

## Draupadi

One of the most prominent female characters within the Hindu religion is that of Draupadi. She originates in Hindu mythology within one of the great epics, the *Mahabharata*. Throughout this epic the true character of Draupadi emanates, displaying her individuality, strength, and unyielding determination for both justice and vengeance. Through these characteristics the figure of Draupadi has come to be a symbol of empowerment for women and has gained the worship of many followers. Not only is Draupadi an empowering character, but she “was a devoted wife, chaste, religious minded and adhering to duty” ( Bhawalkar 142) and thus a remarkable role model for Hindu women.

The *Mahabharata* is where Draupadi’s history begins. As the most prominent female character and heroine of the epic, Draupadi is presented as the wife of the five Pandavas. She and her five husbands, Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva, are wed after Arjuna impressively wins Draupadi’s *svayamvara*. Thus, the daughter of King Drupada begins her life with the Panadavas, a life that is to be full of both epic success and devastating disasters. Throughout this time we see the constant struggle between the Pandavas and their family the Kauravas. The climax of Draupadi’s story is “when the eldest Kaurava brother. Duryodhana, had her dragged by her long hair into the men’s court and tried to strip off her sari” (Diesel 9). Fortunately, through her prayer to Krsna, a miracle occurs and she becomes the “visible recipient of divine grace in the form of endlessly descending sarees” (Hiltebeitel 280). This event is followed by Draupadi’s vow for vengeance and the beginning of an insatiable desire for justice that is only quenched upon her enemy’s blood running through her hair.

The innate qualities with which Draupadi's character is imbued are truly the basis on which her significance within the *Mahabharata* is centred. Her physical portrayal is that "the very sight of her, was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance" (Bhawalkar 141). But it is not just her appearance which makes Draupadi stand out, but her positive qualities as a woman and wife to the Pandavas. Through her actions as wife Draupadi "had become the life breath of her husbands, dearer to them than their life" (Bhawalkar 142) and as such, following her great embarrassment at the hands of the Kauravas, she becomes a pivotal reason for the Pandavas to seek vengeance on the Kauravas for their *adharmic* behaviour.

Though the legend of Draupadi begins within the Hindu epic, her influence extends far beyond the words of her story. Although within the *Mahabharata* Draupadi "was quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness, and grief" (Bhawalkar 141) this is not the only portrayal of her character. "[A] Tamil version of the epic, dating to c.1400 CE, includes additions which relate her apotheosis to the powerful Mother Goddess of Fire" (Diesel 9), which in turn has caused fire walking festivals to be held with Draupadi as their patron. According to this version of the epic, after Draupadi has been avenged, she walks through fire which "confirms and seals her divine nature, transforming her into a Goddess worthy of the worship of her devotees, who must imitate her faithfulness and virtue" (Diesel 10). These festivals are an important part of the religious beliefs for the followers of Draupadi the goddess. Fire walking festivals are especially important for the women who share these beliefs, as it is an empowering experience. According to Deisel: "By emulating the behaviour of the Goddesses, women are able to act in a way that brings them a sense of independence, confidence, and worth, which challenges patriarchal control and has the potential to bring healing" (Diesel 11). Thus, not only are these festivals important religious rights, but they are

tool for women to take some control within their lives and fight the patriarchal oppressions of Indian society.

The worship of Draupadi has become so essential for people within certain areas of India that it has even developed its own cult. This cult is specifically centred in “the Chingleput, and North and South Arcot Districts” (Hiltebeitel 13) of India. Similarly to those who participate in the fire walking festivals, it also focuses on the Tamil version of the *Mahabharata* in its worship of Draupadi (Hiltebeitel 14). Its festivals and religious life hinges on the heroine of this epic tale, believed by her followers as a goddess. With temples and festivals dedicated to this crucial and enduring character within Hindu mythology, the existence of such a cult for the goddess Draupadi demonstrates how essential her role is not only within the *Mahabharata* but within Indian society as well.

## **Bibliography**

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Diesel, Alleyn. (2002) “Tales of Women’s Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 17 Issue 1 (January): 5-20.

Hiltebeitel, Alf (1988) *The Cult of Draupadi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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*The Mahabharata*  
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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draupadi>

<http://www.dollsofindia.com/draupadi.htm>

<http://www.mythfolklore.net/india/encyclopedia/draupadi.htm>

<http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/mythology/mahabharat/draupadi.htm>

<http://www.urday.com/draupadi.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabharata>

<http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Draupadi/id/465014>

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