Is Mahishasur a myth?


Kanwal Bharti December 22, 2018

A researcher of Dalit Literature at Allahabad University was in a dilemma when he had to write a chapter on myths in Dalit Literature. He had finished with the other chapters but was not able to find any material on myths. He spoke in this regard with some eminent writers of Dalit Literature. Most of them said they did not believe in myths, some even said there was no work in Dalit Literature on myths. He then asked me if indeed there was no work on myths in Dalit Literature. My reply was: “Gentleman, Dalit literature was born of myths. Who says that no work has been done on it?”

I further explained that our myths are primarily the stories of the Puranas. Jotirao Phule came up with probably the first important work on it. His book Gulamgiri is but a critical review of the myths. His history of native people of the land is based on the myths of Hindu avatars. The Dalit belief is that while myths are not history, there is definitely history in them. Dr Ambedkar picked up where Phule left off. He analysed the conflict of Aryans and Non-Aryans in the light of myths. He was the first thinker to treat danav, rakshasas, daitya, kinnar, naag, yaksha – the asur communities – as humans and outline their historical struggle.
Dr Ambedkar classified theology into two kinds – one, mythical (ie based on the Puranas) and second, civil (ie human). Mythical theology imaginatively describes the gods and their magical powers. In his book *Riddles in Hinduism*, he has critically reviewed Hindu mythical theology. He was the first to ask questions about the chivalry of and battles fought by the five goddesses – Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati, Durga and Kali. He has asked why only the Puranic goddesses and not Vedic goddesses fought wars. He has also asked why Brahmins declared only Durga, who massacred Asurs, a heroine. These questions have paved the way for research on myths.

Recently, an important book, *Mahishasur: Mithak va Paramparayen* (Mahishasur: Myth and Traditions), edited by Pramod Ranjan, was published by Forward Press in collaboration with Marginalised Publication. The book lets the reader travel through the living history of the myths of Durga and Mahishasur. The book is divided into five parts – ‘Yatra Vrittanta’ (Travelogues), ‘Mithak aur Paramparayen’ (Myths and Traditions), ‘Andolan Kiska, Kiske liye?’ (Whose movement? Who is it for?), ‘Asur: Sanskriti aur Samkaal’ (Asur: Culture and the Past), and ‘Sahitya’ (Literature). It also has an appendix.

Pramod Ranjan travelled to far-off places in search of historical, archaeological traces of Mahishasur. It is an exciting and thrilling narrative. Before discussing the book, let me first quote from his introduction on the Adivasi beliefs about Mahishasur. Pramod Ranjan writes, “There are reports of celebrations of Mahishasur Day from hundreds of places in Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. However, for the first time, there is news that complaints have been filed at police stations against defamation of Mahishasur and Ravana and demands have been made for action against Durga Puja committees. People gheraoed police stations and local authorities and took to the streets raising slogans of ‘Jai Mahishasur’ and ‘Jai Raja Ravana’. In some states, various organizations came together to demand that Durga puja celebrations be stopped. Protestors also included elected representatives. On the other hand, cases have been registered against the alleged insult of goddess Durga and police harassment continues. This month (October 2017), cases were registered and several persons arrested in Delhi, Bulandshahr, Jamshedpur, Wardha, Dadra and Nagar Haveli for alleged insult of goddess Durga. In some places in Jharkhand, the police tried to stop people from observing ‘Mahishasur Divas’.”

This devotion towards Mahishasur is not a sudden development. Rather, the custom has a history that has not been written down and has been destroyed. The travels of Pramod Ranjan, Naval Kishore Kumar and Anil Varghese search for this tradition. In ‘Mahoba mein Mahishasur’ (Mahishasur in Mahoba), Pramod Ranjan writes, “We have two photographs. In one, there is a stone structure that neither looks like a temple nor a house. It looks like a small hut made of slabs of unpolished stone. The other picture is of a signboard on some road, on which is written: ‘Bharat Sarkar: Kendriya Sanrakshit Smarak, Bhainsasur Smarak Mandir, Chauka Tehsil, Kulpahad, Bharatiya Puratatva Sarvekshan, Lucknow Mandal, Lucknow, Upmandal Mahoba, Uttar Pradesh’ (Government of India: Central government’s preserved monument, Bhainsasur Memorial Temple, Chauka Tehsil, Kulpahad, Archaeological Survey of India, Lucknow Division, Lucknow, Sub-Division, Mahoba, Uttar Pradesh). *India Today*’s Piyush Babele had sent these photographs to Pramod Ranjan on 16 October 2014.
Let me digress a bit. I remember there is a place in Lucknow known as Bhainsakund. This was an area inhabited by dairy farmers. If we do some research, it is likely that we will discover some connection of Bhainsakund with Mahishasur.

Anyway, Pramod Ranjan and his friend Rajan went looking for the places that were in the photographs and reached Mahoba. The travel was rough, involving journey by train, bus, tempo and autorickshaw, and walking. If one is passionate enough, one can trek with bare minimum like Rahul Sankrityayan; these are people who can trace diamond in stones. There are such intellectuals, too, who travel by planes and luxury cars and find nothing. They (Pramod and his friend) finally arrived in Kulpahad but discovered there was no such temple. However, they were not disheartened. The residents of Kulpahad directed them to a place called Chauka about 80 kilometres away. They took an autorickshaw on hire and left for Chauka. They crossed into Madhya Pradesh border and reached Harpalpur. Just as they were moving towards Jhansi, they spotted a signboard on the highway that said "Bhainsasur Smarak Mandir, Chauka Tehsil, Kulpahad, Bharatiya Puratattva Survekshan". It was the signboard from the photograph! He writes, “We shouted with joy. We were so happy that we took photos of each other, making victory signs in front of the signboard.”
We then headed to the temple, the Bhainsasur Smarak Mandir. He writes that the stone structure situated on a hillock did not look like a temple at all. The main structure that an ancient feel to it was like a small room. This had an entrance which the archaeological department had closed with an iron door. The village in which this temple is situated is known as Koiri (Kushwaha) Bahul. Apart from the Kushwahas which form the main population of the village, there are Ahirwars, along with some Brahmins and Rajputs. The neighbouring villages have a considerable number of people belonging to the Pal community. Koiri Bahul looked like a poor village. The village also has a well-decorated Durga temple where people worship in large numbers. No puja is performed in the Bhainsasur temple. (Page 21)

While exploring Mahoba, they came across a Gorakh temple on a hill. Apparently, Gorakhnath and his disciples had spent a few years there. A Gorakhpanthi sadhu told them of five small images on a trident-shaped base on the ground outside the Shankar temple on the way uphill – that, according to him, was the Mahishasur temple. Pramod Ranjan has included a transcript of the long conversation with the sadhu in this travelogue. According to the sadhu, it was mainly Yadav and the Pal communities who were Mahishasur devotees. They usually prayed for their cattle at the temple. Many villages of Mahoba had “places” dedicated to Mahishasur. In Rajasthan, there is such a “place” in Jaanjh, where Mahishasur is known as Karas Dev. It is believed that Karas Dev was the younger brother of Mahishasur. The sadhu said that Maikasur also had two brothers – the elder was known as Ajay Paar. In fact, Mahishasur, Maikasur, Karas Dev and Karia Dev are all names of a single entity. They are collectively also known as Gwaal (Dairy) Baba (page 29).
Maikasur “sthal” on the bank of Keerat lake

The Gorakhpanthi sadhu also gave them the locations of all the prominent Mahishasur-related “places” in the surrounding villages. Pramod Ranjan writes, “It turned out to be a secret tunnel, that became a network of tunnels, all hinting at a large Asur civilization, their modern techniques of agriculture and animal husbandry, their love for nature, their values based on equality, being met with terrible violence and coming to an end.” (page 30)

They found the first “tunnel” in Mahoba, on the banks of Keerat lake. On a two-foot gate to 300–400 square yards of space with a perimeter wall was written “Prachin Maikasur Mandir” (Ancient Maikasur Temple). There was no building and no idol – just seven conical, stupa-shaped figures. A local resident told them that it is believed that Maikasur cures animals and
usually offerings of milk and cauliflower are made to the deity. Here, they also learnt of a newly constructed Maikasur temple in Mohari village. When they reached Mohari, Pramod Ranjan writes, “We did not see any temple there either – not architecturally speaking, at least. There was a cement platform over which was a roof supported by four pillars. There was a statue of a buffalo, on the right of which was the statue of a woman who stood holding the reins of a horse. On the top were a rack and the sculpture of a peacock.

Here, Pramod Ranjan asks a few questions: “Did the people of this land have a cultural connection with the buffalo (Mahish)? Was the buffalo their gotra? Or was ‘Mahish’ a synonym for a king and a hero? But who is the woman and why was she next to Maikasur?” Here, he quotes D.D. Kosambi, “in some places in Mahoba, Durga is seen killing Mhasoba (Mahishasur), in other places she is present as his consort or wife.” It is clear that Durga, like Mahishasur, belongs to a non-Aryan community. “What is this horse that belongs to Aryans doing here?” asks Pramod Ranjan. “Was the woman coerced into acting as Mahishasur’s partner?” (page 33)
Furthermore, he tells us, “In all temples in Mohari village, the puja ritual is carried out by Brahmin priests. But the Maikasur priest belongs to the Pal community. All Dalit-OBC communities such as Gadhariya, Koiri, Ahir and Lodh worship Maikasur. Among Dalits, it is chiefly the Ahirwars who are Maikasur devotees. Gradually, the deity is being given the form of Shankar (Shiva). We talked with several elders in the village and asked them when the worship of Durga began in the area. ‘A mere 15-16 years ago’ was the unanimous answer.” (page 34)

From Mahoba, they went to Khajuraho. To their amazement, one of the sculptures in the temple had the face of a buffalo and headgear made of horns. The figure had four arms, the upper left hand held a trident while the upper right hand held what looked like another weapon. On its forehead was a religious symbol of the Gonds. The lower left hand was held in a gesture of making an offering and the lower right hand held a kamandal. There were nearly a dozen similar figures in the temple. In Khajuraho, Pramod Ranjan met with Hindi author Sharad Singh, who was researching on the temple sculptures. She was of the opinion that the figures were that of Nandi, the celestial bull. However, he writes, “So many villages in Bundelkhand have Mahishasur temples, known by the names of Bhainsasur, Maikasur, Karas Dev, Gwal Baba. Then 70 km away, at Chauka Sora village, the Archeological Survey of India has preserved the ‘Bhainsasur Smarak Mandir’. Isn't it then more likely that the heads of these sculptures are that of a buffalo and not a bull?” Very little work has been done on Indian sculpture and architecture. Pramod Ranjan writes high-quality, evidence-supported research is almost negligible. In the future, he says, when researchers from Bahujan communities come up, they will be able to recognize true facts in the light of non-brahmanical traditions. (page 43-47)

Pramod Ranjan draws a few important conclusions from his travels. He says, “The one evident difference between the Bahujan-Shraman traditions related to Mahishasur in Bundelkhand and the Brahmin traditions is that while the gods belonging to the latter live in temples (they need buildings), the Bahujan-Shraman tradition does not even have a God – they have ancestors who live in their homes, fields and barns, mostly in the open. In the Brahmin tradition, god lives in idols. They have been given the human form through the idols. The Bahujan-Shraman tradition mostly does not have idols – it has mounds which in the beginning perhaps symbolized a special place accorded to someone. In the Bahujan-Shraman tradition, their ancestors are part of their lives and occupations – they come to them and speak to them. [page 49]"

Title: Mahishasur: Mithak aur Paramparayen

Editor: Pramod Ranjan

Publisher: Forward Press

Pages: 360

Price: Rs 350 (paperback), Rs 850 (hardback)
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About The Author

Kanwal Bharti

Kanwal Bharti (born February 1953) is a progressive Ambedkarite thinker and one of the most talked-about and active contemporary writers. Dalit Sahitya Kee Adharnaa and Swami Achootanand Harihar Sanchayita are his key books. He was conferred with Dr Ambedkar Kashtriya Award in 1996 and Bhimratna Puraskar in 2001.