Transforming Culture: The Myth-Fiction Interface in the Indian Context

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Of late, there has been a spate of fictional works based upon Indian myths. Fictionalization or re-telling of myths has become a lucrative venture because of the ever-growing demand for new stories from the visual media. Moreover, a huge overseas market has emerged that demands more and more of such stuff with each passing day. The re-telling of myths, per se, is nothing new; after all, we have had so many versions of the Ramayana in our country, produced by poets like Kumbhan, Krittivas, Balramdas, Tulsidas et al. Similar is the case with stories from that sea of stories, Mahabharata. This re-representation of ancient epics and stories is in sync with the deconstructive approach to hierarchies as the contemporary re-tellings are found to be subversive, artistic interventions. And yet it seems politics is involved in the implementation of the postmodern project, what with the prevailing re-Orientalist mode of evaluation of native literary-cum-philosophical traditions. Besides these issues, the paper discusses the impact of these practices on the native culture since the indigenous milieu comes in conflict with the forces of globalization, with the former insisting on reverence to cultural icons and the latter going along with playful irreverence. As the corpus of texts re-told keeps on expanding with writers like Ashok Banker, Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Nilanjan Chowdhary, Krishna Udayshankar…the list is endless, it appears to be opportune time to debate the issues involved.

Ashok Banker - We begin our study with the most voluminous of these writers, viz., Ashok Banker, who, at the age of 52, has written more than fifty books, most of these based upon Indian epics and folktales. He started his career as a journalist but soon turned to writing crime fiction before switching on to mythical novels, his international best-sellers. These include *Siege of Mithila* (2003), *Prince of Ayodhya* (2003), *Demons of Chitrakoot* (2003), *Armies of Hanuman* (2005), *Bridge of Rama* (2005), *King of Ayodhya* (2006) and *Gods of War* (2009).

Taking up one of his earliest books, *Siege of Mithila* starts with the student life of Rama and Lakshman and runs up to their marriage. Both the brothers are shown studying at the Sidha Ashram which is headed by Guru Vishwamitra. Banker changes the details of the story as it is understood by people on the basis of ancient texts and performances. The first chapter shows Rama being woken through a psychic message from the Adi-Shakti who takes him to the nearby Bhayanak Van. What transpires there is nowhere revealed in the book. Soon thereafter, Bejoo, the captain of the army formation called Vajra Kshatriyas arrives to deliver the message that both the brothers are wanted at Ayodhya. The Guru, who has come to know through his telepathic powers that the king of Asuras – Ravana means to attack the Aryavarta nation, leads a big contingent of Brahmin acolytes and Vajra Kshatriya warriors. Meanwhile, at Ayodhya, Ravana has already planted Manthara as his spy. She performs devilish magic rites to transform a serving girl into a likeness of the queen Kaikeyi who is then deputed to murder King Dasaratha. Ravana, on the other hand, infuses life into Bheria, a dead soldier of Bejoo's army unit. This 'twice-lifer' is then made to go to Ayodhya to possess Dasaratha's body and pass orders on his sons Bharat and Shtrughan to proceed with the entire Ayodhya army to two different destinations so that Ayodhya is left defenceless and Ravana can seize it. Bheria actually succeeds in his mission but the situation is finally handled by Guru Vasishtha who defeats Ravana's designs.

Banker has chosen to dip Sita in contemporary colours. She is no demure princess but a warrior who, alongwith a female bodyguard Nakhudi – both disguised as soldiers – goes about in the Dandak-Van and Bhayanak-Van forests, scouting for the security of Mithila, but is surprised by bandits, from which predicament she is delivered by, who else, Rama! The sage had deliberately taken a detour to touch Mithila en route because he knew Ravana would first attack Mithila. The attack on Mithila, like so many other details, is also Banker's own imagination and does not find mention in any version of the original epic Ramayana.

On the way, Rama rescues Ahalya who had been condemned to be a stone by her husband long ago. At Mithila, the defences are down due to the spiritual proclivities of the king Janak. The *Swayamvar* (marriage by girl's choice in an open court) is marred by the appearance of Ravana in camouflage who is able to meet the condition laid down for the *Swayamvar* (later shown to be partial) and claim Sita. When

Janak resists, he holds him by the throat at which Sita begs for her father's life and agrees to be Ravana's wife! However, the situation is saved by the two brothers and then Sita is won by Rama. Ravana disappears but not before delivering a warning to seize Mithila by evening and then rape the kingdom and its princess Sita! Both the brothers are in the vanguard to defend Mithila against the invading Rakshas hordes with the help of the Brahmastra provided by their Guru. It is a mantra rather than an armament, which they have just to read to make the hordes disappear. Banker's Ramayana – part two – ends on this happy note.What emerges from the reading of this book is the vision of a world which was mired in magic and sorcery and in which mantra was used even by Ravana to appear in the midst of wooers at Sita Swayamvar at king Janak's court. He also has the power to appear before his devotees (Manthara, for instance) when they propitiated him like a god through sacrifice and mantras! (270) Ravana can hurt and heal his devotees. He can even enter Dasaratha's body to mislead latter's sons Bharat and Shtrughan (250)! Banker brings in magic in a big way and distorts the storyline as per his fantasy. A serving girl is turned by Manthara into a Kaikeyi clone, who is then sent to poison Dasaratha as the famed 'vish-kanyas' of the middle-ages did. But while cradling the Maharaja's face between her breasts, she "opened her jaws, revealing two enormous serpentine fangs" (132)! Then, "With one final heart-chilling hiss, Kaikeyi raised her head and fell on Dasaratha with the fury of a predator in heat. Her mouth closed over Dasaratha's neck" (133) A female Dracula indeed! Manthara is portrayed as a very powerful sorcerer who throws even queen Sumitra into her secret chamber, the walls of which move with the chanting of mantras. And Sumitra outsmarts the *daiimaa* through a fancy-dress act that makes her look like the goddess Shakti! (406)

To add spice to the narrative, Banker uses hyperbole when he refers to a 7.5 lac strong Ayodhya army, led by 7000-year old Guru Vasishta (255). Guru Vishwamitra, the 5000-year old seer, walks so fast while leading the inmates of his ashram that others fall far behind. When brought to his notice, he slackens his pace so that others can catch up with him. The power of the gurus is so great that they can be compared to gods. Banker's portrayal of state of affairs places the sages at the head of administration. Guru Vasishta chalks out the plan to tackle the invading army of Asuras. He is aware of his power, therefore, he can tell King Janak, "I decree that this very night your great and virtuous city shall be given the fruit of its immense spiritual labours. You shall resist this approaching Asura horde and defend Mithila with great honour and valour" (481). The Guru has the mantra-power (which Banker calls Brahmin power) with which the entire army of Asuras can be made to disappear in thin air. It hardly leaves any leeway for the king or the army to act. For the lovers of thrillers, the scene in which Rama goes down the pit of Vasuki to bring to life Ahalya is a perfect piece with horrendous Vetaals (phantoms) fighting with the two brothers and even Sita who also cuts down 4-5 of them! (401) Banker is adept at painting Amazons as is borne out by his thrillers written before he took to the epics.

This mythical-magical world is made to co-exist with some elements of real present-day human life, in of course, present-day lingo. Needless to say, the two are yoked by violence together and the approach lends an unexpected colour to characters. Rama and Lakshman are not deities but mortals and so the 'boy-meet-girl' pattern is adopted for their meeting. While Sita is looking for Rama:

> Lakshman came up beside him. He spoke softly in Rama's right ear, 'Looks like someone's still sore as a mule at being outed, brother. Watch out for her back-kick!'
> Rama dug his elbow into Lakshman's ribs. (353)

It's not just the modern idiom; it also foists all types of modern ailments and lifestyle aberrations on the mythical period. Thus, the saints discovered cure for diabetics (72) and Manthara's serving girl offers to please her mistress in the lesbian style (84). The serving girl-turned-Kaikeyi goes about naked, "brushing against the guards" (86) but the guards would only think that the queen had taken more of "soma than she could hold" (86). Sita and Nakhudi, disguised as soldiers, are taken to be travelling Kshatriyas willing to work for any master for money. So, the mercenaries are also present here. The Kshatriyas, represented by Kartikeya, brother of Vinayaka, is fond of smoking Ganja and having 'Ganja dreams' (26). The way the story of Lord Vinayaka has been inserted in this narrative is very likely to lead a reader into believing that Banker himself had hallucinations which caused the mix-up.

The writer could have at least taken the trouble of finding out the relevance and meaning of simple words. He puts in the mouth of young students of the Sidh Ashram '*Om Hari Swaha*' (147) as if this were the Sanskrit equivalent of 'Amen' said at the end of prayer. Guru Vasishta is made to proclaim this very word when he finishes his speech and the congregation too responds with '*Swaha*' (282)! The normal ending in such cases is *iti* meaning 'the end'. Instead of the word 'brahmachari' for the students, Banker uses 'Brahmacharya' (150). Seers are addressed as 'Mahadev'! One of his inventions is the reference to Vasishth Puran (111); knowledgeable scholars deny the existence of such a work. There is the *Yoga Vasishta* though. Similarly, the invocation 'Jai Mata Di' (400) sits ill at ease with the description of mythical times. Out of ignorance does the author interpret 'Indra-prastha' as the abode of god Indra and situates it in Swarga Lok (477)!

There is the depiction of the city of Mithila – a virtual Utopia, which is ruled by a spiritualist king Janak. The city is low on defences but high on gambling halls, blouseless beauties, polygamy and polyandry etc.! (411) Surprisingly, Guru Vasishta is said to have used 'sorcery' to remove the veil of Sita in the jungle. And Sita wanted to "scream out loud and run away from these gawking, gaping people" (308). She rightly admonishes them, "And the rest of you, if you want entertainment, go find the nearest tavern or dance hall! This isn't a free show provided for your amusement" (308)

Prior to the Swayamvar, when they meet in the jungle, Lakshman speaks to Sita in this way, "I hear Mithila virgins have fine figures too! You really know how to provoke a man's imagination'… 'I'll be dreaming all night of naked virgins prancing down the raj-marg!" (274). Further, Sita is portrayed as a girl who is rather fussy about her match. "It was not the first swayamvara conducted for the rajkumari. She was notorious for turning down suitors by the hundreds" (412). Perhaps this is what Banker means when he states in the preface to the novel that his intention to relate the Rama tale "respectfully yet realistically" (xxii). He has taken substantial liberty with the myth, as it is generally believed and added to it the spice of titillation to cater to the Western reader.

Banker's treatment of the popular Ramayana is not simple re-reading, rather it creates a different image of an age, its milieu and value system. It has not been without inflicting violence on the underlying idealizing intent. From the clash of forces of dharma and its adversaries – a value-reading of the myth by devout Hindus – it becomes the tale of a materialistic battle by one race to gain victory over the other as the following lines make it clear: "A direct assault on Lanka was beyond the contemplation of any mortal army. And yet as long as Lanka remained in the grasp of the demon lord, the Arya nations could not hope to explore and settle the subcontinent safely" (143).

Amish Tripathi - Amish Tripathi is another Indian writer who has sold some two million of copies of his Shiva Trilogy which comprises of *The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas,* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras.* The sale has meant grossing over Rs 500 million and making the Shiva Trilogy the fastest selling book series in Indian history. He has now embarked upon the project to produce books based upon Ramayana. Tripathi seems to have been inspired by Ashok Banker but his language is rather prosaic and shorn of literary beauty. So far as the subject matter is concerned, he mixes up things in the manner of postmodern mélange, without caring for the element of authenticity. "These three major strands—myth, history, fiction—combine in the most awkward of all possible manners; with possible dangerous consequences" (Gurevitch).

Shiva, in this novel, is indeed the god that is one of the triumvirates of primordial gods – Bramha, Vishnu and Mahesh – who have been venerated since ages by Indian people. Shiva plays with snakes, smokes a chillum (earthen pipe) and has a blue throat – something that, according to the book, are the signs of the messiah. Here he is shown as the tribal leader of Gunas, who live at the foot of Mount Kailash in Tibet. Nandi is not the bull on which Shiva rides; rather it is the captain of the Suryavanshi clan who invites Shiva and his tribal Gunas to settle in Meluha (Kashmir) which is considered to be the richest and most powerful empire in the world. Having reached there, Shiva is declared a messiah (140) who has come to help the Suryavanshi clan of Meluha against the degraded Chandravanshi clan of Ayodhya, who even though worship Lord Ram, have deviated from his message of egalitarianism. They have joined hands with the Nagas and been carrying out terrorist attacks on the Suryavanshis.

The Meluhans are an advanced civilization, settled near Hariyupa (or Harappa) and their scientists have made Somras, which is "the drink of the gods. Taking the Somras at defined times not only postpones our death considerably, but it also allows us to live our entire lives as if were in the prime of our youth – mentally and physically" (81). Driven by jealousy, the Chandravanshis keep on devising ways to destroy the Somras production by diverting the course of the river Saraswati whose water is necessary for its production. The Chandravanshis also align with the Nagas, who are martial race though with physical deformities!

However, Tripathi is for humanizing god. So, Shiva cannot leave smoking marijuana despite warnings (169) and swears a lot. (293). when he is to be presented to the Suryavanshi king, he is made 'presentable': "His hair had been oiled and smoothened. Lines of expensive clothes, attractive ear-rings, necklaces and other jewellery were used to adorn his muscular frame. His fair face had been scrubbed clean with special Ayurvedic herbs to remove years of dead skin and decay" (30)

It is here that Shiva catches sight of king Daksha's daughter Sati when she is being tutored by a dance teacher. Shiva wins her over with his acumen in dancing to the extent that the teacher excuses himself. Does that remind us of any Hindi movie? But Sati is a 'vikarma' meaning she is supposed to have committed some sin in previous life. This concept is opposed by Shiva. The author explains that Lord Ram had institutionalized the system of 'vikarma' based on one's deeds which is now applied irrationally. Clearly, it is a take on the nefarious caste system prevalent in India.

Tripathi's Shiva is an ignorant and diffident character. He does not know about Lord Ram (34), nor does he know the meaning of the sacred word 'Aum' or Om. Nandi also acts as a Guru to Shiva sometimes, as when Shiva is to be enlightened about the meaning of Aum. Says Nandi: "My Lord, Aum is the holiest word in our religion. It is considered to be primeval sound of nature. The hymn of the univers; It was so holy that for many millennia, most people would not insult it by putting it down in written form" (56).

In vain, does Tripathi pretend to grow philosophical when he claims that "The Shiva Trilogy was built around the philosophical question of "What is Evil?" (Das). The discussion on these points is not profound even though in the book he banks upon the known Foucauldian view that those discarded by society are not evil but different. The corruption of myth goes without any scruples. The action is placed around 1850 BC and the reign of lord Ram is anterior to it by 1250 years, according to this novel. But when it comes to matching with the accepted mythology, Rama and Krishna cannot be placed anterior to Shiva, for the triumvirate of gods – Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva is the primordial divine pantheon ruling the universe and Rama and Krishna are supposed to be the incarnations of Vishnu only. So, how could Shiva worship Rama? In India, it is common to see pictures of Rama worshipping Shivalingum while preparing to assault Ravana's kingdom.

Shiva attains the title of 'Neelkanth', which is explained generally as having been assigned because he had drunk the poison churned out of the ocean during the Deva-Asur War, but here Tripathi assigns the physical trait to the drinking of somras that turned the messaih's throat blue like it would the ordinary litmus in a school lab! Tripathi does not spare history too. His inventive mind is behind the claim that Mohan jo Daro, the habitat of Indus Valley Civilization was named after a philosopher Mohan! (205)

Tripathi mixes up imaginings from diverse sources -- Plato's *Republic* to Marxist utopia. Children are the state property in Meluha. The writer fiddles with the idea of effacing caste division, and so in the novel, children are brought up by the state in 'Maika'. When they turn sixteen, they pass various exams. Anyone passing Brahmin exam, would be given to any Bramhin parent aspiring for an adopted child. Over the years, the Brahmin caste went up in number (99). So, where was the effacement of caste? Even here, Lord Vishnu is said to have left behind the Vasudev caste and Rudra the Vayuputras (395-6) – that, of course, is advertisement for the next book, and the doubting Thomases are clearly told to wait for the next book in the end, with the phrase 'to be continued'.

Tripathi mixes up whatever comes his way. So, if it is untouchability that he read about in the morning newspaper, we find there are groups of 'vikarma' men and women made to suffer as untouchables because of the sins committed by them in past life (92). If a person contracts an incurable disease or a woman gives birth to a still-born, he or she would be considered 'vikarma'. This system is

vehemently opposed by Shiva. Again, terrorist attacks too form a plank in the novel. The Chandravanshis are comparable to the Pakistani terrorists (111). The elephants turning around in war and trampling own army remind one of India's past history when Babur's guns created this scene in the defender Hemu's army. Like the disorder on Indian roads, The Chandravanshi capital Swadeep has more potholes than roads. Encroachments are the order of the day: "Some open grounds had been converted into giant slums as illegal immigrants simply pitched their tents on public land. The already narrow roads had been made even narrower by the intrusion of the cloth tents of the homeless. There was constant tension between the rich home-owning class and the poor landless who lived in slums. The emperor had legalized all encroachments established before 1910 BC" (372)!

So, Tripathi has marshalled all elements to create a storyline the like of which is the staple of Bollywood. No movie script would be complete without a lascivious heroine. So, we have the buxom Anandmayi asking for 50 litres of milk for her beauty bath! (366). The hero's friend is entitled to his prize, so we have Bhadra marrying Krittika (286). The city of Ayodhya surpasses the most passive societies of Europe, as we find the young and the old trying to woo whoever they have fancy for. (383).

Devdutt Patanaik - In contrast, however, to the chaotic mélange that writers like Banker and Tripathi have created in their works, Devdutt Pattanaik provides a fresh approach to epics. He is a management consultant, who quotes mythology to buttress his management lessons. His work is different in that he approaches the ancient epics with the eye of a humble seeker and researcher. His submission in the prologue of the book *Sita*, is an indication of it. "Within infinite myths lies the Eternal Truth/ Who sees it all?/ Varuna has but a thousand eyes/ Indra, a hundred/ And I, only two" (Pattanaik xv).

Taking up Pattanaik's *Jaya*, one is struck by the ingenuity seen in the writer's quest for the hidden meaning and its relevance to our times. Indeed, his *The Leadership Sutra* followed this route and became an instant hit with the management students. In *Jaya*, the writer has taken up different episodes from Mahabharata and given an authentic version those appeals to him, out of the many that are in circulation in India and elsewhere. At the end of each episode, his comments in box throw light on any ambiguity found in the narrative. As an example, we take up the section 'Bhima and the Nagas' (Pattanaik 73), which tells about the Duryodhana's jealousy towards the Pandavas during their boyhood days. They would quarrel on issues like succession to the throne. The Pandavas, though qualified by the law of the original bloodline, yet were opposed by Duryodhana. They also feared because their mother was a widow and they had no clout at the court. On the other hand, Bhima was a bullying sort of whom Duryodhana was sick. So, one day, Duryodhana offered sweets laced with poison and when Bhima became unconscious, Duryodhana, along with other Kaurava brothers, threw him into the river. But as fate would have it, he was saved by the Nagas living in the river. They then took him to their king Vasuki who recognized Bhima as related to the Nagas by bloodline. He also gave Bhima a potion to make him insular to poison in future.

The different issues in the story have been commented upon by Pattanaik and out of the five boxed comments; at least three deserve mention here. The first point focusses on the moot point: "Who should be the king – the eldest son or the fittest son? A child belongs to the original bloodline or anyone with the right capability? Vyasa ponders on this point throughout the epic" (Pattanaik 74). The third point refers to the Tamil folktale that says that believing Bhima to be dead, the feast as a part of his last rites was being prepared when Bhima appeared much to the pleasure of the Pandavas, But he insisted on going ahead with the feast as the preparations had been made. He mixed up the vegetables cut for the purpose with coconut milk. This dish called 'aviyal' is still prepared in Tamilnadu. The intent behind narrating this fact is to show how the ordinary people today feel attached to the mythical tales.

The fifth point says that while staying with the Nagas, Bhima was married to a Naga girl from which he later had a son who is known as Barbareek in Rajasthani folktales and Bilalsen in Oriya folk literature. This further underlines the reach and sweep of the mythical tales across the length and breadth of India. The point worth pondering that emerges from these excerpts is that with the fast changes taking place in lifestyle, custom, food habits, etc. of people following globalization (read 'westernnization'),

how unrelated will the next generations feel to their native culture unless re-tellings in contemporary style is not done by writers like Pattanaik.

Pattaniak's work *Sita* is a version of Ramayana that presents Sita's viewpoint. He also quotes different facts and figures about Ramayana through several tables. For instance, the name of Sita's mother is different across different versions of Ramayana. Comparing Devdutt Pattanaik's approach with Amish Tripathi's, a critic comments "Ramayan is still the story of the legendary hero Ram; there are no antagonistic thoughts in Sita's mind against her husband who disowned her because of a petty washerman. There isn't much of fictitious layering in the story which differentiates it from Amish's Shiva Trilogy" (Jha).

Others - We also have some serious writers who wish to present a different viewpoint that lies suppressed in the original text. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a leading novelist known for her poetic prose, re-tells Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. The storyline is original, that is, as understood commonly in India, but the perspective is different here – clearly a feminist one that endears the work to many. Draupadi's relationship with Krishna and Karna are in focus here. Taking a cue, Anand Neelakantan too attempted re-telling of Ramayana from Ravana's point of view in his *Asura*. The popularity of this book enthused Neelakantan to embark upon retelling of Mahabharata and the first volume titled *Ajaya* deals with the epic from the Kauravas' point of view. *Karna's Wife* by Kavita Kane, banks upon the version of Mahabharata from another perspective.

Conclusion - There are four ways in which these texts have been dealt with. One is the way serious scholars like Rajagopalachari and Dev Dutt Pattanaik have re-told Mahabharata, remaining true to the ancient text and deriving lessons for the modern man.   There is the second type in which T.P. Kailasam's plays produced around the time of India's independence brought focus on to sidelined characters like Eklavya, Keechak, Karna et al, but he did not do so by denigrating Krishna or by taking away his divine status. The third type relates to authors who take the authentic storyline as a cover or a metaphor like Shashi Tharoor used the Mahabharata protagonists as "walking metaphors" (Dhar 210) in his acclaimed novel *The Great Indian Novel,* but the reader understands the satire the way John Dryden's *Absolem and Achitophel* written in Biblical metaphor was understood in the 17th century England.

The fourth type is of the authors like Ashok Banker and Amish Tripathi who go about freely distorting mythical storyline and characters without concern for the deeper message sought to have been conveyed by ancient masters. In our times, the lure of lucre and the license validated by the postmodern surge have combined to motivate writers to take liberty with these texts raising concerns about the impact on culture and the process of acculturation of younger generation.

Assessment - This fourth kind of fictionalization of an ancient myth is in sync with what Harold Bloom calls 'misreading', often resorted to by young poets against the 'father-figure' of earlier poets, for whom they are no match but whose good-will they seize upon to prop themselves. (71-98). In this context, one feels tempted to refer to the attempts of some western authors who have even arrogated to themselves the right to be seated alongside a great author of the past even if s/he is no more! [1]

Of late, scholars have tried reading the myths and legends as overblown accounts of histories or camouflaged histories. The speculation over the historical basis of the oldest English epic *Beowulf* is a case in point. A number of historians read in the fantastic tale, the life-history of the northern chief Chochilaicus, who lived around 520 A.D. and who finds parallel with the king Hygelac of the epic just as his nephew is identified with Beowulf. (Long 17) Similarly, social scientist Arnold Toynbee 'regards Homer's *Iliad* [as] a unique blend of history and fiction' (Dhar 39). The western theorists have started believing now that historical records are not absolutely true but relational and open to multiple interpretations. Historians are certainly selective in the choice of evidence and are guided by their ideology. Even scientists have started suspecting that the references to extraordinary creatures in myths – Greek, Egyptian or Indian may be real descriptions of existing life forms seen of visitors from outer space at that time. At times, drawings of aliens have also been found. With the NASA imagery of the Rama

Setu (Adam's bridge) in the gulf of Mannar, joining the southern tip of India to Sri Lanka, the Rama story seems more than a mere myth.

The attitude of ancient Indians towards historiography must also be kept in mind. There is no doubt that the Indian mind, possessed as it was by deeper and more permanent rather than temporal and ephemeral questions of life and world, hated noting down historical details the way the Westerners did. They did, however, meticulously note down their findings from experiments in the spiritual field as the Upanishads amply show it. As for the Ramayana and Mahabharata, these laid down the ideals to be followed in individual, social, political and cultural fields of human activity. Talking of the Mahabharata, Barucha righlty avers that it is "not merely a great narrative poem, it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge for our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, ecology – in short, our history in all its detail and density" (quoted in Dhar 230).For the ancient Indian scholars, however, the myths served as parables for the common man with his limited intelligence; for the enlightened ones were the Vedas and the Upnishads with their dry logic and maxims.

The element of hyperbole is found in all myths. This is quite understandable because they have existed for millennia. Even a simple experiment in a small communication chain shows wide deviations from the original message; in case of thousands of years, what exaggeration might not have worked on the original message. There have been many metaphorical analyses of the Ramayana. The enlightened spiritual masters of our times interpret the myths differently. A case in point is Jaggi Vasudeva's interpretation of the Shiva Purana, who finds the scientific theories of the contemporary world explained in story form in this myth[2].

There is no doubt that the postmodern project of obliterating hierarchies has its merit in focusing on the marginalized but by favouring the re-telling, re-mixing and consequently re-representing the myth in such a derogatory fashion, are we not inscribing reverse binary *secular/religious* or more clearly *faithless/faithful*? Should not the deconstructive freedom be equally available to the one who thinks with his mind and the one who goes by his heart (post-truth)? Still another binary that needs to be resolved is of *present/past* raised in Harold Bloom's formulation. In this regard, it would be instructive to remind ourselves of what T.S. Eliot said in his famous essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent': 'Someone said: "The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did". Precisely, and they are that which we know' (16).

Apart from these considerations, for the anthropologists, there is much to mull over. The myth-based novel might appeal to those who do not think much of its cultural linkage, as for example, the readers in the West, and the writer must mint money by commodifying a cultural work (not text), but we cannot ignore the change in perception that this trivialization of icons and ideals is bound to cause with regard to the cultural discourse which constructs the subject – the young subject belonging to the next generation, for whom Rama and Krishna may not mean the ideals of a race but only cardboard characters like Batman and Superman. The moot question that should bother us is: Whether, by taking away the mystique and the aura from the characters like Ram and by bestowing upon them the traits of a 'pure imaginary', as has been sought to be done to the idea of nation, are we not taking away from society something vital for its existence? Are we sure there is no need for any icons and ideals at all in a society which is witness to constant degradation of values in every field? Do we not need to think 'Without smirti, the life-giving memory of what generations have cherished and passed on, entire communities are known to capitulate to the prevalent or dominant culture?' (Paranjape 123)

The problem lays in the blind application of western yardstick to something that has been produced in a different – here, Indian context. Gross reductionism is inherent in applying the Marxist theory of discourse to the 'production' of a 'text'. The power relations do not fashion the text here because the likes of Valmiki who produced Ramayana were not driven by the desire to maintain their hegemony. They were spiritual adventurers, who had broken bonds with society in the true tradition of ascetics; they sought spiritual rather than material treasures. Indian myths are also structured on the clash between virtue and vice but ultimately it is the virtue that must win in the Indian dialectic mode. Their case cannot be judged by western canons: they should be evaluated on the basis of Indian poetics, which enjoins upon literature (*sahitya*) the responsibility to promote the welfare of all and to uphold dharma, the

sense of righteousness of thought and deed at the level of individual and society. The Indian myths retain for posterity what is of eternal value and let pass what is ephemeral aberration.

NOTES

[1]Eva Sinclair has inserted raunchy scenes in the old classic *Jane Eyre* and the new novel titled *Jane Eyre Laid Bare* shows Charlotte Bronte and Eva Sinclair as joint authors. When asked about the ethics of the project, Sinclair's comment was "No bad idea" (Chhibber) but the unstated intention to make capital out of the work of a death author is quite evident.

[2] In the Shiva Purana stories, you will see that the Theory of Relativity, Quantum Mechanics – the whole of modern physics – has been very beautifully expressed. But somewhere along the way people dropped the science n adjust carried the stories, and the stories were exaggerated from generation to generation to a point of being absolutely ridiculous. If you put the science back into the stories it is a beautiful way to express the science.
The Shiva Purana is the highest science of elevating human nature to the very peak of consciousness, expressed in beautiful stories. Yoga has been expressed in the form of a science without stories attached to it, but if you look at it in a deeper sense, yoga and the Shva Purana cannot be separated. One is for those who like stories, another is for those who are willing to look at everything scientifically but the fundamentals of both are the same. Today scientists are suggesting that one of the best ways to impart education is to impart it in the form of stories or in the form of play. (Interactions)

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