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UNDERSTANDING INDIAN MYTHOLOGY

1. Introduction

The Sanskrit texts of the Vedas, Brahmanas, Ramayana and Mahabharata, are considered prime source material for much of the creative and critical, and some of the historical and scientific Indian writings, relating to India's past. They are generally in the nature of *presentation, representation, deliberarion* or *interpretation* of the texts' contents, which for all purposes are equated to their literal meanings while remaining ambivalent on the superhuman elements.

This Paper presents through some examples, going behind the letter of the texts, a rationally consistent *understanding* of this mythology *including* its superhuman or divine elements. The supporting evidence is spread over in the Author's Books and Papers published or presented over twenty-five years, mainly in Marathi and English, also in Hindi and Sanskrit.

2. The Veda and its Mythology

The वेद has the maximum number of hymns devoted to अग्नि. (fire)'. वेदि is the altar for sacrifice and fire; जातवेद and वे are words for fire. All these have folk-speech cognates in the SI (South-Indian) words: वे (to burn); वेदु (heat). वेद is thus a 'prevedic' word from folk-speech, relating to fire. The class of Veda reciters, wanting to believe and propagate that all knowledge was confined to the Veda, proposed that *the word was derived from the root*विद् 'to know', a process that really goes against the grain for natural languages. वेद the word as well as the text demonstrate a uniquely Indian process: of transfer of words from folk-speech to a literary language, followed by an etymology of the *literary term*, aimed at transformation of the meaning of the original and perception of the literary.

This process, with the addition to it of metaphors on nouns and verbs denoting physical objects and phenomena, helped in the composition of Mythology starting with the Vedic. विष्णु the deity of *ancient*त्रिविक्रम(three exploits) was supposed to represent the sun in its daily course, from rising, to arrival overhead and then to setting. In fact, SI words विण् (sky),विण्णुक (to swell), विक्रम् (enlargement),तिरि (to turn, return) should have contributed the names विष्णु and त्रिविक्रम in Vedic

Sanskrit. The metaphor onविज्ञि, विस्सि (fan) suggests a celestial phenomenon of fanlike appearance, namely a comet, in a past appearance, returning to where it came from.

There are other metaphors on comets in the Veda. केशिन् (cometose) is traditionally considered मुनि (sage) but the allusions like 'stretching to reach both the east and west seas' indicate the physical entity meant. वृषाकपि(male ape) is another, on account of hairy aspect and long tail but prayed 'to arrive once again'.

3. The 'ब्राह्मण' Commentaries: Multifold Metaphors

ब्राह्मणs provide ritualistic rhetoric about selected verses of the Veda. The introduction to the first verse of a hymn to Rudra contains the famous Prajapati story.प्रजापति assumed the form of an *antelope* and lasciviously chased his own daughter who flew to the skies. The Gods were shocked by this unbecoming act. They put together their terrifying aspects to create Rudra, who flung a three-knot arrow at Prajapati. The text identifies the constellations of मृगशीर्ष (Orion) with Prajapati, रोहिणी (Aldebaran) with his daughter and व्याध(Sirius) with Rudra. It proceeds to tell that man and animals were born in a lake of semen that Prajapati spilt. The occurrence of the word प्रजा (progeny) in the Rudra hymn appears to have inspired the curious story.The names of characters invoke metaphors twice: first, in the names given to constellations, of three figures imagined in the luminous spots and then in projecting their nightly journey as mutual chase, hit and pursuance, by the three. Their red aspect makes Sirius रुद्र (frightening) and Aldebaran रोहित (bloody). मृग (antelope) is the result of a phonetic-cum-semantic transformation, from SI-मिरुगु (lustre).

4. Ramayana: Sky-Earth Correspondence

Metaphors on the locations of these heavenly bodies in the sky provided sites of habitation or theatres of war appearing in the Ramayana (as also in other poetic works). रोहिणी appears in the sky as a *triangle* of *five* stars with the brightest at $20^0 celestial$ latitude. The triangle metaphorised as नासिक (nose) gives the name to the town of Nasik at $20^0 earthly$ latitude, as well as the story of शूर्पणखा's nose being chopped off atपंचवटी *(grove of five bunyan trees)*, an obvious metaphor on the *cluster* of five *stars*. The SI word मारिचु (transformed) gave the name to the demon transformed into the (कांचन) मृग (*'golden' antelope*) shot at. The demons came from लंकाwhich name according to पञ्चसिद्धान्तिका signifies the equator in the

sky as it approximately does on the earth. The demons who came by the sky,changed sizes instantly, thundered loudly and spoilt the sacrifices, were also called नैर्ऋत(of the south-west) which gives them away as metaphors on the SW*monsoon clouds*. They are natural foes ofरा मन् (night's king, the moon) with brother लक्ष्मण (लक्ष्म = spot) from SI इलक्कुवन्(the younger), रामचन्द्र's wife सीताwas a metaphor on a (shooting) star, whence she was found under the earth, had to undergo 'the test by fire' and was finally to be taken in by mother earth. Her name has the cognate सित् (to enter a hole) in a SI dialect.

The friendly ape Hanuman is a metaphor on a comet, a take-over from वृषाकपि who spoiled Indrani's gardens and केशिन् who spanned between the seas. His flight over मैनाक, सुरसा and सिंहिका, with sudden contractions and enlargements, represent comet Halley's passage through the houses मीन(Pisces), मकर(Capricornus) and सिंह(Leo). Meteorites have blazing tails, to be metaphorised as monkeys. The astounding numbers of meteorites in the annual showers inspired the count of monkeys in the Ramayana of the order of 10 followed by 66 zeroes !!

5. Mahabharata: War of Meteorite Showers

The epic contains a narrative about Agastya who is mentioned from the Veda down: The mountain Vindhya asked the sun to perambulate him. The sun refused. So Vindhya started growing himself up and prevented the sun's northward passage. It was Agastya who prevailed on him to stop growing till he returned from the South he was proceeding to. Behind this bizarre text are the metaphors: Agastya the bright star (Canopus) near the southern horizon and Vindhya the Tropic of Cancer which the sun does not ever cross. This narrative has given rise to a most fallacious statement of history, about the Vedic sage Agastya having been the pioneer northerner to cross the Vindhyas to go colonising the South.

The Ramayana metaphor of two brothers on the bright and dark parts of the moon is repeated in the pairs of fair (गौर) बलराम and darkकृष्ण, pale पाण्डुand blindधृतराष्ट्र.

पृथ means palm of the hand (हस्त),so the fingers provide the referent for five sons of पृथा (Kunti). हस्तनक्षत्र(Corvus) has five dim stars spaced like finger tips (or the curve of the ear -कर्ण-) and is beside the bright starचित्रा of the house कन्या (Virgo, the virgin).चित्रा lies almost on the ecliptic, so, likely to be covered by the sun some time during the year and also likely to cause 'death' by eclipse, to a full moon covering her. The metaphors contained here explain कर्ण being born of सूर्य and

कुन्ती, पाण्डु suffering death on mating with her, and Kunti being mother to five sons at हस्तिनापुर!

Almost in opposition on the ecliptic, is the house of शतकुम्भ(Aquarius) said to contain a hundred stars that formed the कौरव. Their mother गांधारी is said to have aborted, delivering a लोहाष्ठीली (an iron pebble) which being hot, was quenched with water and crackled into a hundred pieces - an obvious reference to meteorites. कौरवs were no human clones as some claim for glorifying ancient Indian science.

The Leonid and Andromid meteorite showers occurring almost continuously from 10th to 27th November every year not only give a clue to the 18 अक्षौहिणी(almost 40 lakhs) as total army strength, but also to the 18 days' duration of the Great War.

6. The Indian Setting

The above understanding would deny historicity to the Great War and also to the supposedly earlier war between Rama and Ravana or the even earlier Vedic war between fair Indra and his dark foes. That only establishes Indian mythology as Mythology with a capital M.

It is also Indian with a capital I. If Thurston found tribes near Kanyakumari producing fire by churning together sticks from trees sacred to the Vedic priests, the Vedic उखा described by Kashikar is no different from the *Kangri* in use in Kashmir even today. The Vedic couple of Agastya-Lopamudra represents the marriage of two trees with the Tamil names: अगत्ति(*Sesbania grandiflora*) and इलुप्पै मुदिरि(*Madhuka Indica*) while the demon killed by Agastya is metaphor on the seed of इलवु(*Bombax malbaricum*). प्रजापति is the Bengali word for butterfly which even a child could visualise in the stars of मृग (Orion). The नैर्ऋत or clouds of Southwest monsoons cover the Indian skies only and the word monkey did not exist in the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary before the 16th century AD. The trees in Kanva's hermitage typically belong to arid drought-prone areas and the only fledglings saved in the खाण्डव Wildfire were of the Hornbill, emblemic symbol of the Bombay Natural History Society.

The metaphors and narratives are replete with reflections of the social structure and class dominance in Indian society through the ages. On the one hand, folk-festivals and observances are stated to have been instituted by the gods; on the other, every episode contains references to curses and boons by hermits and Brahmins. The

metaphor of a man hanging head down, on the constellation Crux near Agastya, was exploited to relate denial of heavens to Trishanku (a Kshatriya) and penalty of death for undertaking penance, to Shambuka (a shudra).

7. Conclusion: Literature of Comprehension

Sanskrit Mythology was composed by members of the priestly class who were themselves speakers of Indian folk-tongues. For socio-ethical and overtly spiritual effect, its authors employed various literary devices shrouding the themes that inspired them. 'Understanding' them in critical writings, the author was led to composing, *in Sanskrit verse*, similar narratives based on parallel themes, and prose fiction in Marathi describing the likely thought-process behind the composition of Ramayana. All this could be termed 'literature of *Comprehension*' as distinct from that of the four categories mentioned earlier. It would convince the open-minded, that Indian Mythology has to be studied in the multicultural setting of a subcontinent in space and five millennia in time. Understanding Indian Mythology this way, we shall have a better view of our social history and common culture across language-families, to guide us in our march ahead as an integrated nation. We cannot follow the western thinkers and scholars or their sincere Indian followers who tend to apply to it the models based on pristine mythologies of primitive tribes in far-off lands or on lonely islands.

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