

DRAUPADĪ IN THE ASSEMBLY-HALL, GANDHARVA-HUSBANDS
AND THE ORIGIN OF THE GAṆIKĀS

The idea of this paper took shape under the influence of two different trends of scholarly thought. The first one is represented by the Dutch school of Indology, which made the greatest contribution to the discovery and study of the archaic culture of the Indo-Aryans. The purpose of this paper is to find in the texts several more notions and terms belonging to this most archaic level of the Indo-Aryan Culture.

The second trend of thought found its best expression in the works of the Russian school of Comparative Folklore Studies, especially in the works by Vladimir Propp¹. One of the main achievements of this school was the discovery of the fact, that the narrative plots in such genres as «fairy» tale and early epic closely followed the patterns, predetermined by myth and ritual, by the structure and functioning of particular socio-cultural institutions in primitive society. The original semantics of many folklore stories may be understood only by the way of correlating them with that kind of ethnographic phenomena. But there are many cases when the archaic system of rituals, the knowledge of which is so essential for the task, have long died away in a particular culture. In such a case, the folklorists say, we have every right to use for the comparison typologically related ritual material from other cultural traditions and with its help sometimes even to reconstruct the lost system of rituals in the culture we deal with.

1. See, e.g. V. YA. PROPP, *Historical roots of the Fairy-tale*, Leningrad, 1946 (in Russian: 2nd edition - Leningrad, 1986).

Let us try a similar method and start from the ancient Indian folklore plots and motifs, using as an explanatory model for them the ethnographic data taken from other, non-Aryan cultural traditions, in an endeavour to reconstruct for the archaic Indo-Aryan culture a specific socio-cultural institution, the existence of which is not directly testified by the texts. Here the Indologists are in a much more privileged position than the scholars studying, e.g., the European folktale. Whereas the latter has long ago lost its mythic and ritual background, in the Indian literature there are preserved numerous authentic survivals of archaic popular culture. So we suggest a reconstruction of an archaic Indo-Aryan socio-cultural institution on the basis of narrative plots interpreted in the light of comparative ritual data (taken mostly from other cultures), but we shall try also to verify our reconstruction by way of parallel references to the archaic cultural survivals in the Indo-Aryan tradition itself.

As our starting point we take the central episode of the *Mahābhārata* — the famous scene of the «humiliation of Draupadī». The analysis of the episode and of numerous references to it in the Epic shows that the essence of the humiliation, its gravity consists in the fact that the Kauravas just took the wife of the Pāṇḍava brothers to the Assembly Hall, made her enter the *sabhā*, where (for reasons not yet clear) it was forbidden her to appear.

In 1935 G.J. Held, one of the best interpreters of the Epic, explained the situation as follows: 1) in a historical perspective *sabhā* is identical to the so-called «unmarried men's house» of primitive societies, 2) Draupadī should not enter the *sabhā* because all women were forbidden to enter the «men's houses». I readily accept the first point, while the other one need a serious correction.

Not all women were, according to the texts, forbidden to enter the *sabhā*, but only «lawful (dharmic) wives» (*Mbh.* II.62.9; cf. *Kauś.Br.*, VII.9). The humiliation of Draupadī by the Kauravas consists essentially in their attempt to deprive her of that status and to make her join another category of women, who had to be present in the *sabhā*. The characteristics of these women are given in the speech of Duryodhana: they are 1) «common property», 2) naked, and 3) designated by the term *bandhakī*.

This specific character of the *sabhā* may be satisfactorily explained only if we part with the obsolete conception of the «men's house» as a kind of «military barracks», «monastery» or «exclusively male political club» — the view shared by G.J. Held with the ethnologists of the beginning of the century. Already in the 40-es new investigations proved that in the majority of cases the «men's house» was the residence of the age-group of the initiated unmarried boys and that it usually served as a centre of erotic life of the young people of the tribe, turning, as a rule, into a kind of «common dormitory» for teenagers of both sexes. It must be stressed that the same group of young men, having residence in the «men's house», represented usually the main military force and often helped a military leader to seize the power that had formerly belonged to the elders, and to establish a chiefdom or another embryonic form of state.

For a number of ancient Indian plots and motifs, connected with the *sabhā*, we can use as an effective explanatory model the institution of the so-called *ghotul* of the Muria-Gonds, exhaustively described by Verrier Elwin². The *ghotul* is a common dormitory for the young people of the village. In some *ghotuls* each boy and a girl form more or less permanent pairs, but everywhere all the girls (*motiari*) are regarded theoretically as belonging to all the boys of the *ghotul* (*chelik*). In the division of labour inside the village the speciality of the *ghotul* youth is dancing, singing and playing music at all festivals of the village community. They also play an active role in the ceremonial exchange with neighbouring villages, where they undertake «dancing expeditions» (sometimes resembling the «mock raid») on such occasions as marriages and calendar festivities. There they sing and dance, sometimes wearing masks, beg for alms and receive gifts, just like children of a particular age-group do during our Christmas in many European countries.

The end to this amusing period of life is put with the real (as distinguished from the «temporal» one, practiced in some of the *ghotuls*) marriage (corresponding to the «dharmic marriage» of

2. V. ELWIN, *The Muria and their Ghotul*, Bombay, 1947.

the Indo-Aryans). After the marriage the girl has to forget her «*ghotul* name» and to avoid meetings with her former *ghotul* partners. Of course, she is strictly forbidden to visit the *ghotul*. The same may be said about married men, though sometimes *ghotul* boys make exceptions for their married friends.

If we return now to the problem of the *sabhā*, we notice that the characteristics of «women of the *sabhā*» and those of «girls of the *ghotul*» practically coincide. The *sabhā* women «belong to many» — just like the *motiari*, who belong in theory to all *cheliks*. They are naked — but nakedness is obligatory for girls in many «men's houses», and in India this detail is testified by such terms as *mahānagnā* and *nagnā* (I shall return to them below). The term *bandhaki*» allows a *ghotul* interpretation for the whole complex of its meanings: the first one — «bound to many (men)» — is the self-evident «*ghotul*» meaning; the second meaning may be reconstructed (on the analogy with *bandhaka* m. «a catcher; a violator, ravisher») as «a catcheress; a ravisher-woman» (note the active role of the eldest girls in the erotic initiation of the youngest boys in many «men's houses»); the third meaning — «a barren woman» — reminds us of the strange, but well documented by ethnologists, fact of the exceptional rarity of cases of pregnancy among the girls living in «men's houses».

At this point. I would like to anticipate the objection, that such an archaic element as the erotic initiation of the age-group of boys is not consistent with the advanced and highly spiritual Vedic culture. It must be stressed that there are some texts testifying that this practice was actually well-known to the Indo-Aryans. The best example is given by one of the so-called «*kuntāpa*-hymns» of the *Atharvaveda* (XX.136). Its verses bear striking resemblance to the known specimens of the «*ghotul* folklore». They are rich in «animal» similes and metaphors, applied to certain organs of the human body. The central theme is the sexual act performed by a female personage — *mahānagnī* — and her partner. There can be little doubt about the initiatory significance of the act: suffice it to say, that the verses of that text were used in the royal initiatory rite, the *aśvamedha*, and *mahānagnī*, or *mahānagnā*, as a personage appears in the Vedic religious initiation (*dīkṣā*). But there are reasons to believe that the text itself was originally connected not

with any individual, royal or religious, initiation, but with the collective initiation of the age-group of young boys. The *mahānagnī* (called also *kumārī* «a girl») is described as pursuing her partner, forcing him to engage in sexual activity (cf. the second meaning of *bandhakī*). She is opposed to him as *pīvarī* «fat, plump» to *kṛṣītam* «thin, lean, small», and that reminds us of the age difference between the eldest girls of the «men's house» and the initiated youngest boys. The second element in the word *mahānagnī* (-nā) — *nagnī* (*nagnā*), meaning «naked» — coincides with the essential characteristic of the «girls of the men's house», while the first element — *mahā* — may be understood as having the meaning characteristic of children's language: «big» in the sense, of «grown-up», «adult». We cannot exclude the possibility of yet another interpretation: *mahānagnī* (-*nagnā*) may be the designation of the head of the girls («Queen of the *ghotul*», as the Gonds say), while the general term for the girls of this age-group may have been *nagnā*. This can explain, by the way, why there is in the *Arthaśāstra* (III.3) a special rule forbidding a man to call his wife *nagnā*. The terminological nature of the word *nagnā* is further testified by the fact, that the diminutive forme *nagnikā* was used as the terminological designation for the age-group of the youngest, small girls.

It is worth to notice that, when in the *aśvamedha* ritual the priests addressed the queen with the «ribald» speech it was not she who answered them with the verses of the *kuntāpa*-hymn, — it were «the daughters of noble families» who did so. This means that these verses were regarded as inappropriate in the mouth of a married woman whereas they were thought to be the lawful property of the age-group of unmarried girls.

We have no direct indications in the texts that the *mahānagnī* and the erotic initiation were in any way connected with the *sabhā*, but there is some circumstantial evidence. In the Marriage-hymn of the *Atharvaveda* it is said (XIV.1.36): «With what splendour (*varcas*) the backsides of *mahānagnī*, o *Aśvins*, or with what strong drink (*surā*), with what the dice were flooded, with that splendour favour ye this woman». We know that both *surā* and the dice were the characteristic attributes of the *kṣatriya* pastime in the *sabhā*. It seems, that the authors of the hymn ask here *Aśvins*

to transfer to the bride the sacral power of the pleasant things which the bridegroom has previously enjoyed during his life in the «men's house».

The fact that the erotic initiation took place in the *sabhā* is testified also by the reflections of this institution on the level of myth. In the mythic descriptions of Indra's heavenly *sabhā* there are inevitably present the heavenly dancing girls — Apsarases. Their erotic function as lovers of heavenly musicians — Gandharvas — as well as of the *kṣatriyas* slain in battle, is very well known. In the epic story of «Arjuna's Ascent to Indra's Heaven» this hero undergoes in the «*sabhā* of the gods» an initiation rite which consists not only in learning the secrets of heavenly weapons: Gandharva Chitrasena has also to teach him singing and dancing, and the Apsaras Urvaśī is ordered by Indra to initiate him into the art of love. Arjuna rejects her love and has to be punished; the curse of the Apsaras deprives him of his masculinity. By remarkable coincidence the Gonds believe that a *ghotul* girl is able by her magic to punish in the same way a boy who has rejected her love or made her jealous.

In all probability the Apsarases and Gandharvas are nothing but the mythological «heavenly counterparts» of the boys and girls of the Indo-Aryan «men's house». A complete typological parallel may be found in the mythology of the Muria-Gonds: the girls of the *ghotul* have their mythological counterparts in the «heavenly motiari» — singing and dancing nymphs of waters and woods.

Among the stories about Gandharvas one of the best known is the tale of Purūravas and Urvaśī. The Gandharvas allowed the mortal king Purūravas to have sexual relations with the Apsarases, including Urvaśī, provided that their meetings should take place in darkness; the Apsarases should not see the king naked. The jealous Gandharvas provoke the king to break the condition: they carry off the two lambs that were tied to the lovers' bed, Purūravas jumps out of the bed, the Gandharvas produce a flash of lightning and Urvaśī sees the king naked. The story as a whole may be interpreted as a reflection of the inevitable conflicts that arose when the men of senior age groups had relations with the girls of the «men's house», and particularly when the military leader — *rājan* — began to lay claims for the «women of the *sabhā*». Some details

of the story also find their correspondences in the *ghotul* practices: darkness is a necessary condition for sexual activities in the *ghotul*; the stratagem of the Gandharvas — stealing the lambs — too finds a striking parallel: when the cheliks want to put an end to the visits of a married man to the *ghotul*, they carry off from his yard first a cock, then a pig and at last a goat; and the stealing of a goat is a sign of the most categorical prohibition to visit the *ghotul*.

The various terms connected with this socio-cultural institution sometimes appear in the texts as interrelated and convertible. E.g., we mentioned the term *mahānagnī* and then spoke separately about the Gandharvas. But there is a text from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* — (I.27) — where the two terms appear in close connection: «Once upon a time Soma the king was among the Gandharvas. The gods and the seers meditated on him: «How shall Soma the king come hither to us». The goddess Vāc said: «The Gandharvas love women: with me as a woman do ye barter it» (...) With her as a *mahānagnī* they bought Soma from the Gandharvas». So, these two different terms, one belonging to the sphere of ritual, the other — to the sphere of myth, here appear as interrelated in a context that perfectly suits our reconstruction. One more example. We have seen that in the Marriage-hymn AV.XIV.1 the Aśvins are asked to transfer the splendour (*varcas*) from *mahānagnī* to the bride. But in the next hymn (AV.XIV.2) it is the Apsarases who are asked to turn over to the bride their *varcas*.

Besides the stories about the relations of a mortal man with the Apsarases there are also tales about the relations of a mortal woman with the Gandharvas. The most interesting is the story of Draupadī's life at the court of king Virāṭa. Draupadī hires herself out as hairdresser for the women of Virāṭa's family. The text calls her *sairamdhri*; the term in later sources means «chambermaid» and sometimes figures as a tribal ethnic name, but its meaning in the Epic is far from clear³. Taking into account that Draupadī at the same time proclaims herself «the wife of five Gandharvas», I would risk the suggestion that *sairamdhri* may be a pious substi-

3. *The Mahābhārata*, tr. and ed. by J.A.B. VAN BUITENEN, 4. *The Book of Virāṭa*. 5. *The Book of the Effort*, Chicago, 1978, pp. 8-9.

tution for a «rude» term *sādhāraṇī* «belonging to several (men)» (I shall return to this point below in connection with the term *gaṇa*). The heroine's occupation as a hairdresser also seems to be rather significant. Making elaborate hairdresses is a favourite occupation of girls in village youth dormitories all over the world; in the Vedas and the Epic we find mentions of the complex hairdress of the Apsarases (their epithet *pañcacūḍa* (e.g. *Mbh.* III.134.11) means «having their hair divided into five plaits»⁴). When the queen's brother, Kīcaka began to pursue her with his advances she ran for protection into the *sabhā*, where Yudhiṣṭhira was; note that this time her appearance in the *sabhā* created no scandal, evidently the «wife of the Gandharvas» might enter the *sabhā* without hindrance. At night Draupadī sleeps in a specific building — «the dancing hall» — where, as the text says, «the girls dance by day and at night go home»; but, contradictory to it, the text also mentions that there stands a large bed. Draupadī asks Kīcaka to come there «when it is dark, so that the Gandharvas won't notice it» (so we see that the motif of darkness as a necessary condition for love-making persistently reoccurs in the «*ghotul*» stories). In the dark Kīcaka mistakes Bhīma, who waits for him sitting on the bed, for Draupadī and is killed by the Pāṇḍava. This story taken as a whole brings us, I would say, most closely to the historical reality of the Indo-Aryan «men's house» or «common dormitory».

The only other text that can rival it in this respect is the second Marriage-hymn of the *Atharvaveda* (XIV.2). It testifies that the young people of the *sabhā* played a particular role in the marriage rite. Girls and boys of the «Indo-Aryan *ghotul*» are described here sometimes directly, as the real participants of the wedding («sisters» or playmates of the bride, «long-haired» boy-dancers), and sometimes they are spoken of as the Apsarases and Gandharvas, whom they evidently personify in the process of the rite. E.g. the mention of the Apsarases and Gandharvas hiding in the trees and threatening to attack the marriage procession reminds us of a cus-

4. Cf. the custom of Tamil girls to wear five plaits during the season of their love-play with boys in the rice-fields. (A.M. DUBYANSKY, *On the ritual and mythological contents in the imagery of ancient Tamil lyric poetry*. – Vostochnaya poe-tika, Moscow, 1985, p. 148 (in Russian).

tom known to many Indo-European peoples, the Balts in particular: unmarried boys from the bridegroom's age-group attack the marriage-feast, feigning the «kidnapping» of the bride, and the bridegroom has to pay them «ransom» with a bucketful of ale. «Long-haired boys» (long hair, on the one hand — a common characteristic of the Gandharvas, see AV. IV.37.11; VIII.6.17, on the other — a typical characteristic of the members of the unmarried boys' age-group and of the «brotherhoods» of young warriors⁵ in many cultures) and the «sisters» (*jāmi*) of the bride, with loosened hair, dance together at the marriage feast, lamenting the parting with their playmate, «doing evil (to the house) with their wailing». They seem to be the representatives of the forces, inimical to the marriage rite. At a certain moment of the rite the «*ghotul* company» with its leader, who is addressed to as «Gandharva Viśvāvasu», is driven away: «Stand up from here, o Viśvāvasu (...). Seek thou a sister (*jāmi*), sitting among the Fathers⁶, (...) she is thy portion by right of birth (...). Go away unto thy wives, the Apsarases» (XIV.2.33,36). The analysis of the hymn helps us to single out one more probable term for a «girl in the unmarried men's house» — *jāmi* «sister» (it figures also as a name of an Apsaras — *Jāmi*; there are many semantic parallels in the terminology of the «men's houses» and in the folklore reflections of this institution all over the world).

The suggested hypothesis offers the only satisfactory explanation for a number of «strange» notions, in particular connected with the Gandharvas, surviving for a long time in Indian culture. E.g., the well-known idea that every girl before marriage belongs to the Gandharvas (or a Gandharva) now appears to be not a mythological fiction, but a reflection of social reality. The hypothesis also throws new light on such notions as «the Gandharva mar-

5. See, e.g. WILLEM B. BOLLÉE, *The Indo-European Sodalities in Ancient India*, ZDMG, Bd. 131, hf. 1, 1981, p. 174.

6. See *ibid.*, *passim*, on the members of «brotherhoods» as the personifications of the dead; also G.J. HELD, *The Mahābhārata: an Ethnological Study*, L.-Amsterdam, 1935, pp. 236-237 — on the location of the *sabhā* south of the village, in the «region of dead», and pp. 134-135 — on a connection (or identity) between the Gandharvas and the Pitṛs: and lower in this paper on the meaning of the word *gandharva*.

riage». The specific nature of this mode of marriage was till now difficult to understand. The sources say only that it was a marriage based on free union and mutual sympathy and maybe on a previous acquaintance of the bride and bridegroom. But what have the Gandharvas to do with it? Now we may suggest that the Gandharva marriage was originally the marriage of a boy and girl who had previously been engaged in intimate relations in the «men's house». The tribal people condemn such marriages with the same fervour as the Brahminic tradition did, but they seem to be inevitable: the statistics tell that they constitute about 10% of the total number of marriages among the *ghotul*-practicing tribal populations.

Now we can also solve another old Indological enigma, which concerns the duality of the meaning of the word *gandharva*. On the one hand, *gandharva* is in mythology a heavenly dancer and musician, a lover of the Apsarases. On the other hand, in religious and «proto-scientific» texts we find a notion of *gandharva* as a soul or unembodied spirit in the intermediate state between two births, two existences. These two meanings seemed up to now to have nothing in common. But now we believe that the earthly personification of a Gandharva was a boy undergoing the initiation rite. And the initiated in Indian tradition (as in the Vedic *dikṣā*, for example) was thought to be in the state of «temporal death», in an intermediate state between two existences. So both different meanings of the word *gandharva*, viewed in historical perspective, perfectly coincide in the single image of a boy undergoing the initiation, living in the «common dormitory», taking-part in communal festivities in the role of dancer and musician, but at the same time thought to be possessed by a spirit, waiting between two births for its real incarnation in a human form.

There are two more terms to be mentioned here — *gaṇa* and *gaṇikā*. The word *gaṇa* is used in the Vedas mostly for the host of the Maruts, the young warriors «of the same age», «grown up together»⁷ — which clearly shows them to be the representation of an age-group. They possess collectively a young girl (goddess

7. See WILLEM B. BOLLÉE, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

Rodasī) as *sādhāraṇī* (the term means «a woman in common possession»). In post-Vedic mythology *gaṇas* became the wild and furious spirits, the host of Rudra-Śiva. But at the same time historical sources speak of *gaṇas* as of some real military-political organisations (interpreted by most scholars as «kṣatriya republics» or «oligarchies»). Surprisingly, here again we find in the texts assertions that some of these «historical» *gaṇas* did not know the institution of marriage. On that ground different scholars interpreted *gaṇas* as the surviving tribal communities of a supposedly most primitive type, which implies egalitarianism or primitive communism, promiscuity or group-marriage⁸ and so on. These scholars deserve great credit for drawing our attention to this interesting set of facts, but their interpretation of these facts, I am afraid, bears in itself an anachronism. Even the remote ancestors of the Indo-Aryans in the steppes of South Russia must have had a much more complex structure of society. In the light of our hypothesis *gaṇas* must be viewed not as tribal ethnic groups taken in their totality, but as the bands of «unmarried warriors» of one age-group (living in «men's houses» and undertaking mutual raids on neighbouring tribes) and then — as the larger «men's societies», «*die Männerbünde*» or warrior brotherhoods which are usually founded on the basis of the «men's houses» system and play an important political role during the period of transition from archaic tribal society to state organisation. The evidence for the real existence of such *Männerbünde* in India has recently been presented in an article by Willem B. Bollée.

The original meaning of the word *gaṇikā* was undoubtedly «belonging to a *gaṇa*». Historically speaking, the institution of *gaṇikās* was evidently a continuation of the ritual function which previously had been performed by all girls of a particular age-group in the tribe. Gradually, as the archaic tribal society desintegrated, this function was handed over to particular categories of girls (orphans, outsiders, captives), turning at last into

8. E.g. E. HEROLD, *Group-marriage in Vedic Society*, «Archiv Orientální», vol. XXIII (1955), pp. 63-76; D. CHATTOPADHYAYA, *Lokāyata, A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, New Delhi, 1959, pp. 146 ff.; N.N. BHATTACHARYA, *History of Indian Erotic Literature*, New Delhi, 1975, p. 41.

inherited, lifelong occupation. However, some characteristic functions fulfilled by the *gaṇikās* in the classical Indian culture (such as their prominent role in public festivities, in the king's ceremonial entries, hunting expeditions and so on) may be interpreted as traces of the origin of this institution from the age-group organisation. A line of social development, first hinted at in the story of Purūravas and Urvaśī, resulted in the formation of a special institution of the «king's *gaṇikās*» (*rājagaṇikā*).