



## Mythology Meets Modernity: The Pop Culture Impact of Amish Tripathi's Retellings

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### Abstract

This study analyzes how the retelling and reinterpretation of ancient Hindu mythology have shaped contemporary popular culture. The interpretation of "Shiva" as an ordinary human figure contrasts with Lord Shiva of the "Shiv Puran," who is portrayed as a deity with supernatural powers. This makes readers believe that an ordinary person can be elevated to a divine level through their "karma." The scientific explanations of crucial incidents in the trilogy allow readers to accept the ideas with an open mind. In a contemporary world filled with logic and disillusionment, blind acceptance of traditional mythologies is challenged. The blending of mythology with modernity and popular culture helps readers relate to both socio-political issues and personal dilemmas. The overwhelming response from both critics and readers proves that old narratives, when presented in new forms that resonate with popular culture, are embraced and celebrated. This study highlights how Tripathi uses mythology to prompt modern readers to question the reliability of tradition and suggests that outdated customs should be changed. This is evident in the novel, where the concept of "Vikarma" is abolished. The study also focuses on the marginalized voices of the "Nagas," who were treated as inferior due to their deformities and were separated from the Meluhans. The study aims to explain how power is exploited by a few and how it blinds people to the point of being corrupted at an extreme level. This is reflected in how the Meluhans exploit "somras" in the novel.

As T.S. Eliot says, "For a literary work of art must have a fusion of past with present," and Amish Tripathi's retelling of mythologies perfectly exemplifies this idea.

**Keywords:** Popular Culture, Hindu Mythology, Contemporary Literature, Socio-Political Themes, Modern Interpretation of Myths

## Introduction

Mythology has long served as a reservoir of cultural narratives, shaping religious beliefs, societal values, and artistic traditions. Hindu mythology is deeply rooted in ancient scriptures and oral traditions, portraying gods and goddesses who symbolize divine virtues and cosmic order. As a literary form, mythology extends beyond religious texts, influencing various aspects of culture, literature, and popular media.

The term "mythology" originates from the Greek word *mythos* (meaning "story of the people") and *logos* (meaning "speech"). It represents an oral tradition through which historical narratives and cultural values have been transmitted across generations. Bruce Lincoln, in *Myth, Cosmos, and Society* (1986), asserts that myths are not merely ancient tales but function as a reflection of societal structures and moral codes. Similarly, in *Myth and Literature* (2003), it is noted that **"they [myths] are at once regional yet universal, static yet dynamic, stable and yet protean, archaic and yet contemporary, divine and yet human in what they are as much about gods and goddesses as about human beings."**

Claude Lévi-Strauss, a prominent structuralist anthropologist, emphasizes that myths serve as a means of resolving contradictions in human thought. He argues that myths operate within the human mind subconsciously, shaping cultural awareness rather than being consciously analyzed. This perspective underscores the role of mythology in structuring belief systems and influencing individual perceptions of morality and the divine.

Hindu mythology, particularly epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, has played a fundamental role in shaping ethical

frameworks. The *Ramayana*, for instance, presents an archetypal conflict between good and evil, with Lord Rama symbolizing dharma (righteousness) in his struggle against Ravana. Similarly, the *Mahabharata* is more intricate, portraying characters with layered moralities, such as Krishna guiding the Pandavas in the *Dharma Yuddha* against the Kauravas.

In recent decades, Hindu mythology has transcended religious and academic discourse, emerging as a significant component of popular fiction. The genre of mythological retelling has gained widespread acceptance among modern readers, with authors like Ashok Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik, and Amish Tripathi reshaping traditional narratives for contemporary audiences. Vijay S. Prabhat notes in her research that **"retellings are a mixture of social fantasies and scientific facts,"** highlighting the evolving nature of mythology in modern literature.

Among these contemporary adaptations, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* stands out as a groundbreaking reinterpretation. Unlike traditional mythology (*Shiv Puran*), where Shiva is depicted as a deity with supernatural powers, Tripathi's version reimagines him as a mortal tribal leader from Tibet. His transformation into a god is not predestined but rather earned through his karma, leadership, and moral choices. This shift from an extraordinary divine figure to an ordinary yet virtuous individual makes Shiva more relatable to modern readers, bridging the gap between mythology and contemporary storytelling. Furthermore, Tripathi challenges the notion that greatness is inherited, emphasizing that it is acquired through effort and righteousness.

Hindu mythology has increasingly moved beyond religious spaces, entering the

realm of popular culture and fiction. The resurgence of mythological retellings in India signifies a broader cultural shift, where younger generations engage with these narratives not solely as religious texts but as literary and philosophical explorations of identity, morality, and human struggle.

Tripathi himself reinforces this perspective in *The Immortals of Meluha*, stating that "myths are nothing but exaggerated truths." His works exemplify how ancient narratives can be adapted to align with modern sensibilities while retaining their philosophical essence. Through his retellings, Tripathi not only revitalizes Hindu mythology but also makes it accessible to a global audience, cementing its place in popular literature.

### The Role of Karma and Logic

This chapter discusses how Amish Tripathi redefines the character of Shiva, shifting him from divinity to humanity and reinforcing the ideas of karma and self-determination.

The novel opens with an inquiry: "*What if Lord Shiva was not a creation of imagination but a person of flesh and blood?*" This question marks the exact moment where mythology is modernized. The answer unfolds through the portrayal of Shiva as a mortal man who attains godhood through his actions and karma.

In Hindu mythology, Shiva is the destroyer, one of the Trimurti along with Vishnu, the protector, and Brahma, the creator. However, Tripathi's Shiva is the chief of the Gunas tribe—a skilled warrior with human limitations, never possessing magical powers. He exhibits human virtues such as kindness, physical strength, and leadership. To protect his tribe, he must leave his homeland and safeguard them from the attacks of the Prakritis. Tripathi offers a new interpretation of divinity—one that is purely based on karma. Karma, a Sanskrit term for action, becomes the defining principle of Shiva's journey. He follows his instincts and carries moral responsibility with accountability.

Even after acquiring a blue throat and being revered as divine by the people of Meluha, he does not accept this status blindly but instead embraces the responsibilities and expectations that come with it.

During battles with the Chandravanshis and others, Shiva's determination and resilience become evident. He refuses to surrender, regardless of circumstances. His leadership is defined by military tactics, intelligence, and diplomacy rather than divine interventions. Through this portrayal, Tripathi provides a fresh perspective on mythology by replacing magical elements with scientific explanations, making the narrative more appealing to contemporary audiences who seek logical interpretations of mythological events.

For instance, the phenomenon of Shiva's blue throat is depicted as a chemical reaction rather than the result of a magical potion. *Somras* is described as a substance that slows cellular decay, akin to modern anti-aging treatments, while also having side effects. Similarly, the Nagas, serpent-like beings in mythology, are explained as humans suffering from rare genetic disorders, providing a rational perspective rather than a mystical one.

Tripathi further emphasizes the importance of personal choices and instincts through key dialogues in his works. As Shiva states in *The Immortals of Meluha*, "A man becomes a Mahadev not because he is born as one but because of the choices he makes." This reinforces the idea that greatness is earned through actions rather than inherited divinity. In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, another significant quote underscores the theme of moral ambiguity: "We can never be sure that we are doing the right thing, we can only do what we believe is right." This highlights the centrality of personal judgment and ethical dilemmas in shaping one's destiny.

By grounding mythology in logic and human agency, Tripathi bridges the gap between ancient beliefs and modern sensibilities, making his retellings both relatable

and thought-provoking for contemporary readers.

### Challenging Social Injustice - The Vikrama Tradition

This chapter examines the critique of outdated social structures, particularly focusing on the Vikrama tradition in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*.

Prashant P. Dharmadhikari, in his paper titled "New Bard of the McDonald Generation: A Critical Study of the Marginalized Voices in Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy," discusses the Vikrama tradition and its implications. He writes:

"Shiva witnesses a procession of Vikrama women in the street and asks Nandi about the same. Nandi answers that Vikrama are the people with bad fate because of past birth sins. Shiva questions this illogical custom and says that a woman could have given birth to a stillborn simply because she did not take proper care while she was pregnant. Shiva questions the belief of the previous birth deeds. He seeks the blessings of the Vikrama blind man in front of the entire crowd. This Vikrama law was enforced to maintain power over a class of people, and the thrust idea of past sins will never allow them to revolt or question it."

The entire Vikrama tradition is eventually abolished by Shiva. Tripathi, through Shiva, directly challenges the system:

"I want the entire Vikrama law scrapped. Nobody will be a Vikrama from now on. Bad fate can strike anyone; it is ridiculous to blame their past lives for it" (*The Immortals of Meluha*, p. 279).

Here, Shiva rejects discrimination based on the belief in karma from past lives, instead focusing on personal karma rather than pre-destined punishment. This highlights Shiva's

just approach to leadership. He recognizes that social progress requires discarding outdated and unfair customs. By eliminating the Vikrama law, he paves the way for a more rational society where individuals are judged by their present actions rather than by circumstances beyond their control.

This questioning of blind traditions and the call for social justice encourages readers to critically assess which traditions should be preserved and which should be reformed or eliminated.

### Giving a Voice to the Marginalized Nagas

This chapter analyzes the representation of the Nagas as symbols of social exclusion and discrimination in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*.

The Meluhans consider the deformities of the Nagas as the result of sins from their previous births. Hence, they are ostracized from their community and regarded as a threat. However, as the novel progresses, readers come to realize that these deformities are not divine punishment but rather a side effect of excessive consumption of Somras, the anti-aging chemical. The Nagas, despite being innocent, are cast out of Meluhan society, forced to live in exile, and perceived with fear and hatred.

When Sati is saved by the Naga warriors Kali and Ganesh—who are later revealed to be her sister and firstborn son—she initially reacts with terror, demonstrating the deep-seated prejudice against the Nagas. The Nagas had no choice but to establish their own hidden city, Panchvati, to protect themselves from societal rejection. This forced exile leads to their resentment towards the rest of the world. The hypocrisy of the Meluhans is exposed when it is revealed that the very substance that grants them longevity, Somras, is responsible for the deformities in the Nagas. While benefiting from Somras, the Meluhans cast out those who suffer from its side effects, showing how privileged societies often exploit the marginalized and then

abandon them instead of offering help or acceptance. Instead of addressing the issue, they merely label Nagas as cursed.

Ganesh, in the novel, confesses:

"People look at me and see a monster. They do not care who I am, what I feel, or what I have done. They only see my face, my body, and they recoil in fear."  
(*The Secret of the Nagas*)

Another quote from the novel underscores Nagas' suffering and unjust treatment:

"We have always lived in the shadows, feared and hated for no fault of ours. We are victims of a curse we never deserved." (*The Secret of the Nagas*)

Tripathi effectively captures the emotional pain, anger, and resentment of the Nagas, offering a voice to the marginalized.

In his book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Lennard J. Davis explains how society creates and enforces a standard of what is considered 'normal,' leading to the exclusion of those who do not conform to these norms. He states:

"The problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person."

Davis's theory of normalcy helps explain why the Nagas are excluded—not because they are inherently 'lesser' but because society constructs them as 'abnormal.' By portraying the Nagas' struggle for acceptance, Tripathi challenges rigid social norms and highlights the need for an inclusive and empathetic society.

### The Power and Control - Use of Somras

This chapter explores the theme of power dynamics through the exploitation of Somras.

Somras, introduced in *The Immortals of Meluha*, is described as 'the drink of the gods.' It grants the Meluhans longevity and is manufactured on a large scale, despite its complex production process. The making of Somras generates intense heat, requires large amounts of water, and depends on the rare herb Sanjeevani. The Saraswati River serves as the primary water source for producing Somras on the Secret Mandar Hill. The Meluhans believe that their ability to manufacture Somras in abundance sets them apart and makes them superior to the Chandravanshis.

While only Meluhans consume Somras, its toxic byproducts affect others. Waste from Somras production contaminates the river, making the water poisonous. The Branga people, who drank this polluted water, suffered from plagues, while the Saraswati River faced destruction. Thus, Somras, initially depicted as a miraculous elixir that enhances longevity, is later revealed as a tool of exploitation and environmental devastation. The elite class of Meluha benefits from Somras, while the marginalized Nagas suffer its consequences.

Michel Foucault, in his works, explores how power is maintained not just through force but through the control of knowledge, information, and biological life itself. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, he states:

"Government no longer rules by force alone, but by managing people's lives, health, and environment."

The Meluhans' control over Somras reflects real-world systems where powerful groups regulate health, resources, and knowledge to maintain dominance. However, the production and use of Somras come at a hidden cost—it leads to deformities in the Nagas and causes environmental destruction. As stated in *The Oath of the Vayuputras*:

"What we called a gift was actually a curse for those who never got to drink

it. The price of our lives was paid by others.”

The production of Somras was poisoning the river and destroying fertile land, yet the Meluhans, despite being aware of these consequences, continued using it for their benefit. This mirrors capitalist exploitation, where industries prioritize profits over environmental sustainability. Furthermore, the Meluhans concealed the harmful effects of Somras, manipulating history and facts to maintain their dominance and protect their interests.

### Conclusion

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* stands as a remarkable example of how mythology can be reimagined to engage contemporary audiences. He takes characters from traditional mythology and presents them as human figures operating within a rational and worldly framework. Yet, the core essence of the story remains intact, maintaining faith in cultural and mythological traditions while integrating them into popular culture. This retelling revitalizes interest in Hindu mythology, making it resonate with modern times and offering fresh perspectives on mythological characters and incidents.

The *Shiva Trilogy* emerges as both a collision and a bridge between tradition and modernity, where long-standing customs are questioned, and rigid societal structures are challenged. Through the Vikarma system, Tripathi critiques caste-based discrimination, advocating for justice and equality. The struggles of the Nagas, who are ostracized from mainstream society due to their deformities, reflect broader themes of marginalization and social exclusion. Tripathi redefines the role of the so-called 'cursed' as central figures in the fight against injustice.

Moreover, the elite Meluhans' use of Somras as a symbol of power and exploitation mirrors contemporary concerns about capitalism and environmental degradation.

Thus, the trilogy serves as a social commentary wrapped in a popular narrative, making complex issues accessible to a wide readership.

Within the framework of popular literature, *The Shiva Trilogy* exemplifies how mythological retellings function as both entertainment and tools for cultural introspection. The blend of fantasy with philosophy, and ancient traditions with modern ethical dilemmas, makes it a significant text in popular literature. The trilogy does not merely tell a story; it invites readers to engage in mythology as a living, evolving discourse that continues to shape identity and society. Tripathi's work ensures that mythology remains an integral part of the collective imagination – not as a rigid structure of worship but as a dynamic force that inspires reflection, debate, and transformation.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* exemplifies how mythological retellings have become a dominant force in popular literature, blending ancient narratives with modern themes. Alongside bestsellers like Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*, Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Tripathi's work contributes to the contemporary literary landscape, demonstrating the enduring relevance of mythological narratives in shaping popular culture.

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