

# Single Mothers in Hindu History: Raising Brilliant Sons

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## Abstract

A single mother is a parent who is not living with her husband but shoulders most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising her children. A woman can become a single mother due to death of her husband; due to abandonment, divorce or separation; due to adoption; due to birth of a child without marriage. In western societies single mother is a common phenomenon. Estimates are that there are 11 million single parent households in USA of which 80 percent are headed by women.<sup>1</sup> According to the Institute for the Study of Civil Society children of single parents face more difficulties. Studies in the west claim that children who do not have fathers in their lives are more likely to be unhappy; engage in anti-social behavior; get involved in substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. However the case has been different in India's past. The stories of single mothers in Indian history show that they have succeeded in raising their sons to be achievers. Mothers like Sita, Shakuntala, Ganga, Satyawati, Kunti, Hidimba, Subhadra, Mura, Hemvati were able to raise brilliant and successful sons despite being single mothers.

**Keywords:** Indian; Mother; Single; Mythology; History.

## INTRODUCTION

A single mother is a parent who is not living with her husband and who shoulders most of the day-to-day responsibilities in raising her

children. A woman can become a single mother due to death of her husband or partner; due to divorce or separation; due to adoption; due to birth of a child without marriage. In western societies a single mother is a common phenomenon. About 16 percent of children worldwide live in a single parent household. In 2006, 12.9 million families in the US were headed by a single parent, 80 percent of which were headed by a female. According to the Institute for the Study of Civil Society children of single parents face more difficulties. Studies in west show that children who do not have fathers are more likely to be unhappy; engage in anti-social behavior; get involved in substance abuse and juvenile delinquency.<sup>2</sup> However this argument is contested by single mothers even in west. To illustrate the famous writer J K Rowling says that in west too only three per cent of single mothers

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are teenagers while 60 percent of single mothers are mature women who have been married earlier and are now single due to separation, divorce or bereavement. She argues that single mothers like her have raised happy kids. She claims that her daughter is happy the way she's being brought up and is not inferior to anyone else. She claims that it's better for her daughter to be brought up in a single parent family than in the context of an unhappy marriage. She stresses that single parenthood is not all stress and hardship. She claims that since her daughter was born she has given her constant pride, joy and motivation. She also stresses that single parents deserved not condemnation, but congratulations.<sup>3</sup> As numbers and percentage of single mothers are growing in 21st century India it would be interesting to find out how single mothers and their children performed in Indian history.

### *History or Mythology*

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Bharat's Hindu history is often termed as mythology by western scholars and their Indian followers, who describe it as a large body of traditional narratives related to Hinduism contained in Sanskrit literature such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas, and the Vedas. Western scholars also term ancient Tamil literature such as the Sangam literature and Periya Puranam as mythology. Other works like Bhagavata Purana, which are regarded as fifth Veda are also termed as mythology by western scholars. Western scholars fail to understand the diversity and multitude work done in four yugas by rishies of Bharat and lament that Bharat lacks one consistent, monolithic structure. They also argue that all Hindus do not regard these to be literal accounts of historical events.<sup>4</sup> This is correct for Indians educated through British colonial education system. However Hindu literature clearly says these are our history and a growing number of Hindus dispute this narrative given by British/ western scholars and proudly proclaim that epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat depict Indian history spanning four yugas (ages) Satyug, Tretayug, Dwaparyug and Kaliyug. These are not mythologies. In these books of Hindu history we can find many stories of sons, raised by a single mothers against all odds, who grew up to be powerful kings.

### *Life of Jabala*

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This story is mentioned in Chhandogya Uprnishad of Sama Veda. Jabala was a woman who did not have a husband and raised her son single handedly. She taught her son Satyakam Jabali to always speak

truth. Jabali wanted to study Vedas and went to Rishi Gautam. Rishi Gautam asked Jabali about his Gotra/ family. Jabali truthfully told Gautam that he only knows about his mother. Impressed by truthfulness of mother and son Gautam takes him as his pupil. Jabali grows up to be a great Rishi and a bhrahman himself. He wrote Jabalyopanishad.<sup>5</sup>

### *Life of Devi Sita*

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This story is from Tretayug. Ramayana is the history of King Rama and his wife Devi Sita. Devi Sita was adopted daughter of King Janaka and Queen Sunayna of Mithila. The King had found her while tilling the land and raised her as his own daughter. She marries Rama, the prince of Ayodhya when he proves that he is very brave. Rama obeys his father and decides to go to forest as per wishes of his step mother Keykeyi. His wife Sita and brother Lakshman decide to go with him. From the forest the Rakshas King Ravana abducts her while Ram and Lakshman are not with her. Ravana takes her to his kingdom across the sea and imprisons her in the Ashoka Vatika in Lanka. Rama searches for Devi Sita with help of Hanuman; builds a bridge on the sea; kills Ravana in a war; rescues Sita and brings her back to Ayodhya where they are crowned as king and queen. However, Rama had to send Sita to Rishi Valmiki's ashram while she is pregnant due to objections by some citizens. In Rishi Valmiki's ashram Sita gives birth to twin sons Lava and Kusha. Sita raises her sons alone, as a single mother. Lava and Kusha receive education and training in military skills from Sage Valmiki. They grow up to become brave, intelligent boys and defeat Ramas army. Finally they are united with their father when Sita tells Rama that they are his sons. Once she had witnesses the acceptance of her children by Rama, her mother Bhūmi Devi appears and takes Sita away.<sup>6</sup> Rama installs his son Lava at Saravasti and Kusha at Kushavati as kings who later found the cities of Lavapuri and Kasur respectively.<sup>7</sup>

### *Life of Shakuntala*

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Another famous story is that of single mother Shakuntala and her son Bharat from the epic Mahabharta. Shakuntala was the daughter of rishi Vishwamitra and the Apsara (celestial nymph) Menaka. Menka had come to seduce rishi Vishwamitra so that he is unable to complete his penance. Menaka successfully disturbs rishi Vishwamitra's penance and Shakuntala is born. Menakā leaves the newborn Shakuntalā near rishi Kanava's ashram. Kanva Rishi finds the baby surrounded by Shakun birds and names

her Shakuntala and brings her up as his own daughter. Shakuntala grows up to be a beautiful girl. One day King Dushyanta comes to the forest and meets beautiful Shakuntala while rishi Kanva is not in ashram. Shakuntala takes a promise from Dushyant that their son will become heir of king's throne before accepting king's proposal of marriage. Dushyanta returns to his palace with a promise that he would call Shakuntala to his palace soon. He gave Shakuntala a ring as a reminder of his promise. However due to a curse of rishi Durvasa king Dushyant forgets his promise to Shakuntala. In time Shakuntala becomes the mother of a boy, who grew up to be strong and brave. As six years old he plays with young lions, riding on their back. He was called 'all tamer' as he had the ability to tame wild animal like lion and boars. Rishi Kanva asks Shakuntala to go to Dushyant to secure the future of her son. On the way Shakuntala loses the ring given to her by the king. Dushyant could not recognize her due to the curse. Shakuntala goes back and raises her son herself. Later a fisherman shows the ring to the king and Dushyant remembers Shakuntala and his promise. He searches for her and finds his son Bharat playing with wild animals in rishi Kashyap's ashram. Impressed with the boy he asks for his introduction and finds that the boy is his son. Bharat takes Dushyant to Shakuntala and the family is reunited. Dushyant accepts his wife and son. When Dushyanta dies, Bharata becomes the king and extends his kingdom all over Hindustan, which was called Bharatavarsha after him.<sup>8</sup>

### Life of Ganga

This is a story from Dwaparyug. Another famous story from the epic Mahabharata is about single mother Ganga and her son Bhishma. She marries the king of Hastinapur called King Shantanu who was the great grand son of King Bharata. The reason being that she wanted to help the eight Vasus (deities), who were cursed by saint Vasishtha to be born as human beings. The Vasus wanted a short life on earth as possible so that they can return back to their celestial state as soon as possible after fulfilling the curse. Ganga agrees to help them by becoming their mother and helping them have a short life. In return the Vasus will give a part of their power to her real son who would have a long life.<sup>9</sup> Ganga incarnated and became the wife of King Santanu on condition that he will never question her actions, or she would leave him. Ganga gave birth to seven babies one after the other but she left them in her own waters to free them from their curse. But the king questions her when the eighth

child was born, thus breaking his promise to her so she leaves the king while takes away her son with her.<sup>10</sup> She names him Devavrata and promises to return him to the king at right time. She arranges proper education of Devavrata. Who learns Vedas from rishi Vashishth and Yudh Kala (war rules) from Parshuram and Rajneeti (politics) from Guru Bhraspati. When Devavrata was sixteen years old one day he was practicing his archery skill in river Ganga when king passed by. King Shantanu was amazed to see the boy stop the flow of Ganga by a bridge of arrows. When the king was about to break the bridge Ganga appears and introduces him to his son Devavrat and informs the king that his son had a good education and training suitable for a prince and future king, because she knew that Hastinapur should be ruled by a deserving prince and she made sure that Devavrata is capable in true sense. Ganga than asks Devavrata to go with his father and do his duty towards his father.<sup>11</sup> Later Devavrat becomes famous as Bhishm as he promises never to become the king and never to get married and never to have children so that king Shantanu can marry Satyawati. Devavrata all his life takes care of the kingdom and also one of the most respected characters of the Mahābhārata.

### Life of Satyawati

Another strong character in Mahabharata is single mother Satyawati. She was the biological daughter of the Chedi king Vasu and an Apsara (celestial nymph) Adrika. Satyawati was adopted by fisherman chieftain Dusharaj, who raised her as his own daughter. She was known as Matyagandha which means woman with smell of fish. She had a son with Rishi Bhargava whom Rishi Bhargava gave the name Krishna Dvaipayana dark complexioned child born on an island and took him away. He later becomes famous as Ved Vyasa. He compiled the Vedas in four parts. Later King Shantanu fell in love with Satyawati and wanted to marry her. She agreed to marry King Shantanu only if he promised that her son will inherit the throne after King Shantanu. Shantanu could not make the promise because his son with Ganga Devavrata was the crown prince. When Devavrata came to know about this he promised Satyawati that her wish will be fulfilled and requested her to marry King Sahntanu. Thus he was called Bhishma. Satyawati married Shantanu and gave birth to two sons Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. She and her sons ruled the kingdom with the help of Bhishma after Shantanu's death. Unfortunately both her sons died childless. So her first son Vyasa fathered the

children of the two widows Ambika and Ambalika through niyoga. The two children born thus were Dhritarashtra and Pandu who later became fathers of the Kauravas and Pandavas, respectively.<sup>12</sup>

### Life of Kunti

Another story from epic Mahabharata is of Kunti and her five sons, the Pandavas. According to Hindu history, Kunti was daughter of Surasena and sister of Vasudeva father of Krishna but was adopted by King Kuntibhoja who was childless. She was the wife of King Pandu of Hastinapur and the mother of Yudhisthira, Bhim, and Arjun. After the death of her husband, Kunti took care of Nakula and Sahadev (her step sons) as well as her own three sons. Kunti had to go into hiding with her sons after prince Duryodhana and Shakuni (relatives and rivals) tried to kill them by burning them in their house called Lakshagrah. She made sure her sons received good education and training in warfare and instructed them to fight for their rights, take care of the common people and kill the demons.<sup>13</sup> Pandavas fought a bitter war called Mahabharat against their cousins and won with the help of Lord Krishna. They returned to Hastinapura and Yudhisthira ruled the kingdom with his brothers, for many years.

### Life of Hidimba

Another story from the same epic Mahabharata is about single mother Hidimba and her son Ghatotkach. Hidimba lived in forest with her brother and met Pandava prince Bhim when Pandavas were living in forest in exile. Hidimba falls in love with Bhim and wants to marry him. Bhima tells her that he cannot live in forest with her all his life and will have to leave her and go back to his kingdom with his brothers. He promises her that he will stay with her till she becomes a mother. Hidimba agreed and they got married. After some time she gives birth to their son and name him Ghatotkacha as his head resembles a pot. When it's time for Bhim to go, Hidimba accepts her fate with dignity and decides to raise her son alone.<sup>14</sup> Ghatotkach becomes a great warrior and is called by Bhima during Mahabharat war to help the Pandavas. He was a master wizard and sorcerer, and uses his magical powers during the war to help Pandavas.<sup>15</sup> Invoking his magical powers, Ghatotkach wrought great havoc in the Kaurava army but is killed by Karna.<sup>16</sup>

### Life of Subhadra

Another story also from the epic Mahabharata is

about Subhadra and her son Abhimanu. Subhadra was half sister of Krishna and Balarama as she was born to Vasudev and Rohini Devi. When Subhadra becomes of age, Balarama suggests her to choose prince Duryodhana, as her husband but Krishna advises her to choose Arjuna. Arjuna abducts Subhadra and the two get married.<sup>17</sup> Krishna takes Subhadra to Dwarka when she was pregnant and Abhimanyu was born and brought up at Dwarka by his mother Subhadra. He studied under the tutelage of his maternal uncles Balarama, Krishna, Kritvarma and Pradyumna. Subhadra wanted him to become brave like his father. The child was named Abhimanyu, meaning 'one who remains in the midst of wisdom', a very intelligent person. It also means a person who always defends his honour.<sup>18</sup> He had learnt many skills while still in her mother's womb. Abhimanyu died in the Kurukshetra war while fighting for his father and uncles. He is remembered for his bravery.

### Life of Mura

Recent Indian history also has examples of single mothers who successfully raised their children to become powerful kings. The story of single mother Mura and Chandragupta Maurya is one such example. It is believed that word maurya came from his mother's name.<sup>19</sup> Very little is known about Chandragupta's youth and ancestry. Chandragupta's father died in a border fray and his mother took up the responsibility of raising little Chandragupt. Mudrarakshasa uses terms like kulahina and Vrishala for Chandragupta's lineage, but Buddhist text the Mahavamsa says Chandragupta belonged to a Kshatriya clan called the Moriya i.e. Mor clan or gotra of Jat people. His mother gave him to a great Acharya Chankya, who had spotted the talent in Chandragupta. Chandragupta Maurya defeated the Magadha king Dhananand of Nanda clan and his army. Chandragupta was very successful king who united a large part of Bharat which included what today is called Bengal, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Himalayas, Kashmir, Deccan Plateau and all the land in between. He under guidance of Chanakya established peace and prosperity in this land which continued during the rule of his son and grandson. He established a strong central administration. Maurya India was characterized by a strong central administration; an efficient and highly organized bureaucratic structure with a large civil service; a strong economy; thriving internal and external trade; flourishing agriculture; and art and architecture.<sup>20</sup>

### *Life of Hemvati*

Another example of a single mother from Indian history is that of single mother Hemvati and her son Chandravarman. Hemvati was a child widow and daughter of a Brahmin priest.<sup>21</sup> Once she was having a bath in a pool in the moonlight near her house in Varanasi. Attracted by her beauty the Chandra Dev (Moon God) came to meet her and she conceived Chandravarmana. The Chandra Dev (Moon God) assured her that Chandravarman would be the first king of Khajuraho. He asked her go to the forest of khajurs (date palm trees) far away from Benares to deliver her child. He asked her that when the child grows up he should perform a sacrificial ritual that included among its rites the depiction of erotic figures. For this he should build 85 temples carved with erotic figures. Hemvati then left her home to give birth to her son in a tiny village. The child, Chandravarman, was very brave and strong and he could kill tigers or lions with his bare hands when he was just sixteen years old. Delighted by his feats, Hemvati requested the Chandra Dev (Moon God) to make Chandravarman king of Khajuraho. Chandravarman won many victories and built a fortress at Kalinjar. At his mother's request he began the building of 85 glorious temples with lakes and gardens at Khajuraho and performed the ritual to expunge her of her guilt.<sup>22</sup> Those beautiful temples still attract people from all over the world.

All these single mothers played an important role in building a bright future for their sons. They had to face the society but these women were determined to create achievers out of their sons. They are an inspiration for single mothers of today.

The successes of all these single mothers lies in the fact that they gave their all to their children. They did not get distracted in own pleasures or relationships and prioritised their children's interests.

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