sister of Krishna, wife of Arjuna (third of the Pandava brothers), and mother of Abhimanyu. When Pandava went to exile along with Draupadi, Subhadra moved to her brother's place at Dwaraka, and she devoted herself to upbringing her son Abhimanyu and Draupadi's sons Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shrutakarma, Satanika and Shrutasena. However, it is always remembered how Draupadi stood by the side of Pandavas during their tough time. Nevertheless, it is always overlooked how Subhadra dedicated her whole life to nurturing the children in the absence of her family.

4.7.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The strategic trait in Subhadra's character is that she always remained supportive and empathetic to her family and its beloved ones. It is often happening in the leader's life that leaders need to be affiliative and prioritise the organisation people first. This behavioural aspect of the leader builds a harmonious work environment and emotional bonds among the leader and followers, which further helps achieve the organisation's common goals.

The empathetic and communicative leader gains the love and support of followers. If the affiliative leader could be depicted in a single word, it would be agreeable (Kim et al., 2020). They will probably construct groups of people that function admirably together in achieving the targets. These people depict their initiative characteristics among groups. They imply to make people feel a part of the group and inspire them. They are collaborators and represent the group and not their individuality.

4.8 *Vrushali*

4.8.1 *Brief character sketch*

Vrushali is the wife of Karna. Karna's father, Adhiratha, chose her as the bride for his son. She is described to be wise and pious. After the death of her sons and husband, she ended her life on her husband's pyre. Vrushali is one of the least known characters of the great epic Mahabharata. She performed all her duties throughout her life behind the curtains. Karna, a skilled warrior, was stripped of his identity and dignity. He fights social discrimination and gradation to show his potential, and Vrushali always stands by Karna's side in his struggle for self-identification.

4.8.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

Vrushali marries Karna by her choice, but in reciprocation, Karna marries Vrushali for his father's happiness. Moreover, Karna had only a vision of his life, and it is to prove to society that opportunity should be given based on the merit then cast. However, Vrushali supports Karna without expecting anything in revert. This selfless love of Vrushali for Karna shows humility and care for others.

In the organisation, employees often have their personal goals, but being a leader, one constantly needs to remind them of their purpose of existence. A leader in the organisation should act as a pacesetter and motivator to lead from the front like Vrushali.

A leader in the contemporary organisation should set a high standard and helps followers to achieve their organisational goals and personal goals (Narayanswamy, 2016).

The locus of control is within, obsessed about doing things faster and better. The pace-setting administration style is conveyed when a group is profoundly energetic and able. It is seen that a pace-setting authority style annihilates the hierarchical environment (Pawar, 2013). Subordinates feel overpowered by the pacesetter's requests for greatness. The leader here anticipates that employees should realise what to do and even think, and they tend to micro-manage.

4.9 *Kunti*

4.9.1 *Brief character sketch*

Kunti is wife of Pandu and the mother Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna. Kunti's life was complicated, but she tackled challenges head-on, and her patience and self-assurance helped her become a strong woman. Her given name was Pratha, but her father had promised his childless cousin Kuntibhoja that he would give him his firstborn; thus, Pratha, as his firstborn, became Kuntibhoja's daughter and was known as Kunti.

Kunti was blessed by the sacred saint Durvasa to evoke any god to have a child of her choice. She evoked the God Sun and gave birth to Karna, to whom she left because of the customs of the society. In her curiosity, she tried experimenting when she was not married. She always remained an ideal wife, an exemplary daughter-in-law, and a beloved mother who kept her family united against all odds.

4.9.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The character of Kunti emerged in the immortal Mahabharata as a leader having succession planning. Yudhisthira, Bheema and Arjuna were the sons of Kunti, wherein case Sahadeva and Nakula of Madri. However, while upbringing all of them, Kunti never let the latter feel they are the stepbrothers. This foundation of unity helped Pandavas in their clash with Kauravas.

After marriage, when Draupadi comes to Pandavas' family, Kunti happily hands over the charge and accepts her wholeheartedly. This succession planning is the dearth requirement for today's leader (Woods, 2004). No matter how capable one is when times come, one should leave everything keeping the faith in successor, and this is the right approach allowing new blood to the organisation (Starratt, 2001). Kunti has always exhibited a democratic and supportive leadership style by staying together under a single roof with opponents. The portrayal of Kunti enriches participative leadership by staying together with Gandhari, whose sons vowed to destroy the future of her sons. She emerges as the empowered woman when she sympathises with Draupadi on her humiliation in the dice game and supports her for her decision to take revenge.

Moreover, she always favoured the peace between Pandavas and Kauravas, which entails her belief in collaboration and group engagement rather than war. This leadership style brings about a high degree of cooperation and diminishes the requirement for control and formal standards and methods. Creates equipped individuals who will put forth a strong effort and will in general. Promotes subordinates who have an independent mind and look for liability.

4.10 *Rukshmani*

4.10.1 *Brief character sketch*

Rukshmani (Rukmini) is King Bhishmaka's daughter of the Vidarbha kingdom; Rukmini is described as beautiful, intelligent and virtuous. When her brother Rukmi tried to marry Shisupala forcefully, she asked Krishna to abduct her. Krishna heroically eloped with her, and they had ten children, including Pradyumna.

4.10.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The incident of abduction where Rukshmani invites Krishna depicts her decisive skills and courage. Such leadership trait often observes in the laissez-faire leader, i.e., taking fast track decisions living faith in the employees (Glambek et al., 2018). This genre of leadership inspires others with positivity. The less stressed workers will think creatively, and innovative ideas always emerge in a less stressed atmosphere (Ågotnes al., 2018). It allows experts to function productively and challenges them to take personal responsibility for their achievements and failures (Singfiel, 2018). It motivates people to perform optimally. It reinforces successful performance and provides autonomy.

4.11 *Hidimba (Hidimbi)*

4.11.1 *Brief character sketch*

Hidimba (Hidimbi) is the wife of the Pandava Bhima and the mother of Ghatotkacha. Hidimbi's brother Hidimba, an alleged cannibal, had sent her to bring him human flesh, but when she saw the handsome Prince Bhima sitting in the clearing, she fell in love with him and could not bring herself to kill him. She turned into a tall, dark-skinned, gorgeous woman dressed in ornaments and garlands and approached him. When Hidimbi was late, Hidimba came to kill Bhima himself. He tried to attack Hidimbi, but Bhima protected her and killed Hidimba after a good fight.

Hidimbi then asked Bhima to marry her; he hesitated at first but followed after repeated insistence. He agreed to spend time with her from morning to night on the condition that he would stay with his brothers during the dark hours, and this would continue until they had a son. She eventually gave birth to Bhima, a son, Ghatotkacha. When the Pandavas left the forest, Bhima had to leave them as if they were on a war campaign. It is unclear whether they ever met again.

4.11.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The act of Hidimbi convincing Bhima to marry her and give her son as the successor to rule after her brother's death establishes her as a problem solver. This favour of Pandavas – to be precise with Bheema she squares off by sending her son Ghatorkacha on one of the critical days of the Kurukshetra War for supporting Pandavas, reflecting her gratitude trait. She exhibits the servant leadership theory, which entails serving instead of influence. She proves that she is a good listener, which a leader should be, along with an ability to heal and solve problems in a crisis (Kool and van Dierendonck, 2012). This leadership style shows friendly and moral contemplations and accomplishes work by encouraging employees (Koseoglu et al., 2017). It is worth-based administration. It

effectively stimulates the employees' positive behaviours (Krog and Govender, 2015). It promotes the employees' intrinsic motivation and positively influences their behaviour (Lee, 2008).

4.12 *Uttaraa (Uttari)*

4.12.1 *Brief character sketch*

Uttaraa (Uttari) is the daughter of King Virata and Queen Sudeshna, at whose court the Pandavas spent a year in concealment during their exile. She was sister of Uttara Kumar, Sveta and Shanka. She was widowed at a very young age when Abhimanyu was killed in the Kurukshetra War. Her son Parikshita was the only surviving dynast of the Kuru clan and eventually became king of Hastinapura. It is also believed that Uttaraa learned to dance from Arjuna during the 13th year of exile when he was a eunuch. During this period, Arjuna admired Uttaraa's qualities and later proposed her marriage to her son Abhimanyu.

4.12.2 *Behavioural traits/roles and managerial implications*

The character of Uttaraa unfolds self-discipline and learning agility traits of leadership. She lost her husband when she was pregnant at a very young age, but she did not lose hope. She gave successor to the Pandava dynasty in the form of a capable king, i.e., Parikshit, who later lives the legacy of virtues and good governance whose seeds were sown by his ancestral. Uttaraa remained the hope for Pandavas since they lost all their children except the child in Uttaraa's womb during the Kurukshetra War. She supported her brother Uttara Kumar when she was unmarried and her husband, Abhimanyu, after her marriage. She remained the guiding force for Parikshit during his tenure as the king. The coaching leadership incorporates coaching mindsets and behaviours. It does this by unlocking and enabling potential. It is distinct from the traditional management style of command and control, which can often stifle potential.

5 **Significance and relevance to holistic leadership**

The character analysis of the selected women characters from the ancient epic Mahabharata portrays an integrative approach by delineating their key traits as depicted in the epic based on the roles and resultant behavioural tendencies. The authors have attempted to correlate these traits in holistic leadership behaviour and styles in the management context. Further, an attempt has been made to accentuate the managerial implications.

From the summarisation, as depicted, the authors of this paper study affirm that leadership and management are culture-specific. Western management and leadership models and theories cannot be recklessly adopted in the Indian context without understanding the content and context. In the ancient epic of Mahabharata, the less prominent or less known women characters teach us leadership lessons that can be prudently applied, especially in the Indian context. The roles played by these women characters have a definite holistic leadership lesson which is nothing less than a prodigy. The traits of these women characters showcase attitudinal predisposition, which is

reflected in their behavioural tendencies in various episodes of Mahabharata. They are the testimony of the leadership that is time tested and backed up by experiences, turbulence, and results that the entire world has witnessed.

In the subject domain of leadership, the 'holistic' leadership maxim has been talked about, especially with regards to 'spiritual' leaders (Dhiman, 2017) and 'school leadership' (Shaked and Schechter, 2017). The managers and leaders who can achieve collaborative and cooperative participation from their subordinates possess core values like higher cognisance and a humanistic approach towards goals and can lead the organisation to achieve goals (Best, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has pressed leaders to reorient conventional methods of managing people to bring a behavioural modification. Leaders lead effectively by configuring the various touch-points of their subordinates which gives immediate results. Considering the disturbance and instability brought about by COVID-19, holistic leadership is quintessential to work and support in this period of disruption. Managers and leaders encourage others to follow the conventions, refreshing them when new proof surfaces, which adds to their motivation. COVID-19 pandemic has put a substantial interest on people to utilise initiative and use the critical leadership and management attributes.

All holistic leaders are characterised as the people who utilise their encounters and experiences with people in the organisation. They can dominate positively and can be individualistic yet collective in their approach. Holistic leadership is exceptionally significant in the post-pandemic world. They are the powerhouse of information and can tackle perplexing and multidimensional issues for which there is a restricted point of reference considering the social, natural, financial and equity of an organisation (Lapina, 2016).

The existing research hardly discusses any aspects of leadership for achieving knowledge creation, continuous corporate innovation, and long-term sustainable growth from the holy epic scriptures, which is the focal theme of this paper. As authors in this study, we contend that holistic leadership is more comprehensive yet complementary to the leadership practices found in transformational, situational, authentic, servant, and charismatic approaches propounded by Western theorists. Fry (2003) attests that a holistic leader should foster a statement of purpose and a bold vision to elicit collaboration and instil trust and common purpose. In this way, holistic leaders take up a comprehensive initiative to coordinate the four principal regions that characterise the core of human life – corporeality, the brain (legitimate and objective reasoning), the heart (the feelings) and the soul (Fry, 2003).

This paper particularly theorises how the less known and scandalous women characters of Mahabharata were behind the curtains, basically fabricate fundamental leadership ethos for future managers. Through attributes in various episodes of Mahabharata, these characters teach resilience and imbibe wholesomeness to managers in leadership positions rather than operating on a piecemeal basis, as construed in this research study. This paper peculiarly envisages Mahabharata's less known and infamous women characters, which were treated as obscure, can essentially build a strong leadership ethos for managers.

This paper discusses a framework for holistic leadership by integrating varied attributes of a leader irrespective of his style or approach. From the extant literature on leadership, this paper attempts to decipher the available literature in leadership and assert the element of the 'Sarva-Guna-Sampanna leadership' (SGSL) model. The same can help

personify a leader in a true sense, and the framework depicted can also serve as a primer for developing holistic leaders as guided in the time tested and proven epic scripture which shall be regarded as a novel contribution of this research study.

In this paper, the authors attempt to put across that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to become an effective leader. The attributes and the traits are more important than the way of leading people. The conceptualisation of authors in this study relates to the content of leadership, not the process of leadership in general. In the current business climate of vulnerability, indeterminacy, intricacy, uncertainty and equivocalness, managers should foster reasonable judgement through their involvement with dynamism yet withhold virtues and ethics for long-term growth and development (Bleich and Bowles, 2021; Kodama, 2019).

The leadership showed here has been depicted as a ‘sacred leader’, the one who is perfect in all his judgements. Such a leader has an innate quality of speculation and works on the path of virtues, as found in the existing examples of the female characters in the epic Mahabharata. Note that leaders who make progress are the people who practice and use all virtues and attributes together in an integrative way to create a unified impact and solve the problem in the organisation. They act as catalysts of growth and possess the charm of a perfect leader.

Such leaders do not decide on straightforward, either-or decisions yet find innovative replies by comparing two clashing thoughts against one another, differentiating them and embracing the advantages of both. This reasoning method is fundamental for adapting to a world that is turning out to be progressively perplexing amid a determined progression of data. This sort of integrative reasoning is additionally a component of holistic leadership. People are naturally blessed with ‘counter-posing minds’ of a high intellect; however, their powerful urge for straightforward clearness and proficient answers for issues frequently neglect to foster this capacity, and on second thought are attracted to basic coherent reasoning. It leads to complacency and creates a taken for the granted approach, which inhibits leadership growth. It leads them toward unremarkable, ordinary thoughts and dull dynamics with no expectation of development, not to mention showing up at an ideal answer for a specific situation. One might say that leaders who practice integrative or persuasive reasoning likewise showcase higher abilities for managing the organisation.

6 Conclusions

The Mahabharata features galleria of women characters. They are the driving force behind humanity because of their words and behaviour. They continuously intervene, control, enslave, and subvert to carve out a space for themselves and wield authority. The man believes they have them under control and are superior to them, but these are bright, bold, and gorgeous women who are not easily intimidated or controlled. They demonstrated emotional, mental, and strength in dealing with any crisis, and they effectively changed the conventional image of a woman; nonetheless, they were unable to overcome patriarchal society’s barriers. They could manipulate conditions that were working against them and turn them to their advantage. Their independence and belief in their abilities aided them in making better decisions. They were headstrong women of the epic because they had control over their feelings and emotions. This paper is expected to

provide a framework for more research and study of underrated women characters from the Mahabharata and other ancient literature within leadership and management.

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