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## Concept of myths in vedas

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### Abstract

Yaska's Nirukta (BC 700-500) is an ancient treatise on etymology in which he interprets the words of Vedas. He explains synonyms, obscure words and names of Gods and establishes the meaning of Vedas and helps to understand the important Vedic myths contained in the arthavādas. The Aitihasika's different from the Nirukta's interpreted the Vedic myths in terms of historical personalities and historical incidences.

**Keyword:** Vedic Myths, arthavāda, etymology, mythology, adibautika

### Introduction

Indra and Vrtra were historical persons and their fight was real. Sāyana who lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. AD gave a sacrificial mental interpretation of Vedas. According to him Mantras are meaningfull. He also gave a three tier interpretation to the vedic gods and the myths accompanied. The ādibhautika, ādidaivika and ādhyātma. These are partially based on etymology, nature and rituals of Yagas. The Brhaddevatā of Śaunaka collected myths of Vedas and interpreted them on traditional lines.

The Brāhmanas place vedic narratives in a ritualistic context while Upaniṣads below on them the philosophical depth. Ithihāsas and Purānas continued to develop the myths and made new reinterpretations.

### Modern studies of Indian Myths

One of the earliest studies of Indian myths was conducted by Charles Coleman. He published "Mythology of the Hindua" in 1832 from London. At about the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c. Wilkins wrote his. "Hindu Mythology Vedic Puranic" from Culcutta. Wilkins was followed by Cox, by his work "Mythology of the Aryan Nations" in which he followed the method of etymology and interpreted Indian myths as nature myths. Max Muller was the leader of the Nature myth school and was interested in comparative mythology, By the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. a.a. Macdonell's "Vedic Mythology" (1915) and Faushall's "Hindu Mythology according to the Mahabharata" were important contributions to the study of Myths in India. Donald Mackenzic is another writer who authored "Hindu Gods and their Myths". His work "Myth of Pre-columbian America" published from London attracted Mythologists. He uses etymology as a tool in understanding myths. Etymology and Nature-myth interpretations as upheld by Max Muller had much influence on later Sanskrit Scholars.

According to this type of interpretation Pāndu the father of Pāndava brothers of Mahābhārata was explained as the pale sun and Duryodhana was interpreted as the sun in the winter season Draupadi, who was also called Krishna was understood as dark earth and Draupadi's dress that was taken from her body was the barren earth in the winter season.

A new generation of Mythologists equipped with anthropology and ethnology criticized the theory of Max Muller. They held the view that a myth should be studied is its entirety. A myth is a point of faith for the people whose tradition natured it. G.J. Held pointout that people believed in the myth as a whole and not in its naturalistic substraction. He believed that myths are related to rituals. And they transport us not to an imaginary world but to the spot were the rites are celebrated. But Sanskrit Scholars continued to follow the lead of Max Muller.

Andrew Lang studied the "Hindu Myths" and attempted to interpret their meanings. He mentions the myths of Prajapati running after his daughters and discusses the relation between the father and the daughter. Lang objects to the nature based interpretation of myths.

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He mentions Urvashi and Pururavas and remarks that the essential part of the myth is the custom of married woman. He focused the attention on the departure of Urvashi when her husband violated the promise according to which he was not to be seen without cloth on his body. He also points out that myth has its roots in R̥gveda, it is elaborated in the śatapathabrāhmaṇa and it is retold with new implications in the Purāṇa.

J. Gonda, in “Aspects of early Vishnuism” compares Indian myths with Chinese myths and points out to a Chinese parallel in the Indra – Vrtra myth. The origin of the rain in the R̥gveda myth is connected with the dragon (Serpent). He also compared this with the myth of Vishṇu sleeping on a serpent. Gonda’s approach in myths takes care of ethnological, archeological and the etymological evidence and illustrates the method of scholars working in the wider field to find out the meaning of myths. This includes also the interpretation other than the naturalists, historical and sociological explanation and uses new insights into the structure and function of myths in archaic societies gained by scholars outside the field of Sanskrit.

In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. two types of myths were suggested by G.W. Cox primary myths and secondary myths. Primary myth is the very first story of a particular phenomenon, when the original etymological meaning is lost. Secondary myth is set when old epithets became new independent names, each giving rise to its own story. This division of Cox was based on etymology and nature – myths. According to S.A. Dange, we could classify myths as (i) pseudo myths; (ii) myths and (iii) meta-myths. A pseudo myth could be taken as one which is in a very cryptic form. A myth in many cases has the form of a metaphor. This is seen mainly in nature myths and when it is tinted with allegory. These are potential myths or parts of myths which could be developed into full myth but not done so in the tradition. About a regular myth no question and no discussion is necessary, as there is a regular and connected story. Metamyth is a term which could be applied in such myths as have been fashioned on earlier myths but with a change in the main characters. For example according to Dange, Brahmadeva is a myth shaped in the fashion of the Prajāpati myth.

Kirk attempted a classification of myths. According to him myths are mainly of three types (i) Primary narrative and entertaining (ii) operative literature and valedictory (For e.g. the arthavādas of vedic tradition) and (iii) speculative and explanatory. In the first type he included myths dealing with the names of places, myths about the reversal of the course of the sun and the beginning and the end of seasons. In the second type he includes accounts of geneology. The last type of myths named speculative by him include myths regarding creation, about specially sacred places, about the life after death and such other topics.

Joseph Campbell, also has offered a classification of myths which is (i) Mystical, myths of this type dwell on the wonder about the Universe and ultimately enter the sphere of the holy, (ii) Cosmological (iii) Sociological, where myths explain to support the social order and (iv) Pedagogical, where the aim of myths appear to be to teach how best to lead the life. A further and matter of fact classification would be as suggested from Kirk, again (i) Myths of the Gods and the early history of man; (ii) The heroes; and such other topics. Such a classification restricts myths to God’s Tales. This is not according to the modern concept of myth. This impression from the study of Greeks had no myths beyond the tales of Gods and heroes. A large area of mythology is left out here.

Another example is of W.D.O. Flaherty (1975; “Hindu Myths”, Penguin) who presents the myths of Prajāpati, Brahma, Indra, Agni, Rudra, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devi, Gods and demons though her study is multi-pronged, in the myth about Reṇuka. She interprets that cutting of her head is an expression of sexual tension in the husband.

According to S.A. Dange, the characteristics of a Purāṇa in the Hindu traditions, namely creation, counter creation, dynastic description, various eras and exploits of the persons of various families have a general correspondence to the description of cosmogony, hero’s exploits and so on as desired in the mythological studies. Dange has explored the myths connected with Devi and Demon Mahisha and noted the meaning of sexual element, killing and gain which are also related to fertility rites. He also notes that myths of Demons like Dhundu, Karnata etc. indicate seismic change or formation of geographical region. According to him some myths which relates creation and vegetation could be named as vegetation and fertility myths”.

### Conclusion

Before concluding this paper, which generally introduces the major trends in the interpretation of myths, the contributions of V. Propp, also should be mentioned. Propp. Was a great scholar of Russian Folk tales and he tried to find out the underlying structure of the tales- mainly the structure of the plot. He found out that structure which he claimed universal based on the analysis of the functions of characters in the tale their sequence. According to him the tales are constructed by a limited number of functions of characters occurring repeated in variable sequences.

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