

**AND POP GO OUR GODS! MYTH, NATION AND IDEOLOGY IN AMISH
TRIPATHI'S *SHIVA TRILOGY***

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ABSTRACT

The role of myth-making in nation-building is vital and indispensable. National myths plays a more significant role in the context of India whose diverse and teeming millions continuously problematize the notion of the nation. It is here that literature in general , and pulp fiction , in particular, can enable people to connect with one another 'in a kind of deep, horizontal comradeship'. This paper attempts to read the recent phenomenal success of Indian mythological fiction in English in the context of the nation's volatile socio-political milieu. It tries to establish correlations among a number of complex factors involved in this cultural trend: the 'restorying' of myths and legends in the form of epic fantasy; the text as an expression of cultural and ideological differences; questions of nation, citizenry, justice and equality that underpin their narratives; and the impact of their wide circulation on the reading public and in ideology formation. The paper aims to show how ideology can operate through a text's multiple affiliations to popular culture, people and the State

Introduction: Banking on Myth!

The last two decades have witnessed the emergence of a new kind of writing in Indian fiction that is characterized by two obvious features.

First, a number of writers have sprung out of the woodwork whose books are based on mythology, fantasy and folklore. The trend started with the publishing of Ashok Banker's retelling of the Ramayana in three installments, with the first book coming out in 1995. Banker's act was quickly followed by several other writers including Devdutta Patnaik, Ashwin Sanghvi, Anand Neelakantan, and the latest mythifier on the block, Amish Tripathi with his Shiva trilogy. All of these writers have spun their stories from an inexhaustible source, Hindu mythology, using a spool of Indian classical legends and tales. They have based their narratives on an array of traditional religious texts and popular legends, including epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the puranas like the Vishnu and the Shiv puranas, as well as vedic and pre-vedic texts.

Of Gods, Demons and Moral Brigades

Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy is based on the reconstruction of several Indian mythical characters and stories drawn from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Shivapurana. The recreation of Shiva in these books has been clearly fashioned by the writer with an eye on the market. Amish's Shiva is cast as a millennium mutant, cloned from mythology, legend, comic book and Hollywood action films. With regard to the story, while adhering to the basic theme of good versus evil that the genre of 'epic fantasy' generally follows, Amish has also incorporated several changes in the plot construction for its saleability. The lineaments of the 'heroic age', such as those of characters, of quests and battles, and of codes and conduct have been drastically modified. Perhaps the most 'radical' change is the way in which Lord Shiva, the most feared and revered of the trinity of Hindu Gods, has been shown as a mortal walking the path of destiny as other human beings.

While the commercial success of the books has been unprecedented, (the trilogy has sold a staggering 5 million copies!), what has been equally unusual is that neither the books nor its writer has run into controversy. Without being disingenuous, I can't help stating that the deliberate paring-down (will 'down-sizing' be offensive) of Shiva, from his super God status to a more identifiable human being but with extraordinary abilities, could have landed its author into trouble with right-wing Hindu fundamentalists.

After all, if the past has been any pointer, there have been any number of books and films that have been censored, censored or even banned due to the knee-jerk reactions from the so called custodians of our religion and culture. Writers have found to their peril that even the slightest deviation from the glorification and deification of our national icons, be it our freedom fighters, saints and our more than 3000 gods and goddesses have not passed by the scanner of fringe groups. Any attempt to portray our hagiographic figures in a dispassionate and objective manner has immediately caused lumpen groups to take to the streets, raise slogans, burn the 'infernal' work, and bay for the 'satanic' writer's blood. Much hue and cry has been raised over the 'distorted' presentation of historical figures like Shivaji (James Laine), Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Nehru even when hitherto unknown aspects of their lives have been unearthed by rigorous research. The assertion of facts based upon irrefutable evidence has flown in the face of extremist reaction from incendiary protectors of faith and nation. Whenever writers have attempted to demystify legendary personalities from history, politics, and religion, by making them real and human, the revisionist project has become politicized. It is as if nation-making cannot do without myth-making. A culture of desensitization has become the trademark of Indian society.

So, I find it a little surprising that Amish Tripathi's Shiva trilogy did not draw any unwarranted attention from those who constantly ring alarm bells over non-issues to serve their vested interests. In an interview Amish has himself said, "At times I also wonder why the book never became controversial." The books portray Lord Shiva as a man who became a god owing to the greatness of his karma. "Eventually it boils down to how it is presented. Having an alternate opinion about mythology is a good thing. It becomes a problem if you try to degrade characters," he adds.

Not for a moment am I suggesting that Amish's tales should have invited any other kind of attention but the one they got- of fulsome praise and great fan following; nor am I hinting that the writer deserved to be mired in controversy. On the contrary, it is a relief that in spite of the huge attention the books attracted pre-and post-publication, nothing unseemly or untoward happened.

After reams of print as well as megabytes of media coverage, the trilogy has ensured a celebrity status for Amish. The 5-crore deal between the writer and Westland Pvt. Ltd. is reportedly the mother of all sign-ups in the history of Indian publishing. Perhaps never before has a book in India have pre-release videos posted on you-tube (with Amish jiggling up reader curiosity with appropriate 'leaks') and a music album based on Shivshakti post-release.

Mythofiction and Generation Next

The reasons for the success of the trilogy are not difficult to establish. A discussion with my own under-graduate students brought out from them *their* take on what they found *cool* about the stories:

First, the appeal of Shiva as the protagonist of the story. Like all monomythic heroes, he is distinguished by an unclear past or origin, is driven by pure motivations, has a redemptive task on hand, and possesses extraordinary powers. He also fits the archetype of the superhero as someone who is an outsider and is called upon by a community (the *meluhas*) to fight evil or redress wrong. Like the Greek tragic hero Orestes, he also carries the burden of guilt. As a young boy, he had accidentally come upon a brute of a man raping a woman. Fear had made him flee from the scene, but the guilt of turning his back on a woman in distress torments him for the rest of his life.

Of course, the narrative beefs up his exploits from *The Immortals of the Meluhas* to *The Secret of the Vayuputras* to give him a superman status. And he is depicted as a muscle-rippling crusader of truth, a resolute fighter of justice. The cover picture of all three books makes the reader associate him with popular icons – Hollywood and Bollywood action heroes (from Rambo to Ra One), DC and Marvel comics hero (more Batman than Superman in 'darkness'!).

But the 'X' factor that makes young readers connect with him is not his invincibility but his vulnerability. Like the new-age man, Shiva, the father-to-be in the first book is even shown to cook and feed the expecting Sati! Not surprisingly, my students found him endearing for Amish's portrayal of him as a brave, righteous, sensitive man with sense of humour. Such a characterization provides a radical makeover to the fiery image of the legendary Hindu God. Indeed, in the trilogy Amish has Shiva turn into a Mahadev (one of the many archetypes the book follows) only after he has successfully passed a series of tests, of bravery, endurance and self-affirmation. His rite of passage is bedeviled with difficult choices and an uncertain future. He is also shown to make mistakes and take wrong decisions. And it is this attribute that makes Amish's Shiva such a hit with generation next.

A second reason for the success of the trilogy is the appeal of its narrative style and language to a young readership. Most readers find in its medium, colloquial and slangy, an idiom that is modern, hip and upbeat. The writer does not pretend to write in any 'high' literary style

other than what makes his narration racy and cool. Never mind, Shiva's speech is liberally sprinkled with 'dammits' and 'shit', and that the whole northern belt from Kailash to Kashi, from Mansarovar to Magadha, speaks the same register. In fact, despite the legendary characters with their highfalutin addresses of 'lord' and 'lady', 'king' and 'majesty', the language has a ring of campus lingo. Moreover, there are no inflections to differentiate the tongues of the inhabitants of the many cities and regions that the narrative crisscrosses.

Clearly, in shaping the USP of the trilogy, Amish adopts a well thought-out strategy of manipulating commonly known stories and popular perceptions of Lord Shiva. What this creative cocktail of modernist spin and popular tradition does is to allow the writer to deconstruct a whole set of mythological tropes without being irreverent.

'Cult' as 'Pulp'

Now the point of my thesis is that when 'pulp' itself turns into 'cult', we need to turn on our critical eye and rigorously examine the text, its subtexts and context. Amish's Shiva trilogy, on closer scrutiny, throws up a number of crucial issues that allows an interesting engagement with notions of power, motivation, citizenship, legality, and leadership, among many others. The story of Shiva as narrated by Amish is the story of a man who in the process of self-discovery finds his 'divinity' and his destiny.

The resounding success of the trilogy has of course become a milestone of sorts in Indian publishing lore. A whole narrative on writing as merchandise and readers as consumers has developed out of the management of its publishing event. This narrative needs to be investigated not just as a marketing phenomenon but also as a sociological event. In it is embedded a number of subtexts, political, cultural and ideological that when studied reveal some possible reasons as to why and how the trilogy is such a success. It is precisely in popular cultural items like pulp fiction, comic books, 'masala' movies, etc. that one finds the expression of the unresolved political, social and ideological tensions of the nation. But these escape detection because they are disguised as fantastical and popular.

Ideology itself is a many nuanced term that needs careful elaboration here. In the context of this paper, ideology means a body of ideas, values and practices that operates within society through the production, distribution and consumption of popular culture, including fantasy fiction, comic books, graphic novel, films etc. The chief function of these products of mass culture is to perpetuate and consolidate cultural and national memory. Slavoj Zizek considers ideology to be "an indispensable medium through which individuals live out their relations to a social structure, to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power" (1994:3-4). Popular culture, in general, and fantasy fiction, in particular, plays a powerful role in the fulfillment of this objective. Because of its dissemination among a large populace, it possesses the power of creating the illusion of a national consensus and a collective imagined community. One only has to think of the thousands of Amish's readers who hook up on social networking sites by posting, commenting or leaving a scrap about his work to instantly create a digital *communis libris* on a virtual platform.

The premise of my inquiry is that fantasy fiction with its projection of a mythological superhero is deeply embedded in notions of national identity and cultural consciousness.

Texts of superheroes may be read symptomatically as representation of contradictions and paradoxes both in the character and in the character of the nation. In the trilogy, for instance, Shiva is persistently faced with the problem of nation, nationality and representation. The important questions whose answers he must seek are also the central themes of the trilogy: How does the leader recognize who his 'real' people are? How does the leader negotiate with different groups whose demands are conflicting but legitimate? How does the leader follow the path of dharma without compromise?

This kind of analysis yields interesting facts about the complex relationship between culture, religion, society, nation and ideology. Besides, if a myth has to live, it must have the opportunity to recast itself in new forms, in new acts of retelling. It must roll out of its *axis mundi* the truth of universals that can gain currency even in the present. A myth can be used in the manner of Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image', which contains the present and the past simultaneously.

I find in Amish's epic narrative an obvious attempt to draw parallels between the past and the present. The making of the somras, the drink of the gods and the elixir of life, is given out in terms of manufacturing units, production hazards including an explosion that kills Shiva's friend Brahaspati (Chernobyl disaster, Bhopal gas tragedy?), and its market that is as much subject to vagaries as the sensex! The conflict between the Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis, the Meluhas and the Swadeepans, the Nagas and the Brangas are described in a way that brings to the forefront issues of our own incendiary times - communalism, sectarianism and regionalism.

My argument is that the dissemination of popular pulp fiction like other kinds of writings can serve two opposite purposes in society. Because the medium and its message is produced and consumed *en masse*, it can be employed either as a weapon of change by dissident groups or as an instrument for consolidation of *status quo* by the state.

Unlike the direct operation of the first, the latter manifests itself in hidden ways through processes and practices that are normative and proliferating. This is because popular culture works its influence with the consent of the majority; it veils easy recognition of a dominant ideology's persuasive rhetorical force. As Marx and Engels state (in *The German Ideology*, Selected Works 1969, Vol.I): "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas ... The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production" (1969:47). Borrowing this idea, both Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser have shown how ideology operates in civil society by means of state apparatus: repressive state apparatuses (or RSAs – for example, the penal system, police and army) and ideological state apparatuses (ISAs – including religion, the legal system, education, the family, culture and communication). The first are coercive in their operation, while the second function to unify society through ideology and reproduce a regime through consent.

Myth of the State and State of Myth

The myth of the nation-state is constructed with the help of political ideology whose basis is often *a priori* mythic knowledge. Scholars such as Joseph Campbell, Myron Aronoff and

Ernst Cassirer have established the fact that myths play a crucial role in the production and circulation of political ideology. Cassirer, for instance, has pointed out the manipulative function of myth:

The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our own great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth (Cassirer 1946, p.282).

In an Indian context, I can cite the example of how the puranic notion of *Ramrajya*, the ideal republic based on dharma, has often been invoked by political parties as an electoral promise they would fulfill if voted to power. As the dominant political power, the state wields the greatest ability to promulgate and institutionalize specific myths through established channels of mass communication that includes pulp literature like fantasy writing. The State can also create a climate that is conducive for the production and circulation of its agenda. The most potent example of this phenomenon was the tremendous popular reception that television serials like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* registered in the 1980s. Both 'epic' serials brought the nation to a standstill during the time of its screening, and both were financed and produced by Mandi House (Doordarshan). One may argue, and argue convincingly, that behind the mega success of these mythological series, there was a veiled attempt on the part of the State to use its most powerful tool of technology and communication to establish a pan-Indian consciousness. It was possible to imagine a feeling of 'Indianness' (albeit, State-sponsored) surging forward on the crest of a mass medium. People's collective participation through television entertainment as an 'imagined community' fostered a sense of national belonging and common identity. This is what I mean as the 'myth of the State'.

On the other hand, by 'state of myth' I refer to the phenomenon when a certain political ideology is distributed by various state agencies in such a manner as to conceal its politics and highlight its mythical sanctity. 'Hindutva' as a political idea veering towards right wing fundamentalism has often been unfurled on the mast of 'Hindukush', a mythical geography from the past. Thus, unlike a myth that forms beliefs in people from their historic origin, an ideology plants itself in people's minds by arising out of specific situations. In fact, with regard to Amish's books one of the problems is related to the act of reading itself – do the novels drawn on Hindu mythology invite an 'aesthetic' or 'secular' or 'religious' reading? To problematize the text in this fashion is to uncover the underlying premise of the approach; it is to consider the text beyond the semiotics of its signs and to examine its signification to politics and demographics.

Secularization of Myth

My inquiry into our reading of Amish's work, and its impact on youth is partly based on the 'ideology critique', especially on the semiotics of images and representation, and the construction of audiences (here readers). I wish to probe the politics of the text, the connections of its word to its world. These are not according to me extraneous to the text but intrinsic to its subtexts.

To consider the Shiva trilogy less as a literary artifact, and more as cultural product with material result is to grapple with several questions: If the popularity of Shiva be considered the result of his super-heroic performance as shown in the tales, do we also think of him to embody our national identity, albeit a particular Hindu identity? What do we make of the virtues and values that are projected onto his persona in the trilogy? Do we see them linked up with a particular kind of ideology that is of, for and by the dominant religious community? If the Shiva trilogy cashed in on a market trend and a massive readership for scripting success, would such a tale featuring gods of other communities also be a 'hit' in a nation dominated by Hindus? After all, every religion has its own iconic crusaders to fight the universal battle of good over evil. Will a 'dalit' legendary hero recast as the protagonist in the same genre of pulp fantasy have the same reach and impact? What about a woman evil fighter in the mould of Durga or Shakti? Would the representation of girl power through a feminine divine source be given the same fantastic reception in our male-dominated society?

There are two complex issues that I find embedded in the narrative of the text and the discourse of its popularity. First, one might surmise from Amish's recasting of Shiva's myth in a modernist mode that the writer has made conscious attempts to secularize a Hindu legend to reach out to a wider audience. Perhaps, that is also the reason that this fictional work has evaded any kind of political or religious appropriation. The inclusiveness of its message is highlighted in the stuta that prefaces *The Secret of the Nagas* – '*satyam, shivam, sundaram*' which is explained for the reader as "Shiva is truth. Shiva is beauty. Shiva is the masculine. Shiva is the feminine. Shiva is a Suryavanshi. Shiva is a Chandravanshi". The figure of Shiva too has been cleverly 'de-elited' by depicting him as a Tibetan tribal leader. So the writer's emphasis on his tribal origins may, in fact, be a subtle mode of underwriting the primary Hindutva text (with its Kshatriya warrior clans and the brahminical priestly class) with a postcolonial subaltern twist. In spite of creating a kind of pan-Indian identity for the protagonist, the texts do not underplay or elide the crucial differences of religion, class and caste that is subsumed in the popular myth of 'unity in diversity' that makes the national narrative. It is in this play of many meanings and many readings that one discovers the many-layeredness of Amish's texts.

The other issue is the speculation on whether the success of the trilogy springs from any ideological plank. Arguably, those who want to read the work through the distorted lens of religion, caste or class may dig up evidence from the text to support their agenda. Such a reading can be based on the undeniable role that popular culture plays in the propaganda of a dominant ideology. It assumes that the narrative's fictionality cannot override its ideological vision – to airbrush a Hindu God's primary colors with the tricolor shades of pan-Indianism. Nevertheless, one can also counter this claim by pointing out that by combining history and mythology into a fast-paced thriller, Amish has actually reconnected a post-historical and post-national generation to their roots.

END NOTES

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