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## The Synergistic Effect of Myths in Indian life

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research paper is to explore the synergistic effect of the myths in Indian life. Indians consider spiritual principles as an essential part of their existence and derive its essence from mythical stories. As stated by the *Hindu* scriptures, the divine power eternally dwelled in the divine abode of God, but was introduced in the cosmic world through *Brahma*. This knowledge was later transferred to the *Rishis* (sages). The truth of the cosmic drama lay with the earliest myth-makers (sages and rishis) who spoke of the genesis of the Universe and brought about the myths of creation and also spoke of God. It is mostly believed that myth and religion are not the same but at variance. Although to a large extent, they overlap each other. The Indian way of life includes non-mythical components such as a moral code, worship of the divine, obedience to religious codes, conduct and practices, rites and rituals, etc. When does myth become religion and vice versa, myth and religion become interchangeable as one relates to God through myths.

### Introduction

People relate to God through mythology, as God is difficult to describe due to his abstract nature. He can be understood by myth or *Mithya*. It creates the illusion which brings man closer to his realm. Therefore, one could say, representation of God is through myths, especially in Hinduism. The epic sagas and legends in mythology hold a great impact on the *Hindu* mind-set. The presence of God is rendered on a mythological level. Thus, one could fully conceive the divine personality and establish a religious feel through mythology. In other words, myths are efforts to explicate or to bring matters to a man understands of the creation of the universe, the Mother Nature and her demands, super-natural power, the order of creation, and the origin of life. (McLeish, 497) Legends could be called myths produced on historical personalities and incidents. They are not like myths which grow without restrictions, legends frequently have an explicit creator or a turning point and their purpose is to bring a message to society. (McLeish, 420)

Mythology has two explicit implications. Firstly, mythology is a body of myths and the analysis of myths of a particular area. (McLeish, 499) For example: *Hindu* Mythology is a myth itself. Myths create a perception of an object more from the sensory experience and this becomes a symbol which can be a representative, character, sign or figure of religion. Anthropologists also employ the term syncretism to refer to the general cultural variations which are produced when different cultural traditions come together. Therefore a cooperative interaction whereby two practices combine and their act surpasses the entirety of their actions in isolation is called Synergism (Greek, 'working-together'). The *Hindu* believes that all religions are like rivers that drift in the same ocean, and their theories are ultimately syncretised and drawing on the same source (McLeish, 729). Every culture has myths which come from their belief and customs. The concepts of angels and devils, hell and heaven, salvation and damnation have a profound effect on some and constitute the religious myth.

Myth is a notion and mythology is the medium which carries that notion. Myths are beliefs and when they become a part of the culture through mythology. All ideals and principles of life are formed to give a perspective to irrational life. Life is mostly illogical as it is ruled by the irrational, hate, desire, rage, hunger, sorrow, and love. Some beliefs may be sacred to a group of people would be a curse for another and vice versa. Every single choice, act and deed is supported by the prevalent myth (Pattanaik, 3).

### 1. Mythic themes in Indian mythology

#### 1.1 Dharma

In *Hindu* philosophy and mythology, the most significant theme is '*Dharma*.' It conveys the basis of virtue, integrity and duty. According to the *Hindus*, we are born in certain *Varna* (caste) to shoulder responsibilities

and that is the goal of our lives. One has to go through many stages of life which are called *Ashrama*. As stated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna enlightened Arjun to do his own duty (*svadharna*) that would make him worthy other than shunning his duty which he was doing by renouncing war. He was avoiding the duty of a warrior. This adjusting standard in line with caste and stage of life is continually exemplified in myths. The standards through which good or bad karma will be judged are in mythic stories in the Epic and the *Puranas*. One must perform one's duty under all circumstances. Most of the myths have a noticeable tension between duty (*Dharma*) and austerities (*Tapas*). The wicked *Asuras* (demons) went through severe *Tapas* and achieved their wants, mostly for reigning over the *Devas* or gods. Some mythic stories have humans who used their blessings and boons from the *Tapas* to seek revenge and from the sages (*Rishis*) and they would curse the masses or defaulter with the downfall of their dynasty or deformity and even death. The mythical stories in the *Puranas* have morals befitting *Dharma* (duty) and *Tapas* (austerities), truth and religious practice of a great magnitude. (Williams, 25)

### 1.2 Karma

According to Hindu philosophy and mythology, *Karma* is a result of actions executed, which become a medium for future good fortune or retributions concerning the deed conducted. In mythology, one will come across a wide range of stories which are based on *karma*, justice is hard or soft based according to the eternal law. At times the retribution is allowed intervention by divine grace.

The particular myth that exemplifies karma more than any other is the tale of Kamsa who was the Uncle of Krishna. This myth has a sequence of nested stories and tales that advance ahead and backward in time to study the shifting linkage with the principle individual and their karma. At the outset of this *Kalpa* (epoch), a new celestial conception of Kamsa's karma had started. In his first birth, Kamsa was the son of Virocana. He was also known as Kalanemi. He was an *Asura* (demon) and also the brother of Bali. Both the renowned brothers had a score of bad karmas in their preceding *Kalpa*. Kalanemi had six sons, whose wicked *karma* had started in a former lifetime is clearly indicated in another myth. Marici who was a semi divine figure had six sons. He was associated with Indra and was actually a Marut (a storm god) who had a lot supremacy and power. Marici's sons were also powerful and they opposed the creator, Brahma. They clearly mocked him and pointed fingers at Brahma of espousing his daughter, Sarasvati. This aroused Brahma's wrath and their own deeds lead them to a curse by him to be reborn as *Asuras*. Consequently, they were born as sons of Kalanemi the future Kamsa.

The tale goes backward and forward to display good and bad deeds of Kalanemi and his six sons. Later on Kalanemi was reborn as Kamsa, his six sons were also born-again. They took birth twice formerly they were Kamsa's nephew and later they were born to Devaki (lord Krishna's mother) whose infant were murdered by Kamsa as they were born. After numerous lifetimes of conflicting with Vishnu's incarnation, Kamsa or Kalanemi was eventually liberated from his past *karma*. All his *samskaras* (mental impression or imprints) were consumed and burnt in front of the Lord. Thus, it demonstrates the dissolution of *karma* by grace. (William, 27)

### 1.3 Transmigration

A fundamental notion very extensively held in India is the transmigration of souls; it is often termed as reincarnation. There is a belief that when a person dies their soul passes in another body and is born-again as an infant. Reincarnation signifies the changeover from one human body to another one. The forms might be animal, human, plant or inanimate. The Hindu term for this progression of transmigration across many levels of birth and rebirth is termed as *Samsara* (material world). One may not always be born again immediately without delay after death. The scales of happiness and hell vary in accordance to one's *karma* (merit). Nonetheless, one cannot continue forever in any of them as one's merit or demerit gets invariably used up and one need to be reincarnated to earn more merit or to escape the cycle of birth and death through the liberation termed as *Moksha*. (Burr & Smith, 5)

### 1.4 Kala (Time)

In Hinduism the myths of evil and death are strongly related to time. This is particularly seen in the *Bhakti* myths (to attain boons from gods) as well, the same patterns are established in myths of death and myths of evil. It is believed that myths related to death thrive in theology. For instance, premature death or sudden

accidents of human beings are due to their actions and none can escape *Kala*. Myths of *Kala* need continuous alleviation through symbolic means and fear encourages masses to follow a good moral life. There is a dread of 'death' even at the right time in *Hindu* mythology. Therefore, Hindus have always considered death as the embodiment of evil.

Myths of death and the myths of evil share the same recurring themes, time and again offer the same explanations to the various problems posed. The stories from *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata* or the *Brahmanas* one sees 'Time' or *Kala* is the corrupting influence in the origin of evil. If death was non-existent then earth would be overstrained with people who must die. Similarly, earth is overburdened with good men or excessively evil (demons) who must be removed. The origin of evil is inseparably related with the growth of sexual yearnings and hunger; death is likewise connected to these themes. As procreation increases, so does the population and likewise death must counteract it? Many times sexual sin is responsible for death to justify the act. Hunger is yet another natural reason of death. Therefore, death alleviates the burden for the mankind in general. (O'Flaherty, 212)

### 1.5 Cosmogenic return to one

The exemplary Hindu myth of the cosmogenic return to the one can be understood by the mythical tale of Lord *Shiva* whereby a grand destruction of the cosmos is inevitable for new ones to emerge. Also, everything born on earth undergoes the same process of destruction to be reborn as another manifestation of life. However there is an irony; in spite of being dissolved in the celestial spirit of cosmic destruction, one's *karma* continues till divine grace mediates. In a group re-creation exhibits the interrelation or connection to life and with each other. All beings connect on a same level and the myths establish a connection to everyone. For instance: gods, demons, birds, animals and all forms of life in the mythic past were capable to speak to one another, rival with each other, and still breed with each other. The *Hindu* mythology has survived the modern changing times and has established itself in the *Hindu* traditions. The myths of *Apsaras*, *rakshasa*, *devas* etc. are abundant, animals changing into another form or having progeny through another animal form is evident in *Hindu* mythology. All these myths were not perceived as confusing, but linked to the puzzle of primordial unity before creation and segregation. Some of the gods, feared a return to the primordial unity as all beings would be undifferentiated, for instance *Indra* (god of the sky and rain). It also showed gods like *Indra* did not certainly characterise higher wisdom. Going back to oneness was realised as a desired goal by the wise ones only. The sages practised austerities with the intention of changing the cosmic order and to take it back to its original oneness. A conviction in an original homogenous oneness appears to echo in the myths of *Vishnu Varaha* and *Bhumi Devi*. It conveys of constant love-play (*Lila*) eternally for hundreds or thousands of years. The love-play appears to be a recreation of the cosmogenic trice of non-differentiated beings before they became beings or non-beings are separated into other beings (males and females). An embrace of the lovemaking was there but no off springs were there. It was without passion or desire. This divine composition became a representation of the *Tantric* performances in which the participants were accepted as the celestial androgynies. In some myths it was stated that just as a divine couple seek to be one or became one, subsequently the entire differentiated cosmos searches for oneness in the Absolute. (Williams, 29)

### 1.6 Renunciation

In the *Hindu* way of life, a mortal being has to go through four stages (*Ashrams*) of life, namely student-ship, householder or bread winner, retirement and complete renunciation of all ties. It is the strong point of his character, by undergoing all these stages he accumulates merit in many lives which gradually ripens the person's soul, until finally he feels the irresistible call and turns his focus towards his release or *nirvana*. (Coomaraswamy, 436)

### 1.7 Maya as illusion

The *Sanskrit* word for *Mahamaya* means the illusory features of the phenomenal world. In *Hindu* mythology *Maya* is the power explicitly with each deity. It can be defined as wisdom; verdict and control do something, attributed to mighty beings. *Maya* is the supremacy of the gods to make a form in a vacuum, and to undertake forms to make them visible. In *Rig Vedas* one sees gods assume different forms through *Maya*. The unique concept of *Maya* is the ability of the formless to take up a form. This is known as the concept of *Maya* or illusion. Some of the *Hindu* gods show their supremacy by undertaking manifold forms. *Maya* is the magical

essence that they preserve to project illusions. *Maya* is also an act of the mind that can generate both images and materialise those images in the world of marvels. (Austin, 82) According to the *Vedas*, *Maya* could be understood as an illusionary snake which in fact was actually a rope. The mistake lies somewhat in our perception of the rope as rather what it isn't and one sees that. Therefore, the statement that the world is unreal does not denote that it is completely unreal, just in the same way as the son of a barren woman is unreal. In contrast to other subjects that only learnt Indian philosophers grappled with, illusion became the basis of *Hindu* culture; subsequently everyone identifies with *Maya* i.e. what is made up of. It is an artificially constructed something that appears to be there, but has no matter. It is the path of rebirth, the veneration of the gods who have abilities/powers (*Sagun*). In the mythic stories of the *Rig Veda*, it is the mystical, celestial sleight of hand of *Maya* that begins the text. The god *Indra* uses his magical power which is called the *Indra's Net* (*Indra-jala*) to counter his correspondingly supernatural enemy *Vritra*. *Indra* changes himself magically into a hair of one of his horses' tails, and *Vritra* enchantingly invokes up a storm. One can also see numerous magic illusions as a critical part of the play in the *Valmiki Ramayana*. In the story of *Sita* and also in the later *Hindu* traditions of mythology, one comes across a panel of such magical illusions as an integral part of the story. *Maya* is confounding one thing for another thing, such as a rope for a snake. It can be easily corrected upon closer examination. The approach is to remember our memory has with it a false mental state before one acquires a second look. At times it might trigger one to understand the revelation of the far more significant. To comprehend the mistake that they had made all the time considering the material world to be real (*Brahman*) when it is purely *Maya*. Therefore, when one distinguishes that the snake is not a snake, but then only a rope, one goes on to realise that it is not even a rope of any kind. (Doniger, 517)

**Conclusion:** Hinduism has retained an ancient debate between two distinct and apparently incompatible life-orientations of myth and religion. The synergic effect of myths in Indian life is a part of our scripture, culture, mythology, and rituals; they affect the lives of people. This debate doesn't have a simple resolution. A majority of *Hindus* seeks to have a good life that can only be developed from a strong domestic and family life. So the path they follow is of *Dharma*, *karma*, belief in the transmigration of soul, fear of the *Kala*, life is *Maya*, the need for renunciation, cosmogony, is a part of their life incorporated in *Hindu* mythology. These mythic themes in Hinduism have been absorbed by the masses as a way of life and also a part of their culture. Myths find a place even in contemporary genres. One can conclude that myths in India attempt to stake out a middle ground of reverence, belief and acceptance of the irrational. Every single choice and judgement is grounded in the prevailing myth. Consequently, a perfect world is an illusion and also a perfect family doesn't exist anywhere on earth, except in mythology (*Ram Rajya*). Indians consider spiritual principles as an essential part of their existence and derive its essence from mythical stories.

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