



<https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n1.42>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Ancient Wisdom to a Futuristic Vision: Understanding Indian Myths and Folklore as Warning Tales for Ethical Behaviour and Crisis Management

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Abstract

The paper brings out the rich legacy of ancient Indian knowledge systems and its role in shaping the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision of the nation. Mythological folklore and legends also serve as warning tales so that every step taken to build a strong economy is a result of foresight, research and a thorough investigation into every detail. Such fascinating stories of the remote past contribute in a big way to form the core ideology and ethical beliefs of the people. It further states that a society without a strong value system is bound to collapse. Firstly, the paper analyzes the story “The Curse of the Three Sisters” in which three beautiful sisters are cursed for entering a forbidden cave. Taboo practices of restricting human entry to sacred groves/caves in India can be connected to the idea of environment conservation to keep these isolated spots green and pristine through narration of folklore and myths. Also, the Bhasmasura myth describes that when the power of male gods fail, they ‘turn’ to female forms for help. The goddess Mohini depicts the woman’s womb, as the source of feminine energy, wit and intellectual prowess quite enough to destroy the mighty asura also representing the tyrannical political leaders in present times. Similarly, the ‘Bhasmasura’ fear of reducing civilizations to ashes, with nations unleashing their power through nuclear weapons is also threatening the world.

Keywords: Myths, Folklore, Taboo, Womb, Feminine Energy

Indian Folklore, Myths and Legends are cultural artefacts that document the traditions, beliefs and ritualistic practices of ancient communities in India. Through the oral narrative mode, the

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transmission of ethical thought and principles from one generation to another contributes immensely in the building of a humanitarian society. These tales have shaped the national character and have remained an integral part of the collective identity of the people.

The core ideology of the whole society which influences the behavioural patterns of the people is deeply rooted in these stories. Since olden times, these narratives have been agents of social change as they have travelled through time and space, influencing modes of thought and instilling values across diverse societies and cultures. Thus, Indian Folklore and Myths are a rich source of ancient wisdom which lead us to envisioning our country as 'Viksit Bharat' or 'Progressive India'.

The 'Viksit Bharat' Mission aims to bring about massive socio-economic change in our country and re-write the history of India. 2047 is expected to be a landmark year when India will be celebrating 100 years of independence. A whole century is considered to be a long period of time during which a nation rises from the darkness of ignorance and setbacks and takes a huge leap into the vast domain of knowledge and learning. By this time, it is important to make India a self-reliant and progressive nation through various avenues in Information Technology and Artificial Intelligence, Space Science, STEM and other demanding careers which will mark the beginning of a new era. Another important purpose is to bring about the financial empowerment of women through economic participation and providing equal opportunities for growth and development of all individuals. Through the 'Viksit Bharat' Mission, giving training to the youth to create a skilled workforce, eradicating poverty, making India a popular business hub in the world and building smart cities with the best transport and communication networks are some goals to be achieved before India gets into the festive mode.

The Viksit Bharat 2047 model, however, cannot leave behind the rich legacy of the ancient Indian Knowledge Systems, specifically, fascinating folktales, myths and legends as they consist of the traditional beliefs and core values, largely important for laying the groundwork of a forward-thinking economy. In the words of the famous American lawyer, statesman and orator, Daniel Webster, the pride and glory of any powerful nation will sink if national integrity is lost:

“Other misfortunes may be borne, or their effects overcome. If disastrous war should sweep our commerce from the ocean, another generation may renew it; if it exhausts our treasury, future industry may replenish it; if it desolate and lay waste our fields, still, under a new cultivation, they will grow green again, and ripen to future harvests. It were but a trifle even if the walls of yonder Capitol were to crumble, if its lofty pillars should fall, and its gorgeous decorations be all covered by the dust of the valley. All these might be rebuilt. But who shall reconstruct the fabric of demolished government? Who shall rear again the well-proportioned columns of constitutional liberty? Who shall frame together the skillful architecture which unites national sovereignty with state rights, individual security, and public prosperity? No, if these columns fall, they will be raised not again. Like the Coliseum and the Parthenon, they will be destined to a mournful, a melancholy immortality.” (51-52)

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According to Webster, advancements in innovation and technology, ground-breaking scientific discoveries, well-chalked welfare schemes and strategies for growth and development are some determining factors that quantitatively measure the progress of any nation. However, if there is no place for feelings of love, compassion and respect towards other human beings then even financial rise cannot come to the rescue of a nation with psychologically and emotionally disturbed people. Thus, ancient wisdom cannot be disregarded, in fact, it goes a long way in building a modern and ethical society.

Mythological folklore and legends also serve as warning tales so that every step taken to build a strong economy is a result of foresight, research and a thorough investigation into every detail. Through these narratives, one learns lessons of humility and the necessity of adhering to discipline and commitment while taking giant leaps in the highly competitive world of today. Our age-old stories suggest innovative ways of risk-control and disaster management which are the need of the hour as absence of safety nets can make the public and even stable economies vulnerable to downfall and socio-political and economic exploitation.

Firstly, an analysis of a popular Khasi folktale from Meghalaya titled “The Curse of the Three Sisters” depicts the importance of instilling values of obedience among people of every generation. It is a strong warning of terrible consequences that people will have to face if they fail to abide by the laws of nature. The Viksit Bharat dream, too, will not sound rational at all if we keep destroying forest areas and build smart cities without a forest cover. Therefore, folklore plays an important role in imparting moral instruction which teaches every person to treat our flora and fauna with respect so that Nature offers us green and healthy living spaces.

The story “The Curse of the Three Sisters” is about three beautiful sisters who ignore the local narrative of a ‘forbidden cave’ and enter this prohibited zone out of curiosity. They are then cursed by the spirits inhabiting this place due to which they turn into stones. The three huge stones are a stark reminder of Nature penalizing humankind for non-compliance to its sacred laws. According to the local legend, the sisters are punished in order to administer strict discipline by spirits for their intimidating act of transgression or violating boundaries of permissible and non-permissible codes of conduct.

From the Viksit Bharat perspective, instead of blindly following rules, an individual should be taught to understand the ethical principle behind every rule in a civilized nation. For example, the areas near the dense groves are considered as sacred by the Karbi, a tribal community. Therefore, according to the beliefs of the local people, fishing is not allowed in a nearby pond known for its strong association with divine powers. Similarly, plucking of flowers is also banned here as the deity worshipped by the tribal community is believed to inflict severe punishment on those who pollute or violate the sanctity of this place. Thus, a burst of blooming flowers add colour to the whole landscape and the pond is a habitat for a wide variety of species of fish. (Hansepi 18)

The notion of unpolluted ‘sacred groves’ enables conservation of such natural resources on a large scale. The ‘forbidden area’ is a space used for preserving resources which could otherwise go extinct in no time. The folk beliefs, customs and practices of the people act as a

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shield to protect the plant and animal kingdom from destruction by human beings. Similarly, the Khasi story of “The Cursed Sisters”, according to folk beliefs, the cave is a blessed space or an abode of spirits who regard human intervention as transgression. Therefore, the sisters finding access to the cave and losing their identity imprinted the fear of the curse in the minds of people who would never dare to challenge the authority of nature. However, such taboos are prescribed for the good of mankind. In the introductory chapter, ‘Taboo’ is described by Laisram in the following words:

“Taboo is a ritual prohibition that is rooted in specific cultures. It is through the practice of these customs that the community has helped to maintain the sacred sites as repositories of traditional knowledge systems.” (4)

Such taboos may be ‘religious’ or ‘social’ but they are a boon to humanity. Landslides due to soil erosion, global climate crisis and other natural disasters are worst effects of deforestation and environmental degradation. However, the curse fear makes these places inaccessible to mankind and keeps the air and water bodies clean. Such ancient tales uses the terror element so that the natural resources in forest lands are preserved for future generations.

As ancient knowledge systems which include folktales, myths and legends are being ignored in pursuit of western knowledge and education, the harmonious relationship between humankind and nature no longer exists due to the decay of morals and values in Indian society. The biggest mistake committed today is connecting development with erasure of forests and choking the ecosystem. However, presently, the NEP (2020) focuses immensely on popularizing the Indian Knowledge System which is crucial for meeting future challenges to reach the ‘Viksit Bharat 2047’ goal.

Folktales and myths serve as reservoirs of ancient wisdom. However, as mentioned earlier, these stories issue warnings to mankind; emphasizing on modifying behavioural patterns and adapting to social change. In present times, the loss of human values can be attributed to increasing materialism in a rapidly globalizing Indian society. Also, people negotiate ethics with a demonic desire for wealth, fame and power. Therefore, moral teachings of the past come to the rescue in the form of such warning tales .

As these didactic tales that give so much of importance to human virtue and goodness are a part of religious scriptures, then the warning issued by these stories will be taken seriously. The mythological story of “Bhasmasura and Mohini’ taken from the Puranas illustrates the idea that egoistic abuse of power can turn a divine boon into an abrupt and a dangerous curse. After performing the most austere form of ‘tapas’, Lord Shiva was pleased with him and bestowed him with a boon that became a representative of the power dynamics that exists between the Devas and the Asuras. Accordingly, he could use Mahadev’s blessings to turn any living being and individual to ashes by just touching their head. In no time, he started chasing Shiva so that he could test his boon and use his newly acquired power to turn Shiva into ashes. In doing so, he showed ingratitude by betraying the god who empowered him. Instead of using his power in a constructive manner, he revels in pride to destroy the divine being who bestowed him with immense strength. Further, Lord Vishnu approaches him by taking on the form of Mohini, a

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beautiful woman. Through her dance moves, she lures him to place his hand on his own head and he is burnt down and reduced completely to ashes.(Hallegua 34-35)

The story can be explored through the feminist angle to throw light on the intellectual prowess of the feminine mind. As Lord Vishnu's god- like masculinity lacks the womb, he was rendered helpless. Therefore, his shape shifting to a woman's body to dance/fight Bhasmasura shows that the womb is the storehouse of fertility, creativity and imagination. The productive life force of the woman's bosom is the source of feminine energy and it also gives birth to creative ideas which destroys the superhuman powers of Bhasmasura.

The myth of Bhasmasura also runs parallel with Indian political power structures-controlling, authoritative and dictatorial. Although this mythological tale is a story of the past, it is relevant even today because the power- hungry nature of modern-day political leaders exposes their evil intentions. The following lines by Hallegua, a critic, present Valmiki's notions of a perfect leader who plays a great role in building an ideal society:

“... Valmiki contemplates the severity of social discipline (which) increases towards the summit: those who have greatest power must practice the greatest restraint, partly because noblesse oblige as such austere discipline is the necessary condition without which power would rapidly melt away.” (11)

The morally depraved rulers, at the summit, do not contemplate about their responsibilities instead they impose harsh laws on the people. So, according to Valmiki's point of view and also interpreting their behaviour in terms of the Bhasmasura myth; their downfall is imminent. Further, modern day surveillance initiated by the government, corrupt practices and exploitative patterns of the present- day politicians lead to mass public protests and anarchy. The collective strength of the whole nation represents Mohini, the life-force or the power that burns down the excessive pride of Bhasmasuras who think no end of themselves. Moreover, the intelligence of the Indian population harnessed in the vaults of ancient wisdom and flowing like rivers of knowledge through the present education system gives minds of the youth a clear direction so that they can overthrow such tyrannical rulers.

In the present- day world, human dependence on Artificial Intelligence (AI) may erase traditional knowledge, concrete value systems along with human thinking capacity and creativity. Artificial Intelligence is a boon to mankind but governments are misusing this powerful tool to emerge as a technological superpower and dominate the world. Similarly, the Bhasmasura fear of reducing whole nations to ashes by unleashing the power of nuclear weapons is also threatening the world.

To conclude, myths and folklore of India prescribe codes of conduct and build a strong value system to strengthen the social fabric of society. These fascinating tales of ancient wisdom ignite in every individual the joy of learning by blending the past with the present drawing up on a great futuristic vision.

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