
Status and sufferings in the life of Draupadi in Mahabharata

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Draupadi an epitome of patience and forgiveness
Born out of holy pyre was as pure as the fire itself
Her life a saga of sufferings and disgrace
But still an epitome of femininity and feminism
She was a mother of five sons and was never given the status of mother
She had five husbands – but she had none
She had given no Joy, no sense of victory,
No honour as wife no honour as mother
Only the status of queen and an empty crown...

Abstract:

The inner most narrative kernel of Mahabarta tells us the story of a symbolic character called Draupadi. It is true and many critics are of the opinion that if there was no character of Draupadi present in Mahabharata, there was then no Mahabharata at all. This means Draupadi is not only the central character of this greatest epic of the world but her character is symbolic in many ways, her status and sufferings are like a double yarn of life in which the pendulum of life moves between two extremes from joy to sorrow and from tears to smiles. No doubt she enjoyed her status as a queen and as a princess but she was not given any respect or honour by men. Draupadi had developed a strength to bear the trials of life. Her personality was one of lightning and thunder. Her story is a saga of suffering and disgrace but she took everything in her stride and vanquished each one of the perpetrators of her humiliation and agony. In Hinduism according to Bhagavad-Gita when Sita was abducted by Ravana and after her release from the bondage she was thrown into agni in order to test her purity and virginity in which she passed well. Draupadi who was born out of holy pyre was pure and virgin but was dishonoured physically by her enemies. The sufferings of Draupadi starts with the contest arranged by her father Draupad. She was further insulted by Yudhishtira by carrying their mother's wish by treating her as if she were an object won in a contest. She was a victim of circumstances and had no control over the situation when she was told that she had to marry five men at the same time.

Her cruel fate divides her as a possession among five husbands and cuts up her personality. She was living not only in a polyandrous relationship but a polygamous one as well because her husbands had other wives. This fiery princess bent on vengeance. Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. If the Mahabharata is an intricately woven saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem and the all-destroying war it describes.

Keywords: polygamous, Mahabharata, Vengeance, Humiliation, Bhagavad-Gita.

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The inner most narrative kernel of Mahabharata tells us the story of a symbolic character called Draupadi. Draupadi, a divine character was the daughter of Drupad, the king of panchala and the wife and queen of the five great pandavas. She was allegedly born out of sacrificial fire. She was a heroic princess of the Hindu epic of Mahabharata who was firm and a woman with an unbending will. The proud and angry heroine Draupadi has remained an enigmatic woman of substance. She was volcanic and reduced her enemies to the ashes. This fiery princess bent on vengeance could be compassionate and generous, too. Draupadi had developed a strength to bear the trials of life. She had resolved firmly not to harm the good people, and not to bend before the wicked. Draupadi was woman, but she became as famous as the heroic pandavas because of such determination. Her personality was one of lightning and thundering. This unforgettable heroine is in no way less than Beema or Arjuna in strength and spirit, valour and virtue. Her story is a saga of suffering and disgrace but she took everything in her stride and vanquished each one of the perpetrators of her humiliation and agony. She was living not only in polyandrous relationship but polygamous as well because each of her husband takes at least one more wife; she never gets Arjuna to herself for he marries Ulupi, Chitrangada and has Subhadra as his favourite but Draupadi managed her relationship harmoniously with all of them.

She was called parshati, Panchali, Draupadi, shri, yagnasani; and also celebrated as Rajaputri, satyavrata, Manasvini and Yashasvini... but she was Krishna the dusky princess evoking fragrance of the blue lotus. She sprang out of sacrificial fire but unfortunately she existed in the time when a woman's role was serve her husband. As Dr Vanamala Bhawalkar states:

“ in Draupadi's Era, there was no question of woman's equality with men. The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person. As Milton had said, 'He for God and she for the God in him' was true in those days ".(150) The unique relationship between Draupadi and her husbands is what makes her story so exceptional. Draupadi, the wife of mighty pandava brothers was anything but a conventional wife; she was smart, bold and

would often lead her husbands into action. There are few women that complete with the beauty of Draupadi; all those that met her adored her. Her beauty was so great that she delighted all of the woman senses. Alf Hiltbeitel states this of her beauty: "The very sight of her was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance" (Hiltebeitel 267). Draupadi's beauty would gain her much attention , but it is her ability to balance her beauty with the desirable traits of a wife that gain her such devotion. However as Bhawalkar notes, it was not only her beauty that won her praise.

"Yudhisthira said that she as that any man would desire and that she never committed any sin. Bhira equalled her to the ancient famous wives. Her mother -in-law Kunti praised her for the virtues and her laudable behaviour with all her husband's" (Bhawalkar 141).

Draupadi was as skilled in the arts of being a woman, and everything that was associated with womanhood, as she was gifted in beauty. Her opinions were well respected and supported by her family. Due to her vast knowledge of many subjects. Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi's father, Drupada, allowed Draupadi to be educated. Bhawalkar comments on Drupadi's education.

"Drupada has engaged learned Brahmanas for the education of his sons. Draupadi also joined them and became an expert in Political Science"(Bhawalkar 3).

It is possible that the unique qualities that Draupadi possessed, such as strength and audacity, are a result of being educated. Having such a complete education would have given Draupadi a sense of confidence unfamiliar to most women. Also Draupadi was quick to learn and thirsted for knowledge ; she had a keen memory and had a vast knowledge on many subjects. Bhawalkar comments on the success of Draupadi as a student:

"She became known as Pandita (learned and wise) and grew up a charming maiden admired by all"(Bhawalkar 4).

Draupadi's ability to overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart from other women. In the Mahabharata she proves that no situation is insurmountable, and she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the positions they lead her into. After the incident at the court of the Kurus, Draupadi emerges as a much more powerful character and this is seen in the interactions with her husbands. Bhawalkar remarks on Draupadi's relationship with her husbands:

"Draupadi was not a dumb follower of her husbands. She had her own individuality. Though soft speaking she used harsh words to her husbands and others when necessary"(Bhawalkar 143).

This boldness is what sets her apart from other women in the epics. The Pandavas are accepting of this treatment possibly because they feel guilt for their abandonment of Draupadi at the court, or possibly because they truly trust in her decisions.

The Pandavas often looked to Draupadi for guidance and approval. Draupadi was in many ways equal to her husbands and they desired her respect. Despite the fact that Draupadi eventually forgives her husbands, she is left with a desire for vengeance, and is quick to seek revenge on those who offend her or her family Draupadi begins to be recognized for this aggressive attitude and her enemies are wary of her power.

Although Draupadi was desperate for revenge on those who harmed her. Her distinction between right and wrong was rarely clouded and she was often in pursuit of justice. Draupadi's distinction among other women from the epics is paramount and well deserved; she was far ahead of her time, often found commanding her husbands to do her bidding. It is her ability to use her position with responsibility and insight that show her true power as a woman. Dr. Bhawalkar summarizes Draupadi's unique qualities:

"Yet the superb qualities of Draupadi like steadfast devotion to duty, spirit of self sacrifice, fortitude, courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind perseverance, endurance, thirst of knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right or wrong and strength to fight against to injustice, truth modesty, forgiveness, softness, and harshness as the occasion demanded. These and such other qualities seen in Draupadi's life are universal and beyond the limit of time and space" (Bhawalkar 151).

Draupadi's fearlessness and uncompromising nature makes her of great importance in the history of mythological women and of women today.

The tales of flame like beauty of the enchanting princess of Panchala, of her rivetingly lovely dark looks, of her captivating blue lotus fragrance spread like forest fire far and wide. It set aflame the hearts of countless princess. Even the sage Vyasa went into a rapture describing her extraordinary beauty. It was the only time he described his heroine in such detail:

"Eye -ravishing Panchali, black and half-smiling eyes, entrancing and radiant with rather haughty glow.....Soft eye lashes; standing tall, with well formed swelling breasts; narrow waist like the middle of the sacred Veda; plantain-stalk like smooth, round, firm shapely thighs; fingers and toes like champak petals; the new born moon like shining coppery carved nails; palms and foot soles like fresh red lotuses; pearl like teeth; a playful smile that put the lightning to shame. Like an image sculpted by the world's most gifted artist, neither short nor tall, neither dark nor pale; with unblemished beauty of face and matching loveliness of graceful figure; smooth skinned fragrant like the lotus, with long wavy dark-blue hair of serpentine loveliness, like the waves of the ocean that could imprison the breeze into stillness; eyes like autumn-lotus leaves; Her unblemished beautiful sweat-bathed face is lovely, like the blue- lotus, like the jasmine... She is extraordinarily accomplished, soft spoken and gentle.....the intoxicating blue- lotus fragrance of her body deludes even the bees. In her presence the tree leaves stilled for a moment; and, the fires flared but silently. She was a dream incarnated of gods and men alike." (Adi Parva 169.44-46; Sabha 65.33-37).

Draupadi a paragon of chasity, a kanya was a victim of her extra-ordinary beauty that inflamed the desire in the hearts of men. As Sudeshna Kichaka's sister says, 'any man seeing her would fall in love madly'. She seemed to attract violence and wrecked vengeance thereafter. On such occasion she fought the outrage with matchless courage, assurance, skill and presence of mind. She was veritably a goddess of war.

She was married to five brothers without consulting her. The epic gives many justifications for her polyandry and beauty. But the epic also states that all the five brothers lusted after her.

"...after those princes of immeasurable energy had looked at Draupadi, the God of desire invaded their hearts and continued to crash all their senses....the ravishing beauty of Panchali....had been modelled by the creator himself" (Adi Parva, Section CLXLIII).

The sufferings of Draupadi start with the contest arranged by her father Drupad. He was further insulted by Yudshitra by carrying their mother's wish by treating her as if she were an object won in a contest. She was a victim of circumstances and had no control over the situation when she was told that she had to marry five men at the same time. Her cruel fate divides her as a possession among five husbands and cuts up her personality. She was living not only in a polyandrous relationship but a polygamous one as well because her husbands had other wives.

During Sabh Parva, Yudhishtira was enticed to play a game of dice, one by one he lost all his possessions but like an intoxicated gambler he went on playing. He lost his brothers and then himself. When he stated that he have now nothing to stake, Shakuni suggested that he still have Draupadi and by staking her, he could win his freedom back. Shakuni plays very cunningly with Yudhishtira, he almost have him in his grip and Yudhishtira stakes Draupadi and while staking her, he describes her beauty and qualities.

"...neither short nor tall, neither spare nor corpulentwho is possessed of blue curly locks" (Sabha Parva, Section LXIV).

He further describes her beauty including her slender wait and other virtues expected of a woman, like sweet speaking and then stakes her. This description coming from a husband while he was putting her a stake almost sounds like he was enticing his opponents that 'look what a beautiful, costly possession I am having! You can play and win it from me'. It is indicative of the way women were perceived and treated during the period as is evident from the verse.

Mother of five and wife of five
Ruling queen in her hive
Copper skinned and fiery eyes
Dark hair and knee size
Out a fire she did born
Vengeance and forgiveness of twin yarn
Draupadi, though a symbolic name
In stake on the chess of game

Nothing did five and five pondvas
When disrobed by wicked kaurvas
Like Sita under Watika tree
Waiting for Rama to be set free
Druapada's daughter out of fire
For wreaths of woes and deaths pyre

Here now there is a dramatic change of fortune for the Pandvas and Draupadi. Draupadi who had been empress, is now suddenly reduced to the status of a Dasi, a slave maid. But she is unaware of it. Duryodhana without any hesitation commands to Vidura.

“...bring hither Draupadi, the dear and loved wife of the Pandavas. Let her sweep the chambers, force her there-to, and let the unfortunate one stay where our serving women are” (Sabha Parva, Section LXV).

Vidura however do not obey him, but tries to pursue him to refrain from such an evil action which may bring destruction of the whole Kuru clan. Vidura's counsels however fell on the deaf ears and Duryodhana now sends Pratikami, the suta servant to bring Draupadi. So much tension is already built up in the court during the dice game as one after another. Yudhishtara loses all the throws, but Draupadi was unaware of her sudden change of fortune for worse. On the command of Duryodhana, Pratikami goes to bring Draupadi. He says to Draupadi.

“Yudhishtara having been intoxicated with dice, Duryodhana, Draupadi, hath won thee. Come now, therefore to the abode of Dhritrashtra. I will take thee. O Yajnaseni, and put thee in some menial work” (Sabha Parva, section LXVI) .

Draupadi who was conscious of being a Kshatrarii and the queen was suddenly commanded by a servant of a Suta caste to come with him and he will put her to some menial work. She was also addressed by name Draupadi as well as Yajnaseni, instead of queen or princes, which were a usual form of address by which a servant was suppose to address the queen.

“Draupadi was unaware of the things that had happened in the court and was at a loss how to react to Pratikami. She says, “Why, o Pratikamin, dost thou say so?” (Sabha Parva, section LXVI).

She also expresses surprise that a prince can stake his wife! She also asks if the king did not find anything else to stake.

Pratikami explains the sequence in which the king had lost everything; his wealth, Kingdom, then his brothers, then himself and finally Draupadi. Now when Draupadi was informed that Yudhishtira had first lost himself and then staked her, she probably thinks if she can save herself by argument that if Yudhishtira had lost himself first, he had no right to stake her. Draupadi gets angry with Yudhishtira, she refers to him in a very disrespectful manner as a gambler and says to Pratikami.

“O Son of the Suta race, go and ask that gambler present in the assembly, whom he hath

lost first, himself, or me. Ascertaining this, come hither, and then take me with thee. O son of the Suta race”(Sabha Parva, Section LXVI).

Pratikamo goes back to the court, repeat Draupadi’s words in the assembly. The appeal for the adherence to Dharma was made to the whole assembly on the behalf of Draupadi by Pratikami, yet nobody in the assembly gives any answer to be communicated to Draupadi. The epic says that all sat Draupadi’s running away seems to have further angered Dussasana. He ran after her and sized her by her hairs. The epic says,

‘Dussasana roaring in anger ran after her and seized the queen by her locks, so long and blue and wavy. Alas! Those locks that had been sprinkled with water sanctified with mantras in the great Rajasuya sacrifice, were now forcibly seized by the son of Dhritarashtra disregarding the prowess of the Pandvas” (Sabha Parva, section LXVI).

As Draupadi was dragged she was trembling. The text describes her as trembling like a banana plant in a storm, her body was bent and she faintly cried. But her anger do not leave her entirely, she calls Dussaasna a ‘wretch’ and then says that it does not suit him to take her to assembly as her season have come and she was clad in one piece of cloth. Dussaasna continued to drag her and his response to her appeal proves that anger and desire for revenge provokes a devil in human. He says to her that he does not really care if her season had come or not, if she is wearing one piece of cloth or entirely naked. As she had been won at the dice and became their slave, she had to listen to them. Dussasana continued to drag her and she continued to appeal , the epic describes,

“With hair dishevelled and half her attire loosened, all the while dragged by Dussasana”(Sabha Parva Section LXVI).

Draupadi appeals to Dussasana not to drag her in front of the respectable and elderly people. She appeals him not to uncover her. She even threatens that her lords, i.e., the Pandavas will not forgive him. She repeatedly says that she is in seasons. When she was saying all this and was continued to be dragged, they reaches assembly. Draupadi laments that nobody in the assembly was trying to rebuke Dussasana and the Bharata clan had lost its virtue. She also condemns Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and king Dhritrashtra. She puts an open question to assembly that why the Kuru elders are looking silently at this crime?

Then she casts an angry glance over the Pandavas. The epic describes that the anger of the Pandavas was infamed by her angry glance. They were not so distressed at having been robbed of their kingdom, but felt very distressed by the angry glance of Draupadi. When Draupadi was looking at her helpless husbands, Dussasana noticed it and then dragged her more forcibly, addressed her as ‘slave’ slave and laughed aloud. Karna became very happy at this and also laughed aloud. Sakuni also applauded Dussasana. The epic describes that it is only four people i.e. Duryodhana, Dussasana, Karna, and Sakuni who felt happy at this plight of Draupadi, everyone else in the assembly was filled with sorrow.

Draupadi continued to weep and kept looking at her helpless husbands. Dussasana spoke

my disagreeable and harsh words to her. Looking at her position, being dragged during her season, her upper garment loosened, Bhima gives way to anger. He holds Yudhishtara responsible for Draupadi's plight and says he will burn Yudhishtara's hands. He also that many gamblers have women of disreputable character in their home, but they do not put them at stake while gambling Yudhishtara had put his wedded wife at stake. Here Arjuna intervenes and pacifies Bhima.

He further says that she would now select a husband who will not make her slave by gambling and it is normal for a slave woman to freely select her husband. Bhima gets angry at this and says to Yudhishtara that he is forced to listen to all this because Yudhishtara played by staking Draupadi. After this Duryodhana uncovers his left thigh and shows it to Draupadi, which is a very offensive sexual gesture! The epic says that it was his deliberate act to provoke Bhima further. Bhima as expected gets provoked and make a vow that in the war he will break Duryodhana's thighs.

Here we see the divine intervention is brought again in the epic. Vidura and Gandhari tell something to the king. The king then scolds Duryodhana. He says consoling words to Draupadi and tells her to ask for any boon. Draupadi asks that Yudhishtara may be freed. Then Dhritrashtra asks her to take a second boon. Now she asks that her other four husbands should be freed from the bondage along with their arms and chariot. Dhritrashtra grants that also and tells her to ask for the third boon. Here Draupadi comes out very fine. She says, "....Covetousness always bringeth about loss of virtue. I do not deserve a third boon" (Sabha Parva, Section LXX).

After this act of giving boon by the king, Karna praises Draupadi by saying that he became like a boat, that has brought the pandavas to the shore that were sinking in a bottomless ocean of distress. Throughout this act of giving boon to Draupadi by Dhrishthara, Duryodhana seems to be absent.

After this the king returns the Pandava's kingdom and asks them to go back. But on the insistence of Duryodhana, the Pandavas are called back again and they play the dice once again with only one throw and with Yudhishtara losing that also, the Pandavas are banished for thirteen years. When they leave the city of Hastinapur, Dussanana again humiliates Draupadi and asks her to leave the Pandavas and elect another husband. The departure of the Pandavas and Draupadi is also described in very pathetic manner. "Draupadi bathed in tears, and clad in one piece of cloth, stained with blood, and with her dishevelled.....went away weeping and wailing". (Sabha Parva, section LXXVIII).

Disheveled hair is a sign of mourning. The loss of blood signifies the loss of life and the woman in her season without husband signifies the end of the lineage. So the terrible war and destruction which hangs on the considerable part of the epic since beginning is reinforced by the symbolism.

(During the Udyoga Parva, there is a preparation for the Great War from both the side and at the same time both the side tries to explore the possibility of having an amicable settlement. But Draupadi constantly reminds the Pandavas and Krishna about her humiliation. As if she continued to nurture her trauma and her hatred for the perpetrators. All the perpetrators are reminded about their treatment of Draupadi at the time of their death during the war.

Draupadi's troubles were not yet over Jayadrath was the king of Sindhudesh and was married to Dusshala, the daughter of Dhritharashtra he too had gone to Draupadi's Swayamvara but had lost the consent he could not get her by valour. During the days of the banishment to jungle of the Pandavas, one day Draupadi was leaning against a kadamba tree, holding on to a branch with an upraised hand when Jayadratha seized her. She repulsed him so hard that he fell to the ground retaining full control of her faculties, she mounted his chariot on finding him bent on forcing her, calmly asked the family priest to report to her husband's. No Sita like lamentation here, nor shrill outcries for succour! As her husbands closed up on Jayadratha, she taunted him with an elaborate description of the prowess of each and the inevitable trouncing that would follow.

Draupadi is the most complex and controversial female character in Hindu literature. On the one hand, she could be womanly, compassionate and generous and on the other, she could wreak havoc on those who did her wrong. She was never ready to compromise on either her rights as a daughter-in-law or even on the rights of the Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back or avenge high-handedness and injustice meted out to her modesty. She secretly vowed that one day she would definitely seek vendetta on the injustice meted out to her. She did it by igniting the spark of revenge in the hearts of the Pandavas.

If the Mahabharata is an intricately woven saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem and the all-destroying war it describes.

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