

The Evolving Narrative of Indian Mythology and Classical Arts

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Abstract

Abstract philosophy is best explained through effective metaphors. Ancient Indian mythology and classical dance are reflective of this; having been integral to the propagation of philosophical thought from one generation to another. Over centuries, both these mediums have simultaneously evolved by virtue of being influenced by the prevalent socio-cultural scene. And the perspectives that we have therein developed reflect our cultural and spiritual evolution.

We trace the evolution of such perspective through the popular tale of Savitri from the Mahabharata. Classical dance is an effective medium to portray the details of the story but is not limited to it. The use of theatrical elements within the framework of classical dance allows the artiste to intersperse dramatization with narratives of philosophy- be it the poetry of Sufi-mystic Rumi or verses from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad; be it the magnum work of Sri Aurobindo in explaining the abstraction of 'Savitri' or the modern philosophy of 20th century thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore. The presentation format of classical dance today has evolved to allow a dialogue between theatre, classical movement and thought. It provides a deeper connect and understanding of the metaphors that these stories signify. By exploring the multitude of opportunities that this provides in delving into ancient wisdom, one is able to present a multi-dimensional vision of Indian mythology to the current generation. And in this juxtaposition of literal and metaphorical, lies our narrative of spiritual growth and cultural identity.

Keywords: Philosophy, Indian mythology, Classical Dance, Savitri, Narrative.

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Introduction

The Ultimate truth is evasive to most. Ancient theologians and philosophers attempted to understand the nature of this evasive truth. Some succeeded and articulated their questions, critiques and commentaries. Scriptures, authors of which may be known or unknown contain within them insights of these great philosophers. Steeped in philosophical significance, these scriptures too remain esoteric to many our understanding.

To be able to grasp the depth of meaning in even a small part of these scriptures is no mean task. Metaphorical descriptions therefore, are an important tool. In safeguarding and protecting to posterity what these great minds have understood, and in disseminating philosophy that the common man might otherwise fail to understand, metaphors have played a significant role in understanding abstract philosophy. In this context, Indian mythology, a predominantly oral tradition of story-telling has traversed several generations as a carrier of philosophical thought. (Fourth Series of the Proceedings of the Friesian School, 2016-17)

While the essence of philosophy was safely encased within the core of these stories, the superficial layers of these stories have gone through much evolution. This is an evolution that is reflective of the evolving socio-cultural and politico-economic norms over time. The form of the story as it stands today is reflective, therefore of our current standing with respect to our cultural and spiritual evolution. We must revel in the current version of the stories as we understand them today. At the same time, to be able to peel back the layers that then reveal the philosophy that is contained within, must be our ultimate endeavour.

And enabling us on this journey of understanding is yet another facet of Indian cultural heritage- the classical arts- music and dance. As a form of temple worship to the presiding deity, the songs sung and danced by the *devadasis* were replete with metaphorical significance. Sadir, as it was known and practiced, evolved with time, travelling from the temple to the courts of kings and then to present day proscenium gaining its current recognition as Bharatanatyam (Soneji. D, 2011). This evolutionary path has also been greatly influenced by the political and cultural changes that the sub-continent has experienced over time. If today, the grammar of Bharatanatyam allows an artiste to explore contemporary thought and subjects like deforestation or climate change, it continues to simultaneously nurture the philosophical core of ancient scripture, music and poetry.

The Story of Savitri

The Story of Savitri first appears in Chapter three of the Vana Parva (Book of Forest) within the grand Epic Tale of the Mahabharata. The Pativrata Mahatmya Parva describes a conversation between the exiled King Yudishtra and Sage Markandeya. "Is there a woman more righteous than Draupadi", asks Yudishtra for in his eyes, Draupadi's virtues were second to none. In reply, Sage Markandeya tells him the story of Savitri.

Born to King Ashwapati and Queen Malavi after much prayers to the Sun God, Savitri was the epitome of grace, beauty and intellect. Accomplished in her

knowledge of literature, arts, administration and warfare, there was no one who equalled her brilliance and humility. At marriageable age, King Ashwapati worries if he can find a match for her. He then asks her to set forth and travel and find a match for herself. Savitri sets off on a journey, accompanied by a friend. She stops by the hermitage of a saint and meets the exiled prince Satyavan, son of Blind king Dyumatsena. They fall in love and Savitri returns to tell her father that she has chosen her partner for life. Sage Narada, prophecies that Satyavan is destined to die within a year and so a marriage now would mean that Savitri would be widowed too soon. Savitri, however, is adamant, and proceeds to marry Satyavan. She gives up her life at the royal palace and lives with the exiled King, Queen and Satyavan in the forest. A year passes by in happy matrimony. As the destined day arrives, Savitri takes on a penance so severe that her austerities would baffle even the most austere of sages. Standing on one leg, for days on end, she would pray to save the life of her husband. But time waits for none- that is the rule of the cosmos. Yama, the Lord of death appears to take Satyavan's life as he is cutting firewood. Savitri's austerities have given her the power to 'see' Yama. He is amused at this power that she has acquired and her ability to follow him. Impressed by her virtuosity, he grants her 3 boons, except the life of her husband. Savitri in her first 2 wishes asks that her exiled parents-in-law be reinstated and that they regain vision. She asks that her parents be blessed with an heir to the throne. As a final boon, she asks that her lineage be prosperous, tricking Yama into blessing her with a child. Yama, in a hurry, agrees and proceeds, only to be stopped by Savitri. He realises that he has been tricked into restoring Satyavan's life. He blesses her for her intelligence, perseverance and love. (Monier Williams, 1868; Ganguli K.M., 2003)

The story of Savitri although initially appearing in text, is one of many tales that have been handed down generations in the oral format of story-telling. With this unique format, the details of the stories may have undergone several changes and many versions of the story abound to this date.

Interpretation

At a very basic level of understanding, Savitri epitomises love and dedication towards her husband and her marriage. The festival of *Karadaiyan Nombu* celebrated in some communities of South India marks the day on which Savitri concluded her penance and worship to the Goddess Katyayani. The rituals and practices followed within this festival mark a woman's prayers for a long married life and for the well-being of her husband.

At another level of understanding, the story of Savitri serves as a template to explore our current understanding of several concepts- destiny, love, sacrifice, wit, etc. The story serves as a template to also juxtapose thoughts and opinions expounded by philosophers far removed by geography and contemporary thinkers. It provides an opportunity to compare the virtues of selfless love as is described in the story with the concept of love as explained by Sufi mystic poet Rumi, for example. Mortal understanding of life and death is limited. In the story Savitri 'fights' Death to save her love. 20th century poet and philosopher, Sri Rabindranath Tagore (1916), explains the duality of life and death in very objective and philosophical terms. Can these concepts be superimposed to lend us a better understanding? An excerpt from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Ch 4.4.5) states the very nature of the Soul and proclaims

that one's deepest driving desire is the root cause of one's destiny. Does this definition tie in with the interpretation of Sri Aurobindo? In his magnum work of this story of Savitri, Sri Aurobindo (1954) dwells on the abstract metaphors that these characters signify. Satyavan signifies the truth of being that has fallen dead to ignorance. Dyumatsena, his father has been blinded by ignorance and has been therefore banished from the kingdom of 'glory'. Ashwapati, Savitri's father is considered to be the King of *Tapasya* or concentrated focussed energy- a meditative state that could lead one onto the path of realisation. 'Savitri' is the divine word and goddess who has descended to save the truth of being.

Classical dance, mythology and metaphors

The story of Savitri has been presented to audiences through performance in the classical idiom of dance. In most cases, the literal and descriptive parts of the story have alone been explored. Beyond the story, the underlying messages and metaphors that the story signifies are as important to showcase in performance. The grammar of Bharatanatyam or any other classical dance form does not limit our potential to showcase these metaphors. At the same time, the aesthetics of explaining and deliberating on the various commentaries in performance must be taken into consideration when attempting to include them into the classical dance format. In this regard, the introduction of theatrical elements within the framework of classical dance has opened up a new dimension to story-telling, narration and exchange of ideas between performer and audience. Even though classical dance is contained within certain parameters that codify it, there is an inherent fluidic nature that allows the performer to explore the added dimensions of theatre and poetry.

Conclusion

Each of these stories are of phenomenal significance in understanding not just abstract philosophy but also to trace the evolution of structured thought and deliberation over centuries. In current times, given that we have the increased ability to search and access these stories in addition to texts, critiques and commentaries, it must be our endeavour to delve deeper into these narratives. It must also be our endeavour to respectfully evolve methods to disseminate what we learn. Be it in the form of classical dance, dance-theatre or yet another unique form, the treasure house of Indian mythology and cultural heritage holds within it much that can be explored. And in our attempt will lie our own journey of spiritual growth and understanding.

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