

MYTHOLOGY OF INDIA

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Genre While most of the major myths were composed in a Sanskrit genre called *purana* ('old,' 'old times'), hundreds of others were also created in regional languages. Tamil temple myths, or *sthala-puranas* ('place-myths'), for example, narrate stories associated with Siva temples in south India. Most Indian myths are Hindu, but Buddhists and Jains also composed dozens of *puranas*. Myths are considered *smriti* ('remembered') as opposed to *sruti* ('heard') because, unlike the Vedas, myths were not the words of the gods that had to be preserved verbatim. Rather they were stories, albeit it ritually important stories, that could generate many different versions.

History The oral roots of the *puranas* are obvious in that they are largely composed as dialogues. The myth is thus presented as a kind of moral discourse, in response to a series of questions, which was how these texts were originally performed and are still performed. The earliest myths were told in the Vedas, but many more were composed in the classical period and right up to the 19th century. Tradition recognises a canon of 18 or 20 *maha* ('great') *puranas*, which were written down, following an earlier oral composition, from about 250 CE to 900 CE. The oldest surviving text (of the *Skanda Purana*) is a Nepalese manuscript dated to 810 CE. Tamil temple myths were composed mainly during the medieval and early modern periods.

Devotionalism The majority of Hindu myths are devoted to Visnu, Siva, Devi/Sakti/Durga (the goddess) and Brahma. The comparatively greater emphasis on Visnu reflects the devotional aspirations of the Gupta rulers (320-467 CE), under whose patronage many of the Sanskrit *puranas* were created. These massive texts (from 15,000 to 80,000 verses) mark a second major shift in Hinduism. After the philosophical speculation of the Upanishads, the focus became devotionalism, which would remain the core of Indian literature until the mid-19th century.

Function Indian myths contain explanations of everything from the creation of the world to the details of a particular ritual. For many people, however, the prime purpose of a myth is not the story but its ritual efficacy: its power to breathe spirit into a stone statue and enable a deity to bestow favours. Hindu myths also offer moral guidance, spectacle and, not least of all, entertainment.

Creation Myths Creation myths, or cosmogonic myths, are among the most intriguing myths and bear comparison with world mythology. Indians explain the creation of the world from an egg, a primeval ocean or a deity (first Prajapati and later Brahma). Typically, Hindus do not rely on one myth of creation and prefer to entertain multiple explanations for this mystery.

Etiological Myths Many, many Indian myths are etiological, that is, they explain the origin of things in the world. One of the best-known describes how Ganesa got his elephant head. When Parvati was bathing, she told her son to stand guard and prevent anyone from approaching. Siva (Parvati's husband) came near and chopped off the head of his impudent son who dared to order him to stop. The repentant husband then promised his angry wife that he would replace their son's head with the first one he could find. And that was an elephant's head.

Relevance The major myths of Hinduism may have been created in Sanskrit fifteen hundred or more years ago, but they have generated dozens of variants in every one of India's regional languages. They have also been recited by temple-based specialists and told and retold by thousands of storytellers in every town and village in the

subcontinent. As with the great epics of India, no one ever reads these stories for the first time—they are familiar from birth.

Reading

Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (Penguin, 2004)

Wendy O'Flaherty (Doniger), *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (California, 1976)

Wendy O'Flaherty (Doniger), *Siva the Erotic Asectic* (Oxford, 1981)

David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton, 1980)

Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, vol. 1* (Columbia, 1988), pp. 319-331

Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Temple University, 1978)

Alan Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (California, 1984)

Jaan Phuvel, *Comparative Mythology* (John Hopkins, 1989)

Discussion questions

The study of myth is one of the oldest and most controversial fields of scholarship. Several major approaches have dominated the field: (in rough chronological order) euhemerism, myth-ritual, psychoanalysis, functionalism, comparative method, archetypes and structuralism. Analyse the intellectual history of the study of Indian mythology by studying which of these approaches have been used. Why have some of them fallen out of favour and been replaced by others? Try to correlate these trends in scholarship with broader patterns in world history.

Compare Hindu mythology with myths from another part of the world. A comparison with a non-Indo-European tradition would be fruitful (South American, Native American, Mesoamerican, Japanese, Chinese, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Pacific Ocean and Australian Aboriginal, to name a few). Analyse broad patterns and themes, and then focus on two or three Hindu myths and their counterparts in the second tradition.

Select one popular Hindu myth (for instance, the goddess slaying of a buffalo; Visnu becoming a dwarf; the creation of the world from water; Siva's marriage to Parvati; Ganesa's elephant head; Siva's destruction of Kama; Krishna and Radha's love) and find at least ten versions of the same story (this will not be difficult). Then conduct a content analysis of the variation in each version and identify the 'core' story and any optional elements. Finally, explain this variation: Was the key factor geography, history or culture? Or a combination of these?

Tamil temple myths borrowed heavily from their Sanskrit models, but they also adapted them to the local temples in whose honour they were composed. Choose one of the major Tamil temple myths and analyse its relationship with the Sanskrit version. How does it localise the pan-Indian story, its characters, settings and themes? What does this adaptation contribute to the story, which was not read silently but enacted or otherwise performed in temples? Finally, reflect on how this localisation helps us to understand the longevity of Hindu tradition.

Texts

1. From the *Garuda Purana*, translated by Ernest Wood and S.V. Subrahmanyam, 1911:

'Garuḍa [the eagle mount of Visnu] said: What is the path of misery in the world of Yama [god of death] like? Tell me, O Keśava [Visnu], in what way the sinful go there. The Blessed Lord said: I will tell you about the Way of Yama, bestowing great misery. Although you are my devotee, when you have heard it you will become agitated. There is no shade of trees there, in which a man may take rest, and on this road there is none of the foods by which he may support life. No water is to be seen anywhere that he, extremely thirsty, may drink. Twelve suns blaze, O Bird, as though at the end of a pralaya [era]. There the sinful soul goes along pierced by cold winds, in one place torn by thorns, in another stung by very venomous serpents. The sinful in one place is bitten by ferocious lions, tigers, and dogs; in another stung by scorpions; in another burnt by fire...

In one place he falls into a hidden well; in another from a lofty mountain; in another he treads on razor-edges and on spear-points. In one place he stumbles in the awful black darkness and falls into water; in another in mud abounding in leeches; in another in hot slime. In one place is a plain of hot sand, made of smelted copper; in another a mound of embers; in another a great cloud of smoke. In some places are showers of charcoal, showers of stones and thunderbolts, showers of blood, showers of weapons, showers of boiling water...'

2. From the *Skanda Purana*, translated by Wendy O'Flaherty, 1976:

'Kama assumed the form of a very subtle creature and entered Shiva's heart. Then Shiva was heated by a desire for sexual pleasure, and he thought of Devi [goddess], and his perfection vanished. Thus maddened and emotionally stirred by Kama, Shiva made a great effort and regained his firmness. Then he saw Kama in his heart and he thought, 'I will burn Kama out of my body by means of withdrawal from worldly objects. If he should enter a yogi, then the yogi will burn him out of the body by concentrating on the external fire. Kama was terribly heated by Shiva, and he left Shiva's body in a neutral form. Taking refuge at the foot of a mango tree, he shot the arrow of Delusion into Shiva's heart, and in anger Shiva burnt Kama to ashes with the fire from his third eye.'

3. Creation of Man (*Purusha Sukta*) from the *Laws of Manu*, translated by George Bühler, 1886:

'...He, desiring to produce beings of many kinds from his own body, first with a thought created the waters, and placed his seed in them. That (seed) became a golden egg, in brilliancy equal to the sun; in that (egg) he himself was born as Brahman, the progenitor of the whole world. The waters are called narah, (for) the waters are, indeed, the offspring of Nara; as they were his first residence (ayana), he thence is named Narayana.

From that (first) cause, which is indiscernible, eternal, and both real and unreal, was produced that male (Purusha), who is famed in this world (under the appellation of) Brahman. The divine one resided in that egg during a whole year, then he himself by his thought (alone) divided it into two halves; and out of those two halves he formed heaven and earth, between them the middle sphere, the eight points of the horizon, and the eternal abode of the waters.

From himself he also drew forth the mind, which is both real and unreal, likewise from the mind egoism, which possesses the function of self-consciousness (and is) lordly.

Moreover, the great one, the soul, and all (products) affected by the three qualities, and, in their order, the five organs which perceive the objects of sensation...

He, the Lord, also created the class of the gods, who are endowed with life, and whose nature is action; and the subtle class of the Sadhyas, and the eternal sacrifice. But from fire, wind, and the sun he drew forth the threefold eternal Veda, called Rig, Yagur, and Sama, for the due performance of the sacrifice...Austerity, speech, pleasure, desire, and anger, this whole creation he likewise produced, as he desired to call these beings into existence.

But for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds he caused the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya, and the Sudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet...'