

Escape the Bakasura Trap

Escape the Bakasura Trap

Let Contentment Fuel Your Growth

Devdutt Pattanaik

Illustrations by the author



JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2025

Copyright © Devdutt Pattanaik 2025

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353453749

E-ISBN: 9789353456283

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any
means without the written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by Dhaivat Chhaya, Mumbai

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

To Shamsi, and the cream roll



*'Approach this book with curiosity,
not combat.'*

Contents

A Trap and an Escape	1
Step 1 of 3: Eat Better, to Nourish Your 'Business' Body	35
Step 2 of 3: Kill Less, to Retrain Your 'Behavioural' Body	79
Step 3 of 3: Feed More, to Sensitize Your 'Belief' Body	123
Bhima's Contentment	173
Workbooks	185

A Trap and an Escape

Bakasura is a character in the 2,000-year-old Hindu epic Mahabharata. He was so hungry that he ate even those who fed him. This made him infamous as the demon of hunger.

Hunger is translated as 'bhaksha' in Sanskrit and 'baka' in Prakrit. Asura means a demon, one who takes, who opposes Deva, a god, one who gives. Bhaksha-asura, that is, Bakasura, has been made the role model of modern consumer society. Here, we are told to be hungry all the time. Capitalists are hungry for profit; socialists are hungry for justice; libertarians are hungry for freedom. The more we consume, the more we grow. The biggest are ravenous all the time.

Success in modern consumer society is about having more than others. Children are being told by parents, teachers, entertainers, journalists and leaders that they will be valued if they have more: more resources, more pleasure, more

Escape the Bakasura Trap

leisure, more money, more power, more status, more fame, more glamour, more information, more influence, more fans, more followers, more productivity, more wins, more likes.

No one talks about the cost of consumption. The production of anything consumed involves violence. By asking children to have more, we are asking children to kill more. The educated today do not use this language. Ancient Indian sages did.

Known as Rishis, the ones who see what others do not see, these ancient Indian sages said: Hunger (bhaksha) leads to consumption (bhoga), which demands sacrifice (bali), which has consequences (karma) that trap us in the wheel of rebirth (samsara). Eating creates debt (paap). Feeding creates credit (punya). When there is no debit or credit, there is freedom (moksha). This was known to Jain, Buddhist and Hindu merchants, hence the accounting vocabulary. But we have forgotten these ideas. We are now under the spell of Western 'enlightenment'.

Modern vocabulary is filled with words of judgement: right and wrong, good and bad, justified, ethical and moral. It is always the winner who decides who is right and what is wrong. So powerful is this spell that Indians, since the nineteenth century, have translated the word 'dharma' as 'righteousness'. This ignores the accounting paradigm. We have forgotten what dharma used to mean: acts that reduce debt. To reduce debt, we have to stop eating and start feeding. But how can we feed others if we are possessed by

A Trap and an Escape

the demon of hunger? Instructions will not help. Wisdom is needed. Awareness of other people's truth. Sensitivity to other people's hunger. The sage can only give knowledge. Wisdom is an individual's journey. That is why in Hindu mythology, there are no prophets or messengers. Just yogis and avatars, such as Hara (Shiva) and Hari (Vishnu), who nudge both the Asuras and the Devas. The world of Indian myth has no sense of urgency: There is no end of the world, no climax. There is endless eternity (sanatan). We change for our sake, not for the sake of the world. We change because wisdom brings bliss, contentment, kindness and an ecosystem of abundance around us.

Nature	Hermit's World	Householder Culture
Hunger (Bhaksha)	Hunger (Bhaksha)	Hunger (Bhaksha)
↓	↓	↓
Violence (Himsa)	Non-Violence (Ahimsa)	Violence (Himsa)
↓	↓	↓
Eating (Bhoga)	Fasting (Yoga)	Feeding (Naivedya)
↓	↓	↓
Debt (Paap-karma)	No Debt (Shunya)	Credit (Punya-karma)
↓	↓	↓
Being Eaten (Samsara)	Freedom (Moksha)	Being Fed (Prasad)

Escape the Bakasura Trap

Today, hunger is marketed as aspiration and ambition. It is being fuelled with comparison and competition. Everything is being tracked: targets to achieve, tasks to complete. The poor are being motivated to become rich; the rich are being inspired to become richer; the richest are being frightened so that they never leave the killing fields. They must be the biggest canine in the dog-eat-dog world, the fastest rodent in the rat race, the scariest fish in the shark tank. Endless conflict is thus being manufactured between those who consume and those who get consumed, those with surplus and those without access.

We genuinely believe that consuming food and hoarding food will take away hunger. But it only creates addicts. Winners feel successful, but soon, a new target is in sight, a new game, a new goalpost. Losers are resentful, seeking justice: more rights, more opportunities, more reservations, more subsidies, more freedom, more equality, more fairness. Even revolutions have been gamified. Everyone feels tricked, cheated, cancelled, deprived, denied, exiled, victimized. Everyone is locked in a war room, strategizing to crush the competition and emerge triumphant. But the siege of the losers never ends. This ecosystem of inequality, anxiety, pollution and violence is the Bakasura Trap.

A Trap and an Escape

Belief of Capitalists and Socialists	Belief of Rishis	Householder Culture
Hunger + Food ↓ Satisfaction	Hunger + Food ↓ Addiction ↓ Extraction, Hoarding, Raiding, Trickery	Hunger + Food + Empathy (other people's truth) ↓ Contentment ↓ Exchange

To escape, we first need to appreciate:

- How overestimating science and technology has shifted our focus from hunger to food
- How reclaiming myth brings our focus back to hunger, especially the hunger for meaning, which remains, technological shifts notwithstanding
- How modern values are essentially Western, not global, or rational
- How modern notions of success are actually mythical, amplified with the arrogance of technology
- How the Indian epic Mahabharata, seen as the book of war and victory, is actually a meditation on contentment

Only then will Hanuman's intervention in the epic Mahabharata make sense. And it will help us construct the three-step Bhima escape.

Overestimating Science

Animals do not have science, or stories. Humans have both. Because humans can imagine. We can conjure up possibilities outside the realm of experience. We can imagine food coming to us, feeling warm in snow, flying beyond the horizon and swimming under the stars. We can imagine being in control of everything around us: the river, the wind, the plants, the animals, even fellow humans. This compels us to make sense of the world, find causes, consequences and connections between objects and organisms. We observe, we infer, we compare, we find explanations that we can exploit to make life better. This methodical way of thinking is logic, from the Greek word 'logos' for analysis. The Sanskrit word for logic is 'shastra'.

War-zone Imagination	Nature's Reality
Dog-eat-dog world	Eater gets eaten
Rat-race	Killer gets killed
Shark-tank	Parasites kill themselves
War-room	No dominant species
Leaders and Followers	Every organism is predator and prey, and has predator and prey
Winners and Losers	Alpha replaced by meritocracy.
Stories of heroes and martyrs	Queen bee exists for next hive not other way round.
Eat but do not get eaten	Pack feeds the young
	Herd protects the young

A Trap and an Escape

The application of logic to life is rationality. Humans have used rational ways of thinking, involving trial and error and the study of patterns, to create technology. Technology has existed long before science. Every tribe had its own technology which helped desert tribes weather sandstorms, and coastal tribes discover new islands. Technology was jealously guarded by tribes. It was accepted from elders on faith, as it had enabled earlier generations to survive. It was transmitted and refined over generations.

Along with technology came stories that also helped tribal elders explain to the terrified and confused next-generation the origin of the world, the purpose of life, and the nature of the afterlife. Stories explained borders, hierarchies, taboos, establishing beliefs and customs about who to include, who to not include, who to serve, who to exploit, who to trust, who to fear. Inherited knowledge ensured survival. These were the cultural truths of the community, referred to as myths, from the Greek word 'mythos' or narrative. The Sanskrit word for myth is 'akhyana'.

A myth is a belief system: true to the insider, false to the outsider. Unlike a folktale, myth is not meant to entertain. Unlike a parable or fable, myth has no prescription. A myth is not propaganda to cover up a lie or to rouse the rabble. A myth exists to provide meaning: provide a community with a common lens to engage with the world. Logos and mythos constituted the knowledge system of a tribe. Logos transmitted technology. Mythos provided meaning.

Escape the Bakasura Trap

Different knowledge systems existed in each and every tribe of the pre-modern world, until the rise of science in Europe.

Science rose at a time when Europeans were doubting their dominant myth – that the Christian God and His Church were all-powerful and all-knowing. This followed the defeat of Christians by Muslims during the Crusades, about a thousand years ago. Disillusioned Christians began relooking at pre-Christian mythos and logos, especially those of the Greeks. Simultaneously, thanks to trade with Arabs, Europeans were exposed to new ideas like mathematics from India and new technology like paper, gunpowder and the magnetic compass from China. This fuelled an age of curiosity which eventually led to the birth of science. Later, Europeans would credit the Greeks for this transformation, ignoring the contribution of the Arabs, Indians and Chinese.

Science rejected testimony as the source of knowledge. It was sceptical of inherited knowledge from religion or tradition. It rejected subjectivity. To be real, an observation had to be measurable and verifiable. Microscopes and telescopes revealed worlds that the eye could not see. Experiments showed possibilities that had never been transmitted by any holy book or sage. Human opinion took second place to evidence. Argument was left to philosophers. Scientists sought proof.

Technology and engineering born out of science were far more logical than pre-modern inherited technology – far

A Trap and an Escape

more efficient, far more effective, far more productive. This new technology was universal, not rooted in culture. It improved the capacity and capability of the Europeans enormously, enabling them to discover new sea routes, win wars, establish colonies, build empires, extract resources, develop industries and create ways of living that allowed them to dominate the world. The rise of the engineering world was enabled by the rise of the financial world, with new ways of accounting, banking and raising funds through stock markets. The modern age was thus inaugurated by the industrialized imperial powers of the eighteenth century. Every culture around the world would eventually submit to this new Western way.

The West challenged everything and everyone that existed before and elsewhere. It saw faith as the problem, the source of oppression and violence. It pushed for the erasure of tradition, religion, myths, tribes, clans, castes, monarchies. The old ways had to be replaced by more scientific ways, where inputs and outputs could be measured and modified with feedback. Old hierarchies based on race, gender and sexuality were torn down and replaced by secular nation states that valued liberty, equality and justice for all.

- Capitalism was the logical way to generate wealth.
- Socialism was the logical way to distribute wealth.
- Democracy was the right way to distribute power.
- Universities were the right way to distribute and improve on knowledge.

Escape the Bakasura Trap

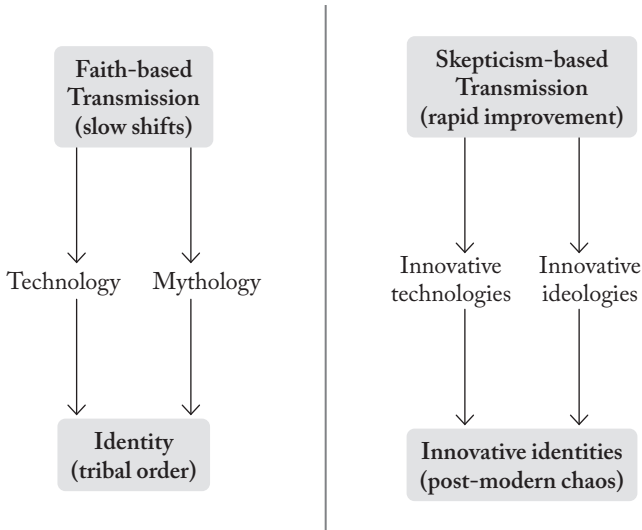
- Feminism challenged traditional gender roles and refused to accept heterosexuality as the norm.

But while science helped created vast wealth in the nineteenth century, it failed to distribute wealth fairly between nations and within nations. In the late twentieth century, social sciences revealed the unequal distribution of wealth and power. These were being rationalized and justified based on laws but made little moral and ethical sense. It became increasingly evident that while measurements were objective, values were not.

Values were shaped by community, creed, caste, class, race, gender and sexuality. Logic, with measurement and evidence, was being used to create better science and technology for all. Logic, without measurement and evidence, was being used to come up with clever arguments to serve the interests of a few. As a result, despite technological progress, the modern world of the 'civilized' was as violent and as unequal as the pre-modern world of the 'savages'. Worse, it was terribly polluted.

The wrath of postmodern philosophers in the twenty-first century gave rise to the woke movement, which cancelled modern arguments, rejected all structures and sought radical social justice for all, a world free of hierarchies and borders. The woke movement even weaponized fragility, by declaring all challenges to itself offensive and hurtful.

A Trap and an Escape



Meanwhile, pre-modern religions and traditions have begun resurrecting themselves with a vengeance, pointing to the failure of science to keep its promises. The problem was never with technology. Science addressed the problem of food. It ignored the problem of hunger. And meaning. And meaning only comes from myth.

Reclaiming Myth

Science is based on measurement and mathematics. Technology tries to make life efficient, productive, predictable and controllable. However, emotions cannot be measured, quantified or regulated. In other words, emotions are outside the scope of science. No science can explain why modern nation states need borders to restrict the movement of people, or why there exist hierarchies amongst the most educated. The arguments offered are always subjective, and rather silly.

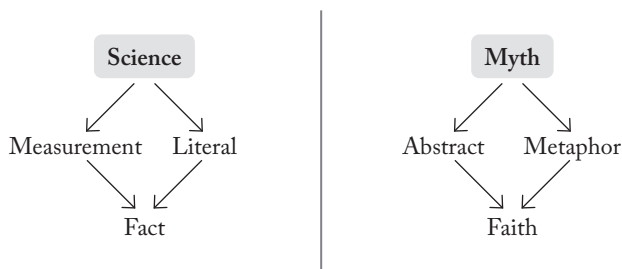
Rather than admitting this, scientists simply ignored emotions and mocked psychology (the study of the human mind) as pseudoscience. At most, neuroscience is used to study mental responses in the best universities to create addictive-technology that amplifies dopamine addiction and generates vast profit, 'ethically'.

Humans express emotions through literature, art and theatre. They present concepts of the mind using metaphors (the use of familiar words to communicate the unfamiliar). Every tribe in the world is unique not just because of its technology but because of its stories, symbols and rituals. These were created by older generations to manage the hungers, fears and curiosities of the younger generations of the tribe. These had to be trusted if the tribe wished to survive. If the tribe survived, the individual survived. To prevent disruption, new ideas were seen as threats; old ideas

A Trap and an Escape

and elder folk were trusted. Myths constructed beliefs that got communities to behave in a particular way that ensured their survival over thousands of years.

For the last 200 years, myth has been used as a synonym for fiction and fantasy, because scientists failed to appreciate the metaphor. They took everything literally. In the last few decades, more and more scholars are separating fantasies and fictions meant for entertainment, expression, reflection and propaganda from myths transmitted over generations that communicate cultural truths and transform a people into a community.



Today, mythology is no longer the study of falsehoods peddled by savages. Myth is distinguished from other forms of storytelling. The point of myth is not to entertain or educate or influence. It is to give the world a structure in which humans can find identity and meaning. It answers questions that are outside the scope of science. Science answers how, not why. Why do we exist? Who is pure and who is impure? What happens after we die? The answers are

Escape the Bakasura Trap

cultural, expressed in stories, rituals and symbols. These bind a community. Modern nation states have national myths for this reason – which bind citizens, get them infuriated when their flags are burnt or their borders violated. Like ancient tribes, we still fight over hunting grounds, share of harvests and control over women's reproductive organs. There is nothing rational about it, despite the complex logical arguments or the presentation of facts.

Type of Subject	Subjects	Measurement	Knowledge
Earth Sciences	Physics, Chemistry, Biology	+++++	Objective
Social Sciences	History, Politics, Economics	+++	Less Objective
(Pseudo?) Sciences	Psychology	+	More Subjective
Humanities	Art, Literature, Philosophy	–	Subjective

The failure of science to understand the human mind meant that rationalists and scientists saw myths as propaganda tools to control and manipulate the human mind. Stories, symbols and rituals were just meant to brainwash people to buy goods and services and follow a particular political ideology. Even today, intellectuals see themselves as rational, logical, scientific people who do not need myth. And yet, without myth, they have no identity, no explanation for

A Trap and an Escape

why they matter, why they exist, why they should be taken seriously by anyone. So they have spawned 'enlightened' atheistic myths such as:

- Capitalism (achievement-based identity)
- Socialism (justice-based identity)
- Libertarianism (individual-based identity, free of state control)

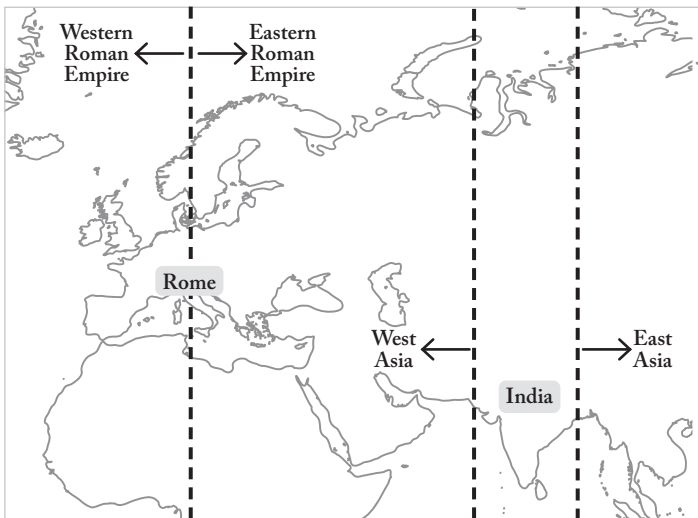
Any student of mythology can see these 'atheistic' myths follow the same structure as that of ancient Western myth:

- The Greek myth of individual struggles and heroic achievement
- The Islamic myth of martyrdom in the quest to institute laws of the one true god

Logical Statement from West	Mythical Statement from West
State is impersonal and fair	God is just
Follow state laws	Obey God's laws
Patriotism	Devotion
Traitor	Infidel
Died speaking truth to power	Martyr
Fascist	Devil
Entrepreneur	Hero
Privileged	Olympian gods
Successful	Elysium, afterlife of the memorable ones
Oppressed	Tartarus, afterlife of endless repetitive meaningless tasks
Middle Class	Asphodel, afterlife of mediocrity

Escape the Bakasura Trap

The reason why the West does not see Islam as a Western myth is because the West defines itself on the basis of the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire. Every Western nomenclature is rooted in its own imagination of itself. The rest of the world does not carry that burden. To understand modern society, we need to understand Western myth better, and for that, we have to distinguish Western myth from Eastern myth and both from Indian myth.



Where is the West?

West Is Not East Is Not India

While there are as many myths as there are cultures, we can group them into three major groups for the sake of the ideas in this book:

- **Western myth:** that only one universal ‘truth’ governs this world. In pre-modern Euro-America, this truth was religion; in modern Euro-America, this was science; in postmodern Euro-America, it is the woke anarchy of postmodern theorists. These are cultures that love to argue and convert others to their way of thinking. Western myth also shapes the Islamic world, which resists Euro-American values. It is all about justice.
- **Eastern myth:** that a wall separates nature from culture, the civilized from the savage. This is a culture that is at peace with borders and hierarchies, as that creates order. Hence, the Great Wall and the Firewall of China, the hermit kingdoms of Korea and the expressionless faces of Japan.
- **Indian myth:** that all myths are valid, contextual, dynamic, relevant to some and interconnected with others. This is the culture where the invisible mind is as valid as the visible body, where the present life cannot ignore the influence of past lives and the impact on future lives. Subjective peace matters here far more than truth, order, the good life or the winning argument.