

Resurgence of Myths and Legends in Contemporary Literature of Indian English in an Emergent India

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This research paper aims to explore the resurgence of interest in our own mythology today and to show that it coincides with the economic development of the nation and thus expresses the self confidence of its people. The use of mythology by a few management gurus to provide guidance and direction in the fiercely competitive modern world is also explored. The paper aims to focus on the works of popular writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Devdutt Pattnaik and to look into the reason for their appeal in the present age. This paper also looks into how greater awareness, education and exposure has led the contemporary reader and the writer to seek to understand the profundity of Indian myths and legends and apply them to day to day challenges of life.

Joseph Strelka from the New York State University, Albany, in his paper *Mythe/Myth* says, "Many literary works serve as excellent examples of the revitalization of myth. No less worthy of note, it is often myth that gives power and vitality to some of the greatest works of literature."(Strelka, *Mythe/Myth*)

Some of the greatest literary writers of Postcolonial Indian English prose and fiction have made use of Indian myths and legends in their works. Girish Karnad in *Yayati*, *Hayavadan*, *Nagamandala*, *Fire and Rain* and Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* are just a few examples of writers who have brought out the emotional, metaphorical, historical and symbolical appeal of myths.

However, it is very interesting to note the resurgence of Indian mythology in popular literature and prose in recent times. Indian English popular prose and fiction has been on the rise in the India of today. A number of Indian writers and diasporic writers of Indian origin have written prose and fiction that has generated a lot of interest and been very popular with the Indian readers of today, especially young adults. In such literature, an entirely new genre of writings about Indian mythology and legends has set the book market on fire.

Writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Devdutt Pattnaik etc have gained a lot of fame because of their books and works involving Indian myths. What is the reason for their popularity and appeal?

One major reason is that post-liberalization era India is very different from pre-liberalization India. Urban India has changed drastically. The opening of India to the

world, the coming of multi-national companies into the country, and the corresponding increase in salaries and perks has led to a massive change in the attitudes and lifestyles of Indians. Global influences have led the educated, upwardly mobile Indian to adapt a more Western lifestyle. Immense technological advancement has made India an IT hub. More of work related travel, both within the country and outside, exposure to foreign films, food and literature, as well as different cultural influences have made the urban, educated Indian a thinking, questioning, rational and tolerant individual.

A capitalist economy and an increasingly consumer driven culture has opened up the publishing industry. Books were previously unaffordable and one shelled out hard earned money only for an exceptional book. Today, however, books are priced reasonably and even a student with average pocket money can afford to buy books of his choice. Then again, marketing strategies and easy interaction with authors has helped bring the printed word that much closer to the reader's heart. People now have the time and leisure to enjoy books and no journey of urban, English medium educated Indians is accomplished without books and no bedside table is devoid of them. According to an article entitled, "The Decade in Literature" in Mint, February 1, 2011,

Globalisation has, arguably, made "literature" a bigger and richer space for most serious readers, making more kinds of books more easily available to more readers, permitting old books to be sold alongside new books, and allowing readers, through the internet, to have a stronger say in book discussion and, thereby, sales.

India's book economy is on a different arc, For an observer of Indian literature in English, the last decade was full of bright lights on all three counts of publishing, book selling, the density and internal diversity of the idea of literature, and the spread of a reading culture. (Mint, Feb 1, 2011)

Apart from the above, educated, urban Indians today are a self-assured and confident breed in themselves. Up till the present times, there are at least two generations of Indians that have grown up in a free India and are completely free of the humiliating past of colonization. These Indians are affluent, skilled, well spoken, well travelled and consider themselves at par with if not better than the rest of the world. These people now feel the need to be exposed to the canons and thoughts of their own texts and writers. They want to read stories written for them, by them and of them. They do not want to continue reading stories of western characters in western settings.

Paradoxically, the present lifestyle has also led to several losses. The joint family system has been replaced by the nuclear family. Nuclear families have ushered in

busy, working parents and growing children have lost that grandmotherly or grandfatherly figure who was the storyteller. Our myths and legends have been handed down to us in the oral tradition through these storytellers who occupied pride of place in children's hearts and imaginations. Hence, the young Indian of today is generally not very aware of her rich heritage of mythology. She has a very vague, often hazy idea of her own mythology. On the other hand, western myths and legends abound in the short stories, poems and novels that children read while growing up. So young readers of today may be familiar with stories of Robinhood, King Arthur and his Roundtable, vampires, Greek legends or witches and wizards, but may not be fully cognizant with stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

In November 2010, at the Mumbai Literature Festival, authors of popular fiction like Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi had expressed the view that when a country and its people become confident of themselves and their place in the world, they express this confidence by exploring their own inherent myths and legends. People who have grown up learning about the mythologies of other advanced cultures, now desire to explore their own culture through their indigenous myths and legends.

Hence when novels such as *The Immortals of Meluha*, *Jaya*, *The Secret of the Nagas* etc came into the market, the average Indian of today realized her lack of knowledge about her own myths and legends and hence their widespread appeal. This can be easily seen in the impressive sales figures of both *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Secret of the Nagas*. Till August 2012, both the novels had sold almost 749000 copies. The books have also been translated into Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi. Similarly, *Chanakya's Chant* won the Vodaphone-Crossword Popular Choice award in 2010 for having logged the highest number of sales that year.

This however does not suggest that any work on mythology would have met with the same success that these books have earned. These works are innovative experiments that have caught the Indian readers' imagination. The most important facet of this fiction is that elements like magic and fantasy are non-existent.

It was generally thought that Indian myths and legends were mere fantasy or superstition. This idea gets credence from the way Hinduism is practiced in a rigidly ritualistic form in most Indian homes. The true essence of the myths and legends gets lost. What remains are the dos and don'ts that most families observe. To the youth, Hinduism is anyway a religion without any single canon or text to follow and hence is so diffused and indistinct that it has lost its spiritual meaning and remains mired in rituals.

However, novels like the Shiva trilogy, *Chanakya's Chant* etc are not only well structured but have also reinterpreted Indian mythology and modernized them so as to appeal to the modern Indian reader. Hence, the reader does not have to willingly suspend her disbelief. On the other hand, the story has been made realistic and scientific so as to render it eminently believable. The author does talk about heroes who are quite above ordinary mortals but they are not supernatural and are not incompatible with science. (Segal 46).

The modern reader is discerning and prides herself in her logicity and rationality. Hence as Robert Segal says,

A defence against the challenge of modern science has been to reconcile myth with that science. Here elements at odds with modern science are either removed or, more cleverly, reinterpreted as in fact modern and scientific. Myth is credible scientifically because it *is* science – modern science. Instead of setting myth against science, this tactic turns myth *into* science. (Segal12-13).

The Immortals of Meluha and *The Secret of the Nagas*, in fact, are built on this premise. The story of the Meluhans is set in what can be called the Indus Valley civilisation with its meticulously constructed cities, drains and baths. Shiva is not any God, but a marijuana smoking Tibetan immigrant who gets anointed as the Mahadev or the God of Gods.

In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Brihaspati is the Chief Scientist, in charge of making Somras or nectar that prolongs the Meluhans' lives and makes them young. He attempts to explain the blue throat of Shiva by saying: I am sure there is a scientific explanation for the blue throat..... I believe in science. It provides a solution and a rationale for everything. And if there is anything that appears like a miracle, the only explanation is that a scientific reason for it has not been discovered as yet. (Immortals of Meluha 136)

The author of the Shiva trilogy, Amish Tripathi, too has this to say: Myths are nothing but jumbled memories of a true past. A past buried under mounds of earth and ignorance.

This trilogy is based on this fundamental premise. I believe that the Hindu gods were not mythical beings or a figment of a rich imagination. I believe that they were creatures of flesh and blood, like you and me. I believe that they achieved godhood through their karma, their deeds. I believe that the words Vishnu and Mahadev are not individual

names. They are in fact titles, given to those persons who are the greatest of leaders, who become god-like. (Tripathi, www.shivatrilogy.com)

Ashwin Sanghi uses the legend of Chanakya and portrays him as a perceptive, cunning, intelligent and patriotic master strategist. He juxtaposes the contemporary Chanakya - a wily and calculating politician, Pandit Gangasagar Mishra - with the legendary one and draws a completely realistic picture. In his latest book, *The Krishna Key*, he yet again researches exhaustively and blends historical elements with the modern age to give us a racy novel in the mould of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*. He says that he is interested in talking about fiction that sounds like fact.

Yet another reason for the appeal of mythological fiction of today is that fundamental principles like the premise of Karma or the concept of cause and effect through the performance of deeds is discussed in these works. Karmic effect is the basic tenet of religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. The popular mythological fiction author has demythologized the myth not eliminating it but by extricating its true, symbolic meaning (Segal 47). Thus Robert A Segal says: Demythologised, myth ceases to be about the world and turns out to be about human experience of the world. Demythologized, myth ceases to be an explanation at all and becomes an expression, an expression of what it 'feels' like to live in the world. Myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false and becomes true. It depicts the human condition. (Segal 48)

The average Indian who is still unclear about her religion, understands the concept of karmic retribution very well. The idea that our deeds of the past have an effect on our present is very rational and logical. This idea is reinforced by the above mentioned mythological fiction. God or legends are so only because of their good karma. They are not out of this world but are mortals who through their deeds have become heroes. They too suffer from existential questions and need to struggle on their own to arrive at the right conclusions.

Shiva too has to find his own answers. In *The Secret of the Nagas*, in a conversation between Shiva and his uncle, he is told by his uncle that,

"It is your karma to fight evil. It doesn't matter if the people that evil is being committed against don't fight back. It doesn't matter if the entire world chooses to look the other way. Always remember this. You don't live with the consequences of other people's karma. You live with the consequences of your own." (Secret of the Nagas 144)

The idea of karma and other philosophies is the crux of the works of another famous mythologist, Dr.Devdutt Pattnaik. Dr.Devdutt Pattnaik has written a number of books and articles showing the relevance of mythology in issues pertaining to life, leadership, governance and management. Dr Pattnaik says, “I help people leverage the power of myth in business, management and life.” Devdutt Pattnaik is a doctor trained in medicine who spent a great deal of time reading and researching myths, rituals, sacred stories and their impact on culture and now occupies the unique post of Chief Belief Officer, in Kishore Biyani’s Future Group. His retelling of the Mahabharata, *Jaya*, was immensely popular. It told the complex tale of the Mahabharata in an easy manner, simultaneously also throwing light on the various ethnic influences that led to the stories developing in different ways.

Dr Pattnaik writes his blog, and his articles appear in various publications like Corporate Dossier of The Times of India, Mumbai Mirror etc, where he draws from mythology to provide life lessons. An example is given from his article, Rules Do Not Make Ram, where he says,

Both Ramayana and Mahabharata are about human society and about rules. In the Ramayana, Ram follows the rules but in the Mahabharata, Krishna breaks the rules. We are told both are righteous. Both uphold dharma. Both are forms of God. Both fight corruption. How can that be?

In the Ramayana, the villain breaks rules. Neither Surpanaka nor Ravan respect the laws of marriage. Surpanakha uses force to get rid of competition and get herself a desirable mate. Ravan uses cunning to steal another man’s only wife, despite having many of his own. In contrast, in the Mahabharata, the villain does not break a single rule. No one – neither Bhisma nor Drona nor Karna nor the Pandavas – cry foul when a woman is dragged and disrobed in public, as technically Duryodhan has not broken a single rule in the gambling hall. A rule-following Ram can combat a rule-breaking Ravan. But would he succeed against a rule-following villain like Duryodhan? That is why even God had to change his avatar, and become Krishna, who bends the laws of nature, and gets cloth to materialize to rescue Draupadi from her shame.

Corruption is not about breaking the rules: corruption is about rejecting our human side, embracing our animal side, and reserving resources for the mighty and dominating the meek. Corruption is about becoming the territorial alpha male who excludes competition and includes no one except those

who surrender to him. (Rules Do not make Ram, Mumbai Mirror, Aug 18, 2010)

The popularity of his writings stems from the fact that life's lessons are easy to understand and apply when couched in the stories of our mythology. Not only do we gain greater insight into the symbolical and deeper meanings of our mythological stories but we also understand life and its anomalies very well.

All of the above authors have used mythology and drawn parallels to the contemporary world. The various interpretations by these authors help the reader relate these stories to her own day to day challenges of life.

Indian mythological prose and fiction has finally found its place under the sun. The works are all written in easy to understand, everyday, non literary language that at once strikes a chord with the reader. What is also very interesting is that the profile of the writers has changed significantly. While Devdutt Pattanaik is a doctor, Tripathi is an IIM Calcutta graduate who wanted to be a historian while Ashwin Sanghi is an MBA from Yale School of Management and is a writer as well as a businessman. The very diverse profile of these writers makes them well able to judge their audience's reading tastes. They do not take their writings for granted but research comprehensively and write in a racy, fast paced manner, packing in a lot of action and suspense- just what the present day reader wishes for. They write in a pedestrian style using day to day terms which again makes the largely non literary kind of audience bond with the works. The characters of these works are also very human and life like. They may sometimes be very restricted and appear flat but they have been drawn in an interesting manner and are definitely not God-like.

The mythology juggernaut continues with recent publications like *Jaal* by Sangeeta Bahadur and *Govinda* by Krishna Udayasankar. *Jaal* . is the first in the Kaal trilogy, is set in an ancient period and borrows several mythological elements. *Govinda*, on the other hand, is an alternative interpretation of the Mahabharata. In the coming months, another retelling of the Mahabharata by Sandipan Deb will be available. Deb sets the epic in the Mumbai underworld. It remains to be seen whether this will appeal to readers the way other mythological fiction has (D.N.A Sept 2, 2012).

However, as long as authors interpret myths in new and innovative forms, mythological prose and fiction will continue to intrigue us and ignite our imagination. According to an article titled, "Best-Selling Myths", published by Ms Reena Singh on mythological fiction, in The Speaking Tree, A Times of India publication, dated September 9, 2012,

Besides philosophical, spiritual and moral insights, stuff that mythological accounts are renowned for, these new stories take liberties with the plot, often placing characters in a contemporary context. What's more, all the deep insight is no longer of the kind that sits heavy on your mind; they are reader-friendly and peppered with current jargon. (The Spiritual Tree, A Times of India Publication, Sept 9, 2012)

Myths and legends may no longer be associated with religious rituals and beliefs but "myths" of heroic characters that mediate the troubling paradoxes of life and emerge triumphant, will always compel us and cast their spells on us (Magoulick: What is Myth).

Hence the fascination for interesting literature on Indian myths and legends shall continue.

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