

Re-reading the Cosmic Myth of Creation and Destruction in Tagore's *Muktadhara*: A Discussion

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Abstract

Mukta Dhara is an abiding testimony to Rabindranath Tagore's celebration of the cosmic myth of creation and destruction. In order to subjugate, Ranajit, the king of Uttarkut builds a huge dam across Mukta Dhara with the help of the brain-strong royal engineer, Bibhuti who is aided by his 'new machine god' that represents modern science, the very antithesis of the will of the benevolent creator. That Rabindranath has conceived of Prince Abhijit in terms Lord Shiva - the destroyer and the preserver - is well borne out by the fact that he breaks the dam at its weak point and frees Mukta Dhara for the people of Shiv Terai, though at the cost of his own life. The tinkling sonorous flow of the emancipated Mukta Dhara that helps Shiv Terai to pulsate with new life is reminiscent of the myth of salvation of the Ganges from the holy lock of Lord Shiva – a fateful release that is believed to yield in fertility of the earth. This paper purports to explore how man's intoxication with and conceited use of 'power' represented by the creation of the dam in the play ultimately destroys creation, which awaits renewal and purgation by bold sacrificial figures like Abhijit.

Keywords: myth, creation, destruction, incarnation, salvation, subjugation



The Oxford Dictionary of English defines myth as ‘a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events’. Generally speaking, myth is something imaginative and far away from the facts and from history. The origin of the word myth is the ancient Greek word *mythos* which means ‘speech or narrative’. But, down the ages it has undergone several changes and explications. Professor Lillian Feder has provided a very succinct definition of myth. According to her,

Myth is a story involving human limitations and superhuman striving and accomplishments which suggest through action usually of a ritual, ceremonial or compulsive nature, man’s attempt to express and thus control his own anxiety about those features of his psychological and physiological make up and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept or master. The characters of myth may be gods, men or monstrous creatures with the qualities both, but even in myths, dealing exclusively with immortals, the narrative material, the portrayal of conflict and sorrow, and the resolution or revelation are all reflections of human concerns. (11)

So, myth is characterized by its antique origin, myriad permutations and ambiguous nature.

Across the globe there are diverse types of myth. Scholars and critics categorize them as either ritual myths or creation myths or nature myths or gender myths or culture myths and so on. Creation myth or cosmic myth denotes how the universe has been created by the creator. Each religion has its own creation myth. In Hinduism creation is mentioned as cyclic. It is stated in the Upanishads that the cosmos with all types of animals including human beings pass through recurring cycles of creation and destruction. The Puranas also speak of the same pattern of creation, destruction and re-creation of the universe. The Hindus believe that Lord Brahma is the creator of this globe; Lord Vishnu, with His potency protects the world and its denizens and Lord Shiva is called the destroyer who destroys the creation only to renew it. So, this *Trimurty* (Trinity) is responsible for the cycle of birth, life and death in this world.

In Shaivism Lord Shiva is not altogether described as the destroyer. The Shaivites find in Him a rare combination of contradictory aspects. To them, Shiva is both benevolent and terrifying; destroyer and creator, transcendent and immanent. He is the ‘cosmic dancer’ who creates the perpetual rhythm of this universe. The image of the dancing Shiva (Nataraj) combines within it the cosmic actions like creation, destruction, protection, divine complacency etc. It is from his thick matted hair (‘jata’) that the sacred river Ganges emerges to destroy the ominous and restore life on earth.

Literature has been adapting myths into its bulk since antiquity. In an engaging manner experts have received, revised and reformulated myths at different points of time in history. The flexible construction of myths sanctions the writers to rejuvenate and contemporize them. Indian English drama, though young in age, has addressed various socio-political, socio-religious, socio-cultural issues vis-a-vis mythical stories, legendary tales, historical facts and day to day events. Noted playwrights like Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, T.P Kailasam, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Uma Parameswaram, et. al. have extensively made use of both indigenous and foreign myths in their plays to voice their concern for the present scenario as well as to critique the turmoils of contemporary



life. Though Indian English writings have felt the impact of modernism, the traditional thoughts including myths and legends have hardly become outmoded. They have continued to manifest in complex and renewed interpretations and have widened frontiers of this emerging field insignificant ways.

Rabindranath Tagore, one of the key figures in Indian drama has caught the shifting mood of human relationships and has fathomed the complexity of human minds in his plays with the help of folklores, myths and legends. His allegorical-symbolic play *Muktadhra* (1922) is a meaningful exploration of the cosmic myth of creation and destruction from a modern perspective. The title of this play was inspired by the famous Pagla–Jhora waterfalls at Darjeeling. The massacre of First World War had left an indelible mark on the psyche of Tagore when he conceived the play. He keenly felt the helpless gyrations of humanity caught in the throes of machine-dominated civilization. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore heartily accepts modernization but he strongly detests such a brand of the ‘modern’ as cohabits with capitalism which reduces humanity to a sapless and life-churning machine. In this play, Tagore seems to be shocked at the fact that machine is making terrible inroads into the human personality and ruthless technological power is eating into the vitals of life. The meaning of *Muktadhra* is ‘free stream’. A dam has been created by the royal engineer Bibhuti to imprison the free flow of water of *Muktadhra*. Abhijit, whose name stands for the ‘conqueror of enemy’ (not without its irony too), has released the stream by breaking the dam. Thus, he restores natural law and saves humanity represented by the people of Shiv Terai in the play. So, the cosmic myth of creation and destruction constitutes the core of this play.

The three-act play begins with a festival where people gather to celebrate the victory of Bibhuti who has built a dam with the help of machine after a long twenty-five years of endeavour. This dam was erected to quench the political hunger and cultural supremacy of king Ranajit over the poor peasants of Shiv-tarai. The construction of dam denies the life sustaining water to Shiv-taraiaans. It prevents them to irrigate their fields and to produce food. This leads to their starvation. But the dictatorial king of Uttarakut, has no concern for them. His sole aim is to subjugate Shiv-taraiaans in an absolute manner i.e. both economically and politically.

The monstrous achievement of Bibhuti, at the cost of considerable loss of lives is in sharp contrast to the bountiful and infinite nature. The creation contains the seeds of demolition and it is evident in the words of the stranger.

STRANGER. What’s that, up in the sky there? It’s a fearsome sight... It looks like a demon’s head; a grinning skeleton head, lying in wait to devour your city into sleep. To have it before your eyes night and day will dry and yours your souls like dead wood. (10)

The construction of dam is nothing but a blasphemy “that it should soar so high above the temple tower” (10). The height of the dam is an open challenge to the authority of Lord Bhirava. Being intoxicated with his achievement of devilish machine Bibhuti is in the mood of self-celebration. He even dares to rise up against God. In an arrogant manner he asserts,

BIBHUTI. It is my mission to prove, by force of the Machine, that God’s throne is ours. (11)

He is not even afraid of the curses of poor demented sonless mother Amba. He boldly declares,

BIBHUTI. My Machine has triumphed against the storm of mothers' curses. He, who fights God's own power, is not afraid of man's malediction. (9)

So the sinister machine has become more vibrant than Shiva's Trident in the Temple. The new prayer of the hapless masses is like this –

SONG. All hail, Machine, we worship thee,
we bow thee, we honour thee,
Machine, O Lord Machine. (15)

Bibhuti's creation has metamorphosed him into a cruel-hearted, callous and pompous human being whose iron heart does not drench at seeing the suffering of defenseless people who have done him no wrong. His words are testimony to this–

BIBHUTI. The purpose of my dam was that human intelligence should win through to its goal, though sand and stone and water all conspired to block its path. I had no time to think whether some farmer's paltry maize crop would die... (12)

The above proclamation is a fatal misuse of science and technology. A self-glorifying man defies the divine design of the creator by replacing life by death. So, Bibhuti is the true agent of devil who creates a dam only to destroy humanity.

King Ranajit, another agent of destruction has done every possible injustice to his people. He vacates the lap of many mothers by seizing their sons for dam construction work. He, like his ancestors has continued the blockage of Nandi pass road in order to stop the free trade of Shiv-tarians with neighbours. His real intention is to make them submissive and dependent totally at his mercy. This is an absolute misuse of god-given power. Dhananjaya, the ascetic and the messenger of hope has raised his voice against this tyrannical rule. He appeals to the king to put an end to this oppression and to set people free from enslavement. But the power-frenzied king is deaf to these requests. Bairagi Dhananjaya tries to remind him of the duty of a king –

DHANANJAYA. He who gives all, keeps all; greed brings you only stolen goods and they won't last. There's yours mistake. What you seized by violence can never be yours. What you set free is yours forever. (44)

The king has made him captive for this audacity. But King Ranajit could imprison the body of Dhananjaya, not his soul. Dhananjaya says –

DHANANJAYA. Yours chain will not put me into confusion
Or will my spirit die beneath your blow. (47)

He has an unshakable faith in God and he believes in the triumph of good over evil. He could visualize the termination of such injustice and oppression. In one of his songs in this play, he has made an appeal to the Almighty to play the harp to keep the universe going according to His laws. The devout people also sing in praise of Lord Shiva, the Terrible to restore normalcy in their lives. They have portrayed the Lord as the dissolver of all doubts, the breaker of fetters who takes away devotees beyond all conflicts. The benevolent God has heard their prayer and responded by sending prince Abhijit, his incarnation to them. Here we can cite the famous *slokas* from *The Bhagavad Gita*-

Whenever there is decay of righteousness, O Bharata,
And there is exaltation of unrighteousness, then I Myself come forth;

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers,
For the sake of firmly establishing righteousness, I am born from age to age.

(Chapter-4, Verse: 7-8)

So God could not remain indifferent to the suffering of His devotees and would not be blind to the injustice inflicted upon them. The crown prince Abhijit is the *avtar* of God who comes to save humanity from the clutches of tyranny. He has come to establish order by demolishing the sinister creation of Bibhuti.

Prince Abhijit, the champion of mankind has shown his utmost sympathy for the Shiv-taraians. He vehemently protests against the nefarious designs of the royal Engineer Bibhuti. To save the people of Shiv-tarai from the famine, he unties the bondage of Nandi pass and thus has become an iconic figure in the eyes of the people of Shiv-tarai and eyesore to the Royalty. For this activity the agitated mob of Uttarakut want to banish him from their kingdom. The king has arrested the prince for the gross violation of royal decision. But the chosen son of God cannot be captivated for a long time. He frees himself from prison very soon.

Abhijit feels a kind of close affinity with the Muktheadhara somehow. And this becomes crystal clear when he comes to know that 'he is not of royal birth, but was picked up below the falls of Muktheadhara'. From then onwards he fixes his goal of life—setting free his mother Muktheadhara from bondage at any cost. He has heard the call of Lord Vairaba and then, there is no going back for him. He says –

ABHIJIT. I must pay my debt, the debt of my birth.
Muktheadhara was nurse and I must set her free. (53)

To satisfy the query of Prince Sanjay regarding this decision Abhijit tells him,

ABHIJIT. I know it is my destiny on earth; my river of life must run free
overleaping the place walls. (27)

He wants to free himself from the suffocating and confined atmosphere of Uttarakut. To him, the liberation of Muktheadhara is actually the liberation of his soul. So he says,

ABHIJIT. Somewhere or other in the external world, God writes for us the secret
mystery of each man's spirit. Muktheadhara is His word to me, bearing the secret of
my inner being. When her feetis bound in iron fetters, I was startled out of a
dream. I realized the truth—the throne of Uttarakut is the dam which binds my
spirit. I have taken the road in order to set it free. (27)

Abhijit releases Muktheadhara by breaking the dam at its Achilles' heel. It is a matter of great surprise for Bibhuti because he believes in the immortality of his machine. According to him, no one will strike its weak point because death guards it. What he does not foresee is that there will be someone who will not be worried about death in order to spread the message of humanity to the universe. Thus, the prediction of messenger has proved to be true as he said to Bibhuti once –

MESSENGER. The god of destruction does not always travel by the highway. The
cracks that await him are seen by no human eye. (13)



The Almighty wakes up in the form of Abhijit as the situation goes out of control. On the altar of worship the people has placed wrong god i.e. Machine. The fearsome design of the machine which appears like “a spasm of agony in the heart of the sky” (21); “like a menacing fist of a giant” (19) cannot be idolized as God. Lord Shiva will never endure such anomies.

Abhijit’s action has received an opposite and equal reaction from machine as it sweeps him away with its turbulent torrent. Sanjay describes this:

SANJAY. Then Muktheadhara, like a mother, took up his wounded body in her arms and carried him away. (71)

Abhijit’s self-sacrifice for saving the people of Shiv-tarai from an unjust and heartless system can be revered as an act God who too has sacrificed His life for the service of Mankind.

The play is embedded in the Tagorean philosophy that denounces unequivocally the subordination of man by machine. His deep philosophical concern with machine and its operations has been noticed in one of the letters to Kalidas Nag where Tagore wrote:

The machine has played a vital role in the play. This machine has deprecated the very soul of life and it is with this soul that the Prince Abhijit has dismantled the machine, not with another machine. The persons who try to enslave with the help of the machine commit a serious crime—their own humanity has been destroyed by their own machine. Abhijit is the representative of these folk, the miserable among the mighty, who ruins the machine to set them free from its clutches.

Ascetic Dhananjaya, the champion humanity though afflicted by the machine has voiced in a lofty tone –

DHANANJAYA. I will triumph because I will not allow the machine and its injuries to overcome my inner spirit. (48)

Ultimately the machine has led mankind to face its tragic fall.

B. C. Chakravorty has rightly pointed out that -

the machine is the manifestation of man’s power and as such its significance and value in life. As long as it is subservient to the beauty and joy of life, as long as it increases the happiness of man it has a right to exist. But when it threatens to crush the spirit of man, when it becomes an instrument of tyranny and drags him down to the level of sub-human existence, it forfeits its right to existence. (140)

In the play *Muktheadhara*, the machine is demolished by the invincible spirit of humanity. Engineer Bibhuti stands in sharp contrast to crown prince Abhijit. If the former with his creation represents the triumph of science and technology, the latter with the destruction of that creation stands for the victory of life on earth.

The liberation of Muktheadhara from its bondage and its gushing currents alludes to the myth of the salvation of the holy river Ganges. The chorus of the play has referred to this issue at the very beginning. In Hindu mythology it is stated that the legendary king Bhageeratha brought the sacred river Ganges to Earth from Heaven after a long arduous

Tapasya to seek nirvana for his accursed ancestors. River Ganges landed on Earth through the Jata (lock of hair) of Lord Shiva to purify the sins of mankind and to make the sterile world generative. In this play, Abhijit's self-sacrifice consequent upon his earnest bid to unshackle Muktheadhara from the dam near the temple of Lord Bhairava is comparable to the fabled untiring 'tapasya' of Bhageeratha who paved the way for the life-sustaining holy Ganges. Like the Ganges, the free flowing water of Muktheadhara also washes out the sins and atrocities committed by King Ranajit and his ancestors. It brings new life to Shiv-tarians in particular and to the whole universe in general. And this noble goal has been achieved by Abhijit, the modern Bhageeratha.

The play, thus, brings to the fore the cosmic myth of creation and destruction in which Lord Shiva, the Preserver and Destroyer operates through the character of Abhijit to protect the existence and to keep the world free from injustice and impropriety. King Ranajit, the Royal Engineer Bhivuti are the true representatives of destruction. They have tried their level best to snatch the basic human rights with the help of their unholy enterprise-the machine. And their efforts have been befittingly countered with the humanist ideals of Abhijit. So any attempt to distort the divine law gets its due punishment. It is proved that the faith in true God, inhumanity, in the spirit of freedom cannot be controlled by any conceited human intelligence. Tagore's *Muktheadhada* is an abiding testimony to his unshaken faith in humanism which triumphs over all. Man's anguished search for consumerist and materialistic prosperity has been critiqued in the play through an immaculate handling of the Puranic myth of creation and destruction.

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