

YAYATI COMPLEX: AN INTERPRETATIVE LENS TO STUDY SON/DAUGHTER AND FATHER/MOTHER RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

'Yayati Complex' or 'Reverse Oedipal' or 'Negative-Oedipus', is a psychological concept rooted in Hindu mythology. The Yayati complex serves as an interpretative Lens in retelling of mythological narratives, woven deeply into Indian culture, bearing cultural, philosophical, and moral significance. Through its narrative tapestry, it imparts profound insights into the complexities of desire, the repercussions of choices, and the essence of the human condition. This research uses textual and discourse methods of analysis to trace the roots of Yayati Complex and understand how Yayati Complex has been shaping the Son/daughter and Father/Mother Relationships in Indian society since Ramayana era.

Keywords: Yayati Complex, Mythology, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The psychoanalytic term "Oedipus Complex" was introduced by Freud in reference to the Greek mythological king Oedipus. The connection between male youngsters and their parents has been described for decades as part of the psychological developmental process known as the oedipal complex but "Learnings from Indian Mythology indicate that a different psychological version of parent-father relation might be active in this part of the world - termed as YAYATI COMPLEX by many Indian psychologists" (Goyal).

Indian Mythology, with its unique perspectives, introduces a psychological archetype termed 'Yayati Complex' or 'Reverse Oedipal' or 'Negative-Oedipus', a concept explored by many Indian psychologists. In this cultural milieu, the father assumes a distinct role, guiding the son in decisions related to education, marriage, and life choices. The obedient son, adhering to these directives, is praised, while disobedience is deemed rebellious and invites societal excommunication (Shah). In Hindu narratives, the hero emerges as one who willingly submits to the will of the father, society, and tradition, encapsulated in what is known as the Yayati Complex. The narrative underscores the significance of obedience, elevating it to the highest value. The father, representing tradition, is to be followed unwaveringly, with his mistakes forgiven. The prevailing ethos dictates that in the Indian tradition, the father must prevail, being

the revered guardian of cultural values. Pattanaik observes, "Tales in Hindu scriptures suggest a reverse-Oedipal, or Yayati, complex. In this case the father destroys the son in order to have his way" (Pattanaik).

It is noteworthy that the term "Yayati Complex" isn't a widely acknowledged psychological concept but rather an interpretative lens rooted in Hindu mythology. Many Indian psychoanalysts contend that the Oedipus complex, often considered universal, may not hold the same relevance in the Indian context. The Yayati complex serves as a retelling of mythological narratives, woven deeply into our Indian culture, bearing cultural, philosophical, and moral significance. Through its narrative tapestry, it imparts profound insights into the complexities of desire, the repercussions of choices, and the essence of the human condition.

The origins of the Yayati complex can be traced back to Hindu mythology and Indian literature, specifically within the *Mahabharata*, which stands as one of the two significant Sanskrit epics of ancient India. The *Mahabharata* unfolds as an epic narrative, containing a wide spectrum of stories, teachings, and dialogues, with the Yayati episode serving as merely one among its numerous sub-stories. This complex is exemplified in an allegorical narrative found in the *Mahabharata*, exploring the human struggle with desire, the consequences of unchecked hedonism, and the ethical dimensions of decision-making. Serving as a moral and philosophical reflection, this tale delves

into the impermanence of worldly pleasures and emphasizes redemption through self-awareness and moral development. Central to this narrative is Yayati, a complex and multifaceted character, a powerful king of the *Chandravansha* (lunar dynasty) celebrated for an insatiable thirst for pleasure and youth. The primary recounting of Yayati's story is situated in the *Adi Parva* (Book of Beginnings) of the *Mahabharata*.

UNDERSTANDING YAYATI COMPLEX

The Yayati complex is a behavioural pattern wherein sons willingly forgo their pleasures to please their fathers, emphasizing the Indian cultural practice of prioritizing parental interests over those of their children when conflicts arise between the two generations. Obedience holds significant value in Indian culture, particularly for children.

In Mahabharata by Rajagopalachari chapter V titled 'The Marriage of Devyani' and chapter VI titled 'Yayati' elaborately discuss the narrative of Yayati. The original narrative intricately weaves layers of irony throughout the story, beginning with the introduction of two friends, Sharmishtha and Devyani. Sharmishtha, the daughter of the *raakshas* (demon) king Vishvaparva, and Devyani, the daughter of the king's *guru* (spiritual teacher) sage Shukracharya, share a childhood rivalry that persists into adulthood. Their trivial dispute takes a dramatic turn when Sharmishtha, in a fit of anger, humiliates Devyani in public, labelling her as a beggar's daughter dependent on the king's charity. Deeply affected by this incident, Devyani is pushed into a well by Sharmishtha but is fortuitously discovered by King Yayati passing by.

Yayati, a ruler of the Indian subcontinent from the *Chandra-Vansi* lineage, was the son of King Nahush, renowned for conquering *Swarga Loka* (celestial abode) by defeating Indra Deva. Yayati, his younger son, emerged as an unparalleled warrior, a *Chakravarti Samrat* (An ideal universal ruler) who had dominion over all four directions. Known for his wisdom, Yayati once halted during a hunting expedition upon hearing a woman's distress calls. Riding swiftly toward the sound, he discovered a well and, to his surprise, found a beautiful maiden named Devyani trapped inside. Without hesitation, Yayati rescued her, and in their ensuing conversation, he learned that Devyani was the sole offspring of the esteemed sage Shukracharya. Devyani, enchanted by Yayati's

chivalry and handsome demeanour, proposed marriage. Yayati after initial reluctance, captivated by Devyani, accepted the proposal for this *pratiloma vivah* (inverse marriage). However, before their union, Devyani revealed an old score that needed resolution (C. Rajagopalachari and Public Resource 32-35).

Devyani, deeply affected by Sharmishtha's attempt on her life in the forest, returned home and narrated the incident to her father, Shukracharya. Insisting on justice, she demanded that all services to the king stop until the king's daughter apologized for her misdeed. Shukracharya, the king's *guru*, conveyed this ultimatum, announcing a halt to all religious rituals until the king addressed the matter with his daughter. During the *rakshasvivah*, Devyani sought revenge and presented a condition to Shukracharya. She adamantly declared that she would only accompany Yayati if Sharmishtha came along as her *dasi* (slave). Shukracharya, a vital figure inventing *Sanjeevani Vidya* (secrets of longevity) for the *rakshasas* (demons), leveraged his importance, threatening to leave *rakshas lok* (demon world) if Devyani's request was denied. Despite the difficult decision, the king had to acquiesce to Devyani's demand under the weight of Shukracharya's threat. Princess Sharmishtha willingly sacrificed her royal status, obediently accepting her new role as a maidservant, all in accordance with her father's request (C. Rajagopalachari and Public Resource 35). This decision aimed to protect her kingdom's interests and contribute to the greater good of the *rakshas yoni* (clan of demons). With the blessings of Shukracharya, Sharmishtha embarked on a journey with Yayati to his kingdom, unknowingly becoming Devyani's companion and maid servant in the kingdom of Hastinapur due to an unfortunate twist of fate. Devyani, inheriting the short temper of her father Shukracharya, introduced discord into the new couple's life. Yayati, troubled by Devyani's tantrums, gradually lost interest in his family and royal responsibilities. Seeking solace in material indulgences, he distanced himself from his kingly duties, which were then efficiently managed by Devyani.

In contrast, Sharmishtha, with a regal spirit and noble lineage, harboured a secret affection for Yayati. Observing this, Yayati reciprocated her feelings, leading to a clandestine marriage (C. Rajagopalachari and Public Resource 35) and the birth of three children. Sharmishtha became the

companion he longed for. Consequently, Yayati expanded his lineage, now the father of five robust sons- Yadu and Turvasu from Devyani, and Druhyu, Anu, and Puru from Sharmishtha.

During a chariot ride with Devyani, Yayati encountered Sharmishtha's sons hunting in the forest. Fearing Devyani's wrath upon discovering his relationship with Sharmishtha, Yayati pretended not to recognize the boys. However, Devyani, fascinated by the youths' hunting skills, approached them to inquire about their father. Unhesitatingly, the boys pointed to Yayati. Inevitably, Devyani eventually learned of her husband's infidelity and his relationship with Sharmishtha, triggering boundless anger (Ray). Shocked and aghast at the painful truth, Devyani rejected Yayati's attempts to explain. Sobbing profusely, she rushed to her father, Shukracharya, narrating the entire incident, seeking solace and guidance from her wise and revered father. This revelation marked a turning point in the complex relationships, leading to profound consequences for Yayati and those involved.

Devyani, the beloved daughter of Shukracharya, held a special place in her father's heart, receiving his utmost love and attention. When Devyani recounted Yayati's ill-treatment, Shukracharya, consumed by anger, pronounced a stern curse upon him. Attributing Yayati's actions to the impulsive nature of youth and lust, Shukracharya condemned him for prioritizing personal desires over familial obligations. The curse, a consequence of Yayati's failure to respect familial bonds, dictated an immediate loss of youth, transforming him into a frail and aged man devoid of earthly pleasures. The abrupt onset of aging served as a poignant reminder of the consequences of Yayati's actions and the gravity of familial commitments. The curse inflicted immense despair upon Yayati, who, driven by his deep attachment to worldly pleasures, vehemently rejected the prospect of aging. In a desperate plea, Yayati beseeched Shukracharya to revoke the curse, recognizing the detrimental impact on his wife, Sharmishtha, and the kingdom. Realizing the predicament, Shukracharya acknowledged the futility of an old and feeble king, yet cautioned Yayati about the consequences of pursuing sensual pleasures without upholding moral duty.

While Shukracharya couldn't fully rescind the uttered curse, he offered a slight modification. He proposed a unique solution: for Yayati to regain his youth, one of his sons must willingly exchange their

youth for Yayati's old age, shouldering the burden of the curse. This remedy, though unconventional, presented a glimmer of hope for Yayati to escape the clutches of old age and restore vitality to his life. Filled with hope, Yayati hurried to his palace, revealing the sage's curse to his eldest son. Desperate for a solution, Yayati pleaded for the temporary loan of Yadu's youth to reverse the curse. However, Yadu adamantly refused, citing the mistreatment he and his mother endured, unwilling to bear the burden of the curse himself.

A parallel narrative unfolded as Yayati approached his three remaining sons with the same request. The incredulity in Yayati's expression was unmistakable as he discovered that none of his sons were willing to shoulder the weight of his impending old age. The looming spectre of aging, with its attendant physical decline, instilled deep dread within Yayati. The poignant realization that none of his sons would alleviate him of the curse left Yayati profoundly wounded. Filled with diminishing hope, he summoned his youngest son, Puru, and presented the same plea. After a series of refusals, Puru, with a heavy heart and in agreement with Sharmishtha, reluctantly consented to the daunting exchange. In a sacrificial act, Puru willingly embraced old age and impotence, allowing his father to relish the fleeting pleasures of youth once more. This decision bore a heavy emotional toll, particularly on Sharmishtha, as Yayati, oblivious to Shukra's cautionary words, exchanged his youth with his youngest son without a moment's hesitation. Yayati's rejuvenation symbolized not only unchecked desires but also the profound consequences of moral transgressions. Consumed by his pursuit of sensory gratification, Yayati neglected his responsibilities both as a ruler and a father. The narrative, with its intricate exploration of Yayati's desires, went beyond mere physical indulgence, revealing the intricate and detrimental nature of unchecked yearnings. The story, at its core, portrayed the complex interplay between desire, responsibility, and the far-reaching consequences of one's actions.

The repercussions of Yayati's choices reverberate through the intricate fabric of familial relationships, leaving an indelible mark on his sons and himself. As Puru bears the burden of old age, Yayati revels in the pleasures of youth, creating a stark dichotomy within the family. The consequences of Yayati's pursuit of pleasure unfold over the years, impacting both his relationships and his personal growth.

Yayati, amidst the hedonistic pursuit of joy and everlasting youth, experiences a moment of profound realization. The fleeting nature of his enjoyment prompts introspection, leading him to question the significance of his desires. This moment becomes a turning point in his life as he grapples with the hollowness of materialistic pursuits, recognizing the inherent futility in chasing ephemeral pleasures. The pursuit of virility and youth, he discovers, fails to bring true contentment. Haunted by a sense of disillusionment and a loss of faith, Yayati undergoes a transformative process. The realization dawns upon him that the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment holds more value than the transient allure of worldly pleasures. Driven by this newfound insight, Yayati decides to detach himself from the transient and alluring world and embark on a path toward spiritual awakening.

In an act of profound sacrifice, Yayati seeks to rectify the consequences of his earlier choices. He approaches Shukracharya and the gods, pleading for a reversal of his fate. In a compassionate gesture, Shukra agrees to Yayati's plea, restoring youth to Puru. This act symbolizes Yayati's redemption, a conscious choice to relinquish the transient pleasures that once ensnared him.

As Yayati faces the culmination of his life, he makes a significant decision regarding his successor. Choosing Puru as his heir is not based on competence but on a deeper rationale – Puru's willingness to bear the burdens imposed by Yayati's choices. This decision carries with it a dual significance, signifying both redemption and a testament to the profound consequences of unchecked desires. Yet, the narrative takes a poignant turn as Yayati, in a moment of frustration, curses Yadu, foreshadowing the complexities that continue to unfold within the familial lineage.

After relinquishing the pursuits of worldly pleasures, Yayati retreated to the serene depths of the forest, dedicating the remaining span of his existence to a life of asceticism and contemplation. Immersed in meditation upon Brahman, the ultimate reality, Yayati embraced the *vanaprastha ashrama* (retiring to the forest), gradually transitioning to a state of self-realization and detachment. Choosing the path of *Swarga* (the celestial realm), to engage in penance, Yayati sought spiritual redemption. In due course, his arduous journey led him to attain the heavenly abode, marking the culmination of his transformative odyssey. Meanwhile, King Puru,

embodying the ideals of sacrifice and selflessness, assumed the reins of the kingdom with wisdom and benevolence. His reign unfolded as an exemplary era, laying the foundation for the illustrious Kuru clan.

Puru's character stands in stark contrast to his father's self-indulgent nature. Unlike Yayati, Puru did not harbor expectations of rewards for his sacrificial act. He becomes the epitome of the 'Yayati Complex'- a concept in Hindu mythology illustrating parents' expectations of sacrifices from their children for their own selfish motives. Puru, in humility, embraces his father's curse, anticipating a deeper understanding of life's meaning. He finds himself in a world undergoing a profound spiritual transition, where old values have faded, and new ones are yet to emerge. Puru's sacrifice becomes a catalyst for Yayati's enlightenment, prompting the remorseful king to revoke the curse from Puru in a quest for personal salvation.

Yet, Puru's sacrifice takes on a dual nature. While embodying the virtues of selflessness, he also becomes a victim of his father's insatiable desire for sensuality. The intricate interplay of sacrifice and consequence weaves a tapestry of complexities within the narrative, reflecting the intricacies of human relationships and the profound impact of choices on subsequent generations.

YAYATI COMPLEX IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

In the realm of Indian psychology, the Yayati Complex manifests in behavioural patterns where a son willingly sacrifices personal pleasures for his father's happiness, aiming to secure paternal goodwill and appreciation to achieve his own aspirations. This motif resonates throughout Indian mythology, finding expression in various narratives, including the tale of Bhishma.

In the *Mahabharata*, Devavrata, a descendant of Puru and later known as Bhishma, exemplifies this complex relationship. Shantanu, his father, desired to marry the fisherwoman Satyawati. However, she imposed a condition that her sons, not Shantanu's rightful heir Devavrata (Bhishma), would inherit the throne. Unable to approach Devavrata due to his status as the legitimate heir, Shantanu turned to him (Goyal). In an extraordinary display of sacrifice, Devavrata renounced his claim to the throne and pledged celibacy to ensure his father's happiness. This self-imposed celibacy incurred the wrath of his ancestors, denying them the opportunity for rebirth

and consigning him to eternal solitude in the afterlife. Bhishma's sacrifice became legendary, earning him the epithet "he who took a terrible vow."

The narrative underscores the recurring theme of sons sacrificing their youth for their fathers' contentment. The Jain tradition even adds a dimension where Bhishma, in an extreme act, is said to have castrated himself to prove his unwavering integrity, a sacrifice deemed necessary to secure a wife for his father. Yet, amidst the praise for Bhishma's sacrifice, there is a critical examination of Shantanu's actions. The narrative prompts reflection on a father's role, questioning the morality of an elderly man so fixated on a fisherwoman that he would willingly allow his son to make such a profound sacrifice ((C. Rajagopalachari and Public Resource pp. 22-24).

Karna's sacrifice emerges as a poignant testament to loyalty and duty. Although not Adhiratha's biological son, Karna remains steadfastly devoted to his foster parents, showcasing a profound sense of familial commitment. Later in the epic, Karna's sacrifice takes a tangible form when he willingly parts with his divine armour, a source of immense strength, giving it to Indra disguised as a Brahmin seeking alms. This selfless act underscores Karna's unwavering dedication to honour and duty, transcending personal gain for the sake of principles deeply ingrained in his character.

The ramifications of the Yayati Complex are evident in the broader context of the *Kurukshetra* war. The disruption in the natural progression of generations, emphasizing the paramount importance of a son's obedience, lays the groundwork for future conflicts and tragedies in the epic narrative. The Yayati Complex becomes a subtle yet powerful force shaping the dynamics of relationships and generations in Indian mythology.

In the timeless epic *Ramayana*, Rama embodies the ideal man, known as *maryadapurushottama* (the perfect adherent to societal values). His perfection lies in consistently conforming to societal expectations. Pattanaik writes:

In the *Ramayana*, Rama is *maryada purushottama*, the perfect upholder of social values, because he always does what is expected of him. In deference to the wishes of his father, he gives up the throne and goes into forest exile. In deference to the wishes of his people, he abandons his dutiful and faithful wife,

Sita. His obedience, his submission to the past, to the family, to the people, is what makes him worthy of worship". (Pattanaik)

In a profound display of obedience, Rama relinquishes the throne, respecting his father Dasharath's wish to preserve integrity. He and his brother Lakshman, ventures into the forest to fulfil Dasharath's promise to one of his wives. Rama's commitment to duty is further evident in his sacrifice, forsaking his devoted wife, Sita, to honour the expectations of his people. Rama's unwavering submission to the past, familial obligations, and societal norms elevates him to a divine status, rendering him worthy of adoration and worship. His narrative reflects the profound complexities of duty and sacrifice in the service of a greater societal order.

In a broader exploration of paternal influence, instances emerge where fathers manipulate their sons and daughters to fulfil their desires. A poignant example is found in Sharmishtha's sacrifice for her father. Transitioning from a royal princess to a humble maid, Sharmishtha willingly embraces a life of servitude to honour her father, the king. This act transcends mere relinquishment of her regal status, signifying a profound emotional and psychological transformation. Sharmishtha's sacrifice embodies the depth of her commitment to her father's wishes, illustrating the enduring power of familial bonds. As a maid, she confronts the challenges of humility and service, reshaping not only her societal standing but the very essence of her being. This narrative underscores the complexities of familial sacrifice, portraying the lengths one can go for love and paternal reverence.

In the *Katha Upanishad*, the sacrificial tale of Nachiketa unfolds as a profound testament to filial devotion. Willingly forsaking personal desires and comforts, Nachiketa embarks on a journey to fulfill his father's unintentional wish to send him to Yama, the lord of death. This act of selflessness and unwavering commitment to his father's words becomes the catalyst for profound spiritual teachings from Yama himself. Nachiketa's sacrifice extends beyond the physical realm, delving into the metaphysical, where his journey becomes a transformative experience, symbolizing the potency of filial duty and its spiritual ramifications.

PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF YAYATI COMPLEX

The Yayati Complex transcends a mere narrative; it becomes a moral discourse on the ramifications of unchecked desires within the moral and cosmic order. Yayati's story unfolds as a didactic exploration of the cyclical nature of desire, illustrating the inescapable repercussions when one pursues fulfillment without ethical constraints. In a broader philosophical and cultural context, the Yayati Complex aligns with the foundational principles of Hinduism, emphasizing *dharma* (righteous duty) and *karma* (the law of cause and effect). It serves as a cautionary tale, delving into the intricate relationship between desires, actions, and their cosmic consequences.

Embedded within the narrative is a reflection on the impact of desire on interpersonal relationships. Yayati's actions strain familial bonds, portraying the intricate web of duty, personal desires, and the ethical quandaries individuals face. The complex interplay between these elements serves as a moral compass, urging contemplation on the ethical dilemmas inherent in the pursuit of personal happiness.

Furthermore, the Yayati Complex delves into the transient nature of worldly pleasures. Despite attaining youth, Yayati grapples with insatiable desires, highlighting the ephemeral nature of superficial joys. This narrative thread prompts a deeper reflection on the pursuit of lasting satisfaction amidst transient pleasures, encouraging individuals to ponder the consequences of prioritizing fleeting desires over enduring values. The Yayati Complex, in its essence, offers profound insights into the intricate tapestry of human desires, morality, and the perpetual quest for genuine

fulfilment. The resolution of the *Yayati* story is marked by a profound acknowledgment of the repercussions of Yayati's actions, leading to a journey of repentance and moral redemption. Yayati's narrative serves as a powerful reminder that self-discovery and transformation are achievable, even after a life characterized by indulgence and transgressions. This redemptive dimension elevates the story beyond a mere cautionary tale, portraying the potential for individuals to transcend the consequences of their actions through reflective introspection and moral growth.

CONCLUSION

Theories are meant to be universal, but given the diversity of cultures, belief systems, and narratives that shape people's lives around the globe; it is difficult to provide explanations about human behavior and relationships that are general in nature. The beliefs and lifestyles upheld in India may be reflected in the legendary stories that have been repeated here for millennia. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the Indian way of life via indigenous theories before accepting western notions as being generally relevant to all lifestyles.

Although not formulated as a psychological theory akin to the Oedipus Complex, the Yayati Complex offers cultural and moral insights into the intricate tapestry of human desire, ethical considerations, and the cyclical nature of consequences. It functions as a narrative lens, inviting individuals in Indian culture to contemplate their choices, uphold essential values, and recognize the transformative potential embedded within the human experience.

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