

Castigating the Hindu Myth or Constructing the Dalit Myth?: Understanding the Re-telling of the Myth of *Dashavatar* in *TeesriAazadi*

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Abstract

Jabbar Patel's highly contentious film *TeesriAazadi* (2006) creates turmoil in the politics of Uttar Pradesh when the film's footage was shown by a news channel. The CD of the film is allegedly made and circulated by some radical Dalit organization. The film gets into controversy due to its anti-Hindu content. Contrary to the popular imagination of the Hindu god Rama as an ideal king, the film portrays Lord Ram as anti-Shudra. The film debunks the stories around the Dashavatar myth of the *puranas* (mythologies), and claims that these mythical stories are part of the conspiracy of the Aryans or Brahmins. These myths are constructed in order to portray the original inhabitants, namely, the Dalits and the tribal communities, as 'demons' and subjugate them to ensure their social supremacy in the land called 'Bharatbhumi' or India. The film's content is based on the template of the Aryan Invasion theory as espoused by the anti-caste social reformers like JyotiraoPhule (1827-1890). This paper attempts to examine the Dashavatar myth as portrayed in the film, and shows how the film contributes to the narrative formation of Dalit mythography.

Keywords: CD; Dashavatar; myth; Aryans Invasion; Dalit; mythography

Introduction

Jabbar Patel's enormously contentious film *Teesri Aazadi* (Third Independence) was released on YouTube in 2006 in a CD format. It was alleged that the CD of the film had been circulated by a Member of Parliament (MP) of the BahujanSamaj Party, a major political party of the Dalit and low-caste social groups. Mayawati, the Chief Minister of the then Uttar Pradesh denied any probable link of her party with the making or release of the CD, stating that 'neither my government, nor the BahujanSamaj Party has anything to do with the CD.' (2013) The news channel which showed some footage of the film claimed that it was Dr AmbedkarSamajSudharSamiti (Dr Ambedkar Social Reformation Organization), an organization based in Basti of eastern UP, which was responsible behind the making and circulation of the CD throughout UP and in some other states. (2013) The AmbedkarBoudhikSanghathan, another organization of the Dalits, is also alleged to have made and circulated the CD of the film. (2008)The film undertaken for study here has adapted, among a number of *kaahinis* or episodes from the *puranas*, the *mahakavya* or epics *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*, the myth of *Dashavatar* described in the *Vishnupurana*, made a commentary on it from Dalit perspective. This paper attempts to examine this adaptation and commentary on the Dashavatar myth, and shows how Jabbar Patel's film *Teesri Aazadi* contributes to narrative formation in Dalit mythography on the premise of the Aryan Invasion theory.

The film is based on the template of Aryan Invasion theory, as espoused by the anti-caste social reformers like JyotiraoPhule (1827-1890) in the nineteenth century. The theory claims that the Shudras and the Ati-Shudras or the untouchables and the tribal communities are the *Mulnivasi* or the original inhabitants of this country. In the hierarchical caste system these social groups are labelled as 'lower castes'. These *Mulnivasi* social groups had developed their own civilization. But they were subjugated by the foreign tribes known as *Aryans*. The *Aryans* later came to be categorized as *uchchavarna* (high varna) consisting of the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya, *savarna*, caste Hindu, high caste or upper caste, and it is the *Mulnivasis* or *Anaryas* or non-Aryans who later came to be known as Shudra, *neechvarna*, *avarna* and low caste or, to use the more politically vibrant category in present day, Dalit. As documented by Rosalind O' Hanlon in *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma JotiraoPhule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (2014),

Phule depicted Brahmans as the descendants of Aryan invaders, who had conquered the indigenous people of India. The Brahmans had imposed their religion as an instrument of social

control designed to perpetuate their rule. This formed the central polemical device in Phule's explanation of the sufferings of the lower castes. (O'Hanlon 141)

The theory also claimed that the Aryans formulated fictional stories which they call *puranas* (roughly translating, mythologies) and used them as a tool to impose rigorous social sanction upon the non-Aryans. As Phule claims,

In order to fulfil their plan that those people should remain perpetually in slavery, and that they should be able to live comfortably on what the Shudras earned by the sweat of their brow, the Brahmins set up the fiction of caste divisions, and made up several books on it for their own selfish ends. (Phule cited in O'Hanlon 142)

In the following sections I will discuss how the narrator explains that the myth of the Dashavatar of Lord Vishnu has been constructed by the Brahmins to serve their interests and maintain their supremacy.

Debunking the Dashavatar Myth and the Counter-narrative

The narrator and commentator of the film delves deep into the *puranas* to explain the conspiracy of the Dashavatar myth.

The Myth of Matsyavatar

The narrator explains that Lord Vishnu first took the avatar or incarnation of Matsya (fish). According to the Hindu belief, Lord Vishnu appeared in the SatyaYug (Era of Truth) in the form of a fish to save humanity from a devastating flood. As the narrator explains the myth, an Asura named Hygro happened to hear the *Veda mantra* (hymn in the *Vedas*) from Lord Bramha, the creator of the universe as per the Hindu mythology, and as a consequence, Lord Vishnu in his earthly incarnation of fish killed him for his 'crime'. It was a crime on the part of the Asura because being a non-Aryan or low-born fellow, he was not entitled to listen to the Vedic hymn. But the history is, as the film claims, that in South India the Dravidian civilization developed by the Shudras prevailed on the coast of the seas. The progressive Dravidians detested the Aryan conspiracy which gave birth to a series of battles between them. But through their deception and conspiracy, the Aryans eventually took control over the Dravidians. It is to conceal this conspiracy and guise of the Aryans that the myth of *matsyavatar* was conceptualized and circulated.

Devising the Myth of Kurmavatar

The narrator next delves into explaining the myth of Kurmavatar. According to this myth, Lord Vishnu took the incarnation in the form of a kurma (tortoise) which was associated with the *samudra-manthan* or churning of the sea. As a result of this churning of the sea, *amrita* (nectar of immortality) is extracted to render immortality to the Devas or the gods. According to the

narrator of the film, when a powerful Anarya king attacked the Aryans who fail to face him, the Aryans took resort to the nature of tortoise and adopted the way of compromise or treaty instead of fighting the Anarya king. As the treaty was conducted on the coast of the sea, the treaty was termed 'samudramanthan' in the puranas. And they propagate their immediate compromised position as kurmavatar. The drinking of amrita or nectar of immortality by the deities after the churning of the sea with the Asuras is another case of conspiracy to befool the common people.

The Myth of Varahavatar

The film then shifts its focus on the myth of Varahavatar. According to this myth, an asura named Hiranyaksh stole the *bhudevi* or earth and hid her in the waters. It is rescue the earth from the asura's abdication that Lord Vishnu took the incarnation as a varah or boar. Vishnu killed Hiranyaksh and rescued the earth. But as the film claims, the Mulnivasi king Hiranyaksh was the rightful heir to the land of Bharatbhumi. The Aryan kept trying to win over his kingdom. They frequently indulged in a series of battles. Hiranyaksh's warm acceptance and popularity amidst the subjects appeared to be a threat to the Brahmins. The Aryans, therefore, took resort to guise to kill Hiranyaksh as the direct act of killing the king would earn disrespect for them. Hence, a mythical narrative was constructed to communicate a message that it was to prevent people from revolting that Lord Vishnu took the incarnation as a varaha or boar, and punished the king for his 'sin'.

The Conspiracy of the Myth of Narasimhavatar

Narasimhavatar was the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. According to the myth, Lord Vishnu took the shape of a half-man-half-lion in order to kill an Asura king called Hiranyakashipu who wanted to become the Supreme God of the universe. He was undefeatable to the extent that neither on sky nor in land, neither in night nor in day, neither inside nor outside, neither by an animal nor by a man could he be killed. As the film constructs the narrative, Hiranyaksh was the brother of Hiranyakashipu. The latter waged battles against the Aryans and made them flee away. Then the Aryans conspired to enter the kingdom of Hiranyakashipu through duping Pralhad, the son of Hiranyakashipu, and killed the king with baghnakh (tiger nail), and put Pralhad on the throne. It is to hide this conspiracy of killing the king with baghnakh that the myth of Narasimhavatar was given birth to.

Interrogating the Myth of Vamanavatar

Vamanavatar was the fifth avatar of Lord Vishnu. As per the myth, Lord Vishnu appeared as a dwarf to defeat the Asura king Mahabali. As the film informs about the myth, Pralhad's son

Bali became the king of the Anaryas. He was aware of his rich ancestral legacy. Bali attacked Amaravati, the capital of the Aryans, and defeated them. The Aryan begged for shelter to king Bali, and in accordance with their request, the generous king Bali gave them shelter. The Aryans took the opportunity and misused the generosity of the king. They gradually took control over the education, trade and wealth, and made the king Bali powerless. The vaman who was of dwarf size asked the king for three-step land as a gift, and accordingly, he was given the same. This three-step or teen-kadam land implied the wealth, education and trade. As it was not easy for the Aryans to defeat the popular king Bali, they took resort to the hapless dwarf and constructed the mythical narrative of Vamanavatar.

The Myth of Parashuram and the Clash of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas

Parasuramavatar is the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu. According to the myth, Lord Vishnu appeared in this avatar to exterminate the Kshatriya kings as the latter turned into oppressors of the Brahmins and created much havoc on earth. The word 'parasu' means axe, and therefore, the name 'Parasurama' suggests Rama with an axe. It is to restore the path of righteousness on earth and protect the Brahmins from the wrath of the Kshatriyas that Lord Vishnu had to appear in the form of Parasurama. As the film claims, after the Aryans took control over king Bali's kingdom, the Aryans ensured the Vedic culture and ensured the system of Chaturvarna (four-fold varna) across the Bharatbhumi. It was the time when the society was divided into four distinct groups: The Brahman, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra. And this form of society created a new crisis: the crisis between the Brahman and the Kshatriya over who holds the supreme power. The Kshatriya was the warrior class. They possessed the throne, the ruling authority, a source of power which intimidated the Brahmins. The Brahmins occupied a lower status in terms of exercising power compared to the Kshatriyas. It was said that Lord Vishnu appeared in the avatar of Parasurama and exterminated the Kshatriya varna through repeated attacks with a view to securing the dominance of the Brahmins.

Interrogating the Valorisation of Rama

As the film narrates, a Brahmin appeared in the court of king Rama with the allegation against him that the latter is the reason behind his son's premature death. When king Rama countered him by asking how he can blame him and make responsible for his son's death, the Brahmin replies that till date no father had to grieve his son's death in the kingdom. He was the first man to lose his son king Rama's kingdom. And it must have occurred due to some 'adharma' or unrighteousness practised in Rama's kingdom. Hence, the king has to take responsibility of his son's death. To enquire about the fact of the matter, the surprised king Rama asked Narada muni (sage) what could be the cause behind such unfortunate incident. As a Kshatriya king,

Rama states, he cannot overlook the suffering of a Brahmin because in so doing he will be damned to hell. It is not only his duty but also 'dharmaadesh' (religious injunction) to protect the Brahmins. To this query of king Rama, Narada muni explains that there must have been some violation of the varna dharma by some Shudra. Only these cases of violation give birth to such unprecedented incident. When Rama along with a Brahmin priest of the court and other attendants ventured to find out the culprit in a forest, he found a sage to deliver lecture to his disciples. The sage in his lecture tried to make his disciples knowledgeable about how the *Prakriti*(Nature) does not discriminate the humans on the basis of varna, how the foreign Aryan invaders destroyed the well-built civilization of the Shudras, and introduced the varna system based on the principle of inequality, and the sage asked his students to annihilate such a system and preach door to door the principle of equality. He also taught that death is the ultimate truth of life. It snatched away the vice called pride from the humans. He also critiqued the idea of *punarjanma* or rebirth. He advised his disciples not to get entrapped in this varna system as it will keep damaging the humans generation after generation. So this varna system must be annihilated out and out. King Rama heard the last portion of his lecture and walked to the sage and admired him for his command over a vast field of knowledge and felt unfortunate not to know such a wise sage. But when king Rama came to know that the learned sage who identifies himself as Shambuka belonged to the Shudra community, he and his Brahmin priest got enraged. They fiercely rebuked the sage for violating the varna dharma. As per the varna dharma, a Shudra is not entitled to acquire knowledge. So, it is an audacity and gross violation of the varna dharma on the part of Shambuka to have command over the field of knowledge. Shambuka is told that it is because of his conduct of violating the varna dharma that a Brahmin's son has died at an early age. He is responsible for causing this anarchy in Rama's kingdom. The Brahmin priest instigates king Rama into believing that due to such Shudras like Shambuka the Shudras will claim to equality some day and disrupt the status quo of the social order. Shambuka told Rama that it is king Rama's moral degeneration which prompts him into making the former responsible for the Brahmin's son's death with which he is in no way associated, and therefore, the allegation is baseless. King Rama and his Brahmin pandit considers Shambuka's act of countering their questions as audacious, and on the pandit's order the Kshatriya king Rama killed the Shudra sage Shambuka to protect the Brahmins from further suffering.

The Avatar of Buddha

While portraying Buddha, the ninth avatar in the chain of the Dashavatar, the film features how Buddha teaches his disciples to dismantle the problem of varna inequality with 'karuna' (compassion). He discarded the notion of God. The film features a sequence in which the Buddhist Bhikkhus or monks ask for water from some untouchable girls who initially refused to give water because of fear of sin. One who will have drinking water from the untouchables will be desecrated as per the varna dharma. But when the enlightened Buddhist monk told the untouchable women that drinking water is associated with thirst, and it has no relation with the *paap-punya* (sin and reward). Then the untouchable girls were convinced to give them water. Buddha's teachings got circulated by his disciples and the scene showing the Vaishyas, the Kshatriyas, the Shudras walking together irritated the Brahmins. Buddha taught people to be free from the fear of God, to be pathfinder of one's own life. The idea of 'parampara' or tradition is not true, that the varna system is a man-made system of inequality. When a Shudra character is found to be assertive, he is rebuked by two Brahmin priests as the former does not salute them. They asked him to carry a dead cow from a nearby Brahmin household. To this the Shudra replies, 'when the cow was alive, it was yours, even the go-daan[donating cow] was also received by you, but whenever it becomes dead, it is no longer the Brahmin's but it is the Shudra's cow'. The *panditayin*, the wife of the Brahmin priest in whose house the dead cow lies, instigates the Brahmin patriarch not to get angry over her, but to get angry over the Shudras who suddenly become derailed from their varna dharma. The *panditayin's* rancour towards the Shudras over her assumption that from now onwards the Shudras will take rest while the Brahmins will be indulged in menial jobs makes a point that the varna system has been devised to capitalize the cheap labour of the Shudras. The Brahmin priests are shown to be engaged in a conversation regarding how the Shudras have become assertive, how they are engaging themselves in acquiring knowledge going against the varna dharma, how they are organizing themselves, how the division between the high varna and the low varna is getting blurred day by day, and it is Goutam Buddha who has hit hard the deeply entrenched varna system. They, therefore, decide to go to the sage Manu who can suggest some remedy to this newly-appeared 'anarchy'. To their request Manu wrote down rigorous penal injunctions to suppress the Shudras and bring them under their control again. Hereafter, the high varnas got the religious sanction to unleash inhuman atrocities on the Buddhists to prevent the spread of Buddhism. The houses, property, books of the Buddhists were burnt. The Brahmins ventured on a mission of exterminating or ethnic cleansing of the Buddhists.

Conclusions

Thus the film questions the traditional myth of the Dashavatar and it is an attempt on the part of the Dalits to debunk the mythical narratives of the Dashavatar. Patel's film shows that the existing myth of the Dashavatar is nothing but a conspiracy.

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