

# “Myth In Indian Context In Amish Tripathi's Novels And Its Impact On 21st Century's Lifestyle”

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## Abstract

Myths are basically the folklores that beautifully narrate the culture, life, and customs followed by ancient people which are perceived in deities that are worshipped. India is well regarded for its diverse and rich culture across the world. Myth in Indian context reflects cultural and religious tales which one generation passed on to another and, as a result, there are several variants of Indian mythology. The contemporary Indian English novelist, Amish Tripathi recreated Indian mythology by mixing it with social fantasies and scientific facts. He adopted mythical characters related to Lord Shiva and other deities in his novels to depict an ideal society. Hence, this paper is aimed to analyse the recreation of myth in Indian context through Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy. It is the best-selling mythological fiction written by Amish Tripathi. This paper also argues that his treatment of mythology in his novels is more of a frame of modern issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than just a historical retelling. This paper also concludes that Tripathi has turned mythology of India into a relevant scripture of 21<sup>st</sup> century by forming mythical stories after the significant events of 21<sup>st</sup> century in India and especially in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Lord Shiva, Shiva Trilogy, Amish Tripathi, Indian mythology, myth in Indian context, 21<sup>st</sup> century, historical retelling

## I. Introduction

Myth plays a very important role in daily life of people as dreams, rituals, religious beliefs, and customs. It has several aspects for different meanings and each is realistic and unique to the one who perceives and adopts or transforms it knowingly or unknowingly. Myths shapes and rules not just the psyche but also the entire cultural side of people. Amish Tripathi is the Indian contemporary author who has retold the myths in his own ways. He doesn't alter the original faith or beliefs. Instead, he gives readers with an opportunity to reread Lord Shiva's myths in different ways. His presentation of myth in Shiva Trilogy

is published in a 3-book series “The Shiva Trilogy”, which includes “The Immortals of Meluha”, “The Secret of Nagas” and “The Oath of Vayuputras”.

As the name suggests, the trilogy deals with the most powerful Indian deity, Lord Shiva, who is well known as the “Destroyer of Evil”. The author has recreated him and portrayed him as a human warrior. Shiva is portrayed as a man who becomes immortal and gets worshipped by his acts, not by his name. The character of Shiva is developed to the position of the God only with his deeds, according to Tripathi. Shiva is the God of Destruction in Indian myth. He wears tiger skin, is abstinent, smokes marijuana, covers his body with ash, and dances in cremation yard. He is acclaimed as Mahadev (aka God of Gods), Bholenath (who holds innocence), and Rudra (the “fierce” warrior).

He is acclaimed as the creator of Vedas at the same time. He is frugal but the Linga is the phallic symbol which shows his erotic love. He is the father of Yoga “Adi Yogi” who balances emotional and physical health, but he also smokes marijuana and consumes bhang, which imbalances health. He is portrayed as “Ardhanareeshwara” along with a divine shaman. He has been praised since Neolithic era. His power is symbolized with fire but he also adorns himself with the mighty River Ganga. The trilogy defines a man with certain limitations instead of a magical hero. Tripathi’s protagonist doesn’t have any superpower like Lord Shiva. But he holds the presence as a true hero with his smartness, determination, and generosity.

In original myth, The Destroyer of Evil, Lord Shiva lives in Mt. Kailash with his Ganas or tribe. The followers of Shiva are described as “the Ganas or hosts of the God, his attendants and followers. Some of them hold a tambour, flute, or any musical instrument. There are five hosts of followers of Lord Shiva and each host is defined by an individual” by Henrich Zimmer. Devils and demons are the companions of Shiva who dances in the cremation yard. But they are represented as humans in the tribe of “Gunas” in Shiva Trilogy.

They are shown as humans with certain limitations as they are often humiliated, assaulted and tortured by “Prakritis”. Gunas accept to become Meluha’s immigrants but they later move to Kashi to survive. Being the leader of the tribe, Shiva guides Gunas and protects them. Shiva is described with this greatness as the chief of Gunas. He says, “This respect was not based only on convention but also on the character. He has helped the Gunas to achieve greatest victories in the battles through his sheer bravery and genius mind” (Immortals of Meluha). Gunas are recreated by Tripathi as modern tribes representing the superiority of the mythical leader.

The historical model of Tripathi provides a surreal insight towards the mythic life of Lord Shiva but Shiva Trilogy holds a social critique that is relevant to the discourses and events of 21<sup>st</sup> century in India. The trilogy is a medium that expresses historical knowledge to interpret ancient India’s heritage in the form of cultural, social, and political scenarios (Brannigan). Ancient India also covers the geographical regions of modern South Asia. There are shocking resemblances and relations between the mythological tales of Shiva Trilogy and modern discourses and South Asian society (Brannigan; Dutt & Bansal).

Shiva Trilogy has political, cultural, and social motives that have been argued to represent the discourses of 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as counter-terrorism, ethno-nationalism, nuclearization, and climate change (Dutt & Bansal). The study revisits the trilogy as the tale of battle for power and divinity between Lord Shiva and immortal Meluhans. Somras is a medicinal drink which makes the citizens of Meluha immortals. Somras also has malicious side effects of depletion of water and intoxication. The trilogy

shows the political struggles for Somras because of these uncertain outcomes. The security concern is the major reason behind power struggles between Meluha and its nearby state “Swadweep”.

Both of these states have compromised their security for several political reasons. On one hand, terrorism is an ecological resistance to genocidal and ecocide effects of Somras in Meluha. On the other side, Meluha’s nuclear threat, counter-terrorism and political intervention are the political sides of resistance of Meluha in Swadweep against Somras. Meluha also faces the rise of ethnonationalism, and it’s affected by social and cultural effects of Somras. Hence, Shiva embarks on a multidimensional fight against Somras as it opposes the cultural, political, and social forces. The life of Shiva is attached to Somras in this trilogy as Shiva attains divinity to destroy Somras’s institution as memorability in common imagination in this battle for noble cause.

### **Treatment of Myth in Shiv Purana and Shiva Trilogy**

Both Shiva Purana and people’s minds tell the tales of Shiva. Purana or Myth is supposed to be an important part of Indian history until 19<sup>th</sup> century (Guha). Rājābali (1808) by Mrityunjay Vidyalankar is a classic example of ancient history which takes place as pre-colonial history which has tales available in public domain from different unknown sources and they don’t differentiate “myth”, “contemporary story” and “history”, given the course of history as defined by the “grace of divine strength” on the parameters of “dharma” or “righteousness” (Chatterjee). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the contemporary historiography of India emerged with the process of “archivization” which gave the rise of “disciplinary protocols”, including postulating ancient myth, sifting facts, and generation of sources and with separation of magical and mythic aspects from previous elements (Mantena).

Myth has been terminated from modern historiography as myth is considered as a problematic element in Western philosophy in its association with philosophical, rational reality to religious and age-old belief (Bidney). Myths have been treated as symbols of moral, natural and philosophical realities by the Neo-Platonists, Sophists, and Stoic philosophers while myths are taken as “fabrication” which covered completely historic and natural events by the Euhemerus and Epicureans, and finally, the Roman and ancient Greek myths have been accorded by Christians as they didn’t contradict Christianity.

On the other side, Myth is translated as “Mithya” by the ancient Hindu seers (Pattanaik). Devdutt Pattanaik explains how the concept of myth comes from Greek “mythos” in his brief genealogy, i.e., “intuitive narration” which is different from “mithya” as designed by sages of India. According to him, Mithya and Sat (truth) are materialistically the same as both refer to reality but different to interpret as mithya is considered to be a limited and contingent range of references to fact and it is known to be a delusion by Hindu seers while truth or “Sat” is just perfect and beyond the boundaries and semiotics. Pattanaik further argues that “myth” is basically a cultural construct after the delusional rationale of “mithya”.

The concept of Shiva as human being is an alternate explanation (Immortals). It is indeed argued that Shiva Trilogy adds another “myth” of Shiva or simply put, “alternate history” of ancient south Asia. This alternate history is briefly explored and discovered in 21<sup>st</sup> century lifestyle. Pattanaik formulated “mithya” in the form of “reference” and is closely associated with novel “Historicist” reading when it comes to explore a range of issues in the behavioural patterns of society and these issues also shape, perpetuate, and alter major codes of the culture (Cadzow). In addition, the delusional element of “mithya” also matches the major assumption of history which assumes that no archival or imaginative

discourse allows static facts or shows unchangeable human nature (Veese). The concept of Shiva as a “human being” is based on historic events and natural facts (Immortals). The historical aspects of myth in Tripathi’s novels refer to the hermeneutical “Euhemerism” to be practiced which considered “gods as mortal men who are worshipped as lords owing to the respect towards their descendants” (Bidney; Cooke).

Amish Tripathi gives euhemeristic cause at the end in “The Oath of Vayuputras” behind the loss of knowledge and heritage of ancient history –

“These descendants behold gods in what were great men of the past, for they believed that such great men couldn’t possibly have existed in reality... divined myths in what was really history, for true memories were forgotten in chaos as vast arrays of daiviasstras used in Great War ravaged the land.” (564-565)

## **II. Rise of Shiva and Decline of Somras**

The whole narrative of trilogy is weaved on the waning of Somras and uprising of Shiva by Tripathi. Somras has medicinal property which removes toxins off the body and keeps the cells splitting even in old age which leads to good health, youth, and active life for eternity. It is the “posthuman” phenomenon in Meluhan society (Bostrom). However, Meluhans are immortals at the cost of subsequent crises and environmental risks. It takes a huge amount of water from the River Saraswati for manufacturing Somras. The mass production of Somras causes depletion of river during processing in the Western Sea and land in Southern Rajasthan has been deserted (Oath 17).

For the cumulative effects and horrifying risks of mass extinction induced by humans and habitat, there are ecocide effects of Somras manufacturing (Broschwimmer). The hazardous practice of Somras is associated with genocide of Naga and Branga tribes. The increasing demand for Somras causes deformities in fetuses in the womb of Naga women (Oath). A huge amount of toxins is generated during the making process, which is the major cause behind Branga plague in early summer. Tripathi held Somras for the plight of Naga and Branga people and contextualized environmental destruction of River Saraswati and caused mass destruction. This event relates genocide with ecocide (Lindgren).

The genocidal effects of Somras can also be related to the concept of ecological destruction and terrible side effects of industrialization. Shiva could see the terrible effects of Somras but he could still cannot perceive it as evil. The author pronounces major concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century environmentalists like Polly Higgins who introduced the campaign for ecocidal law to outlaw the ecocidal practice. In the polemic and elaborated discourse on evil concept, the author urges modern reader to confront the evil openly.

Somras has given continuity, stability, and solidarity to the cultural and national life of the citizens of Meluha for 1200 years as it is administered to the whole population and made significant progress in society (Immortals). Meluha is the most powerful and richest Indian empire and provides means of livelihood and free entry to the immigrants (Immortals 14). Citizens can lead perfect lifestyle in Meluha. Its social system is based on equality, hygiene, honesty, discipline, and law and order. The usage of Somras in daily life is responsible for the concept of hygiene. Water and hygiene are deeply ingrained in the lives of all Meluhans since a young age. The affluent are clearly absorbed by the water and Somras excretes all the toxins. There are three social systems that are the secrets behind the utopian society of Meluha – (1) caste system on the basis of action and abilities (2) the Gurukul system to provide equal benefits of education and opportunity funded completely by the empire, and (3) the Maika system

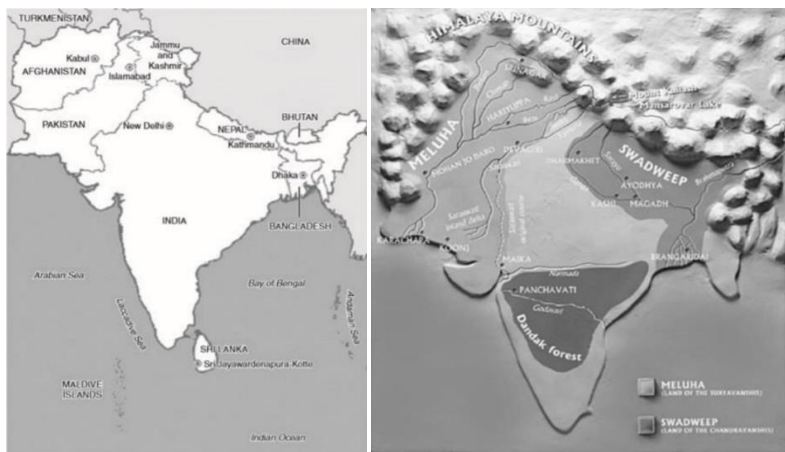
in which the child is adopted by the whole empire just after the birth at the cost of lineage.

### III. The Link between Trilogy and Security Concerns

Shiva trilogy is based on the major security concerns which are common in Meluha's mainland, i.e., to protect the tribe from the aggressive tribe of Prakratis. Shiva is well regarded as "Neelkanth" by King Daksha as he believes that he is the savior owing to his leadership skills and his potential to finish the crisis for lifetime that is given by Chandravanshis, including the shortage of Somras, terrorist attacks, and depletion of Saraswati. Daksha uses Neelkanth's institution as "improvisation as he milks on the unexpected potential of the empire and turns the materials given in his scenario (Greenblatt). Daksha extemporizes the legend like Lucayas's Spanish colonizers and expands the empire and turns out to be the ruler of grown territory by justifying his political schemes and rules.

The Trilogy links security concerns with various social and political concerns that is related to Shiva by Daksha as security is more than just an objective element. Instead, it is securitization that takes place due to social and political discourse (Dutt & Bansal). The trilogy relates Daksha's security concern with the security issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century in South Asia for 3 primary reasons – (1) the trilogy is set on the backdrop of Indian subcontinent which consist of South Asia in today's world; (2) security threats in Swadweep and Meluha is similar to that of modern South Asia (Figure 1), i.e., international relation, terrorism, nuclear energy, and climate change; and (3) national dimension of security concerns.

**Figure 1 – (a) South-Asia in Today's world (b) Meluha and Swadweep in Shiva Trilogy**



**Source – Dutt & Bansal**

From a leader of a tribe to a God who plays a vital role in the first installment of the trilogy, Shiva's journey is incredible. It finalizes when Swadweepans surrender themselves to the Meluhans and the process of colonization starts. The trilogy repletes with postcolonial matters like migration, identity crisis, narration, cultural assimilation and diasporic sense. The entire colonization process can be seen in the "Secret of the Nagas" as how they take lands in their possession, how most ideal and favorite character becomes the greatest liar ever, and how some discourses gain power over colonies, knowingly or unknowingly. The Sapt Sindhu citizens were hoping that their blue-throated savior would come down from high mountains and remove all their difficulties and hardships.

The Guna leader, Shiva meets all needs and conditions as promised. He got enough self-confidence to provide justice to his people. But there is a disruption in the entire concept of justice. In that case, justice is served only for one. It is humiliation for others. Manipulation, modification and narration just create half-baked truths. The migrant leader, Shiva drinks Somras and becomes Neelkanth that is offered to him and his tribe. He couldn't be free from the web that is covering him from all sides. The action hero himself, Shiva works according to the masterplan of Emperor Daksha of Meluha, not by his mind.

Shiva is physically well-off to defeat the evil, the manipulated voices against the city of Meluha. Daksha is not just a king, but he is also a colonial master who rules the entire India with his masterplan. The human version of mythology, Shiva feels that everything which challenges Meluha or against Meluha is an evil. Shiva propagates the colonial agenda of King Daksha to every state of Sapt Sindhu. Colonial agents serve as mediators between the one who is being colonized and those who are colonizing. They were initially bilingual translators to make trade links smoother in India with the Europe, but they later became the colonizers.

First, they were the preys of colonial voyage to gain early access to the secrets and lives of locals. They had privilege of English language and western education which they used to forge their identity of being natives. They surely knew the exploitation their natives were going through but they were not in a situation to give up the privilege they had been getting for a long time. Middle class becomes intellectually lazy and weak which became the main reason behind failure of nationalism (Fanon). Shiva represents the "middle-class" and the link between the colonized and colonizer. He was just a leader of the tribe but his intervention made him conform to the values of middle-class society in Meluha. Shiva puts the flame of anger as the middle man when colonized protested or raised their voice against colonizers.

Sometimes, colonial agents don't show enough concern over the pain of their fellow natives as masters have made their colonial agenda so well that they show only the illusory side to the agents. Here, narration is very important to show the positive sides of their mission and unfold and present the nuances of native past so well that is supposed to be helpful to fix issues. Shiva is the unaware kind of colonial agent. He has the privilege as Neelkanth, despite being an outsider. He is the super-kin, prophesized warrior, and the God to everyone in Meluha. He has won the heart of everyone he met. But he is unwilling to follow the prophecy and he is not concerned about what was happening behind the scenes. So, his character cannot be called "God".

There are different representations behind the myth of Neelkanth. There are two variants of myth in the novel – the Swadweepan and the Meluhan side. People of both nations believe that their worshipped Neelkanth would eradicate their pain and defeat the evil for them. Swadweepans and the ways of their living are evil for Meluhans and vice versa. In that case, who is evil and who is good? According to the "Vasudev" of Ayodhya, "There is God in every one of us. There is also an evil in everyone. We need to fight the battle of good versus evil within."

Vasudev utters the doctrine so that Shiva could realize this fact. It shook Shiva because he felt that he was born not just to identify the evil, but also to get people off their evil side. Despite knowing this fact, Shiva was unable to identify his own evil and what wrong he had done as part of the mission.

Meluha dominates Ayodhya in the holy war "Dharmyudh" in "The Immortals of Meluha". It shows the colonial concept of projection. It shows how colonial concept of projection is practiced. It shows Ayodhya's political system was more liberal and focused on happiness in people. On the other side, the liberty and free will of the people are shortened in the name of equal facilities and rights. It can never

be the ideal system at any cost. The colonized was often shown as primitive, evil, inferior, and the ones who live dark ways of living in the history books.

One can find only negative things about the natives. On the other side, colonizers are shown as more civilized group of people. The secret behind the immortality of Meluhans is a heavenly drink Somras which ensures long lives of their ideologies. The politically influenced colonial agent, Shiva believes everything from Meluha is worth praising and good as Meluhans follow the doctrines of Lord Ram. Major aspect of their majestic agenda is showing them as Lord Ram's devotees. The colonial agent is supposed to be indebted and educated in colonial ways of living.

#### **IV. Political Influences and Terrorism on Trilogy and Modern World**

First installment of the series "The Immortals of Meluha" was politically organized on international relations between Swadweep and Meluha. The emperor of Meluha offers Shiva and his tribe free entry to Meluha for his untold quest for Neelkanth whose entry is prophesized in stories. The search is for destroying the Chandravanshis by the Neelkanth. They are the line of Swadweep kings who have entered Naga's evil force to unleash terrorism due to hatred and Chandravanshis used Nagas for several years to unleash terrorist attacks in the neighboring state.

Mount Mandar was the hidden unit where Somras was being manufactured where a terrorist attack occurred and it caused the controversial death of chief scientist of Meluha, Brahaspati. Sati, Shiva and Pandit were the prime witnesses of three events of explosion. Mandar's terrorist attack is the reminder of the infamous 9/11 attack in the year 2001 on World Trade Center. Shiva finds the clue of offenders at the remains of Mount Mandar, including a leather bracelet with Aum symbol embroidered on it, which Nagas wear and "vows for vengeance".

The way Shiva retaliates post Mt. Mandar attack is closely related to the aftereffects of 9/11 attacks when US Army invaded Afghanistan in the hunt for Al-Qaeda in the Taliban regime. Shiva was stunned with a huge disclosure at the end of the Holy Battle "Dharmayudha" that Nagas are not like Chandravanshis. Shiva doubts the virtue of his actions in the absence of Nagas, "He has done a blunder. What he had done was wrong. They were not evil." The initial installment finalizes in the incomplete battle of Naga and Shiva and leads to "The Secret of Nagas".

The counter-terrorism strategies are clearly defined in what happened in "The Secret of the Nagas". Shiva whets interest of the readers into Nagas amid his combat by wondering, "what kind of demons are they? He leaves enough gold to buy five more horses and steals a horse". He discovers a Branga gold coin which urges him to search Nagas in the "Dandak forest", which was their hinterland. But he unfolds several secrets in his pursuit at various moments of the novel.

The third and final part "The Oath of the Vayuputras" sheds lights on the use and preemption of "Daiviasra", the mythical variant of modern "nuclear weapon". The use of "Pashupatiasra" is the core theme behind the whole narrative of novel. It is completely a "nuclear fusion weapon" and its overwhelming consequences. When investigation is conducted on "wreckage" of attack in earlier part of trilogy, the story gains momentum. According to Parvateshwar, the Meluhan General, King Daksha was behind the whole ambush. Daiviasra was used for this nuclear attack and the story unfolds the defense policy of "Vayuputra Council".

The nuclear defense policy in this novel is related to the international security measures in recent history of South Asia related to the use of nuclear weapons (Blarel). In South Asia, nuclear power is

very important to stabilize geographical tensions since the 1940s. The risk of “deterrence breakdown” increases due to the nuclear attack on the region at the same time, especially in events of domestic politics, strong personalities, organizational mistakes, and accidents. This event of defense policy violation results in the situation looking for “Pashupatiastra”, a nuclear weapon from “Vayuputra Council” associated with redress for crime behind the illicit use of weapon (Oath).

Finally, the nuclear weapon is asked with an intention to normalize geographical conflicts between King Daksha and Shiva (Blarel). They had already decided that they will just threaten to use “Pashupatiastra” instead of actually using it. But they required to establish the weapon out of Devagiri to make it a serious threat. The conflict between Daksha and Shiva gone too personal where Egyptian assassins were hired to kill Sati in order to save Nandi. Shiva chooses to kill everyone except those who made or protected Somras to avenge his wife’s death and destruction of a manufacturing plant in Devagiri.

## V. Conclusion

Shiva Trilogy is based on “mithya” of Shiva in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tripathi relates ancient India with mythological history by blending mythological tales with historical facts. But the novel secularizes divine intervention in previous events to shed light on historical truth, an important trend in India after independence. Shiva inherits the qualities of God in the secular Puranic version for a highly advanced training by Lord Manobhu, the former member of Vayuputra. In the trilogy, immortality is not required by the merit of God. It only took good intentions to serve humanity.

Shiva diminishes the ecocidal and genocidal events of Somras and turns out to be the God. The extinction of Devagiri’s immortals promoted the divinity of humanity whose acts played a vital role in the growth of actual human civilization, instead of their posthuman capabilities. History is a product of prevalent political practice and contingent, the analysis of Tripathi on Puranic past is acceptable for the lack of ancient Indian history which is documented well. In the depths of ignorance and time, Tripathi retrieves a lesson which was lost in narrative of nuclear threat, terrorism and ecological events. The unexpected battle of Shiva against ecological crisis, nuclear threat, and terrorism teaches a lesson that can turn mythical perception of Hindu scriptures and ancient India and also inspires people towards those reactionary takes against those type of crises in 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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