

Article

Śravaṇ Kumār: Rethinking a Cultural Ideal for Indian Youth

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Abstract: Myths and mythological figures serve as cultural symbols that people live by and emulate. Śravaṇ Kumār is one such mythological figure. He carried his blind parents on his shoulders and, with great hardships, tried to fulfil their wish for a pilgrimage. However, before he could complete the journey, he met a tragic end at the hands of Prince Daśrath. Due to his devotion to his parents, he is revered as an ideal youth in the Indian Hindu context. One wonders what values are conveyed about a society that has, for centuries now, idealised the tragic mythical figure of Śravaṇ Kumār? What could be the underlying fascination with the tragic story of Śravaṇ Kumār, his parents, and the guilt-ridden prince responsible for their tragic deaths and the subsequent ordeal the prince's son Rām had to endure in accordance with a curse? This paper reinterprets this myth and examines its relevance in contemporary times. The reinterpretation of the myth is further discussed in connection with the relevant psychoanalytic identity development theories, keeping in view the adolescents in the urban metropolitan context in India. The paper concludes by discussing the significance of having relevant mythical and cultural ideals for the identity development of youth.

Keywords: identity; adolescence; Indian mythology; Rāmāyana; cultural symbolism



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1. Introduction

Myths and mythological figures hold a significant place in all cultures. According to Siikala (2002, p. 16), “The most fundamental areas of cultural consciousness are related to the community’s world view and basic values; mythology is constructed to represent precisely such basic structures of consciousness”. Myths represent such structures and ways of being in a society. Especially during adolescence, “myths have a facilitative function making gods, heroes and nymphs, figures who are all-good or all-bad thus creating a spiritual and mental transitional space for growth” (Anastasopoulos et al. 2010, p. 121). The disillusionment that adolescents generally experience is supplanted by cultural myths. It may be further suggested that myths serve as cultural scripts and mythological figures serve as cultural ideals that shape the outer world—the social institutions—and the inner world—the human psyche. Erickson’s famous treatise titled *Childhood and Society* (Erikson 1964) and Kakar’s acclaimed work *The Inner World* (Kakar 1978) are insightful expositions of this premise. Through the psychosocial theory of personality development, Erikson was amongst the first psychodynamically oriented theorists to propose a complementarity between culture and psyche. Erikson submitted that a person encounters a crisis between psychological and social factors at every stage of personality development. Depending upon how this crisis is resolved, personality development can take a turn in any direction.

In Hindu cultures, epics such as Rāmāyaṇ and Mahābhārat and folk narratives are replete with representations of childhood and adolescence. In these texts, there are detailed descriptions of the adventures of many iconic figures such as Rām, Kriṣhn, Hanumān, Balrām, Pāndavs, and Gaṇeś when they were children and adolescents. These stories have been told and retold from one generation to the next in tales, dramatisations, and songs and, therefore, have stood the test of time. Since these portrayals of childhood and adolescence

are deeply embedded in the Indian cultural psyche and the social fabric of day-to-day life, they warrant academic consideration.

At the heart of the intricate process of identity formation in adolescents is a constant negotiation between meaning-making at the individual level and values and norms at the social level. “The function of mythology is symbolic in the shaping of social relationships. It helps to give ideals, models for identification, replacing the omnipotence of adolescence with attachment to good figures and society” (Anastasopoulos et al. 2010, p. 124). It is the imagination of a connection between the personal and the social that makes myths an instrument of identity formation, which we must examine both epistemically and normatively. Examining the prevalent myths and their multifarious interpretations will allow us to engage critically with the meanings and ideals emanating from them, making them more relevant in contemporary times, especially for adolescents.

In this paper, we examine the culturally rooted myth of ‘Śravaṇ Kumār’ as it potentially influences the process of identity formation of adolescents in the urban metropolitan Indian context. These adolescents frequent cafes and bars, consume Netflix, travel abroad, and buy international brands. They identify with their western counterparts while attempting to hold on to their family traditions and religious values. Against this backdrop, we interpret the myth of ‘Śravaṇ Kumār’ in the light of recent developmental theories. We argue that this interpretation makes the myth more contextually relevant in the lives of youth and their parents as they navigate through the challenges of living in the globalised world, where there is a shift in values, growing discord in personal and shared identities, and inter-generational differences (Kapadia 2017, p. 5).

2. Śravaṇ Kumār: The Myth

Reference to the myth¹ of Śravaṇ Kumār is found in ‘Rāmāyaṇ’², an ancient Hindu text. The mythical figure of Śravaṇ is known for his dedication, commitment, and filial piety toward his parents, who were blind, devout hermits. As his parents aged, they expressed a desire to visit the most sacred pilgrimage sites, which Śravaṇ decided to fulfil despite their limited financial means and modes of transport. He put both his parents in a basket each and tied these baskets at the two ends of a bamboo pole (called vihaṅgikā), which he carried on his shoulder as he travelled to various pilgrimage sites. One day during this journey, Śravaṇ’s sick and tired parents asked him to fetch water in an earthen jug from the nearby river. At the same time, Prince Daśrath of Ayodhyā was hunting in the same jungle. He heard a sound near the river and, without a visual, unleashed an arrow, assuming that it would strike down an animal. The arrow pierced Śravaṇ, who lay there bleeding to death. The prince arrived at the scene and realised his grave mistake. Śravaṇ urged Daśrath to take water to his ailing blind parents and break the tragic news of their son’s death. When Daśrath informed Śravaṇ’s parents of his calamitous mistake, they could not bear the shock. They cursed Daśrath with the same fate as ‘Putraśoka’s’ “grief due to the loss of a son” as they had suffered. Thus, Śravaṇ’s sickly, grief-stricken, and desolate parents died without drinking water. The curse came true when King Daśrath exiled his beloved son Rām for fourteen years due to a promise he made to his youngest wife Kaikeyī when she saved his life on the battlefield years ago.

The moral lesson of the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār seems to be centred on the cultural ideal of filial piety and care for elderly parents. Not caring about his comfort and ambitions and dedicating his life to serving his ageing and ailing parents makes Śravaṇ Kumār a cherished youth ideal in the Indian context. It is also worth mentioning here that, in the Indian patrilineal society, Śravaṇ Kumār is an ideal presented to the male child only, who is primarily responsible for the health and well-being of his aged parents.

In our review of the literature in psychology, religious studies, and philosophy, we found no scholarly articles about the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār. Though we did not consult off-line sources available in Indian regional languages, we came across a couple of psychodynamically oriented research papers written in English that reference the life and death of Sraavan Kumar as a dutiful son (e.g., Roopnarine and Suppal 2000; Shukla 2021). Many

Hindu parents name their male children after Sravan Kumar. There are frequent comparisons of extraordinarily dutiful sons and daughters with Sravan Kumar in news stories (P. Sharma 2015). The politicians use the mythic figure of Sravan Kumar to convey their commitment to serving the community (e.g., S. Sharma 2021). Recently, the government of Maharashtra in India launched an old-age pension scheme named 'Sravan Bal Yojna' in 2008 (Social Justice & Special Assistance Department, Government of Maharashtra 2022). A temple trust in Bihar has instituted a monetary award in the name of Sravan Kumar, which may be given to any person who has demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the care of their parents (Mahavir Mandir Patna 2019). Numerous popular books feature Sravan Kumar's story aimed at inspiring children (e.g., Rajasvi 2006). Four full-length Hindi feature films are made on the story of Sravan Kumar, depicting his popularity in popular culture in India. This is probably why the character and the story pervade the imagination of Indian people even in contemporary times. It is also noteworthy that unlike Rāmāyaṇ, which has many different versions, there are hardly any variations in the retellings of the myth of Sravan Kumar.

In reflecting on our interest in the myth of Sravan Kumar, we share that we both grew up in urban middle-class metropolitan Hindu north-Indian families with an unquestioning acceptance of Sravan Kumar as the ideal son. Like many Hindus, our parents also believed that a son should be as dutiful, caring, and obedient as Śravaṇ Kumār. Though we reckon that the myth was a powerful influence on both of us in our formative years, we experienced it differently as a son and as a daughter. As a daughter, I (Anshu) felt the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār excluded me. While there was no burden of emulating Śravaṇ Kumār and taking care of one's parents in their old age, I realised that this exemption was a reflection of the patriarchal values that the society cherished and the differential status it accorded to a son and a daughter. The myth conveyed to me that I am a '*paraya dhan*' (someone else's valuable object) who is in the care of her parents until she is handed over to another family in the contract of marriage. As a son (Vikas), I grew up in a context where unquestioned parental reverence and obedience were considered a mark of respect. My family and relatives discouraged and dismissed any critical questions about our cultural practices, rituals, and values. Though I felt responsible for taking care of my parents, especially in their old age, I could never understand why taking care of them was equated with obedience. My modern liberal education taught me to have a critical outlook and question the taken-for-granted social scripts and values, and I found this path incompatible with the path of unquestioned filial piety. This tension was difficult to reconcile, and therefore, I found Śravaṇ Kumār an impossible ideal to emulate.

Based on our interaction with our peers and friends, we realised that we were not isolated in our outlook towards the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār. It seemed like people from our age group, who share our cultural and educational background, also felt excluded and burdened by the myth. Perhaps younger people's reactions towards the myth are reflective of the underlying inter-generational differences in the espoused values. So, how do we go about reconciling our discontent with the otherwise culturally celebrated mythical figure of Śravaṇ Kumār? As developmental psychologists fascinated by stories, we wondered if the myth has a layer of meaning beyond what is popularly understood. In other words, is there an alternate, more critical interpretation of the myth possible?

3. Method

With this critical intent in approaching the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār, we root ourselves in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' of Ricoeur (1967). For Ricoeur (1974), interpretation is "the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning" (p. 13). This kind of hermeneutics, due to its unflinching suspicion, allows for a suspension of the taken-for-granted popular meaning of the myth and opens it to a new reading, "one which is even more powerful than our first reading and which correspondingly can evoke in us an even stronger response" (Stewart 1989, p. 306).

However, how do we reach these hidden layers of meaning in a mythical text? In order to resolve this, our interpretive exercise of the myth of Śraṇ Kumār is also loosely inspired by Sri Aurobindo's *'The Secret of the Vedas'* (Aurobindo 1998) and *'Vedic and Philological Studies'* (Aurobindo 2016), where a 'philological justification' is sought for the interpretation of the Vedas. In this approach, one deciphers the "original meaning of the words by taking into account historical and philological considerations such as their etymological derivation and their context" (Medhananda 2021, p. 484). These meanings are then used to arrive at a contextually relevant and plausible psychological interpretation. Therefore, the philological method prepares the basis for carrying out a hermeneutical interpretation. Since the authors of this paper are not proficient in Sanskrit, the meanings of the names and keywords in the myth have been derived from the Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary (Monier-Williams 1899). The literal meanings of the names are then considered with broader reference to the cultural, literary, and philosophical context.

4. Deconstructing the Myth of Śraṇ Kumār

While the dedication and deference of Śraṇ Kumār seem to be the focal points of the myth in the popular imagination, one should not disregard the tragic end of the myth. From a different vantage point, the myth of Śraṇ Kumār is the painful story of an adolescent who, in his attempt to be a dutiful son, undertook a long and arduous journey while carrying his blind parents over his shoulders. On account of an unfortunate mistake by Prince Daśrath, he met an agonising, unfortunate, and premature end. So, a deconstruction of this myth to uncover an alternate interpretation that helps us move beyond the popular understanding is likely to be illuminating.

As one begins to examine the myth of Śraṇ Kumār, some questions emerge. Why would Śraṇ Kumār decide to carry his blind parents on his shoulders? They were blind, but they could have walked with the help of Śraṇ Kumār. Knowing that they couldn't travel on their own, why would Śraṇ's parents put forward such an unreasonable demand for visiting the pilgrimages? And why would they consent to Śraṇ's undertaking such a seemingly impossible and painful task? Is it even physically possible for an adolescent boy to carry both parents on his shoulders and then take a long and arduous journey to multiple places?

In search of answers to these questions, we posit that in the myth of Śraṇ Kumār, carrying blind and ailing parents on one's shoulder and undertaking a long and arduous journey to the pilgrims is symbolic, not just literal. Carrying parents on one's shoulder could mean internalising their image and living one's life based on their worldview. The parents in this myth are blind and ailing, which could symbolise their worldview being outdated and even problematic. Though Śraṇ Kumār voluntarily carried his blind and weak parents, his being a dutiful son came at the cost of being burdened. This could be interpreted as the feeling of being weighed down by the internalised images of parents and the conflict of having to live a life according to a worldview and principles that are limiting.

Embarking on a 'journey to the pilgrims', or 'tirthyātrā' is another significant theme in the myth that offers potent insights. This analysis proposes that the symbolic meaning of pilgrimage as a psychological journey of self-discovery is more important than the literal physical journey. About pilgrimage, Warren S. Poland (1977, pp. 399–400) noted that it "refers to any major journey in life, extending as a reference even to the journey of life itself from birth to death". Instead of understanding pilgrimage as visiting the sacred places physically (Singh 1995), when interpreted psychologically, one may posit that Śraṇ Kumār's act of undertaking a long and challenging journey to a pilgrimage while carrying his blind parents on his shoulder is not just a literal journey. Rather, it is an adolescent's symbolic journey of self-discovery and personal transformation, wherein one needs to grapple with internalised images of parents. On the path to individuation, an adolescent must resolve the intrapsychic conflicts arising from internalised images of parents through rigorous self-reflection, either independently or with professional help. In reference to pilgrimage and self-analysis, Poland (1977) noted that "there is simultaneously an effort to

establish one's self as an individual and to fit one's self into a continuity of generations, and effort to master unconscious identifications and conflicts" (1977, p. 400).

Additionally, since pilgrimages are sites where knowledge, wisdom, and powers are particularly accessible to pilgrims in almost all religions, it may be said that the journey to the places of pilgrimage is a symbolic rite of passage where an adolescent moves beyond the confines of the parental household to become a member of the broader social institutions to seek knowledge. Notably, Sravan Kumar embarked on the pilgrimage already burdened with the internalised images of his parents, and therefore, there was very little room for self-discovery and spiritual transformation.

In the myth, there is a recurrent theme of excessive reliance on 'śruti', i.e., hearing, for making significant decisions instead of 'dṛṣṭi', i.e., visual. The first clue to this effect comes from the protagonist's name, 'Śravaṇ', which means "someone who hears". The second indication comes from the visual impairment of Śravaṇ's parents, which naturally indicates their reliance on hearing instead of seeing. As we make sense of these clues from the myth, it could be interpreted that Śravaṇ Kumār was a son who followed his parents' words to the letter rather than assimilating their teachings into his own vision of the world. Further, the parents themselves were without sight, and, presumably, they also relied on the shared social wisdom passed on by word of mouth, or 'śruti'. The last clue for this line of interpretation comes from the mistake that Prince Daśrath made when he decided to unleash an arrow based solely on the noise he heard. Devoid of any visuals, he assumed an animal was there, which led to the fatal error that marked the tragic end of Śravaṇ Kumār. The arrow that Prince Daśrath unleashed was an 'śabdbhedi bān', which means an arrow pierced the sound source. It is an archery technique where an archer can shoot the target guided by sound instead of sight. This episode and the subsequent curse from Śravaṇ Kumār's parents later proved instrumental in the sequence of events leading to Ram's exile and Daśrath's agonising mourning of his exiled son.

In this myth, the act of hearing—that is, 'śruti', or being a 'śrotā' (the one who hears)—could be juxtaposed with the act of seeing—'dṛṣṭi', or being a 'dṛṣṭā' (the one who sees). 'Seeing' could symbolise a person's search for wisdom or eternal truth. And therefore, being a 'dṛṣṭā' was regarded as the seer of the eternal truth or the ultimate knowledge. According to Sri Aurobindo (1998, p. 63), "dṛṣṭi and śruti, sight and hearing, revelation and inspiration are the two chief powers of that supra-mental faculty which belongs to the old Vedic idea of the Truth, the Ritam". The two are incomplete without each other. Therefore, being a 'śrotā' (the one who hears) without being a 'dṛṣṭā' (the one who sees), perhaps the way Śravaṇ Kumār and Daśrath were, could be inferred as a state of being that is still evolving. By being a 'śrotā', either a person relies on the word of someone else to shape one's understanding of truth (as was the case with Śravaṇ Kumār) or makes assumptions about truth based on limited knowledge (as was the case with Daśrath). For these characters in the myth, making judgements as 'śrotās' led to tragic consequences. It is as if the story of Śravaṇ Kumār is a cautionary tale of the problems of just being a 'śrota' (the one who relies on the wisdom and truth of others) without being a 'dṛṣṭā' (the one who 'searches' for wisdom or eternal truth).

This deconstruction of the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār raises a few questions concerning the process of adolescent identity development. Could the premature, tragic death of Śravaṇ Kumār on his pilgrimage symbolise the failed identity development process? Is it that his individuation process remained incomplete because he could not unburden himself of the internalised images of his parents? Could Sravan's and Prince Daśrath's fates have been different had they been dṛṣṭās (the one who 'searches' for wisdom or eternal truth) and not only śrotas (the one who relies on the wisdom and truth of others)? Therefore, this analysis prompts us to reflect on the significance of working through the internalised images of parents in adolescent identity development.

5. The Myth of Śravaṇ Kumār and Adolescent Identity Development

This section aims at viewing the deconstruction of the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār from the lens of relevant theories of adolescent identity development. The myth is first analysed in the frame of the more individualistic and universal theories of Erikson (1959), Marcia (1966), and Bloss (1967). These theories value the independence and autonomy of adolescents over parental dependence. Subsequently, the myth is also examined within the more collectivist and culturally rooted framework of Kağıtçıbaşı (1996), which values relationality, connectedness, and care.

The analysis of the myth makes further sense when related to Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development. The stage of identity versus role confusion unfolds during adolescence, and during this stage, adolescents struggle to achieve wholeness, which Erikson (1968) terms "a sense of inner identity" (p. 87). He further explains that to experience this wholeness, a young person "must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him." (Erikson 1968, p. 87).

As adolescents work towards establishing their unique identity, they develop new identifications with their peers and role models outside the family (Erikson 1968). For identity formation,

"not only must this stage incorporate a trustworthy "I" who has evolved as an autonomous individual capable of initiating and completing (through industry) satisfying tasks modelled by significant others, but it must also transcend such identifications to produce an "I" sensitive to its own needs and talents and capable of finding its own niche in the surrounding social landscape." (Ferrer-Wreder and Kroger 2019, p. 28, emphasis original).

From Erikson's perspective on identity, it may be suggested that Śravaṇ Kumār's carrying of his blind parents on his shoulders on the pilgrimage could be understood as an adolescent's journey towards the development of one's own identity in a broader social milieu, independent of the childhood parental identifications. Perhaps, the premature termination of this journey and the tragic end of Śravaṇ Kumār indicate that the burden of these childhood identifications could not be done away with, and therefore, the process of identity development was terminated prematurely. This could further mean that the absence of an independent philosophy of life and the resultant role confusion may bring about a weak sense of self, unhealthy relationship patterns, an inability to find a niche for oneself in the social landscape, a lack of self-confidence, and even mental health concerns.

In practice, the role confusion of adolescents and excessive identification with parental figures can lead to enmeshment. Barber and Buehler (1996, p. 433) defined enmeshment as "family patterns that facilitate psychological and emotional fusion among family members, potentially inhibiting the individuation process and the development and maintenance of psychosocial maturity". Parental enmeshment is likely to happen when one or both parents are overly involved in their children's lives and overly responsive to their needs. It is a state where the identity boundaries between the children and the parents are blurred or diffused (Minuchin 1974, p. 242). In such a family, members consider it quite all right to intrude on each other's thoughts, feelings, communications, and privacy. The autonomy and independence of children are significantly compromised in such family systems, leading to the overdependence of children on their parents and vice versa. Thus, forming a healthy adolescent identity lies in discovering a balance between self and others (Ferrer-Wreder and Kroger 2019).

James E. Marcia (1966) extended Erikson's theory to describe the four identity statuses as four different ways adolescents engage in identity formation. These identity statuses are identified based on two dimensions. First, a retrospective assessment of adolescent exploration of diverse values, beliefs, roles, and lifestyles is termed 'exploration'. Second, if, based on such an exploration, specific commitments to some options have been made,

this is termed ‘commitment’. This yields four possible identity statuses: achievement, diffusion, moratorium, and foreclosure. Based on the previous section, it is evident that without engaging in exploration, Śravaṇ Kumār bypassed the necessary process of identity formation to commit to the roles, values, and beliefs of his childhood parental identifications. Therefore, it appears that Śravaṇ Kumār’s identity status is ‘foreclosure’. In the case of foreclosed identity, an “adolescent’s actions will be aimed at receiving parental approval, thereby gaining narcissistic gratification and self-esteem” (Ferrer-Wreder and Kroger 2019, p. 85). This was also the case with Śravaṇ Kumār. He undertook a seemingly impossible task out of his zest for being a dutiful son to his parents, which ultimately led to his untimely and tragic demise. It is as if the myth is cautioning us against the adverse outcomes of identity foreclosure.

Peter Blos’s (1967) work on the impact of separation and individuation in the parent-child relationship on adolescent identity development can help us extend this understanding even further. Erikson (1968, p. 159) suggested that during socialisation, the parents or primary caregiver is internalised, and it becomes the primary way in which the child knows and interacts with the world. Erikson called this internalisation of parent(s) introjection, which becomes the foundation of the child’s sense of self. Blos (1967) posited that this first, albeit rudimentary, sense of self needs to be deconstructed, refined, or even dismantled for a person’s individuation during adolescence. He called this the ‘second individuation’. “During the second individuation process, it was this very internalised images of parent that needed to be relinquished if development were to progress” (Ferrer-Wreder and Kroger 2019, p. 9). To develop an independent sense of identity and its subsequent expression in the form of unique interests, passions, talents, and desires, one needs to abandon and move on from the self that has been constituted by parental internalisations. It “implies that the growing person takes increasing responsibility for what he does and what he is, rather than depositing this responsibility onto the shoulders of those under whose influence and tutelage he has grown up” (Blos 1967, p. 168).

When Blos’s thesis is applied to the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār, the interpretation suggests that while he remained focused on listening to others’ words, Śravaṇ Kumār’s second individuation process may not have been successful, which resulted in his struggles with identity. As a result, he could not outgrow the internalised images of his parents to create an independent worldview—a metaphorical *dr̥ṣṭi* of one’s own. Hoare (2002, p. 31) suggested that identity achievement requires a serious rethinking of one’s past, personal talents, interests, and ideological positions. Perhaps, in his zest to be the ideal son, Śravaṇ Kumār let go of this opportunity for personal growth through self-reflection. However, does the blame for this identity-development failure squarely lie with Śravaṇ Kumār? In this regard, Blos (1967) emphasised that parents and social institutions should appreciate their part in adolescents striving for freedom from childhood dependencies (Ferrer-Wreder and Kroger 2019, p. 84). Adolescents are likely to immensely benefit from social institutions (particularly educational institutions) that supposedly create safe and supportive spaces to explore their potential, experiment with their identity, and arrive at their unique values, talents, and life philosophies. Interestingly, such a space for identity exploration at all different stages of life is in-built into the Āśram system³ in Hinduism. The four stages of the Āśram system—Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vānprastha, and Sanyās—also allow for gradual relinquishing of power and control on the part of parents, and their offspring grow and mature to develop households of their own. During their education, the students, mostly adolescents, lived in the house of the Guru—called Gurukul—away from their parental homes to obtain an education. It was a system that allowed for the growth of adolescents under the tutelage of a teacher, away from parental influence.

However, in the above psychoanalytic frames, autonomy or individuation is equated with separation, i.e., a move away from parents. The development of an adolescent’s autonomous identity is juxtaposed with their relatedness to their parents. This assumption is questionable, particularly in the Indian context, where families deeply value loyalty, unity, harmony, mutual dependence, and cohesion (Kapadia 2017, p. 16). Considering the pattern

this work, scholars may attempt other such culturally situated and autoethnographically grounded critical analyses of other myths. Furthermore, this particular analysis of the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār could serve as a foundation for empirical studies on inter-generational dynamics between adolescents and their parents and grandparents. One could use the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār and other similar myths from different religions to serve as starting points for conversations around inter-generational expectations of care and responsibility. It is also possible to further explore how the youth in India relate to and grapple with other culturally significant mythical and religious figures and the insights these negotiations offer for the process of identity development.

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Notes

- ¹ In our understanding, myth is “a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relates actual events and that is especially associated with religious belief” (Buxton et al. 2020). We consider the story of Śravaṇ Kumār a myth because it is a traditional symbolic story that has its origin in Rāmāyaṇ, the ancient Hindu text. Though we don’t consider Śravaṇ Kumār a god or a superhuman, we certainly believe that his story depicts certain extraordinary events, making him a tragic hero, of sorts.
- ² Though there are many versions of ‘Rāmāyaṇ’ (Richman 1991), we could trace the myth of Śravaṇ Kumār to Valmiki’s Rāmāyaṇ and Tulsidas’s Rāmcharitmānas. The myth of Śravaṇ Kumār also seems to be more prevalent in North India than in other parts of India.
- ³ In brahmacharya, “the school child, growing into youth, learned the basic skills relevant to his future adult working role while he lived together with other students and the guru” (Kakar 1979, p. 7). In the Grahsthya āshram, “man’s-meanings (purusarthas) besides dharma, i.e., artha (material gratification) and kāma (sensual-sexual gratification), flower and are to be enjoyed” (Kakar 1979, p. 8). In Vānaprastha, there is “an inner withdrawal from family affairs and family ties” (Kakar 1979, p. 9), and in Sanyāsa, there is the stage of renunciation of the household to focus on self-realization (mokṣa) (Kakar 1979, p. 10).

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