



PAÑCAKANYĀ: FIVE POWERFUL CHASTE WOMEN FROM EPICS

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Abstract

The Pañcakanyā mentioned in the epics of Ramayan and Mahabharat are the perfect example of five elements of nature. Pañcakanyā (the five virgins), also known as Panchasati, is a group of five women from Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. They were not actually virgins, but are still considered so because of their contribution to establishing dharma (righteousness) in the world. They by their conduct and sacrifice gave new meaning to women and proved that they were not only the epitome of beauty but also a symbol of strength. In this research paper myths and history related to the Pañcakanyās have been analysed on the basis of historical sources.

Keywords: Pañcakanyā, virginity, Chaste, Beauty, Incarnation, Kingdom

Introduction

The world started with Adi Shakti the one true pure form of energy, and femininity has evolved since. Hindus worship Shakti, and Devi and idolize her presence. One such group of amazing femininity is the Pañcakanyā. It is believed that nature manifests itself in five forms: earth, water, fire, wind, and sky.¹ Each Kanya is born of one of these elements, and these five elements of nature formed the essence of their characters. The Pañcakanyā mentioned in the epics of Ramayan and Mahabharat are the perfect example for this. Pañcakanyā (the five virgins), also known as Panchasati, is a group of five women from Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, who had more than one partner (except Goddess Sītā). They were not actually virgins, but are still considered so because of their contribution to establishing dharma (righteousness) in the world. They are the five women who by their conduct and sacrifice gave new meaning to women and proved that they were not only the epitome of beauty but also a symbol of strength. Hindus worship these five women, although their worship is not prevalent except for Goddess Sītā and Draupadī.

The Pañcakanyās are Ahalyā, Draupadī, Sītā (kuntī), Tārā and Mandodarī. Ramayana portrays Ahalyā, Tārā, Mandodarī, and Sītā, while Draupadī and Kuntī are from the Mahabharata.² Sītā and Kuntī are often replaced by each other according to people's beliefs. The Pañcakanyā are revered as consummate women and celibate wives in one view. Simply put all five of them were born in Kanya Rashi or the constellation of Virgo. If we analyse on the basis of linguistics the word "Pañcakanyā" comprises two words, viz. "Pancha" and "Kanya". The word "Pancha" means five, and "Kanya" means a girl, daughter, or virgin. In this context, the word virgin is more appropriate. Therefore, Pañcakanyā means "the five virgins".³ Pañcakanyā is the one who owned their virginity and could revive it. This power owing to their Chastity among them was majorly the result of leading a pious, rightful, and responsible life in thought, in word, and in action thereby the purest and most sincere of conduct even in the most challenging of times. So pure that even through the fire they could pass unharmed. Such exemplary lives have only been portrayed by five women and hence they're remembered for it. A well-known Sanskrit hymn that defines the Pañcakanyā runs as:

ahalyā draupadī sītā tārā mandodarī tathā /

pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ mahāpātakanāśinīḥ //

(Ahalyā, Draupadī, Sītā, Tārā and Mandodarī One should forever remember the Pañcakanyā who are the destroyers of great sins)

A variant from the of Brahma Purana 3.7.229 by Vyasa replaces Sītā with Kuntī:⁴

ahalyā draupadī kuṃtī tārā mandodarī tathā /

pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ mahāpātakanāśinīm //

Practising Hindus, especially Hindu wives, remember the Pañcakanyā in this daily morning prayer. Their names are extolled and the prayer is called a *pratah-smaraniyah*, prescribed to be recited in the early hours of the morning.⁵ Daily remembering the five maidens great, Ahalyā, Draupadī, Sita, Tārā, and Mandodarī Will destroy the greatest sins.

Ahalyā The Bala Kanda of the Ramayana mentions that Lord Brahma molds her out of pure creative energy. Brahma created Ahalyā out of the water as the most beautiful woman in order to break the pride of Urvashi, the foremost celestial nymph. Brahma places her in the care of Gautama until she reaches puberty. When that time arrives, the sage returns Ahalyā to Brahma, who, impressed by Gautama's sexual restraint and asceticism, bestows her upon him. Indra, who believes that the best women are meant for him, resents Ahalyā's marriage to the forest-dwelling ascetic. In another tale, it is said Ahalyā is created from the ashes of the sacrificial fire by the Saptarshi (seven seers) and gifted to sage Goutama. The king of the gods, Indra, was infatuated with her beauty and comes disguised as Gautama when the sage was away and requested physical relationships. In some versions, Ahalyā sees through his disguise but still complies out of "curiosity" and because her husband would neglect his matrimonial duties.⁶ In later versions, Ahalyā falls prey to Indra's trickery and does not recognize him.

In all narratives, Ahalyā and Indra are cursed by Gautama. Gautama then curses Ahalyā to remain invisible to all beings for thousands of years, fast by subsisting only on air, suffering and sleeping in ashes, and being tormented by guilt. Nevertheless, he assures her that her sin will be expiated once she extends her hospitality to Lord Rama, who will visit the ashram. Thereafter, Gautama abandons the ashram and goes to the Himalayas to practice asceticism. Indra was cursed to be castrated or be covered by a thousand vulvae that ultimately turn into a thousand eyes.⁷ The Ayodhya prince Rama, his brother Lakshmana and their guru, the sage Visvamitra pass Gautama's desolate ashram while traveling to King Janaka's court in Mithila. As they near the ashram, Vishvamitra recounts the tale of Ahalyā's curse and instructs Rama to save Ahalyā. Ahalyā is said to have been touched by Rama's feet and rises from her stone state to human form and goes to her abode, Gautama's hermitage. Some versions also mention that she was turned into a dry stream and that she would be condoned for her guilt when eventually the stream starts flowing and joins the river Gautami (Godavari). We learn from Ahalyā is being beautiful from the inside. Ahalyā's beauty bought her many troubles when she was cursed by her husband Rishi Gautam to become a stone. But it is at that time that her inner beauty as a stone shone while she waited patiently for the one who would revive her from the curse. Ahalyā's innocence cost her lot, yet she waited for Shri Ram, who understood her purity and relieved her of her curse. Ahalyā is a lesson that being beautiful is one thing, and upholding it from within is another.

Draupadī was the daughter of King Drupada and the shared wife of five Pandavas. She was born from a Yajna. She was gorgeous and had some kind of scent emanating from her body. Draupadī is also referred to as Panchali (meaning one from the kingdom of Panchala), Yajnaseni (meaning one born from a Yajna or fire-sacrifice), Mahabhaaratii (great wife of the five descendants of Bharata), and Sairandhri (an expert maid, her assumed name during her second exile in which she worked as Virat kingdom's queen Sudeshna's hair-stylist). After Arjuna won the Swayamvara,⁸ he married Draupadī and brought her to his home, but due to a mistake by Kuntī, she had to marry Arjuna's other four brothers as well. The Pandavas agree to the plan that Draupadī would always be the chief consort of all the brothers, and would receive the title of empress. The concept behind her marrying five people is that she is the Shakthi Roopa of the five devas, Dharma – Yudhishtira, Vayu – Bheema, Indra – Arjun, Nakul, and Sahadev – Ashwini Kumaras.

Kauravas deceitfully defeated Pandavas in gambling and won their kingdom and Draupadī. Duryodhana ordered Dushasana to disrobe Draupadī in a court to avenge a previous insult, but Lord Krishna saved her, causing her garments to extend infinitely in length. In a chapter of the epic, Duryodhana falls into a lake of crystal water after mistaking it for land during a rajasuya yajna, and is laughed at by Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and their servants.⁹ In modern adaptations, Draupadī is presented as the one who laughed. One of the pivotal causes of the Mahabharata war was the incident in Indraprastha where Draupadī ridiculed and insulted Duryodhana when he fell into a water pool. Draupadī joked "Andhasya Putra Andhaha" meaning "a blind man's (referring to Dhritrashtra) son is blind! After that, she and her five husbands went into exile. In exile, Jayadratha tried to abduct her by force, but the Pandavas saved her. After the exile, they had to spend a year in disguise. Therefore, they started living in the Virata Kingdom as ordinary people. Because of her beauty, Kichaka, the queen's brother, became her fan and wanted to sleep with her. When Bhima came to know about it, he killed Kichaka.¹⁰

In the Mahabharata War, Bhima killed 100 Kauravas and avenged Draupadī's insult. Her five sons also died after the war in an ambush by Ashwatthama. After life in exile, the Kurukshetra War ensues between the Kauravas and Pandavas, in which the Kauravas are slain. The insult to Draupadī is avenged, but she also loses her father, brothers, and sons in battle. Yudhishtira became the emperor of Hastinapura, with Draupadī as his chief empress consort. After ruling Hastinapur for 36 years, Pandavas handed the kingdom to Parikshit and left for heaven. Draupadī also left with them but died on the way. No woman ever faced the trials and tribulations that Draupadī faced in her life. Even after being born out of the fire to Drupada, even if she had heroic husbands, she had to undergo Vastra harana, exile, and Agnata. Post-war she was faced to watch her entire clan being killed. Yet she bore all these without complaint withers against her Husband or anybody. All she cared about was her worship of Lord Krishna. She is the female protagonist of the Mahabharata.

Sītā Goddess Sītā was the wife of Lord Rama. She was an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi.¹¹ In her previous birth, she was Vedavati and had pledged to be the reason for the destruction of Ravana and the Asura community because Ravana had tried to molest her, she was reborn as the princess of Mithila. Her adopted father Janaka, king of Videha, found while he was furrowing the Earth. Lord Rama married her after fulfilling the condition of wielding the bow of Lord Shiva in her Swayamvara. After some time, Lord Rama had to spend 14 years in a forest because his father had promised Lord Rama's stepmother, Kaikeyi.

Goddess Sītā and Lakshmana (younger brother of Lord Rama) also accompanied him. Goddess Sītā was abducted by the Asura king Ravana, who wished to marry her, but Sītā was a chaste woman and declined his offer. After some time, with the help of Sugriva's army and Lord Hanuman, Lord Rama attacked Lanka and killed Ravana.

Then, he returned to Ayodhya, where they lived happily for some time. Despite giving Agni Pariksha (an ancient ritual of walking through fire to prove one's chastity), some of Lord Rama's subjects were unhappy with his decision to give Goddess Sītā the status of his wife because she had stayed at a stranger's home for a long time. Therefore, Lord Rama banished pregnant Sītā from Ayodhya, and she started living in Sage Valmiki's hermitage. She gave birth to twins, Luv and Kush, who became great warriors. After some years, some dramatic events took place, and Lord Rama learned about Goddess Sītā and his sons, Luv and Kusha, and decided to bring them back to Ayodhya. Goddess Sītā was again asked to give Agni Pariksha as she lived away from her husband for many years. Goddess Sītā was very disappointed by this and decided to end her incarnation on Earth by entering the womb of Earth.¹² The reflection of Shri Ram, Mata Sītā was the epitome of beauty and virtues. While she follows the footsteps of Shri Ram in the forest, she teaches a great lesson that although life is unpredictable one needs to walk the journey with faith and patience. She teaches patience to deal with life in the hardships of forest, courage to face life when separated from Shri Ram and self-respect to regard life when asked to face the trial of fire, the three qualities necessary for a woman to walk miles ahead in life.

Kuntī is the first and principal wife of Pandu, the king of Hastinapura and mother of the three eldest Pandavas and Karna and the stepmother or foster mother of Nakula and Sahadeva. Named Pritha at birth, Kuntī is described as the daughter of the Yadava king Shurasena and is adopted by the childless Kuntibhja, the king of the Kuntī kingdom. She is the sister of Vasudeva and the paternal aunt of Krishna, Balarama, and Subhadra. Hindus believe that she was an incarnation of Goddess Siddhi. She served Sage Durvasa very faithfully, who in turn gave her the boon of having children from any god she wished. Out of curiosity, she invoked Surya and got pregnant. But as she was unmarried, she did not keep the child. She kept her in a basket and made it drift in a river. After some time, she married Pandu, the prince of Hastinapur. Pandu her husband had received a curse from the sage Kindama that he would die on having intercourse with his wife because he had shot the sage with an arrow when he was united with his wife in the guise of a deer. Therefore, Kuntī summoned different gods and gave birth to Yudhishtira, Bhima, and Arjuna. Afterward, she gave the mantra to Madri, the second wife of Pandu, who gave birth to Nakula and Sahadeva.

After Pandu's death, she spent her life as a widow and looked after Pandavas. Kuntī befriends Vidura, the step-brother of Pandu, and the advisor of the king. When Duryodhana schemes to assassinate Kuntī and the Pandavas in the Lakshagriha, they escape. She prevents Bhima from killing the rakshasi Hidimbi and advises him to marry her and beget a son, Ghatatkacha. She instructs her children to take care of the common people and orders Bhima to kill the rakshasa named Baka. Kuntī and Pandavas return to Hastinapura. When the Pandavas are sent to a 13-year exile when defeated in a game of dice by the Kauravas, Kuntī stays with Vidura.¹³ Before the Kurukshetra War, Kuntī reveals to Karna, now a Kaurava general about her identity as his mother. She persuades him to promise her that he would not attempt to kill any of the Pandavas, with the exception of Arjuna. After the war, in which Kauravas and Karna were killed, Kuntī, along with Dhritārashtra and Gandhari, retire to the forest to spend the rest of her life in prayer. She is killed in a forest-fire, and attains heaven. She is one true matriarch of the Saga of Mahabharata.

Tārā was the wife of King Vali and the queen of Kishkindha. Tārā is described as the daughter of the vanara physician, Sushena, in the Ramayana; in later sources, she is stated to be an apsara (celestial nymph) who emerged from the Samudra manthana (churning of the ocean). She marries Vali and bears him a son named Angada. Once, Vali was involved in a fight with a demon, Mayavi, and did not come out of the cave for years. His younger brother, Sugriva, closed the cave opening, thinking that his brother was dead. He returned to the kingdom and announced himself as the king. He also married Tārā, the widow of his brother according to the custom of the time. The lack of a description of formal marriage suggests that Tārā's relationship with Sugriva is neither widow re-marriage nor polyandry, but simply appropriation by Sugriva. But Vali did not die and returned after some time. He thought that Sugriva betrayed him. So, he wounded him badly and banished him from the kingdom. He also married Sugriva's wife, Ruma. After some years, Sugriva collaborated with Lord Rama and decided to fight a duel with Vali. Tārā was not only the beautiful queen of Bali, but was the wise one too. She realises that Dharma is not on their side and advises Bali not to fight Shri Ram but Vali disagreed. Vali lost and died in the duel. In his dying breath, Bali reconciles with Sugriva and instructs him to follow Tārā's wise counsel in all matters. After Vali's death, Sugriva acquired his kingdom and Tārā, whom he had married previously. After Sugriva becomes king, he eventually ignored his promise to Rama to help him win Sītā back.¹⁴ Lakshman was livid to find Sugriva had backtracked on his words. He entered Sugriva's personal chambers to bring his wrath on the king but Queen Tārā very diplomatically pacified the prince Tārā again comes to the rescue of the kingdom while calming down the anger of Lakshman. Tārā convinces Lakshman that Sugriva was indeed truthful and had already sent troops to meet for the quest of Mata Sītā with which she averts a great danger on Kishkindha. Thus, she was instrumental in saving the king from the wrath of the Lakshmana and brought coherence to the Rama camp to fight the great war to avenge Sītā. Tārā proves that a woman is not just known for her beauty and charm, but also for her intellect and wisdom.

Mandodarī was the queen of Lanka and the wife of the Asura king, Ravana. She was the daughter of Mayasur the architect of the demons and the apsara (celestial nymph) Hema. Mayasur rescued a beautiful girl child from the well. He and his wife Hema, adopted her and named her Mandodarī. She was taught aspects of architecture by King Mayasura. He taught Mandodarī about the various landforms of Bharatvarsh which were Swarga (heavenly plateaus), Bhoomi (plains), and Patala (underworld). When she turned fifteen, he started involving her in his projects and eventually met Ravana when he came to seek her counsel. Valmiki's

Ramayana describes Mandodarī was so beautiful that when Lord Hanuman reached Lanka in search of Goddess Sītā, he mistook her for Sītā. Mandodarī bears him three sons: Meghanada (Indrajita), Atikaya, and Akshayakumara.

Although Ravan was known for his ego and arrogance, Mandodarī bore with him patiently and never went against her husband's wishes.¹⁵ Mandodarī revolted for the first time when Ravan abducts Mata Sītā as she knew that Ravan had invited his own doom by this action. When Goddess Sītā rejected to marry Ravana, he tried to kill her, but Mandodarī prevented him by holding his hand and reminding him about the dharma. She advises Ravan and her sons against harming Dharma and proves that when dharma is hindered, it needs to be opposed even though when they are their own kith and kin. Per legend, when Ravana lost all his sons, brothers, and warriors, he organized a yajna to ensure his victory. It was necessary to disturb this yajna. Therefore, Lord Rama sent Angada and Hanuman with a troop of monkeys to do so.

They created havoc in Ravana's palace, but Ravana continued his yajna. In order to disrupt the penance, Angad grabbed Mandodarī by her hair to the court. Mandodarī, begged her husband, "Look at how they're treating your wife, Ravana. Won't you set aside your grudge and your ego to even save me?" Enraged, Ravana abandoned his yajna and struck Angada with his sword, abruptly ending his yajna. Despite Ravana's faults, Mandodarī loved him and was proud of his strength. She was aware of Ravana's weakness towards women. A righteous woman, Mandodarī tried to lead Ravana to righteousness, but Ravana ignored her advice. She even advised him not to subdue the Navagraha, the nine celestial beings that govern one's destiny, and not to seduce Vedavati, who would be reborn as Sītā and cause the destruction of Ravana. In the final combat, Lord Rama killed Ravana. After this, Vibhishana, the brother of Ravana, became the king of Lanka and married Mandodarī.¹⁶

Conclusion

At the end of the discussion, it can be mentioned that all these women did not lead an ordinary life and had to willingly or unwillingly go against the traditions. They all had more than one sexual partner in their lives. By doing so, they helped dharma directly or indirectly. E.g., Ahalyā's illicit act with Indra diverted her husband from enmity with Indra. By marrying Pandavas, Draupadī became a common thread that kept Pandavas together. She also became the reason for the destruction of the Kauravas. Tārā gave birth to Angada, who helped Lord Rama defeat Ravana. Kuntī gave birth to Pandavas, who defeated Kauravas. Mandodarī protected Sītā when she was in Lanka. The Pañcakanyā are regarded by one view as ideal women. George M. Williams remarks, "They are not perfect but they fulfil their dharma (duty) as mothers, sisters, wives and occasionally leaders in their own right." They, as prescribed in Manu Smirti, Ramayana and Mahabharata epics, were considered as the Five ideal Woman, all married.¹⁷ Another view does not regard Pañcakanyā as ideal women who should be emulated. Bhattacharya, author of *Panch-Kanya: The Five Virgins of Indian Epics* contrasts *Pañcakanyā* with the five *satis* enlisted in another traditional prayer: Sati, Sītā, Savitri, Damayanti, and Arundhati. He rhetorically asks, "Are then Ahalyā, Draupadī, kuntī, Tārā and Mandodarī not chaste wives because each has known a man or more than one, other than her husband?"

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