

# Myth and Culture

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## Abstract

Myths and legends are integral to every culture. Certain beliefs and knowledge systems are behind every culture. Culture can be either village- centric or city - centred. Civilizations emerged mostly on the banks of rivers. In forming myths, nature plays a dominant role. Myths are an endless source of knowledge and imagination. God himself is a myth. Behind every major festival there is a myth.

## Key words

Culture, myth, civilization, knowledge systems,unity in diversity, spiritual illumination, environmentalist, manifestation.

Myth is the basic structure of the past of a group of people. It has been defined in many ways: “Myth is a collective term used for one kind of symbolic communication and specially indicates one basic form of religious symbolism as distinguished from symbolic behaviour”<sup>1</sup> (Britannica). Cambridge International Dictionary defines it as “An Ancient story or set of stories, explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts.”<sup>2</sup> Eric From remarks that “Myth is a message from ourselves to ourselves, a secret language which enables us to treat the inner as if an outer event.”<sup>3</sup>

Anyway, we can see that the pollen of the past cultures has palpably fertilized each myth. Born orally and following closely with life, myth has become the salt of generations over time. Even today, all cultures and societies are brimming with mythsand legends.

Man, on his journey from the primitive man to the technically empowered man of today, closely observed his environments and inculcated many things from such observations, and came to many imaginative and scientific conclusions that are the basis for all the achievements hither to made by man.

Cultures were formed when man systematized life in accordance with the values the wise men built over ages, with the help of what is sacred and special in life, through close observation. So culture is that which is the noblest thing he achieved so far. The word “culture” in English means two things: Cultivation and Civilization. The Europeans have

used this word with equal emphasis on both meanings. In the very first meeting of the Parliament of the independent India, there was a discussion on what is meant by culture. At the meeting, Sardar Patel stood up and said: “I know only one culture and that is agriculture. This statement is something made out of age-old respect for the farming culture when man started cultivation and found new places. When he was forced to accommodate his times and places, he became an accomplished creature, acquiring subtlety and wisdom.

Behind all culture there are some beliefs and knowledge systems. Many nations exist on this tradition. In T.S.Eliot’s statement that I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature and a royalist in politics, we can see the good Karma of the past times. We can see the rising sunlight of culture in it – a respect for tradition.

Culture is often considered village-centric. But, cultures can also be urban. The Indus valley Civilization, the Mesopotamian Civilization and the Nile Civilization were built up on the banks of rivers. These riverbanks were not beautified by the splendour of rurality. They were adorned with the pomp of urbanity. So many cultures thus were city-centred. The very beginning of the Dravidian Culture was on the banks of the River Kaveri. The availability of water essential for the primary needs of man was the reason why the riverbeds became the large scale settlement of people and later places crowded with the people.

The first two great civilizations to emerge in the world are the Indian Civilization and the Greek Civilization. Due to the constant wars between nation and the consequent remarking of boundaries between them, Greece later became a less important country. But, due to its unity-in-diversity characteristic, still continuous to be a repertoire of cultures while keeping its own identity intact. Great thinkers and writers like Goethe, Eliot and Max Muller have expressed their devotional respect for Indian Culture and tradition through their writings. But some historians, through their negative mentality and research, are trying to blacken and belittle Indian myths and culture.

India is a piece of land abundant in belief, and traditions. In India, the nation itself is venerated as mother. Myth is a collection of stories that mark the world and man’s place in it. The concepts of gods and goddesses are formed out of this mentality. The Earth thus becomes a Goddess to us. So are five basic elements like water, fire and air. Besides, there are plentiful beliefs and concepts related to rains, rivers, animals and birds. The insight that

the whole world is permeated by godliness is something that underlies the magic world of myth. The individual, the locale, and their possessions, evolve into myths on the basis of the sacred splendour they radiate. They are also based on the philosophical concepts of that brilliance arrived at by people.

Sri Krishna is the clear example of the inculcation of the diversity of metaphors created by a particular person. There is a mixture of different myths in the concept of Sri Krishna. To the devotees, Sri Krishna is an incarnation of benevolence, towards those who take refuge in him one who can be easily approached. To the children he is an endearing playmate. To the wicked people, he is the God of Death. To the love-stricken beautiful girls as conceived in India he is the eternal lover. He is a superb artist to the artists, one with mesmerizing melody on his flute. To the cowherds, he is their constant companion. To the seers, he is a preceptor par excellence. In his times, he was also a revolutionary. Thus, in the Krishna legend, we can see a well-talented and multi-faceted personality, becoming an epitome of enchanting myths. The fact that the charisma of Sri Krishna makes even the atheists search for truth convinces us of the spiritual illumination of that myth.

“Nature is the basis for the formation of legends and myths.”<sup>4</sup> Myths have been formed even to protect nature and some places. There is a place near Ootty in Tamil Nādu where temperature is below 10<sup>0</sup>C for centuries. People were forbidden from entering the area between dusk and dawn. The reason was a myth that claimed that those who took the risk of staying there for the night would die prematurely. But few years ago a group of people braved the odds and stayed at the place for a night. There was no consequence to their actions, meaning no one was killed. Many people attempted the feat and eventually it was found that the myth was baseless. People began to migrate to this place and made it their home. When the place began to be inhabited it increased the temperature. It began to look and feel like any other ordinary place. The myth was just a way to protect the unaltered beauty of the place. But, with the loss of the belief, the place and nature was lost!

Every mountain and every tree in a place have its myths and legends. Once collected and preserved, they will culturally showcase their peculiar existence. Myths and legends, it can be said, give each place and locality its colorful and variegated beauty. It is natural that today's history, facts, and knowledge and reborn as tomorrow's myths. Scientific truths, if falsified, have only the place of an imagined story. The best examples are Newton's Theory of Atom and the Flat-Earth Theory.

Myths are a mine of imagination and knowledge. We can see myths pollinating literary works from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to the novels in different languages which depict the human life in its oceanic vastness. In English, Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* and *The Penelopiad*, Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Gaint*, Christopher Moore's *Coyote Blue*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Russian novelist Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

In Indian literature we have Marath's, K.M. Munshi's, Sathya V.S. Khandekar's Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, In Hindi Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*, in Oriya Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* are based on myths. Malayalam too has its own varied use of myths for fictional writing as in M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* and P.K. Balakrishnan's *Eni Njan Urganatte*. As such, myths have created meaningfully strands of life for us. What makes one country, locality and people different from others is the culture and myth associated with each of them.

If myth is the comprehensiveness of the condensed dreams and hopes, the greatest myth will be God himself. God has been able to remain elusive, incomprehensible, enticing, and also to make man hopeful. The very seeking of God thus becomes an enquiry into the richness of myths. So, the worship and propagation of Gods and Goddesses by man is an examination of the sacredness of the past by the present. In this Pantheology, we give each god the domain in specific spheres. Agni, Varuna, Indra, the Sun and Yama are, respectively, the lords of fire, water, rain, light and death. They are based on unique Indian concepts and conceptualizations which have been in vogue for thousands and thousands of years. They are to be studied giving more importance to the organic nature of the myth than the imaginative elements in them. What makes each group of people different from the other is beliefs. A beautiful myth is born when these beliefs are infused with imagination, aesthetic sense, literature and collective dreams.

Krishna is a remarkable myth in Indian culture. Krishna is physically attractive, artistic, philosophic, righteous and romantic and eco-conscious. That can be absorbed in a way acceptable to each individual. We are attracted to a person by his charisma. Krishna has also an image of being the smart and mischievous kid next door. Krishna has many stages of growth and evolution. But people like his childhood the most. So children too like Krishna. He is their playmate. The legends have it that even the animals in his Vrindhavana would remain lost when he plays his divine flute. Besides, Krishna himself

was a great patron of arts and music. He also serves as an exemplary model for environmentalists. He killed Kaliya the venomous serpent for having polluted the River Kalindi.

The Bhagavat Gita is stream of philosophy. Krishna appears as an unparalleled philosopher in it. He is also a righteous warrior who stood with dharma against the forces of evil. He is not a simple warrior on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. He is also the eternal lover in Indian mythology. Krishna, thus, is an accumulation of many concepts. He can be considered the sublime myth of manhood in Indian mythology. Krishna has become a smiling presence giving us the freedom to interpret his teachings based on our age and nature.

There is a myth behind every celebration in the world. A myth lies behind everything glorified. These celebrations are the external manifestations of beliefs and concepts orally transmitted from time to time. When many people become part of the celebrations, they are universally accepted. We cannot deny the stories and philosophy behind the celebrations of Deepavali, Holi, Budhapoornima and Easter. Therefore, festivals are mythical representations of people's culture.

Every group of people in the world have got their belief systems. Many a culture considers that funeral rituals are the foundation for the dead person's heavenly journey. The wives of the sea-going fishermen are supposed to remain chaste. Some people with certain birth stars are considered to destroy their families. But some stand to gain. They are all myths infused with concepts with their in-built attraction. In addition to this, some characters in the epics are not only considered archetypes but also myths.

### Reference

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