



Is There a Monolithic Indian Culture? A Gendered Study of Ancient Indian Tradition

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For some time now, in an increasingly strident tone it is being projected that 'Indian Culture' is a monolith which owes its vital dynamism to glorious Sanskritic–Brahmanic roots. Not only is Sanskritic–Brahmanism being touted as the sole fountainhead of the Indian nation, but any contestations to this monolith are sought to be discredited as leftist propaganda, feminist carping, non-sanskritist's lack of understanding, and so on. In this era of post-truth, 'ultra-cultural nationalists' are seemingly having a field day. We are being encouraged to undertake a phenomenological analysis of ancient texts, instead of focusing on their historicity, or critiquing them from the 'outside' perspective of the present. But history has always been a dialogue of the present with the past, and when so much of our present hinges on the '*received wisdom*' (italics mine) from the past, it becomes that much more crucial to look at this past dispassionately.

In this essay I propose to critique the monolithic cultural ideal of 'Sanskritic Brahmanism' which was essentially a patriarchal ideology with the help of empirical data from Sanskritic sources themselves which show that there were discordant voices present not only within Sanskritic culture itself but also outside it which posed challenge to the 'Sanskritic Brahmanical' hegemony. This fact by itself is not surprising, because all societies at any given point of time, are witness to multiple norms and ideological strands which jostle with each other. While some become more dominant, few are subordinated, and still others are sought to be erased with a vengeance. For a historian, therefore, it is vital to take stock

of the process whereby normativity gets established even as these norms are contested and sometimes even successfully subverted.

I

An enduring cultural symbol of Indian civilization has been the 'Pativratā' wife; a figure much admired by both early western Indologists and the indigenous ones as well like R.C Majumdar and Vasudevsharan Aggarwal (Shah 2012b, 77-78). Yet, a perusal of the Sanskrit sources themselves show that Pativrata, this high ideal of 'Hindu womanhood', was nonexistent in the Vedic corpus, and also in the post Vedic texts emerging as a cult only in the two epics. This ideal virtuous wife, forever kowtowing to the husband who was her personal God (*bhartā me daivtam param*) was deliberately constructed (Mbh: 3.197.29). This was done firstly in the interest of the stability of the patriarchal family, for as Suvira Jaiswal points out that while patriliney and patrilocality were well established in the Ṛgveda, one cannot say the same for patriarchy (Jaiswal 1998, 9). We come across contradictory evidence which suggests a possibility that more egalitarian gender relations prevailed. After all, Ṛgveda refers to more equitable *dampati* households as well where husband and wife are jointly the owner of the house *dama* and prayers are offered to make them of one mind-*samanasā* (Roy 1994, 247). Interestingly it is in the context of *dampati* household that desire for both *putra* and *kumāri* i.e son and daughter is expressed. The second reason for fashioning the cult of *pativrata* may have been the need to counter the Buddhist and Jaina heterodoxy's acceptance of the female renunciatory order where women by right could eschew family and kinship ties, and in the process jettison their primary caregiver role. After all, *patīśūśruṣā* was integral to the brahmanic notion of *pātivratya dharma* (Mbh: 3.205.3;3.197.28;11.25.39). *Manusmṛti*, defines a virtuous wife (*sādhavyā*) as one who serves her husband (*pati śūśrūṣte*) and she will for that reason alone be exalted in heaven (*yentenswargemahīyate*) (*Manusmṛti*: 5.154-155). Even in the secular *Arthśāstra*, punishment is prescribed for those who would induce a woman to renounce her role as a wife (*Arthśāstra*: 2.1.29). As Shandili notes in the *Mahābhārata* "I have earned my place in heaven by being a pativrata wife and not by wearing the ochre robes of the renunciate, the bark garments of the hermit, the matted locks of the ascetic, or by shaving my head" (Mbh: 13.124.8).

Irawati Karve in her brilliant analysis of kinship terminology in the Vedic texts refers to a wife who is *patighnī* (death of the husband), *patirip* (who cheats on the husband), *patidviṣa* (wife hated by the husband), and *parivṛktā* (forsaken wife) (Karve 1938-39, 130-31). While a wife with a living husband (*avidhvā, jīvapatnī, pativatī*) and one who has borne excellent sons (*suputrā*) is much admired in both Vedic and post Vedic texts, nonetheless *pativratā* does not figure anywhere in this long list of epithets for a wife (Monier-Williams 1994, 108, 422, 582, 1228). The *patighnī* of the Veda became or was made to become a distant memory, and was substituted with epithets like *pativatsalā, patidharmaratā, and pativratāparāyaṇā* (Mbh: 12.30.32; 12.142.6; 1.103.13,17). In other words, what happened historically, and is certainly attested to in the epics, is the process of 'pativratization'. This process of sanitization of truculent wives who could then be made to fit the *pativratā* mould, is particularly well brought out in the figures of Anasuya and Arundhati, both of whom have been enumerated among the great *pativratā* in the Indian Tradition. Yet, in the *Mahābhārata*, Anasuya is described as a *brahmavādinī* who left her husband with the firm intention that she would never allow herself to be dominated by him (Mbh 13.14.65-67). She prayed to Shiva, who granted her the boon that she would parthenogenetically have a son who would bear her name, and bring fame to her *vaṃśa*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* however, transforms Anasuya into Sita's exemplar on *pativratā dharma* resulting in famous Sita Anasuya *saṃvāda* where essentials of a dedicated wife's duties are laid threadbare (Rām: 2.117.19).

The *Ādi parva* of the *Mahābhārata* preserves an equally deviant memory of Arundhati (Mbh: 1.224.26-31). The epic tells us that Arundhati despised her husband sage Vashistha for no cause, and for this contempt, she became a tiny star enveloped in smoke that appears like a bad omen. What is truly interesting in this episode is the fact that the pole star Arundhati is seen here as inauspicious, because of its namesake woman's not so virtuous conduct towards her husband. Yet, in the *Aśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, the bride is made to look at the pole star Arundhati and chant "may my husband live and I get offspring" (*Aśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*: 1.7.22).

Draupadi is the central female character in the main narrative of the epic *Mahābhārata*. And it is in her characterization, which swings from one extreme to another like a pendulum that the process of 'pativratization' is most clearly

apparent. Indologist Sally Sutherland says about Draupadi that coupled with her victimization is a strong realization of this victimization (Sutherland 1989, 72). Draupadi never accepts her humiliation lying down. She does not bewail her fate but calls Yudhishtira a fool (*mūḍha*), a gambler and attributes her sorrows to the fact that she was his wife (Mbh: 4.17.11,14; Mbh: 4.15.35; Mbh: 4.17.1). The other Pāṇḍava husbands are also berated by her for being like eunuchs (*kṛība*) (Mbh: 4.15.21- 22). If *pativratā dharma* enjoins that a wife follows her husband at all times (*samayānuvartinī*) then Draupadi certainly does not bow to this commandment (Rām: 2.117.29). Yet in the vanaparva of the Mahābhārata the fearless and wise Draupadi is co-opted into the rarified community of great *pativratā* wives when she suddenly engages in a vapid dialogue with Satyabhama where she states “to live under husband’s protection (*patyāśrayo*) is the eternal law (*sanātana dharma*) for women. Husband is the only refuge so what woman could displease him.” (Mbh: 3.222.35) This was the female world of social contract under patriarchy which Draupadi was made to articulate.

But perhaps the most sensational makeover of a wife into a *pativratā* has been that of Shakuntala. In the *Ādi parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, Shakuntala walks into Dushyanta’s court, a public site of kingly authority, all by herself while holding her son Bharata’s hand (Shah 2012a, 91). She demands from her husband Dushyanta her due as his wife and mother of his son. When Dushyanta refuses, and instead abuses her calling her a *duṣṭa tāpasī* and a common whore (*puṃscālī*) Shakuntala remains unfazed and asserts “my *kula* is greater than yours”, and curses her son’s father “may your head break into a hundred pieces.” (Mbh: 1.68.75; 1.69.2; Mbh: 1.68.35) Shakuntala throws an open challenge to the king (one of whose prerogative is to decide on his successor), that even without his acknowledgment her son Bharata would one day rule the entire kingdom (Mbh: 1.69.27). Moreover, she has the last word when she tells Dushyanta that she would not like to stay with a man who abuses trust and is a liar (Mbh: 1.69.27). Kalidasa in his play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* emasculates *Mahābhārata*’s Shakuntala beyond recognition. In this play the setting of Shakuntala’s meeting with Dushyanta is a more private spatial zone of *yajñasālā* which precludes any possibility of public indictment or shaming of the unreliable king. Furthermore, Kalidasa presents Shakuntala as a devitalized *pativratā* who shivers with fear (*Śakuntalā bhitā vepate*), cries copiously and

instead of cursing Dushyanta curses her own fate (Abhijñāna Śākuntalam: Act V, 94, 90-91, 95-96). In this play as well like in the *Mahābhārata*, Dushyanta is depicted launching a tirade against Shakuntala's character, yet the only form of mild rebuke which she can come up with is to call him ungentlemanly (*anārya*) and a cheat (*kitava*) who thinks that everyone is as blackhearted as himself (Abhijñāna Śākuntalam Act V, 92-93). She tries desperately to convince Dushyanta of her identity so that he may accept her, even as her male escorts harangue her, blaming her for the predicament she is in (Ibid Act V, 91, 24, 27). This complete erasure of a virago of a wife by Kalidasa represents the ultimate triumph of patriarchal culture, where wife can only be an impotent and subservient creature. Therefore, Shakuntala's escorts insist on leaving her with Dushyanta because husband's authority over his wife is supreme (*dāreṣu prabhutā sarvotmukhī*) (Ibid Act V, 26). They also make it clear to Shakuntala that "It is better for a wife to stay in her husband's home even as a servant" (Ibid Act V,27).

II

The phallic cultural dominance has also resulted in the silencing of women. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Gargi locked horns with Yajnavalkya in a public debate, and was able to pose some sharp questions to him (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.6.1). When Yajnavalkya was unable to answer them, instead of appreciating Gargi's intellectual brilliance he bullied her, and threatened her to keep quiet lest her head was chopped off. We do not hear of Gargi thereafter (*gārgī vācaknavyā upararāma*). Our sources do speak of low-voiced (*mandavākyā*) and mumbling (*antarmukhabhāṣiṇī*) women yet, even in this sea of stammer and silence, some women have cherished their right to speak (Kuṭṭanīmatam: verse 848; Shah 2009, 152). It is a truism that speech is empowering. When you can speak, you also learn to cultivate the mind which acts as an enabler to speech. Our sources refer to women who were not only articulate, but the script which they read was their own too. This fact is acknowledged by Dhanadeva, who refers to four poetesses by name who he said had attained proficiency in expressing everything (*viśvam vaktum yaḥ pravīṇasya*) (Krishnamchariyar, 1970, 391). Thus, poetess Vijjika quite self-consciously calls attention to her intellectual attainments. Disdaining Dandin's description of the goddess of speech Sarasvati as all-white (*sarvaśuklā*) in his text on poetics titled *Kāvyādarśa*, Vijjika declares "Not knowing that I am

dark like a blue lotus, Dandin has vainly said that Sarasvati is all-white". Vijjika's intellectual intransigence was such that she openly boasted about her genius, she says "one was born on the lotus, another on the beach and a third off the anthill, these three (Brahma, Vyasa and Valmiki) are great poets and to them I pay my homage, but if some later men should try to please us with prose and verse composition, well I place my left leg on their heads" (Raghvan 1934, 55-56)

III

Patrilineality has been vital to the institution of patriarchy. In order to ensure purity of patrilineage, control over female sexuality and harnessing that sexuality for reproductive purpose was the *raison d'être* of the masculine social order. As Manu (Manusmṛti: 9.76) notes quite unambiguously "to be mothers were women created" (*prajñārth striyaḥ sṛṣṭāḥ*). This reality has led feminist theorist Catherine Mackinnon to argue that "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism; that which is most one's own yet most taken away". (Mckinnon 1982, 515) Reproductive role of women which results in the birth of sons *jīvasū vīrasū* (Mbh: 1.191.7) - the oft repeated blessing to women is so central to patriarchal culture that it builds a binary between fertile and infertile (*vandhyā*). Furthermore, patrilineal families also esteem the birth of a male child above all. *Manusmṛti* (Manusmṛti: 4.213) is quite categorical in asserting that a woman not blessed with sons (*avīrāyāśca yoṣitaḥ*) is impure whose food cannot be consumed by the brahmanas. It is also interesting to note that the Ayurvedic text *Mādhavanidāna* (*Mādhavanidāna: Nidānapariśiṣṭa, 27*) while enumerating nine types of *vandhyā*, lists a womb that bears only female (*strīprasūti*) among them. In the phallic culture then, the infertile women are inauspicious while motherhood is apotheosized and giving birth to sons bestows preeminence on the women. Yet this most cherished goal of patriarchy went abegging in the world of *veśavāsa* women, who simply mocked it. In Kshemendra's *Samayamāṭṛkā*, (Samayamāṭṛkā: 8.101) *veśyā* expresses the view that giving birth (*prasava*) is a curse (*śrāpa*) for a woman's youth (*yauvana*) being particularly harsh on her breasts. A bawd thus contrasts the physical attractiveness of the *veśyā* with a *kulavadhū* who was seen as constantly pregnant (*nityaprasūti*) with her youth destroyed (*yauvanahata*). And in Damodargupta's *Kuṭṭanīmatam*, a bawd firmly asserts that birth of a daughter alone is desirable (*duhitā eva ślāghya*) (Kuṭṭanīmatam: Verse 146).

Patrilineal patriarchal societies impose chastity but only on women, they also deny them desiring subjectivity, and are viciously ageist as far as women are concerned. But in spite of this, women have raised their voice against these norms. Story of Ahalya in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is noteworthy in this respect. (Rām: 1.48.19-20) Ahalya was not innocently compromised by Indra who visited her disguised as her husband sage Gautama. Ahalya's was a classic case of adultery and that too by a brahmin woman for whom the norms of purity must have been the strictest in a varṇa stratified society. Valmiki tells us quite unambiguously that she was aware (*vijñā*) of Indra's identity and yet out of curiosity (*kautūhalāt*) and excitement entered into a sexual union with the king of Gods. Afterwards with her inner being satiated she tells Indra "I am satisfied (*kṛtārthosmi*) but now go quickly from here and protect yourself and me. Yogakarandika in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, does not even resort to secretive stratagems, she states quite forthrightly "I lived with other men at my pleasure, and so did not cheat the elements of which I was composed and my senses of their lawful enjoyment". (Kathāsaritsāgara: Vol.1, 159)

The desiring subjectivity which some women claim in our sources, is also extended to older women. In majority of the masculine Sanskrit corpus, a youthful (*yauvanasthā*) and pretty (*surūpā*) woman is perceived as the best aphrodisiac (*vṛṣyatamā*) (Shah 2009, 101) for exclusively male erotic stimulation, while an ageing woman with sagging breasts (*bhr̥ṣṭapayodhara*) is equated with bad luck (*saubhāgyaguṇoanganānām naṣṭa*) (Sūktimuktāvali: 226.5). In fact, a frequently used epithet for a woman is one with high breasts (*pīnastanī*). Yet, poetess Shilabhatarika boldly questions the male prerogative to an erotic life even when elderly, though women are denied the same. She asks "how unjustified and improper is the decree of fate which makes men succumb to the sentiment of love even when they are too old for it, while women are denied this right?" (Chaudhuri 1941, Verse 83) This asymmetry of erotic desire in the masculine culture is also the reason why youthful females are seen as threatening to the *brahmacārī* deity of the Sabarimala temple and therefore barred entry (Shah 2021, 237). However, menopausal women who are undesirable to male eyes and therefore perceived as '*naturally celibate*' (italics mine) are allowed into the temple complex. Yet age could not circumscribe women's desire. In Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda* Radha is not only a *gopavadhū* but also an older woman who is sent as an adolescent Krishna's

escort by Nanda and she uses this opportunity to establish an adulterous but a mutually passionate and equitable erotic relationship with him. (Shah 2009, 180)

IV

Patriarchy constrains women in a variety of ways and one major form of policing is to deny them the autonomy of gaze. If the erotic gaze was the vehicle of passion, the means by which desire was constructed and maintained, then women have been denied this gaze. As John Berger pointed out in his seminal work *Ways of Seeing* that looking is always an act that involves a power relationship, so who looks and at what, highlights the dominant and dominated equation (Berger 1972, 8-9,47). Within masculine culture men alone had the right to look, and women could only be the fetishized object of that look. Thus, all the *nakha-śikha varṇana* that we get in our sources are of *nāyikā*. Sanskrit language abounds in many adjectival nouns such as *rambhorū* (thighs like plantain), *suśroṇi* (of good buttocks and loins), *candramukhī* (moon faced) and *ṣodaṣī* (sweet sixteen) and all these epithets are in feminine gender. No masculine equivalent of these occurs in Sanskrit language. Interestingly while one epithet *varāroha/varārohā* occurs in both genders it gives a completely different meaning (Monier-Williams 1994, 922, column 3). While for a woman it denotes 'one with fine hips'; for a man the same term means 'a fine rider.' In other words what is physical beauty in *nāyikā* denotes skill in *nāyaka* because his body cannot be similarly objectified in *nāyikā*'s erotic yearning. If at all male beauty is referred to in our sources as in the case of God/King it is in the form of worship by devotee (female included) as a subordinate and no erotic relationship gets established (Shah 2009, 195).

It is true that Sanskrit texts refer specifically to female side-long glances (*kaṭākṣa*) which are also described as an embodiment of *Kāma* (Shah 2009, 196-197). As one verse in Vidyakara's *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa* states "I sing the praise of lovely eyed women who are victorious over the three eyed Shiva, for by their glances they resurrect *Kāma* which Shiva had destroyed by his." (*Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*: verse 395). Nonetheless perusal of the sources makes it very clear that while the *kaṭākṣa* of women may be erotic they lack the power to objectify the *nāyaka* rather they invite him to objectify the *nāyikā*. One may then conclude that, within phallic

culture women exist exclusively as images that are displayed for the enjoyment of male and not as bearers of look (Mulvey 1989, 20). Yet poetess Vijjika in a unique verse which goes against the usual norm of androcentric erotic (*śṛṅgāri*) texts, claims the erotic gaze for herself. She wants to look with erotic passion that holds her man. Vijjika says, “erotic fulfilment lies in the mere interlocking of the eyes of men and women. If a man desires physical union even after being a target of a woman’s love glances, then woman is at fault for after reaching below the buttocks (*nitamba*) even animals realize the sexual goal (*ratiphala*). This verse of *sambhoga śṛṅgāra* thus clamors for an emotional intimacy in the union, rather than a mere sensuous gratification brought on by the gaze. In other words, the *nāyikā*/poetess even as she claims the gaze does not objectify.

V

In the masculinist world to act on sexual desire by claiming erotic gaze whose focus is always a young and beautiful woman is an exclusively male prerogative and women are never seen as desiring subjects be they young or old. Nonetheless the somatophobic (*kāyājugupsā*) (*Yogavaśiṣṭha*: 1.18) and misogynistic renunciatory discourse in ancient India flipped this normative sexual cultural ideal (“still unborn man suffers a painful confinement in woman’s foul womb”- *Śatakatrayam*: verse 199).

Within this discourse not only does the female body becomes an object of repugnance rather than desire but hitherto passive female is transformed into an active seductress becoming the chief cause of entrapment for the male ascetic. In *Vairāgyaśataka* Bhartrihari states “her face a vile receptacle of phlegm is likened to a moon, her thighs dank with urine are said to rival the elephant’s trunk, mark how this despicable form (*nindyārūpam*) is praised by poets” (*Śatakatrayam*: Verse 159). The ancient texts repeat ad nauseam “where there is a woman there is desire; If you renounce woman, you can renounce the world and renunciation brings happiness.” (*Sūktimuktāvali*: 449.24-25 *yasyastrītasabhogechā strīyamtyaktvājagatyaktam jagatyaktvāsukhībhaveta*).

This happiness could be in the form of disembodied *mokṣa* or place in heaven. Within the renunciatory tradition since the object of temptation is always a

woman while the subject of redemption is forever a man, it is not surprising that the male pilgrims to Sabarimala can proceed there at any age provided they have taken vow of celibacy. (Within Brahmanism women cannot renounce or be 'actively' celibate. Celibacy for women is an imposition—virgin daughters, chaste/ menstruating wives and widows of higher *varṇa*) The very young girls and old women who are not perceived as objects of male desire and therefore cannot be a source of temptation and entrapment for either the *brahmacārī* deity Ayyappa or the celibate male pilgrims, are allowed to undertake the trek to Sabarimala shrine.

The highly gendered renunciatory ideology of all hues be it Brahmanical or heterodox, was challenged throughout the ancient period by a number of philosophies like Lokayata, Tantric and Virashaiva. Because these belief systems eschewed both misogyny and somatophobia, they were ideologically equipped to call the bluff of masculine renunciatory tradition. Lokayata rejected any reality beyond sensory perception so neither body nor bodily pleasure were deprecated. (*Naiṣadhacarita*: 17.54; 17.48,50–51) Thus, a Carvaka asks jeeringly “have those otherworldly fellows renounced their passions? For even after death, they long for heaven, the quintessence of which lies in its gazelle eyed nymphs”. (*Naiṣadhacarita*: 17.68)

In Tantric thought, sexual copulation (*maithuna*) was part of revered *pañcamakāra* and women in general and female principal in particular were apotheosized. (Shah 2009, 66–68) In early Medieval Karnataka the Virashaivas celebrated the physical body as an abode of god giving the slogan of '*kāyāve kailāśa*'. They also rejected the notion of the world as an illusion (*māyā*) and women as an embodiment of *māyā*. (Ramaswamy 1996, 8–9,18) Virashaivism became the most renowned ideology of gender emancipation. While it is true that *dharmasāstra* valorize *gṛhasthāśrama* (*Manusmṛti*: 6.89) and therefore acknowledge women both for her reproductive potential and upbringing of progeny as also for providing companionship on life's journey; (*Manusmṛti*, 9.27 - *utpādanamapatyasya jātasya paripālanam pratyahaṃ lokayātrāyāḥ pratyakṣm strīnibandhanam*) nonetheless they do not effectively critique the underlying misogyny of the renunciatory tradition. In fact, they reiterate it as *Manusmṛti* states: “it is the nature of women to seduce men in

this world...women are able to lead astray not only a fool but even a learned one and make him a slave of desire and anger.” (Manusmṛti: 2.213-215)

VI

If patriarchy demanded chastity from wives, it also required unmarried daughters to kowtow to their father's authority in their marital alliance. *Brahma, daiva, prajāpatya* and *ārṣa* were the four approved forms of marriage in the brahmanical law books and underlined the authority (*svāmya*) of the father over his daughter who would be given away (*kanyādāna*) by him in marriage to a groom of his choice. In the *Mahābhārata*, maiden Satyawati is afraid of her father (*piturbhītā*) and therefore reluctant to enter into sexual liaison with sage Parashara as were Kunti and Tapati. (Shah 2012a, 72) In *Rāmāyaṇa* daughters of king Kushnabha reiterate the divine authority of their father (*prabhusmākam daivatam param*) who alone had right to bestow their hand in marriage and rejected outright any notion of personal choice (*swayam varamupāsmeha*) on their part. (Rām: 1.32.21-22)

While it is true that *gāndharva vivāha* or marriage by choice is listed in the *dharmaśāstra* among the eight forms of marriage, the social and familial hostility to it is fairly pervasive in ancient sources. Given the patriarchal Brahmanical ethics of smṛti texts *gāndharva* marriage is summarily dismissed as one which springs from mere desire, with sexual intercourse as its only aim. (*Manusmṛti*: 3.32 – *gāndharva sa tu vijñeyo maithunyaḥ kāmasambhavaḥ*)

Since marriage for smṛti writers is primarily a sacrament and its purpose is acquisition of merit and progeny, *gāndharva* marriage along with other less approved forms was seen as blamable marriage which would produce only blamable children. (*Manusmṛti*: 3.41-42) Manu is also quite categorical in asserting that where the girl chooses the groom herself, she is not allowed to take with her any ornaments from her natal family (which formed the primary corpus of her *strīdhana*) and if she did so, it was to be regarded as theft. (*Manusmṛti*: 9.92)

As if the economic deterrent was not enough, the social opprobrium and hence psychological pressure on a girl against free marriage is dramatically highlighted

in Kalidasa's play (*Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*: Act V.24). When Dushyanta fails to recognize pregnant Shakuntala whom he had married through gāndharva rite the male escorts of hapless Shakuntala are quick to castigate her for her impulsive (*cāpalam*) behavior. Ironically, Shakuntala herself rues the fact that Dushyanta's refusal to accept her will earn her the 'opprobrium' of a loose woman (*svachandacāriṇī*) (*Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*: Act V, 92).

In our own times, the 'Love Jihad' campaign is a conspicuous example of toxic patriarchy where marriage following mutual love between the couple is fast becoming a battleground, and where the biased state is becoming both a willing policeman and prosecutor on behalf of disgruntled parents. In such times it will do well to reflect on how some women have in the ancient past claimed their right to consent. Amba in the *Mahābhārata*, virulently denounced the charade of svayaṃvara marriage which refers to women's self-choice, but in reality, never gives it to them (Mbh: 5.173.3-5). She curses her slow witted and foolish father (*manda pitaram mūḍha cetas*) for having reduced her to the status of a strumpet (*paṇyastri*), a mere prize for the feat of some manly valor (*vīryaśulkena*), and therefore thunders at the injustice (*anyāya*) of it all.

In *Yaśastilaka Champū*, we meet queen Amritmati who puts forward an extremely cogent critique of patriarchal marriage as a sacrament. (Handiqui 1949, 51) She characterizes such a marriage rite as being sold by parents in the presence of the God, brahmin and fire - *devadvija agnisamakṣam mātṛpitṛ vikṛtasya*. A husband in such a marriage could only be the master of his wife's body, but not of her heart. Amritmati asserts the reciprocity of love as an essential condition for conjugal harmony. She says that there is nothing in this world that men cannot do, except rekindle love in a heart filled with disgust; for who can unite two hearts that are like two iron balls, one hot and the other cold? In Amritmati's passionate plea we can see a complete change in the angle of vision which smṛti writers have brought to bear on marriage in general and on *gāndharva* marriage in particular. She restores individuals and their emotions over what are generic norms and that too gendered ones in the Brahmanical *dharmasāstra*.

VII

Conformity from women in general, and wives in particular in thought, word and deed (*manasāvācākarmaṇā*), has been an article of faith in the patriarchal culture. Yet, in our sources, we come across a contestation of this norm of conformity. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* Sita who is celebrated as a compliant obedient wife actually dares to contest the hegemonic kshatriya prerogative of her husband Rama, to violently engage with the Rākṣasa in the Daṇḍaka forest. In the *Aranyakāṇḍa* of the epic, she forcefully makes a case against the killing (*paraprāṇābhīhimsanam*) (Rām: 3.9.9) of the Rākṣasas who are not Rama's adversary - *vinā vairam ca raudratā*, she asks. And therefore, entreats him not to indulge in any violent aggression against them. (Rām: 3.9.4) For Sita, the forest of Daṇḍakāraṇya is the abode of the Rākṣasa - *rākṣasān daṇḍakāśṛitāna*; (Rām: 3.9.25) therefore killing them, so to speak in their own home would not be considered an act worthy of a chivalrous man - *aparādham vinā hantum loko vīra na maṃsyate*. (Rām: 3.9.25)

Sita's objection to Rama's intent is also based on her perception of the forest as a peaceful place, a site of meditation (*tapah*), and not an arena of war (*ka ca śāstram ka ca vanam ka ca kṣātrama tapah ka ca*). (Rām: 3.9.27) Sita, therefore, considers it against the norm (*deśadharmā*) to indulge in any violent act within the precincts of such a place. Sita's voice, clear and cogent, has resonance even in our fractious present.

Some within academia (Samuel Huntington being the most prominent) and many more outside it (ultra cultural nationalists around the globe) have tried to perpetuate the myth of a pristine culture/civilization which has to fight/erase the "Other" in order to maintain its purity. But as I have tried to argue in this paper, that there has never been a singular culture (glorious or otherwise) or one unique idea in existence at any point of time. Just as all cultures are syncretic (for even the mighty Ganges is fed by many tributaries) all ideas have been contested, even ubiquitous ones like patriarchy.

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