The Psychological Significance of Hindu Myths

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Abstract

Mythology in general influences the religious, social and political life of an individual. The present article explains how Hindu myths contributed in shaping the Hindu mind and suggests the use of these myths in psychotherapy.

Key words -
  Vedic mythology,
  Avataras,
  Psychotherapy

Mythology has always influenced the religious, cultural, social and political life of an individual. It's immense influence on human mind is due to the fact that human mind always thinks in terms of archetypes which are buried deep in the collective unconsciousness. Myths are projections of these archetypes. It is an attempt by man to make order out of chaos, make sense out of the manifold diversity existing in the world [1].

The Latin meaning of myth is "handing over the narration from one generation to another generation". Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences XI describes myths as tales of the supernatural world which share the characteristics of the religious complex [2]. It's stories of the past supernatural things, its types of plot and even its specific incidents are those of current folk tales. But present author does not agree fully with this definition of myths. Myths cannot be said as religious stories alone, since religion in its widest sense includes on the one hand, the conceptions which man entertains of the divine or supernatural power, and on the other, that sense of dependence of human mind on those powers which finds its various expressions in various forms of worship [3]. Mythology can, to some extent, be connected with former side of religion. But it does not make human mind to depend on those mythological characters / gods etc., for their support and help. Sometimes mythology can be merely a wishful thinking. So, mythology cannot be understood for religious stories.

Myths are not folklore either. Folklore are set in modern or post historical period, whereas myths are set in a time when the society had not yet assumed its present form. In folklore, the protagonists are usually human beings or anthromorphic animals, while in myths, the actors are usually of divine origin. Folklores are not necessarily believed or argued upon but myths are culturally sacred precedents for present actions. Folklore amuse or entertain, myths install faith [4].

Myths are not even historical events that really took place. It is true when mythological events are brought before the mind's eye, they appear to be real events - visualised and happened in a particular time and space, but actually, they are imaginary events only. In mythology, the individual entities are not abstracted but their special characteristics are abstracted.

Now, after defining mythology and its scope let us give a brief outline of Hindu mythology. Three trends of research in the last two centuries had direct bearing on the exploration of Hindu mythology. First one is that of social and anthropological trend researches by E B Tyler, Herbert Spencer, Levy Bruhl and Durkheim. These groups carried

research on primitive tribal people and arrived at totemistic, animistic, manistic, solar, lunar and astral theories of the origin of Hindu myths. The second one is Indological trend or approach. Indologists namely, Max Mullar, J J Mayer and Bergaigna reviewed ancient Hindu religious books particularly Puranas and attached cultural meaning to them. While the last group including Jung, Zimmer and Coomaraswami interpreted Hindu myths from psychological view points [5]. All these trends however agree upon the view that imagination of Hindu myths - like any other myth - speaks of the mysterious world beyond the existing one. It's mystic phenomena generates its own momentum and creates an expanding horizon covering the whole range of human psychology. In the following lines, an attempt will be made to explain some of the Hindu myths with their psychological interpretations. Hindu myths are corner stones of Hindu religious and social complex as Hindu religious belief and social practices are unintelligible except through the way of their mythology. Hindu 'Psyche' can be best understood in the context of Hindu religion under the influence of three basic psychological components - namely

1. 'Yagna' (sacrifice, offering)
2. 'Tapas' (asceticism, renunciation) and 'Bhakti' (devotion, surrender).

I consider these three major components of Hindu Psyche as the products of three trends developed in Hindu mythological spectrum in ancient time. They are:

1. Vedic / Brahmanic mythology (sacrifice).
2. Non-vedic mythology (asceticism i.e. Upandishadas, Buddhism and Jainism) and
3. Puranic and Dharmashastric mythology (devotional)

Vedic mythology presents to us an earlier stage in the evolution of beliefs based on the personification of natural phenomena. the foundation on which vedic mythology rests is still the belief that all objects and phenomena of nature by which man is surrounded are animate and divine and hence can be invoked. Thus, natural phenomena like 'Agni' (fire) 'Savitra' (sun),'Ushas' (dawn), 'Indra' (thunder storms) are invoked to seek their favour in earliest text called Rigveda. The total number of these natural gods are 33 though they are grouped into terrestrial, aerial and celestial classes. 'Agni' on earth, 'Indra' in air and 'Surya' in heaven heads these groups [6].

The psychological significance of Vedic gods seems to be the wonder and amusement of Vedic people who had agricultural occupation as the main source of survival. hence, rain, earth, sun etc., became an integral aspect of survival and as such, these natural phenomena on whom the Hindu rely heavily evoke awe, apprehension and regard. These are, hence, personified and worshipped to assure man and, to some extent, relieve man from the apprehension of unpredictability of their occurrence. As such, earth is conceived as 'Prithvi' which is not merely an expansion of land but encompasses its vegetation, wealth and prosperity. Same law stands in case of sun, air and rain also. The Hindu mythopoeic mind has conceptualized them as universal parents. Sun and moon especially acknowledge the sings that guided a traveler from one place to another and rescued him from dangers towards safety and well-being. They liberate the life's journey. besides, thunder storm which causes great destruction of harvest and death (Yama) that takes life away are equally worshipped in order to overcome man's fear through sublimation or projection on an outward source which is not under the control of anybody. 'Yama' is described as having a Court where 'Chitragupta' - his minister keeps all accounts of every man's actions i.e. good or bad action so the doer can be sent to heaven or hell as per his action after this death. On a psychosocial plane, this myth seems to suggest an embedded internal locus of control for an individual's action during his life time. On the other hand, it also suggests man's striving to attain a lasting equanimity in this world. This equanimity is not achieved here and this wish seems to be fulfilled through the conception of Yama's court in other world and thus, trying to make a dream into a reality with slight modification [7]. The moral conduct of Yama is called 'Rita' or law of working in justice. It determines the kind of working, the force, power and measure of working of each thing [8]. Thus, we see that down the centuries, this faith is rooted in the Hindu's ethical consciousness. He obeys rules because nature herself does so and this obedience is at the bottom of the essential cohesion in nature and human society. Morality, then becomes a matter of inner compulsion, 'Niriti' the Goddess of darkness is also described as the evil spirit that grapples men when they violate Rita., Vedic mythology which knows no metamorphosis and still has so much impact on Hindu mind is perhaps due to collective memory demanded of it as an indispensible archetypal pattern. But in due course of time, man rather than gods occupied the central place in Hindu mythology. The straight forward alignment of forces - men versus god - changed radically in the second period viz. the pose vedic period of Hindu mythology when

sacrificial powers came largely to be replaced by ascetic and meditative powers. Myths of this period began to be drafted from the standpoint of man as Brahmins, Rishis, Muni, Arhat, Bodhisattva etc. These ideals of man were looked upon as the highest achievable ones, more important than cosmic order or gods of vedic age. Thus, there is a great antagonism between gods and men. The ascetic is regarded as the virtuous, good and holy. A very different kind of emphasis on human beings appeared in the Upanishadic tests which maintained that without any participation in rituals, a man could achieve a kind of immortality equal or indeed superior to that of god. But this trend could not sustain for a long time.

Puranic and Dharmashastric Mythology

As time passed, the revival of old Vedic thoughts took place in Hindu mythological scene. The gods personified in the Vedic age turned out to be moral and ethical guidelines of human beings and in this process, certain new gods emerged and certain old ones dissolved. In this emergence and dissolution of gods, 3 gods emerged on the horizon of Indian scene and they still dominate the Hindu mythological picture. They are: 'Brahma' - the creator, 'Vishnu' - the protector and 'Shiva' - the destroyer. 'Vishnu' in his role of protector is depicted of taking many 'Avataras' or incarnations. these 'Avataras' are playful acts undertaken by 'Vishnu' in the spirit of 'Leela' or 'Maya' in order to save mankind from evil forces from time to time. These 'Avataras' - twenty four in number are the projection of Hindu's ideal life, philosophy and culture. A spectrum of Indian thought including dance, sculpture, music, poetry and other fine arts and philosophical speculations are interwoven around these 'Avataras'. In these 'Avataras', the basic value of life is brought out i.e., the victory of good over bad through the concept of gods and demons. the demons are depicted as the symbols of ego, pride and delusion [9]. 'Rama' and 'Krishna' - two 'Avataras' of 'Vishnu' still hold good for their ideological, moral, social and spiritual values. Ramayana and Mahabharata two epics still guide the Hindu behavioural pattern. One of the distinct characteristics of Puranic mythology is the fact that gods are not conceptualized as being something divine or mysterious. They are rather depicted as mortals though above anger, malice, boastfulness, jealousy and other temptations.

Use of Hindu myth in Psychotherapy

Myths have been - and continue to be regarded with high reverence by Hindus. They are considered a great authority on religious, moral and social matters. Myths, therefore can be used as a mediator between therapist and patient. They give the patient a basis for identification and at the same time, they are a protection for him. by ascertaining with the story, he talks about himself, his conflicts, his desires especially when there are resistances to be dealt with [10]. Myths can be vehicles by which moral values and behaviour models can be transmitted and anchored in patient's consciousness. Many researchers including Surya and Jayaram [11], Venkoba Rao [12], Carstairs [13] stressed need to incorporate Hindu myths in understanding the etiology and management of mental disorder of Hindu patients. Schizophrenics and manics in India, are reported to have their link with these mythological figures [14]. Thus, therapy lies in understanding and interpreting these myths psychologically.

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