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Myths and Nationalism: The Use of Myths in Nationalist Movements in Pre- and Post-Independence India

Abstract

This paper examines the significant role that myths have played in shaping and advancing nationalist movements in India, both pre-and post-independence. Myths, often rooted in ancient epics, regional legends, and religious narratives, have been used by nationalist leaders to foster a sense of shared identity, unity, and resistance against external domination. During British colonial rule, figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar invoked myths to create symbols of resistance and portray India as a unified, eternal civilization. Post-independence, the mythic narrative has continued to shape Indian nationalism, although its usage has become more contested considering contemporary Hindu-nationalist movements. This paper explores how myths have served both as tools of political mobilization and as vehicles for shaping national identity, while also discussing their potential for exclusionary politics. The paper further delves into the complexities of myth-making in a diverse and pluralistic society like India, where competing mythologies are employed to define the nation's character.

Keywords: Nationalism, Indian-Myths, Colonialism, Post-Independence Nationalism, Indian-Identity, Mobilization.

Introduction

Nationalism is a complex and multifaceted ideology that has been a significant force in the modern history of many nations, including India. It often draws upon historical narratives, symbols, and myths to unite disparate groups, provide a shared identity, and legitimize political goals. In India, the role of myths in shaping and advancing nationalist movements has been profound. These myths, both ancient and contemporary, have been selectively invoked to create a national consciousness that resonates with the collective memory of the people. The Indian nationalist movements, particularly in the colonial era, skilfully used myths to galvanize people against British colonial rule, while post-independence, myths have continued to play a role in shaping national identity. This paper explores the relationship between myths and nationalism in India, focusing on how myths have been used by nationalist movements to create a cohesive national identity and mobilize political action.

The Role of Myths in Shaping National Identity

Myths have been instrumental in forging India's national identity by transcending their mythological roots to become cultural, philosophical, and political cornerstones. Derived from ancient texts such as the *Vedas*,

Upanishads, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Jataka-Tales* and so on, these narratives encapsulate timeless values, offering a shared moral and symbolic framework that unites India's diverse population.

Central to India's collective imagination, myths like those of Rama, Krishna, and Durga function as archetypes of ideal behaviour, cosmic order, and resistance to injustice. These figures, immortalized in festivals, rituals, and folk traditions, foster a sense of belonging and continuity. Moreover, their regional reinterpretations, such as the *Ramayana's* countless versions across states and communities, underscore India's pluralistic ethos, harmonizing local identities within a broader national narrative.

"Myths are traditional stories that convey cultural values, collective memories, and ideals. They often explain the origins of a people, the nature of their relationships with the divine, and their destiny. In the context of India, myths have played an essential role in defining the nation's collective identity. The mythic narratives drawn from Hindu epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as other regional legends, were pivotal in framing the idea of a unified Indian civilization. These myths, whether based in historical reality or not, have been instrumental in fostering a sense of shared cultural heritage that transcends regional and linguistic differences."¹

Historically, myths have acted as

reservoirs of inspiration during critical junctures, including India's independence movement. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi employed the allegory of the *Bhagavad Gita* to frame the struggle against colonial rule as a dharmic battle, resonating with the populace's spiritual and ethical sensibilities. This mythological framework imbued the nationalist discourse with profound moral authority, linking political resistance with spiritual duty.

"During the colonial period, when India was subjected to British rule, nationalist leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai began invoking these ancient myths to construct an image of India as a glorious, united civilization. Tilak, for example, used the figure of 'Shivaji Maharaj,' the 17th-century Maratha king, as a symbol of resistance against foreign domination. Shivaji, often mythologized as a warrior king who fought against Mughal tyranny, became an icon of nationalist struggle. His legend was not only a historical recount of his achievements but also a symbol of India's strength and the fight for sovereignty."²

Furthermore, myths were central to the formulation of the idea of an "eternal India," a civilization with ancient roots that could provide a sense of continuity and identity despite the trauma of British colonialism. This myth of eternal India was leveraged by leaders like "Vinayak Damodar Savarkar," who in his seminal work, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* called upon the mythic and

historical legacy of India to define a Hindu-centric nationalism. He argued that "the shared myths and cultural practices of Hindus formed the backbone of Indian national identity."³

In modern India, myths continue to influence national identity through their reinterpretation in literature, cinema, and digital media, ensuring their relevance in contemporary contexts. These narratives shape public memory, cultivate patriotism, and articulate India's unique civilizational identity on the global stage. They also serve as tools for fostering cultural diplomacy, showcasing India's heritage as both ancient and evolving.

Ultimately, India's myths are not static tales of the past but dynamic forces that continually redefine the nation's identity. By bridging the traditional and the modern, the local and the universal, they provide a cohesive yet adaptable framework for India's unity in diversity.

Myths as Decolonization

Myths have played a profound role in India's decolonization process, functioning as tools of cultural assertion and political resistance. During the colonial era, British authorities sought to delegitimize Indian traditions, portraying them as backward and superstitious. In response, Indian leaders, reformers, and thinkers turned to the nation's rich mythological heritage to counter these narratives, reassert cultural pride, and mobilize the masses in the fight for independence.

1. Myths as a Source of National Unity and Identity :

"Indian mythology, especially the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, became central to fostering a collective identity. These texts, deeply ingrained in the cultural consciousness, were repurposed to inspire resistance against colonial oppression. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, for instance, used the Bhagavad Gita to advocate for selfless action (*karma yoga*), urging Indians to fulfill their duty to the nation with courage and determination."⁴ The Gita's message of righteous warfare resonated with the political struggle, aligning spiritual ideals with the need for active resistance.

Tilak also revived public Ganapati festivals to promote unity among diverse communities. These festivals, rooted in mythological traditions, became platforms for political discourse and collective action, bypassing colonial restrictions on gatherings. By connecting the freedom movement to cultural and religious practices, Tilak ensured widespread participation and fostered a sense of shared heritage.

2. Bharat Mata: Myth as a Symbol of Nationhood

"The emergence of Bharat Mata (Mother India) as a national symbol exemplifies the transformative use of mythology in the decolonization process. Depicted as a goddess embodying the nation, Bharat Mata became a unifying figure transcending religious and regional divides. This mythological representation of India emphasized its sacredness, invoking devotion and inspiring self-sacrifice for the cause of independence."⁵ The figure of Bharat Mata not only

mobilized emotional and spiritual support but also countered colonial depictions of India as fragmented and subservient.

3. Myths as a Counter-Narrative to Colonial Hegemony

"Indian intellectuals used myths to challenge the epistemological dominance of colonial rule. The British often dismissed Indian knowledge systems as irrational, positioning Western ideas as superior. Thinkers like Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghose reinterpreted myths to highlight the philosophical depth and universal relevance of Indian traditions. Vivekananda's speeches, drawing on mythological themes, presented India as a spiritual leader capable of offering solutions to the materialist crises of the West."⁶ Similarly, Aurobindo's writings emphasized the cosmic significance of Indian myths, portraying them as repositories of timeless truths that could guide humanity.

By reclaiming and reinterpreting these myths, Indian intellectuals challenged colonial narratives that sought to undermine the legitimacy of Indian culture. They argued that Indian mythology was not mere folklore but a sophisticated body of knowledge reflecting profound spiritual and ethical insights.

4. Mobilizing the Masses through Mythological Narratives

Myths were particularly effective in mobilizing ordinary people, many of whom were deeply rooted in oral traditions and cultural practices. Leaders used familiar mythological stories to

simplify complex political ideas and inspire grassroots participation in the freedom movement. For instance, the image of Lord Rama in the *Ramayana* symbolized the victory of good over evil, reinforcing the moral imperative to fight against colonial injustice. The tale of Krishna in the *Mahabharata*, urging Arjuna to rise above despair and fulfill his duty, became a metaphor for the courage needed to resist oppression.

The accessibility of these narratives ensured that they resonated across social and linguistic boundaries, fostering solidarity among diverse groups. Mythological themes were also incorporated into art, theater, and literature, further spreading their impact, and sustaining the momentum of the independence movement.

5. Psychological Decolonization through Myths

Beyond political resistance, myths played a crucial role in psychological decolonization. Colonial rule had instilled a sense of inferiority among Indians, undermining their confidence in their cultural heritage. By reviving and reinterpreting myths, Indian leaders restored pride in indigenous traditions and reinforced the idea that India's past held the keys to its future. Myths served as reminders of the nation's enduring strength and resilience, countering the cultural alienation imposed by colonial education and governance.

Myths were not merely cultural artifacts but dynamic instruments of resistance and renewal in India's

decolonization process. They provided a framework for reclaiming identity, fostering unity, and challenging colonial narratives. By invoking the power of myth, Indian leaders and thinkers bridged the gap between tradition and modernity, transforming age-old stories into symbols of hope, courage, and liberation. These efforts ensured that the struggle for independence was not just political but also cultural and psychological, laying the foundation for a post-colonial India rooted in its own heritage.

Myths in Post-Independence Nationalism

In post-independence India, nationalism was significantly shaped by myths that served as tools for unifying a diverse population, legitimizing political authority, and fostering a sense of identity. However, these myths often oversimplified history and marginalized certain groups and perspectives.

"The role of myths in post-independence India is also significant, though the context has changed. After 1947, Indian nationalism had to contend with the challenges of integration and nation-building, especially in a country that was culturally and ethnically diverse. Myths continued to be a powerful tool for creating a cohesive national identity. The leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized the myth of Indian civilization as an inclusive and progressive entity, one that had made significant contributions to world history. This mythic narrative was crucial in

fostering a sense of pride in India's rich cultural heritage, while also presenting a modern vision of India as a democratic, secular nation"⁷

1. Myth of Unity in the Freedom Struggle

A dominant myth in Indian nationalism is the idea of a united, collective struggle against British colonialism. This narrative highlights leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru while downplaying the diversity of movements and ideologies, such as the revolutionary activities of Bhagat Singh or Subhas Chandra Bose's armed struggle. Additionally, regional, and communal contributions are often overlooked, marginalizing the roles of women, Dalits, and tribal communities.

2. Myth of Secularism

India's post-independence identity was rooted in the myth of secularism, emphasizing unity in diversity. The idea of India as a land where multiple religions coexist peacefully was promoted to counter communal divisions. While this was essential for nation-building, it often ignored underlying communal tensions. For instance, the Partition of India and its aftermath, including violence and displacement, were overshadowed by the idealized vision of harmony.

3. Myth of Economic Progress

Post-independence India projected the myth of self-reliance and economic progress under the Nehruvian model of planned development. This narrative celebrated large-scale industrial

projects and land reforms as symbols of modernity and progress. However, it often ignored the struggles of marginalized communities, such as farmers and labourers, who faced displacement and economic hardships.

4. Myth of a Homogenized National Identity

The creation of a singular Indian identity, often centered on the Hindi language and North Indian culture, marginalized regional and linguistic diversities. Movements like the anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu highlighted resistance to this homogenization. Tribal and indigenous identities were similarly overlooked in the national narrative.

5. Myth of Non-violence as the Sole Strategy :

The narrative that India's freedom was won purely through non-violent resistance overlooks the contributions of revolutionary movements and armed struggles. This myth served to legitimize the Congress Party's leadership but erased the complexities of the independence movement. However, "in more recent years, especially with the rise of Hindu nationalist movements, the role of myths has become more contested. Groups associated with the "Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)" and the "Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)" have appropriated ancient myths to promote a vision of India as a Hindu nation. The myth of "Ram Rajya", or the rule of Lord Rama, is one such example. The Ramayana, as a central text in Hindu mythology, has been used to propagate

an idealized image of governance and morality. This has, however, led to debates about the exclusionary nature of such a vision, particularly for non-Hindu minorities in India.⁸ While these myths were instrumental in fostering national unity and pride, they also simplified India's diverse and complex history. Recognizing and addressing these oversights is crucial for building a more inclusive and equitable understanding of India's post-independence identity.

Myths as a tool of Mobilization

Myths have historically served as powerful tools of mobilization, uniting people through shared narratives, values, and aspirations. These symbolic stories often transcend mere entertainment, becoming vehicles for collective identity and action. Myths provide frameworks through which communities understand their past, define their present, and envision their future, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. A key aspect of myths as mobilizing tools lies in their ability to simplify complex realities. By distilling historical events or abstract ideals into relatable and emotionally charged narratives, myths create a shared worldview. For example, the American Dream myth has inspired generations to strive for success and personal liberty, motivating individuals, and communities to overcome adversity in pursuit of a better life.

Furthermore, "myths often invoke a sense of moral urgency. They present heroes and villains, struggles, and triumphs, emphasizing values such as

justice, freedom, or resilience. This emotional resonance galvanizes collective action, as seen in the French Revolution, where myths of equality and fraternity energized widespread political change.⁹ In modern contexts, political and social movements harness myths to mobilize support. Nationalism frequently relies on myths of a glorious past or a shared destiny to unify diverse populations. Similarly, environmental movements invoke myths of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature to inspire action against climate change.

However, "myths can also be divisive or manipulative, as seen in propaganda or extremist ideologies. Their power lies in their ability to shape perceptions and behaviours, for better or worse. Recognizing the influence of myths is crucial to understanding how they mobilize individuals and societies, shaping not actions but also identities and aspirations. Ultimately, myths are not just stories; they are dynamic forces capable of rallying people toward common goals or struggles."¹⁰

"The use of myths in nationalist movements often goes beyond mere cultural symbolism; it becomes a powerful tool for mobilizing the masses. By invoking popular myths, nationalist leaders could tap into deep-seated emotions, creating a collective sense of unity and purpose. The image of a once-mighty India, which had been subjugated by foreign invaders and colonizers,

resonated with the aspirations of a people seeking independence."¹¹

"The most famous example of the use of myth for nationalist mobilization in colonial India is the celebration of 'Durga Puja' and the 'Ganesh festival'. Under the leadership of 'Bal Gangadhar Tilak,' these festivals were transformed into massive public events that fostered unity and a sense of nationalism. Tilak recognized the power of these religious festivals as a platform for political mobilization. Durga, the warrior goddess, symbolized resistance against oppression, and the Ganesh festival became a celebration of India's struggle for freedom, where nationalistic fervour could be openly expressed. These festivals, originally religious in nature, became tools to bring people together across caste and regional lines in a common political cause."¹²

"The Idea of "Akhand Bharat" (undivided India) was also perpetuated through myths, with the assertion that India, as a civilization, had always been one unified entity, even before the advent of the British. This notion was tied to the myth of India's civilizational continuity and the idea that the British had artificially divided the subcontinent. Leaders like 'Subhas Chandra Bose' incorporated these myths in their rhetoric, seeking to inspire a sense of pride in a unified India and to rally the population against the British Empire"¹³

Conclusion

The use of myths in Indian

nationalist movements has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, myths have helped create a sense of shared identity and purpose, uniting a diverse and fragmented population in the struggle for independence. On the other hand, myths have also been used to justify exclusionary ideologies and divisive politics. From Tilak's use of Hindu symbols to unite people against British colonialism, to the contemporary use of Hindu myths in political rhetoric, myths have remained a potent force in shaping Indian nationalism. As India continues to evolve, the role of myths in its national consciousness will likely remain an area of tension and negotiation, as different groups seek to define what it means to be Indian.

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