

The Metamorphic Motif in Indian Myths and its Ethnic Culture

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Abstract:

Metamorphosis, which refers to the metamorphosis and alteration of diverse objects, is a common motif throughout world mythology. Humans, gods, demons, animals, as well as plants and inanimate objects, can turn into each other in Indian myths, expressing the imaginative and majestic manner of Indian myths. In this study, we will quickly outline the metamorphic motifs in Indian myths and explore the causes behind the metamorphic motifs, particularly the effect of Indian ethnic culture on the metamorphic motifs. There are three sorts of metamorphic motifs in Indian myths: reincarnation, deity incarnation, and general transformation, all of which have distinct Indian national cultural overtones. Correspondingly, the creation of Indian mythological metamorphosis stories is affected by India's distinct culture. The ancient Indian notion of reincarnation gave rise to a soul metamorphosis in the style of reincarnation, in which the soul is reincarnated into a different form from its previous life. The theory of "the unity of Brahma and Atman" provides intellectual validity for the deity incarnation. The realistic impetus behind the myth of the incarnation of Indian deities and the incorporation of deities like Vishnu with deities from other civilizations was the need to achieve cultural integration. In this way, the deities from other cultures were transformed into incarnations of Indian deities. The metamorphic motifs bear the imprint of India's cultural identity, and it is through them that the cultural community of the Indian nation has been created.

Keywords: Metamorphosis, Indian Myth, Meincarnation, Ethnocultural Integration

Metamorphosis means the transformation of different objects into each other, realising a morphological crossing between human beings and objects such as animals, plants and inanimate objects. "There is by no means any particular difference between the different spheres of life. Nothing has a limited and unchanging static form: by a sudden metamorphosis, everything can be transformed into everything" (Cassirer, 1944, p.108). Metamorphosis is prevalent in mythologies all over the world and is categorized by Stith Thompson in the *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* as a "magic" motif (D0-699). India is a land of mythology, and the variety and ingenuity of these myths are astounding. However, the metamorphic motifs in Indian myths have not received enough attention. This study will begin with a brief summary of the metamorphosis in Indian myths, focusing on the reasons for the emergence of metamorphosis in Indian myths, especially the influence of Indian national culture.

I. Metamorphosis stories in Indian myths

In Indian myths, there are numerous metamorphoses, which can be categorized into three categories depending on the sort of metamorphosis: reincarnation, deity incarnation, and general transformation. Reincarnation was common in ancient myths. Edward Taylor believed that the animistic view of souls and spirits was the most prominent characteristic of primitive mankind. He came to two major conclusions: first, that the soul could continue to exist after the destruction of the physical body; and second, that the spirits themselves were elevated to gods. (Tylor, 2016, p.426) India's reincarnation system is more refined, and with the spread of religion, it has affected many countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia and other regions. The ancient Indians believed that everyone's existence was staged, that dying was simply a brief farewell, and that reincarnation would allow life to go on indefinitely. Because the soul is immortal, it has the ability to leave its physical body and enter into new bodies. According to the activities, merits, and demerits of the previous life, the reincarnated body is no longer the original body and is instead allocated to a new origin. After reincarnation, a man who belonged to a higher caste in his previous life may be demoted to a lower caste; a person who was a human in his/her previous life may change into an animal; and because the eternal soul connects all of the bodies, metamorphosis is possible. Naturally, Indian myths contain a lot of metamor-

phosis through reincarnation, as seen in the instance of the Buddha in the *Jataka*, who had many reincarnations before becoming a Buddha, including those as a king's illegitimate son, a merchant master, a tree god, a deer, etc. He took on a new form each time he was reincarnated.

Deity incarnation refers to the use of divine power by gods to descend into the human world in a way that differs from how they originally appeared. Deity incarnation stories are numerous and constitute a distinct mythological series in Indian myths. The three main gods, Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, all had numerous incarnations; the story of Vishnu's incarnation is the most typical. There are various stories of Vishnu's incarnations, but just ten are well-known: Matsya(fish), Kurma(turtle), Varaha (boar), Narasimha(or Nrisimha), Vamana(dwarf), Parasurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki. Each of the three principal gods is responsible for something different, with Brahma as the creator, Vishnu as the protector and Shiva as the destroyer. Vishnu descends to earth to uphold the "Dharma," to assist in bringing the world down, and to provide a peaceful passage between the eras whenever the "Dharma" of the Indian mythical world is disturbed and the world is thrown into disorder and degradation. Other deities' incarnations are also primarily for the purpose of saving the world and upholding the "Dharma", which is a distinctive feature of the type of deity incarnation in Indian myths.

General transformation is distinguished from divine incarnation and reincarnation, the latter two being more ethnically Indian, while the former is more universal. The creation myths of incarnation in Indian myths, and stories of metamorphosis due to supernatural divine powers (austerities, curses, etc.) can all be classified as general metamorphoses. The Purusa of the Rig Veda, for example, is the primordial man of Indian myths, from whose body all things are born when he is dismembered –

The brahmin was his mouth. The ruler was made his two arms.
As to his thighs – that is what the freeman was. From his two feet
the servant was born.

The moon was born from his mind. From his eye the sun was born.
From his mouth Indra and Agni, from his breath Vāyu was born.

From his navel was the midspace. From his head the heaven developed.

From his two feet the earth, and the directions from his ear. Thus they arranged the worlds (Rigveda, X.90.12-14).

Similarly, the myth of the giant's corpse is also found in the Chinese myth of Pan Gu and the Babylonian myth of Tiamat. What they all have in common is that the human body corresponds to everything in the outside world, and that the various parts of the body transform into the sun, moon, mountains, rivers, humans, and animals, thus creating the world.

There are many gods and demons in Indian myths, all of whom have the divine power to transform themselves or others. Simultaneously, mortals can gain divine power through "Tapas" and transform others through their powerful curses. The Rigveda describes the black demon Vrtra, who is defeated by Indra and attempts to flee by changing into a deer, but is killed by Indra in the same manner. This is an example of how gods or demons can undergo metamorphosis –

O Indra, possessor of the stone, of the mace, to you alone virile power was conceded.

When (you kept smashing) this wild beast of magic power, you slew him with your own magic power.

– They cheer on your sovereign power (Rigveda, I.80.7).

The reason for changing into an animal is to use its abilities; the running of a deer, the arching of a pig, and the flight of a goose all have significant narrative implications. All in all, Indian myths are rich in the quantity and diversity of metamorphosis stories with a uniquely Indian character. Correspondingly, the distinctive culture of India has had a great impact on the creation of metamorphosis stories in Indian myths.

II. Reincarnation

The ancient Indian concept of reincarnation gave rise to a reincarnation-style metamorphosis. The idea of reincarnation had a lot to do with animism, "Indians understood that all species contain a spiritual component. They frequently emphasized that plants also possessed souls in addition to humans and other creatures" (Nakamura Hajime, 1989, p. 53). They hono-

red natural phenomena in the *Rigveda* alongside medicinal plants as a sort of anthropomorphized deity –

One hundred are the forms of you all, o mother, and a thousand are your shoots.

So then, o you all who possess a hundred strategies, make this (man) here to be free of disease for me

.....

Flying down from heaven, the plants spoke:

“The man whom we will reach (while he is still) alive, that man will not suffer harm” (Rigveda, X.97.2., X.97.17).

Artifacts in human society can likewise be endowed with a soul, such as the pressed stones used for rituals.¹ This press stone was used to extract Sama juice to produce a drink for the sacrifice. The stone is gifted with a soul and receives divine properties as a result of its sacred use in the poems.

Already in Vedic times, Indian Brahman pondered the fate of the soul after death. They held the view that the soul did not perish with the decomposition of the body but may live on and enter heaven or Yama's domain (hell). The 14th hymn in Book 10 of the Rig Veda sings –

Unite with the forefathers, unite with Yama, with what has been sacrificed and bestowed, in the highest distant heaven.

Having left behind imperfection, come home again. Unite with your body in your full luster (Rigveda, X.14.8).

In the Upanishads, the idea of the soul departing from the physical body gave rise to the "five fires and two paths" and the notion of reincarnation in the Upanishads. The "five fires" stand for the five phases of the soul's reincarnation. After cremation, the soul first travels to the moon, then transforms into rain and descends to the earth to be absorbed by plants, which are then eaten by people and turned into sperm, before returning to the mother's womb to mature into an adult. The idea of people experiencing reincarnation after death is already taking shape, despite the fact that this process of reincarnation appears to be primarily grounded in reality and has materialistic associations with the cycle of matter in nature. The "two paths"

¹ See *Rigveda* X 94.

are the "path of the ancestors," and the "road of the gods". The former alludes to the continuation of human existence through the "five fires of reincarnation," and the latter to the entrance of man into heaven. The "two paths" reflect that there is more than one afterlife destination, and that different people have different paths. People can leave the cycle of reincarnation and enter the "Way of the Gods" if they can let go of their desires and understand "the unity of Brahma and Atman". That means they escape from reincarnation and become gods. Those who are unable to comprehend "the unity of Brahma and me " have to continue to reincarnate, but their treatment varies depending on how they have done in their lives.

As a result, a more comprehensive trinity system of myth, philosophy, and religion is formed by combining reincarnation with the philosophical idea that "the unity of Brahma and me " and social ethics. Those who have lived morally are reincarnated into higher castes like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or Vaishyas through reincarnation, while those who have lived dishonorably may not only be reincarnated into lower castes but may even be reincarnated as animals or plants. This kind of reincarnation creates a reincarnation-style metamorphosis – a human in a past life is transformed into an animal in the afterlife due to his own karma. The soul is the one thing that doesn't change between past and present life. Reincarnation, which has been present since the Vedic scriptures, has had a significant impact on India, where it is recognized not just by Brahmin sects, which directly inherited Vedic thought, but also by other faiths like Buddhism and Jainism.

III. “The unity of Brahma and Atman”

The theory of “the unity of Brahma and Atman” was born in the Upanishadic period and is closely related to animism. Animism is strongly tied to the doctrine of "the unity of Brahma and Atman", and bridges the gap between the object and the self. Animism lays the ideological foundation for the subject-object distinction in philosophical epistemology: subject-object and object-subject subjectivism and relativism (Qiu Zi Hua, 2003, p. 128). This kind of consciousness that believes everything is one and blends subject and object, is the precondition for the emergence of “the unity of Brahma and Atman”. The *Brahmana* is where the concept of Brahman first occurs, where it takes the form of the personified god Brahma. One of the three principal deities in later Hinduism is Brahma. It is not until the

Upanishads that Brahman takes on a truly abstract philosophical character, developing into a compound that retains both a figurative sovereign and an abstract philosophical meaning. Brahman is then typically understood to be the ultimate reality of the universe and the essence of everything.

The term "Atman," which is also understood as "I", originally referred to a person's breath and vital organs. However, over time, Indian sages gradually separated the Atman from the physical body and focused primarily on its impersonal spiritual qualities. In the Upanishads, the Atman has two distinct meanings: the "small-self" and the "big-self". The "small-self" is the individual self, soul, or essence of each person and the topic of reincarnation. The "big-self" is Brahma. As was already mentioned, Brahma is the supreme being of the universe, the essence of everything. Since the essence of the supreme being and the essence of every individual are identical, the Brahman and the Atman (the "small-self") are one. In other words, the "small-self" is the "big-self", is the "Brahma". The idea that people and the universe are interconnected is embodied in this philosophical theory. Brahma fills the universe. Each person is related to the other by their connection to Brahma, and everything in the universe functions as a pluralistic, unified, scattered, and integrated whole.

The central idea of the Upanishads and the mainstay of Brahminical philosophy is "the unity of Brahma and Atman, which has had a significant impact on Indian thought and culture. It is also interwoven into mythology, exemplified by the tale of the incarnation of the gods. Because of the supremacy of Brahma, the three principal deities have been recognized by their respective proponents as the supreme god and as being equivalent to the supreme reality. In the beginning, the god Brahma was the "essence" of the term "Brahma", but the sages later separated the abstract idea from this concrete deity, making Brahma the supreme being in both philosophy and religion. As Indian society and religion developed, The prestige of the personal god Brahma diminished, and he lost his unique claim to the term "Brahman". Shiva is also regarded as Brahma in the Upanishads,¹ and Vishnu (Krishna) is equated with Brahma in the Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gita*.² A distinction between subject and object is actually made when gods and Brahma are equated; Brahman is subordinate to the gods, while gods are

¹ See *Svetasvatara Upanisad* III.1-3.

² See *Bhagavad Gita* VII.

given credit for Brahma's nature, which includes the illusory power (Maya) that causes the world to evolve. This persona offers a transcendental reason from a philosophical standpoint for the metamorphosis myths of Vishnu and other gods, which is no longer universally attributed to divine forces.

IV. Ethnocultural integration

One of the realistic reasons for the creation of Indian deities' incarnation was the necessity of integrating the many ethnic cultures. The South Asian subcontinent has been the home to a wide variety of ethnic groups throughout antiquity, giving rise to diverse civilizations. The Aryans first arrived in India around 2000 BC, establishing the Vedic culture. However, before the Aryans arrived, the Dravidians built a sophisticated urban culture in the Indus Valley. Following this, India underwent a protracted merger of Vedic civilization and indigenous civilizations on the one hand, and had to contend with the arrival of other foreign peoples, including the Greeks, Scythians, Turks, Persians, and others who brought their cultures to this region. India is so more than just an anthropological museum; it also serves as a melting pot for various national cultures. The question of how to rationally integrate the cultures of other ethnic groups and develop one's own culture has grown in importance with regard to the cultural identity of all ethnic groups and even their survival in a situation where various ethnic groups are both opposed to and integrated with one another.

One significant method that India has dealt with the issue of ethnic cultural integration is by incorporating foreign gods into their own mythological systems as incarnations of their own supreme gods. "When Darius and Alexander the Great arrived, those already in India believed that the gods of these outsiders were incarnations of that one God; when the Serb racial groups of Central Asia and the various Turkic communities arrived, those already in India believed that the gods of the Serbs and Turks were incarnations of that one God; and when Islam arrived, those already in India believed that the God of Islam was the incarnation of that one God" (Zhang Fa, 2017, pp. 29-30). Despite the fact that new deities were continuously entering the South Asian Subcontinent, all of them were able to be assimilated into their own cultures as incarnations of their own deities. This allowed the many civilizations to coexist and eventually give rise to the Indian cultural community.

Again, take Vishnu as an example. There is no myth of Vishnu's incarnations in the *Rigveda* since the Aryans of the Vedic period were largely in sharp opposition to Dravidians and other original inhabitants of India. The gradual elevation of Vishnu's status and the gradual blending of various peoples' cultures – from the initial clash to the need to integrate other peoples' cultures into their own – were both factors in the later development of the myth of Vishnu's incarnations. As a result, Vishnu rose from being a minor god on the periphery to a major god with numerous incarnations.

Although Vishnu first appears in Indian myths fairly early on, the early stages of the narrative do not place much emphasis on him; there are just five poems written in his honor throughout the entire *Rigveda*, compared to more than 250 for Indra, the high ranking god-king. But the few poems that do exist frequently show Indra and Vishnu engaged in combat as a result of Vishnu's superior martial skills. In addition, the *Rigveda* reveals that his “great stride” is one of his other distinguishing features –

Now shall I proclaim the heroic deeds of Vishnu, who measured out
the earthly realms,

who propped up the higher seat, having stridden out three times,
the wide-ranging one.

In this way Vishnu will be praised for his heroic deed – (he who is)
like a fearsome wild beast, living in the mountains and roaming
wherever it wants, in whose three wide strides dwell all living
beings (Rigveda, I.154.2).

The description of Vishnu's vast strides – three steps over three realms – displays his immense powers and ultimately developed into the tale of Vishnu passing through three realms while dressing as a dwarf.

By the Vaishnava era, Vishnu's status had advanced, and not only was his "great stride" connected to the creation of the world, but he was also associated with sacrifice. At this time, “A god who could represent the sacrifice itself had immense dignity because the sacrifice was the entrance to heaven” (Guo Liang Yun, 1993, p. 3). Following the Vedic era, Vishnu was crowned as one of the three principal gods in the epics and puranas, which was also the time when the myths surrounding his incarnation began to take shape. The image of Vishnu as a deity became widespread as a result of the numerous incarnation myths, and then the cult of Vishnu led to the

spread and development of the incarnation stories. For instance, Rama's dark skin, which contrasts with the lighter skin tone of the Aryans, reveals his native ethnicity; the image of Kalki, a savior who emerges in the end days, was likely inspired by messianic concepts common in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Pattanaik, 2011, p. 171). This image reflects the significant ethnic and social crises India was experiencing at the time and the need to integrate; "The most well-known instance of a local god becoming an incarnation of Vishnu is Krishna, who was previously a deity of a herding community close to Mathura in North India" (Kulke & Rothermund, 2004, p. 146). Following a protracted period of ethnic integration, Krishna attained greatness and penetrated not just the Aryan myths but also their philosophical framework, giving rise to the *Bhagavad Gita*, an outcome of that integration.

The challenging process of blending Aryan civilization with other cultures is shown in the metamorphosis of deities like Vishnu. "Many non-Aryan influences emerged as Aryan civilization matured into Hindu civilization" (Burrow, 1975, p. 26), as ethnic integration advanced. Vishnu, who was initially an Aryan god, subsequently came to be linked with other ethnic deities, and Shiva, who was originally an Indian god and eventually merged with the Aryan god Rudra. In India, the employment of metamorphic motifs has evolved into a mythological strategy for bridging the gap between indigenous and foreign cultures, achieving cultural integration, and creating cultural communities.

Conclusion

There are motivations for the creation of each of the metamorphic themes found in Indian myths, including reincarnation, deity incarnation, and general transformation. It should be noted, nevertheless, that different metamorphoses might not all result from the same root cause but rather from a confluence of two or three variables. For instance, two factors that contribute to the reincarnation type of transformation are the soul's reincarnation and "The unity of Brahma and Atman".

The metamorphic motifs in Indian myths are vast and diverse, showing both the primitive and marvelous thinking of Indian forefathers and the cultural qualities of the later Indian nation following its progress. The spirit of cultural inclusivity, which integrates cultures of diverse peoples to

form a cultural community, is an outstanding embodiment of Indian myths' magical and spectacular style. This inclusive spirit has high artistic and cultural value, as well as cross-cultural comparison and reference, and is a significant source of inspiration for evaluating the mythology and cultural evolution of diverse ethnic groups in the East and even the world.

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