

## Draupadī's Polyandry Revisited

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### 1 Introduction

One of the issues in interpreting the *Mahābhārata* (hereafter MBh) that has puzzled generations of Sanskrit scholars is the polyandry of Draupadī: she is married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers, but we do not find any ordainments in Sanskrit sources that justify this type of marriage.<sup>1</sup> Various interpretations have been offered in previous research: Winternitz [1897] suggested that her polyandry can be explained by non-Aryan traditions found in the Indian subcontinent. Wikander [1947] and Dumézil [1958] interpret Draupadī as reflecting the association of a female deity with the male gods of the three functions, which they claim can be traced to the Indo-European age.<sup>2</sup> Gotō [2004: 61–62] discusses the possibility that when the Aryan tribes invaded the Indian subcontinent, they formed a kind of expeditionary group consisting of a large number of men and a small number of women and that several young men may have shared one woman or a few women. He mentions the case of the Maruts and Rodasī in the *Ṛgveda* and that of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī in the MBh as instances in which such relationships are reflected. Although these observations are not without unique appeals, there being no direct references to such ideas in the MBh or in other related contemporary texts, we cannot verify their arguments in a satisfactory manner at present. Although Gotō's idea does not seem to be internationally known, it certainly sheds new light on the problem. Still, as the materials that fill the time gap between the Aryan invasion and the composition of the MBh have not been presented so far, it appears prudent to treat it as a possibility.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Yoshimizu [2007] for Kumāṛila's attempts to justify Draupadī's polyandry.

<sup>2</sup> For methodological and philological problems in applying Dumézil's theory to mythical or social ideas in South Asia, readers are referred to Brough [1959], Gonda [1960; 1971; 1974], and Matsumura [2014: 152–163]. Besides, in my forthcoming review of Okita [2020], which is based on Dumézil's theory, I have pointed out that their interpretation of *kṣatriya* as "a warrior" is untenable in the light of linguistic and socio-historical studies. Dumézil, as well as Okita, ascribes the first function (sovereignty and rulership) to *brāhmaṇas* "priests" and the second function (warfare) to *kṣatriyas*. However, the word *kṣatriya*, which derives from a neuter substantive *kṣatra* "rulership, ownership," means "ruler, owner" (cf. Mayrhofer [1992–2002. I: 421], Takahashi [forthcoming] Section 2.2), thus pointing to the first function of sovereignty and rulership in Dumézil's system. This does not mean that *kṣatriyas* are not warriors because their ruling power derives from their predominance in military power. Presumably, in order to argue that a *kṣatriya* is per se a pure warrior distancing himself from rulership, Dumézil observes that a king, the foremost *kṣatriya*, is detached from the *kṣatriya*, but his arguments are difficult to support from textual sources. Okita, on her part, has gone so far as to claim that kingship belongs to the priest class, which contradicts the Dharmaśāstra's presentation of the four classes.

<sup>3</sup> Another possible example of polyandry in the *Ṛgveda* can be the case of the twin gods Aśvins and Sūryā, the daughter of Sūrya. She is said to have chosen Aśvins as her husbands in *Ṛgveda* 1.119.5 (cf. Chakravarty [1985: 479–480]). It is to be noted that the relationship between Sūryā and Aśvins may reflect a Vedic view of the solar movements. Gotō [1991, 2009] proposes that *Aśvins* originally represent the morning star and the evening star and that their designation *aśvin* refers to their aspect of the morning star, whereas another frequent and old

Brockington [1998: 69], on the other hand, in his evaluation of Dumézil's contributions to the MBh studies, observes, "The reality is that Śrī was originally a symbol of sovereignty and as such possessed by many rulers and above all Indra (e.g. Mbh<sup>4</sup> 12.124, 218 and 221); she is therefore a natural model for Draupadī." It is too unfortunate that he discontinues the discussion of Draupadī's polyandry and moves on to a different topic, which is very much justifiable considering that his monograph is intended as a general survey of the two Sanskrit epics covering a vast range of topics. To the best of my knowledge, Brockington's suggestion has never been properly heeded in the study of the MBh. However, with a detailed study of Hara [1997], which seems to be unavailable when Brockington was writing his work, his observation seems to increase its probability significantly, as Hara demonstrates that Śrī represents a fickle royal prosperity that does not stay with a single king and goes around different kings according to her likes and dislikes.

The present study aims to explore the possibility that Brockington has proposed in the light of Hara's findings and offers a fresh interpretation of the story of five Indras and Śrī found in MBh 1.189.1–35, which Vyāsa introduces as an explanation as to why Draupadī is to be married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers.

## 2 Layers of Interpretation

Before discussing the representations of Śrī and Draupadī, it might be helpful to look at different, sometimes rather incongruous, opinions voiced by different personae of the epic concerning Draupadī's polyandry. Although these opinions have largely escaped the attention of previous research with some important exceptions, presumably because they appear to be a result of later accretions, an analysis of the intricate narrative structure in which these arguments are arranged will help us understand to which extent a philological probe can offer a solution to our question.

After the *svayaṃvara* in which Arjuna won Draupadī, Arjuna and Bhīma return home and speak of Draupadī to Kuntī, saying, "Here are alms (MBh 1.182.1c: *bhikṣā*)."<sup>5</sup> As Kuntī is inside the house and does not see Draupadī, she replies simply, "You all come together and share it (MBh 1.182.2b: *uvāca bhūṅkteti sametya sarve*)."<sup>4</sup> As soon as Kuntī sees Draupadī, she regrets what she has said and asks Yudhiṣṭhira for a solution. In reply, Yudhiṣṭhira says that Arjuna should marry Draupadī because he won her (MBh 1.182.7). Arjuna, on the other hand, argues that Yudhiṣṭhira should marry her because Arjuna cannot marry any woman as long as his elder brothers remain unmarried (MBh 1.182.8–10). Seeing that the love for Draupadī is stirring in the hearts of all the five Pāṇḍava brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira remembers Vyāsa's revelation to them about Draupadī's previous life (MBh 1.157.6–16), which we

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designation *nāsatya* alludes to their aspect of the evening star. On interpreting *Ṛgveda* 1.118.5 in which Sūryā is said to mount on the chariot of Aśvins, Gotō [2009: 204–205] observes that Sūryā represents some aspects of the morning sun preceded by the morning star as Aśvins.

<sup>4</sup> Mbh stands for the *Mahābhārata* in Brockington [1998].

<sup>5</sup> As *bhikṣā* "alms" (the desiderative form of the verbal root *bhaj-* "to share or to partake") literally means what one desires to share, Hiltebeitel [2011: 491] observes that Arjuna and Bhīma are complicit or have a chancy sense of humor.

shall examine in what follows, and decides that Draupadī be married to the five brothers so that the brothers will not break up.

When asked by Drupada, Draupadī's father, for an explanation for her polyandry, Yudhiṣṭhira says that Draupadī is a jewel and it is the agreement of the five Pāṇḍava brothers to share a jewel (MBh 1.187.24ab: *eṣa naḥ samayo rājan ratnasya sahabhojanam*). Yudhiṣṭhira further says that *dharma* is subtle, and this is the way followed by his predecessors (MBh 1.187.28–29b). He also adds that it was what his mother said and that he himself desires this form of marriage. While Drupada is not fully convinced by Yudhiṣṭhira's justifications, Vyāsa turns up at Drupada's court. When Vyāsa requests each one to express their opinion, Drupada maintains that polyandry goes against *dharma* (MBh 1.188.7–9), while Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Draupadī's elder brother, says that *dharma* is subtle and he cannot decide what is right. Yudhiṣṭhira refers to the case of Jaṭilā Gautamī, who is said to lie with seven seers in the *purāṇa* (MBh 1.188.14)<sup>6</sup> and to follow one's mother's instruction is the highest *dharma* (MBh 1.188.15–16). Kuntī, on her part, expresses her fear of falsehood and requests Vyāsa for a way out of this difficulty.

In reply, Vyāsa narrates two stories about Draupadī's past lives. The first story (MBh 1.189.1–35) features her past life as the goddess Śrī. Once upon a time, gods performed a sacrifice in which Yama, the god of death, also took part. As Yama went through the consecration, he ceased killing living beings. Then living beings began to flourish on the earth because their lives were not taken by Yama. The gods felt a great fear of this situation because there was no longer any distinction between the mortal living beings and the immortal gods. The gods resort to Brahmā for a solution but to no avail. Then Indra, the foremost of the gods, finds a crying woman at the source of the Gaṅgā River. Indra asks her to reveal her identity, and she tells him to follow her. When Indra follows her, he finds a beautiful young man playing the dice seated on a throne. As the young man ignores Indra, the latter gets furious at the former. However, being stared at by the young man, Indra gets stiffened. Then, the young man, who is revealed to be Śiva, orders Indra to enter a cave where he finds four Indras of previous ages. Śiva tells the five Indras that they must be reborn as human beings and kill human beings that flourish on the earth in order to be liberated from this wretchedness. The five Indras decide to be born as the sons of Dharma, Vāyu, Indra, and the twin Aśvins, and Śiva assigns Śrī as their common wife. In other words, the five Pāṇḍava brothers are the incarnations of Indras of different ages, and they share Draupadī as Śrī, who is said to be Indra's wife in the epic.

The text does not specify whether the crying woman Indra sees in the Gaṅgā River is identical to Śrī or not. However, considering that the woman is called a goddess (MBh 1.189.17b *devīm*) and that she is also associated with a golden lotus (MBh 1.189.11ab: *tasyāśrubinduḥ<sup>7</sup> patito jale vaiitat padmam āsīd atha tatra kāñcanam*), whose association with Śrī can be found as early as in the *Śrīsūkta* of the

<sup>6</sup> The story of Jaṭilā Gautamī as a wife or mistress shared by the seven seers is not found in extant Sanskrit materials. Hopkins [1915: 182] argues that Jaṭilā can be Arundhatī, the wife of Vaśiṣṭha. For the story of Arundhatī and the seven seers, see MBh 3.213–219 and Mitchiner [1982: 271–274].

<sup>7</sup> I followed Oberlies's [2003: 41] suggestion that *tasyāśru-* is a result of double sandhi (*tasyāḥ aśru-* > *tasyā aśru-* > *tasyāśru-*).

*Ṛgvedakhila* (cf. Scheftelowitz [1921], Gonda [1954: 213–219]), it is fair to interpret the crying woman as Śrī. The reason why the woman is crying is not explicitly explained in the text, but we can argue that she is most likely distressed about the misery that her husbands are suffering or going to suffer.

The other story of Draupadī's past life Vyāsa narrates is rather simple (MBh 1.189.41–49). There was a beautiful daughter of a seer, but she could not find a husband. With fierce austerity, she satisfies Śiva, who grants her a boon. Since she said, "I wish a husband who has all virtues" five times, she is married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers when she is born as Draupadī in the next life. It is to be noted that this story is already told to the five Pāṇḍava brothers by Vyāsa in MBh 1.157.6–16. After hearing the two stories, Draupadī is satisfied and allows Draupadī to be married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers.

We can identify nine different arguments offered for an explanation of Draupadī's unusual form of marriage:

- (1) Explanation in the narrative of the story: Kuntī carelessly tells the five Pāṇḍava brothers to share Draupadī.
- (2) Arjuna's opinion: As his elder brothers Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma are not married yet, Arjuna cannot marry Draupadī.
- (3) Yudhiṣṭhira's first opinion: It is the agreement among the five Pāṇḍava brothers to share a jewel.
- (4) Yudhiṣṭhira's second opinion: A similar case (Jaṭilā) can be found in the *purāṇas*.
- (5) Yudhiṣṭhira's third opinion: The *dharma* is subtle, and the polyandry is the way followed by his ancestors.
- (6) Yudhiṣṭhira's fourth opinion: He has to follow Kuntī's command, and that is what the five Pāṇḍava brothers want.
- (7) Kuntī's opinion: She cannot withdraw her word because it amounts to falsehood.
- (8) Vyāsa's first explanation: Draupadī is an incarnation of Śrī, and the five Pāṇḍava brothers are those of the five Indras.
- (9) Vyāsa's second explanation: Draupadī said to Śiva, "I wish for a husband who has all virtues" five times.

The reason why the text presents various opinions through the mouth of several figures in different narrative settings seems that none of the opinions appeared fully convincing for the composer or the composers of this part of the text, and different attempts were overpainted upon each other in the process of the expansion of the text. This does not mean, however, that the individual opinions bear no meaning. The very plurality of understandings marks one of the distinctive characteristics of the narrative structure of the MBh: the text offers diverse opinions from several perspectives, leaving some degree of uncertainty instead of giving a final definitive or authoritative conclusion (cf. Fitzgerald [2003], Takahashi [2021: 270–281]). In other words, it is crucial to investigate each opinion in detail to obtain the whole picture of the problem of Draupadī's polyandry. In what follows, after making a brief comment on Dahlmann's [1895] interpretation of (3) Yudhiṣṭhira's first opinion, the present paper focuses on (8) Vyāsa's first explanation in which Draupadī is interpreted as an incarnation of Śrī.

### 3 Dahlmann's [1895] suggestion

Dahlmann [1895: 86] argues that the five Pāṇḍava brothers embody the idea of “an undivided family” (*kulam avibhaktānām*, die ungetheilte Familie) in the Dharmaśāstras. Dahlmann [1895: 86–89] thinks that *avibhakta* represents the idea of sharing the family's property without dividing it. According to Dahlmann's [1895: 97–98] understanding, the story of the five Indras and Śrī (MBh 1.189.1–35) indicates that the five Pāṇḍava brothers share Śrī as royal prosperity.

When Yudhiṣṭhira says that it is the agreement among them to share a jewel (MBh 1.187. 24ab), he may have in mind a similar idea of shared ownership among brothers. It is to be noted, however, that *avibhakta* in the Dharmaśāstras does not refer to the one who shares the family property with other members but to the family member who has not yet received his own share or to the property that is not subject to partition (cf. Olivelle et al. [2015: 66]). Therefore, the word *avibhakta* does not seem to indicate the notion of “the undivided family” sharing the property among its members. Besides, Dahlmann does not give any information about the textual sources that employ the expression *kulam avibhaktānām*, and the present author was not able to find the expression *kulam avibhaktānām* or other similar phrasings in the Dharmaśāstras. Lastly, Dahlmann's observation cannot explain why it is only Draupadī who is shared among the five Pāṇḍava brothers, for they have other wives who are not shared, such as Subhadrā, Arjuna's wife. It appears most advisable to look for a reason peculiar to Draupadī.

### 4 Fickle Śrī and The Story of the Five Indras and Śrī

As demonstrated by Hara's [1997] study of Śrī in the epics and Classical Sanskrit literature, Śrī represents fickle royal prosperity that moves from one ruler to another: a king chosen by Śrī certainly prospers, but the one who is abandoned by her is destined to decline (Hara [1997: 36–38]). Śrī's choice is based on her preferences (Hara [1997: 49–52]), and she is said to favor kings with virtues and valor (Hara [1997: 41–49]). On the other hand, in epics and Classical Sanskrit sources, we find frequent condemnations against her from the kings abandoned by her: the wretched kings claim that Śrī is unstable and capricious and blindly chooses unfitting persons (Hara [1997: 53–58]). In contrast to Śrī, who is said to be fickle royal prosperity that can easily leave a king, *mahī* “the earth” is often represented as a faithful wife who does not abandon her husband even when he is in the face of adversity (Hara [1973; 1997: 33–35]).

Interestingly enough, we find a similar idea in the other branch of Indo-Iranians. *x<sup>o</sup>arənah*, the splendor or luminous power of kings or other great beings, is represented as something that can quickly abandon a king when he has lost required qualities in Young Avestan texts (cf. ad Edholm [2007: 21–28]). One could argue for a shared Proto-Indo-Iranian idea of mobile sovereignty, but, to the best of my knowledge, we do not find any discussions on the mobility of Śrī or similar royal prosperity in Sanskrit texts earlier than the epics. Therefore, it appears wise to attribute the similarity of Śrī and *x<sup>o</sup>arənah* to the independent, albeit in a similar line of thinking, developments of perceptions concerning kingship after the ramification of Indo-Iranians.

The words of the demon king Bali, whom Śrī has abandoned, addressed to Indra, who has

defeated the former and snatched away his Śrī, best illustrate her fickleness:

MBh 12.220.44–46 (cf. Hara [1997: 55–56])  
*aviśvāsye viśvasiṣi manyase cādhruvam dhruvam /*  
*mameyam iti mohāt tvam rājasriyam abhīpsasi // 44 //*  
*neyam tava na cāsmākaṃ na cānyeṣāṃ sthirā matā /*  
*atikramya bahūn anyāṃs tvayi tāvad iyaṃ sthitā // 45 //*  
*kiṃcitkālam iyaṃ sthitvā tvayi vāsava cañcalā /*  
*gaur nīpānam ivotsrjya punar anyam gamiṣyati // 46 //*

You trust in the untrustworthy, and you regard the changeable as the unchangeable. You long for royal prosperity by the delusion “this is mine.” (44)

This [Śrī] is not regarded as consistent for you, for us, or for anyone else. After passing over many others, it stays in you. (45)

This fickle one will stay in you for some time, O Vāsava, and, just like a cow abandons a watering place [and goes to another watering place], it will go to someone else.<sup>8</sup> (46)

In this way, Śrī does not reside in one ruler for good but switches from one king to another. In the dialog between cows and Śrī in MBh 13.81, Śrī asks the cows to let her stay with them, but they deny her wishes on account of her fickleness:

MBh 13.81.10 (cf. Hara [1997: 56])  
*adhruvām cañcalām ca tvām sāmānyām bahubhiḥ saha /*  
*na tvām icchāma<sup>9</sup> bhadram te gamyatām yatra rocate //*

As you are unstable and fickle and **associate with many**, we do not want you. Blessings to you. Go wherever you please.

Hearing an earnest plead from Śrī, merciful cows allow her to reside in their dung and urine. Śrī’s existence in cows’ dung and urine is counted as one of the *māhātmyas* of cows.

As seen above (1. Introduction), Brockington [1998: 69] argues that Śrī as royal sovereignty possessed by many kings provides a suitable model for Draupadī, who is married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers. Brockington [1998: 69] refers to the story of the demon king Prahāda and Indra (MBh 12.124) and two dialogues between Indra and Śrī (MBh 12.218, 221). The underlying motif for these passages is that Indra takes hold of Śrī from demon kings by snatching her away by deceit (MBh 12.124) or by a military defeat (MBh 12.218, 221). In these passages, we are told that Śrī moves from one ruler to the other according to her likes and dislikes, but there is no passage that explicitly attests to the idea of Śrī possessed by many rulers. Unfortunately, Brockington does not substantiate his arguments by referring to individual verses, presumably because his monograph is intended to

<sup>8</sup> In the present paper, all the translations of Sanskrit passages are mine.

<sup>9</sup> *icchāma*: either the 1st person plural of imperative of the present stem indicating the will of the speaker (cf. Oberlies [2003: XXVI, n. 1]), or the 1st person plural of the present indicative with the ending *-maḥ* changed to *-ma* due to *metri causa* (Oberlies [2003: 171]).

introduce various topics of the epic study instead of proving new theories. In support of Brockington's observation, I would like to give two additional remarks:

- (1) The idea of Śrī as being "associating with many" (*sāmānyām bahubhiḥ saha*) found in MBh 13.81.56b renders further support to his idea of Draupadī as representing royal prosperity shared by several rulers.
- (2) The story of the five Indras and Śrī (MBh 1.189.1–35) that Vyāsa introduces as a justification of Draupadī's polyandry seems to suggest that the same Śrī is shared by rulers of different ages represented by the four Indras of previous ages and the current Indra.

It is true that the mythical motif of Śrī as in the possession of many rulers does give a promising insight into one of the several intratextual interpretations of the issue, but the fact that the text offers various other explanations for Draupadī's polyandry seems to suggest that this interpretation was not considered to be a definitive answer by the composer or the composers of the text. In fact, we find two unmistakable differences between Śrī and Draupadī:

- (1) Śrī is shared by rulers of different ages, whereas Draupadī is shared among the five Pāṇḍava brothers, who are contemporary to each other. It is to be noted that the story of the five Indras and Śrī (MBh 1.189.1–35) seems to attempt to bridge this gap by mentioning that the five Indras of different ages are reborn as the five brothers at present.
- (2) Śrī is said to be unstable (*adhruvā*) and fickle (*cañcalā*), whereas Draupadī is represented as being loyal to her husbands (*pativrātā*).

Considering these differences between Śrī and Draupadī and the intricate narrative structure in which various opinions are expressed on this topic, we cannot argue that Śrī's fickleness fully explains Draupadī's unique form of marriage. Nevertheless, the above mythical analysis at least shed light on the possible motivations underlying the incorporation of the five Indras and Śrī in MBh 1.189.1–35.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

As polyandry is by no means an orthopraxy in the Sanskrit cultural milieu, Draupadī's polyandry has been long contested in previous research of the Sanskrit epics. Among the various interpretations given so far, Dumézil's Indo-European tripartite theory and Dahlmann's idea of an undivided family seem to call for thorough reinvestigations. We cannot deny Winternitz's suggestion that Draupadī's polyandry reflects the non-Sanskritic traditions in the Indian subcontinent, considering several reports of contemporary practices of polyandry.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Gotō's attempt to trace this form of marriage to the practice of sharing a woman or a few women by young members of the expedition group at the time of Aryan invasion of the Indian subcontinent seems to be worth considering.

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<sup>10</sup> See Wijesekera [1967] and Jani [1989: 72] for the polyandry cases found in the tribes of Tibet and Himalayan regions, Nairs of Kerala and Toḍas of the Nilgiri hills in South India, and various historical records of polyandry in Sri Lanka. In the Buddhist Khotanese version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā is said to be shared by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (cf. Emmerick [2000]).

If we examine what the MBh says, it appears that the text prefers a mythical interpretation of Draupadī's marriage. At the beginning of the *Ādīparvan* in which the contents of the text are summarized, we read:

MBh 1.2.87–88cd

*pañcendrāṅām upākhyānam atraivādbhutam ucyate /  
pañcānām ekapatnīve vimarśo drupadasya ca // 87 //  
draupadyā devavīhito vivāhaś cāpy amānuṣaḥ / 88cd*

Exactly in this regard, the wondrous episode<sup>11</sup> of the five Indras is narrated. So is Drupada's contemplation on the [sharing of] one wife by the five [Pāṇḍava brothers]. (87)

And also, Draupadī's non-humane marriage arranged by gods [is narrated]. (88cd)

We cannot deny the possibility that a mythical origin for Draupadī's marriage is introduced as a useful pretext for the epic composers to provide a kind of explanation for the inexplicable violation of *dharma*. Nevertheless, the emphasis of divine origin and superhumanness seems to mark the mythical orientation of this passage, thereby echoing the story of the five Indras and Śrī.

The present research was aimed to render further support to Brockington's [1998] idea of Draupadī as representing Śrī "royal prosperity" shared by many rulers with the help of Hara's [1997] overarching survey of Śrī in epics and Classical Sanskrit literature. We have seen that the story of Śrī and cows in MBh 13.81 attests to the idea of Śrī being shared by many rulers (MBh 13.81.10b: *sāmānyāṃ bahubhiḥ saha*) and that the story of the five Indras and Śrī seems to associate the transfer of Śrī from one ruler to another through the ages to the sharing of Draupadī as Śrī among the five brothers.

At the same time, the present work sought to delineate the limitations a philological probe into the MBh has. The text seems to deny a conclusive answer to the problem, and the idea that Draupadī represents royal prosperity is only one of the many answers to the issue. The present author does not claim that the results of this study nullify the attempts in previous research to solve the riddle of Draupadī's polyandry. Rather the contrary, the text seems to leave scope for interpretation on the part of the readers and welcomes solutions from different perspectives.

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<sup>11</sup> See Hildebeitel [2022: 100–103] for the *adbhuta* cluster in the *Ādīparvan*.



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