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Ancient Ballads and Legends: A Picture Gallery of Mythological Figures of Ancient India

Abstract: The native Indian temperament, pantheistic in its make up evinced the love of nature, myths and legends typical of Hindu philosophy. As far as Toru is concerned, she was anxious for the preservation and interpretation of Hindu myths and legends and thus tried to expound the multidimensionality of the Hindu view of life. In her Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan Toru Dutt has successfully striven to interpret the spirit of the East to the West. Tales of ancient Hindu life and mythology are narrated in poems alive with profound sympathy and enthusiasm. Hindu ideals of life and character are presented with force animation and vigour. The cycle of nine legends and ballads strung together in this

work must be of considerable interest to every Indian who has any pride in the characters that adorn the mythological gallery bequeathed to him by the ancient bards of this country.”

Key Words: Myths, legends, Hindu sentiments and traditions, classical, Vedantic

Ancient India was a land of myths and legends that are very intriguing and enlightening in the philosophical and spiritual knowledge. The poet of the earlier generation set out to offer an image of India and share his or her cultural heritage with his or her readers through the device of myths and legends.

Myths are narratives about divine or heroic beings, arranged in a coherent system, passed down traditionally and linked to the spiritual or religious life of a community. In the same way the term Hindu Mythology, is used by Western scholars for a large body of Indian literature that deals with the lives and times of legendary personalities, deities and divine incarnations on earth interspersed with often large section of philosophical and ethical discourse. It must be noted that many of the topic that fall under the category of Hindu mythology are cherished beliefs of Hindus.

Toru respected the gods of ancient India, and there is a deep reverence for an old faith in her heart. Toru's Christian faith does not conflict with her fascination for the deep magic of Hindu religion and epics. She had long been in search of roots and ultimately found them in the ancient myths and legends of her land. She agreeably responded to the heartbeats of the antique racial tradition.

In one of her letters to Mary Martin, Toru exclaimed: ‘How grand, how sublime, how pathetic, our legends are!’¹

As a child, she had heard the stories of the Hindu epics and Puranas, stories of mystery and miracle from her parents. Later exploration in the original Sanskrit had given a keener poetic edge still to the stories and the legends. The old ballads, full of heroism and

pathos, provided her a chance to have links with the living past of India and she cared not if Christian or septic raised their finger against her attitude.

The interesting aspect of these ballads and legends of Indian Mythology is that they are usually meant to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily life. Toru Dutt tries to demystify the myths, which used to prevail in Indian Mythology. It was thus with a very sure instinct that Toru sought in these deathless stories the right material for the expression of her own maturing poetic powers.² The stories Toru chose were quite well known and spoke of an ancient culture and heritage as traditional as the Greek legends. Toru herself commented – “The Sanskrit is as old and as great a language as the Greek”. Toru also had the advantage on the writers of today as being among the first to be able to present Sanskrit themes to a foreign world.³

Ancient Ballads⁴ shows how Toru’s intellect while thoroughly assimilating the spirit of French and English literatures found eventually its truest expression in Sanskrit literature. The stories are drawn from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and from the Vishnu Purana; a wonderful piece containing many legends of kings and sages. These classics embody the highest ideals of culture and civilization in Ancient India. The works of *Sir Edwin Arnold* and *Sir Alfred Lyall* created interest in and enthusiasm for the mysterious East in the minds of the western readers through the medium of English verse, but it was Toru’s destiny to be the first of her sex to interpret the soul of India to the west through her ballads.

No doubt, Hindu sentiments and traditions, is the focal point of Toru’s ballads. As such, Toru Dutt has served her motherland and its original tongue in the truest sense. C.F. Andrews is correct in his pronouncement: “Just as Greek and Roman poetry have become the classics of Christian Europe and have not been put under a ban because pagan mythology is mingled with them so the ancient Sanskrit literature of India will remain the classics of the land and its stories will be cherished in future ages by Christian. To Toru Dutt such an

assimilation of the best of life of India to Christianity came as a natural instinct. Her passionate love for the traditions of her country inherited from her mother in no way militated against her Christian faith".⁵

Let us take the stories of Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan in the context of Myths and legends. Savitri, the first legend of the volume, is in essence a mythological story taken from the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. It is an interpretation of life as found in ancient India. It is the longest and the most ambitious piece translated from five cantos between 293 and 297 in the second section of *Vanaparva* of the Mahabharata. Savitri, is one of the most beautiful legends in the Mahabharata, for it describes in an impressive language the persistence with which Savitri pleads with Death to restore her husband's life. Her pure and deep love for Satyavan is sufficient to overcome all obstacles. It never fails in its appeal to the heart of India. The constancy of the heroine, her purity and her extraordinary devotion to her husband are still considered as the highest standard of conjugal love today,⁶ and hence Indian parents bless their daughters "Be thou like her; in heart and head". (P-81). The story is narrated in an interesting manner and it is with breathless anxiety that the reader expect the final victory of Savitri.

The ballad is divided in five parts. In the first part, we get information about Savitri's birth and parentage, her unusual grace and her falling in love with Satyavan, her parents and Narad Muni's approval of her marriage with the youth of her heart. In the second we have Savitri's marriage with Satyavan, her going to the hermitage, her constant devotion to gods and goddesses by keeping fasts and vigils and by offering prayers, Satyavan's departure for the forest along with Savitri and the acute pain in Satyavan's head. In the third, the session in death's court is shown and the decision of Yama to go for the soul of Satyavan is communicated. In the fourth, we are told about Yama's arrival on the death scene, some Satyavan's death proper, Savitri's constant following of Yama and the philosophical

discussions of Savitri which pleases Yama so much that he grants three boons, including Satyavan's life to her. In the fifth, we learn about Satyavan's regaining of consciousness, his pleasant talk with his wife, their return to the hermitage and their happy domestic life.

As for Savitri, she has become immortal among the Hindus and her name is remembered with great respect at every Hindu marriage. She becomes immortal because of her strong will, selfless love and sense of duty.⁷ Toru dutt concludes the story in this manner:

To this day,
Her name is named, when couples wed
And to the bride the parents say,
Be thou like her in heart and head. (P-81)

Of all the ballads contained in *Ancient Ballads and Legend of Hindustan*, Savitri holds a significant place because of its length and quality. On the one hand, it presents the ideals of Indian womanhood, on the other; it highlights the fundamentals of *Vedantic* philosophy.

The next legend Lakshman, is taken from the forty-fifth cantos of *AranyaKandam* of the Ramayana. This legend is about the touching dialogue between Sita and Lakshman. The real literary beauty of the poem consists in the way the poet builds up the psychological and spiritual tension. Lakshman finally decided to go to rescue his brother from demons. The poem presents an insight into the strength of the bonds that binds the members of an Indian family. Harihar Das remarks that "No where, we think, outside Indian thought could we get so perfect a picture of brotherly loyalty".⁸ Lakshman remains loyal to the instructions of Rama and Sita is not the Sita of Ramayana, a perfect embodiment of virtue, but a woman of the common rank. Sita is foolish, cruel, and perverse, but Lakshman is wise, gentle, and understanding. Against his better judgment, he leaves her alone in the forest

Toru scores again through the simple sufficiency of her clear understanding of the tragedy at the heart of this old world order.⁹

Through Jogadhya Uma, Toru Dutt attains the final stage of maturity as a poet. It belongs to the folklore of Bengal. One of the possible sources for the particular folktale is a legend of the lake of Ranjit Rai on the way to *Kamarpur* in Hoogly district while another can be related to the event of the three-day festival of *Vaishaki Purnima* at Khirogram in Burdwan district.

This poem is unique for its dreamy, mystic beauty. Its theme is not drawn from any of the great epics or Puranas of Sanskrit but from folklore.¹⁰ In other words, we can say that Jogadhya Uma is about the unexpected appearance of the goddess Uma to a simple pedlar, and not to a ritualistic priest. In this ballad, simplicity of heart is placed above blind worship. The greatness of the goddess as well as the beauty of her appearance fascinates the reader most. It is a very lovely tale and a charming folk legend.¹¹ It is a beautiful idea, and there are thousands of such ideas about in our India. Toru did full justice to the appearance of a goddess in the guise of a simple girl.¹²

Toru selected to write this ballad in order to give the Western reader an insight into the simple piousness of our ancient Indian folklore. 'Although she had parted from her ancient faith and become a Christian, it would have been a poem destined to live in the religious poetry of Hinduism, and take a place among the songs of the people'.¹³

The Royal Ascetic and the Hind :

The legend of Jada Bharat in *The Royal Ascetic and the Hind* retells the story from the 13th canto of the second section of *Vishnu Purana*. The ballad opens in the form of a dialogue between *Maitreya* and *Parasura*. It narrates the failure of life of asceticism of King Bharat.

Toru concludes the poem with a strong defense of the hermit king's conduct and condemns the ideal of asceticism.

Not in seclusion, not apart from all,
Not in the place elected for its peace.
But in the heat and bustle of the world
'Mid sorrow, sickness, suffering and sin,
Must he still labour with a living soul?
Who strives to enter through the narrow gate.(p- 106)

In this ballad, love gets upper hand over painstaking asceticism; Toru upholds the right to love and questions the ethics of abandoning the world entirely, as the sages of India were wont to do. ¹⁴

The legend of Dhruva:

The legend of Dhruva, is also taken from the *Vishnu Purana* (Book I, Chapter X-XI). It relates the story of a prince, Dhruva, who was an ambitious, indignant child, anxious to get the love of his father. Suruchee, the favoured queen, did not like this as she wanted that the king's love be exclusively reserved for her own son Uttama. She scolds Dhruva to give up his proud ambition.

He was quite upset by her stepmother's rude behavior. Far from choosing humility as his goal; he decided to seek for himself his rightful place, whatever difficulties he had to face:

I shall try
The highest good, the loftiest place to win
Which the whole world deemes priceless and desires.(p-111)

Renunciation of all desires is regarded to be essential for eternal peace in Hinduism.

Dhruva renounced the position of worldly power for the sake of spiritual greatness.

Buttoo :

Buttoo, another ballad of this volume chosen from the 132nd Canto of *Adiparva* of the Mahabharata, is a popular description of one of the episode of that epic.

In Indian, Mythology Buttoo occupies an important place as someone who exemplifies the nature of *Guru Dakshina* tradition of teaching in India, showing extreme reverence for his *Guru*.

Harihar Das observed: All through the poem we have been carefully prepared for Buttoo's reverent devotion to Dronacharya, who had aroused in the boy an instinct almost of worship. Under the circumstances, the reader is a little jarred by the unexpectedness of the description of Buttoo's attitude at the crucial moment of his test for obedience:

There was no tear in Buttoo's eye,

He left the matter with his God.(p-111)

Noted critic Dr. A.N.Dwivedi in this context remarks: "But this attitude is not unexpected since it is only normal human behavior to react thus to a demand which revealed nothing but a spirit of mean vengeance. The teacher in Dronacharya failed the moment he demanded Buttoo's thumb. The pupil was now disillusioned, for he now realized that the man of his worship was incapable of rising above petty considerations. For him it was a shock too deep for tears. It is, however, doubtless that politics was held above morality in those days. Buttoo gave a superb example of patience and faithfulness by leaving the entire matter to his God, who alone was competent to judge the right from the wrong".¹⁵

Sindhu :

Next legend Sindhu, extracted from the Ramayana, deals with the eternal theme of parental love. Sindhu was an ideal son in his cheerful service of his argumentative, rigorous

parents. All the peevishness of old age was met by patience and sweetness on his part, for he loved to be 'their slave'. He was so dear to his parents 'that none his place might fill'. They were living in full peace in a small and rude cottage.

He went to fetch water from the river for his thirsty parents and was struck by mistake, with an arrow shot by the King Dasaratha. The king filled with remorse tried his best to save Sindhu but in vain. For his own part Sindhu was not sad to die but his heart was filled with dismay for his helpless parents. At last, he urges the king to carry the pitcher down the steep lane to the hut among the trees. 'He pointed – ceased – then sudden died'.^{P-115}

It was a big setback for the old and helpless parents. Miserable and desolate as they were, requested him to guide them to their bed of moss, for life had become meaningless for them. The King guides them where they desired, and watched beside them until the feeble flame of life flickered out. Before his death the old Muni had predicted that, Dasarath too, should one day die, 'for a son's untimely loss' with broken heart. In due course of time, the old Muni's prediction came true.

Prahlad :

The next ballad Prahlad taken from the Mahabharata, is the description of a boy's constant devotion to god, in face of bitter opposition and merciless cruelty at the hands of his tyrant father *HeerunKasyapu* 'a terror both of gods and men'.

Toru Dutt concludes this ballad with these words:

Tyrants of every age and clime
Remember this, – that awful shape
Shall startle you when comes the time,
And send its voice from cape to cape.
As human people suffer pain,

But oh, the lion strength is theirs,

Woe to the king when galls the chain!

Woe, woe, their fury when he dares! (p- 157)

The apostrophe shows Toru's inclination towards didacticism. The ballad contains, too, a good picture of the Eastern tyrant, fearless in his profanity, as his son was in his piety. Eastern, too, is the climax wherein the tyrant is miraculously struck dead by the direct intervention of the gods, and his son declared king in his stead

Sita

The last legend of this volume is Sita. The story is taken from the forty-eight section of *Uttarkandam* of Ramayana. It is very compact and short in length. It describes a scene that was very common in Toru's childhood when she and her brother and sister used to gather near their mother in the twilight and listen to the old, sad story of Sita's sufferings at the hands of Rama.

Toru Dutt has made a fine use of the classical tradition, myths and legends of olden days in her Ancient Ballads. Toru is out and out an Indian in this book. There are some beautiful scenes and sights of the native land in it. The ballads are soaked in Hindu ideals and sentiments and give a vibrant picture of Indian life and customs. The sententious remarks interspersed in the ballads suggest Toru's familiarity with the best expositions of the Hindu view of life.

As far as Hindu view of life is concerned, is primarily based on the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and the *Purana*. The two great epics – The Ramayana and the Mahabharata – are an essential part of Hinduism. Indian philosophers have always advocated a negative outlook to human life and God. It is this, which distinguishes Hindu thoughts from Western thoughts. In this context, one is tempted to quote Albert Schweitzer, "The Indian Aryans show an inclination to world and life negation, the Iranian–Persian and the European

Aryans leans to world and life affirmation. The difference of attitude had its origin in events and these are reflected in thought”¹⁶ By the European Aryans what Mr. Schweitzer means is the people living in Europe or Christians.

The prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include *Dharma* (ethics), *Samsara* (the continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth), *Karma* (action and subsequent reaction), *Moksha* (liberation from sansara) and the various *Yogas* (paths or practice). In simple words pessimism, suffering, disinterestedness, and other worldliness, the practice of yoga, renunciation, and spiritual discipline are the key factors of Hinduism. One can find out all these themes in the ballads and legends of Toru Dutt.

Perhaps the most clear and coherent expression of *Vedantism*, that there is only one God and that this world is as flimsy and transitional as a shadow—is to be found in Savitri. The protagonist of the legend Savitri defines this world as under:

I know that in this transient world
All is delusion, – nothing true;(p- 66-67)

These lines have maturity and a depth of thought rarely to be found in Toru’s poetry. The same poem presents another maxim :

I know in such a world as this
No one can gain his heart’s desire,
Or pass the years in perfect bliss!
Like gold we must be tried by fire. (p- 67))

Another ballad Buttoo is also full of *Vedantic* ideas. Buttoo reveals his firm desires to achieve a unique skill in archery in this manner:

And I shall do my best to gain
The science that man will not teach,
For life is as a shadow vain,

Until the utmost goal we reach
To which the soul points. (p-115)

Lines 3, 7 and 8 in the above passage are especially remarkable for *Vedantic* thought. In the legend of Prahlad, once again we get a glimpse of Vedantic philosophy, when Prahlad asserts that there is one God and that :

I fear not fire, I fear not sword,
All dangers, father, I can dare;
Alone, I can confront a horde,
For oh! My God is everywhere! (p-156)

Another Hindu philosophy is to be had in the following lines of Savitri :

The sun runs on its wonted course,
The earth its plenteous treasure yields,
All for their sake, and by the force
Their prayer united ever wields.(p-71-72)

In the same way – the reference of the ‘doleful lake’ in ballad Savitri is also noteworthy. The Hindus believe that the soul of a dead person has to pass through joyous or sorrowful places according to his deed or *Karma*. Again we find a reference from ‘*Upanishad*’ in the following lines of Savitri:

And then the inner man was tied
The soul no bigger than the thumb.(p- 64)

The Upanishad describe that individual soul or inner man (*Jivatma*) is as a mere thumb lodged in the heart of man.¹⁷

In the legend of Prahlad the poet highlights the victory of good over evil. Prahlad explained the Hindu concept of true wisdom and knowledge in reply to his tutor Sonda Marco:

That is true knowledge which can make
 Us mortals saintlike, holy, pure,
 The strange thirst of the spirit slake
 And strengthen suffering to endure.

In the same ballad at one place Prahlad questions: (p- 149)

Is death annihilation?

And he himself gives the answer:

No.

New world will open my view

When prosecuted hence I go

The right is right, – the true is true.(p-148)

Very famous saying of *Gita* is placed here. Death does not annihilate human beings since their souls are immortal, unchanging, omnipresent, static and imperishable.¹⁸In this ballad, there are references to the *Brahmins* (P-143), the holy *Vedas* (P-143-144) and *the pundits* (P-144). The speeches of the youthful Prahlad are full of energy and faith. His father inquired about God, his dwelling, his shape and his strength. Though Prahlad was somehow confused, still he replies firmly:

Hath He a shape, Or hath He none?

I know not this, nor care to know,

Dwelling in light, to which the sun

Is darkness, – He sees all below,

Himself unseen! In Him I trust,

He can protect me if He will

And if this body turn to dust

He can new life again instill. (p-155)

Today, Prahlad has become a symbol of true faith In the Hindu Scriptures, death is regarded as an opportunity to enter a better world in accordance with one's previous Karmas or Sanskaras. The Bhagvadgita teaches the same thing, the Ramayana also preaches the same spiritual and religious tenet.

Savitri impressively illustrates her views on the theory of *Karma* another important factor of Hindu thoughts:

And each shall suffer as he acts
And thinks, – his own sad burden bear!
No friends can help, - his sins are facts
That nothing can annul or square,
And he must bear their consequence.(p-67)

In the legend of Dhruva,Suneete, the mother of Dhruva interprets the doctrine of *Karma*:

The deeds that thou hast done,
The evil, haply, in some former life,
Long, long ago, who may alas! Annul,
The sins of previous lives must bear their fruit,
For glorious actions done
Not in this life, but in some previous birth. (p-11)

Sindhu too contains an illustration of the essentially Indian doctrine of *Karma*; a man's deeds, whether performed intentionally or unintentionally evil, will pursue him inevitably to a righteous retribution. The fatalistic doctrine of the popular Hindu philosophy is expressed in the following lines:

It is my destiny
O fear not thou, but pity one,

Whose fate is thus to die.(p-133)

To attain spiritual heights Dhruva sacrificed highly, as he abandons princely comfort and goes out to the woods. Dhruva declares firmly to his mother:

Let Uttama my brother, – not thy son, –

Receive the throne and royal titles,

I grudge them not. Not with another's gifts

Desire I, dearest mother, to be rich,

But with my own work would acquire a name.(p-112)

Finally, he did achieve the completely true mission of his life.

In choosing the legends of the past she was simply feeding as the modern poet, critic T.S. Eliot believes, the present, for anything creative could be built only on the edifice of tradition. Therefore, we can say in a way, that Toru was one of the modern poets drawing for her sources upon the popular tales of the past.

Literary Criticism:

Some critics have attacked Toru Dutt's approach to the ancient myths and legends of India. For example E.J. Thompson finds in these ballads only 'scattered beauties' and he complains that the poet 'stands outside the themes and does not enter deeply into them'. He further observes: 'Nor can I consider those themes as of anything like first-class value. Some have rustic charm which strikes the mind pleasantly enough, but not deeply; others had been handled ages before Toru took them up, by writers whose minds were primitive, as hers emphatically was not, and in sympathy, as hers again was not.'¹⁹ Edmund Gosse says that the ballads and legends read like translations of the original in Sanskrit.²⁰ All this criticism seems unjust. The poet's treatment of Indian myths and legends is imaginative and is governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. She has succeeded admirably in narrating the

stories powerfully and investing them with rich symbolic dimensions of implication and hum of meaning. As far as Thompson is concerned, he may be judging Toru in this instance too much as a foreigner, and does not seem to quite understand that. Despite Toru being a Christian, she was certainly able to become a part of the Hindu themes of which she wrote. Neither could the ancient Indian myths ever be old and primitive or lacking in first class value. Toru Dutt praise of Indian women is voiced in a letter to Mlle Clarisse Bader: “and I am proud to be able to say that the heroines of our grand epics are worthy of all honour and love”.²¹ She was much impressed by the wifely devotion that an Indian wife pays her husband, her submission to him even when he is capricious or exacting, her worship of him as her “god and her life”.

Conclusion:

One can conclude by saying: “In her Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan she has successfully striven to interpret the spirit of the East to the West. Tales of ancient Hindu life and mythology are narrated in poems alive with profound sympathy and enthusiasm. Hindu ideals of life and character are presented with force animation and vigour. The cycle of nine legends and ballads strung together in this work must be of considerable interest to every Indian who has any pride in the characters that adorn the mythological gallery bequeathed to him by the ancient bards of this country.”²²

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- अंगुष्ठमात्रः पुरुषौषन् रात्मा सदा जनानां हृदि संनिविष्टः। (कठोपनिषद् 2.3 , 17)
- न जायते, न म्रियते, वा कदाचित् न अयम् , भूत्वा, भविता वा न, भूयः अजः नित्यः शाश्वतः अयम् ,
- पुराणः न, हन्यते, हन्यमाने, शरीरे। (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter-2, Quote-20)

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