



Influence of Myth, Folklore, and Legends on Indian Socio-cultural Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the realm of myths, folklores, and ancient legends of India and explores how these things play a key role in shaping socio-cultural phenomena of Indian society. It examines how the myth, folklores and rural legends influence societal norms, beliefs, public attitudes, moral values, and in broader aspects, the entire socio-cultural landscapes. This paper explores how myths, folklores and legends act as the reservoir of morality, life lessons and wisdom for ages. And in this way, these carry forward regional tradition and rich cultural heritage of Indian subcontinent from generation to generation. This research article explores how mythological themes, legendary characters, and folklores have inspired various art forms like painting, dance, folk theatres, sculpture, and literature. This paper also highlights how mythology and folklores create a sense of identity and communal bonding. In spite of facing challenges like urbanization and globalization, folklores and rural legends are continuously thriving through the adaptation in films, theatres and many other different art forms, preserving diverse regional tradition and cultural identity.

Introduction:

Indus civilization or Indian civilization is one of the most ancient civilizations that is still living as well as thriving, having withstood numerous external invasions, ravages of Islamic rule, British colonial exploitation, and the challenges of 21st century's technological advancements, urbanization and globalization. Myths, rural legends, and folklores serve as the great source of collective ancient wisdom.



These are generally ancient tales from Puranas, Upanishads and regional folk cultures. This oral tradition of storytelling continues to fascinate and captivate audiences across every generation. These stories along with its moral lessons, social commentaries, rich cultural heritage, and tradition have passed down for generations. Folktales and rural legends are rich in variations as these belong to different regions. Every regional community has their own set of religious principles, practices, societal norms, and beliefs that reflect in their folklores and legends. Sometimes, these beliefs and religious rituals are so deeply rooted in their psyche that they transform into reality. Because, when a certain belief makes a significant impression in our lifestyle, it becomes a reality and not a mere belief anymore. Myths, folklores, and rural legends play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage, strengthening community connections, inspiring art and literature, shaping societal norms and beliefs, and promoting oneness in diversity. This research paper explores the socio-cultural phenomena of Indian society, highlighting the influences of myth, folktales, and rural legends.

Chapter 1: Preserving Cultural Heritage and Tradition

Indian folklores, myths, and legends mirror the country's rich cultural heritage, and diverse regional tradition. Ramayana and Mahabharata are two epic that serve as a centre of Indian culture and ancient wisdom. These have been imparting knowledge of morality, duty, and righteousness, shaping societal norms, moral values, and way of living. Stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata preserve traditions and provide a sense of cultural identity.

The Ramayana, one of the most read epics recounts the story of Lord Rama, considered as the 7th incarnation of God Vishnu, a prince of Ayodhya who epitomizes the values of morality, loyalty, duty, and righteousness. This epic has been a profound inspiration to various art forms, like, painting, dance, theatre, film, literature and so on and so forth, captivating masses for generations. Ram Navami, Raam Leela, and Ravan Dahan, have been an integral part of Hindu culture, celebrating the victory of good over evil. Deepavali or Diwali is celebrated to commemorate the return of lord Rama along with Mata Sita and brother Laxman from Lanka to Ayodhya after defeating Ravan.

The Mahabharata, one of the most revered and widely translated epics in Hinduism, tells the story of Kurukshetra war between hundred Kauravas and five Pandavas. The Kauravas embodies evil or Adharma whereas The Pandavas epitomizes Dharma. Lord Krishna, the preserver of Dharma, considered as the 8th incarnation of God Vishnu, is one of the most influential figures of this epic. This epic enlightens that "Truth always triumphs". It also highlights the true nature of dharma, duty, and sacrifice. Srimadbhagvat Geeta is the most significant part of this epic which contains divine advices, and teachings of Sri Krishna.



Sri Krishna himself interpreted Sankhya Yoga, Vakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Jnana Yoga to his disciple Arjuna as four paths to attain ultimate salvation or Moksha (breaking the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and merging of soul to the supreme being). Recitation of Ramayana and Mahabharata are organized every year with utmost devotion in every corner of India. Krishna Janmashtami, Radhashtami, Jhulan Yatra, Holi, Govardhan Puja, and Ratha Yatra are the most celebrated festivals of India. These festivals are deeply connected with the Indian people and their daily life. These festivals and rituals provide a sense of belonging and cultural identity, simultaneously, preserve our cultural heritage and tradition.

Chapter 2: Inspiring Art and Literature

Stories and characters from mythology, folklores, and rural legends have inspired various art forms. Art forms like, painting, sculptures, illustration, literature, dance, and music have influenced from mythological and folkloric characters and stories. Folklore and mythology Illustration is a popular visual art form that interprets myths, rural legends through paintings or imagery. Oil paintings of mythological themes and characters by Raja Ravi Verma are a great example of mythological illustration.

Rock sculpture of mythical creatures, legendary figures are the living proof of India's rich cultural heritage and tradition. These sculptures are mostly seen on the walls of ancient temples and palaces. There are numerous heritage sites in India famous for mesmerizing rock sculptures, for instances, Mahabalipuram of Tamil Nadu, Hoysaleswara Temple of Karnataka, Khajuraho Temple of Madhyapradesh, Ajanta and Ellora cave of Maharashtra, Konark Sun Temple of Odisha, Akshardham Temple of Delhi etc.

The origin of all the classical dance forms can be traced from Mythology, and those were performed in temples as an integral part of worshipping gods and goddesses. Nataraja Shiva is the creator of Tandava Nritya, Lord Krishna is the innovator of Kathhak Nritya and Goddess Durga is the originator of Lasya Nritya, Bharata Muni is the originator of Bharatnatyam. Chhau nritya, a popular folk dance of West Bengal and Jharkhand, deals with various mythological and folkloric themes and stories. In the realm of Indian classical music numerous musical instruments and Raaga are associated with Hindu deities, showcasing rich cultural heritage of mythology. According to Hindu scriptures, the Brahmand or Universe was created by the energy of sound called Nada Brahma. Veena, Bansuri or flute, and Mridanga are associated with Goddess Saraswati, Lord Krishna, and Lord Brahma respectively. Raga Kedar is associated with Lord Shiva. It is considered that, Lord Shiva's damaru is the source of 14 basic sounds or nadanta. These sounds are the fundamentals of Indian classical music. Dhrupada is a classical music emerged from the temples of Mathura and Vrindavan. The references of svara (notes) and tala (rhythm),



considered as the basis of any musical form, can be found in the Vedas. According to some critics, Shiva Tandava or cosmic dance of Shiva is the origin of various rhythms and melodies.

Roland Barthes, a renowned French philosopher and critic, examined myth as a cultural narrative that imparts ideological messages. In his work “Mythologies” (1957) he states that, “Myth is a type of speech that is not defined by its object or purpose, but by the way it is uttered” (Barthes 109). Contemporary Indian literature has explored the theme of mythology, folklore, and rural legends in a greater extent. “The Shiva Trilogy”, contains “Immortals of Meluha” (2010), “The Secret of the Nagas” (2011), “The Oath of the Vayuputras” (2013) by Amish Tripathi is a critically acclaimed series, captivating readership across the globe. Another popular series by Amish Tripathi is “Ram Chandra Series” that comprises of four books based on The Ramayana, these are, “Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku” (2015), “Sita: Warrior of Mithila” (2017), “Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta” (2019). This tetralogy recounts the epic Ramayana from a fresh perspective and humanizes the leading figures, Sri Rama, Mata Sita and Ravana. Anand Neelakantan’s “Asura: Tale of Vanquished” tells Ramayana from Ravana’s standpoint, dealing with societal power dynamics and caste discrimination. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “Palace of Illusion” retells Mahabharata from Draupadi’s viewpoint, offering an intimate insight of her character. Vaishnavi Patel’s “Kaikeyi” delineates a nuanced character sketch of Queen Kaikeyi, presenting her as a complex figure. Regional folklores and legends also have inspired contemporary literature. Sayantani DasGupta’s “The Serpent’s Secret” influenced by Bengali folklore and myth, dealing with the journey of a young girl as a warrior. Swati Teerdhala’s “The Tiger at Midnight”, inspired by Persian and Indian myths. “Kiranmala and the Kingdom Beyond”, a fantasy series written by A. K. Karunaharan, inspired by Indian folktales and mythology, portrays the character of a princess named Kiranmala. Roshani Chokshi’s novel “The Star-Touched Queen” features a powerful female figure drawn its inspiration from Indian Mythology and folklores. Romanian historian of religion and writer Mircea Eliade highlight the significance of myth to comprehend the sacred and the human experience in his famous work, “The Sacred and the Profane” (1959). “For traditional man, reality is a sacred reality” (Eliade 12).

Chapter 3: Shaping Societal Beliefs and Moral Values

Folktales, myths, and legends are not just compilation of stories but also serve as a reservoir of moral guidance. Characters from myths and folklores have been established as role model and everyone should follow in order to lead a virtuous life. Stories from fables and folktales impart practical knowledge of how we should think, look at, interact, and behave with others in our everyday life. Polish anthropologist and ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski is famous for his functionalist approach to myth. He states in his



celebrated work titled, “Magic, Science, and Religion” (1948), that myths perform as a “charter of primitive faith” and play a crucial role in formation of cultural values and practices. “Myth is a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force” (Malinowski 79). Characters feature in most of the rural legends, folklores, and myths embody social values, like, honesty, truthfulness, morality, compassion, selflessness, empathy, and humility. Ramayana and Mahabharata showcase the significance of Dharma (duty). Stories from these epics teach us individual duty towards society, family, and environment. And we must prioritize the grater causes over personal interests for the sake of the betterment of our society. Fables from “Panchatantra” (attributed to Vishnu Sharma), Hitopadesha and folktales from “Thakumar Jhuli” (Bengali folk tales compiled by Dakshinaranjan Mitra) are prominent example of such stories which impart practical knowledge to young generation. These stories often emphasize the importance of family and community bonds, selflessness and sacrifice personal interest for greater cause, respecting elders and abide by their advices, and fulfilling individual responsibilities. Although, there are a few instances in folktales and rural legends that display discrimination based on caste and religion and gender, reinforcing caste discrimination and gender inequality in Indian society. But we should assimilate only positive things in our belief system and thought process then only a progressive society could be constructed.

Chapter 4: Fostering Collective Memory and Promoting Community Bonding

India is a country of diverse culture. The diversity in language and dialect, food habits, attire, rituals, method of worshipping, and lifestyle of people is highly distinguishable. But shared narratives and traditions establish a sense of belonging and unity within communities. Folkloric and mythological stories create a collective identity that helps in strengthening unity and sense of brotherhood among community members. The celebration of festivals like Durga Puja, Navratri, Raksha Bandhan, Holi, Ganesh Chaturthi promotes a feeling of social cohesion through community gathering. These festivals often celebrate rural legends, mythology, and folklores with great reverence and devotion through various art forms, like, Ram Leela, Ravan Dahan, Chhau Nritya, folk theatre, folk songs, Dance drama etc. The recitation of epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata significantly lead to community engagement in a greater extend. Such religious events evoke emotions, connecting community members with each other and nurturing empathy and sensibility. Shared beliefs, common values, and social cohesion bind community members together. “The myth is a story that is told and retold, and in the retelling, it is transformed” (Campbell, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”). The oral tradition of mythological and folkloric storytelling has passed down for generations, ensuring cultural continuity, fostering collective memory, and promoting community education. These stories help community members to feel deeply



connected to their cultural heritage and ancient tradition. Hence, Folklores and myths play a pivotal role in developing community bonding, leading towards cultural continuation and growth within community.

Chapter 5: Shaping Cultural Identity

Myths, and folklores provide a sense of belonging that helps in formation of cultural identity. Mythological stories and folktales connect masses with their history and cultural roots. Ramayana and Mahabharata are not mere epics but also serve as the preserver of cultural heritage and tradition of ancient India. These cultural heritage and traditions have been passed down through generations. Mythological gods and goddesses, folkloric characters, and local deities or heroes are worshipped with great reverence, shaping the regional and communal identity of a particular region or community. The diversity in regional folklores reflect the rich tapestry of Indian culture. Joseph Campbell, American writer and a scholar of comparative mythology and comparative religion, investigated the notion of hero's journey in the mythological context and the function of myth in shaping cultural identity of society and its people. "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder" (Campbell 30). The stories from Thakurmar Jhuli, legends of Gopal Bhaanr, and Raghu Dakat in West Bengal, legends of Sikh Gurus, and Raja Rasalu in Punjab, legend of Veerappan in Tamil Nadu are very much popular and attract huge readership, passing down through generations and ensuring continuation of the flow of cultural heritage. These stories showcase regional customs, beliefs, and values, promoting community bonding and conveying a sense of belonging. These stories construct a sense of social cohesion and unity among the community members, contributing to the communal harmony, cultural unity and national identity to this country. These help people to perceive their place in society and how they look at the world around them. Thus, myths, folklores, and rural legends play an important role in shaping cultural identity of this country. These mythological and folkloric narratives nurture community bonding, preserve cultural heritage, promote cultural diversity, influence societal values, and inspire the lifestyle of the masses through generations.

Conclusion:

India is not just a piece of land but the cradle and bearer of an ancient civilization that is rich in education, science, ancient wisdom, culture, and tradition. The cultural heritage and tradition of India deeply connected with its myths, folklores, and legends that have passed down through generations, extensively constructing country's socio-cultural landscapes. Indian civilization is still thriving despite facing numerous challenges. The oral storytelling tradition is now in the verge of extinction. 21st century's growing technological advancements, urbanization, and globalization are serious threats to



cultural legacy and tradition of our country. Nowadays, Indian cultural tradition is under the influence of western ideals and lifestyles as we witnessing the degradation of diverse indigenous cultural traditions in our society. But we must keep one thing in our mind that a society or nation that neglects its history and cultural roots can endanger the very existence of that nation or society. As a part of one the most ancient civilizations, we must promote our mythology, folklores, and rural legends with utmost sincerity in order to preserve the cultural legacy and traditions. Our traditions, heritage, societal norms, beliefs, customs, and lifestyle are profoundly inspired by the mythological and folkloric narratives which have passed down through oral tradition of storytelling from one generation to another.

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