

MYTHUS: VALID OR VOID

(Reread of Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology is a book on Hindu myths by Devdutt Pattanaik.)

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Abstract

‘Myths’ is the collection of stories which usually deals with the human condition, good and evil, human origins, life and death, the afterlife, and the gods. It expresses the beliefs and values about those subjects that held by a certain culture. It tells the stories of ancestors and the origin of humans and the world, the gods, supernatural beings and heroes with super-human, usually god-given, powers. Myths also describe origins or nuances of long-held customs or explain natural events such as the sunrise and sunset, the full moon or thunder and lightning storms.

Mythology tries to answer the most difficult and the most basic questions of human existence. To the ancients the meaning of the story was most important, not the literal truth of the details of a certain version of a tale. All over the world there are extraordinary narratives that once upon a time were believed to be true but today they are limited to the sphere of ancient myths and Mythical narration. The question remains, are those myths and mythical stories something that existed in the minds of our ancestors, or were they based on true events? It is true that most of those ancient myths and mythical stories appear to the scientific world as fictitious products of vivid imaginations whose goals were purely to explain phenomena beyond their comprehension. In this paper we will explore some of the most unique myths and mythical narratives from around the world that may hold truths that can expose the secrets of our ancient origins.

WHAT IS MYTH?

A myth can be defined as **an ancient legend, story or even a fable of the early history**. A myth can also be used to explain a natural event especially involving supernatural beings. Myths began to develop since the beginning of human existence and civilizations where people had the urge to comprehend the world around them. As science and technological development were rather limited during these times, myths were used as a form of rationalization. It allowed people to make sense of the world in a creative manner.

The every creations of the world, the natural elements were all understood through myths. These myths consisted of various characters such as gods and supernatural beings that

had various powers and potentials to bring about changes in the human world. Myths were also used to sustain the prevailing social order of the society through traditions, customs, and various rituals. Another function of myths was to operate as a moral tale.

- A myth can be defined as an ancient legend, story, or even a fable of the early history which is used to explain a natural event especially involving supernatural beings.
- A myth usually unfolds a story or legend which has supernatural elements such as gods.
- Myths are used to support the prevailing order of a society by providing a moral.

ABOUT INDIAN MYTHOLOGY:

Indian Mythology is one of the richest elements of Indian Culture, which enriches it further and makes it a unique one in the world. Through generations, different stories in Indian mythology have been passed from generation to generation either by word of mouth or through carefully stored scriptures.

It is our endeavour to bring forth the different elements of Indian mythology by a myriad of articles and stories which not only make educational reading but also make a good source of recreational reading. These stories, which form the backbone of Indian mythology, are a great medium for people especially parents to inculcate interest in Indian Culture in the younger generation and to impart values of Indian culture to them. The interesting aspect of the stories in Indian Mythology is that they are usually meant to convey subtle facts, rules and maxims to guide our daily lives. Who doesn't enjoy a well written story? Naturally story-telling is the best medium for conveying even powerful messages. The stories in Indian mythology vary from subtle maxim conveying tales of Panchatantra and Jataka-tales to subtle life paradigm defining stories from the Bhagavad-Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata. A key point to note is that there are usually multiple stories explaining the same fact or occasion or festival. So each version is right in its own merit. This is a result of the natural evolution the stories might have gone in the process of being handed over from generation to generation for centuries.

Aspiring on this, I would like to bring light upon writing of **Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik**:

He is an Indian mythologist and writer known for his work on ancient Indian scriptures. He has incorporated myth into human resource management.

His books include Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology;

Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata;

Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana;

Business Sutra: An Indian Approach to Management;

Shikhandi: And Other Tales they don't tell you;

Shiva to Shankara: Giving Form to the Formless, in which he explores the layers of meanings embedded in Shiva's linga, we discover why and how the Goddess transforms Shiva, the hermit, into Shankara, the householder; He is the former Chief Belief Officer of Future Group, one of India's largest retailers.

He believes that "no society can exist without myth as it creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties". To him, mythology "tells a people how they

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should see the world... Different people will have their own mythology, reframing old ones or creating new ones."

Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology.

Through this, I would like to present this paper to appraise and reread the writing of Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik.

In this book Dr Devdutt Pattanaik, unravels an inherited truth about life and death, nature and culture, perfection and possibility in Hindu mythology. He retells sacred Hindu stories and decodes Hindu symbols and rituals, using a unique style of commentary, illustrations and diagrams. We discover why the villainous Kauravas went to heaven and the virtuous Pandavas were sent to hell; why Rama despite abandoning the innocent Sita remains the model king; why the blood-drinking Kali is another form of the milk-giving Gauri and why Shiva wrenched off the fifth head of Brahma. Constructed over generations, Hindu myths serve as windows to the soul, and provide an understanding of the world around us. Dr. Pattanaik has undertaken a massive project with this little book; condensing centuries of philosophy, profiling hundreds of epic characters, and attempting to provide an introduction not only to the major holy books of Hinduism (the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata) Not only does he succeed in this seemingly impossible task, but he also succeeds in writing an intellectually stimulating and entertaining read. Dr. Pattanaik has written the survey course on Hindu mythology, and bookended it with the most cursory of conceptual guides.

Devdutt's Myth = Mithya is a simple read with not so simple content. The book explores the metaphysical and psychological elements hidden away in Puranas, presented with modern sensibilities, packaged in an attractive manner. The three sections centred on Origin, Culture (social) and Yogic (internal) give a lot to think about if you are having an open mind. Otherwise, it tells you a lot of stories, some known - some unknown on Hinduism. This is a book that is not for heart but for the brain.

For instance, I had always been taught that Shiva played the role of the "destroyer". To me, this word had always meant violence. I would imagine Shiva in the explosions of bombs and the falling of bricks. But, this is a faulty understanding. Shiva destroys through withdrawal, not violence. He is a hermit and ascetic, who renounce the world and all worldly concerns. It is through the act of closing his eyes to the world that he destroys it, as it was the perception of the world by Brahma which created it. This new interpretation of the linguistics of the myth allows me to have a deeper understanding of its philosophical implications to my own spiritual practice, and its relationship to the prevailing paradigms of Hindu thought.

According to Deal & Kennedy (1982) had identified 5 elements to understand corporate cultures. That included three elements such as heroes, rites & rituals, values and the myths and legends of an organization that help us decode its culture.

Think of Devdutt's book as a way to understand the mythology that shapes the way Indians behave. Even though the book is about Hindu mythology, it will help people understand the social beliefs that one sees being enacted all around. Myths are subjective truths expressed

through stories, symbols and rituals. Devdutt believes that the power of these truths can be leverage by people in business, management, and life once they start understanding the myth.

When asked what is the purpose of an organization?

Devdutt answers that it is Lakshmi (the Hindu Goddess of wealth); Saraswati (Goddess of learning) and Durga (Goddess of Shakti is power). Translated in modern terms, the purpose of the organization is to help the employee create wealth, learn new skills and be empowered. In the absence of any one of the three, the relationship between the employer and employee will not be a vibrant one.

While Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the nurturer) and Shiva (the destroyer) form the Holy Trinity of

Hindu gods, Vishnu alone has had ten Avatars (translation: Incarnations). The seventh and eighth incarnations of Vishnu were Rama (the hero of the epic Ramayana) and Krishna (the hero of the epic Mahabharata). The other eight avatars or incarnations were in the form of fish (*matsya*), tortoise (*kurma*), boar (*varah*); man-lion (*narasimha*), Rama with an axe (*parashuram*), *Buddha* and *kalki*. The kalki-avatar is yet to appear.

I enjoyed the most was the comparison of the two epics Ramayana & Mahabharata and why sometimes they seem to contradict each other. Devdutt explains that while Ramayana was set in an earlier age *Treta* Yuga while the story of Mahabharata was set in *Dwapar* Yuga. So the norms of morality also were different.

Hence in Ramayana, the hero Rama always followed the letter and spirit of law and was all about doing the right thing even at the cost of oneself – the Rules that govern behaviour i.e. the letter of the law and Principles i.e. the spirit of the law that governs belief. The villain of Ramayana was Ravana who violated the Rules as well as Principles. The hero of Mahabharata, Krishna would bend the Rules but never violate the Principle. The villain of Mahabharata was Duryodhana would follow the Rules but violates the Principles of Dharma. Devdutt's book is full of little insights and observations. For instance, if the open palm of the god or goddess is pointing towards the earth, then the mortals are being granted prosperity. If the open palm points to the sky, the mortals are being given reassurance.

All the stories are told in a contemporary framework. He describes Mahabharata as a property dispute between cousins. According to him Hindu mythology is full of variety. There are 330 million gods. There are gods, goddesses, spirits, personal gods, household gods and gods of space and time. There are gods for each caste, and guardian gods who look after the artisans. There are gods who are protective of the nature, living in trees and other who take animal form. Some are fond of minerals; some find meaning in geometrical form. Then there are numerous demons, each of which has its own story of rise and fall. Yet, there is no central Devil to this mythology, Devdutt Pattanaik seeks to help readers understand many aspects of Hindu mythology. He selects a few stories which speak for themselves, helping readers understand why Yudhishtira alone went to heaven while his brothers were doomed to hell. He throws light on Rama's status as the model king despite his banishment of Sita to the woods.

He also explains why Gauri and Kali are the same, even though one nourishes while the other slays. This book is a definite read for all those who wish to understand more about Hindu mythology.

Moreover, mythology (the vehicle of conveying the idea of myth) rides on the wings of fantasy and hyperbole. It needs to be so in order to ensure "flawless transmission over generations," says Pattanaik, explaining that it would be arrogant to presume that the ancients actually believed in "virgin births, flying horses, talking serpents, gods with six heads and demons with eight arms". These are symbolic representations of the ideas or concepts of truths that need to be communicated.

This book is a very quick exploration about Hinduism, the Gods, the gods the Asuras and the Rakshashas - and how they all inter-play. Very profound implications of the Hindu mythologies and deities is presented in a very easy to read fashion. Being a Hindu myself, I felt so illiterate about the religion when I read the book. Our deities are everywhere, the mythologies are told to us regularly. Despite this, the real reason for something like the meaning of Ganesha's head or the symbolical meaning being told via Brahma's 4 heads or abundance of snake is something that had never intrigued me. Mr Pattanaik brings forth their meaning as well as the reason for significance of each aspect of such symbol.

Conclusion:

The Myth = Mithya A Handbook of Hindu Mythology is a book which the numerous gods, goddesses, demons and gods of space and time. India has different gods as per their caste, this makes it millions of gods to worship and believe in. The book tries to explain mythology to readers through its stories which link to one another. The author tries to explain many facts of the mythology and gives answers to the same. He talks about why Yudhishtira alone went to heaven while his brothers did not. Similarly, he also talks about Rama and Sita as well as Gauri and Kali. Thus, through this book, the author delves on many concepts of mythology and provides answers to the questions that have always been present. He includes Mahabharata, Ramayana and also talks about Kali. The book is an excellent read for lovers of mythology.

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