

Draupadi: A Complex Journey through Dharma, Status, and Power

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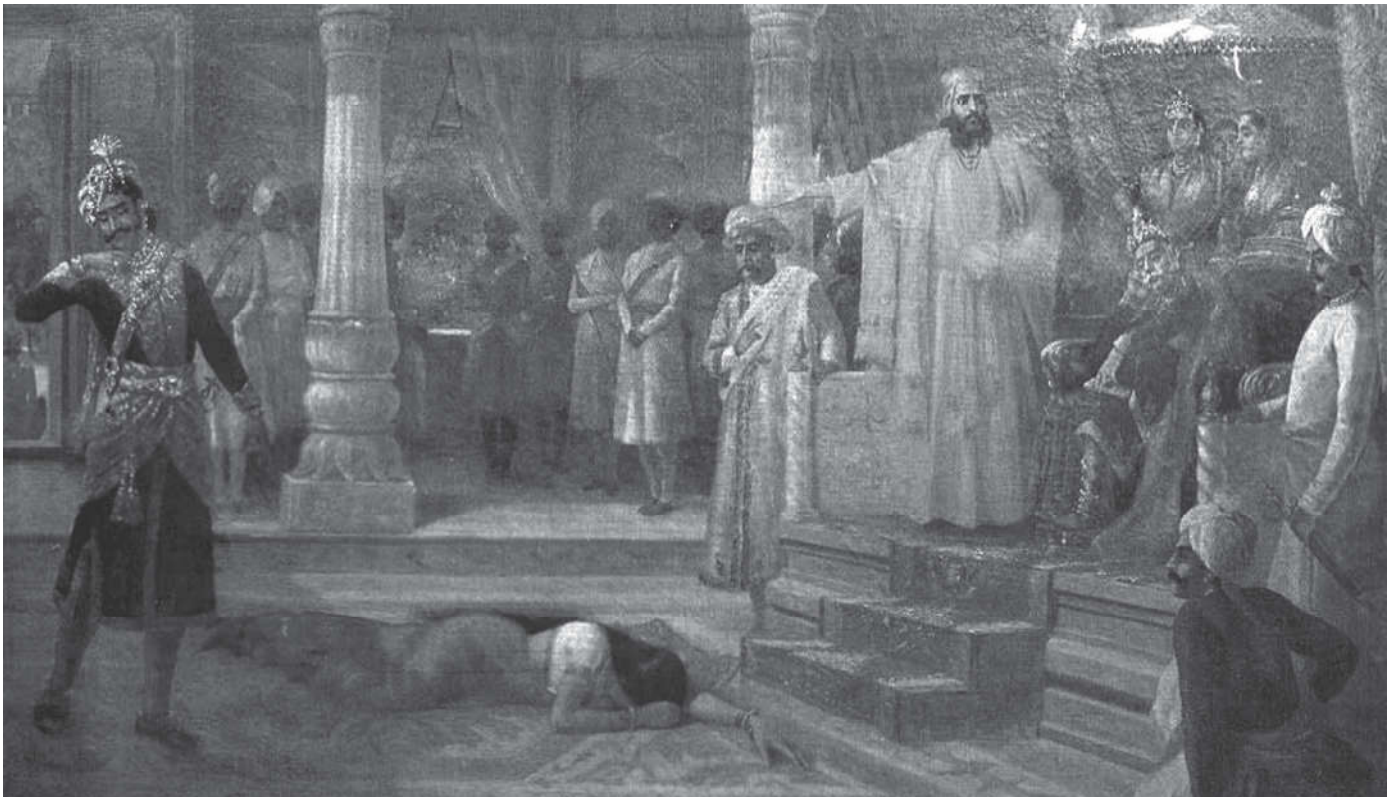
THE FIRST EVER WOMAN in our mythological history who was subjected to public molestation, was Draupadi in the Mahabharata. And it had brought war. It destroyed not only the accused, but also his family, his clan. As I make this statement, you might be reminded of Sita, who was dragged by the powerful Ravana with Jataayu as witness, but Sita's plight was more about an evil-minded kidnap. Draupadi was an obvious case of open humiliation.

Come to think of it, Draupadi had entered the Pandava clan as a docile wife, which is supposed to be the Lakshmi avatar of women. She was meant to symbolise and influence with her *Draupadi Humiliated*

luck, an expansion in pleasure, wealth, opulence, and prosperity to the family she was wedded to, as is the philosophical expectation from any newly-wed bride. In fact, that's the reason why Hindu brides in their wedding are decked up to symbolise Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune. So Draupadi too entered the house attempting to fulfil her responsibilities as Lakshmi, when the mother-in-law unknowingly instructed her to be shared equally among five brothers, which meant Draupadi was supposed to marry all of the five Pandavas!

After she realised that what she had ordered to be shared was a woman and not an object, Kunti may not have found it offensive enough to

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take back her words. Her own sons were borne of different fathers, outside her marriage, but with her consent and the consent of her husband. Here no one felt insulted, humiliated, molested! This drives home the thought that anything that is done for a greater cause, taking into confidence all who might be involved or affected, is 'dharma', the correct or righteous side of things; the cosmic ethics. There is no other definition of right or wrong; everything else has a circumstantial explanation. This is exactly why sex is never a crime, but rape and adultery are crimes.

At the time of Draupadi's *svayamvara*, the choosing of a husband from many suitors, the Pandavas were roaming around and living in the forest. Their survival and chances of winning back their kingdom was possible only if they stayed together. Mother Kunti's order may have escaped her mouth in absentmindedness, but its relevance was profound in their given situation and in the days that followed. Had the Pandavas married different women then, there were higher chances of them settling apart, which in turn would have endangered their survival and the chances of getting back the kingdom. Draupadi, being married to all brothers, ensured that all remained as one close-knit entity. That was probably why Draupadi was accorded the highest status among all other wives, whom the Pandavas had married separately. Even Sri Krishna's sister Subhadra, who was married to Arjuna, didn't have a higher status than Draupadi's.

Thus Arjuna agreeing to share the bride he won in a *svayamvara* with his brothers to fulfil the word of his mother, was an act of sacrifice and detachment of a prince, because nothing or no one was more important or personal than the political decisions taken in favour of the state and the royal family. That was the correct code of conduct as appropriated by Dharma.

After marriage, Draupadi was happy keeping herself confined within the women's chambers,

fulfilling her responsibilities as Lakshmi to the house and her five husbands, turn by turn. But all trouble started when she was dragged into the court. They abused her and disrobed her in public, her dignity restored by Sri Krishna and not any of her husbands, who sat there watching powerlessly. It brings me to think, did the disrobing act symbolically or metaphorically change her identity? From the beautiful, lavish Lakshmi to the fierce, naked Kali? Draupadi in her rage also promised to keep her hair open and unkempt till it had touched the blood of the miscreant, the dishevelled hair being another similarity with Kali. The royal woman, also called Krishna because of her dark skin, may have transformed in emotions and appearance rather effortlessly. And true to her vows, the clan perished in the biggest war of Indian mythology. So did Duhshasana, in his ignorance and futility, actually invoke the black goddess with his actions and was it the merciless Kali, who took over from the graceful Lakshmi, to vow that she would see the end of it all?

Draupadi was not born biologically from her parents. She was born out of a fire sacrifice that her father, King Drupada arranged asking divine solutions for a revenge he wanted to undertake. Writes Shambhavi Chopra in an article titled 'Chidagni: The Goddess as the Fire of Consciousness' in her book *Yogic Secrets of the Dark Goddess: Lightning Dance of the Supreme Shakti*:

At an innermost level, *Agni* is the fire of consciousness, *Chidagni*, the awareness of the supreme Brahman, the ultimate Existence in itself. *Chidjyoti*, the 'light of consciousness', is the power behind the mind that illumines both sensory objects and our thought patterns, bathing them in the beauty of its eternal radiance. The universe weaves a divine tapestry of light and energy, which has been tapped by our ancient Rishis and by Native Guides all over the world resonating with nature's beatitude. The Seers perceived the subtle vibrations, the 'aliveness' of

light, pervading the *Tanmatras* or root essences of sight, sound, taste, touch or smell, as well as the inner intuitive perception of one's sixth sense of Being. Our mergence into the all pervasive light allows us to experience a pure state of illumination inside and outside, ushering us through the gateway of higher consciousness. ...



Draupadi Swayamvara

As the spirit of fire, Agni personifies *Jyoti* or light as perception. The gift of sight is the power of fire, as seeing is our way of cognizing light. The clarity of seeing discloses the essence of everything that we observe. Kali is *Charu-netra*, the 'Devi with beautiful eyes', viewing the entire cosmic play through her fire of consciousness. She destroys all illusion in her role as *Bhrama-nasini*, 'the one who destroys all confusion', embodying the three states of Creation-Preservation-Destruction as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. At the altar of sacrifice Kali is Agni, echoing its brilliance, hissing its fiery magic yet tending the warmth of its dying embers. Fire is a sacrifice unto itself, a sense of mysticism shrouding its powers. At the fire altar is placed our own sacrifice of both inner and outer natures, holding a deep reverence in its sacrificial act.¹

Born from the same fire that represents Kali's clarity of vision, Draupadi was not a planned possession for King Drupada. She emerged with her brother Drishtadyumna, who was born to kill Dronacharya as a revenge of an insult that the royal teacher of Kaurava court had inflicted upon his father. Draupadi's birth was probably a subtle reminder of the cosmos which teaches that you might plan destruction, but the extent of destruction your plan would bring upon the earth may not really be within your control. The negative forces that you acquire to destroy others might end up destroying you in the process. In the great Kurukshetra War—which is regarded as a battle for dharma—both Pandavas and Kauravas lost their parents, grandparents, children, associates, friends, and family.


Draupadi's fight against injustice was not just a protest, but also a movement in resurrecting the fallen grace and spirits of her men, whose consciousness had died when they lost her to a game of dice. Fiercely assuming the anger and vigour of Shakti, she called upon violence as a means of her revenge, which was far distanced from her calm Lakshmi avatar. This also reminds of the concept of Kali who appears with her tongue sticking out as she steps on her husband Shiva lying on the ground. Scholars explain this as Shakti or energy stepping on the 'corpse' to transform the lifeless *shava*, corpse, to vigorous Shiva. Without Shakti, Shiva lies dormant. Draupadi's anger too symbolically forced her husbands out of the state of unconsciousness, eventually declaring war and feeding her hair with the blood of Duhshasana, in order to restore Dharma.

While Kali is known for her practising celibacy with austerity, detachment, and renunciation, Draupadi attained almost the same status in the epic, albeit through a different turn of circumstances. The royal queen was blessed by Shiva with eternal virginity. It is said that Draupadi turned back into a virgin every time she stepped out from the shelter of one of the Pandavas to enter the house of another. Thus her sexuality remained non-exhaustive eternally and she could never belong to one man of her choice, philosophically falling into the same path of renunciation, strength, and enlightenment as Kali.

Whether Draupadi was an incarnation of Kali in the Mahabharata is an endless debate. But researchers have reasons to claim that Krishna, Draupadi, and Kali, all three sharing the same colour of skin and exhibiting mysteriously common connections, do belong to the same ideology or family, even if they were not parts of one single whole. One of the most controversial women from the mythological past does reside timelessly in the hearts across generations. As mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik puts it in his article 'The Clothes of Draupadi':

To call Mahabharata a story based on historical war is to strip it of its magic, its power, its sheer magnificence. To make Mahabharata historical is to confine it to one period of history. If one does that, it holds little relevance in modern times. To be relevant, it cannot be confined to one period in history. It must be a-historical, timeless, free of geographical and historical moorings, independent of space and time. To me, that is what Mahabharata is. To me Mahabharata is a symbolic narration that reflects the thoughts and feelings, concerns and commentaries of the Indian people over centuries. That is why it is an epic. That is why it is sacred. It continues to enchant and enthrall us just as it enchanted and enthralled audiences a hundred years ago. Through the story of the

Pandavas and the Kauravas, it discusses the nature of human society.²

The modern human society too is rampant of instances where women are failed and violated miserably by the guile of men. Only time can predict the rise of another Draupadi who would march forward with the ideals of Shakti, raging another great war to restore dharma and settle the unfair elements to rest once and for all. 

References

1. Shambhavi Chopra, 'Chidagni: the Goddess as the Fire of Consciousness' <<http://vedanet.com/2012/06/13/chidagni-the-goddess-as-the-fire-of-consciousness/>> accessed 15 September 2015.
2. Devdutt Pattanaik, 'The Clothes of Draupadi' <<http://devdutt.com/articles/mahabharata/the-clothes-of-draupadi.html>> accessed 15 September 2015.

Draupadi and Sudeshna

