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INDIA'S NATIONAL WAR OF INDEPENDENCE AND EMOTIONAL MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract:

India's struggle for independence involved a long history of anti-colonial movements and the strategic use of **emotional mythology** to foster national unity and inspire resistance. Historical events, particularly the **Revolt of 1857**, were framed as a unified "national war of independence" to create a collective identity and galvanize public sentiment against British rule. Rooted in reason and guided by science, the modern age, one would imagine, has no place for speculative reflections and metaphysical meanderings, while mythology occupied an important place in ancient cultures as the means of raising questions, setting down moral codes, providing entertainment and more, one may well ask what place it occupies in the modern age. One answer could be that it has had a definite role in guiding the course of history.

In India, myths pervade just about every aspect of culture. From bedtime stories for children's towards used in language, from the arts to performing arts, from religion to politics, mythology rules the roost. Whether it is the nation's name Bharata or political expressions like Ram Rajya, they are all born out the cradle of Indian mythology. Mythological drama Leads the way: Aside from carrying nationalist messages, incidental achievements of mythological drama was the increase in the number of women attending theatre. Playwrights searched for ideas to cloak nationalist messages in a sheath that would elude censorship. Mythology was to be that magic clock. This genre also had also had the advantage of popular appeal. Starting in West Bengal, nationalist theatre soon spread across the nation and was performed to packed audience ranging from commoners to literary and political figures. Impression of Mythology on India's Freedom Struggle had a great impact on National Movement.

Key words: Mythological drama, Nation, Ram Rajya, Culture & Censorship

Introduction:

India's national independence movement was profoundly shaped by the strategic use of **emotional mythology** which helped to forge a unified national identity and inspire mass mobilization against British colonial rule. The Indian independence movement was a series of historic events with the ultimate aim of ending the British rule in India. The movement spanned from 1857 to 1947. The first nationalistic revolutionary movement for Indian independence emerged from Bengal. It later took root in the newly formed Indian National Congress with prominent moderate leaders seeking only their fundamental right to appear for Indian Civil Service examinations in British India, as well as more rights economical in nature, for the people of the soil.

This integration of historical narrative, religious metaphor, and cultural symbols created a powerful, emotional mythology that was instrumental in awakening a sense of national identity and propelling the long struggle for independence. Rooted in reason and guided by science, the modern age, one would imagine, has no place for speculative reflections and metaphysical meanderings, while mythology occupied an important place in ancient cultures as the means o raising questions, setting down moral codes, providing entertainment and more, one may well ask what place it occupies in the modern age. One answer could be that it has had a definite role in guiding the course of history.

In common parlance, the word myth has come to mean an old wife's tale or a generally accepted belief unsubstantiated by fact. However, the etymological origin of the word is from the Greek word mythos, meaning 'word' or 'story'. Traditionally, humans have used stories to describe things that they could not otherwise explain. Ancient myths were stories through which people could assimilate mysteries occurring around them. In this sense, myth was a metaphor.



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This deep-rooted connect between Indian society and mythology was visible during India's Independence movement. From influencing leaders like Gandhi and Tilak to providing themes for artists with nationalist visions, mythology became the guiding force of history. Nowhere else was it more visible than in the realm of the theatre, where plays centered on myths played a key role in evolving a national identity.

18th Century Theatre in India: The theatre in India is not a new phenomenon. Nor the use of mythological themes, which had been popular since the times of Bhasa and Kalidasa. But during the British period, these themes were recast in imaginative ways to communicate a nationalist message. By the early 1860's the need for public theatres was strongly felt as dramatic performances thus far had been private and irregular. During this time, newspapers advocated the need for theatres to act as vehicles of social reforms. At the same time, new ideas and organizations were taking root, causing a wave of social reforms. These ideas gradually permeated into theaters which became a tool of protest against colonial rule.

Theatre in India under British: Under British colonial rule, modern Indian theatre began when a theatre was started in Belgachia. One of the earliest plays composed and staged during this period was Buro Shalikhher Ghaare Roa (1860) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, both in Bengali. Around the same time, Nil Darpan (1858–59) first commercial production in 1872, by Girish Chandra Ghosh at the national theatre in Calcutta a Bengali play by Dinabandhu Mitra garnered both accolades and controversy for depicting the horror and tragedy of indigo cultivation in rural Bengal, and played a major role in the indigo revolt. Rabindranath Tagore was a pioneering modern playwright who wrote plays noted for their exploration and questioning of nationalism, identity, and spiritualism and material greed. His plays are written in Bengali and include Chitra (Chitrangada, 1892), The King of the Dark Chamber (Raja, 1910), The Post Office (Dakghar, 1913) and Red Oleander (Raktakarabi, 1924).

Kalyanam Raghuramaiah, a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, and the Padmashri, was known for the roles of Krishna or Dushyantha, Bhavanisankar, Narada etc. in Telugu theatre. He performed those roles for about 60 years. He indulged in elaborate raga alapana, based on different ragas while rendering padyams. One of the finest method actors, He had the ability to sing padyams and songs through whistle, by putting his finger in mouth and producing the whistle or flute sound (meaning Eela in Telugu). He has acted in various dramas and gave more than 20,000 stage performances. He was called the "Nightingale of the Stage" by Rabindranath Tagore.

The British believed that the Indian actors were mystical creatures. They believed they brought them luck and prosperity. The emergent modern Indian theater, which is also referred to as Native Theater, features a theatrical approach that has been viewed as an intersection of Indian social space with Western theater formats and conventions. The resulting theatrical space is described to be existing at the material, symbolic, and discursive levels. To resist its use by Indians as an instrument of protest against colonial rule, the British Government imposed the Dramatic Performances Act in 1876.

Nil Darpan was the first public performance, staged by the Calcutta National Theatrical Society on December 7th 1872 in Calcutta, where the nationalist theatre took birth. It was a scathing exposure of the oppression of the impoverished Bengali ryots by the British indigo planters. While local newspapers praised the performance, the English press was not impressed. The performance of the play was ordered to be immediately stopped. In February 1876, an ordinance was promulgated to empower the Government of Bengal to prohibit dramatic performances, that were scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interest. The Dramatic Performances Act, 1876 was thereafter enacted to check the revolutionary impulses of the Indian theatre.

The Role of Emotional Mythology: Nationalist leaders and artists effectively utilized existing cultural and religious frameworks to mobilize the masses in a way that bypassed colonial restrictions on political gatherings. Repurposing epics ancient Indian epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata became central to the nationalist movement. National



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leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak used the Bhagavad Gita's message of *karma yoga* (selfless action) to advocate for duty and courageous resistance against oppression. Symbol of Bharat Mata (Mother India) The personification of India as a goddess, **Bharat Mata**, became a powerful and unifying national symbol. This emotional imagery embodied the nation, making the fight for freedom a sacred duty to protect the motherland. Festivals as political Platforms are leaders like Tilak revived public festivals, such as the Ganapati festivals, as legitimate platforms for political discourse and to promote unity among diverse communities. These events, rooted in mythological traditions, fostered a sense of shared heritage. Art and Literature are the power of words, expressed through various literary forms and theatre, was crucial in awakening nationalist sentiment. Plays centred on myths played a key role in evolving a national identity and preserving the memory of the struggle for future generations.

The Dramatic Performances Act 1876: Under the provisions of the act, the idea of seditious theatre was introduced. It empowered the British administration to control the theatre through restrictions. According to this act, if the Government judged any play to be scandalous, disrupting social values, or felt it might excite feelings of disaffection against the government, the performances would stand prohibited.

In 1876, the British India government passed the Dramatic Performances Act to “prohibit dramatic performances” that were “seditious or obscene, or otherwise prejudicial to the public interests,” “likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India” or “likely to deprave and corrupt persons present at the performance” “According to the Act, which applied to all of British India, the director, actors, and theatre owner and even those in attendance at a play that authorities viewed as subversive were liable to punishment through fine or imprisonment or both. A “public place” constituted any building or space to which the public was “admitted to witness a performance on payment of money.”¹ If the censorship records are any indication, the censors carefully policed performances by recording summaries of the plays, names of playwright/director, venues of performance, and whether the play deserved to be censored, producing, in the process, a detailed record that makes the story of censorship and its implementation in India both tangible and insidious. Despite such attempts at silencing its colonized populace, ongoing theatrical activity that flourished in the late-nineteenth century and continued well into the twentieth century, as anticolonial nationalist activity intensified, shows that the suppression of theatre was a battle that the colonial government never fully won.

The penalty for disobedience was imprisonment for three months or a fine, or both. The government had the right to demand plays for verification and the police could enter, arrest and seize any persons, scenery, costumes and or articles. No public performances were to take place without the sanction of a license.

Following Nil Darpan, other nationalist plays like Bharat Mata, Puru- Vikram, Bharate Yavan, Banger Sukhabasan, Beer Nari had gained immense popularity. But after 1876, there was a lull in theatre activity. Police surveillance made it difficult to present drama that openly attacked colonial rule. At such a time, playwrights searched for ideas to cloak nationalist messages in a sheath that would elude censorship. Mythology was to be that magic clock.

Mythological Motifs bear Nationalist Messages: While the British clamped down on the nationalist theatre, they did not interfere with religious plays. This provided a window of opportunity for play writers. ‘The censor board never listened very carefully to religious/ mythological and historical dramas. Carelessly, it would stamp the play for approval. But it listened to and read social plays very carefully. And sometimes the drama- wallahs also managed to deceive the censor board’. (Ganpat Daangi, an actor in mythological plays a of that time, is reported to have said this).

This genre also had also had the advantage of popular appeal. Starting in west Bengal, nationalist theatre soon spread across the nation and was performed to packed audience ranging from commoners to literary and political figures. Here is a look at some notable mythological plays that rocked the stage.

Vir Abhimanyu: One of the plays that created a stir was Vir Abhimanyu, a prolific writer, Abhhimanyu, son of Arjuna, a character from the Mahabharata, had bravely entered the chakravyuha to fight the battle at Kurukshetra. Although the enemy



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was stronger than him, Abhimanyu fought on, sacrificing his own life for the sake of the cause. It was this plot situation that Kathavachak adapted.

In the play, Shubhadra urges her son to fight and Uttara exhibits a nationalist zeal by sending her husband into the battlefield. There is no such scene in the Mahabharata, but Kathavachak adapted the original story to send out a subtle message to women in the audience. **‘Show me how to use the sword..... I will go to the battle and show my valour,’** Uttara says to Abhimanyu, prompting women to join the fight for freedom. Here is a sample of the opening lines exchanged between the sutradhars that set the tone for the play.

Nati: interests are now changing. There is a tradition of mythological drama. At such a time, we should think about playing a significant drama, along with entertainment, we should also preserve our society and our nation. Nata: is that so? then, to show to the children of India, the pride of India’s brave ones, let’s play Bareilly resident Radheyshyam Kathavachak’s drama Vir Abhimanyu... Let us play Abhimanyu Natak for the benefit of our countrymen. Nati: Abhimanyu? Which Abhimanyu?... In the battle of Mahabharata when the Indian field was being marked with the sacred blood of the brave ones, the one who gave up his life to fulfil the pledge (to his nation) That Abhimanyu. Nata: yes, that Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna... the one who immortalized his name by giving up his life. Let us sing the praises of that brave and powerful one. The lines have a deeper significance. Abhimanyu dies for a cause, and his son Parikshit becomes the king, the message to the viewer’s is that Abhimanyu’s sacrifice did not go waste; it had its reward.

Panchali Sabatham: the use of mythological motifs to whip up nationalist fervor was successful in the South as well. Subramanya Bharati, the great Tamil poet (1882-1921), sought inspiration in the episode of Panchali Sabatham (the Vow of Panchali) in the Mahabharata. His poetic dance-drama of that name conveyed the message of freedom. His Panchali Sabatham was written during his ten-year exile in Pondicherry, now Puducherry.

Let us recall the scene: Dharamaputra lost the kingdom, his brothers and his wife, Draupadi, in a game of dice to his Kaurava cousins. Draupadi is disgraced before the assembly of nobles, Bharatiyar transforms this into a political metaphor. Through selective phrases and symbols, he compares the humiliation of Draupadi to the colonial oppression of India. The victimized Draupadi becomes Bharat Mata and the Kauravas symbolise India’s colonial oppressors. Draupadi is referred to as Amman or Goddess in certain parts of Tamil Nadu, where she is revered as a village goddess. Bharatiyar draws inspiration from this background and consistently relates her to Parasakti or the Supreme Sakti, the all-powerful goddess.

Says Richard Frasca in his paper on the Panchali Sabatham, ‘The drama triggers symbols of impurity and purity to evoke images of political oppression and liberation. As the village goddess Draupadi is restored to a pure, revitalized powerful state through the Terekuttu, so is Draupadi as the image of Mother India in Bharatiyar’s drama restored to a place of pristine power’. This work had such a political impact that it was banned by the British. Hand-copied versions of the work were surreptitiously circulated by the college students.

Bhakta Prahlad: Kathavachak penned several other plays including Bhakta Prahlad based on Vishnu Purana, at one level, the story about Prahlad, who stood up against the tyranny of his father, Hiranyakashipu. At a deeper level, it urged Indians to stand up against the tyranny of the British. Prahlad speaks out openly against oppression and dominance. Just as Vishnu supported Prahlad, Indians, too, could expect divine help in their fight against the mighty British. The play won nation-wide fame and ran to packed audiences.

Kichak Vadha: one of the most dramatic and impactful mythological plays with a national outlook, was Kichak Vadha (slaying of Kichaka, written in 1907 by Krishnji Khadilkar, right-hand of Tilak, editor of the Marathi newspaper Kesari. Drawing inspiration from the Mahabharata and heavily the episode of the killing of Kichaka in the Virata- Parvam of the Mahabharata into allegory of India’s colonial humiliation.



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The story is set in the last year of exile of the Pandavas, during which they are in disguise at the court of king Virata. Kichaka a ministering the King's court attempts to molest draupadi While Yuddhishtira does not influenced by Khadilkar's journalist background, the play went on to have violent repercussions.

Maharashtra's Naradiya Keertana style of one-man ballad recitation and enactment of Mahabharatha stories early in the 20th century impacted the political struggle. The hardas (performer), subtly related contemporary events and personalities, to Mahabharata. Perhaps Khadilkar was influenced by this genre of local theatre when he penned his classic. Performed by the Maharashtra Nataka Mandli in Poona, Khadilkar turned intervene. Bhimais infuriated and kills Kichaka. While at the literal level, the play portrayed the last year exile of the Pandavas at a deeper level, it sent out a strong allegorical message, favoring the approach of the Extremists and mocking at the pacifist approach of the moderates.

Several clues pointed to contemporary political parallels resemblance with Indian National Movement.

- Kichaka represented Lord Curzon, the Viceroy.
- Kichaka's atrocities represented the atrocities of Lord Curzon
- Draupadi represented India/ Bharat Mata.
- Draupadi dishonor represented Mother India's shame under foreign oppressors.
- Yudhishtira the moderate Nationalist like Gokhale
- Yudhishtira restraint symbolized the policy of the moderates
- Bhima represents the extremists who were willing to take extreme measures to win freedom
- Bhima's successful violence implied the ultimate triumph of those who called for revolutionary means.

Lord Curzon's arrogant utterances like, rulers are rulers and slaves are slaves are said to have found direct echoes in the words of kichaka in the play. Fiery speeches by Draupadi and Bhima expressed the popular mood of resentment against British rule.

On January 18, 1890, the Times of India wrote a scathing review of the play referring to its 'most pernicious influence' and calling it an act of sedition. In secret police abstract dated November 13, 1909, a police commissioner writes' there is no doubt that the Deccan audience takes this play as a cleverly veiled incitement to murder European officials. On January 27, 1910 the British banned the play. The banning of the play, more than anything else, indicates how impactful it must have been. One can only admire the creative genius of a writer like Khadilkar, who could visualize in the story of Kichaka , parallels with the Indian freedom struggle.

Mythological drama Leads the way: Aside from carrying nationalist messages, incidental achievements of mythological drama were the increase in the number of women attending theatre. Now with characters like Sita, Subhadra, Uttara and Draupadi taking center stage mythological themes helped that perception to change, and made it respectable for women to attend performances. Impression of Mythology on India's Freedom Struggle had a great impact on Indian National Movement.

Conclusion: Provided a symbol of nationhood, the goddess Bharat Mata was created as a unifying symbol, embodying the nation and connecting it to religious veneration. Similarly, the anthem "**Vande Mataram**" from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel honored both the demon-destroying goddess Kali and Mother India. It is offered a moral and spiritual framework. and Nationalist leaders interpreted religious texts to justify the struggle for freedom. Bal Gangadhar Tilak used the Bhagavad Gita to call for karma yoga to fulfil one's duty to the nation. The concept of swadharma from the Bhagavad Gita was used to emphasize the importance of performing one's duty for the country.

The Indian independence movement was a series of historic events with the ultimate aim of ending the British rule in India. The movement spanned from 1857 to 1947. The first nationalistic revolutionary movement for Indian independence emerged from Bengal. It later took root in the newly formed Indian National Congress with prominent moderate leaders seeking only their fundamental right to appear for Indian Civil Service examinations in British India, as



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well as more rights economical in nature, for the people of the soil. Mythology deeply impressed India's national struggle for independence by providing symbols, a moral framework, and a sense of collective identity that inspired resistance. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak used figures like the goddess Bharat Mata and concepts from the Bhagavad Gita, like the duty of selfless action, dedication to unite people and motivate them against colonial rule. This use of mythology helped unify diverse communities through shared cultural heritage and fostered a spirit of nationalism.

Religious festivals and epics helped create a shared heritage and identity among Indians, bypassing colonial restrictions. Tilak revived the public Ganapati and Shivaji festival, turning it into a platform for political discussion and collective action. Mythological stories from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata helped create a collective consciousness centered around a shared cultural past. Mythological themes provided a narrative of righteous warfare against oppression, inspiring courage and determination. Leaders like Shri Aurobindo called on people to fight for freedom with devotional spirit, the cause of independence and national identity and communicate nationalist visions. Emotion of Mythology on India's Freedom Struggle had a great impact on Indian National Movement. Nationalist leaders and artists effectively re-purposed existing cultural and religious narratives to fuel the independence movement.

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