



Neera Misra

April 21st was Akshaya Tritiya, a very important day in Draupadi's life, when once again Sri Vasudeva Krishna protected her from embarrassment. By eating a leftover grain of rice he quenched the hunger of Durvasa Rishi, so he did not return to Draupadi to ask for food. Draupadi was given the status of an equal intellectual partner by Krishna, and he called her 'sakha' or friend. Protecting the honour of a friend was 'dharma' for him.

The treatment and status of women in our country has been deteriorating, and some recent incidents have shaken the conscience of national and international community. The 'unpardonable' remarks, of some public figures are deplorable indeed. Several reasons have led to this very disturbing state wherein we women and girls feel safe nowhere. My almost two decades' experience highlights the veiled jealousy, and many a time just a grudging respect, for educated aware, independent or successful women, by our even 'educated' men folk. One of the crucial reasons for this is the wrong perceptions created over centuries, about liberated women.

Our attitude towards women is much reflected in the way we have treated Draupadi. The wrong done to her almost five thousand years ago is still visible in the treatment meted to her auspicious land Kampilya. Now known as Kampil, Kampilya is in Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh. This place of her birth and 'Swayamvar' was made a Nationally Protected Site by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). (vide Order no: UP 1669-M/ 1133 dated 27.12.1920). British Surveyor General of ASI, Alexander Cunningham, visited and realised the importance of this ancient cities of value.

Yet this sacred place has been completely neglected by governments for almost 50 years, and the local tobacco mafia given a free hand in trampling upon, and destroying the beautiful most ancient temple. The mound, locally called Drupad Quila, has unauthorised construction,

# Reinstating Draupadi

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'molesting' this important symbol of the first ever liberated woman. Extensive excavation and protection has taken place in Guru Dronacharya's 'Ahichhetra', in Duryodhana's Kuru capital Hastinapur, Arjun's Purana Quila (Pandav Quila), Krishna's Mathura and Dwarka. But Kampilya of Draupadi has been left to disintegrate and lie in despair. Why? Because it a place related to a woman who raised her voice against violence against her, and challenged a Kingdom who could not protect the dignity of women?

Gender discrimination shows in Awards named after Mahabharata stalwarts 'Arjuna Awards' and 'Dronacharya Awards' by our governments, but Draupadi again not recognised!. Why nothing in Draupadi's name? We wonder why our efforts for a Draupadi Memorial Cultural Study Centre, or a 'Draupadi Samman Award', in her honour, been ignored for so long? Krishna, Arjuna and Dronacharya are immortalised in a positive way, why has Draupadi left to be denigrated by people with 'half educated medieval mindset'. A few intellectuals deify her in books, but the mindset of general public is left to be adversely affected by the misperceptions created by misguided 'folk traditions', and her wrongful depictions in various forms. Her identity as an educated culturally evolved woman of practical sensitivity, about a woman who overcame adversity with dignity, is never projected.

To restore the dignity of women in our country, we have to begin by restoring the dignity of 'Draupadi' as a role model of educated progressive Bharatiya Nari' or ideal Indian woman. This will send a positive signal to treat women with respect. Steps to change 'medieval mindset' regarding gender issues need attention. It is very unfortunate that a nation that prides in upholding its high traditions, but has done nothing to reinstate Draupadi, to her deserved high status. She is Kampilvasini' and one of the five noble women of ancient India.

Showing respect to Draupadi will send across a clear message of zero tolerance for disrespect towards women, starting from the first wronged woman of our history. It is

time we recognised the glaring cultural bias prevalent in our society and devote special Projects on Socio-Cultural aspects of gender parity. We revere our nation as Bharat Maa, our rivers as mother, so we owe it to history to restore the glory of all female representations, including Draupadi's, place Kampilya, as one more step towards giving women their dignified position. I recently addressed a group of foreign Tourists, on 'knowing India', at residence of Mahatma Gandhi's grand- daughter. Ninety per cent of questions raised related to status of women in India, cases of violence, 'Nirbhaya' case, and insensitive remarks by politicians. I was embarrassed but not surprised that international community is asking for 'suitable' action.

Violence against women not only reminds us of instances that mar our rich ancient civilisation, but also the plight of liberated empowered women. Talk on women's empowerment is incomplete without understanding the cultural ethos of ancient India's women in proper perspective.

Women in ancient India were learned, proficient in various fields and equal partners (*ardhangini*). The prolonged disturbing political turbulence of mediaeval era greatly harmed the status of women in our society. The prolonged

medieval era mindset is still embedded in most people in India. A woman for them is a submissive wife, sister or mother, who is 'good' if she accepts the male authority in her life. So when they are confronted with educated, career oriented professional women, men, and even 'dependant' women, feel insecure. They perceive her as defiant and a challenge to their position. Being threatened, they use means to frighten a woman into submission and create a situation where women will be afraid to claim their freedom. However, today woman has arisen out of a thousand years' burning struggle of forced submission. She has the fiery spirit of Draupadi and is determined to retain her sovereignty, as an equal player.

And like Draupadi, fight every adversity with dignity and rise above the flames, burning negativity, to emerge pure in self perceptions. Then, like Draupadi, we flower like lotus, rising above the dirt. Win we will, as long as we don't give up our identity as a person in our own right. We are proud daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, but we are proudest as individual representations of 'shakti', the power to be what we want to be!

*(The writer is chairperson of Draupadi Dream Trust)*

8 Decades of Dedicated Service

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