Devdutt Pattanaik’s Exploration on Myth

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Abstract:
The paper presents different sorts of retelling and interpretation of myth and mythology given by well-known Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik. He is well-versed in Indian mythologies giving insights about variations in the perception and analysis of Indian mythological stories and Indian culture. He gives logical understanding of every aspect of Indian culture, Gods and Goddesses. His understanding of the subject remains at various dimensions. It is a qualitative research paper following the MLA seventh edition referencing style.

Keywords: Devdutt Pattanaik, Myth, Mythology, Indian Culture, Tradition, Stories, Dharma, Mythological Women Characters, Religion, Gods and Goddesses.

Introduction:
Even before the arrival of writing skills, myths existed in society through oral tradition. It shaped the foundation of civilization religious, culture, philosophies, literature, art, tradition and custom. Myths of a civilization stories which frames and give structure to the culture of that particular civilization. Hence, studying myths, scriptures, epics and sacred book of a particular religion will give a deep insight into its belief system and social structure.

Devdutt’s Exploration on Myth

There have been several contemporary authors who have reinterpreted or retold Indian mythologies with a new perspective. Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik is currently one of the best mythologists of India. His books like Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent, Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana, Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata, Shikhandi: and Other Queer Tales They Don’t Tell You, The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana, Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology and many more, are generally retelling of the stories taken from great Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and several other mythological stories from various different sources.

Retelling is becoming a modern trend in Indian literature. It is basically telling a new version of story in a different way, giving a new perception and often updated. Largely, he retells the story of great Indian epics and in that he tries to bring repressed characters and their viewpoints upfront. He compares, contrasts, analyses, and criticizes these characters in order to reveal much about Indian culture and society from Vedic era to contemporary world. It also examines the treatment of women and culture responsible in framing the human perception, personality and prevailing mind-sets.

He has interpreted a lot about Indian Myths, Indian philosophy, mythological characters, Indian culture and tradition. In ‘Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology’. Myth according to Devdutt Pattanaik “is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular” (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology xvi). He examines the Holy Trinity of Hindu mythology – Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. He retells many stories associated with these Gods and attempts to find out the ‘truth’ behind the myths linked the social
structure of a society. One can find the bifurcation of the truth about Nature and Culture, Life and Death, Dharma and Adharma in the book.

Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For, conventionally, myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth. But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth that is subjective, intuitive, cultural, and grounded in faith (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology xv).

In the very beginning of the book Devdutt clarifies that the truth he is talking about is not the superior or even inferior to any other truth. These interpretations are a different understanding of human life. “Ancient Hindu seers knew myth as mithya. They distinguished it from sat. Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference” (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology xvi).

According to him there is nothing like falsehood. There is only complete truth (Purna Satya) and incomplete truth (Mithya) unlike contemporary understanding of myth as false, he argues and explains myth as subjective truth. It is first a perception given ages ago. With thought comes a perception and with perception one creates a story. That story is complete truth for one but can be incomplete truth for another based on his perception. But none of the perception is incorrect as every perception is built on subjective experience (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology xv).

Further in the same book he explains fundamental things of Hindu scriptures such as for Hindus there are three worlds i.e. Swarga (Heaven), Bhuloka (Earth), and Patala (Hell). And it is not stiff that Gods reside in Swarga, Lord Vishnu for instance resides beyond the three worlds (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology 47-48). Through Yayati’s story Devdutt brings out Indian mind where supporting the older generation and not thinking about gives own happiness is considered very virtuous.

In this book Devdutt searches for the answers related to nature and culture, life and death, perfection and possibility and many such. He retells Indian myths and other Hindu stories in order to logically understand Indian culture, rituals and symbols. “If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitute of stories, symbols and rituals that make a myth tangible. Stories, symbols and rituals are essentially languages. Languages that are heard, seen and performed. Together they construct the truths of the culture” (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology xvi).

He adds to the understanding of the text by giving relevant, diagrams, illustration and commentary. He unravels ancient Hindus myths which frame the Hindu culture and customs. Such as as he explains the action of Sita’s abduction by Ravana in following words:

Within there is regard for the law of marriage; without there isn’t any. Within, Sita is Rama’s wife. Outside, she is a woman for the taking. Ravana knows that if he enters Rama’s hut and forces himself on Sita he will be judged by the rules of society. But when he forces himself on Sita outside the Lakshmana-rekha, he will be judged by the laws of the jungle. Within, he will be the villain who disregarded the laws of marriage. Outside, he will be hero, the great trickster (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology 100).

Mythology plays an important role in human life as it gives us the answers to many religious practices and difference between good and evil. Take any mythology; it will basically be the journey of protagonist, who struggles a lot to live an ethical life. As a result, he faces situations where s/he differentiate between good and evil and learns many moral values which towards the end helps him/her to defeat the evil in the story. And towards the end he stands for righteous things which in Hindu mythology is called Dharma. “Manavas, the descendants of Manu, are expected to follow the code of dharma. This code is based on roles and responsibilities. Every creature is bound by duty. This duty bridles desire. It helps in creating a space where even the weakest can thrive” (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology 98).

In his another mythological book Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent, Devdutt while exploring about fundamental differences between myth and science says “Myth transmits a traditional culture-specific understanding of the world. Science seeks a universal understanding of
the world. Myth needs faith, not proof. Science needs proof, not faith” (Pattanaik, Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinents 11).

He answers many questions related to Hindu Mythology in his famous EPIC channel show ‘Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik’ based on the episodes of this T.V. series three books focussing on his interactions in the show have been published. He transcends us to the world of Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu and the Goddess. He explains the lessons that Holy Hindu Trinity representing creation, sustenance and destruction, teaches to the contemporary world:

We earn, save, spend. Brahma is the one who earns, brings in the money. Vishnu spends and invests it in the market, enabling exchange so that commerce flourishes. Shiva is someone who is not interested in money at all; his is the attitude of non-attachment, vairagya. On the other hand, Brahma’s children are so interested in money that they hoard and fight over it, which is why no one worships Brahma or his children. The one who does business with the world, is involved with it, is Vishnu, so we worship him. When we grow old and wish to get rid of our desires, we can follow Shiva’s example by renouncing money. Each of us has all these qualities, mostly Brahma’s, but we shouldn’t encourage those. We should harness Vishnu’s qualities, so that Lakshmi, money, follows us. Towards the end of our life, we should become like Shiva; renounce the material world and move on (Pattanaik, Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik 23).

Jaya and Sita by the same noted author gives a new understanding of the mythological women characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Kunti, Gandhari, Surpankha, Satyavati, Urmila, Kaikeyi and many more. He reflects different traits of male and female personality. In his book Sita he understands Sita a woman of wisdom: “Sita’s father never knew the world that was the kitchen. Sita’s mother never knew the world that was the court. But Sita realized she knew both. This is how the mind expands, she thought to herself. This is how Brahma becomes the brahman. She was a brahmin, she realized, seeker of wisdom as well as transmitter of wisdom” (Pattanaik, SITA: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana 26).

Devdutt might sound preachy at many points but the sensitive topics that he is dealing with makes him sound like an omniscient writer. The book answers many whys and hows related with mythological characters, which were unanswered till now. There are many reflections of mythological characters in human personality even today such as one will find individual restricted by his own ethical principles like Ram, there are many independent women today who possess their own thoughts and follow their instinct. The character of Ram can be seen as very complicated to be true in reality because of his decisions that he makes during dilemmatic situations.

Another book by Devdutt which explores on evolution of Indian culture is ‘Culture: 50 insights from Mythology’. It connects mythology with culture and their influences on one another. He compares the cultural beliefs of Western mythology with Indian mythology:

The Western story celebrates a linear construct of life – with one beginning, one ending and one life in between. The Indian story celebrates a cyclical construct of life – with many beginnings, many endings and many lives in between. Thus stories reflect the culture they emerge from, while reinforcing the culture at the same time (Pattanaik, Culture: 50 Insights From Mythology 5-6).

Stories and myths of a culture influences perceptions and build truths for a society. A culture is constructed by various mythological stories, which gives relevant answers to many cultural practices, traditions, customs, rituals that we follow. It enlightens its readers with relative truth, which is sometimes taken as an absolute truth by its followers. Culture represents the belief system which is built on the mythologies which consist of myths which keeps on changing with the perception of society in which one lives.

A story is basically a plot but narration is the process by which a story is told. The same story sounds different when the storyteller is different. And every storyteller changes his narration depending on the audience. All this makes storytelling rather complex, which is why our view of the world and our truths are also complex (Pattanaik, Culture: 50 Insights From Mythology 6).

Focusing on female mythological characters Devdutt in his book The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the eternal feminine explores the evolution of goddess worship perceived over 4000 years. He compares
female with Nature, while males with Culture. Females are seen as nurturer and fountainhead of life. Nature according to Devdutt triumphs ultimately:

The triumph is impersonal, non-judgmental. Nature kills everybody, not just the “bad.” To call the goddess “Mother” is to acknowledge only half of her personality. She is also a “killer.” She is the source of joy and sorrow, of hope and despair, life and death. Nature (prakriti), delusion (maya), energy (shakti)—she is the world we react to (Pattanaik, The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine 167).

Devdutt explores five faces of goddess in which the first half of existence is identified with nature at first, then gradually defied and eventually objectified. She is seen as the mother, the caretaker and the life giver. It further transform into a woman who seduces man and drags him in the cycle of life. Later, as a wife she is domesticated and transformed in a multitasking woman from a dominating woman and finally, a submissive woman who redefines herself as a wild and terrifying goddess who seeks for justice and gratification.

The association of man with the head, hence rationality, intelligence, and consciousness, and woman with the body, hence intuition, emotion, and carnality, is obvious. Like the ocean, the woman is passive. Like a flower, she is enchanting. When Brahma is enchanted, the seed of life is sown and life renewed. Her opinion is not sought. She is the object; she is the subject. She is the scenery; he is the seer. She is the primal manifestation. He is the primal cause (Pattanaik, The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Feminine 7).

Conclusion:

By reinterpreting myths from revered classics and folklores, Devdutt explores the mysterious nature of humans. He clarifies and elucidates on the root cause of traditions and taboo practices in India even today. The persona of Gods and Goddess is both feared and worshipped in India when they are seen as mortal men and women.

To end this section with a common quote from all of his books-

Within infinite myths lies the eternal truth

Who sees it all?

Varuna has but a thousand eyes,

Indra has a hundred,

You and I, only two.

- (Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology ix)

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