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Keywords: Draupadi, polyandry, Folk Mahabharatas, Vasuki Naga, Fire, desire, sexual power, erotic, forced voyeurism, politics

THE JOYS OF THE EROTIC- DRAUPADI IN MAHABHARATA: THE EROTIC OR THE POLITICAL?

Putting aside the 'patriarchal' interpretation of Mahabharata, Draupadi is undoubtedly the central character in Mahabharata. Other than the Draupadi we find in Vyasa's Mahabharata in its present form – which has obviously been tampered much to give it a gloss of male-glory, though, even then Draupadi flashes through that cloud of conspiracy as the central character every now and then – folk imagination runs wild with Draupadi. In all folk Mahabharatas – they are many, varied, and to be found spanning across different cultures of India – Draupadi is a powerful woman with powerful sexuality and has been hailed for her voracious sexuality. 'Classical' Mahabharata does not show Draupadi's sexual relation with any man other than her five husbands – even in her fantasy; however, Folk Mahabharata shows it without hesitation and reserve. In the Buddhist Jataka, Draupadi has illicit sexual relation with a hump-backed servant; in some Folk Mahabharata of South India, Draupadi has secret sexual desire for Krishna and Karna; in Bheel Bharata – a Folk Mahabharata of the Bheel (or, Bhil) tribes of Rajasthan – she has sexual relation with Vasuka Naga, a 'snake' king – initially it seems Vasuki rapes her, but on scrutiny it does not seem so, and Draupadi is Vasuki's willing sexual partner for sometime; and in Devi Bhagavata Puraana, Kichaka, the brother-in-law of King Virata of Matsya Kingdom, rapes her. From Kautilya's Arthashastra and Vatsayana's Kamasutra, we learn that women used their sexuality for political reasons – of course this is as relevant today. There is no denying that even in classical Mahabharata, Draupadi had a very active role in state politics, and as such her conscious use of her sexuality had a political dimension. In other words, she sometimes used her sexuality for political gain of her husbands. Careful scrutiny of Jayadratha-episode and Kichaka-episode reveals this. Jayadratha tried to abduct her (with professed intention to marry her – which, of course can be interpreted as forcing her into sex – though marriage by abduction was 'legal' in those days in the name of Rakshasa marriage), and Kichaka, after failing to earn her consent in sex (again, with professed intention to marry her), tried to rape her. In both cases, Draupadi's 'use' of sexuality is evident. What is more, the Pandavas ultimately gained politically – when, following Draupadi's insult, they humiliated Jayadratha and killed Kichaka. This clearly brings out that Draupadi used her sexuality 'politically' to achieve that end.

In the present paper I will refer to an episode of Mahabharata which is not the classical but a tribal one. The tribal Bheels have a Mahabharata version of their own, episodes of which are narrated or sung during their festivals, usually accompanied by music and sometimes with dance – a captivating version that never fails to thrill, one of the secrets of its allure being its truly enchanting folktale-like quality.

Draupadi is having her siesta one beautiful afternoon in Hastinapura. Her maids gently comb her hair as she sleeps.

As they do so, a single hair from her golden tresses breaks off and comes loose. The maids are terrified and look at one another, their eyes full of terror. They fear for what would happen when Draupadi awakens and sees what has happened. Eventually they decide to hang the hair from the window, perhaps hoping the wind will carry it away.

And the wind sees the strand of hair and decides to play a prank. Storm after storm rush towards Hastinapura. The single hair dangling from the royal window is lifted up, carried far and dropped. But such is the weight of that hair that the earth is not able to bear it and splits open, giving way, and the hair floats down right into Patala where the king of serpents and the lord of the netherworlds, Vasuki Naga, has been asleep for twelve years and his queens, the Padma Naginis, are fanning him. As the strand of hair falls on the chest of the mighty king of Patala, unable to wear its weight Vasuki's chest begins to quake and he wakes up in a

shock. He picks up the hair and studies it – it is a woman's hair. He springs up and going to the seventh chamber in the basement, opens it.

The queens realize Vasuki is planning to visit the earth. They gather around him and ask him where he is going and he tells them he is going to the earth in search of the woman with golden hair. The Padma Naginis tell him not to get entangled with a woman who does not belong to him, that is a dangerous path, he will be committing a sin. They tell him each of them would keep him with her for twelve years in her bed and pleasure him. He tells them not to worry and promises he would just have a look at the woman with golden hair and would be back. Vasuki does the sixteen sringaras, and the queens move around him wailing aloud.

Vasuki mounts his horse, whips it, a dust-storm rises up as the horse takes off whinnying mightily towards the earth. They are now in a meadow on the earth. Vasuki pulls the reins of the horse and wonder where to go now. On a hunch, he decides to go westward. The horse flies like the wind. Soon large cities appear.

The king of Patala searches for the queen with golden hair in the markets of these cities. Eventually he reaches a lake on the outskirts of a city, decides to rest there for a while and dismounts. He is unable to rest, though – for in his mind is the queen with the golden hair. [It is a queen, and as such another man's wife, he is searching for, and not a princess.] As he stands there, on the bank of the lake, searching far with his eyes, he sees yet another city in the distance: Hastinapura. He mounts his horse again, whips it and the horse starts fleeing. The bird of good omen calls and the king's heart is filled with joy. In the royal gardens of Hastinapura, he ties the horse under a champa tree and gives it fresh grass. Then, whip in his hand, he starts merrily walking towards the cloud palace.

Draupadi is now sitting on a swing. The rays of the sun fall on her hair through the window. The light is reflected by Draupadi's golden hair, and it blinds Vasuki for a moment. Such is his joy there are goosebumps all over his body. His feet quicken.

Draupadi sees him and thinks a guest has lost his way and is coming towards the queen's apartments instead of going to the royal assembly. She sends her maids to show him the way. He ignores their directions, pushes them away roughly and proceeds towards Draupadi undaunted.

Seeing him approaching, Draupadi gets up to go to the inner chambers. But before she can do so, Vasuki swings the whip and lashes it at Draupadi's thin waste. Draupadi runs, falls down, her scarf moves off her head and Vasuki realizes this is the woman he has been looking for. He rushes towards her and falls over her. Draupadi shouts at him and asks him to get away if he wants to remain alive, for the Pandavas would kill him if they come to know of his being here. Ignoring her words, Vasuki picks her up and carries her to her bed.

Draupadi screams from the bed and Vasuki tells her he has been hungry for her for days. Her fury has no effect on him. Instead, he orders her to warm water for his bath. After the water is heated, she bathes him. He then asks her to prepare a thirty-two course meal for him. She does so and then serves the meal in gold plates and, while he remains reclining on the bed, feeds him, placing the food with her hands in his mouth. As she feeds him, she wonders who

this obstinate man is. The meal over, she again tells him to hurry away. He tells her that when a man comes, he does not go away like that; as for him, he plans to spend the night there.

In the meantime, the Pandava assembly is over and the sounds of people dispersing could be heard. Vasuki tells Draupadi not to worry, let her husband come. So powerful are the steps of Arjuna as he approaches that the very rooftops of the palace quake. As Arjuna enters the chamber, Vasuki jumps up from the bed and gathers Arjuna in a mighty stranglehold in his arms. The fight that ensues is terrible – it takes the two of them down to Patala, back to the earth, then to the skies. Eventually Vasuki defeats Arjuna, and sitting on his chest, ties up his hands and legs with a hair pulled out from his moustache. He then hoists him up onto a peg on the wall.

Draupadi now gets her bed ready for them. Fragrant flowers are spread on it, musk and flower essences are sprinkled. Seated on the bed, the Pandava queen and the king of Patala play a game of dice. Arjuna hanging from the peg is a witness to the game. After the game of dice, the two of them move on to another game. Draupadi and Vasuki have sex, now tenderly, now furiously, right before his eyes. Their games are now hot, now tender and poor Arjuna watches it all helplessly.

In the morning Vasuki leaves promising to come back again in the evening. Before leaving, he picks up his shining sword and cuts off the whisker with which he had bound Arjuna's hands and feet. Arjuna falls to the ground with a thud.

Draupadi comes running to Arjuna, raises him up, consoles him and leading him to the bed, lays him down on it. She heats water and massages and bathes him. She cooks another thirty-two course meal and feeds him. Arjuna then whimpers to Draupadi that this will now be an everyday affair. "It is fine with you," he says, "but my bones break. Oh, how I have to suffer!" He asks her to find out how to kill Vasuki from Vasuki himself and Draupadi promises to do so.

Back in Patala, Vasuki finds no more pleasure in the company of his wives or the food they serve him. He passes the day impatiently waiting for the evening. In the evening, back at Hastinapura, he finds Draupadi restlessly waiting for him. Arjuna is again tied up and hung from the peg and becomes the helpless witness to their games.

Before that, however, Draupadi through a clever pretext learns from Vasuki that he is not in the least afraid of the Pandavas – the only one he fears is Karna, who belongs to the Kauravas. That night while Vasuki is asleep, she crawls into his stomach and learns the secret of his death.

The next morning after Vasuki has left, Draupadi again raises up Arjuna from the ground where he had fallen with a thud as Vasuki snapped the whisker that bound his hands and legs and lays him on the bed. She reveals the secret of killing Vasuki to Arjuna through Karna. Arjuna is reluctant to take help from Karna – that would be humiliating to him, but Draupadi convinces him that there is no other way. Agreeing, he goes and sits under a tree waiting for Karna on his way to the Kauravas. As Karna sees him and greets him, Arjuna acknowledges the greeting with his foot, raising it to receive it.

Karna flies into a fury at this insult. He asks Arjuna what his fault was to be insulted thus in the morning. And Arjuna tells him: "You, without a father! Who is your father? And you

spoil my days by showing your face to me every morning. That is why I took your greeting on my ankle.”

In a rage, the tormented Karna flees to his mother, Mansa Malini and questions her about who his father is. Initially she tells him she and the mali are his parents, but when he threatens her, she admits they are his foster parents, he is a foundling, they brought him up after they found him in a rubbish heap. She advises Karna to go to Kunti.

He goes straight to Kunti and asks her how many children she gave birth to. When Kunti says five, he threatens her too and then she admits no, she has given birth to six children and she had buried him, Karna, under a rubbish heap. Under pressure she later admits that he is the son of Soorya, the sun god. When he asks for a proof for this, she gives him an agan-pichhaura and a ball of wax and asks him to go to Bengal and meet the rising sun there. Karna proceeds towards Bengal.

Having reached there, as the sun rises up in the east, Karna covers it up with the agan-pichhaura. Soorya tries to free himself from the agan-pichhaura and failing, asks him who he is and why he has stopped his rays. Karma tells him he is his son come to meet him. Soorya asks him to free him but Karna wants Soorya to promise him that he would meet him face to face. Soorya promises, on condition that Karna passes a test to prove that he is really his son. The freed sun attacks Karna with a thousand blazing rays. The rays pass through him without harming him. Karna has won the test, Soorya acknowledges him, and the father and the son meet affectionately.

Karna asks Soorya to give him his weapon so that he could teach the Pandavas a lesson and punish Arjuna for his insult. Soorya advises him patience and gives him an agan-katari, a fire dagger, asking him to keep it in the wax scabbard given to him by his mother and not to take it out except in dire necessity. The dagger, says the sun god, is dangerous and if it is taken out without a real need, the earth would split, the nine hundred thousand stars would burn down to ashes, and so would the gods in heaven, the gods in the netherworlds, the forests with all their trees and bushes, and even the winds along with all the water on the earth.

As a happy Karna returns towards Hastinapura with sprightly steps, Draupadi sees him from afar. She hurries to him, stops him on the way, and tells him why Arjuna has insulted him – she tells him of Vasuki’s atrocities and the terrible misery he has reduced her and Arjuna to. She tells him that Vasuki would be coming as soon as the sun reaches the west. “He will tie the horse to the champa tree and then come to my chamber. He will tie up your brother Arjuna’s hands and legs with a hair of his moustache and hang him up from a tall peg on the wall, and then he will have his pleasure with me the whole night.” They are dying because of Vasuki’s atrocities, she tells him, and then adds that he alone can save them now. Karna’s anger is now directed at Vasuki and he promises to do what she desires.

That evening Vasuki comes as usual again. After tying up his horse under the champa, he proceeds to Draupadi’s palace, swinging his whip merrily. He ties up Arjuna as usual and hangs him up from the peg, from where he watches with unblinking eyes as the king of patala takes his pleasure by enjoying Draupadi all night. As he leaves the next morning, Draupadi tells him she is one life with him, there is no hero on the earth like him, she can’t live a moment without him and if he must leave now, he should, but he must promise to hurry back in the evening without delay. Vasuki promises this and goes away, his heart filled with Draupadi’s loving words.

Strolling through the Pandavas' garden the next morning, Karna comes across Vasuki's horse. He takes out Soorya's fire dagger from its wax scabbard and places it before the horse. Every limb of the horse is burnt. As Vasuki approaches, Karna places the agan-katar before him and Vasuki falls down on the ground. Karna burns up eight of the nine hoods of Vasuki. As his body catches fire, Vasuki joins his hands in supplication and begs for his life, promising Karna never to come that way again. Karma is moved by the begging and lets off the now single-hooded Vasuki.

The story of the rape of Draupadi by the serpent king Vasuki is a completely new addition by the Bheels to the Mahabharata – there is nothing like that in Vyasa's epic. Looking at it from the standpoint of the classical Mahabharata, the first question that naturally arises in our mind is why this scandalous story has been added to the Bheel epic. The story not only paints a very poor picture of Arjuna, it also depicts Draupadi as a woman subjected to sexual ravishing. She thus loses, by traditional Indian standards, the right to be called a sati or a pativrata, a chaste wife, since she has had sex outside marriage. Traditional Indian culture considers that a woman loses her chastity by merely thinking sexually about a man other than her husband. Why do the Bheels then add this story to the epic? While no conclusive answer is possible, several could be speculated.

One of them is that the purpose of the addition is to bring out the greatness of Karna. The Indian psyche has never felt comfortable with what happened to Karna and has always felt guilty about it. Another possibility is Vasuki-centred. It is possible that this episode is an attempt to portray the might of a serpent. As in several other parts of India, serpent legends abound in areas where Doongri Bheel is spoken and in the neighbouring areas of mainstream Rajasthani culture. Moreover, in the Mahabharata we find humour when the mighty Bheema is reduced to nothing by Hanuman. Similarly, Arjuna's discomfiture, his unspeakable humiliation, in spite of the sympathies it arises, is humour. No doubt this is coarse humour, but it is humour that the Bheel audiences would enjoy uproariously.

But the strongest possibility is, this is a tale of Draupadi's powerful sexuality. A woman's long, flowing hair is part of her sexual attractiveness and a universal symbol of female sexuality. Draupadi, even in the Mahabharata, is the archetypal sexual woman. There are those who argue that the entire Mahabharata war resulted from her powerful sexuality. In the Bheel Bharata, when the earth is unable to bear the weight of a single strand of Draupadi's golden hair, and the hair floats down to Patala, it is actually her sexuality that is seeking out satisfaction in the netherworld unable to find fulfilment on the earth. Her five husbands are not enough for her. She requires someone like the mighty Vasuki, who can tie up Arjuna with a single whisker from his moustache. Beckoned by her sexuality, Vasuki leaves Patala immediately, breaking his twelve-year sleep, leaving all his beautiful queens behind. In her cloud palace, from his external actions it appears that Vasuki is the master and he is taking Draupadi by force, but in reality he is her slave, he cannot live without her, he is alive only in the moments when he is with her, his existence has only one meaning from the moment that golden hair falls on his chest – to be with her, to have sex with her. Draupadi reduces even the mighty king of Patala to her sexual slave. She is the fire into which the king of Patala flings himself ecstatically, only to be consumed by her as fire devours the moth that flings itself into it. If we stick to our original idea of Draupadi as a 'sati' as per Indian standard then the simple argument will be she has successfully used her sexuality to force Karna to use his powerful weapon agan-katari gifted by his father on Vasuki which, otherwise, could have destroyed her husband Arjuna for it is known to us, if the sun-born Karna wishes to establish himself as the best archer he will have to do away with Arjuna. So there is no denying, in

both the classical and folk Mahabharata Draupadi has used her sexuality 'politically' to achieve ends.

Acknowledgement

- 1) Vinod Viplab: The Rape of Draupadi by Satya Chaitany
- 2) Rape of Draupadi by Indrajit Bandyopadhyay