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Utkarsh Patel, professor of Comparative Mythology at the Mumbai University with qualifications in Indian and World Mythology and author of 'Shakuntala - The wronged woman' is also a founder member of Talking Myths, an online archive of traditional tales from the Indian sub-continent. While in Goa, for the inaugural of their latest venture - Centre for Study of Mythology and Culture, Patel caught up with **NT BUZZ** for a candid chat about Indian Hindu mythology, the mythological fervour that has seemingly gripped the Indian populace, its religious connotations vis-a-vis the sub-continent and, of course, his book.

Is mythology religion?

- A deconstruction

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In the zealous din raised by the ever-increasing tribe of writers of Indian Hindu mythology, Utkarsh Patel's soft but firm tones rise with logical coolness. A professor in Comparative Mythology at the Mumbai University with qualifications in Indian and World mythology, Patel's views remain that of a clear thinking educationist, with a touch of psychology and philosophy. Not his is the impassioned fervour of a devotee. He dissects mythology, religion and culture in a way that attempts to understand the steadily increasing bigotry and intolerance being witnessed in India.

The conversation begins on an obvious note - the increasing demand for all content mythological and the matching supply via television, films and books.

"Well," surmises Patel, "Probably the English educated Indian populace brought up on a diet of western mythology reached a point where they had had just too much of Percy Jackson and Harry Potter. It was time for introspection. Additionally, the Indians settled abroad needed something more than traditional attire and food to build links for their children with India." The time was right for the serving and lo and behold Indians were hit from every side with 'retellings' of mythology - be it in the form of Chhota Bheem or a slew of books re-interpreting/re-telling

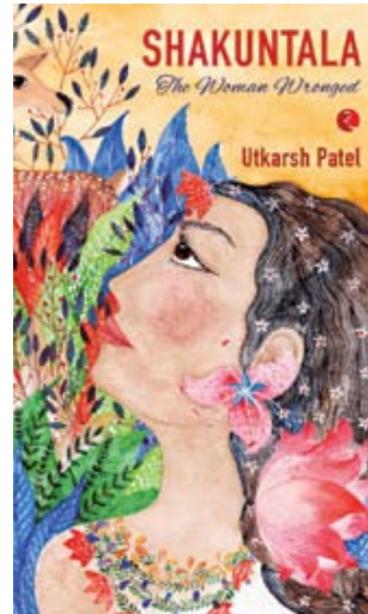
the story of mythological characters.

"Let me get this clear," says Patel, "I teach mythology, but my novel 'Shakuntala - The Woman Wronged' is fiction. Yes, my novel is based on Vyasa's characterisation of Shakuntala in his Mahabharata, but given that I have chosen to add two characters to further strengthen Shakuntala as a character, I chose to call it fiction."

This is where Patel makes his first point about mythology clear - that they are ancient original stories of a culture that have to be left that way.

"Calling it an interesting re-telling or re-interpretation of mythology for modern sensibilities is a dangerous trend because in the end - say a hundred years from now - these stories will camouflage the real stories. In the process it will influence minds and people will begin to accept and believe these changed facts," says Patel, who while broadly accepting mythological stories for what they are - stories, also accepts that there must be grains of history in their weaving.

For easier understanding he divides tales from Hindu mythology into two distinct eras - the Vedic and the Puranic. The Vedic mythology involves simple shlokas that are left to the listener/reader to interpret. The Puranic stories on the other hand are more defined and evolved, more narrative with definite culture orientation, wherein a culture is being defined and set, the do's and



don'ts, established.

"The Vedic Hindu mythology is all about questioning; right from the self to God. But the Puranic has no space for questioning. Probably because there were several aspects of the way of life of that time that the Puranic generation had started to grow ashamed of. They did not want to talk about it neither did they want to debate it."

To explain, take the story of Ahilya. This daughter of Bhrama, created with great perfection to surpass all beauty, was handed over to rishi Gautama to bring up as his daughter. When Ahilya hit puberty, Bhrama handed her back to rishi Gautama, this time as his wife.

"While the weirdness of this will strike us strongly, sitting where we are today, centuries down the line, ours is not to sit in judgment over the cultural or moral connotations presented in this story. Ours is to listen and understand and accept without prejudices that this was how it was," Patel says, explaining that it was probably these kinds of things that shamed the Puranics, who gradually began a process of sanitisation while simultaneously discouraging questioning of any sort.

And this is where Patel makes his second point - the reason why Hindu Indians

sections are busy banning and burning anything remotely distasteful. Sanitisation has reached its peak. While the right wingers are busy culturalising an already evolved culture, "They forget Hinduism began as a philosophy of questioning. That it was a way of life and that it had no codification."

While that would explain the bans, etc, how would it explain the intolerance to other faiths that Hindus are increasingly displaying.

To which Patel replies: "What we are witnessing is not more of I-love-my-religion sentiment. It is more of I-hate-your-religion sentiment as a way to prove I love my religion." This in his opinion is a dangerous trend because in the process many Hindus themselves will want nothing to do with Hinduism. "It will create alienation."

"Besides, it will also create a confused generation." Why? Because while on the one hand we are launching missiles and talking about development we are also bringing in regressive backward thinking narrow mindset by referring to mythological stories that hold no relevance today besides being a looking glass into the way life once was.

And with this Patel makes his final point - is mythology religion?

His answer: mythology is not religion. "But in India this is not so. Mythology came to take the shape of our religion because what was Hinduism in the beginning - just a way of life. A philosophy that encouraged thinking and questioning. This was then, in a matter of speaking, codified in the Puranic times by way of converting the same myths into detailed stories that witnessed culturalisation. Then emerged the Puranic gods like Krishna."

And this according to him is where the trouble lies. A country like Greece, which has its rich mythology and folklore, witnesses no conflict of interest between its religion and stories of the land and therefore there is no strife. But, India, where mythology was given the form of religion, this is not the case.

Hopefully, ventures like 'Talking Myths' and 'Centre for Study of Mythology and Culture' will help deconstruct this religion-mythology web and will be successful in presenting to people mythology just for what it is - stories from a time gone by, that are meant to keep alive that time in memory and not to drive this contemporary time.

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About Shakuntala, The Woman Wronged

While an overwhelming majority today believes that Shakuntala was a character created by Kalidasa in his famous Sanskrit dance drama Abhijnanashakuntalam, the truth is that Shakuntala was the first female character created by Vyasa for his Mahabharata.

Kalidasa characterised Shakuntala as a helpless, lovelorn woman left crying over her fate.

"But," says Utkarsh Patel, whose profession involves studying, analysing and comparing mythology, "That was not how Vyasa originally sketched her character. Vyasa's Shakuntala was a strong woman who fought for her right standing in court in front of King Dhushyant, who is also her husband."

She was an independent woman, fully aware of her parentage, and in need of no male patronage, not father, not brother, not husband. And she asserted her right for justice.

"Today's woman is like that, and if she is not she should be," says Patel who decided to write this book simply because though Indian Hindu Mythology refers to a lot of strong women, these women only form a part of the narrative and are never assigned the role of the hero. "In the Mahabharata, Shakuntala's may be a small story, but it is the story of a fiercely independent woman. She is the hero of her story, but the rules of dramatisation of those days did not allow women in that role. I have taken the lengthy monologue delivered by her in Dushyant's court, where she is proving her identity as his wife and mother of his son, and novelised it."

Taking poetic licences he has introduced two characters - that of Ahilya and Madhavi - and presented them through the eyes of Shakuntala. And, Patel has made no attempt at cultural sanitisation. So reader's can read and learn that once in India sexual hospitality was a norm. Whether then they chose to shut their eyes or accept that this was the way things were - no more, no less - is up to them.

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