

# ‘May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons’: Social and Ethical Impact of Surrogacy in Ancient Indian Myths

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## Introduction

The practice and implications of surrogacy in the twenty-first century Indian society raise several interesting questions related to social and ethical issues like commercialization of women which are of significance in modern times. Surrogacy, however, is not a contemporary practice recently evolving in modern society. Its roots may be traced to ancient Indian society as depicted in our myths, where surrogacy was not only practised but also socially accepted. My discussion will be limited to referring to a few instances of surrogacy and its variations as found in these myths, where women come forth as strikingly forthright and often take independent decisions regarding their involvement in surrogate births, thus displaying many ‘modern’ responses.

In the first part of my article, I shall discuss some instances of surrogate births which were not considered unethical by ancient society in general, though the woman was apparently regarded as merely an instrument to propagate the family line. What is more, any emotional turmoil or physical trauma that the woman might undergo in the process was subordinate to the urgent necessity of producing children to prevent extinction of the family name, involving in most cases the woman’s active or passive support.

At the start, we must also keep in mind that the study of Hermeneutics, or the reconstruction of the historical context of a literary work, speaks of analysing a text by placing it in the context of its times and the society in which it was located, while appreciating the cultural and social forces that might have influenced its outlook. Ethical or moral views and ideas of commercialization would have been far different in ancient times and therefore the actions and responses of mythological characters should be judged in the perspective of norms and accepted modes of social behaviour of that time. Thus what may seem ‘unethical’ or ‘commercial’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may have been the accepted code of conduct for men as well as for women in their contemporary social context. For this reason, we should be careful not to impose our own set of perceptions or apply our present-day standards of the rights and privileges of men and women in modern society on these ancient men and women who lived and acted in accordance with the ethical values or moral principles laid down by their society, that in turn controlled or influenced their behaviour.

Birth in Indian mythology is initially conceived of as mental, not womb-born (*a-yonija*). From Vishnu's navel a lotus emerges in which Brahma appears. In other versions the first creation is a golden egg (Hiranya-garbha) from which Brahma appears. Brahma creates mind-born sons (manas-putra) and a daughter Sandhya. When these do not agree to propagate, he creates from his mind Svayambhuva Manu and Shatarupa, the first couple, who produce humanity. In Greek mythology too, Athene appears out of Zeus’s head full grown, like Brahma's sons and daughters.

It is interesting to note that there are numerous instances of miraculous births in our epics. Rama and his brothers are womb-born after their mothers have consumed the magical pudding that the supernatural being appearing from the *yajna*-flames handed over to King Dasharatha. Jarasandha is also born after a miraculous mango is given to Brihadratha's two queens by a sage. Each queen produces half a child and throws that away. The Rakshasi Jara joins the halves together to make a complete boy who is named after her. As she gave him life, so she is a surrogate mother in a way. Even our 'Thakurmar Jhuli' is full of tales of children born after mothers eat miraculous plants or fruits. No male agency appears to be needed. There are also instances of men turning into women and having children: Ila, from whom the lunar dynasty emerges, was the male Sudyumna and female Ila in alternate months and had sons in both conditions. Bhangasvana had a hundred sons as a man and another hundred as a woman, but preferred to remain a woman when given the choice.

### **Surrogacy and Ethics in Indian Mythology**

Instances of surrogacy and surrogate parenthood, involving the practice of giving birth to a baby for another woman or man who is unable to have a baby, form an important aspect of studies on classical Indian mythology and reveal several interesting features.

The *Anushasana Parva*, section 49 of the *Mahabharata* lists six different types of sons that may be classed as heirs and kinsmen as allowed by the *Manusambhita*. These are :

'one's own son; son born to one's wife by an accomplished person; son born to one's wife through another by payment; son of a remarried woman by her second husband or to a woman through *niyoga* (levirate) son born to the wife before her marriage; and son of an adulterous wife.'

Pandu lectures Pritha( Kunti) on this in an effort to persuade her to beget sons through other men. He also mentions six others who have no such rights: 'the son given away in adoption; the son who, out of gratitude, calls himself thus, the son conceived before marriage (how does this differ from the son born to the wife before marriage?); the son born of incest; and the son of a lower caste womb.'<sup>1</sup>

What follows is a fascinating exchange between Pandu and Kunti as each narrates stories in support of their views. Kunti refers to the story of Vyusitashva, a famous king in the *Puranas*, and Bhadra who was able to have seven sons by lying with her dead husband. Pandu, in turn, gives an account of the freedom of women in ancient Indian society, which was gradually curtailed with the advance of Aryan civilization, till the woman became bound by the dictates of the father, the husband and later the sons:

“ in the past, women  
were not restricted to the house,  
dependent on family members;  
they moved about freely,  
they enjoyed themselves freely.  
They slept with any man they liked  
from the age of puberty;  
they were unfaithful to their husbands,  
and yet it was not adharma,  
for the practice of those times  
was promiscuous intercourse.”<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Pandu refers to two more pertinent facts:

The maha rishis have praised  
this Purana-dharma;  
the northern Kurus still practise it. ...  
the new custom is very recent” – 122.7,8

Pandu also refers to the story of Shvetaketu, son of Uddalaka, who is outraged at his mother being taken away by a Brahmin in the presence of his father. Uddalaka explains the rightness of this incident to his son:

This is the Sanatana Dharma  
all women of the four castes  
are free to have relations  
with any man.” – 122. 13-14

Pandu further quotes the third dictate of Shvetaketu that:

“Third, the faithful wife who,  
commanded by her husband  
to procreate children, refuses,  
is guilty of infanticide.” – 122. 19

Citing the examples of Saudasa’s wife Madayanti who had a son by Vashishtha, and Ambika and Ambalika bearing Vyasa’s children, Pandu declares:

With these precedents before you,  
you should do as I say” – 122. 24

However, Pandu does not bully his wife or coerce her into submitting to his demands by citing these examples. Aware of Kunti’s strong will – she had already told Pandu “Not even in thought will I/ be embraced by another” (122.25-26) – he begs her, with great humility, to agree to his suggestion:

Sweet lady,  
I fold my palms  
joining the tips  
of my lotus-leaf fingers  
and I implore you in anjali  
listen to me!  
be gracious to me!” – 122. 29

Thus directly appealing for grace and becoming suppliant, Pandu gains his desired end and Kunti relents – not only so that she is not guilty of committing *adharma* but also because she is prompted by her strong love for her husband that had always been a motivating force in her life. Kunti’s initial refusal to even ‘think’ of another man is ironic, for she has already given birth to Karna. As an unmarried princess, Kunti had yielded to the temptation of testing Durvasa’s boon and when Surya, the Sun-god, appeared before her, she had capitulated to his demand for sexual union on condition that her ‘virginity’ or purity of spirit would be reinstated and that her son would resemble him. Karna, her first-born son, however, is marginalized at birth, being cast away by Kunti for being illegitimate, and never publicly acknowledged by her during his lifetime for fear of social disgrace. Karna is brought up by Adhiratha and Radha who are not his surrogate parents but may be regarded as his foster- parents.

Multiple surrogacy is seen in the case of Kunti after her marriage to Pandu who is cursed with the inability to have children. Kunti uses Durvasa's boon, accepting Pandu's selection of different fathers who may be regarded as 'surrogate' fathers, to give him three sons through three different 'gods', each being an embodiment of their respective fathers' virtues. The ancient myths valorized the unknown fathers of princes to be gods, which increased their sense of nobility and majesty, arousing awe in the minds of common man. For instance, Alexander proclaimed himself to be the son of Zeus, though Philip of Macedonia was his father. Kunti accepts 'gods' or surrogate fathers to produce sons who would succeed Pandu and, on her husband's insistence, takes resort to the ancient, socially accepted custom of *nijoga* which was used to propagate the family line. However, she displays admirable self-control, strength of mind and independence of spirit in refusing to submit herself to further relationships with other 'gods' to give the insatiable Pandu more sons:

“The wise do not sanction  
a fourth conception, even in crisis.  
The woman who has intercourse  
for a fourth is a svarini, a loose woman;  
the woman who has intercourse  
for a fifth is bandhaki, a prostitute” ( 123. 83)

Despite these socially accepted extra-marital relationships with 'gods' or surrogate fathers who assist in the continuation of the royal lineage of Pandu, Kunti is revered due to her purity of spirit that remains inviolate, and she is loved by the Pandavas who obey her every command, including her advice that all five brothers should wed Draupadi. Indeed, Kunti, “the archetype of the Single Mother”<sup>3</sup> in Vyasa's epic *Mahabharata*, provides perhaps one of the earliest instances of the modern concept of “other mothering”<sup>4</sup> for she cares for Madri's sons Nakula and Sahadeva, also born of surrogate fathers and who are not her blood relations, a fact which reinforces her as a powerful mother-figure.

In the epic, surrogacy is clearly seen to have social acceptance and respectability and Kunti's status in society remains untrammelled: neither does she express any mental trauma at having to accept three different men to father her sons. In fact, Kunti is totally at ease with Dharma, (or Vidura, as Iravati Karve and Pradip Bhattacharya observe) the first 'god' of Pandu's choice, who is her brother-in-law:

He laughed.  
“Kunti, what can I give you?”  
She laughed,  
“A son”. – 123.4

Here are mature individuals fully aware of their responsibilities, willingly and with good humour, consenting to participate in an act that is socially necessary and ethically acceptable. There is no evidence of mental anguish on the part of Kunti, neither does she feel that she is treated as a commodity by Pandu, who instead regards her with respect and love.

Traditionally, epic women are revered by their families and society, though they often had more than one husband or had extra-marital relationships with other men who in turn were required to act as surrogate fathers. Surrogacy in the *Mahabharata* is seen to propagate the Kuru dynasty of Santanu. When Vichitravirya dies without an heir, his mother, Queen Satyawati of the Nishada race unhesitatingly commands Vyasa, her illegitimate son by the sage Parashara, to impregnate Vichitravirya's widows in accordance with the custom of *Nijoga* to further the family line. Vyasa

advises his mother to wait till the widows are purified by a year-long vow of chastity, but Satyavati, citing reasons of the security of the kingdom, refuses to wait. The two widows silently acquiesce but are terrified by Vyasa's 'fearful, stern looks' and repulsed by his fishy 'smell' (105.45) which he had inherited from his mother. When Vyasa reveals to Satyavati that his sons by the widows, Ambika and Ambalika, would be born blind (Dhritarashtra) and sickly (Pandu), Satyavati, in desperation, commands him to impregnate Ambika again. The latter takes recourse to subterfuge and sends in her maid-servant in her place and Vidura is born of her. Here Vyasa becomes the surrogate father of Dhritarashtra and Pandu but it is to be debated whether the unnamed maid of Ambika can be considered a surrogate mother, for though she bears a child on behalf of Ambika, the latter never accepts Vidura as her son and he is marginalized at birth, never being considered suitable to ascend the throne of Hastinapura. Significantly, through Vyasa's act of surrogacy, the aristocratic Kuru dynasty is replaced by the Nishada race propagated through Satyavati and Vyasa.

Another example of surrogacy in ancient times is seen in the *Adi Parva*, Chapter 92 of the *Mahabharata*. which contains the story of the blind sage Dirghatamas whom King Bali approached for sons, having none. Queen Sudeshna avoided the sage's command and sent her maid instead to be her surrogate. When this was discovered, she was forced to comply and gave birth to five sons Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra and Suhma after whom kingdoms were named (Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, North Bengal, South Bengal). Sage Dirghatamas may be regarded as their surrogate father. Significantly, no allowances are made for Sudeshna's feelings and her submission to her husband's demands is considered to constitute her royal duty. Can we, then, regard this to be an instance of commodification of women in ancient society? The laws of *Manusambhita* on different ways of begetting heirs were presumably a product of a patriarchal society and women generally obeyed – or were forced to comply with – these laws as a matter of course.

Gandhari's conception and the consequent birth of her children have certain parallels with the modern concept of artificial birth. Gandhari, wife of King Dhritarashtra, conceived, but after two years she delivered a mass or mole. Vyasa found 101 cells that were normal in the mass. He directed these cells to be placed in a nutrient medium and grown to full term. Of these, one hundred developed into male children: Duryodhana, Duhshasana and the other Kauravas, and one developed into a daughter Duhshala. No doubt that Vyasa turns that mass into one hundred sons and a daughter – but giving life may not qualify for surrogacy (cf. Krishna resuscitating his grand nephew, the still-born Parikshit). Surrogacy is also found elsewhere in Hindu mythology. For instance, in the *Bhagvata Purana*, Vishnu hears Vasudev pleading with Kansa not to kill all his sons and transfers an embryo from Devaki's womb to the womb of Rohini, another wife of Vasudev. Rohini, the surrogate mother, gives birth to Balaram, brother of Krishna, and secretly raises the child, while Vasudev and Devaki conceal this fact from Kansa, telling him that their child was born dead. Kartikeya, too, is the surrogate son of Shiva and Parvati.

Surrogacy is present in Biblical times as well. The Old Testament contains the example of Abraham's infertile wife, Sarah, who "commissions" her maid Hagar to bear her a child by Abraham.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Rachel, the childless wife of Jacob, commissions her maid Bilhah to have a child by Jacob.<sup>6</sup> Thus, surrogacy is considered as a social necessity in the face of childlessness and does not apparently disrupt normal husband-wife relationships, having ethical acceptance in society. Surrogacy is accepted with maturity and practicality – indeed, the ancient, socially accepted custom of '*niyoga*' served to simplify the complexities that would inevitably arise out of a king not having an heir.

### Commercialisation of Women: Womb-on-Rent

The mythological story of Madhavi that appears in Udyoga Parva (sections 119-122) of the *Mahabharata* portrays a variation of the modern day commercialization of women by encouraging the practice of a 'womb-on-rent'. Galava, a very devoted pupil of the sage - King- teacher Visvamitra of Kanyakubja (who may not be the Visvamitra of *Ramayana*) wanted to offer *guru- dakshina* to his teacher on completion of his studies. Visvamitra refused to accept anything at first, but later, slightly annoyed at Galav's insistence, asked for eight hundred white Ashvamedhi horses, each having one ear that was black. Galav searched far and wide but could not find such horses. Finally, he approached King Yayati, renowned for his wealth, for help. Yayati, unwilling to refuse Galav though he could not give him the required horses, gifted him his daughter Madhavi instead. Madhavi was blessed with the ability to produce sons for kings, and yet retain her virtue and virginity. Galav offered Madhavi to three kings, namely, Haryasva of Ikshvaku race who ruled at Ayodhya, Divodasa King of Kashi and King Ushinara of Bhojanagari , each of whom had only two hundred Ashwamedhi horses which they agreed to exchange in return for sons by Madhavi.

Madhavi agreed to their proposal and Galav obtained six hundred horses in exchange of Madhavi's three sons. Madhavi left behind each son to accompany Galav in his search for the remaining horses. Unable to find any more horses, Galav offered the six hundred horses to Visvamitra and requested the sage to accept Madhavi in place of the remaining two hundred horses – this being the only recorded instance of a woman being exchanged for horses in ancient society. Visvamitra accepted this proposal and Galav's debt was discharged in this way. He and the three Kings later thank Madhavi for complying with their requirements and Galav retires to the forest. Madhavi bears a son for Visvamitra .Later, Vishvamitra hands over the six hundred horses to Ashtaka, the son he has by Madhavi and sends the latter back to her father's palace. Yayati wants to get his daughter married and arranges for Madhavi's *swayamvara*, as many suitors (including the three kings who had sons by her) were eager to marry her. But, Madhavi is no longer interested in marriage or childbearing and retires to the forest to live as a hermit.

The story of Madhavi displays how society sought to endow women with respectability and even reverence after they had served the purpose of propagating royal dynasties. Madhavi's four sons grow up to become great kings whose deeds are celebrated in the Puranas. : King Haryasva's son Vasumanasa, also called Vasuprada, later grew up to be one of the wealthiest and greatest of benefactors among all the kings; King Divodasa's son Pratardana became a celebrated hero; King Ushinara's son Sibi gained renown as the upholder of truth and justice; and Visvamitra's son Ashtaka gained fame as the king who performed grand *Ashva-medha yajnas*.

Though this story of the 'salvation of the kings by a maiden' is re-told in *Mahabharata* , its principal characters come from the distant Pre-Vedic or early Vedic times and the modern reader may feel that a woman was regarded as merely a commodity from the earliest of times. The manner in which it is depicted in the epic, however, is quite different. Everyone in the story tries to live earnestly and honestly: Galav tries to fulfil his obligation to his teacher; Yayati to discharge his duty as the King by helping one who comes to him for help; while Madhavi considers it her filial duty to save her father from disgrace; as well as to assist a dedicated student in fulfilling his promise to Visvamitra; moreover, it is she herself, who suggests the arrangement of exchanging each of her three sons for two hundred horses. Her sons who were aware of the circumstances of their birth proudly called themselves the sons of Madhavi and they all succeed their fathers to the throne when they grow up; Sibi and Ashtaka are made kings by preference over the sons of their fathers' individual wives, thus showing that there was no social stigma attached to their birth. The sons too had great reverence for their mother and saluted her as 'the abode of asceticism.' In section 122 of

*Udyoga Parva*, Madhavi's father Yayati – the son of the legendary King Nahusha and propagator of the great *Chandravamsa* dynasty from which the Pandavas descended many generations later – is depicted as being able to ascend to heaven by virtue of the good deeds of Madhavi's sons. Thereby Madhavi's actions are given heavenly sanction.

In this particular myth then, ethics, defined as moral principles that control or influence a person's behaviour, do not seem to be violated, and the modern day views regarding commercialization, the practice of using something to try to make a profit, especially in a way that other people do not approve of – do not seem to be applicable, for Madhavi's actions are approved by society, and she faces no social disgrace but gains approbation for her selflessness and dedication to duty.

From the modern viewpoint, however, Madhavi displays a classic case of a 'womb –on –rent' as a strongly patriarchal society rides roughshod over her feelings. Bhisham Sahni's play 'Madhavi' (1982) portrays a modern interpretation to the story, in which Madhavi initially protests and then silently submits to the demands of her father Yayati and Munikumar Galav in begetting three sons through three different kings, undergoing intense emotional trauma as she leaves behind each child to accompany Galav on his mission to obtain eight hundred *ashwamedhi* horses, in exchange of her sons. In Bhisham Sahni's play, she emerges as vocal, for she bitterly asks her father:

"If Mother were alive would she have let you gift me away like this?"

Later, she expresses her anguish to Galav before leaving him and renouncing a patriarchal society that exploits and humiliates women:

"I am a woman who has given birth to three sons and lost each of them...  
I am going to run away... how can I piece together my broken heart? ...  
The world is a vast place. I am sure that somewhere there will be room for me.  
I have done my duty and fulfilled all my obligations."<sup>7</sup>

Madhavi's final exit from the *swayamvar sabha* organised by her father is reminiscent of Sita's disappearance in *Uttarakanda* – a later addition to the *Ramayana* – after she restores her sons to their father Rama, disillusioned and deeply hurt at her husband's continuing demand that she give proof of her purity. Both Madhavi and Sita, by renouncing society, seem to express their strong protest at the social injustice meted out to them. A recent production of the play 'Madhavi' depicts renowned actress Rashi Bunny in a solo performance that is thought-provoking, focusing on the double standards of society and the modern day exploitation and commodification of women. The point to be noted, however is that the story of Sita's disappearance is present in *Uttarakanda* – inserted much later; while Bhisham Sahni writes his play in 1982. Can we then regard the concept of commodification of women as having been present in the pre-Vedic or early Vedic times? Hermeneutics would perhaps not advise us to think so.

From the perspective of modern responses we may interpret the myths as depicting women often being treated as commodities by men – as the story of Madhavi shows. For the same reason, Pritha(Kunti) can be gifted away to a friend by her father Shurasena; then put at the exclusive disposal of an eccentric hermit by her foster-father Kuntibhoja and so have an illegitimate son; Jatila and Varkshi are treated as commodity and forced to have several husbands at a time. Again, in the dice-game between Pushkara and Nala, the former tempts Nala to pledge his wife Damayanti after he has lost the kingdom, but unlike Yudhishtira he refuses to do so. But the point is that the wife was regarded as a possession. Women were essentially son producers and if the husband were sterile or dead those in power unhesitatingly demanded that they practise *niyoga* with a relative or a sage.

For similar reasons Draupadi is also treated as a commodity for she can be staked in a gambling match besides being married to the five Pandavas, for by this latter arrangement, Kunti ensures that there is a single pivot for the five – spoked wheel of the Pandava destiny: Draupadi. This is because Kunti, like Yudhishtira, had noticed that when the brothers looked at Draupadi ‘each had her in his heart.’<sup>8</sup>

The reincarnation of Shri, the consort of Vishnu, Draupadi is unique in being the only woman in the epic who in a previous birth had asked Shiva five times for a husband – and had been destined by him to have five husbands. Thus, her marriage to the five Pandavas, instead of being considered socially unacceptable, is given divine sanction. Draupadi, like Durga and Athena, emerges fully grown from a sacrificial fire. Indeed the gods ordain that she would bring about destruction to the Kshatriyas and there is a heavenly announcement on her appearance at Drupada’s *yajna*.

Loveliest of ladies,  
This dark-skinned beauty Krishna  
Will be the cause of the destruction  
Of the Kshatriyas. (169. 48)

In this, she is like Helen of Troy, fated to bring destruction and death. Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi are both *a-yonija*, not womb-born, appearing out of the *yajna*-fire. Drupada is more an adoptive father, adopting these two children of unknown parentage as his progeny. Drupada's queen, unable to be present during their emergence, cannot be regarded as their surrogate mother but as she requests that they regard her as mother, she is their foster-mother, as Yashoda is for Krishna. Draupadi, daughter of the King of Panchala, is also called Panchali, meaning ‘puppet.’ She is indeed a ‘puppet’ in the hands of her father, a commodity and an instrument of Drupada’s obsession to avenge himself on Drona who had defeated him.

### Conclusion

Mythological women like Madhavi, Satyavati, Kunti and Draupadi are among the few women who are considered exceptionally virtuous with the singular capacity of retaining their ‘virginity’ or purity of spirit. In fact, they are revered and held in high esteem despite having extra-marital relationships or more than one husband. Virginity in these cases is not considered a physiological condition but a spiritual state of mind and the *kanya* or virgin is regarded as *a-yonija* or ‘one-in-herself’ – an independent entity, as M. Esther Harding observes<sup>9</sup>. These ‘virgins’ or *kanyas*<sup>10</sup> have to face insurmountable obstacles and tragic circumstances in their lives that lead to intense suffering and emotional upheavals. Despite being in positions of power, their lives seem to be singularly lonely, for they are often confined by patriarchal restraint and demands of marriage and surrogate parenthood in a largely parochial, male-dominated society.

Myths form an integral part of the culture of every race and may be taken to be a social document of ancient times. These ancient myths, through a continuous process of re-interpretation and re-invention, thereby retain their dynamic nature and social relevance in modern times. In a society where the ability to ‘be the mother of a hundred sons’ was considered a blessing and a privilege, the popularity and social acceptance of surrogacy and the *niyoga* system would have been inevitable and a matter of necessity. Did the practice of surrogacy further increase the sense of loneliness and suffering of these epic women, while they silently submitted to the demands of society, never breaking down in the face of exceptional odds? Or was our ancient society far more permissive and liberal, where men and women equally contributed to the welfare of their families and kingdoms, often sacrificing their individual aspirations and emotions? Ancient myths and epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* provide a systematic enquiry into the mystery of human



existence which remains eternally unanswered and touch upon these universal themes, simultaneously portraying a complex skein of emotions and relationships that arouse our interest even today.

#### Notes and References:

1. Pradip Bhattacharya, *Narrative Art in the Mahabharata : The Adi Parva*, ( New Delhi: Dev Publishers and Distributors, 2012), p.218.
2. P. Lal, *The Mahabharata, the complete Adi Parva*, (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2005) 122.4-5. All future references from *The Mahabharata* will be from this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text.
3. Pradip Bhattacharya, *Pancha Kanya, The Five Virgins of Indian Epics: A Quest in Search of Meaning* (Calcutta : Writers Workshop, 2005)
4. Jane Freedman, *Feminism* (New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2002), p.75.
5. Genesis 16
6. Genesis 30:1-8.
7. Bhisham Sahni, *Madhavi*, translated from Hindi by Alok Bhalla (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), pp. 10, 68.
8. Pradip Bhattacharya, 'Apropos Epic Women: East and West',  
<http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?mdl=Contents&sd=ArticleID=1172>, accessed 9.2.12.
9. Pradip Bhattacharya, *Pancha Kanya, The Five Virgins of Indian Epics : A Quest in Search of Meaning*, op.cit. p.64. Significantly, despite her transgression with Indra, Ahalya is regarded by the Rama, Prince of Ayodhya as "blameless and inviolate" thus showing that the ancient concepts of virginity or morality were quite different from that of subsequent ages. Again, the goddesses Ishtar and Aphrodite too were initially regarded as virgins, though in later ages they were considered 'immoral'.
10. Pradip Bhattacharya, *Pancha Kanya, The Five Virgins of Indian Epics : A Quest in Search of Meaning*, op.cit. p. 9. In his erudite Publisher's Note, Padma Shri Professor P. Lal provides a list of sixteen kinds of unmarried girls that are mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts, noting that *Kanya* denotes a girl of eight. Also see my article, 'The Magic Suggestiveness of *Pancha Kanya*: An Exploration into Some Aspects of Classical Indian Feminism' pub. *Jadavpur University Essays and Studies*, Kolkata, Vol. XIX- XX, 2005- 06, pp.91- 108, where I have discussed in more detail the responses and actions of the five 'virgins' of the Indian epics.
11. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the valued guidance of reputed Indologist, Dr. Pradip Bhattacharya, IAS (Retd) without which it would not have been possible to prepare this article.

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