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Impact of Mythology on India's Freedom Struggle

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Rooted in reason and guided by science, the modern age, one would imagine, has no place for speculative reflections and metaphysical meanderings. While mythology occupied an important place in ancient cultures as the means of raising questions, setting down moral codes, providing entertainment and more, one may well ask what place it occupies in the modern age. One answer could be that it has had a definite role in guiding the course of history.

In common parlance, the word myth has come to mean an old wives' tale or a generally accepted

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belief unsubstantiated by fact. However, the etymological origin of the word is from the Greek word mythos, meaning 'word' or 'story'.

Traditionally, humans have used stories to describe things that they could not otherwise explain. Ancient myths were stories through which people could assimilate mysteries occurring around them. In this sense, myth was a metaphor.

In India, myths pervade just about every aspect of culture. From bedtime stories for children to words used in language, from fine arts to performing arts, from religion to politics, mythology rules the roost. Whether it is the nation's name *Bharata* or political expressions like *Ram Rajya*, they are all born out of the cradle of Indian mythology.

This deep-rooted connect between Indian society and mythology was visible during India's Independence Movement. From influencing leaders like Gandhi and Tilak to providing themes for artists with nationalist visions, mythology became the guiding force of history. And nowhere else was it more visible than in the realm of the theatre, where plays centred on myths

played a key role in evolving a national identity.

18th Century Theatre in India

The theatre in India is not a new phenomenon. Nor the use of mythological themes, which had been popular since the times of Bhasa and Kalidasa. But during the British period, these themes were recast in imaginative ways to communicate a nationalist message.

By the early 1860s, the need for public theatres was strongly felt as dramatic performances thus far had been private and irregular. During this time, newspapers advocated the need for theatres to act as vehicles of social reforms. At the same time, new ideas and organizations were taking root, causing a wave of social reforms. These ideas gradually permeated into theatre which became a tool of protest against oppressive colonial rule.

Nil Darpan was the first public performance, staged by the Calcutta National Theatrical Society on December 7, 1872 in Calcutta, where the nationalist theatre took birth. It was a scathing exposure of the oppression of the impoverished Bengali ryots by the British indigo planters. While local

“**Nil Darpan** was the first public performance, staged by the Calcutta National Theatrical Society on December 7, 1872 in Calcutta, where the nationalist theatre took birth.”

newspapers praised the performance, the English press was not impressed. The performance of the play was ordered to be immediately stopped. In February 1876, an ordinance was promulgated to empower the Government of Bengal to prohibit dramatic performances, that were scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest. The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876 was thereafter enacted to check the revolutionary impulses of the Indian theatre.

The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876
Under the provisions of the Act, the idea of seditious theatre was

introduced. It empowered the British administration to control the theatre through restrictions. According to this Act, if the Government judged any play to be scandalous, disrupting social values, or felt it might excite feelings of disaffection against the government, the performance would stand prohibited.

The penalty for disobedience was imprisonment for three months or a fine, or both. The Government had the right to demand plays for verification and the police could enter, arrest and seize any persons, scenery, costumes, and/or articles. No public performance was to take place without the sanction of a license.

Following *Nil Darpan*, other nationalist plays like *Bharat Mata*, *Puru-Vikram*, *Bharate Yavan*, *Banger Sukhabasan*, *Beer Nari* had gained immense popularity. But after 1876, there was a lull in theatre activity. Police surveillance made it difficult to present drama that openly attacked colonial rule.

At such a time, playwrights searched for ideas to cloak nationalist messages in a sheath that would elude censorship.

Mythology was to be that magic cloak!

Mythological Motifs bear Nationalist Messages

While the British clamped down on the nationalist theatre, they did not interfere with religious plays. This provided a window of opportunity for playwrights. The censor board never listened very carefully to religious/mythological and historical dramas. Carelessly, it would stamp the play for approval. But it listened to and read social plays very carefully. And sometimes the drama-wallahs also managed to deceive the censor board.’ (Ganpat Daangi, an actor in mythological plays of that time, is reported to have said this:.)

This genre also had the advantage of popular appeal. Starting in West Bengal, nationalist theatre soon spread across the nation and was performed to packed audiences ranging from commoners to literary and political figures. Here is a look at some notable mythological plays that rocked the stage.

Vir Abhimanyu
One of the plays that created a stir was *Vir Abhimanyu* by Radheyshyam Kathavachak, a prolific writer. Abhimanyu, son of

Arjuna, a character from the *Mahabharata*, had bravely entered the *chakravyuha* to fight the battle at Kurukshetra. Although the enemy was stronger than him, Abhimanyu fought on, sacrificing his own life for the sake of the cause. It was this plot situation that Kathavachak adapted.

In the play, Shubhadra urges her son to fight and Uttara exhibits a nationalist zeal by sending her husband into the battlefield. There is no such scene in the *Mahabharata*. But Kathavachak adapted the original story to send out a subtle message to women in the audience.

‘Show me how to use the sword...I will go to the battle and show my valour,’ Uttara says to Abhimanyu, prompting women to join the fight for freedom.

Here is a sample of the opening lines exchanged between the sutradhars, that set the tone for the play!

Nati: *Interests are now changing. There is a tradition of mythological drama. At such a time, we should think about playing a significant drama, along with entertainment, we should also preserve our society and our nation.*

Nata: *Is that so? Then, to show*

to the children of India, the pride of India's brave ones, let's play Bareilly resident Radheyshyam Kathavachak's drama *Vir Abhimanyu*.... Let us play *Abhimanyu Natak* for the benefit of our countrymen.

Nati: *Abhimanyu? Which Abhimanyu?... In the battle of Mahābhārata when the Indian field was being marked with the sacred blood of the brave ones, the one who gave up his life to fulfil the pledge [to his nation].... that Abhimanyu? Nati: Yes, that Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna.... the one who immortalized his name by giving up his life. Let us sing the praises of that brave and powerful one.*²

The lines have a deeper significance. Abhimanyu dies for a cause, and his son Parikshit becomes the king, the message to the viewers is that Abhimanyu's sacrifice did not go waste; it had its reward.

Bhakta Prahlad

Kathavachak penned several other plays including *Bhakta Prahlad*. Based on the *Vishnu Purana*, at one level, the story is about Prahlad, who stood up against the tyranny of his father, Hiranyakashipu. At a deeper level, it urged Indians to stand up against



Subramanya Bharati

His *Panchali Sabatham* (The Vow of Draupadi), was written during his ten-year exile in Pondicherry, now Puducherry.

Let us recall the scene: Dharmaputra lost the kingdom, his brothers and his wife, Draupadi, in a game of dice to his Kaurava cousins. Draupadi is disgraced before the assembly of nobles. Bharatiyar transforms this into a political metaphor. Through selective phrases and symbols, he compares the humiliation of Draupadi to the colonial oppression of India. The victimized Draupadi becomes Bharat Mata and the Kauravas symbolize India's colonial oppressors.

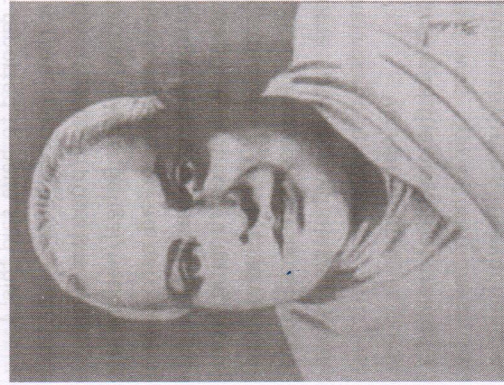
Draupadi is referred to as *Amman* or Goddess in certain parts of Tamil Nadu, where she is revered as a village goddess. Bharatiyar draws inspiration from this background and consistently relates her to Parasakti or the Supreme Sakti, the all-powerful goddess.

Says Richard Frasca in his paper on the *Panchali Sabatham*, 'The drama triggers symbols of impurity and purity to evoke images of political oppression and liberation. As the village goddess Draupadi is restored to a pure, revitalized powerful state through the *terukkuttu*, so is Draupadi as the image of Mother India in Bharatiyar's drama restored to a place of pristine power.³

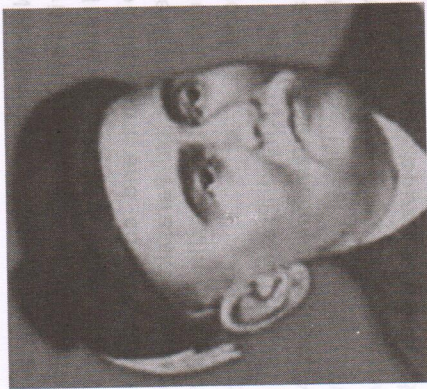
This work had such a political impact that it was banned by the British. Hand-copied versions of the work were surreptitiously circulated by college students.¹

Kichak Vadha

One of the most dramatic and impactful mythological plays with a national outlook, was *Kichak-Vadha* (slaying of Kichaka), written in 1907 by Krishnaji Khadiikar, right-hand man of Tilak, editor of the Marathi newspaper *Kesari*. Drawing inspiration from the *Mahabharata* and heavily



Radheyshyam Kathavachak



Krishnaji Khadilkar

influenced by Khadilkar's journalistic background, the play went on to have violent repercussions.

Maharashtra's 'naradiya keertan' style of one-man ballad recitation and enactment of Mahabharata stories, early in the 20th century, impacted the political struggle. The hardas (performer), subtly related contemporary events and personalities, to the Mahabharata. Perhaps, Khadilkar was influenced by this genre of local theatre when he penned his classic. Performed by the Maharashtra Natak Mandli in Poona, Khadilkar turned

the episode of the killing of Kichaka in the Virata-Parvam of the Mahabharata into an allegory of India's colonial humiliation.

The story is set in the last year of exile of the Pandavas, during which they are in disguise at the court of King Virata. Kichaka, a minister in the king's court, attempts to molest Draupadi. While Yuddhishtira does not



Raja Ravi Verma's painting of Kichaka and Draupadi as Sairandhri.

intervene. Bhima is infuriated and kills Kichaka. While, at the literal level, the play portrayed the last year of exile of the Pandavas, at a deeper level, it sent out a strong allegorical message, favouring the approach of the Extremists and mocking at the pacifist approach of the Moderates.

Several clues pointed to contemporary political parallels:

- Kichaka represented Lord Curzon, the Viceroy.
- Kichaka's atrocities represented the atrocities of Lord Curzon;
- Draupadi represented India / Bharat Mata;
- Draupadi's dishonour represented Mother India's shame under foreign oppressors;
- Yudhishtira the moderate nationalists like Gokhale.
- Yudhishtira's restraint symbolized the policy of the Moderates;
- Bhima represented the extremists who were willing to take extreme measures to win freedom;
- Bhima's successful violence implied the ultimate triumph of those who called for revolutionary means.

Lord Curzon's arrogant utterances like, 'rulers are rulers and slaves are slaves' are said to have found direct echoes in the words of Kichaka in the play. Fiery speeches by Draupadi and Bhima expressed the popular mood of resentment and revolt.

On January 18, 1910, The Times wrote a scathing review of the play referring to its 'most pernicious influence' and calling it an act of sedition. In a secret police abstract dated November 13, 1909, a police commissioner writes: 'There is no doubt that the Deccan audience takes this play as a cleverly veiled incitement to murder European officials.'

On January 27, 1910, the British banned the play.

The banning of the play, more than anything else, indicates how impactful it must have been. One can only admire the creative genius of a writer like Khadilkar, who could visualise in the story of Kichaka, parallels with the Indian freedom struggle.

Mythological Drama

Leads the Way

Aside from carrying nationalist messages, a notable incidental achievement of mythological drama, was the

The Judicial Department also, it seems, acted swiftly and here is an order banning the play:

No. 503 of 1910

JUDICIAL DEPARTMENT

Bombay Castle, 27th January, 1910.

RESOLUTION — The Governor in Council is pleased to prohibit under section 3 of the Dramatic Performances Act, 1876 (XIX of 1876), the performance of the play known as *Kichak Vadha*. The necessary order is forwarded to the District Magistrate, Poona, who is requested to take such action as may be desirable under sections 4 and 5 of the Act.

2. A copy of the order should be forwarded to all District Magistrates in the Presidency proper and to all Political Agents. A copy should also be forwarded to the Inspector General of Police for insertion in the Police Gazette with sufficient explanation to enable the play to be identified.

Order dated 27th January, 1910 banning *Kichak Vadha*

increase in the number of women attending theatre. Tainted with labels of obscenity, the theatre was in bad odour. Now with characters like Sita, Subhadra and Draupadi taking centre stage mythological themes helped perception to change, and made it respectable for women to attend performances.⁵

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