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Myths are a projection of existence and an expression of the human condition. The truth in myth is not to be found in establishing its historical validity but in its illustration of something true about the human condition; that is, when it represents the true spirit of the human consciousness seeking to understand the world. The reappearance of certain themes of friendship, fidelity, courage and politics of victory of good over evil explain the universality and relevance of mythical truths (though they are bound by time and context).

Myths also encourage people to accept both, the pleasurable and the painful aspects of life, to affirm life through a creative impulse, no matter what. For generations, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have continued to dominate Indian tradition dominated by Hindu sensibilities. While books of popular literature reiterate and distort the rhetoric of pluralism for entertainment and commercial value, texts like *Harivamsha* translated by Bibek Debroy may be useful as a primary text for acquainting oneself with the epic. Yet, its limitation is that it only makes a case for nostalgia and uncritical approach towards tradition.

Books like Shubha Vilas' *The Chronicles of Hanuman* that compile all depictions of Hanuman in Vedic as well as folk tales too makes a call for a nostalgic return to tradition as it aims to glorify the heroism of the Hanuman and openly claims to leave out all versions that may dishonour the divine personality of Hanuman. In contrast, Mandrakranta Bose's *The Ramayana in Bengali Folk Paintings* is an example of healthy, creative and natural energy that myths provide to human communities. The book is a retelling of the popular mythology through the folk art of Bengal. The author takes us through the history of the art of *patas* or *patachitras* and the history of this artist community. The book details the painting tradition and thus helps understand the reception of the

ancient tale of *Ramayana* among the rural subaltern. Legend revisited through folk songs and paintings, thus, are explained as a journey into 'empathy with the disempowered people of the world'. The book is well documented, beautifully illustrated and the songs and paintings explained in most accessible manner. The book very interestingly makes a case for multiple versions of *Ramayana* as it explains how certain popular episodes of the epic have not been illustrated.

Though it follows the general narrative, the artisans have their own version as famous episodes such as Rama's killing of Vali, the Ayodhyakanda and scheming of Rama's banishment by Manthara and Kaikeyi have been completely left out from the narratives. If this is understood as an intent to glorify Rama's virtuous self and gloss over incidents that discredit Rama then it is difficult to understand why the *patas* highlight Rama's repeated humiliation of Sita. The book makes a case that the accounts on the *patas* are fascinating precisely because of these departures from Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

The paintings are illustrative of the socio political and ethical concerns of the subaltern. The visual and song medium involves the spectator in away that the epic is collectively enjoyed, yet the viewer remains distant creating an emotional and ethical totality of communication.

Arshia Sattar's *Uttara: The Book of Answers* is an interesting retelling of the Uttara Kanda, which is perhaps the most problematic part of seven books that comprise the Valmiki *Ramayana*. The author's depiction of the Lakshmana, Ravana and Rama are interesting as significant events are dramatised in a way that grapples with the theme of finitude of the Gods as well as core questions of ethics concerning free will, pre destination.

Ravana is doomed by a series of curses, Rama banishes his beloved Sita because he is persuaded by town gossip that a good man would not take back a wife who had lived in the house of another man; Rama kills

HINDU MYTHOLOGY

A thin line between epic and reality



■ **Uttara: The Book of Answers**
■ **By: Arshia Sattar**
■ **Publisher: Penguin**
■ **Pages: 286; Price: 499**

■ **The Chronicles of Hanuman**
■ **By: Shubha Vilas**
■ **Publisher: Om Books International**
■ **Pages: 278; Price: 350**

■ **Yuganta**
■ **By: Irawati Karve**
■ **Publisher: Orient Black Swan.**
■ **Pages: 217; Price: 195**

■ **The Ramayana in Bengali Folk Paintings**
■ **By: Mandakranta Bose**
■ **Publisher: Niyogi Books**
■ **Pages: 138; Price: 795**

■ **The Harivamsha**
■ **Translated by Bibek Debroy**
■ **Publisher: Penguin**
■ **Pages: 441; Price: 599**

Shambuka, a low-caste man practicing austerities that are above his station, in order to secure the health and well-being of the Brahmins in his kingdom; Rama is reunited with his sons, whom he now believes to be his legitimate heirs, at the sacrifice that he conducts, the same sacri-

ifice at which he loses his wife forever; Rama watches over the voluntary death of his devoted brother Lakshmana who submits to the curse of the sage Durvasa.

Thus, *Uttara* is interesting for noticeable difference in the narrative that is driven by transgressions of women and lower castes

and one is forced to read the epic backwards or in retrospect in order to get answers to questions on love, fidelity, good, evil, ethical duties that may redefine our morality of contemporary times. Thus, Sattar's commentary particularly plays an important part as it revisits traditional

retellings through contemporary sensibilities.

Her retelling Sita's banishment is particularly interesting as it makes a case for an alternative view, that is, Sita wasn't banished at all, she chose to leave an oppressive patriarchal society that had robbed her of her digni-

ty. Interpretations such as these, make it possible to enter the traditional universe of *Ramayana* and relate it to our own world.

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of the Epoch* similarly presents a fascinating case of humanity (rather than spectacles) as the driving force of narratives. First published in Marathi in 1969, the book has been reprinted several times and translated in English because of its relevance. The book is a series of essays on the epic *Mahabharata* and each one depicts the main players in the epic tale, focusing on the fascinating and mesmerizing impact of the major events of the epic.

The book highlights the reason we still find ourselves enchanted by episodes such as Yudishtara gambling away his kingdom, his brothers, his self and his wife, or as Arjuna sits in between armies and refuses to fight his cousins.

Discussions include the inconsistencies and faults in Bhishma's reputation for wisdom and descriptions of his unwise actions; Kunti as the best example of Kshatriya in the epic and Karna as the implant of an older, now-replaced pantheon; the burning of the Khandava forest; the evolution of Krishna from a man into a god; and Draupadi's defiance of wanting to argue the law in the King's court. *The end of epoch* is significant as it judges the period as unique, with its end came the end of an epoch and values, gods and literature came to be understood completely differently.

The author makes her point by contrasting it with attitude of people in *Mahabharata* and later periods of Brahmin orthodoxy by raising questions like: How the of pedagogy critical thinking came to be replaced by the *guru-shishya parampara* and how the legacy meat eaters (including beef eaters) find satisfaction in ritually drinking the urine of cow and calling the animal their mother?

These questions are most relevant in contemporary context of growing intolerance and positivist historicising of mythology that has made myths less relevant and its role of providing ethical creativity impossible.