



Vetal Myth: Indigenous Justice, Ecology, and the Forest in *The Baital Pachchisi*

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The Vetal myth earns its recognition as a symbol of indigenous resistance within the Indian folkloric tradition. A classic trickster parable, the Vetal myth is primarily derived from *The Baital Pachchisi* or *Vetala Panchavimshati*. Vetal's role can be analyzed as a spirit of the forest, a protector of the natural world, and an embodiment of the ecological conscience. The clash between human nature and the ordered civilization is best personified through Vetal and King Vikramaditya. Through an ecocritical lens, the myth emerges as a narrative of resistance in the context of the global crisis of the Anthropocene.

The Baital Pachchisi is a collection of tales compiled by the Kashmiri poet Somdev Bhatt in the 11th century. It forms an integral part of the larger narrative work known as the *Kathasaritasagra*, originally composed in Sanskrit. Bhatt's text has since been translated into various Indian vernaculars, emphasizing its cultural influence. A notable English rendition is provided by John Platts, titled "Twenty-Five Tales of a Sprite," derived from Dr. Duncan Forbes' Hindi translation. Vetal can be considered an early Indian predecessor of the "vampyr" or "vampire" myth, popularized mainly through Stoker's *Dracula*. Both myths share similarities in demonstrating the unrestrained forces of nature at odds with the human world. "Vetal" or "Vetala" comes from Hindu mythology, referring to a spirit that haunts cemeteries or charnel grounds. Meanwhile, the name "Vikram" or "Vikrama," derived from the root word "krama," meaning "step," translates to "stepping forth" or "victorious stride."

In literature and history, nature has been regarded as an independent and immaculate entity, indifferent to human plight. Thoreau had described the natural world as "primaeval, untamed, and forever untamable... something savage and awful, though beautiful". (Thoreau) The current crisis of the exploitation of biodiversity and climate change uncovers the limits of abstract, critical theories. The Anthropocene is a new literary theory that has emerged as a result of the growing ecological consciousness in literature. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer coined the term "Anthropocene" in 2000 to characterize the extraordinary effects of human activity on Earth:



"It seems appropriate to assign the term 'Anthropocene' to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch." (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000)

As John N. Gray observes, "This may be the era of the Anthropocene, but it is also one in which the human animal is less than ever in charge". He highlights the paradox that, despite having unprecedented geological influence, humans have little real control over the ecological effects of their actions. (Gray) Dipesh Chakrabarty explained that climate change forces us to view humans as biological components of Earth's systems. He further explained that humans unintentionally affect geological processes, collapsing the divide between natural history and human history. (Chakrabarty, 2009) Hence literature exploring myth, folklore, and non-human perspectives has emerged as a result of traditional narratives' inability to capture the essence of the Anthropocene. According to this theory, myths become important because they depict entities that transcend the human condition, such as Vetal, forest spirits, and tribal deities.

The central figure of *The Baital Pachchisi* is Vetal, an indigenous deity and a symbol of harmony with the natural world. He is described as "a sprite haunting cemeteries and animating dead bodies", born out of a tricked union between an ascetic and a courtesan. (Forbes) The courtesan, commissioned by a king, endeavors to subvert the ascetic's rigorous spiritual discipline. He is symbolically represented by his posture of suspension, head-down, from a tree in the forest. By seducing him, the courtesan lures the ascetic to partake in carnal pleasures. He impregnates her, only to realize he was a victim of the king's vile mechanisms. In a fit of rage, he slits his child, turning it into a demon, cursed to haunt the cremation grounds. Hence Vetal's birth is highly erratic, resulting from the dangers of attempting to dominate sacred, mythical spaces. Like Oedipus or Grendel, Vetal's presence is an ontological disturbance, a violation of natural orders. Vetal exists as a demonic residue of sexual transgression, a product of problematic libidinal formation. He dangles upside down, speaking only in riddles, for his existence is irresolute. In Hindu tantric texts like *Kalikula*, Shiva is depicted as *shava* or corpse, often in an inverted position, signifying liberation through non-normative paths. Vetal is often identified with this *gana*, a retinue of Shiva. He is associated with the tantric imagery of death, a reminder of the cyclical nature of existence. Vetal also recalls the Hanged Man archetype in Western mysticism, a figure symbolizing a voluntary act of surrender to life's inevitable end.

Vetal governs the cremation ground or *smasana*, an irrational and polluted space according to Brahmanical cosmology. He acts as a guardian spirit of the forest, where human agency is meaningless. The cemetery grounds embody the Darwinian fears of humans descending into insanity in the presence of untamed natural forces. A crucial episode in the text is when King Vikram is sent into the forest by an



ascetic to retrieve Vetāl, a corpse suspended upon an ancient *siris* tree. He explains to Vikram that it is an integral element for his devotional rituals. The devotee urges the king, “O king! . . . bring that [corpse] to me at once to this place, where I shall be performing my devotions.” (Forbes) Vikram, an intruder in this dark realm, falls prey to the devious hostility of the supernatural. The cremation ground evokes Dante’s *Inferno*, fraught with goblins, witches, serpents and other terrifying beasts. As Vikram walks into the torrential rain and flaming ground, he is untouched by the repeated spectral cries, “Kill him! Seize him!”. Alex Wayman identified a fourth *Sandhyā* or “time of twilight” that emerges outside traditional Vedic practices, representing a profound moment of darkness (Wayman). In this space, the highest spiritual potential is awakened, allowing individuals to confront and transcend death. Yama, the lord of the threshold, serves as the guardian of this esoteric initiation, where all souls face a reckoning. This intermediate realm is a metaphysical cremation ground, essential for Tantric practices. Protected by entities like Vetāl, who ensure the sanctity of this transformative experience. In an Anthropocene reading, the forest claims its identity in the presence of the predominant rational, human subject.

King Vikram acts as an agent of anthropogenic control, with his royal heritage and cultural ascendancy. Vetāl mocks his resolve and interrogates his ethical judgements, testing his relevance as a soon-to-be ruler. Dipesh Chakrabarty pointed out, “Humans have become a geological force.” He explains that humanity, albeit human activity, has deeply altered Earth's interacting physical, chemical, and biological processes. (Chakrabarty 2016) As Vikram carries Vetāl, he warns in a ghostly vengeance, “If you utter a word, I will return.” Each failed riddle causes Vetāl to retreat back to the *siris* tree, which frustrates Vikram. The tales of Vetāl follow a noticeable pattern where there are cities and rulers, reinforcing royal power as the axis of social order. Consequently, Brahmins and Vaishyas dominate the narrative space as protagonists or key moral agents. Hence, the concept of justice becomes a fragile negotiation shaped by power, hierarchy, and historical context. Girish Karnad's interpretation of the Yavakri myth in *The Fire and the Rain* demonstrates ethically corrosive Brahmanical epistemology. However, Vetāl exists outside settled society, inhabits cremation grounds and forests, and repeatedly questions royal judgment. He can be read as a Shudra or avarna figure within the varna framework, thereby subverting the dominant order. Unlike Brahmin characters, Vetāl speaks from the margins, challenging the king through riddles and ethical dilemmas rather than ritual authority. A comparative reading of the *Betal Pachisi* reveals a subversion of a rigid Brahmanical social framework in which kingship, caste hierarchy, and moral authority are severely challenged. Significantly, Vetāl’s central role as a moral guide suggests a silent rebellion against the exclusion of lower castes.



In Indian mythology, the concept of *nyaya* or justice is deeply intertwined with *dharma* or the moral and cosmic order that sustains the world. Justice is believed to function as a mechanism for restoring balance, working in favour of rationality. In the *Mahabharata*, the Kurukshetra war worked as a necessary divine intervention, despite being a catastrophic event. In the *Ramayana*, Sita's trial by fire is justified according to royal justice, although such a form of justice exploits the vulnerability of women. It reflects that a major portion of Indian folklore portrays *dharma* aligning with authoritarian, Brahmanical power. However, in *The Baital Pachchisi*, an alternative form of justice emerges through dialogue between Vetal and Vikram. King Vikram's journey into the forest turns it into a site of conquest rather than a living ecology. But Vetal's riddles destabilize Vikram's moral certainty, revealing his failure of domination and the fractures in the justice system. His tales often feature cities under authoritarian rule, where the sovereign acts as a colonizer, ensuring absolute power. Donna Haraway, in the Plantationocene discussion, reframes the ecological crisis as a result of colonial system rather than human activity. She argues:

“That the problem really is humanity, not “Man” in the Enlightenment sense, but humanity in its evolutionary social history on this planet— its increase in numbers, its increase in demands. This strengthens the illusion that turning all that is Earth into resource for humanity is inevitable, if tragic.” (Haraway and Tsing 2019)

Unlike Brahmanical or colonial social orders, members of tribal communities resolve disputes only through moral accountability. A transgression in the forest develops into a disturbance in the world of humans, non-human life, and ancestral spirits. Justice thereby becomes restorative, requiring the culprit to undergo a transformation for the common good. Many tribal myths and folklore constitute a long history of resistance against foreign invasion, destruction of forest property, and exploitation of natives. The Santhal Rebellion of the 1850s mobilized the masses against British officials, moneylenders, and zamindars. The Bhil uprisings and Kol Rebellion rose against land alienation and interference. Birsa Munda led the famous Tebhaga Movement, which remains a monumental chapter in history in tribal resistance, proving that justice can be embedded within ecological responsibility. In *The Baital Pachchisi*, Vetal continually tested the king's judgment rather than his physical strength, challenging his ethical understanding. The Green Knight in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* serves as an embodiment of nature and the supernatural, with his uncanny vitality. Gawain's odyssey into the wilderness echoes Vikram's descent, as both protagonists navigate trials within hostile spaces where the natural world and the supernatural converge, ultimately testing the integrity of human character. The juncture between the



natural and the supernatural in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a compelling parallel to Vikram's journey into the cremation ground (Harrison and Cooper). In a manner reminiscent of Vikram's experiences, Gawain encounters various formidable creatures such as serpents, wolves, and giants throughout the forest, each serving as symbols of nature's resistance to intrusions by humanity.

King Vikram embodies the Freudian superego, representing societal reason and structure, while Vetal initially embodies the id, representing primal instincts and intuition. Ultimately, Vetal transforms into a guardian of moral order, exposing the ascetic's true intentions. He originally premeditated to sacrifice King Vikram as a part of his rites. The slaying of the ascetic by Vikram hence turns out to be a symbolic act of restoring justice within the forest. The ascetic's use of tantric power had disrupted the moral ecology of the forest and breached the land's sanctity. Chakrabarty famously remarks that “we do not yet know how to think justice for non-human life.” (Chakrabarty, 2009) He recognized the deficiencies of the current legal system, which ignores ecosystems, rivers, forests, animals, and future generations. Traditional historical justice and knowledge have only recognized human inequality, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. Subsequently, the lack of sufficient moral frameworks for addressing environmental damage is revealed by the ethical issues raised by climate change. Hence, the Vetal myth promotes a more peaceful coexistence with the environment, reminding us of the significance of appreciating the inherent worth of the natural world. Consequently, new ethical and narrative frameworks that can address ecological justice are prerequisite in the Anthropocene.

In the present time of highly unstable climatic changes, the Vetal myth in *The Baital Pachchisi* takes on new significance. By transcending conventional frameworks, this folkloric tradition conveyed the significance of humility before nature and obligation toward vulnerable ecologies. The forest emerges as a living, breathing entity with a higher moral consciousness rather than just a backdrop for anthropogenic narratives. The tale emphasizes the need for sovereignty to be centered on self-control, responsibility, and accountability towards both the human and non-human worlds. Through Vetal's transitional existence, the drawbacks of hierarchical justice and the misuse of political power systems are exposed. The text presents a counter-narrative to the paradigms of capitalism, colonialism, and Brahmanism, seeing justice as the cautious maintenance of interconnected worlds.

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