

History and Hindu Mythology: The Thinning Lines with References to Ashwin Sanghi's Bharat Series and Related Literature

Poumita Paul

Abstract— India is a country enriched with a diverse past of discovery, altering social order, invasions, battles and heroism reflected keenly by the historians with a linear chronological structure on the basis of relevant investigations and enquiries. Hinduism is one of the widely practised religion in this part of the world and holds its own version of widely propagated past which includes a circular notion of time, rebirth and characters like Shiva, Ram, Krishna and the tales associated with it which is supposed to have paved the socio-political structure of the present sub-continent. However, due to the lack of proper evidences, these tales do not find any place in the documentation of a rational historian and are only confined as mere literary creations getting its shape in the Vedic period (c. 1500- c. 500 BCE) meant to set morals and mould the human behavior likewise. These tales find their places only in the realm of Mythology. But, with the advent of the Postmodernity and its zeal of seeking the unsought, several notions related to the Hindu Mythological tales had obtained a material form through the discovery of various associated relics and texts tending to locate such circulations as a part of the documented history. Such re-establishment of past and the thinning line between these cultural mythologies and the documented history has become a widely popular and highly accepted phenomenon in 21st century India and there are ample amount of contributions from authors like Ashwin Sanghi and Christopher. C. Doyle to the domain of Indian English literature to correspond to the same. This paper tries to focus on the tangible variations on the status of popular tales and characters of Hindu Mythology with time and try to analyze the associated rationale acting upon the Indian society causing to thin down of the line previously barring it from the realm of history. It also aims to seek the purpose of such historiography from the Indian authors and hence, inspect the presence of any socio-cultural or political wave within the process.

Index Terms— Rehistoricization, Hindu Mythology, New Historism, Ideological Construct, Socio-political debate, Politics of Literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

History and Mythology had been the bed time tales of almost every Indian kid. To the initial conception, both seemed to represent fragments of past dealing with the rise, fall and the heroic achievements of the protagonist, creating a fanciful excitement in the young minds. However, with the withdrawal of innocence, hits the logic and thus, the thin line between history and mythology is realized. According to John Jacob Andersen, "History is a narration of the events which have

happened among mankind, including an account of the rise and fall of nations, as well as of other great changes which have affected the political and social condition of the human race."; as such, anything relating to the domain of history is a knowledge based on inquiries and investigations. The domain of myths or mythology, on the other hand, are not the results of any inquiry or investigation of the past and are mostly owed to traditional propagation. The Oxford Dictionary defines Myths as "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon..." and thus, making Mythology the body of knowledge formed out of them. Mythologies propagated in a landmass are often known to be associated with a religious or cultural tradition of the same and even though, it appears to present a chunk of our past, are merely shared beliefs propagated to induce the morals, vices, virtues and human responsibilities.

The curving of a land's history out of the innumerable tales associated with its past has been an intriguing issue since long and it's no different when it comes to the Indian context. The area of Indian mythology is as vast as the Indian history and both are equally influential in framing the Indian society. The ancient civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, the Aryan invasions, the mastery of the first manuscripts, the Islamic Invasions and its socio-cultural implications, the British invasion and the blood-shedding revolution everything has been the pride of an Indian History book and it is the same socio-cultural and political legacy with a blend of fraternity and rebellion that pioneers the Indian society till date. The tales attributed to mythology, however, has no perfectly unanimous record and are mostly learnt through the the compilation of oral narratives and religious preaching. Hinduism, a widely practised philosophy in India, contributes to a large number mythological tales with a variety of conjectures within the Indian mind. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik, in *Myth=Mithya Decoding Hindu Mythology*, analyzes the importance of such Hindu myths in Indian lives and devices the untruthfulness of myths as "truth being seen through a frame of reference". Pattanaik, in his introduction discusses the importance of the popular Hindu myths like the Three Hundred and Thirty Million Deities, tales of Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Creator and the Creation etc corresponding to the fact that these tales cannot be rationalized after a point.

However, being exposed to the Postmodern resurrection in the whole world, the wave of resurrecting the 'original' Indian

history tends to place the chunks in a different manner. The phenomenon could be traced at the depiction of time being cyclic in nature through the dimension of the four epoches or four Yugas of Hinduism, as described in the Hindu Puranas. The existense of such Yugas consisting of 360 human years and the consequent decline of power and wisdom in each successive Yuga were something lying in the realm of obscurity due to lack of logic, reason and existing records. The advent of the resurrectional wave tends to demystify the obscurities related to the belief and claims that the concept of circular time is very much a part of the Indian past. The domain of literature, too, mirrored the social waves too well. Indian authors like Ashwin Sanghi and Christopher C Doyle logicalizes the existence of various Hindu mythological stances and even presents a linear string of events so as to consequentialize the events of present to the one popularly nurtured in the domain of mythology. Ashwin Sanghi's *Bharat Series*, a propounding novel series trying to resurrect the true entity of the nation tends to present calculative and analyzed descriptions of various mythological figures. Sanghi's novel *The Krishna Key* (2012) depicts the tale of mythological figure Krishna, a representative of the third epoch (Dwapara Yuga) as very much an ancestor of the present generation and depicts his infamous achievements including the battle of Kurukshetra as very much a part of Indian History absent from the History books. In his novel *The Sialkot Saga* (2016), Sanghi tends to draw a convergence between myth and knowledge when he brings in the character of Hanuman, one of the Three Hundred and Thirty Million Deities as described in the Hindu Epic *The Ramayana* and other ancient Indian texts like *Rig Veda* and the *Skanda Purana* being bestowed with the boon of immortality as a living character in his novel. Sanghi presents Hanuman as one of Emperor Ashoka's nine unknown men entrusted to protect and preserve the sacred knowledge of mankind. Christopher C. Doyle's *The Mahabharata Quest Series*, tries a similar approach when he traces the ruins of the infamous battle of Kurukshetra to retrieve enough evidences linking it to the phenomena of present.

As such the characters and events identified in the realm of mythology attains its own logic and are often declared a contributing factor to the country's present. Indian has been facing various such urges of thinning of lines between Mythological and historical realm over few decades, be it in the form of an encounter with Mahayogi Pilot Baba's encounter with Ashwatthama (a character in Mahabharata booned with immortality) in his non-fiction *Discover Secrets of Himalaya* or the hoax surrounding the discovery of the skeletons of the mythical figure Ghatotkacha or even the assumed location of the birthplace of Rama (the hero of Ramayana and a representative of the second epoch of the cycle). But, what actually are these characters and their associated tales? Can these be considered as the elements of the 'original' Indian History?...Or a mere cultural resurgence aimed towards the formation of a majoritarian canon?

Before going to ant theoretical perspective, let us analyze a number of such instances reflected in Indian texts where the Hindu Mythology invaded into the realm of reality entailing necessary evidences getting it closer to qualify as a potential

Indian History.

II. MYTHS INTERFACING HISTORY

A. *Syamantaka in Taj Mahal: The Krishna Key* (2012)

One of the seven wonders of the world The Taj Mahal is traditionally believed to be built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the memory of his third wife Mumtaz Mahal. However, the popular notion circulated in the Indian History books was challenged for the first time by Historical revisionist P. N. Oak who in *Taj Mahal: The true story* claimed that the monument was initially known a Hindu temple Tejo Mahalaya, a Shiva Temple vandalized of its identity by the Mughals. Ashwin Sanghi's anthropological thriller *The Krishna Key*, however, revisioned the perspective by an entirely different light when the climax of the novel unveils the Taj Mahal being formerly a Shiva temple still housing of the mythologically significant 'Syamantaka' stone once possessed by Krishna in the Dwapara Yuga. Sanghi's novel identifies the mythological stone as the sacred reason for veiling the identity of Tejo Mahalaya with Islamic documentation. Thus, Sanghi, in his novel, craftedly places the entity of 'Syamantaka' originated from the medieval Hindu texts Vishnu Purana and Bhagavata in the realm popular history, thus, rationalizing it to the popular belief. Sanghi again identifies the mythological stone as the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond believed to be looted by the Shah of Persia, Nadir Shah, thus, aligning it with another major phase of Indian History.

B. *Emperor Ashoka and the Ashtha Cheeranjeevis*

The mystery surrounding the belief of Mauryan Empire and his creation of the society of nine unknown men chosen to protect and preserve the sacred knowledge of mankind had given an interesting plot for many authors. But, unlike Tablot Mundy, Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, Ashwin Sanghi's identification of eight out of the nine men in *The Sialkot Saga* (2016) did not correspond to any general intellectual warrior but the 'Ashtha Cheeranjeevis' or the eight immortals (Markandeya, Bali, Hanuman, Kripacharya, Parashurama, Vibhishana, Vyasa and Ashwatthama) of Hindu mythology belonging to different epoches of circular time. Thus, the mythological concept of the boons of immortality propagated in medieval Hindu texts including *The Ramayana* and *The Mhabharata* dives into the historical empire through its own rationale.

C. *Babri Masjid vs The Ramjanmabhoomi*

The interface between Babri Masjid and the Ramjanmabhoomi is one of the most alarming issues within the Indian sub-continent since the independence of the country. The centre of the debate circles around a patch of land in Ayodhya, holding The Babri Masjid, a mosque believed to be built in 1528-29 on the instructions of Mughal emperor Babur. However, the Postmodern revisionist wave in the 18th century dropped a claim of the exact site to be the birthplace of Rama, the 7th 'avatar' of Hindu deity Vishnu in the Treta Yuga (the second age of the cycle). The mosque was demolished on 6 December 1992 by the 'Hindu Nationalists'. The atypical facet behind the whole issue is the yet-to-be absolved status of the Hindu deities lying the domain of

mythology and very existence of Rama besides being the central figure in the ancient Indian epic poem The Ramayana composed by Valmiki in 2nd Century BCE. However, the relics acknowledged by the Archeological Survey of India, the ongoing legal quests alongside the Pan-Hindutva texts like Minakshi Jain's *The Battle of Rama: Case of the Temple* (2017) tends to reflect the tales and characters confined to its own cultural specificity into an acceptable version of human history.

D. Encounters with the 'Myths'

Despite a large number of obscurities surrounding the concept of immortality in the whole world, the Hindu mythology encodes it as an ultimate reward for one's own deeds across the four Yugas. The Hindu mythology, thus, constructs the image of eight immortals or the 'ashta chiranjeevis' consisting of Asura king Mahabali, Maha Rishi Markandeya, Parshurama, Vibhishana Hanuman, Vyasa, Kripacharya and Ashwatthama.

But, except their depictions in a number of Medieval Hindu texts and the recurring existence of the characters in the tales across Yugas, there had been no evidence of the existence of the eight immortals. However, Mahayogi Pilot Baba in *Discover Secrets of the Himalaya* depicts his encounter with Ashwatthama on his quest to reach the Himalayas. The Hindu spiritual Guru describes his dialogues with the immortal and even claimed to know the temple where Ashwatthama resided. Interestingly, it wasn't the first time that the claims of such encounter are made. The retrieved excerpts of Chand Bardai's Prithvirak Raso describes the Indian King Prithviraj Chauhan's encounter with a wounded being who called himself Ashwatthama and was even nursed by the king to health.

However, such negotiation with the mythological entities got a new compulsion in the past two decades be it in the form of the news channel documentaries on tracing the existence of the 5000 years old Ashwatthama in the jungles of Lakhimpur in Uttar Pradesh or even the very recent claims of discovering the skeleton of a 22 ft man near the banks of Saraswati and marking it as the remains of Bhima's son Ghatotkacha (a character from the Mahabharata).

It is clearly seen that the invasion of the compulsive cultural beliefs tend to create a new domain of knowledge associated with the Indian past so as to generate an original depiction of the land based on a particularization of philosophies and majoritarianity.

III. UNDERLYING THEORY AND PURPOSE

A study of the depictions leaves no doubt that the Indian subcontinent is going through a Pan-Hindu wave since the past few decades with a deeper impact on the socio-cultural structure every single time. However, being an acclaimed secular nation, such realization of such cultural beliefs into the domain of History on the basis of majoritarianity at times becomes an issue of conflict resting on a vague purpose.

According to the J. F. Jameson, History is 'an expression of necessity' and as such, every remodelling an refurbished version of a nation's past tends to represent the need of the hour. But, what are the needs? Why are the needs? Whose are the needs?

Talking about such acts of re-historicization, Harold Aram Veesar in his anthology of essays, *The New Historicism* (1989) holds no discourse that could claim the inalterability of human nature. He even brings forward the concept of recurring capitalism as a cause and reason behind such reconstructions and states the same as a reason for the ultimate rise of a new intellectual paradigm, viz., a new ideological domain. As such, there is a possibility of a recurring existence of Imperialist-Subaltern relationship within every society. Dipesh Chakrabarty in *History as Critique and Critique(s) of History* (1991) suggests that a traditionally accepted version of the history gets unaccepted and remodelled only when the powers shift from the centre to the peripheries.

A keen look at the Indian History books would, perhaps, correspond a little more to Chakrabarty's words when applied on the basis of the Pan-Hindu or Hindutva movements propagated by the Hindu Nationalists for last few decades. According to that, the epitome of Indian History books has mostly centred around either the British rule or the Islamic invasion and their conquests in the Indian sub-continent. As such, any Indian kid going through the pages of History when asked to name an Indian king would go for 'Akbar' with a fair chance of 85%. As such, movies, soap operas, tales of chivalry and romance alongside worshipping heroic demeanors and the music and architecture attributed to the Islamic rulers tended to create a canonized domain within the subconscious of the radicalist Hindu society which the later might relate to 'Historical Subjugation' or a 'Cultural foreshadowing'. Thus, according to Historians like Sita Ram Goel, there is a need to question the absolutism of the Abrahamic faiths and propagations vested into the sub-continent and alongside a 'proper' reconstruction of history conferring the 'lost' and 'original' Hindu past of the land. In one of his jointly written books *Hindu Temples: What Happened to Them*, Goel expressively illustrates the distortion of Hindu faith and monuments in the past as a trial to its 'de-establishment', which, he complains, were barely brought up by the Historians. Thus, with the thoughts of (re)-historians like Rajiv Malhotra and Sita Ram Goel alongside the advent of the long awaited socio-political resurgence and a glimpse of ideological supremacy, the wave penned its way; much corresponding to R. G Collingwood's notion that the re-evaluation of History depends on socio-cultural prejudices. The need of restructuring the Hindu ideals through the supremacy of beliefs, thus, became a tool to create the 'Hindutva' consciousness and a hope to regain what they felt they lost.

IV. IS THIS THE ACTUAL STORY?

Towards the end of this paper, let's remember that 'Hindutva' unlike 'Hinduism' is not a philosophy or a spiritual belief system. Hindutva, like any other Postmodern wave, is a counter movement to drive one's self from the assumed periphery towards the centre. And in Marxian terms, it is just another ideological Superstructure hiding the a non-ideological base filled with vague political interests. Thus, the thinning lines between the Hindu Mythological tales and the actual History are mere trials to hold the 'imaginary' centre while a probable merger would provide a grasp to hold

it tight.

However, with a new centre, comes new peripheries, with new peripheries, comes new necessities of reconstruction generating a new wave. So, drawing the parallels, the paper would like to conclude that with every step nearing the merger of articulated History with the domain of Hindu Mythologies, the wave of 'Hindutva' would be countered by a new counterfeit forming on the peripheries, thus, suggesting that the complete disappearance of the line between History and Cultural Mythologies are never possible.

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