

## The Role of Mythology in Religion: Ramakrishna and the Revival of Mythology–I

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According to Joseph Campbell: ‘All our names and images for God are masks . . . signifying the ultimate reality that by definition transcends language and art. A myth is a mask of God, too—a metaphor for what lies behind the visible world.’<sup>1</sup> In another place Campbell said: ‘The whole function of mythological and ritual instruction is to transform the person who lives for animal ends into one who lives for cultural and spiritual ends. The individual who teaches these aims, these aspects of life—who really teaches them—is one who has experienced them.’<sup>2</sup> Such teachers are what we usually refer to as ‘saints’.

It cannot be mere coincidence that India has both a consistent ability to produce great saints as well as rich and beautiful mythologies. As Campbell indicates, the two are related. Myths are often revealed to saints, but sometimes the saints draw on existing mythology for their inspiration. Then again, they also inspire new mythologies—through their lives or their writings or both. Nāmadeva, Janābai, Tukārām, and other Maharashtrian saints all drew their inspiration from the temple and legends of Vithobā at Pandharpur, but then their own writings and the stories of their lives added new material to the mythological corpus of that temple. Again, Mirabai’s heart and soul were deeply immersed in the stories of Krishna, but she in turn inspired many more stories about her own life and love of Krishna. Moreover, inspired by her life and songs, so many women since then have followed (and still follow) in her footsteps.

We can also give the example of Tulsidas here. He drew his inspiration for his spiritual life from various *Rāmāyana*-s, but then he became inspired to write a new *Rāmāyana*, the *Rāmācharitamānasa*. And this work has, in turn, been the source of inspiration for other saints.

A myth is the story of a person, event, or deed—whether historical or revealed in a sacred manner—that gives an explanation of and/or meaning to life for a group of people. Often the story has such great significance for a group—for example, the story of the Thrice-Blessed Day of the Buddhists—that it is incumbent on the group, as a sacred duty, to remember and celebrate it in some way. And in some cases its remembrance, ritualization, or re-enactment are believed to revitalize the power of the initial event.

Whether the story is historical or not really doesn’t matter. What matters is the significance that the story has for the group, its revelation in the minds of saints, and also the power that the story has to change people’s lives for the better. For instance, whether a historical Rāma actually built a historical bridge to Sri Lanka does not really matter. If that story is revealed in the minds of saints, then it is—on a higher, divine level—true. And if the story of Rāma has the power to inspire people and awaken Godly qualities in them—qualities like compassion, love for all beings, truthfulness, etc.—then it is to be considered sacred. Again, everything connected with that story is sacred also, and is to be honoured, remembered, meditated on, and talked about again and again.

Harry M. Buck, author of a condensed *Rāmāyana* in English, says that one of the functions of retelling or performing a myth is anamnesis, which he translates as 'recollection'. He gives the example: 'At the end of his life, Jesus broke bread in a symbolic act interpreted by Christians to be the inauguration of a sacramental celebration, using these words, "Do this for my anamnesis."' In the English Bible this is often translated, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' However, as Buck says: '... more than simple memory is involved. When the devotee participates in the cultic anamnesis, he causes the redemptive event to happen all over again, as it were, or else you might say that he transcends any temporal barriers that may exist and participates directly in the actions of the deity in his life.'<sup>3</sup>

However, we have to qualify this just a bit. (But I shall shortly qualify this qualifier.) To a great extent, the anamnesis depends on the faith of the devotee participating in or witnessing the re-enactment. Thousands of such re-enactments take place every day all over the world in various religious traditions, but how many people truly receive divine grace from them? Perhaps only a few. For the most part, we can say that only those who have genuine faith in and love for God get any real benefit and can 'participate directly in the actions of the deity'. Yet it is because of these few people—people who can really 'touch' the inner meaning of the ritual or re-enactment—that it continues to retain its redemptive power.

Most religious traditions have rituals and dramas that re-enact sacred moments from their spiritual heritage. In the Jewish tradition, Passover is remembered and celebrated every year when families read aloud the story of this event. And the story of Esther is celebrated every year with folk dramas re-enacting her heroic life.

In the Christian tradition, Christ's birth, life, and death are all celebrated with rituals, oratorios, songs, and plays that re-enact scenes from these events. Again, stories, such

as Mary's appearance to a peasant at Guadalupe in Mexico, are often dramatized and performed by troupes in various places. (And here I am qualifying my qualifier above, as this really vindicates Buck's statement.) Many years ago someone I know was a participant in one of these dramas. And in spite of the fact that, at the time, she was an agnostic and had no faith in the incident that was being dramatized, the power of the drama left her bewildered. Her days as an agnostic were soon over, and she later came to feel that her participation in that drama was something of a joke played on her by the Lord.

In the Hindu tradition also scriptures such as the *Rāmācharitamānasa* and the *Srīmad Bhāgavatam* are often read in public gatherings with songs and commentaries added. In addition, stories from the *Rāmāyana* and the *Bhāgavatam* are regularly enacted in many places of India. The Rām Lilās of Varanasi at the time of Durga Puja and the Krishna Rāslilās of Vrindaban during the monsoon season are especially well known.

In some traditions, mythology implies participation. It is not passive. For instance, children in India are sometimes asked who they identify with in the *Rāmāyana*. One son might be inspired by Rāma, or another by Lakshmana. A daughter might be inspired by Sitā or by Urmilā. Such mythology also aims for 'feeling' the presence of the God or Goddess of the myth, especially by establishing a loving relationship with Him or Her.

To carry this even further, both in the Hindu tradition and in the Christian tradition there are spiritual practices in which the devotee meditates on a scene from the scriptures. Jesuit priests will meditate on an event in the life of Christ and then imagine that they are there with Christ, as his friend and disciple. In this way they share with Christ and the other disciples the joys and sorrows of the various events in Christ's life. Some Vaishnavites also will meditate on a scene from the *Rāmāyana* or *Bhāgavatam*. They

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will imagine that they are a servant or friend or some other person in the divine drama and gradually immerse themselves in a particular scene until they feel that they are actually living that event with Rāma or Krishna. As the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski believed, '... myth is not merely a story to be told, but is a reality to be lived.'<sup>4</sup>

So what happens when an Incarnation of God lives a myth, or participates in a re-enactment of a divine myth? If, when an ordinary devotee re-enacts a myth, the redemptive event can happen all over again, what kind of power is released when a divine Incarnation re-enacts it?

There have been two great saints or Incarnations of God in the Hindu tradition—Chaitanya and Ramakrishna—who took as the basis of their *sāadhanā* the re-enactment of sacred myths. Chaitanya's *sāadhanā*-s were focused almost exclusively on stories of Krishna's life in Vrindaban, while Ramakrishna's *sāadhanā*-s covered various aspects of Hinduism as well as aspects of Christianity and Islam.

We can understand from the biographies of Chaitanya (1486-1534) that the Vaishnava religion was, during his lifetime, waning, especially in Bengal. But his life and *sāadhanā*-s created a huge wave of interest in, and a revival of, that faith—so much so that within 50 years of his passing away Vrindaban and its surrounding areas were transformed from places of relative obscurity to active pilgrimage centres with some of the most beautiful temples in northern India.

Before Chaitanya took *sannyāsa* and renounced the world, he drew a group of devotees around him, and they would often perform plays depicting incidents from Krishna's life. Around the year 1515, several years after taking *sannyāsa*, he went on a pilgrimage to Vrindaban and, through visions, he was able to identify places connected with Krishna's life. He then sent Rupa and Sanatana Goswami there to identify further places and also develop them

into pilgrimage sites. During the last eighteen years of Chaitanya's life, when he lived in Puri, he became so totally immersed in visions of Krishna's *lilā*-s that he hardly had any awareness of the external world around him. He lived and breathed and had his whole being in Krishna's realm.

So, in the case of Sri Chaitanya, what was the result of his constant participation in the re-enactment of this divine myth? But first we might ask, why would he so totally absorb himself in a divine myth—to the point of losing all connection with the external world? What good does it do for someone to be so totally disconnected from this world? This question implies, of course, that everything in this world has to have a practical value. But if we want to look at it in such terms, we can say that his life revealed the secret of divine love, as well as its depth. And this love generated such power—a tidal wave, in fact—that it is felt even today—even in other countries. Inspired by Chaitanya's superhuman love of God, many people have left everything to follow in his path. They have understood that the only thing meaningful in life is to realize divine love. Would that have been possible if he had not lived the life? Another result of Chaitanya's absorption in the mythology of Krishna is that soon after his passing away, his own life became part of the spiritual mythology—a mythology to be meditated on and re-enacted to learn the secret of divine love.

About three hundred years after Chaitanya's passing away, Ramakrishna was born. Due to the Western brand of education that was imposed on Indians at that time, religion again began to wane in India. Many British-educated youths doubted or lost faith in the Hindu religion. Some actively scorned it. Then Ramakrishna appeared—an uneducated idolater. Hardly the kind of person who could shake up a nation, but shake up India he did. Suddenly Hindus were proud to be Hindus. They finally regained faith in their scriptures and

in their gods and goddesses.

From his birth Ramakrishna lived in a world of myth. Both of his parents, Kshudiram and Chandramani, had many visions of gods and goddesses. Before Ramakrishna was born, his parents had to leave Kshudiram's native village, Dere, in West Bengal, when the local landlord filed a false lawsuit against the family and seized their property. Kshudiram could take nothing with him when he left for his new home at Kamarpukur, not even his family deities.

However, it seems his Chosen Deity, Raghuvir, did not want to be deprived of Kshudiram's love and devotion, and soon devised a way to re-enter the new household at Kamarpukur. Once when Kshudiram was returning home from a trip to another village, he felt tired and decided to rest under a tree. He soon fell asleep, and in a dream he saw the child Rāma pointing to a spot in a nearby field. His complexion was the colour of a blade of new grass. Rāma told him that he was staying there in the field, and asked Kshudiram to take him home. When Kshudiram awoke, he recognized the field nearby to be the one Rāma was pointing to in his dream, and he went to investigate. At the spot Rāma was pointing to, he saw a sacred *shālagrāma shilā* (a stone symbol of Vishnu) with a cobra coiled up next to it, spreading its hood over the stone.<sup>5</sup> Without any fear of the snake, Kshudiram grabbed the stone, and after examining it, found that it had the sacred markings of Raghuvir (Rāma) on it. Overjoyed, Kshudiram took the *shālagrāma* home and began worshipping it. It is worshipped even now in the family shrine at Kamarpukur.

Shitalā was another deity whom Kshudiram adored. It is said that he often had visions of this goddess in the form of a small child. Early in the morning, when he would go out to prepare for his daily worship, she would sometimes accompany him and help him pick flowers.

So this was the religious atmosphere in which Ramakrishna was born and brought

up. Because of these visions and experiences, the whole family felt that there was a special grace bestowed on them by the Lord. For that reason, they realized the sacredness of their religious duties and devotions, and took them seriously.

When Ramakrishna was a child, living at Kamarpukur, he would often put on plays with his friends, as Chaitanya had done, enacting the stories of Krishna or Rāma. Though it may seem that the children were doing it for their amusement, we can understand from Ramakrishna's later life that for him the purpose was probably more to enter the world of Krishna or Rāma—to be part of their *lilā*. This became apparent when he took the part of Shiva in a play on the holy occasion of Shivarātri. Though just a child, he became so absorbed in the thought of Shiva that he lost all outward consciousness. He became fully merged in Shiva, and the stunned villagers realized it. If this doesn't show the purpose of the re-enactment of a divine myth, I don't know what does. Again, he often lost outer consciousness when he performed the worship of the family deities.

Ramakrishna's spiritual *sāadhanā* began in earnest, however, when he started worshipping the Divine Mother Kali at the Dakshineswar temple, near Calcutta. His spiritual zeal was so great that as soon as he began worshipping the Mother, he did it with complete faith that She was a living deity, and he offered himself wholeheartedly to Her. Yet it is significant that, after practising intense austerities to have Her vision and She still had not appeared to him, he began to question Her reality. However, when he questioned it, he was, truly speaking, asking for everyone. 'Art Thou true, Mother,' he said, 'or is it all a fiction of the mind—mere poetry without any reality? If Thou dost exist, why can I not see Thee? Is religion, then, a fantasy, a mere castle in the air?''<sup>6</sup>

But unlike most people who wonder if God really exists and then do nothing to find out, he never quit trying to have Her vision. He, in fact, increased his *sāadhanā* even

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more. At last—when he was literally ready to die for Her vision—he got it. Yet he was not satisfied simply having the vision of Her once. He would not rest until he had the constant vision of Her and could see Her and talk to Her at will. But even then, he was not satisfied until he had proven to himself that his visions were not figments of his imagination. Once, in order to obtain a sign that a certain vision was true, he performed an act of truth, saying ‘If this vision of mine is true, let this rock [which was in front of the *nahabat*] jump three times.’ And the rock actually did it.<sup>7</sup>

Again, most people would have rested on their laurels right then, but he did not. Why? Because he wanted to see God in many forms and in many aspects, and he wanted to love Him in various relationships. In his biography of Ramakrishna, Swami Saradananda raises this question—about why Ramakrishna practised so many *sādhana*-s:

Why did the Master continue practising sadhana even after attaining the constant

presence of the Divine Mother, the Cause of the Universe? An aspirant practises meditation and austerities in order to realize God, but what is the need for sadhana if one looks upon Him as a close relative? . . . We did not hesitate to ask him [Ramakrishna] about it. The Master said in reply: ‘One who lives near the sea sometimes has a desire to find out how many pearls are hidden in the ocean depths. Similarly, after realizing the Divine Mother and being constantly near Her, I thought that I should see Her multiple forms. If I had a desire to see Her in a particular way, I would importune Her with a longing heart. Then the gracious Mother would supply whatever was necessary to experience that form, make me practise that sadhana, and reveal Herself to me accordingly. Thus, I practised sadhanas belonging to various paths.’<sup>8</sup>

It seems also, from other things Ramakrishna said, that the Divine Mother made him practise those *sādhana*-s with a definite purpose: to show the world that they are all true, and that they all lead to the same goal. ■

(To be concluded)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. xvii.
- 2 Joseph Campbell, *The Way of Myth* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), p. 38.
- 3 Harry M. Buck, ‘The Role of the Sacred Book in Religion—The Ramayana’, in *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, ed. By V. Raghavan (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1989), pp. 45-46.
- 4 Magic, Science and Religion; quoted in: David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 170, fn. 20.
- 5 From the mythological perspective, the snake seems to have been a manifestation of Ananta, or Adishesha, the thousand-headed serpent. Vishnu is said to recline on Ananta’s body while the serpent spreads his hoods over Him.
- 6 Swami Nikhilananda, *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1955), p. 69.
- 7 Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. by Swami Chetanananda (St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003), p. 635fn.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 304

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