

An ode to the women in the Mahabharata

Understanding Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari

ANURADHA RAMAN

What do Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari have in common? In the Mahabharata, they are all wronged and they, in turn, wrong others.

What sets Irawati Karve's slim telling of the epic apart from other versions is the stories of these women. The 217 page-long book is also a feminist understanding of the women who shaped the Mahabharata and who in turn were shaped by events that were not entirely in their control. It is also a more humane understanding of the choices made by these women. Reading *Yuganta: The End of An Epoch* and placing it in the present context is a worthwhile exercise. In Irawati Karve's hands, the Mahabharata, with all the characters committing mistakes, becomes only too human.

In comparison to the Ramayana, the Mahabharata is far more complex.

No one is perfect in *Yuganta*, which won the Sahitya Akademi award upon publication in the original Marathi. In fact, the warts overshadow the strengths of the characters. The comparisons Karve makes between Sita and Draupadi are telling: "Draupadi's sorrows, humiliations are realistic. She burst out in anger against Arjuna when he married Subhadra. Sita never had to face the problem of a rival wife. Both Draupadi and Sita made mistakes and were punished." Draupadi's biggest mistake, she says, was perhaps her arrogance. How many women do we know today who are named Draupadi?

Gandhari is a young bride who is told only moments before she is about to see her husband that he is blind, and so begins her journey with him by covering her eyes. This forced blindness is not because Gandhari wants to show solidarity with her

husband; it is a decision borne out of grief and betrayal.

Kunti, on the other hand is unrelenting and unbending, and in Karve's hands, is a feisty woman who knows her mind. As *Yuganta* progresses, it is the women who stand out compared to the men who declared wars on their behalf.

Then there's also Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, again on the story of Draupadi, which is the story of almost every Indian woman. If we overlook the detail of Draupadi having five husbands, Ray's interpretation of Draupadi is the struggle of many a woman caught in the stranglehold of a patriarchal system where they are required to conform. Think of all the misogynistic insults and threats heaped on women on social media, and you can see the legatees of Draupadi who refused to be beaten into submission.