

Introduction to Indian Mythology

V.Durgalakshmi, Ph.D {Samskruth}

Mythology: Definition and Need to Study

A collection of myth, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition is the dictionary definition of mythology. It is also defined as a set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious. We need to understand that mythology is a branch of knowledge that deals with narratives about Goddesses & Gods, demi-gods, legendary personalities of different civilizations and their cultures. Traditions, folklore and legends are similar to and sometimes part of Mythology.

Since mythology typically incorporates superhuman characters, it is important for us to study them with a “time-perspective”. We also need to understand the mythology of our respective cultures to bond with it better. The volume of knowledge in the myths not only transmits religious experiences, but also projects role models of behavior patterns. They explain patterns of worship and attempt to reconnect the modern society to the bygone ages.

Modern theories on mythology sum up the branch as that which explains the spiritual potential of individuals and societies. Also contemporary theorists say that myths explore common archetypes and explain mind patterns especially in relation to the pairs of opposites like good and bad, virtue and vice etc.

Indian Mythology

Through generations, different stories in Indian mythology have been passed from generation to generation either by word of mouth or through carefully stored records of the same. These stories, which form the backbone of Indian mythology, are a great medium for people to inculcate interest in Indian Culture in the younger generation, both the natives and non-natives.

Given below are some salient features of Indian mythology.

- The stories are most effective in conveying powerful messages to the readers, thereby influencing their personality.
- The intention of Indian mythological literature is to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily lives.

- There are usually multiple stories explaining the same fact, occasion or festival with each version being right in its own merit. This is a result of the natural evolution the stories might have gone through in the process of being handed over from generation to generation for centuries.
- Across geographical differences, myths taken from the Vedhas, Purāṇas and Ithihāsas retain their original intent, adding local flavour only in terms of language, imagery etc.

Vedhic mythology

This section refers to the mythological aspects found in Vedhic literature of the very ancient Vedhic religion, mostly centred round the hymns of the Ṛgveda. There are four Vedhas-Ṛg, Yajur, Sāma and Athharva. They remain the principle texts of the ancient Indian civilization, venerated till date.

It is very fascinating to note that Vedhic lore contains numerous elements, which are common to Indo-European mythological traditions, like the mythologies of the Persian, Greek, Roman, Celtic, Germanic and Slavic civilizations.

Vedhic hymns refer to many deities, often 33, consisting of eight Vasus, eleven Rudhras, twelve Ādhithyas, and the late Ṛgvedhic Prajāpathi. These deities belong to the three dimensions of the universe/heavens, the earth, and the intermediate space.

Major deities of the Vedhic tradition are:

Indhra, Sūrya, Agni, Vāyu, Varuṇa, Mithra, Adhithi, Yama, Soma, Uṣhas, Sarasvathi, Pruthvi, and Rudhra.

Vedhic mythology has in many ways contributed to the evolution and development of later Hindhuism and Hindhu mythology.

Post-Vedhic mythology

Post – Vedhic mytholgy is popularly known as Hindhu mytholgy. Hindhu mythology is the large body of traditional stories or narratives related to Hindhuism and this is contained mostly in Sanskrit literature, such as the Sanskrit epics and the Purāṇas. The important features of Hindhu Mythology are:

- It is a range of diverse traditions, developed by different sects, people and philosophical schools.
- Far from being confined to one particular region, one can note that this collection is a subset of Nepali and pan Indian culture.
- It is a collection of works not only marked by different regions but also composed at different time periods.

- On a practical but surprising note, all of these are not necessarily held by all Hindus to be literal accounts of historical events of any era.
- They are taken to have deeper, often symbolic meanings, all of which have been given a complex range of interpretations.

The concept of Yuga

A brief understanding of time periods in the Indian context is necessary for us to gain more clarity. Yuga means an era or epoch. In the Hindu theory of creation life is created and destroyed in the beginning and end of every Yuga. In total, there are 4 Yugas. These are the Sathya or Krutha Yuga, the Thretha Yuga, the Dhvāpara Yuga, and the Kali Yuga. The time period of each Yuga is defined to be between 4 hundred thousand to 4 billion plus years in a descending order from Sathya yuga to Kali yuga. When all the four Yugas are completed, it is one Yuga cycle and the next starts with Sathya yuga again. These 4 yugas follow a timeline ratio of 4:3:2:1

It is interesting to note that specific qualities of human life are given to these Yugas and it is said that with each Yuga virtue, wisdom, knowledge and even the life-span of the humans progressively decreases. It is said that from 1, 00, 000 years in Sathya yuga the life-span comes down to 100 years in the Kali yuga and at the end of Kali yuga it will be just 20 years!

As we have understood earlier that Indian mythology spans many Yugas, we will now get a better picture of the content in terms of the respective time-frames.

Epics

The epics are part of the Ithihāsa genre which is semi-historical. The definition of Ithihāsa has varied over time, with the most popular one being that it is a narrative of past which includes teachings on the purpose of human life. For the period of Classical Sanskrit, immense material is available to us in the Sanskrit epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhāratha which are set in different Yugas.

- The Rāmāyaṇa, written by the poet Vālmīki, describes the life and times of Lord Rāma (the seventh avatar of Lord Viṣṇu) in the Thretha yuga.
- The Mahābhāratha describes the life and times of the Pāṇḍavas, in the Dhvāpara yuga, a period associated with Lord Kriṣṇa (the eighth avathāra of Lord Viṣṇu).

Rāmāyaṇa - The epic of Vālmīki describing Rāma's journey concentrates on the idealism of all characters there in.

- The Rāmāyaṇa consists of 24,000 verses in seven kāṇḍas (Books or Chapters) and 500 Sargas (cantos).
- The epic is central to the cultures of most south-east Asian countries, the epic inspires all till date with its unique portrayal of philosophy, devotion, and human values.
- Rāmāyaṇa has been re-written in Hindi, Thamizh and other Indian languages and translated world over in many more.
- In the Indian cultural context, it is closest to the heart of the populace than any other narrative with the characters of Rāma and his brothers, wife Sīthā and devotee Hanumān etched in their psyche.

Mahābhāratha – Traditionally, the authorship of the epic is attributed to Vyāsa.

- Scholars till date attempt to understand its historical growth and compositional layers of Jaya, Vijaya, Bhāratha and Mahābhāratha.
- The Mahābhāratha is the longest Sanskrit epic and its longest version consists of over 100,000 verses or over 200,000 individual verse lines (each Śhloka is a couplet) and also many long passages in prose.
- It narrates about the Kurukṣethra war and the lives of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍava princes who fought the war.
- The best component of this epic is the Bhagavadh Gīthā, the discourse given by Kriṣṇa to Arjuna in the battlefield. The battle produces multiple conflicts of relationships, instances of family loyalty and duty taking precedence over what is right, as well as the converse.

Besides mythology proper, the voluminous epics also provide a wide range of information about ancient Indian society, philosophy, culture, religion and ways of life.

Purāṇas

The Purāṇas deal with narratives that are old. With the derivative noun *Purāṇa*, meaning "old story", we need to note that *Purāthana* is Sanskrit for "ancient". The Purāṇic literature goes through a large time period from pre-epic to post epic. The eighteen Purāṇas are divided into three groups based on their allegiance to Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śhiva.

- The Purāṇas for Brahmā are Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa, Brahmavaivārtha Purāṇa, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, Bhaviṣhya Purāṇa, Vāmana Purāṇa and Brahma Purāṇa.
- The Purāṇas for Viṣṇu are Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Nāradhīya Purāṇa Padhma Purāṇa, Garuḍa Purāṇa, Varāha Purāṇa, Bhāgavatha Purāṇa
- The Purāṇas for Śhiva are Mathsya Purāṇa, Kurma Purāṇa, Linga Purāṇa, Shiva Purāṇa, Skandha Purāṇa, and Agni Purāṇa

Relevance of mythology to performing and fine arts

Artists will be a deprived lot, if mythology was not available to them in its variety. In all the cultures of the world, ancient and modern, mythology is the substratum for the various artistic productions across genres. Indian mythology not only inspires these performers but also artists belonging to other fine fields like painting, sculpture and many more. As has been the trend, the richness of this almost in-exhaustive resource is to be honoured and maintained in both pure and fusion forms. The Vedhas, Purāṇas and later literature like the Kāvya provide ample concepts for Indian musicians and dancers of all genres – classical, folk and others. All the 'Navarasas'--nine emotions-- are given enough scope in Indian mythology and this magnifies the ability of the performer to present them. Indian myths provide the singer or the dancer with a vast repertoire for their entire productions.

Conclusion

Myths, world over, have to be critically studied to get a complete understanding of its relevance in the cultural context. Many modern scholars and students dismiss the importance of mythological studies as irrelevant or term it obsolete. But, it can be observed that with the increasing number of avenues available to us, the practice of passing on mythology is very much prevalent today, as never before. It is interesting to note that the audiences for cinemas, theatre-classical, folk & contemporary and even tele-serials are huge in numbers, if the story or concept is based on Indian mythology.

Joseph Campbell defined myths as having four basic functions:

- the Mystical Function—experiencing the awe of the universe;
- the Cosmological Function—explaining the shape of the universe;
- the Sociological Function—supporting and validating a certain social order;
- and the Pedagogical Function—how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances.

We can conclude that Indian mythology fulfils all the above functions and is indispensable in order to impart values of Indian culture worldwide.