

## INDIAN MYTHOLOGY FROM PAST TO PRESENT: AN OVERVIEW

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### Abstract

Indian mythology, as we all know is one of the oldest mythologies and beliefs that exist in the world. Almost it is as old as the Greek and Egyptian mythology. But unlike the westerners, many Indians are found to rely on the mythological practices that still exist in India. Unlike the other two mythologies mentioned above i.e., it may be hard to find a contemporary Greek who still believes in Zeus and a contemporary Egyptian who believes in Horus. But the contemporary Indians still believe in the incarnations of Vishnu and Shiva. This phenomenon leads to a question that “How Indian Mythology is still alive in the minds of Indians?” This paper tries to find an answer to the above question. This paper looks at the different interpretations of Indian mythology among Indians from the past till date and how these different interpretations of the mythology help them to keep their culture and heritage alive. The researcher has made an attempt to clear these questions and the paper focuses on the mythical aspects of Hinduism and not its philosophy.

**Key Words:** Mythology, Vedas, Avatar, Puranas, Diverse Traditions, Ramayana, Deification.

### Introduction

Indian mythology, popularly known as Hindu mythology largely constitutes of Sanskrit literature, which contains the traditional narratives of Hinduism. This literature is inclusive of the famous epics: *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and other Vedas and *Puranas*. The Sangam literature of Tamil language has also constituted more on Indian mythology. Especially the Hindu Mythology, rather than having a monolithic structure, is found to have diverse traditions developed by people belonging to different languages and climatic conditions. This in turn,

strengthens the mythology as it suits the belief and comfort of people belonging to the different places in India. Coming to the mainstream of the paper, and on the attempt to answer the question “How Indian mythology is still alive in the lives of Indians?” one may have to understand the mythology from its course. This paper classifies the process of finding the answer to the question into three:

1. The evolution of God in Indian mythology
2. The non monolithic structure of Indian mythology
3. The science in Indian mythology

Throwing light on the above titles while discussing Indian mythology, one may have a better understanding of the Indian mythology as well as its richness.

### **Hindu Mythology and Hindu Philosophy:**

Before attempting to answer the forth mentioned question, it is essential to know the difference between Hindu mythology and Hindu philosophy, which perhaps helps us to understand the paper better. Hindu mythology is majorly constituted by literature, the puranas where as Hindu philosophy on other hand refers to the ideas expressed in the six *Darshanas* : *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta* and other *Nastika* (heterodox) schools of thoughts that include Buddhism, Jainism, Carvaka, Ajivika and a few others.

### **The Evolution of God in Indian Mythology:**

When one pays a closer attention to Indian mythology, one can find that there are four concepts of God to be prevalent in different time periods.

#### ***Nirgun and Nirakar God:***

The famous hymns in Hinduism, *Lalitāsahasranāma* is found to describe the qualities of God in a detailed way. The forty-fourth sloka (verse) of the *Lalitāsahasranāma* describes God as *Nirgun* and *Nirakar* which means “formless and virtueless” God. In *Advaita Vedanta*, *Nirguna Brahman* means a formless God which is of course the *Para Brahman* (the ultimate God). This is as seen in the 44<sup>th</sup> Hymn, which explains God as “*Nirlebha nirmala nitha niragara niragula /Nirguna nishkala shantha nishkama nirubhaplava*” (44<sup>th</sup> Hymn, *Lalitāsahasranāma*).

#### ***Sargun and Aakar God:***

Later the Hindu mythology discusses *Sargun* and *Aakar* of God (as the name suggests, the opposite of *Nirgun* and *Niraakar*) where God is assumed to take forms to come closer to human beings. *Sargun* is a compound word of two words: *Sar* and *Gun*: where *Sar* means “with” and *Gun* means “form or quality”. As the adjective refers to God, it means the “Supreme form”. There are references to this kind of God in “*Guru granth sahib*”, the religious text of the Sikhs. The following line from the holy book explains the supremacy of God. “*Sargunḥ nirgunḥ thāpai nāḥo. Duh mil ekai kīno thāḥo*” (||3||). Which means that he (God) is said to be the highest attributes or in other words the supreme form and he is said to be formless and both is found to converge on to its single point.

#### ***Avatar God:***

The next stage, which is to be focused here, is the stage where the incarnations take place which discusses the *avatāra* (form) of God. The Sanskrit word *avatāra* literally means to take appearance or forms. This stage discusses that God not only has forms but also lives with human beings as a fellow human being or any other creature in order to teach them lessons or to make

them realize the importance of following good virtues. The incarnations of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Shakti were logically supposed to take place in this period, i.e., *Treta yuga* and *Dvapara Yuga* as described by Maharishi Valmiki and Maharishi Vyasa in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* respectively. The incarnations of Vishnu are very famous in Hindu mythology. In *Garuda Purana*, God Vishnu is said to have *Dasvatara* (*Dasa* – ten, *avatara* – incarnations) and in *Brahmanda Purana*, Vishnu is said to have twenty two avatars and the latter puranaas call them as innumerable. It is useful to quote the fifth canto of the *Bhagavat Gita*, “*Paritranaya Sadhunam Vinashaya Ca-dushkrtam / Dharma Samsthapanarthaya sambavami yuge yuge*” (4.8). The above sloka from *Bhagavat Gita*, literally means “song of the lord”, which is further elaborated as: “In order to deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of religion, I advent Myself millennium after millennium” (5).

### **Deification:**

The fourth stage is the stage where human beings are transformed into God for possessing great virtues. This is well known as “Deification”. A well known example, of the one who belongs to this stage is Buddha. As we all know, Buddha is deified in to God.

Another example from the south is Kannagi, the protagonist of *Silappadhigaram*, who is an icon of chastity in South India. She is worshipped majorly in the western regions of Tamil Nadu and a few regions of Kerala and Sri Lanka. Kannagi, a girl from Vaishya community is worshipped in Sri Lanka as Goddess *Pathini* by the Sinhala Buddhists and as *Kannagi Amman* (female God) by Sinhala Tamils. Also, she is popularly known as *Bhagavathi Amman* in a few regions of Kerala.

This four stages explain how the concept of God, evolved in Hindu Mythology from the formless God to Human beings as God. This evolution of the concept of God helps the Indians to believe in their God and to worship them. As they start localizing the concept of God, they are found to have more attachment with their mythology.

### **The Non-monolithic Structure of Hindu Mythology:**

We should remember that our mythology is not monolithic in structure, as we find in the introduction and this monolithic structure helps the long life mythology of our mythology as discussed. India, a country known for its diversities, has diverse opinions also in its mythical beliefs. For instance, the art of creation is discussed in different ways in various literatures that exist in Indian languages. In *Rig Veda*, the first of the four Vedas, the creation comes from a Golden egg known as *Hiranyagarbha*. In *Purusha Suktha*, the origin of creation is from the limb of *Purusha*, a non-natural, magnified man who was sacrificed by the Gods. In the *Puranaas*, *Vishnu*, in the shape of boar, plunged in to the cosmic water and brought *Bhumi* or *Pritvi* i.e., the earth.

The above idea may raise this question in our mind: how a mythology that has diverse opinions for a single situation or a phenomenon, like that of the language with an ambiguous sentence violates the Grice’s maxim of manner. For this, it is better to sight an analogy: a normal lunch differs from a feast by its variety of dishes available. Also one may have the liberty to eat their most favourite food. Similarly, the non monolithic structure of the mythology gives Indians a wide variety of choice. This availability of diverse options makes them still follow their tradition by choosing their favourite option.

This is chiefly because of the localization of ideas available. People adapt the original and modify it with respect to their belief system. As we all know India is a country, where people

speak languages, face different climate, has different beliefs and follow various caste and creed. India is found to have different geological features and climatic conditions, which is the reason to call India a sub continent. It is a well known fact that the climate and weather plays an important role in the cultural system of the society. Therefore India is found to have different culture co-existing with each other. This diverse traditions and culture make the country localize the ideas present in *Itihaasaas* and *Puraanas* with respect to a particular tradition or culture to choose their life style. A well-known example of this process of “Localizing the Ideas”, that is for instance, the different versions of *Ramayana* available throughout India. The original version of the *Ramayana* is written by Valmiki and is later translated into different languages or adapted in different languages.

There are nearly three hundred versions of *Ramayana* that are found to exist, depending on the methods of counting. The original version by *Valmiki* has been adapted by poets of different languages and each adaptation is found to have twist in the plots and thematic adaptations. The famous versions include *The Ramavatharam* by Kambar, *Sri Ranganatha Ramyanam* in Telugu, *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Adhbuta Ramayana* and so on.

The process of localizing the ideas can be well explained using the version of *Adhbuta Ramayana*. This *Ramayana* is found to have more emphasis on *Sita* rather than *Rama*. *Sita* is accorded far more prominence in this variant of the *Ramayana* narrative, and indeed two of its most notable contributions are an elaboration of the events surrounding her birth—in this case to *Ravana*'s wife, *Mandodari*—as well as her conquest of *Ravana*'s elder brother in her *Mahakali* form. Also this *Ramayana* has a surprise ending where *Sita* kills *Ravana* and not *Rama* as portrayed in the original version by *Valmiki*. In fact, this story omits the early life of *Rama* till the *Swayamvara*, unlike the other versions, where *Rama* is given more importance.

This example from *Adhbuta Ramayana* explains how Indians excel at the art of adapting the original ideas to suit their comfort. This act of localizing the ideas in accordance with the belief system prevalent over a particular region helps the Indians to keep their mythologies and traditional stories still alive and afresh. Also the diverse features that are prevalent in India is the reason behind the long life of Indian mythology.

### Indian Mythology and Science:

Hindu mythology and science is a well discussed and a proven topic as well. So the paper does not discuss much about it. However one cannot escape discussing science in mythology while discussing the long life of the same. Though there are many reasons stated above, the rational Indians believe in this mythology for the scientific facts it has, which is indeed accepted throughout the world. For instance, one can find references to our solar system, sun's distance from earth and many scientific facts that are discovered later, to be a part of the *Vedas* and *Puranaas*. For illustration follows an excerpt from the translation of the *Rig Veda* (the first of *Chathur Veda*), “The sun moves in its own orbit but holding earth and other heavenly bodies in a manner that they do not collide with each other through force of attraction (*Rig Veda 1.35.9*).

Indians not only excel in geological science, but also found to do extremely well in medical science and many other fields. The highly valuable medicinal herbs like turmeric, neem, tulsi (to name a few) is considered as the symbols of God and in today's world, people know well the medicinal values of the above mentioned herbs. For instance, tulsi is proved to emit Ozone gas and Hindus keep Tulsi plant in their courtyard, an open space in the centre of their house and the place of the plant makes us understand that there is an opportunity of everyone in the home to inhale the gas, which is proven to benefit in many ways. Also it is significant to

highlight that “Ozone therapy” is introduced in Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, realizing the benefits of inhaling Ozone. Whatever be the other supporting reasons are, most of the Hindus do follow their traditional practices, believe in their mythology because of the embedded science in the myth. This is the scientific facts found in Indian mythology that may give confidence among the Hindus to practice its rituals.

**Conclusion:**

It is a well known fact that, any system that adapts itself to the contemporary lifestyle can be found to be long living. This fact is applicable to language, science, arts, etc., and as we discuss in the paper, religion or mythology is not an exception in following the above characteristic. As the paper discusses, the answer for the question “How Indian mythology is still alive in the lives of Indians?” is found, in my view, to be the range of diverse traditions which adapts the mythology in accordance with a particular belief system. Again this paper attempts to have a brief look at the mythology, discussing its features and how the mythology gets adapted and modified over periods. However this paper does not consciously aim at criticizing the mythology or people who believe in it and it does not claim that this can be the only reason for the long life of Hindu mythology.

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