

## The Festival of Draupadi In Vanniyar Community

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Festivals are mingle with human life and given entire satisfaction of their life without fair and festival on one country, village or community will exist. Fair and festivals of the particular district, town, and village usually express their entire life style. People from all walks of life are longing to celebrate their fair and festivals. The Hindus, Christians, Muslims and other religious sects also mingled with their own fair and festivals. The Vanniyars also very much involved and observed their fair and festivals in a grand manner.

### Family Deities and Festivals of the Vanniyars

The annual festivals of the Vanniyars were celebrated in a befitting manner. They worshiped Draupathi as a head of the Vanniya goddesses. Also, in dramatic plays, the king was always taken by a Kshatriya, who is generally a Vanniya. These peculiarities, however, have become common nowadays, when privileges peculiar to one caste are being trampled upon by the other caste men. In the Tirupporur temple, the practice of beating the Mazhu (red hot iron) is done by a dancing – girl serving the Vanniya caste. The privilege of treading on the fire is also peculiar to the Vanniyas. In South Arcot district, “Draupadi’s temples are very numerous, and the priest at them is generally a Palli by caste, and Pallis take the leading part in the ceremonies. Why this should be so is not clear. The Pallis say it is because both the Pandava brothers and themselves were born of fire, and are therefore related. Festivals to Draupathi always involve on two points namely ritual and recital or acting of a part of the ‘*Mahabharata*’ and a fire – walking (walking over fire) ceremony.<sup>1</sup> The first of this is usually done by the Pallis, who are very fond of the great epic, and many of whom know it uncommonly well. In the city of Madras there are several Draupathi Amman temples belonging to the Pallis. The fire walking ceremony cannot be observed without the help of a member of this caste, who is to walk first over the hot ashes.<sup>2</sup>

### The festival of Draupadi Amman

Draupadi worship finds more space and importance in local traditions, Draupadi is an important deity for the Vanniyar community, 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, 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.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, 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.<sup>4</sup>

In Tamil Nadu, Draupadi is identified as a mother goddess. Pucari songs (the songs of the priest, pujari) sing of her as ‘mother, beautiful goddess 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 Cettiyyar sings. It is such an act of mythicization which enables Draupadi’s construction as a goddess.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

Draupadi's fury abated; she became maternal and loving again. 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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. 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.

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.

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.<sup>16</sup> 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 'amman' (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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

### End Notes

1. Sakshi soni, *Op.cit.*, VOL 2: 2015, Pp 23-24
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8. Monier-Williams. *Op.cit.*, p. 168.
9. Aiyappan a., *Iravas and Culture Change*, Madras, 1986.p.46.
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13. Vishnu Purana., *Op.cit.*,
14. Francis.W., *South Arcot Gazetteer.*
15. *Vishnu Purana* 4:20:12
16. *Bh gavata Purana* 9:22:32
17. Sorensen., *Ir vat in Mahabharata book 6, chapters 45,*
18. Sakshi soni, *Draupadi in Folk Performances and Sculptural representations*, University of Delhi, VOL 2: 2015 Pp 25-27