

Taking religion out of mythology

Mallika Iyer | Updated: Thursday, August 22, 2019, 03:11 PM IST



RECENT STORIES



Mallika Iyer discovers mythological stories free from colours of religion and shades of politics

Ask anybody what mythology means and chances are that the answer you get will invariably contain the term religion. But mythology and religion are not the same thing. As per nuanced academic divisions, Theology is the domain that covers the study of God and religion. So what then is mythology? In a country like India, where mythology is so inextricably linked with religion, perhaps it is difficult to imagine one without the other. But two unique groups in the city are trying to do just that.

The Talking Myths Project is one such initiative that seeks to understand mythology for what it is. It is an endeavour to create a repository of folklore, myth and legend from around the subcontinent and seeks to record oral narratives that are quietly disappearing from our collective psyche. It also seeks to record myths and stories recorded in written texts that are not popularly known.

“It began out of a need to provide an authentic and comprehensive source for people seeking to know more about mythology of various regions and groups, as well as a desire to provide a resource that would help writers/academics and amateur mythologists understand the subject,” explains Utkarsh Patel, one of the founders of the project.

Utkarsh is also Visiting Faculty at the University of Mumbai where he teaches Comparative Mythology and author of two popular books of mythological fiction – Shakuntala and Satyavati. “At Talking Myths, we intend to undertake a fair and an unbiased discussion on mythology, and keep it away from the realm of religion,” he explains.

Dr Vidya Kamat, artist, research scholar and Professor of Comparative Mythology and Arundhuti Dasgupta Singhal, author, editor and mythologist are the other co-founders behind this initiative. Regarding the curated online archive of myths they say, “Traditionally myths are oral tales. They are passed down the generations either as a sacred story or as an aphorism and treasured by a community as a valuable source of their heritage. When people migrate, their stories travel with them. The national and cultural character of India and subcontinent was maintained through such narratives. The Talking Myths Project attempts to capture and engage with this shared mythological heritage of the region.”



Talking Myths holds regular lectures in the city where they discuss myths and draw connections between narratives from different parts of the country and the world as also discuss and bust the popular notions about mythology. Some of the sessions conducted so far have been on the Mother Goddesses, the Epics, Panchakanya, Womens tales, Heroes and Superheroes, Same-sex Love in Mythology, Tribal mythology, etc.

“It is important to understand mythology from a rational perspective and we at the Talking Myths Project very strongly believe in this,” says Utkarsh when asked about the spirit behind the project.

Encouraged by the Talking Myths Project, some of Utkarsh’s students began their own version of this unique endeavour. Their group known as Mythopia is an informal gathering of mythology buffs, who are interested in discussing and understanding mythology from a different perspective, than that which is available in the popular domain.

“At Mythopia, the aim is to discuss different texts, theories, stories and subjects related to the world of mythology and bring in diverse perspectives to understand better, the stories we know,” explains Radhika Radia, co-founder of the initiative.

Irawati’s Karwe’s path-breaking book Yuganta which discusses the characters of the Mahabharata in an unconventional manner was the first book to be analysed at the inaugural session. Dr Vineet Agarwal, author of two popular works of mythological fiction – Vishwamitra and Parshurama – recently conducted a session on the Sapta-rishis.

“Mythology is interesting, not just for its connection with religion but also as a window to understand our roots,” says Vineet as he begins his engaging lecture about the seven rishis.

An open mind and the willingness to question and learn are all one needs to get immersed in the Canvas of Mythology. Over millenia, several shades have been superimposed on these stories. With colours of religion and shades of politics, the canvas of mythology has slowly metamorphised into something very different from what it originally might have been. Both Talking Myths and Mythopia offer a window in unravelling this mystery and entering this fascinating world.

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The next event of Talking Myths features alternative tellings of the epics including folk renditions. The talk will be held on 20th May at 5.30 pm at Trilogy, Juhu, Mumbai.

The curated online archive of Talking myths can be viewed at www.talkingmyths.com.

Those interested in the events of Mythopia may contact Radhika/Neelkanth at atmythopia.mumbai@gmail.com

The lectures and discussions of Talking Myths and Mythopia are conducted free of cost.

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