



Talk by Urmi Chanda-Vaz Disrobing the Queen

Depiction, Normalization and Transmission of GBV in Indic Lore

at ISME, Mumbai on 24th May, 2019



Ms. Urmi Chanda-Vaz, a clinical psychologist, a journalist and now 'culturalist' gave a talk on how Indic lore has played a role in normalisation and intergenerational transmittance of GBV. She began with the example of an article about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech wherein he used Lord Krishna as a symbol to connect to the Hindu vote bank to draw a parallel on how over generations mythology has been used for certain benefits. She tried to explain the subtle manner in which mythological symbols make appearances in our daily lives and how they have always been deeply rooted in our collective conscience.

She talked about how a few years ago, a powerful ad campaign which showcased the goddesses Durga, Laxmi and Sarasvati (all of the Hindu pantheon) as victims of domestic violence, attracted a lot of eyeballs and controversies. Ms. Chanda-Vaz explained that while the ad managed to put its message forward, it was not at all an exaggeration. All the goddesses have been subject to violence in one way or another, in epics and/or other holy texts. The images portrayed in the campaign were not just a figment of someone's imagination; they are justifiable by myths.

She divided her presentation into three main areas
1. Myths from ancient India. 2. Texts and traditions from the medieval India 3. Mythmaking from contemporary India.

Beginning with myths from ancient India she stated some of the most common stories like the abduction of Sita, a clear case of violence wherein a woman is

abducted and taken against her will. She mentioned that there are several versions of Ramayana that try to justify this course of action by portraying Ravana as Sita's father. According to these versions, Ravana was trying to keep his daughter safe from the unhappy situation of an exile in the forest. Regarding the trial of Sita Ms. Chanda-Vaz asked the audience if they do not believe it to be a case of violence as Sita had walked the fire voluntarily. She argued that a woman who had just gotten out of exile was called upon in front of everyone who fought on behalf of her and was asked to walk through fire just to prove her innocence. Sita in the face of social pressure was rendered powerless and had to oblige to perform her trial. This is a place where men consider women's bodies as their properties and any woman who dares to challenge norms has to be punished.

Ms. Chanda-Vaz narrated another blatant bias against a woman with the story of Ahalya. Ahalya was the wife of Rishi Gautam and lived in a hut in the forest. The god, Indra took on the form of Gautam to have sex with her. When Gautam found this out he cursed Ahalya, his wife, to turn into a stone statue. Here, once again a woman was violated by deceit, and cursed for having a sexuality.

Our epics are full of unjust, biased and vicious episodes but they have been justified in one sense or the other, like the tragic public disrobing of the queen Draupadi. She was treated as property and was gambled off to the Kaurava clan. This act has been forever justified by saying that Lord Krishna stopped this, but she asked the audience what about the humiliation and pain experienced by her, and whether that could be justified. Ms. Chanda-Vaz continued, Draupadi's ordeal did not end there, during their exile in the forest she






was abducted by Jaidrath who was Duryodhana's brother in law. Another man named Kichaka forced himself on her during their year of agyatvas. She exclaimed people do not respect the agency of women as women, but treat them based on their social status. Even though in all these incidents, the men at fault had been punished, these atrocities are often conducted against women even today. There is a need to teach the next generation these stories by making them aware of the wrongs and giving them the right perspective. In the stories of Sita and Draupadi, Ram and the Pandavas were ironically responsible for many miseries of their lives. Moreover, regardless of their god-like status, they should not have been allowed to go without questioning.

Ms. Chanda-Vaz next shared the story of Tulsi Vivah from the Puranas. A demon called Jalandhar, whom the gods could not defeat because his power was in his fidelity, was defeated by Vishnu by having deceptive sex with his wife, Vrinda. When Jalandhar was defeated and Vrinda found out, she cursed Vishnu and committed suicide. Again, it was pointed out how men use deception and coercion against women for their own advantages.

Moving forward from classical myths, Ms. Chanda-Vaz proceeded to discuss myths from different tribes of India. She talked about how members of Baiga tribe believed in the idea of vagina dentata. She explained that this belief says that some women have teeth in their vagina, which comes from the collective neurotic fear of men of losing their penis. She explained that the 'teeth' in this tale could be taken as a symbol of power a woman has over a man, but ultimately he renders her powerless by removing her teeth and hence her defence.

She talked about how Manu Smriti is another example of how we get legitimacy for many of the undesirable social behaviours pertaining to violence from classical texts. The misogynist and patriarchal texts impose restrictions on women and give men full freedom to treat the other gender in a derogatory manner. These texts give justifications to practices like Sati and Jauhar. Ms. Chanda-Vaz asked the audience – "Since Jauhar was mostly voluntary, why would someone want to die in such a horrific manner?" She explained that women were trying to escape a fate much worse, a fate that





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Sexual, racial,
gender and
other forms of
discrimination &
violence in a
culture cannot
be eliminated
without
*changing
culture.*”

DRAPADI WITH DICE
Charlotte Bunch

*Founding Director;
Centre for Women's
Global Leadership*

Image: Draupadi on Dice, MF Hussain
Courtesy: www.asianart.com

would mean lifelong torture of all forms. Manu Smriti states that after a woman's husband is dead "She can voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flower, roots, and fruits. She should never even mention the name of another man. Aspiring to that unsurpassed law of women devoted to a single husband, she should remain patient, controlled and celibate until her death." Therefore, in anthropological terms, a widow is a surplus woman and therefore a burden.

Continuing Ms. Chanda-Vaz mentioned that Manu Smriti also sanctioned child marriage and how it states that 'any man can marry a charming girl of 12 years and any girl of 8 years.' She called attention to the several rituals, limitations, and restrictions that a woman goes through right from the minute she is born, and how there is no end to the norms she needs to follow.

Using the instance of Nirbhaya who was brutally raped and killed in 2012 and Sita, Ms. Chanda-Vaz clarifies that they had been stripped of their 'humanness' and therefore were not even allowed to feel and express their pain. She raised the question of why being raped equates to losing of 'humanness' although this was the position taken by her and the audience seemed in agreement.

Concluding the talk Ms. Chanda-Vaz poignantly mentioned the community of transwomen, who are left out in discussions of gender-based violence.