

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. **(Ramswami)** 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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