

Depoliticization in Hindu Rituals: A Critical Reading of Folktales

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Abstract:

This article explores and analyzes how rituals and practices in folktales are normalized and naturalized in order to depoliticize them. The rituals and practices prevalent have been mythologized and depoliticized with hidden political interest. The Brahmins and priests have created their own discourses, circulated them and shaped the minds of people and ultimately depoliticized keeping their own interests at the center. Therefore, we find the priests and Brahmins as the sources of knowledge, spirituality and life as they can solve all the problems communicating with god. In this sense, they have been deified and valorized which is political. But, it has been depoliticized in the name of cultures, rituals and practices associating with faiths, beliefs and human duties and responsibilities. It has been normalized, naturalized and factualized. Therefore, people do not think about it critically nor they question it rather they follow it taking it as an appendage. People's mind is appropriated in such a way that they can't even imagine rituals as political; they internalize the ritual practices. In this way, rituals and practices have been politically depoliticized because of the nexus between politics and religion, state and religious institutions. In this article, the deconstructive idea of Roland Barthes from his text *Myth Today* and Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony have been used to analyze the Hindu Folktales 'The Fox Who Saved the Priest', 'The Right Husband', 'Confrontation with Kichikinny', 'The Tale of the Seven Sisters' and 'Looking for a Husband' centering on idea of politico-religious nexus.

Keywords: depoliticization, folktale, hegemony, identity, ritual.

Introduction

Rituals are the beliefs, traditions, customs and the practices existing in the society since long. From the origin, humans practice different types of activities, behaviors and traditions in the process of living their lives. It is their way of life that creates culture from which they gain identity. Rituals are associated with religion too. Slowly and gradually, the rituals and practices become appendage to human beings and they continue as their culture and civilization. Whether the rituals are factual or not, human beings do not question rather they believe them. There is no critical thinking and questioning in rituals. It is the rituals that bring humans together with the communal feeling. Together in the community, people organize various ceremonies and celebrations with different faiths and beliefs. People follow the rituals like birth rituals, baptism, marriage, plantation, death etc. On the basis of the same rituals and practices, people create different folktales combining fact and fiction. Generally, the folktales have no specific writers as they have been orally transmitted from one generation to another.

Hindu rituals are based on spiritual aspects of life. Though Hinduism is a human civilization and philosophy, it has been dominantly established as religion which is to keep people under certain rules with fear and faith. Both as religion and civilization, Hindu rituals are largely practiced in India and Nepal where majority of people are Hindus. Hindus have so many rituals, mantras and gods and goddesses which demonstrates that Hindu culture is richest among all. The folktales reflect the society beliefs, rituals and practices with moral lesson to people generations to generations. Different beliefs, rituals and practices have their own rules and regulations. Yet, it is claimed that the major motive is to continue human civilization with faith, fear, encouragement, excitement, sense of responsibilities, will power and life force as a whole.

However, the rituals and practices prevalent have been mythologized and depoliticized with the hidden political interest. The Brahmins and the priests have created their own discourses, circulated them and shaped the minds of people and ultimately depoliticized keeping their own interests at the center. Therefore, we find the priests and the Brahmins as the sources of knowledge, spirituality and life as they can solve all the problems communicating with god. In this sense, they have been deified and valorized which is political. But it has been depoliticized in the name of cultures, rituals and practices associating with faiths, beliefs and human duties and responsibilities. It has been normalized, naturalized and actualized. That is why, people do not think about it critically nor they question it rather they follow it taking it as an appendage.

People's mind is appropriated in such a way that they can't even imagine the rituals as political; they internalize the ritual practices. In this way, rituals and practices have been politically depoliticized.

Depoliticization refers to the tactful mission of naturalizing and normalizing the political issues making people internalize them as non-political. Keeping self-interest at the center, the power or authority holders create such discourses transforming ultimately into a natural one. Especially, the government, socio-cultural institutions, priests, Brahmins and political leaders attempt to depoliticize the political with the hidden motive of doing politics. In this sense, even myths, rituals and practices are politically depoliticized and naturalized. "*Myth is depoliticized speech*" (Barthes "Myth Today"142). Depoliticization is presented, in the conference on *Depoliticization and the political today* (2016) as "We understand processes and discourses of depoliticization as a particular political strategy" (First Para.) It shows that depoliticization is a political trick. All the existing institutions of the society attempt to normalize even the highly political aspects, "depoliticization of life" (Second Para.). Commenting on her own edited book *Anti-politics, Depoliticisation and Governance* (2017), Matt Wood claims: "Depoliticisation is a way of understanding how the institutional structures governments create lead to public apathy (anti-politics) and potentially stall opposition to dominant socio-economic policies despite bubbling public discontent" (First Para.). The governments depoliticize their political agenda through natural-looking institutions and the structures. Wood continues: "Depoliticisation can be a highly effective strategy for governments seeking to displace responsibility for contentious decisions, and make those decisions appear non-political by manipulating the public's 'normal' discourse around what is and isn't a matter of politics" (Seventh Para.). It means the power naturalizes the discourse which people inculcate within themselves. But, through critical and other-side thinking, "depoliticisation might be resisted" (Sixth Para.). In the same light, the depoliticization of the deification of priests and Brahmins in Hindu rituals can be resisted and exposed as a political strategy.

The Brahmins and the priests make rules, norms, values and practices keeping themselves at the center. In all kinds of rituals, they make a system of offering *daan / dakshina* (gifts) to the priests and Brahmins to get blessings from god. In the cremation rituals, they need gifts which they give to the dead ones that helps them reach heaven without getting distracted. Thereafter the soul of the dead won't be distracted rather be pacified. Moreover, they form caste hierarchy and

discriminate against the untouchables. They tactfully create the discourses of their mediation to god for the people and make their own superior status. However, they do so in such a way that common people accept them as the cultural practices and religious ceremonies. It is nothing more than their depoliticization of the self-interest which is political. Yet, most of the researchers just make the informative research and present what happens in different cultures and societies. The other side of the ritualistic practices or the hidden interest within them remains unexplored. Therefore, this research attempts to look at the political aspects of the rituals, depoliticized by the Brahmins and priests, through the critical lens of Barthian Philosophy.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to explore how rituals, practices and myths are depoliticized in the name of cultures, beliefs, faiths and human civilization though the hidden motive of such depoliticization is political. This research also examines through some folktales how priests and Brahmins in Hindu societies are deified and valorized associating their role with cultures, norms and human values in order to superiorize them and inferiorize the others and to continue hierarchical structure making people internalize it as natural.

Methodology

This study is a library-based literary research and therefore, textual analysis method has been used here. Hindu Folktales “The Fox Who Saved the Priest”, “The Right Husband”, “Confrontation with Kichikinny”, “The Tale of the Seven Sisters” and “Looking for a Husband” are the basic texts for analysis. These texts have been analyzed from Barthian concept of ‘depoliticization’.

Theoretical Background

This study analyzes some folktales and representation of Brahmins and priests as deities and superiors in the Hindu societies. Moreover, it explores the politico-religious nexus in order to perpetuate the elitist structure in the name of ritualization formed by the rulers and the priests or Brahmins. To prove that myths, rituals and practices are politically depoliticized with discourses, Roland Barthes’ ideas of myth from *Mythologies* (1970) and Antonio Gramsci’s ideas of hegemony from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) have been used.

Review of Literature

Various researchers, theorists and critics have studied and interpreted myths and rituals from different perspectives. Joseph Campbell focuses on hero myth, Northrop Frye on seasons and genres and Levi Strauss on structural aspects of myths. But, Roland Barthes looks at the political aspect of the myths and rituals as they are politically depoliticized, and Antonio Gramsci claims that state creates hegemony through rituals and religious institutions. However, rituals are largely considered to be the source of human identity and problem solving. Talking about ritual and identity, Cristolph Wulf explicates:

Rituals play a central role in the development of individual and collective identity. While they were previously made a subject of discussion under the aspects of stereotyping, rigidity and violence, this examination concentrates on productive moments of rituals that contribute to making and forming the identity of communities and individuals. In ritual processes, the body, the senses and the performative actions of all parties involved play an important role. Rituals serve the community as a medium for generating and dealing with differences, for overcoming crises and for structuring transitions.
(Preface)

Rituals are the tools for generating identities, handling the differences and overcoming the problems and continuing the structures from generation to generation. Mainly, rituals are taken as a means of human civilization, harmony and order in the society.

Ritual is defined as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins 7). By contrast, research in psychology, which focuses more on individual-level processes, generally defines ritual as a particular type of action that is as likely to be solitary as it is not (Malley and Barrett 23). Prayer, for example, would fit unproblematically into the psychological research on ritual. Psychological research has further demonstrated that agency and identity are crucial to the creation of the sense of heightened meaningfulness linked to ritual activity. We consider the role of agency and identity alongside group participation in the process whereby ritual experience emerges for individuals to shed light on broader questions about the origins of ritual behavior, the development of new rituals, and the largely unexplored differences between individual and group ritual behavior.

Up to now, the researchers, commentators and the analysts have depicted the rituals as the cultural practices and folktales are reflections them. Whatever is presented in the folktales is culturally true and the folktales are full of moral lessons. But, the rituals and practices narrated in the folktales have not been looked at from the other side, except the one-sided summarization of them. Everything must be viewed and analyzed critically to explore the hidden meaning. Therefore, this research explores how rituals and practices, narrated in folktales, are depoliticized.

Textual Analysis

Generally, people believe myths, rituals and practices are natural and so they do not question them. They adopt them as their culture i.e. way of life. In Eastern folktales, the Hindu myths, rituals and practices are largely dominated by the superior role of the Priests and Brahmins who have nexus with the rulers. Glorifying the Priests and Brahmins in the rituals and practices, the folktales create hegemony upon the people which means people give their consent to control them by the power. The superior role of the priests and Brahmins is naturalized in such a way that people internalize it and follow it as religious reality. But, it is nothing more than depoliticization in order to continue the rule of the Brahmins and priests supporting the ruling class which is quite political in nature.

The ruling class people always try to create and continue the hierarchical structure in the society by superiorizing themselves and inferiorizing the others. They stand in support of the rulers so that they can preserve their system. The state makes a nexus with the religious institutions and the leaders who promote religious ideology. In all the rituals, myths and practices, the kings, priests and the Brahmins are depicted as saviours, pure and superior figures. The folktales reflect the same images with the hidden motive of promoting them. Their greater roles and people's dependency are depicted in such a way that they are naturally real which people cannot discard. It is the depoliticizing process in which the rulers and the agents do their politics. Roland Barthes, in "Myth Today", claims that myth is a depoliticized speech. He asserts:

... What myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality. And just as bourgeois ideology is defined by the abandonment of the name 'bourgeois', myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made. (142)

The real lose their quality and the false get the reward of reality due to the bourgeois ideological depoliticization of the rituals and the practices. Therefore, the Brahmins, priests and the kings as saviours is nothing more than naturalization of the false elitist ideology.

The practices depicted in the folktales are nothing more than the political practices of the rulers and the elites. However, they are presented in such a way that they are the realest things in the world. People even do not know how the political interest is depoliticized and made real. Barthes acclaims:

The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence. It is now possible to complete the semiological definition of myth in a bourgeois society: *myth is depoliticized speech*. (142)

It is the priests' great politics to present the ritualistic practices as culture, civilization and the respect to god in the process of living life making them the way of life. They are the bourgeois and create false beliefs to the people emptying the realities. Therefore, myth made by the elites is a depoliticized speech.

Myth gives historical intention a natural justification and makes contingency appear eternal. It is nothing more than a bourgeois political ideology though it is depoliticized. Barthes depicts:

Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. Now this process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society. (142)

Myth is the greatest weapon of the bourgeois to reverse the truth in the society. Though reality is inversed, people take it as real because myth is associated with religion, cultural practice and belief which ultimately become way of life. The folktales carry the same ideology of the bourgeois in the form of the practices which are naturalized. The folktales try to reflect that priests are superior and common people are inferior as people believe and practice whatever the priests tell taking it as inherently true.

In the folktale, we find the existence of the *Kichikinny* as the incomplete cremation changes the nymphomaniac girl's soul into a log or a bone and haunts people in the form of a beautiful lady. This is the myth created by priests and the people believe without questioning it. Only the *mantra* of the priests can remove the fear and haunting of the *kichikinny* and so people worship the priests as saviours. The folktale is:

The rowdy young boys search the *kitchinnay* and find the most beautiful woman standing at the cross-roads next to a *lukmadya* on the moonlit night. They held her down all the night and when the first rays of dawn appeared all they found was a charred log. They consulted the priest and on his command they slit the log with an axe. To their surprise blood spurted out from the middle, and with each blow a yelping sound followed. The priest guessed that the log must have been used for burning in the cremation pyre of the beautiful nymphomaniac girl. The cremation party must have returned home before the whole body was burnt and because of rain or some other reason, the fire must have been extinguished. As a result of the incomplete cremation, the nymphomaniac's soul had entered a log. So the priest told them to burn every splinter of the log. After that nobody ever heard of the *kichikinny* in that locality again. ('Confrontation with a *Kichikinny*')

The folktale carries the discourse of the priests. It forcefully establishes a claim that the priest is omniscient and can liberate people from the troubles of *Kichikinny*. But, people do not question it rather they take the power and knowledge of the priest as natural not political as it is tactfully depoliticized.

Context determines truth and falsity. Myth and truth are totally different. The elite people create myth according to their necessity and problems in life. Through the myth, they serve their self-interest which is political. But, it is depoliticized in such a way that people take it natural not political. Barthes mentions: "Men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they depoliticize according to their needs" (144). Needs borne the myth and then gets depoliticized. The language with the powerful use is a metalanguage. Barthes presents:

Now myth always comes under the heading of metalanguage: the depoliticization which it carries out often supervenes against a background

which is already naturalized, depoliticized by a general metalanguage which is trained to *celebrate* things, and no longer to ‘act them’. (143)

Depoliticization destroys people’s critical thinking and action. Therefore, people celebrate the ideological practices of the priests without questioning them. The folktales spread the discourse of *reincarnation*, *mantra* of the priests, sacrifices of the *sages* and the justice of the *king*. They put forward the priests’ ideologies naturalizing them so people internalize them.

Because of the nexus between the rulers and the priests, rituals are inconspicuously depoliticized. The kings protect the priests and the priests support the kings whereas the common people understand their vested interests as natural human practices. The folktale claims:

One day, on the course of the journey, one of the three suitors met a very learned Brahmin who was known for his power of returning the dead to life. The guru was very happy with the young man’s dedication and taught him many rituals. He went straight back to the place where the woman had jumped into the fire. With the power of the knowledge he had achieved, he mumbled a mantra over some water and sprinkled it over the ashes. At once the girl was reborn and rose up, yawning as if she had been in a deep sleep. At the same time, the man who had committed suicide along with the girl also appeared. They all agreed to visit the Gorkha King whose powers of fair unprejudiced judgement were well known. The man with ascetic life became her husband. The three men were convinced by the king’s fair and rational judgement. (“The Right Husband”)

The folktale “The Right Husband” carries the ideologies of the king and the priests normalizing and naturalizing them so that people blindly believe, follow and practice them as their ways of life. The *mantra* of the priests revives the dead and when there is a problem, the king solves it. In this way, we find the representation of the kings and priests as saviours in the society.

Antonio Gramsci claims that the religions, practices, rituals, norms and values are set up by the intellectuals and religious institutions which always promote the bourgeois ideology and culture that hegemonizes the people. In *The Prison Notebook* (1971), he displays:

‘All religions, even the most refined and sophisticated are “folklore” in relation to modern thought’, but with the difference – indicated by the

quotation marks given to ‘folklore’ – that the great religions are ‘elaborated and set up’ by intellectuals and organized religious institutions. (109)

All the rituals are established in order to fulfill the self-interest of the rulers and the elites. The folktales carry the same rituals with vested interest in the manner that they are natural rather than political but actually they are political though depoliticized.

Folktales serve the interests of the rulers and the elites promoting their culture naturalizing it. Though folktale claims to be the carrier of the culture of the common folk, it stands boldly to endorse culture of the dominant class. In another note on folklore Gramsci inscribes:

folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and, in its own way, has drawn from it the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with the previous traditions ... there is nothing more contradictory and fragmentary than folklore (*Cultural Writings* 194).

Gramsci claims that folklore is more contradictory and fragmentary even than the fictional stories. But they are made natural, real and cultural and are ultimately depoliticized though hidden motive is continuity of the superior rule of the elites.

There is always a “symbiotic” relationship between folk culture and official culture: “The official exists in no small measure because it defines folklore, but folklore exists (and with it, ways of living beneficial to certain groups or people) in part because it officiates as the ‘Other’ for the official” (Gencarella, “Folk Criticism” 259). In this symbiotic co-existence of folk culture and official culture, it is the former which keeps on displaying remarkable flexibility through its cultural attributes of fluidity, pliability and elasticity and its social predicating of a resistance to official conceptions.

Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (1977) defines the word hegemony. Hegemony attempts to neutralize opposition, “the decisive hegemonic function is to control or transform or even incorporate [alternatives and opposition]” (113). One can argue persuasively that “the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture” (113).

The Brahmins and priests are depicted as kind-hearted, sacred and responsible in the folktales. They are not presented with their real face inside. They are always the good images in the society though they do politics in the name of rituals and practices which people internalize as natural. This is nothing more than depoliticization of myths and rituals in Hindu society. Let's see the folktale:

Once upon a time, there lived a very kind-hearted Brahmin priest who spent most of his time performing rituals and worshipping for the inhabitants of different villages. The Brahmin was very scared by the sight of such a ferocious animal (lion), but his kind-hearted nature wouldn't allow him to ignore his duty. ("The Fox Who Saved the Priest")

"The Fox Who Saved the Priest" depoliticizes the Hindu political practice of superiorizing the priests and Brahmins depicting them as holy and godly figures in the society.

Gramsci uses the term hegemony to talk about the power exercise in the society. The ruling class controls the common people through their own consent. The people happily let the ruling class dominate them as they are unaware of tactful depolarization by them. Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebook*, marks: "the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (244). Hegemony is defined as *consent* organized by the organizations of civil society as opposed to the state with its apparatus of *coercive* power.

The two levels ('civil society' called private and 'political society' or 'the State') correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government. (12)

Civil society includes organizations such as churches, trade unions, and schools, which as Gramsci notes are typically thought of as private or non-political. A major piece of Gramsci's project is to show that civil society's ways of establishing and organizing human relationships and consciousness are deeply political, and should in fact be considered integral to class domination (and to the possibility of overcoming it), particularly in Western Europe. According to Gramsci, civil society corresponds to hegemony, while political society or "State" — in what

Gramsci will call the “narrow sense” (264) — corresponds to “‘direct domination’ or command” (12)

In “The Tale of Seven Sisters”, the good is rewarded and the bad is punished. Truth gets victory over the falsity. This folktale gives us a moral lesson and moral pressure to remain passive without questioning anything. The ruling class people teach others to be good but they themselves misuse their power and resources. It is nothing more than depoliticization of their political interest of remaining superior among others. “They then served him the eighty-four traditional feast dishes. They gave her a present of a *marakashi*. The evil step mother died. God had given the such great wealth.” (“The Tale of Seven Sisters”) Here, god is valorized and created hierarchy presenting the events as if they are natural.

According to Gramsci, one of the most important functions of a State is “to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling class” (*The Prison Notebook* 258). In the name of morality, the elites rule the common people. They depoliticize the ideology and hegemonize the people. They always try to destroy the ambition, expectation and critical faculty of the people by limiting them with moral lessons: let’s see the Hindu Folktale:

The lady rat, to live the happiest life in future marrying the most important person in the universe, decided to begin the course of religious penance. She spent days doing nothing but meditating and worshipping the God Vishnu, the benefactor of the universe. While choosing the best suitor for her, she hears about the sun, the cloud, the wind, the mountain and the rat itself ultimately. The mountain said, “The rat: he has such powerful teeth and claws that he can crush all my foundations”. Then the lady rat forgot her ambitions, married to her clan and lived happily. (“Looking for a Husband”)

The lady rat ultimately leaves her ambition and decides to marry her own clan i.e. the rat as she is taught a moral lesson that she has to marry only with the same line. Through such presentation, the folktale limits and hegemonizes the people. It endeavors to perpetuate the hierarchical structure of superiority and inferiority.

Conclusion: Ritualization or Politicization?

To conclude, even though myths, rituals and the cultural practices are sources of humanization, identification, civilization and life as a whole which maintain peace, discipline and harmony in the society among the people through fear and faith, they are nothing more than the depoliticized political speeches by the nexus of the rulers and the priests. The priests and the Brahmins create the discourses, associate them with the culture, mythologize them and ultimately naturalize them with the vested interest of superiorizing themselves and inferiorizing the common people. But the common people internalize such products of the hidden interests as their ways of life rather than the politics of the elites- rulers and priests. When the common people find such things as normal and practice and continue them as appendage, the elites hegemonize them. The rulers to continue their rule and the priests to perpetuate their superiority support each other forming a political nexus. The folktales are nothing more than the weapons of the rulers and the priests to achieve their goal of elongating their rule. The Hindu Folktales “The Fox Who Saved the Priest”, “The Right Husband”, “Confrontation with *Kichikinny*”, “The Tale of the Seven Sisters” and “Looking for a Husband” based on politico-religious nexus depoliticize the interests of the elite class associating them with cultural and religion practices for civilization and humanity. It is depolitically political.

Lastly, in the world trend of making research on folktales from the anthropological and informative approach highlighting on the ritualistic practices as human values, but without critically displaying the other side of them, this research can be a step forward to develop critical approach in analyzing rituals depicted in the folktales. It sets a path in political reading of the rituals and practices considered to be natural.

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