

The Monomyth of Vikramaditya

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Higher Education

Government of Madhya Pradesh

India

shubh60@yahoo.co.in

Abstract

The legendary king Vikramaditya, revered in India as an epitome of valour and justice is an enigmatic paradox of historical reality and mythic truth. Despite several textual references, his historical presence, is ambiguous and lacking in epigraphic evidence. The credibility of the Vikramaditya legend has often been disregarded by factual historians sniffing and screening out elements of fantasy in the tales. However, the eternal spirit of Vikramaditya is beyond what eyes can see and beyond what the mind can prove. While from a historical standpoint an accurate account of the King would inevitably remain incomplete, Vikramaditya, the archetypal hero is absolute and ephemeral. His identity as an archetypal the hero, typically confirms to the archetypal structure of the 'mono-myth' and is analogous to mythic parallels of several cultures. This paper undertakes to examine king Vikramaditya with respect to the archetypal manifestation of his existence, in the mythic perspective.

Keywords: Vikramaditya, Vetaal Panchavinsati, Archetypal Hero, Monomyth

The relationship between the historicity of Vikramaditya and the reality of his legendary story is complex and disputed. There are two broad categories of theories centred

around the legendary king. The first, confirms the authenticity of legends involving Vikramaditya and establishes him as the king of Ujjain in the first century BCE. The second disregards the mythic material as reliable evidence and postulates Chandra Gupta II as the representative ruler of the Vikramaditya tradition.

The legendary king Vikramaditya appears in literature and myths as the epitome of justice, valour and rightful conduct. The question of king Vikramaditya's historicity has captured public fascination and ignited scholarly debates. While the historic narrative of Vikramaditya, the historical person, is ambiguous and lacking in epigraphic evidence, the Legend of Vikramaditya, the mythic hero, is ever green and timeless. The legend transmitted initially through the oral tradition, lives on to give testimony, where historic records have failed.

He is usually regarded as the universal ruler of India with his head- quarters at Ujjain in the Malwa region, though, in a few early cases, he is called 'the lord of Pataliputra' (the capital of Magadha). There are multitude myths, highlighting qualities of the ideal king, reiterating the significance of the mythic rather than historic persona of the legendary hero.

He appears in myths as a super human preserver of the weak and oppressed, an incarnation of valour and righteousness that earned for him the name Sahasanka (literally, 'one whose characteristic mark is the daring courage') and a liberator of India from foreigners, often specifically called the Sakas. His greatest achievement was the destruction of the Sakas and this is illustrated by his epithet or secondary name Sakari (Sakadvis, etc.) meaning 'the Enemy of the Sakas'.

Vikramaditya may be best understood not as a single historic person but rather as an epitome of qualities assumed by great kings from time to time. Tradition thus places Vikramaditya in the first century BCE. Several Indian kings, revered the legendary king Vikramaditya and his name became a venerable title for seekers aspiring for the glory.

The Orality of the legendary king has been recorded in several ancient texts, the most significant of the surviving ones include *Baital Pachisi* and *Singhasan Battisi*. The legends contain the archetypal ethos and are evergreen, still manifesting themselves in hyper media and television serials and cartoons. Most of the legends glorify the legendary ruler as a “*chakravarti samrath*” or a universal ruler.

The Jain text *Kalakacharya Kathinaka* elaborates upon the narrative of outlines the story about Gardabhila, King of Ujjayini, who abducted Saraswati, the sister of a Jain monk Kalaka. Kalaka, in order to take revenge sought help of the Saka chiefs settled on the territory on the other side of the Indus. The Sakas defeated Gardabhila and seized Ujjayini. The king Vikramaditya, defeated the Sakas, and started an era of his own, known as Vikram Samvat. One thirty five years after 'Vikrama-Samvat', the Sakas won back Ujjayini again and started an era of their own - the Saka era.

Another account of Vikramaditya appears in *Gathasaptasati*, a Prakrit anthology composed by Hala, the king of Pratihsthana. The *BrihatKatha* by Gunadhya, written in Paisachi Prakrit, the original text of which is lost, but the tales are recounted in two important Sanskrit works - the *Brihat Kathamanjari* of Kshendra and *Katha Saritsagar* of Somadeva.

The Jain *Pattavalis*, written in Prakrit, which record the names of rulers of Avanti chronologically, place a king named Vikramaditya about the middle of the 1st century BCE. The *Harivamsha* too mentions the lineage belonging to Vikramaditya and records a list of rulers of Ujjain in chronological order.

The Puranas provide a general reference to the Gardabhilas, while the *Bhavishaya Puran* specifically mentions Vikramaditya as the king of Avanti, born to destroy the Sakas and to establish Aryan religion. The *Kumar Khand* of *Skand Puran* also mentions king Vikramaditya three thousand years after the beginning of the Kali Age.

Despite several textual references to Vikramaditya, the evidence of his historic persona, is subject to scholarly debate on several counts.

Several scholars assert that Vikramaditya belonged to the Gardabhila clan of Malwa and established the era called the Vikram Samvat. However, this theory is not without counter arguments as, firstly, the name Vikramaditya is not associated with the Vikrama era from the time of its foundation and has also been referred to as Krita and Malwa eras. Secondly, the post Christian era, often refers to the Saka era rather than to Vikrama Samvat to indicate the date of their compositions.

The purpose of this paper is not a historic dissection of the rather undeterminable truth but the archetypal assimilation and synthesis of the legacy of Vikramaditya and cognizance of its shaping influence on the Indian identity, both in the past and in present.

Vikramaditya the hero typically confirms to the archetypal structure of the 'mono-myth' and is analogous to mythic parallels of several cultures. Vikramaditya as an integral element of the Indian national identity, is more of an embodiment of cultural legacy, than of history. The legend of Vikramaditya resides in the collective unconscious, living, re-emerging time and time again in popular culture, in forms such as books, comics, animation, tele- vision serials, documentaries and visual art. The archetypal Vikramaditya is an amalgamation of central ideas or basic tenants around his enduring core, which testifies that prototype paragon of Vikramaditya once lived and simultaneously sustains within, the seeds which ensure further, through collective memory, the idea that Vikramaditya will continue to live.

The mythic persona of the legendary king is preserved in *Vetal Panchavinshati*, a compilation of tales and legends written in Sanskrit. However the tales are a compilation based on oral literature of much older eras . They have been drawn from the narratives of the

mysterious *Brihatkatha*, authored by Gunadhya, in the esoteric language Paishachi, which is now lost.

Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* cast a great influence on literature and his tales survived through oral tradition even after the manuscript was lost. Raja Bhoja acknowledged the *Brihatkatha* as a form of literature. It is said that the tales of the *Brihatkatha* were so fascinating that the wild beasts of the jungle forgot to eat their food and listened tearful eyes.

The earliest and the most notable renditions of *Vetala Panchavinshati* in Sanskrit comprise the works of two Kashmiri poets. The famous Kashmiri Pandit Somadeva has compiled these stories in his famous work the *Katha Sarit Sagara* written in the 11th century. The second major work belongs to Shivadas prepared in around the 15th century.

The narrative involves King Trivikramasena, the legendary Vikramaditya, who receives every year a fruit from a sage practicing occult, with a gem concealed in it. In gratitude, he wants to oblige the sage who in turn asks him to help him in his spiritual pursuit by performing an impossible task - bringing Vetaal : a corpse, possessed by a ghost, hanging on a sesame tree, in a cemetery. Metaphorically, the king faces the challenge of commanding the dark forces of the unconscious, undoubtedly which only the supremely righteous and the brave can accomplish.

Capturing the elusive Vetaal becomes a challenge for the brave hero, who was an epitome of valour, justice and chivalry. The Vetaal agrees to go with him but charts his terms and conditions which makes the narrative complex. Each time the King tries to capture the Vetaal, it tells a story that ends with a riddle.

The Vetaal postulates three situations : First, if the Vikramaditya cannot answer the question correctly (the likelihood of which was the least), the Vetaal agrees to remain in captivity. Second, knowing very well that Vikramaditya, who was well renowned for his outstanding sense of judgement, the Vetaal proposes that - if the King knows the answer but

still does not speak, in order to prevent Vetaal from leaving, then his head shall burst into thousand pieces. Third, if the King answers the question correctly, Vetaal would return to the tree. The paradoxical narrative proceeds with the successive sequence of riddles being solved by Vikramaditya twenty-four times.

Vikramaditya can discern right from the wrong and correctly draw inferential judgement, for which he was most famous and has to speak and therefore the sequence of seizing and releasing the Vetaal continues twenty-four times.

However, on the twenty-fifth attempt, Vetaal bounces a paradoxical riddle, which the king is unable to solve and so he remains quiet. The Vetaal narrates the story of a father and a son who win a devastating battle and find the enemy's queen and the princess alive in the aftermath. The king and his son decide to marry the queen and the princess respectively. However, accidentally they end up marrying the wrong spouse – the son marries the queen and the king marries the princess, which places them in an awkward relation. Eventually, the son and the queen have a son, and the father and the princess have a daughter. Vetaal asks the King what was the relation between the two new-born children?

The twenty four riddles which Vetaal had put forth until now were within the bounds of justice, laws and norms of society and Vikramaditya could solve them within the blink of an eye. However, the question final question does not confirm to the laws of civilisation and henceforth cannot be resolved. Accordingly, the narrative comes to an end and Vetaal allows himself to be taken to the sage. Vetal reveals that the malicious sage wants to sacrifice Vikramaditya and become an invincible *chakravarti*. He suggests that Vikramaditya sacrifice him instead and the King acts accordingly.

It is significant that the narrative continues till the time Vikramaditya knows the answer to the riddles and provides the correct answers. However, the key to commanding the Vetaal

lies in ‘not knowing’ rather than ‘knowing’. Almost as soon as Vikramaditya accepts defeat with humility, the elusive unconscious powers begin to operate at his command.

An archetypal reading of the work on a fundamental level, reveals three significant points, in terms of – (a) a standard sequence of events in the narrative; (b) a general sense of meaningfulness and completion, in contrast to the post-modern existential meaninglessness in literature and (c) a pervading sense of morality and a belief in the dictum of “victory of good over evil.”

The stories in the narrative are replete with archetypes such as – the Hunter, The Enchanted Forest, the Lady of the Lake, the King, the Prince, the Minister’s Son, the Lake, the Pond and the Old Woman. The stories are set in specific locations, some of which like Ujjain and Benaras are still in existence and thus provide historic credibility to the tales, even though, the content remains more mythic than historic. While the location has been specified in each of the stories, the setting in terms of time, has either not been narrated, or has been lost through its transmission through the ages. The names of several locations such as Avanti and Shobhavati and characters such as King Yashodharman and Madansundari are repeated in the tales. The typical pattern of the plot where - the Hunter King, over-whips his horses, who goes astray and leads him into wilderness of the forest, where he loses his heart to a beautiful maiden; is reiterated in several stories. The theme of the story draws close parallels to the pool of myths in India as well as with myths across cultures.

The stories twist the plot towards a complicated riddle. The narrative continues till the riddles can be resolved within the bounds of *dharma* and righteousness and Justice prevails. However, the twenty-fifth riddle, pertains to a problem, outside the purview of natural sense of justice and is left unresolved by the King known for his great sense of Justice. With the riddle unsolved, the chain is broken and the narrative ends. As long as the King can unknot the knot, the story continues, but with the knot untied, the narrative comes to a final full stop.

The memory of the legendary king is etched in the collective memory of the Indian nation and Vikramaditya indisputably exists as a common title adopted by several Indian kings. His name reverberates best, not as Vikramaditya: the historic King, but as Vikramaditya: the emblem of valour and justice. The historical proof of his existence may have been wiped from the ocular sight, but the ephemeral essence of his spirit will always linger unabashed. He will live as long as prototype 'Vikramadityas' emulate him as a role model and live by the qualities he stands for. The evidence and existence of the legendary Vikramaditya from an objective historical standpoint would inevitably remain incomplete, but Vikramaditya, the archetypal hero, has always lived and will continue to live.

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