

Editorial

Introduction

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‘Myths do not happen all at once. They do not spring forth whole into the world. They form slowly, rolled between the hands of time until their edges smooth, until the saying of the story gives enough weight to the words—to the memories—to keep them rolling on their own.

But all stories must start somewhere... (VE Schwab---A Conjuring of Light).

The oral tradition of myths and legends are an important and integral part in the life of man. They are a vibrant and enduring feature of man’s culture which takes on a life of its own, changing in the hands of each storyteller. Each retelling is unique in its own way. Children have been brought up on tales---fairy or myth, legends, traditions, and folklore. These have educated the young, instilling certain cultural values in them. At the same time in this day, myths can be a catalyst for a wider range of new ideas and imaginative recreation much like the saying “old wine in a new bottle”. They signal a rebirth and re invention of culture.

The rationalist temper of the enlightenment had rejected myths as blind superstitions, but the German thinker Herder rehabilitated their position. According to him myths are symbolical forms arising out of collective experiences around which the cultural imaginaries of particular communities cohere. After Herder’s co-relation between myths, culture and society, the Romantics gave an almost cult status to the mythopoeic imagination which transformed metaphysical idealism to concrete forms. More recently however, the concept of myths as transcendent representations of natural phenomena experienced by man has been modified to fit into a more cultural, psychological, even ideological perspective. The gradual secularisation of the discourse has led to the emergence of various lenses through which to view the semiotics of myths. The interpretations of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have held that these symbolical tales represent archetypes of recurrent and universal causes of individual neurosis. Karl Marx pointed to the role of myths as powerful tools to enforce the ideological apparatus of the state. Derrida has discussed the internalisation of myths as foundational metaphors of western civilisation, whereas Roland Barthes and Adorno have studied its relation to popular culture and the culture industry, respectively.

Myths and legends it may be said, can be used in various manners: to embody transcendent philosophies, to provide cultural identity, to enforce conformity to social and political ideologies. In India, where myths and religiosity are an important part of our voluntary participation in rituals as part of the quotidian, its role in the collective imagination and as a part of an ongoing bid for cultural homogenisation cannot be denied, although the

multiplicity of myths in a diverse country can sometime challenge the obliteration of difference.

Keeping in mind this train of thought the fifth volume of *Colloquium*, the interdisciplinary journal of the Arts faculty, presents papers on the reinventing of myths and legends in the present age.

Urban legends arise in the course of the evolution of a modern metropolis which is often accompanied by its own lore which may proliferate through rumour, gossip and anecdotes. Kolkata, or, Calcutta, an amalgam of the old and new, be it buildings, traditions or beliefs, is full of these stories. In her article titled "Some selected Ghost stories as Urban Legends of Calcutta", Debika Banerjee attempts to classify the urban legends of Calcutta in her presentation. By classifying these legends she has been able to link the various stories that are part and parcel of the rich lore of Calcutta.

Theatre is one of the oldest and most popular mediums of literary art known to man which has a close association with myths. It has evolved through the ages and the genre has constantly enriched itself with its variety of source material. Tirthankar Sengupta's article on "Performing Meghnadbadh Kabya: Questioning Conventions and Challenging the Conventional" turns to the representation myths through performance. Bengali Theatre has its origins in the British rule of the early 19th century. It has always been popular and powerful in spreading social and cultural awareness. Sengupta has traced the journey of the myth of The Ramayana from Michael Madhusudan Dutt's MeghnadBadh Kavya to thespian Gautam Halder's brilliant and unconventional artistic deconstruction of it.

The hermeneutics of suspicion which have moulded modern reception of myths has led to the questioning of the societal or moral values sought to be imposed through the power of myths. The great Indian epics are part and parcel of the social construction of the position and conduct expected of individuals in everyday life. The two papers that have been based on these epics have shown totally different approaches to the stories that are part of the rich Indian lore. Shreya Bhattacharya and Dr. Aniksha Roy's paper titled "*Traversing the meandering lanes of women's vocalizations and political manipulations : An introspection into the Epic Mahabharata*" has given us insights into the life and position of women in the patriarchal society of India during that era. They touch upon several issues regarding women with emphasis on the "dharma" of women.

Paromita Chakrabarty has tried to put a historical construct on myths and legends. In her article called "Reviewing the Myths: Phule's Approach to the Past by Means of Deconstruction" she has explicated on the way Jyotiba Phule has tried to de-construct the myth of the Puranas by showing that these myths actually had their foundations in historical events. By discussing how these myths were structured to suit the society of those times, the links between historiography and myths is suggested.

Souradeep Sen's paper titled "Surviving the Global Epoch: The Myth of Sisyphus Revisited" is an explication on the semiotic relevance of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* in relation to globalisation. He opines that globalism is a myth and man is becoming a victim of alienation. He posits the notion of global man who, like Sisyphus is doomed to be continually in search of the meaning of life.

Who has not heard of the "Western" in American films? Arup Ratan Samajdar in his paper called 'Tales of Violence and Revival: Persistence of the Mythic Hero in American Cinema'

explores the popular myth of the evergreen 'western' hero in films, thereby exploring the link between the entertainment industry and the creation of cultural icons. The paper traces the concept of the western hero through the history of the white man's settlement in the vast desolate areas of America to his depiction in motion pictures. The popularity of the western hero may have waned at times but it has never completely disappeared from the silver screen.

Soumya Bhattacharjee's article, ***Gopal theke Dashu: 'Jana' Myther Bhanga Gora***, follows Marxist commentators in exploring the stories of *Pagla Dashu*, which revolve round the eponymous hero, an iconic figure in Bengali children's literature, created by Sukumar Ray. Dashu, the incorrigible prankster subverts all attempts to make him fit within the binaries of the 'good boy' or 'bad boy', represented through the figures of Gopal and Rakhai. In Bhattacharjee's reading, it is his disruptive resistance which makes Dashu a cultural icon for the middleclass Bengalis, otherwise restricted by expectations of cultural conformity.

This volume brings together various receptions of myths by contemporary scholars with the hope that this will contribute to a richer understanding of the power of myths and legends and the dynamics of their construction and dissemination through various media.

Tales of violence and revival: Persistence of the mythic hero in American cinema

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When James Mangold's *Logan* released in 2017, it was a highly anticipated superhero film.¹ While the film was all set to become a landmark in the superhero genre, as soon as it opened in theatres, fans and critics immediately noted how far removed the film was from the usual superhero fanfare and how closely it resonated with westerns. In one of the earliest reviews, Peter Travers noted, "Logan has the shape of a classic western. Shane is directly referenced in one scene and the elegiac tone of the film recalls Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning *Unforgiven*".² While Travers might have just scratched the surface, given the limited scope and immediacy of a review, *Logan* shares far deeper bonds with westerns than just familiar plotlines and iconographies. To understand the structural similarities which impart the film its identity as a western, one must go back to the most fundamental facets of the genre, namely the frontier myth and the notion of the mythic hero and address one of the foremost preoccupations of westerns, idea of masculinity.

American West(ern): From history to myth

"When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

- *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962)

The western has not only been the most distinctive genre in the American studio system but also a quintessential American institution. Western's popularity and predominance throughout the studio era can be attributed to a multitude of social, cultural, political and historical factors. Considering Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), it can be argued that westerns predate the studio system itself. The settings and iconographies of the cinematic west, evoking the frontier experience, were already a familiar visual territory by the time the Classical Hollywood film form began to take shape.

Historically, America's frontier experience has largely been a part of the westward expansion which took place over a major part of the 19th century, approximately from the 1830s to the late 1890s. Throughout this period, and even extending into the early years of the 20th century, events and locations associated with westward expansion found its way into the American popular imagination through multiple regimes of representation including literature, painting and vaudeville performances.³ They introduced a highly romanticized notion of the frontier experience to a wider and more urban population of America.

A significant landmark in the process of idealization of the west has been the notion of Manifest Destiny⁴. The term was originally used to express the belief that United States was predestined to expand across the North American continent. Although it never took the shape of a political policy, it continued to serve as a theoretical justification for U.S. expansion outside its boundaries.

Equally impactful was historian Frederick Jackson Turner's detailed observation which came to be known as the 'Turner Thesis'. Taking his cue from Darwinian ideology and Manifest Destiny, Turner argued the American west or the frontier functioned as an eco-cultural setting against which the nation's most primal and fundamental conflicts such as man against nature or civilization against savagery are played out and resolved and thus providing the necessary thrust for American progress to continue. As Henry Nash Smith states, "The idea of nature [at the frontier] suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier".⁵

All these factors collectively contributed in the construction of a mythic imagination surrounding the American frontier advocating the supremacy of the white Christian race across the continent, promoting a narrative of progress. Thus, America's perennial fascination with the frontier experience and the frontier myth has been the cultural benchmark of American identity itself.

Thus, placed within a matrix of cultural representations and historical debates, westerns recast the events and characters from history and reorganize them into narratives with a specific ideological function, advocating a discursive accuracy over factual or material accuracy. The idea of myth in this context can thus be defined as narratives with a cultural utility of making social, political or historical experience intelligible and meaningful to oneself or the nation at large. As John E O'Connor and Peter C Rollins observe about the Hollywood westerns, "In these visual narratives, Hollywood has interpreted America to itself".⁶

Located at a poignant historical moment between America's agrarian past and industrial future, westerns have continuously negotiated with the frontier myth, conforming, subverting or even negating it. A diachronic look at the genre further reveals that the western has evolved steadily; an optimistic nation building charge of the post war years giving way to darker and bleaker films during the McCarthy era and further into the turbulent 1960s and the morally ambiguous '70s.

But irrespective of the socio-political or economic climate of the country, mainstream American cinema has always 'looked to the west' and inevitably resorted to the mythic hero, the tall and silent westerner riding across the open range carrying a six shooter, to scrutinize and intervene into the contemporary issues and in the process re-evaluate the very notion of nationhood and national identity.

Knights on open range: *Shane* and western's concern with masculinity

Harmonica: So, you found out you're not a businessman after all.

Frank: Just a man.

Harmonica: An ancient race.

- *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968)

Discussing the idea of genre films, Barry Keith Grant avers, "...genre movies are those commercial feature films, which through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations".⁷ The western, being hardly an exception to this principle, presents a gamut of recognizable character types such as sheriff, Indian, homesteader families, outlaws, gamblers, whores but none more identifiable than the cowboy or the westerner. With the growth of an industrial capitalist economy and urban way of life, the collective consciousness of America chose the archetype of cowboy – a gun wielding shepherd riding a horse across western plains – to endow with a mythic excess. The westerner thus stood for a symbol of hard work and mobility, residing at the brink of civilization and wilderness; a figure which not only recalls a lost plenitude but in its rugged individualism, it also becomes a touchstone of American masculinity.

Masculinity has always been one of western's primary concerns and the films have always been preoccupied with the sheer spectacle of the male body. In fact, the camera's obsession with the male body puts westerns quite ill-at-ease among the conventional Hollywood repertoire where the film form is largely derived from an objectification of the woman-on-screen, which Laura Mulvey describes as, "to-be-looked-at-ness".⁸ Right from John Wayne and Gary Cooper to Paul Newman or Clint Eastwood, westerns have not only cast actors possessing the classic Anglo-Saxon features in the role of the mythic westerner but have always framed and lit them up in a way to allow the camera to linger upon their angular faces, thin lips, slanted eyes, strong jawlines and broad shoulders. But it is to be noted that contrary to the objectification of women, westerns indulge in a celebration of male body, constituting an idea of American masculinity. Even, the familiar position of sitting erect on a horse invokes the mythological image of a centaur renowned and often notorious for their sexual prowess, and thus poses the westerner as a sexual being, literally emphasizing on his manhood.

However, it should be noted that westerns are not confined to portrayal, observation and celebration of male bodies. The body is made to go through elaborate rituals of violation and reconstruction. The westerner goes through customary visits to the barber shop, disrobing in bath houses, toiling menial tasks, bar brawls and even the occasional gunfights leading to flesh wounds. All these minute details of the 'idealized' frontier life foreground the male body in a vulnerable or broken condition, only to be gradually reconstructed and reconstituted before the camera, leading to the final showdown. In fact, westerns can be understood as a series of rituals performed and experienced to reinstate the masculine identity on to the male body; the rite of passage of becoming the mythic hero.

One of the most significant films among the post WW II westerns, in this context, which deals with the mythic nature of the westerner is *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953).⁹ As Andre Bazin notes, "George Stevens set out to justify the western - by the western. The others do their ingenious best to extract explicit themes from implied myths but the theme of *Shane* is the myth".¹⁰ The film, both content and the form, is conscious in the mythic representation of the westerner. It largely unfolds from the ocular and psychological perspective of little boy called Joey whose head is filled with tales of courage, chivalry and gunfighting in wild west. On getting acquainted with Shane, Joey continuously invests his fantasies and speculations about adventures and gunfights, upon Shane.

Shane formally foregrounds the very process of mythification as both the camera and Joey looks up to the westerner inevitably framed against nature, the valley, the sky or the mountains; the towering closeups in 'flat' widescreen illuminated with an ethereal glow and isolating him from other characters and everyday surroundings. The opening scene is particularly poignant where Joey's gaze follows the arrival of Shane as he descends the mountains and rides leisurely across a quaint pastoral setting and is framed in between the ornate antlers of a buck grazing by the brook. As he comes into focus, he is almost like an ancient luminous God, clad in buckskin, who has arrived from Olympus into the realm of mortals in their times of trouble.

Furthermore, when Shane comes back from a prolonged bar brawl sustaining injuries on his face and body, Joey's mother tends to him by cleaning the wounds, wiping the blood and applying medication. All throughout, Joey sits there wide eyed and awe-struck speculating about Shane's larger than life ability to endure bodily pain, the much-venerated restraint and resilience inherent to his persona. While Shane goes through the ritualistic violation and subsequent healing, Joey constructs romanticized narratives about Shane's superhuman ability to withstand the sting of the medicine; myths preceding the actual events. As Lee Clark Mitchell remarks, "We watch, that is, men becoming men in the principal way the Western allows, by being restored to their male bodies".¹¹

Legends from other realms: Displacement of the mythic hero

“Maybe a quarter of it happened – but not like this!”
 - *Logan* (James Mangold, 2017)

As westerns approached its demise in the late 1970s, the genre’s ability to serve as a contemporary cultural artefact was slowly draining away.¹² However, westerns have been an essential component of the mainstream American cinema, responsible for addressing some of the fundamental concerns throughout the years. The notion of the frontier myth and the mythic hero traditionally demanded a film form that has been provided by the western genre. In the wake of the genre’s decline, the issues still being relevant and contemporary, the responsibility of articulating them through a familiar narrative structure thus fell upon the other existing genres such as fantasy, gangster, sci-fi, superhero, etc.

Thus, one can argue that western’s decline had witnessed a displacement of the essential generic concerns into narratives belonging to other genres, although the shift that is being discussed here cannot be described solely as a dislodgment of elements from films of one genre to another. It is important to note that while films of other genres are addressing the issues and concerns of the western genre and appropriating the codes and conventions of the same into their film texts, they are doing it in a template resembling the western. The above argument can be further illustrated with the examples of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) and *Logan*, a sci-fi and a superhero film respectively, both of which can be considered as loose reworkings of *Shane*, while sharing an array of concerns with classic westerns, most significantly refiguring and reaffirming the idea of mythic hero.

Both the films unfold in a dystopic, technocratic near future, throwing into sharp relief the darker side of the frontier myth; a Frankenstein effect of manifest destiny and spirit of expanding the horizon, fuelled by an unchecked growth of corporate greed. With the very democratic fibre of the nation in peril and the future uncertain, the films call for heroes, who are perennial outsiders possessing enhanced physical abilities and tasked with a mission that could save the day for the everyday American way of life. Furthermore, the mythic nature of the heroes is foregrounded by the presence of a child, in both the cases.

Terminator 2 does an interesting thing by separating the narratorial voice belonging to the mother and the narratorial gaze belonging to the son, John (Edward Furlong), emphasizing the mythic nature of T-800 (Arnold Schwarzenegger), the guardian machine sent from future to protect John. As both John and the camera witness his superhuman abilities, the gaze is loaded with narratives John had heard about the future, and for the spectator it invokes the memory of the previous film in the series. Schwarzenegger’s remarkable physique imparts an excess to the character, separating him from his immediate surroundings. *Logan* is evidently more self-reflexive. The child entrusted to Logan’s (Hugh Jackman) care is an avid reader and believer in comic books that narrate a romanticized account of the X-Men’s adventures. The film is almost centred upon the contradiction between the Wolverine described in the comic books and the aging, out-of-shape Logan in real life.

Keeping with the tradition of classic westerns, both films subject the male body to extreme violence. The T-800 takes a sadomasochistic punishment till the light literally goes out of his eye, leading to an alternate power backup that enables him to finally overthrow the antagonist. Logan too is beaten up to the point that his self-healing fails and lies unconscious in the care of children. The film does a playful take on the barber-shop shaving scene in westerns, as the children shave off Logan’s facial hair and he wakes up to see his own reflection in mirror to find his face resembling Wolverine from the comics and earlier films, before the final showdown. On close scrutiny, one can find clear resonances of Turner’s notions of ‘rebirth, regeneration and rejuvenation’ at play in these scenes. Just like the west ceases to

remain a geographical location and becomes a mythic space, the body of the westerner becomes a site of transformation of society and nation.

In these films, as in westerns, the heroes have more in common with their adversaries than is apparent. The fundamental difference is that the hero is aware of his location in history and fights for a future which will have no place for him. The final shootout scene in *Shane* is preceded by an exchange of words between Shane and old man Ryker which echoes this exact sentiment. Thus, killing the antagonist becomes almost a sacrificial ritual. *Logan* does a clever take on this phenomenon by turning the antagonist into a lab made soulless doppelganger of Logan while in *Terminator 2* both the T-800 as well as the rival T-1000 are products of same manufacturer. And be it the bullet in *Shane* or molten steel in *Terminator 2* or Adamantium claw in *Logan*, both the hero and the villain finally succumb to the same factor, time. One lies dead while the other disappears into myth.

The popularity of westerns in American cinema is nowhere near what it used to be thirty years back. The image of the lone rider across an arid landscape has indeed become a rarity on American screen. But the exigencies of a globalized world will persistently bring forth the question of identity and its cultural construction, something which popular cinema cannot ignore, overlook or neglect. Thus, the mythic hero, with or without his usual outfit, ride and firearms, will continue to be a spectral presence in American cinema addressing and resolving the collective crises and anxieties of the nation.

Notes

¹ It was the tenth instalment in the popular X-Men film series besides being the third and final solo Wolverine film. This film marked Hugh Jackman's final appearance as Logan/Wolverine, a role he had reprised nine times over seventeen years.

² Travers, Peter. "'Logan' Review: Hugh Jackman's 'X-Men' Swan Song Is Bloody, Violent, Brilliant". *Rolling Stone*. 28 February 2017. Web. 8 July 2018.

³ The leather stocking novels by James Fenimore Cooper deserves a special mention in this respect as they not only laid out the essential thematic structure for the genre, but also contributed vastly to the construction of the 'West' as we know of it as a hallmark of American identity. Cooper's novels, which were contemporary to the early years of the Westward expansion, almost became prophetic about the collective anxieties and apprehensions about the permanent loss of the frontier; a theme that will become a recurrent motif in films more than a hundred years hence. Equally significant are the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain school of paintings. Thomas Cole's works have been interpreted more as a lament for man's estrangement with nature rather than a celebration about the achievements, another concern to be taken up in films. On the other hand, the paintings of Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, Albert Bierstadt, etc. have been described as a consistent effort to articulate a Darwinian notion (Man vs. Nature) and thus a celebration of the progress and triumph of the White civilization, an issue with direct resonances with the concept of Manifest Destiny, discussed later. The Vaudeville performances collectively termed as the Wild West Shows, marked the introduction of essential 'western' themes and elements such as cowboys, Indians, wild animals, outlaws, cavalry, etc. in the domain of performing arts.

⁴ The term arguably originated in 1839 but came into wider use in columns of John L. O'Sullivan, a journalist from New York in 1845, while campaigning for the annexation of Texas.

⁵ Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. 2000. Print

⁶ Rollins, Peter C., and John E. O'Connor. Ed(s). *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Print

⁷ Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre: From Iconography To Ideology*. Wiltshire: Wallflower Press, 2007. Print

⁸ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema". *Film Theory And Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Gerald Mast, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 746-57. Print

⁹ The plot of the film deals with a family of farmers who are violently forced to leave the lands by a villainous cattle baron called Ryker (Emile Meyer). As the farmers try to make a stand, a mysterious lone rider called Shane (Alan Ladd) comes in their aid while striking up a special bond with a little boy called Joey (Brandon deWilde).

¹⁰ Bazin, Andre. *What Is Cinema? Vol. II*. Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2005. Print

¹¹ Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Westerns: Making The Man In Fiction And Film*. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1996. Print

¹² By middle of the 1970s, westerns faced almost a crisis of extinction from American cinema. The WW II with all its nationalist fervour has already become a distant memory and events such as McCarthyism, assassinations of Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, Watergate Scandal and the overarching threat of cold war had exposed the glaring ruptures in the apparently smooth narrative of American progress. It became difficult for westerns to survive in such a climate in its pure form. The decline of the genre becomes empirically evident considering the number of westerns dwindled from 34 in 1959 to a mere 9 in 1979 and that too 5 of the films blending in other genres.

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Some selected Ghost stories as Urban Legends of Calcutta

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Introduction

Urban legends are stories that have been fabricated and interwoven into the history and essence of a city (Young, 2016). An urban legend usually lies in part truth, an incident or the ambience of a place is given prime importance and a tale builds up. They have their origins in folklore (Ashcroft et al. 2000). Urban legends have a strong historical and cultural setting (Biswas, 2010) even though they are mostly fictional in character. Hence, some of them have been documented in books, others remain in the oral form while many are slowly lost with time and a change in the city's character (Bird, 2002).

Popularity of urban legends maybe attributed to the fact that these give charm and character to a place. However the very nature of their origin gives a distorted view and is more embroiled in the psychology of the residents (Harding, 2005). A historical view on urban legends can form a very basic interesting surmise for establishing the nature and character of a city.

Review of Literature:

Calcutta, the erstwhile British capital of the Raj, has its fair share of urban legends and ghost stories. It is one favourite occupation of the Bengali, to fabricate oral narratives, sometimes passed from one generation to the other, spoken, ornamented and listened to on rainy afternoons. Such tales had their humble origins in the rural regions of Bengal, where 'Ashaare Golpo' (simply 'cock and bull story'). Ashaar is the month of June and July, when the incessant monsoon rain prevents people to go out to work, so they curl up on the bed and exchange stories, sometimes true, mostly fabricated. Hence the term 'golpo' or story (Day, 1883). This term is mainly associated with fictional accounts was a brilliant form of entertainment on the days spent indoors. Bengalis also have a wide plethora of ghost, ghouls and demons, each having distinctive characters as well as belonging to different sections of the society, maintaining the hierarchy even after death (Day, 1883). However if Calcutta is taken into consideration we find a number of such bizarre urban legends, some popular, the others now lost in oblivion. The British seem to have carved a special niche in Calcutta's history of urban legends (Samajdar, 1963; Ortiz, 2015). The number of Sahib and Memsahib Ghosts who haunt the different villas and mansions in Calcutta are many; still holding on to the grand British era. Carriages and Palquains carrying British Lords, Ball dances and dinner parties and headless British horsemen form the very common urban legends that have been passed on from one generation of Calcuttans to the next. So Calcutta has an ethno-centric history of myths

(Brunvand, 2001) that can be categorically divided into region specific hauntings. Most interestingly these hauntings have an associated history that has been passed on as oral accounts and this forms the very basis of this paper.

Objectives:

- a) Classifying the various urban legends of the city (ghost stories and hauntings) and understanding their spatial spread over the city.
- b) Trying to look into the reasons behind the segregation of these legends in respect of the city's history and social setup.

Methodology:

The ghost stories that have been documented in some written format as a narrative have been taken into consideration. Their spatial location is considered based on the map to understand their distribution over the map.

Classification of Urban Legends

This paper will mainly focus on the urban legends that are associated with hauntings. Serial killings that once had created sensations have been left out.

Attempts to classify Urban Legends have not been done by many because of their fabricated and ever changing nature (Harding, 2005). However Brunvand (2001) classifies urban legends under the following major categories:

1. Legends about Automobiles
2. Legends about Animals
3. Horror Legends
4. Accident Legends
5. Sex and Scandal Legends
6. Crime Legends
7. Business and Professional Legends
8. Legends about Governments
9. Celebrity Rumours and legends
10. Academic legends

The focus on Calcutta's urban legends in this paper are based on the horror stories. Horror stories can be divided into subclasses (Brunvand, 2001) according to the American popular urban legends. But since urban legends are place specific, the horror legends have been reclassified to meet the needs of Calcutta's urban fabric.

Stories of ghosts can be broadly classified on the type of spectre/ ghost. Based on this, the houses and streets of Calcutta with popular urban legends can be clubbed together. The classification has been done on the basis of popular stories by the author as there is a marked absence of any classification which will fit the scenario of Calcutta's diverse tales.

White Town Urban Legends: The White Town is that part of the city which was inhabited by the British. This part of the town can be spatially demarcated as Park Street-BBD Bag and its environs as well as Alipore and its surroundings. This part of the city has many British mansions which are associated with ghost stories. Some of the most common legends are the ghost of Hastings House, National Library, Grand Post Office, Garstin Place (All India Radio Office) and so on to name a few. The Sir Stuart Hogg Market and buildings surrounding it have also their own stories of haunted Britishers out on a nightly vigil. Accounts of ghosts, phantom carriages, duels, Memsahibs form a myriad platter of urban legends that have become the very essence of Calcutta's interesting history and myth.

Black Town Urban Legends: The 'Black Town' is originally named to the native occupied part of the city, i.e. the Northern part of the city. The haunted houses of North Calcutta are numerous, but most of the residents have either forgotten the urban legends associated with them as with time they are being razed to the ground.

Metiabruz: The Metiabruz area with the legends of the Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah has left behind stories of ghosts, hauntings, murders, dead bodies which have been documented by Samajdar in his book. The history, its fabrications and mystery creates a beautiful setting for the weaving of such tales. Again this area is a classic case of the 'Other' (in this case the exiled Nawab) who lives an unhappy life in a make-belief world of Lucknow right in the heart of the city. The locals may have fabricated and romanticised the life of the Nawab which was a new alien external feeling for the people of the city.

Other Ghost Stories: The other ghost stories are scattered across different parts of the city, some of them having found favour with the internet revolution. These urban legends are as well popular and find an important niche amongst the other older haunting stories.

Urban legends: looking at the realities behind the legends

Calcutta's urban legends may be segregated on the basis of their distribution in relation to the exotic and the relationships existing between the colonisers and the native residents (Fig.1). The spatial distribution of the haunting incidents maybe very closely linked with the socio-economic setup of the city historically. It is the British, the rulers and colonisers caused fear amongst their native subjects. The stories of their oppression would create fear that lived on in the form of urban legends of the city (Kumar, 2013). These marginalised people (the locals) had little contact with the Europeans and were segregated and declared as the 'Other' (Young, 2016). Such differences made the 'Other' fearful of their masters when they lived and even beyond their powers when they died and became feared ghosts. The most popular urban legends are associated with the British or White Town region of Calcutta. A cluster of haunted mansions are seen in the BBD Bag region (former Dalhousie Square), which have been mentioned in a number of books and oral accounts of spectral visions and strange occurring. It's

interesting to note how Ortiz (2015) in his book 'Ghosts of Calcutta' has spoken about a lady who tortures her native servants and her ghost is seen to haunt and punish them. This clearly portrays the negative relationships that were established then. Maybe this negativity can be accounted for the popular ghost stories about numerous British men and women. Similarly, the 'exotic' flavour is attached to all things that are beyond the common man's reach. Such fables revolved around the exiled nawab and his 'mini Lucknow'. The Nawab and his entourage also belonged exclusively to the 'Other' community: speaking a different language, having definitive styles of dress and food which was very different from the residents of the Lower Ganga plains. This exclusion lead to rumours which persisted and became fabricated and slowly became legends (Lomba, 1998). The legends in North Calcutta find their origins from the rural folk tales and many such stories of headless ghosts and fish eating banshees can be traced back to them.

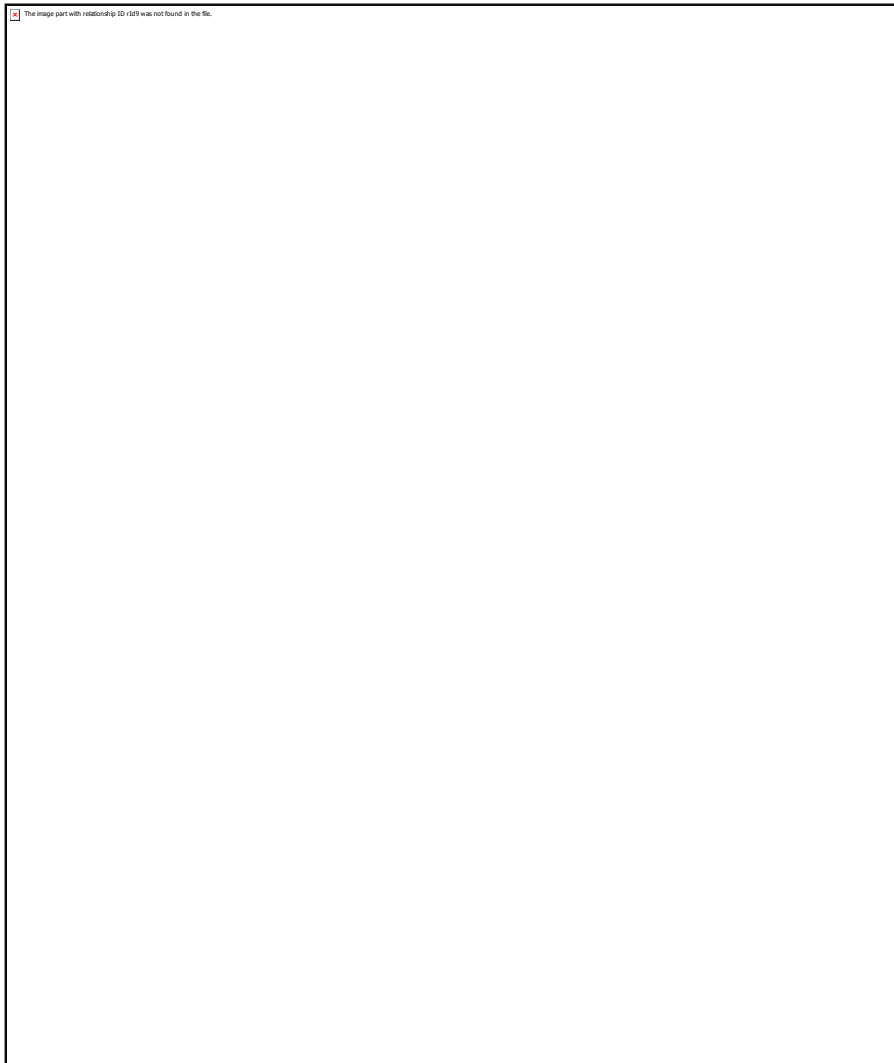


Fig.1: Urban Legend Map of Calcutta

Urban legends of Post-independence period:

Most of the urban legends cited here belong to a pre independence era with fewer ghost stories finding favour amongst the citizens. However it is seen that the internet has revolutionised these myths as countdowns of hauntings and ghost walks have become quite popular in the city (Biswas, 2010; Sen, 2015). It can mostly be cited as a product of the colonial structure whose weakening has led to the dissolution of such stories (Kumar, 2013).

Conclusion

The attempt at mapping lost narratives and urban legends of Calcutta shows a new aspect of the city: that of its rich oral history in the form of legends and myths that are dynamic and has an important historical and cultural dimension. Their spatial distribution is in accordance with the socio-cultural dimensions of the city. Such urban legends should be documented as they can be important themes to explore into the psychological growth of the city.

Note

Calcutta city has been renamed as Kolkata. However the older name has been used in the article. The author holds no claim to the authenticity of the narratives as most of them are personal experiences and perceptions of interviews given in some books. Since legends are fabricated in nature, certain popular legends have been documented which forms the basis of choosing locations on the map. It is notable that a number of 'ghost walks' in the city are also a reference point for this article. The author takes no responsibility for the authenticity of these stories.

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Reviewing the Myths: Phule's Approach to the Past by Means of Deconstruction

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Myths and legends in a civilization is not merely a collection of sacred narratives. These hold people together and enable the search for identity both individual and collective, reflecting the power of culture to transcend and sometime divisive tendencies of religion. They determine cultural identity which constitute national cultural heritage. Indian myths convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide mundane life. Most of the myths were composed by men for men. Myths intervene in history, positively or negatively, often speaking of utopias in the golden ages of the past. Most of the accounts have little or often no amount of evidence supporting the persons or places and cannot be effectively verified. The mythical discourses and legends are all about faith, belief and assumptions applying to all communities past and present. The study of mythology would be enriched as a cultural phenomenon rather than as authentic history that is based on material evidence without it suffering the ignominy of being false or inferior. (Mukhia)

Over the course of history, nevertheless, attempts were made to find an underlying implication tending to deconstruct to represent concerns of the subjugated class in order to highlight their distressed state or plight; thereby allowing the myths to acquire an edge. Deconstruction of a mythical event often leads to multiple interpretations from multiple perspectives giving a new approach to the past. It is used as a means through which the voiceless (and not the dominant groups who are at the helm of a society and get represented in mainstream historical discourses) can articulate their dissent. Thus the end product is an outcome of rediscovery involving interpretation and imaginative reconstruction of the past.

Mahisasur, the buffalo demon, whom goddess Durga slays, has been ascribed by many as the tribal peasant groups swept down from the upland and from the forests, colonizing the river valleys and dewatering the wet swamps of medieval Bengal and had to eliminate hordes of rogue 'Mahisas' or buffaloes. (**Sirkar**) Many Dalit and tribal communities have honoured Mahisasur as a real life historical hero and not a mythical demon for thousand years.

The Asur tribe mainly residing in Jharkhand region often claims Mahisasur as an ancestor as do the Santhals and Bil tribes and people pertaining to Yadav, Kushwaha and Kumhar castes and million others. (**The Caravan**) Asurs are the primitive tribal group of Jharkhand. Earlier they led a nomadic existence but gradually they settled down in villages. They believe that they are descendents of 'Hindur Durga' a name in the local dialect for Mahisasur. They claim that the narrative in 'Markandeya Puran' related to the birth of and description of goddess Durga is biased. They claim that Ravana and Mahisasur are their ancestors.

A renowned politician called Prem Kumar Mani gives a different version of the narrative. They argue that the word Mahisasur denotes people who rear buffalo or those who trade in milk or

the dairy people. Asur has changed to Ahur and then to Ahir class which in present day is a dairyman caste. They might have dominated the Banga region in the past. They were Dravidian by race and had opposed the Aryan culture. To vanquish them the Aryans had used a woman as a weapon i.e. Durga. She took nine nights to kill Mahisasur and finally when she emerged winner after slaying the Aryans the Brahmin upper caste went agog. But became distraught by the genocide, plunged herself into the river. The people look at the festival as the celebration of genocide of the natives. **(Shukla)**

In north India a large number of people belonging to the lower social order celebrate Mahisha, the buffalo demon king of the Hindu mythology to signify the Bahujan culture of resistance to brahmanical tyranny. In Bengal also there are many who consider themselves as the progeny of Mahisasur. Thus uniting of Dalit indigenous people around Mahish resemble the uniting of Dravidian lower caste in Tamil Nadu who challenge the dominant ideology and claim a narrative of strength and independence. **(Austin)**

Using myth to narrate history supposes a sense of myth as alternative history. The idea that myths are both true and false provides an ideal foundation on which to construct narratives that interrogate ideological impact of particular historical moments. Jyotiba Phule deconstructed the myths in Purans as a concoction fabricated by the Brahmins in order to build up the legendary character Bali, the demon king as a symbol of empowerment to bolster the morale of those belonging to the lower stratum of the social hierarchy. He held that the Vedas, Smritis, Shrutis percolated myths to rationalize brahmanical dominance and were historical constructs over time as a tool to ideologically oppress and dominate. Therefore he struggled against the myths built by

Brahmanical ideologies embedded in Purans. His work *Gulamgiri* (1973) is an imaginative polemic structured around the concept of incarnation. He historicized myths in order to expose the social origin and power relation in Hindu society, ridiculed the mythology and used it as a metaphor for the varying forms of Aryan invasions. He incorporated the popular folk deities of Maharashtra and interpreted them as *sardars* or chiefs of king Bali. Thus on one hand he deemed the traditional Hindu religion characterized by imperfection and on the other he revived many Hindu practices and traditions in a reformed way. He saw the golden age in pre Aryan India and the Aryan invasion occurred motivated by the visions of this wealth and resulted in slavery, he saw in Bali the symbol of human achievement and the masses remembered him as an ideal king. Brahmanic theory regarded Bali as a demon. **(Omvedt)**

He explained how the mythological accounts of the ten incarnations of Vishnu and Parahuram's extirpation of the kshatriyas from the earth were distorted versions of the actual historical conquest and defeat of the natives. The first nine chapters of his book have been devoted to reconstruct the past and reinterpret the ten incarnations of Vishnu. He expounded that the Aryans first attacked in small boats that moved in water like fish and thus the first Aryan leader to attack the kshatriyas was called Matsya i.e the first incarnation of lord Vishnu. The kshatriyas were the original inhabitants of the land and were called khatriyas by invaders because they inhabited in *kshetras* or fields. Phule believed that the stories of Hindu mythology were distorted where the combat was between the Brahmins and the kshatriyas. The Brahmins were outsiders, coming from the region beyond river Indus.

In Bhagvat Puran the Brahmin writers distorted the historical event to show that lord Vishnu emerged from a fish. The second time when the Aryans attacked they arrived in larger boats which were slow moving and resembled tortoise movement. This is referred to as the second incarnation of Vishnu in Bhagvat Puran where he emerged from the tortoise to recover valuable objects lost in the deluge. Phule pointed out that Varaha or boar, Narasimha or man lion and dwarf or Vaman incarnations of Vishnu were to free the world from the tyranny of demon kings who were historically the defeated kshatriya rulers. Then he recounted that the next leader of the Aryans was Brahma. He endeavoured to debunk the claim of the Vedas where the origin of the caste has described as the Brahmins emerging from the mouth of Brahma, kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the limb and Shudras from the feet. According to Phule it was the work of shrewd Brahmins to beguile the masses. Therefore he argued that after the death of Vaman, Aryans had no significant leader than Brahma, cunning and avaricious Brahmin clerk took over. He invented the art of writing on palm leaves, composed little poems like those of the Parsi which along with a few magical incantations which were popular these days were put down to palm leaves and this subsequently gave birth to the belief that Vedas came from the mouth of the Brahma. Brahma took advantage of the death of the native king Banasira by invading his kingdom of Kshetra and vanquished the inhabitants. Then Parashuram succeeded Brahma.

The small group of kshatriyas which was still left unconquered attacked Parashuram twenty one times. They were termed as 'Maha-ari' or the great enemy by the Aryans and described them as demon race who rebelled against gods. Myth has it Parashuram's defeating the 'Maha-ari' as the devastation of the kshatriya race from the face of the earth. Now Phule pointed out that historically this decimated group was reduced to miserable and pauper condition and to survive they ate the flesh of dead animals. Therefore Mahar and Mang communities were born who were despised as unclean and untouchables by the upper castes and earned their wrath and fury. The upper castes inflicted a severe punishment when they were forced to wear a black thread around the neck as a sign of identification to be treated as the lowest of the low Shudras whom even the other Shudras could not touch. **(Patil)**

He rejected the superstitions, rituals, traditions and religious beliefs advocated by the Brahmins. He was critical of the caste system and treated the scriptures as legends offering insights into the past history. His projection of the era historically as a combat between the Aryans whom he exposed as Brahmin outsiders, subsequently became domineering upper castes and the natives of the land, subjected to oppression. Phule ascribed that the caste system in Hindu society reinforced the inequality of human and this hierarchy of castes brought maximum benefits to the Brahmins who were the authors of the myriad Purans. This composition rendered legitimacy to the caste system in order to subjugate the folks belonging to the lower stratum in servility i.e. subjected to perennial slavery. **(Shinde)** His minute study of Prakrit and Sanskrit literature had strengthened his conviction and arguments because the scorn and abhorrence subjected on them indicated the chance of tussle between the Aryans outsiders and the aborigines. This system got further approval from the Brahmin authors like Kautilya and Manu as they sanctioned commands, which were deemed deific or holy or eternal. He viewed the legend of Krishna with skepticism where he blurted out that Krishna's lifting of Govardhan mountain as incredulous. **(Phadke)** Since Brahmins held power, they advertently

wrote the myths to legitimize their god to conceal overbearing disposition. Thus these myths were nothing but a sham to elevate their position.

History is manmade portraying human struggles in varied social and physical condition; the events are transient and therefore not eternal. Thus collective changes can be made through awareness in history. Phule did not negate the presence of divine order and religion. He looked for the historical origin of the myths and inferred that they were stories of power, control and domination. He ridiculed the possibility of the existence of Narasimha (partial lion and man). Vishnu came in this form to punish Hiranyakashyapu, a demon given a boon by Brahma that neither animal nor human could kill him. He became a terror and once even attempted to kill his son Prahlad, a devotee of Vishnu. Eventually he was slew by Narasimha. Phule suggested that Hiranyakashyapu was a kshatriya ruler who challenged the brahmanical Aryan dominance. Narasimha manipulated Prahlad to turn him into a rebel against his father. Finally, Narasimha masqueraded as a lion and attacked Hiranyakashyapu killing him instantly. Hiranyakashyapu had challenged brahmanical dominance and refused to follow their social norms and therefore he was turned into an 'evil' and demon in ancient myth. In mythology Brahma is said to have four faces and Phule transformed it as someone four faced in behavior or treacherous. The non Brahmins were prohibited to chant Gayatri mantra which he believed originated from Brahma's teaching his brethren if they were attacked so that they could only share it among themselves. Brahma also invented the tying of white thread across the chest so that he could identify his group. His defeat of the indigenous 'demon' kings turned the kshatriyas or native warriors into shudras because he enslaved them. Thus they offered their servitude to the Brahmins and now doing menial tasks. These Aryan Brahmins wrote their prejudices where it was declared that they were debarred from doing menial jobs that included agricultural activities as those would defile their community. These books were confined in their own sphere whereby the so called lower castes were kept illiterate by the invention of religious codes which did not permit them to read. (**Devare**) Phule used the past instrumentally for an explicit political purpose in the present to question the caste system by exploring its origin and development. Thus caste is established as a historical process that ripened over time rather than being rooted in an eternal Hindu tradition, so it is subject to change. He viewed the past through the prism of present because history is linked to politics. Despite him being skeptic about the accuracy and exactness of ancient myths and their poetic imagination he delved into them to plot their narratives in a different way. Therefore he drew on popular folk customs and practices of Maharashtra region such as Bali myth, tied to the religious world views of peasant castes because myths are an integral part of society tied to people's mundane lives. (**Devare**) He was eager to construct an alternative mythology for the peasants and subaltern castes of his time (primarily the non Brahmin and non literate groups) drawing on oral and written narratives, resorting to popular forms such as short poems, plays, ballads and stories and sought to unearth historical origins and the social and material meaning of the popular myth.

He had made acrid criticisms of the conversations in many legends and myths. Therefore he appropriated certain important mythological figures by explicitly exemplifying lower Shudra glory and heritage. He asserted that many epics and mythology degrade the demons as evils to silence the lower castes counter narratives that held these figures with high esteem. For instance many tribals such as Gonds in central India revere Ravana who is depicted as the

demon in the epic Ramayana. Likewise the Purans are ambivalent about Bali but the fact that the gods played some tricks is acknowledged. Vishnu's blessing that Bali would become a god at a later time and also be recalled by people at a certain time of the year i.e. at Onam festival (it takes place in southern territory of India) was a concession granted on account of Bali's magnanimousness. The people of Maharashtra too commemorated Bali by celebrating Diwali festival. **(Chousalkar)**

Similarly the characterization of Ramayana's villain is used as an ideological weapon in Valmiki's Ramayana to domesticate indigenous people. The epic has also been used as a tool by several sects such as Vaishnavas against Shaivas, Brahmins and Aryans against Dravidians to promote their cultural agenda and to fight back against perceived subjugation and cultural hegemony. **(Austin)** Periyar gave a call to fellow Tamils to dismantle the veneration of Rama and Sita and approach Ramayana as an antagonistic piece of fiction. Vivekananda and Nehru too stated Ramayana as a myth depicting the lifelong struggle between the Aryans and the non Aryans. **(Ramaswami)** Sundaram Pillai's 'Ravana the Great King of Lanka', a work written in 1920s as a political reevaluation of India's oldest religious epic where Ravana is extolled as an intelligent and valiant hero and virtuous in character even in his conduct with Sita. **(Pillai)**. Kamban also did not project Ravana as a black villain but a tragic hero, generous and cruel, gentle and vicious at the same time. Kulantai Pulavar reinterpreted the epic by presenting Ramayana as a competition between Indo Aryans and Dravidians where the former were a despised meatarians and the latter were vegetarians. The depiction was on a pro Dravidian side. **(Zvelebil)**

The elites of the defeated societies sense that the dominant ideology of the state and their own privileged access to the state apparatus are sanctioned by the idea of history. Their subjects oppressed in the name of history believe that their distressed state should be blamed on their inadequate knowledge of history. **(Nandy)** Jyotiba Phule was a compatriot of humanity and not a religious personality rather more ethical, social and rational. His earnest effort to demystify the Puranic myths, the discourses which often demonstrate and magnify the valiance of the Aryans who mauled the peaceful existence of the aborigines and then again he reassembled them with a significant twist through models and metaphors to promote a feeling of equality. Nonetheless, he has emerged a winner in providing an identity to the downtrodden, the so called non Aryan identity to the aborigines who were once at the zenith of their splendor stood subjugated, persecuted and diminished in social position by the so called Aryans in course of time.

During the 1930s the elites of the society had shifted their focus on the argument that the Aryans had originated in India itself and were builders of the newly excavated culture called Indus Civilization owing to the proliferation of Dalit movement and non brahmanic movement in south India. The subjugated people have developed over the years their perspective on historical events to subvert the hegemony of dominant groups and its oppressive measures.

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A Sociological Study of Women's 'expected virtues' and sufferings with reference to Mahabharata

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Mahabharata. The word remains very synonymous to our childhood and deeply etched in our memories. As we grow older we are able to speculate that this grandiloquent saga has so much more to offer than the intense emotional sentiments and was actually a reservoir of wisdom and profound philosophy. Vrinda Nabar (2005) in her article 'Whose "Mahabharat"? A point of view' wrote that the epic contained labyrinthine plots and has been a hunting ground for sociology, literature, anthropology, cultural history and feminist studies.

Central Concern

The principal concern of Mahabharata is the relationship of the self with the self and with the other. It sows the seed for 'politics', 'gendered' society witnessed by posterity. The universality of the themes explored in the literature speaks volumes of the critical, reflective enquiry, it makes into human condition. Mahabharata contains the 'Bhagwad Gita' that is the religious bedrock of the Hindus. It espouses values and ethics and shows Man the 'Dharma' to live life. The longest poem, ten times the size of Iliad and Odyssey, dwells upon the intricate human relations in the form of political alliances and gendered cleavages existent then and now. The paper addresses three main issues:

1. How 'women' bear misery and pain because of her gender.
2. How was pativrata dharma the highest virtue for women.
3. How did women's change of "self" go through layers of unfurling in the epic.

I. Women as 'sufferers'

The epic is filled with fascinating tales of sages and seers who had renounced all worldly pleasures and were deeply respected for it. But if we are talking of gender disparity one has to mention the story of Vrddhakanya, an ascetic woman who was forced to believe that being a brahmacarini was not substantial enough to occupy a place in heaven or achieve enlightenment. She would have to marry and though she found the idea quite implausible she was compelled to find a husband and give in to the rigid moralities of society. She wedded a

young *rishi* Praksrngavat who had agreed to be her husband for only a day on the grounds that she would give him half of her penance. Therefore, a content ascetic was coerced into following conventions only because of the fact that she was a woman and marriage was her dharma. But here Praksrngavat falls in love with her and is devastated when the next day she gives her penance as per the deal and dies proving that though she had to bend and oblige her enlightenment state shone through and it was the man who was actually weak and loses his ascetic fervor. Thus it could be said that men make the laws and impose them on women to hide their feebleness and nature of dependency.

The Mahabharata documents the steady journey of repression and subjugation of women. It all begins with the feelings of jealousy a son had towards his mother. The tale of Mamata and Dirghatamas unfolds when Dirghatamas is still a foetus in Mamata's womb and attempts to stop his uncle from advancing amorous behaviour towards his mother. Brhaspati, his uncle, out of rage curses him to be born blind. This was the cause of his lifelong insecurity towards women. Dirghatamas's wife deserts him for being useless which ultimately leads him to curse all women to marry, be faithful to one man (as women used to be free and liberated) and prevented widows from getting married.

The concept of restraining for women from having multiple relationships with men was probably to establish the knowledge of paternity and trace lineage of the sons. Therefore illegitimate children were a bane to women who would lose face and status in society. The early seeds, hence, were sowed. The example of Kunti could be stated here who gave birth to Karna had to abandon him because she was an unwed mother and live with the guilt of deserting her first born for the rest of her life. Another tale of signifying the emergence of patriarchy is of Goddess Aditi who as a mother refused food to Buddha till all her children were fed. Buddha, tired and hungry, was enraged and cursed her pain in her womb during the birth of her son. Henceforth, all mothers bear the pain and suffer during childbirth.

The aforementioned examples prove the fact that chastity and loyalty have forever been "expected virtues" of women. The 'fairer sex' was responsible for maintaining 'order' in the society. Manusmriti, suggested that men born of higher 'caste' and 'status' could marry women from lower social categories as the latter would undergo positional change, resulting in cleansing and ritual purity that had been associated with women of lower castes since ages. This kind of ideological underpinnings had a far-reaching impact on the social order in India. Dowry, bride -burning and lower absorption rate in the paid labour market are a fall-out of such ideological undercover. Emancipation or empowerment of women, when defined, seems an obscure impediment in bringing about concrete reforms for them in most countries. It might be ascertained that women have experienced liberation in one way or the other but the 'differential liberation' experienced by the second sex across caste, class, race and ethnicity in India hinges us to the fact that "women were empowered before the birth of civilization, now empowerment comes with a caveat..."

In that country

where doors are adorned

with flowers and mango-leaves,

*the houses decorated
 with lighted lamps,
 in that country
 the woman is still a slave.
 Where Sita had to pass
 the ordeal by fire
 to prove she was a pativrata,
 Ahilya to sacrifice herself
 to Indra's sexual desire,
 and Draupadi was divided up
 among five men,
 the woman of that country
 still remains a slave...*

- The Slave by Hira Bansode (1939)

II. Women, and Pativrata as Dharma

Indian culture since time immemorial has placed great prominence on *pativrata dharma*, the highest form of virtue for a woman. As Shalini Shah in her article "On Gender, Wives and Pativratas" reiterates that the transition of wife from patni to pativrata is evident in the portrayal of Draupadi, one of the central characters in the Mahabharata. She terms this process of transition as 'pativratization'. She writes that 'a fearless and wise Draupadi with a mind of her own is ingeniously introduced by her husband Yudhishthira as both pandita and pativrata. Thus, to worship husband as God was what defined pativrata dharma and it was commonly believed that there was no protector the equal of one's husband, nor any joy greater than him and the ideal way of life for a woman was to sacrifice everything and take refuge in her husband considered equivalent to heaven. The husband was discerned to be the sole repository of his wife's happiness and it was unfathomable that she would seek it elsewhere. This unquestioned passive faith was, as Shah (2012) puts it, "an ingenious ideology which eschewed the necessity of applying physical coercion over women in an oppressive patriarchal household, which would have been more difficult to establish and maintain. Instead, this ideology was used to elicit conformity with oppressive norms on a psychological plane". The pativrata stri was also expected to render services to her husband's family as well.

When we are on the subject on the patriarchy its most pure form was observed when Draupadi had to take all the Pandavas as her husbands. Fraternal polyandry, as was the case, delineated a shift towards patriarchy with Bhishma rationalizing her set of affairs and the other wise men like Guru Dronacharya choosing to stay silent. Draupadi was betrayed by her husbands, used as a pawn in the battle for the throne, lost and publicly mortified and shamed. Yet she was

expected to continue with her stri-dharma and had to coexist with her husbands' other wives without churning any feelings of malice or resent.

The label 'second sex' was attributed to women by Simon de Beauvoir. The name itself goes on to speak 'volumes' that life for the 'fairer sex' has always been under marginalization and subservience. "Expected qualities" of women have always been defined in definite terms. Adjectives such as polite, docile, obedient, caring, affectionate, motherly, are associated with 'women'. The longest epic of the world too, reiterates this philosophy in terms of the characterization it has etched. Even in the 21st century, women's autonomy is paraphrased in terms of relational autonomy. They are considered as bridges between relations, 'builders' of bonds and 'sustainers' of tradition. The 'womb' not only holds life, but carries the seeds of custom that will take birth on the remnants of the 'bygones'.

III. Metamorphosis and Social Perpetuation

The process of Metamorphosis or transformation has a critical meaning in Mahabharata signifying polarized gendered roles rooted in patriarchy. At first glance, we see all characters following prescribed gendered rules yet as the story unfolds there are instances where women become men and men become women or animals or rocks due to circumstantial conditions. If we take the example of Amba, a woman abducted by Bhishma for his brother Vicitravirya, and later on turned away by her lover King Salva, as he doubted her chastity, she turned into a hermit and lived many years alone in a forest to arrange a boon that would reborn her as a man who would kill Bhishma. She then organized a large fire and burnt herself in it. Half of her metamorphosed into a river and the other half was reborn in the palace of King Drupad. Born a girl, she was brought up as Sikhandin, a boy skilled in warfare, and a secret known exclusively to her parents.

To flow with the regular societal conventions Sikhandin was wedded to a princess and it was she who discovered the lie and made her father declare war against Drupad. Sikhandin escaped into a forest and had an encounter with Yaksha Sthutanakarna who hearing her sad plight agreed to exchange his maleness with her. Sikhandin returns home a male and eventually in the war of Kurukshetra kills Bhishma with Arjuna.

It is very important to clarify the importance of metamorphosis here. Amba, disallowed by circumstances to follow the conventional ideals of womanhood and despite her righteousness and honesty, rejected and misused by the males, exposed their careless attitudes towards women. This realization made her patient, a virtue not generally seen in men. She out of perseverance excelled first in ascetism which made her capable of writing her own fate and second by rebirth became a warrior beating her enemy in the battle.

Amba's transformation from female to male is indicative of the true nature of society where each sex contains its inherent restrictions and she grapples with the idea that antagonism and ferocity are synonymous to the male form. Regardless of the fact that Sikhandin was a fearless warrior she was forced to live the lie of being a man.

The epic offers a number of examples of women being punished especially by the ascetics who often inflicted curses to control uncustomary or defiant behaviour. Apsaras, or the damsels of the Gods, were frequently cursed simply because of being beautiful and usually transformed into less enchanting guises. Adrika was cursed and altered to a fish and in this form gave birth to Satyavati who later on became the queen of Shantanu, the Kuru king of Hastinapur, mother of Vyas who authored Mahabharata, and the great grandmother of the Pandava and Kaurava princes. Varga, Saurabheyi, Samici, Vudvuda and Lata were all Apsaras cursed to change into crocodiles for a century. Rambha, another Apsara, was cursed to be a rock for ten thousand years by Vishwamitra, a Brahmarishi, when she had disturbed his penance as ordered by Indra.

These curses or punishments were actual reflections of male dominance and aggressive patriarchal mindset. The stories of metamorphosis underline how agonizing it is for people to be captivated in bodies which curtailed their fulfillment of desires.

Conclusion

The stage of summary becomes the most arduous task. Women have been the structure and agent of various discourses. However, the work is never complete. The epic symbolizes women's power but does not keep the fact latent that they are the sufferers as well. The fact they can nurture life itself becomes a curse when such nurturing has to be justified within the defined precincts of virtues. On a similar note, their voices remain unheard or subdued when they exercise their will to topple traditional jurisdiction of authority. Women are often, the vassals of the dominant sex and find greater approval if they respect the space.

On a positive and brighter note, it may be said that they are an assertive voice in the space of planning and execution of decisions within the family and beyond. All the women discussed here had a will, power and influence of their own, each reacting to patriarchal situations in their own way. They demand respect for their unyielding strength, individuality and determination to seek justice and vengeance for all the wrong doings. The Mahabharata carry immense weight and reverence in our society. The women in the epic are known for their expressions of fortitude, courage and multilayered qualities.

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Surviving the Global Epoch: *The Myth of Sisyphus* Revisited

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“There is something feeble, and a little contemptible, about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably some part of him is aware that they are myths and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dare not face this thought, and he therefore cannot carry his own reflections to any logical conclusion. Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not rational, he becomes furious when they are disputed.”

-Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, 219-220

Human beings are essentially subjective. On deeper introspection, it might become clear that we exude values and sensibilities more naturally and predominantly than rationality and logic. But, we do vacillate based on time, circumstances and interests. To exemplify, Russell's aforementioned adage is a product of his broader belief in rationalism, progress and the scientific temper. He denigrates what many people may treat as sacrosanct in their lives – their own basic systems of belief. But, how do we know that the self-same rationalism is itself not a myth? Were not the maxim of logical positivism challenged and even discarded by Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper and the likes to usher in a different comportment of logic? Making a religion out of science, by guarding its ambits jealously only reaffirms its frailties, its mutability and its symbolic nature to be akin to that of a myth. Didn't Russell clamour unfoundedly for a better world, devoid of nuclear weapons and wars, pestilence, savagery and hunger, elsewhere (*Has Man a Future?* 7-14)? Thus, rationalism and utopianism are often traits embodied by the same man, and we are never purely either a rationalist or an anti-foundationalist. In other words, we continuously create myths (stories/narratives) either secular or religious as explanations of the cosmos, having a generic fluidity which reflects the indeterminacies of human lives. Myths are symbolic tales. They may be connected to belief systems or rituals and can help in directing social action and values. And when we conceive of values in interpersonal and social settings, we are soon confronted with the inexorable dynamics of power and authority. This brings us directly to the question of politics. If politics is basically the struggle for power and is a necessary variable in all spheres of human life, will not the myth created by the powerful triumph over those of the vanquished? One such myth in our present milieu is globalization; fostering an even profound myth of the 'global man'. If Russell is to be believed, then man indeed believes in the more comfortable of myths. Nietzsche would interject that it is because those are more life affirming. The present endeavour tries to fathom how and why the myth of globalization has been robbing man of his very nature, his surroundings and even his sanity – alienating him not only from his immediate life, but his aspirations. And the ways in which the more comforting myth of affirmation and personal rebellion against the absurdity of his existence (which becomes evident first to others and only then to himself) elucidated in Albert

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* be revamped to provide hope in a hopelessly reified and 'global' world. In short, the present paper resorts to an interpretation of a time-honoured myth for answering a very basic and at once private dilemma: how to live and find meaning in the global age.

The 'Globalism' Myth

In almost all publications emanating from the academia of this epoch there is a trenchant reminder that our socio-political, cultural and economic lives unfold in what Kenichi Ohmae has called a borderless world; where the workings of the market's invisible hand have powers and reach beyond anything that Adam Smith could have possibly imagined (*The End of the Nation State* 41). In recent years, global trade flows along with capital mobility and national competition for investment –creating a genuinely global labour market without taking into consideration the social and environmental costs of such interconnectedness-have animated the need for careful scrutiny into the context provided by the phenomenon of globalization. Like every myth, globalization is difficult to define, and there are myriad scholarly differences surrounding its nature and scope. Although the 'channels of interaction' fostering globalization are indeed economic, it also has significant economic and political implications. And akin to the concept of human security in the XXI century, the impacts of globalization can be deconstructed not only to the systemic and national, but also to the societal and human units of analysis. The diffusion of familiarity with key brand names, the speed of social interconnectivity through the use of ICTs have transformed lives, by converting localized issues into global political discourses, among diverse people who are no longer constrained by the ambits of their economic status and national identities (Schrecker 3). Perhaps the paramount socio-cultural accompaniment to the emergence of the myth of an interconnected economic order is the notion of 'globalism'. The view that one has to choose between primordial identities and forms of production or the global outlook; in other words, globalism views destructive social and economic processes as natural and inevitable –and any ethical and political opposition to this destructive urge, which may favour the sanctity of localized existence, as confused, unnecessary and retrograde.

But, such comfortable generalizations aside, what is so mythical about the myth of globalization? The developed world as the repository of economic and political power wishes to propagate the following myth:

The world economy has internationalized in its basic dynamics, it is dominated by uncontrollable market forces, and it has as its principal economic actors and major agents of change truly transnational corporations that owe allegiance to no nation-state and locate wherever on the globe market advantage dictates. This image is so powerful that it has mesmerized analysts and captured political imaginations. (Hirst and Thompson 98).

The same authors have proffered what is perhaps by far the most convincing analysis of globalization as a necessary 'comforting myth' propagated by the global powers that be. That globalization is not a sacrosanct reality, but is a powerful narrative wielded by the denizens of 'comparative advantage', at the cost of the quality of human lives can be nominally established by focusing on its contradictory economic realities. It is a form of truism that since the 1960s, economic interconnectedness has increased due to a myriad of domestic and international

factors. However, a closer look yields a plethora of unfounded claims held by radical hyper-globalists. Following Hirst and Thompson (98), three facts can be adduced herein to establish the mythical elements of world-wide interconnectedness: first, the absence of a commonly accepted model of the new global economy and how it differs from previous international structures; second, in the absence of such a model to facilitate verification of trends, the tendency to casually cite examples of the internationalization of sectors and processes, as evidences of growth driven by autonomous global market forces is presumptuous; and third, the lack of historical depth, or the tendency to portray current changes as unique and unprecedented with the propensity of being prolonged into the future, threatens more than it reassures. Thus, belying the sanguinity of hyper-globalizers, Hirst and Thompson weave a polemic which thoroughly reduces globalization to a myth. Arguing instead that the present rhetoric surrounding a highly internationalized economy is not unprecedented and has been raging with leaps in technological innovations since the 1870s; that genuinely transnational companies are rare and capital mobility does not axiomatically lead to massive shifts in investment and employment from the advanced to the developing countries; that the world economy is far from genuinely global, concentrated in specific belts; and finally that the wielders of economic power have the capacity to exert powerful governance pressures over financial markets and other economic tendencies –in short, global markets are at the beck and call of great powers and the economic discourse prevalent among their elites (Hirst and Thompson 98-99). Hence, any strong version of globalization –especially its economic facet- is a myth constructed by a particular clique with interests of its own: for without the myth of a truly globalized economy, the socio-cultural and political consequences of the unadulterated lust for the lucre would be threatening and ultimately unsustainable.

Globalization and Alienation: The Myth of the Global Man

As an indictment to the myth of globalization, one can legitimately pose the question: whether or not increases in spatial mobility and communication abilities foster greater connectedness among peoples and locales? The resolution of this dilemma would entail a discussion on alienation and its relation with globalization; it would also require negotiating the understanding deeper into a single unit of analysis, i.e. the individual in the global age. The foremost irony of the post-industrial and globalized eras, is that their significant myths rest on the bulwark of greater specialization which differentiates one man from another. Ironically, economic development makes people and places parts of a holistic setup accentuating alienation or estrangement. Larger control organizations reduce man to a mere cog in an ostensibly self-operating system, coordinating and synchronizing their actions –separating the individual from any comprehension of the system that embraces him like a caul. For Janelle, the spatial division of labour reinforces this pattern of alienation, giving rise to highly segmented views on the nature of society (Janelle 38). Each and every region of the world, under the impact of this powerful myth has degenerated into parochialism, projecting hostility to the ‘other’. The same author believes that this broad synthesis of social evolution over time has increased individual specialization and has enlarged the span of control organizations, resulting in greater differentiation of the parts from the whole (Janelle 38-39). As individuals in specific regional setups come to know that they are just indirect beneficiaries of an unforgiving global

economic system of greed and have no points of exit, the socio-political manifestations of alienation and stress reveal to him his real incapacity to wield any power over the system and his own place within it. The dominant narrative of globalism embodies increasing spatial mobility of individuals and organizations and decreasing long-term fidelity to places of residence (Janelle 39). Hence, at the local level, an individual's sense of control and participation in governance suffers. Consequently, the ability to resolve conflicts –which bring the local and global at loggerheads- is also diminished.

The alienating effects of globalization is being felt not only in the developed world, but also in our own milieu. 'Separation' is the term to explain this crisis (Janelle 40). The hallmark of this is the ever-increasing distance between the workplace and the home. The advent of large urban setups and new transportation technologies often compound the feeling of separation. Consequently, individuals in the service of the global market have to devote more time to commuting which leaves them with little scope for family and community socializing. And as the proportion of independent members of extended families –having specialized roles in the production process- increases, the distance of their spatial dispersal increases as well. Such social separation serves as an indicator of alienation. Studies by Armand M. Nicholi Jr. confirm a positive correlation between the strength of family support and the emotional health of children and adolescents (227-241). The dispersal of families on broad regional and continental scales fosters a growing sense of rootlessness, reinforced by the pace of change and by the dependence on ICTs to overcome distance. Unrestrained economic growth is often anathema to the past, with its inexorable zest of building newer infrastructures by obliterating older structures and neighbourhoods. Residential communities stand sharply divided by social cleavages and variances in income, ethnicity, race and demographic traits (Janelle 41). In the name of world-wide interconnectivity, the globalism myth leads to diminished intercommunity contact and understanding: the ones who reap only a perfunctory share or no share at all of the global market find themselves trapped in poverty and in urban ghettos; while the direct beneficiaries of the new rhetoric enjoy a premium privately secured communities, lifestyles and amenities.

The global connectivity has indeed led to greater interrelatedness. But the cognition of collective and specific vulnerabilities has increased nonetheless. The fear of a nuclear holocaust, resource exhaustion, environmental hazards, the movement of massive refugee populations as a consequence of war and economic instabilities, and the specter of terrorism are but instances from which there seems no escape short of basic changes in human values and habits (Janelle 43). The present author asks, can we be sure of their amelioration in the wake of a particular community's changed circumstances and imaginings? Perhaps one cannot betray tangible realities with an affirmative retort. In the harsh realities fostered by the 'global' myth, no nation, no community, not even individuals are shielded from the caprices of economic pseudo-interconnectivity. As one author, elucidating forms of separation at the local and global levels has opined: political boundaries, Iron Curtains, and military alliances are ephemeral and offer no protection (Ohmae *The Borderless World*).

Although increasing levels of global interaction help in the awareness of world issues, significantly large populations remain outside the precincts of the global exchange of information –especially in developing economies. But, the general diffusion of information to

the broader population shows greater expansion. The alienating impact of this technologically driven information revolution can be located in the rapidity of modern transportation and communication linkages which might assail a community's cultural integrity and sense of geographical position. To exemplify, the exposure of primitive indigenous cultures to globalism through mass media must be practiced with caution and sensitivity, lest it is confronted with reaction and rejection. Even in developing economies –much like instances observed in the developed world during the last quarter of the XX century- a growing substratum of the populace may find such connectivity intimidating, alienating them from an economic system driven by the imperatives of global demand and supply and isolated from the daily hardships of unemployment and poverty (Janelle 44). The globalism myth favours interconnectivity among metropolitan centres at the cost of localism; it fosters concentration of political and economic power risking inequalities in the allocation of wealth; and externalizes socio-economic and environmental problems to those residing on the margins of the world economy without any recognition of its consequent estrangement. In short, these are the comportments of alienation emanating from the not-so-comfortable myth of globalization.

Such are the inevitabilities nurtured by globalism in the lives of communities and families. The point, however, is to further the analysis of the impact of such vagaries on the life of an individual. In other words, to fathom the contradictions within the 'global man'. What constitutes his myth? The study by Nicholi referred above (227-241) concludes that the youth of today exhibits a greater likelihood of dropping out of schools, having children out of wedlock, resorting to drug and other substance abuse –and ultimately committing suicide. Owing to the impact of alienation on adults the rates of divorce, street crime, alcohol abuse, drug addiction and so on as manifested behavioural deviances have shown a marked propensity of leading to suicide. Man has never been so sanguine of his growth and economic security in preceding epochs; conversely, he has never been so vulnerable to alienation before the advent of the global age. He has the power of the world residing within the gadgets he carries everywhere, he has the access to travel and enjoy the fruits of his economic activities regardless of national and geographical constraints. But, during an unassuming yet propitious day, when his sensitivity takes over, destroying his veil of ignorance, when he comes to see that the successes heaped onto him as a effective minor character in the great myth of change unfolding around him is only his own imagining and is meaningless, nay alien to the world around him, his charade of respectable behaviour soon falls off. There may come a day, when any person, involved in any activity of the reified system may ultimately conclude that for all his life he was in the wrong, that his work is not his own, and he is separated from everything which his subjectivity had once deemed necessary and sufficient for his existence. And the epitome of it all is the very pertinent feeling that there are insoluble paradoxes in between himself and his surroundings, more profoundly within his own being. The situation engendered by the myth of globalism – unfolding so obtrusively in our surroundings and within our own selves, thereby requiring no academic citation- can be summed up in the following way: confronted with the absurd, man is becoming a victim of alienation; conversely, recognizing the alien and impersonal character of his own existence, man soon recognizes the absurdity of his life. This is a vicious cycle, a sword that cuts both ways, a malady which becomes direr by the sensitive estimation that not only the family, community and nation, but the entire world is looking at a man, judging his every

move, commenting on his every frailty and bestowing upon him laurels for nothing but his productive capabilities –not to forget, with a tacit warning of being hastily consigned to the dustbins of history once his skills falter or his economic judgment recedes. The ‘global man’, thus, is compelled to choose between a personality and an economic status, which leads him to an overwhelming question: is life worth living in the global age? His subjectivity permitting, an untimely meditation may dawn upon him: at the end of the day, being a cog in the wheel of the system, his efforts yield little more than futility. Even his successes are relative, ultimately signifying vanity. If a man knows the ultimate to a simple negation of the negation, where ‘nothing’ carries the value of the Kantian *nihil negativum* and assails the ‘being’, leading however to no such thing as a determinate ‘becoming’, his query with regard to the sanctity and value of his life in a milieu propelled by a narrative in favour of the economically powerful is perhaps the only legitimate question. Such a question also potentially impresses upon a broader philosophical enquiry, and particularly upon the realm of political philosophy.

The growing awareness of industrialization’s alienating influences in the XX century finds expression in the writings of social critics, historians, litterateurs and philosophers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, Jean Paul Sartre, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and T. S. Eliot. The recurrent theme is that of a sick culture marked by the pathologies of defeat, estrangement and the failure of rejuvenation, in which humans are eking out a living, only to be divested of all meanings. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of great minds articulating the ways in which such a sickness has entrenched itself in the XXI century under the influence of globalism. Writing in the previous century, Robert Nisbet (1) opined that during the Renaissance it was the myth of ‘reasonable man’ which predominated; in the VIII century it was that of ‘natural man’ and in the XI century of ‘economic and political man’. And finally, under the influence of industrialization in the XX century there emerges the myth of the alienated or mal-adjusted man, forever in search of identity and meaning. Arguing in the same vein, Nisbet’s logic can be prolonged into our own age to adduce the emergence of the ‘global man’: as a victim of the absurd, prone to more anxiety than what Kafka could have delineated in *The Trial*, or Sartre could have explained in *Nausea*, Auden in *The Age of Anxiety* or what Leonard Bernstein could have represented in a symphony inspired by Auden’s verse, bearing the same title. The persistent theme which Nisbet seems to be investigating is that of “the individual uprooted, without status, struggling for relations of meaning, fellowship in some kind of moral community; of the disenchanting, lonely figure, searching for ethical significance in the smallest of things, struggling for identification with race or class or group” (11-12).

The epitomizing irony of the industrial age articulated in the 1950s (Nisbet *The Quest for Community*) can be transposed with ease to describe tangible realities engendered by the globalism myth: in the very age when man’s control of environment is the greatest, his belief in himself has become weakest. And since this comportment of alienation is not societal, but personal, a man can very well ask in weariness and amazement as to why his is doing this at all. Since the cognition of the absurd is a personal tragedy, a resort to the comfortable myth of Marxism becomes unnecessary. To answer the question emanating from the uncomfortable myth of globalism, one can revamp and take recourse to the comfortable myth of affirmation and personal rebellion based on a philosophy which takes the absurd as its point of initiation.

The Myth of Sisyphus Revisited: Tackling the Globalism Myth

The timeless wisdom captured by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* can serve as a comfortable myth for souls confronted by the absurdity of the global age. This is not to argue that every person needs to take recourse to a philosophy which is more of an anti-philosophy – perhaps just those who are overwhelmed by their own sensitivity and the subjective estimation of their position in society. Man under the garb of rationality and objectivity does not require the cushion of myths and therein Russell’s adage stands vindicated. But, perhaps it is only a matter of time... whatever be it, Camus’ book-length essay can serve as the primer for living in the global age. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus presents a philosophy that contests philosophy itself, in tune with his own position which shifts from the extremes of nihilism and anti-nihilism. The essential paradox in his philosophy, which echoes in the life of the global man is the central notion of the absurd. Camus affirms that humans cannot escape asking the question, ‘what is the meaning of life?’ Being a professed non-believer in any philosophical system, Camus denies that there is an answer to this query and rejects every scientific, teleological, metaphysical or anthropomorphic end which seeks to provide a partial answer. Thus, while accepting that humans inexorably seek to understand life’s purpose, Camus, like Nietzsche, is skeptical of the natural world, the universe and human enterprise providing an answer. The wisdom that a reading of Camus might impart to the global man is that existence itself has no meaning and we must learn to accept an irreparable emptiness. The absurd is thus, not only what the global man confronts one fine day, as a reflection of his futility, but is an element of his own self. As Camus wrote elsewhere, the absurd being the only truth, the essence of the human condition, one can only accept the “desperate encounter between human enquiry and the silence of the universe” (*The Rebel* 6). His philosophy of the absurd explores the consequences arising from this basic paradox, one that is seemingly dear to the global man, as a victim of estrangement.

Camus’ explanation of absurdity is captured not as a philosophical argument. It is embodied in the interpretation of a myth: that of Sisyphus, condemned, straining to push his rock up the mountain, only to watch it roll down, and then descending after the rock only to begin anew, in an eternal cycle. Like Sisyphus, the global man cannot help but continue to seek after the meaning of life, only to see his (logical?) formulations tumble back down. Thus, happiness and salvation have dubious locations in the life of the global man forever enchained by his rational choices to a cycle of life Camus astutely encapsulates as “rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 19).

Armed with the knowledge of the human condition under the preponderant myth of globalism elucidated in the previous sections, suicide may seem to be a natural response to its underlying premise, viz. that life is absurd in the global age in a variety of ways. Camus’ originality, resonating in this age of global helplessness is adduced right at the beginning of his investigation, He writes,

“There is but one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest... come afterwards. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 11)”

Both in the presence and absence of life, man, divested of all meanings in a reified global system, is faced with a single condition expressed in a Camusean way as: it is absurd to find meaning in life when there are none, and to hope for some form of untrammelled existence after death given that the latter divests us of our bodily existence. The alienated man confronts the absurd under the burden of introspection. However, to whom shall he shift the burden of blame: to his corporate superiors if he is in the service of a multinational firm, to his departmental colleagues and fellow academics if he serves the commodified system of creating and disseminating knowledge or to his immediate family and peer group for compelling him to sign a pact with the devil assuring him of the baser pleasures of life? Camus thinks that it is absurd to try to know. Or to try to understand and explain the world with elegant yet ephemeral syllogisms, for he rightly sees –and that can be transposed to explain the futility of the global man- the vanity of any attempt to gain rational knowledge. In this, Camus is antagonistic to both science and philosophy, challenging the deterministic claims of both (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 17-32). The cardinal starting point of this theme lies in what Camus calls the ‘absurd sensibility’ (10), which is an intellectual malady of the age. Following his series of ‘truisms’ and ‘obvious themes’, Camus comes at a crucial juncture where he asks: does the absurd dictate death? (16). Elsewhere he writes that the absurd is an experience that must be affirmed; it is a point of departure in existence akin to Descartes’ methodical doubt (*The Rebel* 4). *The Myth of Sisyphus* seeks to describe that elusive feeling of absurdity in our lives, which is accentuated under the impact of globalism, at once transforming the text into an explanation of our times and as a panacea to our daily existential crises.

Following his ‘absurd reasoning’, Camus arrives at the question of death, formulating what he believes to be an objective truth: that we must despair over reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 24). And this is perhaps the only comfortable myth the global man can embrace to further his earthly tenure; as this world in itself is not reasonable and that is all that can be said (27-32). The global man’s effort to find meanings are driven by a nostalgia for unity, permissible not in his midst but in the bygone eras. Camus’ comfortable myth resonates in the global age, as he points to the imperative and inescapable hiatus between “what we fancy we know and what we really know” (24), forever shall the global man remain a stranger to himself and the sooner he realizes this the better for him. There is no certainty, no God to help him overcome this sickness unto death, this most vapid alienation. Under such circumstances there are two alternatives: suicide and hope. Camus treats hope as a variable emanating from religion’s assurance of a better life after death. Like Camus, the global man must discard both hope and suicide if he wishes to live. To live is to do without escape and with integrity to oneself, in rebellion and defiance of the vagaries of one’s milieu and fate, balancing the tension which is so intrinsic to human life. For Camus, death is the profoundest of absurdities and one must die unreconciled and not of one’s own free will (64-85). Life must be lived to the point of tears, if the global man wishes to cut athwart the vile myth surrounding his existence, if he is to regain the consciousness of his own morality and its ambitions and to embark upon a personal rebellion against whatever in the system is life-denying.

By way of a Conclusion

How then must the global man remain committed to his life, consistent with absurd reasoning without being a victim to the spirit of nostalgia? Revamping *The Myth of Sisyphus* evokes only one answer: by abandoning the tracts of philosophy altogether, to find refuge in art and to create another comfortable myth. The final myth to counteract the ill-effects of globalism is where a man imagines himself as an artist. And once he recognizes that his life is ultimately his own and the product of his choices, the artist becomes the author of his existence. In the story of Sisyphus as incarnating a sense of life's ultimate futilities, Camus sees his ordeals and its consciousness as a triumph. Sisyphus demonstrates that we can live with the certainty of crushing fate, without the resignation that accompanies it (59-63). Having a direct bearing upon the conclusions of this paper is Camus' belief that Sisyphus reminds us of our futility to understand reality, and to strive instead toward living as the ultimate answer to the absurd. Akin to Sisyphus, man in every age, especially in the global epoch is his own fate; he is the embodiment of his frustration and can never escape it. Sisyphus relentlessly pushing his rock only to see it tumble down "is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock" (109). Will it be too much to ask of the same conduct from the global man, the modern Sisyphus? "Sisyphus, the proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition" (109). For the global man to come out of myth that enchains him, he must imagine himself as Sisyphus and axiomatically as Sisyphus happy, for "happiness and absurdity are the two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable" (110). It is not necessary that the discovery of the absurd in the global age will lead to happiness, but the acknowledgement of human frailties, limitations and the zest for wishing beyond our capabilities can help a man to posit any value and meaning on his life. And that might lead to happiness even in the midst of alienation and helplessness. In all its finality, in the inexorable penchant for creating dangerously, the modern Sisyphus, condemned by the economic powers that be, can find happiness in affirmation: that his fate belongs to him. Echoing the Nietzschean *Amor Fati*, Camus exhorts man to love his fate. After all, our burdens are our very own, globalism and localism notwithstanding.

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Performing Meghnadbah Kabya: Questioning Conventions and Challenging the Conventional

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Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbah Kabya* (1861) is unanimously considered as one of the most important texts of Bengali literary canon. Not only was it the work of an extraordinarily gifted poet (Bandyopadhyay 21)—a rebellious figure whose life was marred in controversies, it is also the most significant effort of writing an Epic in Bengali in modern times and is marked by a number of influences of Western literary traditions including the use of blank verse. However, most importantly, it is an oft discussed text because of the subversive and transgressive way in which it re-tells the story of a portion of the Ramayana, the oldest Indian epic.

One should remember that the seeds of Dutt's unconventional reading were always present in the Ramayana. Paul Innes marks how the conventional motif of "dharma" has a problematic treatment in the text: "there are moments of narrative crisis at which Ram seems to act against 'dharma', emblemizing it as a concept that is open to interpretation" (Innes 62).

Thus, without really altering the story, Dutt simply focuses on the way Meghnad was unfairly killed by Laxman, and presents us with an alternative perspective on the entire text—one which valorizes the 'Rakshasas', generally accepted as the 'villains' of the tale, and arouses in the mind of the readers respect and pity for them. Consequently, this text is seen as an important document relating to the themes of power and politics, an exercise in seeing the conventional through alternative viewpoints. It is one of the most notable deconstructed readings of a canonized mythical text in the context of Indian culture.

However, this research paper shall discuss the use and re-interpretation of myth in *Meghnadbah Kabya*, with special focus on a theatrical performance of the text. In 1995, Goutam Halder, (then) one of the brightest young thespians of the renowned Bengali theatre group Nandikar ventured to bring this epic poem on stage by performing it as a play. Not only was it a novel effort which took up the challenge of dissolving conventional generic boundaries, it was considered a one-of-a-kind daring endeavour since he chose to enact the entire play all by himself, retaining the 'grand', 'mighty' ambience and seemingly hard to master language of Dutt's blank verse. The performance created quite a stir among the audience and critics alike; there was widespread appreciation with comparatively fewer responses of criticism, but almost everyone praised Halder for his stupendous enterprise. As early as in 1996, the performance was almost unanimously being recognized as a unique, one-of-a-kind theatrical attempt; a milestone in the history of modern Bengali theatre ("Pratikshan er Adda" 65). It is thus not surprising that when I got to know about this act and watched it in 2012, it had already ensured

a place for itself in the history of Bengali theatre. I've watched it multiple times ever since. Incredible as it may sound, the performance is now twenty three years old but Halder is still performing it in regular intervals and going strong. Thus, it shall only be fair to consider it as a cultural text worthy of critical attention and analysis by itself, not merely because it is an enactment of one of the most significant texts of Bengali literature.

No two performances of the same script are the same; making a critical analysis of a performative form like theatre tricky and complicated. It is especially tough in a place like India where there is serious dearth of critical material on performances—even the most popular, long-lasting and critically acclaimed ones. Researchers have to look for reviews in articles found in newspapers or magazines and occasional interviews of the actor(s), dramatist, director or a critic, mentioning or discussing the performance. The quality of most of these, from a critical and academic point of view, is rather ordinary. Often enough, a researcher aspiring to work on theatre is forced to shift focus towards the play-text, a literary document, than have enough scope or resources to concentrate on the performance. I've encountered all the above mentioned challenges and hindrances—but added to this is another unique problem, a rather bizarre one.

Though Halder was and has remained the actor (the only one if one ignores the chorus) and director of the performance, while at Nandikar this performance was stylistically guided and shaped Rudraprasad Sengupta and Swatilekha Sengupta—the senior-most members of the group. Certain sources allege that Halder was not given complete creative freedom (“Theatre Review”). In 2010, he broke away from Nandikar and formed his own group—Naye Natua. The popular perception goes that as the sole authority in the newly formed group, he could afford and dare to be even more fearless and experimental.

Every performance evolves over time and it is normal that one which has been going on for more than two decades will have major and minor changes. Interestingly enough, there are some material in the form of reviews and discussions concerning the performance dating back to 1995 and 1996. But there is very little critical material on the recent performances and none that systematically studies the evolution of this performance or categorically notes the differences between the performances under Nandikar and while at Naye Natua. I've been compelled to undertake an innovative methodology of trusting the archived material to get a sense of the performance in the 1990s and bank upon the first hand experience of watching the performance in the recent past. I have watched it more than five times; the comments I make in this paper are categorically taken from my memories of two of those performances in Girish Mancha and the Victoria Memorial grounds (as part of the Kolkata Literary Meet), on 22nd August, 2012 and 25th January, 2018, respectively. The choice of these two performances is simply not due to the fact that these were the first and the latest instances of me seeing it; what matters more is that these were performances during different contexts and atmosphere—in space and time.

My paper does not deal too much with the textual intricacies and thus, for occasional textual references, I've stuck to the original Bengali text rather than search for an English translation. The book I use has an invaluable introduction and critical commentary by Sukumar Bandyopadhyay. Besides his own critical opinions, he also refers to and quotes a number of

important personalities including Michael himself commenting on his own work. However, he does not cite their sources; I have thus not been able to cite them though I have used them in the paper. Most of the critical comments on the play and the performance are in Bengali, I have translated or summarized them myself. Further, in my paper, I shall refer to Dutt's work as a "poem" and Halder's act as a "performance" or a "play", and use the term "text" to refer to both of them.

Since the use and interpretation of myth is the starting point of this research paper, I intend to begin by studying how Dutt adapts from the Ramayana. Parallely I shall analyze Goutam Halder's adaptation of Dutt's poem, and, by extension, the epic itself. I shall proceed to explore the generic complexities of each of the two texts discussed here; as to how Madhusudan's work displays features of both an epic and a tragedy and how Halder's attempt is almost an indefinable unique art form, fusing elements of several performative traditions. The element of 'style' shall be analyzed next and here I shall limit myself almost entirely to the theatrical performance and not the poem since the style of the poem has considerably less relation with the source-myth. Furthermore, the craft of Dutt in this poem (his use of blank verse, epic similes and among others) has already been extensively studied while Halder's play has not been critically analyzed enough.

I intend to proceed to investigate the continuing relevance of the two texts, focusing primarily on the socio-political significance—studying the impact created in late nineteenth century Bengal, India in the 1990s as well as the current times. I shall like to conclude exploring the possibility if a connection can be found between the myth and the two texts which appropriate it; as well as between the creator-artists themselves.

"I despise Ram and his rabbles", said Michael Madhusudan; this line is enough to suggest that when such a man adapts sections of the Ramayana, one is bound to get an unconventional alternative reading. Dutt's relation with the Indian epics is complex and fascinating. As a child he loved reading them; as an adult who became a "jolly Christian youth" who "could not care a pin's head for Hinduism", he loved the "grand mythology" of his ancestors which was "full poetry". He plainly asserted that, "a fellow with an inventive head can manufacture the most beautiful things out of it!" A common, extremely simplistic notion considers *Meghnadbadh Kabya* as a Christian convert's daring effort to deconstruct a "sacred" Hindu text. But there is much more to it. Indrashis Lahiri finds in the poem an echo of Milton (he calls Dutt's act as one of "creative plagiarism") —the tendency of subverting the impression and definition of good and evil as Milton had (consciously or unconsciously) done in *Paradise Lost* ("Pratikshan er Adda" 59). Indeed, Dutt mentions western literary traditions as his inspiring influence a number of times. However, he was confident of sticking to his Indian roots—it was his ambition to "engraft the exquisite graces of Greek mythology on" the Indian subject matter. Although he pledged to borrow as little as possible from Valmiki, he remained confident that no one could accuse his poem of being "un-Hindu in character". He said that he was not looking to borrow Greek stories; rather, he was trying to write, as a Greek poet would.

That he was successful is evident as the characters of *Meghnadbadh Kabya* are not European but Indian in spirit. The other distinguishable factor is their 'humanity'—not only the monstrous

Rakshasas but also Ram, Laxman and Sita are portrayed as ‘human beings’ and not as Gods. This, I would argue later, helps create an ambience of the tragic within the context of an epic.

A defining feature of the characterization of *Meghnadbadh Kabya* that has received unanimous agreement is the “masculinity” of Ravan and Meghnad and the “femininity” of Ram and Laxman. Ashis Nandi notes how Dutt turns the traditionally sacred figures of Rama and Laksmana into “weak-kneed, passive-aggressive, feminine villains” and the demons Ravan and his son Meghnad into “majestic, masculine, modern heroes” (Nandy 19). Even Rabindranath Tagore noted this as he commented that Dutt was attracted to and found pleasure in the majestic masculine strength of the rakshasas than in the cautious, god-fearing nature of Ram.

In choosing to remain faithful to the text, Goutam Halder’s adaptation had to follow the same line of deconstructing the Ramayana. The freedom of experimenting with gestures might have given him scope to reveal certain personal interpretations of the characters, but he couldn’t afford to be much different in ideology from Michael. However, as Dutt chose a specific portion of the oldest Indian epic, Halder too chooses for his script, certain sections (‘sargas’ or cantos) of Dutt’s work. While this issue of editing the text has been frowned upon by most critics, I see in it a sense of purpose. Halder’s selection of sections makes his performance-text focus exclusively upon the event of assassination of Meghnad. In ‘eliminating’ unnecessary digressions, I feel that he develops a certain dramatic tension around the episode, something that is vitally necessary for a script to be successfully performed as a play on stage.

While Michael’s acknowledgement of the western sources is well known, one often forgets that besides mentioning western poets, he also mentioned being indebted to western dramatists (“Pratikshan er Adda” 55). *Meghnadbadh Kabya* is a unique example that blends elements of the epic and tragedy as well as the elements of the Indian and the Western epics. Though written in Bengali, it does not have the conventional “nandi, stuti or mangalacharan” but proceeds directly to a more westernized invocation of goddess Saraswati. The poet’s pledge to sing his song in “bir-rasa” should have led to a purely heroic poem but critics agree that it is the “karuna-rasa” that dominates the poem—making it more tragic than heroic (Bandyopadhyay 23). If we look at two random critical statements on the poem even before Halder brought it onto the stage, we notice something crucial. Ashis Nandy refers to this poem as a ‘tragedy’; R. C. Dutt commented that this poem showed that Dutt belonged to a level of excellence “second only to Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidas, Homer or Shakespeare”—the inclusion of a tragic dramatist amongst these epic poets proves my point. It is as if the comment involves the simultaneous praise of an epic poet and a tragic poet. This is not unusual for a man like Dutt who had clearly stated that he would not adhere to typical rules of Indian aesthetics set in a text like *Sahitya Darpana* by Viswanath Kabiraj. However, Dutt’s disregard for conventional generic limits should not be seen as only being a result of his naturally rebellious personality—what he was seeking indeed, was a freedom for the artist to experiment with forms (Bandyopadhyay 24).

This apparent paradoxical amalgamation of the epic and the tragic may be explained or understood by referring to the concepts of the “authentic” and the “literary epic” as opined by Abercrombie and noted by Bandyopadhyay. The “authentic” epic is a text which encompasses the history of a race or a nation rather than focus primarily on individuals. The poet merely narrates the tale his personality is generally absent; these poems are commonly ‘recited’ (thus,

performed). In contrast, a “literary” epic has a more limited and focused content; the personality of the poet/creator is distinctly tangible and these are meant to be ‘read’.

In *Meghnadbadh Kabya* we find an almost perfect balance of the authentic and the literary—it is a tale of the fate of the Lankans yet told through a distinct perspective of the poet Dutt. It is thus, both ‘readable’ as well as ‘recitable’; it is perfectly “performable” (Bandyopadhyay 30)—validating Halder’s attempt.

Halder and his co-actors at Nandikar had taken up this poem merely in order to memorize and recite it as part of an exercise to improve their pronunciation. But the theatricality of the poem fascinated them and they ventured towards performing it as a play. One can notice an interesting antithetical relationship at play here. Dutt was writing an epic in an Indian language and Indian topic using western aesthetic and technical devices. Halder performs this play within the predominantly west-influenced Proscenium theatrical set up but uses several tools of different indigenous performative forms. The influences of Kathakatha, Pandavani and Akhyan-Kabya are visible (“Pratikshan er Adda” 52). The aspects of ‘reading’, ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’—each being the dominant form in different performative and literary genres combine in Halder’s work; his use of the ‘Kathak’ figure (the narrator) was widely praised. However, the ‘form’ of his performance has had the fair share of criticism. Dharani Ghosh, speaking from an extremely conservative point of view reminds one that a poem is “meant to be read” and not performed—Halder’s attempt is a basic “failure to respect an artis’s (Dutt’s) choice of form”. Whether or not this art form at all needed impersonation of individual characters has been another question that has been raised. Along with Shaoli Mitra’s *Nathabati Anathbat*, another solo performance based on a script on the Mahabharata, Halder might have fallen into the same trap of attempting something impossible. This performance has often been labeled as “an absurd project” (Dharani Ghosh) or a “too ambitious attempt” (“Of Classical Characters”). While it is true that an epic can never fully become a play, one must accept and appreciate the significance of this unique art-form; especially now that it has kept the audience interested for more than two decades.

The legendary Bengali thespian Girish Ghosh had presented a theatre production based on this poem in 1877 where couple of actors played multiple roles. Although Goutam’s project was not the first time that the Bengali stage saw a solo actor playing all roles, the stylistic aspects, are nonetheless unique. He comes clad in white against a pitch black background, the ‘chadar’ is his only prop which he masterfully utilizes to impersonate different characters. The shift between the central kathak (narrator) figure, “reviving the genre of bardic oral delivery” (“Of Classical Characters”) and the various characters is incredibly swift and the audience has generally been left engaged and mesmerized for the two hours of the act. His energy is tremendous. It was seen as one of the instances where “acting” as a concept acquires new and different dimensions. A review commented:—“There are theatres, and there are different theatres”, going on to call this performance a rare example of that “different theatre” (“Theatre Review”). Sankha Ghosh saw in this performance a perfect fusion of “narration, description and dialogues” into “one totality” (Brochure Nandikar). He felt it to be a rare way of making *Meghnadbadh Kabya* relevant to contemporary society.

However, there have been several criticisms too. These include his typical mannerism of diction (something that has been an issue of constant discussion over the years and regarding most of Halder's roles as an actor). Some felt that his portrayal of characters in general and the female ones in particular seemed too simplistic and clichéd—and it was hard to separate one character from another. (“Pratikshan er Adda” 57) The portrayal of Maya as a woman has attracted criticism from critics like Jayati Basu as well as support from critics like Sekhar Samaddar (“Pratikshan er Adda” 59).

Music and the chorus have a crucial role in this performance with Swatilekha Sengupta's arrangement being praised by almost everybody. However several critics found Halder's decision to sing the songs himself an unwise one—the tremendous physical strain of the performance was seriously hampering the quality of his singing. Having read about the Nandikar phase of the performance in reports and seen the performance in the Naye-Natua phase, I can report that in the last few years, Halder takes significant vocal support from the chorus with regards to the songs.

However, there are two more significant criticisms of Halder; firstly that his decision to direct himself was unfair since it was virtually impossible for him to ‘see’, impartially ‘judge’ or ‘guide’ himself (“Of Classical Characters”). This has crystallized into an even greater ethical and ideological issue. Jayati Basu questioned the idea of choosing a text like this, with multiple characters of multiple genders, for a solo performance. She also felt that a venture of solo-performance in theatre is little more than exhibitionism and self glorification; and is harmful for group theatre movement (“Pratikshan er Adda” 62)!

A text like *Meghnadbadh Kabya* has survived and thrived over ages both due to its form and its content. While the attempt at writing an epic in Bengali in the nineteenth century using the blank verse remains the most notable aspects of the form, the longevity of the text's content is certainly got to do with its political implications. Not only does the text embody a subversion of the notion and nature of good and evil, it is a distinctly anti-colonial, political document written during a crucial phase in the history of the nation. *Meghnadbadh Kabya* reveals that Dutt's basic perception of the Ram-Ravana battle in the Ramayana was to see it as a tale showing an island being attacked by a foreign army. The freedom and existence of the invaded nation is at stake. The king, while fighting to defend his land, loses his sons, grandsons and other relatives at war, but does not give up. He is determined to live only a life of freedom (Bandyopadhyay 22). Though this analogy does not stand valid if one considers various different episodes of the source-epic, the parallel with the British invasion of India is too obvious to be missed. Interestingly, one can observe how the Ram-Ravana conflict, seen down the ages as a battle between the Aryans and non-Aryans, that is, two factions of Indian races, was utilized to portray a symbol of India being invaded by a foreign power.

An extremely complex paradox of sorts emerges here. While he lived, it was not uncommon for Madhusudan to see some people viewing him as an “anti-national” figure—as the heretic Christian convert who challenged the sanctity of one of the two “National” Epics. Ironically, a post-colonial reading of the same text can make it the account of a nation's struggle against invaders, glorifying the pride and self-esteem of the race. In the most recent contemporary context though, we seem to have receded from the realm of symbolic implications, with

mythological figures, their portrayal and treatment, inviting severe scrutiny and extreme reactions in itself. Ranjit Singha, as early as in 1996, had marked Goutam's audacity of critiquing and satirizing the hallowed figure of Ram. The relevance, of both the performance and the comment, is even more acute and alarming today.

While Halder's performance doesn't undo any of the above implications, it also does not add anything much to the political implications of the text. On the one hand, it fails to depict the issue of higher and more complicated politics (beyond Ram and Ravana), between the Gods and the Demons and even within the Gods themselves. On the other hand, it does not do enough to try and connect the text with certain tendencies in contemporary politics. Almost all critics see it as a major lack in the performance. While defenders of Goutam suggest that remaining faithful and sticking to Dutt's text does not allow him to do much alteration, critics like Suman Mukhopadhyay state that he could have hinted at contemporary issues by intelligently using his gestures, even within the confines of the original text.

The urban India of the 1990s was experiencing major socio-economic and political changes, (rise of the extremists/right wing and neo-liberal economy) much in the same manner of the times of Michael himself. In the brochure to the performance, Rudraprasad Sengupta, the guiding force behind Nandikar, had hinted at a possible contemporary significance though the connection was not explicitly political. Both in the brochure as well as during a short address before each show, he stated the performance to be an important cultural effort at a time of rampant multinational consumerism. Whatever may be the extent of the socio-political significance, the cultural impact of the performance was undeniably supreme—Sekhar Samaddar called it a "massive jump/leap" at a time when Bengali theatre was threatening to get stuck ("Pratikshan er Adda" 55).

After three decades where they primarily performed Indian adaptations of foreign plays, Nandikar saw this project a kind of "homecoming", a "return to the roots"—of both language and cultural and theatrical traditions. The performance is also a tribute to Dutt himself—a remembrance of significance. Whether the remembrance and the return to the roots contribute significantly to a relevance in the contemporary times, has been a matter of debate ever since. Perhaps the longevity of the performance owes itself to the novelty of form and an incredible interest to witness Halder's stupefying ability to be at the top of his art for so long. But surely, the interest in the performance could not have lasted this long until and unless it found a way to remain constantly relevant or able to capture things extremely basic, lying at the heart of human existence.

Both Michael Madhusudan Dutt's poem and Goutam Halder's performance of it share certain uncanny connection with the myth it uses and deconstructs. A change in focus and an altered perspective opens up enormous possibilities of re-interpretation. At the centre of the tale lies a valiant hero who is unfairly defeated by a corrupt majoritarian system. His tale embodies a personal tragedy of parents who lose a son, and a wife who loses her husband. His fate also binds itself with that of his race and state—in truly epic proportions. Both Dutt and Halder's creations and the engagement it has with their lives and legacies show the same pattern. Their creations are exercises in individualism—of not only rebellious human beings who fight to win the right to disagree (even in their arts) but also of artists who opine for space to experiment

with forms, (even in the ways they live). Individually and together, they remain inspiring examples to those who dare to question conventions and challenge the conventional.

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গোপাল থেকে দাশু: 'জানা' মিথের ভাঙা-গড়া

ভাষার প্রাথমিক কাজ সংজ্ঞাপন, আশা করা যায় সকলেই মানবেন। আর সেই সংজ্ঞাপনের ক্ষেত্রে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা গ্রহণ করে শব্দ। বস্তুত শব্দের সঙ্গে শব্দের যথার্থ সংসক্তিভেদেই সার্থক সংজ্ঞাপন ঘটে। এসবই নিশ্চিত বহুবার জানা কথা, তবু মিথ সংক্রান্ত আলোচনায় ঢোকার আগে আরেকবার স্মরণ করা শুধু এই কারণেই যে শব্দের কারসাজি বোঝা যে একটি জরুরী প্রক্রিয়া, সেই বিষয়ে সন্দেহ নিরসন। প্রাচীন ভারতীয় দর্শন প্রস্থান থেকে আধুনিক সেমিওটিক্সের চর্চায় সেই সন্দেহ নিরসনের চেষ্টাই ধৃত। 'শব্দ ব্রহ্ম' -বক্তব্যটি তাই হয়তো বর্তমানে উৎস সন্ধান নির্বিশেষে স্বতোসিদ্ধ। মিথের আলোচনায় যাওয়ার আগে এই বক্তব্যের সঙ্গে সহমত থাকলে আমাদের বক্তব্য পেশের কিঞ্চিৎ সুবিধা।

'মিথ'- শব্দটির উচ্চারণে আমাদের সামনে যে চেনা ছকটি আসে তাকে অক্সফোর্ড অভিধান বিবৃত করছেন এইভাবে- "A traditional story, especially on concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon and typically involving supernatural beings or events." অর্থাৎ এমন একটি প্রচলিত গল্প যা প্রাক্-ইতিহাস সংশ্লিষ্ট মানুষ সংক্রান্ত অথবা একটি প্রাকৃতিক বা কাল্পনিক ফেনোমেনন সংক্রান্ত এবং যা অতিপ্রাকৃত ঘটনা সম্বলিত। এই সংজ্ঞাটি থেকে মিথ সংক্রান্ত চিরায়ত ধারণাটি স্পষ্ট হয়। মিথ বলতে অধিকাংশে যা বোঝেন, অর্থাৎ সুপ্রাচীন কালের সঙ্গে সম্পৃক্ত এক গল্প যার মধ্যে ধরা রয়েছে কিছু অমোঘ অনুচ্চারিত নিয়ম সমাবেশ। তার ক্ষমতা মূলত নির্দেশাত্মক কিন্তু তার সামগ্রিক পরিবেশন গল্পের একটি ছদ্ম আবরণে আবৃত। সহজে বুঝলে "এইরকম হলে তার ফলশ্রুতিতে এইরকম হয়" এই জাতীয় বোধের জন্ম দিতে মিথ সক্ষম। ফলে মিথের আলোচনায় কিংবা আধুনিক কালে মিথের পুনর্নির্মাণে পুরাণ, কল্প-ইতিহাস, ফেনোমেনোলজির অনুসঙ্গ এসে পড়ে স্বাভাবিকভাবেই। কিন্তু আমরা মিথের এই চিরায়ত পাঠকে একটু অন্যভাবে দেখতে চাইছি। 'মিথ' বলতে অভিধান বর্ণিত গতানুগতিক ধারার বাইরে ভিন্নতর কোনো অর্থের দ্যোতনা রয়েছে কিনা, বুঝে নিতে চাইছি তাকেও। কিন্তু কীভাবে? তবে কি মিথের আবার অন্যতর সংজ্ঞা নির্ধারণ প্রয়োজন? নাকি মিথ স্বয়ং তার নিজের মধ্যে স্থিত উপাদানের নিরিখেই নিজের সংজ্ঞাকে চ্যালেঞ্জ করার ইঙ্গিতবাহী? এই

প্রসঙ্গে যাওয়ার আগে সংক্ষেপে বুঝতে হবে মিথ সম্বন্ধে আমরা যা ‘জানি’ তা কী? সেই ‘জানা’র প্রকারটাই বা কী?

যেকোনো ‘জানা’র ক্ষেত্রেই প্রাথমিকভাবে প্রশ্ন তৈরী হয় যে ‘কে জানে? কী জানে?’ প্রথমটির উত্তর হতে পারে- ব্যক্তি-চৈতন্য; কিন্তু কেবল আপন অনুভূতি বা অভিজ্ঞতায় যে বোধগম্যতা তৈরী হয় তাই কি কেবল জানা? যদি তাই হয় তবে ব্যক্তিমানুষের পক্ষে তার ব্যাপ্তিতে কতটুকুই বা জানা সম্ভব? বড়োই খন্ড নয় কি সেই জানার পরিধি? আবার দ্বিতীয়টির, অর্থাৎ যে জানে সে ‘কী জানে’র উত্তর খোঁজার দিকে গেলে দেখা যাবে প্রতি মুহূর্তে জ্ঞাতার চৈতন্য যে অজস্র তথ্যরাশির মুখোমুখি হচ্ছে, সেই সব তথ্যরাশির সঙ্গে চলছে তার নিরন্তর লেনদেনের উভমুখী ক্রিয়া, সেই ক্রিয়াজাত জ্ঞানই সে ‘জানে’। সেই লেনদেন অবশ্যই প্রশ্নহীন নয়, নিয়মিত প্রশ্ন জ্ঞাতার চৈতন্যকে ‘মিথ্যাঙ্গন’ এড়াতে সাহায্য করে। যদিবা কখনো সাময়িকভাবে ব্যক্তি চৈতন্য মিথ্যাঙ্গনে আচ্ছন্ন হয়, তবে ভবিষ্য প্রশ্ন করার সম্ভাবনা তাকে সেই আচ্ছন্নতা কাটাবার সুযোগ দেয়। কোনো এক বিশেষ মুহূর্তে বাহ্যত দেখলে অবশ্য এই লেনদেনকে খন্ড বলে ভুল হওয়া অস্বাভাবিক নয়; কিন্তু চলমানতার নিরিখে এ এক দীর্ঘ প্রক্রিয়া। অর্থাৎ যখন আমি দাবি করছি ‘আমি জানি’, আসলে সেই আমিটি তো জীবনের কোনো এক বিন্দুতে যে টুকরো ‘আমি’টি দাঁড়িয়ে রয়েছে সেই বিন্দুমুহূর্ত পর্যন্ত আমার ‘জানা’র যোগফল। তার মানে এই জানার প্রক্রিয়া এমন একটি চলমান প্রক্রিয়া যাতে আমার পূর্ব ইতিহাস, তার প্রত্যক্ষ জ্ঞান ব্যতিরেকেই, নানাভাবে আমার মধ্যে সঞ্চারিত হয়। অর্থাৎ ‘আমি জানি’র ঐ বিশেষ মুহূর্তে আমি, আমার প্রত্যক্ষ জ্ঞান এবং পূর্ব ইতিহাস সহ অন্যান্য সূত্রজাত জ্ঞানের যৌথতায় অবস্থিত। তার মানে আমার অজান্তেই আমার জানার মধ্যে সঞ্চারিত হয়েছে পূর্বজন্দের অজস্র জানা। তখন আমার জানাটি আর কেবল খন্ড জানায় স্থিত নয়, তার মধ্যে সঞ্চারিত হয়েছে পূর্বোক্ত সেই প্রবহমান জানার প্রক্রিয়া। ‘আমি’(যে জানে) সেই প্রক্রিয়ার অন্তর্ভুক্ত হই, তাতে সক্রিয় অংশগ্রহণ করি, আবার সেই প্রবহমান ধারায় গতিশীল অনুঘটকের ভূমিকা পালন করি। অর্থাৎ মিথ সম্বন্ধে আমার ‘জানা’ কেবল কিছু শব্দ সংস্কৃত গল্প-বাক্য বা আগুবাণ্য জানা নয়, একই সঙ্গে মিথ সংশ্লিষ্ট যাবতীয় ইতিহাস বোধকে আমার চৈতন্যের অন্তর্ভুক্ত করা। কিন্তু অন্যান্য

জানার সঙ্গে মিথকে জানার মধ্যে ফারাক আছে। মিথ এমন এক জ্ঞাতব্য, যা প্রশ্নহীন, যাকে জানার পর আর প্রশ্ন করা যায় না। কিন্তু কীভাবে?

আমরা একটু আগেই আলোচনা করতে গিয়ে বলেছিলাম যে ব্যক্তি চৈতন্যের সঙ্গে নিরন্তর সপ্রশ্ন লেনদেনের মাধ্যমেই গড়ে ওঠে জ্ঞাতার ‘জানা’। অর্থাৎ বাহ্য আগত তথ্যরাশির সঙ্গে ব্যক্তি চৈতন্যের একটি দ্বিপাক্ষিক তর্ক-বাচনের সম্পর্ক রয়েছে। খেয়াল করতে হবে আমরা জানার অনুসঙ্গে তাই প্রায়শই ‘বোঝা’কে ব্যবহার করি। অর্থাৎ আমরা কেবল বাহ্য আগত তথ্যরাশিকে যেমনটি-তেমন ভাবে চৈতন্যে ধারণ করি না, তাকে প্রশ্ন করে তার স্বরূপ উপলব্ধির চেষ্টা করি, নিরন্তর তর্কের মাধ্যমেই তাকে আত্মস্থ করি, বা তাকে ‘বুঝি’। জানা যদি প্রশ্নহীন হয় তবে তা হয় স্বতোসিদ্ধ কিংবা নির্দেশাত্মক ভঙ্গিতে আমাদের চৈতন্যের সামনে এসে উপস্থিত হয়; ঠিক যেমনটি হয় মিথের ক্ষেত্রে। মিথের অস্তিত্ব প্রশ্নহীন। তাই সে কখনো নির্দেশাত্মক, কখনো তার উপস্থিতি স্বতোসিদ্ধের মতো। কিন্তু কীভাবে মিথ হয়ে উঠলো তর্কের অতীত? মিথকে কেবল পৌরাণিক কাহিনি কিংবা সামাজিক ফেনোমেননের সাথে সংশ্লিষ্ট আখ্যান হিসাবে না দেখে, যদি দেখতে চাই ভাষার মতো একটি দ্বিপাক্ষিক বাচন হিসেবে, যেভাবে দেখতে চেয়েছিলেন রুঁল্যা বার্থ^১, তাহলে মিথের প্রশ্নহীন অস্তিত্বের কথা বুঝতে আমাদের খানিক সুবিধা হবে। মিথ স্বয়ং একপ্রকার ‘জানা’, কেবল ব্যক্তি চৈতন্যের জানার পরিবর্তে এখানে গোষ্ঠীর জানা প্রকাশিত। বার্থ তাঁর মিথ সংক্রান্ত প্রস্তাবনা *Mythologies* এ দেখাচ্ছেন^২ কীভাবে মিথও আসলে ভাষার মতোই চিহ্নক-চিহ্নণ (signifier-signified) যুক্ত প্রক্রিয়া। আরো সুনির্দিষ্ট ভাবে বললে চিহ্নক-চিহ্নণ যুক্ত একটি স্বয়ং সম্পূর্ণ সিস্টেম। কিন্তু মিথের ক্ষেত্রে ভাষার মতো দ্বিপাক্ষিক বাচনে শ্রোতার(যিনি আবার দ্বিতীয় বক্তাও বটে) ভূমিকা নগণ্য, অর্থাৎ মিথের সঙ্গে বাচনে রত একক ব্যক্তি চৈতন্য কখনোই মিথে বলা আখ্যানের যৌক্তিক পারস্পর্য নিয়ে প্রশ্ন করার সুযোগ পায়না। একই প্রক্রিয়া ঘটে মিথ সম্বন্ধীয় সংশ্লিষ্ট গোষ্ঠী-চৈতন্যের ‘জানা’তেও। কারন প্রশ্নের অধিকার মিথের এলাকায় অচল; ‘কোনো প্রশ্ন নয়’- লালমোহনবাবুর এই বিখ্যাত উক্তিটি মিথ হয়ে ওঠার প্রাথমিক শর্ত। কোনো মিথকে যদি কখনো কোনো প্রশ্নের অবকাশ আসে তবে তাঁর থেকে তৈরী হতে পারে আরেকটি মিথের

জন্ম-সম্ভাবনা। তাই মিথকে জানার যে গোষ্ঠী প্রয়াস তা মূলত এই প্রশ্নহীনতার সাপেক্ষেই নির্মিত।

খানিক আগেই আমরা বোঝার চেষ্টা করছিলাম যে প্রকৃতিগত ভাবে ‘জানা’ কীভাবে একটি সতত চলমান প্রক্রিয়া; কিন্তু মজার বিষয় হলো এই যে মিথের ক্ষেত্রে জানার এই চলমানতা পূর্ণ অনুচ্ছেদ প্রাপ্ত হয়েছে। কারণ সেই প্রশ্নহীনতা। কিন্তু তাহলে কি মিথ সম্বন্ধে জানা শেষ হয়ে গিয়েছে? কারণ জানার প্রক্রিয়ার যে চলমানতা তা এই তর্কাভ্যাসের উপরই দাঁড়িয়ে আছে যে। মিথের ক্ষেত্রে জানার প্রসঙ্গটি খানিক থমকে থাকাই বটে। একটি জনগোষ্ঠী, যখন কোনো আখ্যানকে মিথে পরিণত করে তখন সাময়িকভাবে সেই আখ্যান সম্বন্ধে তার ‘জানা’কে সে স্মৃতি-কুঠুরীর চৌখুপির মধ্যে তালাবন্ধ করে রাখে। কারণ ক্রমাগত জানতে গেলে নিরন্তর প্রশ্ন জরুরী, কিন্তু মিথ প্রশ্নহীন। যদি কখনো সেই তালা খোলার অবকাশ তৈরি হয় তো সেই মিথ পুনর্নির্মিত হয়, আত্মপ্রকাশ করে নবকলেবরে। আধুনিক যুগে তাঁর নিদর্শন অজস্র। এই প্রসঙ্গে বার্খের মিথ সংক্রান্ত বক্তব্যের সঙ্গে সহমত পোষণ করে আমরা কেবল এইটুকু যোগ করতে চাই যে, মানব চৈতন্যের অন্যান্য জানার সঙ্গে মিথকে জানার একটি মৌলিক ফারাক রয়েছে। ভাষার ক্ষেত্রে চিহ্নক ও চিহ্নণ যুগপৎ ভাবে ‘জানা’র ক্ষেত্রে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করে। সেই ক্ষেত্রে চিহ্নক ও চিহ্নণ উভয়কে জানাই জ্ঞাতব্যকে জানার সঙ্গে সংশ্লিষ্ট। কিন্তু একটু লক্ষ্য করলেই বোঝা যাবে, মিথের ক্ষেত্রে ব্যবহৃত গল্পটি যা আদর্শে চিহ্নক, তাকে কিন্তু আমরা মুখ্যত জানতে চাইনা, বা বলা ভালো ‘জানি’ না, ‘জানি’ তার অন্তর্ভুক্ত, চিহ্নণকে। ধরা যাক, আপনি একটি মোড়কে আচ্ছাদিত বস্তু সম্বন্ধে জানতে চান, কিন্তু মোড়ক আচ্ছাদিত থাকায় কেবল তার বাহ্য মোড়কটি সম্বন্ধেই আপনার জ্ঞান হচ্ছে। সেক্ষেত্রে সংশ্লিষ্ট বস্তু সম্বন্ধে জানতে আপনাকে মোড়কটি খুলতে হবে। মিথের ক্ষেত্রে ব্যবহৃত গল্পটি হলো সেই মোড়কের আচ্ছাদন, চিহ্নক। আর মোড়কের অন্তর্ভুক্ত হলো সেই জ্ঞান, চিহ্নণ, যাকে আপনি জানতে চান। ‘আমি মিথটি জানি’ এই বাক্যের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে অনুচ্চারণেই বলা হয়, আসলে মিথের গল্পটি নয়, তার অন্তর্নিহিত বার্তাটি জানি; ঠিক মোড়ক আচ্ছাদিত বস্তুর মতো। আরেকটু বিশেষ ভাবে বললে বলা যেতে পারে, প্রমাণ হিসেবে ভারতীয় দর্শন যাকে ‘উপমান’ বলেছেন^০, মিথ কতকটা তাঁর সঙ্গে তুলনীয়। ন্যায়-দার্শনিকেরা যে সাদৃশ্য জ্ঞানের ভিত্তিতে প্রমাণে পৌঁছতে চেয়েছেন, মিথও

খানিক সেই রকম চেষ্টা করে বৈকি। কেবল ফারাক এইখানে যে ন্যায়েব সাদৃশ্য-বৈসাদৃশ্য একত্রেই আসে সর্বদা, মিথের ক্ষেত্রে প্রশ্ন না করার পরিপ্রেক্ষিতে বৈসাদৃশ্যের সম্ভাবনার অবলুপ্তি ঘটে। আর যদি থেকে যায় কোথাও বৈসাদৃশ্যের চুঁইয়ে পড়ার এতটুকু সুযোগ, তবে সেখান থেকেই জন্ম নেয় মিথের প্রতিস্পর্ধী অবস্থান, কখনো বা নতুন মিথের। কিন্তু নিছক শিশুপাঠ্য হিসেবে লেখা গোপাল-রাখাল আখ্যান^৬ বা দাশুর গল্পের^৭ সঙ্গে এর যোগ কী?

মিথের চিরায়ত ধারণা অনুযায়ী ঈশ্বরচন্দ্র বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় সৃষ্ট গোপাল-রাখাল এই বাইনারি অবস্থানটিকে মিথ বলা মুশকিল আছে; কিন্তু বার্খের প্রস্তাব অনুযায়ী মিথকে যদি একটা চিহ্নক-চিহ্ন সমন্বিত একটি স্বয়ং সম্পূর্ণ সিস্টেম হিসেবে দেখি, যেখানে শ্রোতার প্রশ্নহীন অবস্থান সত্ত্বেও একটি দ্বিপাক্ষিক বাচনের ক্ষীণ হলেও সম্ভাবনা আছে, তাহলে উনিশ শতকের শৈশব নির্মাণের ক্ষেত্রে ‘গোপাল-রাখাল’কে মিথের মর্যাদা দেওয়া বোধহয় খুব একটা অত্যাুক্তি হবে না। কিন্তু কীভাবে গড়ে উঠলো এই মিথ? কীই বা তার পরিণতি? উপরন্তু মিথের নির্মাণের জন্য গোষ্ঠী চৈতন্যে তার উপস্থিতি প্রয়োজন, সেখানে ব্যক্তি অথারের লেখা কি আদৌ শেষ পর্যন্ত মিথ হয়ে উঠতে পারে? উত্তরে বলা যায়, পারে, যদি সেই আখ্যানের মধ্যে ব্যাপক অংশের মানুষকে প্রভাবিত করার এবং সেই আখ্যানের মোড়কে নিহিত অন্তর্বস্তু প্রায় প্রশ্নহীন হয়ে ওঠার ক্ষমতা রাখে। উনিশ শতকের ঔপনিবেশিক শিক্ষা বিস্তারের সাথে সাথেই নব্য স্কুল শিক্ষায় শিক্ষিত বাঙালি শিশুর ভবিষ্যত সুরক্ষিত ঘেরাটোপে রাখা এবং বাধ্য(যাতে সে প্রশ্ন না করে?) রাখতেই ছিলো গোপাল-রাখালের অনিবার্য দাওয়াই। খুব অল্পদিনেই তা ভীষণ জনপ্রিয় এবং প্রায় দেড় শতাব্দী ধরে শিশুশিক্ষার কাল্টে পরিণত। ‘কী করণীয়’-এই বিচারে গোপালের অস্তিত্ব প্রশ্নহীন; দুচ্ছাই হতে হতে, নাকচ হতে হতে ‘করণীয় নয়’ এর বিচারে আশ্চর্য ভাবে রাখালও কিন্তু প্রশ্নহীন! মিথে পর্যবসিত উভয়েই। শিশু সাহিত্য কিংবা প্রাইমারের জগতে তারপর অনেকেই যাতায়াত করেছেন, কিন্তু বাঙালি শিশুর জন্য শিষ্ট-গোপালের নির্ধারিত গভীর বাইরে পা বাড়ানোর সাহস দেখান নি কেউই। এও একধরনের ‘মিথ’, যা ব্যক্তি অথারের লেখায় তৈরি। অথার সচেতন ভাবে তাকে মিথ হিসেবে গড়তে চাননি, তার উদ্দেশ্য ছিল ভিন্ন; মূলত শৈশব নির্মাণ। ব্যাপক জনপ্রিয়তা এবং উতুঙ্গ গোষ্ঠী চাহিদা তাকে প্রশ্নহীন করেছে, মিথের চেহারা দিয়েছে। এর পাশাপাশি আবার এটাও ঠিক যে ব্যক্তি অথারের সৃষ্ট বলেই তাকে

প্রশ্ন করার সম্ভাবনা গুলিও তুলনামূলক ভাবে বেশি। যুগ যুগ ধরে লোকশ্রুতি, আখ্যান কিংবা পূর্বজদের জ্ঞানের(সেই জ্ঞান সত্য মিথ্যা যাই হোক) ভিত্তিতে নির্মিত মিথের তুলনায় আধুনিক যুগে ব্যক্তি অথারের সৃষ্ট আখ্যানজাত মিথ প্রশ্নহীনতার নিরিখে খানিক দুর্বল, সন্দেহ নেই। আধুনিকের চিহ্নও প্রশ্ন করা। সেই প্রশ্ন থেকেই শিষ্ট গোপাল অথবা দুষ্ট রাখালের এই অবধারিত সামাজিক অবস্থানের বিপ্রতীপে সুকুমার রায় এনে হাজির করেন দাশু'কে।

গোপালরা সুকুমারের সময়েও ভীষণ ভাবে উপস্থিত, কখনো তার নন্দলালের বেশে কখনো বা জগদ্যাদাসের নামে।^১ এই বুর্জোয়া তথাকথিত গণতান্ত্রিক ঔপনিবেশিক শিক্ষাব্যবস্থার মধ্যে যে শ'য়ে শ'য়ে গোপাল তৈরির কারখানা স্থাপিত হয়েছিল উনিশ শতকে, নন্দলাল বা জগদ্যাদাসের দুর্দশা সেই ব্যবস্থারই ফলশ্রুতি। উৎপাদিত সামগ্রীর চাহিদার ঘাটতি-বৃদ্ধির উপরই যে আসলে এই শিক্ষা ব্যবস্থার মৌল কাঠামোটি নির্ভরশীল, তা বারংবার নন্দলালদের এই উপাখ্যানের মধ্যে লেখা হয়। কারণ শিক্ষা যেখানে আত্মবিকাশের মাধ্যম নয় সেখানে হামেশাই এই জাতীয় গোলোযোগ অবশ্যস্বাভাবী। কিন্তু গোপালের জন্য নির্দিষ্ট করা ছকের বাইরে পা রাখলেই কেবল কি শুধু রাখালের বৃত্তেই গিয়ে পড়তে হবে? মূলত এই প্রশ্নের মুখে দাঁড়িয়ে সুকুমার রায় দাশুকে গোপালের মুখোমুখি দাঁড় করিয়েছেন।

মানবেন্দ্র বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় দাশুকে চেনার জন্য প্রশ্ন করেছিলেন “কে ইহারা? পাগল, না সেয়ানা? বেকুবের বেহদ, না চালাকিতে চিকচাকন চৌখশ? মিচকে, ফাজিল, ইয়ার্কিবাগীশ? ইহাদের যথার্থ সংজ্ঞার্থ কী হইবে, ভাবিয়া ভাবিয়া হবু-গবু সবাই কুপোকাত, অথবা চিৎপাত।”^২ আসলে হয়তো এই ধাঁধা লাগানো রহস্যময়তা দাশুর চরিত্রের বিশিষ্ট লক্ষণ। আদর্শ শিক্ষাব্রতী বালকের বিপ্রতীপে যে কেবল রাখাল নয়, কোথাও কোথাও দাশুও বাস করে, হয়তো দেখা যেতে পারে দাশুরাই আদমসুমারীতে সংখ্যা গরিষ্ঠ। দাশু কিন্তু কখনোই রাখালের প্রতিস্থাপনযোগ্য একক নয়, সে নিজেই একটি স্বতন্ত্র অবস্থান। স্যোসুরের^৩ বক্তব্যকে যদি ধরি যে সাদৃশ্য দিয়ে চিহ্ন নির্মিত হলেও আসলে বৈসাদৃশ্যের জোর বেশি, তাহলে দাশুরও চরিত্র চরিত্র লক্ষণ বুঝতে গোপালের সঙ্গে তার সার্বিক বৈসাদৃশ্যগুলিই কাজে আসে পারে। গোপাল-রাখালের বিপ্রতীপে এই তৃতীয় অবস্থানটি তাই ক্রমশ জনপ্রিয় হয়েছে। নাম না জানা কত ‘দাশু’ তার পরবর্তীতে আশ্রয় পেয়েছে এই চরিত্রের ছত্রছায়ায়। গোপাল আর রাখালের বাইনারির বাধ্যতার মধ্যে

ছটফট করতে থাকা ঔপনিবেশিক শৈশব যে হাঁফ ছেড়ে বাঁচতে চাইছিল, দাশুর ক্রমশ প্রতিস্পর্ধী হয়ে ওঠা, তার প্রমাণ। মিথের ‘জানা’ এইভাবে পরিবর্তিত হতে হতে, প্রশ্নহীন অবস্থানকে প্রশ্নের মুখোমুখি দাঁড় করিয়ে জন্ম দিয়েছে এমন এক নূতন মিথের যা নিজেই নিজেকে ভাঙার জন্য সতত ব্যগ্র। পাঠক সঙ্গত প্রশ্ন করতেই পারেন, যদি ভাঙবেই বা, তবে তা মিথ হলো কীভাবে? উত্তরটি লুকিয়ে আছে দাশুর চরিত্রের মধ্যে। সেই মোড়ক আর তার ভিতরের বস্তুর গল্প; আমি আসলে ‘জানতে চাই’ ভিতরের বস্তু বা চিহ্নকে, কিন্তুবাহ্যত দেখে মনে হয় আমি ‘জানছি’ বাইরের মোড়ক বা চিহ্নক বা দাশুর অদ্ভুতুড়ে কীর্তিকলাপ। কিন্তু এক্ষেত্রে আমার জানতে চাওয়া চিহ্নটির স্বরূপ কী? দাশুর মতো প্রায় বিদূষক আধুনিক চরিত্রের মজাটাই এইখানে যে তার চিহ্নটি সুনির্দিষ্ট, প্রত্যাশিত ছকের বাইরে। এইটি শেষ পর্যন্ত বন্ধ নয়, খোলামুখ চিহ্ন। অর্থাৎ নয়-গোপাল অথচ সম্পূর্ণত রাখাল না হতে চাওয়া পাঠকের আকাঙ্ক্ষা এই চিহ্নটিকে প্রতি মূল্লর্তে নির্মাণ করে চলেছে। চিহ্নটি মিথ, কারণ গোপাল-রাখালের বাইরে অসংখ্য তৃতীয় বর্গের মানুষের আকাঙ্ক্ষা দ্বারা তা সঞ্জাত। কিন্তু এইটি পরিবর্তনশীল, আধুনিকের গন্ধ এর পরতে পরতে মোড়া। কেউ চাইলে দাশুর গল্পকে তার নিজের গল্প দিয়ে প্রতিস্থাপিত করতে পারে; সেতো শুধু মোড়কের পরিবর্তন। কিন্তু ওই যে তৃতীয় বর্গের দাশু হতে চাওয়ার আকাঙ্ক্ষা, তাদের ‘জানা’টাই এই প্রতিস্পর্ধী হয়ে ওঠার সাহস জুগিয়ে যাচ্ছে, নিয়মিত। তাই ‘জানা’ থেকেই মিথ, ‘জানা’ই মিথমুক্তি।

তথ্যসূত্রঃ

1. Oxford Dictionary কৃত মিথে (Myth) র সংজ্ঞা।
2. Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*, (Trans. by Annette Lavers) The Noonday Press, 1991, NewYork. এই বইটিতে বার্ষ মিথ সংক্রান্ত চিরায়ত ধারণাগুলিকে ভেঙে ভাষা ও মিথের সংযোগ এবং মিথের স্বয়ংসম্পূর্ণ তন্ত্র সম্বন্ধে প্রথম বিস্তারিত আলোচনা করেন।
3. ঐ, পৃঃ- ১১৩।
4. প্রাচীন ভারতীয় ন্যায়-দার্শনিকেরা ‘উপমান’ নামক একটি প্রমাণের কথা প্রথম উল্লেখ করেন। তবে বৌদ্ধ দার্শনিকদের সঙ্গে এই প্রসঙ্গে যুক্তি বিবাদ চলেছে বহুকাল।

৫. ঈশ্বরচন্দ্র বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়ের লেখা বাংলা প্রাইমার 'বর্ণপরিচয়ের' দুই চরিত্র। সময় পরবর্তীতে দুটি পৃথক অবস্থানের চিহ্নক।

৬. সুকুমার রায় সৃষ্ট চরিত্র দাশু ওরফে পাগলা দাশু।

৭. সুকুমার রায়ের 'নন্দলালের মন্দ কপাল' ও 'জগদ্যদাসের মামা' গল্পদুটির চরিত্র।

৮. মানবেন্দ্র বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়, 'শেক্ দি বটল্! শেক্ দি বটল্!', অনুপম মজুমদার ও আশিষ লাহিড়ী (সম্পাদিত) 'প্রস্তুতি পর্ব', কারিগর, ২০১৩, কলকাতা।

৯. উনিশ শতকের বর্ণনামূলক ভাষাবিজ্ঞানের জনক ফার্দিনান্দ দ্য স্যোসুরের ভাষাকে বোঝার ক্ষেত্রে বৈপ্লবিক অবদান গুলির মধ্যে অন্যতম হলো ভাষাকে signifier ও signified এর মাধ্যমে বোঝার চেষ্টা করা। শব্দের অর্থ বোঝার ক্ষেত্রে সাদৃশ্য ও বৈসাদৃশ্যের যুগপৎ ভূমিকা বিশ্লেষণও তার কাজের আওতাভুক্ত। আগ্রহীরা বিস্তারে জানার জন্য তার মূল বইটির ইংরেজি অনুবাদ 'General Linguistics' দেখতে পারেন।

ডঃ সৌম্য ভট্টাচার্য

অ্যাসিস্টেন্ট প্রফেসর,

বাংলা বিভাগ, দি ভবানীপুর এডুকেশন সোসাইটি কলেজ।