



Draupadi in Folk Performances and Sculptural Representations

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Abstract

The paper explores multiple versions of The *Mahabharata* stories, all centred on the character of Draupadi in written, oral and performative representative arts. Such a study documents a change and continuity in the representation of Draupadi as performed by multiple sectarian traditions. It is suggested here that women-centred narratives tend to come from regions where one can trace signs of thriving matriarchy beside an underlying polyandrous setup rather than from those which have a dominant presence of patriarchy along with apparent polygamy. The change and variation in the construction of Draupadi is demonstrated through the Draupadi Amman festival and Yakshagana performative art on the one hand and sculptural representation on the other.

Keywords: Draupadi, Representation, Gender, Multiplicity, Women-centred narratives, Transmediality.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to perceive the production and reception of an *itihasa-purana*, that is, *The Mahabharata* tradition with regard to one of its women characters, Draupadi. Taking gender, an important constituent of social epistemology, as the axis, the paper traces the change and variation in the construction of Draupadi in the regional/folk/vernacular versions of *The Mahabharata*. Such a study documents a change and continuity in the representation of Draupadi as performed by multiple sectarian traditions. The aim is to understand narratives as representative of the cultural and communal ethos of the society working behind their construction subsuming scripto-centric (written traditions), phono-centric (oral traditions) and body-centric (performative, painting and sculptural) representations (Satyanath 2010). Taking this preliminary discussion as the basis, the paper suggests the centrality of women as represented in societies which produce and consume women-centred narratives. Furthermore, it is implied that communities that are socially located in the regions where

polyandrous matriarchy is practiced are likely to produce and consume narratives with a higher degree of centrality rendered to the character of Draupadi as compared to the ones which are located in other communities with patriarchal leanings. The paper thus underscores the importance of the strategies involved in projecting female superiority through the space, role and centrality attributed to them in the narratives; their extraordinary actions; multiple limbs, eyes or heads; relative height; their names appearing within the titles of the narratives; relative absence of men; absence of episodes undermining their position or role, through inversion of stereotypical attributes; and attributing myths and centring rituals exclusively around them.

Many *Mahabharatas* and many Draupadis

It is evident that there is not one *Mahabharata* precisely because it is an *itihasa-purana*. Since communities trace individual and separate histories for themselves, their identification with the epic tends to be varied. It cannot be overlooked that each history is grounded on perspective and is driven by an ideological bent of mind. Each chronicle serves the purpose of a particular community or a society united by a shared outlook. However, despite the prevalence of multiple versions and recensions of *The Mahabharata*, the process of cosmopolitanism regards the classical or the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* as the standard *Mahabharata*, thereby arrogating tenets of originality and authenticity. Hence there can be no sense of hierarchy as induced by Sanskrit cosmopolitanism. Treating India and thus *The Mahabharata* as a monolithic entity is not only an act of suppression and domination but also of marginalizing its vernacular, oral and performative versions. *The Mahabharata* is a tradition and traditions can manifest in multiple ways. As a result, it has evolved as a fluid text with marked changes and variations in terms of ‘chronotope’, to use Bakhtin’s term (1981), that is, it undergoes change and transformation in terms of space and time. The teller of the narrative, the times in which he is writing/narrating/telling, the nature of the audience whom he is addressing and finally the reception of the work all influence the narrative as there is a dynamic and interactive relation between culture and literature.

As against the European understanding of an epic as a grand narrative, in a multilingual and multicultural pan Indian situation, there may be multiple sub-narratives. Hence, the model for *The Mahabharata* cannot be that of an inverted tree which begins ontologically with one original narrative and only later branches out as several versions of this epic narrative. The Indian epic traditions on the other hand have to be understood as co-existing and parallel systems. Therefore, the model to understand *The Mahabharata* in general and the character of Draupadi in particular is not only ontogenetic but it is also non-hierarchical. Interestingly, in this regard Ramanujan’s observation in his seminal essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’ (1991: 24–25) is noteworthy:

I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur-text*..., the earliest and the most prestigious of them all.

Thus what we have are manifestations of parallel, co-existing and apparently independent stories constructed by different social groups/communities. As a consequence, it is professed here that the different representations of Draupadi whether in the written tradition or manifested through the oral tradition or represented through sculptures or even exhibited through performances, need not converge since they are located at different chronotope. It is within such a multitude of social groups taking part in the production and consumption that we need to understand multiple tellings of Draupadi stories from *The Mahabharata* tradition.

Draupadi as pluralistic epistemology

One finds that as compared to the cosmopolitan Sanskrit writing culture (Pollock 2002), in the vernacular versions and narrations of the epic (be they scripto-centric, phono-centric or body-centric), Draupadi's epic roles within the communities (discussed below, are deepened through mythicization, ritualization and the deification processes (this is constructed terminology: I call these 'representation strategies of ascendance' which subsume all three terms) so much so that the actions of the male heroes now largely revolve around her. The study done here broadly agrees with Shulman (1986: 107–13) and Ramanujan (1986: 217–26) who postulate that the heroine in folk versions of the epic is usually more dominant and powerful than in the classical versions of the same epic. The mythicization process centred on feminine agency often constructs empowered female characters which tend to reinforce the Shakta representation of the narratives.

It is within this broad framework of conceptualizing the Draupadi narratives as pluralistic epistemology, incorporating social epistemology and an approach from the periphery to the centre or from folklore to vernacular and from vernacular to the Cosmopolitan that a dominant, homogenous construction of a singular *Mahabharata* narrative needs to be problematized. Here, I will confine myself to a discussion of two folk versions of *The Mahabharata* which locate Draupadi at the centre—the Draupadi Amman festival of Tamil Nadu and the Yakshagana performance of Karnataka. The mythical, ritualistic and iconographic details from these two performances and from medieval sculptures are brought together to show the contours of constructing Draupadi through 'representation strategies of ascendance'.

The Draupadi Amman festival

As discussed, Draupadi finds more space and importance in local traditions, which the classical text fails to render to her. This Draupadi is so different from the Draupadi constructed by Vyasa that one can easily surmise that both have little or no resemblance, except in certain cases in the situations in which they find themselves. This suggests that they may have separate processes of representations and semiotic systems working around them. One of the best exemplum of this is found in the folk traditions of Tamil Nadu. Here, Draupadi is an important deity for the Vanniyar¹ community, as it is around her that the Draupadi Amman festival is celebrated. Draupadi is conceived differently when it comes to

the vernacular versions and even within the vernacular versions, the Draupadi Amman festival is different from Villiputtur Bharatam (Villiputtur, c. 15th century), a Tamil version of the vernacular *Mahabharata* from which it draws its mythology. The community at play constructs a different *Mahabharata*, one that is interpreted through the centrality of the goddess. In this regard, Hildebeitel (1991: xviii) sees the Draupadi cult as ‘singularly representative’ of popular devotional Hinduism since it incorporates dimensions of other cults, especially the Pattini cult. It has been noted that the cult of goddess Pattini, prevalent and popular among Buddhists and Hindus of the east coast of Sri Lanka has died out in south India or has been assimilated into the Kali cult, the Draupadi cult, or other cults of the Indian mother goddess (Obeysekere 1984).

In the Gingee area of Tamil Nadu, Draupadi is identified as a mother goddess. Pucari songs (the songs of the priest, pujari) sing of her as ‘mother, beautiful goddess... (the one who) went to the forest...as Virasakti to be their (Pandavas) escort.’ She is regarded as the protector of the five Pandavas and is invoked to protect all her children in the same vein. She is the Parasakti who marries all the five Pandavas, as Cattivel Cettiyar sings. It is such an act of mythicization which enables Draupadi’s construction as a goddess.

Therefore, in this incarnation Draupadi is not talked about in terms of her disrobing since this does not work out for her stature as a goddess as constructed by the Vanniyar community. Interestingly, Hildebeitel (1991: 7) notes that even the Pucari songs omit the scenes of disrobing. Also since the Draupadi that they construct here is one who is merciful and compassionate, it does not allow inclusion of those episodes wherein she makes violent vows of revenge. However, only the Tindivanam Pucari’s songs mention this incident but even there it is depicted not as a scene of degradation but as an anticipation of victory. It is in subsequent events leading towards the forest that major transformations occur in Draupadi’s character. It is she who protects the Pandavas unlike her depiction in Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* where she is a helpless woman who needs to be rescued from an inadvertent crisis by either the Pandavas or Krishna. It is interesting to note that the Virataparva, wherein Draupadi is depicted as submissive, helpless and also vulnerable, is considered a later interpolation into the classical *Mahabharata* and is conspicuously absent in the narratives of the Draupadi Amman cult. However, this could also be due to the patriarchal thrust within Vyasa’s text. It is in this regard that one can understand how the issues of chastity and virginity have been problematized and treated in local renderings. Draupadi’s polyandrous marriage is not a problem for these communities since the practice of polyandry is prevalent among them and so they do not have to negotiate it by providing strange justifications as the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* does. Moreover, the allusions to the ‘forest Draupadi’ accentuate themes of power and violence. She goes into the forest as Virasakti, a form unknown even to her own husbands. Interestingly, the immigrant Vanniyars named later as Tigalas in Karnataka retain this 'Vira' epithet for goddess Draupadi and also refer to themselves as ‘Virakumaras’ which is indicative of their earlier status as a martial community despite their subsequent transformation into an agrarian class.

The story of the southern Indian goddess Virapanchali, the divine aspect of the Pandava queen Draupadi, captures the idea that consumption of blood satisfies the sexual

urge of the goddess and that maturity domesticates her. The myth goes as follows:

During their exile in the forest, the Pandava Bhima complained to Krishna that he could not satisfy his wife sexually and felt inadequate as a result. Krishna revealed to Bhima that Draupadi was the primal mother goddess Adya-Maya-Shakti. One night the Pandavas discovered that Draupadi was not in her bed. They searched the forest and discovered her running wild and naked in the forest, eating goats, buffaloes, and other wild animals. When she saw her husbands spying on her, she ran towards them, intending to catch and eat them too. The Pandavas ran for cover and sought refuge in their hut. They shut the door and refused to let Draupadi in until she promised not to harm them. She agreed and Bhima opened the door. Draupadi gripped his hand so hard that her five finger nails pierced his skin and five drops of blood fell on the ground. These turned into children and hearing them cry, Draupadi's fury abated; she became maternal and loving again (Hiltebeitel 1991:293).

It is suggested that during her forest exile Draupadi observed abstinence from sexual relations with any of her husbands. It is important to note this since beyond this retreat into the forest she is a normal wife and mother. However, when she takes on the role of the primordial goddess, she must be seen as a virgin. Therefore, in the Draupadi cult she is revered as a virgin goddess. She is nonetheless chaste even besides this forest episode since she is a faithful wife and one who is faithful to one's husband is chaste and by extension, pure. This purity and sanctity can be taken to extend the meaning of a 'virgin'. The fire walk ceremony which is deeply entrenched with the Draupadi cult rituals further substantiates this point. Although her affinities with fire which render eternal virginity and chastity to her are implicit, it is more significant or appropriate for the Vanniyar community to include the fire-walking ceremony within the ritualization process centred on her. Here, she is invoked in her cosmic and salvific forms through images of fire. The mythology of Draupadi's fire-walking has an underlying belief for devotees that Draupadi with her divine powers makes the red hot coals cool for her sincere devotees. She is said to make the coals fresh and cool like flowers, or believed to drape her hair or her saris over the coals (Hiltebeitel 1991: 437). The decision to participate in the fire-walking ceremony is closely associated with taking of vows (*vrata*), which plays an important part in all traditional Hindu worship. However, from the perspective of faith in the deity it is the means through which supernatural powers associated with the deity can be demonstrated. Those practicing the fire-walking ceremony follow the goddess personified, thereby proving their faith in goddess Draupadi since it is believed that only those who are devoted to her will come out unscathed. The community which takes part in the ritual involving walking on red hot coals bare feet after the image personifying Draupadi does it as an act of faith thereby surrendering to the supremacy of the goddess and offering a mark of its devotion. It is also seen as a means of absolution from their sins or as part of the ritualistic vow. Taking place as the last act of the festival, it is something like a culmination of the enactment of the myth in the form of the ritual which celebrates the supremacy of goddess Draupadi. With respect to it being practiced in societies with matriarchal ties, it is natural for the communities to conceive of the goddess as revengeful

and identify with her the emotion of anger for the repeated attempts at defiling her. Also noteworthy is the fact that the fire-walking ritual is dedicated to numerous other village goddesses found in south India, which are directly or indirectly related to the Shakti cult.

This ritual, widely known as the Timiti festival, is celebrated not only in India, but also in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa and other countries with large south Indian populations. Annual fire-walking ceremonies are also held at four traditional Hindu temples in Natal (the so-called Indian area) in South Africa.

These are some of the attributes which make Draupadi's deification possible. The songs deepen her identification as a form of the goddess as through the connection with the lion: the mount of the warrior goddess Durga. Her deification is also enabled through her identification as Vishnu's sister in her representation or embodiment as the primal goddess. In south Indian traditions, especially in Tamil mythology, it is common to see a goddess in a sibling relationship with god Vishnu. This theme is traceable even to the *Harivamsha Purana* where the goddess takes birth as Krishna's sister. This divine sister of Krishna in *The Mahabharata* is identified with none other than Draupadi. Hiltebeitel (1991:10) also points out that the Pucari songs eulogize Draupadi as Vishnu or Krishna's sister.

The myth, which is part of the ritual worship of Draupadi Amman, is dramatized in Terukkuttu. Terukkuttu (literally street theatre), is a popular form of the folk theatre of Tamil Nadu, which is now confined to a contiguous area of Dharmapuri, North and South Arcot and Chingleput districts, traditionally known as Tondaimandalam. This area also corresponds roughly to the area where the Draupadi Amman cult is practiced today. It begins in the middle of the 21-day long festival and continues till the morning of the penultimate day. In Terukkuttu performances, *The Mahabharata* episodes are performed over a period of 18 days as a part of the Draupadi Amman festival. In fact, Terukkuttu forms a part of the temple festival (Draupadi Amman festival), a ritual enactment of the Draupadi myth. In order to further substantiate the goddess and Draupadi equation one needs to look at the constraints that the performer of Duhshasana's role has in Terukkuttu. The Terukkuttu drama shows Duhshasana not only referring to Draupadi as 'amma' (mother), but also not letting himself hold her hair in his hands, he rather pulls at a rope tied to her hair.

This suggests a lot about the cultural ethos of the community. In any society, the deities are represented with those values which the inhabitants of that society possess. This is best exemplified through the sacrifices that the people make to their deities. A society where eating non-vegetarian food is the preferred order, even the gods are propitiated with the same kind of offering although it may not be considered pure and right by other societies. Similarly, a matriarchal or matrilineal community naturally tends to have a goddess as its supreme deity. Also it is likely that the values ascribed to this goddess will most probably be martial since the community working behind such constructions appears to have martial precedents.

Matriarchal, polyandrous and martial communities appear to have a high probability ritualization and deification centring on women figures like Draupadi in particular and Durga and Kali in general in their sectarian narratives and rituals. Another instance which validates such a claim is spatially located not far from the region celebrating the Draupadi Amman festival but which takes us only as far as to the coastal and Malenadu (hilly) regions of

Karnataka which is recognized as the region where matriarchy was prevalent in the old days. It must be noted that a community where men work as traders and warriors or are employed in kings' armies are potential contributors to the thriving matrilineal or matriarchal regions.

In the frequent absence of the man as he is constantly on the move, the family takes descent from the woman's side while the children too are regarded as the heirs to the house of their mother. In such a family system, mostly it is the brother of the woman or mother who serves the role of the father. It is also believed that the matrilineal system was a direct result of polyandry that existed among the people in the past. In such a case, the husband and wife live apart in their separate families, the couple visiting each other in their respective homes occasionally. The children of such marriages are raised by the mother's extended matrilineal clan who take the mother's family name and are entitled to a share of the matrilineal property (see also C.J. Fuller 1976).

Yakshagana

Yakshagana is another form of folk theatre of Karnataka which draws its themes from *The Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and other mythological tales. The striking portrayal of Draupadi in one of the plays by the name *Draupadi Pratapa* is significant for the present study. The play which is discussed here for the depiction of a dynamic conception of Draupadi is contiguous with her conceptualization in other ritualistic theatre groups like Terukkuttu and other festivals centred around her. Here, I discuss the textual as well as performative dimensions of the play in order to demonstrate Draupadi's valour, centrality and her essential form as a goddess in the play. This play establishes the supremacy of Draupadi who is depicted not as an ordinary woman but as an incarnation of the fiery goddess Chandi. The play is centred on this figure of a martial woman. This is set into *The Mahabharata* frame where Vaishampayana tells Janamejaya that over the row between Bhima and Arjuna in order to establish their glory and prove their might in the Kurukshetra war, Draupadi is made to intervene when Bhima loses the duel. While Bhima and Arjuna were boasting of their feats, Draupadi too has boasts about her victory over the demon Kaundinya who had abducted Rati, the bride of Krishna's son Pradyumna. (It must be noted that Rati being Kaundinya's niece through his sister is the potential and rightful bride for Kaundinya, as sanctioned by many matrilineal communities). Even then Draupadi had assumed the form of Chandi, while Krishna, Balarama, the entire Yadu clan and even the Pandavas had been thrown to dust by the demon; Draupadi in this Chandi form defeats Kaundinya and restores Rati to Pradyumna in marriage. The detailed story goes as follows:

On Narada's suggestion Krishna is called to decide who is a better warrior, Arjuna or Bhima. Krishna plays the trick by saying he is only a chariot driver and it is only the head of Bhabrusena that has seen the battle in detail. So, they should ask him. Then, several warriors reach the swarga to ask Bhabrusena and decide as to who won the war. Bhabrusena says he hasn't seen any 'chakravatti' killing to win, but only the chakra of Krishna along with Chandika was seen moving around the battlefield. When the matter does not get resolved, the two brothers fight a duel wherein Bhima becomes unconscious by the constant onslaught of arrows from Arjuna. Bhima then calls out to Panchali—by calling her as the one who has a

voice like Kira, one who is lotus-faced and one who has hair like the serpent. He also reminds her of the times when he did favours for her. Draupadi braces herself and addresses Arjuna by calling out to his valour. Arjuna tries to dissuade her and failing to do so, he realises that Draupadi has undergone transformation and is now the personification of Mari (great goddess). He decides to offer a great feast in order to satiate her. He calls out to Hanumanta and admits that he himself cannot match the valour of the beautiful and fiery Draupadi. Hanumanta tries to intimidate her but when he too fails, he calls out Draupadi for a duel ending in his defeat.

Hanumanta then reveals to him that Draupadi is Adishakti, the power or active aspect of God Almighty. Adishakti is the embodiment of His Power. Now Draupadi in good spirits challenges Arjuna that he may even call Shiva and Vishnu to fight on his behalf but she will not retrace her steps. Arjuna fetches Subhadra. Subhadra and Draupadi have a fight following this. They wear the dress of martial soldiers and take on male impersonation. They fight with each other but eventually Subhadra loses and falls to the ground. Draupadi then defeats Shevatshava, Balarama, Krishna and others of the army of the Yadu clan one after the other. She also defeats ganas (contingents) of Shiva, including Ganesha, Shanmukha (general of Devas), Virabhadra and Shiva himself.

It is at this moment that Shiva summons Parvati. However, Parvati in her form as Durga is also defeated by Draupadi. Finally, Parvati assumes the form of Kali and confronts Draupadi who is in the form of Chandi. They go on fighting but neither of them wins over the other or defeats the other one. Ultimately, Narada intervenes and expresses his concern before all other gods who were witnessing the fight between two fiery goddesses. He too finally admits that the Kurukshetra war was fought by the chakra which put warriors to death while following it went Draupadi in the form of Chandi, drinking blood of corpses. He further warns that if this fight continues, the world will go into ruin and be destroyed. Accordingly, the two goddesses are propitiated and the ruin is averted (translation T.S. Satyanath).

At the end, sage Vaishampayana tells Janamejaya that all this was Krishna's 'leela' since he wanted the Pandavas to submit and throw away their pride. Although the textual claim mentions mending the pride of the Pandavas as the purpose, yet simultaneously it appears to arrogate divine powers to Draupadi which relegates her supremacy. It is evident that no masculine power is any match for her. She defeats them all and establishes her superiority over all of them. The narrative is revelatory of the fact that the powers attributed to women are far superior to those given to men as the latter appeal to women's help when they themselves have been defeated. Also the cross-dressing of Draupadi and Subhadra in men's clothes and their martial capabilities have significant implications. They take upon the role of martial soldiers suggestive of the transgression involved in this vertical or upward mobility resulting in the enhancement of their role and powers. The transgression or transvestism of the reverse order brings on a series of enhancements to the character of Draupadi in particular and to the role of women in general in such communities. Figure 1 clearly demonstrates Draupadi in an aggressive stance.



Figure 1: Draupadi during an episode in the Yakshagana play Draupadi Pratapa. The actor performing the role of Draupadi is the great Yakshagana exponent Dr Kolyur Ramachandra Rao. (Courtesy: Kuljeet Singh).

The picture in Figure 1 appropriately captures the valorous spirit of Draupadi, carrying bow and arrow which clearly is a suggestion of transgression into the space stereotypically reserved for men. In this form, she is the incarnation of the fierce goddess Chandi and can only be matched by Parvati's incarnation as Kali. It must be noted that Caṇḍī or Caṇḍīika is the name by which the supreme goddess is referred to in *Devi Mahatmya*, wherein Chandi, Chandika, Ambika and Durga have been used synonymously. *Devi Mahatmya* as the central text to the Shakta cults in different parts of India might explain Chandi getting associated with Draupadi narratives. The coastal Karnataka region where Yakshagana is a form of folk theatre is also the region from where several matrilineal and polyandrous communities have been reported (Thurston and Rangachari 1909).

Such constructions of Draupadi champion the cause of Shakta worship in upholding feminine energy as the most supreme and can also be linked to the family system and social organization of the regional communities which construct such narratives. However, due to the constraints of the scope of this paper, this discussion needs to be done at some other point. Nonetheless, it is imperative to point out that interpretation and appropriation of myths is a direct result of the social constituents, namely family system, kinship setup and ideology of the community.

Semiotics of iconographic representations of Draupadi

The pluralistic epistemology incorporates within itself not only the multiplicity of narratives

but also takes transmediality under its purview. Indian cultural representations are often scripto-centric, phono-centric and body-centric in nature. Thus a comparison of different sculptural and visual representations of Draupadi will provide multiple possibilities of understanding her character and thereby the background culture.

It is suggested here that each community constructs a system of representation or a semiotic system for representing the male-female relationship which reflects gender hierarchy. Reading this semiotic system in the several representations of Draupadi and the Pandavas may also suggest an inherent power relationship.

The first of these is the sculpture at Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh which was built in the century during the Gupta period. Heinrich Zimmer writes extensively about this temple in his 1990 book, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. In his book he includes images of a number of temple sculptures, including Lord Vishnu reclining on Ananta and Gajendramoksha. Zimmer points out that central to the panel is Yudhisthira, with Bhima and Arjuna on his left and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva on his right. Draupadi is positioned in the corner of the scene (Figure 2).

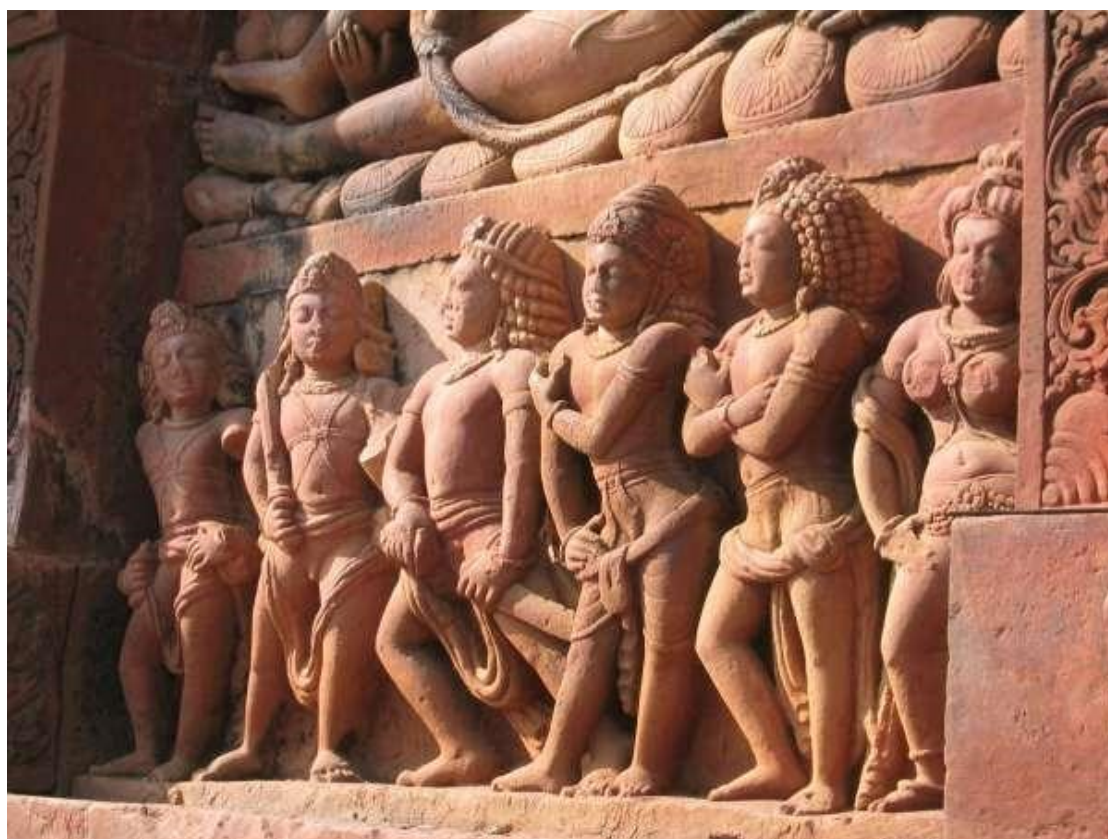


Figure 2: *The five Pandava brothers, and Draupadi; from Deogarh, late 500s. (Source: <http://www.harekrsna.com/sun/features/10-08/features1163.htm>).*

Here Draupadi is clearly of the same height as that of the Pandavas. One is tempted to conclude that this suggests that they are equals and do not conform to the stereotypical imagery where a man is superior to women and so is taller than them. However, this could have been induced by panel limitations. An interesting inter-textuality is revealed and highlighted by Zimmer as he associates this sculpture with the panel above depicting Vishnu

as depicted in Figure 3.



Figure 3: *Sheshayi Vishnu* from Deogarh, Uttar Pradesh, 5th century. (Source: <http://www.harekrsna.com/sun/features/10-08/features1163.htm>).

Zimmer establishes a link between them by conceiving the five Pandavas and Draupadi as celebrated recipients of Vishnu's favour (pg. 61). This implies an alternative reading of the sculpture in terms of polyandrous semantics. The Sheshayi Vishnu depicts one of the well-known polygamous representations wherein he is reclining on the serpent with Sridevi and Bhudevi attending to him. Such inter-textuality with the polygamous Vishnu with his two consorts and the polyandrous Draupadi with five husbands and the corresponding iconographic measurements and statures provides a striking contrast between the two systems depicted here. These two cases correspond to two of the three types of unions postulated by Marglin (1978: 298–315) wherein the power semantics between the male and the female representations/characters vary in each case. In the first, the God and his consort are in a power relationship: Vishnu-Lakshmi or Uma-Maheshwara in which the female is slightly smaller in size as compared to her male counterpart. Here the woman is primarily depicted as the consort of the god and it is only this that renders her deification. Most of the iconographies depicting such a relationship have the woman performing wifely duties or subservient duties. The Sheshashayi Vishnu is an exemplum of such a polygamous relationship. In the next type, the male and female counterparts are of equal power as in

Ardhanarishwara. Shiva and Parvati are split into two vertically and are joined together. Since there is no disparity in their sizes, this implies that there is no possibility of a hierarchical relationship between the male and the female. Figure 2 seems to correspond to this. The third and the last type reverses the conventional male-female power relationship. This could be seen in Kali mounting Shiva, suggesting a Shakta or Tantric paradigm. Here the goddess appears more independent and clearly establishes a supremacy over the god. This is discussed shortly but for now what comes out as striking is not the equal height of Pandavas and Draupadi so much, rather, this figure can be read as the juxtaposed image of Vishnu with Sridevi and Bhudevi (Figure 3). It draws a viewer's attention towards the polyandrous setup involving Draupadi wedded to the five Pandavas. This unique marital arrangement definitely invests centrality to Draupadi although she is depicted in the corner here. Polyandry clearly relegates some kind of power to her. In this regard, polyandry is like any other multiplicity convention inherent to Hinduism wherein it is ascribed to major gods of the main sects of Hinduism especially to the creator deities—Shiva, Vasudeva Krishna and the goddess or Devi. As a consequence, Draupadi's status is enhanced due to multiple husbands. More so, the height of Draupadi being the same as all other Pandavas only makes the earlier suggestion of her empowered position stronger.

In order to substantiate the third type of Marglin, I would like to point out the prominence rendered to her in iconography represented through the process of deification in the region under discussion. In order to demonstrate this, I present a photo from the Draupadi Amman festival (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Draupadi and the Pandavas at the Draupadi Amman festival. (Photograph by the author).

This picture is taken from the Draupadi Amman festival from the northern Tamil Nadu-Andhra Pradesh border region reduplicated and performed at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) as part of a month-long Jaya festival wherein custodians of traditional knowledge and living practitioners of age old customs related to *The Mahabharata* tradition congregated. Within the dominant practices of iconography, it is customary to represent the

female counterpart as slightly smaller in size as compared to the male, suggesting her subservience and subordination subsuming a centrality to the male deity and a peripheral position to his consorts. In the case of deities representing polygamy, not only is the male located in the centre but he is also depicted as being taller than his female counterparts suggesting domination and superiority. What is interesting here is that contrary to the usual convention of locating Draupadi as standing to the extreme left of the Pandavas (as represented in the sculpture at Deogarh in Figure 2), well within the medieval conventions of iconographic tradition, there also appears to be a radical shift to centre her as compared to the Deogarh sculpture. It is possible that the corner position attributed to Draupadi in Deogarh becomes more central within the polyandrous and matrilineal Vanniyar community of south India. Draupadi here is transposed to the centre. Her move from the periphery to the centre is not only physical but also symbolical, that is, in this setting it is she who gains centrality which suggests that the concentration of power rests with her. Also Draupadi becomes significant as the worship is offered primarily to her. Rituals too centre on her. The red cloth wrapped around her waist containing grains is symbolic of her fertility which enables her identification with goddess Sri. Also the fact that Draupadi is not depicted as smaller in size than the Pandavas cannot be overlooked easily. It is clear that here some sort of semiotics is at work which is visibly pro-women or inclined towards depicting Draupadi in an equal relationship with the Pandavas. However, her centrality also bespeaks of the prominence that is attributed to her in this polyandrous setup. Notably, there are also cases in Draupadi's depiction wherein the reverse of the polygynous semiotics mentioned above could be seen suggesting a polyandrous semiotics at work. In Figure 4, the power semantics suggest a clearly unequal relationship wherein Draupadi is conspicuously prominent as compared to the Pandavas within the iconographic semiotic systems that are being discussed here (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Draupadi, five Pandavas and Krishna at Draupadi Amman festival. (Photograph by the author).

Here again, Draupadi is in the centre but she is remarkably taller than all the Pandavas. This indicates that the Pandavas are assigned relatively lesser power than Draupadi. Her conception is clearly that of an independent goddess while the Pandavas

assume marginal positions. This mode of representation not only acts as a counter-structure of the deification process within the representation of divine polygyny as discussed earlier but also postulates the characteristics/schema of a divine polyandry.

Interestingly, this schema appears like an inversion of category 1 of the three union types where the female figure is depicted as subservient to the male god, or a different form of category 3 wherein the feminine power subordinates and castrates the male power, as postulated by Marglin (1978). Thus different communities construct a dominant semiotic system wherein its appropriation and manipulation are constantly in interplay.

Conclusion

The world embodied by Vyasa's *Mahabharata* being a construct of overt patriarchy apparently either ignores or provides marginal spaces to female voices and experiences. However, the vernacular versions being grounded in peripheral local cultures and communities explore a variety of gender relations with a matrix of power and sexuality in many different cultural contexts. These local narratives when transmitted textually, orally, ritually and through performance across generations are influenced and shaped by the women folk as they are the primary custodians and transmitters of such knowledge systems. Also these narratives naturally tend to exalt women, especially if the society or the community has matrilineal or polyandrous ties. The centrality of women in the narratives suggests the centrality of women even within the social matrix of the society or the community. Thus the depiction of Draupadi's centrality through 'representation strategies of ascendance' is indicative of the prominence attached to her character within the vernacular versions of *The Mahabharata* and reveals the ideology working behind such constructions. Draupadi is only one of the possible characters upon whom the narratives may be centred, as there are also traditions which worship other women characters of the epic, namely Subhadra, Kunti, Chitrangada and Ulupi among others and also other Shakta beliefs or faith systems.

End-notes

¹The Vanniyars derive their caste name from the Sanskrit *vahni*, which is taken as the root word for the Tamil word *vanni*, that is, fire. It is also the Tamil name of an important tree: the Sanskrit *shami* (the tree in which the Pandavas hid their weapons on entering the kingdom of Virata to begin their period of concealment). Hildebeitel (1991: 35) links the Vanniyar legends intimately with the Draupadi cult and the *Mahabharata*. This is the caste which seems to be majorly responsible for establishing Draupadi temples at various sites through migration and other channels of transmission and interaction. Hildebeitel also confirms their spread in Sri Lanka and of finding the Draupadi cult there.

²Virashakti literally means 'heroic Shakti'.

³While some versions owe this to an accidental utterance made on the part of Kunti to her sons to divide equally among themselves whatever they had brought with them that day, others link it with Draupadi's previous birth when she had importuned Shiva five times for a husband and had received as answer that in a later existence she would have five husbands, or even to her past life as Nalayani, a sage's wife who got the curse of getting married to five men in her next birth because of her insatiable sexual appetite. Another elaborate explanation of the Pandavas as a five-fold incarnation of Indra constituting a uniquely single husband for Draupadi is based on frequent references in the *Mahabharata* to Kunti's sons as 'sakrapratimatejasah' (images of the energy of Sakra, that is, Indra) and would appeal to a more sophisticated audience.

⁴Find more on this in my dissertation titled *Pluralistic Epistemology: Mythicising and Ritualising Draupadi in Mahabharata Tradition*.

⁵The Mariamman temple in Pietermaritzburg; two temples in Durban; and the Glencoe Hindu temple in

northern Natal. This was brought to Natal in the 1860s by Tamil speaking Hindus from the Madras area in south India, whose ancestors had practiced this as a part of their village goddess tradition. The ceremony here is in honour of goddess Draupadi, one of the many goddesses worshipped by Hindus, who believe that both female and male deities are necessary to sustain the universe. The goddess is the great Mother Earth who is the active power of existence, animating the entire natural world, and can thus be worshipped as the supreme power of the universe. Although it is believed that she is basically one, she manifests herself in a great variety of forms: as Uma, Parvati, Lakshmi and others, she is gentle and benign; whereas in forms such as Kali, Durga, Mariamman and Draupadi, she is fierce and at times malevolent (cf. Diesel 1990).

⁶Such a sibling relation could also be noticed in Katyayani's vow and in the cult of Puri Jagannath with that of Subhadra.

⁷It is interesting to note that Vanniyars, Tigalas and Coorgs have been identified with martial skills and are matrilineal communities.

⁸As practiced under the Tharavad system of joint family by people in Kerala, especially Nairs. The Tharavad was administered by a Karnavar, the senior most male member of the family, who would be the eldest maternal uncle of the family. Members of the Tharavad consisted of mother, daughters, sons, sisters and brothers while the fathers and husbands had only a minimal role to play in the affairs. It was a true matrilineal affair. The Karnavar took all major decisions. However, the consent of the eldest female member of the family was obtained before implementing the decisions.

⁹Cf. Ramarao, Kadandale B. (n.d.) Udupi: Pavanja Gururao and Sons. I am highly indebted to Dr Purushottama Bilimale, director of the American Institute of Indian Studies for his invaluable help in making this rare Kannada text available to me. I would also like to thank my supervisor Professor T.S. Satyanath for his extended assistance in translating the text in English.

¹⁰According to Coburn (1984), 'Caṇḍīka' is 'the violent and impetuous one'. In the light of the primacy of this designation of the goddess, it is striking that the word Caṇḍīka has virtually no earlier history in Sanskrit. There are no instances of its occurrence in the Vedic literature that I have surveyed. The reason for the absence of the name Chandi in any ancient Sanskrit work is because the deity belonged to the non-Sanskrit or non-brahminical tradition of Hinduism, and originates in Bengal as a non-Aryan tribal deity.

¹¹Thanks to Professor Bhaktavatsala Reddy for having given me valuable insights on the Draupadi Amman festival.

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