

CHANGE IN EXPECTATIONS OF CULTURAL TRENDS: A STUDY OF EPIC FIGURES IN PANCHKANYATHEN AND NOW

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Culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies. Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. When used in the speech of a layman, a “culture” is the set of customs, traditions and values of a society or community, such as a nation. It is also the set of knowledge acquired over time. Sometimes “culture” is also used to describe specific practices within a subgroup of a society. Within cultural anthropology, where anthropology already is a branch of anthropology focused on the study of cultural variation among humans, the ideology holds that cultures cannot easily be objectively ranked or evaluated because any evaluation is necessarily situated within the value system of a given culture.

In modern era, the term “culture” is based on a term used by the *Ancient Roman orator Cicero* in his book *Tusculanae Disputationes*. In 1986, philosopher Edward S. Casey stated, “The very word *culture* meant ‘place tilled’ in Middle English and the same word goes back to Latin *colere* meant ‘to inhabit, care for, till, worship’ and *cultus* meant ‘to be cultural or to have a culture’. So, the culture is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensive to cultivate it, that is to say to be responsible for it, to respond to it and to attend to it caringly.”

The description of Culture by Richard Velkley gathers the earlier thoughts to the present one: “... originally meant the cultivation of the soul or mind” and it acquires most of its later modern meaning in the writings of the 18th century German thinkers who were on various levels developing Rousseau’s criticism of ‘modern liberalism and Enlightenment’.

Here in the current study, the cultural values and the shift happened in cultural values are focused upon and to draw a parallelism an age old dynamic concept of Five Virgins or **Panchkanyain** Hindi has been taken into consideration for discussion. The works studies the values inculcated and transmitted through them to the society at large and their shift at present time.

At this point, the concept of the Five Virgins of the Indian context will be explained to revive the memory of the mythological persona’s characters of the readers followed by the present context and the change in these values in a democratic set up.

Panchakanya, known as the Five Virgins, is a group of five iconic heroins of Hindu epics and they belonged to different times *per se*, are believed to dispel sin when remembered through reciting their stories. These five legendary ladies are *Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari*. *Ahalya, Tara* and *Mandodari* belong to the epic *Ramayana*, between 4th and 2nd century BCE with augmentation upto 300 CE or Satya Yug whereas *Draupadi* and *Kunti* belong to the epic of *Mahabharata*, 3139 BC or Dvapara Yuga that is third age of a four age cycle according to Hinduism, namely, Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga and Kali Yuga

(<https://www.quora.com/How-old-are-the-Mahabharata-and-Ramayana>). The panchakanyas are venerated as ideal women and chaste wives as per the traditional view. As a rule of the Indian values, one should forever remember, specifically during the morning prayer, the panchakanya who are the destroyers of great sins. Here, this study is going to elaborate the relevance of these stories in today's context, especially the values inculcated through them in us culturally.

Ahalya

Ahalya, is the wife of sage Gautama Maharishi. Ahalya is often regarded as the leader of the *panchkanya* due to the "nobility of her character, her extraordinary beauty, although fictitious, and the fact of her being chronologically the first *kanya*". Ahalya is often described to be created by the god Brahma as the most beautiful woman in the entire universe Ahalya, as per its' meaning a lady without any deformation, was placed in the care of Gautama, until she gained puberty and was finally married to the elderly sage. According to another narrative, *Ahalya* was created by Indra himself

The king of gods, Indra, was infatuated with her beauty and comes disguised as Gautama, when the sage was away and requests a physical intimacy. In the *Ramayana* (the earliest full narrative of the tale), Ahalya falls prey to Indra's trick and does not recognize him. However, in other narratives, she could recognize the disguise of Indra. In all narratives, Ahalya and (her lover) Indra were cursed by the sage Gautama. Ahalya remained invisible to the world and how she is purified by offering Rama (an avatar of god Vishnu and hero of *Ramayana*) hospitality, but in the popular retelling developed over time, Ahalya is cursed to become a stone or immobile and regains her human form after she is brushed by Rama's foot. However, the curse upon Indra was not elaborated in either of the narratives. Here are few things to be noted that the reader of the tale never hears through any of the narratives the voice of *Ahalya*. The so-called noble lady and the most beautiful one did never have a say in the society, about her penance let alone before her husband. In spite of her extra ordinary beauty, she was humble enough to accept the severe penance by her Sage husband yet the narrators of different versions of the same story had never explained about the penance uttered against the King of Gods and the repercussion thereafter in heavenly realm. Finally, the modern age may take it as the humility and a speechless loyalty of a flawless beautiful woman.

Ahalya expected love, recognition of her love and a minimum respect not only as a woman but also as a wife. Her silence kept haunting the modernity and the woman of the current generation to revenge in silence, from silence and to be revengeful by knowing the ancient texts of knowledge and science and the words of sages.

Tara

Tara is Queen of Kishkindha and wife of monkey King Vali. After being widowed, she becomes Queen by marrying Sugriva, Vali's brother. Tara is described as the daughter of monkey physician, Sushena, in the *Ramayana* and in later sources as an apsara (celestial nymph). She marries Vali and bears him a son named Angada. After Vali is presumed dead in a battle with a demon, his brother Sugriva becomes king and marries Tara; however, Vali returns and regains Tara and exiles his brother, accusing him of treachery and also appropriates Sugriva's wife Ruma. When Sugriva challenges Vali to a duel, Tara wisely advises Vali not to accept because of the former's alliance with Rama, but Vali does not heed her and deceptively dies from

Rama's arrow, shot at the behest of Sugriva. In his dying breath, Vali reconciles with Sugriva and instructs him to follow Tara's wise counsel in all matters. Tara casts a curse on Rama by the power of her chastity. Sugriva returns to the throne, but spends his time carousing often with now his current chief queen Tara and fails to act on his promise to assist Rama in recovering his kidnapped wife, Sita. Tara—now Sugriva's queen and chief diplomat—is then instrumental in tactfully reconciling Rama with Sugriva after pacifying Lakshmana, Rama's brother, who was about to destroy Kishkinda in retribution for Sugriva's perceived treachery.

Tara's expectation of being and remaining tactful in her managerial quality and diplomacy allures today's woman to be diplomatic and maintain one's quality of being politic as it is recorded paleographically although in mythology.

Mandodari

Mandodari is a queen of Ravana, the Rakshasa(demon) king of Lanka. The Hindu epics describe her as beautiful, pious and righteous. Mandodari is daughter of Mayasura, the King of Asuras(demons) and apsara(celestial nymph) Hema. She is adopted by Mayasura as his daughter Mandodari. Ravana comes to the house of Mayasura and falls in love with Mandodari and then marries her. Mandodari bears him three sons. Despite her husband's faults, Mandodari loves him and advises him to follow the path of righteousness till the last moment, previewing well the future of a war out of pride. Mandodari repeatedly advises Ravana to return Sita to Rama, but her advice falls on deaf ears. Her repetitive pleading to Ravana proves her helplessness as a dependant person in the family or in the palace of Ravana. Mandodari is described in *Ramayana* as a beautiful, pious and a righteous lady. Her love and loyalty to Ravana portrays the values of respect and responsibility toward her own family and these values are the ones that are praised in the *Ramayana* through this *Kanya*. Certain narrations of *Ramayana* says that Hanuman tricks her into disclosing the location of a magical arrow which Rama should use to kill Ravana.

Mandodari, keeping her love and loyalty to her proud husband, shows a managerial courage while practicing another managerial trait of having a vision which is responsible, inspiring and politically intellectual at the same time and communicating her ideas and vision to her husband who did not understand the political strategy of mutual and peaceful agreement to bring not only peace but also to win over an enemy and to gain popularity in the deal. Her appeal and tears mark a path where a present generation woman can easily wipe out or remove tears and gather the common managerial traits like having a vision and communicating It, being autonomous and responsible, taking the right decisions at the right time, demonstrating managerial courage, showing leadership and inspiring others, having intellectual resources, having political sense, having empathy, showing humility and vulnerability, showing emotional intelligence, being solution oriented, cultivating happiness etc.

Sita

Sita is the heroine of *Ramayana* and the consort of the Hindu god Rama (avatar of Vishnu) and is an avatar of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and wife of Vishnu. She is esteemed as a standard-setter for wifely and womanly virtues for all Hindu women, remaining calm, silent and obedient almost without any say, yet with an immaculate beauty. Sita is the adopted daughter of Janaka, king of Videha, found while he was plowing the earth. The prince of Ayodhya, Rama wins Sita in

her swayamvara. Later, when Rama is sentenced to a fourteen-year exile, Sita following the virtues of a good wife, joins Rama and his brother Lakshmana in exile, despite Rama's wish for her to remain in Ayodhya. While in exile in Dandaka forest, she falls prey to Ravana's scheme and sends Rama away in quest of a golden deer, while she is kidnapped by Ravana. Sita is imprisoned in the Ashoka Vatika grove of Lanka, until she is rescued by Rama, who slays Ravana in war. Sita proves her chastity by undergoing a trial of fire. Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya, where Rama is coronated as king. When a washerman casts doubts about her chastity, Rama abandons a pregnant Sita in the forest. Sita gives birth to twins in the hermitage of sage Valmiki, who protects her. Her sons grow and reunite with Rama and again Sita is asked to prove her chastity before Rama can take her back. However, Sita chooses to return to the womb of her mother, Earth.

Sita's loyalty, chastity and love win people's mind through the epic of all times, Ramayan, yet challenges the virtues and the age-old values (of India) of a woman becoming submissive and willingly remaining marginal without any prominent rights over her husband's deeds or possession except a few adorned to her. Today's woman takes up the challenge by becoming prominent in the society.

The Hindu epic Mahabharata features kanya Draupadi and Kunti, included in the panchakanya.

Draupadi

Draupadi is the heroine of *Mahabharata*. She is the common wife of the five Pandava brothers and queen of Hastinapur, in their reign. Born from a fire-sacrifice of king of Panchala - Drupada, Draupadi was prophesied to lead to the end of Drona and Kauravas. Though the middle Pandava Arjuna wins her in her swayamvara, Draupadi is compelled to marry all the five brothers on command of her mother-in-law Kunti. Pandavas agree to the plan that Draupadi will always be the chief consort of all brothers and always the empress. She will be in personal union with one brother every year and may bear him a child. Anyone of the other 4, who interrupts them during a private time within that one year, must go on a 11-month pilgrimage. She insults Kaurava general Karna in the swayamvara and laughs at Duryodhana - the leader of Kauravas - when he falls in her Pandava palace at Indraprastha. She mothers five sons from each of the Pandavas, regaining her virginity after every year. The Kauravas take their revenge when the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira loses her to Kauravas in a game of dice. Kaurava Dushasana tries to disrobe her in the royal court, however divine intervention saves her dignity by making her wrapped cloth infinite in length. Draupadi pledges to keep her hair untied till they were drenched by Dushasana's blood. Pandavas and Draupadi finally accept 13-year exile for losing the game. While in exile in the forest, her second husband Bhima rescued her from various demons and Jayadratha, who abducted her. She also instructed Krishna's queen Satyabhama on the duties of a wife. In the 13th year of exile, Draupadi and her husbands spent life incognito in Virata's court. She served as the maid of the queen and is harassed by the queen's brother Kichaka, who she desired to be killed by Bhima. After life in exile, a war breaks between the Kauravas and Pandavas, in which the Kauravas are slain and her insult avenged, but Draupadi also loses her father, brothers and sons. Yudhishtira became the emperor of Hastinapur with Draupadi as the chief consort. At the end of their lives, Draupadi and her husbands set off to the Himalayas to walk to heaven; but Draupadi falls in the middle as she loved Arjuna more than her other husbands. She is venerated as a village goddess and described at times an avatar of the fierce

goddess Kali, in the ancient festival of Bangalore Karaga Draupadi is worshipped as an avatar of Adishaki and Parvati.

If Draupadi's fate is accepted as a fate, the modern woman is at a better position to chose her husband and other relation beside her wedlock. She, in her certain conditions, cannot be sold off, yet today's woman did not lose the fierceness of Draupadi and time and again, she takes the lead and shows the right path to this world too. It is very interesting to note that Draupadi was insulted by males and her help came from male too. This character shows a bend of personality toward practicing religion and prayer and this trait of the character reveals a bend toward accepting the divinity in one's own way, and which is also an important value of Indian culture. The help that Draupadi received was again from the society itself, it's a small portion of the society that is compassionate toward the values and needs.

Kunti

Kunti is the queen of Pandu, the king of Hastinapur and mother of three eldest Pandavas. Kunti was daughter of the Yadava king Shurasena and was adopted by the childless Kuntibhoja, king of Kunti Kingdom. By her service, she propitiated the sage Durvasa, who granted her a mantra by which she could summon a god and have a child by him. She recklessly tests the boon and invites Sun-god Surya, who grants a son named Karna, whom she abandons. In due course of time, Kunti chooses Pandu in her swayamvara. Pandu abdicates after being cursed by a sage that union with a woman will result in his death. At Pandu's behest, Kunti uses Durvasa's boon to mother Yudhishtira from god Dharma, then Bhima from god Vayu, and thirdly Arjuna, from god Indra. Her co-wife Madri bears the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, from Asvins. After death of Pandu, Madri being cause of Pandu's death commits sati on same pyre while Kunti returns to Hastinapur and takes care of the five Pandavas. Kunti befriends Vidura, stepbrother of Pandu and the advisor of the king. When Kauravas, the princes of Hastinapur and the cousins of Pandavas, try to kill Kunti and her sons, however they escape. She prevents Bhima from killing the demoness Hidimbi and advises him to marry her and beget a son, Ghatotkacha. She instructs her children to take care of the common people and orders Bhima to kill the demon Bakasura. When Arjuna wins Draupadi, Kunti instructs the brothers to share the prize. When Pandavas are sent to 12-year exile as defeated in a game of dice by the Kauravas, Kunti stays in Vidura's refuge. When an epic war between Pandavas and Kauravas is to ensue, Kunti reveals to Karna - now a Kaurava general - about being his mother and gets him to promise her that he will not kill any other Pandava, except Arjuna. After the war, in which Kauravas and Karna were killed, Kunti with the parents of Kauravas left for the forest and spent rest of her life in prayer. She was killed in a forest fire and attained heaven.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to say that a variant replaces Sita with Kunti and it is also noted that all these virgins or *kanyas* lacked mothers in their life. Ahalya, Tara, Mandodari, Sita and Draupadi had supernatural births, while Kunti was adopted at birth and separated from a mother. Though all of these virgins were described as mothers, except Kunti, no virgin's motherhood was emphasized in their tales. Another common element is the theme of loss in their legends. Ahalya was cursed and was abandoned. Tara lost her husband, Draupadi lost her sons and Mandodarilost not only her husband, but, sons and the family too in war. Each of them suffered a tragedy and used by men, but battles on with life and society. They could be considered as victims of patriarchal myth-making, however orthodox Hindus usually oppose

such theoretical speculation and consider such speculation distorting the message. However, the present reality brings down almost every other woman as sufferer and are lingering on with life and society with only one difference in speech and a thin legal protection around them with a much heavier struggle. A free-spirited Ahalya is punished for her adultery. Draupadi, who challenged and mocked even at her husbands, had her dignity repeatedly violated by men. However, they are venerated and mentioned widely. The Mahari dance tradition of Odisha equates the panchakanya with the five elements for displaying some outstanding qualities. Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari represent water, fire, earth, wind and ether respectively. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore also wrote a collection of poems titled *PanchaKanya* with themes of episodes from mythology of panchakanya or the Five Virgins. Bhattacharya, author of *Panch-Kanya: The Five Virgins of Indian Epics* contrasts the panchakanya with the five satis enlisted in another traditional prayer: Sati, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti and Arundhati. He rhetorically asks, "Are then Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari not chaste wives because each has 'known' a man, or more than one, other than her husband?" It is pertinent to ask at this juncture that if these five *kanyas* are not chaste, no other woman after these, especially at present time, are chaste, therefore, having lived in an wedlock or otherwise.

This value system remained for ages in this land because, maybe, the curse like the one received by Ahalya was not reachable or not treated to the then medical science that was again practiced by the sages who were mostly and commonly men. At the current times, this kind of case could be presented to the law for justice as the medical science could treat the physiological symptoms of the immobility better than before.

Tara, again proved to be a good and well-groomed manager. In spite of changing hands and location as per earlier practice, she did not become impoverished of her quality. She continued to serve politically within the palatial décor wherever she went although with either of both the brothers as her husband, fighting physically and winning her over. In modern times, her social status could be denigrating but her willingness and the quality to serve, could not be matched. This inner strength or willingness replicates or re-depict the image of woman even in different value systems.

Nobody these days wants to be a subdued Mandodari, yet today's women are more like confluent tones, with other basic feminine attire, that help them to take the lead and be servile as and when that is necessary. In today's female milieu, the expectations of Madodari have changed more into an organizer and comptroller than just remaining as a follower of her husband.

Sita stands before us through Hindu Epic as a perfect female talking and smiling statue of silence, beauty and obedience. This character talks so less, as if to challenge the world with its silence, yet so human with the desire of acquiring a dream in her fist by having a golden deer. Silence of Sita tells the women of present Era that this particular virtue of silence has a much higher value than other virtues, so much so that even the demonic powers could not do any harm beyond taking her away. Even the demonic power failed to understand Sita's mind behind her silence. Yet, the same silence had a greater solace and consolation to Sita's family members namely Rama, Lakshman and others.

Viewing these five virgins and their dedication to the society, their chastity to the men they have been presented to, it is very easy to chase the traces of values nurtured by and in the society. These virgins were always sharing their husband or husbands with other co-wife(ves). If

these situations are brought to the present conditions, these are not far away from any adultery. Therefore, in the contemporary era, as we are bewildered by the recent news of ‘adultery not being anymore a criminal offence’, it is imperative to mention that the values of the same society remain the same, only a shift has occurred that has taken the values to the court to have got approved legally by the administrations. As the age old practices were well-kept in the folds of the Hindu epics, it should have had and indeed has the physiological, psychological and mental effects through the neurological labyrinth upon men and women both. Thus, the age-old values are not forgotten in the complexity of the modern walled life busy in searching nearly everything from the web, rather the so-called modern society has recognized through a legal step in the world.

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