

JOURNEY FROM SHIVA TO MAHADEV: THE OATH OF VAYUPUTRAS

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The major focus of the paper marks the culmination of the journey of Shiva, the warrior, to Mahadev the savior of the universe. It attempts to study his mission, which is to save the community to which he belongs from the impact of evil and to preserve it from further destruction in the future. Shiva is obsessed to understand the nature of evil, as Tripathi puts it, "I was thinking that the primary source of Evil is human greed. It's our greed to extract more and more from good that turns it to Evil." (The Oath of Vayuputras 133). As events unfold his thirst for knowledge increases, "I need to know more, I have to know more." (52). The plot works at two levels social and personal, firstly it is the social obligation of Neelkanth to restore equality and liberty in a society which had become autocratic and unjust because of the greed for Somras. Secondly, it traces the bildungsroman of how an ordinary mortal is deified as Mahadev due to his valorous deeds, Tripathi writes:

'We don't become gods because we think we are gods', said the Mithra. That is only a sign of ego. We become gods when we realise that a part of the universal divinity lives within us; when we understand our role in this great world and when we strive to fulfil that role. There is nobody striving harder than you, Lord Neelkanth. That makes you a God. And remember, gods don't fail. You cannot fail. Remember what your duty is. You have to take Evil out of the equation. You shouldn't destroy all traces of the Somras, for it may become Good in times to come, when it might be required once again. You have to keep the knowledge of the Somras alive. You will also have to create a tribe which will manage the Somras till it is required once again. Once all this is done, your mission will be over. (403)

The Vayuputras are a secret group of followers left by the previous Mahadev Lord Rudra, who stay in the remote land of Pariha and are responsible for the creation of Neelkanth when evil forces become uncontrollable in the world. Shiva travels with Gopal, the chief of the Vasudevas, to seek their help because it is not easy to destroy evil. So the title symbolises the oath or promise of the Vayuputras to help, create, and assist the Neelkanth in his final fight to destroy evil.

The first two novels *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Secret of the Nagas* end on a cliff-hanger and leave several questions unanswered which are eventually revealed and *The Oath of Vayuputras* clear all the doubts which have plagued Shiva's soul. On meeting Brahaspati at Panchavati, Shiva comes to know about the evil Somras, and its ill effects on the people of India. He was pleasantly surprised to see Brahaspati's changed appearance:

The beard had been shaved, replaced by a pencil-thin moustache. The broad shoulders and broad chest were much better defined. The man must be getting regular exercise. The janau, the holy thread of Brahmin identity was loosely sling over newly developed muscles. The head remained shaven, but the tuft of hair at the back appeared longer and neater. The deep-set eyes had the same serenity that had drawn Shiva to him earlier. (4)

Brahaspati had spread the rumour of his death and to ally with the Nagas. He even destroyed his life's work Mount Mandar and he had been waiting for Neelkanth all these years to reveal to him the truth about Somras. Shiva is very happy to see his friend alive and embraces Brahaspati but he is very keen to know the reasons for his escape from Meluha. To which Brahaspati replies that:

I always trusted you, Shiva, said Brahaspati, but I could not trust all those who were around you. They would have prevented me from accomplishing my mission. I might even have been assassinated had they learnt about my plans. My mission, I admit, prevailed over my love for you. It was only when you parted ways with them, that I could meet you safely. (5)

The Oath of the Vayuputras can also be interpreted in an eco critical perspective as he discusses the various environmental issues here. Brahaspati explains that the large amount of water required to manufacture Somras had resulted in the depletion of the Saraswati river which explains the mythical disappearance of the river. The waste generated in the process of manufacturing the Somras was dumped in the Tsangpo River, which flows through Branga territory as the Brahmaputra and resulted in a disastrous plague. The birth of Naga babies was

also credited to Somras as it resulted in the multiplication of cells at a very high rate which lead to their deformation and outgrowths at birth. Shiva understands why, “Somras has tipped over from the greatest Good to the greatest Evil.”(6).

Shiva travels to the hidden city of Ujjain along with his entourage to meet the chief of Vasudev pandits, Gopal. He explains how the Vayuputra council, an ancient tribe left by the previous Mahadev Lord Rudra, dwelt the remote land of Pariha in the West and trained a member of their tribe as the Neelkanth when "evil" rises. Hindu mythology revolves around the notion of the good and evil, just as we only need light when we are in darkness, we can understand the value of good only when there is evil to compare it with. There is a place for everything in the universe—good and evil, happiness and sorrow, and life and death. In all the epics of Hindu mythology, the concept of nemesis plays an integral part for every ‘Kansa’ there is a ‘Krishna’ and for every ‘Ravana’ there is a ‘Rama’. There is no denying the fact that the evil plays a key role in bringing out the good. Shiva understands that it was his uncle Manobhu, who turns out to be a former Vayuputra member, trained him as Neelkanth for this very purpose. Seeing that Meluha is the centre of manufacturing the Somras, Shiva declares a holy war on the kingdom and appeals to the people to stop using the drink. Parvateshwar decides to join Meluha, since he thinks that it is his duty to defend his motherland, so does Anandmayi. Shiva also realizes that Maharishi Bhrigu is the mastermind behind the attack on Panchavati, plotting against him along with the Swadweepan emperor Dilipa and Daksha. As Shiva prepares for a series of battles the rulers of Branga, Vaishali and Kashi come to his aid. He takes the Nagas, the Brangas and the Vasudev elephant corps to attack Meluha, while Kartik and Ganesh attack Ayodhya and successfully prevent them from aiding Meluha. Shiva captures the city of Mrityukavatti and makes the citizens imprison the Meluhan army led by Vidyumali, who believes Shiva to be a fraud. He manages to escape and persuade Bhrigu and Parvateshwar to attack Sati's army with a thousand Meluhan troops, and defeats her.

Following this defeat, Shiva abandons the plan of invading Meluha and leaves for Pariha with Gopal; he wants to procure the deadly Brahmastra weapon, to threaten the Meluhans into making peace with them. There he meets the chief of Vayuputras, Mithra, who turns out to be his maternal uncle. Mithra convinces the Vayuputras that Shiva is the real Neelkanth and gives him the Pashupathiastra which acts on a specific target, rather than annihilating everything like the Brahmastra. Meanwhile, Parvateshwar uses decoy ships to give an impression to Kali that he was going to attack Panchavati. Alarmed, Kali takes the bait and leaves with the finest Naga soldiers in their pursuit, however, she realizes her folly and returns.

Daksha plans to assassinate Shiva and sends Vidyumali to get Egyptian assassins. He frames a peace treaty for Shiva but in his absence, Sati attends the peace conference and finds out the truth. She fights the assassins valiantly, but is killed. The war ends with Sati's death, but an enraged Shiva decides to use the Pashupathiastra to finish Devagiri forever. Parvateshwar, Anandmayi, Veerini decide to stay back in the city and die with it, but Kartik persuades Bhrigu to remain alive and share his vast knowledge with future generations. Shiva unleashes the astra and ends Devagiri's history, along with the Somras manufacturing units hidden beneath the city.

In the epilogue, Shiva retires to Mount Kailash where he lives the rest of his days peacefully, though missing Sati every day. Tripathi has retold the Shivpurana in a brilliant way and this sort of experimentation with Indian mythology was long overdue his concept of myth- thriller. During an interview with *Daily News and Analysis*, Tripathi says:

He had purposefully used the modern terms for the different historical locations described in the book, including calling India by its name, rather than its ancient name, *Jambudweep*. He did not believe that India could be represented as a political concept in his book, since at the timeline followed in the Shiva trilogy, India was still a cultural concept.”(Krishna, 3)

Some of the characters retain their mythological names, but do not follow the characteristic traits of the mythical characters. The author said: “When I was writing the first book, I was struggling with the Naga, because I wanted to desperately change his character – that he should be jovial and happy. But he kept ending up as a tormented and troubled a guy who was suffering. Popular Culture Studies celebrate the fragmented, the plural, the contingent and the local while rejecting universals and totalities.”(3). It sees representation as an end in itself calls into question the notion of a truth and collapses the distinction between original and copy. This is what Adorno says:

The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The illusion is created that the outside world is a straightforward continuation of what is presented on the screen. Real life becomes indistinguishable from the movies which leave no room for imagination or reflection, confronting the spectator with a rush of facts, precluding any space for sustained thought. (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126-127)

Although, Adorno is talking about movies and screen, but it also applies to this novel where we get so much involved in the episodes and incidents that we think this is the truth thus myth becomes transposed to a popular contemporary content.

All cultures have expressed mythical quest for an ideal state in terms of their hopes, dreams, imperial ambition, as well as highest state of grace, in such concepts as “Utopia”, “Promised Land”, “Kingdom of Heaven”, “Ideal Republic”, “Krita Yuga” or “Ram- Rajya” and the instrument for such transformation is an “Avatara”, “Bodhisattva”, “Visionary Seer”, a “Mahatma”, or a “Neelkanth”. Shiva despite being a common man has many heroic attributes as depicted in W.H Auden’s essay, “The quest hero”, “He resembles the hero of the modern world, a man of hidden powers, intelligence and trustworthy” (31). In a world of evil he is capable of radiating the invisible message of goodness, truth and justice to the people. When the Meluhans respect him as Neelkanth, he is not happy with the title and wants to know the reason behind it.

‘Who is Neelkanth?’ this question has been raised many times in the novel by the Meluhans, Gopal (Vasudev), and also by the main protagonist “Shiva” himself. Gopal is the mentor who enters Shiva’s life to explain the source of evil and to tell him that he has to bring it to an end. It is Gopal who makes Shiva aware of the fact that he is not an ordinary person, but a hero who has before him the awesome task of saving the world from the chaos generated by the imbalance of evil overpowering the good.

It has been defined that Vasudev are the tribe left behind by the previous Vishnu they are a secretive group of priests who wait through the millennia to assist the Neelkanth in destroying evil, whereas Vayuputras are the tribe left behind by the previous Mahadev, Lord *Rudra*. Both work to facilitate the arrival of Neelkanth, and mentor/assist him in the battle against evil forces represented by Daksha and Dilipa. The novel is named after Vayuputras and their oath; they are assigned the work of finding the “evil” in the society and the next great “good” in the world. It is the duty of the Vayuputra to control the institution of the Neelkanth, they train the eligible candidate for the role of Neelkanth and if they believe that evil has risen, they allow the identification of a Neelkanth. Gopal tells Shiva that they administer some medicine to the candidates as he enters adolescence. The effect of the medicine remains dormant in his throat for years till it manifests itself on his drinking the Somras at a specific age. When the Somras is given and it reacts with the traces of the medicine already present in the man’s throat it makes the neck appear blue. All of the activities have to be done at specific time period in the man’s life if, this is to happen the way it has been conceptualized. For example, if a man drinks the Somras more than fifteen years after adolescence, his throat will not turn blue even if he has taken the Vayuputra medicine as a child. People’s blind faith in the legend would ensure that they would follow the Neelkanth and evil would be taken out of the equation. Shiva was shocked to hear since he is not the member of the Vayuputra tribe how did he suddenly emerge out of nowhere:

Yes. Nobody really understood what had happened. We knew you were not a Vayuputra authorised candidate. Many Vayuputra infact believed that you were a fraud who would be exposed soon enough. Some even wanted you assassinated in the interests of the institution of the Neelkanth. But the leader of the Vayuputra, Mithra prevailed upon them and decreed that you be allowed to live out your Karma. (105)

It is a mystery why some people believe he is the Neelkanth while some people in Meluha think that he is mere barbarian. Shiva realises why his uncle gave him medicine in childhood. Lord Manobhu trained Shiva for his journey against evil and he is the one who prepared the medicine that is responsible for the blue throat of Shiva. This is revealed by Mithra his maternal uncle when he says, “Your uncle and I made the medicine together” (398). Shiva acknowledges that he is trained and educated for the fight against evil. He says, “I was trained by him, no doubt, he taught me ethics, warfare, psychology arts.”(113).

The chapter titled “The Kings Have Chosen”, depicts Shiva as a man of destiny, “The chosen one.” In spite of his apparent ordinariness Shiva is called upon to play the role of destroyer of evil. Gopal says that Shiva is not marked for any set task yet, he was given the Vayuputra medicine at the right age. He arrived in Meluha at the appropriate time and was given the Somras that made his throat turns blue. He is trained for the role of Neelkanth but nobody could tell him why he was the chosen one. Everyone was careful in communicating with Shiva because they did not want to create a bias in his mind. He arrives at the right answer by his own intellect to know since he desires to get the truth. Gopal said that this was ample proof that Shiva was chosen one and had been sent by *paramatma* to end evil. Gopal and the various other pundits prove to be the mentor who guides Shiva in his journey of self realization.

The wisdom of Shiva is also seen when he talks of choosing right methods to fight against the evil forces, “I don’t believe it is wrong to attack an unprepared enemy. Yes, their using Daivi astras can be considered questionable. Even so, two wrongs don’t make a right. I will not lie to win this war. We will win it the right

way.” (160). He is true to his dharma, but is not immune to temptations during his journey. But his heroism lies in his strong will power that resists all temptations. Mithra says:

I have heard stories about you, especially about the way you have fought your battles. You have behaved in an exemplary manner until now. Even when you could have gained by doing something wrong, you refrained from doing so. You didn't fall prey to the logic of doing a small wrong for the sake of the greater good; of the ends justifying the means. That takes moral courage. So yes, I have already made up my mind. But I wanted to see you in any case. You will be remembered as the greatest man of our age; generations will look up to you as their God. (402-403)

It's during his journey that he learns about Parmatma, the supreme soul. When he asks the meaning of Mandal, Gopal replies, “it's a symbolic representation of an approach to spirituality” (87). He further says:

The square boundary of the moat symbolizes Prithvi, the land we live on. It is represented by a square that is bound on four sides, just like our land which is also bound by the four directions. The space within the square represents Prakriti or nature, as the land that we live on is uncultured and a wild jungle. Within it, the path of consciousness is the path of the Parmatma, which is represented by the circle. (87)

Loyalty and self-sacrifice are the virtues inherent in Shiva, along with a natural ability to accomplish difficult tasks. His altruism is expressed by Ganesha when he says “Baba's mission is to fight for the oppressed; to be the voice of the voiceless.” (41). He condemned the Vikarma law and gave the victims the right to live with dignity and honour in society. He fought for the Nagas people when he came to know the secrets of the Nagas, and then he fought for the evil which was present in every single being and against the root of all evil which is “Somras.” He has hidden depths, unknown even to himself and is evidenced from his own visionary dreams, in which he saw:

Sati sat calmly atop a thick pile of wood. Her metal armour had been secured around her torso, carved arm bands glistened in the dusky light, her sword lay by her side and the shield was fastened on her back. She was prepared for war. But why was she wearing a saffron angvastram, the colour of the final journey? (354)

Shiva further sees that, “Sati opened her eyes and smiled sincerely. It appeared that she was speaking. But Shiva couldn't hear the words. The sound reached his ears with a delay of a few moments. ‘I'll be waiting for you.’”(354). The dream becomes a reality with the death of Sati, Shiva is no longer the Neelkanth but a husband crying over his dead wife. Sacrifice of the self for the welfare of others runs like a golden thread in the life of Shiva. He is prepared to sacrifice the love of his life for the good of society. Shiva laments the death of Sati, holding her body in grief:

Shiva sat there, immobile, shivering due to cold and his grief, stunned into absolute silence, staring into nothingness, despite sitting on ice, Shiva's brow throbbed desperately, as if a great fire raged within. An angry blackish-red blotch had formed between his brows. He had been sitting thus for many hours. He hadn't moved. He hadn't eaten. He had stopped crying. It was almost as if he had chosen to be as lifeless as the love of his life. (490)

The novel was expected to end happily as modern epic where Shiva and Sati return to Himalayas and people welcome them with the flowers showered upon their chariot but the end is tragic; after losing Sati, and after his battle against evil in *Devagiri*, Shiva becomes an ascetic and leaves for his heavenly journey.

In the subsequent years, Shiva became increasingly reclusive; he began spending many days, even months, in isolation within the claustrophobic confines of mountain caves, performing severe penance. He smiled once, only for a moment before he was to leave his mortal body. This indicates that Shiva gave up life because he understood its true meaning. He accomplished his heroic mission, gained respect because of his deeds and choosing to die, he follows the accepted pattern of a heroic figure who became God.

From Neelkanth Shiva achieves the godly form of Mahadev, an ordinary man becomes “God” that is the motif of *Mahadev—The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). Lord Shiva endowed with great qualities of a leader never boasted of any selfish motive and worked for the common good; this quality of Shiva makes him Mahadev, The Lord of Lords. He understood the true meaning of life and in his journey encounters several difficulties but with his wisdom he takes good decisions for the betterment of society. He takes the responsibility of all the people and worked for their welfare. Loyalty and self-sacrifice are the virtues imbibed by Shiva, along with a natural ability to accomplish difficult tasks. He was the voice of the voiceless; he condemns the Vikarma law and the treatment of discrimination on Nagas. He supported Sati and stand beside her in her difficult times. Thus, it is

the growth of Shiva from personal to social. And, in this manner Shiva, a man, becomes Mahadev the God of gods.

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